

A HOUSE IN KABUL

FAREED NAWABI PETER STICKLAND

A HOUSE IN KABUL

PAINTINGS

FAREED NAWABI

POEMS

PETER STICKLAND

77books

First published January 2019 by
77 Books
69 Osbaldeston Rd
London N16 7DL

www.77books.co.uk

ISBN 978-0-9570997-7-7

Copyright © 2018
Fareed Nawabi and Peter Stickland

The authors have asserted their right under
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988
to be identified as the authors of this work.

Book and cover layout by Frances (Fang Xie)
Cover graphics: MAMA graficos



Aft is the central figure of this tale. His name means *Seven* in Persian. He was born in a house in Kabul, which was a hive of mistrust. Aft is a fictitious character who has emerged from my past. These are my memories and my inner world. Aft is the character I have tried to hide from all my life. I ran away from him. He is my past and, I suspect, he will probably be my future. The story may strike you as surreal, but it about a real world, the world I grew up in. The inhabitants of the Kabul house are either my Afghan family or my family from Baluchistan. Most of the characters are real people. They inhabited my past and they continue inhabit my present.

This is a story about survival. It is a story about the anguish of being abandoned by love. It is a story about destructive families who are driven by greed to manipulate those around them. It is a story about the pursuit of beauty and the damaging effects of vanity and egotism.

Aft, or Seven, learns that looking back holds no virtues. He must escape from it. He hopes and yearns for a future that will not continue to be detrimental to his well-being. All he has is a vague kind of hope.

Peter's poems manipulated my paint brush, they provoked me into illustrating this story and induced me to dig back into my past. I wasn't sure about undertaking this difficult journey, but I got there, and I have returned in one piece. I hope you will find it an engaging tale.

Fareed Nawabi

Posadas, June 2018

Our correspondence about making a book together started in June 2015, more than three years ago. We had no idea what kind of book it might be, but Fareed started by sending me texts which I re-wrote, staying as close to his style and meaning as I could. There were memories of his early years in London, stories about his Afghan family and in the midst of all this, a story called Seven, which is the content of this book. I tried various writing styles, each shift being an attempt to find a form to carry the stories being presented to me. We wanted to include photographs as Fareed has many pictures of his early life, so I pasted these into the text which I organised under headings, each chapter like a vignette of the times. I started with a poetic prose, changed the language to a simple prose and later converted it to lyrics, just in case this project was going to be a musical rather than a book. Then I separated out the Seven story and we both discussed and worked on the possibility of it becoming a film. Fareed dreaming up the art direction while I wrote the script.

I was always looking for a simple structure, and to honour this ambition, I converted the text into a series of poems. I asked Fareed to paint pictures rather than use photographs and this is how the current book emerged. We have been through a great many formats, combinations and sizes, each time the pictures growing in depth and meaning. They are now an extraordinary record of Fareed's rich imagination.

Peter Stickland London, June 2018



1 - The beehive

Sixty-nine souls live in Kabul's largest
House; the seventieth is expected.
May; two thousand and seven, snow and ice.
People blame the spring freeze on sorcerers.
At times a sapphire blue sky emerges.
Smoke rises from flickering oil lanterns.
Hungry crows circle the cold, hazy sky.
Galoshes leave frozen footprints behind.
The adobe houses cast no shadows.
Dogs vanish in scary white blizzards.

Superstitions and rumours cast shadows
Over the royal, enchanted household.
Zambur, the dowager queen and cousin
Of the Amir, knows about the curses.
A holy man declared that every
Seven hundred and seventy-seven
Years a portentous event would occur.
No one can predict its nature, so things
Could change for the better or the worse.
The queen suspects it is time for the curse.

Zambur - queen bee of this humming beehive,
Queen of treachery, gossip, love and lies,
Queen of established habits that feed on
Isolated life and boredom - listens as
Tongues, sharp as wasp stings, talk of the blizzard.
On the seventh of April, a month back,
Trees shocked all with joyful jewels of fruit.
Now dogs are heard and not seen, the stables
Are full of uneasy horses, kicking
Up dust and straw, scaring the scorpions.







2 - A house ruled by women

The seventieth member of the clan
Will be born to Zara, Zambur's niece by
Her sister, wife to the Khan of Sistan -
The ancient city of Baluchistan.
Zambur allows Zara and her servants
From Somalia to govern their world.
Zara is married to Zambur's nephew,
Massod Khan, who's hunting game with his clan.
Zara curses his absence, calling on
The frozen blizzards to keep him captive.

Zara and her maids watch the stable hands
From their window. By custom, men should
Attend to chores away from the women.
If they need to move around the house,
They must do so completely unnoticed.
If a male servant meets a woman from
The clan, they should turn and face the wall in
Silence and, if they are not addressed, they
Must remain 'hidden' until the woman
Passes and then continue with their work.

This tradition allows the women to
Develop a plethora of secrets,
Gossip, plot intrigues and cast spells against
Each other, unhindered. Many of the
Younger female cousins look for prospects
To flout this rule. Their preferred pastime is
Spying on men in the Hamman, breathing
Lewd sighs over them, breaking into laughter
And quickly drawing veils across their eyes,
To fake a sober air to passing servants.







3 - Zara's window of heaven

The house is sealed off from the frozen world.
The young bride, Zara, alone in her quarters,
Continues to curse her husband for his
Preference to go hunting when he could
Enjoy endless pleasures at home with her.
She also curses Zambur's Hazara
Maid, Sitara, for being in love with
Her husband. Pretty Sitara grew up
With Massod and Zara torments herself
With thoughts of their youthful intimacies.

Zara murders all her hopes with her fears.
She hates the clan of this house, preferring
The playful company of her sensual
Servants, her loyal family of maids,
Who could almost be her true-blood sisters.
In the afternoons Zara and these women
Gaze out from her bedroom window to watch
Stable hands, mounting their sturdy horses.
They Kajal their dark eyes and cry with joy
When the lustful stallions mount the mares.

For Zara this window is magical.
It's a window to the sky, a window
To freedom and lustful dreams and a way
Out of this callous house, this museum
Of quiet violence, filled with dead game.
Here blood from the remains of last week's
Hunt defiles silken rugs from Bokhara
And wet galoshes sit beside muskets
In the entrance hall. Birds with dead eyes gaze
At silk chapans, speaking only of death.







4 - Female cousins

Time has been replaced by an endless storm
And turbulent winds aggravate black skies.
Servants raise lantern wicks, increasing the
Dark, snaking smoke marks on adobe walls.
A Korsi table is placed over a
Heater, where seventeen cousins sip tea
From jade cups, sharing intimate scandal.
They pick at richly embroidered fuchsias
On the table cloth and eat dried fruits, their
Rich scent mingling with whiffs of kerosene.

This house with its crumbling walls and fragile
Beams is held together by old cobwebs.
A niche imprisons a Russian timepiece,
Repeatedly striking seven o'clock.
The girls lean languidly on each other,
While Sitara listens to their laughter
Behind the door. When she hears the cries of
Zara's birth-pains, she silences them and
Insists they cease their juvenile pastime.

Zara will bring her child to this house of
Magic and lies on the month's seventh day.
As her cries get louder, a cousin takes
A knife and opens a pomegranate.
Red juice fills the plate and slips off the edge.
The storm forecasts disaster, but this vile
Vision speaks of malevolent witchcraft.
The girls gawp, breathe a sigh and then giggle.
They wonder how it would feel to fall in
Love, how it would feel to lie with a man.







5 – Impossible love

Sitara ends their daydreams and bids them
Join the clan gathering in Zara's house.
Throwing cashmere shawls over Samarkand
Silks, they take a forgotten passageway to
The heart of the labyrinth, leaving a snail's
Trail of wetness on the parched wooden floors.
Girls, with flickering lanterns, meander
Blindly through a passage that's rarely used.
As their silks flutter against dry walls, they
Appear to be moving like moths in flight.

Sitara, surprised by a window to
The courtyard, sees Zara lift a lantern
To her window to gaze at the blizzard.
Then she observes prancing horses blowing
Humid anxiety from their nostrils.
Through the white haze, she counts seven swirling
Tails and countless hooves rising up, clashing.
She pictures this hypnotic skirmish as
A life and death struggle for the horses.
Zara retreats and her cries grow louder.

Sitara tidies her long, flowing hair.
The horses scatter; the empty courtyard
Is cold and deserted, just like her heart.
Her emptiness is her impossible
And unbearable love for Massod Kahn.
She knows her position will never change.
She is fated to care for the cousins
Who wander child-like about the palace.
She hopes the horses fought in play, for the
Thought of a stallion battle scares her.







6 – Smoke and scent

The female clan sit around two korsi
Tables in the lounge by Zara's bedroom.
Tea is served in Uzbek porcelain cups.
Somali maids, with trays, constantly move
back and forth from a large brass samovar.
A cold wind blows through gaps under the doors.
The room, lit by diverse lanterns, flickers.
Out of respect for Zambur, rumours cease,
But hushed chatter still rivals the sound of
Prayers and the click of rosary beads.

A hand, reaching for dried figs, knocks over
A fragile bottle of lavender oil -
Parisian perfume bought to inspire
Exotic nights of clandestine passion.
Its fragrance at odds with the hushed chatter,
With Zara's shouts and the sound of Zambur's
Silver bangles, that clatter when she lifts
Her tobacco chillum to her mouth.
Smoke and lavender adds a trancelike air
To this timeless child bearing ritual.

The tobacco reminds the young cousins
Of stories about family adventures
In foreign lands, far from Afghanistan.
They desire travel and freedom, knowing
They will be denied these carefree pleasures.
The cries of labour from Zara's bedroom
Don't deter their vague dreams of exotic,
Lavender nights. Zambur, aware of their
Carnal fantasies, glares at them, darkly.
She's becoming increasingly tetchy.









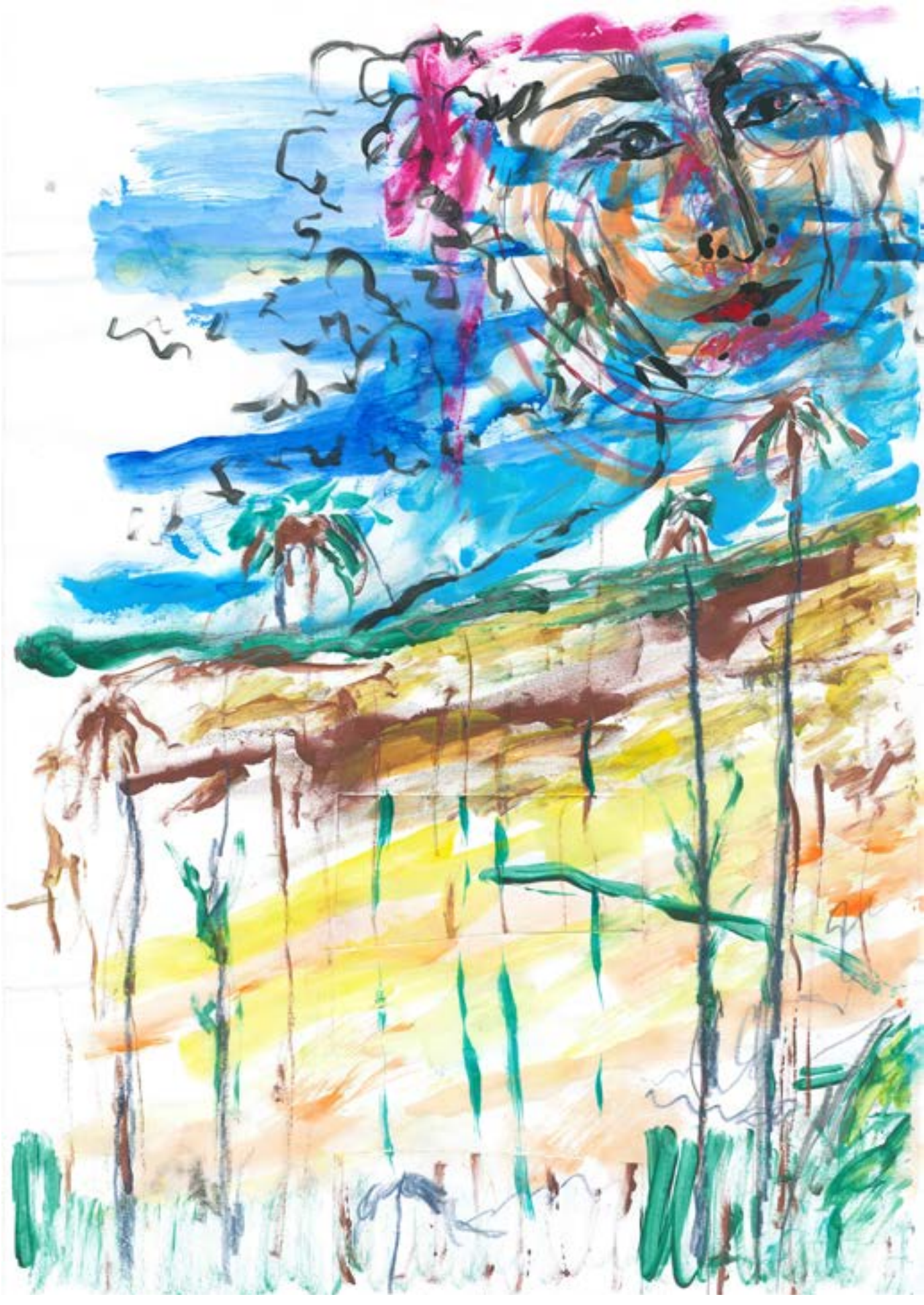


7 – A spy and confidant

All fear Zambur; they'd do anything to
To avoid her sharp, punitive orders.
When she's riled by the maid's lethargic way
Of guarding Zara's door, she ushers the
Midwife into the bedroom by waving
The mouth piece of her copper water pipe.
Then she calls her special servant, Sheerjahn
To her and whispers instructions to him.
He smiles and the cousins tremble, knowing
That revelations are not far away.

Some say Sheerjahn's a woman dressed in a
Man's suit. With his small build, they're uncertain.
He keeps his dubious identity
Hidden behind a tightly drawn waistcoat.
As spy and confidant to Zambur, he's
A potent force. As palace character,
Dressed impeccably in karakul hat
And tattooed moustache, he's mysterious.
He fulfils Zambur's orders faultlessly,
His cryptic answers, hidden in mumbles.

Sheerjahn, a chronic kleptomaniac,
Irritates and frustrates Zambur, who scolds
Him at the end of each month and demands
He returns silver tea spoons he's stolen.
The rituals of this odd pair of actors
Mystifies the court, but they don't talk of
The dowager princess overtly - she
Has an old woman's strict authority
And silence is part of her armoury;
It confirms her reign over this kingdom.







8 – Narcotics and superstition

Any change requires Zambur's approval,
She rules house and occupants equally
And rises above all muddled affairs.
No one knows her age, and none remembers
Her husband, but it is certain she has
Enjoyed the exotic pleasures of the
Loving lavender that now fills the air.
She believes her years of dedication
To the clan have not produced scars and she's
Certain that longevity's in her blood.

Zambur's calm, distant air has tobacco,
Opium, arak and snuff to aid it.
She's not certain how old she is, but if
Questioned, she will take out her silver rouge
Box and apply some colour to her cheeks.
She's often seen gazing in the mirror
That sits inside her small, silver snuff box.
During the Anglo-Afghan wars, she and
Her sister nursed the injured beside her
Husband in the desert tent hospital.

This Princess of dignity and power,
Honoured by the Emir, has visited
Her fortune teller who warned that
A frozen storm would bring a child to her
Family and this would signal harsh change.
"You will know him," the mystic insisted,
"By a sapphire mark over his nose and
He'll be the son of your nephew, Massod."
There's talk of the last Baluch princess
Who married one of Zambur's ancestors.







9 – The birth of Aft

The last princess, born a hundred and seven
Years ago, had created mayhem.
All she touched turned to water and she was
Banished for flooding the entire valley.
Zambur calls this deceitful fairy tales,
But it's seven o'clock and the onslaught
Of sevens is causing dread and dismay.
Not wishing to show her fear, she diverts
Prying eyes by sending Sitara to
Zara's room to verify the progress.

The mystic said she must not judge outcomes
Or show feelings, but she's tired of waiting.
She prays the magic papers, sewn into
Sitara's chadar and fixed to the walls
Of Zara's bedroom will prove effective.
She has taught the spiders to guard these wild
Chants and prevent the wretched prophecies
From being true, but come what may she must
Protect the child to secure the future.

As Zara's cries grow shrill, Zambur calms the
Girls while inhaling deeply on her pipe.
The Somali servants hold Zara tight
And secure to prevent delirium.
She faces the window, sheets over her,
Her knees up, her legs apart. Time's frozen.
She hears wild horses and Hindi chants and
Sees a knife piercing the sky as cold winds
Blow the window open and liquid light
Pours brightly through a torn seam in her sheet.















10 – The sapphire birthmark

Horses whinny, dogs bark and all gaze at
The silver knife glittering in the sky.
The night darkens, emphasising the light
That glows brightly from between Zara's thighs.
All are aware that many white opals
Are falling on Zara's bed and the scent
Of lavender has just turned to jasmine.
Sitara lifts Aft up to his mother.
He has jet black hair and an inverted,
Sapphire coloured, half-moon on his forehead.

Aft is wrapped in white cloth interwoven
With a fine golden thread, depicting moths.
Zara stands, lifts her son to the window
And tells him, "You are Aft, you are Seven."
She sees a horseman move rhythmically
On his large white steed, his dancing hips
At one with the horse. When he pulls at the
Reins, they freeze, as if made of ivory.
Aft smiles and suddenly there is morning
Light. Zara passes him to Sitara.

Zara imagines a chessboard on which
Her last lustful pageant of desire has
Been played out and she's overwhelmed by fate.
From now on all her desires will be crushed
And these adobe walls will be her prison;
A life she was born to and can't reject.
She asks if Massod is back from hunting,
But no one has news of him, so she tells
Them to leave her in peace; she wishes to
Reminisce about love's earlier days.







11- The bewitched palace

Zambur, with cane in hand, runs to the court
Yard and whips the prancing horseman until
He falls and lands heavily on the ground.
Zara tries to see this, but Sitara
Prevents her and breaks Zara's glass bangles.
Drops of blood appear on the floor; a sign
That Zara's life will never be the same.
She holds Aft to her breast and white opals
Fall from their embrace, covering the floor,
Their shimmer adding lustre to the light.

The tempests rage for days and Kabul is
Soon hidden under a blanket of snow.
On the seventh day, all wake to the sound
Of bees buzzing; the snow vanishes and
The fruit trees are suddenly over ripe.
Zara gazes at the stones on her floor.
Aft's birth has shipwrecked her and the tide has
Carried her to coasts with opal beaches.
She rubs the soles of her feet on the stones.
How could she have been washed up on this land?

She only once saw the sea and loved the
Humid breezes and the bright coastal light.
She imagines white sands in the distance,
Her mother's chadar blowing in the wind.
These innocent, carefree days are long gone.
Zara takes a sheet, wraps up opals and
Pulls the load to a corner of her room.
She's the daughter of the Khan of Sistan
And vows to direct how her life changes.
She has an opal sent to her father.





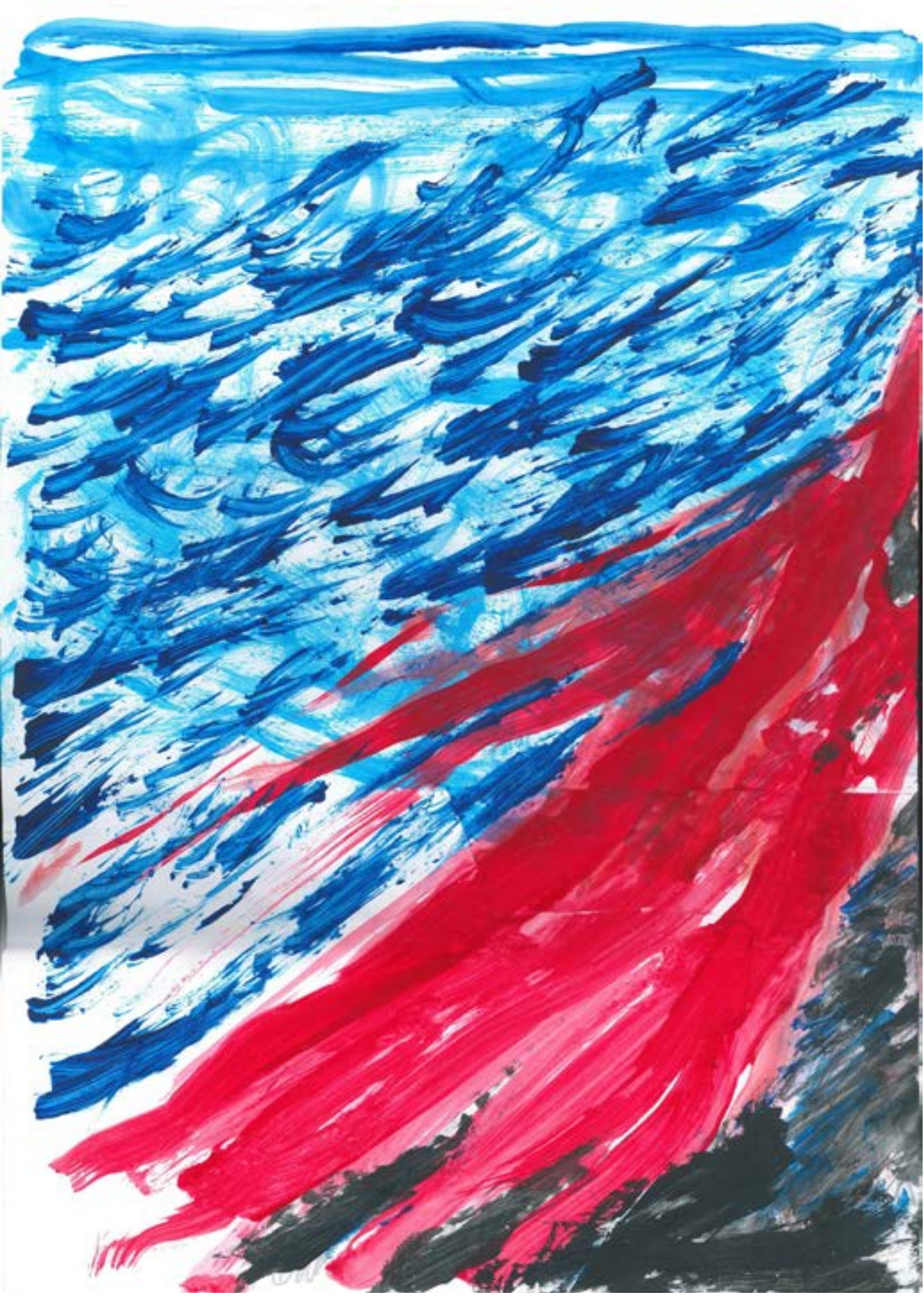


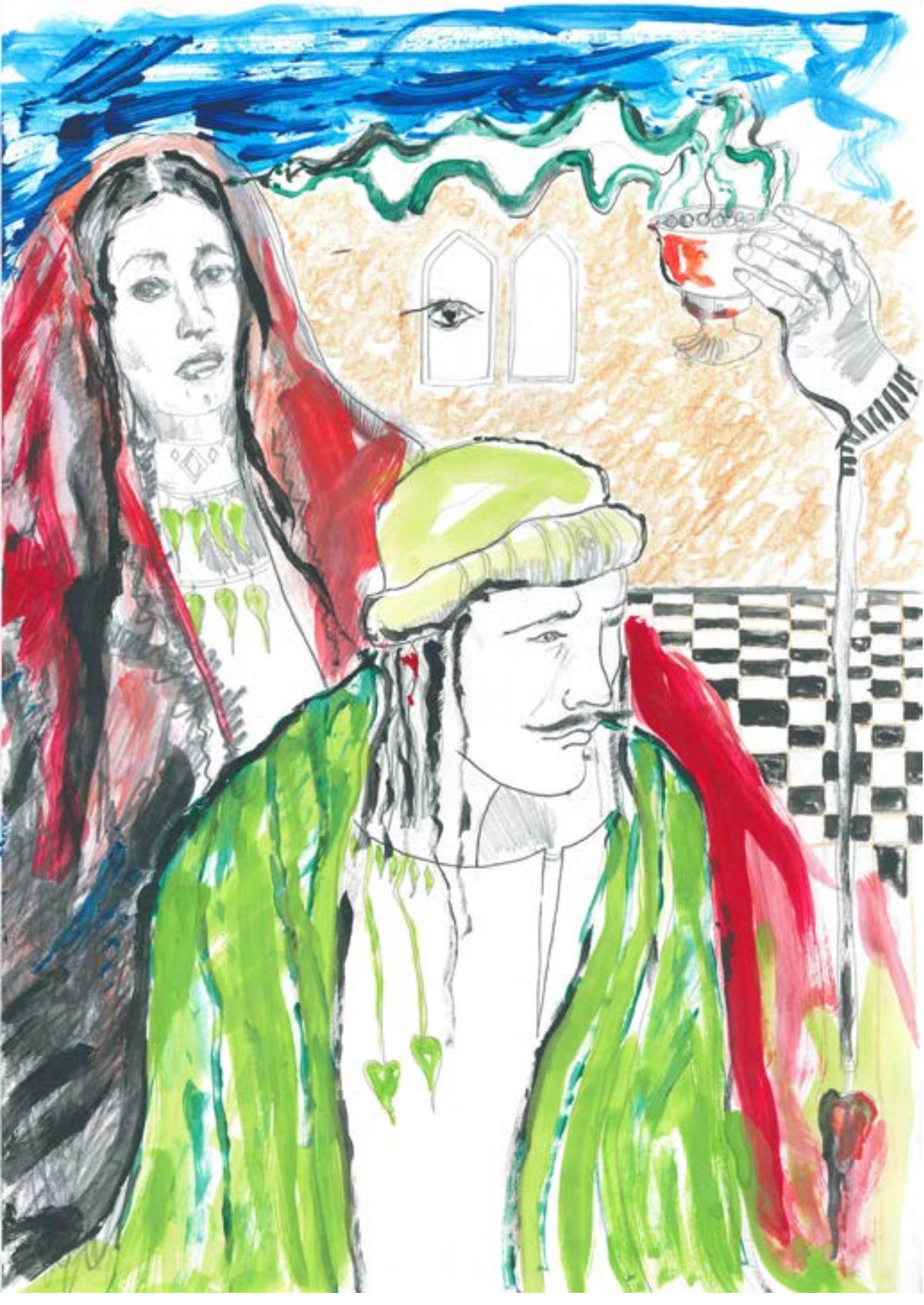
12- Magic and false dignitaries

The palace of Sistan is built on land
That's Sacred to Hindus. Their priests, angered
By the royal theft, have for centuries
Made visible their anger and revenge.
The royals have become inured to the
Quagmire of mysteries, theatrical
Plagues and long lists of unsolved incidents.
Aft's opals were made by Hindu magic
As are the many thousands of white moths
That will be infesting Zambur's garden.

The Khan rejoices in the news about
His heir to the throne, but he darkens when
He sees Zara's opal wrapped in a box.
He fears the misfortune this child will bring.
Despite his doubts, the Khan orders a grand
Reception to be held in the palace.
Out of respect, he invites the British.
Protocol demands that they're set apart
From other guests, and the musicians must
Face the wall when playing their instruments.

The grounds are adorned with silk and flowers.
The scent of oud wafts up from copper stoves.
An army of servants run back and forth
Keeping many guests suitably refreshed.
It's a party, but British lieutenants,
In black uniforms, swathed in victory's
Medals, play the role of dignitaries.
Wallowing in the respect they command,
They lie with imperial grandeur on
Old Persian carpets covering the lawn.







13 - A life of rebellious surprises

The thin army wives, also dressed in black,
Are invited to sit with the Begum.
This is Zara's mother, Zambur's cousin.
Shocked by their dull weaves the Begum gives them
Coloured silk shawls and, as etiquette rules,
An ancestral box filled with pearls, offered
With charming condescending smiles - these are
The miserable price of invasion.
Mixed with the pearls are magic opals to
Ensure their lives too will suffer defeat.

At the ladies' banquet, a boy with his
Monkey perform traditional dances.
Holding a cage with a white moth inside,
The boy hands it to one of the British
Women, who looks first at the cage and then
At the date she's holding in her fingers.
She eats the date and lifts the cage to her
Mouth, placing a gentle kiss upon it.
The boy, an accomplished sorcerer, smiles.
The Begum reclines on her silk cushion.

A soft breeze brings the scent of roses to
The garden, where polite chatter proceeds.
A wife asks the Begum, what it's like living
With the Khan. Ears are keen for her answer.
"When men take an Afghan wife, they take on
A life of rebellious surprises,
So why should the Kahn's life be different?
Don't underrate your conquests, dear lady."
There is an audible intake of breath
From the British women and then silence.







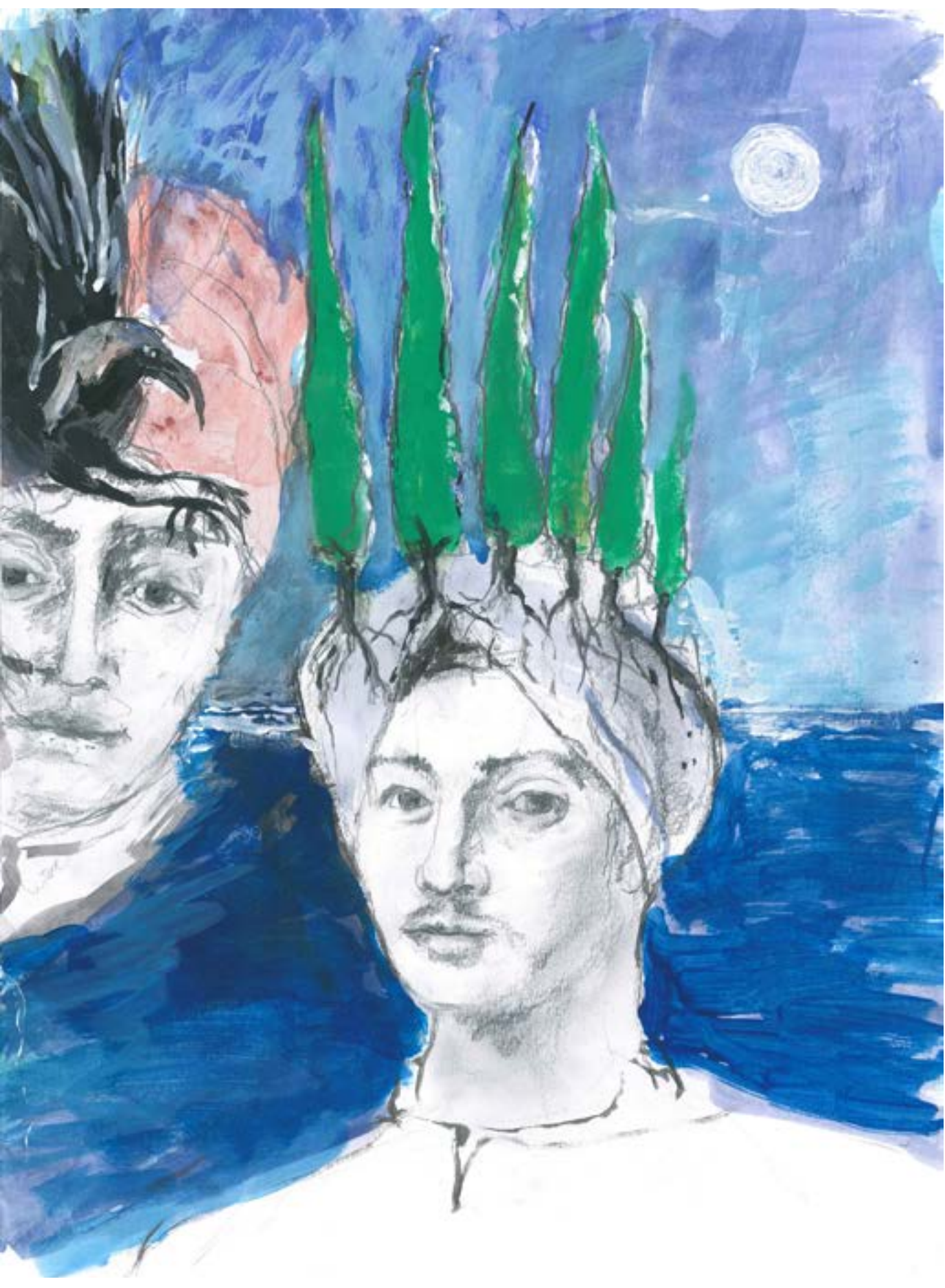
14 – Hindu Spirits

The young boy with his monkey hands out dates.
The guests, relieved by the distraction, are
Delighted that the banquet is ending.
The clear sky grows dark, a dusty breeze fills
The garden and the cypress trees waver.
Suddenly, anxiety fills the air.
The Begum suspects that Hindu spirits
Are at work, but she laughs and directs the
Guests to the palace just as giant hail
Stones rain down on them, creating mayhem.

Servants rush to pull the fainting and bruised
Ladies to safety. Smiling Hindu priests,
Content with the undignified retreat,
Scurry quickly between the cypress trees.
Taking white dusty moths from their pockets,
They propel them northwards towards Kabul.
The Khan, concerned about his family
Fortune, toasts Zara's surprising opal.
He's more alarmed by the blitz of hail stones
Upon his ancient, ancestral carpets.

The Mullah calls for prayers. The Kahn calls for
His carpets to be safe from blooded limbs.
Carriages come to aid the Brits beat a
Swift retreat and the Kahn watches, helpless,
As leather boots trample his beloved lawn.
Servants collect debris and roll up rugs,
Recklessly assaulting fragile roses.
He returns to his peaceful rooms where he
Prays the Brits will soon leave his lands and plans
A visit to his lover in Delhi.







15 – Massod's return

Massod and the male clan return from the hunt.
Slaughtered deer are hung from hooks on walls or
Lie sprawled on the floor. The blood of these dead
Trophies cover carpets that once portrayed
The glamorous gardens of paradise.
They celebrate Aft's birth in the main hall.
Rubab and tabla players accompany
Male dancers cloaked in dubious attire.
Eunuchs with coaled eyes serve spiced rice, arak,
Tea and melons in the boisterous hall.

From behind closed doors, marijuana beer in
Silver goblets, is served by veiled bodies.
Elegant men in blue and green chapans,
Interwoven with gold thread, fill the air
With laughter and thick, heady chillum smoke.
One flaunts his Tsarist watch on a gold chain.
One flaunts his chain entwined with red roses.
One flaunts rings of emerald and rubies.
The heat is stifling, minds wander, they talk
Of the next hunt and the games they might play.

Unnoticed, white moths shimmer in the haze,
Giving the hall a golden patina.
The uneasy horses switch their tails, which
Sends the plague of moths in frantic swirls.
A slow Rubab tune ends, and the dwindling
Light takes on a dusty, golden lustre.
In their joyous malaise, the men have no
Thought of time, place or fluttering moth wings.
They sprawl, bewitched and lusting for women,
Who dance before them in transparent silk.







16 – A golden haze

After the party, a night languishing
In transparent pearls - the looted gains of
Past conquests that once adorned the turbans
Of Indian Maharajas - the men
Wake to see sunlight making a vain bid
To shine through a shimmering, golden haze.
The light, reflecting off glass sewn into
Samarkand silks, dances on the ceiling.
After their lustful shipwreck, they've woken
Upon an opaque, dusty, foreign shore.

The bruised eyes of these thirsty sailors can't
Quite grasp the large fluttering invasion.
They want a breakfast of roasted quails with
Bread and honey, but these jaded, yawning,
Aristocrats can barely rise from the
Couches, let alone find the dining room.
When they finally leave, Sheerjahn, Zambur's
Servant, awakens the women, pays them
And sends them off. The corruption in this
Part of the house is distasteful to him.

Sheerjahn, disturbed by the moths, opens a
Window to find them masking the façade.
Sheerjahn is anxious about this bad magic.
He orders the rooms to be cleaned and the
Dust to be collected and placed in urns.
He shows the dust to Zambur, who gravely
Stares at the urn, ignoring its contents.
She instructs Sheerjahn to throw the dust into
The well, a decree that leaves her troubled.
She runs her hand through her lover's dark hair.







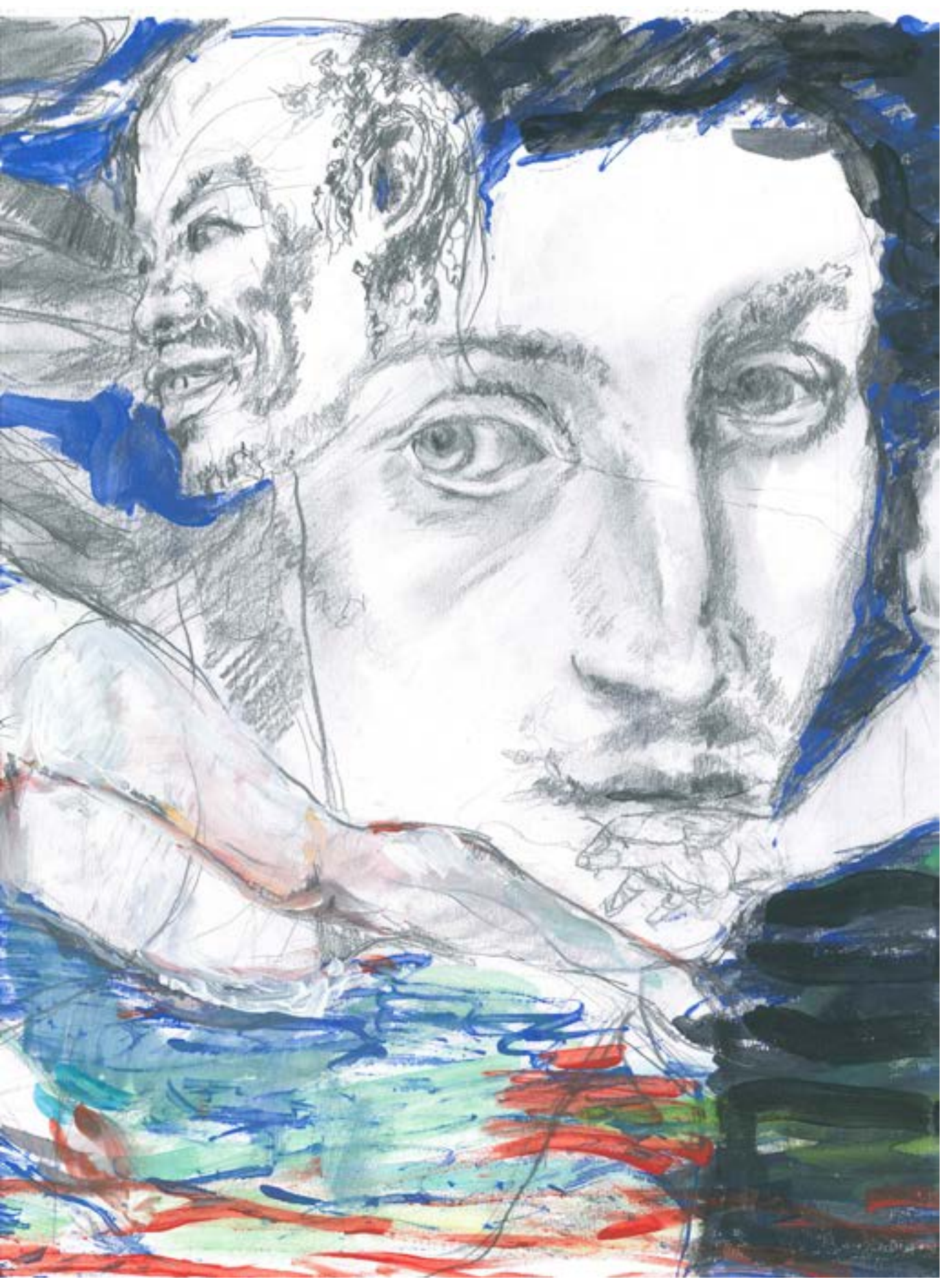
17 – Greed is rife

Zambur's lover, a cousin and poet,
Is counting out time on an Abacus.
He lives in the shadows of this rambling
Mansion, his tedious life one long, slow
Drift into opium unconsciousness.
The moth dust caking the mansion has turned
To gold and crowds come on pilgrimage to
Witness the mystical conversion.
They believe it is now a scared, Sikh
Temple, a place of wonder and worship.

Pilgrims crowd the walls, preventing the
Occupants from getting out. Zambur thinks
This plague of moths will ruin her status,
But she's more troubled by the crowd, who call
Her a witch and fight over the gold dust.
Greed is rife. Court ladies come to visit,
So that servants can gather up the dust.
Afterwards they hurry to the local
Jewellers, to have the dust converted
Into ornate, fashionable trinkets.

The moths continue to multiply and
The royal household are no longer free
Or safe, for pilgrims have dug holes under
The walls and parts of the facade are now
Starting to crumble and disintegrate.
Zambur calls the Amir. When his guards come,
They disperse the crowds by shooting at them
And then they burn the dust off the facade.
The hostilities come to an end when the
Shimmering gold dust no longer exists.











18 – Blood flows in the streets

After the day of mayhem, all that's left
Is a sea of turbans and the bodies
Of those who have been shot or trampled while
Trying to escape the Amir's soldiers.
The plague at an end, peace is restored and
Zambur has her damaged facade rebuilt.
Life can't return to normal as Kabul
Is drowning in elaborate jewellery.
Simple wives flaunt their wealth and even wear
Sparkling bangles while doing the cooking.

Heavy gold collars are now common and
The jewellers have become rich enough to
Finance armies and win favours abroad.
On the seventh day of the seventh month,
Disaster looms; horses pull at their reigns
And birds fly wildly, screeching in terror.
A storm breaks and a deluge of rain falls.
By seven at night, cries of terror ring
Out in the city as the jewellery
Expands, crushing fingers, arms and necks.

After minutes of hell, blood fills the streets
And the mayhem stops. Carts, carrying the
Dead and injured, rush everywhere looking
Hopelessly for medical assistance.
Before long, the weeping and grieving
Inhabitants are burying their dead.
Sheerjahn blames the covetous people, but
Zambur, shocked and fearful, instructs him to
Ask the Amir for more soldiers to keep peace.
She sits and smokes her chillum solemnly.







19 - The scorned princess

Aft grows rapidly and at seven years
He looks like a seventeen-year-old man.
Zambur insists that the genes of Zara's
Baluch clan are responsible for his
Maturity. None at court would dare to
Contradict her insistent reasoning.
Zara stays alone in her rooms, having
Handed the care of her son to Zambur's
Hazara maid, Sitara, who is now
Living with Zara's husband, Massod Kahn.

Zara, the scorned princess, declares her hate
For Sitara, but no one has any
Sympathy for a spurned woman who's lost
Her reason and can't distinguish between
Obvious reality and fable.
Zara lives by night, talking to the moon
And stars. Their advice is that she can't stay
In a place where love has abandoned her,
She must flee this house of vile gossip and
Lies and return home to Baluchistan.

Her thoughts return to those sweet afternoons
When she gazed from her bedroom window and
Watched the stable hands mounting their horses.
She clings to the visions offered by this
Magical window, her window to the
Sky, to freedom and to her dreams; it was
The only place that offered her promise.
Zara has little to treasure now and
By constantly dwelling on her fate,
She tortures herself and loses her mind.







20 - Sitara's dream

Sitara dreamt of a house that's devoid
Of people but filled with hunting trophies.
Rain fell on a blue globe and became a
Jade coloured river. It was Hazarajat
In harvest time. Sitara's family were
Gathering walnuts and grapes in the sun,
That shone lime-coloured past leaves to the earth.
They drank warm tea in green porcelain cups,
Painted with roses. When she awoke her
Own sunlight was blocked by dusty windows.

She saw a mirror opposite her bed.
Neither it, nor its shelf were there before.
Looking into it, she saw a wedding
Day party in Hazarajat and heard
The trees, vines and birds beseech her to join
Them in the mystic mirror. She reached
In to touch a fig leaf and her mother
Grabbed hold of her hand and pulled her inside.
She told Sitara to observe how fast
The river flows after torrential rains.

Sensing she was bearing Massod's child, she
Instructed Sitara to bring her child home.
"Don't stay in that palace as a common
Concubine, a forgotten servant girl.
The adobe walls will imprison you
And your blameless, illegitimate child.
That mountainous, unchanging world, without
Seasons, has held you captive for too long."
Sitara entered the mirror to join
Her future, knowing she'd never return.







21 – Sad, betrayed and lonely

During Sitara's last unhappy months
Zambur had taken Aft, her surrogate
Son, on a grand cultural excursion
To Samarkand, Isfahan and Delhi.
When Aft returns, he comes to Sitara's
Room, seeking affection and discovers
An opal on the shelf by the mirror.
Sitara had retrieved this opal from
Zara's bed on the night of Aft's birth.
He suspects Sitara has returned home.

Aft stands before the mirror, its frame full
Of woodworm, and watches spiders catch moths.
Broken windows swing in the wind and moths
Have eaten the bedding. The whole room is
Is covered in dust. He needs light and looks
For an oil lamp, but they are all broken.
He kisses the opal, puts it in his
Pocket, straightens his turban and storms out.
Walking the streets, brushing dust off his clothes,
He's sad, betrayed and utterly alone.

Some see his striking black eyes, blood shot and
Tearful and sympathize with his distress.
He strides angrily through the labyrinthine
Streets, unaware that moths from Sitar's
Room are flying from his turban, heedless
That people are falling in love with him.
Radiating an air of grandeur, this
Handsome man in his prime, thinks his looks are
Responsible for their gaze, not magic
Moths from Sitara's dusty apartment.







22 – An open season of desire

For weeks following Aft's melancholy
Walk, people fall in love with each other.
It is an epidemic of lust and
Sex that brings all other life to a halt.
The brothels are full and rape is frequent.
The law courts hear only crimes of passion,
All committed by conventional folk.
This desperate and disordered way of
Life continues until autumn rains clean
The streets of the provocative moth dust.

Shy citizens retreat to their homes in
Shame, silence reigns and repentant souls, in
Dire need of absolution, fill the mosques.
All are relieved that the open season
Of desire is now a vague memory
Of mythical tales once told in the past.
Aft too lives to forget the episode,
But he has no talent for reflection.
He's a recluse, his life dedicated
To collecting and studying insects.

The exotic furnishings in his rooms
Include huge glass bowls where insects flourish.
Zara never visits him, but he is
Now hardened to the absence of her love.
Seven white horses and seven white hounds
With green eyes are his faithful companions.
For human contact he fights with Sheerjahn,
Zambur's spy and servant, or he plays chess
With her lover, lost in opium dreams.
Aft's loneliness is his real opponent.







23 – A ghost and a fantasy

Aft, forever the dandy, only leaves
The house if he must visit his tailor.
At twenty-seven he looks as he did
When he was seventeen and his jealous
Cousins claim it's magic that gives him his
Huge run of luck and all the finest gifts.
They are intent on preventing him from
Receiving Zambur's prized inheritance,
And conspiratorial whispers prompt
Secret plans for his assassination.

Aft's quarters are locked and guarded at night.
At times, he sees his mother, a ghost-like
Figure walking in the garden. Those with no
Eye upon the inner chambers of the
Beehive, have no idea that Zara, the
Sad princess, has now become transparent.
For Aft, she's a mystery and a dream
Long forgotten, but Zambur still spurns her.
She claims that Zara's spectre-like presence
Is part of Aft's wild imagination.

Aft has secrets not shared with aunt Zambur.
On the seventh day of each week he is
Overwhelmed with feelings of tender love.
He unlocks Sitara's room, inhales her
Scent and dreams of her face in the mirror.
He's deeply ashamed of these acts and he
Contritely returns to study his globes
Of insects or the stars in the night sky -
Distant worlds where he can avoid feelings
That will disturb his fragile condition.







24 – The Hazara girl

Aft leaves a silk turban with gold thread in
The yard where horses trample it. He leaves
Crocodile sandals in the hammam that
Were made by the best cobblers in Bombay.
He owns too much, cares for nothing and has
Desperate longing in his lonely heart.
He sits on his patio watching a
Hazara girl wash his clothes. The washing
Is delivered by the girl's despotic
Grandma who constantly embraces her.

She makes glances at Aft, pretending she's
Gazing at the wasps making their home in
The corner of a wall above his head.
It is late afternoon and only bird
Chatter breaks up the persistent silence.
In the hazy light, Aft, stares at the wasp's
Nest, briefly fantasises that the young girl
Is a geisha made from white porcelain
And falls asleep, dreaming that he's smoking
Grandfather's opium with Sitara.

She is laughing in a garden of faint
Moonlight, surrounded by Somali slaves
Who cast blue shadows. He smells acacia
Oil, sees Hindu spirits darting between
Cypress trees and feels a slap on his face.
The Hazara girl has just killed a wasp
On his cheek and runs away, laughing
At his surprise. Aft thinks he's in love
With her and returns to ask his insects
If this could be true. They doubt that it's love.







25 – Zara's return

Aft runs through the mansion looking for his
Mother, but finds emptiness and silence.
He imagines he's being watched by a
Transparent figure hiding in the trees.
Zara, comatose, looks in the mirror.
She knows she is slowly disappearing.
She moves to the window, holds her hands up
To the moon and vows to put an end to
This solitary, melancholy life.
She will escape from this nest of wild bees.

She calls out to her Somali servant
And informs her that she will depart from
Afghanistan and return To Sistan.
Her servant plaits her hair, dresses her in
An abundance of colourful gypsy
Clothing and covers her head in a shawl.
The servant leads Zara through a disused
Passage and out of the house. They are met by
A nomad family mounted on camels
And covered in shining silver jewels.

The caravan takes Zara to Sistan.
Aft seals his mother's house, mixing anger
With adobe and hay. He's blotting
Out the existence of the seventh house,
Concealing its memories and contents.
Because of his love for Sitara, he
Takes the white opal he found on her shelf.
Confused, mixing memory with desire,
He wonders how change occurs and whether
He will ever get to know his feelings.







26 – The paradox of beauty

Aft, without solace, abandoned and lost,
Cries tears that fall as tiny stones, pearls that
Multiply and conceal each new footprint.
They bury the city's streets and buildings.
Aft's house, his old adobe prison, sinks
Beneath a pearl sea, and the citizens
Clamber over it like desert nomads.
He looks straight ahead. He'll never return.
The language of bees, growing blue roses -
These are the past. He'll attend to his storm.

Aft, a disturbing yet evocative
Paradox of beauty whose soul can't touch
Anything without shaking it apart,
Once desired to make the land fertile, but
His zeal converted desert into sea.
These days, with sad, yet bright spirit, he hides
His over-abundant life in slumber.
He dreams of journeys taken by ancients
While in a trance, and wakes with stories that
Inspire wonder in the eyes of children.

Avoiding greedy crowds, Aft finds friendship
With the cave-dwellers who travel freely.
Grateful he can spring loose of time, he seeks
Ageless memories to help him dance his life.
He knows death will enliven him, for his
Dust has floated in air since time began.
His valiant and exhausting mission
Almost complete, Aft walks endlessly on,
Picking up the treasure others have dropped.
He's just beginning to sense the earth's truths.



