

The background of the cover is a textured, off-white paper with various watercolor washes. There are large, irregular yellow washes scattered across the surface, some with darker, more saturated yellow areas. There are also several light blue washes, some of which are more vertical and elongated, resembling stems or drips. The overall effect is abstract and artistic, with a focus on color and texture.

a tiny circle tessellated

poems and fragments, 2004-2013: volume one

steven schroeder

text and images ©2022 Steven Schroeder

cover and interior design by Steven Schroeder

cover: study the wildflowers, how they grow 21 (detail) | watercolor on paper, 14x20
inches [2017]

a tiny circle tessellated is the first of a series of collections that draw on material from notebooks I kept between 2004 and 2013. I returned to that material in 2021 with Basho and haibun in mind, as well as the prosimetrum tradition that flourished in medieval Europe. Both play off a tension between poetry and prose, and, looking back, that is what I found myself doing during that decade, when I was dividing my time among Shenzhen, Chicago, and the Texas Panhandle – and spending considerable time on the road betwixt and between. Haibun and prosimetrum both call our attention to the fact that writing itself is a journey, a practice (as de Certeau recognized) akin to walking. That is how I think of this work – as a long walk that was and continues to be a practice of meditation.

All of the texts are from the first of ten notebooks and were drafted between June and August 2004. Some of the material has appeared previously in poetry collections I have published since 2006, but I have gone back to the original drafts to rethink and reconfigure what appears here. Almost all of the material in this first volume was composed while walking and committed to writing during stops along the way (perchings in my flight, one might say, with William James and Richard Luecke in mind). That the material was composed while walking is important for the rhythm of both the poetry and the prose in the collection. It may be measured in breaths, steps, stops, and heartbeats – a reminder that this is the work of material bodies moving in space and time – the writer, the reader, the words on the page, and the ground beneath the feet of all three.

The images are details from paintings included in a series I have been working on for the past several years, “study the wildflowers, how they grow.” The title of the series is a translation of a phrase that appears in slightly different forms in two of the synoptic gospels, Matthew 6:28 (*καταμάθετε τὰ κρίνα τοῦ ἀγροῦ πῶς αὐξάνουσιν*) and Luke 12:27 (*κατανοήσατε τὰ κρίνα πῶς αὐξάνει*). It seems to me that both suggest careful study – close reading – of how wildflowers grow (not just a passing glance), and that’s the direction I have gone in this series of paintings. I’ve allowed the paint to flow with minimal intervention, allowing the flowers to move (as wildflowers do) the way liquid moves on paper. They spill over lines and boundaries – sometimes in surprising ways, and that is an important part of their beauty. For *a tiny circle tessellated*, I scanned originals from the series at 2400 dpi, then divided them

into small segments that allow a close look at details that would likely escape a casual glance. On each page, a chance operation (a roll of the dice) determined the image, its position on the page, and its orientation. Each image occupies roughly half the page, with the other half devoted to text (including the space around and between words). In my mind, the images, like the text, are an inscription made in the process of studying the world by walking it.

I look forward to joining you for a while *in medias res* as this long walk continues.

Chicago

January 2022

I

a bit of nothing



Chengdu | 2 June 2004

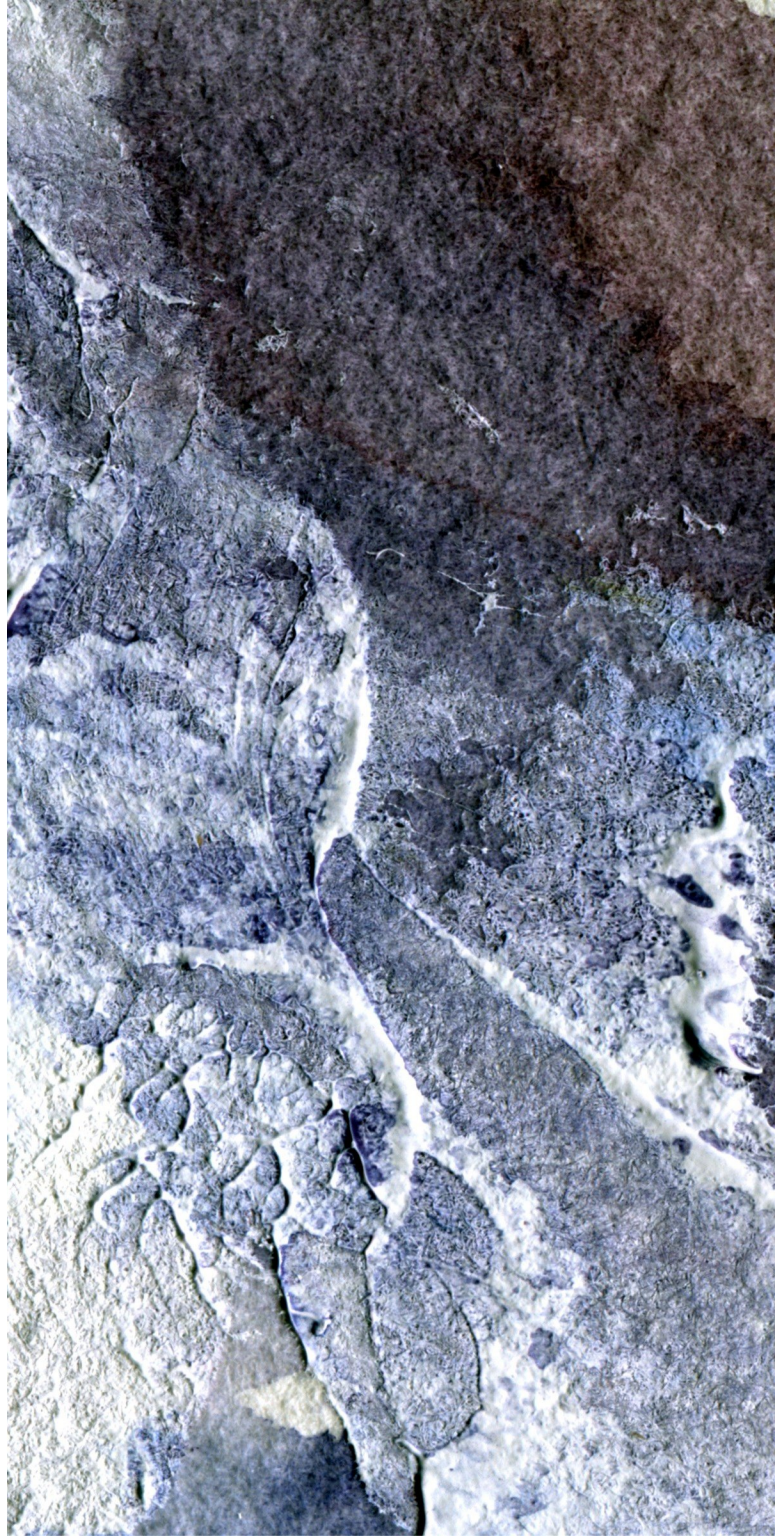
Landing in Chengdu, the music on Air China is Stéphane Grappelli, not erhu. Stepping out onto the street, I can feel the weight of heat and ocean lift here at the edge of mountain air. An old woman chuckles when I hand her a fifty cent coin from Hong Kong instead of wu jiao. She strokes the coin and contemplates how to explain without words in common, then smiles when I say I get it and count out the coins one jiao at a time. She gives the fifty back to me with a bottle of water and laughs one more time when I say zai jian and walk away.

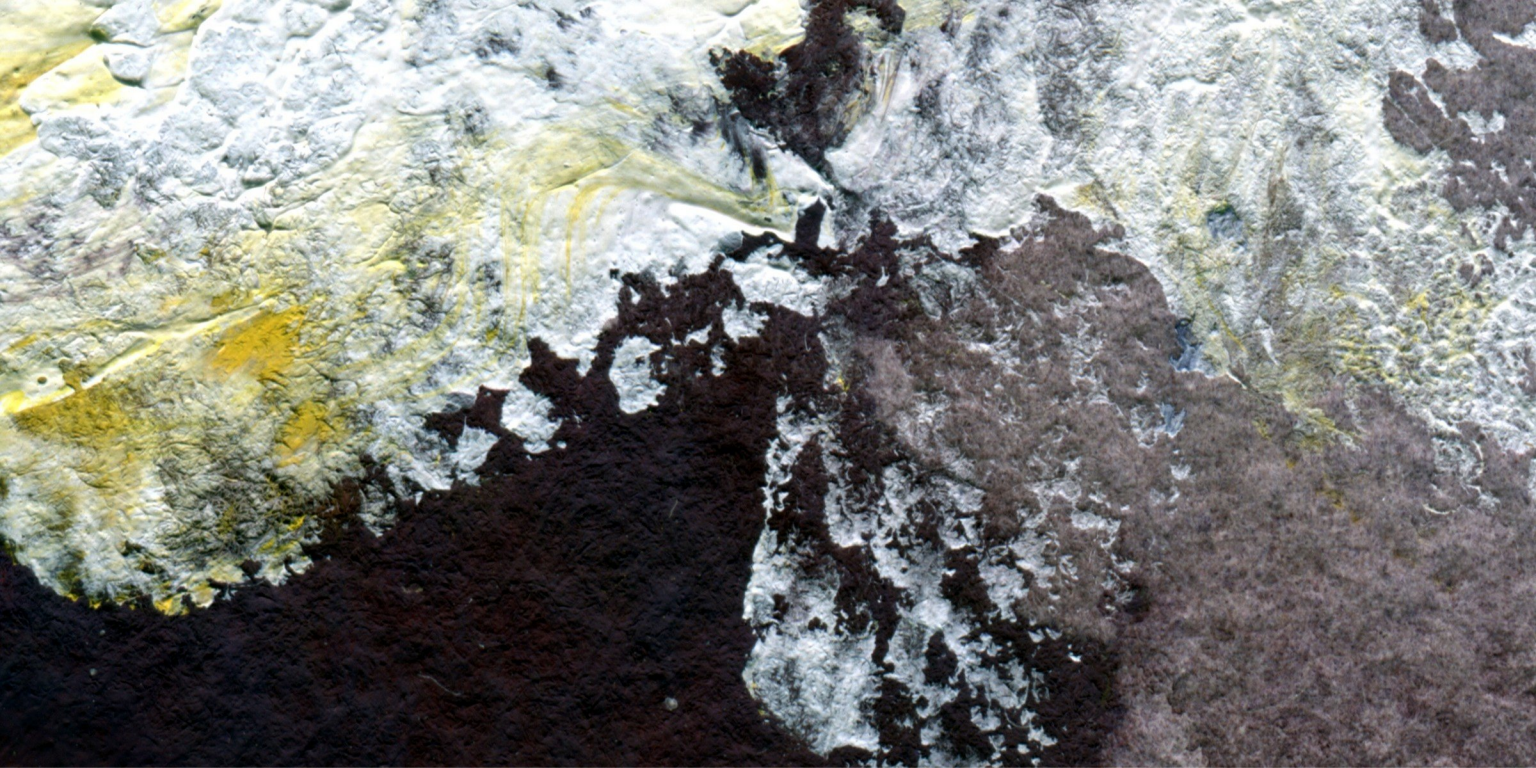
Sitting on the walk outside Kehuayuan Hotel in Chengdu I watch people and rain. David Amram waiting for a bus performs impromptu in the lobby and inside music mingles outside with street sounds. Drop two coins into outstretched begging bowls, one each, and the old women who extend them hopefully bow and extend their gratitude again and again. I put my hands together and bow in return. It is nothing, nothing.



Chengdu | 3 June 2004

When I hear a young person say we are too busy making a living to live, I am more certain than ever it is time to consider how deep and wide the mechanism of containment.





Chengdu | 4 June 2004

Sun can do no more tomorrow
than reflect bright night moon
when it disappears for a day.



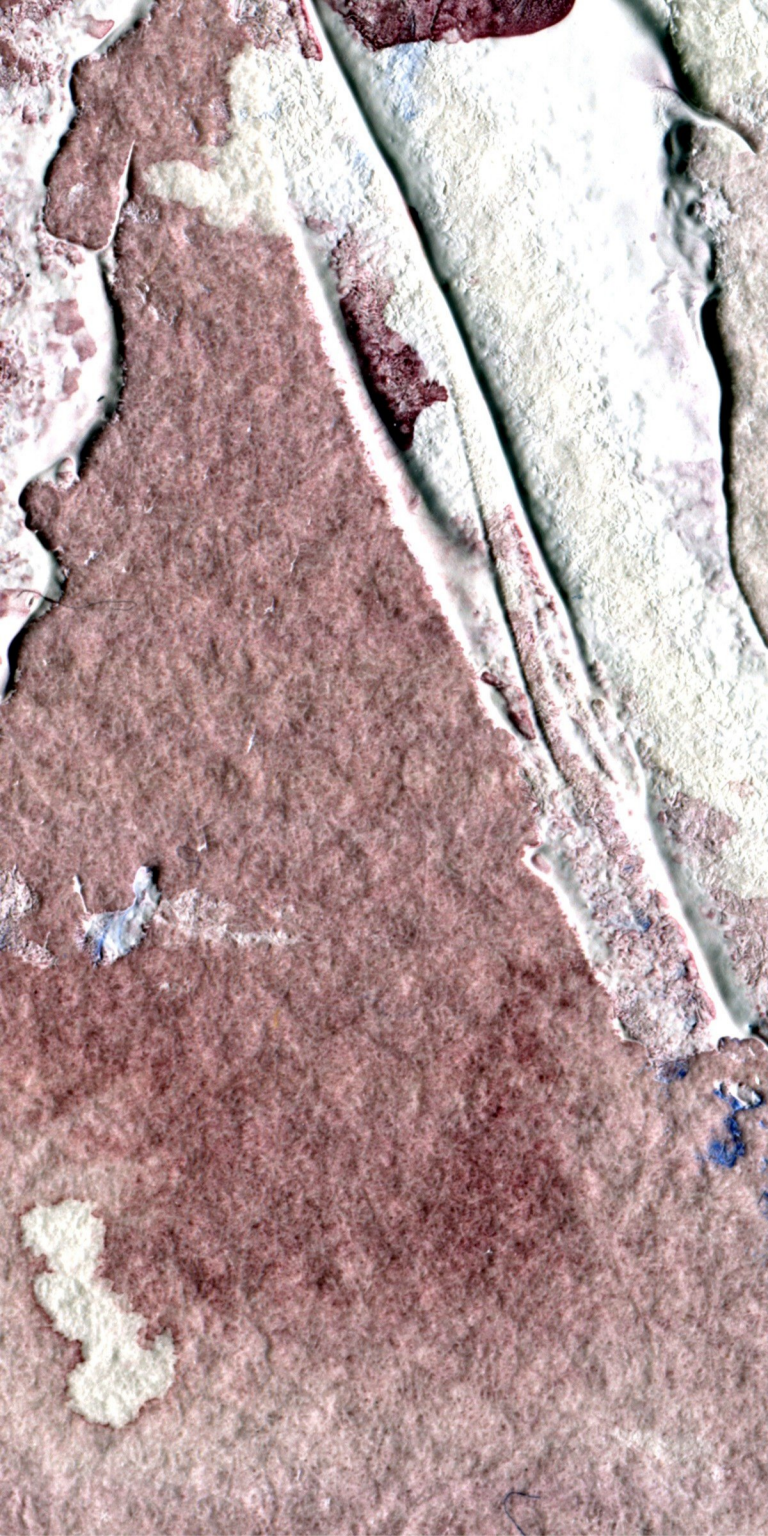
Chengdu | 5 June 2004

Rain falls
two coins ring
in tin begging bowl.



Chengdu | 5 June 2004

Spirit filled, Li Bai
laughs poems while lean
Du Fu devours them.



Chengdu | 5 June 2004

Poet birds sing in pines
where Du Fu lived. Behind
a fence a worker whistles.

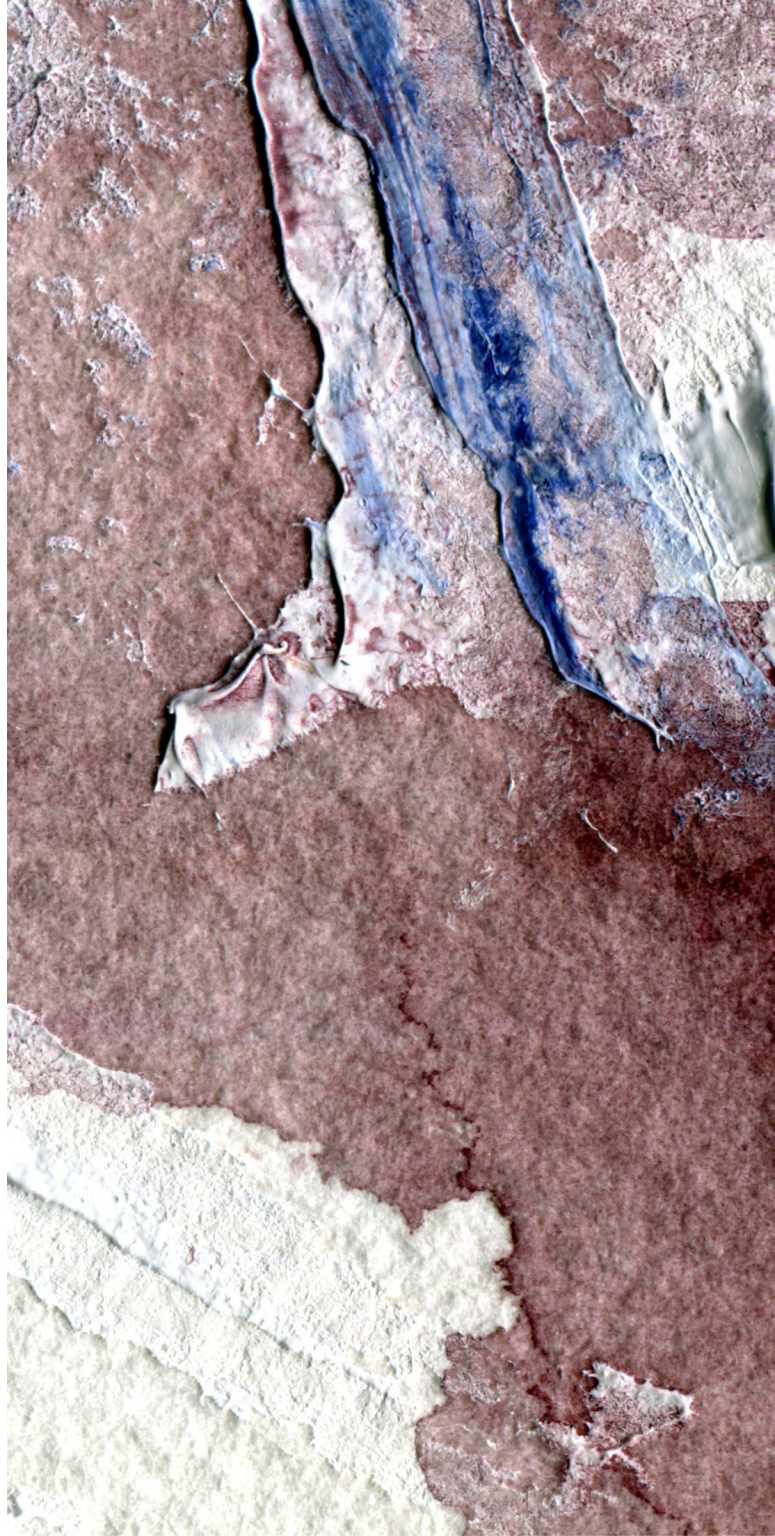
Chengdu | 5 June 2004

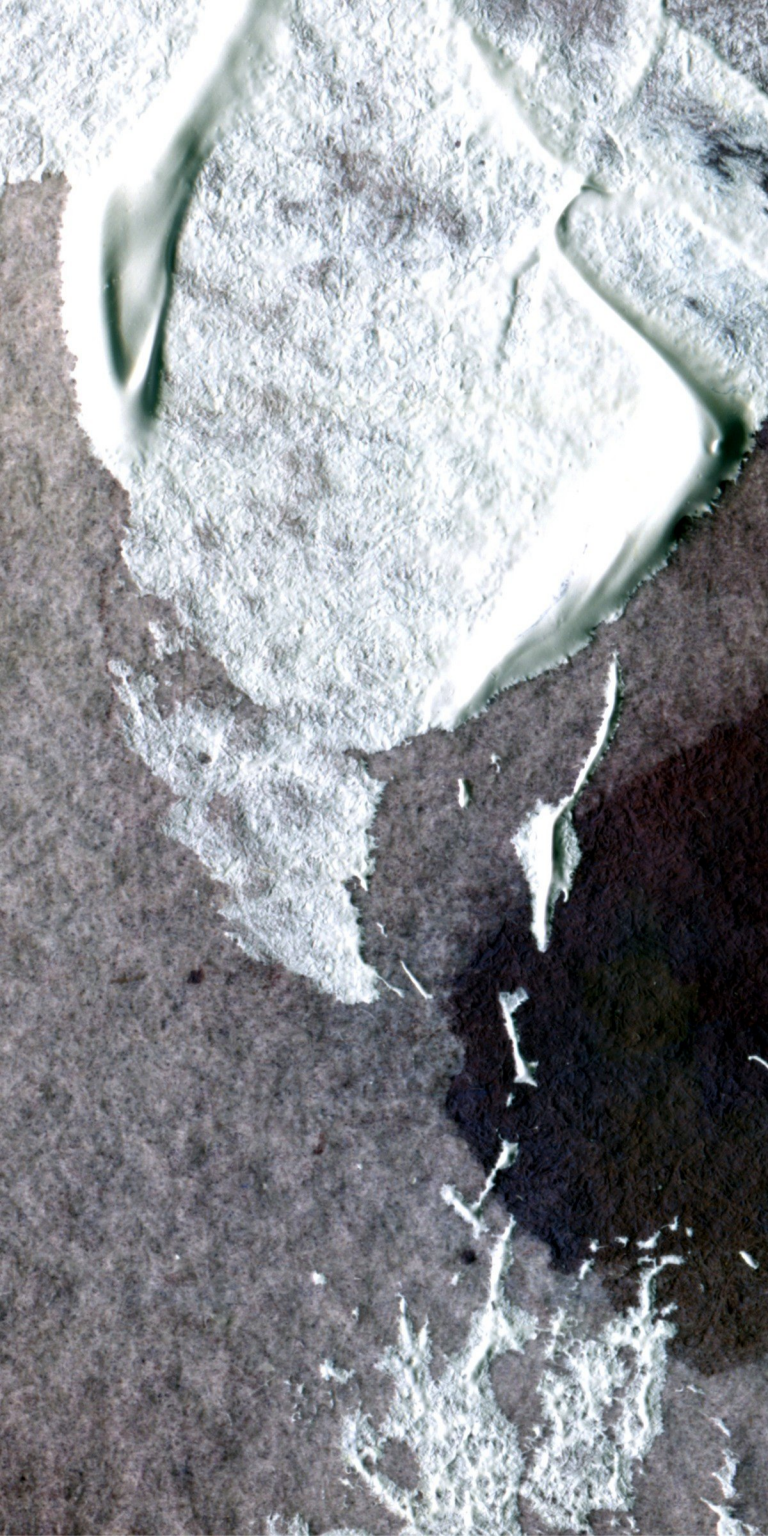
In the distance, a bird sings
three notes, two, a breath, then one
and silence, then two again.

Another trills
a song to enclose
a bit of nothing.

Steady hum of traffic
blends with motorcycle whine
while two men in hats shaped like cones

pedal past each other
on the street below,
baskets empty now.



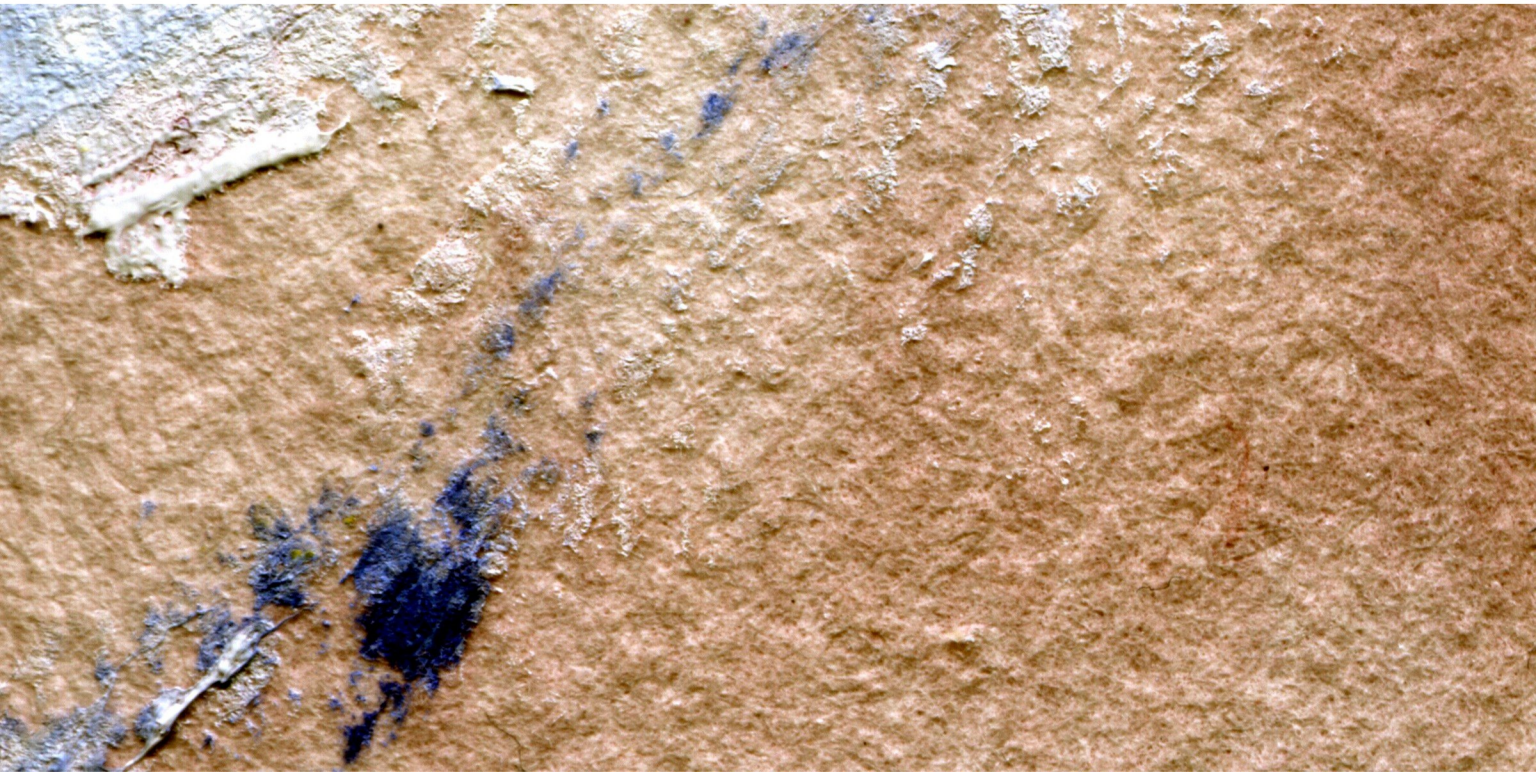


Chengdu | 5 June 2004

Sitting with poets
whose words fall rain soft,
I am well fed.

Chengdu | 5 June 2004

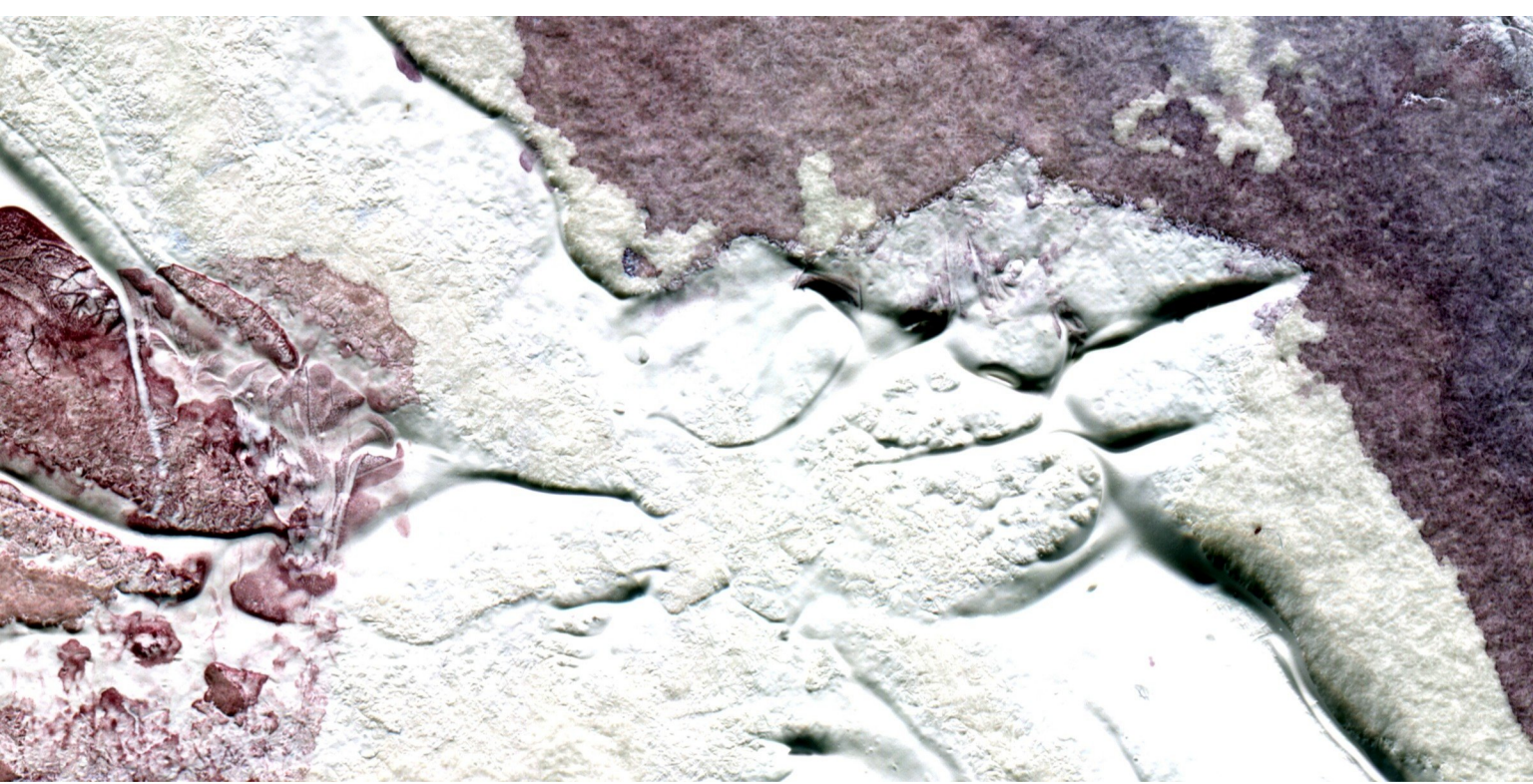
Fat panda feeds beer gut
on bamboo, flashes
the crowd who stare at him.



II

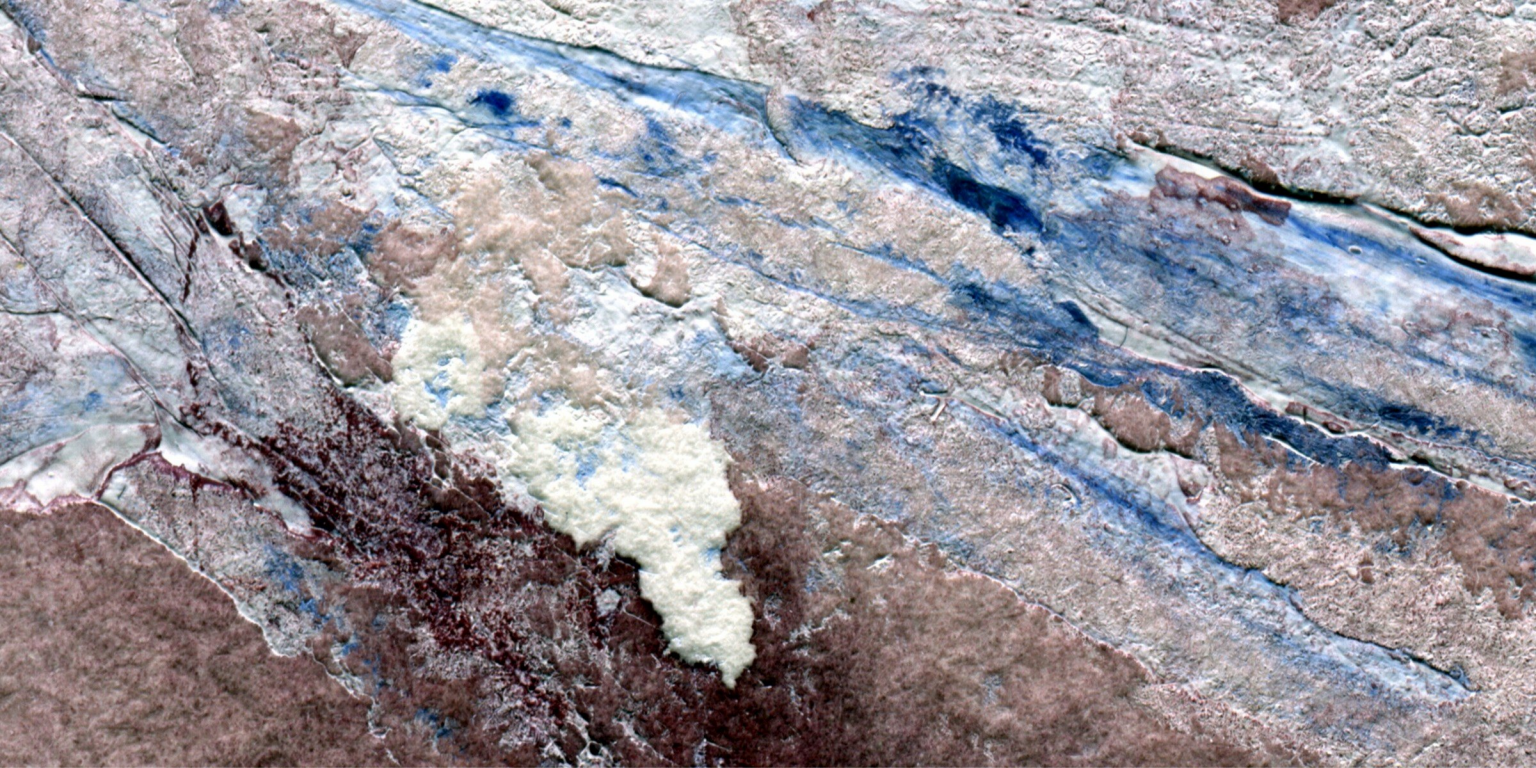
good exercise





Lhasa | 6 June 2004

Outside Jokhang Temple, three monks sit on a bench among shopping stalls with their feet up, chatting. One, who wears running shoes, is rubbing tired feet.

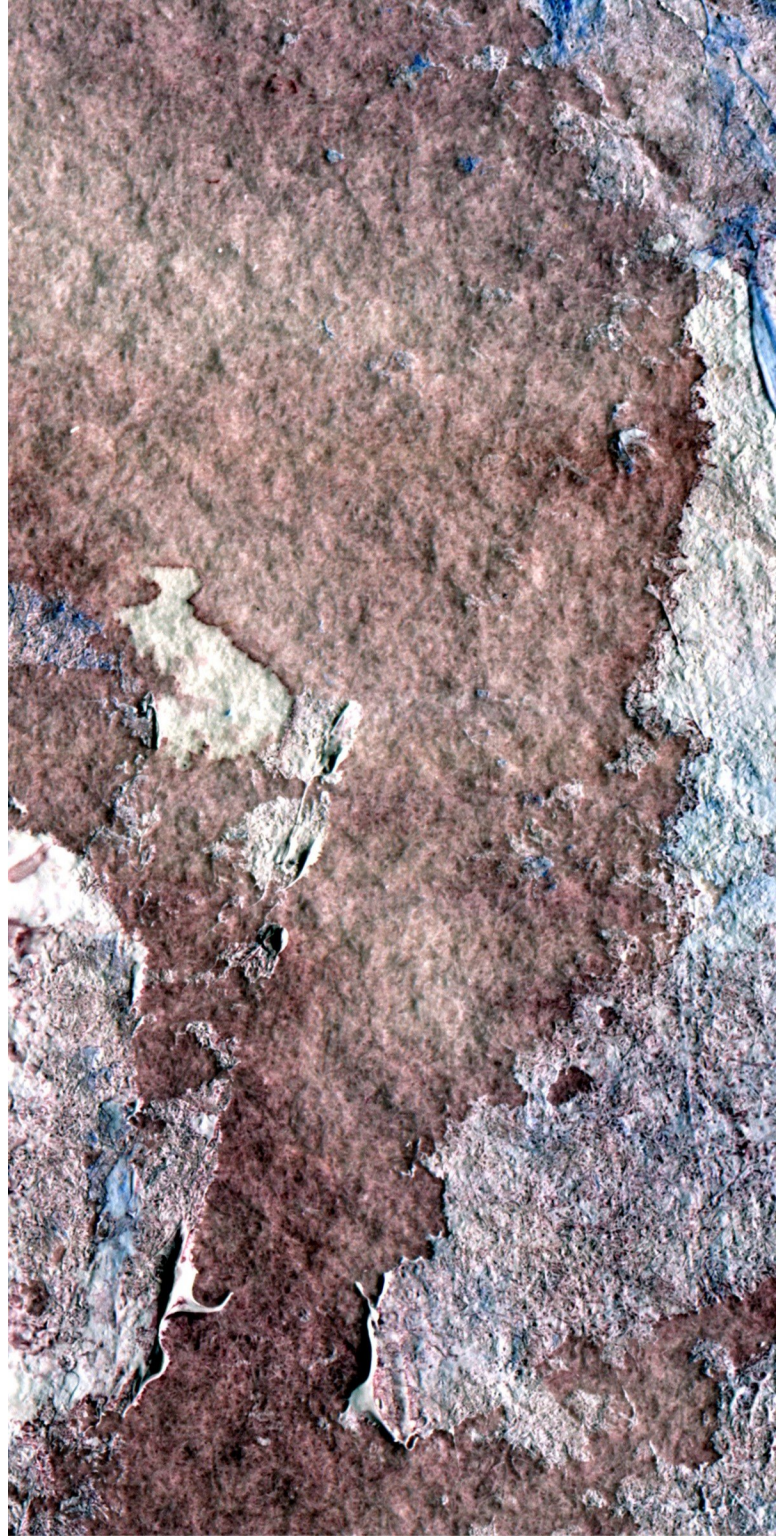


Lhasa | 6 June 2004

Three young boys walk ahead of me laughing in a Lhasa crowd. The one on the left turns to see my beard; I smile and say tashidelek, but he is too shy to speak. The one in the middle wears a monk's robe. We are swept together between peddler's stalls toward the temple at the center of the city.

Lhasa | 6 June 2004

Suppliants prostrate themselves at Jokhang Temple before Sakyamuni, one hundred and eight times each day. It is a perfect number, not to mention, as our guide says with a smile, good exercise.



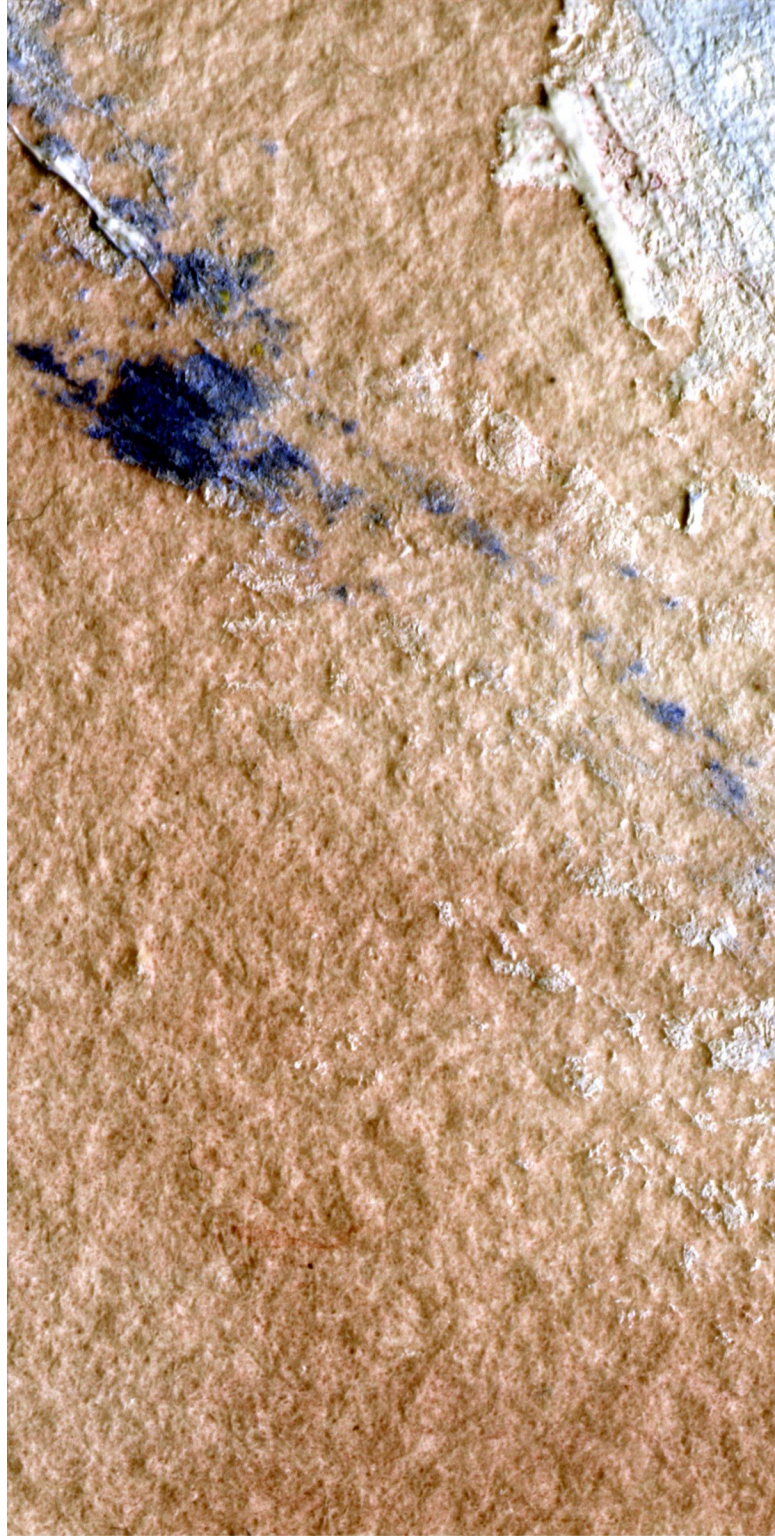


Lhasa (and on the road) | 7 June 2004

Early morning after rain, no one on the street at this hour except taxis, a few monks and nuns with prayer wheels, pilgrims. I follow two nuns for a while, listen to their soft chant as the city begins to wake. At Jokhang Temple, supplicants are already prostrating themselves and there are fires burning for offerings outside the door. An old man asks for money, but I have no coins. Returning, four sheep walk on the sidewalk wearing bells as their shepherd urges them on.

Lhasa (and on the road) | 7 June 2004

Beside the road to Gyantze
a truck is broken down,
a suppliant beneath it,
feet on the road,
prostrate before another god.



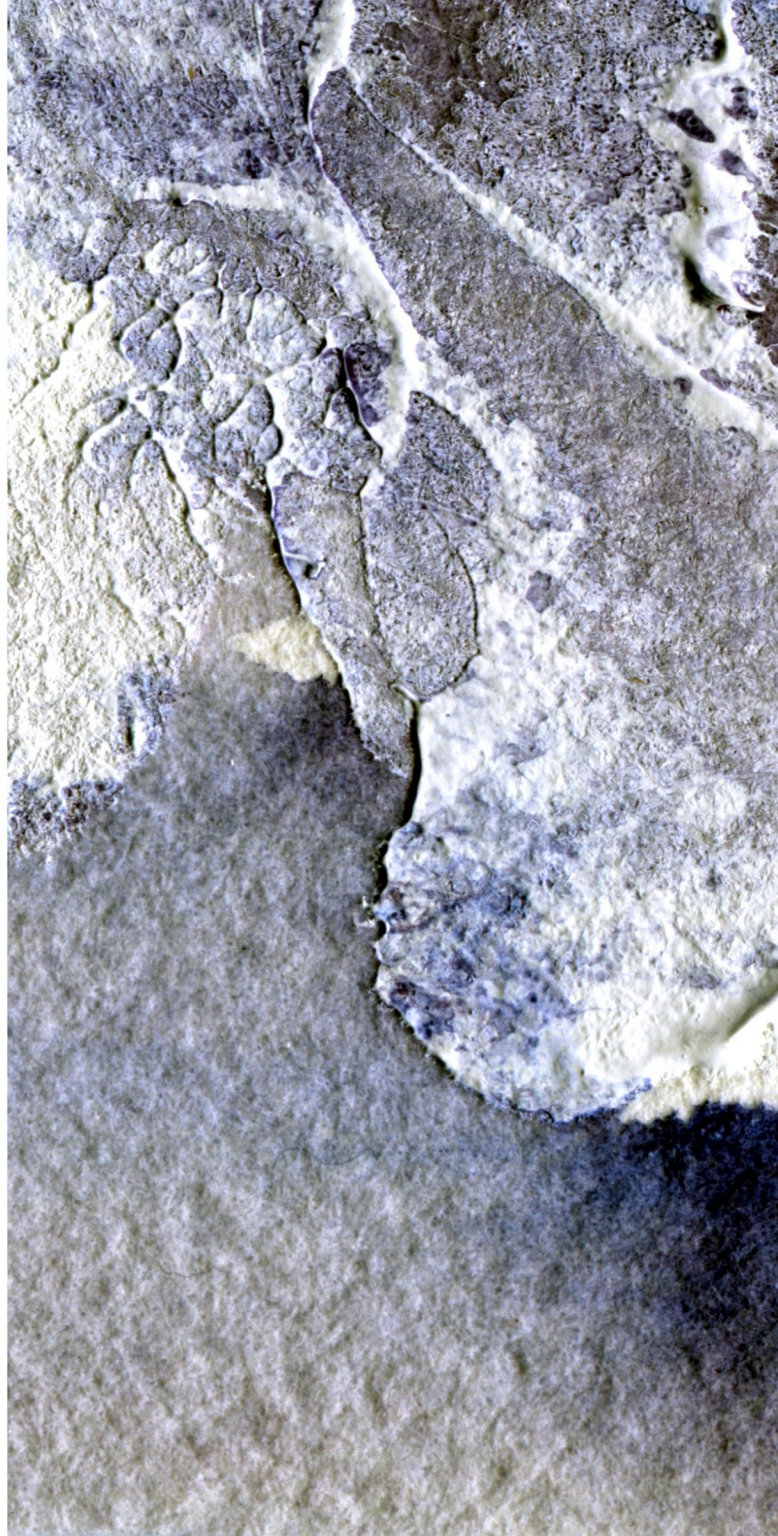


Lhasa (and on the road) | 7 June 2004

On the down side of a five thousand meter pass on the road between Lhasa and Baiju Monastery, an old woman stands outside with a prayer wheel and chants. The mantra washes over everyone everywhere, and Sakyamuni smiles.

Lhasa (and on the road) | 7 June 2004

This dusty road is nothing more than ruts no wider than the bus, and we are nearing the top of the world when we have to stop to let a truck going the other direction pass. There is snow almost in reach in June, and the water tumbling down the mountain by the road is cold. It fills a lake that goes on for miles. When we stop to picnic beside it, four young women stand near and smile until we share our food with them. We exchange the few words we know, and there is food for all, not five thousand to be sure, but a miracle nonetheless.



Xigaze | 8 June 2004

Around the corner is a restaurant called Paradise that you can reach from the other direction by way of the Virtuous Together Hall. It stands before a snow-capped mountain. There is a white brick wall with “I love you” scrawled in three languages and a sad little dog guarding something neither of us could explain. A young boy crosses the street to say “Hello. Good morning,” and smiles when I say “tashidelek.” Three dogs on guard duty romp in circles across the street on the corner. A ditch of stagnant water and debris tries to drag it down, but cool mountain air rests lightly everywhere on everything.



Xigaze | 8 June 2004

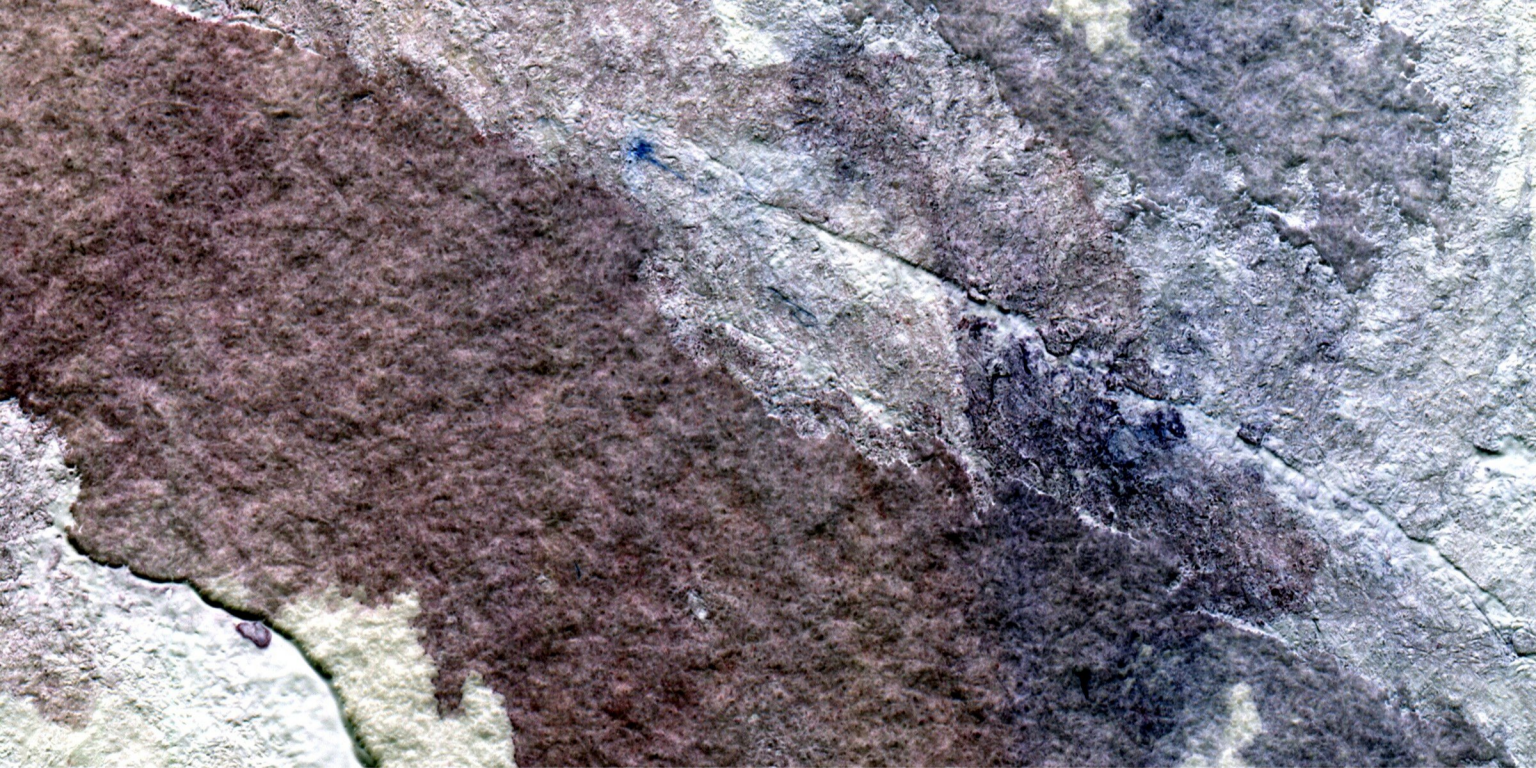
I walk for a while with a small group of Tibetan workers who follow a front-end loader out of an alley carrying shovels and picks. Across the street, three Chinese businessmen in suits walk the other way with briefcases.





on the road to Lhasa | 8 June 2004

Returning to Lhasa
after twelve hours
on backroads, a
perfect rainbow forms
across our path, and we
slip under it into a place
where we can rest.



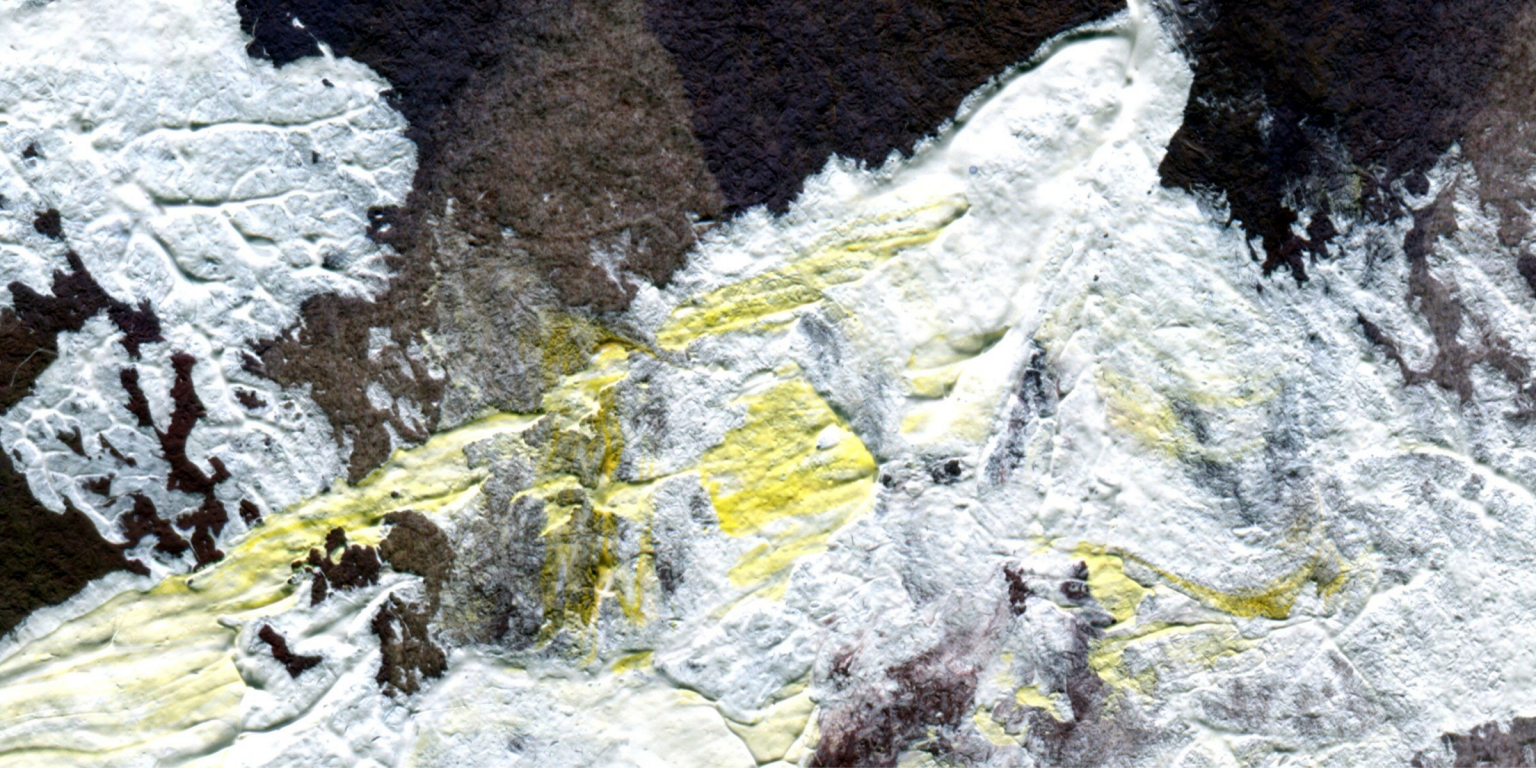
on the road to Lhasa | 8 June 2004

We are above the snow much of the day, making our way over mountains on the road to Lhasa. We travel beside a cold stream, then come to a place where sulfurous steam rises from a pool hot enough to boil eggs. A turbine across the road turns steam into power, turns it again by hidden machinery to occupation.

Lhasa | 9 June 2004

Every city is full of pilgrims circumambulating some shrine. In this one, they carry prayer wheels and circle Jokhang Temple, keeping time with mantras repeated in a low voice. A small dog wearing bells trots counterpoint, and taxis sweep by at intervals, adding an occasional horn. I walk counter to the clockwise flow, a pilgrim without a mantra, without a prayer.



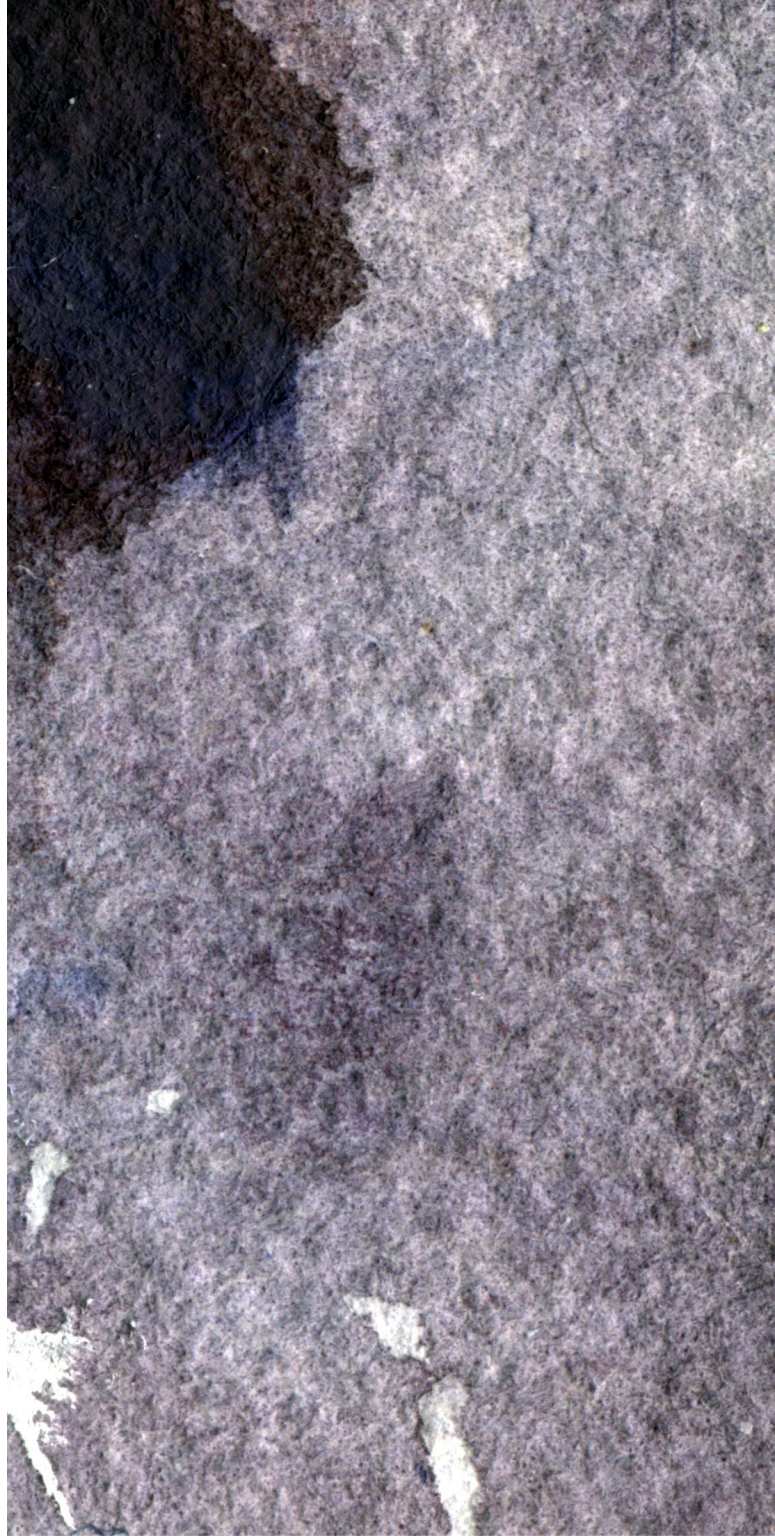


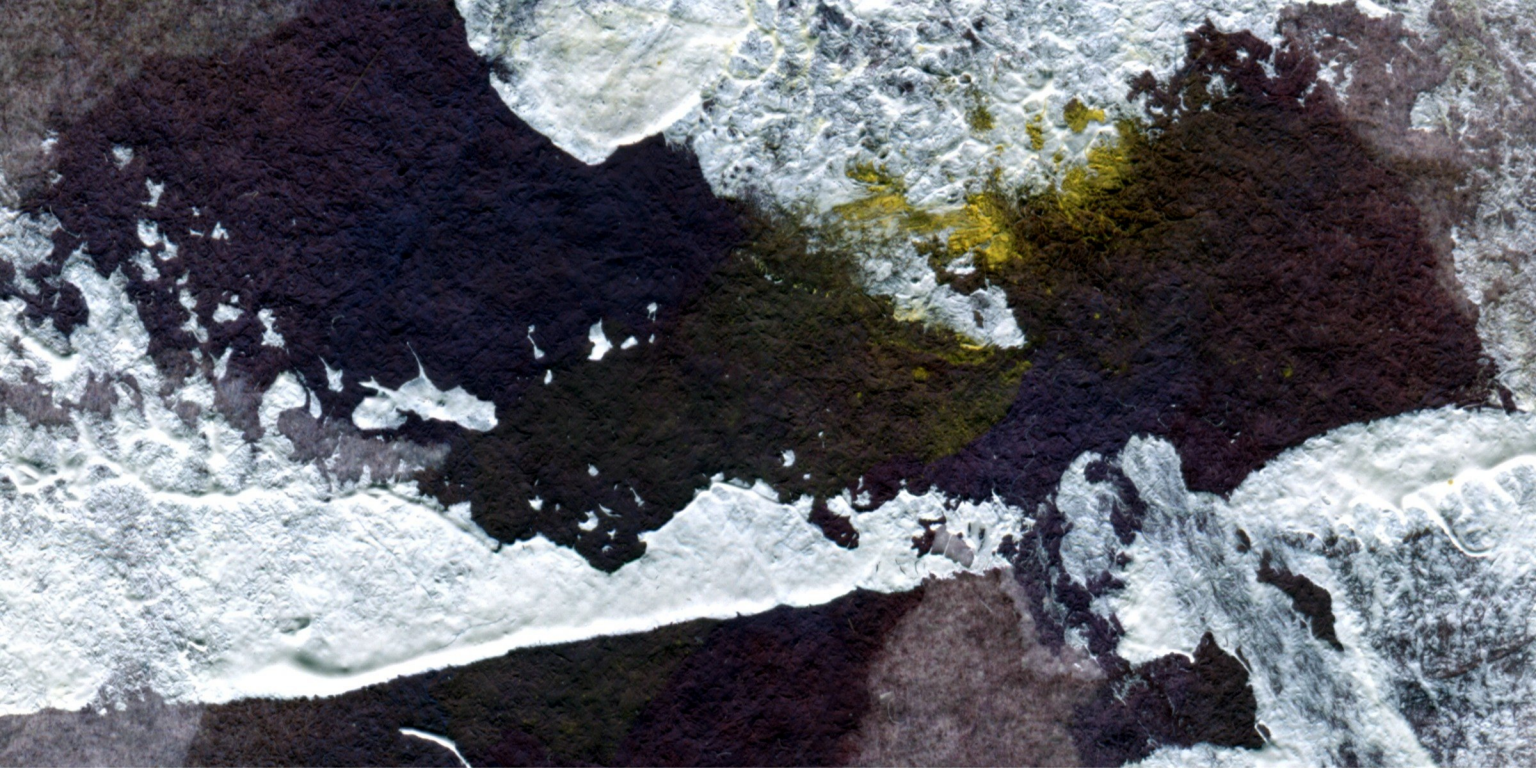
Lhasa | 9 June 2004

Devout dogs in Lhasa wear bells to accompany their masters' mantras. Mantras are a low hum in time with the sweep of pilgrims' feet not quite lifted after so many passes. Bells keep up a dog trot counterpoint to human steps, three for every one, but dogs do not drag their feet, even after a hundred circles; their smiles get broader, their tongues hang out, and they sit patiently, time after time, through a hundred or more iterations of a hundred and eight prostrations.

Lhasa | 9 June 2004

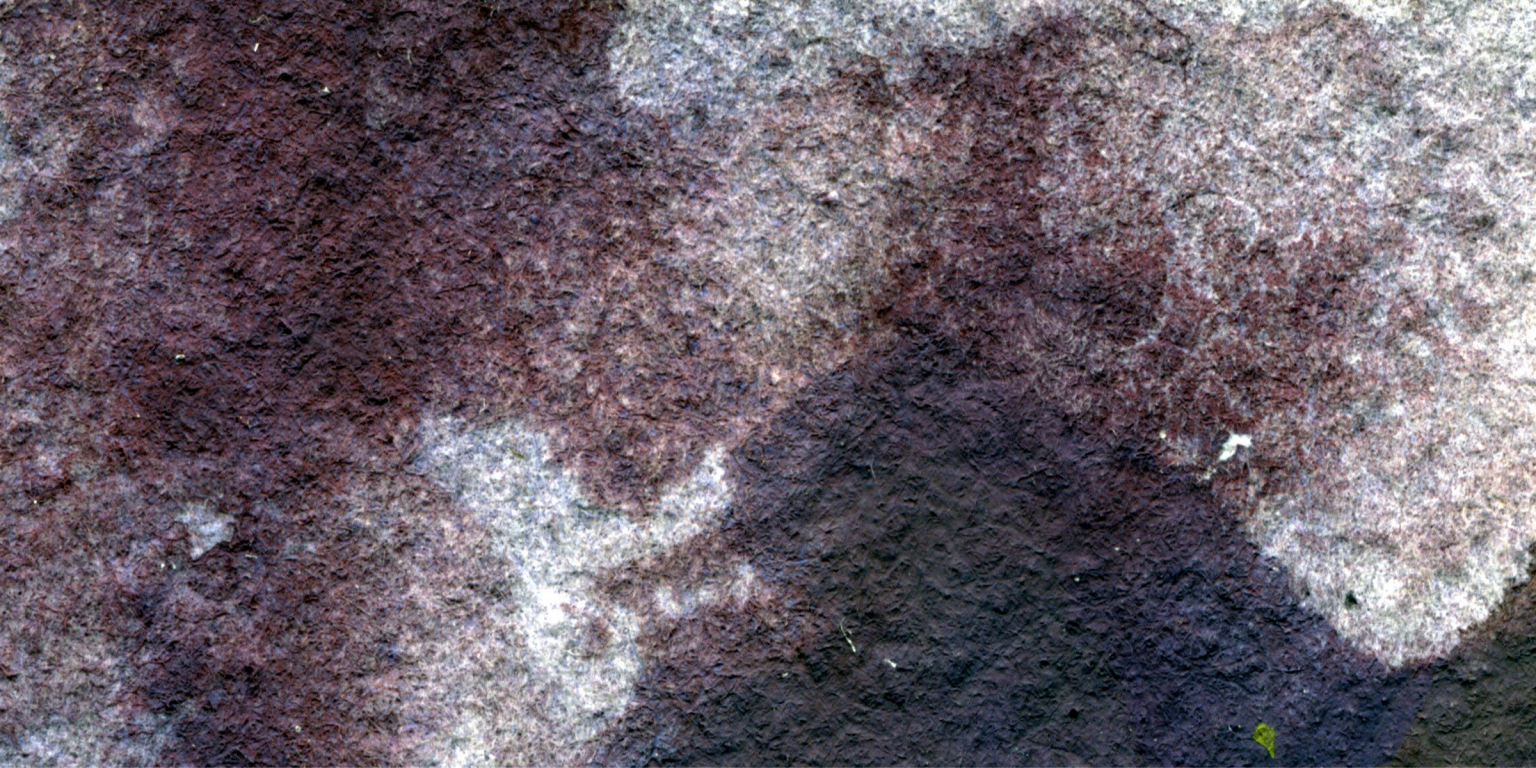
Monk smiles when
cat says miao at a human
touch, then both return
to their mantras – two
bodhisattvas face to
face with Sakyamuni
in deep meditation, not
unmindful of the passing world.





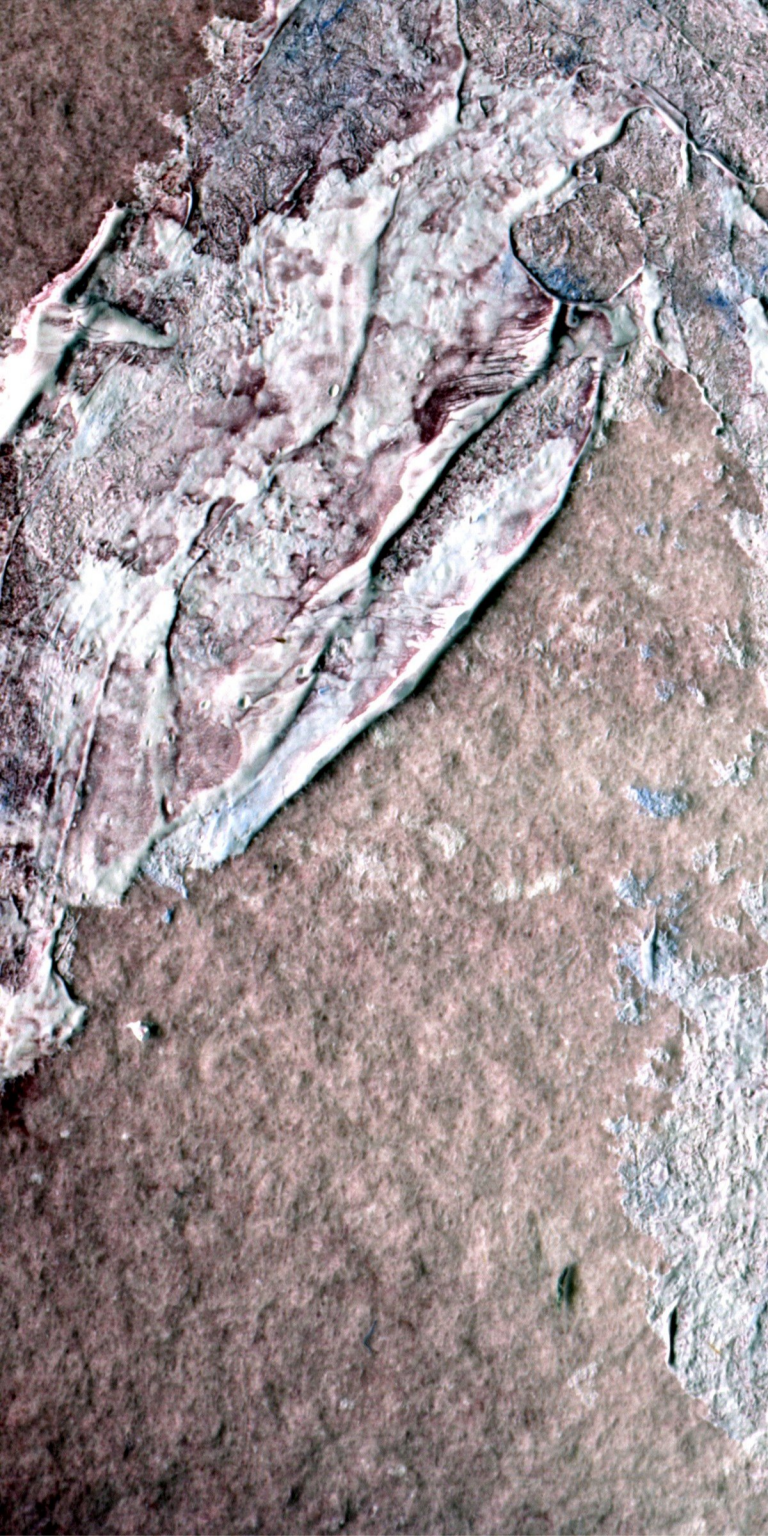
Lhasa | 9 June 2004

Red-robed monk reads in
a crowd of pilgrims, then
breaks his study to ask
where I come from. He smiles
and repeats Chicago. The cat on
his lap until he rises, in satori, never
interrupts her meditation.



Lhasa | 10 June 2004

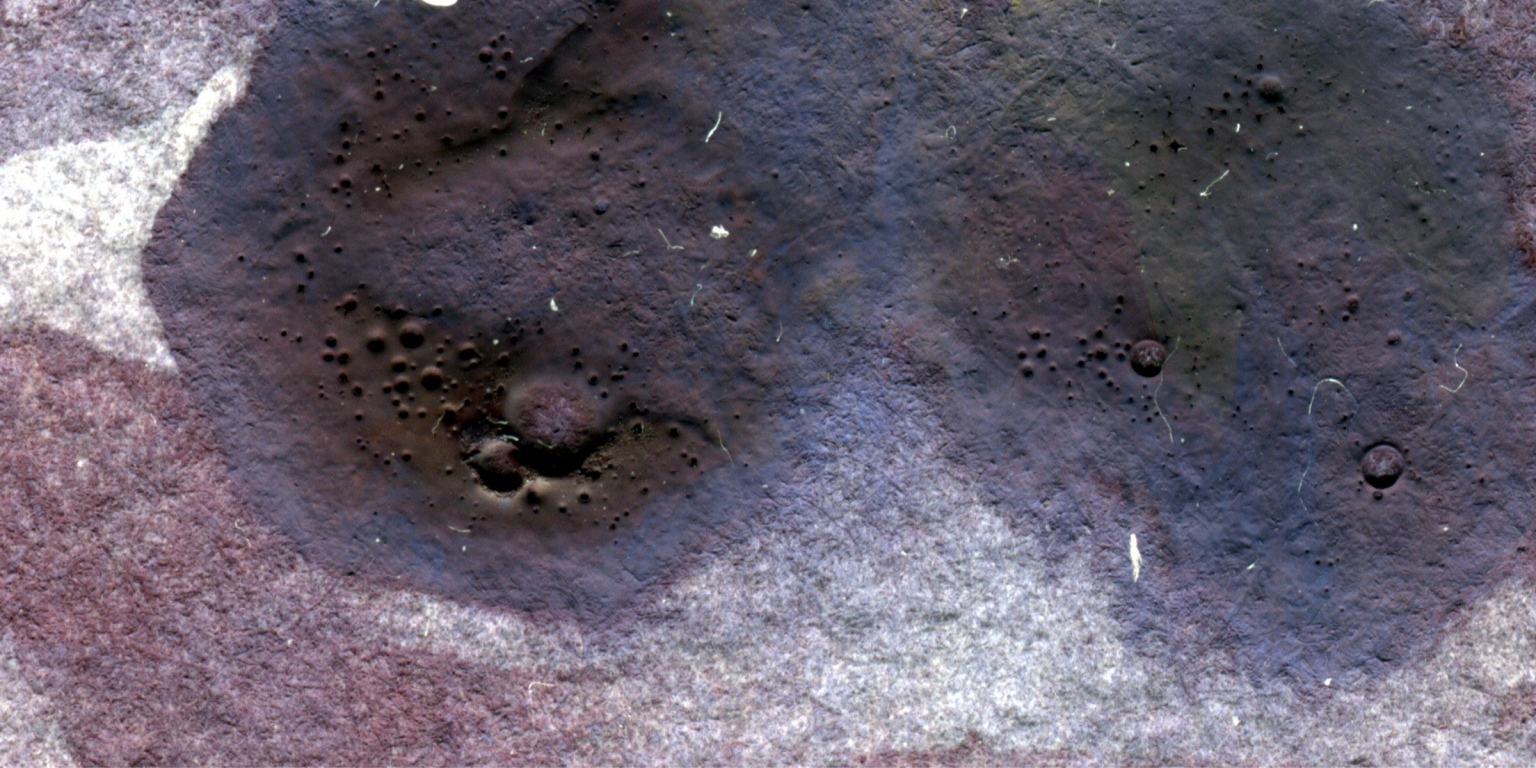
Two small dogs share the square in front of Jokhang Temple with a sheep early in the morning, before the market opens – a trio of bells in three tones and rhythms to match their steps. The sheep is slow, in step with the shepherd, wishing for a meadow to replace paving stones beneath her feet. The dogs are short sharp tones that match their size. One cannot resist barking at the sheep, who doesn't seem to notice. Narrow walkways are filled with pilgrims and children on their way to school; mantras and prayer beads blend with conversation and bells on dog collars as the path passes by the mosque. A bird adds its voice there, and the smell of fresh naan harmonizes in a new dimension. Behind a wire mesh, a perfect white rose blooms on a windowsill in a gray building just above the level of the street.



Lhasa | 10 June 2004

An audience with a monk who has lived in a monastery for sixty-two of his seventy-nine years leaves us with nothing much to say. “Tell us about life in the monastery.” “It is normal.” Well, yes, of course, after more than sixty years. And he says he practices meditation when he dreams, but he does not have a cat. It is the presence, not the words that matter most. He distributes sweets, poses with us for a picture before we say good-bye.

Later a pilgrimage to an internet cafe, where the homepage is some soft porn site and there is no email that could not have waited two days. That, too, is normal, and no easier to explain than the ordinary life of a simple monk in his eightieth year.



Lhasa | 11 June 2004

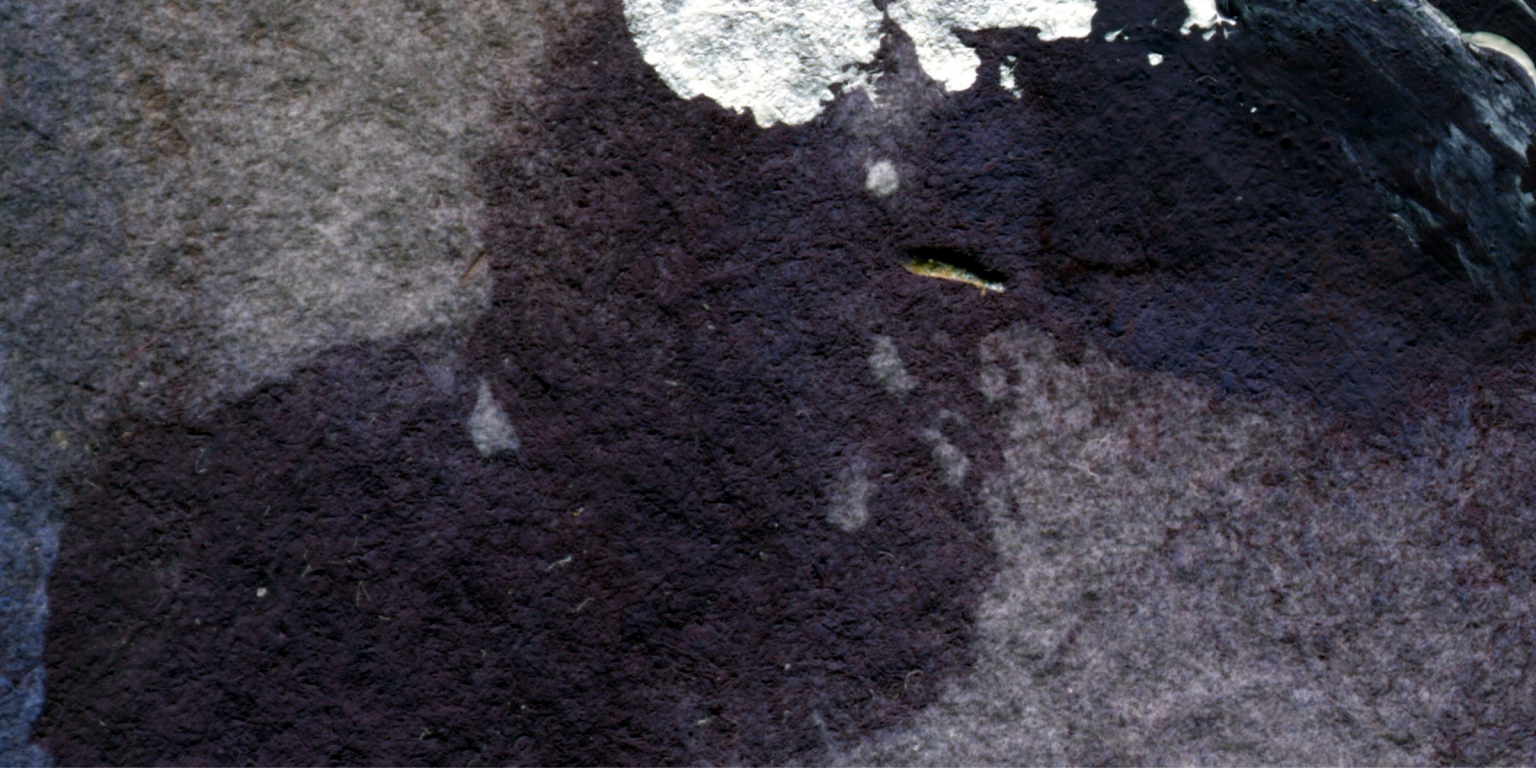
At the Mad Yak, a dancer is contained in costumes designed to make her quaint and carry with her a people who are of some other world that might have been but is not now. Her hands are hidden by the long sleeves of her costume, and her feet are bound by steps written for tourists in an idiom of occupation.

The audience is written into the dance as well, Chinese on one side, Europeans and Americans on the other, Tibetan guides in back. I am mesmerized by the authentic dance of her eyes, weary beyond words, which speak sadness and will not be extinguished.

Lhasa | 11 June 2004

Pilgrim bells this morning include a flock of sheep making its way before the city wakes and traffic makes this street too hard. An old ram in front believes he is leading. The shepherd walks behind them, clicking his tongue to guide the sheep and prayer beads to accompany a low mantra.

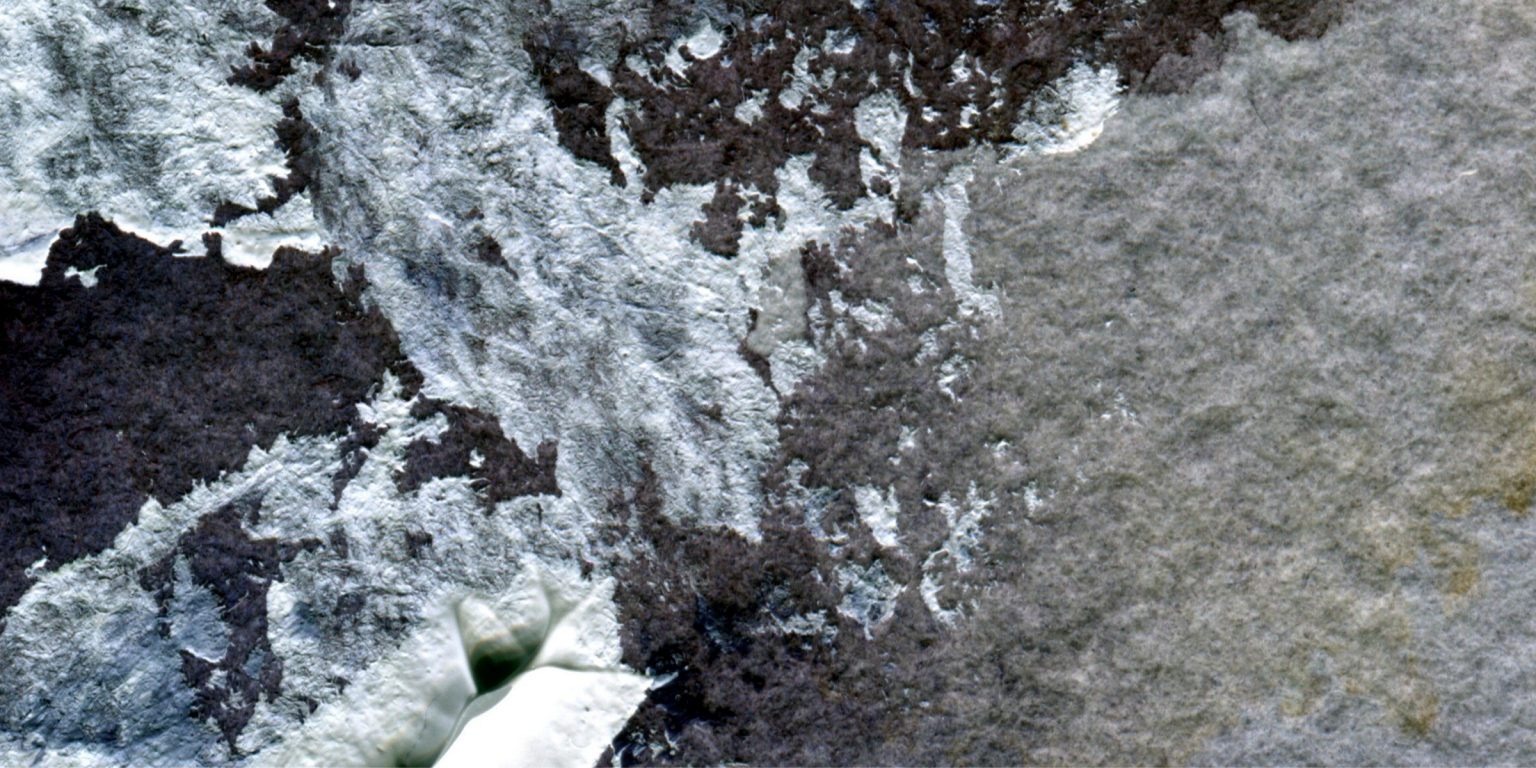




Lhasa | 11 June 2004

When I walk into the restaurant early this morning, a gray mouse scurries out of sight over the back of a soft cushion, and I wonder if it is the same one that woke me last night with his feet on the metal headboard of my bed.

In the new China, a good cat would see to this, but the lucky mouse lives in Tibet, where cats rest in satori and do not concern themselves with the world of passing mice.



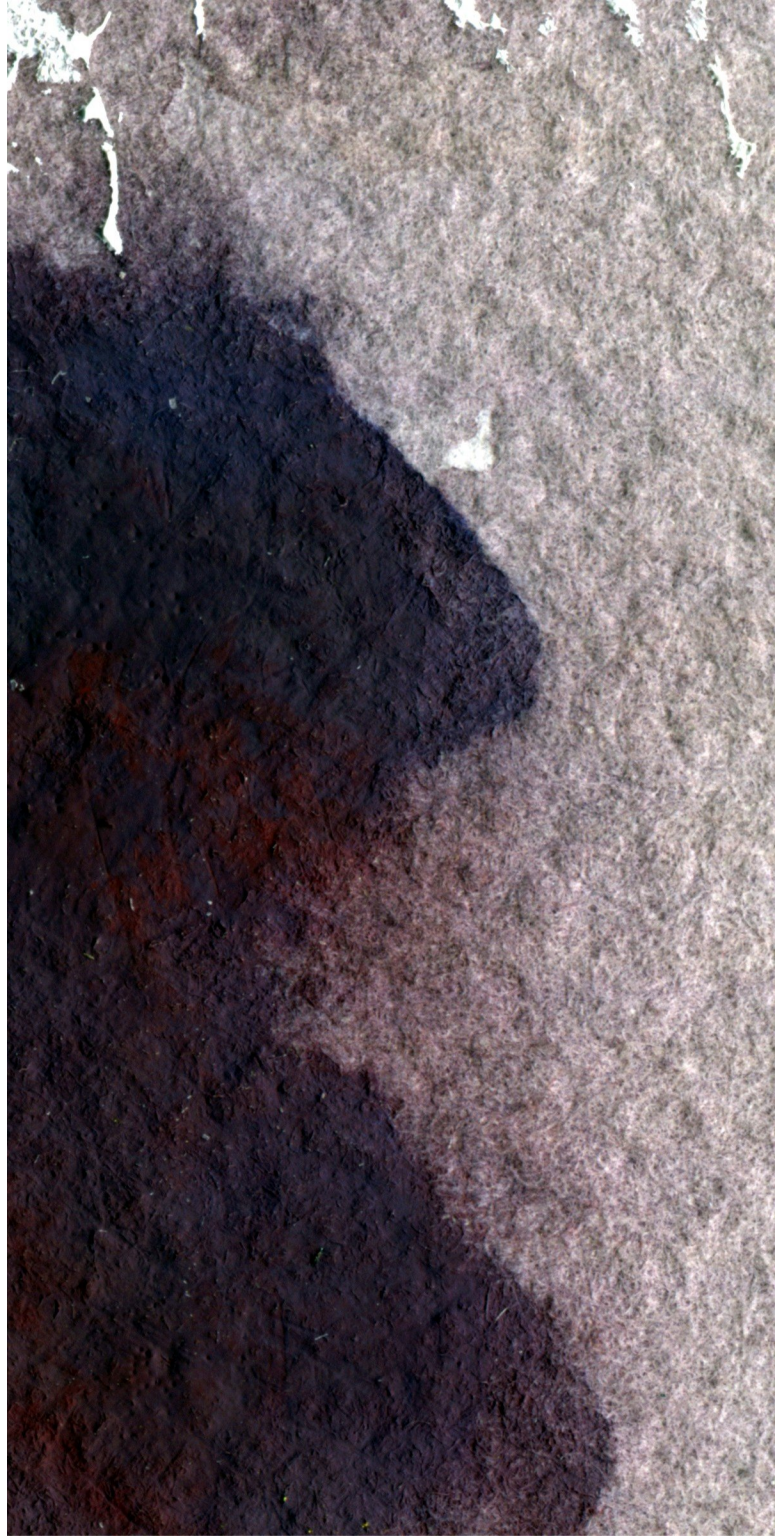
Lhasa | 11 June 2004

A goat sits meditation on the steps between a dormitory for monks and the temple, among children seeking alms and others who live on the monastery's edge.

He is unconcerned with passersby and does not interrupt his contemplation when we stop to take his picture. He is a bodhisattva of compassion who will not move until every being is enlightened.

Lhasa to Chengdu | 11 June 2004

The tops of the mountains fly almost as high as the plane, and it seems you could reach out and touch the snow that caps them. A line is drawn right down the middle of a ridge, red on one side, green on the other. The line of the river winds between ridges, pauses now and again to rest in a blue pool set in a green field.





Lhasa to Chengdu | 11 June 2004

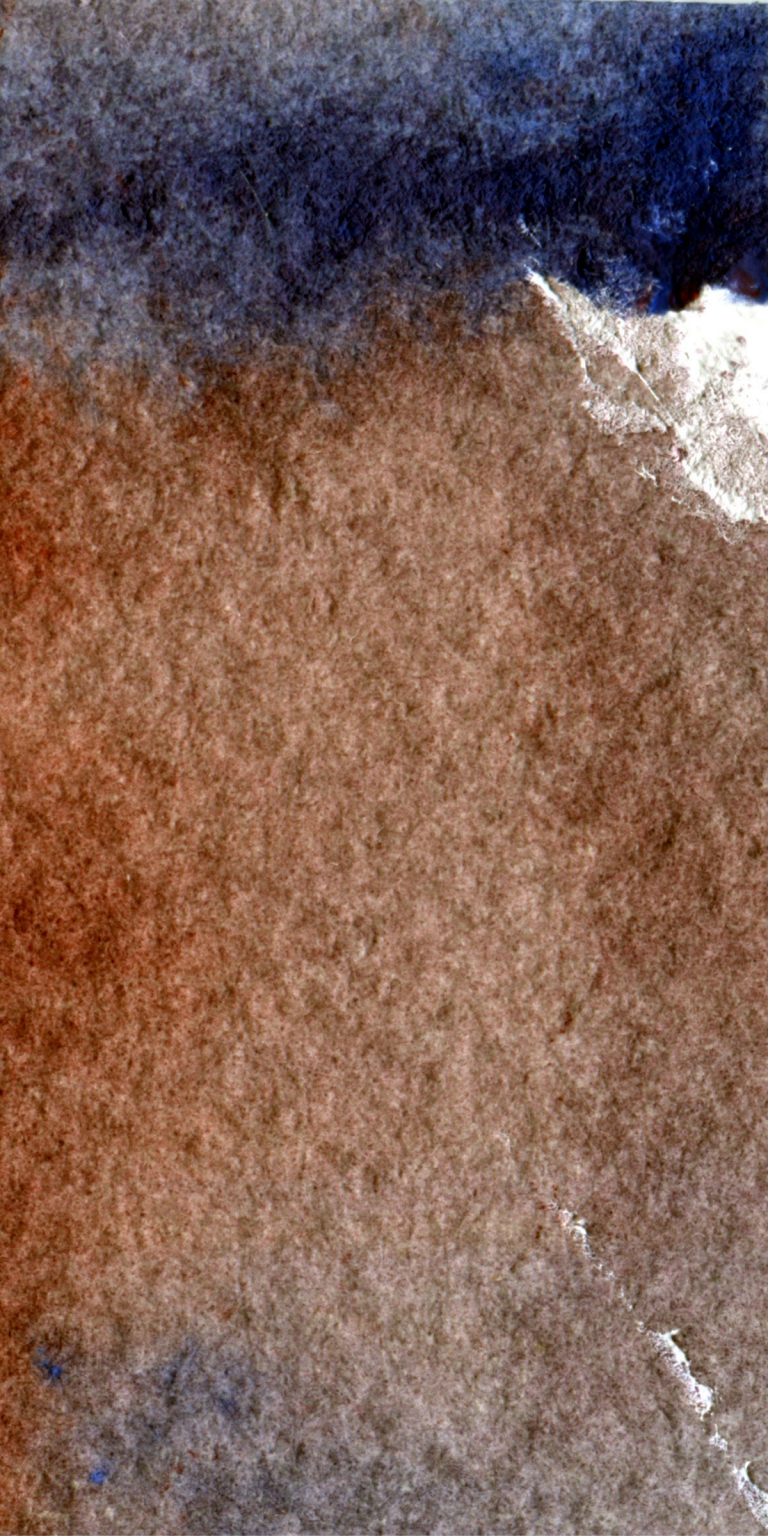
Clouds mingle with mountaintops,
rest like snow
on the highest peaks.

Blue sky stretches over the whole.
Shadows below, hidden above,
darken the earthbound world today.

III

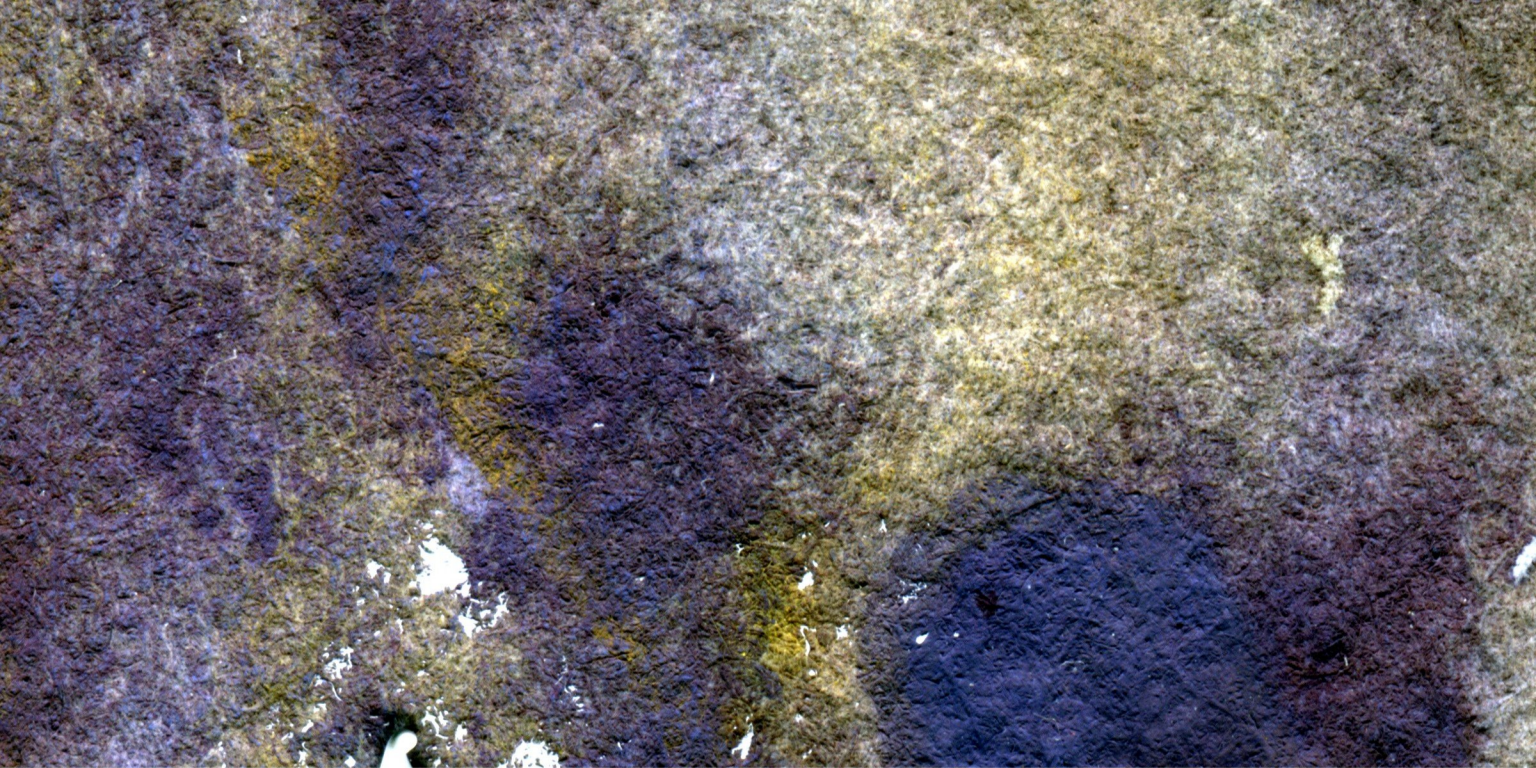
to join the dance





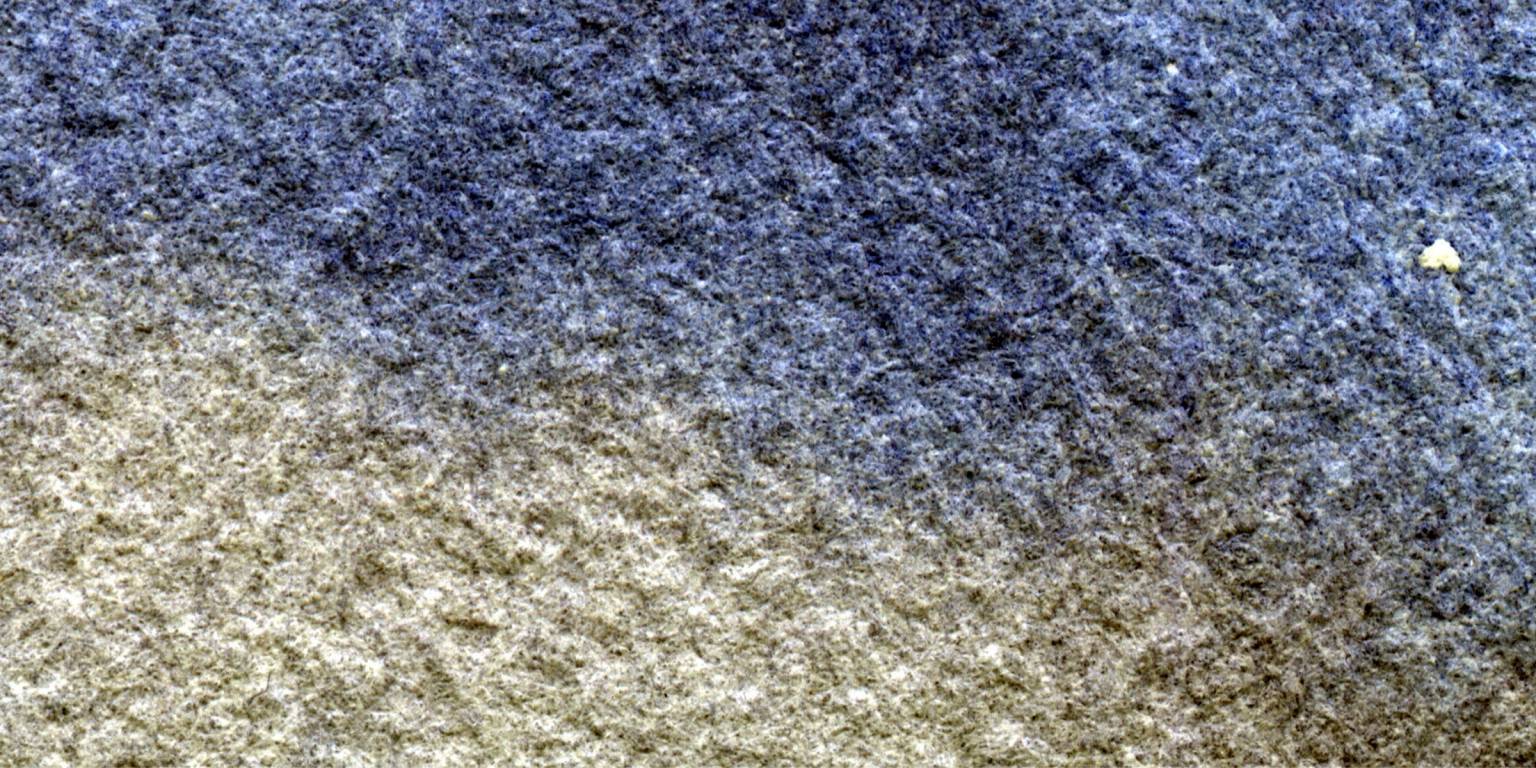
Chengdu and Hong Kong | 12 June 2004

From pure spirit to the heart of the matter in a single day, by way of a Mexican bar in Chengdu called Carole's Diner. A map of New Mexico on one side of the table, a flag on the other – through the window, the Jin River. In Lhasa, pilgrims circumambulate Jokhang Temple. In Hong Kong, it is the Bank of China and more than a hundred and eight prostrations a day. The mountains of Tibet lift matter and spirit so close to heaven that some people can hardly breathe. In Hong Kong, they vanish into air so heavy it has to be lifted step by step as you slip under its low cover and try to remember yesterday's pure light. If Lhasa takes your breath away, Hong Kong replaces it with lead – or gold, which, truth be told, is just as heavy when you breathe it.



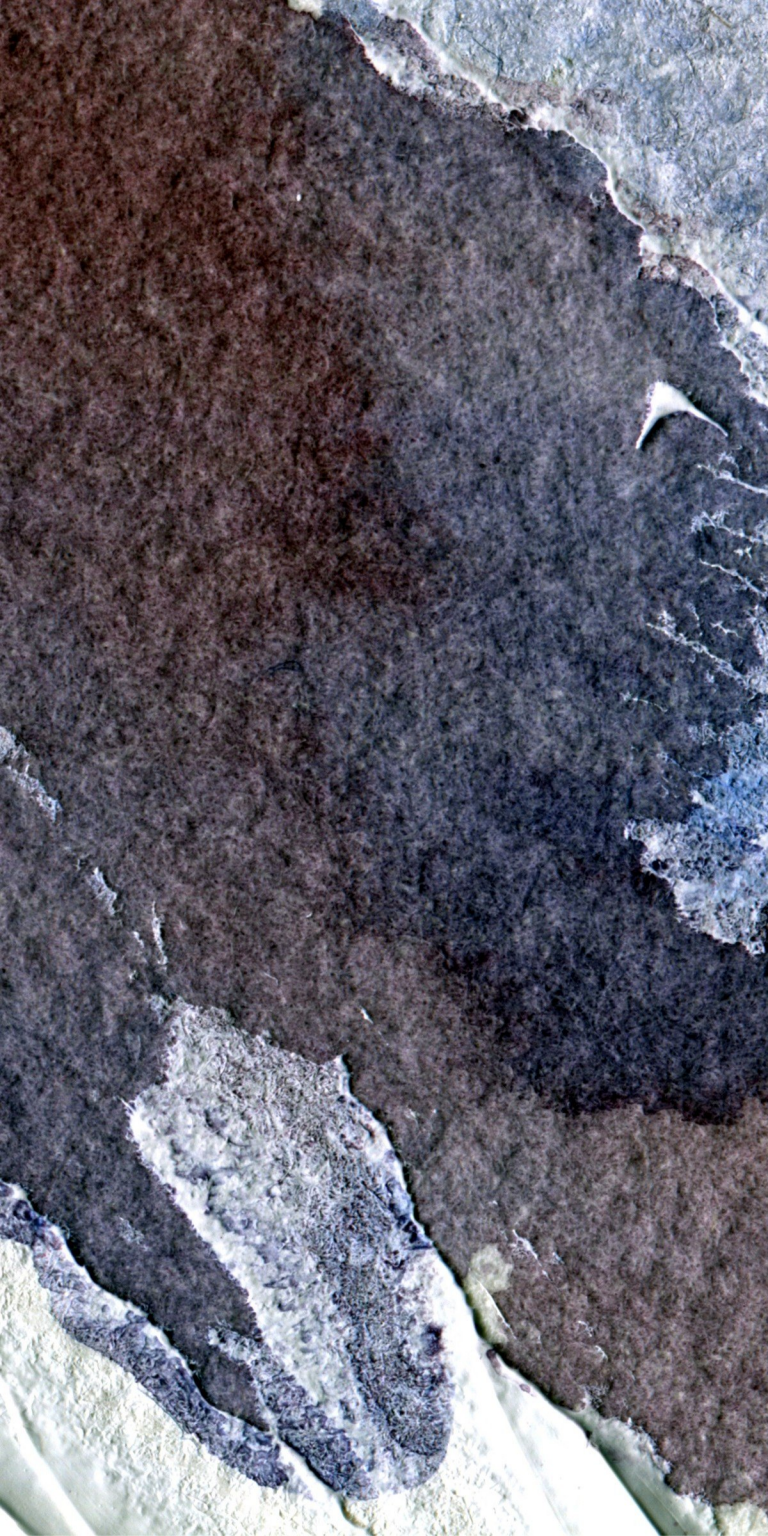
Hong Kong and Shenzhen | 13 June 2004

Poor children in Lhasa ask for money. They send the children out like an army, says my Tibetan friend who has been cheerfully handing out jiao to the crowds of tiny suppliants, bantering with them all the while. Here, they cling close to the edge of a monastery, where pilgrims are likely to offer alms as acts of devotion. In Shenzhen, at a European coffee house, middle class children beg for attention while their parents drink and talk business on cellphones. They cling close to the edge of a bank and a line of European cafes on the first floor of a luxury hotel: more armies, another invasion, a different devotion, still hunger.



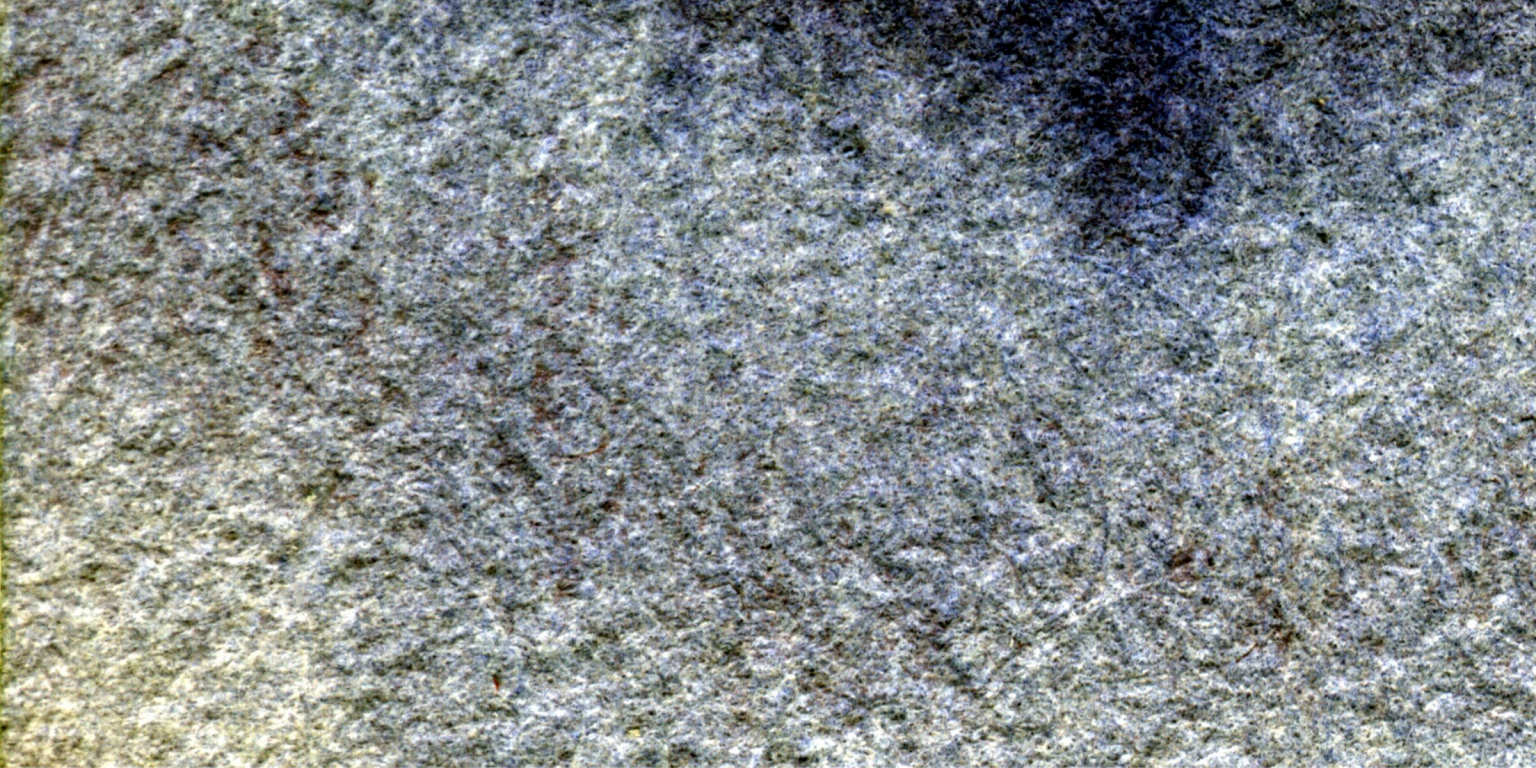
Hong Kong and Shenzhen | 13 June 2004

While I sit and wait for coffee, a small crowd gathers in the square. A middle aged couple begins a ballroom dance while three men in white shirts and dark pants watch. Then the three join in, and another couple appears. The only music I hear is cicada song accompanied by an occasional bird, but I can see a waltz and the first steps of two tiny children who appear in strollers with their mothers to join the dance.



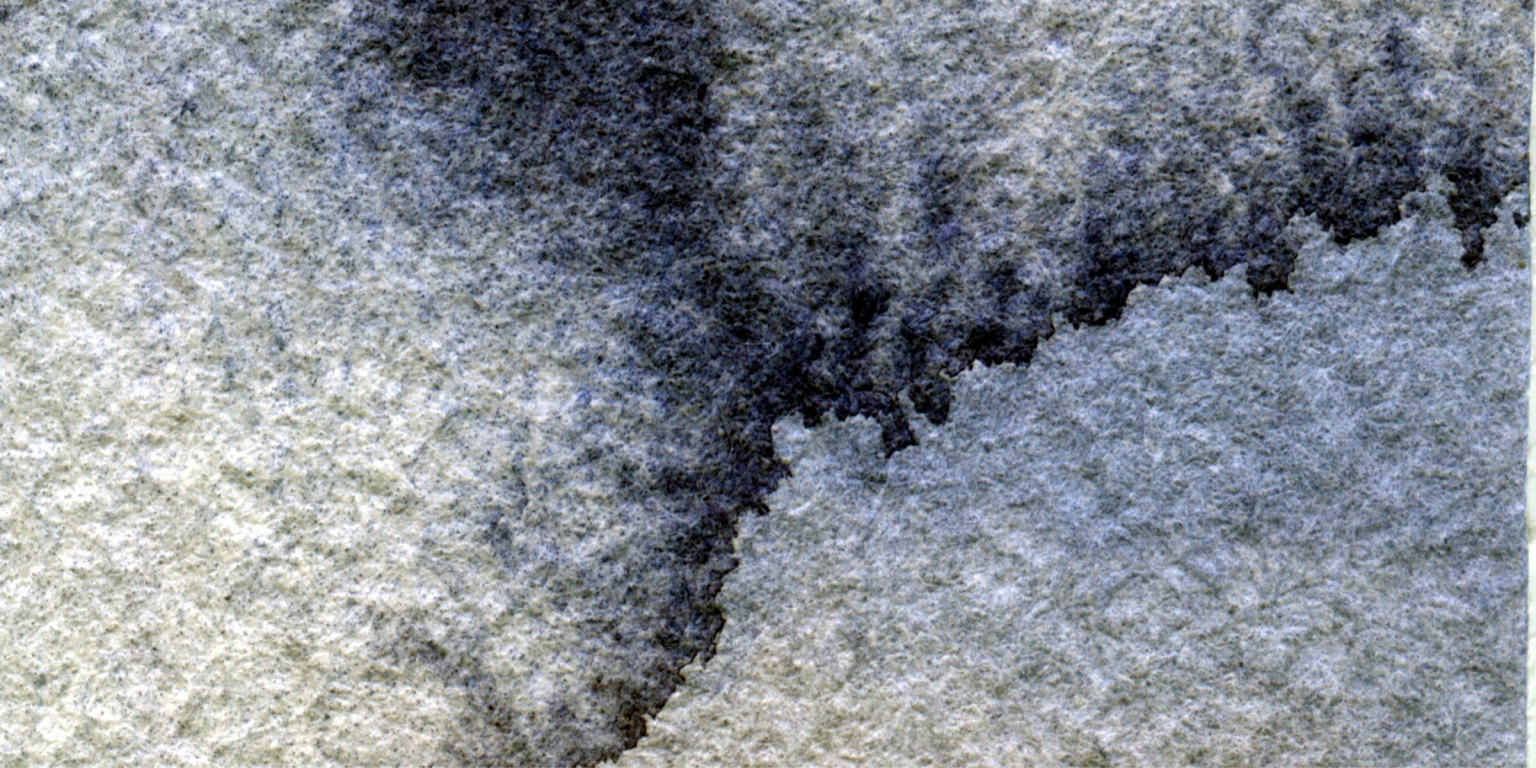
Shenzhen | 14 June 2004

One red rose lies dried and broken on the
walk this morning, plucked by some hand sick
with love from the bush that grows by the road
and left by another out of passion or loss.
Rootless, red is the red of dried blood
underfoot, faded memory of a life discarded.



Shenzhen | 14 June 2004

Traffic cops are born to the stage. At this busy intersection, a glance would suffice to remind impatient drivers to attend to signals intended to restrain them from running down pedestrians or colliding with turning traffic. But this cop resorts to grand gestures and a whistle to keep the corner in an uproar. Nothing diverts cyclists who are agnostic with regard to signals and cops but must have a deep faith in something when they coast unprotected in front of oncoming trucks whose drivers cannot hear whistles and seldom glance at anything but the road before them. To outsiders, this intersection looks like chaos; but it is a dance, the cop a dancer. Watch your toes, but rest assured it will take a miracle to carry you safely across.

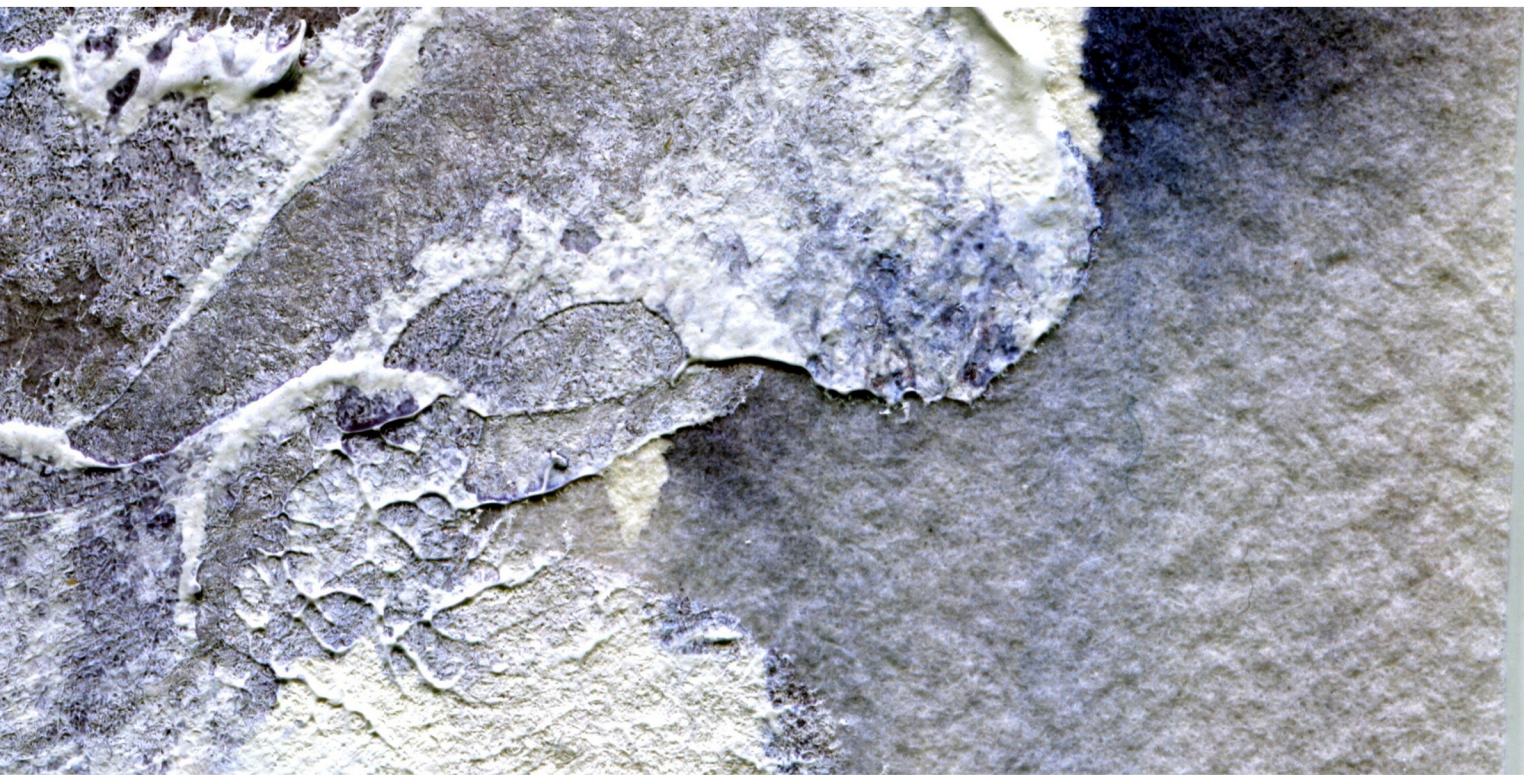


Shenzhen | 15 June 2004

Words roll through this
intersection way too fast.
Look for paint on their fenders.

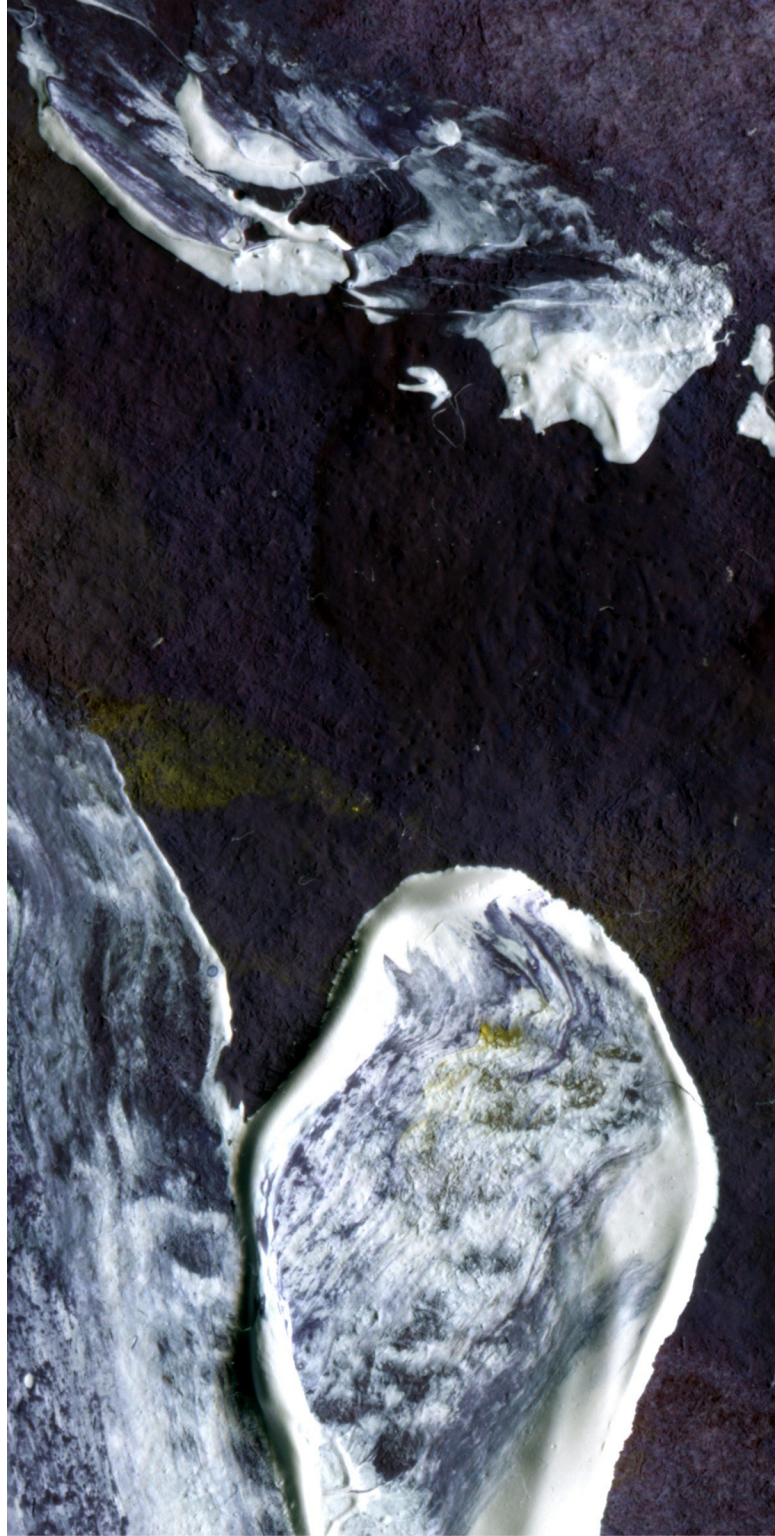
Shenzhen | 15 June 2004

Birds rise early to sing sun over horizon. It seems they wake cicadas, whose song begins later. Once it starts, birdsong slips under rapid percussion and soon there is nothing to be heard but the shaking of a million castanets under sun so heavy when it rises that the world must slow and concentrate to keep it from sinking all the way through soft earth.



Shenzhen | 15 June 2004

Rain is no surprise, but it surprises when it cools the sun for a moment. It will rise again as steam this afternoon, but now it is an answer to the prayer hidden under small talk about heat over morning coffee.





Shenzhen | 15 June 2004

Remnants of a thunderstorm cling to one of the low mountains on the edge of the city, between fog and rain. The downpour has broken the heat for now; but it will return as quickly as the rain. A woman has been trying to sweep the water away while it falls, and painters busily assess the damage when it stops, casting despairing looks on milky liquid that spreads across gray and red paving stones. They will begin again when the sun returns. The day will begin again when the sun returns; when the sun returns rain will be forgotten and will come again as a surprise next time.

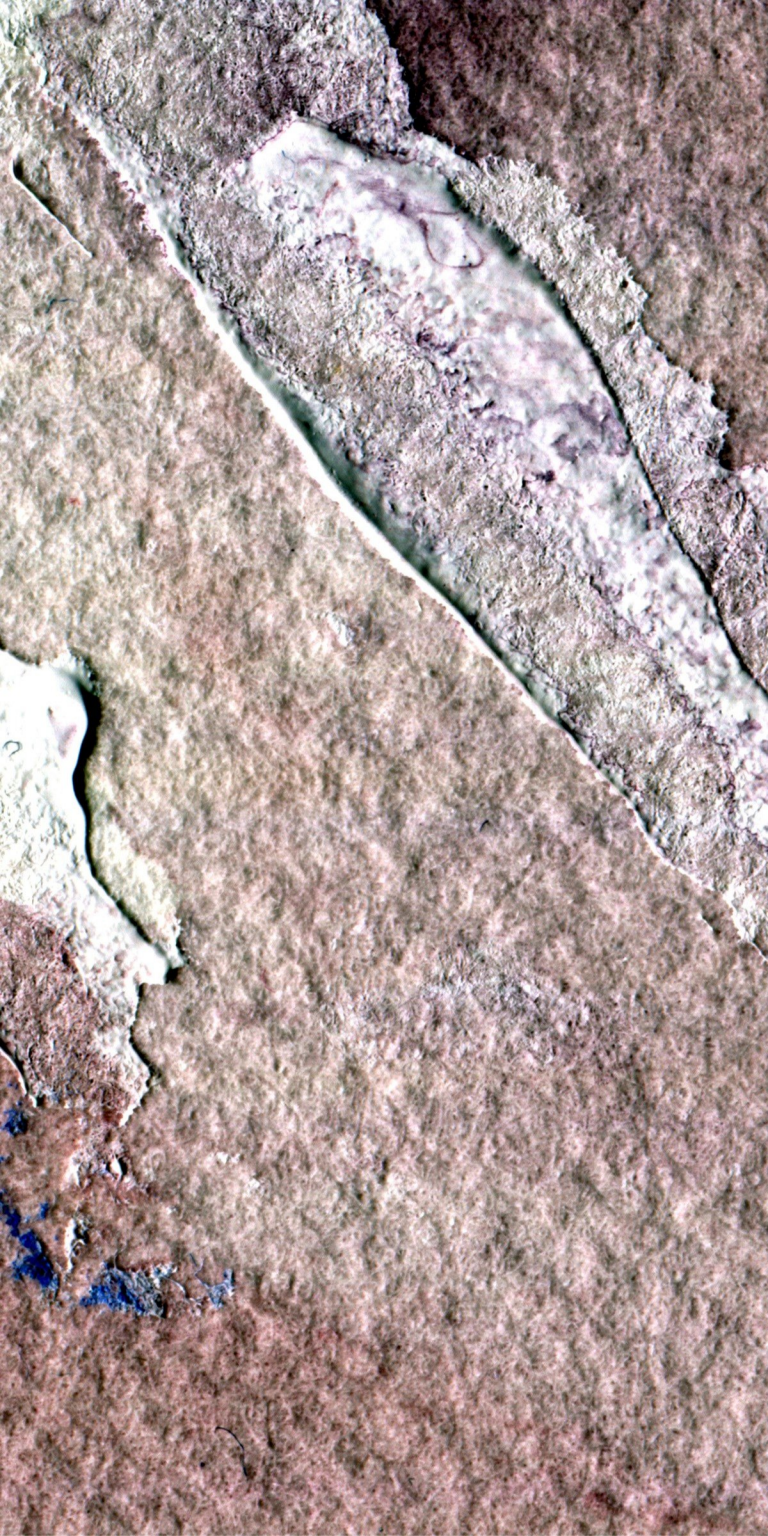
Shenzhen | 15 June 2004

Disrobe soft sweet flesh
in summer heat gently
with your fingertips.

Eat.

This body
on your tongue
will dissolve every thirst.





Shenzhen | 16 June 2004

Ragged clouds
half hearted rain
mud underfoot
cicada song
silent.

When rain stops, sound
will pour down again,
right through open parasols.

Rain soaked, sound soaked air:
dampness rises inside out,
falls between cicada songs
when clouds can bear it no longer.

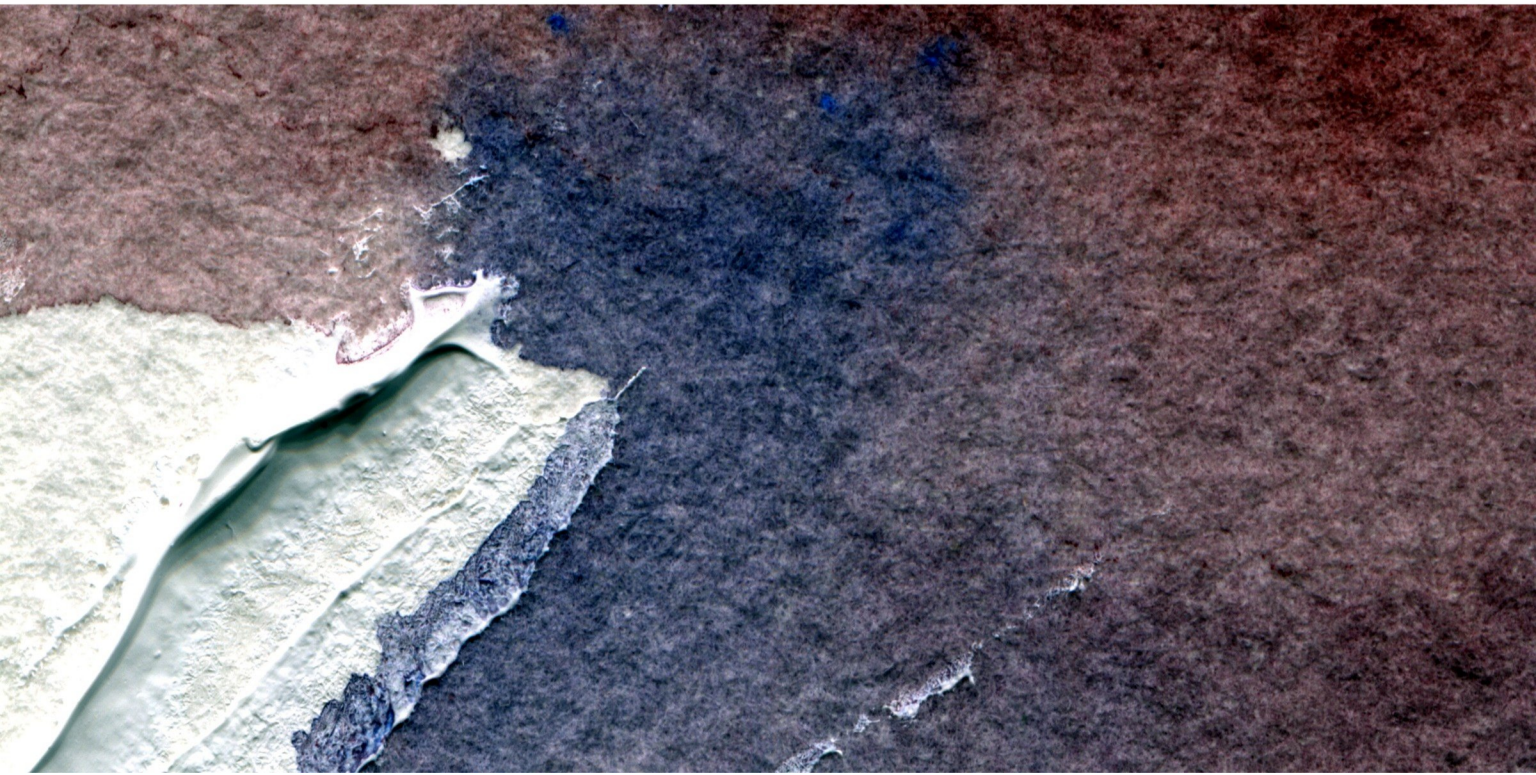


Shenzhen | 16 June 2004

Clouds have pulled themselves together, and rain is steady. It may have moved in for the day, but there is still a hint of sun on the horizon that could get a toe under the cover and throw it off again before rising late.

Shenzhen | 16 June 2004

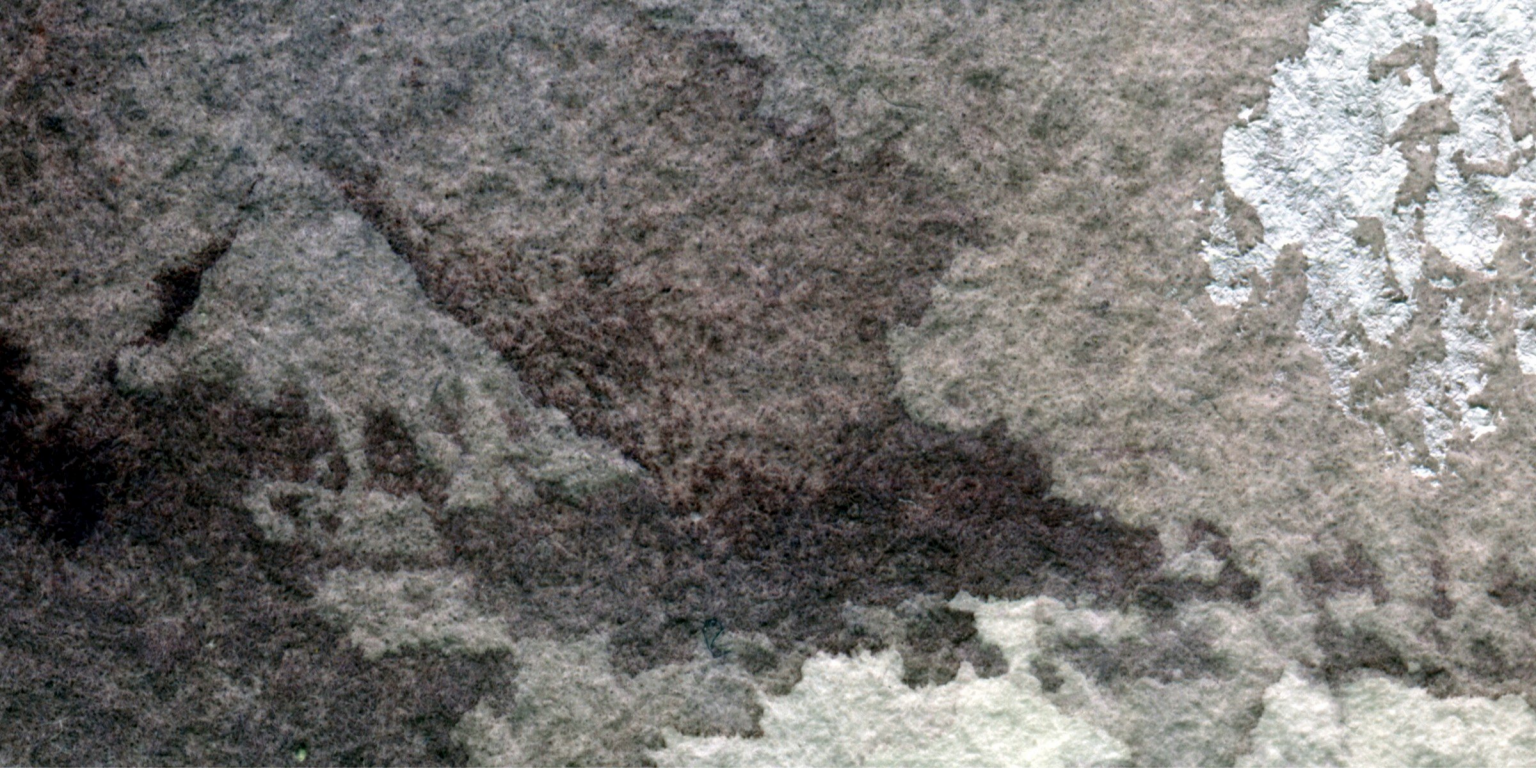
Southern horizon grows light and rain hesitates. It is still coming down, but its heart is elsewhere. The woman who sweeps the square pulls her trousers up to tiptoe through water standing there, but she is off to get her broom and push it back again when sun returns to help her dry low places. People carry umbrellas and stroll in rain that has turned gentle, but they are prepared to run for cover again if it pulls itself together and the sun goes back to bed. I am grateful for the cool breeze and willing to wait for a break in the clouds or make my way back under cover in good time.





Shenzhen | 17 June 2004

Air is so saturated with water here that it is a wonder anything could ever be dry. Climbing stairs, lungs are scarcely adapted to drink it; and they can leave you gasping at the top reaching for a towel as though you'd just emerged dripping from the pool. It is so much better to swim in this medium than to walk. Compared to last week's mountains, it is the bottom of an ocean, and that explains the slow wobbling of a thousand cyclists making their way among streams of ten thousand on foot. But dry cicada music floods the place each morning after birds wake the sun, and I am dry, choking on dry dust thrown up from dry memory that winds out of dry past into present anticipation, makes it difficult to be here now, though there is no then and nowhere else to be. This is the down side of a mountain, but the summit is nothing more than more dust that fills my lungs when I look back and leaves me inexplicably dry, swimming in an undeniably fluid atmosphere.



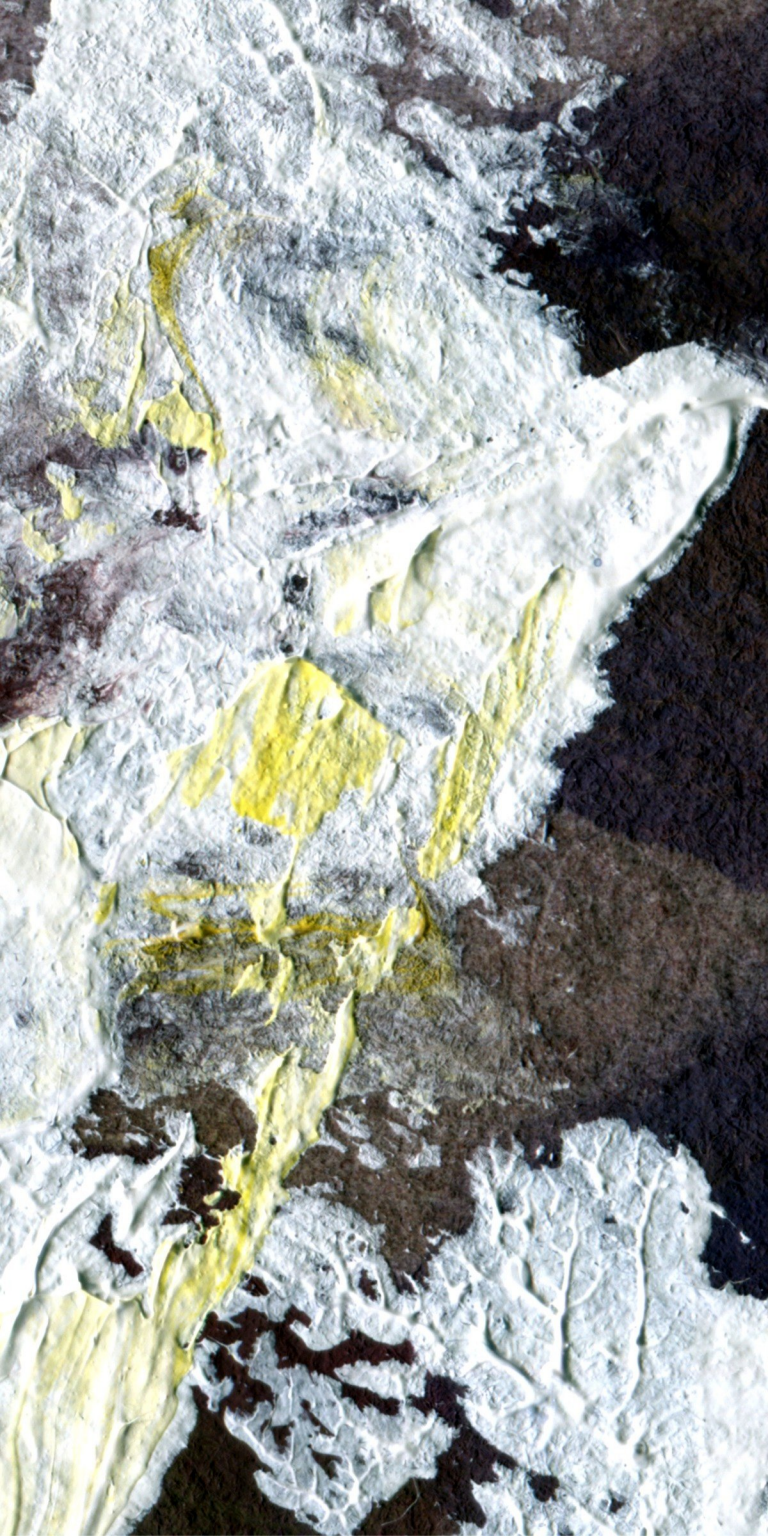
Shenzhen | 18 June 2004

Prayer beads cut from their string, they lie in an arc cherry-pit brown with a blush, remnant of the rough red skin that contained them, discarded now in a pile on gray pavement. The arc is so smooth you'd think you could scoop them up in one hand unbroken and repeat a mantra over them, but there is no invisible string to hold them, so one would not follow another, and they would scatter from your hand when you opened it into another arc to entice another act of devotion. Some minor god wandering this street early in the morning has devoured the sticky sweet flesh that surrounded them like a prayer and is smiling now, sated.



Shenzhen | 18 June 2004

Fat carp flock mouths gaping at the surface where water meets air. They climb on top of each other like drowning survivors of a shipwreck gasping for breath, but for that they would dive deeper and be still. They are not hungry: the water is a mirror.

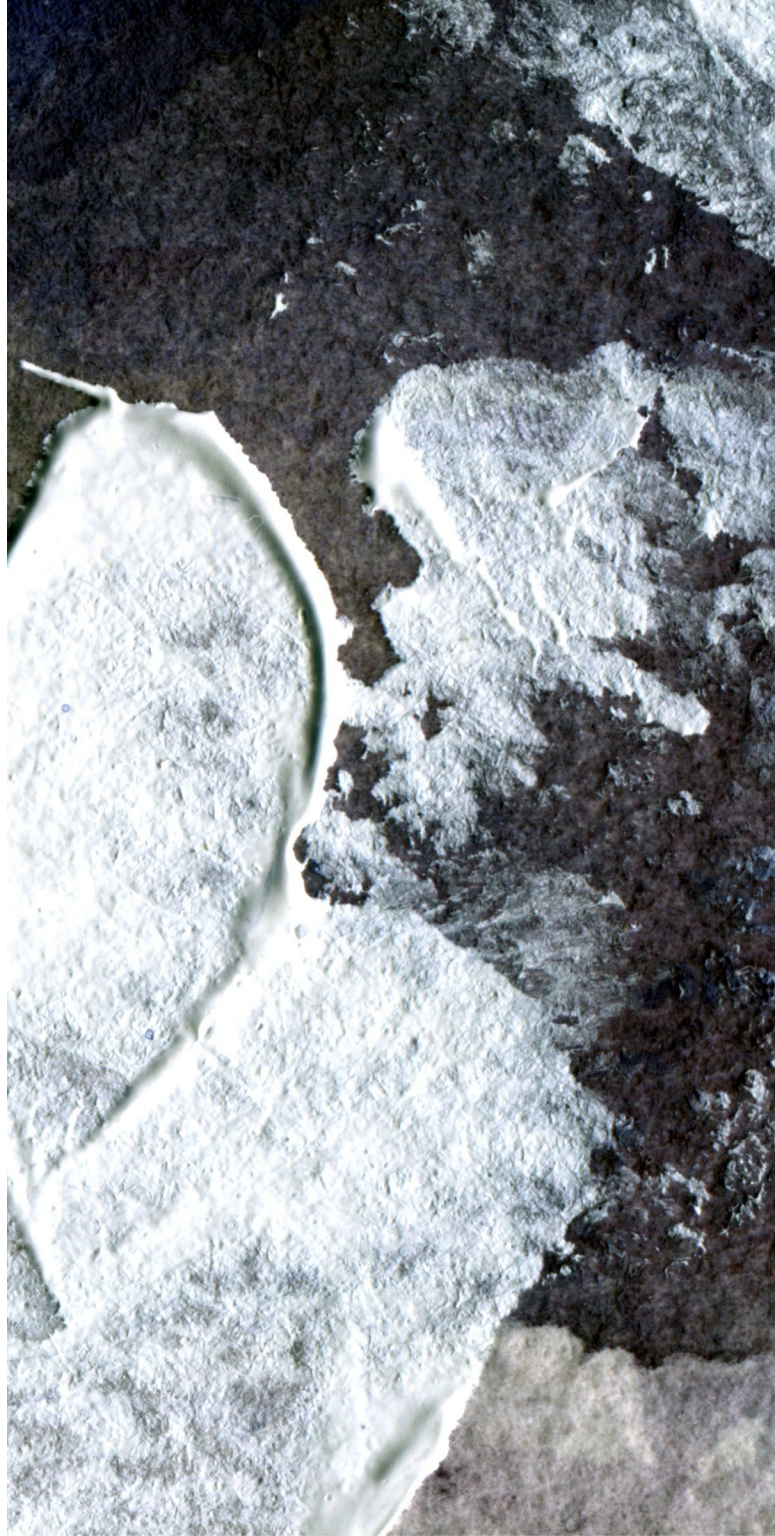


Shenzhen | 18 June 2004

A string of red paper lanterns suspended from a wire dances in morning breeze. Sun shines through an opening in the top of each one, makes five unblinking eyes so the dance, through the dancers, can watch the watchers' passing dance.

Shenzhen | 18 June 2004

A little girl out walking carries her guinea pig in a cage. He wears the same dazed expression his kind always wears, and I try to imagine what he thinks of the great world visible between bars. Truth is, he concentrates on chewing a morsel and may not have the world in mind at all. But I suppose this is not unlike a tram ride down a mountain, watching the world below with one eye through metal bars and plexiglass, absent-mindedly pondering great heights and making small talk (though it is hard to imagine a conversation of any size about snow in this hot place) about the depth of the powder.



Shenzhen | 19 June 2004

This is a child city that cannot stay out of the mud,
so the shower last night didn't do any good
except for the faint sweet odor it left in the air
early this morning. When it sees a puddle,
it cannot resist splashing in, and then the red
dust that is scattered everywhere becomes new
mud clinging to the city's feet that makes it easy to track.

It follows the wind chime laughter of young girls
and children who wear squeaky shoes
so their parents can always hear
where they are.

And the sound becomes such a source of fascination
that the child marches round and round,
stepping high to get the full effect

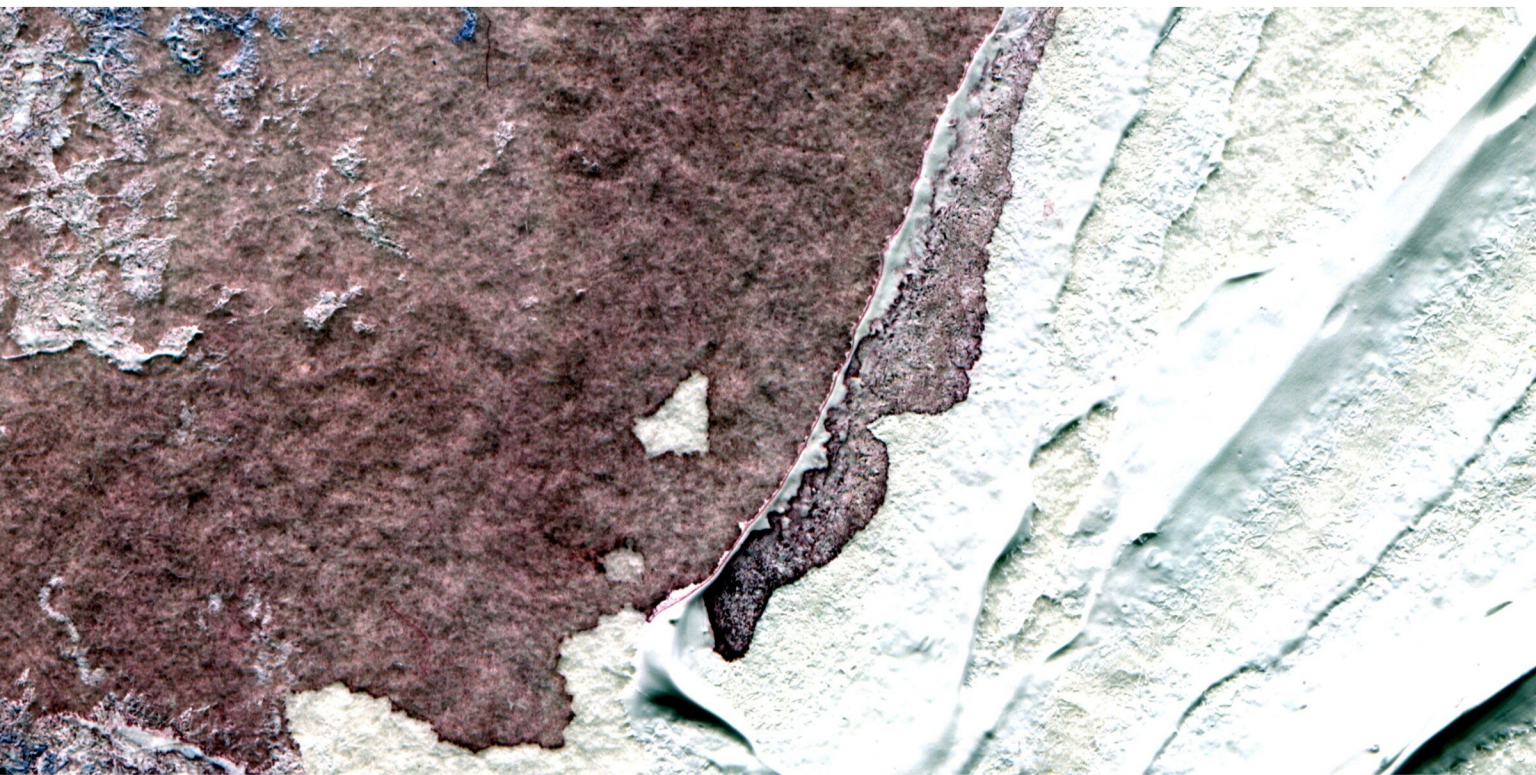
until the sound is everywhere and it mixes with the laughter
of ten thousand tiny bells dancing on wind
and a marimba chorus of insects over
a few hardy birds who sing
through it long after
most of their number have given up.

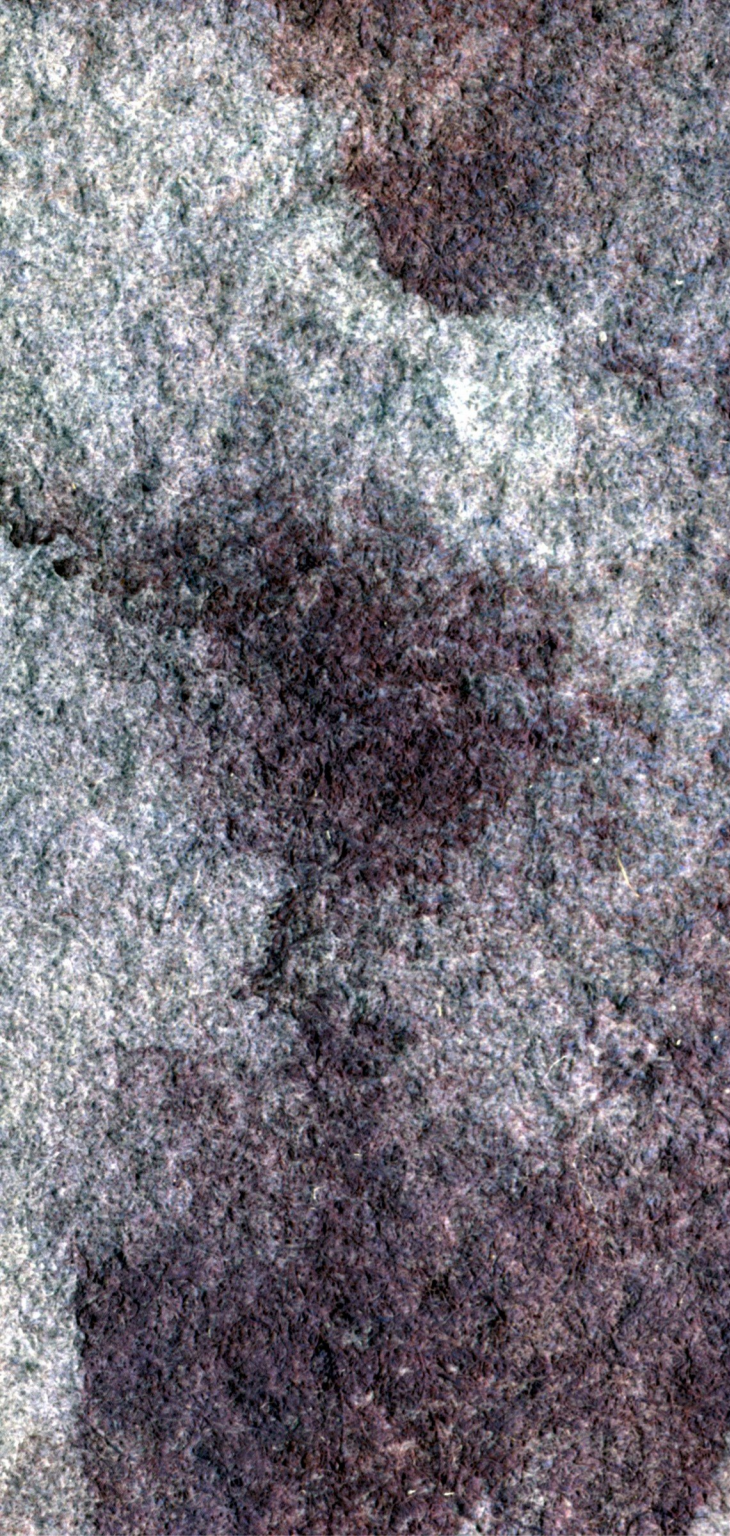
There is a different music coming from every bar
on this street lined with them and if you listen
you can find the edge where they all melt
in the sun and run together

Shenzhen | 19 June 2004

with engine sounds,
sandals slipping on pavement,
wind in trees, horns or the high screech
of brakes straining when horns fail to move their target.

Fireworks for the ears, rising
to the limit of vision, visible as
absence at the corner of the eye, no face when
you turn to face it. Your ears can scarcely
take their eyes off it.





Shenzhen | 21 June 2004

If tears contain SARS, we are in for a cold, cold war.
We have unleashed forces of nature before
thinking we could rein them in when
they get out of hand, but when
the time comes to dispose of
the leavings of this one,
we will come to know

that the half life
of plutonium is nothing
compared to the half life of a tear.

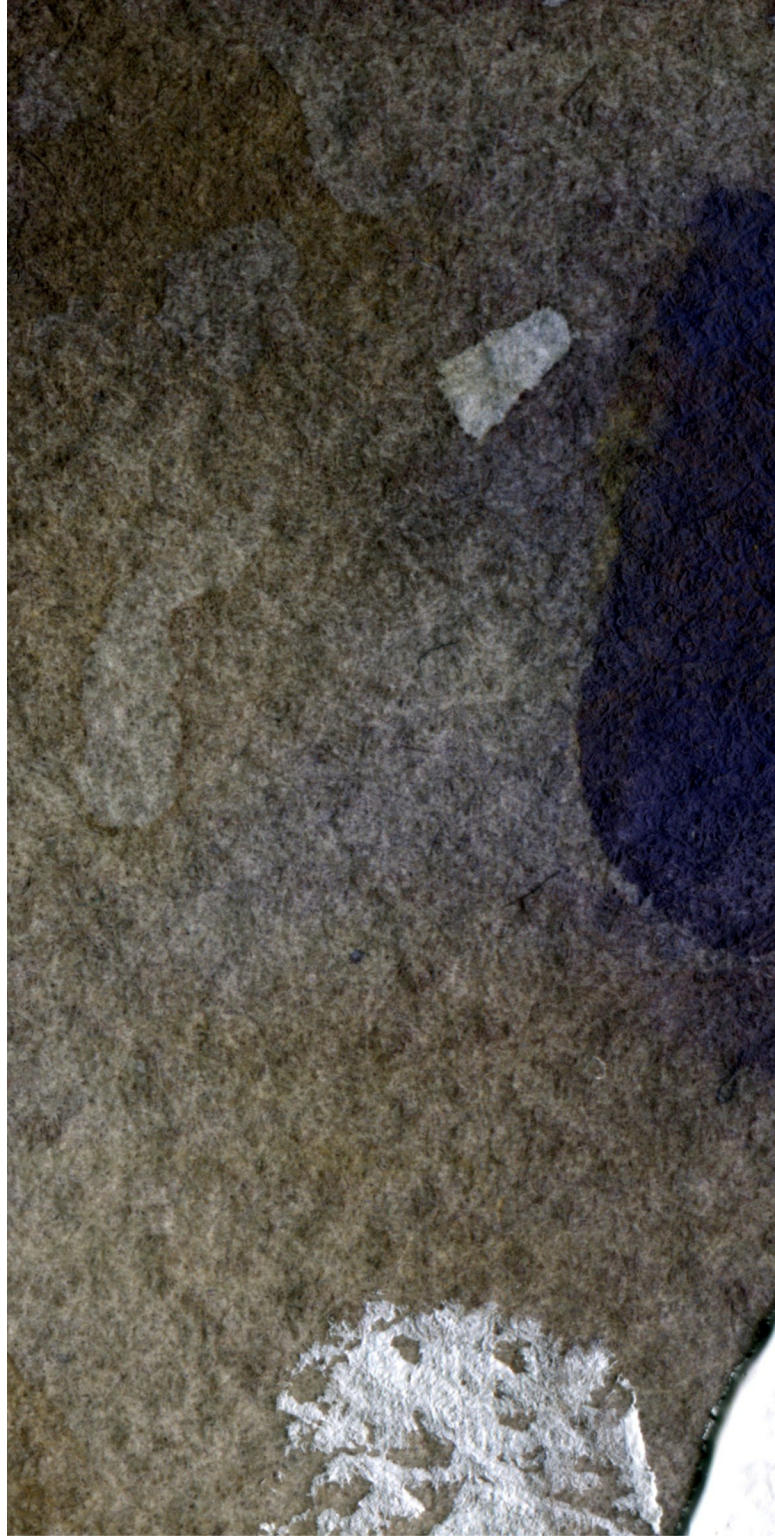
Shenzhen | 21 June 2004


A scattering of clear jewels
has gathered on the right side
of a long leaf after a night of rain,

fallen from a string
broken in a downpour,
gathering the deep tropical green

of a tree not quite at home
in a container kept at a sidewalk cafe
as they would on the string gather the soft tone

of a woman not quite at home
in the illusion of elegance.





Shenzhen | 22 June 2004

In the south, sticky sweet summer heat
entices every thing that grows to an orgy.

Lichi leave orchards in June, gather in flesh
pots, alligator red skin on skin, soft
sweet nectar on tiptoe

just beneath the surface,
all anticipation of the moment
it will break free and touch the world.

There are wicker baskets full
at the bottom of stairways,
bags and boxes in every office.

They drop, plop, at your feet,
manna from a promiscuous heaven
dispersed by armies a thousand times ten

thousand strong on foot enlisted
to scatter seeds without knowing they
are carriers. Fruit tempts with no assistance

from subtle serpent theologians, and
no one believes they can be booted from
this garden, which promises to go on and on

Shenzhen | 22 June 2004

and on, now and forever,
world without end.

A worker preparing for a day
of hard labor puts his pick down, strips
skin from half a dozen one by one, kisses down
the pulp, spits the seeds into a flower
bed where they will grow.

Some seed falls on
rock, some on paving stone.
Some sprouts and grows, comes again,

entices orgies other times.
And careless walkers
and walkers who

have despaired
of finding a moment lichi free
for feet, grind the sweet pulp into the faint odor

of sugary decay that permeates southern places
in summer, a molasses coated world
you can sink into

with no sign of ice,
no expectation of winter.



Shenzhen | 22 June 2004

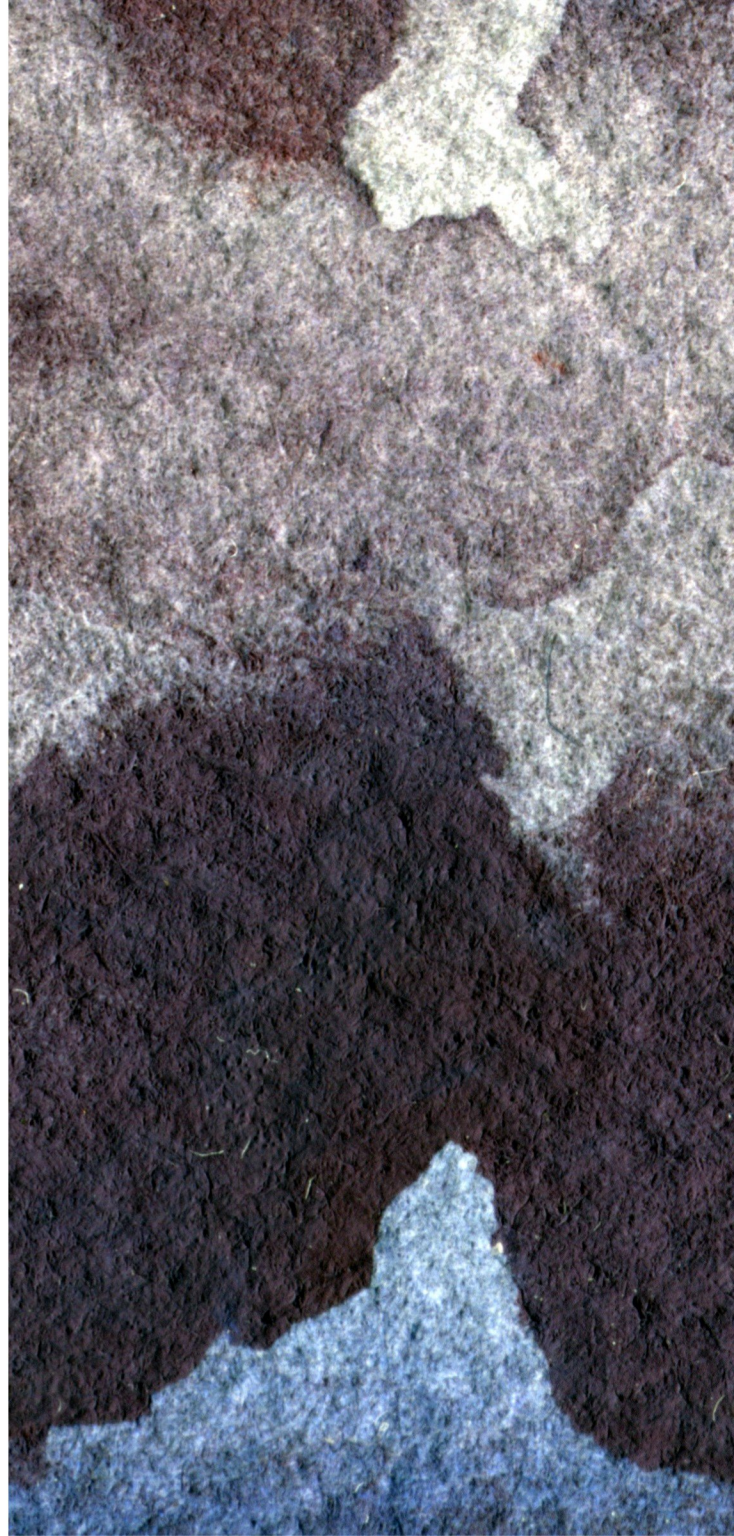
Raven black cascades
from bowed head over
shoulders slumped, back bent
under some invisible weight
that might be the weight
of the whole world.

I cannot see her face, but I fear
it continues the same posture of despair.
She sits alone at the edge of the walk
and does not have to say out loud
she has been hurt.

It seems she has tamed a rat,
who bounces out of a hole and
takes some tidbit from her.

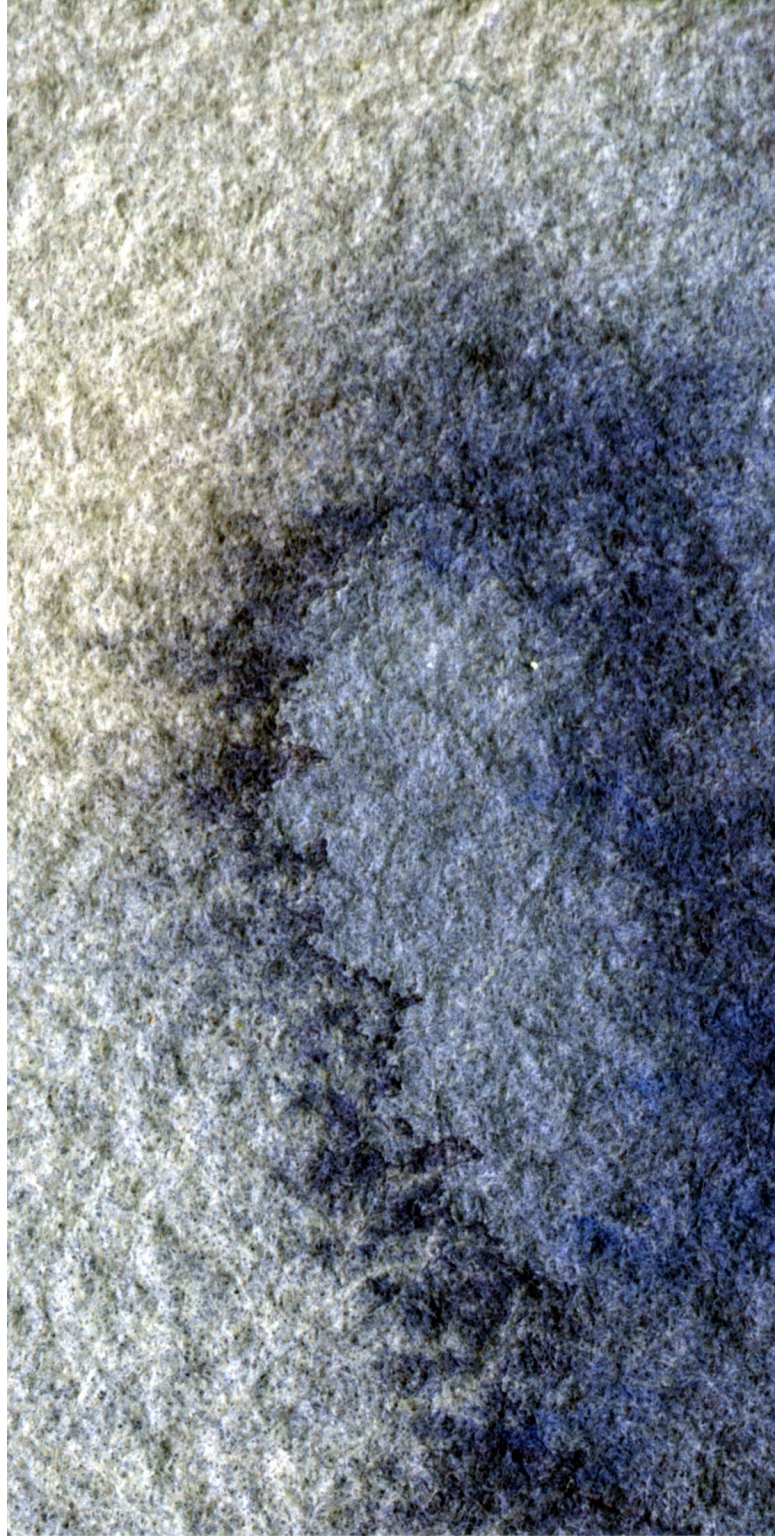
This is the way of heat in
southern China: at the very bottom
of despair it has wild animals eating out of its hand.

Everything depends on the hunger,
the hunger of the rat, the hunger
of the young girl's despair.



Shenzhen | 23 June 2004

A woman is mopping the square, the same one who struggled three days ago in a downpour to hold back rising water with her broom. These omnipresent sweepers are miracles of nature, relentlessly tending to the order veiled under this city's chaos, coaxing it to light, coaxing the sun to rise and begin another day.





Shenzhen | 24 June 2004

Time comes when viscous heat slows mind
to a dead stop. It cannot fold its wings
any closer, and the resistance
of the medium is greater

than the motive power of the mind. Body
moves in air, slows, but never stops.

The medium of mind
is heat itself, and now it is still.

Shenzhen | 24 June 2004

The air, I think, of a predator.

Yellow blouse barely caresses
waist, exposes promise of flesh.

High heels force body forward, arch back,
accentuate breasts. She turns the heads
of women sweeping the square.

Unaware of the beauty of their years of care,
they wish in this instant for
smooth faces
with no visible
memories of hard labor.

Long, black hair moves with her,
moves with gentle breeze, moves as she paces,
paces, stops at the bars of a cage she alone can see, turns,

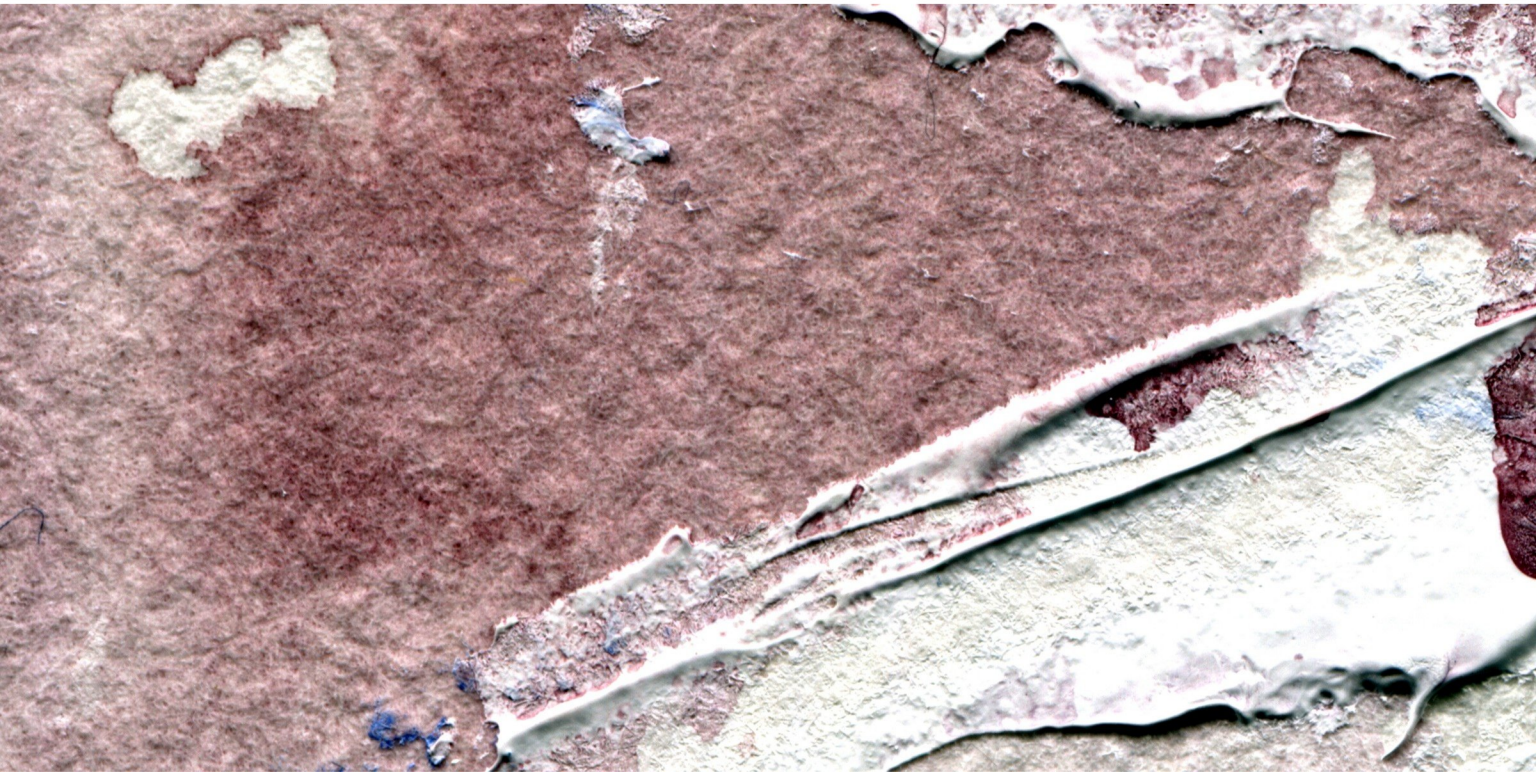
measures the length of it
to the other invisible
end, then again,

then again, then again and again. She turns
her hand, glances at her wrist
without bowing her head.

Shenzhen | 24 June 2004

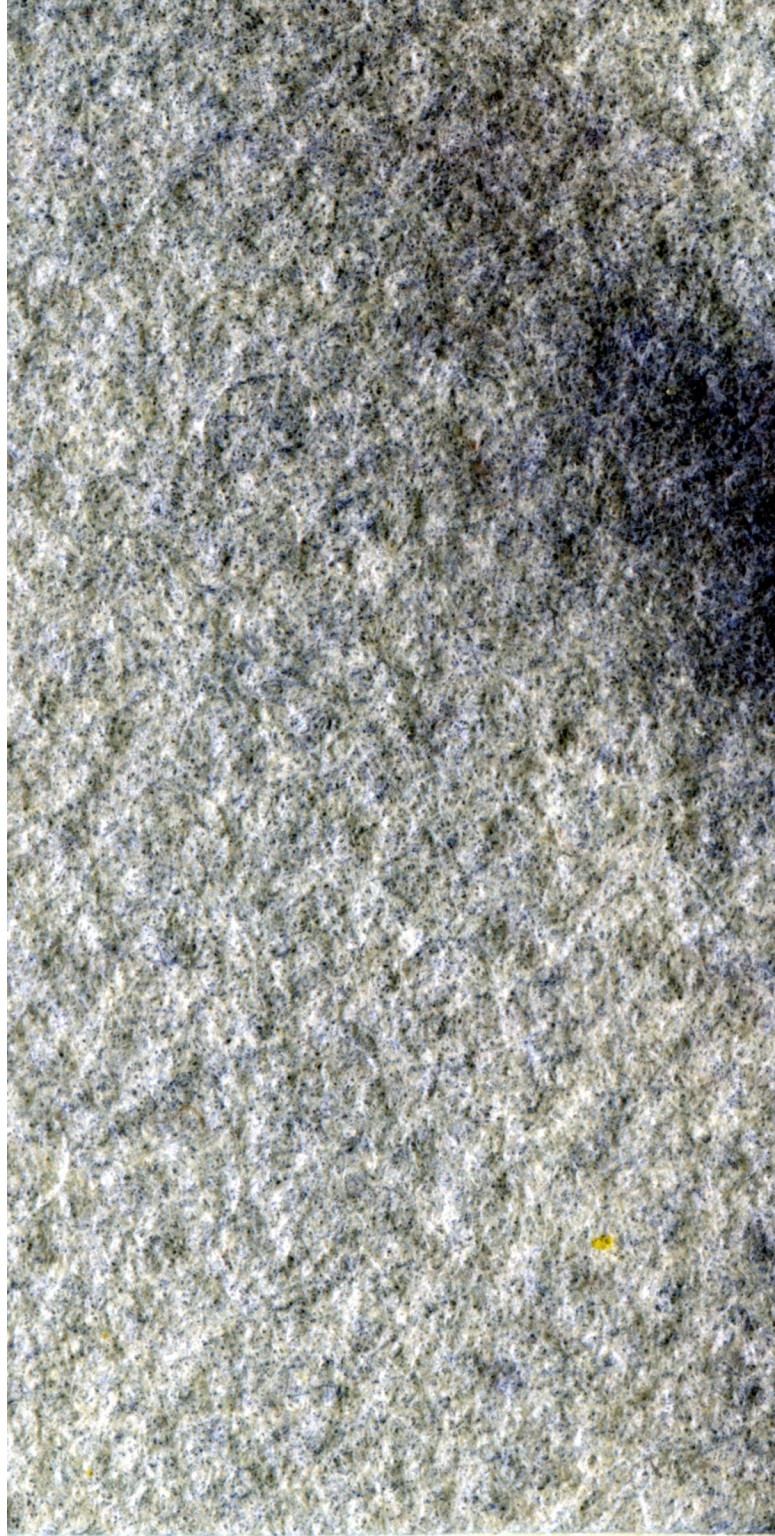
The door of the cage opens; she strides
to the street – long, decisive
steps, not a trace
of hesitation,
stops a taxi

with her eyes.
She is gone.



Shenzhen | 25 June 2004

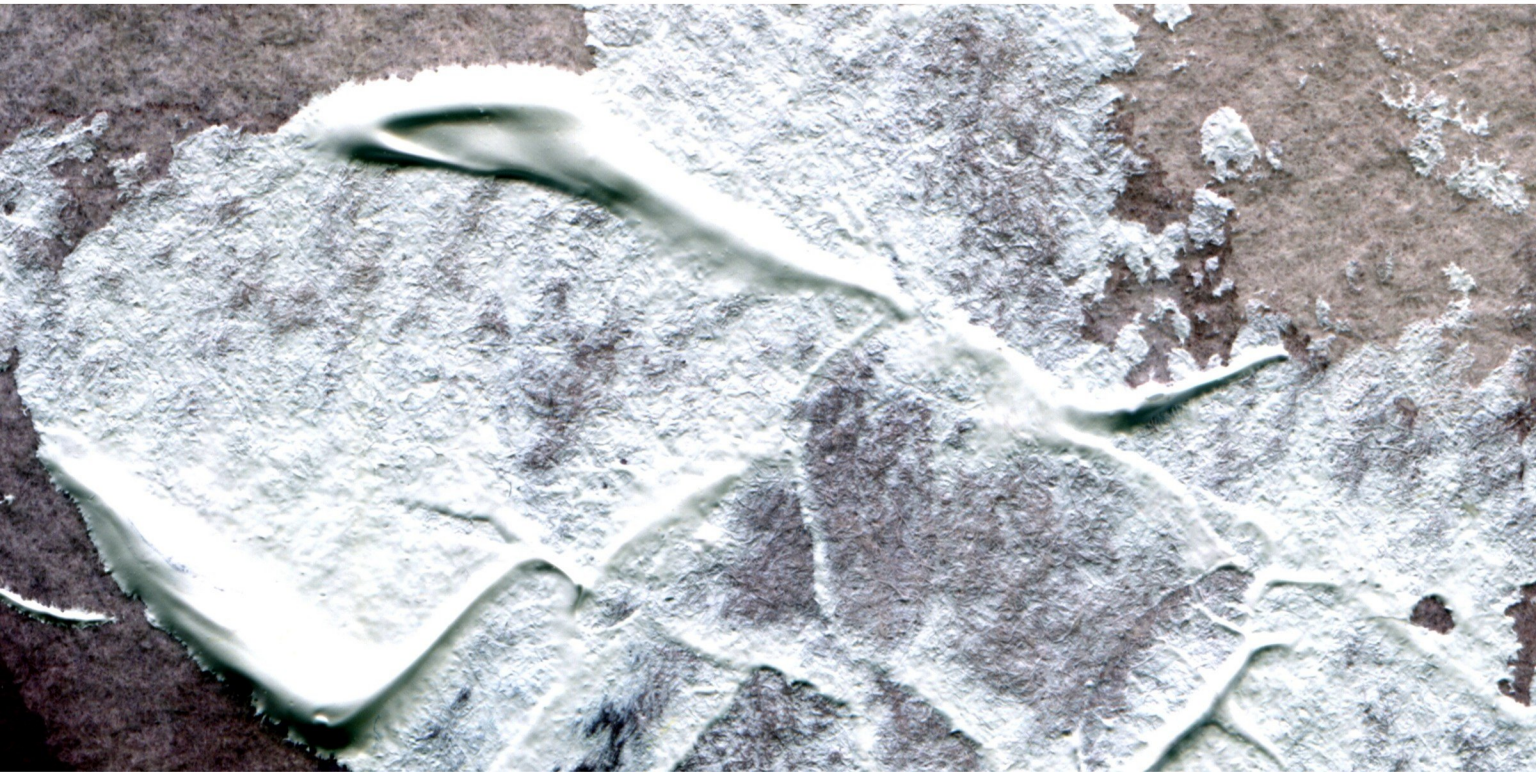
Che Guevara's face stands out in the second row of my class on American poetry in China, so I raise my clenched fist and say *Hasta la siempre victoria!* The response is a puzzled look, so I try *I like your t-shirt*, to which the wearer responds *Cuban hero*. I say, *yes, yes, la lucha continua*. And it does, it does it does. And as long as it does, it is good to know that face is known. The true revolutionary is motivated by love, and, given time and poetry, I will learn to say it in Chinese.



Shenzhen | 25 June 2004

It surprised me when they did not understand
the small hands of lovers and rain in this place. Perhaps it is
because the hands of rain are so often clenched when they fall here.

But this morning, its open fingers are
so tiny you do not know
their touch until
you have walked a long way with no
umbrella and see that you are soaked through.





Shenzhen | 26 June 2004

There are sleepers along the walk,
stripped to the waist in heat
that does not break

even when it rains. It rolled in
at the beginning of May and has
crushed the last parasol of resistance

by the end of June. Some of them
worked through the night on this city
that has no idea how to stop. Some will rise

soon to begin again, tearing the city down by hand
with pick and hammer, while massive
trucks wait in line to pour concrete
where the Phoenix city is rising

as it falls, a Daoist geometry of solid contraries. Some
will gather at the edges of rich people's haunts
and scratch for leavings as they pass.

There are little armies marching on
these same edges with sticks
they carry to keep the rabble in
line, ensure that money is never disturbed.

Shenzhen | 26 June 2004

There are moments of contact. Where a cop
and a beggar have waited on the same corner for years,
there is a strategic admiration like that between commanders

who face each other on the same battlefield
a long time, intimate as lovers. The longer the war
the more it resembles a lovers' quarrel.

I have seen cops and beggars trade smiles
and conversation after coins have dropped
and another tourist has gone away undisturbed.

They have roles to play, and the drama, like
the city, does not sleep for fear it will not wake.

When a coin drops in a beggar's bowl it is
the sound of money rhythmic
as picks and hammers

at scenes of endless construction:
tear the city down,
raise the city
up, let us make a city.

There are sleepers,
but never the city.

Shenzhen | 26 June 2004

Three young teens have brought a skateboard
to practice on the wide open square
at hai shang shi jie –

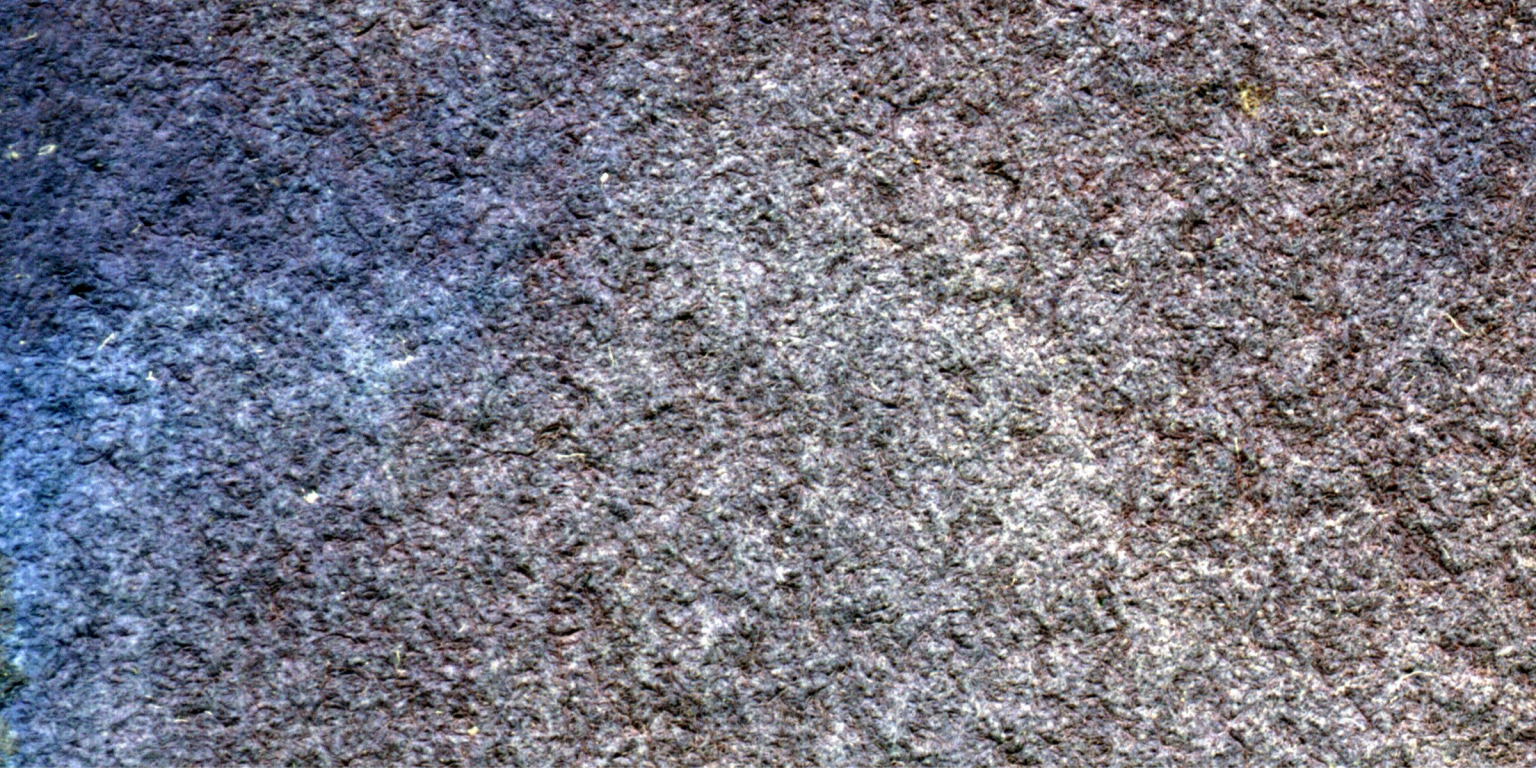
almost too early to vogue, but a cop not much older than they
watches with a look that says he would join them
if he could. He will send them away

when the square is crowded with tourists
and young mothers who bring their children
here to walk. But not now. A man who must be forty
something stops, hand on hip contrapposto, to watch them.

He can remember a moment
if he holds himself still against the money.

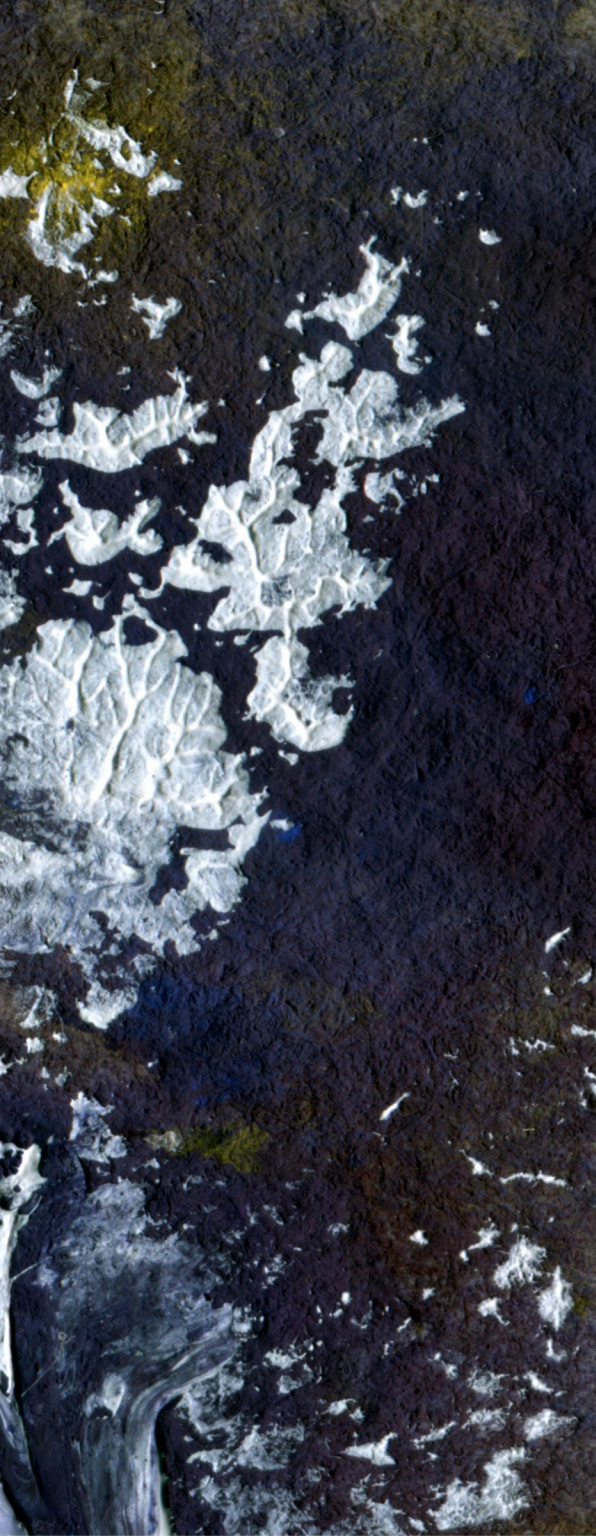
But still is possible only for an instant at the pivot point
on which the world turns. He moves, and so do the
boys with the skateboard. A mother laughs with her
daughter in a bright orange dress, shows her how
to flap her wings, and trailing tiny bells of laughter, they fly.





Shenzhen | 27 June 2004

There is a way of saying “hello” in China that is not a greeting, but a celebration of the silliness of the sound, an occasion for laughter. Americans on the street must learn that there is no more reason to turn on hearing it than to answer a cell phone ringing in a stranger’s pocket. A person extending a greeting will look at you and smile, and you will know, without hello, to say ni hao.



Shenzhen | 27 June 2004

When the young woman who serves my coffee
almost every morning said her name
was Summer, I thought she said Summa
and took it as a mantra for morning meditation on names.

I considered Thomas and his descriptions
of actions mistaken for proofs that always come to
what everybody knows as... though everybody knows nothing.

She has a smile that is more like Spring than this
relentless heat, but I can see the sunshine
in it. I also have a friend named Nature
and I met Ice Cream last week.

Not long after I arrived, I met Chocolate and Tomato,
and I knew Coffee before I found a shop on
every second corner in Shekou.

This is a custom Americans should borrow.
We should all choose Chinese names
to replace our unpronounceable ones in English,
borrowed already from God knows where or when.

And for beginners, the words will be simple,
like Bambi weaving a world of new words with those he loves,
knowing in his young heart that a friend is a flower

Shenzhen | 27 June 2004

even if he is a skunk. A rose is a rose
is a rose, and so we could be Hua
because they smell sweet

in the sticky heat of Shenzhen summer
or smile through it in ten thousand
colors among butterflies. Or we

could be Shan because they are good to
climb and for the eyes, and it sounds almost Irish. We
could be Feng, because it cools us in the moment
it sweeps over what is left of ocean. Shui

to quench our thirst, Chai because it heals us. Tian
because it brings us clouds, Zhongzi, sticky sweet
as summer, hot in banana leaves, Bao because

it holds tasty surprises,
Mifan because it nourishes us, Miao
because it is what cats say when they speak to us.

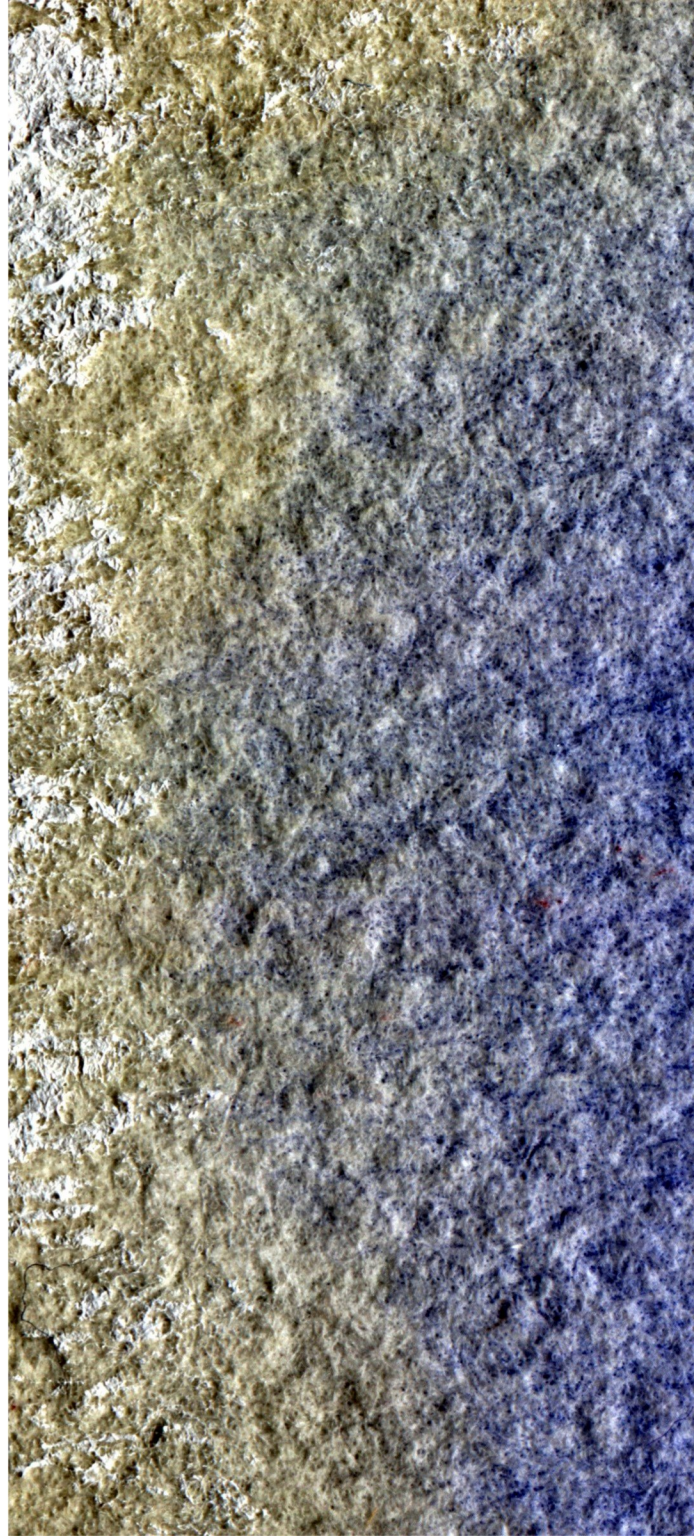
Niao for the song they sing every morning.
And Shu if we sing it one way is a tree
to shade us from sun, and if we
sing it another, we can read it in the shade.

Shenzhen | 27 June 2004

Pinguo because it is
sweet and juicy. Or Da,
which is what my daughter
called me when she was tiny and had to look
straight up to see my face. Lichi sweet and red in June.

Endless possibilities if we use all the languages we meet
but hardly know to introduce ourselves to
new friends. And this will teach us
quickly, if we do not know it yet
how delicate reference is.
Words cannot contain
beings of infinite names,

and every gesture in a world of such beings
does nothing but call the wonder of it all to mind.




Shenzhen | 28 June 2004

I have had occasion of late
to contemplate the undeniable weight
of heat. Not a particular hot thing that would tip a scale,

but heat itself, which searches out
the permeability of everything, settles right
into its bones, transmutes to gold or something that

is weightier still. Still, it can no longer lift its feet.
And so it can do nothing but wait for rain
or what passes here as winter.





Shenzhen | 28 June 2004

This morning is ballroom dancing
in the square, and a cluster
of middle aged women
and men who remember a time when
they moved with the graceful youth
of the couple they are following now or wish they did

– a young woman whose body dances even
when she walks among dancers,
a tall young man

with dark hair who takes the hand of each woman
in turn and makes her think she is the only one
replaces qigong with Western steps.

They are looking for a dance to dance
them elsewhere. A beautiful
dark young woman
dressed for hard labor
and carrying a heavy pack slows
as she passes to watch, and her progress
is the dance of history lived forward
without the luxury of a backward glance or
a ballroom dance. She is, I think, Tibetan, and this
would be the place she would go to find work,

Shenzhen | 28 June 2004

not as different as she hoped
from gathering rocks at the summit of a mountain
whose fingertips touch heaven; not so different but more
than an arm's length from the sky.

She sees her mother in these women
who follow a sorceress in a strange city. The dancers
turn the heads of every young woman who passes,

and I wonder if it is the future they see there
that makes them pause or if they are
using the young woman
in the lead as a mirror
in which to check their makeup.

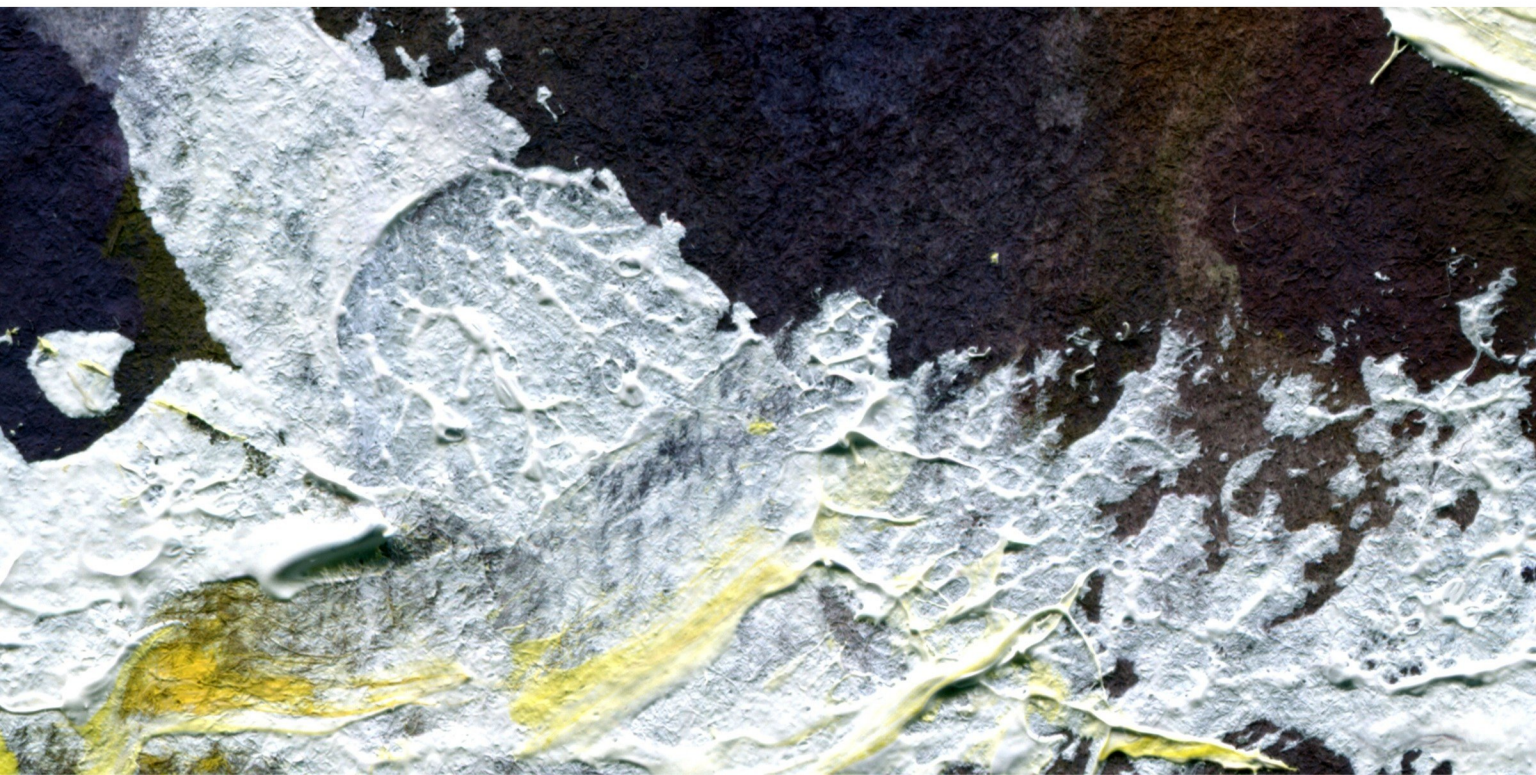
The children do not turn to watch, but
they are happy to hear the music and dance their own dance.
They do not think it strange when these old folk receive walking
lessons while they are learning to dance. Learning to walk is
something they know well, and they have a reason
to think it will end, no reason to think they will
become these dancers.



Shenzhen | 28 June 2004

A call from a friend late last night
to consult on the proper placement
of the adjective “Christian.” I give him
the best answer I can with reference
to the choir of a Shenzhen church,

but I cannot stop thinking that the proper placement is
somewhere else. This place has its own song to sing,
and I fear the adjective will leave no place in which to sing it.



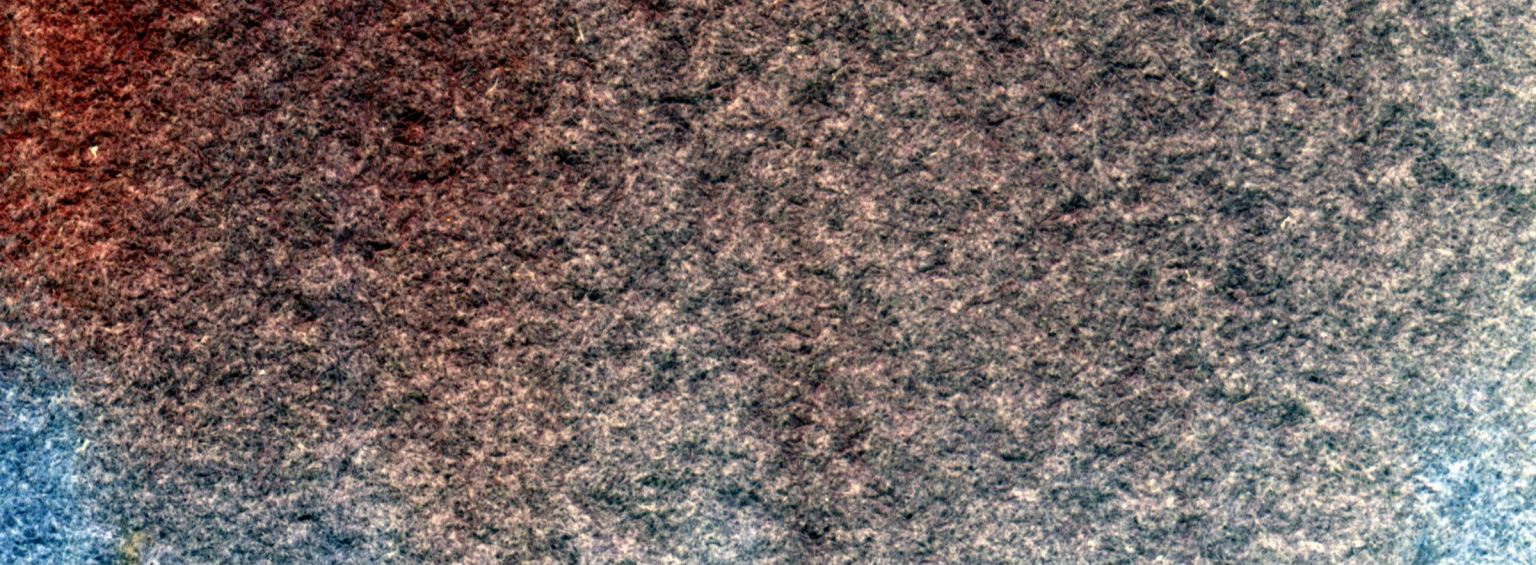


Shenzhen and Guangzhou | 29 June 2004

Bird sings early this morning before heat takes all the song
out of him. There is a chorus of two bird songs,
joined as heat deepens by cicadas on washboards.

By the time the sun rises,
the rhythm section has taken over the band,
bird song fades, heat settles, insects dream out loud
while life thickens and slows of a time when

this heat will be all there is,
and it will all be theirs.

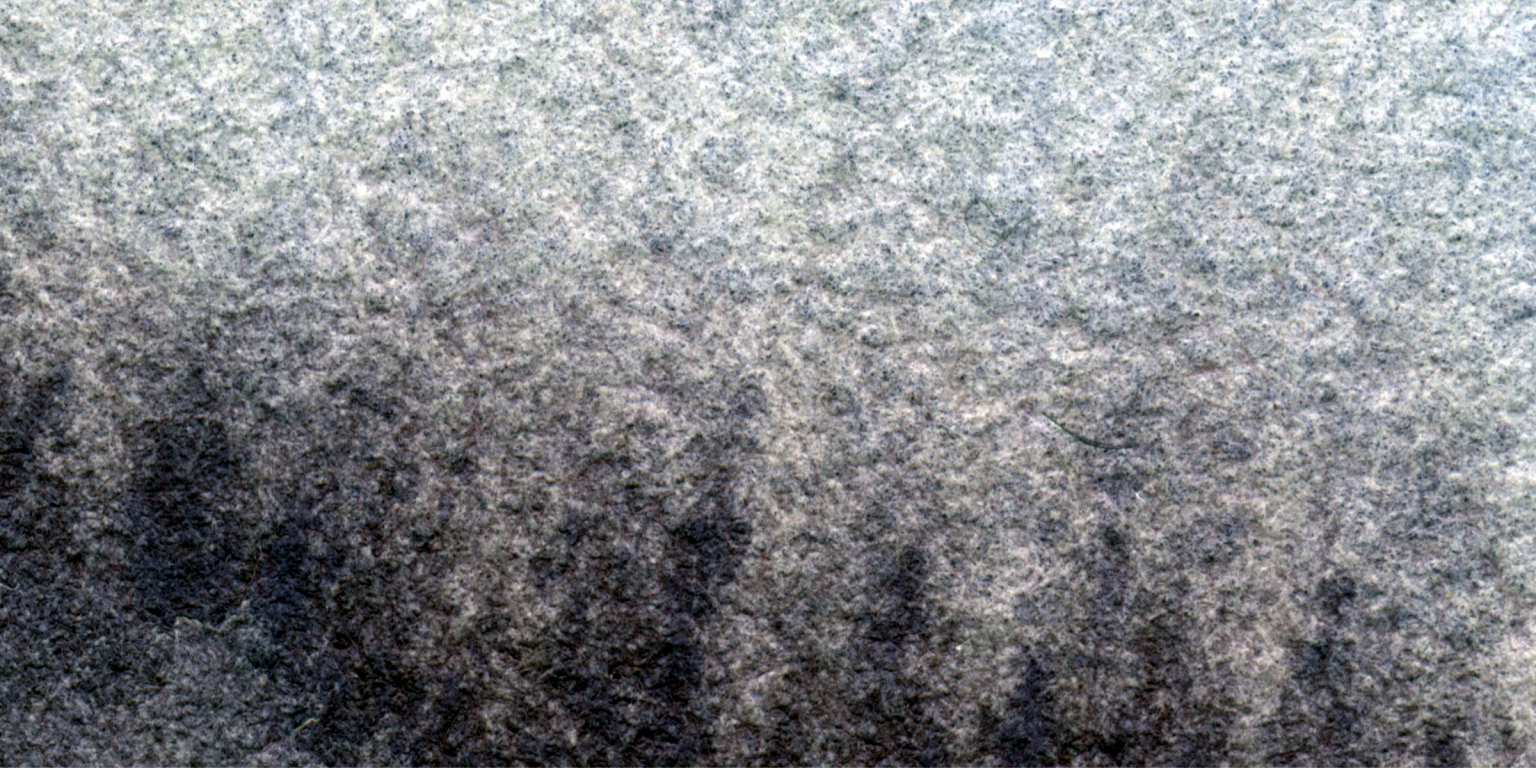


Shenzhen and Guangzhou | 29 June 2004

In Guangzhou, when I have to use a cellphone
to arrange a meeting with a friend, I become
one of those postmodern peripatetics
snatching shards of conversation
from the air on a busy street.

I wonder how she can hear me when
I speak as though she were walking beside me
but she isn't, and there is nothing to speak into. I hear
only fragments of what she says,
and I think we have become

adept at restoring cities of conversation
from broken remnants, finding our way in them
with an imprecision we learned to tolerate by degrees
when the cities were still standing but had begun to crumble.



Guangzhou | 29 June 2004

Morning air
can't quite bear
the weight of sunshine
in this heat. So it lays it down

rippling in a line
across the surface
of the water.

Guangzhou | 29 June 2004

At the invitation of my friends, I recite
a sensuous poem about lichi after dinner,
but it is in English and does not
conform to classical style.

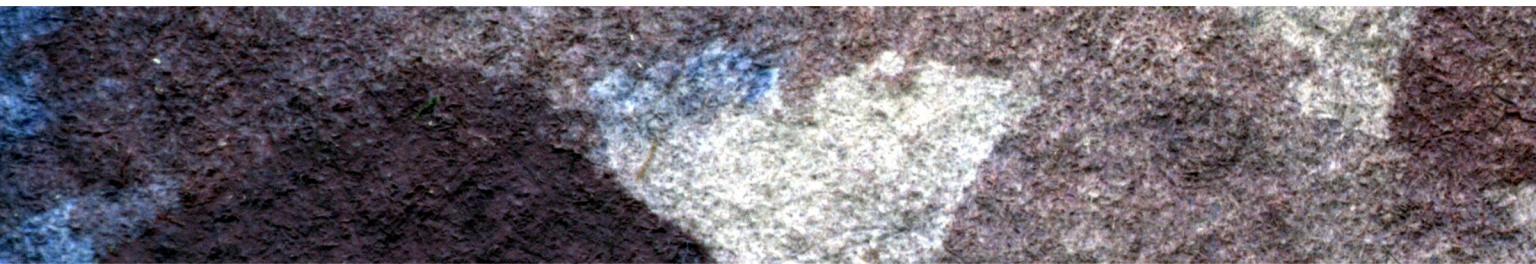
Over lichi, cha, and beer,
it leaves my hands and becomes Chinese.

A Cantonese opera song about a country girl
who sells lichi by the road. Characters scrawled on
paper, then the song sung in a woman's steady voice.

Someone thinks of Su Shi, whole
volumes of lichi poems, where the lichi's
heat gathers opposite the stem, a thin white layer
under red, red dress, white slip. How sweet
the center! The best poem points,

holds a branch with laurel leaves high, yi liang san si...
It is a sensuous fruit, especially among friends,
and it opens to sensuous poetry,
sweet song,
laughter,

four classical lines: count them.



Guangzhou | 29 June 2004

There are a thousand people
between here and the river
reaching for qi this morning.
A grandmother sings a sad song
to a young boy who hangs
from her arms and takes it all in.

Birdsong is accompanied here
by the hacking coughs of old men
who have lived too long
with bad air.

They shuffle to and from
the river, trying to clear their
lungs. The air is beyond them;

but they look into the eyes
of the little boy as they pass,
listen to grandmother's song,
breathe deep in memory.



Shenzhen | 1 July 2004

A yellow green mottled leaf lies still where it fell
yesterday when wind came up
on a gray paving stone

in red dust raised by a long march –
five thousand years that turned this way
with Deng Xiaoping after Mao.

All the sadness in the world stirs in it when
wind stirs and I think of the smiles
on the faces of peasant soldiers on bicycles

who take the radio station in Guangzhou for the people,
contained in photos that hang in a shiny new
building that has put programs on the

Market while the old men who keep
themselves alive on it hire youthful smiles
to hide behind. It seems that every picture contains

at least one smile on the face of someone who
died at their own hand in some cultural revolution.

(How do you say Phil Ochs in Cantonese?)

It was a children's crusade, and nothing
could contain their happiness. Even
separated from the tree, the leaf contains

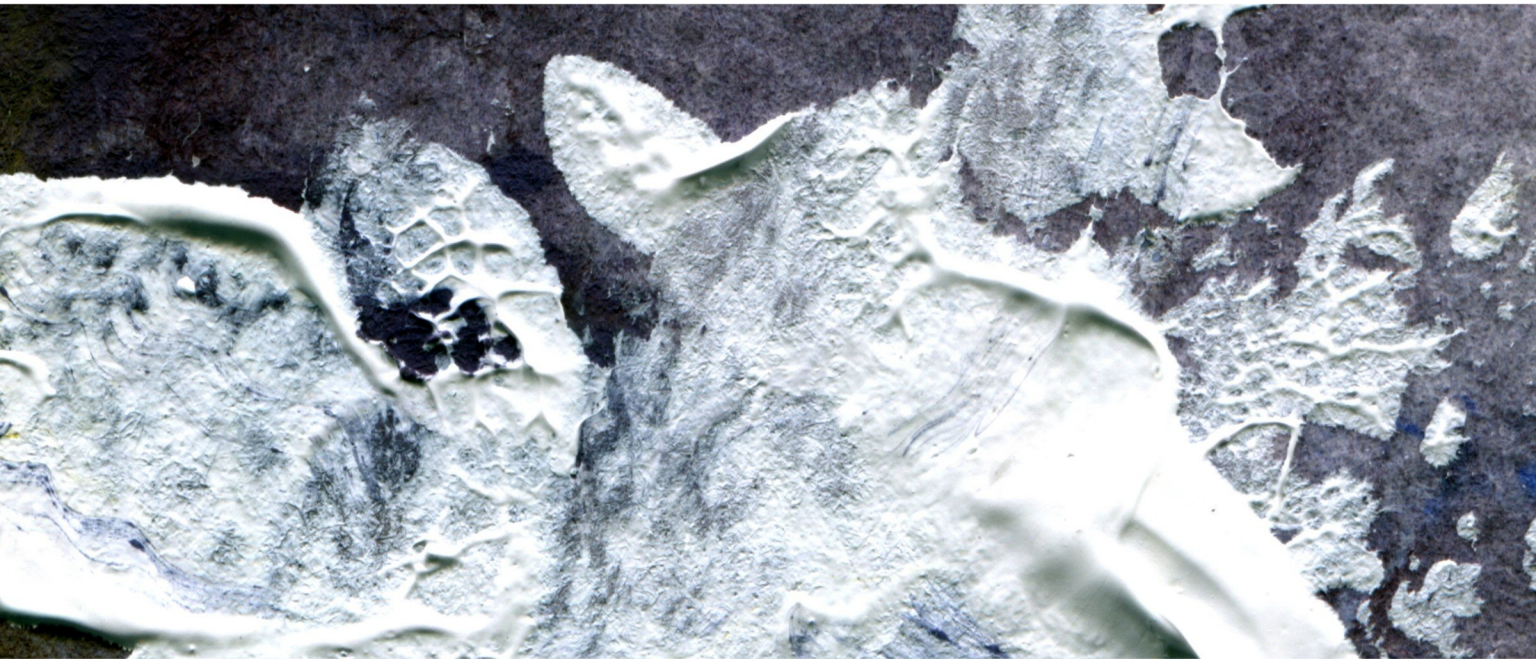
Shenzhen | 1 July 2004

millennia of memory that will dry and crumble
slowly in the liquid heat of this place before it is washed
away in a downpour on the edge of the next typhoon

that wanders this way. The city tries to begin
its memory with Deng and employs thousands of sweepers
with old brooms to remove traces of whatever was before –

but they cannot do what typhoons and heat
that melts into every crevice has not done.
Mao or no, Mao's smile remains,

and the steps of a five thousand year
march before him.





Shenzhen | 1 July 2004

A young boy bursts into the square
with a basketball he handles
with his feet, stops it cold with one
but does not bend it with the other
to an imagined goal. His imagination
stretches from Beckham to Yao Ming, and
he flips it to his hand, dribbles between
his legs, behind his back, turns
and walks away with his mother –
basketball tucked under his arm –
when she joins him.

Shenzhen | 2 July 2004

Full moon finds her way
to what is left of the sea.
lays down her burden

of light in a line
that ripples between
fishing boats to the feet of a crowd

gathered on rocks by the shore.
She stays a long time
watching

the crowd watching



Shenzhen | 2 July 2004

Moon rises full over an old ship
that used to be French and seaworthy but is
stranded now by the flood of sand rising toward Hong Kong.

She hesitates, confused by this great whale
stranded far from shore. Her face
clouds as she watches, then

brightens again, and she makes her way
to a small fishing fleet poised to enter
the Pearl River and sail up toward

Guangzhou, where they know
Guanyin has smiled on
hungry people before.

This time, they hope
for fish but would settle for rams
bearing gifts. Moon smiles at this, gives
them all she has: a ripple of diamonds
on the surface of nighttime water.





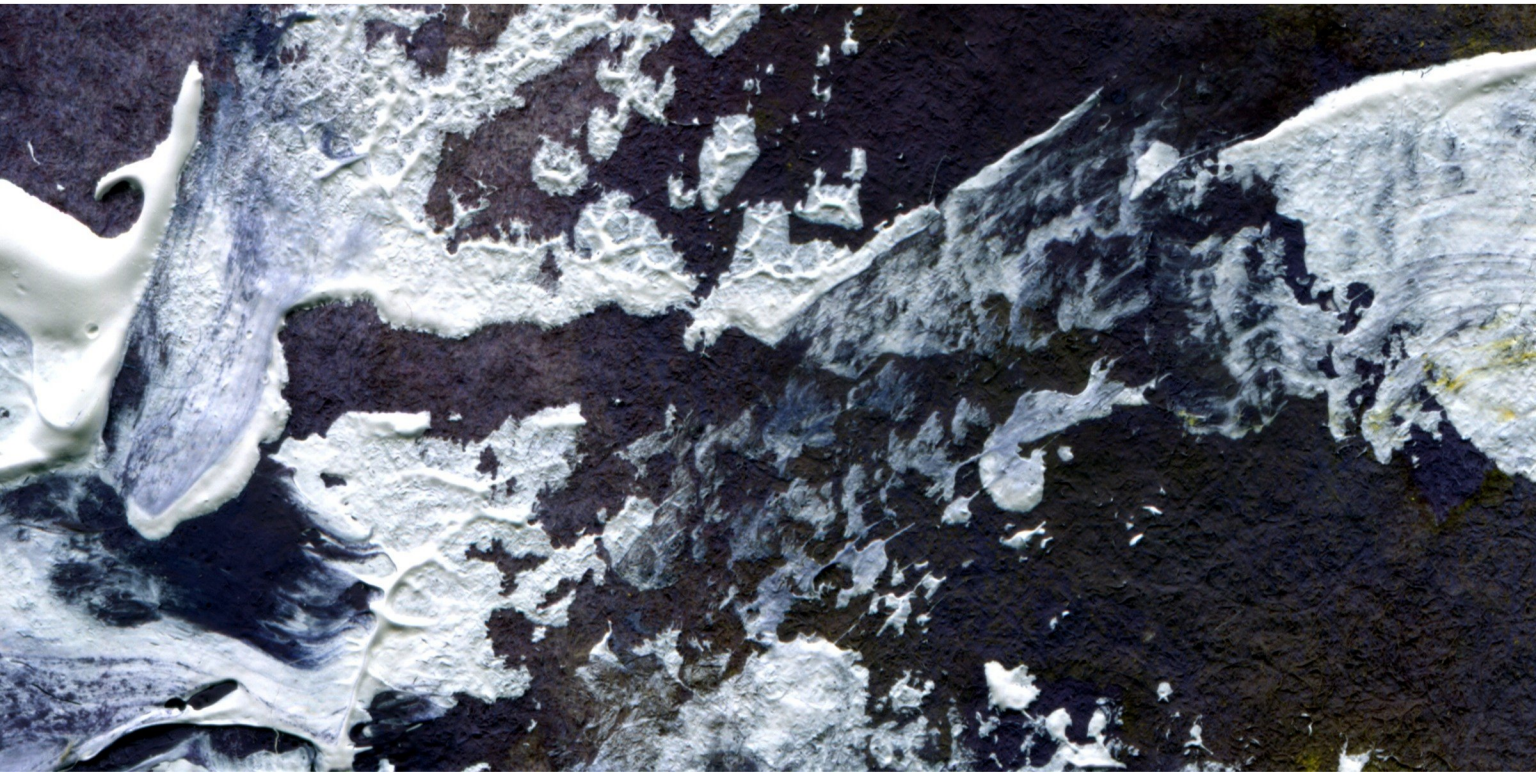
Shenzhen | 3 July 2004

Wind rose this morning, and rain
fell hard enough to bring down branches.
But solitary leaves lay still in places
where rain did not reach, broken

on the edge of a typhoon that remains
only a dark possibility for now but turns
every conversation about leaving to a litany
of ways to reach Hong Kong when the ferry stops.

Shenzhen | 3 July 2004

Days of haze under the shadow
of an approaching typhoon have left the city
lethargic. Slow pace slows until nothing moves.
There is nothing to do but watch for
the storm and its shadow to pass.



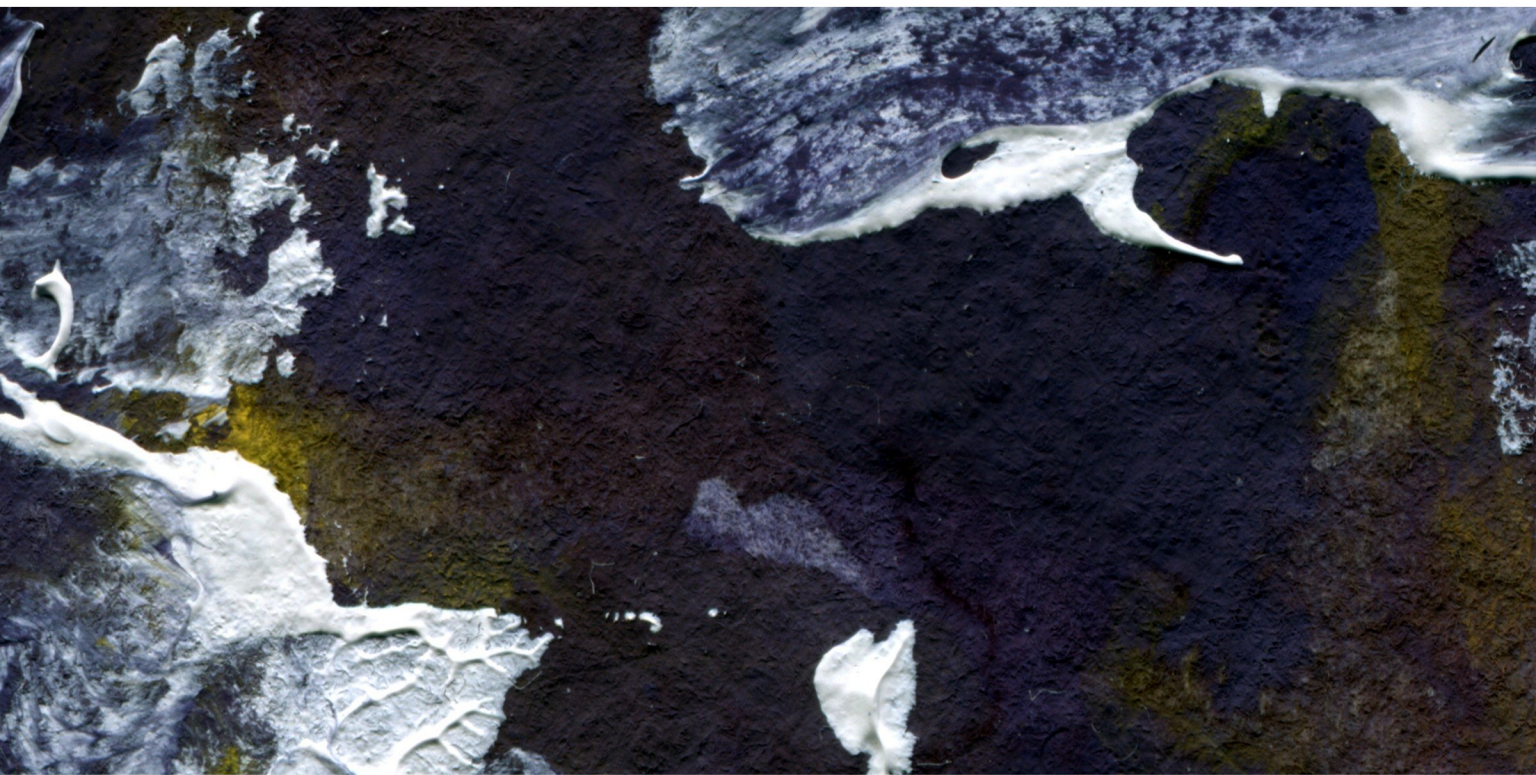
Shenzhen | 4 July 2004

A pair of high heeled shoes lies
at the bottom of a thousand steps over
a busy street; one is toppled on its side, one
upright. Toes point away from steps; straps
unclasped, not broken. The woman's absence is
so strong you can taste her perfume. You can see her
stop after making her way over the street
beside an impatient man wearing comfortable shoes,
unclasp those heels from feet that have been bound too long
and step out of them
to make the rest of the journey alone
tall enough in stocking feet.



Shenzhen | 4 July 2004

Trying to explain to a young woman why writing is more intimate than talking on a cellphone, I am reminded why women grow more beautiful with age. There is nothing to love if not time, and nothing kills it more quickly than the shattering impatience of digital speech.



Shenzhen | 5 July 2004

After three hours of politics over cha,
we drink a toast to doubt
on the fourth of July,

pledge to do the same on first October. It is
simple, really. When politicians give up
dreams of godhead, give up power

over life and death, they can turn their attention
from war to what should concern
them: taking out the garbage,

keeping the sewers open. What is so hard
about being human among humans?

We were waiting out the rain
and notice it has stopped. Taiwan
is still threatening to declare independence;

the United States is still playing God.
The girl next door is still marching off to war
and cheerfully torturing the enemy d'jour. true believers

are still demanding that the world walk
their walk or go to hell. But we
have sat together, and we know it can be done.

Shenzhen | 5 July 2004

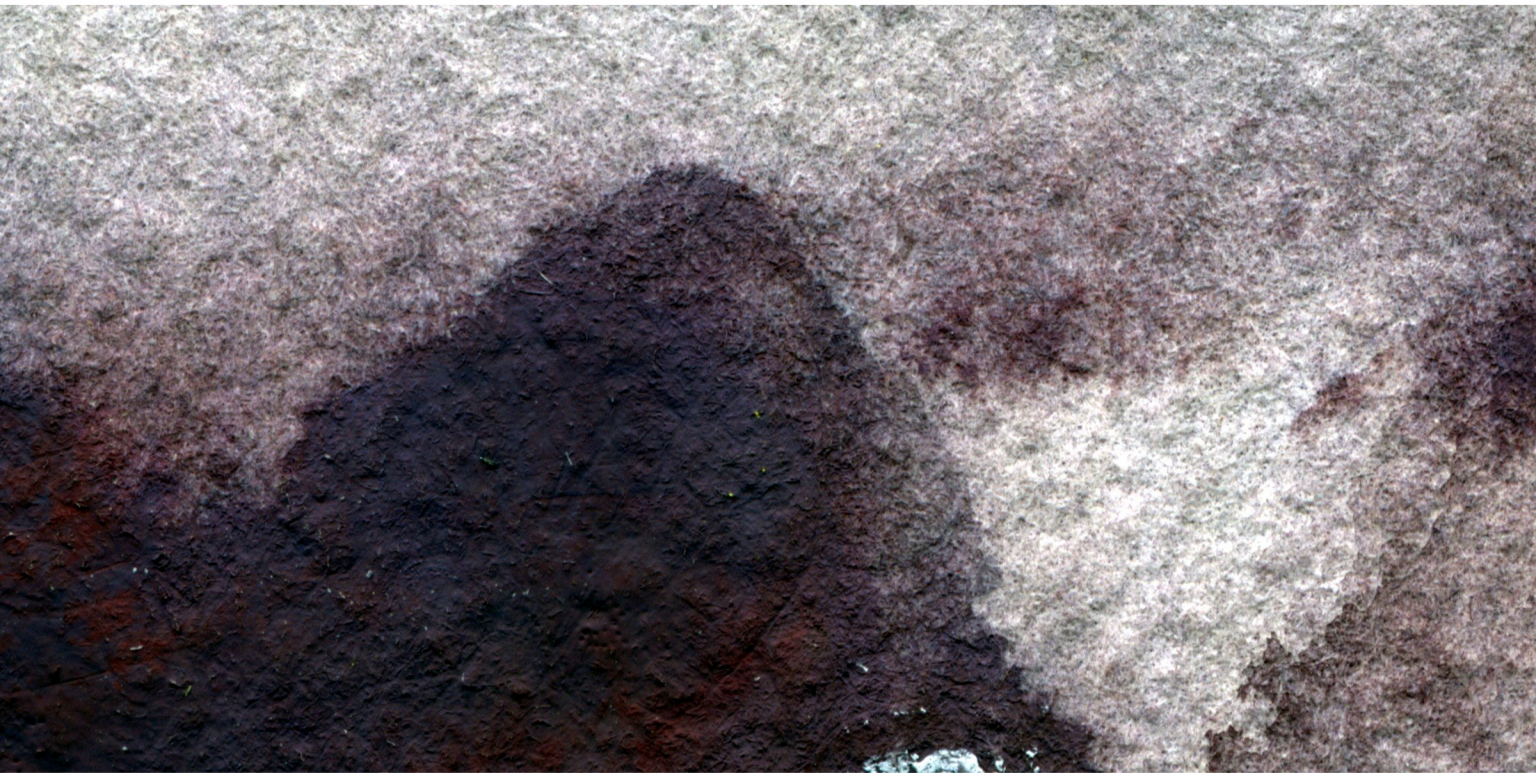
How did this begin?

With a reference to Che

on a student's t-shirt as a fashion statement.

Hasta la victoria siempre. But no need to wait for victoria

siempre, no need to wait for victoria at all, no
need to wait.

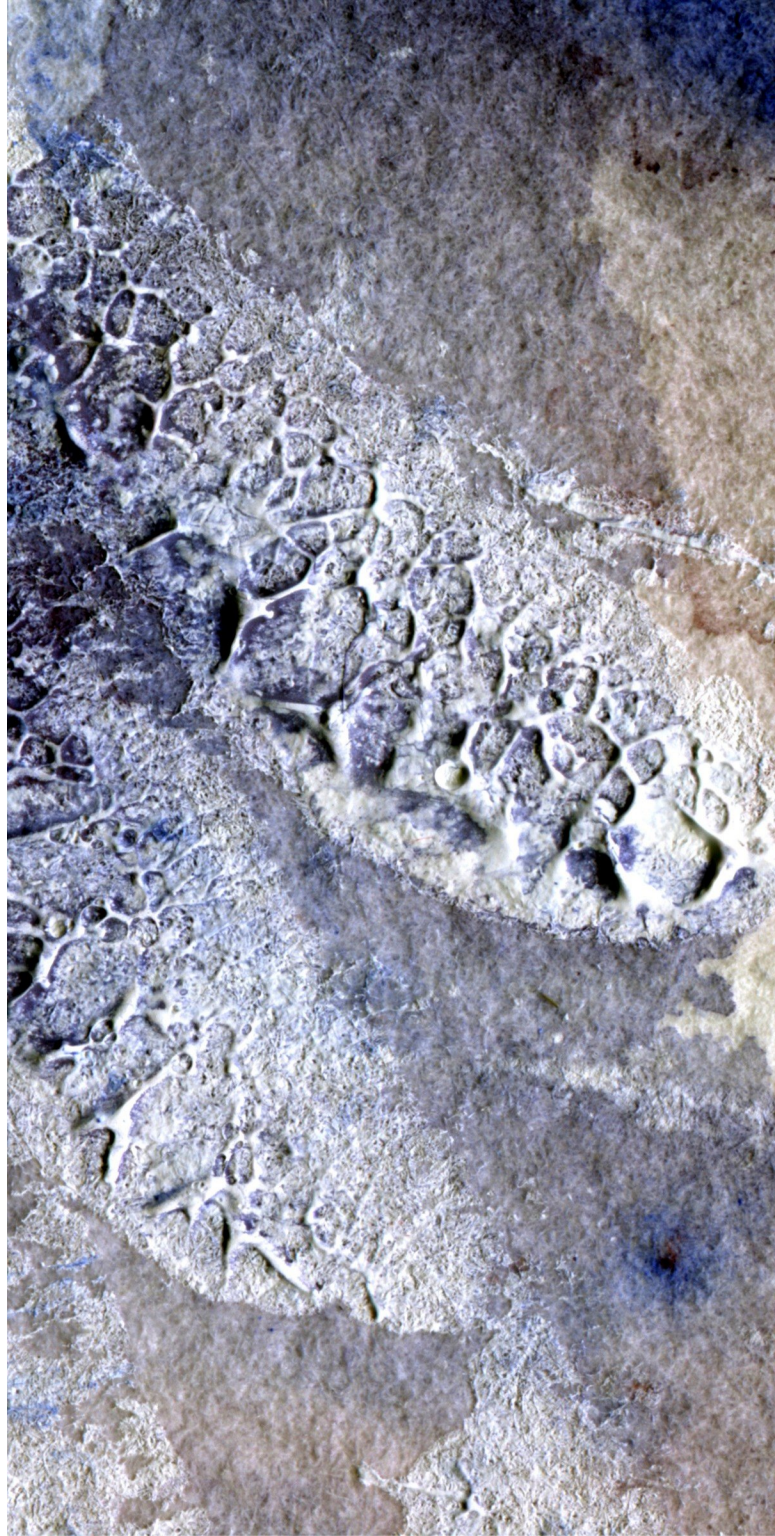


Shenzhen | 6 July 2004

Waiting for the bus, rain
is falling hard. A laughing
little boy faces the downpour
at shelter's edge with no umbrella
while adults intent on staying dry huddle
behind him.

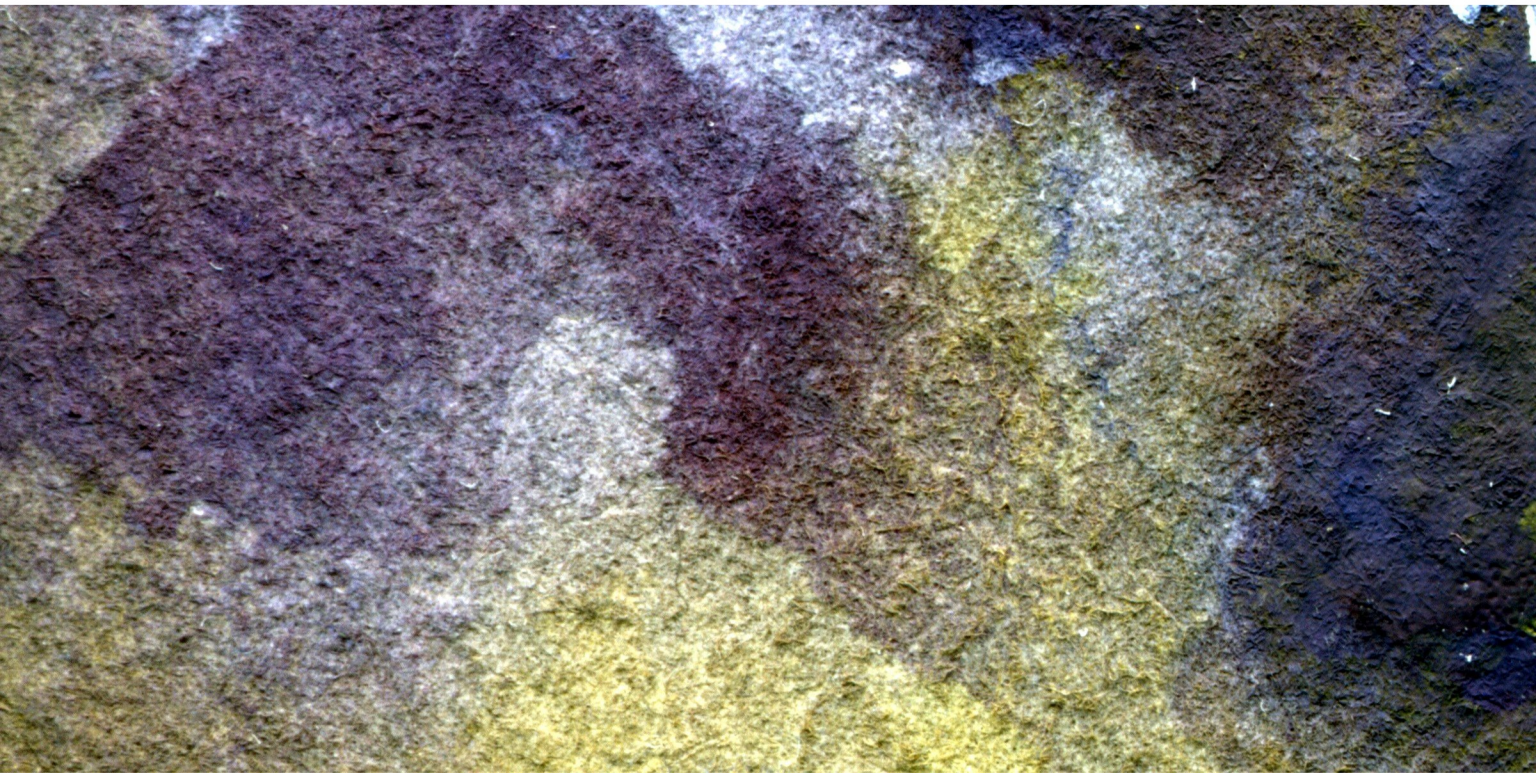
In a flash, he drops his pants
and sends a long arc
out into the flood.

He is too young to make love
to the world, but there is anticipation
of joyous desire in this spontaneous mingling.



Shenzhen | 6 July 2004

Walking in heavy traffic this evening,
I meditate on silence.
And the memory of your eyes
makes a place near my heart
to hold it in a song.



Shenzhen | 7 July 2004

Fat fish floats silver
on the surface of the water,
wide eyed, surprised by death

like everything once living.
It is surrounded by
a school of minnows

that will survive for a while on its decay
if a fat carp doesn't eat them.
Flies gather black

with green iridescent eyes
where air
meets water

and everything that moves
catches light while heat
melts sky, incubates


a teeming world over the rhythm of locusts.
Frogs will sing tonight, birds tomorrow,
but in the heat there is nothing
but the dry chatter of insect castanets.



IV

fiddling with the lights



A close-up photograph of a dead bird on a platform. The bird's body is the central focus, showing its head, neck, and back. The background is a textured, light-colored surface, possibly concrete or stone, with some darker areas. The lighting is somewhat dim, creating a somber and desaturated atmosphere.

Chicago | 9 July 2004

Dead bird on the platform
at 59th Street is a vortex
through which the line
of every dry branch
on the cottonwoods beside
the tracks passes. It is flat lifeless gray.

The light has gone out of its eyes,
and it is hard to imagine
this inert mass

light enough to rise on the breeze
that stirs leaves on still
living branches.

No green pulsing life breaks the monotony
of this gray death. But if it stays
another day,

maggots will be feeding on it,
and life will rise, as it always does,
out of death. This body will not fly again,

but it will feed bodies that rise
on breezes stirring leaves on still
living branches.

Chicago | 13 July 2004

Three sparrows and I celebrate
the day before Bastille Day
on the sidewalk outside a French bakery
with conspiratorial glances as I sip Brazilian coffee
and slip the smallest ones bits of French pastry.

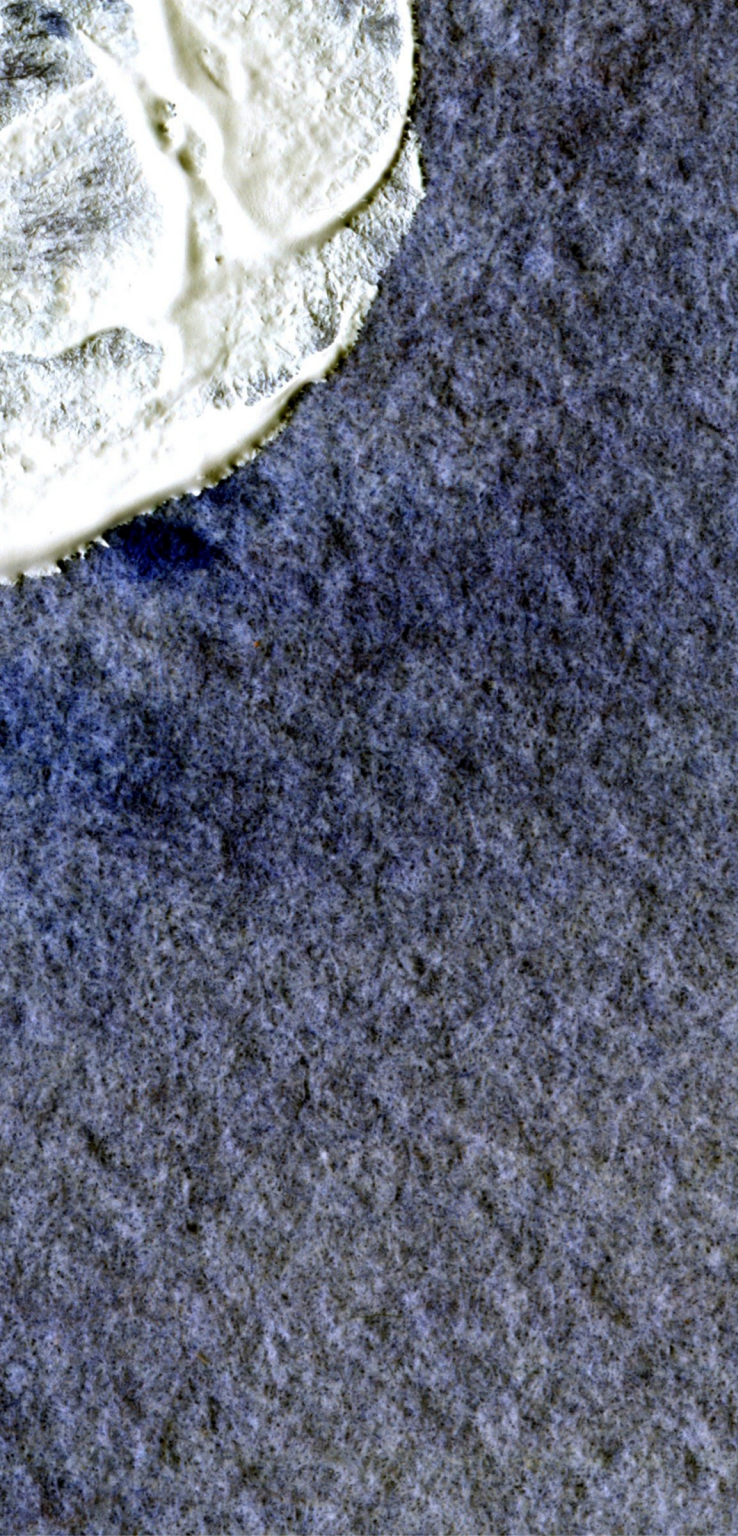
I ignore pigeons who crowd out smaller birds
and posture shamelessly, reward the little ones
for hanging back when I suppose
it would be more in keeping
with the approaching holiday

to teach them to storm the ramparts
of notorious prisons or at least stand up
to pigeons. I like to think they are learning
to bide their time, cultivating revolutionary patience.

But these fat birds are so well fed
that they might mourn the passing
of the ancien regime, scorn
gaunt revolutionaries
with hungry eyes,

and nod assent when a pampered
empress says let them eat cake.





Chicago | 14 July 2004

Pigeon feet scratching on shingles call to mind
the ease with which we forget wings and cling
to mere surfaces when the whole depth of the sky
is within reach. An old crow on a dead branch
at the top of a cottonwood beside the tracks
shouts this again and again to no avail.

He sees it wholly, with an eye
for bright things. But pigeons
know nothing of elsewhere.
They keep their tetrachromatic
eyes fixed on bits of grain
wherever they turn up.

Chicago | 14 July 2004

On the street, they ask if I would like to help defeat George Bush, and I say I would love to, but I do not break my stride, and I suppose they wonder why I do not sign the paper they hold in a clipboard as though filling it would solve some fundamental problem in politics. But I want to ask if they have posed a problem, what it is they will have fixed if George W goes back to Texas. They are not convinced it is broken, so they dance the same dance with a different partner. But where is the revolution in the same old song?





Chicago | 16 July 2004

Today is as good a day as any
to contemplate holding fast
and barren fields. A dream
may be all that stands
between us and winter,
but winter minds know
ice when they see it, and that is
handy when a madman dreams of nothing
but barren fields. Better a dream should die than
the city chosen to be its target.

We conjure such good
tricks we forget which sunrise
is true and can no longer distinguish
murder from the inevitability of death.

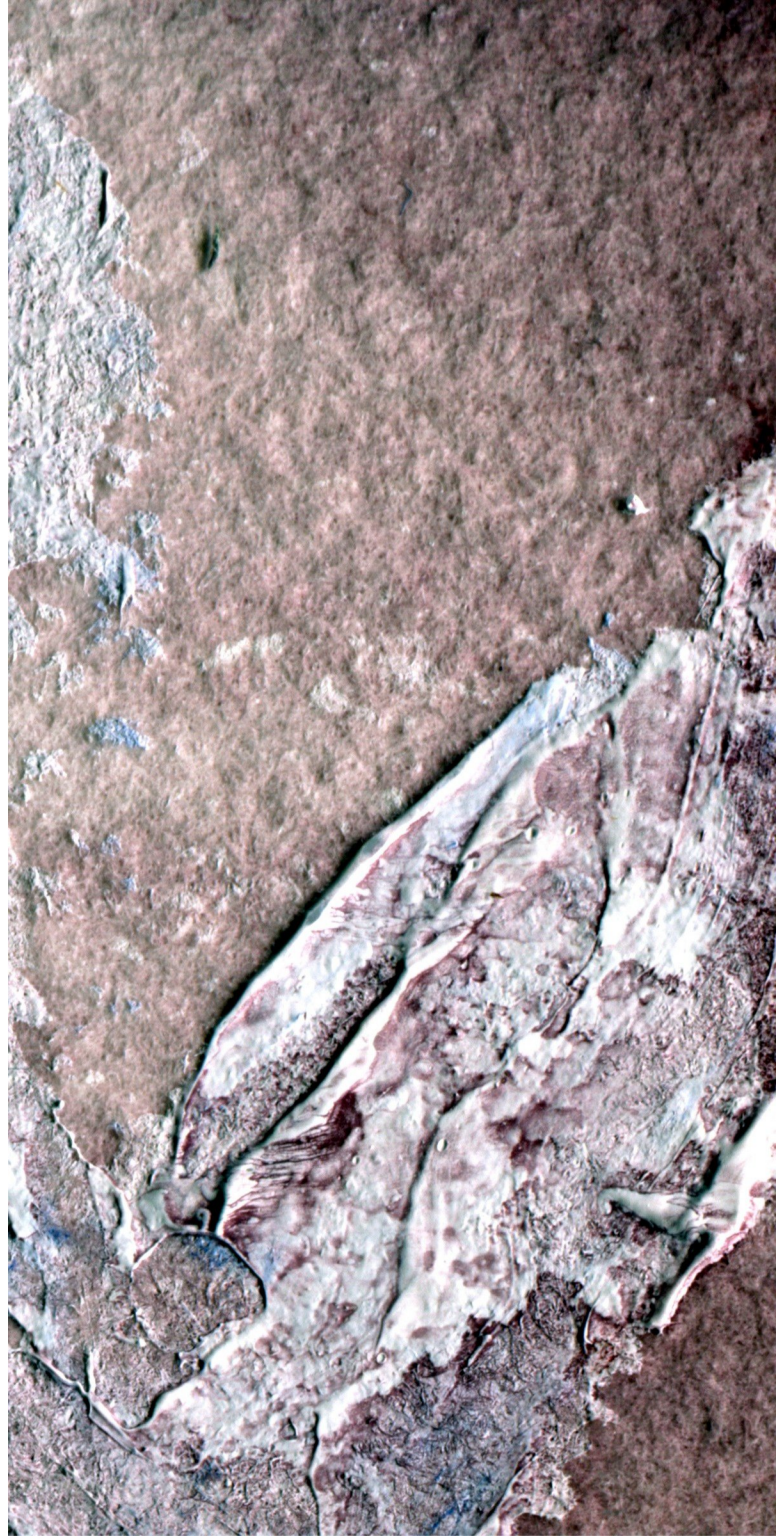
Chicago | 21 July 2004

On the hottest midsummer day, a cool breeze
blows west off Lake Michigan; but you
would never know it if you stayed
on the surface of the city.

It is underground, making its way
through hollows and caves
among pillars and pilings
that reach down, down,

dark reflections of spires
and towers above.

At the mouth of a cave,
a coffee shop with half a dozen
empty tables on the sidewalk; Bob Dylan
sings Highway 61, but no one listens; a wasp
puzzles against clear glass but never finds the sun
while a cluster outside pounds the other way,
and none of us know the wind if we
don't go down, down, down
to see it for ourselves.

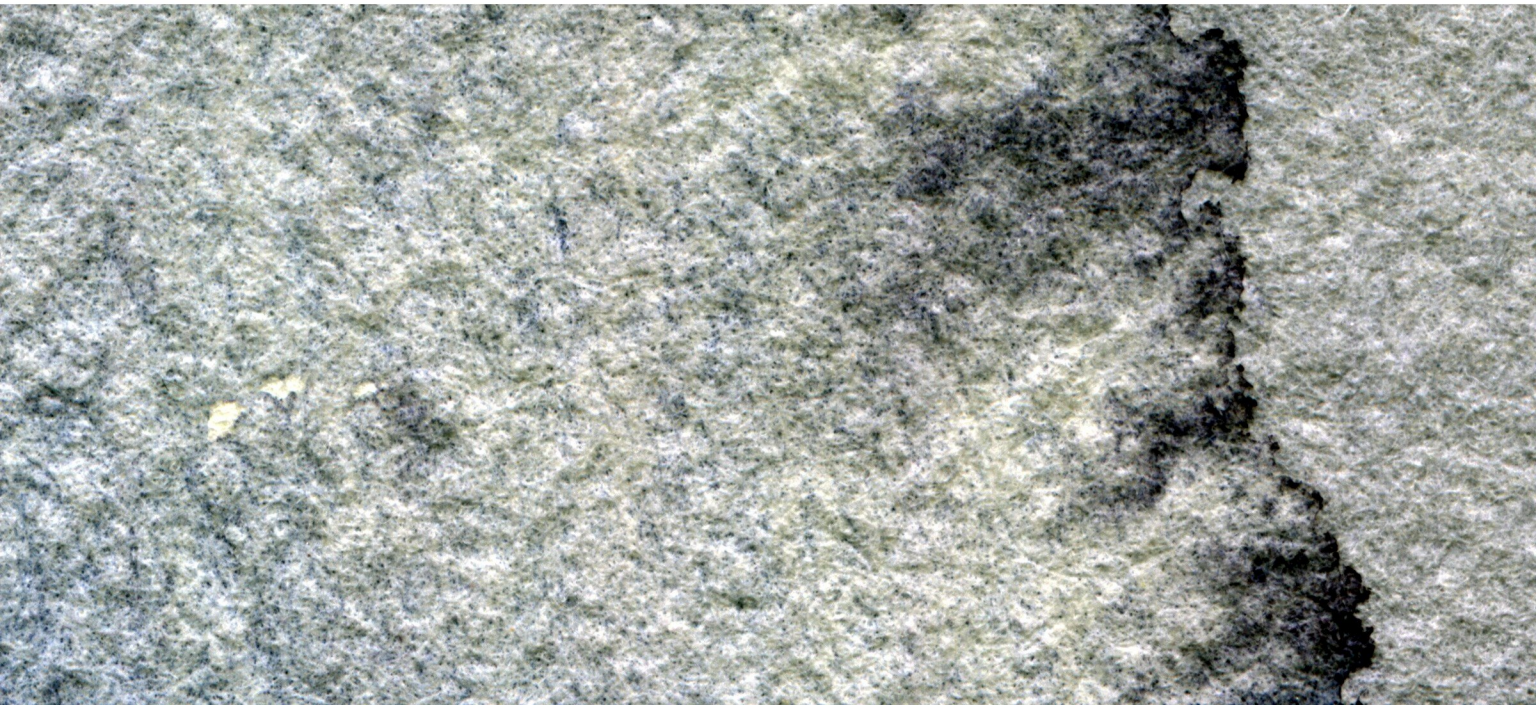


Chicago | 26 July 2004

Pink cosmos in a bare patch
on the north side of an old building
stretch to light in the morning
but cannot find east.

A critical mass of daisy flowers, they burn
but do not explode like their purple cousins
among rocks on the lake shore, desire
that draws them to the sun

checked by human desire for daisies
where there is no sun and hosta
simply will not suffice.





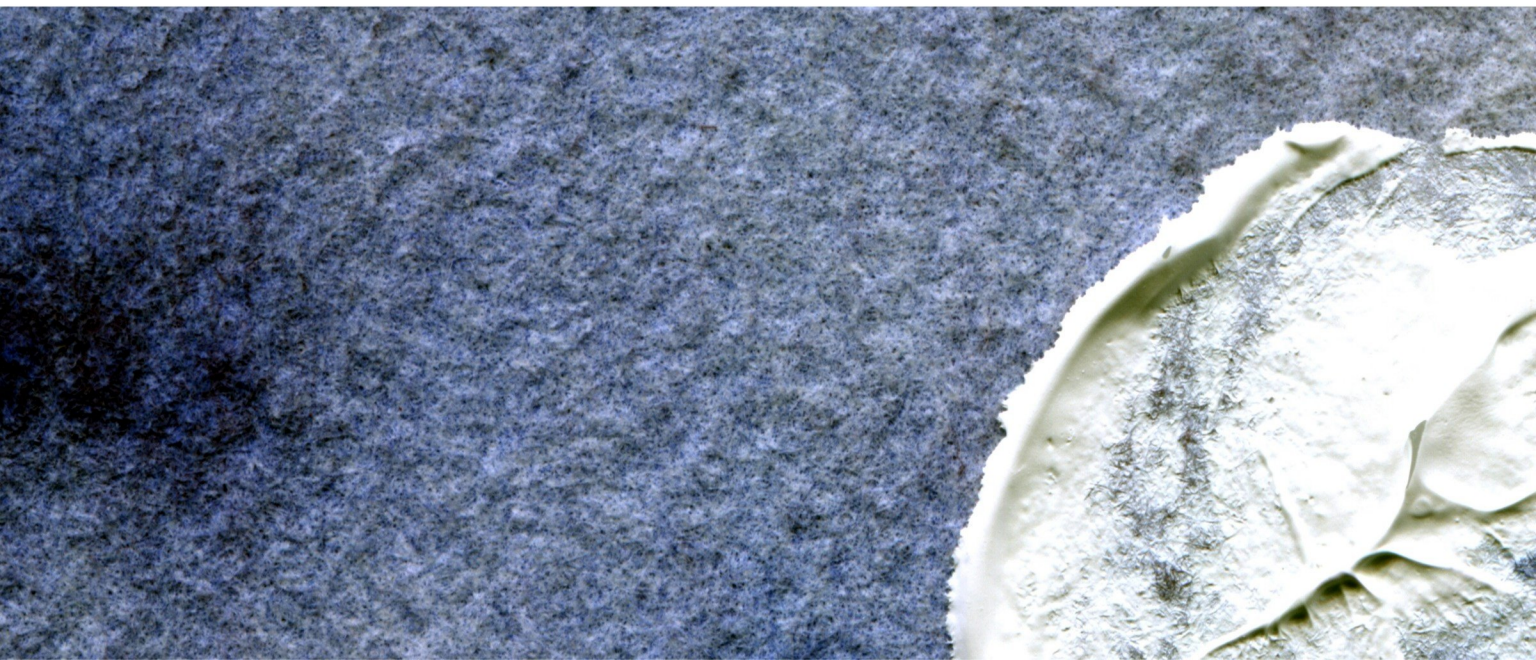
Chicago | 26 July 2004

equal and opposite needs balance
on a chain of daisy flowers while
ordinary life trickles by unchecked

Chicago | 27 July 2004

War scrawled on the sign
at the end of the block
changes its significance,
but I wonder if the driver who
rolls through the intersection
with no more than a gesture
toward hesitation sees it.

Multiply the rolling stop
by a thousand, a thousand,
and a thousand more
and the product is war,
a billion rolling stops
and as many little murders.





Chicago | 27 July 2004

A thousand gloriosa daisies
jostle under trees
on the south side of a house
built before the fire. They seem
to reach for sun. But it is an impulse
to shade smaller plants

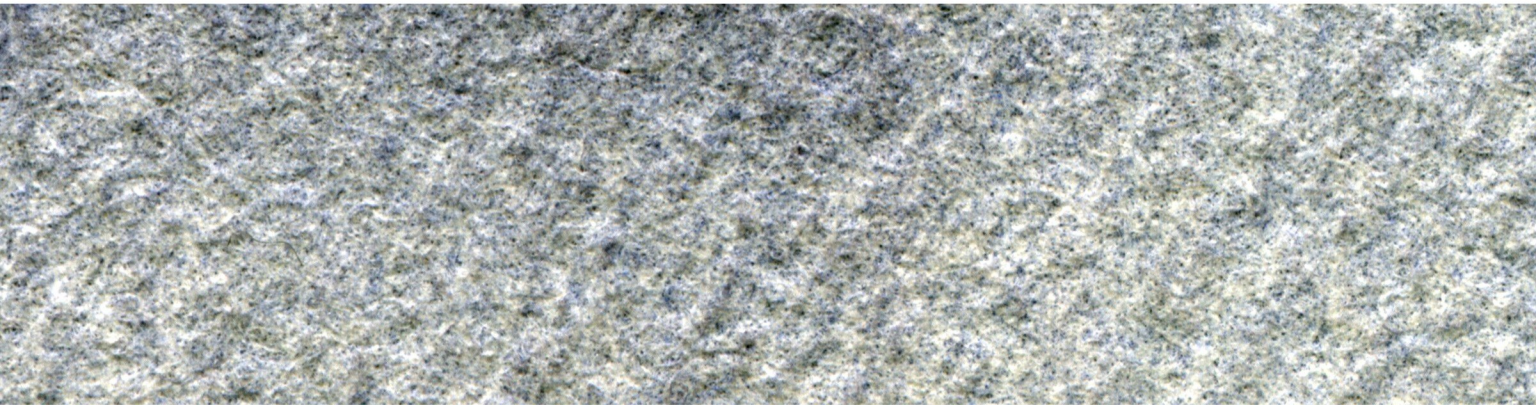
on the ground beneath their
feet that drives them. Each holds
a golden parasol that cools
a tiny circle tessellated
to protect the whole.

Chicago | 31 July 2004

Two old gulls, dark eyes set deep in gray,
indignant at a human presence on their beach,
watch until I am so close I cannot be denied,
then curse and fly off into the lake where they know
I cannot follow. It is hardly a beach, this arc of shore
line that has been meticulously smoothed by the army corps
of engineers, a prototype for a lake front free of rocks
and proudly indifferent to waves that have made
their presence known for years on the surface
of limestone that still remains on either side
of this panopticon. Gulls and engineers like it
because it makes it harder to surprise.

Confusing a clear line of sight to the first corner
with forever, they think they can see what is
coming before it comes. But there are already cracks
in the surface where the waves have gone back to work.

Two jet skiers roar right by the gulls,
who fly off screaming that they hold me responsible
for starting this with a quiet walk on their new concrete beach.



Chicago | 31 July 2004

Leaving the open shore that has been paved
to protect it from the slow demolition
of wind and water, I climb up onto the grass
trailed by the curses of gulls that float offshore
or circle overhead and demand to know what I am doing here.
They will not believe nothing. I stop at the first tree and join
ten thousand midges whose intelligence more than
equals mine in matters of sun and shade.

How I remain so still is beyond them, and I think swarming
around in clouds of perpetual collisions is the only way
they can assure themselves they are alive.

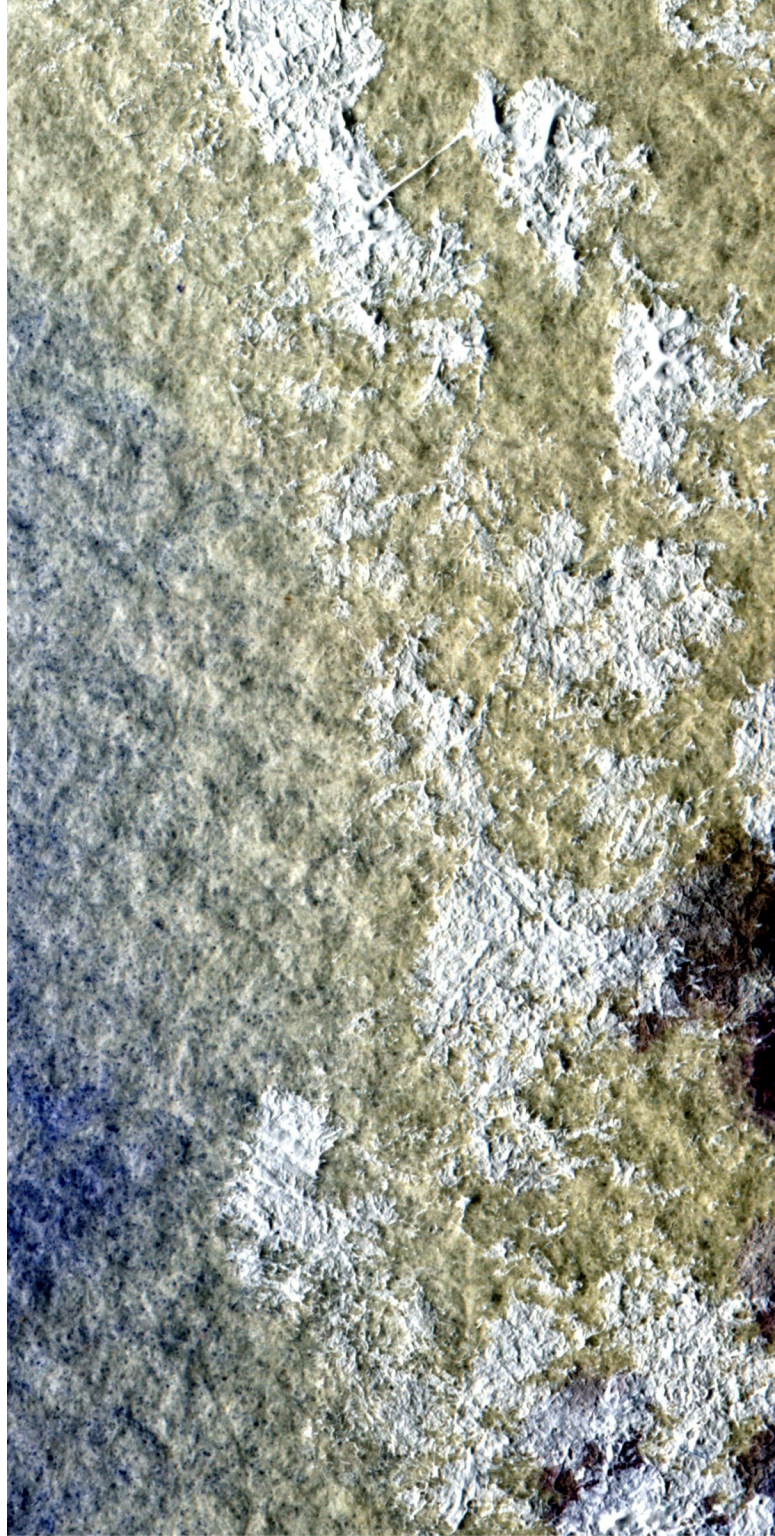
In this, they are not so different from the cluster of pink bodies
on rocks further south worshipping sun. Why that
cluster is so pink is as mysterious as my stillness.
I pass through a rainbow of bodies on the path home.

Conversation in the park
is all about a black widow spider
that made its way from California in
a bag of grapes and has been on the news
since last night. I imagine the spider's conversation

behind glass where she has
been deposited at the zoo – how it
suddenly grew cold in summer and she woke in
a strange place to hear a woman screaming.

Chicago | 31 July 2004

She is sorry it was too cold to drink the sweet nectar of the grapes and she knows she is a long way from California; but, given the size of that woman, she supposes she must be lucky to be alive.



Chicago | 2 August 2004

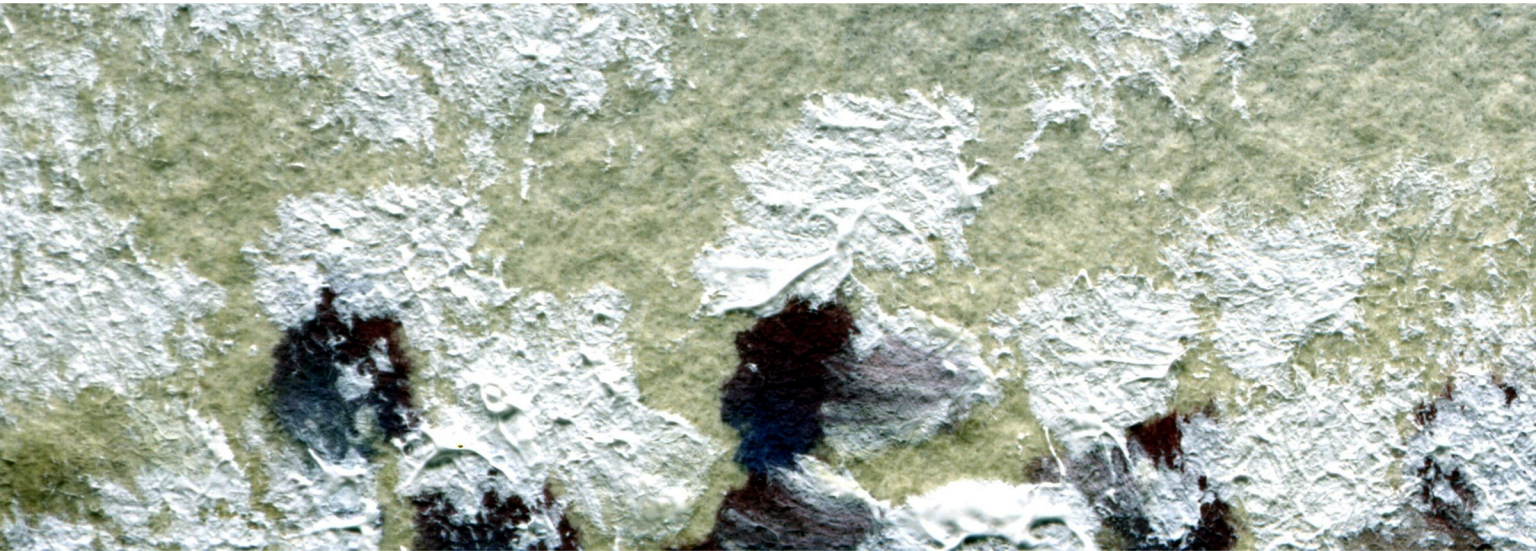
A critic of the new critics, who are mostly dead and have not been new for a long time, said that if you write about the beauty of a tree you are not writing about racism, sexism, classism. But she must be making fun of us, because this is new criticism. Writing about writing about a tree without writing about the author or the author's place and time, not to mention beauty, is writing about nothing but a text. It is political, but it is not conscious. In this time and place, if writing about beauty, about the beauty of a tree, is not writing about racism, classism, sexism, nothing is.

The only way a tree can be beautiful in a world this wrong is to right it. Nothing could be more political.



Chicago | 2 August 2004

Traffic washes in waves
along the shore at my back
while the lake spreads unperturbed
to the horizon, a cluster of buildings
so far distant on my left that it is
hard to imagine how close
it is to the sky. From here,
they appear flat on sky fabric
unrolled to a line where it meets
the lake and curves around the whole
city, around three sailboats, around
two noisy swimmers counting strokes,
stretching to embrace them all, to embrace
me watching, to embrace the poem, a rainbow
rising from white noise
at a right angle
to the arc of the city.



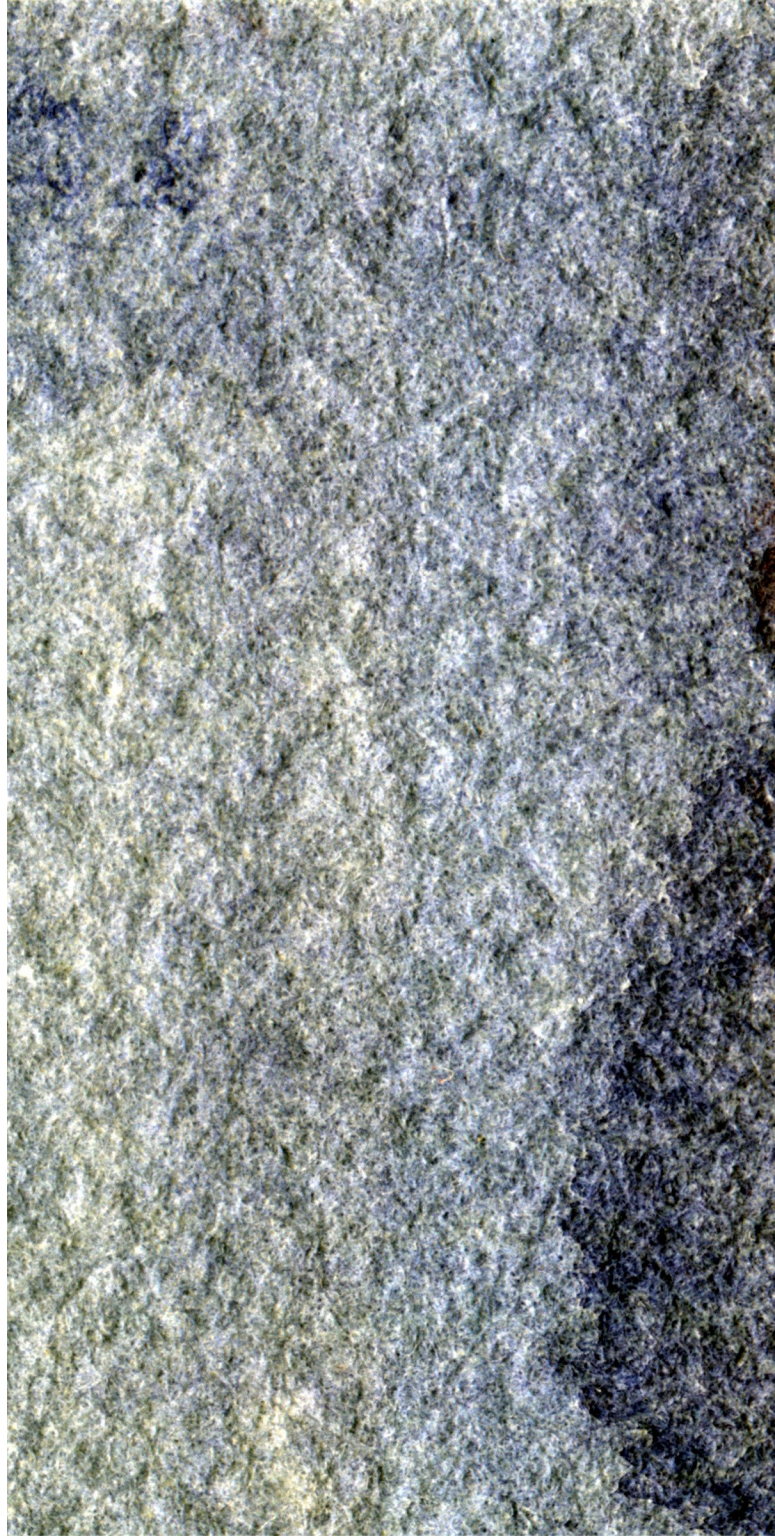
Chicago | 5 August 2004

A rose is a rose is
a rose, and I am
not convinced
every rose

on the street can
overlook this with a Shakespearean
flourish. Call it what you will,
the observer will call it as
he sees it; and she will

see it with her whole body. Noses
cannot close their eyes, always
encounter the world with eyes wide open.

In a name, there is a world to contain
named, namer, others
before whom named is named.



Chicago | 5 August 2004

A friend sent me a story
about a composer who hears mushrooms
singing. He asked if there have been
writers to whom plants have spoken,
and I said all of them, all the time.

The heavens declare the glory of God,
but mushrooms sing earthy songs
and tell the everyday stories
that we live in.





Chicago | 11 August 2004

My neighbor kindly planted white impatiens in the flower boxes on my balcony when I was out of town. Inspired by this, a crowd of native plants with woody stems, red-tinged, and pale green serrated leaves joined them, discretely standing more than an inch or two above white flowers. In July, a pair of volunteer petunias woke from a two year nap and raised their heads, one pink, one striped pink and white, just above green leaves and white flowers, inclined toward east and south, where they can catch sun early and hold it till afternoon shade. Even the maple trees lay low in this box and make a bonsai forest opposite petunias. But four ostentatious locals homesteading among maples tower over the whole, reaching for the only branch of a tree that is dying a slow death on the street. It seems they cannot believe it is the same species as their diminutive neighbors, so they reach for a closer look. They bend east and south like the petunias but strain closer to sun – no flowers, but heads that recall what wheat was before we tamed it. They eye the sidewalk below and will one day leap across it to find footholds in the gaps between concrete and grass that has never really had its heart in covering ground between sidewalk and street.

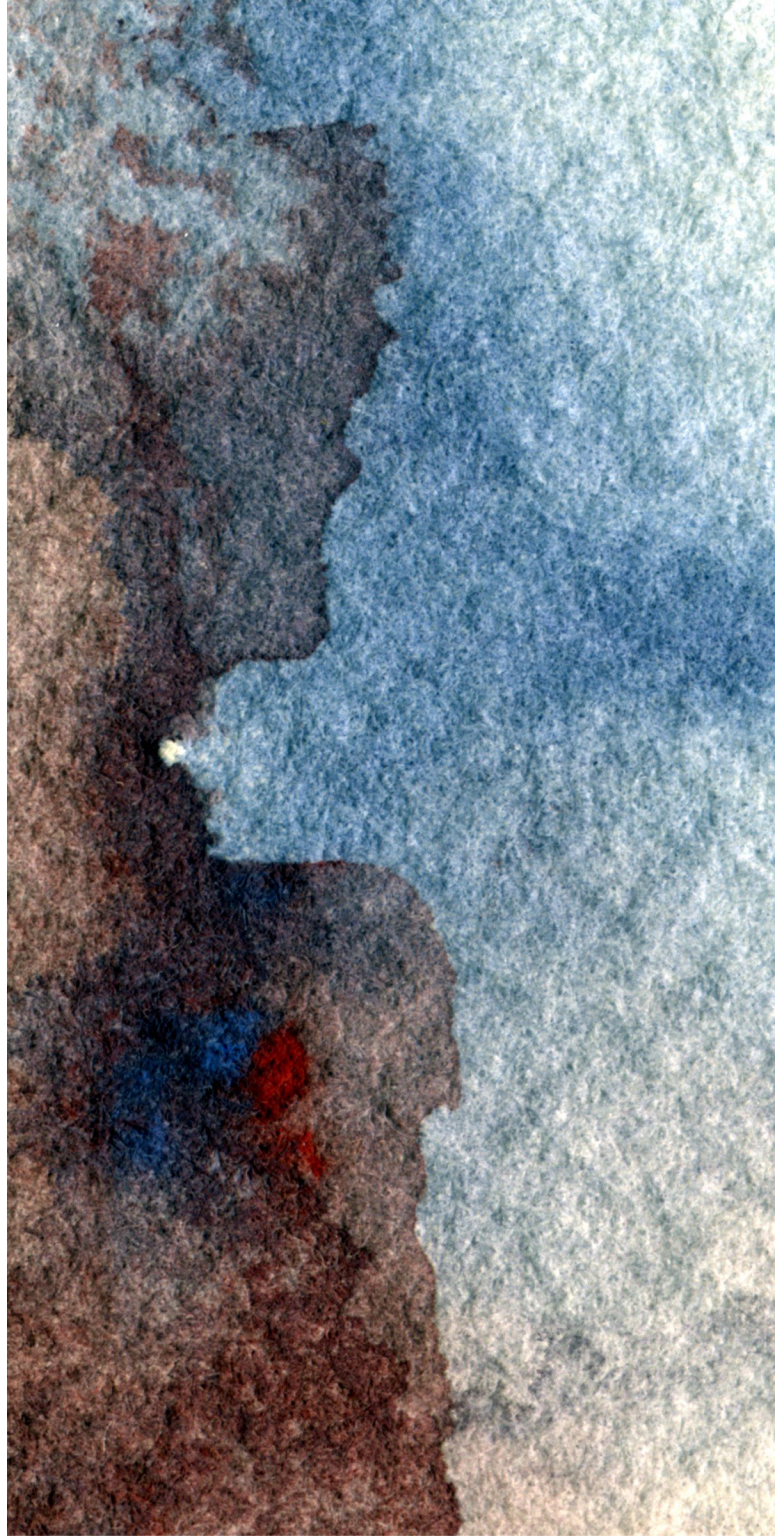
Chicago | 11 August 2004

An autumn day in August
leaves trees feeling
sadly underdressed
in uniform summer green.

A scattering of white flowers
beside the railroad tracks
breaks the monotony
but can't supply the aspen gold

or maple red this wind calls for.
Someone skipped a frame
when they dubbed this weather,
and the green language of the leaves

is a step behind the rhythm of the wind's speech.
Time is supposed to be behind a curtain, but
there it is on a gray day, in plain sight,
stealing the show, fiddling with the lights.



Steven Schroeder is a poet and visual artist who lives and works in Chicago. More at stevenschroeder.org.

Clouds mingle with mountaintops,
rest like snow
on the highest peaks.

Blue sky stretches over the whole.
Shadows below, hidden above,
darken the earthbound world today.

stevenschroeder.org

