

Murree Museum
Artist Residency
2018

Amna Hashmi
Madiha Aijaz
Omer Wasim

MAPPING THE

F O R E S T

“Company raj redefined Indian forests as separate from the agricultural plains before launching a major onslaught on forests and forest peoples. Large-scale deforestation not only produced climatic change but also led to the disruption of tribal lands and the rude intrusion of money into tribal economies. With the assistance of Indian money-lenders and traders the company subdued India’s newly redefined, internal tribal frontiers. For instance, the Bhils of western India were ‘pacified’ during military expeditions in the 1820s. The attack on forests was accompanied by an invasion of the nomadic and pastoral economy. In northern and central India groups engaged in cattle raising and horse breeding, such as Gujars, Bhattis, Rangars, Rajputs and Mewatis, were subjected to the stern discipline and immobility of agricultural commodity production.”

Ayesha Jalal
Modern South Asia, Pg. 64.

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The Murree Residency Artist Residency

was established in 2014. Named after its location which is a mountain resort town with a colonial history, the Murree Residency is concerned with artistic practices that pertain to representation and marginalization in a postcolonial landscape. Its contemporaneity is informed by a revisiting of local histories in an attempt to reconcile with the region's troubled and complex colonial past. The aim of the Murree Residency is to explore and imagine alternative ideas of social integration, holistic strategies of economic upliftment, religious tolerance and economic freedom. Artists are encouraged to reach out to the local community through art workshops conducted with children residing in the town and through exhibitions in local public spaces.

Project Summary

Pakistan has the lowest forest density in Asia, according to the Asian Development Bank report, 2016. Unplanned construction and urban sprawl coupled with the rise of a timber mafia has irrevocably altered and damaged the landscape of the town. The Residency is situated in the midst of the last remaining forest area which is a sanctuary for wildlife and animals. It is a catchment area of rare birds. The forest also serves as a refuge cum summer home to a gypsy tribe; the dwindling forest area has meant that their natural habitat is under threat. It is also an area claimed by the Musiari tribe who were dispossessed by the British and are now self-organizing themselves to claim it back¹. The three artists who were invited this year explored the forest and as a result produced works that responded to their surroundings.



Mapping the Forest
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¹In conversation with the Musiari Itehad Group

Foreword

Murree is a small, 3.5 km long British colonial town in the foot hills of Pakistan. It was shortlisted as the summer capital for the British Raj but due to shortage of water and natural springs, it became a thorough-way to Kashmir². The elitist town, which became a playground for imagination and fun and frolic, with strict apartheid was up for grabs after the 1947 partition and liberation from colonial rule. After the Partition there was a deluge of tourists and rampant construction that completely destroyed the town forever. Artists, writers and practitioners are invited for a month to respond to the disasters of Murree, urban, environmental, ecological even sociological.

This year artists already working on themes of dying, intangible cultures, geology and book-making were invited to

respond the forest in the form of artists' books.

The theme for this year's Residency used the forest as a site to explore ecological interconnectedness and the belief that our resources are finite. These concerns, coupled with a colonial history that is replete with accounts of systematic abuse of both natural resources as well as of the region's inhabitants/tribes, aimed at compelling artists to delve into colonial archives as well. The aim was to highlight the importance of understanding the present through the past.

Inhabitants of the forest also embody the rapid change in cultural values that have affected this hill town. The forest is home to the Gujjar tribe whose traditional way of living has become precarious due to modern day

²"Murree During the Raj: a British Town in the Hills", Dr. Farakh A. Khan.

forest laws. It has recently seen an influx of Afghan refugees who are populating the area. The forest is now being reclaimed by the Musiari tribes who were the original owners of the Murree villages and according to folklore were duped by the British in leasing their land for perpetuity. Multilayered histories, dilemmas about belonging, transculturation and identity will lend currency to the belief that there needs to be greater engagement with the environment to understand the complexity of alienation and assimilation— one that encourages the emergence of alternative histories and voices from the peripheries of culture.

The artists processed these concerns, giving tangibility to the experience through the form of books.

Amna Hashmi's magic realism of the Murree town constructed from overheard contemporary folklore construed by the residents. The use of trees as markers of property, unlike concrete walls circumscribing lots in the urban plains. The Gujjar tribe children living amongst trees had their own versions of the folklore, seeing trees from

a different lens. The creation of mythology by people in a place where mythology doesn't exist. It is hereditary and storytelling becomes integral to passing down of knowledge of the hill; a derivative of the social structures. The tree contains stories, bearing witness as a silent bystander; the resident also bears witness to the violence faced by the tree from nature, the stories are retold. Murree becomes a transient dream through portholes, through a view on a bench, or up the staircase, through the exchange of trade of tourism.

Madiha Aijaz documents unfinished structures. Large skeletal buildings sprout out, tearing through the earth, taking over the greenery. Poured concrete pillars become trunks and iron bars become branches. Like Aijaz's documentative works of looking at peripheral cultures, the unfinished buildings also teeter on the edges between the development and the forest. Conversations are recorded, where memory becomes the living archives of the space and experience, fragmented sentences reveal undocumented histories and local wisdoms. Constant flux of construction

laws create the beastly, concrete mammoths, leaving them in a ghostly limbo.

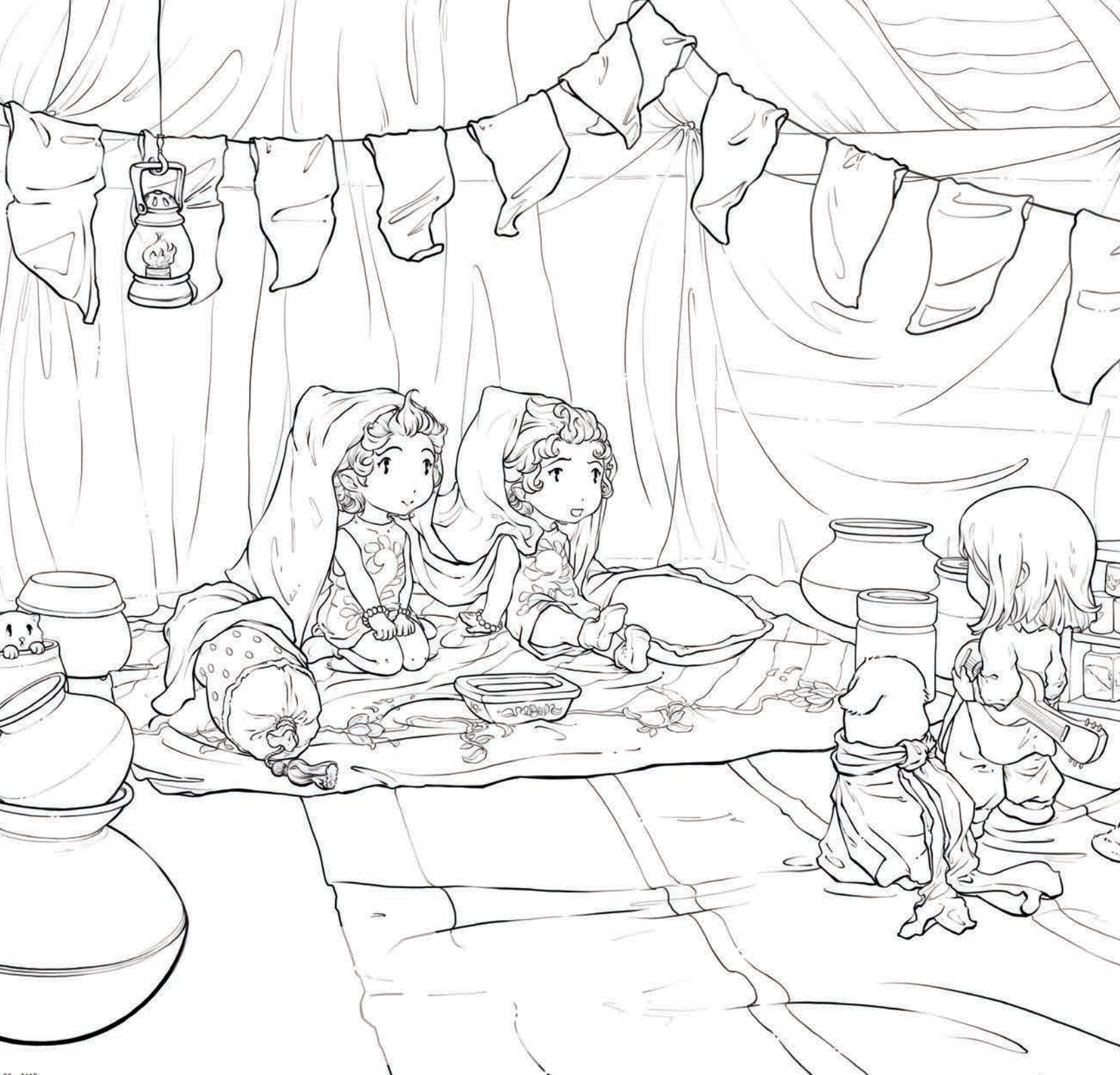
Omer Wasim looks at the forest and its plants as a subversive cover—it both veils and reveals. The indigenous, wild plants are decolonized and grow freely and overlooked, living on the fringes of the urbanization of the hill. Wasim has conversations with other queer persons while coursing through the forest, navigating blindly in pitch darkness of the night or during the day, losing their bearings in the process. It turns into an act similar to finding one another on 'hook-up' apps. It becomes a performance of subversion, hidden in the darkness of the forest, walking and sprawling unhindered like the indigenous weeds that take over tall pines planted by the colonizer.

Books have been an active and effective strategy in transferring information in the cheapest and lightest form. Easy-to-fit-in-hand-carry books become mobile sites of exhibition that can travel distances. They also democratize art making and collecting, where white-cube exhibitions can be sometimes

regarded as more static and exclusive.

Books have, in the past, held the power and capacity to transmit radical ideas and values. It was not uncommon for libraries to be burnt and looted when a civilization was occupied. Valuable, collated archival knowledge of the Subcontinent though, whether in the form of manuscripts and folios etc. was transported, carted off and scattered with the arrival of colonization. Fragments of this dispersed knowledge now lie in museums, private collection and auction houses outside the country leaving us bereft of precolonial histories. Gaining access to this knowledge is becoming an uphill task though with growing visa restrictions and curtailment of mobility and travel. In this context perhaps today, it is now with more urgency that we need to tackle these challenges to generate a consciousness of our constructed past and revisit it on our own terms.

Saba Khan
November, 2018



Amna
Hashmi

On the
Creation
of the Myth

Amna Hashmi is a visual artist and art educationist, specializing in the art of Miniature Painting. Combining her interest in historical illuminated manuscripts with her love for Japanese manga, her work has revolved around her primary interest of storytelling and the recording of historical events – exploring the boundaries that exist between actual facts and the creation of myths, magical and collective imaginary spaces that are often neglected in

our present-day, media-saturated lives.

Her recent works have been shown in 'From the Scroll to the Book', He Yuan Peace Garden Museum, Beijing, China (2017) and 'Ato Nexus', Embassy of Pakistan, Tokyo, Japan (2016). Hashmi is currently teaching as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture and Design at COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad.





Past the Valley of the Gujjars lies one of the last few stretches of the Grand Forest. Every summer, as the snows melt, they return to their ancestral homeland by the stream.

The hills of Murree gently roll, rising out of the land. Stretches upon stretches of green, the multi-hued broad leaved summery trees gradually transform into the spiny dark forms of wintery foliage, silent sentinels guarding the land.

Wild and vast, yet at the same time welcoming and comforting, over the ages the hills and its resident trees have stood as silent watchers of the happenings of man. As people have come and gone, communities moving as spaces changed hands, these original dwellers of the land have continued to live and evolve. Watchers of the happenings of man, it is them who have silently observed all the tales, never to be spoken. From the ghosts of the dak bungalows, the lurking wild beasts, to the elitist, divided legacy, the tales weave into the fabric of the land, with time becoming its very myth.

But what exactly are those myths? Are they only the tales born out of the natural and cosmological phenomena which dictate the people's fundamental emotions or could sociological and historical events be considered equal influencers?

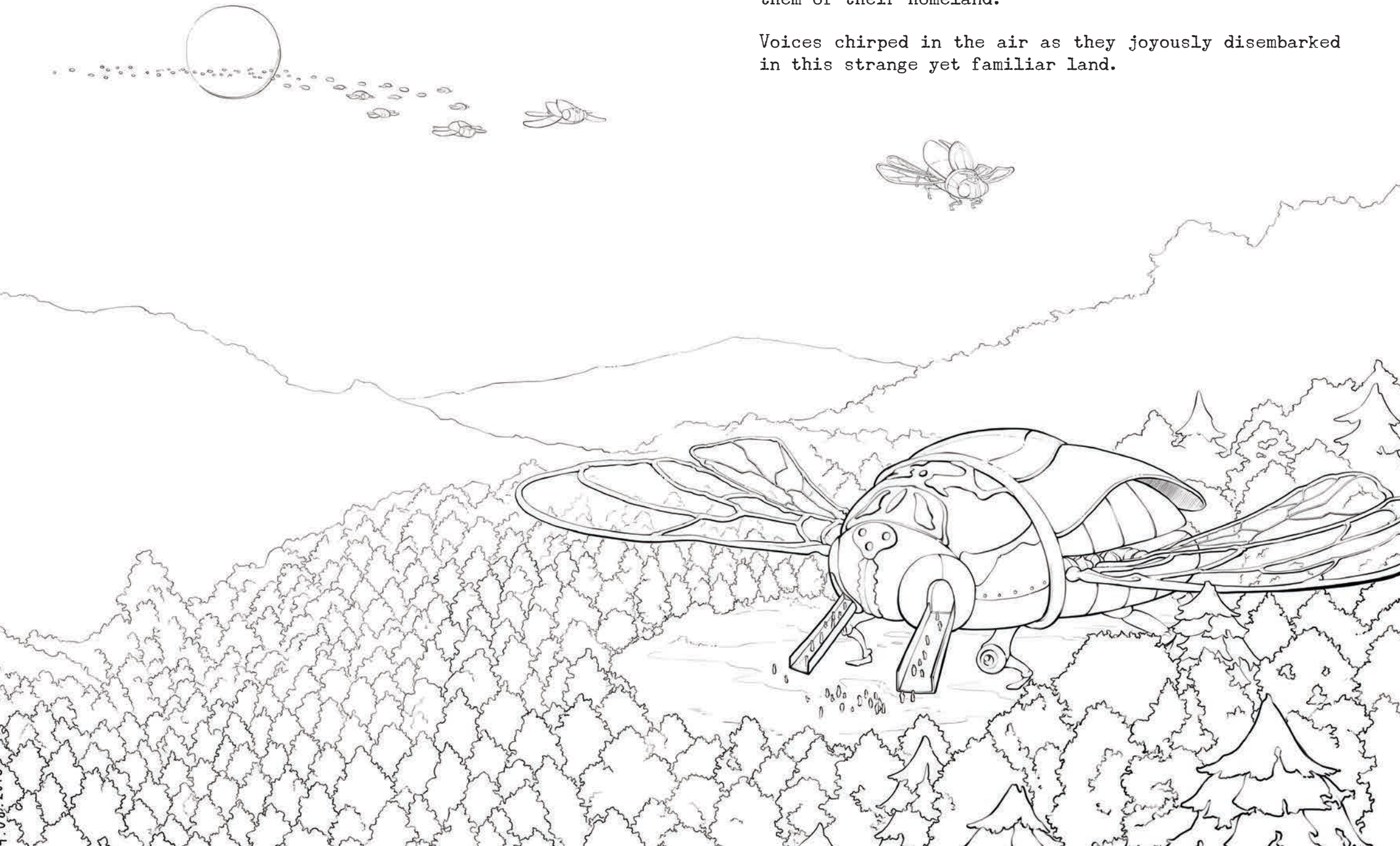
For the people who live with this ever changing forest, the dreams that are given to them by the trees, reflect the language of the space. Borrowing elements of that which exists and remains of what existed, the children of the forest speak of tales of power and co-existence. Tales of the tiger that roams the hills, the unseen people who possess those who dare to walk to the dark stream's side at night, of houses colourful and bright strewn with flowers, as they themselves weave their crowns of daisies.

Like markers to point the beginning of a tale, the silent sentinels of the land stand, signalling the memory's existence. Even as the men went away and their structures fell, these monoliths remain as the last testament to the existence of the event. Yet change comes at long last even to these unchanging dwellers. As the earth sheds its ancient prejudice, to replace them with the new, these dark pillars fall at the hands of their newer cohabitants.

The testifiers and the influencers of the myth disappear, and the very core begins to change.

The mothership. They came in droves, flocking in one after another. The summers here were cool and reminded them of their homeland.

Voices chirped in the air as they joyously disembarked in this strange yet familiar land.



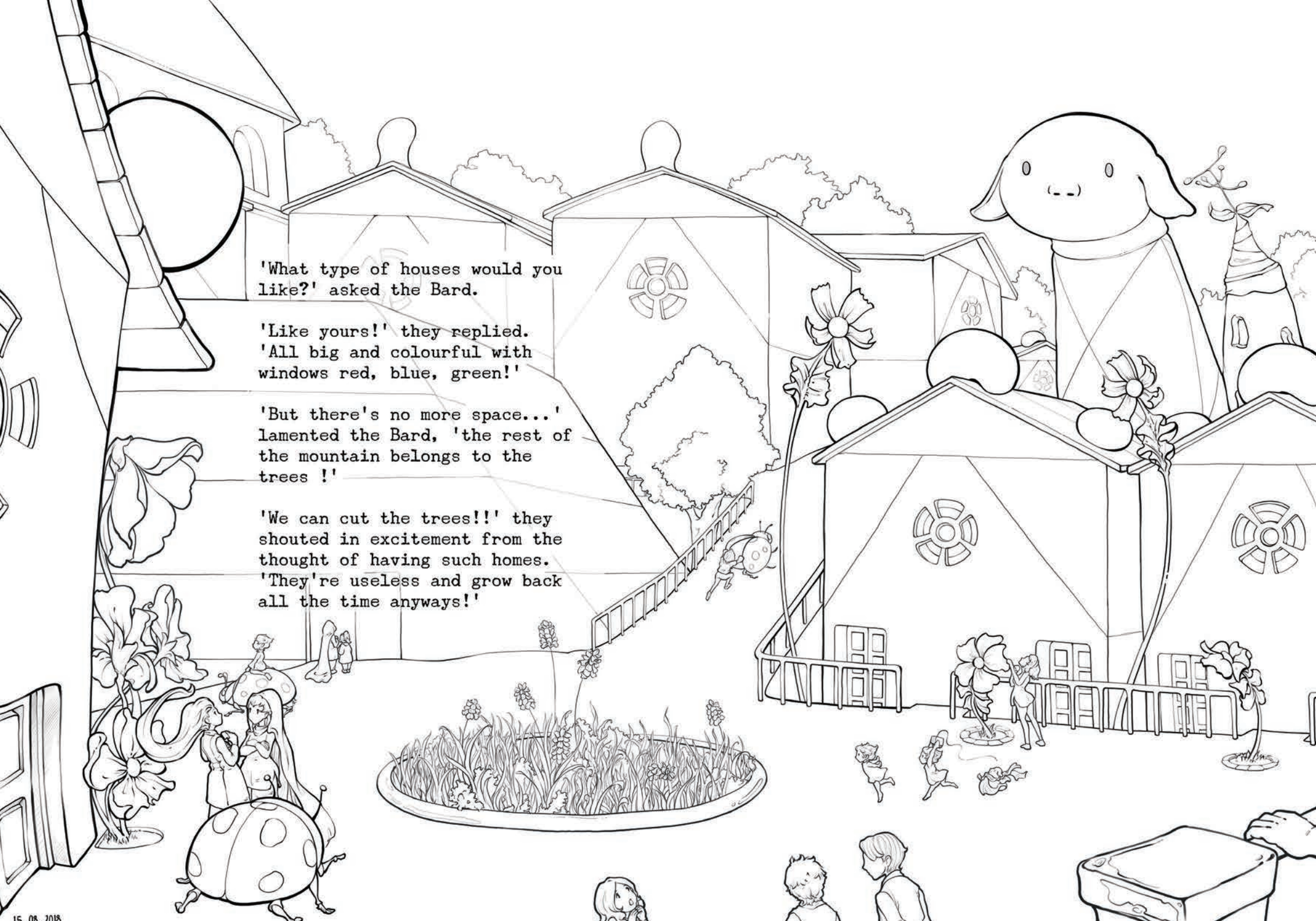


Shahnaz Bibi (13)
Chan Maima (12)
Adnan (8)

The Bard walked up the pagdandy as the Gujjars guided him from behind. The path up the tower was treacherous and could only be traversed by those who were versed in the lay of the land. 'There ought to be an easier way!' he declared. 'Maybe we can cut the trees to build a ladder?'

His song was beautiful. The Gujjars nodded in agreement.





'What type of houses would you like?' asked the Bard.

'Like yours!' they replied.
'All big and colourful with
windows red, blue, green!'

'But there's no more space...' lamented the Bard, 'the rest of the mountain belongs to the trees !'

'We can cut the trees!!' they shouted in excitement from the thought of having such homes.
'They're useless and grow back all the time anyways!'



Shahr Bano Bibi (12)





Madiha
Aijaz

A House
in the Hills



Since 2013, the DC informed

to the court today (Monday).
free to come to the court.

"I saw Murree's Mall Road I grew older".

"Submit a list structures appeared. from your institution.
Don't hide reasons. will be consequences".
he remarked.

adjourned until tomorrow (Tuesday).
on Oct 20 a 20-day ban
set up in sheer violation of bylaw,
TMA has published a list of 30 such housing societies
had already denuded a vast area
about 12,384 kanals forest land was encroached

"Either these will



" is becoming a Raja Bazaar."

fall or you will."



Ban lifted in Murree¹

a violation of basic human rights and nullified the notification

Nine years ago,
which was not effective as influential people, allegedly in connivance
and with political support,

were asked to demolish them.
The ban also cost the TMA millions of rupees to construction.

“Influential people disregard

”

¹ December 2017

The building code has since been revised and since 2007
publicise the revised version of it for public.

To add insult to injury,
still in vogue in Murree².

I fail to understand is not allowed.

in Murree in line with the new building code
an adverse cold season for more than eight months a year.

not so for the poor residents

not everyone is equal before law

² <https://www.dawn.com/news/1111618> , June 2014









Omer Wasim

excerpts from

As the Light Turns

Omer Wasim is a multidisciplinary artist based in Karachi. His solo practice is anchored around the subversive potential of queerness, which he applies to urban and developmental milieus, as well as their effects on, and interactions with, nature. His collaborative practice with Saira Sheikh aims to re-configure, re-articulate, and disrupt existing and complacent modes of artistic engagement and production. He teaches at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture; serves on the Editorial Board of *Hybrid*, and will

edit its third issue. He graduated with a BFA in Interdisciplinary Sculpture with a concentration in Video and Film Arts, and an MA in Critical Studies from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

His collaborative works have been shown at the Dhaka Art Summit (2018); Rossi & Rossi, London (2018); Gandhara-Art Space, Karachi (2018); Aicon Gallery, New York City (2018); Karachi Biennale (2017); Cairo Video Festival (2017); and CICA Museum, Gimpö (2016).

I.

A Walk Through the Forest

I vividly remember carrying my bag, stuffed with an umbrella, a grey jacket (borrowed from my father), water, and cigarettes (stashed in the front pocket of the bag). The weather was slightly cold, and I was wearing a blue cotton sweater (actually a sweat-shirt, but I never allow myself to think of it as such). It was probably between 7:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. (can't recall the exact time). We were waiting patiently—as on numerous occasions for the last two weeks—on an empty, foggy street, next to the Governor House in Murree. We were waiting for *him*.

He had been driving us around, taking us to film and photograph numerous sites in the area; the day before, I had made him promise to show up on time. The “waiting patiently” part stemmed from the trust that we had intrinsically established in him between moments of silence and laughter, making and loitering, failure and success. So much of making art is actually failure that when we make with and around people, it is inevitable that they experience that failure, too, even if it is not immediately their own, which, to a certain extent, would explain our connection with him.

Fog in the air carried the lights of his car, announcing his arrival; he stopped, reversed, got out to help us with the equipment. We were going to the forest to course through it, in the dense of the night, in hopes that she may get some images, and I to learn from her and talk to him. Once we got there, we realised that the ground was waterlogged, with invisible puddles camouflaged in and with grass and weeds, and by this time he had mentioned, several

times over, that there had been leopard sightings here—and that he had seen them himself. We believed him, allowing the night and its darkness to seep into our skin. We walked, and walked, and then some, huddled together, never far from each other, following a paved path, going deeper into the forest with every step, breaking this rhythm only to setup the equipment to photograph.

He eventually persuaded us to go off the track to see a different side of the forest. We agreed, not anticipating that the ground would get steeper and wetter, and certainly not knowing that the light being used for navigation would die only a couple of minutes into this foray. What ensued was both terrifying and exhilarating: even a slight sound would send us careening into him, and with such darkness, it was him who held our hands and navigated the landscape for us—having done it for as long as he could remember.

When I think about that night, I most remember his touch, his gaze, held for a split second longer, the darkness, as it allowed us to experience something together that has probably changed us forever, and that which has not yet revealed itself.

That night, I went to bed asking myself if it were a queer experience.



II.

Soil is created by rubbing of, and friction between, stones—such beautiful, generative, and perhaps queer, intimacy.¹

III.

Colonial Ruins/ Ruination

03/08/2018

Aspirations.

—

Colonial encounter in the Subcontinent made visible the forest as a source of timber, as opposed to source of water, especially for building railways to further perpetuate British Imperialism.²

—

We had been walking in and out of old colonial houses, close to Mall Road in Murree, to see their architecture, how they partitioned spaces, and trees in and around them—most of which were hundreds of years old with unusual forms, and against the darkness of the sky looked foreboding.

Out of the many houses we visited that evening, one was experienced differently by all of us. It was falling apart, quite literally, with the ceiling caving-in in some parts, mould, deep pockets of dust, torn-up furniture; these were remnants of aspirations, money, and lavishness that only existed in dust-covered photographs on walls that barely had the capacity to stand now.

Being in that space inspired us to imagine what kind of narratives could be set there. From what *she* narrated, *her* experience sounded more visceral than any of ours combined; *she* had come out of it with a kind of cinematic visuality in which *she* repeatedly



needed to be rescued, by a male protagonist, from the many demonic possessions in the house. This innocent, personal, albeit cinematic, desire for visibility at crossroads with money, power, and the colonial encounter.

I listened with silent affirmations to *her* desire for visibility and situating the colonial as demonic; and even though I wanted to tell *her* that no man would ever save *her*, I restrained myself from doing so.

Imperial narratives of desecrating the land and its people, and mining their collective resources, versus non-hegemonic desires of visibility. To simply be filmed, photographed, remembered in small gestures, and not disappear from public imaginary. There is still hope in that this narrative emerged out of a colonial ruin, which in its peak would have silenced it entirely.

The forest held, nurtured *her* narrative, and made space for it, allowing its queerness to surface, breathe. The forest that *they* so brazenly destroyed—thousands of years of history vanished in a matter of years, decades, a century or almost two—and that which we continue to chip, eat away at. Slowly, the trees will be entirely gone and with them the space for *her* narratives, their queerness, *her* queerness. Who is going to hold and nurture them then?

—

*The present day concreteness of gender and sexuality "is a fallout of the colonial encounter."*³

*When India, on September 6th 2018, overturned section 377, Shahmir Sanni on Twitter wrote: "From gay Sufi lovers to Hindu transgender women. India's [the Subcontinent's, really] sexual fluidity was always a dirty, barbaric concept to its western invaders[,] and it is crucial for the LGBTQ community here in the west to understand this. This isn't India becoming 'westernised'. It's India decolonising."*⁴

IV.

*Are, bure, boke.*⁵



V. In/On/With the *Bichoo Booti*

It had been raining for a week straight, which kept us from going out and working. When it finally cleared, I was in a rush to shoot as our days were numbered, and, of course, I needed something to show for my time there. It was right before *Maghrib*, when the light is about to turn, day fades into the night, and with a very compressed time to shoot, I was on a mission to get at least one video out of the way—we had missed a window to shoot the day before, or that is how I am remembering it now, it would certainly explain the rush. I was already outside, taking pictures in the backyard. When it was time to rouse her up to setup the equipment, I rushed inside to do just that, but as the time was closing in on us, I decided to forgo putting on pants and proper shoes—going out to the patch instead in just sandals and shorts.

The wooded patch diametrically across from the main entrance of the house had quite a few mature trees, with majority of the ground covered in/with *Bichoo Booti* and *Palak* (its antidote).⁶ I had been eyeing that spot for a while, and had decided, many nights ago, between moments of conceptual clarity, that *that* was where I had to shoot. Once we were there, I was forced to tiptoe on the ground while negotiating my body and its weight, manoeuvring between the notorious weed, careful not to allow it to touch my legs. I reached up to the tree, hung the shirt on it, and walked back, eventually standing next to her. The shirt had to be adjusted twice before its location was locked, and when going back the second time to the equipment, *Bichoo Booti* brushed my left leg ever so slightly, right above the ankle. It was a strange-kind-of-sensation—it wasn't burning, rather

it was a tingling, piercing, another kind of, cascading sensation, unlike any that I had bodily experienced. The camera started rolling, and we waited for the light to turn, for the white of the shirt to disappear into the darkness, before we switched it off. I retrieved the shirt, picked up the tripod, plucked some *Palak*, and rubbed it violently against my skin, releasing its green sap, at the point of contact.

The sensation subsided, only to rise up again later in the night. This corporeal experience lingered beneath my skin, and I experienced my leg, between bouts of sleep, "as if [it were] not entirely my own."⁷

1. This was in the notes that I had made during the Murree Museum Artist Residency. The note is dated 3 August 2018, and coincides with Professor Z. B. Mirza's visit to Murree, where he had come to meet with the resident artists who were working on their individual projects toward "Mapping the Forest".

2. Ibid. For a hauntingly poetic account on the colonial railway project in the Subcontinent, the ecological devastation it caused, and the recent interest in reviving it, see Zahra Malkani, Shahana Rajani, and Abeera Kamran, "Rakshas Railway and Unruly Lines," in *Exhausted Geographies Vol. II* (Karachi: Self-Published, 2018).

3. Huma Yusuf, "History repeats itself," *Dawn*, 7 August 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/812975>, accessed 1 October 2018.

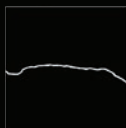
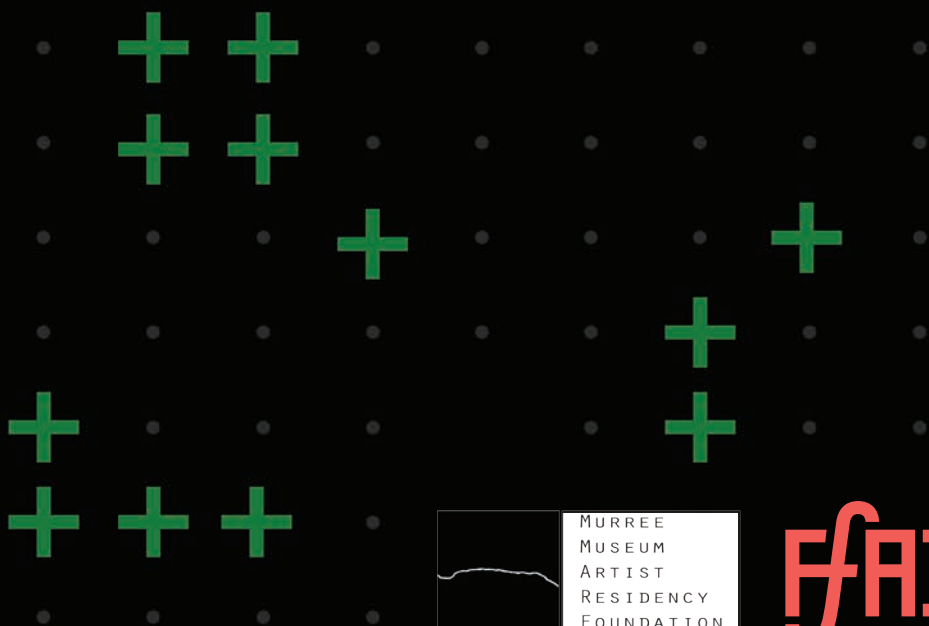
4. Shahmir Sanni, Twitter, 6 September 2018, <https://twitter.com/shahmiruk/status/1037638915795111936>, accessed 1 October 2018.

5. This was in the notes that I had made during the Murree Museum Artist Residency. In conversation with Amna Hashmi, date unknown.

6. This section is heavily influenced by and indebted to Joe Crowdy's work. See Joe Crowdy, "Queer Undergrowth: Weeds and Sexuality in the Architecture of the Garden," *Architecture and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2017): 423-433, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2017.1365541>, pp. 430, 431, accessed 3 October 2018.

7. Ibid., p. 431.





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