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Eyre

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EYRE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY


Andrea Lesley Adams

June 2015


THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2015

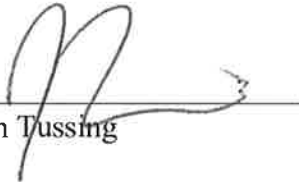
We hereby recommend that the thesis of **Andrea Lesley Adams** entitled **EYRE** be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.



David Anthony Durham Advisor



Sarah Braunstein Reader



Justin Tussing Interim Director

Accepted



Manuel Avalos Dean, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

ABSTRACT

Charlotte Brontë's semi-autobiographical 1847 novel *Jane Eyre* is the source of inspiration for *EYRE*, an illustrated adaptation. *EYRE* takes the protagonist Jane, an orphaned governess, and places her in a fantastical construct which bridges the worlds of 19th century Japan and England. Jane's story becomes one of an unexpected warrior battling the dark demons of alienation and desire which populate her psyche. Characters are reinterpreted as mythological creatures from within the Japanese spiritual pantheon. A synthesis of multiple forms, this work combines abstracted text influenced by traditional Asian poetry and illustrations defined by a naturalistic style harkening to European Symbolist art and Japanese calligraphic painting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author-illustrator would like to thank the following: David Anthony Durham for his perpetually sage advice, Megan Frazer Blakemore for her inspiration, Theodora Goss for her wisdom, Nancy Holder for her energy, Michael Kimball for his spirit, Ted Deppe for his soul, and her instructors and mentors at the Art Center College of Design for their invaluable tutelage. Thanks also to the Five Horsewomen of the Apocalypse for setting the bar high, David Burnett for artistic guidance, Kendra Levin and Rosemary Stimola for literary guidance, my students at the Gnomon School for their understanding, Audie Love for a lifetime of mentorship, and Zachary Adams, Patricia & Ronald Finn for their support.

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It's a breezy Sunday morning. Quiet outside except for birdsong. It seems like a good time to put my Blu-Ray of *Jane Eyre* into the player and pour a cup of coffee. This is when I let my mind open. I relax and watch a world I've imagined many times. Fog creeps through gnarled oaks as Jane, cloaked in a swirl of wool like a witch's cape, sees ghosts on the road. Firelight flickers over Mr. Rochester's stern (and too-youthful, according to purists) face as Jane blends surreptitiously into the background with her demure, muted gown, hands clasped in her lap. This 2011 version, directed by Cary Fukunaga (of *True Detective* fame) isn't the best adaptation of the many out there, but it's the most visually atmospheric. That's specifically what I need for this project: an injection of mood, to remind me of the purpose of this book I'm crafting: to illustrate an idea and illuminate connections, not just tell a story.

I've been fooling around with the idea of an adaptation of *Jane Eyre* for a while now. The origins for my chosen approach are peculiar. There's a copy of *Jane Eyre* on my great-aunt's bookshelf in Maine, along with all the other classics I was frankly more interested in as a girl, like *Rebecca*, *Little Women*, and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. *Jane Eyre* looked ponderous to me, and seemed very mature and alien; I think the dark, stiff Fritz Eichenberg woodcut illustrations contributed to that feeling. I was always more of a fan of N.C. Wyeth's whiz-bang style.

During a BBC kick I was on back when this film was released, I watched a pile of Dickens, Austen and Brontë adaptations for film and television. I ended up pulling *Jane Eyre* off the shelf and cocking a judicious eye at it. Something about Jane's story in particular – a strange combination of proper Victoriana and latent monster-movie aggression – appealed to me in a way it hadn't when I was young and more interested in

Jo March's imaginary adventures or Anne McCaffrey's gigantic dragons. The other 19th century novels with juicy visual adaptations - like *Bleak House* - were straight social commentary, lacking the weird allusions to vampires, fairies and ghosts that captured my fancy.

Then, I watched a documentary one morning called *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. It's a portrait of the most famous sushi chef in the world and a meditation on his method, the Japanese spiritual notion of *shokunin*, or eternal striving towards perfection in one's craft. That notion alone was a heady inspiration. I watched the documentary twice that day, something I never do; experiencing this portrait of such a humble master was like a bomb going off in my head. The documentary seemed to depict Jiro Ono as a quiet warrior, precise, extraordinary, capable of harnessing some kind of spiritual power over his art.

Something shoved me towards the bookshelf again that night. I pulled down that edition of *Jane Eyre* and flipped through it, the pages and illustrations blurring together in my excitement. The connection I made to Jiro was with the character of Jane, a quiet warrior in her own right; someone at war with convention while she tries simultaneously to accept it. The illustrations, I now saw clearly, were influenced by Japanese floating-world woodcuts (something I would have known nothing about as a young artist, indoctrinated as I was in Western art), and I got even more excited as I sensed a strange ideological connection tenuously forming between this novel and the cultural traditions of Japan. Somewhat nonsensically, I immediately began knocking together rough sketches for a graphic novel where Jane was an intersexed samurai traveling to America to be schooled with Japanese immigrants to fight American Indian demons.

Okay, so, that ‘concept’ - a term used very loosely! - was a total mess, but even now when I look at the pages I scribbled out, I haven’t strayed far from the core idea: Jane as a warrior, a follower of the samurai ethos of *bushido*, battling psychological demons manifested as real ones. I got about twenty pages in and was then overwhelmed by the task of trying to do justice to the original character while turning her into someone with the monumental social and emotional baggage which would logically accompany an intersexed person. The project staggered to a halt and was back-burnered while I tried to get into graduate school.

Jane wouldn’t go away, though. She kept popping up all over the place: every time I snooped through my DVDs, as a t-shirt design hanging in the window of my favorite independent bookstore in rural Montana, and as a fellow Stonecoaster’s wrist tattoo. I was working on some good stuff for Stonecoast, but Jane was tugging at my sleeve, nudging me, reminding me that while I loved learning to write, I was also a visual artist, and that she was the perfect vehicle with which to combine those two facets of my craft.

I knew my original idea was ludicrous, but it just needed attention, scholarship and old-fashioned elbow grease. *Shokunin* was not going to be easy. I needed to figure out how to give Jane her due, and to do it the best way I knew how. The toughest part was working through the purification of the story. For a long time I really felt Jane needed to be intersexed somehow (I say ‘somehow’ because I knew the character wouldn’t be traditionally conceptualized no matter what), in order to make it clear that she possessed both masculine and feminine characteristics. At the same time I was aware this might be a cop-out, a blatant pandering to the social zeitgeist, and wasn’t really the truth of the character after all. Part of what has made Jane a touchstone is her disenfranchised place

in her particular world, fitting right into the little niche that Victorian society carved out for real and literary women alike. It began to be more important that I remain true to the character's gender, but I didn't want to sacrifice the potent male element expressed through her bold actions. Wouldn't it be better to consider instead how that masculinity might manifest itself as an external force?

It made sense, all of a sudden. That's why she had to be a samurai; that was already an aspect of my interpretation of the character, I just hadn't understood it was the explanation for her male attitudes. Samurai, I learned through the research for my academic paper, were an entire class, not just a brand of warrior; that meant there were samurai women as well who were held to a similar social standard, a spiritual and ethical code which actually transcended gender, in theory. Reading 17th-century texts about *bushido*, the Way of the Samurai, clarified what I already suspected: replace a Japanese sabre with British Victorian manners, and the parallels begin to emerge. (I knew they weren't actually relative to one another; it was the ideologies which aligned, thanks to similarly strict cultural mores.)

My research opened many doors for me and both reinforced vague, previously-held ideas and introduced new ones with concrete force. It helped that my advisor, Sarah Braunstein, was whole-hog for all of it, allowing me to cast my net wide and drag in everything from traditional Japanese poetry to Jean-Giraud Moebius as fodder for the research which would re-shape my concept into something streamlined. Her unmitigated support and excitement for this bizarre mish-mash of concepts, history, gender politics and art was infectious. I found myself feeling I'd made the right choice to dig deep into the paper, carefully tethering 19th century Japan to 19th century England through Jane and

her maker, Charlotte Brontë. I learned of the psyche of the Victorian governess, the attitudes towards ritual suicide of the samurai, the shifting position of women in pre-industrial Japan; I learned how warriors fought, how writers wrote, and how a connection to one's spirituality in her art defined *shokunin*. By the time I read of the warrior's step-by-step journey along the thousand-mile road, I knew I'd chosen the right path for 'Samurai *Jane Eyre*,' as I was calling it.

Towards the end of the paper, Professor Braunstein suggested including a discussion of what the creative thesis would be like, since it tied so thoroughly into my academic research. I'd be able to include photos and sketches to help visually define that discussion. In crafting this last third of the paper, I was able to refine some of those big ideas into how the project might be executed. Not every problem received a solution, but it enabled me to be more decisive as I've worked on the novel and new options have arisen. It also gave me a touchstone, both mentally and in physical research: I have a folder on my desktop full of curated imagery, plus a large idea board which sits in front of me at all times, propped against the gas pot-bellied stove, a constant reminder of choices made and opportunities still available.

The original incarnation of 'Samurai *Jane Eyre*' was in a traditional paneled graphic novel format. It was a fine place to start, but by the time I came back to the project at Stonecoast, I realized I wasn't actually interested in doing graphic novels. I was trained as a traditional print illustrator; those full-page color glossies in the 'Treasure Island' of my childhood had always defined my approach, and my traditionalist instructors at the Art Center College of Design reinforced it. I wanted to be able to illustrate the project the way I knew how, rather than try and force a method I wasn't comfortable with. That

meant full-page images, spilling over into almost double-page spreads, with a small amount of text as an abstraction of the original. The images and the text would be created hand-in-hand, so every illustration would have to reflect my ideas and research as opposed to just aping the narrative of the book. I found specific, immediate references for this in a Jean Giraud Moebius/Alexandro Jodorowsky illustrated novel, *The Eyes of the Cat*, and an Audrey Niffenegger novel, *The Three Incestuous Sisters*.

I began pulling 19th century hand-tinted photographs of Japan and other direct-source images, like photos of architecture and landscapes, to be able to ground my concept. Previous research into 18th and 19th century Japanese woodblock print masters was helpful, as were many photos I'd taken in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Asian collections. The ukiyo-e images (woodcuts) were actually one of several art styles from Japan I looked at: possibly even more influential were bird-and-flower paintings, compositionally restrained images of nature, and sumi-e (black ink) paintings. I also had a decent background in the painterly visuals of 19th century Europe, to be able to counter-balance the Japanese influence. Western Symbolist and Expressionist art from the turn of the century, marked by the indelible styles of favored artists and illustrators such as Egon Schiele, Frantisek Kupka, Arthur Rackham, and Edmund Dulac rounded out my specific cues.

But the movement of the rest of my inspiration came from a broader, more atypical series of sources. Because of my background in theatre, I tend to use modern lyric dance as a concrete inspiration. The energy of dance always comes through in my figurative work in key aspects from visual storytelling to character development. Most dance performances may be virtually devoid of imagery and use only the most abstract

narrative, but to me that feels like a distillation of art into its essence. If you can get an idea all the way down to its principle nature, then you can build it back up into something visually and emotionally powerful. So during this time I became influenced by a performance I attended of the Nederland Dans Theatre, the best modern ballet company on the planet; by the film *Pina*, a biography of the famous choreographer; and by the lectures I give at the Gnomon School on the Ballet Russes, one of the most creative organizations of the early twentieth century.

Interestingly, all three of those things dovetailed early in 2013 for the centennial of Igor Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring,' originally performed by the Ballet Russes and reinterpreted separately by Pina Bausch and the NDT; the concepts for this piece have long inspired me, ever since I became aware of folk primitivism in art. This was the moment for the impact of that Stravinsky and Nijinsky collaboration to bring 'Samurai *Jane Eyre*' to the fore. Possessing bold costumes and choreography revolving around fertility, sacrifice, and sex, 'The Rite of Spring' represents to me the purest aspects of art through dance, music and costume; narrative and character are alluded to through gesture and movement in ways which seem simple, but are actually complex. Because my illustration style isn't like this – it's dense and detailed – I instead consider this more along the lines of my fundamental approach to design and form.

When crafting the illustrations, I wanted to find the nexus between graphic novel imagery (which follows no rules), comic book imagery (which is generally dynamic), and book illustration (which is best when alluding to, rather than defining, story). A simple, powerful image would match simple text better than over-drawing and over-complicating. In choosing what to draw, I tried to let the moment in the story speak to me

as much as the textual interpretation did; sometimes that just meant an image happened with little to no forethought, as I'd spent so much time beforehand learning Brontë's novel and my own influences. This doesn't mean the image has to stay the way I conjured it – no professional artist believes that for a heartbeat – but it does create a hopefully visceral visual response to the source.

This meant some of the images are only obliquely narrative. The great Golden Age illustrators – like the aforementioned N.C. Wyeth – knew not to show 'the moment' of a story but instead illustrate the moment before...or the moment after. It takes artistic courage to show a scene once the tension has dissipated; it's much easier to show the fist connecting to the face. The only way to do it is to understand the underlying trajectory of the story, or the overall motivations of the characters, and then impart the greater whole somehow through the illustration. Not an easy task, and one requiring a certain control of style and absolute comprehension of purpose. My way of doing that was to try and feel what the emotional beat was of the scene, and work around that.

Sometimes I missed the mark and gave away too much; sometimes I hit it right on the nose. There are definitely images in this work more narrative than others, which attempt to define a critical point in the source novel. It remained important, as I sketched, that I not deviate from the spine of the narrative at the risk of alienating the audience. For example, one of the lynchpin images in the work, which is repeated several times with differing elements in it, is of Jane's feet, her skirts slightly lifted. This is an image which harkens to a multitude of story points: Jane as a warrior walking the thousand-mile road; Jane with all her power removed by society; Jane's sexuality; or even Jane's connection to her demonic alter ego, her lover Rochester's insane wife Bertha. There is no image

described in *Jane Eyre* of the protagonist in bare feet, but I felt it was a simple abstraction of some critical elements of the story, and also one which wasn't so bizarre that nobody would understand why it was included.

I also consider this abstraction the key for the writing. Reducing Charlotte Brontë's effulgent, complex prose to a few punchy, interpretive lines per page requires finding the core of her purpose in writing the novel – for her characters, for herself, for all the smart women living in a patriarchy doomed to small lives – and then visualizing it. By continuing to refer my eye to dance theatre, I can remind myself of the maxim 'less is more,' a sort of aesthetic, literary version of Ockham's Razor.

At first I felt obligated to try actual poetic text, but not only was that not enough narrative for an illustrated novel – albeit an abstracted one – it created a finality on every page, rather than a continual flow of story. I looked at 19th century Japanese poetry, particularly the work of Ema Saikō, a *bunjin* (scholar of Chinese art) who wrote extremely sparse verse; the form, though, was not necessarily clear in the translations. At Stonecoast Ireland, Ted Deppe took a stab at helping me understand traditional tanka poetry, but the more restrictive the structure, the more I felt stultified by it, especially as an untrained poet. The purpose of the project was not to attempt a genre shift, but to manipulate an existing one to suit my needs. I also needed to be able to leave enough overt breadcrumbs so the novel itself could be read between the lines, so to speak. The more poetry I was writing, the more abstruse the text, and I needed to control and clarify the narrative so it didn't become impenetrable. A poet friend of mine, Justin Wallace Kibbe, told me that poetry ends before the end of the page, and I liked that idea from a prose perspective, that sense of unfinished momentum that could carry one bit of the

story to the next. Rather than complicating the situation, I realized, yet again, that the simpler solution was the better one.

In looking back over the years which led up to the execution of this work, I think it represents my ongoing efforts to simplify and reduce the weight of the busy way I write and draw. Most literature that I admire as an adult is streamlined and spare: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Richard Yates's *Young Hearts Crying*, and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* are all novels which have inspired me deeply over the years for their elegant yet pointed style. Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* and Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* are all reserved middle grade or young adult classics I also consider inspirational to my children's writing. I've acknowledged, however, that my own style doesn't usually follow suit. I tend to wordiness, to excessive adverbs and adjectives, and to an over-worked structure, much of which is a product of never actually having been taught how to write. Instead, I was given glowing, useless praise but no actual guidance in craft. At Stonecoast, I have finally been shown what to do, and how to do it. Workshops led by attentive craftsmen have provided me with a wealth of critical feedback which now allows me to look back at the works which inspire me with a better understanding of how they were created, and how to apply that to my own work. When I snoop through the notes Megan Frazer Blakemore, David Anthony Durham, Theodora Goss, Nancy Holder, Michael Kimball, and Ted Deppe wrote up for me about the projects I workshopped – along with the invaluable aid written by Stonecoast students in each workshop as well – I have hope that I can continue to push my methods to move beyond what I've unthinkingly relied on for years, into a realm of conscientious craft.


Now the project is in its first true incarnation: as a completed text with rough illustrations. My thesis advisor, David Anthony Durham, has granted me an extraordinary amount of leeway in order to be able to execute an entire 200 page draft, 100 pages of which are textual, but all of which are meaningful. The next step for *EYRE*, as it's now called, is to rewrite and refine the text as well as have the imagery art-directed for clarity and composition. The end goal for the illustrations is a mixed-media application of graphite sketching, light colored ink washes (with the graphite visible through the ink) and dry-brush overlay for accenting textures. I want to keep the figures energetic, dance-like; the environments abstract, like silk paintings; and the storytelling symbolic. I have no doubt that it will take a great deal more work to get it to the point where both text and imagery are satisfactory, but if I'm to be *shokunin*, then it'll be worth it.











Dear Reader, here is my story:

my wings were not always spread so wide,
nor my jaw set with such defiance.

I tell myself the howls of the wind must fall
on deaf ears, and stay steadfast
against the storm.



This is how I prepare to do battle with demons:

I set my heel and bend my elbow
so that even a graceful nod cuts like a steel whip
laid through a sheet of rain,
severing each drop.

One foot,

turned out,

countered by the other;

they press into the earth to hold me, root-like.

The pine lashes its boughs, bamboo bends and quakes its leaves,

but my head lifts in a curve rising from one calf through the braid of my spine

to my neck, uncowed.

Resolution vibrates through my grip, in the knotting of each forearm.

My nostrils flare and eyes narrow,
trembling with secret vigor.

I shake from the chill soaking me through,

or from fury,

or the strain of that defiance;

bitter, but satisfying as a bite into metal that does not shatter the teeth.





I must be like a pillar of stone buffeted by wind across the waves.

Sea birds caught in an autumn storm rush past.

The angry hands of the gale snatch at us,

trying to break our wings,

to snap our bones.

The storm's desire to annihilate is strong,
but my will must be stronger.

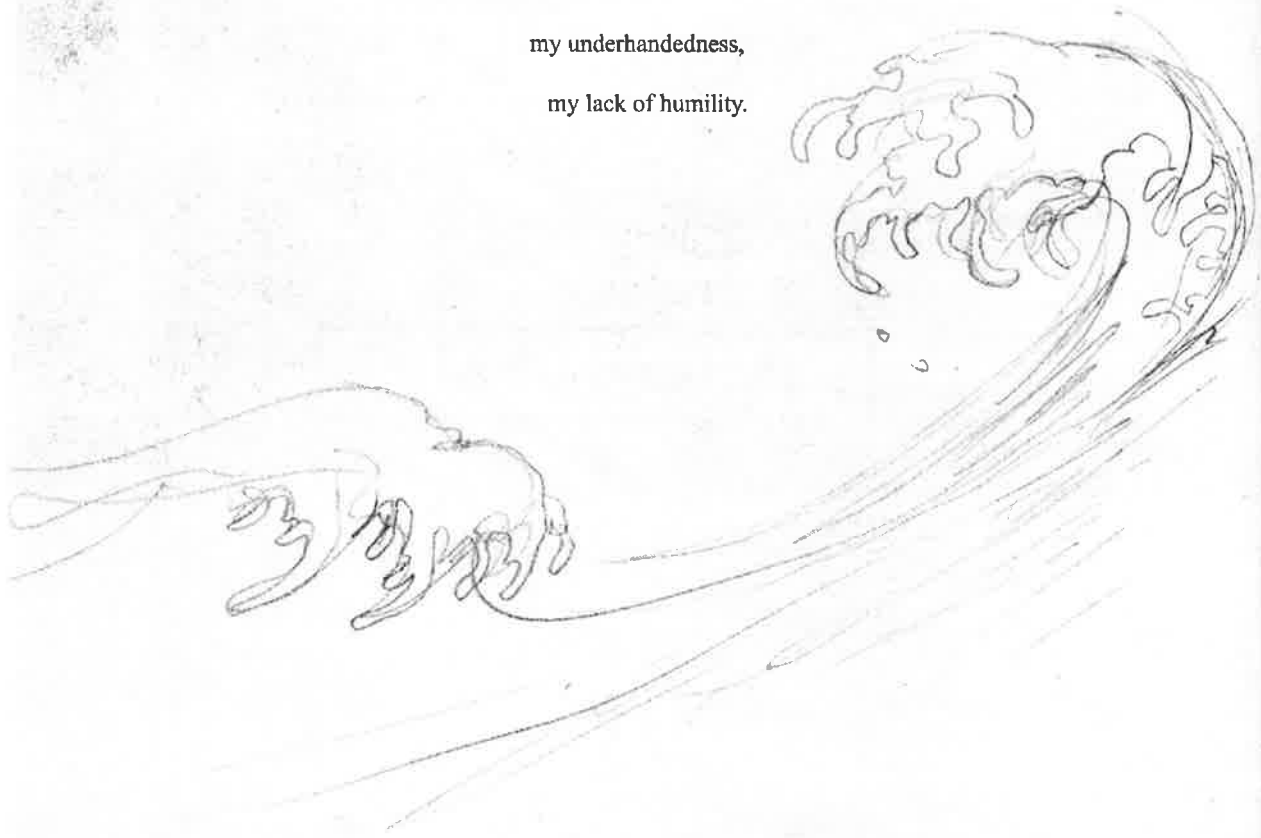
It is a hardening of the weaknesses of all unloved children,
borne against the tyrannies of their captors.

The songs of my childhood are all the same, discordant chants about

my dependence,

my underhandedness,

my lack of humility.



I am abandoned here, an infant left on the stoop
like a basket of peelings.

Time is meted slowly in this prison masquerading as a home.

A metronome ticks a constant tempo,
ordered and structured and without genuine care.

My life grows as would any small plant in a dim space:
it puts out leaves, its stalk thickens,
and yet without warm sunlight,
without affection,
it remains wan and soft.

I spend many hours at the window, gazing outward
through bars filigreed, or gilded,
or draped in heavy scarlet cloth,
but still caged.

Inside, I am assiduously ignored by my adoptive family, and occasionally scorned;
I am derided, and often afraid of the unknown which each minute brings.

A cruel slap, a twist of the ear,
a harsh hand on my arm;
these are things I come to expect.

If I look away, a hand reaches out
to grip and tug at my chin.

Not even the doorway of a book
will let me pass outside,

where the path hurries away from this place to disappear
in the silent forest beyond.



My guardian:

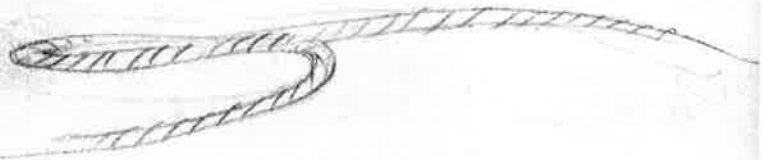
my jailer, the key clutched firmly in her claws,
She squats, lumpen, on her fatty haunches,
a sow's ear dressed in a silk purse.

The tip of her tail twitches like a cat's warning.
Her eye squints in judgment,
and from her tongue drips a noxious poison.

My tormentor:

her son, a sagging, bilious creature.
He is a capering fool squeezed into the costume
of a fine young man, the kind who
pulls the wings off flies while smiling.

I am repulsed by them,
and their mean spirits have the same opinion of me;
I am an irritation,
an open sore.





No matter how hard I try,

I am ham-strung and hobbled.

A noose is slung over me

to hold me as frozen as the mouse transfixed by the owl.

My tormentor tightens that noose,

and I lean into it.

But what if that loop abrading against my neck snaps,

and freedom from those tyrannies is mine?

What if the hemp fouling my limbs comes undone?





Then I fight back:

Vase, smashing -

Table, splintering -

Stems, crushing -

Hair, snarling -

Orchids, scattering -

Screen, tearing -

Feathers, breaking -

Flesh, rending -

Blood, spattering.



I am unceremoniously snatched up
and dragged towards oblivion.

I kick, I shriek, but their hold on me is iron.

Why am I cast down by them,
and forgotten?

Their loathing pours over me, thick as bile;
their limbs convulse in fury,
they tug harder so my shoulders burn.

Hope is a wasted desire.

The bottom opens below my feet
and I sense an endless cold void

rushing up to meet me.





Weeping stone abrades my fingertips as I
reach up from this dank hollow.

Each toe wedges into the smallest
crack, seeking purchase, pain
forking through my feet.

I am unable to climb, to free myself, to
bridge the gulf between
below and above
as twilight lowers and I

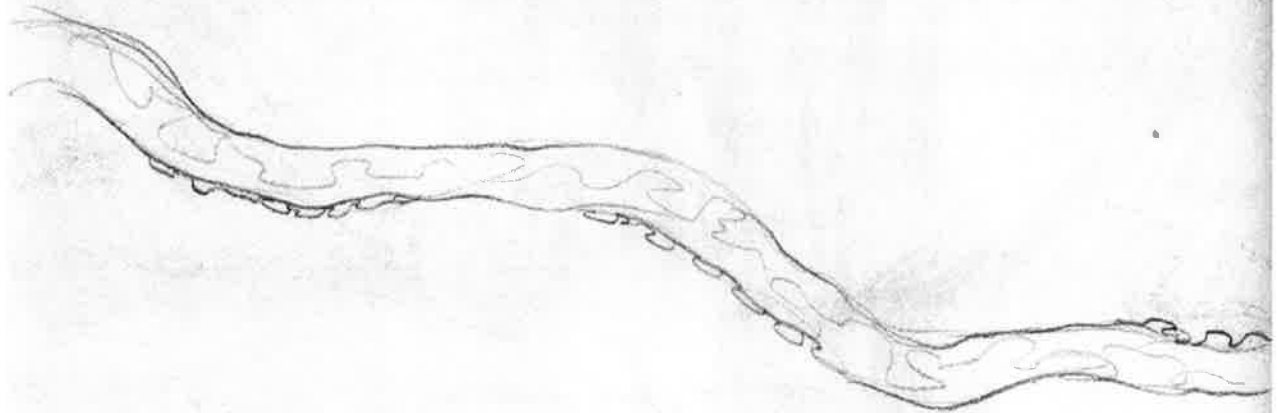
sink, mired in
desolation.

One by one they turn from me, and
I am
abandoned.

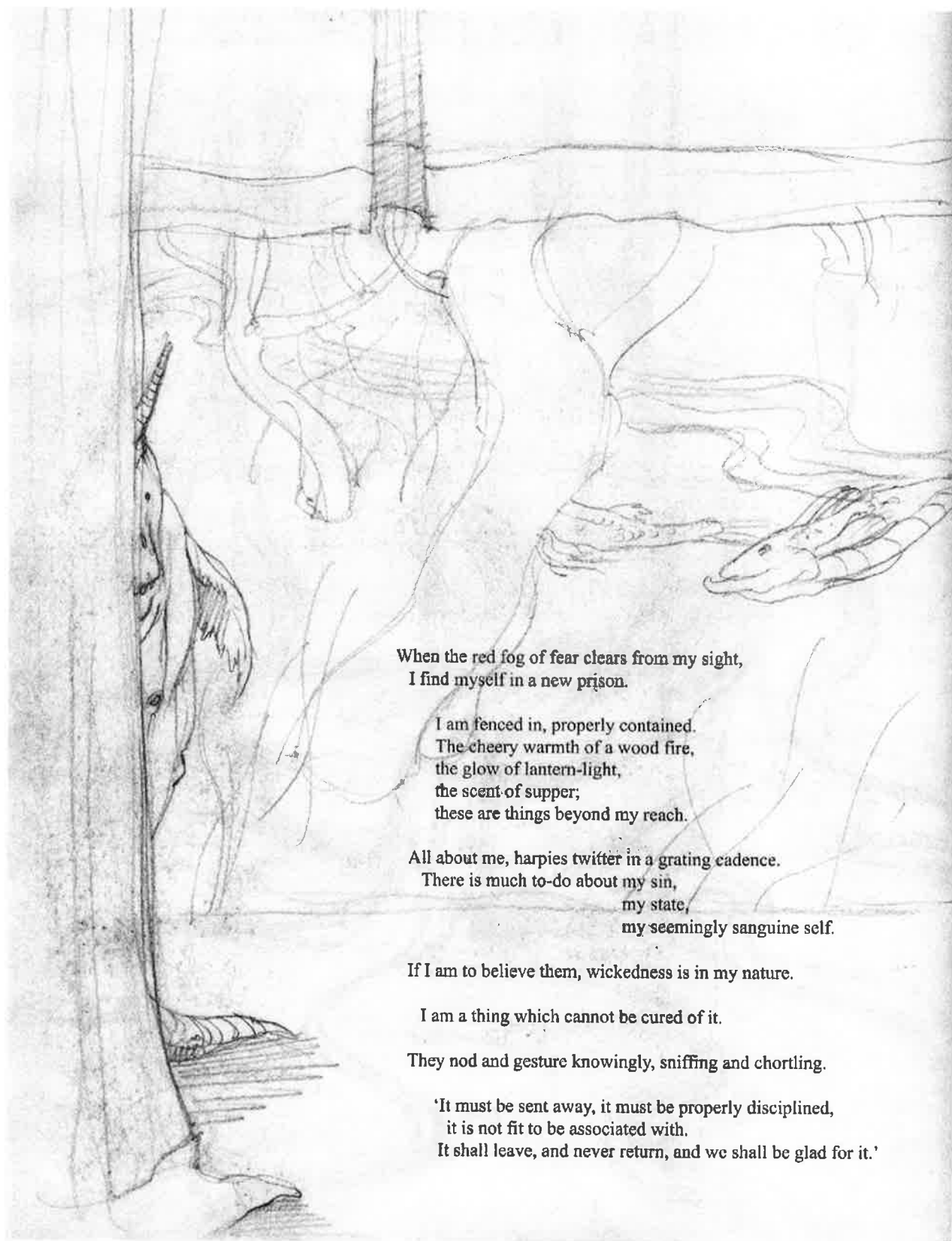


Derangement settles upon me like a wet cloak. It collapses my lungs, folding my spine into a damp little package with crushed corners. It coats each pore, thick as smoke. My skin ripples like the surface of a lake. The light sliding over the walls of this place might be a glimmer of salvation; it might be the gleam of the moon, or a beam from a lantern. I see it only as something terrifying, a spectre sent to entangle me, to clasp me tight and drag me into the otherworld. The midnight wind coils over me, cold as a trailing rill of slime. My cries fall on deaf ears.

This is the way of it.







When the red fog of fear clears from my sight,
I find myself in a new prison.

I am fenced in, properly contained.
The cheery warmth of a wood fire,
the glow of lantern-light,
the scent of supper;
these are things beyond my reach.

All about me, harpies twitter in a grating cadence.
There is much to-do about my sin,
my state,
my seemingly sanguine self.

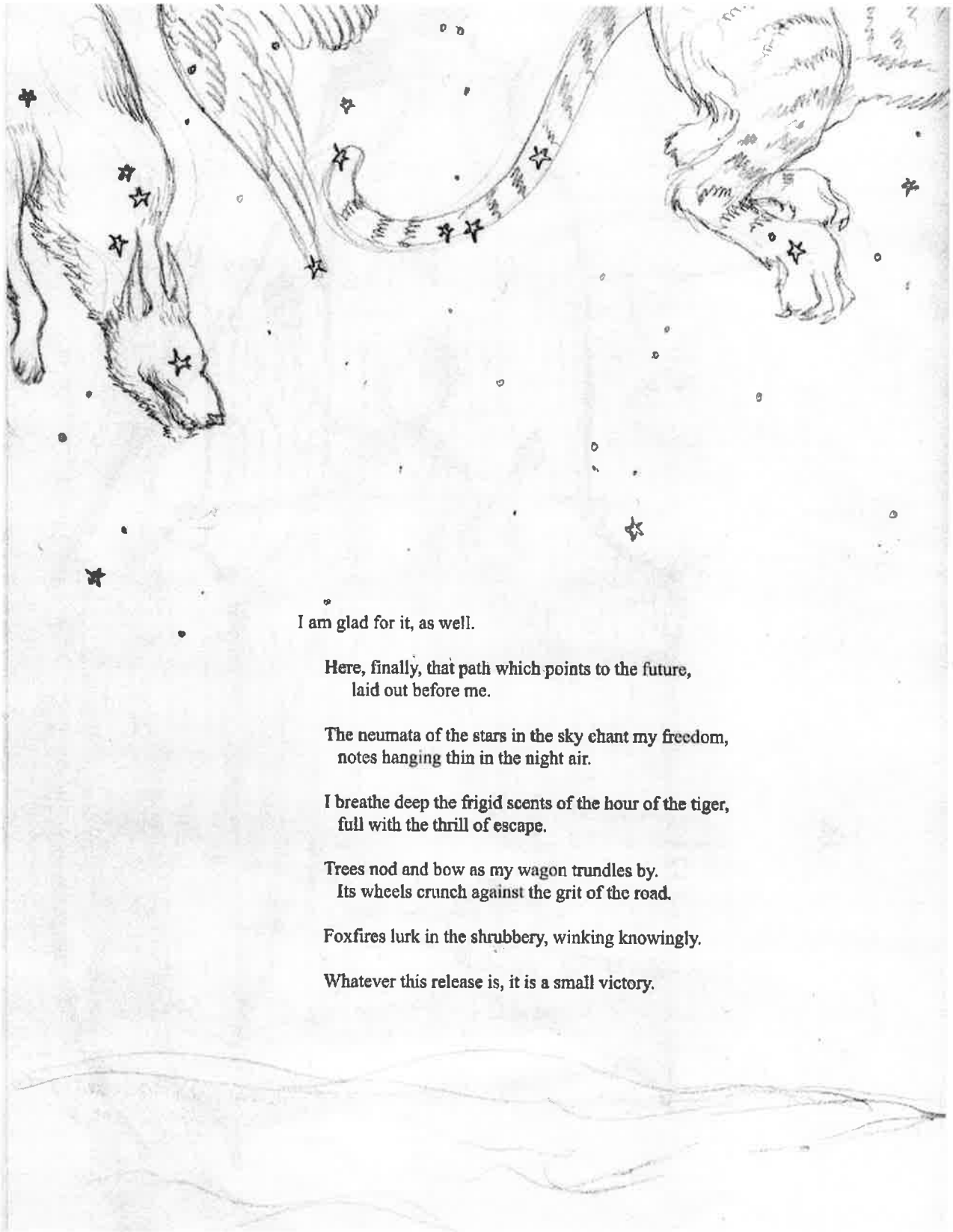
If I am to believe them, wickedness is in my nature.

I am a thing which cannot be cured of it.

They nod and gesture knowingly, sniffing and chortling.

'It must be sent away, it must be properly disciplined,
it is not fit to be associated with.
It shall leave, and never return, and we shall be glad for it.'





I am glad for it, as well.

Here, finally, that path which points to the future,
laid out before me.

The neumata of the stars in the sky chant my freedom,
notes hanging thin in the night air.

I breathe deep the frigid scents of the hour of the tiger,
full with the thrill of escape.

Trees nod and bow as my wagon trundles by.
Its wheels crunch against the grit of the road.

Foxfires lurk in the shrubbery, winking knowingly.

Whatever this release is, it is a small victory.



Should I claw my way free from this confinement,
as I approach another?
To where, to whom?
My wings are stunted and clipped, tendons peeling, lips cracked.
Blight clings to me as it does to this low wood;
its gates hang ajar, a warning to all who choose to heed it.
But my jailers know well how to crush my spirit and sap my strength.
The short seasons of my life are as weak
as the flick of a fly's wing.
My triumph is short-lived.
Winter will soon close over my head again,
sure as still waters sheathed in ice.







Bowls of glutinous rice.

Soles of shoes, clattering loosely.

Rough linen scrapes against reddened limbs.

Damp hair clings to feverish skin.

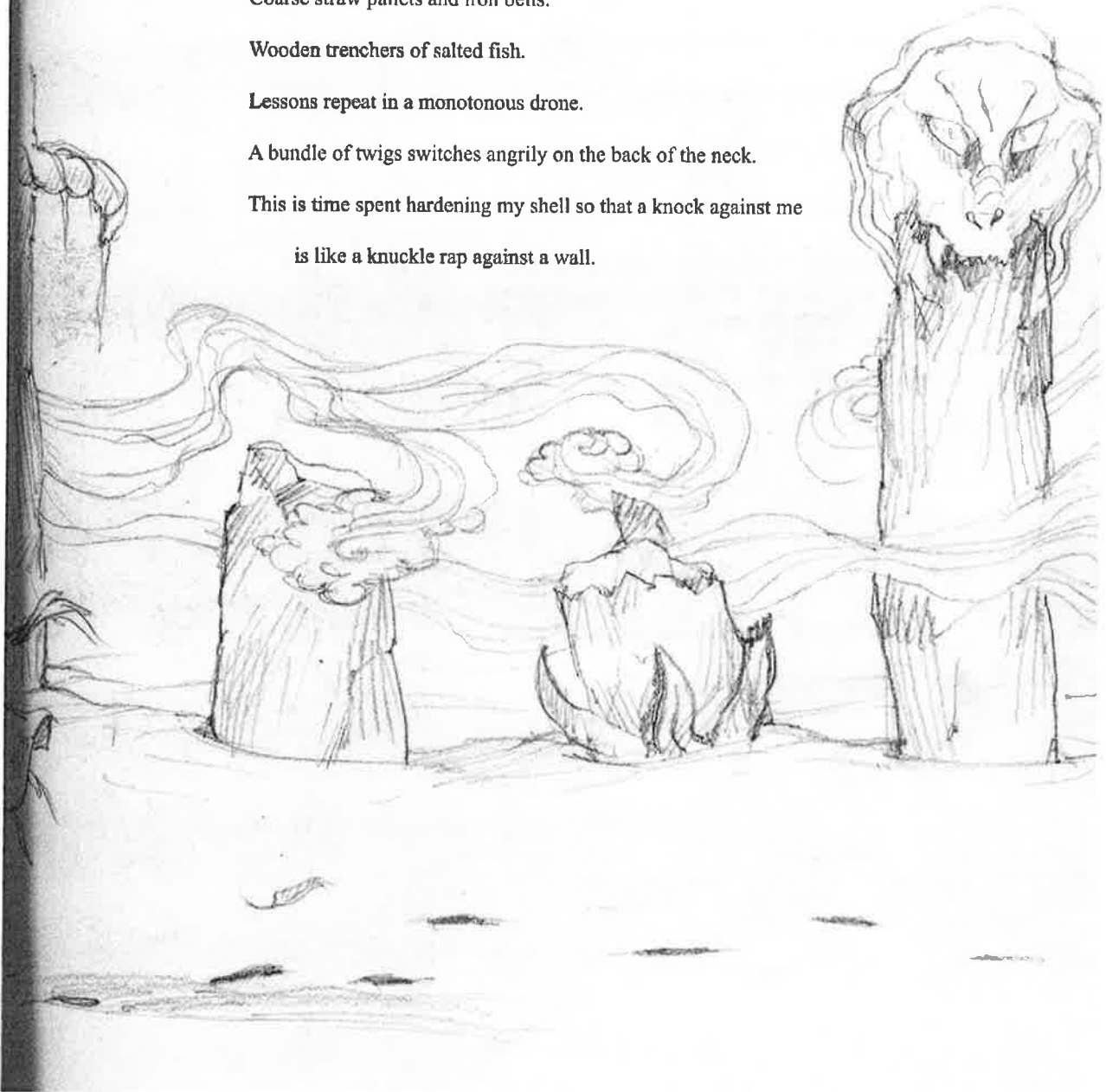
Coarse straw pallets and iron bells.

Wooden trenchers of salted fish.

Lessons repeat in a monotonous drone.

A bundle of twigs switches angrily on the back of the neck.

This is time spent hardening my shell so that a knock against me
is like a knuckle rap against a wall.



A crack in that shell, though,

allows a sliver of light to shine through.

Bare branches flower into spring, that most hopeful harbinger of the spirit's renewal.

Banked fires kindle and spark.

Small birds shake and puff their feathers.

The pond is dotted with the heads of frogs and fish.

A true friend is as a strong right hand; capable
of gripping tight, or guiding, or clasping easily;
she points due north.

I do not know how much I need friendship until it is offered to me.

The days at school, once endless,

now drift past like leaves on a merry current,

and the thousand-mile road I seem fated to walk

is not such a lonely path.





When water melts from ice, it adopts the shape of its container.

Curved, tall, squat;

hurried, leisurely, still.

Water may be the tiny trickle of a mountain stream, or it may rage

over stones, or it may rise into waves breaking

over a bar of sand.

Each of these has the heart of the goddess in it.

The crane steps scissor-legged through nodding rice stalks,

intent on doom,

barely a ripple in the water from its footfalls.

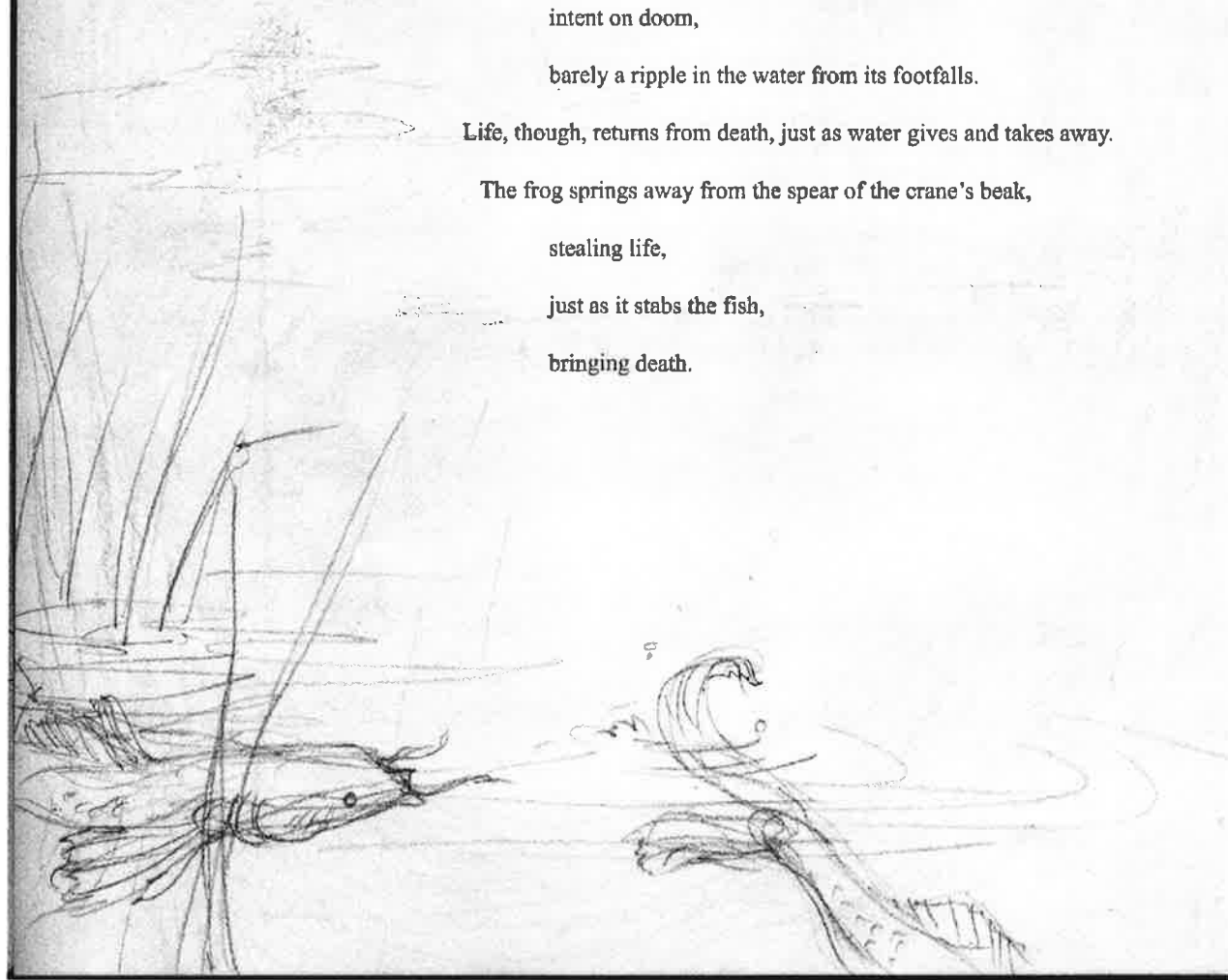
Life, though, returns from death, just as water gives and takes away.

The frog springs away from the spear of the crane's beak,

stealing life,

just as it stabs the fish,

bringing death.



The rise and fall of the moon, too,
is a cycle which turns,
and turns.

There is a chasm between light and the void,
and now I must step to its edge.

I recoil from the roiling chaos below,
and am afraid.

This invisible kingdom of spirits is unknown to me.

I clasp her hand in my cold grip,
and squeeze my eyes shut against
what I know is coming;

a white shroud,
cast over her like a wing.

It settles upon her as
her fingers slip from mine.



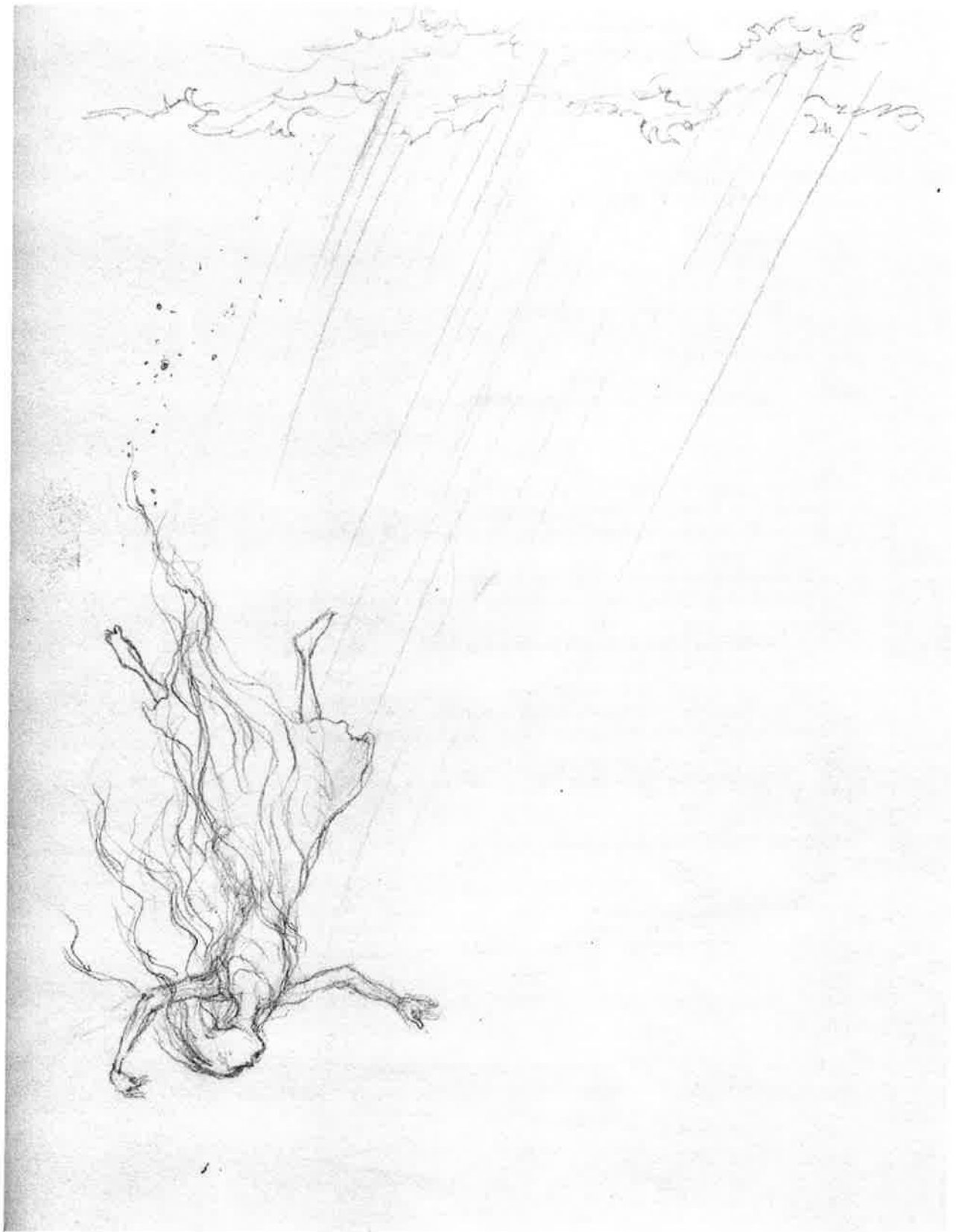


Goodnight.

Goodnight.

Goodnight.

Goodnight.



Then, time.

I have been here before,
though with far more pain;

a month,
a year,
two,
five pass without any real suffering save loneliness.

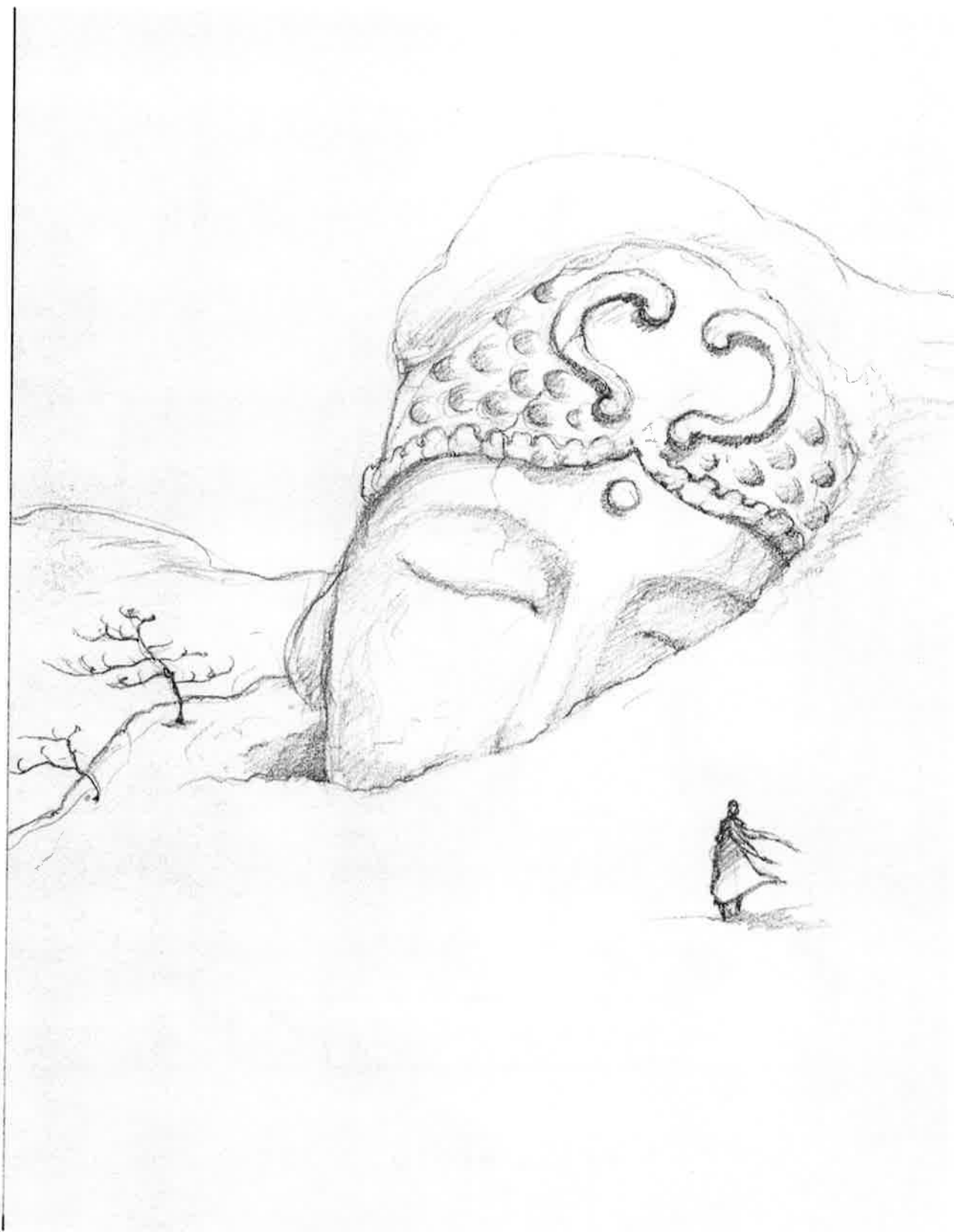
I work, I live, I sleep, I
live, I work, and all the while I
walk that thousand-mile road with measured steps.

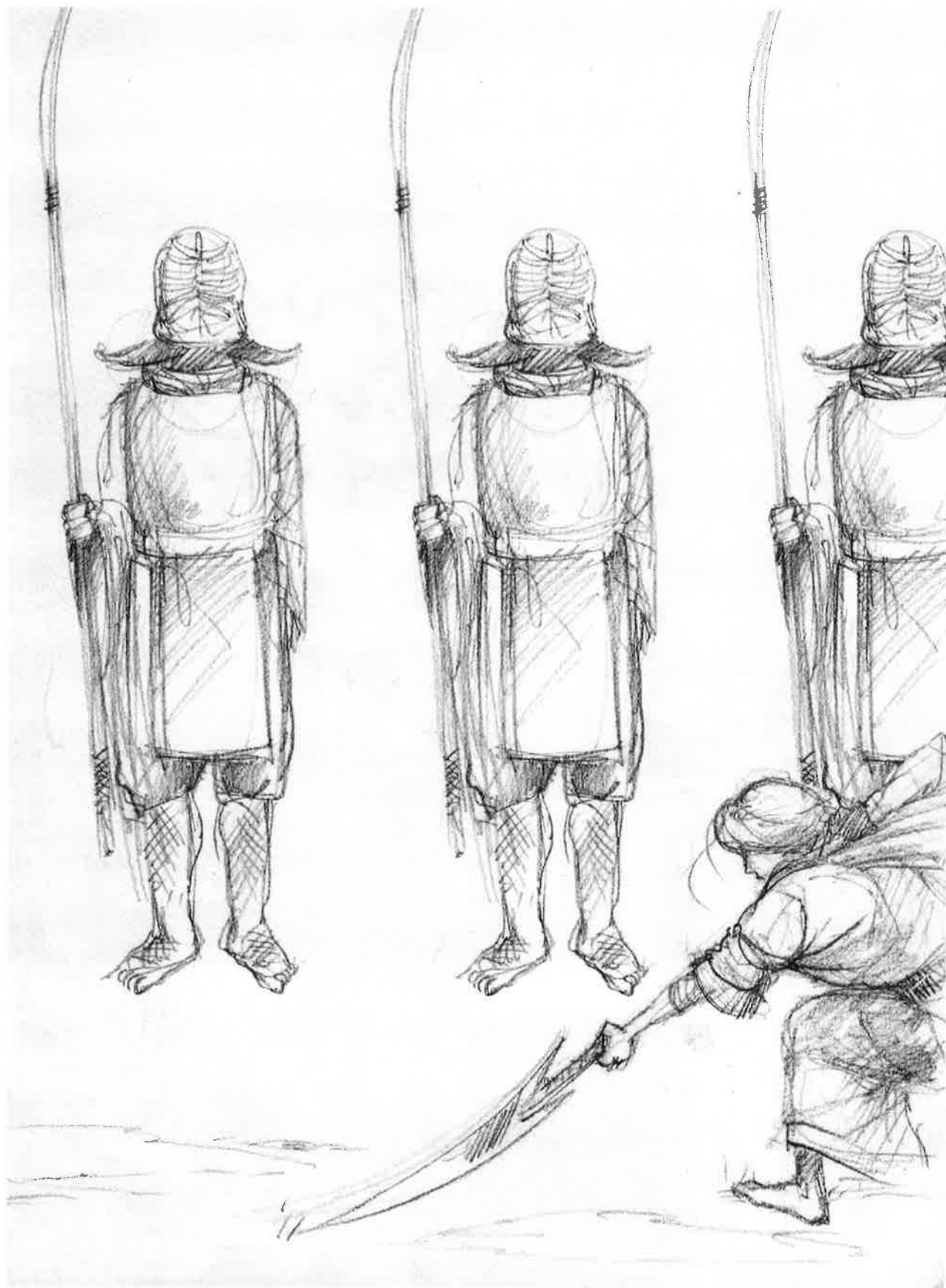
In my mind there is a temple built of stacked blocks of ice.
The ridges of its roof are fluted to a sharp fillet.
Its lotus windows are near-transparent, but still clouded with the frozen
energy of turbid water.
The tiles are carved deeply with scenes of a barren childhood,
a frieze of cringing figures and scowling faces like masks in a pantomime.

With infinitesimal patience the rain erodes this fortress,
the ice beginning to droop and slide.
Something concealed within emerges slowly.
It is an artifact embedded with the care of an emperor's tomb.
Around it, the city of the dead echoes with the pinging sound of rain against ice.

This thing which is revealed, bit by bit,
is my soul.

It lies in its frozen sarcophagus, waiting for spring.





Daily I hone and clean my sword.

I embrace the tenets of the warrior.

I learn to cross at a ford despite the day, or
the weather; if the wind changes I must
stay the course.

If the wind fails, I must row.

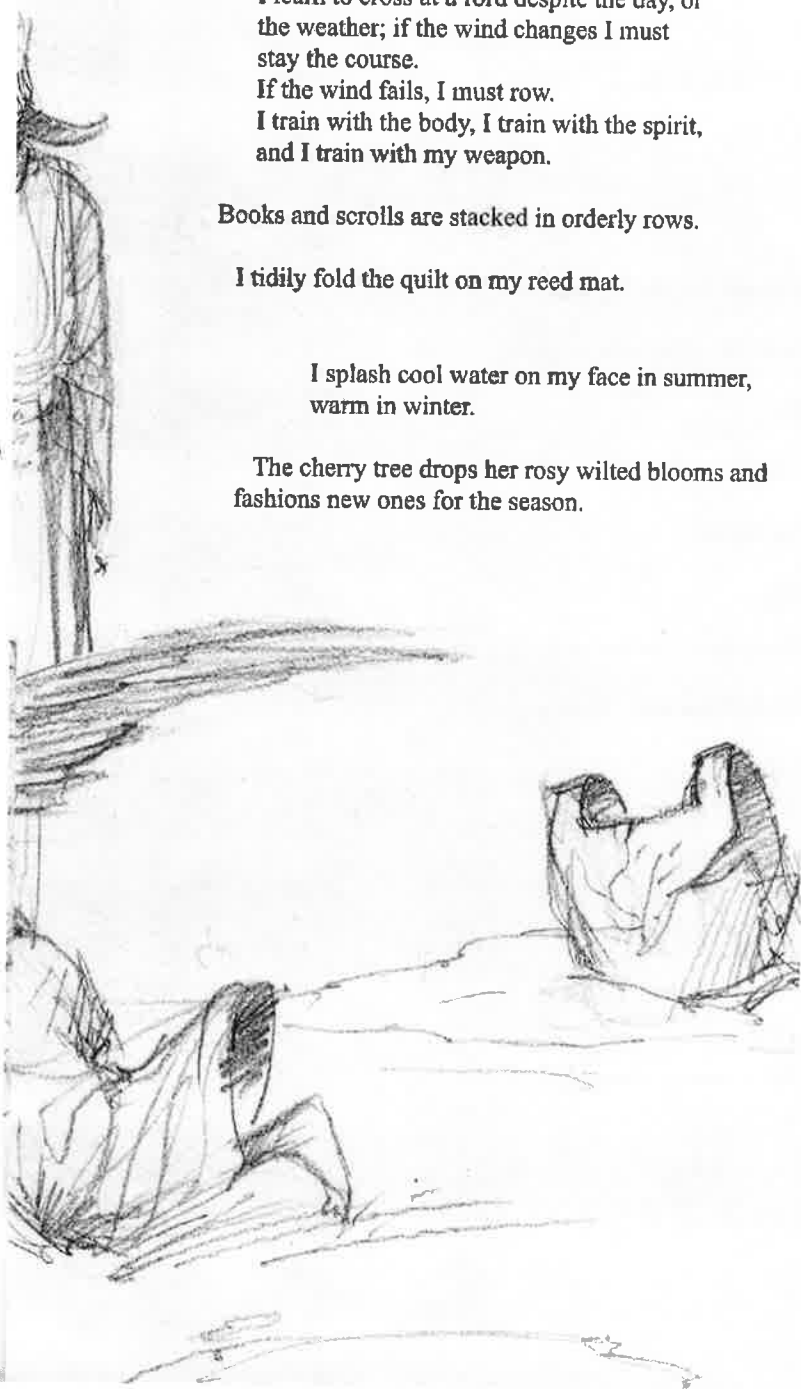
I train with the body, I train with the spirit,
and I train with my weapon.

Books and scrolls are stacked in orderly rows.

I tidily fold the quilt on my reed mat.

I splash cool water on my face in summer,
warm in winter.

The cherry tree drops her rosy wilted blooms and
fashions new ones for the season.



Eight years, and time turns busily

from noon

to night.

The days are different, and yet the same,

as I strive towards light like that small plant,

seeking strength.

I pace in my chamber, my hands

in knots, as old emotions

stir within me.

When I open the window to let the smoke of autumn in,

I hear the iron bell peal once for supper,

twice for freedom.

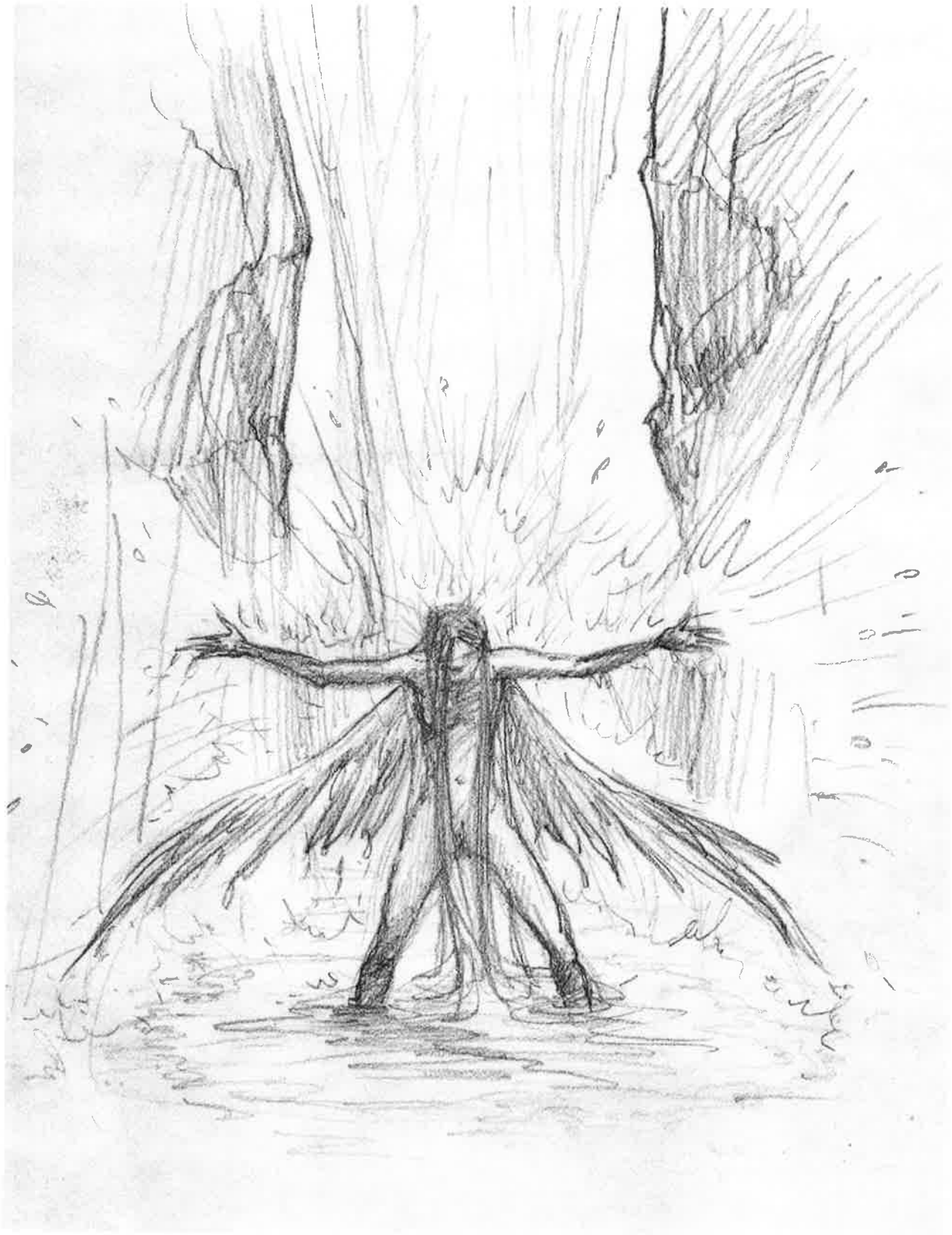


It is a pure note, deep
as the sound of thunder rolling
through a mountain pass.


Its echo rings me awake,
shivering
through waves of maroon maple leaves and
ochre sheaves of rice.

It pours
over the edge
of a rock,
sinks to the bottom of a steel-blue lake.

It sets a flock of geese to the air,








At once, my past surges by, swift
as deer bounding through a twilight forest.

In the space between two breaths I realize
I have not walked the road at all;
I have been standing at its head, foot
lifted, about to
step

but always holding, always waiting.
I know no other way.



Who can teach me of liberty?
Only myself.

Who encourages me to put my
hand on the gate latch and push?
Only myself.

The fledgling tumbles, bruising,
flight feathers crooked;

but she also rises with each beat
and pulse of her shoulders.



I have decided.

A position awaits me, ready to test my mettle.

All I have learned is ready to become action, as I embrace my final tenet:
do nothing which is of no use.

I have my new place as protector, a purposeful servitude.

Once night is relieved by dawn for the last time over these low woods I flex my fingers and toes
against the sill and
hurl myself skyward.

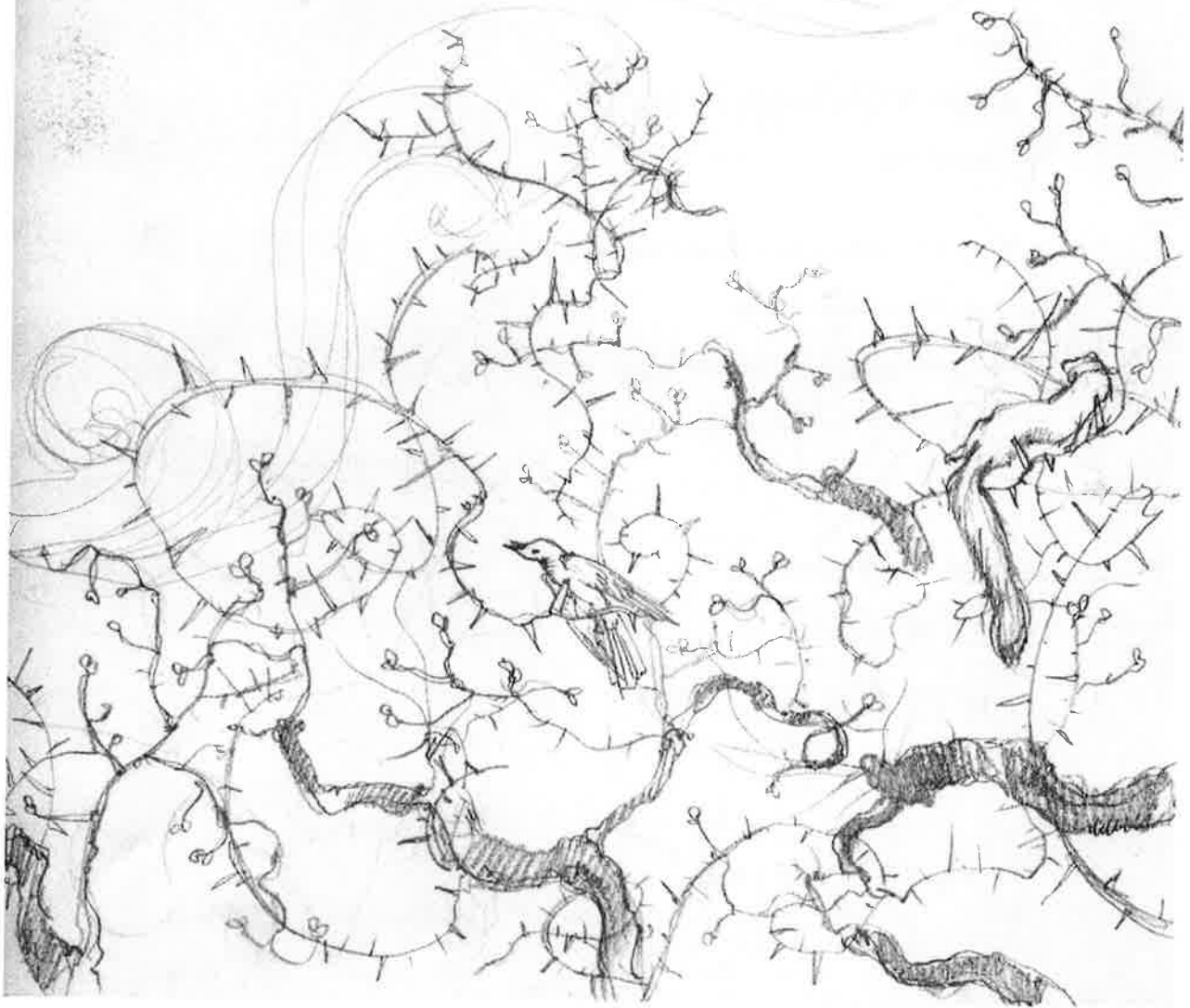
The morning chases me over that road.

Noon casts a bold shadow below me.

Evening fringes me with purple and gold.

The road winds easily, a ribbon unfurling; tangled in bamboo, skipping over creeks, caught
in the breeze and twisting into loops.

Always I follow, darting, rushing, refusing to slow now that I have a taste for it.



And yet, as I approach this strange destiny

of mine,

it recedes like a mythic fairy land always just

out of reach.

Its master is unknown to me; I can only hope he is benevolent.

Many years have passed without

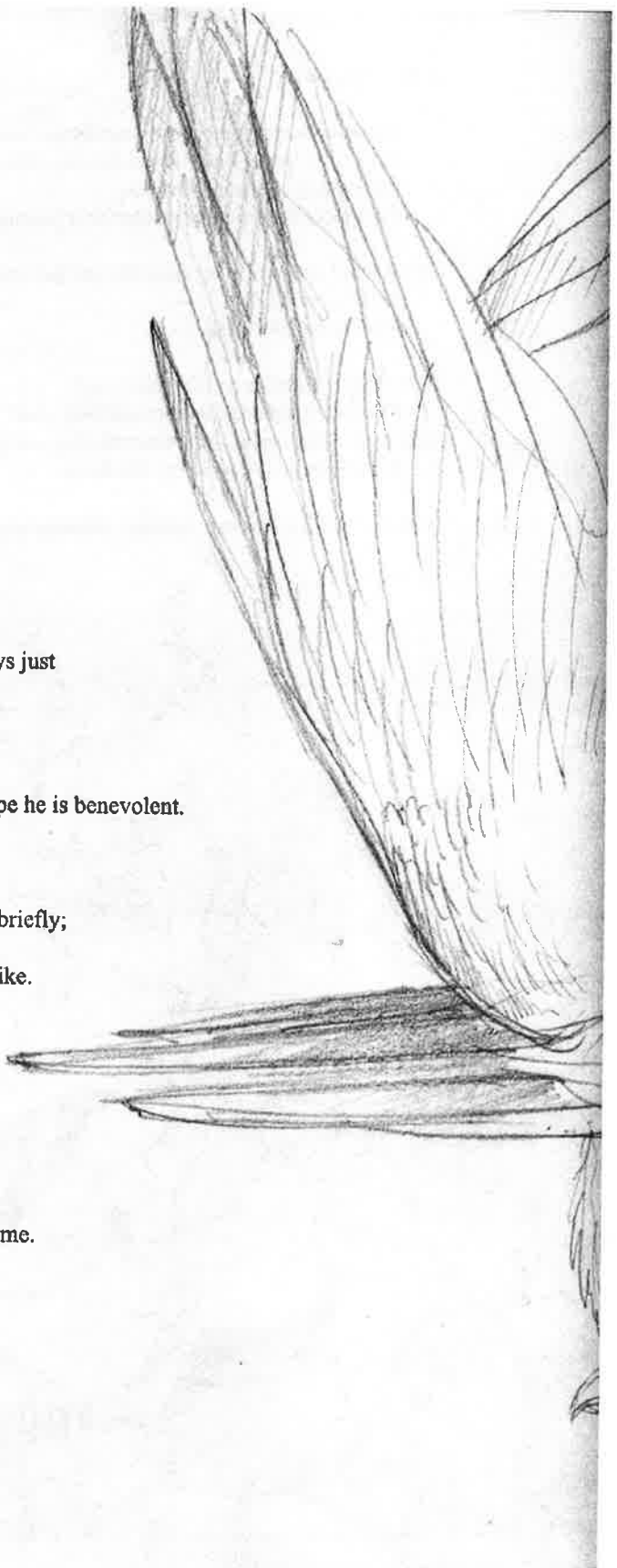
true kindness given to me, and then only briefly;

I must imagine what such gestures are like.

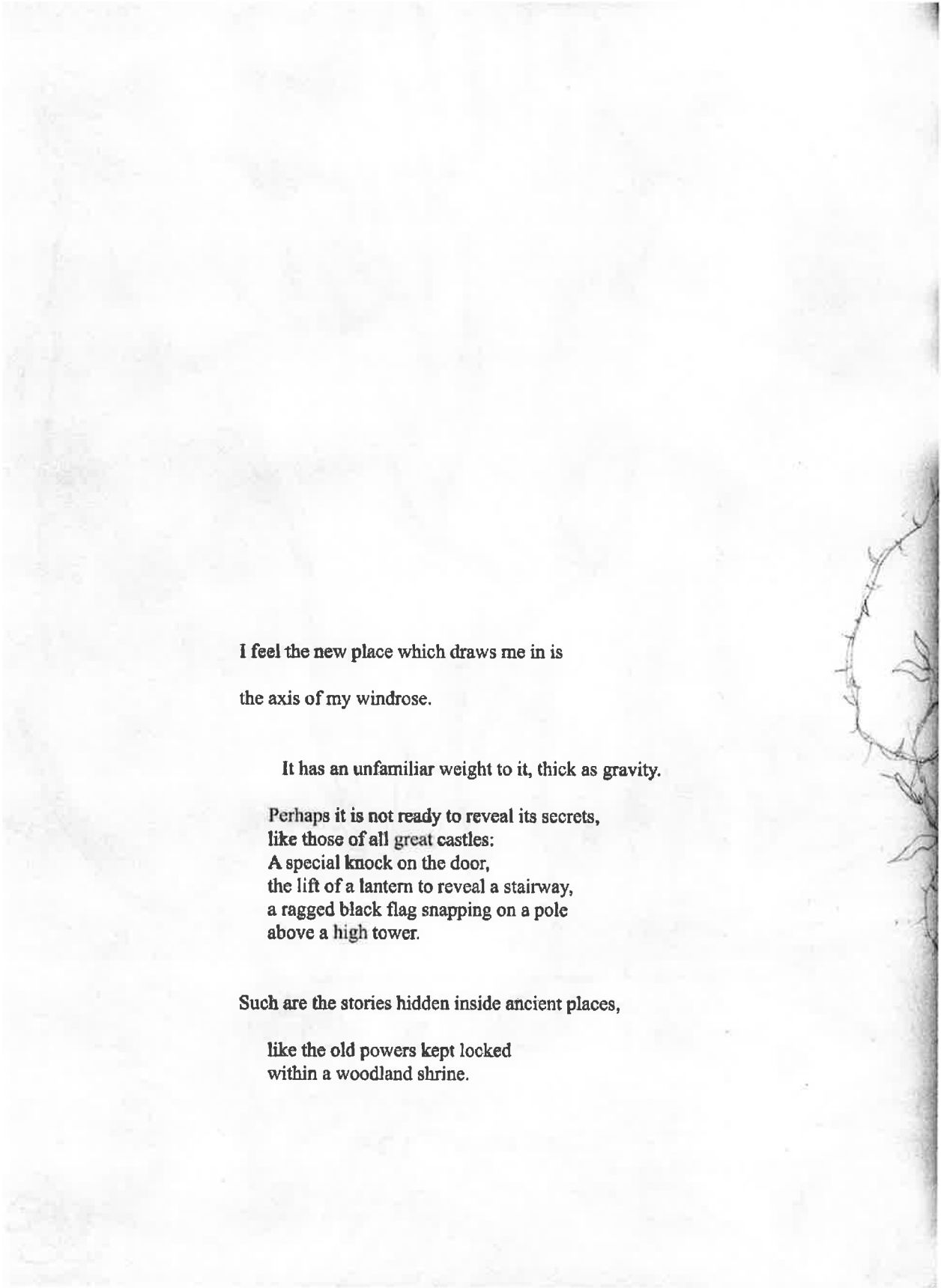
A firm hand extended in support,

a word of appreciation.

My heart swells at the hope of a fairer time.







I feel the new place which draws me in is
the axis of my windrose.

It has an unfamiliar weight to it, thick as gravity.

Perhaps it is not ready to reveal its secrets,
like those of all great castles:
A special knock on the door,
the lift of a lantern to reveal a stairway,
a ragged black flag snapping on a pole
above a high tower.

Such are the stories hidden inside ancient places,
like the old powers kept locked
within a woodland shrine.



The curtain rises on this new chapter.
There is a sense of magic upon the scene.

Reader, you should imagine a stage:
the worn floorboards glowing,
the backdrop gilded,
the stage lanterns flickering and
swaying above.
The song of the flute is a night whisper,
the drums a hollow tattoo.

I step onto that stage, my pact with
the audience made.

With a rattle of my wooden sabre
and a shout,

I enter this world.



That ribbon reels me in,

fine as gossamer. I believe I have found

safe haven,

and offer up thanks in gratitude for
kindness which has been given to me
without being earned.

There are no thorns in my bed, no fears clouding my dreams.

I create a new memory of this first night in a place where

I am wanted

rather than tolerated.

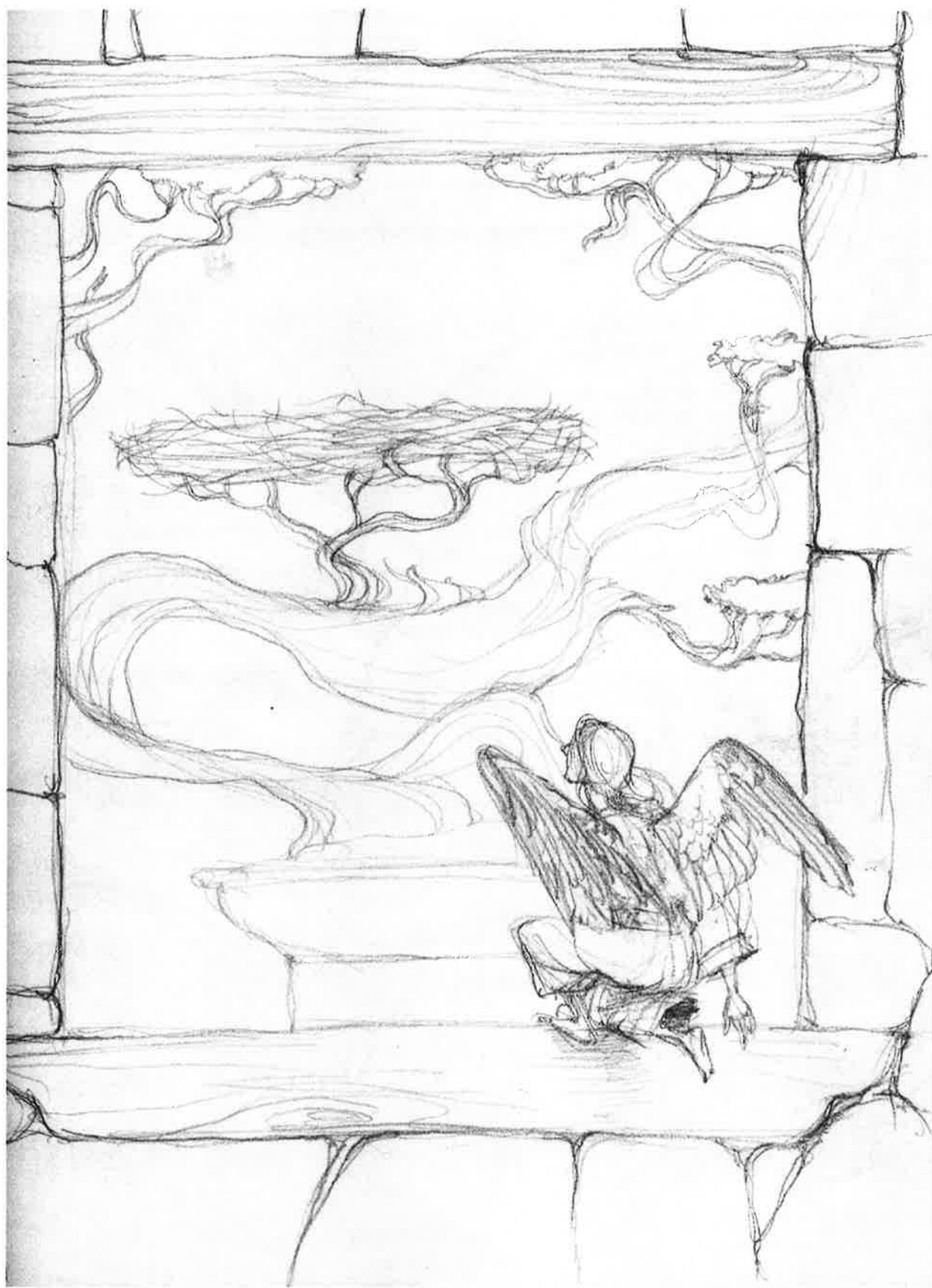
I cross the threshold and the screen slides to close me in.

The moon remains in her sky,

the owl's heavy call scrapes against the hills.

In the hour of the ox,

stillness lies like silk over the landscape.



I know little of my new position save my duty:

to protect my master, who remains a mystery.

I am told he is
fastidious;
just;
peculiar;
and good,
words which mean nothing
without a character attached to them.

The harvest moon casts a
persimmon warmth
over the relics of his castle,
objects arranged in a shrine to memory.

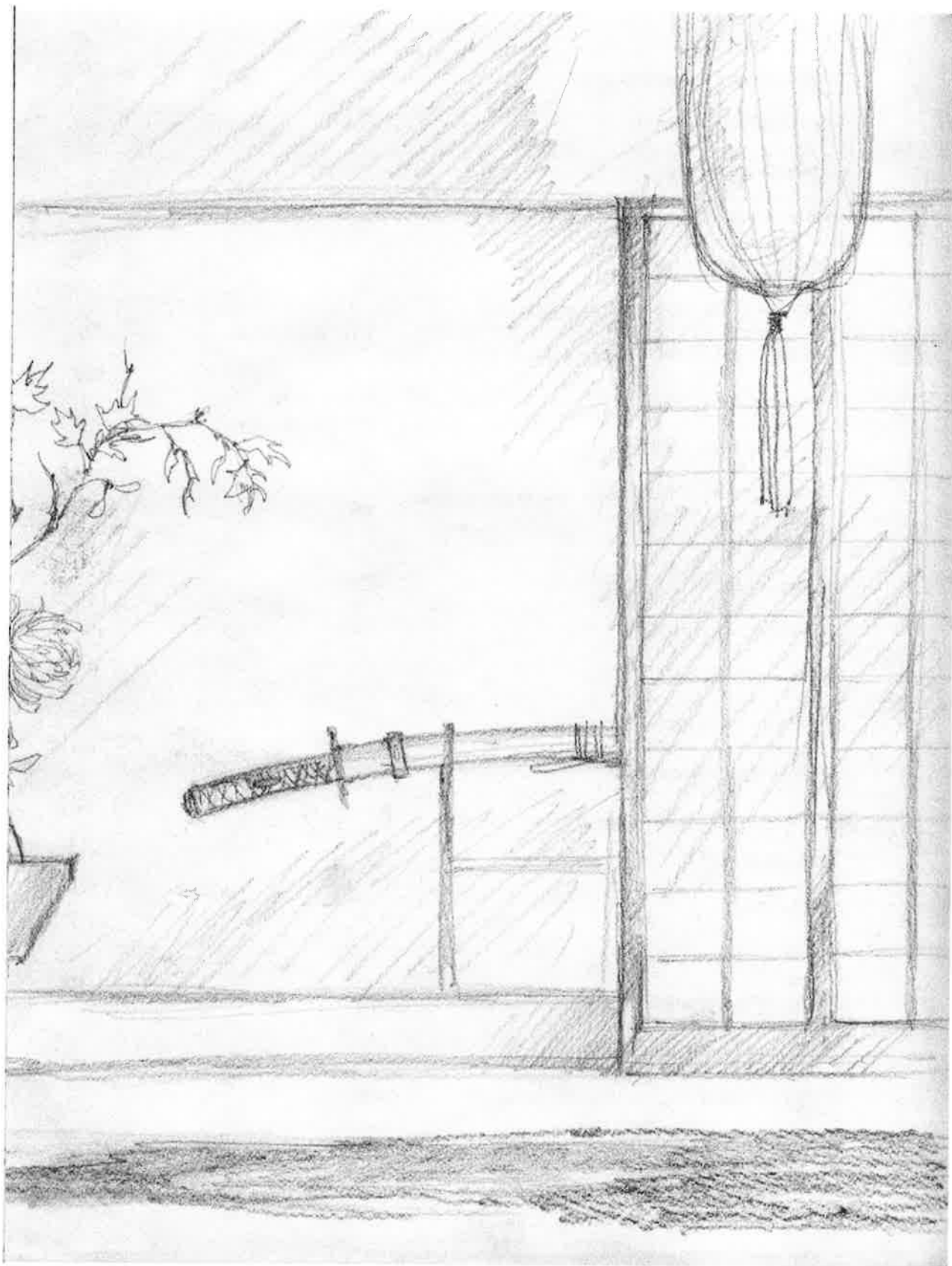
There is little of him here;
instead, I sense his absence
in the hushed rooms,
the blank screens,
the closed doors.

He is a guarded figure,
protecting those memories by
shutting them away.

When I linger in these spaces,
sometimes I hear an uncanny echo
of voices of the past;
but when I seek their source,

there is only emptiness.





Banners above the battlements
curl in the evening breeze.
I take my place among
the ranks of those who
hold down shadows.
One hand will be on my weapon at all times,
one hand will held out in counter-balance.
One foot will rest lightly,
the other will plant firmly.
Despite the years of indifference towards my existence,
I was taught well,
and am prepared.
I fix my eye upon my fears,
as I have done before,
but this time gaze into the heart of them and
know how to vanquish them.
Now I know how to distinguish between
good and ill,
gain and loss.
I think only honest thoughts,
and intuit the ways of all things, even those new to my sphere.
I perceive all things unseen, that
invisible kingdom
I could not see as a child but now
is revealed to me.





From my position at attention, I can see

a knotty barrier between our land

and the distant world.

Flowering hawthorns catch upon themselves like
skeins of yarn in the claws of a cat.

Mist creeps over the hills.

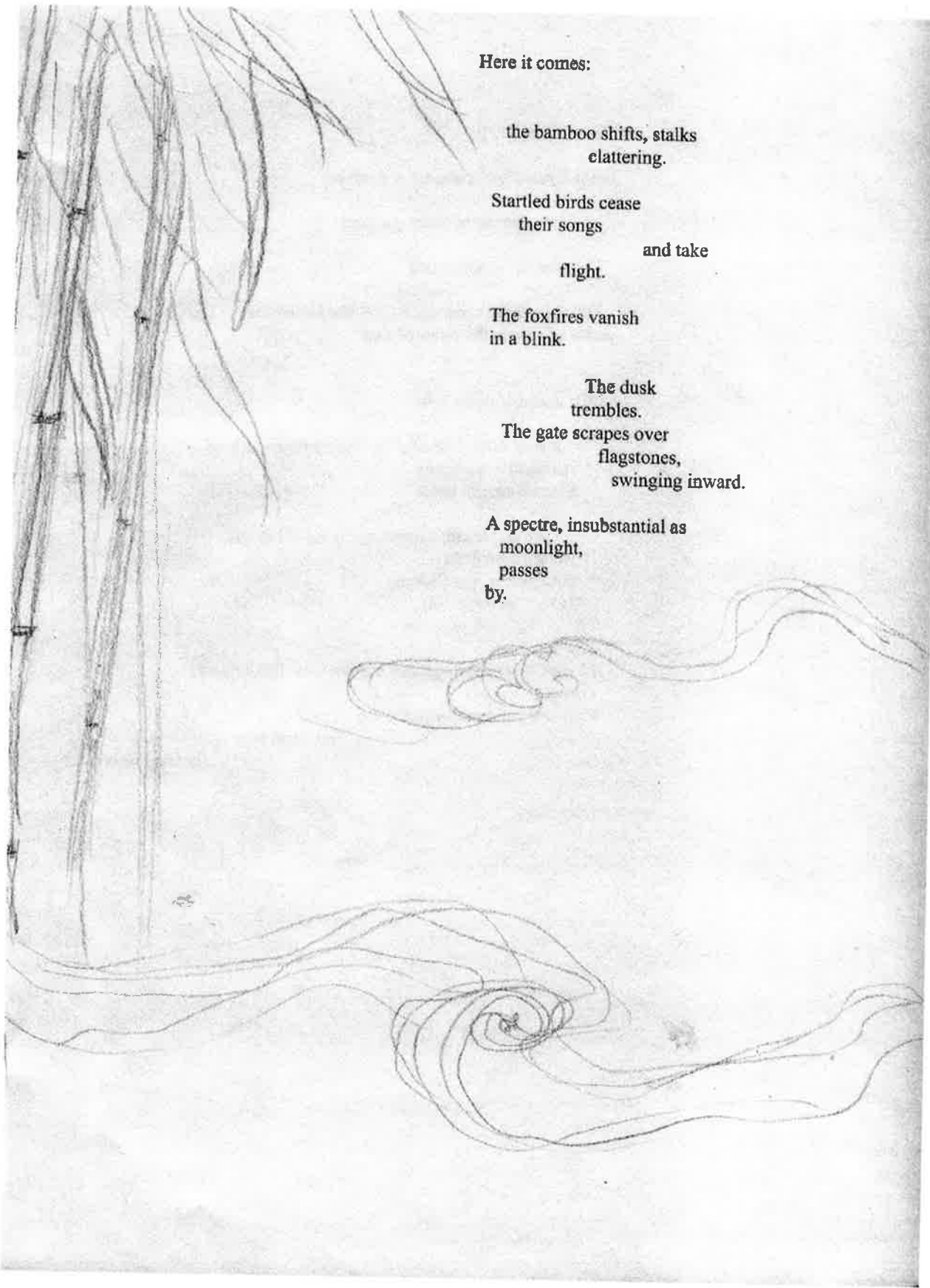
It is lit from within by the curling flame-tails of
the foxfires gathering
beneath ancient trees.

They nod to one another, speaking old magic,
while above them
the Evening Star flickers
against an indigo sky.

If I were to pass through that barrier, what lies beyond?

What else moves through the fog
on silent feet,
holding its breath?





Here it comes:

the bamboo shifts, stalks
elattering.

Startled birds cease
their songs
and take
flight.

The foxfires vanish
in a blink.

The dusk
trembles.
The gate scrapes over
flagstones,
swinging inward.

A spectre, insubstantial as
moonlight,
passes
by.



My master enters boldly.

Shadows retreat before him.

Dogs' noses quiver with alert desire,
horses' ears prick,
cats' spines bristle
and arch.

His muscles bunch
and cord when he
makes a fist, his eye burns
like star fire.

I stand firm as the knotty pine while wind swirls around it.

He growls,
he hisses,
he snaps his beak;
I nod, I square my shoulders, I lift my chin.

I sense latent anger in him, like
an animal straining against
the end of a chain; yet
I am not afraid.



His roughness appeals to me. Elegance and gallantry
are things which live in stories, and are as removed from
my understanding as
a life from truth.

I prefer the moon,
the sun,
the lightning striking a tree,
the surge of tide or
the wind through reeds.

These are things in my small world
I recognize.

The dragonfly lands on the bent stalk,
delicate as a jewel.
It is called beautiful, but
its beauty matters little when its prey
is in its jaws.

We circle one another, gauging, testing.
I sense that he, too, is indifferent to my femininity,
and instead is pleased by my forthrightness.





I am commanded to kneel at a right angle to him.

Tea is served in measured ritual.

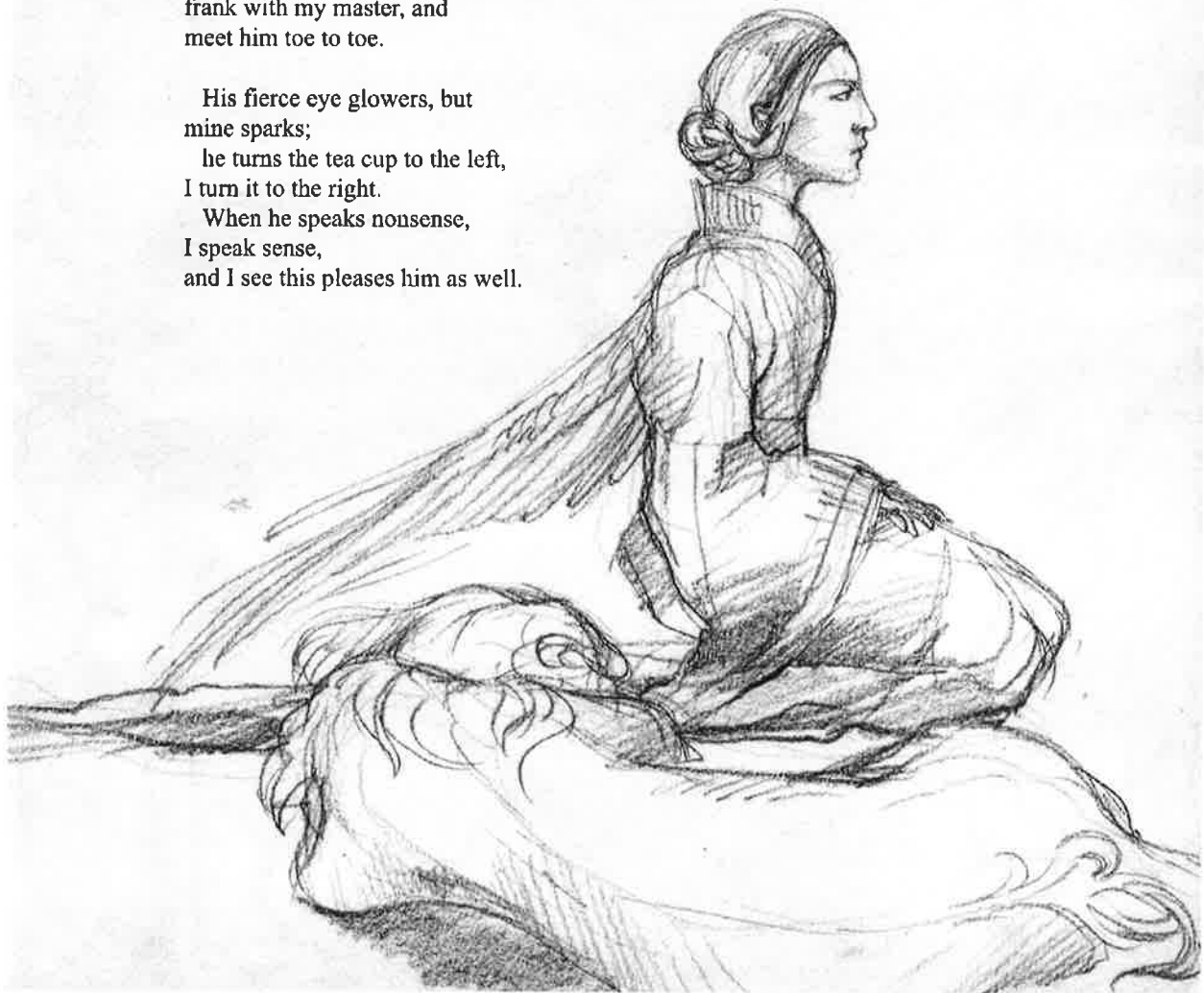
We still circle one another, sparring lightly.

The tea cup is filled with
green water, glinting
gold in the lantern light.
Its surface is as impenetrable as a
malachite sea.

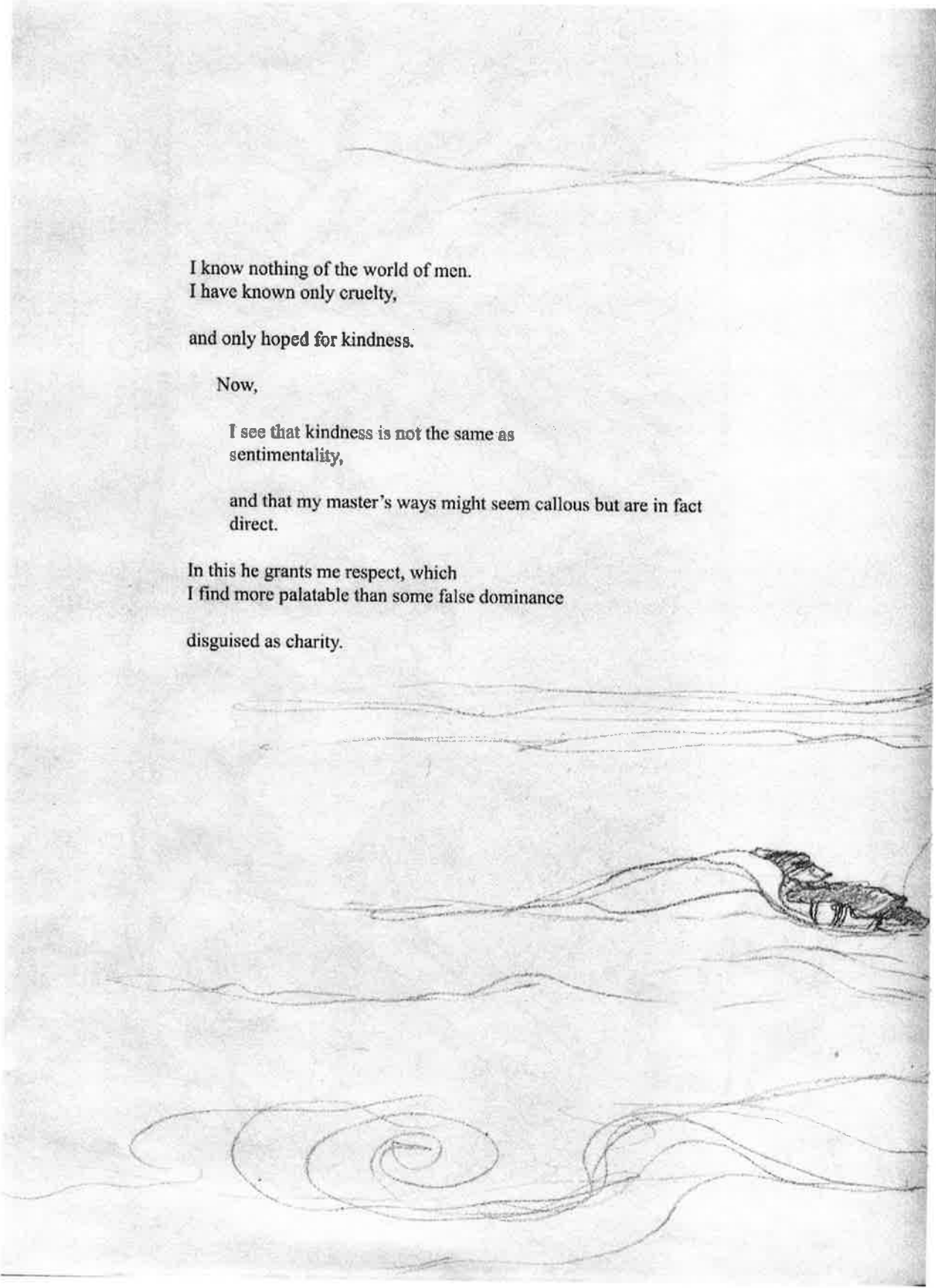
I think of a shipwreck submerged beneath a sheet of ice,
its ghost crew tangled in its ropes.

I should be cautious, but instead I am
frank with my master, and
meet him toe to toe.

His fierce eye glowers, but
mine sparks;
he turns the tea cup to the left,
I turn it to the right.
When he speaks nonsense,
I speak sense,
and I see this pleases him as well.







I know nothing of the world of men.
I have known only cruelty,

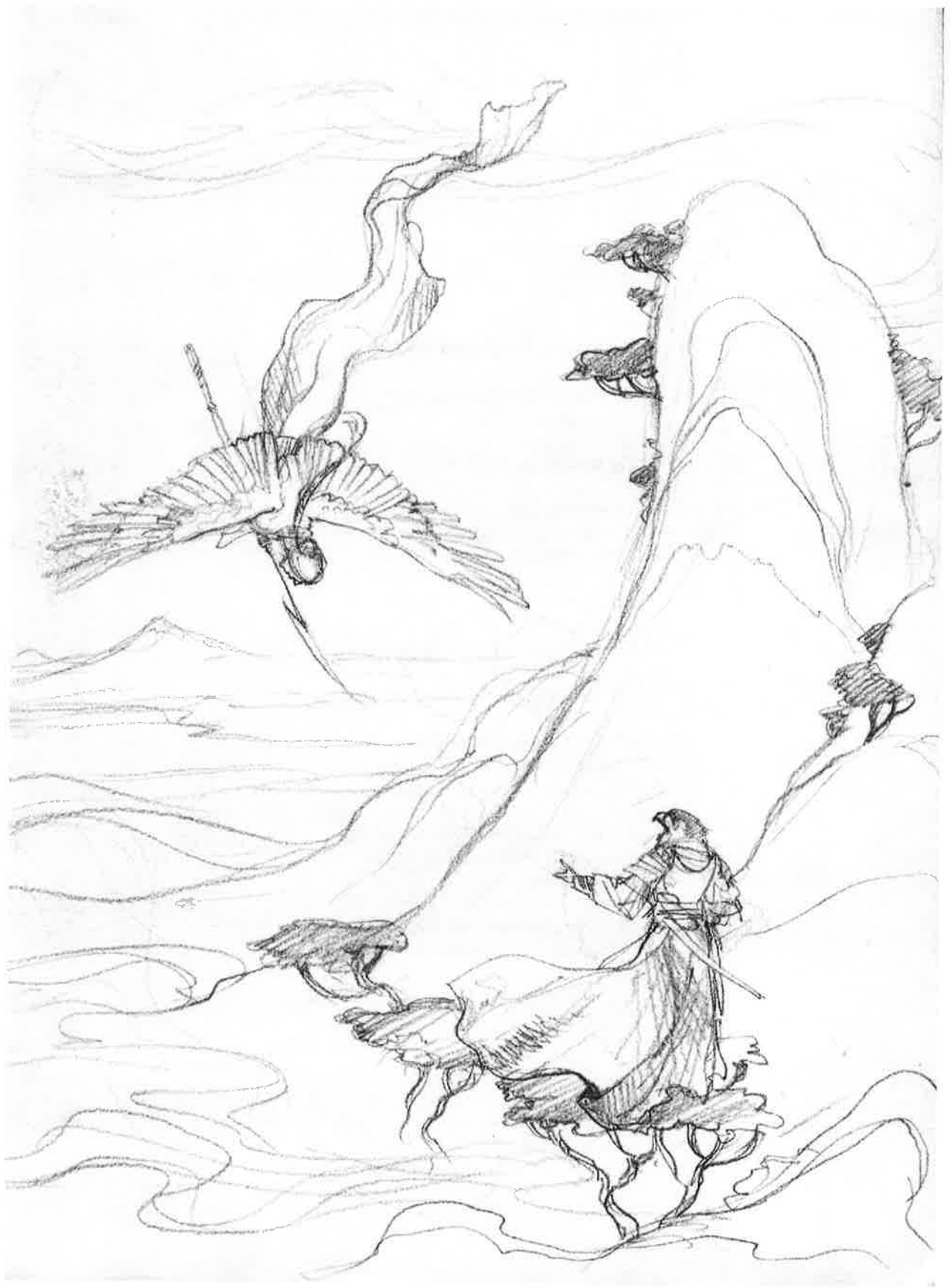
and only hoped for kindness.

Now,

I see that kindness is not the same as
sentimentality,

and that my master's ways might seem callous but are in fact
direct.

In this he grants me respect, which
I find more palatable than some false dominance
disguised as charity.



There is something behind his
blustery front,
his feathers ruffling as he
stomps and huffs,

which belies his arrogant mien.

Something holds tight within, with a
steely grip around his windpipe so
his breath comes short.


A deep conflict within him,
as wild as a falcon savaging a dove,
has turned him cynical and sharp.

When he focuses that baleful eye on me,
though,
I know it is not me who angers him.

It is this revenant of his past which
haunts his mind as sure as a spirit
haunts a ruin.

He recognizes it too, and ducks his head
in chagrin at his moody fits of temper.





I only wish these imaginings of the spirit world are
what wakes me one dreary night,

but no.

The moon is a watery sliver,
the sky clogged with clouds.

My eyes fly open at

the sound
of

scraping along
the hallway wall,
clicking and groping.
fingernails
over my door,

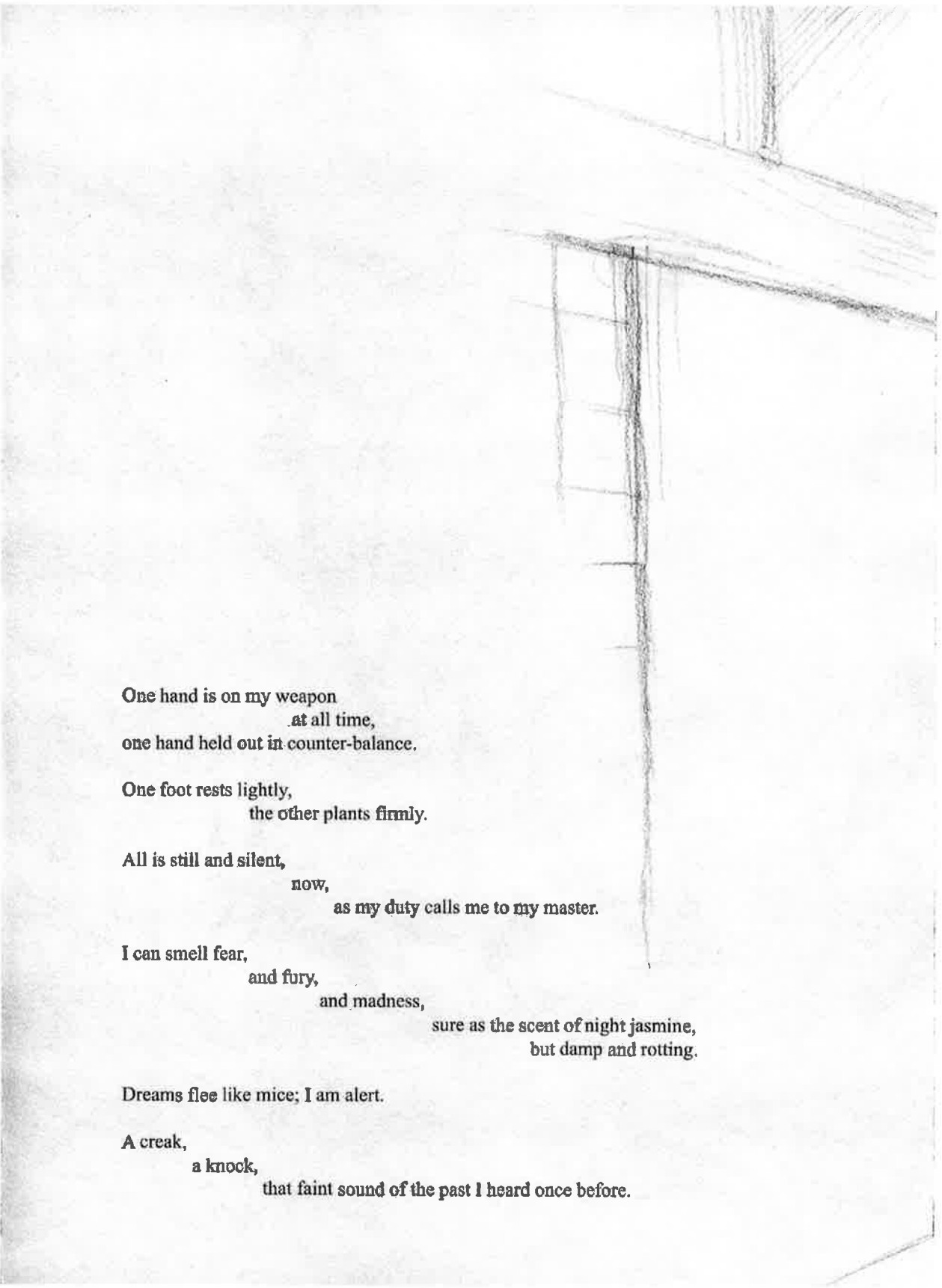
There is a susurrant of mutterings, the low
chortling of goblins,

and then

a gurgle deep in the throat,

like choking on blood.





One hand is on my weapon
 at all time,
one hand held out in counter-balance.

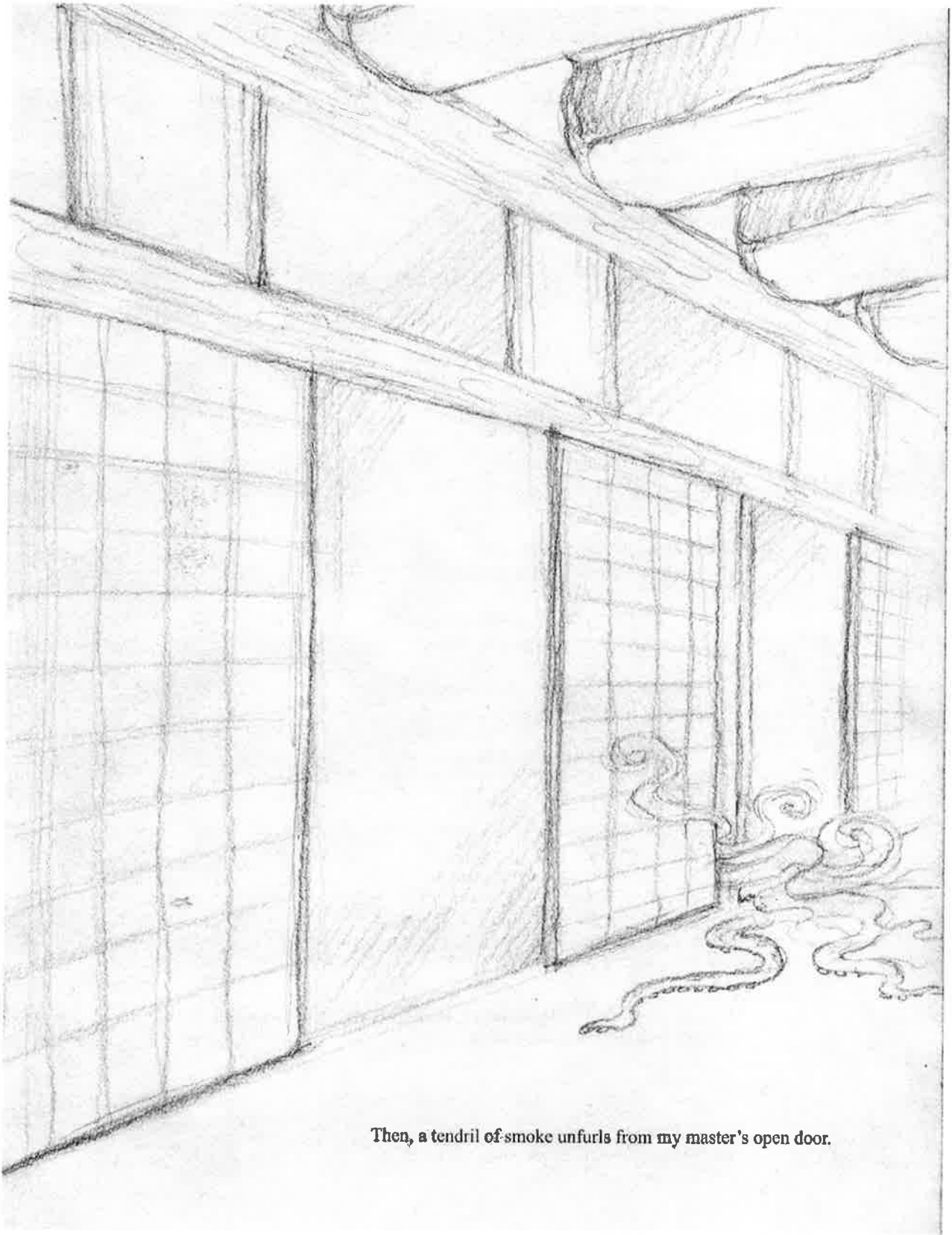
One foot rests lightly,
 the other plants firmly.

All is still and silent,
 now,
 as my duty calls me to my master.

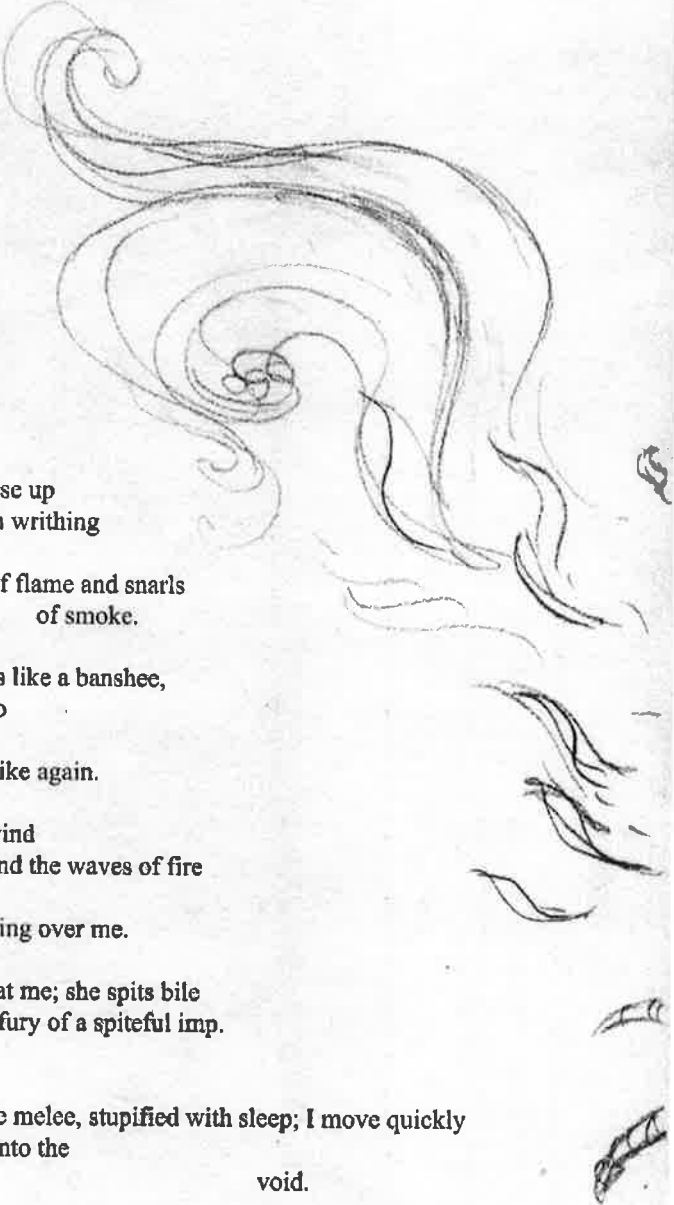
I can smell fear,
 and fury,
 and madness,
 sure as the scent of night jasmine,
 but damp and rotting.

Dreams flee like mice; I am alert.

A creak,
 a knock,
 that faint sound of the past I heard once before.



Then, a tendril of smoke unfurls from my master's open door.



I leap inward,
sword at the ready, and rise up
to clash with the demon writhing
through tongues of flame and snarls
of smoke.

She shrieks and hisses like a banshee,
whipping her tail at me so

I must strike and strike again.

I shout against the blasting wind
from her gaping maw and the waves of fire
breaking over me.

Her jaws snap and crack at me; she spits bile
and lashes out with the fury of a spiteful imp.

My master is insensible to the melee, stupified with sleep; I move quickly
to drive the demon back into the
void.

A door slams, and once more,
that gloating chortle echoes until
it is swallowed by silence.



My master is slow to realization.
His chamber is a wreck, charred and shattered.
He drags himself up like a drowned man onto shore.
It is a grave, shadowed eye he turns to me.
All light left the room once I vanquished the fire.
He will not speak of that monstrous thing I thought
dwelled only in my imagination, but now know to be real.
And yet, when I bow my head, he bows his,
in obeisant gratitude; when I demur, he presses me;
when I make to leave him, he clutches at my hand.



A strange fire pulses beneath his skin.

It slowly comes in tune with my own heartbeat.

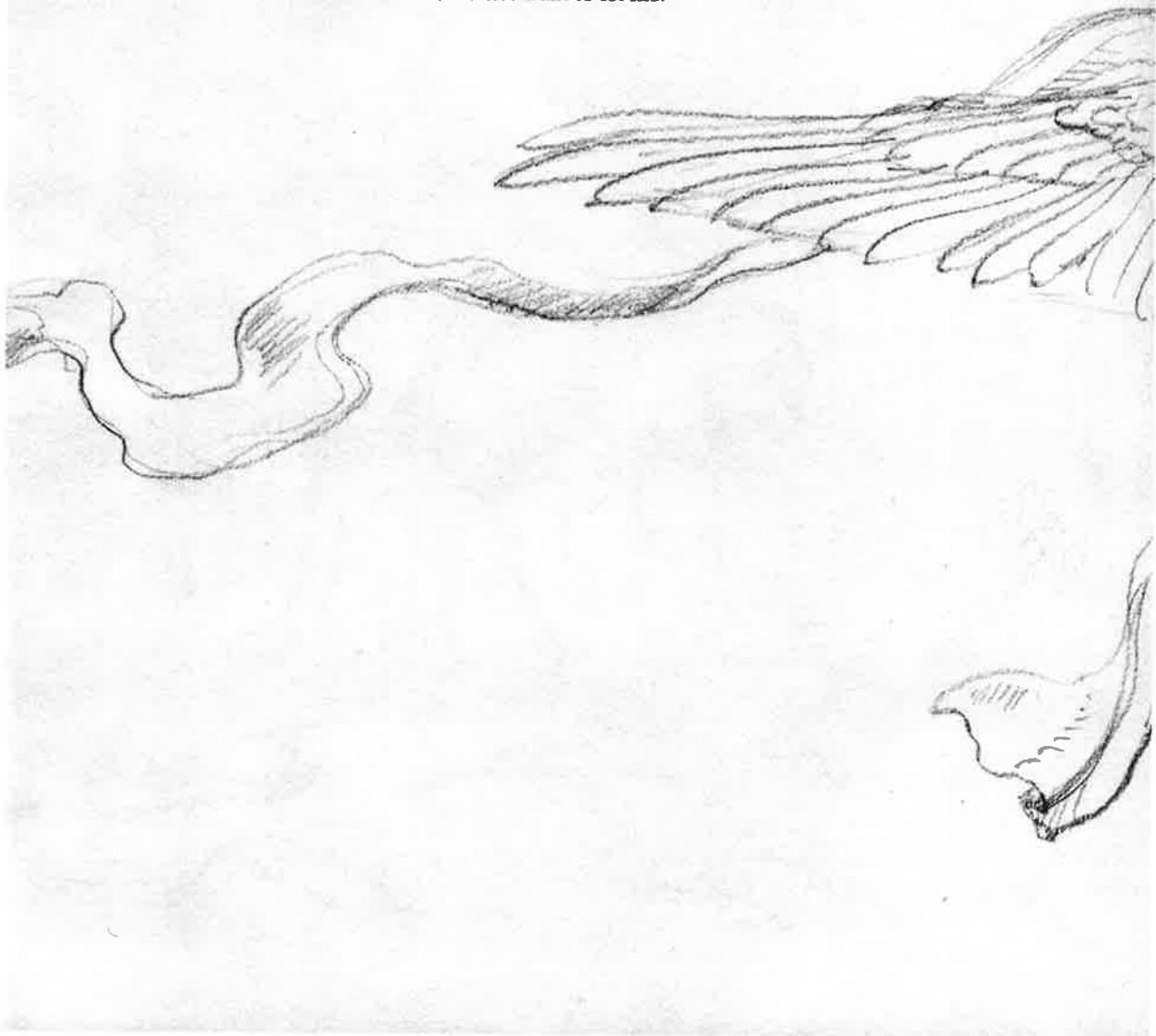
I am beset by a turbulent hope
which I immediately try to quench with
sensible judgment.

I am struck by how I am held firm by the sympathy in his expression:

now I, too, am slow to realization;

it is not that I do not want to go,

but that he does not want to let me.





A new day brings
wonderment.

Remembering his words,
his look,
his voice,
I struggle with what they could mean.

Reason takes hold of sentiment,
and they battle one another.

How dare I stray from my path, no matter the cause?

My fidelity to my master must remain true, and not
be shaken by flights of fancy.

In the daylight
it all seems like a fever dream:

the breathless silence,
the fiery demon,
the violent clash,
our clasping hands.

When I learn he has gone,
with no word of when he might return,
I swallow the sick disappointment which rises in my throat,
and set myself to sensible endeavors.



Each midnight,
spring stands still.

Crickets cease
their scrapings.

The air
is a soup of jasmine,
wisteria,
and plum,
each bloom a weight
pressing
on me,
stifling my breath.

The clocks have all
stopped.

Time smirks at me
as I lie awake.

Each midnight,
there is the possibility I will not think of possibilities, and
each midnight,
spring stands still.





My hand should be firm on the grip of my weapon
no matter the course of my thoughts,

I must stay dutiful to my purpose.

I look down at my hand now
and there is the faintest tremor;

where the breeze lays a strand
of hair across my face,
my skin flushes.

My gaze searches across the greening landscape
to where my master is,
somewhere beyond the waving stalks of rice,
and my struggle is renewed.

When word comes on the breeze of his imminent return,

I set aside those thoughts
and bend my knee.

I hear shouts and greetings over
wheels clattering on flagstone,
but my gaze remains downcast.





My master is a fixed point
around which his showy, haughty companions
flutter and squawk.

To them I am a discarded tea cup,
skinned with damp leaves.

I am ashes on the hearth,
a lost shoe,
a troublesome thread come loose at the hem.

I am an annoyance,
superfluous.

I could turn and fight,
stomp and shout,
but it would gain me nothing;
and gain is not the warrior's way.

Instead, I curl inward,
seeking invisibility.

My heart beats and trembles
like a small cat curled on
her master's lap,
hoping his warm palm will pass over her.





But, then, I fear I am also ready to
lash out with those cat's claws,
if need be.

My nerves sing,
my blood boils
with fiery abandon.

I feel heat pulse crimson against
my skin
every time
my eyes seek my master's;
and yet, he keeps his turned away.

The crowd discusses me, for I am fodder for the party.

With eyes narrowed in judgment they point out
my numerous faults,
my corrupt spirit,
my ignorance.

My master's favored one,
her eye a glass orb,
flaunts her petty brilliance.

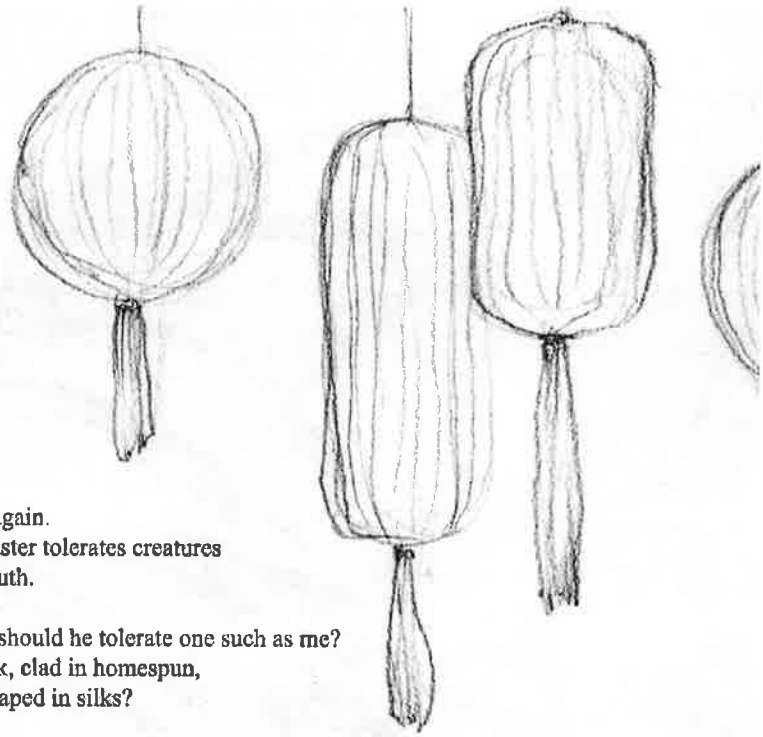
Like my jailers of old, I repulse them;
that they repulse me is irrelevant.

They kick me aside, their robes flaring.

Lock the box,
toss the key;
out of sight,
out of mind.

But always, my master turns away, silent.



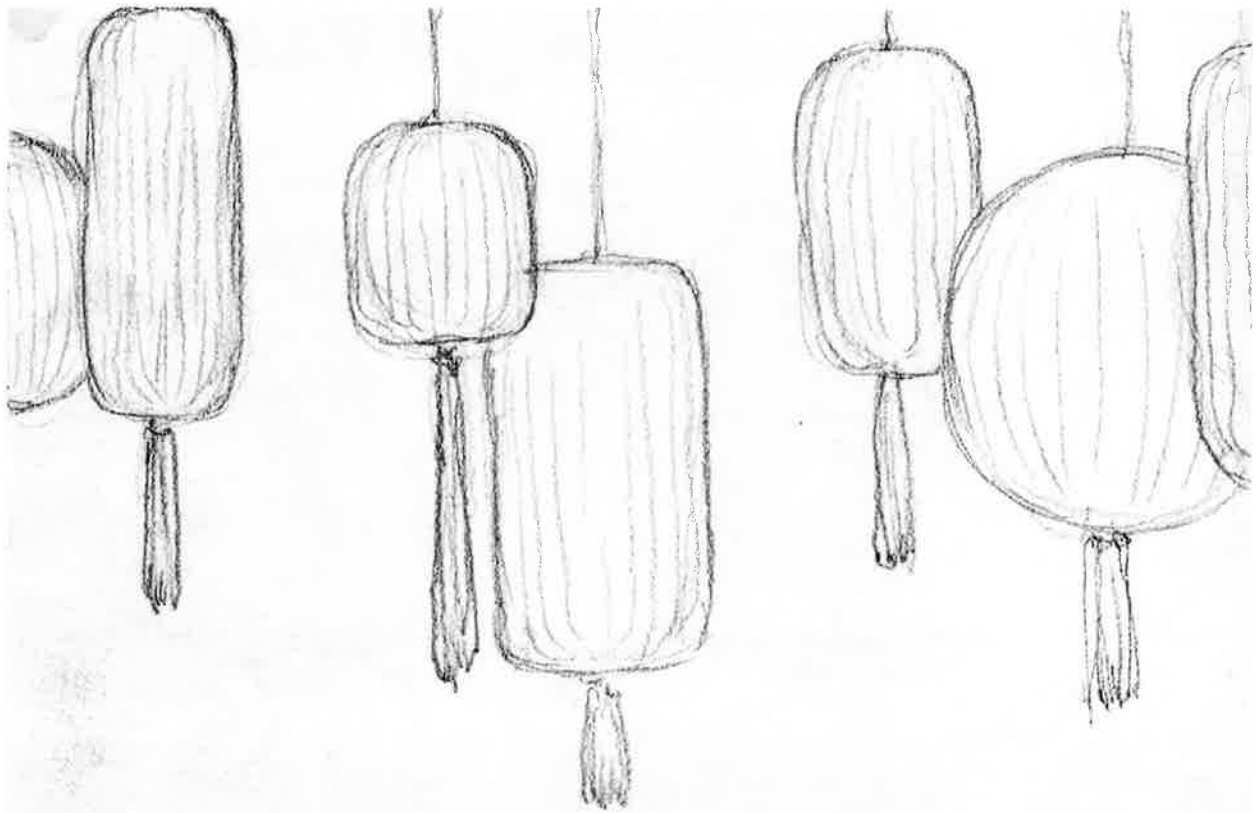


My psyche takes up the struggle again.
I cannot understand why my master tolerates creatures
so devoid of tenderness and truth.

By the same token, thought, why should he tolerate one such as me?
Why embrace the workday week, clad in homespun,
rather than the Sunday rest, draped in silks?

When provoked, I challenge, despite my fomenting feelings;
and he rises to that challenge, confusing me further.





All the superficial gaiety of the crowd
melts away, and instead there is only the
clash of our swords,
blade sparking against blade.



He asks:

Would I lend him my shoulder,
for support?

I would.

He asks:

Would I minister to him, as one
stronger than he?

I would.

He asks:

Would I put that crowd of fools
out into the night, if
they spat at him?

I would.

I could say, Reader,
it is my code which speaks
through me,
but it is more than that.

I ask myself:

What would I do for him?
And what would he do for me?





With a gust of foul wind, the
doors blow open.

In crawls a stranger,
shallow and servile.

He twines around my master like
a clinging vine around
an oak.

My master cringes, but from what
I cannot tell;
he is as powerful a figure as
this creature is weak.

He puts on a mask of cheer,
but I can see his revulsion beneath it.

The doors blow closed, shutting me out.



The shade of my master's fears comes
on quiet feet.

It tiptoes up the spiraling stair,
melts through walls,
peers through cracks.

It winks and
squints,
tongue lolling,
claws scrabbling.

I know these noises, now,
and am on my guard;
my blade glints as I take up arms.

But then
an unholy scream
tears through the moonlit night.

It shatters
stone,
topples timber,
crushes clouds.

It is the sound of the void, if such a thing is possible;
the agony of madness,
of a soul unhinged from its body, doomed to destruction.



My master comes to me,
subdued,
strained;
he takes my hand and draws me to the tallest tower.

I come willingly, unafraid.

Here is what I see:

the stranger, bloodied and ruined.

He scrabbles on the floor, his throat

rent by that vampire,

that demon.

I tend to this thing,
stanching the blood,
while he grovels and pants.

His eye rolls in white terror, but
there is a canny spark behind the fear, and
I am left wondering what transpired.

That eye, a trembling slice of moonlight,
tells me nothing; it is
gelid and weak,
devoid of spirit.

I do as I am bid, though,
and keep him alive.

His essence wavers as

the candle goes out,

and he flinches as
my master's silhouette
appears on the screen.



Dawn's fingers reach

over the hills, casting pale shadows.

My master commands the stranger,
bundled and bandaged,
to be gone;

his shoulders curl under a mysterious strain of
horror and disgust,
his countenance warps with exhaustion
as though he had run many leagues without respite.

He bows his head further, though,
in gratitude to me; as the
rising sun paints our backs I am also
warmed by his respect.

His party guests seem forgotten;

the horrors of the night fade;

there is only us,

speaking in tune like

the ringing of bells.



Here,
now,
my master opens to me like a flower.
I hold my breath for fear of breaking the spell.
He speaks of the withering of his soul, of hope
eclipsed by a perpetual night,
and thought his life has been far removed from mine
I harken to my own childhood and its hopes
crushed into dust.
His nerves are laid bare, alive
as the faint birdsong of morning
filtering through spring's branches.
But,
there,
a raven's croak,
like sandpaper on a wound;
and suddenly he is gone, his heart locked tight.
My knocking falls on hollow wood.
With a swirl of robes,
my master's favored one draws him from me.



I have a dream,
the same for many nights,
of a strange phantom child in my bed
like an egg in a nest.

It is a little thing
that mewls and squirms, its eyes
as blank as marbles.

I have heard that it is bad luck, to dream of children.

When I feel it push against me

I recoil,
not understanding,
and wake in dread.

Indeed, in the day, that dread lingers, and manifests:

word from my childhood prison,
that my former jailer is dying
and wants me there.



I must go, no matter how much my master scowls.

It is as though our moment at dawn never happened.

Why should I bother, he asks,
with a creature which hated and mistreated me?

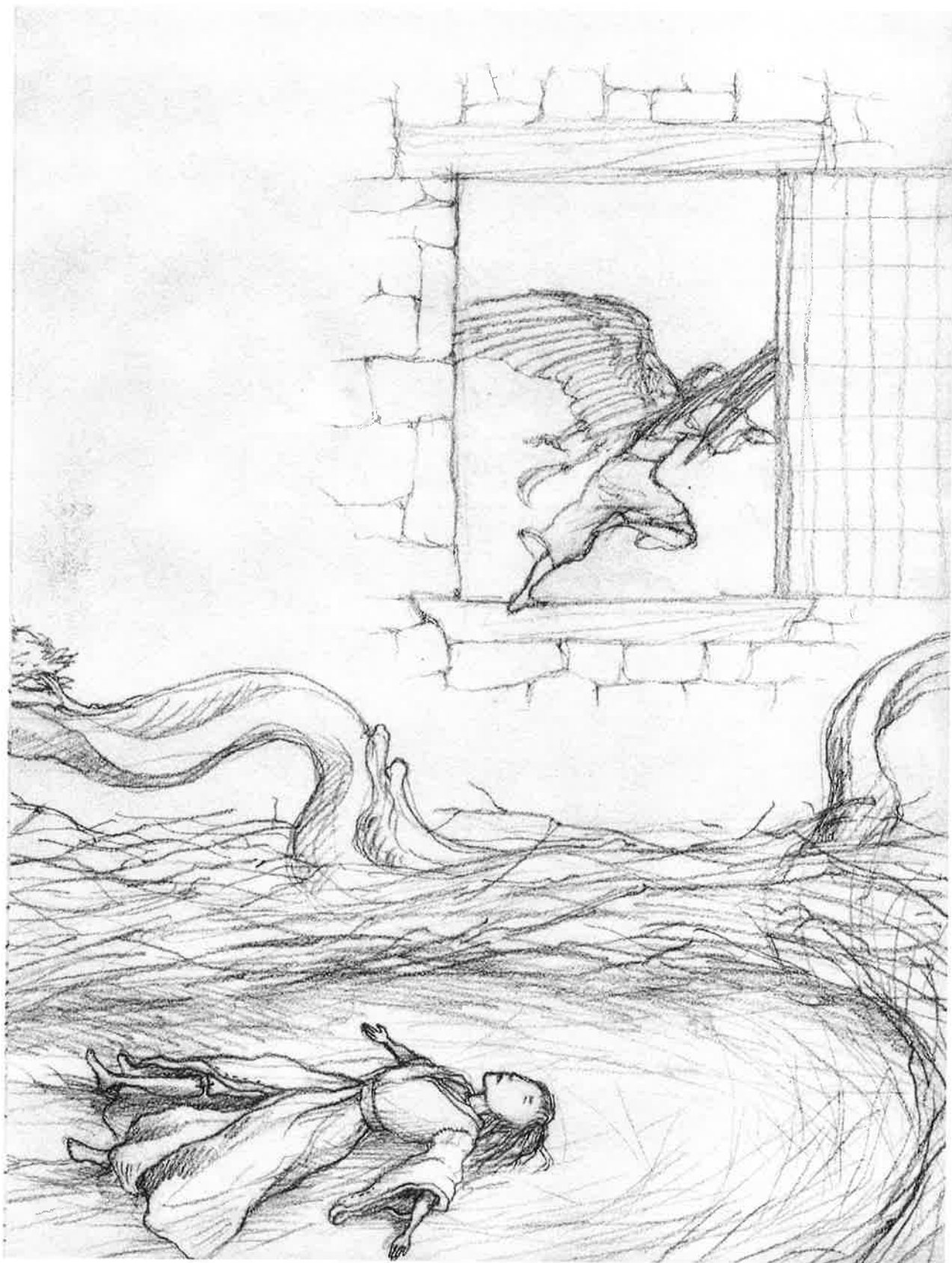
In death, I reply, there is only forgiveness.

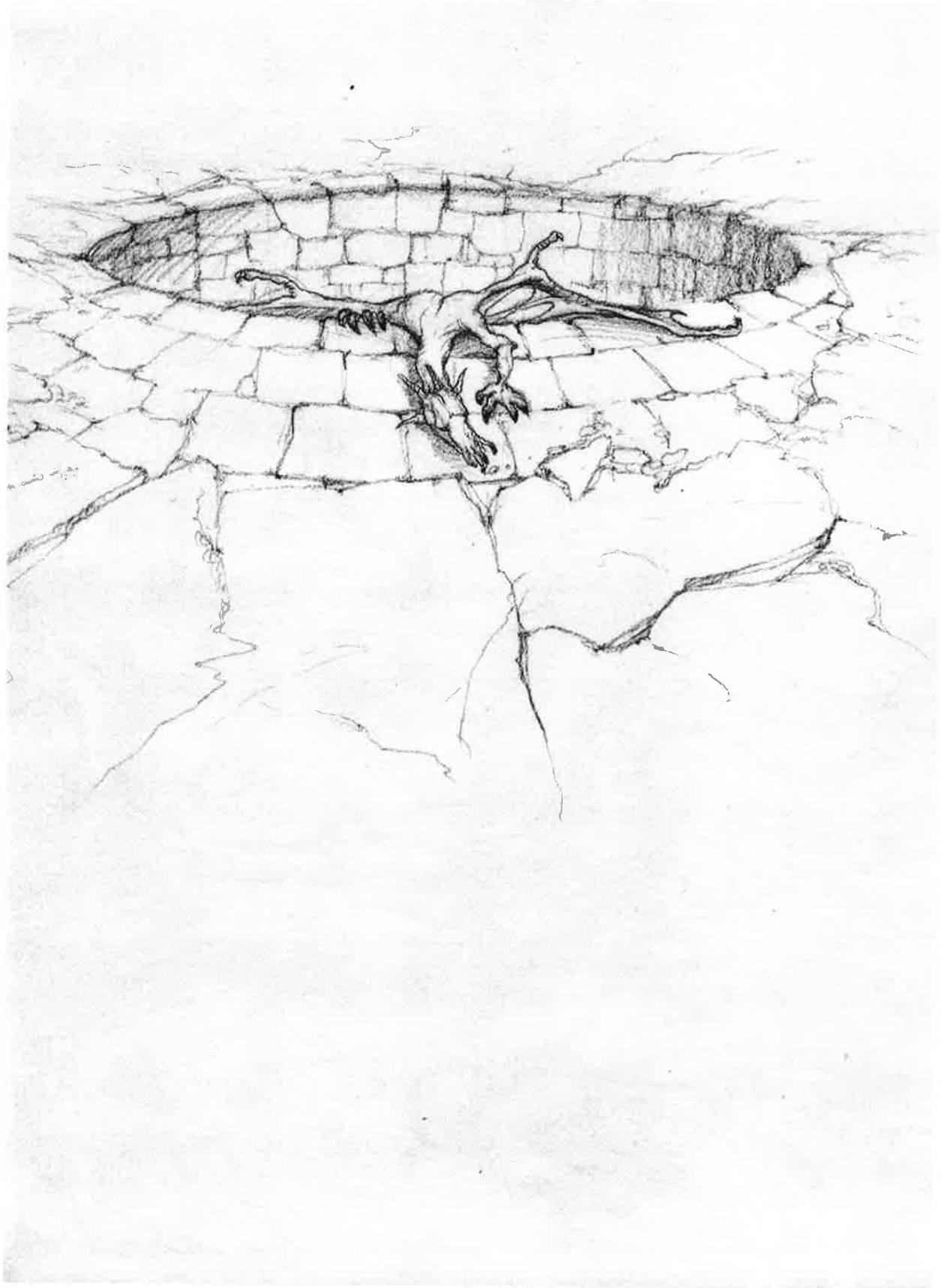
His eye winks in some sort of fierce humor, but I turn from him, weary
of his changefulness.

I wish only to put paid to the past and return
to my duties; these games
seem better suited to his
faithless companions.

I must have been wrong, and foolish with it.







The hawthorn,

thick with white blossoms, passes below
my wing.

Memories of my heavy heart coalesce as

I draw near, but

I am stronger now, and the desolate landscape before me -
home to bitter anamnesis -
does not hold the power it once did.

As I patiently wait for death


to open the door for my jailer, I visit
the relics of that bygone time.

My fingertips slide over dusty scrolls,
unread these years?
an empty table, once home to a broken vase;
a hanging silk,
torn and unrepaired.

Now, shadows creep from the corners to lay hold of my jailer and
drag her into the void.

Is there one last moment for us, where my declaration of childhood's lost hope
for love might turn her back towards me?

There is only fear, here, for that icy inexorable soul.



I think of the only friend I call worthy, remembering
the gift of her teachings and her belief
in the sublime.

I think of my master, and the welter of questions
unanswered.

My dreams are of the place I dare call home, the castle gates barred
against my entry, while
the ravens scream with laughter and my master's favored one
imperiously ruffles her feathers.
Can I not instead see beyond, to that invisible kingdom burning brightly
in the strata of the firmament,
and seek peace?

It is my charge, after all, despite
the wayward leaning of my spirit,
to stand fast.

I may look into my reflection and see no scry there,
and must be content with my lot.



As I approach,
the road grows short.

The bamboo curves and straightens
in concert with the evening breeze.

Wizened trees bow under the weight
of their fruit.

The setting sun strikes the flint
of my master's gaze, and I am
undone by it.

Fire flares in the gloaming, and

with it my heart

as he welcomes me home.

I take up my sword again with
more happiness than I deserve,
and turn my back to the unknown.



It is a time of peace for me.
Farmers, bent-backed and swaying,
wade through the rice fields under the lengthening sun.
The stones of the castle are white and baked,
the eagle's cry thin and joyous on the rising waves of heat.
My master's mood rises with the thermals,
and with it a calm settles over all.
There are no interlopers,
no ghostly battles,
no demons trailing smoke and flame in the night.
I may even fool myself yet into believing my place here
is more than simply that of a sword in the hand.



On the longest day, when
the sunset drags trails of crimson
past the pale disc of the moon,
my master finds me at the old cherry tree
in the hour of the hound.

The foxfires scatter as he approaches,
crickets quieting.

A quick wind heralds the coming of a summer storm.
It is the festival of the seventh month, when
star-crossed lovers may unite for one night;
my breath comes short when I realize we are
alone,
separated only by convention.



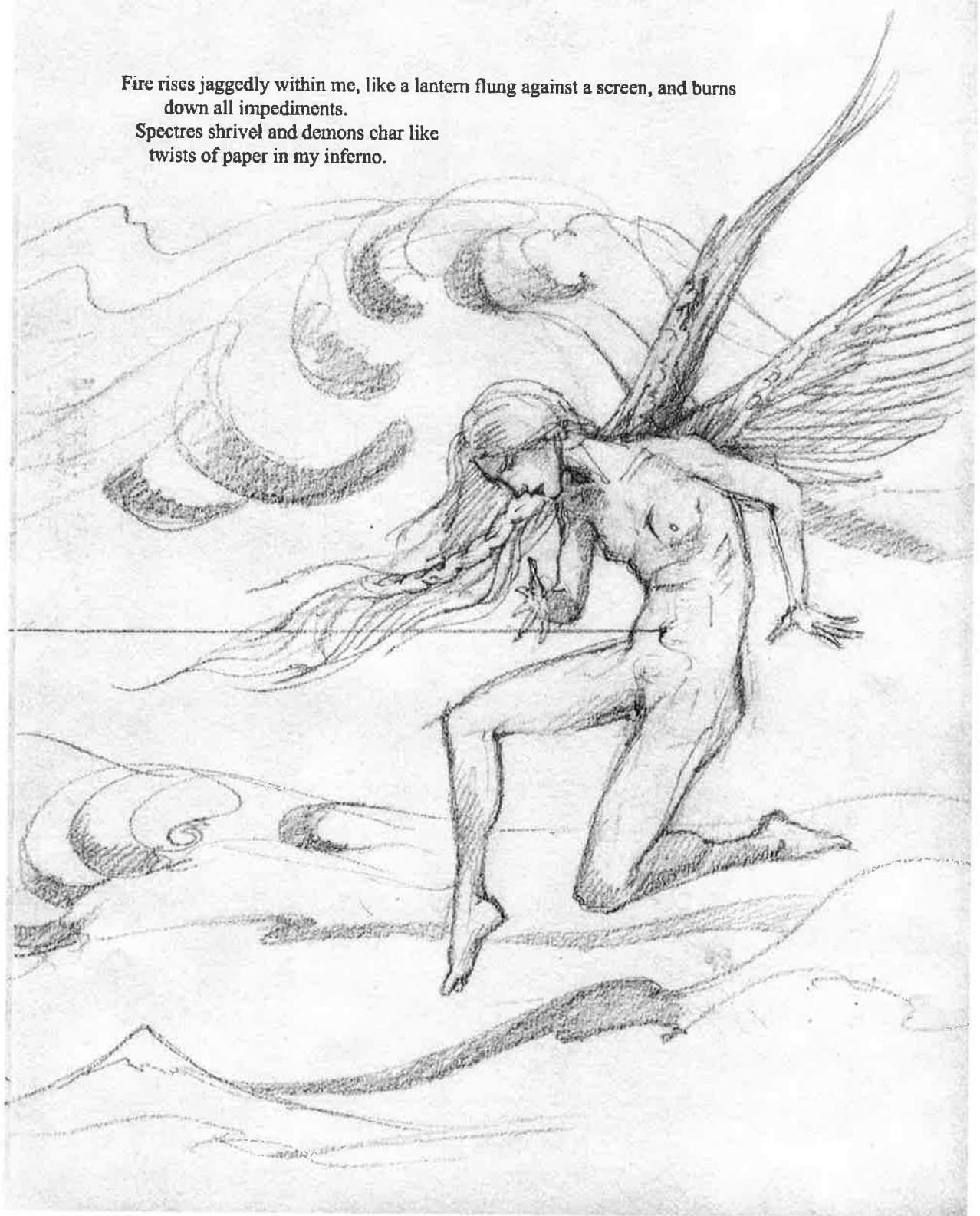
I can hide only for so long
from that which I have tried to quash.

There is a string, knotted beneath my rib, and it stretches
to him, knotted beneath his rib; and we are bound
together thus,

no matter how far apart we are, no matter who wanders into
our paths. I cast aside the idea of his favored one, I cast aside
the strange ways of his nature, I cast aside my duty.



Fire rises jaggedly within me, like a lantern flung against a screen, and burns
down all impediments.
Spectres shrivel and demons char like
twists of paper in my inferno.





He draws me closer,
fist over fist,
until we are united;

the gathering clouds blot out the stars.

His cry is one of
savage exultation;
mine is equally fierce,

that thing of life
which shouts against the storm,

uncaring in the moment
that lightning may strike.

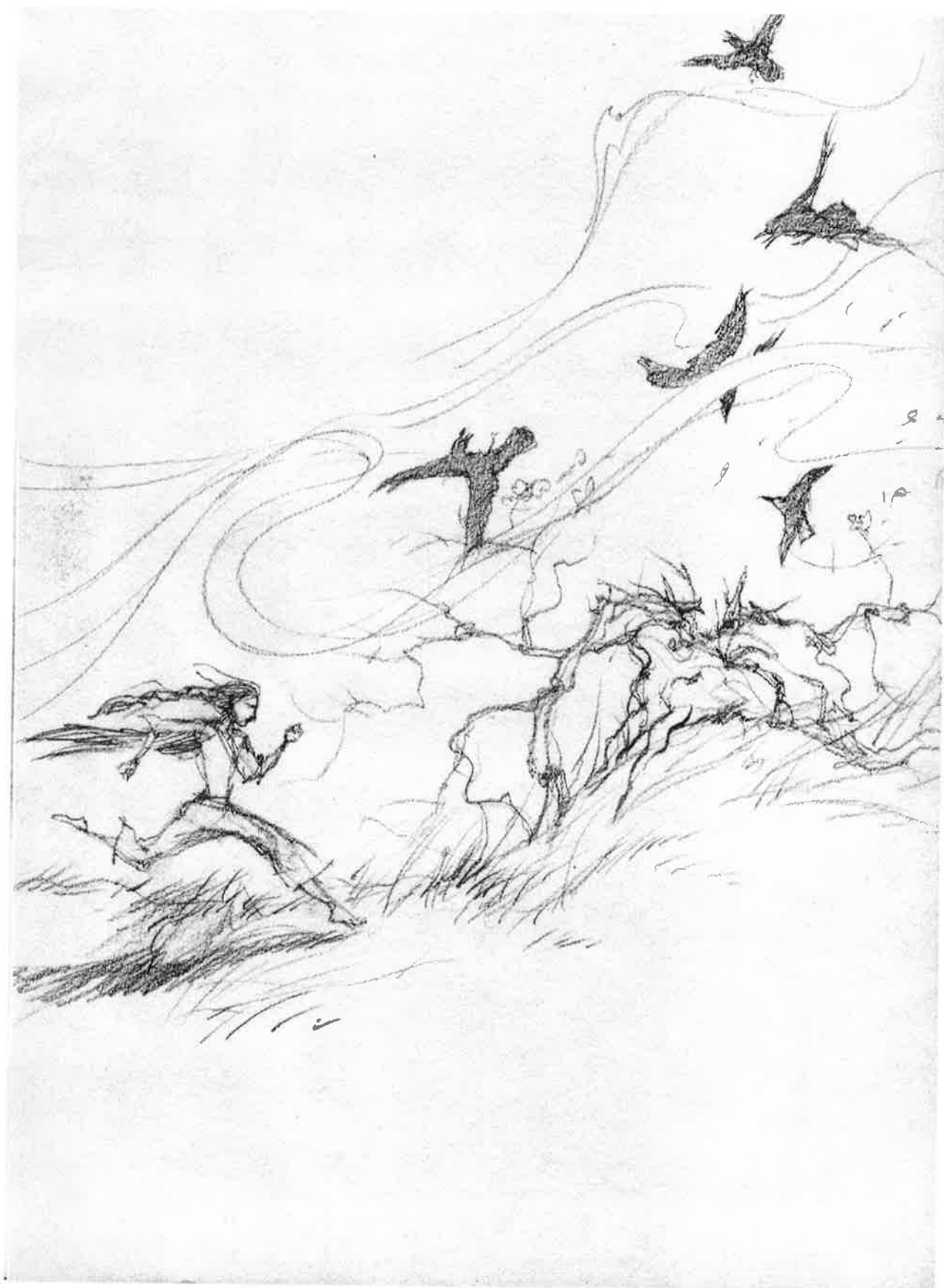
It is the earliest moment of day,


when the first note
of the first songbird
rings out.

I look in the glass and see
a changeling who has replaced the self I knew.

All the wounded scraps of my soul
scatter on the wind,
a new inner being radiating outward
as the skin of the old peels away.

The subjectivity of beauty pales
in the face of such triumph of the spirit.





My master jests with that wicked way of his
that he will pile glories upon me,
and make me in the very shape of an empress.


He would
wrap me in chains of jewels,
burden my hands with stacks of rings,
clasp my wrists in bracelets,
and press a circlet onto my brow
like the tokens of worship draped over a statue.

The treasures of the castle may soon be mine,
but I care not for trappings of wealth.

I refuse, ridiculing his notions of grandeur;
it is not the warrior's way.

I am no angel,
I am no princess,
I am no object
to be enshrined;

I will not be a jay in borrowed plumes,
enslaved to riches.





Instead,

I will be myself.

I glow like a fire-spirit,
not glimmer like a block of ice.

I demand truth,
embrace confidence,
and vouchsafe succor.

To those who disbelieve, I ask, am I a monster?

Is it such an impossibility,
that I should be loved?

To those who disbelieve, my master says, let them.

We will live in the heavens, clothed in clouds
and warmed by the flames deep within
the lunar mountains.

Such is the place for creatures of the invisible kingdom,
even if it means they must leave
the world behind.



My master tugs on that gossamer skein
which connects us.

He winds it round himself,
cocooning himself in the witchery
he claims I have over him.

To the warrior,
the teacher is as a needle,
the disciple is as thread.

For us, now, we are both needle,
and the thread is the tether
which binds our strength to one another.

Of this castle I remain guardian,
as he remains lord;

but titles are one thing, actions another.

My weapon is still held at the ready,
his nature is still abrupt,
and I would have it no other way.





Soon it will be the day when

all things may change,

or remain the same.

Here comes the wind, hooting mournfully round the eaves
and digging its fingers into every crack and chink in the walls.

Open the wardrobe door.

Instead of my sturdy garments hangs cloth of
pearl and gold.

Instead of my lacquered armor drapes a veil
woven of vapor and stardust.

It is the brutish hour of the boar,
the only light my little lantern;
shadows draw near,
so that the veil seems to shift and twist like a wraith.





A strange vision comes unbidden to me.

I am visited again in my dreams by that phantom child. It quakes in my arms, wailing piteously, clinging to my neck with damp cold fingers. Ahead of me, lost to the mists, is my master; so far distant he is more the phantom than this child. I take a step, and then another, but I have not moved. My limbs are leaden. The path is unclear.

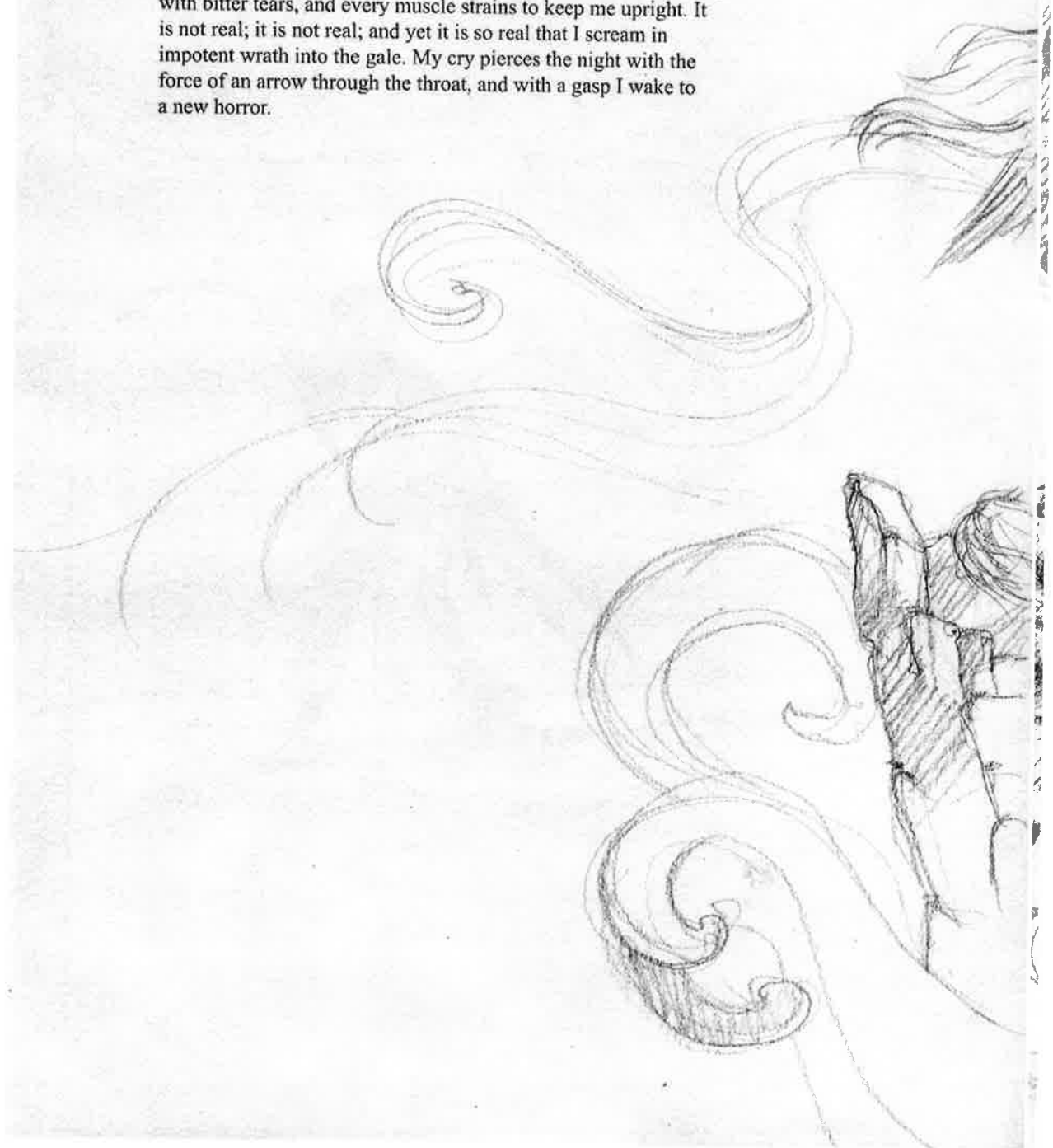
I cannot see my way.





The dream continues,
gripping my mind with unrelenting strength.

I am standing among the ruins of the castle tower, the weight of the child like a stone against my breast. The crumbling pillar beneath my feet sways in the whiplash of the wind, my eyes sting with bitter tears, and every muscle strains to keep me upright. It is not real; it is not real; and yet it is so real that I scream in impotent wrath into the gale. My cry pierces the night with the force of an arrow through the throat, and with a gasp I wake to a new horror.





My demon has come to me again.

Her fires are banked;

she is cloaked in smoke.

She preens in the glass like some
grotesque reflection of
my truth.

When our eyes meet, though,

she explodes with furious intent,

her jaws wide and spitting

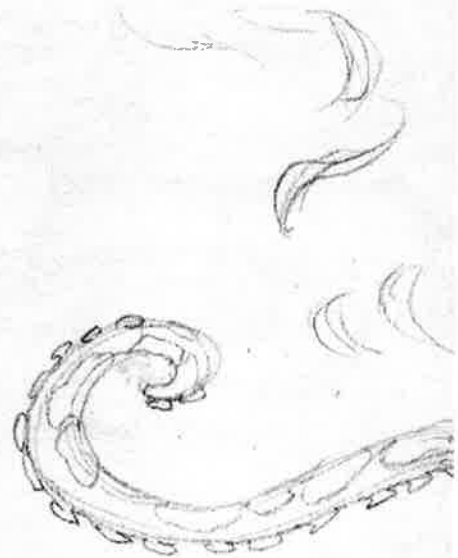
fireballs, her talons raking her face.

The veil is rent in two, the demon
flees into the wind, and my
heart stops at the madness of it all.

Why does the night torment me?

Why does the wind laugh in terrible mimicry

of my desperate breaths?





I have seen a shroud before.

It is a white wing drawn across the face,
wrapped around the shoulder,
so still

it might be carved from palest jade.

It is heavier than stone,
heavier than iron;
it bears the weight of death.

There lies my veil, once
a sign of love,
now a relic of lost hope.

I am determined to destroy
the destroyer.

I will not be beaten down by it.

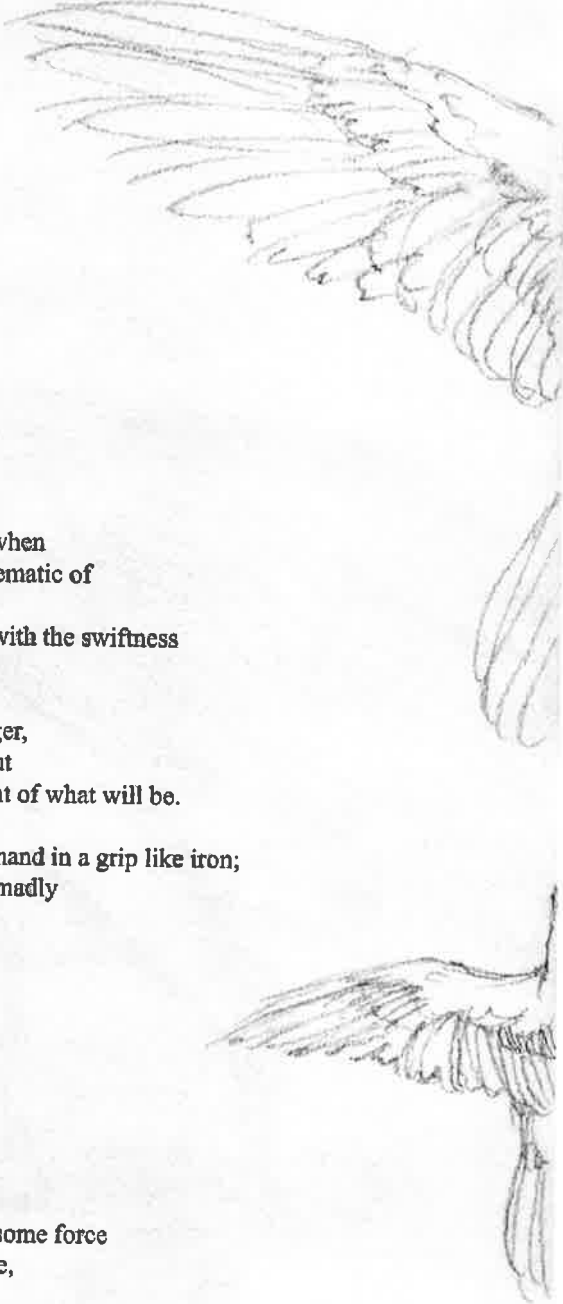
I will not succumb.

I can make my stance again,
gathering strength from
below
and within;

I must look at things from a high point of view,
and not be drawn under.







This is the morning when
all things seem emblematic of
my past life,
each moment passing with the swiftness
of a leaf in a stream.

There is no time to linger,
to wax nostalgic about
what once was in light of what will be.

My master takes my hand in a grip like iron;
I feel his heart pulse madly
through his skin like a
trapped thing.

My own heart fills
my eyes
so I am nearly blind,
and cannot tell if
the day is fair or foul.

We run,
my master driven by some force
I can only hope is love,

pulling me along so I
trip and stumble
past quiet graves and stone shrines.



I have no dowry,
I bring only myself to this union.

It is the moment when the
two halves of a shell
close to form a perfect whole.

All is still;
even the rooks cease their cawing.
The shrine before me is
alive with the power
of old gods.

I bow my head
beneath their gazes and
hold my breath.



A pebble is dropped into the pool, spreading
ripples of discord.

A voice,

harsh as the clamor of
baying hounds,
breaks the silence.

It is the stranger again,
crawling in on his belly.

Improbable words are spoken:
my master is a liar.

We cannot be joined.

He is already wed these many years,
to the stranger's sister.

The words are like insects, scurrying
around my feet, droning
around my head.
My master collapses beneath the weight of them.
The spark in his eyes has turned to blood.
The muscles in my limbs have turned to wood.

More words are spoken,
this time from my master's lips.
They must be false, and yet they are true.



My master unscrolls a terrible fairy tale.

It is a story of

a mad creature chained in the tower
who was once a woman like any other,

a demon clawing its way out
from a pit of fire only
to fall again.

It is a story of

a thing which haunts
the hallways at night,
bent on destruction.

It is the story of

a special knock on the door,
the lift of a lantern
to reveal a stairway,
a ragged black flag snapping on a pole above a high tower.

It is the story of

a brother doggedly pursuing my master to
reveal the truth.

It is a story

in which I have no part to play.



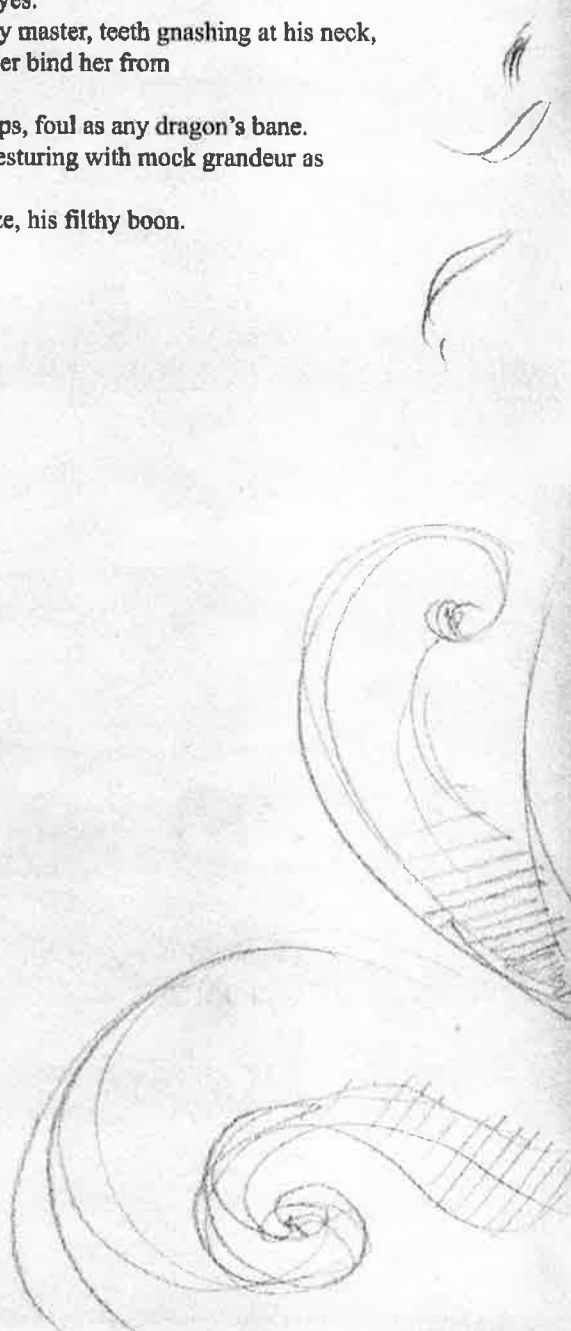
He drags me to the castle, up the winding stair, into the shadows.
Something in the corner runs back and forth on all fours,
elbows akimbo,
seething.

Smoke lies thick over the floor, the creature nosing through it,
flames leaking from her eyes.
She rises up to lunge at my master, teeth gnashing at his neck,
but the ropes entangling her bind her from
doing harm.

Venom drips from her lips, foul as any dragon's bane.
My master bows to her, gesturing with mock grandeur as
she writhes.

She is his grotesque prize, his filthy boon.
Should I feel pity,
or fury?

There is only emptiness.





I am once again standing
at the edge of the abyss,
having been placed there like
a disjointed puppet set on a shelf.

My limbs hang
wearily, my
strings tangled.

Lean over,
look in;
there is the demon coiling in the deep, her
red eye turned upward to mine
in mortal enmity.

That pit yawns,
ready to swallow me whole.

I am encased in ice again,
scaled in a frozen skin, all
warmth and heat and life
scaled over.

I could topple in and shatter into oblivion.



My room contracts around me
like the cold.

Without ceremony
I remove my raiment, folding them away.

I sway,
bent double by
some force which sweeps over
me like wind across a snowdrift.

This wintry blight burns as sure as any flame.

Beneath the weight of
that avalanche is a

flutter,

the barest twitch of a wing.

Fingers curl into a fist as
the ghost of the warrior
crumples like paper.

My sword is pinned, the blade crystalline.

All hopes have been proven lies, and
with them the death of desire.

It is the hour of the rat,
when things creep and sneak,
when all which was proud becomes base;
it seems fitting, now, that
I should be brought down so low,

when before I dared to fly too high.



My master prostrates himself
at my threshold.

He begs,
he reasons,
he reaches for me with desperate hands.

Frenzy is barely contained within
his convulsing form.

He sobs,
he raves,
he crashes like thunder and
hums like a plague of locusts.

He tugs on that cord which connects us, but rather
than run smoothly through our hands it

catches
in
knots.

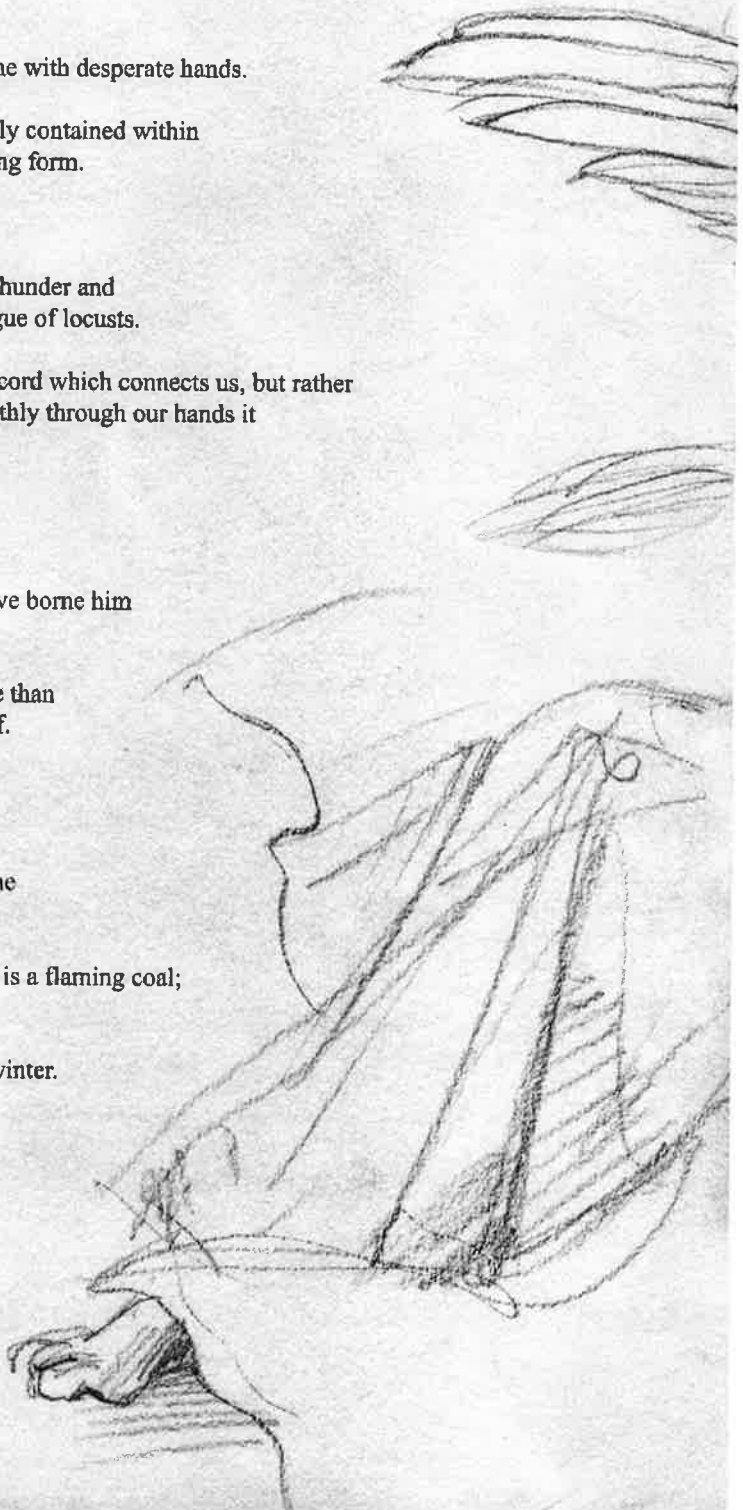
He tells me I have borne him
up on my wing,
as though
he were no more than
a feather himself.

I hear him,
I see him,

but ice around me
clouds my eyes.

Inside, my gut is a flaming coal;
outside,

I am a stone in winter.





I turn my gaze
upward.

The castle roof resolves to high clouds,
flecked with starlight;
the moon swells
with gravid splendor. One star,
its nimbus radiant, becomes a woman
before my eyes, crowned with a
smattering of constellations.

She parts the clouds with an outstretched hand, and
takes mine in hers,
pulling my spirit into the atmosphere.

It is my sign to go.
Though my mind knows it,
my soul years to stay,
though I know it cannot be.



The door opens without a creak.
The gate is ajar.
My footfalls are silent as any creature in the grass.

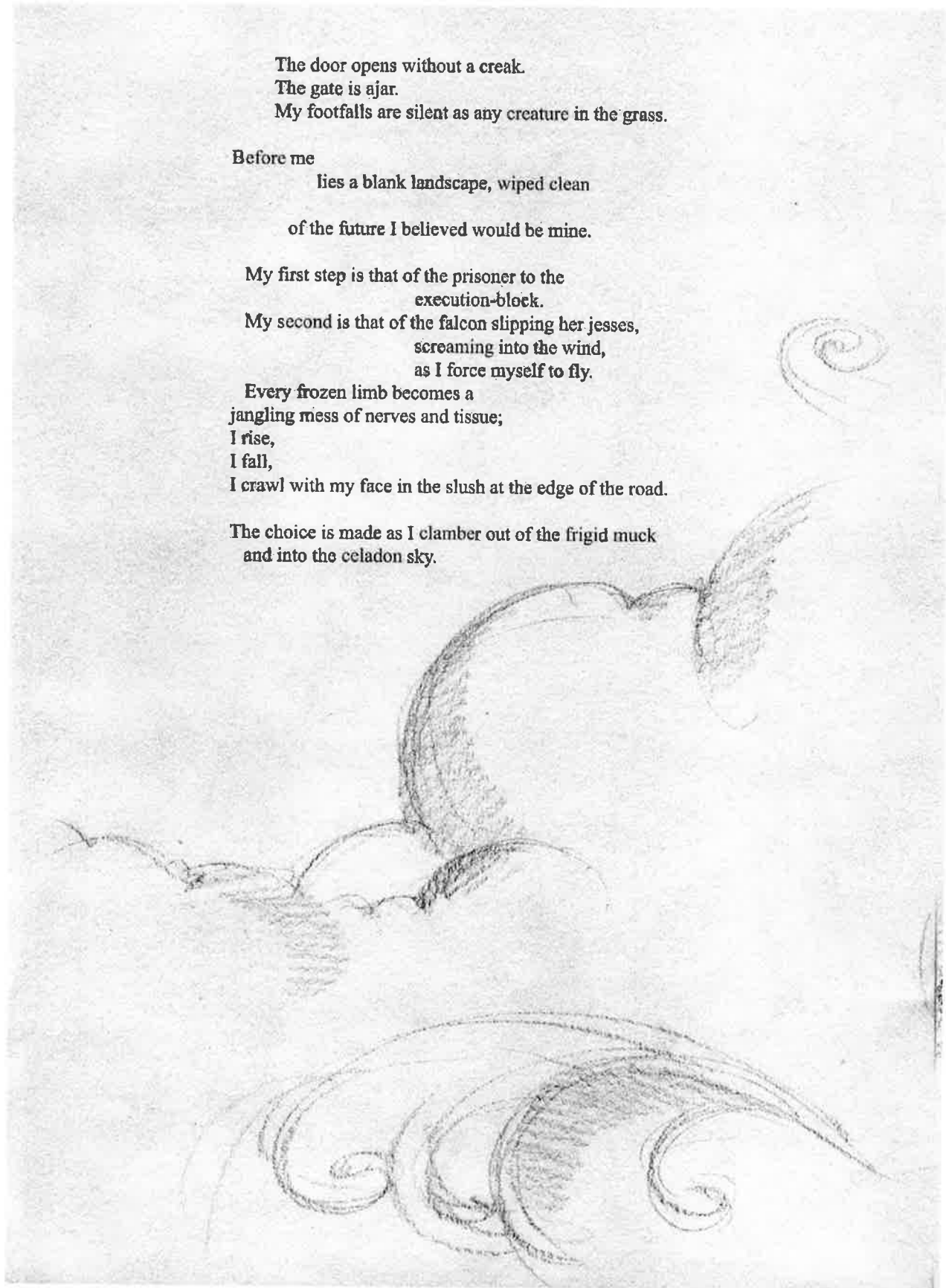
Before me
 lies a blank landscape, wiped clean

of the future I believed would be mine.

My first step is that of the prisoner to the
 execution-block.
My second is that of the falcon slipping her jesses,
 screaming into the wind,
 as I force myself to fly.

Every frozen limb becomes a
jangling mess of nerves and tissue;
I rise,
I fall,
I crawl with my face in the slush at the edge of the road.

The choice is made as I clamber out of the frigid muck
and into the celadon sky.





There is a crossroads

many leagues deep in the waste,

marked by a stern guardian.

It casts a blue shadow in the twilight settling
over the sea of white hills
spreading into the infinite.

I settle shivering beneath it, folded
into a tiny packet.

This stone finger points to where?

My childhood, coated in slime?

My time spent learning the ways of the warrior,
purposeful but lonely?

My life with my master, a withered bloom?

Not a single thing holds me to past,

present,

or future at this moment.

The paths to north, south, east, and west
are as empty as my heart;

I am a masterless man of the waves
with nowhere to go.



This independence is powerful, but
difficult to bear in such solitude.

The forsaken has been left behind,
and yet I feel it keenly as if I am
the one abandoned.

My restless self grapples with the
hold my master has over me; not just
his presence, or his affection, but
his respect, his challenge.

Servitude grew to partnership, and I know
he must feel this severance as I do.

I acknowledge it was impossible for me
to stay, no matter the delusion which
veils the truth. My new reality is

I must ford this unknown river in a
rudderless boat, yawing across choppy waters,
and if I confront headwinds or wreckage,
I must pick up an oar and row.



I can wallow only so long,
and must turn to my training to remind me
I must be of use to the world.

I am plagued by riotous dreams of my master,
where fire consumes and victory is mine,
but when daylight comes I return to the known
and my new way in it.

The snow lies with a lighter touch
on the ground,
and I kick it up with the flat of my blade and the spade of my foot.





As time turns, so recedes the weight
of that winter of sorrow.

I recall, within the flicker of fire in my belly,
waking up after a long slumber.

It sends warmth to my limbs,

which bunch and flex;

it stretches my neck, to peer over tree tops;

it sparks in my eye, to seek once again

the direction of my path.

When I speak, even if it is only to myself,
I speak with resolve.

When I lift my leg, the ropes of old slide off
to pool beneath me in ragged loops.



The night arrives like a balm,
even the cold distant planets shining with the warmth of
light on water. The worlds of the universe wheel past me
in an eternal dance, set to some celestial chorus
I cannot hear, yet I sway under its power.

In this tapestry I sense, too, the presence of the infinite,
that kingdom I glimpsed when happiness was
finally mine. It is not mine to know, but merely to be
influenced by, just as the ghost of she who first told it me
is a trace of starlight in the vast bowl above me.

The mighty spray of the galaxy arching across the sky
separates mythic lovers of old, but on this night I feel
a tremor, a rift, as though the sky itself were coming apart
like a ship wrecking majestically against wave-drenched rocks.

Will I ever be able to reach across that chasm to touch my own star again?





As I rise on tip-toe,
I thrill to a feeling which passes through me
with the breath of a spectre
and the shock of electricity.

I hear it, too, a
familiar echo
reverberating across the web of stars
in the sky.

It is more than a voice; it is the galvanic force
of a spirit I know nearly as well as my own.

It calls to me,
an urgent cry

which turns to pain.

My master is trapped, somehow,
suffering extraordinarily.

My own cry leaps from me.

I must ascend with all the strength of
my convictions, and come to his aid;

it is the will of the warrior.



I have known the
paralyzing accession
to a life frozen over.

I understand it is the easy choice; that desire
to stop struggling, to release, to let
inexorable cold deaden what was once
fiery.

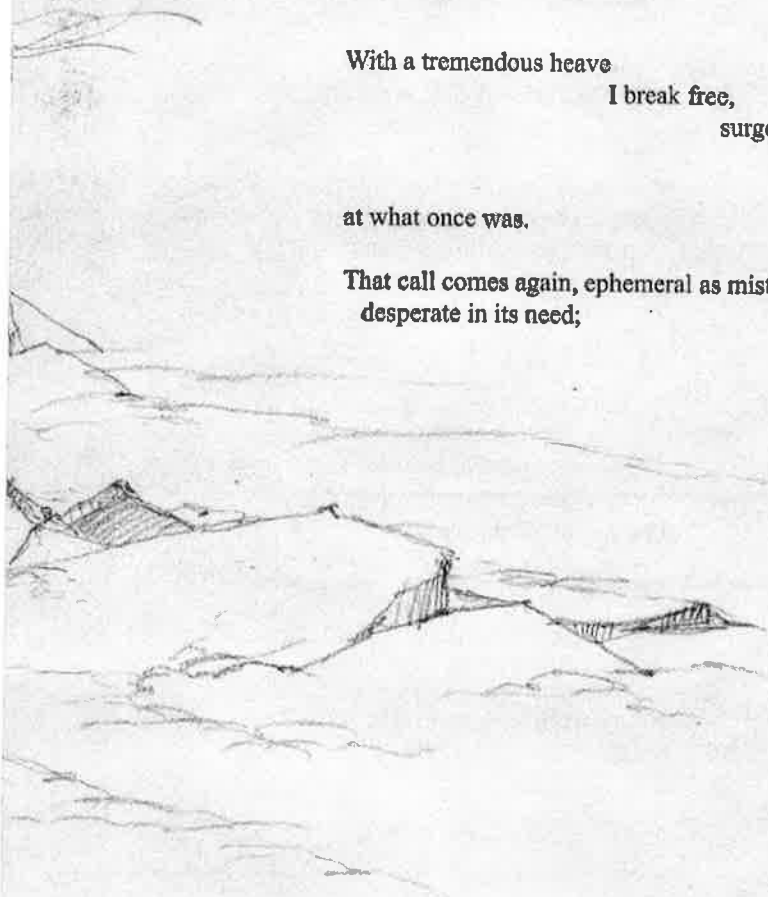
It is a kind of false peace
which steals over the soul, promising
relief and restitution.

With a tremendous heave
I break free,
surge skyward,
never to look back
at what once was.

That call comes again, ephemeral as mist, but
desperate in its need;

I follow,

I follow.



One hand on the stile,
pushing it aside.

One hand out,
parting the tall grass and
tangled brambles which have
grown strangely high.

Stepping carefully over
hummocks and holes,

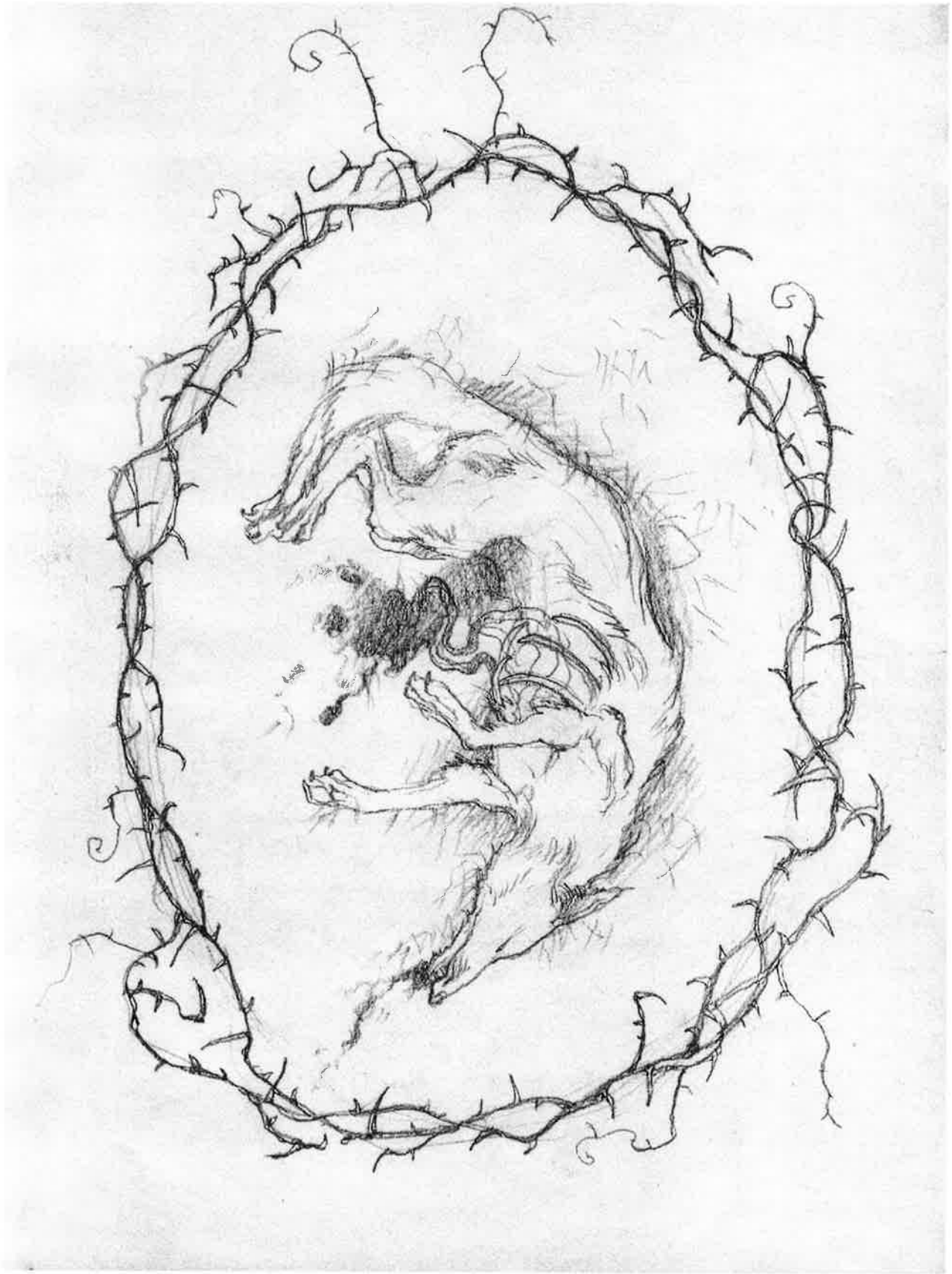
I draw near,
my eyes widening at the sight.

Reader,
I know something happened;
I still feel my master's call
thrum through me like
the currents of sound from a struck bell.

But I am not prepared for what I see:

a burned carapace,
the bones of the castle slanting
like the ribs of some beast
destroyed in an inferno.

The silence of death hovers
like a pall of smoke over all,
and even birdsong is absent.



I pass through the gate and on the flagstones before me
is the answer to my question:
a sprawling stain of blood, near as black as the charred
timbers of my master's home. His demon's tower
is a crook-backed ruin rising from scorched rubble,
and I need not close my eyes for the scene to play
out before me in all its clarity.

First:

the demon escapes again during the hour of the tiger,
slinking through the castle with mad intent.

Fire and doom follow her
wherever she goes.





Next:

she seeks him she means
to embrace with flame,

her husband,
my master.

She comes,
and he is ready for her deadly kiss, those jaws of horror
open wide,
slavering and screaming.

Every inch of her whips
like a pinned snake as he fights
for his freedom from
her insane tyranny.

Her fire spreads
from limb to tentacle to
banner to
hallway
to roof to
tower,

choking the air with soot and charcoal
as the castle collapses around them.





I have only the proof in my heart that
it is the demon who has died,
and not my master.

His call comes again,
even more present than before,
as though I am close to him and
need only follow the echo
as I might follow a will-o'-the-wisp
into the forest.



There he is:

a hulking wreck,
a mere shadow
in the sylvan dusk,
sitting in quiet solitude.

He is lonely, as I never felt him
to be before, though he might not
be alone.

He is the one suffering abandonment,
not just by me but
the life he knew,
no matter how cruel.

There is no sword at his hip;
he has lost his fighting arm.
My master is now the caged creature.

The light in his eyes is
dimmed and brooding,
his countenance scarred and sullen.

I know that desperate mood well, and
have conquered it;

perhaps I can show him the way.



His breath catches.

His hand clutches.

He does not believe -

he can not believe -

I must make him believe.


To him I am a shade,
an enchantment,
an apparition made of smoke
and memory.

Our hands entangle,
his fingers shaking,
and in that moment I choose to forgive,
so that my soul swells with the confidence of our love.

He tells me he called my name into the night, and
that was the sound I heard
which pulled me to him,

sure as the string which binds us
at our core.





That fettered falcon is troubled, though,
by my sacrifice, and ruffles his feathers
in gloomy worry.
He is ruined and damaged, while I am strong and whole.
His judgment fails to quash my eagerness for
our union; I care nothing for corporeal infirmity.
My independence has taught me that the masterless warrior
has purpose, and her fledge feathers have long
given way to strong pinions
which sweep aside the clouds.



That lightning-struck tree might be

twisted
and
decayed,

but around it dance the foxfires of eventide,
and through its limbs
wind new vines which hold it up.

Together

we hold one another,

and the shadows cast by the

nearing storm

are not so cold
as they once were.





The background of the page features a faint, sketchy illustration. On the right side, a warrior is depicted in profile, wearing a helmet and holding a sword. The warrior appears to be looking towards the left. The entire scene is overlaid with numerous diagonal lines, suggesting a heavy rain or a storm. The lines are more densely packed in the lower right corner, where the warrior is located, and become sparser towards the top left.

Now:

I grit my teeth.

Take up my sword.

Hold its edge fast
against the driving rain,

and defeat might be mine.

The blade is my voice and
the grip is my strength;

it has taken the length of my life, but
I am now prepared for
all that may come.

I have learned
that a warrior walks
the thousand-mile road

one step at a time.



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