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OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# RIVERS AND MEANING



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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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FEATURE

TWEED

By Tania Kovats and Mary Modeen

The River Tweed speaks instantly of borders, of unity and division, but also of warp and weft, telling us much about its shapeshifting character. This living marker of national meanings and historical boundaries flows eastwards 97 miles from the Lowther Hills to Berwick-upon-Tweed, descending 1,440 feet over that length. Its source rises 40 miles north of Scotland’s westernmost border with England. The river enters the sea two miles south of the border’s easternmost point. There is a ring of geological predestination to this bordering identity. It’s as if the Tweed exists as a

sturdy trace of the ocean that separated Scotland and England 520 million years ago.

The hills in which it rises, and along whose northern margin it meanders, are the deposits of that ocean, thrown skyward by the collision of the two continents, Laurentia and Gondwana, in the Ordovician era, 450 million years ago. The English Lake District and the entirety of the Southern Uplands are the remnants of that collision. In spite of centuries of cross border strife between their respective peoples, there is



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*“TWEED: Border Ballads” courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



much that is shared, including ancestry. It is very telling that on the map of Scotland's 2014 independence referendum results, a striking bulwark of "No" (to independence) voting constituencies form a thick line north of the border, coinciding with the Ordovician geology. The warp and weft of cross-border communities is strong, and the Tweed unifies as much as it divides.

Kovats says of the work:

"*TWEED* started by me following the river. Tweeds Well is a lonely place in the Lowther Hills, where the river rises, traveling for just under one hundred miles before entering the sea at Tweedmouth. I believe all rivers have their own voice. Some rivers run through you, your conscious and beyond-conscious mind. Tweed is a bilingual river that travels along a border, a historic, geopolitical, psychological and metaphoric boundary. For *TWEED*, I brought together a set of writings and drawings in the form of a unique newspaper publication that were part of an exhibition in the summer of 2019 at Berwick Gymnasium in the exhibition *Head to Mouth*.

Border ballads are a discrete song form of the landscape that the river Tweed runs through and lent *TWEED* its form. In *TWEED* I expressed the narrative of the river as a tortured love story between he/she, north/south, that ultimately ends in separation. The shapeshifter Tam Lin lent his liquid identity to the narrative. This 'border ballad' of drawings and writing addressed the fragile state of the 'Union' as a metaphysical love story and a test of internal and external boundaries."

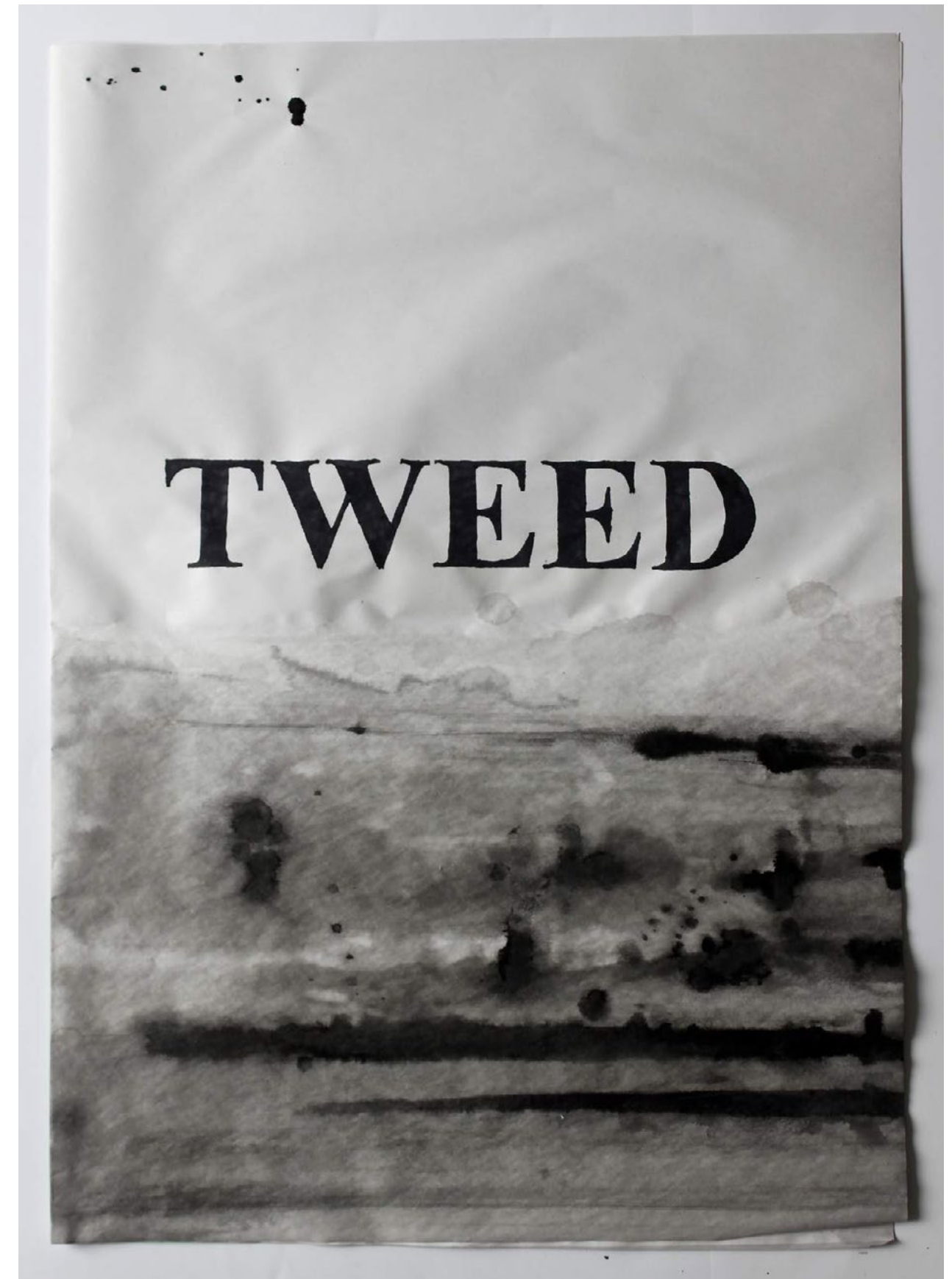
Tania Kovats comes to the River Tweed with that deep sense of time, able to unite its geological agency with its geopolitical resonance. Her work, *TWEED*, addresses the specificity of this national river and the fluidity of identity that it prompts in its communities. The work also

takes its place within the broader arc of her work with, and about, water. Her 2014 exhibition *Oceans*, held at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery, foregrounded the significance of water on a planetary scale. A scan of the Earth's surface reminds us of what we as land creatures too easily forget; the ocean's waters cover 71% of the planet and underpin the freshwater systems on land that enable all life. *Rivers*, her permanent installation at the Jupiter Artland's boathouse, shifts to a national scale, housing samples of water that the artist collected from 100 rivers across the UK. *TWEED* zooms in further, and expresses Kovats' immersion in the geography, mythology, social history and of course balladry of this nationally significant river.

The work that follows here is a set of Tania's inkwash drawings with the text of the border ballads that accompany the artworks. Her focus on water, fluidity, atmosphere, and the character of the river come to the fore in this work.

*All images courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

*View TWEED on [Issuu](#).*

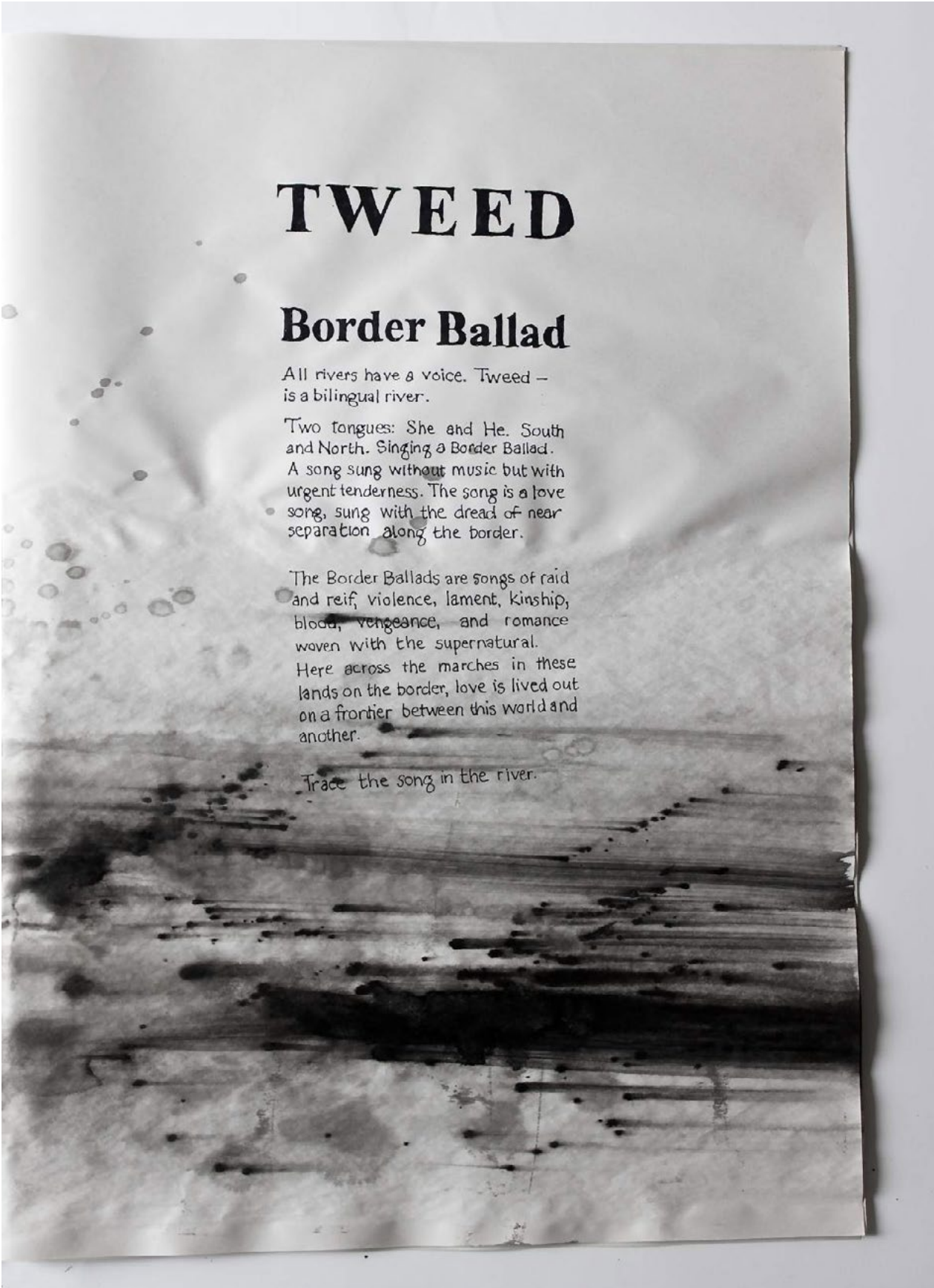


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



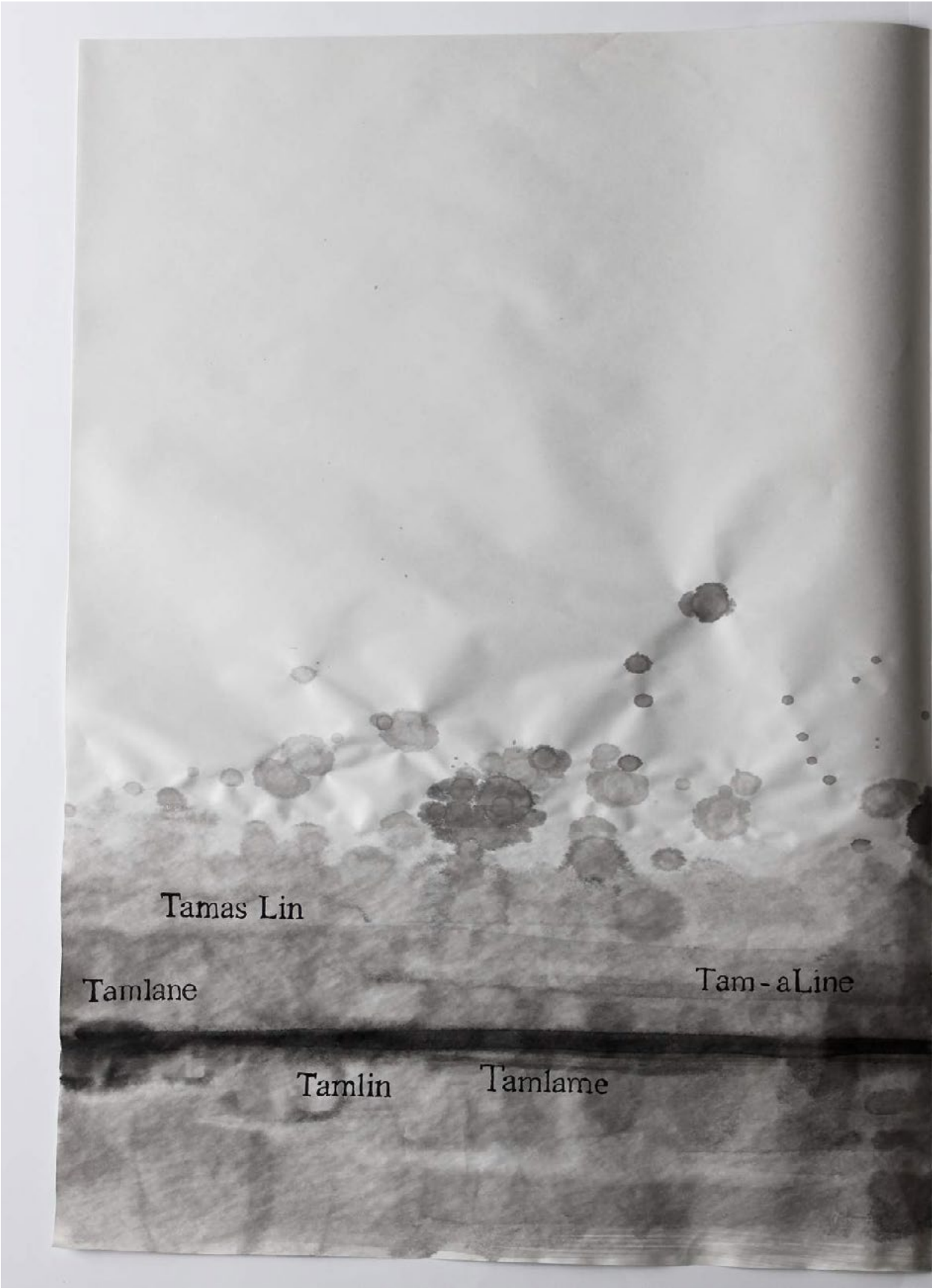


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

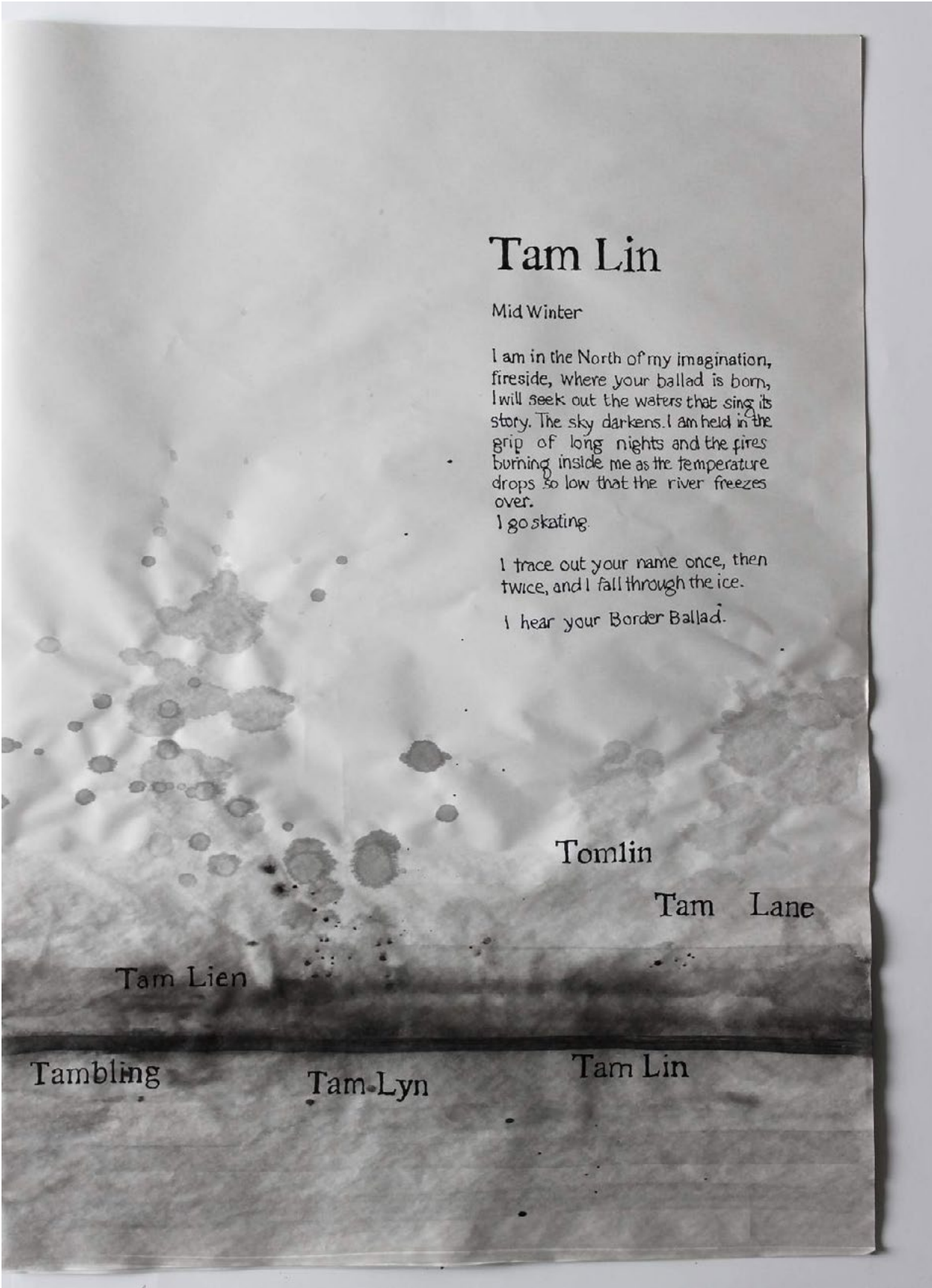


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





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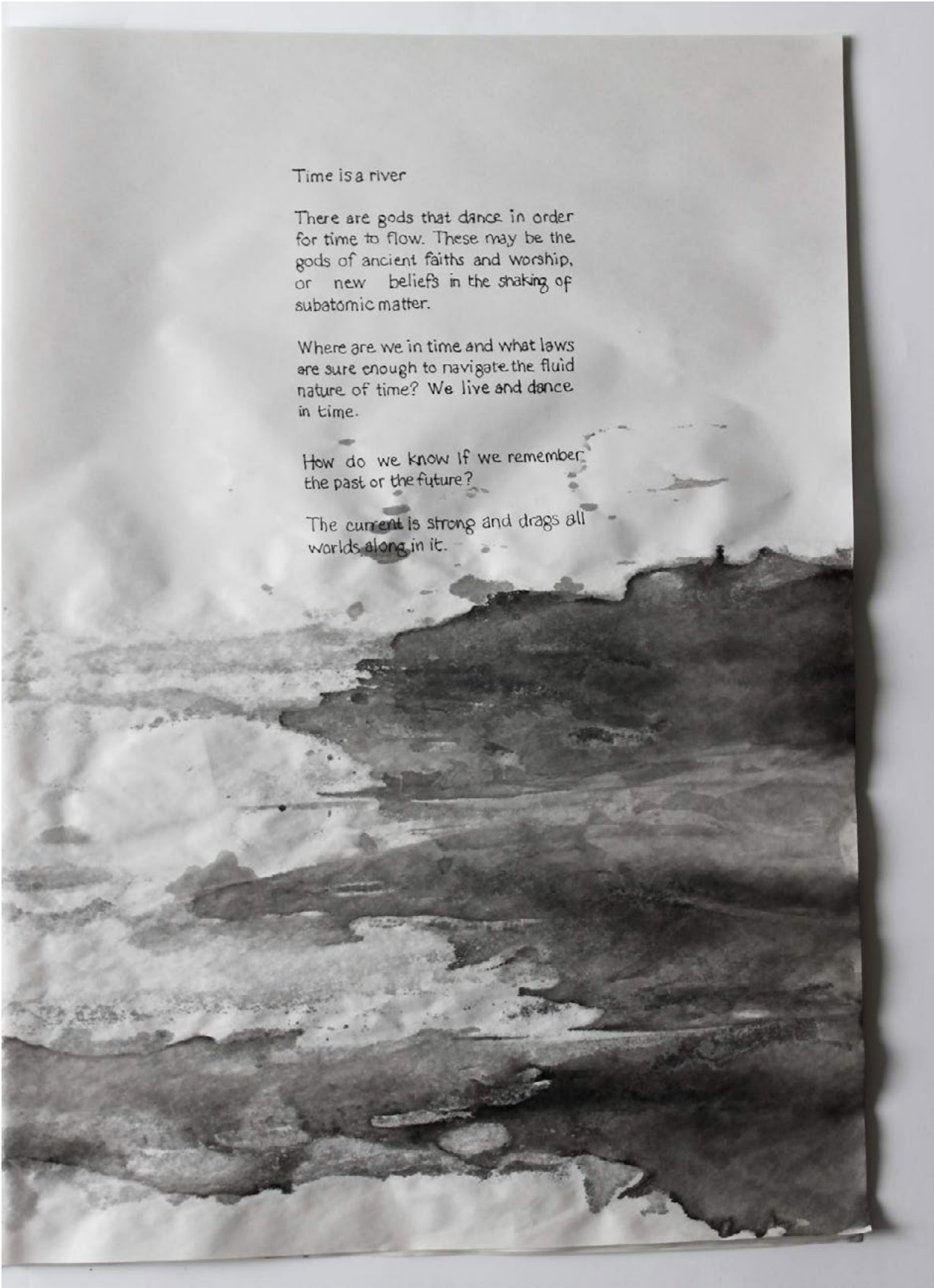


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





*‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



Tam Lin

In the woods of Carterhaugh near the confluence of the Yarrow Water and Ettrick Water, He waits. He will have Her if She comes near enough. She is at the well where She plucks a double rose. He appears to Her. She He are close and they are moved to each other.

The voice in Her ear a tongue from the North, it laughs, questions and wants Her. She replies in a tongue laughing, that questions back from the South. The two tongues find each other. Liquid selves touch and dissolve. She to Him. He to Her. Along the water, along the boundary until the line between them is washed away. He is all over Her and She opens to Him.

He is the river and calls to Her. He has drawn Her into these waters, running fast and strong through the lonely hills to meet Her here.

She slips into water. Even in the shallows the current is strong. The river at Her thighs, She is gasping with cold. She laughs, shivers, and She continues electrified by the burning cold water. Out of Her depth, already impossible to swim against it. She passes into a place where She opens and receives an energy that is

new to Her. She is vibrating. She finds Him in the water. They are together in their liquid selves. In this moment of confluence She conceives.

They are carried along in shimmering waters spreading shining spiralling selves silver. They swim together.

His heart opens. He feels a pain. He doesn't understand and He is afraid. He finds the current too strong for Him. He wants back across the border. Her eyes closed Her back arched She has passed into a dream. She is the river now.

His fear gives Him strength. He crawls up the bank out of the water, slithering wet in along the track and back, finding his feet and running. He runs all the way back to the queen that dragged Him from His horse as a boy.

She dreams on and sees Him in a dream. He lays down and the queen cuts his throat. Bloodletting. There has to be blood and vengeance in the Border Ballad and there it is, spit on the floor.

She comes out of Her dream and is howling that He is no longer there. She shakes and cannot stop shaking. Nothing can stop She. She cannot stop the flow of Herself. She cannot get to the bank. The river is too wide. She is both sides, deep and strong.

She is the river now. She cannot climb out of Herself. She is pulled towards the sea, to the tides that connect Her to all waters.

He remains as a secret pregnant inside Her. She cannot speak of her loss. She can only howl and swallow water. She holds the idea of Him in Her arms, dancing with a ghost, with the shadow of Him in the water. She is drowning with the weight of carrying the thought of Him. They separate and He separates Her from everything that She has loved or lived before. He shape shifts, a snake, an adder a burning coal, an eel, a dove, a swan, turning in Her arms but She holds on. She holds Him fast in every slippery shape. She drowns. She floats. She surfaces. She sinks. She dreams. She drowns again, but She holds on until He is born back into Her world and becomes real again. She is at the mouth of the river. The sea is a North sea a roaring as it pounds the coast, so loud it drowns out Her screaming. She is part of all waters now, salty and magnificent.

On the high tide She moves back into the river up stream, seeking Him out. He is always out of reach. She waits for the storm that will force Her inland to find Him. He is still running, compelled to run paths along the coast to try to find Her. He waits for the flood that will force His upstream world out to sea. Their waters will touch again.

What are the boundaries you cannot cross?

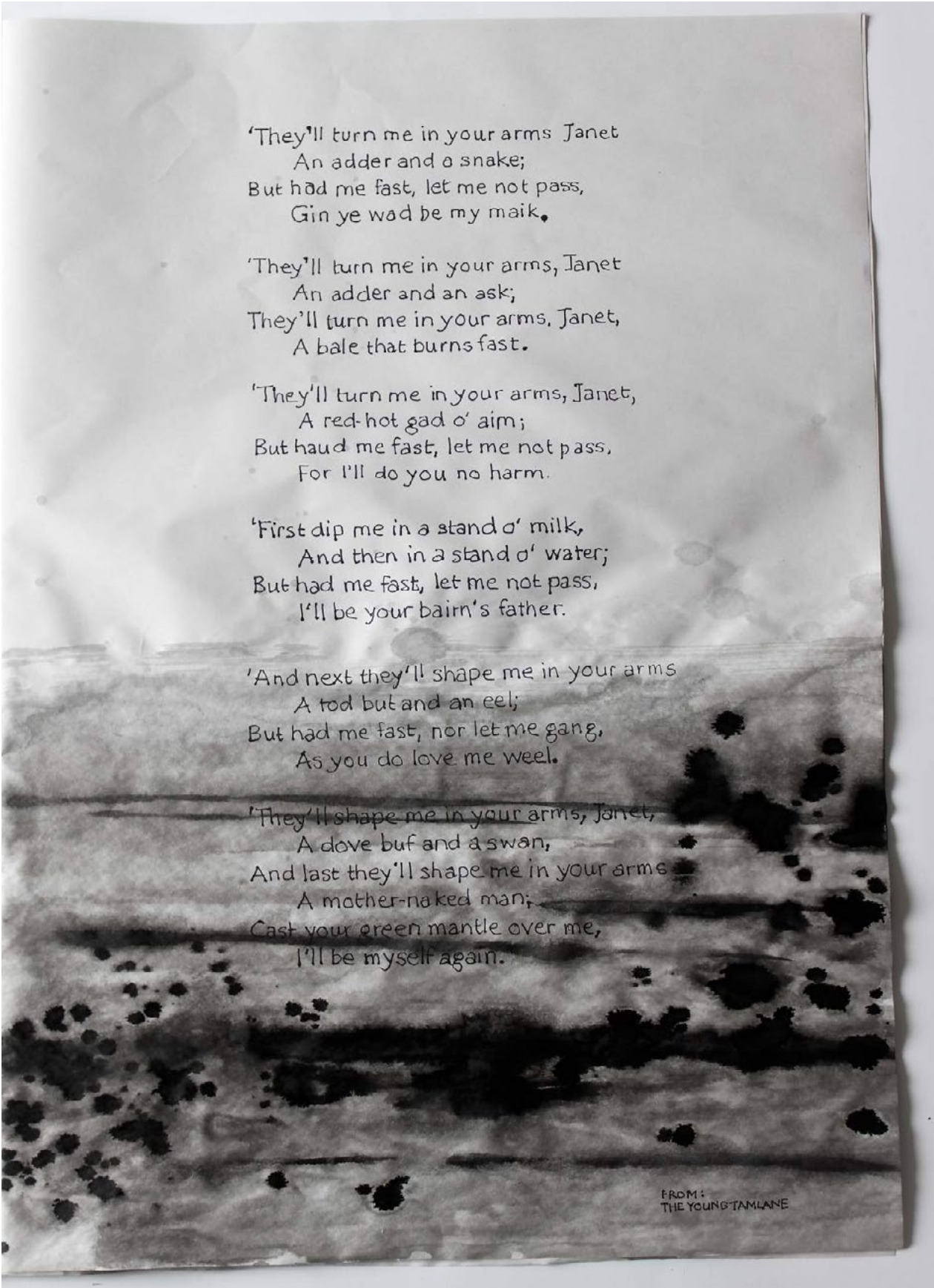
*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

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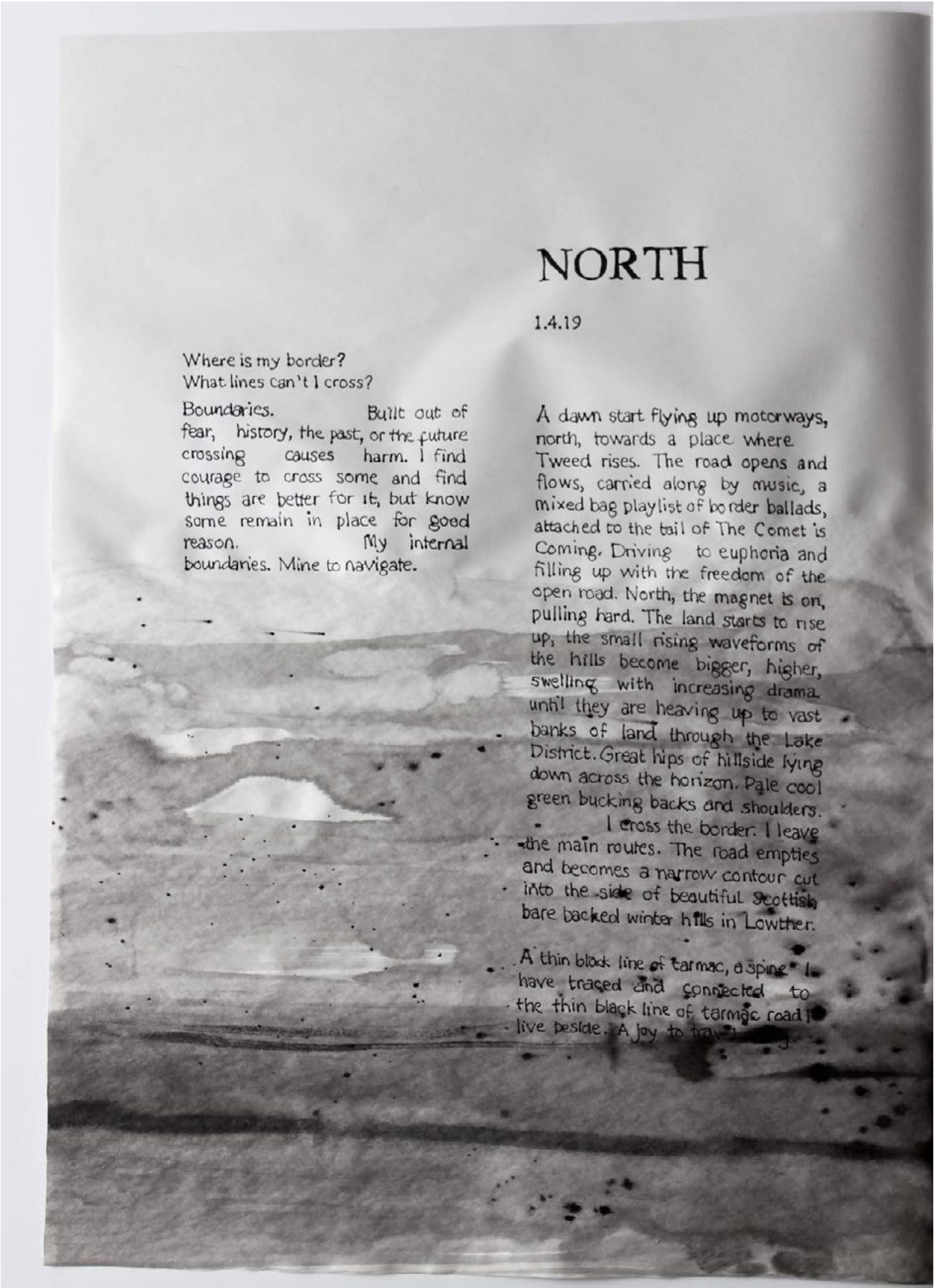


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





# NORTH

1.4.19

Where is my border?  
What lines can't I cross?

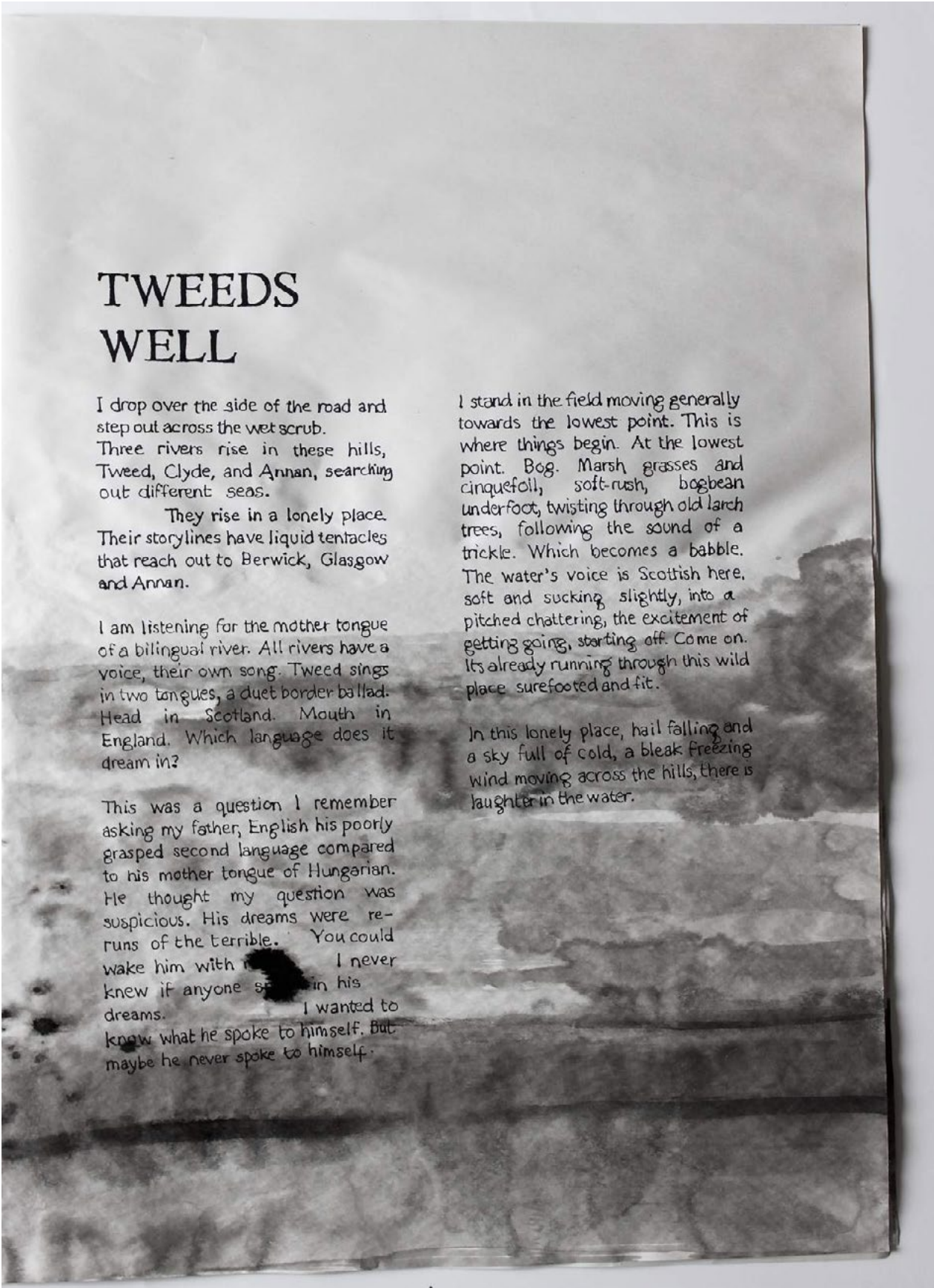
Boundaries. Built out of fear, history, the past, or the future crossing causes harm. I find courage to cross some and find things are better for it, but know some remain in place for good reason. My internal boundaries. Mine to navigate.

A dawn start flying up motorways, north, towards a place where Tweed rises. The road opens and flows, carried along by music, a mixed bag playlist of border ballads, attached to the tail of The Comet is Coming. Driving to euphoria and filling up with the freedom of the open road. North, the magnet is on, pulling hard. The land starts to rise up, the small rising waveforms of the hills become bigger, higher, swelling with increasing drama, until they are heaving up to vast banks of land through the Lake District. Great hips of hillside lying down across the horizon. Pale cool green bucking backs and shoulders.

I cross the border. I leave the main routes. The road empties and becomes a narrow contour cut into the side of beautiful Scottish bare backed winter hills in Lowther.

A thin black line of tarmac, a spine I have traced and connected to the thin black line of tarmac road I live beside. A joy to travel.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



# TWEEDS WELL

I drop over the side of the road and step out across the wet scrub. Three rivers rise in these hills, Tweed, Clyde, and Annan, searching out different seas.

They rise in a lonely place. Their storylines have liquid tentacles that reach out to Berwick, Glasgow and Annan.

I am listening for the mother tongue of a bilingual river. All rivers have a voice, their own song. Tweed sings in two tongues, a duet border ballad. Head in Scotland. Mouth in England. Which language does it dream in?

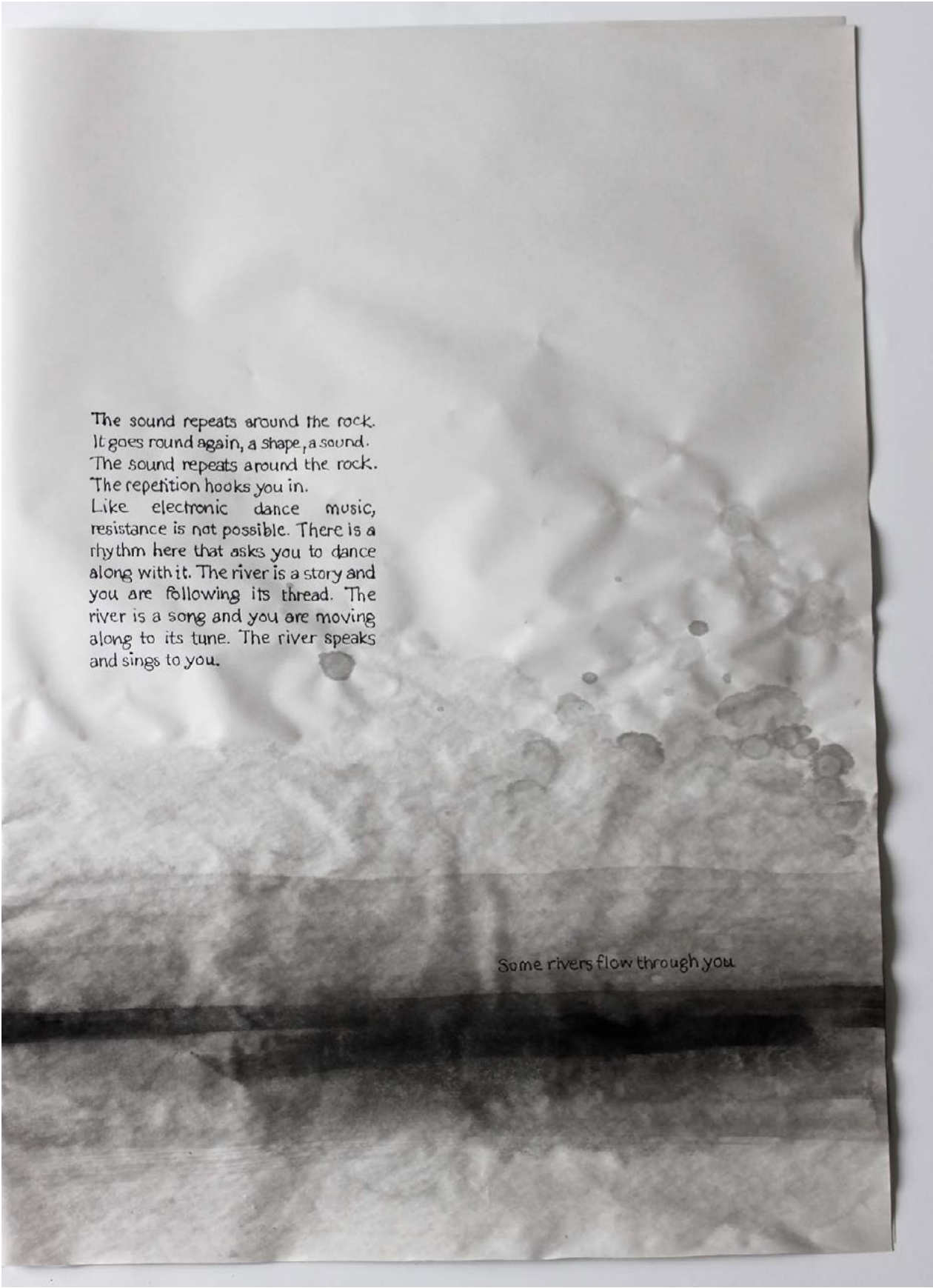
This was a question I remember asking my father, English his poorly grasped second language compared to his mother tongue of Hungarian. He thought my question was suspicious. His dreams were reruns of the terrible. You could wake him with it. I never knew if anyone spoke in his dreams. I wanted to know what he spoke to himself. But maybe he never spoke to himself.

I stand in the field moving generally towards the lowest point. This is where things begin. At the lowest point. Bog. Marsh grasses and cinquefoil, soft-rush, bogbean underfoot, twisting through old larch trees, following the sound of a trickle. Which becomes a babble. The water's voice is Scottish here. soft and sucking slightly, into a pitched chattering, the excitement of getting going, starting off. Come on. Its already running through this wild place surefooted and fit.

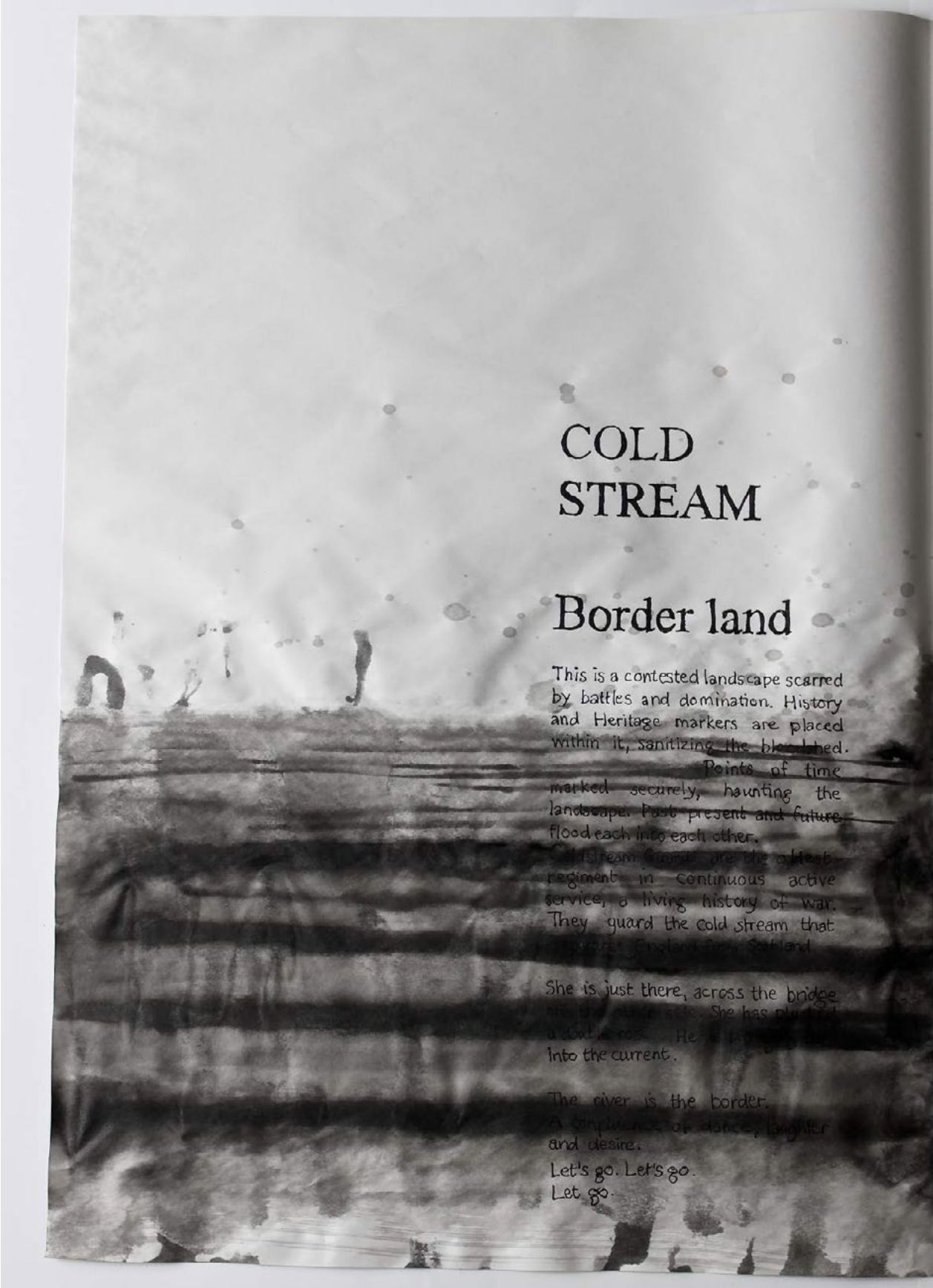
In this lonely place, hail falling and a sky full of cold, a bleak freezing wind moving across the hills, there is laughter in the water.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*







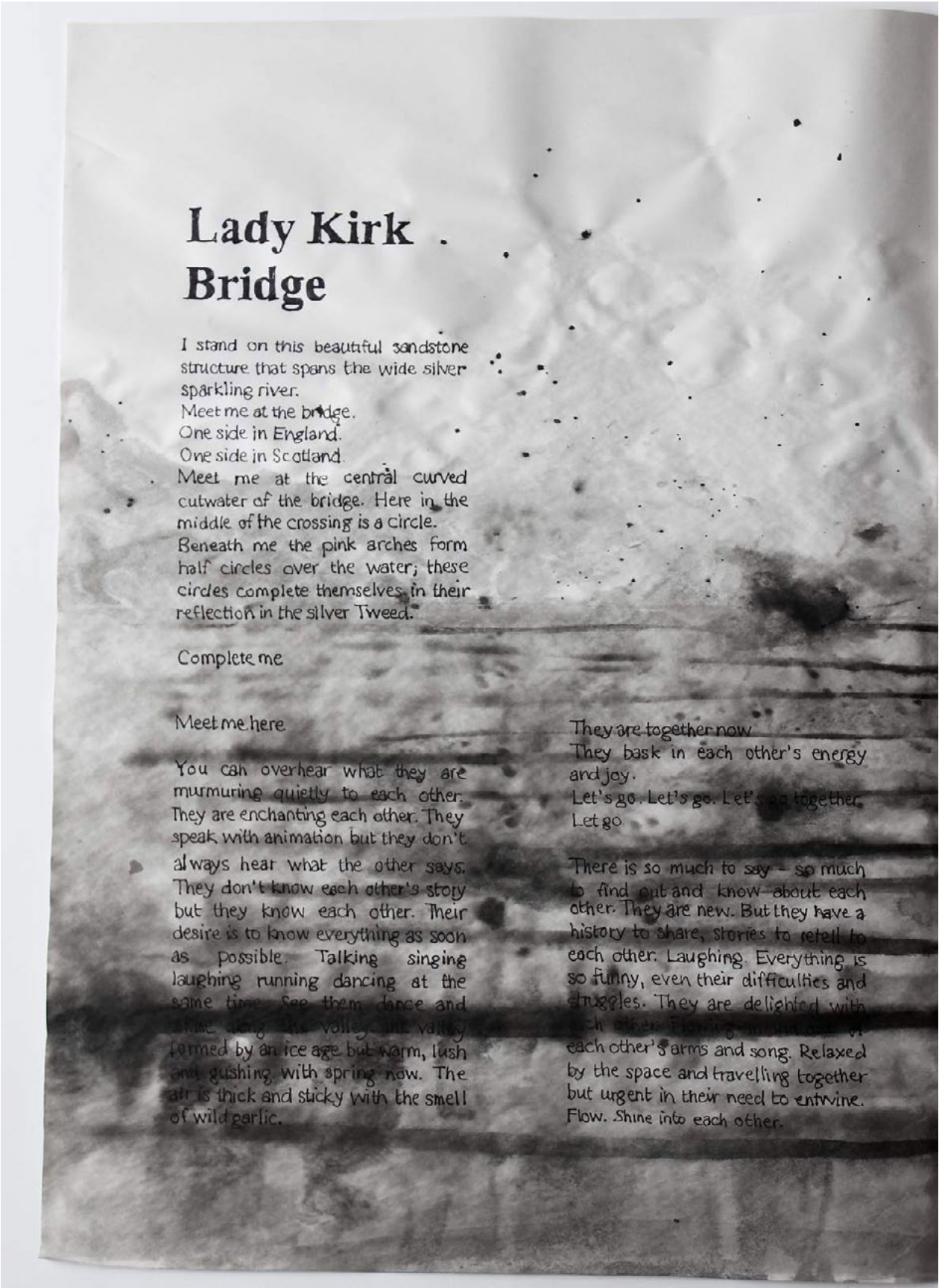


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





# Lady Kirk Bridge

I stand on this beautiful sandstone structure that spans the wide silver sparkling river.  
Meet me at the bridge.  
One side in England.  
One side in Scotland.  
Meet me at the central curved cutwater of the bridge. Here in the middle of the crossing is a circle.  
Beneath me the pink arches form half circles over the water; these circles complete themselves in their reflection in the silver Tweed.

Complete me

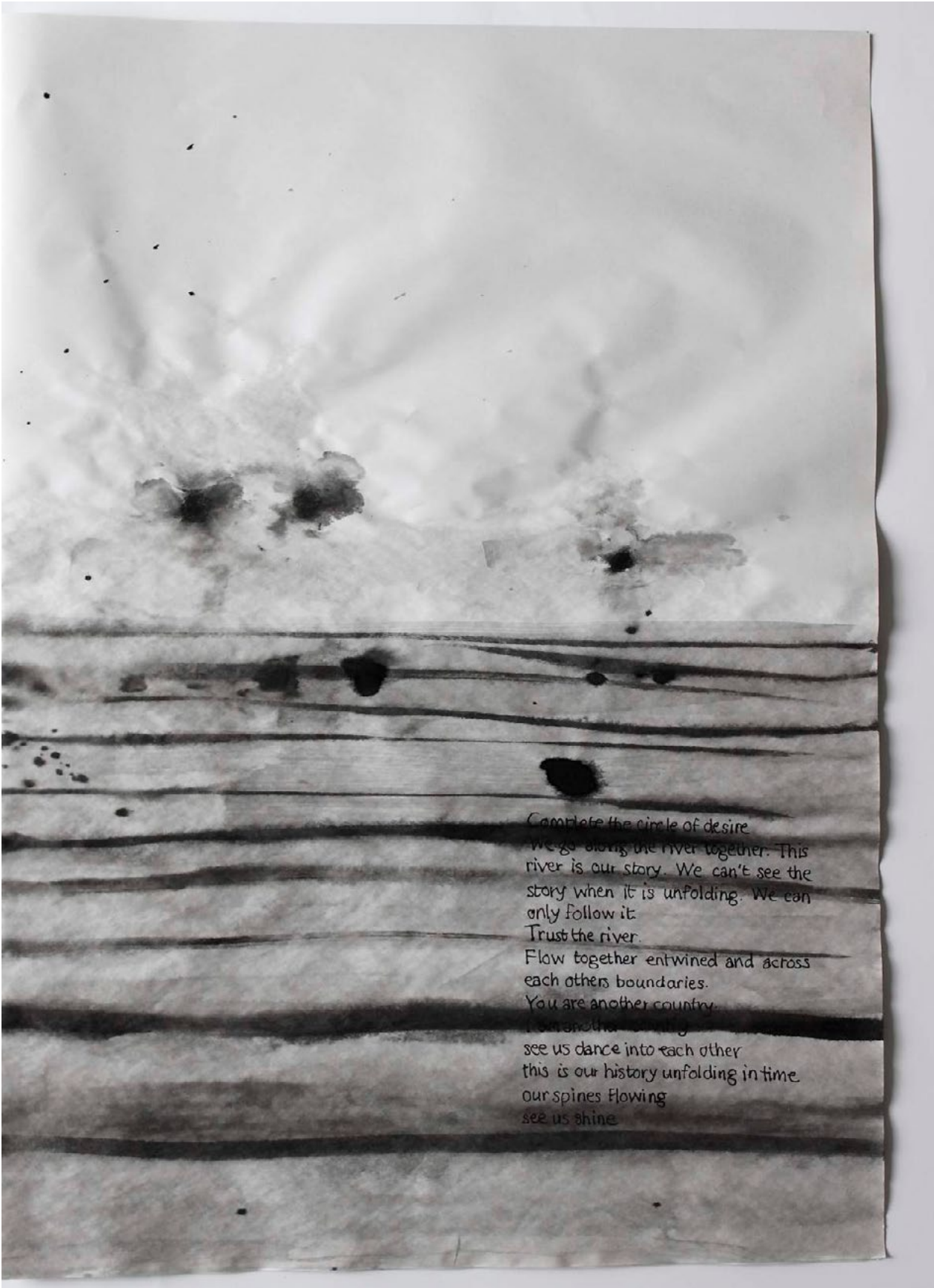
Meet me here

You can overhear what they are murmuring quietly to each other. They are enchanting each other. They speak with animation but they don't always hear what the other says. They don't know each other's story but they know each other. Their desire is to know everything as soon as possible. Talking singing laughing running dancing at the same time. See them dance and shine along the valley. The valley formed by an ice age but warm, lush and gushing with spring now. The air is thick and sticky with the smell of wild garlic.

They are together now  
They bask in each other's energy and joy.  
Let's go. Let's go. Let's go together.  
Let go

There is so much to say – so much to find out and know about each other. They are new. But they have a history to share, stories to retell to each other. Laughing. Everything is so funny, even their difficulties and struggles. They are delighted with each other. Flowing into each other's arms and song. Relaxed by the space and travelling together but urgent in their need to entwine. Flow. Shine into each other.

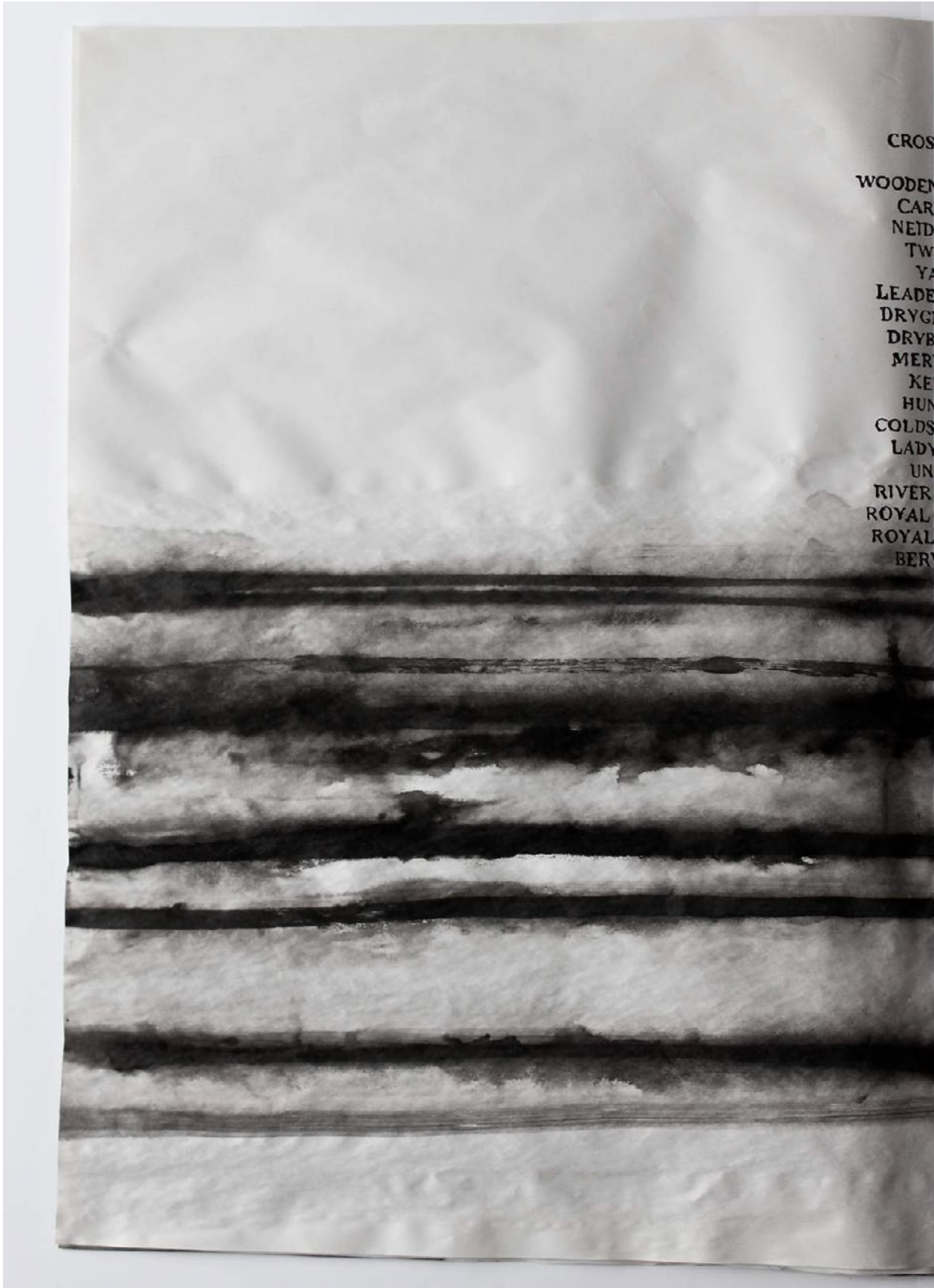
*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



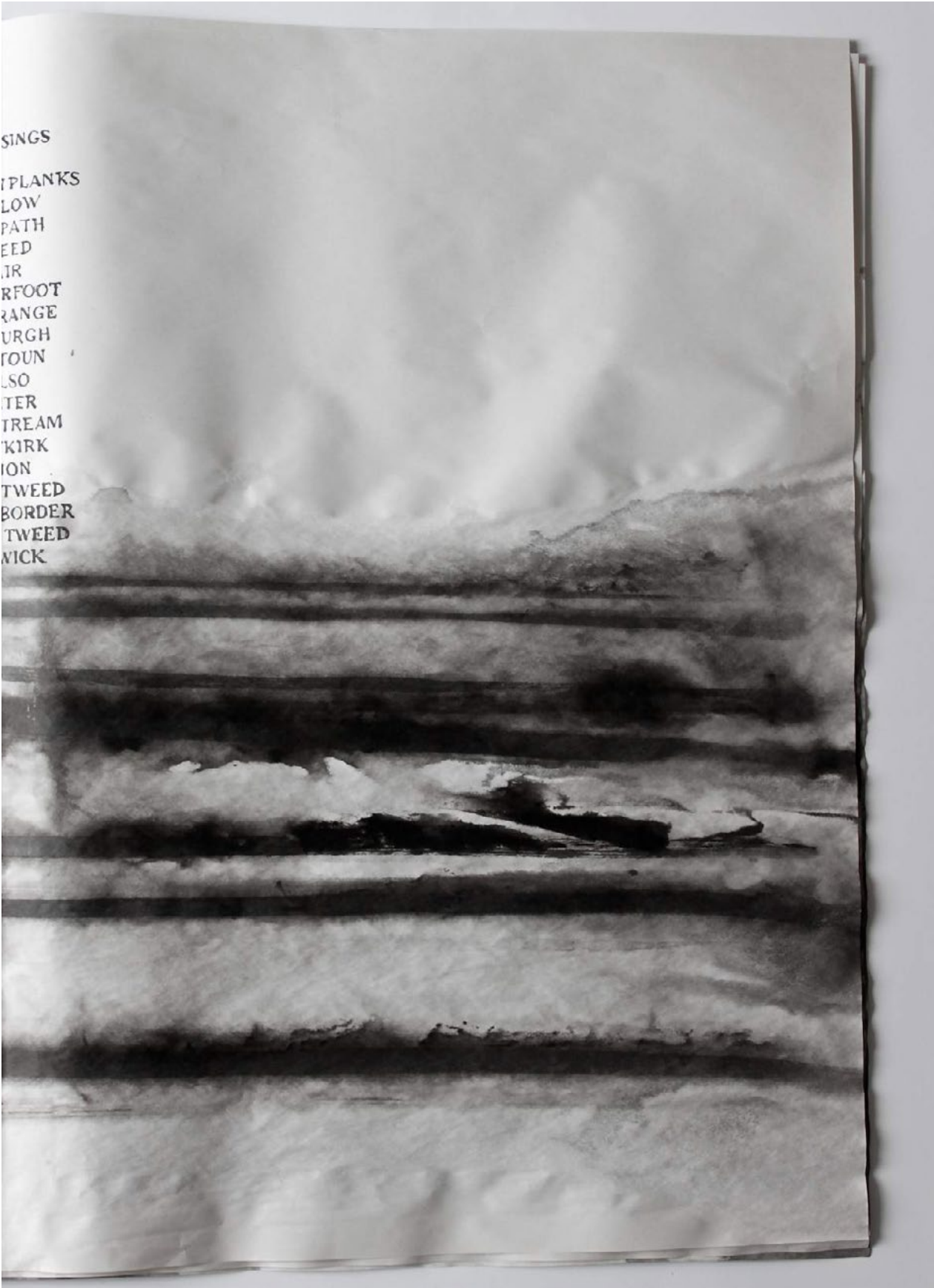
Complete the circle of desire  
We go along the river together. This river is our story. We can't see the story when it is unfolding. We can only follow it.  
Trust the river.  
Flow together entwined and across each others boundaries.  
You are another country.  
I am another country.  
see us dance into each other  
this is our history unfolding in time  
our spines flowing  
see us shine

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



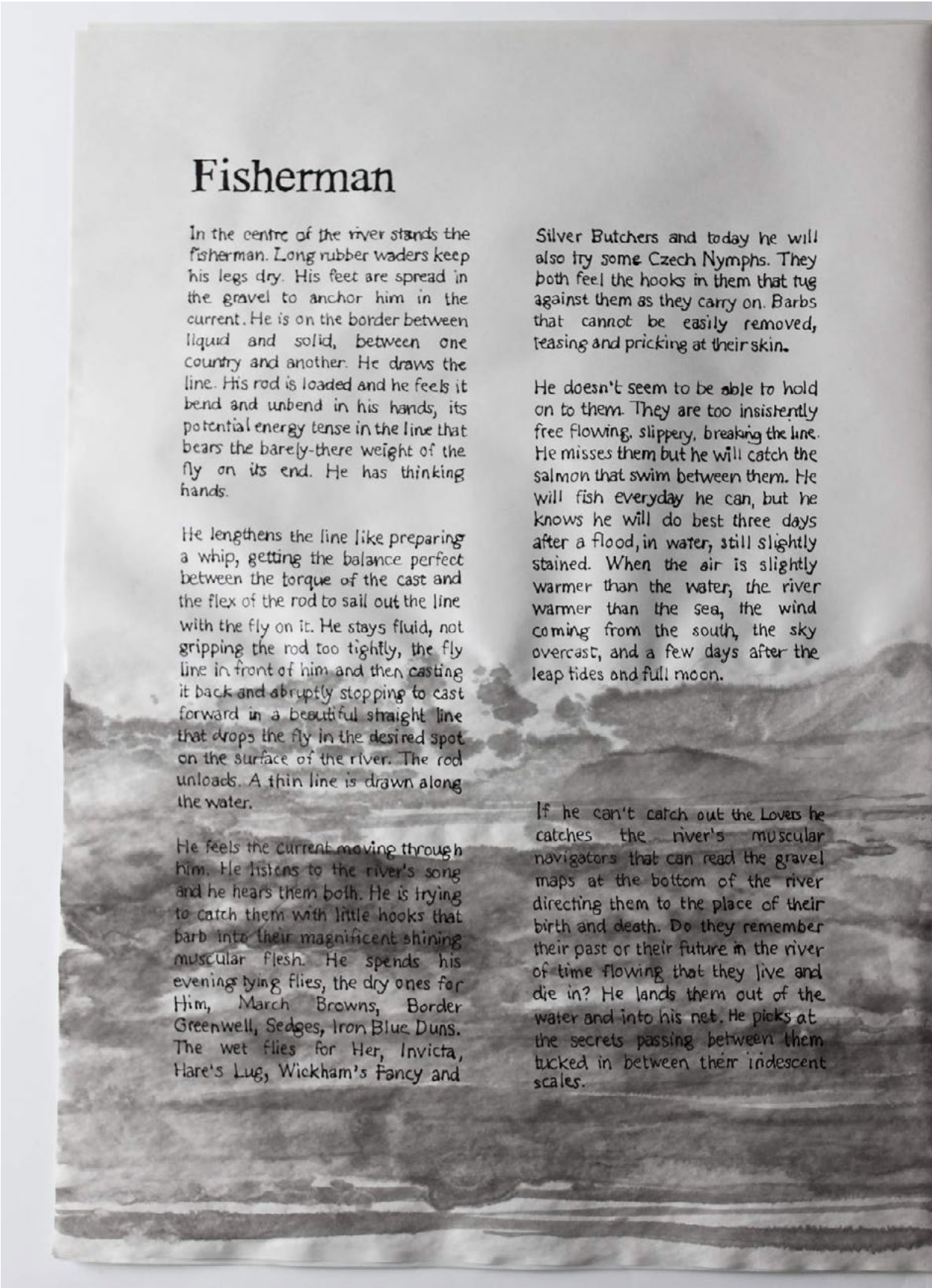


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





# Fisherman

In the centre of the river stands the fisherman. Long rubber waders keep his legs dry. His feet are spread in the gravel to anchor him in the current. He is on the border between liquid and solid, between one country and another. He draws the line. His rod is loaded and he feels it bend and unbend in his hands, its potential energy tense in the line that bears the barely-there weight of the fly on its end. He has thinking hands.

He lengthens the line like preparing a whip, getting the balance perfect between the torque of the cast and the flex of the rod to sail out the line with the fly on it. He stays fluid, not gripping the rod too tightly, the fly line in front of him and then casting it back and abruptly stopping to cast forward in a beautiful straight line that drops the fly in the desired spot on the surface of the river. The rod unloads. A thin line is drawn along the water.

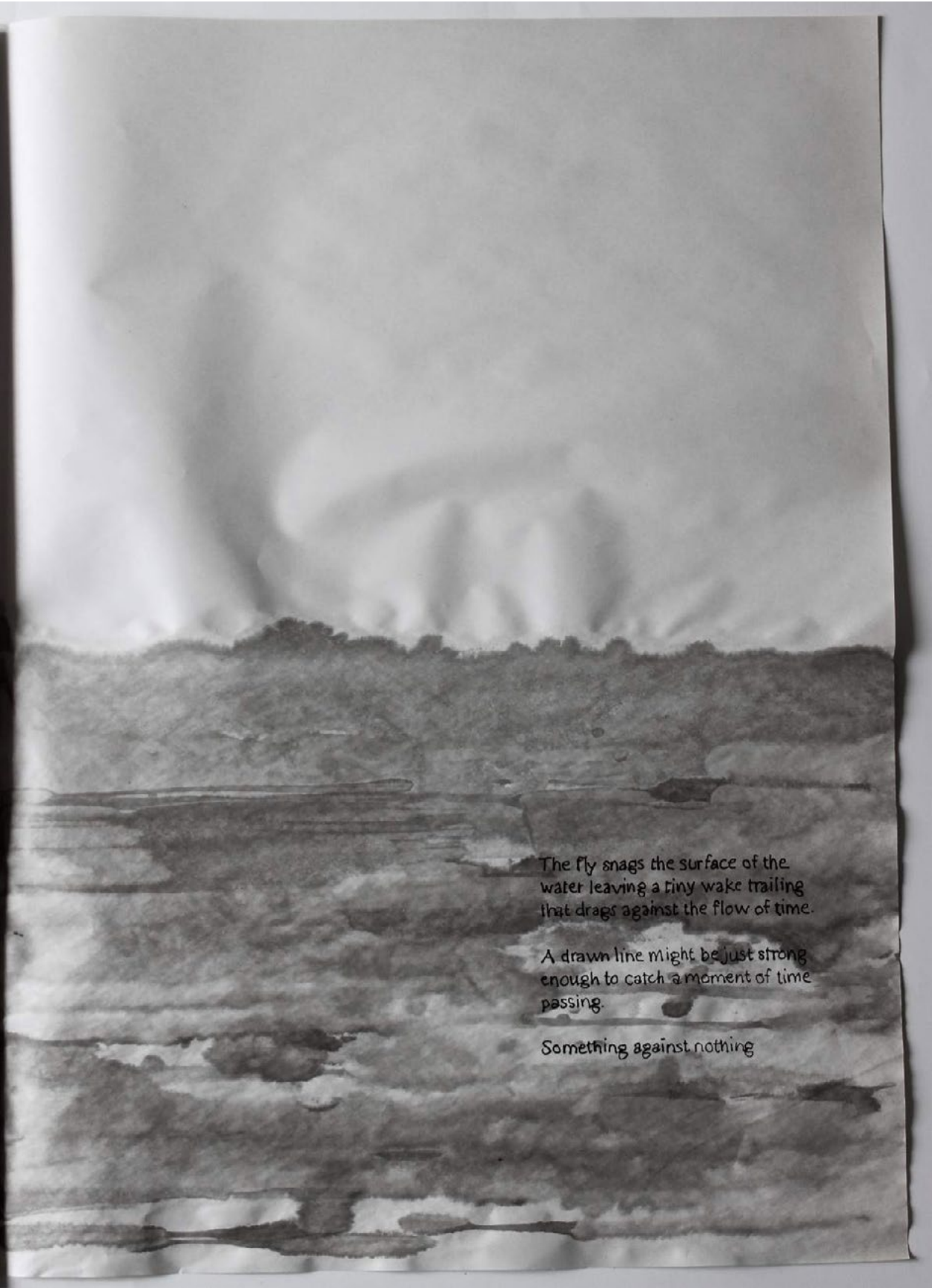
He feels the current moving through him. He listens to the river's song and he hears them both. He is trying to catch them with little hooks that barb into their magnificent shining muscular flesh. He spends his evening tying flies, the dry ones for Him, March Browns, Border Greenwell, Sedges, Iron Blue Duns. The wet flies for Her, Invicta, Hare's Lug, Wickham's Fancy and

Silver Butchers and today he will also try some Czech Nymphs. They both feel the hooks in them that tug against them as they carry on. Barbs that cannot be easily removed, teasing and pricking at their skin.

He doesn't seem to be able to hold on to them. They are too insistently free flowing, slippery, breaking the line. He misses them but he will catch the salmon that swim between them. He will fish everyday he can, but he knows he will do best three days after a flood, in water, still slightly stained. When the air is slightly warmer than the water, the river warmer than the sea, the wind coming from the south, the sky overcast, and a few days after the leap tides and full moon.

If he can't catch out the Lovers he catches the river's muscular navigators that can read the gravel maps at the bottom of the river directing them to the place of their birth and death. Do they remember their past or their future in the river of time flowing that they live and die in? He lands them out of the water and into his net. He picks at the secrets passing between them tucked in between their indescent scales.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



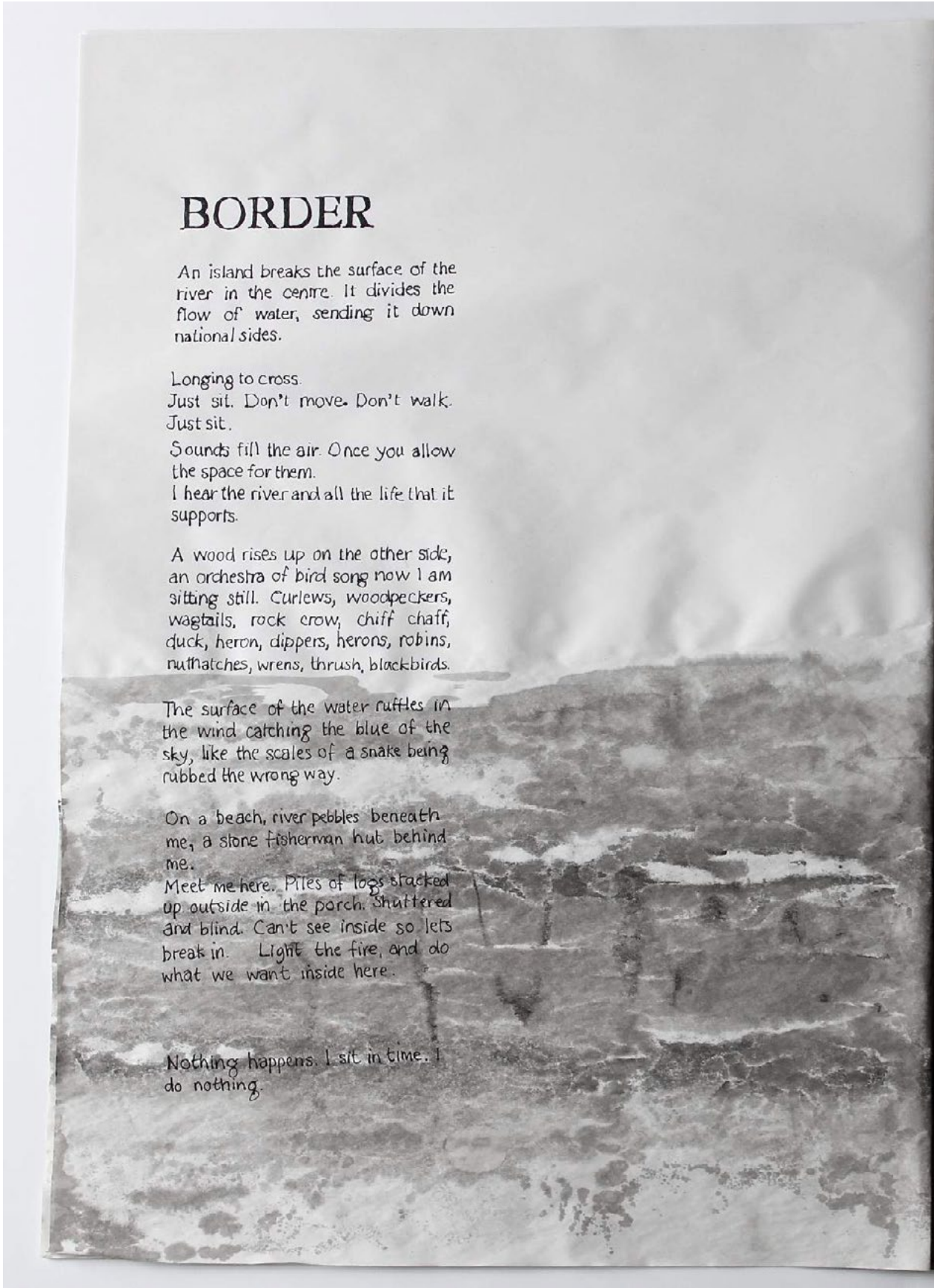
The fly snags the surface of the water leaving a tiny wake trailing that drags against the flow of time.

A drawn line might be just strong enough to catch a moment of time passing.

Something against nothing

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





## BORDER

An island breaks the surface of the river in the centre. It divides the flow of water, sending it down national sides.

Longing to cross.  
Just sit. Don't move. Don't walk.  
Just sit.

Sounds fill the air. Once you allow the space for them.  
I hear the river and all the life that it supports.

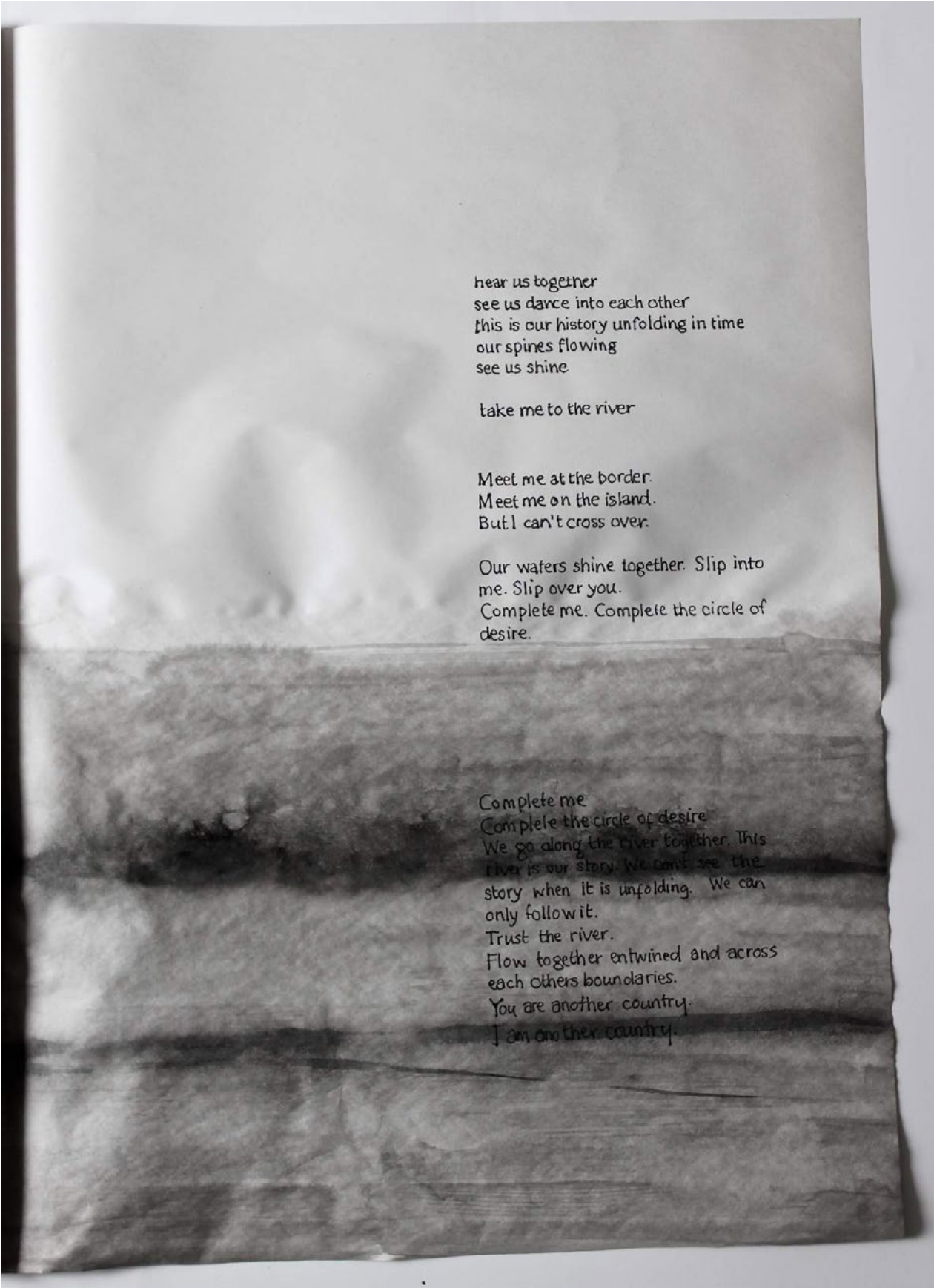
A wood rises up on the other side, an orchestra of bird song now I am sitting still. Curlews, woodpeckers, wagtails, rock crow, chaff chaff, duck, heron, dippers, herons, robins, nuthatches, wrens, thrush, blackbirds.

The surface of the water ruffles in the wind catching the blue of the sky, like the scales of a snake being rubbed the wrong way.

On a beach, river pebbles beneath me, a stone fisherman hut behind me.  
Meet me here. Piles of logs stacked up outside in the porch. Shattered and blind. Can't see inside so lets break in. Light the fire, and do what we want inside here.

Nothing happens. I sit in time. I do nothing.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



hear us together  
see us dance into each other  
this is our history unfolding in time  
our spines flowing  
see us shine

take me to the river

Meet me at the border.  
Meet me on the island.  
But I can't cross over.

Our waters shine together. Slip into me. Slip over you.  
Complete me. Complete the circle of desire.

Complete me  
Complete the circle of desire  
We go along the river together. This river is our story. We can't see the story when it is unfolding. We can only follow it.  
Trust the river.  
Flow together entwined and across each others boundaries.  
You are another country.  
I am another country.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



Past  
Union Bridge  
English side

I walk along a river bank in sunshine  
on buoyant new grass. Sheep and  
lambs everywhere. The land divided  
into enclosures, ladder styles take  
you up and over the stone walls.  
Keep checking the map, orientating  
through the small stone fisherman  
huts and tracks that come off the  
river.

Heading for the place where the  
border slithers up out of the water,  
onto the bank, up a little track and  
away across the fields, on the other side.

I listen to the river now and only  
Her voice is left.

An escape, a desertion, a betrayal.  
Why aren't you here? Why aren't  
we together? Why have you left?  
We could make space for each other  
here in the flowing river.

See the small fisherman's hut. Red  
shutters shut. Red door bolted. A  
blind place that won't let me in. I  
want to be inside, human, naked, alive.  
Against a stone wall with you pushed  
inside me.

I am trying to remember what  
brought me here.  
Making time to swim together.  
Drawing water. Liquefying. Instead  
all I feel is the ripping apart and the  
emptiness in the space desire filled.  
The madness of loss possesses me.  
Can we lie down in the water?  
I want to lie down in the water.  
I cannot stop myself flowing.

Can we flow? You are inside of me  
and you keep changing shape. I hold  
on but I am drowning. I am holding  
on to nothing  
I can feel the wind coming in off the  
coast pushing on surface of my  
waters upstream. The currents  
underneath pulses downstream. My  
waters are pressing against  
themselves, confused waters,  
pushing against each other, trying to  
stay in this place where you left the  
river.  
Equal forces equal resistance. Just  
in this place for a moment it is as if  
my water is standing still.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

He has left the river and taken the  
border with him, slithering out of the  
water and running out over the land  
again. Back in the world beyond the  
river.

She doesn't want to leave and go on,  
on Her own. No longer the border.  
No longer entwined. She can sense  
Her end will be as His beginning, a  
lonely place.

The river full and brown from last  
night's downpour.

You can't say no to the story. The  
song goes on. You can't resist its  
pull and direction.

Clinging on to nothing She has to go  
on. She goes on.

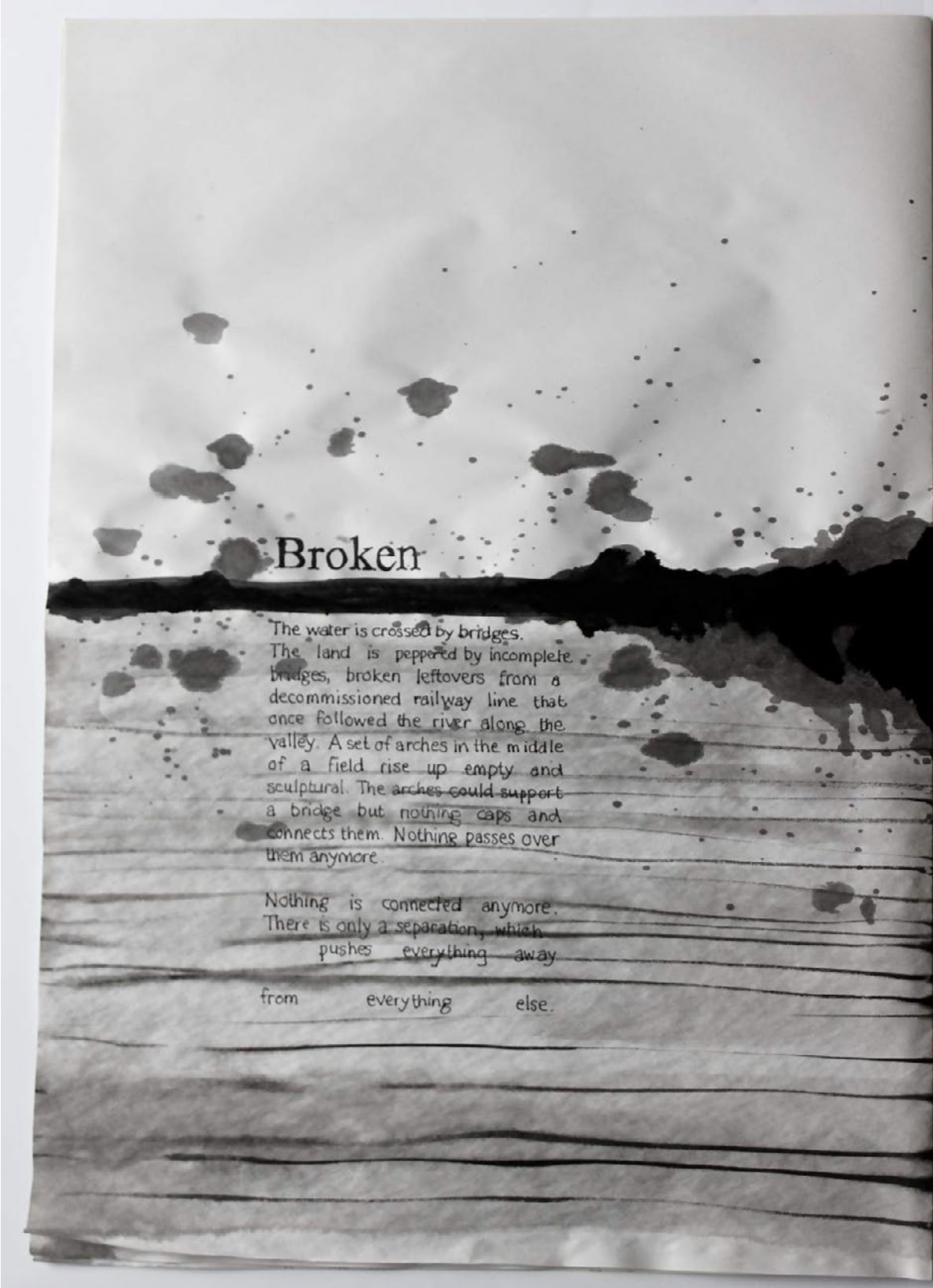
Here is your border, the line you  
could not cross. It is a pain threshold  
of separation.

Clouds push over the river's mirror.  
Shadowing the water.  
She aches  
Churns  
Bulges  
Chills  
Widens  
Spreads  
Gives Herself over to the water in  
Her. The weeping is easiest of all  
here in this lonely place.

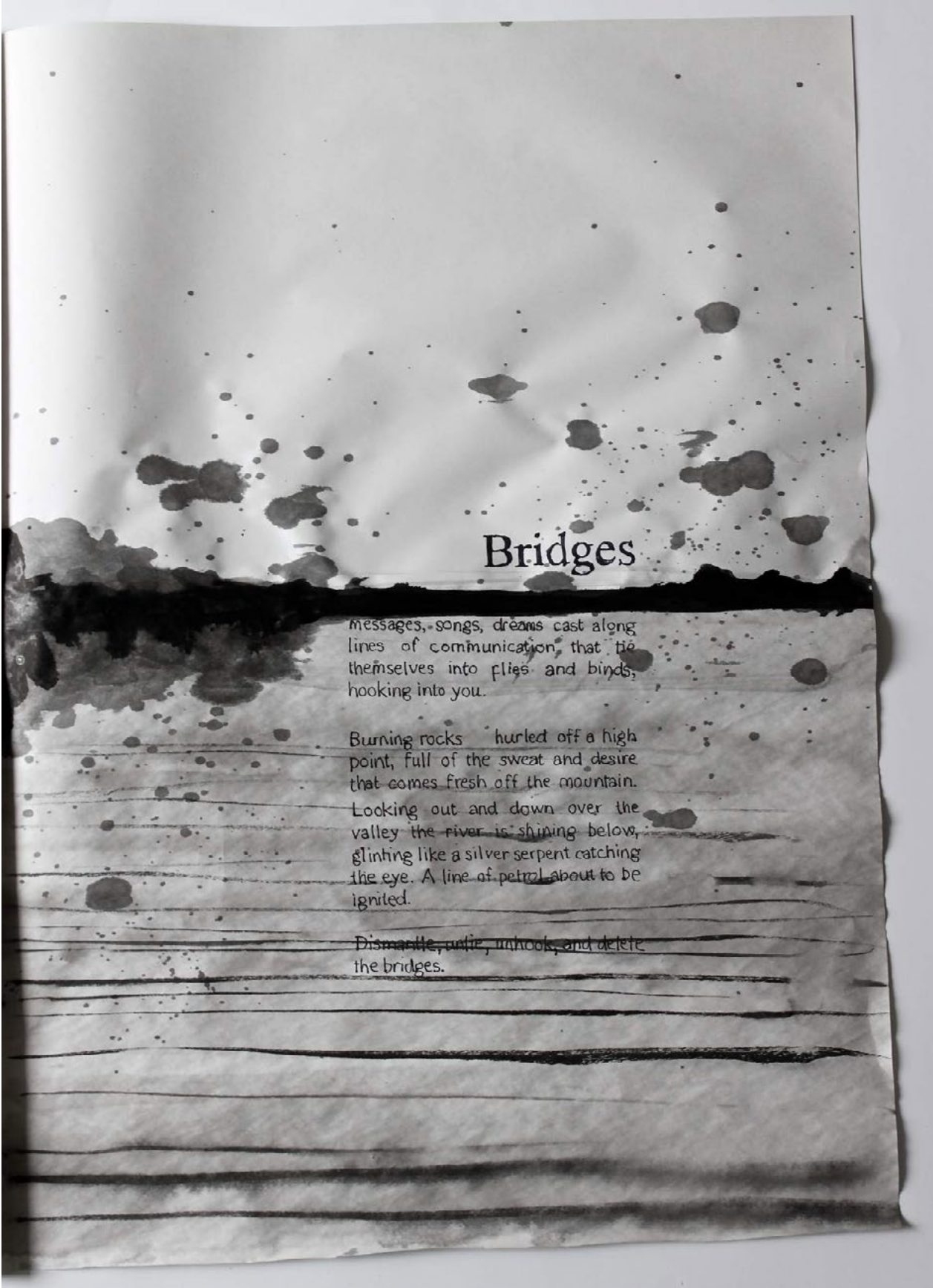
Dissolve  
I do not cross the border again.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



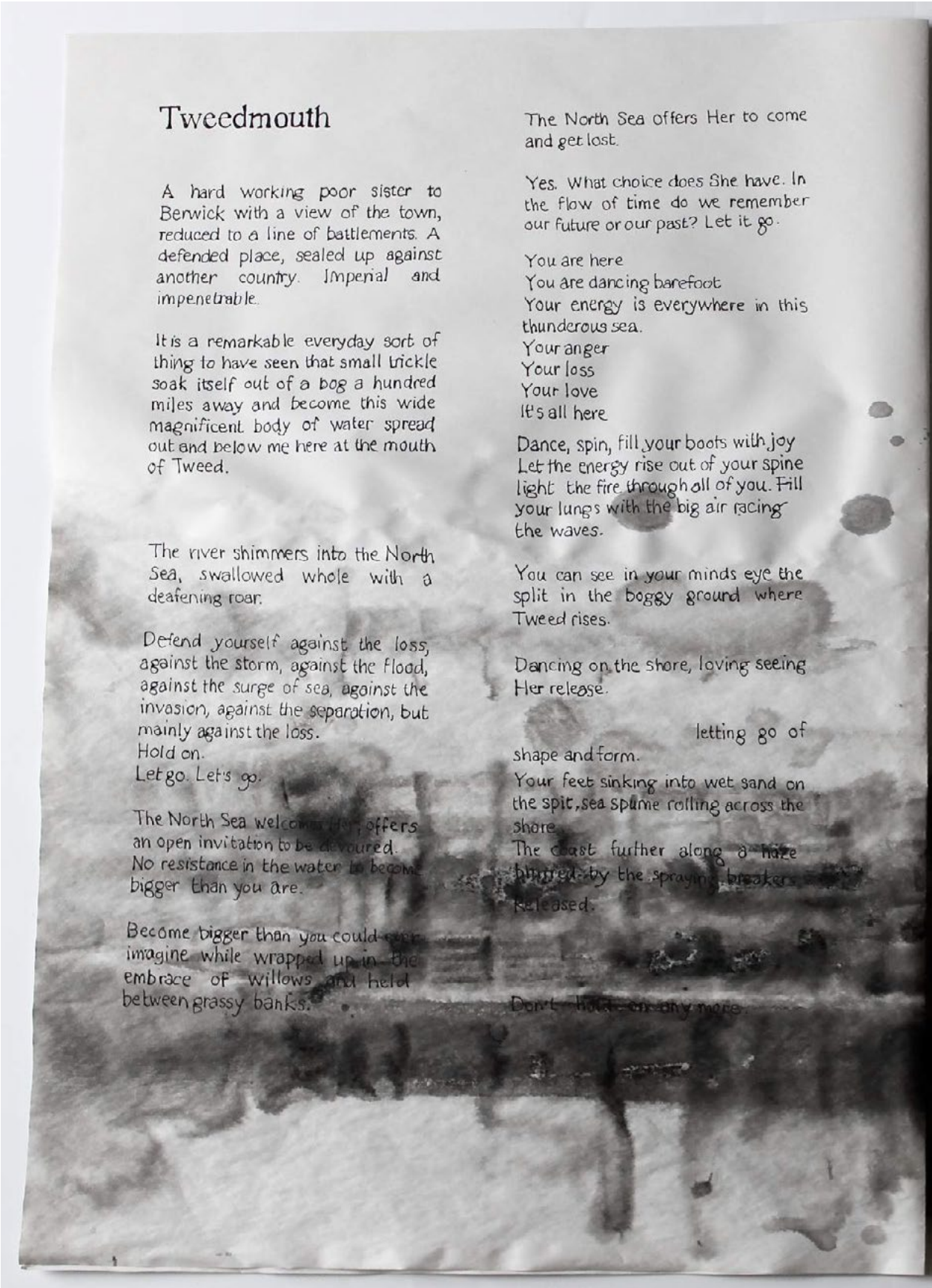


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





## Tweedmouth

A hard working poor sister to  
Berwick with a view of the town,  
reduced to a line of battlements. A  
defended place, sealed up against  
another country. Impenial and  
impenetrable.

It is a remarkable everyday sort of  
thing to have seen that small trickle  
soak itself out of a bog a hundred  
miles away and become this wide  
magnificent body of water spread  
out and below me here at the mouth  
of Tweed.

The river shimmers into the North  
Sea, swallowed whole with a  
deafening roar.

Defend yourself against the loss,  
against the storm, against the flood,  
against the surge of sea, against the  
invasion, against the separation, but  
mainly against the loss.

Hold on.  
Let go. Let's go.

The North Sea welcomes you, offers  
an open invitation to be devoured.  
No resistance in the water to become  
bigger than you are.

Become bigger than you could ever  
imagine while wrapped up in the  
embrace of willows and held  
between grassy banks.

The North Sea offers Her to come  
and get lost.

Yes. What choice does She have. In  
the flow of time do we remember  
our future or our past? Let it go.

You are here  
You are dancing barefoot  
Your energy is everywhere in this  
thunderous sea.  
Your anger  
Your loss  
Your love  
It's all here

Dance, spin, fill your boots with joy  
Let the energy rise out of your spine  
light the fire through all of you. Fill  
your lungs with the big air racing  
the waves.

You can see in your mind's eye the  
split in the boggy ground where  
Tweed rises.

Dancing on the shore, loving seeing  
Her release.

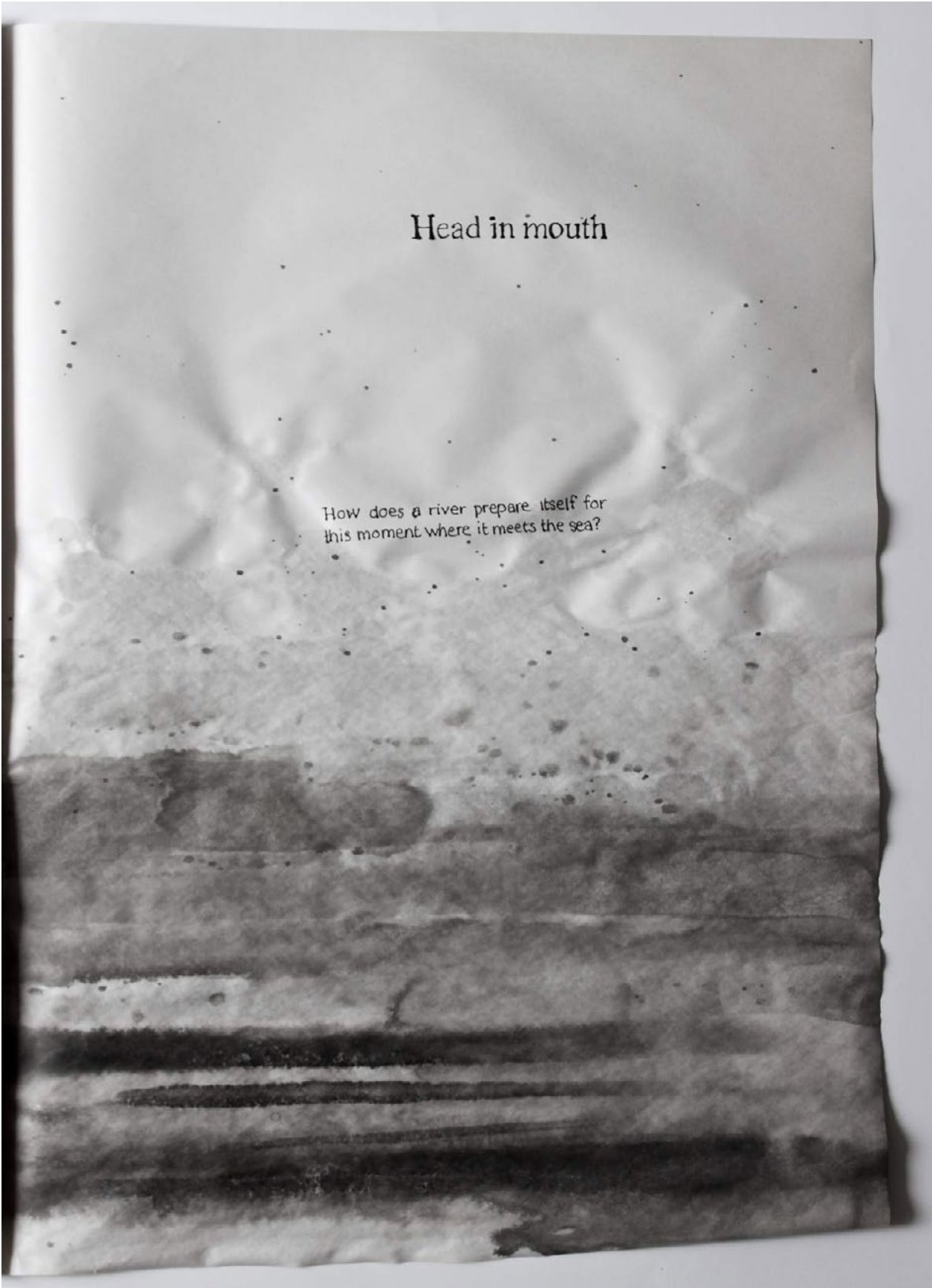
letting go of  
shape and form.

Your feet sinking into wet sand on  
the spit, sea spume rolling across the  
shore.

The coast further along a haze  
blurred by the spraying breakers  
Released.

Don't hold on any more.

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

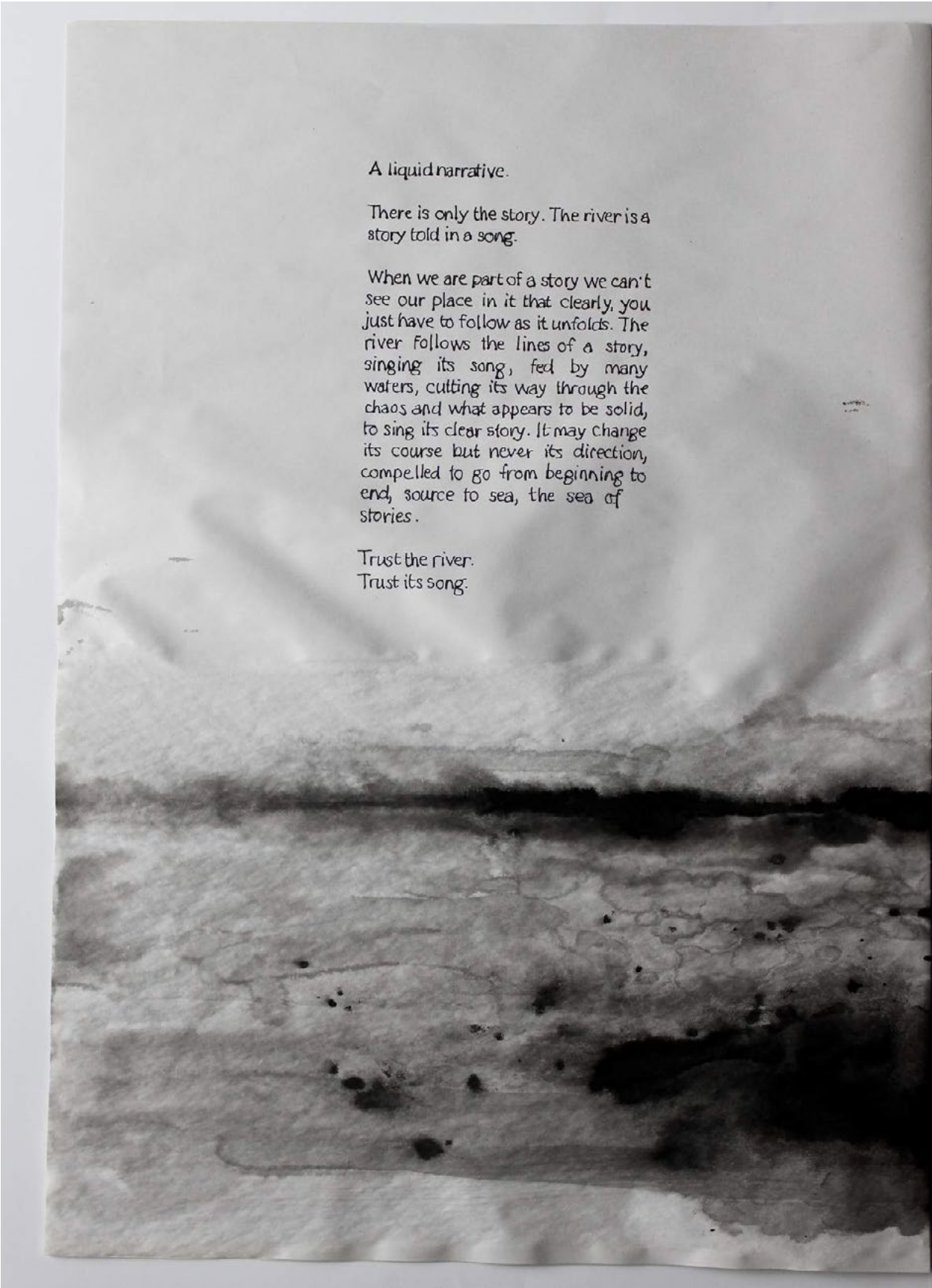


## Head in mouth

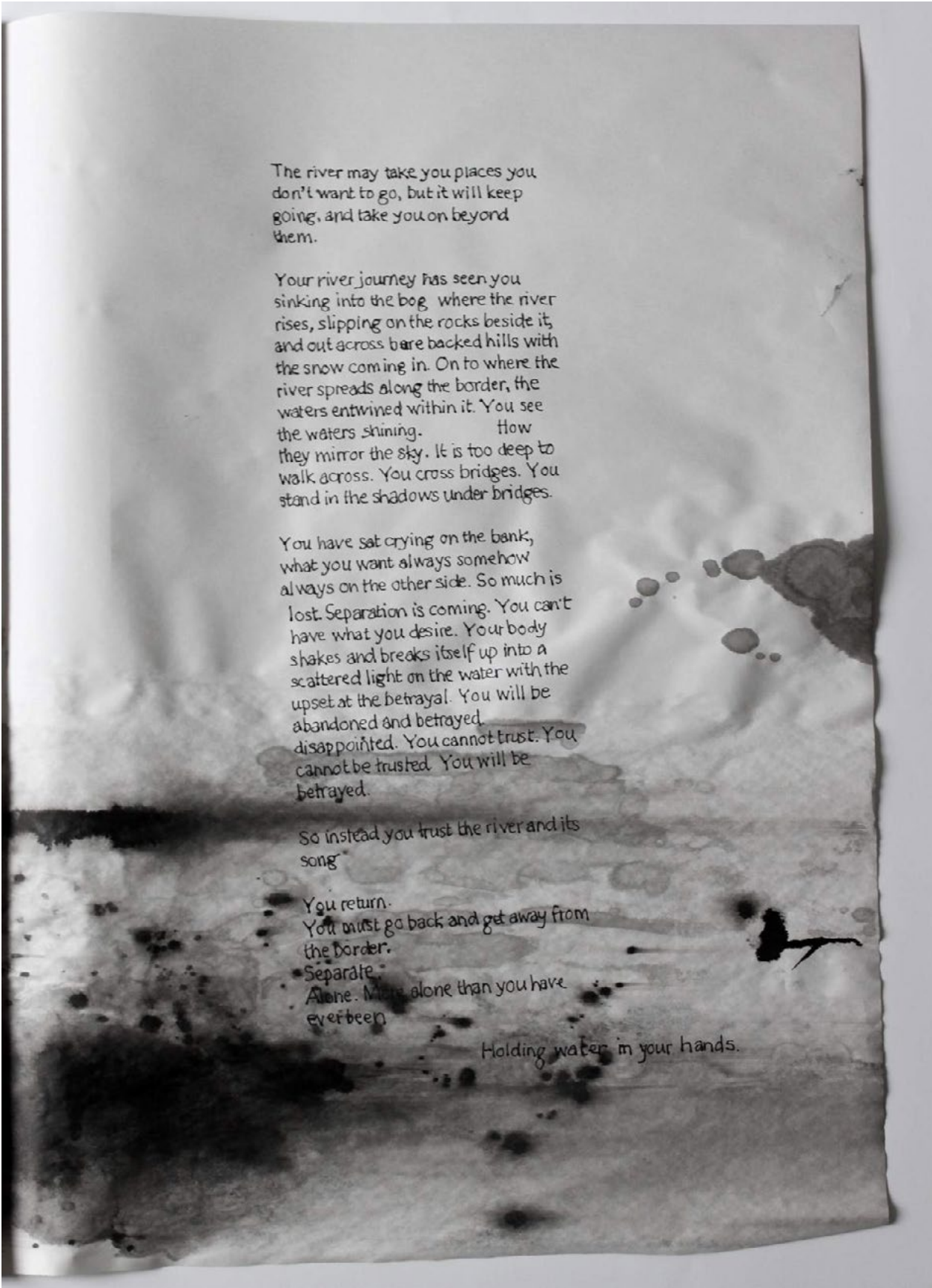
How does a river prepare itself for  
this moment where it meets the sea?

*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

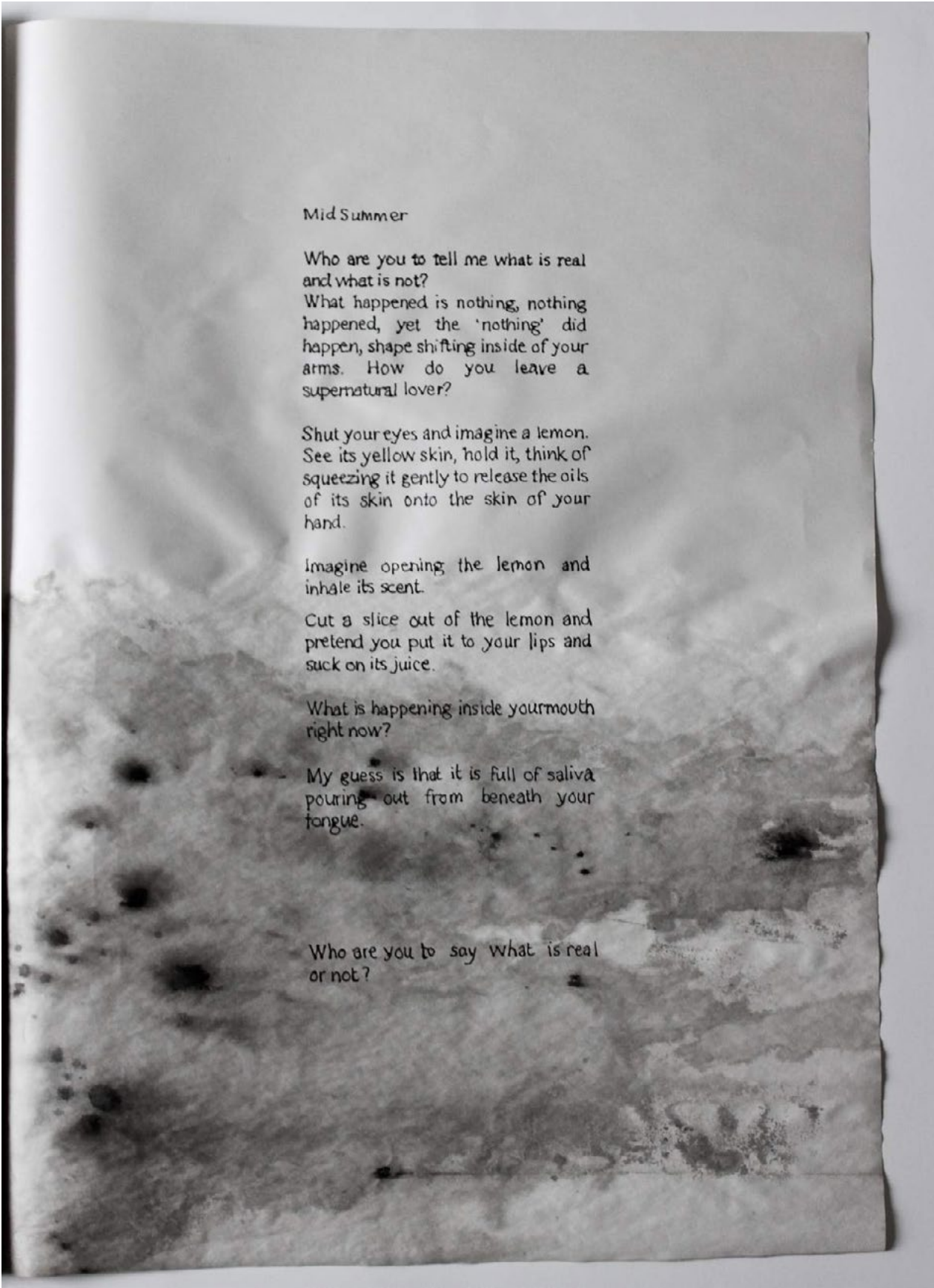


*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





*‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.*



Mid Summer

Who are you to tell me what is real  
and what is not?  
What happened is nothing, nothing  
happened, yet the ‘nothing’ did  
happen, shape shifting inside of your  
arms. How do you leave a  
supernatural lover?

Shut your eyes and imagine a lemon.  
See its yellow skin, hold it, think of  
squeezing it gently to release the oils  
of its skin onto the skin of your  
hand.

Imagine opening the lemon and  
inhale its scent.

Cut a slice out of the lemon and  
pretend you put it to your lips and  
suck on its juice.

What is happening inside your mouth  
right now?

My guess is that it is full of saliva  
pouring out from beneath your  
tongue.

Who are you to say what is real  
or not?

*‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.*





*'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.*

### Further reading:

Holt, Ysanne. 2019. "On Watery Borders, Borderlands, and Tania Kovats' *Head to Mouth*." *Arts* 8 (3): 104. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8030104>.

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### About the Authors

Tania Kovats' practice and research as an artist is an exploration of our experience of landscape, increasingly with an environmental focus. Her work includes temporary and permanent sculptural works often in the public realm, drawing, and writing, that currently consider her preoccupation with water, rivers, seas, and oceans. She works at the confluence of environmental, psychological, political, and the personal. Kovats is an advocate for drawing in its expanded field, as a highly significant tool of thinking and expression that provides an infinite and varied means of communication that continues to be expanded and enriched by practitioners. She regularly seeks out engagement and impact with audiences beyond the gallery. Her works are in both public and private collections in the UK and abroad, including Arts Council, Jupiter Artland, The British Council, Government Art Collection, the National Maritime Museum Greenwich, and the V&A.

Her research and advocacy for drawing has resulted in two publications: *The Drawing Book. A Survey of Drawing: The Primary Means of Expression* compiling a cross-disciplinary survey of drawing as a primary generative form of visual communication; and *Drawing Water: Drawing as a Mechanism of Exploration* which consisted of drawings thematically linked by the sea.

Professor Mary Modeen, as an artist/academic, lectures in fine art and more broadly across the humanities in relation to creative practices. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and especially place-based research, which connects many of these concerns with attention to cultural values, history, and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, and part as writing and presentations. Modeen addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans, and valuing the cultural and individual differences inherent in these perceptions.

Her most recent publications include a co-authored book with Iain Biggs, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* (Routledge, 2021), and "Traditional Knowledge of the Sea in a Time of Change: Stories of the Caiçaras," in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* (November 2020). Her edited book and essay just published is titled *Decolonising Place-Based Arts Research* (Dundee, 2021). She is chair of Interdisciplinary Art Practice and associate dean international for Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee, in Scotland and visiting fellow with the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota.