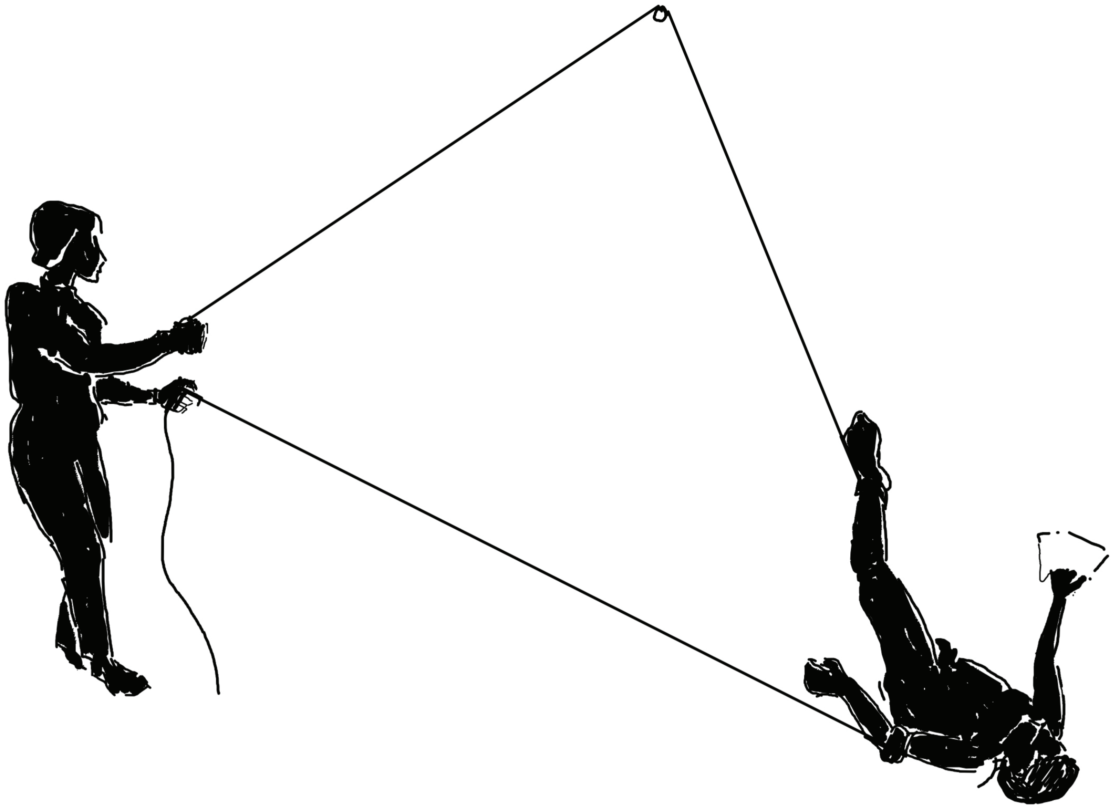
CALLISTHENICS

stories of support, aversion and love



CALLISTHENICS: *stories of support, aversion and love.*
by
Paloma Bouhana, Henny Dörr & Philippine Hoegen,

a first iteration, presented at the 3rd International Care Ethics Research Consortium Conference: Care, Aesthetics, and Repair, on January 23rd and 24th 2025, Soesterberg, NL. Thank you Louis van den Hengel and Jake Smit for your support.

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Thank you Stut Theater, Utrecht, for rehearsal space.

Thank you to our parents, children, siblings, partners, friends, supporters and chosen family members.

Don't stop talking about Palestine.

FOREWORD

January 15th 2025, Brussels

Dear spectators,

You are receiving this collection of letters that Philippine Hoegen, Henny Dörr and myself have been writing to each other over the course of a year. These letters comprise the script of Callisthenics: Stories of Support, Aversion and Love, a performance about being untrained, unprepared and unwilling for care giving and receiving.

The piece deals with unmentionable aspects of informal care, through the lens of our intergenerational personal experiences. Drawing from the heavy emotional and physical load of caring for parents, partners, or siblings, the narrative explores themes of conflicting needs and desires, paradoxes in care relationships, and the interplay between love and revulsion.

These letters are accompanied by different scores, sets of instructions or tasks that serve as a communication tool for generating movements related to these stories of informal care. When creating those movements we asked ourselves questions like 'where is this feeling of revulsion located in our bodies?', 'how does that express itself?', 'how can the ropes and harnesses either amplify or relieve these sensations?'.

The performance brings together a constellation of three generations of artworkers who believe in, and practice, art as a place of mutual care, artistic exchange, and solidarity. Performance is the medium that connects us, both as method and as dissemination of our work and research.
We chose to write these letters to activate the notion of 'auto-theory', what Lauren Fournier calls a 'feminist transmedial manifestation'. A way to write with self-reflectivity and performativity. The letters contain our own lived experiences, including excerpts from theoretical texts we encountered during this period. Fournier calls this 'intertextual intimacy': a way for us to intertwine quoting and personal recounting.

During the performance we embody various roles, shifting between them to speak of the multifaceted nature of care relationships. Through 'showing doing', we explore the physical and emotional weight of caregiving and receiving, the contrasts and the paradoxes of responsibilities.

The stage is set with a central pulley system, embodying the physical and emotional weightlifting required in care. We alternately carry and are carried, lift and drag, wholly, or limb by limb. Silence and speaking also alternate. Eventually our letters end up being impacted by the movements of our bodies…

With love,

Paloma Bouhana (and Rima)

INTRODUCTION

January 11th 2025, Brussels

Dear Henny and Paloma,

There is a thick white fog holding the city, which has no colour these days.

Many things have happened since we wrote our last letters to each other. We began working those letters, which we had written throughout the summer, into a script. Three scripts actually, with three performances in mind, and we began to rehearse, discovering how to move each other and ourselves. Untrained and unprepared we pushed and pulled, experimented, our bodies cumbersome, limited and sometimes suddenly light and delightful.

Because we wanted to catch our chance discoveries I began to draw our bodies' movements, thinking about a manual, a 'how to' for our performance. And we got nerdy about equipment: which harnesses? Which gloves? Should we wear black? Catsuits? Paloma, meanwhile, you puzzled over the pulleys, and the maths of our weight divided by what? And Henny, you laboured as both dramaturg and performer, and then embraced completely the latter.

Then you become pregnant Paloma. Suddenly you are two. And your body, up until then the most lithe, young and healthy gains a whole new aspect. A new fragility and a power at the same time.

And then you, Henny, are struck by a cerebral hemorrhage.

Our little cocoon cracks. We have been talking about care, illness, vulnerability as they intersect in our daily lives, we were always in the thick of it but with just enough space to move with and around them, to look at these things, to speak and think about them. Now that space collapses.

But we keep working.

Henny, you are struggling your way back to speech. To memory. To yourself. You find yourself in a fog. The struggle is immense.

Paloma, you're at your grandfather's funeral in France while I'm writing this. And last month my father lost the last bit of power in his legs and now surrenders to the hated wheelchair.

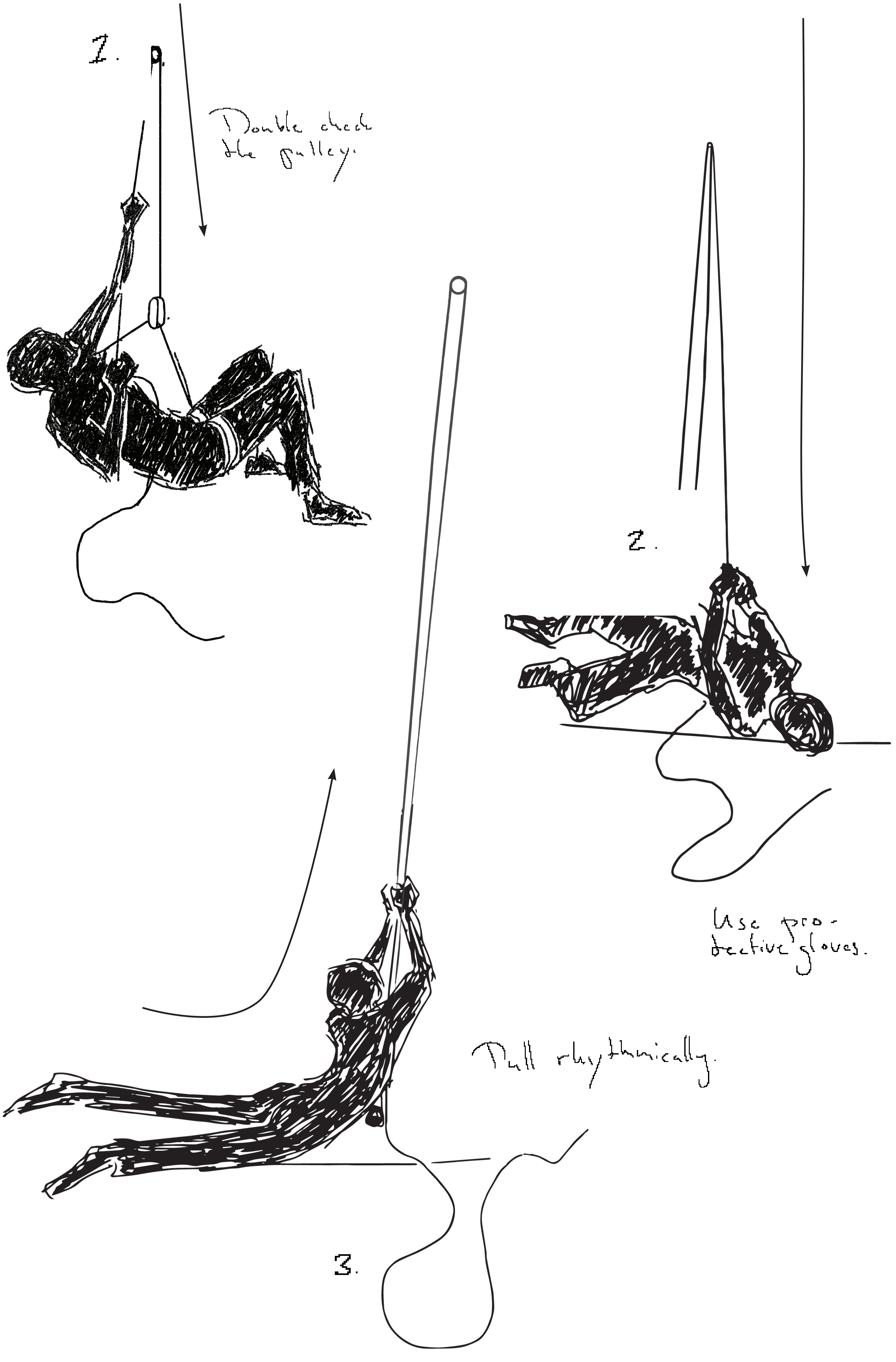
We keep working.

I wonder about the need for distance to reflect on these processes. I don't have it. We are in the thick of it, and so we speak from that position. What I can say is that we keep working and that I love you.

Kisses,

Philippine.

CHAPTER 1



Double check the pulley.

Use protective gloves.

Pull rhythmically.

July 1st, 2024, Brussels

Dear both,

Just before my family moved to Holland, in 1982, my mother started teaching me Dutch, by having me write a letter to my grandma every week. The letters always started like this: ‘Lieve Ama, hoe gaat het met jou? Met mij gaat het goed.’ I once found an old shoe box, with all the letters my mother wrote to her parents after they’d moved to Ireland, leaving the kids with their grandmother in Holland. Every single letter started the same: ‘Lieve Vader en Moeder, hoe gaat het met u? Met mij gaat het goed.’

We were the same age when we wrote these letters.

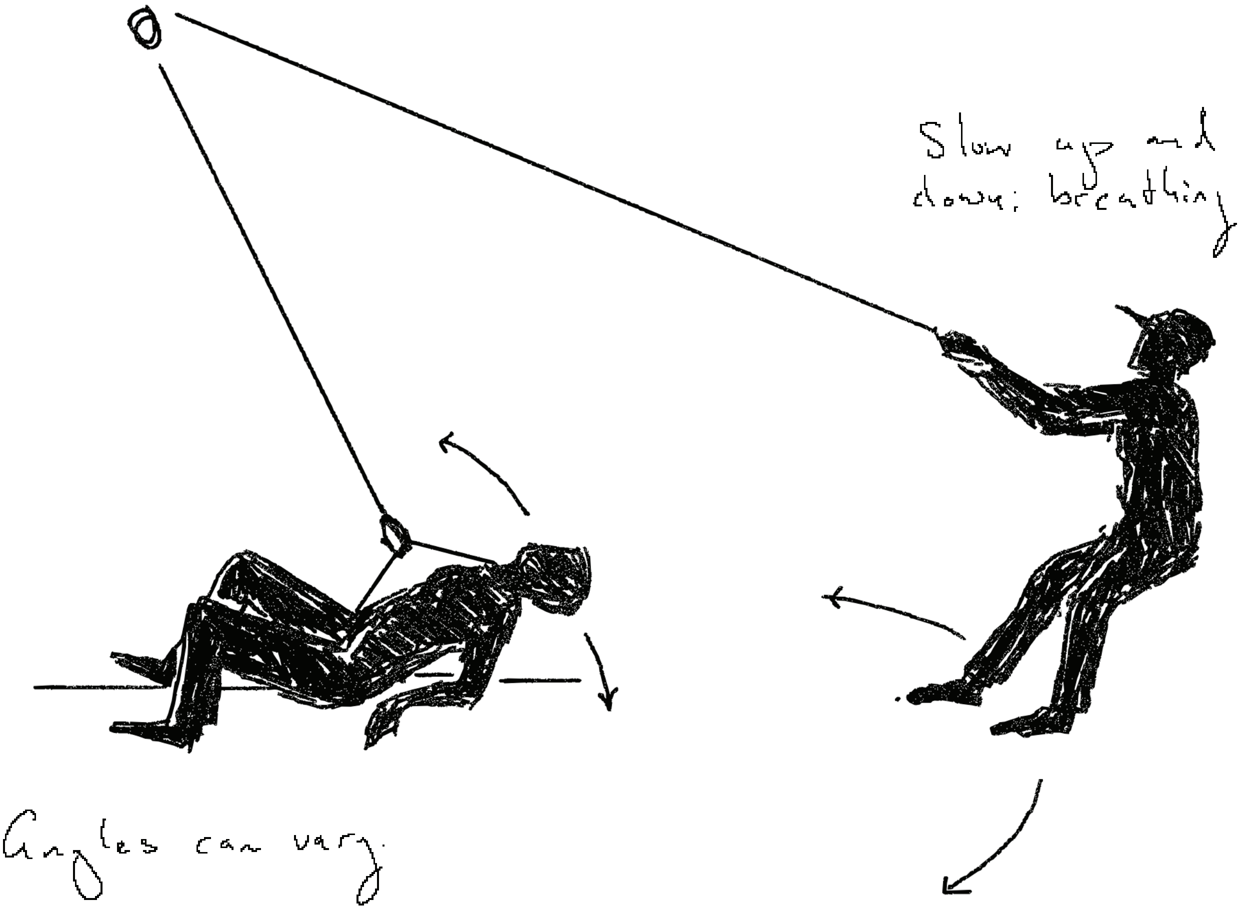
So: how are you? I am … quite well.

I’m reading *My Mother Laughs* by Chantal Akerman, about the last years of her mother’s life. On page 39 she writes: ‘[my mother] said (...) I can’t stand to see you in that dirty shirt, you deserve a smack. She brought her hand up to her face like she was really going to do it. I thought to myself, she must have been bottling up this hatred for years. That it was the reason for all the kisses she’d given and taken away.’

My own mum’s taken to beating my dad with her crutches.
She tries to hit me and my sister too but we can usually dodge. I’d rather not talk about it, but my belly hurts if I don’t, so here it is.

Kisses,

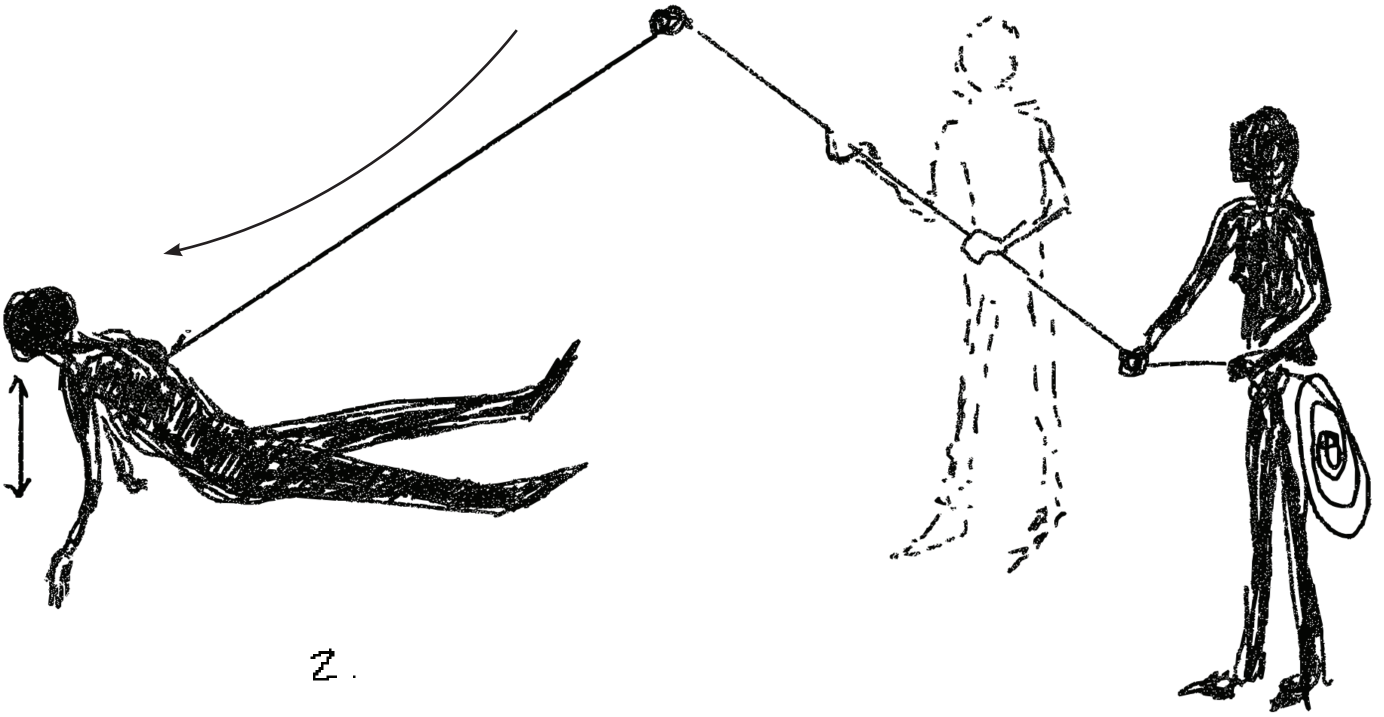
Philippine



Slow up and down; breathing

Angles can vary.

1.



2.

August 12th 2024, Saint Gilles

Hello,

I hope you're well,

You mentioned the book by Akerman, and I found Beauvoir's 1964, *A Very Easy Death*, on the death of her own mother.

She writes: 'The physiotherapist came to Maman's bed, turned down the sheet and took hold of her left leg: Maman had an open hospital nightdress on and she did not mind that her wrinkled belly, criss-crossed with tiny lines, and her bald pubis showed. "I no longer have any sort of shame," she observed in a surprised voice. (...) The sight of my mother's nakedness had jarred me. Nobody existed less for me: none existed more.'

In this text de Beauvoir talks about her inability to cope with this mother in a weak position. She is no longer 'simone-indépendante', but is suddenly faced with an intricate 'web of dependencies'.

I like that phrase, 'web of dependencies'.

Kisses from me,

Paloma

July 2nd, 2024, Amsterdam

Dears,

You both write about mothers. I'm so sad I couldn't take more care of my mother. She died when I was 30. I feel like I hardly knew her. Being the youngest of three, born when she was 45, I only consciously remember the older mother, the one that needed care. My mother... My mother, adored by my father. He would carry her, wipe her ass, put her to bed, and sit next to her, always there with his unconditional love.

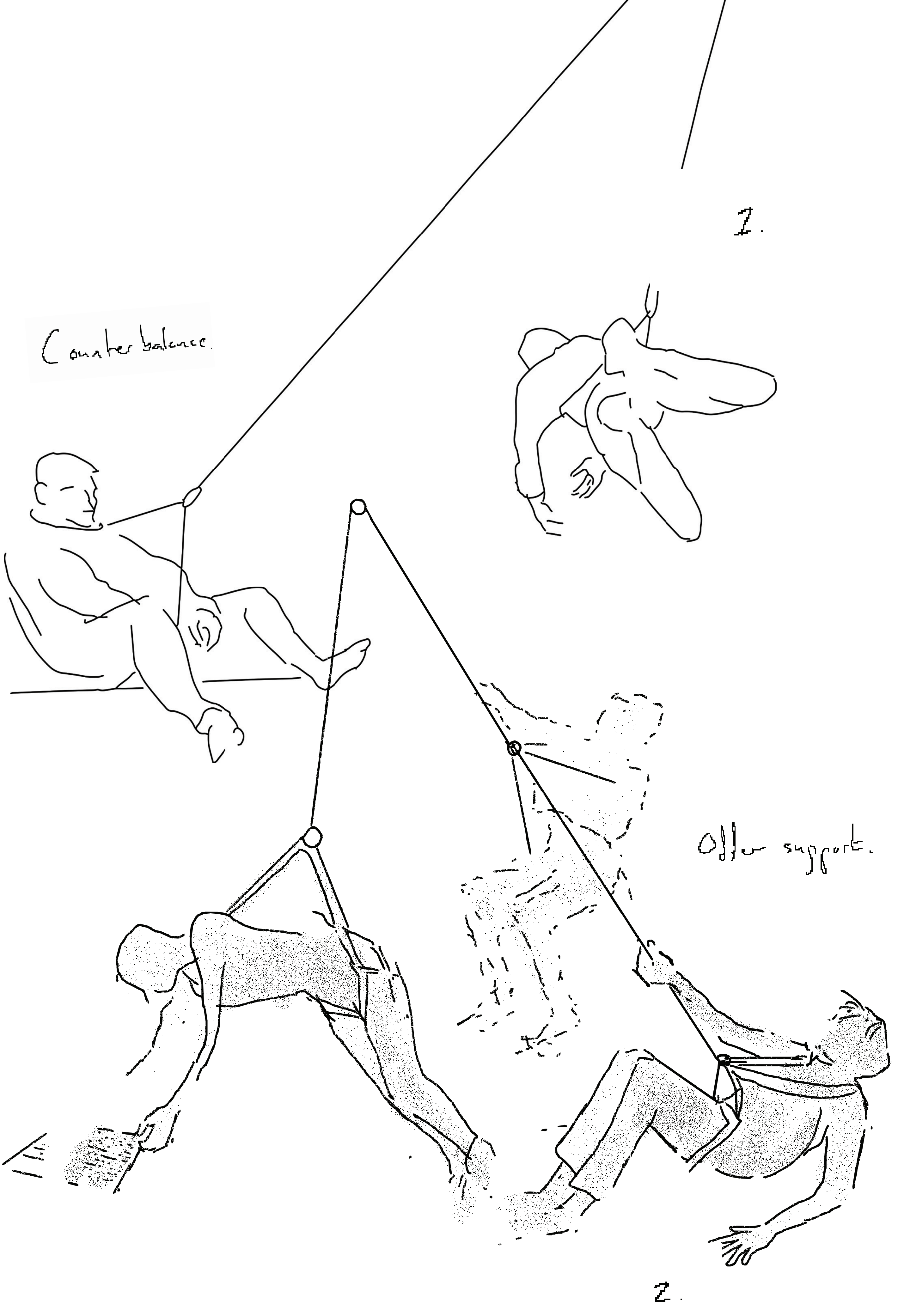
I'm so sad that I didn't take care of my mother more.

And now my sister is almost 84 years old, and me being 64, I take care of her, who used to care of me. And I cry for our mother. And for my sister. Who keeps the memory of my mother alive, with her stories of a family life from before I was born. Taking care of her means everything to me. And I'm haunted by the thought that I will lose them both.

Who will take care of me?

Hugs,

Henny



Counterbalance.

1.

Offer support.

2.

July 23rd 2024, Haarlem

Dear both,

Yes, who will care for us?

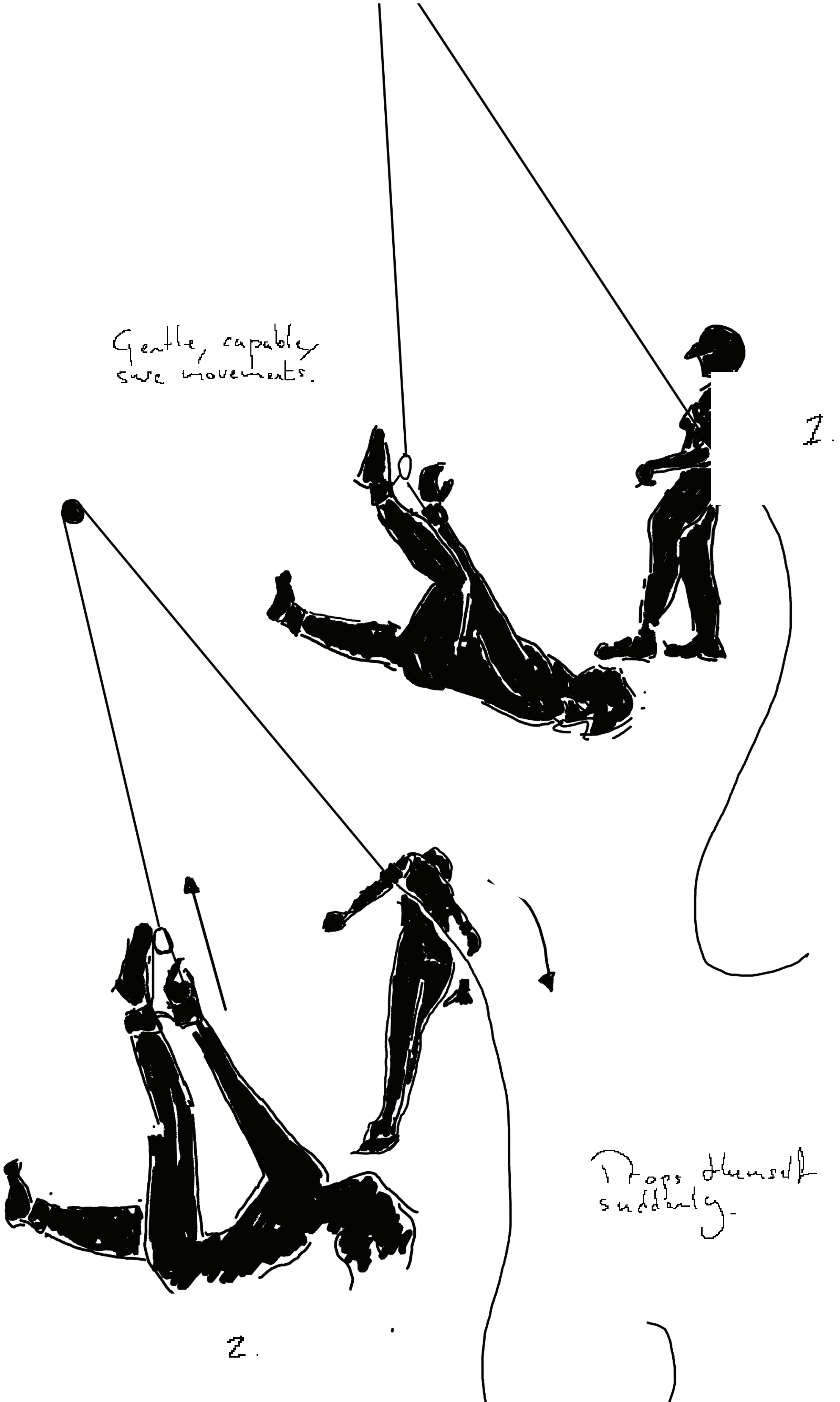
I’m working these days for a small dutch company where I’ve worked occasionally for many years now. One of their employees is called Miriam. Miriam is 71. Miriam was diagnosed with a burn out last year after she lost her sister and her father within a few months.

Miriam wants to die now. When she opens her eyes in the morning, she suddenly remembers which trap she is in. It’s like somebody is sitting on her chest. She holds her arms wide and high when she tells me about the pile of pills she’s stashing to take all at once, and she presses two tears from the corner of her eyes.

I don’t know why I feel so close to Miriam. I don’t know why I don’t believe her when she says she wants to die. I wish I could invite her home and take her in my arms. She’s very thin and I think that in my embrace she’d look like 12 years old again.

Love,

Paloma



Gentle, capably sure movements.

Drops themself suddenly.

September 11th 2024, Ede

Dears,

Your story of Miriam made me cry.

You know, a while ago I came up with a pretty solid pIan for how I could kill my mother softly and painlessly.

But today I'm too angry to even want to kill her.

The plan you see was born from love, as a way to spare her the things that are ahead. My mum has Lewey Body dementia. Besides memory loss, you get angry, paranoid and violent. It's progressive, so it gets worse and worse, and then the body also begins to forget: how to shit, to swallow, to breathe...

I was thinking what is the best thing I can do for her now? What would be a real act of loyalty, of love?

But today, after dealing with her for five days, seeing her beat my dad, undergoing all her blame, anger, paranoia, I don't even want to touch her. And I know, I know: it's the Alzheimers.

She can't help it.

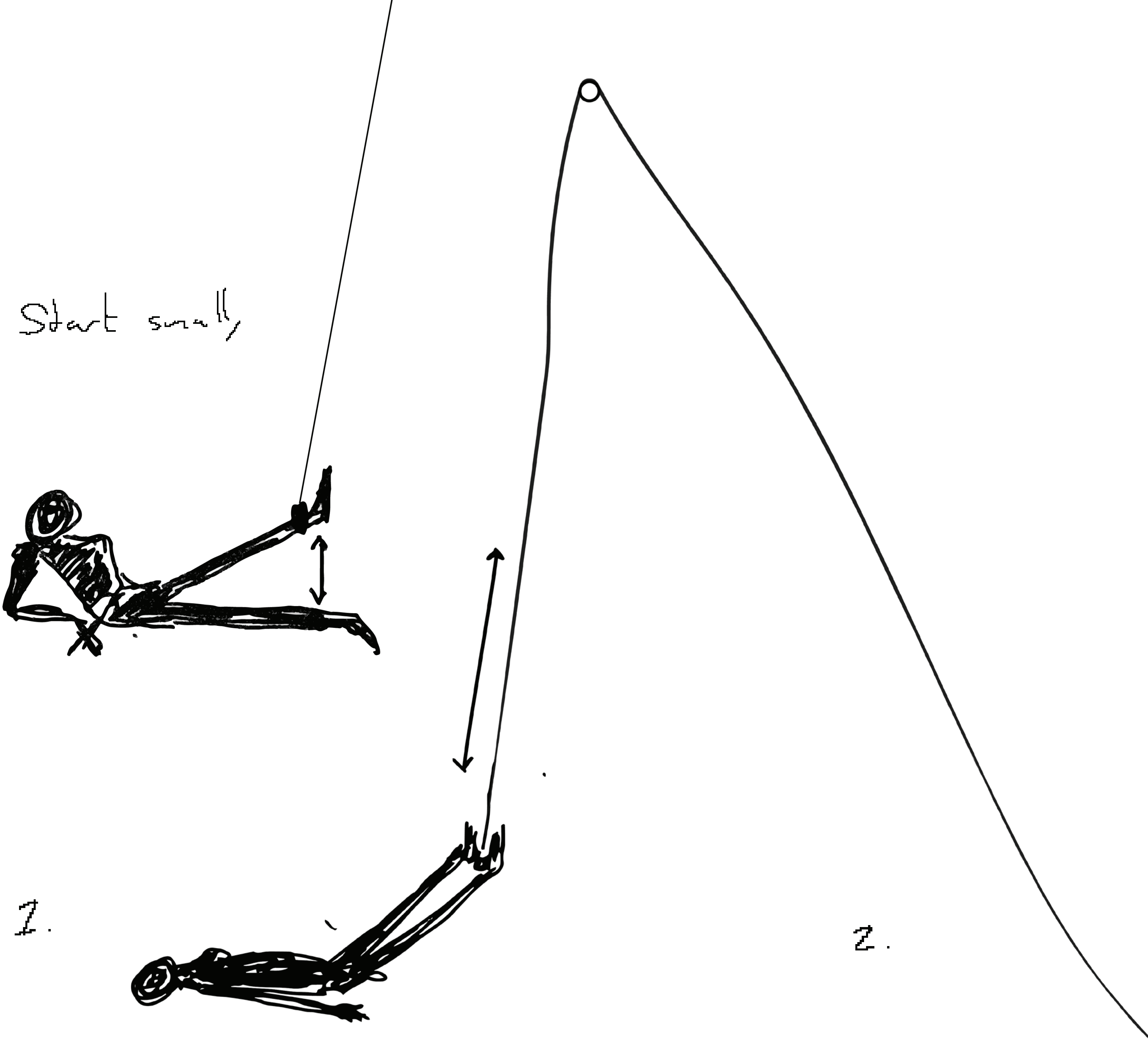
But what makes that really hard is that actually, it is her.

Her naked self, unfiltered.

Lots of love.

Philippine

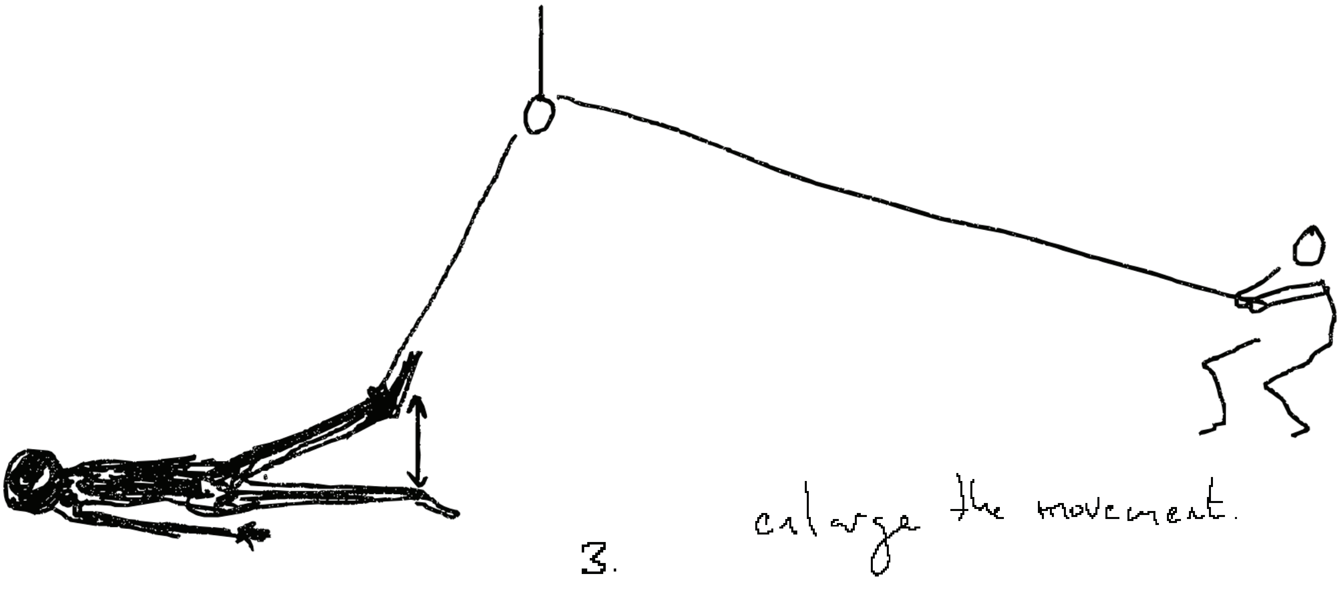
Start small,



1.

2.

quicker



enlarge the movement.

3.

November 11th 2024, Comares

Dears,

I’m reading through *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich, which resonates with your letters. The theme is Anger and Tenderness, and on the first page she already hits me on the head, in the heart.

‘There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, (…)’ she writes.

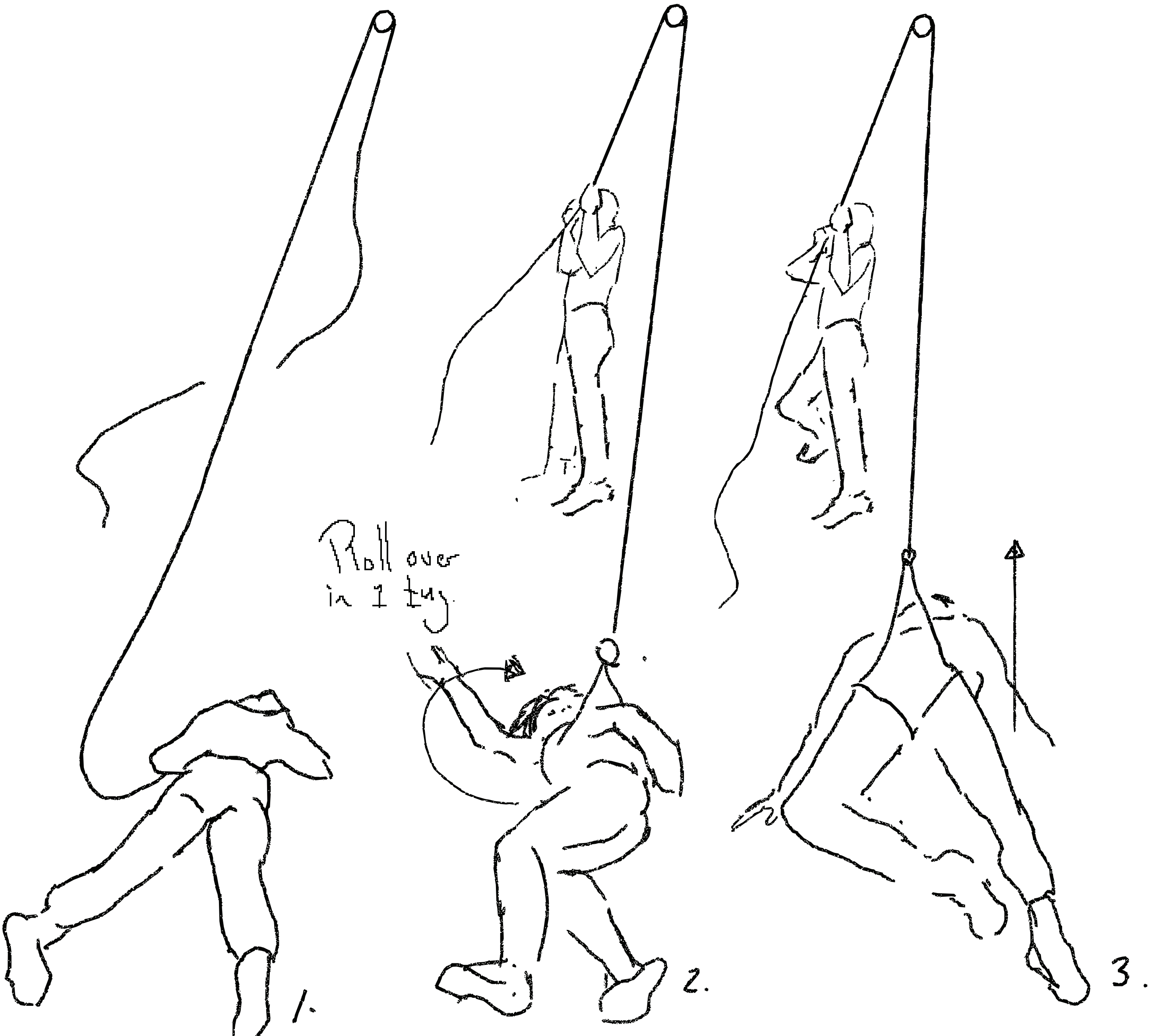
Illness does not mask itself. Once there, it is what it is.
My wife has suffered from cancer twice and went through some terrible healing processes. Radiation, Chemo, Surgery, or as I call them: Burning, Poisoning and Cutting.

I never wanted anything else but to take care of her. I was scared, and in my mind prepared for her death so many times, that at a point you think, let it happen, but it’s not what you really feel and want, that’s clear.

I tried to take care of her as best I could, making it possible for her to fight her way back to health. This was without any anger, or repulsion. I never blamed anyone, I did everything I could and the rest was in the hands of the gods and the doctors.

See you soon.

Henny



freeze poses.

August 10th 2024, Brussels

Dear Henny and Paloma,

Your letters make me think about fear, and about control.

My mother was always wonderful at caring for others, especially animals. She'd spend nights in stables with a mare due to foal or helping ewes lamb. She loved caring for us kids too, and we could feel that.

But for herself…

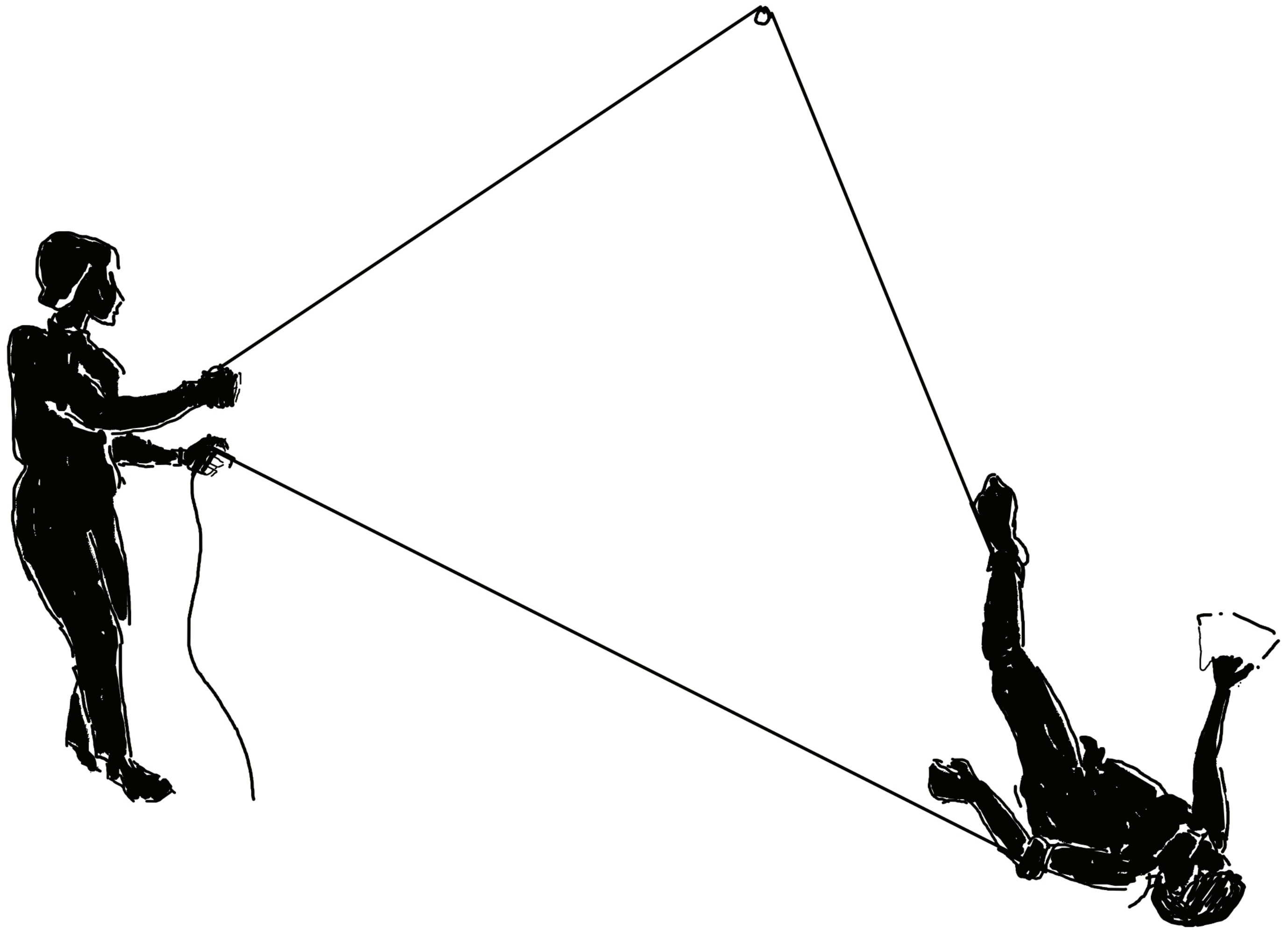
She always regarded her own body as an enemy that must be silenced, numbed and if it got in the way it had to be punished. God forbid she couldn't control it. She would take herself off to whatever doctor she could find for a quick fix, usually a massive pain killer with a lifelong addiction in tow. Anything to come back home radiant and ready for action. Her illnesses were made absolutely unmentionable by her, a strict taboo.

But control is the first thing you lose in illness, and in care as well: the carer is equally delivered over to the illness, its waves and tides.

Thank you for reading, for writing. Being allowed to hear and say the unmentionable to each other, it helps.

Kisses from me to you,

Philippine



Puppet-like
horse lungeing.

CHAPTER 2

July 1st, 2024, Haarlem

Dears,

I’m writing from Haarlem, the Netherlands, this first letter to both of you.

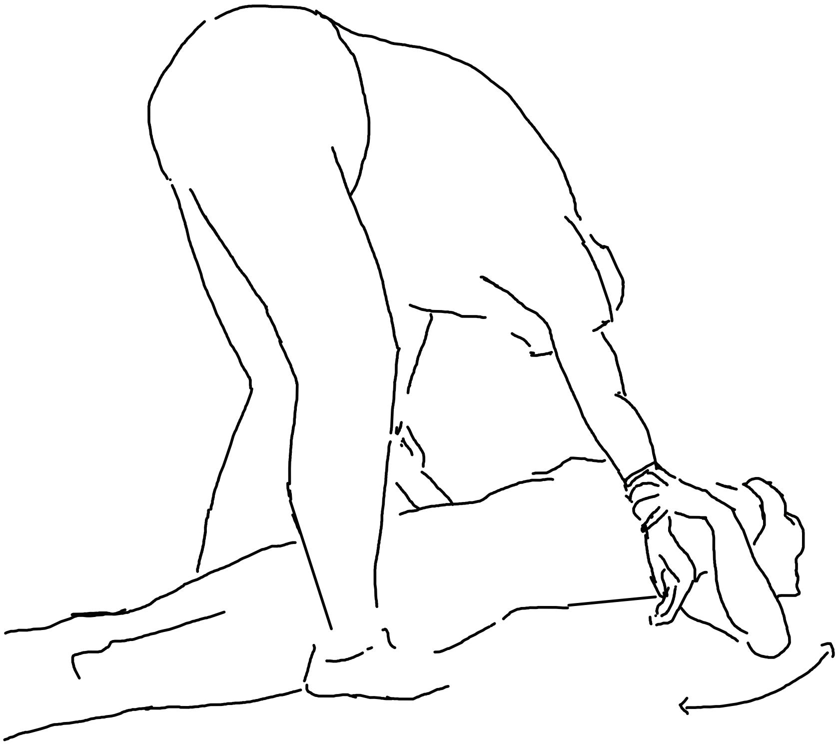
Let me tell you:

I know a grand-mother who thought she was taking care of her son while he was being abused by an older man for years. I know a grand-mother who refused occidental medical management and died of cancer at 55. I know a grand-father whose entire left side is slowly getting petrified by a rare auto-immune disease. I know a grand-father who can’t cut his own steak anymore. I know a father who is pretending to use a walking stick in public to get his disability pension. I know a father who is drunk by 12 pm. I know a mother who fell down the stairs on her way back to the pub. I know a daughter who slapped her mother in the face. I know all these people. I know them because we share DNA. Today I refuse to look after them. I refuse to look if they dropped something on the floor. I refuse to help. To clean. To feed. To carry. To care. I am not sure why, yet. Maybe I think they don’t deserve it. Maybe I think somebody who’s trained and paid will do it for them. I have been told that as a kid my parents would call me ‘la petite infirmière’ (the little nurse). But unsurprisingly, I had decided I wanted to become a surgeon. Today in some of my relationships, I have been told I am hiding behind a ‘caregiver mask’.

Let’s talk soon for more.

Kisses,

Paloma



Pumping.

November 11th 2024, Comares

Dear friends, fellow carers,

This opening up to you is scary. Forgive me my emotions in this letter.

My sister is 20 years older than I am. I love my sister beyond words. She has been my second mother. She is the reason I work as a dramaturg, my love for theatre and performance stem from her singing career. Then she left me alone for more than 20 years. For France. Now she is 84 years old. Her husband of 85 has lost his mind to Alzheimers. I more or less had to force her to move back to me. To save her. My wife and I have spent months finding them a place to live in Amsterdam, clearing out their stuffed house in France, working on their finances, insurance, administration, and so much more…

This Caring felt like WORK.

I hated it. But it was done out of love. It was a choice, or was it? Nobody else would nor could do it. He has lost all sense of time, space, social behavior, and is aggressive, he shouts. I find it impossible to deal with this, although I know he is ill, I still get hurt by what he says, I believe he knows where to hurt me exactly. I hate that I am in this situation now, things would be a lot better if he would die. I don't say that out of love.

I hate him.

Will continue writing to you,

Lots of love,

Henny

Swinging

Holding becomes enduring

Early and mid August 2024, Denmark

Dear Henny and Paloma,

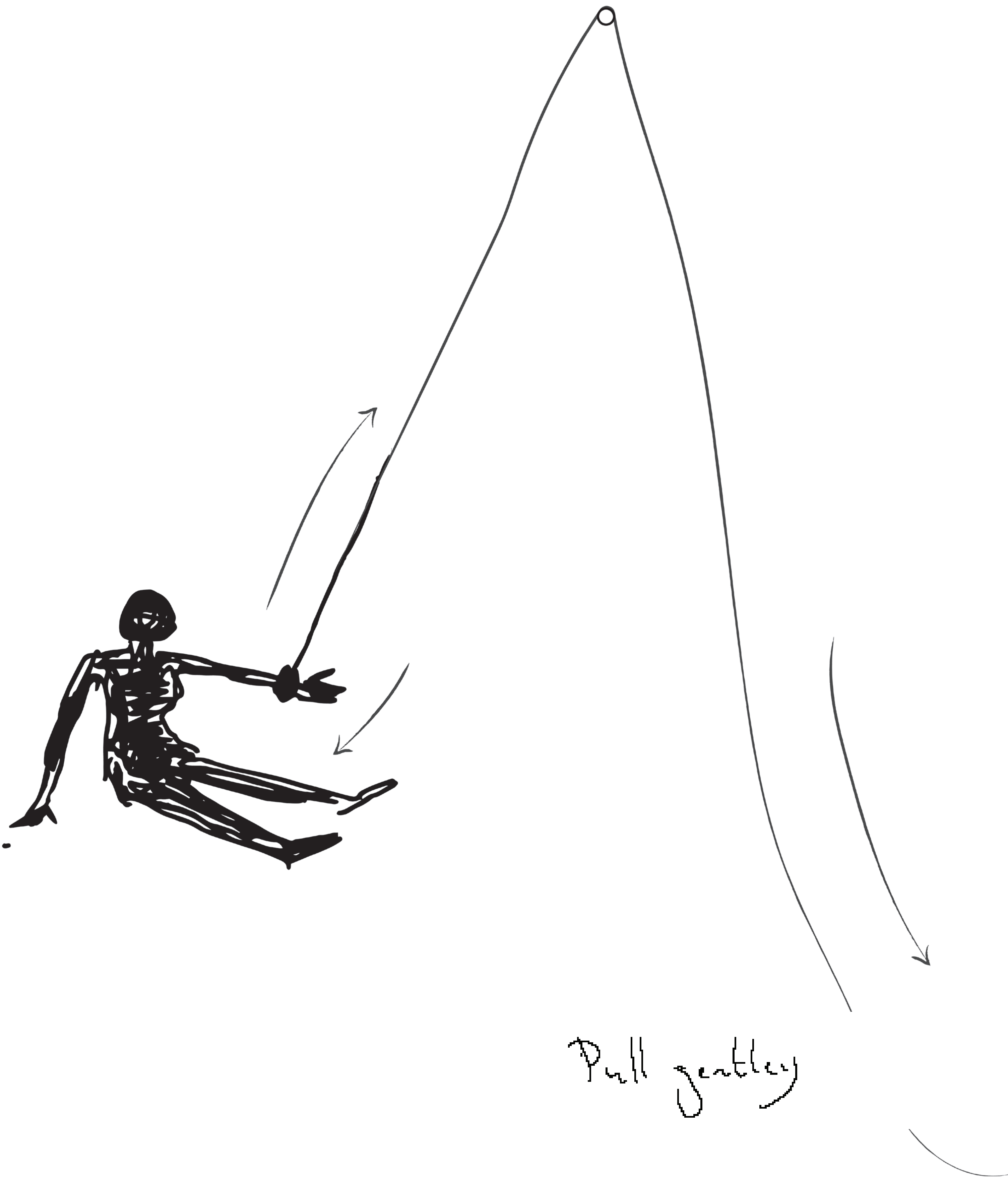
In the book *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, Audre Lorde discusses ‘destructive guilt’ among white feminists when they’re taken to task on their failure in tending to differences in lived experiences between white women and women of colour.

Guilt feels to me like an integral part of care: guilt over not caring enough, over not caring well, not feeling able to meet the needs of someone in your care, or not feeling able, period. I realised recently that guilt can transform from paralysing, destructive guilt into responsibility when placed in the right hands. My more rational self understands that moving my parents to a care home was the right choice, freeing my other me’s from the cloud of guilt that twisted into anger, allowing for love to flow again.

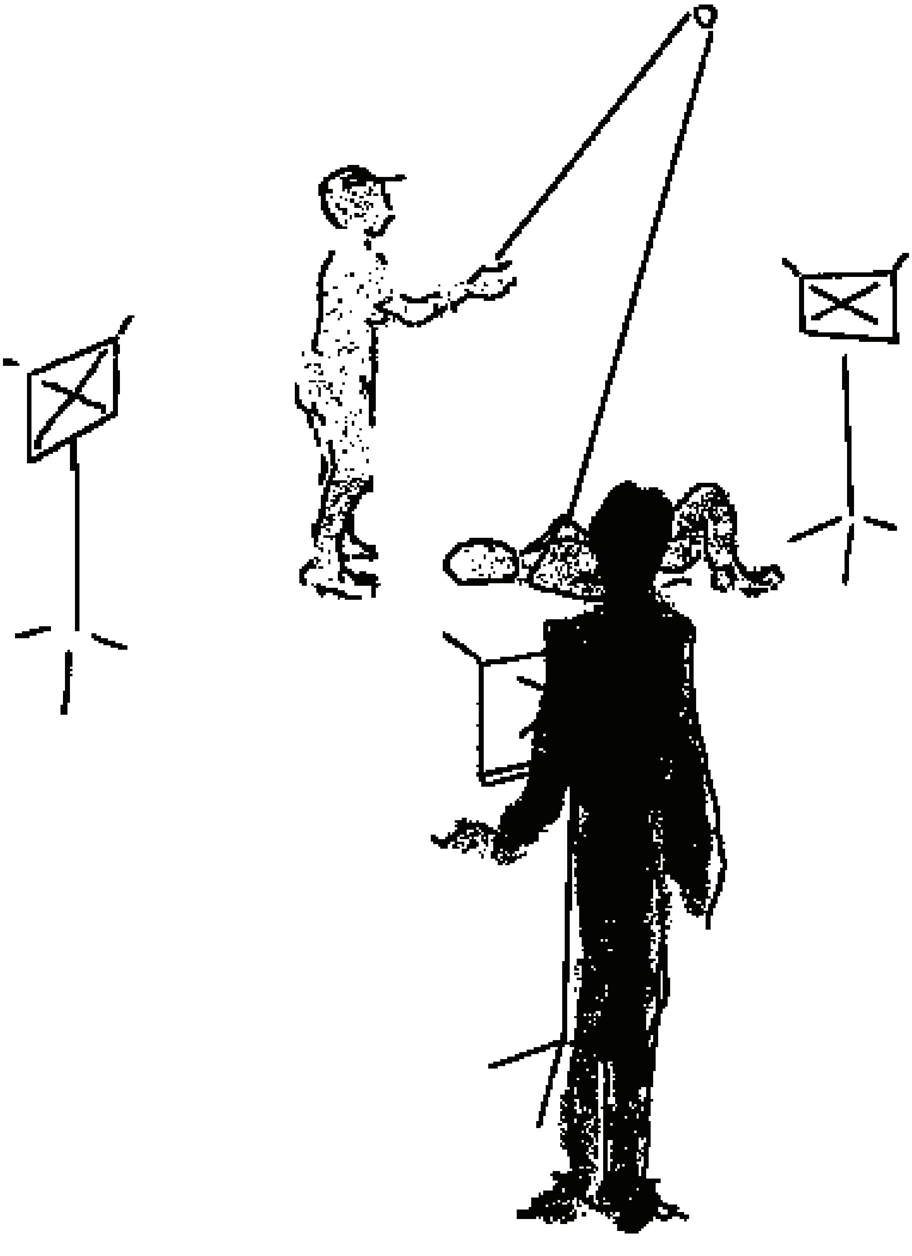
The weather is confused and I feel nervous.

Looking forward to reading you,

Philippine



Pull gently



July 17th 2024, Saint-Gilles

Hey,

For some reason I want to speak in more fantastic words. At night I am reading a lot of science fiction these days. During the days I am taking care of eight children, for an entire week. I am working as an educator and I organized a summer creative atelier for them. It’s strange how being an artist allows you to take on various roles without really knowing what you’re doing—just faking it until you make it. The parents don’t know me, there is no contract, no agreement, no diploma… Today, I took the kids to the museum. As we crossed the city, I had violent images flashing in my mind—like one of them jumping in front of a motorbike. I wonder if those images continue to flash before the eyes of the informal caretaker, even after months of ‘practicing’ it. Is this how it feels to be informally responsible for others? One of the kids actually did fall while running to an ice cream truck. As he cried, I saw in the eyes of the bystanders the weight of my responsibility. They were advising me what to do: ‘Hide his face from the sun!’ ‘Call the paramedics!’ ‘Pour water on the bruise!’

I was the person in charge, apparently… Anyway, I got him a ‘stracciatella on a cone with sprinkles’ and chaos dissipated immediately.

Could we be better at caring for people we don’t know? Do we need this distance in order for the violent images to evaporate quicker? Am I paying my dues to society if I take care of some random kids while some random person is taking care of my father?

Our letters help.

Wishing you both a good day.

Paloma

November 23rd 2024, Brussels

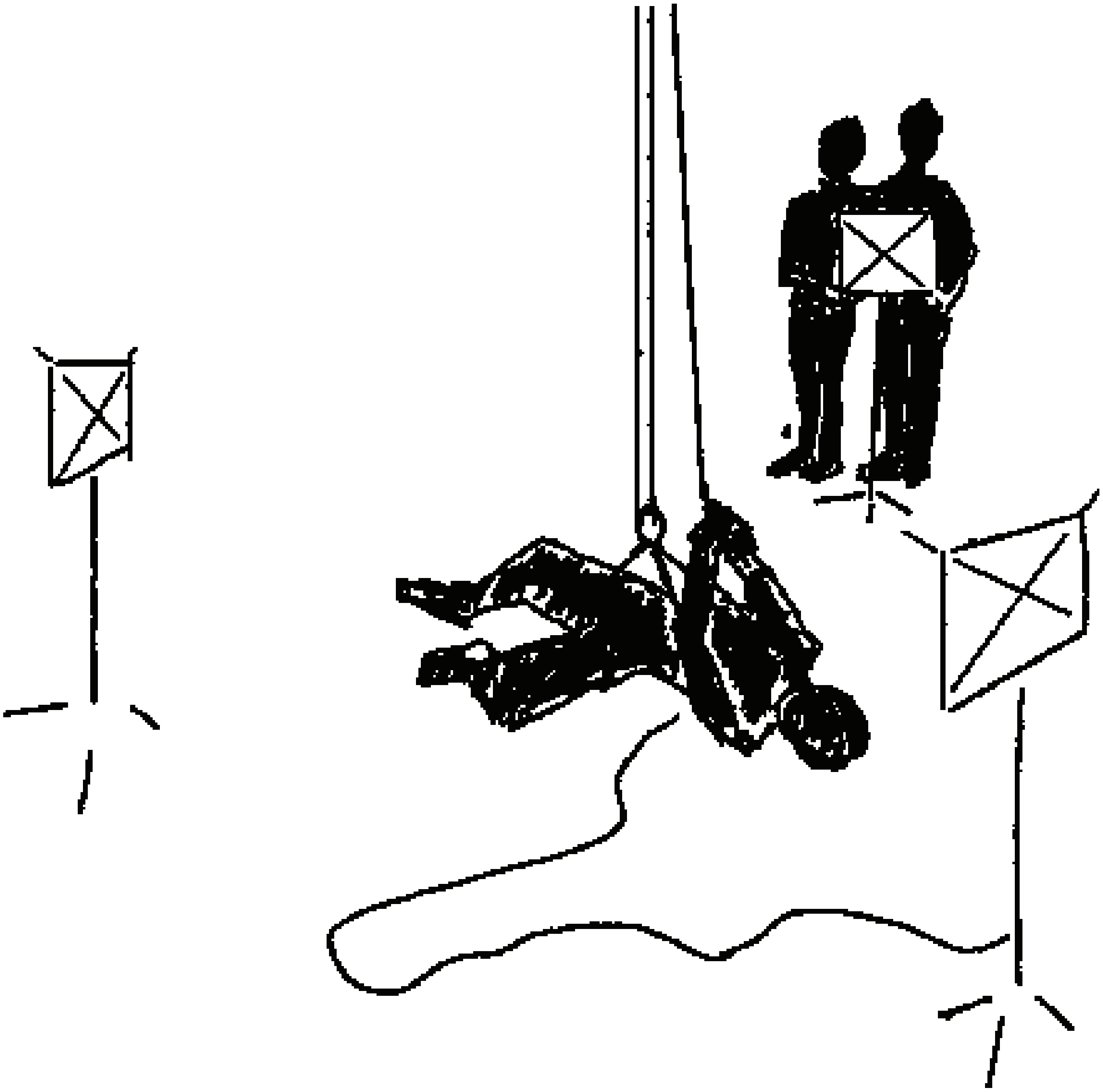
Dear fellow artists,

I met my friend K in Saint Gilles, and we shared a picnic filled with talk about the ambivalences of care. We're both co-carers of an activist organization and have aging mothers in care homes. K has just lost her brother to cancer. Somehow we landed on the topic of how we judge people in the past – not only the perpetrators but the 'implicated subjects' as articulated by Michael Rothberg – and we wondered how history will judge us, questioning why we continue with our routines despite the world's horror. At which point we thought: how is it possible we are all basically 'getting on with it' as usual? Why don't we all stop everything and refuse to move anymore until the genocide that's being committed under our noses stops? As horrified as we are, as outraged, how come we carry on? This brought us to the subject of collective and individual responsibilities.

Implicated subjectivity is a collective category not an individual plight. But that doesn't mean that individual initiative doesn't count.
Care taking is a collective project not an individual plight. But most of the time, it feels lonely.
Maybe care is considerably (immeasurably) lighter when performed collectively.

With love,

Philippine



CHAPTER 3

August 12th 2024, Haarlem

My dear friends,

I recently found out about this tik-tok trend, called the 'carefluencers'. People who are caring for their loved ones, take this opportunity to create content for their social networks.
One of them takes care of her alcoholic, depressed and handicapped father.

She films his condition and posts it online on a daily basis. People react positively to the madness of her father. She documents how, because of hyperacusis, he wears earplugs night and day. She documents how the cocktail of medicines and alcohol makes his body temperature jump, he sweats litres, therefore he needs to live naked. (He agrees to put some boxer shorts on for the camera). She documents how they had to block out all the light in the tiny house by nailing up woollen blankets. She documents how much valium he has to take to go to sleep and how much oxycodone he has to take to get up in the afternoon.

And during all these hours of recording, her dad is always talking. He talks and talks and talks. It's as if he had just emerged from a decade of enforced silence. He talks about the podcasts he is listening to, he talks about his pain, he recalls memories with his own mother, he talks about all the arguments he's had: the one with the mechanic, the one with a long time friend or the one with the government administration.

And then one day while the daughter is reviewing some videos she notices something. It's very hard to perceive but she sees his face has changed. It's almost imperceptible but if she compares videos month after month she can see it.

The mouth. His mouth is slowly closing in the corners of his lips. The opening is slowly reducing week after week, as if an invisible thread was progressively sewing it closed from side to side.

She wonders how long it will take before no noise is able to come out…

The weather is heavy…
I am feeling light.

Hope you are well,

Paloma

August 19th 2024, Denmark

Dears,

The expected silence of this father made me wonder about my position as a speaker. Who am I to talk? Am I the right person to talk? At whose cost do I speak?

I'm re-reading Audre Lorde's *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* in which she speaks of destructive guilt, which often substitutes action.

I understand this as the same paralysing guilt that I feel while I look away from news flashes on Gaza. I feel a kind of hysterical, paralysing guilt.

Guilt feels to me like an integral part of care: not caring enough, not caring well, not feeling able to care...
But guilt can transform. It can transform into accountability. Acknowledging how my struggle intersects with the experiences of the nurses, cooks and cleaners working in the care facilities my parents are able to pay for. And how taking the decision to put my parents there, which makes me feel massively guilty, is actually just an act of taking responsibility.

I don't know how to continue this thought.

Let me park it for now.

The weather is confused and I feel nervous.

Lots of love to you both.

Philippine

October 8th 2024, Brussels

My friends,

There's a legacy of weightlifting in my family. My father, a 'house maker' and metalsmith, broke his back at 50. The liquid between his vertebrae dissolved. This fluid between his discs wasn't flowing unlimitedly. This is the 'life meter' that Bourdieu talks about. The 'corporal capital'. My father's body was his main tool of trade.

For Bourdieu, bodies of the working classes are exploitable capital.

His chronic pain started years back. He lives on pills. Valium and white wine to sleep, oxycodone and beer to get up. There is no cure for such pain. As Judith Butler says, chronic pain became part of his identity, it became inseparable from his grievable existence. Disability forced him to stop, and he applied for disability benefits. To convince everybody of his condition, he sometimes gets a walking stick out of his bag and starts leaning on it. That is what Butler defines in 2001 as 'performed' disability in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Bodily vulnerability can be both a lived reality and a performance. If your caretaker is the state, then the recognition of your disability becomes a negotiation with institutions. It imposes a standard of what a 'legitimate' suffering body is.

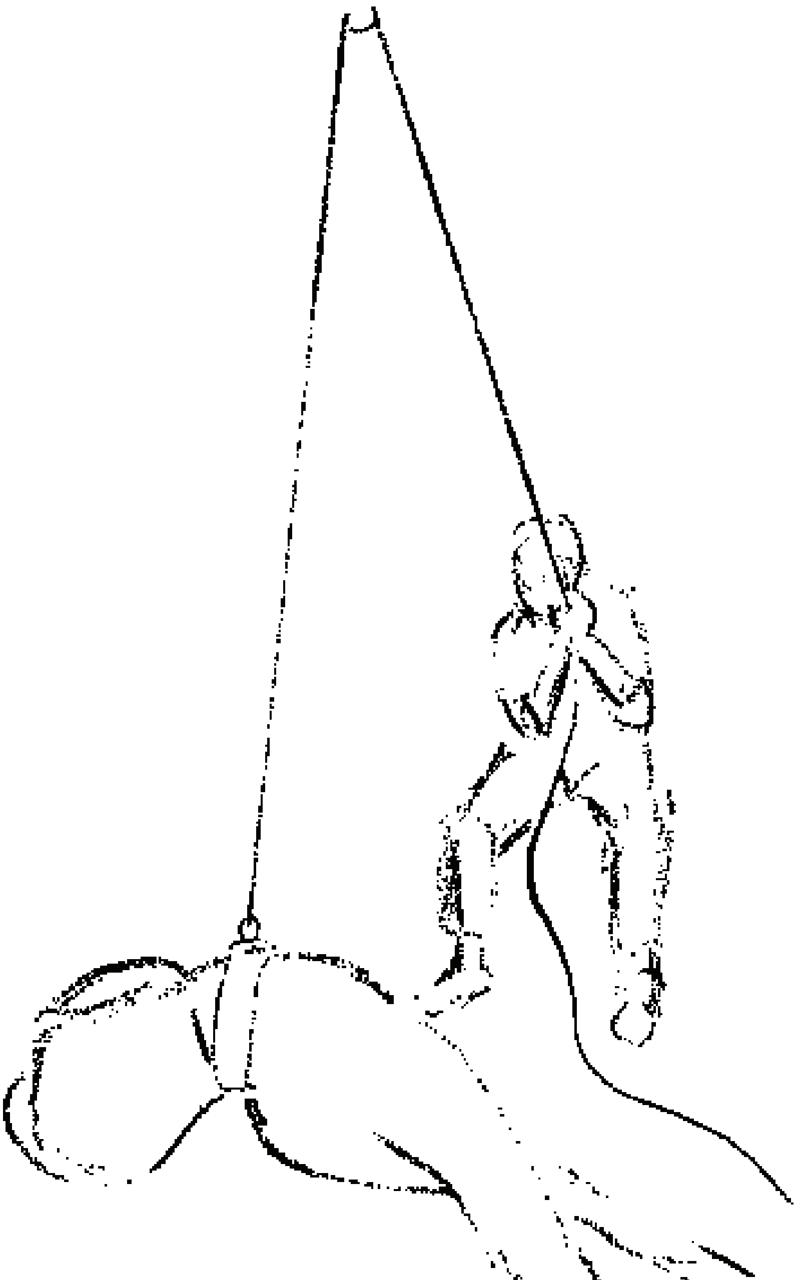
My father is seen as a 'welfare state blood sucker', part of the narrative that blames social benefits for societal issues. I read that 'social benefits undermine the family and lead to increased criminality, especially amongst young men brought up without fathers'. According to these liberal voices, if I would take care of him, it would be more cost effective for society. The question remains, if a dad doesn't take care of his son, will the future daughter of this son take over? I don't want to be another woman invisibly working to repair silently.

This is, of course, what Federici, Tronto, Fraser and hooks call 'intergenerational transfer of responsibility'. We expect daughters to 'pick up the slack' where fathers fail. Society relies on my invisible labor to function. But, naturally, I will not perform…

I hope to talk to you soon.

Wishing you a good week.

Paloma



November 11th 2024, Comares

Dears,

Reading through *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich, she hits me on the head, in the heart, already on the first page…

‘There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another’, she writes.

I recognize this ambivalence as a mother and queer woman, living with my wife of 34 years. We raised two kids without a father, facing occasional judgment from others, but we navigated through it.

When our daughter was diagnosed as autistic at 16, the diagnosis offered clarity but couldn’t repair the toxic dynamic we had developed. Her blame, anger, and refusal of help made it impossible to connect with love or tenderness. She saw us as the cause of her struggles, even expressing that she didn’t want to live. I was overwhelmed by guilt and anger, shouting in moments of crisis that I couldn’t cope. Her response cut deeply: ‘Oh my God, now it’s about you again!’

At my lowest, I resonated with Rich’s words.
Did I want her to die? No.
Did I want to die, did I want to disappear? Yes.

I was so angry, and sad. Because only love had brought me there, to that dark place.
Now, three years later, we have made space for healing. Our daughter has embraced independence and professional support, showing love in her own way. Therapy, detachment and acceptance have helped us all. My wife and I still carry trauma, but it gets better every day.

This experience of informal care was never a choice, and it didn’t make me a better person; it made me quieter, humbler. I can’t believe that my wife and I are still together…

Caring seems endless. There's always someone or something in need, just as happiness always eludes, existing only in fleeting moments. Recently, my partner and I drove a really old car through a rally, navigating challenges. Unlike the past year's real challenges these were actually fun. We committed with the same energy we've poured into our life's crises: caring for our daughter, offering palliative support to friends, clearing out a family member's hoarded home. With perseverance, we thrived and even won the rally.

Much love!

Henny

Ps: the weather is overwhelming, rivers have flooded but now the sun is shining bright.

Physical and digital books:

Ahmed, Sara – *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004)
Akerman, Chantal – *My Mother Laughs* (2013)
Bourdieu, Pierre – *The Weight of the World* (1999)
Butler, Judith – *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2001), *Excitable Speech* (1997)
de Beauvoir, Simone – *A Very Easy Death* (1964)
Foucault, Michel – *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978)
Federici, Silvia – *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), *Wages Against Housework* and *The Politics of Care Work* (1975)
Fournier, Lauren – *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021)
hooks, bell – *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000) and *The Will to Change: men, masculinity, and love* (2004)
Laing, Olivia – *Everybody: A Book about Freedom* (2021)
Le Breton, David – *Anthropology of Pain* (2009)
Lorde, Audre – *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (2017)
Marx, Karl – *Alienation of Labor* (1844)
Maté, Gabor – *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture* (2022)
Nelson, Maggie – *The Argonauts* (2015), *On Freedom* (2021)
Nussbaum, Martha – *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986)
Osborne-Crowley, Lucia – *Who Do We Not Save, in On Being Ill* (1926, 2021)
Rich, Adrienne – *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1995)
Rothberg, Michael – *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019)
Tronto, Joan – *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993)

Online articles:

Andrea Martani, Antonina Brunner, Tenzin Wangmo – *Intergenerational Familial Care: Shaping Future Care Policies for Older Adults* | PubMed (2021)
Barbara D'Amen, Marco Socci & Sara Santini – *Intergenerational Caring: A Systematic Literature Review on Young and Young Adult Caregivers of Older People* | BMC Geriatrics (2021)
Beverley Johnston – *Intergenerational Care* | The Education People (2019)
Irving Goh – *Auto-thanato-theory: Dark Narcissistic Care for the Self in Sedgwick and Zambreno* (2020)
Kathleen W Piercy – *Characteristics of Strong Commitments to Intergenerational Family Care of Older Adults* | PubMed (2007)
Lorna Hummel – *Querying and Queering Caregiving: Reading Bodies Othered by Illness via Porochista Khakpour's Sick: A Memoir* (2018)