

Buddhist statues'. Near our home was a field scattered with mysterious ruins – statues of lions on their haunches, broken columns, headless figures and, oddest of all, hundreds of stone umbrellas.

Islam came to our valley in the eleventh century when Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni invaded from Afghanistan and became our ruler, but in ancient times Swat was a Buddhist kingdom. The Buddhists had arrived here in the second century and their kings ruled the valley for more than 500 years. Chinese explorers wrote stories of how there were 1,400 Buddhist monasteries along the banks of the River Swat, and the magical sound of temple bells would ring out across the valley. The temples are long gone, but almost anywhere you go in Swat, amid all the primroses and other wild flowers, you find their remains. We would often picnic among rock carvings of a smiling fat Buddha sitting cross-legged on a lotus flower. There are many stories that Lord Buddha himself came here because it is a place of such peace, and some of his ashes are said to be buried in the valley in a giant stupa.

Our Butkara ruins were a magical place to play hide and seek. Once some foreign archaeologists arrived to do some work there and told us that in times gone by it was a place of pilgrimage, full of beautiful temples domed with gold where Buddhist kings lay buried. My father wrote a poem, 'The Relics of Butkara', which summed up perfectly how temple and mosque could exist side by side: 'When the voice of truth rises from the minarets,/ The Buddha smiles,/ And the broken chain of history reconnects.'

We lived in the shadow of the Hindu Kush mountains, where the men went to shoot ibex and golden cockerels. Our house was one storey and proper concrete. On the left were steps up to a flat roof big enough for us children to play cricket on. It was our playground. At dusk my father and his friends often gathered to sit and drink tea there. Sometimes I sat on the roof too, watching the smoke rise from the cooking fires all around and listening to the nightly racket of the crickets.

Our valley is full of fruit trees on which grow the sweetest figs and pomegranates and peaches, and in our garden we had grapes, guavas and persimmons. There was a plum tree in our front yard which gave the most delicious fruit. It was always a race between us and the birds to get to them. The birds loved that tree. Even the woodpeckers.

For as long as I can remember my mother has talked to birds. At the back of the house was a veranda where the women gathered. We knew what it was like to be hungry so my mother always cooked extra and gave food to poor families. If there was any left she fed it to the birds. In Pashto we love to sing *tapey*, two-line poems, and as she scattered the rice she would sing one: 'Don't kill doves in the garden./ You kill one and the others won't come.'

I liked to sit on the roof and watch the mountains and dream. The highest mountain of all is the pyramid-shaped Mount Elum. To us it's a sacred mountain and so high that it always wears a necklace of fleecy clouds. Even in summer it's frosted with snow. At school we learned that in 327 BC, even before the Buddhists came to Swat, Alexander the Great swept into the valley with thousands of elephants and soldiers on his way from Afghanistan to the Indus. The Swati people fled up the mountain, believing they would be protected by their gods because it was so high. But Alexander was a determined and patient leader. He built a wooden ramp from which his catapults and arrows could reach the top of the mountain. Then he climbed up so he could catch hold of the star of Jupiter as a symbol of his power.

From the rooftop I watched the mountains change with the seasons. In the autumn chill winds would come. In the winter everything was white snow, long icicles hanging from the roof like daggers, which we loved to snap off. We raced around, building snowmen and snow bears and trying to catch