Prologue

I am sitting in the study of my family home in the picturesque foothills of the Himalayas, thinking through the desire for freedom and happiness that is a driving force behind many of the decisions that we take in life. As my thoughts gradually wander across the view of the Doon valley, in which the old city of Dehradun is nestled and which, from my perspective, appears as a peaceful oasis of calm and quiet, I become immediately aware of the contingency of my location. Like many smaller cities in India's new market economy, Dehradun is an overgrown bustling town where the cacophony of horns merges with whirls of smoke and dust, street vendors and overcrowded pavements. Masses of people stream in and out of brand-name stores offering the latest fashion accessories, electronic gadgets and luxury cars. This determined march into the neoliberal market sits against the nostalgic backdrop of this old colonial town, where an embattled past fends off the encroachments of a rapidly mutating present. Numerous idols of gods and goddesses adorn the streets and pavements, often squatting under the dusty majesty of large banyan trees that are scattered across the city, as if to take shelter from the sweltering heat. Loudspeakers deployed by those doing the bidding of local politicians blare interminably, making a brazen appeal to the electorate to return them to power despite a trail of broken promises. Other than the avid spectacle of consumerism, the city has little to show in terms of local 'development'.

But from the aperture of my location, as a light gathering of clouds descends from the mountaintops and covers the valley under a wistful haze, the clamour and clatter of the city resolves into silence. It is a noiseless peace – a freedom from the commotion of the world. How removed this perspective appears to be from the normative order of happiness and understandings of freedom that are continually restless, profit-driven, instrumental, transactional and directed towards an ever elusive goal whose true contours remain obscured.

At this moment, there is some commotion in the living room, which is at the end of a long corridor that separates it from the study. Walking towards the room, I glimpse a sudden undulation, like a wave flattening itself. Even as the snake retreats, I am fully aware that she is searching
for a way out of the house. She finds shelter beneath the skirting of an old, battered chair. All the windows of the room are closed. I stay quiet and remain an observer on the threshold. Her head emerges hesitantly from beneath her temporary haven, and then she swiftly glides towards the fireplace. She is on full display. Nearly five feet long and two inches thick. I see a flash of her yellow underbelly and a maquillage of thin green and black lines that adorn the entire length of her back. I marvel at how she is, inseparably, her very movement – an absolute fusion like fire and heat or water and wetness. She slides completely into the back of the fireplace, and it seems as if she has found her node of withdrawal from any impending threat of harm or danger.

So we wait – the two of us. I am certain now that all she wants is to find her freedom, a way out of the human structures surrounding and incarcerating her.

As the minutes slowly pass, she emerges again, looking sideways and upwards. She moves out of her impermanent refuge and then undertakes the most astonishing act – she gradually raises her entire pulchritudinous and supple form upwards, defying gravity and, also, the construction of her own anatomy. And within a moment she is quite literally standing. She rests on the tip of her tail, and she swivels her long and elegant neck, searching and seeking – a way out. She wants her freedom and to escape from a world that wants little to do with her; and, quite clearly, she wants little to do with it. As she remains fully upright on what seem to be invisible hind legs, I am struck by the surreal quality of this scene. No, there really is a snake standing in my living room!

While I am a mesmerized spectator to her performance, I also immediately have the urge to assist her in resolving her dilemma. I weigh up the different possible interventions. One strategy is a rescue-and-rehabilitation approach that entails grabbing her, putting her in a sack and delivering her to the nearest zoo or vet. There is something entirely imperialistic about this approach, given that I know nothing about snakes and their needs. I acknowledge the need to let go of the salvation mentality and shake off the conceit that I think I know what is best for her. Another option entails her physical destruction. After all, she could harm me. She might be poisonous. She is an intruder, an unwelcome and agitated presence, who has infiltrated my space of familiarity and has the capacity to cause fear and panic; annihilating her would ensure the peace I so cherish.

But then I ask: who is the interloper? Perhaps it is my world that has suddenly, inexplicably manifested in her world, rather than the other way around. Resolution lies not in my taking violent control of her fate, but in my recognizing that the space that we both inhabit should not be
demarcated through the destruction of what we perceive to be ‘Other’ to ourselves. A final option is to adopt her as a pet. It is highly unlikely that she could be assimilated into the normative order of my world, where pets are usually furry, cute and eminently pettable. And she has already displayed her autonomy and subversive potential by defying the gravitational pull of the ‘normal’ order of things through her vertical feat.

It gradually becomes evident to me that none of these options give her what she desires – freedom. She desperately wants to escape her predicament.

As her perpendicular, staff-like posture gradually descends into a spiral that is almost a gesture of surrender, I take advantage of the opportunity to quickly open two windows at a distance from where she is, and then retreat back to my own spot on the threshold of the room. She senses a change, an opportunity, and an alternative possibility of freedom from any of the ones I had considered. With caution as well as excitement, she gradually undulates towards the windows. She raises herself to the ledge, stops and turns in a gesture of acknowledgement towards the human world she is leaving behind, and then slides out of the window and onwards in her journey.