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Got Your Tongue

Joseph Buckley
University of New Orleans, jbuckle2@uno.edu

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Got Your Tongue

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Creative Writing
Poetry

By
Joseph Buckley
B.A. Colorado State University, 2006
May, 2017

For God, Television, and every woman in my life.

Table of Contents

Missed Connections: A Preface	1
I	10
My New Her	11
Mailman, Newsmen, Television	13
Checking Out	14
The Dating World	15
Self-Immolating Action/Love Doll.....	17
Sex.....	19
Night Shift.....	20
Public Service Announcement.....	21
II.....	23
Without Ever Touching.....	24
Feral Animals in Urban Communities: A Case Study	25
In Other News	27
Okay Be	28
Sparring with Words	29
Caught in Catch.....	30
Traps	31
White Wine in Paper Cups.....	32
The Man in My Kitchen Cabinet	34
Suggestion Planes	35
Reflection.....	36
III.....	37
Where Are They Running.....	38
Conversations at Night.....	39
Let Them: One at a Time	40
Look at Them Now	41
The Day I Died.....	42
Scrapbooking with Death.....	43
California Dreamin'	44
Pic	45
The Missing Answer	46
Vita.....	47

Missed Connections: A Preface

I will write my richest poetry from my deathbed. Life experience, my writing practice, and years of reading will further enrich my poetic craft. However, there's still a great need for me to write now: to fully develop the lens through which I understand the world and, in turn, communicate this understanding to my audience. My graduate thesis, *Got Your Tongue*, centers on my personal disconnection from reality. I hope that these poems are crafted with a subtle, subversive surreality and come across as satiric in tone. Through the use of satire and surrealism, the poems should display a slight glimmer of hope in spite of the speaker's detachment. This disjunction mirrors my relationship to poetry, which began before I even knew what poetry was. During family holidays, my father would recite *The Night Before Christmas*, and my uncle would recite Alfred Lord Tennyson to my siblings and me. Twenty years later, I elected to pursue an MFA in creative writing. However, my connection to poetry is actually removed, similar to my disconnection with reality.

In 1924, Andre Breton released his "Surrealist Manifesto," which defines surrealism as a "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express -- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern (75)." This pure state of automatism describes the way I draft my poems. Additionally, I intend for my poems to include qualities of satire. *Dictionary.com* defines satire as "a literary

composition, in verse or prose, in which human folly and vice are held up to scorn, derision, or ridicule.” Satire and surrealism are contradictory. For a work to be surreal (exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern), it would not serve the rhetorical function inherent to satire, which is to undermine the subject the satire addresses. However, I hope my poems borrow specific aspects from both movements. The psychic-automatism Breton references, is an idea I try to invoke when I generate my poems. After the automated-generation I try to imbue further meaning into the poems through satiric tones. Through the use of these ideas, I intend to demonstrate my theme of human isolation in modern life.

During my time in the MFA, I have cultivated my poetic voice by studying surrealist poets such as Charles Simic. His collection of prose poems, *The World Doesn't End*, demonstrates his use of subtle and unexpected turns. In his poem, “Fork,” Simic illuminates a different side of a fork’s life: “This strange thing must have crept/ right out of hell/ It resembles a bird’s foot/ worn around the cannibals neck” (1-4). The fork is shown to have significance beyond just a tool. The speaker of the poem thinks the fork is straight from hell, which causes him to then reconsider his sense of self, as someone who consumes, in the following stanza. My poems, “Scrapbooking with Death” and “Conversations at Night” have taken from Simic their similarly strange depictions of common objects. In “Scrapbooking with Death,” death as personified suffers from loneliness, and in “Conversations at Night,” I mean to reimagine a mannequin as someone who has a better life than its observer.

In this surrealist vein, my poetry accesses the actual function of my thought. I try to represent the chaos of human thought without regard to reason or “moral concern.” For example,

“Where Are They Running,” and “Mailman, Newsman, Television” feature foreboding moods and unresolved conclusions. Something’s not quite right as it’s unclear who the runners are running from, or why bad things happen to the man and woman inside their house. However, these are some of the most subtle examples, whereas other poems such as “In Other News” and “The Dating World,” take more blatant surreal opportunities by bringing dinosaurs to life and depicting a man trying to date a sloth. Bringing inanimate objects and ideas to life is an idea that originates from the free flowing thoughts of surrealism. It is how my poems are generated, but I also try to give them further heft by nurturing a satiric tone.

Despite the impulses of surrealist design, my satiric tone aims to undermine the arbitrariness of certain objects and structures humans have collectively created. Punk rock is a genre of rock and roll that’s inherently satiric and as a collective genre it mocks just about every idea in sight. The lyrics of The Dead Kennedy’s, a politically-charged punk band, have shown me how satire can enhance the message of their art. A song such as “Moral Majority” challenges politics and religion:

You say “God loves you. Come and buy the good news”

Then you buy the president and swimming pools

If Jesus don’t save ‘til we’re lining your pockets

God must be dead if you’re alive.

The punk-rock approach is acerbic, but a band such as The Dead Kennedy’s also intends to effect social change through their subversive messages. The Dead Kennedy’s wanted to expose the corruption they saw in politics, as demonstrated with “Moral Majority.” I want these poems

to function in the same way Punk music reveals the truths it sees. My intention is to take some of that acerbic wit to add themes and tone to the surreal conception of my poems.

A poem such as “Public Service Announcement,” in which a man falls in love with a gun, is a tonally glib mocking of people’s love of material objects. Through exaggeration and explicit language it serves to undermine the fever-pitch fanaticism that surrounds firearms in this country, not to mention how it seems to be a phenomenon disproportionately occurring with men. It features the couplet and the use of satire:

Jimmy laid out bullet-shells like rose-petals
lit candles and proposed to the gun
Jimmy found a dirty keyring
that he slid over the barrel
Jimmy thrust the gun in and out of his ass
while stroking his penis (29-35).

My intention is to mock and expose the frightening connection to guns a great deal of people have in our country. The satiric tone is intended to give the poem a strong social commentary, which bolsters its themes.

The strophic and prose paragraph structures of my poems further their depiction of my worldview. I use free verse couplets to create chaos and challenge meaning and intent through line breaks and enjambment. The couplet acts like a leash for the flightiest ideas. The structure of the poems will never get too far out of hand because of their grounding within the couplet. This

is best represented in the poem “Feral Animals in Urban Communities: A Case Study” when the poem’s content appears uncontrollable:

neighborhood didn’t like the city’s solution
of urbanizing all the coyotes from Canada
to Guatemala to stifle the cat’s meows,
when the coyotes ran them off
and killed the chaff. Subsequently
the coyotes worked entire blocks (15-20).

Each couplet builds on the one before. Therefore, the line breaks create energy and deeper meanings, as more and more animals join the cityscape. In addition, the couplet looks aesthetically beautiful on the page. The couplet grounds, groups, and doubles. The space between the two lines almost acts as a line itself until there’s one big family of lines that are tight and playful.

A poem such as “My New Her” represents form, content, and function coming together.

The couplets enhance or double the meaning of the narrative:

I give her things, like a face
made from old-fashioned magazines:
a symmetrically perfect composite
of the popular world’s
most voted for physical features,
cut and pasted together: so breathless (15-20).

The couplet sets a slow rhythm here to give the poem a frank tone. Additionally, the couplet allows the surreal narrative of taking home a model skeleton to take on greater meaning through the line breaks. “I give her things, like a face” on its own suggests one idea but also sets up the next line, “made from old fashioned magazines,” which may surprise the reader. I also mean for the frank to suggest satire, as the speaker is deriding his former lover through a comparison with his current lover, the model skeleton. My intention is to have the surreal situation allow for the frank and biting tone, all inside of the formality of couplets. The counterbalance of the couplets to the illogical images represents a disconnection.

The poets Russell Edson and James Tate have also influenced the poems in this collection. Tate’s use of dialogue in his collection of prose poetry, *Dome of the Hidden Pavilion*, inspired my approach to “The Man in My Kitchen Cabinet.” Tate repeats simple speaker tags in a poem such as “The Baby” so often that the back and forth of the speakers slows the rhythm of the poem: “I said, ‘I’m afraid to go into the woods at night. Please don’t make me go into the woods.’ ‘But somebody has stolen our baby and has taken it into the woods. You must go’ she said. We don’t have a baby, Cynthia. How many times must I tell you that?’ I said (Tate, 4).” The speaker’s tags slow the rhythm and give a sense of refrain in Tate’s prose poem. The tags further serve to ground the reader as the characters of the poem unravel.

Edson’s mark can also be seen in a handful of the poems in this collection: “Night Shift,” “Look at Them Now,” “Okay, Be,” and “Suggestion Planes.” His collection *The Tormented Mirror*, which reimagines domestic spaces, has played a significant influence in the way the tone of his poems work. The objects in Edson’s poems are often placed in funny and impossible

situations. His techniques are more brazen than Tate and Simic. A poem such as “The Key,” displays the potential of juxtaposing objects to create new ideas: “I think I’ve found the key to the universe, said the old woman showing the old man her crocheting hook. Look how it unlocks your beard and my shawl and relocks them as one. Why, you hardly tell where one ends and the other begins (Edson, 15)” The shawl and the beard become one and offer a different view of the man’s *beard* and the woman’s *shawl*. Because of its hybridity and because of the way it works with the sentence instead of the line, the prose poem breaks away from traditional poetic structure as described by David Lehman in his introduction to *Great American Prose Poems*:

The form of a prose poem is not an absence of form. It is just that the sentence and the paragraph must act the part of the line and the stanza, and there are fewer rules and governing traditions to observe, or different ones, because the prose poem has a relatively short history and has enjoyed outsider status for most of that time.

In the same way the prose poem challenges the traditional poetic structure, the context of my poems subverts whatever rhetorical situation is being explored. The subversive qualities of the prose poem reinforce the satiric and challenging vision I have of the human experience, as seen in a poem such as “Night Shift.”

Gertrude Stein has influenced my use of inversion, elision, repetition, and reordering of proper syntax as tactics. Stein’s poem “Susie Asado” directly influences poems such as “Caught in Catch,” and “White Wine in Paper Cups.” Stein’s poem achieves meaning through syntactical organization and the sounds of words in a specific order, “A pot. A pot is a beginning of a rare bit of trees. Trees tremble, the old vats are in bobbles, which shade and shove and render clean,

render clean must. Drink pups” (11-13). Here the chaos of speech and word sounds is explored through the progression and repetition of the words. This creates a fast rhythm, and the phrases of the poem continue to build from previous words so heavily that at poem’s end, it has almost spun out of control.

Through form, tone, and content, the poems included in *Got Your Tongue* are intended to come from a place of pure thoughts and find further thematic strength through choices of tone. The prose poem, free verse, and couplet forms embody the messages I wish to communicate with my audience. I’m trying to communicate and build a disconnect for the reader that resembles the world I experience in my life, a world at times hard to believe. This manuscript of poems should challenge the beliefs of its readers. It should offer a hint of hope. It should offer new perspectives to old ideas, because there’s always another side to any story.

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I

My New Her

Back when we were all about navigating
the space between two people,

that space bloomed and fell
in equally mystic instances.

Now I'm all about the space
between me and my new her,

which, when I reach my hand
out, I shorten simply.

I used to struggle
to wear empathy because no matter

what my size, those emotions never fit.
Now love is easier. My new her

doesn't speak. Although skeletons
model, empathy's not a pose.

I give her things, like a face
made from old-fashioned magazines:

a symmetrically perfect composite
of the popular world's

most voted-for physical features,
cut and pasted together: so breathless.

I remember watching you
try on clothes: how amazed I was

to see your mind at play. When I dangle her
white bones over designer boots

I bought for her, she never changes
her mind. She never gets upset

when I come home late. I've found
she simply doesn't share your opinion

that I've let myself go. She doesn't share
my opinion either. In fact

her thoughts drift out enigmatic
and vaporous as yours, but your thoughts

come from a time when everything magical
popped out in front of me, from unknown

black hats, up to and including the day
you walked away and I stumbled through dark alleys

looking through empty trash bins
for other fragments from other wholes.

That's when I spotted her and thought
she looked just like someone I once knew.

Mailman, Newsman, Television

On the couch next to me, a girl ate beef with her hands.

An airplane fell through my television like the ball at New Year's.

Blood splatted onto the girl's favorite blue striped blouse.

I wet a rag and dabbed at the red indication. It was then a wetter shade of red.

Termites tore into my house's foundation with tiny chainsaws.

On the coffee table laid a newspaper that was entirely blank.

Don Waddles' wife laughed not knowing the definition of tomato blight.

School kids read books aloud to trees on how paper's made.

A phone rang, rang for more trash cans.

The exterminator laughed after he smashed and swallowed all the bugs.

Paint sprayed on my walls read like a phone book written by baby arms.

My house didn't shake when the wind blew. It screamed as if it were smacked.

My mailbox filled up with fire-drill escape routes.

With only one door there were zero fucks cared about the effects of scorching on flesh.

The coupons reproduced. If something's not done soon, they'll all blow away.

The striped blouse became the stained blouse and the girl removed it.

Checking Out

In the grocery line,
iconized on wire racks,
is God on the cover of all
the tabloids:

God's Fall!
Will He See Grace Again!

He wears a flame-print
swimsuit with sporty sunglasses
and barbed-wire and tribal
tattoos wrap his arms.

Is The Heavenly Father
a Sexist Misogynist?

Co-eds drape themselves
around the man upstairs,
and he thrusts his pelvis
and tongue at them.

Does God Have a Drinking
or Drug Problem?

God's omnipotent hand
holds a pink drink topped
by a paper umbrella:
an asterisk for an unknown footnote.

God Caught in the Act
in Club 59 Bathroom!

Drool drips from his lower lip,
seeking salvation, in his
now stained beard, and the white
robes appear yellow and mold-green.

God Checks Into Rehab,
No Longer Speaking With Mankind!

The Dating World

FADE IN:

EXT. PUBLIC PARK - DAY

SLOTH, seen as three-toe's, at a car door. Glamour nails can't grip the handle. Hair is mangy and shoots off in random directions. The way its mouth creases is like an almost mocking smile. Inside the car is ME, anemic, 30s, desperate, a mountain of cigarette butts and empty coffee cups next to me in the passenger's seat. A cloud of smoke so thick, it's opaque.

ME, eyelids twitter, tweaking the upper lip, this way, ok, that way, pouting it, pursing both lips together.

FADE TO:

INT. FANCY RESTAURANT - NIGHT

SLOTH eating lobster, then swallowing the whole cup of drawn butter, then the cup, then the lobster shell, moves on to the food on MY plate, MY napkin, and then MY tie.

ME unable to control MY sweat. Folded hands, legs crossed, elbows off the table. Tries to steady shaking hold spilling third cocktail on its way to MY lips. Forced smile.

MONTAGE:

SLOTH and ME on the couch, in front of the television, strapped in ambivalence. Cartoon hearts float up and pop. The word "Love" appears.

ME with a look of elation, ebullient, the corners of my smile quiver with emotional impact. Eyelids tremor, body burns, bones gelatinize?

CUT TO:

ME shrugging my shoulders repeatedly

CUT TO:

ME throwing the sloth's jars of dried bugs, leaf-print throw, and inversion table into the yard.

CUT TO:

ME crying on my knees, hands folded and held to the sky.

CLOSE ON ME looking at a framed picture of the SLOTH and ME holding hands in front of the insectarium. The sloth wearing a baseball hat that reads, "Buggin' Out." MY expression is of panicked forgiveness.

BACK TO SCENE:

EXT. BEACH - DAY - *Climactic Music Plays*

ME on a beach, eyes wide, running through swarms of sandpipers and seagulls, toward the SLOTH. SLOTH standing still, belly flared, tilts its neck to the side and stares at ME with the mock smile, falls over to play with a bug in the sand.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOME - DAY

ME and SLOTH on rocking chairs, glasses with tea. Gaze into one another's eye, gaze into the horizon.

FADE BACK:

EXT. PUBLIC PARK - DAY

ME continually shifting my hips, hands, and lips to look sexy and available in the car. ME unable to sit still. SLOTH stands at my door, homeless bees swarm, the sun suns.

FADE OUT.

Self-Immolating Action/Love Doll

With my hair painted
on my head in a crew cut
(stiff plastic), like the package
I lived in, each day
the flat lights rose,
a machine blew bubbles
that drew over neon flowers
and my life without additions
was simple.

Your parents took me
off the shelf for you,
dressed in your pink
skirt, barrettes thumbed
into your shoulder-length hair
and in your warm touch
my stiff body softened
so the petting was like a birth
through the tips of your fingers.
You called me *doll*
and my camo pants
grew tight.

Later, you found a new friend
who tossed me in a dirty
clothes pile, while you played
the same games with his body
you had played before
with mine. Words such as *shame* and *desire*,
were now not so new to me.
Sadness too, before and after
you left me for days, months, then years
among basketballs, and roller-skates in a bin,
in the garage. I waited and waited,
feeling defective. Why
did I still hold
out for the hope
we could play together again?
How had I come

to abandon my duties?

I have your shoelace around my neck.
and I hope you'll remember
the snap after I jump
from your bedpost
above the two of you
fucking without me.
When you read this letter,
will you know my struggle?

Sex

We had it over for supper and when it stroked the cold flatware a strange mucus dripped from the silver handles. It moaned when the butter spread and passed and then the table shook. The table shook and the china cabinet doors shuddered. There was the squishing and the flipping and flopping. He was had under the table, then over it, the in and out and on and on. He was had uncomfortably rigorous at first, then blissful, then exhausting, then it was a load-lifting relief. He didn't eat any of the food we had him over for. He just tossed the food about and came over.

Night Shift

The fruits in the terminal ward had entered their final stages of rotting. Some were already subsumed in green and white pustules. Others had just begun spotting. The oranges, kiwis, apples, and mangos all tried to cover up their rotting with lipsticks and powders, but their postures gave them away. We set them, with the humbler others in wicker baskets. The staff pushed them around the sterile ward hallways in shopping carts, bundled like distressed Tiny Tims.

I was called the juicer. My job was to scoop away the pulp remainders into a large garbage disposal, once the fruit had passed. After turning to juice, the mess went down the drain like water from the tap. No one wanted to eat the fruits anymore. A fact the staff is told to never speak aloud. Just push them in carts. Leave them alone, smile often.

One banana came in so brown, deflated, and limp they had it in an airtight baggy. It didn't notice that brown goo dripped out of cracks in its peel. When I looked into its moldy peel, I saw its former yellow firmness. My sorrow and admiration overtook me, so I snuck into the bananas room that night and worked its peel off. I ate the entire mess of liquefying-mold-banana so it wouldn't die alone.

Public Service Announcement

Jimmy and Jane loved each other
very much and married.

One day Jimmy bought a pistol
to protect his sacred union.

The townspeople looked unfavorably
on change.

The weight of the steel in Jimmy's hand
enlightened him.

Jimmy's love for his gun grew.

The town held an ongoing seminar for self-care.
Jimmy never went.

Jimmy took the pistol to bed.

Jimmy whispered secrets to the gun.

Just last week a boy killed a dog
playing with his daddy's gun.

Jimmy cleaned and rubbed the gun
until it shined with bright ideas.

He missed Jane's birthday
and the birth of their daughter.

Jane asked Jimmy to move out.

Jimmy lived on a bourbon-stained mattress
in the back of his pick-up.

The townspeople were concerned for Jimmy.

They worried when the truck hadn't moved

for three weeks.

Jimmy laid out bullet-shells like rose-petals,
lit candles and proposed to the gun.

Jimmy found a dirty keyring
that he slid over the barrel.

To consecrate their union
Jimmy lubricated the barrel.

Jimmy thrust the gun in and out of his ass
while stroking his penis.

In desperate confusion Jimmy had to climax
at the same time as the gun.

II

Without Ever Touching

The blind man walks into the subway
but cannot see which lines go

where Wind in city streets picks
up hats and bags then runs out of heads

and hands A little girl laces
her high-tops shoots basketball

at skyscrapers The goals are missing
windows I dream in fast cars

aimed at brick walls
I dream but when

I try to draw myself
in I can't move from the page

A mother cradles a pile of leaves
mouthing loving words The leaves

fall apart leap frogging over one
another without ever

touching Television's music fills
balloons for deaf children

without hands laughing
The moon looms like a wrestler

ready to drop his best move
from the top rope

Feral Animals in Urban Communities: A Case Study

When the city wept from the force of mice
that duplicated as rapidly as the waste

that was the mice's food, city fathers
decided it was in their best interest

to stamp out the problem as one would
any spark or wildfire.

The simple plan: breed an overabundance of
cats, that would no doubt grow hungry

and wipe out the mouse problem,
until it became a cat problem

before day's end. The city's lower income
areas were hit hard by roaming bands of cats,

the meows of which could be heard late
into the night. The slightly more well-to-do

neighborhood didn't like the city's solution
of urbanizing all the coyotes from Canada

to Guatemala to stifle the cat's meows,
when the coyotes ran them off

and killed the chaff. Subsequently,
the coyotes worked entire blocks of the

slightly more well-to-do than the slightly more
well-to-do neighborhoods, which caused more

outcries. Hardly had the coyotes spread
when the council lured black bears

from the Appalachians. Bears who
immediately looted small cars and dumpsters

and bullied school kids who carried bagged
lunches at recess. The most well-to-do

recoiled when the wily bears
climbed their fruit trees tossing

orange peels over their 12-foot white-cement-fences,
which they afforded through their private

exchange of cash with illegal dealers
for the sale of extremely not well-

to-do people brought over to the city
by boats rampant with mice.

In Other News

Larger than the width of the sidewalk,
larger than cars: yes, larger

than the boy bundled to his eyes in wool.
The tail was purple, the tail

was green-spotted, the tail connected
to a Tyrannosaurus-Rex,

who curled under newspaper blankets,
headlines reading: *Snow*.

Snow covered the dinosaur. Snow fell
over buildings, signs, and eyes

for years. As far back as anyone could recall: snow.
Villainous-insistence, relentless insistently

the white came. Dreamy white powder,
permeable white, moldable

as bars of soap; Over the beast's dead-gray skin,
the boy laid his scarf.

Okay, Be

The hand that crafted the snow globe suffered a real bad accident. It was mangled. The other hand was a left hand. So the two hands, one normal, one mangled, went about crafting a life in miniature.

They built a tiny train. The asymmetrical hands couldn't center the cars on the rails, left or right, over the tracks. The tracks were poked, in alternating intensities, into a glue pool.

It would be okay, the hands knew it was winter in the globe: all white.

The mountains beyond the train tracks resembled partially eaten apples. The mountain scene was made to be realistic: trees jammed into rocky cliffsides. The trees were twigs that the mismatched hands kept cracking.

The scene was more dropped on its head, than mountain majestic: glue fastened missed connections.

The normal hand and the mangled hand painted stars on the rear-inside of the globe that looked like white wounds. This would be okay too, the hands knew, and the snow covered the scene.

Sparring with Words

Day and night he sat
at a desk built to conjure

from the depths, of space,
from branches in his window

framed by the light holding
bright birds who sang

to him poems, as he typed,
My love is like...

Papers crumpled and piled
around him. Each typewriter

clack consumed more
of the man's strength.

Misfired attempts surrounded
him like so many opponents,

horrified and subsumed by black
letters like cataracts in his eyes.

He blindly punched the keys
until they slapped their beauty

onto the white.

Caught in Catch

The wide-world caught webs in webs. Let them
catch disease with more sickness
and let that spread through the same
means as convivial greetings,
the same ends as medians.
Let the web let them, spiral down,
oceans, up
skies, yes, skies, and through the *hey, all right,*
throbbing hearts
kept in pockets that open up web-filled showers
of *pretty cool* web-threads.

All phones stall, web weeps, there's not enough web-thread to sew ends to
gather, carry the too (to keep going) too fast, to *look out*:

A non-fast man slows women,
hey look at me, hey look at me
outsidein
and thread through web,
the questionof
man woman,
throbbing hearts,
the question of
web(without thread)

and inside his pants pockets (contagion).
and inside her pants pockets *it's all ZZZ's*
and the web said, *the web said*.
A lot of words.
Without web-thread the web said
end this,

Traps

The bicycle weeps. The melancholic lightning. The swan wanders. The bucolic disposition. The thought shelter. The shadow throws ambulation.

The gutter-steaks. Sidewalks cry violins: cuckolded.

The rubber shoe. Squeak panic: bouquet colors: flowers petal fallen ashtrays.

The matriculated lichen: the antithetic incumbent debate: faux letters fall. The swan wanders: slipstreams: prays.

The dry squares. The bramble before the firing squad: clicks zeroes.

No.

Clicks.

Hopeful

wanders swan, drowned: statuary surrounds: quiet. Now. The pool heaves: overpopulated: beached obituaries. The wind blows: cocked. The deconstructed coops. The exhausted containers: popped lids.

The coupons: The wilted: The spent.

White Wine in Paper Cups

Hello echoes when I speak
into my cup.

Hello echoes
it has zero to say
it just repeats me. The wine
ripples. I'm broke,
morally, ripples
like shards,
as if finally upgrading. We're going
to finally afford
to buy a house,
she says and she says
move up there.
Up where?

Hello echoes.

Landscape shift.

Slide.

Now we're somewhere,

echoes *Hello*.

Where it goes from here

I don't wanna know.

I don't want to know,

she says,

I don't want to go.

It echoes like hello, okay,

we've got the shards, all right

hands full with all

the past spills,

then there's the wine,

the wine

like *Hello*?

Are we in a Los Angeles timeline

right now? I'm an actor

and you're the sunset strip.

She says are we ever leaving anything

behind, will we
ever leave
anything behind?
We haven't gone
 anywhere
she says are we
ever echoes *Hello*.

The Man in My Kitchen Cabinet

He doesn't wear any clothes. His beard and hair have grown into a single tangle that twirls and twines its way around his gnarled, root-like limbs. Contorted into the cubical space, he resembles a blinking bush that given enough sun may overrun the kitchen. One of his hands he raises above himself, this holds a cupboard in place. His other hand he loops through the handle of my favorite coffee mug. The one with a cat's face on the front and its rear on the rear.

I ask, "May I please use that mug?" He says, "I'm sorry, I cannot. This mug tells me the future." I reply, "It's very important to me." He says, "This mug is very important to me." He holds it to his ear. I say, "You're getting it dirty." He says, "Listening to the future." He places the mug over his mouth and mumbles words I can't hear. I say, "What're you saying into that mug?" He says, "Possible answers." I say, "To what?" He says, "The future wonders how this can be without me." What's this? I think to myself. He says, "This is your future and quite some mug."

Suggestion Planes

Written on a piece of cardboard
strung around my neck are the words
“suggestion planes.” Strangers come
to offer suggestions, which I
write onto paper, then fold
the aphorisms into planes.

I tie one of my shoes to one
of these bent messages.
In the shoe I set a friendship
bracelet. Blots of rain dragged
the flying paper back down
to the ground, the sky moved on.

With the other shoe on my foot,
I’m lopsided, walking,
and listing left,
in circles. Strangers stare
without a word.
I point a camera back
at my face, snap a picture
and set the portrait into my other
shoe. I tie the shoe to another
paper plane, and send it off. I kneel,
open and cup my empty hands.

None of the planes
have made it back.

Reflection

Make-up mirrors arrived ashore,
riding high tide like shooting-star
wishes, now fallen, now jetsam:

empty crosses, empty crowns,
fallen towers, fallen towns,
broken bodies, then bones.

Rats raced from sunken ships,
lapped at the wreckage of left-overs,
nibbled at busted structures,

the ever hopefuls want to
find something helpful to
look into: scouring the shore.

Small findings reflected small images,
limited to two or three inches,
one idea, only one. Ocean

tide beached more baubles,
with traces of the gold that once
glittered, and the mirror

stayed honest, but all the faces
who look cannot see
if nothing's there. The rats scatter.

III

Where are They Running

I watch horror movies
in slow motion and reverse.
The victim's running feet
keep trying to stay off the ground.

A moment occurs before
they've seen their threat
before any of them begin to run.
I press pause after I see their faces
panic, as the rewinding face
settles gradually back to calm

like a wave retreating.
In this moment their expression
is like a just born baby.
Outside my door
everyone I've ever known
with the same calm expression

and nothing behind them.
There's nothing
in front of them either
yet they continue to run.
All their feet trying
to escape the ground.

Conversations at Night

A pane of glass divides a mannequin
from the raindrops that punctuate my skin.
I lean close to the glass to touch
the heat of its never-night world:

The heat of the flat beach scene
the mannequin poses by with a hand
in the come hither position. I tell
the mannequin the names of my children, pets, and wife.
I tell how I can't keep any of my houseplants
alive and my lack of faith in having faith.
I try to communicate my inability
to distinguish between a lover and barbed wire,
between surfeit and shame.
I try to tell a joke.

My breath leaves a bloom of fog on the window
and my face leaves three holes in the bloom.
I ask the mannequin if it knows
a place with good margaritas
and could I join it in its life
on the other side of the window.
Next to the picture of white sand,
green trees and a cruise ship,
all the tiny people wave themselves off
to a place, I so clearly dream.

Let Them: One at a Time

In my dogs' mouth a fallen angel:
I kneel under the dripping sky: why? Why angel body
parts want to be drawn by hand. White body parts:
expressing faces etched by hands I'd never
shaken. Why the saliva soaks into their white bodies
never to be seen again.
My dog scratches dirt from a patch
in our backyard. My dog claws
open a hole of earth, a hole with a pile of maggots
creeping around a pile of white bodies. White angel
bodies crumple here and there unashamed
that I now see inside,
unashamed that I now see a hyper-extended
knot of limbs, legs braided, elbows in mouths, and one
lonely white angel slapped against the hole's wall
as if it were climbing, its lower torso
a yellow maggot bikini. Despite the mud and blood,
despite the unknown depth of the pile, despite the stained not-white,
their hand-drawn faces stay unaffected.
Their intention was their existence.

Look at Them Now

Lately, I've taken to planting memories in my backyard. They grow like any tree or bush, with grass between, with negative space between.

The planting process is simply complicated. I reach my hand to my scalp, push past the hard skull bones and finger around the tender brain muscle until I hook one. They always wiggle between my thumb and forefinger, like a cold caterpillar. Teeth without lips emerge from one end of the tube-shaped memory.

Once planted, I settle into my lawn chair: memories sprout and flourish at different rates, days, weeks, maybe months. Initially, the memories all look the same, incubating inside bubbles that sprout from stems, that sprout from tree-type stumps. They're foetal and rounded like organ spirals.

The memories are characters, fuzzy like home movies. They look real. Broadcast across their skin, as if their flesh were filmstrip that flips through images so fast they blend into the one before and after. The images are the faces of those who've ever looked me in the eye. Repeated at such a rate the faces homogenize into a stranger. Each memory is like someone you pass once on a sidewalk.

And then the snow starts falling. I lose myself in the rows like a cornfield. The snow weighs the bubbles on their stems. Some break off and are lost in the white, some sag a small amount, clinging to their roots. Frozen out by the world that moves around them.

The Day I Died

It is 6 a.m. on a Monday,
and my cat purrs
by my dead body
slumped on the floor
in a puddle of cold
oatmeal my cat sticks
her tongue out to taste,
taking no notice
of the difference in my life.
Roaches scatter
from the small band of sun
that slides through a window
to warm my corpse.
The oatmeal tastes bland;
my body's too soft to scratch.
My desktop, busied by bills
paid and unpaid.
The computer's feed scrolls
on, relentless as time.
My friend Becky talks
to Freddy about what
Randy talks to himself
about. My phone
doesn't ring but
the alarm beeps.
Pictures on the wall
stay smiling.
Dust piles slow
as it has since
1984, in the spaces
between footprints.
While astronauts explore
the red dirt of mars,
my thin house wobbles
in the wind. It's going
to keep the neighbors away.
Scrapbooking with Death

Scrapbooking With Death

In the craft aisle stood
a skeleton. Collected
in a shroud of dust.
The skeleton pushed
a cart filled
with x-ed out portraits
and topped with scissors,
glue, glitter, string,
and colored paper.
The left bone-hand
couldn't let go
of a dull scythe
that whined
across the tile floor.
A lingerie mannequin
tripped the skeleton.
Cart, supplies, scythe,
and pictures all floated
into chaos, which stopped
amid clothing racks,
and mannequins dressed
in sweaters with hand
stitched hearts.
The skeleton sat down
by all the faces
it touched once,
then chopped and glued
and glittered,
glittered. It would've
cried but
had no eyes.

California Dreamin'

At the wheel of my taxi
on Sunset Boulevard.
Three zombies in the backseat
draped in mink with nametags

that read Actor, Actor, Actor.
Dust coated their glam-glasses:
they couldn't see the sun
set some time ago.

The paparazzi, tabloid writers,
and bloggers went extinct.
The hills we drove
were dark and contrived.

Billboards bombed the sky.
White letters like a vision
H-O-L-Y
no one could account

for the other four,
that maybe burned out
like the shriveled zombie
lips that fell from their faces

as they tried to tell me
their final destinations.
Their body's remainders
crumbled like old film negatives.

I rolled down the window
and their disembodied
parts strayed into space,
noisy as stars. Palms passed

as a round of applause.
I drove on.

Pic

News cameras, phone cameras,
camera cameras,
snapped in a line
that parodied down the mountain.
Those in the line
didn't want
to be the one
not to see
the next best thing.
I couldn't remember
a time when
I wasn't in line.
This line ended
in a cliff.
Once my turn,
my next step forward
was over and I fell
slowly with others
not far behind
me and others before me
in pieces below me.
Now that it seemed
I was dying,
I was dying
to not know.
Looking back
at the people
along the edge
I was reminded
of a picture
I had seen.

The Missing Answer

Our ladder rose
from the failed relationships
that could only be
escaped by going up.

It stretched into a new
social strata. Tall enough
for a new world
of thought. Decisions

such as what to do when
it hurts, or when one cries
were below us.
To our old world we turned

our backs and ascended
through the clouds - beyond
where the trees and birds
ended, beyond terrestrial

confusions. We climbed beyond
the world's chatter, beyond
heavenly ideas. We were so far

up that we didn't care
about the existence of words,
such as *up* and *down*.

Our desire to uncover
the unknown
was all we had left
and from this height
it stung us like a punch line.

VITA

Joseph Buckley was born in New Hartford, NY. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts from Colorado State University in 2007. Joseph joined the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop in 2013 to earn his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing concentrating in the genre of poetry. He hopes to pursue poetry study for the remainder of his life in addition to teaching.