stage for his play of puppets. The stage would be set as a court: two rows of lesser thrones for minor royalty to flump on would lead to a high double-throne back of centre. There would be ministers and commoners, half-naked tribals and red-coated British soldiers. But there was one little figure that remained almost overlooked until the play started with a roll of drums and vocal tracks from Ramji and his wife. This was the *Tashaywallah*, royal herald and common drum-beater. He sat crumpled in one corner of the stage which was, of course, the entrance to the royal court. A little, sharp-nosed, big-eyed puppet with incredibly mobile arms, drum sticks permanently affixed to them, and a colourful drum hanging from his neck. His dress would not be as glittery as that of the courtiers or as threadbare as that of the commoners (except for some obese merchants).

The play would start and the *Tashaywallah* would jump to his feet, his strawy arms in a flurry, his drum exploding into the background frenzy of *dapli*-beats. A new-comer would be announced. Ramji and his wife would take turns giving a voice to each of the puppets. The Englishmen, for obvious reasons, never spoke. The play itself would be simple, a collage of legends and stories concocted by Ramji who generally did not differentiate much between fact and fiction and employed all the techniques of post-modernism two decades before anyone had heard of it in my state. Commoners and courtiers would walk into Ramji's court, with various problems and complaints. The King (sometimes accompanied by his queen) would pronounce his judgements. Stories would range from the legend of the child who was claimed by two 'mothers' to petty squabbles over the ownership of land and run-away wives. Ramji's wife would contribute a complete song or two in a dialect we could not understand and break into occasional lines of singsong rhymes. In later years, Ramji and his wife were accompanied by a baby who would contribute a wail at some crucial juncture of the play, at which Ramji's wife would unceremoniously break her song to mutter a lullaby to the baby or to scold it.

The King, like most kings, would be unable to hang on to his throne. He would quarrel with the queen and his courtiers. The princes and the Englishmen would bicker and scheme. While the commoners drummed in by the *Tashaywallah* with a cryptic introduction ('Petitioner: farmer and his wife from the village of X') would mostly ascend out of the court after their business was over, the royalty and the courtiers (given an elaborate introduction) would stay on. Petty kings would be added to the royal *tamasha* on the stage. With every royalty drummed in by the *Tashaywallah*, the bickering and the fighting would increase. The *Tashaywallah* would himself remain a watchful figure in his corner, seemingly aloof but quite capable of tripping the occasional minister or putting in a word or two of satirical description while heralding a stuffed prince. He would receive a clout on his head for such acts and submissively flop down in his corner.

Towards the end of Ramji's hour long plays, the stage would explode into the thrash of stuffed arms and the flash of tinsel swords. The princes would first fight the English soldiers, who would be conveniently disposed of; and then, after a minute or two of peace, would set about killing each other. It was in moments like these that the *Tashaywallah* came into his own. He would watch the 'battle' from his corner, dart suddenly at some prince, English officer or courtier who had humiliated him earlier on and deliver a few lightning-quick blows with his drum sticks. Ramji would play the same, though shorter, 'drum-beat' to express the sound of wooden sticks striking a privileged head. There was something incredibly funny and impressive in the sight of the puny *Tashaywallah* foraying into clusters of armed aristocracy, inflicting a few choice blows on some royal offender and returning nonchalantly to his place by the 'entrance'. We, Ramji's *bachcha log*, would laugh until tears streamed down our cheeks.

But sooner or later, the princes would catch on. One or more of them would grab the *Tashaywallah* and, after a failed attempt or two, throttle him to death. There the *Tashaywallah* would lie in a corner, a crumpled and lifeless heap. while the princes and their ministers continued their orgy of violence. Soon Ramji's stage would be more clogged with bodies than the last scene of an Elizabethan tragedy: no one would be left alive. Then, as we would be about to leave our stools and mats, one crumpled body would stir. The *Tashaywallah* would gather himself up into a sitting position, reiterating in his nasal, squeaky voice, 'I am still alive, but I am still alive!'

I have not seen Ramji for two decades now. He stopped visiting our street in the late seventies. We had grown older and educated enough to disdain his slapstick humour, his unrefined parodies. The *Tashaywallah*, I later discovered, had been a stock puppet character from pre-independence (probably pre-British) times. An Indian Punch, he had cropped up in puppet plays all across North India; my aunts had seen him when they were children, so had a friend who grew up in a city a thousand miles away from my hometown. However, I could not spot him in the 'cultural festival' puppet show that I saw recently. No research papers appear to have been written on him, though all Indian papers carry occasional articles on Punch and most literary journals discuss Bakhtin's notion of parody. Faced with daily evidence of the fact that Ramji and his family are a species endangered by modern and electronic forms of entertainment, I nevertheless cannot help hoping that somewhere the Tashaywallah is still beating his drum.

SOPHIE JAMES

Auckland House, Simla

This is the house that the British built. They moved in and moved out from here, pulled it down, put it up again, just as they liked, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. Called Auckland House, it stands on a hill, two thousand metres high, in Simla – site of splendid summer occupation. On a slope it has a view and is surrounded by mountains.

The history book tells me that it was our governor-generals who lived here first: Lords Auckland, Hardinge and Ellenborough. Auckland lived here with

Emily, his sister – the writer, Emily Eden; the British named the hill after her, apparently: Elysium Hill. Throughout the 1830s she held balls at the house and hung paper lanterns in the rhododendron trees which line the drive to light the way for her guests, scattering the silver langur monkeys from the branches of the trees as she did so, their long silver tails trailing like silver bell-ropes behind them.

Now in 1995 I share Emily's view: my bedroom is where her drawing room once was. But I've got nothing to do with paper lanterns. Instead, I have come here to teach, for this house is now a girl's boarding school: Auckland House School. Set up for daughters of the Raj, once the governor-generals had grown bored by its size, by a succession of spinster headmistresses: the Misses Pratt, Quinn and Twiss. I've come all the way to the Himalayas to teach Shakespeare and Herrick, to conduct Christian assemblies for my Indian Hindu, Muslim and Sikh girl-students, who sing Wesley hymns each morning and recite a Christian grace before each meal.

I do not live with the elegance that Emily Eden did. With other staff at the school, I live in the attic. My room is oddshaped, with wooden beams in the walls like splints in plaster. The wooden floors slant down towards one end of the house. The walls are white and peeling but there is one perfect square window in my room and through the glass, the view of the valley below. It's the view west across many ridges to Prospect Hill where the Viceroy of India had his summer lodge.

These are the hills which Emily refers to in her letters, the same hills that E M Forster took delight in walking when in 1921 he toured here with the Maharaja of Dewas Senior. In the daylight when I look from my window, the vast rounds of the mountains are brown and graceless. Even from a distance the slopes look spiteful with the brittle pine trees which, in winter, are the only green vegetation. I see how daylight mocks the mountains, washes their colour out. At a point on the slopes I see Simla town – which has been falling into the valley for years – awkwardly halt and the house end. The houses can sustain themselves no longer. From here the ridges take over and only small farm holdings can be seen across the hills.

At such a height the great shadows of clouds pattern and cover the hills. The scale of the hills is so large, I become obsessed by them. As soon as I wake in the morning I check through the glass; the morning light makes the hills grey and blue and in the evening they turn colour again, the effect of candle light on human skin; not dull but sure – risen in colour from brown to grey to silver, to shadow and grey, to silver silhouette: sometimes I notice they look white. Then, in the hills it is dark; night is black after all, for when the lights of the houses in the valley end, there is no electric shine in the valley to interrupt the moon or the stars. Again, the scale of the Himalayas diminishes me. I do not only look down into the valley but up into the sky and in between I am placed very small. And because there is no end to the hills as they continue into the horizon, there is a peculiar effect of suspended time. It is not a scale that England knows – we made our homes here as little tin men, after all. And Emily's wish that she would stay here for ever and ever if only the Simla hills were a continuation of Primrose Hill – or Penge Common – makes me wonder whether she ever saw the mountains at all.

There are aspects of Simla now that the Hon. Emily could not have guessed at. On my side of the valley, where the hills are inhabited, the buildings appear on the slopes to be either half built or half falling down: new hotels and tourist guest houses partially constructed, their scaffolding stuck like broken skeletons on the slopes. Poor Simla, the slopes abandoned. The other buildings, the shops, the homes, the bazaar stalls seem to be sliding into one another and all down the hills. I remember arriving by toy train in this Himachale district. We snaked round a hill and then, there was Simla, at a distance, a silver landslide in corrugated sheets down the hill, this metal the best roofing against the monsoons. My first vision of Simla as a vast waste slide.

But this architecture is entirely suited to the Simla hills. Everything leans, hills, trees, walls, bodies: and the leaning begins an intimacy. It's like walking in town and watching the coolies, immigrants from Kashmir, bent under the burdens of gas canisters or beds or luggage that they carry up and down the hills. Or seeing the old hill men who walk propped up by the local Himachal mountain sticks. So – structure is visible as health and life are vulnerable and must be supported. Neither do the main municipal buildings escape this peculiar inevitable descension; on the Mall, the green and white liquorice sticks of wood that just hold the Post Office together; higher along the same slope, the falling telegraph office; below, the large police building with their elaborate tiered matchstick structure: all teasing the passer by, will I fall, won't I?

Next to Auckland House we have our own fine sliding house, another Raj building, called Chapslees – once home for the secretary of the Governor General. Now it is part hotel and part junior school where the boy-students come out of the gates at three o'clock to pee in the drains outside. It is about this house that my father sends me a history of the Victorian Ilberts at Chapslee. I read it on the school's upstairs veranda with a direct view of Chapslee, wondering more and more about my Victorian ancestors in Simla. Looking up from the book at Chapslee's lawn, I fill it with Victorians: tea parties, croquet and the avoidance of cholera.

If Emily wrote her long letters home from this house, so do I. Simple impressions strike me first. There is Holi, the festival of colour; large sacks of coloured powder are sold in the bazaars and walking past them I am white, pale, almost transparent. I want the cinnamon skin of my students. Their brown is an invitation to paint and in the playground pink, yellow, red and purple are removed from the sacks and the students, dressed in their bright salwaar-kemez and watched by the headmistress, colour their faces in a fast game of powder-tag. In Simla pure colour surprises me. Like the white of the dhoti and the red mouth of the pan seller, or my girlfriend Sujata eating toast in a buttercup yellow cotton sari at breakfast; like the yellow ceiling dormitories, the blue God Krishna, the blue hills in the morning, an orange sun in the monsoon evenings. Like the yellow primrose church on the ridge.

I can just see the church if I crank my head out of the bedroom window. I take the junior girls to Sunday School here each Sunday morning. British built and filled with brasses commemorating the British dead, the brasses now spoiled with drips of paint after years of whitewashing. The Indians have left the pew-labels there – where the English sat: 'THE VICEROY, THE LEUTENANT-IN-CHIEF'. Walking up the hill to the church with my charges, the children in crocodile up the slope and all dressed in berets and blazers, I draw a small crowd as I suppose the guards do at Buckingham Palace. My school is a legacy of the Raj and as such a curiosity. The girls remain oblivious to their history. In the church and once seated for the service, they fiddle irritatingly with the old labels on the pews.

In my letters I tell my parents how crowds always gather on the ridge outside the church. So it is not only the Victorians who would promenade. Especially in the evenings of the hottest months when the pariah dogs sleep in puddles of dust, it becomes a lazy promenade with the Indian tourists who come to the hills from the plains to escape the heat. In June and July they floodlight the primrose church and balloon sellers appear on the ridge. Groups of black children play, dressed in white fairytale frocks – all lace and ribbons, a teenage Christening robe, the latest children's' fashions for the Indian rich. They lift these huge pastel balloons, floating them up and strangely making the warm air smell of rubber. They try to disperse the hundreds of moths who fly relentlessly into the floodlights. Children not playing with balloons are offered pony rides across the ridge, for motor cars have been banned. In Victorian Simla it was the British who banned the Indians from the ridge. And now the main pest who no authority can banish are the brown monkeys, stalking the square and taunting the tourists.

Actually, it is the monkeys who give me most to report in my letters home. In the attic at Auckland House, there is a long corridor that separates the bathrooms from the bedrooms. It's the southside, the side the sun rises. We have a waterman who brings a metal bucket of hot water once in the morning at six o'clock. Slowly familiar with washing from a jug and bucket, it is in the bathroom that I receive a shock as I take a wash. Against the window in my bathroom, an old Times of India had been stuck with glue. I remove it in order to see the sun rising. Washing in this tiny cubicle, I stand naked and wet – and suddenly see I am observed. I instinctively use my hands to cover myself. Opposite me is a brown Simla monkey. It watches me as I remove my hands and then continue to pour the hot water onto me creating a steam which rises in the air and mixes with the streams of yellow morning light.

The water collects in a puddle and I see myself reflected. I am naked, proud. But then my monkey, bored with his visit to the zoo, turns away and looks instead into the valley – now I am hairless, unattractive. I learn that he is there not for me but the sun, a routine which the monkeys keep each morning in the fine weather – and one they must have kept for generations and generations – sat on the school's roof and welcoming the light as the sun rises in the valley. Naked in the cubicle, I cannot shift Emily in her Victorian pelisse from my mind and wonder – just wonder – what she did when faced with such an intruder?

Art

GEETA KAPUR

Bhupen Khakhar's Watercolours

Bhupen Khakhar has been turning every convention inside out for thirty years and the water colours shown in the exhibition, 'The Other Self', bring this trajectory to a climax. It may be that his showing took place in a conservative institution, Delhi's National Gallery of Modern Art, by something like a happy default. It nevertheless made an indelible impression on the spectators' memory – on those that like Khakar's work and those that do not. As there are many more who positively dislike his work the impression would be only subliminally retained... But that is how prejudice is subverted, by a vision that goes beyond the conscious will of the recipient, and by a challenge that proposes with some humour that the imaginary is beyond the Law – in this case the law based on heterosexual mores.

The significant thing is that the impression itself conveys a lightness of being that Khakhar has devised after so many years of heavily saturated, covertly erotic painting. A sublimated form of homoeroticism, this lightness carries a peculiar enchantment. Here is a sexuality that is neither innocent nor provocative, but a form of *jouissance* that comes through to the spectator as colour first and foremost. Proposing a sexate subjective identity for the artist, for the painted figures, and for the spectators, each in their won place, Khakhar takes away the moral responsibility to censure anyone's desire or sexual preference. The conspicuous nakedness of his male figures is the result of the painter having peeled his eyes to see the world as he wishes to, and the halo around those naked bodies is a reflection from the glowing starkness of the gaze that he invites you to share. Khakhar is supremely indifferent, now, as to the consequences of his display of paintings. He is even less interested to shock anyone, so accessible and transcendent is the sexual display *in* the paintings.

I wonder after seeing this set of Khakhar paintings whether in some way the privilege of portraying desire has passed beyond the heterosexual male artist who has piled centuries of fantastical pleasure on to the female body. This passing beyond refers also to powers of portrayal of the woman artist whether her desire is directed towards the male or the female body. With women artists taking possession of their sexuality, a vastly differentiated iconography of the desiring subject manifests itself in Indian art. It should hardly need to be said that this polymorphous sexuality is a liberating thing for all concerned and brings to life a more generously shared form of sexual identity.

Khakhar could be among the best painters in the world handling homoerotic motifs. As an avid reader of literature (and