

MAY 2020

DRAWING CLOSER TO HEALING

Speechless Series | Jo Smail



Jo Smail (South African, born 1943). *Speechless 1*. 2000. *Speechless* series. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in. Courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary Gallery

Two unevenly spaced grids in blue with splotches of ink in various sizes and locations; a series of horizontal lines beginning, at the top, with two faint black lines and continuing thereafter in gold with a vertical gold line running down through the left side of the lines; a group of vertical lines in gold, many of which have large dots of gold ink at the top and, at the bottom, gradually fan out to the left; a tightly aligned series of horizontal lines in black, fading to faint. The drawings themselves occupy only small portions of the paper, leaving large areas of white untouched by the ink. Each drawing uses the direction, pressure, and spacing of lines to create varying effects. They may evoke images of threads, weaving, lines in notebook paper, and even lines in paper used for musical notation. These are all part of *Speechless*, a series of drawings in ink by artist Jo Smail.

While the works in *Speechless* may seem like modest drawing explorations, the story behind them illustrates the determination and perseverance of the artist. Each of the drawings was carefully rendered in 2000 as Smail attempted to recover from a stroke that temporarily left her without the ability to speak. The products of this process eventually became the material for a new series of work. However, the stroke was not the first event to significantly disrupt her life and career. In 1996, a devastating fire at her studio destroyed 20 years' worth of art, forcing her to begin creating an entirely new body of work. A white South African woman, Smail and her husband chose to leave their home country 29 years ago, at a time when apartheid—the legalized discrimination against black South Africans—was in full force. She made her home in Baltimore and since then has worked and taught in the city. She is currently a Professor Emeritus at Maryland Institute College of Art.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Everyone has had a time when they were wounded, either physically or emotionally. Invite your students to look at the *Speechless* series without giving any information about the works. Ask them to share what they observe in the drawings and what associations they have with what they see. After the class has discussed the images, share the story behind the works. Does that information shift how they see the works? Why do they think that Jo Smail would have created these works in her process of healing? Knowing more about her life, how can they see these works as evidence of her perseverance and resilience? Next, invite students to reflect on a time when they were wounded and ask them to silently and individually write down what happened and its effect on a piece of paper or index card. Then ask them to sketch either what helped them heal from this injury or, if they are still injured, what they think they might do in order to heal from this injury. If students wish to share, they may do so, but no student should be required to share.



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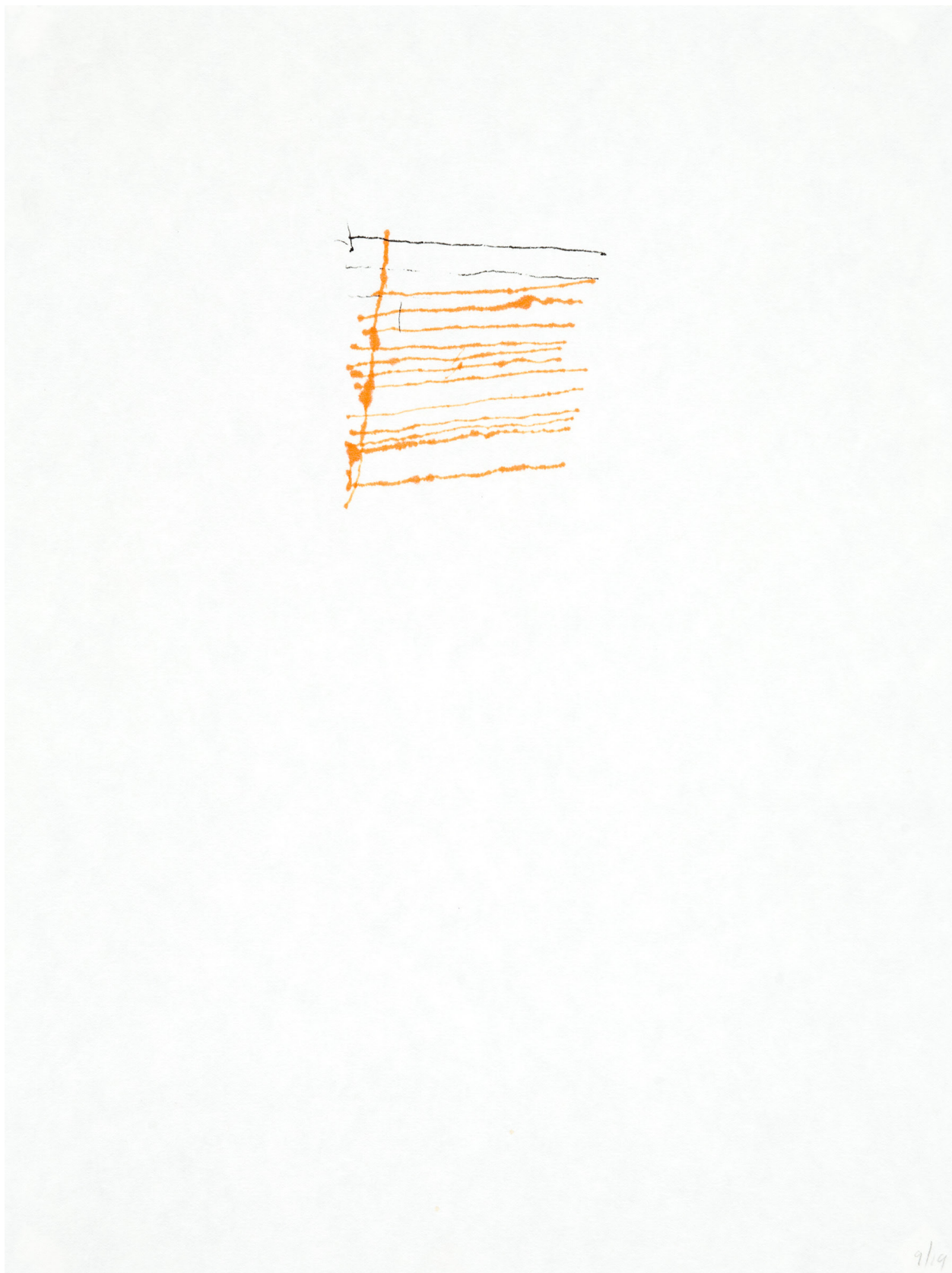
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Speechless 1, 2000

Jo Smail (South African, born 1943). *Speechless 1*. 2000. *Speechless* series. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in.
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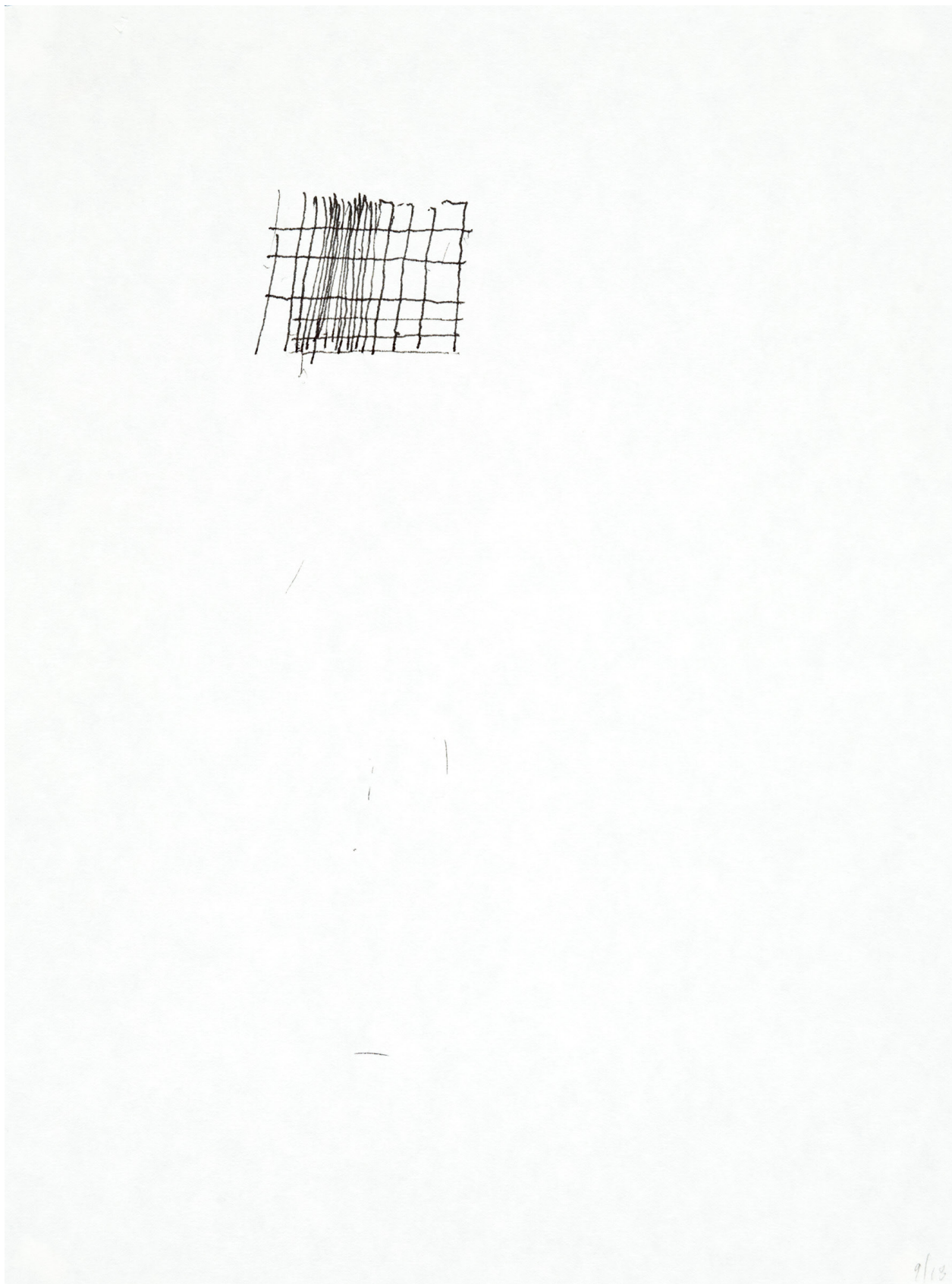
Speechless 2, 2000

Jo Smail (South African, born 1943). *Speechless 2*. 2000. *Speechless* series. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary Gallery



Speechless 3, 2000

Jo Smail (South African, born 1943). *Speechless 3*. 2000. *Speechless* series. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary Gallery



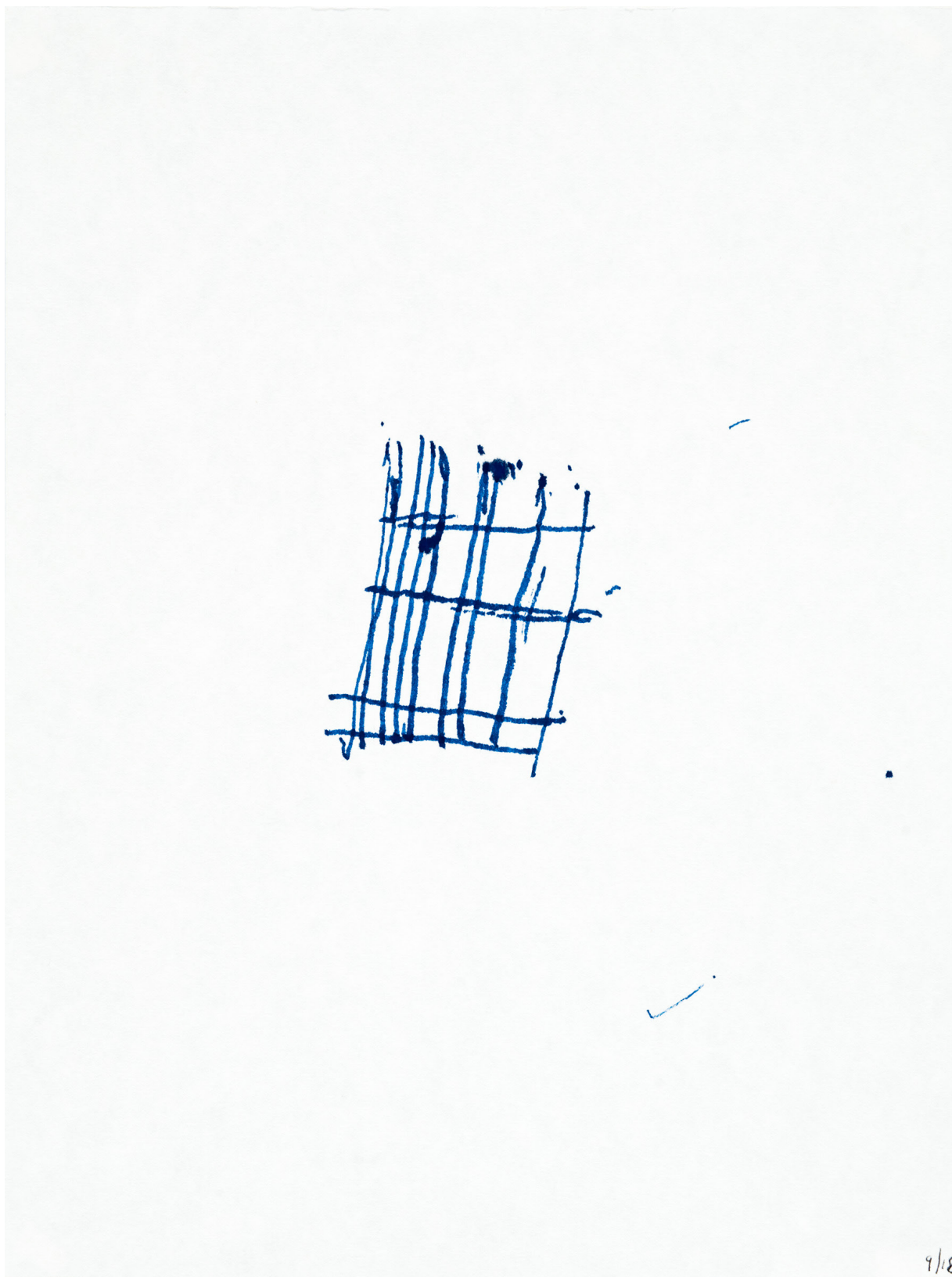
Speechless 4, 2000

Jo Smail (South African, born 1943). *Speechless 4, 2000*. *Speechless* series. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary Gallery



Speechless 5, 2000

Jo Smail (South African, born 1943). *Speechless 5*. 2000. *Speechless* series. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary Gallery



Speechless 6, 2000

Jo Smail (South African, born 1943). *Speechless 6*. 2000. *Speechless* series. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary Gallery