

DAVID CAMPBELL

On The Flip Side, 2015
Oil on Canvas, 17 x 17 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

Beggars & Choosers

A reminder that small things can bring riches

Fourth grade, after school ... half a mile walk down East Valley Road to the YMCA. I kill afternoons watching high school kids shoot S-ball on the only pool table I've ever seen. When it closes up at 5:00, I take myself out to the cement steps in front and sit in the dark waiting for my parents to collect me after work.

I'm trailing a pack of eighth graders on the dirt path beside the road. Bernard Lambert, the star athlete at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, is bragging how he'll be playing hardball, hitting homers off over-hand pitching this summer in Little League. He's swigging a 12 oz. Coca Cola—top dog, and everything comes as easy as tilting his head back and draining the last of his Coke while his pals look on.

Then, tossing the bottle over his shoulder into the gulch, like it's nothing, like he's made of money, he glances back up the path gives me a, *watch it kid*, icy glare, then turns and leads his gang down the road. I keep my head down, hang back, make it look like I saw nothing, hoping no one else paid attention, so if I come back later, the bottle will still be there.

When I get to the village, the little grocery and soda fountain next to the Y, I find my pal Greg Burlingler and tell him about the bottle, the 2¢ deposit we can redeem. We've both got iron-on patches on the knees of our blue uniform pants, a button missing or rip in our shirts. He doesn't quite believe it, but between us, all we have in our pockets is lint, so we double up on his bike and Greg hauls us back up the road. We're amazed it's there, and I scramble down and pick the bottle out of the weeds. We coast back down hill to the store and turn it in for two sticks of red licorice each, feeling one up on the world for once....

Sixty years, and the scene comes back to me this afternoon. After a rare afternoon of rain, our local blue jay squawks from the eaves. I go to the sliding door and pitch a peanut out on the patio, call him with a couple clicks. He swoops right down, shakes his bedraggled feathers, grabs it, then hesitates as I toss a couple more. He puts the first one down to weigh the next one in his beak, trying to find the biggest—takes his time selecting one before flying off ... and I feel rich and happy and joyous as he goes from supplicant to a minor prince of the republic.

Christopher Buckley's *STAR JOURNAL: Selected Poems* will be published by the Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, Fall 2016. His third nonfiction book, *Holy Days of Obligation*, is out from Lynx House Press, 2014. He edited *On The Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing*, Recipient of a Guggenheim in Poetry, two NEAs, Fulbright Award in Creative Writing, four Pushcart Prizes; 2013 winner of the Campbell Corner Poetry Contest.