The Way to Bhutan[[1]](#endnote-1)

by Rupert Arrowsmith

A Japanese forest of damp pine and camphor

Was where it caught me in the end, Buddhism,

 I having sought the bright eye of a sculpture

 In a temple of wood

 once riven by lightning.

For some weeks I crouched by a whitewashed wall,

Watching the tides of my own mind lap

 ‘Til a monk rapped my back with a timber

 (For slouching – in Zen a sloppy habit)

The deeps of the white wall seemed to imply,

 *There is another place –
 A place of snows,*

 *A place in the sky*.

Next was a land of salt and fine dust, in China

Right hand of the Silk Road that once had spanned

 a bright Buddhist continent,

 its light long gone out

 pinched

 between caliph and commissar.
A stone face loomed from a broken cave

Roomed half in *nirvana* and half outside,

 in carven relief

 it seemed to explain,

 *There is a place where it all still exists –*

 *A place walled by mountains,*

 *Hard to attain.*

In Burma I found it, when I went south,

Each mountain crowned with a temple town,

 the very air humming
 with monastic murmur.

And I shaved my skull,

and put on crimson,

And in the forest I begged and was silent,

beginning to understand,
beginning to get it all.

 But even there in the lull of the hall,

 I seemed to perceive,

 *There’s another land yet,
 Where it never went out.*

And I saw a track of monks, one behind another,

More than two thousand summers, all the way back

 to the Western Ghats

to the first halls of India,

 sliced out of rock with the skill of a laser,

 so flat, the floor where they sat and were silent,

 those who were first to have shaved their heads.

So I went to that place, but the halls were dead,

 (even to tourists,

 if not to bats)

 And in their stillness they seemed to have said,

 *There is a place where it all continues,
 A place where the air is bright with life.*

And high to the North, the law too had died,

A place where a Buddha once had braced

Great shoulders against a gray mountainside

But now lay a pile of gunpowdered fragments.

 A place that had once shone,

Shambhala

 Gone into a blank desolation of fear.
 But the broken stones seemed still to say,

 *There is a place that is still Shambhala*,

 *Where the King*

 *and the Law*

 *and the people are One.*

I have spent many years in search of that place,

But now, Bhutan, I humbly approach.

1. ‘The Way to Bhutan is dedicated to His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of his birth. A copy of the poem in a silver document cylinder was presented to the Queen Mother of Bhutan, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, after the author had recited it to open the Mountain Echoes Literary Festival in Thimphu in August of 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)