

Alaska

Cheryl Martin





The question is: what makes us?

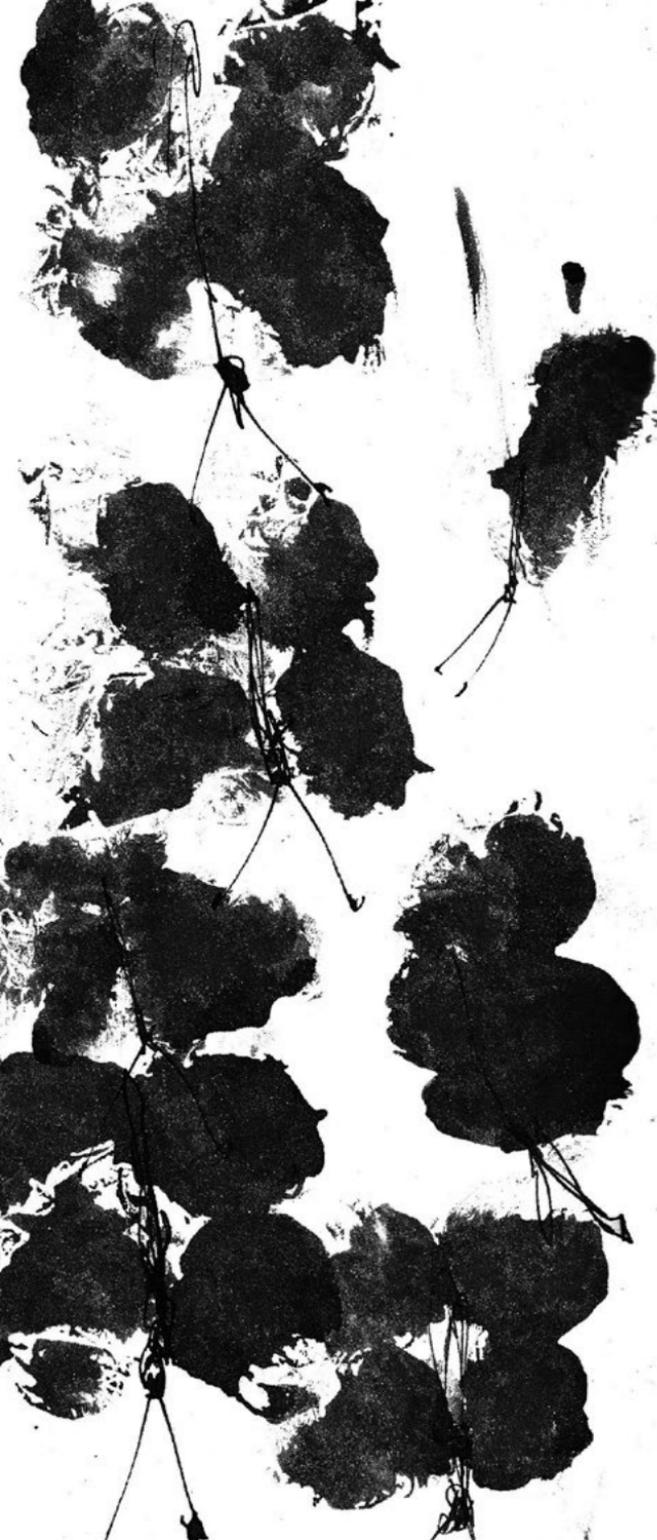
Cheryl Martin's debut collection, written with a candour as provocative in its honesty as it is poignant in its compassion, tackles this question head on. Her poetry is a journey across territory at once desolate and beautiful, where everything in life has to happen in the brief summer before the onset of winter.

A remote wilderness much closer than most of us think.

[Click here for Animation](#)



ALASKA



by Cheryl Martin

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For my sister Winnie, who sent books that made me laugh.

For my friends Anjum and Linda, who keep Christmas bearable.

For my brothers Fletcher and Steve, who gave us such lovely children.

For my friend David, who would have loved this book.

For my friends Jon and Ellis, who give me hope.

For my friend John, who believes in me.

For my father, who sent my first poems to magazines.

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For Jon and Ellis, 1st May, 2010

Time is an illusion. Every moment that has ever been or ever will be is here now. Nothing is ever lost. Somewhere, you're getting laid for the first time, forever. Somewhere, you're discovering the difference between getting laid and being in love, forever. Somewhere, you're kissing the first person you ever kissed. It's happening now, it never stopped happening. If we only knew how, we could choose that one moment and stay there, forever. Maybe at the end of everything, we do. But which one will it be, for you?

If it's only one, doesn't it have to be important, doesn't it have to be right, incredible, significant, that one moment that explains everything, that shines light through your whole life?

Your whole life. Choose one moment for your whole life. Choose one person for your whole life.

Running the rapids. Diving into white water. Split-second, adrenalin decides — but it's not the adrenalin, it's not the rush. It's years and years and years of learning, looking, loving, losing. It's that wisdom compressed by endless atmospheres of longing turning intellect into instinct that tells you - this moment. This person. And then, yes. Time can stand still.

Back in the seventies people who understood time had NASA send two messages into space. Voyager, going 1,000 million years into the future, carrying visions. Everything they thought was most important on earth. Bach. A two-thousand-five-hundred-year-old Chinese song. A little hello from the children of the world in the 59 most populous languages. A record of cosmologist Carl Sagan and his wife Ann's first days of realising they were in love.

Some people say no one will ever hear it. We weren't there, but we do. Today. Forever. It's Jon. It's Ellis. It's us.



I join in.

We call it
fun.

Butterflies



Everyone says how pretty butterflies are.
But have you seen the buggers
when they come out of the chrysalis,
encrusted with mucus,
eyes glued shut to the light,
wings plastered to their sides,
practically puking as they struggle to breathe?
Takes a lot of balls to break out of the cocoon
when you're half-done,
all potential and no proof,
nearly crazy with the beauty of a blue sun.
You have to.



Butterflies

Fragile



When I look at my friends
their faces are fragile
smaller than I remember
skin softly folding into itself
like a baby's

I want to pick them up
swing them into the air
make them laugh
put them over my shoulder
sing them to sleep
they seem so small
my eyes want to water

but all I do is smile
and smile

Fragile



I Remember Being the Vampire's Daughter

He wanted me, not lovely
little Lucy — me. Because I
was his.

 No need for mirrors, answers. He
parted my thighs
(I felt hair on his knee).

But they took him.

God,
he had such pale, pretty teeth.
They'd glisten as he stretched
 above my waiting neck,
bent, breathed...

But they were watching,
(I saw my other lover, how he —
the way his eyes wouldn't touch me
when he knew.)

 used me for bait, saved me
too soon.

Held him, poor Papa:
left him straining, mouth willing,
 moon glinting on those
beautiful teeth.

Such long, wet teeth.
(My other lover stood behind him,
grinning,
hammer at the ready.)

I wouldn't watch. They think
they killed him, my father —
but I still taste his tongue.

The Conservation of Energy



How do the dead survive?

Synapses of memory,
phantom signals,
trace chemicals in the brain,
stalled impulses
refuse to break connection,
infect our dreams.

My grandmother's hair lies tangled in her brush.
I hid it in a bottom drawer
so I wouldn't see her any more,
or spend another bewildered night
at her dining room table
trying to remember where I live,
who I married,
what I lost.

The dead survive.

Silver salts grained on celluloid
until they walk and talk
beyond our touch.

Voices stream into space,
wave after wave.
Light-years from now
some boy I loved whispers shyly.
I won't hear.

Flakes of skin and teeth and hair.

I took my grandmother's long
moon-white hair from her brush,
wound it into a locket.

My husband's amber hair
drifts, spun sun,
his chest to my back.

The way he touched the back of my knee
while we watched TV,
and I blushed.

That will survive.

The background image shows the Angel of the Republic statue in Paris, France. The statue is a large, bronze sculpture of a winged woman holding a torch in her right hand and a sword in her left. The image is a low-angle shot, showing the statue against a bright blue sky with some white clouds. The statue's wings are spread, and its face is turned slightly to the right. The overall tone is bright and clear.

The Conservation of Energy





Her last birthday

For her last birthday
we gave her one of the old
afternoons: Cal with his friends climbing
over the fence to sit
silly on a crumbling branch,
ten little stoners in a row;
El and Ant whacking the hell out of a swing
ball; Michelle and her church friend
getting sloshed, quietly, on sparkling
while the rest of us danced off four
different kinds of chocolate cake in the sun.

When the morphine ran out,
they put her on an Ikea special garden
chair, carried her out.
Her bearers.

Because she couldn't walk, we
didn't move for a while.

Arrested Development



My shrink told me once I had an emotional age of fourteen. I was twenty-seven at the time and found this oddly disturbing.

Mind you, I had just explained that I couldn't understand why courtship was necessary. Why can't you just walk up to a man and say, "I can't think when you're in the room. All I want to do is look at you. I can't hear anything but your voice inside me. I want to sink into your skin and inhale. I want to listen to the exact rhythm in which your blood runs. I want to watch you come."

Why can't you just say it?
That's what I want to know.
This may have influenced his opinion.
Perhaps my shrink got confused.
I wasn't thinking about him, it was a guy called David Blue, who terrified me because I lusted after him totally.
But my shrink probably thought I was into some transference-bag and wanted him, too.

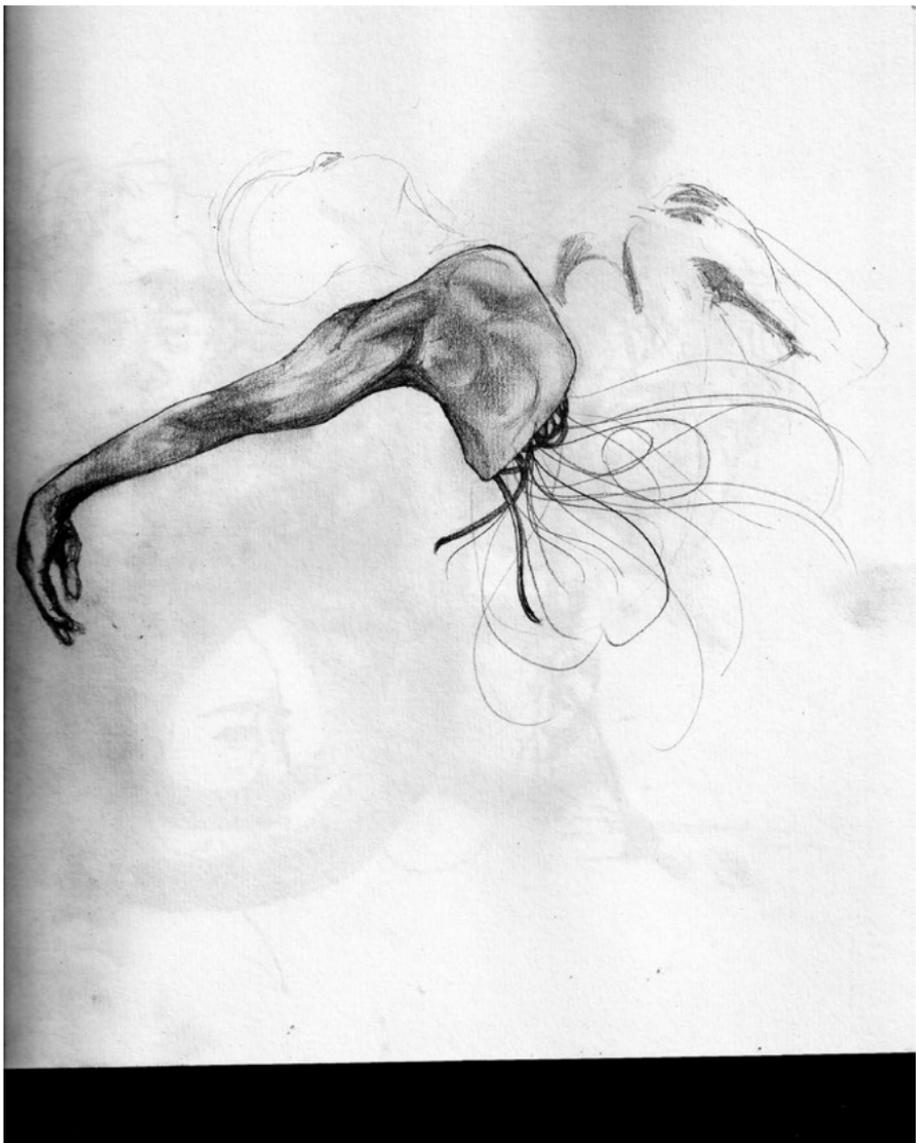
That's never true.

There was a girl at the mental hospital who had a bad habit of phoning men up while we were eating dinner and asking them things like, "Can I sit on your face?"

Institutional peas are difficult to digest at any time, but these calls really put me off my food.

It wasn't simply that she was crude, but she did what I didn't have the guts to, so naturally I hated her.

Maybe the shrink was right.



Strings¹

1 Caroline Says II, by Lou Reed

Pain in my arms, as if my veins
were strings and someone had pulled them tight:
in my head, my legs, my fingers.
Sleep was a foreign country: like a black stopped at
the French border,
passport stamped "Come back
when you're white."

Food. Frightening
as sex without a condom.
Turned into a stick insect:
looked really good, everybody said.

Cut my wrists to make sure
I was alive.

You —
at twilight your mantra,
whispered:
"Never change, never change."
I love you just
the way you are.

When I left
you wondered why.

Chapters

I

It might be the shape of your hand or a particularly loud shirt. It might be untied shoelaces or your hair swinging down.

It might be the way you look at me.

It might be the note you just missed singing right, five o'clock morning light, your hand on my arm, wondering how that drink tastes on your tongue.

It might be the way you watch me dance, the hidden park that no one knows.

It might be where we meet.

II

I sleep in a green cocoon,
hang from a 30s chandelier in the cool room.
The golden hour seeps through the silk.

Your voice.

I hear your voice filtered as if underwater,
as if you sang from the bottom of the sea.

I smile.

You wait, while stroking me.

III

During the last mail strike, I was in Grantham,
waiting for a letter from my lover in Edinburgh, on
which I had staked sunlight and sweet cool grass.

Eyes, ears, tongue, touch, could have been sitting
in a railcar near the border.

I never knew.

IV

Enough, baby, no more hyena love. The love of
kites for a fallen calf:

I'm free now.

I'd say good-bye. I'd give you my hand, but you

V

It would suit me to be barren, the one white birch
among green and gold pines.² The ghost gum
flaring pale against the dark, frigid as an April
snowfall.

Yielding only to the blue of a January noon-day sun.

For All the Wrong Reasons

Your boyfriend found out about us.
He stabbed you to death.

I was flicking through photos
You
Hair down
You smiling
Hair spread over the grass
You smiling
Hair in your eyes
In your mouth
You smiling
I was trying to write your mother
Black-edged paper
You
Came
Sat next to me
Pointed to the picture
Said you were miserable that day
I couldn't write that you were dead
So I stopped time
For you
I turned time back
For you
I brought you back
So you could tell me again

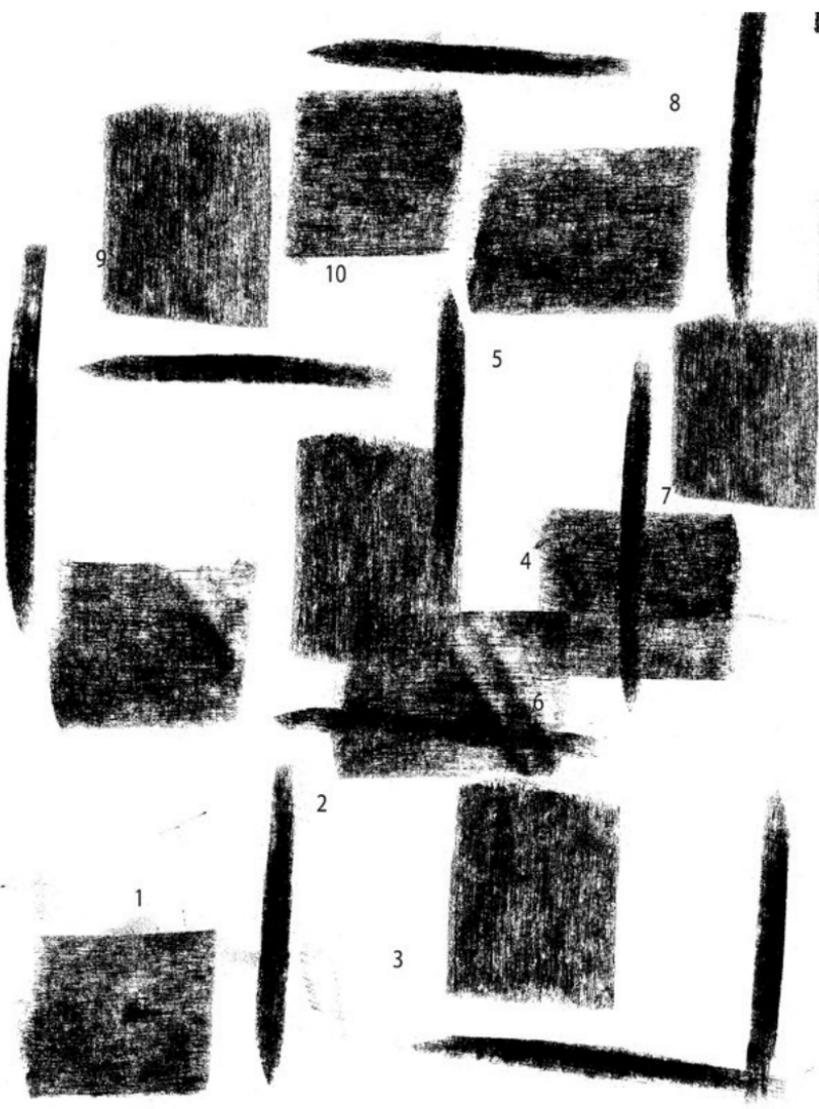
You didn't love me

In fact,
Next day
You catalogued the many ways
I couldn't love anyone.
I spent the next twenty years
Fucking men
So I'd never feel that pain again,
When really
You were just a bit of a cunt,
Weren't you, sweetie?

For All The Wrong Reasons



Ten Do's and Don'ts of Turning Lezza



1. *n. pl.* the shoes. Well, I already wear Birkenstocks.

2. *n. pl.* the dresses. OK, OK, I know I wear a lot of dresses, and some of them are pink. OK. And you say I look thinner in jeans — OK. New Jeans. Tighter.

3. *n. (comp.)* PVC versus latex. Never tried latex. Sounds really Grace Jones. Mmm.

4. *n. (inq.)* paraphernalia. Strap-on dildos, things I don't even know? Yes, please.

5. *n. (vex.)* the hair. Look, let me explain it. You do not mess with a black woman and her hair. This is my hair, I did not buy it in a store. It took me bloody 13 years to grow this goddamn hair. I don't have to kill it with chemicals. I don't have to pay some bored lady from Sierra Leone £200 a month to plait it. I don't have to worry about it in the rain. Old white women take one look at it and give me a seat to myself on the bus and the train. Fist-fuck you in public? I'll try it. Cut my hair, no. Doesn't mean I don't love you, though.

6. *vb.(occ.adj.)* bad timing. I'd fix this if I could.

7. *vb. (past.)* gay guy porn. Already there, honey.
Years ago.

8. *vb. (res.)* bingeing constantly versus acting like we've got half a brain between us. We could definitely make more of an effort.

9. *adj. (occ. n.)* short fingernails. Done.

10. *vb.(intr.)* compulsively washing away all natural smell. Maybe not.

Oestrus



I'm in heat.
I can smell
myself.
Fresh cunt,
fish counter
scent

floats

over the theatre.
The girls notice.

Good.

I wish I weren't
wearing pants, so I could
rub it into my
seat.

Mark my territory —

Space 2, back row,
dead centre.

Scales mark the spot.

Sunday in the Park



Bits of lives drift on the wind
between the gayer
trying too hard too loud
to have a good time
and Sacha the shrunk lassie dog
barking at every passing bitch
and my small moan
as I come
simply from watching you
sleep in the sun

Food sticks



Food sticks in my throat
like spiders
clawing their way
out of a bathtub drain.

Everyone says I look great,
I've lost so much weight.

I fantasise
knives
in the spleen —
I push them straight in
when I dream.

Then I don't see —

I don't feel
the sucking.
Breasts full,
curdled milk.

Then I don't think of you
while I'm fucking.

Stoned³

3 They Flee From Me That Sometime Did Me Seek, by Sir
Thomas Wyatt

I

You love [her] the way you smoke your joints.
You throw away loads,
sure you'll get another soon.
I smoke down
till the roach burns
my fingers,
burns the exposed
underside of my lip.
'Cause I never know
where the next is coming from.

II

Saturday night in Berlin
watch my ex-lover —
not my ex-girlfriend, just my ex-lover —
play pool with a woman
who'd love to fuck
either or both of us at once,
wishing I were the kind of girl
who could wank in the washroom

and let someone watch.
I've changed.

III

Woke up with someone's fingers up my cunt.
Don't know who.
Small hand.
Might've been her but can't tell.
Wouldn't open my eyes to see.
Wasn't you.
Wasn't you.
Wish for once I'd waited for you to text first.
You wouldn't have done.
I wouldn't have come.
I wouldn't have to watch you now.



Fun

There's a joy in
self-destruction

You're into wounds.
You smell them out — reach
into picked-open scars.

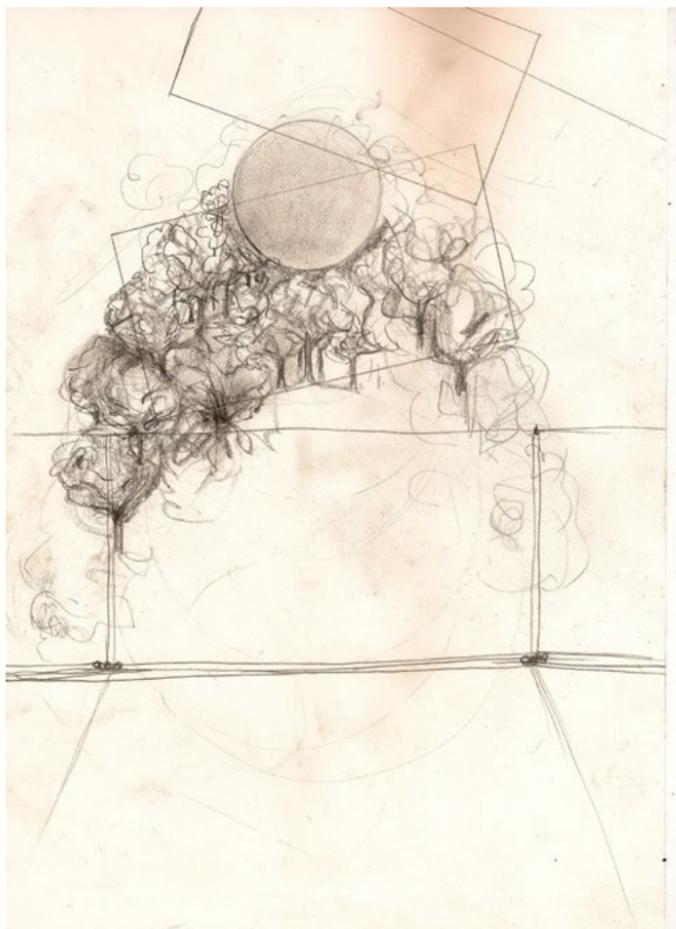
Widen them,
so you can crawl inside to warm
yourself.

I let you. Sit still
as in a dentist's chair
while you pull out little bits
of me.

Weigh,
Discard.

It's not your fault.
It's who you are — a bird
pecking.
You live in a cage, bang
your head against the bars
until you bleed.

Early Morning



From the pool I can
watch
the sun leave the mountain
pink under lip rock.

That was slow.

This morning from my
balcony
I watched the sun
come down a forested hill
turning the trees gold

before I could





Illustrations





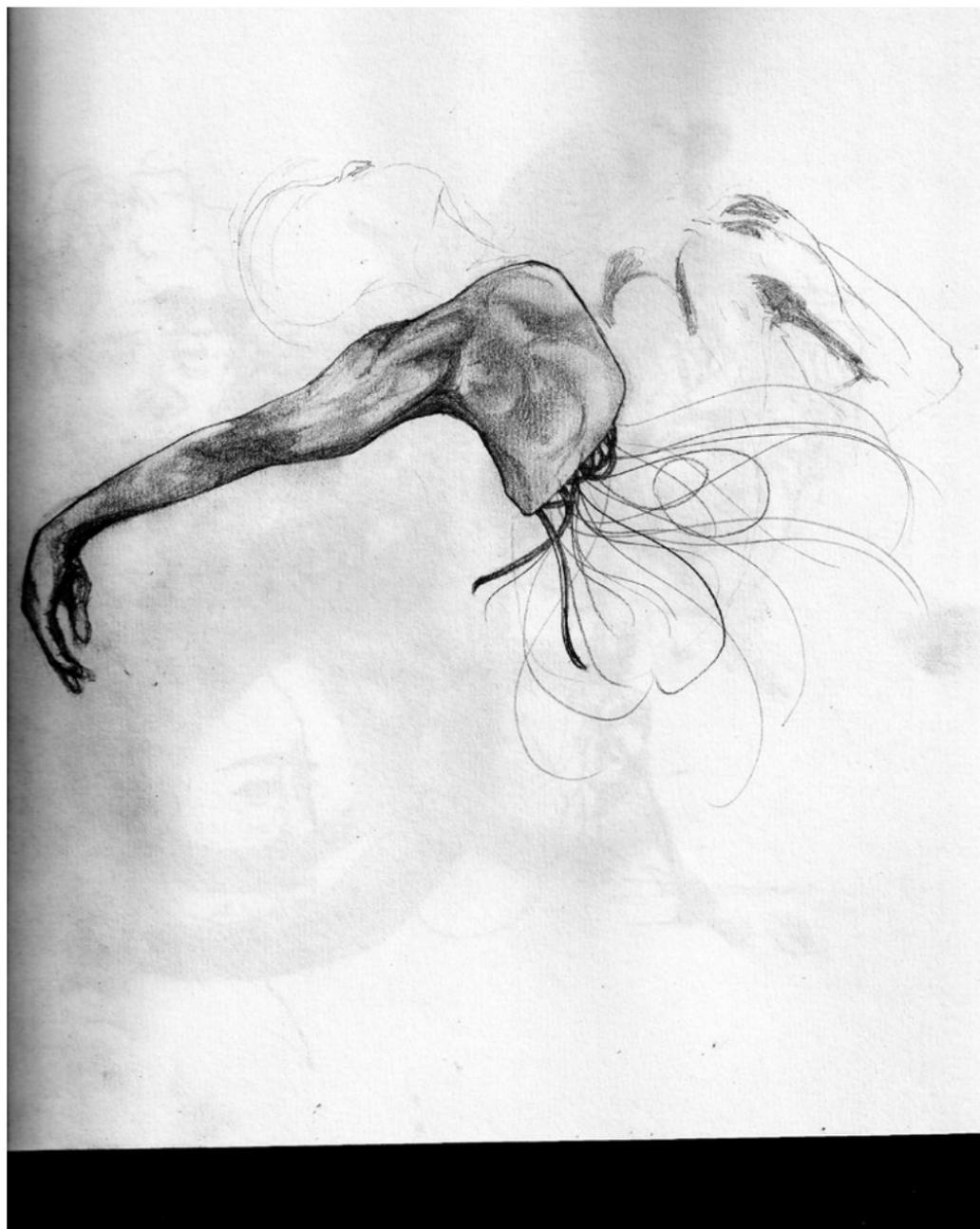


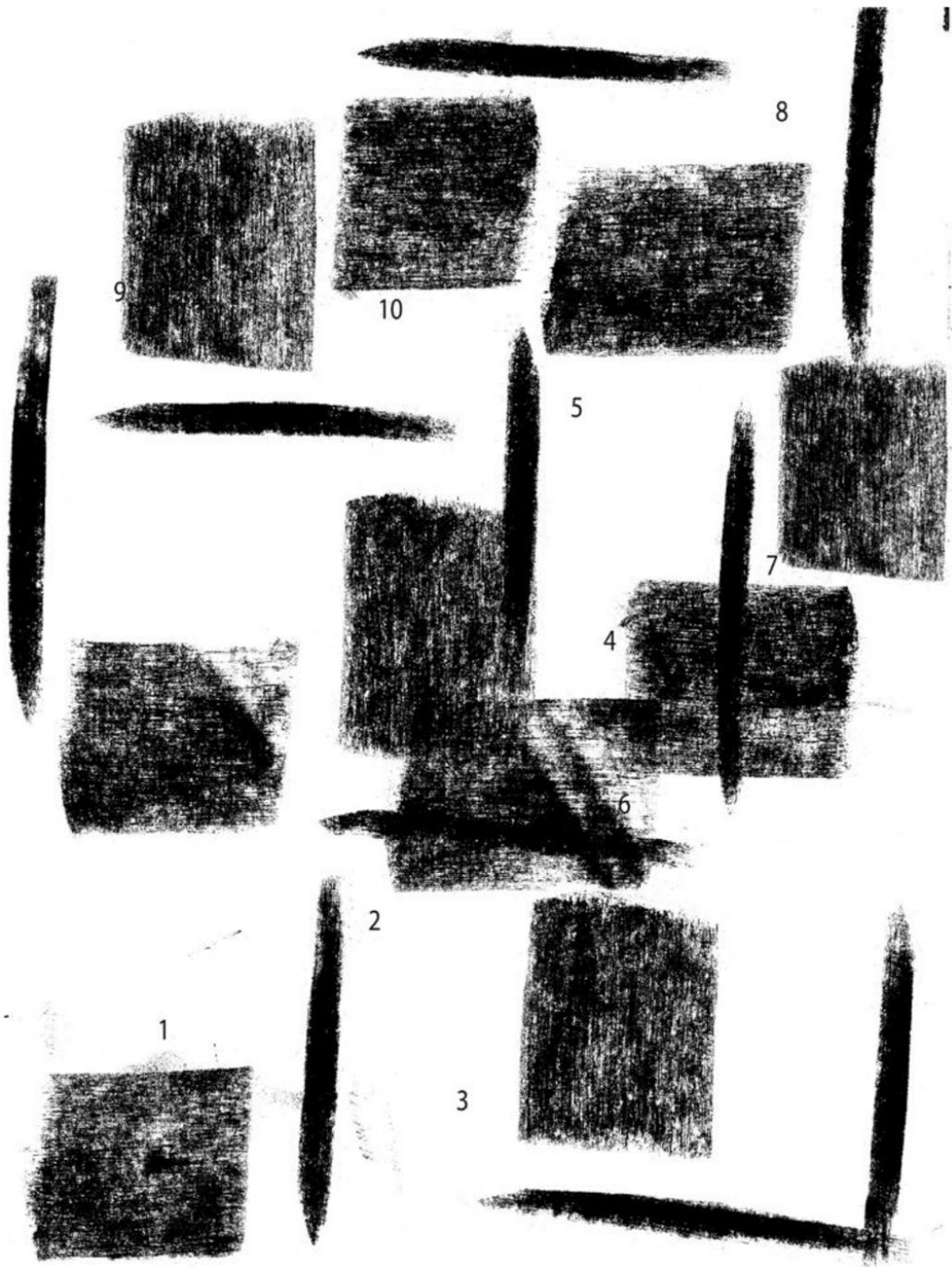












9

10

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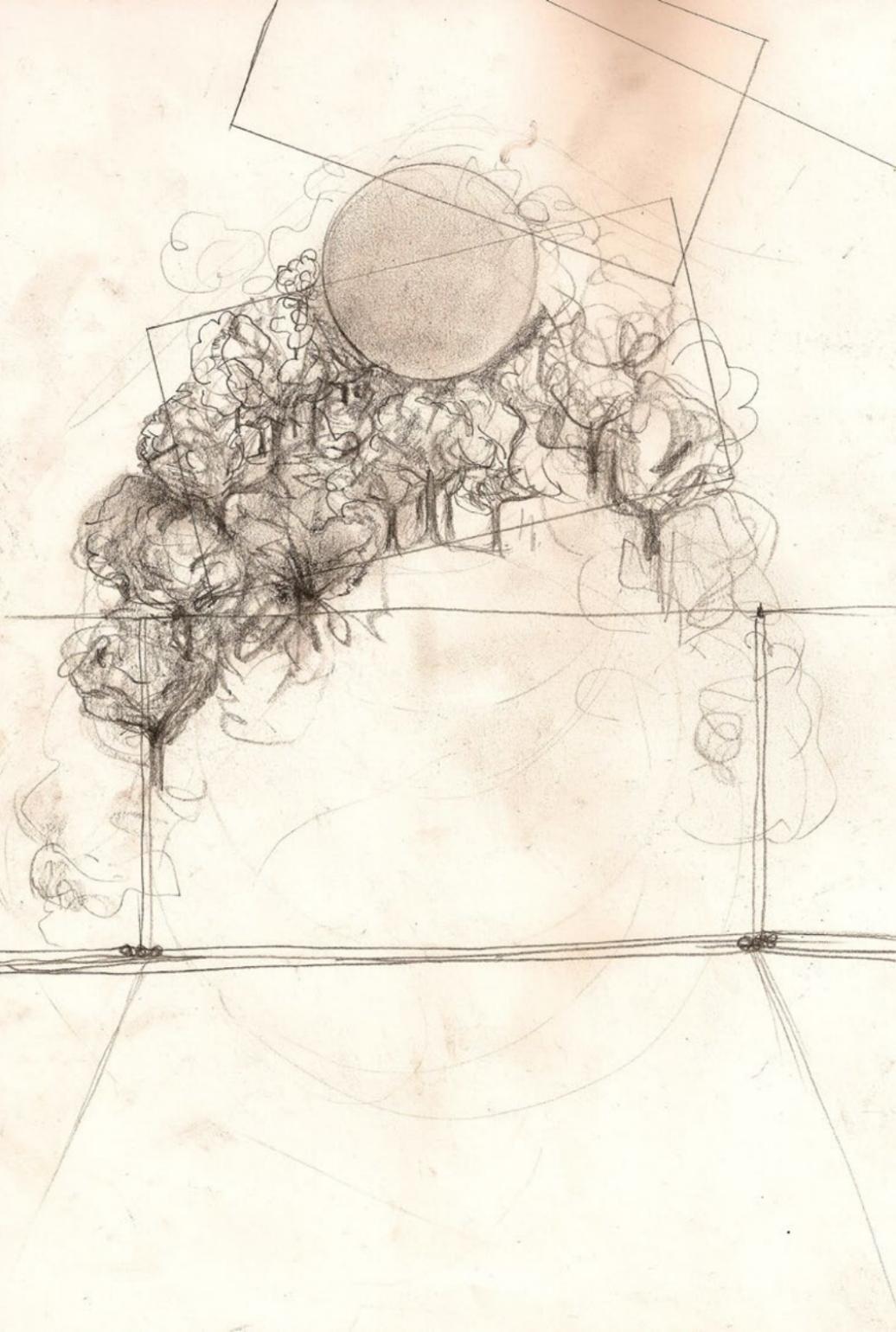
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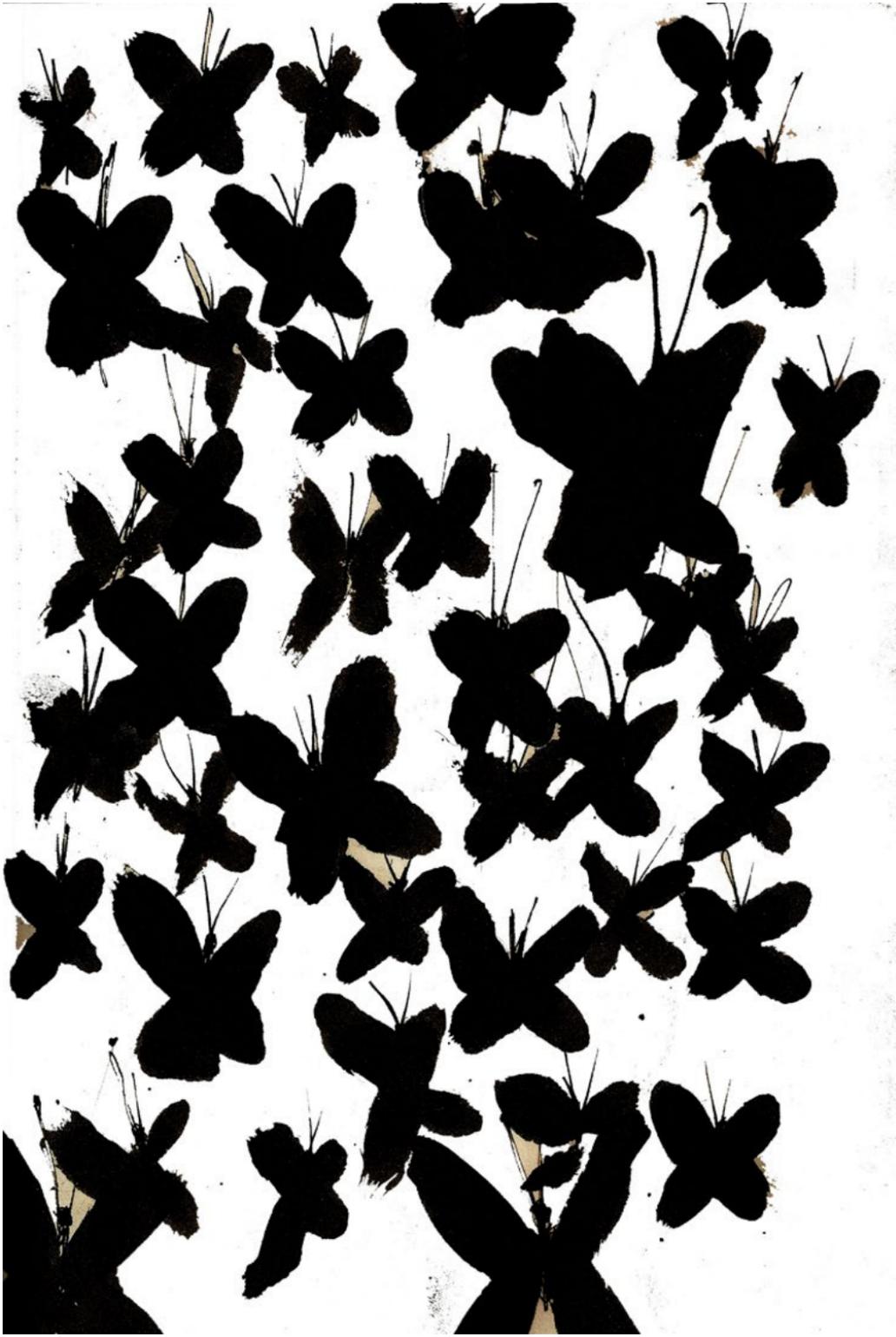












Video Links

Video links:

Alaska Animation:

For Jon and Ellis

<http://www.cherylmartin.co.uk/videos/for-jon-and-ellis>

Butterflies

<http://www.cherylmartin.co.uk/videos/butterflies>

Fragile

<http://www.cherylmartin.co.uk/videos/fragile>

