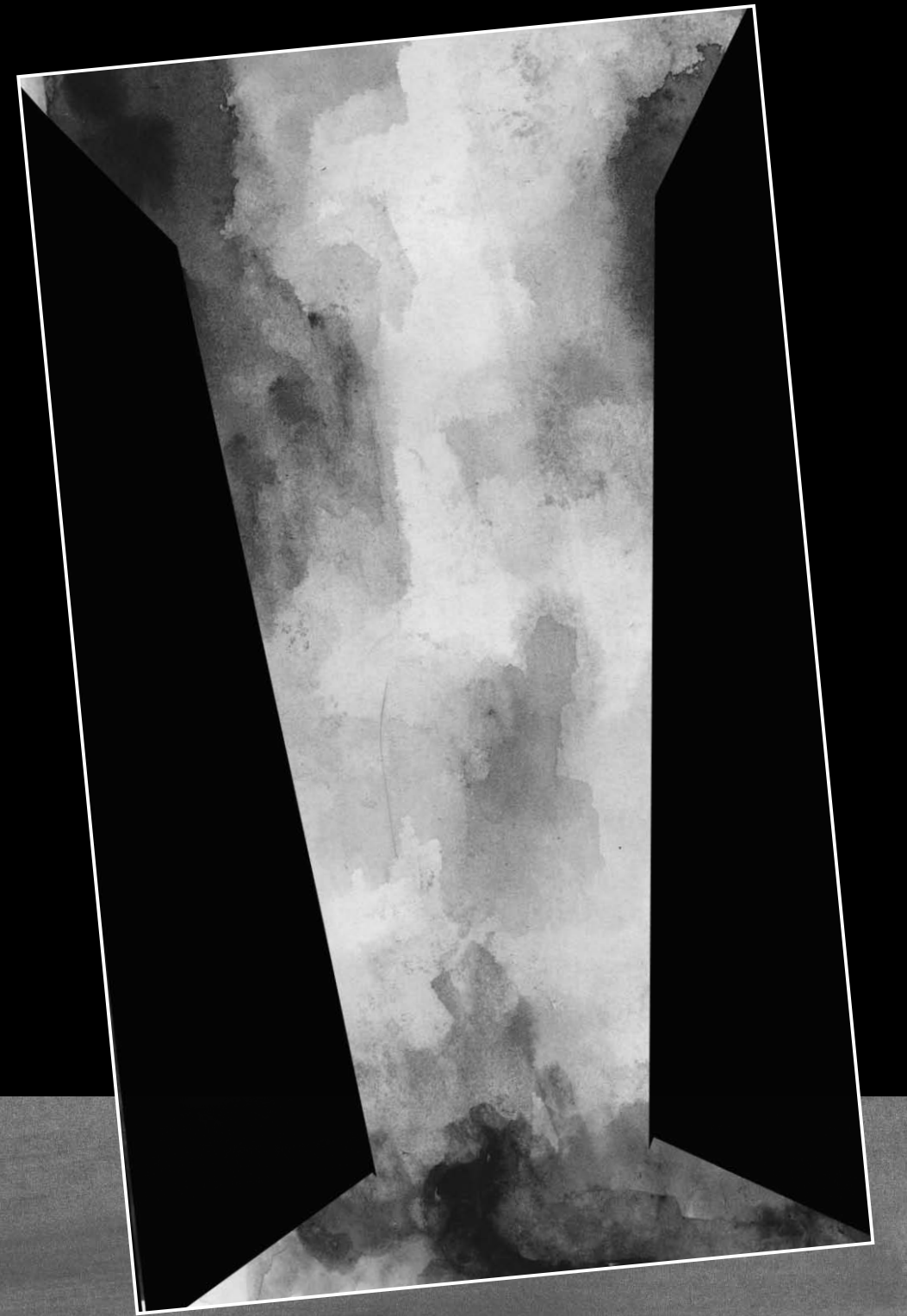


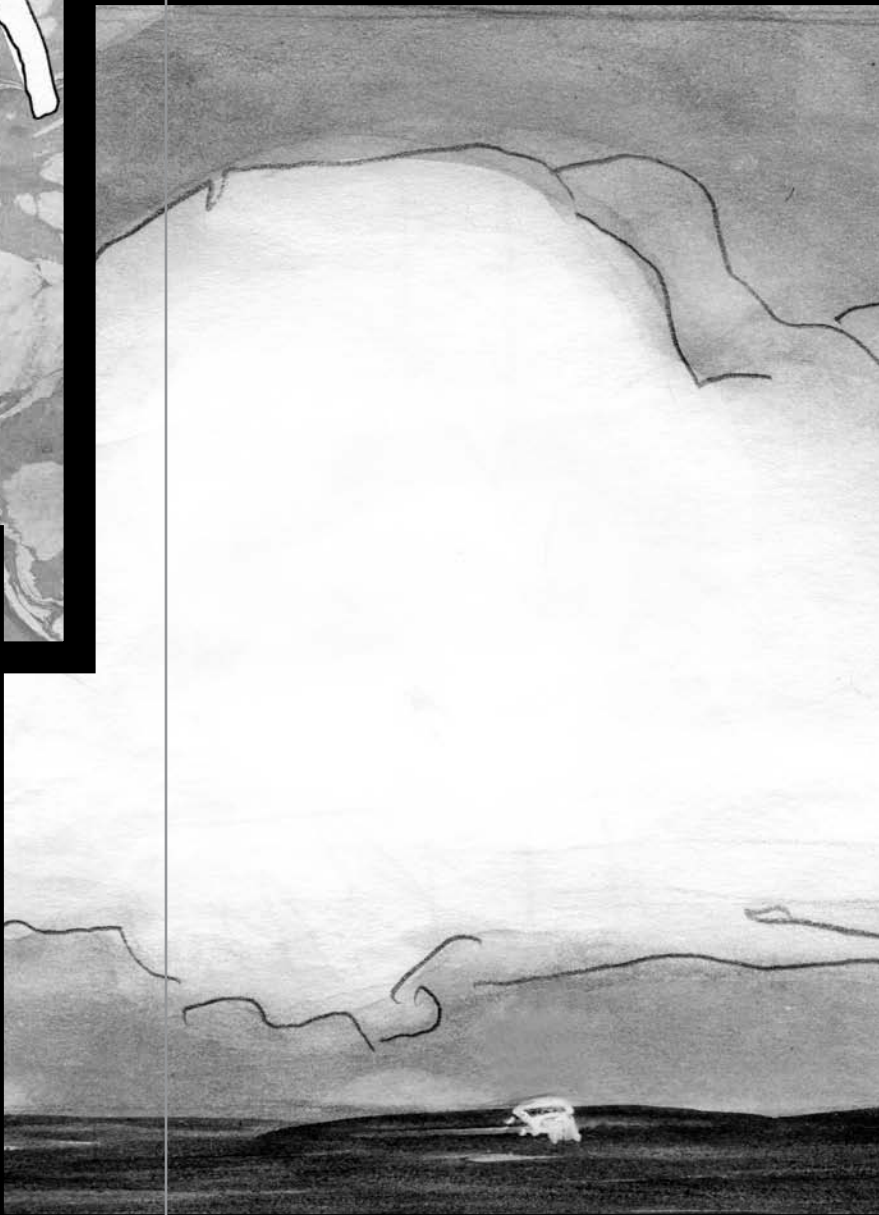
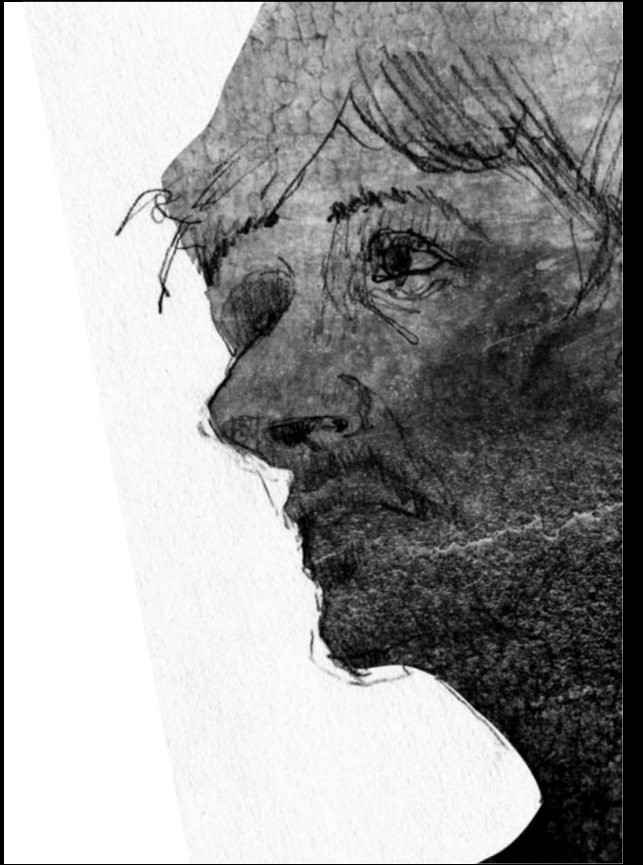
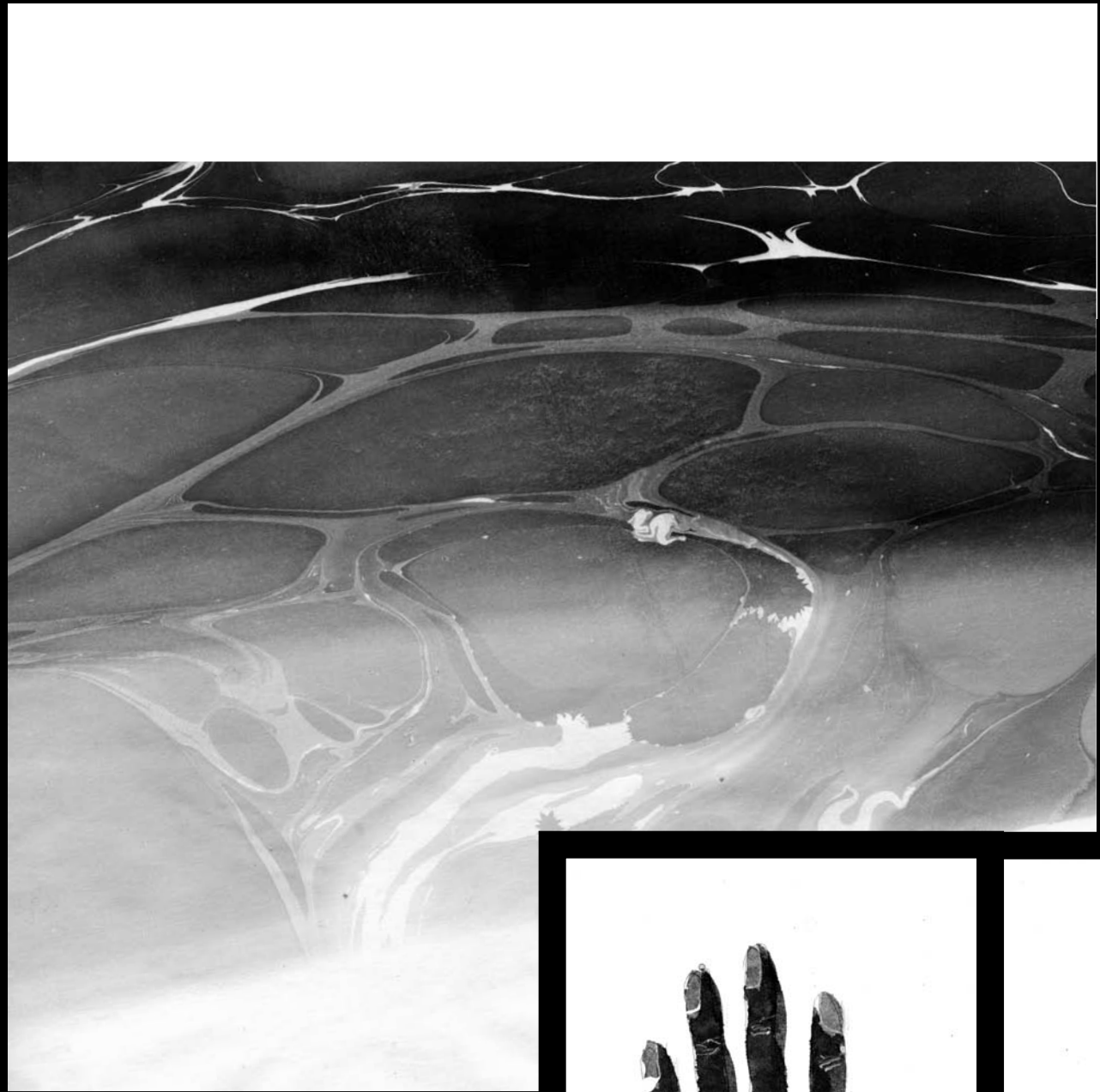
The Perennials

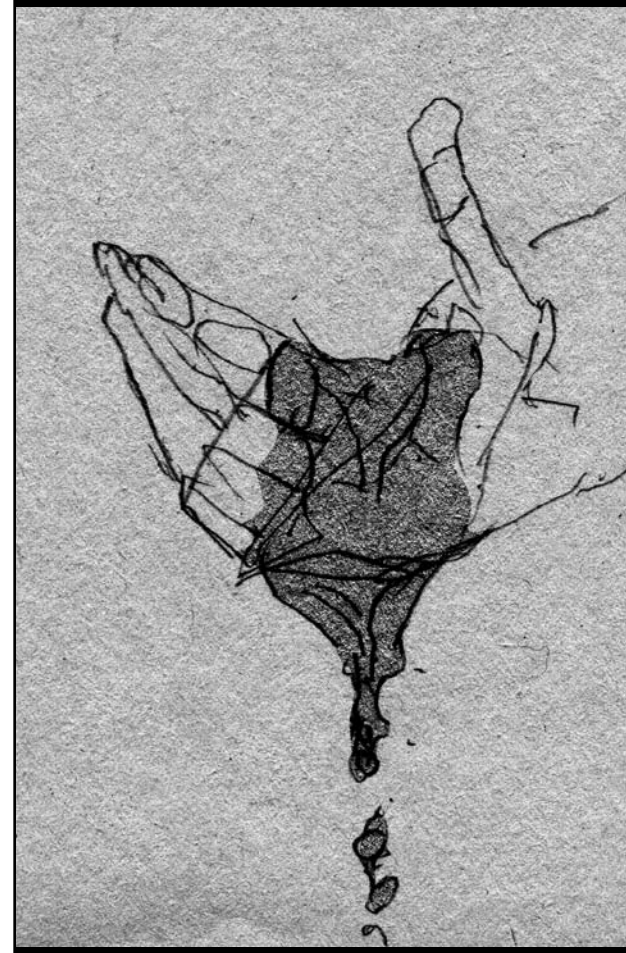
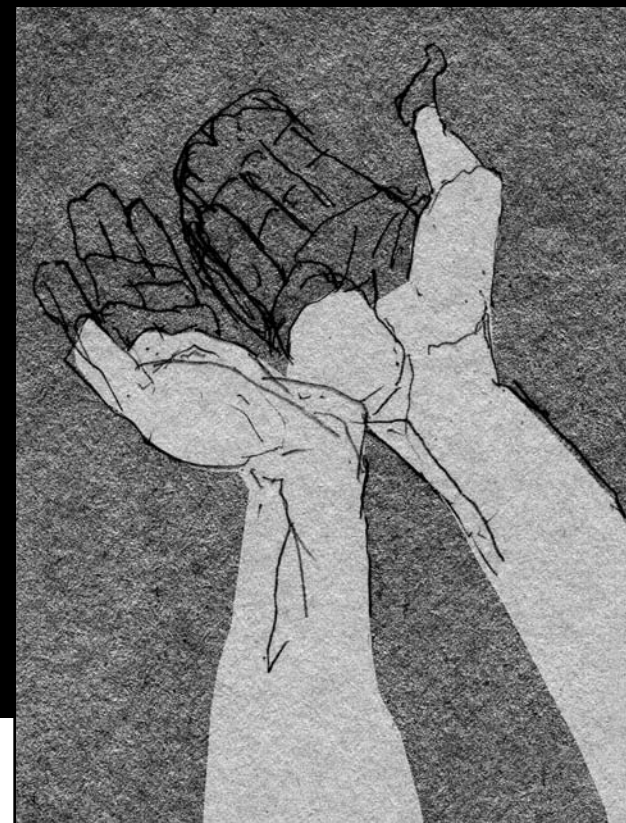
series I
BOOK I
JAINSCOUGH

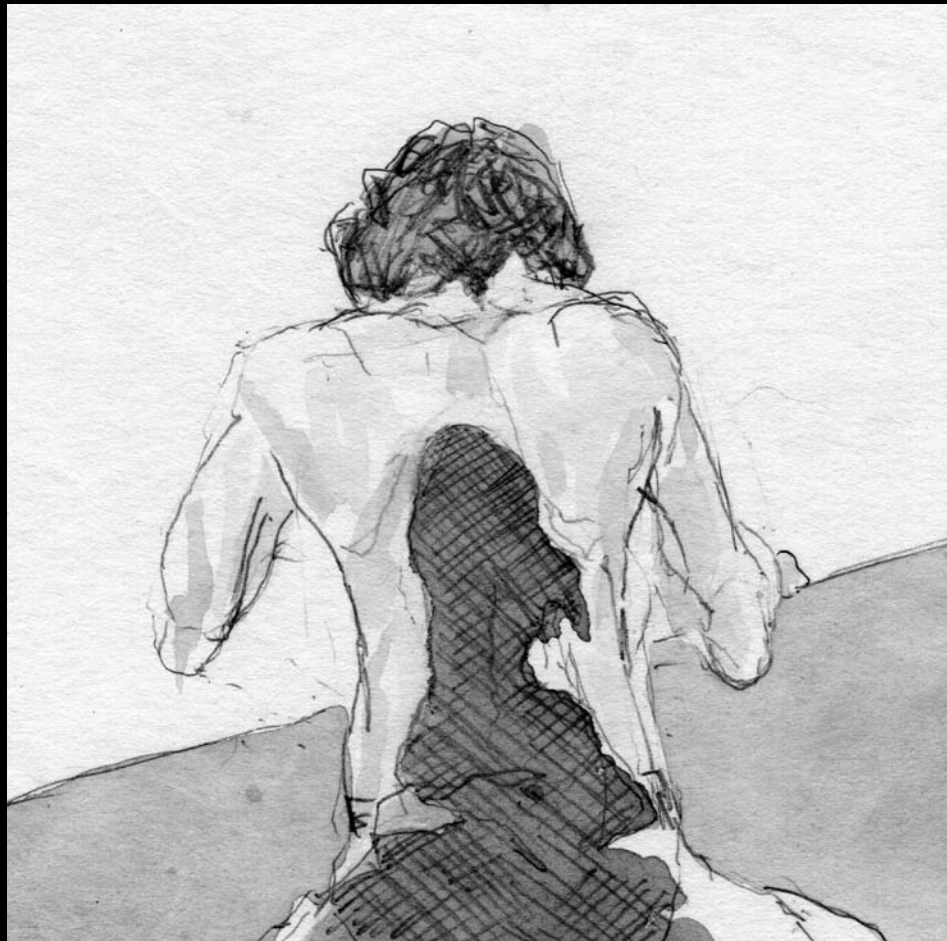


Adrift

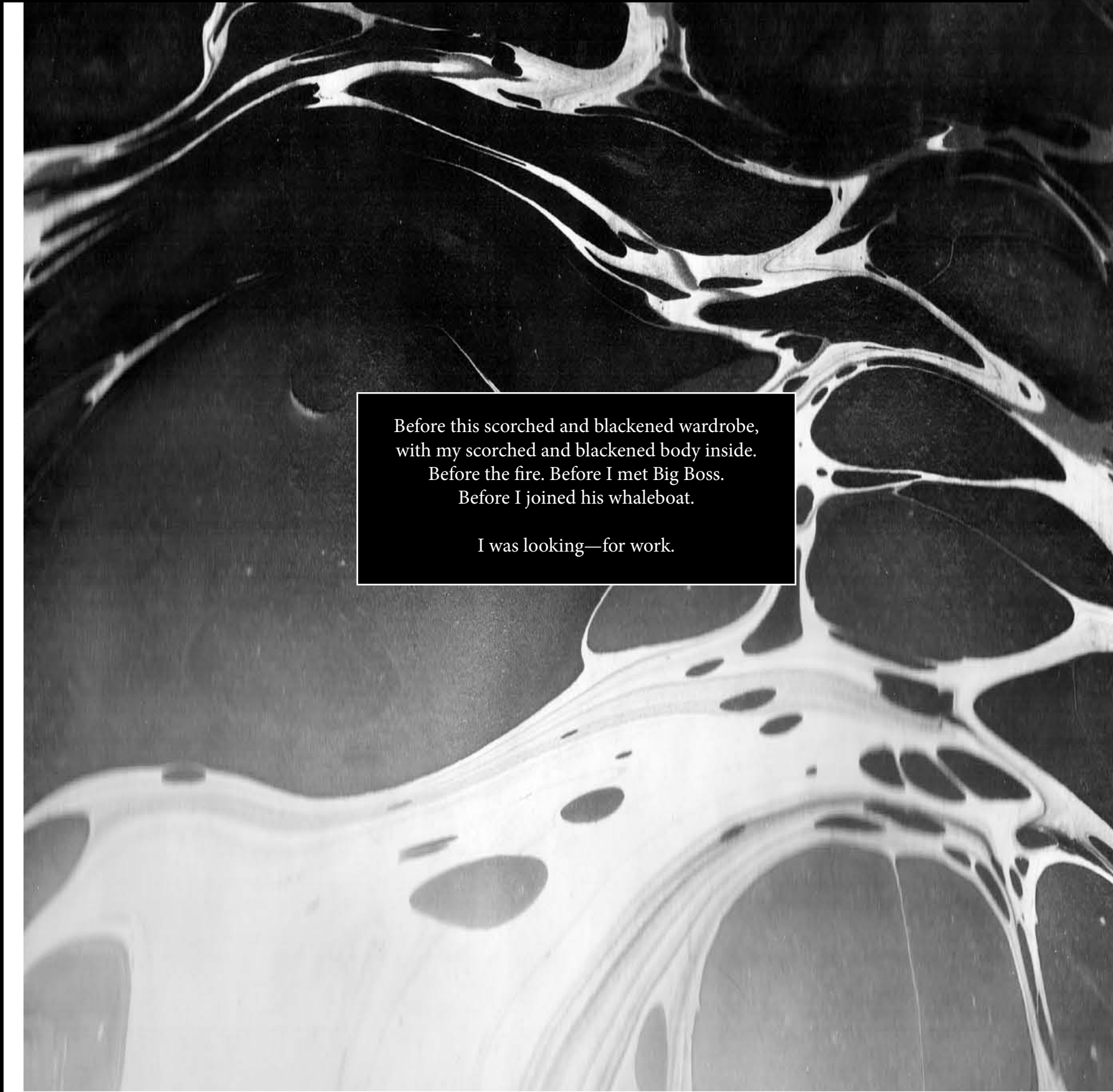








But before this.



Before this scorched and blackened wardrobe,
with my scorched and blackened body inside.
Before the fire. Before I met Big Boss.
Before I joined his whaleboat.

I was looking—for work.

Awash

One Year Prior.

My home was
an island

A single seed.

Calm. Quiet. Controlled.

Entirely mine.

It was a living thing.

It had a spirit, a soul.

My soul.

When I dreamed of life
with my husband, I never
imagined a house.

There was something
greedy, even lonely
about the idea.

But when we built our
home it became more than
a thing to be possessed.

And when I cleaned,
I maintained it—

—and it maintained me.



It protected me.

And in many ways—

—it owned me.



Endless walls,
floors, ceilings.

TWO

Overlapping,
creasing, looping.

Pushing me
further.

Deeper within.
Inside.

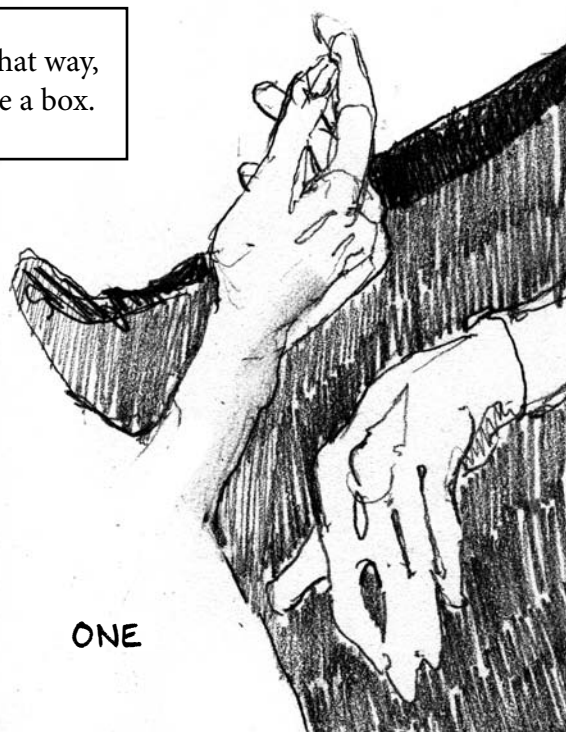
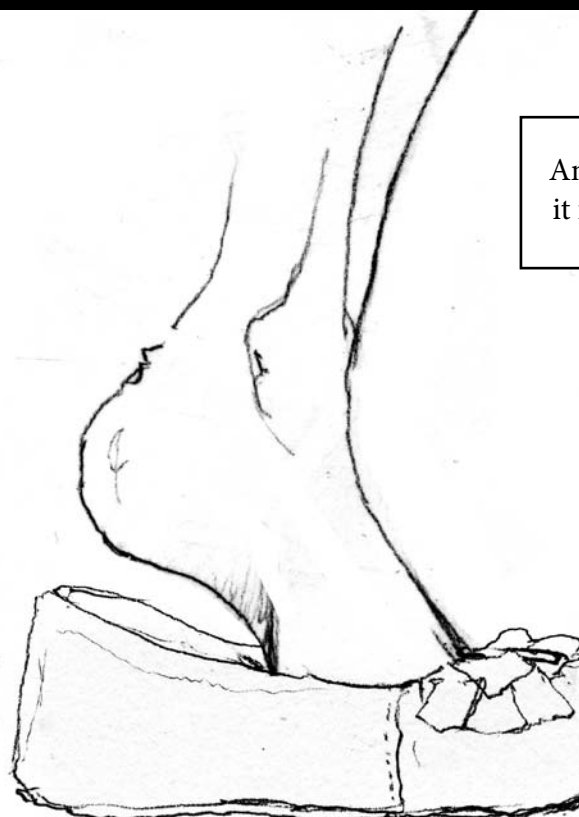


THREE

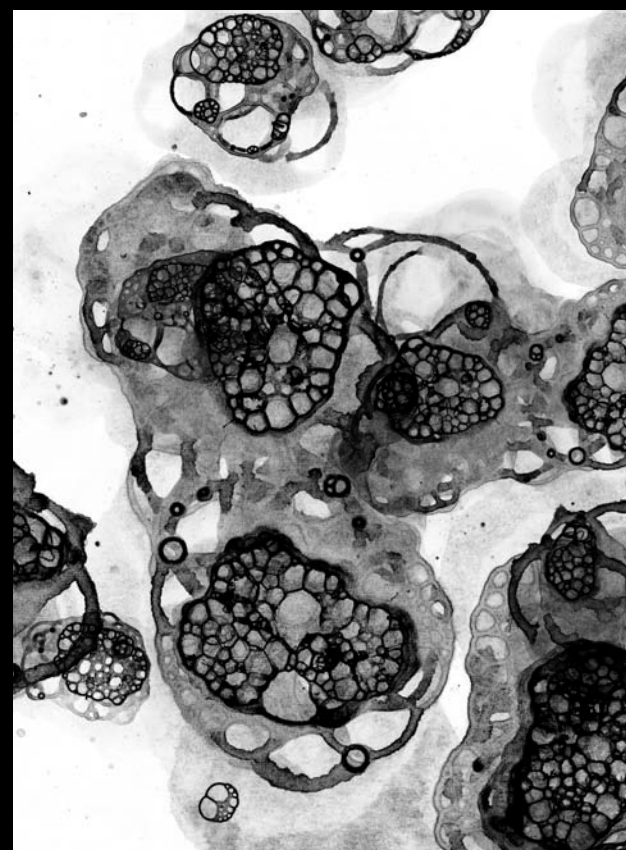
A soul, but
only a soul,
surrounded
in itself.



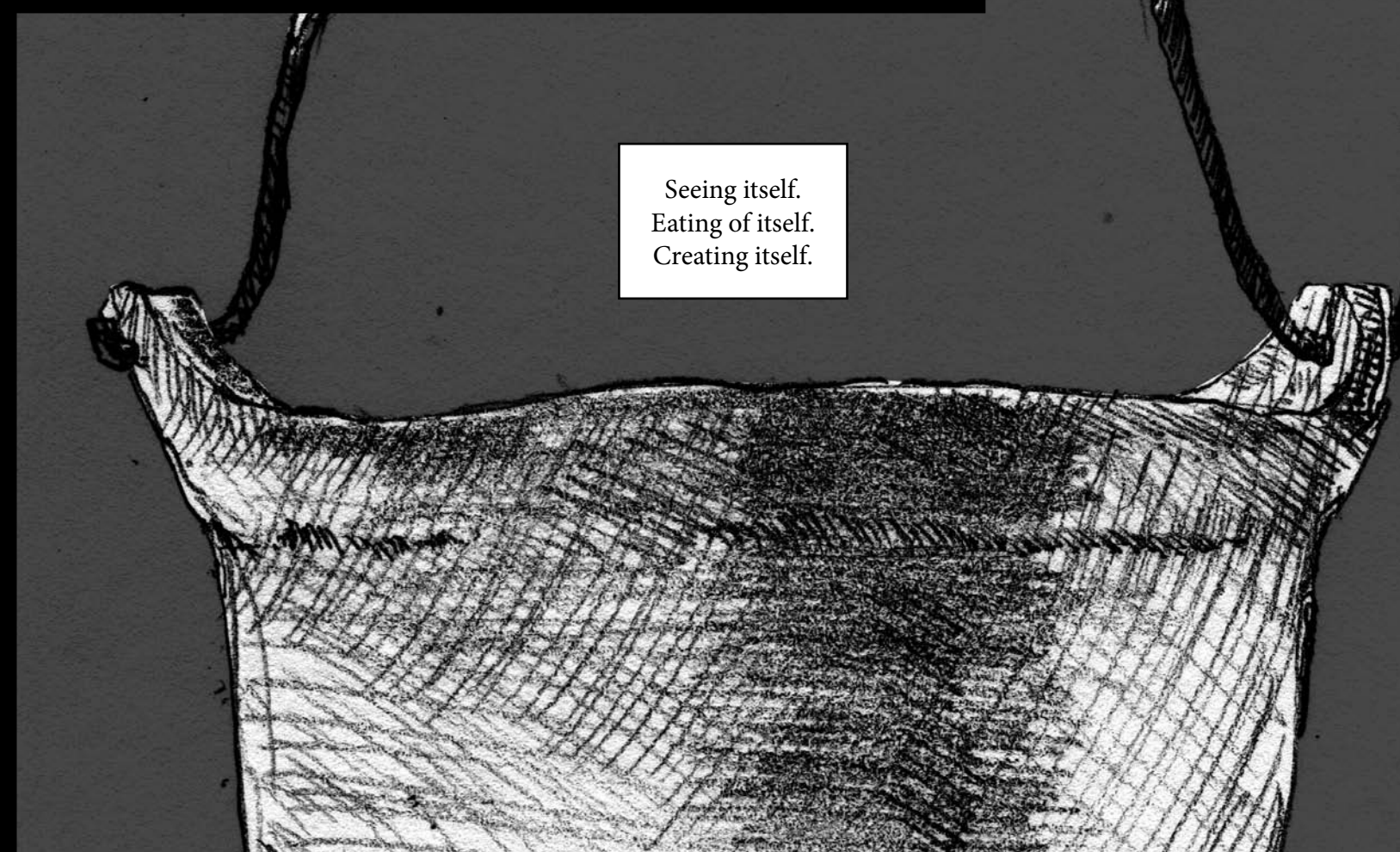
And in that way,
it felt like a box.

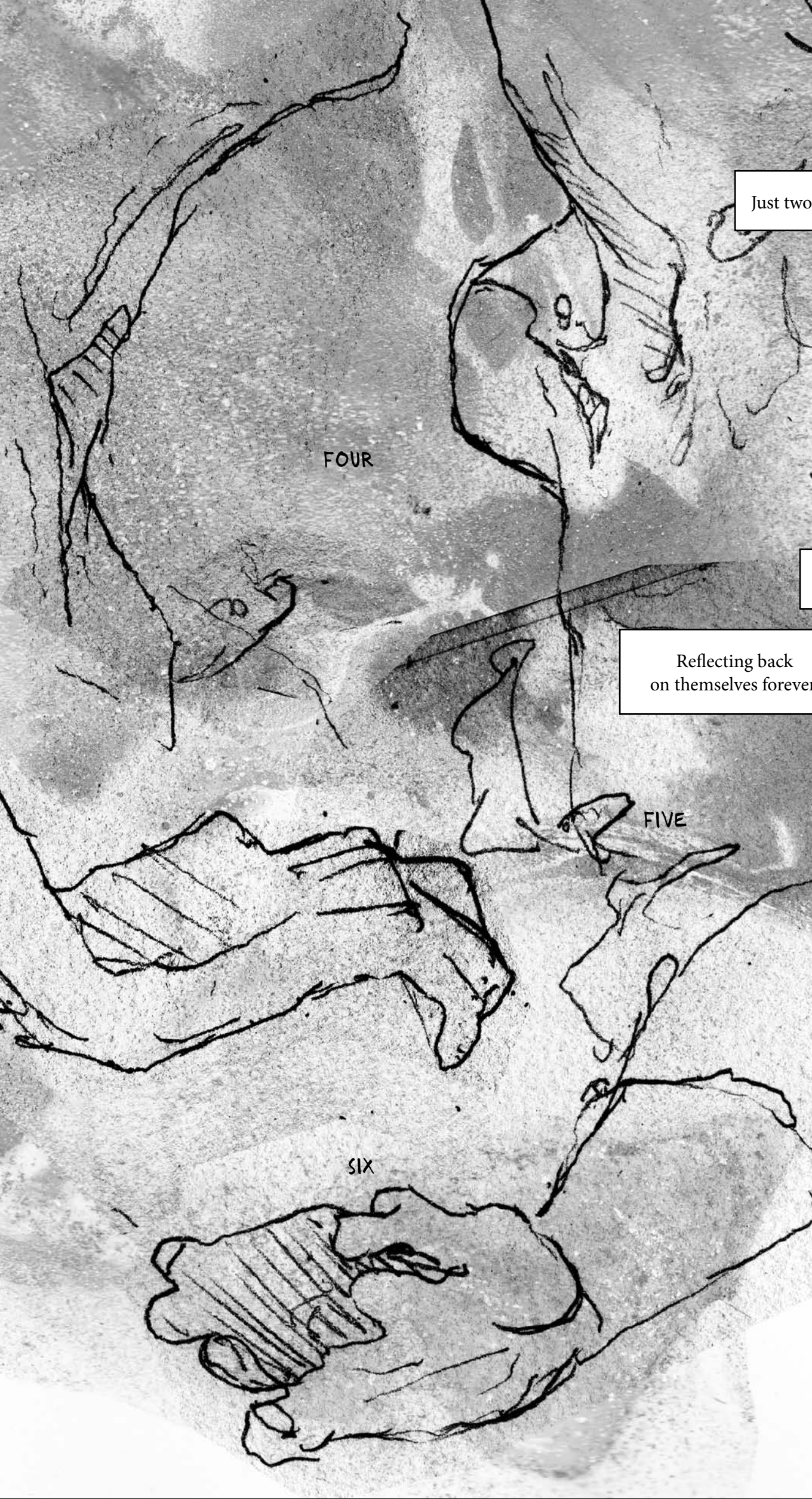


ONE



Seeing itself.
Eating of itself.
Creating itself.

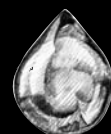




Just two mirrors.

Facing each other.

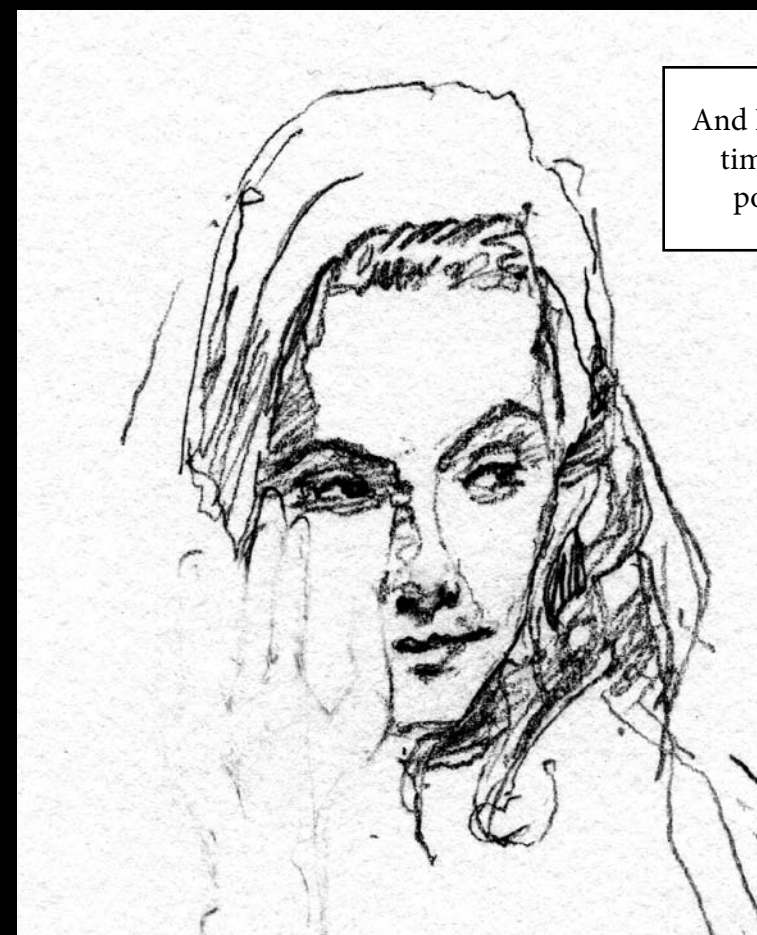
Reflecting back
on themselves forever.



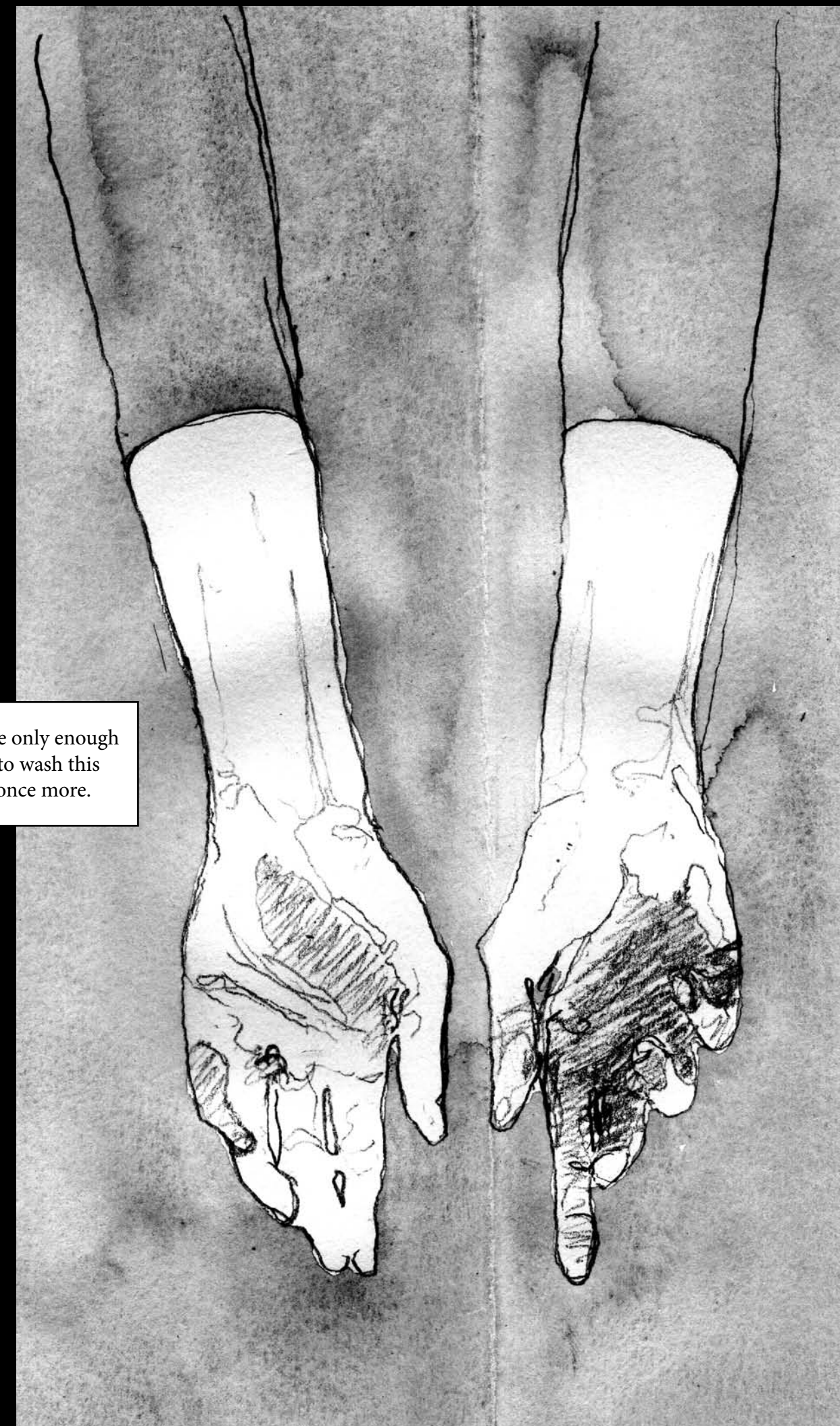
I needed to focus.



My husband
would be home soon.



And I've only enough
time to wash this
pot once more.



Follows

My wife was
expecting me.

But I followed the
woman through the park.

A schedule that I'd now memorized.
Perhaps more then memorized—
internalized and made into my own.

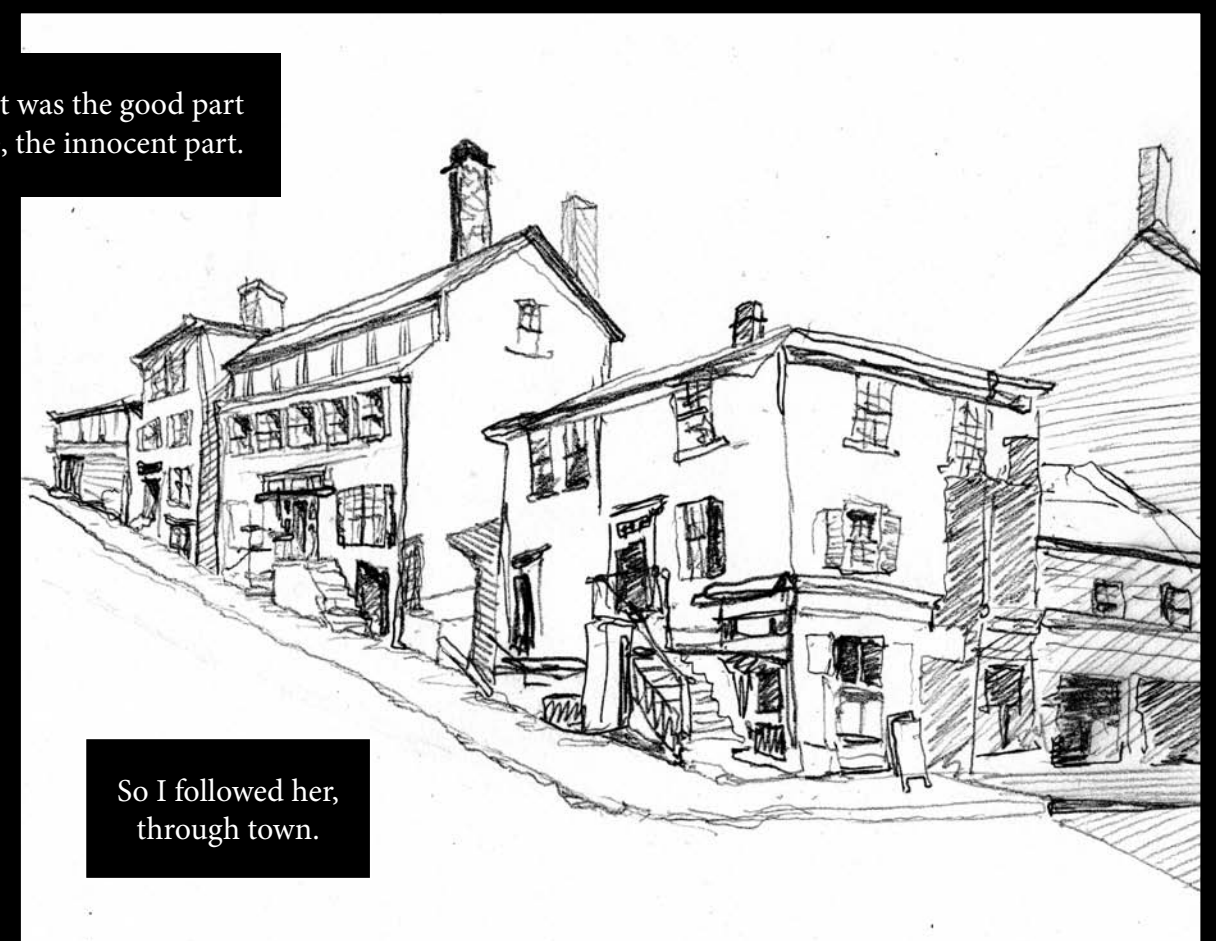
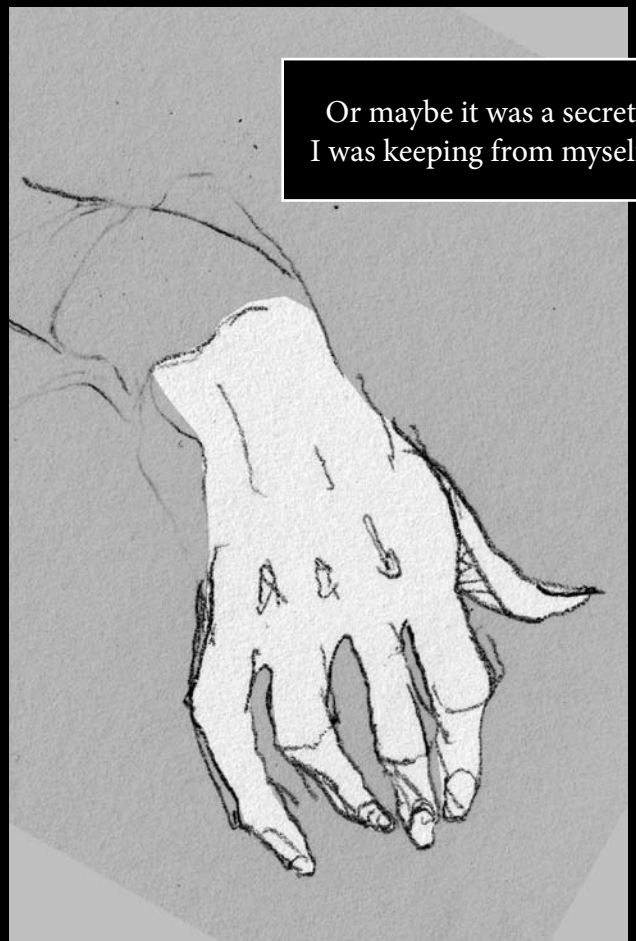
Why did I follow her?
Why her? I don't know.

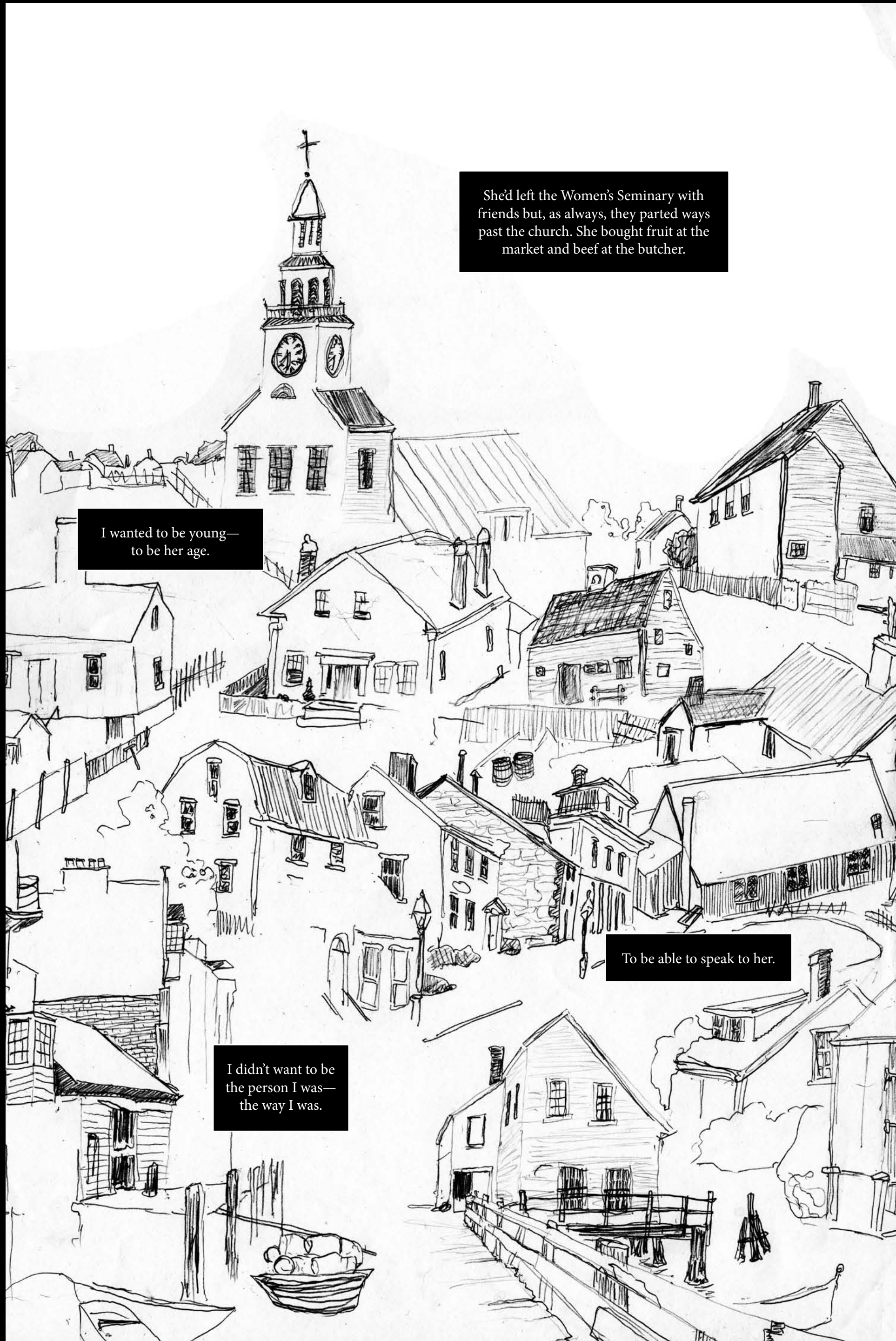
Or maybe it was a secret
I was keeping from myself.

Seeing her calmed me.
When I hadn't seen her
and I thought of her,
some part of me ached.

And it was the good part
of me, the innocent part.

So I followed her,
through town.





She'd left the Women's Seminary with friends but, as always, they parted ways past the church. She bought fruit at the market and beef at the butcher.

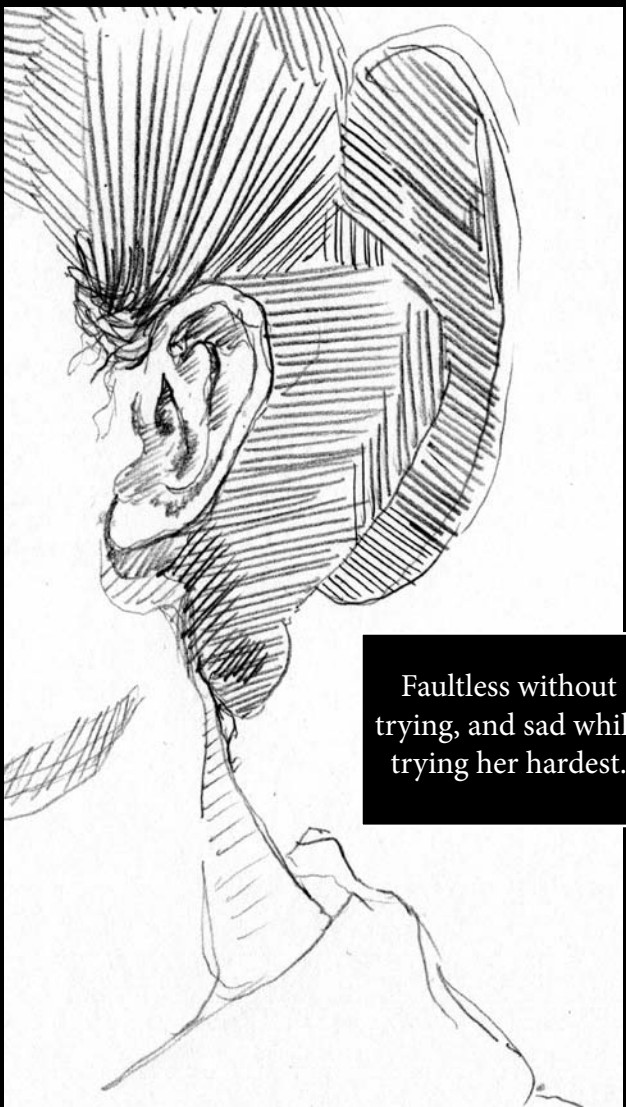
I wanted to be young—to be her age.

To be able to speak to her.

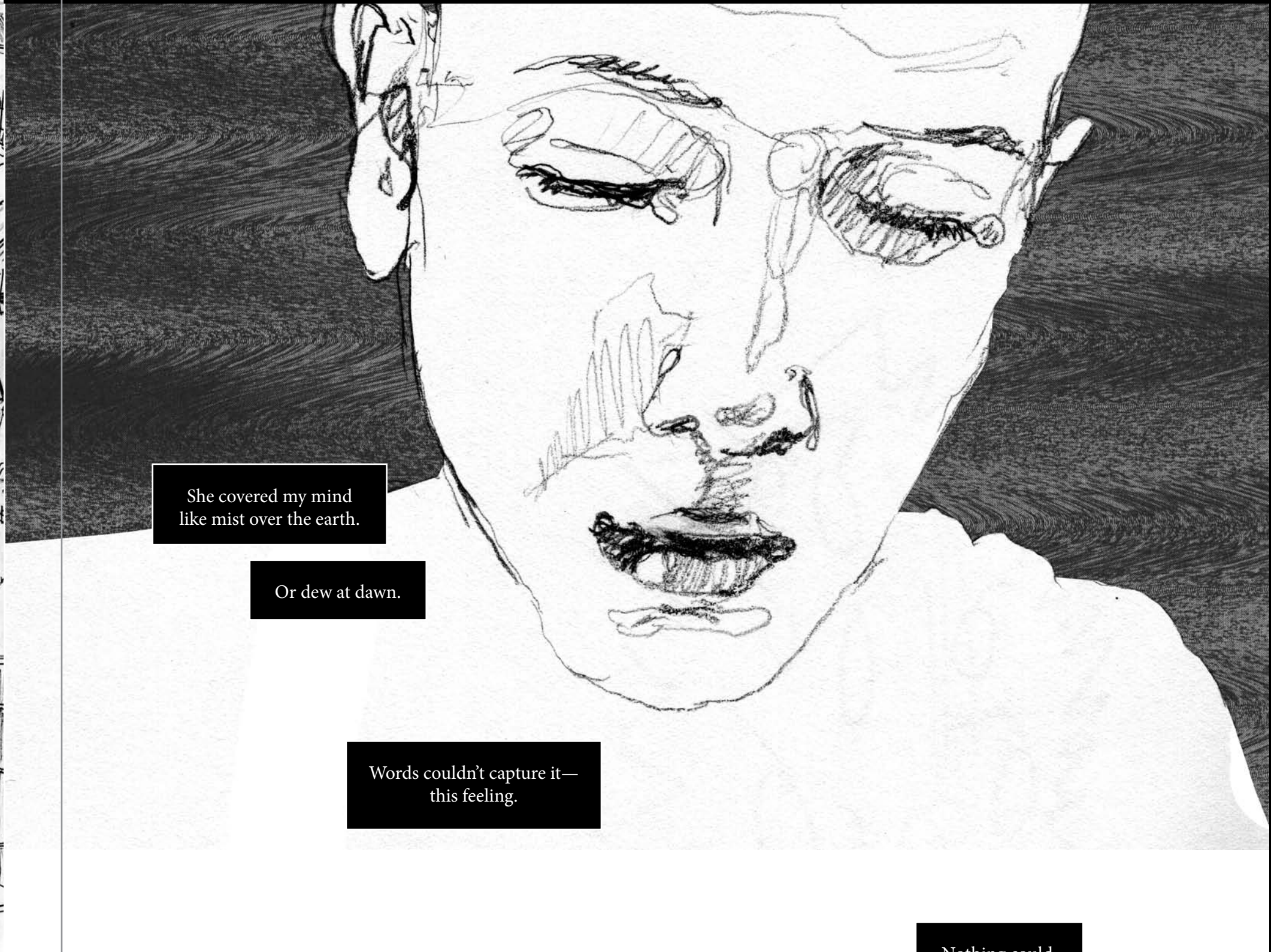
I didn't want to be the person I was—the way I was.



She moved casually, like a soothing breeze.



Faultless without trying, and sad while trying her hardest.



She covered my mind like mist over the earth.

Or dew at dawn.

Words couldn't capture it—this feeling.

Nothing could.



I followed
her home.

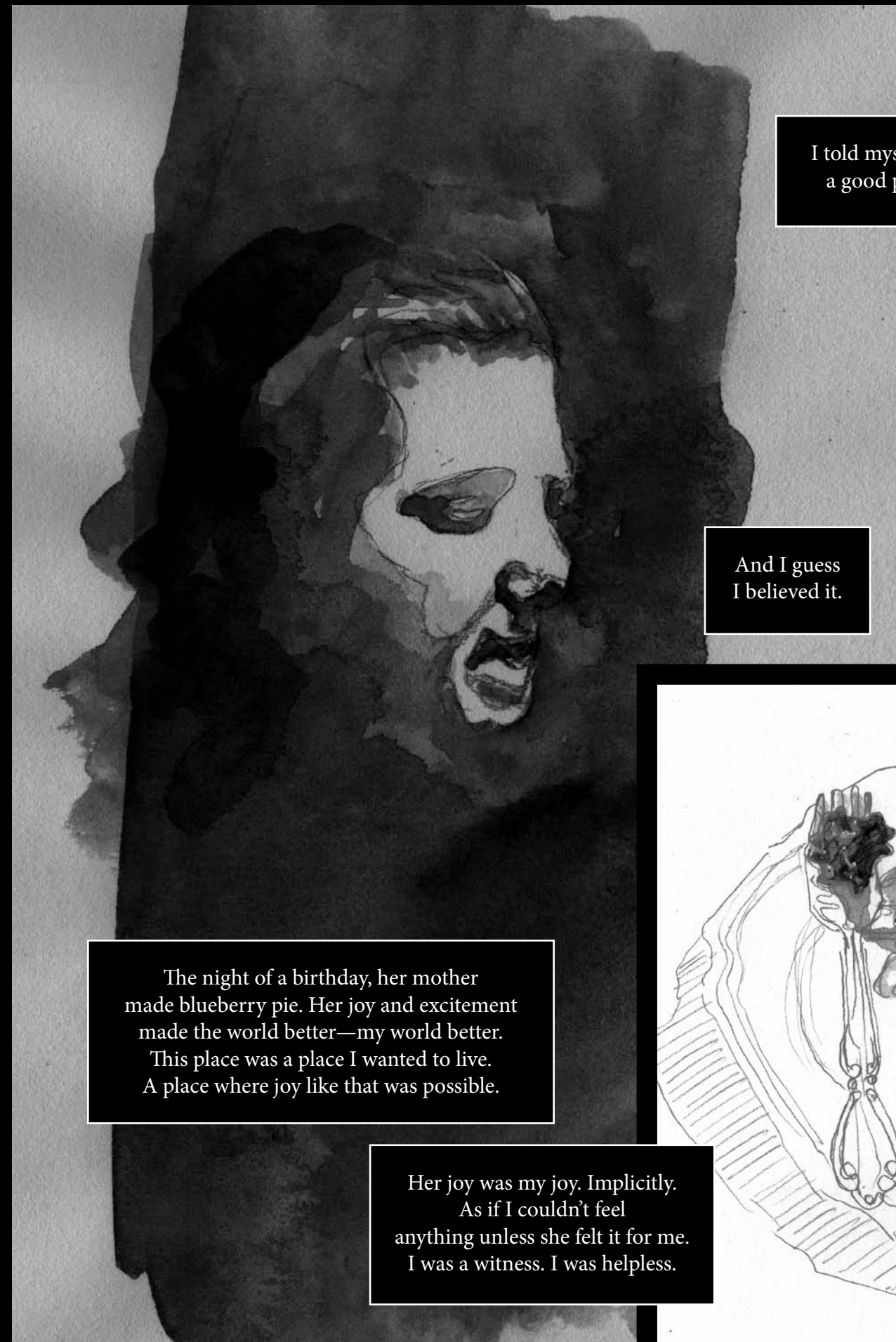
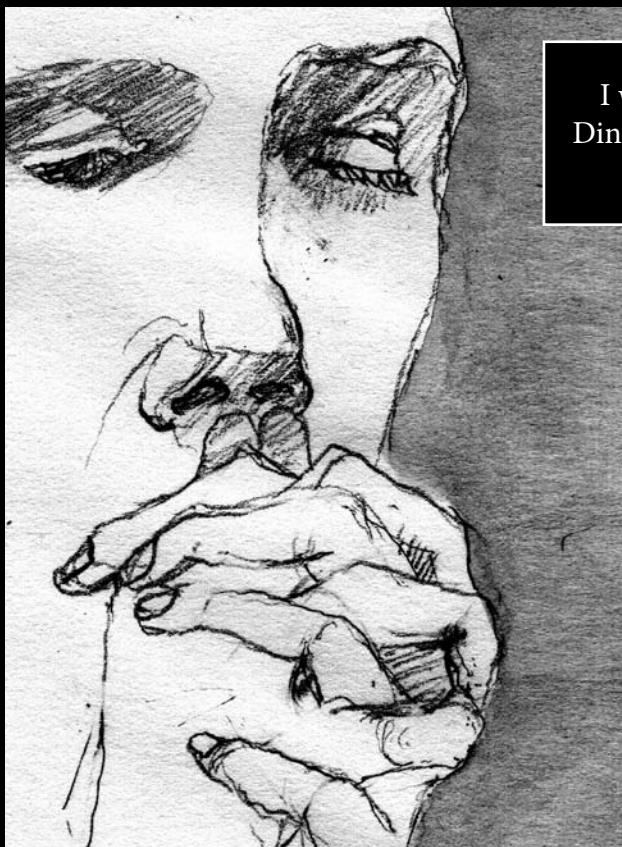


*I would get past this,
if I would just **speak**
to her, I think to myself.*

but no sooner do I
finish the thought—
I recoil.

Have any words passed
closer between Satan's
lips and my ears?

I watched her pass time.
Dinner with family. Reading
and school work.



I told myself I was
a good person.

And I guess
I believed it.

The night of a birthday, her mother
made blueberry pie. Her joy and excitement
made the world better—my world better.
This place was a place I wanted to live.
A place where joy like that was possible.

Her joy was my joy. Implicitly.
As if I couldn't feel
anything unless she felt it for me.
I was a witness. I was helpless.



She folded clothes.



Washed dishes.

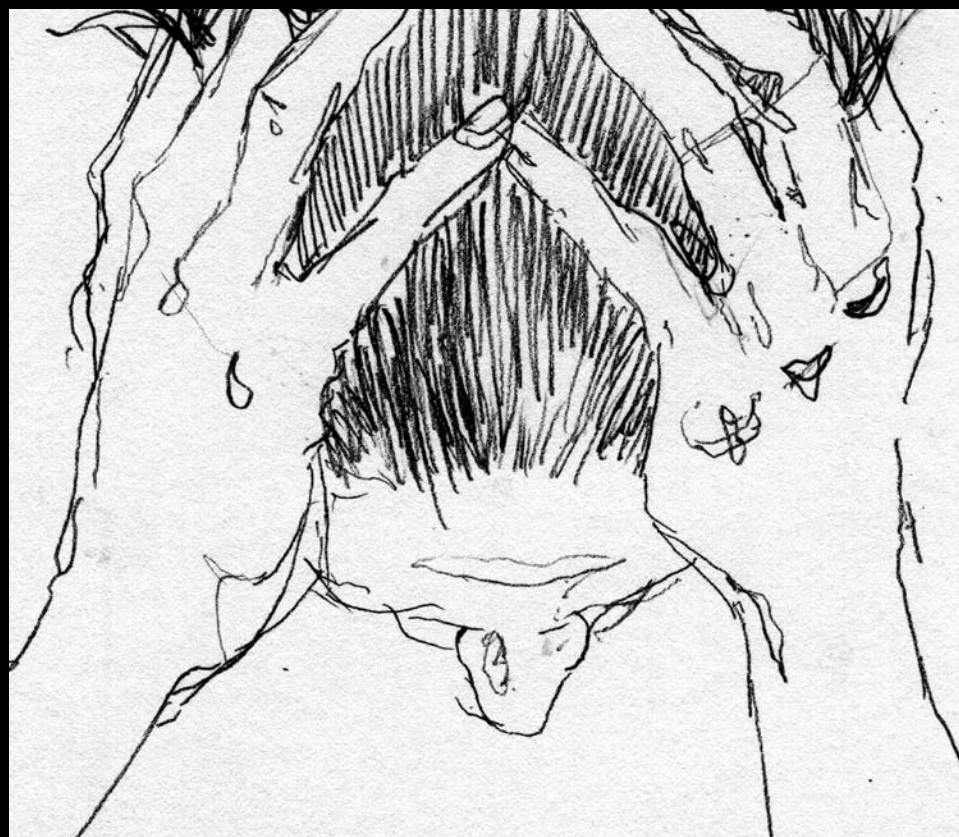
Paused for a moment,
lost in thought.



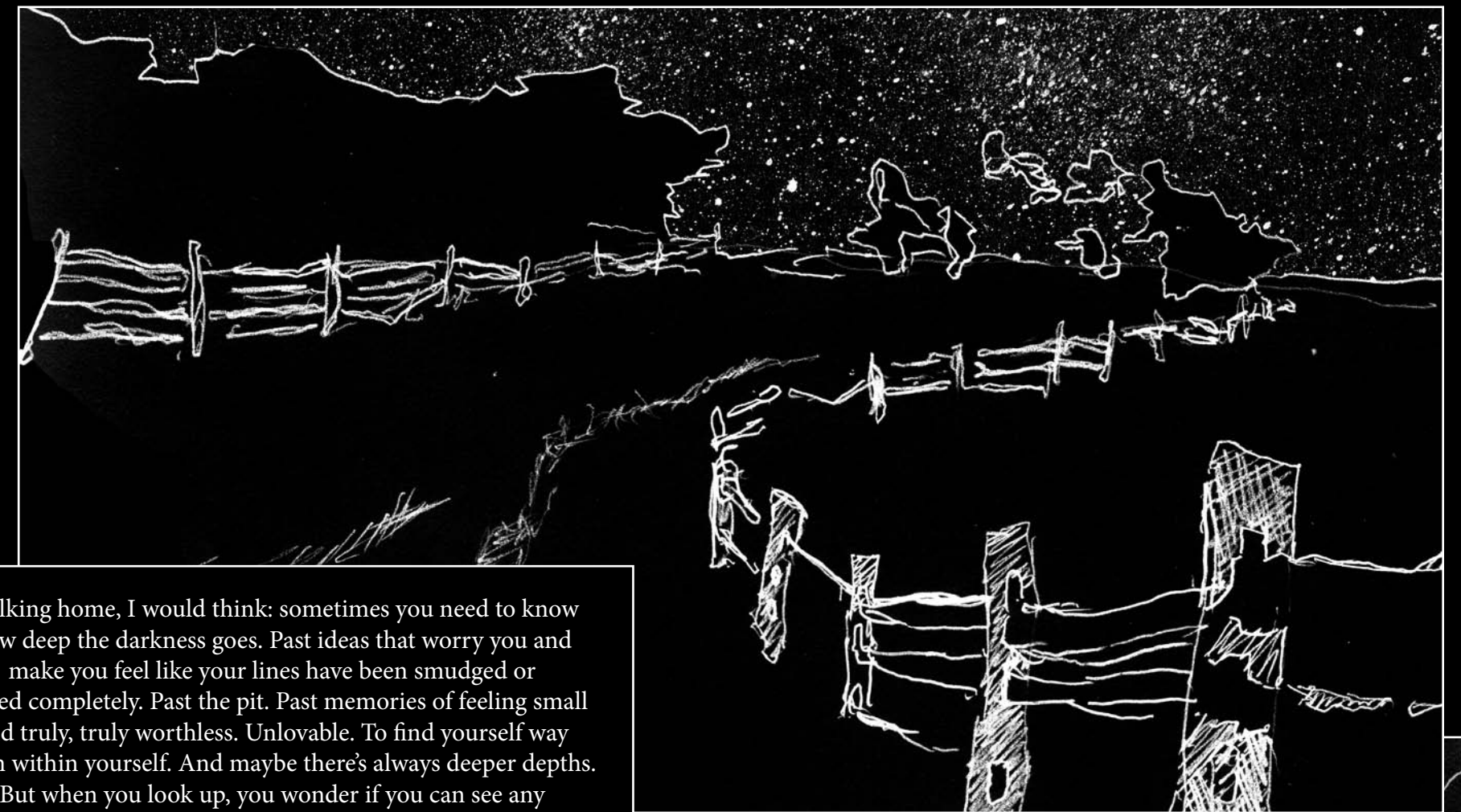
And in those moments
I saw my reflection in the
windows and it struck me—

—how frightening
I must have looked.

Hidden in the shadows. Lowly. Cruel.



I wanted to be dead. Or born again.
Or never born in the first place.



Walking home, I would think: sometimes you need to know
how deep the darkness goes. Past ideas that worry you and
make you feel like your lines have been smudged or
erased completely. Past the pit. Past memories of feeling small
and truly, truly worthless. Unlovable. To find yourself way
down within yourself. And maybe there's always deeper depths.
But when you look up, you wonder if you can see any
light peeking in from where you started.

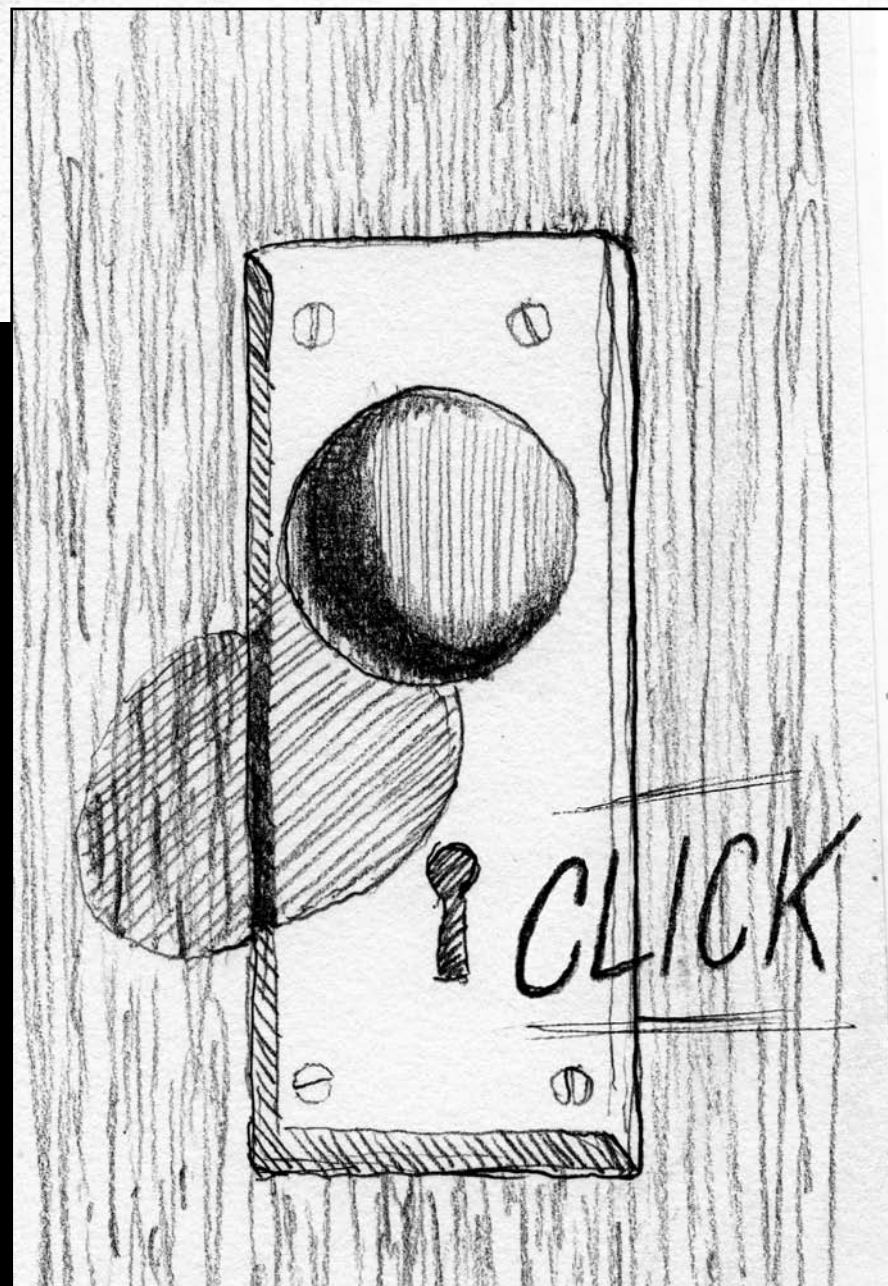
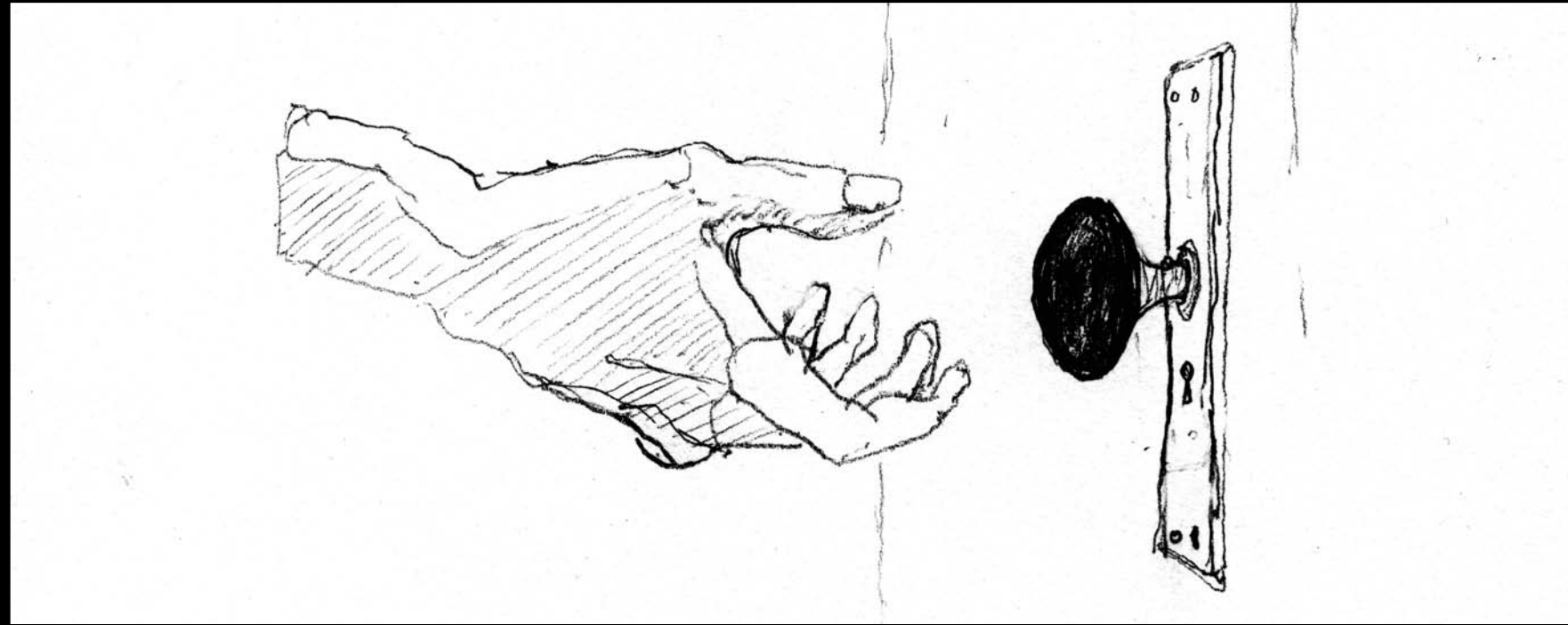


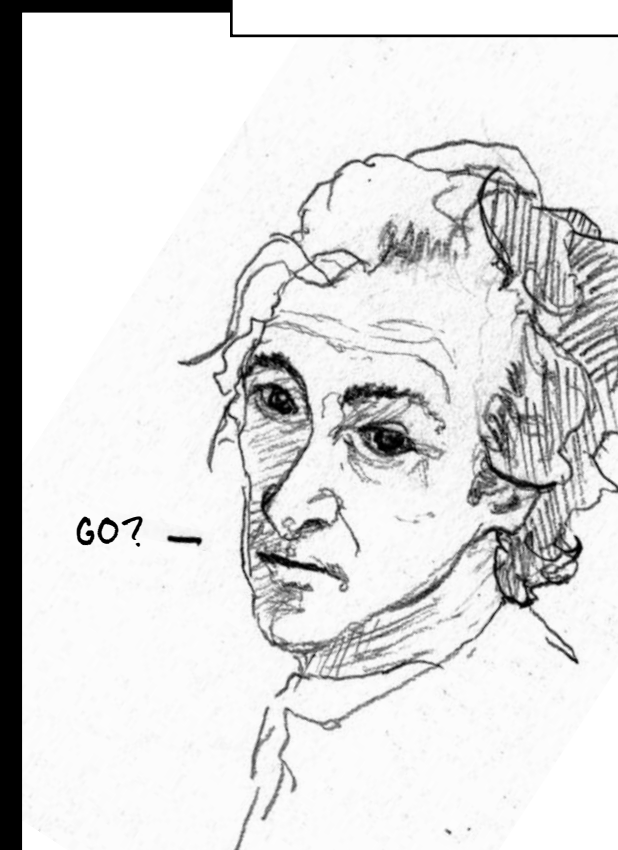
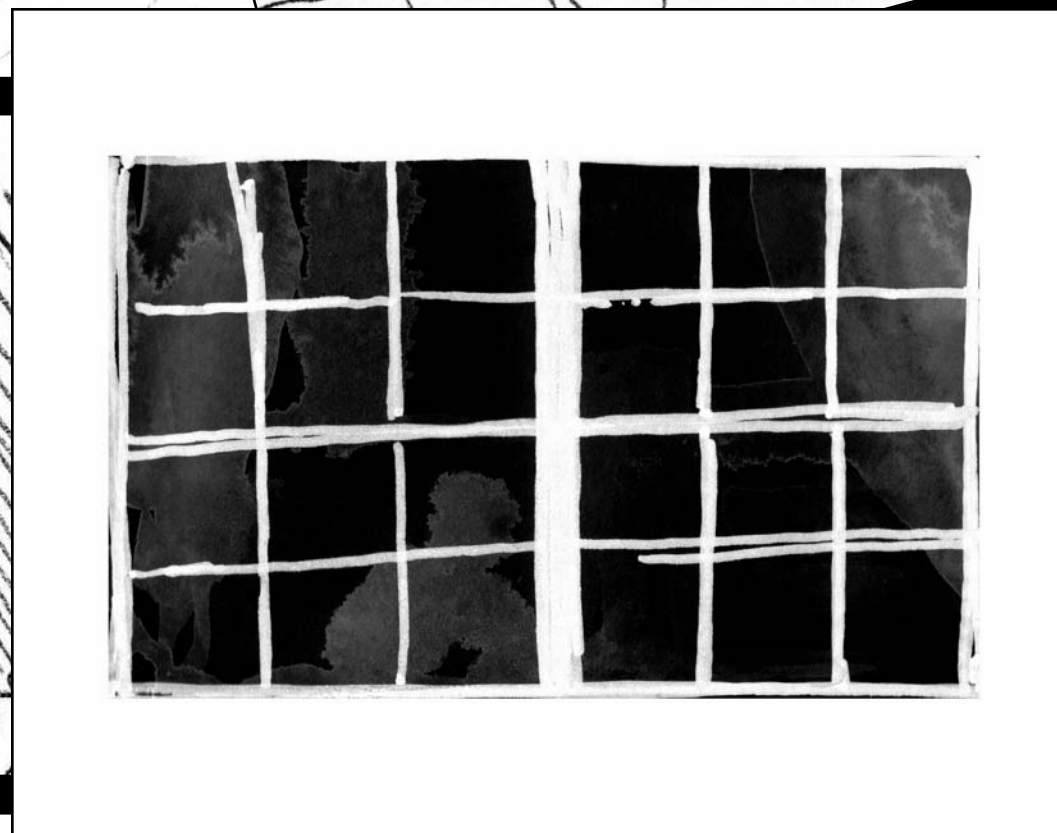
You can be crushed by depth as
pressure builds. Strange things happen.
You can become less than yourself,
something less than a person.

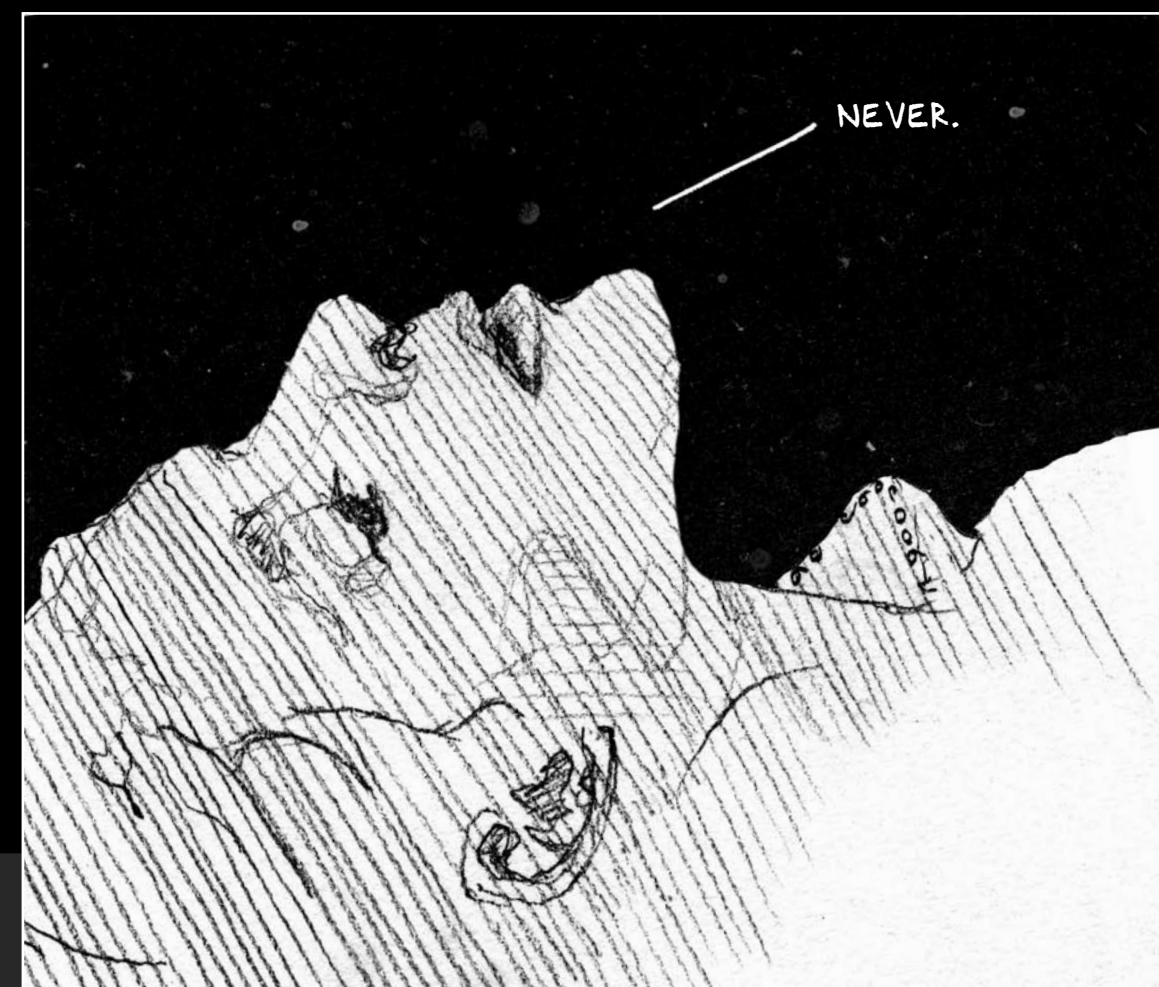
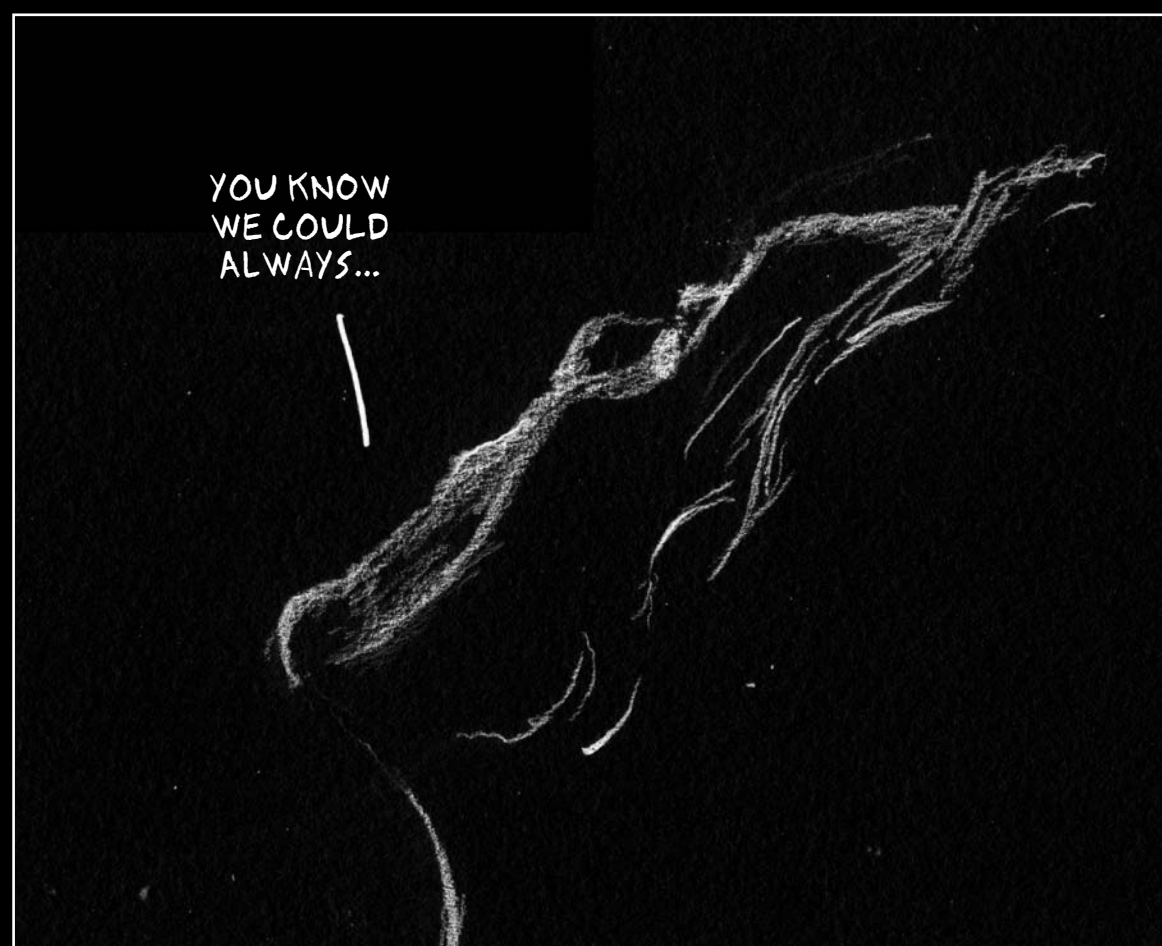
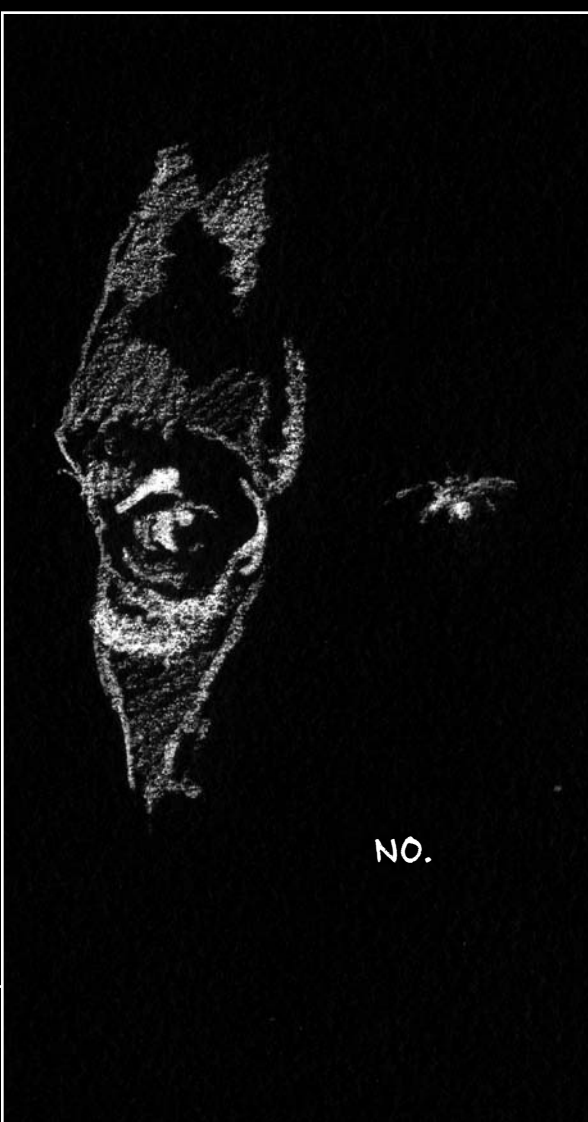


Its utter completeness was astounding.
Like standing on the shore and trying
to imagine the entire ocean. I could
overcome it with time, the same way I could
drink the whole ocean in time. Only now
I couldn't manage to swallow a sip.

Home

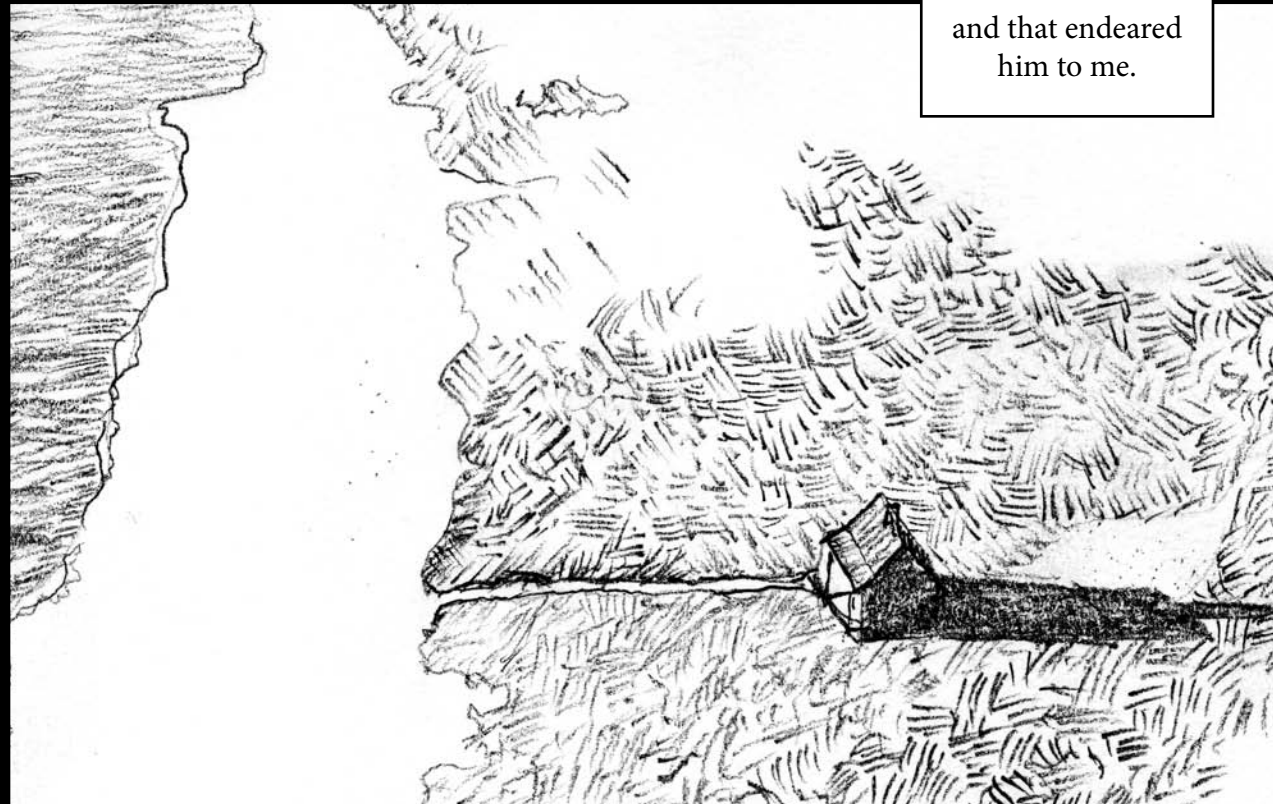






He was hard to love,

and that endeared
him to me.



He could be distant, sometimes.
Never manipulative. He didn't
flatter, or coax, or connive.
He was honest.

Sometimes
alarmingly so...



DO YOU
EVER FEEL
STUCK?



— HERE?



NO.
STUCK IN A
THOUGHT?



NO.
I GUESS NOT.

But that was a lie.
In some caustic way I was
always stuck in a thought.



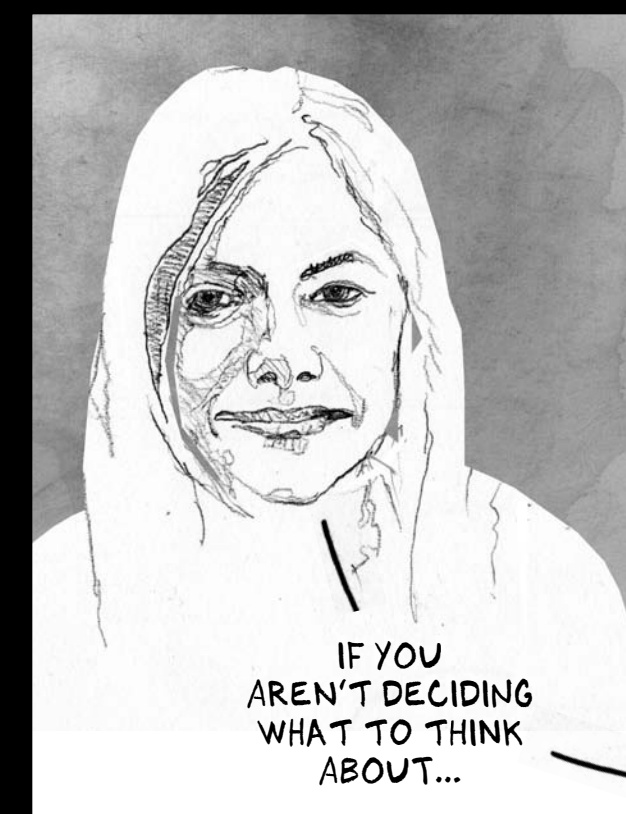
WHAT ARE YOU
STUCK ON?



I JUST FEEL
LIKE, SOMETIMES,
I CAN'T PICK WHAT
I THINK OF.



WELL...

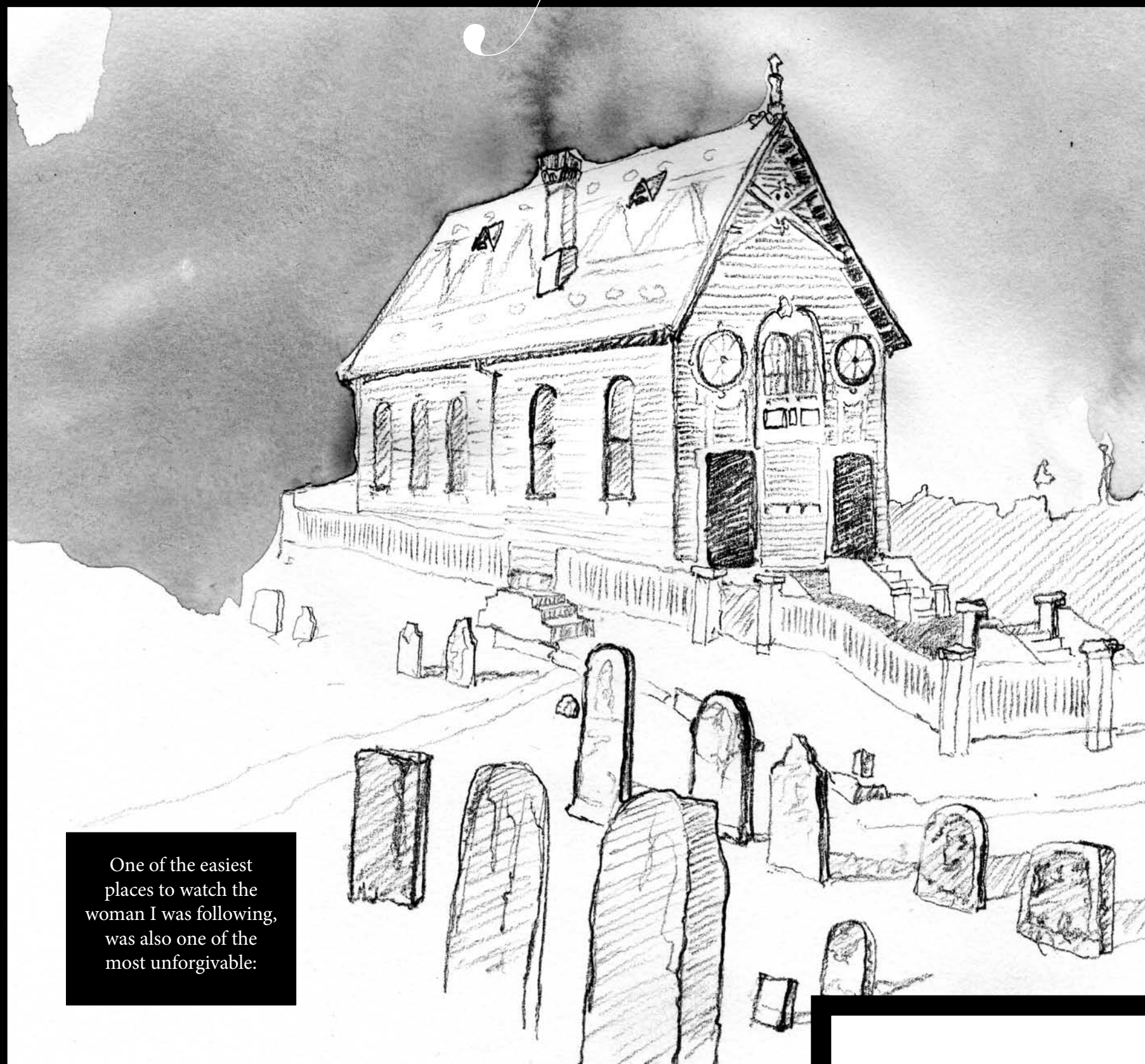


IF YOU
AREN'T DECIDING
WHAT TO THINK
ABOUT...



WHO IS?

Away



One of the easiest places to watch the woman I was following, was also one of the most unforgivable:



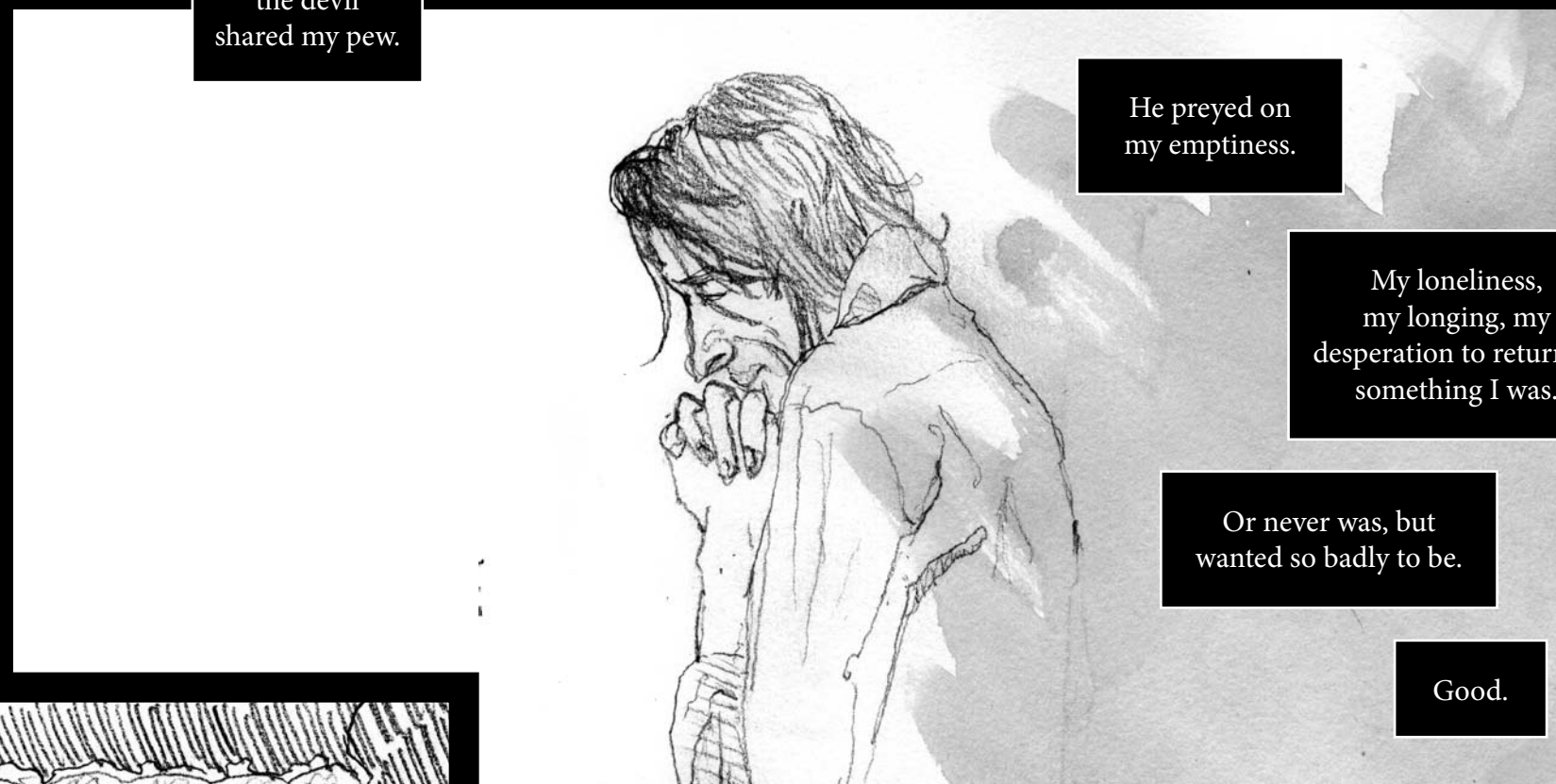
her church.

She was so absorbed by it —she was lost.

And I, in turn, was lost in her.



In church, the devil shared my pew.



He preyed on my emptiness.

My loneliness, my longing, my desperation to return to something I was.

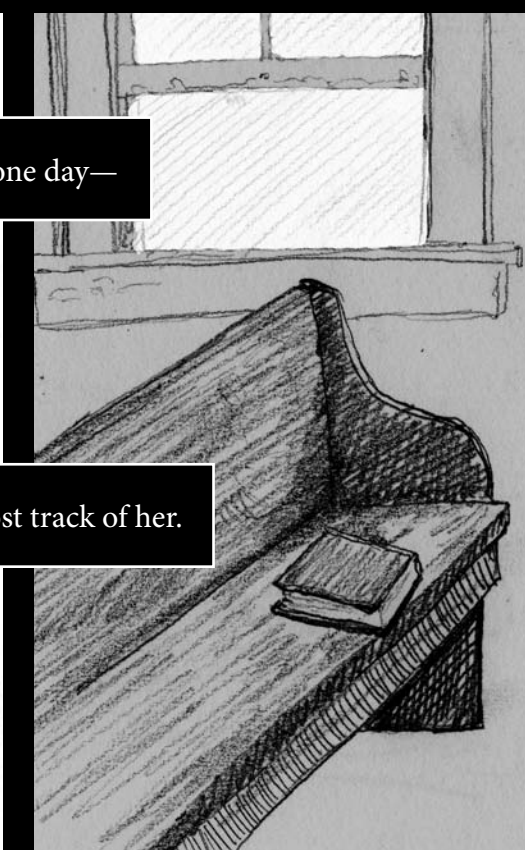
Or never was, but wanted so badly to be.

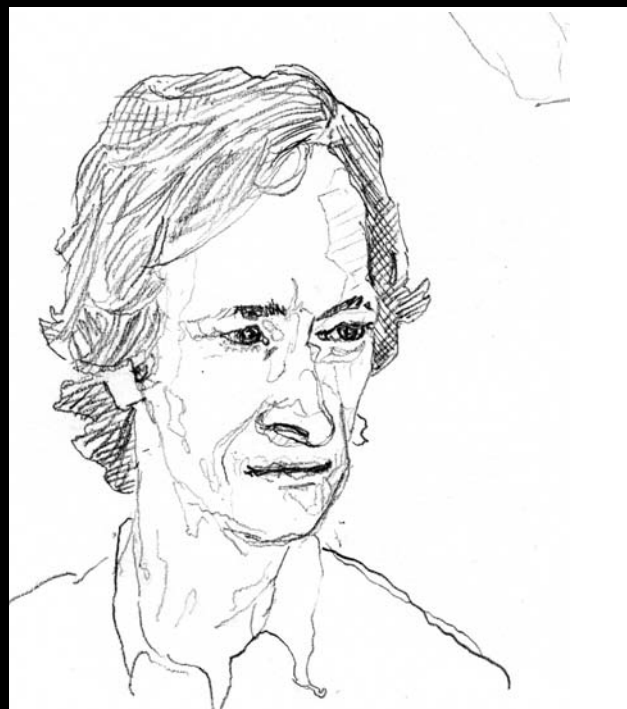
Good.



Only one day—

I lost track of her.

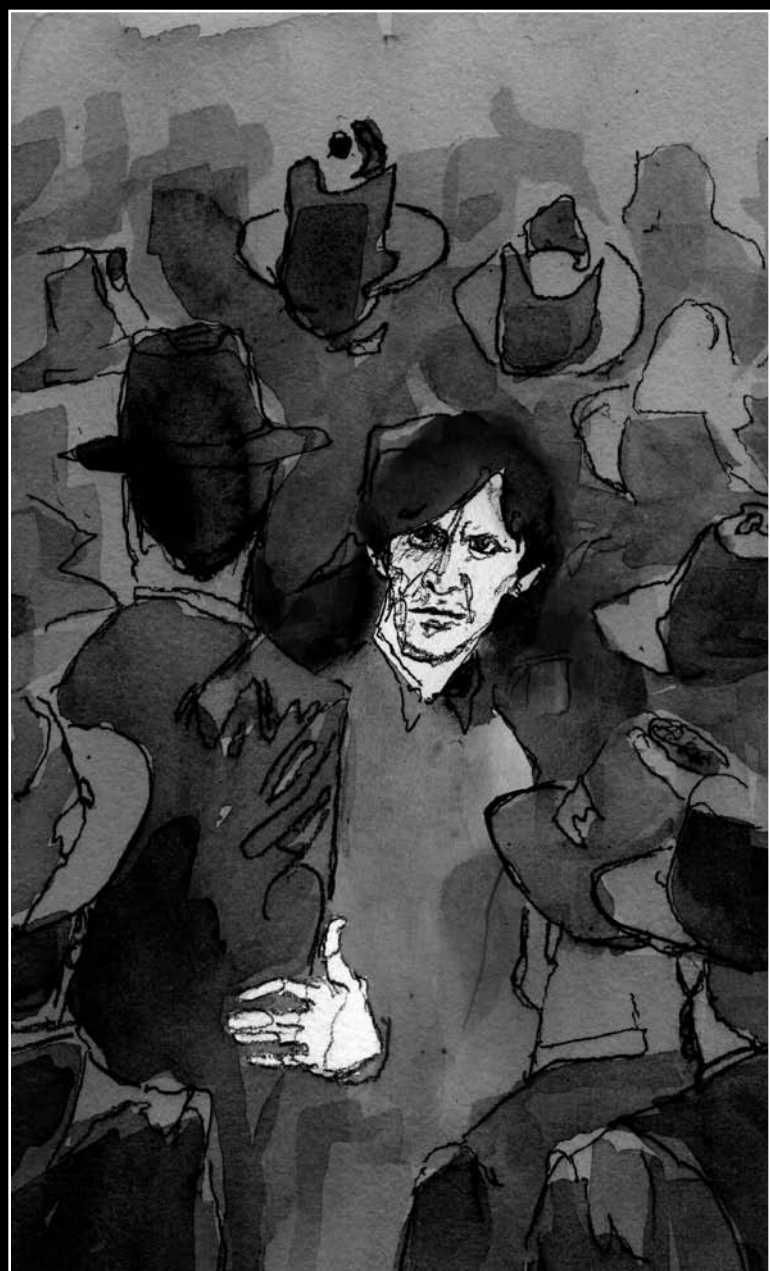




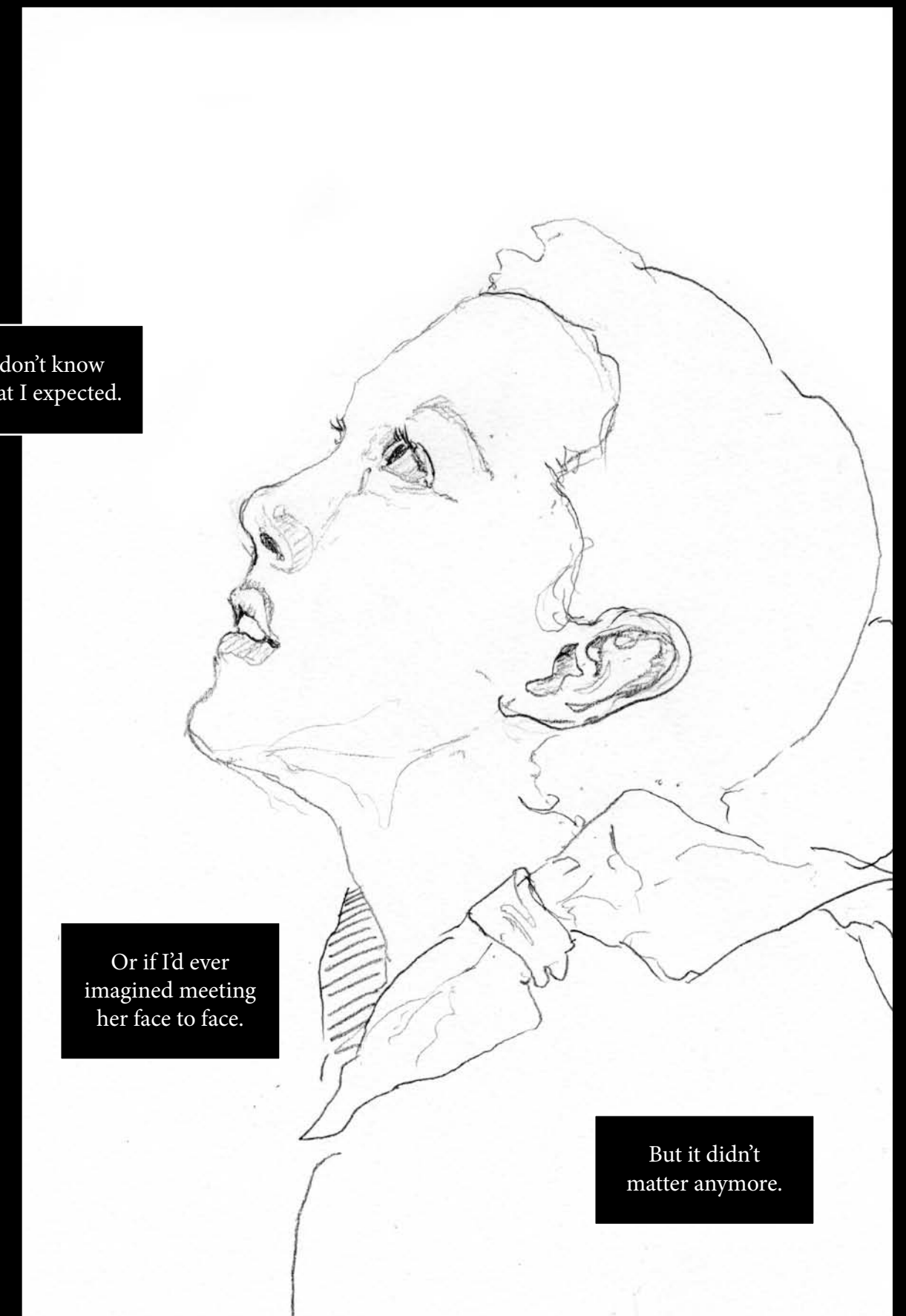
In my haste—
we collided.



She fell so tenderly,
so delicate, it was
as if she were being lowered
by some unseeable force.




I don't know
what I expected.



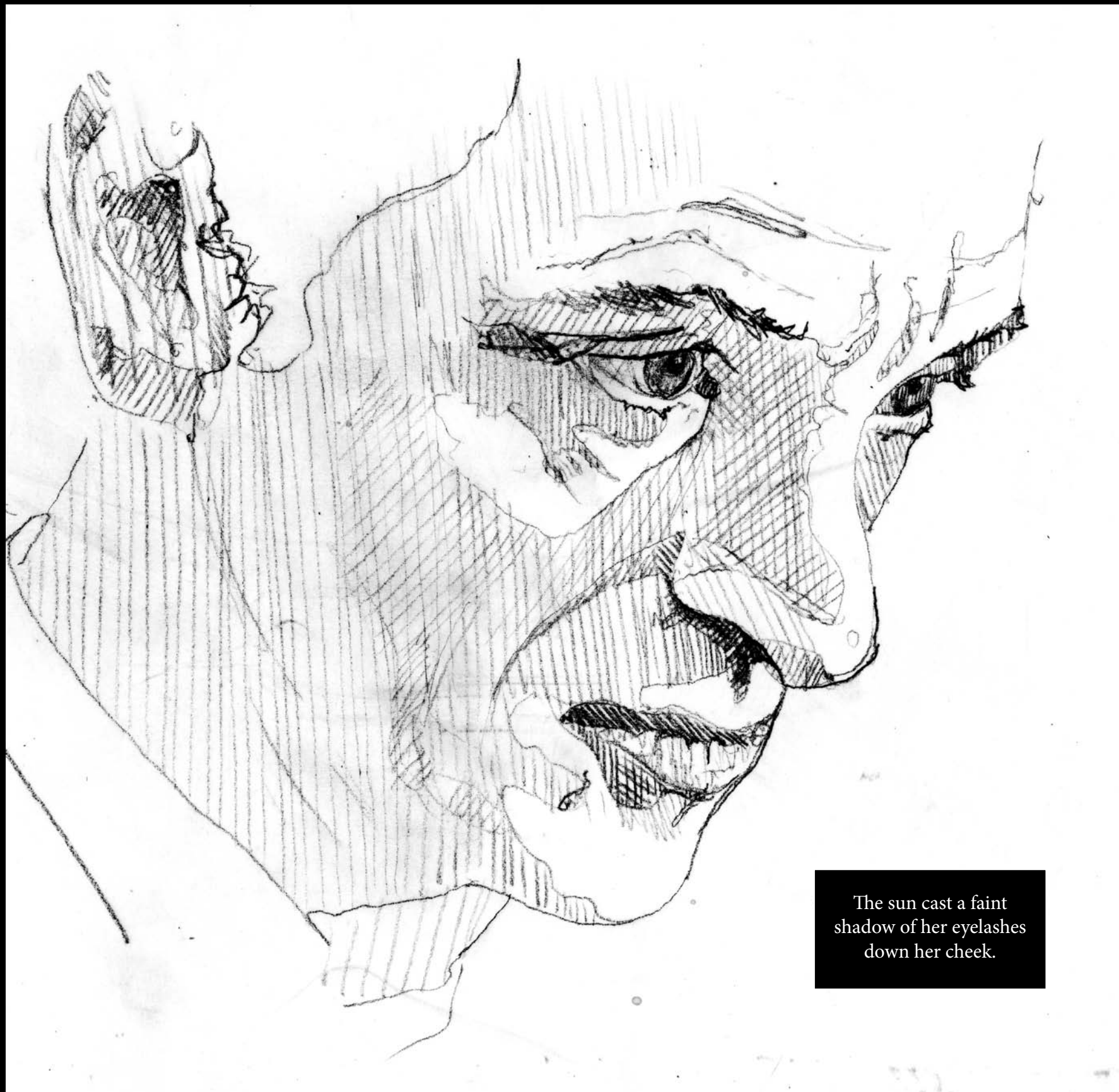
Or if I'd ever
imagined meeting
her face to face.

But it didn't
matter anymore.



She was there.
She was her.

And I was me.
I couldn't pretend
any longer.



The sun cast a faint shadow of her eyelashes down her cheek.

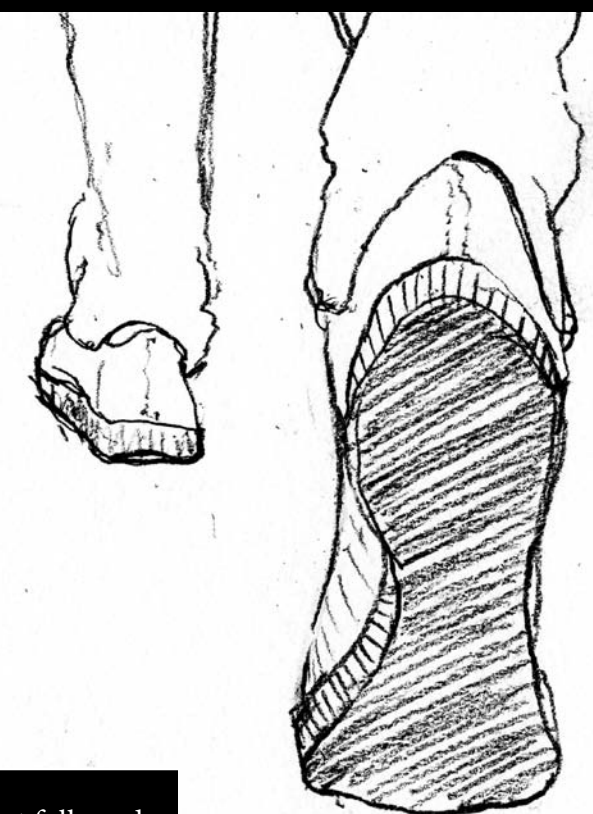
And I would exist too, only always on this side; the outside.



The outside of this feeling.



I walked, but I didn't know where.



I just followed my feet.



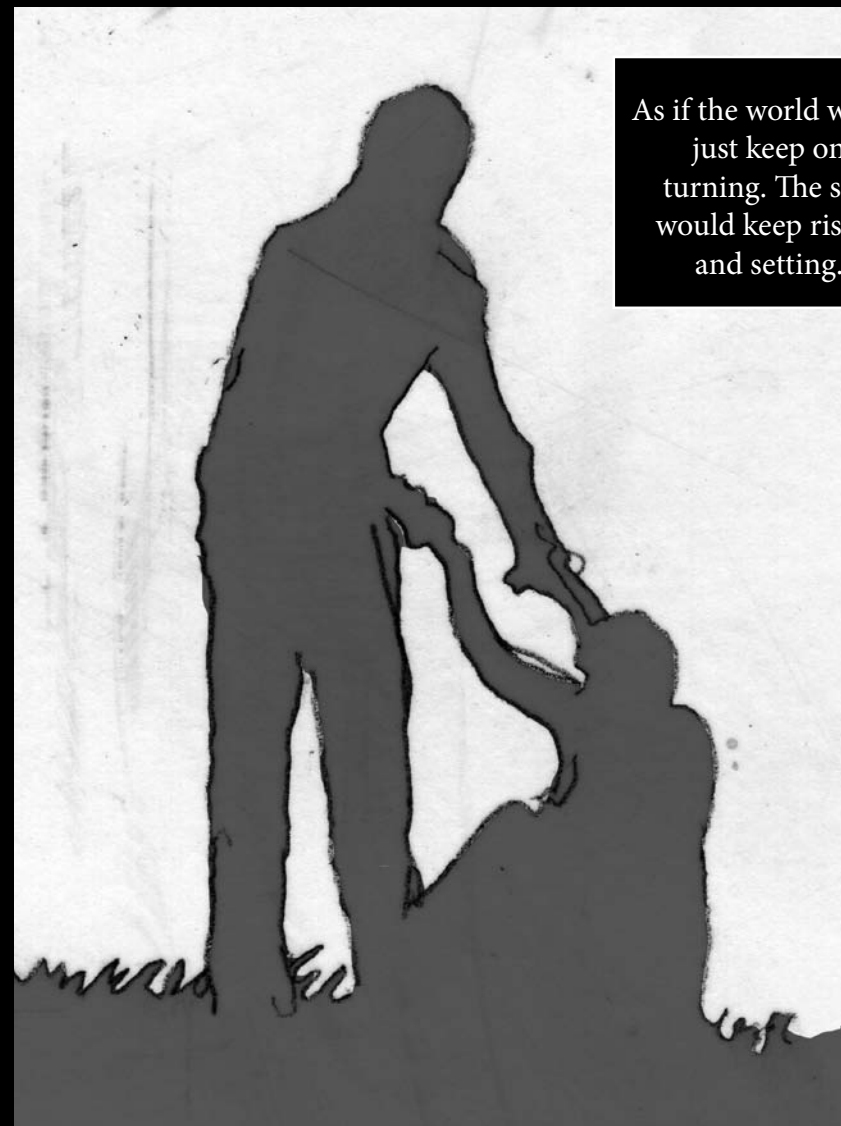
And before I knew it,

A shadow.

Just existing, as if anything else in this world existed.



As if the world would just keep on turning. The sun would keep rising and setting.



I'd arrived.

