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VS

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VS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing:  
Poetry

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by  
Bolin John Jue  
June 2016

VS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
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Bolin John Jue

June 2016

Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

*VS* is a poetic exercise in rhyme and rhythm. An exercise attempting to camouflage ideas in humor, in song, in lyrical overtures, and in social media pop culture lingo to highlight the damaging effects technology and social media have on the human relationship with the earth. *VS* is a mirror, is an attempt to selfie the world we have lost touch with by contemplating where our role as caretakers for our planet lies. Through varying poetic forms, *VS* displays and critiques the limited perspective forced upon us when we socialize and experience life solely through phones and screens.

In this manuscript, the speaker is fluid and mainly seen in the first person plural, or the collective, “we.” This voice includes the average media-driven American, as well as one who is considering how social media impacts their current lifestyles. In *VS*, the speaker represents various voices of faceless social media users who are separated from the physical world by the screens themselves and by digital avatars disguising further what is real. And yet, the speaker also represents a voiceless natural world—such as if it had the ability to forbid our modern ways of life from diminishing the world’s natural resources and curb further global pollution—while always questioning how these ways of life are being preserved on the physical land we live on and alongside.

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

VS

### Clap and Tap Gives Birth to Rhythm

“One-E-and-Uh Two-E-and-Uh Three-E-and-Uh...”. A traditional metronome marks time with a series of regular ticks. The tempo of the metronome begins by setting or tapping a selected rate. VS believes we have an internal metronome and in 6<sup>th</sup> grade marching band, mine was set into motion. This motion ticked me into having an urge to create and shine light on, through physical manifestation, ideas not unlike the American writer, feminist, and civil rights activist, Audre Lorde's theories of forming "...ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized"( Lorde 282 ). Mrs. Ballard, my marching band teacher, would slap you with a drum stick if you were just slightly off time, slightly out of key, or not tapping your foot while you played. She got into your head and if you weren't counting there, smack to the wrist. Mrs. Ballard herself was a flawless musician. Given her villainous strictness and harshness on her middle school marching band kids, she herself played clarinet not only beautifully, but like it was a part of nature. This ability to control music, control rhythm, so well that it seems natural is one move VS attempts to use in its rhythmic deliverance. But before rhythm in my poetics was to be developed, it needed to manifest itself physically, in pulse, in breath, in my heart, as a way of rhythmic training.



Before we even picked up any instruments, we'd practice and be tested in what Mrs. Ballard called, "Clap and Tap". Clap and tap is a visual sort of notated way of reading not music but rhythm. Say "1-and-2-and-3-and-4-and" out loud, you're basically counting eighth notes. Now say, "1-E-and-Uh 2-E-and-Uh 3-E-and-Uh 4-E-and-Uh" those are sixteenth notes. Clap your hands, while counting aloud of course, every time you say a number. Whenever you say "and" and "Uh" tap your foot. You are now not only participating in the legendary clap and tap exercise, you're essentially playing the drums. Air drums to any unknowing onlookers.

After clap and tap we started playing our instruments, and keeping time while playing consisted of tapping your foot while holding the instrument that was most likely dominating over your little middle school body. After a while of playing in class, we started playing while marching. The task of marching from the heel of the foot, to the ball, to toe of the foot, as a way of keeping time through step, was not an easy one. But this way of keeping time too was drilled into my thinking process. I've been bruised by rhythm. From clap and tap, to playing and tapping my foot, to marching as a way of keeping time, rhythm's new way of using my state of being as a metronome has hit into my poetry. This is where meter and rhythm fall into VS.

The 4/4 time signature is the usual go to time signature in rock and roll. Pop songs are in 4/4 most of the time and are played at 120 beats per minute because that's supposed to be the rate of our metronomic hearts. Though today,

those bpm's are probably set a lot higher to keep up with our speedy compulsions, as implied in VS, "...a new endurance// an upgrade/ of patience/ our quickness/ has only recently/ evaded".

I played in and toured with various bands right out of high school, because we all have our silly dreams. But being in desert dance-rock bands was always moving me in 4/4 time and other crazy time signatures that spawned from messing with the traditional 4/4 time. This is no different as sticking to and perfecting strict meters in poetry that will allow you to break out into more rhythmically sporadic free verse techniques. VS, on purpose, messes with accents. You see? Two accented rhythms separated, like a ref between two fighters, by a uni-syllabic prepositional word. So what does this do? And why does VS care to do it? Scroll down and find out.

Just as there is a common beat and time signature in American and British music, there seems to be a natural familiar sensible beat that lingers in British and American poetry.

Iambic pentameter is this beat and is one type of many established rhythms a poem may have. Iambic pentameter is a riff of unstressed to stressed accented words. This rhythmic set up develops a duh(unstressed)-DUM(stressed) beat. Duh-Dum, Duh-Dum, Duh-Dum. Say this out loud and cave-man hit your chest in syncopation with the rhythm. Notice anything? It was the OG poet's attempt to mimic the heartbeat. This rhythm of the poem is what can be referred to as its meter, the time signature of a poem. It's also helpful in identifying poetic forms.

Iambic Pentameter is for some reason, almost instinctively, the English Language's go to syllabic rhythm. It's English's 4/4 pop song time signature.

So, the stresses and forced perfection of rhythm in marching band I had endured caused me to have this urge, this instinctive want, to write poetry rhythmically unstressed to stressed patterns, and rhythmically conscious of itself. Physically keeping time is as much physical as it is mental and this physical keeping of time gets rerouted into poetry when one writes it. So why attempt to syntactically and linguistically mimic the heart beat? VS believes doing so embeds a humanistic quality into the poem, it gives a layer of soul to the piece. Rhythm then becomes the core of a thing, like a Tesla car's battery, that makes it, us, go, this is what art, attempts to show. Here's VS trying to do it, "instantness, outruns our feet, sends our thoughts obs-/ olete broken/ rivers re-/ load midstream".

These lines are short given the various metric changes that VS contains. The first line and word is Dactyl metered. No it's not a dinosaur it's a rhythm where the first syllable is stressed followed by two unstressed syllables. DAH-dum-dum, IN-stant-ness. The following lines mimic the same rhythmic sonic and conclusive characteristics of a Shakespearian sonnet. We know what those are



right? It's important for the VS poems to have this conclusive or thought provoking Shakespearian couplet ending because with such questions of environmental and social themes that VS endings attempt to display, "windows

admit light/ into closed/ spaces// and what is admitted/ into scrolling/ gazes?",  
"whom do our/ slips/ feed?", or "there's no present/ we always/ miss it", it's  
important that the reader is left with questions of how we're physically and  
mentally changing as humans when we use our brains, not like reading, to stare  
constantly at screens, or "scrolling gazes"?

## From Rhythm's Ruins Rises Faith

The strict and limiting order of marching band may have caused me to jump its ship. Yet the internal metronome in my body pushed me into a motion with more momentum, skateboarding. I know skateboarding is difficult to take seriously. But when you're surrounded by serious skateboarders, skating gets horribly serious, which is not too unlike art and artists. Skaters learn not only how to fall but that falling is almost necessary, and with that said, something all skaters know about this sport is the magic behind the infamous "first try". To land a trick first try is finding the last beer at the party, ok no it's a waiter catching a falling glass, maybe it's Jordan making the winning shot, no, it's a snow storm in the middle of a drought, it's a glorious moment and every skater who has experienced this phenomenon can easily categorize it as a miracle.

But why is this? It's simple. The way skaters learn tricks, which make them some of the most unique athletes, is their acceptance and relationship with failure. Skateboarders fall, and they fall, then they fall. But perhaps more importantly, immediately after that fall, if all body parts are still intact, they get right back up and repeat the very action that just sent them hurling across gravel.



Skating for me was not only an early way to accept failing, but it made me discover failure as an essential. To not fall would be to not try, and not trying is more damaging than any fall.

What is also important is to note that there is a difference between accepting failure, and expecting it. Skaters are ok with failing because they get back up, but what makes them get back up isn't the idea that they're going to fall again, it's the idea that they're not. When you're approaching a 20-foot drop, you don't expect to fall, you can't, otherwise, you surely will. Instead, you believe you will land the 20-foot drop, and if you don't then you believe the next attempt will be the one with all four wheels on the ground. But this belief is super important not just for me but I believe for all artists and people in general. The belief that you'll land that 20-foot drop and not fall and break open your jaw as it slaps the ground is what I'd like to call, faith. Skating taught me faith.

As writers, as poets, as artists, we are some of the most hyper-aware and sensitive babies ever. If you go into a piece already thinking it's not going to be good, or perform a piece with the preconceived notion that the crowd will fall asleep, it's the equivalent of not having faith that the next try at landing a trick is going to be the one. And that attitude is going to reflect in the piece or the performance. As artists we have to be strong and confident and believe in what we are doing. #HOWEVER, this also means it's important to make #art in the name of something worth believing in. Just as approaching a 20 foot drop on a 1-and-a-half-inch piece of maple wood with 4 wheels attached to it at dashing speeds is nothing to take lightly, neither is @art. This of course doesn't mean that we must take ourselves seriously, only what we're doing as artists.

So how does faith in oneself tie into poetry and VS? For me, it's the #Edit. Editing is crucial, but more specifically, cutting and making an idea concise and projecting an idea sometimes takes trusting your reader. This to me means having faith in your work, but that gets tricky. Appreciation is good, but don't get it twisted with being cocky. Understanding that constructive criticism or critique is there for not you, but your poem's own good, is also faith. Killing your darlings or cutting an "ing" or trimming the fat of the poem is having faith in your work and in your reader. From this type of faith, one possible poetic development than can materialize is implication. Implication is one poetic tool that I absolutely love to use and love to read from other poets as well. Implication in a poem is an invitation into the poem. Implication is involvement between the reader and the piece. It is the opposite of spoon feeding. Implication rids the piece as something preaching or as something that is merely on display. Implication can swoop the reader into a piece of art. In other words, implication is one trait that causes art to be engaging, inspiring, and active.

A poem is not a tv set, or a smart device's screen, it isn't just meant to be looked at. A poem, or any piece of art for that matter, should be interacting with you, like a handshake, like a tug of war, like the rain falling on your head, both you and those drops feel each other. In particular, one way a poem can cause interaction is with this poetic device of implication. Implication can be set up with a series of notions, lined up precisely like a row of dominoes. The reader, if this set up is done carefully, will automatically connect the dots of these rows of ideas

or images that are being presented. (We'll get to seeding in a bit). This connection generates or draws out in the reader's mind a larger picture or feeling or idea, and when this happens, the effect is far more appreciated, understood, and felt, than if the same concepts were simply flat out stated. Small examples of this in *VS* are moments when words aren't present as symbols that represent ideas they are literally stating, but rather a realm of place in which they would be read representatively. Huh? Words in *VS* are sometimes meant to be read not as texts on a page but texts on someone's screen, texts someone reads in an open digital space, texts on a social media site, where other people are reading the same thing, in media, in pop culture, or even on a billboard.

click

A detective is captured by a mobster planning to  
hack his facebook  
and spam his friends one by one  
until he reveals the whereabouts of a stashed loot.

click

THE ALL CAPS  
BUTTON



IS BROKEN

faintly taps the tips of fingers.

click

It's representative of a collective voice, only it's an internal voice, the voice that sounds in our minds as we read one another's words on a screen rather than absorb them in person. VS has to trust its reader in playing along that these texts, rather in or out of the boxes, represent fabricated quotes, referring to a society rather than the statements of one. And what about the texts in the boxes? We'll come back to those. But the interpretations of what is presented in boxes in this context is fully given to VS readers, because the way the boxes are presented are fit for open interpretations, but really in the context they are presented, it's most likely those interpretations will be in favor of a larger idea VS is trying to get to. This assumed arrival of the reader, is having faith that a connection to the text of a whole will be made, given the baited words and notions VS presents. You've gotta know and believe in what you're doing, so that your reader does too.

## Faith Turns to Rhyme and Calls for Craft

Skating slowly drifted from me as I got involved in even more physically dramatic sports, Roman Greco, Freestyle, and Collegiate wrestling. As a freshman I started out at the top of my class on Varsity. In fact I was never on the JV team and was immediately surrounded by older better athletes than myself. And it was in this surrounding of the older and better wrestlers and stealing their techniques that I was first really introduced to the idea of technique, and craft.

In poetry, stealing techniques has been a learning tool for me, especially in terms of craft. Craft, as I see it, is the nuts and bolts of a poem that keep everything from falling apart. It's all the techniques or poetic moves one is using within a poem that make that poem work. What makes a poem work? When emotions evoked by the poem, balanced out with expository techniques, induce meaning to its reader, a poem is working. I believe poems can just be poems in the process of becoming, and poems can also be art. Just as music can just be music, or a painting can just be a painting, once craft is involved, they can be more than that. Craft creates thought out purposeful meaningful meticulous pieces of physical offspring of emotion, which in my view is art. In wrestling, or any other thing we do as people which can be interpreted into an art form, craft must exist.

It's 2001 or 2002ish and it's my first official wrestling match ever. I'm a nervous wreck on the Indio High School side as we are up against Hemet high school. Some of us are seated butterfly stretched on the floor waiting for George

Palmer to start off the first match of the night. And just who is George Palmer? Well he is one of the best wrestlers in the entire state of California, he is black, and disfavored by most refs because of it. George is representative of some of the first racial tensions and prejudices I've witnessed, from other white wrestlers or old white refs who would obviously make unfair calls. Starved, weak and tired, I watch George step on the mat, shake his opponent's hand, and wait for the ref to blow the whistle and start their match. George seems to stop time slowly before he begins, and completely as he starts.

Right as that whistle blows, George's right arm extends out towards the left side of his white opponent's head. While his right arm does this, his right hand, all the way down to his forearm, transforms into a crowbar. It has the exact hooking curve and straightened body that solid steel is shaped with. George's crowbar arm latches onto the back left side of his opponent's neck.

However, while this happens, George's left arm too, is in motion. His left arm shoots diagonally down towards his opponent's right ankle. Only this arm transforms into a baseball bat. The bat rushes down with the motion of a swinging golf club. And in perfect synchronization with his crowbar, this baseball bat takes out his opponent's left ankle just as that crowbar latches onto and yanks down on that Hemet neck.

The effect of this can be seen as two cars driving full speed perpendicularly towards each other, and as they meet in the middle, a loud collision occurs. These cars are George's hands. And in this crash and perfect

control of motion, George takes down this opponent and pins him to the ground. The ref literally drops to the mat like he tripped himself. His hand does a wind up motion and smacks the floor. As his hand hits the mat, he blows the whistle to declare the match over.

This all has taken place, in 4.3 seconds. At the time, this was the fastest pin in the whole nation. I can't type out the words "four point three seconds" in 4.3 seconds. I can't open a video app on a phone to record something that fast in that fast amount of time. Yet here through precision and craft, mountains collide and explode within such a short amount of time. This move that George did, where his arms turn into a crowbar and a baseball bat, is called an ankle pick, and it was not only the first time I had seen anyone do it, it was the first time I



understood what the notions of craft and technique are. One other thing though, when Palmer made those 4.3 seconds stop, as he seemingly in slow motion moved the facing massive white boy body of 185 pounds down to the ground, he had stopped time. There's a poetic term for this, but patience hi speed internet reader, we'll get to this notion in due time. Also, did my mentioning of these wrestlers' skin colors make ya feel weird? No? good. Yeah? Well that's ok, VS deals with some of those reasons for you, or at least tries to demonstrate how race shows up in an online society VS a physical society in person.

We read in the VS poem *Sticks VS Stones*, "Our skin a badge of honor/  
our skin a badge of shame/ a rusted knight's armor/ a heavy historic chain".

Here, VS attempts to take the persona of a collective consciousness of a group of people of color and present it through the first person plural.

This idea of speaking as one but for many, comes from such works as the award winning novelist Julie Otsuka's, *Buddha in the Attic*, or American Book Award finalist Kate Walbert's, *Our Kind*, which are novels written in the first person plural. Otsuka writes in the first person plural, *we*, as a way of representing marginalized Japanese brides, who in the early 1900's immigrate to America to marry men they've never met and all of the dehumanizing obstacles they had to face in the process. In *Buddha in the Attic*, the use of the first person plural creates lines such as, "We gave birth to babies that were American citizens and in whose names we could finally lease lands...We gave birth to babies that were sickly and blue. We gave birth without our mothers, who would have known exactly what to do" (Otsuka 58 ). Walbert's Novel uses the first person plural to characterize a group of upper class widowed or divorced older women, who have been friends since childhood and in their old ages, face their approaching deaths. Here the first person plural can read as, "Bambi was once, no contest, the best of us, her eyes huge and brown, doelike, her hair a shiny auburn...And she'd been tall; we had forgotten" (Walbert 50). While these books seem to oppose in class and ethnicity, VS attempts to use the first person plural to cover a wider group of people, anyone connected on social media sites. VS poems dealing specifically with race represent all people of color, and furthermore anyone who has felt that

their physical appearance has placed them in a certain boxed perspective, in the world of social media.

Skin, along with its color, can be the deciding factor in how someone perceives you, regardless if those perceptions are true or not, it is what some people base their opinion of you on. It's unfair and unjust and distorting. This VS poem, through images of "armor" and "badges", and "chains", show how complicated and burdening such a simple trait of our skin can socially get. These visual descriptions through exposition of these VS poems on race, try to get readers to see how visual and external personas and assumptions are placed onto a person of color. The attempts to evoke emotion with words like "shame", "heavy", and again "chains", work to show the range and weight of emotions felt by someone undergoing racial prejudice. The issue of racial profiling and prejudice is important for me and is presented in VS, because it is something I feel can absolutely not be ignored or brushed off like it doesn't exist. George and all of us through George, experienced an outward response not only to his physical appearance, but to a historical presence attached to him as well. This is something I have only recently experienced but am proud to have known people like Palmer, who did not let external demeaning perceptions of them, due to their skin color, hold them down.

So let's return to George's ankle pick. From the next day on, I practiced ankle picks furiously. With the drive skating taught me of trying after each failed attempt, ankle picks became my signature move, and I beat 95 percent of the

people I wrestled which helped me to be the best 103 pound wrestler in all of Riverside County. It probably sounds cooler than it is, but it was only through the understanding of craft and technique that I was able to do this. I had to once again, and in a more conscious manner, be hyper aware of my body's rhythmic manner.

Crank the head, create momentum, creation motion, a little chaos, get their weight on one leg and then boom! I started to learn how people reacted to not only my attempts at ankle picking but at my set ups for the move as well. Set ups are equally as important as the execution itself. I think professor JPG would call poetic set ups, "seeding", implications, powered by poetic faith, can spawn from them. Seeding, for an image or an ending, is what I take as rocking your opponent to the exact position you want them in, so that when that move happens, it works. #ThisIsTechnique. #Control=Technique. #NoControl=NoArt

After a while of this, one starts to understand the nature of the move. You understand its relationship to the person you're trying it on. You understand the usual most common reactions to your attempts. You start to understand your own reactions to the failed attempts and how it could have been executed better. After the possibilities, fails, and successes of the move, right when it starts to get old or repetitive, and it all starts getting routine, something clicks.

You've suddenly got complete control of this one move that you've devoted your mind and body to. You start to know when to throw the move and when not to. You start to understand the move, and it becomes a part of you. It

suddenly turns into an instinctive act, like blinking. The move becomes an apparatus, a limb which is an extension of and controlled by you, yet is very much somehow externally active. It's as if your mind is the captain and the move, the rhyme, the image you've seeded for, is the missile of the artistic battleship you are steering. You start to develop your own style and interpretation of the move because simply doing it one general way is now not challenging enough. You start to do ankle picks switch handed. You start to do fake out picks, where you reach for the left ankle, expecting it to move, solely to take out the right ankle but only because you're so intimate with the mechanics of how the move is carried out.

The same idea applies in familiarizing oneself so much with a poetic technique that it becomes an extension of your stylistic voice. You start to use internal rhyme, forced rhyme, end rhymes, weird rhymes only present to you, or consecutive rhymes so obvious it's ringing on the ears, and even fake out rhymes, where you set up a rhythm and an initial sound that creates an expected rhyme, only so that you purposely use a non-rhyming word to pair that initial sound. The key notion is control. JPG's term "seeding" happens through control. Control happens through technique. Craft happens with technique which comes with practice. Practice happens through reading and writing what "move" you want to get good at.

This means, finding authors that are doing this move and using it extremely well, so well that you can draw out the mechanics of how they are



executing this technique. For me, sound is one move in poetry I want to be good at. I want to be able to have it down to the point where you know what to expect, yet it still takes you by surprise when it happens, kind of like that ankle pick. So, one person I steal from, my poetic George Palmer, is Kay Ryan. Like watching footage of someone ankle picking over and over again, I read Kay Ryan over and over again, and replay the good parts, the parts where she uses rhyme the way I want to use rhyme. I study her set ups, read the words and feel the rhythms that come immediately before the rhymes. I study the reactions of the move, of the rhymes, by reading and close reading what is being done with the lines and words immediately following these rhymes.

One poem of Kay Ryan's that has inspired VS's use of both internal and end rhymes to create a sense of motion for the poem to pass would be her poem "Spiderweb". If the beginnings and ends of a type of VS poem can be seen as the tops and bottoms of ladders, then sound is the poem's rungs which give the reader a way of getting from top to bottom. By setting up sounds with a little help from rhythm, the reader automatically moves forward in a search and expectation for that sound, or at least in search for what sound will be paired with that initial seeded sound. Ryan does this with lines,

...spider's, always

hauling coarse

ropes, hitching

lines to the  
best posts  
possible. It's  
heavy work  
everyplace,  
fighting sag,  
winching up  
give. It  
isn't ever  
delicate

to live. (Ryan 26)

Here we see "ropes" and "posts" have this magnetic pull not only to each other but that pulls the reader through the poem, yet the rhythm is unexpected. We then see the relationship of the sounds between "give" and "live" opposed to the previous mixed rhythm and rhyme scheme of the "Oh" sounds, these words as a closer, are set up as end rhymes. This move to use end rhymes as a signifier of the end of a poem is a large trait VS has adapted in its own endings.

A roof  
to block  
the sun?  
  
how

fun

a thought

like convinced

ants on rocks

at ease

under rays

of falling

feet

This is VS's poem titled, *Sun VS Sun Roof*, and it's attempting some of the poetic uses of rhyme Ryan's *Spiderweb* is doing to get the reader through the poem. While "sun" and "fun" are not rhythmically corresponding, the rhyme is what pulls them and creates a balance, even though they fall on different accents. While "ease" and "feet" do fall on the same end lined accent and sound, to pull towards and represent the closing of the poem.

To develop a sense of craft or ability to carry out an artistic move through craft, such as we see here with sound, it takes an immense practice of technique. No, it requires you drown in it. One must explore in every depth and possibility the tool they are using to be able to instinctively use it in a piece of art. And in poetry, or wrestling, or any form of art, to act out and, create at the rate of

thought is to depend on the foundations of craft. Creating and moving physically or artistically at such speeds is equally as inspiring and breath taking as it is almost scary and overwhelming. But we must be able to act at such speeds to capture and represent moments like when George Palmer stopped time, or when Kay Ryan takes hold of and slows or quickens the pace of one's reading. In literature, these moments and displays of concise control, and balance, is what baits and taunts my poetic hunger.

## Form Mourns for Nature

Let's turn the clock back once again, to 1991. I'm four years old and outside the place where I was raised. This place sits in the middle of a windy desert with no front or backyard, no neighbors, no visitor booth, no sliding gates that keep out non-residents, no wifi connections, and no power boxes or street lights. On the surface of a desert slab, two wooden houses made by the people who live in them, stand and lean against each other. This is the stage for my growth and development as a child. One house, built so high it peers down a giant mora tree through a red curtain that halos and glows with a galaxy of dust and spirals of fibers mixed in the wind, has a porch that splinters the shoeless. The house leaning on this house's back is a weathered green, and has an abandoned Dick Tracy car as an accessory. The house serves as a castle and it is surrounded by a pomegranate tree blockade. When I wake up in the top room looking down on the yard, the desert, the Aloe vera garden, the skeletal porch, I run through the dusty milky way twirling around the window, and my grandmother takes me out to the desert. We go to what was referred to simply as *the bridge*. This bridge, looking back on it, was actually a sand dune. But we walked across that sand dune, which seemed to bridge the real world to a place where nothing mattered, where the sun took a break, where walls of wind-raised sand sheltered and blocked out all that wasn't love, all that wasn't pure, the bridge was the opposite of a spam folder, it housed only what mattered. This is where I try to go

now in my head when things get difficult, and I'm still not sure why we took our somewhat dangerous journeys on this elevated piece of desert.

Around eight years later, I'm standing behind a chain linked fence that is built around a cul-de-sac in a brand new suburban neighborhood. The neighborhood lays out right in front of this once mythical bridge and castle. Apparently a movie is being filmed, and the ranch is the subject and it is being prepped for demolishing. I stand by my bicycle and watch the ranch explode into a grand wave of fire. Too startled by the explosion to pick up my bike, I run away. When the debris is done falling I walk back to my bike and find that the handlebars are still warm from the explosion. This warmth of the fire that destroyed the place where I was raised, a place that represented the last days of an old way of living, a way of living in communion with the land, with an understanding of what nature's boundaries were, continues to haunt me. It seeps into my aesthetics in any art I attempt. As if *the bridge*, the fire, the physical resonance, and the heat from one's past were grasping at me for a last ripple of life, there is a bridge that VS attempts to build between the ghost of nature in our physical world and its current understanding and digital presence in modern societies. This bridge is built through the forms of the VS poems.

There are several ways VS is attempting this, yet first it seems important to see what type of patterns arise from the removal or covering of nature. There is a certain type of consumer clutter that physically manifests itself in cities that once served as great agricultural contributors to the surrounding lands. Things

get complicated. Parking lots get made. Street lights, stop signs, and sidewalks get slabbed on the floor, lead by street lights, stop signs, and sidewalks slabbed on across a different desert floor. Perhaps it's not as damaging as it is anti-nostalgic for the farmers and plants and animals and a different type of community that existed between the physical land and the sun sealed bond that was being built between humans VS nature. There wasn't as much of a desire to have as many clothing stores, jewelers, mini marts, gas stations, various species of drugstores and malls planted. So we've tattooed regretful initials on some of the earth's surface with concrete and product driven desires. And there is a physical change that takes place. If you witness this in a small enough town or desert, it seems more obvious. The perfect order of physicality that nature has, say in a desert, seems to get really cubical and maze-like when it is bombarded on with hundreds of concrete boxes and squares and chaotic parking lot beehives.

Across VS, there is a similar mockery of physical transformation and change on our physical world that VS is attempting to carve out in the collaborative forms of the VS poems. In the begging of VS, the poems' forms are less strict or heavy on a steady meter or rhyme. They are written more in free verse and yet have a trait to them that seems to be pre-programmed in the sense that they all contain one specific element that seems to vanish by the end of VS. This is the idea of the screen or window or limited view of perception that shows up in the poem's physical form as

screen

As mentioned earlier, these boxes represent not only our skewed perceptions of our new technological world, through literal and metaphorical screens and windows, but also a collective voice of all of us that live with these limitations. The pioneer behind finding a visual and poetic representation of this limiting view, is Derek Henderson. Henderson too uses the text box in poetry to portray a certain way of experiencing, or not experiencing, the world. In his book *Songs*, Henderson displays causal captures of life yet projects them with poetic forms representing windows showing a gaze onto the world as nature's song and onto the world as our own perception. Every poem in *Songs*, has a text box around it. I've taken that windowing notion and played with it slightly, though with the same idea of a windowing perception being represented on the page.

The beginning of VS represents the era we currently live in. Yet if we see the begging of VS correlating to an earlier time in history and the second half of VS correlating to a later more present time in history, VS then flips the order of time. Early in VS, our current ignored consequences of our American technological and social desires are most presently represented both in content and form. We see this with the presence of the text box,

This selfie mimics me

This video mimics speed

This keyboard mimics teeth



This comment mimic speech

Yet the second half of *VS* represents more harmonious way of living, an obedience with nature's order, with the physical land, pre-Walgreens. One way *VS* represents a time of crossing sand dunes is through the gradual omission of these representative boxes within poems. There is a reverse fading compared to what is being represented. Unlike the fading of the natural world by capitalism and consumerism and all the concrete that comes with it, it is the digital social media world that gradually disappears through the progression of *VS*. This mirrors or flips reality of course as we are currently seeing more of a digital world than the physical one, living in the palms of our hands. By the last ending poems of *VS*, the boxes are completely gone and a seemingly more simplistic poetic style is used. This is to show how a submersion and observation of nature can be less complicated, and perhaps, through directly experiencing an aspect of the natural world, more nourishing than that of the complicated life of social media.

tailgate

mimics

rock

playlist

mimics

squawk

picnic

mimics

the hunt

flashlight

mimics

the sun

fire

mimics

time

smoke

mimics

flying

pavement

mimics

death

these verses

mimic

breath

Another way the physical forms of the VS poems mimic the physicality of nature, as seen above, is through #Tercets. Tercets have a funny way of wanting to sing in the key of nature. Perhaps it is their resemblance of the #Haiku, who are so devoted to image that they are usually dressed in the genre of nature.



Wallace Stevens uses a tercet form in the poem "Snowman" in which he speaks directly to the same appreciating notions of nature VS hopes to deliver. Stevens writes, with tercets, "For the listener, who listens in the snow, /And, nothing himself, beholds /Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens). Throughout VS, the same gestures at nature are tried, yet these physical forms are most potent towards the second half. Such examples can be in poems *Wildfires VS Firelines*,

a party of bees

drink up

cups empty

from fumes

of our presence

they roll

in our

leftover

effervescence

Or in *Taxi VS Uber*

techno savvy knickknacks

won't turn the turtle

flipped back

they might fill

with impatience

the cup

of the race's

hare-brained

runners-up

These types of later poems in *VS*, have a cleaner visual look to them. By

this I mean there is less going on with the visual forms of the poems. There are no text boxes, less jumping and uses of space, and the language reads with less modern techno-influenced jargon and slang, and the rhythmic movements as well as the rhymes get easier and more fluid in the movement of the lines. This is all to capture a simplicity and mystic power something such as art, nature, light, certain animals, anything not Googable, has when it doesn't give away easily, at our utmost convenient moment, an answer or experience of life. And why do this? If we see our humanistic responsibility as caretakers or babysitters of earth, how then will separating ourselves from it aid in our personal, artistic, or intellectual growth? How are we to understand ourselves and the world if both of those physical forms are ignored? We are not meant to experience or to see the world through camera lenses, but our own eye focal lenses, so let's get focused.

## PDC

My MFA experience has been an interesting one to say the least, but I got here from a very different and far away place. I feel very fortunate to have come from the Coachella Valley Desert, if only for the fact that there is located, where there isn't a whole lot, the CSUSB extension campus, or the Palm Desert Campus. This isolated campus, by desert crows and inhabitants, is referred to as PDC. PDC is where my undergraduate English coursework was done, and it was where one professor singlehandedly changed my life. Professor Lehigh participated as the sole proprietor in permanently altering my mind, he changed my perception of the world, helped develop my critical attitude towards art, my notions on what art even is, and my love for writing poetry. One might wonder how, I will attempt to explain.

Lehigh himself is a professor by nature. He is someone that teaches and learns from people because he is threaded with care and a certain awareness tightened between him and the people he encounters. Lehigh is interested in you not merely as a statistical digit or student or name on a roll call list or as a face to grade at the end of quarters, he is interested in what you have to contribute to the world.

At PDC, it seemed to be a universal understanding that as an artist, one cannot simply effortlessly and without a sense of craft attempt to create art, because when one makes art they are contributing to a pool of art that is filled with the human history of all art that has been created. There is a certain weight

and effort that gets embedded into one's attempts when they start to make art after realizing this.

When you go into a Lehigh class, this same notion for some reason kicks in, and you are no longer simply going to class, you are participating in some sort of ancient historic dialog not with Plato, not with Socrates, but with Lehigh, and more so, with the surrounding students that all feel the same way. Something quite special happened at PDC from 2012 to 2014 and class was less of a class and more of an organism which moved forward if intellect is a space and it grew fat and widened if artistic development is a body and it was fed by Lehigh, if great diverse and highly intelligent and creative collections of literary works were nourishment.

Along with the many others, there were two works Lehigh prescribed in his class that have heavily influenced my decisions on what to explore through art and poetry. The first is a national award winning young adult novel, *Feed*, by M.T. Anderson. The second, by critically acclaimed author known for his social critiques and environmental warnings, James Howard Kunstler, titled *Too Much Magic*. Anderson's novel has a more allegorical message, its underlying meaning that I felt the book was really trying to communicate to its reader was not something it was very direct in saying. This novel portrayed not just a futuristic world, but an idea of human beings and how we might change ourselves into being with the mistaken notion of this change as evolution. This novel showed one avenue an obsession with technology and social life experiences through

technology can lead us to. People are bored on the moon, and effortlessly pay for products they're told they want without even having to swipe a card or think about it. The boredom of nature and mindless buying into capitalistic trends in *Feed's* futuristic world, is not too far off from the world we currently live in.

However, it was Kunstler's, *Too Much Magic* that actually put these ideas into straightforward ideas, and real current life examples.

...After I gave my talk on the energy situation, some time had been reserved for questions and answers. There were no questions, only statements from several Googlers, and they all pretty much said the same thing, which might be summed up as *Like dude, we've got technology...*(subtext: *You're a asshole.*)

This informed me of something pretty scary: the executives and programmers at Google didn't know the difference between technology and energy. They assumed that these were interchangeable, that if you run out of one you just plug in the other, which is inconsistent with reality (Kunstler 5)

After reading this book, I was equally shocked as I was ashamed of the way I had seen the world, utterly inaccurately. I woke up out of some societal induced clouded daze that kept my conception of reality inside a brightly lit LCD screen. I realized that we are in fact draining the earth, the same earth that I



once walked on with my grandmother in el rancho, the same earth that I wrestled on, that I fell and bled on, the same earth I had a physical relationship with. I realized then, after reading such works at PDC, that I needed to reestablish an appreciation and awareness I once had with the physical land. It's what kept me mentally steady and focused and able to get school work done, to create art with a clear mind, and to function as a more descent and functional human being. It's what made me such a happy child, it was an essence I had been missing as a constant socializer strictly through social media. This spark is similar to some of the writings of the great Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke. In, "Letters to a Young Poet", Rilke writes,

If you trust in Nature, in what is simple in Nature, in the small Things that hardly anyone sees and that can so suddenly become huge, immeasurable...everything will become easier for you, more coherent and somehow more reconciling, not in your conscious mind perhaps, which stays behind, astonished, but in your innermost awareness, awakens, and knowledge (Rilke 30)

This spark that had awoken me, is the same spark, or set of ideas, that VS is attempting to suggest to its reader, by its mentioning of nature and implications that we ought to respect our physical world. Some of these notions are implied strictly in the tensions that are created within the titles, such as, *Wildlife VS*

*Campsites*, where a campsite which is man-made, compares against what that campsite is mimicking, which is the wild and all that live in the wild, free of parking fees and tent parties. In, *Squirrels VS Skyscrapers*, we build buildings and destroy the land as payment of those buildings, which contradicts a squirrel's building of trees, which doesn't destroy but create and adds to the land. Or in *Birds VS Semi-Trucks*, where the sounds of trucks transporting natural resources plucked from the earth's core shout over birds who are transporting seeds and sticks across fields and trees.

VS was birthed by the urge to investigate a way of life that has only recently developed. VS, as well as any sort of other poetry or work of art I've recently as a graduate student have attempted, usually has a critique or questioning of what we as people are doing to our planet and each other. This was initiated by my PDC undergraduate career. And as it turns out, my MFA experience has been book ended by the PDC campus. From my very first experiences in poetry through Lehigh's creative writing classes during my undergraduate years, to now in my very last enrolment in graduate school in Lehigh's 513 creative writing class on consciousness, PDC has shaped my poetic eye, which is something I will strive to continue to perfect. This poetic eye, this drive and ability to take rhythm embedded in my body and in the body of a pop culture form of communication we've developed, the sound of rhyme and phonetic music in language, and the spotting of instances in real life experiences to use as poetic topics and to integrate those tools into form, is why I am able to

create a manuscript such as *VS*, and it is at the PDC campus where I found the sources of artistic techniques and desires to put these tools to use. After *VS* is closer to its preferred state of being, I hope to continue to apply these tools I've acquired at PDC in my art, in my thoughts, in my approach to my life, to show people who I might encounter through these mediums, the importance of sustaining natural life, free of digital barriers, free of false communications, and free of self indulging disconnections from our physical world.

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APPENDIX

VS