

Areez Khatun

Journal Extracts

2018 —

AREEZ KATKI
Journal Extracts Pt. I

Bombay

Extract i
Thursday 21st June 2018
Café Banyan Tree
Sofia Girls College Lane, Mumbai

“Sure, I know where that is – the Parsi Colony before *Tulsiwadi*, right? I knew that you were a Parsi within minutes,”* the taxi driver playfully claimed. Curious about how this assumption was made, I asked why and he replied, “Because of your features. You people have distinct faces. And the way in which you spoke to me, with that sweet tone. You said ‘*please*’ and ‘*thank you*’ in a manner only typical of Parsi folk.”* It was just after midnight in Mumbai and I was on my way back home after a dinner with some friends in Bandra. (*Translated from a conversation originally spoken in Hindi)

This notion of being associated with a distinct identity wasn’t something I grew up with in New Zealand, or when I lived in Europe. However it seems to be happening a lot here. That fragment from my conversation with a *taxiwalla* wasn’t just a one-off incident since I’ve been in Mumbai. It kept happening and it still keeps happening. Taxi drivers, guards, shopkeepers and various figures have openly and warmly associated me with our ancient Persian clan. It conjures a sensation that I haven’t ever felt back home in Auckland. Was it *pride*? Perhaps, though I’m just as *proud* to be a New Zealander. So it might actually be a simple, uncomplicated sense of belonging somewhere. Untangling these distinct threads from my genetic roots, however far across the Arabian Sea they might’ve spooled eleven centuries ago. For the first time in my life, I have arrived and started inhabiting a physical space that *recognises* me.

There was something that my uncle Dinshaw recently said about Gran: “When she was able-bodied and even after, there isn’t anything she wouldn’t have done for her own. That’s just the way we are reared. You’re one of us and we will love you fiercely, regardless of anything you do or don’t do.” This reminded me of the time I saw that disappointment in my mother’s face while I confronted her about my sexual orientation. I was 16. Distraught as she was, disappointment and fear weren’t the only factors. There was one more ingredient in that pool of tears; an embrace that soared above all barriers. Unconditional love – however wrought with melodrama and sentiment, that emotion might well be an intrinsic Parsi characteristic.

There are certain emotional components at play when my identity as a Queer Parsi-born New Zealander is addressed. These are more than enough to sustain, perhaps even over-supply, the iconography with which my recent practices as an artist and craftsperson have shaped this body of work. While I experience the sensations of identity-definition and explore what it means to be a homosexual Parsi man in the arts, I would also like to expand on and explore the notion of an emotional drive. Demonstrated perhaps, through visual and text-based content for my solo exhibition. To look through personal histories and locate those components, in order to create a narrative that is punctuated by emotional responses rather than time.

I'd like to approach this through pictorial elements using (predominantly) needlework based craft practices that were handed down to me from a series of lessons from the matriarchs in my family. Several of these works will be based on instinctual responses to my immediate environment – often based on my drawings and studies of particular spaces, objects, motifs and subjects. Some will directly reference statistics about the Parsi community, their spiritual practices, legends, rituals, topography, architecture, her historic figures, local artists, distant relatives and common traits of this minority who make up only 6% of the population of South Mumbai but happen to own 80% of its land. It will presumably come full circle at some point and hopefully address some of the personal narratives within this framework.

The wider cultural framework that I've been exploring is going to be more ambitious than initially anticipated. Given the centuries of diaspora that shaped what we know today as a 'Parsi identity.' Being based in Mumbai, I also plan on exploring early settlements around Gujarat (*Udwada, Surat, Diu-Daman & Navsari*) in late-July. In August I will be meeting descendants of old *Mul* (cotton muslin) weavers in Calcutta who supplied Parsi households with some of the finest spiritual textiles ever woven by hand (300+ thread count). I am then taking a month to step further back in our timeline and explore Zoroastrian heritage sites around Iran and Azerbaijan in September.

There is also the matter of my own perspective and agency as an expatriate who was born and almost immediately removed from these institutions that protect our cultural identity in Mumbai. Despite initially sounding critical of those limitations, they address an important subject: diaspora and the survival of Zoroastrianism. Due to the very exclusive nature of Mumbai's Parsi community, they seemed to have retained strong values without having made any allowances for outsiders to enter. This is due to a series of promises* made during the entrance of our first clan members as refugees into the Kingdom of Gujarat in the 9th Century. (*Expanded on this subject with more information in journal extract no. iii).

So even today, the pressures for Zoroastrian children to marry other Zoroastrian children is interestingly even stronger among diaspora families who now reside as micro minorities in various parts of the world – forming close-knitted communities around the U.K, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

For my research on this subject I've looked at the effects of that pressure, a lack of inclusivity and how these actions may affect the survival of their community on a global scale. Matters of gender, sexuality, political and social values have been addressed as I've looked at the lives of pioneering figures from the wider Parsi community – some of whom were exiled or stepped away due to conflicting ideals. Examples of such Parsi-born figures from the 19th & 20th century are *Madame Bikhaji Cama*, *Hoshang Merchant* and *Farokh Bulsara*.

As previously discussed with Zoe (Hoerberigs), I really wanted to work with **Bildungsroman** as the format and possibly part of a working title, for this exhibition. As a narrative trope it here refers to the formation and development of identities from two perspectives.

One: Parsi diaspora viewed through an alternative lens (Zoroastrian lineage being strongly patriarchal) by focusing on craft traditions that have endured through matriarchal hereditary. The development and growth of identity from the perspective of women who nurtured, crafted, cooked, taught and worked. The domestic realm.

Two: A more personal growth. My formative experiences as a young Zoroastrian, to the 'self-removed' homosexual expatriate that I am today. Revisiting early experiences as a Parsi and beyond. Such as my Navjote initiation ceremony (which every child has at age 7). Also being born into a sacred '*Osta*' clan meant that our family's patriarchal lineage of Priesthood was left solely up to me to inherit. It involved a series of rituals over 60 days of isolation in a fire temple when I was 10 years old. Events like these and more will be explored to address notions of questioning spirituality, authority and the formulation of an immigrant's identity. How might such factors might propagate, generate (or degenerate) personal belief systems?

A clearer format for this exhibition is still being concocted – I still have six or so months to continue making, refining and editing as I go. Do anticipate a point in the next couple of months when I'll briefly step away and begin (privately) sharing images of full works with their titles + details. So far I've almost solely worked on smaller scale panels that feature dense hand-embroidery, using a broadened sets of skills that I've practiced since the

Parsi Gara embroidery workshop I attended in April. Having sourced hand-woven panels of everyday cloth (Bengali muslin, 'khatka' rags, tea-towels, handkerchiefs etc) that have quintessential Parsi connotations. Approaching domestic materiality, rituals and the idea of our thresholds (both open *and* closed from entry) as a starting point. There will of course be a few (not many) larger scale works too. However, for this exhibition I have been drawn to a scale that is more intimate.

I hope these journal extracts are helpful to some extent. Please let me know if there are any questions or clarifications that would be useful. I guess that the purpose of my (almost daily) journaling exercise is to enrich the contextualisation of this body of work.

Images will be shared soon.

Thank you kindly.

*Extract ii
Monday 2nd July
At Grandma's blue desk
Sir C.J Colony, Tardeo, Mumbai.*

At six twenty five in the morning I sit with my laptop against the pale blue surface of a desk where I remember grandma sewing buttons, granddad signing cheques and both of them adorably bickering over little things like the perfect temperature of tea. A dark mahogany writing table with sets of drawers on both sides and a wide central opening where a matching deco chair would slide in. There were three pieces to the set – a desk and two chairs. Designed and built by my great-grandfather Minocher Lakdawalla's factory, who crafted wooden furniture for offices and government buildings around Bombay (present day Mumbai).

In the later years there was a side hustle introduced by Granddad, where he took small offcuts and created these educational wooden toys – some of which I was lucky enough to inherit. A fire destroyed our factory in the 1950's, a few years before my mother was born. Despite this ending all woodworking practices, our Parsi family name 'Lakdawalla,' (translating as 'Wood craftspeople') had still survived as a wee token of our craft heritage. According to Gran it was Granddad's idea to add a layer of pale blue resin-based lamination on the writing surface of this desk.

This blue surface has seen so much, yet it never weathered nor showed significant signs of age like the rest of this once-polished teakwood desk. Drawers had swollen and splintered from wear, the decorative Art Deco grooves on its legs have been scuffed and sanded down over time. I remember once stepping up on this desk in my sister's skirt during a particular winter break. It was 1996 and I was seven years old. We were here on a little vacation, as was customary and often planned in December when Mumbai was cooler. It was a week before my older sister Delzin's *Navjote*. A Parsi ceremony not dissimilar to a *Bat Mitzvah*, where children on the cusp of puberty underwent their formal initiation and received sacraments as a rite of passage before following the Zoroastrian doctrine.

My mother had picked out the textiles, trimmings and jewellery for the three outfits that Delzin would change into that day. One consisted of a full silk skirt that went down to her little calves, trimmed with a thin but ornate strip of Belgian-style lace. Underneath that full skirt was this tulle petticoat that helped the whole thing maintain that 1950's volume which the skirt was constructed for. '*Little girls should always look good twirling around in their Navjote evening dresses,*' our dear old pageant mum would say.

One afternoon, I remember peeping through the bedroom door, closed off from any male members of our family while Delzin tried on and played with our cousin Zendyn, both dancing around in their skirts. Jumping from chair to bed to desk to stool – pretending that the grey Kota stone flooring in our ancestral home was molten lava. The way all those frills flew about, emphasized by currents of air created by the ceiling fan (which of course, was left on at full speed in the middle of winter). They noticed my little giggle behind the door and decided to allow me in.

What happened after that was inevitable. A tactile seduction, one might say, that was already a long time coming. Textiles, however camp and fruity were always within reach of my fingers as a child. Every time my mother and sister went shopping I caressed and examined them intently. Held them up against my older, pre-pubescent siblings and watched them grow into young women over the years. So that afternoon, my sister thought it might be '*adorable*' to see me in her frilly pink petticoat. So on it went *finally!* I thought. Pinched in with a bobby pin due to my lack of a waist. *Spin, spin! Twirl!* Then a few necklaces wouldn't go amiss – grandma's amber beads and glass bangles too. With a little headscarf over my crown, tied in the fashion that old Parsi ladies did before entering their local fire temples.

Strange thing was I don't remember feeling unsafe or even very different from my playtime companions in those moments, not when compared to how I felt on a cricket field. I had found my people – they were *women*. Up on that desk, garishly festooned with trimmings, the notion of my sexuality was suspended for a moment in the presence of those darling creatures

never to be questioned, or so I thought. To an outsider it might've looked like a performance and it might very well have been one. However it validated the feminine in me and grew like an ulcer in my father's stomach over the years to come.

Still, we kept playing those dress-up games, time and time again. And my queerness thrived in secrecy behind closed doors. It developed, became more refined and found ways to live beyond the need for approval from Mama or Papa. Not an uncommon scenario in the lives of many young queer men, but the placement and precedent that was set that afternoon was certainly memorable, if not formative.

It feels rather apt to be journaling these recollections while I sit against the very same pale blue desk in the room where it began. To be back here, living freely and alone in this home – now almost empty, yet so full of *content*. I find myself intimately engaging with yet another 'origin story.' One of many that I look forward to unearthing & carefully documenting while I'm here.

Extract iii
Saturday 7th July 2018
Blue Tokai Café at the abandoned old Shakti Mill
Dadar, Mumbai (16:22)

Legends

I

Having recently come across an old book of short stories for Parsi children, I've been reading further into the legend of *Banu Pars*, daughter of *Yazdegird III* the last Sassanian King of Persia. As the final caliphate of an imminent Islamic invasion approached to kill the Sassanian royal family, Banu was separated from their caravan, in which all-remaining members fled to seek shelter, disguised as common folk. Based on both, my imagination and the perception of losing one's identity, I imagine this girl barely sixteen years of age, fleeing from a mob of men who had just defeated her father's army and burned down their palace.

Banu's story, less grand and auspicious, became a legend because of the faith it inspired for the surviving descendants of her clan. Its leitmotif differs from the community-driven trope of most Zoroastrian legends: Prophets gathering around squares and priests performing sacred rites inside palatial

homes. Those were events and legends that demonstrated unity and hope from a collective point of view. But Banu was alone. She fled, on foot perhaps. And approached the foothills of a great mountainside in the region in present-day Yazd, where a goatherd offered the princess some milk from his goat. Unfortunately the beast had kicked the bowl out of our peasant's hands and they didn't have time to extract more milk. So Banu thanked him for his efforts and ran on towards the mountainside, still parched. She reached the base of a great sandy mountain that provided neither nourishment nor shelter from approaching enemies. So Banu, at her wit's end, began to weep. Alone and deserted – pursued by invaders who attempted to kill an entire race and till this day occupy their land. She wept and then I imagine she might've stopped – in a moment of both desperation and clarity, she prayed for the assistance of *Dadar Ahura Mazda*, the first known monotheistic god conjured by the founder of *Zoroastrianism*. However in response she heard the hum of a female deity – Anahita, goddess of fertility, who whispered, '*Come here my love.*' Anahita created small streams of crystalline water where Banu's tears fell, from which she could then drink. Banu followed the stream up towards a small crevice in that rockface. And so as legend goes, the face of that mountain had completely parted – forming a small, lush valley into which Banu crept and safely hid.

Centuries later, stories of a large fragment from a woman's dress was found deeply crested into a crevice of that legendary mountain, completely torn off from the remains of an ancient garment. It is said to have been a portion of her simple dress that got caught on a rock, as Banu crept into the valley which had closed behind her and completely vanished. Leaving history with only a fragment of cloth – not the cloth of an emperor's daughter, but a piece of *simple cloth* that now tells a rather grand story.

II

There is sweetness in the way you people act, or so say observers who have interacted with Parsis. This following legend is extracted from a historic anecdote related to the '*Qissa-i-Sanjan*' records from the 9th Century. There are elements of the treaty that might stem from socio-political accounts created to demonstrate the many contributions made by the Zoroastrian immigrant community in India.

I have faint memories of when my mother used to read us bedtime stories. She was a great resource, spinning fantastic tales that stemmed from many sources; variations from Firdausi's *Shanameh* to twists on the Grimm

Brothers' classics. This one however, was recited at bedtime around November 1998 – weeks before we were going revisit to Bombay and our old family home in Udwarda, Gujarat. Not sure if that was her intention, to time this narrative so appropriately with a re-visitation of our ancestral settlers' early landing sites. Part of me likes to think that Mum was a clever and thoughtful creature who thought out each aspect of our childhood concocting as many little narratives as she could until, like any parent, time seemingly made her retire that post.

The story goes like this. A few of our tribes from the Greater Khorasan region of *Pars* had managed to flee death and persecution during the Islamic conquest of Persia. They set sail across the Persian Gulf and landed on the island of Dio with a ship that held one of the most sacred fires extracted from an ancient temple that had been destroyed. The fleet lived on Dio for nine years, communicating with natives and slowly building a friendship with them. The Island however was too small and lacked vegetation enough to feel a growing community. On an expedition for more fertile land they stumbled upon the bay of Sanjan, which was then (and still is) part of Gujarat. The Kingdom of Gujarat was a predominantly Hindu state, ruled by just and pre-cautious Maharaja Jadav Rana. Upon finding these tall bearded men in armour, with their fair-skinned women and children in strange garb, the king's men practiced caution before any provocation of battle – he asked their most educated man to meet up on a flat plane where King Rana held court. The tribe from Pars had offered their high priest as a representative. Not much is known of this man, but we do know that he spoke several languages and offered counsel to officers, with humility and reason at the forefront of every endeavour.

As the High Priest approached, dressed plainly in his white muslin robes (*Jama* and *Pichori*), the king asked him to describe the values and practices of his people, followed by their story and what brought them to Gujarat. After having explained their predicament to Jadav Rana, the High Priest humbly requested for his people to seek asylum in India, where land was justly ruled and the practices of various religious sub-groups harmoniously coexisted. Still skeptical about this request, Rana pointed out the obvious differences between those who were native to the Indian subcontinent and their alien race, not just physically but also through cultural practices and customs. This meant that proper assimilation in India would not only be a difficult balancing act, but also pose a threat to both their values.

Understanding the reasons for Rana's caution, the High Priest made a very bold but peculiar request: he asked the King's courtiers for a jug of milk and some sugar in a large bowl. After these were brought to him, the Priest poured the entire jug of milk into bowl containing some sugar and asked the

king to look at it. *How does it appear? Still the same, no?* – Yes, the King nodded. Our priest then said:

“This is what we humbly propose, as a people seeking shelter in your land. You are the milk and we will be the sugar. The appearance of your nation will remain unchanged by our kin. We will adapt as many customs, values, traditions and practices that will allow us to live comfortably among your people, while silently preserving our faith. Our children will not marry your children; our women will adapt the customary dress as your women do. We will not perform rituals such as weddings until after sunset, so as not to detract attention from your festivities. The only supplement that we may offer will be in the manner of this sugar that I have poured into your bowl filled with milk. In appearance, it is invisible. So like this bowl, the appearance of your nation will remain unchanged by our people, yet only made sweeter.”

The rest is history, as you might know. Till this day the Parsi community manages to remain invisible from mainstream Indian culture. If you *do* decide to scratch beyond the surface and ‘*taste the milk*’, you might just find some of that sweetness within a gulp. Some of this nation’s most beloved artists, architects, merchants, governors, altruists and various public figures were descendants of an incredibly peaceful tribe of immigrants; still living as a minority amongst their own kind, endeavoring to sweeten things from within.

Legend of the Milk & the Sugar

Narrated from memory by Areez Katki

Some (*but not all*) useful resources:

Godrej, Pheroza J. *A Zoroastrian Tapestry: Art Religion & Culture*. Mumbai, Mapin (First ed.), 2003.

Godrej et al. *Across Oceans and Flowing Silks, from Canton to Bombay 18th-20th centuries and No Parsi is an Island (A Curatorial Re-reading Across 150 Years)*. New Delhi, Spenta Media (First ed.), 2013.

Merchant, Hoshang. *Secret Writings of Hoshang Merchant*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Tapi Collection. *Peonies & Pagodas: Embroidered Parsi Textiles*. Mumbai, Garden Silk Mills, 2011.

Online Sources:

<https://scroll.in/article/806939/what-does-it-mean-to-be-parsi-an-exhibition-provides-an-answer>

<http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-growing-up-parsi-and-gay-in-bombay-1640698>

<https://www.upi.com/Feature-Parsis-face-success-survival/45981023826994/>

<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/variety/how-parsis-with-persian-roots-flowered-in-indian-soil/article9730657.ece>

The subject of my cultural identity is one that I've never been confronted with so much since the last 18 hours. It all began with my flight from Istanbul to Tehran. The man at the boarding gate seemed skeptical about my appearance, which didn't seem to match his idea of a New Zealander. After much explanation and waiting, I found myself sweating rather nervously to an Omani-British lady in a full Burqa holding a crying baby. With a very high BPM drumming through my chest we both eventually made our way through the gate with smirks and clenched teeth. *Thank you sir, turns out the English and people from New Zealand do come in more than one colour.*

As we boarded the flight I was politely requested if I'd swap seats with a lady so that she could sit next to her sister. After having switched this conversation to English, the adorable old man next to whom I was then meant to sit threw a big tantrum in Farsi. Passengers next to him giggled and told me that he didn't like that I was conversing in English. "How selfish you are, being Iranian but not speaking with us in Farsi!" I was speechless. Not only was this my first interaction with a group of Persians en-route to Iran, but also one who immediately read my genetic features and made the assumption that I was one of them. Mixed emotions and trepidation ensued.

I couldn't read, write or sleep throughout that flight. I had no idea what was to be expected. Visa problems? Customs issues? Would they think I was an expat and therefore a potential spy? I immediately deleted my social media apps as a way to detox from that world and focus on exploring my Motherland more intently. I also deleted my gay dating apps, just to be safe. Only to find out via a dozen WhatsApp messages once I switched on my phone in Tehran, that Section 377 had been repealed on that very day in India! An archaic colonial-era law that outlawed homosexuality had been effectively abolished in India for the first time – my friends in Mumbai were celebrating and I couldn't hold back my tears of both, joy and sadness that I couldn't join them. Iran was a completely different world. Where saying the words 'homosexual' or 'gay' in the wrong places might result in arrest and interrogation – and if proven, a public execution.

So here I am, having lunch at a small cafe that was recommended to me by my hosts in Tehran, a young man named Zoubin whose ex girlfriend Zoufa, friends Siavash & Omid welcomed me to their place in Tehran yesterday. I'm still not sure how to feel about my time here but I'll do my best to adapt and learn everything possible from food, regional customs to an improved understanding of the Persian language. If Parsis had one universal attribute it would be their talent for adapting and integrating sweetly with any setting they're placed in. Hoping this won't be too difficult, as several Iranians have already presumed I was a local and asked for directions on my first day.

Extract v
Friday 7th September 2018
Carpet Museum, Tehran 18:23

I just had another interesting interaction that has been worth noting. But first let me describe the Carpet Museum of Tehran. A brutalist structure designed by architect Abdol-Aziz Mizra Farmanfarmaian that was completed in 1976, three years before the Islamic Revolution. From the exterior it resembles a carpet loom and is home to some of the most precious carpet specimens from the 15th Century. The interior sections of the Carpet Museum are cool and dark wide corridors that slink into ramp ways, taking one through the various regions, eras and styles of carpet-making crafts, with techniques ranging from nomadic flat-woven Kilims to intricately hand-knotted Qom silk rugs.

As I wandered through the museum over the past three hours, I began to grasp the monumental scale of this nation's textile history. It ran deep and spread wide, far beyond the borders of modern-day Iran. There has been a great deal of iconography that I saw and could describe for hours. However in order to save time (the museum closes in 30 minutes) I'll highlight two main sources of intrigue that will hopefully inform my textile practice.

Firstly, from my part there has been a long admiration for flat-weaving techniques that Kilim weavers have used in Asia Minor and further east (up 'till Uzbekistan). A particular Kilim style I just discovered in the West Azerbaijani section was very intriguing. Mainly because every Kilim I've yet encountered (especially while I was in Turkey last month) has usually explored naturalistic geometry that neatly sectioned off colour changes

through neat inlets between weft bobbin changes; resulting in a knotted seam-like opening on the surface of the textile (usually more evident when one examines the ‘wrong’ side). What I saw today was far more advanced. Less naïve and far less naturalistic in their proportions or themes. This is something I must look further into when I’m around West Azerbaijan next week, as that is the region where these nomadic tribes produce Kilims so intricately woven that the colour intervals between their ‘blocks’ are practically invisible to the naked eye. The closest I’ll get to describing the surface decoration of these panels is that they resemble mottled, marbling stone in biomorphic formed sections that repeat harmoniously over the surface they’ve been painstakingly flat-woven into.

Secondly, the narrative & pictorial elements of Kashan rugs blew me away not only through the skill of their meticulously hand-knotted friezes but also the content. Illustrating salacious stories from Hafez to Ferdowsi, I found it particularly interesting how these narratives have been celebrated in a country where seeing a woman’s exposed ankle is practically considered blasphemous. The male gaze here is at an interesting cross-section, somewhere between exploitative and helpless. Most medieval Persian narratives have an interestingly rebellious strain & tension, when depicted pictorially. One in particular was the courtship of the (already-married) Queen Shirin with her lover Farhad. Seeing her bare chested wearing only an Ijar (Persian bloomers), reclined, self-aware & languishing before her lover’s gaze while he peruses her hand in marriage. Of course we all know how Farhad & Shirin’s tale ends – with him flinging himself off a cliff in present-day Kermanshah, where a pomegranate tree still thrives – said to have magical properties that heal broken hearts (*definitely going there*). Depictions of Hafez’s love of wine, Shirazi women and hashish may also be identified when one reads into some of these rugs – all of which are off-limits today or have been manipulated by fundamentalist Islamic texts. For example, when these fundamentalists interpret Hafez’s penchant for intoxication today, they believe he referred to his ardor for having received Allah’s love. *Ahem*. The dude loved his wine, mind-altering substances and women – there’s no question about that, case closed.

So back to the identity-confronting element of this museum visit. I was by the counter of the Museum’s teashop, chatting with two ladies about carpet restoration and how their sources dated back to the Qajar & Pahlavi dynasty’s art collections. They politely asked me where I came from and in order to stick to English (since my Persian is still well below passing grade), I said that I’m from New Zealand. As I was ordered a rose and cardamom tea from a girl behind the counter named Sara, here colleague Nazanin began to giggle – and even though I had suspicions as to why, I immediately got out my phone’s voice recorder and asked for permission before she said anything else. When I asked why she found this amusing, I realised that she was staring at my face intently and moved a step closer to examine it. The

girl smiled and said, 'It is funny because you look exactly like my brother. You don't look like you're from New Zealand, your nose, your eyes and all your features look like they're from here.' At that point I knew almost undoubtedly, that I was getting closer to the physical spaces where my genetic features came from - a feeling that I've never quite felt comfortable with exploring until now.

Extract vi
Wednesday 12th September 2018
Anahita Temple, Takht-E-Soleyman, 18:45

I didn't get a chance to write at Behastan Castle earlier today. It was the site we climbed around a few hours ago, after a two hour drive through the Alborz Mountains. There are however a series of conte & oil pastel drawings that I managed to do on site - mostly studies of rock formations and responses to the majestic ruin with its deep ochre tones. Including once-carved stone columns, pyres and cave-like entranceways that have made their way back to the elements of reddish earth and plant life.

Takht-E-Soleyman, or Azar Goshnasp is a different setting altogether. Less neglected and far better strategically utilized by invaders after the fall of the Sassanian dynasty in the 6th Century AD. A series of legends have been attached to his site and some of them can be dated all the way back to 350 BC. For example, the temple at which I'm currently seated - on a step under a partially collapsed entranceway, facing the main altar. While Azar Goshnasp was a Fire Temple dedicated to a singular God represented by fire (Ahura Mazda), there was once an equilibrium between fire and water worship that Zoroastrianism revered to equal effect; the goddess or female deity, Anahita of water & fertility. I'm at one of the few existing sites that prove this reverence held by early-Zoroastrian beliefs. Another such site is in Bishapur, where I'll go in a couple of weeks. So when this 'Fire of Fires' once burned and all Sassanid kings came to bow before it a week prior to their coronations, the same deed required an offering to our water deity. Legend goes that before and after these kings arrived, this fire would be soft and aglow as a mere ember. However once a true monarch bathed in Anahita's water temple and made his way to the fire via secret passageways, it would miraculously come ablaze - flying around the inner sanctum where only high priests and kings would enter. The story demonstrates how there was once a balance between natural elements, when Zoroastrianism revered the forces led by matriarchal priestesses as well as their male counterparts. This has sadly changed quite drastically in present-day practices, where authoritative patriarchs now perform almost every rite. Rebellious

priestesses around Yazd still exist today; only some from the community acknowledge their spiritual sanctity while most do not. Meanwhile the Parsi diaspora in India have not yet had a conversation about gender equality within their temple walls.

Extract vii
Sunday 16th September 2018
Somewhere in Kurdistan, by Sandaj
en route to Susa, 01:46am

Not that all the other places that I've driven through didn't feel welcoming but there's something particularly charming about the people from Kurdish provinces. Their kindness, generosity and warmth have been incredibly moving ever since Takht-E-Soleyman earlier this week, when a Kurdish family came up to me and discussed my origins, work and shared incidents of how their people have been persecuted from both sides of the border with Iraq which, side note, we're getting closer to each day. The kids in their family wanted to take photographs with me and the cutest thing happened when a particularly shy boy posed nervously next to me and winced when I asked what his name was. His older sister Selen then told me that little Amir, "Has never met a foreigner before," at which point their mother corrected Selen by saying, "He's no foreigner you're one of us! Please join us for dinner if you and your driver are able to this evening?" *Where else in the world could I go. How could I possibly refuse*, I thought. Such affirmations of inclusivity and acknowledgment of being Persian *but not Iranian* have been recurring during this trip. I almost sound like a broken record but I don't care. Every major act of kindness performed by our people deserves documentation and fond remembrance, even if it is just me who understands & remembers.

Another such incident just occurred an hour ago. You see, my driver Siavash has been tinkering away under the bonnet of our car while I've been writing this off the side lane of a highway. He decided to pull over next to a Falafel truck where he thought I could grab a stool and work while he changes the oil or whatever it is that needs changing. As I approached the truck, I saw three men – two young slender guys outside the vehicle leaning in and chatting with our Falafel chef, a large older man named Behzad. I learned that the other two are named Jamshid and Mehervan. Funny how these names don't sound unfamiliar to me – they're like the Johns and Jacks of the Parsi community, I've met and known so many already. As Behzad handed me a delicious falafel that I had just seen him freshly mould and fry,

Jamshid asked me where I'm from (at this point I had Siavash translate). Once explained, they both looked at me altogether differently. I heard the words 'Zarthoshti' and 'kheyli khub' the latter meaning 'how wonderful.' The men all wanted to show me pictures of their homes during Nowruz, the Zoroastrian New Year, and told me how much they wished there were more of us in Iran. Then, when I indicated that I felt a bit thirsty, Mehrvan handed me a cola drink which I would've normally refused. However this one was special – a clear glass bottle featuring a print in stylized Farsi under an italicized sans-serif Roman font that read: PARSI COLA.

To see the word 'Parsi' printed on a drink or anything for that matter, outside of Bombay, was a shock and a delight. And also in the typically Parsi colours of creme, crimson and blue! As if stolen directly from Bombay's iconic Parsi Dairy Farm deli's packaging. Connections have been made and I'm feeling rather content sitting here with a cigarette, this journal and a bottle of sweet Parsi Cola. Might smuggle this wee typographic design specimen to NZ if I can.

Extract viii
Wednesday 17th September 2018
Tchogga Zambil, Shush (Susa), Khoramabad 19:09

Presently I am seated on the ground, leaning against the base of a circular altar that dates back over five thousand years. In the complex of an ancient 11th Century BC Elamite citadel that pre-dates Zoroastrianism and the Achaemenid Empire. From the Western side I currently face one of the world's best-preserved Ziggurat structures, Tchogga Zambil, which is one of the few existing step pyramids still intact outside of Mesopotamia. I believe this is the most ancient of archaeological sites in Persia and apparently the first to be inducted with a UNESCO world heritage stamp back in 1979. It confounds me why nobody else is here today. Perhaps because it was 50 degrees in Susa today and that this site is incredibly hard to find? But find it we did! In spite of all the crazy rumours about how dangerous the roads would be. Siavash is currently on his phone so I've been wandering around the complex completely alone. Meditating on these thoughts with an audible wind blowing through the ancient mud bricks around me.

What I've been trying to record through my drawings and this brief account of words is how such an ancient civilization's architecture was

adapted and appropriated by the preceding one. I can see traces of Achaemenid ornament and layouts here – how the step pyramid shape, once thought to be a stylized fern, is actually a clear reference to the historic conquest of the Elamites and pays tribute to their heritage, which was absorbed by Zoroastrian practices. Animal sacrifices included, apparently.

Through some of the texts and a meeting with the director at the Susa Museum, I learned that Tchogga Zambil means ‘Basket Mound’ on account of its woven texture; complex arcades, razed ramparts, subterranean tombs and courtyards that protruded at various intervals. What I find most fascinating about the Elamite civilization is that their polytheistic beliefs focused primarily on Matriarchal practices. Including element worship (sound familiar?) through deities such as Kiririsha, whose status as the supreme mother goddess can arguably be seen as an early prototype of our Zoroastrian fertility deity, Anahita.

Extract ix
Wednesday 17th September 2018
Drive from Ahwaz toward Shiraz, Pars 22:28

So much has been felt, seen and learned today – I only hope that it stays with me, the memory of this day and ones to come. I feel like a worn out vessel now, on this bus late at night trying to jot this down, curled over a tiny folding table. I only write to document and mark the next phase of this journey. From the richly diverse landscapes through the North and Western Provinces of Persia, to the province in the Greater Khorasan region of the South known as ‘Pars’ (present day Fars). This is where the term ‘Parsi’ comes from – the closest physical link that still exists, providing our little immigrant community with a grand provenance story.

Another factor worth mentioning is that I’m finally going solo, sans driver. From Shiraz onward – Siavash dropped me off at the bus terminal in Ahwaz where I boarded a hastily pre-booked seat by our kind hotel concierge in Susa. It feels strangely like the returning leg of an odyssey, but returning to what? I’ve never been here before, neither my parents nor their parents.

Despite the fatigue, I find it difficult to fall asleep now on this ‘luxury bus’ with extremely plush seating. What have been remarkably comforting are these small glimpses of glowing light that seem to go past as we drive through a dark rural highway. At first I didn’t know what the sources were but after I put my glasses on and focused on one distant blotch of light, I realised what the glowing lights are: Fire! Regulated bush fires apparently (the driver just told me) where villagers burn dried vegetation once every few

months. I'm not particularly superstitious but it feels particularly auspicious for a Zoroastrian-born son to find fires lining his way to the heart of his Motherland. I should rest though. A rather strenuous and overwhelming experience to be had in Shiraz; the ruins of Persepolis, Naqsh-E-Rostam, Naqsh-E-Rajab, Pasargadae and then a day trip through Bishapur.

Extract x
Thursday 18th September 2018
Persepolis, Naqsh-E-Rostam & Pasargadae, Pars 13:12 - 19:55

A funny thing happened as my Shirazi driver Yahya and I were making way toward the old citadels and Necropolis. It feels worth noting down, since this (apparently) almost never happens during September in Shiraz.

As we drove toward Naqsh-E-Rostam at a brisk pace, a large set of clouds began looming over us and it began to rain. This was particularly unnerving, as I had dreamed of visiting these three sites ever since I learned about them as a child in Zoroastrian studies classes after school. I still remember the various animal transfigurations on our Persian columns and what these mythical creatures each represent, along with a vivid memory of trying to memorise each procession figure from Darius I's grand Apadana (audience palace) frieze. The latter is practically impossible, as there are thousands of variations and each person represented a different subject of the Persian Empire during his time (3rd Century BC): the Achaemenid Dynasty – our Golden Age.

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Naqsh-E Rostam is a grand but austere site. I won't write much because I'd rather draw more while I'm here. With hopes to feature the layout of Darius I's tomb in my work someday. When one looks directly forward whilst standing 10 to 15 meters away from the mountain face, you almost see the entire thing as a big monumental bass relief – one with deeper creases in the center which then loosen up and form shallow markings closer toward the natural surface of the mountain. This happens as one's gaze moves outward. The lower reliefs depicting Kings Shapur and Ardeshir were obviously Sassanid in style and added onto the rock face centuries later during the third Dynasty (224-651 AD). They are not as remarkable in my opinion (sloppy and somehow aggressive at the same time).

One other notable structure in the Necropolis grounds is the Kabbah-E-Zarthosht. Funny that they choose to call it a 'Kabbah,' after an Islamic

monolithic monument, when in reality the structure predates even Jesus Christ let alone any Abrahamic offshoots. After discussing it with my driver and reading more about it online, I found out that it was an equivalent of the 'Bunghli' cottages we find outside the Towers of Silence in India. However not necessarily large enough for comprehensive rituals, it once held a very holy eternal flame around which royal mourners & priests gathered prior to a monarch's burial. A beautiful, modest structure with intriguing dovetailing techniques, which are still visible in its well-preserved stonework.

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Persepolis. I'm finally here and I can't believe I've only seen half of the site with huge grounds yet to cover. I guess there's a reason why Alexander burned it to the ground. How could one possibly live up to a site like this? Its sacred geometry puts the Greeks to shame. Its dynamic but balanced ornamentation put the Sassanians to shame. Its scale might've once even put the Egyptians to shame. However we won't quite know these claims for sure, since all that seems to be standing (after some reconstruction during Shah Reza Pahlavi's revival of our heritage) are a few gargantuan columns, the Gate of All Nations and the Apadana Palace. I won't go into detail yet I'll wait until I've gathered enough – and then follow up on descriptions. The emotional response however has been grand and tragic. It feels like coming back home and finding out that despite everything having been destroyed, my ancestors still found a way to share their majestic achievements with us. Giving us a reason to be proud and resilient.

P.S The sun seems to be re-appearing and shining beautifully in Baroque heaven-like rays between those rain clouds from before. Must hurry up, Pasargadae is 1.5 hours away and I still have the museum to visit before sunset.

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On my way to Pasargadae I saw things slowly vanish from my sight. I comically couldn't get this repetitive thought out of my head, *'Heritage – Heritage. This is what it means to be a Persian. These are our monuments and these are our stories. Mustn't miss a single thing. Or else Mum & Dad will be disappointed.'* As we drove, the diffused glow of a setting sun went from warm to cooler hues. Twilight is now upon us as I sit on the gravel facing the Tomb of Cyrus the Great. Barely made it in time. But here I am, paying our King of Kings a visit.

At the twilight of the Achaemenid Empire in 330 BC, Alexander burned Persepolis to the ground and made his way toward Pasargadae, roughly 80km North West along the road we just travelled. Here he found the ruins

of an even older city that had been under renovation. They pillaged its resources with little resistance, since news of the Macedonian's conquest had already spread. Certain records from Aristobulus (Athens, 6:29:3 YA, 324 AD) state that Alexander knelt on these very steps, facing the entranceway of Cyrus' tomb. There he wept as he read an inscription on the final resting place of one of history's most magnanimous rulers. No physical trace of this inscription is visible (Dad asked me to keep an 'eye out') but records say that it once read:

*'O Man, I am Cyrus son
of Cymbyes,
who founded the Empire of Persia,
ruled over Asia and Europe.
Do not grudge me my
Humble monument'*

This was the man who wrote the world's first bill of Human Rights (currently on display at the UN Headquarters), abolished slavery within the empire and is the only Gentile to be mentioned favourably in the Old Testament for having freed Jews from captivity and then helped them rebuild the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.

In contrast, Alexander ruled Persia for only 33 years and is regarded as one of the greatest world leaders of his time. He was of European descent, which just so happens to be the perspective from which we're taught to view these events today. It marked a pivotal shift in power when European imperialism would soon come to dominate the world. So one wonders what 'great' responses Alexander's brief reign might've elicited among the subjects of the vast realm he acquired? For him it apparently began with bloodshed followed by tearful regret at these very steps.

Worth noting: After having shed his alleged tears at Pasargadae, Alexander forbade any soldier from laying a hand on Cyrus' tomb. It is still the only monument that is completely intact at Pasargadae today.

*Extract xi
21st September 2018
Anahita Temple of Bishapur, Pars 10:29*

Last night I caught up with a remarkable new friend who I met a few days ago at Hotel Niyayesh in Shiraz – Catherine is a Paris-based philosophy professor who has been doing her introductory trip through Iran and is

particularly interested in rare depictions of the feminine deities around Persia. Totally my buzz. So we drove out towards Bishapur this morning, with a plan to cover all 22 Sassanian Bas Reliefs, dotted around obscure mountainsides – a very good thing that we hired a driver and guide for the occasion.

Right now Catherine is wandering around the citadel complex of Bishapur, adjacent to the (now almost dry) Shapur River. The city was founded by and named after Shapur I, the Sassanian king who began the trend of shifting between capitals Istakhr and Ctesiphon (in present-day Iraq) to his summer palace where we currently are. I'm on the steps of the Anahita Temple, yet another one that happens to be adjacent to a great Atash Gadeh (Fire Temple) in clear Sassanian cross-sectioned layout with some reliefs & carvings still visible.

The Anahita Temple is a simple but monumental testament to old Sassanian architecture, where larger slabs of stone have been carefully placed and weighed down with 'capitals' – in Anahita's case here, one which took the shape of a cow. The central water chamber with its small ducts and canals showed where the river water would've flown and then drained from – it was where fertility ceremonies were conducted by both men and women. I must photograph the place in its entirety, as some of these drawings are starting to look like Lego renditions of a half-complete model – almost completely intact below the neck, simply no roof. I've been sitting here in this shaded stairwell for a good thirty minutes, content and trying to capture as many details. A very calming prospect, to imagine this chamber once filled with sweet fresh water from the Shapur river.

Extract xii
Saturday 22nd September 2018
Zoroastrian Sarv, Abarkooh, Yazd Province 14:41

A living, breathing mortal being – a growing organism over four millennia old. I currently sit under its shade, in awe of what the world's oldest Cypress tree must've seen. Perhaps wise beyond human comprehension and too grand in scale for images to do her any justice. Still green. Still standing tall and swaying resiliently against powerful winds.

What I'll try to do while I sit here, another mortal dressed in green today, is attempt to describe the immediate feelings that are flowing through me.

Small: yet not in an insignificant manner. I feel miniscule as though I were a small component, that aids the function of a greater machine. Purposefully small.

Very comfortable: the temperature here (in the middle of a desert), is a surprisingly low 23 degrees Celsius, who knows why or how? The effects of a giant tree that produces clean, cool oxygen and has the ability to change the climate immediately around it perhaps?

Anxious: because as much as I hope and wish to dig further into Zoroastrian heritage & spiritual sites, I am scared of how the wider Zoroastrian community will react to me as a homosexual.

Will I be welcome? Will my identity be completely acknowledged?

Will I change? If so, how might this affect the people in my life, the course of my own life and the way I work?

What if I don't feel anything?

What if I feel too much?

What if my actions & reactions have dire consequences?

What if nobody understands me? Would that even matter at this point?

Side note: the story/correlation of the holy Cypress Tree and our much-beloved paisley symbol has been such a great revelation! I have fallen back in love with Paisley since, just through knowing that this beautiful creature was its source of inspiration.

Extract xiii
23rd September 2018
Vazili Café, Yazd 15:31

I wanted to return to yesterday's café (suggestion from Siavash again, bless), where I sat and touched up some looser drawings from previous days. Great way to build some semblance of a routine while I'm in Yazd for a week.

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Tension around my shoulders from last night had dispersed after I returned to my guesthouse safely at ram. I had completely lost track of time and literally lost myself in the maze of Yazd's old city. The arcades, as well lit as some parts might've been, were completely devoid of life after midnight. Life was contained on terraces and inside homes or cafes, which is where I

was. Writing and speaking with two ladies from Barcelona who gave me a chance to practice my Castilian Spanish (something I can never pass up).

But that walk home felt Kiarostami-esque. There were cats creeping out of corners and trees growing between old mud-brick wind towers; life where one wouldn't expect it to flourish, in the middle of the desert. I was alert at all times and held my iPhone torch for extra illumination. I kept mumbling our *Yatha Ahu Vairyo* and *Ashem Vohu* chants that Mum taught me to repeat every time I got scared as a child. And when I finally found my bearings almost an hour later, the house's custodian Ali was angrily woken. He let me in begrudgingly. This morning that tension thankfully reduced and he served me a simple but nutritious Persian breakfast of pomegranate seeds, olives, figs, a cucumber salad, soft cheeses with honey and a freshly baked sheet of Barbari bread.

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After breakfast Navid picked me up and took me to a few sites of cultural significance that only Zoroastrians are aware of. Technically only Irani Zoroastrians enter these sites but with knowledge of my diaspora, Navid has been great at translating and obtaining permission for me to enter. The fact that I've been wearing my Sudreh (muslin inner tunic), Kushti (wool prayer girdle) and a Topi (cap) has also been helpful. I get nods and smiles from Zarthoshtis around Yazd like the sweetest secret acknowledgement of our kinship. Seti Pir was the first of our shrines or 'Pirs' a modest but beautiful mud-brick complex consisting of three elemental shrines. Then we explored Marayamabad, the Zoroastrian Quarter where I met the head priest and went to the 9th Atarsh Behram in the world that nobody in my family had ever visited the other 8 are in India (4 in Mumbai, 4 scattered around the Gujarati coast). It was surreal seeing how this sacred spot had now been turned into a tourist destination, but only from one glass-covered entrance. The other quarters of the fire antechamber were only for 'us' where we may worship and give offerings of cedar, frankincense and sandalwood to our eternal flame without disturbances.

After the temple, we visited the Markar Museum Center, otherwise known as the Zoroastrian Culture & Heritage Museum, which was located in a historical building that was once an orphanage for Zarthoshti children whose parents died or couldn't afford to raise them during the most potent decades of the 20th century's Islamic regime. Here I met with master weavers who made Sudreh and Kushti, with whom I exchanged details looking forward to sitting down and properly learning the processes of spinning the wool and cotton for our respective spiritual garments, along with how they are woven & constructed. This will be tomorrow morning at one of their homes in Maryamabad. Other artifacts and cultural textiles worth noting were the delightfully subtle Zardozi embroidered silk Tableaus. Some made

with 22ct gold and sterling silver thread. Then I met a lady who also agreed to show me Doozi needlework, which Zoroastrian bridal mantles are made of – comprising of both needlework and quilting techniques which use strips of thin printed cloth to form rich and densely filled-in matriarchal heirlooms. Far too much to absorb in one week, honestly. But I must return tomorrow and perhaps once again before my Yazd trip ends.

I should also head back to my guest home soon and take a wee nap before Navid picks me up again to visit the Dakhmeh – Yazd's Old Towers of Silence, which have been integral to Zoroastrianism. For millennia this method of exposure was deemed the purest way to return our deceased to the elements without any ecological pollutants. However, since the 6th century our ancestors were forbidden from utilizing this technique, which has been heartbreaking to hear about. Makes me value & feel so grateful for what our immigrant Parsi ancestors built in Mumbai – I'm referring to Doongerwadi, the Towers of Silence located on Malabar Hill, the most prestigious district and coveted natural reserve in South Mumbai. I feel both inquisitive and some kind of trepidation about seeing the abandoned state of this ancient equivalent of our Towers of Silence.

Extract xiv
24th September 2018
Chak Chak, Pir-E-Sabz, Yazd Province 12:09

This morning I was prepared to visit the last of our sacred shrines in Yazd one in particular contains the richest visual iconography and has always been on my dream list of sites to visit: *Chak Chak*, or *Pir-E-Sabz*. I've highlighted the legend of Pars Banu in a previous journal entry; the youngest daughter of our last Sassanid King (Yazdegerd III), who ran from Arab soldiers and through a magical chasm that opened up into a mountain. This happened after Banu Pars cried tears of despair and prayed to the goddess Anahita for safety. The site is now located in the middle of the desert, far from civilization and resources other than a miraculous fresh cave water spring that drips into the shrine, making an audible '*Chak Chak*' sound, which is from where the Persians gave it its unofficial name.

As Navid, Catherine (who just arrived last night from Shiraz) and I drove to the outskirts of Yazd, I was sure that today of all days must be taken seriously – and documented carefully on three cameras (DSLR, medium format film and iPhone), my sketchbook and this journal. I even think I'll scan the pages and send them to Mum if I get a chance. She'll want to know

how it feels to enter that cave, to drink from our spring and pray under a canopy of wet rocks, lush foliage and birds singing merrily in the middle of a dry, barren desert. The place where all the elementary worship components in Zoroastrianism come harmoniously together. I almost expected to cry tears of relief for having fulfilled this pilgrimage to the shrine of shrines. But instead I felt calmer than ever.

As we drove up closer to the mountain pass, I found little green speckles that weren't identifiable until we got 50m closer. The railings and trimmings of modern housing & shelter units built by the WZO (World Zoroastrian Organisation), for all pilgrims to rest, pray and attend rituals when they visit Pir-E-Sabz. Navid explained that each 'Bungalow' was dedicated to a different community of Zoroastrians who contribute to the site's maintenance. Despite some of these structures only being 40-60 years old, the goal is to keep renovating them so that each generation of Zoroastrians from every faction of the wider community has a place to rest here.

Navid introduced me to Zal, the custodian and resident priest (*'Zarthoshti Mobed'*) who was this adorable, kindly man in a white shirt and cap bearing the Farvahar symbol in green embroidery. I've worn my usual hounds tooth tweed cotton trousers, a crisp cotton shirt and my grandfather's black velvet cap with a Sudreh and Kushti underneath, of course. Zal and I shared a sweet mint tea and communicated with my limited Farsi as Navid photographed us sitting together. He then began laughing and said something that I couldn't understand – later explaining that it was about our noses. I just looked back at the images on my DSLR camera and they were right! Zal and I had almost identical noses. Which isn't terribly rare among Zoroastrians from the same regions but it felt significant because even my parents don't have the same ridge and slightly deviated septum as mine (mind you, Dad had his reconstructed due to respiratory problems back in 2011).

Walking up the stairs and into the cave shrine was a silent, solemn moment. With each step I felt my heart leap. Slowly experiencing the sounds of birds, water dripping and the smell of moist rocks with green moss growing over them. I took off my shoes & socks, declining guest slippers because I wanted to feel the moisture on my feet. It wasn't slimy or stagnant as I expected the wet stone floor to feel. The smoothened granite was cool and my hot little feet were relieved from a day's drive through the desert. With wet cuffs and water dripping over my shoulders, I began to wash my hands and face. Then I stepped aside to do my Sudreh-Kushti prayers, facing East as it was still morning at this time. A small eternal fire was burning under a canopy of rocks, with offerings of sandalwood and frankincense that I was about to add (I brought some from India especially for such occasions).

After thirty minutes of praying and offering, I decided to record some of the sounds inside the cave: The rhythmic dripping of water, melodic birds singing above us, the wind blowing through rocks older than the last Persian Empire. I thought about legends and myths and how they came to manifest physically into sites like *Chak Chak*. I dared to examine my own place in the grander scheme of things, not only as a Zoroastrian-born priest but a conscious being. How were my beliefs formed? Was this one of the sources? Were any of these sources legitimised by a so-called ‘higher power’? Or is all theology based purely on allegorical content? For once I didn’t feel the need to find solutions or any sense of resolution, not here, not in this microcosmic paradise where plant, mineral and animal all coexist harmoniously. It is a place where I was glad to leave my skepticism at the door. I am writing this outside on the steps as I wait for Navid and Catherine to finish another tea with Zal. I’m about to meet them downstairs where we parked Navid’s car. Funny that I keep writing about the spiritual correlations with my lineage, given that I’m a homosexual Zoroastrian priest who doesn’t even believe in the existence of god-like entities, let alone *Ahura Mazda* specifically. Tears are finally welling up as I write this and I’m not sure why, but I think they’re a healthy byproduct of the emotions long kept unaddressed. Now prepared to gently explore why these emotional components have been kept at bay.

However things might go with my exhibition in February next year, I’m really glad that I’ve come here and hope that my parents get to experience Chak Chak at some point in their lives too.

Next up we’re going to visit Pir-E-Banu, Pir-E-Hrishteh, the ancient citadel of Kharnaq (Avestan for ‘Birthplace of the Sun’) and the fortified city of Meybod. Hopefully grab some doogh, water and lunchables on the way. Dying for a cigarette but I’d better wait until our car is far from Zal, who will remain here calmly and solemnly watching over Chak Chak.

Extract xv
28th September 2018
Atashgah Hill, Isfahan 13:12

Today I woke up relatively early and ordered in my breakfast room service, which I find ridiculous, but hey they said it was all included in this insanely large suite that I accidentally rented for my stay in Isfahan. It also happens to be right by Naqsh-E-Jahan Square with all the palaces & mosques that

my friend Reza (who I caught up with in Izmir last month) said I should visit.

This being said, I'm sorry Reza but my agenda isn't quite as straightforward. These ornate Seljuc, Qajar & Safavid sites in Isfahan, once the center of the world (or '*Half the World*' as proclaimed in Persian) form only the thin topcoat of my environment here. I wouldn't know how to focus on or address them at depth, once held against the much deeper, more ancient roots that my ancestors laid here – among other minorities who've cohabited this grand metropolitan city for centuries.

After a quick espresso at Café Ghosedak ('Dandelion' in Persian) and directions from my new friend Mohsen and his brother Ali, who I hung out with yesterday, I caught a taxi to Atashgah Hill, an ancient Zoroastrian temple built by the first Sassanian King Ardashir I in the 1st C. AD. I'm currently sitting on top of the hill after a rather treacherous climb up with little to no safety. Only rocks spray-painted with 'suggested routes' as the gatekeeper below said. Red for descent, blue for upward. If you fall, you fall.

Funny how that olfactory sensation keeps returning every time I'm at a culturally significant archaeological site. Again and again I grasp faint wafts of sandalwood embers burning and sweet smoke produced by the lightest sprinkle of powdered frankincense. A moment ago my eyes were closed and my breath, still shallow from the climb, was filled with this sensation. I think a smile must've appeared on my face because when I opened my eyes an old man and what I assume was his granddaughter were smiling at me and waving.

The pyre or altar in the central chamber of this little cylindrical mud-brick structure with two storeys of arched windows, only 7m wide in circumference, is a subtly razed disk where I imagine a great big eternal flame must've lived – only to be snuffed out and soon be forgotten by invaders around the 6th or 7th Centuries AD. A wonder that sites like these are still accessible. It has been a simple and solemn experience to visit sites like this old temple, whose ruins are still located on a hill in the center of Isfahan, not far from the riverbed. Perhaps once upon a time there might've been an inlet that led to an Anahita Temple nearby? Who knows, most of our matrilineal heritage sites were destroyed well before the final conquest.

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I'll head down soon and visit the Jolfa – Isfahan's Armenian Quarter where another minority sought refuge after centuries of persecution. The Vank Church, Armenian Museum and Holocaust Memorial are up next. Hopefully I'll get to visit an Iranian caviar bar and drink some contraband vodka there,

as promised by friends who gave me complicated directions to a secret little place in the heart of Jolfa. Fingers crossed.

Extract xvi

28th September 2018

Khaju Bridge & Café Ghasedak, Isfahan 17:05 – 19:20

Very interesting to sense and compare varying energies felt around otherwise very similar public spaces – I speak of the 33-arched Sio-Se-Pol bridge and then just down the river, of Khaju Bridge, both built during the Safavid period between 1600 and 1650.

At Sio-Se-Pol one senses the austere and monumental architectural weight of its engineering. Glazed brick and stone construction with 33 wide archways that spanned a very wide point of the Zayanderad River – which has been dry for the past 11 years (only 7 months of water over the past decade were stingily gifted to our poor Isfahanis in the last decade). Nobody seemed to interact or engage in discussions or social activities here. It was merely a transit point for feet, bicycles and motorbikes, or a place to sit solemnly, alone under one of the archways. Perhaps eat a piece of fruit or bread and then going on with one's life. I did not stay there for very long because I wanted to walk the span of this dry river and experience a contrast at Khaju Bridge, which is where I'm currently sitting against a lower level arch base.

Khaju Bridge is vibrant. Thinner in construction with fewer archways but more intervals that undulate with celebratory peaks and friezes of glazed bricks and tiles depicting Isfahani motifs of nightingales and flowers among many others – most presumably plucked from the medieval Persian poetry in *Hafez's Divan*. That was my experience on the upper levels of the bridge, where the sun was just on the verge of setting and everything seemed to glisten; stone walls and turrets bathed in warm light and dry air. Imagine how glorious this bridge, or even this entire city might've once felt when the river was full. Another atrocity committed by us humans, specifically the Iranian government for letting bodies of water like the Zayanderad River, Namak Lake and Lake Urmia dry out completely.

As I walked downward after covering the entire span of the bridge I entered the famous vaults under the bridge, where I was told singers and poets recited new and old works one after another under the high vaulted ceilings. The acoustics were magnificent and the setting sun only added to the overall mood. Despite the desolate waterway, this underbelly hosted vibrant men and women languishing against little openings under the vaults. Some

brought blankets & cushions, smoked their pipes, sang and recited poetry. Each interval between the arches contained a new setting, a new performance where members of the audience and the performers engaged in a mélange of social activity. I was urged to join a few of them, so at this point I asked for permission to record & photograph some of the individuals I met. Beautiful Isfahani bohemians, how I wish I could've understood most of the lyrics that were sung in dialects too high or old for my basic comprehension of Persian to follow. Songs by Hayadeh, Mohsen Namjoo, Moein and verses from Hafez were barely identified by my ears.

Perhaps I'll improve my Persian language skills and return one day, perhaps I'll return and recite something here myself.

Extract xvii
1st October 2018
Café 3in, Kashan 15:48

So I just returned from my second visitation and lesson with the Sohrabi Brothers' Silk Weaving Workshop in Kashan. This time around I recorded a few of them going about their daily tasks and then joined in on the spinning processes, followed by basic loom-tuning and threading. What amazes me is how brothers Hossein, Akbar and their cousin Ashraf come from a guild of weavers who go back to the 17th Century, all having learned these very specific silk weaving techniques to produce a uniquely woven cloth that has been used by Kashanis for various celebratory events. I have been very fortunate to interact with these looms, almost 500 years old, in their underground workshop. The first time I visited the Sohrabis with Farshad (a young friend I made in Kashan who has been very helpful with translations and getting me in touch with the weavers associations and Ancient Crafts Centre in Kashan), the brothers seemed skeptical about why I wanted to learn more about their regional silk cloth. I explained my work & creative process to them – also how this workshop was one of the main reasons I wanted to visit Kashan. Then Hossein offered me a tea and I offered him a mini Bahman 'Duli' cigarette (which I'll miss dearly) and the rest is history. Between his broken English and my broken Persian, we were able to communicate just fine!

So more about the textile: a waxy silk that Ashraf dyes and spins in their vaulted basement workshop, which looks like a dark and damp space where one might store wine or ferment cheeses. The reason why they've been at this location for centuries is because of an interesting quality that the wet

earth (sprinkled with water by Akbar just moments ago) has on the way silk reacts with moisture while it is still being woven. The weft strands, already quite fine, have then a tendency to fuse together with the warp while they are being woven. This is why it is very crucial to retain certain levels of moisture (and minimal light) inside this high-vaulted room under a mud-brick home. It brings out a more malleable, pliable quality in the silk which is then woven on 8ft high looms that spread across half a breadth of their workshop. Akbar and Hossein sit side-by-side at their larger looms on the right as one enters, while Ashraf has his one thirds of the room to tend to the drying, spinning and weaving of smaller bolts of cloth on his slightly smaller loom. I have been lucky to sit with Hossein on his ‘grand loom’ and also with Ashraf behind the wheel and his smaller loom today. Producing a jacquard-like pattern around the centre and weft edges of each textile was very difficult so I was allowed to weave only within the parts that had little detail. One day I would love to return and learn the more laborious, intricate processes of co-ordinating my feet, hands and eyes – today it was simply mesmerizing to watch, as Akbar made conscious gestures to interchange the weft thread colours with tiny needles & various bobbins. Tomorrow I’ll be returning with some more money and hopefully purchase one bolt of silk made by each Sohrabi brother. Hossein already insisted on gifting me a sampler but I said that it was too precious and that I’ll only take it with me if I could pay him for it. Tomorrow!

Right now I am lying on a divan in absolute bliss, recounting the experiences and interactions I’ve had with textiles in Kashan. The Ancient Crafts Center was another great resource, I’ll be interviewing their director Ali-Reza in the morning at 8am, so I’d better get enough rest and prepare some questions tonight. After I finish the last of this Dizi curry (sans goat meat) and a delicious orange blossom sherbet that Nazanin made for me (the waitress and proprietor of Café 3in), I’ll head over to the Kashan Bazaar for another little sourcing trip: nomadic rugs for myself and maybe a Kashani carpet for Mum.

Extract xiii
Wednesday 3rd October 2018
Reera Café, Tehran 13:14

I am back in Tehran, at the very cafe and table where I wrote my first journal entry in Iran. Twenty-five days after having travelled through the North, West, South and Central regions, touching only a few Southeastern provinces. I can barely remember how it felt when I first arrived – knowing only a handful of Persian words back then, while now I’m capable of having

a simple conversation in Farsi without being called out as a '*Khareji*' (tourist) or expatriate. How strange that language was the main barrier back then and I hadn't a clue! All of that fear, anxiety and nervousness melted with each day, resulting in a heartwarming odyssey through my ancestral motherland.

With much confidence, I can now say that I have more faith in the good people that dwell this land. Despite all the persecution, oppression and having to censor their behavior, ideals and education, they've come out victorious according to me at least. Because as I got to know some of the individuals here, one realises how much depth and reverence for culture, education and humanity they actually have. To see fragments of the Zoroastrian doctrine, 'Truth is Light' having survived long since the children of Persia were converted. This bit of information about contemporary Persians is not to be underestimated or exploited – nor is it something to forget or ignore. To engage in pleasant conversations, a smile, a nod or the way Iranis tap your hand when one exchanges anything as a way of saying 'Thank you' – all of their subtle gestures have been magical to learn about and practice. The nuances and little customs that can be dated all the way back to the Achaemenid Empire from 350 BC. Name a central-European culture that has been through worse in the second half of the 20th Century and has still managed to retain millennia-old customs with such grace & integrity? These small acts of resilience can be seen when one looks more intently: the way a couple holds hands in public between their sleeves, the way a woman shakes her head so that her hijab "accidentally" gets pushed further and further away from her face, the way young men on bicycles wear no socks and perhaps a Farvahar pendant proudly glistening between a pair of collarbones. These are the ways a contemporary Persian wants to make it subtly known that they have faith in our best traits, our warmth, inclusivity and adaptability.

Ooou did I just write '*our*' and thus refer to myself as an Iranian? Well I'm still unsure whether this '*Son of Persia*,' as described by Omid from Tabriz Grand Bazaar's Carpet Quarter, is worthy of the title. However for the sake of concluding this entry I will say with immense gratitude that it has been an honour to have seen, explored, learned and started to understand my culture – with roots as deep as the world's oldest Cypress tree.

The drive from Bombay to Udwada with Mum's cousin Uncle Polly (short for Pahlonji), my friend Reza (who just arrived last night) and our driver Tofiq was rather tedious due to the traffic and amount of dust in the air as we left Maharashtra. What's funny is how I've approached pilgrimage-visitations and the routes to reach those sites. Less weight attached to these places, less urgency and more just a sense of 'lets get this done man, I've done the hardest bits in Iran, now its time to tick all the boxes.'

That would be more true if I could remember what Iranshah Atash Behram felt, looked and smelled like since the many times we visited this site when I was a child. Today I can barely remember the roads or layout of our little Zoroastrian Village on the coast of Gujarat. Udwada is both a cultural sanctuary and a ghost town. Those who live here live simply and those who visit seem extremely austere & pious. Not much from that joyful nature of our faith that I experienced in cities like Yazd in Iran. Perhaps the inhabitants are too worried about survival and logistical matters of maintaining this historic site. Perhaps the pilgrims are too tired and sweaty from having travelled through that dusty highway. Who knows.

All I can say is, it was a lovely way to breathe fresh ocean air, eat Pomfrets, Dhansak with caramelized rice and sweet biscuits with tea on cottage stoops with Reza. Its funny to see him here and for us to have even brought him with us on this trip. Not only because of his Islamic/non-Zoroastrian status but also because he has been a semi-romantic partner of mine since Turkey in August. But still, it had to be done. This trip needed to happen and he already booked his ticket to come stay with me in Bombay, so I had no choice but to bring him along with me to Gujarat. Something tells me that this experience between ethno-cultural and romantic facets of my identity will or at least *might* act as a consolidation between the two aspects of my personal narrative.

Right now I'm with Reza sitting across from the temporarily relocated site of IRANSHAH – the fire of fires, which was the original flame that my ancestors brought with them from Iran across the Persian Gulf, all the way here to the coast of Gujarat. I just did my obligatory prayers, offerings and

lit an oil lamp for every member of my immediate family (Mum's request) and bowed before the great fire. It was the change in Gah, which happens five times each day and results in a beautiful, melodic prayer being chanted out loud by the head priest. This happens as he offers new kindling to the Iranshah fire and rings the big brass bell inside the antechamber twelve times.

The village of Udwada feels petrified by time yet remains as this high point in every Parsi's pilgrimage to the eight *Atash Behrams* of India (plus that one in Iran, making a total of nine in the world). Beautiful paint-chipped villas dotted along the street, adjacent to the beach. Udwada's coast, where palm trees are harvested for their coconuts and some of those are used to make a delicious semi-alcoholic specialty called '*Tari*,' fermented between dusk and dawn. Iranshah's flame was bright and large but the new location due to reconstruction and renovations at the old temple have prevented me from remembering all those visits here as a child. Only when I closed my eyes and concentrated on the olfactory & audio senses did I faintly remember, *this is what Udwada feels like*. The village where Gran taught me how to knit under a canopy of bougainvillea, where we came for so many winter weddings and Navjote ceremonies when I was much younger.

Reza and I also visited (him from outside, while I briefly entered) a new Agiary Fire Temple that was built behind Iranshah in the 1960's. Only today did I notice its rather progressive Modernist architecture and come to admire how it utilised Deco ornamentation with early brutalism. Images and drawings have been made in the other book.

Extract xx
Saturday 22nd December 2018
Chai wallah next to Atash Behram Temple, Navsari, Gujarat 08:45

Last night we checked into the Navsar Parsi Dharamsala, a place where pilgrims and Parsi travellers are welcome to stay any time of the year – many of these around India and globally (the one in Auckland is on Pakuranga Road across from the main mall, with a big silver Farvahar outside in case anybody is curious). Despite the nighttime Atash Behram visit and little adventures that Reza and I had around town between 7pm-10pm, I decided to visit the *Atash Behram* again this morning. It was one of my favourite temples as a kid and according to Uncle Polly the, “Best, cleanest flame with the most powerful energy field.”

The temple's architecture is a very simple, austere yet grand marriage of Neoclassical and Art Deco with some Sassanid elements (the plan/layout, namely). An asymmetrical front entrance with a main hall at the side and the antechamber at the cross section of the plan is a typically Parsi architectural plan. I had a really good look through the priest's quarters, office chambers, gallery and main hall – all of which I was allowed to photograph! This was a very rare and lucky opportunity I had, to capture as many elements inside an *Atash Behram* and share it with the rest of the non-Parsi world. Obviously I wasn't able to photograph all the way in to the main antechamber, where the fire lives within an inner sanctum – but this is the closest I've ever gotten in India.

In the main hall I saw portraits of all the previous benefactors, patrons, *Panthaki* (holy) families, priests and prophets – mostly oil paint on canvas or wood panels, much like the early Anglican Christian iconography one might see in 18th Century chapels. My favourite moments were when I encountered a row of *Jamas*, the crisp, sheer muslin priest's robes draped gracefully around the place. One was resting alone in the middle of the hall on a bench, appearing so animated and so fragile. The other four were obediently hung against a room-dividing screen. I also found a great watercolour aerial plan of the temple from the time when it was built (1925) along with a beautiful early 19th Century Tableau of pale canary yellow silk that was already coming away from its board, peeling and deteriorating under its glass frame. It featured embroidery in gold thread and beads depicting several icons and totems from a young priest's initiation ceremony. I remember these well! The *Burz*, a bull-headed brass scepter held in the right hand, the *Afarganiyu* containing a holy flame, our recurring *Farvahar* angel symbol, a pomegranate, the sun, stars, the moon and what might be a stylised well. Unfortunately my photographs of this Tableau weren't the best, as the glass wasn't museum grade and had so many reflections from the window behind us. However I have made several sketches in this diary on the next page.

As I was about to leave and go find Reza outside (bless him for waiting, poor guy), I saw the sweetest thing and simply had to ask for permission to photograph them: A father perhaps in his late 70's and son in his mid-50's lighting an oil lamp and then walking towards the exit whilst holding hands.

Right now I'm having a wee snack at our guesthouse, all packed and ready to leave for Surat, which has two of the last *Atarsh Behrams* I'll have to visit to complete all 9 with one year.

Sunday 23rd December 2018
Steps outside Shehenshah Atash Behram, Surat, Gujarat 16:45

What's particularly interesting about the two Atash Behrams in Surat is that there was actually once a need for two places of Zoroastrian fire worship within a 500m radius. You see, I just learned about the varying calendars that different sects (all quite peacefully cohabitating with only minor conflicts) of Zoroastrians follow; The *Shehenshahi* Calendar follows an imperial timeline of events following the ascension of King Ardeshir I to the Sassanid throne. This was the calendar that many Parsi immigrants in India followed until the advice of the *High Priest Jamasp Peshotan Velati*, who discovered the 'royalist' discrepancies of the *Shehenshahi* calendar after a trip back to Persia in 1720. This led to a resurgence or revival of followers who wanted to adapt the *Qadimi* Calendar, which is an older calendar that dates back to Zarathushtra's birth and events from his life. Therefore creating a rift between the Zoroastrian communities who inhabited Surat and flourished here more so than any other city in Gujarat – that is, until they moved southward to Bombay due to faster trade routes set up by the British.

Once I was ready, I left Reza at our hotel room in Surat to take a wee nap while I visited both temples. First was the more ascetic and traditional Qadimi Atash Behram. A gorgeous crème Victorian façade with pale blue trimmed windows, shutters and doorways, one of which led to a courtyard filled with roses and foliage – *very* Parsi. I then asked the custodian where I could wash my hands and pray, which happened to be behind a little stairwell in the partially covered main hall to the right as one enters. When I entered the main temple's bungalow, I noticed how the décor, furnishings and trimmings had all become darker, more austere. Green jasper floors, an interior onyx wall (which reminded me of Mies Van Der Rohe) creating the antechamber section. Also worth noting were a Kashani Persian rugs laid beside a very plush Victorian oxblood leather love chair (swoon). The lighting made it very difficult to photograph the space but one thing I was adamant to capture was the room-dividing screen, much like the kinds I saw in Bombay and used as inspiration for our collaboration with Bombay Atelier (Farzin Adenwalla's design for my larger embroidered panels). After a few offerings of sandalwood and lighting an oil lamp, I said goodbye to Uncle Polly who was praying inside and made my way to the next and final Fire Temple of the year.

The Shehenshahi Atarsh Behram was grand – as the name suggests It did not hold back on Persepolis frieze or Gate of all Nations references, which were executed here quite garishly in plastered and carved stonework. In pale crème with gold paint trimmings everywhere. A lotus here and there, several

griffin-headed capitals, bulls, lions, stylised Deco *Farvahars* and of course, the sun and moon motif to represent balance between the dual forces of light and dark, day and night. The Farvahar representing our human conscience, placed between the two celestial bodies who control the earth and the oceans.

At this temple I had a great chance to photograph almost everything, even the main fire if I wanted to (I refrained out of courtesy to the immediate Parsi community). What I experienced however was this grand display of opulence on every wall and ceiling. The floors had Italian tiles or Persian rugs, the chandeliers were crystal containing delicately placed oil lamps and the walls were covered with oil paintings of many deceased benefactors and their families. It read like a who's who of Surat's Parsi elite society. One room that I stumbled upon and actually adore was the most spartan. The space where holy sacraments are given to elemental deities at different times of the year and also where young *Mobeds* (priests) such as myself would've learned fire keeping and practiced ceremonial teachings. Kota stone floor with stone benches where priests would humbly sit cross-legged in their sheer muslin robes, praying and tending to the elements. The room was vacant and I just walked in alone to discover three window shutters letting in rays of sunlight that caught the smoky air particles to form dramatic beams against the silver chalices and then landed gracefully on the floor. A very soft, tender place where one could sense the reverence of those who had just vacated the room. Luckily the priests must've been napping or having lunch at this time, so I managed to get in very easily everywhere. The perfect finale to this pilgrim's quest for spiritual iconography.

Before ending the Gujarat chapter I must also note that while I've been here I encountered some of the nicest *Parsi Torans* (tapestry beaded threshold hangings) and a book on some of the traditional patterns that the ladies in Gujarat use. I documented as many of these hangings in situ from Surat all the way back to Navsari, Udwada, Ahmedabad and Bombay. Even one in Calcutta. However I have refrained from buying too many of these because instead of hoarding or reselling these culturally significant objects, I have been trying to master the art of weaving them myself. My Aunt Dolly has been giving me lessons throughout this year. Since having sourced the original Czech glass beads that my great grandmother used (who was actually the person that taught Dolly her *Toran* weaving skills) I'm proud to say that I've not only inherited this particular technique at its fullest extent, but I have also completed my very own *Toran*, alone as of last Wednesday! It took me between the 2nd of November until the 19th of December to complete a 65cm panel all on my own – and I'm incredibly glad that we have this object to share along with a wider body of work that addresses my cultural heritage.

BILDUNGSROMAN

An Introduction by Anna Miles

In March 2018 Areez Katki set off from his East Auckland home for Mumbai on a carefully conceived quest to trace his creative inheritance as the son of a Parsi Indian family with ancient Persian roots. First stop on Katki's fancifully named 'Bildungsroman' was his birthplace, an Art Deco apartment building in Mumbai's Sir Ratan Tata Colony, once home to four generations of his family. This restrained geometric complex (the same shade of deep cream as the linen he often exercises his distinctive embroidery over), became atelier and headquarters for a diasporic aesthetic adventure recorded on his Instagram account and condensed in the contents of this exhibition.

Katki's ruminations on what it means to be Parsi are inclusive of small acts of kindness and the razed ramparts of civilisations. He travels to familial and spiritual locations in Gujarat, Calcutta and further afield to Zoroastrian heritage sites in Iran and Azerbaijan: He sits in the shade of the world's oldest cypress tree; partakes in a bottle of 'Parsi Cola' in Kurdistan; fearfully deletes gay dating apps enroute to Tehran; samples orange blossom sherbet; wears spiritual undergarments; swoons over a Victorian leather love seat; calls on weavers and tailors; dissuades himself from acquiring more textiles; finds his drawings of a Sassanian Temple to look much like Lego; returns to the village where his grandmother first taught him to knit; and lies on a divan in absolute bliss after lessons at a silk weaving workshop. His catalogue of cultural experiences is comprehensive.

Katki is alive to the multiple significances of the objects, motifs and artifacts that he encounters. The desk in the Art Deco Mumbai apartment where he makes much of the work in the exhibition is exhumed as a familial cornucopia. Designed and built in his Great grandfather's factory (which produced wooden furniture for offices and government buildings until being destroyed by fire in the 1950s), the desk is a link to his Parsi family name, 'Lakdawalla', that translates as 'wood craftspeople'. It is the place where he recalls his grandparents "adorably bickering over little things like the perfect temperature of tea." The pale blue lacquer surface of the desk is the place he chooses to write the story of his "tactile seduction," recalling frills flying on the current of the ceiling fan in the childhood dress-up games where his queerness thrived.

Katki's approach to making work for the exhibition honours his inheritance of needlecraft traditions via the female members of his family and his consciousness of the political significance of craft practices. He notes the difficulty of recovering matrilineal heritage within Zoroastrian tradition; searching out stories of female deities and independent Parsi women as well as the presence of textiles. The tale of a piece of simple cloth that now tells a grand story, captures his imagination. He eschews the more extravagant frontiers of Parsi textile tradition – bypassing sumptuous brocades, riotously embroidered silk 'Garas' and quilted bridal mantles – and selecting to embroider over everyday cloths sourced during his travels ('khatka' dust rags used for cleaning; repurposed stripey teatowels hand-woven in Bombay during the 1940's; cotton khadi handkerchiefs; handwoven West Bengali mul; green 1990's gingham dustcloths; a 1950's floral coaster and fragments of tablecloths and useful bags).

Bildungsroman parallels Katki's grand tour journal, which conveys the sincere curiosity of an expatriate outsider prying into the closed Zoroastrian community with questions of gender, sexuality and politics in mind. The artist's alertness to the provenance of materials, motifs and techniques transforms ordinary household cloths and glass bead adornments into objects of rare gravitas.

BILDUNGSROMAN

List of Works with Contextual Notes

1. Folding Screen Two, 2018 *The Solaces of Matriarchy*

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed 60% Silk x 40% Cotton Khadi (Dove Grey).

Executed on dove grey silk x cotton hand-woven khadi. This screen diptych features a domestic narrative, drawing from ephemera found around early to contemporary Zoroastrian households and ethno-religious carpet iconography from Tabriz. This screen's title refers to a chapter from 'The Secret Writings of Hoshang Merchant,' a Parsi man who was India's first openly queer poet & professor at the University of Bangalore.

Panel I

Embedded with initiate moments, this panel depicts studies of ceramic forms from villages around Gujarat and archaeological findings around Bishapur and Susa (present day Shush, Iran) – some of which confirm the presence of a matrileal 'Cult of Anahita' which was a precursor to later Zoroastrian beliefs.

Panel II

Refer to Journal Extract (Iran) no. v. featuring the iconic paisley symbol, omnipresent in every Persian household.

(Draped on central panel of Screen Two)

Sudreh Series, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed West Bengali cotton Mul.

Sudrehs are spiritual inner garments made of fine hand-woven cotton muslin, usually worn underneath clothing with a hand-woven prayer girdle called the 'Kushti' over it. Also worn alone by Parsi men on the occasion that it is very hot at home. Two sudrehs have been made in the artist's size using the men's format of stitches – with each little seam and patch symbolising various 'daily reminders' of the Zoroastrian doctrine, 'Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds'.

I Legend of the Sugar & the Milk

Refer to Bombay Journal Entry iii ('Legend II) for a full account of the legend. Using fine hand-embroidery it illustrates the story of the sugar and the milk, a recurring motif in Parsi iconography when held against the history of the community's contributions to the progressive growth of modern-day India.

2. *Still Life, Spin & Thrust*, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on repurposed green gingham dust cloth (c. 1990).

Over a well-used green cotton gingham rag that has been repurposed and embroidered with juxtaposing objects from the Tata Collection of Chinoiserie ceramics (bequeathed to the CSMVS, formerly Prince of Wales Museum, 1910), a spinning ceiling fan and a wooden work titled 'Thrust (a study)' by Parsi J.J School of Arts modernist sculptor Adi Davierwalla.

3. *Bombay Dyeing 1990*, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on repurposed Bombay Dyeing tote bag with '1990' calendar print.

A repurposed tote bag sewn by a member of the artist's family (unknown) using a textile designed by Bombay Dyeing that was printed with the calendar from the year 1990. Embroidery with gestures suggestive of wobbling grocery items within and circled-in months & dates when the artist's mother gave birth to both her two children who were 3 and 1 in 1990.

4. *Hoshang Merchant takes his Vitamin D*, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on repurposed Bombay Dyeing floral printed coaster (c. 1950).

A repurposed napkin textile from the Wadia Group's Bombay Dyeing Mills (floral wood-block printed) c. 1940. Embroidery of a figurative home with a 'void' figure outline of Queer Parsi poet Hoshang Merchant standing under its suggestively phallus-laid brick roof.

5. *Farvahar Redux (Matriarch Rises)*, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed cotton Khatka.

Reinventing the iconic Zoroastrian Farvahar symbol and appropriating its meaning to depict the artist's urge to 'drop the eternal circle' of biological procession that has resulted in his own containment within a patriarchal system. Depicted also around this figure are several fertility symbols that were found on archeological fragments around sites adjacent to Anahita Temples in West Azerbaijan, Khoramabad and Bishapur.

6. *Caspian Dispersion*, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on hand-woven indigo dyed cotton rug.

An indigo-dyed khadi runner rug from Dio Island, hand-woven by women from its rural Parsi community. Embroidered with objects, fragments, symbols,

archaeological ruins, topographic (Lake Urmia & the Caspian sea) 'blobs' – the journey trope represented through the Parsis' loss of Persian land and yet their retention of ethno-cultural Zoroastrian iconography within Indian society today.

7. Nāvar Initiation (Zoroastrian Priesthood), 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed cotton tea towel
(green windowpane check).

Navar is the first stage of Zoroastrian Priesthood. A patrilineal rite concluding with a final ceremony performed following 30 days of isolation/'purification', by pre-pubescent boys from certain Parsi families who arrived from Persia (the Katki clan being one of them). The artist was ordained as a Navar in 2000 and a Martab (higher level priest) in 2001. This panel looks at the elemental sacraments and ceremonial ephemera described in Journal Extract (Gujarat) xxi.

8. Handkerchief Series, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed cotton Khadi handkerchiefs.

An intimate series of embroidered shapes around the centre of striped hand-woven khadi handkerchiefs – much like the kind the artist's grandfather carried and used. This series looks at a person's retention of memory & pleasure. Created by recording sensations and transcribing them visually through line, colour and form using synaesthesia multi-sensory receptors. One 'sense' was assigned to the preparation of each dish, made by neighbours and family friends around the artist's Parsi Colony setting.

I The Smell of Akoori

Akoori = Parsi scrsambled eggs.

II The Taste of Malido

Malido = a pudding made of cracked wheat, sugar and spices.

III The Sound of Dhansak

Dhansak = a dense eight-lentil & pumpkin curry served over caramelised rice.

9. Agiary Series, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed cotton Khatka.

Agiarys are the Zoroastrian Fire Temples dotted all over India, most prominently around South Mumbai, where the majority of India's Parsi population live, forming only 6% of its population but having a major presence through their ownership of approximately 80% of the peninsula's land. Each Agiary contains a consecrated eternal flame, slightly junior in consecration to the Atarsh Behram fires, of which there are 4 in Mumbai, 4 in Gujarat and 1 in Iran – a total of 9 in the world. As linguistic feature in this series, the artist has extracted shorthand script from

notebooks belonging to his mother (Yasmin Lakdawalla) & aunt (Perviz Lakdawalla).

Panel I *Batliwalla Agiary (Closed Threshold)*

Down the road from where the artist lived, this temple (named after the Batliwalla family of patrons) sits on the main road and features intriguing ornamentation taken from Persepolis (Achaemenid Persian c. 320 BC) with elements of Art Deco. The artist's matrilineal grandmother's family vocation of being prominent stained glass makers in Bombay during the 19th and early 20th centuries has lent a stylistic influence for the fragmented colour work in this series.

Panel II *It'll Rot if You Don't Chew Fast, Shirin!*

An allegorical pun – One, referring to the Zoroastrian rite of passage 'Navjote' ceremony where a child receives sacraments including three pomegranate tree leaves. Two, referring to a tragic trope from Persian Poet Ferdowsi's Farhad & Shirin – a story from his epic, Shahnameh.

Panel III *Temple of Anāhita*

Dismantling the patriarchal format of contemporary Zoroastrian temples – attempted here by 'reinstating' certain elementary and feminine cyclical worship motifs derived from ancient Anahita Temple sites. Citing Avestan Zoroastrian texts and archaeological findings around the Greater Khorasan and West Azerbaijan regions of present-day Iran.

10. Within the Magian Tavern, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on re-repurposed green paisley woodblock printed cotton tablecloth fragment.

Over a repurposed chintz paisley tablecloth fragment salvaged by the artist's grandmother in the mid-70's. Embroidery here was based on a pre-drawn synaesthetic reaction to a live reading from Persian Poet Hafez's 'Divan', referring to his love for wine and the sacraments used by the Three Wise Men (or Magi) who were the Zoroastrian Priests from Urmia (East Azerbaijan) who travelled to Bethlehem & witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ.

11. Money Pouches, 2018 (I & II)

Cotton thread hand embroidery on repurposed cotton canvas 'Duke' money pouches (c. 1930).

Two repurposed canvas 'Moneybags' as the artist's maternal grandfather would call them. They were reusable banking envelopes that, for unknown reasons, had the word 'Duke' printed over them, perhaps referring to a Royal British mercantile bank that Parsis were often members of. Both works have been playfully 'scribbled'

over with gestural linear embroidery and symbols extracted from early Zoroastrian scriptures.

12. Folding Screen One, 2018 *Temples & Shrines*

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed 60% Silk x 40% Cotton Khadi (Moss).

On Moss silk x cotton khadi textile. The 'holy' screen if you will, which looks at statistical points of worship between India and Iran – all of which have been covered by the artist within the 9 months of his residency & trip. The structure of both screens has been designed in collaboration with Parsi-born New Zealander Farzin Adenwalla, who is the furniture designer of Bombay Atelier. The function and structural properties of this object were derived from room dividers/folding screens found inside Parsi Fire Temples and around several historic households that Farzin and the artist visited over the weeks of research that led to its final design. Executed by R.K & B.B in NZ pinewood.

Panel I

Referring to the Atarsh Behrams from Journal Extracts (Iran) xiii and (Gujarat) ix-xxi. Featuring ships with nine stylised silver chalices in which each eternal flame lives.

Panel II

Referring to the 'Pirs' from Journal Extracts xiii-xiv in Yazd. Grounded by six Ziggurat motifs from early Elamite and Achaemenid architecture.

(Draped on central panel of Screen One)

Sudreh Series, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed West Bengali cotton Mul.

II *Massacre of the Tall Poppies*

A slightly darker and more humourous attempt to illustrate two narratives. Firstly, the sources of early 18th Century Parsi merchants who were hired by the East India Trade Company during the British Raj to source Opium from the Far East and return with silk – thus making their first fortunes. Secondly, the sociological phenomena known as 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' which (from the artist's personal observations) has been prevalent in both, Parsi society and around creative communities in New Zealand.

13. Diaspora Series, 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on repurposed Bombay Dyeing striped tea towels (c. 1940) with applied 19th Century handloomed cotton Mul fragments.

Panel I *Dio Dispersion*

Featuring a stylised rendering of a 17th Century Portuguese cartographer's map of the Isle of Dio (earliest map available, sourced from Tata Archives). This is the island where the first Zoroastrian refugees landed in the 8th Century AD and resided for 9 years before sailing towards the Kingdom of Gujarat on mainland India. The island is now part of the mainland and still has a small rural Parsi population. Other features on this panel are an appliqued 200-year-old fragment of muslin from the artist's great grandfather's Sudreh and a typically Parsi 'Kor' embroidered border depicting his ancestors' maritime journey.

Panel II *Udwada*

A study of the thatched and multi-level rooftops of Udwada with clothes drying between palm trees, beams and terraces. Featuring two fragments of 200-year-old Sudreh muslin carefully embroidered and appliqued onto the base cloth, along with a Parsi 'Kor' border depicting a repeated coastal laundry motif.

14. Nine Fragments, 2018

Czech glass beads tapestry-threaded with mercerised cotton thread.

Beaded coasters that were threaded using Czech glass beads and mercerised cotton thread with a tapestry technique taught to him by his Aunt Dolly. Aunt Dolly is the artist's neighbour and also his grandmother's best friend. As a young craftsperson Dolly learned this particular beading technique from the artist's great-grandmother. So here we see an intergenerational re-inheritance of domestic craft skills, executed to fabricate nine vignettes or fragments that form the penultimate iconographic culmination in the artist's visual narrative for this body of work.

I *Digital Jaali*

"Jaali" is the Indian term for a patterned metal grill that allows for windows to be opened during hot summer months without risking large intruders (often birds).

II *Pink Breakfast Table*

The pink-veneered table built by the artist's grandfather, an iconic point in their household where his grandmother would conduct her many domestic tasks.

III *Cornelia Sorabji*

A Parsi born advocate for women's rights and social reform in India. Cornelia was the first woman to graduate from Bombay University. In 1889 she was also the first female and first person of colour to attend and graduate with a law degree from the University of Oxford. Making her one of the world's first women to practice law.

IV *Anahita*

The female deity of fertility and water, here depicted with a growth of vines emerging from her loins. Appropriation of a Sythian (early Zoroastrian) applique fragment from the 4th Century BC.

V *Tappeh Sarab Deity*

Clay Fertility Goddess c.7000-6100 BC, the discovery of which proved legitimate traces of a Neolithic Matrilineal cult that pre-dated and influenced early Zoroastrianism. Currently on display at the National Museum of Iran, excavated in 1966 from Tappeh Sarab (present day Kermanshah, Iran).

VI *Bombay Deco*

Bombay (present day Mumbai) is a city containing the most Art Deco buildings in the world after Miami. Most of them were built and are still owned by Parsis.

VII *Digital Paisley*

The Zoroastrian Paisley symbol as a recurring motif, here 'digitised' in appearance. Digital here also refers to the use of human fingers needed to produce this particular woven & beaded work, one that cannot be mechanised or industrialised (unlike 21st c. machine embroidery & textile beading machines).

VIII *Beam Gazing*

Depiction of a ceiling fan spinning around the exposed roof, rafters and beams above the bed where the artist's grandparents, mother and he himself have slept.

IX *Madame Cama*

Madame Bhikhaji Cama, born in a wealthy mercantile Parsi family, rebelliously stood up against their values and fought for decolonisation well before the Independence of India was openly discussed. In 1907 Madame Cama designed and embroidered the first prototype of India's tricolour flag and raised it at the second Socialist Congress in Stuttgart. As a result of this rebellious act, she was exiled and forbidden from returning to India or stepping foot on British soil. Madame Cama lived in Paris for the rest of her life, working as a liaison for freedom fighters communicating from Indian Tea Houses in Calcutta. She died in 1936, eleven years before the official Independence of India in 1947. She is now regarded as a national hero, with her first flag displayed at the National Library in Pune.

15. **Parsi Colony Series, 2018**

Cotton thread hand embroidery on handloomed cotton Khatka.

Based on studies of the art deco buildings at Sir C.J. Parsi Colony on Sir Ratan Tata Path in Tardeo. Sir Cowasjee Jehanghir founded the colony in 1915, with all existing buildings completed by 1922 and now maintained by the Tata Parsi Trust. Four generations of the artist's family (including him in 2018) have resided in Buildings no. 5 and 3.

(Exterior)

Panel I *Three Balconies*

Study of the curved balconies on the façade of Building no. 3 where the artist's grandmother grew up.

Panel II *Sunset Release!*

Study of a window grill (or 'Jaali') of the Colony's High School building (which the artist's mother and grandmother attended). Void figure outline alluding to an allegorical 'escape' from insular community life.

Panel III *Threshold, Open at Dawn*

Based on live studies of a ground-floor colony doorway (where his matrilineal grandmother lived as a child), opening to let light in at dawn.

(Interior)

Panel IV *Self Portrait with Blue Desk*

Refer to Journal Extract 'ii' (Bombay) where Areez had an early childhood experience within the confines of a safe, playful feminine space.

Panel V *Shrine (Still Life with Partially Squeezed Lime)*

Still life study of Aunt Dolly's kitchen table + shrine.

Panel VI *Blue Bathing in Pink*

A maternal figure rendered in blue chain stitch, bathing in the artist's musk pink-tiled bathroom.

16. In Small Places (Farokh & Sohrab), 2018

Cotton thread hand embroidery on repurposed handloomed tea towel.

Referencing the Constantine P. Cavafy-inspired series of drawings by David Hockney titled 'In The Dull Village' which were released in 1966, one year before homosexuality was legalised in the UK. The work's title here references a quote extracted from an interview that Hockney gave for BBC's 'The History of the World in 100 Objects' curated by Neil MacGregor, where Hockney stated that "Human rights begin in small places..." This work attempts to follow the queer trope of small domestic spaces containing intimate gestures within the boundaries dictated by society. Also suggested here, through the Persian blanket on the couple's bed covering both figures (named after Freddy Mercury and an imaginary lover named after Firdausi's Persian hero) that notions of cultural identity need not be mutually exclusive from celebrating ones' sexuality.

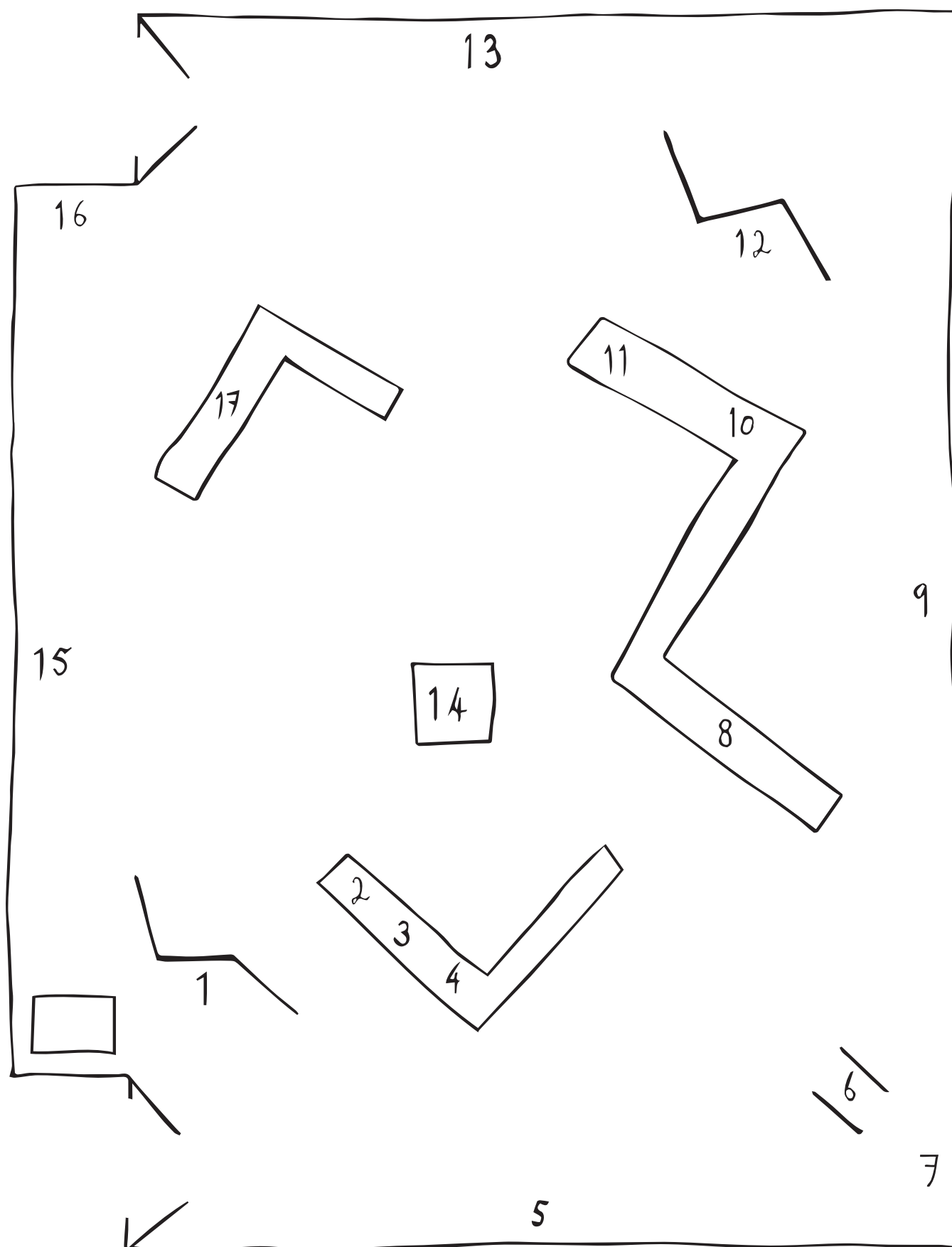
This work was created during the year (2018) in which India's Supreme Court removed a 200 year old piece of colonial legislation called 'Section 377', thus decriminalising all consensual homosexual acts in India for the first time in history.

17. *Homecoming*, 2019

Czech glass beads tapestry-threaded with mercerised cotton thread.

A beaded work crafted using the Parsi Toran weaving technique in Czech bohemian glass beads and mercerized cotton threads that were stretched taut over a small tapestry frame. An appropriation of the traditional 'God Bless Our Home' threshold-hanging phrase, often found hanging above the entranceways of Parsi homes. This version reads 'GOD BLESS OUR HOMO' – in an attempt to consolidate both, the ethno-cultural and queer aspects of the artist's identity. It is reductive in style and features fragments of personal and cultural iconography ranging from poppies, a broken Farvahar, holy flames, a chalice, paisley and a housed 'void' figure stepping outward.

Devoid of a Toran's traditionally-tasseled trims or hanging (ring) devices, this object is to be laid over a surface within eye level. It alludes to the cascading banner or 'ribbon' gifted to Persian Kings by the supreme god Ahura Mazda, upon their coronations (a scene depicted on various Sassanid mountainside bas reliefs in Bishapur, Iran). The Sassanid ribbon symbolized the inheritance of the Zoroastrian doctrine and its eternal quest for truth.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS, PLACES & EPHEMERA

AGIARI A Zoroastrian Fire Temple containing a junior consecrated eternal flame. Popular points of worship around South Mumbai, known for their unique architectural features, sanctuary of resident priests and access exclusive to Zoroastrian descendants only.

AHURA MAZDA The world's first monotheistic God proclaimed by Zoroaster around 1500 BC, typically represented as fire or the Farvahar symbol.

AKOORI A typically Parsi scrambled-egg dish made with spices, onion and tomato.

ANAHITA A Zoroastrian deity representing fertility & water. Developed from a pre-Zoroastrian goddess, a key deity worshipped among Matriarchal cults, c. 4500 BC.

ATASH BEHRAM Nine highly consecrated Zoroastrian Fire Temples made of 12 'miraculous' ignitions. Four of which are in Mumbai, four in Gujarat and one in Iran.

DHANSAK A lentil curry made with spices and pumpkin, served over caramelized rice.

DIO Island off the coast of Gujarat, occupied by Parsi refugees for nine years in the 8th Century AD. Now part of mainland India after 19th Century land reclamations.

FARVAHAR An early Zoroastrian winged angel signifying human consciousness through Ahura Mazda. The popular icon often features a bearded man within the central ring, holding a smaller ring in his right hand signifying the biological rite of (patriarchal) Kingship.

GARA A typically Parsi silk textile, hand-embroidered using a very fine silk floss using the Zardozi style of embroidery among other fine needlework techniques. As a garment it is draped and worn similarly to the Indian Sari. However in style, the Gara combines Early 19th Century neoclassical motifs, Chinoiserie narratives and Mughal-Persian iconography creating dense and unique mélange.

KOR The intricately embroidered border of a Gara, often detachable and matrilineally inherited.

KHATKA A slubby dust rag (customarily reused until it falls apart) handwoven on small square table looms by apprentices & students learning to weave. Typically made in the Maharashtra & Gujarat regions of India, using waste cotton byproducts from larger looms & spinning wheels.

KUSHTI A finely handspun Virgin Wool prayer girdle that is typically handwoven over two weeks on a small frame, using techniques dating back to early Zoroastrianism. Worn thrice around the waist over a Sudreh during prayers, with carefully placed knots creating a protective spiritual force field.

MALIDO A ceremonial pudding made of cracked wheat, sugar and spices.

MARTAB The second stage of Zoroastrian Priesthood (after 'Navar'). Both consist of 30 days spent in isolation & contemplative spiritual study.

NAVAR The first stage of Zoroastrian priesthood, patrilineally inherited by sons of families with spiritual lineage. The priest's lineage stems from one of these original families.

NAVJOTE A rite of passage initiation ceremony, which inducts pre-pubescent children of Zoroastrian lineage with holy sacraments, spiritual undergarments (the ‘Sudreh’ & ‘Kushti’) and ancient Avestan teachings. Usually followed by large informal parties.

PARSI Descendants from the diasporic group of refugees who fled from persecution in Persia after the 7th Century’s Islamic Conquest. ‘Parsi’ meaning ‘people from Pars,’ the region of Greater Khorasan where the first group of refugees were from.

PIR Zoroastrian Shrines in the Yazd Province of Iran. Six main places of worship protected by the local Zoroastrian community and located in isolated geological sites around the mountainous desert areas of Yazd.

SARV The Persian term for a Cypress tree (*Cupressus sempervirens*) worshipped by ancient Zoroastrians. The Sarv is more popularly represented worldwide through the *Paisley* symbol, which dates back to Achaemenid bas reliefs from 420 BC.

SUDREH A cotton muslin inner garment that signifies various facets of the Zoroastrian doctrine. Given to a child upon their coming of age ‘Navjote’ initiation (or ‘Sedreh-Poshti’ in Iran) and worn with a Kushti tied over it every day since.

TORAN A glass-beaded banner typically hung in doorways above Parsi thresholds. Traditionally hand-woven over a tapestry frame with mercerized cotton thread and Bohemian (Czech) glass beads.

UDWADA A village on the coast of Gujarat which now hosts the oldest Eternal Flame called ‘Iranshah,’ which travelled across the Persian Gulf with the first group of Zoroastrian refugees who fled from religious persecution.

ZOROASTRIANISM The world’s oldest Monotheistic faith, dating back approximately 3,500 years. The current followers of this faith have to be born of pure Zoroastrian lineage, with no allowances having been made for conversion since the 7th Century AD. Current worldwide population: 190,000 (WZO census 2011).