

David Mackintosh

The Curtain.



Curtain Call  
David Mackintosh

listen













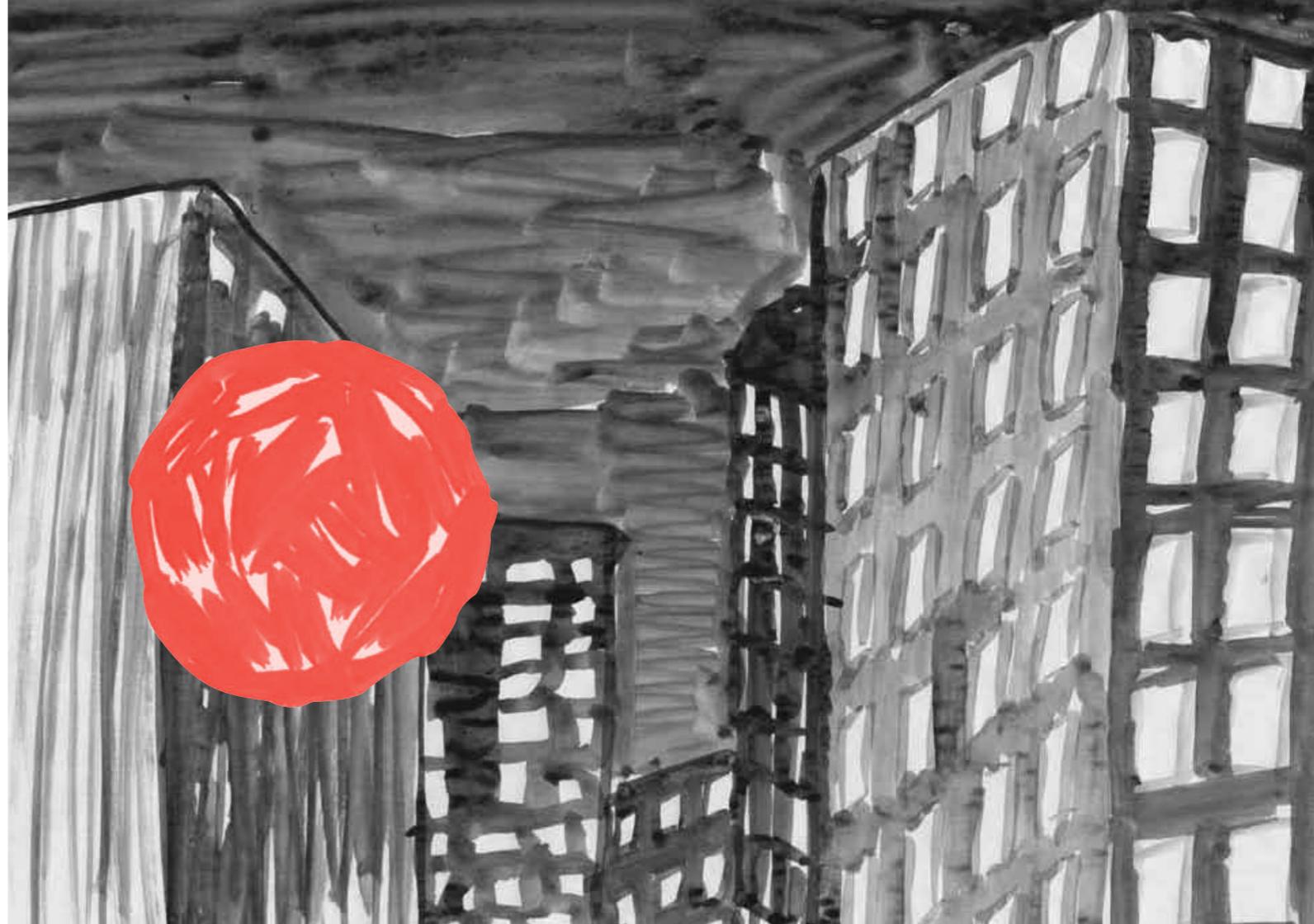


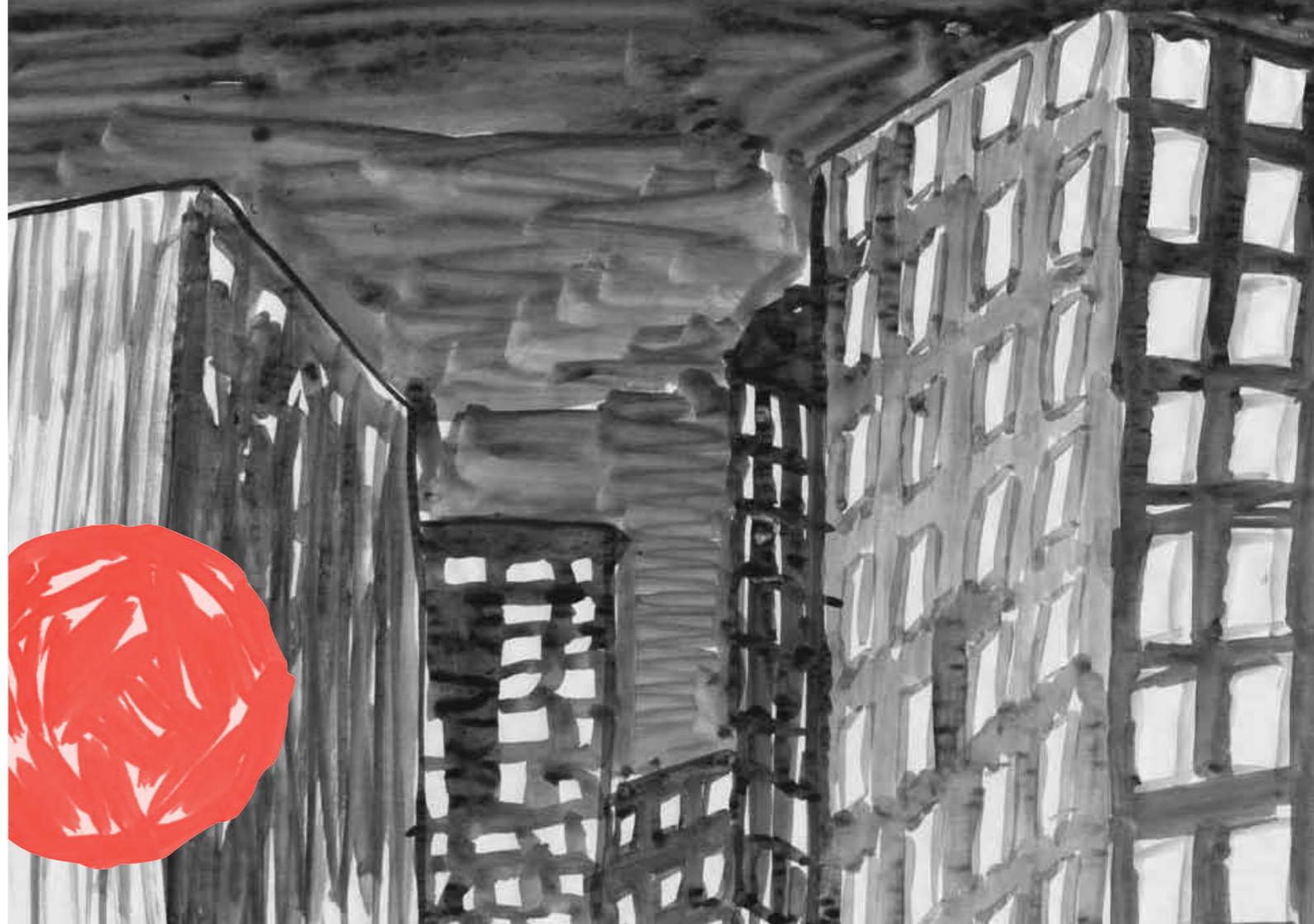
















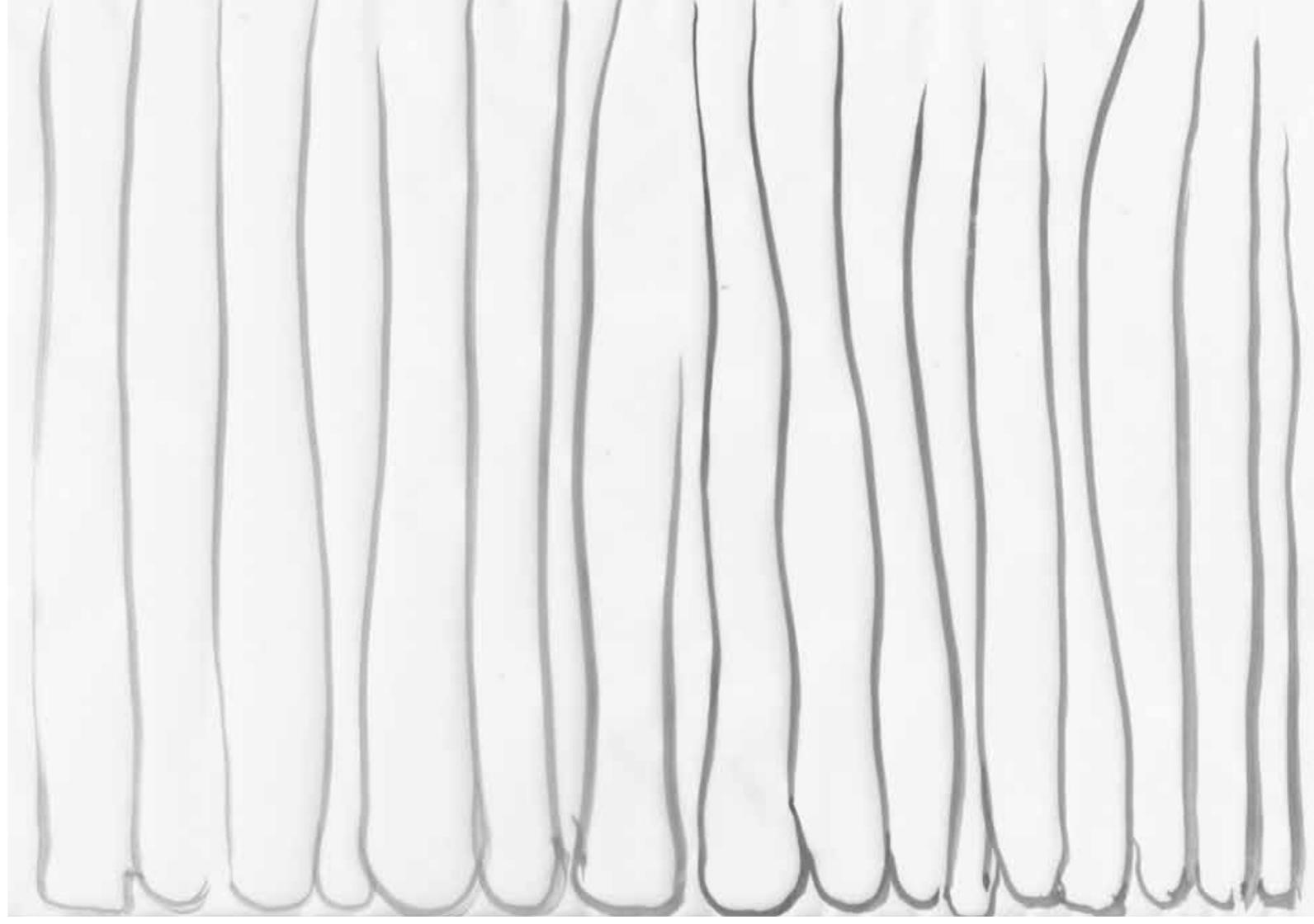
are you  
a wake?









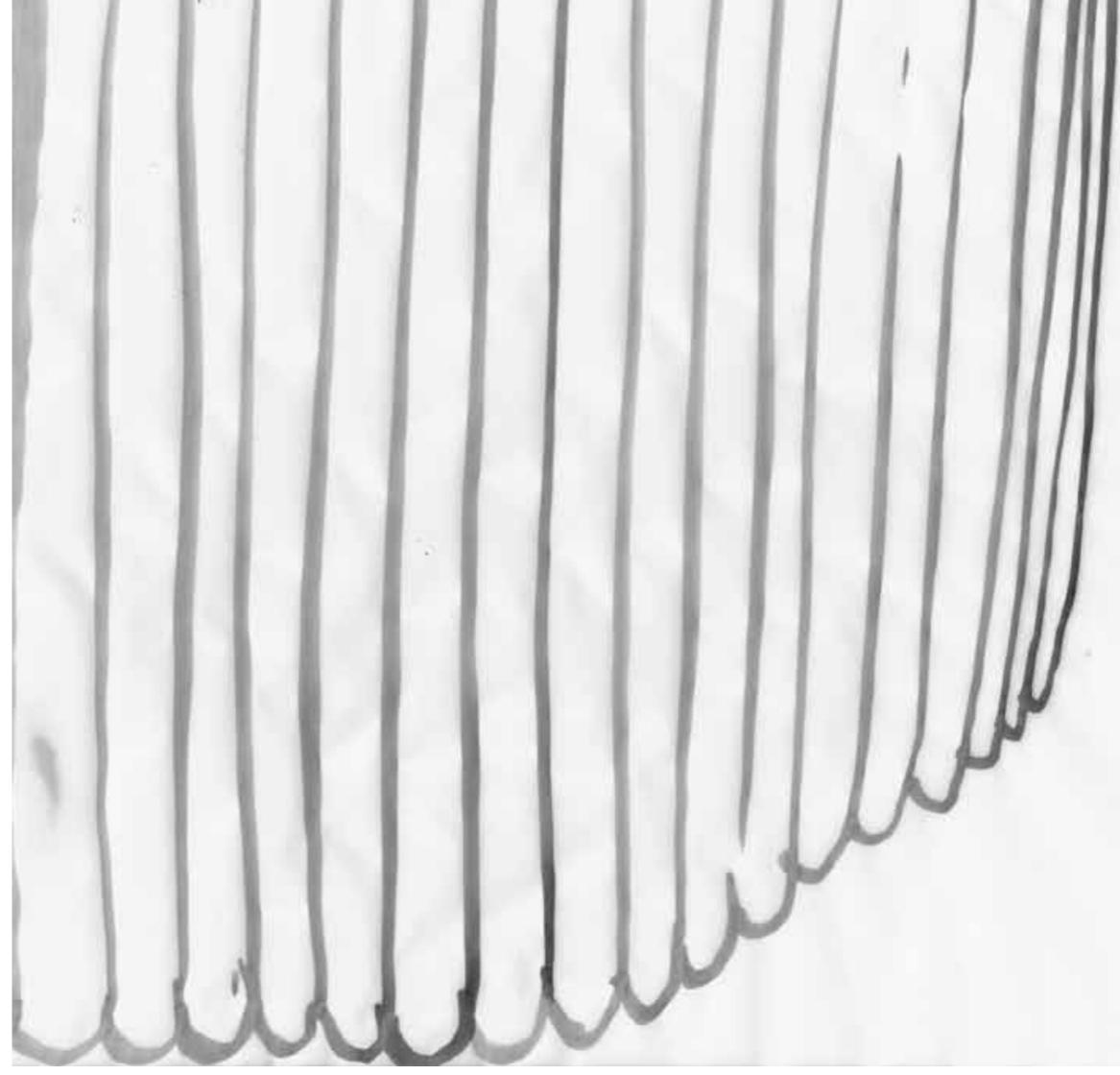


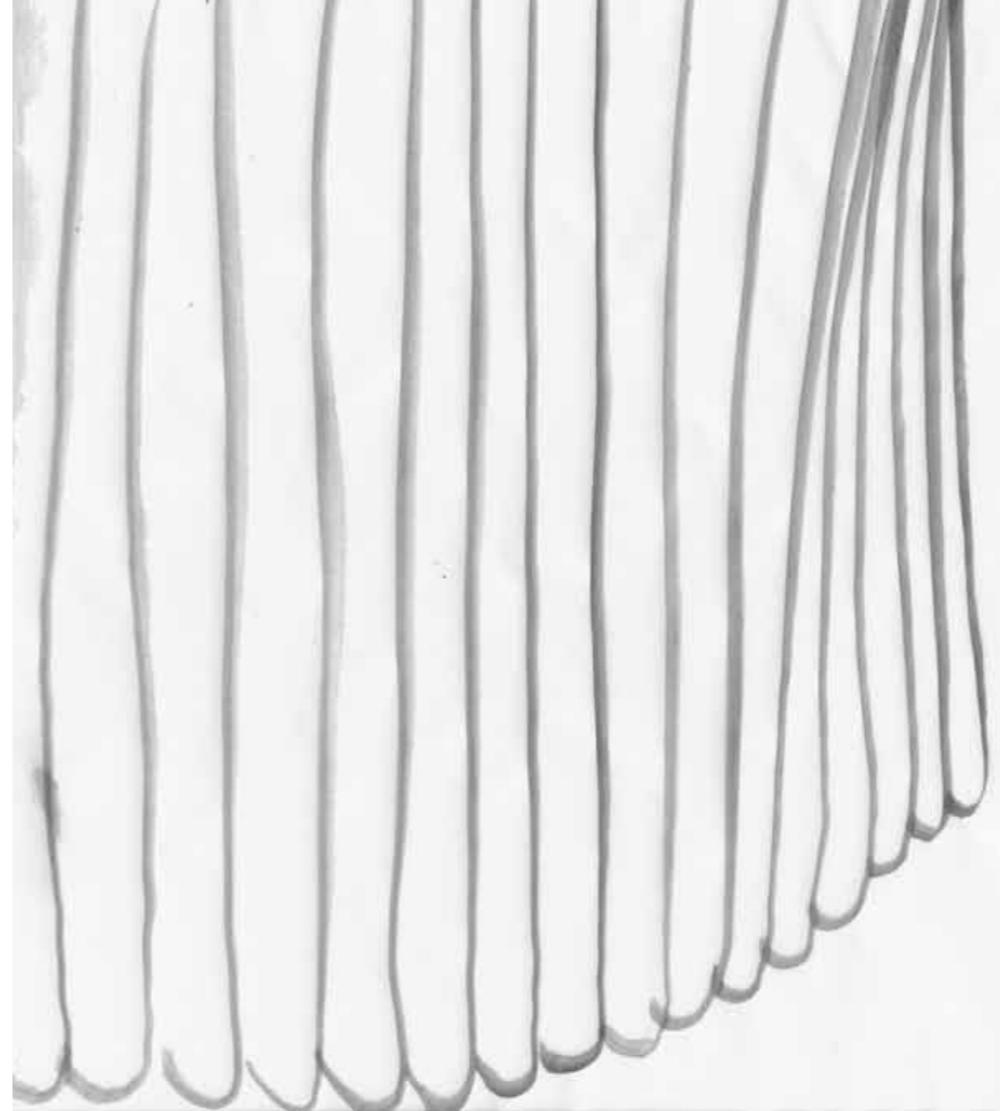


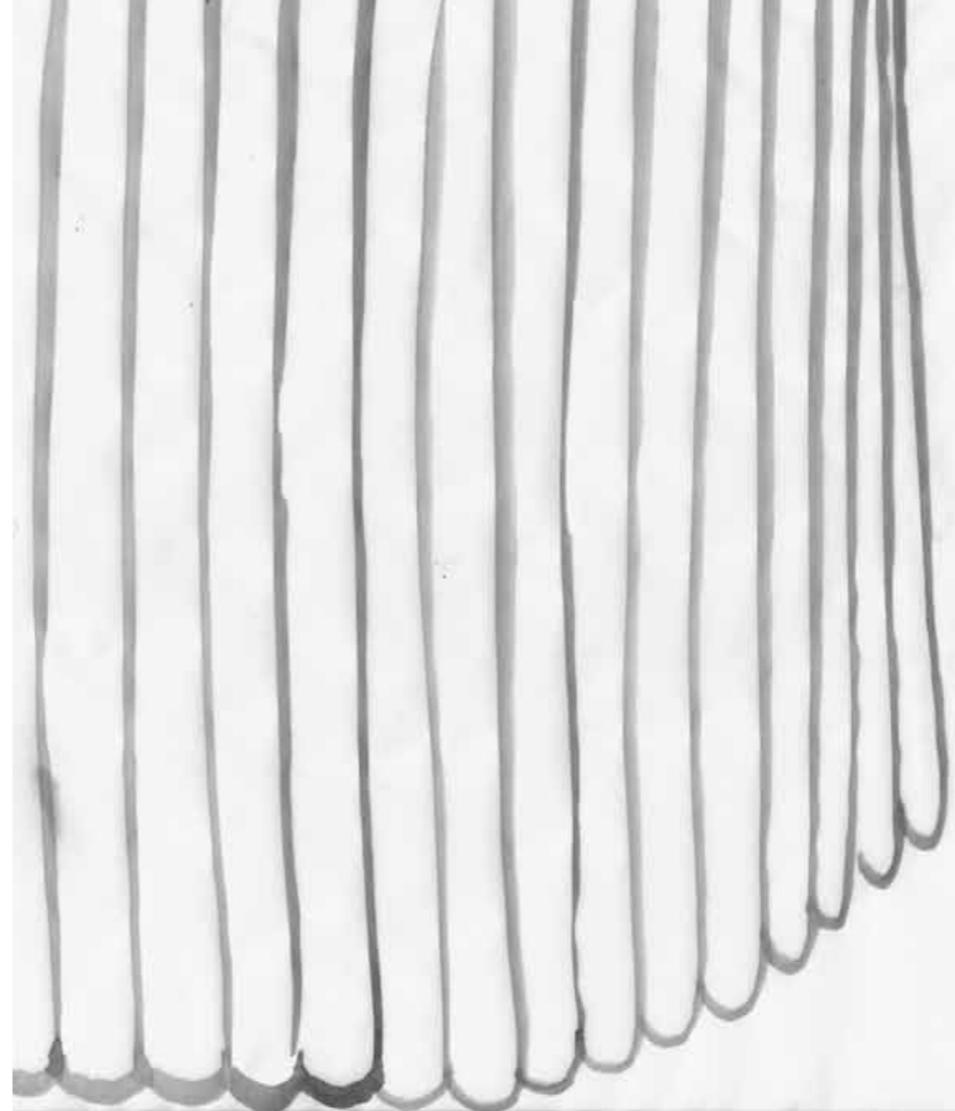


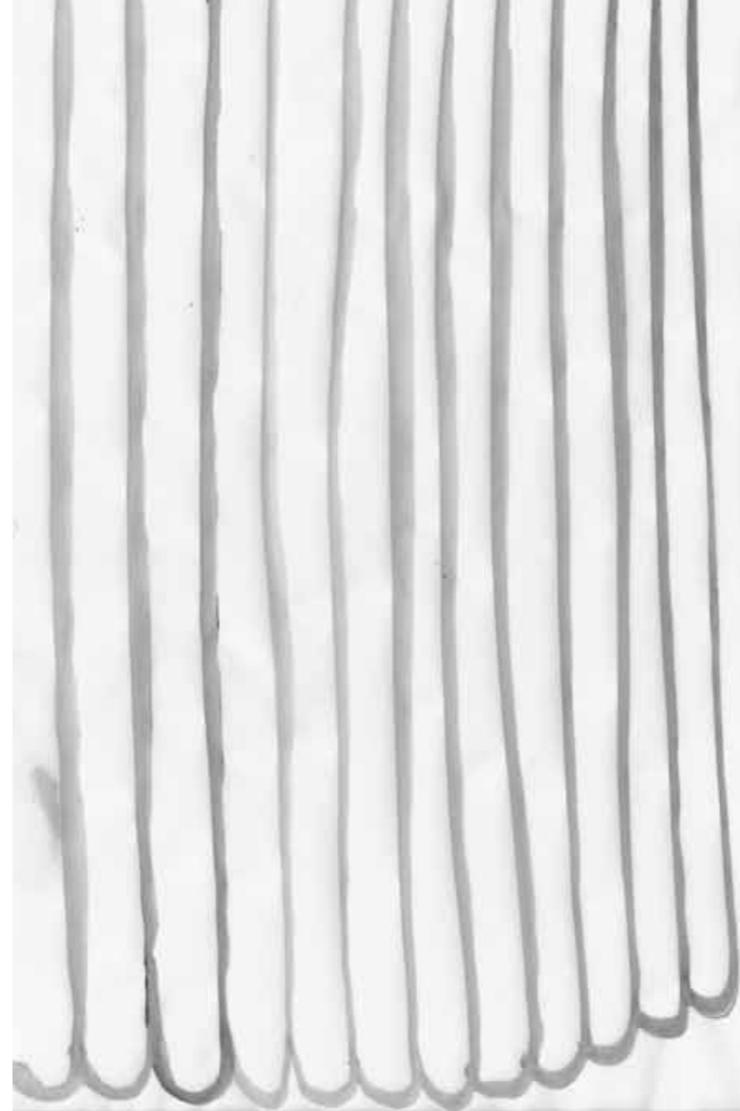


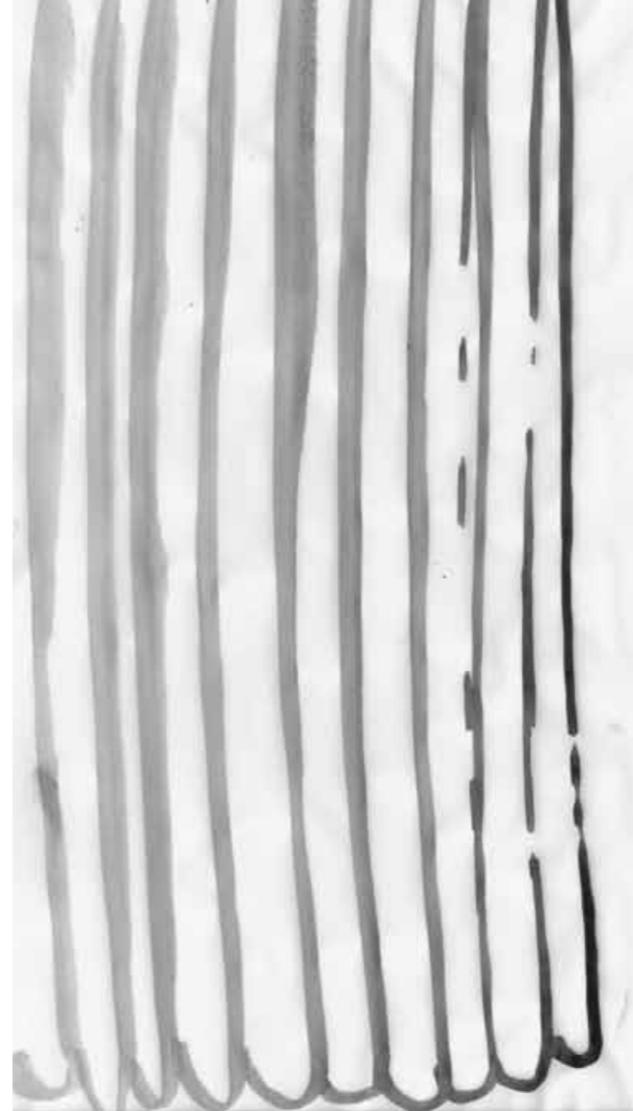






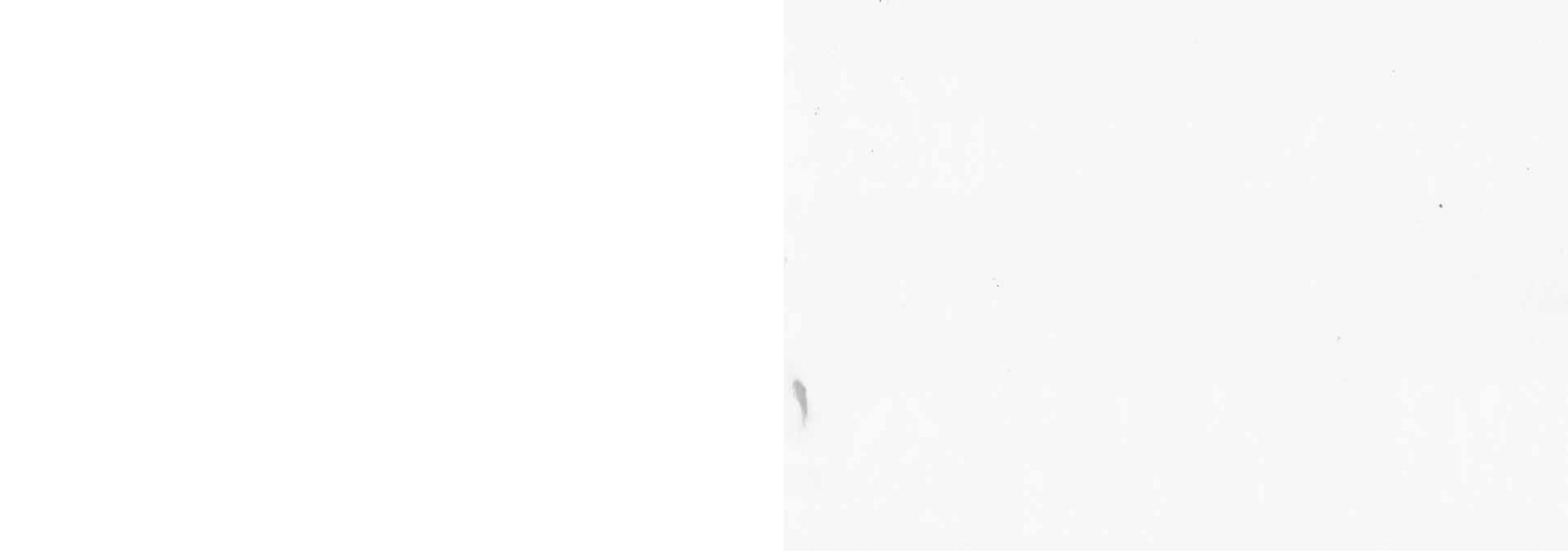










































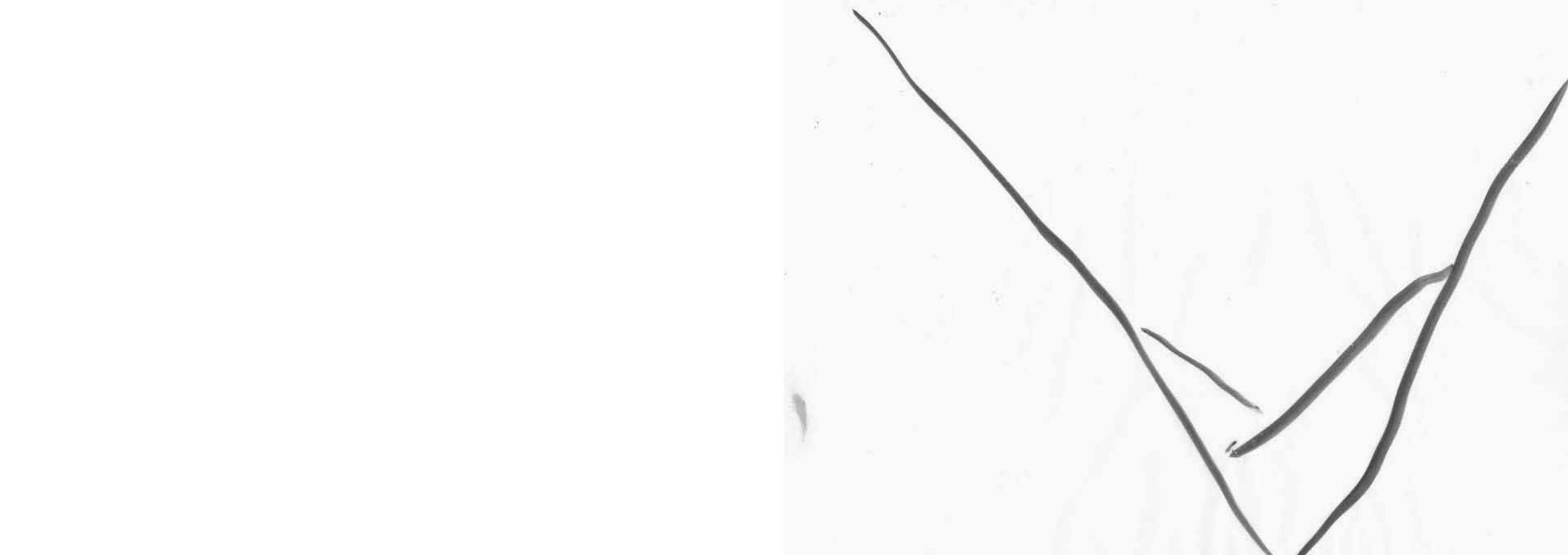


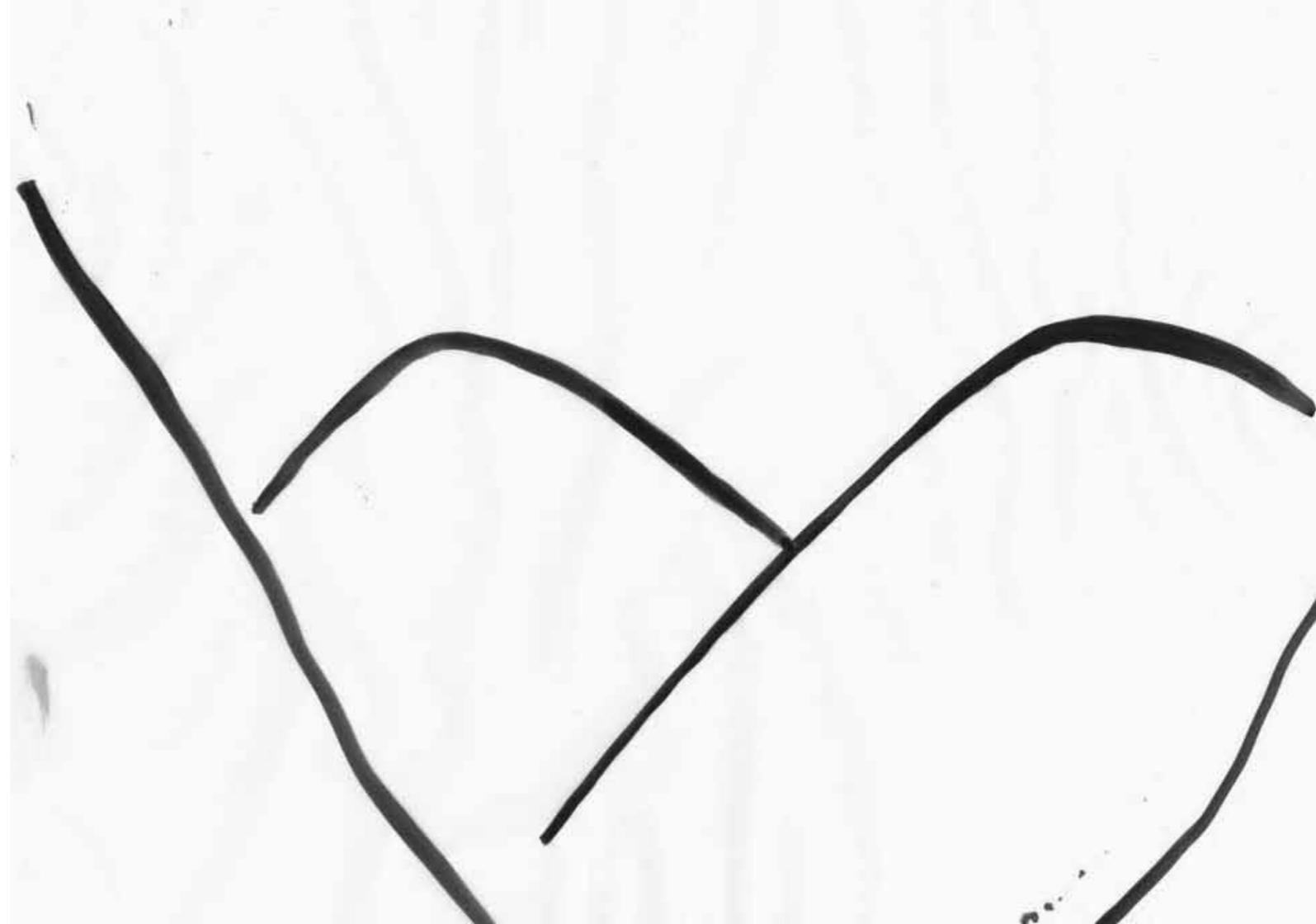




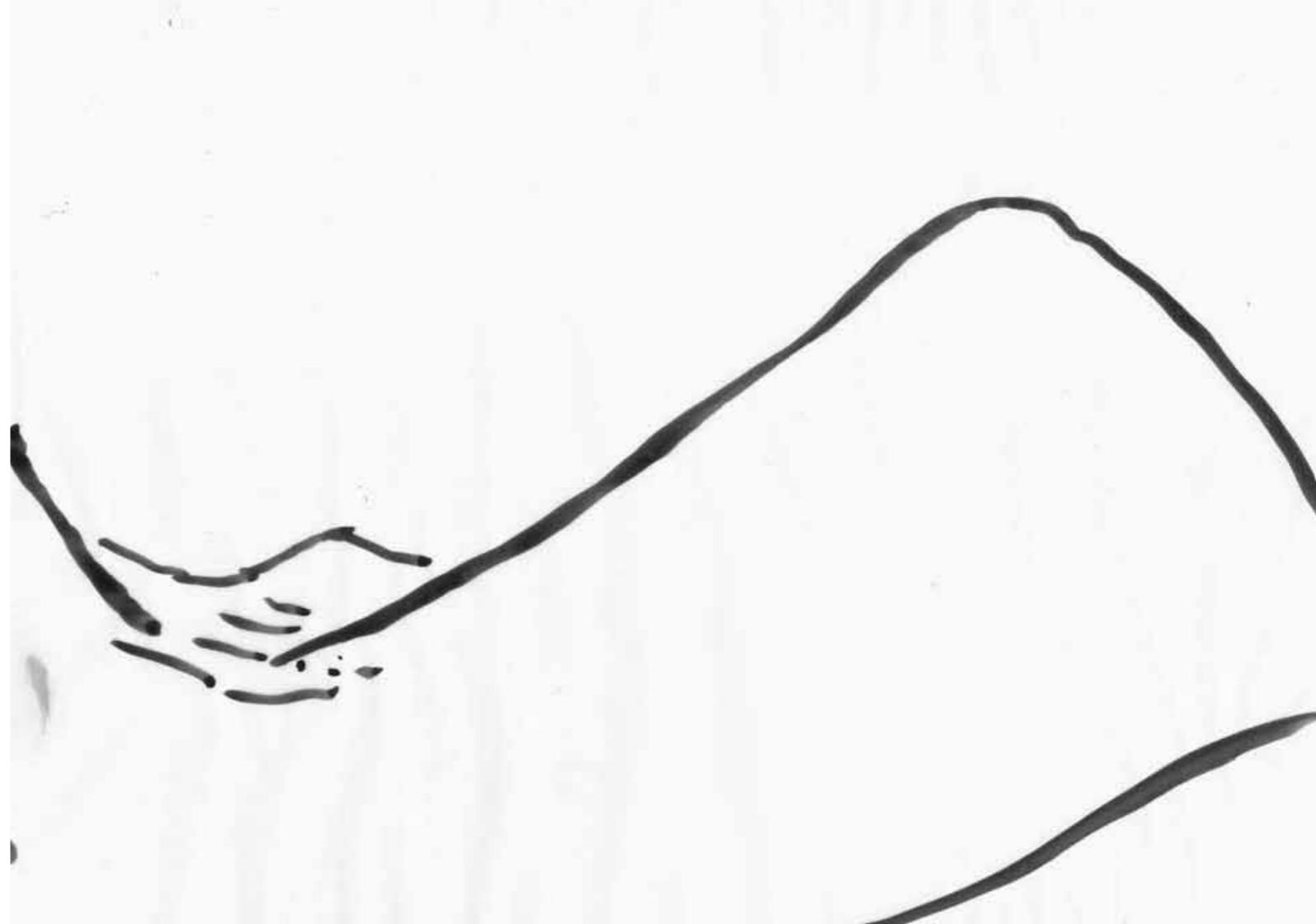


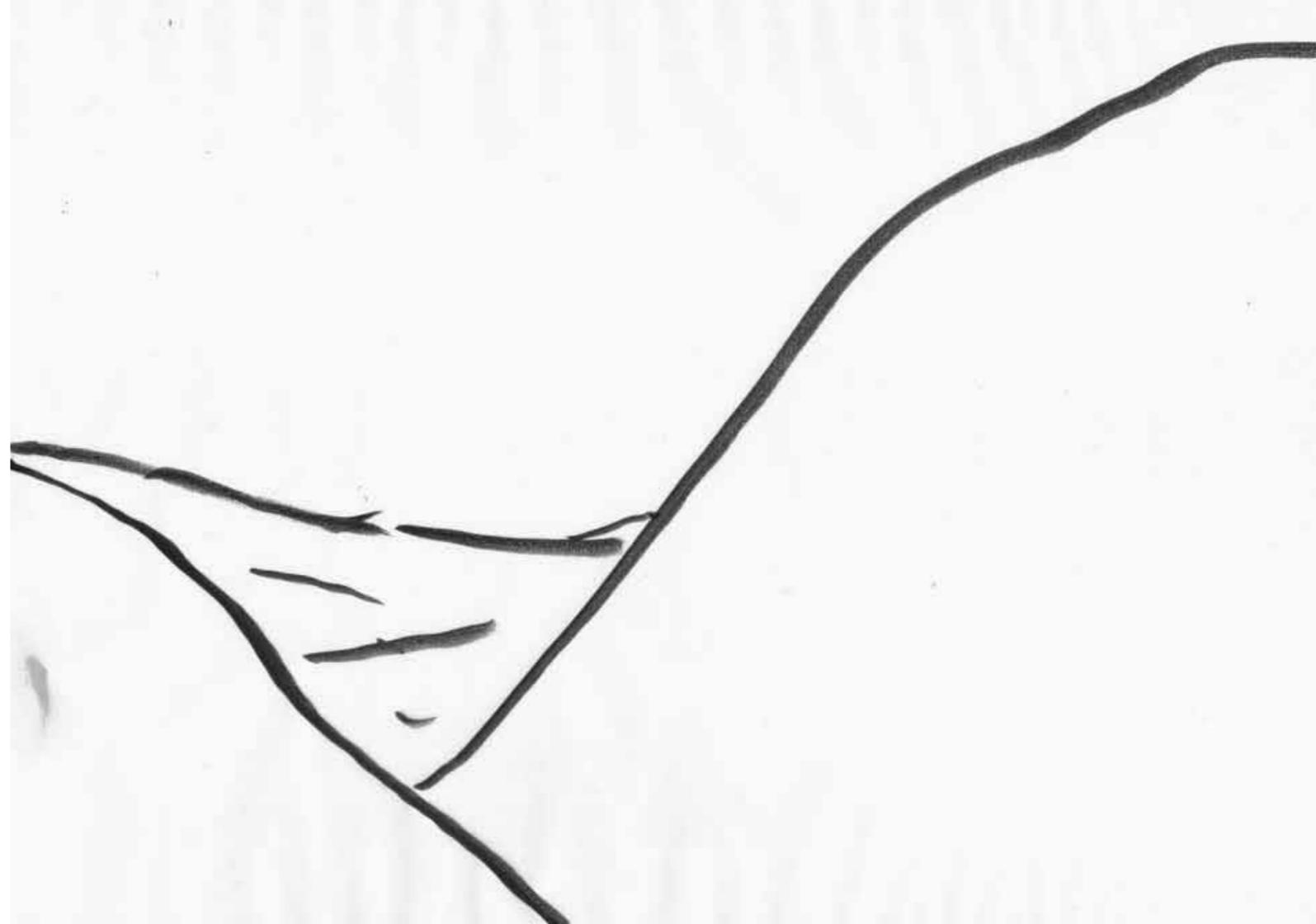


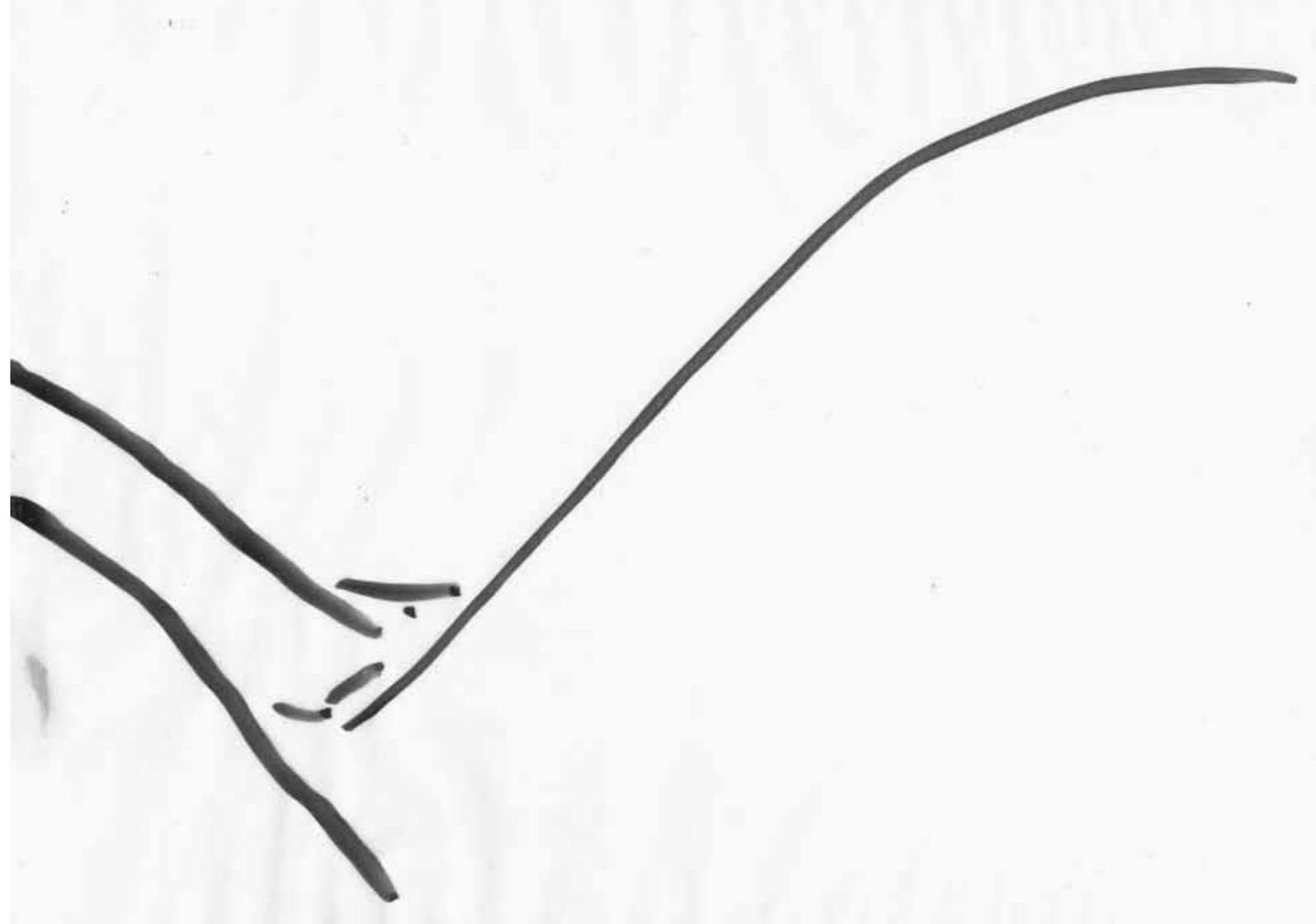


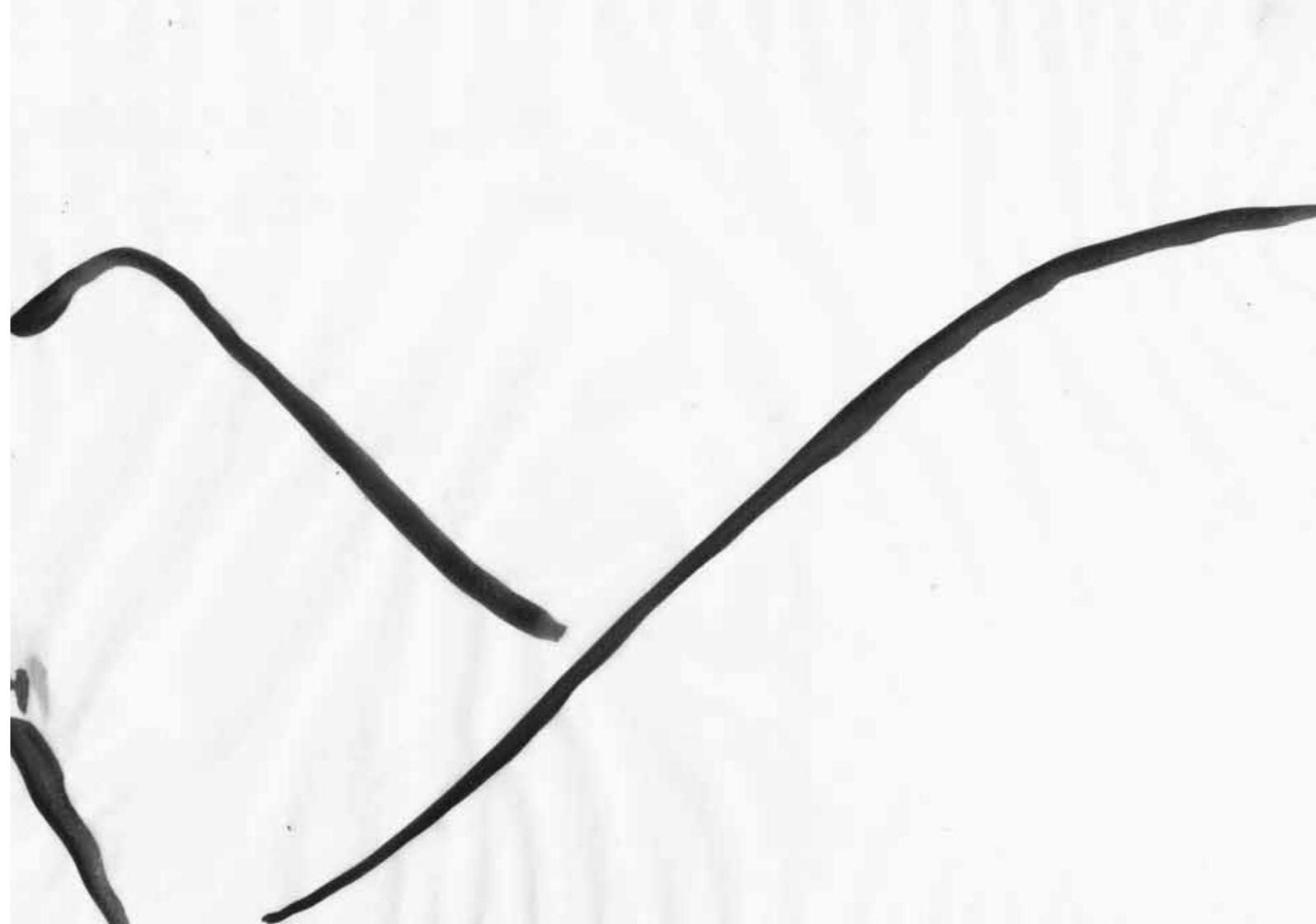


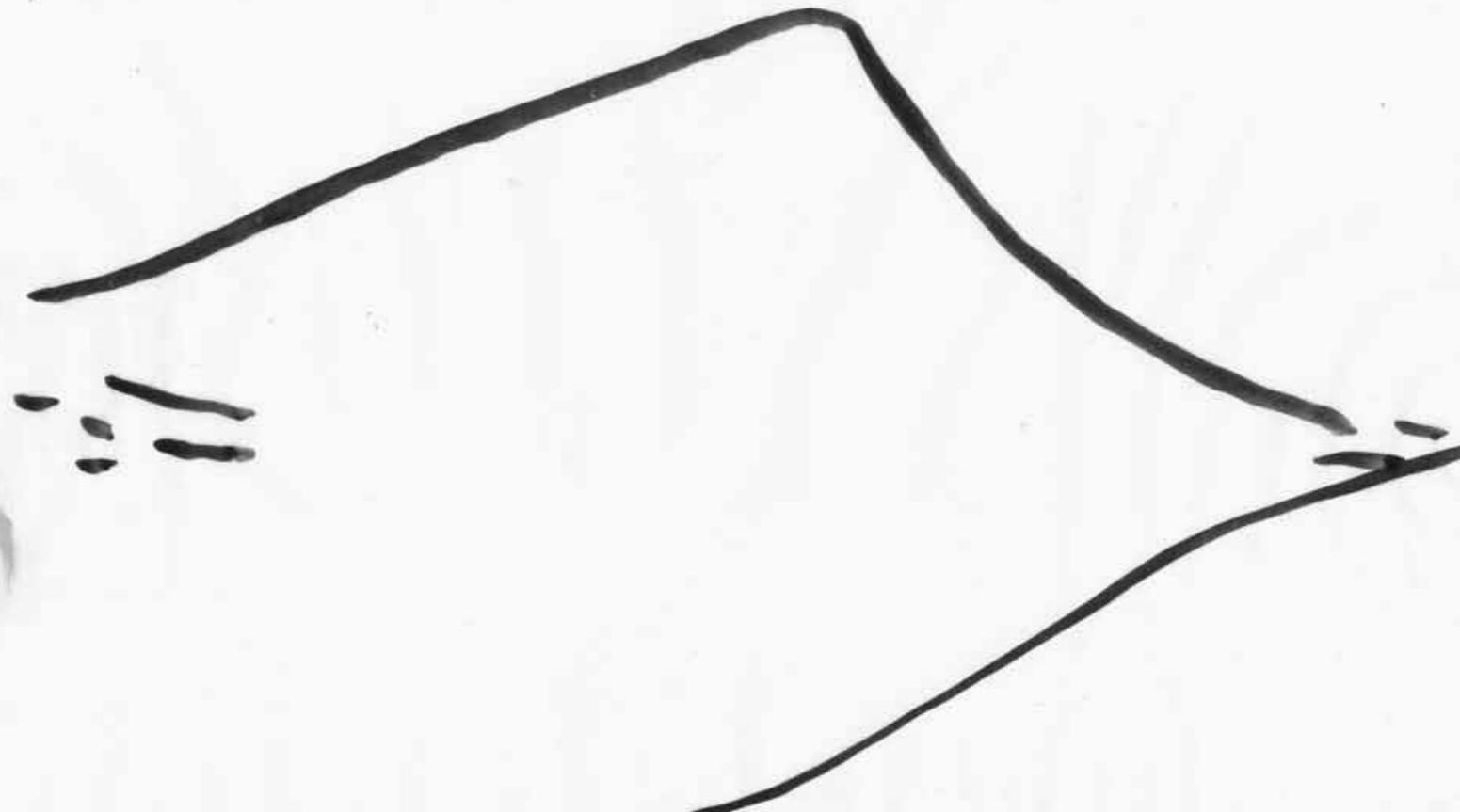




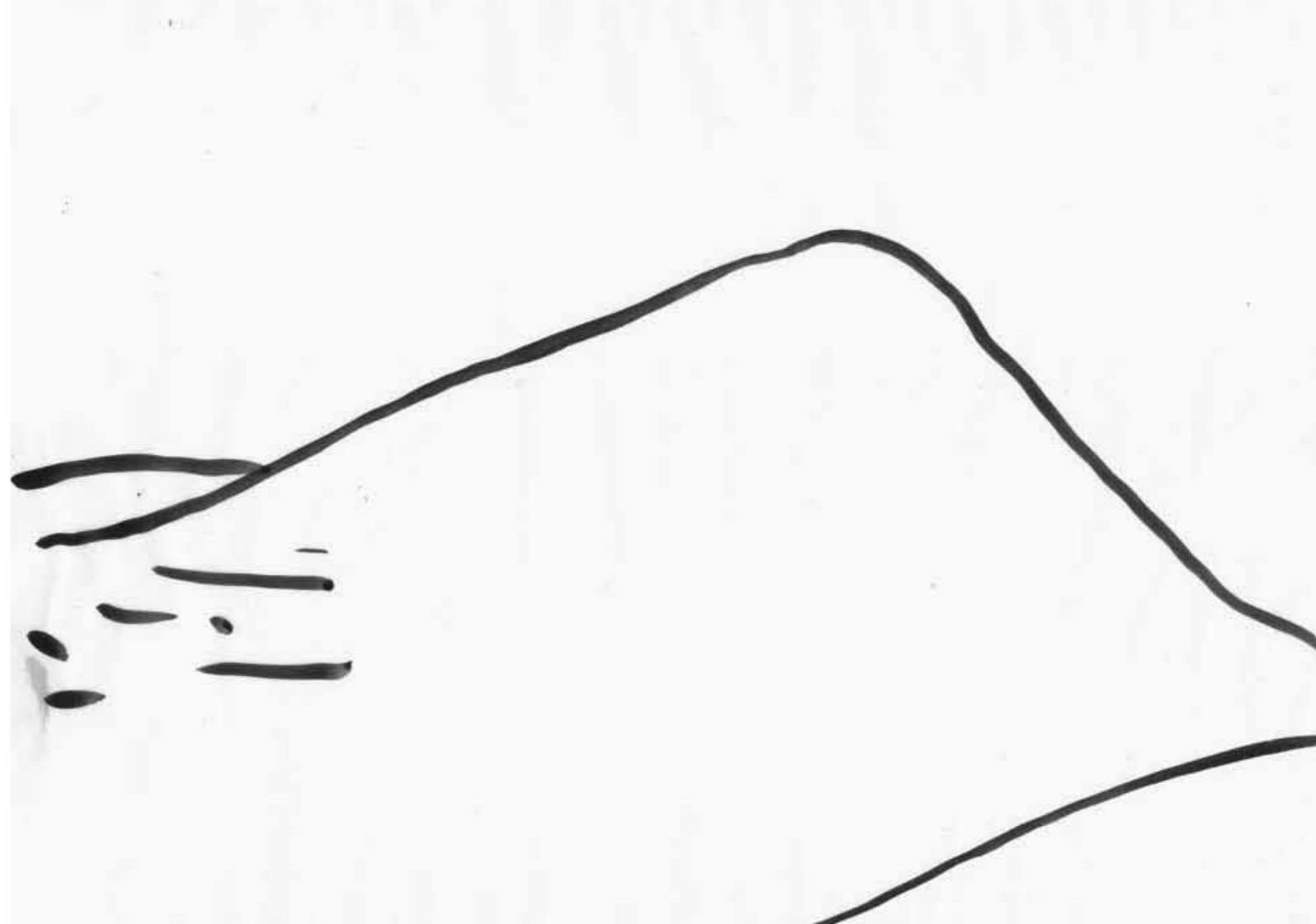


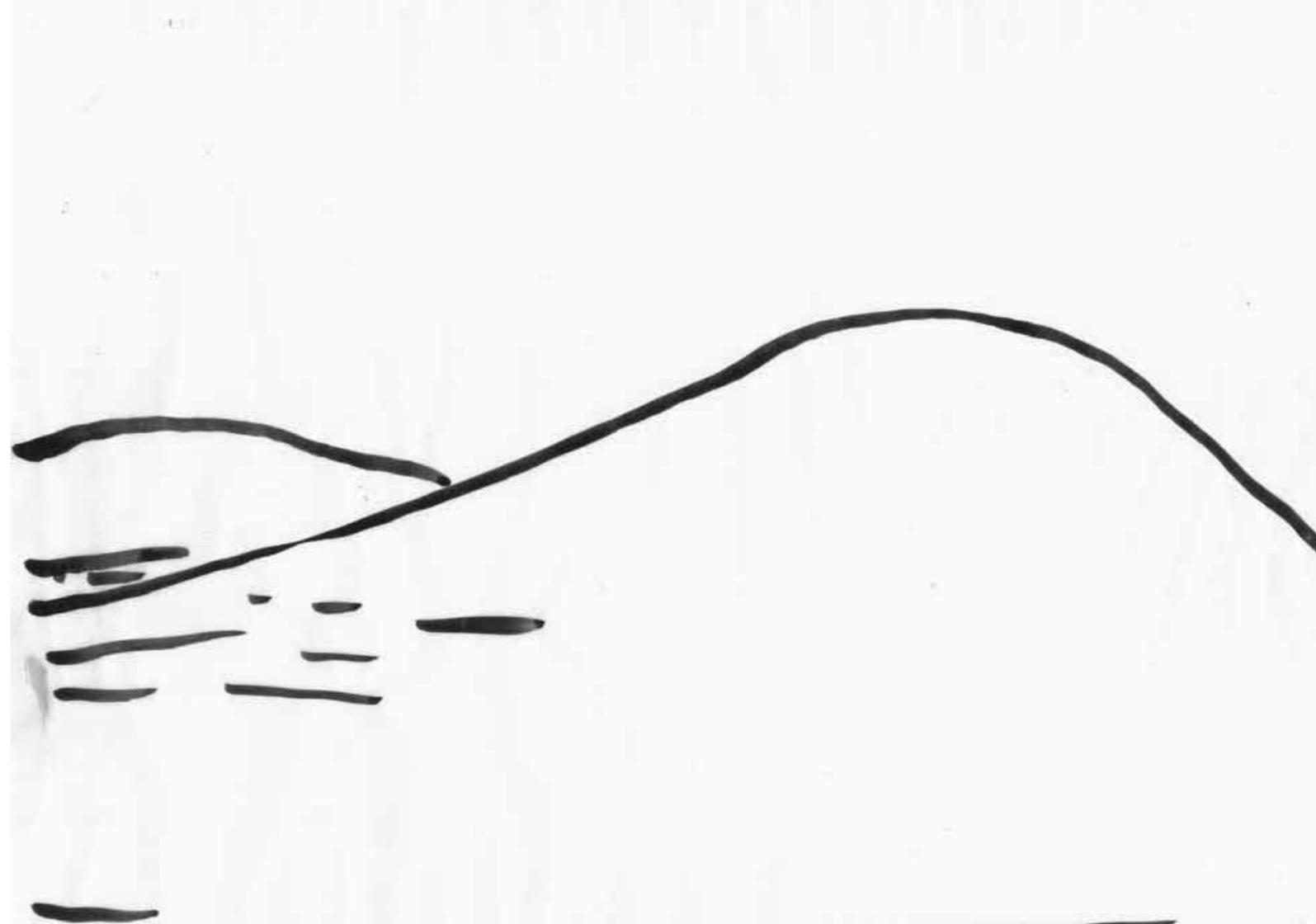


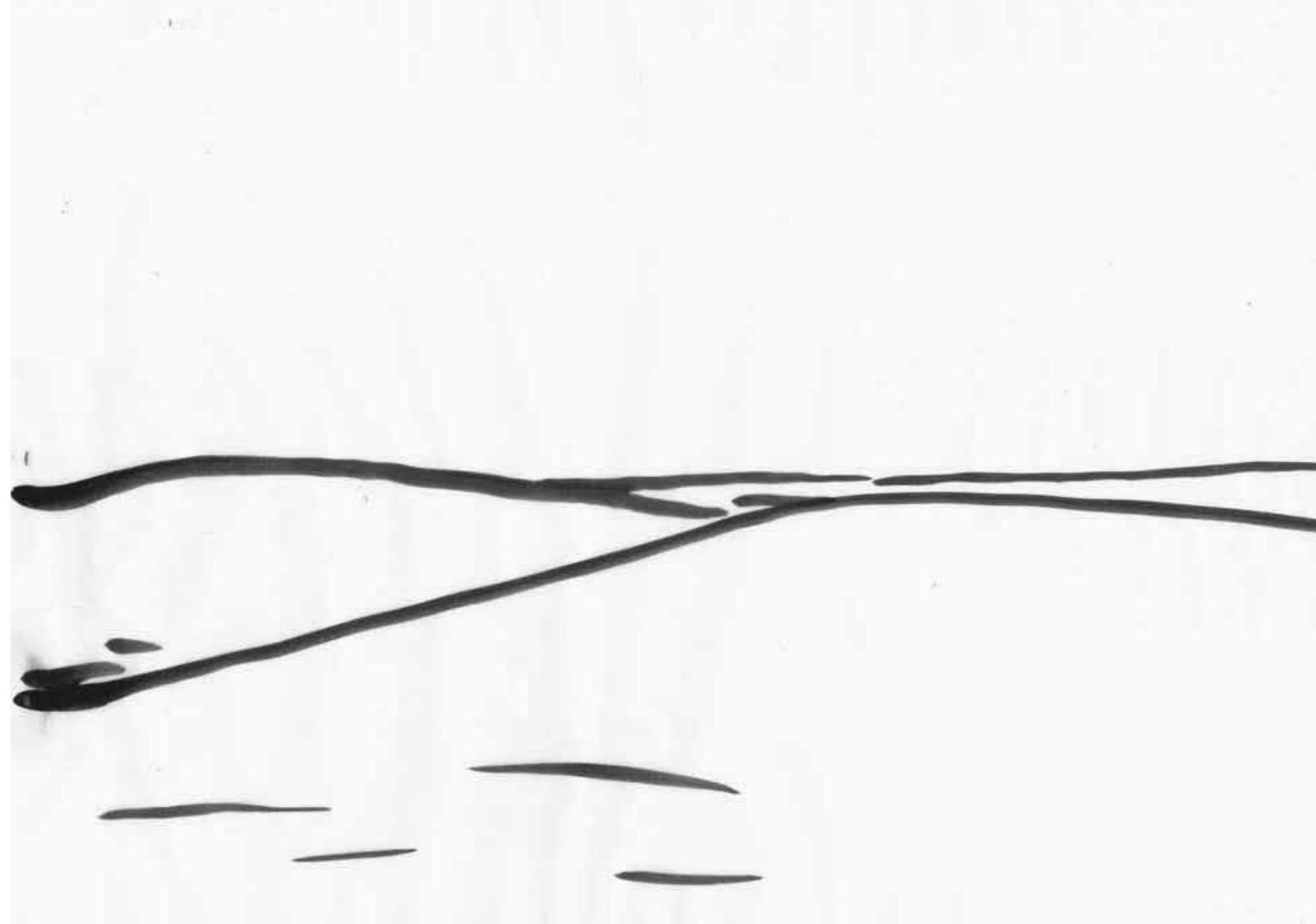


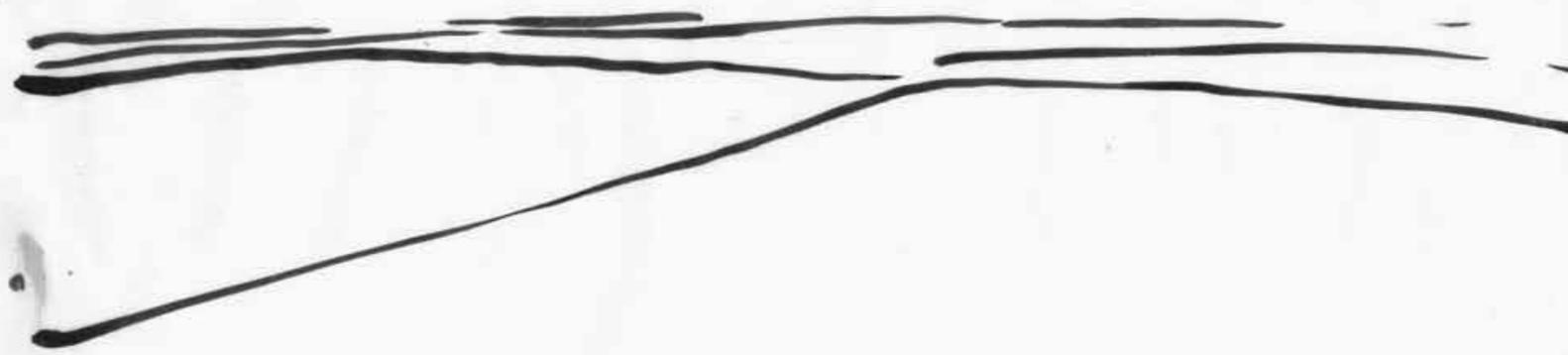


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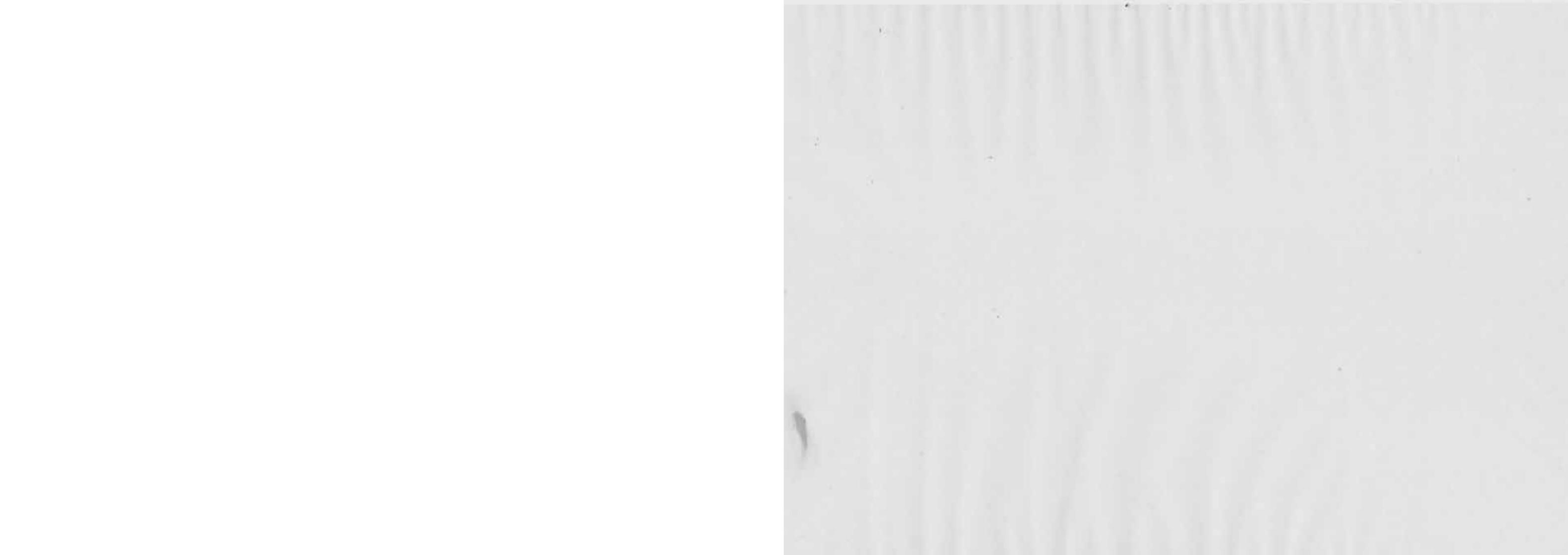


Handwritten Chinese characters in cursive script (草书), likely reading "天下第一" (The First Under Heaven). The characters are highly stylized and connected, with prominent horizontal strokes at the bottom.

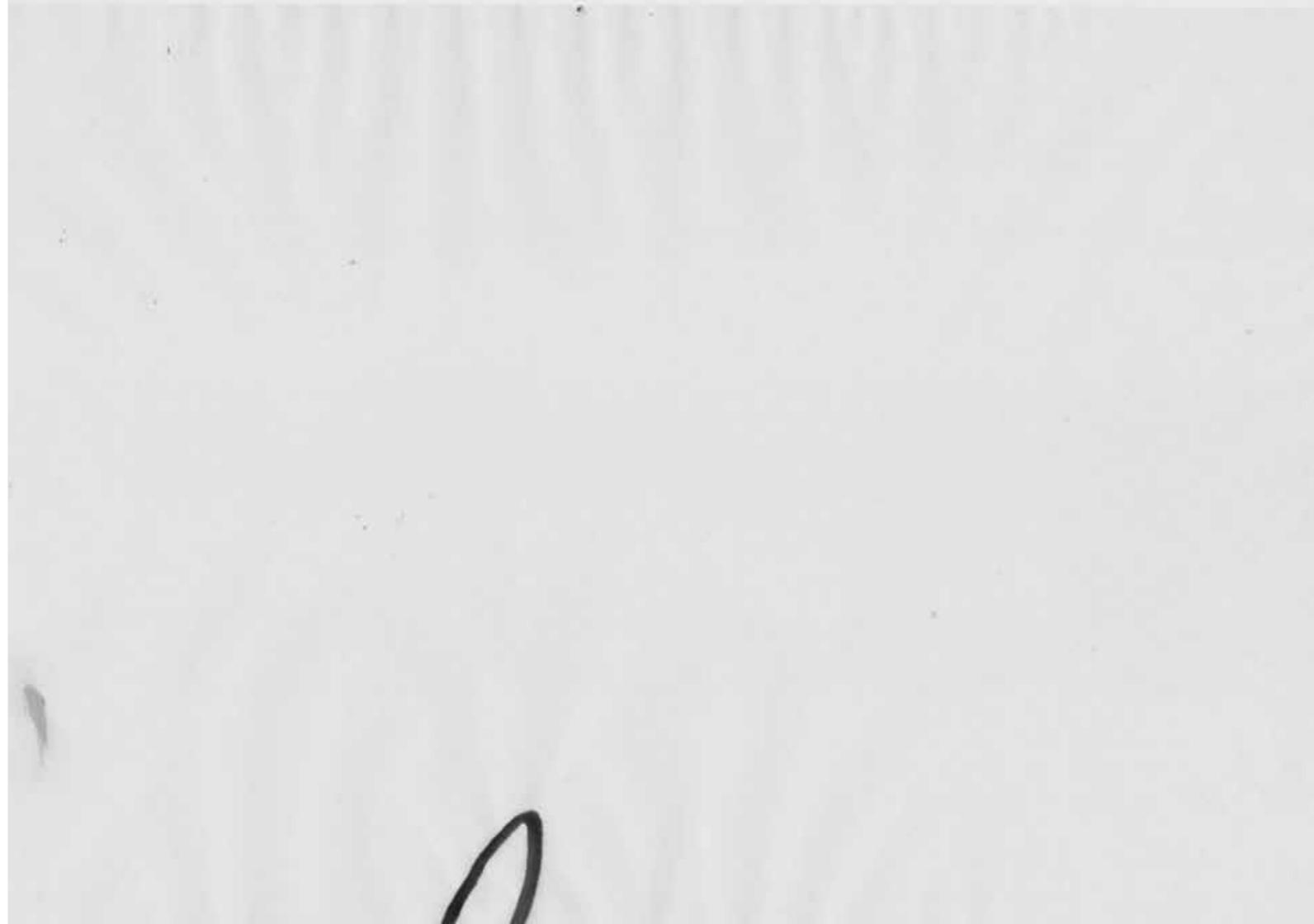
Handwritten text in Arabic script, likely a signature or name, written in black ink on a light-colored background. The text is written in a cursive style and appears to be a personal name or signature.

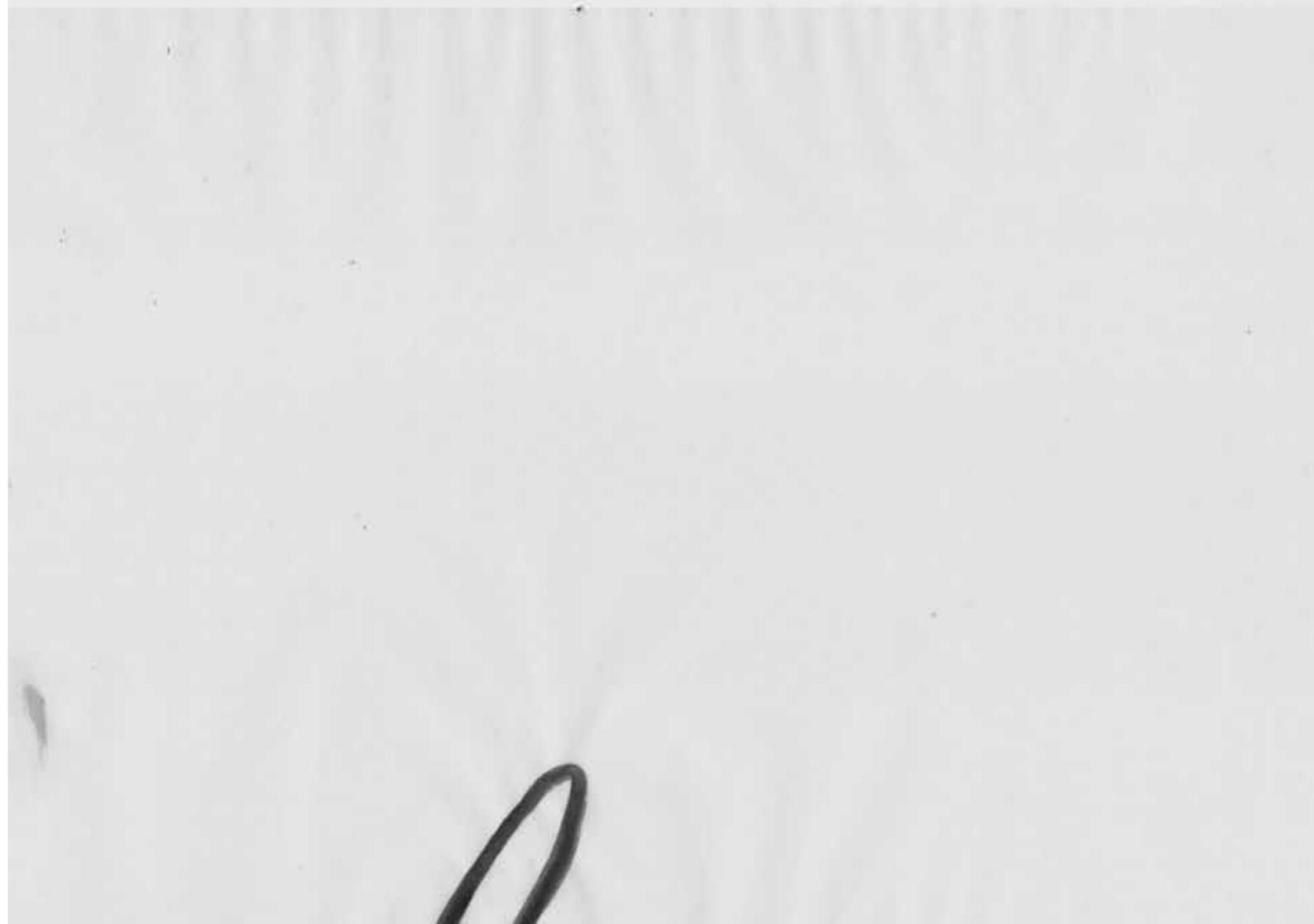
Handwritten text in two lines, likely a signature or name, written in a cursive style. The characters are dark and appear to be written on a light-colored, possibly white, background. The first line contains approximately 10 characters, and the second line contains approximately 12 characters. The handwriting is fluid and somewhat stylized, characteristic of a personal signature.

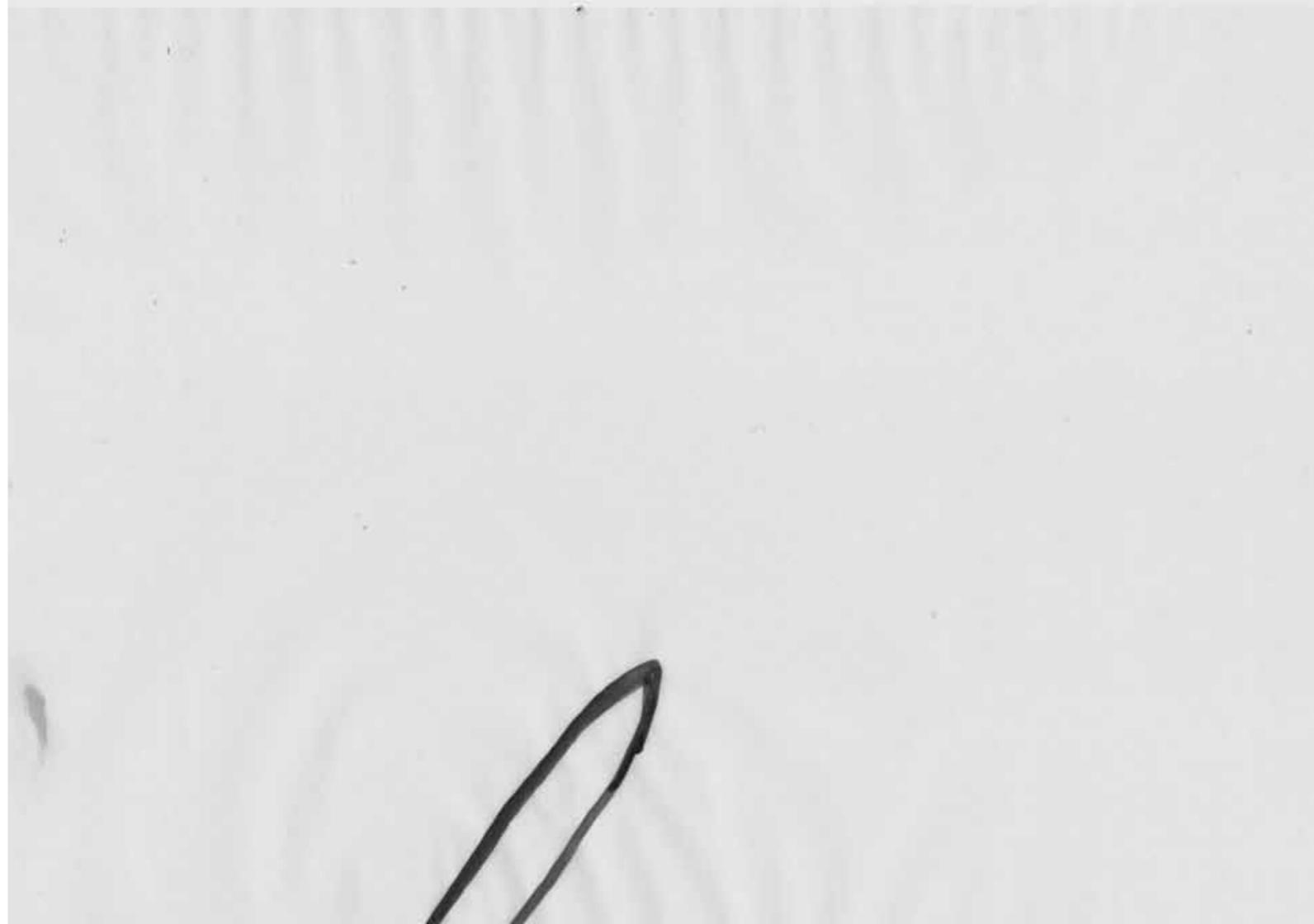
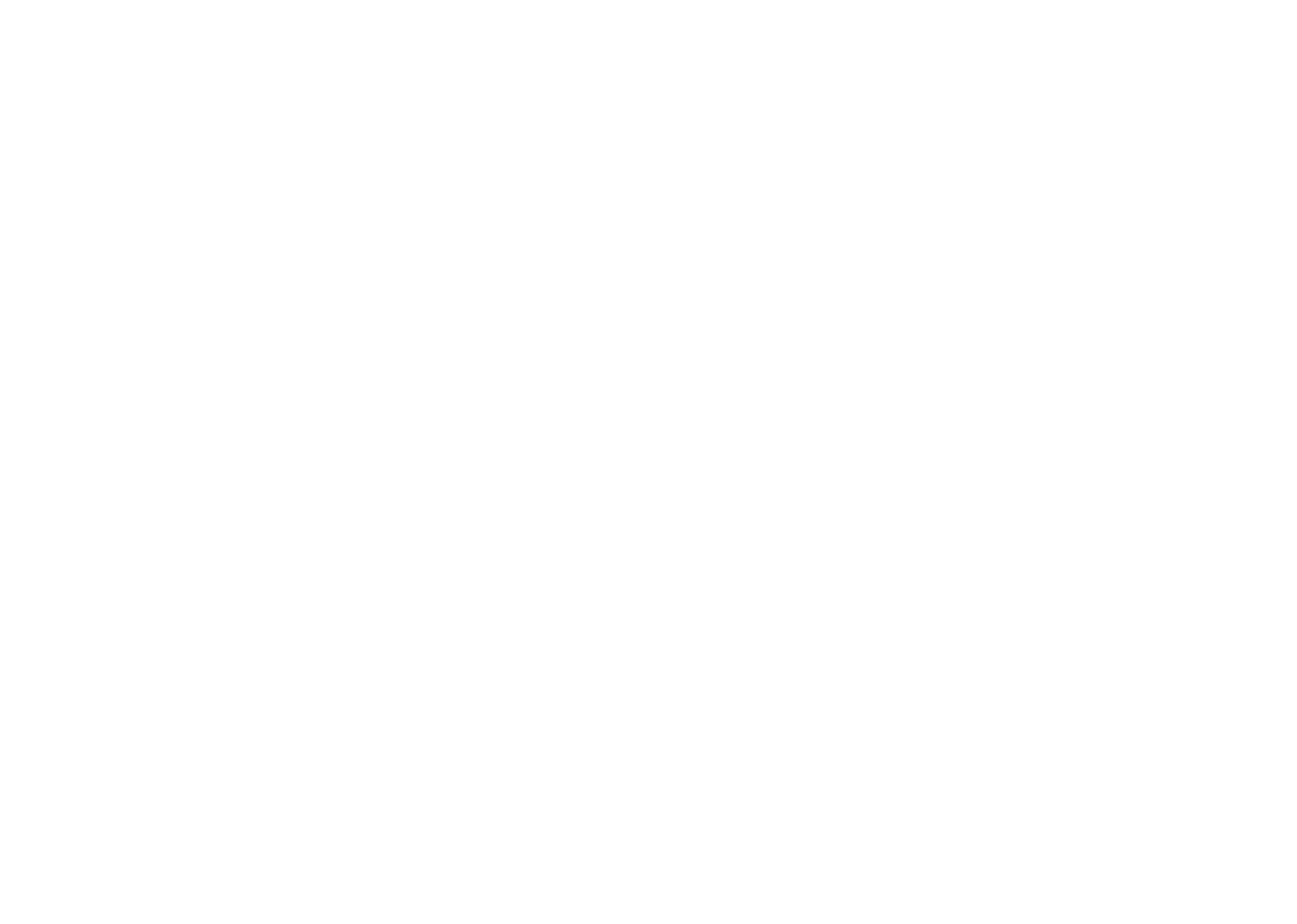
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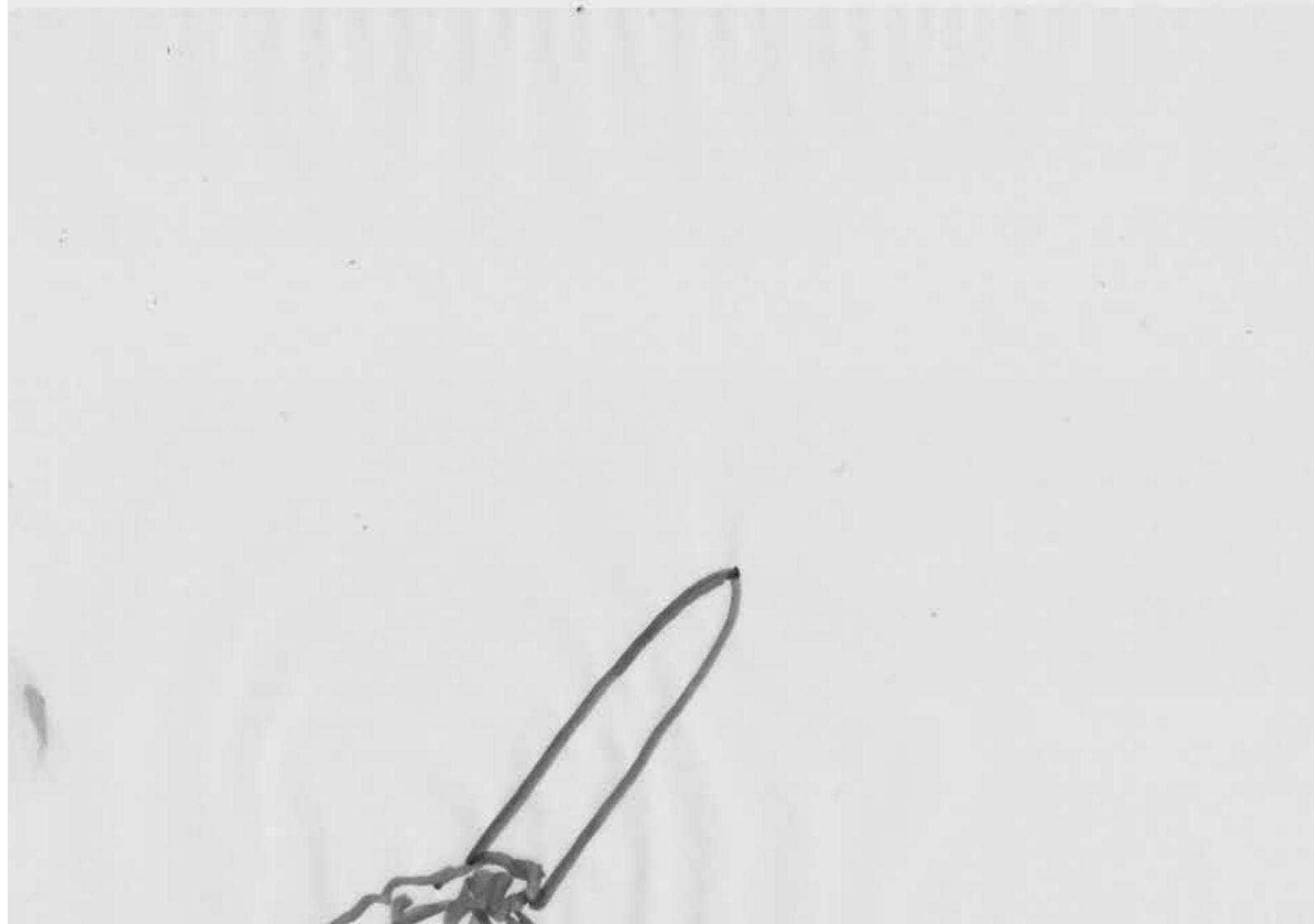


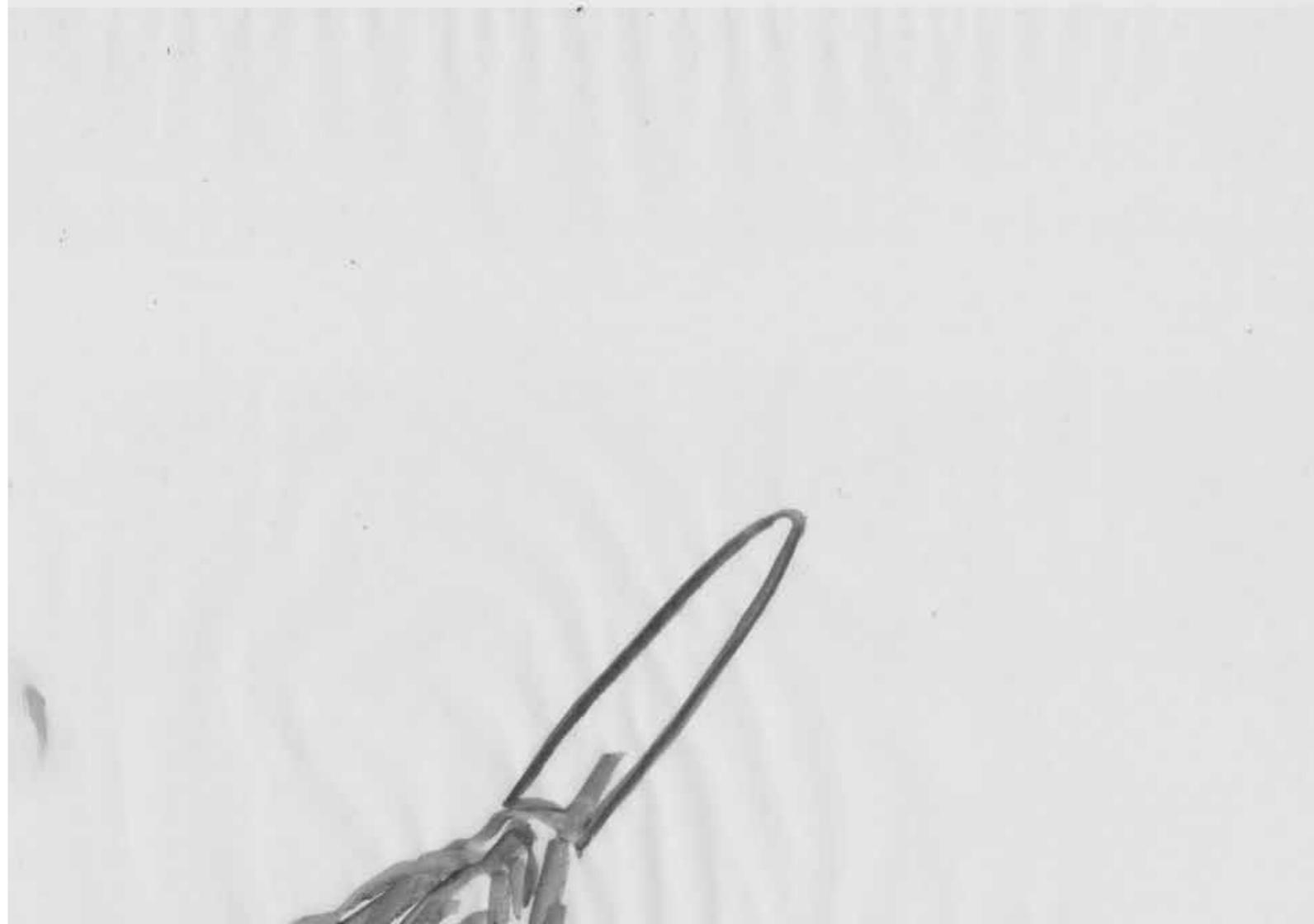


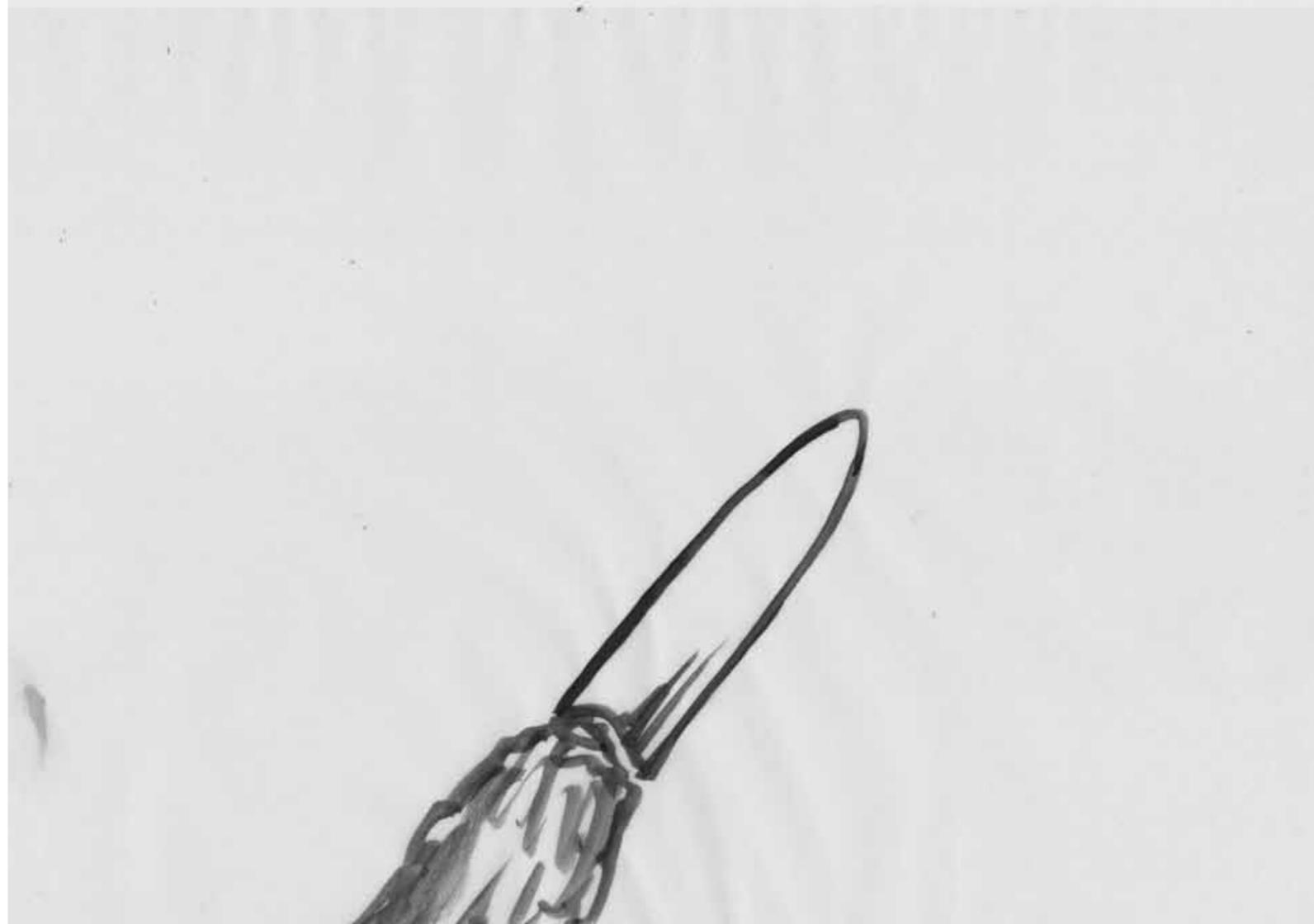


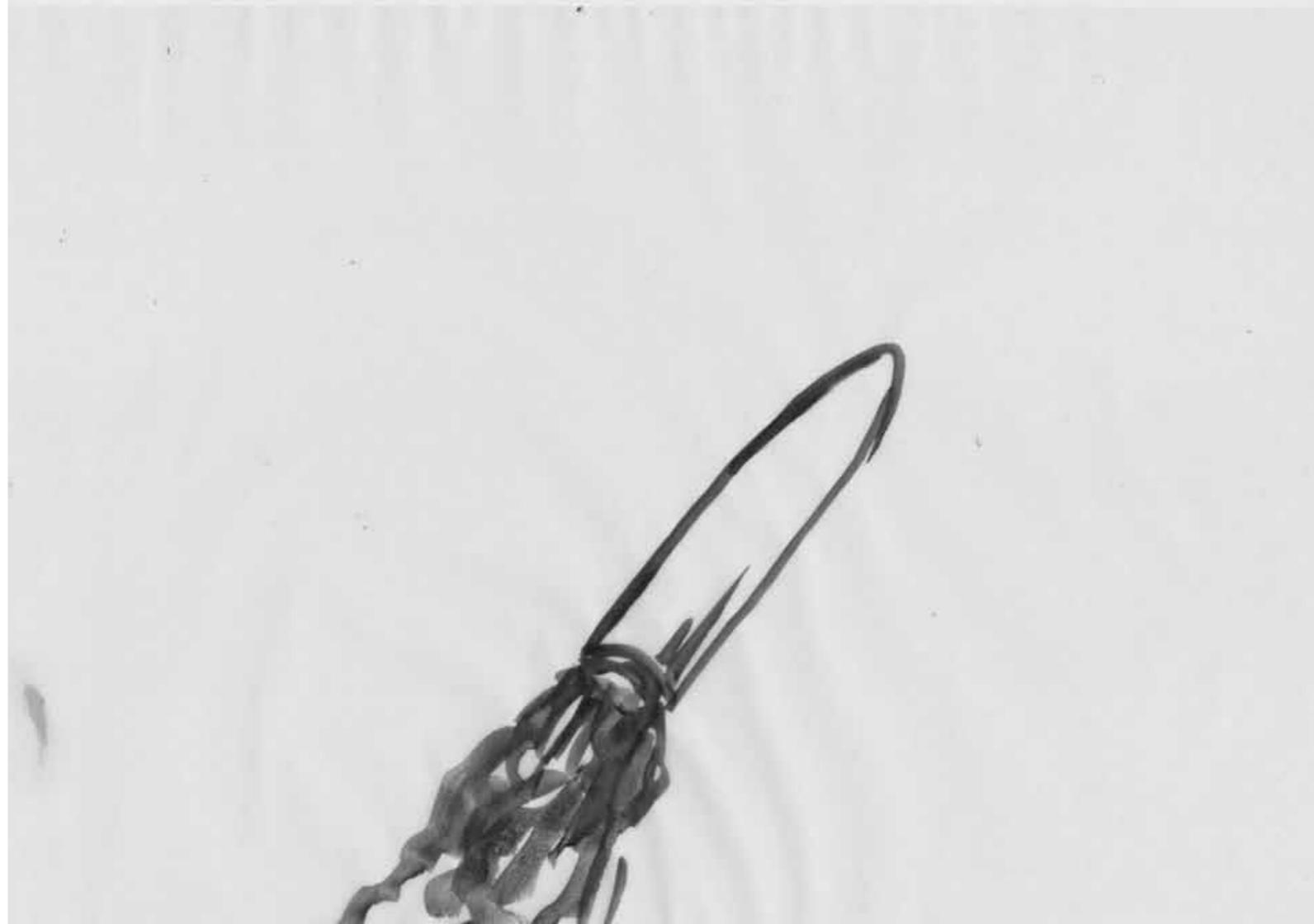


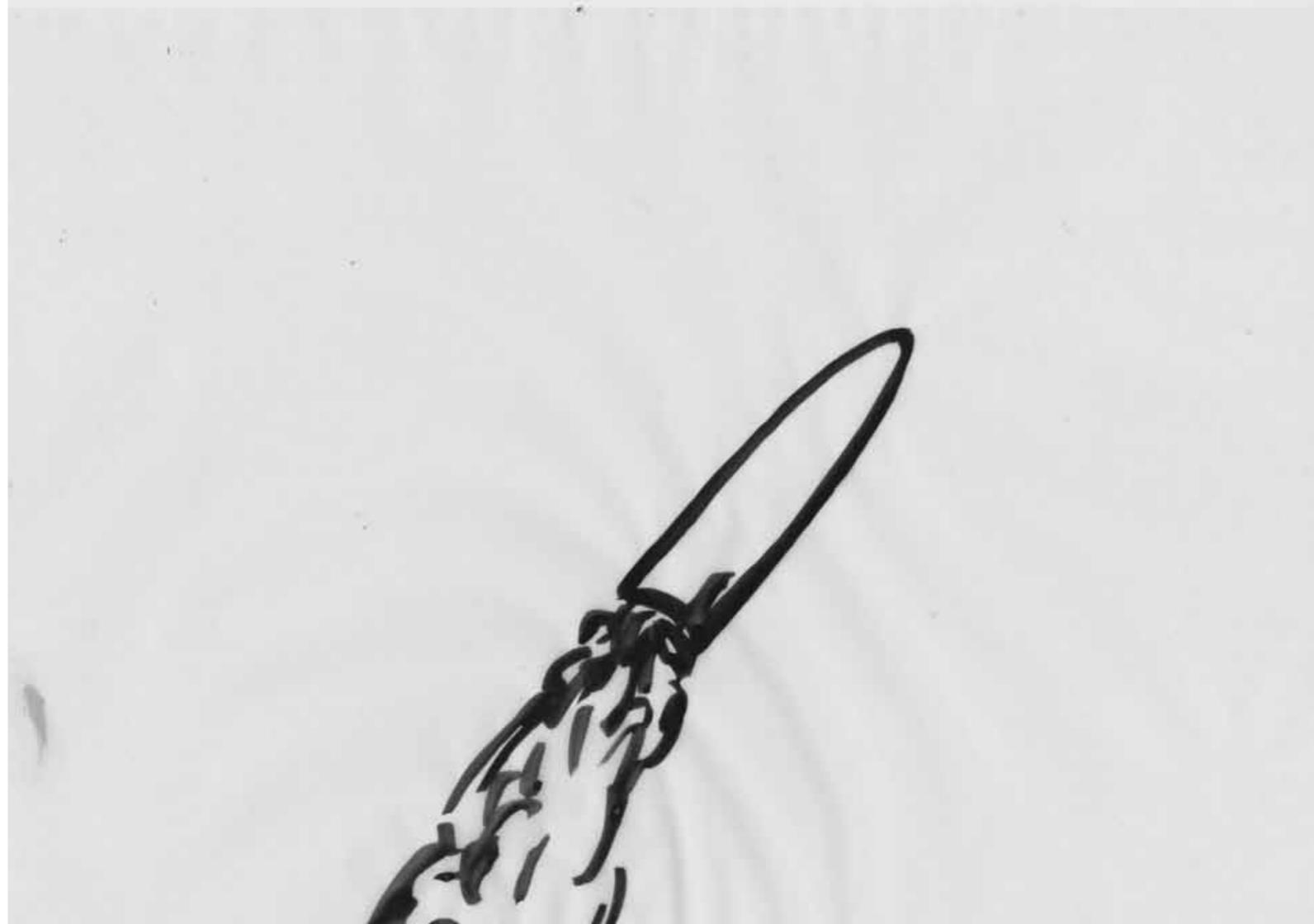


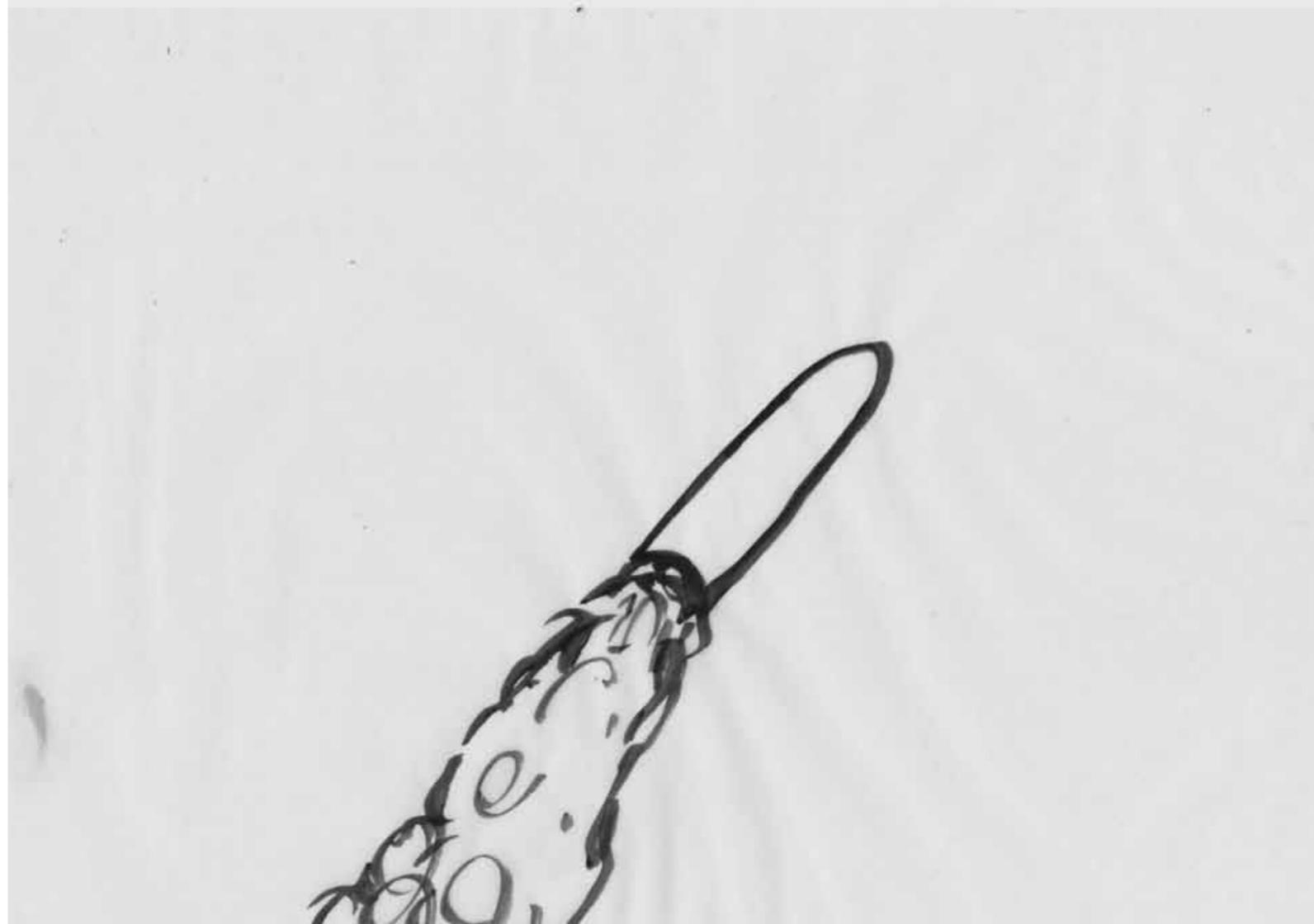




















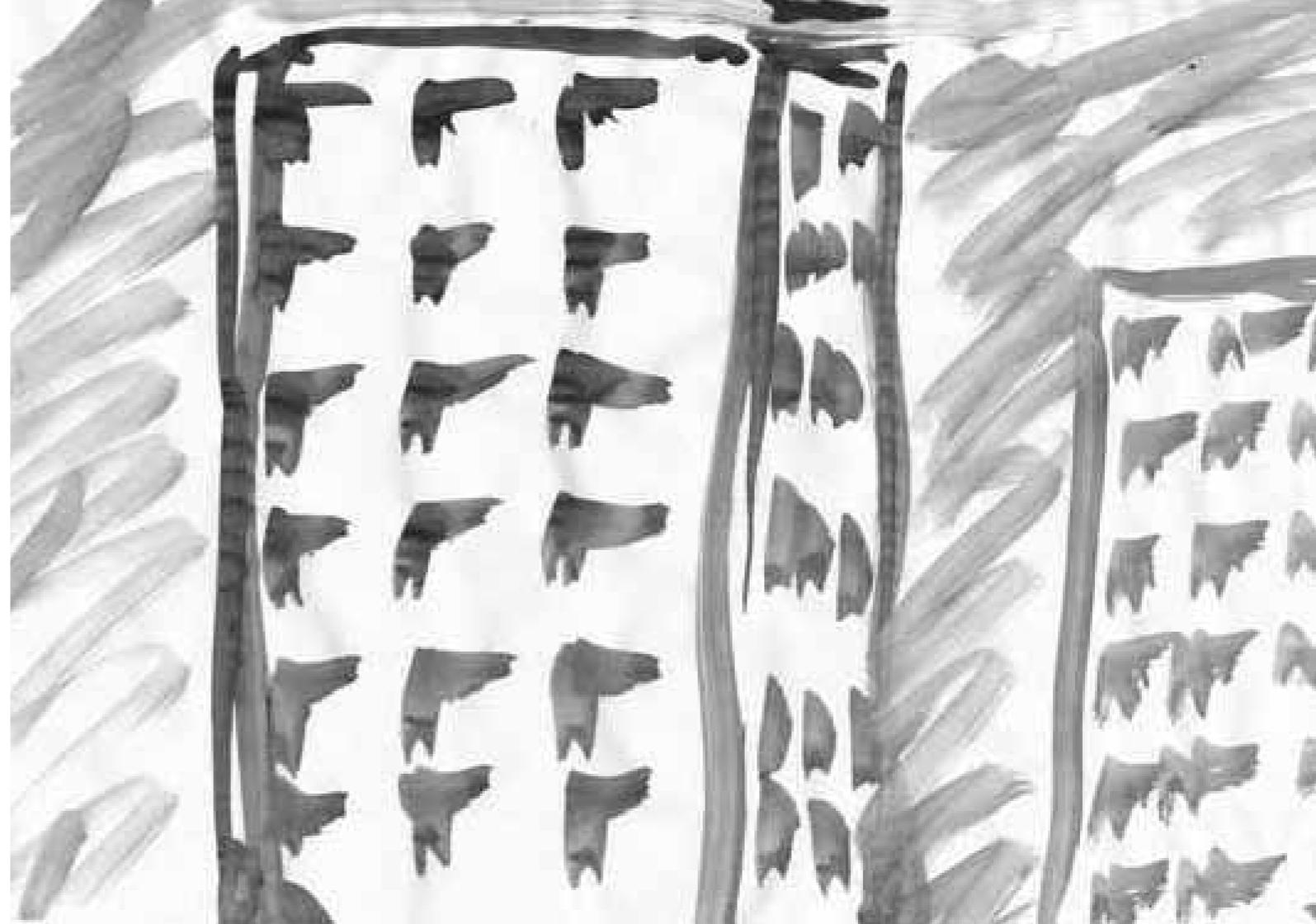




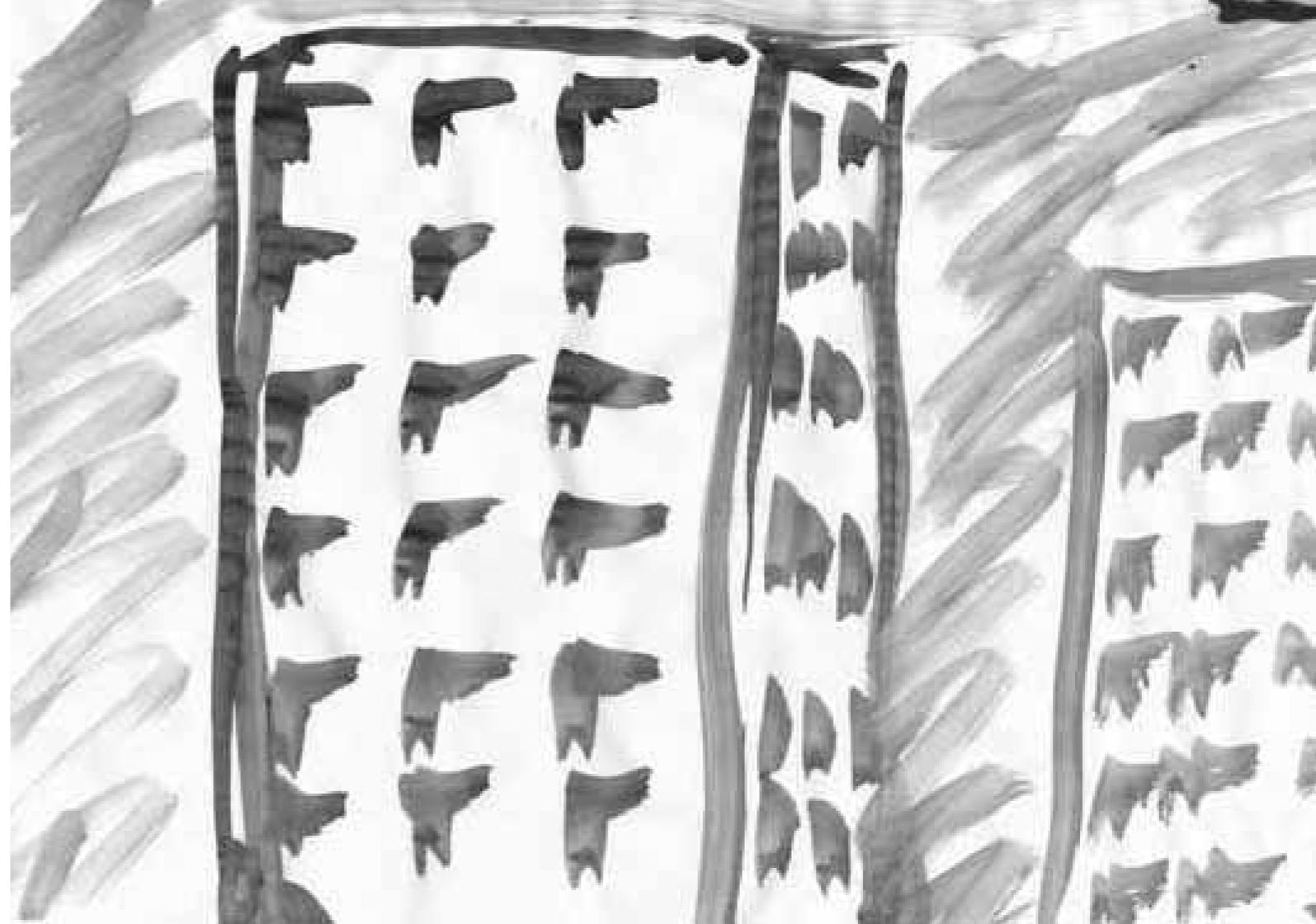




















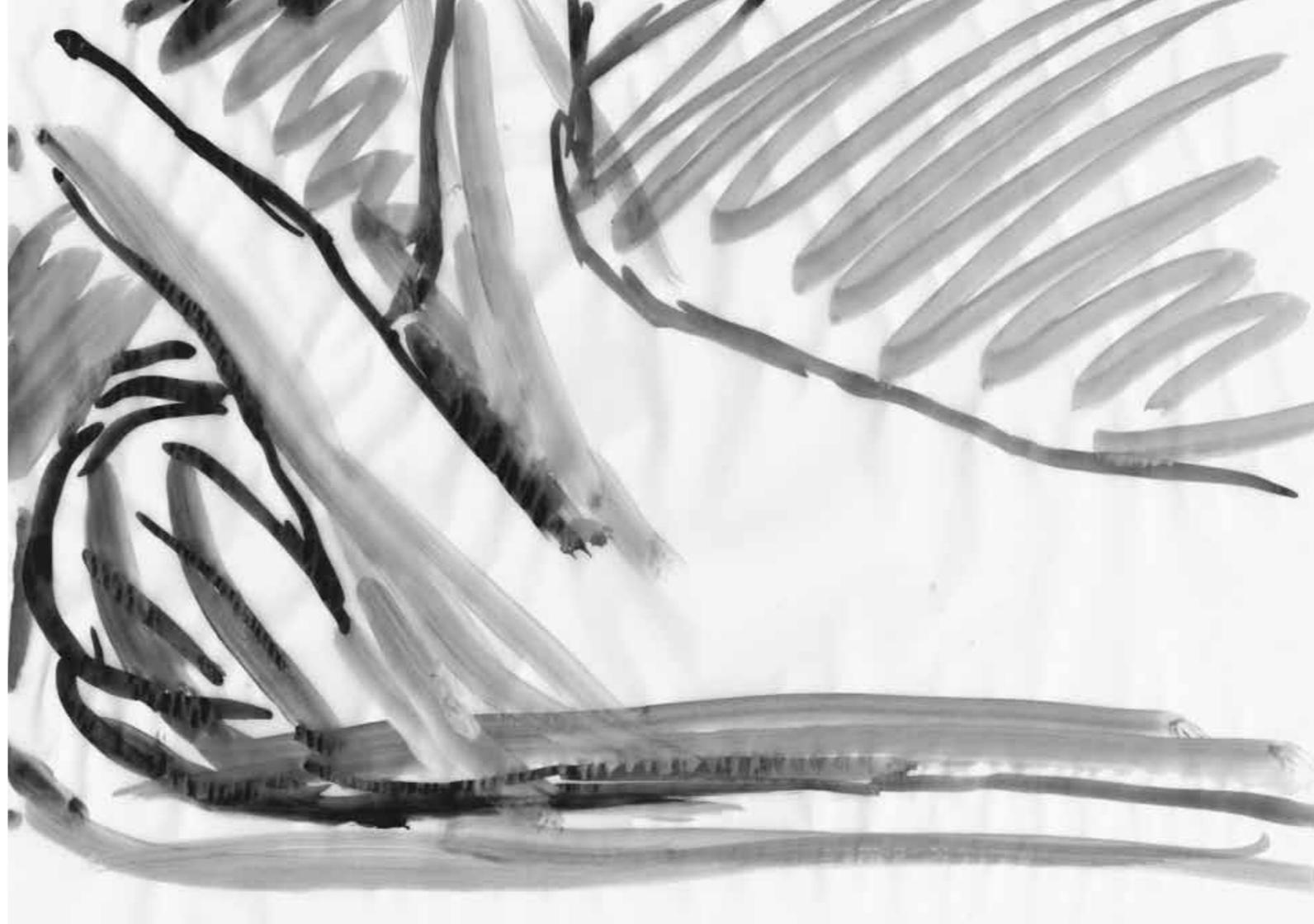






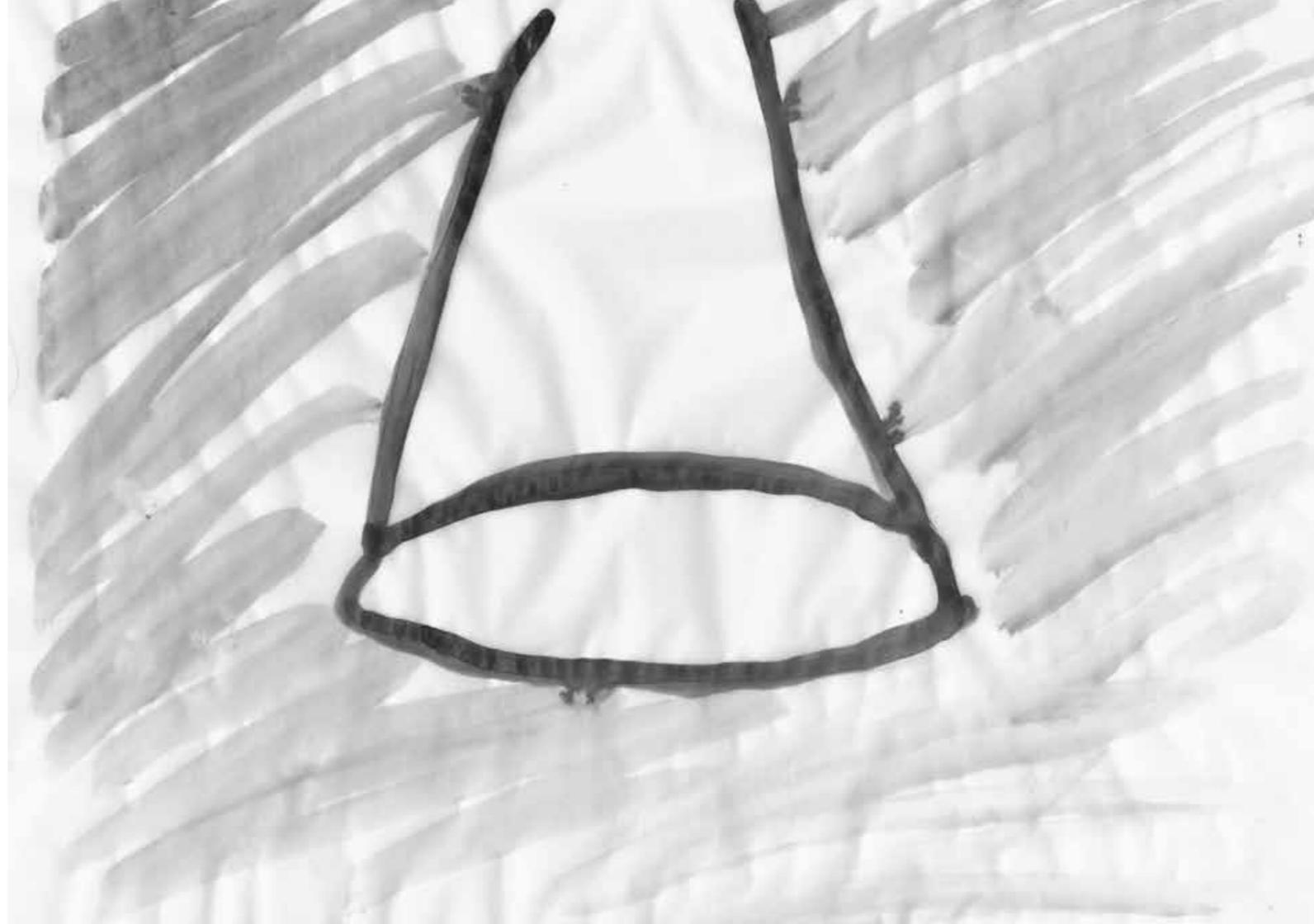




















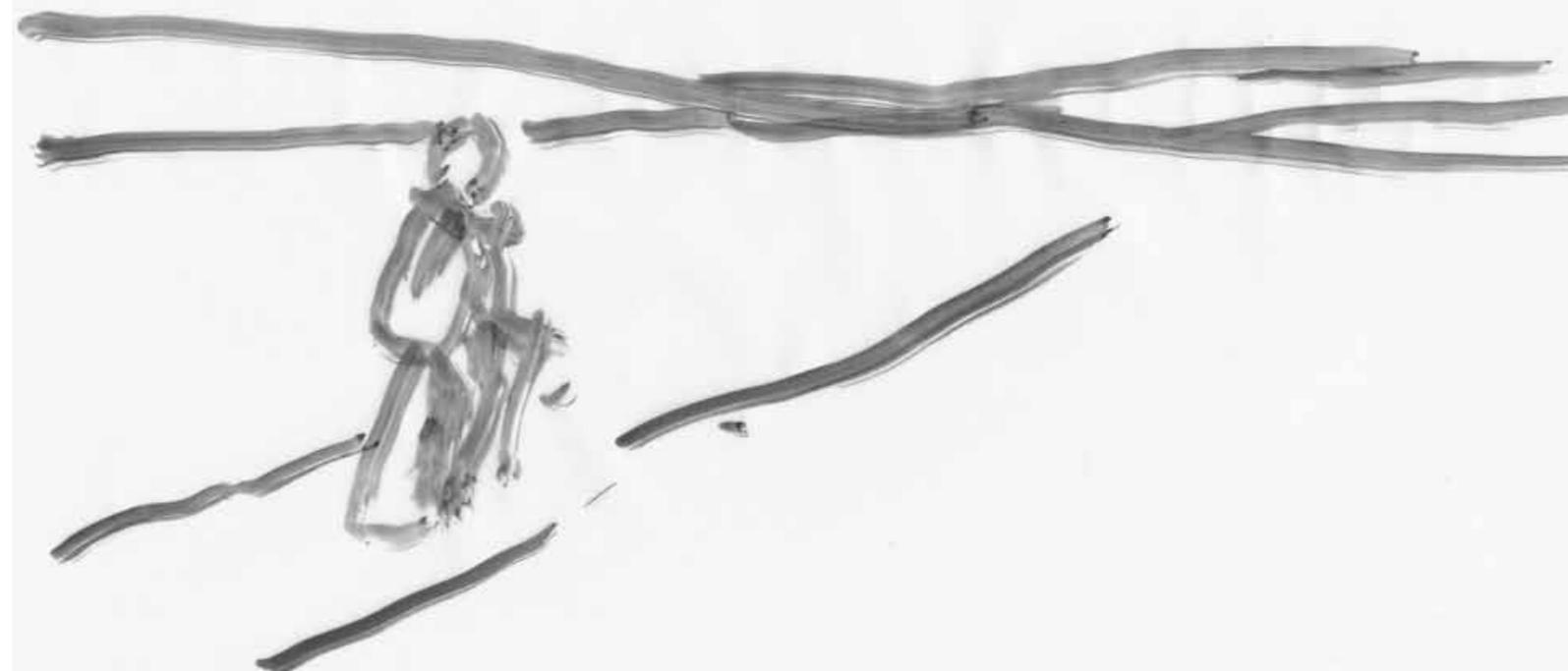




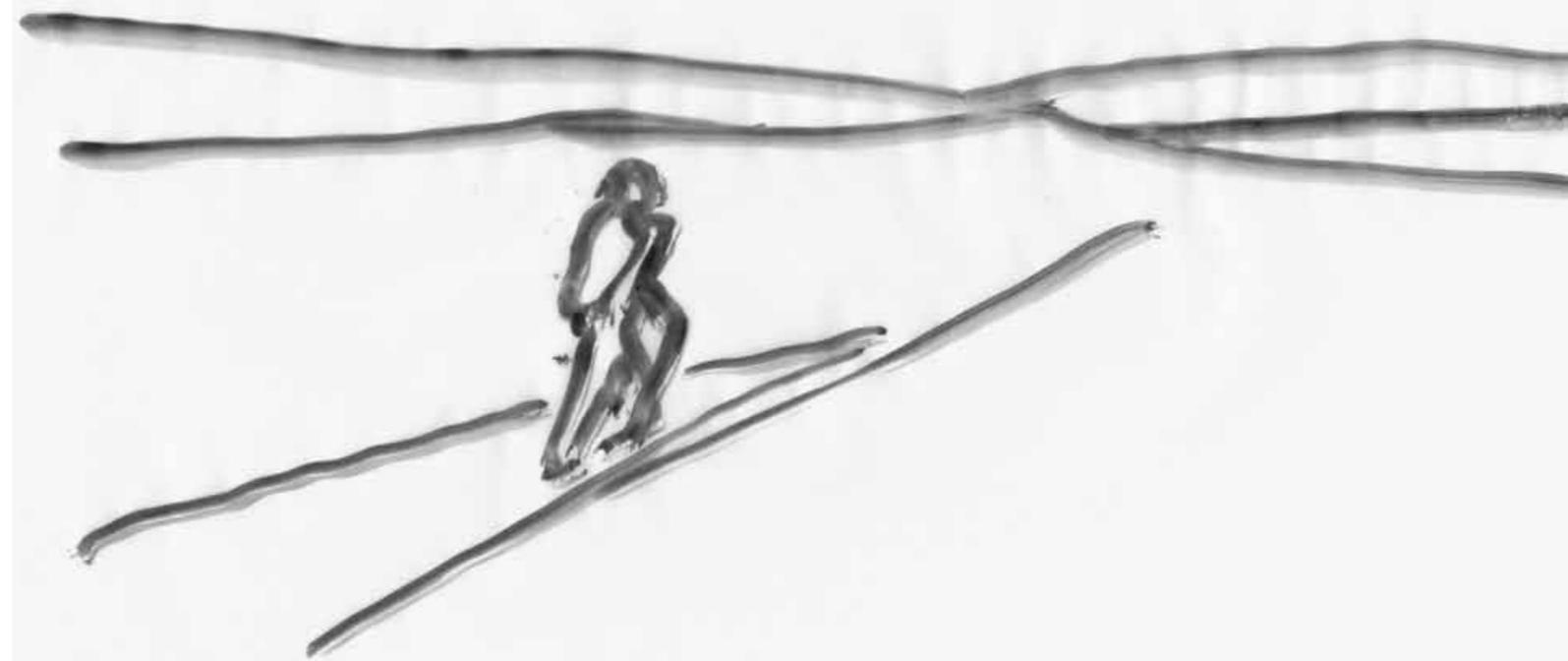










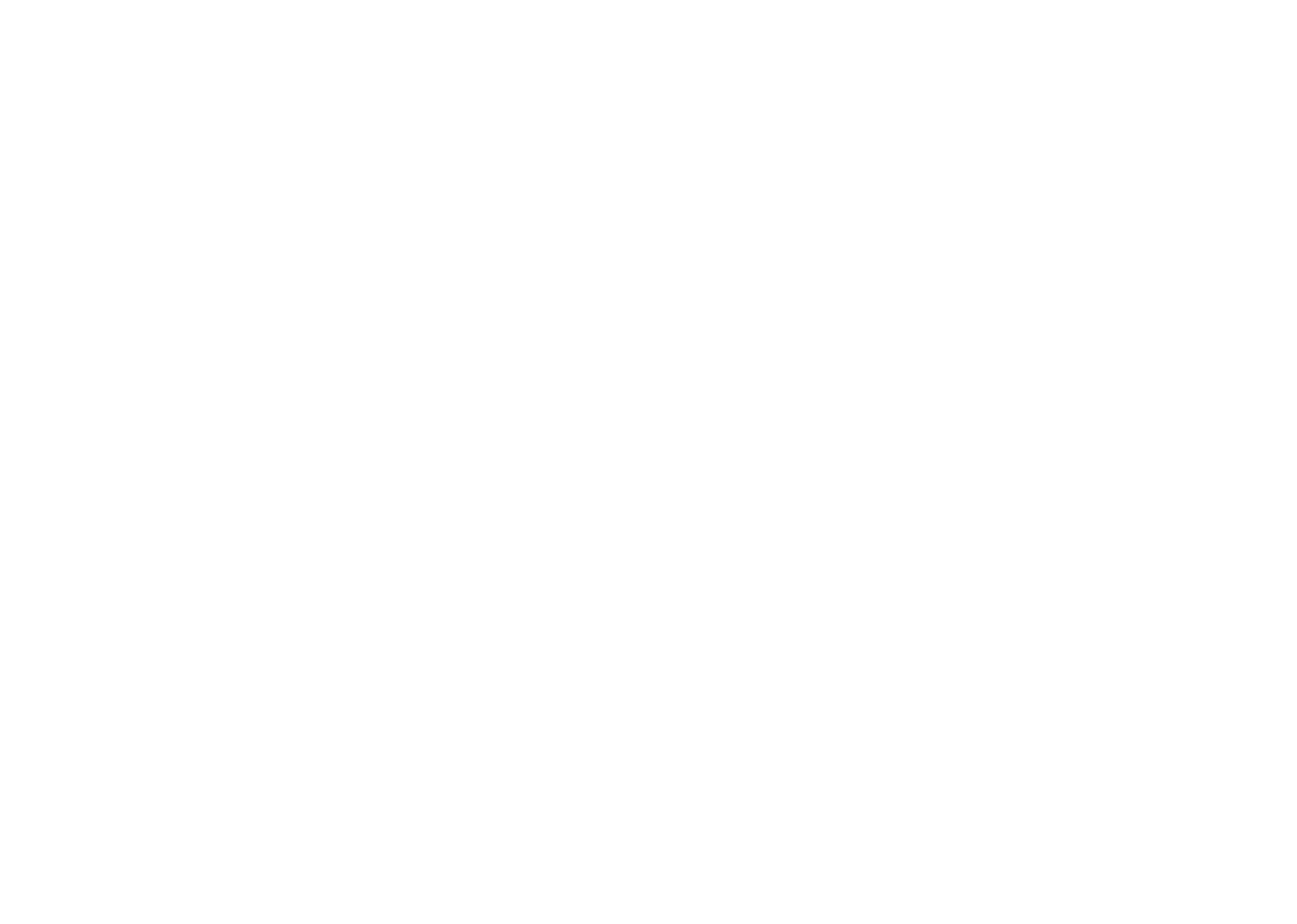


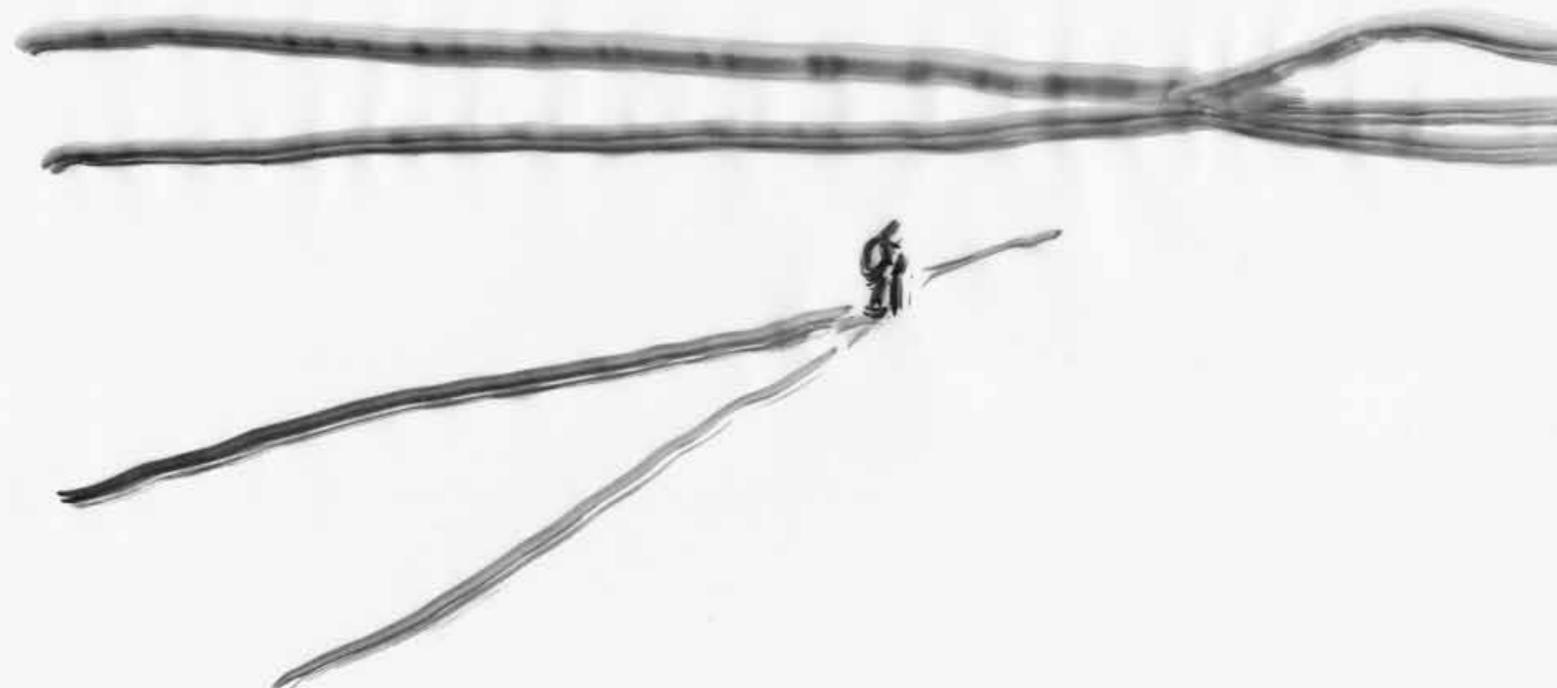




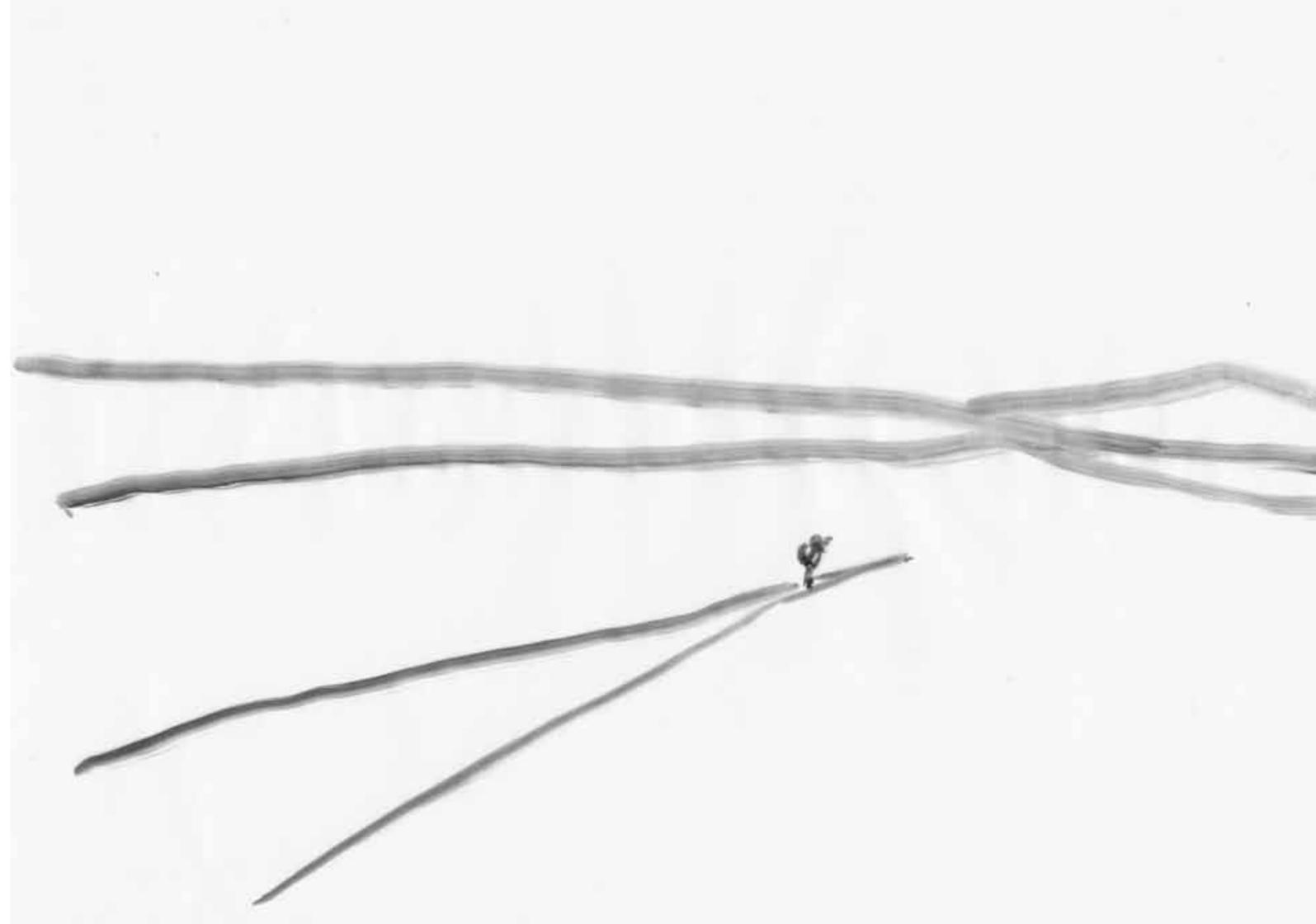














All of David Mackintosh's images are unique. The paintings, however, that he executes directly on to a gallery wall are exceptional. They are exceptionally large within a career where uniformly sized drawings predominate and — for an artist distinguished by the spontaneity of his making — they are exceptionally calculated.

In the current climate for the practice of drawing, in which its ploys and strategies, relativities and functions are being scrutinised, extended, retracted and dissolved, an exhibition by Mackintosh arrives like a fresh breeze in an expanding Sahara). Newly heated and warmed-over discussions about what drawing is give way to the essence of the medium. That essence is the practical deployment of line close to nature and expressive of a thought.

"I like the idea of things concealed or hidden by a curtain or cover, and that the drawings in the show might reveal things." If an artwork embodies thought, Mackintosh presents thinking in visible form on a scale few of his contemporaries can equal. Launched into the sight, minds and physical territory of the spectator is the fundamental, intuitive value of making a mark. Sheets of paper advance diverse and sometimes indistinct images, repeatedly leaping out with a surprise that can bring a smile or an unexpectedly different reaction; the viewer, captivated by one type of imagery, rhythm of gesture and suggestion of space, is suddenly shaken into another type, rhythm, space and image. Lines tangle and shade; they shape, overlay and obscure; they are enlivened by the potential for movement if not made to move already by the artist through animation.

But lines seldom explain. Mackintosh makes unity and incoherence co-exist in gestures that leave an impression: "If meaning is too explicit I

will undo the drawing by adding another", says Mackintosh, helpfully. Paradoxically the initial impression on entering an exhibition that he has installed of his own work is that various forms of communication will divulge information. Framed images line the walls separated by varying intervals of space, like words gathered in sentences. On three recent occasions there has been a large screen on to which moving images are projected. And, as often, the artist has magnified his marks to fill a wall with a nameable representation.

The most notable reason, however, for being wrong-footed into an expectation of transference is that in recent years Mackintosh has occupied the body of the exhibition space with frameworks in wood to which are attached sheets of strongly coloured paper. As each sheet contains an image the association at first sight is with noticeboards, display panels; even with ship's semaphore flags and forms of signalling at sea in which actions link up. In those instances colour is commonplace, clarity an advantage (but not a necessity) and space an invitation.

Yet the drawings remain stubbornly mute. Physically close enough to illustration to connect semantically they remain several paces back from the brink of transmission. Why? Because they can! Mackintosh wants to build anticipation; imminence is the prevailing condition of what he creates. Encapsulating that position between expectation and revelation (but doing so only coincidentally because Mackintosh is not intentionally a maker of emblems) is the image of a drawn curtain. The single undecorated panel hangs by loops from a rail and only the suggestion of shadow indicates shallow space behind.

The accident of a 'drawn' curtain in a drawing presents delicious linguistic possibilities. But, that pleasure aside (in art where pleasure — in making, looking, imagining, toying — is a strong feature), what penetrates the viewer's sensibility most strongly about the curtain is the notion of suspension (another play on words?). What lies behind? What is being concealed? Is this curtain the barrier that closes off or is it the background on which to project?

That first curtain was made with grey gouache on a white, A1-sized sheet of 170 gsm-weighted paper. For over a decade Mackintosh has made use of paper that large and that heavy: he found by chance that the specification suited him. Paper originally offered itself because it was cheaper than the rabbit skin, hessian or oatmeal canvas on which he had been making paintings. Working with acrylic, he loosely compartmentalised intriguing objects within the picture plane; some were drawn and many were stencilled from magazines. The desire to objectify has stayed; it is the origin of forms that has changed.

Turning to paper was, he said, "a moment of revelation". Early on he layered sheets of paper on the studio wall, making a drawing with acrylic and brush in each. These were series of drawings, not sequences. Mackintosh has never presumed connections between drawings: they are not like frames in a storyboard or cells in a comic strip. At first he would repeat an image so that the form developed with each repetition, isolating the drawings he found interesting when he reflected solicitously on his production (a process still crucial to his practice).

Thus he had established the basis for a way of working that has evolved further by doing more and more drawing and observing more and more living. Consequently, the principal characteristics

of his work on paper can be listed. Mackintosh works within the middle of the sheet and, having shaped a drawing, leaves much of the area around the centre untouched. Apparent in each drawing are the tense surface oscillations as the drying gouache cockles the paper, pulling fibres into the tracks of a mark and away from the white space. There are few colours: black; green (a tone called 'willow'); cadmium red, and yellow. Each colour is used unmixed from the tube. Mackintosh claims he has not learned to use colour yet and that partly accounts for his choice. He adds that he does not want colour to dictate the observer's response.

"But", he goes on, "the drawings start in black; they are conceived in black". Nonetheless, they need not stay black which implies that colour is applied randomly, a possibility entirely within reason. That The Curtain was painted with a brush in grey may be significant. A few other drawings have subsequently been made in the same gouache and whether this tone contributes more than another colour to setting an atmosphere for the drawing is conjecture Mackintosh is content to leave suspended. Grey is tentative and even faintly mysterious whereas other colours stall the narrative impulse, asserting each drawing's basic formality.

A seismic shift arose with the introduction of paper that brought its own colour into the finished work. The development was not intentional: unable to buy his preferred white stock he was offered tinted sheets and decided to try them. As a result, blue was brought into his spectrum as a ground; red, black, green and yellow continued with the occasional use of off-whites. These drawings have tended to be in black although red has emerged as a forceful drawing colour on all surfaces and featuring strongly on black paper.

It is probably futile to analyse what emerges on the paper. A series can encompass the outlines of four overlapping, projecting cubes (or are they stacking tables imagined from an elevated angle?); a man's head from the back showing a gesture with a finger against one ear (like scratching?); a shape that resembles a jelly mould or a yellow, stylised mountain; a red bird silhouette with a heavy black crescent for a skull; a shape that could be a cloud with a measure beneath it marked 'alpha'; the head of Lenin; and a tree. There is a grassy mound in one with a fringe of bunny ears and the inscription 'wilderness · the', while Lenin and the tree are overlaid with circles that seem to have migrated from another drawing. Floaters, maybe, that impair vision but also the drawing that Mackintosh makes over the first, fusing two into one space in the middle of the white sheet. Lenin (in pale red) can be read, understood; the rings (black) are not so amenable.

The artist maintains that these forms (to which numerous others can be added from different series: mountains, chequer-squares, teeth, hanging shapes, boulders, ellipses) come from memory. The moment of drawing is a factor in their creation as well as a channel for remembering; it generates its own need to put marks on paper. No copying is involved when he works on this scale and Mackintosh himself contends that he is not clear about their 'meaning'. Imagery is a minefield in art, he admits, conditioned by its constant, unremitting theoretical analysis. It constitutes a significant element of contemporary art, globally, and as a conscious participant in that global scene he cannot ignore its influence, while arguing that he does not play up to it.

The sheer range of his drawing vindicates the artist's claim. Indeed, Mackintosh appears to play down the precious, even anxious status that the image has attracted in new art. Instead, he feels as surprised

as his commentators by the nature of some of the drawings he makes; his method permits a degree of automatism and therapy as well as unconstrained invention. By being prepared to throw open their interpretation to every viewer Mackintosh displays growing confidence with his work, and this gathering assurance is transmitted to his audience through line.

In pursuit of a theme writers have identified a bleak, gruff or, even, an aggressive world-view reflected in his exhibitions. Past series that featured the body and its apparent isolation within the white space of paper fed that view: a group of baseball caps in 2003, for instance, which placed handwritten inscriptions where the badge should be (an interesting manoeuvre that inferred 'drawing' could be an emblem) had the title 'Hats for people I hate'. It may then have seemed prudent for organisers to carve out a less ambiguous conceptual path than Mackintosh has, in the past three years, been prepared zealously to pursue. Past observers, indeed, may have ascribed more uncertainty to this artist's endeavours than can at this moment be justified.

The consolidation of imagery into animation, however, has thrown light (as it were) on that foggy area of intention. 'Film' may now appear to have been the natural next step in Mackintosh's method. The artist was suspicious of this move; partly it was because others saw it as inevitable and also because he had to hit upon his own way into the medium. For all his intimate and eclectic spirit, Mackintosh is not a maverick. His practice is by no means detached from the potent discourse among artists about what legitimately constitutes modern fine-art activity. Having seen what he regarded as the failures and also the successes of other visual artists' attempts at moving images (most notably William Kentridge), he questioned its viability for him as a complement to

activities already underway in a multifarious career.

It was his first digital camera that opened the route into animation. Having always reviewed his production of drawings at home or in the studio, Mackintosh began to photograph the day's production and look at them, for instance, in the pub. His new camera allowed him to scroll back and forth, to edit and advance in sequences. Suddenly — and, as Mackintosh relates it, it was sudden — he could relate his process to what animation offered; supported by the research that he subsequently undertook into stop-frame work by experimental pioneer filmmakers, including former abstract painter Robert Breer. But commenting on the initial unannounced catalyst for his filmmaking, the purchase of his camera, he says it sounds "corny, but I quite like the 'magic' of it".

Magic, indeed. Animation unexpectedly rationalises the experience of Mackintosh's exhibitions with constantly shifting images into one concentrated place. The artist propels on to his viewer's consciousness arbitrary chance encounters and the sensation of being buffeted by the unrelatedness of numerous images. Yet this discontinuity occurs alongside a musical accompaniment that can sound, by comparison, notably together, even in its sometimes-chaotic disharmony.

Although the first animation made use of Bach's Goldberg Variations, what followed showed Mackintosh taking his own route: "I have always played music", the artist points out, "and it seemed a very natural thing to start making music to work with the animations. For the second animation I played the piano myself and wrote the music, if you can say 'wrote' — as I can't write music or play the piano — and for the new animation I have recorded some piano parts and percussion sounds." Music and image carry

equal billing with one subtly energising the movement of the other. Moreover, composing specifically for the animations himself distances the work from the 'fine art' conventions that have emerged in films by visual artists. And, as Mackintosh adds: "There is something I like about the combination which is to do with being in total control."

That each animation consists of a non-narrative, flipbook cascade of constant interruptions, banality and periods of nothing is important. Diversions are every bit as pleasurable and (simultaneously or consecutively) unsettling as straight paths ahead, perhaps more so for being presented in Mackintosh's laconic fashion. This falling-apart parallels with unforeseen acuity aspects of daily existence, the random, unsettled strand of time intersected by undigested happenings and partially-remembered details; by things seen; emotions felt; events half-noticed, and by expressions neither understood nor spoken.

From this perspective the actual structures from which drawings hang accost and detain the viewer in a replaying of animated experience but in three dimensions. Exhibited drawings seldom occupy space in this fashion, like a street where images are thrown out this way and that from architecture and screens on to a retina that captures, assesses in outline, selects or discards in order to move on. Mackintosh proposes the whirligig fairground of modern existence where the jangling mental soundtrack is provided by colour, line, light and movement.

The constructions are as much part of the work as the coloured drawings that hang from their horizontal members; they are not devices for showing. And like the drawings, they are filled with delight and surprise whether they lean against the gallery wall or occupy

the floor. As well as taking up space they occupy time by moving the visitor physically this way and that, around and behind, and take the eye from one level to another. Undeniably mobile in its conjecture, the presentation (Pageant? Parade? Miniature spectacle?) has arguably a slower pulse than that offered by the animation, partly because Mackintosh diverts attention with another dimension of making.

Wood is part of this artist's make-up; it has family provenance. That connection may have a bearing on Mackintosh's own work in wood. Produced as spontaneously as the drawings up to a few years ago, it resulted from a jigsaw routing out drawings in plywood; on other occasions drawings were carefully (and laboriously) re-crafted in oak veneer and hardwood marquetry. The artist thought of this practice as 'extending' an image no less inscrutable than those he now combines with oak frameworks. The contradiction of elaborating the banal remains no less reverberant.

Daily seeing and abstract forms interweave with alternating depth and flatness in drawings that adopt multiple manifestations. The imitation of human perception and consciousness may or may not be a project in Mackintosh's art. Yet, with the dull inevitable force with which a hypodermic needle punctures tissue, this artist gets below the surface to cause the viewer to reflect – on being, looking and thinking.

Comments by the artist are quoted from conversations and correspondence with the author, July 2010 – February 2011.

Martin Holman is a writer on modern and contemporary art currently based in Florence. Recent publications include monographs about British artists Terry Setch, Graham Crowley and Richard Rome (all published by Lund Humphries). He selected the first solo exhibition in Britain about the Italian arte povera artist Pino Pascali at Camden Arts Centre, London, in 2011.

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