Mark Murphy, "Model with Unfinished Self-Portrait"

I am on board ship for no other reason than the price.
Half finished, half famous. I foresee only minor difficulties.
The picture remains a major work in my mother's eyes,
what more approval does a son need? To acquiesce

to a mother's judgment is critical. The problem
with history is rendering. I remain tight lipped.
After all, an artist's model should be open to interpretation.
The problem with art is that it is never finished.

Sam Byfield

YOU REACH FOUR THOUSAND METERS:

You reach four thousand meters:
The air is thin, foliage changes
with each twist you take.
Bamboo shifts to tundra, then
a rare and sudden flush of flowers.

Sheer barren rocks, limestone white,
a remnant of the wet season.
Goats spread across the trail
and their eyes follow you. An old male
brushes your leg, horns massive,

and is off again over boulders, down
into the ravine. A farmer appears
and as if by osmosis the goats gather again
by his side. You can't breathe and the view
is to die for. Clouds slide around you,
each step is a prayer for flat ground.
They call this the Spring Province
but you didn’t expect summer
in winter. Your group of six divides,
reforms, divides. The girls have large packs

while you have nothing but a spare shirt
and socks to last God knows how long.
The sun is huge and the Yangtze snakes
boldly through the valley, blue then brilliant
white. You are inches from death

and never happier. You find yourself alone,
suck in sweet, light air but can never
get enough. A butterfly perches
upon your arm, the manifold greys of dawn,
a man on horseback stops, asks

if you’re ok, and if you could reply
you’d say yes. There’s nothing
left in your legs or lungs, but then
she’s there again, like so often
this past week. Just the two of you

and a vastness you’d not imagined,
You sit together, dust-covered
and weary, then you find something extra,
and it’s all downhill from here
into the evening and a shared night.