

# Mountains of the Bible: Permanence and Impermanence (The Everlasting Hills Melt like Wax)

*As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the Lord surrounds his people  
both now and forevermore.*

—Psalm 125: 1-2

*"Yes, 'n' how many years can a mountain exist  
Before it is washed to the sea?"*

—Bob Dylan

*The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,  
before the Lord of all the earth.*

—Psalm 97: 5

*"Mountains are Earth's undecaying monuments."*

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

*The nation falls into  
ruins;  
rivers and mountains  
remain.*

—Tu Fu

*"Heart of Jesus, desire of the everlasting hills, have mercy on us."*

—Roman Catholic "Litany of the Sacred Heart"

^ ^ ^

Like most mornings, I begin today sipping tea and looking out at the world. With the sun still hidden beneath the hills behind me, I watch the morning light sharpen focus on the landscape—first brightening the tall peaks of the Adirondacks, then drawing back the day's curtain closer and lower on the hills and fields to my west. As it often does, my gaze settles west/ northwest with Giant Mountain filling my sight. With its steady ridge rising south to north to the peak, and gently descending back north behind hills, the mountain is broader and sturdier than anything else in view. In the morning, it gives a sense of grounded calm. I ponder words like: durable, reliable, sure, presence, reality. Today Giant is donning a familiar, soft purple glow as the morning light bounces off the imposing mountainside and scatters, with the shorter blue/purple wavelengths dominating the tone as the light refracts. Artists call this particular purple/blue hue of distant mountains "atmospheric perspective." A crown of summer cumulus adorns Giant's bald peak. The mountain, it seems, prefers to wear its thick hair of trees in the medieval tonsure style of a monk. A lone vulture teeters in the wind in the foreground, appearing from this angle to be a massive, mythical winged creature circling the distant peak. Compared to the vulture's unsteady,

unpredictable flight, and compared to the churning, drifting, billowing clouds, the mountain looms with a distinct steadiness, a stability, a groundedness. The mountain is earth is all of its solidity and gravity, a protrusion of permanence under a sky of vast openness and endless impermanence.

Looking at Giant this morning, it makes sense to me that mountains are often thought of as symbols of permanence, stability, and constancy. Indeed, compared to every other manifestation of earth, mountains (and mineral reality more generally) appear to be resistant to and transcendent of the change that is constantly working on and in everything else—the trees as they grow and bud and leaf and change color and drop leaves; the oceans as they rise and fall; the rivers endlessly flowing; the creatures like us born and growing and living and moving and facing our own decline and decay and death. Over the timespans that we know, that we can see and feel with our immediate senses—the timespans of the earth's seasons and of the human lifetime—mountains appear to remain essentially unchanged. From our perspective, mountains seem unborn and undying. They seem absolute, ultimate, eternal. No wonder then, that in mythological and religious terms, mountains are so often seen as the dwelling place of the gods, the home of the immortals, that meeting point of time and eternity, where ever-changing earth meets everlasting heaven.

At times, the Biblical imagination draws on this primal sense of mountains as symbols of permanence. In the Torah, God's promised blessing and covenant with Israel is compared in terms of its stability and trustworthiness to the "ancient mountains" and "the everlasting hills." (Gen. 49: 26; Deut. 33: 15) In the Psalms, God's unchanging righteousness is compared to the solid mountains (Ps. 36: 6), and, in Psalm 125—part of the "song of ascents" collection of prayers designed for climbing the mountain during the annual pilgrimage to the temple—God's faithfulness is compared to a mountain that stands forever:

*Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,  
which cannot be shaken but endures forever.  
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,  
so the Lord surrounds his people  
both now and forevermore.*

—Psalm 125: 1-2

The permanence of mountains makes sense to immediate sensory perception. As I continue with my morning meditation with Giant Mountain, there is the sense that gazing at the mountain—the way the mountain fills my sight and is reflected in the mirror of the mind—is a timeless moment, as if this moment could recur lifetime after lifetime, and though the "I" of the gazing self will be different, if human consciousness remains on this earth I can't help but trust that the mountain too will remain long enough to fill sight with its durable, grounding, presence; its sheer physicality suggesting to the human mind that some things are stable and lasting, that some things are solid and sure.



From the geological perspective, of course, mountains are as ever-changing as everything else in the universe. Seen from the perspective of thousands and millions of years, the rocks of mountains flow and change just as surely and just as fluidly as the water in the riverbed that makes it way down the mountain to the ocean.

Giant Mountain is part of the Adirondack massif in upstate New York. The Adirondacks are a unique mountain range in the Eastern United States in that they are not connected geologically to the Appalachian or to any other mountain range in the area (Catskills, Taconics, etc.). Strangely, the Adirondacks are both much older than the other mountain ranges in the area, and at the same time, much younger. The rock that makes up the Adirondacks is ancient—about two billion years old, some of the oldest rock on earth. Anorthosite makes up much of the High Peaks range of the Adirondacks, a rock that is more common on the moon than it is on the earth. This is rock that geologists figure had to have been formed underneath 15 miles of overlying rock. This is rock from deep beneath the earth's surface. This is ancient bedrock from the basement of time. And in the Adirondacks, the higher up you go, the older the rock. This unique geological configuration makes hiking in these peaks both an exercise in moving upwards in space, and moving backwards in time.

Although the rocks themselves are ancient, the mountains are quite young. It was only about 10 million years ago that these rocks started to be uplifted. The exact cause of this uplift is still unknown. The leading theory is that there is a “hot spot” in the earth's crust beneath the range. The Adirondacks are young and like young children they are growing quickly—rising up at a rate of 2-3 millimeters per year. The Adirondacks are “new mountains made of old stuff.” And Giant Mountain, as one of the 46 “High Peaks,” is one of the mountains experiencing a particularly precocious growth spurt, rising to a height of 4,262 feet and looming over the Keene Valley, giving credence to its original name, “The Giant of the Valley.”



“The Giant of the Valley,” Gustave Weigand (1910-12)



I put down my tea and pick up the book I've been bringing to my morning mountain meditations this summer—*Mountain Home: The Wilderness Poetry of Ancient China*, with translations and commentary by David Hinton, a Vermont-based poet, scholar, and translator of Chinese poetry. In the "Introduction," Hinton proposes the thesis that: "Originating in the earth 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and stretching across two millennia, China's tradition of rivers-and-mountains (*shan-shui*) poetry represents the earliest and most extensive literary engagement with wilderness in human history."

"The poetry of this wilderness cosmology," he continues, "feels utterly contemporary, and in an age of global ecological disruption and mass extinction, this engagement with wilderness makes it more urgently and universally important by the day." Having been immersing myself in Chinese mountain poetry for over a dozen years now, I have come to believe that Hinton is on to something here. Although there are traditions of mountain poetry and mountain spirituality from around the world, including the early Christian engagement with mountains and fierce landscapes by the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century Desert Fathers and Mothers tradition, in my reading up till now at least, I've found the most significant and sustained mountain engagement in the art and spirituality of East Asia—including the mountain traditions in India, Tibet, Japan, and China. And above all, for me it's been the Chinese tradition which has captivated and shaped my mountain imagination. Blending a Confucian focus on harmony and order with a Taoist sense of the organic flux of reality, and adding to that mix the penetrating insights of Zen Buddhism (Ch'an in the Chinese tradition), Chinese landscape poetry presents a unique artistic attempt to weave human consciousness back into the processes of nature, and to locate the stirrings of the human heart back into the longing of the cosmos itself. Here, for example, is a brief glossary of some of the key concepts that articulate the cosmology that Chinese mountain poems seek to represent and enact:

**Tao** – literally the "Way," or process through which all things arise and pass away

**Yu & Wu** – presence & absence, being (the empirical universe, "the ten thousand things") & nonbeing (the generative void, the emptiness from which all things arise)

**Tzu-jan** – the mechanism through which being arises out of nonbeing. Literally- "self-ablaze," or "self-so." Figuratively, "spontaneous," or "natural." David Hinton translates *tzu-jan* as "occurrence appearing of itself."

**Yin & Yang** – male and female energies of the universe. In mountains the Chinese poets saw yin mingling with yang.

**Ch'i**—the universal breath-force that moves through the cosmos as both matter and energy. Ch'i is seen perhaps most clearly in a landscape in which clouds and mountains mingle. Hinton writes: "Sky with its mist and cloud

seethes down and vanishes among mountains, while mountains in turn vanish into that mist and cloud, only to reappear churning up into sky.”

**Li** – the natural law of things, the inner pattern. What in Christian philosophy is *Logos*. What in Buddhism is *Dharma*. *Li* originally referred to the veins and pattern-markings in a piece of jade.

**Shang** – Adoration. The best way to understand *li*. Shang involves experiencing the things of nature as essentially one.

Hinton writes of the ancient Chinese cosmology—“This is simply an ontological description of natural process, and it is perhaps most immediately manifest in the seasonal cycle: the emptiness of nonbeing in winter, being’s burgeoning forth in spring, the fullness of its flourishing in summer, and its dying back into nonbeing in autumn.”

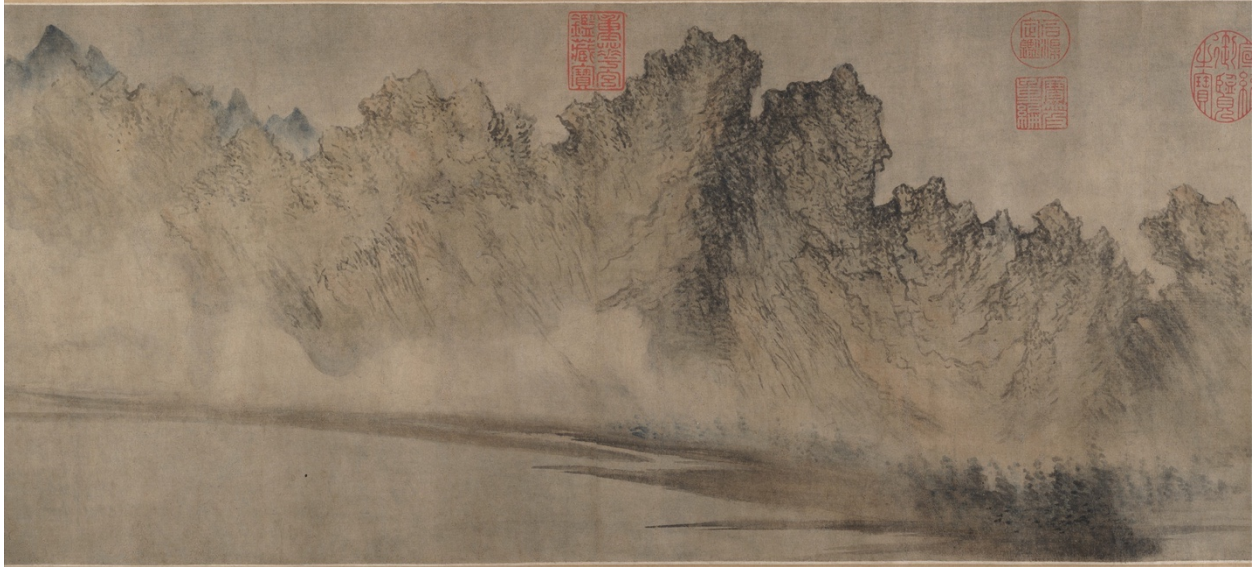
The role of the poet in such a cosmology is to realize and enact (rather than merely portray or discuss abstractly) the primordial, immediate experience of the cosmos that always and already rises out of nothingness, unfolds in constant change, and returns to the empty void, from which it will burgeon forth again. In this system of thought there is no inside and no outside, no self and no exterior world, no distinction between human and nature—the world is nature through and through, the self is as much a part of the *Tao* of things as the mountain and the river. The poetic ideal, then, is to attain to the Buddhist “empty-mind” perspective—to see the ten thousand things of the world with mirrorlike precision, and to let the things of the world speak for themselves. In other words, the ideal is to dwell close to *tzu-jan*—occurrence appearing of itself—that dance of summer cumulus adorning Giant Mountain like a crown; that vulture teetering in the updrift of wind; the empty mind mirroring the flux of the cosmos by identifying fully with it—such that when the poet speaks, it is essentially the mountain speaking, it is the vulture soaring, it is the universe reflecting on itself, and through the adoration and love of the artist, the whole field is rendered complete, whole, and utterly sufficient unto itself—nature remains intact as the integral, shimmering, rippling reality that it is, just as it is.

Consider, for example, the radical ecological identification with nature in a famous mountain poem by Li Po (701 – 762):

#### ZAZEN (“SITTING MEDITATION”) ON CHING-TING MOUNTAIN

*The birds have vanished from the sky; Now the last cloud drains away.*

*We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains.*



Fang Ts'ung-i (14<sup>th</sup> century), *Cloudy Mountains*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Strongly influenced by Buddhism with its emphasis on impermanence—the first of the three “Marks of Existence,” or “Dharma Seals”—the Chinese poets are quick to acknowledge and embrace the fleeting, transient nature of all things, including the seemingly stable, seemingly permanent mountains. It’s our grasping after permanence—our expectation that impermanent things will last forever—that lies at the root of human suffering, the philosophy goes. And so Buddhism aims to let go of attachment to permanence, and to accept and celebrate reality and life in all its transience and change. Some Chinese poets took the embrace of impermanence to extend to the practice of their art itself, rendering their own creations purposely ephemeral. The tradition of *shi-shu*—literally “rocks-and-bark poetry”—included recluse, mountain hermits who would leave their poems written on scraps of bamboo, scratched into bark, painted on rocks, or chiseled into the rock wall. Meng Hao-jan (691-740), for example, was known for burning his poems immediately after writing them. Han Shan (“Cold Mountain”) would write his poems with water-soluble ink on rocks and trees, and would dance and sing when they would be washed away by the rain.





"The monk pair Shih Te and Han Shan," Sendai Gibon (1938)

An 8<sup>th</sup>-century mountain recluse, Cold Mountain's biography is shrouded in lore and legend. He is perhaps the most famous eccentric in the Chinese Ch'an (Zen) poetry tradition. A sort of paradigmatic trickster figure and iconoclast, Cold Mountain is often depicted in Chinese painting with his sidekick and partner in mischief, Shih Te. Shih Te was the kitchen hand at a mountain monastery. Han Shan would visit the monastery often, unkempt and dressed in rags, and would wander the lecture halls for hours, laughing and clapping obnoxiously in response to

the monks' serious, deep teachings. Shih Te would smuggle some food from the kitchen under his robe and sneak it to Cold Mountain, and the two of them would then set off on mountain excursions, camping under the open sky, laughing and telling jokes as they went along their way. As a common portrait in Zen painting, Han Shan and Shih Te are easy to recognize in their ragged clothing and disheveled appearance, often seen wandering in nature while laughing or with a mischievous look on their faces. Han Shan is often painted holding a blank scroll, symbolizing his work as a poet. The scroll is left blank because, from the Zen perspective, words themselves are nothing compared to the unspeakable glory of nature itself. The blank scroll is like an empty mirror, ready to reflect reality in its fullness, beyond words. Shih Te holds a broom, referencing his work in the monastery kitchen. From the Zen perspective, though, the broom symbolizes the attempt to sweep clean the dusty cobwebs from the soul. With their untethered, light—some describe them as “lunatic”—way of being in the world, Han Shan and Shih Te teach a radical embrace and friendship with life's impermanence. Consider these two poems from Han Shan's “Cold Mountain” series:

### **Cold Mountain Poem #7**

I settled at Cold Mountain long ago,  
 Already it seems like years and years.  
 Freely drifting, I prowl the woods and streams  
 And linger watching things themselves.  
 Men don't get this far into the mountains,  
 White clouds gather and billow.  
 Thin grass does for a mattress,  
 The blue sky makes a good quilt.  
 Happy with a stone under head  
 Let heaven and earth go about their changes.

### **Cold Mountain Poem #17**

If I hide out at Cold Mountain  
 Living off mountain plants and berries –  
 All my lifetime, why worry?  
 One follows one's karma through.  
 Days and months slip by like water,  
 Time is like sparks knocked off flint.  
 Go ahead and let the world change –  
 I'm happy to sit among these cliffs.

^ ^ ^

The Christian tradition too, although perhaps in a less systematic and sustained way, also teaches a message of radical impermanence. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,”



Jesus says, in one of his more Zen-like poetic teachings, “where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt. 6: 19-21)

Surprisingly perhaps, although mountains do figure as symbols of permanence in a small handful of instances, in the Bible it is much more common to find mountains evoked as symbols of impermanence. In the Psalms and the Prophets especially, more often than not mountains appear to speak to the radical impermanence of the earth, and in contrast and comparison, the radical permanence of God. Written from a pre-geological mindset, before scientific inquiry plumbed not just the depths of the earth’s spatial geography but also the earth’s scale of geological time, when we read the Bible from the perspective of mountains we find a surprisingly modern teaching on flux and impermanence.

In my reading, there appear to be at least two major ways that the figure of mountains in the Bible speaks to the transient, impermanent nature of reality. These are: 1) the impermanence of mountains as a foil and indication of the permanence of God; and 2) mountains as malleable and mobile.

Psalms 46, for an example of the first case, commends God as our greatest “refuge and strength” by way comparing the stability of God to the instability of nature, to the oceans and mountains which can surge and crumble:

*God is our refuge and strength,  
an ever-present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,  
though its waters roar and foam  
and the mountains quake with their surging.*  
—Psalms 46: 1-3

Isaiah 54: 10 is one of many similar passages (c.f., Habakkuk 3: 6), wherein God says, “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken.” If even mountains, which appear to be the strongest force against change that the earth presents, eventually crumble and fall, how much sturdier and more enduring must the word of God be, according to these mountain metaphors. In other words, even though mountains can last for thousands and millions of years, God’s word lasts even longer.

The second major way that mountains appear as a metaphor of impermanence in the Bible is as symbols of the earth’s malleability and mobility. Perhaps the most striking image of mountains that we find in the Bible are the many instances in which mountains are pictured to “melt like wax.” Psalm 97: 5, for example, states directly that “The mountains melt like wax before the Lord.” We find this image evoked elsewhere too (c.f., Micah 1: 4, Nahum 1:5, Is. 34: 3 & Is. 64: 1).

It's a powerful image—a mountain like a hulking candle melting down into a puddle of wax. Similarly, the Isaiah prophecy of chapter 40 presents an image that resounds throughout the Old and New Testaments—an image of the valleys lifted and the mountains flattened—“Every valley shall be raised, every mountain and hill made low.” (C.f., Luke 3: 5, Zechariah 4: 7)

Not only are mountains profoundly malleable, the Bible also recognizes them as moveable. Job talks about God as one who can “move mountains without their knowing it.” (Job 9: 5). In one of his more challenging and enigmatic teachings, Jesus picks up on this image of the seemingly impossible mobility of mountains. “*Truly I tell you*,” Jesus taught,

*if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’  
and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say  
will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever  
you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be  
yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold  
anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in  
heaven may forgive you your sins.”*

—Mark 11: 23-25 (c.f., Mt. 17: 20, Mt. 21: 21, 1 Corinthians 13: 2)

Perhaps the most beautiful, if not equally bewildering, reference to the mobility of mountains is found in Psalm 114, which celebrates the wonders of God on display during the Exodus saga, where against all odds God leads the people from bondage to freedom.

*When Israel went out from Egypt,  
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,  
Judah became God's sanctuary,  
Israel his dominion.  
The sea looked and fled;  
Jordan turned back.  
The mountains skipped like rams,  
the hills like lambs.  
Why is it, O sea, that you flee?  
O Jordan, that you turn back?  
O mountains, that you skip like rams?  
O hills, like lambs?*

—Psalm 114: 1-6

What's going on here with these poetic references to mountains in the Bible? Mountains crumbling into the sea; mountains melting like wax; mountains jumping from one place to another; mountains skipping for joy like bighorn sheep frolicking in an alpine meadow?

^ ^ ^

In mid-afternoon, I return to my Giant Mountain gazing spot. The summer sun bears down relentlessly on the mountain's bald peak, as upon my straw hat. The tea now swirls and pops with water as the ice in the glass hisses and melts. I dream about swimming in a shaded mountain stream to cool off. "Okay, Giant-of-the-Valley," I say to no one but the mountain. "Lake Champlain is just a short hop, skip, and a jump away. Jesus said it's possible, why don't you go take a cooling dip? 'Go, throw yourself in the sea!'"

The ridgeline stares back, seeming more solid and unmoving than ever. A harrier glides past my vision, on the hunt for field mice. It hovers in place for a few seconds before striking down into the grass. It turns around and flies off with proud determination, having secured afternoon provisions. Its sudden appearance and disappearance takes me away from the mountain for a moment, and reminds me how quickly things in nature can move and change.

Geology teaches that from the moment mountains are born, they face forces that effect their eventual demise. "Denudation" is the technical term for this process by which natural forces break down mountains. The sun, for example, that shines so strongly today. Especially on the sunward side of a mountain, the surface layer of the rock becomes hot and expands, making the mountainside more susceptible to disintegration. Rainfall adds to the denudation process by washing away rocks that are loosened by the sun and wind, as well as by a chemical process by which rain absorbs CO<sub>2</sub> to become a weak acid capable of speeding the rocks' erosion. When rainwater freezes it seeps into the deepest cracks of the mountain and expands, making the crack bigger and more vulnerable to collapse. As piles of rocks fall and gather into scree, landslides further the erosion process. As snow packs on top of snow, heavy glaciers form, frozen rivers capable of carving rock over time like a knife carves butter. While vegetation protects the mountainside in some ways, it too contributes to the denudation of mountains as root systems drive and push deep into cracks. Animals break down the mountain when they cut boroughs into the rock, and when they eat away at the erosion resistant vegetation. And, of course, we humans assault mountains in many ways too, through quarries, mines, tunnels, and the gruesome, geological genocide which is mountaintop removal.

As illustrator and filmmaker Temujin Doran puts it in his beautiful short film on the life and death of mountains (*The Weight of Mountains*), "Over time, the substance of a mountain is broken down, or dissolved into smaller and smaller pieces. Running water picks up and transports the material downstream where it meets the open water. Over the course of millions of years, water carries the mountains down to the sea, a teaspoon at a time."

Although they can seem permanent, or relatively permanent to us mortal creatures, geology teaches that like us, mountains are born, mountains grow and evolve, expand and shrink, and like us mountains weather and decay over time. And like us mountains eventually crumble and disintegrate back into the earth from whence they came. Mountains, like us, are finite, mortal, fleeting manifestations of the earth in its various expressions. Like ours, the life of mountains, as Temujin Doran puts it, "is a life that carries the weight of being, an anticipation of sadness that one day things will change." Like us, mountains arise here on earth as things that don't last forever, surrounded by things like their fellow peaks which all also will not last forever.



*The nation falls into  
ruins;  
rivers and mountains  
remain.*

-Tu Fu (712 - 770)

The paradigmatic life-pattern for the Chinese poets was to spend roughly the first half of one's life in public service, working as a government official to strive on behalf of the most Confucian harmony and order in society as could be hoped for. Acknowledging the imperfection of human systems, and disillusioned by the human world of greed and competition, the poets would retire to live the remainder of their lives as hermits in the mountains. It was thought that living in the mountains was the way to get closest to the natural process of the cosmos and the ten thousand things rising and falling in the constant interplay of being and nonbeing. It was in the presence of mountains that one could come closest to the deepest heart and truth of reality. It was in the presence of mountains that one could merge with occurrence appearing of itself (*tzu-jan*). It was in the presence of mountains that one could embrace impermanence most fully, and most fully come into the human vocation of consciousness and presence—that when we think of the world, we are the universe thinking of itself—and that when we create art, like in the Chinese mountain poem and the Hebrew mountain psalm below, we are the universe highlighting and magnifying its own beauty and truth:

**Mountain Poem #1, by Shiwu**  
(“Stonehouse,” 1272-1352)

This body's existence is like a  
bubble's  
may as well accept what happens

events and hopes seldom agree  
but who can step back doesn't worry

we blossom and fade like flowers  
gather and part like clouds

worldly thoughts I forgot long ago  
relaxing all day on a mountain peak.

**Psalm 90: 1-6**

Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the  
world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are  
God.  
You turn us back to dust,  
and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.  
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.



I return to my Giant Meditation spot at evening, just before the sun will drop behind the High Peaks. From my vantage point in the Lemon Fair Valley, on the summer solstice the sun retires exactly behind Giant Mountain, making the mountain my own personal Stonehenge. Here as the wind of summer's fullness starts to mingle with the cool letting-go of autumn, the sun drops a few peaks to the south, on the northward slope of Dix Mountain. This morning's lone vulture has added a few friends—forming a group of vultures, also known as a committee, or a kettle, or more ominously, a wake. I look again at Giant's strong ridgeline. Sometimes when I think of my own death I imagine a sky burial (Tibetan: བྱ་གཏོར་, *bya gtor*, literally "bird-scattered"). I imagine my body left on the sunny side of a mountain to participate in the mountain's own natural denudation process. I picture the turkey vultures, the "golden purifiers," (Latin: *Cathartes aura*) finding my body and taking me up into theirs, literally turning death into new life, these incredible "frowsy old saints" (Margaret Atwood), these teetering, gliding sky-masters of resurrection. I picture the sun and rain and wind and snow working my mineral remains just as on they do on the mineral skeleton of the mountain. A teaspoon at a time, we'll both reach the deep open seas, where eventually, we'll be tossed back up by the waves, salt-bleached on a beach, ready to begin the climb to the high peaks again.

T'ao Ch'ien (365 – 427), generally regarded as the founder of the Chinese mountain poetry tradition, wrote a poem along these lines on his deathbed:

Once this dark house is all closed up,  
day won't dawn again in a thousand years.

Day won't dawn again in a thousand years,  
and what can all our wisdom do about it?

Those who were just here saying farewell  
return to their separate homes. And though

my family may still grieve, the others  
must be singing again by now. Once you're

dead and gone, what then? Trust yourself  
to the mountainside. It will take you in.

As the sun melts like wax behind the everlasting hills, I close my eyes for a moment, groping around in the darkness of nonbeing, the generative void, the opaque mystery that is in the darkness of the dark matter and the dark energy in the dark cosmos as much as it is in the mysterious emptiness of a dark blank screen mind. I open my eyes, and I look again, one last time for the day, at Giant Mountain's solid, dark green sundown slope. Or maybe it's not I that look,

but it is empty mind that registers the mountain's gaze. Letting the mountain appear as it appears as a way of enacting the universe reflecting on itself, and in this case, the mountain looking at the mountain, the mountain thinking mountain thoughts, the mountain gazing at itself in the empty mirror of mountain mind.

As light dims, the vultures disappear from the sky. The last of the summer cumulus fades into wisps of sun-kissed-peach tiger stripes. This moment, reflections sparkling in the mirror of empty mind, is everlasting in its way because of its dissolution of distance and separation and its merging with the immediate constancy of nature's change. For the next moments I linger out the day with The Giant of the Valley—this young mountain, growing for now, made, for the time being, out of such old stuff. “The mountain and me,” as Li Po said, “Until only the mountain remains.”



*Giant Mountain from Rock Peak Ridge, Keene Valley New York, photograph by Toby McGuire, 2017*