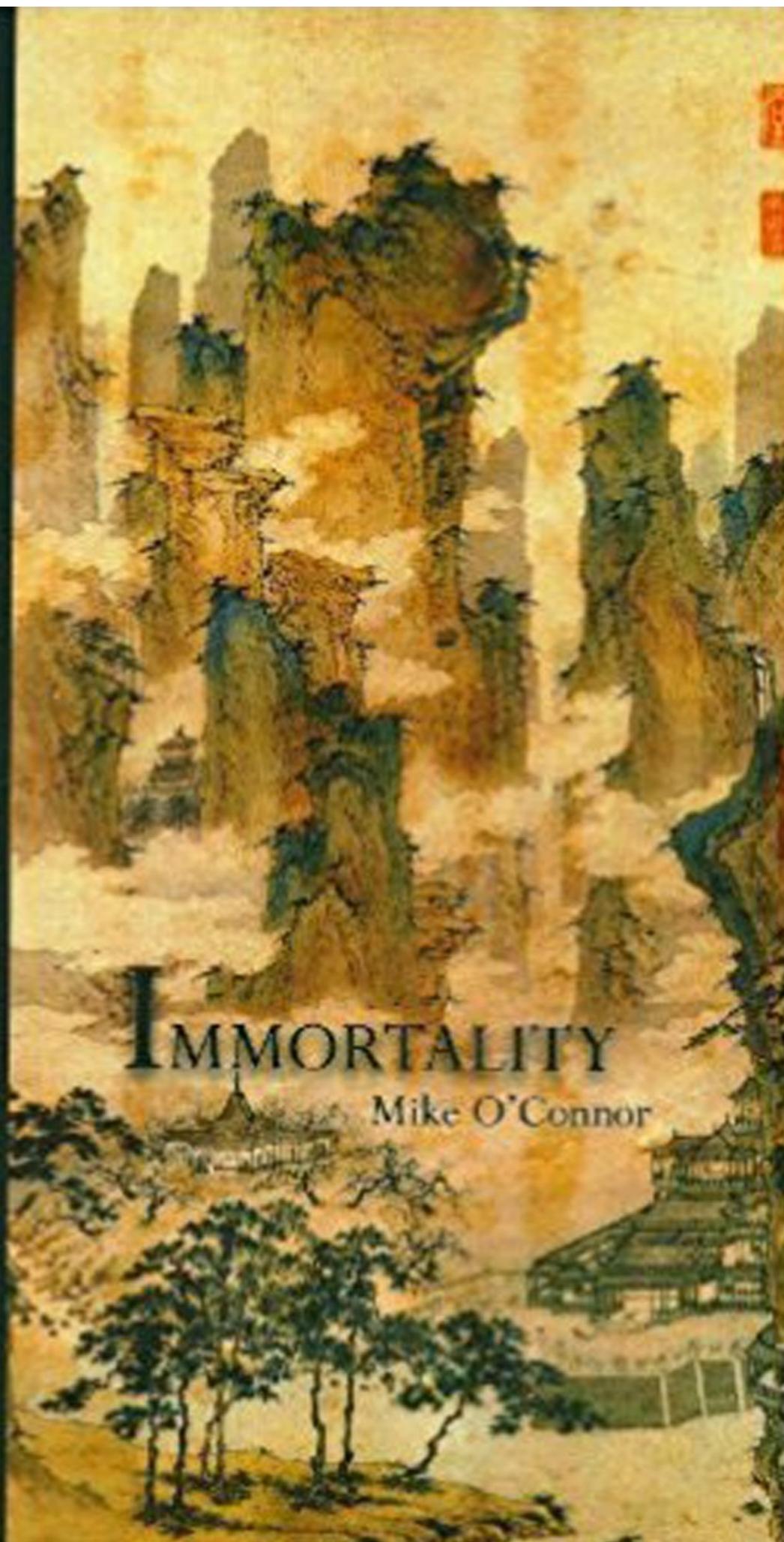


POEMS

IMMORTALITY

Mike O'Connor



Immortality
By Mike O'connor

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PART ONE

DAWN ON JADE MOUNTAIN (YUSHAN)

—for Philip Liu

At three o'clock we're woken
who have hardly slept
at White Cloud mountain shelter,
late fall, thirty-five-undred meters.

It's warm somehow
and when I step outside
everywhere the stars
are thick and bright.

Skirting a ravine, the trail
climbs through a gnarled mix
of pine, *hinoki*, cypress,
breaks out in switchbacks, rock.

Our string of flashlights glows
candlelike in the dark
south face of Yushan.

I keep looking around
at the sword & belt of the Hunter,
at the cloud of light in Pleiades—
I keep almost falling over.

A woman in our party
begins a mountain song,
mellifluous, sure,
and a second woman knows
just where to come in.

Tinkling backpack bells
help indicate the route.

It cools; the stars pale
and seem to roll away below us;
we're thirty-eight-hundred meters
and close.

A scrub juniper community
and tilted strata of shale
as we approach the crest.
This is the realm before thought:
expansiveness and fragrant air!
We pass through the *fengko*
where the wind is born,
then a scramble to the frosty peak.
A long horizontal band of peach light,
virginal, among other bands
where the sun will be,
and a world of painted clouds and peaks.
The alpine zone of Asia
at the Tropic of Cancer—
snowless, above jungle, ever-green—
resembling the Olympics back home
at five or six thousand feet,
yet tall as Mount Rainier.
The sun lifts from the Pacific,
small and red, and the edges
of cirrus above,
turn blinding gold.
I bow,
and the high-tech cameras
of the climbers (Japanese,
Chinese, American)
flash.
Yushan, once highest
in the Japanese Empire,
now its own national park,
how mercifully
you have yielded to our climb,

placing me and friends

on your monumental shoulders.

The sun's rays strike our crag perch,

warm my cold toes. Then:

just joy of the mountains.

FAREWELL TO A PALACE LADY ENTERING THE WAY

—by *Chang Chi* (776-circa 829)

In the old Han Emperor's
Chao-yang Palace,
a woman most rare
sought to make Immortal.
Her name originally stood out
in palace records;
she was not yet familiar
with robes of colored clouds.
But she stopped
singing and dancing (both much praised)
and long followed
the flight of the crane.
Officials of the Court
stood by as she entered a mountain cave,
then drove the jade-wheeled car,
home.

IMMORTALITY

—for Ray Grecott

In spring, Year One
of Emperor Wen Tsung's reign
(827 of the Christian era),
Buddhist poet Wu-pen,
once a monk,
traveled to resplendent Ch'ing-lung-ssu
(Green Dragon Monastery)
in the capital Ch'ang-an
where, in monastic days,
he persevered in Zen.
T'ai-yuan, master at the temple
and Wu-pen's former teacher,
apprised of Wu-pen's visit
to the *sangha*, sent
welcome to him.
At the great Buddha Hall
of that famed temple
in earth's most populous city
at the time, the master
greeted Wu-pen with a bow
and led him to a private wing for tea.
"You've come back to us, Wu-pen,"
teased T'ai-yuan, "That's the thing
about the world—there are
a lot of *foxes* hiding there."
Wu-pen smiled and said,
"That's true, and not a few
know how to sow delusion."
The master smiled and asked,
"So, Wu-pen, since you left

our Buddhist Order, how
has lay life treated you?”

“I can’t complain, O Master,
I have a tutor’s job at court
and earn subsistence.”

“And your poetry, Wu-pen?
Has the poet’s devil, Shih-mo,
compensated for your loss
of meditative life?”

Wu-pen smiled again.

“Poetry’s not as pure as meditation,
but I found it difficult—
as you well know—to grasp
sunyata, emptiness.”

“Emptiness, ah yes.”

The master chuckled. “But
that’s a subject we never
touch on here.”

Then: “Wu-pen, did you bring
along a poem or two?”

Throughout the Middle Kingdom
your reputation grows.”

“In fact, I did. I’ve brought
a work drawn from local lore,
a narrative in verse that,
if you’d read, you’d honor me.”

“Good. Let’s have another
cup of mountain tea,
but—because my eyes are weak—
why not, Wu-pen, read
the poem aloud to me?”

Eccoci.

Spring, 1945,
and American forces are sweeping
northward across Italy.

Italy's Fascist "Republic of Salò"
melts like slush
in the warm rains of liberation.

Since 1944, when the poet Ezra Pound
and wife Dorothy were
"advised" by the Germans
to leave their Rapallo seaside flat,
the couple has resided in the hills
of Sant' Ambrogio, at the home
of Olga Rudge (violinist-musicologist),
Pound's mistress through the years.

Bombs fall intermittently
at Genoa, then closer
to Rapallo at Zoagli.

On a sunny hillside,
smooth black steps
lead past garden flowers
to a green door—

Casa Sessante, number 60.

Virginia creepers,
honeysuckle flutter
at the entranceway.

Inside, Olga and Dorothy
seek to make the best
of things: the war,
with its rationing;
the close quarters;
their long estrangement

from each other—
Pound, Olga,
and Dorothy (a painter),
and an old cat,
tensely quartered above
a ground-floor olive press.
Except for walks—the poet's
constitutionals—with his
black malacca cane,
Pound sticks close to his desk,
typewriter, books, and lamp
in the white, uncluttered room.
A window gives out on
a grove of olive trees,
eucalyptus, and—
beyond the hillside
of white stucco villas—
the ever-changing colors of the sea;
a view fit for the gods, and for Pound,
who, vivifying Nature,
has written much invoking them.
Olga brings tea to the study,
and the poet pauses in his work,
rises, and crosses the room
to recline in an armchair
he has made for Olga—the same
slouched pose as in his portrait
by Wyndham Lewis, 1938,
but the beard gone gray.
Born in Hailey, Idaho, in 1885,
near the Sawtooth Range,
this is the man who set out

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