

Christmas Island and the Mediatisation of Tragedy

Annarose Robinson

I spent a quarter of my year in 2010 inside the Curtin and Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centres, volunteering with the charity ALIV (now inactive within the IDCs). I will value this time forever, for the things I saw and the experiences I had. But I value most is the opportunity I had to get to know the people behind the rhetoric. For three months, I spent ten hours a day inside the centres, learning the stories and the characters of the asylum seekers who graciously welcomed me into their lives. From them I learnt of the pain of degradation and indignity. However, I also learnt how to play card games and make friendship bracelets. Asylum seekers as an issue in Australia is constantly being framed and reframed by politicians, the media and even some social activists, all of whom use asylum seekers as a tool in conveying their own message. Sometimes it can be hard to remember that behind the rhetoric, the asylum seekers really are just people, who are right now probably eating, or watching television, or talking on the phone. I was able to get to know the people, to learn that their reasons for coming to Australia, their characters, their beliefs, their opinions and their taste in food are as diverse as their fingerprints. I will always treasure this, and always feel gratitude to the people who gave me the privilege of getting to know them. I think it is a shame that more Australians cannot see asylum seekers as nothing more mundane, yet nothing more precious, than just people.

On December 15, 2010, a tragedy occurred which resulted in the loss of life of nearly 60 people. I was on Christmas Island when this happened. I did not witness this tragedy through two minute news segments, through instant

political framing or from a place far removed. It was not happening to a group of people alien to me, or whose suffering was already somewhat dulled to me through years of consistent news grabs of seemingly endless wars. Instead, I was there, and it happened to people I knew or would come to know. I remember this event not for the news stories, for the policy reflection or for the political statements. I remember it just for the people.

As the charity through which I was working is no longer active in detention centres, I no longer feel bound by its confidentiality clause. Therefore, these are my memories of that time, that event and those people.

On December 13, as Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel 221 was making its way through the Indian Ocean, I was running an activity in a compound in the men's camp. I saw a guy I knew who a few days earlier had made me a friendship bracelet and who had given me a review- in very broken English- of the performance of every Manchester United player of that season. That was in a different detention centre on Christmas Island, and I asked why he had been moved. He shrugged, but told me it didn't matter, because his wife and baby were on their way, and so soon he would be in family camp.

As we drove home from the centre that day, my manager remarked that in his year working on Christmas Island, he had never seen the ocean as rough as the fast few days. He told us of the tide breaking over the pier where the Navy ship sometimes docked.

December 14. In our evening debrief session, volunteers were telling the group how a boat had

arrived, but because the water was so rough, it couldn't unload in Flying Fish Cove (the usual place). Instead, the SIEV had been escorted by the Navy right around to the other side of the island. The SIEV was taken into the shallows of a calm bay and the people had to wade to shore. We were laughing that evening as the volunteers described a manager shouting down the phone in a very English accent for "tow-els, tow-els!"

On December 15, I woke up early to a cramp in my leg. I walked it off, around my soft, warm room. It eased, and I went back to bed. Two kilometres away, at the same time, a local bus driver had noticed a boat on the water. It was following the usual path of SIEV's, to Flying Fish Cove. But it was coming close to the rocks, and didn't seem to have a working engine. The bus driver called the authorities.

A couple of hours later, that same bus driver came to take us to the centre. His face was deathly white as he explained to us that the boat had come closer and closer and then smashed against the rocks. He told us of the people in the water, of the frightened children screaming for help. He told us of standing above, with others, helplessly watching them die below. He told us of the courage of the Navy, who brought their inflatable boats far too close to the rocks, to save everyone they could. He told us of the bodies floating. "They're just kids," he said, numbly. We arrived at the centre. An officer I knew told me it was bad, very bad. At least 7 confirmed dead, at that stage, with far more to come. The people in the centre were just waking up, with no idea what had happened. That evening, as we debriefed, volunteers in the different centres on the island told of hearing howls and screams of agony as people were made aware of what had happened.

The next day, December 16, was our scheduled day off. The BBC- the only channel we got- was saying at least twenty dead. A few friends and I went to the spot where it happened and put down flowers and stood for a while in silence. Before, a friend and I had discussed why we felt we should. It was, she said, because people we knew who would want to, couldn't. So we

would do it in their honour. After, we sat in her bedroom, half-watching a movie. Our bedrooms overlooked a little bay, in which little inflatable navy boats zipped around. Collecting the bodies.

The next day, we went back to the centres. As always, at the end of the day we debriefed. The volunteers from the Phosphate Hill centre told us of people coming together in an outpouring of grief and frustration. Of how they shouted and cried for their loved ones, who had died just two days before. Of how eventually the tears had dried up. The next day, these volunteers in anger watched the news and saw that the grief they had witnessed was being framed by the media as a riot.

The next few days, evening debrief was full of stories of sadness. When volunteers learnt that people they were close to had lost family. When the journalists, swarming everywhere, accosted us (and everyone), brashly asking insensitive and invasive questions. A friend of mine was playing Jenga with an asylum seeker, when friends of his rushed over and whispered to him. He collapsed and as they supported him, they explained to my friend, "his sister... the boat...".

I ran into an immigration officer I knew from Curtin IDC. He was part of the team that focused only on the boat crash. I asked how that was. He looked serious- the only time he ever has. "It makes me realise I'm lucky- so, so lucky. That could have been me, could have been my kids. It's only luck that I'm from where I'm am, not from where they're are."

I was coming back from an evening activity when I saw the Manchester United fan. I had been wondering about him, but about 3 boats had arrived in those few days, and his wife and baby could have been on one of those that arrived safely. As soon as I saw his face, I knew it wasn't true. I'll never forget the enormity of his broken English; "I tell wife, come, come, so they come, and now, wife finish, baby finish."

A memorial service was held. A few of the volunteers came, after we were invited by the asylum seekers. I stood next to a friend of mine who peeled my orange for me every lunchtime. He had lost family members. "You expect this in

Iran," he said, "but here... why here? They were so close. They were right here."

The days went on and the centres settled down into a sort of muted normality. The group of volunteers who had been there before the crash left, and a new group came. Some asylum seekers still only wore black, wrote the names of their dead on their arms in henna. Some people I knew from before the crash, who were cheerful and hopeful, I never saw again. Their friends told me they stayed in their rooms. I never saw the Manchester United supporter again.

We got to know the survivors- their recreational area was where we ate our meals. The children played football loudly all day. The adults often joined us for meals. We made friends, swapped words of each others language. We taught some to use chopsticks and they taught us threading (they were more successful with the chopsticks than we with the threading). We chatted and sometimes we laughed. Sometimes someone would talk about a relative who had died on the boat. "The Boat"- words which made everyone fall silent. With so few words of each others language, it was awkward. We would convey sympathy. Everyone would sit quietly for a while.

The weeks passed. We heard there would be inquests, inquiries. We heard about it sometimes on the news- about how this was

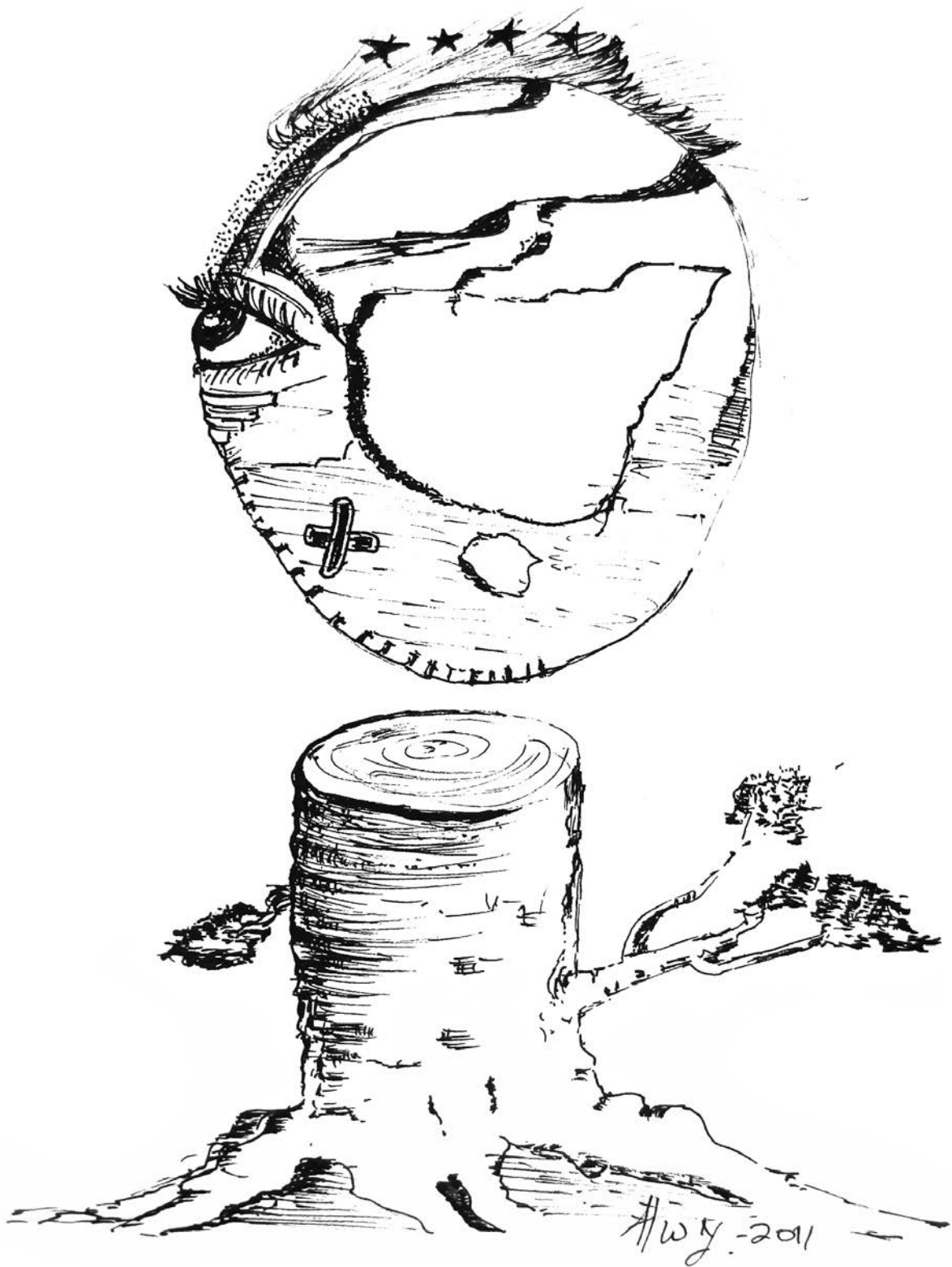
what happened if you engage a people smuggler, about whether the Navy had done enough. It was both immediate to and yet worlds apart from the people who we ate lunch with every day. As always with the asylum seeker debate, the rhetoric drifted away from the people, until the two were nearly entirely separate.

I got tonsillitis, and one day at the centre began throwing up. The other volunteers went into the compounds to run their activities, and I waited for my lift home on a step near our office, feeling sorry for myself and running to the bathroom. A man passed who I knew. Most of his family had died on the boat crash. He saw that I was looking unwell. He had nearly no English, but he stayed with me, making sympathetic noises, until my boss picked me up.

It was my last day. A month and a half had passed since the boat crash. On my last night, we played Iranian and Tamil music, everyone dancing or clapping. I saw a guy, all in black and with a long beard. He had lost his wife on the boat crash. When I last saw him, before December 15, he had been clean-shaven and hopeful for the future. I had never seen him since. His friends always told me he would not leave his room. Now he was here, and sometimes he smiled. I smiled too.



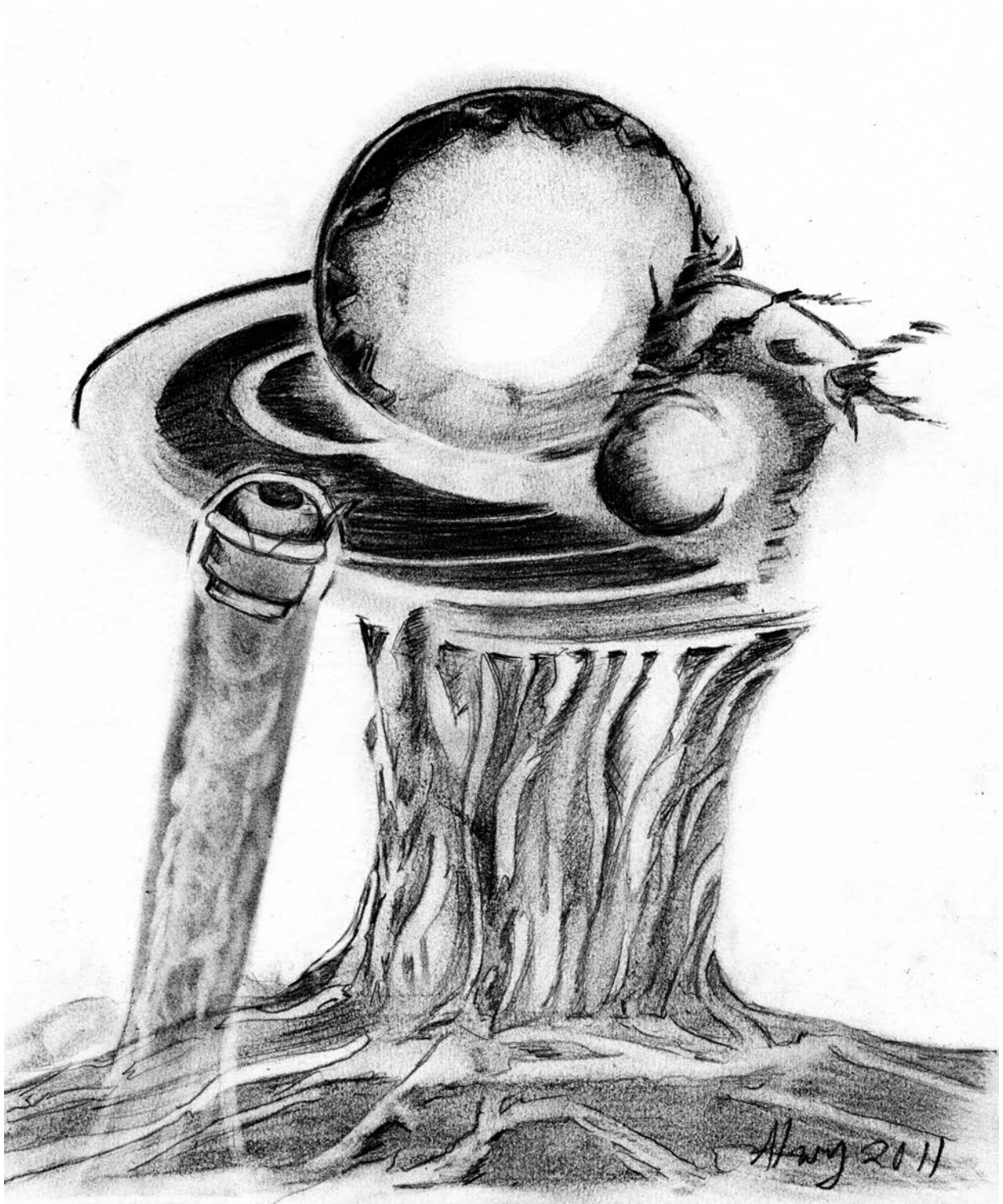
Tahmineh Jafari, Portrait of the Artist's Son, pencil on paper, 35x48cm



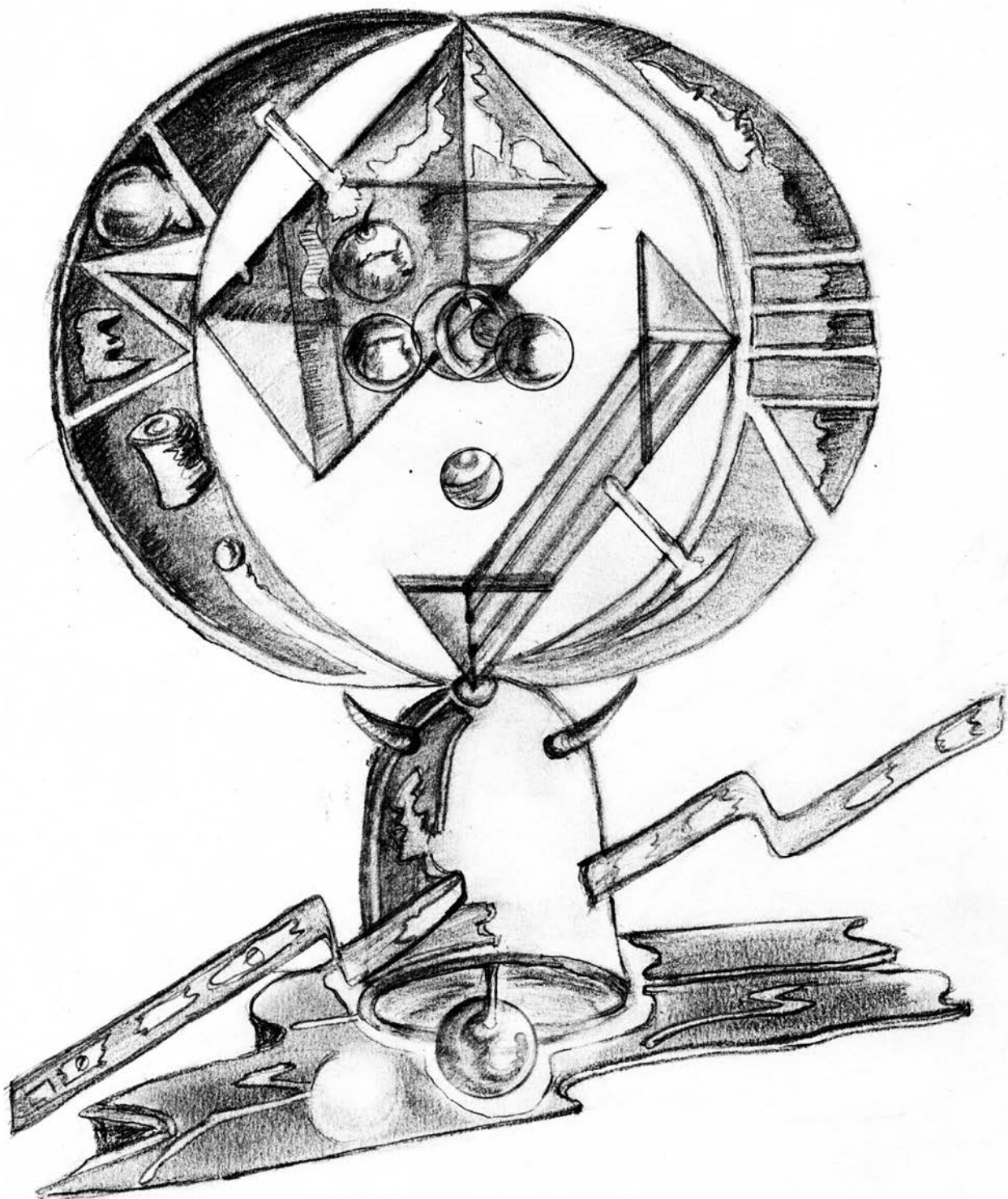
Alwy Fadhel, Untitled 1, pen and ink on paper, 21x29cm



Alwy Fadhel, Untitled 2, pen and ink on paper, 21x29cm

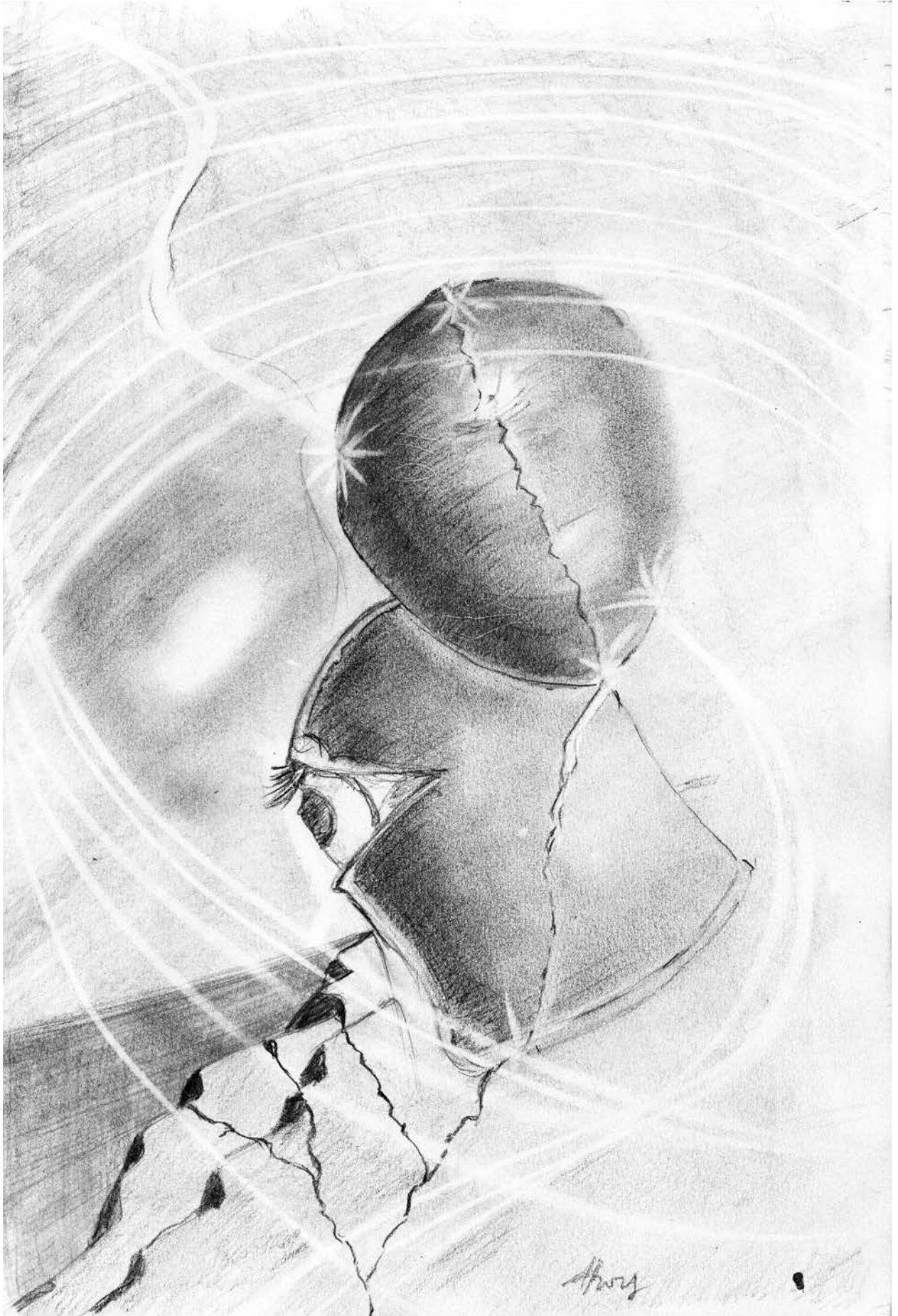


Alwy Fadhel, Untitled 5, pen and ink on paper, 21x29cm

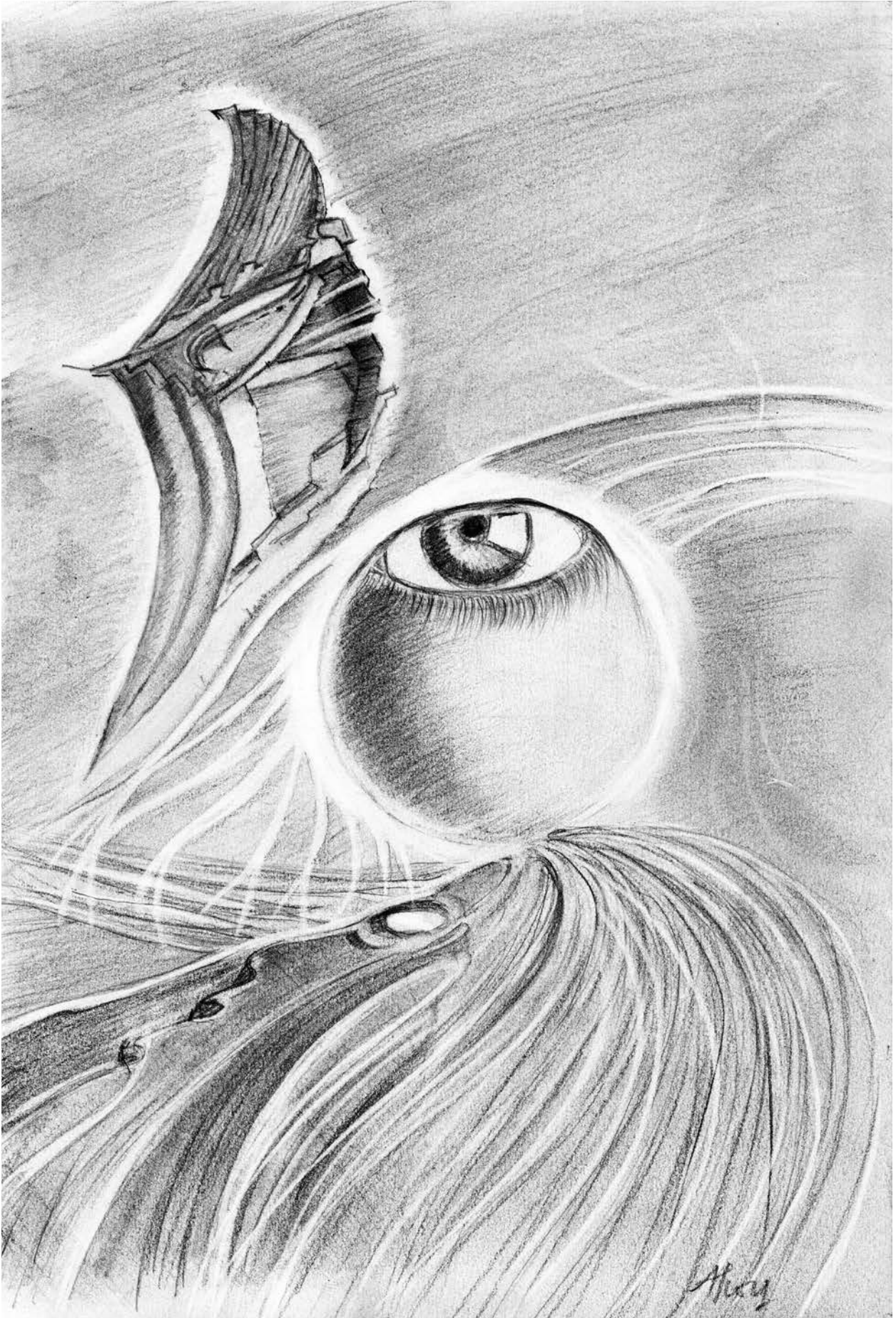


Alwy 2011

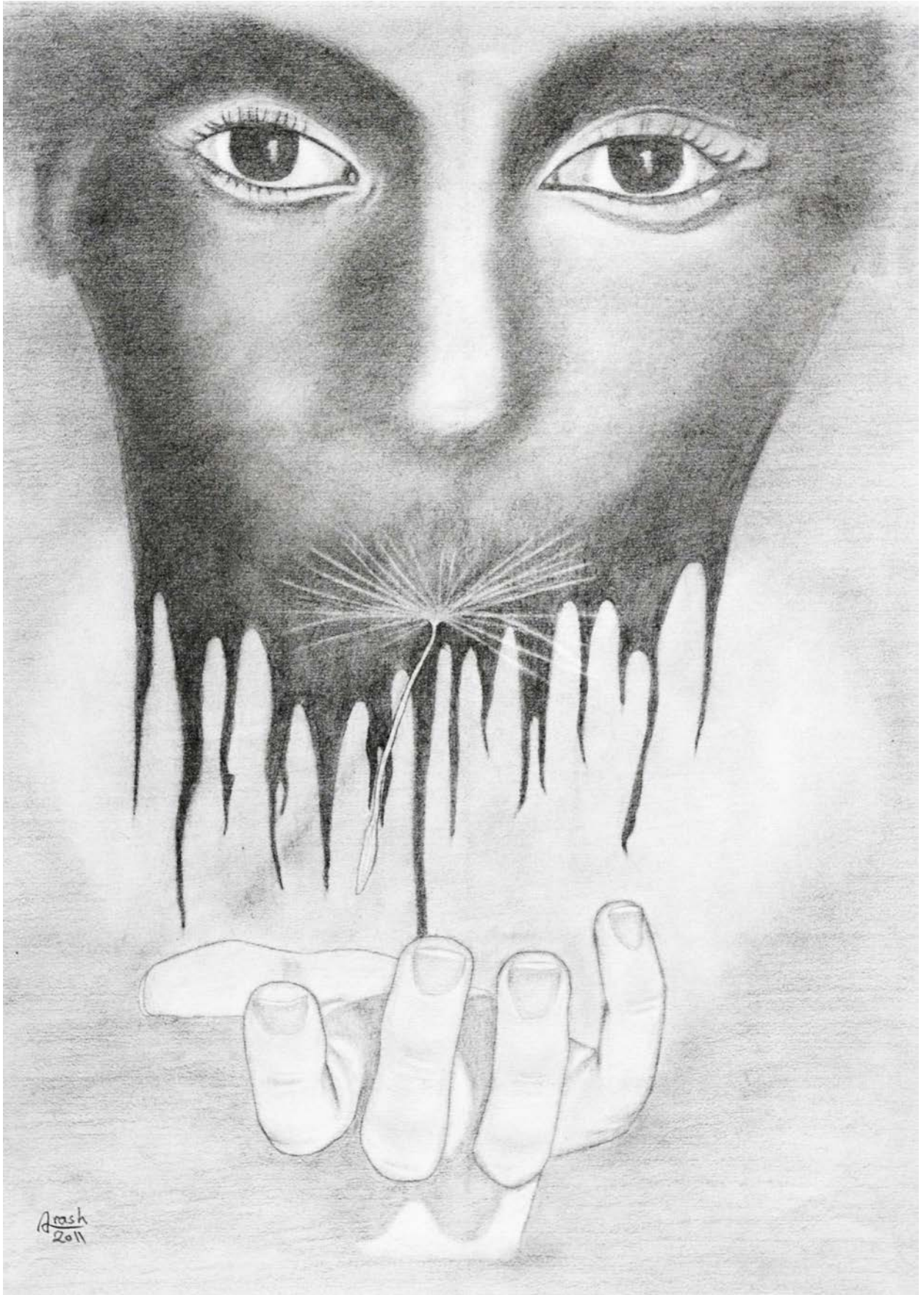
Alwy Fadhel, Untitled 6, pen and ink on paper, 21x29cm



Alwy Fadhel, Untitled, pencil on paper, 21x29cm



Alwy Fadhel, Untitled, pencil on paper, 21x29cm



E, The Wish, pencil on paper, 29x41cm



E, Dreams of Freedom, pencil on paper, 29x41cm