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