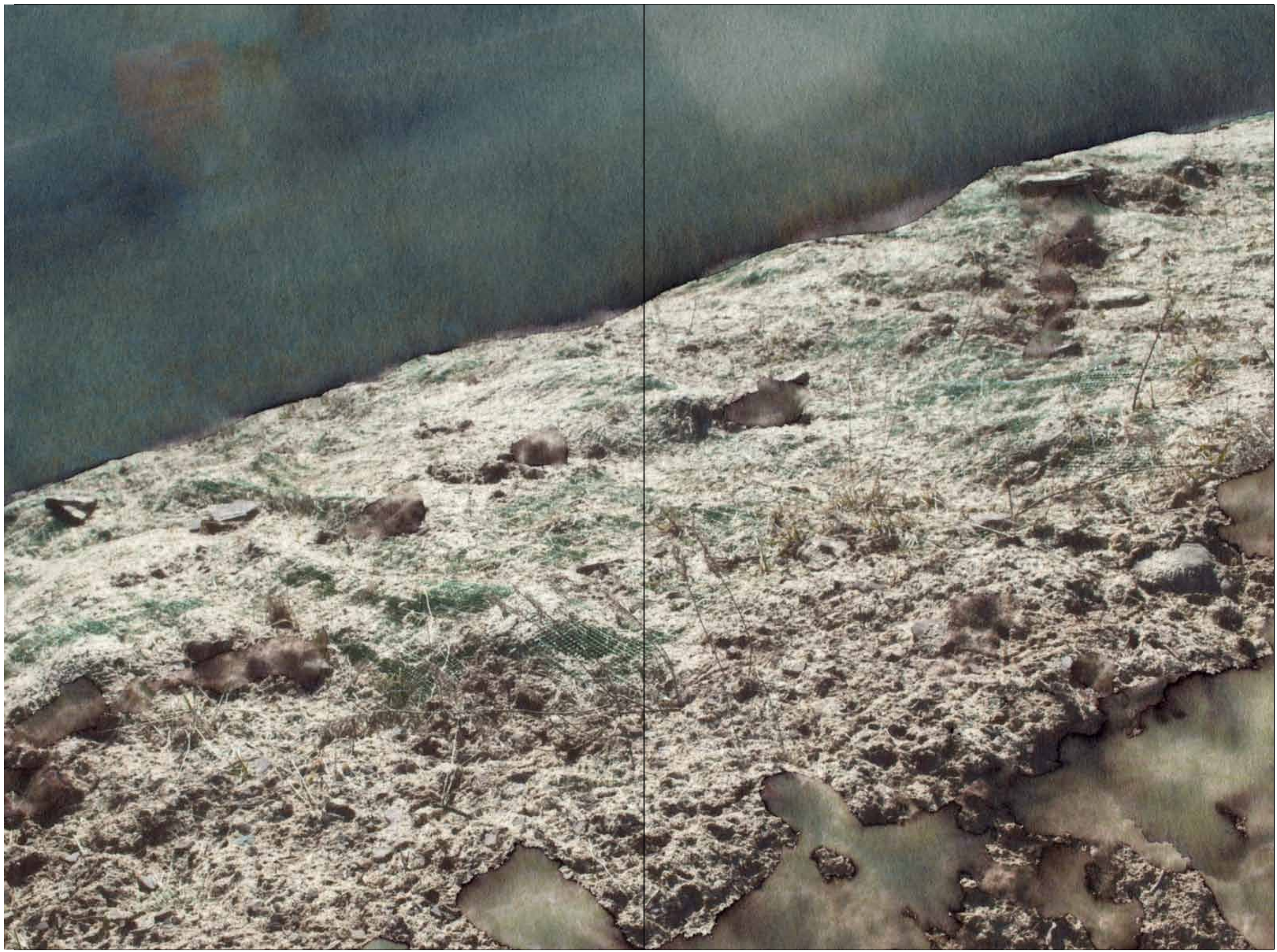
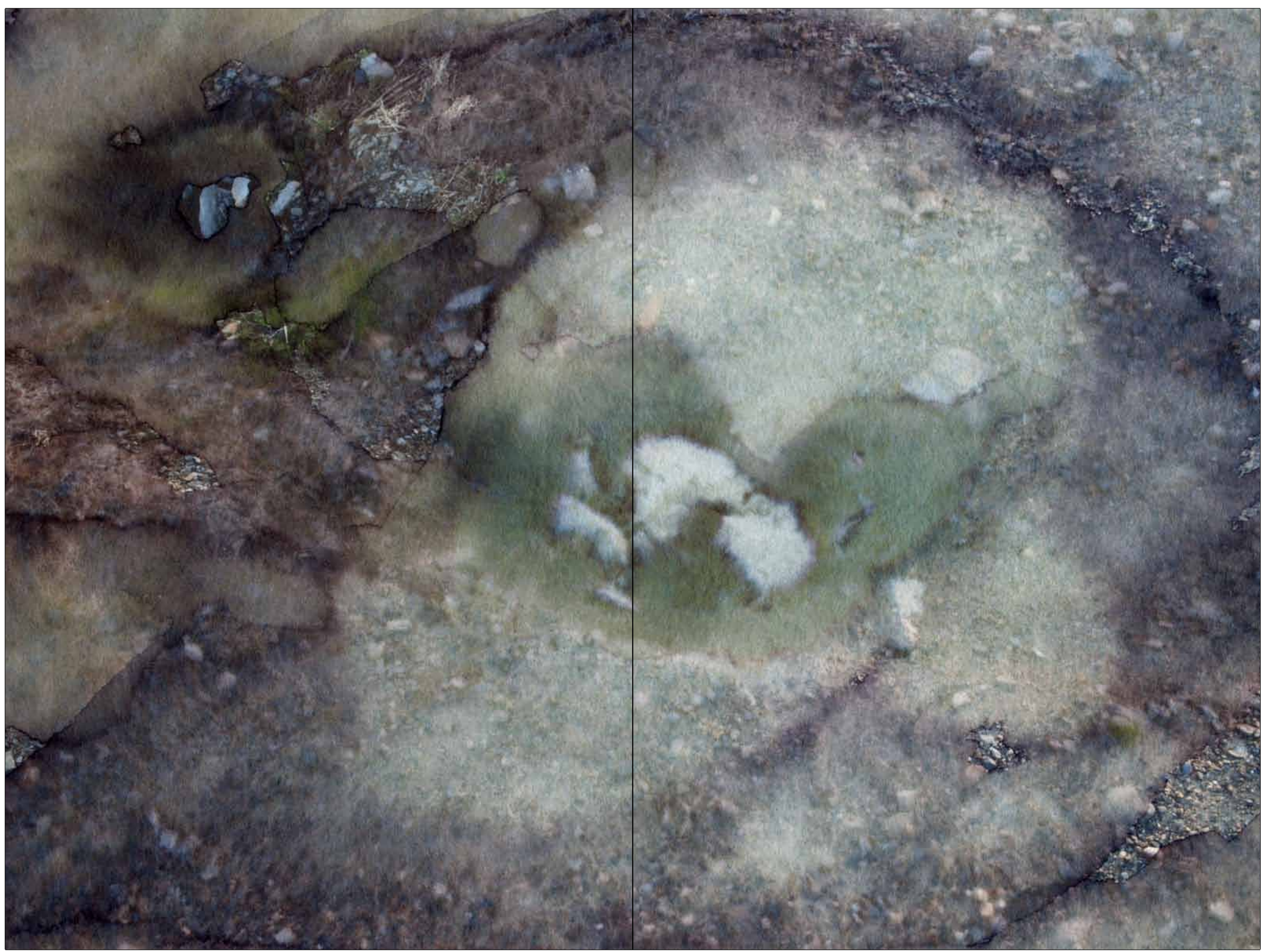


The Ground





It began as a blank book. The self-imposed assignment was to make this book from all white materials—white paper and cloth—take it on an early morning walk in the forest, and bury it. I would return every morning thereafter, dig it up, turn a page, and then return it until the ground had printed the entire book.



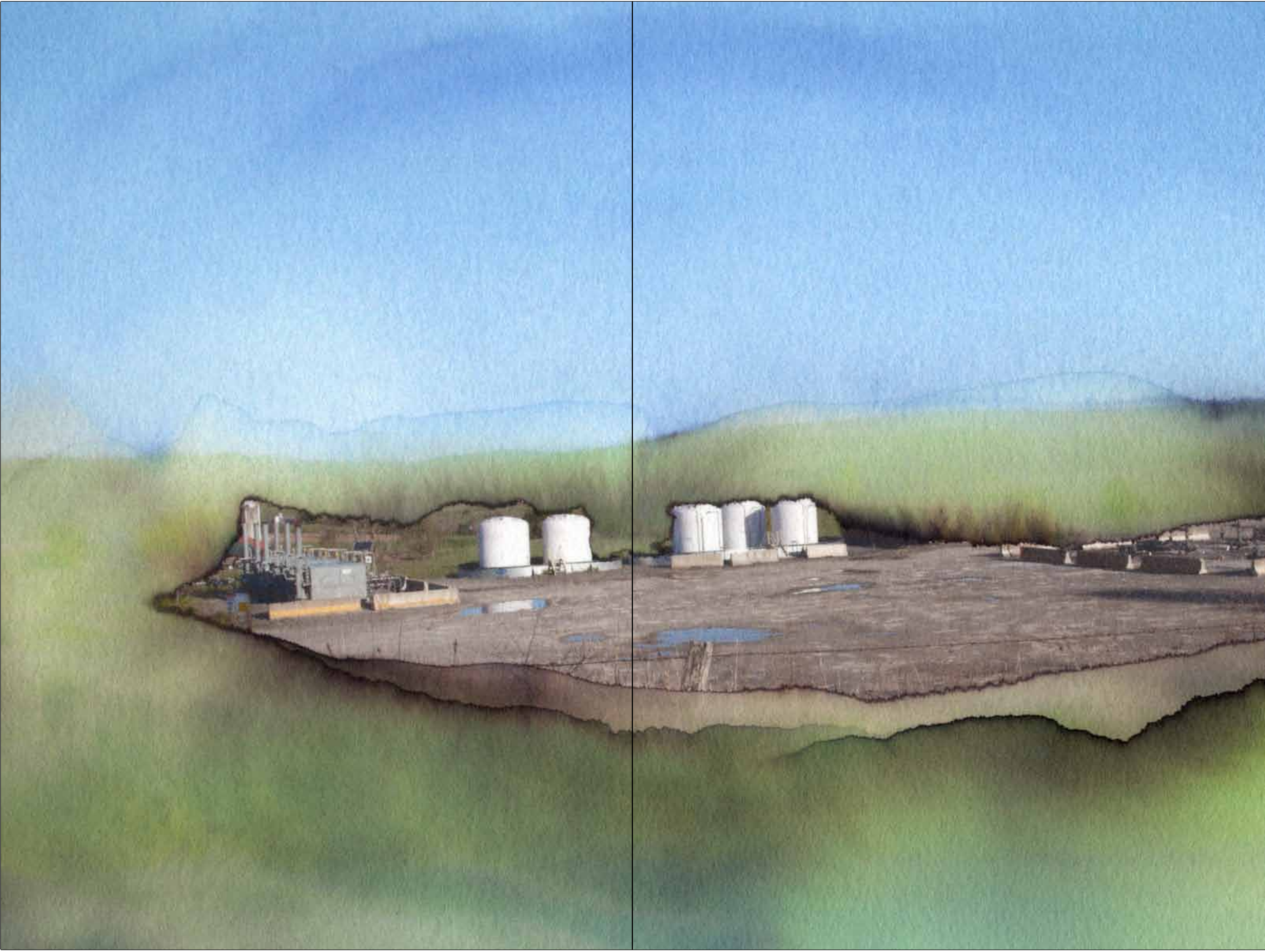


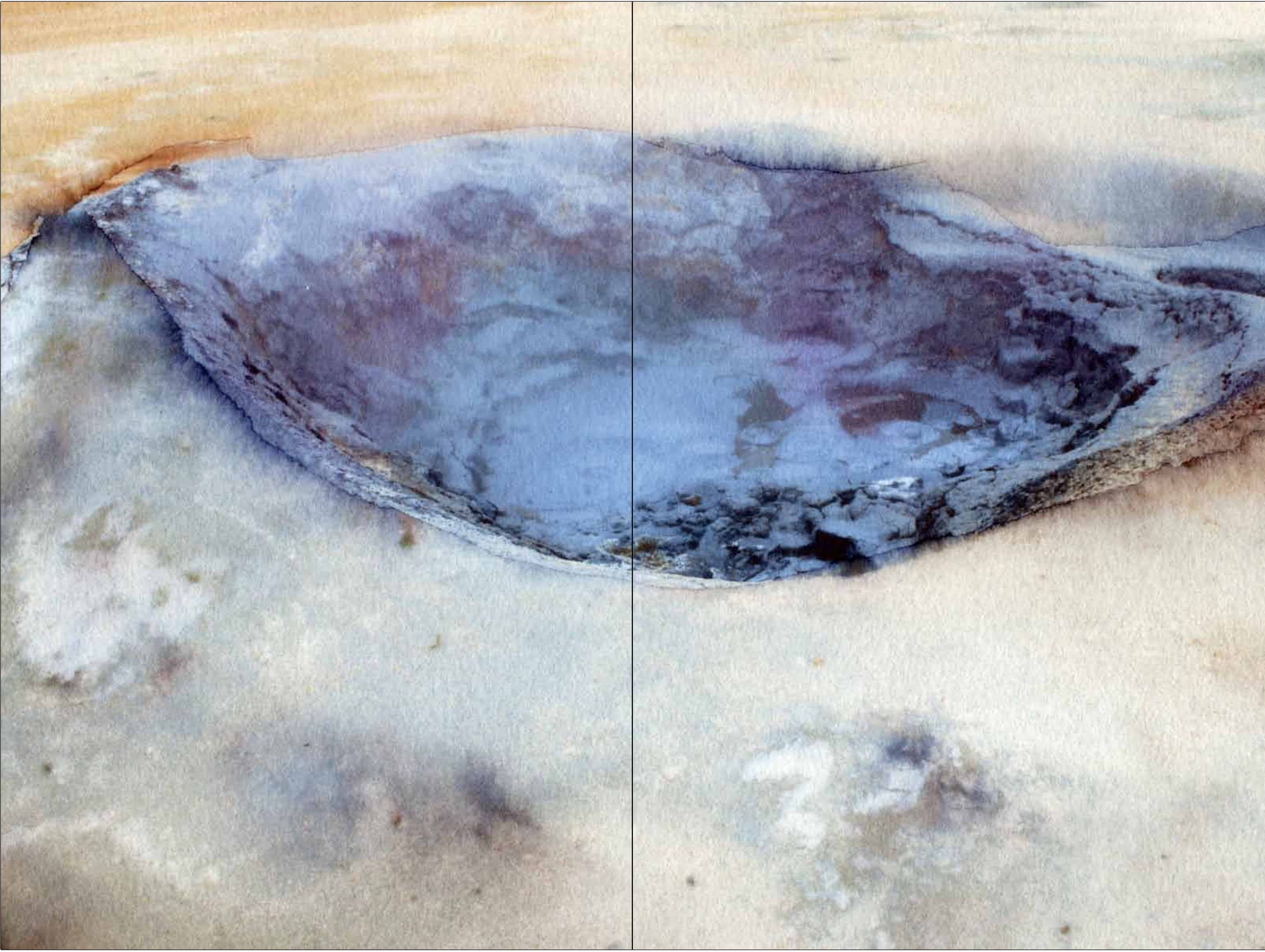
I did not believe I would be living in Tioga County, Pennsylvania, for very long. Although I knew I was no Thoreau, I tried to be excited about living in the country by telling myself these walks in the woods would help me know something more about nature. Anxious to have my attention move away from me to the world around me, I set an objective to shift my perception from figure to ground. My ground-printing scheme must have come from an inkling of these forests as a passing source of natural energy. Days went by with my hopes running high for the task to bury the book.

Most of all I wanted to create something without having to make any decisions.

Over the years such willful will-lessness had become deep-rooted, starting with my graduation from college in the Midwest. Soon after, I married a religion scholar and violinist who was accepted into a PhD program in the South. Her family lived in a town of around three thousand people, where her dad pastored a small church. Having visited once before, she had taken me to the area's most prominent tourist stop, Pine Creek Gorge, also known as the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania. Starting at this tourist lookout we hiked the Turkey Path that wound steeply down for a mile past a couple of small waterfalls before we made the full descent to the creek, only to look at the clear, flowing water a few minutes then turn around, and hike our way out of the bottom. Recollecting this now, I must have romantically harbored an image of us living in a tiny cabin on that creek bank.







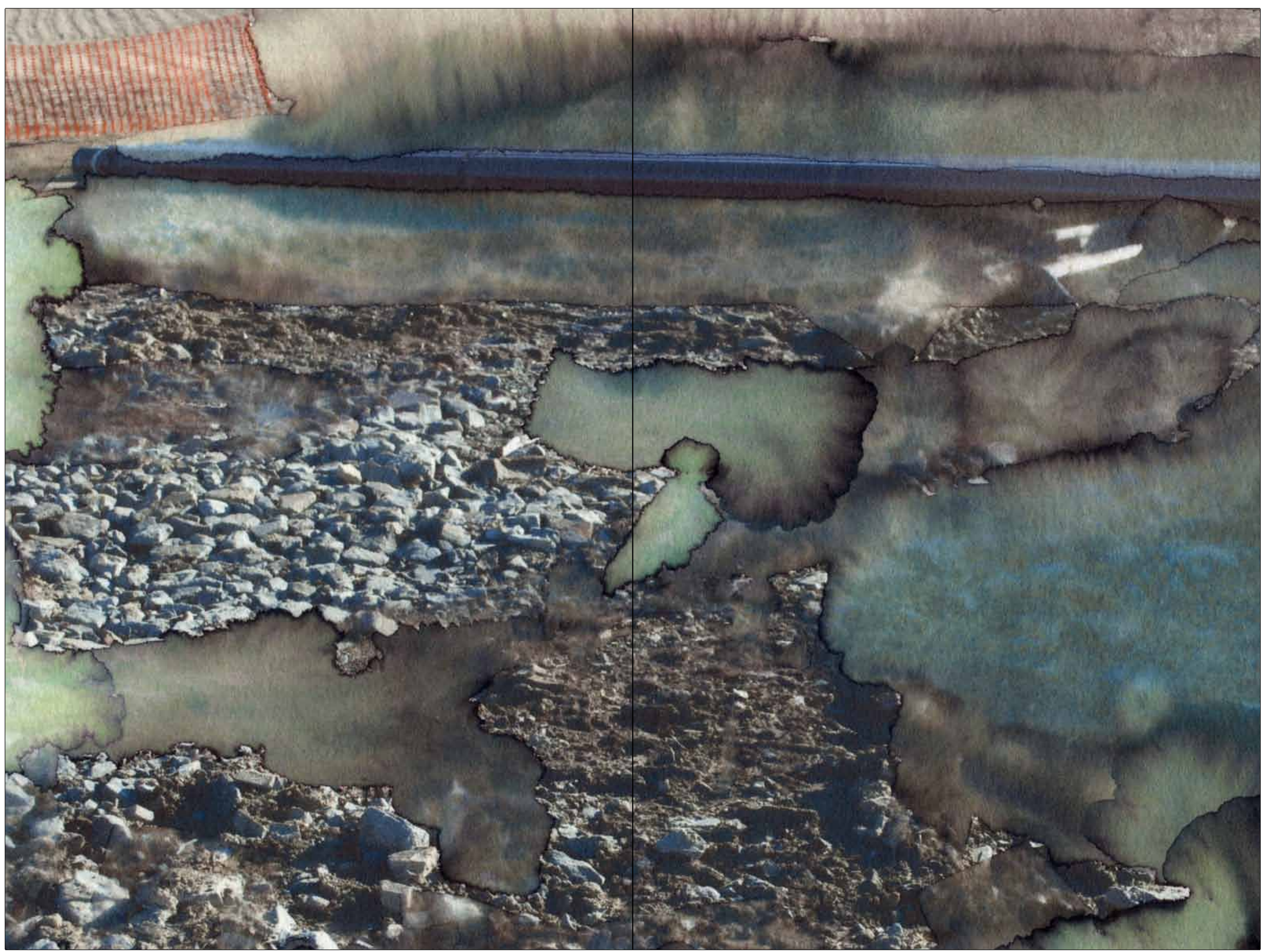
We relocated the following year, hurriedly building up our professional lives only to lose our main source of income. Looking to escape a situation that had quickly turned from planned-out to overwhelming, we faced the choice of moving temporarily to her parents' house or mine. We packed ourselves with some belongings into my father-in-law's basement office, opting for this more idealized, pastoral existence in Pennsylvania without considering the lack of work for people whose primary interests were in books and music, or the depths of poverty in Tioga County, which at the time was the second most impoverished in the state.

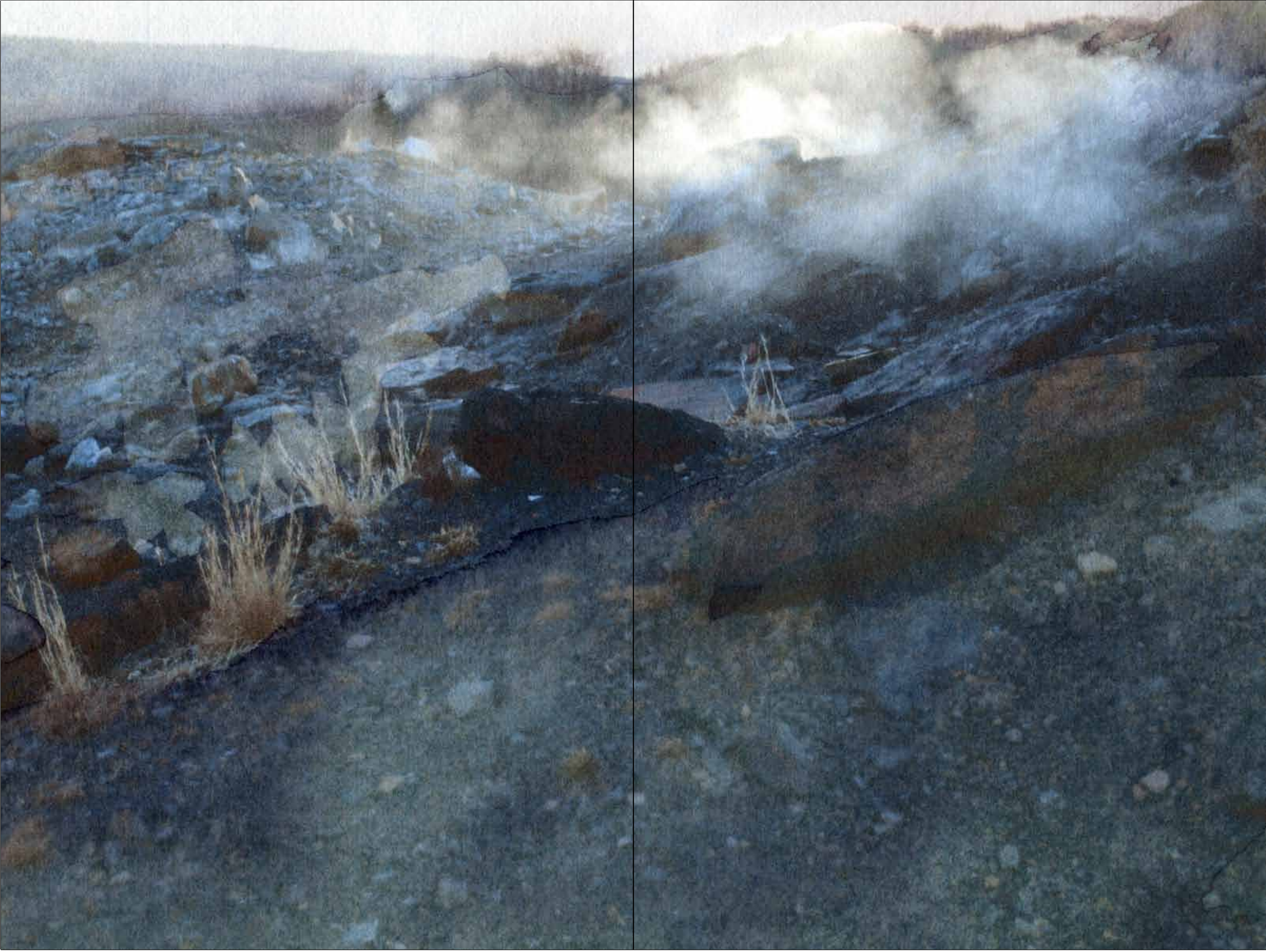
While comfortable and the family wholly hospitable, my state of mind was that of being bunkered away. It was late fall, early winter. Situated at a high elevation, the town had a permanent low ceiling of thick, opaque cloud-cover. Even in the open air it felt like being beneath the surface of something, as if tunneling through the atmosphere.

Water from rain or melting snow would occasionally rise up in the basement through the foundation. It did not flood or pool so much as seem to simply emanate from the ground and seep through the concrete, dampening and darkening the carpet. When this happened we would climb behind the furniture to plug in a circle of fans around the dark spots.









Our basement living quarters doubled as my makeshift, underground studio. Working late into the night, I made charcoal drawings of the characters I encountered day-to-day in my service job: the unruly bear and deer hunters who came into town from their camps, and the haggard waitresses who filled them with food and drinks.

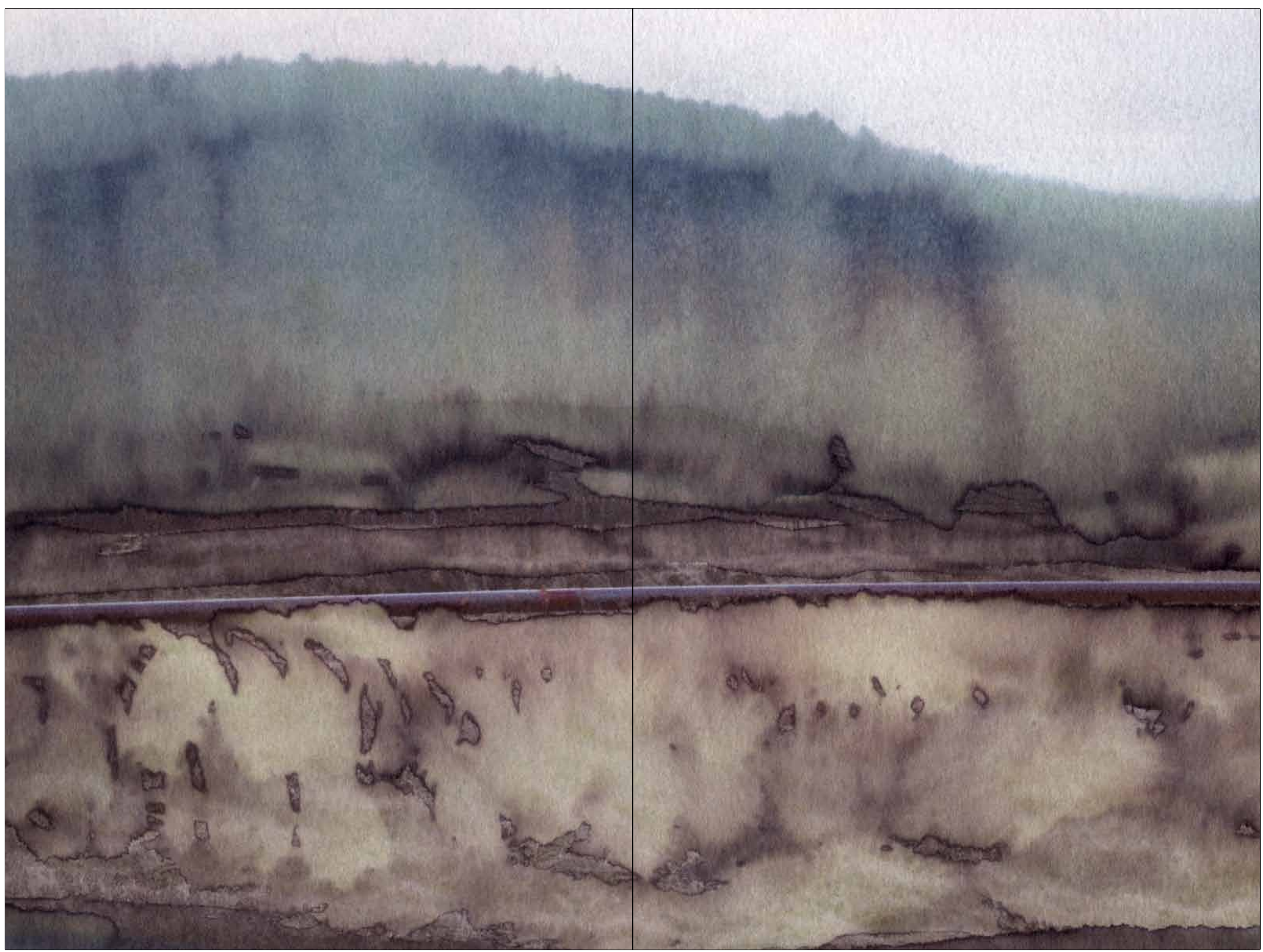
That fall a favorite folksinger, Richard Buckner, released his album The Hill interpreting several of Edgar Lee Masters' classic poems from Spoon River Anthology. Set in a fictional, small American town, the poems are epitaphs with each character speaking from the grave. I came to deeply associate that album with my time in Pennsylvania. I listened to it over and again for hours, darkening sheets of paper as Buckner's voice filled the room with harsh, low, gravelly tones that nimbly turned gentle, subtle, and high. Charcoal dust fell across the walls in light arcs like soft shadows from party streamers. Fine piles of it rested on the baseboard heater. An airy, black film coated the carpet.

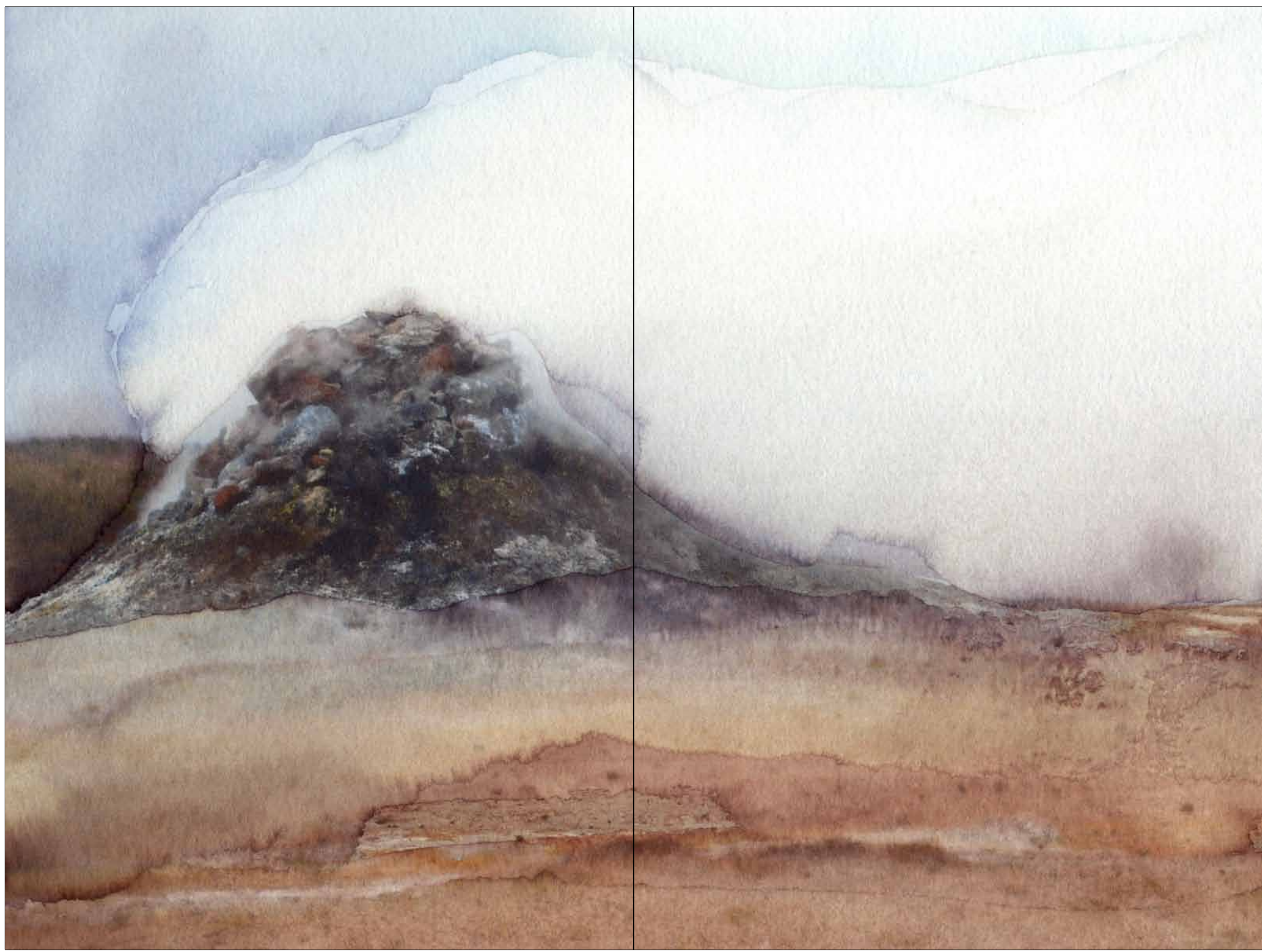
Six months later we moved from the basement into a one-room apartment in a farmhouse. Our landlord, who described himself as a full-time substitute teacher, saw us moving cardboard box after box labeled "books" into the ground floor of the house and offered to loan us any of his own volumes from the apartment upstairs. Barely restraining his pride, he said the barn was also his personal library and we were welcome to browse or borrow from it any time.

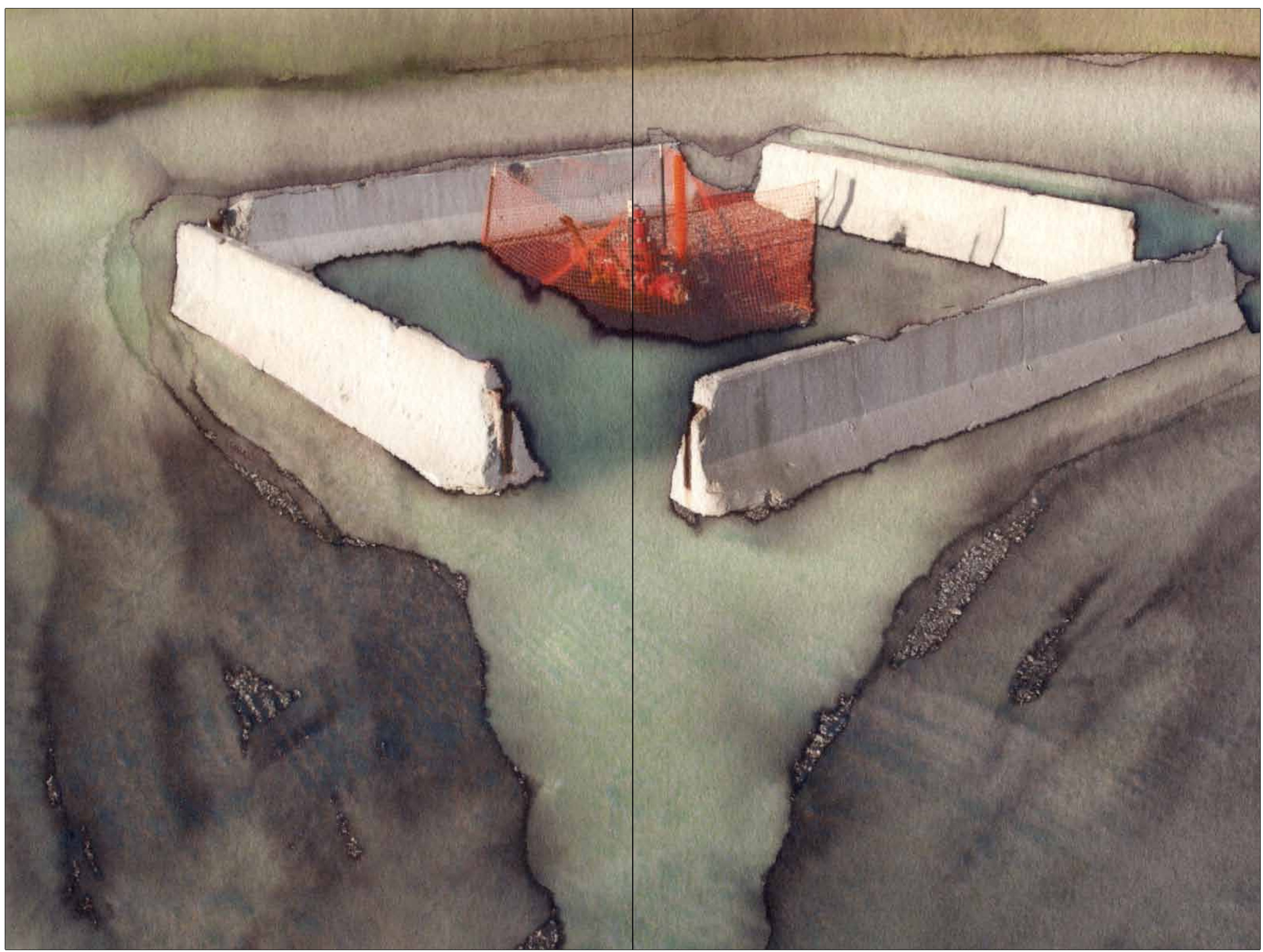
On a walk one day I went past the mobile home the landlord was remodeling to explore the unlocked barn. As I heaved open the sliding wood door, a stream of light spilled into the space, illuminating puffs of disrupted dust and white specks of bugs. Every wall was stacked with paperbacks on wooden shelves with protruding nail heads and screws. Thousands of dank books in no discernible order lined the space, decaying amongst cat food, dirty tools, and a stack of yellow, plastic tractor seats.

Shortly after my visit to the library, I came upon a fire pit dug into the side of a small hill. Our landlord had told us to throw our trash on a wagon hitched to a four-wheeler parked outside the apartment door. Once a week he burned the garbage on his property.

Wheel tracks wore a path to the pit. The smell fluctuated between extinguished campfire and foul factory emissions. A fine dust darkened the grass in a wide circle emanating from a spot where the ground seemed permanently scorched. Chaotically scattered in the shallow, gray ashes were tin cans and other charred bits of metal. Several worn tires nearby sprouted cowlick weeds through their donut openings.











Pennsylvania felt like a place of exile. Anxious for a sense of belonging, but mainly eager to make something from my time there, I formed the idea of the buried book. I had to make do with the offerings in the arts and crafts section at Walmart as it was the only store in Tioga County with the necessary materials. I stripped commercially packaged art supplies for their parts. Pages were torn from a coil-bound sketchbook: I trimmed off the perforated ends of the paper with a carpet knife. To make endleaves, I peeled heavy watercolor paper from a glue-bound tablet. For the cover material, I took a pre-stretched painting canvas, unwrapped it from its cellophane packaging, and pried the staples from the canvas stretcher bars using needle nose pliers. The backing chipboard from the sketchbook and watercolor tablet provided the hardcover boards. A lightweight cord sewed the pages together.

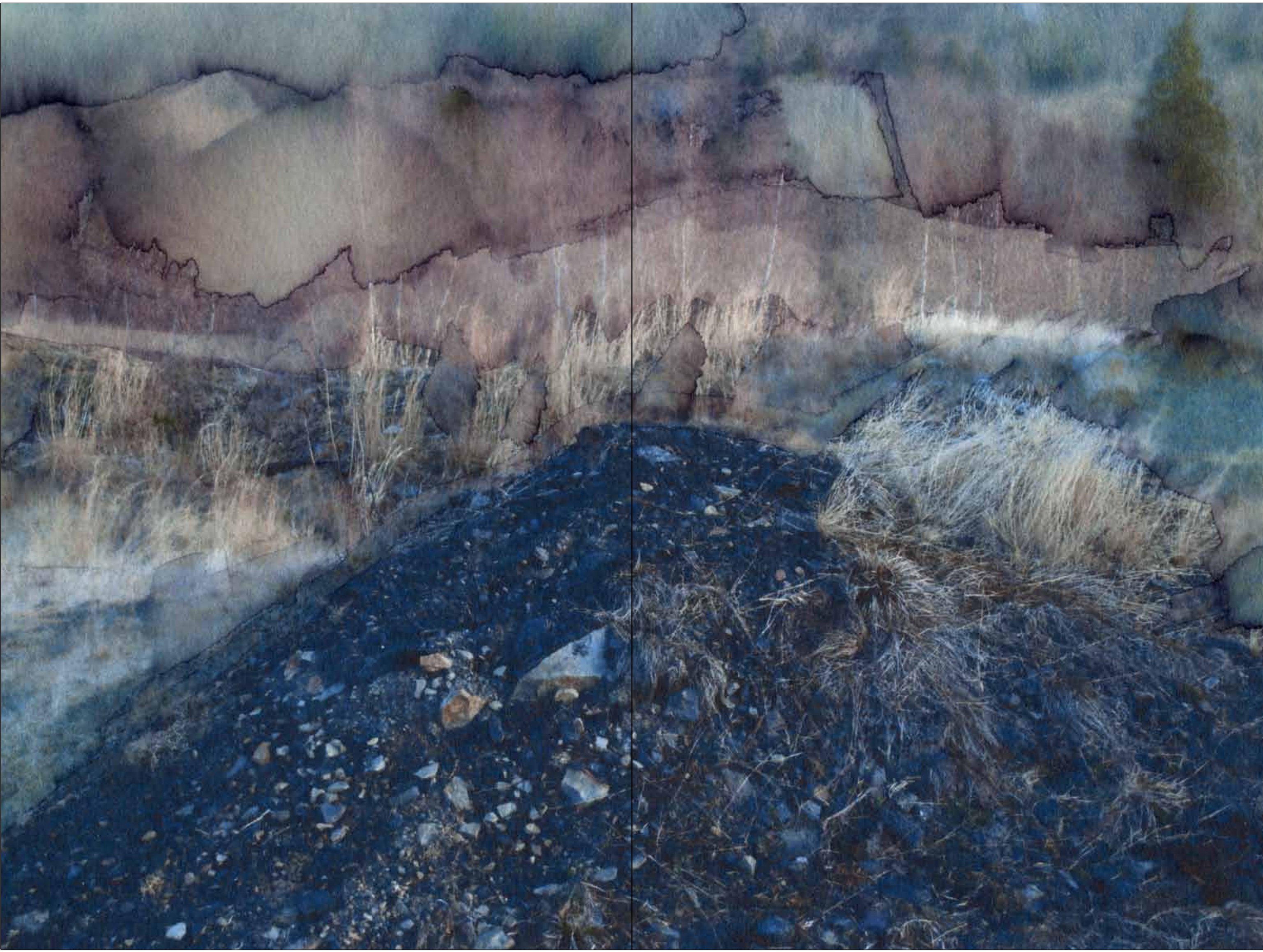
I assembled the book at a tiny desk in the corner of the kitchen. Thick, white craft glue adhered the endleaves and cover material to the chipboard. Holes were bored through the book block so I could stitch it together with the cord. All of this was done without skill or patience. By economizing all the materials, the paper and fabric grains went the wrong direction and my binding was too tight leaving the front cover stubbornly ajar. It was a consumer-art-supply Frankenstein monster with its mouth partially open.

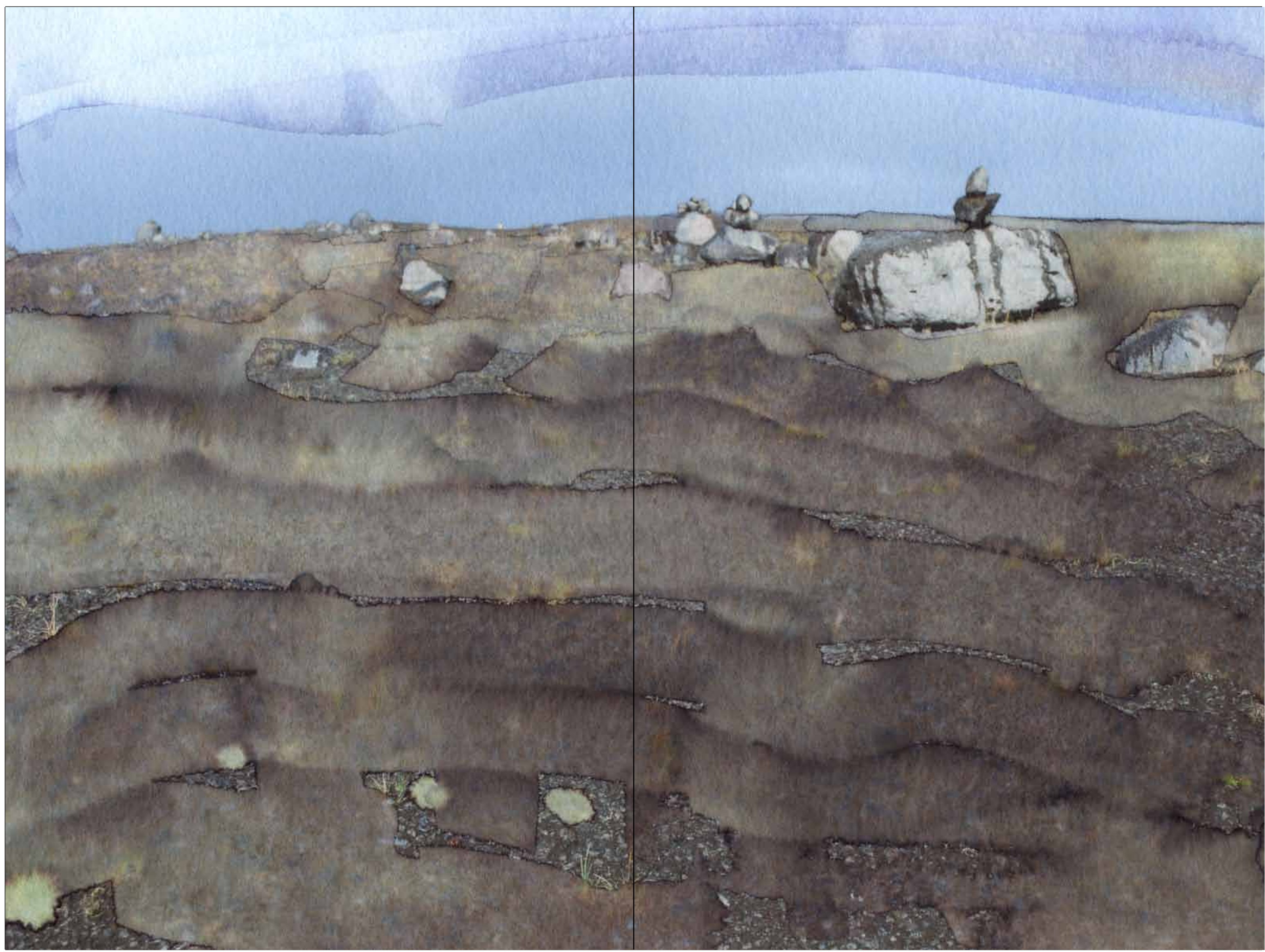
Waking early the next morning, I exited the house with the slam of the wood-framed screen door behind me. Walking with a shovel in one hand and my monster in the other, it was the first time I ventured beyond the little pond my landlord had dug himself where, he had told me, one blue heron would return for a few days each fall as it made its way south for the winter. Marching with intention, I headed toward the tree line where a small herd of deer would frequently forage camouflaged by the tall, tan grasses.

The night before, as I lay awake in bed, I had imagined following a clear path meandering its way through the forest. But in the reality of the woods, I could not see the ground for the wild, green growth striking my shins. Branches and leaves slapped and scratched me all over my body. My hands full, I tried to swat at tiny gnats and bugs by flailing elbows and knees to keep away the irritating swarms. Prickly plants clawed at my pant legs. Underfoot twigs snapped loudly enough to scare me.

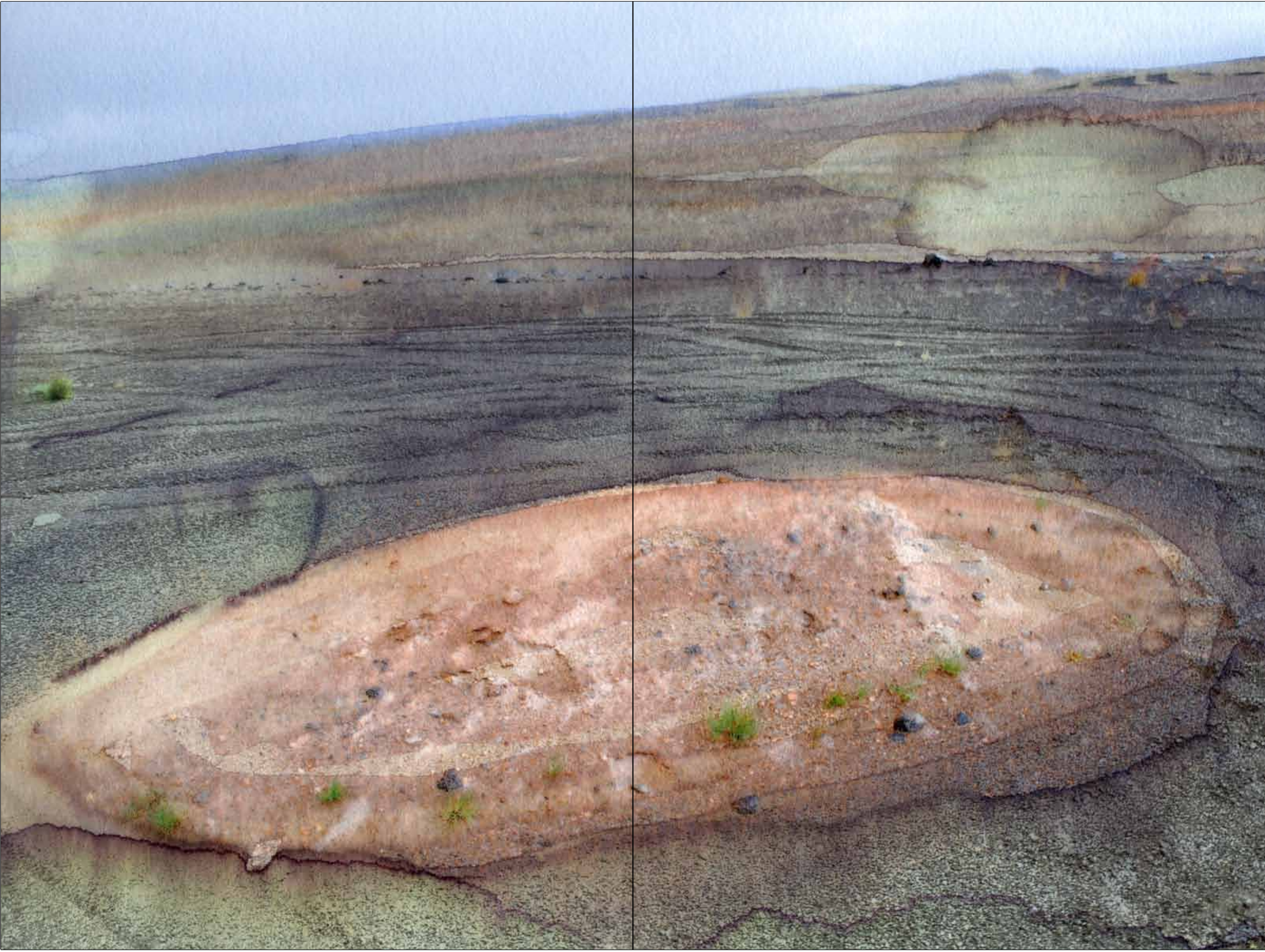
Sweating and desperate, I came to a patch of ferns that immediately reminded me of Anselm Kiefer works I had seen in library books. He used fern fronds as both material and symbol in large book sculptures and paintings. Wishing the walk to end, I took the ferns as a sign for me to plant the book in a neighboring patch of ground. Giving little consideration to the white book at rest in the dark brown soil, I covered it in a thin blanket of the stony dirt and walked away without looking back.











After burying the book, I made a circle to return to the farmhouse. Coming to a particularly dense field, I waded into the thick weeds with grass up to my waist. Pushing forward I was distracted, depressed about the ugliness of the book, the stony ground, and the thought of doing this every day.

Suddenly, a deer leapt over my shoulder, bounding past.

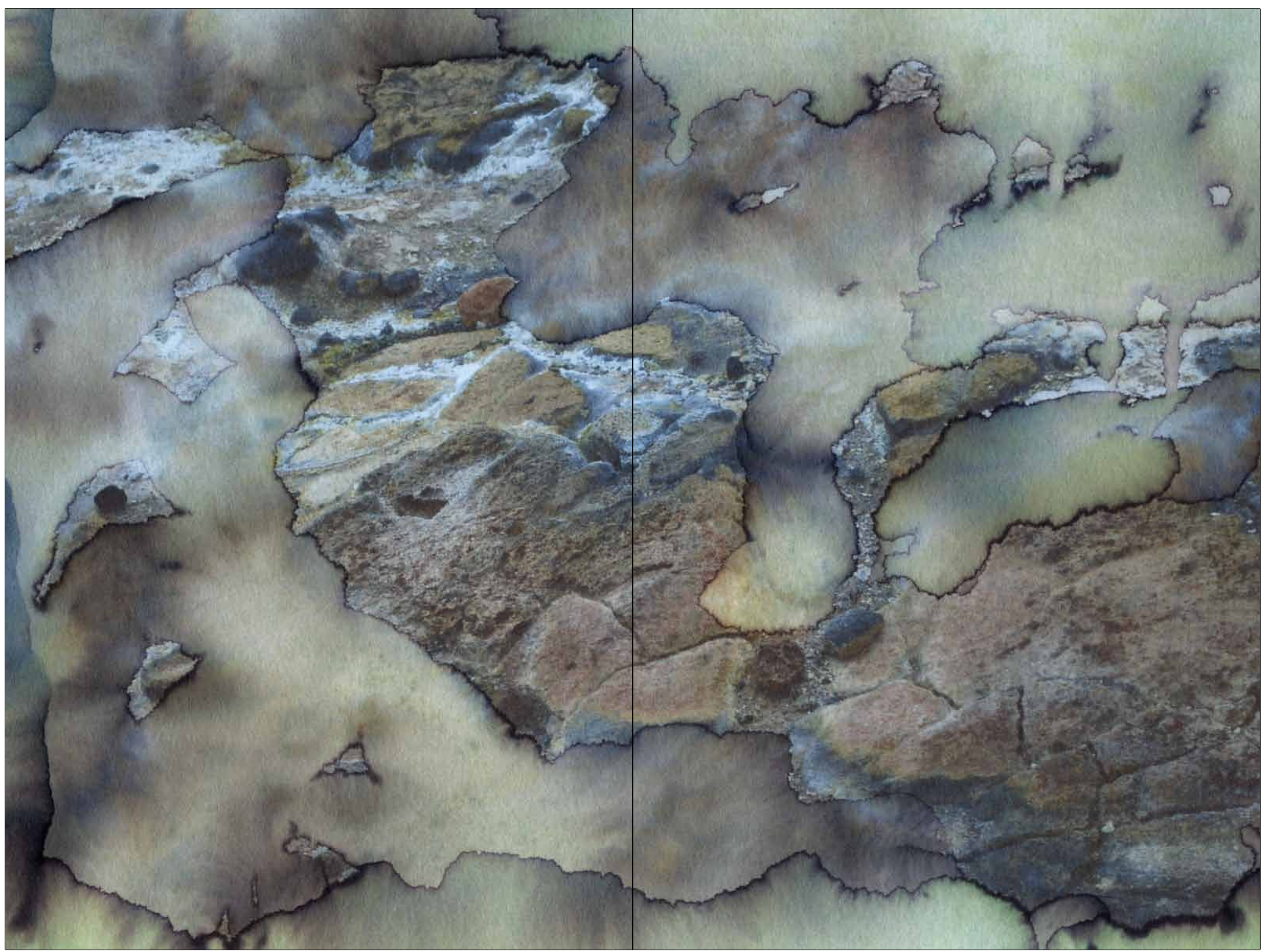
One summer evening around this same time, near sunset, my wife, a small, gray cat named Twitchy and I were leisurely walking up the hill on the dusty gravel road past the library barn. At the moment we crested the hill, an unseen horse brayed loudly, literally startling the shit out of the cat. This is what my defeated body wanted to do when the renegade deer jumped in front of me. Now, even more aware of my indoor, bookish disposition, I did not go back to turn pages in the buried book. In fact, since I never once followed up on the task, the book seemed permanently laid to rest.

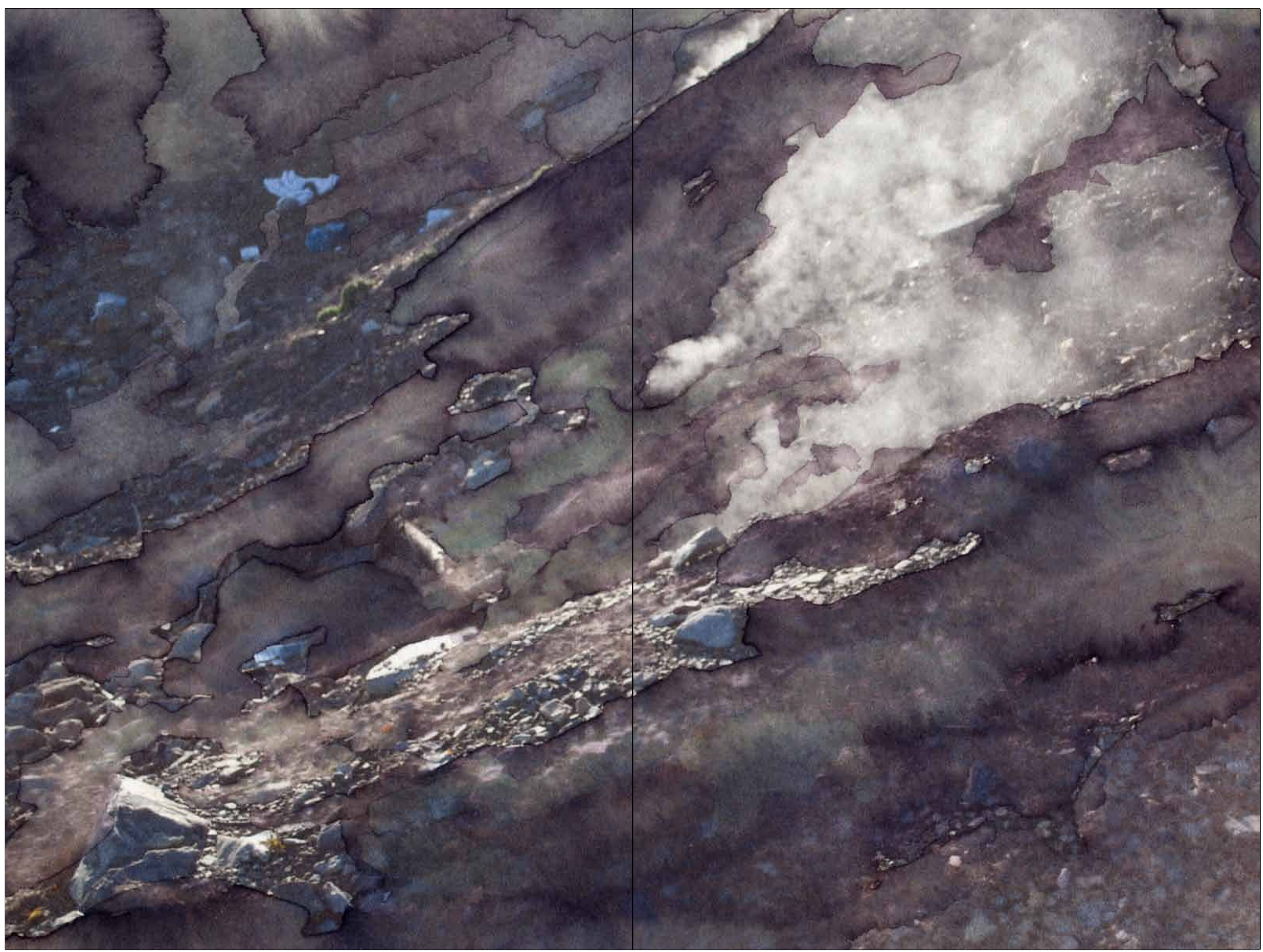
Around the time the book was buried, I observed firsthand a situation I have come to see as somehow correlative—another person I thought to be struggling to balance the search for something eternal with a wild and shifting ground. In the three years I lived in Tioga County, I attended my father-in-law's church only once. Humility and sadness were present as he spoke, as if he were slowly unpacking some burden he could only understand by carrying it. Sitting in the congregation, more observer than observant, I felt as though everyone in the room was similarly humbled and connected by collectively holding this weight.

I came to understand I was wrong. These people I thought were connected had many contradictory demands. Accustomed to the delivery of popular movies, music, and media, some congregation members were putting pressure on him to address the church format. A faction wanted a more contemporary approach to the church service. They preferred bluegrass music to the staid, old hymns. Their aim was for the services to be undulating celebrations that would form swells of emotion. A compromise was made to have two church services, one with the traditional old hymns, and one with the faction performing their own music with projected words on a screen for people to sing along.

However, it became clear the offshoot wanted another minister and they pushed my father-in-law out of the church.

From then, my memory has him reading and scratching little pencil notes in the margins of his theology and philosophy books for hours. Apocalyptic-sounding free jazz played softly in the background. A pot of chili or split pea and ham soup sat steaming on the stove all day. There was something both comfortable and mournful about his long days at home.











Following a hard overnight rain I woke earlier than normal to find the apartment more dark and gloomy than usual. My mind was a fog from the muggy night's sleep and the air was humid and heavy. Having slept with all the windows open, the screens were dark and murky; dust off the adjacent dirt road that always clung to the wire mesh had turned brown and muddy from all the moisture. I rose and quickly dressed in preparation to retrieve the book I had buried six inches in the ground near the patch of ferns.

A stratum of white mist hovered in a low cloud over the man-made pond. Using the shovel as a walking stick, I glided easily between the forest's damp stalks. Enough time had passed that finding the fern plot required patience and careful plodding around the general area where I believed the book to be buried, but once the spot was found, digging in the moist soil to unearth it went quickly.

Upon exhuming the book I understood instantly it had completely changed. There were blank spots where the canvas texture recalled to my hands and eyes its previous, off-the-shelf condition. But these openings only elicited a faint reminiscence, like touching one's father's weathered hands and having an image from childhood flash across the mind.

I brushed away the excess earth, creating a black dirt mark of my sweeping hand movement that arced through blotches and stains. When I turned the book's pages, several dried pillbug crustaceans rolled out across the wavy planes of paper before falling back to earth. Pages were richly stippled in places with a range of brown, rust, purple, green, red, and yellow colors, all printed from organic matter. Corners of the paper were smooth and rounded, and throughout were the pockmarked signs that microbes had been eating it.

Full of enthusiasm and impatience I returned to the farmhouse and hastily stored the buried book in a large, plastic bag. I was afraid, though, to bring the book inside, leaving it wrapped and lying on a concrete slab porch beneath the eaves outside the apartment door.

Mold spores unremitting as any language continued writing the exhumed book inside its body bag. After several more weeks of it growing fungus, I placed the book upright in the grass on a sunny day. Within each of the page openings I positioned a piece of gravel to weigh it down and fan it open so the breeze would air it out and sun beams could bake the paper dry. Once desiccated, flakes and scales of paper frayed and crumbled from its pale, leprous form.

For a year I made scans of the book's decomposed parts. Recalling the vistas that had drawn me out to explore the natural setting, I rotated the images of the book openings ninety degrees so the gutter might be seen as the horizon line of a moldering landscape. A diary-like set of images was established and I eventually exhibited the portfolio, along with the original, unearthed book, at a state university library gallery in Tioga County.

A week into the exhibition, a frantic librarian called me in a panic, ordering that I pick up the disinterred book at once.

By that time my wife and I had exhausted all resources for living together in Pennsylvania. We had both moved away—she to the West Coast and me to western New York—and were in the process of getting divorced.

It was a bright Sunday afternoon when I made the two-and-a-half-hour drive south to retrieve the book. Unlocking the gallery door, the librarian held it open for me. As I passed by her she shook her head, dismayed by my willingness to exhibit such a thing that could destroy her book collection, which ignited my shame.

While I gathered up the book, she gave a lecture on the appalling nature of mold and its capacity for sending its spores airborne. Her lecture did not seem directed at me so much as it was for the books to hear and to fill the silent air.

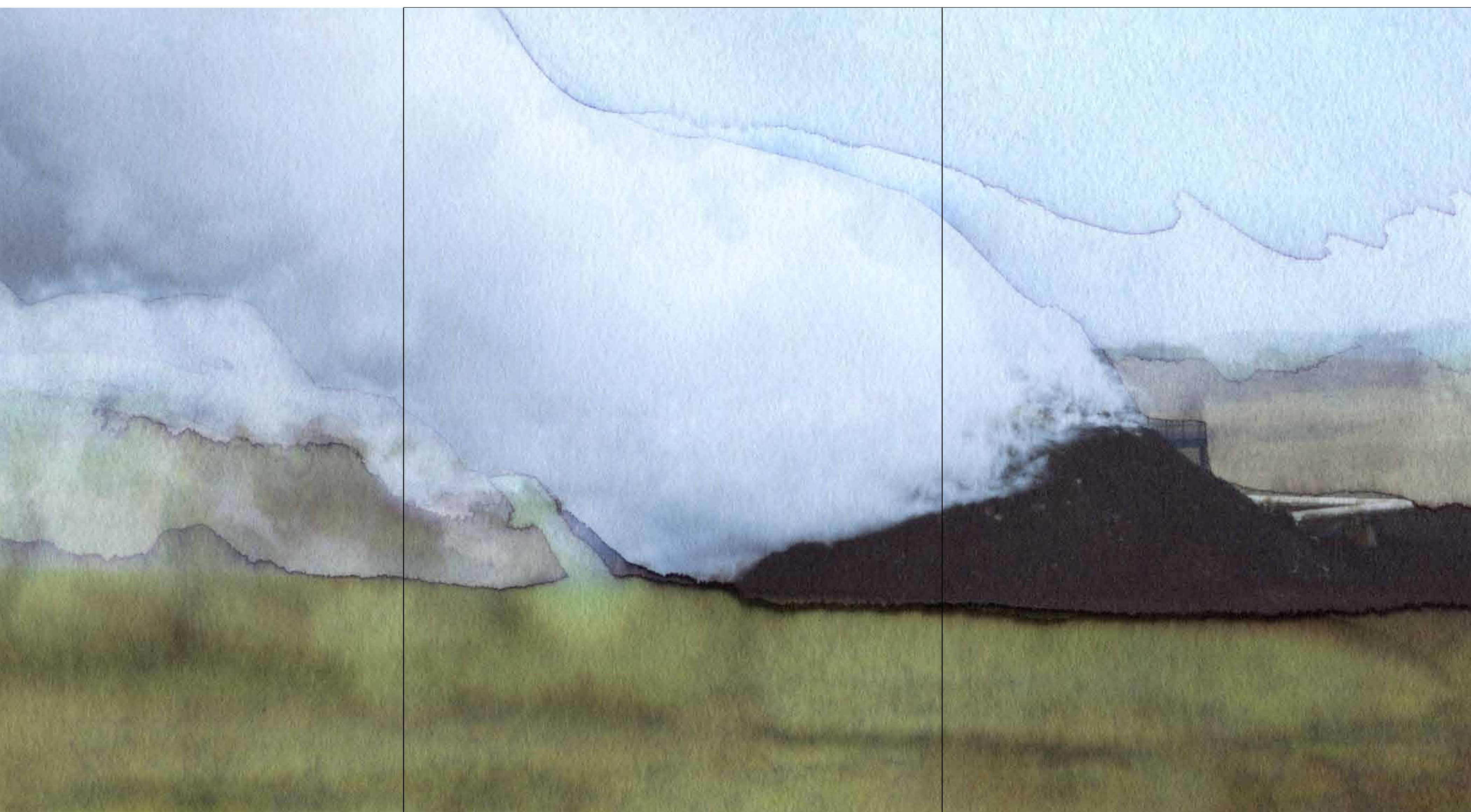
The unearthed book came home with me to the city where I continue to live. For years it was stored under my bed, sealed up in a plastic bin with other books I had made. It has since been lost or thrown away, probably in the winnowing of belongings in moves from one place to another.

I thought I, too, had so completely moved on from my time living in this pastoral, impoverished part of Pennsylvania that the story itself seemed unchanging and to exist as some expendable entity entirely separate from both the place and me. But a dozen years later, I returned to the fern patch and stood a few yards from where the book had been buried. Looking through a grouping of red maple and birch trees that would soon be competing for light and space in the approaching spring, I saw from a distance how the mining industry was in the process of excavating the ground there to extract natural gas in the shale rock deep below the surface.

And because the ground had shifted in Tioga County, I began to understand I was actually preserving a time I thought was mine to discard and leave behind.

I know now, yet struggle to fully recognize, how the place and I are mere abstractions, the miniscule design elements of an ornately patterned carpet. To remember the place and my time there is to beat this rug for memories to fly out like a cloud of dancing dust particles.



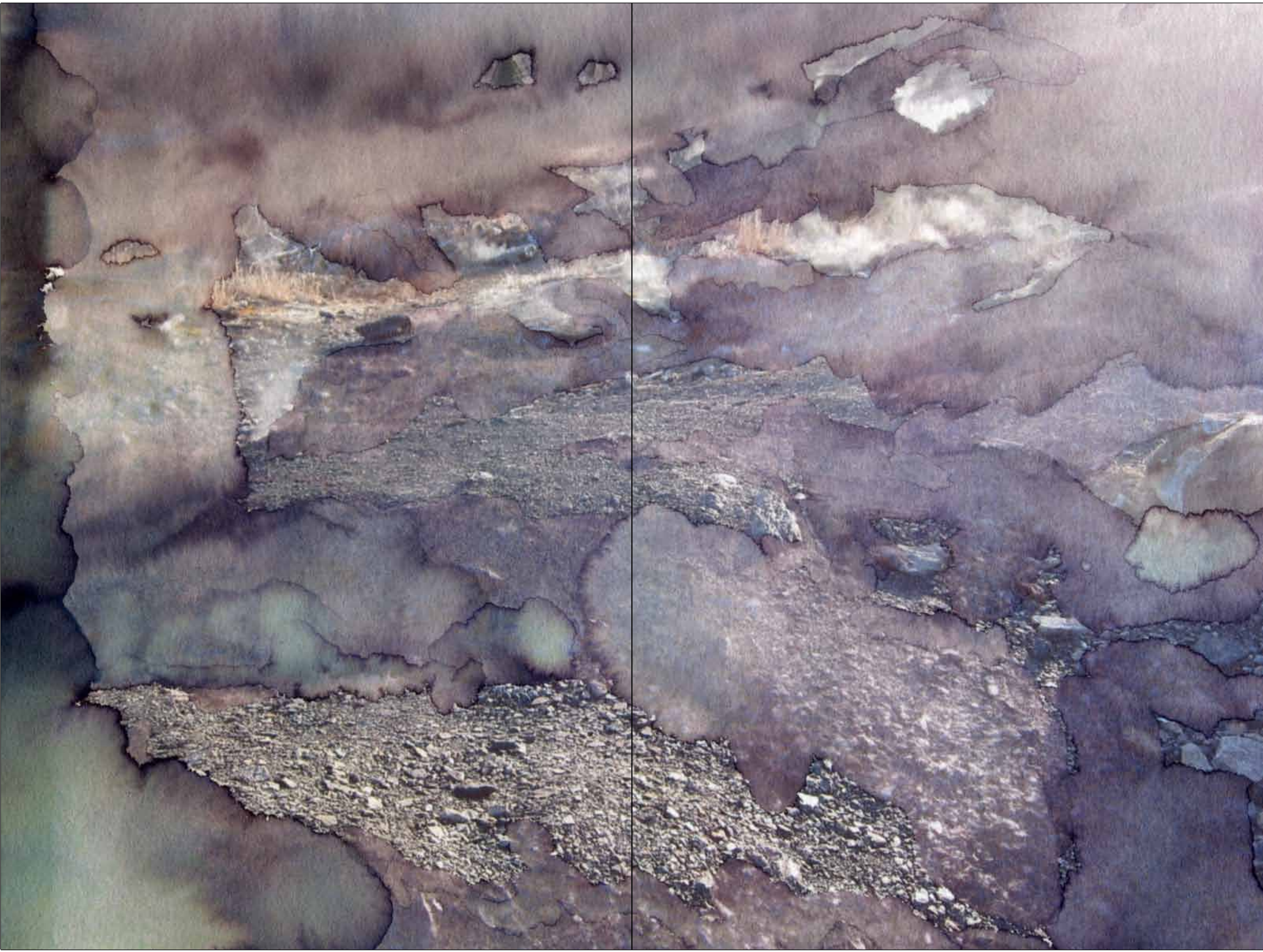


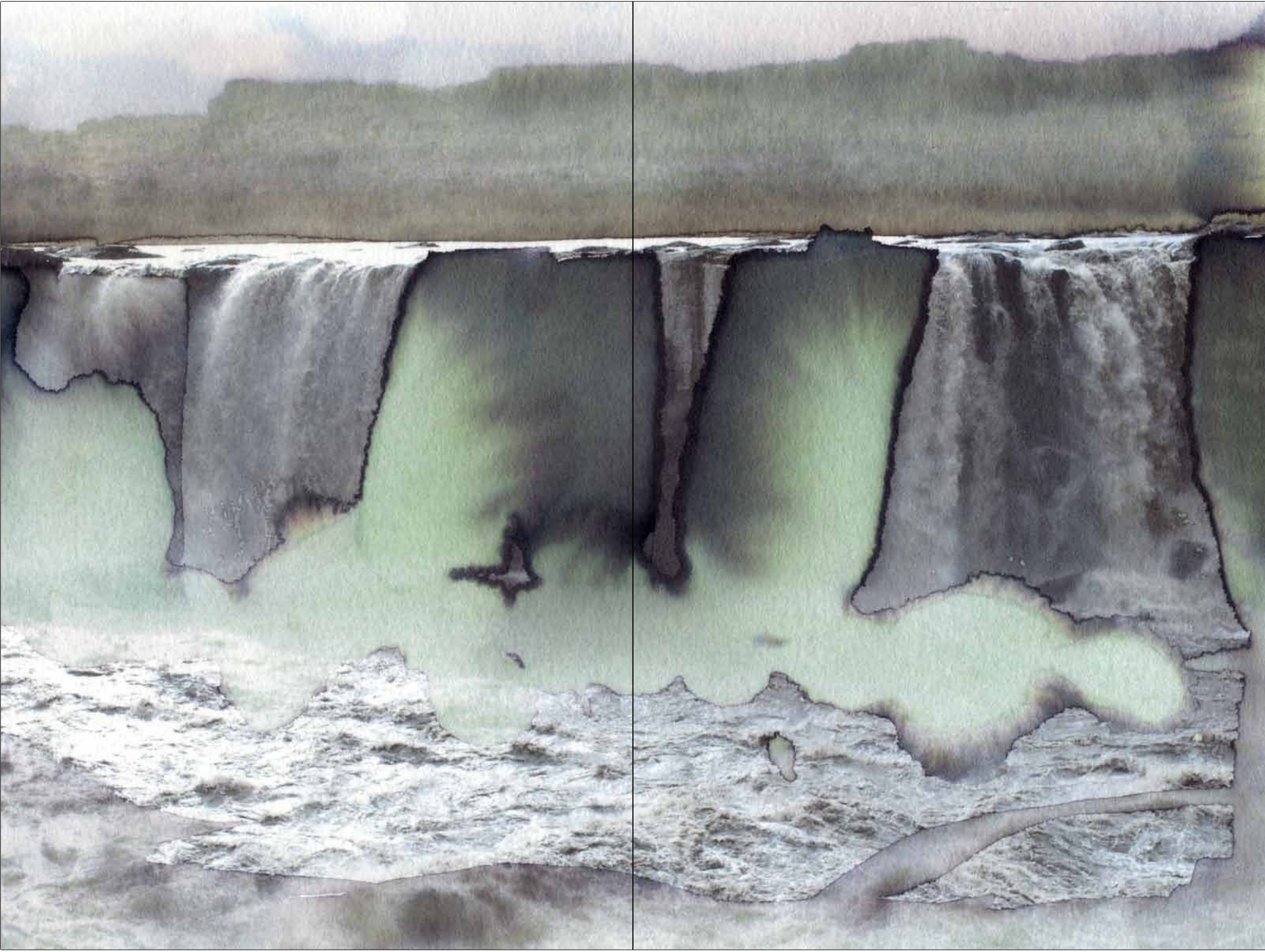
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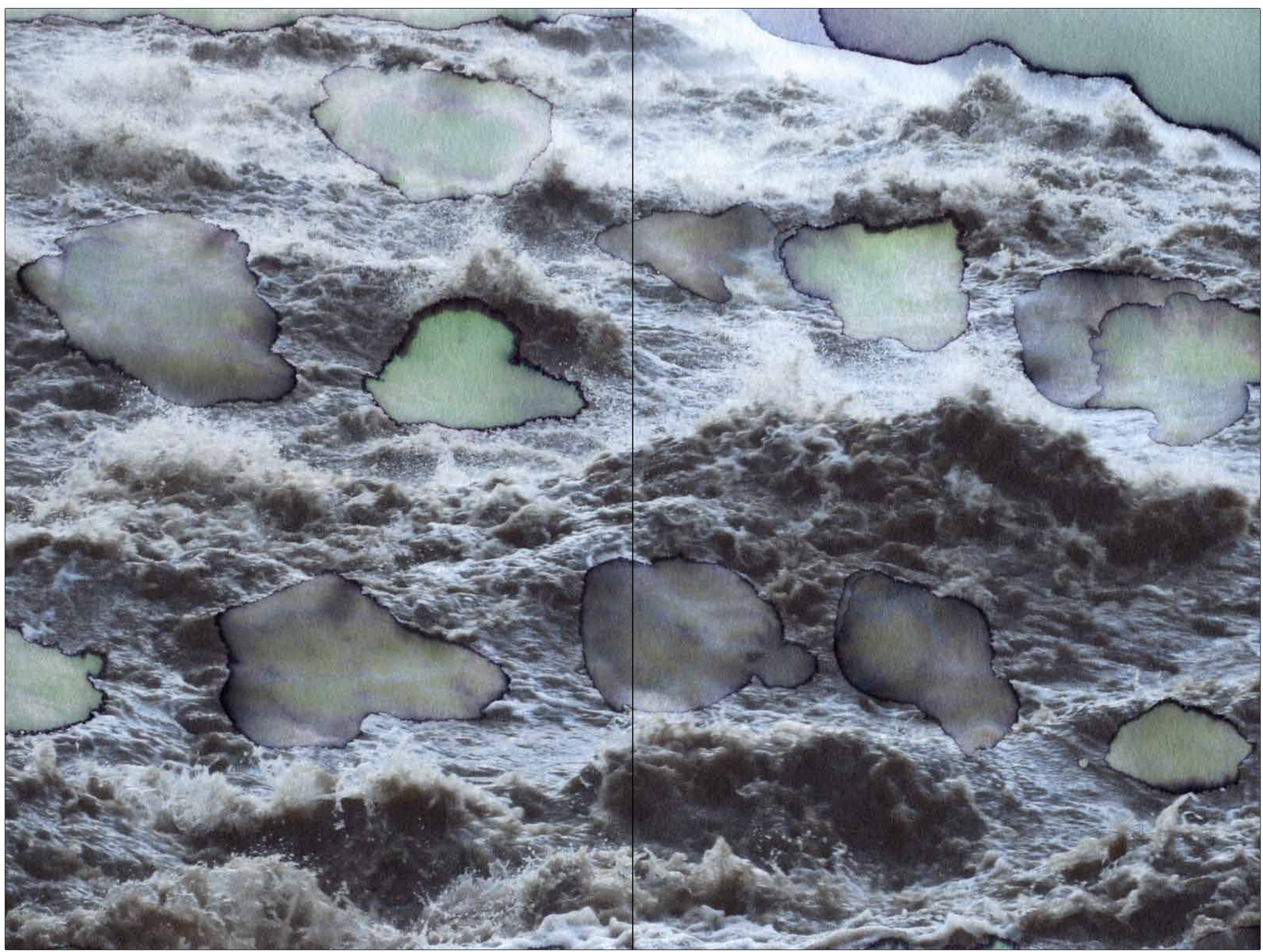
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A decade after my time living in Pennsylvania, my girlfriend (now wife) and I took our first trip together to the north of Iceland, traveling on a small, rocky airplane that advertised Dramamine and nicotine on the seatbacks. Then in a tiny rental car we drove along unprotected precipices to Lake Myvatn, eating chocolate-covered licorice along the way.

We visited a mineral-painted geothermal field so otherworldly it seemed impossible the ground could be continuous with the good ole soil back home. On the field were walkways made from wood slats that ended abruptly like a dock out over the ocean. It was as if when I stepped off the last wooden plank the ground might not support my weight and I would plunge straight through the surface. With trepidation I walked the field, inspecting bubbling mud pits, pale patches of ground that looked like scabrous pus, and a few stone formations blowing steam like ancient funereal pyres. Later I read these lava stones were placed more than fifty years prior on fumaroles from sulfur mining wells drilled into the hottest parts of the field.

Nearby we saw Europe's most powerful waterfall where a million gallons of water goes charging over its edge each second. It created an eternal, pounding energy as if throughout all time the river had and would fall from this ledge, a sign there still exists unexhausted parts of the world.

No ropes obstructed the view or kept people from climbing the rocks to look out over the brink at the falls' imposing power. White-haired men stood before a background wall of spray and looked directly into the maelstrom below taking cell phone pictures. What seemed like a permanent rainbow formed over the tourists--themselves a rainbow of brightly-colored parkas arcing out over the rocks. Crashing water masked all other sound like a white noise sleep machine. All of this was covered in mist as if it were a dream.

We toured an area where Icelanders had worked for four decades to establish a geothermal power plant in this somewhat energy-starved part of the country. Geodesic dome-like nodes now dot the landscape, each housing a borehole drilled deep into the ground pulling steam under enormous pressure from the bowels of the earth.

The plant's network of pipelines looked like EEG sensors stuck on the scalp of the landscape recording the ground's brain activity. I wondered what stimulated impulses, what waves of energy traveled along this network? How did the ground produce its thinking?

Near the geothermal plant holes had been drilled into underground magma chambers by mistake. A cone covered the holes to baffle the sound though even still it was loud, like standing next to a jet airliner running its engine before takeoff. The tapering of the cone formation was also supposed to cool the steam before it mixed with the atmosphere yet the steam roiled anxiously within the thick, colorless sky.

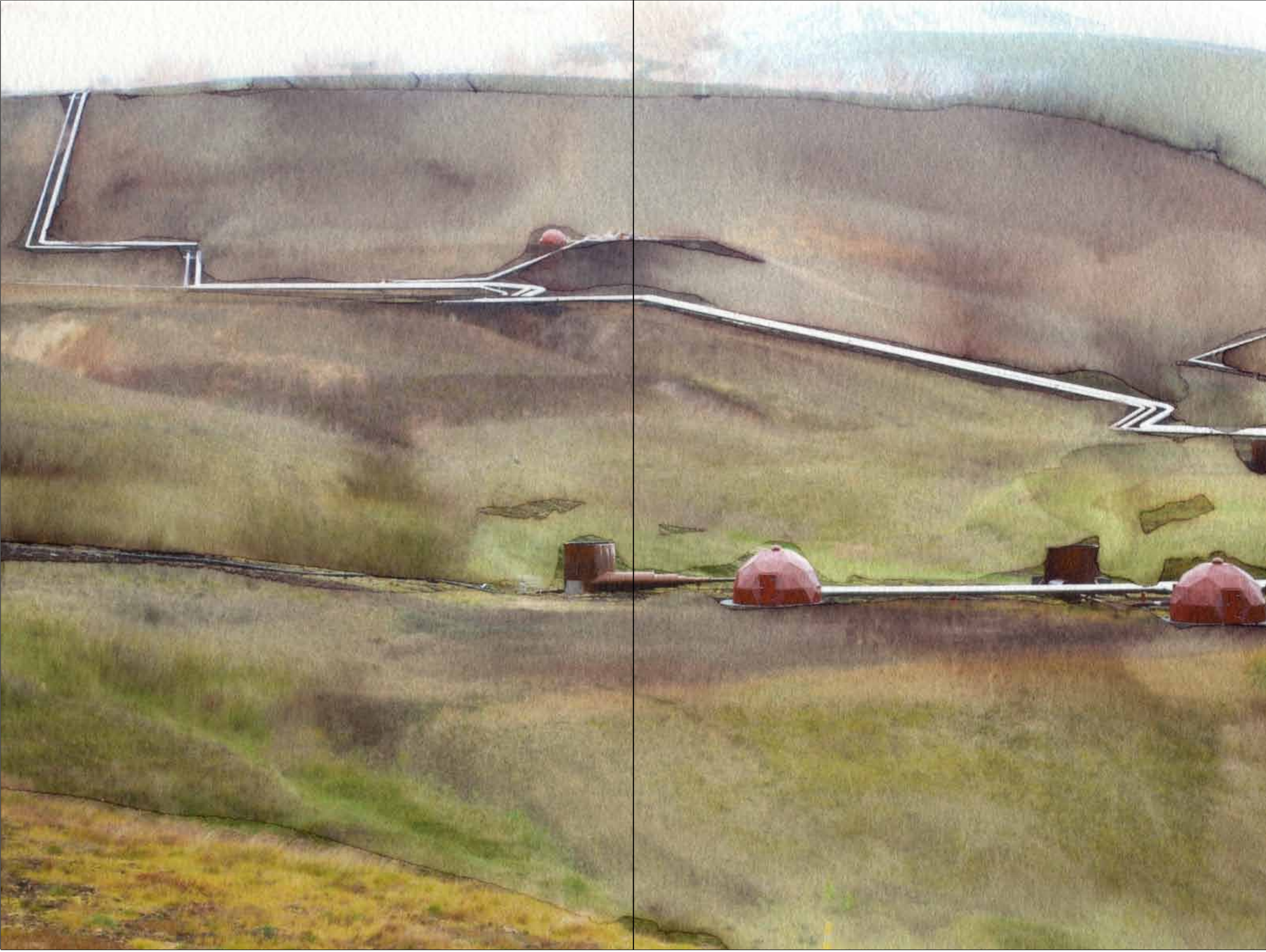
Overcome by an irrepressible need, I paced a circle around one fumarole cone and made picture after picture as if the jetting steam released secrets from the distant past and I must capture all these mysteries freed from the ground before they all dissipated in the ether.

Recalling these moments touring Iceland, with the aid of the photographs made, I have come now to see how I look upon the ground--the landscape, the universe, the cosmos, everything--as potential energy for one book or another. Perhaps it began with the book I buried and then sourced for imagery. Regardless, my self-imposed assignment to make something from the ground's natural resources represents the thinking.

Realizing now how my thoughts and the unearthed book may have affected everything since, it is as if I am once again listening to that librarian's lecture, causing me presently to see the enduring effects of this moldy book from the ground. It would seem each title in my personal library and I have caught its aerial fungus trapeze leaping from spine to hand to spine. Each of these objects of knowledge with their hope for timeless content, each leaf I have turned with a printed image, all their fibrous language, seems partially decayed and composting within me.

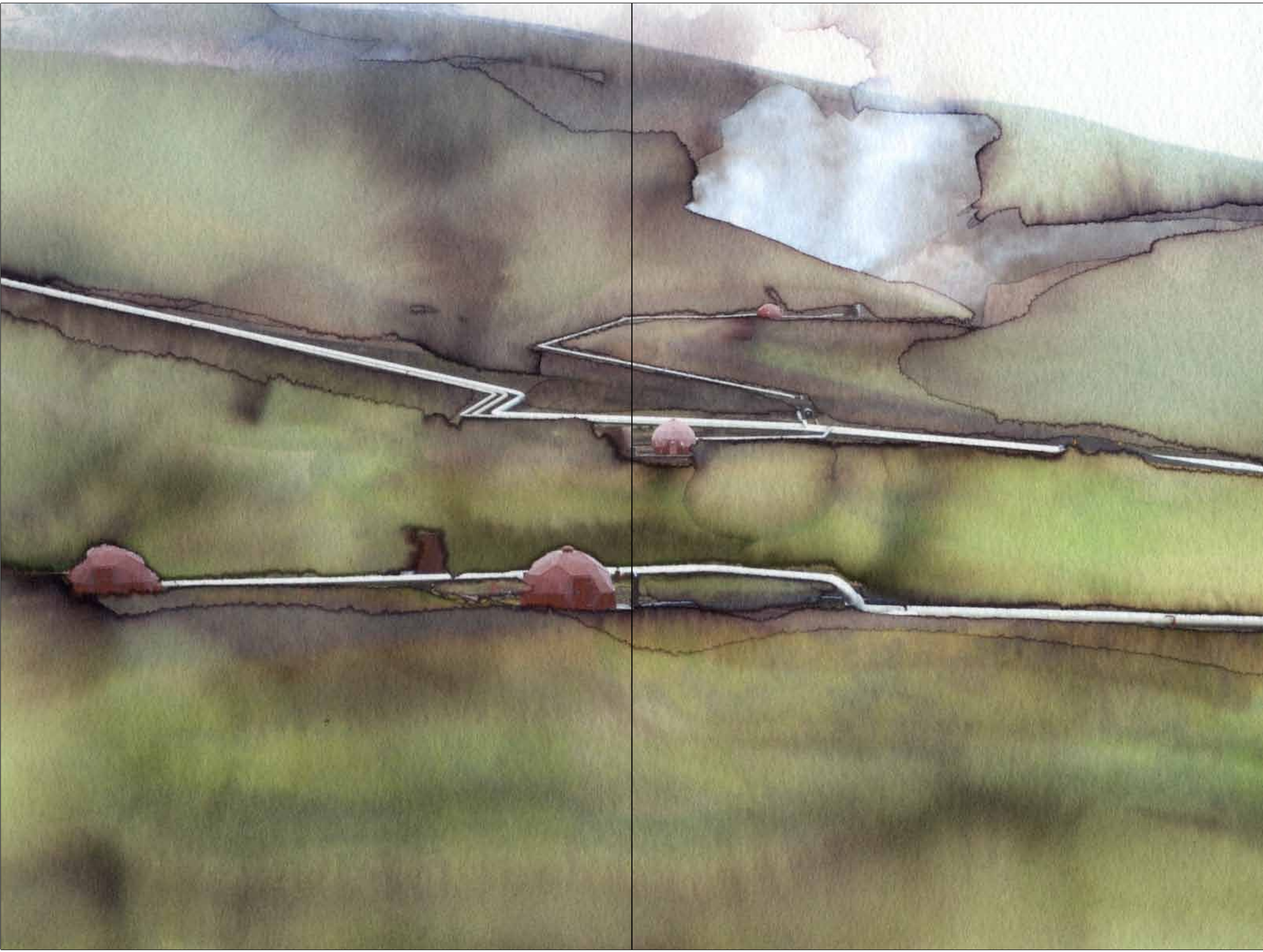
In Greek mythology Hades, god of the underworld, had a cap of invisibility enabling him to move throughout the world above ground undetected as if covered by a mist. This is how I go around unseen, even to myself, in a cloud of thinking about books, obscured from those I am with and wherever it is I am. Whether or not something existed had begun to depend if it had been in a book I have made or read. Whatever efforts I have made to photograph or make note of things does little to connect me with what is happening, these attempts being linked only to the book they may become.

And so it would seem, without my immediate recognition, that a creeping, unchecked ambition to create and consume evermore books formed a new ground that is everything and all that I could see.











Returning home from Iceland I set about editing my photographs and notes to make a book. I had in mind to start from the geothermal energy plant's network of borehouses as EEG electrodes suction-cupped onto the cranium of Earth. But I did not know what I wanted to say otherwise or why a book was required.

Around the same time I was reading anything I could find by David Bohm, who before his death in the early 1990s, produced creative work in physics and philosophy. His view of the world's wholeness, using the metaphor of the patterned carpet (from which I have borrowed), is that individually constituent parts cannot be unwoven from the overall pattern.

Bohm, as it happens, was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and attended college in the 1930s at what is now Penn State University. Researchers there produced the initial studies that led to more than five thousand natural gas wells drilled in Pennsylvania's portion of the Marcellus Shale rock formation. At present Tioga County is the second richest region for drillers and royalty earners in the state, with millions of cubic feet of natural gas produced in the area each day.

To give our attention to thinking, Bohm said, we must first understand that thought is real. Part of the evidence he presents is how EEG instruments reveal the muscle impulses, electrical charges, and chemical changes that come when one is thinking. Almost everything there is to see—the fracking derricks, the geothermal network, the buried and unearthed book—are the existence of thoughts because thought created them.

What Bohm tried to get people to see is that the way we think is fragmented. We think up solutions to problems we are creating in the first place through simultaneous activities—such as the need for sustainable energy, or to make a book, in my case.

I read Bohm's ideas about the difficulty of fragmented thinking yet could not, for whatever reason, connect them to the problem I created for myself to make a book from the Iceland material. By then I thought there was the potential for a book to come from my every experience. If you had asked me what a book could be, I would have found it difficult to contain my enthusiasm and impatience, not knowing where to begin. Books, I thought, are an open ground, a field to move through every single day, a space to dissolve one's self completely.

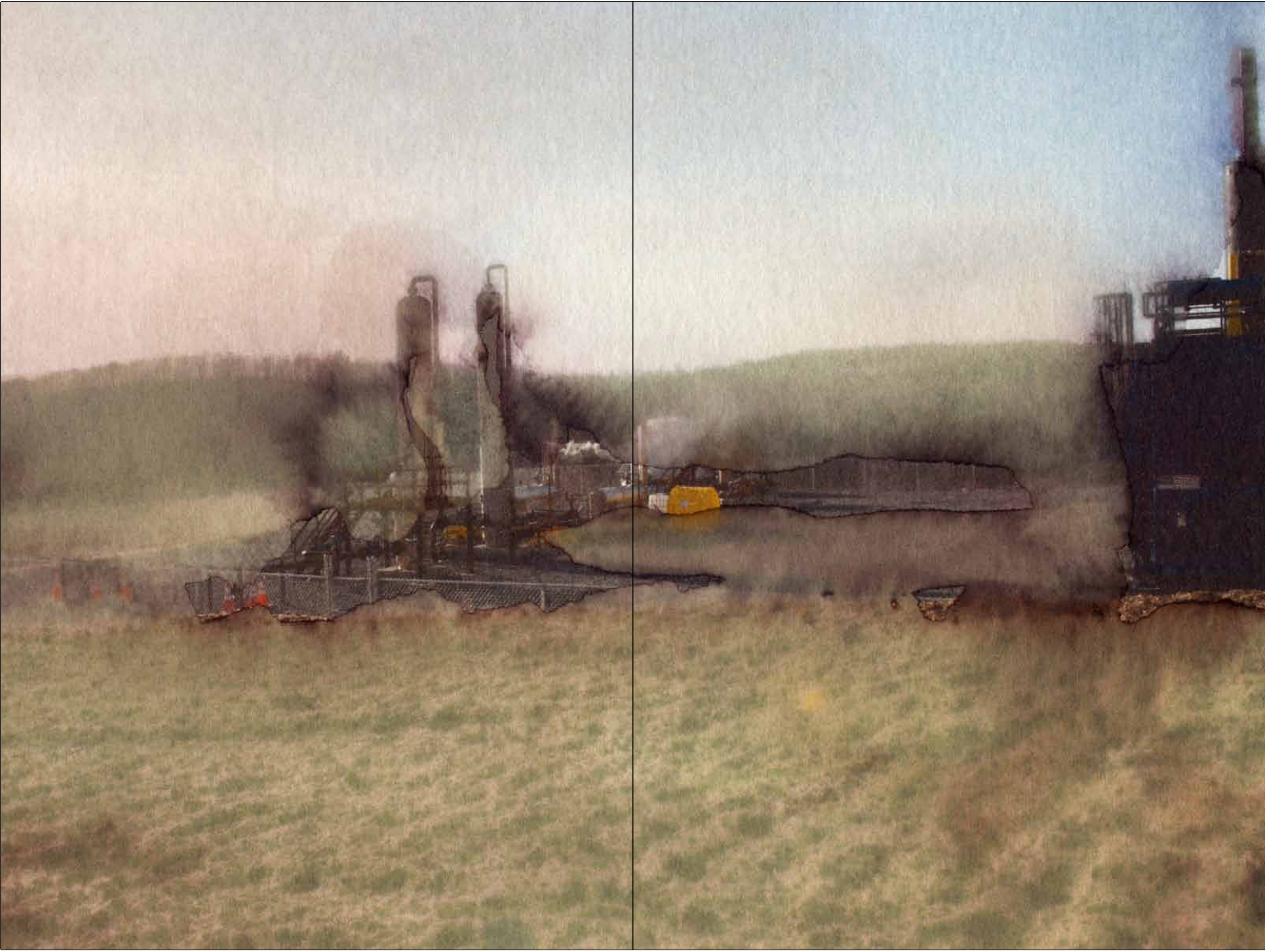
In the mid 1990s, I felt I had found my medium and fixed the book as the ground of my own creative practice, a choice that at first was liberating in every way. For a time I studied everything about books I could find and took workshops, attended lectures, worked in book archives, and eventually built an occupation from teaching books.

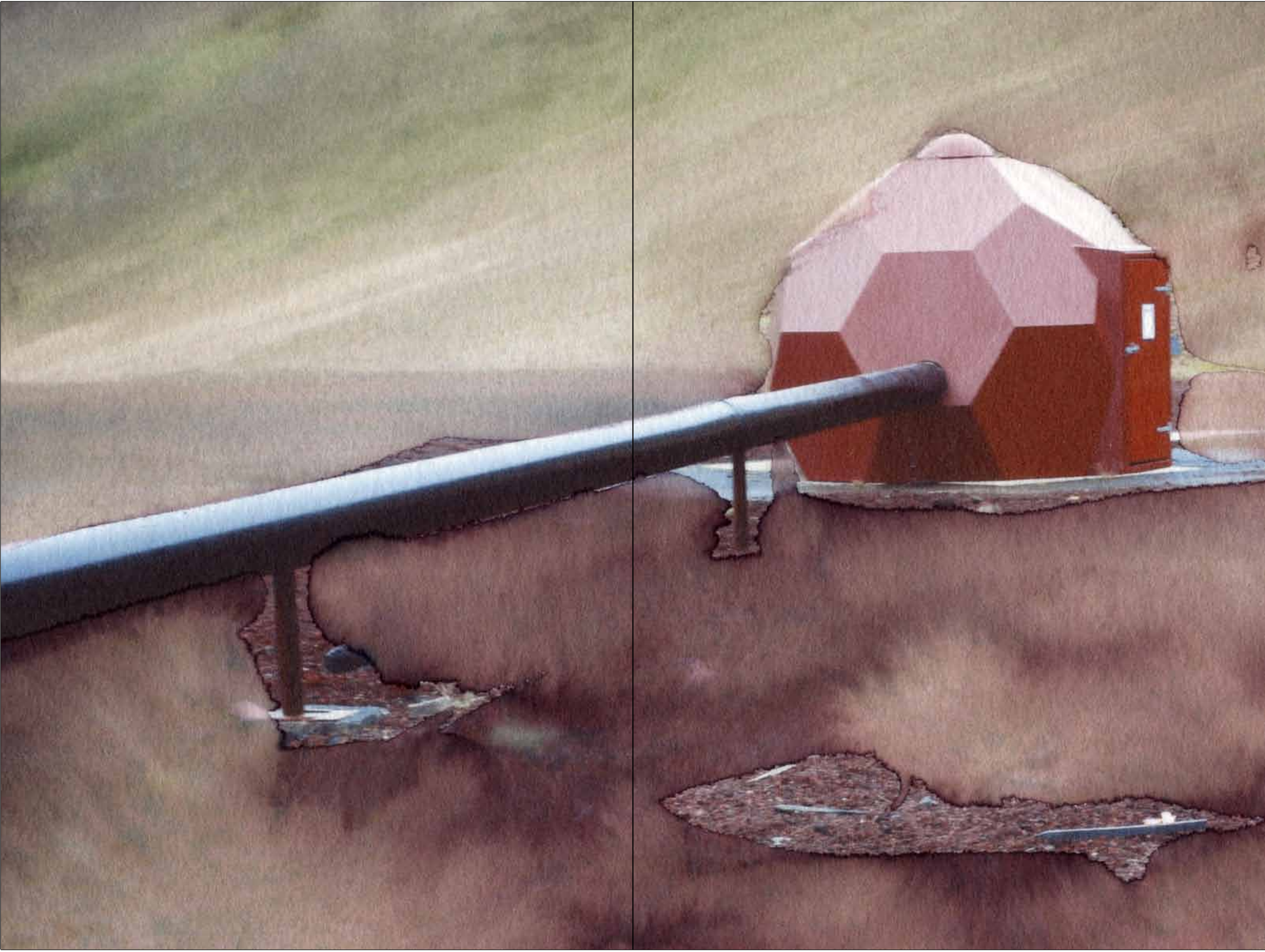
I drilled deeper into the Iceland material out of fear that doing nothing would result in my personal apocalypse. Struggling with an overpowering need to make a book, my thinking stuck in a degenerative mechanical order, I thought I found a way out of the loop by adopting Bohm's view of the world as whole and not fragmented. As he put it, "Everybody and every thought is broken into bits, like this nation, this country, this region, this profession, and so on." I began to see how my Iceland excursion was connected to where the natural gas industry in Tioga County had drilled into the site of my former life.

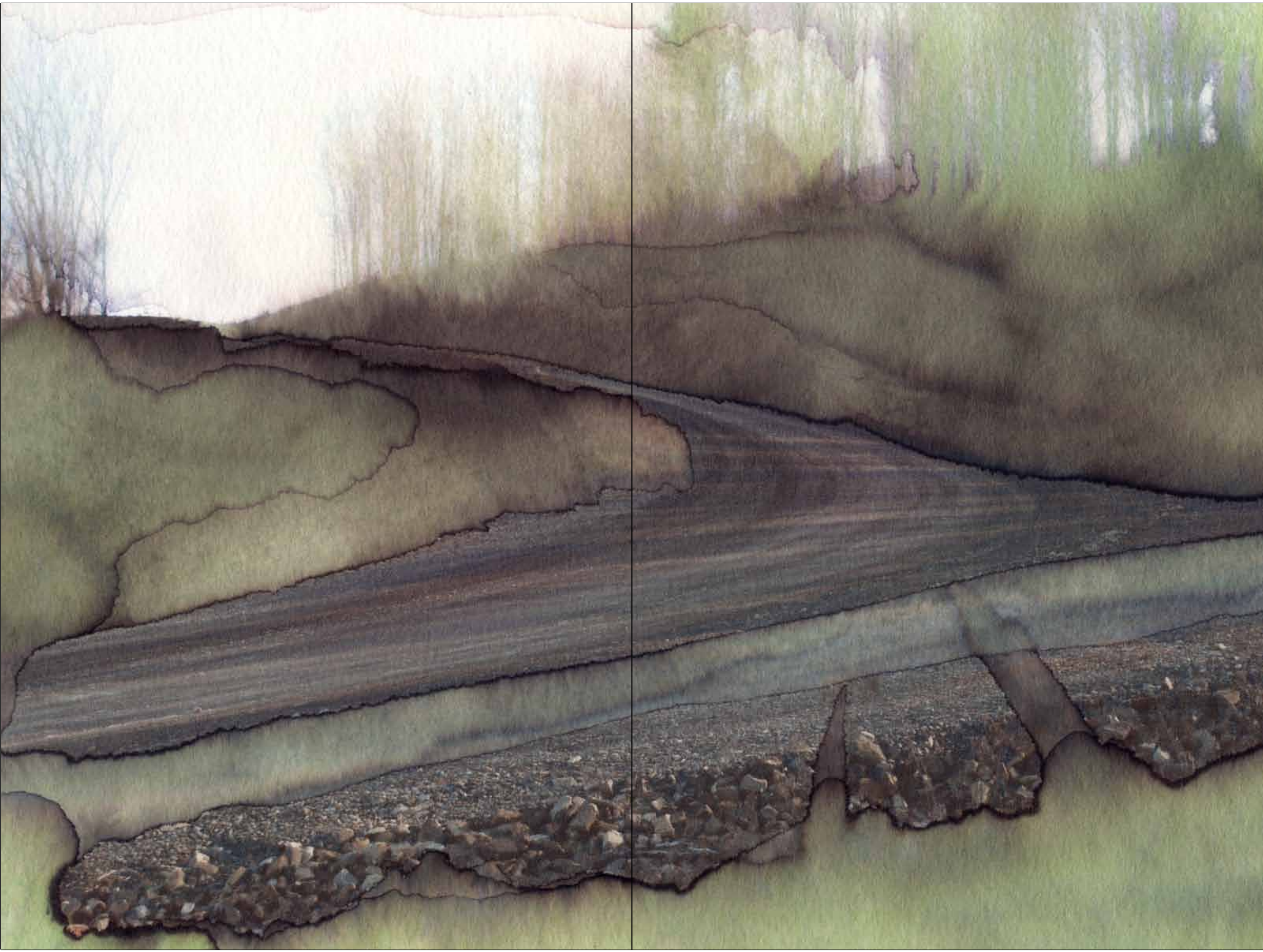
Tioga comes from the Seneca Indian word meaning "forks in a stream." Bohm made a practice of holding dialogues without any agenda other than for participants to think together and for thought to flow between them as a stream flows between two banks, and this energy that flowed—the unfolding, he called it—would be the meaning of the dialogue. And so it went that I came to create a dialogue, or stream as Bohm described, that would unfold between Iceland and Pennsylvania.

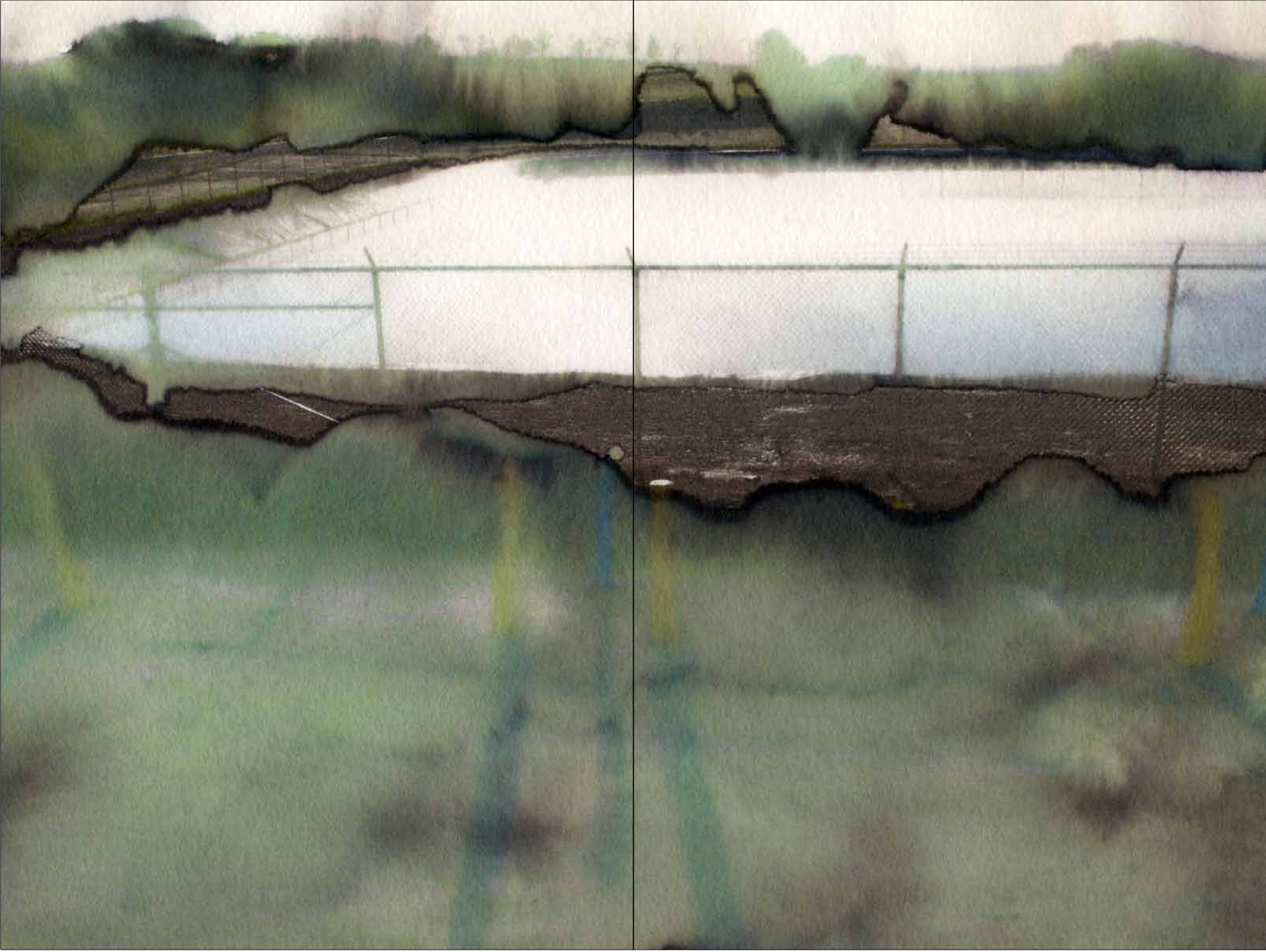
When I scheduled a return trip to Tioga County, I spoke of my plan with some students; one suggested I also continue on just a few hours farther to see what I could of an underground coalmine fire in the former mining town of Centralia, Pennsylvania, that has been burning for fifty years.

My hopes were high that notes and pictures of additional locations in Pennsylvania would set a book free from me, and me from it, by moving my perception away from me and back to the world around me.









Upon returning to Pennsylvania, I first had lunch with my former father-in-law, who after leaving the church got a PhD, then a motorcycle. Now he and his wife go riding in the area's mountains where, on one occasion, a security guard stopped them because they had accidentally trespassed on a new private gas company road. He updated me on his family, including his youngest daughter who had been laid off as a security guard for a natural gas company after prices fell due to the high volume of shale drilling.

After parting ways, I drove the back gravel roads, drawn into the mountains by following the signs of new construction. My first stop was nearby a lone farmhouse overlooking an atmospheric valley to the west where a hydrofracking pad took up about a fifth of the view. Around the pad was a field recently tilled and reseeded for grass with a fine, mesh netting visible through the delicate top layer of soil.

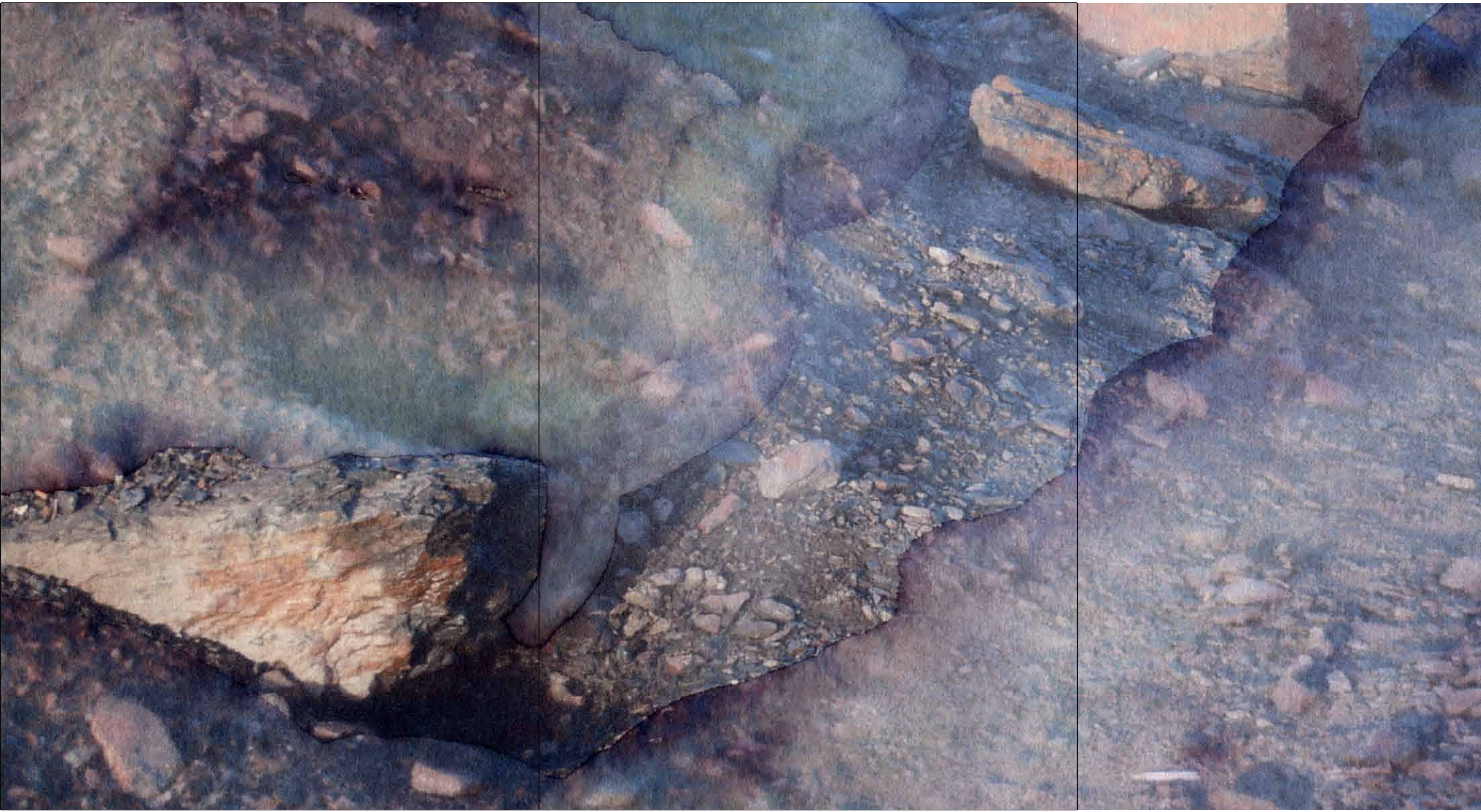
From notes I made that day when I crossed over the freshly turned-over earth at the outskirts of the fracking pad, lyrics from an old hymn, The Solid Rock, specifically its refrain, "all other ground is sinking sand," had entered my mind and repeated. This phenomenon is probably explainable as a conflation of remembrances: I had read that in drilling shale a heavy dose of sand is mixed with the fracking fluid of water and chemicals; and I associated this landscape with the hymn fiasco that went down at my former father-in-law's church. (I was also born into a deeply religious family where several times a week as a kid I would sing aloud with a church congregation; melodies and lyrics from old hymns will irrepressibly come to me at unexpected moments as an adult.)

And so it went with me creeping around the county noting signs of the energy industry while memories from previous lives suddenly arose full of mystery then seemed almost predictable.

On the final bright morning, I trespassed onto gas company property to photograph an evaporation pit used to dump hydrofracking wastewater. These earthen pits are lined with black rubber material so they will not leak and contaminate ground water and aquifers. Water in the pits can be white, bright green, black, blue, or rust—depending on the chemical compound present. Lighter chemicals in the wastewater may go airborne into the atmosphere creating concern about potential health disorders.

I visited friends who had moved to Tioga County, but over the border in New York State where hydrofracking is not currently permitted. They had considered moving to the town where I once lived but decided against it due to shale drilling in the area. We talked about the debate over mining as well as Centralia, where I was headed next.













Although I had never been to Centralia before, as I drove there in the pre-dawn hours it seemed like something of a homecoming. I drank drive-through coffee from the same chain I had patronized when living in Pennsylvania. Listening to The Hill by Buckner as my headlights illuminated the edges of such a familiar, scraggly landscape produced a feeling that this car journey was being made by a version of me that had gone missing and was presumed dead.

A memory ascended like vapor off the pool of my mind, a hazy recollection of a night in the summer before I moved to Tioga County when I had gone with a dear friend to see Buckner perform. As he packed up his guitar and other gear, my friend waited on as I nervously solicited the musician to sign on for a chapbook publication of his writings.

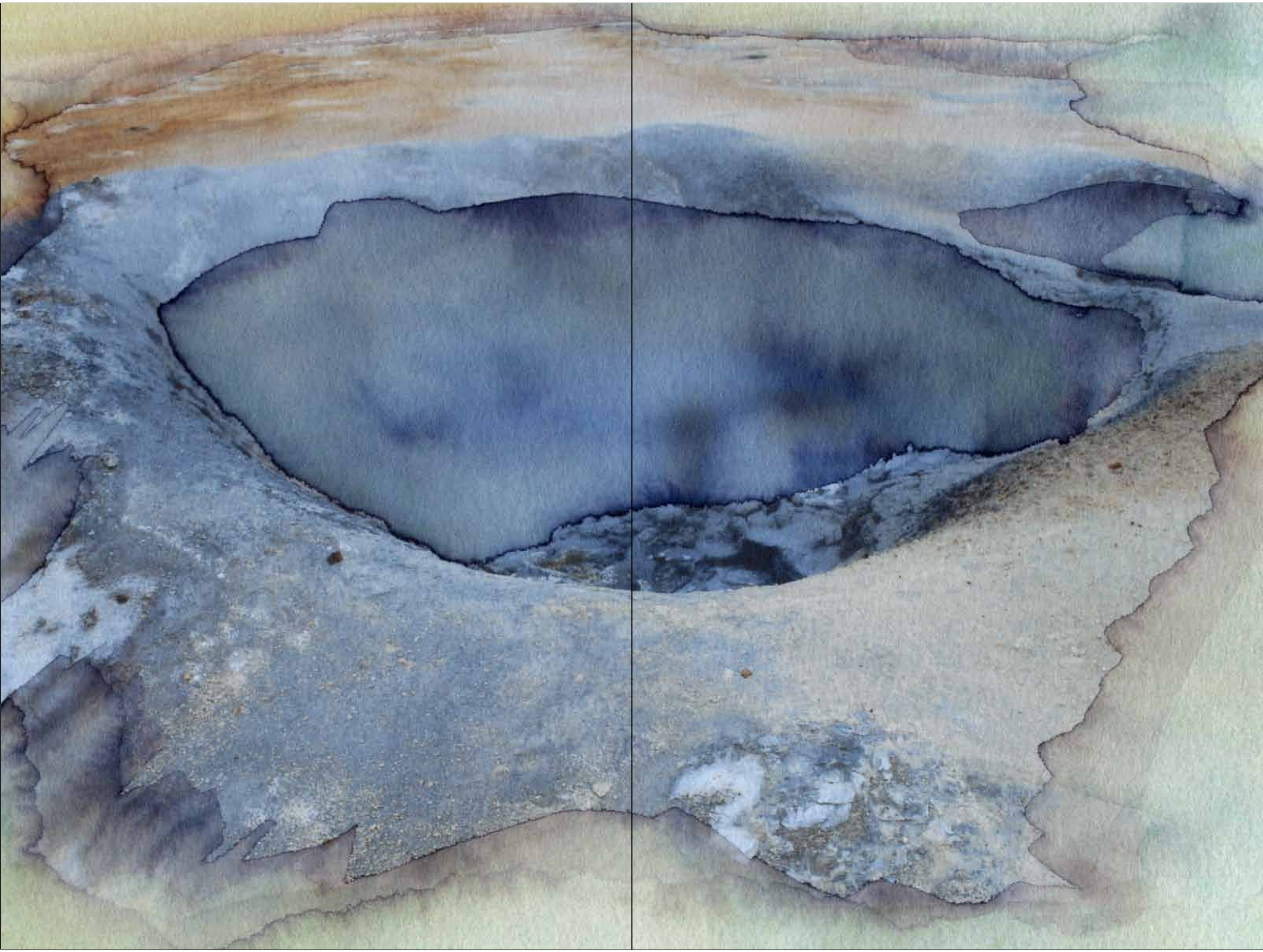
Recently I saw Buckner perform again and his presence in the room felt wondrous, like watching the movements of a bear I had been stalking for years. His mood was earnest without a hint of pretention. After one solemn number where his voice and guitar seemed to trail off and slowly dissipate in the room, he gradually opened his eyes and said, "Just so you know ahead of time all the songs end unresolved."

Those first few moments in Centralia, I drove past the well-maintained cemetery at daybreak as Buckner's recorded voice sang out from my car speakers evincing the pained, lovelorn story of some deceased character or other. The deep emotion in his singing faintly resounds in my head even now, recalling the wide-eyed anticipation mixed with vulnerability I felt stepping out on a hilltop where a half century-old fire burned below the surface of the ground.

The fire is fueled by anthracite, the kind of coal used in steel ovens, and the ground was baked hard with all the nutrients cooked out of the soil. Litter strewn around the hillside brought to mind the history of the fire having been started by burning trash in an exhausted open-pit mine converted into the town's landfill. The garbage also reminded me of the pages-long fanboy letter I wrote to Buckner after approaching him following that performance so many years ago. Mailed to someplace in San Francisco, that awkward outpouring of ink on paper has hopefully since been buried in a California landfill.

Looking around at the trash, I asked myself what I had come to photograph. I stood there wondering what if anything could be extracted for a book, when at last I quieted my mind and listened as a slight hiss issued from fissures all over the hillside. Before I embarked on this trip a photographer friend who had been to Centralia told me I "better go when the air is cold." Upon hearing the hissing I recalled this offhanded comment, and though it had been unfolding all around me, I instantly understood what I was meant to see: the plumes of steam emitting from holes and hovering over the brittle, warm earth before evaporating into nothing.



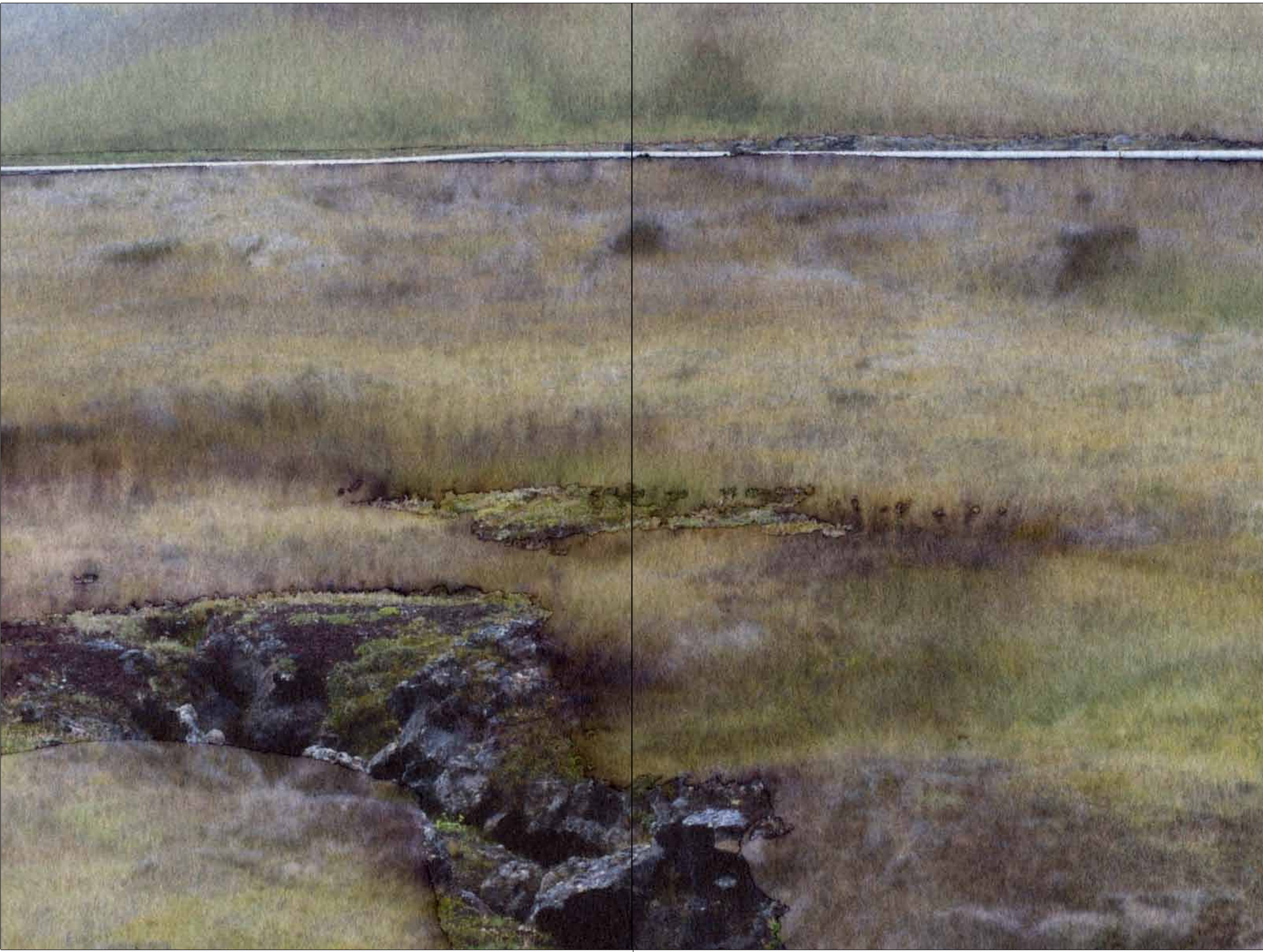


Returning home I was renewed with energy. For weeks my hopes remained high, oblivious to what was really happening as I resumed toiling away again on the ground. What I believed was hope was naïveté, as the ground that is the source and sink of all my energy was left with holes that allowed my thoughts to rise and dissipate like steam through the earth's vents, disconnected from reality. Doing nothing has been the only thing that prevents me from thinking up solutions to fix it. Since I started doing nothing many other moments have come to me I never would have seen before.

My wife and I had spent our last few nights in the geothermal area of Iceland wading in the naturally heated water of a public bath created from run-off of the geothermal power plant. Without my notepad and camera, these moments went undocumented, any lasting knowledge of them simply lived.

Softening in the bath, my wife and I came together with her seated comfortably on my thighs, her legs surrounding my hips, her arms wrapped loosely about my neck; warm water droplets from her fingertips dripped on my back. Moving around the bath as one unit, we gently bobbed up and down to push the scalding hot surface water below so it would mix with the slightly cooler water beneath and make the warmest areas of the pool tolerable. We joked about my initial embarrassment over our up-and-down motions worrying other bathers would read the bobbing act coitally.

Moving around together we found additional comfort in any hot spot in the water; it seemed like an infinite source of amazement—to find the energy pockets that existed on their own to be found and absorbed by our bodies. Soaking and expanding there in the warmth, our limbs wrapped together, our breathing became more fluid and shimmery, like the vaporous water in the moonlight



Still and calm in the bath, I watched the silhouettes of a dozen other bathers lightly bobbing up and down as we had. Steam emanating from their heads rose and dissipated in the deep blue night sky.

The dark forms drifted around like us, looking for energy, seeking additional warmth. And we all flowed together, connected to one another, and to where we were, one complex of energies.

The Ground by Tate Shaw
For Christine

Thanks most sincerely to those who appear in this book
and to those who read its many drafts along the way.

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