

## White Dust

I had lunch with a colleague  
from another department  
and said how much I liked  
the high ceiling in their seminar room.

And she told me about the ants,  
the white ants  
eating away  
at the foundation of their building,  
the oldest on campus,  
part of Hong Kong's heritage.

A few years ago,  
the ants got so bad  
four banyan trees with roots  
deep into the ground  
had to be cut down.

One day she moved  
a chair. The back came off  
swarming with ants all over her floor.  
The Estates Office called in the pest exterminators  
who poisoned the whole department  
but still advised vigilance.  
"They will come back.  
The building is full of wood."

Another time,  
her colleague took out a book.  
It fell out in white dust  
between intact covers.  
The whole bookshelf had been infested.  
He sued the university.

He got back a few thousand  
but not his books.  
“If he had not touched them  
for as long as it took the ants to eat them,  
they could not have been of much utility.”  
The lawyer had argued.

I remember vaguely  
this British colleague of hers who left  
some time ago. There was a write-up about him  
in the papers. He looked intelligent,  
charming. He had died in England.  
Was he sick? Was he drinking?  
Did he kill himself?  
I do not remember.

He was a man with talent.  
Was he eaten up  
before he left Hong Kong?  
Or before he came?

Who else  
around me is but white dust?

AGNES LAM