

GARY HUGHES

Life on the Last Available Surface, 2014
Oil on panel, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

The Ontology of Hermeneutics

Catholic School, Eternity, and Poetry

You've seen the bumper sticker: I SURVIVED CATHOLIC SCHOOL. Don't believe it. Not for a second. You may have a happy marriage and a good job, be healthy, and still it will surface through every bit of ratiocination that says you are long past the mental torture and flimflam, past the viral crime and punishment fed into your consciousness during every grade in school as if from a spiritually twisted saline drip. You never completely outgrow the terror and the doubt. My father contracted malaria during World War II, and as much as twenty years later he would, from time to time, wake from a full night of fever and sweats. Like that.

No night in particular, you'll bolt up in the dark and catch your breath as the brain's computer screen boots up... and instead of the usual bills to pay, deadlines missed, betrayals, book deals fumbled, "colleagues" you'd like to place on the top floor of a hotel fire, there's that dark corridor leading past retirement and the realization that you are in fact going to die. What then?

As early as first grade, we were sweating it out in religion class at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in woodsy and lovely Montecito, California, convinced that the nuns could at will turn up the gas jets just beneath the floor and give us all a taste of the brimstone and burning pit, the flames waiting to lick our bones for all time—that they could mark us for life and especially for death, and label us for hell, which is where it seemed we were headed, no matter what.

Ontology—we were exposed early on to that subset of metaphysics about the theory of the nature of being and existence, though we certainly had no neat definition of it then; our concerns were just the immediate day-to-day threats attached to the religious disquisition. The nuns began early shaking our six-year-old brains like snow globes, force-feeding us sin reinforced with death as soon as we were conscious enough to be frightened out of our wits—as we said back then—by the imminent possibility of spending eternity (most of the nuns who tormented us looked as if they'd seen three or four eternities already) roasting over red-hot rocks. They emphasized daily that hell and suffering were facts, not theory; and they supported this doctrine with horrific stories of instant retribution for transgressions, especially as they prepared us for First Communion. The thoroughly evil individual who broke into a church and de-