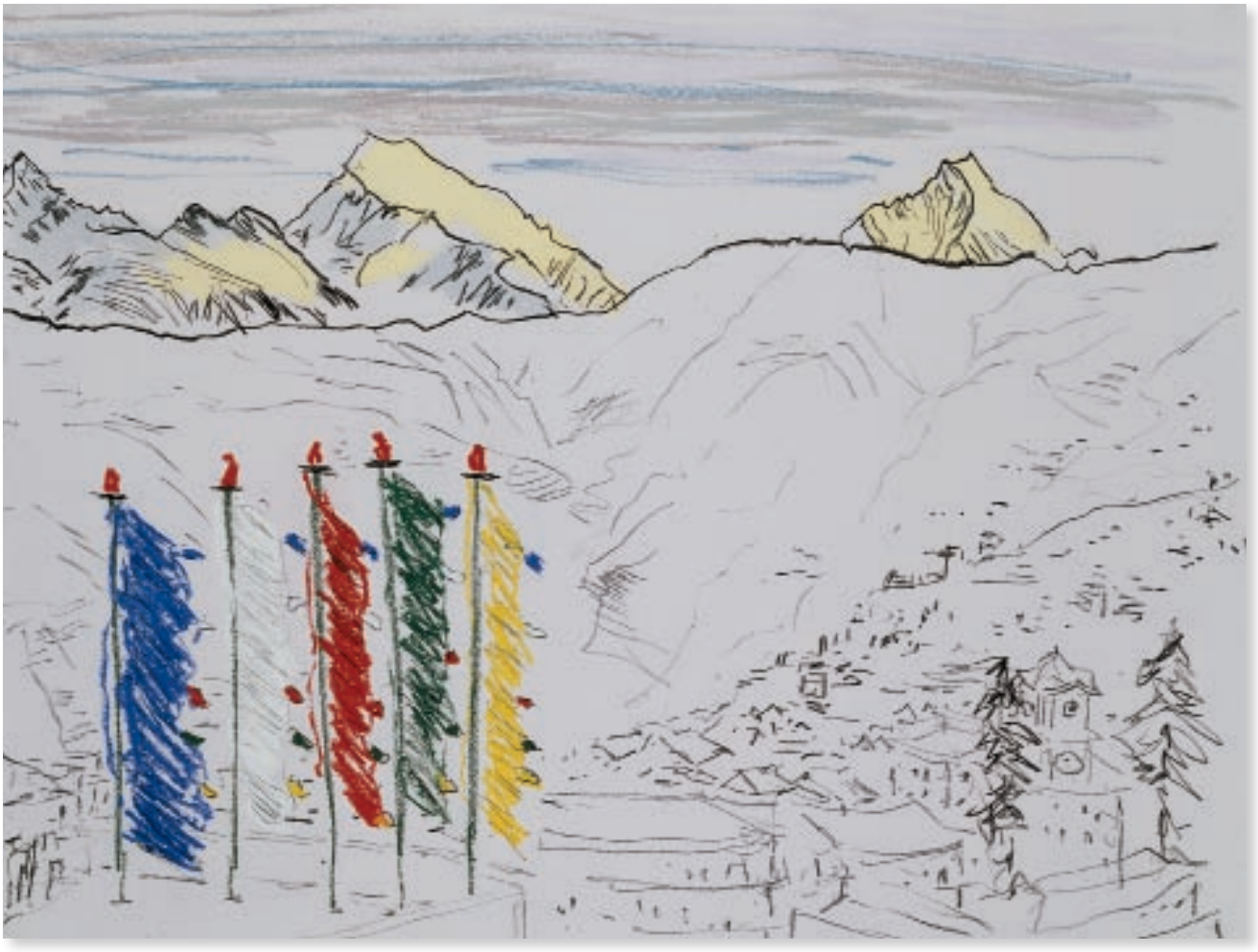
The Tashiding Monastery, in Sikkim.

DRAGON SEASON

RETURNING TO SIKKIM, IN INDIA'S FAR NORTH— THE CORE OF HER NOVEL *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*— **KIRAN DESAI** REFLECTS ON THE BEAUTY, VIOLENCE, AND SPIRITUALITY OF A MISTY HIMALAYAN REALM, WHERE NATURE ULTIMATELY DWARFS ALL HUMAN CONCERNS. ILLUSTRATED BY **CHRISTIAN PELTENBURG-BRECHNEFF**



Sunrise in Gangtok, Sikkim.

THE MURAL IN THE Tashiding Monastery is of a graceful woman mounted on a yak in a lotus blossom garden. "That is Tara," explains a monk: a virtuous form of Buddha.

"And that?" A fierce figure resembling something out of a Japanese cartoon sits astride a snow lion, scattering thunderbolts. "He disperses ghosts, chases evil spirits."

Another mural shows creatures in a mountain pond, a beast with an elephant trunk emerging from a conch shell, a winged lion with a bird's beak and horns.

"These you will not find here. If you go farther north into the jungle, you will find them."

"And these?" The monk smiles, wraps and rewraps his scarlet shawl. "You know, in the rainy season they come out of the ground and fly about."

"I'm sorry?"

"Dragons, you know how they fly about?"

It is dragon season in Sikkim. Monsoon storms hurtle against mountains with a savagery matched only by the ferocity with which the earth responds to this onslaught. Overnight, things sprout and grow. Little clusters of huts are lost in a wild exuberance of cardamom, banana, and deadly nightshade. The Tista and the Rangit rivers leap through jungle of teak and incandescent fields of paddy. Ginger is being harvested, and the freshly dug roots spice the air.

Sikkim is possessed of an almost mythical bounty. The mountainside is so steep, the vegetation seems confounded:

HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS, RUMORS OF

View of the Himalayan peak Kanchenjunga, from the Sikkimese town of Pelling.

everything grows. Cactus, orchids, orange trees, rhododendron, oak. Higher, in the alpine reaches where rumors of the yeti and Loch Ness monster–like beasts live on, the gullibility of travelers is tested by yak herders attempting to sell shriveled ginseng root as a bit of a yeti arm, or the pelt of a Himalayan bear as yeti fur. Higher still, proffering an aching beauty that alters constantly with the light, is Kanchenjunga, the third-highest mountain in the world, a plume of snow blown by dervish winds at its summit.

The Monastery of Tashiding was built in 1717 when a rainbow was seen connecting the site with Kanchenjunga. The interior is aglow with the fluttering flames of copper lamps. Before images of the Buddha and various high lamas, there are offerings of rice and oil, water, incense, bananas. The monks sit in two rows on either side. Old spectacled monks, tiny novices in toddler-size robes, looking like so many marigolds. Earlier, these little monks had helped me pull off the leeches—five, ten, fifteen—that I'd collected on my walk through the jungle from Kalimpong to Tashiding. They carried them out, placed them gently, respectfully on leaves, giggled madly when I suggested delivering them the death sentence with a big stone. Surely I was making a very funny joke? True to the teachings of the Buddha, the monks will kill no living creature. Not even malevolent bloodsuckers.

The sound of chanting rises; it catches the rhythm of the rain outside. Conch shells trimmed in silver and long horns encrusted with turquoise are blown, cymbals are clashed together, bells rung. The murals, in addition to the Tara and the ghost chaser, present a demon with the

SOME OF THE 200 OR SO MONASTERIES

wheel of life clasped in its fangs and talons to indicate the knot that binds us: rooster-snake-pig as lust-anger-foolishness, each chasing, each feeding on, each consumed by the other. Also displayed is the tantric symbol of the Kalachakra, demonic forms of male and female power in grotesque sexual union, Dracula teeth and pink tongues fiercely intertwined, multiple heads crowned by skulls, a snatch of leopard-skin skirt for modesty's sake, tiny naked humans being crushed under their careless feet. Nearby, a Buddha sits, serene despite this arresting sight. Lust upon these walls, and fear, peace, grace, and fantasy. Images that simultaneously inspire and terrify.

Guru Padmasambhava (Lotus Born), the tantric master who is depicted with a wrathful smile ensconced in a curling mustache, introduced this particular brand of Buddhism, "the ancient Nyingma (Red Hat) order," into Tibet in the third century. When the reformist Gelugpas (Yellow Hats), the order of the Dalai Lama, rose in power in the 14th century, three Nyingmapa monks convened at Yuksom in Sikkim to reestablish power. They crowned the first *chogyal* ("Righteous Monarch") of Sikkim, then called Denzong, or Valley of Rice.

The Himalayan Hotel in Kalimpong, West Bengal, bordering Sikkim.

In all, there are about 200 monasteries in Sikkim. Some are being renovated with poster paints and fluorescent lighting, bathroom-tile floors, jail cell–like steel crisscross doors, metal grilles in the windows. Some are as yet unspoiled; the pigments are jade, bronze, and garnet. They are faded, but the demonic energy still seems potent. The floors are of teak and the prayer wheels are made of buffalo hide. Photographs of head lamas are displayed at the altars, and should you ask, "Is he still alive?" you sometimes get the answer "Yes, his reincarnation is here already."

In the years after the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1950, Sikkim became a haven for fleeing monks. Residents describe the hillside burning scarlet as if with fire while lines of monks came streaming down the old salt and wool trade routes from Lhasa. They're still leaving. The monasteries of Tibet are being emptied at these borders. Visit antiques shops in Darjeeling, and if they deem you a serious buyer, bundles of dirty cloth and newspaper are taken from beneath the counter, unwrapped to reveal treasures being offered for a pittance. It is so dreadfully sad to see the heritage of a nation being sold in this soiled, ignominious way, sold by the desperate, bought by the unscrupulous. Silver and gold prayer books and scroll containers; prayer wheels made of bone, silver, copper, leather, wood, coral, and turquoise; and jade bowls so transparent the day shines through to illuminate patterns of deep thunderclouds approaching.

Delicate border politics with China, Bhutan, and Nepal account for a heavy military presence here. The North is largely off-limits to even Indian visitors, and in the rest of the state, passes are checked and rechecked, policemen making a little extra finagling bribes for permission to drive through sensitive areas. Foreign nationals must request permits to visit Sikkim. Their stays are limited to 15 days.

TERRIBLE LANDSLIDES. The roads falter across a vast morass of boulders. Sometimes they are transformed into riverbeds. I travel from Gangtok in the east to Pemayangtse in the west, stopping at all the monasteries along the way in a hired diesel Jeep Commander, a skeletal frame attached to a rough, kicking machine, so every organ is given a tremendous shake. Monsoon clouds billow into the vehicle, hiding everyone from each other, oneself from oneself. Now and then, a brief moment of sun, and dozens of butterflies sail forth, yellow, iridescent blue.

On these broken roads, squatting in circles, sitting on the rocks, having a leisurely chat as if in a living room, for it is the single place at this time of year that is not squelchy and overgrown with foliage, are bands of resting villagers. A group of women in ruffled flowered nighties, which have become a daytime fashion here, admire a baby held by one of them. The baby has big kohl-lined eyes and a large black painted spot to ward off the evil eye. They get up to let our Jeep pass, resettle, and entertain the laughing baby by pelting him with lantana flowers.

Large signs—BARRACKS, CANTEEN, OFFICERS' MESS—mark sad concrete buildings. Little groups of soldiers go

ARE RENOVATED WITH POSTER PAINT

jogging by in comically big shorts, skinny legs sticking out, looking not nearly sturdy enough for combat. But when I ask the driver if he thinks India is properly defended against the Chinese, so close across the mountains at Nathu La, the old trade pass into Tibet, he says: "Oh, we are well defended. No need for worry. With roads like these how many Chinese will make it over? Ha ha ha!"

Perhaps the bad state of the roads has also kept many monasteries remote. They feel so far from the world and its dirty problems, it is jarring then to descend to military checkpoints and see these two aspects of Sikkim side by side, to witness how this place with a fairy-tale reputation has faced the problems of the modern world, with particularly tragic consequences.

Dubdi Monastery, in Yuksom, Sikkim.

The British began their forays into this region in the early 1800's, starting tea plantations in the drenched and misty landscape after they lost their monopoly on the tea trade with China. Darjeeling was forcibly annexed from Sikkim by the Raj in 1861. The British took Kalimpong from Bhutan after the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1864. They brought in Nepalis to work the tea plantations, for the area was too sparsely populated to provide sufficient labor. Soon the Lepchas, who practice Bon, a form of animism, and who believe that they are descended from sacred Kanchenjunga snow, became a minority in their own hills. The population is now 75 percent Nepali, less than 20 percent Lepcha. Later India adopted much the same attitude toward Sikkim as the British had earlier. Despite a desperate attempt to keep his kingdom's sovereignty, the last *chogyal* of the only Himalayan Buddhist kingdom other than Bhutan was forced, after a plebiscite, to succumb to the vote of the Nepali majority. Sikkim was annexed by India in 1975. Wary of a similar fate, Bhutan adopted an aggressive policy against its Nepali population, attempting to keep out new immigrants. Nepalis were also hounded from the Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya in bouts of terrible violence. And in yet another twist of history, shaken Indian Nepalis demanded a separate Nepali state, Gorkhaland. For years, through the 1980's, the mountains were engulfed by a separatist movement called GNLF, Gorkha National Liberation Front. Perhaps it was an inevitable occurrence in a nation cobbled together in this fashion, with shifting populations and borders, with so many competing loyalties. Ownership will always be contested—it is just perspective, after all.

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, my family had a house in Kalimpong, across the Tista River from Darjeeling. The hills of Sikkim were blue in the distance. Some 20 years ago now, and I still remember how the air was thick with the threat of what was to come. People here refer to what occurred as "the Agitation." What exactly happened will always be debated. Bridges and police stations were bombed, roads destroyed, government buildings went up in flames, police brutality was sanctioned by politicians. Business came to a standstill. Tea plantations were shut down, the tourism industry vanished, schools and colleges closed. No water, no phones, no electricity, no food. In the end, the GNLF was granted a political platform and greater autonomy, which stopped, however, short of statehood. In the air today is the stink of something not quite over.

The ghost of the Raj lingers on not merely in the politics, but in moldy buildings that once were grand. I have an aunt who still lives in Kalimpong, in an old English stone house that she discovered as a ruin, roof loaded with ferns, seemingly deserted, but with a blind Englishwoman being eaten alive by maggots in her big brass bed, abandoned by her servants. Eventually the woman died, and the house was sold by relatives in England. My aunt bought it, she says, because this place offers something that life elsewhere never could. She loves it for its beauty, fierce beyond the reach of civilization. Above her home, the mountains soar in twisted, hornlike peaks and convolutions that seem to mirror the region's history and politics.

We spend a rainy-season dusk on her veranda. Below, the army is eating dinner in the mess. *(Continued on page 227)*

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Above, in forests of bamboo, the monks are chanting their last prayer of the day. It is so peaceful now, but it is impossible not to reflect on the fact that life here is a complicated endeavor. As a doctor working in a clinic in the bazaar, my aunt has seen the darker side of life here, the worst effects of poverty and political upheaval.

I ponder, then, the particular form of tantric Buddhism that is nurtured in the Himalayan monasteries, their reflection of the complex human soul that seems related to this landscape, this history. I think of the monks housed in dark swampy rooms, living so remotely, so simply, so as to pour all they have into keeping this faith fervently burning, this form of Buddhism even more ancient than the one practiced in Tibet, close to Bon and the spirit worship of the Lepchas. I think of those phantasmagoric murals, the dragons that we have scoffed at, condemning ourselves to savor them only in meager ways, illustrations in a children's book or a cartoon film. Here they are free and freeing, and something precious to the human spirit, lost elsewhere, is yet vibrant.

We sit as people do most evenings, in the wavering light of uneven voltage, grand moths with the wingspans of birds flying by. We eat mutton, stuffed *momo* dumplings with red-chili chutney on the side, and drink *chang* through bamboo straws in mugs, topping and retopping the fermented grains of millet with warm water from a big copper kettle. We wait for the evening's usual episode of rain. When it arrives the storm blocks everything out but itself, drowns out all observations and meditations, ruins all conversations. The dragons the monk at Tashiding assured me were alive are writhing and gnashing. They are far too compelling to balance against any human consideration. In these hours, there is immense relief.

We sit and watch, lighting the lanterns when the electricity fails entirely.

Kiran Desai won the Man Booker Prize in 2006 for her second novel, The Inheritance of Loss. *She lives in Brooklyn.*

GUIDE TO **SIKKIM**

WHEN TO GO

Most travelers will want to avoid the torrents of monsoon season (June to mid-September) in favor of shoulder season: hundreds of orchids bloom in March and April, and from late September through October the nights are cool and clear.

GETTING THERE

American Airlines (*aa.com*) and Continental Airlines (*continental.com*) fly direct from the United States to Delhi. From Delhi, connect to Bagdogra via Indian Airlines (*indian-airlines.nic.in*) or Jet Airways (*jetairways.com*). From Bagdogra it is a 30-mile drive to Kalimpong and a 50-mile drive to Gangtok, Sikkim's capital. Arrange ground transportation ahead of time through your travel agent. We recommend T+L A-List agent Ellison Poe (*800/727-1960; poetravel.com*). A tourist visa ($73) is required to enter India, and must be obtained at an Indian embassy or consulate before arriving in the country. A second "inner line" permit is needed to enter Sikkim. Obtain from an embassy or consulate, or a tourist office in India.

WHERE TO STAY

There are no true luxury hotels in Sikkim, but these two options are clean, comfortable, and safe.

Himalayan Hotel *Upper Cart Rd., Kalimpong, West Bengal; 91-3552/255-248; himalayanhotel.biz; doubles from $65.*

Netuk House *Tibet Rd., Gangtok, Sikkim; 91-3592/222-374; doubles from $96.*

WHAT TO DO

The best time to visit Sikkim's **Buddhist monasteries** is in the morning, when monks gather to recite prayers. For regularly scheduled or customized **guided eco-tours** through Sikkim and Ladakh—including a rhododendron trek, a snow leopard quest, and visits to important Buddhist sites—try **KarmaQuest Ecotourism and Adventure Travel** (*650/560-0101; karmaquests.com*).