

Fiction

Of stones and fishes

SURAJIT SARKAR

Surajit Sarkar worked for many years with Kishore Bharati, an NGO that was active in Madhya Pradesh in children's education. He was the author and associate director of the well known science programme on Doordarshan, Turning Point, which was awarded Prix Jules Verne as the best science programme on TV at the 11th and 12th International Science Film Festivals at Paris in 1994 and 1995. These days he makes documentary films, one of which, Meals Ready, co-directed with Vani Subramaniam, won the second prize at Film South Asia, Kathmandu, in 1997. He also runs an experimental school at Pachmarhi, Madhya Pradesh. We carry below two of his fictional pieces.

I. Speaking of Stones

I don't know whether any of you have met a gargoyle. It's one of those stumpy, grotesque, lion like creatures that are found beside the arches and lintels of doorways in temples, palaces and other old buildings. Even now, I can't quite decide how to describe our meeting.

It happened in the hot, humid nights just before the rains. Dinner was delayed at the lodgings, and I felt that a quiet walk would clear the heaviness in my head. I stepped out, with no clear idea of where to go, except that I wanted to be myself. Not far from my lodgings lay some ruins, which the clean air, the riotous greenery and the luminous twilight of the clear monsoon evening made too attractive to ignore.

It wasn't too long after that I crossed a ruined doorway at the other end of a grassy patch. At one time it may have been a garden with a driveway, but now a profusion of big leafy plants made it clear that nature was trying hard to make it a jungle once again. There was no evidence of any human visitors, but strangely the thought did not make me tense or frightened.

I paused to wipe the sweat off my forehead. Another time, the sweating might have irritated me, but the complex geometry of the roofless rooms invited me inside. Turning a corner, I discovered that the wall ahead had collapsed in such a way that the remaining stones formed a stairway to take me to the level of the roof.

Going up was easy, the rough stairway being two stones, or a foot and a half wide. There seemed no danger of slipping and as I went up, I received an instant lesson in its

construction. The roofs had been made of wood, or at least had used supporting timbers. These had all fallen, but the notches in the wall were visible and their thickness amazed me. However, there was little time to marvel or imagine as my feet continued to climb beyond this level. Following this unexpected route up, I soon found myself at the next set of supporting timbers, which were still doing what they were supposed to do.

I gingerly stepped onto a stone slab that had once been part of the roof, and was now all that remained of it. Looking around, I found myself on the highest point of the building. The view from here seemed fresh and new, and I scanned the horizons, drinking it all in. The countryside was of rolling hills, flecked with rich greens and browns, transforming into myriad shades of green as it came closer. For many moments I stood there, absorbed in the colours that altered magnificently in the changing twilight. Then, as I edged closer to the parapet, an old but gentle voice from somewhere below said, 'Isn't it terribly tiring in the heat?'

I looked around, expecting to see someone, but there was nothing. Looking around a second time, I thought I could distinguish against the brown and grey stonework the outlines of a toad as big as a cat. And suddenly in the fading light, I came face to face with a pair of deep luminous eyes that were staring back from sockets that seemed to be carved of stone. The face was unmistakably that of a gargoyle. And below the eyes, from slightly open lips, I heard it continue, 'I always find the first steps the hardest.'

Before I am misunderstood, I

would like to inform the reader that my travels have taken me to distant places, introducing me to creatures unbelievable but true. But as yet, I had not met any of the speaking kind. Quite unprepared to find this unknown creature using the same tongue as mine, I was surprised into silence as it painfully hopped to my level. Only later did I remember that the building had a row of gargoyles on every side, perched on columns and seeming to hold up the roof and walls on their back.

These and other now forgotten thoughts flashed through my mind, even as my eyes were drinking the creature in. The colour and texture of its skin were no different from the walls below and beside it. Yet, once it moved, I had no difficulty in knowing where it was. The light came off its body in a way quite different from the other stones.

Today, as I look back, it seems that I was less surprised and more aghast at what I was seeing. After all, all ruins look mysterious in the half light of dusk, especially when they are moist and mossy and overwhelmed by creepers. My mind's eye had been conjuring faces and shapes amongst the patches of damp and, not surprisingly, for a moment I believed that one of those had come alive.

'Oh hello,' the creature said, breaking what had become an embarrassing silence, 'Do you mind stepping to one side. The floor is a bit weak here.' I stepped back obediently, with no other thought.

The gargoyle probably took my silence as permission to carry on talking. I did not know at the time that a gargoyle almost always has its way, unless you step in first. It told me that I was the fourth person that month to come into the ruins, and the only one who had done so in the dark. That my wife loved me very much, and my friends thought I was eccentric. That the bus I had to catch in the morning would leave late enough for me to get a seat ...

By this time, thoughts and questions of all kinds had started rushing into my mind, as if making up for the earlier moments of stunned surprise. I could not restrain my curiosity any longer. 'A moment please,' I ventured, 'A moment please.'

The gargoyle stopped. Politely he asked me to carry on speaking, apologizing for the way he just went on and on. 'Who are you? And what are you doing here?' I asked. Hearing this, the creature became quite

offended and reminded me that I had no business to ask that. This was his house, he was created here, and to the best of his knowledge he would die here. And knowing that he would die at the place of his birth, despite travelling far and wide, was, for him, the greatest sorrow.

The sadness of his tone made me feel sorry. But I was overwhelmed by the desire to find out how he knew so much about me. 'How old do you think we stones are?' replied the gargoyle. 'I even know of the day you ran away from home, just as your grandfather did.' In an instant, I realized that the creature was not going to give me the answers I expected. It's twisted replies only seemed like answers but were questions themselves, which I was unprepared to tackle. It became clear that if I did not keep my wits during the conversation, I would lose either my turn or my partner.

Changing the topic, I asked him how much he had seen of the world, and he said that he had seen most of it. I remarked that he had already achieved what I aspired to do, and wondered what made him travel so much. He replied that the ruins made him think of his own death, and such a thought always made him restless. But that in no way meant that he was always on the move, as only rarely could he find someone to come in and take his place.

On hearing this, I walked to the edge of the parapet and looked down on the other side. I had seen a row of gargoyles sitting near the arches when I had crossed the garden, and was expecting to see a vacant place there. But there was no such thing. From the top, it looked like the walls of any ruin, all petrified stone, cracked and worn with age. And between them, an unbroken row of weathered stone gargoyles, still holding up what remained of their burden.

The gargoyle had by now moved past where I had stood, and was hobbling painfully down the wall. I moved fast to catch him, trying to see as much of him before the moonless night swallowed what remained of my sight. When we were together again on the makeshift stairway, I turned to face the creature, and in doing so blocked its way.

'What's your hurry,' I remarked, asking him where he was off to.

'To meet my family,' was the simple reply, as he turned this way and that around my feet.

'And where may they be?' I asked again, the words coming slowly as I wondered how much of his replies I should believe.

The gargoyle stopped fidgeting, leant back on its haunches and looked up at me. Peering in the fast fading light, I could see it take on an expressionless look, though its eyes never stopped twinkling for a moment. 'It's your choice whether you want to believe me or not,' he said, unnervingly reading my thought again, 'but I am not lonely, nor am I a freak. I am one of many brothers and sisters, cut from a quarry by people of your kind a long, long time ago.'

The gargoyle was sitting half crouched, its body angled away from me. Questions came faster into my mind as the light disappeared. 'Who taught you to speak like us?'

'Why should I not speak like you, if I am one of you.'

I could not believe that the creature and me had anything in common. I said so aloud, only to hear, 'Where do you think your words will go after your tongue is all ashes and dust?'

Before I could respond to this, he jumped off the wall onto the ground below. And as he was swallowed up by the night, I could see the hobble change into larger and faster bounds that covered the garden in an instant and took him out of my sight.

II. Graphites

Kent's *Materia Medica* of homeopathic medicines lists among Graphites' many symptoms: 'Object passing rapidly through one's vision.' I was amused when I discovered it, and then forgot all about it, till one day...

I thought I saw something splash out of the water. There was nothing to see except ripples crossing one another on the surface of the tank. My eyes travelled across the submerged step, all the way to the far bank on the right. Still nothing. I looked back. The fisherman shrugged his shoulders. The little girl turned to face the humming tank.

'You forget me very soon. Is that how much fishing interests you?'

Even before I turned around I knew it was a fish. The low hum in my ears didn't hurt, but lent a haunted air to the situation. It looked like the large and powerful fish that had not so long ago escaped from our grasp. The fish did not have the silly, wide-eyed, undecided look that market place fish have. The look in this one's eyes and the set of its mouth

seemed almost human. Feeling I should not disappoint this unusual creature, I replied, 'You're not like the other fish that my friend here would recognize, I'm sure of that.'

My words were ignored. 'Do me a favour. Will you carry me to the big tank across?'

'Okay, I will.' I called the fisherman over. The girl by this time had begun yelling 'magic fish, magic fish' and getting in our way. But once she figured out how the two of us were planning to pick and move the fish, she took position alongside. And as I picked the fish by its tail and the fisherman held it across its chest, she placed both her hands, palm down, on its scales.

'It's not the same fish that we'd caught earlier,' said the fisherman. 'That one was lighter and somewhat more slippery.'

The fish laughed, or at least I thought it did. I heard it, but remembered too late to see how it was done. 'That's what you think? But neither of your friends think that way, do they?'

I looked at the girl. 'It's the same magic fish. And I know it.' This description was neither very helpful nor explained how I was sure of what I knew. 'I know this is the same fish, but I don't know why,' I said.

'Yes, it was me that time as well. But you people jumped at me too soon. So I slid through easily, just like that, just the way they said it would be.'

'Excuse me, who said what about whom?,' I interrupted, quite unable to follow the train of these words. And so he explained it once again, and we got talking, and the conversation had really begun to flow as we topped the ridge at the rim of the tank. In front of us was a vast expanse of water, almost like a lake, fringed on two sides by trees and on the other two by a wall twice a man's height. The regularity was broken at a number of places by stone steps that came around the water's edge.

'Stop,' said the fish in our arms. 'If you don't mind, could you take me to those blocks, the farthest ones on your left? The ones near the trees?'

'I don't think I should be doing this at all,' said the fisherman, 'carrying a fish that talks, and then helping it go off again.' The girl, who had been walking beside us, suddenly ducked below the animal and ran across and ahead. 'This way, this way! I know the way,' she insisted. I noticed that the hum in my ears had fallen to a level that

seemed a part of the landscape. I began to wonder if my ears were really not deceiving me, but were in fact receiving sounds created by some freak of nature. In much the same way as the broad shallow waves ebbed and surged across the lake, without even the slightest trace of a storm.

'It'll take us a while to reach there. Would you want to hear what I have to tell?'

'Yes, of course,' I said to the fish, or more correctly, to what I could see of its face from behind and an arm's length above.

'Well, life in the water is only one of its kind. We know what is happening even as it is happening to us.' I couldn't follow this easily, and the back of the fisherman's neck stiffened. Trick words, I could hear him say to his cronies later in the evening.

'Do any of you know what dying is like? I know, because I've heard the dying describe what is happening. And it always happens the same way.'

I could see the fisherman's interest growing as the fish finished speaking. 'Do you mean to say that suddenly one morning a fish knows its going to be caught in a net...That's bad!'

'It's not in a morning or something. Nor does it happen only to one of us. All of us know. It's like we're all part of the knowing, but usually we can do nothing, we just let it be.'

'So when do you not agree with what you know?'

'When it comes suddenly, without warning, like the touch of her hands when I did not expect it.'

'So what do you do then?'

'Very little, or a lot. Depends on how you see it. I could have squirmed out of your grip, but didn't. On the other hand, the fish in the big lake know I'm coming, but can do very little about it.'

I thought that the animal's sense of the dramatic was getting the better of him. I decided to ignore it, and waited for it to continue. But the others stepped in, speaking simultaneously.

'So that's why the lake looks as if a storm is blowing over it,' said the girl.

I swear the fish actually turned its head to look at the fisherman. 'Children know quite a lot. Actually, they're a bit like fish themselves. I've had fun at times playing with them.'

Our destination was near, and I

was curious to learn what may be happening beneath the ruffled waters of the lake. 'What's happening in there,' I asked, indicating towards the water.

'Not much, for you at least. They're just passing the word around that someone from a different water is coming, and they're apprehensive.'

'By the looks of it, they're expecting a storm,' I said.

'That's why I asked to be let down near the trees. For a while I'll stay between their roots at the water's edge. The water gets all confusing there. It's half land, half water, so tank-fish give it a wide berth. It's not really necessary for them to go there anyway. There's enough food elsewhere and easily reached too.'

'You're a funny fellow,' said the fisherman, 'crossing over just to hide.'

'You're very impatient for a fisherman. Why do you think nothing happened when I jumped out?'

'I know,' said the child, 'They knew you were leaving. So they didn't do anything.'

'Exactly. Now will you please just drop me in the water to your right. Just here. Don't worry too much about me. They'll get used to me soon. Bye.'

Saying so, it burst free from our grasp with a jerk that caused me to slip while it leapt away to fall into the water beside the irregularly arranged blocks of stone. A final climb to the surface, and then it was off swimming away in the direction of the trees.

The three of us stood looking at the trees at the water's edge for a few long moments. Something began to feel different, quieter. The hum in my ears seemed to have disappeared. Strange, how it began when the fish entered the scene and disappeared with its exit. Walking back, I happened to mention this to the fisherman. Stolid as ever, he said, 'What hum? It was a buzz. Thought it was a headache or something since you didn't seem to talk about it.'

I called out to the girl who was running noisily some distance ahead. 'Did you hear something while we were carrying the fish?'

'Yes, someone was whistling a tune. It was something like this, Wooooo wooooo wo wo wo wooooo woooo wo wo wo wo wo woo woo woo...'

Kent's *Materia Medica* recommends Graphites for noises heard while in motion.