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-

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filed the tabernacle, who threw the Eucharist hosts all over the floor and was immediately struck down by a bolt of light—his flesh zapped black as burnt toast—was one. Another was the man who, also motivated by nothing more than pure evil, took his communion host (which in those days only a priest could touch) home, floated it in a glass of water, and poked it with a fork, whereupon it immediately emitted streams of blood. These were the true uses of the mind? These images were the underpinnings of faith, arguments for a spiritual continuum appropriate to present to such easily astonished souls as ourselves? Evidently so. I have compared and confirmed such stories with many others subjected to a Catholic education in the fifties and found only slight variations on the themes.

Sure, we received a more complete education than most—Ancient History with the Catholic spin, rough and tumble of old-time religion, tooth and claw of Hammurabi, Hittites with a monopoly on swords and spears made from iron, the Chaldeans destroying the temple in Jerusalem, and the big finish with Constantine whacking boatloads of pagans under the sign of the cross at the Milvian Bridge. And words. In first grade I could pronounce "ignominious" from the boilerplate responses we memorized for the Stations of the Cross each Friday afternoon, and in class I testified to the weak fabric of the flesh as a result of our common stain of "concupiscence." We were all born sinners, given to "iniquity"; there seemed no hope. Moreover, the fifties and early sixties were replete with movies that seemed made precisely to support the official party line: *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, *The Robe*, *Barabbas*, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Solomon and Sheba*, and *Quo Vadis*, all filmed in the new big and bright CinemaScope for a more spectacular, lasting effect.

And though I'd thrown in the towel of orthodoxy by the time I was eleven—quietly renouncing any allegiance to the incredulous boilerplate of the *Baltimore Catechism*, cancelling my subscription to the Archdiocese of Los Angeles's newspaper *The Tidings* and its official lists of forbidden behaviors—a vague metaphysical questioning stayed with me. Somewhere, far back in my mind, where I kept a patch of clear blue sky and some Ivory Soap Flake clouds, where the fiery flames of Purgatory and Hell were not allowed to reach, I hoped there was something that went on afterwards, even if we ended up as a bunch of invisible wafers circling the sky over a carwash in Beirut.

This ongoing ontological worry arrived with the concept of eternity. When I was six, a nun whose face and name I've blotted from memory, implanted in my brain an image like a fishhook, one I was never able to pull out. "Imagine a stainless steel ball the size of the earth," she said, "and an eagle flying in every ten million years and landing on that ball and then taking off again. The time it takes that friction to wear the ball down to nothing is less than a second in eternity." Eternity was of course the time we'd be burning in hell for cussing, eating hot dogs on Fridays, missing our yearly Easter obligation of communion and mass. I was a C- student in arithmetic, but this set me thinking about the impossible number our misery would add up to if we did not display proper comportment. Death, darkness, and sure damnation awaited all of us who did not stop talking during mass, who did not go out there and finagle quarters selling Holy Seals to our relatives and neighbors for the pagan babies in Africa—kids who, when we collected enough money, were allowed to be named Charlemagne and Constantine. Dear God. I wanted to live forever. I wanted everyone—well, with the exception of a few nuns—to live forever. I worried about the mama cat and the kittens under the porch—what was going to happen to them? And why, in a moderate climate like Santa Barbara where I was growing up, couldn't we all just continue going to the beach?

Because there was sin, and as a result, death and hell to be avoided—or more to the point, *paid*. We were more or less consistent in our avoidance of "the near occasions of sin"—stealing another kid's cookies from his lunch bag, taking someone else's ballpoint pen, changing the grades on our report cards. The rules and consequences seemed as clear as a game of foursquare or tetherball in the schoolyard. Take your eye off the ball and you were OUT. We did not ask questions beyond the question-and-answer setups given in the pages of the blue *Baltimore Catechism* (the exception being the one suburban bit of theological sophistication passed around all Catholic schools and asked of the priest when he made one of his surprise visits to our class: "Can God make a rock so big He himself cannot move it?"). We did not investigate the hyperbole and myth of our conditioning, and only a few of us would even hear the word *hermeneutics* twenty years hence. Knowing the little we did, we bought into the game-show prize-oriented version of an afterlife, drilled as we were with the tenets and outcomes available for our behavior. We were made anxious about the possibility of dying on the side of a road and not having a chance to make a perfect Act of Contrition, and thus spending an eternity in agony, our bodies and souls BBQ'd continuously with the loss of God's grace for ducking out early on Sunday Mass and riding our bikes to the beach.

So the regulars at our lunch table wondered what would befall Eddy Villaseñor who ate a baloney sandwich one Friday. I mean, baloney barely qualifies as meat in the first place. Because meat was forbidden on Fridays, Catholic school kids were often referred to as "mackerel snappers," as it was always tuna sandwiches at week's end, except for a lucky one or two with peanut butter and jelly. But one Friday, Eddy's mother was operating on automatic and just made the same sandwich she usually made—a slice of Oscar Mayer Bologna on white Weber's Bread, with mayonnaise and a leaf of lettuce. Eddy unwrapped the wax paper and took a couple bites without checking. By the time someone pointed out that it was baloney, it was too late; the transgression had taken place. His soul was blotted—a bottle of milk with large black polka dots of sin was the image the nuns had given us. He would need to get to confession before he was hit by a beer truck as he crossed the road on his way home from school with that mortal sin on his soul and so be sentenced to spend eternity in hell with no sandwiches at all. Poor Eddy. He couldn't finish the sandwich and he'd eaten his Fritos at recess, so he went hungry the rest of the day. Such are the wages of sin, the nuns would remind us. Church law would change twenty years later and you could eat five Burger King Whoppers on Friday and still be admitted to heaven when the saints went marching in; how would that effect all those souls suffering in hell over the centuries for not sticking to tuna fish on Fridays? You can take in all the myth, absurdity, and intimidation with a pillar of salt, but years later it will be the pillars of fire that still snake through your synapses as you try to make those residual images intelligible.

My first brush with hermeneutics came in high school. By that point I was no longer buying into the official piano roll of prohibitions—the precise duration in seconds of a French kiss, for example, that separated a mortal sin from a venial; the INDEX of forbidden books; the list of current films we were banned, as Catholics, from seeing. But I did not want to engage those arguments in class and be branded heretic, apostate, Communist—the church, the priests, seemed to make that connection without much trouble those days, and the padres felt little compunction about humiliating you in front of your friends and classmates. I was not, however, trying to work out any deep errors in the order of existence beyond that.

So my first exposure to hermeneutics—theories of interpretation for biblical and/or philosophic texts—occurred tangentially via Loren Van Wyk, now dearly departed from this mortal coil. He was one of the brightest students in our class, introspective and exceptionally well read for a lad of sixteen—a quiet but precocious young man whom I knew from Our Lady of Mount Carmel grammar school where he always received A's and arrived with his uniform shirt and blue corduroys pressed and clean. Loren would stand, removing his glasses and cleaning the lenses on his shirttail as he spoke, slowly and carefully. In religion class at Bishop High, he worked out the faults of logic in the priest's position while the rest of us were daydreaming fast breaks and twenty-foot set shots on the basketball court. One day Loren rose to his feet to dispute traditional claptrap served up about creation and the "prime mover." He sent poor neurotic Father Geary into an apoplectic fit when he quoted from Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* regarding the unfolding of the material cosmos and the unification of consciousness. I had no idea who de Chardin was, but I took notice when I heard his name, as it sounded like baseball players Cookie Lavagetto, Zoilo Versalles, and Gino Cimoli, whom I liked just for the

mellifluous quality of their names. (I did pay attention in English class and had picked up a few terms.) Language interested me for its music, if not its sense; moreover, for me, the Four Horsemen were the backfield of Notre Dame's 1924 football team under Knute Rockne, not Death, Destruction, Pestilence, and Famine from the Bible.

In any event, we all could tell Father Geary had had a couple nervous breakdowns by the way he stuttered and repeated details from the life of Saint Ubaldus, Bishop of Gubbio; he had only been given a couple of religion classes to teach, and he wandered around the school grounds mumbling into his breviary most of the day. Before Loren could finish making his point, Geary began waving his arms over his head and rushing down the row of desks toward Loren, saying he could be excommunicated and cast forever into perdition for reading books proscribed by the church. Loren, who seemed a little confused that Father Geary could not see the lines of reason in his argument, finally sat down, looking a bit embarrassed for the old priest. My true interest in interpretation those days was the size and shape of waves breaking at Miramar Point or Hammond's Reef, assessing the offshore breeze to see if the tubes would hollow out enough for me and my surfing pals to shoot the curl after class. Other than that, I did not find much occasion to question the texts or the world unfolding before us.

At Saint Mary's College of California, I was as dedicated a scholar as most nineteen-year-olds after suffering through a week of Ayer, Wittgenstein, and Peirce's pragmatic theory. This was, after all, the sixties—*Surrealistic Pillow*, "Purple Haze," *Sgt. Pepper's*, tie-dye, Tabasco Sauce, Haight-Ashbury, Hare Krishna, spare change. Following week-long theoretical discussions, we dedicated ourselves to bouncing on our beds with boilermakers in hand while listening to the Rolling Stones blasting out the high and immediate message of hedonism. Nonetheless, I gradually found myself taking an interest in "World Classics," a seminar in which we read Greek literature and history. A good portion of the grade depended on active class contributions about what we had read, on our responses to prompts from the professor. I found talking to be part of my innate skill set, though as often as not I had the wrong end of the stick, as we used to say, when it came to parsing the overall schemes. Still, I picked up information that I thought interesting if esoteric. The Greek view of language as signs that could lead to truth or falsehood seemed true enough. Hermeneutics had its origin with the god Hermes, mediator between gods and men—an interpreter, liar, and trickster; and on a subconscious level, at least, this squared with grammar school and all the tales we had been told.

Our philosophy classes only added to this. I had developed an interest in poetry, thanks to a string of unsuccessful romances, and it seemed Aristotle was enunciating the obvious when he wrote, "Words spoken are symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul…." Was Aristotle the first semiotician? At any rate, this was later presented—without attribution to Aristotle—as cutting edge news by the professors of deconstruction in the late seventies and eighties. Aristotle saw poetry within boundaries of the sacred—a divine message received, a bit of madness inflicted upon the poet. So of course someone well versed in hermeneutics would be required to determine the truth or falsity of the message, a view I trace right up to the present day in the theory-laden English departments of our universities. Aristotle passed this on to Plato, who as we all know said poets should be shown the door. We grew tired of Aristotle and Plato, who were replayed in philosophy class each and every semester, including Modern Thought our senior year. We held a little strike that last semester and demanded that, in addition to the perennial discussion of "treeness" and *the good for man*, we read something contemporary. We managed to have *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver and some books of poetry added to our list—one by Rod McKuen—and someone brought in lyrics from the Moody Blues… well, it was the sixties, and our intellectual grasp fell well short of our reach.

At Saint Mary's, I completed a minor in theology during my senior year. Given all the required theology classes, I needed only two more for a minor, and there were a couple of semi–New Age topics offered by Jesuits as well as a couple of Christian Brothers who were free thinkers compared to the rest of the lot. I discovered that the idea of personal confession was not an original rite of the church, but had been promulgated by Irish monks centuries earlier. Individual confessions certainly kept priests fully employed. And we delved into exegesis—another name for hermeneutics—with a Jesuit who broke down apocryphal language and its embellishment in the Bible, explaining how writers stretched the facts (or the absence thereof) to make a point. For example, the marshy reeds at one end of the Red Sea would, at low tide, allow the Israelites to cross on foot but would entangle the wheels of Pharaohs' chariots and drown a cohort or two as the tide came up. That made some sense. One Jesuit, Father Peter Rega, had a social message: he opposed the war in Vietnam on moral principles, suggesting that those in society who had benefited and were well off had a Christian obligation to the poor, to their fellow man. Radical Marxist/Stalinist thought in the late sixties, and at such a conservative institution as our college, compelled the students to brand him "Red Rega." 1968, remember, would see George Wallace win the Deep South on a segregation platform and Nixon get elected president.

My interest in poetry and literature increasing, I switched from a major in business, which my father had insisted on, to English. I took a year-long course in Major British Writers and read T. S. Eliot on my own, without a clue. I spoke up often in class, but it seemed I had not cracked the code. The influence of Eliot was not helpful to my own writing that I regularly inflicted on my roommates. It was encoded, and required me to explain it, which was how I thought it worked. (I'd read all the notes at the end of "The Waste Land.") I kept two or three pieces of paper about the size of a driver's license—poems typed on both sides—in my wallet. Occasionally my roommate, Bill, fixed us up with blind dates from women's colleges nearby. After a picnic and a few beers from the small portable kegs of Hamm's we carried along in the trunks of our cars in those days, I would pull out a poem and read it to my date. There were never any second dates. Everyone was a critic, I thought—and there was not the least interest in hermeneutics. They were probably looking for agreeable guys with futures in business administration.

The most inspirational event in my college years was a poetry reading on campus by William Stafford. I could not believe that his poems were so direct, personal, and clear; that no explanation was needed. My Brit Lit professor encouraged us to ask questions following the reading, and with no one coming forward, I blithely asked if it was really all right to use "I" in a poem—to be so personal, to not speak in the modern vatic voice that I of course associated with Eliot and poetry. "It works for me. What do you think?" is what Stafford replied. It would take me years to put such a sensible approach into use.

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Forward to San Diego State University for an MA in English with an emphasis in creative writing. In those days, they pretty much admitted everyone; you did not have to submit a portfolio of work to be approved. I had a folder of forty or more poems, all typed, and thought I was way ahead of the requirement for the thesis. I was fortunate in turning up a rigorous and dedicated teacher for my workshops, Glover Davis, one of the early students of Philip Levine, and I discovered that I did not have one good line, let alone a finished poem. You did not explain your poem; there was no "reader-response"; everything was not open for interpretation. You revised, revised some more, and made your meaning clearly on the page. Saved my life. Tossed my folder of poems influenced by sources as disparate as Eliot, Swinburne, and Crosby, Stills & Nash, and two and a half years later managed just enough pages for a thesis.

Which led to the MFA program at the University of California, Irvine. During our second year, the department poet, teaching the workshop for the third time (Charles Wright, with whom most of us had hoped to work, was gone for two years on grants and a visiting appointment to Iowa), decided to bring down some English faculty from upstairs to shake up the workshop. Irvine in the early to mid-seventies was one of three institutions—Yale and the University of Washington being the others—on the ground floor of deconstruction, semiotics, and a theory-related interpretation of literature, the new self-promoting industry in academia. Murray Krieger, Hazard Adams,

and two or three others sat on the sofas and explained that we had no real idea what we were writing; they, however, did. They interpreted our hidden signs, explained meaning was relative or nonexistent, and congratulated themselves on speaking in the same hermeneutic codes. At least that is my memory of the first half of the workshop. After the break, Gary Soto, Jon Veinberg, and I did not return for more.

I wrote, published; avoided theory, its disregard for "primary texts," its disdain for writers—and kept trying to work out what I could in some coherent ontological fashion. To me, we wrote to try to make sense of our lives, if only in bits and pieces. I taught at a fourth-rate college in Pennsylvania for a number of years, and at a year-end gathering of faculty and students, a colleague from England—hired to teach American literature, though he'd only published one book describing the tenets of deconstruction—asked about my most recent book: "You don't really think you know what you're doing when writing your poems, do you?" It wasn't personal, as he had not spent any real time with my books. He was just promoting his view of literature, which he was sure—though he had never written or published any literature—was correct. I was leaving to chair a creative writing department at the University of California; I'd had a glass or two of wine, which, in my experience, promotes candor—and what was more, I could see no reason to suffer his academic arrogance. "I damn well do," I said, and added a few sentences further to that effect…. I think he took my meaning.

I returned to California, to Santa Barbara, a place that still holds an Edenic thread for me and my writing. I'm still trying to answer some of the questions implanted in my brain when I was six at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School about why I am here, what it all leads to… if anything. I have, over the last several years, taken up reading popular books on cosmology. I am interested in the "theory of everything," M-theory, the eleven dimensions of string theory, parallel universes, dark matter and energy, what exactly every bright thing in the universe is redshifted toward as we pick up speed, apparently hell-bent for darkness. How might this all undercut intelligent design? Looking out at the sky, I keep wondering what all the metaphors might ever add up to. And I have to wonder how much time there is left to wonder, to write. The information coming in, the cold hard scientific facts, do not offer much hope. It appears we are alone among scattered billions of stars, a lucky spot where some mitochondrial DNA dropped down off a comet and gave rise to some self-conscious constructions such as ourselves. We want more, something beyond the stars, but this may well be it. All I can hope for is that I might live long enough to believe in something else.

In 2014, **Christopher Buckley** published his twentieth book of poetry, *Back Room at the Philosophers' Club* (Stephen F. Austin State University Press), and his third book of nonfiction, *Holy Days of Obligation* (Lynx House Press). He is editor of the poetry journal *MIRAMAR*.

GARY HUGHES

Common Objects Enjoy the Beach, 2014
Oil on panel, 36 x 48

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