

# The mind releases what the body can handle

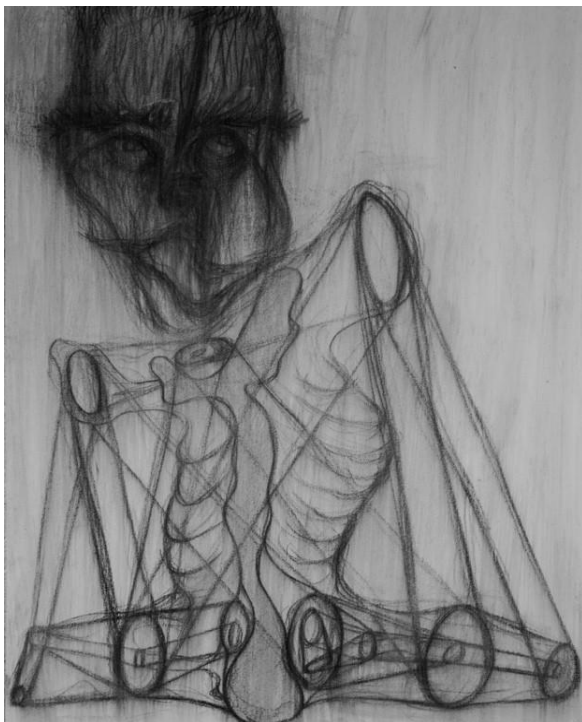
*Translation of article that appeared in 'Spiegel' magazine*

*Text and artwork: Veerle Van Wassenhove*

Every night, after an hour of restlessly tossing and turning in my bed, the muscles in my legs start to contract, wildly and uncontrollably. I have 'restless legs'. At the same time, I feel an almost irresistible urge to destroy my legs, to cut them off. My body needs to be destroyed. These self-destructive urges lessen when I can channel the adrenaline, by physically exhausting myself until fatigue sets in and I can no longer stand. This is how my mind controls the release of adrenaline (a little every night). It's a delicate balance: the underlying information is released in carefully dosed amounts, just enough so that the adrenaline releases gradually, and not in a torrent that would cause me to kill myself. It's as though my mind knows exactly what my body can handle, and my body sets the pace.

At the point of exhaustion, I start to cry. The adrenaline rush (of fighting for my life) abates enough for me to realise that my panic (of suffocating and dying) stems from being abused by my father as a small child. In these moments, I can clearly see my physical problems and my emotions in the context of my history of sexual abuse, and so over the years, their intensity has lessened.

It's only after I've gone through this process of realisation that I can finally direct my anger towards my father, instead of towards myself. The physical pain of an immeasurable sorrow sits in the pit of my stomach: the absolute loneliness (=I don't really have a father) that would have certainly killed me as a small child if I hadn't developed my survival mechanisms.



*Untitled. Charcoal on paper. 72cmx54cm*

From my diary:

Night after night my body tries to break  
If I feel  
What I feel  
When I reattach my legs to my body  
Then heaven and hell and all there is, breaks loose  
Then I drown in sorrow

## How did my survival mechanism work?

When I was being raped, I couldn't fight against or run away from my father. But the adrenaline that was released while I was fighting for my life allowed me to disassociate myself from what was happening: **when my body couldn't stand the terror any more, my brain made sure there were no feelings**. There was a kind of narrowing of consciousness that separated me from my body. Because it felt like the abuse was no longer happening to me, I could stop feeling the terror and survive, at least temporarily.

## Consequences of this survival mechanism

This mechanism, which was a temporary solution to a life-threatening situation, has had dire consequences.

- By narrowing the **mind**, information about these life-threatening events is split off from consciousness. The information is still stored somewhere, but it is not easily accessible.
- On the **emotional** level, I died a little with each dissociation. Dying inside was the only way not to feel the terror. The more often a person has to dissociate in order to survive, the greater the volume of 'deadness' inside and the more wounds that need to be resolved through therapy. If necessary, for a whole lifetime.
- My **body** survived the onslaught by dissociating, but that left my body feeling like a distant part of myself, unreachable. Like a hollow shell that acted, and sometimes still acts, rationally without feeling. Emotionally flatlined, like an object.

The body, emotions and mind should ideally interact with each other in a continuous, harmonious, flowing way. This flow (=association) was broken, because there was no body to house these interactions, connections and wiring.



From my diary:

I long for a body  
A body to sleep in  
A body to house  
What you have incited

*Title: Sleepbody.  
Coloured ink and acrylics on paper. 108cmx72cm*

It was because of my body that I could be abused, which makes me blame my body. I would prefer to not even have a body anymore. However, if I want to regain my lust for life, I need to make peace with that body, and lay the blame with the perpetrator. There is a battle going on inside me. Part of me wants to stay loyal to my father, but the other part can't, because now I understand that he abused me. My dissociation from the abuse as a child lies at the heart of this dichotomy: a split in my personality.



*Title: In two parts.*

*Coloured ink and acrylics on paper. 54cmx36cm.*

From my diary:

Lifeline, waiting for me  
To fill in the blanks  
With mist and forgotten being  
Frightening everything together  
Then she will know about the other one who is  
also me  
And just wants to drift away

My skin bursting to be all  
enveloping  
and I am spilling out

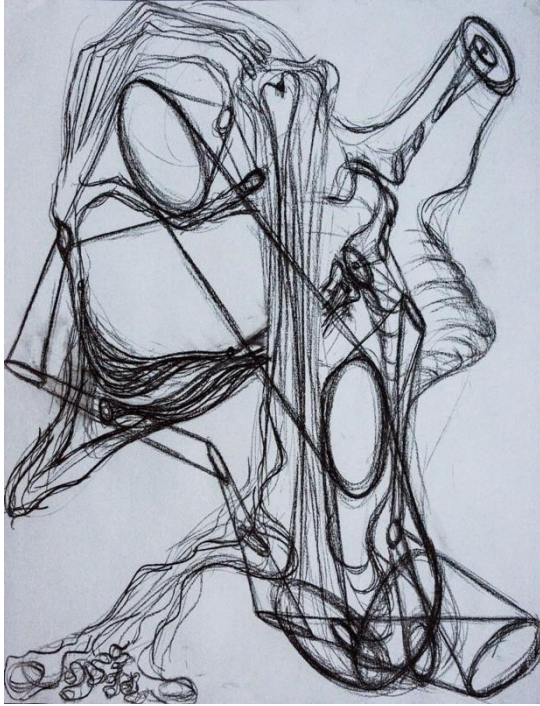
She who surrendered and joined in  
She who threw herself to the ground in sorrow  
Because you took me  
Because I allowed you to  
Because I couldn't not

## Therapy: the road to association (=lust for life)

Therapy feels like peeling an onion, where each layer represents a trauma part for me to get through. Going through the layers, I feel I am battling my father, fighting the fight I couldn't fight when I was young. And I realise that I am winning, that I am staying alive. This gives me a rush. But after that rush come all the negative emotions that - because of how I dissociated myself from the abuse - had been left unfelt, hidden and unreachable: deathly terror, disgust, sorrow, rage, longing for death. By allowing those feelings, I can integrate an element of the trauma and restore some of the connection between body, mind and emotion (=association).

Therapy makes it possible to turn dissociation into association, step by step, always respecting the pace that the body can (only just) handle. The further I go, the more I can feel and experience my emotions. Events in the present are slowly getting charged with emotions, allowing me to make memories, enabling me to feel lust for life.

In the image below: How it felt/feels when I try to be in my body, to associate.



*Title: Body with dissociative disorder.  
Charcoal on paper. 72cmx54cm.*

From my diary:

I no longer want to  
rip my body apart  
but I have to;  
Or it will rip me apart.

## Conclusion and thoughts

- Most of my physical problems (chronic migraines, chronic sore throat, sleeplessness, lack of muscular strength or uncontrolled muscle spasms) form a common thread on the 'journey back' from my dissociative disorder. **My body and its physical capacity set the pace.** But there's also meaning in the kind of physical problem I experience (why the throat? why the bladder?). Analysing and understanding the meaning of these physical symptoms in the context of my history has proved indispensable on my journey to recovery.
- As a victim of chronic sexual abuse and emotional neglect, it's been difficult for me to be labelled with a 'psychiatric disorder'. In my opinion, psychiatry puts too much emphasis on what is wrong with a person (personality disorder) – or, perhaps unknowingly, creates this perception in society – while failing to highlight the causes. I don't feel like a patient. I feel like a victim of chronic early childhood trauma. Society (my social context) needs insight into what it means to dissociate, so that my story can be understood and recognised.

- As a society, we cannot afford to look away from the havoc that chronic early childhood trauma causes, not only at a personal level, but also at an economic and social level. Through psychoeducation we, as a society, could form a collective body of knowledge, which could:
  - o help future generations be more aware of the psychological wellbeing of their children
  - o enable future generations to react more appropriately to difficult situations and be less likely to stigmatise
  - o break the taboo surrounding early chronic childhood trauma.

This is necessary, not only to help our children, but also as a step towards the next big taboo: vulnerable parents (or other adult caretakers).

**Note:** All artwork was created between 2006 and 2012. During this period, imagery was my way of communicating my story, before I was able to put words to it.