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When the Ground Is Gone

Identity Reorganization After Loss, Injury, and Displacement — and What Painting Makes Visible

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A GRANDMOTHER'S ANSWER

"This is not good art."

Four hundred years ago, painting a bouquet for its own sake was new — a statement about what deserves our attention. Today the same act, however skilful, is a repetition.

NOW, A CONFESSION

I paint flowers.



Inspired by the Dutch Golden Age

In the 1600s the Dutch Republic began growing and trading flower bulbs. The Dutch were proud of what they grew — and they painted that pride.



Rachel Ruysch

Daughter of a botanist. Court painter, among the highest-paid artists of her time, man or woman.

Mother of ten. Still painting in her eighties.





They painted by oil lamp: light on the flowers, darkness all around. I lit my flowers with a flashlight in a dark room.

A small light held on what is still alive.



Is this art?

One word in the chat: yes or no.

Tonight, in five steps

1

“I am not me”

What clients tell us

2

Never only mine

Self, others, community

3

Consistent, unlivable

Coherence and viability

4

The inner life

Where art opens a door

5

The collective

When a people loses its ground

PART 1

“Everything is still there. And I am not me.”

A house after an earthquake

CONTENTS — STILL THERE

Memories · values · skills · relationships

ORGANIZATION — LOST

How they are held together into “this is me, this is my life”

An injury, a loss, a forced move can leave the contents untouched — and break the organization.

For us, treatment is finished.
For her, it has not yet started.

Trauma Beyond Injury: the injury is what happened to the body or the brain. The trauma beyond it is what the injury cost the self.

A MOMENT TO THINK

Think of one person who told you, “I am not me.”

What was still there? And what had stopped fitting together?

PART 2

Identity is never only mine.

When one person moves to a new country, who changes?

She

The respected professional is a beginner again.

Her children

For the first time, they see an uncertain mother.

Her parents

The ones who stayed lose a daughter close by.

Her communities

The old one goes on without her. The new one has plans for her.



Identity is nested

The self. The people who hold a picture of me — and sometimes need me to stay that picture. The community, culture and history I belong to.

A change in one circle always moves the others.

“You were always the strong one.”

Sometimes the self is ready to change — and the people around are not. The person is held in place by love.

Who in your life still needs you to be who you were?

PART 3

Consistent, but no longer livable.

Two different questions

COHERENCE

Does it hold together?

VIABILITY

Can it be lived, in the life I have now?

An identity can be fully coherent — and no longer viable.

Is that betrayal?

If she stops being only his wife, and becomes also his caregiver — and a woman with a life of her own?

If a refugee stops being only the doctor she was back home?

If a person after injury stops trying to become exactly who he was?

Not betrayal. Survival — and sometimes growth.

PART 4

Where the inner life lives

VIKTOR FRANKL'S DISCOVERY

Everything outside was taken. Something inside was still alive.

Art is a door into that inner space — where we see what we feel before we have words for it, and try being someone we do not yet know.



My Town

A child wakes up — not to her room, her home, her parents, but to destruction.

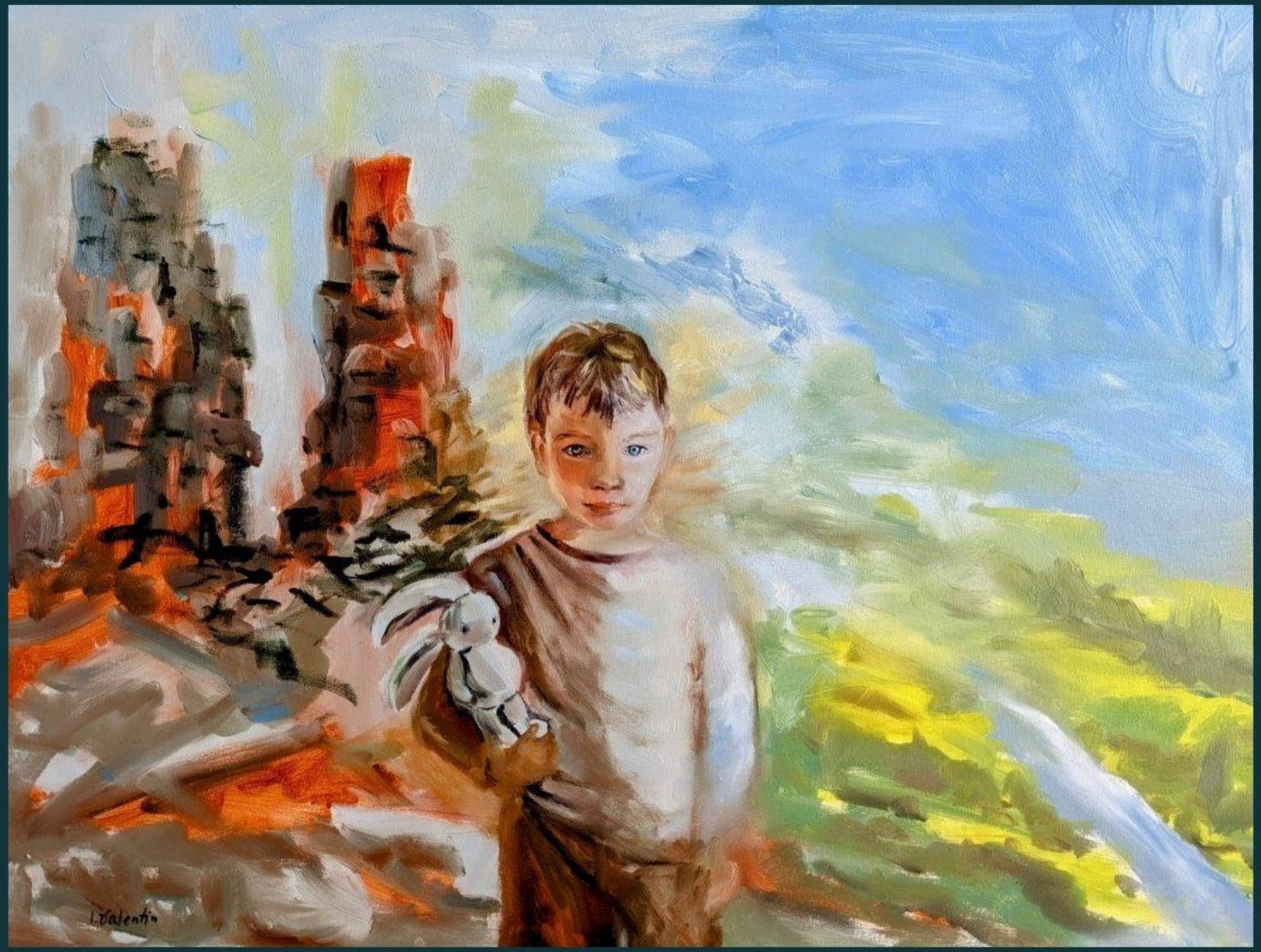
On the right, light breaking through.



2022

The father stays to serve. The mother and her little girl leave — not knowing if they will see each other again.

The family circle, cut by a sheet of glass.



Dnipro

He still holds his rabbit. In a matter of days, he grew up.

Everything is still there. And he is not who he was.



What are you leaving us?

There is no other planet. There is no plan B for our new generation.

I did not plan these paintings.
I found myself in them.



The river of life

A piano full of flowers, floating toward the light. Art brings the sounds and the colours.

And you never know what the next turn will be.

Where I make, and where I return

THE CORNER

Nothing to live up to. I disappear into the painting.

THE STUDIO

It carries a dream. I return there to meet myself.



Nearly fifty paintings

Made in one year, without intention, without a plan. Laid out on the floor and looked at together.

A year of my inner life.

The flowers left the vase and began to move





From sparrow to phoenix

First, a sparrow: grey, hardworking, ordinary. From its belly, a shadow — and the shadow became a phoenix, in ashes and fire.

The last strokes turned the fire into something exotic, feminine and very alive.

DR. IRINA VALENTIN · KINERGIA

Art of Emotions

EXPRESSIVE ART ACTIVITY

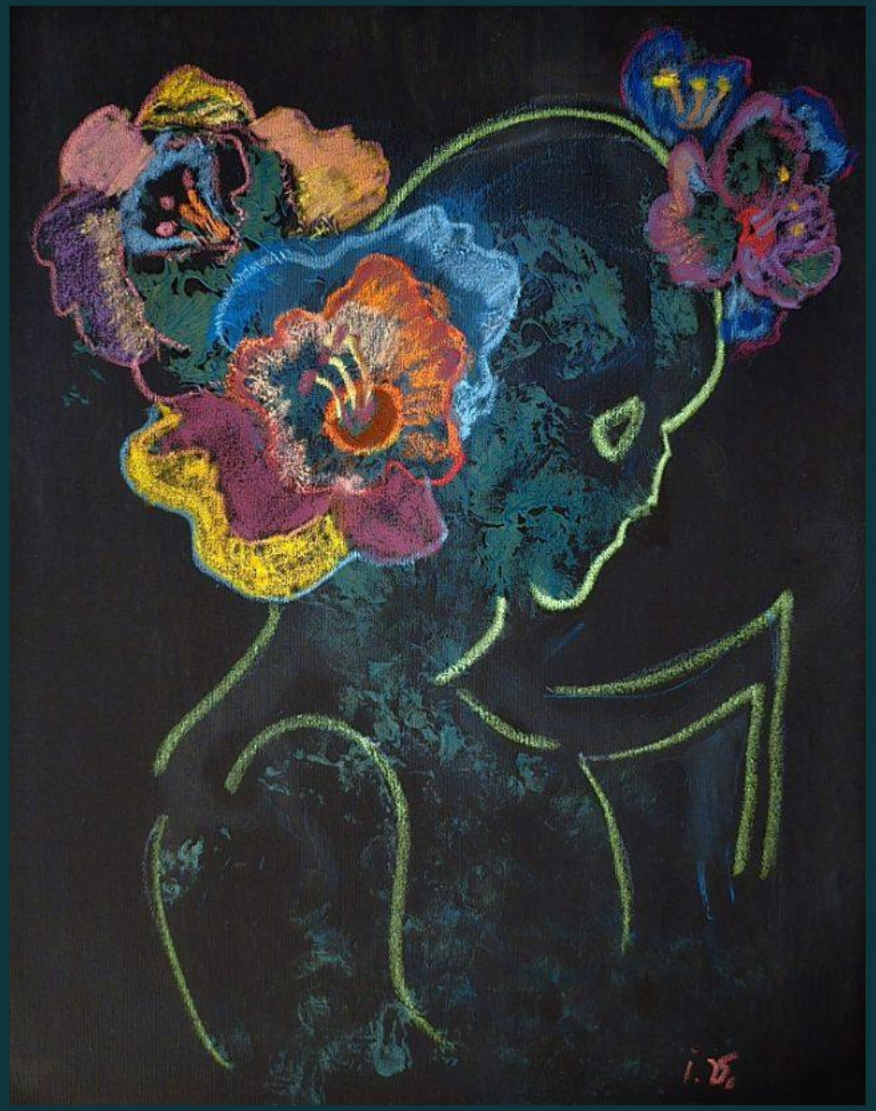
"Draw whatever you feel."

STRUCTURED IMAGE WORK

Make · look · speak · work with what the image made visible

The image becomes a rehearsal space for the self.

The material from this work is being studied; no results are presented tonight.



Death of Ego

In identity reconstruction nothing is familiar. The ego's needs — to achieve, to be recognized — are gone. Even "where am I going?" is dark.

Every gardener knows: after every goodbye, a new spring.



The Wound

Almost dissolved. The heart torn open. Coldness. Pain.

And inside the wound, half the garden is already in spring.

We do not have to wait for the pain to end before new life begins.



Where is your corner?

One word in the chat: the place or activity where you disappear into something — and come back a little more yourself.

PART 5

When a people loses its ground



Identity carried without ground

Again and again the land, the homes, the right to work and to stay were taken. Identity was carried by memory, text, ritual, family and story — and rebuilt wherever people found themselves.

The contents were taken; the organization was carried forward.

Ukraine, now

Millions forced from their homes. Many are here, in Toronto, in Canada — perhaps in your offices.

NOT

a comparison of suffering. These histories are not the same.

BUT

a similar task: rebuild as people, families and a community — all at once.

I thought I was supporting them. Their resilience kept mine.

BERLIN, THE LAST WORD

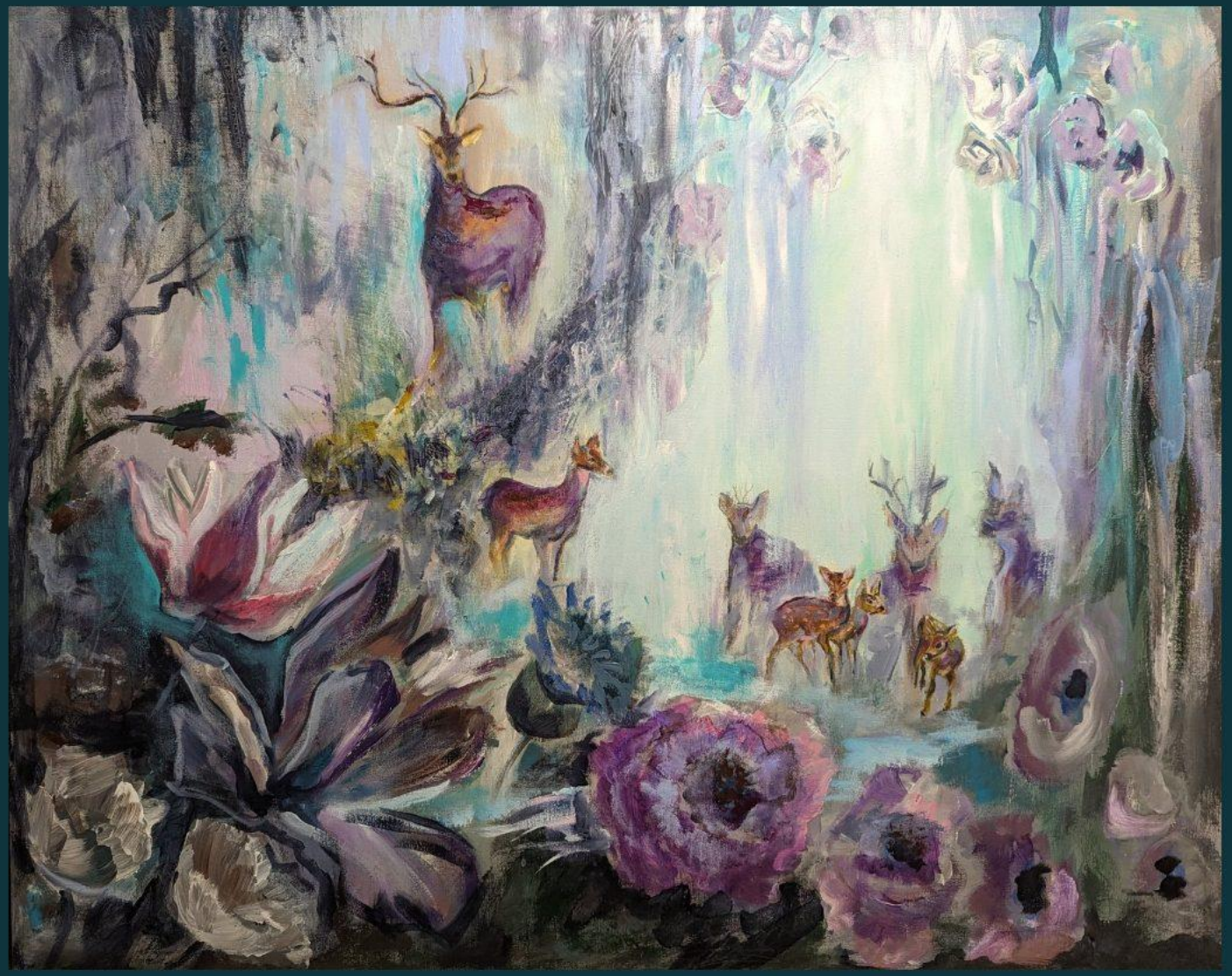
“Artists and philosophers were all alienated.”

Yes — as individuals. But the ones we remember gave humanity a new way of seeing itself. At the collective level, they were not alienated.

Frankl: from the most extreme alienation, a book that connected millions to their own inner life.

When the ground is gone

1. People can keep almost everything — and still lose themselves.
2. The loss moves through families and whole communities.
3. An identity can stay coherent — and no longer be livable.
4. Art is a safe place to try on a new self — first for ourselves, sometimes for others.



The young deer. The ancestors' shadows, watching and protecting. The adults between past and future — holding, guarding, acting.

Perhaps this is our answer to the boy holding the planet.



The empty frames of life

We are born into frames: a family, a culture, the traditions and values given to us.

How we fill those frames is up to us.

What would you dare to paint for the first time?

Thank you.

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LET'S STAY CONNECTED

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