

Star Apocrypha

Christopher Buckley

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The vibrant hardscapes of California's streets, beaches, and sere, high deserts frame the austere beautiful internal terrain of middle age, in this new collection by regional poet and scholar Buckley.

The poetry, mostly free verse, and of moderate length, immediately engages the reader with focused, sometimes startling imagery. A bell-ringing "Death rid[ing] past / the thrift stores on a Mexican bicycle" offers a freewheeling vision of mortality. That vision is echoed later by these lines from "Some Last Existential Thoughts at Surf Beach": "shepherds / in their autumn-colored capes" with "violet smoke / that covers the tiny music of their herds."

A seasoned, aging wayfarer comments with frank humor, or heartbreaking sadness, on the inconsistencies, lies, and indifference of a complex universe, as poignantly as birds in blue eucalyptus trees, "singing their hearts out / for nothing but the last crumbs / of daylight pinpointing the small space of their lives," in "Prayer to Escape the East."

Not the East Coast satirical novelist, but possibly his more soulfully literary alter ego, this Christopher Buckley has published several poetry books and anthologies that have won him numerous accolades, including a Fulbright Award and four Pushcart Prizes. As the chair of the University of California, Riverside's Creative Writing Department, he stands firmly within the academic discipline of study, reflection, and objective distance from his subject. Yet he never lapses into tiresome pedagogic lectures on the "meaning of life," but gently accompanies the reader on excursions, such as to a beachside bench or cheap motel room, that celebrate emotional and philosophical connections made along the way.

Like Thom Gunn, Gary Snyder, and other modern poets whose informal style of philosophical questing complements their easy intimacy with the natural, feeling world, Buckley's new volume deserves an honored place on the shelves of well-rounded libraries and bookstores.

JOSEPHINE ARROWOOD (September / October 2001)

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