

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Spectral Houses, the Analyst's Drawings: Postscript to the Dying Patient in  
Psychotherapy**

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**ISSN: 2044-7221**

**Date of Publication: 28/4/2020**

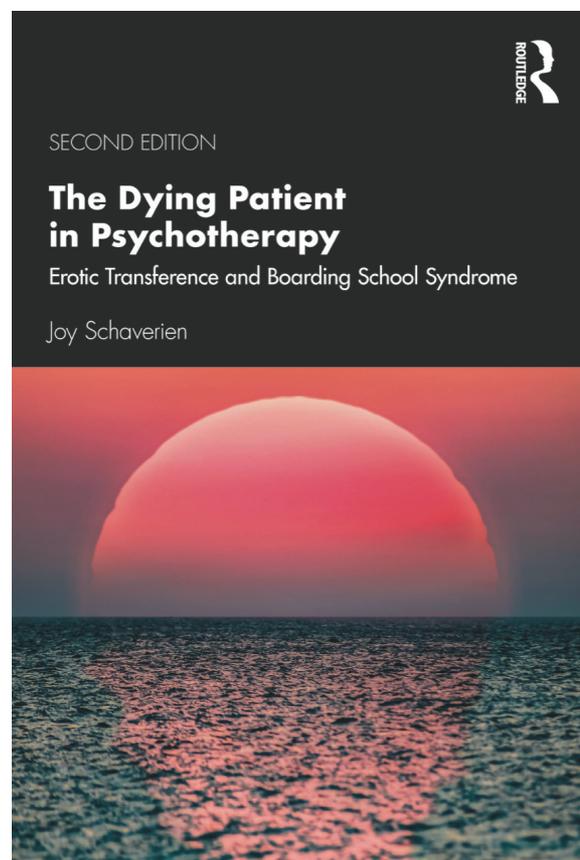
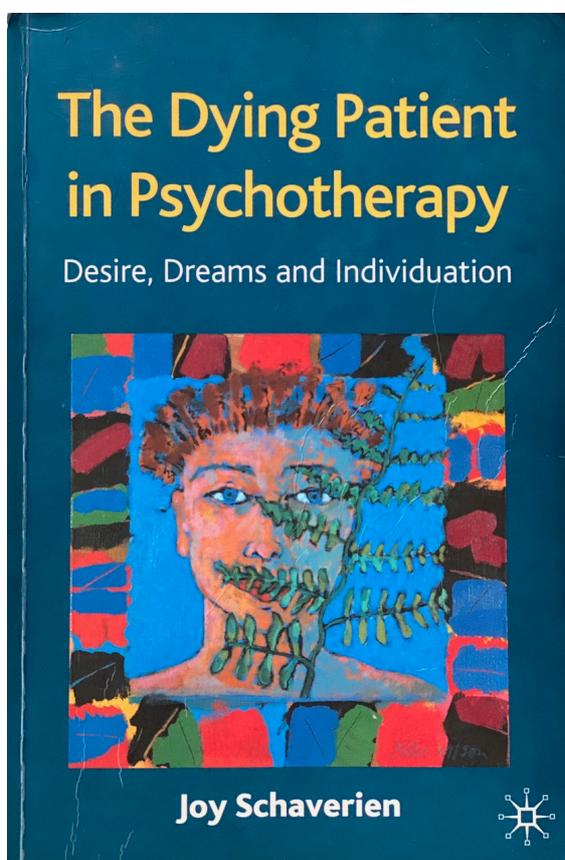
**Citation:** Schaverien, J. (2020) Spectral Houses, the Analyst's Drawings: Postscript to the Dying Patient in Psychotherapy. *ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine 11 (1)*. Available at: <http://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.atol.v11i1.1393>



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This article is written in response to a timely request from the editors of ATOL to write for the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition. It was a very encouraging request inviting thoughts about the past 10 years and it came at a time when I was just completing the new edition of my book *The Dying Patient in Psychotherapy*. In 2002 I published an account of my work in analysis with a dying man and now, in 2020, a new edition of this book is to be published by Routledge. Whilst planning the second edition I remembered that I had made some drawings during the process of the work with this patient. I searched them out and wrote a chapter based on them, with a view to publishing it in the book. However my own pictures just did not seem to fit anywhere within the context of the book and so I discarded the chapter. At the point that I was thinking the chapter was redundant the request from the editors of ATOL came. So this article is based on that chapter. It is presented here as both, a postscript to the new edition of the book, and as a stand-alone article in celebration of ATOL.



The pictures were made during the course of the work but I had not thought about them very much since. I searched them out, checked the dates against my notes, and was surprised to realise that there were not many of them, and that they were all made in the very last phase of the analysis. This was when the patient (who I called James) was nearing the end of his life. It is not uncommon for art therapists to use their own artwork for self-supervision or to explore the countertransference. However these were not consciously made as part of such a process. The drawings emerged intuitively; they were private drawings but evidently they were a way of managing the extremes of this rewarding but also distressing work. Each drawing began with no aim in mind: they were merely doodles, which then evolved without my conscious guidance. As Jung writes: 'often the hands know how to solve a riddle with which the intellect has struggled in vain. By shaping it, one goes on dreaming the dream in the waking state...' CG Jung (1916 CW8, pars. 131 - 193). I am not sure that there was a riddle here, but I do think these drawings were a case of dreaming the dream in the waking state.

### **The Story**

A brief précis of the story in the book will contextualize the pictures. A GP referred a divorced man, in his mid-forties, to me for psychotherapy: he was suffering from depression and living alone but staying in his parents' house. The main theme quickly emerged as he told his story. He had been sent to boarding school at the age of 8 and clearly the wound was still live. (It was this case that alerted me to the significant trauma caused by early boarding (Schaverien 2004, 2011a, 2011b, 2015)). Within a few weeks of starting psychotherapy a strong therapeutic bond had developed. During this time James was referred by his GP to a medical team for investigation of some physical symptoms and, three months after starting psychotherapy, lung cancer was diagnosed. At the time of diagnosis he asked the young doctor, giving him the devastating news, how long he might have left to live and was given a prognosis of 6 months. Straight after this appointment he arrived in my room reeling with shock and, from then on, his physical health became a dominant concern in psychotherapy. For the next two and half years we continued to meet twice a week until, he died, half way through the third year. The complex challenges of working with a man who came for psychotherapy and then became seriously ill led me to write the book. It was the book that I would have liked to

be able to read whilst working with him. However the need to write was because the power of the erotic transference was also testing. It emerged in all its many facets, positive and negative, including: idealisation, denigration, envy, love, hate, sexuality and violence. It became a challenge to maintain the therapeutic boundaries under pressure from the intensity of the emotions generated.

At the end of the work I was left with a particular form of bereavement: this I called 'countertransference bereavement'. Professionals who work with the dying sometimes experience something similar see Straker (2013) and Mannix (2017) who write respectively of psycho-oncology and working in palliative care. The loss is not personal – it is a professional relationship – and so cannot be shared with friends and family in the usual way, and yet for the time of the work, the therapist has become deeply involved with the person so it is a bereavement all the same.

## **Houses**

The drawings are all on the theme of houses. The central significance of real and metaphorical houses in James's psyche was an enduring theme. The house as a metaphor for the spaces humans have inhabited, both physically and psychologically, is evoked in the writings of Gaston Bachelard, the French philosopher. He advocates that psychoanalysts engage in: 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives....' (Bachelard 1964:8). Remembrances of spaces that have housed our earliest experiences nourish the life of imagination.

Real and metaphorical houses became a central preoccupation in James's analysis. The house image became symbolic of states of emotional at-home-ness; as a symbol of the self and, as a metaphor for intimacy and exile, the house became part of the language between us. When James had been exiled to boarding school at a young age he had missed, not only his family, but also the special manor house where his family lived. Much of the work in therapy was about helping him detach from the grand houses of his family so that he could find a more simple home – a place for himself to live. It was towards the end of the work that James was finally able to move out of his parents' house and, with the help of friends and family, find a place – a house of his own. Tragically at the same time as this renewal of life was taking place he was beginning to lose his life.

### **The Drawings of Spectral Houses**

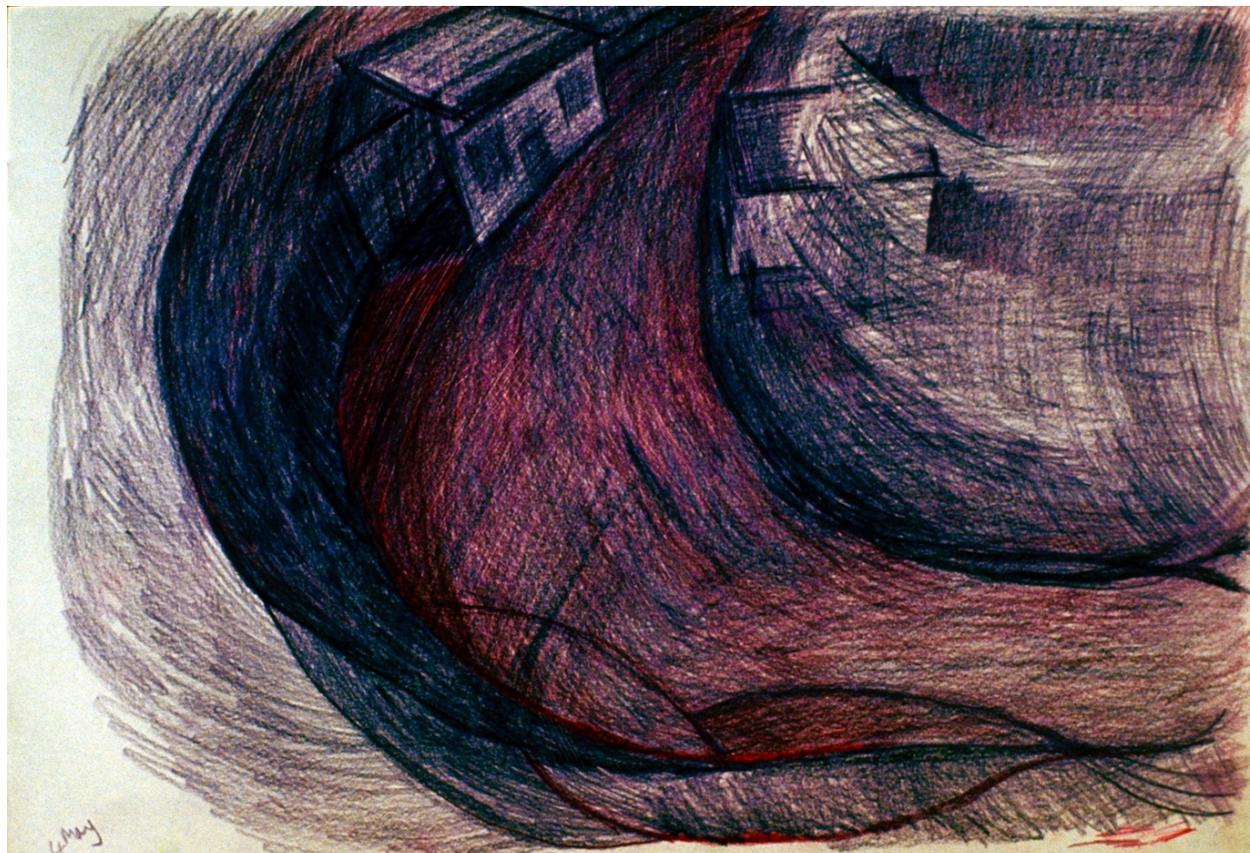
The pictures are in keeping with this theme. During the period that the analysis was moving towards its inevitable conclusion, these drawings became a way of mediating my powerful emotions. The drawings of transparent houses resonate with the theme of symbolic houses. There is little to add to these images – nonetheless I show them here with a few of my own retrospective observations. They are offered to show how this one analyst processed the ‘countertransference bereavement’. In regarding them from this distance of time it is almost as if another person drew them. So my commentary reflects this.

The spectral houses drawn during the last phase of the work with James echo the significance of the house as a metaphor. My consulting room is located in a barn close to, but separated from, my home by a path. Whilst these are in no way literal depictions, the drawings resemble this location. The drawings seem to be visual metaphors for the ending of this analysis. The pictures of ghostly houses were elicited by a sense of tragedy and loss.

The description of the pictures offered here has emerged from the reflection on my retrospective understanding of what I think was going on at the time. I have treated them as I do clients’ artwork. I describe the elements seen in the pictures, and then reflect how they relate to the end of this analysis.

They illuminate the intense engagement the work sometimes demands. These drawings were made between sessions and were private; shown to no one at the time. In retrospect I have come to realise that they are part of this story.

**Drawing 1. 4<sup>th</sup> May, Year 3:**



A single uninhabited house, on the left, is surrounded by darkness. It has two windows and a door and is swept across by a storm of strokes of the pastel crayons. Another building, opposite and on the right of the picture, is separated from the house by a reddish coloured road. That building is dark at the front and the rest is partly obscured by sweeping strokes of the crayons that appear to be like a force field covering part of the barn.

Although not in appearance like my actual house, the house on the left, could be seen to signify my place. My consulting room is a similar shaped barn to the one in the drawing. The partial obliteration of the barn, – the location of the work – may indicate the ending of analysis.

**Drawing 2. 8<sup>th</sup> May, Year 3:**



In a vividly coloured landscape, much brighter than the previous image, are three houses. There is a central field of light: yellow, orange and pink that seem to radiate from a house in the centre distance. It seems partly obliterated by the sunset glow. The building on the left is very much like the barn from which I work; it appears to be transparent and uninhabited. The house on the right could be my own personal house, self-contained with windows and a door. A path of striking light comes between the barn on the left and the house on the right. Perhaps this is symbolic of what was happening at the time: as James moved away into the distance and I stayed grounded, but sad.

**Drawing 3. 9th May, Year 3:**

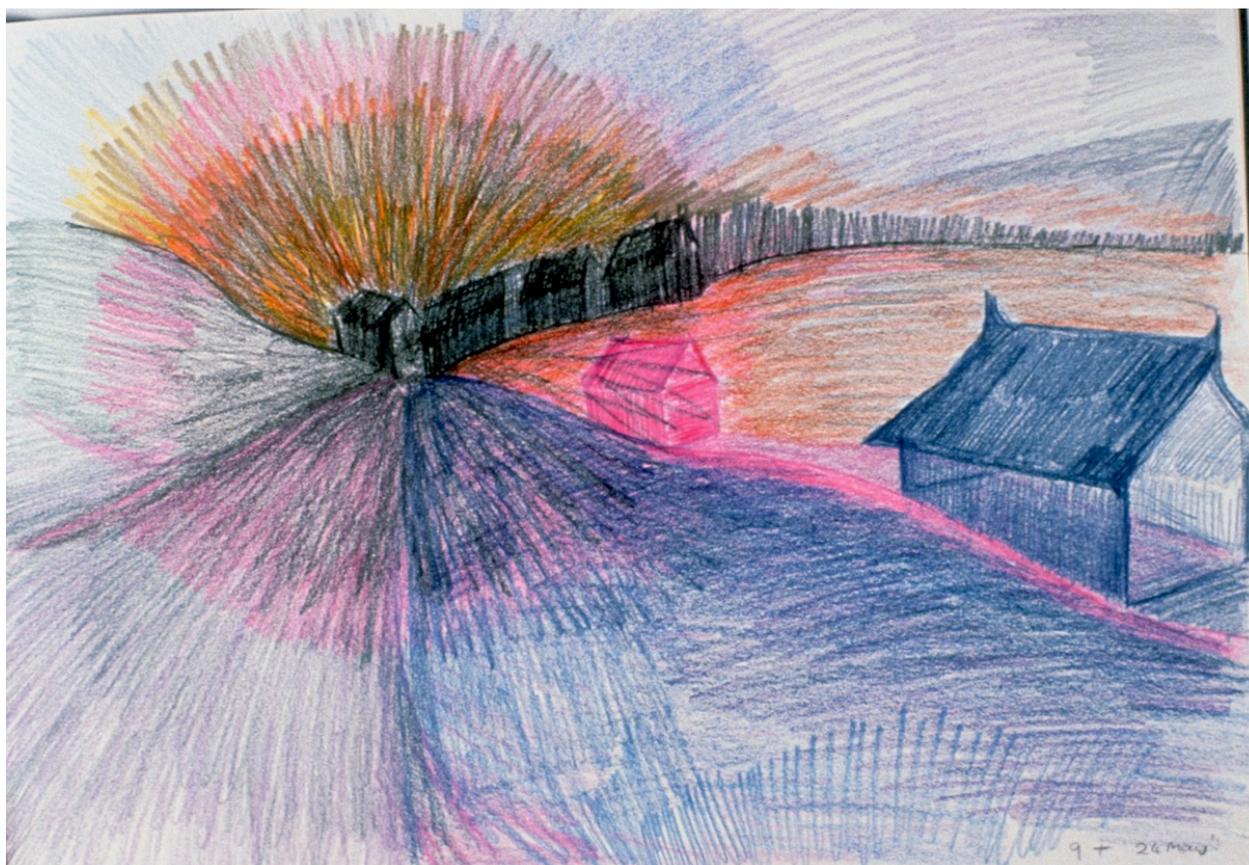


Two transparent and spectral houses in a blue landscape appear empty. The barn has a door and the house on the right seems to be contained and calm with windows, like eyes watching; the door is shut. A strong dark circle radiates from the centre between the house and the barn. Compared with the previous picture distance is growing between them. The sky seems to be transitioning from light to dark and creating a blue shadow like a partial eclipse of the sun.

This links to a time when, as analyst, I was witnessing James fading. I think these houses, without conscious intention to do so, tell that story. Both houses are mine – as is the real consulting room – which I share with the patient, and the house where my personal life takes place. This is my perception of the consulting room being vacated by this man. Perhaps it marks a need to withdraw my investment in the relationship but

watching as the patient moves away into his own future. As analysts this is what we do at the end of the work; but here it is particularly poignant, as James was moving towards the end of his life.

**Drawing 4. 9<sup>th</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> May, year 3:**



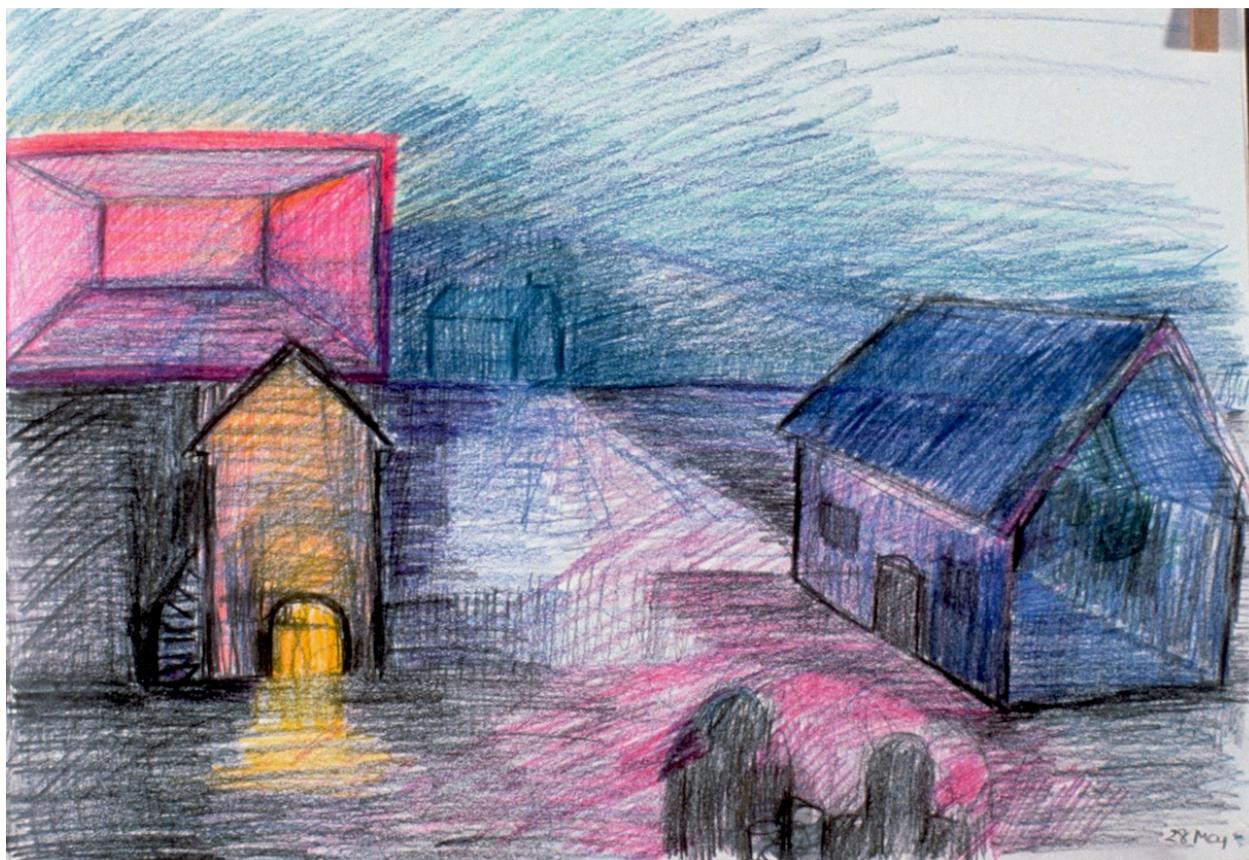
Rather lighter in colour, houses sit in a landscape. The first, on the right, is like the earlier houses, transparent and without door or windows. A pink thread leads to a faded pink barn trailing from the blue barn on the right. Perhaps this is my attachment to James. The eye is drawn to a central circular area where lines again radiate out in a circular motion. They are lighter in colour than in the previous picture. The colour seems again to indicate a sunset, as the yellow turns to blue, over-drawn with darker colours. A group of four darker shapes of houses in are situated on a horizon in a distant landscape. Perhaps this is James's life as I envisaged it now with his family and friends in his new home.

**Drawing 5. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> May, Year 3:**



An assembly of four houses are depicted here. The viewer's eye is led to the centre where, at the back, facing the viewer, is a house with warmth of yellow and orange colours. Overlaid by blues, creating brown, it is as if the light is on and it is inhabited. In the foreground are two shadowy figures with backs to the viewer; the one further away is lighter than the one in the foreground. As if one is following the other with blue lines radiating from them. Perhaps this symbolically depicts the analyst watching as the patient moved away. The empty barn is open to the elements with three walls: the one facing the spectator is open to view. The little house we have seen in the other pictures is on the right; it is still there with its two windows (eyes) and door. It too is transparent and lacking a wall, perhaps it too is not as solid as it appeared previously. Behind that house is another, darker and more shadowy, also apparently with windows. Blue lines at the back of the picture are drawn vertically over the central house and in the position where the sun was previously.

**Drawing 6. 28<sup>th</sup> May, Year 3:**



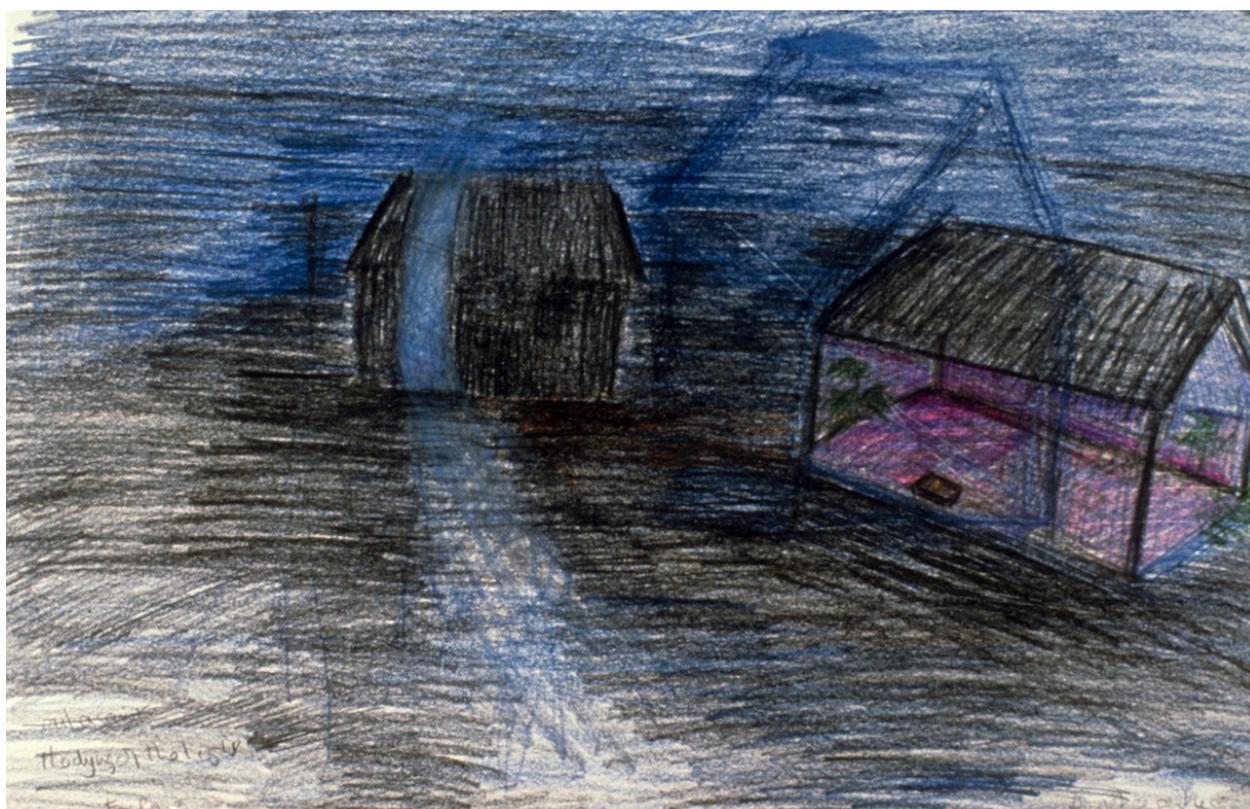
A similar transparent house on the right, with door and windows is apparently empty. In the foreground again are what seem to be two figures, – head and shoulders only, and seen from behind. On the left is a more complex assembly of buildings/rooms. First is a tower-like building with a light glowing from it. It looks warm and inviting and the light radiates on to the ground outside, through an open space an arched door-less entrance. Above it, like a higher storey is a room; box-like it is open on one side revealing a blue ground with pink walls and ceiling. In the distance is another building that seems to be the barn. A light area in front of it links it to the house on the right, with the windows and door in a similar position in relation to the barn as it was before, – but now it is receding into the distance.

Reflecting on this with hindsight it seems that the house on the right is my home. It is transparent – not impermeable. In the distance the barn fades into a less important building no longer needed for this analysis. At the time James was in his own home, which might be the building on the left. For me the picture was perhaps symbolic of

where I sensed James was now located. Living on his own and surrounded by those who loved him.

I was no longer needed but I could imagine him in a warm embracing place like the rooms depicted. In a sense I was healthily redundant, – as analysts are at the end of the work.

**Drawing 7. 8<sup>th</sup> June, Year 3:**



The last picture in this series of spectral houses was drawn the week after James died. Three houses are depicted; two main ones and a third ghostly one hovers between the house and the barn. Drawn in black and blue crayon one of the houses on the right is transparent and empty. The other in the centre faces the viewer and it is shadowy, dark coloured, and rather than being transparent there is a rubbed out blemish across part of it. A path area leads the eye of the viewer towards this central house. This was the final picture in this series. Reflecting on this, and following on from the others, perhaps something had to rearrange in my psyche to adjust to the space that was left by the absence of James.

It is not uncommon for art therapists use their art as a means of processing their experience of the therapeutic relationship. It is an accepted form of mediation and self-supervision. Although not consciously intended in that way, the pictures seem to show the process of letting go that is common in all analyses, but rather different when the client leaves in this particular way. These are pictures of 'countertransference bereavement'.

These pictures are offered as observation of the analyst's own process but also they show how sometimes our own art is helpful in mediating emotions that have no other outlet. These pictures are not included in the book because I did not find a way to include them: they do not fit James's story. They are my own private drawings and yet they are a postscript to the story, and so the opportunity to publish them in ATOL is both timely and appropriate. Where else to discuss the art therapists art than in this online Art Therapy Journal? At the very beginning of ATOL I was involved as a member of the consortium and continued, in this not very hands on role, for a number of years. It is great to see how it has grown and developed in these ten years. I wish it well for the next stage.

## **Biography**

**Joy Schaverien** PhD is a Training Analyst of the Society of Analytical Psychology (London). She has published extensively on topics related to art, psychotherapy and analytical psychology and is the author of *The Revealing Image* (1992) and *Boarding School Syndrome: The Psychological Trauma of the 'Privileged' Child*, (which was a Routledge and Amazon bestseller in 2015). *The Dying Patient in Psychotherapy* is to be republished by Routledge in April 2020. Website: [https://: www.joyschaverien.com](https://www.joyschaverien.com)

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