

ALASKA

VOLUME

2

ALASKA

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ALASKA

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SHORT STORY BY
WELLS TOWER

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THE DRAWING CENTER

Atreus

WELLS TOWER

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Arthur Hollis was the son of Michael Hollis, the architect who designed the widely admired town hall in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and the grandson of Edward Hollis, who served as ambassador to Ecuador under Harry Truman. A searching history of the Hollis genealogy would not reveal a single death due to suicide, alcoholism, or venereal disease. The family's home was designed by Stanford White, and the rose garden was open to the public summer, spring and fall. For as long as anyone could remember every July 4th, hot dogs were distributed free of charge on the Hollis's lawn. The family bore its good fortune with such grace and restraint that Arthur was one of the only souls in town who thought the Hollises near-sociopathic in their arrogance and grandiosity.

Arthur was accepted to MIT without mentioning his father's legacy there. He paid his tuition with wages he earned repairing small engines. The summer after graduating with a degree in mechanical engineering, Arthur went to Nushagak, Alaska, a remote island community on Bristol Bay, to work as a salmon fisherman.

Nushagak is not a port of call of the Princess cruise ship line. The beaches are gray mud. Mosquitoes there are a form of terrible weather. Snatch a palmful of

air in Nushagak, and mosquito vitals will squirt from the end of your fist. In the village, the ditches brim brightly with spent antifreeze. Garbage fires burn on most lawns. Also there is beauty there. Stare at the bay for twenty minutes, and you will likely see a pale beluga whale breach the estuarine bay water, which is silty and blue-gray, the color of ash dissolved in skim milk. The surrounding mountains look like a beer-can label. In summer, it is worth risking consumption by grizzly bear to hike inland along the Wood River to see the submarine wildfire of salmon, gorgeously deformed by exposure to fresh water: crimson bodies, verdant heads, demonic green underbites.

This was a land designed by Arthur's sort of god, a rough Eden for the unfussy and the capable. By the end of his first month in Nushagak, he decided to stay for the winter crabs. In August, when he met Cleo Petoskey he resolved to stay for good. The Petoskeys owned the crab and salmon cannery that was the lifeblood of the town, and Carol regarded her parents with a quiet resentment familiar and appealing to Arthur. In October, he proposed. Carol made him wait through the winter for an answer. In springtime, she accepted a piece of raw placer gold in lieu of his ring.

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Arthur found work repairing seaplane and helicopter engines. In three years, he had a shop and hangar of his own. Cleo gave birth to two children, Ippy and Owen, both of whom were blessed with the lean, dark comeliness of the Hollis line.

Owen was a delicate, bookish boy whose fits of wrath his parents tolerated as an effect of his fierce intelligence. Owen's older sister was a sunny, uncomplaining girl who took naturally to life in Nushagak. By the time Ippy was eleven, she knew more knots than most fishermen and could rebuild an outboard motor. Arthur loved his daughter with an intensity that pained him. At last, apart and in retreat from his extended family, he had inherited the sense of completeness his forebears had found in heading a tribe of accomplished people. For a solid decade, he was tense with dread of the day when Ippy would go south to Stanford or UCLA.

During Ippy's sixteenth summer, she fell in love with Pete Tate, a shifty boy from Oregon who worked the salmon guillotine in the cannery. Arthur tried to pay the boy to leave. Pete took Arthur's money and stayed. He bought plywood cabin and a shorenetting claim on the Queen Slough on the far side of the bay. Ippy joined him

there. She would sometimes try to reach her father on CB channel fourteen, which she knew he used. He never answered, but she knew he was listening.

We are told that quicksand is a mythical substance, invented by authors of children's adventure tales. If you have been to Nushagak and experienced the mud of the tidal aprons, you know this isn't true. The mud there is made of fine silt, silky as whipped joint compound. It steals boots and anchors. A deep patch will hold a moose for drowning when the tide comes in. The summer after she left home, Ippy Hollis stepped out of the skiff at low tide and sunk into a body of this legendary mud. The mud was at her sternum when she stopped sinking. Pete beached the boat beside her and strained to pull her out, but the mud had formed a solid vacuum around the girl. It held her fast as concrete, and the tide was coming in.

Arthur heard the CB. He hijacked from his own hangar the Robinson R22 helicopter some Chinese oil prospectors had left in his care. The water was to Ippy's chin when he reached her. Pete threaded one end a rope through her life vest and the other around the chopper's left skid. The chopper rose. The rope went taut for a slim instant and then Ippy's head, arms and chest floated free. Pete cheered and then he didn't. Arthur angled up over the tundra with most of his daughter still stuck in the mud.

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2

A shore-tethered salmon net, or "set-net" has a cork line and a lead line. The cork line is studded with floats and sits on the river's surface. The lead line is a weighted welt that sinks to the river bottom, stretching the net the full depth of the waterway. When full of fish, the net is heavy. It must be hauled aboard over a roller, which is a giant aluminum rolling pin clamped to the gunwale of the fisherman's skiff.

After Ippy's death, Arthur stopped repairing, operating or riding in flying machines. Pete moved back to Portland, and Arthur took over the sites on the slough Pete had bought with Arthur's money. This was in the days before farm-raised salmon forced all the setnetters out of the business, and if they didn't exactly prosper, the Hollises survived with what they cleared in the summer run. You didn't often see them around town, and when you did, they didn't shine much light into your day. They were a curt, creased, silent pair who seemed to communicate with one another by a hostile telepathy.

Owen was with them when Arthur died. He was in a skiff upstream, towing a net into the current. His mother and father were in a second boat, hauling in a catch. It had been a bumper day, with fish brimming to the gunwales. Arthur was trying to free the net from a snag when he stepped on the roller and went overboard into the net. Gillcaught salmon bucked and grunted about his gasping face. The weight of the fish and the heavy leadline would soon drag Arthur down. He clung to the side of the boat for thirty seconds or so. Owen heard Arthur say these words to Cleo: "I don't want to die like this."

Cleo pawed at him and made some sounds as Arthur drowned, but she did not do the obvious thing, which was to take the filet knife from the scabbard on her belt and cut him free of the net.

3

No one in Nushagak said out loud that Cleo had let Arthur pay for Ippy's life with his own. Owen didn't say it either but that was what he thought. Now nineteen, he moved to Anchorage and found work as a salesman in a department store, but that came to an end when a little video camera that belonged to him was discovered in the ladies' changing room. A judge gave him two years' probation. Owen found work as an orderly at an assisted living facility, and that came to an end when a schizophrenic girl saw the red eye of Owen's camera winking through a hole in the Celotex tile over her bed. After eleven months in Lemon Creek Correctional Center, he returned to Nushagak as a registered sex offender.

Since Arthur's passing, Cleo's life had improved. Her father had died. He hadn't bothered to leave the cannery to Cleo in his will, but there were no rival heirs. Cleo put Owen to work in the office. She didn't want him down on the line where he might get into trouble with the seasonal help.

The summer Owen returned, the salmon flooded home in a hundred-year run. The cannery ran twenty-four hours. Forty thousand pounds of fish rotted on the dock waiting to be processed, but millions more were sold and shipped to Tokyo.

Before the run gave out, Owen disappeared with the petty cash in the cannery's safe and the contents of the bank account. That money belonged to the fishermen, to the cannery workers, who were paid in a lump sum when the season closed.

When word got around that the cannery was bankrupt, it was a minor miracle that no one put a bullet in Cleo's head. The fishermen and line workers descended on the cannery and exacted their wages wherever they could find them. They made off with the forklifts, the freezers, the reefer trucks, the conveyor belts, the copper wire in the walls, the timbers in the dock. What couldn't be stolen was broken or set on fire.

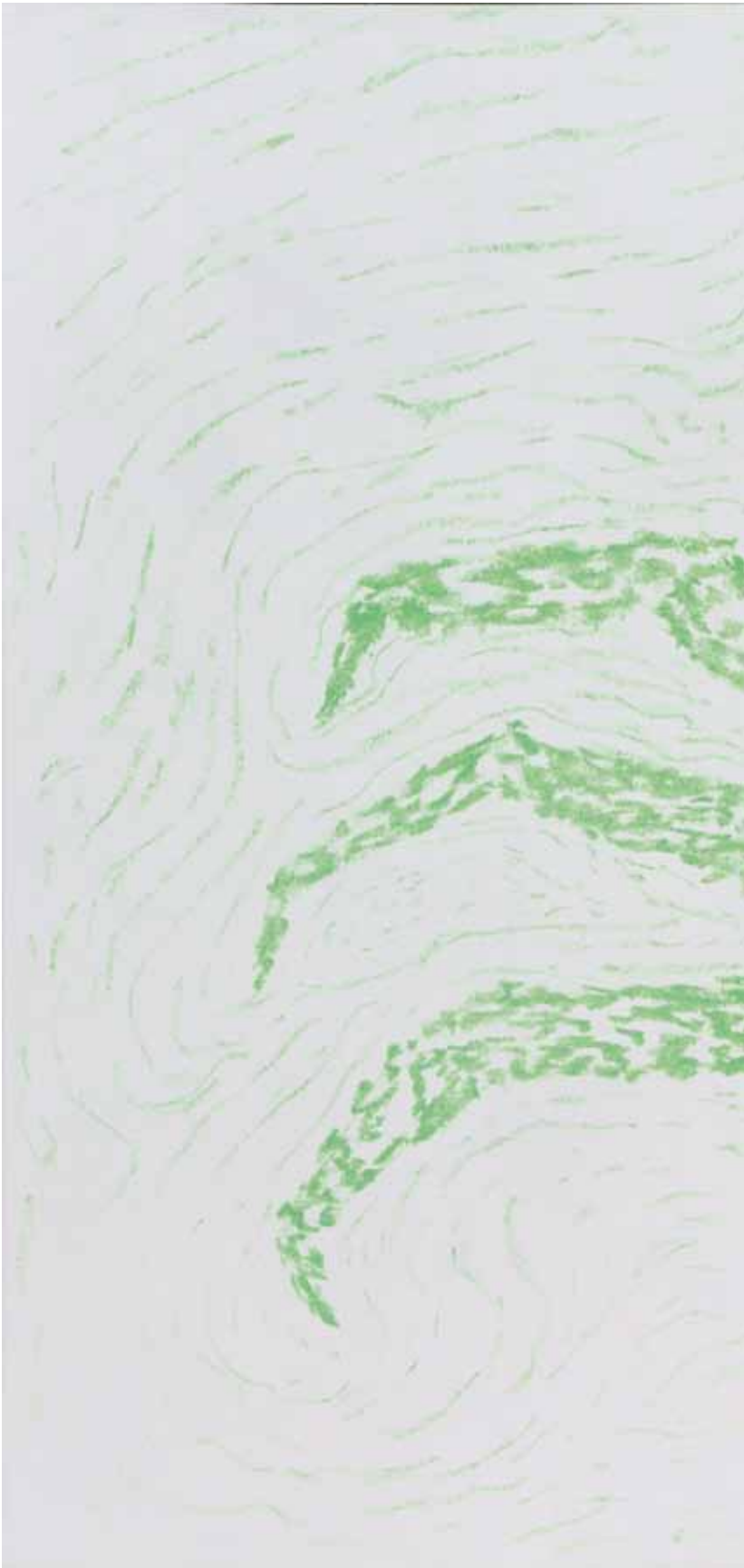
To the villagers' surprise, Cleo didn't leave Nushagak. She took a job as a breakfast cook in the town's one restaurant. The destruction of the cannery had been sufficiently violent and thorough as to furnish the folks wronged by Owen's larceny with some small sense of reckoning. If Owen had ever returned, the villagers would have surely done extraordinary things to him, but Cleo herself was not despised much past the summer. The villagers did not withhold a greeting or a smile when they saw Cleo at the post office, or sucking a quick cigarette in the lee of the restaurant's grease vault. But for the most part, the villagers kept clear of her, as it is wise to keep clear of those for whom more loss can only be a kind of gain.

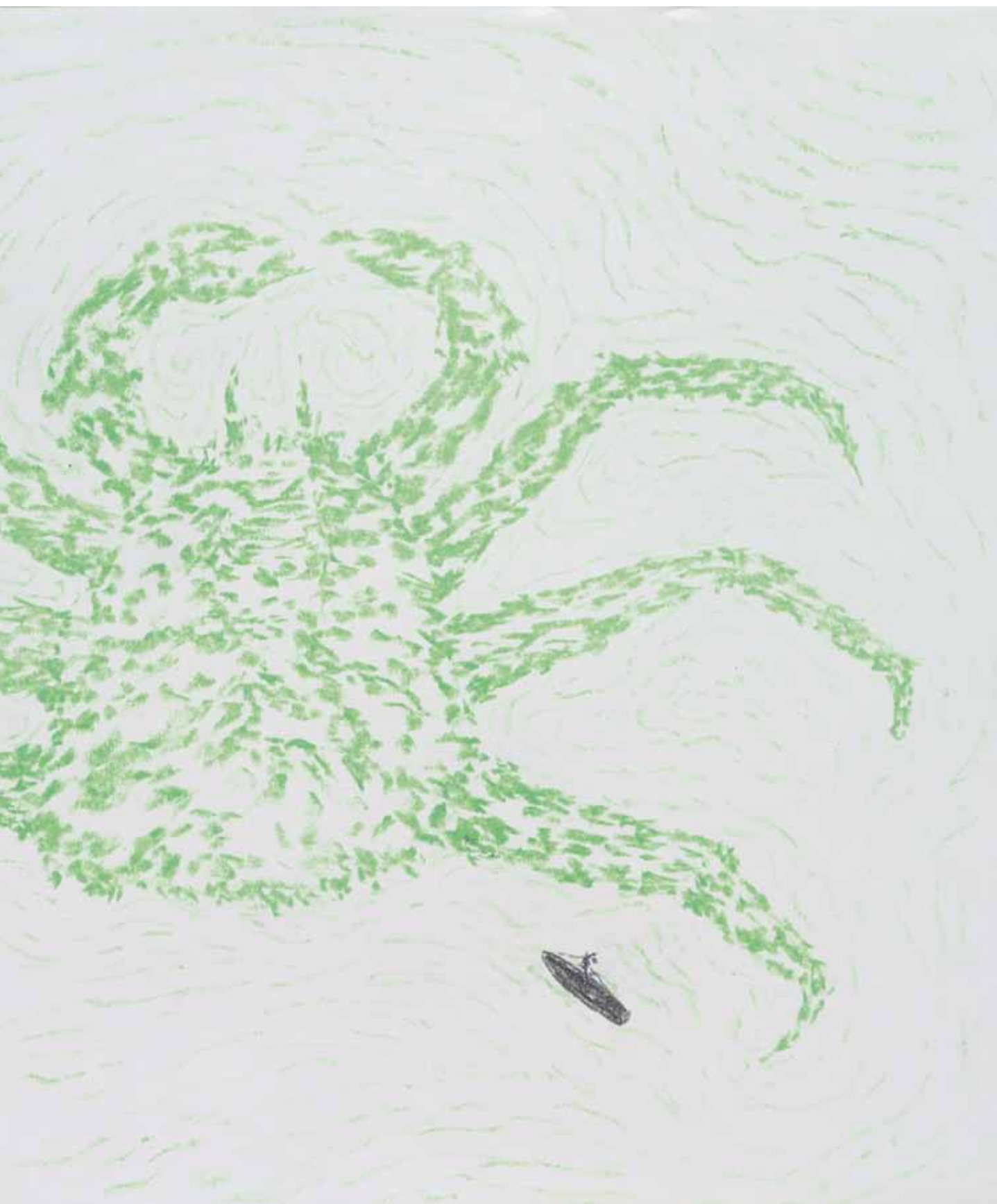
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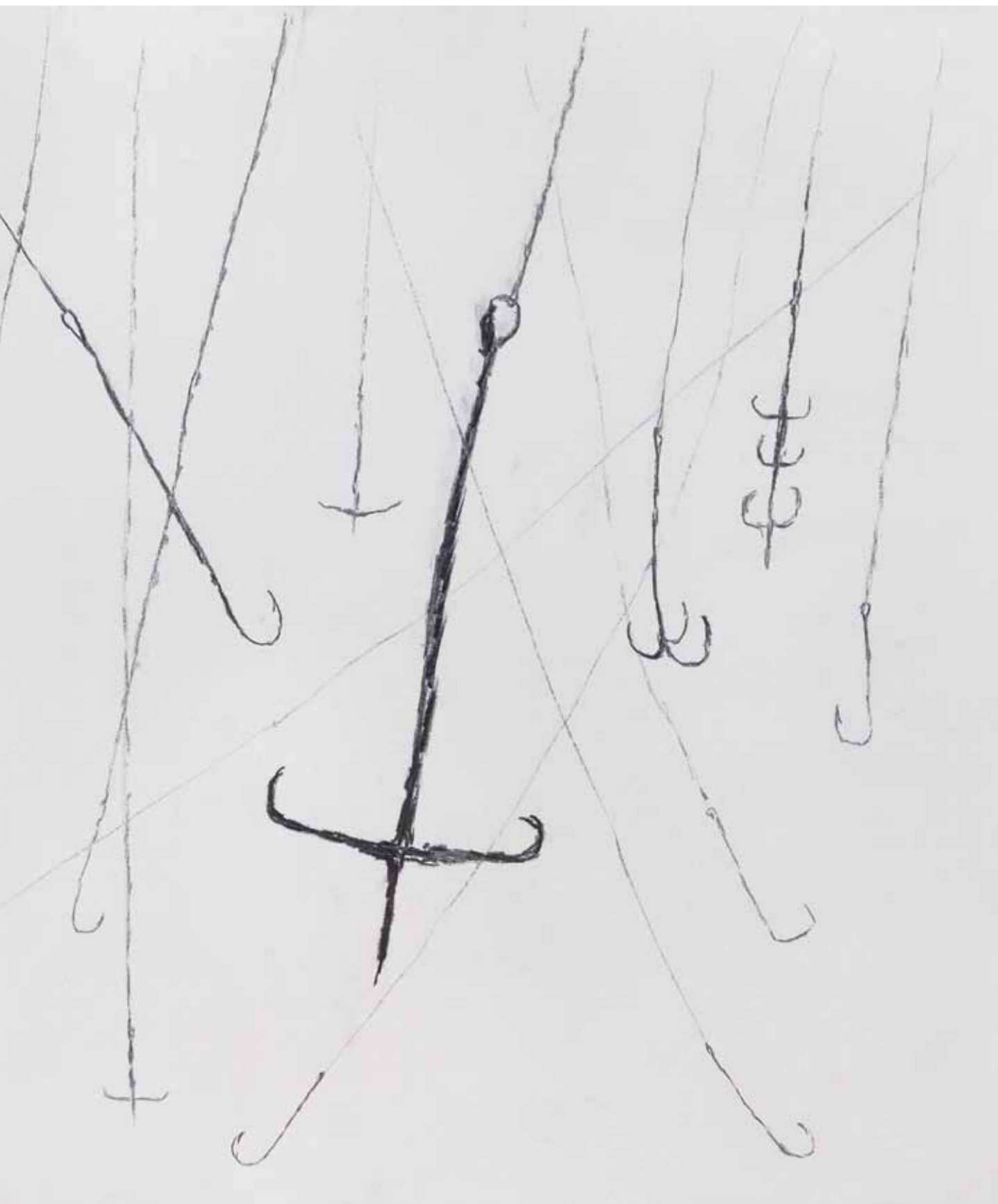
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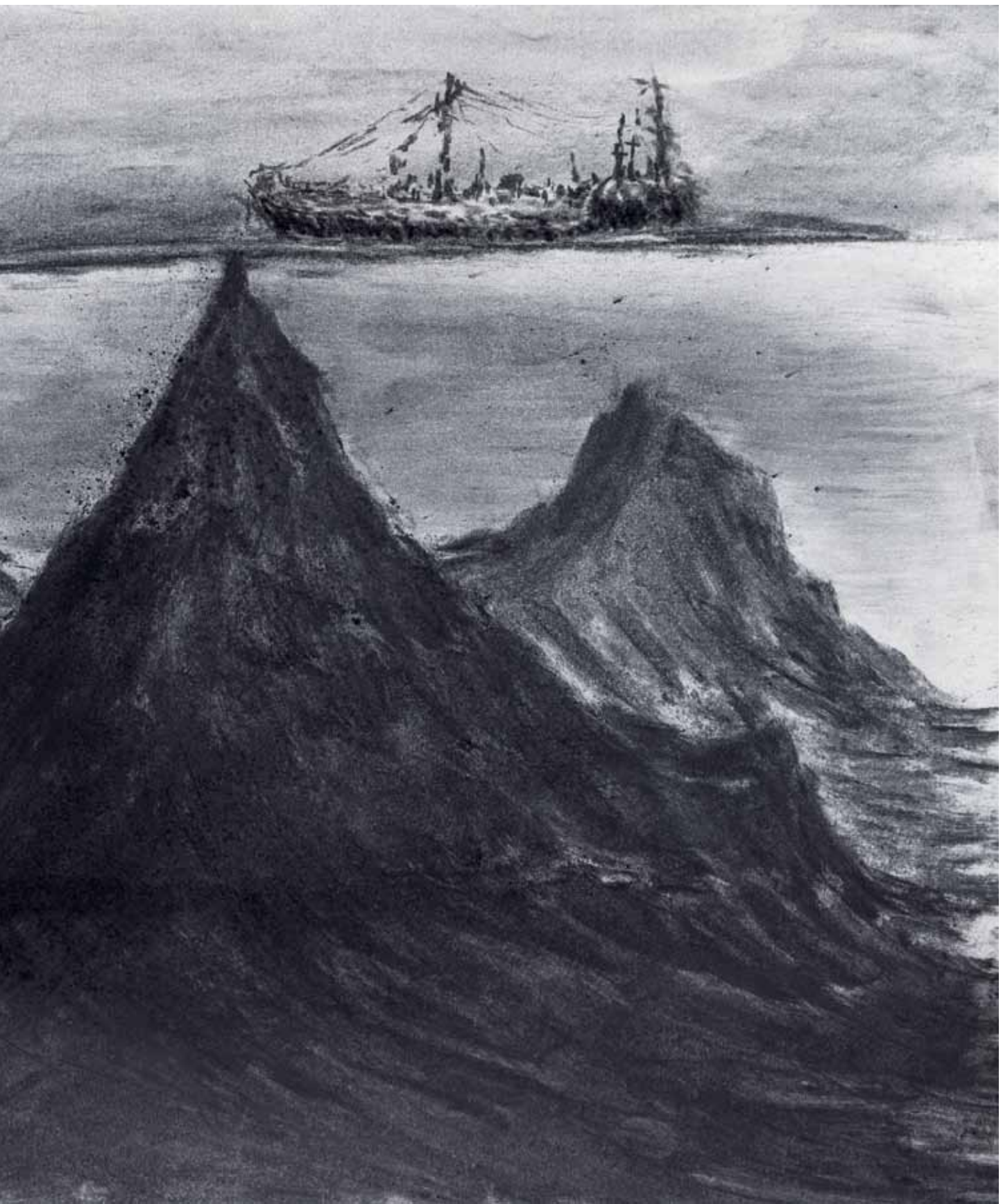


























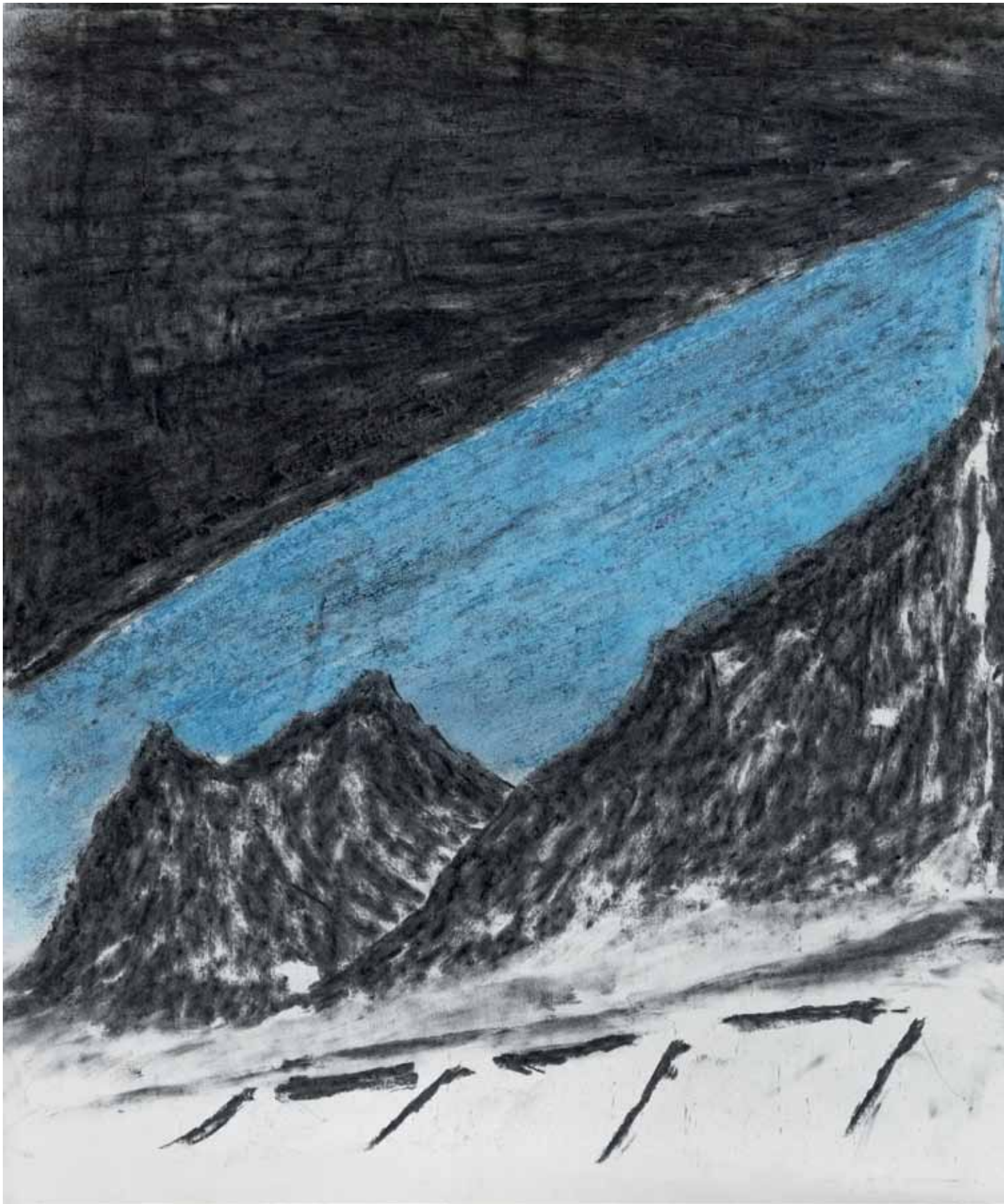




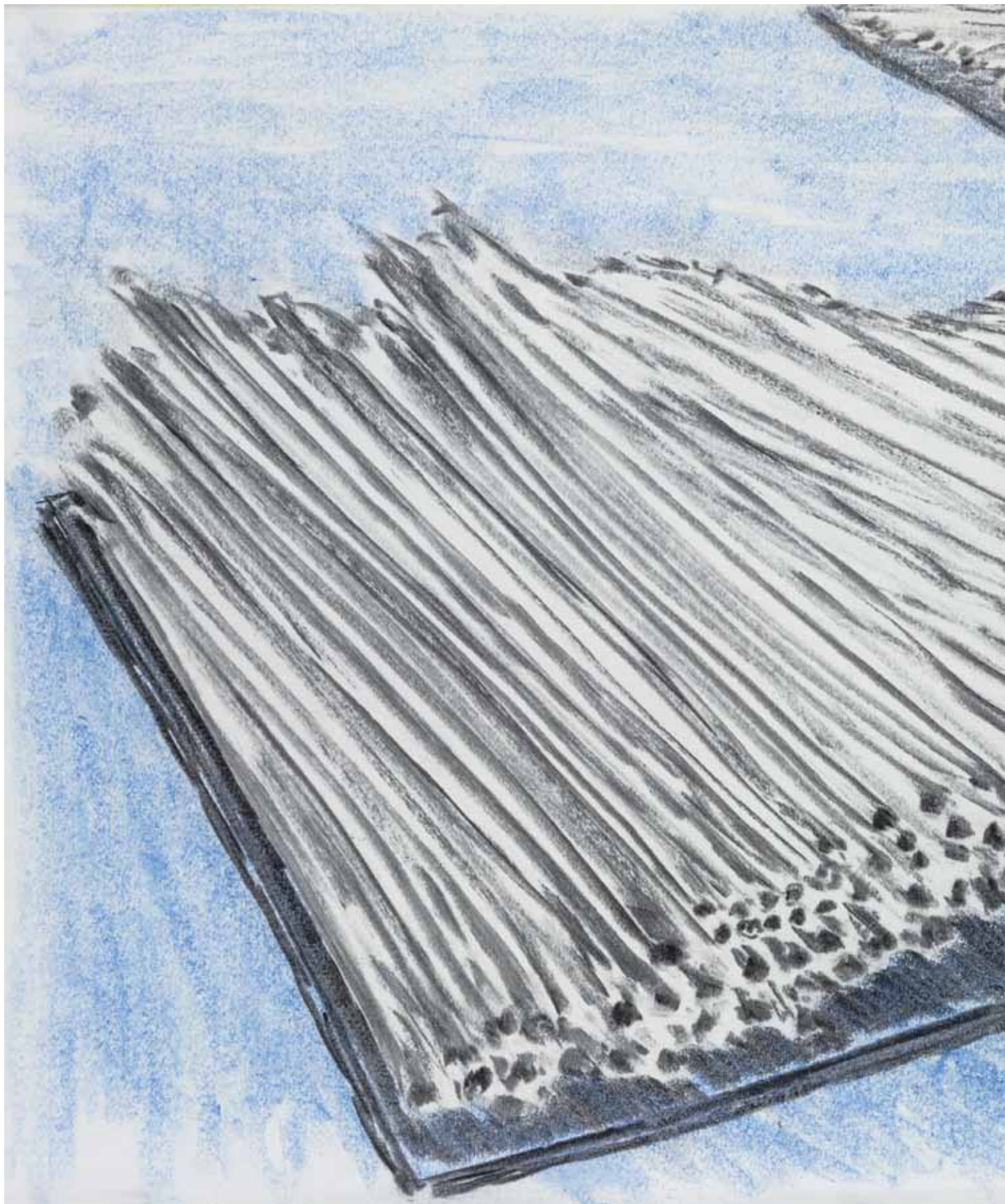






































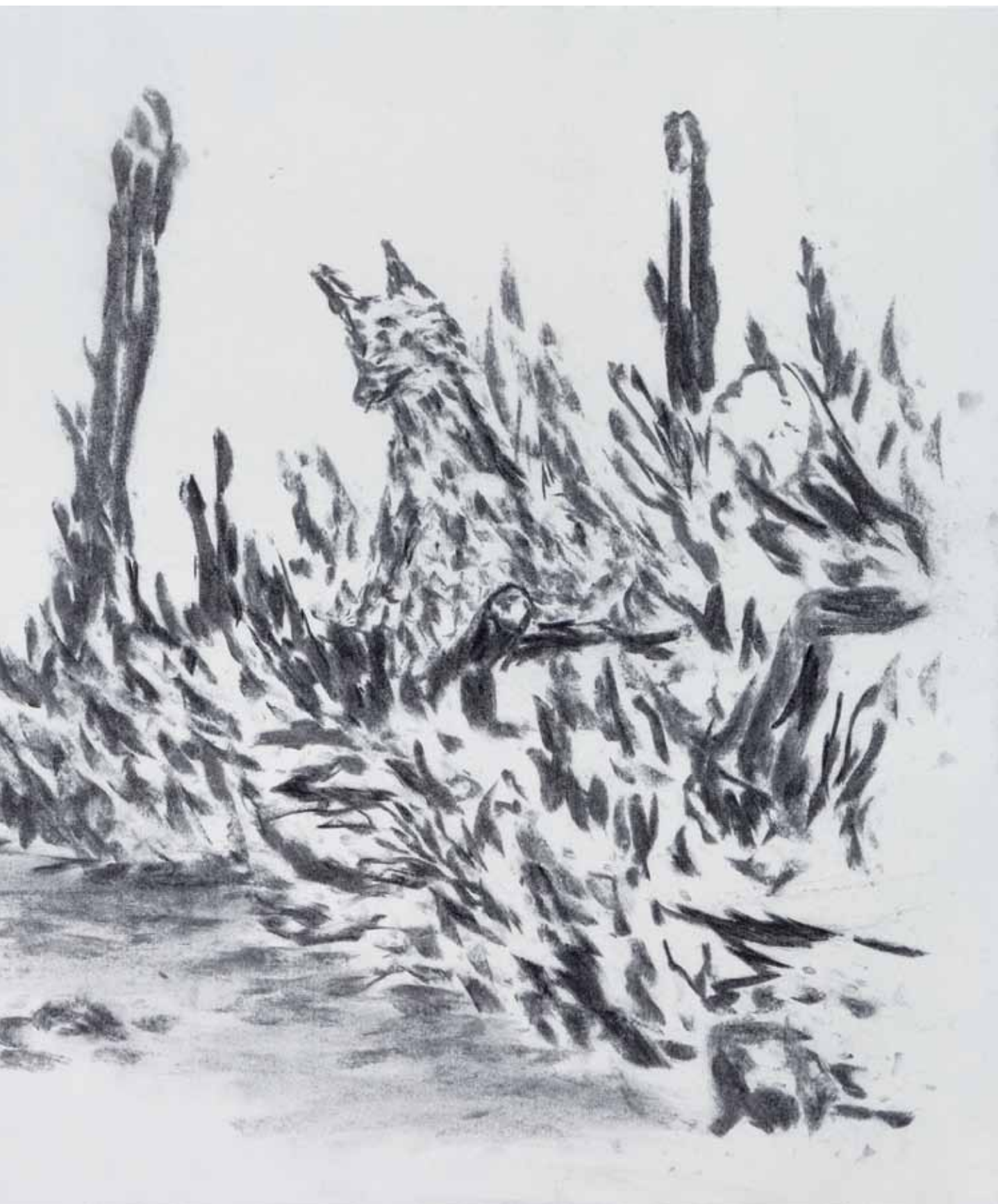


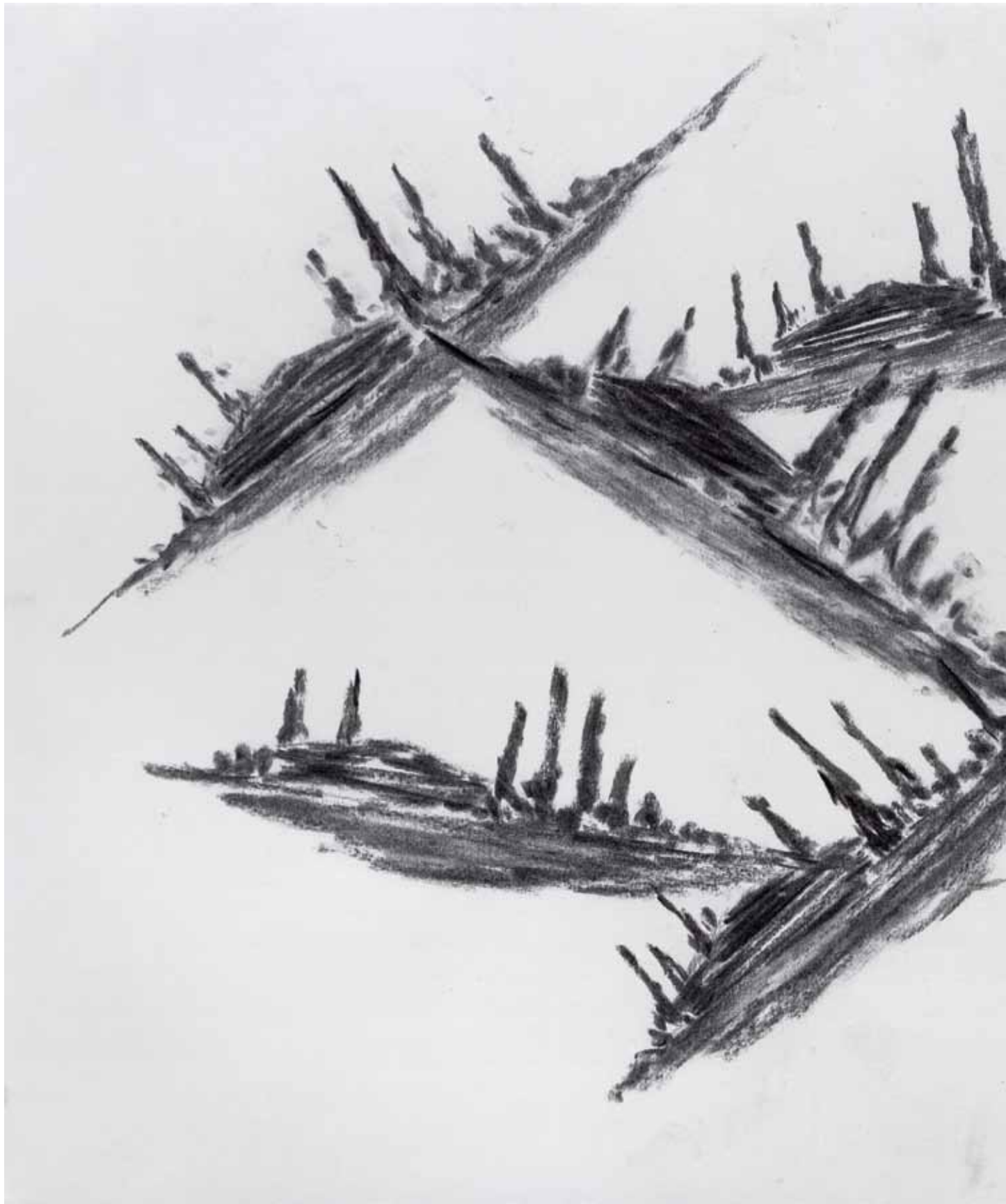






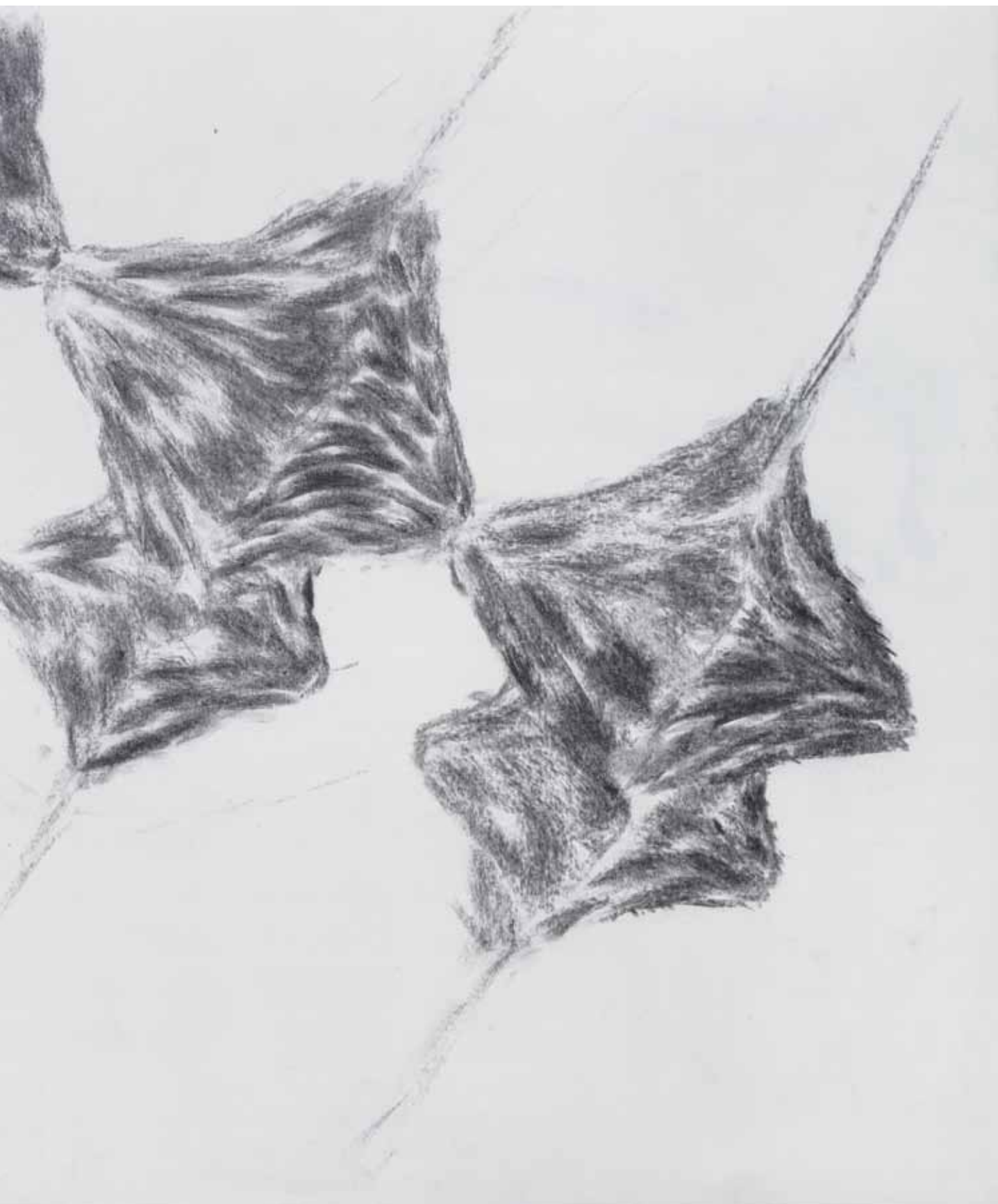




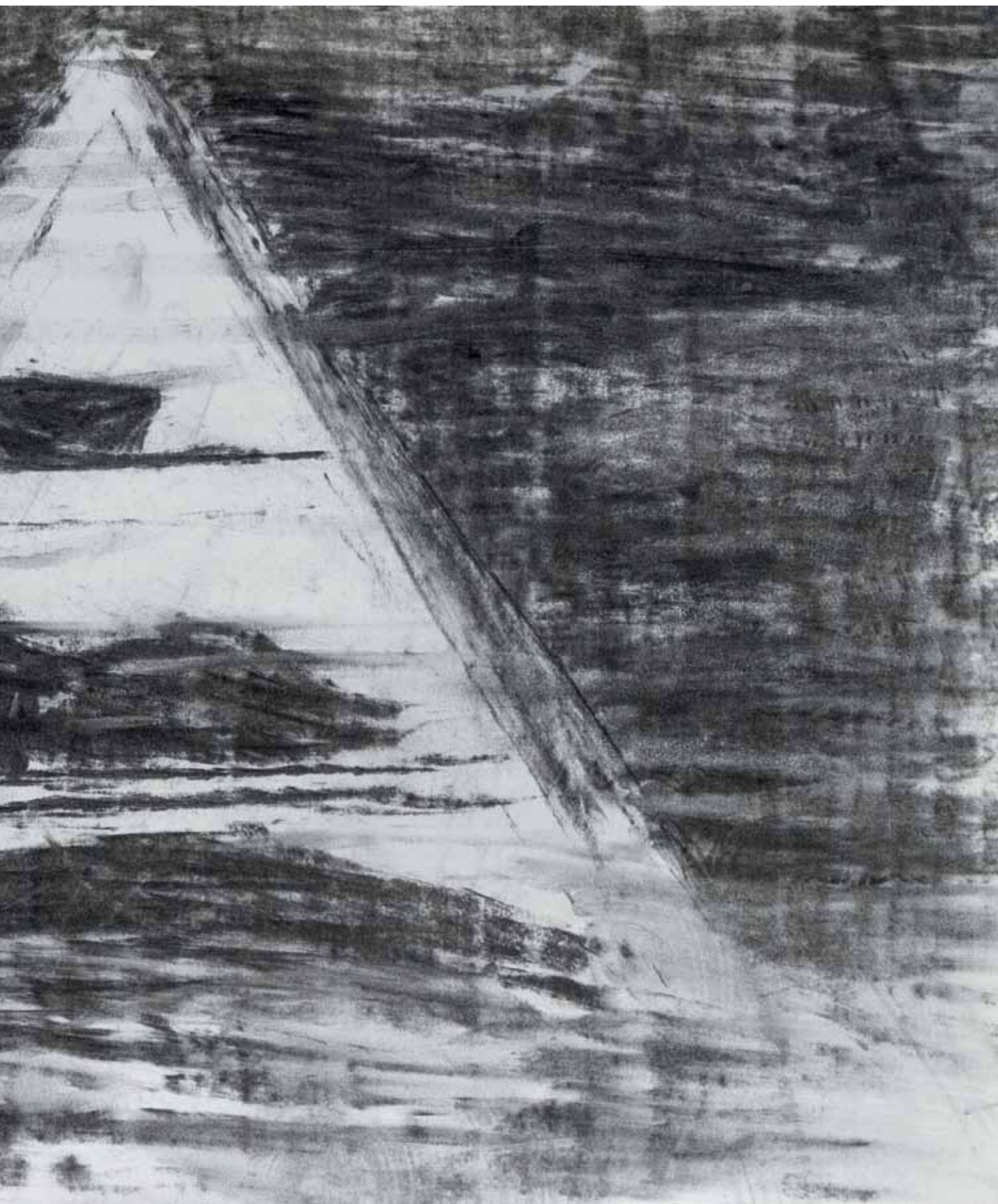


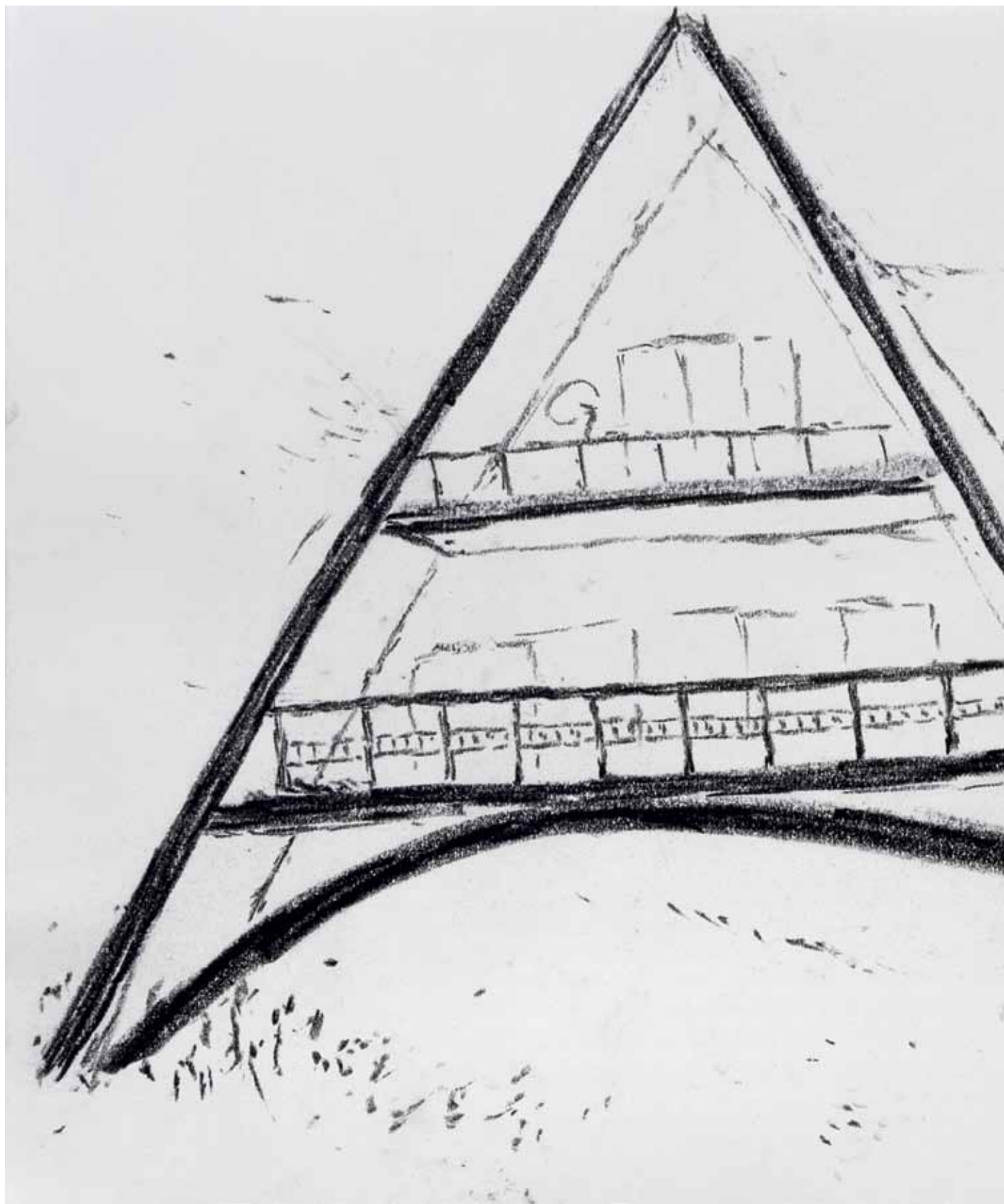






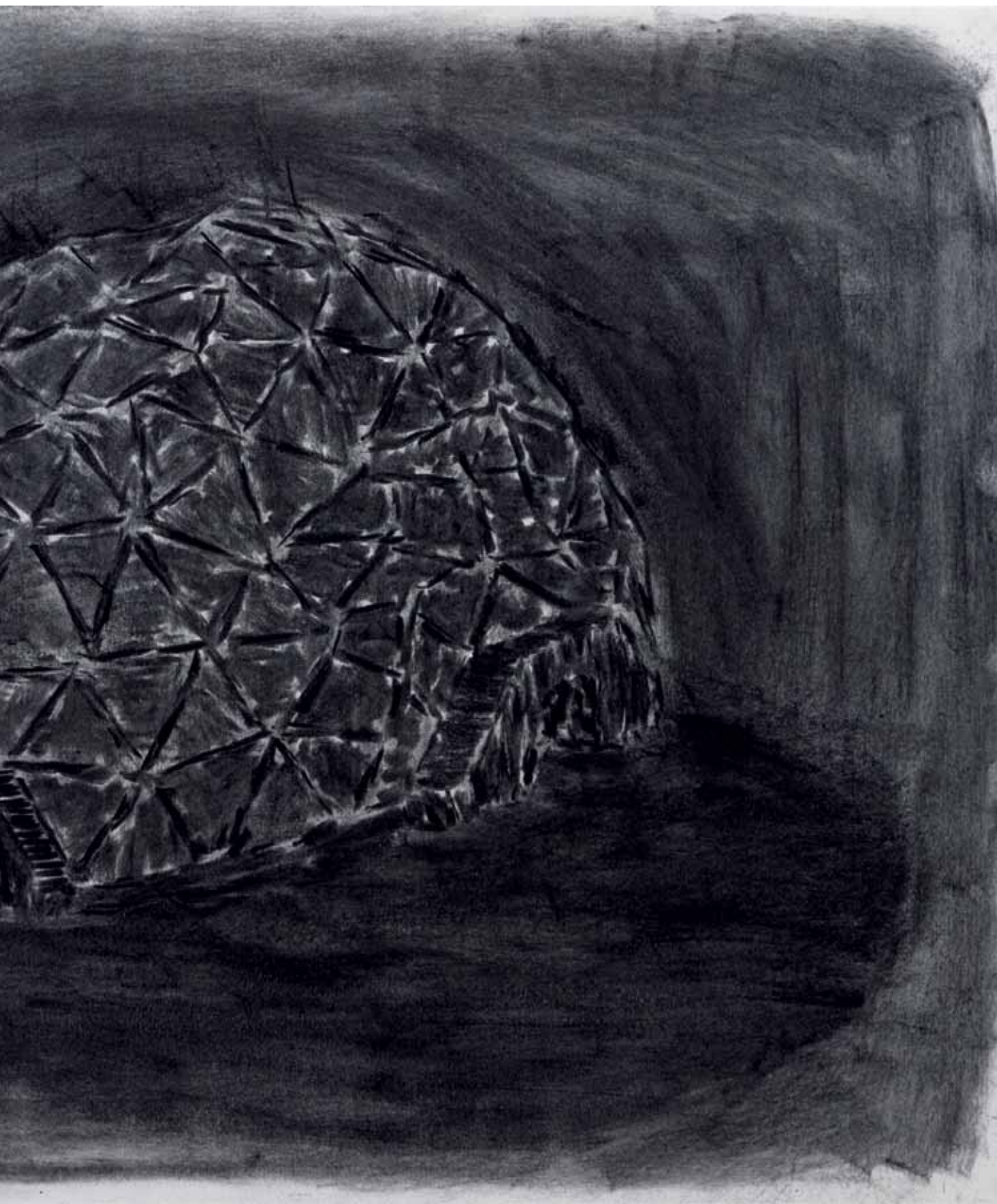


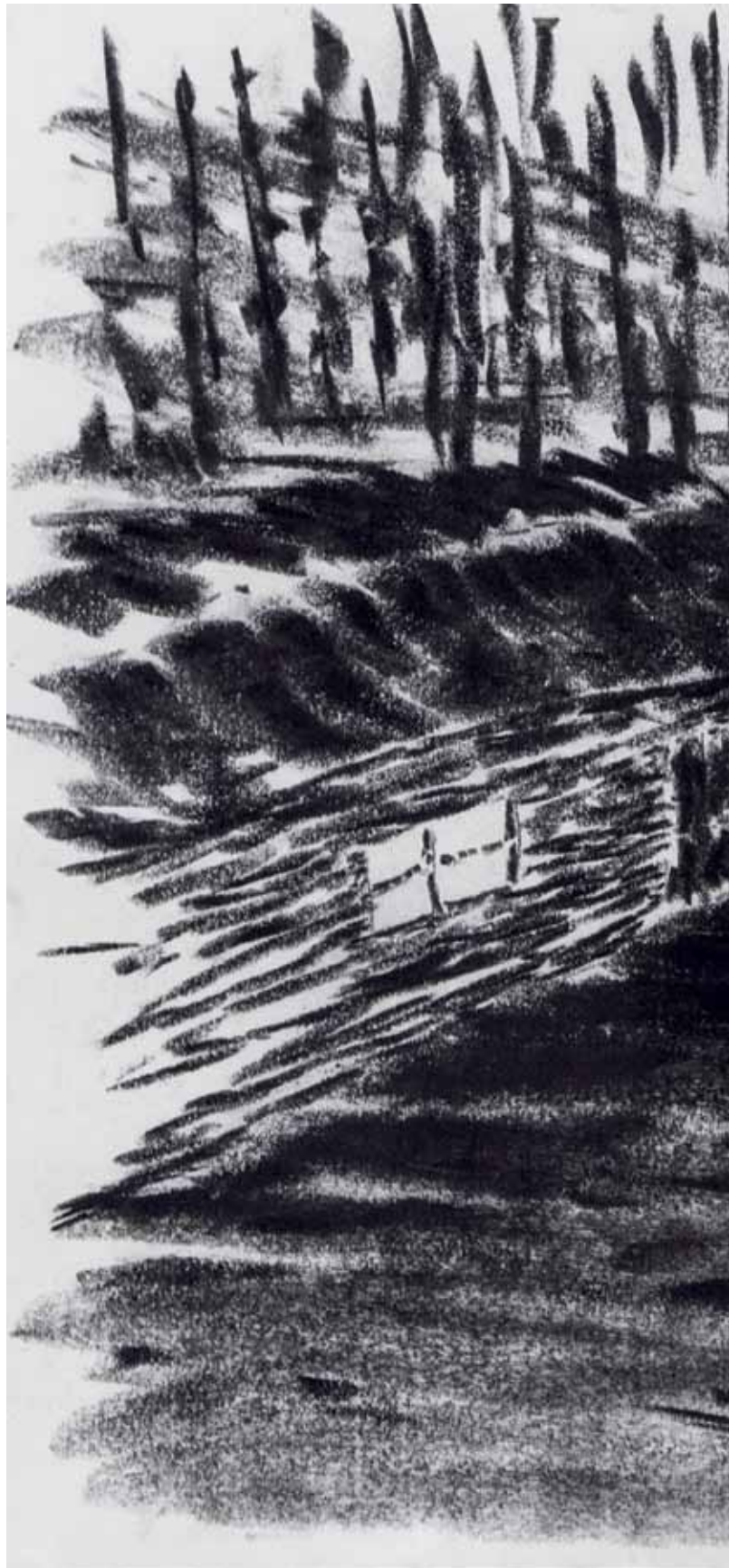


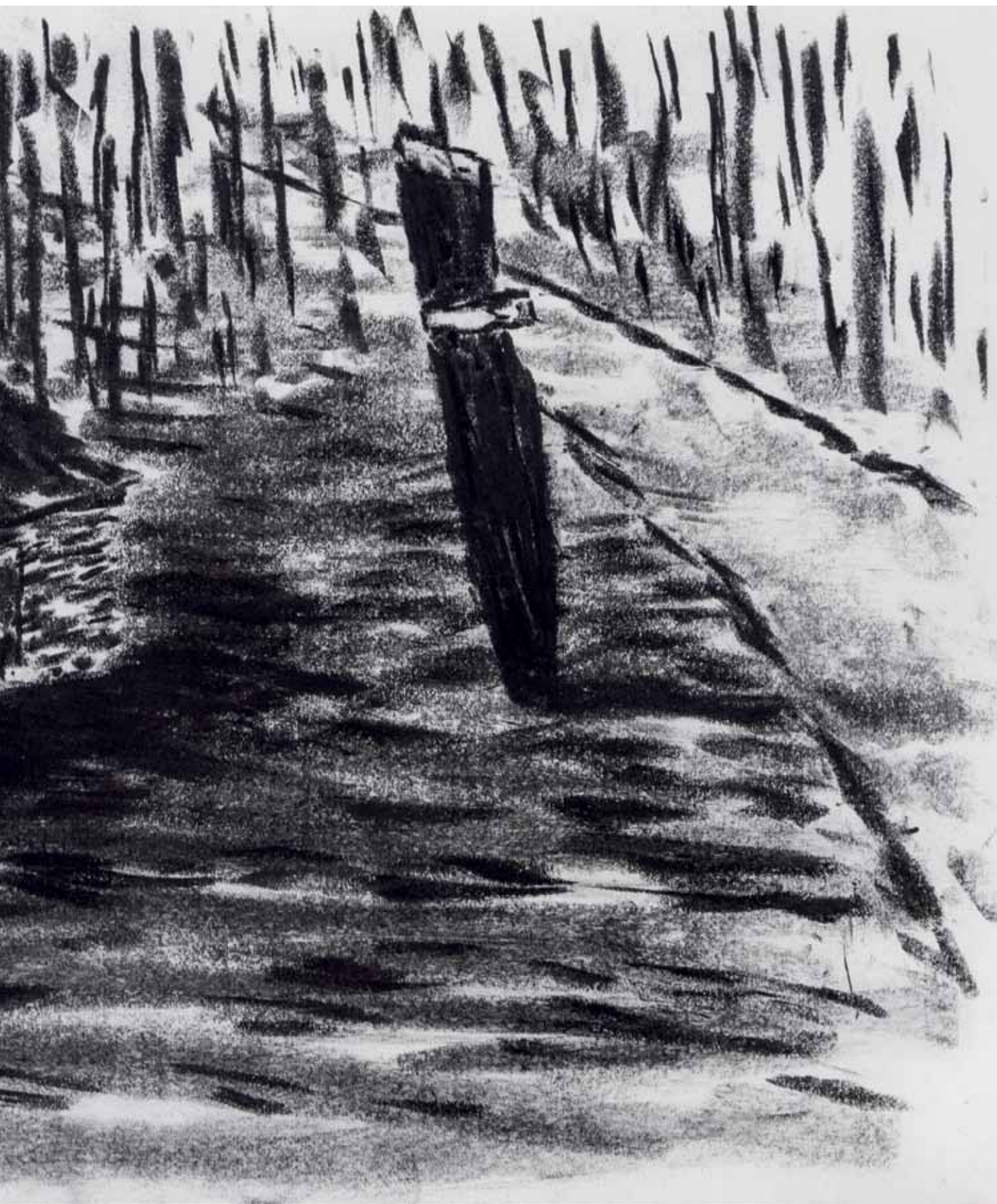








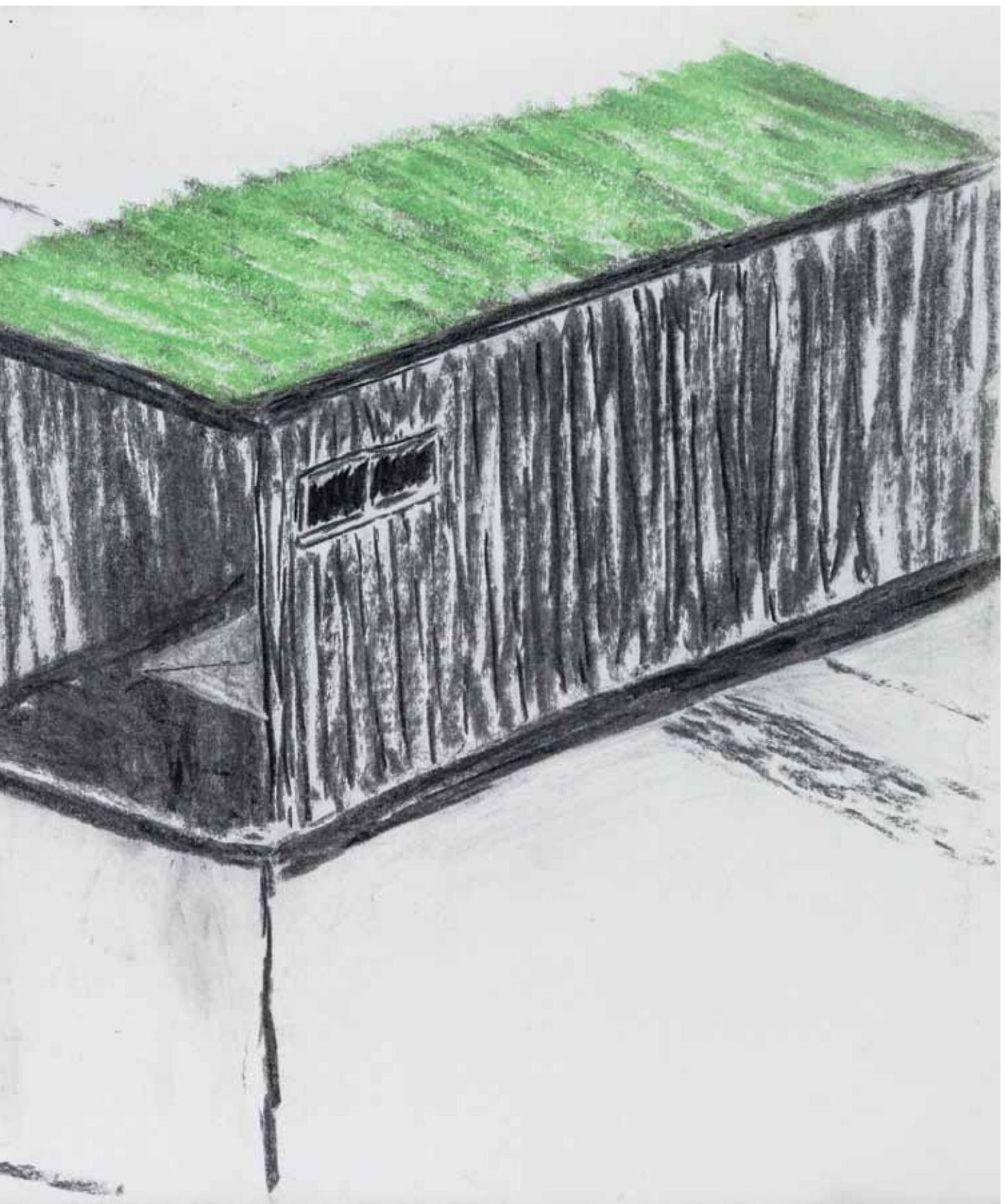
























































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COLOPHON

Matias Duville: Alaska

Published by The Drawing Center, NY

Edited by Brett Littman

Images © 2013 Matias Duville

Text © 2013 Wells Tower

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



MATIAS DUVILLE: ALASKA

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