



SHIBANI CHATTOPADHYAY

# An Inventory of Shapes

CHATTOPADHYAY

When I was nine, I realized that there were two ways to draw a chair. I do know that I happened to be nine then for that was the year 1953, the year my father started coming home with a new bottle of perfume for my mother every month. He had been philandering, I guessed. Children can always sense the weariness with which two people hold on to each other just out of habit.

I think that weariness is like a house that cannot live without its owner, and crumbles soon after. I don't remember much of my house anymore, except that its walls were the colour of earwax, and there was a beggar who sometimes ate the moss that grew on the damp wood of our gate leading to the tiny garden. I didn't really think of it as strange then. As a child, I always thought that his concept of hunger was different from mine. I thought I was entitled to throw a tantrum when my *aayah* sometimes put too much salt into the rice cakes, and I insisted that she make me a fresh batch and throw away the old one.

Now I know that it isn't so. I think geometry can be used to symbolise what we are. Everything has a shape. Sleep, happiness, anger, anguish, light and odours as well. Anger is a many-pointed, fierce, pulsating star. Indecisiveness is a circle and you could argue forever about the exact point on its body where the circle starts and

ends. Light is a thin, very thin, silver cylinder that writhes snake-like and hollow. A memory is the shape of a square with a side unhinged.

We all merely peruse through the Inventory of Shapes, borrow the shapes that we think suit us best, and pour ourselves into its mould. Then we un-pour and discard and take up a new one.

I digress.

A chair can be drawn in two ways. You can either sketch the outlines of wood that make it up, or sketch the empty blocks of space that hug the wood. That is how I think I have lived my life as well. Confused as to whether to define it by the absence of things, or by their presence.

I remember the very first bottle of perfume.

It was made of thin blue glass, and when I shook it the liquid inside frothed like some agitated sea. I still have that bottle, along with the others that flocked in after it, like long-lost siblings now reunited.

My mother never used them. Now I have them all kept on a special table, and what I enjoy most, even now, is to mix them up, and then regroup them again and again in the staggering number of variations possible. I can sort them by colour. Size. Cloudiness of the liquid inside. Shapes of the dispenser. Names on their labels. Fonts. Alphabetic. Coded into numbers. Anything.

I always pick a bottle randomly and spray the room with perfume after I inhale in a pinch of the powder, so that Malcolmia does not smell the heady odour of the crystals and know what I have done. I always un-wrap the powder very careful from its silver foil, like a precious newborn. The powder makes my thoughts whirl and shapes fly into my head, till I am left gasping at the sudden rush of euphoria that I feel, and how very simple it is to connect one thought to another. The Effortlessness of Living suddenly seems within my grasp.

I must make a correction.

I *used* to pick the bottles at random before I discovered that the one named ‘Anais—the cloak of beauty’ masked the odour of the powder better than all the others did.