

## **Valley of Dreams/Wadi-e-khwaab**

Razia Aziz

*A new myth about the origins of the Cuckmere River, valley floor and estuary, interweaving strands of Urdu with English.*

### ***Part One: Intimate Strangers***

I know that you have dropped me from your gaze but you will never be able to forget my face. *[Sung] Mujhay tum nazar se giraar se rahe ho, Mujhe tum kabhi bhee bhulaa na sakoge...*

*Aadaab. Greetings. Kahiye – tell me, what is on your mind? Yes, I know, you have so many wonderings, like 'Who are you?', 'Why, or what, are you singing?', and 'What about mixing your languages like that?' Be patient and all will become clear, my friend. Please, pause for a moment... Breathe...*

Feel your feet supported by the earth... Sense the thousand subtle streams surging through your body...

My name is *Daaman*. I am the *ruh-e-wadi*, the Spirit of the Valley. My sun-bleached bones made these hills, my back bares the cloud-patterned land to the jealous sky, my blood flows clear and strong to the sea. I am also in you: like the figure you dimly remember standing in the moonlit doorway when you half opened one eye over the love-worn face of your favourite bear, whom you clutched against your fear of the dark – and instead of fright you felt comforted by the soft-edged stranger and fell into the deepest of dreamless sleeps.

*Daaman* comes from Urdu, the language of lovers and poets, courtesans and kings. *Daa-mān*: it is the arc of hill where it joins the valley floor; the border of your shirt with which you might dab eyes moistened by sorrow or joy; the curve of your cloak where it sweeps the ground, erasing your footsteps. It was given to me by a celestial wayfarer who, like so many thousands, brought her dreams to this Valley. She left here with a broken reed for a heart – left behind a deep imprint upon the land – and left me with fragments of songs and a tangled tongue.

Before she arrived, I was not me. I had no name and no language recognisable to humans. It was her *ghazals* – the love songs – that called me up out of the land. At first, they stirred, but did not break, my slumber. But then she sang *Daaman se agar pochoo(n), to daaman mera jal jaye, ae kaash ke soz-e-gham ashko(n) mai(n) na dal jaye*. Though the words were strange to this sky, it called forth tears of rain that stung me to wakefulness. Ever since then, rest has been a stranger to me.

I have heard every language under the sun: the quiet creak of those trees on the hill as they bow to the wind, the swish of those swan breasts through the ripples, the distant roar of the river of rubber and steel on the coast road; the great gabble of human tongues that streams along these paths every day. But her renditions cast a spell upon me, filling me with an unquenchable sadness.

Then one day she left and did not return. Her sudden absence became my exile from anonymity. It sentenced me to wander, consorting with two, four and six-leggeds, eavesdropping on their longings, singing half-stanzas of songs whose endings I will never learn, telling tales of this *wadi-e-khwaab*, this Valley of Dreams.

'Dreams?', you ask, 'what dreams, whose dreams?' They do not belong to anyone. They just are. Like you – you are one of them, if only you knew. Listen... can you not hear them creak, these tightly folded origamis of cliff edges and cropped grasses, egret wings and shingle, juniper bush and rabbit tail? They burst from every berry and briar; twist the curious air into ribbons; sweep yarns about your hair. They tremble in every thread of birdsong; call their silent petitions from hill to hill; succumb to every crashing wave. Dreams longing to be unfolded, to be told, to be released at last to *azaadi*, freedom. Can you not sense them? If once you do, *khayal rakhna dost*, take care my friend – for you may become enchanted and get lost for a very long time in their maze.

*Ijjazat hai*, allow me to be your guide. Just tune into my voice tapping morse kisses across the bridge of spacetime on those twin timpani in your head.

See the path that runs east toward the hidden river and then seaward? *Chalo challe*, let us go and partake of the feast the valley floor has spread at our feet, so that the dreams may live in us. They will roll over our tongues as the wind rolls over the water and foam fingers reach into

shingle in a bid to slake their thirst for connection in a world of separation.

### ***Part Two: A Lotus Blooms***

See the fast, straight mere reveal itself down to our left? Look beyond it to that other coiled rind of river, the meanders thick and brown with silt, and you may spy an uncommon sight: peeping between mute swans or paddle boards, unsuspected by day trippers – a single white lotus flower. It blooms in the gloaming like an Indic spell, beguiling the gods of this most English of landscapes. What you cannot see are the tears of blood hidden in its pristine whorls, as fresh as the day they were shed, which no rain can wash away. You may think the presence of the lotus to be strange, even exotic – yet, not so far from here, on the Downs, is the marble bloom of the Chattri. It casts its protective gaze upon the Indian fallen of the First World War who passed through the fire, high above Brighton, whose symbol, the Pavilion, owes its form to the flowers of the east. And not 40 miles from there in a Garden of Peace in Woking, another blossom of stone honours the Muslim compatriots, buried so far from home. The roots of these strange flora reach far below the surface to places, so seemingly far away, yet whose drum-beat is closer than the

throb of blood in your own jugular vein – which, when you notice it, brings fascination, fear, vulnerability, gratitude.

*Kya kanwal ki nazar nahee(n) aati?* You cannot see the lotus? No matter. As we walk the path to the sea, I will tell of how the mere was dismembered; how the bleeding lotus came to grow here; and how I came to sing to you so of the innocence and agonies of love.

### ***Part Three: The Story of the River***

[sung] *Aye dil e nadan, aye dil e nadan, Aarzoo kia hai, justuju kia hai?*

[Oh my naïve heart, what is your desire, what is your quest?]

Once upon a time, the maiden flower goddess Maru awoke from her slumber to find a surge of warm, oily liquid painting thighs sticky and red-washed with blood spilled during the night. In the next room, her father, Waalid, who had peeled her lovingly from his womb thirteen-and-a-half celestial years before, slept on, his breath troubling the morning air and Maru's heart with its familiar rumbling. For this was a day like no other: age had come upon her, and her limbs surged with an unfamiliar vigour, her legs veining crimson down to the ground.

Everywhere she shed, life sprang out of the terracotta earth, crusting it in unseasonal flowers, which did not know whether to bud, bloom or head to seed. Maru loped about the vast meadow of her backyard, which stretched from horizon to horizon, whooping and calling her gladness to everyone and no-one in particular. Her feet pounded the earth, drumming awake the land gods, scattering peacocks, rousing the leopard queen from her sleep and sending the spectacled cobra into a frenzy, while its dance sent bandicoots and bush rats diving for cover.

Waalid knew before the hullabaloo roused him that the day had come. He had seen it in his dream. As was customary, the Father god prepared to send his daughter forth on her rite of passage, criss-crossing the world, naked but for the crown of King's Clover he had gifted her at birth and the single ancestral seed of white lotus, hidden in a small recess in her breast bone – with only the love songs of her native land – these *ghazals* – for her protection.

With hardly a word of goodbye, she was gone, singing into the wind. *Aye dil-e-nadaan...!* Waalid wept, causing the river to burst its banks near the estuary. The sea reached inland in an attempt to comfort him, flooding the people's farms with brackish water. The villagers put on puppet shows

and feasts of hearty peasant food to cheer the Father god, but to little avail.

Meanwhile, the prodigious power of her limbs, dark and shiny as black strap molasses, carried Maru and her songs over oceans and forests, along languid rivers and desiccated mountain plateaux, spawning frog storms and butterfly blizzards, sweet cyclones, red tsunamis and other strange meteorological phenomena in their wake. Petals poured in torrents from her dragon-sized dreadlocks, sending rainbow lightning from each to every other point of the compass; ships were catapulted skyward, and blown half-way across the world, as wide-eyed crews feared freefall into the abyss from the edge of what they believed was a flat planet. Everywhere crazed flora grew where it should not – and died just as quickly – to the lullaby of her voice.

The young goddess threatened to rain misfortune upon the inhabitants of so many lands. Until just as quickly, in the way of a brazen young girl turning womanish tender, she awoke to the impact of her bloodrush upon the world. With the gentleness only giants can show, she made to rescue each and every creature of two, four or six legs, feathers or fur, scales or tentacles, tooth or claw, all the while sending the sweet fire of



her breath upon them. For she was a benevolent goddess and wished no-one harm. All she wanted was to see the world, find love, plant her lotus seed and return safely home to the valley of her childhood beneath a reddening sun and tell Waalid of all her adventures.

After her labours, Maru found herself here in this Valley, a quarter turn of the earth northwest of her home. You would not have recognised this place before she came – everything around you that now bristles with life was a flat grey void. She collapsed exhausted on her back, her great body sending up the cliffs on either side, and sung herself to sleep. Her eyelids set with the sun as it sank beneath a new horizon. In the calm that ensued, four ships set sail from Woolwich, their prows four arrows aimed at the promise of spice gold in the vast region of the planet east of the Cape of Good Hope.

That night Maru slid in her dreams beneath the surface of the land, and dropped into a pool where a shapeshifting lover, now mannish, now womanish, first surveyed, and then flowed into, every cavern, curve and crease of her uncharted body. Maru came alive and returned the favour

to her paramour countless times. She awoke singing of spring, only to find her beloved there, above her, gazing in awe upon her.

[sung] *Aap kya aaye, bahar aagayi maikhaane mai(n), Phool hi phool khil  
uthe mere paimaane mai(n).*

[If you have come, then spring has come to our tavern; see – nothing but flowers bloom in my wine goblet.]

That is how she fell for the Sky, which fell in adoration upon her.

Day and night their love folded and unfolded, quickening the dust on which they lay, drawing seedlings out of the dormant land: Hawthorn and Blackthorn, Red Star-Thistle, Spiral Tasselweed, Distant Sedge, Upright Brome, Round-headed Rampion and Burnt-tip Orchid adorned the Valley; Rock Samphire, Sea Kale, Yellow-Horned Poppy, Sea Pearlwort, Narrow-Leaved Bird's-Foot-Trefoil and Long-Stalked Crane's-Bill fringed

the shingle. Maru's precious crown of King's Clover fell upon the earth and took root.

Maru sank deeper with every arch of her back and coil of her hips, becoming one with the ground. The tender young life that radiated from the lovers awoke the mercy of the Earth, who – witnessing the flowering in the Valley – called forth the water snake Aarzo from their deep, dark lair, and sent them toward the sea on a mission to irrigate the fledgling plant nations. Aarzo is the most revered and ancient of the serpent family – so ancient that their birth dates back to the non-binary origin of life, long before 'she' and 'he'. The granter of that which is most longed for, Aarzo takes a thousand celestial years to complete their journey from source to sea where, once met, they shed their sweet skin into the salt tides. And there come to rest, replete and free from craving at last.

The snake-river became a magnet for life. The lesser spotted dogfish, tench and European seabass darted and wove in the shimmering water. Birds, drawn by thermals of desire to the efflorescence on the valley floor, swooped and curled, cawed and cooed, crooned and chattered, slipped and splashed, bobbed and dived, strutted and squawked, and spilled

their windswept symphony into the hungry air. Rabbits, foxes and badgers came to bathe and drink in the sweet water and strings of geese flew by to adorn the Sky at dusk.

The tallest of the throng, the two-leggeds, came from all points of the compass to sing, whisper and cry their entreaties to Aarzo. They pastured their animals, grew crops and raised their children. Their incredulity at their good fortune overcame the inconvenience of siting their settlement upon a nuptial bed. They secured their shacks against the unusual movements of land, water and air and their children's eyes and ears against the more overt signs of carnality. It was not an easy life but had its rewards. They swam in the water and took their fishing boats out to sea but kept away from the estuary. There, the incessant flow – in then out, then both in and out at once, mixed air and water, saline and honeyed, cool and warm, in the most tantalising jazz formations. The water dances were bewitching and the fear of drowning or capsizing were a constant concern.

Every now and then, the ardour of the lovers caused the river to flood, just as Waalid's tears had in that other valley all those moons before. The

people tolerated this too – until it became so frequent an occurrence that a special Council of Elders was called. The Council sat around a great fire and heard petitions from farmers fearful for their crops and livestock; householders anxious to safeguard their homes; and old ones who foresaw the loss of the entire Valley to two-legged settlement in a calamitous flood – should Aarzo grant the lovers what was, no doubt, their deepest desire, which was to be finally extinguished in one another.

The eldest of the elders, Agga, spoke up and said “What must be must be – we are custodians, not rulers, in these lands. We have moved our settlements before, and can again, when the time comes.” But many of the people, while they feigned respect for the old ways, had long since abandoned their belief in the sacred duty of the two-leggeds.

The argument raged for seven days and seven nights, burning seven fires down to their embers.

In the end, Agga was a lone voice. It was agreed to break with the old ways and commit an act that no human had ever before spoken of, let

alone attempted: severing of the head and tail of Aarzo, to put an end forever to their seaward quest.

Barriers were laid to separate Aarzo's head and tail from their body. Aarzo cried and struggled, and in the fray shed a shard of skin – which you can now see down to our right. Their cries troubled the Earth and seared the escarpment there on the left with that snake-shaped scar. Their writhing added the final flourish of a curve to the straightened bypass there, at the estuary.

Robbed of hope that her prayer for union with the Sky would ever be answered, Maru sank even deeper into the ground in search of an escape route and was never again seen in the Valley. A single lotus seed in the depths of the meanders was her parting gift. The waters were bloodied by Aarzo's demise: the crimson drops enfolded in the lotus's petals would forever bear witness to the cruelty of people.

Meanwhile, plunder had ravaged the land Maru had called home and subjugation dulled the lustre of its people. But Waalid's joy at the return

of his prodigal daughter was unbounded. The two-leggeds set to work, preparing a great feast of celebration, the spirit of revival stirring in their hearts. Ten years later, those who had been taken into the service of the colonisers waxed to Mutiny. But that is another story...

Back here in the Valley, the Sky tried to sing a few lines of Maru's love songs upon the wind in the hope of winning her back. When this failed, the Sky took a vow of eternal silence, celibacy and solitude, regaining the high dome we now see in the timeplace we call 'today'. The two-leggeds returned to their toil. The river flowed fast and full. *Nadi baha jati hai, zindagi guzar jati hai*. The flowers bloomed. And I became the custodian of these unfinished songs.

Characteristically, the two-leggeds, in their haste to do something, had not considered the full impact of their actions. The Earth did not take kindly to the people harming Aarzoo so egregiously and determined to exact a toll for their treachery. Aarzoo was revived and lived on dismembered, in perpetual longing to complete their journey to dissolution – for even the Earth cannot completely undo the deeds of humans. But it won't be so long now. The oceans are rising fast – in the

blink of an eye in celestial time. Long before the epoch of the two-leggeds is over, the whole valley floor will be underwater and rivers, flowers and lovers alike will be no more than the submerged dream of an insatiable sea and the great serpent will finally rest.

**Valley of Dreams / Wadi-e-khwaab** contains four songs that are well known in the public domain, in order as follows:

'Mujhe tum nazar se giraa to rahe ho' sung by Mehdi Hassan, from the Pakistani movie *Doraha* (1967).

'Aye dil-e-naadaan' sung by Lata Mangeshkar, from the Indian movie *Razia Sultan* (1983).

'Phool hi phool khil uthe' by Mehdi Hassan. The first recorded version may have been 1979.

'Aye kaash ke soz-e-gham ashkon main na dhal jaye', by Govind Rajasthani.



## **Razia Aziz**

Razia's creative practice involves written and spoken word, live and recorded song and music. It flows alongside her work as a coach, facilitator and consultant – a weave made possible by a steadfast meditation practice, loving circles of family, friends and community – and the constant support of the natural surroundings. Razia has lived in the lap of the South Downs for most of her life. Her recent work is oriented toward re-languaging and re-telling the landscape by accessing precious seams of ancestry buried in it and in us, which have been disrupted, but not destroyed, by the march of history. It includes *Challé Gayé* (a bilingual soundscape at the Chattri monument commissioned by Witness Stand at Brighton Festival 2022). Razia has created three albums of music (western and Hindustani), composed music for theatre and written and performed plays. Razia is also a Changing Chalk Associate Artist for Writing Our Legacy/The National Trust.

A recording of this text can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](https://writersmosaic.org.uk)

© Razia Aziz