

***THE DRAGON RUN*, A TRAVEL MEMOIR OF BHUTAN WITH
CRITICAL COMMENTARY EXAMINING REPRESENTATION
OF THE SELF IN MODERN TRAVEL WRITING**

TONY ROBINSON-SMITH

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Thesis Abstract

The creative component of this dissertation is excerpts from *The Dragon Run*, a travel memoir recounting the author's experiences living in and running across Bhutan (2006-2008). Aligning itself with the accounts of contemplative travel writers from the West who have spent extended periods in the Himalayan Kingdom, the memoir is as revealing psychologically and temperamentally of the narrator as it is descriptive of the nature and culture of the host country. However, it differs from these accounts in that a distinction is made between the naive newcomer to the country and the more discerning sojourner. It also contrasts thematically in that the narrator's reflections engage with themes associated with the Kingdom's drive to modernise before its first parliamentary election: Gross National Happiness, the 'Last Shangri-La,' Buddhist ethics, the value of wilderness and the virtue of raising funds to send village children to school.

The critical commentary that follows the creative element examines self-revelation in contemporary travel writing, the argument being that a travel book has greater appeal when an interior voyage runs parallel to the outer one. Part I argues that the fictional techniques travel writers commandeer to represent their journeying selves, such as the articulation of thoughts, mingling of dramatic scenes

with personal reflection and tracing of a path of learning, endow their protagonists with psychological depth. Part II finds that the ways in which authors have their travelling selves respond to wilderness give insight into their personalities: their spiritual connection with nature, their sadness at its destruction, the solace they draw from close contact. Part III considers the legacy of Orientalism in modern travel writing and argues that balanced treatment of people belonging to other cultures and greater understanding of the self depend on the sensitivity of the traveller to his or her own culture. Provided that the travel writer does not mythologise too freely, self-disclosure enriches the book through arousing readers' interest as much in the traveller as his or her travels. The narrative strategies that travel writers use to represent the inner lives of their voyaging personas manufacture the interior journey. Study of them informs the decisions the author has made in writing *The Dragon Run*.

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Preface

This thesis is approximately two-thirds creative and one-third critical. The creative part comprises chapters from a non-fiction travel memoir called *The Dragon Run*. The critical commentary that follows it investigates the representation of the self in modern travel writing (readers wishing to begin with the commentary should turn to page 195).

Reconstructed from the journals I kept during my two-year stay in Bhutan (2006-2008), the first part of the memoir tells of life in the remote eastern village of Kandisor and my tenure as a lecturer in English at Sherading College. The second describes a 578-kilometre marathon across the ‘Dragon Kingdom,’ a sponsored run my wife Nadya and I organised and performed with ten of our students to raise money for a Bhutanese charity foundation, headed by the eldest of the four queens. The names of the principal characters have been altered for ethical reasons. A prologue, set in Canada, explains how the trip came about, and an epilogue, set partly in England, offers speculation on Bhutan’s impetus to modernise and a reflection on the personal growth of the narrator. The memoir is intended to appeal to teachers, planning to take up posts in developing countries; to distance runners or charity groups, wishing for insight into a project organised by Westerners overseas; to travellers, curious about Buddhist rituals, a happiness index, corybantic performances or folk tales; to naturalists, keen to learn of the plant and bird life belonging to an ‘ecological hotspot’ in the Himalayas; and to those interested in learning more about a transformative period in the history of a tiny Himalayan Kingdom, until recently sheltered from the world. A glossary lists foreign words (mainly Dzongkha), italicised only on first mention in the text. The sections of *The Dragon Run* included in this submission (prologue, Chapters 2, 3, 4

and 5 of Part I, Chapters 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 of Part II, and epilogue) are those that best reflect my themes of critical inquiry in that they are the most revealing of the narrator.

As expanded on in the introduction to my critical commentary, the nature of the destination, a secluded, ecologically abundant, sparsely populated region in the Himalayas, invited the telling of a narrative as much contemplative as descriptive. The commentary explores how recent introspective travel writers reconstruct their journeying selves in their books and relates their practice to my own, with particular focus on three themes: the autobiographical self, self-awareness in wilderness settings and the self in relation to the 'foreign other.' The creative decisions I made stimulated critical analysis, and growing familiarity with the stylistic techniques used by other travel writers influenced the ways I chose to represent my travelling self. As I had difficulty early in the narrative presenting my more naive persona (I cast him as too composed and knowing), I consider, for example, thoughts on how to articulate raw emotions,¹ and Jamie Zeppa's practice in so doing in her Bhutanese travelogue. Peter Matthiessen's Zen Buddhist projections of self in the vertiginous interior of Nepal have propelled me to explore other literary responses to wilderness together with criticism in an effort to articulate imaginatively my own traveller's strong feelings for and in nature.² Short

¹ William L. Howarth, 'Some Principles of Autobiography,' in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical & Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980), pp. 84-114; William R. Siebenshuh, *Fictional Techniques and Factual Works* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1983); Hélène Cixous, 'Without End, No, State of Drawingness, No, Rather: The Executioner's Taking Off,' in *Stigmata* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 16-27

² Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1992); Mark Tredinnick, *The Land's Wild Music: Encounters with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, & James Galvin* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University, 2005); David D. Joplin, 'Searching for God or Medusa through Allusion in Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*,' *Western American Literature*, 43, 2 (2008) 103-27

extracts from early drafts of my creative work may be found in the appendix to this thesis.

THE DRAGON RUN

A Journey across Bhutan

Prologue

We stand in a line at the college gate, caps off, heads bowed, facing the Lam Neten of Trashigang Dzong. Shaven-headed and dressed in orange robes, the lama chants words of Choekey into the sky just over our heads. A teenage monk comes with a mirror and a *bumpo*, a bronze jug with a peacock feather sticking out the top, and pours a thin, wavy line of holy water at our feet. Then another and another. It seems he is drawing a diagram of the mountains we will cross. Next, the lama takes a handful of rice from a bowl and throws it over us. He does this with his right hand while sounding a little wooden drum with string clappers in his left. Bhutan Broadcasting Service films the ceremony. A journalist from *Kuensel* takes photographs.

“Holy water is offering to good spirits for success of our mission,” Mr Namgay whispers in my ear. “Mirror send our prayer back to us. Rice purify our bad deeds.”

“And what do the words mean?”

“All beings should support as a whole, universal.” I look at him, puzzled. “If good luck come to Mr Tony, then this good luck will go from him to other beings. If good spirit good to us, we in turn good to other.” It was Mr Namgay who said we must have *thruesel* before beginning our Tara-thon.

The blessing ends when Lam Neten ties a small pouch of prayers on a bit of string round our necks and puts a *kaddah* (a ceremonial silk scarf) over each runner’s head. I am nervous. No one has done this before. I’m not so worried about myself or Sonia, but what happens if one of the students gets hypothermia and collapses? It is winter. I pray the ten with us are reincarnated mountain goats, inclined in their past lives to race up and down mountains for pleasure. I hope our cause has put fire in their blood. For extra luck, we walk three times around the temple in front of the college, spinning Thermos-size prayer wheels set in the wall as we go.

Blog Entry (21 December, 2007)

“Magical place ... nowhere on earth like it ... last Shangri-la ... You are travellers, you *must* go!”

The idea of going to a tiny Himalayan country on the other side of the planet came from the grandson of our landlord. The University of New Brunswick had arranged for Youssef to spend two months as an intern in a college in Bhutan. Shortly after returning to Fredericton, he had bowled into our apartment with an armful of books, raving about his experience. Bhutan? Where the heck was that? One book was called *Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods*, another *Of Rainbows and Clouds*. Bhutan, it would seem, was a high place. There were pictures of water-logged paddy fields glinting on mountainsides, villagers threshing wheat with sticks, a god riding a tiger, long-tailed monkeys in treetops and a penis with eyes and fangs. It was May, 2005. I had just finished my MA at UNB and was teaching for the English department; Sonia had a demanding job working for the federal government. We were both ready for a change.

I made some enquiries and discovered that the university had a “Bhutan Project,” funded by the Canadian International Development Agency. I found it on the second floor of Marshall D’Avray Hall at the end of a corridor: two quiet offices with exotic yellow, blue and red curtains hanging in front of the doors. No one was there. I waited in a small, adjoining lounge that had a bookcase against one wall, crammed with books, video tapes, school textbooks and bound master’s theses. I ran my eyes over some of the titles: *The Jesuit and the Dragon*, *Bhutan and the British*, *Gross National Happiness and Development*, “A King in the Service of his People,” “Folk Tales of Bhutan.” A recent thesis was called “The Emergence of Modern Bhutan.” Stacked on the bottom shelf were old in-flight magazines belonging to Royal Bhutan Airlines, called *Tashi Delek*. I picked one up and found a factsheet on the country inside the front cover. Appalled at my ignorance, I scribbled down some notes on a scrap of paper.

Bhutan: eastern Himalayas (between India & China) – area: 38, 394 sq. km (size of Switzerland) – altitude: 180m to 7,550m ASL – population: 699,000 – main religion: Mahayana Buddhism – currency: *ngultrum* (47 to US dollar) – national animal: takin (a what?) – national bird: raven – flag: yellow triangle rep. “secular authority of the King” over orange triangle rep. “spiritual power of Buddhism,” white dragon in middle – local name of country: *Druk Yul* (Land of the Thunder Dragon)

There was a map on the wall. Druk Yul looked more like a chubby coral fish than a dragon. Where were the mountains? I had never seen a map of a country so empty of detail. Bhutan was green with a light freckling of black dots, the largest labelled “Thimphu.” The main feature was a thin, white line that wiggled across the map, so horribly snarled in places it resembled a broken guitar string.

“Can I help you?” A lean woman in her early fifties with a tanned face bordered by riotous blonde curls was at my elbow. I put the magazine back, wondering as I did what the title meant.

“I’m here to find out a bit about Bhutan.” I introduced myself and told her about the intern. “How come UNB has a connection with a Buddhist country in Asia?” I had been here three years, but it was the first I had heard of it.

Shirley-Dale Easley took me into her office and told me about a Jesuit priest from Montreal invited to Bhutan by the King in the 1960s to set up the first secular school, about volunteer teachers posted to remote schools there in the 1980s by the World University Service of Canada, and about the university getting funding from CIDA in the 1990s to bring Bhutanese teachers here for training and graduates to do their master’s degrees. I did not understand all the connections (what had a Jesuit priest from Montreal to do with UNB? had WUSC recruited teachers from UNB?), but it was clear that Canada had developed a special relationship with Bhutan and that the focus was on education. The Project was currently working with Bhutanese teachers on a new English curriculum for middle school. Shirley-

Dale had been to Bhutan several times to help implement it. She spoke of walking for days over mountains and through forests to reach villages far from the road, of teaching classes of sixty students who stood up and bowed before answering questions, of bathing in a soup pot supplied by the school cook, of giant hornbills, of unbroken silence.

“Bhutan,” she said with a smile, “is like being at the edge of the world.”

*

“So, what do you think?”

Sonia had *Mountain Fortress* open on her lap at a chapter entitled “Religion and Rituals.” A pile of books on Bhutan had joined Youssef’s on our dining table. Having studied Asian culture and religion in her graduate studies, she was keen to learn more about Buddhism.

“I think you should go back,” she replied after a long pause.

I sighed. On my second and third visits to the Bhutan Project, I had met others who spoke just as glowingly of the Kingdom as Shirley-Dale. Well, would it be possible for my wife and me to join the Project and teach over there? I asked speculatively. I was qualified and had fifteen years’ experience teaching English in Canada and overseas, and my wife had a Master’s degree in Intercultural Communication and had worked abroad. Sonia and I now knew that, as fascinating as Bhutan sounded, we would not be going there without contracts. The Royal Government charged tourists a tariff of US\$250 *per day*. No, Shirley-Dale confirmed, the Project only supported UNB professors who went to train teachers or consult on curriculum. “But your website says the Project’s ‘main aim’ is ‘to strengthen Bhutan’s educational system,’” I wanted to remind her. Surely, we could help with that, and, naturally, we would pay for our own air fares. Disappointed, I asked about Youssef’s internship, but this had nothing to do with the Project.

“Ask them if they know someone at CIDA we could talk to. Ask them about WUSC,” Sonia recommended.

I was reluctant to return, so I took with me some of the books and videos I had borrowed. Bhutan seemed too good to be true anyway. One documentary we had watched was by a Canadian novelist who had been to Bhutan on assignment in 1969 and then returned twenty-five years later. “Back in my beloved Himalayan paradise at last, Bhutan truly is Shangri-la,” gushed Nancy Gettelman in “A Himalayan Cultural Diary.” “The descent into the Paro valley was absolutely gorgeous. We could already tell from the air that Bhutan is clean, prosperous, vigorous, progressive, well-kept. Cool, cultivated, green Paro valley lies at 7,200 feet, blessed relief after hot, humid Calcutta ...”

“Can I help you?” This time, a woman in her late forties with close-cropped hair whitening at the sides was sitting in Shirley-Dale’s office. I felt a slight tightening in my stomach as I introduced myself. This was no administrative assistant.

Nathalie Myer managed the Canadian Collaboration Office in Thimphu. She was in Fredericton on her “annual pilgrimage” for faculty meetings and to “see how the Bhutanese were getting along.” Her office, she explained, made all the arrangements for the Bhutanese to come here: bursaries, visas, travel itineraries.

“And I suppose the professors and academic advisors from UNB ...”

“... begin their time in Bhutan with me, yes,” Nathalie supplied. CCO played host to all kinds of Canadians: government ministers, journalists, financial consultants, researchers, aid workers, photographers, she said. “From time to time, even tourists who have got themselves in a fix show up.”

But CCO had a larger role than this. Nathalie told me about some of the office’s development initiatives over the past decade. Many had to do with getting basics like blackboards, library books, typewriters, cooking stoves and kerosene

generators out to schools in remote areas of Bhutan. Nathalie had first-hand knowledge of the hardships of life there. Her first posting in 1986 was to a primary school in Phongmey, a village at the end of a dirt road on the east side of the Kingdom. For three years, she lived in a hut with mud walls and a tin roof, hauling water by bucket from the nearest stream and cooking dinner on a wood stove under a kerosene lamp. Her first three weeks of classes were on the grass while workmen put a floor in her classroom, she chuckled. I remembered my first teaching post: an air-conditioned apartment in the suburbs of Tokyo, high-speed train to work, class of eight tight-collared executives learning business English. I said I was interested in teaching in Bhutan.

“Oh, yes. Why?” Nathalie asked.

I drew a breath and looked around the office. A white silk scarf hung down the side of a cupboard and gleamed under the fluorescent light.

“Well, I’ve always found working overseas to be, um, culturally enriching. I mean, I’ve learned as much from my students as they have from me ...”

*

“It doesn’t look like we’re going to the Land of the Thunder Dragon, does it?” I said, pushing my plate aside and looking out the window.

The last Sunday of October, Sonia and I were having breakfast at *Chez Cora* downtown. Five months had passed since Nathalie was in Fredericton. We had invited her over to our place for dinner during her brief visit. At the end of the evening, she had said that it might be possible for us to go and work in Bhutan, but it was not up to her. We should send her our CVs, and she would mention us to the Royal Civil Service Commission when she got back. I should get in touch with Dr Tenzin Dorji, principal of Sherading College, and ask him if he needed an English lecturer from Canada.

I had written a long email message to Dr Tenzin the following day, introducing myself. Two weeks passed. I got no reply. I sent another message and waited another week. Nothing. Was the address the right one? Bhutan had the Internet, but were the Bhutanese in the habit of using it? I sent a message to Nathalie, asking if she had got our CVs. Surely she would be checking her inbox regularly. Had she heard back from RCSC? Did she have another email address for Dr Tenzin? No reply. I waited two weeks before trying again. I printed off my letter to the principal and mailed it with our CVs (would it get there? the college had no postcode). I tried phoning CCO, but could not get through. Then it was August. Frustrated, I went back to the Bhutan Project. It was locked. I went again and met a woman called Kathy, who had dropped by to do paperwork. She didn't have an alternative email address for Dr Tenzin or for Nathalie. Did she know if Nathalie would be back in Canada before the end of the year? We gave Youssef his books back. Maybe Nathalie had changed her mind. Perhaps we had been overly optimistic ... a sudden rush of interest. Why was I so keen to go anyway?

My view from *Chez Cora* was of Queen Street: parking meters, lampposts, steel benches, concrete sidewalks, a steady stream of traffic, the sole pedestrian a woman in sweatpants and sneakers marching by, arms swinging rhythmically, eyes glued to the ground, wires running from her ears to an iPod on her hip. A Chevrolet truck with darkened windows and wing mirrors the size of my head tried to squeeze itself into a parking space.

I thought back to the evening in September when the Bhutan Project had screened a Bhutanese film called *Travellers and Magicians*. It was about a restless government official called Dondup who wished to leave his quiet village in eastern Bhutan and go to America. Dondup misses the one bus going across the country – Bhutan's only airport at the time being in the west – and has to hitchhike, but there is almost no traffic. He spends hours, then a night, at the roadside, frustrated when

other hitchhikers show up, angry when the batteries of his tape player die. A monk heading the same way teases him for his impatience and tells him an enchanting story about a trainee magician who gets lost in the forest and falls in love with a woodcutter's wife. It was a peaceful, slow film with shots of a rugged and apparently largely undisturbed land. I thought of the map in the Project office. The road across the country seemed little more than a parting of the trees, a scratch on the sides of the mountains.

I wanted to be in a country with no traffic, where the main road was hardly used and all but swallowed by trees, where parking meters and traffic jams did not exist. Living and studying in a small town in eastern Canada was pleasant, but Fredericton no longer held any surprises and tank-size cars seemed to be around every street corner. In Bhutan, I felt I might easily run along the middle of the east-west highway for half a day unimpeded ... or stray from it, lose myself, and make unexpected discoveries ... follow a steep, twisting trail through dense woods to a hidden temple. The movie had rekindled our interest in going to Bhutan – as had the arrival at UNB of the King's eldest son.

His Royal Highness Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck came from one of the smallest countries on earth to the second largest to receive his honorary doctorate of laws at a convocation ceremony on October 20th. The occasion marked the twentieth anniversary of the UNB's association with the Kingdom. In his speech to the graduates, some of whom were Bhutanese, he emphasised that it was not only the Royal Government's responsibility but also the duty of every Bhutanese to look after the nation's natural heritage. "Bhutan can pass laws to preserve the environment," he had said, "but if we make environmentalists out of every Bhutanese, that will be the essence." This seemed like enlightened thinking, especially coming from the impending leader of an underdeveloped country. The Prince was a handsome, articulate man in his twenties, attired in what had to be the

national dress: a robe like a dressing gown extending to the knees called a *gho*, black knee-socks, and narrow, stretched shoes with turned-up toes. I was tempted to see his appearance at the university as a sign. In cap and gown, I was also collecting my degree.

“Did you hear back from Sarawak?” Sonia asked, waving to a waitress for the bill.

I shook my head. Late August, I had answered an ad in the newspaper for an English instructor at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Sonia and I knew as little about Sarawak as we did about Bhutan although we had spent time travelling in other parts of Southeast Asia. The Sarawak of my imagination was orangutans, pangolins, hornbills and dripping lianas, none of which figured largely in Fredericton.

*

Two weeks later, an envelope that looked like it had been used as a fly-swatter dropped through the letterbox. It contained a six-page contract from the Royal Government of Bhutan. I must complete and send it, a letter said, to the principal of Sherading College, together with ten passport photographs and a “Certificate of Character and Good Conduct” signed by a senior government officer. The Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) would open for the academic year on the 20th February, but my wife and I should be in Thimphu well before as the mountain passes on the road to the college could be blocked by snow.

Part I

The Dragon Kingdom

Chapter 2

Fire Male Dog Year

Only middle class romantics with full bellies talk about returning to a ‘state of nature’ in which, as a 17th century philosopher reminded us, the typical life is ‘poor, nasty, brutish and short.’ It had fallen to the King, my guide and his kind to make a conscious choice of what Bhutan should become. Had I been born in Bhutan, wouldn’t I too have strived for these very changes? Why should Bhutan or any other country live in medieval ignorance; quaint, colourful and attractive to tourists, but actually drab, underdeveloped and soul destructive? My guide’s generation were marching forward out of the medieval past, determined on change. I could only hope that somehow the best of the old would mingle with the new.

The Dragon Kingdom (1986)
Lt. General E.A. Vas

“Tony, wake up.”

“Uh?” I open my eyes. Can’t see a thing. Where am I?

Dogs are barking outside. Not just barking, yelping hysterically. I rub my eyes and take a deep breath. I have been woken a couple of nights by dogs in the two weeks we have been here, but not like this.

“Something’s happening. Listen.” Sonia is sitting up in bed. A cow moos in distress: long, stricken bellows, like it is giving birth. I push back the curtain. I see stars, the silhouette of a house, a great black mass of mountain.

I jerk back. The windowpane is vibrating. What the hell is going on? For a moment, I am at a loss. The windows all begin rattling violently in their frames. There is movement under us too and creaking sounds. I grab hold of the headboard, feeling my legs shaking. A glass of water clatters across my bedside table. I reach for it and hear a bottle of shampoo fall over in the bathroom. Over

our heads, the rafters make tortured, wrenching sounds. Now I know. I remember being woken like this in Tokyo in 1989. We should get out of the house right away. Things are dropping off the shelves in the pantry, and something is banging about in the fridge. A sharp crack makes us jump.

“What was that?” Sonia grips my arm, and we listen intently. The vibrations weaken. Our bed stops shuddering. Neither of us moves.

A few minutes later, the windows start rattling again. We get ready to make a dash for the door, but the second tremor is less intense. The rattling dies out. We sit for a while on the side of the bed, but then the cold makes us get back under the blankets. The dogs go on barking for an hour. I lie on my back, listening to them. Perhaps they are an early warning system. Just when I think I have heard the last, another starts up, upsetting another and another, till the neighbourhood is in uproar again. Each time it reaches a crescendo, I grip the bed. I draw the curtain back a couple of times, expecting to see people running about with torches, but there is no one. Maybe the villagers are accustomed to this. In the morning, I find a bottle of fruit juice on the pantry floor, lying in an amoeba-shaped puddle. I guess the Thunder Dragon was turning in its sleep.

Our new home needs a bit of work but appears sturdy enough. It has roughly mortared stone walls set in a bed of concrete, a roof of heavy timbers supporting sheets of corrugated iron, and thick wooden doors with sliding bolts, front and back. It doesn't look like much from the outside – no elaborate, multi-coloured Buddhist symbols decorating the windows, no dangling phalluses – but inside, it is comfortable. There are three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a lounge with wood-burning stove and a kitchen with gas stove, water boiler and rice cooker. A curly cornered photograph of the Himalayas is taped to the back of the front door and a map of the New York City subway network to the wall in the lounge. We are not the first foreign lecturers to stay here. When we arrived, I was astonished. I had

been expecting something like Tangsibi or the place Nathalie had in Phongmey. But for an oven, bathtub and central heating, our apartment in Fredericton was hardly any better. We even have a little garden with roses and a fuchsia bush. The bungalow shares a shelf of land with about twenty houses, a primary school, paddy fields, half a dozen shops and three tiny restaurants. Sherading College sits on a larger shelf just below.

A couple of days later, Bhutan's national newspaper explains the disturbance in the night.

Residents of Samdrup Jongkhar and its adjoining areas in Eastern Bhutan and Assam were rudely routed out of their beds when two earthquakes, one after the other, struck between 2:04am and 2:07am (Bhutan Standard Time) on February 24.

The earthquakes, each measuring 5.8 and 5.5 on the Richter scale, were third in a row to hit Bhutan in less than two weeks.

No one was hurt, and no buildings collapsed. Houses in Bhutan would seem to be sturdier than those in India, for the earthquake on February 10, measuring 5.7 and felt in Thimphu, killed two and damaged thousands of homes in neighbouring Sikkim.

Kuensel also tells me that February is the beginning of Fire Male Dog Year. Each year has a different designation in accordance with the Tibetan almanac (last year was Wood Female Rooster Year, next will be Fire Female Hog Year). The event we attended at Dr Tenzin's sister's place, I now know, was a *puja* or purification ceremony to mark its arrival. According to the *datho*, the Buddhist astrological calendar, 2006 will be "peaceful and prosperous," although "not a good year for livestock and aquatic life." I wonder whether the two calves galloping up and down in front of our house know this. As Kandisor clings to a mountainside 1,870 metres above sea level, aquatic life amounts to whatever is in

the stream that runs through the village. “The symbolic good direction is east, south and north. While starting new ventures or starting some important task, the datho recommends facing in these directions.” Our front door faces north. Maybe I should check my classroom when I start at the college next week. There is a calendar inside the newspaper to put on the wall. In one corner, a jolly, black and white cartoon dog wearing a yellow gho and holding a newspaper runs on its hind legs like a person. The editorial is called “In transition” and reflects on the year past.

It was an extraordinary year in which an overwhelmed nation shed tears and the transition of a generation was never felt so much. His Majesty the King announced that he would step down in 2008, taking the dramatic changes of recent years to a painful peak.

“Why, and why now?” we asked. And, accepting that such a decision was based on profound wisdom, and that there is no turning back, we have begun to look ahead, albeit with deep apprehension.

I remember hearing about this from Nathalie in Fredericton. After thirty-three years of rule, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck is soon to pass the raven crown to his eldest son. Apparently, there is no precedent for this, the previous kings all holding onto power until their deaths. Just as disturbing for the Bhutanese is the King’s announcement that the nation will become a parliamentary democracy the year after next. For the first time ever, Bhutanese must go to the polls and elect their own government.

Why is the King stepping down? Why does he want his people to govern themselves? I think of the pictures I have seen of the fourth *Druk Gyalpo*, lavishly garmented in a gold gho and embroidered leather boots, smiling paternally, flanked by his four wives. Every shop, restaurant and hotel lobby has a framed picture of the “Precious Ruler of the Dragon People” leaning out from the wall, a silk scarf

draped around it. The Bhutanese would appear to love their King. “Next stage in the Royal Government’s drive to modernise the nation,” Dr Tenzin told us on the journey here from Thimphu. But why does Bhutan wish to modernise? A foolish question. Bhutan now has TV and Internet, and, no doubt, more and more tourists are arriving each year with their Gore-Tex jackets and light-weight trekking poles, their digital cameras and cell phones. Bhutanese want what Westerners have. I open my guidebook to the history section. No. The impetus to modernise came from the King’s father, a response to China’s invasion of Tibet in 1959: “it became obvious that a policy of isolationism was not appropriate in the modern world.” China may have wanted to snatch more territory, and Bhutan, being rich in natural resources, would have been an alluring prize. I flick back in my journal to notes scribbled down from *Mountain Fortress of the Gods* in Canada:

rich array of animal and plant species ... almost unbelievably unspoilt ... a great ecological treasure-house ... More than half the country is still covered with forests.

I look out the window. Red-vented bulbuls are rough-housing in the front hedge again. They are thrush-size, chocolate- and coffee-coloured birds with white stomachs, black conical crests and bright orange posteriors, as bold and squawky as red-winged blackbirds in Canada. Through the gate, I can see a dense shag of forest spilling over the road, snow-cruled mountains rearing up behind.

Why the “deep apprehension”? The Bhutanese no longer fear invasion from the north, surely? I look again at the book. After the Chinese took control of Tibet, the third Druk Gyalpo forged an alliance with Bhutan’s neighbour to the south. India agreed to help the Dragon Kingdom develop by financing road-building, construction and hydroelectric projects. I think of the Indian crews we saw tarring the road on the way here, and Indian labourers are putting up new buildings at the

college. India clearly remains intimate with its little neighbour, and, presumably, would stand by it at a time of war. Bhutan has also reached further afield for allies. In Thimphu, we saw offices belonging to Swiss, Danish and Netherlander development agencies, and Nathalie said that Bhutan was now a member of the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

If the Bhutanese are not worried about security, then they must be about politics. I reach for older *Kuensels*, left by previous teachers in a pile beside the wood stove. The headlines on several of the more recent relate to the Crown Prince's tour of the realm. It is his job to explain his father's draft constitution to the nation and answer people's questions. The articles are long, the people's concerns many, but the gist seems to be that the Bhutanese do not feel ready for change. Politicians cannot be trusted, they say. parties may lie and accept bribes during elections. The new government will turn a blind eye to people living in the countryside. Would the King intervene if things go awry? Why do we need democracy at a time of "unprecedented peace and prosperity under the reign of His Majesty"?

I picture the composed twenty-five-year-old who attended my convocation trying to reassure thousands of villagers (6,000 in Sarpang *dzongkhag*) that all would be well. They must choose their leaders wisely, he would respond. An Anti-Corruption Commission and an Election Commission will curb malpractice. No, His Majesty would not take over the affairs of state if the government failed. This is the right time for change: "Bhutan is blessed with peace and security, rapid socio-economic growth, a rich and unspoiled environment ..." I recall the Prince's speech at UNB on the environment and the note I made in my journal from *Gross National Happiness and Development*.

Progress depends on

- 1) equitable and sustainable socio-economic development
- 2) preservation and promotion of cultural values
- 3) conservation of the natural environment
- 4) good governance

people's spiritual well-being more important than their material wealth

The King came up with this concept in 1972, an alternative to Gross National Product. Now that he is stepping down, would the new government honour his code of conduct? How on earth would it go about quantifying happiness?

A van pulls up outside, a Suzuki Omni like the taxis in Thimphu, although this one appears to be wearing a hat. Sheets of corrugated iron roped to the roof droop over the windscreen. Two men climb out, one short and about my age with a pitted face and a crew-cut, the other taller, younger, with chiselled features. The smaller man is Ugyen Dendup, head of the English department at Sherading and my new boss, the other Karma Drukpa, head of economics. I put aside the newspapers.

“Jedup is coming with his men,” says Ugyen, marching in through the gate, paying no heed to the dog snapping at his knees. I go out and lean our bamboo ladder against the roof.

This is our third visit from college maintenance workers, all sent by Ugyen at our request. A man called Penjor came to fit a washbasin, which was coming off the bathroom wall, with a new bracket. Then the college gardener brought us wood for the *bukkari*. Unfortunately, the first time the gardener came, we weren't in, and he got bitten by “our” dog. I met him on his second visit. Mid-sixties, weather-beaten face with deep grooves around the eyes, flat cap on his head. He took the cap off when he spotted me and tapped his right calf with a stick, turning the leg so

I could see the bite-marks. He pointed at the dog responsible – which I had to fend off as it was keen to bite him again – and made plaintive sounds in *Shar chop*.

According to the neighbour, the name of the dog we have inherited is “Mutu,” an apt name, given that she is a stray of indeterminate breed. Mutu is medium-sized, fawn-coloured, filthy and looks a bit like a fox. Her hobbies are barking at passers-by, barking when other dogs in the vicinity bark, barking when it is dinnertime and night-howling. She appears used to foreigners, but does not care for the average Bhutanese citizen. She hangs around the kitchen door, expecting scraps in return for her duties as security guard. Sonia gives her leftover rice or *zao* spruced up with fish oil. Mutu’s closest companion is a silver tick the size of my finger-nail, its head buried in her neck, its body swollen with blood. We have offered to pinch it off, but house dog and new residents are not yet on sufficiently intimate terms for this to happen.

We are drinking tea when the banging over our heads begins. Sonia and I trail the supervisors out onto the grass in front of the house. The man hammering rivets into our roof is about eighteen, has a thatch of never-combed hair, a half-shut dead eye and a practised aim. Another man about the same age kneels beside him and hands him the rivets. They look like they have just come from another job as their ghos are streaked with grime, their flip-flops crusty with dirt. For a hundred ngultrum (two and a half bucks), they will fix five new strips of “reiging” (such is the word on the bill) to our roof, and it takes them thirty minutes to do so. A third, older man in an unsoiled gho stands over them, giving orders. He smiles down at us and after a while shouts something to Ugyen and Karma.

“What did he say?”

“Jedup say ... if roof fall down, you can sue him,” Karma translates. Ugyen climbs the ladder and sticks his head in the chimney.

“Mr Tony, you have long wire?”

In our back garden, there is a water tank on stilts, a septic tank, a pile of ash from the bukkari, another of logs for the bukkari, a pile of garden refuse doubling as Mutu's bed and a flimsy wooden shed containing rusty tin cans, burnt-out light bulbs, empty plastic bottles, bricks and a hose pipe.

"Mr Ugyen?" I look up the ladder. A black head with red teeth appears overhead.

"You know Blake's 'Chimney Sweep'?" Ugyen giggles through a mouthful of *doma*, seizing the roll of wire I have found. His cheeks are flushed from the stimulant. "I am he." I had mentioned that our bukkari was blocked last time we spoke. Sonia had filled the stove with newspaper and kindling the second night we were here as there was nothing else to heat the house and the temperature was around zero. The smoke did not seem to make it to the chimney. It billowed out of the joins in the metal pipe going to the wall and quickly filled the lounge.

"Bird's nest might be in there," hollers Ugyen, poking the wire down. Sonia joins him on the roof, and I go inside and take the stove pipe out of the wall. Soot showers down into the lounge and then half-burnt wads of *Kuensel* roll out, which I try and catch in a paper bag.

The work done, we have more *nadja* and snacks. The workmen come in, but refuse to sit with us on the sofa or armchairs, preferring a bench by the door. Sonia serves zao and an Indian snack called "Haldiram's Crunchy All-in-One Mixture" in bamboo bowls we found in one of the cupboards. With a teaspoon, I make a large blister of yellow milk-skin spin slowly on the surface of my tea and watch the Bhutanese take turns scooping up handfuls of the toasted rice and throwing it in theirs, lecturers first, then foreman, last workers. The men are all wearing national dress and there is friendly intercourse between them, but there is no mistaking rank. The workers do not look their superiors in the eye and seem ill at ease in our house. I recall the deference shown to Dr Tenzin in Tangsibi and to us by Ugyen

Wangchuck in Thimphu and wonder whether the arrival of democracy will bring about any change in behaviour. I wonder how students treat their professors here and how I should treat my students.

“So, gentlemen, tell me about the students at Sherading.”

Ugyen digs in his gho for doma. He has been for a wash, but still has smuts of soot on his cheeks and forehead. He passes a leaf to Karma. Muttering *kadrinche*, the workmen excuse themselves.

“Firstly, they will be shy because you are *chilip*,” Karma says, getting out his lime. “They are not use to chilip. You have ... funny accent. They know Indian one only.” I smile. My British accent attracted similar comment in Canada.

Ugyen nods and scratches the side of his head. “And many of them, they have very bad grammars, very bad. A verb? A preposition?” He giggles. “They don’t know what it is. You must give them exercise to do in class.”

“Actually, it’s the same in Canada.” I think of the freshers I was teaching after finishing my Master’s. “Canadian students have no idea what a preposition is either. Do you give them homework to do?”

“They must do homeworks,” Karma replies sternly, nodding his head. “But some are lazy boys and don’t do.”

“And they don’t read,” Ugyen adds. “Even in English, they don’t read the books, and they think they can pass exam!” Dr Tenzin had mentioned this. I thought I might have them read a poem or a chapter a day. “Also, you should walk up and down classroom and ask question. Principal-sir want us to do this.” He looks at Karma, and they both nod.

“What do the students do in their free time?” Sonia asks after a pause.

“We have many event, soccer tournament, volleyball tournament, archery tournament, running race, tug-o-war, many thing,” Ugyen replies.

“And sometimes the student put on show, they sing and do dance,” Karma adds.

It is lunchtime, and I suggest we go out for *momos*, but both men politely decline. Karma has to meet new students off the bus from Thimphu and assign them to hostels, then do an inventory of food supplies at the college mess. Ugyen will monitor students sweeping the road to the main gate and meet Dr Tenzin to discuss the new English curriculum. The range of their duties surprises me.

“What should I do with trouble-makers?” I ask.

“Send to principal-sir. He will make them cut grass or clean toilet or pick litter around the hostels.”

*

“*Momo plate tur, samosa pshee, nadjia niksia,*” Sonia says, enunciating her words carefully. She has been learning to count in Sharchop.

This is our fourth visit to Yangki Restaurant. To get there from our bungalow, we go down a grass bank, climb over a collapsed barbed-wire fence at the bottom and cross the stream on two wobbly logs. This we have learned to do sideways and with arms outstretched as the stream is a noxious soup of dal-stained rice, bovine ordure, bleached cabbage leaves, banana skins and betel nut husks. Two out-pipes from the restaurant, two shops and the neighbouring houses dump waste here. I saw a dead dog the first week, half-submerged in the sludge, legs outstretched, eyes shut, stomach bloated. It seemed to be fast asleep. A stone I tossed bounced off the stomach like it was a drum. From the stream, we clamber up a dirt path, past a brick outhouse to a flight of concrete steps, which lead to the restaurant.

Dema tips her head to one side and disappears into the kitchen. She is a stout, ruddy cheeked woman who speaks no English, crunches raw chilli peppers and weaves shoulder bags when she is not serving. The first time we saw a

Bhutanese give the gesture, we thought it meant either “don’t think I can help you there” or else “doing that may be tricky.” Dema sits behind a glass-fronted cabinet, containing packets of instant noodles and cartons of apple juice, and watches Bollywood films or soaps in Hindi on a flickering TV. Over the door is a photograph of the King and on the wall two glossy posters, one of a Swiss village under snow with the words, “Count your life by smiles, not tears,” the other of an English country garden with “Only those who see the invisible can do the impossible.”

“*Kuzu zangpo*, Jurmi.”

“Kuzu zangpo, Sir.

While Dema steams the momos, I wander into Choda General Store opposite and chat with Jurmi, a student at Sherading whose family owns the place. With room inside for eight customers, Choda is the largest shop in Kandisor and sells whatever the owners can lay their hands on: umbrellas, hand cream, plastic buckets, butter lamps, chocolate, processed cheese, badly made shoes, AA batteries, candles, mouse traps, faded greeting cards, doma. I didn’t expect to find Kit-Kats or Brylcream in a remote Himalayan village. I don’t suppose they would be here if the road weren’t. Almost all of these products come up from Samdrup Jongkhar, 152 kilometres south of us, one of two main border crossings with India (the other being Phuentsholing in the west). With the border to the north being closed, 90% of imports come from India, Jurmi tells me.

“Did the earthquake wake you the other night?”

“No, Sir. I slept through!” He laughs. “I called my friend in SJ. Some people there, they ran into street.”

“But aren’t you worried? I mean, that’s the third ...”

“Yes, we are worry, Sir, but nothing to do. If big earthquake come ...” He turns and takes ngultrum off a woman with a string of yellow dice in her hand. “... it come.” Jurmi sees me looking at her.

“Cheese. From yak. Is cow still eating Sir and Madam’s fence?” I mentioned this last time we came.

I sigh. “Ah, Jurmi. It ate all our roses.”

Many villagers have cows in Kandisor, and there seem to be two distinct kinds: a blotchy, beige-and-cream Jersey-cross, kept for milking, and a brawny, broad-horned import from Assam, called a Mithun, used to plough fields. As there are no proper fences, villagers tether their cows to wooden stakes they bang into the grass with stones. The rope is fifteen to twenty feet long, and the cow spends its day grazing in ever decreasing circles till the owner comes by in the evening and moves it to a new location. This works fine, provided the cow doesn’t yank out the stake and go in search of more appetising fare. By the time I had spotted the innocent brown head poking through our front hedge last week, not only had the rose buds gone, but the entire rose bush, stalks, thorns, even some of the roots. The fuchsia beside it had also taken a beating.

“What to do?” Jurmi folds his arms and shakes his head. It is unfortunate Choda doesn’t sell takin fencing.

I pick up a bag of Maa Laxmi Puffed Rice for breakfast (Maa Laxmi is an Indian goddess with an elaborate crown, an urn tucked under one arm, and an owl perched on a seashell at her feet), two tins of Coronet Brand Mackerel, a Gala Sparkle Magic Sponge Pad made in Mumbai to do the dishes (“Severe on Vessels, Gentle on Hands”), coconut biscuits called Sohum Eat ’n Enjoy Elaichi Bisk Yummy Yummy from Guwahati, and a loaf of bread baked in Trashigang. Jurmi’s helper, a seven-year-old boy called Jigme, puts the things in a paper bag made of glued-together pages of old Kuensels, it being illegal for shops to sell plastic bags.

“*Shimpula!*” Sonia and I chorus, our eyes watering as we tuck into the momos. Dema looks happy; she taught us this word. Momos are Tibetan-style dough envelopes stuffed with cabbage shavings and cheese and served with chilli paste. Their semi-translucent, bladder-like bodies remind me of Portuguese Men of War without the tentacles.

Through the window, I see the owner of the greengrocer’s next door to Choda. He is a frail, jittery man in his early forties with a bitty moustache and tired eyes. There’s not much in his shop at present, a few onions and chilli peppers in baskets, bananas blackening on hooks. Karma and Ugyen have told us that more fruit and vegetables will appear later in the year. We’ve tried the bananas, but they’re pasty and contain pips like peppercorns. Tashi squats down beside Jurmi and Dema in front of a heap of betel nuts and helps peel them. I watch them slice open the husks, extract and cut the nuts, and drop the pieces into paper cones with three or four heart-shaped leaves.

“*Hapthur?*” Sonia asks, poking her head out the window. While she pays, I read the side of the shopping bag.

Devotees attending the religious transmission are from all walks of life. According to the director of Dratshang Lhentshok, Ngawang Phuntsho, about half the number of devotees attending the Thru ceremony are middle-age people over 40 years.

“I have always been looking forward to attend a thru ceremony from His Holiness,” said Sonam a high school student from

On the other side, a barely legible article with “Construction Frenzy” in the headline is next to a public notice from the Ministry of Agriculture.

The Thimphu Dzongkhag Livestock Sector will carry out its regular mass dog sterilisation campaign to control the rabies (and other nuisance factors such as

noise pollution, unhygienic situations and attacks on human and other animals), in the Peri-Urban and Rural areas of Thimphu Dzongkhag.

The success of the campaign will solely depend on the active participation of the public in helping capture the stray dogs. The organisers will pay a sum of Nu.20 for each stray dog brought to the sterilisation campaign.

*

Our first day at Sherading College begins in Dr Tenzin's office. I have to complete a joining report, submit a medical certificate and sign an oath of secrecy. After the documents have been processed, I will get a work permit, and Sonia will be my "dependant" until Dr Tenzin can find something for her to do. No foreigner, whether worker or tourist, may be in Bhutan without being attached to an organisation. From behind his desk, the principal, dressed in a mahogany gho with blemish-less white collar and cuffs, calmly deals with a stream of visitors and phone calls. Sonia and I, also in our best clothes, sit on a bench at a right angle to his desk. Gleaming saffron curtains splashed with green and red flowers sweep down from the windows. Framed photographs of His Majesty the Fourth King and former principals of the college decorate the walls.

"You need a secretary!" Sonia exclaims to Dr Tenzin as the phone interrupts his conversation with a man I saw outside forking the flower beds. Before him, two lecturers from Environmental Science came to ask about laboratory equipment, and before them, the college accountant requiring approval for a salary advance for a lecturer. Waiting at the door is a librarian and behind her the Director of Sports. The phone rings every few minutes. A wire tray on Dr Tenzin's desk marked "IN" is piled high with papers. This office appears to be the nerve centre of the college, the place where everyone comes for an answer. The accountant's office is opposite, the administration officer's next door and the Dean of Student Affairs works two doors down. The office is located right at the entrance of Sherading, so

all visitors pass by it. Through the window, I can see a flagpole, an ornamental fountain and the main gate of the college.

While we wait, I pick up a copy of the college prospectus for 2006 and read the introduction. The first principal of Sherading (meaning “Peak of Learning”) was Father William Mackey, the Jesuit priest Shirley-Dale Easley mentioned to me in Fredericton. The Third King invited Mackey to Bhutan forty years ago and had him set up the Kingdom’s first high school. Before Sherading Public School opened its doors to a hundred boys in 1968, the Kingdom only had schools for monks and some twenty primary schools. Families who wanted their children to continue their secular education had to send them to India. Mackey chose Kandisor for the high school because it was neither too hot nor too cold and there was enough flat ground for a playing field. Sport, for the priest, was an essential component of education. The school was turned into a junior college in 1976 and then a college attached to Delhi University in 1983. Sherading College now has 1,029 students, 667 of which are male, 362 female. I look up at the wall. The founding father of Sherading stares down at me, his face partially obscured by an enormous pair of bottle-bottom bifocals, making his eyes seem excessively large. He seems like a perspicacious, but also a mischievous man. We understand from Dr Tenzin that he used to have students leap through flaming hoops on the playing field.

A fire of newly cut pine branches crackles beside the gate, a thick rope of dark smoke curling around the two students tending it. The college is expecting guests. Seventy lecturers line the fifty metres of road from the entrance to the gate. Half are Bhutanese, the other half Indian, all smartly turned out in their ghos and *kiras*, their suits and saris. The women could be competing in a fashion show: striking purple and red cotton kiras, garish yellow and blue silk saris. Sonia and I go out and join the line, leaving Dr Tenzin with the Director of Sports, a hardy-

looking, barrel-shaped Bhutanese dressed in a brown gho. Ex-military, I think, as I push back the curtain separating the office from the corridor. Mr Namgay is the only person to stand upright, almost to attention, in front of the head of Sherading.

A jeep pulls up at the gate and four monks in orange gowns climb out. Dr Tenzin, now with a *kabney* draped over his left shoulder, emerges from the college and strides down the road to welcome the Lam Neten of Trashigang Dzong. With his shaved crown and broad shoulders, the lama looks more like a rugby player in fancy dress than a Buddhist priest. He has come to give blessings and say prayers so that Sherading may begin Fire Male Dog Year in an auspicious way. With the principal at his side and shadowed by his three assistants, the lama moves slowly along the line of lecturers, acknowledging bows from the Bhutanese and shaking hands with the Indians. The Bhutanese put their mouths in their sleeves so as not to breathe on him. At the college steps, he turns and everyone gathers in a horseshoe around him. Three students bring out a wooden table carved with dragons, cover it with a yellow tablecloth and put it at the foot of the steps. A fourth brings the college flag on a pole and stands to one side with it leaning on his shoulder. The table supports a tureen the size of a car wheel with three silver horns sprouting from its rim. Avoiding these, Dr Tenzin must dip a long-handled spoon into it, extract *arra* and take it to the Lam Neten for a blessing. The lama places two fingers on the spoon. Dr Tenzin then goes to either side of the college entrance and tips a little of the liquid on the ground. Next, he gets the college flag and takes this to be blessed. This ceremony is called *marchang*, Mr Namgay tells me later when I introduce myself, a way of asking the gods for a favourable beginning. It ends when Dr Tenzin walks to the flagpole a few minutes later and pulls a cord. A bundle at the top bursts open, and confetti showers down over him. A brisk spring breeze seizes the flag and breathes life into the Thunder Dragon at its centre, making its serpentine body writhe with life.

Chapter 3 Peak of Learning

The more I see of the Bhutanese, the more I am pleased with them. The common people are good-humoured, downright, and, I think, thoroughly trusty. The statesmen have some of the art which belong to their profession. They are the best-built race of men I ever saw; many of them very handsome, with complexions as fair as the French.

The simplicity of their manners, their slight intercourse with strangers, and a strong sense of religion, preserve the Bhutanese from many of the vices to which more polished nations are addicted.

Journal entries (1774)
George Bogle

“What kind of man is the King of Brobdingnag?”

Eighty-eight eyes stare at me. I am still the strange chilip, the foreigner from a country as unfamiliar to them as Brobdingnag. The students pack onto four rows of rickety benches and compete for elbow space over trestle tables. Several of the girls are in each other’s laps, but they don’t seem to mind. Three weeks have passed since marchang, but this is the first time I have had everyone on the register in the room. The late arrivals tell me they had to walk several days from their villages to reach the road. One says he had to sleep by the road for two nights because it was blocked by a landslide. My students are beginning their third and final year of study at Sherading, and I will teach them for an hour a day, six days a week until December. The first text on Paper VI of the Delhi University syllabus is *Gulliver’s Travels*. Ugyen Tshering stands up and clears his throat.

“He’s ... big, Sar.” He sits down, and then promptly stands up again. “Sixty feets high, Sar.”

“Yes, true, a giant. But what about his character?”

Another long silence. Many of the girls begin whispering among themselves. The female class monitor, a slim, athletic girl in a blue kira and pink waistcoat called Karma Choki Dorji, gets to her feet. The students always stand up when I enter the room or whenever they address me. I understand that they abide by a code of conduct introduced by the fourth Druk Gyalpo in 1988 known as *driglam namzha*, which teaches them to respect their elders, dress properly and behave well in public.

“He’s clever, Sar,” offers Karma. “He knows philosophy and mathematics.”

“And gentle. He don’t harm Gulliver,” Pema Khandu chips in, hardly off his bench before speaking. I have got to know Pema and Karma a bit. Both have joined Sonia and me for runs round campus after class – training for the first sports event on the college calendar.

“And enlighten,” adds Sonam, perhaps the brightest student in the class. “The King say that if a man can grow twice more rice in a field than before then he is worth more than a politician.”

“Corn. Yes. Good. In terms of character, how does the King of Brobdingnag compare with the Emperor of Lilliput?”

“Emperor of Lilliput is full of pride, Sar,” says Tshering Palden, the male class monitor, who wants to be a high school English teacher. “He *thinks* he is big man, but he isn’t. He is only six inches tall. King of Brobdingnag *is* big, but his virtue is also big.”

“So what can we say about size and attitude?” I look around the room, pleased with these responses.

More whispering. Finally, Dorji Yuden rises from her seat. She has a shy smile and sun-scorched cheeks, as though she has been working in a low-lying paddy field all winter.

“Size don’t matter, Sar. How you behave is most important.”

It surprises me that they grasp what is going on in the book so well, although Swift's allusions to eighteenth-century English politics are mysterious. Maybe Bhutanese folk tales are full of giants and pygmies, but I think the novel's main appeal for them lies in its descriptions of royalty. Reading about Brobdingnag, an isolated Kingdom cut off from the world by mountains "thirty Miles high" governed by a benevolent monarch uninterested in warfare, it is hard not to think of Bhutan.

Nima Tshering – or perhaps it is Karma Tshering – excuses himself to go and ring the bell for the end of class. I am still having a lot of trouble with their names. I have six Tsherings in the class, five Pemas, four Ugyens, four Karmas and three Dorjis. Dr Tenzin said that most people in the Kingdom share a dozen names and that these can be either first names or last, men's names or women's. It is not hard to guess why some of the names are popular. Pema Lingpa is a highly venerated fifteenth-century lama who discovered sacred texts left by Guru Rinpoche, Channa Dorji the god of power and victory and Ugyen Wangchuck the King. Karma, according to Karma Tshering who works with Nathalie in Thimphu, refers to Karmapa, a twelfth-century Tibetan lama and founder of a Buddhist lineage, as well as to the positive or negative outcome of one's deeds. Tshering, he says, means "long life." "When you are not knowing the names, just you are pointing at the students only," Dr Shukla, an Indian lecturer in the commerce department, advised me in the first week. Dr Shukla has been with Sherading eight years and has a cabin next to mine.

"Read the first two chapters of Gulliver's third voyage for tomorrow. For those out training with us tonight, we'll meet at the prayer wheel at six."

*

Offices here are called "cabins," and mine is on the second floor of a three-story building that looks, with its ivory walls, jutting balconies and trefoil window

frames studded with flowers and gems, like it could be a Royal Pavilion. I share it with a twenty-six-year-old Indian from Kerala called Madam Chitra Sadagopan, who has hair down to her waist, wears spectacular fluorescent saris and sneakers to work and, like me, is a recent addition to the department. We have each been given a computer, but nowhere to plug it in. Power comes from wherever the extension cord ends when it leaves the cabin through the window. As it is spring, we must both wear sweaters at our desks. Our view is of a pine tree with long, whiskery needles and the college prayer wheel, a steel cylinder the size of an industrial boiler, recently repainted by students in psychedelic colours (red, blue, orange, pink) with Sanskrit letters in gold girdling the middle, saying “Om mane padme hum.”

Last Tuesday, Doctor Tenzin cancelled classes and had students line the road from the top gate of the college to the prayer wheel. The *Je Khenpo*, chief abbot of the realm, touring the eastern dzongkhags conducting “ceremonies of admonition, empowerment, and mass prayers” (said *Kuensel*) would stop by and bless the wheel. Students lit another bonfire at the gate. As he descended in his Toyota Land cruiser, His Holiness leaned out the window and tapped each bowed head with a wooden baton. To consecrate the prayer wheel, he walked round it scattering seeds bearing the likeness of the Sanskrit character for “Om” (“*tsampa meto*,” Mr Namgay called them) around the base, and I was reminded again of the importance of auspicious beginnings. Students and staff have been spinning the wheel ever since, sending out prayers for the well-being of all, a bell at the top giving a thumping clang with each revolution.

*

Classes are cancelled again on Saturday when Sonia and I join about two hundred students in T-shirts, baggy shorts (baring thighs is contrary to driglam namzha) and sneakers, tennis pumps, sandals or flip-flops on the road in front of the prayer

wheel. The official start time for the Annual Spring Marathon (a half-marathon for men, ten kilometres for women) was 8am, but now it is ten past and students are still darting off to give the wheel a final spin. But for Ugyen Dendup and Karma Drukpa, we are the only members of staff taking part in the event. I look down at the feet of my colleagues. Ugyen is wearing a pair of pumps, the rubber along the sides deeply cracked, and has a packet of cigarettes tucked in his sock, and Karma is in the shoes he wears round college: brown and shiny and flat. The Director of Sports steps out in front of the runners and blows his whistle. He is wearing a blue tracksuit with the word “BHUTAN” printed on the back. He waits for the prayer wheel bell to stop ringing.

“Men run to Yonphula, turn around at first electricity pole after army base, women go half-way, okay? Stay on road. No take shortcut! Best of luck. Principal-sir will flag off.”

He moves quickly to the side of the road and asks the Dean of Student Affairs if he is ready with the stopwatch. Sonia and I look at the crush of bodies in front of us and then at each other. I am used to starting road races near the front, but today this would clearly be unwise. Mr Namgay said as much to me a few days ago. “You must to be careful at start, Mr Tony. The student, they so full of bean, they push you right off street!” I see that principal-sir is standing, sensibly, on a grassy bank above the road. He nods at the Director of Sports and the timekeeper and then turns to the runners with a smile on his face. The administration officer hands him a white flag on a bamboo stick.

“5-4-3-2-1, yaaah!” bellows Dr Tenzin and sweeps the flag in an extravagant arc to the ground. The students give an answering roar and bolt for the main gate of the college. A mass of flailing arms and flicking heels surges away from us, a tight pack in the middle of the road with looser groups to either side. I stand motionless for several seconds, watching the men in the pack sprint shoulder to shoulder,

shoving each other aside both accidentally and deliberately. One is busy slapping another on the back of the head. A tall boy wearing a headband running behind the pack veers from left to right until he finds a gap and elbows his way through. A girl stumbles, and two others following close behind sprawl over her. I have never thought of the marathon as a contact sport. Now that the students are out of uniform, it seems that driglam namzha does not apply. But it all appears good-humoured: there are wild hoots, laughter, even some singing. The girls roll over, scramble to their feet and dash forward again. Sonia and I set off. But for the two Bhutanese lecturers and four girls walking and chattering together merrily, we are last. I shrug and think back to the speech I gave earlier in the term.

Twice a week before class, students and staff gather in a large hall for morning assembly. Dr Tenzin leads prayers, gives announcements and speaks on topics of general interest. He invites lecturers to give talks. As I have been a keen runner for years and competed in several road races and as I hadn't seen anyone except my wife out training for the spring marathon, I offered to talk about distance running and introduce Sheradings to a running legend. In 1980, after losing a leg to cancer, Terry Fox decided to run across Canada to raise money for cancer research, I told them. On one real leg and one artificial leg, he ran a marathon a day for 143 days until cancer spread to his lungs and stopped him. Terry was the age of many of the students at Sherading and an example of what could be achieved with determination.

I advised participants on marathon day to show similar resolve, to keep going when the going got tough. I advised them to take it slowly at first and save energy. Training before the event was also important. I mentioned the message painted at a viewpoint just below Yonphula by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), the Indian company who built the road: "Enjoy the beauty of nature." Without regular training, I said, appreciation of the beauty of nature on the day of

the marathon would be slender. I invited students to join Sonia and me two evenings a week for a run. Two second-year girls showed up for three weeks and then disappeared. Pema Khandu, Karma Choki Dorji and a boy studying computer science ran with us twice. For the rest, training appeared to begin on the Wednesday before the marathon (I saw six students running up the road to Yonphula before class), or yesterday (when I counted nine), or it never began at all.

The distance to the gate from the prayer wheel is about two hundred and fifty metres, and it is the only flat stretch of road in the area. There are only two ways to go once you leave the college: down twenty-two kilometres to the town of Trashigang or up ten to the village of Yonphula. Passing a sign saying “Tobacco and alcohol free zone. Help keep Kandisor clean and green,” Sonia and I turn and begin the ascent. I look up and see a string of coloured shirts winding up the side of the mountain. We pass most of them before leaving Kandisor. Some runners have slowed to a snail’s pace and are gasping for breath; others have become walkers with their hands on their hips and their heads bowed. I pass one student with a rolled-up rag coated in glucose powder sticking out his mouth. Another student is doubled over at the side of the road jettisoning his breakfast, and a third is sitting down with his shoes off. I overtake Pema Khandu and wish him luck; he is limping along and shaking his head. Just before the first kilometre marker, I see three students with red faces sitting in front of someone’s house, drinking tea. At the second kilometre marker, I catch the leader, a short, wiry lad, breathing like a steam locomotive. He turns his head and in a ragged voice says, “Good fortune, Sar.”

The road is steep, sinuous and, in two places, sandy – the asphalt washed away by heavy rains in the monsoon season. It is a pretty road, arcing up past farms with crescent-shaped paddy fields and white *chortens* like upended ice-

cream cones. Streams pass under the road and bubble alongside it. Exposed bends are marked by little forests of flapping prayer flags on tall wooden masts. When I run this way at dawn, I often find myself entering banks of cloud. I get sudden views of the valley below or of truncated ridges on the far side. The first time I ran to Yonphula, two things kept me from giving up: the yellow and white kilometre markers shaped like gravestones denoting my progress and the encouraging messages written beneath the numerals. “Everything achievable by effort,” says the BRO in bold, black letters on one, “All we need your smile and collaboration” on another.

I settle into a rhythm and look ahead for the next marker and the next. Two kilometres done, three, four. Mr Namgay passes me in the college jeep and waves. Five, six. At eight kilometres and three or four hundred metres above Kandisor, I am breathing like a locomotive. I fail to enjoy the beauty of nature at the viewpoint. I am overheating. I didn’t expect it to be this warm in early April. The cooling mist I enjoy at dawn is not around. My throat is dry, and I have run out of spit. If I don’t get a drink of water soon, I will blow a gasket. Mr Namgay said there would be water stations at regular intervals along the way, but there hasn’t been one yet. Around the next bend is the nine-kilometre marker. “Reach home in peace and not pieces,” recommends the BRO. I see what I suspect is a water station: two students asleep on the grass in front of a house with an empty bucket between them. I try and hail them, but I am out of breath. Finally, one of them hears my ragged breathing, jumps up and dashes into the house. He doesn’t emerge. I chug slowly round the bend, legs turning to jelly, telling myself I will wring their necks on my way back down. A kilometre further, at the turnaround, I see Mr Namgay and the jeep. A student with a bucket of water and a cup is standing beside him.

“Mr Tony, you take this, please, to finish point,” says the Director of Sports, handing me a piece of paper the size of a playing card. It has the Sherading College official stamp on it, proof that I have made it to the halfway point. I stare at it stupidly. With no pocket in my shorts, how am I to carry it? Feeling giddy, but glad of a drink of water, I nod, stuff the slip of paper behind my watch and head back down the mountain.

The finish line is a wooden arch erected for the event on the college playing field. I pass under it in an hour and thirty-three minutes and yield the sweaty remains of the slip of paper to the administration officer. A footballer I have not seen out training once comes in eleven minutes later. The wiry student who was leading at the start arrives two minutes after him and promptly falls to the ground and curls up shivering in the foetal position. I watch a boy with bulging eyes and a scarlet face nosedive through the arch. Slowly, others arrive with heaving chests and desperate looks on their faces, their legs buckling under them. Collapsing at the finish appears to be a custom. Fortunately, there are plenty of spectators waiting with outstretched arms. I watch a girl slump sobbing into the arms of her three friends, one pouring orange juice down her neck. One lad faints on the finish line and has to be dragged away and revived by Mr Namgay. After a while, the playing field begins to resemble a battlefield with students on their backs moaning or staggering around in pain. About half the runners complete the race.

“How did you do?” I find Sonia helping a girl to her feet. “Must’ve been hard in those.” Sonia ran in trekking pants, the kind that reach below the knee and have bulky pockets sticking out the sides. She has decided not to use her running shorts in Bhutan as they don’t cover her thighs. I am lucky I brought a pair of swimming shorts with me.

“Not really. I’m used to them now. Ten kilometres was too short! I just got out of Kandisor, and then I was at the turnaround.”

“Guess you should’ve done the men’s event.”

Ugyen Dendup comes over. He tells us he ran two kilometres, smoked a cigarette and then came back down. I ask him the name of the student who came in third. No longer curled up on the ground, I see him hobbling about with an arm draped over the shoulder of a friend.

“Ugyen,” Ugyen replies.

I wander over and congratulate him. Ugyen’s face is white, his eyes sunken and bloodshot.

“Going up, I was very in pain, Sar, I couldn’t bear.”

“I was suffering too. Hot day for a race.”

“Yes, Sar, but when I was at high school, I could do very easily.”

“Did you drink any water on the way?”

“Only just there, Sar.” He points. The best water station was courtesy of a small boy with a bucket next to the stream that runs through Kandisor, four hundred metres or so from the finish.

Mr Namgay blows his whistle and an award ceremony begins. Sonia and I get medals and certificates for finishing first in our events, and the top three students get these and cash prizes. Dr Tenzin presents the prizes while a dozen lecturers look on and applaud. Just after midday, as things are being packed up and the arch taken down, Karma Drukpa arrives with a sunburnt face, bleeding feet and a big grin on his face. Dr Shukla shakes his head in disbelief. In his customary starched collar, pressed suit and polished shoes, hair combed and moustache scissored, he is a striking contrast.

“Genderally speaking, staffs are nut running in the marathon,” he says, arms folding and nodding his head. Whether he finds this development pleasing or the contrary, I cannot tell.

Walking home, I feel a little sad. In Canada, April would mark the beginning of race season. Maybe, with the permission of the Director of Sports, the two chilip could organise another event.

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Sonia and I are on the road to Yonphula again a couple of weeks later, this time in a Suzuki Omni driven by Tshering Wangdi, a colleague from the English department. Tshering's wife Dechen is in the front, and we are squeezed in behind with their two boys and Dechen's father. I have a tub of red rice and another of *emadatse* on my knees, and Sonia has a wicker bag of Thermos flasks and a melon the size of a beach ball on hers. Tshering has invited us to celebrate *tsechu* with his family, an annual festival of dances honouring Guru Rinpoche.

Tshering parks at the bottom of a dirt road jammed with people: monks in dusty sandals trailing up and down arm in arm, women with babies scarfed to their backs buying snacks from stalls lining the way, Indian soldiers in spotless green uniforms and matching turbans standing with their hands behind their backs, Sherading students chucking balled-up socks at pyramids of tin cans. A man sits under a canvas awning surrounded by photographs of the King and representations of Rinpoche. A woman on her knees sells cartons of Jooz Mango, kids' shoes, bouncing balls, balloons and hairgrips. There is a mud hut with a tin roof called "Tashidema Hotal Bar," serving bottles of "Hit" and "10,000 Super Strong" beer and eight-inch soybean tubes that look like dried animal intestines. Dogs paw the litter under everyone's feet, and a cow at the roadside chews a cardboard box.

The road takes us up to a gate with a yellow roof set in a wall of white chortens. Two policemen are yelling at a forty-person scrum trying to ram its way into the temple. A skinny man with jutting cheekbones and prayer beads around his neck drives forward heedlessly, his hands on the shoulders of a teenager. A plump woman with a mouthful of doma shoves from the back while two boys crawl

through her legs. Over the heads of the people come the wail of horns and every now and then the crash of cymbals. Putting his youngest son on his shoulder, Tshering follows behind the woman, shouting that he is with visiting dignitaries. We laugh and join the crush.

On the other side of the gate is a stone-flagged courtyard enclosed by white buildings two storeys high with fenced balconies and recessed windows, around their frames the by now familiar riot of curly and colourful flowers, clouds and gems. Dragon heads scowl from the roof corners, and short yellow curtains skirt the tops of the doorways and the eaves. Five or six hundred people are sitting on the ground, shoulder to shoulder, cross-legged, facing inwards, their eyes trained on some of the most bizarre figures I have ever seen.

“Tshering, what ... are ... those?” Sonia stammers. I find myself thinking of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. There are sixteen in all – mainly human, but with the heads of animals – dancing in a circle. I can see a jackrabbit, pink ears sticking up, a toucan with a long, down-turned bill, two stags with antlers, a bear or perhaps a wolf with a broad snout, and a reptile of some kind.

“Deities. I think this is *Drametse Nga Cham*. Dechen, which dance is this?” He turns round, but his wife is no longer with us. She has found people she knows in the crowd. “Cham means dance, nga means drum.” He pronounces it *ne-gya*, the “g” coming from the palate. “Drametse is the name of a village on other side of the valley.”

The dancers are lavishly dressed in red and blue silk brocade tunics with baggy sleeves, billowy skirts reaching down to their knees, and sashes – some worn as belts, others knotted to their thumbs. To the accompaniment of cymbals, they leap and spin in the air, land on alternate feet and beat drums like those we had seen at Dr Tenzin’s puja. While we search for a place to sit, I watch one of the stags whirl like a dervish and realise I have, in fact, seen the likes of it before.

Before we came to Bhutan, my aunt gave us Michael Palin's book on the Himalayas. Palin was in Paro attending tsechu two years ago. I remember a photograph of him buried in a crowd of onlookers, an antlered deity in front balancing on one leg and baring its teeth. I look around the courtyard. My wife and I are the only Westerners here.

“What's the meaning of it all?” Sonia asks Dechen, who has rejoined us.

“Tsechu is like blessing. Just coming and seeing the gods dance is good for your karma. Also, the gods, they chase off evil spirits that make us do bad things.” I had assumed the beast-men *were* the evil spirits – demonic deities soon to be seen off by benign gods like Jampelyang, perhaps, with his flaming sword. No doubt my guidebook gives an explanation. Tsechu is one of the main reasons tourists come to Bhutan.

“Some of the gods are angry ...” Dechen turns to Tshering for the right word but then remembers it herself. “... manifestations of Guru Rinpoche.” Oh, so the Precious Teacher is both the amiable Buddha we saw in Tangsibi and someone or something more fearsome.

“People also learn what will happen to them after they die,” adds Dechen's father, “if they are enlighten and enter nirvana.”

“And who's the one in the middle with the funny mask?” I ask. I have been watching a wrinkle-browed old man with a white beard and a goofy smile standing in the middle of the circle, dressed in a plain gho with a green sash around the waist. He watches the dancers with his hands on his hips or with one hand cupping his wooden chin critically.

“*Atsara*,” Tshering says. “He mock the one who do not do it properly.” As if on cue, the clown dashes over to the toucan and begins aping its lacklustre movements, then to the wolf to straighten its skirt. I look to see whether the audience finds this amusing. The spectators nearest eye him warily. Sometimes,

when the dance is running smoothly, the clown darts out of the circle and molests little children, poking them in their tummies, pinching their thighs or stealing their toys. The children cower or squeal or run away.

The dance ends when the deities waltz out of the courtyard through a curtained doorway. I admire their stamina. They have been spinning in circles, swishing their heavy wooden heads to the ground for two hours. The clown stays and seems at a loss until he is joined by another, similarly masked, holding a long yellow sash. This atsara has an enormous orange erection sewn on the back of his gho. People get up, stretch and mill about. The clowns merge with the crowd. Tshering drifts off. Sonia excuses herself. I wander around taking photos. I photograph a knot of people sitting on a stone staircase leading up to where the monks have been playing their instruments. I take a shot of a pretty girl of about eight with an inflamed eye, crouching alone on her haunches. Two teenage monks pose for me. I am taking a picture of a man who, in a Russian fur hat, looks more Muscovite than Bhutanese when the yellow sash arrives on my shoulder. I start and take the camera from my face. Two wrinkle-browed old men with permanent grins are standing in front of me. One of them recites a verse while the other pumps a large wooden phallus up and down with both hands vigorously under my nose. I step back. The one with the phallus is chuckling like a madman.

“Okay, good, good, yes,” I say after a minute. Some children with dribbly noses have come around our legs. Two parties of adults are looking our way.

“Thank you, yes, kadrinche, ha!” I expect the atsaras to move off, but they show no inclination to do so. They look at each other, exchange a few words, and redouble their efforts. The verse rattles out louder – it is like gunfire now. Up and down, up and down goes the phallus, keeping pace.

“O-kay, well, I think we’re done here, yes? Sonia?” I look around for her. Perhaps she could take a photograph of this. The clowns fall silent. Their bulging

wooden eyes glare at me unblinkingly. The phallus wilts. Clown One whispers into the big, false ear of Clown Two. They look back at me. I can see two pairs of beady eyes staring out of the open mouths of the masks. Tshering might be able to explain all this. Where the devil is Tshering? I should perhaps remove the sash, bow, return it to them, muttering my humble thanks, even offer to buy it. Clown Two retrieves the sash somewhat brusquely.

The clowns turn and wander away, hollering cheerfully at the tops of their voices. I watch them pick through the crowd and then select a man standing with a little boy clinging to his gho. They chuck the sash over the man's shoulder. The end flops over the head of his son. The man smiles in a relaxed, friendly manner. As the chanting and jerking gets underway, he digs into the front of his gho. Two ten-ngultrum notes. Clown One plucks them from his fingers, and the pair shuffle off. Sonia appears at my side.

“Did you make some new friends, Tony?”

“Where *were* you?”

“Oh, sitting on the steps over there, watching you. I wanted to come over, but thought it rude to interrupt.”

The dances go on all day. People come and go as they please, and we take a break at midday for our picnic. Sonia had offered to bring food, but Tshering and Dechen wouldn't hear of it. At dusk, we walk back down the dirt road, the parents carrying the boys. Some of my students are playing a game of knock-down-the-cans. Another stall is packed with drunken men gambling noisily. There is a pile of beer bottles outside Tashidema Hotal Bar. We pass the man under the canvas awning. He is flat on his back asleep, his Guru Rinpoche pictures sold.

“What did you make of all that?” I ask Sonia while we wait for the others. She thinks for a moment.

“I might go to church back home if it was a bit more like that.”

Chapter 4

All for One

In James Hilton's 1933 classic, *Lost Horizon*, Shangri-La was a tiny isolated paradise in the Himalayas, where people lived in near perfection. The Kingdom of Bhutan bears strong geographical likenesses – mountainous remoteness makes communication difficult within and without, and the country kept to itself well into the 20th century. But it also confronts highly intertwined real-world issues – needs that include improving the economy, literacy rates and the education system as a whole. To prosper, Bhutan needs more educated and literate citizens.

“Education at the root of Bhutan's growth plan” (2006)
Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada

“So, what happens to Cardinal Wolsey?”

Next on Paper VI of the Delhi syllabus is Samuel Johnson. My students must study “London” and now “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” a total of 631 lines of eighteenth-century poetry. The final exam at the end of the year will ask them to analyse extracts from these poems in detail. Since parting company with Swift and *Gulliver's Travels*, we have found it an uphill slog (far worse than running to Yonphula). I know my students have studied difficult poetry before – Chaucer, Donne, Milton and Shakespeare in their first two years at Sherading – but they don't seem to have the analytical skills they need. I have divided the class up into groups, assigning each a section of the poem to prepare for homework. At the start of every lesson, we review the lines covered the day before.

“Well, what kind of man is he?” I ask after a full minute of silence. “Look again at the part Group C presented yesterday: ‘Still to new Heights his restless Wishes tow'r/Claim leads to Claim, and Pow'r advances Pow'r ...’”

“Greedy, Sar.” Tshering Palden offers, rising to his feet after a further half-minute. He sits down again quickly.

“Yes, greedy. Wolsey craves more and more power. What is his fate? Does he end his life happily?”

This time there is no reply. It is a bad sign when none of the girls are whispering. I wait another minute. Even Sonam is avoiding my gaze. Dorji Llamo and Pema Yangzom described Wolsey’s fall from grace yesterday.

“At length his Sov’ reign frowns – the Train of State ...” I prompt, looking round for signs of recognition. “‘Mark the keen Glance and watch the Sign to hate.’ You know that the sovereign is King Henry VIII. What’s a frown?”

Forty-four frowning faces. My students can stand up and read from a prepared script readily enough, but have difficulty using what they know to answer questions. Not that I don’t appreciate the literary mountain they are trying to scale. In a language not their first, they must study long, intricate poems full of unfamiliar words and back-to-front syntax, referring to a radically different culture half a world away and centuries old. The Indian textbook assigned to the paper has brief annotations, and the college library is of little help (the dozen books of critical essays it has are ancient, scribbled over and in tatters). The few operating computers in the college are in hot demand. Other lecturers tell me the students’ main sources of reference are the notes their seniors leave behind when they graduate.

Fortunately, change is on the horizon. Sherading College is soon to cut loose from Delhi University, and the English Department will be among the first to write its own, more modern curriculum. Out with a traditional survey of English literature of the kind probably taught in England in the 1950s and no doubt imposed on Indians by the British; in with courses like post-colonial literature, literary criticism, basic writing skills and creative writing. Instead of end-of-year exams worth 75% of the final grade, continual assessment will account for the lion’s share of the marks. The style of learning will also change. Fewer lectures

delivered by the professor from the front of class while students sit and take notes, more pair work, group work and student presentations. “Student-centered learning” is the buzz-phrase around college.

“Gone are the days of sitting silently in lesson and learning like parrot for exam,” said our forward-looking principal in a staff meeting at the start of term, remembering perhaps his own schooling (“Teachers used to teach us by reading the text from the books and explained their meanings, and we learnt the texts by memorising,” he wrote in an article called “Tangsibi and Beyond” in 2002). “Bhutan needs graduates who can speak and write well, analyse and think critically.”

I now have regular meetings with my colleagues to discuss the content of the new curriculum. It is clear that I will spend much of Fire Male Dog Year in my office searching online for suitable texts for the new courses and writing course descriptions. A team of educators from RUB and Delhi University will come to Sherading at the end of the year to assess and hopefully validate the curriculum. I have no experience of curriculum design, but it has dawned on me that this might be the reason I have been given a contract to work here.

“Review the lines on Wolsey, and I’ll ask you again tomorrow,” I say to the class. “Let’s hear from Group D now.”

Seven students led by Sonam shuffle to the front to present “the young Enthusiast,” Johnson’s satirical portrait of the self-absorbed scholar. They have one script between them. As usual, each presenter will read from the script and pass it to the next. “All for one,” said Ugyen Tshering cheerfully last week when I asked his group whether everyone had worked on the lines independently, “And one for all!” chorused Group B. I wonder if this will be a problem when they come to review for their exams. I see them sitting round a table in the library, reading a sheet of notes and then passing it on. More worrying is the evidence of plagiarism

and copying in their written assignments. The students clearly work closely together on these too. All for one, the stronger students helping the weaker to get by. While I admire the camaraderie, they must know that the final exam won't be a team effort.

I look out the window and spot a hoopoe scratching in the dust for insects. A month has passed since tsechu, and warmer temperatures have brought all manner of gaily painted birdlife to Kandisor: barbets, babblers, minivets, tree pies. My father, an avid birdwatcher in his time, would have loved this place. The hoopoe has a fawn-coloured body, zebra-striped wings and a crest like a lady's fan. When it feeds on the ground, it folds back the crest. The head with its slightly decurved beak now resembles a pickaxe. Lessons will become easier once we get to the Romantic poets. Wordsworth and Coleridge preferred to write about the splendour of nature and rural life than about the vanity of statesmen and urban degeneracy. The fact that they felt a spiritual connection with the natural environment should appeal to the Bhutanese. The Romantics also wrote verse in a plainer language than their neo-classical predecessors, making it easier to understand.

As the fifth presenter winds up, Nima Tshering begins his march from the back of the classroom to the other side of college to ring the bell. He bows to me as he passes.

“Okay, we'll finish there for today.” I see relief on several faces. “And please, read the lines carefully on your own before tomorrow's lesson. Underline anything you don't understand, and we'll go over it together.”

As I gather my teaching notes, I think about the value for Bhutanese of studying the works of Shakespeare or Swift or Johnson. All are entry points into Western culture and so have the potential to make students worldlier. Deciphering and writing about literary classics can also advance analytical and critical skills.

But how much is enough? I know I didn't have to wrestle with "The Vanity of Human Wishes" when I was an undergraduate.

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I see the external signs of change when I jog round campus before work (giving my grumbling calves and knees a rest from repeated ascents and descents).

Workmen carry cushioned seats fit for a Greyhound bus into a brand new lecture theatre, an Indian crew clears a space between Dr Tenzin's office and the main gate for an IT center, and new student dormitories (called hostels here) sprout from the hill overlooking the college. Sherading is not only modernising, it is growing bigger. According to the Royal University's strategic plan for 2006, the college will accommodate 1,380 students by 2010, 1,775 by 2012. Money for these projects comes from the Indian government, 78 million ngultrum (\$2,080,000), apparently, and much of the work will be done by Indian companies or Bhutanese companies employing Indians. Sherading may be pulling away from Delhi University academically, but Bhutan's southern neighbour will continue to have a large role in its future. There hasn't been any talk of increasing the number or size of classrooms, but this will have to happen too. My class needs a room half again the size of the one we have.

My jog begins with a hop, skip and jump over cowpats decorating the grass in front of our bungalow. Then I join a mud path that takes me down to the stream flowing through the village. Right now, the stream is only a trickle and clogged with reeds and rubbish. Water has been scarce of late. Three weeks ago, turning on the tap to wash my face one morning, I got a sneeze, a thin thread of water lasting fifteen seconds, another bigger sneeze, eight brown drips, a throat-clearing sound and then nothing. Sonia and I have been bucketing in water from a tap in the village since, a return journey of ten minutes. We are starting to appreciate what it means to have running water at the twist of a tap – especially on laundry day. A

chemistry lecturer living two doors up suggested our tank may be empty. He took us five minutes up the mountain to a stone bunker the size of a mail van that had cracked walls and a cow-nibbled bamboo roof. Two thick black hoses plugged into the stream behind spat water into the tank in fits and starts. An armful of thinner hoses in several colours radiated optimistically from a leaky hole in the bottom. One of these, Karma Lhendup assured me, was ours. The tank was almost empty and the hoses at the bottom swimming in mud.

I cross the stream through a horseshoe shaped cow-proof gate and run along a crumbly concrete footpath on the other side. This passes under the warped boughs of an elderly oak tree and takes me to the top gate of the college. Just inside the gate, a gang of Indian labourers squats and fries chapattis over a fire. They are thin, baked men in ragged dhotis and slippers with towels wound round their heads to keep out the morning chill. They are building new staff quarters and live nearby in ramshackle plank shelters with tin roofs next to the college *lhakhang*. The road to campus is beautifully sheltered by chir pines, cypresses, silver oaks and junipers, but it is almost too steep to jog. I am relieved when I can peel off and descend a long flight of stairs cutting down through lecturers' quarters. At the bottom, I cross the stream for a second time over a red bridge and pause on the other side to spin the college prayer wheel, a new habit of mine. This action (or maybe it is the distinctive aroma of chilip) rouses the campus canines from their slumbers. I turn the nozzle on my pepper spray to "fire."

Seventy or eighty stray dogs call Sherading home. They wander around the buildings endlessly sniffing for scraps, poke their heads enquiringly into the classrooms during lessons, sleep stretched out in the washrooms and attend all outdoor functions. Many of them camp within striking distance of the college mess or the canteen next to the playing field and fight over scraps tossed out after each meal. Their bodies bear witness to a hard life. Most have scarred shanks, ripped

ears and mange. Some have open, dirt-filled wounds on their legs and necks, others horrible cancers swelling their genitals and behinds. There are a few with no hair at all, their blotchy pink skins making them look like some kind of mutant species. A chocolate brown one with friendly eyes has a growth resembling a ruptured haggis where its bottom jaw should be. Apparently, this particular dog tried to bite a farmer who was at the college gate selling his vegetables. The farmer was carrying a machete at the time. The dog trots around campus trailing a glistening string of saliva and eats with its cheek to the ground through a gap at the corner of its mouth the size of a bath plug.

What to do about the dogs is a recurring topic of conversation among my colleagues. Views range from “They do no harm, let them be” to “Give me the gun and I am killing aall the stray dogs,” depending on whether the speaker is a Buddhist or a Hindu (the former regarding all life as sacred, the latter only people, snakes and cows). Kill them and we will be free of their unsightly presence, say the exterminators. Kill them and others from the village will replace them, counter the preservers. Lecturers with small children, Bhutanese and Indian alike, want them put down. Most agree something has to be done – at the very least, sterilisation. Last week, Saturday classes were cancelled so that a health official from Trashigang could give a talk on German measles, avian flu and rabies. He said that sixty-six cases of rabies had been recorded in Kandisor and warned us that the disease was incurable. We should avoid dogs we see “running amuck” or showing “tendency to eat sticks, mud and stones,” those with “excessive salivation” or barking with “changed voice.” Father Mackey’s solution to the dog problem back in the seventies was to put down poison. When that failed, he called the army in to shoot the dogs, but this didn’t work either. On hearing the first shot, the dogs shot off into the bushes. The need for a solution has become more pressing since a dog

suspected of having rabies ran onto the basketball court last month and bit five students.

I usually do six to eight laps of the campus, following dirt footpaths beside the student hostels and charging up and down flights of concrete steps in between. After the fourth loop, the sun is up, and I get glimpses between the buildings of gleaming, snow-dusted mountains on the horizon. The dogs emerge from their nests in the bushes and begin washing themselves in patches of sunlight. There is always one in the waste pit in front of each hostel. These were dug by students at the start of the year to deal with the increase in litter around campus and are another source of lively debate. The president of FINA, the largest student body at Sherading, was the last to weigh in via college Intranet.

Dear sirs and madams,

All the pits we had dug for ourselves are filled with unhygienic materials such as sanitary towels used by females, and the dogs pick them up and scatter them on the roads. We get jitters, and disgusted when we burn the wastes in the pit. I would like to request all our esteemed colleagues not to throw your sanitary towels in the waste pit. The solution to dispose your sanitary towels off is to bury them in the ground. We are all responsible for keeping our areas clean. The initiative should come from each one of us. By the way, I am not the authority to say all these; it is only a knock in our heads about our social responsibilities.

There is no organised collection or treatment of refuse in Kandisor. There are no rubbish bins. People either burn their litter or throw it down the mountain. From what I can gather, this appears to be the practice everywhere in the country, with the exception of Thimphu where a dozen trucks a day haul solid waste up to Dochu La and dump it in a landfill. Fortunately, the population of Bhutan is small and most of the rubbish biodegradable. Sonia and I saw very little litter when we crossed the Kingdom with Dr Tenzin. However, with imports from India

increasing (worth 6.9 billion rupees, roughly US\$155 million, in 2001, according to *Kuensel*, 12.8 billion rupees or US\$288 million last year) and with more tourists arriving each year (6,393 in 2001, 13,600 last), demanding things like camera batteries, bottled water and sunscreen, waste disposal services nationwide will surely become urgent. Sherading needs rubbish bins with lids and, with the increase of students over the coming years, a landfill or refuse incinerator.

The last part of my jog takes me past the building where my office is located and back up the hill to the top gate. Often as not, I hear bleeping from someone's room. Power outages are practically a daily occurrence in Kandisor. Fortunately, a computer comes with an "APC Back-up," a battery the size and weight of a breeze-block that beeps and flashes hysterically when the electricity fails, giving the user two minutes to back up files before the computer dies. At home, Sonia and I must make sure there are always candles and matches at hand in case of a black-out, which happens without warning and lasts anywhere from two minutes to four hours. No one at the college can tell me why the power goes. It just does – especially when it rains.

After three months in Kandisor, Sonia and I still regard everything as novel: marchang, rabid dogs, washing dishes in a bucket, the datho, earthquakes, cooking by candlelight – all part of the adventure and refreshingly different from life in Canada. However, I can't help but wonder on my jogs whether we might do more than just help Sherading advance academically. No longer my dependant, Sonia now has a contract and gives workshops in critical thinking and essay writing to students, a task given to her by Dr Tenzin. Trouble is, I know little other than English teaching and Sonia's background is in intercultural relations. Kandisor seems to need electricians, sanitation engineers, plumbers and veterinarians.

*

"Sonia, what do you think about organising a sponsored run?"

I am just back from one of my morning runs and feel peculiarly alive after a cold water bucket-bath. For the first time, I made it to Yonphu La, the pass beyond the temple, a round trip of twenty-six kilometres – and without hunting desperately around each bend for a Border Roads gravestone. I am not sure why, but I seem to have more energy than I did in Canada. Maybe it is the altitude ... or perhaps the food. Breakfast isn't much – an Indian version of Cornflakes, white bread with butter and jam – but lunch and dinner are solid meals: rice, beef, turnip, chilli peppers. Maybe it is the chillies, red and fiery and fresh. Egg, bacon and sausage at *Chez Cora* in Fredericton already seem to belong to the distant past.

“Listen to this.” My wife is sitting at the dinner table, reading the *Kuensel*. “The present rabies outbreak is a major one and has mainly affected the three dzongkhags of Trashigang, Trashiyangtse and Mongar.” The headline is “Rabies not yet contained” next to a picture of an infected cow with wide eyes and saliva dribbling from its mouth. “I hope Mutu doesn't get it.”

Sonia is also doing more running than she used to, now that swimming and cycling, her other sports, are not possible. We don't often run together, and I worry about dogs attacking her. I have had one or two nasty encounters, padding past people's houses before dawn. But Sonia says she isn't bothered and refuses to take the pepper spray. I like it when the house dog accompanies her on a run. Mutu doesn't put up with any nonsense from other dogs. While we were out shopping once, we watched her fasten onto the back leg of a dog half again her size till the stricken creature squealed for mercy.

“What would we be raising money for?” Sonia puts the newspaper aside.

“Um, something the college needs, I thought, like new books for the library or a garbage incinerator.” Sonia and I have done one or two sponsored runs before, the most recent being the Terry Fox Run for cancer research from New Brunswick to Prince Edward Island over Confederation Bridge.

“Sounds like a good idea,” Sonia says. “How about kennels for the dogs?”

She goes in the kitchen and brings back a plate of toast. Sitting down, she scrapes the milk fat off her tea and puts it in a saucer. We get our milk from a neighbour with two cows, an arrangement made for us by a zoology lecturer. A boy called Sonam brings it over every other evening in an old whisky bottle: 500 millilitres for half a buck.

“How far were you thinking and who would do it?” Sonia picks up a slice of toast and daubs it with butter.

“Um, from here to Thimphu. Just you and me.”

My wife pauses before taking a bite out of her toast and looks at me carefully. “That’s six hundred kilometres, Tony!”

“Five hundred and seventy-eight.”

Do a sponsored run round here, I have decided, and we would end up with enough money to buy the college one litter bin. Students have no money, and the shops and restaurants in Kandisor are all family operations. For twenty kilometres in either direction, it is mountains, trees, chortens and isolated farms. We would have to hit the towns, where there are *dzongs*, government offices, hotels, businesses, gas stations and proper restaurants. I have no doubt that we can raise money in a developing country reliant on foreign aid. As in most developing countries, there are those that have money and those that do not. I know it would be important to seek donations in Thimphu, where we saw Land cruisers humming along Norzin Lam like those on the streets of Fredericton. Given that Sherading is the leading university college in the Kingdom, it has occurred to me that many of the civil servants and hoteliers could well be alumni.

“We haven’t run anything like that far before, have we?”

“No,” I concede. “Not even close.” I ran The Dartford Marathon in England nineteen years ago, but haven’t run a marathon since; Sonia has never run a

marathon. In Canada, we do ten-kilometre road races and the odd half-marathon and usually choose flat courses to get fast times.

“We’d need to do an awful lot of training,” Sonia says, looking serious.

“Yes,” I admit. “But it would be for a good cause, and no one has run across Bhutan before.”

The idea had come to me on the flight here from Bangkok. There was an article in the in-flight magazine called “Pedalling through Paradise” about three Bhutanese who had cycled from Samdrup Jongkhar to Phuentsholing, stopping at schools along the way to give talks on AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse. “Congratulation for being the 1st Bhutanese to bike across the Kingdom,” said a banner welcoming “businessman and fitness enthusiast” Wangda Tobgyal and his companions to Phuentsholing. How very Western, I thought. There was another picture of Wangda in Lycra cycling shorts, straddling his mountain bike and tickling the trunk of an elephant.

My wife spreads Himalayan Gift slowly over her toast. She calls the jam “neon jelly” because of its sickly colour. There are no ingredients listed on the side of the jar, just a blurry image of guavas, apples, strawberries, pineapples and mangoes, none of which, as far as I know, grow in the Himalayas. Remarkably, it tastes rather good.

“You know, I’m not sure it’s the right time to propose something like that. I mean, we’re still quite new here, aren’t we? I still feel a bit like we’re on probation. We’re the first Canadians to get long-term teaching posts in Bhutan in fifteen years.”

There is a bark at the back door. Sonia gets up and takes her saucer to the kitchen, opens a can of mackerel, pours the oil from the can into a plastic bowl, adds two handfuls of zao, stirs and then tosses the milk skin on top. In a few minutes, armed with a faggot of firewood, I will step outside to make sure that

none of Kandisor's strays come to rob Mutu of this concoction. I hear the school bell ring and turn my chair round to face the front window. A stream of children is coursing down the mountain. A teacher is at the gate of the school waving them in. When I run to Yonphula, I find myself dodging these kids on my way down. Some of the boys race me round a couple of bends in the road, yelling "Hallo, Sar! Hallo, Sar!" little legs motoring beneath their ghos, lunch tins rattling. I look through a hole in the bamboo fence for the lad living next door. He is about the right age to attend the school, but, when the bell rings at eight, he is always milking a cow or chopping up bamboo stalks for fodder. His mother seems to have a lot of work for him to do.

Sonia comes back in, picks up a class register and shoves it under her arm.

"Can I leave you the dishes?" She knows if she is quick, Mutu won't tail her to college. "Drop in on Dr Tenzin. See what he thinks."

I sit for a while in silence, staring at the breakfast table, the bread crumbs on the plates, the jar of Himalayan Gift with a knife sticking out of it. Sonia is right. I am being premature. Why am I suddenly full of this idea? I cannot be suffering from inertia already, can I? That doesn't make sense. With my six-day teaching week and long hours in the office doing lesson prep, essay marking and curriculum design, I am actually busier than I ever was in Canada. Maybe it is the routine. We have come half way round the planet to a remote college half way up a mountain, and yet, each morning, I put on my slacks and shiny shoes and slick back my hair just as I used to in Fredericton. I am in need of a challenge – something looming on the horizon that scares me. But a run of hundreds of kilometres across the Himalayas? Does it need to be so extreme? If we do decide to cross the Kingdom on foot, why not walk? Rather than think about running across the country, I should be poring over a map and planning the treks Sonia and I will do during summer recess. We have not even begun to explore Bhutan yet.

*

“Twenty-four, seven, I think of you. Twenty-four, seven, I think of you.”

The taxi bombs south from Samdrup Jongkhar, the border town, music blaring. Eighty-five kilometres an hour is the fastest we have been in five months. Banana trees with leaves like slashed tents spin by on either side. We are dodging bicycles, motorised and pedal rickshaws, cows, trucks, cars, goats, buses and pedestrians.

In the front with our driver is Dr Shukla, who has loosened his starched collar since we descended the mountains and sprinkled talcum powder liberally over his neck. We really don't know him, but have accepted an invitation to visit his home town Muzaffarpur in Bihar state. Sonia and I share the back seat with his wife Mamta, who is dressed in a flame orange sari and has two dozen bracelets on her wrist. The windows are down and the air beating my cheeks after the cool of the mountains feels like it is from sauna coals. This and the dust and smoke from the bus in front make me squint, cough and lick my lips. My shirt is gummed to my stomach, my shorts darkened with sweat. The temperature must be thirty-five, and this is eight-thirty in the evening.

The taxi has to slow down every ten minutes when the banana trees give way to clusters of buildings. These are single storey, lit by lanterns and have tufts of chopped-off rebar sprouting from their roofs like errant hairs. People squat in front on rugs or under bamboo shelters selling sugar cane, jackfruit, engine parts or chapattis. I see six men in dhotis sitting on a rickety bench outside a restaurant, a jumble of wrecked rickshaws kids are using as a climbing frame. A fat-bellied sow thrusts her snout into a mound of rubbish heaped against the restaurant. If I didn't know better, I would say we were driving through a hot spring area. Everyone seems undressed or in a state of partial undress. Bare boys dash across the road. A girl of about fourteen with her shirt off tips a basin of water over her head. A gaunt

man with a beard down to his stomach and a towel round his waist stares into the Suzuki Alto's headlights with a look of shock on his face.

"Anything can come if you can expect." Dr Shukla turns round in his seat and giggles. He knows it is our first visit to India.

Another village recedes behind. The driver accelerates and, honking furiously, pulls out to overtake the bus that has been forcing us to travel at a safe speed. Dr Shukla jerks back in his seat. A "Tata" lorry is lumbering towards us. Done up like a Christmas tree with strings of blinking lights around the radiator and an illuminated Hindu god perched on the roof of the cab, it is an attractive sight. I occasionally see these six-wheelers on my runs from Kandisor, wheezing up the mountain, rattling down the other side. Here, they are barrelling towards us every few seconds. I brace for impact. People hanging out the windows of the bus shout at us and fling litter.

"Jelli, Jelli. Oh, Jelli, Jelli," croons a girl gaily from the CD player.

Our driver seems to enjoy playing chicken with the oncoming traffic. He has already displaced two cyclists and a rickshaw onto the soft verge. Instead of hitting the brakes and retreating, he goes further right and leaves the road. The lorry roars between us and the bus, blasting its horn.

"Jelli, Jelli. Oh-oh, Jelli, Jelli."

We are now on packed dirt in front of someone's house. Chickens flee from the wheels. Two men having an argument leap out of the way. There is a dull thud and a dog streaks into the bushes, yelping. My head bangs the roof and my water bottle slips down between my legs. Sonia huddles down, gripping her bag. Mamta's bracelets travel along her arm, making a shushing sound. Dr Shukla bobs up and down, chuckling.

"If you are growing bad habit, you will be gaining bad harvest."

I grip the door handle with both hands and wonder why we accepted his invitation. The taxi must now shoot forward and return to the road or hit a cow blinking in its headlights. People on the bus jeer and wave their arms at us as we zoom by in a cloud of dust. I ease back in my seat and look out my window.

The sky is large and speckled with stars, the moon a sharpened boomerang. There is a storm on the horizon. The lightning flashes have a curious effect in the dark. For a split second, everything stops dead, frozen in black and white: the startled face of a man dismantling a bike, a boy excreting down the side of a wall, a dog caught mid-yap in front of a cow. A BRO road sign winks by: "Safety on the road is safe tea at home." Buckled and leaning, it looks like it has been hit many times. "Better late than never" says another. The messages are corny, like those near Kandisor, but also deadly serious. There must be horrendous pile-ups on this road.

I think of Bhutan and its drive for modernisation. I know nothing about India, but gods forbid that its Himalayan neighbour turn out like this: the lateral road heaving with traffic, litter everywhere, Guru Rinpoche pinned to the cab roof of a truck. I wipe the sweat from my face, cradle my upset stomach. Maybe I am just recoiling from the sensory overload. Maybe the mountains and tradition, forcing a slow pace of development, will save Bhutan.

*

"Dema say that Sir should eating noodle only."

"Kadrinche, Tashi. Good idea."

After two hellish weeks in northern India, Sonia and I return to Kandisor. Momos and samosas with chilli would indeed be a mistake. I have what a Nigerian travel companion once described as a "running stomach." Being within striking distance of a lavatory is imperative. It would be nice to go for a long run, not only to rid myself of the ugly feeling, but also to sweat out the toxins. Perhaps the

thumping headache would abate too, and I could blow the dirt out of my nose. But I feel drained of energy, and my Achilles tendon is sore from my fall in the muddy streets of Bodhgaya. Still, it is an immense relief to be off the sweltering, flooded plains and back in the mountains, to feel a cool breeze on the face, to breathe clean air again. After Muzaffarpur, Sonia and I travelled to see the ghats in Varanasi and Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, where Siddhartha became the Buddha. Temperatures hovered around forty degrees before the monsoon rains came crashing down.

Sonia also has diarrhoea and says she feels dirty. She may be thinking of our final seventeen-hour train ride from Patna to Rangia. We boarded the train at midnight and had a four-berth cabin to ourselves: 'Two A/C' (second class with air-con). I took a bottom bunk, Sonia the one above. She woke in the morning to find a thick-bearded, turbaned Sikh staring at her with undisguised lust from the bunk opposite. We chatted to him, establishing early in the conversation that Sonia was my wife. In basic English, he told us he was also married and had three children. This exchange did not deter him, however, from asking Sonia for a kiss when I went out to the bathroom. On learning this, I wagged my finger severely and told him twice to "Show respect." He seemed taken aback, and hid himself for the remainder of the journey under his bed sheet.

"*Shey!*"

Dema puts two steaming bowls in front of us. She has put *saag* in with the noodles. We twirl our forks in the mixture and try to muster interest. I want to ask her to turn the volume down on the TV as a Bollywood dance sequence is in full fling, the women's voices shrill and squeaky, but stick my head out the window instead. Tashi is now sitting on a bench outside Choda, minding the shop while Jurmi attends class at Sherading; Jigme marches up and down with a stick, seeing off stray dogs. I look beyond the pair to the road. The traffic is a cow, swishing

flies away with its tail, shadowed by a farmer, then two lads chasing a wheel made of wire downhill, the taller one controlling it by means of a rod with a hook in the end. A man of twenty or so with wild hair and a catapult shambles by, then four teenage monks on their way to the *shedra*.

“*Suja*,” Dema says emphatically, placing two cups on our table.

I look at Sonia. We didn’t order butter tea. Dema smiles and pats her stomach.

*

“Kuzu zangpo, Tony. Come in.” A week later, I discover Dr Tenzin in his office, hidden behind a mountain of papers rising out of his in-tray.

“Kuzu zangpo, Sir. How was your holiday?”

“Exhausting. I wanted to stay here and catch up on my work, but I had to go to Paro for meetings.” The principal of Sherading is also the director of the National Institute of Education in Paro.

“You worked during your holiday?”

“Yes. And when I get called for a meeting in Thimphu or Paro, it always takes a full week to go and come back.” He shakes his head helplessly. “I need a helicopter!”

“I hope I’m not disturbing you at ...”

“No, not at all. I was just going for lunch. Do you want to join me? I hear you were in India. You chose an interesting time of year to go!”

We walk across campus and down a steep, stone staircase shaded by cedar trees. Seventeen dogs are sitting outside the college mess at the bottom, licking their chops. Somebody has fed them. The students eating at the trestle table nearest the door go quiet when we enter. Dr Tenzin leads the way to the counter, where two cooks are ladling rice, dal, turnips and beef curry into bowls. I haven’t asked anyone yet, but how come the Bhutanese aren’t vegetarians if all sentient beings

are holy? As brown curry smothers each heap of rice, my stomach tightens. “Slimy in, slimy out,” warned my brother in an email when he heard about our cases of “Delhi belly.” Sonia and I seem to be back to normal, but I remain wary. The curry drains through the rice, leaving more bones and vertebrae than meat.

“I sometimes come and eat here,” Dr Tenzin says, declining the curry. The cook hands him a cup of dal. “One of the problems is the students take the bones out their bowls and put them on the table.” We sit down at an empty table. “Then the cook comes, and he brushes them on the floor.” I look down and see chewed splinters of bone under several of the tables.

“And the dogs come in and eat them,” I add. As if on cue, a particularly battered bitch with flaccid teats sidles over and collapses under the chair next to mine. She doesn’t seem to have the energy to beg.

“This is very unhygienic. And it looks bad to have dogs sniffing round our legs when dignitaries come.” With all that is going on at the college, I am surprised Dr Tenzin has time to think about this. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

I suddenly feel like I shouldn’t be wasting the principal’s time. “Um, Sonia and I were thinking of, ah, running across Bhutan to raise money for, for ...”

I expect my lunch companion to choke on a turnip. Dr Tenzin did his master’s degree in England and his doctorate in Australia, so I feel sure he is familiar with the idea of a sponsored run. I wipe a dribble of curry from my chin, before continuing. I have tried to eat with my fingers in a civilised manner like the Bhutanese and Indians do, but I always end up decorating my face and shirt.

“... a worthy cause. The question is, um, what cause ... and, of course ... whether or not you approve of such a venture. We thought we might raise money to build kennels for the dogs at the college or buy an incinerator perhaps, given, ah, the litter problem we have.”

Dr Tenzin separates some rice from the mound in his bowl, squeezes it into a ball with his fingers, places it in his mouth and chews thoughtfully. He looks over at the next table. A tall lad I have seen out on the soccer field a few times scoops rice and curry into his mouth from a mound twice the size of mine. Another is using a splinter of bone as a toothpick.

“How about taking some of our students with you?”

“Sorry?”

“I know of one or two who might be interested.”

I scratch the side of my head with my clean hand and look down in my bowl. He must be joking.

Sports Day had followed the Annual Spring Marathon. Mr Namgay had borrowed cement from the building site near the main gate to draw a race track on the playing field. The students had competed in one-, two-, four-, and eight-hundred-metre events. The longer the race, the fewer the finishers. In my event, the five-thousand, nine of the forty-five who began the race crossed the finish line, the dropouts unashamedly melting into the ring of spectators. It was further confirmation that the students had little stamina, but it also showed me that they did not care whether they finished or not.

“Um, well, yes ... yes. That’s a good idea. Yes. I suppose we *could* do that if, um, that is, um, any were up to the task.”

Twenty students come into the mess, talking loudly. When they spot Dr Tenzin, they straighten their ghos, bow and say, “Good afternoon, Sar” sheepishly. One passes out bowls to the rest, and they form an orderly line. Some other students get up and leave, rinsing their bowls under a tap on their way out. I look at the debris left on their table.

“Have you thought of introducing trays?” I say, recovering.

“Yes. This is one solution, but trays are difficult to get. We’d have to get them from India.” Dr Tenzin rises. “Well, I should get back. There will be a queue outside my door. Talk to Mr Namgay about your idea.”

Chapter 5

Suja with Mr Namgay

The Six Transcendental Perfections in Buddhism include Generosity (Jinpa), Discipline (Tshuelthrim), Diligence (Tsuenda), Patience (Zoipa), Concentration/Meditation (Samten) and Wisdom (Sherub) ... sports have the potential to pragmatise three of the six transcendental perfections, namely discipline, diligence and patience and make an individual consciously or unconsciously more spiritually sublime. Discipline, diligence and patience are very important not only in games and sports and PE, but also in life. Whatever we do, we need to have those qualities to make our work successful.

“Sports and Some Essential Elements of Buddhism” (2006)
Singye Namgyal

Monsoon season arrives in Kandisor. Savage downpours begin abruptly in the afternoons and batter the village. Rain hammers the tin roofs of the houses and drills holes in the ground where it cascades off. It thrashes the road and creates muddy streams at the sides. Trees and bushes with shallow roots leaning over the road topple. Dirt feeder roads turn into mudslides. The stream through the village becomes bubbly and wild and has ceased to look like a sewer: food slops from the restaurants, betel nut husks, sanitary towels and the bones of dead dogs get washed down the mountain. In places, the stream bursts its banks and fans out over the road. My morning jog has become an obstacle course.

“We are having this for tree munts,” says Dr Shukla gleefully, watching me squelch into my office in saturated shoes. I have gotten into the habit of bringing a towel and spare socks to work. He tells me what happened in the summer of 2004. “The bridge on the road to Trashigang was washed away, and there was a big landslide covering entirely the road to Yonphula. The college was completely cut off with no electricity. We were not having a-ny fresh supplies for two munts.”

“How did you cope?”

“We chopped down some of the trees for cooking, and we were down to eating rice only. The shops ran out of food and were charging four times the normal price for candles!”

The monsoon hit Trashigang dzongkhag hard that year. According to a UNDP report, 1,437 households lost their crops, 133 houses were washed away or damaged, 22 bridges collapsed and 11 people died in floods and landslides. Eighty kilometres north of Kandisor, the Kholong Chhu in Bomdeling flooded its banks, dumping sand, silt and debris over sixty acres of paddy fields. Seventy-four farmers lost their livelihoods. When they can get a ride on a lorry, Sherading students go and play beach volleyball where the fields used to be.

The college seems well prepared for the monsoon. Deep gutters around the roofs of the buildings catch the rain, thick drainpipes carry it to the ground and foot-deep open drains at the sides of the sloping concrete pathways take the water away. Workmen wander about in flip-flops, freeing the drains of fallen branches and litter. Nevertheless, there is mud everywhere and ponds on the playing field. When the skies darken and the first fat drops fall, the campus dogs flatten their ears, begin to whine and try to take shelter inside the doorways. Dr Shukla claps his hands, yells “Zoosh!” and chases them out with his broom. The hoopoe’s crest now looks like a punk rocker’s Mohawk.

The World Cup has also arrived in Kandisor. My Bhutanese colleagues are showing up at work with bags under their eyes, and I have several zombies in the back row of my class (“Karma! Wake up!” “Sorry, Saaar. It was Netherlands versus Ivory Coast last night”). Each hostel has a lounge with a television. Thankfully, we have moved from Samuel Johnson to pre-Romantic poet Oliver Goldsmith on the syllabus. However, while “The Deserted Village” may be preferable to “London,” it doesn’t compare with Berlin. In mid-June, *Kuensel* acknowledges that the tournament may be a distraction, but also sees it as “a

healthy competition that will inspire many of our youngsters. It is a good geography lesson.” A month later, when France’s ace midfielder is sent off in the final for head butting an Italian player, the newspaper seems less certain: “The World Cup matches showed us that it is important to maintain a good sporting spirit and there is no point fighting with a referee or another player.”

A disciplined game with referees is not what I find on the grass in front of our house when I come home from work each evening. Shirts off, barefoot, hair in bristly wet spikes, the Kandisor kids fight to get a football the shape of a mango between two bent sticks. They ignore teeming rain and barely notice as I splotch past, water dripping from my knees. They are soccer superstars, playing their own World Cup, sixteen a side, kissing their fingers when they score a goal and lifting them to the crowd (bedraggled red-vented bulbuls sitting on the telephone lines). At times, the ball is kicked high by one of the older boys and sails over our fence. It thumps the roof, rolls down and comes to rest in the garden under the fuchsia bush or in the middle of our orchids and irises. A little boy creeps in the gate, squints through the window, and then scurries to retrieve the ball. When they are thirsty, the soccer kids dash to the back of the house where there is an outdoor tap and put the nozzle in their mouths, there being no shortage of water from the taps now. Surprisingly, Mutu doesn’t object to these incursions. Maybe the intruders are too small to be taken seriously. The soccer kids vanish at 7pm when it gets dark and the World Cup comes on. A grocer in the village has a television, and they peek through the windows till they are commanded home.

The Kandisor kids are not the only ones with World Cup fever. It is no longer just dogs and a lone chilip on campus at daybreak. A game of football is invariably in progress on the playing field, the players fully kitted out in matching jerseys, baggy shorts, shin pads and boots with studs. There is always a ref and usually spectators on the sidelines, returning the ball to play when it flies off.

Sometimes, when I have finished my loops, I stand and watch for a while. I am impressed with how well the students organise themselves. The Director of Sports is nowhere to be seen. The game shows no sign of drawing to a close as I head for home. Some mornings there are still players warming up behind the goals, waiting for their turn on the field. Several must show up late for their first class.

*

“Is Mr Namgay in?”

It is a quarter past five on a Saturday evening, and Sonia and I are expected for tea. We haven't been to the Director of Sport's house before, but he has pointed it out to us a couple of times from the playing field (“Up there. You see? With prayer flag”). We have taken the unpaved road to the new student hostels above campus and then a footpath to a rudimentary hut made of rammed mud and bamboo. A sodden prayer flag hangs limply from a pole outside.

“He went to SJ,” replies a teenager, cleaning billycans. This must be his son. My wife looks at me and raises her eyebrows. Mr Namgay told us to come at five.

“He must've been called away at short notice,” I say with a shrug. We know he goes to Samdrup Jongkhar every so often to get sports gear. Last time he disappeared for a week and returned with a dozen soccer balls.

“Well, tell him Sonia and Tony came by.” Sonia gives the boy a bag of carrots she grew in the back garden.

We walk back down the hill, pausing on the way to admire the view. The sun has reappeared after the customary deluge, tinting the white walls of the college buildings orange and making the green roofs shine. Raindrops hang like fine jewellery from conifer needles, and a thousand puddles have become broken mirrors. Sickle-shaped paddy fields to the left, crammed with rice plants, shimmer an unlikely chartreuse colour. The mountain ridges beyond the college swim in a sea of low-lying cloud. I see promontories, coves and islands and imagine beaches,

marinas, a catamaran. In some places, the cloud boils up round the heads of land; Sonia says she sees fat men in a hot tub. The cloud will have thinned by morning to skeins of wool, casting squid-like shadows on the tilted ground beneath.

Back at home, Sonia is busy making dinner when I hear a rap on the front door. I discover a skinny, wild-haired lad outside, standing to attention. He is not one of the Kandisor soccer kids, but something about him is familiar.

“Mr Namgay, he wait for you at his hom.” Judging by the look of fierce concentration on the boy’s face, this line has been rehearsed several times.

Up the hill we go again, past the hostels, but this time along a different path, the boy leading the way. After ten minutes, we are at a short flight of stone steps, lined by dahlias and nasturtiums. I look up and see a face grinning down. If someone were to hand me a passport photo of Mr Namgay as a young man and ask me to guess his job, I would say, “professional wrestler” or “drill sergeant.” His head is a boulder: smooth, shiny, solid and screwed directly to the shoulders, a line of whitening hair prickling the top. He has the high cheeks, broad nose and unpronounced brow ridge of a Mongol, and his eyes are narrow cracks. With cauliflower ears, this head would be intimidating, but the ears are large and affable with leaning helices and plump lobes, and they support a pair of delicate spectacles with large lenses. When Mr Namgay laughs, he has the look of a boisterous schoolboy, the kind who spends his lunch breaks dashing tirelessly up and down the school yard. A deep tan bears testimony to a life spent outdoors under the Himalayan sun. The Director of Sports will be fifty-seven this year, his last at the college after eighteen years of service.

“Konichi-wa.”

It is an odd greeting from a Bhutanese, but Mr Namgay has been to Japan and knows I used to live there. At the top of the steps, we find a simple white bungalow with smart blue and red window frames and potted plants outside, a

home more befitting of a head coach. There is a garden to one side with potatoes and a pomegranate tree, a heap of rocks and timber on the other, and a line of prayer flags in front. Mr Namgay is dressed in track pants, sweatshirt, sports jacket and a cowboy hat. He has been sitting on a plastic chair waiting for us. Prayer beads, rubbed shiny with use, hang from his pocket. We make our apologies, telling him the carrots we brought are with Mr Namgay. He laughs, calls over his shoulder to the house, waits a moment for a reply and then takes us inside.

Suddenly, we are surrounded by framed pictures in a room with a low ceiling and a hardwood floor. Two sideboards stuffed with dal bowls, lidded teacups and soccer trophies stand in the corner, one supporting a small television. A couch with square cushions is against one wall with a worn coffee table in front. Coloured curtains of the sort granting privacy to all rooms in Bhutan hang in front of three doorways. Sonia and I gravitate towards the pictures. They are mostly photographs of people, some in black and white the size of table mats, others in colour as large as windows. They hang just below the ceiling with several made to lean out from the wall so the faces of the people look down on the occupants of the room.

Inside a gold frame, the fourth Druk Gyalpo, dressed in a burning yellow gho (the royal colour) and embroidered boots, stands with his hands behind his back, flanked by his wives. The Crown Prince in a purple gho and with lacquered hair looks out discerningly from another. In a third, Bhutan's four kings are together in the kind of cloudy celestial paradise I associate with Lord Buddha and Guru Rinpoche, two fiery thunder dragons stationed nearby. The largest picture is a reproduction of a painting: Father Mackey in his sixties with a beaming smile on his face and as little hair as Mr Namgay.

“He was my teacher in Trashigang before he come to Sherading,” says our host. “He always keep good eye on me. One time, he say, ‘Namgay, you always

kicking that soccer ball around. Don't forget your studies. If you study hard as you play football, you become intellecshul!" He giggles at the memory and tells us about a book in the library on the Jesuit. "I am in chapter thirteen."

Mr Namgay's wife enters with a tray of nadja, and we sit down. With a full head of dark hair, she appears to be a good eight to ten years younger than her husband. She mumbles something to him as she sets down the tray. There are only two cups, so I assume she is asking him if he also wants tea. Like Dr Tenzin's wife, she speaks no English and doesn't address us. She returns a moment later with a plate of biscuits from India called "Britannia Good Day" and nods silently when we say kadrinche. Rongthong Namgay and Chimi Dedema have a son and daughter, both living at home.

"Is that you, Mr Namgay?" Sonia removes the lid from her tea and points to a blurry photo hanging over the television. A soccer team with officials poses for the camera, six men crouching on the ground, twelve standing behind. In the front row, a young man in vest and shorts with a broad face and receding hairline leans on one knee.

"After high school, I join Royal Bodyguard, and after few year, get good luck and play for national soccer team. Team become first official Bhutan side in 1974 with name 'Druk 11.' Druk mean Thunder Dragon, and we have black shirt with gold dragon on back." Mr Namgay smiles, and I wonder whether he still has the shirt. "His Majesty Fourth King was our goalkeeper." I look carefully at the photo and spot the King standing in the back row, wearing a stripy golf shirt. He looks about nineteen or twenty and utterly remote from the patriarch with wives further along the wall. I understand that soccer took off in Bhutan when the King began playing. "When we train together, we careful not to score too many goal!"

There's a blue FIFA pennant not far from the photo. I read in the newspaper that Bhutan has a FIFA ranking of 190 in the world this year, up from 202nd or

second to bottom last time the World Cup was on. We talk for a while about the World Cup, and Sonia asks Mr Namgay what he thought of fans with national flags painted on their faces. I still have an image in my head of an England fan with red and white hair, English flag bra on his hairy chest, striking a Mr Universe pose. The coach shakes his head. He was more surprised at the way some of the players argued with the referees.

“Here player is more discipline. If the referee say, ‘Offside,’ or he say, ‘Foul,’ the player accept his decision.”

“And do you think our students are getting more skilful,” I ask after a short silence, “now that soccer has taken off, and they can watch international matches on television?”

“Some have good skill, but they don’t train. That is problem.” Mr Namgay looks exasperated. “I tell them ‘work on your pass, work on your ball control,’ but they don’t do.”

I nod. It is always a full-bloodied match I see on the playing field early morning. No drills, no practising corners, no dribbling round cones. “It was the same for the marathon,” I say, remembering my speech in morning assembly. “I told the students they should train properly, but none of them did.”

Chimi brings in momos and suja, this time with three cups. Beside the momos is *ezay*, a relish made of chilli peppers, soft cheese and finely chopped onions and tomatoes. I was afraid to eat *ezay* when I first arrived because it is not cooked, but now I am not so worried. Suja is tea churned with salt and rancid butter and is more like a thin soup than a tea. I find it foul, but it definitely sits better in the stomach than sugary *nadja*. I could imagine being quite glad of it on a windy mountainside above the tree line in winter.

I wonder if I should mention my idea of running across the Kingdom. Mr Namgay might know of some students up to the task and help us coach them. But it

doesn't seem like the right time to bring this up. I know from the college calendar that he is going to have his hands full from Monday when the biggest sports event of the year kicks off, the Monsoon Soccer Tournament.

Before we leave, Mr Namgay sweeps aside a curtain in front of one of the doorways and reveals a shrine room. It is the most ornate we have seen. Tall wooden altars like royal dressers house statuettes of gods and saints, their gold faces staring out from glass-fronted niches. Painted patterns of the kind we first admired in Dr Tenzin's sister's *choesum* in Tangsibi decorate the carved wood around the figures, only these are richer, more intricate. Photographs of lamas stand next to copper butter lamps in front and incense sticks smoulder at the sides. Mr Namgay tells us he spends two hours a day praying in this room.

Back in the main room, I find another image of the coach, this time in a wood frame tucked behind a trophy on the sideboard. Mr Namgay is in the middle of a page from a Japanese newspaper.

"I took athletics team to Fukuoka for World Student Games in '95. On the last day, journalist interview me and write story."

I look closely at the headline. The first character means "blessing" or "happiness" or "good fortune." The next one I don't know, but it contains the radical for "hill" or "small mountain." The last word is "Arigato," thank you. It would seem that Bhutan's emissary was appreciated in the Land of the Rising Sun.

*

Wednesday is a half day of teaching at Sherading, the afternoon being given over to sports. With my jog out of the way before breakfast, I am often in the library after lunch, sifting through books. My latest proposal for the new curriculum is a course in travel literature. Surely students will become worldlier if they read accounts of journeys down the Amazon or into the heart of Africa or through Asia.

They should read *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* or *The Gunpowder Gardens: Travels through India and China in search of Tea*, and perhaps the diaries of travellers who have explored Druk Yul. Well-written travelogues could help them make better sense of the world they encounter on television or via the Internet, which have only been in the country since 1999.

The college library is a poky, dimly lit place on two floors, reminding me of the used bookstore in Fredericton: the same towers of never-shelved books on the floor, the same rough groupings of books on the shelves. I recall a tubby tabby cat padding around there. Here it could be a beat-up hound collapsed among the encyclopaedias. I was astonished when I first visited in February. A hill of books the height of a Canadian snow drift blocked the entrance, some spread-eagled with their page corners trodden down, others coverless and naked. I had come to search for secondary sources for Paper VI. My first thought was that a stack of shelves had toppled over, victim of the earthquake that had shaken our house. Actually, students had returned the books all at once before winter recess. The overwhelmed librarians had tossed the books through a door leading to the stacks, and there they remained till the first week of the new academic year. It is a shame the books are mistreated, but I have come to see that Bhutanese do not regard them as fondly as we do. Traditionally, knowledge is passed on orally and performatively by means of folk tales, songs and masked dances. Acquiring knowledge through reading books came with secular education in the 1960s.

My trips to the library have turned up only two travel books, both accounts by foreigners who have visited Bhutan. Jamie Zeppa was a volunteer in the late eighties with the World University Service of Canada and taught at a junior high school in Pema Gatshel, a small town south of Kandisor, and then at Sherading. Both experiences were clearly demanding. In Pema Gatshel, she began her classes without books, syllabus or chalk for the blackboard and lived in a dingy flat with

no electricity or running water. She contracted giardia and was bitten by a dog. She was at Sherading when the Royal Government was taking measures to clamp down on Nepali immigrants, insisting they prove their citizenship by means of thirty-year-old land-tax receipts and wear the national dress despite being Hindu. Violence erupted in the south and factionalism developed on campus with northerners and southerners dividing into hostile camps. Zeppa endured through building close ties with her students and making the effort to get to know them outside class. Being single and living alone on campus seemed to help this to happen. She ended up falling in love with Bhutan and extending her contract.

In 1996, Joanna Lumley walked or rode a horse from Paro in the west to Bumthang in the centre, following a trail taken by her grandparents sixty-five years earlier. Her book, like Michael Palin's, is full of photographs: twenty-five packhorses negotiating a steep, boulder-strewn path bordered by rhododendron bushes, frost-coated tents at a mountain pass, children crowding around her as she sketches a chorten. She gets me thinking about the route our run could take. Crossing the Kingdom on footpaths or mule tracks would be a hard grind but certainly have its virtues. It would be more direct and picturesque than the highway, and donkeys could carry our tents, sleeping bags, billycans, bags of rice and flasks of suja. We would have to plan a route going via the main towns to collect sponsorship money and get supplies. Timing would be important too. Leave in monsoon season, and the paths could be cataracts.

On my way out of the library one Wednesday, I see some familiar gold lettering on the spine of a big, red book: *Mountain Fortress of the Gods*, the book that Youssef lent us last year. I had treated it as a coffee table book in Fredericton, reading little more than the captions beneath the glossy photos. As torrential rain is making the quadrangle in front of the library resemble an outdoor swimming pool, I linger awhile and read two essays under the heading of "Bhutanese Buddhism" –

one by Mynak Tulku, a Buddhist monk, the other by Christian Schicklgruber, a Viennese ethnographer – and jot down some quotes in my journal.

Many of the mountains and local deities which the people worship today were originally Bön gods who, as a result of Padmasambhava's work, were taken into Buddhism as protector deities.

I hadn't understood why Bhutanese revere so many deities. Buddhism absorbed rather than swept aside traditional animist beliefs. Padmasambhava, known here as Guru Rinpoche, tamed the gods of mountain, lake, forest, river and stream and bade them protect the people who lived nearby. For this service, humans must give regular offerings to the "non-human owners" of the earth and behave ethically. I think back to Dr Tenzin pouring arra out the jeep window at each mountain pass on our way here.

Every year in many of the temples, monasteries and *dzongs* the ritual of casting away *torma* is performed. These *torma* embody all the evil and misfortunes of the community and end the negativities of the previous year.

We saw these ritual dough offerings for the first time on the altar of the college lhakhang in June. Bhutanese staff and students were celebrating *Parinirvana*, the time when Sakyamuni dies and achieves absolute enlightenment. After the event, the students carried out the *torma* and put them on the front wall. The evil and misfortunes were carried off by crows and gobbled up by dogs. White doves living under the yellow pagoda roofs swooped down and pecked up the final crumbs.

Those watching the sacred dances receive blessings through their enjoyment of the performances, while those dancing are making offerings to the Buddhas.

This is what we witnessed at tsechu: laughter, fun, enjoyment. While the festival is clearly carnivalesque in atmosphere, I wonder if the Bhutanese have the same attitude towards the other, merit-earning duties and rituals they perform. How appealing is the idea of gaining merit *through* enjoying a religious ceremony.

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It is one thirty in the afternoon on the last Saturday of August, and the rain clouds have parted. Sonia and I are sitting on plastic chairs, sipping tea beside the college playing field. Now that the sun is out, the air is thick and tropical, and we have begun to sweat. Flies sail in and out of the canteen behind us and settle on the dogs mooching about our legs. I would like to be out of my creased slacks and collared shirt and in shorts and a T-shirt, but these would not suit the occasion. I look around. There must be three hundred people here today: thirty lecturers with us; the vice-principal, deans and senior lecturers in a wooden pavilion overlooking the centreline; shopkeepers, mothers with babies, farmers and monks on the far side of the pitch; and students behind the goals and along the sidelines. More students hang out of the windows of the nearest hostel, and I see a banner draped down the front of the building saying, “Go Alligators!”

The sound of an engine straining up a steep incline makes everyone go quiet and look towards the corner of the playing field. A Tata truck pulls up at the canteen, brimming with soccer players, school kids and students in fancy dress. There is a banner strung down the side, saying “D.H. III Day Scholars.” They disembark and begin a march round the stadium, a file of fifteen players each holding the hand of a boy, followed by reporters for “Sports News” with cardboard cameras, FBI agents in black suits and shades, doctors with stethoscopes, soldiers wearing khaki uniforms and traditional masked dancers with drums. The players have painted their faces red and white to match their strip, and the boys have empty soda bottles under their arms. A few minutes later, the “Campus II

Alligators” arrive the same way, their colours being blue and white, their banner decorated with a dragon-like alligator.

“Where do they *get* those costumes?” Sonia asks no one in particular.

The final of the Monsoon Soccer Tournament begins half an hour later when Mr Namgay calls on the deputy principal, Mr Lhato Jamba, to follow him onto the pitch to shake the players’ hands and kick the ball (Dr Tenzin is away on business). The ball rises about four metres in the air and lands with a dull splat in a pool of mud, where it sticks fast. The professors and deans in the pavilion clap politely. The Director of Sports retrieves the ball and takes it to the centre spot. Two referees dressed in green join him, and there is some vigorous nodding of heads. The kids shoot off to the sidelines and gather up their plastic bottles. Once Mr Lhato and Mr Namgay are safely out of the way, the referees nod to each other and to the linesmen, a whistle is blown, and all hell breaks loose.

During the next ninety minutes, the red and white strip of the Scholars and the blue and white of the Alligators gradually turn brown. The players charge up and down the pitch stamping in puddles, skidding on mud-slicks and screaming. Muddy water flicks up from their heels and flies from the ball every time it is kicked. It is fortunate that our seats are not on the same level as the playing field. Despite hard effort, neither team is able to make much headway, as the ball never travels very far unless kicked in the air and few players can manage this. Much of the play is laborious dribbles, intercepted passes and impressive sliding tackles that result in players going down like skittles. At one point, a dog streaks onto the pitch barking with excitement, pursued by a linesman trying to swat it with his flag. The spectators roar with laughter and yell encouragement to the teams, and the soccer kids beat their soda bottles together and holler, “We love Campus II!” or “Scholaaas! Scholaaas!” The first half of the match ends with no goals scored.

Given what I witnessed on marathon day and sports day, I expect the students to flag in the second half, for some of them to drift off into the crowd for a chat, a cup of tea even, but neither of these things happens. Instead, a war of attrition sets in, one side inching the ball forward through the gluey mud, trying desperately to make good passes and gain ground, but soon losing possession and falling back panting, while the other side tries to do the same. The action begins to clog in the centre of the pitch, the wingers on both sides, fed up with never getting the ball, migrating inwards. I wonder if tempers might flare, as the players get in each other's way and shoulders and elbows collide with heads and chests, but the game remains civil, despite the referees stopping it regularly for fouls.

Increasingly, the Scholars find themselves on the defensive and their goalmouth becomes a grassless quagmire. In the last quarter, the Alligators score, and there is jubilation from their corner of the field. With five minutes to go, they score again.

A mud-freckled ref blows his whistle four times to signal the end of the match, and the crowd invades the pitch. The players shake each others' hands and stagger off, heads bowed, hands on their hips, while supporters clap them on the back and hoist the goal scorers in the air. The children reach for the hands of their heroes and cling to them. The players gulp down drinks and wipe the mud off their faces and then line up in front of the pavilion. Mr Lhato descends and with a broad smile gives a speech into a microphone on the importance of sports, on how they foster "good attitude" and "team spirit." After applause, Mr Namgay calls each player forward to receive a certificate. The teams also get trophies, the winner's resembling a Saxon shield, made of wood and decorated with a silver Buddha and silver Thunder Dragons. A khaddar is knotted around the base. The soccer kids are recognised as "ball boys" and awarded cookies. The afternoon ends with photographs, team members and fans taking it in turns to hold up the trophies. Father Mackey would have been proud, I think.

I look over at the mountains before going home. One or two distant peaks are visible, swirls of cloud like scarves slung loosely around their necks. I think of the road that winds through them. With training, a few of our students probably have what it takes to run across the country. What would motivate them to do so, to put in the kind of determined effort displayed this afternoon day after day, remains to be found. Maybe Sonia and I should have them dribble a football to Thimphu.

PART II

Tara-thon

Chapter 3

The Longest Climb

1. Marry the right person. This one person will determine 90% of your happiness or misery
2. Work on something you enjoy and that's worthy of your time and talent
5. Be forgiving of yourself and others
13. Understand that happiness is not based on possessions, power or prestige, but on relationships with people you love and respect
17. Be decisive even if it means you'll sometimes be wrong
19. Be bold and courageous. When you look back on your life, you'll regret the things you didn't do more than the things you did

From "21 Suggestions for Success"
Principal's office, Mongar High School

"What a bloody tip!" I almost say. But, looking at the six bleary-eyed runners clutching their belongings in the doorway, I bite my lip. "What a ... disappointment."

The dormitory looks like it has taken a direct hit from heavy artillery. The windows are all shattered or cracked, the walls gouged and streaked with dirt and most of the bunks reduced to steel frames. A thick layer of screwed-up study notes, masonry rubble, wood splinters and noodle wrappers coats the floor. Judging by the shards of glass on the windowsills and on the few bunks with mattresses, the carnage appears to have happened recently. I imagine a final act of joyful destruction by kids gone berserk before vacation. I walk around, my Fastwitches crunching on broken glass, and find three serviceable bunks. Lifting the mattresses, though, I see that the wooden slats are either missing or snapped. Could there at least be a broom in this abandoned school? Yeshey puts down his bag and starts picking up litter.

“Don’t worry, Sar. We are used,” Wangchuck Lhamo says and does the same. Like the others in the team, he knows the rigours of a rural life. Raised in Nabji, a village in Trongsa dzongkhag with no electricity, no road and no school, he had to walk over a mountain to the next valley for an education. It was too far for him to walk back at night, so he spent weekdays boarding in a “temporary hut,” built beside the school, surviving on the rice and vegetables he carried from home.

“Well, at least, you can go and clean up. There are plenty of showers outside.”
“None of them are working, Sar.”

“What? You’re kidding. But the school was supposed to ...”

I go out and check. Eight taps poke through a crumbly wall next to the dorm. Only three have handles. I spin two of them, not bothering to stand out of the way. I can see from the dead leaves and dry mud around my feet that they have not been used in some time. Next to the showers are toilet stalls. I already know what I am going to find there. The stench is appalling. Flies sail in and out, settling on the door jams and glinting in the last of the afternoon sun.

“Where’s Mr Namgay?”

I look across the soccer pitch and spot him standing by the bus on the other side. I march over, scowling at the pain in my knees, which has returned after today’s long downhill. *Why didn’t he phone ahead and make sure the school was ready to receive us? Didn’t he call the District Education Officer and have him inform the school principal that we were coming? Where is the school principal? Surely someone from the school should be here.* I think of our stay at Yadi Middle Secondary two nights ago. A young economics teacher called Kinga had welcomed us at the gate, showed us round and invited us to join him for dinner at the school. We spent the night on bunk-beds set up in two swept classrooms.

“Mr Namgay, have you seen the hostel? It’s a disgrace. I wouldn’t ask my dog to stay there!” The word “dog” comes out like a bark.

The Director of Sports looks at me, taken aback.

“The toilets too. Foul! Covered in shit. Flies everywhere. And none of the showers work.”

No response.

I turn and watch Ugyen Leki toss bags and billycans off the roof of the bus to Ugyen Pema and Phuntsho, waiting with outstretched arms below. Sonia made out a chore rota for the team in Trashigang. Two students get up early to help the cook peel and slice potatoes for lunch, another two help him make dinner. Two pitch tents after the day’s run, two collect firewood. When we are staying at a school, one pair must organise a writing or drawing activity with the pupils when we arrive, another lead the warm-up and stretching routine before we depart. She has mixed up the pairs so that everyone gets to work with everyone else. Often I see three or four students doing the assigned chore together. The students unloading the bus were chatting loudly when I arrived. Now they are silent. I turn back to Mr Namgay.

“You’re the event coordinator.” The words come out louder than I intended. Ugyen stops what he is doing and looks over. I soften my voice. “We need to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

Mr Namgay excuses himself, saying he has letters of reference to write for some final-year students at Sherading. I sigh and wonder if I should have the team pitch camp for the night on the playing field. I go in search of Sonia. She must be scouring the school for a working tap, so she can bathe her foot. She emerges from one of the buildings with a man in a grey gho.

“This is the vice-principal, Tony.”

He installs us in the principal’s office for the night. Mr Namgay gets a classroom. The team must make do in the hostel. We explain about the water, and he switches it on before leaving. Sonia and I take a wash in the dark and then, exhausted, unroll our sleeping mats on the floor of the office. I have an unsettled

night. There is a scratching sound in the walls and then scampering across the floor. Shrews would scoot out from under the fridge from time to time at our home in Kandisor, but this creature is bigger. Then I spot him under the principal's desk, a hairy silhouette with a long pale tail, caught in a shaft of moonlight stretching through the window. Sonia does not stir.

The next day, I look for Mr Namgay, knowing I owe him an apology. I find him sitting alone in the staffroom, using a computer. He looks at me with sadness in his eyes as I try to explain why I was upset.

"Intellectshul should not raise voice," he says. We agree that lack of communication is also part of the problem. "Things must be clear-cut," he insists, chopping the desk with the edge of his hand.

*

"I've failed. All that training and preparation ... wasted! Mongar isn't even a, a fifth of the way to Thimphu." My wife bursts into tears.

Her foot looks the same as it did the day before yesterday, puffed up and discoloured, the anklebone all but swallowed. She is unable to get her running shoe on, even with the laces fully loosened. The old injury she got playing volleyball in her twenties has flared up again. She bathed her foot repeatedly yesterday, thinking that this would return it to its normal shape. She sprawls on the floor of the vice-principal's office, where we spent our second night, arms folded, one shoe on, one shoe off, a look of defeat on her face. I stop rolling up my sleeping mat and go and give her a hug.

"You need to go to the hospital, honey."

"There's no time. We have to leave now."

I look at my watch. 9:05am. Flag off at 9:30, Mr Namgay told the DEO. I look out the window and see the two men chatting. Sonam Rigzin and Sonam Tshering are strapping the last of the bags to the roof of the bus. The girls who served us *desi*

when we arrived have formed a semicircle around Yeshey and Norbu for the warm-up. Our runners look in good shape although Tiger is limping again. I have no idea what they did round town yesterday, but imagine they took advantage of the restaurants. Sonia said she saw Yeshey with a cream-filled pastry in his hand, looking happy. They also clearly enjoy poking their heads in shops for donations and handed over 14,495 ngultrum to me in the evening, 10,000 of which came from the dzong.

“You go ahead,” Sonia says, tight-lipped. “I’ll get Kezang to give me a ride to the hospital. Don’t worry. I’ll catch you up.”

She manages to wrestle the shoe on, but not without crying out in pain. She won’t be able to run twenty-three kilometres to our next stop. She will have to take another day off and ride in the bus. I nod and finish packing up our gear, hating to leave her like this, but she must go and see a doctor. It will be hard to find one once we leave – the next town with a hospital is 266 kilometres away.

It feels like everyone is staring at me when I go outside. It is 9:35. I tell Mr Namgay that we are ready to start. Madam will follow later. I tell Kezang to wait and see if she needs a lift. Like the vice-principal of Trashigang Middle Secondary, the DEO of Mongar dzongkhag has no idea how to signal the start. Mr Namgay offers him no tips. He finally decides on a kind of silent, sweeping-brush gesture using both arms, and I chuckle despite feeling that things are beginning to go wrong.

There is no spring in my step as I run down the hill with the others. We are no longer the “Long Distance Dozen” ... or baker’s dozen. God knows what happened to the dog. I jog half-heartedly for a kilometre, letting the others zoom ahead. Pine trees shade the road on both sides. I stop, look over my shoulder, start again. Stop. I coast for another kilometre before turning round.

“Have you seen a chilip with a bad foot?” I do an impersonation, staggering forward and back, dragging my foot behind me. The man leaning against the wall of

the hospital laughs. His eyes peer at me from hollow sockets. His gho hangs off his stooped shoulders. I am a fool. He is a patient. *Why am I asking him? Why didn't I learn Dzongkha?* Tashi the Kandisor greengrocer's medical words have deserted me. I dash between wards, poking my head in each, calling Sonia's name. Pregnant woman laid out on a bed, boy with withered leg trying out a crutch, woman putting fresh sheets on a bed. *Should I be doing this?*

"Tony?"

I find her in a corridor, weaving her way around patients and their families.

"Sonia! You okay? What did the doctor say?"

"Nothing broken. My ankle needs a lot of rest though, and I have to keep it elevated. He gave me Ibuprofen for the pain and some extra bandages." Her foot is now bandaged and sits more easily in the shoe. "And, look, massage cream for the team! He gave me three jars of it."

We walk out of the hospital and back to the highway. The bus is waiting.

"So, what do you want to do?"

Sitting by the rear wheel is a familiar barrel of brown fluff.

"Yana, Yana, sho!" calls Sonia. I see her smile for the first time. The dog trots over, sore front paw apparently better. He is wearing a red shirt with "Please donate" painted on it.

"Let's run," Sonia says.

Chir pines, tangerine orchards, cornfields, *tengma* stalls. As we descend, the temperature climbs. Our run is more like a shuffle, Sonia sticking to the soft grass at the side of the road wherever possible. Below the road, women roast corn in shallow pans over log fires. Later, they will pound it with pestles to make a tough version of Cornflakes, which they sell in bags at the side of the road. I tried eating *tengma* for breakfast one morning in Kandisor. After three mouthfuls, I realised that milk was

not going to make it any softer, and I would be late for class if I stayed to finish my bowl.

At 6k, we run into the girls from the school, walking back to town. They cheer and yell, “Best of luck!” causing Yana to gallop over expecting a treat. The dog is a handy distraction for Sonia today. He frequently dives into the bush, following scent trails. Sonia calls to him when he disappears. We go round two or three bends and then hear his nails clicking on the tarmac behind us. Where have you been this time? she asks him. I wonder what kind of life he had in Trashigang. Was he a stray like those at Sherading College, fighting savagely for scraps chucked out by restaurants? Somehow, I doubt it. He is too amiable and lacks scars.

Our progress is slow, but the kilometres keep slipping by. The Kuri Chhu draws nearer and nearer, a blue arm scratched with foam and freckled with stones. At 16k, we overtake Tiger, who complains of cramp and seems to be running on wooden legs. He grimaces every third stride, but laughs when I ask him if he needs a piggy-back. At 20k, we hear the shushing sound of water over rocks. A glittering white chorten with a gold pinnacle comes into view and then an iron bridge and two shops: Kurizampa, the lowest point on our journey. As we round the final bends, I see some of our hares, sprawled out beside the river, sunbathing. They have clearly been waiting for some time. I look at my watch. It has taken us practically three hours to run the twenty-six kilometres.

Sonia collapses next to the chorten and removes her shoe and sock. Her ankle has blown up again, but she does not seem in pain. A quarter of an hour later, Tiger limps in and leans on the bridge, panting. Fetching my wallet from the bus, I go into one of the shops and buy bottles of Pepsi or Sprite for everyone. I have an ugly feeling in my stomach. On the far side of the river, we must run eighty-four kilometres uphill to reach the next pass, a climb of almost ten thousand feet. Some of our runners will not make it. What should we do with the drop-outs? Send them

home? Let them ride in the bus? Sonia and I have been most insistent that this is a run across the Kingdom and not a walk. And what of my wife?

But the longest climb of our journey will not begin today. We board the bus and bump along a dirt road tracking the river. From the window, I spot an eagle with broad shoulders and a white head eying us from its perch on a tall, grey rock standing up from the river.

*

“And what is that?”

The tower at the side of the river reminds me of an Escher sketch: a precarious staircase, making right-angled turns as it rises and appearing to defy gravity. But the steps are actually tanks of water, each spilling its contents into the one below. Together, they form a long, gurgling chute. Water cascades down, slopping out in places and spattering the rocks below.

“Fish ladder, Sar,” Phuntsho says.

I look for fish in the tanks nearest us, but see none. Climbing the ladder would be quite a feat for them. The height of the dam, we now know, is fifty-five metres. The fish would need to jump about a hundred times from one tank to the next and the next, and I find it hard to imagine migrating carp or trout managing it. Nevertheless, I am pleased with the idea. The ladder is further evidence of sustainable development.

The principal of Gyelpozhing High School, where we will stay tonight, has arranged a permit for us to visit the Kurichu Hydroelectric Plant. I am glad of the distraction. We have already learned a lot from the soldier showing us round. Financed entirely by grants and loans from India, the project is the first of its kind in eastern Bhutan, and, apparently, has already supplied power to 7,400 households in eight dzongkhags since 2005, the year it was commissioned (I guess if we had arrived in Kandisor that year, we might have been cooking by kerosene lantern or

candlelight). Seventy percent of the sixty megawatts generated is sold to India. The plant employs “run-of-the-river” technology, meaning that it uses the natural flow of the river to spin its turbines, rather than water gathered in a head pond. I think of the destructive alternative and recall travelling by ferry along the Yangtse in 1997, knowing that the three beautiful gorges were condemned.

It is rather odd suddenly being surrounded by spinning turbines the diameter of grain storage silos, water pipes large enough to stand in, banks of monitors with flickering needles and an electrical grid resembling a monstrous spider’s web. This machinery does not belong to the Bhutan we have got to know. And yet the mechanism, in essence, does not seem complex. Water flows into the barrage and gathers speed as it tumbles down a concrete ramp. At the bottom, it drives four turbines, resembling many-bladed propellers. Shafts rising from the turbines connect to generators that produce the electricity. The electricity goes to a grid beside the dam, and then transmission lines carry it over the mountains. A village in Luentse, Trashiyangtse or Pemagatshel lights up. Then I remember that getting electricity to a village buried in the Himalayas is, in fact, no easy task.

One afternoon last winter, before beginning the climb to Tsebar in the southern dzongkhag of Pemagatshel, Sonia and I stopped at a river to refill our canteens and buy mandarins from a farmer. It was another sweltering day, and the village was a two- or three-hour trek from the river up a steep dirt path. We were about to go on our way when we heard yells from behind. Two files of people, about forty in all, were coming along the path carrying a metal box the size of a refrigerator lashed between two eight-metre bamboo poles. The poles were bending under the weight like archery bows. We put our packs back down and let them pass. Tough young men with ghos rolled down to their waists and sweat coursing down their necks were taking most of the weight, but there were women

too, middle-aged and matronly, one older with narrow shoulders and whitening hair. At the end of the train were three students from Sherading.

“Hello, Sar!”

“Where are you going?”

“To their village, Sar,” one replies with a chuckle. “Dungmin.”

“Is that on the way to Tsebar?”

“No, Sar, on other side. Over the pass. Six or seven hour from here, I think.”

“But longer surely if you’re carrying this?”

I studied the electrical transformer. Not only was it clearly heavy, but it was awkward. Three rocket-like bushings stuck out the top, two at 60-degree angles, and there was a cylindrical tank (for oil perhaps?) on a pair of steel arms, also rising from the top, but at a different angle. A sharp-cornered, rectangular control box projected about fifteen centimetres from one side. It had a door with a handle – good, no doubt, at snagging gho pouches and passing branches. Metal brackets that would be used to anchor the transformer at its destination protruded from the underside, and a valve or connecting rod of some sort pointed out one end.

“It will take ... maybe a week, Sar.”

“Hell. How much does it weigh?”

“Six hundred, twenty kilogram, Sar.”

Our packs weighed no more than fifteen or sixteen. Surely there was a better way? But I knew that Bhutan had no helicopters, and donkeys, tethered to the poles, would probably not work either. The path was too narrow and twisty. Some kind of cart perhaps? I looked ahead. Soon, the path would take a sharp right turn down to the river and disintegrate into boulders and fallen branches. On the far bank, it resumed, but there it was narrower and inclining at a slant. I looked again at the villagers. Their feet were sliding in and out of their flip-flops as they

staggered forward. One man seemed to be doing most of the shouting. The rest heaved and groaned and laughed.

*

Our run from Kurizampa to Yongkola was tough that I felt, one thing its steep slope and hot day. It was really tough but still then I try to win the game. As I recall what Tee said to me... "Wangchuck, whenever you get tired and don't feel like running you think about those student who are not able to study and stay in village without education, be motivate yourself by thinking that you are doing good to them and remember the caption that was written on our shirt "Run For the kids". This was what Tee told to me on the way and I keep running think that I am doing noble job.

Blog Entry (07 January, 2008)
Wangchuck Lhamo

It is Day 9 of our marathon for Târâyana, and our itinerary says we must run to Yongkola, 23 kilometres from the river. The bus disgorges us at the end of the bridge. It is another cloudless day. I look around at the team and try to gauge the mood. Last week, they were kicking soccer balls about to warm up before starting the day's run. None are doing that today. Sonia gathers them round for a pep-talk. I look down at her foot, wound in bandage. She has told me not to hang back. She will run up this mountain at her own speed. I cannot say I feel especially lively myself. I did not get a good night's sleep. My body is baffled by the daily changes in temperature. In Mongar, I needed my sleeping bag. Last night, I woke sweating and had to shrug it off. I look at my watch. It is only 9:30, but it must already be thirty degrees. I stick my head through the rusted iron struts of the bridge and look for the eagle, but it has gone from its lookout. Minutes tick by. It is 10 o'clock. We should really get going, but Mr Namgay is with a reporter from BBS. 10:30. Finally, the bus roars to life, zooms over the bridge and attacks a ferocious incline on the far side. We slowly give pursuit.

But after half an hour, we have stopped again. Wangchuck, Yeshey and Ugyen Leki have ducked into two shops at a bend in the road called Lingmithang to ask for donations. I squat in the shade of some dusty eucalypts and watch two monks giving blessings to passers-by. On a table between them is a curious object. It resembles a chorten but is only two feet high and much dressier in appearance with doors that open out at the bottom. I wander over and crouch in front of it. Behind each door is a miniature Buddha, meticulously painted, sitting in a niche the size of a matchbox. Daisy-chains of prayer flags hang in front of the doors.

“Tashi gomang,” Mr Namgay says. “Portable chorten for sick person or good fortune.”

He goes to the bus and asks Kezang to hand him his wallet. He calls the team over and, walking down the line, presses a fifty-ngultrum note to each of our foreheads. He then takes the money over to the monks, puts it to his own head and places it in one of the doors of the shrine. One of the monks rings a bell. The ritual is no less bizarre to me than the ceremony that launched us on this expedition nine days ago, and yet I hardly bat an eyelid. Nothing important happens here without propitiating the gods. Funny how I have not only come to accept this as reasonable, but also believe it has worth. I have never been superstitious – never worried about black cats or broken mirrors or ladders – but, here in Bhutan, I would not walk round a chorten the wrong way or pass by a cairn on a hiking trail without leaving an offering for the god of the road. Tashi delek. That the god of the mountain send not boulders crashing down on our heads. Tashi delek. That our modest efforts to raise money for education be smiled upon. I look at the rearing land ahead. We are in the company of giants. It is fitting that we salute them.

“Stop at six kilometre, again after six, Mr Tony?”

“Yes. Yes, please, Mr Namgay.” It is the first time he has checked with me about this.

“You know what we call this?” The Director of Sports seems to be in a good mood today. “Better communication.”

I nod and smile, grateful to him for clearing the air between us.

“Okay, let’s get on with it!” I yell, turning to the students and clapping my hands. Some of them, I notice, are back on the bus, swigging water and mopping their brows. We need to be out of this hot valley before midday. I will set an example. We made it up to Kori-La. We had a rest day in Mongar. Our legs are fresh after dunking them in the Kuri Chhu yesterday. We have had another blessing. The heat will diminish as we gain height and re-enter the forest. Picking up my knees and pumping my arms, I lead the way for the first time since leaving Kandisor. Time to conquer Thrumshing-La!

From Lingmithang, the lateral road rises gently at first. Fruit orchards pass on my right, many of the trees dripping with mandarins. I see darkening avocados and vines sagging with bubble-skinned bitter gourds. A foul taste collects in my mouth as I look at the gourds and recall almost gagging on them in Kandisor. High on my left, I spot an isolated stone turret, squatting alone on a wooded promontory. It is split down the middle and resembles an old man’s molar. It could be the remains of a Norman castle if this were England. I will have to ask Mr Namgay about it. I round a sharp bend and suddenly come face to face with a man standing motionlessly between two papaya trees. I wave. He does not respond. I try to make out his expression, but he is in the shade. Farmers often stop what they are doing when they see us. They look at us with incredulity or amusement. I wonder what this particular man is thinking. *Why are you in such a hurry? Is your house on fire? Have your cows run off?* Three kilometres done, now four. *Did your tour bus leave without you?*

My pace slackens involuntarily, and I feel light-headed. I should probably ease off at the bends where the road is at its steepest. I have been doing just the

opposite to put them behind me. Five kilometres, six. I see Ngawang standing by the bus with a bottle of water and a cup. I have said about three words to this man over the nine days. Mr Namgay recruited him from the college mess the day before we set out. He has already proved invaluable. He is up before any of us in the morning and seems undaunted cooking meals for twelve ravenous runners three times a day over open fires at the side of the road. From the way he handles burning logs, I would say he comes equipped with hands made of asbestos.

“Kadrinche, Ngawang.” I stay only for as long as it takes to drain the cup.

Unsheltered road continues for another four kilometres. My chest is heaving now, my vision blurry. I am fourteen clicks from the river, but the heat feels just as intense. I shake my head. What is wrong? My legs feel like they have lead weights attached. Someone calls my name. I look back. I rub my face on my shirt and think of the training run I did from Trashigang to Kandisor in monsoon season, plodding laboriously uphill for two hours through thrashing thundershowers, water streaming down the road and washing round my ankles. The dead weight then was my saturated shoes. I look up at the sky, hoping for a darkened cloud – any cloud – but there is just the sun, desert-like in its unfiltered brilliance. How can the weather be so like summer? My pace deadens to a crawl. Where are the chilling winds of winter? My head is swimming. A Bhutanese superstition pops into my head: “If you have difficulty walking uphill, carry an arrow. If you have trouble walking downhill, then carry a ball.” Today I need the arrow. Paddy field, abandoned tengma stall, cow – tail flicking from side to side, flies buzzing round its nose. *Flies everywhere. And none of the showers work.* I look over my shoulder. Where are the Ugyens? Where is Yana? The Tara-thon bus suddenly steams past, but I do not recognise it until it is almost round the next bend. I wave half-heartedly. *We need to make sure this doesn't happen again.* Slower, gaze fixed to the ground.

Hoof print in cake of dry mud, tire-flattened mandarin skin, truck skid marks.
Giddy. I slap my cheek. Black dots hover in front of my eyes.

I look up, swallow hard and take several gulps of air. I should not be running with my head down. *Turn it into a game.* I trundle onward, blinking furiously, willing the black dots to disperse. *Paint the roadside ahead with waypoints.* That stumpy concrete pillar marking the edge *get there*, now the flower with velvety leaves and small pink blooms *make it*, now the pile of fire-blackened stones, now those hairy tufts of lemon grass. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glint of metal a hundred metres over my head, then a searing flash of sunlight off glass. If I dash up the paddy staircase, I will be there in five minutes, but the road swings me away in the opposite direction. *Where in the world you go in opposite directions to reach saame place?*

This time, there is no one beside the bus. I collapse in its shadow and squeeze my eyes shut. My head is pounding. *Idiot.* When I open my eyes, I am looking at a boy with a cleft lip and a horribly disfigured stomach. He is smiling and offering me a mandarin. Surely not. I reach out for the fruit, claw off the peel, ram half of it in my mouth and rest my head against the side of the bus. The mandarin is so ripe, the segments explode against the back of my throat as I chew, making me cough and splutter. I lean forward as juice runs down my chin. The boy looks at me closely. Embarrassed, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and snort helplessly. He smiles again and digs four more of the fruit out of his gho and drops them in my lap. His stomach shrinks.

“Kadrinche,” I croak and hold up my hand, indicating that he should wait.

“Kezang?”

“Sar?”

“Give this boy some money from the kitty, would you?”

I clamber onto the bus, tear the cap off a water bottle, take a shot of glucose, eat three of the mandarins in rapid succession, rub my face with a flannel and then slump in a seat and stare out the window. The little boy has vanished. My eyelids droop, and my body slowly tilts forward till my forehead is resting on the seatback in front. There is a tingling sensation in my hands. I close my eyes. *Dog, dusty, furless, watery-eyed, licking the boils on her back with a black tongue. "Give me the gun and I am killing aaall the stray dogs."* I jerk my eyes open, lick my lips, try to focus on my hand, my watch, the checkered pattern on the seatback. Still the dots. *Chorten, dark hole in the side, a howling wind, black clouds chasing across the sky, torn prayers on parchment unravelling off a cracked wooden spool. Should you circumambulate a desecrated chorten?* I breathe out, and let my body sink back in my seat. The pounding in my head softens. When I open my eyes again, I see a cowboy hat. Kezang is dozing in the driver's seat, arms folded, hat tipped forward over his face. He snores gently. I look around to see if anyone else is flaked out on a seat. Where is Mr Namgay?

Tee comes up the stairs and goes to his seat at the front. His face is scarlet, his cap pulled down over his eyes, his Tara-thon T-shirt stuck to his stomach. I hear his basketball pumps flapping. He snatches up a water bottle.

"Is Sar okay?" Concern on his face. I look at his feet. One toecap is soon to detach itself from the shoe. Then what?

"I'm fine, Tee. Just taking a rest. How about you?"

"Fine, Sar." He takes another swig from the bottle, scoops up a handful of Britannia Good Day biscuits and heads out, look of singular determination on his face.

I look again at my watch. I can read the display now: 2:34pm. The black dots have gone. God, how long have I been sitting here? I stare at the display. Timex "Ironman." 2:35pm, 3 seconds, 4 seconds, 5. "Start/Split" button,

“Stop/Reset” button. 2:36pm. I take the watch off and sling it in my bag. I take off my Fastwitch racing lights too and put on my heavier running shoes.

*

“Long, long ago, there was beautiful lady who lived in Thriatangbi village. She engaged to a man who only came to her at night time. He left her before sun come up each day. Soon she became pregnant and want to find out where her lover go. So, you know what she do? Mr Tony, you know?”

We are sitting on a low wall outside the only shop in Yongkola, plastic plates of curry on our knees, cups of dal at our elbows. I look around the circle of faces in the ebbing light. Everyone looks beat. Heads hang, spoons lift slowly. Even Tiger with his “paining knee” made it. I am flabbergasted. As far as I know, no one flagged down the Tara-bus for a ride, no one thumbed a lift off a passing truck and no one walked. These students must indeed be reincarnated mountain goats ... or beneficiaries, perhaps, of Father Mackey’s visionary emphasis on sport in education. I was impressed to see how the early finishers remained standing and cheered home the tail-end Charlies. Tonight, our runners will get a well-earned roof over their heads and comfortable beds. Mr Namgay has arranged for them to stay in a bunkhouse across the road. I look up at Mr Namgay and shake my head. I had asked him about the ruined castle I saw on the way up.

“She tied a string to his waist. When morning come, she follow that string through forest and it lead to ruined dzong. After entering, she found string was tied to biiiig snake. He was owner that dzong, a bad spirit. We cannot go that dzong. No courage because bad spirit live there. Only big lama can go.”

I had under-estimated the Bhutanese. When their motivations are strong, they too are strong. I think of the dancers at tsechu, leaping and spinning for two hours at a stretch, weighty wooden masks strapped to their heads. I think of the

villagers carrying electricity up the mountain. Maybe Mr Namgay's morning pujas are rallying the spirits to our cause.

Chapter 4

Death of a Runner

As I hand over my responsibilities to my son, I repose my full faith and belief in the people of Bhutan to look after the future of our nation, for it is the Bhutanese people who are the true custodians of our tradition and culture and the ultimate guardians of the security, sovereignty and continued wellbeing of our country.

May the blessings of Ugyen Guru Rimpoche, the father of our nation Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and our Guardian Deities continue to guide the destiny of our country and protect the future of the glorious Palden Drukpa!

Royal *kasho* to parliament, 9 December, 2006
His Majesty, the fourth Druk Gyalpo

Wind snatches powdered snow from the banks at the side of the road and flings it in my eyes. I blink and wipe away the fresh tears with the back of my glove, which has become rigid with ice. Drops still freeze into pellets in my eyelashes, and I am finding it increasingly hard to see. I will need to stop soon, remove my outer glove and pinch together my eyelashes, so the warmth of my fingers thaws the pellets and I can pull them out. The inside of my nose prickles as the snot freezes. It is minus twenty-five today – minus thirty-four in the wind, the weatherman said. Just as well I am wearing my ski mask for this run, the flaps shielding my nose and ears, a grille covering my mouth. With my toque pulled down to my eyebrows, I am showing little of my face to the world. After last night's blizzard, the going is tough. Snow swallows my legs at times to the knee, and there are fallen branches to dodge. Maple trees lining the road sway and creak. I turn a corner and head for home, lifting my knees high and keeping my breathing regular. I feel invigorated, strong, confident. The wind shakes the branches of a Balsam fir to my right, loosening its load. A lone maple leaf cartwheels across the road in front of me.

A sound like laughter from the bamboo thicket to my left jolts me back to the present. Canadian winter effloresces into Bhutanese. At an altitude of 2,000 metres on the road to Namling, our next destination, winter means lush deciduous jungle with ferns like fish bones cascading to the road, dripping lianas and tall sprays of bamboo. The day is cloudless once again, but with altitude and shade come cooler temperatures. I realise as I run that one of my assumptions concerning plant and tree life here is at fault: the richest growth is often not to be found in the valleys next to the rivers, but half way up the mountains where the air is moister, where it is easier to breathe. More cackles from the bush. Sonia and I know this character from our hikes. Cocky and clamorous as our blue jay and of similar size, the white-crested laughingthrush flies in gangs of eight or ten and mocks trekkers when they are struggling.

I am running with Wangchuck Lhamo today, a first-year science student with square glasses and a goatee, who has painted “Tara-thon” on the side of his baseball cap. Team Tara-thon had a rough night, he tells me. They had to share their bunkhouse with a mad lady. I noticed her before I went to bed: shoeless and dressed in rags, a scarecrow of a woman in her sixties with long, straggly hair and cloth braids on her wrists. She was hooting and flinging her arms about wildly – happy, it would seem, at the prospect of spending a night with ten young athletes. Ugyen Pema told me over breakfast that she had kept them awake until the early hours with her shrieking (“Like demon, Sar”). Maybe this was the beautiful lady that Mr Namgay told us about, shocked out of her wits for all eternity when she discovered that her lover was a snake. I wonder if she is a bad omen. Dark clouds have gathered around the mountaintops ahead.

I return to autopilot, glad, after yesterday’s exertions, to shuffle along and dream. Thankfully, so far today, the road is not as steep or as snarled with switchbacks: severe gradients prohibit day-dreaming. Thoughts drift into my mind,

lodge there for a while, and then drift out to be replaced by others. I relive our late departure this morning, Mr Namgay's starting clap and the chorus of groans in response, the lads creaking forth robotically, the uncomprehending shopkeeper sitting on the wall, the demon-lady at the side of the road twisting her hair into knots. My mind adds Prince Jigyel to the scene, standing with arms folded, hair neatly combed, shaking his head. What a fool I was yesterday, charging up the mountain like a student at Sherading doing his first Annual Spring Marathon. I failed, quite simply, to respect the mountain. I should know better although, come to think of it, my races in Canada were all on flat land. I wonder what Tee thought, seeing me slumped in the bus. You don't begin an eighty-four-kilometre climb by bolting the first twenty.

I run my fingers through the leaves of a low-hanging branch and allow a liana to trail over my shoulder like a streamer. Looking to my right, I am struck – almost intimidated – by the sheer weight of vegetable life, cascading down the mountain, trying, it would seem, to roll over the road and reclaim it. Leaves of all shapes and shades catch the sunlight and flicker in the breeze, some almond-shaped, thick and waxy like the leaves of a tea plant, others broader and more like kitchen spatulas. Some plants have delicate, arching stems that support fans of thin, blade-like leaves, reminding me of open hands, while others have thicker pipes connecting to floppy lids that could serve as umbrellas. Few of the plants or trees are flowering, but I see dainty white bells hanging from wandering tendrils and, from time to time, flaming pink or red rhododendron blooms. Here and there are the stretched saw-tooth leaves of marijuana plants, which grow everywhere in Bhutan and are fed to swine. I think of the highways in Canada, the verges shorn like a bad haircut, fences up to stop moose, the road so wide. Nature is no more than a green smudge at 110 kilometres an hour. Here, humans seem to be short-stay tenants.

“Sar.”

I turn my head. Two young bulls are on the road in front, staring down at us, ears cocked, muscles tensed, flicking their tails. I look about. Where the heck did they come from? There is no sign of a farm nearby, or of a farmer, and the mountain falls away sharply below the road. One, I see, has a rope dangling from its neck, and I remember the cows of Kandisor, dragging out the stakes they were tied to and coming to dine on our front hedge.

The smaller bull, deciding we are up to no good, turns and bolts uphill, but instantly smacks into the side of the other. The pair shake themselves and snort at each other.

“They want to run away from us, Sar.”

Or with us, it would seem. Each time we draw close, they sprint away, but then stop again forty or fifty metres up the road and allow us to catch up. An incongruous picture forms in my mind of Team Tara-thon jogging into Thimphu, two lecturers, ten university students and a hundred school kids, followed by eight stray dogs, a herd of cows dragging stakes, three takins. Finally, we overtake the bulls and watch them gallop off downhill.

The jungle seems abruptly to end when we round a corner an hour and a half later and discover Namling, four empty road workers’ shacks and the shell of a guesthouse. The Ugyens are there, sitting on their haunches and looking cold with their hands shrugged into their sleeves. The temperature has certainly dipped. I tell them to clap home the runners as they come in. Ahead I see black cliff, cut with white lines of falling water, and the road clawing up the side diagonally. It will be another hard climb tomorrow, but, at least we won’t have to do it in the heat. How labourers ever managed to carve a way for the road out of such vertical rock is a mystery. I know that many died while building this particular stretch of the

highway. A chorten, looking like it was painted last week, stands at a crook in the road.

“We must not stop there, Sar,” Ugyen Pema says seriously.

“Why not?”

“It is *tsubta*. Risky area.”

Three years ago, he tells me, a bus careered off the road here, killing all aboard, including many school children. Apparently, the driver was drunk. The chorten was put up to mark the spot, and the Je Khenpo came and conducted a puja to rid the place of evil. I recall reading of similar accidents in *Kuensel*. Every few weeks, it seemed, there was a picture of a Tata truck, pointing head first down a cliff with its cab buried in a tree trunk, or a report of multiple deaths and broken spines after a vehicle left the road. In one incident near Trashigang the first year we were here, passengers were pushing a bus up a steep incline when it started to roll backwards. Before it left the road, it crushed the head of the co-driver, who was trying to jam rocks behind the back wheels. Miraculously, the bus only fell a hundred and fifty metres, and eight of the nine passengers who had remained on board survived.

“But don’t worry, Sar,” Ugyen whispers in my ear. “I did some dice and prayed for that local deity to reach us to Thimphu. Good luck number came.”

*

After a cold night with our sleep mats unrolled on bare concrete inside the guesthouse, we enter *tsubta* early the next morning. A chilling mist percolates up from the valley, blurring the cliff and making it resemble a fortress. As we pass under its walls, I think of battlements and archers and boiling oil. The students run huddled together in a group and in silence. I see that most are now wearing sweat pants and woolly hats, and I have put running tights on over my shorts. Silvery beads of moisture settle on our clothes. We don’t stop at the memorial chorten.

The gradient of the road is, at times, fifteen to twenty per cent: by my reckoning, the steepest we have encountered so far. I should be concentrating on the ground just ahead of me, but cannot help looking up – especially when I see rocks on the road ranging in size from a basketball to a beer barrel. In places, there are piles of shattered rock at the foot of scree-clogged ravines. If there were an earthquake here, I have the feeling the road would simply vanish. In Japan, they drape heavy wire mesh over mountainsides to prevent landslides, or else coat them in cement. Both solutions, though practical, are horrible eyesores. Maybe Bhutan needs avalanche sheds like those sheltering the Trans-Canada highway in the Rockies. We shuffle along, breathing hard.

After four kilometres, the road narrows to little more than a single lane, and the rock wall leans over it. How do loaded trucks coming from opposite directions cope? Reversing here would be a daunting proposition, especially in icy conditions or during monsoon. On the narrowest section, we run beside a row of slender, waist-high concrete posts, intended to stop vehicles from shooting over the edge. Two are missing and several buckled. As runners, while it is true that a boulder may bounce down and clobber us, or a car “on run-power” may glide round a corner unexpectedly, we have a measure of control over our destiny. I listen out for the growl of an engine, the squeal of brakes.

At 6k, I see prayer flags strung up over the road, and the bus pulled over in front of a shrine. I remember stopping here with Dr Tenzin on our first crossing of the country. A stream comes coursing down the mountain, disappears under the road and then pitches itself into the void on the other side. The shrine, a tiny cabin with an altar and nine cups of holy water behind a yellow curtain, sits right on the brink. It must have taken a feat of daring to build. When Sonia arrives, we climb the concrete steps to the shrine and, as there is no guardrail or wall, take turns leaning out over the abyss while holding onto each other’s waistbands. I try to see

the foot of the waterfall, but cannot. Water separates and whitens, the finer droplets merging with the mist. I listen for the smack of water on rock below, but can hear nothing.

The word “sublime” in Canada, like “awesome,” has been drained of true meaning. It is more readily applied now to a new flavour of ice-cream, a birdie on the golf course or special effects in a sci-fi movie than to a landscape that both terrifies and inspires, the notion Edmund Burke and the Romantic poets had. Nevertheless, this is the word that comes to mind as I watch the water tipping over the edge and feel the rush of rising air on my face, when I look down at the purple valley floor far below smudged in haze. I think of the poetry I taught to my third-year class at Sherading, the transcendence Wordsworth sought among “steep and lofty cliffs” above Tintern Abbey, Coleridge’s “gardens bright with sinuous rills.” The bond between the spiritual and the natural seems especially strong in Bhutan, the two mingling effortlessly. Schicklgruber speaks of a “deified landscape” in *Mountain Fortress of the Gods*, a deity living in every rock, river and ravine, wind teasing prayers from their flags on mountain passes, water driving prayer wheels straddling streams, chortens protecting the trails between villages and keeping demons in check on the road.

The rattle and bang of a Tata truck on its way down from Thrumshing-La interrupts my thoughts. It is the first vehicle to come our way this morning, and I sigh, resenting the mechanical intrusion. I turn and watch its progress on the far side of the valley. I can’t see it clearly through the mist, but the thing seems barely under control, surging forward on the straight stretches, pulling up suddenly before swinging round corners. Maybe the driver is in a hurry. Every few seconds, it disappears behind a fold in the rock. The drone dies and tranquility is almost restored, but not for long. As the truck gets nearer, the sound divides into the strain of the engine, the chomping of gears and the clatter of the wooden slats of the bed.

This merchant must be on his way to the border to pick up a load. The truck rounds the final bends, and I wonder if the driver will pull over and say a prayer at the shrine. No. He barrels past. Then something remarkable happens. The front wheels lock, there is a sickly scurching sound and the back wheels lift off the ground, spin in the air for a second and then slam down. The tailgate shakes violently. One of our students must have dashed across the road. Or Yana. Then I see it, or I see the tail of it: much, much smaller than our thirteenth runner.

“Di-did you see that?” I turn to Sonia. The stink of burnt rubber fills the air.

“Mon Dieu!” She shakes her head. “A mouse.”

Returning to the road and resuming the run, I think about the Bhutanese folktale I read in Mongar about a mouse. One day, while tending her flock, a shepherdess dropped her lunch. As it was a circular loaf wrapped in a cloth, it rolled down the mountain. The girl gave chase, but it went into a mouse hole. You can keep the bread, the girl called to the mouse, but could she have the cloth back? The mouse invited her to step in, and, like Alice, the girl closed her eyes and was able to do so. What would she like for dinner? asked the mouse hospitably. Leftovers would do for a poor girl, replied the shepherdess. The mouse prepared a meal fit for a Princess. What would she like to sleep on? A bed of rags would be adequate for a poor girl, she answered. The mouse gave her soft blankets and a pillow stuffed with cotton. Don’t worry if your hair gets tugged during the night, warned the mouse. In the morning, the girl returned home with her hair strung with precious jewels and her *torrath* full of more. When a rich girl in the same village heard of the shepherdess’s sudden good fortune, she too entered the mouse hole but demanded a sumptuous dinner and a good bed. Undiscouraged when she got neither, she anticipated riches when, in the night, she felt tugs on her hair. Back home the next day, she discovered not jewels in her hair but mouse droppings.

The tale comes from Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan*, one of thirty books we have in a cardboard box on the bus. Knowing there would be hours to kill on our journey, Sonia persuaded Sherading library to lend us some books for the winter. These include Daphne du Maurier's *The Birds and Other Stories*, Roald Dahl's *Kiss, Kiss*, James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*, T. Namgay Wangchuk's *Seeing with the Third Eye* and Rinzin Namgay Dorji's *The Walk across the Kingdom*. The folktales I have read seem mostly to be morality tales in the manner of Aesop's fables. Material wealth is gained through being humble and compassionate; greed and stupidity are punished. A poor farm boy spares the lives of sparrows that have eaten his seeds, and, in exchange, the sparrows give him a magic cup that fills with food on demand. A fox persuades a leopard who wants to eat him to try fishing in a lake with his tail. The leopard tries this for a night, but it is winter. The lake freezes over, and he loses the fur off his tail while trying to yank it out.

There is one folktale in the collection that tells of a runner. One day, in olden times, the Trongsa *penlop* ordered his *garba* ("attendant with wheels of fire") to carry a letter to Wangdi Phodrang, get a reply from the *dzongpon* there and return the same day: a round trip of 129 kilometres. But *garba* Lung gi Korlo had grown weary of running long distances, having carried letters for his lord all his life. Passing through a dark ravine on his way, the reputed abode of a demoness, he yelled, "I am so tired that I would rather you took my life than that I do one more journey like this." There was no reply, but, on his way back through the region, he met an old woman wearing a black kira washing meat in a water trough. Curious, he asked if the meat belonged to a large animal. No, said the old woman. "Garba Lung gi Korlo gave me his life this morning. These are his entrails." Shocked and no longer feeling the pain in his legs, the courier ran home, delivered the message to his lord and was rewarded with a fine meal. He went

home, told his wife about his strange encounter on the road and went to bed. He never woke up.

*

“Sar, I cannot bear any longer.”

It is three hours later, and Yeshey and I are sitting in a stream at Sengor, seventeen kilometres from the shrine. Our shoes and socks are on a rock nearby. Glassy wafers of ice glitter in the shallows. I hope our team leader does not see this as a punishment for coming in last today. I should have collared Tiger too, who was moaning about his thighs and also bringing up the rear.

“Five minutes done, five to go. C-come on, we’ll do it together.”

Yeshey is one of two lads on the team I would call a “hobby runner.” Like Sonia and me, he jogs regularly for pleasure. When I was out at dawn doing my laps around Sherading, I would sometimes find Yeshey doing the same. When he heard of our plan to run to Thimphu for Târâyana, he doubled his training from an hour a day to two to prepare for his trial. For the last couple of days, he has been lagging behind the team and complaining of sore knees. He tells me he used to hate running at school, but has now discovered the fun of it.

“Sar?”

“Yes, Yeshey, what is it?”

“Time, Sar?”

“Let me consult my watch.”

“Saaar?”

“Three minutes to go.”

I grit my teeth and keep my eye on the campfire two hundred metres away. I have taken cold baths after long runs before in Canada. After thirty seconds, your body adapts and the discomfort passes, your legs warming the static water around them. Dunking them in an icy stream at 3,200 metres is a different proposition. The

flowing water bites ever deeper, stealing body heat and carting it off. I turn away from Yeshey, close my eyes and count down the seconds. The stinging sensation is particularly exquisite, I notice, around the crotch. I pause in my counting and peer down the front of my shorts. All I can see is an item resembling a dried fig. I look over at the fire again. I suppose if I were a Buddhist monk, I would be able to banish all thoughts of past or future. We surrender after nine minutes and lumber back to camp like golems. I may not need my watch for our runs, but for “blue-legging,” as Ugyen Leki, the other hobby runner, has christened it, I certainly do.

“Look,” someone says. “Sar has blue nose.”

My knees refuse to bend as I try to sit down. My legs are wooden posts. Yet, this, I have discovered, is the trick to running day after day. When I get up tomorrow, the aches and pains will be gone. I collapse awkwardly beside my wife and get my legs as close to the fire as possible without singeing the hairs. As our camps each night are beside rivers or streams, Sonia and I have been pushing our runners to bathe their legs, but they don’t seem terribly keen. For sure, at this altitude, we say, you must not go blue-legging before the cook has lit the fire.

“How’s your ankle?” I ask Sonia, as sensation begins to return to mine. She has removed the bandage. The swelling seems to have gone down.

“I’m going to bathe it in a moment. The painkillers are definitely helping. I ran with Tiger today and gave him some.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s in good spirits. I get biscuits from the bus each time it stops and put them in my pocket. We munch them as we go along.” Gingerly, she gets to her feet. “He’ll be glad of a rest though.”

It is the last day of the year, and, before mounting our assault on the pass, we have a day off. We were expecting Sengor High School to put us up, but today is Election Day for the National Council, and apparently there are no officials in

town. Fortunately, Mr Namgay knows the park ranger for Thrumshing-La National Park, and he has unlocked the “Livestock Extension Centre” for us. Our two nights here will be chilly with no electricity and no beds.

I watch my wife as she circles the fire, telling the boys to draw close, strip off their sweatpants and massage analgesic cream into their legs. She even inspects Yana’s paw. Like some of the lads, she now has a nickname. A farmer yelled “*Za min thur!*” as she ran past his paddy-field a couple of days ago, “The only girl!” I have asked her whether she minds this status. She laughs and reminds me how she would fight with boys in the back alley in Montreal when she was a kid. She has assumed a maternal role in this event, and I see how readily “the boys” respond to her. While they work together naturally as a team, collecting donations and sharing camp chores, I think they appreciate having her around, reminding them to run slowly and look after their feet, to rest rather than kick the soccer ball about. I imagine they find her more approachable than me, fearing perhaps that I will send them home if they don’t measure up to the job. I was the one who laid down the rules at the start: no walking, no cadging lifts, no taking shortcuts. I look around for Mr Namgay and wonder how he feels about her involvement in the project, but he is not around. If she weren’t here, would he be the one giving advice on injuries? Would he be acting more like a sports coach?

It occurs to me that I have met few women in positions of authority during my time in Bhutan. The registrar at the university is a woman, and so is the head librarian at Sherading. The Director General of Târâyana and the assistant DEO we met in Trashigang were both female. The overwhelming majority in office, however – whether district administrators or village heads, business leaders or hotel managers, doctors or police, school or college administrators – are men. I hear there are practically no women in the Royal Government, and the monastic body is 99% male. When it comes to menial or manual work, though, women are

highly conspicuous. It was always female students that served us refreshments at college functions, or wives when we got invited to professors' homes, and I remember lines of women with mud up to their knees in the paddy fields of Kandisor during monsoon season, thinning out rice plants. From time to time in the newspaper, there would be an article saying how women had made inroads into traditionally male professions, like painting devotional images or driving goods trucks. Bhutan's first and only lady judge joined the Thimphu district court in the year we arrived, and a much-teased twenty-two-year-old became the first female taxi driver there. Buddhism says that men and women are equal, but Bhutan would seem to have some way to go when it comes to professional equality.

As Sonia does her rounds, my thoughts turn to today's election, and I silently wish Dr Tenzin tashi delek. He aims to join Bhutan's equivalent of the House of Lords or the Senate, a body of twenty-five keeping checks and balances on the governing party. The stakes for him are high. If he doesn't win the seat for his district, he will be out of work, unable to belong to the new government or return to his old job. There was an article in the *Bhutan Observer* not long ago telling of his candidature. I heave myself to my feet and go over to the bus to root through the newspaper clippings I have collected. Flicking through, I suddenly find a picture of him beaming up at me, dressed in a smart gho but with a bamboo pot-lid hat on his head of the kind paddy-farmers wear to keep the sun off. "Democracy is a gift from the King," the paper reports him saying underneath the photo. "It is the responsibility of the people to make it a success." After thirty-seven years as an educator, Tenzin Dorji felt it his duty to put his career aside and serve King and country.

It was about this time last year that the King announced to the nation that he was stepping down as Head of State. Fire Female Hog Year has seen the Royal Government take pains to prepare the people to govern themselves. It is time for

Bhutanese to learn about politics and become part of the decision-making process. The newly formed Election Commission of Bhutan has issued every citizen with a Voter Photo Identity Card, distributed a thirty-page voter guide explaining what an election is and how to vote, delimited constituencies and, in its “Bhutan Electoral Education and Training Strategy,” sent 188 electoral instructors out to all households. There have been two rounds of mock elections, in which people voted for imaginary parties given different colours: Druk Red for industrial development, Druk Blue for a “free and fair society,” Druk Green promoting environmentally friendly development, and Druk Yellow preserving tradition and culture. Druk Yellow won both rounds hands down (46 of the 47 constituencies in the second) as yellow is the royal colour. “A political party will not be allowed to have a party logo or symbol that is associated with national or religious colours,” a frustrated Dasho Kunzang Wangdi, the election commissioner, warned afterwards.

Two main political parties have emerged: the People’s Democratic Party, led by Namgay Ngedup, former Minister of Agriculture and brother of the four Queens; and Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (meaning “Land of Blissful Harmony”), led by Jigmi Y. Thinley, former Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs. Both leaders have had to resign from the Royal Government in order to enter politics. Their manifestos aim to reassure the Bhutanese, who love the King and are happy for him to make decisions on their behalf, that all will be well come the New Year. “By gifting us democracy, our Monarchs have not forsaken us. As the Sovereign of our nation and the symbol of our unity they will be everpresent, reassuring us of their continued guidance and benevolence,” insists the PDP. The DPT guarantees that “We shall always uphold the sacred institution of the Monarchy and the person of His Majesty the King with the highest of reverence and allegiance as the fountainhead of justice and the symbol of our nation’s sovereignty and unity.”

Newspapers (*Bhutan Times* and *Bhutan Observer* have now joined *Kuensel*) report that voters, especially in rural areas, remain worried about the future and “confused” about colours, parties and voting procedure. The fifth Druk Gyalpo has been on tour, answering questions and attempting to put people’s minds at rest, the way he did as Crown Prince after his father released the draft constitution. He attended the first mock election in Dunkhar in the far north, the ancestral home of the Wangchucks. “Where villagers seemed hesitant and apprehensive, His Majesty urged them to seize this opportunity to play their part in a historic moment in Bhutan,” one newspaper reported. They must get involved in the electoral process and choose the right leaders. I recall him giving a rallying cry similar in tone to graduates at Sherading’s eleventh biennial convocation back in April: “The future depends on you ... Shall we sit and dream or work hard and reap the benefits?” The general election will be held in March.

Stapled to the newspaper article is Dr Tenzin’s farewell letter to the college, sent to all staff and students on the Intranet in August. I have read it several times, but still find it disarmingly sincere, more the words of a caring parent than a principal signing off.

Dear Sheradingans,

I certainly do not feel good to leave your learned and joyful company, but as change comes to everybody the sense of attachment has to be abandoned. So I do it with some courage.

I have learnt a great deal while in Sherading and now I leave here with much learning. I have made many mistakes but these are because two and half years here have been filled with new activities. I am not sure how far these changes will impact you positively but I am sure they are all heading for the final vision of excellence.

I come from a humble farming family with no promising property. It is the Royal Government's efforts and His Majesty the King's continued commitment that I have been given this rare opportunity to work with you here at the peak of learning. Without this I would still be ploughing the field. I believe most of us have the same background. So we need to return this kindness with full commitments in body, mind and in our speeches.

Now the guard is changing, I wish my successor and all of you a very enriching stay in Sherading and prosperity and success in your future wherever you go and do.

Remember that complacency is a fool's theory while you must believe that without a disciplined mind nothing can be attained.

Yours now a well-wisher.

So long,
Tenzin Dorji

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On our day off, I take a walk with the park ranger, Ugyen Tenzin. His job is to patrol the district (Mongar to Ura), report any illegal logging or poaching, check forestry permits and monitor resources. The area we have just passed through is "cool broadleaf forest," he tells me, "*acer*, birch, *taxus bacatta*, champ, cane." Acer, I find out later, is maple and *taxus bacatta* is yew – neither of which I had noticed. Around Sengor, it is mainly hemlock interspersed with larch, giving the forest "grey spot" during wintertime as larch drops its needles.

"In old day, we use hemlock as duster for clean butter lamp," he informs me. "Also tasty food for yak."

"What is champ?"

"Tree with yellow flower like orchid. We use oil come from it in soap and perfume."

I tell him how splendid I have found the rhododendrons, their bold indigos, creams, crimsons and purples. I was surprised on our hikes last winter to find a variety near the mountain passes with leaves as long as my forearm.

“There are fifty species of rhododendron in Bhutan. *Rhododendron arboreum* is main bush in Sengor area. Eating flower is cure for dysentery. Some kind of rhododendron we dry leaves and use for make incense.”

“And what do you recommend tired runners chew to give them energy?” I ask.

Ugyen thinks for a moment and then laughs. I expect him to say doma, but he doesn't. “*Yarsta goenbub!*”

“What's that?”

“Cordyceps.”

That would be the fungus that grows out of the head of a caterpillar. I remember seeing two or three in a glass jar in one of the science laboratories at Sherading one open day, the caterpillar pale yellow and the length of my thumb, the fungus a twisted grey stick. I had not seen or heard of anything quite like it and thought naively at the time that it might somehow be a symbiotic relationship. But the fungus is a parasite that mummifies its host. *Yarsta goenbub* is highly sought after in Asian markets as an aphrodisiac and cure-all. Unfortunately, at 75,000 ngultrum (\$2,000) a kilo, it is a little beyond the reach of the Tara-thon kitty.

I find that Ugyen is also knowledgeable about birds. I mention the laughingthrush and describe another that I could not find in our bird book, belonging to the same family but blue-black in colour. I see this bird quite often, streaking across the road in front of us, disturbed from its foraging in ditches.

“Whistling thrush,” the park ranger says without hesitation. “In Bhutan, we call this one ‘culvert in-charge.’” I know the suffix from Sherading. It was given to those with special responsibilities. Ugyen Dendup was English Department in-

charge, Sonia was Language Centre in-charge. “Whistling thrush is boss of little river!”

“Tourist come to Sengor to see tragopan,” he continues, pulling a book out of his bag and showing me one labelled *satyr tragopan*. A kind of partridge, it would seem, plump and ungainly, with a blue and black head and a red and brown body, speckled with white dots. An extraordinary looking creature. According to the description, it bleats like a goat kid.

“Are there any about?”

“Not at this time of year. You must come back in the spring!”

Before going about his duties, he tells me we are lucky not to be running in the snow. Sengor usually gets a foot of it in January.

I return to camp and learn that Dr Tenzin has been elected to the National Council.

Chapter 5

Yalama!

[T]he manifold rise in real income in several highly industrialised countries over the last fifty years has not led to similar increases in happiness. It is evident that triumphs in the rat race to earn more, have more, and consume more do not bring true and lasting happiness. The rich, the powerful, and the glamorous, it appears, are often the ones who are more impoverished spiritually and socially and thereby are less happy. While there is certainly considerable room for improvement to what and how we measure both wealth and happiness, the lack of any correlation between the two, after meeting basic needs, clearly indicates that happiness cannot be found on the unending, rudderless journey powered by man's insatiable greed.

“Gross National Happiness” (2005)
Jigmi Y. Thinley, Leader of Druk Phuensum Tshogpa

“If what you do is selfish, you will not succeed,” Singye Namgyel says, looking sternly into the faces of the ten shivering students gathered about him. He pauses, pulls his scarf tighter around his neck and smiles. “But your run is for a good cause. All good intention have good ending.”

The new director of Sherading College has honoured his promise and stopped by on his way to Thimphu to check we are all right. The students are clearly happy to see him, their aches and pains temporarily forgotten. He has brought with him a large box of bananas, another of mandarins and a third of milk drinks called “Amul Kool.” He speaks to each of them in turn and writes down their shoe sizes. A box of new running shoes will be waiting for them, he promises, when they reach Jakar, a four-day run from here. I am most grateful for this gesture and wonder if Prince Jigyel had a word with him. This will help some of the strugglers to stay motivated.

The latest casualty is Sonam Tshering, a reserved lad of twenty-two from a village near Trashigang. Last to arrive today, he went straight to Sonia, complaining of a bad ankle. Sonia made him sit down while she hacked ice from

the stream and put it in a bag. Hunting for her dwindling supply of painkillers as she saw swelling of the kind she had had, she turned and found him foraging for firewood with Phuntsho. “Sit, Sonam Tshering,” she yelled, “sit! Take your weight off that leg.” Sonam timidly obeyed and applied the icepack. He told us in his interview that his father had died five years ago and that his mother was now the most important person in his life. He may be missing her. He was in the habit of going home regularly from Sherading to feed the cattle and collect firewood for her. “I never noticed frustration or sadness on her face after father die,” he confided. “Rather her face always decorated with smiles and laughter. Maybe she is bearing all hectic works and hiding her tears and sweats within herself to make me happy.” His mother, he said, was enormously proud that he was spending his winter break running for education. I inspected Sonam’s running shoe when he took it off. A poorly made imitation of a Puma with a thin sole, knobbly tread and bright yellow zigzags down the side, it seemed more suited to a twenty-minute jog along a dirt trail (or for impressing girls?) than a month-long ultra-marathon on tarmac.

The director probably finds us a bit of a motley crew, wearing every stitch of clothing we own and huddling round a fire that refuses to start. Our gear is strewn over the ground: blankets, billy-cans, sacks of lentils and chick peas, tipped-over thermos flasks, plastic cups. A rock prevents a flaccid tent yet to be erected from taking off and sailing back to Sengor. Yeshey is wearing army fatigues and a sweatshirt with the word “Reaky” on the front and Sonam Tshering has a cloth toque on his head marked “11” and a T-shirt showing through his jacket with “Good Bush” written beside a picture of a woman slipping off her panties and “Bad Bush” next to one of the current US president. The head of Sherading is in a burgundy gho and shiny brown shoes and looks like he just stepped out of his

office for lunch. I wonder what the journalist from *Kuensel* accompanying him will say in his write-up.

Finally, shaking Mr Namgay's hand and giving him two vouchers for his cell phone, Singye Namgyel takes his leave.

"Tashi delek," he says. "I hope you reach safely to Thimphu."

Our itinerary says we should be at Thrumshing-La tonight, but the park ranger told us there would be no water or flat ground for our tents at the saddle. He recommended instead a road workers' camp thirteen kilometres from Sengor. Go further than this, and we would have to make it to Gyazamchu, ten kilometres beyond Thrumshing-La. We have ignored his advice and found a windy gully four kilometres short. Thinking of democracy earlier in the day, I invited the team to vote on where to camp for the night: hands up for the ranger's suggestion, hands up those who wish to go further. The students looked at each other, amused. One voted for the road workers' camp, nine for uncertainty.

"Sorry, Tiger," I said, "but the voice of the majority has just been heard!"

Firewood is scant here and there is no running water, but a narrow lay-by on the other side of the road will give us just enough room to pitch our tents. If a trucker on arra happens to fly down the road in the middle of the night, however, we will be flattened.

I look around the camp. Now that the director has gone, everyone except Sonam Tshering and Mr Namgay is busy. Ngawang is crouching beside the fire, trying to blow life into it while Tiger uses his body as a shield. Phuntsho has seized the cook's *patang* and is chopping away at an uprooted tree stump and tossing over kindling. Sonam Rigzin is helping Tee pour water from a jerry-can into one of the billies. Ugyen Pema is snapping tent poles together while Norbu gets out pegs. Ugyen Leki and Wangchuck are dragging a dead branch down off the mountain. Yeshey is chipping ice into a bucket and Kezang is making a flute. While it is true

that Sonia assigned chores to the students in Trashigang, it surprises me that they never need chivying to perform them, despite fatigue. They have even asked Sonia and me if we would like them to put up our tent. I realise too that we haven't had to teach the Bhutanese a thing about camp craft. Camping isn't a craft for them. It is a common activity, as natural as boiling rice or saying mantras, and they are handy with fires and machetes and expert at making do. I look at the tent Ugyen has now put up: no fly sheet, zips that jam, a hole in the side as large as my bottom. The day before our departure from Kandisor, one of our runners cut a panel from an umbrella to seal the hole.

Having helped gather wood, I get my journal from the bus and find a sheltered spot behind a boulder to write. The journal is actually a laboratory notebook, purchased in Kandisor, with lined pages for writing and blank ones for diagrams. The lined ones have "experiment number" at the top, the blank facing them "figure number." I sketch a picture on the figure page for a change, the first I have drawn for years. I used to enjoy drawing as a child, my favoured subjects being insects, ugly faces, pretty landscapes and UFOs. I begin with the dying conifer over the road. Now we are above 12,000 feet, all the deciduous trees are gone: no oak or maple or champ. The conifer is more a black spike than a tree, its few remaining branches bent or broken and cobwebbed in Spanish moss or the Himalayan equivalent. The moss billows out, but the tree itself seems undisturbed by the wind. It looks as if it has been there for centuries, survivor of countless blizzards and rock falls, as if it could last for centuries more, slowly eroding but never falling. Then I draw the perfectly symmetrical Christmas trees beneath it, the next generation perhaps, silvery green in lustre with beardless branches that resemble reaching hands.

"Sar can draw nice picture!" The fire is now curling up through the wood, and Tiger has wandered over.

“Just simple stuff, that’s all. How’s your knee?”

“Still paining, Sar, but getting better.”

“The new shoes will help. My knees always tell me when I need to go shopping! Can you last till Jakar?”

“Of course!” He laughs. “When I doubt, I remember my childhood memories.”

“Breaking rocks?”

“Yessar, and never losing hope and keeping up your spirits.”

“‘Tiger, tiger, burning bright’?”

“In the forest of the night.” He giggles.

“Is that how you got your nickname?”

“No, Sar, not from Blake’s poem. When I was a boy, I was playing ‘Police and Thieves’ with my friends. I was always thief. My friends, they gave me that name because I could run and jump and get away from police.”

The Spanish moss ignites into fiery tongues in the last of the afternoon sun. Shadows stretch from the conifers. Tigers continue to roam the wilds of Bhutan, and I try to imagine one padding silently through the brush towards us, the light of our campfire in its eyes.

I ask Tiger about a song I often hear him singing while he goes about his camp chores. “Pelo, pelo, kabi na...” A Dzongkha song?

“No, Hindi one, Sar,” he replies.

I have him write a translation in my journal.

*Drink, drink, some time you drink
Drink some water from the drain.
I am hero, you are zero.*

“Just that? What does it mean?”

He laughs. “I don’t know, Sar.”

“Yalama!”

At Bhutan’s highest pass on the lateral road, a vermilion flag of a secular nature now flaps alongside the thousand multi-coloured Buddhist prayer flags. It would appear that Ugyen Pema has artistic skills. The flag is about the size of two table mats and, in white paint, says “Tara-thon” at the top and “3-1-2008” at the bottom. A stickman runner is at the centre, arms spread wide in what seems to be a gesture of ecstasy, or perhaps of embrace. Our flag is likely to last longer than the others as the creator has sewn the top and bottom edges to bamboo canes and hung it from the corners to a string of prayer flags. Instead of flapping torturously in the wind, it hangs like a banner and waves regally back and forth.

“Yalama!” roar our runners again, all wearing their “Run for the Kids” T-shirts today and throwing their arms in the air while looking up at this evidence of their accomplishment. Sonia and I laugh and take photos.

I look over at Mr Namgay to see whether he approves. We found him waiting for us beside a smoking chorten at the pass, counting his prayer beads. As we came in, he had us run three times around the *mani* wall serving as a traffic island. There is no doubt that Thrumshing-La is a sacred place. Only one other mountain pass on the highway has a *sangphu* (literally “incense palace”), purifying the air, and only this a wall of stone tablets repeating over and over the Buddhist mantra, “Om mani padme hum.” No other mountain pass has anywhere near as many prayer flags. There are so many swaddling the mani wall, it is barely visible. But our event coordinator made no objection when Kezang positioned the bus, and Ugyen Pema strung his flag up with the others. Raising a flag here seems to reinforce the spiritual dimension of our marathon.

I look at my wife and see tears in her eyes, and think for a while about happiness. We rejoice with our runners, but I wonder whether we feel quite as they

do. Allowing for the exuberance of youth, there is no doubt that we share with them the elation of having run to the highest point on our journey. A hard climb is now behind us. Despite “paining” knees and swollen ankles, with two weeks of running and 220 kilometres done, we are proving equal to the task we have set ourselves. The road will, of course, exact further tolls, but the mood is one of optimism. But is the happiness Sonia and I feel more relief that the project we have mounted is succeeding and pride that we have turned ten Bhutanese into distance runners? I cannot speak for Sonia, but I know that my own motivation for launching the Tara-thon is questionable. I wished to be the first to run across Bhutan. It is not that I don’t believe in our cause, but I run too for acknowledgment and welcome the attention of the media. Looking back into my past, I know that I have derived happiness mostly from personal achievement: fast times and medals in road races, a black belt in karate, crossing Canada by bicycle, a Master’s degree. Is my happiness here on Thrumshing-La more egotistic back-slapping than joy in a shared accomplishment?

This does not appear to be the case with our students. Unless I am deluding myself, they are running primarily for Queen and country and wouldn’t be here if our objective were merely to set a record. When the going is hard, they have told us and have written in our Tara-blog, they conjure up a picture in their heads of the children they are raising money to help. Several were once those kids in need themselves. They are probably also drawing strength and joy from the Buddhist notion that helping others earns them merit. Taking part in this charitable endeavour brings them a little closer to nirvana.

We remain at Thrumshing-La until our teeth start to chatter, swig a cup of suja, and then commence our descent. The morning sun disappears as we drop below the saddle. There were banks of old snow, crusty with ice, under the prayer flags. Now it is on both sides of the road and frozen to some of the hemlock

branches. The streams we pass are frozen over: long, rippling beards that smooth out into slabs of marble when they meet the road. I hear the drain-like trickle of water flowing underneath. Where the water has spilled out over the road and frozen, we must skate a little, and I think again of my winter runs in Canada. To my right through the trees, I can see Tibet, a row of ragged, glittering teeth cutting the sky.

“Yalama!” The word echoes off the fortress walls, our hares staying in touch with our tortoises.

*

“I think I have latitude sickness, Sar,” Tee admits when we reach Gyazamchu. I look at his eyes. They are wandering about in their sockets. “My head, it feel sort of cloudy.”

I remember the sensation from one of our hikes last winter. Climbing to a *la* at 4,200 metres separating two Brokpa villages in the east, I began to feel giddy and nauseous. I stopped, leaned against a tree, closed my eyes, drank water, waited for my heart to stop tripping and thought about my trip to the Chilean Andes in 1994. Suffering in the same way at a similar altitude, I chose to ignore the warning bells and foolishly quickened my pace. An hour later at the Bolivian border, I collapsed with a splitting headache that plagued me for three days.

Should we stop at Gyazamchu then? Fourteen kilometres is hardly a full day’s run and will put us behind on our schedule. I look around, recognising this insalubrious spot: the patchy roofed canteen, the derelict shelter marked “Labour Camp.” Sonia and I camped here a night with Dr Tenzin, Zangmo and Pema. Just as before, the place is strewn with litter. I remember Dr Tenzin pulling in beside the shelter in the dark, my putting our headlamp on the little boy’s head and sending him off to fetch firewood. There was so little wood, we ended up cooking

over a garbage fire. The canteen is where Pema ate his ill-fated bowl of rice porridge. Tee should probably go in and have some.

I put it once again to the vote. The chef in the canteen says it is twenty-five kilometres to Ura, the first village on this side of the pass, or four to a cowshed, where there is barely any water but probably enough space for tents. Gyazamchu? No show of hands. Ura? Three hares stick their paws in the air. Cowshed? No votes. I look at Sonam Tshering with his limp, at Tee rubbing his eyes.

“As project leader, um, my vote is worth five of yours!” I smile and wait for a cry of protest.

The four kilometres turn out to be four uphill kilometres, surprisingly, and it takes our tortoises over an hour to cover the distance. As we unpack our gear next to a tumbledown shack in fading light, I see several of the team blinking with exhaustion. We probably shouldn't have spent as long as we did at the pass this morning. Riding high on the moment, none of us thought to go to the bus for a jacket. Mr Namgay pours out cups of suja, and Sonia urges the boys to change out of their sweaty running gear.

While Ngawang prepares a dinner of rice, cabbage curry and dal, Kezang plays his “snake-charmer,” a flute he made a couple of days ago out of bamboo, one end stuck in half a plastic bottle to amplify the sound. The students laugh as they go about their chores at the odd warbles the instrument produces. In cowboy hat, overly short gho (it only extends to mid-thigh) and trekking boots, our driver is a bizarre-looking character, a cross between a Bhutanese and a Westerner, who has picked up English through taking tourists rafting and kayaking for Lotus Tours. He has already played a role larger than his designation in this Tara-thon. He helps out around camp, and clearly gets on well with the students (who call him “Atta Kezang”) and with Yana (who appears to have forgiven him for the unsolicited

bath in the Sheri Chhu). How avuncular Kezang truly is, I cannot tell, but imagine our students find him more approachable than Mr Namgay, Sonia or me.

Scant firewood means a small campfire to fend off a bitter evening chill, so we retire early, Sonia and I shrugging on our sleeping bags fully dressed. During the cold night, I toss, turn and fart repeatedly, my stomach troubled by the curry, and Sonia snores at “excited hog volume” (or so I decide while writing in my journal the next day). If she sleeps on her side, she doesn’t snore, but doctor’s orders are that she must sleep on her back with her damaged ankle elevated. Unable to sleep, I look through the tent-flap and see Yana, sitting by the embers of the fire staring at the moon.

*

A young man dressed in a dark gho and white sneakers jogs down a flight of stone steps leading from his village to a wooden bridge. He is carrying a suitcase in one hand and a ghetto-blaster in the other and sings as he goes. He crosses the bridge and runs up a path on the other side. He must now follow a narrower dirt path over a grassy ridge to another bridge. From the ridge, he can see the motor road and the bus to Thimphu pulling over to pick up three passengers. He yells, begins to sprint, stops for a moment to whistle at the bus, sprints again. The bus leaves without him.

His curses echo off the grey, snow-dusted mountains. Dondup sits despondently on his suitcase at the side of the road and lights a cigarette. A summer breeze makes moss trailing from the branch of a tree wag like a dog’s tail. Three geese glide by overhead, honking.

The sun is out, and I feel warm for the first time in days. I can wear shorts, a T-shirt and my lightweight running shoes. For the first forty minutes of the day’s run, I am with Phuntsho, a cheery, capable runner with bread-loaf thighs, who has made it here from Kandisor apparently unscathed. I give him the nickname “Chapsa Phuntsho” as he has already dashed into the trees twice to relieve himself. He laughs and says he drank too much suja at breakfast. After a couple of uphill bends in the road from the cowshed, we seem to turn a corner. I stop for a moment to

drink in the new view. To our right is the mountain, the rock leaning over the road now an orange colour and blotched with black lichen. To our left is the abyss, free here of mist. I assume a river is down there somewhere, but all I can see is a procession of dark green, interlocking knuckles of land. Ahead of us, the way is all down, the highway looping around a succession of rounded spurs. A large, brown eagle swoops low over the road, its primary feathers splayed like fingers, its shadow clear-edged on the tarmac, and vanishes into conifers below. We set off again, and I chuckle remembering *Travellers and Magicians*, the film Sonia and I saw before coming to Bhutan, and Dondup's efforts to escape all this for America, the land of his dreams.

Buffeted by cool wind rising from the valley, Phuntsho and I glide down the switchbacks and let the rhythm of the run carry us. After ten minutes, I no longer hear the slap of our shoes on the road or our panting breath. I am no longer conscious of my forty-three-year-old-body with its achy joints. My arms swing effortlessly, and the action seems to match the sway of the plants and trees at the roadside. It is probably the rush of endorphins or the effect of the rarified air, but, flushed with wellbeing, I seem more to flow down the mountain than run down it; I feel suddenly unencumbered, free of anxiety, light. In Canada, running would always calm my body, clear my mind and improve my mood, but here in Bhutan, the activity can be more dramatically transformative. After the strain of reaching a saddle, the legs die, the body sags and the mind is liberated. Conscious still of winding road, rippling prayer flag or blooming rhododendron, it rides high, questing for a larger view, some greater meaning, a spiritual insight even. A couple of the students have spoken of meditating while they run. Perhaps the activity helps them detach from earthly concerns and reside in the moment.

I am glad that our Tara-thon is not a Tara-trek. Walking does not produce these effects as readily: the trekker, loaded with pack and in heavy boots, tends to

remain grounded. It is true that nature encounters are briefer for the runner, but sometimes these can be more intense as he or she can steal up on a bird or an animal. I smile, remembering the astonished bulls two days ago, the fleeing ‘culvert-in-charge,’ the deer and skunks I used to startle while out on dawn runs in the woods near Fredericton.

Phuntsho ducks into the woods again, and I slow to a trot. The highway uncoils below me, twisting from left to right and wriggling finally into forest. Part of my joy, I realise, is that there are no billboards polluting the natural splendour, no pictures of false smiles and tooth-whitening products, no “It’s the real thing. Coke,” no cars with absurd names like “Escape” or “Odyssey” or “Pathfinder” seen on TV driving alone in wilderness settings, no laundry detergents and softer than soft towels. The image of a junk food sign beside the walking trail in Fredericton enters my head. For weeks, I ran past a monster burger a metre high, beaming down at me in technicolour: two meat patties resembling hockey pucks, a square of shiny processed cheese wilting between them, glittering onion rings and curls of lettuce smothered in mayonnaise, the two halves of the bun as substantial as bath sponges barely containing the stack. Having ads along the highway or in towns, suggesting that material things can yield happiness, would be particularly offensive in this Buddhist land, where desire leads to suffering.

The bang of a hammer wakes me. I round a bend and suddenly find a woman squatting at the side of the road, beating a rock. She has a baby wrapped in a blanket on her back and a dirty pink scarf pulled up over her mouth.

“*Kuzu zangpo!*” I bellow, unthinkingly. Phuntsho laughs. Two other labourers are staggering towards her, holding between them a jute sack sling filled with rocks. The woman looks up from her work, and I see the fatigue in her eyes. She nods once and waves a dust-whitened hand.

I run on, feeling guilty. A book review I read last winter on *Baby in a Backpack to Bhutan*, a travelogue written by an Australian visitor, comes to mind. The Bhutanese reviewer was surprised that once again a Westerner had written a book using what he termed “the *Lost Horizon* approach,” waxing lyrical about majestic scenery and monasteries perched on hilltops, an approach he slammed as a failure to understand his country. He did not elaborate on why, but his critique made me think of Gettelman returning to her “beloved Himalayan paradise” and Lumley on her pony expedition, likening the forest to one in a Grimm’s fairy-tale. Now that the media has tagged Druk Yul the “Last Shangri-La” and tour companies actively entice customers using the label, it is easy, I imagine, for a visitor from the West to come to Bhutan in the hope of finding a hidden sanctuary, a place of extraordinary natural beauty inhabited by peace-loving, godly people, just as many did to Tibet in the 1950s. I came myself with this expectation, and the road to Ura on this beautiful January morning shows me once again that it exists.

But to see Bhutan as simply Shangri-La is to overlook its problems. I think of diseased dogs roaming the college campus, lightless villages many days’ walk from the road, garbage tossed down mountainsides, fenceless cornfields raided by monkeys, betel-ruined mouths and Nepali refugees. I remember the hard lives of Tangsibians, perhaps wholly reliant, before Dr Tenzin became their benefactor, on the success of the harvest to survive winter. They would likely find the notion of Shangri-La incongruous, as would the woman I just passed breaking rocks or, for that matter, Dondup, an educated government official bored to his back teeth living in a remote eastern village. “I love the view, but I would not want the life,” Jamie Zeppa decided towards the end of her travelogue. I remember reading a page in the *Bhutan Times* last summer called “People Speak.” The person who wrote in was a housewife who said she got no compensation when her husband, an official courier, fell off a cliff and died while running between villages. When her hut

collapsed shortly after, she failed again to get reparation though she was eligible (a government-backed scheme insuring all rural households against natural disaster). The housewife had to move into a cowshed with her eighty-year-old grandmother and two teenage daughters. Then she got in a traffic accident. Hospitalised and broke, she had to take her daughters out of school and send them to work. The title of the article was “What does GNH mean to her?”

Is Druk Yul the happy Kingdom that many foreign journalists, intrigued by the concept of Gross National Happiness, make it out to be? Bhutan is one of the poorer nations on earth, ranked, according to the United Nations, 141st of the 187 on the Human Development Index; and yet, from what Sonia and I have witnessed on our unguided hikes around the countryside, where most Bhutanese live, that poverty is not typically grinding. Village life on a mountainside can be basic – shockingly so, by our standards – houses lit by candles, the kids shoeless and dirty, everyone drawing water from a single well – but we met no homeless people and only one beggar (a little girl who asked for a pen at a tourist spot). Most Bhutanese lead healthy, active lives and live relatively long (men, on average, to 66, women to 70) and seem, for the most part, to be high-spirited. They inhabit a protected and generally pristine land (a law saying that at least 60% of the Kingdom must remain forested at all times with 25% put aside for national parks, reserves and wildlife sanctuaries), they adore their King and believe he has their best interests in mind and they are clearly proud to be who they are (building their houses in the traditional way, wearing national dress, gathering frequently to honour their gods). While it is difficult for a foreign visitor to really tell whether the Bhutanese are genuinely happy, it appears on the surface, at least, that most of them are.

This is endorsed by a pilot study conducted by the Centre for Bhutan Studies, a research body commissioned by the Royal Government to create a set of domains or indicators to measure Gross National Happiness for 2008. The Centre

began its study in February, 2006 and took a year and a half to interview 350 Bhutanese (old and young, male and female, educated and uneducated) from nine dzongkhags across the Kingdom and compile the results (each interview lasting, apparently, a full day). To the question “How much do you enjoy life?” 78.6% of the respondents answered either “Quite a lot” or “An extreme amount.” Asked to rate their overall quality of life, 62% reported that it was “good” (the other options being very poor, poor, neither good nor poor and very good). Fifty-six per cent said they were completely satisfied with their health and 86.6% completely satisfied with their family relationships. The study focused on the psychological and spiritual wellbeing of the individual, but happiness clearly derives too from community. The Bhutanese, Sonia and I noticed from the start, seem to do virtually everything together. Farmers help each other to plant and harvest crops, *dashos* rub shoulders with yak herders at tsechu, students at Sherading complete assignments together, an entire village crams into one house to see in the New Year. Our runners seem at their happiest when in camp, helping one another do chores. Maybe this is why the Bhutanese are not naturally drawn to running; it is, in essence, a solo act.

With eleven of the twenty kilometres for the day done, I emerge from the shadow of a spur and behold, in brilliant sunshine, a galleon in full sail. For a second time, I stop and stare. Three towering, rectangular white shrouds, bloated with wind, appear to ride conifer waves on a westerly course. So I must be heading north, then, at present, as this vessel is Gangkhar Puensum, the tallest in Bhutan’s flotilla, and I know it marks the border with Tibet. *Sum* means “three,” a student once told me, *puen* “brother,” and I imagine three deities navigating their stone ship for millennia towards the setting sun.

“Yalama!” I run on, and, five minutes later, hear a cry behind me. Someone else has seen the galleon.

“*Angay Sonam* say you can retire on this bench, Mr Tony, and Madam Sonia on bench on other side of room. Dasho is away on business.”

“What about the team, Mr Namgay?”

“There is room for them downstairs.”

No two nights are the same. The night before last, our tents went up by a cowshed and an ice-choked stream near a mountain pass. Last night, we were laid out like moth pupae on the concrete floor of a furnitureless Department of Roads shelter three kilometres short of the village of Ura. Tonight, we are on the second floor of a posh house belonging to an absent dignitary. It would seem that our event coordinator simply knocked on the door of this house and asked the owners whether they would mind putting up twelve runners, who hadn’t washed in a week, and a stray dog, who may have only had one wash in his life. I have not seen Mr Namgay look this happy since returning to his old school in Trashigang.

The room seems as though it is rarely used. Three dusty armchairs stand in front of a table supporting a vase of equally dusty fake roses. Two thick, curly edged rugs cover the floor, the larger with a pancake-shaped hole in it. Black-and-white photographs of Bhutan’s kings lean out from the walls, the most recent one being of Jigme Singye Wangchuck wearing embroidered leather boots and looking about the age he was when he took up office in 1972. I try the bench for size, with its richly patterned but faded cushioning, and find that my feet dangle over the end.

When he returns in the morning, Mr Namgay tells me about our hosts. In traditional Bhutanese society, there are four castes, he explains, making me write them down (“Short pencil better than long memory, Mr Tony”): “*dung ju*, aristocracy; *chejey*, middle class; *khochi penchen*, working class; and *drapa*, servants.” The family living in this house is *dung ju*, and *dung ju* is rooted in “*Tshering tshrishung dretsum*,” meaning “saintly stock.” *Angay Sonam* is the lady

of the house and mother of the absent dasho, Karma Geley, who is advisor to the present King and “a renowned person in country since second King.” I nod, jotting down the unfamiliar words as he spells them, and realise that we are privileged to be guests here. It surprises me to hear that Bhutan has a caste system, and I assume it belongs more to feudal times. The stratification in Bhutanese society today seems to have to do with professional status, and I recall how the maintenance staff who fixed our roof in Kandisor deferred to Ugyen and Karma and how Mr Namgay deferred to Dr Tenzin. It is pleasing that a Bhutanese of humble origins, like Tenzin Dorji, can rise through the ranks and become a college principal, even a national councillor.

Mr Namgay takes us down to meet Angay, saying that he has told her about our project. I find her leaning on her walking stick in front of the house. I can see she is old, but I would not have guessed eighty-nine. Angay Sonam’s eyes are clear and bright, her hearing good, her voice steady and her hair more grey than white. She is obviously proud to be Bhutanese, judging by her fine quality kira, pinned at the shoulder with silver brooches. The rings on her fingers and bronze or gold bracelet on her wrist may be markers of her caste. I have not seen this much jewellery on a Bhutanese person before, but it does not seem ostentatious on this woman. The way her earrings drag down the earlobes makes me think of Lord Buddha.

“*Nami samé kadrinche*,” I say, bowing my head, grateful to her for opening her doors to so many strangers.

Angay seizes my hand and presses it to her head. I am taken aback. No Bhutanese has ever done that before. I wonder if I should do the same with hers, but then figure that it is her way of giving us her blessing. Unsure of what to say, I ask her the secret to a long life. Mr Namgay translates. Angay giggles and answers without hesitation.

“She say she walk up and down, day by day.”

Putting my bag on the bus before we begin our run to Jakar, I dig out the journal I kept for 2006. I remember scribbling down the words of a reincarnated lama who came to Sherading and gave a talk on the brevity of life and on happiness.

This life is short. The future life is long. We have already wasted half of our life. We all do bad karmas to get happiness, to get a nice home, more money, more pleasure. It is very stupid. We are accumulating a lot of bad karmas to have happiness. Even the animals, the ants, keeping busy jumping around, they also want to be free from suffering. All sentient beings are busy wanting happiness. That's how we survive in this world. From the point of view from spiritual path, it is stupid. Life is short. Happiness is impermanent. It is like dew on the grass.

Chapter 7

Bumpy Road to Wangdi

The practice of the “middle way” in daily life is manifested in two features of East Asian communication: emotional control and avoidance of aggressive behaviors. Through self-discipline and self-restraint emotional control is considered the responsibility of cultivated persons. Showing raw emotion threatens the principle of the “middle way.” In addition, the emphasis on self-discipline and self-restraint leads to the avoidance of showing aggressive behaviors in the process of interaction. Showing aggressive behaviors immediately violates the principle of compassion and harmony.

“Buddhist Perspectives and Human Communication” (2003)
Rueyling Chuang and Guo-Ming Chen

By the time the district administrator, the chief justice, the chief of police, a senior monk, a representative of the business community, the Telecom manager and the Tara-thon event coordinator have delivered their speeches, the “Long Distance Dozen,” swollen with *shamdey* and *suja* and shivering in their Tara T-shirts, are ready to make a dash into the bushes. The runners perch on the edges of their seats outside the Royal Pavilion, arms folded, legs crossed, gnawing their knuckles and nodding seriously. Heavy rain pummelled Trongsa last night, and the temperature has dipped. Slugs of grey cloud creep up from the Mangde valley and curl over the highway.

“YO-YAAH!” yells the dzongdag finally and charges off down the hill in the direction of Thimphu, much to the delight of the betel-chewing women minding their vegetables at the market nearby.

The chief of police takes off after him, followed soon after by the Telecom manager, three giggling market vendors in flapping flip-flops, a Sherading alumna who served us *kewadatse* and *keptang* in her hotel last night, a man in his early twenties with long, wavy hair in a red gho and white pumps, a gang of whooping children and four barking dogs. Having irrigated the bushes, Team Tara-thon gives

chase. It is Day 24 of our ultra-marathon, and we must descend seven kilometres from Trongsa to the Mangde Chhu, cross a bridge and then climb fifteen to Dr Tenzin's home village, Tangsibi, on the far side of the valley.

A kilometre from town, we discover the *dzongdag* doubled over, gasping for breath, gho unravelled over his knees, a big smile on his red face. I clap him on the back and congratulate him on being the first district administrator to run a stretch of the Tara-thon. He snorts and mutters something about putting on a few pounds in recent years. Like the hotelier, he was once a student at the "Peak of Learning" and has treated us, during our two-day stay in Trongsa, like visiting royalty. He unlocked the Royal Pavilion, birth place of the third Druk Gyalpo, and, for the first time since leaving Kandisor, we got the chance to sleep on beds with mattresses, pillows and duvets, read under electric lights and wash in hot water.

Leaving our new acquaintances to walk back to town, we descend further, and I feel a rush of affection for the team as we settle into a steady pace. They might have stampeded from town, whizzed past the winded Trongsans and made for the river. Instead, despite the chilly conditions, they slowed down, linked arms with the women and ruffled the little boys' hair. Ugyen Pema and Tiger stopped at the side of the road and waved everyone onward, yelling "You can do! You can do!" Even Sonam Tshering with his elasticised stocking and Norbu with his bandaged calves seemed to forget their injuries and join in the fun. How much poorer this experience would have been, I think, if Sonia and I had set out from Kandisor alone.

Half an hour after crossing the Mangde Chhu, cloud engulfs us. The road narrows, and rock towers over us once again – although here, white paint splats on the parts that jut out warn loaded trucks. After the commotion of our departure, we are suddenly and eerily alone, listening to each other's slapping soles and Yana's clicking toenails. At a bend where the old highway intersects with the new, we stop

to look back at the dzong. It is hard to make out and seems, leached of colour, like a cheap household ornament. I wonder whether Sonia and I will ever again lay eyes on Bhutan's grandest fortress. Another half hour of running and a mustard-coloured apparition appears. For a moment, I am flummoxed. Wangchuck, ten metres ahead of me, starts skipping from side to side, and I stub my toe on something hard. Smashed rocks and lumps of earth, hairy with plant roots, litter the road. The apparition materialises into an inert excavator with a hydraulic arm and a bucket, squatting on a shelf of shattered rock. Road widening. It seems like a futile task. Surely dynamite would be needed here.

The gradient eases, and a brisk wind shreds the cloud. We leave the Mangde valley, and the highway resumes its westerly course. Another forty-five minutes of twists and turns, and a line of houses comes into view, some looking distinctly familiar. One belongs to Dr Tenzin's sister. Our run for the day ends in front of a new temple, its woodwork yet to be enlivened by paint. This was no more than a stack of timber when Sonia and I first visited.

The students, driver and cook will unroll their bedding in the temple, declares Mr Namgay. Sir Tony, Madam Sonia and he will stay with Dr Tenzin's niece in the house next door. He introduces us to a shy woman in her late twenties called Sonam Pelden. With three rambunctious kids and a baby to look after, she must be earning good karma by welcoming guests into her house while her husband is away on business. She is also clearly a resourceful woman as she has wrapped a wire cage around the bukkari to prevent her three- and four-year-olds from burning their fingers on the metal. She occupies the eight-year-old with laundry duties, the soapy clothes going in a large enamel basin on the floor, the child climbing in barefoot and stamping the dirt out of them. As the children crawl and leapfrog over our bags, shrieking ecstatically through the evening, and the mother suckles her tearful baby, I wonder at such a life. Sonia and I have decided

not to have any children. We value too much our liberty, the freedom we have to drop everything in Canada and travel. The irony of the cause we have chosen for our run is not lost on me as I visit the bathroom and find a washbasin full of vomit. In truth, I find kids bothersome and enervating, a strain on the nerves. I think back to the ball banging on our roof in Kandisor, kicked over our fence repeatedly by the kids playing soccer. Weren't we going to raise money to buy Sherading a garbage incinerator or kennels for the strays?

After dinner, Ngawang making enough to feed Sonam and her children as well as the team, the village *gup* drops by. He has heard of our project and passed the hat around Tangsibi. The Tara accountant gives him a puzzled look. *Ngapcha*, he said, didn't he? Five hundred ngultrum. He has given her eight. The three hundred extra, he explains, is a contribution from a neighbouring village.

"Ting karmo tshu la tshu. Sa nagpo gome ge joy," he says before leaving.

Mr Namgay translates. "Mark the distance by the cloud. Measure the distance by footstep.' In old time, they look at cloud and mark their day for walk. Then they measure it with footstep."

*

Travelling by bus or by car on a long journey, you get only a vague sense of the land. You sit in your seat and doze for much of the time or stare vacantly out the window, images flashing in front of your eyes quickly replaced by others, until everything becomes a blur. Only the sudden appearance of an oddity jolts you. Here, it might be grey langurs leaping between trees, a cow on the road or a roadside shrine. I thought the sixty-one kilometres from the Mangde Chhu, another low point on our run, to Pele-La were unrelenting ascent. Running, I realise that the nineteen-kilometre stretch to Chendebji, our next stop, is, in fact, undulating.

Today, I am with Sonam Rigzin, who never rushes and has so far avoided injury. He has discovered fun on the Tara-thon, he says, and gives me a summary of his new life.

“We Tara-thonners must eat dal and *chana* every morning for breakfast, run for hours and get exhausted, then eat potato and rice for lunch, the same every time. Then we do painful blue-legging in river because Sar says it is good for us. After dinner – that is same one as lunch – we hang around camp after 7pm with nothing to do. Monotonous and fun.”

I ask him if he has read any of the books from the box. Yes, Daphne du Maurier’s *The Birds*, he assures me.

“But it doesn’t make any sense, Sar. Why do the birds attack the people?” It seems bizarre to me too, I tell him, imagining laughingthrushes descending from the trees and laughing uproariously while pecking our ears.

We pass through tiny villages with curious names like Sakhachew (“meaning is ‘forehead on the ground,’ Sar”), Banglapokto (“hilltop house”) and Serphuchen (“gold mountain”). Streams erupt from the verge and splatter down on the road, gather themselves, then gurgle under it. In a car, I probably wouldn’t have paid much heed to dull cracking sounds coming from under the wheels. Running, I see that the villagers have laid bamboo canes out over the road. Flattened by passing cars, these will then be woven into fences or mats, Sonam informs me. I wonder how long the villagers have to wait for the bamboo to be crushed. Only two vehicles have passed us this morning.

As we coast along, I reflect on the house call Sonia and I made after breakfast. Doctor Tenzin’s sister wasn’t at home, just her disabled husband Kezang and their daughter Jangchub. We hadn’t seen the family since the puja last year and wished to bid them farewell. Mr Namgay decided to tag along.

“Yalama!” exclaimed Kezang, spotting Mr Namgay. “Am I dreaming?”

The two hadn't met since the 1970s when they served together in the Royal Body Guard. It was a happy and a sad reunion. After leaving the army, Kezang had become a high school teacher, he told us, and then a headmaster. But something was wrong. He had increasing trouble getting out of bed in the mornings and found he was losing control of parts of his body. After a year of stiffening up and stumbling around with a cane, he was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy and had to resign. He got compensation for lost earnings from the government at first, but that dried up, and he had to look to his son-in-law for support. Paralysed now from the neck down, but alert mentally, Kezang was fully able to reflect on his lamentable situation.

“Look at me, stuck here in this corner. What an awful life! Can't get a proper night's sleep, relying on my family to feed and dress me, unable to do anything for them in return. Horrible!”

Mr Namgay seemed close to tears, and stuffed a five-hundred-ngultrum note in his old friend's gho. Just one organisation assists disabled people in Bhutan and this only gives vocational training to youngsters, so they can enter the workforce. It is up to the family and the community to look after their physically and mentally handicapped, belief in karma helping the Bhutanese to do so with compassion. We spent half an hour drinking tea with Kezang, Jangchub sitting on her knees at his side, tipping the liquid into his mouth and wiping his chin. From time to time, at his bidding, she seized him under the armpits, hoisted him off the floor and unwound his wasted legs.

“We are so lucky,” I muttered to Mr Namgay as we walked down the dirt path back to the road. It was the only thing I could think of to say.

At Chendebji, Mr Namgay runs into another one-time army buddy and, fortunately, this is a happier encounter for him. Jamba is a cheery, wrinkle-eyed seventy-year-old who served in the Guard for the third and fourth kings. His job

now is to look after one of the three most sacred Nepali-style chortens in the Kingdom. Gomchen Drub Zhidhe, a renowned *drupthop* or master meditator, vanquished here two demonesses in the habit of snatching travellers from the road and devouring them. A great Buddhist lama then built a twenty-metre-high chorten to mark the spot, taking the model from Bepo in Nepal. A Nepali chorten differs from a Bhutanese one in that it is dome-shaped rather than square and has a stepped spire decorated with a pair of eyes. Jamba gives us permission to sleep in the Royal Pavilion facing the chorten, which, with its missing fourth wall, is more like a stage in a theatre. The pinched, gold-and-black eyes of the Buddha will watch over us while we sleep.

Before dinner, I go blue-legging with Yeshey. As our team leader is still inclined to run at the back of the pack, I ask him how the tail-end Charlies are doing. Are they going to make it to Thimphu? Should they take a day or two off and ride in the bus? What about Sonam Tshering with his pulled muscle? With two mountain passes still to cross, Sonia and I think that the cumulative strains of three and a half weeks of running may get the better of our weakest runners.

Things are fine at the moment, Yeshey assures me. “They can bear. Better if Sar leave them be right now as they are worry to be sent home. We take turn to run with Sonam. When he suffer, we say, ‘*Khemi, atis ra in, betsu!*’ Just a few more minute, you can do!”

I nod. While it would be wonderful for the entire team to run all the way to the capital, it would be irresponsible of Sonia, Mr Namgay and me to let our students soldier on in pain till they drop and then have to spend three months after the Tara-thon recuperating. Sherading College has placed ten students in our charge. Singye Namgyel would be less than impressed if we returned damaged goods. Before leaving the college, the director asked me whether I had thought about health and safety. I resolve to keep an eye on our slowest runners in the new

day. The severest section of the climb to Pele-La begins, no doubt, around the next corner.

Judging by the lively chatter around camp, team morale remains high. Mr Namgay wanders off, counting his prayer beads, and Sonia and I sit with the students, she encouraging those with “paining” legs to draw close to the fire and knead their muscles. “Look, like this,” she demonstrates once again, squeezing analgesic cream into the palm of her hand and working it into her own left thigh. As well as Tara accountant, she has become the Tara nurse, the boys coming to her for help with all manner of complaints (“Not just knee and feet problems,” she tells me, “but headaches, altitude sickness, stomach aches, even mouth ulcers”). She hands out Ibuprofen for headaches and tells them to stop sneaking extra chilli peppers into their meals. Conversation round the fire is generally in Dzongkha, but this evening, out of deference to us, or, perhaps, because we have become more intimate after twenty-five days on the road together, it is in English.

“How much training did you really do for this event? Sonia asks, shaking her head and clucking as those massaging their legs whimper and moan.

“I ran ten kilometres in the morning and ten again in the evenings.” Tee is the first to answer. “Then, after a few weeks, I increase morning run to twenty kilometre.”

“I did some training runs in the mornings,” offers Sonam Rigzin quietly, “and I took eggs and chickpea and milk every evening.”

“I didn’t do *any* training for this Tara-thon!” Tiger says, rocking forward and back and grinning.

I rub my eyes. Sonia and I should have done more in Kandisor to whip our team into shape. After the three-day trial in September, some of the selected showed up for our pre-dawn training runs, but most did not. We might have

established a training routine before classes ended and the students went home to revise for their exams and insisted they stick to it.

“But,” adds Tiger, serious now, “when I was young boy, I run ten kilometres every day to school and back.” Like Haile Gabrselassie, the boy who became a running legend because he didn’t want to be late for school.

Yeshey admits to loathing running at school, but says he happily got in the habit of doing two hours a day to train for the Tara-thon. Ugyen Leki recollects how he used to chase after his father’s cows when he was a boy. He also didn’t like running much at school. He tells a story about helping a friend in his class to finish a race.

“I switch between pushing him and pulling him. He was twentieth in line at halfway and completely exhausted, but, with my help, he finish in fifth position.”

I imagine him dragging his pal along by the waistband of his shorts. Sonia, noticing how Ugyen Leki likes to zip away ahead of the pack each morning, has thought of a new nickname for him: “Road Runner.” He had never heard of the bird or the cartoon, but seems to like this better than “Living Skeleton.” Yeshey also has a nickname now. He is “Coco,” apparently, meaning egg, the team having decided that he is the only one to have put on weight since we left Kandisor.

As dusk darkens the mountains and the stars freckle the sky, conversation flicks from Bollywood movies to life on other planets to our arrival in Thimphu to wildlife programmes on television. Wangchuck asks us about our travels, and Sonia describes the visit we made in 1997 to Emeishan, one of China’s most sacred mountains.

“We had to climb three thousand steps to reach the summit, and our thighs hurt a lot on the second and third days, but we made it to the top. We stayed in temples on the way, washed in streams and had tea with the monks. Oh, and on the first day, a monkey tried to steal Tony’s lunch.”

“That’s right, a hairy baboon with a pink bottom, an ugly brute,” I say, picking up the story. “He was on the stairs above, snarling, so I took off my daypack and held it in front of me for protection. But the baboon grabbed it, and, well, we had a tug-of-war! I carried a big stick with me after that.”

Laughter. The students appreciate this anecdote far more than the joke I told at camp three nights ago.

“China is more development country, isn’t it, Ma’am?” Norbu asks. Sonia has got to know Norbu better than I as he continues to have trouble with his calves and heels and is on her daily leg-massage detail.

“We were there when China was modernising,” she replies, after thinking for a bit. “There was a lot of construction and tall cranes and dust. The air was very dirty. Some parts of China, the big cities, were changing fast, but life in the countryside was still primitive. I think China still has a long way to go to raise the living standards of the villagers.”

“It is the same like in India,” Phuntsho says.

“What do you think about the way Bhutan is changing now His Majesty is stepping down?” I ask. “Are you worried about the future?”

“We are worry that there will be strikes, revolts, corruptions and demonstrations like we can see on television in India,” Ugyen Leki offers, after a short silence.

“I felt sorry to hear His Majesty is stepping down,” says Wangchuck. “We were happy and enjoy peace and prosperity under his reign.”

“If His Majesty decide that it is time for Bhutan to become democracy, then it is time,” Yeshey says philosophically. “Gross National Happiness is the guiding principle for our development. It is like while we fly higher, yet we are mindful keeping our shadow grounded.”

In the twenty-two months Sonia and I have been in Bhutan, I have not once heard criticism of the King. “Do you think His Majesty is right to pass the crown to his son?” “Do you think the Bhutanese should go to the polls and elect their own government?” we asked our Bhutanese colleagues at Sherading. “We were all very surprise when His Majesty announce he is stepping down,” Ugyen Dendup admitted, “but he know what is best for us.” “We repose faith in fourth King and fifth King,” Mr Namgay said levelly. “The farmer in country don’t know what to do. When they vote, they just choose favourite colour!” remarked Sonam Wangdi, laughing. Dr Tenzin said he found the fourth King’s abdication hard to accept, but thought his son mature enough to take over. “He will be on the throne at the prime of life and able to display his leadership at this time of starting a new era.”

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Ten kilometres west of Chendebji, the highway dips to a bridge crossing the Chendebji Chhu and a cluster of roadside shops and restaurants called Chazam. Buses from Thimphu or from Jakar like to stop here, the drivers giving their passengers twenty minutes to gulp down noodles and suja or purchase dried river weed, for which the spot is known. We also pause on our day’s run before attacking a seventeen-kilometre climb to Pele-La on the far bank. Noticing that the Tara biscuit box is practically empty, I buy every packet the shops have, and Sonia searches for river weed, so Ngawang can make soup at the pass. The word is it has snowed up there.

We shuffle off in a tight pack, no one wishing to forge ahead, and I enjoy the slow pace and sense of camaraderie, the twelve of us breathing roughly in time, our feet pattering on the tarmac in near-unison. I look to my left and right to see if the students are following the advice I gave in Trongsa: when running uphill, keep your eyes on the road about six metres ahead; do not look at the horizon or you will never get there. Sonam Rigzin, I see, is on the shoulder of Yeshey,

Wangchuck beside Tee. Phuntsho shadows the two Ugyens. Their eyes are less on the road than on their partners. They appear to be tuning into each other's movements, harmonising. I haven't mentioned this as a technique and, as far as I know, neither has Sonia. I think of drafting during a cycle race, letting the leader cut the air and do the hard work, then switching round.

We pass a solitary general store to our left with an ejaculating phallus painted in bright colours on the front. Arriving from the west on his peregrinations in the fifteenth century, subduing demons along the way with the "Flaming Thunderbolt of Wisdom" dangling between his legs, the Divine Madman stopped to ask an old man what villages lay in the valley east of Pele-La. "First Rukhubji, then Chendibji, and then Tangsbji," answered the man. As every village appeared to be home to a *bji* or demon, the Tantric master turned around and went back the way he had come. Around another bend and to our right, we pass a shallow cave adorned with a Buddha and some text in English. I have time to read the first three lines: "May all sentient beings be free from wanting to be praised, not wanting to be criticised, wanting to be happy, not wanting to be unhappy, wanting to gain ..."

In *Travellers and Magicians*, unable to find an onward ride to Thimphu, Dondup spends a night here, his determination to escape Bhutan beginning to waver, given that a fellow hitchhiker happens to be an attractive young woman from his home village.

The road creeps upwards, twisting torturously, and the team strings out, each pair of runners finding their own pace. At 6k from Chazam, I stop to catch my breath. Above, a line of conifers, crusted with snow and ice, gleams in the afternoon sun, and eight vultures draw figures-of-eight over the pass. Below is Rukhubji, a dozen houses stuck to the mountainside with silver tin roofs, a yellow roof on the temple, a red one on the school. In the far distance, the chorten at Chendebji sticks up like a cat's tooth. On the switchbacks, Phuntsho is coming my

way, Sonia following just behind, and Wangchuck and Tee are heading the opposite way on the loop below. I smile, remembering Dr Tenzin's words: "Where in the world you go in opposite directions to reach same place?" Sonam Tshering and Norbu bring up the rear several loops lower, trundling along behind Tiger, Yeshey and Yana. I fill my lungs and cup my hands to my mouth.

"GO, GO, YOU TARA-THONNERS!"

The night stop is at Longte, a clearing just below the snowline, six kilometres from Rukhubji, five from Pele-La. Tshering arrives last on wooden legs, drains a cup of suja and then, as Tiger did at Kori-La, promptly flakes out. Ugyen Leki takes the cook's patang, hacks off some live rhododendron branches and tosses them on the camp fire, a puja to petition the gods of the pass not to send snow. A band of cowherds with sculpted calves and firewood strapped to their backs joins us early evening and we serve them tea – a chance visit, it would seem, until Mr Namgay informs me that the gup of Rukhubji bade them bring us the wood. Maybe the Divine Madman would have enjoyed a hospitable welcome after all.

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No vultures swoop down and carry off our stragglers on our ascent through grassy barrens and dwarf bamboo to Pele-La the next day. Ten smiling students gather for a photograph by the chorten marking the saddle while a sangphu Mr Namgay has lit spews smoke. Luck remains with us. There are no signs of fresh snow on the ground after all, and the sky remains clear. Pausing before beginning the descent to peer west through a gap in the moss-draped hemlocks, I see a row of ragged, white teeth spanning the horizon, Jumolhari the most incisor-like, and a deeply furrowed land beneath, fins of brown rock emerging from forest that, from this perspective, resembles lichen. There is no sign of the lateral road, but, about fifty kilometres

away as the crow flies, tucked away in one of the folds, is the capital city. If everything goes according to plan, we will arrive there in nine days.

Team Tara-thon strings out once again, and I position myself somewhere between the hares and tortoises. Running alone, I try to recover the rhythm I had coming down from Thrumshing-La, transcend my body and let my thoughts drift, making the seventeen kilometres to Nobding Lower Secondary School, our destination for the day, sail by unnoticed. The highway prevents this: I keep stumbling. The west side of the pass would appear to see worse weather than the east. The tarmac is rutted, pot-holed and, in some places, absent. We run over bare sections of gravel and stones, and sharp rocks pressing through the thin soles of my Fastwitches make me grimace. When I reach the bus at 6k, I hop aboard and switch to my sturdier running shoes. The temperature steadily rises as we descend further, and hemlock, yew, cypress and juniper give way to oak, maple, birch and alder.

“Up here now! Welcome. This my restaurant.”

A young man in a blue-and-red checked gho is suddenly at the side of the highway, waving his arms. He wants me to divert up a side road to a building decorated with phalluses. I slow down, opening my mouth to protest, say kadrinche and explain that we are bound for Nobding, but then notice the name of the village written on a sign to one side of the building and four Tara-hares drinking tea. Three minutes later, I am with them, holding a china cup in one hand and a plate of desi in the other. Our host is Kinley, the village chief. The refreshments, he says, are courtesy of the Wangdi DEO, part of an official welcome to the dzongkhag. If this is the official reception, then where is Mr Namgay? The bus, I know, is ahead of us. Forty-five minutes later, when everyone has arrived, we jog down into the village and meet it on its way up.

“What happen? We wait at the school for you,” splutters the event coordinator from the passenger seat, his arms folded over his chest. He orders Kezang to turn around.

We follow the bus for about half a kilometre until it pulls in through a gate in a dismantled perimeter wall. Nobding Lower Secondary is clearly undergoing repairs, although no workmen are visible. Smashed concrete slabs and masonry rubble sit on a ring-less basketball court in front of the entrance. There are deep pits in the ground and exposed water pipes. The dormitory resembles the one at Mongar High School. Sonia asks Mr Namgay if the kitchen functions and whether there is flowing water.

“Just you ... I will arrange all,” he replies. “Mr Tony, your living quarter is this way.”

He leads us to an office with a sheet of blue canvas for a ceiling. The furniture inside is in disarray and covered in dust. We can unroll our sleeping mats on the floor, he suggests, between the filing cabinet and the desk.

“Tonight, Mr Namgay, we’ve been invited by the gup to eat at the restaurant up the road,” I say, relaying an invitation from Kinley. He nods silently and marches off.

An hour later, Kezang knocks on the door. Mr Namgay has got angry with him, he says, about taking the team up to the restaurant this evening by bus.

“He say it waste of petrol, Sar.”

I sigh. “The students ran twenty-two kilometres today, and they have twenty-six to do tomorrow,” I reply. “Let’s drive up.”

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“I could *kill* that fucking Mr Namgay!” Sonia hisses, bursting in through the door the following day, face red, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I stop packing my bag and look at her, stunned.

“Why? What happened? What did he say to you?”

She opens her mouth to answer, then changes her mind and shakes her head.

“I, I ... Just give me five minutes, okay?”

She closes her eyes and sighs, then reaches down and scoops her sleeping bag off the floor and stuffs it viciously into its compression sack, pulling hard on the straps. She pauses for a moment to mutter something obscene in French, then starts rolling up her sleeping mat, but stops again and tosses it aside. She stands up and looks about the room, sees the savaged chip packet on the desk, the cause of last night’s disturbance, walks over and smacks it to the floor. Nibbled potato crisps fly in all directions. I should have known not to leave food out. Once the rats had ripped open the packet in the early hours of the morning and scattered the contents, there was no point in getting up. The school has no electricity, and, in darkness, we would never have been able to clear up the mess. “If the food is on the desk,” my wife reasoned, “that probably means they won’t be chewing on our faces.” This observation made me think of Winston Smith’s torture in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

I thought we had made our peace with the event coordinator last night. Though he refused to ride with us in the bus to the restaurant, he clearly enjoyed the company of the gup and the fine dinner of red rice, potato curry and beef. “The RBG doesn’t mind going on foot, hey, Mr Namgay?” I said at the end of the evening with a chuckle. He rode back to the school with us in the bus.

Sonia tells me about the conversation she had with him this morning. One of the students had recommended a suitable place to camp near Khelakha, another village on the road to Wangdi Phodrang, so she mentioned this to Mr Namgay.

““Student should come to me,”” he said. ““If ten people give opinion, then nothing arrange.”” Sonia manages a passable impersonation of the coach, with the same gravelly, aphoristic delivery. “I said to him, I said, ‘Can’t we at least discuss

it?’ No. He would arrange our night stops, he replied. That was that. I should concern myself with my own affairs. Well, I just lost it. I said, ‘Why can’t you communicate with me?’”

I pick up the chip packet and scrunch it up into a ball.

“Let’s go and talk to him.”

Day 28 of the Tara-thon is overcast and surprisingly muggy, given that we were above the snowline yesterday. The students are on the basketball court, packing their bags and loading the billy cans onto the roof of the bus. The fifteen stray dogs that hung around at breakfast time are sitting watching them, noses twitching. Judging by the way they competed for scraps earlier, they are famished now the school mess is closed for winter recess.

“Mr Namgay, may I have a word with you?” I steer him to one side. “Sonia is pretty upset. Did you have an argument with ...”

“I am just old man!” he yells. “No one listen to me!”

“Listen, we need to ...” My own temper flares, but I bite my lip, remembering what happened in Mongar. I indicate that we should move further off. “Look, we are all under a lot of stress at present, but we have a job to do here, and we need to do it together.” I look over my shoulder at the students. They are pretending not to notice. “Could you apologise to Sonia, please?”

Mr Namgay pouts and folds his arms. I can tell without looking at the team that all activity has come to a standstill.

“Gather round for a minute, would you?” I say, walking over to the bus.

Looking around the circle of faces, I realise that we are at a critical point in our run: our destination appears to be within striking distance, yet we still have over a hundred kilometres left and one tall pass to conquer. I have no idea what to say beyond obvious things to boost morale, so I dig into my past and tell a story about crossing the Indian Ocean on a sailing yacht.

“... in the sixth month of our seven at sea, quarrels broke out among the crew. We were all tired and starting to get on each other’s nerves. But we had a job to do. We had to deliver the boat to its owner in Europe. He was counting on us to complete our voyage, you see.”

Mr Namgay follows with a speech on sports psychology. Sonia decides that enough has been said for one morning, and goes in search of Yana.

The day’s run is long, the tortoises taking forever to get down the mountain. At the end of the final leg, the bus stopping, for some reason, after ten kilometres rather than the usual six, the team has to wait an hour and a quarter for Tshering to catch up. Concerned, Sonia suggests it backtrack and find him. I put this to Mr Namgay, who reluctantly agrees. When Sonam finally appears, bus trundling along at walking pace behind him, I see I was mistaken. Our slowest runner was not alone. One hare, Ugyen Pema, had hung back to run with him, water bottle on a strap slung over his shoulder.

Our camp for the night is not at the village of Khelakha, but beside a steel bridge built by the Japanese to carry the lateral road over the Dang Chhu. Sonia has the lads go blue-legging (“No excuses! There’s no ice in the water here!”). Despite the tensions of the morning and the hours of running, they seem to be in good spirits, she reports back, now that we are just thirteen kilometres from Wangdi Phodrang. On our day off there, she would like half the team to collect donations around town while the other half does the same in Punaka, home to one of the Kingdom’s largest dzongs. The second group will need Kezang to take them as Punaka is twenty-one kilometres from Wangdi. I try to patch things up with Mr Namgay as he should really approve of such an initiative.

“Well, Mr Tony, what to do?” he says morosely. “Madam, she have her own mind.”

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Wangdi seems to me less like a town than a refuelling depot. Buses, Tata trucks and yellow taxi cabs hover around two battered Bharat Petroleum pumps that look like one-armed robots holding guns to their heads. More taxis circle the petrol station, revving their engines and waiting for a turn. Like Jakar and Trongsa, Wangdi Phodrang is a junctural town: go north for Punaka, the former capital; go north a bit and then west to get to Thimphu; head south for Sarpang and the Indian border; head east for Mongar and Trashigang. The name means “the palace where the four directions are gathered.” Legend has it that, in the seventeenth century, Yeshe Goenpo, the guardian spirit of Bhutan, told the Shabdrung to go to a rocky spur overlooking two rivers and build a fortress where he saw ravens fly off in four directions.

Apart from the dzong, there are, apparently, some 230 businesses crammed onto this narrow promontory overlooking the meeting point of the Dang and Puna Tsang rivers. There have been efforts to relocate the town to a fifteen-hectare area of flatter ground to the side, where street lights, a two-lane road and parking spaces have been constructed in readiness. Unfortunately, only 138 plots of land are available there. Allocating these has caused dispute and complaints to the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement, and Bajothang, as the new town is called, has been waiting for occupancy since October, 2005. With its rectangles of wild flowers, it resembles an elaborate ornamental garden.

Shabby stores line the oil-streaked dirt road, each with a tin roof weighed down by stones and an overflowing garbage pail out front. A sign on one store says, “Tharpa Lhamo’s Gift Shop and Bar”; another reads, “Deki General Cum Bar Shop.” As the vehicles shunt this way and that, dust and fumes mingle, and I start coughing. With the heat, it feels like being back in India. Once again, we have switched climates. Three days ago, we were listening to the creak of ice-crusty pines and blowing on our fingers; now, sun-baked cacti border the road and sweat

darkens our arm-pits. Blissfully, we did not have to jog around the town twice with the dzongdag and his administrative assistant when we arrived yesterday, waving at everyone and smiling, like in Mongar. Mr Namgay stopped us at Wangdi Middle Secondary on the edge of town, where the dzongdag and his staff were also waiting.

Five Tara-thonners, dressed in their ghos but smelling of sweat, disperse to collect donations. I head back to the school to see if I can do laundry, but find once again that there is no water. The Assistant DEO said yesterday that the pipes were being repaired, but assured us the water would be back “after some time.” Twenty-four hours have passed. I consider hiking down to one of the rivers to do the chore, but decide instead to explore the school. Like others we have stayed at, there are philosophical messages on wooden signs around the grounds and on posters taped to the walls indoors (“A man educated yesterday stops learning today will be uneducated tomorrow,” “He who learns and makes no use of his learning is a beast of burden with a load of books”), and, as at Sherading, labels on the trees: *prunus persica* (peach), *magnifira indica* (mango) and *punica granatum* (pomegranate). In one of the classrooms, I come across some dog-eared textbooks, tossed on the floor. On the front of one, there is a picture of a family outside their house, the father hanging washing out on the line, the mother sitting under a tree making a basket, their kids playing on the grass. “Gross National Happiness” is written above the picture, “Small is Beautiful” below it. I open the book:

Every society has evolved its own ways of preparing its younger members for adulthood primarily through an education process, now generally known as family life education. Traditionally, most elements of family life education have been informal, taking place in the home ...

When I go back outside, I see Mr Namgay snoozing in a plastic chair in the shade, head slumped on his chest, prayer beads dangling from his hand. I haven't seen him like this before. Maybe the heat got to him. Maybe he is feeling his age. It can't be easy, retiring last month from Sherading after nearly two decades of service. I fear that Sonia and I have estranged this man, have failed to give him the sort of respect he clearly commands among his countrymen. A story he told me one afternoon at Sherading comes to mind. In 1994, he went to Hungary to take a soccer coaching course and met a young Israeli doing the same.

“Every morning when he see me, he say, ‘HEY, BHUTAN!’ in loud voice. Every morning, same: ‘HEY, BHUTAN!’ Like that. After few time, I say to him, ‘How old do you think I am?’ and he say nothing. He look at his feet. After that, he say, ‘Good morning, Mr Namgay, how are you today?’”

Before we set out on our run, I had assumed that Team Tara-thon would be one big happy family, united in its mission, Mr Namgay acting as a father figure, fixing problems and giving practical advice, drawing on his army training and his years as a sports coach. He has done a great job of arranging our night stops and hooking us up with dignitaries, but has not been involved with the students as much as I expected. He must have plenty to say on keeping a pair of legs in good running order. Perhaps he feels that Sonia has ousted him in that duty. I guess event coordinator and project leaders should have sat down together in Kandisor and discussed our respective roles. I realise too that I have spent too much time in my own head to pay heed to any signs of discord. And I really shouldn't have barked at him in front of the students in Mongar. Like in Japan, shaming an elder in public here is unforgivable.

A dark side of my self emerges when I turn on the tap in the school yard for the eighth time of the day and see water finally dribble out. Since breakfast, half a dozen boys have been hanging about the school, yelling “Hello! Hello!” and

“Wodsyaname?” incessantly, performing break-dancing moves around our legs and snatching things from our hands. They are nine or ten years old – too young for middle secondary – and, filthy and shoeless, look like the kind of children we are running for. The team has been tolerant. “They are very naughty boys,” Yeshey, the model of good behaviour, conceded when the urchins were climbing on his back and trying to steal his plate at lunchtime. As I fill my bucket with soapy water and put in the clothes, a boy with snot running down his face thrusts his hands in. I swat him away, but he is undeterred. In again go his hands. I seize him this time by the shirtfront, lift him off the ground and toss him across the yard. He lands hard on his behind and falls backwards, but is almost instantly on his feet again. His friends stop dashing about. The boy doesn’t cry, but there is shock in his face.

“Don’t. Do. That,” I say, wagging my finger.

He walks off, rubbing his bum, trailed by his gang, and I wonder again about our chosen cause. While it seems right to send town kids to school so that, in due course, they can take over their parents’ businesses and run them efficiently, is it such a good idea to educate village children? I think of the little boy with the cleft lip selling mandarins at the roadside near Lingmithang. Maybe he shouldn’t walk five hours to attend elementary school in Mongar. His parents own an orchard and probably rely on him to sell their crop to passersby. If he learns to add and subtract, read and write, his family will lose him. He will go to Thimphu, buy fancy shoes, a TV, a car. Educating village children will also mean more derelict paddy fields. I remember Dr Tenzin pointing these out in Tangsibi. Literate teenagers don’t want to do back-breaking work in the fields. Maybe what we are doing helps erode traditional ways and encourages migration to the towns. If kids go to school and learn their ABCs, will it be the old men who round up the yaks from the mountainsides?

And what of this charity marathon, this piece of transported Western culture we have imposed on the Bhutanese? Isn't it ludicrously out of context? The perception in the West is that the runner should be lauded for giving up his or her time and embracing hardship on behalf of the sick or less fortunate. Such willingness to suffer would appear to prove that the cause is just, the champion of it a worthy hero, and so people donate. But, for most Bhutanese, hardship is a daily reality. Far from seeing noble suffering, they may look on a supported run across the Kingdom as a peculiar form of indulgence, a kind of holiday: instead of working, we have the time and money to run. While it is true that Lyonpo Namgay Ngedup on his "Move for Health" demonstrated that a nation can get behind such a venture, the Bhutanese would probably have recognised how tough it was for a government minister with a pack on his shoulders to walk across the country. Isn't what we are doing more of a lark, a stunt?

Wringing my clothes out, I sense that I am no longer alone. Expecting to see a Tara-thonner back from collecting donations, I turn and find the urchin looking up at me. I shouldn't have lost my temper. He holds out his hand. In it is a cracked, white brick with rounded edges.

"Soap for Sar."

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In the evening, Sonia and the other half of the team return from Punaka with Nu. 10,000 from dzongkhag administration and Nu. 15,000 from the monk body. This goes with almost Nu. 50,000 received from the dzong, army, banks, post office and police in Wangdi. Another thirty-seven village kids get to go to school.

Chapter 8

Tea with Her Majesty

More than the run, it was to do with the climate and the mental preparations ... To adapt with the cleanliness, my own cleanliness, I had to wash in the ice-cold waters. Blue my legs, blue my nose! And Sar Tony has been always saying to me, 'The thing that doesn't kill you, but it's hard to bear, makes you stronger,' so I believe in that strength. I have come a long way in adapting to all the coldness, and now I am stronger compared to what I was thirty-five days ago.

Ugyen Leki (22nd January, 2008)
BBS interview

Our second day on the lateral road from Wangdi, with its sheltering oaks and cascading ferns, its rattly bridges and phallus-adorned bar-cum-restaurants, would be a joy if it weren't for the traffic. Taxi vans and tourist Land Rovers sweep by us, but more obnoxious are the Tata or Eicher dumper trucks, grinding their way laboriously up to Dochu-La. These are hauling sand from the Puna Tsang Chhu to Thimphu, where a frenzy of building is taking place. The newspaper reported in 2007 that there were 192 separate construction sites. Male Earth Rat Year will see the Bhutanese not only go to the polls for the first time and elect a government, but also celebrate a hundred years of monarchy and crown their fifth King. Changlimithang stadium alone, where most of the festivities will take place, apparently requires two thousand truckloads of sand for its makeover.

The trucks overtake us in threes or fours, spilling sand on the road and fouling the air with their exhaust fumes, making us cough and spit. Their racket causes spotted forktails feeding next to the streams to flee. The leaves on the trees nearest the road have turned black. I begin to dread the sound of a straining engine, echoing up from the valley. When the trucks are on the switchback below mine, I slow to barely a jog, pull my baseball cap down over my eyes and practise

breathing shallowly. As they pass, I run as close as possible to the edge of the road and either focus on the play of light and shadow on the tarmac ahead or look over my shoulder for glimpses of the Puna Tsang river and its beaches.

“Ahhh! You ... piece ... of frigging ...” Suddenly, I am in the bushes, snatching at plants, tripping over rocks. “What the hell ...?”

I look up and get a glimpse of a grinning brown head, a red bandanna, a hand holding a cigarette, then a blur of metal stanchions, sandy planks and spinning rear wheels. Smoke engulfs me, and I hold my breath. Caught off guard at a bend in the road. I turn round and stare stupidly as the truck clatters down the mountain, speed unchecked, tailgate clapping, wheels chucking up dust. Did the driver have the engine switched off? Then another truck comes, and another: Eicher, Tata, Eicher, Tata, returning from the capital to load up with more sand. The only thing slowing them down is the loaded trucks coming up from the river. I hope the other runners are watching out. There is no escaping this. Only one road goes to the capital, and we can't simply take the day off. We need to do twenty kilometres today to remain on schedule. It is January 21st. We have to be in Thimphu on the 24th to meet Her Majesty the Queen.

“Hang in there, lads! You're doing fine.”

Forced off the road a second time when two trucks coming from opposite directions block the way, I turn and see that Sonam Rigzin, Tee and Phuntsho are not far behind. Like me, they have slowed to a crawl, their arms barely swinging. I really couldn't blame any of the team for walking today. I expect to see tension on their faces as they pass by me. Instead, I see resignation. Laughingthrushes, cows, stray dogs, trucks: let them come, say their expressions. I recall Dr Shukla's cryptic remark when we were in the taxi in northern India: “Anything can come if you can expect.” Then I remember that, as a twenty-year-old, I used to run

alongside the busy A5 in England for miles, oblivious to the four lanes of traffic roaring by. The three runners pad past me, each nodding once and mouthing “Sar.”

There are no cries of “Suja! Suja!” from the team when we reach Menchhunang, our roadside camp for the night. Everyone is tired and thirsty. At breakfast this morning, the cook forgot to boil water to refill our jerry cans. I shook one of the empties at Mr Namgay when the bus halted at 6k in the hope that he would drive ahead and stock up at the next village. He nodded, acknowledging the problem, but, on our arrival at Thinleygang, had done nothing about it. I found him standing outside a shop-cum-bar with bottled water in the window, engaged in a lively conversation with the owner. Gravel-mouthed from breathing motor exhaust and dust, I snatched the kitty out of the glove compartment on the bus and promptly bought ten bottles of mineral water from the shopkeeper’s wife. Fortunately, Menchhunang, which is just a grassy lay-by with a chorten below the highway and a truckers’ canteen above it, has a water source.

Having put up our tent and helped out with chores, I sit down behind the chorten and try to gather my thoughts. I think about our stay last night at the newly erected Natural Resources Training Institute in Lobesa. Karma Lhendup, a former colleague of ours at Sherading but now a researcher at the institute, kindly unlocked the dormitories for us. Sonia and I suddenly found ourselves in the company of Western pop idols: a snarling, muscular Afro-American man with heavily tattooed arms called “50 Cent,” five boyish faces bathed in a golden light labelled “West Life,” a perfectly barbered Ronan Keating. I felt like ripping the posters from the walls or else sticking over them pictures of the red-necked cranes we beheld at Phobjika last winter, yaks with handlebar horns and bells on their necks, young monks in burgundy gowns playing soccer. I adjust my position, feeling the rough stones of the chorten pressing into my back. Has Druk Yul changed us, or will we quickly revert to our old ways once back in Canada? What

have we learned? A familiar cry comes from one of the trees, a monotonous *piao*, *piao*, *piao* that I used to loathe when sitting in my office at Sherading, trying to mark essays. I search the branches for a parrot-like bird with a yellowy-green body, an out-sized ebony head and a yellow beak. After Bhutan, will different things disturb us?

A vehicle grinds to an abrupt halt in the lay-by, worn-out brakes whining, folding passenger door clattering open. Yana starts barking. I glimpse a flash of colour as the great barbet shoots off. Suddenly, people are on either side of me, dashing through our campsite and into the bushes beyond. They jump in recklessly, snapping branches, hiking up their ghos or kiras. There is a pause and then deep sighs of relief. A child squats on the grass behind Mr Namgay's tent. I rise to my feet. A bus marked Pelyab Transport from Thimphu has pulled in behind ours and disgorged its passengers. The driver puts his feet up on the steering wheel and lights a cigarette. A window near the back opens and an instant noodle packet flutters out. After a few minutes, brushing themselves down, the passengers emerge from the bushes and make their way back to the road, sticking their heads in our tents as they go. A teenage boy with oiled hair reaches down and presses his thumb into my foam sleeping mat. An Indian mother with a stud in her nose snatches a baseball cap from her infant daughter and returns it to Ngawang. After ten minutes, a horn sounds, the passengers climb back on the bus and it thunders off to Wangdi. Before dusk, five more buses and three dumper trucks pause on their journeys.

I have a fitful night's sleep. A dog howling at the moon wakes me around midnight. I try burying my head in my sleeping bag, but it is no good. The doleful wail goes on and on and on. I unzip my sleeping bag, unzip the tent flap and scramble out into the night in my underpants. A cold wind blowing down the mountain from the pass makes the flap thrash about. The howler is sitting on a rock

outside the canteen, a large beast, but featureless in the dark. I dash to the road barefoot, pick up a stone and throw it hard. The dog doesn't budge, and I don't hear the stone land. So I pick up a handful of stones and fling them. Two smack the front of the building. The dog bolts.

"Tony? What's up?" I have woken Sonia. "What was that noise?"

"Fucking dog. Didn't you hear it?"

"Yana?"

"No, no, not Yana. One over the road outside the hut. Think I nailed it."

"Come to bed. You'll wake everyone up."

I stand by the chorten, fists balled, reluctant to move, staring at the rock beside the canteen, willing the creature to reappear. There were nights in Kandisor when I had to get up and toss a bucket of water at Mutu for howling outside our bedroom window.

"Tony?"

I crawl back in the tent and into my sleeping bag, heart thumping. I massage my temples and count to a hundred, trying to get my breathing under control. It takes me a good hour to fall asleep. I am in a road race with a thousand others, wearing a white bib with a number on it, waiting for the starter's gun. Bang. The lead pack shoots off, all knocking elbows and flicking heels, and I follow. Every second counts. But, after five hundred metres, the route takes an unexpected turn and heads into a shopping mall. Suddenly, we are dodging people carrying bulging plastic bags and drinking coffee from disposable cups. Which way now? There should be arrows. Where are the race marshals? Flustered, I look to left and right, then dash up a flight of stairs. More stores: Wal-Mart, Tim Hortons, a hair salon, a dollar store. Which way? Alone now, sprinting down a corridor, sharp right turn, down another corridor. Which way do I go? The clock is ticking. Up a down escalator, panting hard, shoving aside shoppers. Hey, buddy, watch what you're

doing! There must be a fire exit in this building somefuckingwhere. Another turn. Another corridor.

I wake up, shivering. It is still dark. I put on a T-shirt and stick my head out the tent. The dog is back on the rock, baying at the moon.

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“Sonam Tshering?”

“Here, Sar.”

“Let the others load the bus. You and Norbu start running now. Take a bottle of water with you, okay?”

“Yessar!”

“Ugyen Leki?”

“Sar?”

“It’s 6:15. You start at 6:45, okay, fifteen minutes before everyone else.”

“Sar.”

“Mr Namgay, let’s be out of here by 7:00 to beat the traffic. Can you make sure we have enough boiled water?”

Eighteen kilometres separate us from the final mountain pass. I should have thought before of having the slower runners begin the day’s run ahead of everyone else, especially when we are at high altitude and it is cold. It would have saved the hares having to wait around in shorts and T-shirts for the bus. It is ironic to find “Road Runner” now among the limpers. Jumping up and down to restore circulation after a lengthy bout of blue-legging in the Dang Chhu a few days ago, he pulled a hamstring. Yesterday, he made the mistake of wearing an old pair of running shoes, which made the injury worse. Sonia will have to find a new nickname for him.

I take off for Dochu-La, head crowded with thoughts. In Wangdi, Mr Namgay told Yeshey, Sonia and me that we would have to give speeches at the

reception in Thimphu. What am I to say to the Queen of Bhutan and representatives of her government? Something meaningful about the value of education, no doubt, but I cannot think of anything that doesn't sound contrived or insincere: "The new democratic Bhutan needs bright, young minds ..." "Education is the way forward ..." I have yet to set anything down on paper. Invading my head are ugly images of home. Where has development got us? Old-growth forest clear-cut, leaving eroded wastelands or genetically modified "replacement" conifers, planted for profit; thousands of square kilometres of open-pit mining in Alberta, the earth disfigured by monstrous shovels, Brobdingnagian trucks carting off tons of oil-rich sand, tailing ponds leaking toxins into rivers; town-edge shopping malls, promoting consumerism (and driving) with year-round "bargain sales"; fast-food restaurants serving substandard meals on use-once polystyrene plates and oversized, sugar-saturated sodas; violent video games; auto companies, subsidised by the government, turning out ever-larger polluters ... Is this what we mean by progress? I think back to sitting by the window at *Chez Cora* in Fredericton and watching the Dodge Rams and Nissan Titans growl by.

I speed up, but, after half a kilometre, begin to feel giddy. My arms are flapping about uselessly, no longer coordinating with my legs; I am lurching from side to side. *Ease up, for Chrissake!* I remember the mistake I made running up to Yongkola. I slow down and focus on taking regular breaths. *You're leaning too far forward.* I straighten up, shake the stiffness out of my fingers, windmill my arms. *And stop listening for bloody trucks!* I look about. Fewer oaks and ferns now. More pine trees with intricate moss-crusty trunks, the branches dipping to the ground and curling up like ladles. Flashes of pink: rhododendron flowers bursting into bloom. Near the streams, clumps of primroses with delicate violet flowers. I think again of the cow sticking its head through our front hedge in Kandisor and gobbling our roses, then of the flowerless shrub that grew outside my office and released a

perfume each evening as heady as lilac. I think of the flowerless parasitic orchids, spilling from a mossy branch, that Dr Tenzin pointed out to us on our hike with him last winter, of the crude, water-driven prayer wheels straddling streams that clunked and creaked as they turned.

“Do you want to see where I was born?” Dr Tenzin had asked us in Tangsibi.

He led Sonia and me for two hours along steep trails and through dense forest to a clearing, where there were three cows and a stone hut under a fig tree. His parents used to spend winters here with their cows, feeding them on fig leaves. Tenzin was born in a stone-walled paddock to one side. His older brother Norbu, who continued to look after the cows, was supposed to be there, but the hut was empty. Instead, we met one of Bhutan’s rare primates. Slender-limbed and long-tailed, it leapt from branch to branch at the edge of the clearing and then onto one ten metres above the hut, sending down a shower of leaves. There it squatted, resting an elbow on one knee, and observing us critically. While the golden fur covering its body and the halo of paler hair round its wrinkled, black face were striking, it was the expression on that face that was more so. The golden langur trained its red eyes on each of us in turn, then raised its head, wrinkled its nose and looked to the other side of the clearing. We were not, it appeared, a threat worth bothering about. I recall the intense feeling of privilege. Nature, for a change, was not in flight. It seemed like circumstances had allowed us to meet an extraordinary creature on equal terms.

The memory makes me think of a book in the bus book box written by T. Sangay Wangchuk, a Bhutanese raised by his grandmother in the countryside. *Seeing with the Third Eye* tells of the intimacy villagers have with their natural surroundings, of nature as a teacher. When barbets sing in the morning, young Sangay learned from Angay, it was time to take the cattle to the forest for grazing;

rain would come soon when Laughingthrushes descended to lower altitudes; following the example of dogs and cats, the villagers would eat grass to cure themselves of stomach-ache. “Through the Third Eye, one may see the symbiotic nature of human beings with other partners on this planet,” says Wangchuk. I think of the Târâyana emblem, a white hand holding a delicate, thin-stemmed flower. The hand might easily crush the flower, if it were to close, but there is an eye embedded in the palm, watching what is going on. “The time has come to see things through the Third Eye,” warns Wangchuk, speaking more broadly of humankind’s destructive tendencies, “so that its wisdom could also protect the other living beings,” and I am reminded of a line in an article written by Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki I used in my writing classes in Fredericton: “It is folly to forget our dependence on an intact ecosystem.”

A solitary figure is on the road ahead, running as if he has a pebble in his shoe. I close in on a skinny man with head bent, punching the air. Ugyen Leki is proving that he is still the Road Runner. None of his comrades has caught up with him, and he is only two kilometres from the saddle.

“Hello, Sar.”

Together we jog round the final bends and under parabolas of prayer flags, suspended from the trees, and I begin to recover my rhythm, arms swinging in time with my legs. Miraculously, no sweating sand trucks have passed by this morning. January 22nd must be an inauspicious day for transporting construction materials. Our destination becomes visible: an island of 108 red-and-white chortens.

“Try not to look wasted,” I urge Ugyen. “There may be a crowd up there.”

Mr Namgay said the mayor of Thimphu and a reporter from BBS would be at Dochu-La to greet us. We should, perhaps, appear to be conquerors of mountains rather than limpers and groaners. But, as Ugyen and I dash up the final ramp to the chortens just after midday, we find only five cheering women – two

matronly, three teenage – holding Thermos flasks and packets of biscuits. They introduce themselves as Ugyen Pema’s mother, aunt and sisters, up here from the city to welcome home the hero of the family. The suja is highly appreciated as the temperature is close now to zero, Ugyen and I are in T-shirts and shorts, and our bus has yet to arrive. We jog around the chortens and clap home the other runners to keep warm: Phuntsho, then Ugyen Pema, Wangchuk, Sonam Rigzin, Tiger, Yeshey, Sonia, Yana, Norbu, Tee, finally Sonam Tshering, who arrives at 1:20pm looking shattered, but breaks into a smile when the rest slap him on the back.

We spend the entire afternoon at the pass. The mayor presents us with khaddars and gives a speech, Ugyen Pema’s mother and aunt serve lunch and the reporter takes six of us aside for interviews. BBS has decided to make a documentary movie on the Tara-thon, and Chimi Rinzin wishes to shadow us to the capital with his cameraman.

“I remember when we were climbing up to Thrumshing-La, I was with our Tiger, and he was limping and I was limping, and we were wondering, ‘Are we going to make it?’” Sonia tells Chimi when asked to describe a particularly hard day. “And Tiger said, ‘Well, you know, Ma’am, when we reach Thimphu, we’ll have to do this and we’ll have to do that, and make sure of this and make sure of that. Oh, and we must stay together for an extra day to collect donations ...’ Well, it just blew me away! I was so impressed that he wasn’t thinking about his pain.”

“It was hard on my part because it used to be very early for me to wake and jog before class, and I thought maybe I shouldn’t do it,” Sonam Rigzin says, recalling his training in Kandisor. “But my conscience, it kept bugging me from inside. You are going to run for good cause. It is service from the heart. So I had to do it. I asked my friends to come and wake me, and we did it together in the dark.”

In the evening, we have two surprise visits. After the television interviews, we jog about a kilometre down from the pass and camp in a lay-by out of the wind.

With a towel under my arm, I walk to the nearest water source, a stream beside the road with a wooden gutter, making the water accessible to motorists. Getting a wash proves to be a slow business as the gutter is clogged with ice and there is only a dribble falling on my soapy head. A Land Cruiser passes. I turn my head and see brake lights. Someone is stopping at our campsite for suja. Having removed my shoes and socks and washed my legs, I return to camp, stamping my feet to get the blood going again.

“You missed Lyonpo, Mr Tony Sar,” says Yeshey.

“Lyonpo?”

“Lyonpo Jigme Y. Thinley, leader of DPT, maybe next prime minister of Bhutan. He gave donation of 5,000.”

I nod, happy about this, but disappointed that I didn’t get to shake his hand.

“Lyonpo say he saw crazy man taking bath in icy stream,” chips in Mr Namgay.

The second visitor is Nathalie Myer. We have kept in touch with her via email, reporting on our progress, but we didn’t expect to see her before arriving in Thimphu. We needn’t cook tonight, she says; we are to get in our bus and follow her car. Ten minutes later, we are in a plush tourist restaurant near Dochu-La, tucking into *phag-sha chem*, *kewadatse*, *shamudatse*, dal and mountains of rice. In a speech after dinner, Nathalie says how proud she is of our runners: they are a credit to the Kingdom and role models for the younger generation. While I take photographs, she rewards each runner with a reference letter from the Canadian Collaboration Office to present to future employers. She then calls on our team leader to accept a small, white cardboard box, tied with a blue ribbon, that might previously have held a cake. Yeshey unties the ribbon carefully and opens the box. Inside is a wad of money, the notes kept together with elastic bands: Nu. 100,000

for Project Tara-thon (\$2,666). We are flabbergasted. This is the largest donation we have received by far. Wide-eyed, each runner takes it in turn to hold the wad.

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There is another surprise waiting for us when we get up the following morning. The weather has finally turned. Snow patters the sides of our tents and coats the bus. During breakfast, the wind picks up. It becomes a race to get the pots clean and the tent pegs up before they disappear under a white blanket. The students run about in ecstasy, shrieking, chucking snowballs and dumping snow over one another's heads. Yana looks stupefied. Trashigang, his home town, would never have known snow.

We return to Dochu-La, run a lap around the chortens for luck, kicking the snow, and then begin our eighteen-kilometre descent into the Thimphu valley. For Sonia and me, it is like being back in Canada on a late November day during the first snowstorm of the season: dripping noses, numb fingers, wet feet. Sonia warns the boys to take it easy as they seem inclined to dash downhill, hollering; the last thing we want is for someone to fall and crack his skull (that would definitely not impress the Queen). The highway twists through snow-laden firs, and, save for the Tara bus, there is no traffic. But then, at about four kilometres from the saddle, we spot the mayor's 4WD, struggling up the road towards us, wheels skidding on icy patches. Concerned for our welfare, he has turned out once again from Thimphu to check we have not been snowed in. Touched, I thank him profusely, shake his hand and assure him all is well.

We remain for the day's run in a close pack, the "Long Distance (Baker's) Dozen," so BBS can film us. As we lose altitude, the wind dies and the snowflakes fatten, disintegrating when they hit the wet road. Our pace is slow, and the team sings. I am pleased to see them so exhilarated, the tense atmosphere of a few days ago forgotten, Yeshey wearing his red baseball cap marked "Tara-thon" back to

front, Tiger swinging his gloved hands across his body, Ugyen Pema loping along, Road Runner beetling, Tshering limping. Yana in “Please donate” bib, nails clicking, snow on his nose, weaves through our legs.

“Yana has been more than just a runner,” Sonia told Chimi Rinzin yesterday. “He has been the spirit of our team. Yana was the first to limp. When we had leg problems, we looked at Yana, and Yana was no longer limping, so we knew that we would recover too!”

“Are you the ones on BBS?” hollers the old policeman from his cabin at Hongtscho, seven kilometres from Simtokha, our destination for the day. “I saw you on television last night!”

Sonia and I have met this man before, a cheery fellow with long, grey hairs cascading from his chin. In the past, we have had to show him our road permits, but not today.

The day’s run ends at a T-junction, where traffic can either turn south for Paro and the airport or Phuentsholing and the border, or else head north to Thimphu. The spot is marked by a scuffed prayer wheel serving as a traffic island, a police kiosk and idling Maruti taxi-vans and Tata goods trucks. My mood sinks as it did in Jakar and Wangdi. Is this the end then of fresh air and eagle days?

“No words can explain what we are feeling at the moment!” exclaims Ugyen Leki to the camera. “We are on top of the world!”

“The snow has come to celebrate with us,” adds Sonam Rigzin gleefully.

*

The thirty-fifth and final day of our ultra-marathon begins in chaos. On the menu at RUB headquarters in Simtokha for 24 January, 2008 is fried rice and *puri sabji*, tea and coffee. Bowls, plates, spoons and cups clatter onto and off plastic trays, and the sound of excited chatter fills the mess hall. Once breakfast is done, the students fly about, digging in their bags for their Târâyana T-shirts, tying and re-tying their

shoes, limbering up, bumping into one another. There are more of us now. Twenty-one students taking part in the “Para-thon,” a seventy-two-kilometre run from Paro to Thimphu, have joined us. A few weeks before our departure from Kandisor, a second-year geography student came to see us. As the Tara-thon itinerary didn’t include Paro dzongkhag, could he gather together some runners and organise a second sponsored run that would hook up with ours on the last day? Knowing that no member of staff would be supervising and that Tenzin was unlikely to put his runners through a three-day trial to see if they were up to the job, Sonia and I were sceptical but too busy at the time to object. The Para-thonners managed to raise Nu. 62,911 (\$1,678).

Sonia stayed up late last night, totting up the cash and checking the ledger as she knew time would be short this morning. Her Majesty expects us in Thimphu town square at 11:10am. We must hand over the money to Târâyana at that time and declare the amount we have collected. Sonia and I rapidly bundle it into wads of like denomination, tie each with string and toss them in a large cardboard box. Carrying it between us, we sprint for the Tara bus, parked now beside the traffic-island prayer-wheel, and dump it on board. Mr Namgay is standing on the island, briefing the students in the way he would for the Annual Spring Marathon at Sherading. The students take turns spinning the prayer wheel. I grin. With snow around, thirty-one bare-legged runners dressed in white T-shirts and shorts are a curious spectacle for the Indian truckers in dhotis and overcoats waiting to get their documents stamped at the police kiosk.

“5-4-3-2-1!” our event coordinator bellows and claps his hands for the last time. Four hares streak off – with strict instructions to wait at the end of Lungten Zampa, the bridge that carries the highway over the Wang Chhu into Thimphu. We must all enter the town square together.

The five kilometres to town are along undulating, wheel-worn highway tracking the river. The morning is cool but bright, the sun prying loaves of snow off tall branches and sending them crashing to the ground. After the third kilometre, I expect to hear sounds of construction and notice a change in air quality, but detect neither. The first houses come into view, and I see the snow is gone from the streets, but continues to stick to the rooftops and coat bamboo scaffolding wrapped around half-made buildings. There is some movement in the market area, some taxis travelling up and down the streets; otherwise, all is still. The sonnet Wordsworth composed on Westminster Bridge comes to mind, the beauty he was surprised to discover in the city in early morning, the buildings glittering, the air smokeless, the houses asleep. I would later learn that Thimphu hadn't seen this much snow in three years.

The BBS car, the Tara bus and two police motorcycles are waiting for us at the bridge. We are to form a double-file and follow the bikes to the town square. We jog slowly over the bridge and along Norzin Lam, the main thoroughfare, waving at the people lining the way, cheering and clapping.

Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck is waiting for us beside the clock tower, a banner behind her saying "Tara-thon 2008 – Education for All." The Queen is dressed in a mauve kira and vermilion *toego* and is flanked by Her Royal Highness Princess Ashi Sonam Dechen; the Minister of Education, Thinley Jamtscho; the Minister of Information and Communications, Lyonpo Leki Dorji; the Secretary of Finance, Dasho Yanki; the Vice-Chancellor of RUB, Pema Thinley; the Director of Sherading College, Singye Namgyel; the Indian ambassador; the Deputy Head of UNDP; and Nathalie Myer. She takes rolled-up khaddars from a tray held by Tshering Yangzom from Târâyana, shakes them out and drapes them over the wrists of each runner bowing low before her. BBS films

her doing this, and Kuensel takes photos. Her Majesty then leads the way into the five-star Druk Hotel and to the conference room.

“Today, I stand before you, my heart ... bursting with joy and pride,” my wife begins, after Yeshey has said how thankful the students are to Sir and Madam for letting them run to “help disadvantaged children avail education.”

Sonia wipes tears from her eyes before continuing, and I feel my own eyes prickling. I think of a message I received from my mother in the third week of our run. “Make the most of this experience,” she had said. I look round the room. Sonia and I are unlikely to be in this situation again, addressing government ministers and two members of the Bhutanese royal family, runners sitting in rows with ceremonial scarves draped around their necks, TV cameraman filming, journalists furiously scribbling notes.

“We are grateful to Her Majesty and the Târâyana Foundation for believing in our project and for giving us their approval and support ...” I say when it is my turn. Much of my speech is a list of thank-yous, and I realise as I speak (“to His Royal Highness Prince Jigyel for pulling over near Trashigang and offering us his wise words, to Lam Neten of Trongsa for granting us an audience, to the Director of Sherading College for providing us with new running shoes, to Aum Nathalie for selflessly donating one *lac* ...”) just how indebted we are beyond my list. What of Angay Sonam, the grandmother who opened her doors to twelve sweaty strangers near Jakar, the villagers who brought us firewood from Rukhubji, the little boy who gave me tangerines near Lingmithang? “My wife and I are soon to leave the Land of the Thunder Dragon, but its charming roars will echo in our heads for many years to come,” I conclude, leaving the lectern, then remember that I haven’t said how much money Project Tara-thon made. I return with the box of donations.

“In here is Nu. 618,916.”

About \$US14,200. I am pleased with our efforts. More will come from donors in Thimphu and overseas. I make my way to the Queen, but am intercepted by Tshering Yangzom. Her Majesty does not need to grapple with a large cardboard box.

“You have done a wonderful thing for Bhutan,” the Queen says when we adjourn for tea in the hotel lobby.

“It was really the students, Your Majesty, who made it a success” Sonia responds.

“We hope our project spawns others like it,” I add.

“I hope so too. Come. Let’s have our photo taken next to our dragon,” the Queen suggests. “I imagine you would like that. Sonam?”

A gold-bodied, silver-bearded, red-tongued Thunder Dragon scales a black marble wall in the lobby of the Druk Hotel. Her Majesty positions herself beneath it, and Sonia and I stand on either side of her. Princess Sonam comes and stands to my right. I feel decidedly odd, dressed in T-shirt, tights and running shoes, standing between a Princess and a Queen. After a month on the road, washing mainly in streams and having done my laundry only twice, I imagine parts of me are ripe. If either of the Ashis notice, they are too polite to remark.

*

“Through thick and thin, we made it through.” Sonam Tshering.

“We have been together long durations. Tara-thon was tough job, but I enjoyed.” Wangchuck Lhamo.

“Misunderstanding help us to know each other better. In the team, there is less ‘I’ and more ‘we.’” Sonam Rigzin.

“The love of animal kept us together!” Tee.

Day 36. Thimphu. No kilometres to run. Our farewell dinner with the team is at Tandin, the hotel Sonia and I first stayed at when we arrived in Bhutan. We

have shoved several tables together in the middle of the dining room and are making quite a racket. Prem and his waiters don't seem to mind, though, and keep bringing in more red rice, shamudatse, fish curry, vegetable curry, naan bread and beer. Everyone is here, except Mr Namgay, and the students take it in turns to stand up and say a few words.

“He said like this, Sar,” Yeshey translates for Ngawang, the cook, who, remarkably, managed to run the final week of the Tara-thon with us. ‘Though we are not from single parent, Sar and Madam are like our parent.’” I look across the table at Sonia and see she is close again to tears. I feel as if we owe more to Ngawang than he to us.

We spent the morning together with “the boys” at Tango Goemba higher up the Thimphu valley, a quiet monastery built by the Divine Madman in the fifteenth century. Sonia wore her kira, me my teaching clothes, and our students, driver and cook their ghos. A black-capped sibia sat in a bare tree and watched us struggle up the icy path to the monastery in our dress shoes. The lama, a spectacled teenager, tapped each of us in turn on the head with his sacred baton and gave us orange strings to tie around our necks to guard against evil spirits. Mr Namgay didn't come along. The last anyone saw of him was yesterday in the Druk Hotel. He chatted briefly with one or two of the dignitaries and then disappeared.

“Sorry that we didn't always see eye to eye,” I said to him before he made for the door. The Tara-thon event coordinator nodded, looked at the floor and thanked me for acknowledging him in my speech.

“There have been misunderstanding, Mr Tony,” he replied sadly, managing a smile, “but all misunderstanding left in forest. My job is done. I hand over to Director now.”

“Mr Namgay Sar was keeping grudge from Mongar,” Ugyen Pema would later comment when Sonia and I visited his house and I asked him why Mr

Namgay hadn't stuck around in Thimphu the extra day. "If we Buddhist get angry once, it snatch away all our good deed. If you chant mantra for billion time and you said bad word, then all mantra is in vain."

I wonder if Sonia and I will ever hear again from the former Royal Bodyguard. I realise that I failed to give this deeply spiritual man the credit he deserves. Apart from arranging our night halts, he prayed for us daily, sharing his morning tea with the gods of the road and wandering off each evening to count his prayer beads. Our Tara-thon began with a benediction that he insisted we have, and I remember him pressing ngultrum to our foreheads and making an offering to the tashi gomang on Day 9. Perhaps these acts were more important than coaching our team or helping out with camp chores. Our slow crossing of the Himalayas at this time of year might have been hell, all blizzards and biting winds at the mountain passes and lashing rain at lower altitudes. Who is to say that his spiritual ministrations didn't smooth the way for us? And then there was the effect of Mr Namgay's presence on the team, his military bearing, his reputation as a football player, his association with the fourth King. This must have made our runners feel that the mission they were on was a serious affair.

There is talk around the table of the behaviour of the Para-thonners. Apparently, many of the team hadn't run from Paro to Thimphu after all, including Tenzin himself. They had admitted as much in Simtokha. When they got tired, they had flagged down their bus. Two girls couldn't even manage the last five kilometres to Thimphu and took the bus. Sonia and I look at each other guiltily; we should have arranged for a Mr Namgay to supervise them. After the Tara-thonners had gritted their teeth, accepted days of pain and run the distance, why should the Para-thonners share in the glory? I should, at least, have had the Tara-thonners collect their khaddars from Her Majesty before the Para-thonners. But then I think, while this must annoy our runners, it matters less in the larger scheme of things.

The short-distance twenty-one also raised money for our cause and extended the reach of our project. In the years to come, our ten runners will remember that they ran right across the Kingdom for Her Majesty.

I think back to the Kuzoo FM interview Sonia and I had this afternoon.

“What will you remember about the Tara-thon twenty years from now?”

Dorji, the shaven-headed host with earring, had wondered.

“The looks of determination on the faces of our young runners as they scaled the mountains,” I replied, conscious that our runners may be heroes for Kuzoo listeners.

What *will* I recall of the Tara-thon at the age of sixty-three? The emerald waters of the Burning Lake? The rat caught in a beam of moonlight in the principal’s office in Mongar High School? Yana the stray getting his first ever bath in the Sheri Chhu? Gonpo Trashi, the Tibetan renegade? Blue-legging? I look round the dinner table at the twelve Bhutanese that Sonia and I have been with for the past thirty-five days. Perhaps the hoots and cheers of our runners as a little vermilion Tara-thon banner joined a thousand prayer flags at Bhutan’s highest pass on the lateral road crossing the Land of the Thunder Dragon.

Epilogue

Bhutan has wandered without a map into that psychological territory where a magical innocence is lost and there are no signposts to what lies ahead. In Buddhist terms, the Bhutanese are collectively in some kind of *bardo*, the place between cycles of death and rebirth, waiting to see if they will enter the next life as a nation selectively modernised for the common good but otherwise unaltered, or as another small third-world country rent with social and ethnic divisions and vulnerable to corruption, violence, and political opportunism. One way or another, change is coming. This is not Brigadoon.

So Close to Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas (1995)
Barbara Crossette

“So, Tony, how were your treks with Târâyana?”

Sonia and I spend our final weekend in Bhutan hiking with Dr Tenzin and Zangmo. Our destination is Jili Dzong, the windblown monastic retreat a thousand metres above Paro that we visited last winter. Today, I am tail-end Charlie, slogging up the steep dirt path, straps of my pack digging into my shoulders. I must have been extraordinarily evil in my past life as Dr Tenzin has loaded me with five half-kilogram bricks of solidified butter to give to the monks for their lamps and one five-kilogram tent that he and his wife will use once we are up there.

“Gruelling,” I reply, chest heaving, “but also an eye-opener.”

In the last week of February (having gained visa extensions to stay for an extra month), Sonia and I accompanied two Târâyana field officers to village schools in Zhemgang dzongkhag, a poorer district in the south. It was Pasang and Roselene’s responsibility to visit the schools there periodically to deliver cash from the Scholarship Endowment Fund to beneficiaries. Shingkar village was a two-and-a-half-day trek from the road along mud trails rising and falling through dense forest. At the primary school, we found a hundred and fifty children sitting cross-legged on the floor in two furnitureless classrooms, which they swept daily using

bushes for brooms. The assembly hall for morning prayers was an area of packed dirt to the side. In Digala, six days from the road, we met a twenty-three-year-old called Lobzang, the sole teacher in charge of sixty-four children, reliant for feeding them on sporadic parcels sent by the World Food Programme. Seeing the fascination of two little girls in Shingkar, poring over an inflatable globe and trying to find Canada, and hearing from Lobzang about the determination of another beneficiary, a boy of eight from a broken home, I had to think again about whether educating village kids was a good idea.

“Some village children should have the chance for education,” says Dr Tenzin when I speak of this, “the ones who have talent for studies. Târâyana tries to choose those with most potential. In the future, they may help their villages in bigger ways than ploughing earth.”

Those like little Tenzin Dorji perhaps. “Tangsibi and Beyond” comes to mind, the article he wrote describing his own path from village cowherd to Director of the National Institute of Education. Without schooling, he “would have been limited to being a semi-literate farmer or a *gomchen*,” he admitted and expressed immense gratitude to those who taught him: “I prostrate to my teacher and all the subsequent teachers ...”

“And, of course, students with good potential learn far more from teacher than two-plus-two or how to memorise facts,” he reminds me. “They learn right attitude, right value, how to communicate better, how to look after environment, about civic responsibility, about their own country and about the wider world.”

His words make me think of Father Mackey, who defined education as “not merely memorising information, but learning to relate to one’s environment in particular and the world in general in a creative and intelligent manner.” Mackey, the teacher who believed that sports in school were as important as academic subjects, would, I think, have approved of our sponsored run.

We look up and see our wives waiting for us at the mani wall marking the half way point to the dzong. It is a day of brilliant sunshine, but little warmth. A brisk wind makes the needles of blue pines shake and their pendulous cones wag. Sonia may not know much Dzongkha, but somehow she is managing to share a joke with Zangmo. Maybe they are laughing at the two slowcoaches. Dr Tenzin tells me that he tried to persuade his wife to attend school when she was younger, but she refused. Now she is reliant on him for a living and spends all her time at home. It is a wonder to me that their relationship works, given that one partner is educated to a high level and the other not at all. Their interests, I would have thought, must be quite divergent.

“By the way, what should we call you now,” Sonia asks when we catch up, “Dr Tenzin or Dasho Tenzin, now that you’re a National Councillor?”

“How about Dasho Doctor?” he replies with a chuckle, throwing his haversack down by the wall. “Sorry I couldn’t be at your arrival ceremony with Her Majesty. This transition has been a busy time for me. You did well. You must be happy.”

“The timing was off, sadly,” Sonia replies. “All the schools were closed for winter recess. We had hoped to collect stories and drawings on our theme for Târâyana.”

“But you raised a lot of money, didn’t you?”

“Enough to send 330 kids to school,” I say. “We couldn’t have done it without your help.”

We find a sunny patch to sit, and Sonia breaks out the stale chocolate and peanuts she bought in Paro. I look closely at the former principal of Sherading. I don’t think Sonia and I will forget this man in a hurry. Today, in his gho, hiking boots, trekking pants and baseball cap, he looks a curious mixture of cultures, and it occurs to me that he has managed to assimilate wisdom from the West while

remaining thoroughly Bhutanese. If people like him are to govern, the Dragon Kingdom is in safe hands.

“Any thoughts, Dasho Doctor, on who will win the election?” I ask.

He smiles, punctures a peanut shell with his thumbnail and shakes his head.

“I don’t know. Both parties are promising new roads, more employment, better health care, better education quality. They both say they are going to honour GNH, that they will boost the economy while, at the same time, preserving our cultural heritage and look after the forest. Their manifestos are very similar. I don’t think it really matters which one wins.”

“Are you satisfied with the way the electoral process has been conducted?”

Sonia inquires.

“I am worried that the right people may not get into office. In the old system, the seniors get high position after many years of service – maybe twenty or thirty years. Now, the minimum requirement for a candidate is a bachelor’s degree. Many of the older, more experienced ones don’t have this and so get screened out. The young graduates apply, their heads full of high hopes of leading the nation, but they don’t have the respect of the people.”

“So you are not optimistic about the future then?”

“I cannot say this, but it is all very hurried. I am worried that the people are not ready for democracy. Too many are still illiterate and uneducated. They don’t understand that the enticements they are being fed by the parties may not come true.”

I recall an editorial from last year’s *Kuensel*, entitled “Hurrying Slowly.” In the past, said the writer, Bhutan developed slowly and learned from the mistakes other countries made. Now, feeling pressured by globalisation and fearing that it might get left behind, it was forgetting the cautiousness that had always been its strength. “We are building not just roads but networks of highways, not just

pipelines but urban infrastructure, not just houses but towns ...” Everything is happening too fast. Yes, we must hurry to catch up with the world, but we must hurry slowly ... or expect calamity. The expression makes me think of our Taramthor tortoises.

We walk on silently, and the way is steep. Fallen pinecones, their seeds dry and brittle, crackle underfoot. The trees thin out. After forty-five minutes, we emerge onto a grassy meadow, dusted with snow, a place for yaks to graze or even takins – in our two years here, Sonia and I have not seen a single one out of captivity. It takes us another forty minutes to reach the saddle and Jili Dzong, a white and red turret stationed on a bare promontory of rock, defying the elements.

Dr Tenzin removes his cap and straightens his gho before knocking on the door. I get the bricks of butter out of my pack. The door creaks open, and the old monk we met last year invites us in. He must have seen us coming.

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“DPT will dedicate itself to building on the firm foundation for a peaceful and prosperous nation that is the legacy of the fourth Druk Gyalpo and of all the great Kings before him. As we look to the future, we do so with the confidence and the knowledge that we’ll have the benefit of the guidance and the wisdom of His Majesty the King,” Lyonpo Jigme Y. Thinley declares to the nation on March 24th as Druk Phuensum Tshogpa becomes Bhutan’s first democratically elected government.

Sonia and I are in the conservatory of my mother’s cottage near Leicester eating scones when the news comes on the radio. Instead of returning home to Canada directly, we have stopped off in England for a couple of weeks. My mother chops vegetables for a ratatouille in the kitchen, and my stepfather mows the lawn while listening to Beethoven through headphones. Their two cats lie stretched out on the sofa asleep. Sonia and I now have comfort: flowing water, unfailing

electricity, central heating, every imaginable foodstuff at the supermarket (Sonia even found Bhutanese red rice at Sainsbury's), our sizes in footwear, fifty channels to choose from on the television. I had looked forward to all this on the flight here, feeling somehow that we deserved it after living for two years in a developing country, but the joys are short-lived. The overriding feeling is of loss.

Now that Druk Phuensum Tshogpa is in charge, I wonder what is in store for Bhutan. Is it destined to embrace capitalism and modernise like its neighbours? Will those with wealth – fed by images on TV and the Internet of cars and washing machines and body lotions and life insurance – want more of it? Will private corporations dive into international markets and seek to maximise their profits, paying only lip service to their social and environmental responsibilities? Is Bhutan going to develop at the expense of its traditional ways? Perhaps not. Lyonpo Thinley I know to be a strong advocate of Gross National Happiness, calling it “the guiding philosophy of Bhutan’s development process.” The policies and programmes that the new government will put in place, according to the party manifesto, are intended to strike a balance between material gains and people’s welfare. At a time when industrialised nations are realising that economic growth at any cost is destructive, maybe Bhutan, putting “equitable and sustainable socio-economic development,” the first pillar of the Druk Gyalpo’s visionary concept, into practice, will turn out to be a leader – or, at least, proof of a better way. I go and dig out the newspaper clippings I brought back with me, remembering an article written by the Honorary Consul of the Netherlands to Bhutan in December, expressing similar thoughts.

Leaders all over the world are searching for alternative approaches to development in light of the recognition that economic development and GDP in and of themselves do not necessarily make people happy. For quite some time there has been talk of ‘a paradigm shift,’ an ‘alternative worldview’ – something more

holistic and human, capable of transforming the world. The concept of GNH is a possible answer to this transformation.

Or will Gross National Happiness be viewed by the world as a quaint but impractical Shangri-larian notion, feasible only in a backward Buddhist country (if at all) and hardly to be taken seriously? It is probably true that government policies that call on businesses to channel a percentage of their profits towards the welfare of their employees (or society at large) and conservation of the natural environment are more likely to gain purchase in a Buddhist setting, where compassion for others earns spiritual merit and all life is sacred. However, while Bhutan has challenges to meet regarding Nepali refugees, disposal of litter and treatment of stray dogs (to name but three), it surely has valuable lessons to teach us: that relationships and community involvement are more important than accumulating wealth; that close contact with and reverence for nature helps us live healthier, less wasteful lives (I recall again David Suzuki's words: "if we retain a spiritual sense of connection with all other life forms, it can't help but profoundly affect the way we act"); that a vibrant religious philosophy and colourful folktales can instruct and enrich; that we can often walk to where we need to go; that slowing down is a good thing ...

I wonder while staring out the window at a rhododendron in bloom in the corner of the garden whether I truly opened myself up to the experience of the past two years. Full of my Western ways and eager to make my mark, I quickly established my workaday routine on arrival and then became consumed with a pet project. As trite as it sounds, did I really stop and smell the roses? Did I feel at all the "spiritual sense of connection" with bird and plant and human being in a land where gods are said to inhabit every mountain pass and every bend in the road, where winds tear prayer flags apart and streams drive prayer wheels? It will take Sonia and me time, no doubt, to appreciate more deeply the ways in which this

small Himalayan Kingdom has touched us and fully acknowledge what a privilege it was to go there. In my mind, too, is the question of our impact on the country. Though we went to help out, have we, in a sense, hastened its Westernisation and so been instrumental in eroding its traditions? Will our student runners, for instance, aspire to lead lives like ours: earning money enough to buy digital cameras and fancy camping gear, having no obligations to family or state, travelling widely? And if, on my return to Canada, I write a book about Bhutan, describing takins and tragopans, masked dances and mountain treks, will I be putting more tourist pressure on the “Last Shangri-La”?

“Let’s go for a run,” Sonia suggests.

“It’ll have to be across the fields,” I reply, putting an elastic band around my newspaper clippings. “There are no quiet roads around here anymore.”

We head out across the village green and join an overgrown path crossing a farmer’s field. Butterflies pick up from nettles and dandelions and mill about our legs. In the hedgerows lining the field are yellowhammers with fiery heads and chestnut backs, their beaks stuffed with nesting material. One settles on a hawthorn twig and observes us, head twitching, before shooting off across the rows of oilseed rape in the direction of a solitary oak tree.

The Dragon Run

Glossary of Dzongkha Words

(note: only italicised in text at first mention)

<i>angay</i>	grandmother
<i>arra</i>	home-made liquor made from rice, wheat, or barley
<i>atsara</i>	clown at masked dance
<i>atta</i>	uncle
<i>bji</i>	demon
<i>Bön</i>	animist religion predating Buddhism
<i>bukkari</i>	wood-burning stove
<i>bumpo</i>	holy water jug
<i>cham</i>	religious dance
<i>chana</i>	chickpeas
<i>chapsa</i>	toilet
<i>chilip</i>	foreigner
<i>chhu</i>	river
<i>choesum</i>	family shrine room
<i>chorten</i>	Bhutanese stupa
<i>Choekey</i>	classical Tibetan
<i>dal</i>	lentil soup
<i>dasho</i>	an official title given by the King
<i>datho</i>	Buddhist astrological calendar
<i>desi</i>	tinted rice with raisins and coconut shavings
<i>dharma</i>	teachings of Buddha
<i>doma</i>	areca nut, betel leaf and lime
<i>drangpon</i>	chief justice
<i>driglam namzha</i>	code of correct behaviour
<i>Druk Gyalpo</i>	Precious Ruler of the Dragon People
<i>Druk Yul</i>	Land of the Thunder Dragon
<i>Drukpa Kagyu</i>	official school of Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan
<i>drupthop</i>	master meditator
<i>dzong</i>	fortress monastery
<i>dzongdag</i>	district administrator
<i>dzongkhag</i>	district
<i>emadatse</i>	chilli peppers in melted cheese (national dish)
<i>ezay</i>	spicy Bhutanese salad

<i>gho</i>	traditional dress for men
<i>gomchen</i>	lay-priest
<i>gup</i>	village chief
<i>hang ten cha</i>	how are you? (Sharchop)
<i>haphthur</i>	how much? (Sharchop)
<i>Je Khenpo</i>	Chief Abbot of the Kingdom
<i>kabney</i>	ceremonial scarf worn over shoulder by men
<i>kaddah</i>	ceremonial silk scarf
<i>kadrinche</i>	thank you
<i>kasho</i>	decree
<i>keptang</i>	Tibetan bread
<i>kewadatse</i>	emadatse with potatoes
<i>khenpo</i>	abbot
<i>kira</i>	traditional dress for women
<i>kuzu zangpo</i>	greetings
<i>la</i>	mountain pass
<i>lac</i>	hundred thousand
<i>lhakhang</i>	Buddhist temple
<i>Lam Neten</i>	Head Abbot
<i>Losar</i>	Bhutanese New Year
<i>lopon</i>	teacher/senior monk
<i>lyonpo</i>	government minister
<i>mani</i>	wall of stone tablets inscribed with Buddhist prayers
<i>marchang</i>	ceremony calling on gods for an auspicious beginning
<i>momo</i>	Tibetan steamed dumpling
<i>oishii</i>	tasty (Japanese)
<i>nadja</i>	sweet milk tea
<i>nami samé kadrinche</i>	thank you very much
<i>nga</i>	drum
<i>ngultrum</i>	Bhutanese currency
<i>niksin</i>	two (Sharchop)
<i>patang</i>	machete
<i>penlop</i>	provincial governor
<i>phag-sha chem</i>	pork curry
<i>pshee</i>	four (Sharchop)
<i>puja</i>	purification ceremony
<i>puri sabji</i>	vegetables in spicy sauce with fried bread (Indian)
<i>putang</i>	Bumthang buckwheat noodles
<i>saag</i>	spinach
<i>sangphu</i>	chorten incense burner

<i>shamdey</i>	rice with meat, vegetables and egg
<i>shamudatse</i>	emadatse with mushrooms
<i>Sharchop</i>	Language of the East
<i>shedra</i>	school for Buddhist monks
<i>shey</i>	bon appetite! (literally, eat!) (Sharchop)
<i>suja</i>	butter tea
<i>tashi delek</i>	good luck
<i>tashi tagye</i>	eight auspicious Buddhist signs
<i>tengma</i>	beaten maize
<i>terma</i>	sacred treasure
<i>thruesel</i>	Buddhist benediction
<i>toego</i>	women's waistcoat
<i>torma</i>	ritual dough cake
<i>torrath</i>	cloth for wrapping lunch in
<i>tsechu</i>	festival of dances honouring Guru Rinpoche
<i>tshongkhang</i>	shop
<i>tsubta</i>	a dangerous place
<i>tur</i>	one (Sharchop)
<i>shamdey</i>	rice mixed with meat, vegetables and egg
<i>shimpula</i>	delicious (Sharchop)
<i>yalama</i>	splendid, remarkable
<i>yosha</i>	yak cheese
<i>zakar</i>	horoscope
<i>za min thur</i>	the only girl
<i>zao</i>	toasted rice

The Dragon Run Critical Commentary

Representing the Self in Modern Travel Writing

Introduction

Travel critics and commentators have noted a trend in travel writing since the late nineteenth century towards a more subjective style of storytelling, for the author's inner voyage to figure as largely in the book as his or her description of jungle, ziggurat or bustling bazaar.³ In *The Self and the World*, Casey Blanton refers to 'a mediating consciousness that monitors the journey, judges, thinks, confesses, changes, and even grows.'⁴ Carl Thompson devotes a chapter of his book on the genre to 'Revealing the Self' and finds 'autobiographical and inward-looking strains' in recent works of travel. The traveller has become, he observes, 'as much the object of the reader's attention as the place travelled to.'⁵ Stephan Kohl goes so far as to say that 'the real subject of literary travelogues is not the outside world, but the evolution of the writer-traveller's mind.'⁶ This swing towards self-examination and revelation in travel writing is motivated by a range of incitements, some relatively common, others less so: examples include from desperation to

³ Stephan Kohl, 'Travel, Literature, and the Art of Self-Invention,' in *Anglistentag 1989, Wurzburg*, ed. by Ahrens, Rüdiger (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1990), pp. 179-183; Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2000); Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁴ Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997). p. 4

⁵ Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp. 98, 99

⁶ Kohl, 'Self-Invention,' p. 175

escape an oppressive urban life⁷ or commune with nature in solitude⁸ to a need to explore feelings of social estrangement after the Second World War⁹ or rehabilitate after prolonged mental illness.¹⁰ A common catalyst could be the feeling the introspective traveller has that his or her life is somehow false, broken or incomplete. For the journey to be a success, it must bring authenticity, recovery or wholeness (at the end of *Venture to the Interior*, Post sees the rift between his European and African selves begin to close;¹¹ in the solitude of Labrador, Perkins purges the tormenting voices from his head¹²).

While traditionally propelled to bring news from abroad of ‘the habits and customs ... of other people’s lives,’ offer ‘vivid descriptions of flora, topography, climate, animal and insect life, foodstuffs and local sexual customs’¹³ and address themes like exile, belonging, difference and belatedness, travel writers also embarking on interior voyages endow their travelogues with an added layer of interest and very likely symbolic depth (provided they have, as Norman Douglas puts it, ‘brain[s] worth exploring’¹⁴). Thus, Graham Greene travels to ‘the rock bottom of his consciousness, where the earliest fears are laid bare’ while delving deep into the Liberian jungle in 1935,¹⁵ Bruce Chatwin tests his theory that people are by nature nomadic by tracing the wandering ‘songlines’ of the Aborigines

⁷ H. M. Tomlinson, *The Sea and the Jungle* [1912] (New York: The New American Library, 1961); Florence Page Jacques, *Canoe Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1938).

⁸ Henry Beston, *The Outermost House* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1928); Franklin Russell, *The Secret Islands* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1965).

⁹ Laurens van der Post, *Venture to the Interior* (New York: Penguin, 1957).

¹⁰ Robert Perkins, *Against Straight Lines: Alone in Labrador* (Toronto: Little, Brown & Company, 1983).

¹¹ Post, *Venture*, p. 238

¹² Perkins, *Lines*, p. 97

¹³ Michael Kowalewski, ‘Introduction: The Modern Literature of Travel,’ in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1992), pp. 1-16 (p. 8)

¹⁴ Norman Douglas, *Experiments* (New York: R. M. McBride & Co, 1925), p. 9

¹⁵ Blanton, *Self*, p. 70

across Australia in the 1980s,¹⁶ and Cheryl Strayed sees the loss of her family and home as her ‘own private clear-cut’ when she discovers on the Pacific Crest Trail in 1994 a tract of forest devastated by logging.¹⁷ On their travels, introspective writers dig up troubling episodes from their pasts and re-examine them (Greene recalls the terrors of English public school), ask searching questions of themselves and interrogate their beliefs (Strayed wonders what drove her to divorce and heroin abuse), and seek solutions to their private problems. As Robin Jarvis notices, tracing self-reflexivity in travel writing from Lord Byron and William Hazlitt to Bruce Chatwin and Jonathan Raban, this inclination is likely rooted in the Romantic tradition. The self-conscious modern travel writer takes a trip in search of ‘an antidote to personal sorrow,’ to discover ‘elements in his thoughts and sensibility of which he was previously unaware,’ or, in Hazlitt’s words, to “‘become the creature of the moment, clear of all ties.’”¹⁸

Exploring inwardly, however, brings risks as well as opportunities for travel writers, the most obvious being that their inner journeys can fail to harmonise successfully with their outer, the expectation of most readers of travel books probably being that the latter takes precedence over the former. As Paul Fussell notes in *Abroad*, ‘the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant and unfamiliar data.’¹⁹ The travellers’ mental peregrinations may have little more than tenuous ties with the places they have chosen to visit. Worse, they might become so buried in their thoughts, so intent on personal

¹⁶ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Vintage Books, 1998).

¹⁷ Cheryl Strayed, *Wild: from Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), p. 210

¹⁸ Robin Jarvis, ‘Self-Discovery from Byron to Raban: The Long Afterlife of Romantic Travel,’ *Studies in Travel Writing*, 9, 2 (2005), pp. 185-204 (pp. 189-92) [Jarvis quotes from Hazlitt’s ‘On Going a Journey,’ 1822]

¹⁹ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (New York: Oxford University, 1980), p. 203

improvement or self-therapy that the physical journeys are rendered incidental or even invalid. How much does a reader learn of the mid-western and western States from Robert Pirsig's account of his motorcycle tour there in the 1960s?²⁰ Do we learn anything new about Antarctica from Jenny Diski's record of her voyage to the continent in the 1990s?²¹ Pirsig's ride is loaded with philosophical musings, Diski's cruise misted by psychological self-analysis. While some readers, cherishing the kind of broader or deeper insights that Pirsig and Diski proffer, may not object to such diversions (or even see them as diversions), what Macauley and Lanning say of novels likely holds true of travel books. '[T]he writer who wishes to use some scheme of double or multiple plot should carefully consider what his different lines have in common, where they come together, where they refer to each other, where each reinforces a definite theme [...] If the coincidence of the two is haphazard or artificial, the book itself is likely to be fragmentary.'²² A second, related risk is the over-accenting of self in the book. Enamoured of their personal stories, the travellers may turn themselves into the heroes and heroines of their adventures with the natives assuming the roles of 'bit players.'²³ In so doing, they can come across as 'self-obsessed' or 'self-indulgent' as Holland and Huggan find Redmond O'Hanlon is in his travel books.²⁴ A further danger is that the crafting of the interior voyage gives obtrusively contrived shape to the book as a

²⁰ Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: William Morrow, 1974).

²¹ Jenny Diski, *Skating to Antarctica* (London: Granta, 1997).

²² Robie Macauley and George Lanning, *Technique in Fiction* (London: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 178

²³ Heather Henderson, 'The Travel Writer and the Text: "My Giant Goes with Me Wherever I Go,"' in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1992), pp. 230-46 (p. 245)

²⁴ Holland and Huggan, *Tourists*, p. 17

whole with a manufactured ‘eureka’ moment of self-realisation conveniently preceding the traveller’s return home.

Little has been written on the strategies self-conscious travel writers employ to communicate their interior journeys to their readers,²⁵ although critics and practitioners alike have remarked on the presence in travel books of ‘the devices of fiction.’²⁶ In *Journey to Kars*, Philip Glazebrook declares, ‘[t]he impulse to write fiction is felt strongly ... by travellers. Incidents need to be developed or run together, events shaped, characters touched up, drama heightened, if the reader is to appreciate what were the traveller’s feelings at the time.’²⁷ Criticism relating to the allied genres of autobiography and memoir (Fussell calls travel writing ‘a subspecies of memoir’²⁸), both by definition engaged in representing the self or selves, points out the same. ‘[T]he autobiographer “makes up” – that is, creates – his life from the trifles he arranges into a dominant pattern,’ asserts Barrett Mandel,²⁹ and memoirists, while more inclined to isolate an incident in a life or a theme, would appear to behave similarly.³⁰ Further inquiry might examine self-construction in recent introspective travel accounts with reference to life writing, especially to

²⁵ Those for whom self-inquiry and representation are as important in their writing as record of matters foreign.

²⁶ Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 203; see also Jonathan Raban, *For Love & Money. Writing. Reading. Travelling. 1969–1987* (London: Collins Harvill, 1987), pp. 247-48; and Elton Glaser, ‘The Self-Reflexive Traveler: Paul Theroux on the Art of Travel and Travel Writing,’ *The Centennial Review*, 33, 3 (1989), pp. 193-206 (p. 201)

²⁷ Philip Glazebrook, *Journey to Kars: A Modern Traveller in the Ottoman Lands* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), p. 167

²⁸ Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 203

²⁹ Barrett J. Mandel, ‘Full of Life Now,’ in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980), pp. 50-72 (p. 61)

³⁰ Thomas Larson, *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading & Writing Personal Narrative* (Athens, GA: Swallow, 2007), p. 17; Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2008), p. 36

narrative design – the ways real events are shaped to tell a story.³¹ Analysis of the literary devices writers use to represent their wayfaring selves (voicing thoughts, combining dramatic scenes with reflection, building narrative suspense, describing a path of learning) influences the decisions I make in representing my travelling persona.

While critics have remarked on how Romantic themes continue to influence the literature of exploration (travel as a return for the wayfarer to a state of childlike innocence, travel in perilous landscapes as a route to ‘greater wisdom and insight through suffering,’ the transformative potential of travel in mountainous regions³²), little has been said about the relevance of nature as a stimulus for self-inquiry in travel writing in the way that it clearly is for prose nature writers. As Scott Slovic remarks while examining those *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, it is ‘only by testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realise who they are,’³³ and the same may be true of some more inward-looking travel writers. When one is immersed in nature, writes travel critic McKay Jenkins, the borders dividing self from non-self ‘begin to melt away and are replaced by ... an inexpressible sense of belonging to or inclusion within a larger perceptual

³¹ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960); J. H. Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1974); William R. Siebenschuh, *Fictional Techniques and Factual Works* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1983); Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1989).

³² David Espey, ‘Childhood and Travel Literature,’ in *Travel Culture: Essays on what makes us go*, ed. by Carol Tragnor Williams (Westport, MA: Praeger, 1998), pp. 51-58; Carl Thompson, *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), p. 274; Simon Bainbridge, ‘Romantic writers and mountaineering,’ *Romanticism*, 18, 1 (2012), pp. 1-15

³³ Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1992), p. 6

framework.’³⁴ Investigation of the methods travel writers use to describe their personal encounters with nature, with reference to Thoreauvian Transcendentalism and the American nature writing tradition,³⁵ nourishes my own inclination to be contemplative in a wilderness setting. Study of nature writing from the American continent is especially relevant as it has from its inception responded to wilderness, its founding fathers persuaded that as ‘wilderness had no counterpart in the Old World,’ by celebrating its value, they were ‘destined for artistic and literary excellence.’³⁶ Given that Bhutan has been identified as one of the few remaining ecologically intact wilderness regions on earth and stirs the traveller to be inward-looking, study of this body of literature seems fitting.³⁷

Believing that Norman Douglas is right to say that ‘the reader of a good travel-book is entitled not only to an exterior voyage, to descriptions of scenery and so forth, but to an interior, a sentimental or temperamental voyage,’³⁸ I have discovered in my literary reconstruction of the two years I spent teaching in and running across Bhutan a number of challenges. What ‘devices of fiction’ would best disclose the character traits of my travelling self, his thoughts and his feelings? An interior voyage suggests a path of learning for the traveller from naive newcomer to more settled visitor. How would I distinguish between these personas

³⁴ McKay Jenkins, ‘“Thinking like a Mountain”: Death and Deep Ecology in the Work of Peter Matthiessen,’ in *Reading under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*, ed. by John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2000), pp. 265-79 (p. 266)

³⁵ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (London: Yale University, 1967); Mark C. Allister, *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001); John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, & Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); Mark Tredinnick, *The Land’s Wild Music: Encounters with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, & James Galvin* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University, 2005).

³⁶ Nash, *Wilderness*, p. 67

³⁷ Gerald Navara, ‘The Lay of the Land,’ in *Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods*, ed. by Christian Schicklgruber and Francoise Pommaret (New Delhi: Bookwise, 1997), p. 31

³⁸ Douglas, *Experiments*, p. 8

and demonstrate that change or personal growth occurred? The interior and exterior voyages must, as Douglas insists, run ‘side by side,’³⁹ but this implies that they sustain each other and likely intersect unobtrusively. What methods could I use to accomplish this? In these matters, my challenges are those of the autobiographer or the memoirist, who, wishing to yield the most insightful account of his or her past and tell a good story, must not only choose the most revealing and compelling episodes, but attempt to reinhabit the self (or selves) who experienced them. In addition, the journey to my own interior was partly enabled by the nature of my destination, a sparsely populated, under-developed, ecologically rich region of the Himalayas, until recently cut off from the modern world. Living in an isolated village on the side of a mountain, surrounded by dense forest, and then running along a road, frequented more by cows than by motor vehicles, invited contemplation. How did immersion in wilderness affect the traveller? Finally, I have had to think carefully too about my reconstruction of the Bhutanese ‘other’ and the bearing this has on the way I represent my travelling self.

As Bhutan only truly opened its doors to the world in 1974 when foreign journalists were allowed in for the first time to witness the coronation of the fourth king, travel literature on the country is in short supply. From the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth, literary views came in the form of reports written by British military officers or diplomats,⁴⁰ who remarked in the dispassionate and topographically and culturally descriptive style of many Victorian explorers on

³⁹ Douglas, *Experiments*, p. 8

⁴⁰ Clements R. Markham, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa* [1876] (New Delhi: Manjusri, 1971); Samuel Turner, *An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet: Containing a Narrative of a Journey Through Bootan and Part of Tibet* [1800] (Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1991); Capt. R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan* [1838] (Kolkata: Sagnik, 2005); Earl of Ronaldshay, *Lands of the Thunderbolt* [1923] (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2005).

precipitous terrain, monastic customs, corybantic performances and feudalism, with the Earl of Ronaldshay being perhaps the most revealing of self. On beholding the monastic fort at Paro, '[o]ne is overwhelmed by its immensity,' he said, 'one's critical faculties are swamped.'⁴¹ The first notable travel narrative by a Western visitor was French ethnographer Michel Peissel's account of his journey across the Kingdom in 1968, the narrator pitching himself playfully and, at times, patronisingly into the role of 'Cortez or Columbus,' intent on discovering the 'fairy-tale' land of *Lords and Lamas*.⁴² Subsequent travel narratives have tended to fall into two distinct groups: those relating trekking experiences,⁴³ and those describing work placements.⁴⁴ Of the trekking sort, Katie Hickman and Kevin Grange mingle observation of cultural phenomena (Buddhist deities and Braga drinking customs; burial practices and *beyuls*) with personal quest (to explore the 'secretive lands' of the east in her case, to unlock 'the secret of lasting grace' in his), with Hickman careful to avoid romanticism ('I was no longer a mere traveller but a seeker of treasures ... an adventuress ... These reveries, of course, cannot last long'), but Grange not ('the path to paradise is neither easy, nor safe').⁴⁵ Hickman's travel book differs from others in that she uses prefatory autobiographical background (concerning her childhood in Spain and Singapore) to

⁴¹ Ronaldshay, *Lands*, p. 235

⁴² Michel Peissel, *Lords & Lamas: A Solitary Expedition across the Secret Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan* (London: Heinemann, 1970), pp. 7, 53

⁴³ Katie Hickman, *Dreams of a Peaceful Dragon* (London: Phoenix, 1987); Joanna Lumley, *In the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon* (London: BBC Books, 1997); Kevin Grange, *Beneath Blossom Rain: Discovering Bhutan on the Toughest Trek in the World* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2011).

⁴⁴ Jamie Zeppa, *Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey into Bhutan* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2000); Britta Das, *Buttertea at Sunrise: A Year in the Bhutan Himalaya* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2007); Ken Haigh, *Under the Holy Lake: A Memoir of Eastern Bhutan* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2008); Lisa Napoli, *Radio Shangri-La: What I Discovered on my Accidental Journey to the Happiest Kingdom on Earth* (New York: Random House, 2011).

⁴⁵ Hickman, *Dreams*, pp. 29, 60; Grange, *Blossom Rain*, pp. 3, 241

establish herself as a judicious traveller and keen witness to foreign custom. Of those posted for work, Jamie Zeppa and Ken Haigh are the most reflective and insightful, the latter notable for his self-deprecatory sense of humour. Both these writers are thoughtful about how their Western backgrounds interfere with, indeed shape, their experiences in and reading of Bhutan, Zeppa taking the trouble to chart the psychological evolution of her younger self and pausing periodically in her narrative to report on her learning and changes in outlook.

Understanding how I might represent my travelling self in *The Dragon Run* most effectively and originally necessitates a broader inquiry into recent works of travel that feature a narrator inclined to look inwardly and be contemplative. While it could be said that a measure of self-revelation and expression is discernible in any travel book, those authored by travellers who spend extended periods of time abroad and seek out environments conducive to reflection (often solitudes far from the commotion of city) tend to be the most instructive. I am influenced, in particular, by the travel narratives of H. M. Tomlinson, Laurens van der Post, V. S. Naipaul, Jonathan Raban, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Robyn Davidson, Peter Hessler, Mike Tidwell and Peter Matthiessen, all of whom journey deep into foreign or disorienting territories and learn more about themselves through so doing. Given that journey narratives in which running, the dominant theme of the second half of my book, as a mode of transit appear absent from the genre and as narrators of running books fail by and large to be introspective (James E. Shapiro's reflections when running across America and Haruki Murakami's self-analysis during marathons offering only passing insights⁴⁶), I give some consideration in Part II of my commentary to the kindred act of walking. '[B]ecause walking is

⁴⁶ James E. Shapiro, *Meditations from the Breakdown Lane: Running across America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982); Haruki Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir* (London: Vintage, 2009).

natural, slow, successive yet continuous movement,' Anne Wallace suggests in her study of pedestrianism in the nineteenth century, 'it stimulates ... superior perception.'⁴⁷ The same might also be said of running.

Part I of this commentary explores the autobiographical self in recent works of travel, with particular reference to Jamie Zeppa's highly inward-looking Bhutanese travelogue *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* (2000). My aim is to shed light on the relationship between autobiographical narrative and recalled experience within a travel narrative, a relationship that is critical to the success of my own journey memoir. Placing emphasis on Zeppa's memoir is fitting as many aspects of her exterior and interior journeys resonate with my own. Her 'remote posting'⁴⁸ also took her to the eastern reaches of Bhutan to teach English for two years and into intimate relations with the Bhutanese (especially her students). Both our journeys originated in Canada, so I share many of her cultural assumptions. Her motivation to go was born, like mine, out of feelings of disenchantment with a colourless city and dreary prospects at home (a traditional motive among travel writers, quickened by the lure of the exotic: D. H. Lawrence abandoned post-war England for Italy in 1919; Eric Newby resigned from the London dress trade in 1956 to climb in Afghanistan). In a tiny Buddhist Kingdom removed from the modern world, Zeppa too was able to explore how distinctive social behaviours, political views and faith practices challenged her way of thinking. Her strategies for resurrecting her travelling self contrast with those of Peter Hessler, Laurens van der Post and Jonathan Raban. As I describe in my memoir my uneasy relations with Mr Namgay, the Bhutanese coordinator for the Tara-thon, and my subsequent regrets, I consider, for example, the way Hessler in *River Town* mingles scene and

⁴⁷ Anne D. Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 4

⁴⁸ Zeppa, *Sky and the Earth*, p. 3

reflection to reconstruct his quarrel with a local Chinese.⁴⁹ Fed too by images of Shangri-la before leaving home, I am influenced by Raban's voyage down the Mississippi in 1979 to test whether the 'stillwater paradise' he romantically imagined in his childhood matched the real river, and by the devices he uses to dramatise the erosion of his fantasy.⁵⁰

I turn my attention in Part II to narrating the self in wilderness settings. By examining the narrative strategies writers use, I aim to show that the language reveals as much about the observer as it does about the observed. *The Snow Leopard*, Peter Matthiessen's record of his trek onto the Tibetan plateau in 1973, is my principal focus.⁵¹ As I wished in my book to report extensively on the natural opulence of Bhutan (on its parasitic orchids, its white-crested laughingthrushes, its gold-furred langurs), to remark on the threats to this splendour of human activity at a time of rapid modernisation, and to reflect on a Buddhist Kingdom's value as a spiritual haven, study of Matthiessen's travelogue is relevant. Matthiessen trains the keen eye of a naturalist on quartering lammergeyers, silver-brown langurs and edelweiss, rails against harmful farming practices, deforestation and littering, and, as a practising Zen Buddhist, seeks to shed 'the armor of the "I"' in natural surroundings and transcend the self.⁵² The narrative strategies he uses to both follow and subvert the tradition that says Westerners may expect spiritual enlightenment by undertaking a pilgrimage to Tibet are informative (through hard physical effort and meditation, Matthiessen merges with the mountain, but acknowledges, when he returns to civilisation, that he is 'still beset by the same old lusts and ego and emotions'⁵³). I contrast Matthiessen's efforts to commune with

⁴⁹ Peter Hessler, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

⁵⁰ Jonathan Raban, *Old Glory* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 12

⁵¹ Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard* (New York: Viking, 1978).

⁵² Matthiessen, *Snow Leopard*, p. 42

⁵³ Matthiessen, *Snow Leopard*, p. 298

nature with the scientific fascination of Annie Dillard, who reveals in her writing, for instance, how galvanised she becomes observing the ‘pulsing abdomen’ of a pregnant praying mantis, clinging to a wild rose,⁵⁴ and with Edward Abbey’s earthy outrage in *Desert Solitaire* at the damaging effect he sees automobiles and mass tourism having on the natural environment,⁵⁵ feelings that I try without fetishising wilderness to articulate in my own book.

Part III of my commentary turns to postcolonial frameworks in order to mobilise a discussion of the relationship between the travelling self and the foreign other, my intention being to consider how representations of the host in other travel memoirs influence my own. Critics such as Mary Louise Pratt, Debbie Lisle and Carl Thompson have noticed a continuance into modern-day travel writing of a patronising treatment of the other by some Western authors.⁵⁶ As Lisle puts it, some ‘contemporary travel writers carry on the imperialist project by assuming a moral universe of Western superiority,’ with the danger being that ‘the rational/unified/conscious “I” of the travel writer transforms all outside of that description into irrational/chaotic/ignorant “others.”’⁵⁷ While, as Thompson points out, some degree of ‘othering’ is inevitable, given that the premise of any travel account is that it brings to its readership news of the unfamiliar,⁵⁸ a derisive or supercilious treatment of the host is hardly to be condoned. As, in early drafts of *The Dragon Run*, I was to some extent guilty of this, I examine the strategies used

⁵⁴ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 57

⁵⁵ Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

⁵⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, ‘Scratches on the Face of the Country; Or What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen,’ *Critical Inquiry*, 12, 1 (1985), pp. 119-43, and *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing & Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006); Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 2011.

⁵⁷ Lisle, *Global Politics*, pp. 69, 71

⁵⁸ Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p. 133

by V. S. Naipaul, much maligned in *An Area of Darkness*⁵⁹ for his pejorative representation of the Indian other,⁶⁰ and Robyn Davidson's more sensitive handling, acutely aware of her status as encroaching 'whitefella' on Aboriginal territory during her crossing of the Australian Outback with camels in 1977.⁶¹ Other than by the afore-mentioned resources, I am guided in this part by the critical studies of Said, Dissanayake and Wickramagamage, and Chow.⁶² As my analysis includes discussion of ways in which narrators in 'the contact zone'⁶³ confess to error or self-censor, I refer too to critical work conducted at the boundary of autobiography and ethnography.⁶⁴

Underpinning my inquiry into self-representation in modern travel writing are psychological and philosophical ideas concerning the nature of self. Of the 'Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge' cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser identifies, the '*extended self*,' '*ecological self*' and '*interpersonal self*' are relevant.⁶⁵ The first of these, extending from the past to the present, 'defines the self in terms of a particular series of remembered experiences' that coalesce to form a life

⁵⁹ V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964).

⁶⁰ H. H. Gowda, Aniah, 'Naipaul in India,' *The Literary Half-Yearly*, 2 (1970), pp. 163-70; Nassim Ezekiel, 'Naipaul's India and Mine,' *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 11, 3/4 (1974), pp. 193-205; Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (Oxford: OUP, 1992).

⁶¹ Robyn Davidson, *Tracks* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

⁶² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Wimal Dissanayake and Carmen Wickramagamage, *Self and Colonial Desire: Travel Writings of V. S. Naipaul* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993); Rey Chow, 'Where Have All the Natives Gone?' in *Contemporary Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Padmia Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 124-41

⁶³ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 43

⁶⁴ John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Nigel P. Short, Lydia Turner and Alec Grant, *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2013); Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler, 'Ethical Issues in Self-Censorship: Ethnographic Research on Sensitive Topics,' in *Researching Sensitive Topics*, ed. by Claire M. Renzetti and Raymond M. Lee (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993), pp. 249-66

⁶⁵ Ulric Neisser, 'Five Kinds of Self-knowledge,' *Philosophical Psychology*, 1 (1988), 1, pp. 35-59 (p. 36). The other two kinds of self-knowledge are the '*private self*' and the '*conceptual self*.'

narrative.⁶⁶ ‘To answer the question “Who?” [...] is to tell the story of a life,’ Paul Ricoeur states in *Time and Narrative*,⁶⁷ and one thinks of writers that weave autobiographical history richly into the reports of their travels (Greene, Diski, Napoli and Zeppa, for example). Narratologists such as Bruner, Schechtman and MacIntyre insist that turning life into story is, in fact, essential for the self to be ‘psychologically intelligible.’⁶⁸ Neisser’s ecological self is that ‘perceived with respect to the physical environment [...] What we perceive is ourselves *as embedded* in the environment, and acting with respect to it,’ he claims.⁶⁹ The shift is away from an anthropocentric self toward a more interconnected, holistic self, one that extends beyond an ‘egoic, biographical, or personal sense of self’ to one that is ‘wide, expansive, field-like’⁷⁰ and interacts with nature. The writings of Dillard, Lopez, Russell or Matthiessen come to mind. The interpersonal self emerges through intense interaction with another person or people.⁷¹ As Dan Zahavi remarks, inquiring into *Subjectivity & Selfhood*, ‘[s]ome have argued that the constitution of the self is a social process, that we are selves not by individual right, but in virtue of our relation to others.’⁷² The travelling self is constructed or adjusted through contact with the foreign other in a way that ultimately destabilises the boundaries between the two. The works of Davidson, Haigh, Naipaul and

⁶⁶ Neisser, ‘Five Kinds,’ p. 49

⁶⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), p. 246

⁶⁸ Jerome Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality,’ *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1991), pp. 8-21; Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1996); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 2000); Fred Vollmer, ‘The Narrative Self,’ *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 35, 2 (2005), pp. 189-205 (p. 197)

⁶⁹ Neisser, ‘Five Kinds,’ pp. 36, 40

⁷⁰ Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (New York: State University, 1995), pp. 197, 217

⁷¹ Neisser, ‘Five Kinds,’ p. 41

⁷² Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (London: MIT, 2005), p. 2

Tidwell are germane. In its findings, this commentary establishes some links between this theory and travel writing practice.

PART I

The Autobiographical Self

In his ground breaking book *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Roy Pascal defines autobiography as an exercise in ‘discrimination and selection in the face of the endless complexity of life’ with a view to reconstructing ‘the movement of life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived.’⁷³ In recording this movement, he says, an autobiography should have ‘a main strand’ or teleological trajectory, which may lead to nothing more than a change in attitude, but could give rise to ‘the formation of a philosophy.’⁷⁴ For an autobiography to be convincing, however, the writer must avoid creating too smooth a trajectory or too obvious an outcome by including ‘oscillations’⁷⁵ that interrupt the narrative flow and give a sense that life has not been conveniently repackaged (Paul Ricoeur refers to ‘surprises [coincidences, recognitions, revelations, etc]’⁷⁶). In general, ‘a sort of harmony’ should exist, ‘between outward experience and inward growth,’ so that every incident ‘becomes a part of a process and a revelation of something within the personality.’⁷⁷ For Pascal, then, writing up a life is an exercise in skilful story-telling, of resurrecting only those episodes from the past that serve to propel the narrative towards some kind of climax and disclose essential information about

⁷³ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 9, 10

⁷⁴ Pascal, *Design*, pp. 185, 95

⁷⁵ Pascal, *Design*, p. 17

⁷⁶ Paul Ricoeur, ‘Explanation and Understanding: On Some Remarkable Connections Among the Theory of the Text, Theory of Action, and Theory of History,’ in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work*, ed. by Charles Paul E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978), p. 164

⁷⁷ Pascal, *Design*, p. 10

the teller. For the autobiography to be believed, the writer must include haphazard events in the narrative design to lend the work as a whole an air of authenticity.

There are, of course, patent differences between an autobiography and a travel memoir. In the former, the self is the centre of focus whereas the writer of the latter is likely to strike roughly an even balance between insight into the place visited and disclosure of the person visiting. The ‘endless complexity of life’ is more manageable for the travel writer looking back on his or her journey, given its limited timeframe. The degree of self-exposure is probably greater for the autobiographer. However, similarities evidently exist when it comes to literary representation of the self. The travel writer, like the autobiographer, enters upon a kind of ‘*pacte autobiographique*,’ as Philippe Lejeune terms it, with the reader,⁷⁸ the tacit understanding that the self represented in the memoir has a basis in reality. However, being temporally distant from his or her journeying self and reliant on memory for reconstruction, the writer inevitably creates a persona that is only ‘psychologically intelligible’ if the ‘beliefs, desires, values, emotions, actions, and experiences ... hang together,’ as they do in good fiction.⁷⁹ The fictional techniques that William Siebenschuh identifies in factual works (‘dialogue, dramatised episodes, sustained narrative or dramatic structure, symbolism, imagery and heavy dependence on the purely affective dimension of language’)⁸⁰ combine to resurrect this persona. The effect of their combined use, as Zeppa deftly demonstrates in *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*, is to show the protagonist reacting temperamentally (naively, hot-headedly, anxiously, impetuously, reflectively) to circumstances and going through a process of learning. This part of my commentary examines first

⁷⁸ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1989), p. ix (author’s italics)

⁷⁹ Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1996), p. 97

⁸⁰ William R. Siebenschuh, *Fictional Techniques and Factual Works* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1983), p. 7

the construction of the narrative persona in recent works of travel, then assesses the role of dramatic scenes in character development, considers next the importance of interaction between the inner and outer voyages and concludes with a look at the traveller's developmental path. I argue that the methods of self-representation writers use endow their travelogues with a psychological depth they might otherwise lack.

(i) Revealing Character

The construction of a literary persona is central to the success of the autobiographical travel narrative Jamie Zeppa wrote about her time serving as a volunteer teacher for the World University Service of Canada at a junior high school in eastern Bhutan. From its outset, she places introspective recollection and self-scrutiny of her motivations at the forefront of the narrative. She begins by recalling the trepidation she felt before leaving home, her decision to go being strongly opposed by her protective grandfather, who raised her and wished her to do her doctorate, and by her fiancé Robert, who found the post too remote and the time away too long:

I could call up the office in Ottawa, I thought, and tell them I can't go, I could cite personal reasons. I could still apply to graduate school. I could take a year to think about it. Two years was a long time to be apart – I *should* think about it. But I knew that if I didn't go now, I never would. And lots of people had relationships over long distances, I told myself.⁸¹

In Bhutan, as her 'alternative education' gets underway, Zeppa expresses her agitated state of mind again. On her first hike from Pemagatshel to visit a teacher

⁸¹ Zeppa, *Sky and the Earth*, p. 11 (further page references will be given parenthetically in the text)

living in Tsebar, a village on the next mountain, she pauses by a stream to catch her breath:

How much farther up is it? Shouldn't I be there now? Is this the right way? Why is my backpack so heavy?

You shouldn't have brought *Where There Is No Doctor*.

What if something happens out here? I'll need it.

The only thing that's going to happen is you're going to collapse under the weight of it.

You can't be too careful.

Yes you can. You can be careful unto craziness. (52, 53)

More than a decade separates the apprehensive twenty-three-year-old on her first big adventure abroad from the wiser author reminiscing and writing her book at home afterwards, yet Zeppa displays a clear interest not only in recollecting her thoughts and feelings, but also in setting them down in the manner that, apparently, they were originally registered (that is, in all their jerky, iterative, disputatious and emotion-fuelled spontaneity). This is Zeppa's strategy to capture what Hélène Cixous, preferring the rude lines of da Vinci's, Picasso's and Rembrandt's preliminary drawings where 'agitation reigns' to the polished quality of their finished paintings, calls "the living of life,"⁸² the raw image, the naked emotion. The aim of the artist is to capture the unvarnished truth of the subject though, as Cixous acknowledges, this is an illusion when presented in writing, achievable only through rigorous editing. To represent the agitation her younger self experienced on the way to Tsebar, Zeppa creates two selves (or two voices), giving each a personality, the 'I' fearful and hesitant, the 'you' strident and critical. Her use of the second person point of view is not the one most commonly found in stories, inviting the reader to share in the narrated experience. Rather, the author

⁸² Hélène Cixous, 'Without End, No, State of Drawingness, No, Rather: The Executioner's Taking Off,' in *Stigmata* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 16-27 (pp. 25, 21)

constructs an alterity, a mature, calmer, more reasonable self, to which, as a vulnerable newcomer to Bhutan, she probably aspires (it also proves to be proleptic).

By writing in this way, Zeppa adds a psychological dimension to her narrative – as well as, of course, humour and suspense (will the heroine successfully liberate herself from the stifling paternalism of home? will she arrive at Tsebar intact?). As William Howarth, examining the resurrection of self and construction of character in autobiography, puts it, ‘A narrator always knows more than his protagonist, yet he remains faithful to the latter’s ignorance for the sake of credible suspense.’⁸³ Readers – especially backpackers or those who have taken up similar posts in developing countries – take interest in the faltering, discombobulated, somewhat naive young traveller and wish to discover how things turn out for her, the revelation of emotions inviting intimacy. They can readily imagine themselves agonising similarly, wandering alone in a remote part of a distant and unfamiliar country (or else identify with the more rational ‘other’ in the traveller’s head). Robyn Davidson, also inclined to introspection, uses the same technique to effect in *Tracks*: ‘But there’ll be water there, of course there will. Haven’t they told me so? What if there’s not? What if the mill’s run dry? What if I miss it? What if this thin little piece of string that keeps me tied to the camels breaks? What then?’ In contrast to Zeppa, Davidson lets the questions in her head go unanswered, manufacturing arguably greater narrative suspense (‘will there indeed be water at the mill?’ the reader probably wonders, intrigued; ‘will her camels indeed go astray?’).⁸⁴

⁸³ William L. Howarth, ‘Some Principles of Autobiography,’ in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical & Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980), pp. 84-114 (p. 87)

⁸⁴ Robyn Davidson, *Tracks* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 159

In an early draft of the prologue to *The Dragon Run* set in Canada, I relied mainly on statistics on the Himalayan Kingdom, gleaned from books to generate intrigue. I made little effort to place myself in the shoes of my younger self and glossed over the troubles he had encountered getting permission to work over there from the Royal Civil Service Commission and a contract to teach from the principal of Sherading College. In the revised version, instead of gaining a contract with apparent ease ('It had taken half a year, but eventually RCSC had said yes, and Dr Tenzin had sent me a contract to sign'⁸⁵), I recollected the actions I had taken and the frustrations I had felt during the six months I had to wait to get a response from Bhutan. I tried to recast my protagonist as impatient to seize an opportunity and chose short statements, sentence fragments and rhetorical questions to express this:

I had written a long email message to Dr Tenzin the following day, introducing myself. Two weeks passed. I got no reply. I sent another message and waited another week. Nothing. Was the address the right one? Bhutan had Internet, but were the Bhutanese in the habit of using it? I sent a message to Nathalie, asking if she got our CVs. Surely she would be checking her inbox regularly. Had she heard back from RCSC? Did she have another email address for Dr Tenzin? No reply. I waited two weeks before trying again.⁸⁶

Rather than construct a second self, a 'you' recommending patience and drawing, perhaps, on past experiences of dealing with officialdom in developing countries, I chose to question my motivation for wishing to go to Bhutan – 'Why was I so keen to go anyway?'⁸⁷ – and examine my feelings of disenchantment with life at home (an alternative strategy could have seen Sonia assume the role of sober advisor).

⁸⁵ Appendix: *The Dragon Run*, prologue (draft)

⁸⁶ *The Dragon Run*, prologue, p. 7

⁸⁷ *The Dragon Run*, prologue, p. 7

To manufacture suspense, I put off telling the reader whether or not I got a contract until the end of the prologue (when it drops through the letterbox).

Writing the first draft of Part I, Chapter 2 and following one convention in travel writing that defers background information on the foreign country,⁸⁸ I fell into the trap of making myself seem wiser than I actually was at the time of travel. Prompted to ponder Bhutan's pending switch from monarchical rule to parliamentary democracy by an article I found in the local newspaper called 'In Transition,' I launched into a long aside chronicling the history of the Kingdom, most of which was the product of post-journey research. 'Many Bhutanese are fearful that modernisation will erode their traditions and damage the environment,' I concluded authoritatively near the end.⁸⁹ I had read very little on Bhutan and had met only a handful of Bhutanese by this point on my trip, so how did I know? In Cixous's words, I had failed to 'trace the quick of life hidden behind the rounded appearances.'⁹⁰ In my revisions, I shed the rounded, unreferenced summary and rummaged through my journals for the original rough sketch:

Why is the king stepping down? Why does he want his people to govern themselves? [...] Every shop, restaurant and hotel lobby has a framed picture of the 'Precious Ruler of the Dragon People' leaning out from the wall, a silk scarf draped around it. The Bhutanese would appear to love their King. 'Next stage in the Royal Government's drive to modernise the nation,' Dr Tenzin told us on the journey here from Thimphu. But why does Bhutan wish to modernise? A foolish question. [...] Bhutanese want what Westerners have. I open my guidebook to the history section. No. The impetus to modernise came from the King's father, a response to China's invasion of Tibet in 1959.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Colin Thubron, *To a Mountain in Tibet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011); Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Everest Disaster* (New York: Villard Books, 1997); Jonathan Raban, *Coasting* (London: Picador, 1987).

⁸⁹ Appendix: *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 2 (draft)

⁹⁰ Cixous, 'Without End,' p. 21

⁹¹ *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 2, p. 15

I tried to capture the newcomer's efforts to make sense of Bhutan's political transition by having him piece together the facts he had gathered so far, asking himself questions along the way and venturing answers, correcting himself here and there and admitting his sources, his tone halting and tentative. Instead of getting a history lesson, delivered eloquently and dispassionately, from the author, the reader not only shares in the protagonist's learning (a process he or she could, perhaps, imagine following), but also becomes more acquainted with the personality of the traveller, more invested in his personal story.

In Part II, Chapter 5, I erred in the opposite direction and made my more experienced self appear naive when he was reflecting on Gross National Happiness, the fourth King's development initiative. By this point on his journey (twenty-two months having elapsed), the traveller should have been (and was) more knowing about the host country than I had suggested: 'How one goes about measuring happiness with accuracy is a mystery to me, but I understand that GNH is assessed through ...' and 'the Bhutanese, I sense, score well on criteria relating to well-being ...'⁹² The tone was too tentative, the information offered too conjectural. I had made my speaker seem unsure of his facts and undermined the authority he had established in earlier chapters of Part II of the book as a more seasoned and insightful observer. In the revised version, I added a paragraph describing a survey, conducted by the Centre for Bhutan Studies during the first year of my stay, that aimed to assess national well-being, the results of which had appeared in the local newspaper. I presented the findings, giving examples of the kinds of questions the Centre had asked and how respondents had reacted. To this statistical information, I added the thoughts I had had on the subject at the time.⁹³ Such changes, I hoped,

⁹² Appendix: *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 5 (draft)

⁹³ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 5, pp. 130-33

would persuade readers to accept more readily the maturer traveller as suitably informed and to trust in what he had to say.

A strategy, then, for breathing life back into the wayfarer and granting him or her a textual presence distinct from the author is for the latter to try, in as far as it is possible, to reinhabit the head of the former, to articulate his or her fears and frustrations during the journey. Successfully managed, this gives substance to the personality of the traveller and, probably, if sustained, greater credibility: getting to know the traveller is likely to help the reader accept more readily his or her interpretation of events.

(ii) Dramatising Personality

Dramatic scenes also help readers to engage with the protagonist on a deeper level, especially those that are coupled with thoughtful reflection. As William Siebenschuh notes, citing Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907) as an example, 'dramatic recreation of the moment does what only fictional technique can do: it allows us to imagine we see the subject act and speak; it enlarges and complicates our sympathies.'⁹⁴ Jamie Zeppa's intellectual and emotional growth is, to some extent, enabled by and demonstrated through her encounters, especially those in which her perception is challenged; scrutiny of the techniques she uses to represent these illuminates further the nature of an autobiographical travel narrative. The volunteer notices soon after being posted in Pemagatshel, for instance, that many of the teachers at her school beat the children, usually with a stick, for the slightest of infractions. While appalled at the practice, she recognises that corporal

⁹⁴ Siebenschuh, *Fictional Techniques*, p. 40

punishment is a cultural norm in Bhutanese schools: WUSC informed her during her orientation that gurus in monastic schools routinely beat their students in order to break their egos. ‘But,’ she protests, ‘it is very hard to see how this applies to class III students who do not understand multiplication’ (127). Zeppa broods on the topic, but she also captures her dilemma dramatically:

One afternoon, from across the playing field, I watch Mr. Rinzin slap Karma Dorji across the face and I go running across the grass, heart swollen with rage, how dare he, how *dare* he? ‘What seems to be the problem?’ I ask Mr. Rinzin. My voice is shaking but he does not seem to notice. ‘Nothing, nothing. There’s no problem,’ he says, smiling, and walks away.

‘What happened, Karma?’ I ask.

‘He is calling me to come, but I am coming there too slowly.’ He shrugs and plods off to join his friends, and I burst into tears. (127)

The narration of a scene in which the impressionable young teacher, ‘heart swollen with rage,’ rushes to the aid of one of her students likely ‘enlarges and complicates our sympathies,’ giving us the opportunity, as Siebenschuh finds in emotionally charged scenes of *Father and Son*, to ‘participate imaginatively.’ Zeppa makes us witnesses to the confrontation that so outraged her at the time.⁹⁵ Being there at the playing field, a place of recreation for the children, and observing a Bhutanese teacher’s casual indifference to his violent act, a little boy’s resigned stoicism in response and the protagonist’s frustration at being unable to intervene effectively, provokes us to react in a way that a brief summary of the incident probably would not. Many readers would feel compelled to examine their own cultural standards, consider whether they apply in this foreign setting and either side with the traveller or distance themselves from her. The scene also gives Zeppa the WUSC Volunteer a textual presence or ‘aliveness’ distinct from Zeppa

⁹⁵ Siebenschuh, *Fictional Techniques*, p. 41

the Author, thus preserving the ‘ontological gap’ between author and protagonist.⁹⁶ In terms of her personal journey, it serves as a waypoint on the heroine’s path to greater understanding and cultivation of a working code of ethics. The vitality of the scene propels readers down a narrative pathway: they may wish to learn more, not only of corporal punishment in Bhutan, but also (and probably more so) about how the traveller negotiates the impasse and learns. Zeppa subsequently talks the matter over with the headmaster, reflects on how flawed the American model is (‘parents suing teachers, children suing parents ...’ 129) and comes to regret the hastiness of her actions: ‘Here ... is the mind,’ she laments, ‘leaping from emotion to speech without reflection’ (129). Further thought might have brought her to the conclusion that both systems are, in fact, defective or that Bhutanese educators may not be excused, despite the cultural embeddedness of corporal punishment.

In *River Town*, Peter Hessler, who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in China for two years, also aims to bring his younger self into keener focus and incite his readers’ sympathies through rendering in a scene coupled with reflection an altercation he had with a local Chinese. The man objected to his filming the antics of a fellow volunteer, who was entertaining a crowd on the street.

‘Stop hitting the camera,’ I said. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m a citizen,’ he said again. He had a thick local accent and he stepped close, threateningly. He was a big man with a belly and a shock of greasy hair and a round face that shone with anger [...]

‘I’m a citizen too,’ I said. ‘I live here in Fuling. I teach at the teachers college [...]

He swung again at the camera, hitting it. I stepped forward.

‘Leave me alone,’ I said. ‘I’m not doing anything wrong. Get out of here. Blow away.’⁹⁷

⁹⁶ David J. Gordon, ‘Character and Self in Autobiography,’ *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 18, 2 (1988), pp. 105-19 (p. 109)

⁹⁷ Hessler, *River Town*, p. 382

At face value, the exchange hardly casts the foreign visitor in a favourable light. While some allowance must be made for the fact that the dialogue is a translation from Chinese which Hessler learned while in Fuling, the volunteer berates the man for his behaviour in the bluntest language (the last command being an insult). To the unendearing physical description (emphasising the man's apparent lack of self-respect), the writer adds the dismissive assumption that he is likely 'a minor government cadre or a lower-level factory boss.'⁹⁸ But the quarrel occurs at the end of the volunteer's stay in the country, during which he tried hard to rise above his assigned status of '*waiguoren*' (outside person) and gain acceptance in the local community.⁹⁹ The author appeals to the sympathies of the reader through subtle repetition of the word 'citizen,' which the offended man uses three times over. The visiting American is not a citizen, but an outsider. The way he is made to speak and describe betrays the frustration he feels at being treated like a camera-toting tourist. In the paragraphs of reflection that follow, Hessler unpacks 'the baggage that accompanies a *waiguoren* holding a camera in China' and has his protagonist review the video tape and admit to being 'too quick to anger and use strong language.'¹⁰⁰

In my literary reconstruction of a tense encounter I had with the event coordinator of the 'Tara-thon,' the sponsored run across the Kingdom that Sonia and I organised and took part in, I wondered how best to disclose the temperament of my younger self. The occasion was the team's arrival at Mongar High School, where we planned to stay for two nights. The dormitory, regrettably, had been vandalised and the latrines fouled with excrement. It was Mr Namgay's job to contact the District Education Officer in each *dzongkhag* in advance and make

⁹⁸ Hessler, *River Town*, p. 382

⁹⁹ Hessler, *River Town*, p. 16

¹⁰⁰ Hessler, *River Town*, pp. 383-84

arrangements with the school principals for our stays. It appeared he had not done so. Zeppa, I noted, began her scene of confrontation by having her heroine dash across the playing field, the urgency of the action and the words in her head, ‘how dare he, how *dare* he?’ (127) expressing her emotional state. I decided to try something similar. ‘*Why didn’t he phone ahead and make sure the school was ready to receive us?*’ I had my protagonist think crossly as he marched from the dormitory towards the school entrance, where Mr Namgay was standing. ‘*Didn’t he call the District Education Officer and have him inform the school principal that we were coming?*’¹⁰¹ As for Zeppa with Mr Rinzin, my interaction with the coordinator was brief, he offering no explanation. I tried to imply the awkwardness of the moment and my imprudence through statements like, ‘The words come out louder than I intended’ and ‘I soften my voice’ and by describing the reactions of three of our students unloading the bus nearby.¹⁰² A sustained expression of regret, in the manner of Hessler, I deferred to later in the narrative: ‘I fear that Sonia and I have estranged this man, have failed to give him the sort of respect he clearly commands among his countrymen [...] I really shouldn’t have barked at him in front of the students in Mongar. Like in Japan, shaming an elder in public here is unforgivable.’¹⁰³

By restaging conversations (especially altercations) and recalling or generating reflections on their significance, introspective travel writers give invaluable insight into the personalities of their travelling personas, both through the expression of raw emotions felt at the time (anger, helplessness, arrogance) and the articulation of more sober thoughts subsequently (on sensitivity to cultural

¹⁰¹ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 3, p. 83

¹⁰² *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 3, p. 84

¹⁰³ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, p. 158

difference, on the status of the visitor in the foreign land, on customs elsewhere bearing likeness).

(iii) Integrating Inner and Outer

Roy Pascal remarks how, in well-written autobiography, a certain harmony exists between external experience and thoughtful reflection, the former often serving as a ‘catalytic agent’ for the latter.¹⁰⁴ Travel commentator Rockwell Gray notices the same in a good travel memoir: ‘the inner roads of mental travel are not only enriched by but doubtless dependent for their metaphorical form upon the travels along the real roads of the world.’¹⁰⁵ Analysis of the way Jamie Zeppa balances the two when re-presenting the ethnic conflict that threatened to destabilise Bhutan during her tenure at Sherubtse informs my own practice. She describes the conflict according to how it affected her at the time. First, she registers the shock her younger self experienced at witnessing a bitter stand-off at the college gate, the principal forbidding students of Nepali extraction to leave campus to celebrate a Hindu festival wearing traditional costumes instead of the mandatory Bhutanese national dress. Next, she relives her frustration at not being able to get the students in her class to explain the reasons for the recent outbreak of hostilities (‘I feel desperate to understand,’ 203). This gives way to her protagonist’s anxiety on learning that two of her Nepali Bhutanese students have been arrested and taken away to Trashigang for questioning. Finally, her persona, in a calmer frame of mind, reports on what she has learned about the crisis through reading newspapers

¹⁰⁴ Pascal, *Design*, p. 97

¹⁰⁵ Rockwell Gray, ‘Travel,’ in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1992), pp. 33-50 (p. 39)

and questioning her colleagues. To preserve a sense of real life unfolding (and to build suspense), the author introduces some of Pascal's 'oscillations' along the way, quotidian events that interrupt the dramatic narrative: a hike with a friend to a local lake, a winter break in India.

For Laurens van der Post, by contrast, the inner life seems less to mesh harmoniously with the outer than to govern it. *Venture to the Interior* (1957) is as much an account of the author's voyage to his own interior as it is of a mission to map the interior of Nyasaland (Malawi) for the British government. The scenes he chooses to re-enact seem primarily to reaffirm the theory he posits in his preface: that man has lost touch with the noble, 'Homeric,' African side of himself and allowed self-serving, European 'unreason' to dictate his actions with disastrous results.¹⁰⁶ Having spent the Second World War serving in the British Army away from his homeland of South Africa, he returns with the chief purpose of repairing this rift in himself, and his personal mission colours all that he experiences. On the first part of his mission, an ascent of Mount Mlanje in heavy rain, he is joined by Richard Vance, a young forester, who drowns while attempting to ford a river in flood. As Mark Cocker observes, '[e]ven in [...] apparently innocent small-talk,' Post 'marks the trail that leads to Vance's fatal accident.'¹⁰⁷ Vance is a transposed European, who lives in a 'Tudor building' and is, in the eyes of the narrator, 'far too young for the grey, old, pre-human world about us.'¹⁰⁸ He symbolises the detached European self Post resents and wishes to purge from himself. When Vance has a minor argument with the provincial forestry officer, Post remarks that the incident 'might be a kind of warning.'¹⁰⁹ When Vance bids farewell to his wife in an 'awkward, brusque' manner, Post thinks to himself, "Dear God, I do hope

¹⁰⁶ Post, *Venture*, pp. xii, xiii

¹⁰⁷ Mark Cocker, *Loneliness and Time* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992), p. 79

¹⁰⁸ Post, *Venture*, pp. 110, 111

¹⁰⁹ Post, *Venture*, p. 110

nothing is going to happen to make those children regret their inadequate good-bye.”¹¹⁰ The traveller’s inner voyage intrudes on the outer, shaping and anticipating it. The risk the author takes, of course, is that his readers may resent the narrator’s overt manipulation of the facts and reject the travelogue as false (a charge brought against Post, most notably by J. D. F. Jones¹¹¹). Whether they do or not may depend on how interested they are in the personality of the writer and in the psychological journey of his or her travelling persona.

Wishing to bring my readers up to date on recent political developments in Bhutan, I began Chapter 2 of Part II of *The Dragon Run* by giving a several-page round-up that diverted readers away from our charity run and seemed to have little bearing on it. I had given no thought to how I might merge it with my personal story. Bearing in mind Larson’s point that story in memoir ‘transforms deed into lesson,’¹¹² I removed the passage from the second chapter and integrated it into the narrative of the fourth. Team Tara-thon arrives in Sengor and struggles to find a place to stay as it is Election Day for the National Council (the Bhutanese House of Lords), and all officials are out of town. This problem leads naturally to thoughts of Dr Tenzin, who is running for office in the new democratic government, but has also been instrumental in the Tara-thon and figured largely in earlier chapters. Using one of the newspaper clippings I collected while in Bhutan, concerning Dr Tenzin’s political aspirations, and a copy of his valedictory letter to Sherading College, I found myself with a better opportunity to achieve coherence, to suggest that those of humble origins (the former college principal was, like several of our student runners, a cow herder in his younger days) may, with courage and

¹¹⁰ Post, *Venture*, p. 123

¹¹¹ J. D. F. Jones, *Storyteller: The Many Lives of Laurens van der Post* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

¹¹² Thomas Larson, *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading & Writing Personal Narrative* (Athens, GA: Swallow, 2007), p. 153

determination, come to lead a nation.¹¹³ This paves the way to the conversation with the Tara-thonners round the campfire in Chapter 7 and the dialogue with Dr Tenzin in the epilogue, both of which enlarge the narrator's comprehension of Bhutan's political transition and lead to reflections on Gross National Happiness and Jigme Singye Wangchuck's guiding principle of governance. This in turn leads to musings on the lessons the West might learn and to the protagonist's interrogation of change within himself.¹¹⁴

Paul Fussell's comment that 'the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker's encounter with distant and unfamiliar data' would appear to be accurate.¹¹⁵ Disengaged, that narrative may interfere with or even derail the account of the external voyage, readers losing perhaps the more obvious plotline dictated by the journey's itinerary. But the inner journey has to do more than simply 'arise from' the outer; it must intertwine with it, emerging and re-emerging reactively to external developments and tracking the traveller's progression in understanding.

(iv) Path of Learning

In his seminal study of 'highly autobiographical' novels of 'growing up and gradual self-discovery,' such as *Jude the Obscure* and *Of Human Bondage*, Jerome Buckley finds the *Bildungsroman* a fitting model.¹¹⁶ Typical to these novels, the young hero (Buckley practically ignores heroines), feeling socially and

¹¹³ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 4, pp. 112-15

¹¹⁴ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, pp. 146-47; epilogue

¹¹⁵ Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 203

¹¹⁶ J. H. Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1974), p. viii

intellectually stifled at home and constrained by an overbearing father ‘antagonistic to his ambitions,’ leaves home, usually for the city, and there begins his ‘real “education.”’ With time and through ‘painful soul-searching,’ he reappraises his values and ultimately matures.¹¹⁷ Jamie Zeppa’s tale clearly bears likenesses although a *Bildungsroman* is traditionally a growing-up story, tracing the protagonist’s journey from adolescence to adulthood. Susan Midalia in her more recent study of the modern female counterpart may be correct in saying, however, that where ‘earlier versions of the genre present youth as the most decisive stage of an individual’s life history, contemporary female examples sometimes begin in middle-age as precipitating a crisis of identity, a questioning of hitherto unproblematically internalised social norms.’¹¹⁸ Discussion of the techniques Zeppa uses to trace how her younger incarnation metamorphosed from the helpless, homesick volunteer teacher at a village school to the more mature and confident lecturer at a university college points to the merits of (re)constructing a path of learning in an autobiographical travel narrative.

To represent the evolution of her protagonist over the course of her two-year stay in Bhutan, Zeppa has her pause for thought at critical moments and comment on her learning and the changes she sees in herself. She realises after ten weeks in the Kingdom, for instance, that she has ‘done nothing but worry’ since arriving, that eight-year-olds have taken care of her and that she has ‘had to learn everything all over again’ (102). After six months, unable any longer to write letters to her fiancé (as it feels like a betrayal), she writes one to herself – the form suggesting, as an apparently unedited journal entry might, that the transcribed emotions are genuine – telling of the love affair she is now having with Bhutan, ‘*with the way its*

¹¹⁷ Buckley, *Season*, p. 17

¹¹⁸ Susan Midalia, ‘The Contemporary Female Bildungsroman: Gender, Genre, and the Politics of Optimism,’ *Westerley: A Quarterly Review*, 41, 1 (1996), pp. 89-104 (p. 90)

green mountains turn into blue shadows in the afternoon light [...] the feeling of the great dark night all around' (181; italics in original). In her second year, trying desperately to understand why indigenous Bhutanese and Nepali immigrants are suddenly at each other's throats, she admits to romanticising her adopted country. The way the author drives home the emergent awareness of her younger self indicates that she experienced a kind of epiphany (repetition of the word 'real' implying that all her Shangri-Larian fancies have been swept away):

I know it is wrong, dishonest to separate the two things, the splendour of rural Bhutan and the political situation. Bhutan is a real place, with a real history, in which real conflicts lead to real upheaval, the real suffering of real people. As much as I would like it to be, it is not a hidden valley. (250)

Thus, Zeppa the Author propels Zeppa the WUSC Volunteer towards her 'graduation,' as Susanna Egan describes coming of age in her inquiry into phases of experience in life writing, 'from a protected to an autonomous state.'¹¹⁹ Admitting that she has no power to solve the problems she perceives in her adopted country, whether institutional or political, Zeppa looks, instead, deep within herself for answers. 'Buddhism requires that I take on the terrifying responsibility for myself,' she acknowledges (244) before rejecting her Catholic faith, marrying one of her students and accepting Bhutan as home, bringing the fictional arc of a non-fiction *Bildungsroman* to resolution. Apart from having her protagonist pause and reflect at critical moments, the narrator also signposts the inner journey more mechanically by means of section titles that relate to personal growth ('Arrival,' 'Entrance,' 'Involvement,' 'Love') and through epigraphs from Buddhist scriptures that suggest it ('Involvement' begins with the words, '*If you hit*

¹¹⁹ Susanna Egan, *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1984), p. 105

upon the idea that this or that country is safe, prosperous, or fortunate, give it up, my friend' 209; italics in original).

In *Old Glory* (1986), Jonathan Raban's protagonist also undergoes a journey of personal transformation. Inspired to float down the Mississippi by reading *Huckleberry Finn* as a boy, an image of Twain's hero drifting 'blissfully lost' on 'an enamelled pool of lapis lazuli' lodged in his mind, Raban's voyager gradually learns that navigating the treacherous river in a sixteen-foot 'shell of aluminium' – hardly 'a craft in which one might float at all easily into an idyll' – fails to live up to his fantasy.¹²⁰ To dramatise the progressive disintegration of the dream, the author begins by having the stern warning of the lockmaster at Minneapolis dam (where the voyage began) recur chiastically in his traveller's head as he fearfully dodges hidden sawyers and ploughing towheads ('You better respect her, or she'll do you in'¹²¹). When the voyager reaches Red Wing, fifty miles from Minneapolis, and retreats to a church, he places a string of sentences, all beginning with 'I' in his head as he wonders, humbled and hesitant, whether it is wise to continue: 'I wanted to get down the river safely. I was frightened of the weather, the waves and wakes [...] I worried about the strength of the lock on my outboard motor.'¹²² The simply worded command in the first case and the plain independent clauses in the second convey gut feelings, the balder language seeming to pierce a delicate image like 'lapis lazuli.' As with Zeppa the WUSC Volunteer, the passage of time helps Raban the Pilot to think more calmly, and the author puts distance between the romantic dreamer and his more realistic counterpart by using first- and third-person points of view: 'He hadn't predicted the fright of it [...] he hadn't been afraid of drowning. I was. I kept on seeing myself dead in the river.'¹²³ Raban concludes his

¹²⁰ Raban, *Old Glory*, pp. 11, 46

¹²¹ Raban, *Old Glory*, pp. 48, 58, 83

¹²² Raban, *Old Glory*, p. 96

¹²³ Raban, *Old Glory*, p. 183

inner/outer voyage by having his traveller wander aimlessly and dejectedly in the littered mangrove swamps of the Mississippi delta, all Huckleberry Finnian flights of fancy apparently washed away. By deciding on an indeterminate ending, the author problematises the path of learning of his travelling *alter ego*, the outer journey unsettling any contrived resolution of the inner.

Like Zeppa and Raban, I travelled overseas with a notion of Shangri-La in my head, conjured from images I had seen of the foreign country in coffee-table books and on film. In the first draft of my prologue (set entirely in Bhutan), I failed to mention this and so missed an opportunity to present the more naive view of my protagonist in Canada and demonstrate subsequently how he came to revise this view on reaching his destination. In re-writing, knowing that neither a childlike nor childhood fantasy had taken me to the Himalayas, I acknowledged the impetus, dismissing first the hyperbole of a Canadian documentarian who effused about the Kingdom, and then relating the Bhutan of my imagination to my desire for adventure: ‘In Bhutan, I felt I might easily run along the middle of the east-west highway for half a day unimpeded ... lose myself and make unexpected discoveries ... follow a steep, twisting trail through dense woods to a hidden temple.’¹²⁴ I had my more discerning self, approaching the end of his sojourn and aware by then of the deficiencies of the host country, admit that, while a foreign visitor might discover fleetingly a picture-perfect paradise, it is a delusion to believe that Bhutan is Shangri-La:

it is easy, I imagine, for a visitor from the West to come to Bhutan in the hope of finding a hidden sanctuary, a place of extraordinary natural beauty inhabited by peace-loving, godly people, just as many did to Tibet in the 1950s. I came myself with this expectation, and the road to Ura on this beautiful January morning shows me once again that it exists.

¹²⁴ *The Dragon Run*, prologue, p. 8

But to see Bhutan as simply Shangri-La is to overlook its problems.¹²⁵

I tried to contrast the two views stylistically. I expressed the first in a dreamy, speculative manner, stringing loosely together a series of imaginary events, connecting these with suspension points to suggest meandering thought and using extravagant past participles ('unimpeded,' 'unexpected,' 'hidden') to further the sense of illusion. The second I articulated more soberly and evaluatively, drawing on a relevant parallel and pinning down the fantasy to a specific place and time. Here the tone is didactic, the speaker more knowing and reasonable.

A second and more important aspect of personal growth relates to my protagonist's shift from self-centeredness to greater communal sensitivity. Writing Chapter 5 of Part II and speculating on the difference between my happiness on reaching the highest mountain pass on our ultra-marathon and that of our Bhutanese runners, I realised the need to review an earlier chapter of my book. In order for my maturer self to admit that his motives for undertaking the Tara-thon were not altogether altruistic, his younger, more egotistic counterpart would have to say more than 'I cannot be suffering from inertia already, can I?' as an impulse to stage a run across the nation.¹²⁶ In my revisions, I made him more open about his motives: 'I am in need of a challenge – something looming on the horizon that scares me'¹²⁷ and summarised an article I had read on the flight over to Bhutan about three Bhutanese celebrated for being the first to cycle across the Kingdom. To demonstrate that my protagonist gradually became less self-focused and more community minded as the Tara-thon proceeded, I inserted scenes in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of Part II, showing how he came to interact in a fuller way. In Chapter 6, he celebrates the arrival at the fourth pass of a limping Sonam Tshering with applause

¹²⁵ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 5, pp. 130-31

¹²⁶ Appendix: *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 4 (draft)

¹²⁷ *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 4, pp. 57-58

and encouraging words; in Chapter 7, he takes the team leader aside to discover how the ‘tail-end Charlies’ are faring; and, in Chapter 8, he jogs to the final pass with Ugyen Leki, the latest runner to suffer injury.¹²⁸ As my inner voyage did not have the prominence of Zeppa’s, I chose not to divide my narrative into sections with titles and epigraphs signalling my protagonist’s shifts in outlook. My chapter epigraphs refer more to the exterior journey than to the interior with the exception of two near the end that emphasise the importance in Bhutan of cooperation and consideration of others. Interested, like Raban, in an irresolute ending to both my external and internal journeys, I situated the final scene of my epilogue in England, a place of transition for Sonia and me on our return to Canada. As the news came in that Bhutan had elected its first government, I had my protagonist reflect on the changes that democracy might bring as well as those in himself, but reach no conclusions: ‘Is [Bhutan] destined to embrace capitalism and modernise like its neighbours? [...] It will take Sonia and me time, no doubt, to appreciate more deeply the ways in which this small Himalayan Kingdom has touched us.’¹²⁹

In ‘Literature and the Narrative Self,’ Samantha Vice remarks that ‘[e]ssential to the concept of a narrative is that it shows connections between its constitutive elements and traces continuities and changes through time.’¹³⁰ The literary devices that self-conscious travel writers summon to describe the developmental paths trodden by their travelling selves (whether isolating critical moments of new understanding, making distinctions between their wiser and naive selves or pointing towards transformation by means of epigraphic signposts) draw attention to those connections, continuities and changes. Their combined effect, as

¹²⁸ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 6; Chapter 7, pp. 143-44; Chapter 8, p. 170

¹²⁹ *The Dragon Run*, epilogue, pp. 187, 189

¹³⁰ Samantha Vice, ‘Literature and the Narrative Self,’ *Philosophy* 78 (2003), pp. 93-108 (p. 95)

Vivian Gornick suggests, is that ‘the idea of the self ... clarifies ... gaining strength and definition as the narrative progresses.’¹³¹

To sum up, the fictional techniques that William Siebenschuh sees autobiographers employing to tell the stories of their lives are also recognisable in contemporary travel writing, particularly of the sort that foregrounds the narrator. Authors put themselves back in the subject positions of their travelling counterparts and try to recall how exactly their trips affected them psychologically and temperamentally. In so doing, they construct characters that disclose themselves to readers through thoughtful reflection and dramatic scenes of interaction with others, and demonstrate, perhaps, that they have undergone some process of learning while abroad and return home with fresh outlooks. Robyn Davidson, remembering how she went about representing her travelling selves in *Tracks* and *Desert Places*, admits to doing this, her characters being ‘bits’ or ‘projections’ of her true self.¹³² Vice is right to warn, however, that thinking of past selves as characters and ‘too consciously “moulding” or “fashioning”’ their representation in writing jeopardises their authenticity.¹³³ Yet, if their ‘reactions, motivations, and decisions’ are plotted with skill, the kind of ‘robust picture’ that narratologist Marya Schechtman expects of a character in a good novel or in a superior autobiography often emerges.¹³⁴ The textual presences of Zeppa the WUSC Volunteer or Raban the Pilot attest to this.

¹³¹ Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), p. 92

¹³² Tim Youngs, ‘Interview with Robyn Davidson,’ *Studies in Travel Writing*, 9, 1 (2005), pp. 20-36 (p. 27)

¹³³ Vice, ‘Narrative Self,’ p. 102

¹³⁴ Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1996), p. 97

PART II

Self and Wilderness

The journal that nineteenth-century American philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau kept while living and wandering in the wilderness was, as Scott Slovic points out, an ““autobiographical mirror”” as well as a record of encounters with nature. Thoreau exercised ‘a kind of double vision, a way of seeing which acknowledges the subtle, vital unity of the self and the world.’¹³⁵ Thoreau spurned those who accumulated and presented facts in a detached manner (such as Linnaeus or Buffon), favouring instead ‘an account of interaction, the mental processes of the human observer becoming as significant a feature of the text as the external information.’¹³⁶ Slovic describes how Thoreau’s intimate encounter on May 7th, 1855 with a screech owl nesting in a hollow oak tree reveals as much about the writer as it does about the bird, and analyses the phases of engagement, the shifts in the observer’s awareness (from fear as he thrusts his hand through a hole in the trunk to surprise at discovering the owl to curiosity over whether it has eggs).¹³⁷ But Thoreau’s engagement with the natural world ran deeper than description of his close interactions with plants, birds or animals. He was part of nature, he insisted, and nature a part of him, ‘the wild other within his own “brain and bowels,”’ an ‘inner other’ to be interpreted and celebrated.¹³⁸ Immersion in the wilderness also brought him spiritual fulfillment: ‘I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven/Than I live to Walden even,’ he effused poetically while ensconced alone for two years in a log cabin in the woods of Concord,¹³⁹ a sentiment he shared with

¹³⁵ Slovic, *Awareness*, p. 25

¹³⁶ Slovic, *Awareness*, p. 42

¹³⁷ Slovic, *Awareness*, p. 43

¹³⁸ Slovic, *Awareness*, p. 33

¹³⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* [1854] (New Jersey: Princeton University, 1971), p. 193

other American Transcendentalists and their descendants (Emerson, Audubon, Leopold, Burroughs and Muir).

There is much common ground in the works of introspective travellers and those of naturalist-philosophers writing about wildernesses in the American tradition. Such settings invite contemplation of the self and the world, and incline wanderers belonging to both camps to explore their psyches, interrogate their beliefs and seek solace. They typically report on an enlarged consciousness that is more ecologically alert, a greater self realised phenomenologically through identification with nature. As Eric Katz puts it, ‘when we seriously identify with other living beings, we engage in a process of expanding our narrow egoistical “self” into a larger “Self” that encompasses all,’¹⁴⁰ a process deep ecologist Arne Naess calls ‘Self-realisation’ or seeing our actions ‘as part of a larger gestalt.’¹⁴¹ Such identification with nature necessarily engenders increased respect, the wayfarer coming to understand that ‘if we destroy our environment, we are destroying our larger self.’¹⁴² Like their nature-worshipping counterparts, ruminative travel writers tend to be highly descriptive of their surroundings, questioning of nature’s workings, expressive of their feelings, open to spiritual insights and critical of humankind’s lack of respect for the environment. They also tend to travel on foot, believing perhaps, as Thoreau did, that ‘the ideal mode of experiencing and perceiving nature entail[s] a mixture of active movement through natural settings and passive reception of sensory impressions.’¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Eric Katz, ‘Against the Inevitability of Anthropocentrism,’ in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. by Katz, Light and Rothenberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000), pp. 17-42 (p. 27)

¹⁴¹ Arne Naess, *Ecology, community and lifestyle*, trans, David Rothenberg (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p. 9

¹⁴² Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 132

¹⁴³ Slovic, *Awareness*, p. 52

In their study of ‘slow travel’ (the recent trend in staying for longer periods at holiday destinations and getting to know the local people, using wherever possible environmentally sustainable modes of transport, and ‘savouring the journey’ rather than dashing between tourist ‘must-sees’¹⁴⁴), Janet Dickinson and Les Lumsdon devote a chapter to walking. ‘[T]he actual movement of walking,’ they insist, is ‘a way of enjoying natural environments ... at a pace where sensory perception is attuned to the familiar, and in some cases unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells.’¹⁴⁵ By exploring a foreign place on foot, the visitor is liable to gain a richer appreciation of the landscape, the light and the native inhabitants. Tim Edensor, inquiring into reflexivity and rambling in the British countryside, examines in greater depth this relationship between place and excursive walking. According to him, the practice articulates ‘a complex imbrication of the material organisation and shape of the landscape, its symbolic meaning, and the ongoing sensual perception and experience of moving through space.’ The act of walking ‘(re)produces and (re)interprets space and place.’¹⁴⁶

While the concepts of space and place are culturally bound and hermeneutically fluid (does space, for example, prefigure place or is it that the latter makes possible the existence of the former?¹⁴⁷), for the purposes of considering the relationship between the self, the practice of walking and the natural environment, emphasis might be laid on how the pedestrian comes to perceive differently. Edensor suggests that the subject often becomes through ‘intense reflexive monitoring’ increasingly aware of ‘the way in which it moves

¹⁴⁴ Janet Dickinson and Les Lumsdon, *Slow Travel and Tourism* (London: Earthscan, 2010), p. 79

¹⁴⁵ Dickinson, *Slow Travel*, p. 124

¹⁴⁶ Tim Edensor, ‘Walking in the British Countryside: Reflexivity, Embodied Practices and Ways of Escape,’ *Body & Society* 6, 3/4 (2000), pp. 81-106 (p. 82)

¹⁴⁷ Edward S. Casey, ‘How to get from Space to Place in a fairly short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,’ in *Senses of Place*, ed. by Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1997), pp. 13-51.

through, senses and apprehends nature.’¹⁴⁸ There may at times be, as Paul Rodaway observes, ‘a kind of structuring of space and defining of place’ according to sensory readings of the environment, the landscape determined phenomenologically rather than cartographically, the attentive walker, travelling at a slow pace and sensuously aroused, constructing perhaps a haptic, olfactory or auditory geography.¹⁴⁹ Robert Macfarlane describes ‘a kind of over-the-head, whole-body engagement’ when walking in nature and tells of Nan Shepherd trekking barefoot in the Cairngorms in order to feel “‘long grass at morning, hot in the sun, but still cool and wet when the foot sinks into it,’” the foot being one sensuous ‘route to immediacy.’¹⁵⁰ At other times, especially when the walker must do battle with rugged terrain, the focus may fall on the rigours of the activity and the deleterious effects on the body (on aches and blisters, on tiredness and thirst; on loose stones on the path to negotiate or a fast-flowing river to cross).

The slow pace and rhythm of an excursion on foot away from the city, as ethnographer Sean Slavin discovers on the Camino de Santiago, may also induce spiritual reverie, particularly when the going is tough.¹⁵¹ The pilgrims he interviews doing the 800-kilometre trek report a shift as days pass ‘away from the material, spatial world towards a spiritual and non-spatial one,’ aspects of the landscape (‘the type and shape of rocks on the path, the formation of clouds’¹⁵²) inducing them to put aside their concerns, reside in the present moment and look

¹⁴⁸ Edensor, ‘Walking,’ p. 84

¹⁴⁹ Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense, and Place*. (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 4

¹⁵⁰ Adam Nicolson, ‘The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot by Robert Macfarlane: review,’ *The Telegraph: Book Reviews*, 28 May, 2012 <www.telegraph.co.uk> [accessed 28 March 2016], para. 10

¹⁵¹ Sean Slavin, ‘Walking as Spiritual Practice: The Pilgrimage to Saniago de Compostela,’ *Body & Society*, 9, 3 (2003), pp. 1-18.

¹⁵² Slavin, ‘Walking,’ p. 11

inquiringly within.¹⁵³ In so doing, they glimpse the infinite in all its intensity ('the Milky Way, the dreams of a single night'), but also the finite nature of existence (the walker's 'there-ness' in the landscape). 'The practice of walking allowed us,' he concludes on completing the Camino, 'to understand and explore a nexus between the body, self and the world.'¹⁵⁴

This part of my commentary begins with critical analysis of the role descriptions of landscape play in travelogues chronicling foot journeys in wilderness, proceeds to consider expressions of protest at ecological desecration and concludes with an inquiry into the way writers speak of nature's capacity to soothe. I argue that the manner in which travel writers respond to foreign landscapes can transmit important messages about their temperaments and beliefs (their love of and spiritual need for wildernesses, humanity's place in and respect for nature).

(i) Self-revelation in nature

The road travelled on foot towards self-realisation in a wilderness setting invigorates *The Snow Leopard* in a way that few other self-inquiring travel writers have equalled in their works. Scrutiny of its representation yields important lessons for my own rendering of self in nature in *The Dragon Run*. While Peter Matthiessen tells the reader much about himself in his book by including disquisitions on his Zen Buddhist faith and its practice, reminiscences on his past life (especially concerning his late wife, for whom he mourns) and feelings about his trekking companion, George Schaller, and their Sherpa porters (in particular

¹⁵³ Slavin, 'Walking,' p. 7

¹⁵⁴ Slavin, 'Walking,' p. 16

Tukten), it is through his solitary contemplation of nature that he is probably most revelatory. The expedition, after three weeks on the trail, comes across the Suli Gad at an altitude of 9,400 feet. The narrator describes the encounter as follows:

Where morning sun lights the red leaves and dark banks of fern, the river sparkles in the forest shadow; turquoise and white, it thunders past spray-shined boulders, foaming pools, in a long rocky chute of broken rapids. In the cold breath of the torrent, the dry air is softened by mist [...] At the head of the waterfall, downstream, its sparkle leaps into the air, leaps at the sun, and sun rays are tumbled in the waves that dance against the snows of distant mountains.

Upstream, in the inner canyon, dark silences are deepened by the roar of stones. Something is listening, and I listen too: who is it that intrudes here? Who is breathing? [...] Who is the ever-present 'I' that is not me?¹⁵⁵

In *The Land's Wild Music*, Mark Tredinnick, analysing the literary style of contemporary nature writers, finds Matthiessen's prose in *The Snow Leopard* 'austere, yet rich and textured' and notes how his description of scenery manages to 'draw thought – the writer's and the reader's – to a point, as meditation and acute awareness within a landscape do.'¹⁵⁶ Matthiessen does more than simply describe a landscape; he breathes life into it and engages the senses. Dynamic verbs in the active voice, like 'thunders,' 'leaps' and 'dance,' animating the river, alternate with passive, such as 'is softened,' 'are tumbled' and 'are deepened,' creating a reactive, orphic depth (how could sun's rays be tumbled, how 'dark silences' deepened by the sound of shifting stones?). He captures the stirring beauty of the scene by setting in counterpoint vivid, contrastive adjective-noun clusters ('red leaves' with 'dark banks,' 'spray-shined boulders' with 'foaming pools'). He suggests the harmonious flow of the mountain river by means of sibilance ('downstream its sparkle leaps') and a string of plural nouns, its

¹⁵⁵ Matthiessen, *Snow Leopard*, pp. 135, 136 (further page references will be given parenthetically in the text)

¹⁵⁶ Tredinnick, *Wild Music*, pp. 132, 134

choppiness and violence by using harsh consonants ('rocky chute of broken rapids'). Such techniques, as Tredinnick observes, endow Matthiessen's work with the sort of lyrical intensity one usually finds in poetry or the 'restrained and deep-voiced music,' perhaps, of the cello or oboe.¹⁵⁷ They reveal the writer's sentimental attachment to the landscape and transmit implicit messages about his personality (his enthrallment, his admiration, his respect, his terror even). Matthiessen's engagement with his surroundings, however, goes further than expressions of Romantic awe for the natural sublime. In passages like the above, typical of his style, he has one eye looking outward, the other peering in. Observation of the external world prompts scrutiny of the self. In the presence of nature in all its Himalayan grandeur, Matthiessen wonders at this early point on his journey about the dividing line between himself and the natural other. Is he intruding on nature or is nature intruding on him? Is it he who breathes or is it the torrent?

Another journalising American intent on exploring consciousness while walking in the wilderness is Annie Dillard. Quoting Thoreau, she calls *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the account of the year she spent recording the seasonal changes in her pastoral Virginian retreat, "a meteorological journal of the mind."¹⁵⁸ Like Matthiessen (and the pioneers of nature writing in America), she describes nature in explicit and lyrical detail (an eroded hill is 'a rutted wreck of red clay broken by grassy hillocks,' the wings of a Polyphemus moth 'velveted in a rich, warm brown, and edged in bands of blue and pink'¹⁵⁹), displaying that she has the sharp eye of a naturalist. As for him, an intense encounter can cause a joining of self with the natural other, a coalescence of biotic rhythms: 'I am the skin of water the wind

¹⁵⁷ Tredinnick, *Wild Music*, p. 114

¹⁵⁸ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, p. 11

¹⁵⁹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, pp. 57, 60

plays over; I am petal, feather, stone.’¹⁶⁰ Unlike Matthiessen, though, Dillard is fond when amazed by nature of reaching far for unlikely and striking comparisons. The abdomen of an egg-laden praying mantis, discovered on a wild rose in spring, for instance, is ‘swollen like a smashed finger’ and ‘puffed like a concertina’ when the insect moved. The detached wing of a monarch butterfly she discovered in autumn has ‘a kind of resilient scaffolding’ when divested of its scales, ‘like the webbing over a hot-air balloon,’ the integument stretched over it being ‘as thin as the skin peeled from sunburn.’¹⁶¹ Dillard betrays her fascination, her intensity of feeling, by consciously pausing on her walks and involving herself Thoreau-like in each encounter (and in the recording of it): ‘I settled my nose an inch from the pulsing abdomen;’ through the integument of the butterfly wing, she claims she can ‘read the smallest print.’¹⁶² She also differs from Matthiessen, who would seem to be on a more private and esoteric pilgrimage, by inviting Every(wo)man to take part in hers and calling regularly on sources of authority to substantiate her observations (entomologists, philosophers, biologists, theologians and literati). Through writing in this way, Dillard reveals herself as both informed tutor and perplexed student, as adherent of Darwinian ideas and believer in religious doctrine.

Wishing to capture the delicate beauty of the Himalayan landscape after a monsoon rain shower, I described Sherading College and its surroundings in the first part of *The Dragon Run* in the following way:

The sun has reappeared after the customary deluge, tinting the white walls of the college buildings orange and making the green roofs shine. Raindrops hang like fine jewellery from conifer needles, and a thousand puddles have become broken mirrors. Sickle-shaped paddy fields to the left, crammed with rice plants, shimmer

¹⁶⁰ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, p. 201

¹⁶¹ Dillard, *Pilgrim*, pp. 57, 256

¹⁶² Dillard, *Pilgrim*, pp. 57, 256

an unlikely chartreuse colour. The mountain ridges beyond the college swim in a sea of low-lying cloud. I see promontories, coves and islands, and imagine beaches, marinas, a catamaran. In some places, the cloud boils up round the heads of land; Sonia says she sees fat men in a hot tub. The cloud will have thinned by morning to skeins of wool, casting squid-like shadows on the tilted ground beneath.¹⁶³

Stopping on his walk to look down on the campus from above, the observer sees more of the roofs, paddy fields and puddles than he would at ground level.

Through using radiant colours, verbs associated with light (tint, shine, shimmer) and images of bounty or luxury (jewellery, ‘crammed’ fields, marinas), I tried to convey a sense of natural richness, a theme pervasive in my book. The beauty is tenuous and transitory, but also coarse, and images of disruption (broken mirrors, boiling cloud) are intended to tether with an account given earlier in the chapter of the destruction caused by the monsoon. Rather than deploying similes to draw comparisons, I chose a flight of fancy to a context alien to high mountains and a landlocked nation that might not immediately occur to the reader: a coastal scene. The paragraph ends with hard reality (‘the tilted ground’), but retains something of the ephemeral and other-worldly in the resemblances augmenting the cloud and shadows. Describing landscape in this way would, I hoped, endow my travelogue with the kind of ‘rich texturing’ of which Tredinnick speaks. It also helps mark the newcomer to Bhutan as sensitive not only to the grandeur and opulence of his surroundings, but also to its magical, surreal properties. It points the way to the more ruminative cogitations of his maturer counterpart later in the book, disposed to reflect on the connection between natural phenomena and divinity, summoning, Dillard-like, textual backing: ‘Schicklgruber speaks of a “deified landscape” in *Mountain Fortress of the Gods*, a deity living in every rock, river and ravine, wind teasing prayers from their flags on mountain passes, water driving prayer wheels

¹⁶³ *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 5, pp. 69-70

straddling streams.’¹⁶⁴ The observing ‘I’ is present, but does not enter or merge with the post-monsoonal scenery as the traveller is, at this point in the narrative, by no means emotionally or spiritually transported.

After six gruelling weeks of hiking, Matthiessen and Schaller arrive at Crystal Monastery, their destination at 15,000 feet, and the naturalist-philosopher describes the view:

The ground whirls with its own energy, not in an alarming way but in slow spiral, and at these altitudes, in this vast space and silence, that energy pours through me, joining my body with the sun until small silver breaths of cold, clean air, no longer mine, are lost in the mineral breathing of the mountain. A white down feather, sun-filled, dances before me on the wind: alighting nowhere, it balances on a shining thorn, goes spinning on. Between this white feather, sheep dung, light, and the fleeting aggregate of atoms that is ‘I,’ there is no particle of difference. There is a mountain opposite, but this ‘I’ is opposite nothing, opposed to nothing. (232)

The sonorous lyricism of the prose that Tredinnick commends is present once again (in the alliteration, delicacy and balance, for example, of a phrase like ‘small silver breaths of cold, clean air’), but now the harsher sounds, the images of turbulence are either gone (the earth ‘whirls,’ but not alarmingly) or absorbed (the sharpness of the thorn is neutralised – if only momentarily – by the dainty feather, the less attractive ‘sheep dung’ buried in the middle of a list). Light, no longer seen in contrast, floods the scene (‘silver breaths,’ ‘sun-filled’ feather, ‘shining’ thorn), and the “‘I,’” no longer separate or intrusive, blends into the landscape. Not only do ‘[h]oliness and mystery convey themselves to us in the way Matthiessen sets small details within a wide landscape,’ as Tredinnick summarises,¹⁶⁵ but also in the deeply sensitive way he sings them into existence. By describing the scene in this manner, Matthiessen reveals that his state of mind has changed. He senses a

¹⁶⁴ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 4, p. 106

¹⁶⁵ Tredinnick, *Wild Music*, p. 31

spiritual presence in the land, feels at one with the earth and inclines towards transcendence. Inviting comparison with his encounter with the waterfall at the Suli Gad, Matthiessen likens his true self to the mist: water that no longer belongs to the tumultuous cascade, but has risen and entered the larger natural world (233), the recollected euphoria of walking at high altitude likely enabling this reinterpretation of place and space.¹⁶⁶

In the first draft of a chapter in the second part of my memoir, I attempted to communicate my feelings of euphoria while running down from Thrumshing-La (at 12,000 feet, the highest pass on our run across Bhutan) by means of a glowing description of the landscape. I spoke of black lichen adorning orange rock, a procession of ‘interlocking knuckles’ of land fanning out beneath me, an eagle swooping down over the highway.¹⁶⁷ The description was akin to others appearing earlier in my book, but the reader, I realised, would surely expect more from the seasoned and contemplative traveller in a state of heightened awareness: some sign of a deeper connection with nature, insight into self and the world perhaps, a spiritual revelation even. In my revisions, however, I had to beware of making nature gleam or contriving a spiritual awakening that had not occurred. Peter Bishop excoriates even Matthiessen, who took thousands of feet of ascent (and hundreds of pages of narration) to merge successfully with down feather, sheep dung, sun and mountain, for indulging overtly in the Western imaginative tradition that sees spiritual enlightenment as the expectation of a traveller destined for Tibet.¹⁶⁸ I was not a naturalist-philosopher, attuned to a ‘ringing’ landscape (98, 159, 197, 212, 232) and wishing to soar with the great lammergeyer (176, 211), nor a trained Zen Buddhist, giving credence to ‘the transcendental belief that nature is

¹⁶⁶ Edensor, ‘Walking,’ p. 82

¹⁶⁷ Appendix: *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 5 (draft)

¹⁶⁸ Peter Bishop, ‘The Geography of Hope and Despair: Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*,’ *Critique* 26, 4 (1985), pp. 203-16 (pp. 207, 208)

God's scripture' and intent on interpreting her divine secrets.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, I did wish while feeling euphoric to report on a blurring of perimeters between self and nature, acknowledge the possibility of spiritual insight and reflect more deeply on Bhutanese affairs. I added further paragraphs, describing how my protagonist while running sensed a congruence between himself and his natural surroundings, examined the psychological effects of his transcendent state (distinguishing here between running and walking) and duly felt disposed to comment on wellbeing in the Kingdom at large (with reference, in particular, to Shangri-La and to Gross National Happiness).¹⁷⁰

Writing about running, whether recollecting the effects on the body or on the mind, I found to be more challenging than writing about Bhutan. 'How can I describe what running all day is as a sensation or as an experience?' James E. Shapiro wonders, while committing to paper memories of his solo 3,100-mile run in 1980 from San Francisco to New York. Of what interest is the 'perpetual talk endemic to the breed [of ultra-marathoners] about injuries and troubles with joints, stomachs and bowel movements'?¹⁷¹ Shapiro reflects little on the act of running and is also sparingly philosophical, admitting early in his memoir that 'pain won't be something that I will burst through into some higher state.'¹⁷² He does, however, dramatise his day of greatest suffering, employing a narrative technique familiar to Jamie Zeppa. Limping on a badly injured ankle to Harlan, Iowa 1,757 miles into his crossing, the narrator divides himself into two personas, one whining and defeated, the other cajoling and stern:

¹⁶⁹ Mark C. Allister, *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001), p. 130

¹⁷⁰ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 5, pp. 128-33

¹⁷¹ Shapiro, *Meditations*, pp. 135, 28

¹⁷² Shapiro, *Meditations*, p. 68

Run nine miles more. How about that? Come on, this is the last time I'll ever ask you. I swear to God.

You always say that!

No, no. I promise. *This* time you have to!

I won't, I can hitch into Harlan.

No, you have to do it running. Just get there. You always get there. You never bust!¹⁷³

He follows this by recollecting how he had endured much worse pain in the past: at the news of the sudden death of his mother when he was fifteen years old, at the agony in his bent legs while sitting in *zazen* during meditation practice.

I also chose spells of adversity to explore what happened to my younger self while running. The third chapter of Part II tells of how he suffered from dehydration on the hard climb from Kurizampa to Yongkola:

My pace deadens to a crawl [...] Paddy field, abandoned tengma stall, cow – tail flicking from side to side, flies buzzing round its nose. *Flies everywhere. And none of the showers work* [...] The Tara-thon bus suddenly steams past, but I do not recognise it until it is almost round the next bend. I wave half-heartedly. *We need to make sure this doesn't happen again* [...] Slower, gaze fixed to the ground. Hoof print in cake of dry mud, tire-flattened mandarin skin, truck skid marks ...

... I trundle onward, blinking furiously. *Paint the roadside ahead with waypoints*. That stumpy concrete pillar marking the edge *get there*, now the flower with velvety leaves ...¹⁷⁴

I tried to reflect the state of body and mind of my protagonist through the way I described his surroundings, his movements and his thoughts. I reduced my description of landscape to naming disparate, nearby objects to suggest his inability to focus his attention on any one thing for long or appreciate the landscape at large. I rendered his actions in short, sometimes fragmentary statements to display their graceless, functional nature. And I interjected at random

¹⁷³ Shapiro, *Meditations*, p. 169

¹⁷⁴ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 3, p. 96

loose thoughts that had drifted into his head (reminiscences of a recent quarrel with Mr Sangay), putting the words in italics to make them distinct. These give way, subsequently, to self-motivating directives as the beleaguered runner engages in what Shapiro calls ‘one-step-at-a-time philosophy ... To that big tree down there without stopping. To the top of the next rise ...’¹⁷⁵ To give the struggle more of a regional flavour, I added to this description a Bhutanese superstition about the need to carry an arrow when having trouble going uphill.¹⁷⁶ As rushing had been my runner’s error, I concluded the scene by having him reflect on his impulsiveness (his ridiculous Western preoccupation with the passage of time, his willful desire to conquer the mountain).¹⁷⁷

The ways, then, that reflective travel writers describe wilderness landscapes in their narratives – whether these be quasi-Transcendentalist outpourings of the sort that Matthiessen articulates when sensing the divine or expressions of scientific engrossment of the kind Dillard inscribes – say much about who they are – or who they were at the time of their journeys. Such descriptions reveal travellers who are peculiarly attentive to their surroundings (to lichen, thorn, bird feather or hoof print in dry mud) and eager not simply to penetrate surfaces and learn of nature’s mysteries, but discover more about themselves through the interaction. Critical studies have noted that the act of walking helps this to happen. Rebecca Solnit in *Wanderlust* remarks on how ‘the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts.’¹⁷⁸ Such would also seem to be true of distance running. Jogging through the New Jersey countryside, George

¹⁷⁵ Shapiro, *Meditations*, p. 169

¹⁷⁶ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 3, p. 96

¹⁷⁷ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 3, p. 98, 102

¹⁷⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Viking, 2000), p. 6

Sheehan notes how his thoughts pass ‘like so much white water ... giving me here a new insight, a new intuition, a new understanding.’¹⁷⁹

(ii) Environmental Conscience

‘Appreciation of wilderness led easily to sadness at its disappearance,’ Roderick Nash declares while resurrecting early literary objections to man’s conquest and exploitation of nature in his inquiry into *Wilderness and the American Mind*. ‘The greedy mills told the sad tale that in a century the noble forests ... should exist no more,’ Audubon lamented in the 1820s. ‘As sheep advance,’ Muir moaned while high in the wilderness of the Sierra in the 1860s, ‘flowers, vegetation, grass, soil, plenty, and poetry vanish.’¹⁸⁰ The approach that Peter Matthiessen takes to expressing comparable sentiments while passing through the polluted Nepali lowlands demonstrates one way such criticism might be incorporated into a travel narrative. His technique is first to describe in vivid detail the grimness of his surroundings, then examine the underlying causes or offer a broader view of environmental degradation. Near the village of Pokhara, for instance, having noted the dilapidated huts, stagnant ditches, emaciated chickens and dogs feasting on human faeces, he expands to ‘the pain of Asia’ and discussion of human destitution in India (12) and the effects of deforestation, poaching and over-grazing on populations of elephants, tigers and lions in the region (14). Encountering indigent village children on the second day of the trek prompts him to speculate on how this generation will further soil erosion and desertification by scouring the already scarred land for firewood, and he goes on to draw comparisons with Africa and

¹⁷⁹ Sheehan, *Running*, p. 222

¹⁸⁰ Nash, *Wilderness*, pp. 96, 97, 130

Pakistan (23). His tone is elegiac and resigned (Buddhist philosophy saying that the practitioner must accept all), and this is conveyed partly by means of dismal statistical evidence ('the last wild Indian cheetah was sighted in central India in 1952' [14]), but also through the accumulation of gloomy images ('sick pariah dog eating withered grass' [12], 'thin soil' from denuded slopes 'will wash away ... clogging the river channels farther down' [23]).

If Matthiessen responds to evidence of man's deleterious impact on the natural environment with sadness and resignation, then Edward Abbey, also penetrating a 'fierce landscape' seeking 'purgation, illumination, and union,'¹⁸¹ does so in *Desert Solitaire* using irony, satire and polemic. Like Matthiessen and Dillard, Abbey writes in the Thoreauvian tradition (from a deep love of wilderness, with scepticism for the virtues of civilised life), but, unlike them, rejects the idea that the traveller may encounter God through immersing himself in nature. Nearing the end of his year living alone in a house trailer in Arches National Monument in Utah, where he was working as a park ranger, Abbey reacts to the arrival of tourists on Labor Day:

Flux and influx, the final visitation of the season, they come in herds, like buffalo, down from The City. A veil of dust floats above the sneaky snaky old road from here to the highway, drifting gently downwind to settle upon the blades of the yucca, the mustard-yellow rabbitbrush, the petals of the asters and autumn sunflowers, the umbrella-shaped clumps of blooming wild buckwheat.

What can I tell them? Sealed in their metallic shells like molluscs on wheels, how can I pry the people free? The auto as tin can, the park ranger as opener. Look here, I want to say, for godsake folks get out of them there machines, take off those fucking sunglasses and unpeel both eyeballs, look around; throw away those goddamned idiot cameras!¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 6

¹⁸² Abbey, *Solitaire*, pp. 261, 262

Abbey communicates his regard for nature in the sentence that begins with dust and road but ends with a naturalist's appreciation of five desert plants, each described in a manner that emphasises as much its fragility as its beauty, creating an image of vulnerability. Threatening the plants are the tourists in their automobiles that, ironically and satirically, Abbey likens to buffalo (possibly referring as much to the visitors as their vehicles), animals that tend to blunder across the land in large numbers, heedless of where they step. A lesser writer might have had the 'buffalo' flatten some of the asters or at least rock the buckwheat umbrellas, but Abbey is more subtle. In a further graceful image, he associates the dust kicked up by the cars with the delicacy of a veil and has it float over the road and then drift 'gently downwind,' suggesting that the effect of the intrusion is insidious (what from a distance may seem attractive is, in fact, destructive). His use of the word 'sneaky' as a descriptor for the road seems to support this: the road encroaches on the wilderness and has wound its way in deviously (putting 'sneaky' next to 'snaky' further insinuating that it brings evil).

But the technique that distinguishes Abbey's style perhaps most notably is, as David Joplin points out, the way he makes 'tonal shifts' between paragraphs or even within sentences, creating an effect of 'comic incongruity.'¹⁸³ Bright rabbitbrush and blooming buckwheat seem swept away in the torrent of blunt language that follows, the anger explicit not only in the savage mockery (cars are like 'molluscs,' a low form of life; the eyes of tourists are so blind, they need peeling), but also in the unbridled insults ('fucking sunglasses,' 'goddamned idiot cameras!'), softened only by the amicable word 'folks' and the playful vernacular 'them there.' Some readers may find the page-long polemic (which ends with the

¹⁸³ David D. Joplin, 'Searching for God or Medusa through Allusion in Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*,' *Western American Literature*, 43, 2 (2008), pp.103-27 (pp. 123, 122)

furious bark, ‘walk – walk – WALK upon our sweet and blessed land!’¹⁸⁴) impudent and offensive, but, once again, Abbey is crafty in the way he vents his frustration. He only imagines what he would like to say to lazy, car-bound tourists and laces his vitriol with humour (‘Dusty? Of course it’s dusty – this is Utah!’¹⁸⁵). Immediately following the outburst is a transcript of a conversation that the park ranger presumably had with a party of visitors, in which he is polite and restrained, making light of their ignorance and allowing them to condemn themselves with their foolish inquiries (another tonal shift). Varying tonal register or switching personas (from disgruntled romantic to incensed eco-critic to long-suffering park ranger) in this fashion shows Abbey to be a complex narrator, one capable of addressing his theme from different angles and thus appealing to his audience’s sympathies in alternative ways.

In Part II of *The Dragon Run*, I also wished to express displeasure and outrage, the first over our return to civilisation on the Tara-thon, the second concerning environmentally harmful modern developments back home in Canada.¹⁸⁶ Having spent three weeks running through a wilderness landscape largely free of vehicular traffic, in ‘Bumpy Road to Wangdi,’ I tried to transmit my feelings through the way I described town:

Wangdi seems to me less like a town than a refuelling depot. Buses, Tata trucks and yellow taxi cabs hover around two battered Bharat Petroleum pumps that look like one-armed robots holding guns to their heads. More taxis circle the petrol station, revving their engines and waiting for a turn. [...] Shabby stores line the oil-streaked dirt road, each with a tin roof weighed down by stones and an overflowing garbage pail out front [...] As the vehicles shunt this way and that, the dust and fumes mingle, and I start coughing. With the heat, it feels like being back in India.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Abbey, *Solitaire*, p. 262

¹⁸⁵ Abbey, *Solitaire*, p. 262

¹⁸⁶ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapters 7 and 8

¹⁸⁷ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, p. 155

Like Matthiessen's protagonist, feeling weighed down by evidence of Third World squalor, my travelling self, newly descended from pristine forest and eagle-frequented mountain pass to a tree-denuded lowland ridge, registers the human scene bleakly. Where another visitor might have found Wangdi colourful and exhilarating and described the bustle of commercial activity with delight, my narrator saw 'battered' petrol pumps and the charmless temporary shacks of local vendors. Through highlighting characteristics typical of an Indian town ('Tata trucks,' 'Bharat Petroleum,' vehicular chaos, litter, smog), I hoped to give some justification for the manner of description by reminding the reader of the protagonist's earlier concerns that Bhutan might develop in ways similar to its southern neighbour.¹⁸⁸ I also added a paragraph to explain the reason for the congestion (the failure of civil administration to relocate the town from its narrow ridge to a more spacious site in the valley below¹⁸⁹). I might have added another contrasting Wangdi and its growing pains to a Himalayan town elsewhere, but elected instead to reflect on the causes of personal disgruntlement (lack of running water at the host school and damaged relations with the event coordinator).

The traveller's tirade in Chapter 8 wells from such distaste for human activity that degrades the environment. Just as tourist automobiles kicking up veils of dust that coat desert flora ignite Abbey's rage, so the smoke, dust and clamour of dumper trucks shipping sand from Wangdi to Thimphu for construction incite mine.¹⁹⁰ Rather than mimic Abbey's strident didacticism and his oscillations in tone between blunt criticism and playful ridicule, I, in a darker frame of mind, chose to pile image on noxious image in the hope that the combined effect would communicate my disgust: 'Old-growth forest clear-cut, leaving eroded wastelands

¹⁸⁸ *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 4, p. 61

¹⁸⁹ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, p. 156

¹⁹⁰ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 8, pp. 161-63

[...] thousands of square kilometres of open-pit mining in Alberta, the earth disfigured by monstrous shovels, Brobdingnagian trucks carting off tons of oil-rich sand, tailing ponds leaking toxins into rivers ...'¹⁹¹ Matthiessen, I noticed, has his narrator sound more authoritative, less emotional in his fulminations by eliminating reference to self whereas Abbey, clearly conscious of adopting the persona of flamboyant contrarian, uses 'I' frequently, and, in so doing, seems to emphasise that his remarks should be taken with a pinch of salt. Favouring a more Matthiessenian gravity and wishing the reader to share in my disgust (rather than chuckle at the ranting narrator), I limited my use of the first-person pronoun to a concluding recollection concerning traffic in my home town in Canada. Thus, both through implying displeasure by means of description and through declaring it more disputatiously in a sustained outburst, I hoped, at this point in my travelogue, to demonstrate how my travelling self moved beyond appreciation for the natural splendours of Bhutan to greater sensitivity concerning environmental welfare.¹⁹²

In the epilogue to my book, I tried to take this a step further. On his way back to Canada and feeling more optimistic about modernisation in Bhutan, my traveller reflects more level-headedly on the complex relationship between economic development and environmental conservation. Perhaps the new administration would honour Gross National Happiness and modernise sustainably. Maybe the capitalist West, recognising the need for “a paradigm shift” towards “something more holistic and human,” might regard Bhutan as a worthy model to emulate.¹⁹³ Such ruminations served to point out from the book towards emergent

¹⁹¹ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 8, p. 167

¹⁹² *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 5, pp. 69, 70; Part II, Chapter 4, pp. 105-06

¹⁹³ *The Dragon Run*, epilogue, p. 188

concepts like ‘environmental citizenship’¹⁹⁴ and ‘ecologism’¹⁹⁵ that link environmental ethics with political decision-making. Their articulation, I hoped, would point to a wiser narrator, more capable having left Bhutan of appreciating the larger picture and speculating on the future.

Witnessing on their journeys evidence of humankind’s defilement of nature, whether it be indiscriminate logging, dust clouds from automobiles or the clamour of dumper trucks climbing a mountain road, provokes travel writers with an environmental conscience to vent their feelings. The manner in which they choose to do so (with sad resignation, angry outcry, satirical rant or blunt criticism) further serves to inform readers of their dispositions and convictions. It reveals them not only as impassioned and discerning, but capable too of regarding their immediate surroundings and contextualising.

(iii) Nature as Antidote

Examining the journal of Thoreau to determine how exactly his inner and outer worlds interacted, Scott Slovic brings to light the naturalist-philosopher’s conviction that ‘intense contact between the human and the nonhuman, between himself and nature’ had ‘a beneficial effect upon his human self.’¹⁹⁶ In *Walden*, Thoreau speaks of the ‘tonic of wildness,’ of the restorative effect of hearing, for example, ‘the booming of the snipe’ in the marshes or smelling ‘the whispering

¹⁹⁴ Deane Curtin, *Chinnagounder’s Challenge: The Question of Ecological Citizenship* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1999); Andrew Dobson, *Environmental Citizenship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006).

¹⁹⁵ Brian Baxter, *Ecologism: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 1999).

¹⁹⁶ Slovic, *Awareness*, p. 38

sedge.’¹⁹⁷ Thoreau wasn’t alone in this belief. Emerson called nature ‘medicinal’ and spoke of its ‘healing powers’ in his seminal work *Nature* and recommended it as a prescription for ‘the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work.’¹⁹⁸ Estwick Evans decided that a fitting palliative to the ‘factitious prejudices and imperfections of civilisation’ would be a four-thousand-mile trek from his home in New Hampshire to Detroit, for wilderness, he wrote in his journal, ‘charms the ear, and soothes the spirit of man.’¹⁹⁹ Such sentiments, as commentators on wilderness writing are wont to remark, are those commonly expressed by English Romantic poets. Ashley Montagu, for instance, refers in ‘Wilderness and Humanity’ to a Keatsian sonnet telling of the weary poet’s escape from the confining city to the country where he revives by lying in the grass “[f]ull in the smile of the blue firmament” and gazing at a “sailing cloudlet’s bright career.”²⁰⁰ Contemplative twentieth-century travel writers who incline towards nature, like Franklin Russell, Edward Abbey or Florence Page Jaques, seek solace similarly when civilisation oppresses or they feel ill-at-ease, but usually keep in rein such Romantic flights of fancy. Attention, in particular, to the ways H. M. Tomlinson and Peter Matthiessen speak of the palliative potency of nature informs my own efforts.

It would appear from the book Tomlinson wrote about his experiences travelling by tramp steamer through Amazonia at the turn of the twentieth century that, in dismal times, nature helped restore his spirits. Disgusted by the evidence he

¹⁹⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, vols. 1-14 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), pp. 317-18

¹⁹⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe & Co, 1836), p. 13

¹⁹⁹ Estwick Evans, *A Pedestrious Tour, or Four Thousand Miles, Through the Western States and Territories, During the Winter and Spring of 1818* (Concord, NH: Joseph C. Spear, 1819), pp. 6, 102

²⁰⁰ Ashley Montagu, ‘Wilderness and Humanity,’ in *Voices for the Wilderness*, ed. by William Schwarz (New York: Ballantine, 1970), p. 127

found of destruction at Pôrto Velho on the Rio Madeira, a town with ‘burnt tree stumps’ and ‘scarified earth’ carved out of the tropical rainforest to serve the rubber trade, he reports that he found hope, for example, in the form of a *Coloenis*, a scarlet butterfly with wings like a swallow, that frequented a drainage trench beside labourers’ huts.²⁰¹ This for the traveller was ‘life insurgent, beaten down by fire and sword, but never to its source and copious springs.’²⁰² Later, when walking alongside the Rio Caracoles and feeling overwhelmed by the gloom of the forest ‘where nothing moved, and all was grey monotone,’ he tells of catching sight of a blue morpho butterfly. He stumbles after this ‘drifting fragment of sunny sky,’ mesmerised by its ‘happy undulating flight,’ until he trips over a log and comes to his senses.²⁰³ While Tomlinson clearly has his hero react with Romantic exuberance (assigning the butterflies emblematic valence, indulging in anthropomorphism), a style that may provoke some readers to censure the record of events as overly imaginative, much is revealed about the narrator in so doing. Hyperbolic language of this sort befits a wayfarer from a London suburb, used to back gardens, dahlias and cabbage whites,²⁰⁴ visiting the tropics for the first time, and his awe and delight (horror, in the case of the rubber town) are communicated powerfully. Tomlinson tempers such description by including passages of self-conscious scientific observation: ‘Nothing should escape me; the colour of the mud, the water tepid to my hand, the bronze canoeman’ and ‘I guessed these two giants to be silk-cottons. Another, which I supposed to be of the leguminous order, had a silvery bole ...’²⁰⁵ In the manner of Dillard, Tomlinson shows himself capable of responding both temperamentally and cerebrally to nature.

²⁰¹ H. M. Tomlinson, *The Sea and the Jungle* [1912] (New York: The New American Library, 1961), p. 156

²⁰² Tomlinson, *Sea*, p. 186

²⁰³ Tomlinson, *Sea*, p. 200

²⁰⁴ Tomlinson, *Sea*, pp. 7, 142

²⁰⁵ Tomlinson, *Sea*, pp. 107, 137

While Matthiessen also looks to nature for comfort and inspiration, he recognises too that intense contact may be transformative. For a vertigo sufferer, hiking at 12,000 feet after rain along trails less than two feet wide skirting sheer rock precipice brings dread. His faith teaches that he must ‘embrace all that he most fears or finds repugnant,’ and he turns to meditation to conquer his fear of death. To focus the mind, he reminds himself in his journal on October 14, ‘[i]t helps to pay attention to details – a shard of rose quartz, a cinnamon fern with spores, a companionable mound of pony dung’ (92, 93). In the paragraph that follows, rather than have nature ‘smile’ on the traveller in a pathetic fallacious way, the writer describes, instead, its radiance (the ash trees are ‘fire-colored,’ the alpine florets ‘fresh mineral blue,’ a woodpecker ‘vivid green,’ 93). He then inserts a break in the text, and, when the narrative resumes, the traveller, his gaze now more distantly on ‘sun ... snow and cloud,’ reports that ‘the morbid feeling ... has passed away’ (93). Without endowing nature with human emotions, Matthiessen implies that it has a role in restoring the traveller’s composure. In a parallel scene shortly after, he takes this intensity of contact a step further. A prime objective of the pilgrim’s personal voyage, stated at the start of his trek, is to shatter the shell of his civilised self and ‘respond to things spontaneously, without defensive or self-conscious screens’ (115). The journal entry for October 18 tells of sun ‘igniting’ the peaks, of a light breeze making ‘shimmering’ pine needles ‘dance,’ of ‘the warming scent of resin.’ Listening to the hum of mountain bees, the traveller sits alone in silence on the mountainside, warmed by the sun, his head clear, watching an emerald butterfly that has alighted on his knee dry its wings. Through gathering such sensory stimuli, the writer reconstructs the natural setting that proved conducive for his traveller to successfully achieve his goal, the moment of self-obliterating transcendence that caused him to weep for the first time in twenty years (115).

Disturbed by the presence of smoke-belching quarry trucks on the road and disgusted when recollecting darker aspects of civilised progress back home in Canada, my protagonist looked on his run up Dochu-La to nature for relief. In reconstructing the scene, aware through reading the works of nature writers that the palliative effects are rarely immediate or lasting, I had him react first to a series of organic stimuli, registering their details (the ‘intricate moss-crusty trunks’ of pine trees with branches that ‘dip to the ground and curl up like ladles,’ the bursting pink blooms of rhododendrons, the ‘clumps of primroses with delicate violet flowers’) along the roadside. I added to these pleasant recollections of previous floral encounters in Bhutan: roses in our garden in Kandisor, a scented bush outside my office at Sherading, orchids in Dr Tenzin’s village.²⁰⁶ More, however, was needed for him to recover a degree of balance. Tomlinson seemed to find the company of butterflies most curative, Matthiessen birds, both kinds of creature being capable of flight and symbolically associated with the human spirit. I had not halted on my ascent to marvel at any natural spectacle and so decided instead to have my malcontented traveller reminisce on an earlier encounter. I chose the golden langur Sonia and I saw on a hike with Dr Tenzin the winter before and aimed in my description of it to avoid exoticism (making it overtly alluring and alien), but endow it discreetly with inspiring features. I wished, too, to suggest that there was in the contact intensity pronounced enough to influence the observer’s state of mind.

Slender-limbed and long-tailed, it leapt from branch to branch at the edge of the clearing and then onto one ten metres above the hut, sending down a shower of leaves. There it squatted, resting an elbow on one knee, and observed us critically. While the golden fur covering its body and the halo of paler hair round its wrinkled, black face were striking, it was the expression on that face that was more so. The golden langur trained its red eyes on each of us in turn, then raised its head,

²⁰⁶ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 8, pp. 167-68

wrinkled its nose and looked to the other side of the clearing. We were not, it appeared, a threat worth bothering about.²⁰⁷

I began by describing the langur's physical appearance, first from afar and then in greater detail as the creature approached. I tried to convey a sense of its humanness, its personality and intelligence, through having it behave, to some extent, like a person (in the way it reposed, in its reaction to strangers, in its nonchalance). The intensity of engagement between a man and a beast would, I hoped, derive not simply from the captivating beauty of the latter for the former, but also from the observer's awareness that the observed was also critical observer (the kind of blurring of boundaries between self and natural other of which McKay Jenkins speaks²⁰⁸). I might have had my travelling persona reflect on the implications of this – on the notion, for instance, that, as estranged as we have become in our civilised ways, we belong as much as ever to the organic world – but elected instead to allow the memory of the affirming encounter to have a soothing effect on my running self. Head clearer, he recovers his rhythm ('arms swinging in time with my legs') and completes the ascent to Dochu-La, the final mountain pass.²⁰⁹

'[O]ne of the principal psycho-spiritual benefits of wilderness experience is said to be contact with the radical "other,"' states J. Baird Callicott in his essay challenging the idea that nature and civilisation are antithetical, the latter contaminating the former. In truth, though, 'man is a part of nature' and 'the works of man, however precocious, are as natural as those of beavers, or termites, or any other species that dramatically modify their habitats.'²¹⁰ William Cronin, citing

²⁰⁷ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 8, pp. 168-69

²⁰⁸ Jenkins, "'Thinking like a Mountain,'" p. 266

²⁰⁹ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 8, pp. 169-70

²¹⁰ J. Baird Callicott, 'The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative,' in *The Great Wilderness Debate*, ed. by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 337-366 (p. 350)

Biblical associations in ‘The Trouble with Wilderness,’ remarks similarly: we have set wilderness aside and endowed it with wonder when traditionally (for Adam and Eve, for Moses, for Christ), it was a place of desolation. Cronin explains the switch with reference to the Romantic interest in the sublime (that God might be found away from the city in grand, unpopulated landscapes) and primitivism (the belief that the antidote to an overly refined life is a return to nature), and in the American frontier spirit. Wilderness has been constructed as ‘the place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives.’ It is ‘the ultimate landscape of authenticity.’²¹¹

The fetishisation of wilderness in America is probably born out of the sort of Transcendentalist raptures that Thoreau and Muir express in their writings. After days roaming the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in the summer of 1869, John Muir remarked in his journal that ‘[i]t would seem impossible that anyone, however encrusted with care, could escape the Godful influence of these sacred ferns.’²¹² It endures in Jon Krakauer’s representation of Chris McCandless’s motivations for spurning human society and pitching himself fatally *Into the Wild* of the Alaskan interior and attempting to live off the land. Infatuated with the fiction of Jack London, who glorified the northern frontier,²¹³ McCandless (branded by Krakauer a ‘latter-day adherent of Henry David Thoreau’²¹⁴) sought from wilderness ‘raw, transcendent experience.’²¹⁵ On a plywood board covering a broken window of the abandoned bus where he died of starvation, he wrote a declaration of independence

²¹¹ William Cronin, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,’ in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. by William Cronin (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), pp. 69-90 (pp. 70, 80)

²¹² John Muir and Ansel Adams, *Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada*, ed. by Charlotte. E. Mauk (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), p. 42

²¹³ See *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906)

²¹⁴ Jon Krakauer, *Into The Wild* (New York: Villard Books, 2007), p. 28

²¹⁵ Krakauer, *Into The Wild*, p. ix

(rendered in the third person, suggesting perhaps that he saw emergent an idealised self): ‘He walks the earth, no phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes ... ultimate freedom ... no longer to be poisoned by civilization.’²¹⁶

In my portrait of the golden langur or, more broadly, my descriptions of Bhutan, I had to beware of fetishising the subject – an easy recourse given that the more pernicious aspects of modern development were also on the mind of my travelling self at the time of the trip. As Cronin warns, the writer inclined to moralize may appeal to wilderness as ‘the standard against which to measure the failings of our human world.’²¹⁷ Edward Abbey, admiring the Glen Canyon while rafting down the doomed Colorado River in 1966 (it was soon to be dammed), while purposefully elegiac, avoids reverencing nature irrationally. Rather than indulge in ‘fantasies of the supernal,’ he remarks soberly, human beings should ‘perceive in water, leaves and silence more than sufficient of the absolute and marvellous.’²¹⁸ I tried in my writing not to hallow nature despite the fact that Buddhism does. I did, however, wish to acknowledge its capacity to soothe – not through blatantly declaring the fact while condemning the works of humankind, but through presenting a succession of benign images (Kandisor after a monsoon rain shower, a waterfall dropping into a purple valley on the road to Sengor, chuckling Laughingthrushes in the trees above Yongkola, Thimphu under snow²¹⁹).

Contemplative travel writers who are sensitive to their natural surroundings report, then, that nature has a meaningful role in appeasing their troubled minds and spirits. While a panoramic view can have salutary effects on the onlooker (the tranquility of northern Minnesota helps New Yorker Florence Page Jaques ‘forget

²¹⁶ Krakauer, *Into The Wild*, p. 163

²¹⁷ Cronin, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness,’ p. 80

²¹⁸ Abbey, *Solitaire*, p. 200

²¹⁹ *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 4 and Part II, Chapters 4 and 8

all the world's turmoils and antagonisms;²²⁰ the 'hushed, lush valley' that Davidson enters in the Gibson Desert with Eddie helps loosen the 'Western nets' in which she feels ensnared²²¹), intimate encounters with butterfly, alpine floret or langur may be of greater therapeutic benefit. The intensity of focus displayed in the description of these encounters has a reflexive value that can successfully communicate to the reader the traveller's strongest feelings, even primal urges. In representing these, the writer must be cautious, though, not to bifurcate humankind and nature, irrationally venerating the latter or seeing it as a cure to the evil-doings of the former.

To conclude, inward-peering travel writers recollecting their prolonged excursions on foot into wilderness regions abroad register a 'widening and deepening' of themselves through their self-conscious interaction with the natural world.²²² This they convey to their readers through impassioned descriptions of landscape and animals, vehement protests at humankind's destruction of the environment and touching accounts of intimate nature encounters that sooth and revive, all of which grant the traveller an 'embeddedness' in context as well as a powerful presence in the text.²²³ Such interaction may even induce 'identification,' the discovery for deep ecologists that 'parts of nature are parts of ourselves,'²²⁴ and a kind of merging of subject and object positions occurs. Practising Buddhists, like Matthiessen, wishing to erase their egos and 'live in ever deeper awareness of the present moment,' aim to realise themselves literally 'as the mountains, rivers, and

²²⁰ Florence Page Jaques, *Canoe Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1938), p. 37

²²¹ Davidson, *Tracks*, p. 177

²²² Naess, *Ecology*, p. 173

²²³ Neisser, 'Five Kinds,' p. 40

²²⁴ Naess, *Ecology*, p. 10

forests.’²²⁵ For them, protest at destruction is, perhaps, a cry of pain from deep within.

²²⁵ M. E. Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams, *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (New York: Harvard University, 1997), pp. 169, 172

PART III

Self and Other

In *Self and Colonial Desire*, Wimal Dissanayake and Carmen Wickramagamage begin their critical inquiry into the travel writings of V. S. Naipaul by examining a passage from a popular travelogue written by renowned writer and Naipaul's understudy, Paul Theroux, and find in it 'misrepresentation, distortion, orientalisms, and search for cheap effects that characterise much travel writing.'²²⁶ The passage from *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975) depicts Sri Lankan intellectuals and leading writers, attending a three-day seminar on American literature at the luxurious New Orient Hotel in Galle, passing their time either gorging themselves on the food provided or else in "prolonged slumber interrupted by attacks of furious belching."²²⁷ In all attempts at representing the 'foreign other' in travel writing, Dissanayake and Wickramagamage go on to assert, referring as they do so to the philosophy of Ricoeur and Lacan (both of whom consider the other of vital importance in self-construction), 'there is a concurrent projection of self.'²²⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, who also castigates Theroux for condemning or trivialising foreign places and people in his travel books, traces the historical lineage of the mastering colonial voice (from Burton and Speke in the nineteenth century to Alberto Moravia and Theroux in the twentieth) and the enduring enactment of what she calls the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey scene.'²²⁹ Typically, the Occidental author (usually male) creates 'a mode of discourse' promoting difference that exoticises and essentialises the Oriental other, relegating

²²⁶ Wimal Dissanayake and Carmen Wickramagamage, *Self and Colonial Desire: Travel Writings of V. S. Naipaul* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 2

²²⁷ Dissanayake, *Colonial Desire*, pp. 1, 2

²²⁸ Dissanayake, *Colonial Desire*, p. 3

²²⁹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, pp. 212, 213

him or her to a position of inferiority, while, at the same time, empowering the travelling self as ‘rational, virtuous, mature, “normal,”’ heroic and superior.²³⁰

Fair treatment of the foreign other in a travelogue can be seen to depend, to some extent, on the degree to which the writer from the West is self-aware – especially concerning sensitivity to internalised notions regarding Western dominance – and on the strategies he or she brings to bear in representing the interaction between the travelling self and the host. Travel writers more introspective than Theroux (whose books Allan Massie describes in ‘Travelling too light’ as lacking ‘an individual stamp’ because he reveals in them little of himself²³¹), such as Zeppa or Matthiessen, are more circumspect in their language, more disposed to see in foreign encounters (particularly those that are unsettling) occasion to learn or grow. ‘One cannot reach the bottom of oneself if one excludes others,’ Tzvetan Todorov adjudicates philosophically while considering ‘The Journey and its Narrative.’ On a trip, travellers necessarily ‘discover other men and women whose vision of the world is different’ and this, ‘in turn, could change them and lead them to be a little wiser.’²³² Debbie Lisle, citing Foucauldian discourse analysis, suggests something similar: the modern subject only comes to know itself and ‘acquire a stable identity by locating others through visible signs of difference.’²³³ Hegelian dialectics press this idea further: recognising the other (‘being for the Other’) is a necessary step if the subject wishes to attain full self-

²³⁰ Said, pp. 2, 40; see also Homi Bhabha, ‘The Other Question,’ *Contemporary Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Padminia Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 37-53; Gary A. Olson et al, *Race, Rhetoric and the Postcolonial* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999); and Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).

²³¹ Allan Massie, ‘Travelling too light,’ *The Spectator* (29 June, 1985), pp. 26-27 (p. 27)

²³² Tzvetan Todorov, ‘The Journey and its Narrative,’ in *Transports: Travel, Pleasure, and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830* (London: Yale University, 1996), pp. 287-95 (p. 292)

²³³ Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), p.

consciousness.²³⁴ Suffice to say, literary treatment of the host by the narrator speaks volumes about the latter. This part of my commentary begins with analysis of some of the ways that self-conscious travel writers represent the communities they encounter on their travels, goes on to examine their rendering of specific foreigners and ends by discussing the importance of self-censoring, my argument being that a Western travel writer's balanced representation of the host depends on a keen awareness of his or her own cultural coordinates.

(i) The Host Community

Few modern travel books are as revealing of the author as *An Area of Darkness*, Trinidadian writer V. S. Naipaul's account of his first visit to India in the 1960s. Naipaul's treatment of Indians *en masse* invites study as his 'othering' of them is explicit. He describes the cleaners at the hotel in Bombay where he was staying, for instance, in the following way:

You cannot complain that the hotel is dirty. No Indian will agree with you. Four sweepers are in daily attendance, and it is enough in India that the sweepers attend. They are not required to *clean*. That is a subsidiary part of their function, which is to *be* sweepers, degraded beings, to go through the motions of degradation. They [...] squat and move like crabs [...] never looking up.²³⁵

Dissanayake and Wickramagamage find this kind of observation, which is preceded by a sustained indictment of defecating in public and the lack of adequate sanitation in India and succeeded by another on the evils of the caste system and

²³⁴ Frances Berenson, 'Hegel on Others and the Self,' *Philosophy*, 57, 219 (1982), pp. 77-90 (p. 85)

²³⁵ Naipaul, *Area*, p. 79

dishonesty in business, to bear ‘all the traces of a colonial gaze’²³⁶ – or expression, perhaps, of the internalised self-hatred of the colonised subject, given that the writer is of Indian descent. While Naipaul may have been ten months into his year-long sojourn, he had yet to travel extensively in the country and risks censure in generalising in this way about sweepers and – more sweepingly – about Indians. His homogenisation of the sweepers into a collective ‘they’ and his use of what Thompson calls the ‘ethnographic present’ (‘are not required,’ ‘squat and move’), ‘which purports to sum up the behaviour and beliefs of an entire culture,’²³⁷ support Dissanayake and Wickramagamage’s argument. And one might add that an aloof, didactic tone of voice, detectable in the direct address (‘You’) appealing to the rational Westerner, italicisation to drive home an apparently unassailable viewpoint and condemnatory vocabulary (‘degraded beings,’ ‘crabs,’ ‘never looking up’) add to the effect. Naipaul did not take the initiative to communicate with the cleaners, nor does he individualise them, and he suggests no limits to his authority (a hallmark, according to Pratt, of the colonising voice²³⁸). The passage is one of several that, particularly in the first part (of three) of the book, ‘dwell on the repulsive’²³⁹ and incite criticism that sees the author as angry, arrogant and obsessive.

Naipaul, arguably, rescues himself from this through including in his book pages of self-revelation and descriptions of uplifting encounters with individual Indians. In Part I, he gives extensive autobiographical background explaining his feelings of displacement in Trinidad and pride in being a ‘Real brahmin,’²⁴⁰ thus accounting, to some extent, for his feelings of disappointment, even betrayal, on

²³⁶ Dissanayake, *Colonial Desire*, p. 45

²³⁷ Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp. 147, 148

²³⁸ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 213

²³⁹ Gowda, ‘Naipaul in India,’ p. 164

²⁴⁰ Naipaul, *Area*, p. 37

discovering a ruined India, which he had imagined as a kind of home. In Part II, while on pilgrimage in Kashmir, he visits a region that is less despoiled and accords with the India of his imagination, appreciates the ‘complete, disquieting beauty’ of a young *sadhu*,²⁴¹ and forges a friendship with his personal servant Aziz. Before going home to Trinidad, he also admits to misjudgement and failure to understand the birth place of his ancestors.²⁴² His travelogue might be compared with that of John Krich, also briefly on pilgrimage in the Himalayas. But for the traveller’s titular ‘*Bad Mood*,’ Krich offers no credible excuse for flagrant othering: in the town of Taramarang, for instance, he calls the tailors a ‘clump of life’ and finds there ‘no Strindbergian struggle [...] against “the filth of life;”’ in Keul, the Sherpa boys, he decides without conversing with them, are ‘disgruntled, distrustful little men.’²⁴³ Such rhetoric sustains the Western hegemonic discourse that Said finds pervasive in colonial literature, the Orient being clearly depraved and ‘in need of corrective study by the West,’²⁴⁴ the visitor looking on amused and appalled (if only the lowly Nepali villagers would put up some kind of noble resistance to the filth). Ironically, instead of fortifying the subject position of the onlooker as authoritative and virtuous (as Orientalism is supposed²⁴⁵), Krich, in his lack of heroism or trust (he fails miserably to complete his pilgrimage and is suspicious of many of the Nepalis he encounters), actually undermines his apparent Western superiority.

In *Under the Holy Lake*, Ken Haigh, on a two-year posting in Bhutan, takes a different approach to representing the foreign other. After half a year working at

²⁴¹ Naipaul, *Area*, p. 177

²⁴² Naipaul, *Area*, pp. 242, 266

²⁴³ John Krich, *Music in Every Room: Around the World in a Bad Mood* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co, 1984), pp. 176, 183, 181

²⁴⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 41

²⁴⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3

a high school in the village of Khaling, the Canadian teacher decides to take his class out for a picnic.

I had visions of packing a few sandwiches in our *jolas* and going for a hike, but I was quickly disabused. That is not the way these things are done in Bhutan. A picnic in this country is a feast [...] Most girls were wearing their best summer-weight *kiras*. The boys were dressed in shirts and trousers. We filed down the drive and out along the road toward Dowzor, bundles slung over shoulders or balanced on heads, looking like a line of porters accompanying Henry Morton Stanley through darkest Africa.²⁴⁶

Like Naipaul, Haigh generalises about the host country using verbs in the present tense ('is,' 'are done,' 'is'), but the statements are embedded in personal anecdote, recounted in the past. Instead of sounding imperious and detached, the narrator appears more qualified to offer broader comment as he speaks with the authority of an 'insider' (in as far as a Western visitor to the Orient can be): he is personally involved and circumstantial evidence is at hand. In his descriptions of the Bhutanese, Haigh might have continued in the present tense (girls tend to dress up for such an occasion, boys dress down), but this would have been to overstep the bounds of his knowledge and possibly make him guilty of essentialising the Bhutanese (he has direct experience of provisioning and dressing for a hike in Bhutan, but less so of a picnic). The tone of voice is also quite different from Naipaul's. Without being derisive, Haigh recounts the episode light-heartedly. Once again, his own engagement is critical in its rendering. Rather than stand to one side and find the diminutive Bhutanese school children like Stanley's African porters (the teacher playing the role of the Victorian explorer, perhaps), Haigh places his younger self among them. 'We' is used instead of 'They.' Everyone, visitor and host alike, is involved in the mock-epic adventure. By writing like this,

²⁴⁶ Haigh, *Holy Lake*, p. 79

Haigh is clearly taking care not to diminish the foreign other or cast his travelling self in the role of latter-day ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ (although he is perhaps indulging in romance). Readers also get the sense that, by engaging himself fully in the outing, the teacher learns some important lessons. He wishes, for instance, to help with chores when they arrive at the picnic site, like gathering firewood and washing rice, but custom dictates that members of staff are guests; he must sit and drink tea, insist the children.

‘The Bhutanese do virtually everything together,’ I declared authoritatively in the first draft of one of the more reflective sections of Part II of *The Dragon Run*, having mused at some length during our run on living standards and contentment in the Kingdom.

Farmers help each other to plant and harvest crops, dashos rub shoulders with yak herders at tsechu, students in my class at Sherading complete assignments together [...] Our runners seem at their happiest when in camp, helping one another do chores. Maybe this is why the Bhutanese are not naturally drawn to running; it is, in essence, a solo act. Soccer, on the other hand, is all about teamwork and fits with their disposition perfectly. Maybe Sonia and I should let them kick a ball to Thimphu after all.²⁴⁷

Near the end of my stay in Bhutan, after living in a village surrounded by farms, attending several traditional masked dances, teaching for two academic years at Sherading College and attending sports events, I felt sufficiently qualified to draw some conclusions. Aware of the danger of typecasting the Bhutanese, I modified my discourse with vocabulary that aimed to disturb some of the generalisations: ‘virtually,’ ‘seem’ and ‘Maybe.’ However, two statements, in particular, made me undeniably culpable of othering. The fact that the Bhutanese tend to be community oriented does not make them ‘perfectly’ suited to soccer, and saying that our

²⁴⁷ Appendix: *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 5 (draft)

students should be permitted to kick a football to our destination was clearly derisive. It was also imperious to suggest that the disposition of the Bhutanese was now known to me. I eliminated these sentences in my revisions and made the leading statement more tentative, limiting it to the subjectivity of the Western visitors: ‘The Bhutanese, Sonia and I noticed from the start, seem to do virtually everything together.’²⁴⁸ In a subsequent chapter, I had my younger self reflect while watching the students closely that it *is* possible to take a collective approach to running: ‘Sonam Rigzin, I see, is on the shoulder of Yeshey, Wangchuck Lhamo beside Tee. Phuntsho shadows the two Ugyens. Their eyes are less on the road than on their partners. They appear to be tuning into each other’s movements, harmonising.’²⁴⁹

In my reconstruction of the ‘Annual Spring Marathon’ at Sherading earlier in the narrative, I had found myself facing a similar challenge: how to represent the other without being patronising. I wished, as Haigh does at the class picnic (or Hessler in his description of ‘The Annual Long Race To Welcome Spring’ in *River Town*), to convey something of the chaos of the event. The temptation was to have my protagonist look on from the sidelines and satirise, and this, as Dissanayake and Wickramagamage excuse in Naipaul’s rendering of the South Indians he observes on the train (‘lapping up their liquidised foods’ and ‘squelching, chattering and sighing’²⁵⁰), can be playful and endear the host (and, arguably, the narrator) to the reader.²⁵¹ As the rudimentary nature of the college marathon served a narrative purpose (how would Bhutanese students, shod in flip-flops or sandals and gasping for breath after five minutes of a half-marathon, ever be capable of running across the country?), I chose to describe in this way, casting my younger

²⁴⁸ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 5, p. 133

²⁴⁹ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, p. 148

²⁵⁰ Naipaul, *Area*, pp. 235, 236

²⁵¹ Dissanayake, *Colonial Desire*, p. 54

self in the role of seasoned distance runner amused at the efforts of amateurs. I referred to the speech he gave in morning assembly a few weeks before the race, advising participants to train hard and run slowly on the big day. I undermined his mastery mid-race when he realises that the level of organisation isn't what he was accustomed to in Canada. He, like a Bhutanese runner he sailed past earlier, starts 'breathing like a steam locomotive' and becomes flustered at the dearth of water stations. A corny sign put up by the Indian company that built the road appears to mock him: 'Reach home in peace and not pieces.'²⁵² I hoped, by satirising both self and collective other in a genial way such as this, to entertain but not disaffect the reader. As Pratt remarks, representation of the authorial self and foreign others in 'contact zones,' as she terms 'those social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other,' can be more complex than being alert to colonial gaze.²⁵³ It may be that the Westerners are the ones 'othered' as she notices in the early testament of Peter Kolb, amused at "Hottentots" in South Africa, "who eat no butter," but make it in filthy conditions to sell to visiting Europeans. 'Who are the barbarians and who are the civilised?'²⁵⁴ To the head of the English department at Sherading, I am the foreigner with "funny accent;" for my third-year class studying *Gulliver's Travels*, I am a 'strange *chilip* from a country as unfamiliar to them as Brobdingnag.'²⁵⁵

Given the apparent longevity of the colonial gaze, in crafting their literary representations of foreign communities, travel writers from the West would best interrogate their (likely privileged) subject positions and find ways to communicate to readers awareness of their cultural programming. Unless the intent of the author is to correct the early prejudices of his or her travelling self before ending the

²⁵² *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 3, p. 36

²⁵³ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 7

²⁵⁴ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 42

²⁵⁵ *The Dragon Run*, Part I, Chapter 2, p. 20 and Chapter 3, p. 29

book, broad generalisations on ethnicity are likely to be at best inaccurate, at worst derogatory. Humour that is genial rather than satiric and aims as much at the narrator as the host may serve to point to difference without doing so with derision.

(ii) Personal Encounters

In his essay ‘Where Have All the Natives Gone?’ Rey Chow speaks of a need in post-colonial discourse to combat ‘the construction of the native as the straightforward or direct “other” of the coloniser.’²⁵⁶ Exploring the subjectivity of the native is one way ‘to change the defiled image, the stripped image [...] by showing the truth behind/beneath/around it.’²⁵⁷ Granting the native a returning gaze, he goes on to say, ‘makes the coloniser “conscious” of himself, leading to a need to turn this gaze around and look at himself,’ causing him to feel ‘uneasy and uncomfortable.’²⁵⁸ While there are, of course, limits in a mediated text for the foreign other to really ‘gaze’ from the pages or for truths about his or her genuine nature (perhaps misrepresented in the past) to be disclosed, some more self-aware travel writers nevertheless attempt this. The inclination to consider the subject position of the host tends to occur through sustained and intimate encounters with individuals, the traveller imagining, if only transiently, what it is like to see through the eyes of a foreign other, and then reflecting on what the new perspective brings to an understanding of self. Robyn Davidson and Mike Tidwell are two travel writers who, to some extent, achieve this. Consideration of their

²⁵⁶ Chow, ‘Natives,’ p. 139

²⁵⁷ Chow, ‘Natives,’ p. 123

²⁵⁸ Chow, ‘Natives,’ p. 139

techniques guides my efforts as I represent how my travelling self appreciated Mr Namgay's subject position.

Repeatedly in *Tracks*, the book she wrote about her trek with three feral camels across the deserts of Western Australia, Davidson expresses deep respect for the Aboriginal people and disgust at the racism of many white Australians, who treat the natives as backward.²⁵⁹ She gains insight into the subject position of the Aborigine when an old Pitjantjara tribesman called Eddie joins her, and they encounter one afternoon a party of obnoxious, snap-happy tourists, one of whom grabs the Aborigine by the arm and says, "Hey, Jacky-Jacky, come and stand alonga camel, boy." The heroine promptly loses her temper, but her companion chooses to play the coloniser's assigned role of 'dangerous idiot boong' and chases them off.²⁶⁰ Davidson offers this reflection:

The thing that impressed me most was that Eddie should have been bitter and he was not. He had used the incident for his own entertainment and mine. Whether he also used it for my edification I do not know. But I thought about this old man then. And his people. Thought about how they'd been slaughtered, almost wiped out, forced to live on settlements like concentration camps, then poked, prodded, measured and taped²⁶¹

The defiled, stripped image of the native, to which Chow refers, is evident from the tourist's contemptuous utterance and the author's paragraph-long polemic condemning the abuses of the white settler that follows (the writer's outrage transmitted through denunciatory vocabulary, such as 'slaughtered,' 'wiped out' and 'concentration camps'). Davidson's insight is not so much empathy for the victim, which she already had before her trip began, but the realisation that the native is capable of rising above injustice and even turning the tables on the

²⁵⁹ Davidson, *Tracks*, pp. 21, 35, 149

²⁶⁰ Davidson, *Tracks*, p. 183

²⁶¹ Davidson, *Tracks*, pp. 183, 184

oppressor. Careful to admit the limits of her interpretative powers, the extent to which she can explore the tribesman's subjectivity (was Eddie's aim in his actions to edify her?), she acknowledges that his behaviour has increased her understanding of and, needless to say, admiration for the Aborigines. Bearing witness to the colonised gaining the upper hand also provokes her to look again at her own attitude to the problem: 'I looked at this marvellous old half-blind codger laughing his socks off as if he ... had never been the butt of cruel ignorant bigoted contempt ... and I thought, O. K. old man, if you can, me too.'²⁶² If the downtrodden could laugh at bigotry, perhaps she could too; this may even be a strategy for dismantling it.

For Mike Tidwell, it is his third encounter with Mutoba in Kalambayi, the mad beggar woman who brands him a '*muena tshitua*' when he refuses her alms one morning, that forces him to consider the subjectivity of the African other and examine carefully his own cultural programming. 'She made me pay,' he admits resignedly, 'for all my previous behavior.'²⁶³ The author demonstrates how his younger, more egocentric self changes his way of thinking through casting Mbaya, the Peace Corps volunteer's house attendant and closest friend, in a mediating role:

Then, delicately, he explained that I hadn't done the right thing that morning. It was all right to shoo Mutoba away, but the proper response was to give her a little food or whatever she needed first. That's what most people did. He was right, of course. The same villagers who vigorously plied me with *fufu* and peanuts everywhere I went also took care of Mutoba.²⁶⁴

Tidwell gains fresh insight into the Congolese mind when Mbaya informs him that 'a *muena tshitua* [...] is someone who doesn't share,' a stingy person,²⁶⁵ and the

²⁶² Davidson, *Tracks*, p. 184

²⁶³ Mike Tidwell, *The Ponds of Kalambayi* (New York: The Lions Press, 1990), p. 70

²⁶⁴ Tidwell, *Ponds*, p. 72

²⁶⁵ Tidwell, *Ponds*, p. 72

volunteer realises, looking back on his three months in Kalambayi, how other villagers gave Mutoba clothes when hers were too torn, soap when she became too dirty, food when she was hungry, and, more broadly, how men never smoked a full cigarette but passed it around, how visitors were welcomed and fed if they happened to drop by at mealtimes, how the villagers gave to their neighbours the tilapia he had taught them to raise for profit. The traveller gazes at himself and feels, as Chow puts it, ‘uneasy and uncomfortable,’ ensnared in Western cultural values (‘my attachment to the word ‘mine’ was strong and stubborn,’ he confesses²⁶⁶), and determines ‘to rip something out in order to add something new.’²⁶⁷ As Heewon Chang examining self and others in autoethnography notes, to transform, ‘[s]elf may need to start with “denying self” by putting aside its own standards, crossing its own cultural boundaries, and “immersing” self in others’ cultures.’²⁶⁸ Tidwell’s reformed protagonist starts giving papaya and dried fish to Mutoba when she knocks on his door, shares his meals and cigarettes with his neighbours, and gives cash to farmers to feed their kids.

Wishing to make amends, my protagonist approaches Mr Namgay at the reception ceremony hosted by Her Majesty the Queen in Thimphu and apologises for their heated exchanges on the road. Part of the problem for him was that the event coordinator did not seem willing to act as a sports coach during the Tara-thon (his job at Sherading), nor help out with camp chores each morning and night. Reminiscing on our disputes while writing my book, I looked for quiet moments during the narrative of our run for my *alter ego* to imagine himself in the subject position of the Bhutanese man he had come to know well. The first of these presented itself at Wangdi Middle Secondary school when, one hot afternoon, he

²⁶⁶ Tidwell, *Ponds*, p. 69

²⁶⁷ Tidwell, *Ponds*, p. 73

²⁶⁸ Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2008), p. 28

discovers Mr Namgay asleep in a plastic chair in the playground, ‘head slumped on his chest, prayer beads dangling from his hand.’²⁶⁹ The passive image causes him to remember that the man has just reluctantly retired from Sherading after nearly twenty years of service and may feel ousted again by Sonia, who has taken the student runners under her wing, giving advice on their injuries and arranging duties in camp. The second reflection happens in Thimphu after project leader and event coordinator part company for the last time, Ugyen Pema, one of our more outspoken runners, acting in a Mbaya-like role (albeit briefly) as partial stimulus (“‘Mr Namgay Sar was keeping grudge from Mongar.’”²⁷⁰):

I realise that I have failed to give this deeply spiritual man the credit he deserves. Apart from arranging our night halts, he prayed for us daily, sharing his morning tea with the gods of the road and wandering off each evening to count his prayer beads [...] Perhaps these acts were more important than coaching our team or helping out with camp chores. Our slow crossing of the Himalayas at this time of year might have been hell [...] Who is to say that his spiritual ministrations didn’t smooth the way for us?²⁷¹

Wary of exoticising Mr Namgay as a repository of ‘ancient wisdom that has been lost in the modern world,’ valued because he is ‘closer to the mysteries of nature, spirituality and the universe,’²⁷² I tried to be speculative in my thoughts by using more tentative language (‘probably,’ ‘Perhaps,’ ‘might,’ ‘Who is to say ...?’) and not pretend superciliously to fully understand him. While, in *Tracks*, Eddie’s ‘authority and guidance open up’ for Davidson’s travelling self ‘a completely new vision of the bush,’²⁷³ relations between mine and the foreign other terminate

²⁶⁹ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, p. 157

²⁷⁰ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 8, p. 179

²⁷¹ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 8, pp. 179, 180

²⁷² Lisle, *Global Politics*, pp. 85, 86

²⁷³ Malgorzata Rutkowska, “‘The Imprint of the Desert’: Space, Time and Self in Wilfred Thesiger’s *Arabian Sands* and Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks*,” in *Metamorphoses of Travel Writing*:

abruptly at journey's end. I concluded my reflection with a question, pointing out from the text to mysteries another traveller to the Dragon Kingdom might investigate. The setting for the reflection is a farewell dinner with the Tarathonners the day after the Queen's reception, and the mood is celebratory. The departing traveller is not bitter, I suggested in his tone of voice, but philosophical: he is aware of gaining insight into a Bhutanese mind, but equally aware that his gaze has penetrated only so far. His thoughts lead to broader reflection in the epilogue on spirituality and the lessons that Westerners might learn from the Bhutanese (about 'reverence for nature,' about retaining "a spiritual sense of connection with all other life forms"²⁷⁴).

(iii) Confession and self-censorship

The extent to which narrators tell of themselves in their memoirs and the methods they use to integrate personal data with insight into the foreign other are themes of critical interest in ethnography as well as in travel writing. John Van Maanen, dissecting tales of foreign encounters that are confessional as well as ethnographic,²⁷⁵ notes how researchers may speak of their 'personality biases, character flaws, or bad habits' and of the blunders and social gaffes they make while in the field. Through so doing, he concludes, they construct 'an ironic self-portrait with which the readers can identify (See, I'm just like you, full of

Across Theories, Genres, Centuries and Literary Tradition, ed. by G. Moroz (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), p. 169

²⁷⁴ *The Dragon Run*, epilogue, p. 188

²⁷⁵ Such as Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977) or Jean-Paul Dumont's *The Headman and I: Ambiguity and Ambivalence in the Fieldworking Experience* (Austin: University of Texas, 1978).

foibles).²⁷⁶ Patricia and Peter Adler, in their inquiry into sensitive topics in such self-conscious ethnography, observe how researchers would at times also censor their reports ‘to hide not only the behavior of their subjects but their own as well,’ reasoning that ‘[t]hey may not want their spouses, children, or parents to know how involved they were in the field setting, especially if they did things that they sense might bring disapproval.’²⁷⁷ Study of confession and self-censorship in the travel memoirs of Kevin Grange and Eric Newby influences the decisions I have made either to expose or conceal ‘a vulnerable self.’²⁷⁸

Grange’s motive for his trip to Bhutan, aside from doing a twenty-four-day trek with a tour company through the eastern Himalayas, was to discover the secret of ‘lasting contentment,’ for him mysteriously connected to ‘*metok-chharp*’ or blossom rain, ‘the moment of rainbow light when it is raining and sunny at the same time.’²⁷⁹ Already aware that the rare weather event is considered a favourable omen in the Kingdom, Grange asks Sonam, a Bhutanese meal server for the expedition, to explain what it means.

‘Mean, sir?’

I asked Sonam why it was good luck. ‘Is there a teaching behind it?’

With that, Sonam gave me a crazy look and patted me on the back, like I’d just told a terrific joke, and started up the trail.

‘Hey, wait!’ I yelled after him. ‘That’s no answer!’²⁸⁰

With increasing frustration, Grange goes on to interrogate each member of the Bhutanese staff in turn about the superstition, on one occasion offering the guide \$20 for an explanation, on another pestering the cook who speaks no English.²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, p. 75

²⁷⁷ Adler and Adler, ‘Self-Censorship,’ p. 260

²⁷⁸ Short, *Autoethnography*, p. 214

²⁷⁹ Grange, *Blossom*, pp. 324, 103

²⁸⁰ Grange, *Blossom*, p. 104

²⁸¹ Grange, *Blossom*, pp. 167, 254-55

Why he is unable to speculate on the possible symbolic associations for himself, especially as he claims to have read several key Buddhist texts, would appear a greater mystery than the meteorological phenomenon. Grange's persistence marks him as a traveller obsessed with a personal mission and lacking in cultural sensitivity. Far from coming to see this, admitting fault and confessing to bullheadedness, he continues with his enquiries in a state of bafflement to the end. Neither does the author present the kind of 'ironic portrait' of his *alter ego* that Van Maanen sees as a legitimate approach to writing confessional ethnography, nor does he censor his traveller's ludicrous fixation (and allow, perhaps, the mystery simply to remain). Finally, it is Peter, a fellow trekker, who suggests to Grange that blossom rain has, in fact, no deeper meaning; some moments are not meant to be captured or defined.

Likely a more seasoned traveller and travel writer than Grange, Newby is more circumspect in the way he represents his explorer self in his travel books. While it is true that he writes in the tradition of the intrepid but bumbling Englishman abroad who doesn't make a fuss when finding himself *in extremis*,²⁸² Newby clearly censors his feelings and relies instead on situation to reveal the personality of his wayfarer. Wrongfully accused of running down and killing a nomadic tribesman in Turkey in 1956, Newby describes how his wife and friend from the Foreign Office defend themselves in court:

For two hours we argued; when Hugh flagged I intervened; then Wanda took up the struggle; arguments shot backwards and forwards across the room like tennis balls: about diplomatic immunity, children languishing in Europe without their mother, ships and planes missed, expeditions ruined, the absence of witnesses.²⁸³

²⁸² Such as Robert Byron, Peter Fleming or John Hillaby

²⁸³ Newby, *A Short Walk*, p. 54

In replaying the scene, the author might easily have expressed the frustration the trio must have felt at the time trying to overcome the language barrier, their guilt over shamelessly manufacturing excuses so as to be allowed onward passage, and their anxiety at the prospect of being imprisoned in a Turkish jail. Instead, he summarises the court proceedings, having admitted earlier that he and his companions were horribly out of their depth ('we did not realise our predicament'²⁸⁴). The reader gains the sense, without being told directly, that the traveller is in an awkward spot and conducts himself in an understandable (if not entirely commendable) manner. While *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* is not a confessional or particularly reflective travel memoir, Newby does disclose in subtle ways the vulnerability and charm of his protagonist.

Near the end of my memoir, I wished to report on an act of violence performed by my younger self of which I was not proud. I described how at Wangdi Middle Secondary school where Team Tara-thon was staying, I seized by the shirt a Bhutanese street kid, who had entered the grounds and was interfering with my laundry, and tossed him across the school yard. The incident was perhaps too petty to relate, but the irony of it was apparent to me: 'filthy and shoeless,'²⁸⁵ the boy was exactly of the type we were running to sponsor. By including it in the narrative, however, I risked alienating my readers, who may feel that such behaviour undermined my charitable purpose. On the other hand, its presence could heighten interest in the narrator (who had admitted earlier that he found kids 'bothersome and enervating' and that he wasn't sure the team had chosen the right cause²⁸⁶) and reveal again how he is conflicted. I decided, finally, to include the scene in the narrative. Maybe Judith Oakley, emphasising the importance of self-

²⁸⁴ Newby, *A Short Walk*, p. 50

²⁸⁵ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, p. 158

²⁸⁶ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, p. 140

disclosure in ethnographic writing, is right to say that ‘those who protect the self from scrutiny could ... be labelled self-satisfied and arrogant in presuming that their presence and relations with others to be unproblematic.’²⁸⁷ Concluding the scene, I acknowledged my error and expressed regret, but, rather than elaborate further on my feelings, chose to remark on ‘the broader context of the experience’²⁸⁸ instead (the morality of helping kids leave their villages and attend school, the validity of running as a method of raising money in a developing country²⁸⁹).

It may be that recognition of the self as an entity that is shaped ‘interpersonally’ of which psychologist Ulric Neisser speaks,²⁹⁰ is, for the introspective traveller, born out of close interaction with a foreign other. The encounter with difference, at the very least, unsettles the wayfarer’s composure, causing him or her to pause and think again, but may strike deeper, shaking the very foundations of his or her beliefs. Its representation in writing, whether it incorporates quiet reflection after an emotionally charged scene, acknowledgement of the intervention of a trusted intermediary who edifies, or meditation on the greater significance of the meeting, requires candour from the narrator, a willingness to confess to wrongdoing and possibly make amends.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said expounds on the pervasiveness of imperialist discourse, describing it as ‘a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts.’²⁹¹ Contemporary Western travel writers are influenced by those texts and by the

²⁸⁷ Judith Okely and Helen Callaway, *Anthropology and Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 2

²⁸⁸ Short, *Autoethnography*, p. 214

²⁸⁹ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 7, pp. 159-60

²⁹⁰ Neisser, ‘Five Kinds,’ p. 41

²⁹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 12 (author’s italics)

uneven power relations they promulgate. To avoid pejorative othering in their writing, they would best interrogate internalised scripts that assign the foreign other depreciated status, and give representation that is respectful. It may be that settled visitors staying in small communities in developing countries are more likely to do this as they tend to become more intimate with the host than travellers passing through. Volunteers working overseas, like Jamie Zeppa, Ken Haigh, Peter Hessler and Mike Tidwell, are examples, each trying hard to gain acceptance in the communities they join and nurture lasting friendships. Typically, such workers come to have high regard for the people they live with and feel increasingly inclined to question the ways of life back home. The ‘transnational’ affiliations that Basch, Schiller and Blanc see migrants achieving, as devoted to their adopted countries as those they hail from, may be applicable and point towards a self that sees the other on a more equal footing.²⁹² While my travelling self was not as immersed perhaps as a migrant or volunteer worker, his involvement in a large-scale charity project did bring him into close relations with a small community of Bhutanese. The experience inclines him to speculate afterwards on the impact of his presence in Bhutan and Bhutan’s on him, how the self might mould the foreign other and vice versa.²⁹³

²⁹² Linda G. Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Christina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments and deterritorialized nation-states* (London: Gordon and Breach, 1994).

²⁹³ *The Dragon Run*, epilogue, p. 189

Conclusion

Provided that they do indeed have ‘brain[s] worth exploring,’ as Norman Douglas posits amusingly, contemporary travel writers wishing on their trips to launch themselves on self-searching inner voyages as well as on outer are likely to enhance the appeal of their books. This they may achieve by rearticulating the fears or doubts or joys of their travelling *alter egos*, by recollecting important encounters and rendering them in dramatic scenes, by reflecting on lessons learned *en route* and the ways in which they grew psychologically and emotionally, by reliving moments when they transcended in wilderness settings or by pausing in their narratives to fulminate over humankind’s abuse of the natural environment. Their gains in so doing, as indicated in the introduction and demonstrated in the discussion of this commentary, are several. Readers may be more willing, for example, to accept Jamie Zeppa’s conversion to Buddhism and decision to make Bhutan her home through her resigned acknowledgement that the Dragon Kingdom isn’t the Shangri-La her more naive self wished it to be, but a real place with real problems.²⁹⁴ They may accept more readily Peter Matthiessen’s merging of self with mountain at Crystal Monastery, given his admission while homeward bound that he continues to struggle with ego and emotion, that he hasn’t become spiritually enlightened (as Kevin Grange appears to be²⁹⁵) in the tradition of pilgrims from the West to Tibet.²⁹⁶ Hopefully, readers of my book will find a traveller inclined to examine his motivations for running across the Himalayas and question the validity of his charitable cause more credible than the unexamined

²⁹⁴ Zeppa, *Sky and the Earth*, p. 250

²⁹⁵ Grange, *Blossom*, p. 241

²⁹⁶ Matthiessen, *Snow Leopard*, p. 298

hero of a successful fund-raising project.²⁹⁷ One justification for self-revelation in travel writing is that it can ground the wayfarer in apparent reality: while he or she may have more ambition, the traveller has the same shortcomings and insecurities as everyone else, is as prone to misunderstand and make false assumptions.

Travel critics and commentators, critics of autobiography and narratologists have all remarked, however, on the dangers of craftsmanship in life writing. ‘Generally speaking, travel writers do not have the same licence as novelists simply to make things up,’ Carl Thompson warns; ‘to do so is to risk one’s narrative being classed as fiction, or worse, as fraudulent.’²⁹⁸ ‘Mythologise too much, and veracity leaks, then pours out of the story,’ cautions Jonathan Raban, reflecting perhaps on his own creative act.²⁹⁹ ‘The very act of story-telling corrupts the facts,’ Paul Eakin declares of autobiography, branding it ‘a mode of self-invention.’³⁰⁰ If life writers “‘fashion” and stylise, go over and smooth the edges,’ remarks Samantha Vice, the ‘accretions of stylistic modifications may bury what really happened and what it really means.’³⁰¹ Unless life writers choose to hybridise genres and create fictionalised memoirs, as Ondaatje and Hong Kingston do, for instance (both incorporating surreal elements into the accounts of their lives),³⁰² a tension clearly exists for non-fiction writers who wish to remain true to what actually happened, but also give their readers a compelling narrative endowed with the attributes of fiction (character development, symbolism, suspense, climax and resolution). For travel writers eager to show how their journeys abroad

²⁹⁷ *The Dragon Run*, Part II, Chapter 5, pp. 124, 125; Part II, Chapter 7, pp. 159-160

²⁹⁸ Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p. 16

²⁹⁹ Raban, *Love & Money*, p. 284

³⁰⁰ Paul J. Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1985), pp. 6, 9

³⁰¹ Vice, ‘Narrative Self,’ p. 103

³⁰² Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982); Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).

changed them in profound ways, reconciling these conflicting directives is likely to be a challenge. Is Matthiessen too fittingly gloomy and anchored in the eroded Nepali lowlands, too conveniently uplifted and inspired in the environs of Crystal Monastery high in the mountains to be fully believed? Am I guilty of ‘smoothing over the edges’ in my epilogue by having the protagonist believe once again in the virtue of giving villagers cash to send their kids to school?

As acknowledged in the first part of this commentary, a measure of fabrication is inevitable in travel writing, given that the author is reliant on memory – albeit supported by journal entries and research – for reconstruction of the past (at the end of *Desert Places*, Robyn Davidson admits to having reported ‘as truthfully as the distortions of memory would allow’³⁰³). An area of inquiry beyond the scope of this commentary but clearly inviting investigation is the kind of truth travel writers offer. Is Mark Cocker right, for example, to commend Laurens van der Post, notoriously loose with his facts and mystically inclined, for ‘liberating’ his travel writing ‘from the confines of absolute verisimilitude’ to reveal ‘hidden patterns of significance’?³⁰⁴ Paul Ricoeur would seem to believe something similar: turning life history into story, he says, ‘communicates additional truths’ about what happened.³⁰⁵ While both statements are ambiguous (what ‘hidden patterns’ precisely, what ‘additional truths’?), the suggestion is that travel writers – especially those disposed to be introspective and contemplative – may offer rewarding insight that reaches far beyond the bare facts of their trips and likely explores the links between what they experienced and who they are, an impetus condoned by critics and practitioners alike. “‘The narrator must turn himself into the Hero, if readers are to follow his adventures sufficiently eagerly,”

³⁰³ Robyn Davidson, *Desert Places* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 277

³⁰⁴ Cocker, *Loneliness*, p. 95

³⁰⁵ John McCarthy, *Dennett & Ricoeur on the Narrative Self* (New York: Humanity Books, 2007), p. 197

insists Philip Glazebrook. “[T]o achieve this requires selection and embellishment, even invention, so long as verisimilitude – dramatic truth – is the aim.”³⁰⁶ Many travel books are worth reading ‘less for the facts they may contain than for their elegant, inventive, sometimes cranky styles of personal witness.’³⁰⁷ The issue regarding fidelity in writing to what actually happened on the trip would seem, then, to be a matter of degree, of striking a balance between invention and truth, between more subjective and objective styles of report. Jan Borm appears to have this delicate balance in mind when he defines travel writing as ‘*any narrative characterised by a non-fiction dominant that relates (almost always) in the first person a journey or journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality.*’³⁰⁸ The skill travel writers display in representing themselves and their journeys, of anchoring their accounts in reality but offering as well ‘personal witness’ and ‘dramatic truth,’ probably determines the success of their books. By foregrounding my narrator and having him respond at times dispassionately to circumstances while at others more temperamentally, I aim in *The Dragon Run* to offer my readers both insight into Bhutan and revelation of ‘a brain worth exploring.’

³⁰⁶ Henderson, “‘My Giant,’” pp. 244-45

³⁰⁷ Kowalewski, ‘Modern Literature,’ p. 9

³⁰⁸ Jan Borm, ‘Defining Travel: on the travel book, travel writing and terminology,’ in *Perspectives on Travel Writing*, ed. by Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 13-26 (p. 17) (author’s italics)

The Dragon Run
APPENDIX

Excerpts from Early Drafts

Part I, prologue

(Critical Commentary, Part I, footnote 85, p. 216)

Nathalie Myer was a keen-minded woman in her late forties with short greying hair who had spent almost two decades in Bhutan and obviously adored the place. She managed the Canadian Collaboration Office in Thimphu, the capital. Over dinner at our place, she said it might be possible for Sonia and me to go and work, but it was up to the Bhutanese government. We should send her our CVs and she would mention us to the Royal Civil Service Commission when she got back. And I should get in touch with her good friend Dr Tenzin Dorji, principal of Sherading College, and see if he needed an English lecturer from Canada. It had taken half a year, but eventually RCSC had said yes, and Dr Tenzin had sent me a contract to sign.

Part I, Chapter 2

(Critical Commentary: Part I, footnote 89, p. 217)

Many Bhutanese are fearful that modernisation will erode their traditions and damage the environment, but the Druk Gyalpo has thought about this. Bhutanese are obliged to wear traditional dress in public (ghos for men, kiras for women), and traditional architecture (white houses with Buddhist decorations) is promoted. Chopping down trees is illegal, and a law says that at least 60% of the Kingdom must remain forested at all times with 25% put aside for national parks,

reserves and wildlife sanctuaries. Tourism is restricted. Gross National Happiness, the King's inspired substitute for Gross National Product, has four "pillars" on which progress depends: "equitable and sustainable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance." Gross National Happiness emphasises that the people's spiritual well-being is of equal importance to their material wealth.

Part II, Chapter 5

(Critical Commentary: Part I, footnote 92, p. 218)

How one goes about measuring happiness with accuracy is a mystery to me, but I understand that GNH is assessed through collecting and collating data within domains, of which "psychological well-being," "health," "community vitality" and "ecological diversity" are four. Gross National Income per capita is low (most people earning less than a dollar a day), but the Bhutanese, I sense, score well on criteria relating to well-being. I have been particularly impressed from the start with how community directed the people are.

Part I, Chapter 4

(Critical Commentary: Part I, footnote 126, p. 232)

I sit for a while in silence, staring at the breakfast table, the bread crumbs on the plates, the jar of Himalayan Gift with a knife sticking out of it. Sonia is right. I am being premature. Why am I suddenly so full of this idea? I cannot be suffering from inertia already, can I? We have not even begun to explore the country. I

should be poring over a map and planning the treks Sonia and I will do during summer recess.

Part II, Chapter 5

(Critical Commentary: Part II, footnote 167, p. 245)

The sun is out, and I feel warm for the first time in days. I can wear shorts, a T-shirt and my lightweight running shoes. For the first twenty minutes of the day's run, I am with Phuntsho, a cheery, capable runner with bread-loaf thighs, who has made it here from Kandisor apparently unscathed. I give him the nickname "Chapsa Phuntsho" as he has already dashed into the trees twice to relieve himself. He laughs and says he drank too much suja at breakfast. After a couple of uphill twists in the road from the cowshed, it seems we have turned a corner. I stop for a moment to drink in the new view. To my right is the mountain, the rock leaning over the road an orange colour now and blotched with black lichen. To my left is the abyss, free here of mist. I assume there is a river down there somewhere, but all I can see is a procession of dark green, interlocking knuckles of land. Ahead of us, the way is all down, the highway looping around a succession of rounded spurs. A large, brown eagle swoops down low over the road, its primary feathers splayed like fingers, its shadow clear-edged on the tarmac, and disappears into conifers below. I set off again, chuckling when I remember *Travellers and Magicians* and Dondup's efforts to escape all this for America, the land of his dreams.

Part II, Chapter 5

(Critical Commentary: Part III, footnote 247, p. 271)

The Bhutanese do virtually everything together. Farmers help each other to plant and harvest crops, dashos rub shoulders with yak herders at tsechu, students in my class at Sherading complete assignments together, an entire village crams into one house to see in the New Year. Our runners seem at their happiest when in camp, helping one another do chores. Maybe this is why the Bhutanese are not naturally drawn to running; it is, in essence, a solo act. Soccer, on the other hand, is all about teamwork and fits with their disposition perfectly. Maybe Sonia and I should let them kick a ball to Thimphu after all.

The Dragon Run **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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