

ALASKA

VOLUME

3

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MATIAS DUVILLE

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THE DRAWING CENTER

Matías Duville and the Alaskan Paradox

ROBERT NELSON

THE THING THAT IS NO-THING

Matías Duville draws with recognizable imagery but without a familiar logic. I am never in any doubt about the details that I see. There is plainly a hill, a wolf's head, a fish jumping out of the water. But the picture that these details are a part of is oneirically incomplete and suggestively ambiguous. The hills that are evocatively drawn give way when their lines become nothing more than an evaporating trace; or the contours and details of a wolf's body or the surface of water are abandoned to the neutral shade of the paper itself.

Duville's drawings are wilful. A hill is also a wave or a kind of wigwam. They are points of transference, where the meaning of one image seeps into that of another. The induction of meaning takes place with a formidable energy, somehow committed, so that we do not read the ambiguity as a kind of visual doubt but a deliberate fusion where one form exerts its sway over the other in a reciprocal surge. Hence the remarkable open-endedness when a thing that is a body or a mass of land evaporates into the trace that generated it; the think of bulk undetermines itself as a single line, drawn by the hand. One never thinks: 'this is where Duville gave up' but rather 'this is where the object sought to be reconciled with the paper'. Because in the end, these objects are nothing material. They are the immateriality of the idea.

Duville draws a place where he does not live or, until recently, even visit. It is Alaska, in many ways an archetypical frontier in the global imagination, a remaining wilderness throughout the industrial age, like Australia, that enjoyed unseasonable fame and appeal thanks to gold and other minerals, which have so little to do with the phenomenology of land or the experience of people who live there. Today, Alaska is valued as an ecosystem and a concept, an endangered environmental haven, a place where one might still observe the migration of fish or birds from aeons back, where comparatively little of the land is given over to farming. But regardless of these complicated associations and their perverse histories, Duville does not come to Alaska as a field-worker, a natural historian or even an environmentalist. For a long time in generating his Alaskan oeuvre, he did not go there at all. And regardless of any travel in the meantime, he visits Alaska primarily in his imagination.

Against centuries of drawing being tied to the authenticity of lived experience, Duville draws an idea of what another part of the world may prompt in the mind. European tradition certainly accommodates imaginative drawing, as when artists tackle heaven or Olympus or the holy lands, never having been to Israel or Greece much less paradise. But these projections formed part of a humanist covenant that justified all licence because a pious desire was thereby fulfilled. When Duville draws from Alaska, it causes the viewer to inquire: to what does Duville respond? It is not ‘the motif’ in the sense of Cézanne being present before Mont Sainte-Victoire for an authentic perceptual experience which he records by look-and-put. Nor does Duville respond to an expectation of an artistic utopia, as with the representation of angels, for which the invention of sublimity was *de rigueur*. Rather, Duville inquires into the desire to commune with another place. It is as if he wants to engage with Alaska in an intimate way without the need for a personal advent, even if his imaginary witness-bearing defies the assumed need for physical presence. He seems to ask: does the remoteness of the subject matter equate with a reciprocal remoteness of the artist? Is the artist equally remote in the metaphor of cold, which all Alaska literally exemplifies in its morbid chill? Duville calls into question how much the artist must belong to his or her subject matter or how much the subject matter belongs to him or her. His method also asks us to ponder how much the earth—when seen in ecologically holistic terms (but perhaps not Indigenous terms)—is common to all people on the globe who think of it.

In the imagination, all sites become world property when they become famous. Like a humanist of the *ancien régime*, I have never been to Greece but I managed to fill myself up with Greek language and imagery; so in a somewhat disembodied sense, I own the Acropolis, in the same way that I have absorbed the myths of the epic or the vocabulary of Plato. Compared to the demotic realities of contemporary Greece—for which there are scary counterparts to Sarah Palin in Alaska—my conception of Greece is a fantasy, a construct that testifies to my desires, an extrapolation that accommodates my nostalgia and the gratification of my learning. It does not matter how incongruous or romantic I recognize my folly to be: it is inescapable in the very word of ‘Greece’, a syllable that automatically detonates certain Hellenic visions that take me back to my youth when I learnt to read the original texts and studied Greek art and architecture. For me, even if I did now buy an air ticket and visit Athens, there is no Greece that is not predetermined by my rewards for thinking of it.

Alaska is very different to those prestigious Mediterranean slopes with their ineradicable claims to cultural posterity, populated by poets and satyrs and gods. Alaska satisfies a uniquely industrial myth, the concept of wilderness, a world quite recently without taint, symbolized by the whiteness of the landscape, which is populated by stoic and gory wildlife. But as different as it may be, the northerly American state shares with Greece and the glary ochres of Australia the status of geographical archetype that we figure in our mind first and foremost and encounter as a reality almost by way of a postscript: oh, and I recently visited and found that there is a lot of anger on the streets.

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THE CLEANNESSTHAT IS MADE FROM COAL

The call that Duville answers in figuring Alaska from afar is not really a plea on behalf of a threatened wilderness nor even a planetary sympathy to find one’s way—like certain migratory species of bird or fish—to a necessary sanctuary. It is the recognition of Alaska as canvas, as blank field, as something on a horizontal plane that might equate with the paper.

When the artist’s carbon darkens the field, it is always to register the fault, the shadow, the outsider. In that sense, there can never be a meaningful drawing of the Alaskan wilderness from the inside. Photography, too, has great difficulty with the snow. Snow photography is a genre all of its own which, however, lacks the

many inflexions by which Eskimos can calibrate the colour white using language. As the snow glistens most, it is only revealed by the photographic paper having no chemical taint or, these days, by the ink forbearing to squirt from the cartridge.

But this justification of the negative, as we have noted, is not a motivating force in Duville. His white does not bring us snow but paper itself. He reserves the extensive whiteness for when the drawn trait wants to be nothing but itself, a line that acts upon the paper. So everything else that *is* is carbon, something dirty like coal, both spent and full of energy, positive, capable of supporting flame and heat. It is the final irony of a place where mineral wealth lies beneath the surface in deep mines that the technique for representing any feature above ground invokes the carbon from below.

And now, for the final irony, the very word carbon is catastrophic and spoken of with fear for the very survival of ice. The loading of carbon in the air which causes global warming threatens the arctic conditions: climate change, the revenge of exhumed carbon, turns our frosty paradise into sludge as it sets alight the sear forests of Australia.

Duville's imaginary landscapes and animal figures are symbolic but not allegorical. They do not argue for environmental protection because the gallery is not the right forum for a polemic and Duville errs to curiosity rather than didacticism. (If I wanted to make green claims for Duville, I would celebrate the ecology of travel in the imagination, as opposed to aviation which has such massive carbon emissions.) But the many paradoxes of his work open up the whole perversity of a beautiful world that is so self-destructive, so uncaring and self-interested, that in many ways the only logical response is to imagine what it really is inside the psyche where it grew originally toward what it needed to be.

ALASKA

PLATES

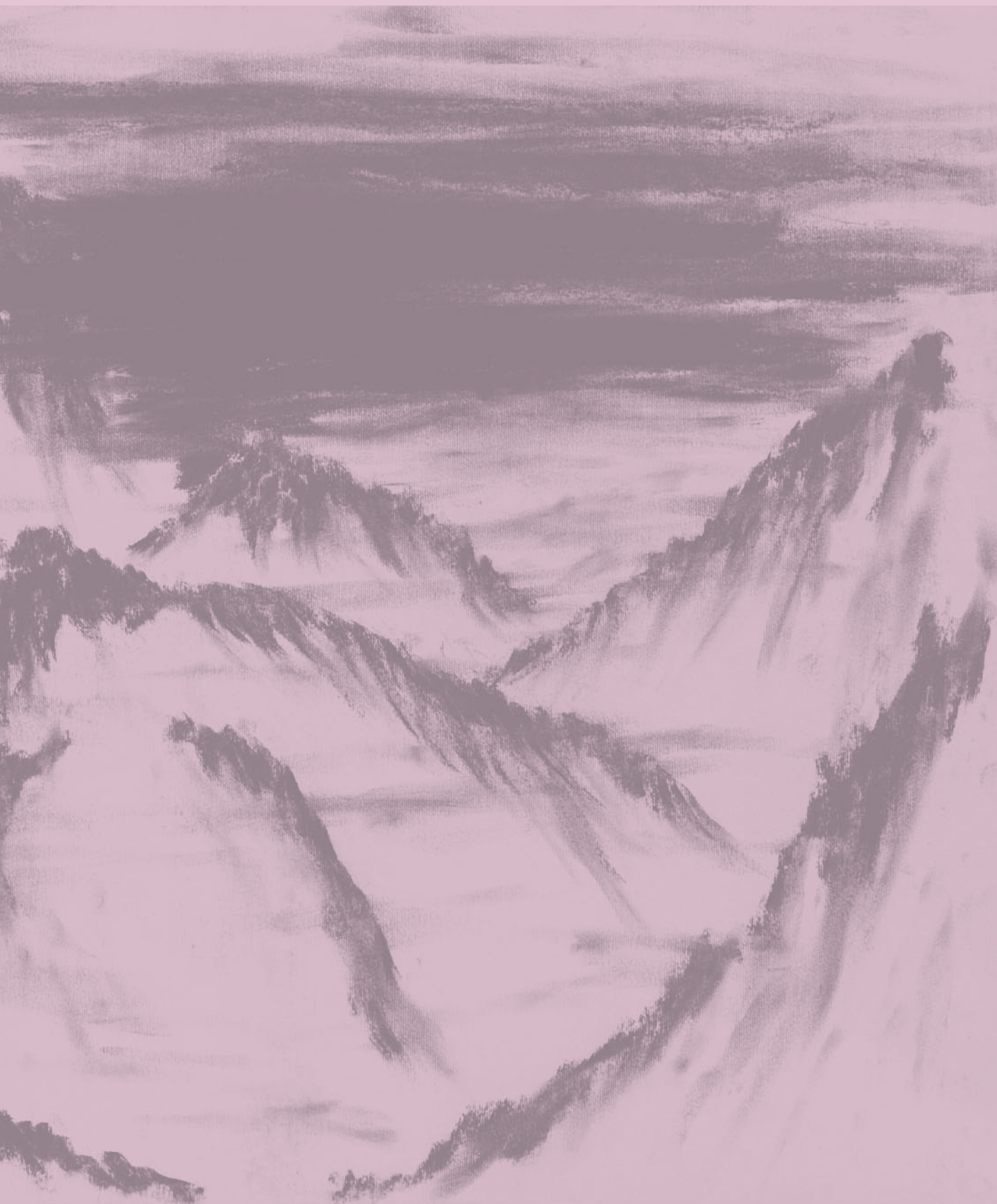
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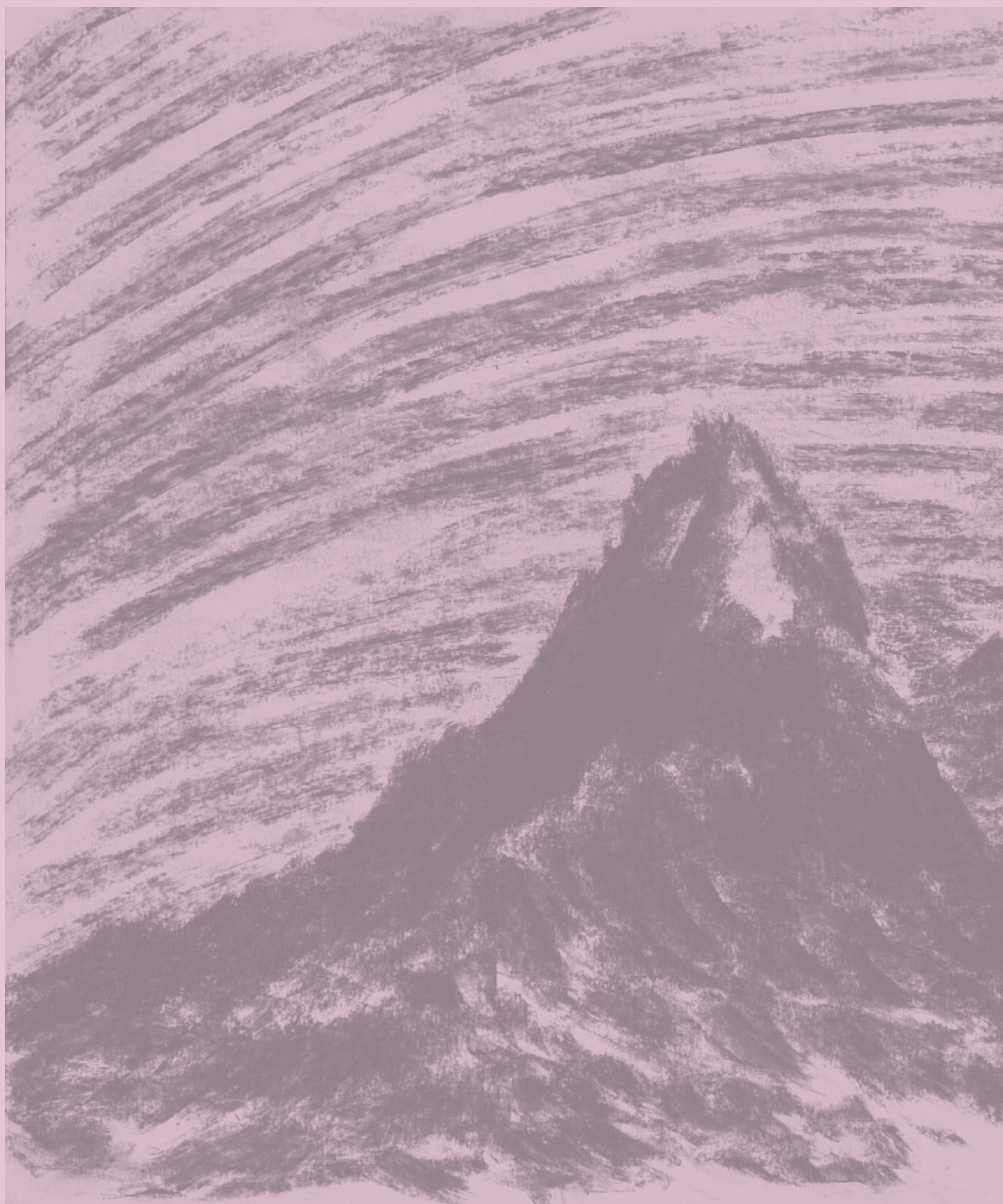
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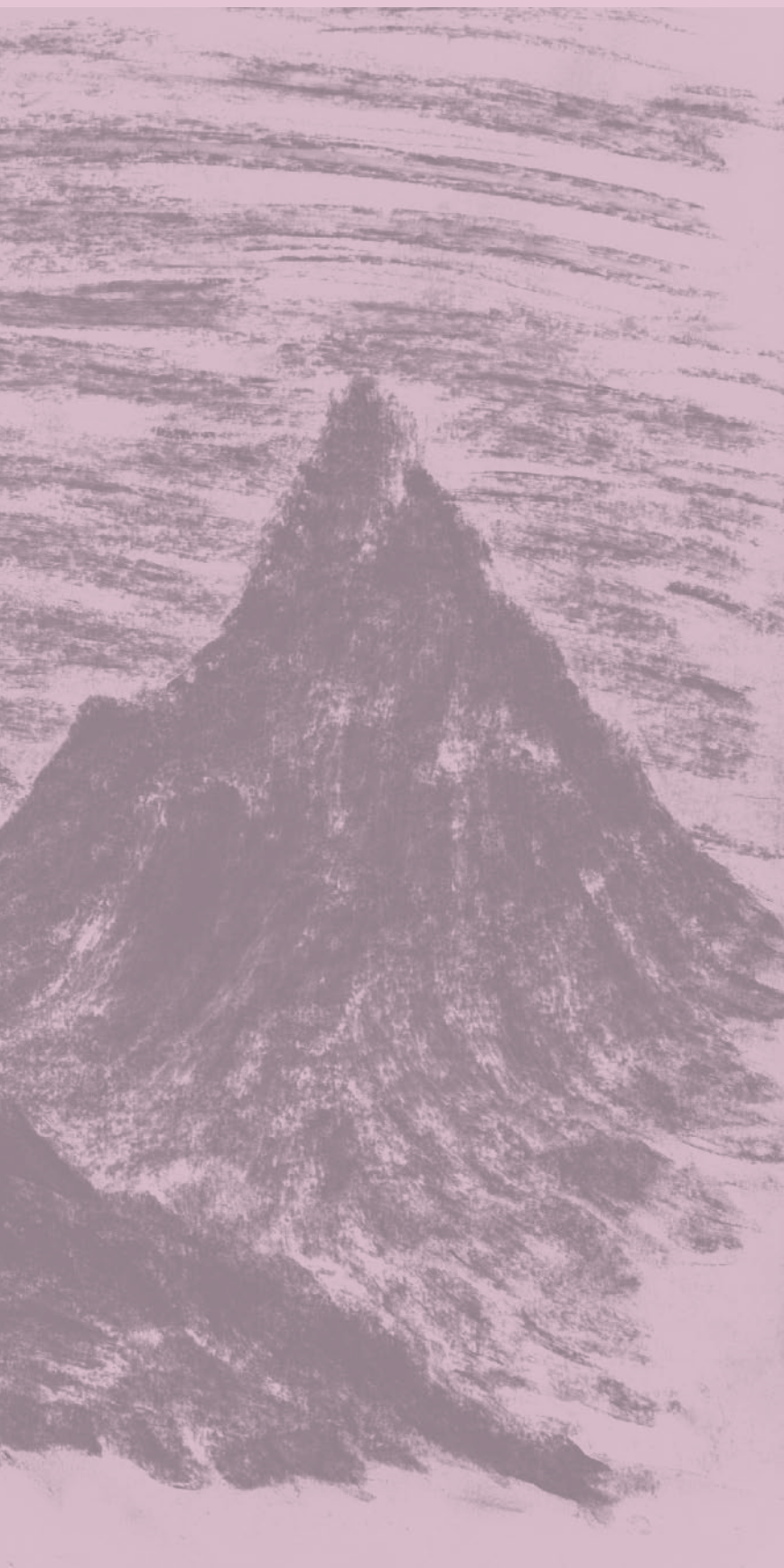








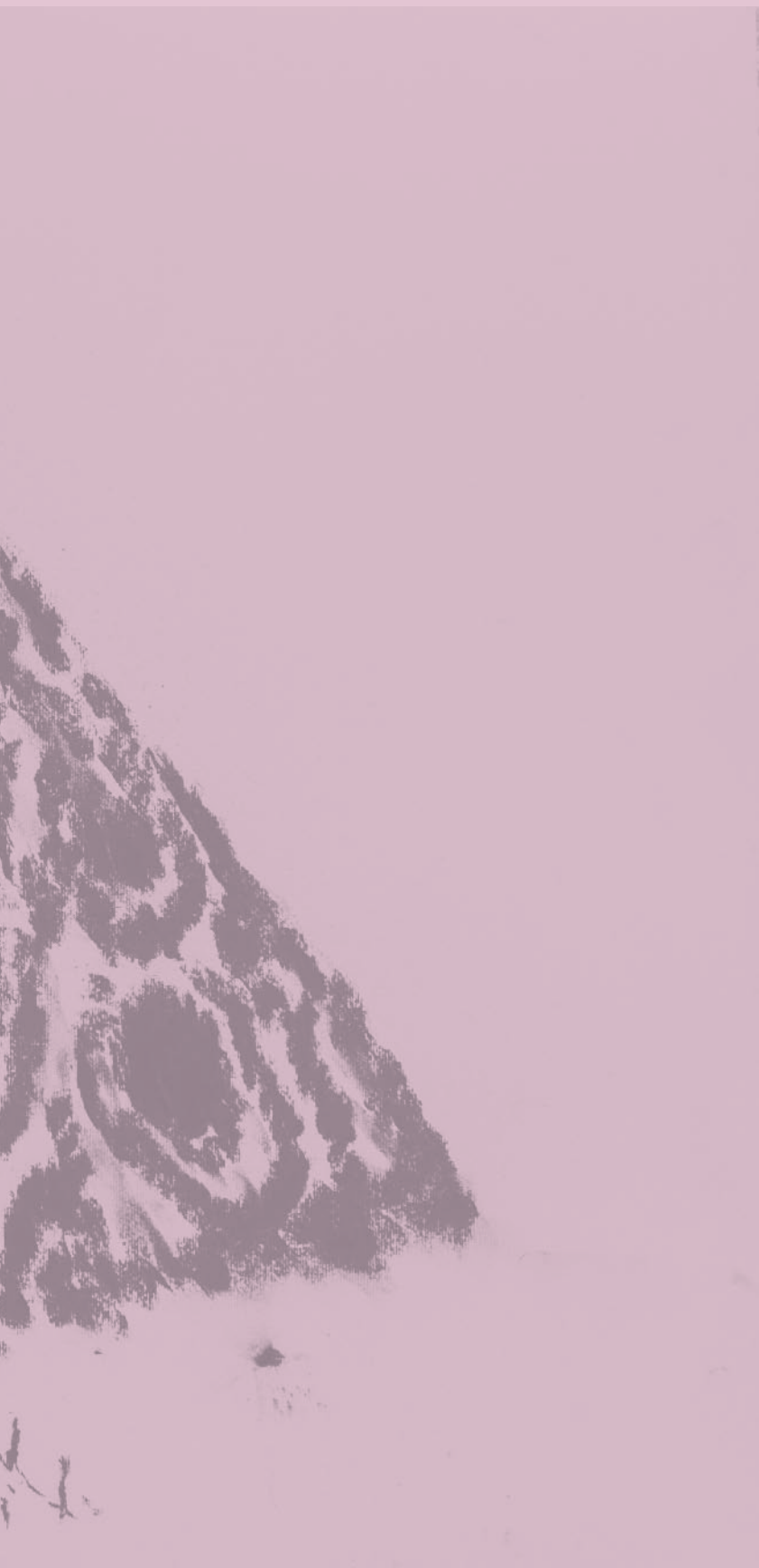




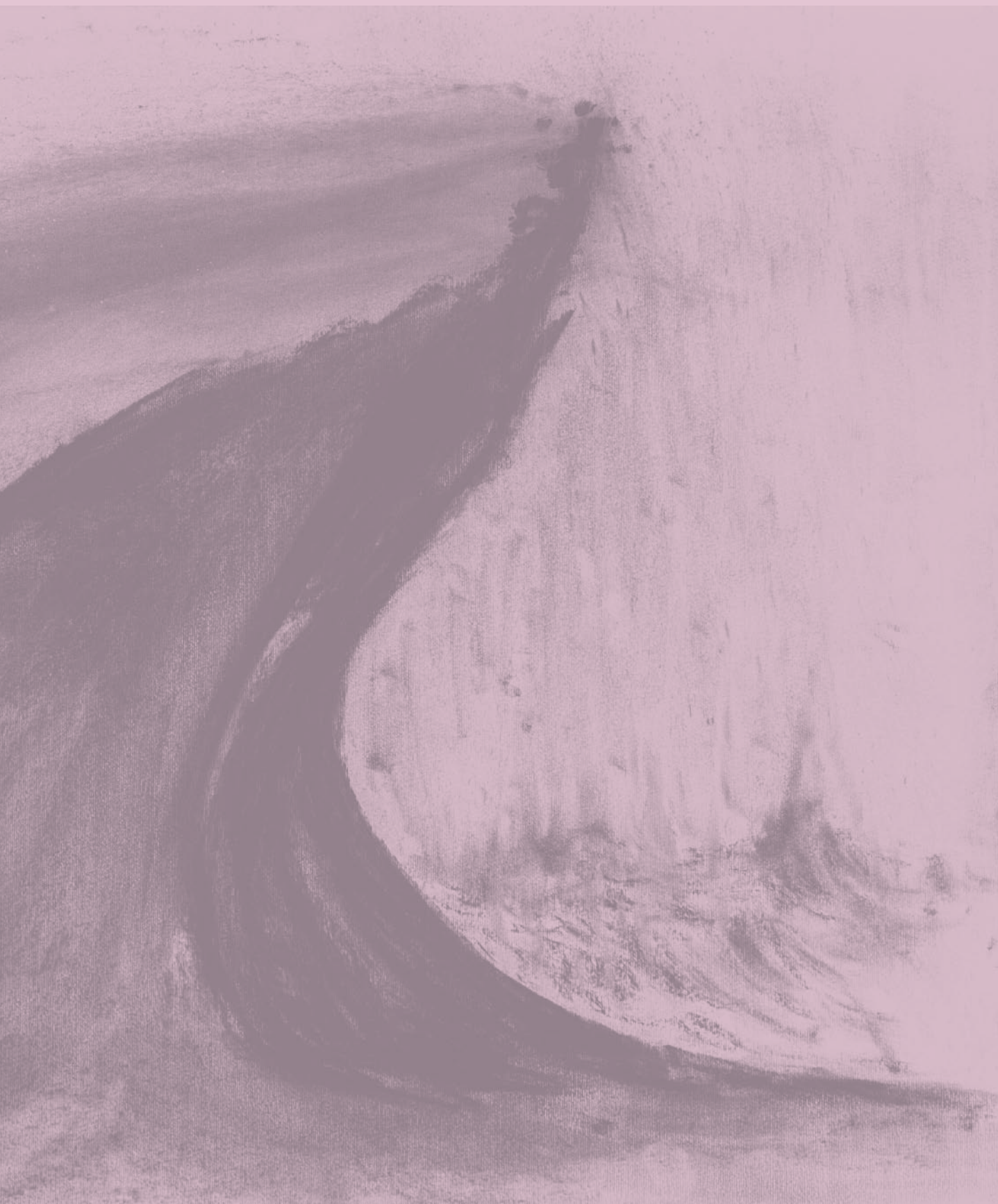










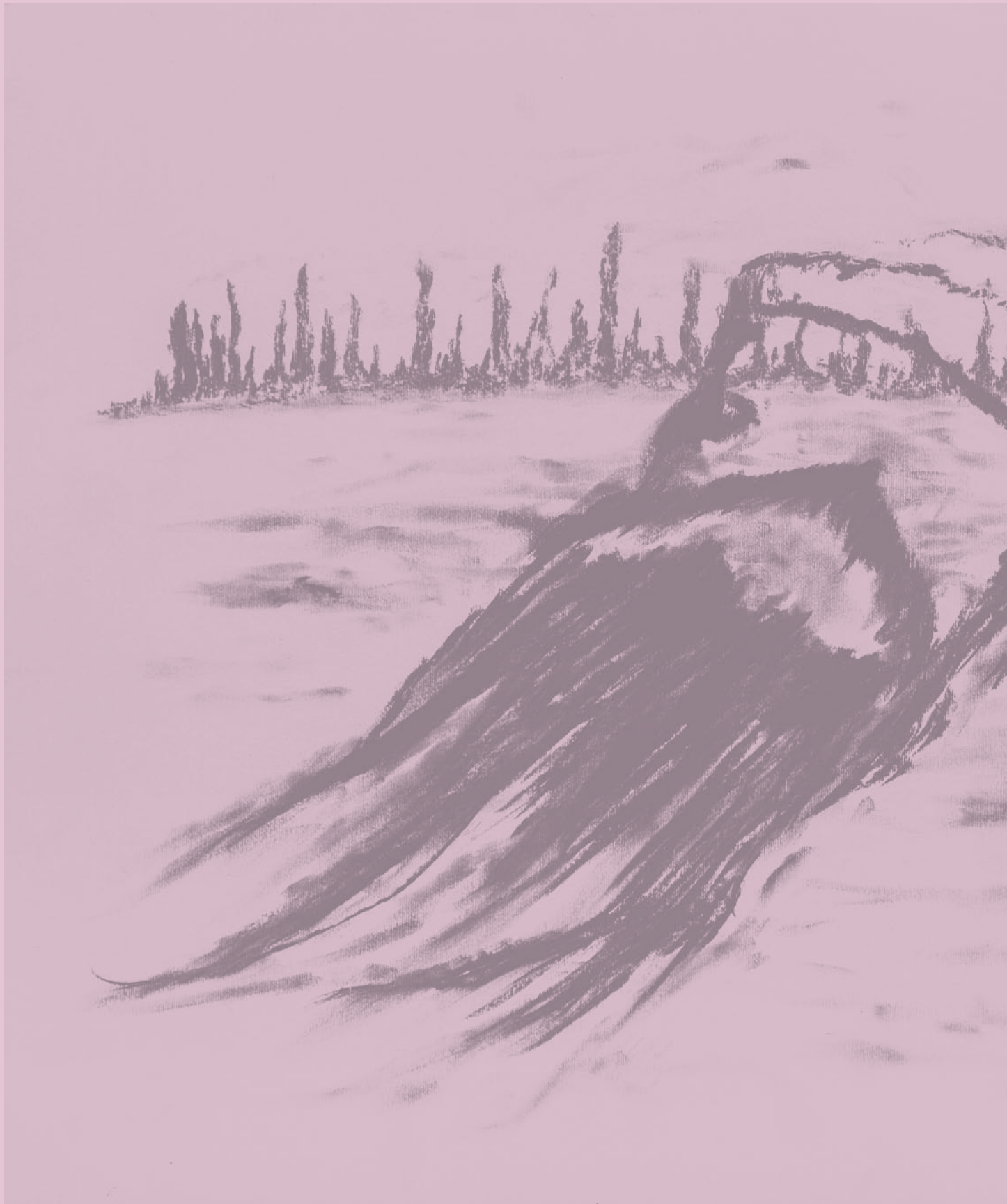






















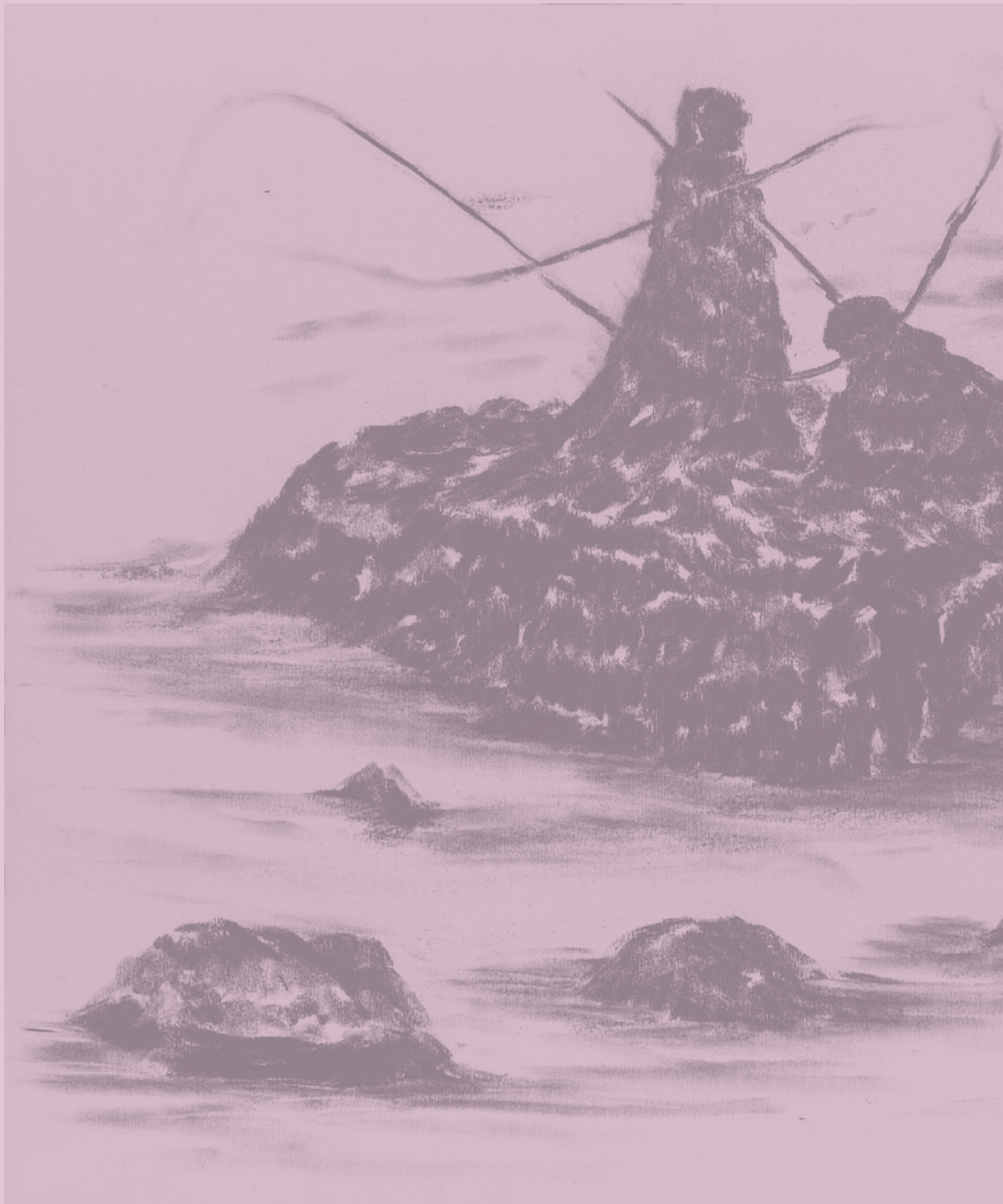






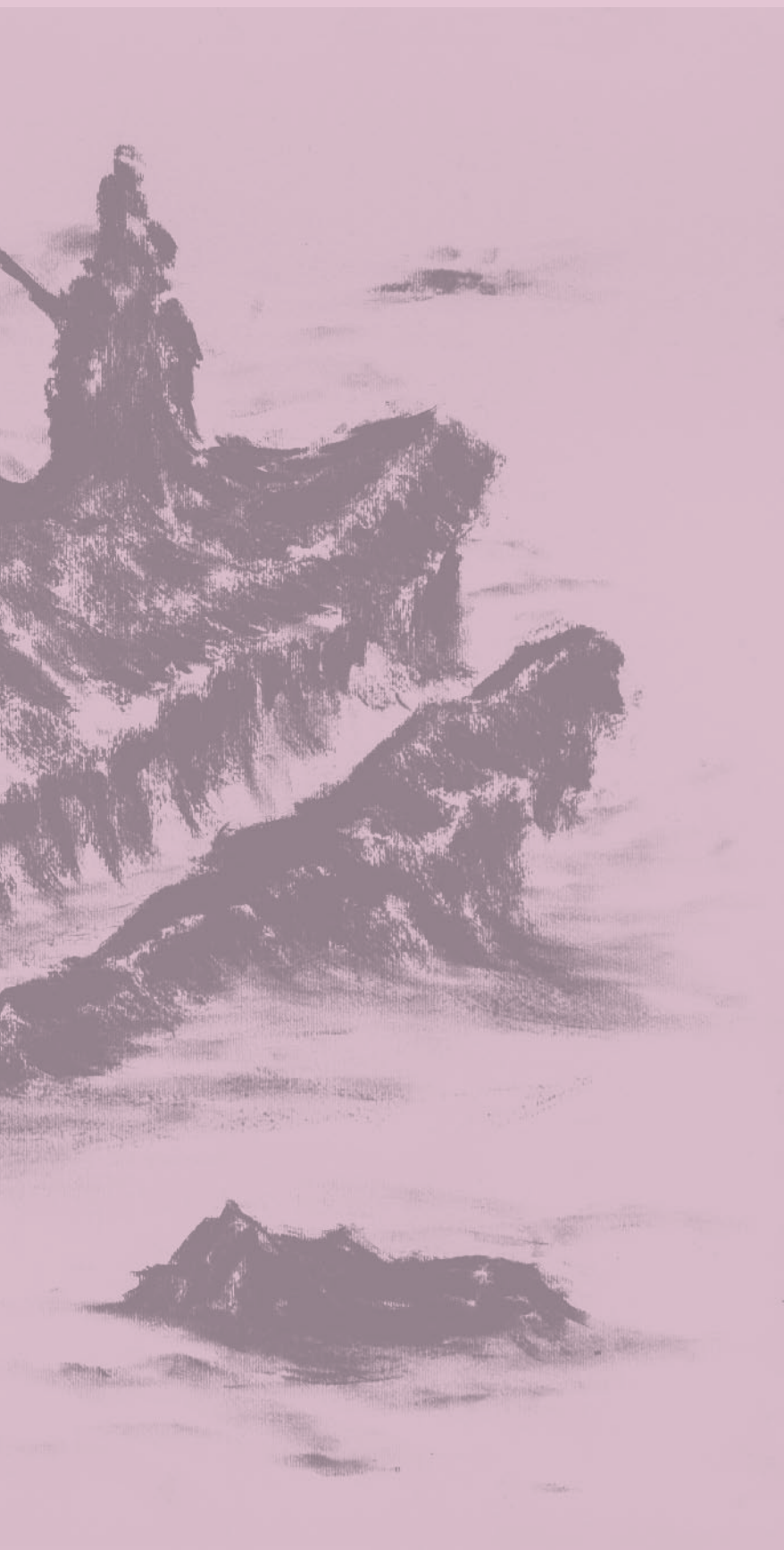












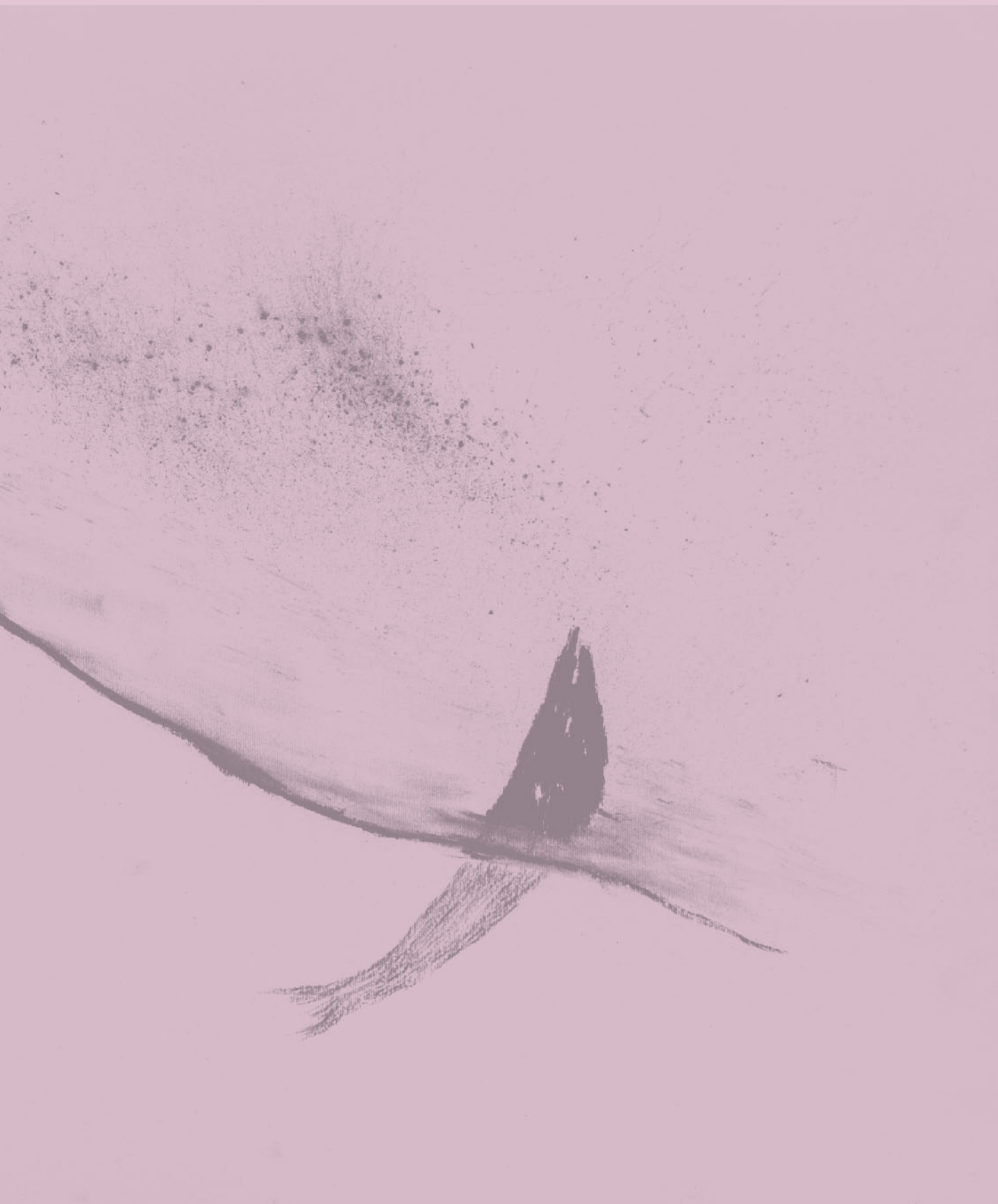


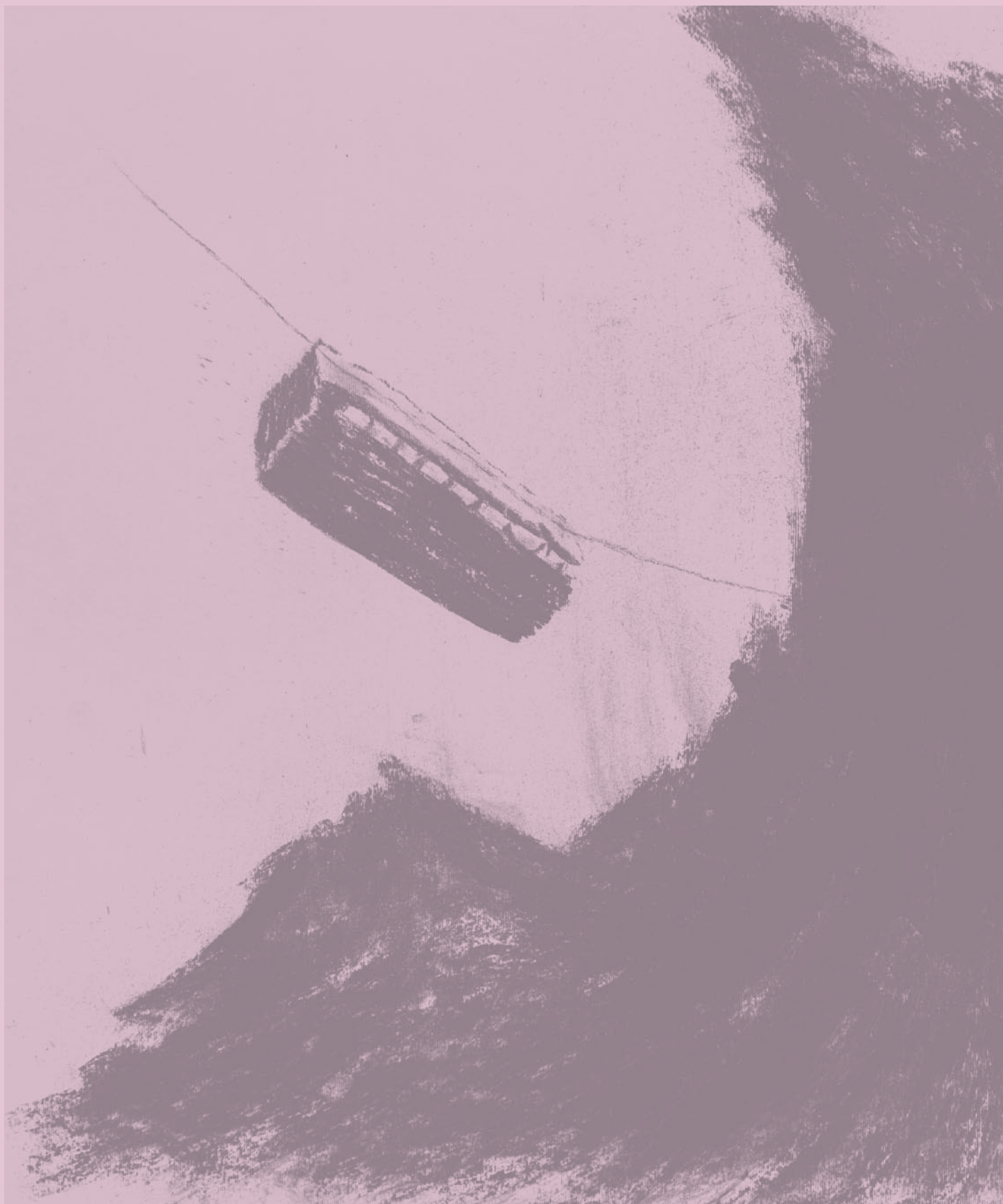




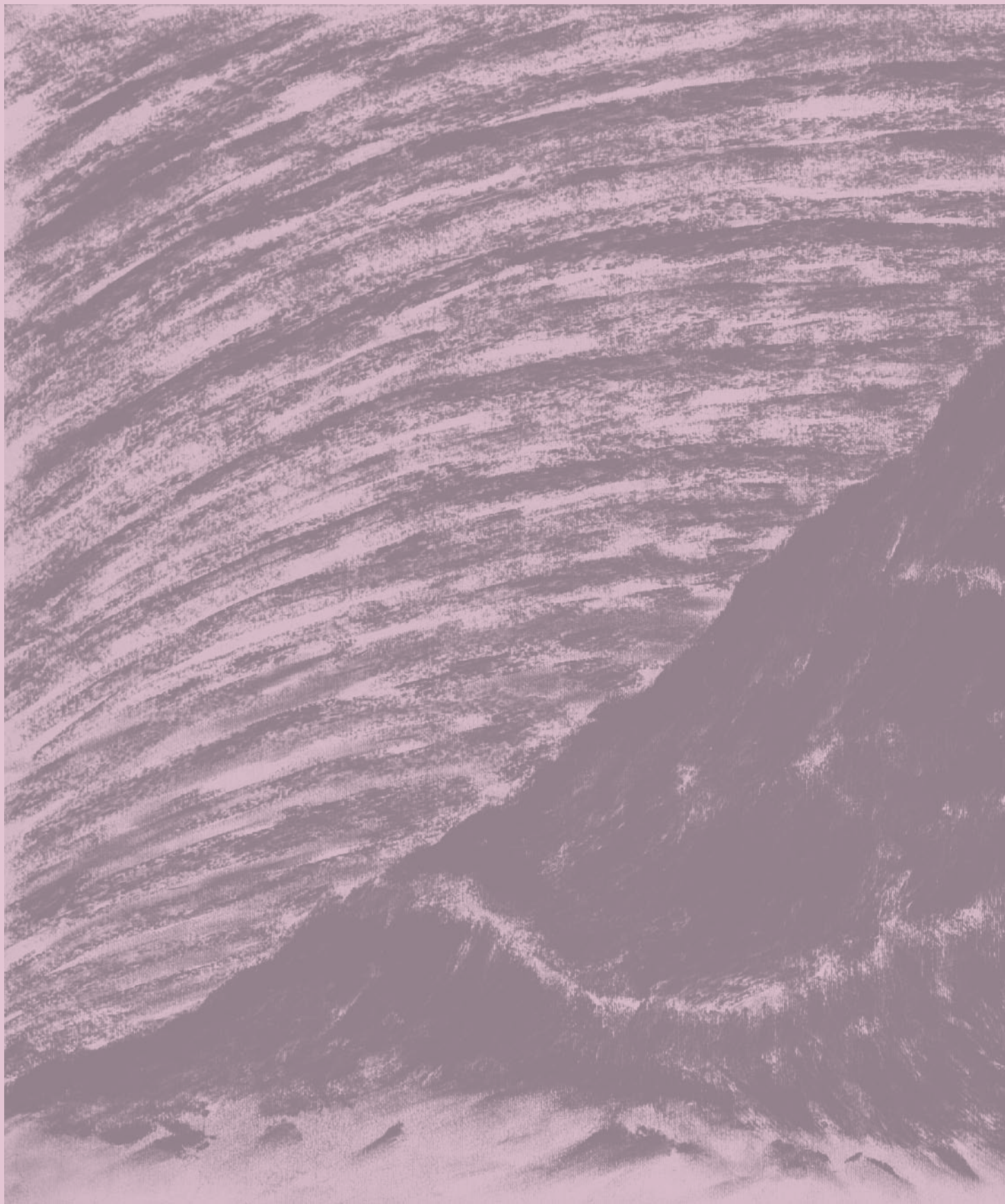


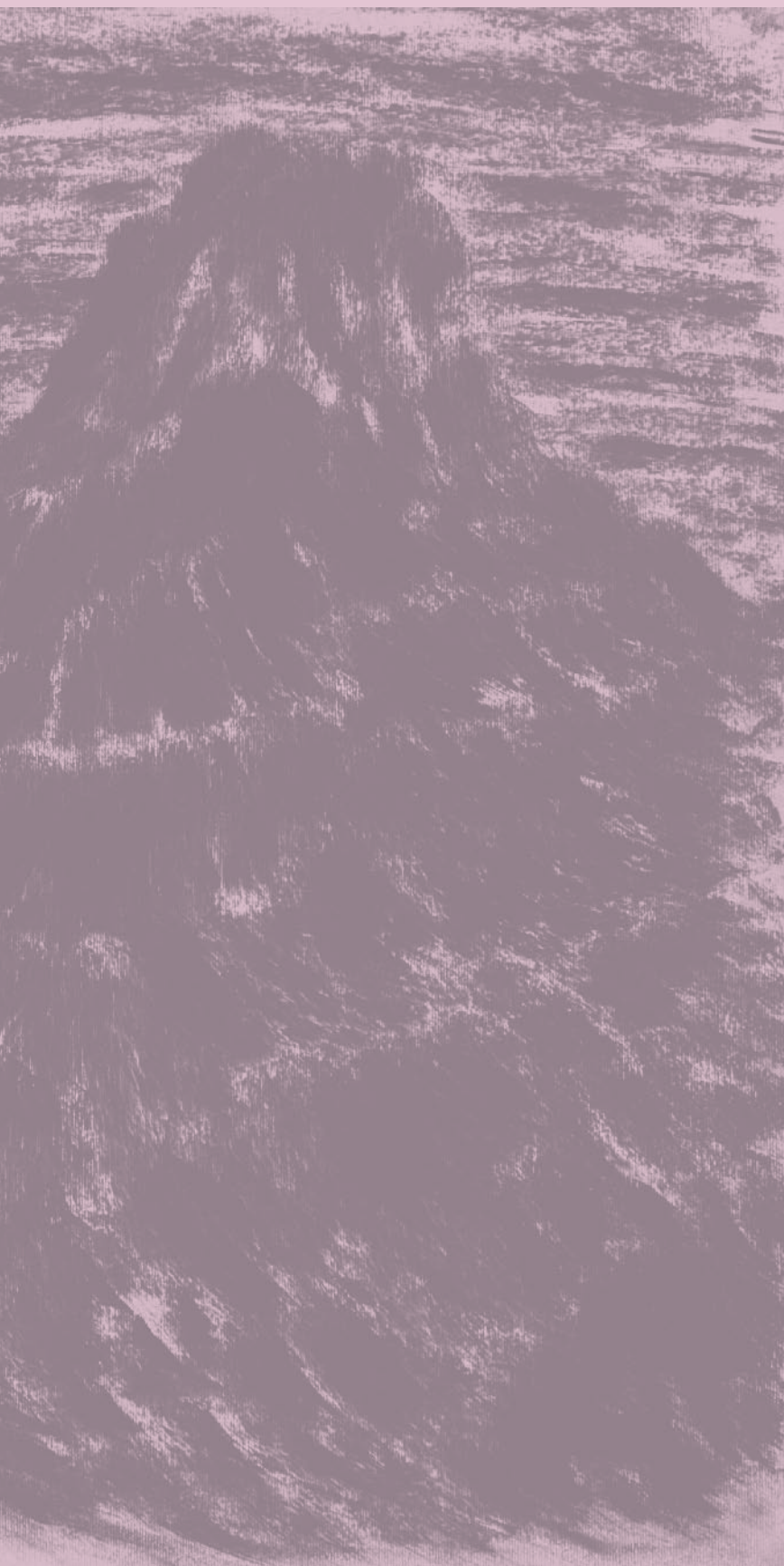










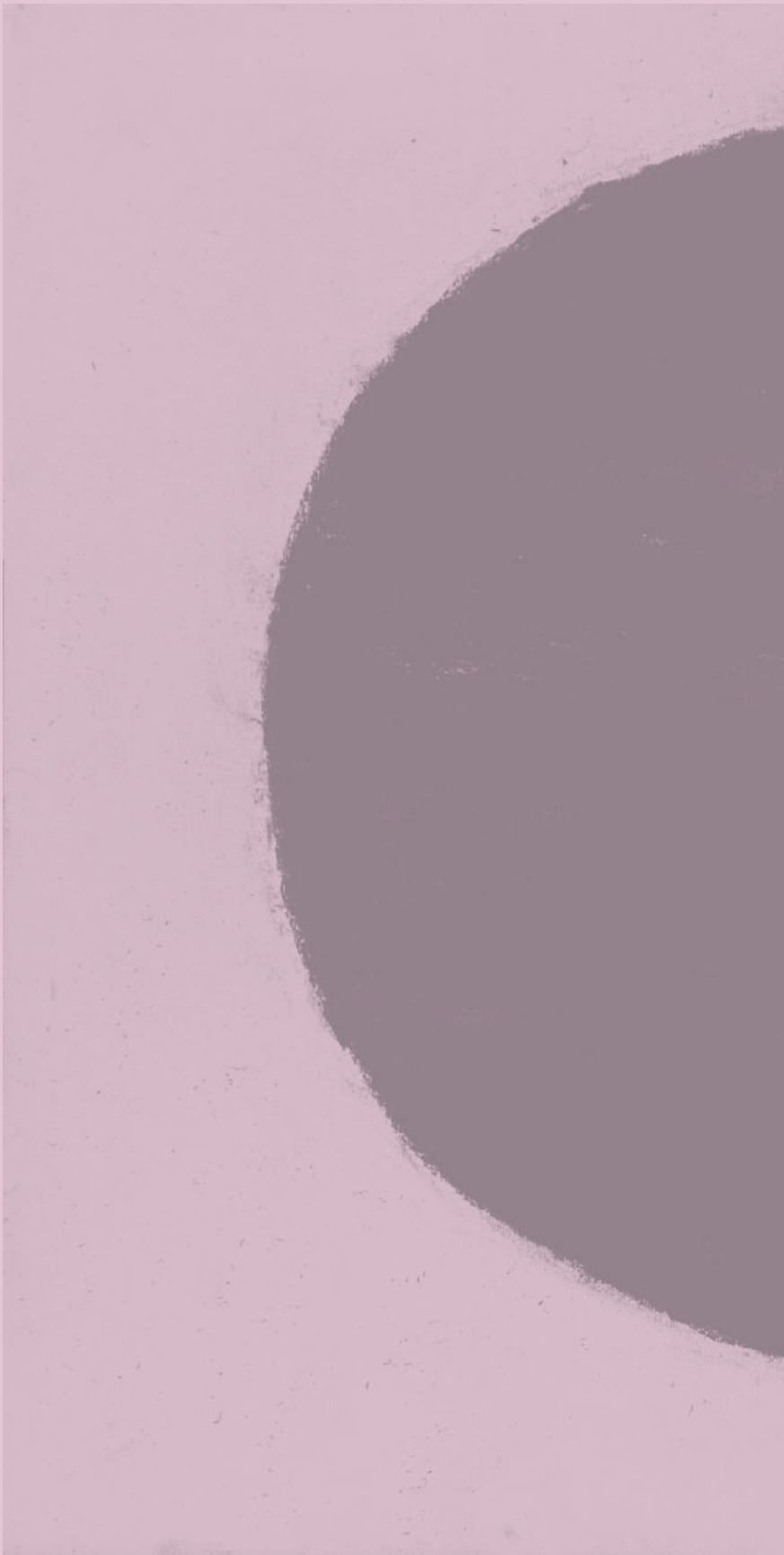




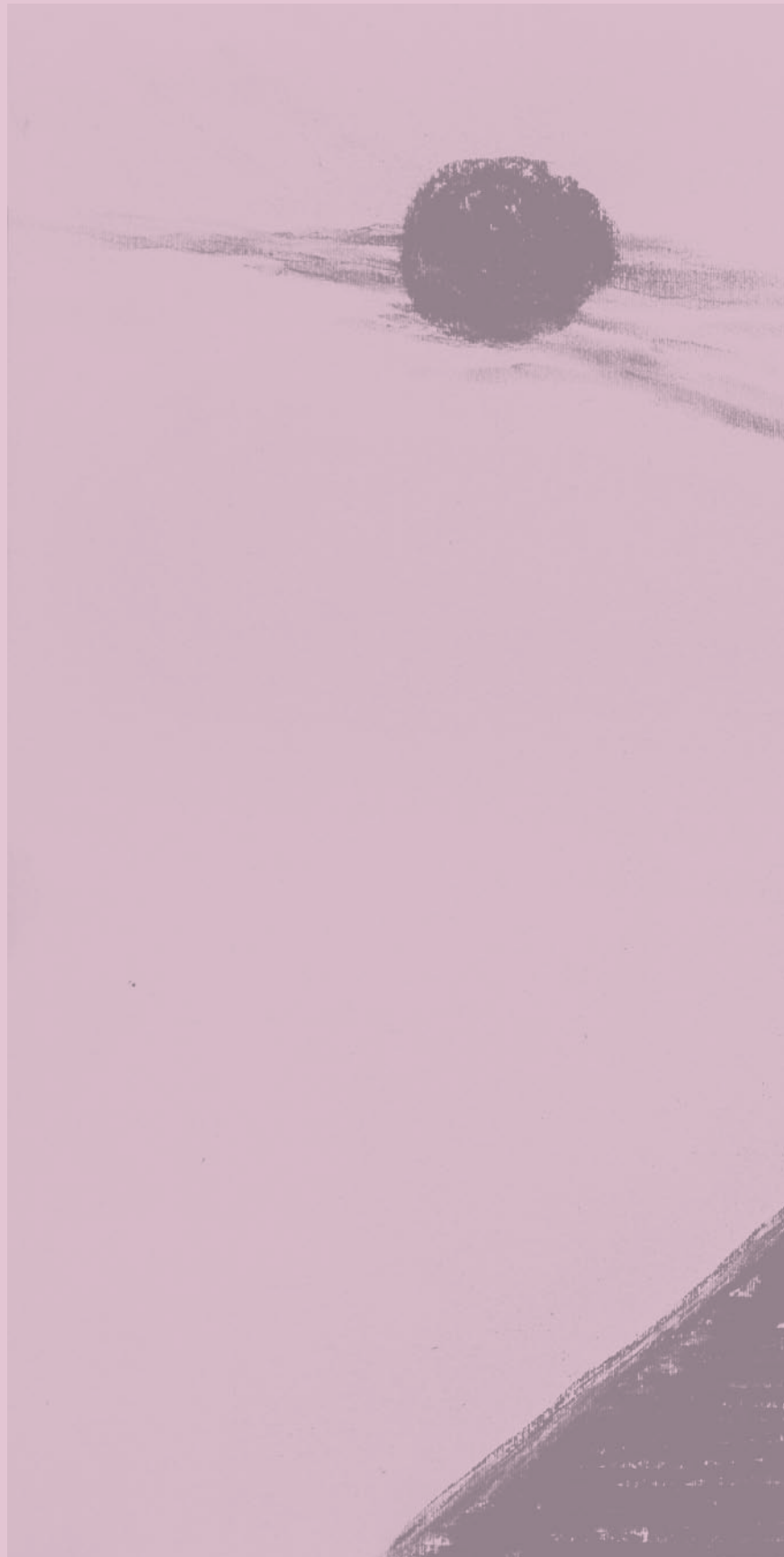
















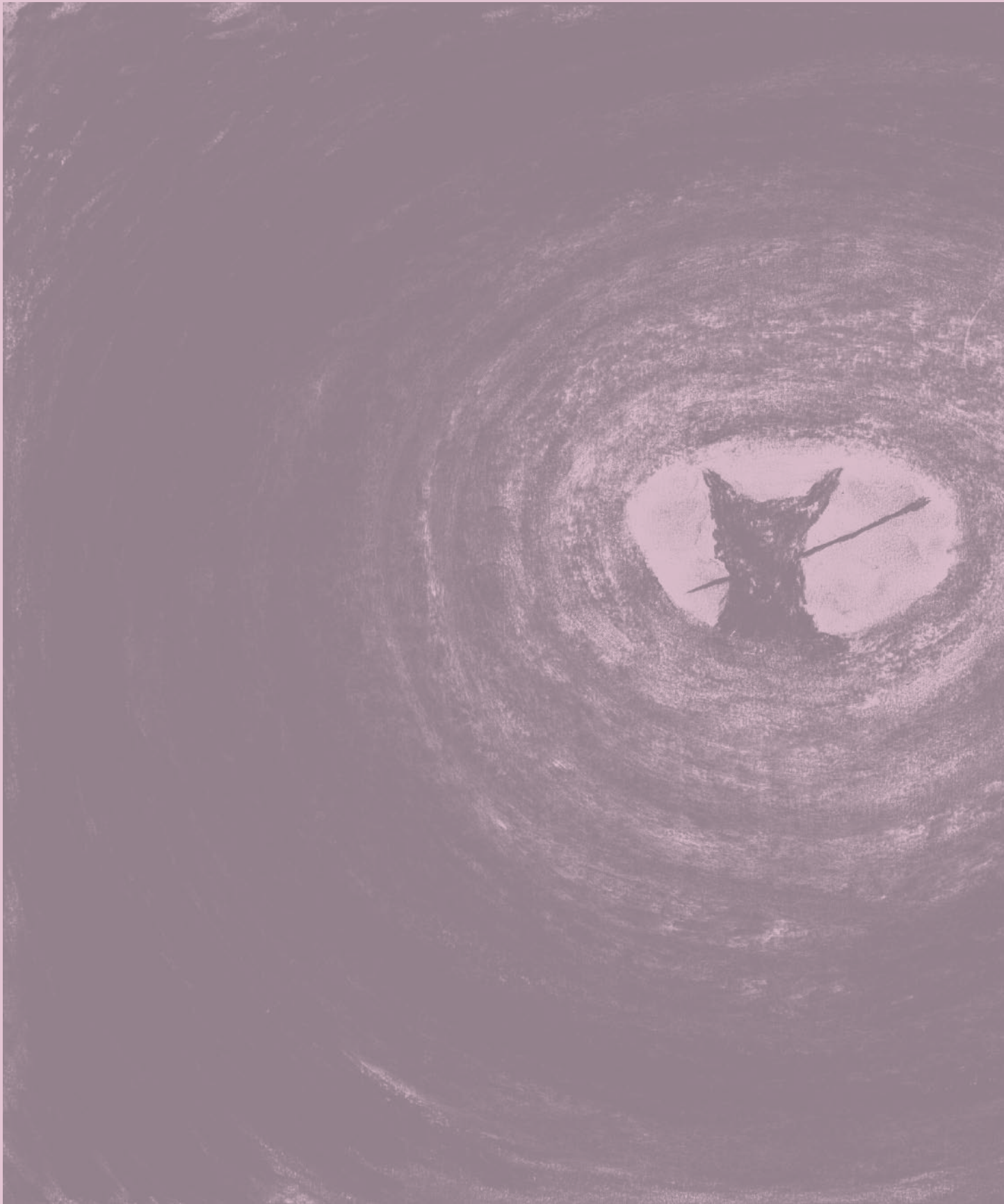


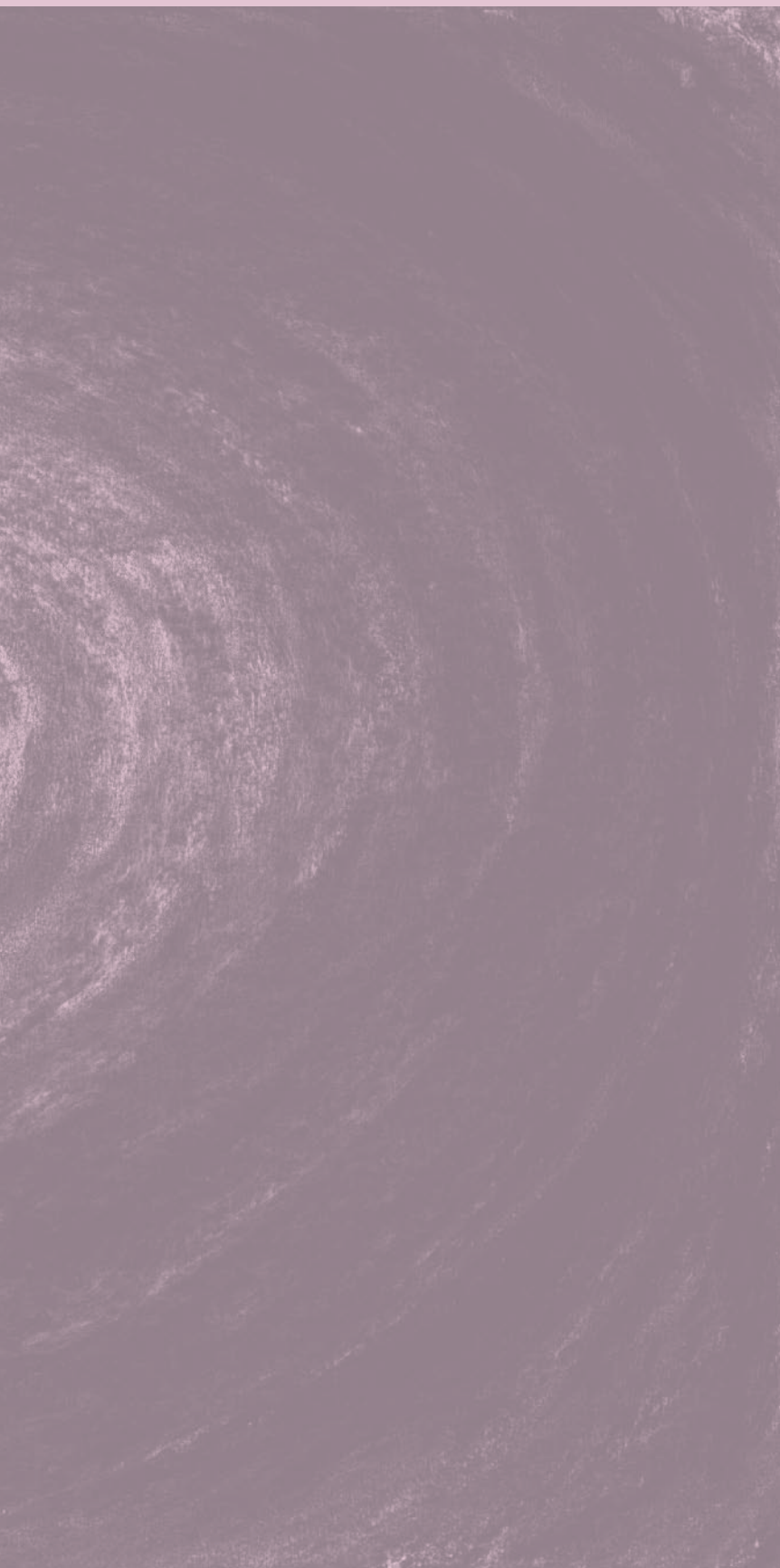


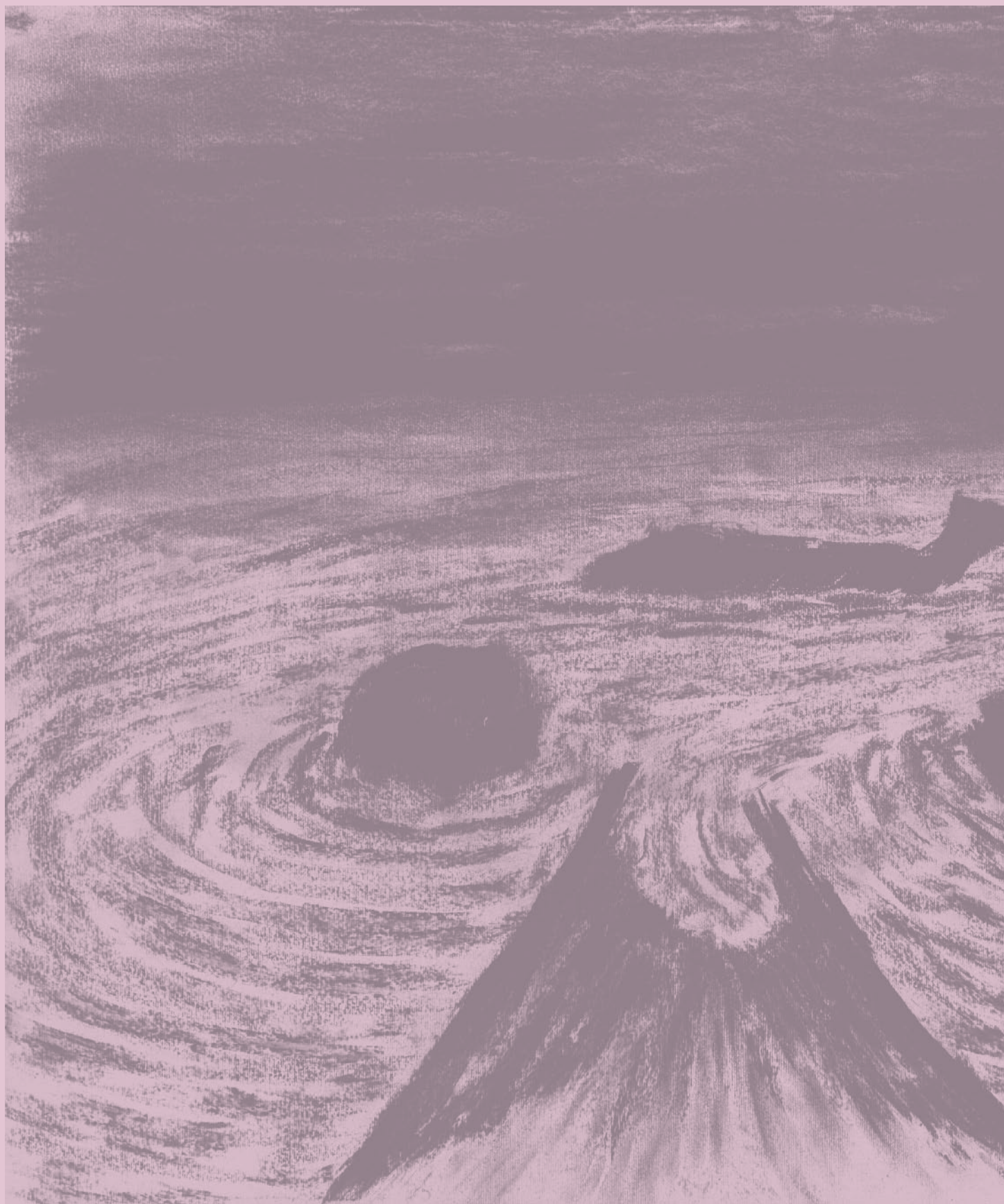


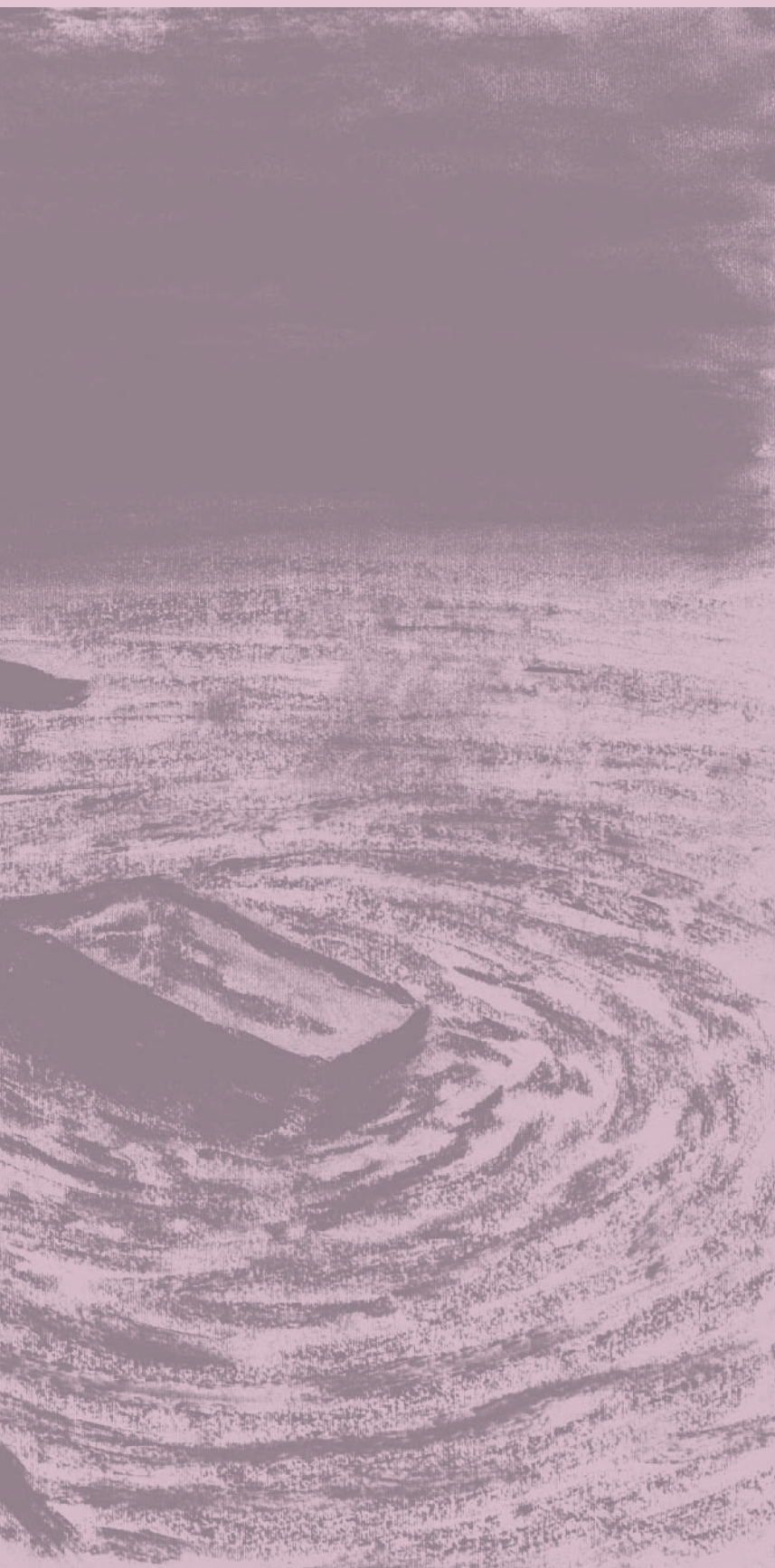












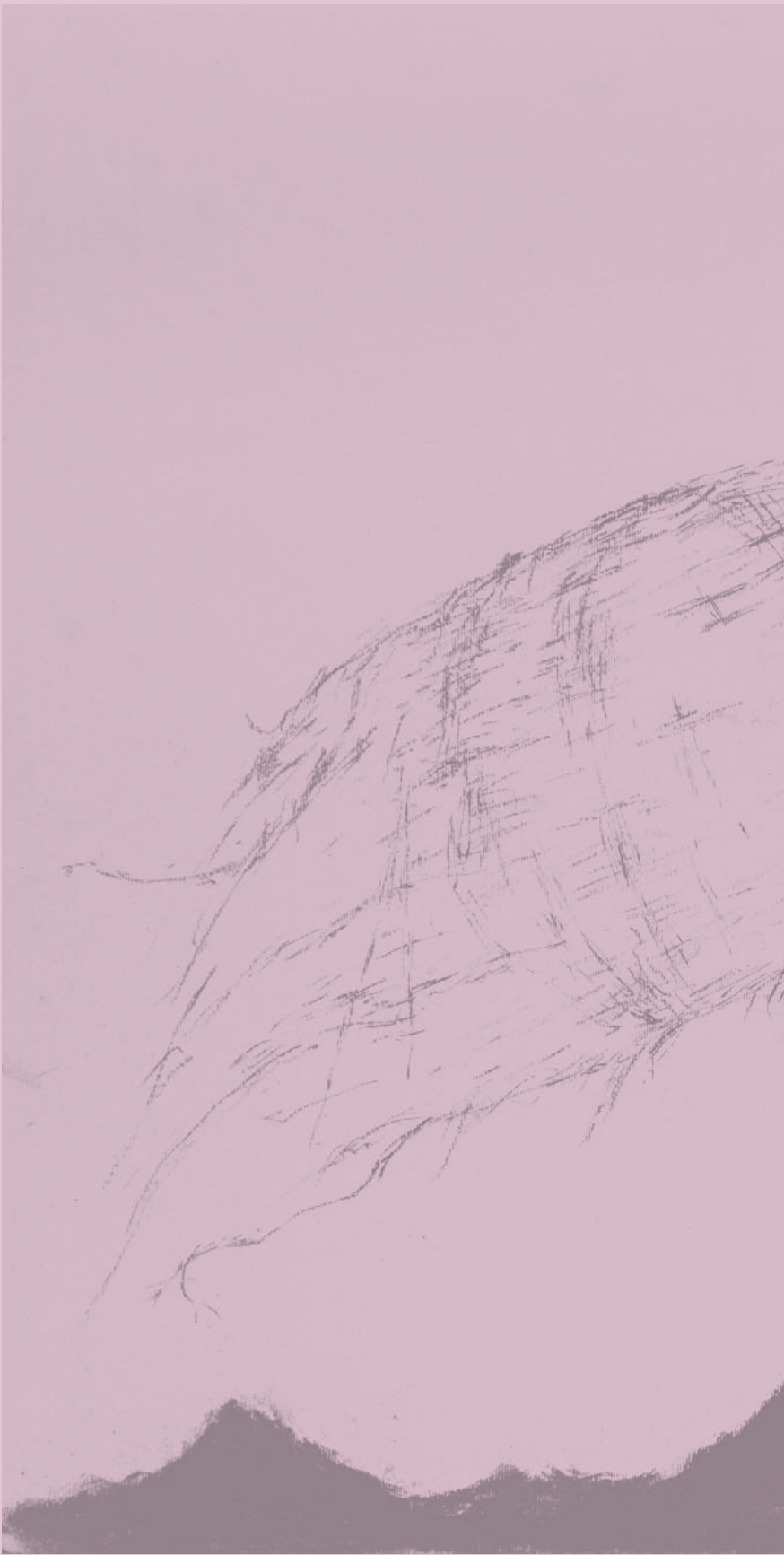














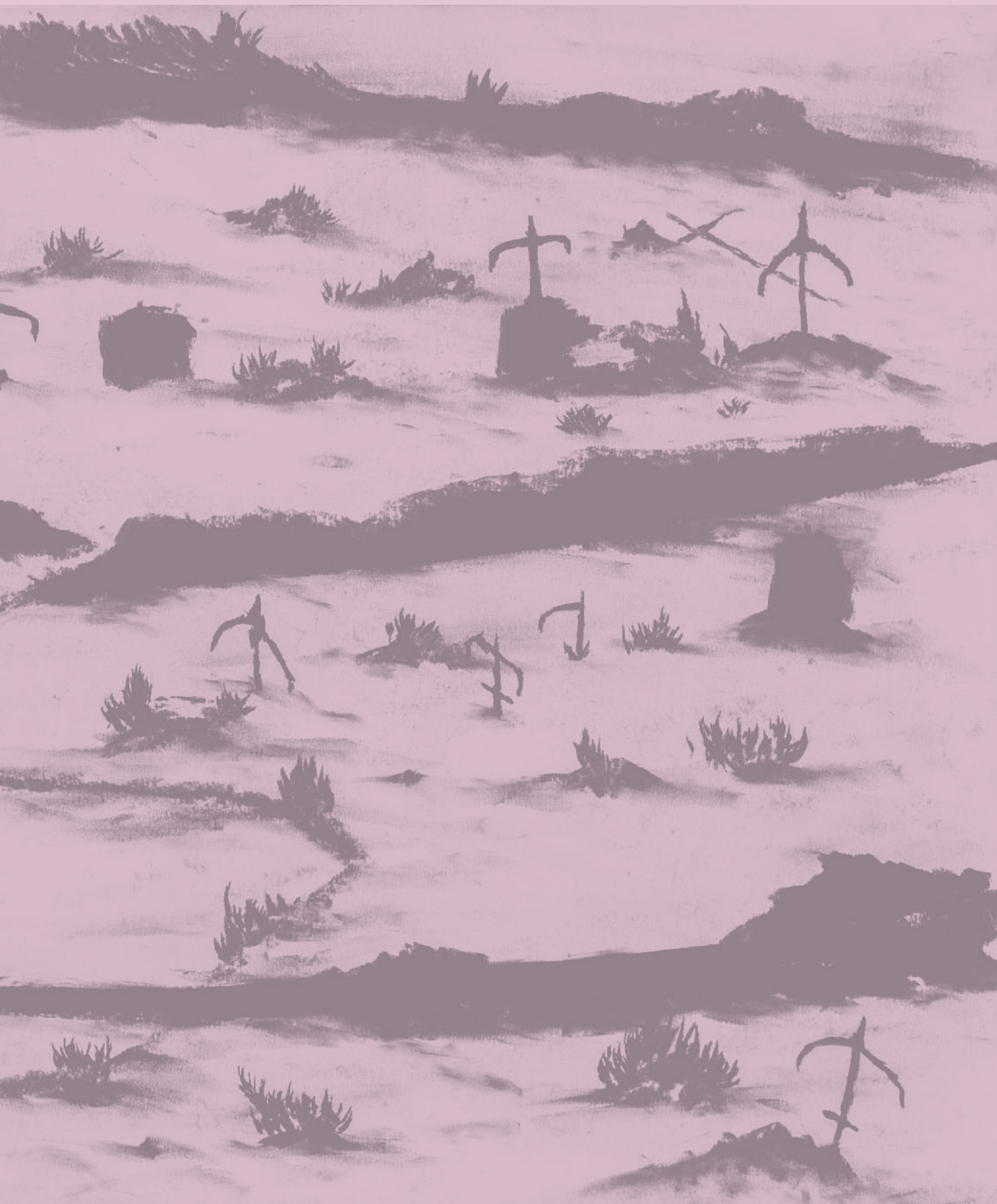
























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COLOPHON

Matias Duville: Alaska

Published by The Drawing Center, NY

Edited by Brett Littman

Images © 2013 Matias Duville

Text © 2013 Robert Nelson

First Printing First Edition of 500

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Designed by AHL&CO

All work photographed by Tomas Maglione

Color separations by Guillermo Frontalini

Printed by Shapco Printing, Minneapolis, Minnesota

2013 © Matias Duville

ISBN: 978-0-942324-75-4

Special financial support for this publication has been provided by

GALERÍA ALBERTO SENDRÓS



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