room 6.22

A Sketchbook for Analytic *Action*

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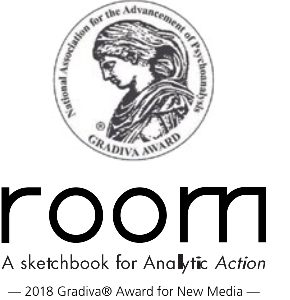
ROOM: A Sketchbook for Analytic *Action*
was started as a newsletter by a group of New York–based psychoanalysts in response to the trauma of the 2016 US election. Since then *ROOM* has become an award-winning, interdisciplinary magazine that is a forum for mental health professionals, poets, artists and activists to engage in community-building and transformation by shedding light on the effect our cultural and political reality has on our inner world and the effect our psychic reality has on society.



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Levas Kovarskis, MD, is a psychiatrist and senior psychoanalyst in the Finnish Psychoanalytical Association. With his colleagues, he helped bring psychoanalysis to his native country, Lithuania, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. He currently trains psychoanalytic psychotherapists and psychoanalysts in Finland and Eastern Europe and is also an honorary professor and head of the psychoanalytic department at the Moscow Institute of Psychoanalysis.

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Mary Mykhaylova, LCSW, is a psychotherapist in private practice in San Francisco, CA. She is an instructor and supervisor at Access Institute, a supervisor at Queer LifeSpace, and a participant in the Supervision Study Program at the Psychotherapy Institute. She has a longstanding curiosity about how the sociopolitical context shapes identities and relationships and how these themes emerge in clinical work. In her writing, she is currently exploring her experience as a Ukrainian living in the United States. More of her recent work appears at *Apofenie* and *Medium*. When she is not writing or providing therapy, Mary can be found brushing up on her Ukrainian language skills. She can also be found on Twitter @marymykhaylova and online at mary.care.

Lavinia Munteanu was born in Romania and now lives in Germany. She is a freelance architect, visual artist, and author. Her drawing, video, and poetry contributions to various exhibitions and literary magazines demonstrate her interest in cultural and political processes as well as in psychoanalysis and depth-hermeneutics.

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Doug Pagitt is the cofounder and executive director of Vote Common Good, a national political nonprofit dedicated to inspiring, energizing, and mobilizing people of faith to engage in civic life. He is the founding pastor of Solomon's Porch and a founder and active member of the Greater Things Foundation. He has authored ten books on spirituality, Christianity, and leadership and has been featured by the *Washington Post*, NPR, the *New York Times*, C-Span, *USA Today*, the *Guardian*, and more.

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Olga Shtonda is an artist and illustrator from Kharkiv, Ukraine. She studied graphic arts at Kharkiv Design and Arts Academy (2009–2015). There she fell in love with printmaking techniques, which greatly influenced her style. She creates illustrations for children's books, book covers, magazines, and animation projects.

Erin Trapp, PhD, lives in Minneapolis and is currently a fellow at the Minnesota Psychoanalytic Society and Institute. She is a practicing therapist and has published essays on poetry, psychoanalysis, and the environment in journals such as *Social Text, Postmodern Culture*, and *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*. With Ana Baginski, Anne-Lise François, and Chris Malcolm, she has also edited a volume of *Yearbook of Comparative Literature* (University of Toronto, forthcoming 2022) on environment and loss.

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DAVID CLARKE/UNSPLASH

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Breaking Through

... the world weeps, and mortal matters move the heart.

—Virgil, *The Aeneid (translated by Shadi Bartsch)*

Nowadays, I am acutely aware of the power of transgenerational trauma that has come to life in new circumstances. I feel like it's getting scary to speak openly. This is what was passed down to me from my ancestors from the USSR, what the people already lived during the oppressive Stalin years." **Finding a Voice** recounts a special day in the life of Elena Ozerova: her ten-year-old son's graduation from elementary school. "Last week," she writes, "my son asked me to explain what is happening between Russia and Ukraine. He wants to know: Are we good or bad? Are we attacking or defending? My son is no longer a small child but not yet an adult. He wants to draw together with his classmates, write letters (to the soldiers), be a good kid and send sweets to the defenders of the country. He wants to feel like a part of something good." Ozerova writes from Moscow, but as a mother, she could easily be writing these words from New York, Jerusalem, or Kabul.

"The country he dreams of being a part of is kind and noble, driven by justice and dignity, where people live in peace and travel the world...I love my son very much and I love my country, but to my regret, this ideal country has never existed." Ozerova's anguish is being felt the world over.

Cosimo Schinaia also wonders if the country "indelibly fixed" in his mind ever even existed. In **Memories of My Vanished Birthplace**, he recalls the Ionian shore where, as a small boy, "We saw the beach starting from the top, with golden dunes covered by white wild lilies, and then going down, after the rows of wooden cabins and the mills with roofs of reed, in a large shoreline ending in the transparent seawater." Now it is a "dead and terrifying place" decimated by pollution. Had he been dreaming? "Was I seeking an idealized beach that was all mine, a place in my mind, an image distorted by the deceptive memory of someone who has stayed away for a long time?" he asks. Is this a "false memory?" or a "negative hallucination?" Schinaia's essay is a meditation on the meaning of the "imaginary home" we carry in us and of "landscape (as) the most trusted mirror of society."

It is the landscape of a "rapid psychosocial deterioration of a coherent shared reality" that Lithuanian-born analyst Levas Kovarskis is looking at. In **Crimes Against Reality: A Proposal for Action**, Kovarskis tells us he is "shocked by the speed with which public information has altered our reality in no less than three weeks." Returning to Freud, he makes a historical case for how the recent weaponization of speech and propaganda preys upon and perverts raw human desire, culminating in a societal breakdown that "looks similar to the psychotic breakdown of individuals we might see in our psychotherapy offices." In an interview **Reaching Evangelicals and Catholics**, Doug Pagitt, founder of Vote Common Good, talks to Elizabeth Evert about the specific ways people can be helped to "detach their political identity from the rest of this cultural shaping."

The human drive Ozerova, Kovarskis, and Pagitt allude to, the desire that can lead (and mislead) us to want to be part of something larger than ourselves, is taken up by Erin Trapp in her far-reaching essay **Climate Breakdown**. Trapp looks back to our early sensorial experiences with the environment that "predates understanding and communication and marks our fragility and dependence on the nonhuman world." Channeling the work of Searles, Winnicott, and Charles, she describes how our primal "longing and anxiety to become one with the environment" is being shaken to the core by the current climate crisis, and (like race) is often excluded from both our psychic life and clinical work. "To not register the psychic conflict evoked," she writes, "contributes to the powerlessness, deadness, and apathy we take on in relation to the "external" ecologically deteriorating world." Schiniai's sensory-laden memories of golden sand and translucent waters are what Trapp, evoking Rachel Carson and Harold Searles, describes as the "felt shape of life."

The "felt shape" of a childhood spent under a Communist dictatorship comes back to Lavinia Munteanu in three dreams, and to Daniela Andronache in a single word: Afghanistan. Munteanu's grandfather taught her that "not everything that was discussed at home was allowed to leak out, that words could be dangerous." **The Big Eye** is her dream catcher. The gaps in the curtains and walls, the missing and unlocked doors, are harbingers of foreboding danger now leaking out in the shape of her dreams.

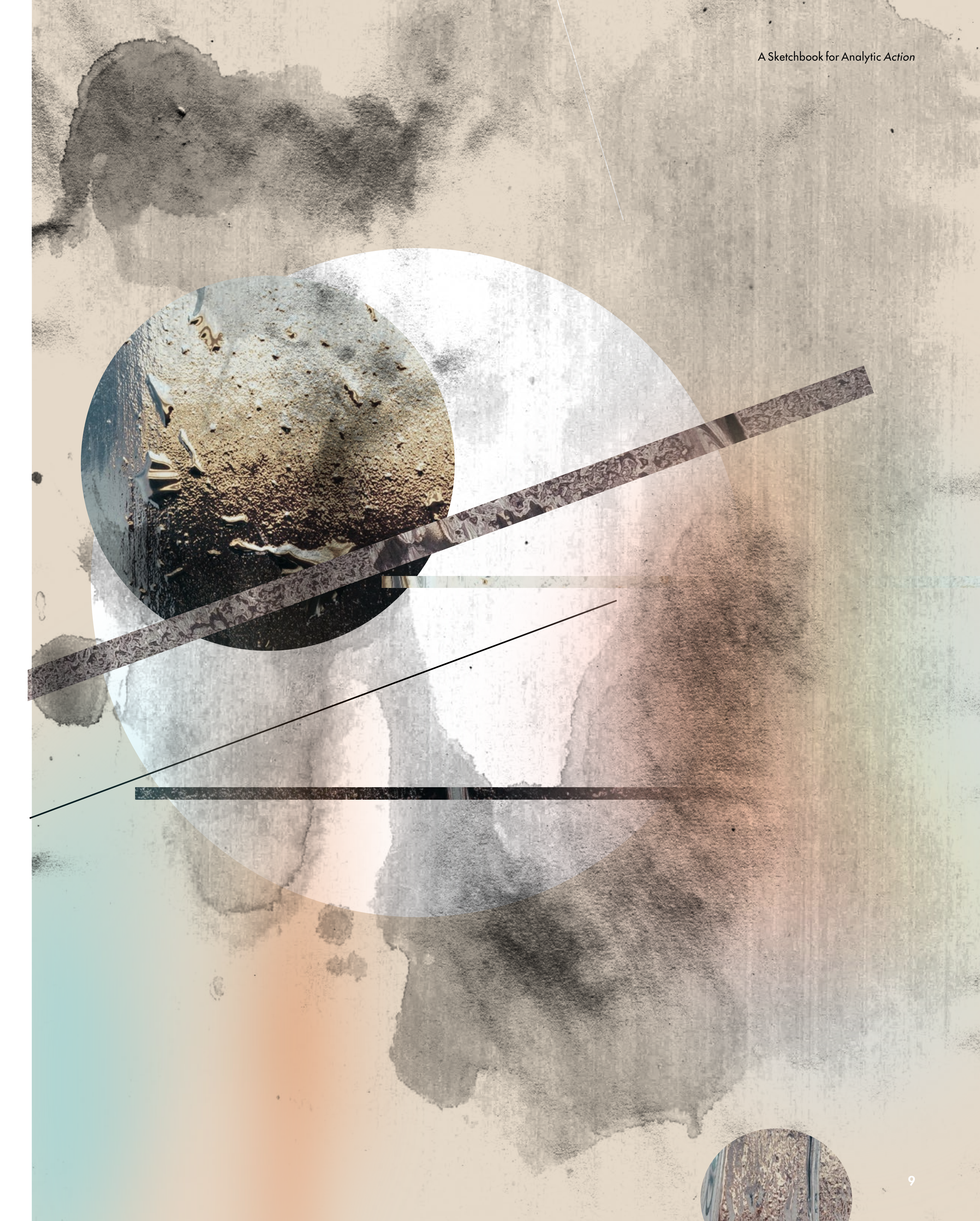
All the doors Andronache writes about in **The Afghanistan Feeling** are locked and offer no exit. The images of women in Kabul "locked out of planet Earth" touch her viscerally. She tells us, "The feeling is like no other. It blocks your nostrils and fills your lungs with unbreathable, scratching flows of air, until you feel like you are bleeding from your trachea, suffocating." Afghanistan opens an old door. "From the depths of the past, a new stream of memories. This time, I saw myself walking down the street in the sad city, my nose blocked by the stink of the days-old garbage spread all around, taking big steps to avoid debris and holes left by the reconstruction enthusiasm of a totalitarian regime. I remembered deep in my lungs the feeling of the 'gray-iced air of my adolescent winters in the freezing, unheated apartment we called home.'" Afghanistan, in a word, has become synonymous with the sound of locks snapping shut.

"How *am* I doing?" asks Mary Mykhaylova, a Ukrainian émigrée in **Emotional Resilience in the Time of War**. "There is a boulder in my belly, and I search for what else can help me feel a little lighter," she writes. "I alternate from hopelessness, pride, and reassurance (or is that denial?) to feeling numb. I successfully get distracted and then I remember. Then comes the guilt for getting distracted. Then comes reminding myself that this guilt does not serve me or anyone else. I am processing, processing..." Jeanne Lemkau visited Mykhaylova's hometown in 1989, just four years before the USSR was dissolved. **Six Days in Odesa** recalls "a city redolent with memories of dear people and precious encounters." The news is very close to Lemkau's heart. "I fear for Odesa, the 'Pearl of the Black Sea.' I fear it could become another Mariupol in Putin's brutal war."

Mykhaylova is also frightened and grieving. "It is so hard to feel powerless in the face of something so vast. The boulder grows in my belly, up into my chest." But she notices that each time she writes, she breathes more fully. "I get to let something go, and in doing so, I start to glue myself back together. I find the answers I seek in my writing." Humor, she tells us, can also be an "act of resistance." She and her father "keep in contact by sharing funny topical content in the hope that it will bring the other a moment of levity." And it occurs to her that they get their relationship to humor from their "social context" mother, their "Odesa Mama," a city known as the humor capital of the world.

But what happens when there are no answers to be found in writing or talking, when black humor takes a horrifying turn, when transgenerational trauma is laid out bare for the world to see? **Milk and Poison** is the heartbreaking description of Ellen Luborsky's brief work with a three-year-old Cambodian refugee. Here we are given a close-up view of a traumatized child's play devolving when it becomes a millimeter too close to reality and how her traumatized mother's sarcasm was, in the end, enacted to smash the biggest joke of all—the therapist's hope to help.

What can be done? What can we imagine now? These are the questions that haunt *ROOM 6.22*. The essays jump from Russia to Ukraine, from Romania to Italy, from the United States to a childhood spent in an unnamed Communist dictatorship. The authors recall worlds gone forever and describe the signs they sense of dangerous worlds reemerging. Many speak to the uncanny impact of transgenerational traumas. Many allude to the perils and possibilities of speech. Some speak to the weight our children are now required to bear and carry forward with them. Their memories, their tears, their voices, their hopes, their courage are breaking through. ■



Elena Ozerova
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TODAY WAS AN IMPORTANT EVENT IN MY FAMILY'S LIFE.

Our ten-year-old son had a graduation ceremony from primary school. My husband, our four-month-old baby daughter, and I came to school to support him during this event. Suddenly, at the beginning of the ceremony, the Russian anthem was played. (This was a surprising new initiative, implemented in all Russian schools by our government. During my school days, we never had to listen to the anthem being played on the school grounds.) While I was surprised and annoyed by this, I saw how my son tried to sing it well, how focused and sincere he was. It was clear that he had the ideal picture of our country in his head. The country he dreams of being a part of is kind and noble, driven by justice and dignity, where people live in peace and travel the world. Tears welled up in my eyes. Feelings were raging inside me. I love my son very much and I love my country, but to my regret, this ideal country has never existed. On the contrary, the worst oppressive practices of the Soviet Union started to mutate in an ugly way in nowadays Russia.

During my life, I worked hard and have done a lot to move from a small town to Moscow, where, to my knowledge, people were more open to hearing the truth about themselves and their selfhood. For the same reason, I did seven years of analysis with an exceptional IPA-accredited psychoanalytic who affected my way of thinking. I've studied for many years, first in medical school, then to earn a psychiatric and psychology license, building my career as a psychoanalyst, creating a place where my patients and I can have freedom of thought and opinions, a place for free associations. And I identified myself with this freedom.

Nowadays, I am acutely aware of the power of the transgenerational trauma that has come to life in new circumstances. I feel like it's getting scary to speak openly. This is what was passed down to me from my ancestors from the USSR, what the people already lived during the oppressive Stalin years. I can't speak freely because of the fear of being declared a "foreign agent" or being arrested under the law on "discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of Russia abroad" (basically for voicing the truth instead of state propaganda).

I carefully preserve the setting in the office, ensuring confidentiality to my patients so that they can continue to free associate and be truthful with themselves, with me. It helps me get mental safety through these times.

Last week, my son asked me to explain what is happening now between Russia and Ukraine. He wants to know: Are we good or bad? Are we attacking or defending? A few days earlier, the school told children to bring sweets for Russian soldiers who are fighting on the front line and write letters of gratitude for protecting the children from the sounds of bombs and war. My son is no longer a small child but not yet an adult. He wants to draw together with his classmates, write letters, be a good kid, and send sweets to the defenders of the country. He wants to feel like a part of something good.

My husband and I were furious about this initiative of the school management. Clearly, this was state-forced on all schools. On one hand, this was a disgusting manipulation of a child's fragile psyche. On the other hand, not doing this would create a scandal with teachers and the principal and would pit our kid against other children and their parents who support these ideas. In the end, we forbade him to buy and bring to school any sweets in support of soldiers. Allowing it meant betraying our understanding of what is happening and deceiving our son. He knows our attitude about this war—we are against it. But I see that his psyche wants to not understand this; he asks again and again, as if hoping to get a different answer.

In February, before the war started, he sent many letters to his favorite celebrities in Europe and the United States, asking for an autograph and writing about himself. These were musicians, actors, and writers. It was his way of establishing a connection with the rest of the world, to feel that there are no borders. And he was very lucky because Robert Englund wrote back to him. In the new circumstances of the war, when all projects, businesses, and cooperation began to be curtailed, he still received one letter in response. And it became important for him and for the whole family. He framed the postcard as the most sacred jewel of a ten-year-old kid and displayed it in the best visible place in his room. This is a symbol that he is being heard and that there are connections with the civilized world. Although twenty other people he wrote to did not respond to him, one letter became very important and supportive.

At the end of the graduation ceremony, the pupils prepared balloons; each class had balloons of a different color. And unexpectedly, yellow and blue balloons happened to be nearby. These were the colors of the Ukrainian flag, which were held by children who had recently sent letters to Russian soldiers expressing the support and gratitude as a part of a school initiative.

The tragedy of this war, with all the horror, betrayal, and war crimes, will shape the next generations in our countries. Our children will have to clean up this mess, build bridges, and restore trust over time. Life will put everything in its place. I really want to believe that the constructive forces and the passion to live will win over the destructive forces and the attraction of death. It is very scary that freedom of thought is now under threat in my country. All we can do is look for ways to preserve what's left of it, support it, and understand how to separate the truth from anything else. ■

MARIANA MONTRAZI

Nancy Kuhl
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The Talking Cure

1

To be alive now
is to take this

into consideration:
the bottom of breath

is nearly not human.
Turn sound toward

meaning by force.
Mouthful of gravel

or moss and
language,

this language—
bloodied, in pieces.

Monstrous,
misshapen thing.

2

Worn out and
nerve-shot,

her ache is ramble
then rant. Or

it's a language
half-heard,

halfhearted.
Her pain is a voice

pulled by handfuls
from the throat.

"There is the space where a thought would be, but which you can't get hold of. I love that space. It's the reason I like to deal with fragments. Because no matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn't be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, so spooky."

Anne Carson
"The Art of Poetry No 88"
The Paris Review, *Fall 2004*

My work is an investigation of abstraction's capacity to engage beauty and tension without justification or narrative. In my paintings and works on paper, references are suggested, not identified; meaning is organic since images mingle, shift, and position themselves within a field of agitated or flat color. Within these works, inspiration springs from diverse sources sponsored, in part, from the views of gnarled and jagged trees and bark from the woodlands surrounding my home, discarded shards of construction debris, and constant encounters with the internal and external world. In this odd combination of elements, the initial mark prompts the starting point. Hesitation and agitation of brushstrokes within the gesture are revealed as content. Incompleteness—the unfinished fragment of what "almost was" and "might become"—amplifies meaning. In this orbit, painting explores what I consider as embracing the unpredictable and accidental. Accepting this means assumptions are suspended and discoveries may emerge.
This edge of conflict and sequence of processes, including scraping and repainting, fresh forms, and constructed imagery, becomes the elemental act of painting.

Ancient History 12
2021
Acrylic on paper
30" x 30"

Deborah Dancy
deborahdancy.com

Quicksand
2020
Oil on canvas
58" x 50"

Morass 1
2020
Acrylic on paper
30" x 22"

Smoke and Mirrors 5
2020
Acrylic on paper
30" x 22"

The Weight of a Million Black Stars #10
2020
Acrylic and black crushed stone on paper
50" x 38"

House of Straw
2017
Acrylic on paper
50" x 38"

Mary Mykhaylova
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Illustration by Olga Shtonda
shtonadoo@gmail.com

You have to hold yourself in your hands—a literal translation of a saying we have that means something along the lines of "get ahold of yourself."

In the days since February 24, I have spoken to my cousin Oksana frequently. She lives in Odesa, our home city in Ukraine. What echoes for me from our conversations is her use of metaphor—feeling "unglued," feeling afraid but still trying to "think with a cold head." It sounds like bitter poetry.

She has decided to stay, at least for now. She goes to work, though the nature of her job has shifted away from floral arrangements to food distribution. I bear witness as she goes through the process of adjusting to her new reality. From my more distant vantage point, I too reckon with how to live through this collective trauma without falling apart or losing my mind, even as the effects are more vicarious for me as a Ukrainian immigrant and US citizen. As a psychotherapist, I feel a particular sense of responsibility to stay grounded while I continue to work and hold space for others.

How are you doing?

The question I seem to get way too often these days. How am I doing? I alternate from hopelessness, pride, and reassurance (or is that denial?), to feeling numb. I successfully get distracted and then I remember. Then comes the guilt for getting distracted. Then comes reminding myself that this guilt does not serve me or anyone else. I am processing, processing. I try to hold some of the good things in my life, because yes, there are some very good things, along with the full truth of what is happening, and I quickly run out of room. It is all spilling over, and I, too, start to feel unglued.

You have to hold yourself in your hands.

How are you even working right now?

My patient asks me this. It's a fair question. As I mentioned in an earlier piece[1], my work has been a welcome respite, grounding me, bringing my focus off the news and out of my head and onto the experiences of others and the relationships between my patients and me. A handful of my colleagues reached out to me after reading my writing, echoing the sentiment that the work we do can bring us relief in times of personal difficulty. A moment of mirroring.

In addition to my usual clinical work, I dive into crafting the syllabus for my first class. Having never taught before, I anticipate the newness to come. There is something so containing about leafing and scrolling through page after page of text. I don't always know exactly what I am looking for, but I know it when I find it. I feel like I am in my own little world—a flow state, perhaps. I feel safe, like I could stay there for a long time. I hear a little voice in my head whisper that it can't only be about work. I know I should listen to it.

There is a boulder in my belly, and I search for what else can help me feel a little lighter. Humor has always been central for me. I like to refer to it as my favorite defense mechanism. Even as a therapist, I use humor wherever I can to bring more of myself in, strengthen rapport, and help patients hear difficult things about themselves. I think my loved ones would describe me as striking a balance between always finding the humor while also being very serious.

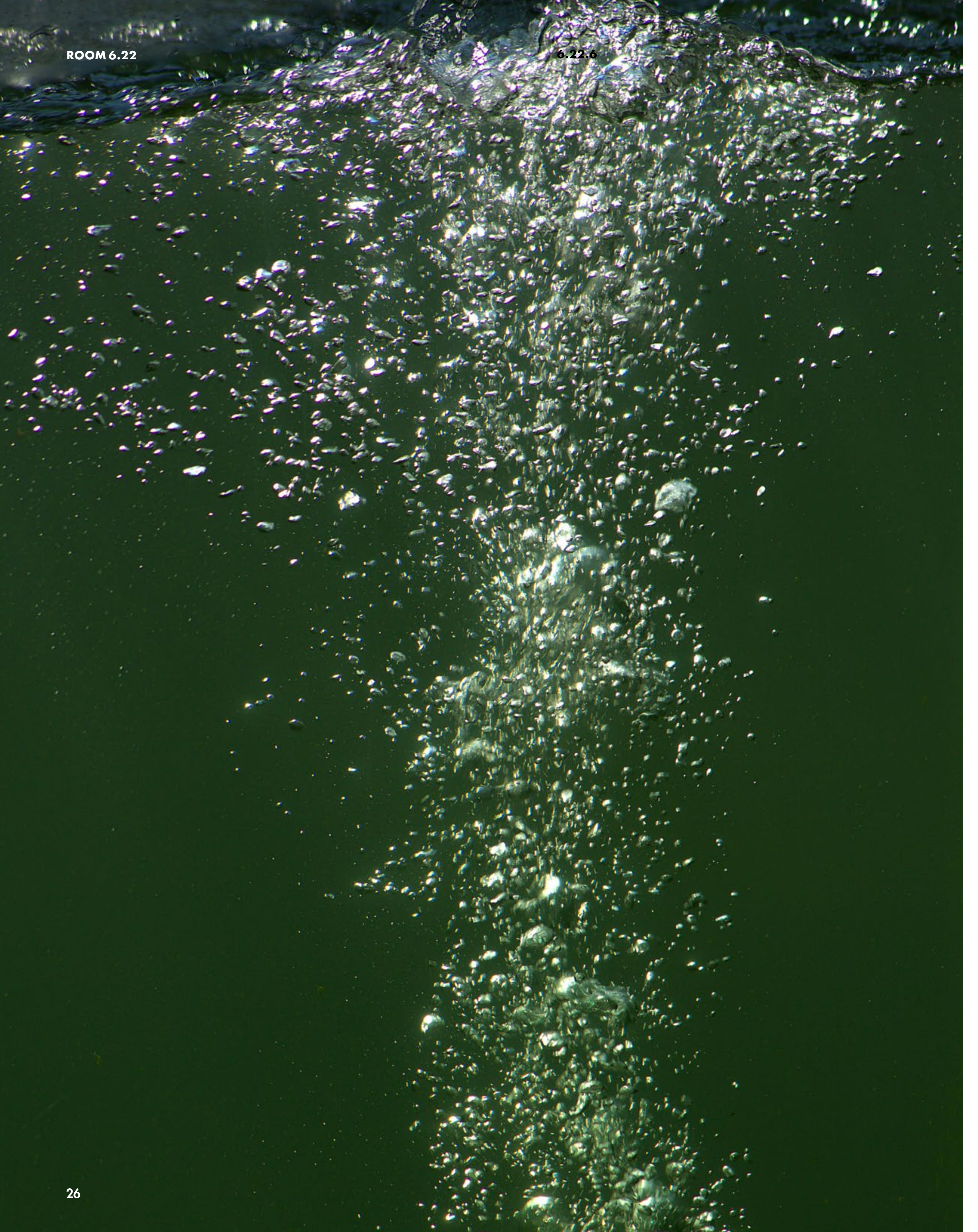
I think I learned this way of being from my relationship with my father. Even in this most somber time, he and I keep in contact by sharing funny topical content with the hope that it will bring the other a moment of levity. I am also reminded that Odesa is well known as the capital of humor and has a long-standing history of making space for laughter in the face of hardship. The annual festival Humorina originated as a response to Soviet censorship in the 1970s. As fellow Odesite and Ukrainian American comedian Sofiya Alexandra aptly stated on the public radio program *The World*, "A sense of humor is not just a coping mechanism, but it is also an act of resistance, and I think that's what we are seeing here in the spirit and in the actions of the Ukrainian people." Perhaps both my father and I internalized our relationship to humor from our social-context mother, our Odesa Mama (a reference to a popular song and a moniker people in Odesa use as a term of endearment for our city).

Humor helps me feel alive, resilient, and connected to the people in Ukraine as well as the people who are in the moment with me. Still, I am often left feeling that I need to *do* something. It is so hard to feel powerless in the face of something so vast. The boulder grows in my belly, up into my chest. Yearning for spaciousness, I start writing again for the first time in two years. I notice that each time I write—even as little as a single sentence—I start to breathe more fully. A little bit lighter. I shake myself out of my own stupor. It feels unexpected, a transcendental way of moving the energy around inside me. I get to let something go, and in doing so, I start to glue myself back together. I find the answers that I seek in my writing.

I am at my learning edge—a place for turbulence, a place for growth. I lean on trusted people in my life, and when they can't meet me in the ways I need, I lean on myself. I work, I love, I laugh, I create. And when all else fails, I hold myself in my hands.

Слава Україні! ■

1. https://medium.com/@mary.care/reflections-of-a-ukrainian-immigrant-bb969dc9ee7c



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THE *AFGHANISTAN* FEELING

When I think "Afghanistan," I think of a faraway country in the middle of nowhere, a yellow desert where rare people are all covered in gray sheets, protecting them from the hot sun. I've never been there, and I've never met an Afghan person. I know nothing about that place—at times I even wonder if it truly exists. I've never checked it with my own eyes, never felt it on my own skin.

But *Afghanistan* moves something inside me, a feeling, a motion, a disturbing sensation. *Afghanistan* is more than a place under a killing sun. It is a feeling from deep inside me. On the surface, it may comprise various geographical references: countries like Syria, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, or Saharan Africa. We are so far apart, so alien to one another, and yet, thinking of those places, I feel as if a strong and old experience of them hides somewhere deep inside my body.

My *Afghanistan* feeling is a complicated emotion. It's not anxiety. It's more like a lurking apprehension, as if I'm in hiding in a dangerous place that I cannot escape, as there is no exit. Maybe that's what it is: my fear of locked places, my claustrophobia?

I felt *Afghanistan* that morning last year when I learned about US troops leaving Afghanistan. The beats of my heart slowed for a few moments, and my mind spun: What happens to Afghanistan?! Then I minded my small, little life, and my *Afghanistan* feeling faded away. Me here, Afghanistan on the other side of the planet or on a totally different planet. I've never been there; I know no Afghan person…

Indeed, I felt *Afghanistan* again last fall. That feeling was right there, awakening from the depths of my guts, rising from so far inside me that its exoticism could hardly even touch me, and yet it was so close that I could smell it. You cannot avoid smelling Afghanistan. It is the odor of dry COVID. It blocks your nostrils and fills your lungs with unbreathable, scratching flows of air, until you feel like you are bleeding from your trachea, suffocating.

Late last fall, on a quiet morning, I was reading e-mails, including the October issue of *ROOM*, which published letters from young students from Afghanistan—cries for help and hope. They wrote about how they were getting locked outside the planet Earth, how they were refused education. Again that *Afghanistan* feeling reared up inside me, confusing my thinking, like a thick fog engulfing my brain. All sounds faded away in my ears, lost far away.

The words started dancing on the screen; I couldn't read anymore. In a flashback, I saw my mother as a fourteen-year-old, in 1959, heart trembling, looking for her name on the admissions list in the yard of the best high school in the city of Bucharest. I tried to read on her face the emotion she felt when she saw her name, the third from the top: *Admitted—No Place*. She'd passed the exams to go to high school, third-best result, but there was no place for her. Daughter of a kulak, born and raised in a village in the middle of nowhere in South Romania, my mother was refused, at fourteen, the right to higher education. Like the young girls today in Afghanistan.

People who knew nothing about the existence of that daughter of a hardworking peasant family, with her blond hair braided in two thick tails and her innocent sky-blue eyes, had ruled that she was not allowed to study at any high school in the country, despite her academic excellence. My mother was punished because her father owned lands: he was a middle-class kulak.

And a kulak he remained: he never signed up for the collectivization, for the loss of his lands and all his tools and carriages and horses. Yes, the horses… They took away his beautiful black horses, ripping his kulak heart from his chest… And he took a job in town.

The Russian occupation imposed a Communist government in Romania after World War II, and they bound my mother away from school before she could even understand that her father's creed of belief in hard work, the Good Lord, and the mighty king was not state policy anymore. The new political regime demanded that they change their beliefs, forgot about God and the king, and replaced them with…nothing.

My grandparents continued to believe in the Bible and in the king. My parents taught me, too, about Christ and the kings of Romania. Never in words—it was too dangerous to be spoken aloud—but they showed them to me: every year on my mother's birthday, May 10, we took family trips to the Royal Cathedral and the kings' tombs. I learned only later that there were kings buried there and that it so happened that May 10 was also the last Romanian king's birthday. But I was always aware of that *Afghanistan* feeling lurking around these special days and special places. There was this thick sadness, although we were supposed to celebrate, as if we had to stay in hiding, in a place with no exit. Maybe a tomb?

Still striving to give his fourteen-year-old daughter a future, my grandfather bribed a principal of a technical school to leave the "kulak origin" mention out of my mother's file. For two years, she trained to manufacture matches. At sixteen, she was rewarded for being such a hardworking student: they gave her a red booklet that said she was a member of the Communist Party. Eventually that allowed her to go to high school, but only for night classes. That was her purgatory.

When all doors are closing, you open new ones, they say. At sixteen, my mother became a hard worker in a factory two hundred miles away from home and kept going on with her life. But she would never train for that academic career she had dreamed of.

She kept her creeds to herself, and she did as she was told. She closed up and became dumb to the world, never understanding the Communist ideas and never contradicting them. She followed her path, opening greedily and eagerly every single door she could open: the factory, the night-classes high school, and later her family.

The image of my mother reading that admissions list faded away. The letters on the laptop screen came back together in words. I could feel the despair of those Afghan women. I could feel *Afghanistan*. Doors locking the world away, far away, to another planet.

The beats of my heart ran faster and faster as a new painful thought lit up my mind, pulling up from the depths of the past a new stream of memories. This time I saw myself walking down the street in the sad city, my nose blocked by the stink of the days-old garbage spread all around, taking big steps to avoid debris and holes left by the reconstruction enthusiasm of a totalitarian regime. I remembered, deep in my lungs, the feeling of the gray-iced air of my adolescent winters, in the freezing, unheated apartment we called home. And I realized how much *Afghanistan* I experienced in the first years of my life.

I saw again the large ground floor of Eva Department Store downtown, with only one model of shoe: it was half shoe, half sandal, closed in front and open at the back, an elegant, fashionable leather model, with sharp points and low heels and a small leather bow under each ankle to mask the elastic bond that made them just a little more than slippers.

The shoes came in two colors: blue on the left wall and brown on the right, perfectly aligned on the glittering mirror shelves. I remembered my mother inviting me to choose, with the same *Afghanistan* expression on her face. We still had the freedom to choose between blue and brown! That shade of blue was the color of my school uniform, and I saw it again, years later, on the blue burkas of the Afghan women. Yes, it was exactly that burka blue, but on shoes… I hated blue: we wore identical blue uniforms at school every day—like blue burkas. It felt so *Afghanistan*!

I chose the light-brown ones. Boring brown shoes, like the brown shadows on the walls in my room when I lit the gas lamp to study for medical school—in the late 1980s, in the large cities of Romania, they were limiting electricity and heating every night at dark. It made me feel like I lived in a tomb. Or maybe in Afghanistan.

I pushed back those memories. I almost shouted out loud, "No! We cannot go back there! It will never happen again! I refuse!" And I felt I needed to know more about the place those cries for help came from: I googled "Afghanistan." I found pictures of Afghanistan in the 1970s, with women wearing their hair and faces free, with big smiles and big bunches of books in their arms, and then I found the blue burkas of the Taliban regime. What happened to Afghanistan?!

Those burkas are the concrete representation of my *Afghanistan* feeling: hiding, with no exit, no escape. I am trying so hard to forget (while I am so unable to forgive) my mother's confusing despair when reading, *Admitted—No Place*, my own despair choosing between blue and brown for the unique model of shoes, or my freezing in the black nights in the dark unheated apartment, and the despair of the young Afghan girls writing these letters. I have to. I need to. I need to forget, to survive, and to enjoy my life today. So, when I feel *Afghanistan*, I feel that thick fearful sadness of those special family trips to special places on those special birthdays of my childhood, and I keep faith.

I wrote the lines above, about my experience of reading the letters from Afghani readers in *ROOM 10.21* just a couple of months before Russia invaded Ukraine, on February 24, 2022. I wrote about my *Afghanistan* feeling on a quiet morning, living on the free side of Earth. Writing, I was thinking about how people living in the free part of Earth wear their own burkas of denial of the existence of evil. We prefer to ignore what happens outside those narrow circles we keep drawing daily around our small, little lives, the same way Taliban Afghans prefer to ignore the evil temptations from the women hidden under the burkas. At times, that ignorance becomes the official policy of the very state… Or even of the States…

We willingly ignore evil, unless it directly harms ourselves, even here in Romania, where only three decades ago we wrote letters like those coming from Afghanistan today. And yet what am I to do with this struggle inside me against my *Afghanistan* feeling every single time I remember it? It is my burka, my inescapable place; it stays with me wherever I go on earth or on another planet. I grew up feeling *Afghanistan*. It fuels my hopes and my power to look for the next open door.

How do I feel today, living in Bucharest, only two hundred miles from the border with Ukraine? I feel, again, *Afghanistan*. Or maybe today, I feel *Ukraine*… But I will write about my Ukraine feeling on another quiet morning, maybe. ■

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MILK and POISON

The water table lured a stream of children to its side. A large rectangle on legs, it stood by the window with funnels and tugboats floating on its surface. But the liquid itself was the biggest draw. Pouring it, feeling it, doing anything with water would lull these three-year-olds into its flow.

Today only Nina stood by the water, her black hair framing a solemn face. She filled a plastic cup with water and held it up in the air.

"This is milk," she pronounced. She poured out the water and filled the cup again. "This is poison."

Nina emptied and filled that cup over and over again in her own hypnotic rhythm. Another girl brought a baby doll over to wash in the water. Nina didn't miss a beat.

"This is milk. This is poison." She spoke out loud to no one, but I was listening.

After the seventh cup, I spoke. "This one is milk, and it is good to drink. That one is poison, and it can hurt you."

Nina darted away. From the other side of the room, she gave me a sideways glance. She stayed as far away from me as she could get, while I bit my upper lip.

What had I done?

I thought my words would be harmless, a mere repetition of hers with a millimeter of meaning attached. I had hoped they would let her know I heard her. How did I alarm her instead?

She had been pouring poison in and out of her cup until my words stopped her, as if the poison turned real when I spoke. I should never have linked play with harm. It was weeks before she would come near me again.

I first met Nina on the second day of school. Sitting at a wooden table with a puzzle of a panda bear in front of her, she patiently turned each ear around to fit it into its slot. She finished the bear and moved on to a flower garden, quietly putting wooden leaves into holes, while other children said tearful goodbyes to their parents. She noticed me watching but did not return my smile.

She intrigued me, this quiet child. Some days Nina arrived at school early, handed her mother her jacket, and went off to play. Other times she negotiated the long stretch of sidewalk from the corner to the school all alone and burst into tears at the door. I imagined being Nina's size, moving between tall people walking fast and children holding parents' hands. Why had she been left to fend for herself?

At school she had been waking up sobbing in the middle of her nap. Nothing would console her. Her teachers thought maybe she was having nightmares. They asked me to meet with her mother about it. I was glad to have a chance to find out more.

"What do we know about her?" I asked the teachers before the meeting.

"They're from Cambodia, you know."

I didn't.

"Now you know everything I know. Except the mother's very smart. She's studying to be a doctor."

Her mother came in during her lunch hour just a few days later. She was working in medical records while studying for her MCATs.

"Nightmares? That is ridiculous! They should concentrate on what she's learning, not on nightmares."

"How does Nina sleep at home?" I asked.

"She wakes up crying and comes over to my bed." She laughed. "I get up and walk away."

Her laugh froze my questions. "Night must be hard," I concluded.

"Her father is in Cambodia." She looked at the door.

I looked toward the door too. "Will he be joining you?"

"Oh yes." She laughed again.

What did her laugh mean? Did he say he was coming, but that was a joke? Maybe the joke was on me for asking.

She turned from me to the clock on the wall. It was time to go.

I watched her walk quietly through the doorway. It was May, but the air felt cold.

Nina had a friend named Stephanie. They liked to play dress-up together, winding their way across the room, draped in pink and green scarves. When Stephanie went off to play with another child, Nina bit her on the arm. Leaving was some kind of poison.

One evening, after I finished a late meeting at the day care center, I heard a despondent cry. I followed the sound to the basement. It was coming from the after-hours room, where after six o'clock, children of all ages waited for their parents.

There sat Nina in the middle of the floor, sobbing, while older children raced around her. She looked up at me, standing in the doorway, and put up her arms. In a strange place, I was a familiar friend. Nina quieted as I held her. When her mother arrived that evening, Nina was still on my lap.

I suggested that we meet. "How about next Thursday?"

She wrote down the time.

Thursday came, and I waited. After twenty minutes I figured the meeting wasn't happening. I wasn't entirely surprised, since I hadn't seen Nina at school that week.

I checked with her teacher. "Is she sick?"

"The mother put her in a different center." Her teacher gave me a half smile. "Don't worry, it's got nothing to do with you."

Nothing? *Nothing* shouldn't make me feel like a pariah. As I moved toward Nina, she moved away. When she came closer, her mother made a U-turn that knocked me off the path.

I sat down beside the water table and watched two children float plastic boats. Where was Nina? Was she pouring milk and poison somewhere else? Would anyone decode the meaning of those cups of water?

I now had some clues. Sometimes people take care of you, but sometimes they walk away. Sometimes they read to you, but sometimes they laugh at you. Nina could fill as many cups as she liked with poison without feeling the pain that could come from people.

Her mother alluded to a similar story. People may say they are coming to join you, but they don't. Leavings are a piece of sarcasm to unravel. Having been hurled out as part of the joke, I had my own dose of the danger of getting anywhere close to close. I could only wonder what lay behind.

What terrifying events might Nina's mother have lived through as a young child in Cambodia? Who cared for her, and who did she leave behind? I wondered what kinds of memories filled the moments when she laughed at Nina's tears.

I never found out. I only knew what Nina knew: milk and poison. ■

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SIX DAYS IN ODESA

Smoke is engulfing the streets of Odesa from the bombardment of the city's oil refinery by Russian missiles. The Zatoka bridge, which links the city with the rest of Ukraine, has been attacked and destroyed. I watch the news with horror as the map of Russian-controlled territory expands. I fear for Odesa, the "Pearl of the Black Sea." I fear it could become another Mariupol in Putin's brutal war. ¶ Because I have traveled to Odesa, the news feels personal. Odesa is a city redolent with memories of dear people and precious encounters.

In 1989 I served as a faculty member with the Semester at Sea program of the University of Pittsburgh. Odesa, then part of the Soviet Union, was the seventh of nine stops on our voyage. My husband, daughter, and I had six days to explore the city. Each day we left our mother ship to climb the Potemkin Stairs, which led from the port to the cobblestoned streets of Odesa. Seven-year-old Karin counted the 192 steps as we climbed. The city was replete with ornate nineteenth-century buildings, wide boulevards lined with sycamores, and the most magnificent opera house outside Vienna. Silver and gold onion domes of Russian Orthodox churches shone vividly against the blue November sky.

It was cold. Locals bundled up in fur hats and drab wool coats. We stood out with our light jackets in primary colors as we walked the city streets, perusing stores with empty shelves and passing lines of people waiting to buy the most basic consumer goods. Friendly locals approached us, asking if we might trade items of our clothing for black market rubles or caviar. One fellow reappeared wherever we went, offering to sell us an "official" Russian military watch, laughing each time we declined. People seemed to enjoy the banter of negotiation even when no transactions took place.

One morning, as I caught my breath at the top of the steps, I was approached by a young Russian named Vitali, who, after briefly chatting with me in English, invited me and my family to share dinner with his family the following day. We taxied to their country cottage several miles outside the city, where we were greeted by his wife, Svetlana, and an old woman in traditional babushka whose enthusiasm for our company made language irrelevant. Vitali and Svetlana's two-year-old daughter, Lila, eyed Karin shyly at first, but the girls soon began to play together. We adults talked, Vitali deftly translating for all. They shared family picture albums. Over dinner, we drank vodka and toasted the future lives of our daughters.

As we readied to leave, the old woman stood up and gathered the two little girls to either side, holding one under each arm as a hen might shelter her chicks. Her cheerfulness dissolved into an expression of great sadness. Looking directly at us, with tears shining on her cheeks, she implored, "No more war!"

I wondered, but did not ask, what the old woman had endured during her long life—the famines of Stalin's occupation of Ukraine in the thirties and then the Nazi occupation of WWII? How many family members had she lost? And what were her hopes in directing her words our way?

Vitali and Svetlana insisted on gifting us with a large green clock from their cottage and a pottery decanter full of wine. They drove us back to the ship, on the way taking us for a walk on the beach.

The next day I was buying a small weaving when, hearing me speak English to the clerk, an attractive Soviet woman interrupted us and introduced herself. She was my age, an English teacher named Nina. Might I meet with her and her class? she asked. "Anytime and anywhere." Why not? I thought. Early the next day, she escorted me to a home whose parlor was full of young professionals who had been meeting with her for a dozen years in pursuit of English fluency. A young man had prepared a fancy torte, another a samovar for tea and coffee. We passed several hours in animated interchange about books, politics, and life in the USSR and the USA.

That afternoon Nina and I strolled the city arm in arm, as I might with a close friend at home, but with the poignancy of knowing that this intense connection might be the only one we would ever have. I asked if I might buy her something from the dollar store, where foreigners could access items not available to locals. She smiled. "There are so many things we need that I do not allow myself to want." I didn't know then that I would see her again. Two years later she visited the United States, and we strolled the streets of Washington arm in arm, visited a museum of women's art, and shared afternoon tea.

My role on the ship required me to plan field trips in various ports relevant to the courses I was teaching onboard. For my Psychology of Women course, I arranged a visit to a maternity hospital in Odesa. There we were introduced to a jovial physician in a white coat who provided us with scrubs and masks and took us to the newborn nursery.

Morning sunshine streamed through tall paned windows, bathing dozens of infants in soft light. The babies were lined up like cookies in a tin, each one tightly swaddled in soft white cloth and settled in a tiny hammock. Only their round faces were visible. Not one of them was crying. I was awash with wonder, looking at the long row of slumbering innocents. The future of Russia, I thought, not knowing then that they would become the future of Ukraine instead.

Sipping tea in a government hotel, I noticed a sign announcing massage services. I paid the required sixteen dollars and reported back the next day as instructed. I climbed gray stone stairs to find the appointed room on the third floor. The wide halls were empty and silent, but I could see light behind one door. I knocked. A swarthy middle-aged fellow opened the door. He smiled and looked at me with kind brown eyes, and I soon realized that his English was as absent as my Russian. I looked around. The room was small, sparsely furnished, dimly lit, and with a black massage table in the middle. We were alone. I hesitated briefly, unsure.

My Russian comrade nodded. Assuming we shared a massage language, I undressed. He gestured toward the table, and I climbed on. He draped a towel over my buttocks, doused me generously with talcum powder, and began to thump vigorously on my back. He moved quickly with staccato punches and rubs, generating such friction that my whole body was warmed. Occasionally he hit a sore spot, I groaned, and he said, "Da!" When his pummeling stopped, I opened my eyes. From where I lay on my back, I could see him upside down, standing at my head. His hands were pressed together as if in prayer. He smiled broadly, exposing a jumble of teeth in need of dentistry, and bowed. "Fineesh!" he declared.

I dressed. We shook hands. I thanked him, knowing he would understand that much. When our eyes met, I think we shared an awareness of this encounter as an act of trust and mutual respect, a radical border crossing between two children from the opposite sides of the Cold War.

When our ship was ready to sail, Nina came to see us off. There on the dock, she accepted some practical items from us—laundry detergent and hosiery—and a book of Russian feminist writings. She gifted Karin with a book of fairy tales that her own daughter had loved.

In 1989, the masseur, Nina, Vitali, Svetlana, Lina, the old woman, and the man hawking the Soviet watch were all Russians. With the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, they became Ukrainians. No longer Russians, they now face the threat of obliteration by Russians.

Thankfully, the old woman must have died before this war, not knowing that she would leave her family—if they survive—to plead "No more war!" after this one.

Nina must be in her seventies now. I alternately imagine her fleeing her country or sheltering in a basement with her daughter's family, praying for the survival of her grandchildren.

And the sweet, swaddled newborns bathed by morning sunlight? They would be thirty-two-year-old men and women now. Where are they? ■

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CRIMES

A PROPOSAL

AGAINST

FOR ACTION

REALITY

IN a single month, I, along with millions of people around the world, and most painfully of all, of course, people in Ukraine and Russia, have witnessed and experienced a strange psychosocial dynamic. The most well-meaning, thoughtful people, usually inclined to carefully reflect on matters that concern them and not in any sense radical, have now been "moved" from a shared reality into separate realities. I do not use the word "reality" as a metaphor here. I mean reality as such. Former President Trump's expression "alternative facts," which so many used to laugh at, has turned into a very tangible "alternative reality," which is not a joke but a dangerous phenomenon. My aim here is to outline the importance and the danger of this phenomenon as it exists today.

I believe the roots of this phenomenon lie far deeper than the realm of politics. I would suggest they may be linked to brain evolution, deep psychology, and religion. I would posit, in fact, that the origins of the use of deception as a social tool stem from imagination combined with magical thinking. Some of the first—and to this day the most tangible—products of this combination are the alternative realities of postmortem life and godlike authorities created within the various religious doctrines of history. For even these can be seen as subconscious creations that serve the purpose of strengthening social cohesion by creating a shared episteme. Now the same psychic tools are directed toward and used for massive secular indoctrination and to divide people. These essentially haven't changed from the time of the Inquisition—physical threat, threat of societal exclusion, institutional authorities' unified opinion, group-directed information, strong leader-image, and many others.

While the obvious catalyst for this psychosocial change was the war in Ukraine, the trend has been observable for years. In 1928, Edward L. Bernays, an American theorist who is considered the "father of public relations," described how the sociopsychological mechanism of effective advertising and political promotion was a benign modern technology designed to assist a capitalistic economy. The same year—1928—Hitler appointed Joseph Goebbels as his propaganda director. The world soon learned that the "benign" technology can be applied to an evil end. It seems that the origins of the use of deception as a social tool stem from the very perception of reality, which, when processed by a group becomes molded by motivation, imagination, and magical thinking.

Hannah Arendt described the self-deception that covered the entire United States in the 1960s using a forty-seven-volume report titled "History of Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy." This work, commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, was mainly ignored by the US government for the first three years after its publication, but it gained renown as "The Pentagon Papers" after its publication in the *New York Times* magazine in 1971. The very fact that this publication was written at all testified to the vigor of American democracy at the time, while the core message of the publication—the years-long self-deception on a massive scale with all the suffering it entailed —testified to the opposite, namely the failure of democracy to protect itself and the world. As always, Hannah Arendt's analysis is penetrating and humane, almost psychoanalytic: there is no external evil to blame. Rather, the fault lies with us, regular people corrupted by the conflicts between our own desires and the roles we play in society. As almost always, the evil remains murky and so entwined in everyday life that it is practically untraceable. Or as Arendt put it: banal.

This is not how Sigmund Freud saw it. In his analysis from *Civilizations and its Discontents*, he wrote "…every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization." Freud went even further than Arendt when noting: "Thus, civilization has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed to that task." If this insight is to be taken seriously, it implies that the "enemy" can be seen as a kind of passive emotional relic, which can be readily activated when offered appropriate opportunity, especially if the basically antisocial aim is socially approved.

Fostered by social dynamics, rules, and mechanisms, Freud's "enemy of civilization" is activated and develops over time. For instance, since Bernays defined "propaganda" in 1928 as something that could come as more or less subtle, aggressive, or fraudulent information, the form propaganda takes has now grown into a conscious political desire to construct separate realities. The political entities creating this "propaganda" have highly sophisticated technology and very evolved psycho-socio-behavioral know-how. In short, *the enemy of civilization, which resides within every human being, now uses the most sophisticated technology in order to deceive and divide us*. The US presidential election of 2016 gave the world a glimpse of the levels of impact targeted use of information could have—it split the nation. Now the war in Ukraine has called to question the very nature of news. It has led to a situation where half the planet continually accuses the other of lying, of fabricating news for the purpose of propaganda, and of spreading false information.

SIVANI B/UNSPLASH

Currently, and for the past several years, I have been teaching psychoanalysis in Russia and other East European countries, while living myself in Finland. Speaking with people from countries both involved and not involved directly in the war, I find myself sometimes completely falling out of a singular, shared system of understanding: each narrative provided in the media is confronted with an opposite narrative. Each view is argumentatively disputed, and each argument relies on "reliable" sources. Each fact can be countered by *alternative facts*, and each reality has an *alternative reality*. And, since both realities are painful, they understandably feel compelled to address the pain: the immediate urge is to choose quickly between the provided options or alternative facts. Since the prevalent emotions are anxiety and helplessness, we end up making such decisions with our minds already clouded. From my perspective, this rapid psychosocial deterioration of coherent shared reality looks similar to a psychotic breakdown of an individual patient we might see in our psychotherapy offices. I am shocked by the speed with which public information has altered our reality in no less than three weeks, by the disastrous psychosocial consequences I foresee this may have, and by the process's tendency to promote itself. It has reminded me of a keen observation made by Hanna Arendt in the early eighties: "Image-making as global policy—not world conquest, but victory in the battle 'to win the people's minds'—is indeed *something new* in the huge arsenal of human follies recorded in history." As a psychoanalyst, I have come to believe that Freud's observation regarding the enemy of civilization within ourselves calls for a broader action: such conscious political misinformation and corresponding actions should be classified as a crime against humanity.

I have heard many times the "diagnosis" of the postmodern world as a narcissistic one. I disagree: politically, we live in a hysterical world, where feelings are manipulated, and manipulation as such is not condemned but almost admired. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this hysteria may now be best understood in the context of a perversion in which the psyche's distorted way of dealing with desire has become consciously approved. Dissociated information-processing is not only widespread socially but also considered by many a normal and desirable part of democratic governing. Perhaps the world is like a hysterical child whose conscious lies and preconscious and unconscious dissociations are approved by his parents.

The core of the issue is the unilateral way in which facts are presented in almost all press and media. Most publishers do not appear to be motivated by a desire to present the objective truth. Instead, they overtly aim to influence, to push the reader's mind in a certain direction. Too many of the articles that present themselves as "analytic" actually press a clear or hidden political agenda and provide one-sided and overemotional information. This is not done to persuade the reader but rather to create a certain picture of reality, which could affect entire groups of readers emotionally. In other words, the emotional information is not directed toward individuals or to entire nations but rather to the groups defined beforehand: to right-wing-minded groups within right-wing media, and vice versa with left-wing groups and media and various other factions of thought. This kind of social information-processing is divisive and, with modern technology, very dangerous in a global world. It depicts the features of a hysterical character at its best: manipulating the thoughts and emotions with an undeclared purpose in mind—to perversely evade the unpleasant truth about one's own prohibited desire, to evade consciousness. Psychoanalysis was created to treat hysteria. Do we not as a profession have a responsibility to try to directly address this perversion of our humanity? ■

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REACHING EVANGELICALS AND CATHOLICS

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOUG PAGITT OF VOTE COMMON GOOD

Doug Pagitt, a Midwestern Evangelical Pastor and founder of Vote Common Good, describes that in the 2020 election, there was a 5 to 10 percent shift in Evangelical voters away from Republicans. He is confident that an additional 5 to 10 percent are looking for an "exit ramp" from supporting Republicans involved with "policies of division, racism, selfishness, cruelty, and exclusion.

As part of a series of articles for *ROOM* about bridging divides in the United States, I interviewed him about his work with politicians, as well as Evangelical and Catholic voters, and asked for advice for people on the left who are interested in building inclusive coalitions.

Could you tell me about the work you're doing with politicians?

Our fundamental work is to help Democratic politicians feel comfortable saying that they want the vote of Evangelicals and Catholics. You would think that's not a thing you would have to do: Why is that a problem? It's an amazingly high-cost thing to do. There is so much pressure on Democratic politicians to not cater to the right.

We work with Katie Porter in California: she goes to Evangelical churches all the time. She goes to meet the pastors and hangs out in the lobby and says, "I feel like our groups never get to know each other." The message comes across: "I see you, and I know this church is in my district."

But people need help getting there. Toward the end of a speech at one of our events, a candidate described getting to "add something into my speech that I normally don't say: Growing up, my mom was our pastor." The crowd warmed up, and she went on and on. Afterward she said, "I've been door-knocking through the district here, and I keep meeting all these people at the door that say, 'I'm a Christian. So I vote for Republicans.' I haven't understood that maybe we can change that." I understand it: "You've been an elected representative, and you've never told anybody that you grew up with a pastor as a mom." She wouldn't have done that if her dad had been a labor organizer or if her mom had been in the Marines. But she had an intuition in Wisconsin that it's a political liability, as a Democrat, to tell people that your parent was a pastor.

What we have found is even when people are not religious at all—"I never grew up in it, and I've watched religion really do some harm"—that's the thing they can share. Say to people, "Hey, look, I've seen that religion can be really harmful, though I've also seen the beautiful things it does." And you know, you'll have a bunch of Catholics and Evangelicals nodding their heads and going, "Yeah, we know, like, thanks for that. That's the world we're living in all the time."

Our fundamental argument is that Evangelicals, like every other group, don't need their president to be like them. But they do want their president to like them. If you can give off the attitude that you like them and you respect them, even if you don't always agree with them, that's important.

Can you describe the work you do with Catholic and Evangelical voters?

We travel the country, provide resources, and host online communities, but it's all really in one effort, and that is to help Evangelicals and Catholics who have shaped their understanding of themselves due to their political and religious identity. These are really not religious and theological categories. They're sociocultural categories: when you meet someone, and they say, "Hey, I'm a Catholic," you don't often say to them, "Let's chat a little about your theology of the Mother Mary," right? They're like, "Nah, I don't actually think about that stuff at all." Or if you even say, "Well, what parish are you involved in?" they might say, "Oh, I haven't gone to church for years. But I'm Catholic." Jewish communities understand this—Muslim communities as well. That's what's confusing to a lot of people about Evangelicals particularly. They think it's religion. I'm not saying these people are not religious—they certainly are. There's definitely a religious component. But it's fundamentally a world view or a sociocultural category—a frame of reference to their lives. And we help people detach their political identity from the rest of this cultural shaping.

For a lot of people, being good is an important piece of this. We're trying to contrast their best goodness with "Why are you doing things where you feel like you're plugging your nose to still vote for Donald Trump or a Republican person, or where you feel you're violating your sense of goodness somewhere?"

Another piece is understanding yourself in the milieu of all the changes in culture and society. Where do you find your sense of community?

The third element is that many of these people don't see themselves fundamentally as political. When you start talking about politics, they're like, "Hey, man, I'm not political," and then you drill down a little deeper, and they definitely are, but by their own definition: being a good person who's in a community is that you put your values higher than just a political identity.

In 2019, we did a series of interviews with Evangelicals, especially white Evangelicals, who voted for Trump in 2016 but were not going to vote for Trump in 2020, primarily because of their faith. One of the pattern pieces was "I'm not political." And we'd ask them, "Have you ever voted for someone who's not a Republican?" "No, I've never not voted for a Republican, but I'm not political, in that same way." There's something where there's a way to narrate your story, that you're a good person, you're doing the heroic thing inside your community, and you're not being bossed around by the political forces. When someone comes to the realization that any one of those is not actually the heroic piece —

What do you mean by the heroic piece?

Because your religion gives you a narrative of how you're a good person, then your job is to act in ways that are good when other people are acting in ways that aren't. So very often—and this was particular to voting for Donald Trump, but I think it's broader than that—they would say things like "Look, I didn't want to vote for Donald Trump. But I couldn't vote for Hillary Clinton." Like she had become this image of something so diabolical that they had to do the heroic thing in voting for Donald Trump. The story they had in their heads wasn't "I did a bad thing voting for Trump." It was "I did the heroic thing in 2016, because I couldn't vote for her. But now I've realized that really wasn't the choice I should have made. Now I'm going to do the next heroic thing and not vote for him again."

People saw themselves as acting heroically on what they knew was good inside a community that gave them meaning. But they broke a community norm. And then they had to navigate. You start looking around at your church or the people in your town or the people at your coffee shop, and you're like, "Who am I going to talk to? Who do I know?"

We are trying to help people see a community that's still your people but just voting a different way.

What about abortion?

This has been made into a political issue. It's a stand-in.

I've talked to hundreds of people who say that abortion is the single issue they base their vote on. And I know people who are single-issue voters truly, and abortion is the issue. But they are so rare.

In 2019 to 2020, I asked hundreds of people: "Do a thought experiment with me. If you turn on your radio tomorrow and hear that Joe Biden came out and said, 'Look, I had an epiphany overnight. The Mother Mary herself visited me, and I've changed my view on abortion. I now am a pro-life candidate.' Would you consider voting for him?" To a person they all said no.

In his 2020 sequel to *What's the Matter with Kansas*, Thomas Frank says that it's "a tradition of quasi-aristocratic scorn that has allowed the paranoid right to flower so abundantly." What do you think about that? Do you think people feel condescended to?

That is the fuel that drives the engine, no doubt about it. It's the biggest thing. And the advice we give to people in other professions is: Do the best you can to help people not compare one side's best against the other side's worst.

Speak of your own limitations and that there are some things the other side gets right. ■

This piece was condensed from a longer interview. The full interview is available at analytic-room.com.

COURTESY OF DOUG PAGITT

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My primary areas of research include the issues of trauma, post-memory, commemorative practices, and agency and visibility of vulnerable groups. I am particularly interested in how trauma comes to language in the possibilities of representation of traumatic events and how "difficult knowledge" and "difficult past" can be described and visualized. I work across a wide range of media, including photography, installations, textile sculptures, and interventions into urban space.

Untitled 1/4, 2018
Collages; found photographs, orange tape

Untitled 2/4, 2018
Collages; found photographs, orange tape

Untitled 3/4, 2018
Collages; found photographs, orange tape

Untitled 4/4, 2018
Collages; found photographs, orange tape

THE BIG EYE

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND THREE DREAMS

I spent the first ten years of my life in my grandparents' house. One day excavators rolled onto our street, and the opposite side of it fell. The demolition stopped one house beside ours. As a child, I sometimes imagined I would wake up in the morning and half of the house would be missing. From the adults' conversations, I found out that the inhabitants of the demolished houses had been moved to apartments in housing blocks, some larger and in the center of the city, others smaller and in a neighborhood on the outskirts. My grandfather suspected connections between party loyalty and apartment size. It was also he who taught me that not everything that was discussed at home was allowed to leak out, that words could be dangerous.

I wake up in the living room, in my grandparents' house alone. I look at the two doors that lead out of the room, one to the kitchen, the other to the courtyard. Several layers of heavy curtains hang in front of both doors. I get up slowly and lock the door to the kitchen with the latch. After that, I realize that the door to the courtyard that should have been behind the curtains is missing. I try to bring the curtains together with a clothespin.

I sit with my grandparents at the table in the dining room. The table is loaded with food and drinks, but we don't eat. We are silent. The large windows that face the street have become half-open doors. The walkway is only one step away from the dining room. Anyone who passes by can look inside our house.

I am standing in front of my mother's apartment. Around the door is a strange gap; the doorframe does not close on the wall. I approach this floating door anxiously and look through the crack. I wonder if someone could walk through this empty space between the wall and the doorframe. This apartment door is locked, but it cannot protect my mother's home from foreign eyes, I tell myself.

Being a child during the Communist dictatorship was something like walking naked on the street without ever being able to take a rest. It felt like the others stared at me, but I couldn't tell who "the others" were—they had no face. I was ashamed. A big eye was on me, an eye that never slept. I was constantly trying to shut doors during my childhood, to hide beneath curtains and walls, in the house of my grandparents, in their arms. I am still locking doors in my dreams.

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memories of my vanished birthplace

ricordi del mio luogo d'infanzia scomparso

"The fireflies first began to disappear in the early sixties because of air and water pollution. Mostly this was just in the countryside. The rivers stopped being blue; the canals were no longer clear. And then, in a flash, the fireflies were no more. Now they are a memory, a deeply painful memory of the past."

—Pier Paolo Pasolini, Disappearance of the Fireflies, *1975*

I was born in Taranto, the Apulian city of the two seas, which had been the wonderful capital of Magna Graecia. Among the many memories of my childhood and adolescence, the seafood of Taranto has certainly a central place. In fact, it occurs in several episodes of my life, which my memory has indelibly fixed. When I was a child, after school ended each year, I spent my summer with my mother and brothers at Lido Venere (Venus Beach), on the Ionian coast, north of Calabria. We took the bus, then continued by foot and crossed a small wooden bridge at the mouth of the small river Tara, whose name probably comes from Taras, the mythological founder of Taranto. Tara's cold waters separated the baths of Lido Venere from that of another beach called Pino Solitario (Lonely Pine), located on the opposite bank.

We saw the beach starting from the top, with golden dunes covered by white wild lilies, and then going down, after the rows of wooden cabins and the mills with roofs of reed, in a large shoreline ending in the transparent seawater.

We as children used to stay in the water until our lips turned purple. But when the adults called for us to get out, before leaving the sea, we dug our hands in the sand and, with no effort, collected handfuls of cockles. After purging them of sand, my mother cooked them for dinner with tomato sauce to season spaghetti. When I got older, cockles were replaced by clams, which I went to collect where the sea was deepest, repeatedly diving underwater.

For a few years I lived in the old town of Taranto. My grandmother ran a fishing shop near the seashore. The shop's walls emitted a characteristic scent of sea and rope. I used the little money she gave me to buy myself a handful of scallops instead of candies. A street vendor opened them in front of me while I waited.

Every Sunday my father brought home a basket filled with oysters, which he skillfully opened for the whole family as a starter to lunch. When I turned fourteen, he announced with much seriousness that I was growing up and this meant that I should learn how to shuck oysters myself: the shucking of oysters was going to be a rite of passage in my family narrative.

After many years, I went back to the beach of my childhood, but I did not find it. I asked myself if I was not seeking an idealized beach, a beach that was all mine, a place in my mind, an image distorted by the deceptive memory of someone who stayed away for a long time. Alas, it was not so. It was not a "negative hallucination": the beach where I used to play for many years had actually disappeared. With a mixture of bitterness and rage, I looked at the mouth of the Tara; that little river, partly diverted, runs today through a desolate strip of land severely scarred by pollution, a strip of land with dying pinewood, neither part of the city nor part of the countryside. It is not even an industrialized area. It is a dead and terrifying landscape. Despite the proximity of the port's industrial chimneys and cranes, the Tara seemed not just polluted but to have lost its identity. The same was true for the beach; it almost disappeared because it was occupied by the "multisectorial" pier advancing into the sea for about 1,300 meters, one of the structures created for the steel company ILVA. The pier was built by placing concrete caissons filled with toxic waste from the steel industry on the seafloor. Especially during windy days, the pier became a malodorous landfill, as did the so-called ecological hills, between the steel complex and the Tamburi district, originally built to contain mineral dust. The imposing structure of the pier has led to the erosion of the beach.

Nei primi anni sessanta, a causa dell'inquinamento dell'aria, e, soprattutto in campagna, a causa dell'inquinamento dell'acqua, (gli azzurri fiumi e le rogge trasparenti) sono cominciate a sparire le lucciole. Il fenomeno è stato fulmineo e folgorante. Dopo pochi anni le lucciole non c'erano più. Sono ora un ricordo, abbastanza straziante, del passato [...].

—Pier Paolo Pasolini, "L'articolo delle lucciole", in Scritti corsari, 1975.

Sono nato a Taranto, la città pugliese dei due mari, che fu la splendida capitale della Magna Grecia.

Tra i tanti ricordi della mia infanzia e della mia adolescenza, certamente i frutti di mare di Taranto hanno un posto di rilievo, ricorrendo in diversi episodi, che la mia memoria ha fissato indelebilmente.

D'estate, dopo la chiusura delle scuole, quando ero un bambino, andavo con mia madre e i miei fratelli a fare i bagni al Lido Venere, uno stabilimento balneare situato sulla costa jonica che porta verso la Calabria. Si andava in pullman, e poi a piedi si attraversava un ponticello di legno posto alla foce del piccolo fiume Tara, il cui nome probabilmente deriva da Taras, il mitico fondatore della città di Taranto e le cui fredde acque separavano i bagni di Lido Venere da quelli di Pino Solitario, posti sulla sponda opposta.

La spiaggia cominciava dall'alto con delle dune di sabbia dorata coperte dai gigli selvatici bianchi, per poi degradare, dopo le file di cabine di legno e, quindi, le "freschiere" con il tetto fatto di canne, in una grande battigia verso l'acqua marina trasparente.

Noi bambini restavamo in acqua finché le labbra non diventavano viola. Ma prima di uscire, chiamati a gran voce dagli adulti, scavavamo con le mani nella sabbia dove si toccava, e raccoglievamo senza alcuna fatica manciate di telline. Dopo averle fatte spurgare dalla sabbia, mia madre le cucinava per cena col sugo al pomodoro per condire gli spaghetti. Quando sono diventato più grande, le telline sono state sostituite dalle vongole, che andavo a raccogliere dove il mare era più alto, tuffandomi sott'acqua in apnea a più riprese.

Per alcuni anni ho vissuto nella città vecchia, dove mia nonna gestiva a due passi dalla marina un negozio di articoli per pescatori, dalle cui pareti promanava un caratteristico profumo di mare e di cordame. Con gli spiccioli che mi dava, andavo a comprarmi, al posto delle caramelle, una manciata di cozze San Giacomo, che il venditore ambulante mi apriva al momento.

Tutte le domeniche mio padre portava a casa un paniere pieno di ostriche che, prima del pranzo festivo, apriva con maestria per tutta la famiglia. Quando ho compiuto quattordici anni, con voce grave ha annunciato che ormai ero diventato grande e ha stabilito che avrei dovuto imparare ad aprire le ostriche da solo. Insomma, l'evento dell'apertura delle ostriche andava a costituirsi come un vero e proprio rito di passaggio nel romanzo familiare.

Sono tornato dopo molti anni su quella spiaggia, ma non l'ho ritrovata.

Subito mi sono chiesto se non cercassi, senza trovarla, una spiaggia tutta mia, una mia spiaggia interna, idealizzata dalla fallace memoria di chi da troppo tempo era andato via. Ma purtroppo non era così. Non si trattava di un'allucinazione negativa: la spiaggia su cui avevo giocato per tanti anni era veramente sparita. In un misto di amarezza e collera, ho guardato la foce del Tara; quel fiumicello, in parte deviato, oggi scorre in un lembo di terra desolata fortemente segnata dall'inquinamento: un lembo di terra con la pineta morente, che non è più né città né campagna. E neanche industria. Un paesaggio morto e terrificante. Nonostante la vicinanza delle ciminiere e delle gru del porto, probabilmente il Tara è più degradato che inquinato. Lo stesso degrado si è impossessato della spiaggia, che quasi non esiste più a causa del molo polisettoriale, una banchina che si inoltra nel mare per circa 1.300 metri, una delle opere realizzate in funzione dell'acciaieria ILVA, il cui nome deriva da Ilva, l'antico nome latino dell'Isola d'Elba, che significa "ferro". Il molo è stato real-

In place of the golden dunes of my childhood, there was a residual beach, no longer resplendent with light but hard and compressed. Because of the carbon coke deposit, a sort of grayish-black blanket covered everything. The sea turned darker with greenish tones. The posidonia—which had reached the shore—had disappeared. The color of the surrounding streets was reddish because of the carbon coke dust accumulating on the edges of the roads and encrusting the guardrails. The iron residue came from Italsider, Italy's largest steel producer, whose name had changed to ILVA after the ancient Latin name of Elba Island, which means "iron." The plant had been built in the 1960s, around the time I departed Taranto to study medicine in Northern Italy, at the University of Pavia.

Goodbye, cockles and clams of my childhood! The water of Mar Piccolo (Little Sea), the inland sea of Taranto, a bay where some of the best mussel and oyster farms were found, was polluted by dioxin because of natural water exchange problems. I felt the way Pasolini did when he describes at the beginning of the sixties the disappearance of fireflies because of pollution of the air and of the azure rivers and limpid canals above all in the countryside.

Relatives and friends firmly advised me to stay away from seafood, especially the raw kind. Pollution destroyed my childhood memories, even those olfactory ones, and forced me to face my ignorance of the transformations that had taken place.

Cesare Pavese in *The Moon and the Bonfires* asked how it was possible that at forty, with all he had seen around the world, he still did not know what had become of his country. Like him, I could no longer understand what had happened to the places of the first part of my life.

We usually leave our home forcibly or by choice, as exiles and refugees, immigrants, travelers, or simply because we were attracted by other landscapes and civilizations. Even when we declare allegiance to a certain place, the place we call home changes. This is partly because of our nomad nature and partly because of the fluctuations of history: our geography is more grounded in an imaginary landscape of our mind rather than in its physicality. Home is always an imaginary place.

The landscape is the most trusted mirror of society, which can create, feed, and strengthen it, but it can also destroy it, annihilating its collective memory and, basically, itself in a sort of suicidal impulse.

Goodbye, scallops, and goodbye, oysters! ■

Special thank you to Delia Batten for help with the translation.

izzato posando nel fondo del mare cassoni di cemento, nei quali sono stati tombati scarti tossici della lavorazione siderurgica. Insomma si tratta di una vera e propria discarica brutta a maleodorante, come lo sono le cosiddette colline ecologiche, poste tra il complesso siderurgico e il quartiere Tamburi, costruite originariamente con l'obiettivo di contenere la diffusione delle polveri minerali, specie nelle giornate di vento . Si tratta di un'opera che per la sua imponenza ha portato all'erosione di una parte della spiaggia.

Al posto delle dune dorate della mia infanzia, si offriva al mio sguardo una spiaggia residuale che non era più chiara e brillante, ma che invece era diventata dura e impastata. Una coltre grigio-nerastra, per via del deposito del carbon coke, copriva tutto. Anche il mare è diventato più scuro, tendente al verdastro ed è scomparsa la posidonia, che arrivava sino a riva. Le strade intorno erano di colore rossastro a causa della polvere di carbon coke che si accumula sui bordi delle strade ed incrosta i guard-rails. I residui ferrosi provenivano dalle lavorazioni dell'Italsider, il più grande impianto siderurgico italiano, costruito negli anni sessanta del secolo scorso, diventato successivamente ILVA, quasi in coincidenza con il mio allontanamento dalla città natale per andare a studiare Medicina all'Università di Pavia.

Addio telline e vongole della mia infanzia!

Le acque del Mar Piccolo , il mare interno di Taranto, una laguna dove insisteva la maggior parte degli allevamenti delle cozze e delle ostriche, note per la loro bontà, risultavano, a causa dei naturali problemi di ricambio idrico, gravemente inquinate dalla diossina. I parenti e gli amici mi consigliavano con decisione di stare lontano dai frutti di mare, soprattutto quelli crudi. L'inquinamento distruggeva le mie piccole memorie, anche quelle olfattive, e mi costringeva a confrontarmi autenticamente con la mia ignoranza delle trasformazioni avvenute.

Cesare Pavese in La luna e i falò (1950) si chiede se è possibile che all'età di quarant'anni, e con tutto quello che ha visto nel mondo, non sappia ancora che cos'è il suo paese.

Anche io, come Pavese, non capivo più cos'erano e cos'erano diventati i luoghi della prima parte della mia vita.

Lasciamo la nostra casa forzatamente o per scelta, come esuli e rifugiati o come immigrati o viaggiatori, o più semplicemente perché siamo attratti da altri paesaggi e altre civiltà. Ma anche se rimaniamo, il posto che chiamiamo casa cambia. In parte a causa della nostra natura nomade, e in parte per le fluttuazioni della storia, la nostra geografia si fonda non tanto su un terreno materiale quanto su un terreno fantasma. La casa è sempre un luogo immaginario.

Il paesaggio è lo specchio più fedele della società che lo produce, che se ne alimenta, che può trarne forza, ma può anche distruggerlo, annientando la propria memoria collettiva, e in ultima analisi annientando se stessa in uno spasimo suicida.

Addio cozze San Giacomo, addio ostriche! ■

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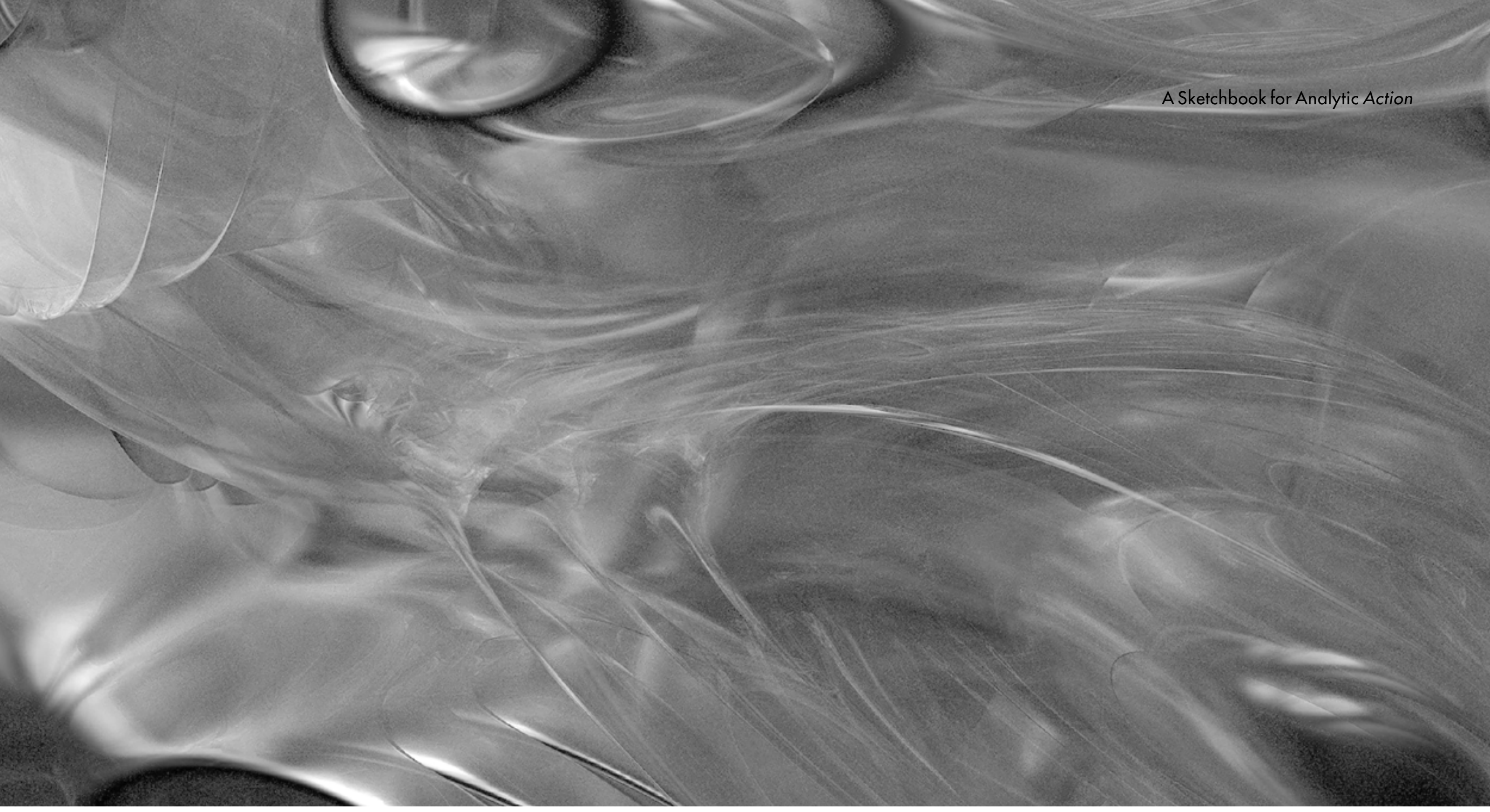
CLIMATE BREAKDOWN

To understand the shore, it is not enough to catalogue its life. Understanding comes only when, standing on a beach, we can sense the long rhythms of earth and sea that sculptured its land forms and produced the rock and sand of which it is composed; when we can sense with the eye and ear of the mind the surge of life beating always at its shores—blindly, inexorably pressing for a foothold.

—Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*

“Caroline from babyhood had no ‘wooly’ of any kind whatever.” Such “objectless” children constitute an example of...the failure of some children to develop a normal degree of relatedness with their nonhuman environment, because of their having to be excessively absorbed with their interpersonal relationships in the home.

—Harold Searles, *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and in Schizophrenia*



RICK ROTHENBERG/UNSPLASH

my childhood backyard, there were large ferns beneath which I existed for long hours in the summer, imagining and tending to a world of dirt, potato bugs, and the layer of cool air under the canopy of fronds. I’ve only thought recently about what kind of longing comes over me when I pass by a randomly situated copse on the freeway and have an urge to simply be in it. And I’ve only recently thought about this longing in the context of climate breakdown, walking alongside a creek and coming to a place where the banks form an enclave, where I can transport myself momentarily to a world after collapse, a post-apocalyptic state of survival, one that is “prior” to the aliveness of this world. If I feel grief about anything right now, it’s about the idea that this prior state would not happen in my lifetime—a wish perverse, bizarre, shameful. A retreat into a world in which the clear lines that can now be perceived are rendered fuzzy, blurred, diffuse shapes. A return to a time and experience before my own aliveness.

We both long for and are anxious in relation to becoming one with the environment, Harold Searles argues in *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and in Schizophrenia*. Searles notes that there is “an early phase of oneness with the total environment and a subsequent phase—the animistic period—in which all objects are personified. These probably precede the infant’s recognition of his own aliveness” (1960, 52). Not only are we variously oriented toward the nonhuman in terms of feeling, but the temporal position that Searles describes also involves a “beyond” that is “before.” Searles writes, “I feel that these hypotheses [about the nonhuman environment] furnish us with a far broader, richer, truer frame of reference from which to understand early ego development, than is provided by the usual preoccupation solely with the infant’s differentiation of its self from the mother. And I believe, further, that these hypotheses provide a likewise enhanced basis for considering the subsequent maturation, throughout life, of the individual personality; this maturation needs to be seen, thus, as inextricably a part of the total matrix, a matrix comprised not only of other human beings but, as I have earlier emphasized, of predominantly nonhuman elements—trees, clouds, stars, landscapes, buildings, and so on ad infinitum” (1960, 53). Ad infinitum, “again and again in the same ways forever,” a temporal, durational dimension, a force of repetition. And yet in Searles’s nonhuman environment, it also implies the panoply of the nonhuman in the midst of our most intimate human relationships: nothing outside the frame.

In “Fear of Breakdown,” D. W. Winnicott phrases *breakdown* as an experience that has happened in the past but is looked for in the future. In this way, climate breakdown in the United States is the future horizon of the genocide of Native Americans, played out over centuries and into the present in policies of removal and eradication. Ad infinitum. When climate, like racialized violence, enters the clinical space, the hardness of the frame is felt: there may be an urgency felt by therapist or client to push against it and “do” something; it may be dismissed as displacement; the question that comes up in consultation, “But what’s the clinical issue here?”

How do we bring what gets pushed outside the frame into view, bring it within the field of vision, of psychoanalysis? I find myself drawn to Thomas Ogden’s description of the autistic-contiguous position, a term he uses to describe processes of taking in the outside world. Ogden refers to the autistic-contiguous position as “a sensory-dominated, presymbolic area of experience in which the most primitive form of meaning is generated on the basis of the organization of sensory impressions, particularly at the skin surface” (1989, 4). Ogden glosses Frances Tustin’s notion of auto-sensuous shapes in describing what happens here: “Shapes generated in an autistic-contiguous mode must be distinguished from what we ordinarily think of as the shape of an object. These early shapes are ‘felt shapes’ arising from the experience of soft touching of surfaces, which makes a sensory impression” (Ogden, 1989, 55). Spit forms a bubble in the mouth; it is the “‘felt’ sensation of a circle” and not spit itself or the “three-dimensional object located in external space” (Tustin, 1984, 280) that is at play in this experience.

In her book *Patterns: Building Blocks of Experience*, Marilyn Charles extends the notion of “felt shapes” to a description of her enactment of “longings to make sense of whatever cues are provided in a universe always, to some extent, beyond comprehension” (2002, 21). The experience described by Ogden and Charles is one in which the child generates a sense of comfort and “self-soothing” prior to the use of symbols as a means of communication. The autistic-contiguous is not pathological autism but is seen as common to human development, and while the move to “communication” and “symbol formation” may seem like “normal” development, to move there too quickly is to lose a sense of the fragility and externality that mark our dependence on the nonhuman world. Charles writes, “Integral to the understanding of the roots of this experience is the awareness of the

extent and nature of the fears at this level of experience 'such as the unconscious anxiety that aspects of oneself are so private and so central to an endangered sense of being alive that the very act of communication will endanger the integrity of the self'" (2002, 60). The conflict between these "private" aspects of oneself and the "endangered sense of being alive" is resolved by communication, yet communication may not register the sense of endangered life that it compromises. Is this the experience of the self we find in climate breakdown?

Climate breakdown encompasses a scope of experience that is "beyond comprehension." It elicits an experience of anxiety specific to the autistic-contiguous position described by Ogden: "… autistic-contiguous anxiety involves the experience of impending disintegration of one's sensory surfaces or one's 'rhythm of safety' (Tustin, 1986), resulting in the feeling of leaking, dissolving, disappearing, or falling into shapeless unbounded space" (1989, 68). Such anxiety, in contrast to a depressive anxiety (worry about harming others) or a paranoid-schizoid anxiety (worry about impending annihilation), involves worry about the loss of differentiation between the sensory surfaces of the body and the external world.

Perhaps the autistic, rather than narcissistic, edge of experience can guide clinical work with climate change. In his 1972 essay "Unconscious Processes in Relation to Environmental Crises," Searles argues that the conflict between nonhuman and human is increasingly difficult to tolerate: "…we become increasingly unable to experience consciously, as an inner emotional conflict, the war between the 'human' and the 'nonhuman' (autistic, omnipotence-based) aspects of ourself" (1979, 237). Instead, the conflict is projected onto "this ecologically deteriorating world…and, since conflict is the essence of human life, we project in this same process, in large part, our aliveness" (1979, 241). In projecting aliveness, we imagine the "real, outer" world as the site of conflict and chaos, instead of locating that chaos and conflict within. Searles writes: "The greatest danger lies in the fact that the world is in such a state as to evoke our very earliest anxieties and at the same time to offer the delusional 'promise,' the actually deadly promise, of assuaging these anxieties, effacing them, by fully externalizing and reifying our most primitive conflicts that produce those anxieties. In the pull upon us to become omnipotently free of human conflict, we are in danger of bringing about our extinction" (1979, 242).

PHOTOS: RICK ROTHENBERG

In other words, not registering the psychical conflict evoked by climate breakdown contributes to the powerlessness, deadness, and apathy we take on in relation to the "external" ecologically deteriorating world.

To bring the nonhuman world and relatedness to the nonhuman world within the ken of psychoanalysis helps me to think about how to listen for climate anxieties and what to hear there. It is important to note that like the formation of racialized subjects in relation to the State, the sensory environment of the autistic-contiguous position, and the objects and shapes related to climate breakdown are often excluded from psychical life. They become the nonhuman objects around which the busy relations of human life take place. The child who finds a space in their mind free from the busy interactions of others may not have a "wooly" to animate and take into this space away from others, but they may still soothe and burrow themselves in the patterns of light and sound. It's a world that is an enclave, prior to "aliveness."

"It's like watching the sea," my friend Rei said many years ago, observing my two-month-old baby's expressions shift as she took in the world. I recall watching her begin to perceive patterns of light, begin to take in the shape of Bea, the cat, walking along the back of the couch. I can't bear psychoanalysis that takes away the utter uncertainty, the precarity of that sensory experience, or that reduces the little we know about it to the terms of the family unit and finds the force of repetition there. I find, as a therapist, that it is not only terror about climate breakdown that needs holding, but the utter terror lest this experience of the felt shapes of the environment be destroyed. The self-soothing experience of the autistic-contiguous position—a connection to the felt shapes of oneself in the nonhuman world—is the site of this most basic conflict around human and nonhuman omnipotence and aliveness. In it we can see a relatedness to the nonhuman environment that is often viewed as regressive but that exhibits what Searles identifies as a "basically positive striving" for aliveness (1960, 252), which we might recognize in what Rachel Carson calls "pressing for a foothold," the felt shape of life. ■

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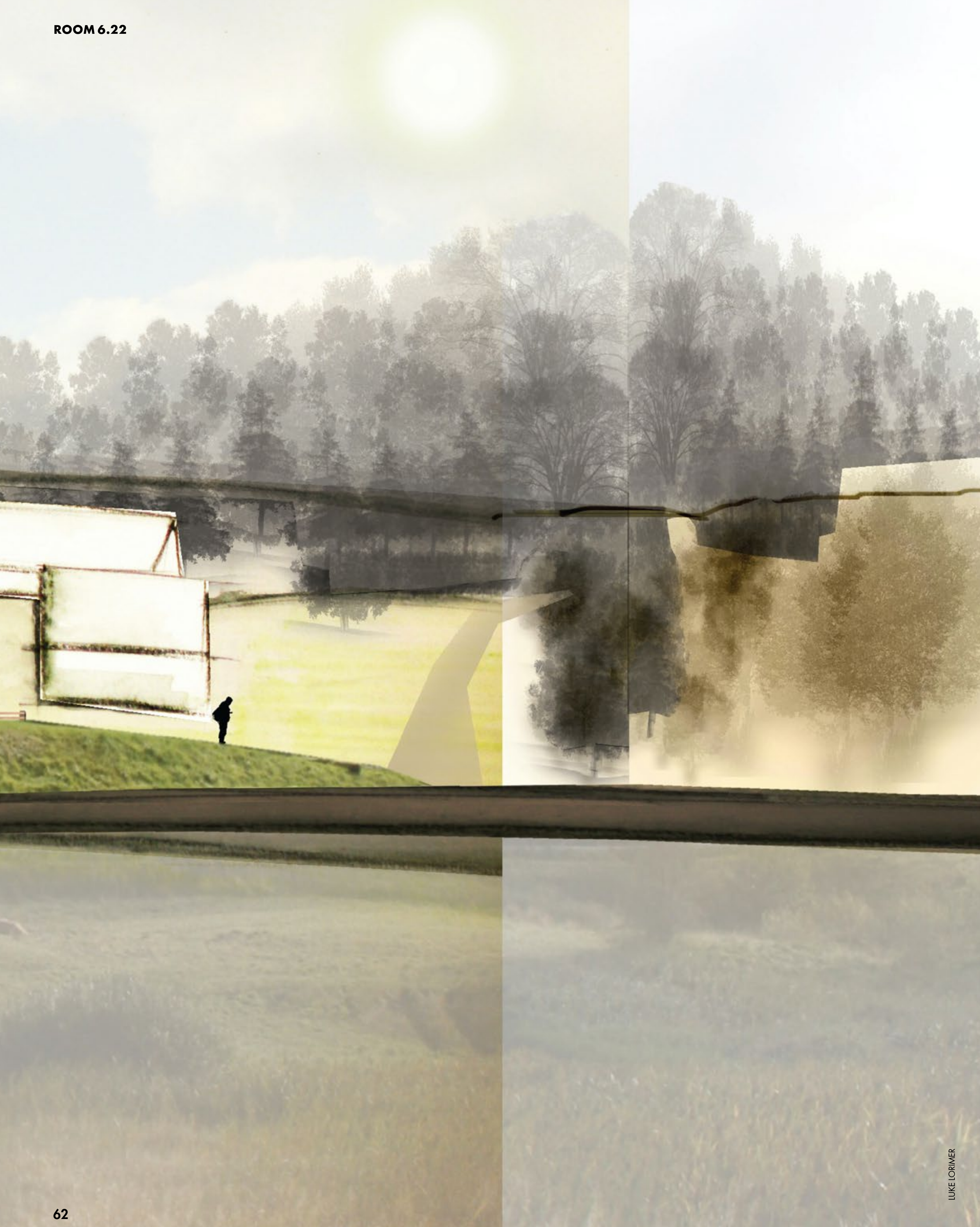
LUKE LORIMER

Linda Hillringhouse
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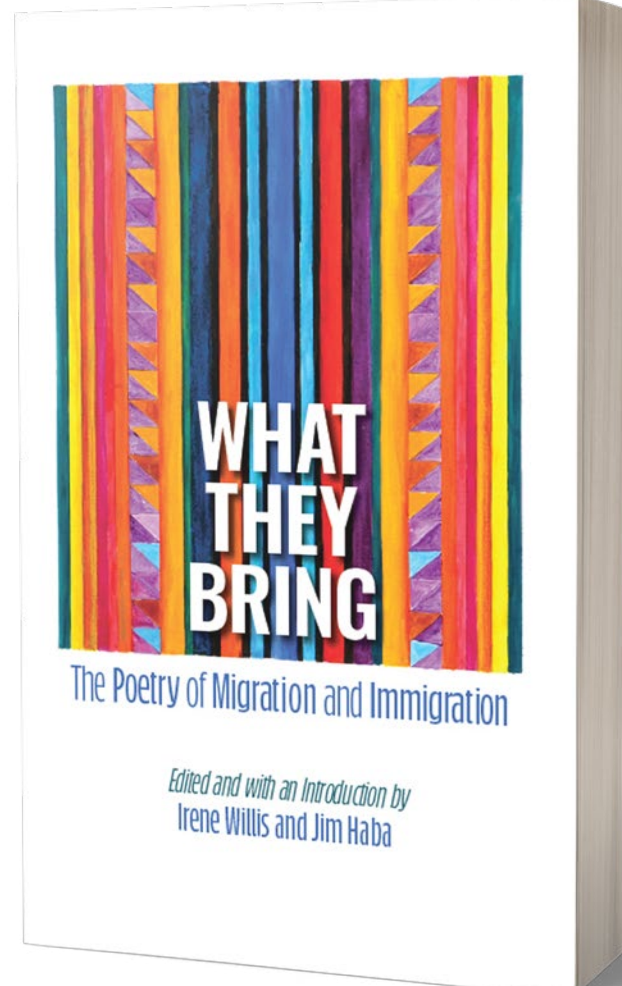
Summering in the Underworld

Someone is summering in the underworld
where the fountains and forests are forever frozen
and the mountains are empty. It's an unkind mercy
that these things retain their form. Maybe it was once
beautiful here before sorrow became a sin. But there is
goodness in fog, in forgetting the clothes we wore, the things
we said, what we saw. Memory cleanses itself, casting out
devils and angels.

I was born, and the foot of fate kicked me down the road.
I remember the sheep and cows peering at me kindly
through the fence. I remember the blue chairs under the cypresses.
I wish I had known me then. I would've held me and administered
the holy eye drops, so I could see what was coming. I would've
taken myself to a monastery and begged to be tied to a tree until
impulse disappeared and only prayer remained.

Ancient bees and flowers mummified in amber, alive in the days
of dinosaurs and still I don't believe time will leave me behind.
Why were we made to move among miracles with cloudy vision?
Why were we made so flimsily? I once liked questions like these,
but now they're like trying to drink water from a glass encased in glass.

IP Books



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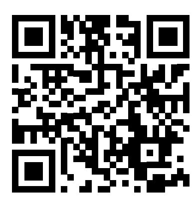

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LIVE VIA ZOOM

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Join us for a conversation moderated by Richard Grose and featuring:

Daniela Andromache, a Romanian psychiatrist/psychoanalyst who grew up during a Communist dictatorship: *The Afghanistan Feeling*

Mary Mykhaylova, a Ukrainian émigrée with family in Odesa, practicing psychotherapy in San Francisco: *Emotional Resilience in a Time of War*

Doug Pagitt, an Evangelical pastor who works with Catholics, Evangelicals, and Democratic politicians seeking to connect with voters of these faiths: *Reaching Evangelicals and Catholics—An Interview with Doug Pagitt of Vote Common Good*

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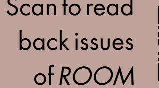

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The IARPP (International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy) is fundraising with the aim of giving financial support for food and other essentials to as many therapists and their dependents as possible. The funds are transferred directly to those requesting aid; there is no middleman. Applicants receive the full amount we award within a matter of weeks, if not days, of their request. We are steadily distributing funding directly to over 100 applicants, but the pile of applications is growing. The need has been so overwhelming, in fact, that our initial funds were depleted in two days. To date, we have raised and distributed about $110,000. This amount reflects the contributions of more than 560 donors.

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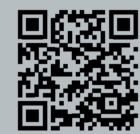

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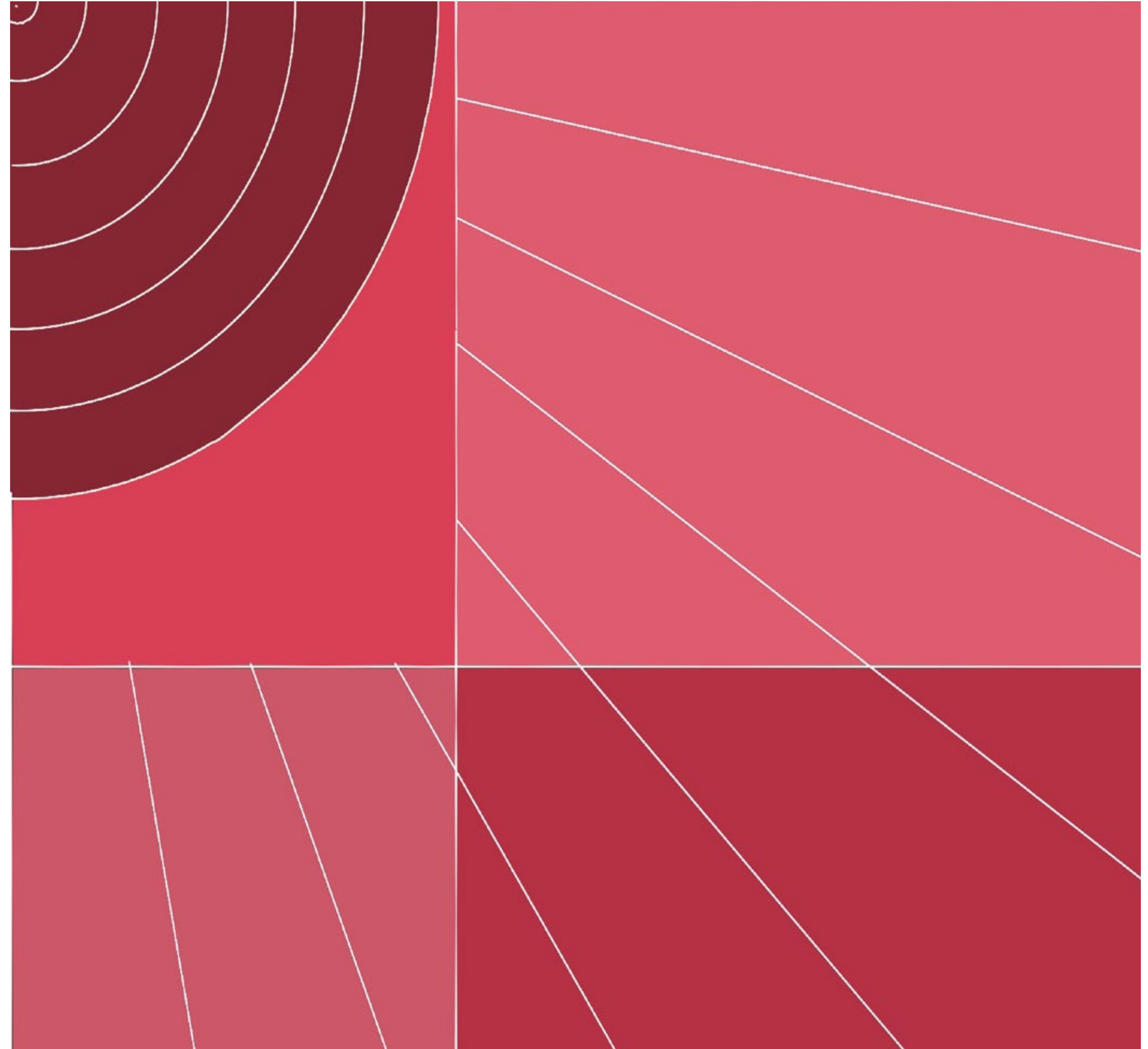

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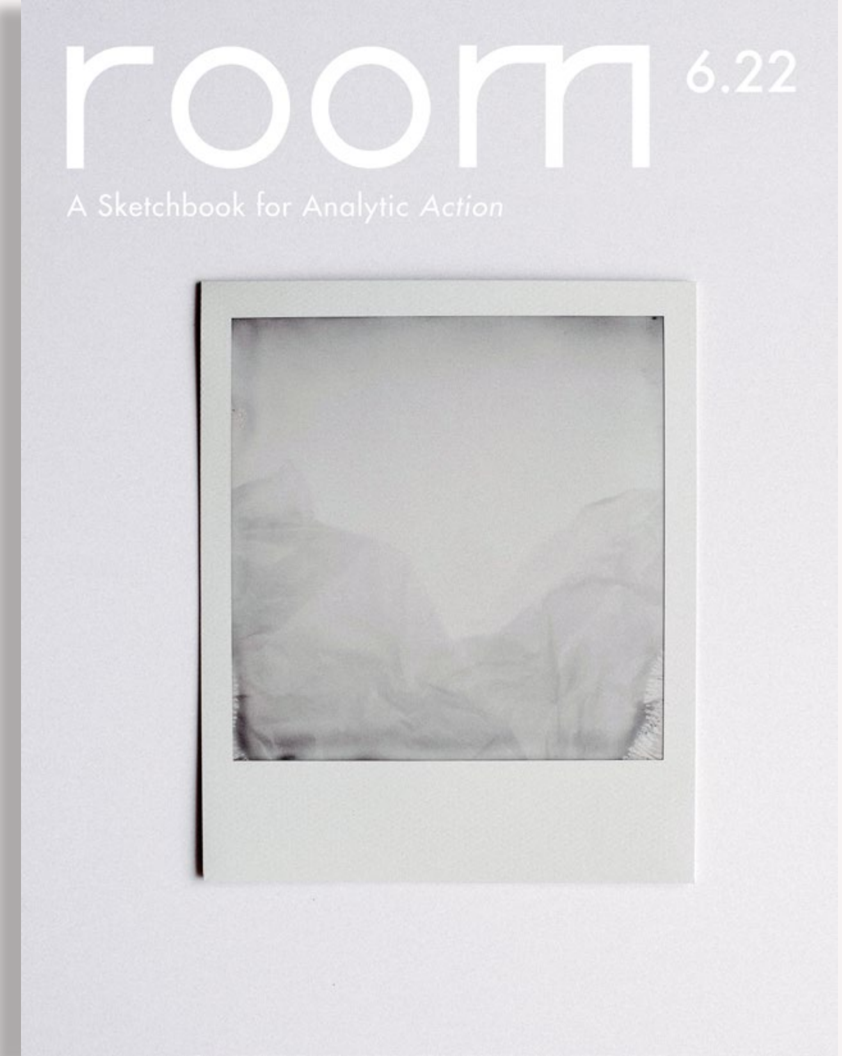

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