Richard Kenton Webb

A conversation with
Lycidas by John Milton

2020

Lycidas

by

John Milton

Charcoal, pencils, compressed charcoal and chalk

on

Zerkall-Butten mould made paper (extra smooth),
170gsm,

53cm x 76cm

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more

Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,

I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,

And with forc'd fingers rude

Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.

Bitter constraint and sad occasion dear

Compels me to disturb your season due;

For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,

Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.

Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew

Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.

He must not float upon his wat'ry bier

Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,

Without the meed of some melodious tear.

I. *Grief*

Begin then, Sisters of the sacred well

That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring;

Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string.

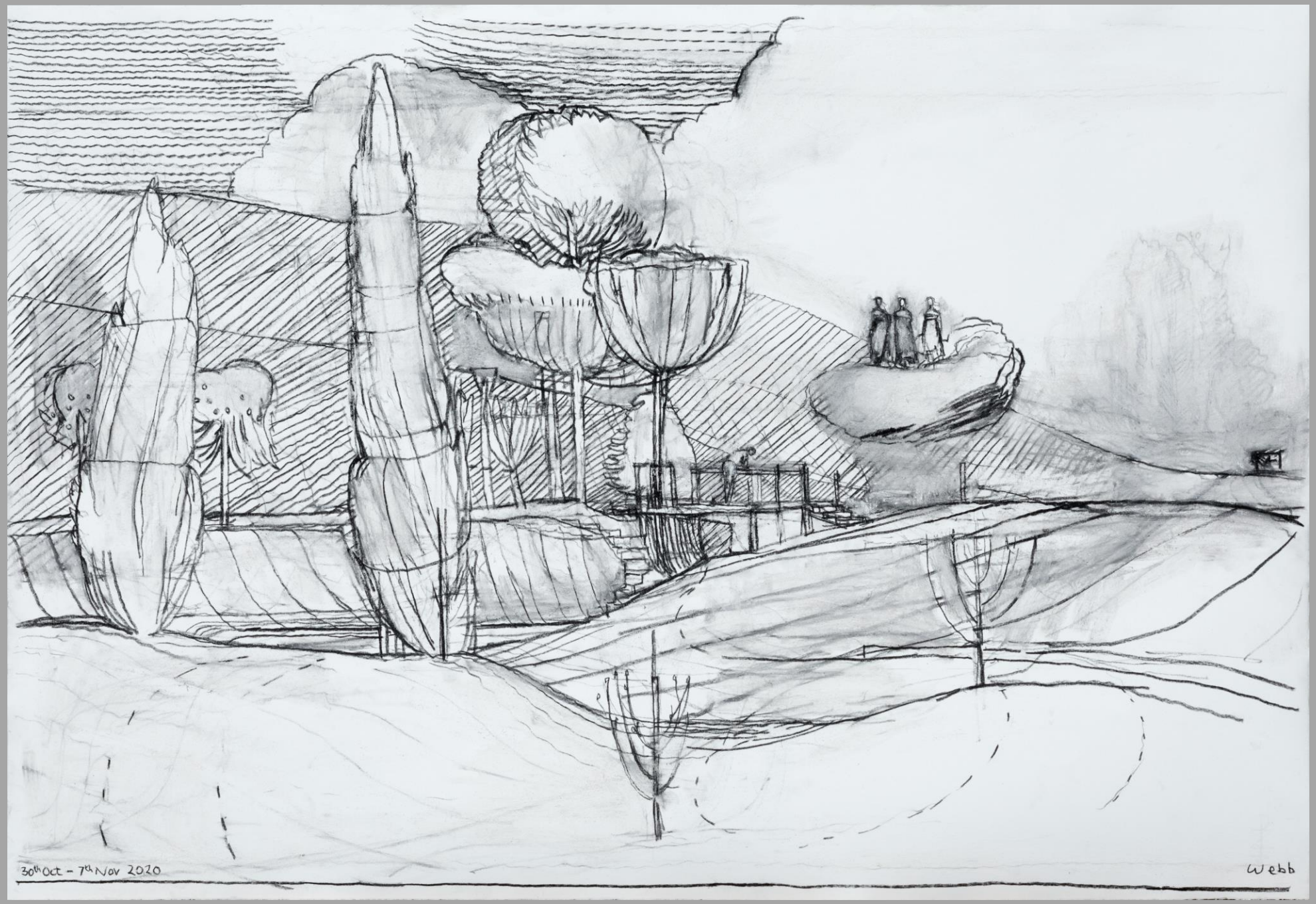
Hence with denial vain and coy excuse!

So may some gentle muse

With lucky words favour my destin'd urn,

And as he passes turn

And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud!



II. *Calling*

For we were nurs'd upon the self-same hill,

Fed the same flock, by fountain, shade, and rill;

Together both, ere the high lawns appear'd

Under the opening eyelids of the morn,

We drove afield, and both together heard

What time the gray-fly winds her sultry horn,

Batt'ning our flocks with the fresh dews of night,

Oft till the star that rose at ev'ning bright

Toward heav'n's descent had slop'd his westering wheel.

Meanwhile the rural ditties were not mute,

Temper'd to th'oaten flute;

Rough Satyrs danc'd, and Fauns with clov'n heel,

From the glad sound would not be absent long;

And old Damætas lov'd to hear our song.

III. *Destiny*

But O the heavy change now thou art gone,

Now thou art gone, and never must return!

Thee, Shepherd, thee the woods and desert caves,

With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,

And all their echoes mourn.

The willows and the hazel copses green

Shall now no more be seen

Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays.

As killing as the canker to the rose,

Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze,

Or frost to flowers that their gay wardrobe wear

When first the white thorn blows:

Such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd's ear.

IV. *Mortality*

Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep

Clos'd o'er the head of your lov'd Lycidas?

For neither were ye playing on the steep

Where your old bards, the famous Druids, lie,

Nor on the shaggy top of Mona high,

Nor yet where Deva spreads her wizard stream.

Ay me! I fondly dream

Had ye bin there'—for what could that have done?

What could the Muse herself that Orpheus bore,

The Muse herself, for her enchanting son,

Whom universal nature did lament,

When by the rout that made the hideous roar

His gory visage down the stream was sent,

Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore?

V. *Futility*

Alas! what boots it with incessant care

To tend the homely, slighted shepherd's trade,

And strictly meditate the thankless Muse?

Were it not better done, as others use,

To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,

Or with the tangles of Neæra's hair?

Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise

(That last infirmity of noble mind)

To scorn delights and live laborious days;

But the fair guerdon when we hope to find,

And think to burst out into sudden blaze,

Comes the blind Fury with th'abhorred shears,

And slits the thin-spun life. "But not the praise,"

Phoebus replied, and touch'd my trembling ears;

"Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,

Nor in the glistering foil

Set off to th'world, nor in broad rumour lies,

But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes

And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;

As he pronounces lastly on each deed,

Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed."

VI. *Integrity*

O fountain Arethuse, and thou honour'd flood,

Smooth-sliding Mincius, crown'd with vocal reeds,

That strain I heard was of a higher mood.

But now my oat proceeds,

And listens to the Herald of the Sea,

That came in Neptune's plea.

He ask'd the waves, and ask'd the felon winds,

"What hard mishap hath doom'd this gentle swain?"

And question'd every gust of rugged wings

That blows from off each beaked promontory.

They knew not of his story;

And sage Hippotades their answer brings,

That not a blast was from his dungeon stray'd;

The air was calm, and on the level brine

Sleek Panope with all her sisters play'd.

It was that fatal and perfidious bark,

Built in th'eclipse, and rigg'd with curses dark,

That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.

VII. *Courage*

Next Camus, reverend sire, went footing slow,

His mantle hairy, and his bonnet sedge,

Inwrought with figures dim, and on the edge

Like to that sanguine flower inscrib'd with woe.

"Ah! who hath reft," quoth he, "my dearest pledge?"

Last came, and last did go,

The Pilot of the Galilean lake;

Two massy keys he bore of metals twain

(The golden opes, the iron shuts amain).

He shook his mitred locks, and stern bespake:

"How well could I have spar'd for thee, young swain,

Enow of such as for their bellies' sake

Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold?

Of other care they little reck'ning make

Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast

And shove away the worthy bidden guest.

Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold

A sheep-hook, or have learn'd aught else the least

That to the faithful herdman's art belongs!

What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;

And when they list their lean and flashy songs

Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw,

The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,

But, swoll'n with wind and the rank mist they draw,

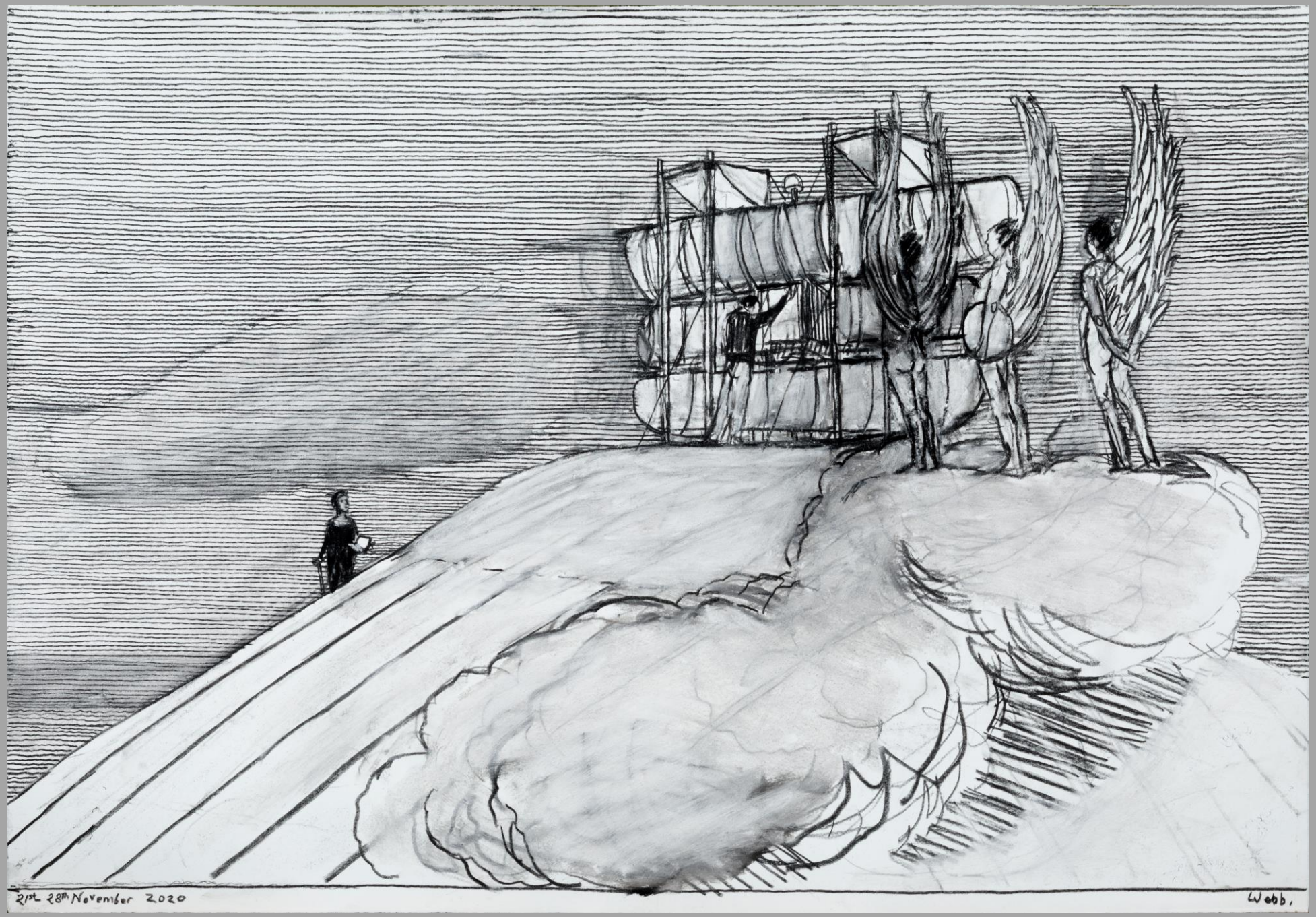
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread;

Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw

Daily devours apace, and nothing said,

But that two-handed engine at the door

Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.



VIII. *Faith*

Return, Alpheus: the dread voice is past

That shrunk thy streams; return, Sicilian Muse,

And call the vales and bid them hither cast

Their bells and flow'rets of a thousand hues.

Ye valleys low, where the mild whispers use

Of shades and wanton winds, and gushing brooks,

On whose fresh lap the swart star sparely looks,

Throw hither all your quaint enamel'd eyes,

That on the green turf suck the honied showers

And purple all the ground with vernal flowers.

Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies,

The tufted crow-toe, and pale jessamine,

The white pink, and the pansy freak'd with jet,

The glowing violet,

The musk-rose, and the well attir'd woodbine,

With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,

And every flower that sad embroidery wears;

Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,

And daffadillies fill their cups with tears,

To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.

For so to interpose a little ease,

Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.

Ay me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding seas

Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurl'd;

Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,

Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide

Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world,

Or whether thou, to our moist vows denied,

Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old,

Where the great vision of the guarded mount

Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold:

Look homeward Angel now, and melt with ruth;

And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.

IX. *The Song of the Poet*

Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,

For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead,

Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor;

So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,

And yet anon repairs his drooping head,

And tricks his beams, and with new spangled ore

Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:

So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high

Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves;

Where, other groves and other streams along,

With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,

And hears the unexpressive nuptial song,

In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love.

There entertain him all the Saints above,

In solemn troops, and sweet societies,

That sing, and singing in their glory move,

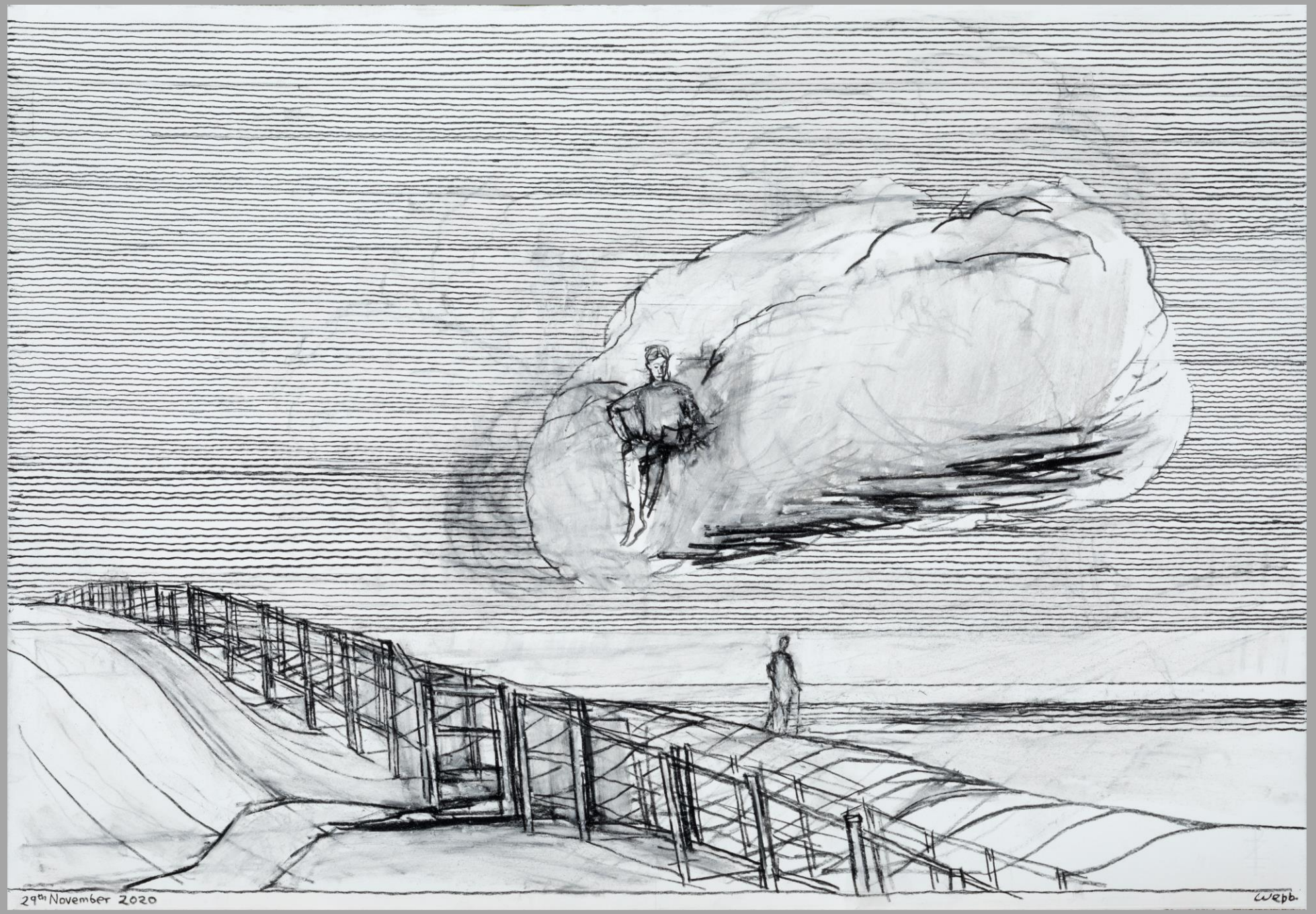
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.

Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more:

Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore,

In thy large recompense, and shalt be good

To all that wander in that perilous flood.



X. *Consolation*

Thus sang the uncouth swain to th'oaks and rills,

While the still morn went out with sandals gray;

He touch'd the tender stops of various quills,

With eager thought warbling his Doric lay;

And now the sun had stretch'd out all the hills,

And now was dropp'd into the western bay;

XI. *Anointing*

At last he rose, and twitch'd his mantle blue:

To-morrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

XII. *Mantle*