How does a potato experience life? It is hard to answer this question as potatoes are vastly different from us. They have no brain or method of speaking but they are alive none the less. They might have a story or two to tell us but the question is, “How do we tell it?” This is what Italo Calvino accomplished when he wrote his stories staring Qwfwq. Through Qwfwq Calvino can explore our universe in all sorts of bizarre ways. Qwfwq allows this, because he provides a relatable human element that allowed us to identify with the story.

When you pick up a story, you are not just reading words. “Words mean things. . . . But the use of language in fiction only mimics its use in life.” (Gass 30) Human writers, write stories for other humans to read. This is not a coincidence. Each story speaks to us on many levels as a person. This isn’t just a philosophical outlook on writing either. Jonathan Gottschall writes about the neuroscience of mirror neurons in his book, “The Storytelling Animal”:

Many scientists now believe we have neural networks that activate when we perform an action or experience an emotion, and also when we observe someone else performing an action or experiencing an emotion. . . . But whether mirror neurons turn out to be the ultimate explanation or not, we know from laboratory studies that stories affect us physically, not just mentally. When the protagonist is
in a tight corner, our hearts race, we breathe faster, and we sweat more.

(Gottschall 60-61)

When reading a story, we latch onto actions, desires, and situations that are similar to those we have experienced. This is what lets us transition between reality and fiction, and without these elements we are left in a lurch. Even in a situation where humanity wouldn’t apply, we have to involve human experience somewhere for context. It is Qwfwq’s personality and experiences that we can latch on to in Calvino’s stories.

Qwfwq is something akin to a jet-setting wonder-man who changes shape to match the needs of the story and the time period within the particular story he is in. In “The Aquatic Uncle” Qwfwq is a “creature” living on the land. The method of his narration is conversational, as if he were talking to you across the table at a café. He doesn’t just state the facts, but meanders from subject to subject as he introduces the story. Qwfwq’s great-uncle N’ba N’ga was stubborn (who doesn’t have a relative like this?) and Qwfwq was trying to get N’ba N’ga to look beyond the shore of the water.

‘You can clean those revolting warts you’ve got with your stinking cockroaches!’

Our great-uncle’s answer was always some remark of this sort, or perhaps even ruder: this is how he welcomed us every time, but we paid no attention because we knew he would mellow after a little while, accept our presents gladly, and converse in politer tones.’ (Calvino 70)

N’ba N’ga is a stubborn old coot who is stuck in his ways, and only frustrates Qwfwq and the rest of his family when they try to get him out of the lagoon. He is reluctant to introduce his fiancé, Lll, to his great-uncle on the grounds that N’ba N’ga would be considered backwards.
Qwfwq is floored when LL enjoys N’ba N’ga’s company and then his great-uncle steals LL by convincing her to return to the water. The story highlights the struggles that life underwent as the world evolved. Qwfwq helped humanize the evolutionary process. The frustration, loneliness, the abandonment of species left in the dust as life advanced ever forward.

Qwfwq plays around with the speed of light as well. In “The Light-Years” he plays the role of a stargazer who sees the most curious sign in a nearby galaxy. It is his anxiety over what this sign reads that drives the story.

“On it was written: I SAW YOU. . . . Even before I checked my diary to see what I had been doing that day, I was seized by a ghastly presentiment: exactly two hundred millions years before, not a day more nor a day less, something had happened to me that I had always tried to hide.” (Calvino 123)

Each statement that is sent back and forth is done over ever increasing time periods as the two galaxies move apart. Then he started to see more signs pop up. His anxiety is cemented around the fact that there will be a point where some galaxies will be moving too fast for them to see his signs explaining the situation. At the start of the story Qwfwq sounds like he never considered that the other galaxies were looking in on him. With the revelation that others were watching him, he began to become more self-conscious. It is this that leads to hilarity as he designs two signs, one to attract attention to him, and another to distract people. He then struggles between deciding he wants attention or if he doesn’t. It is social interaction on a galactic scale that he has to deal with, and any infraction on his part takes millennia to correct as the light of his actions has to take time to reach the other galaxy. It doesn’t matter in the end as the other galaxies are speeding away too fast for his light to catch up and people could no longer
see him anymore. Qwfwq is relieved by this fact as he is no longer being scrutinized, and therefore doesn’t have to constant jump through sociological hoops while juggling signs. In many ways it is the evaluation of the person and society together. The person desires its own space, whereas the society wants people to be part of it.

The conflict between people, regardless of whether it is physical or societal, is important to writers. Calvino touches on this with particles in “The Form of Space.” Qwfwq is a particle in a parallel descent with two other particles, Ursula H’x, and Lieutenant Fenimore. Each character is a particle that predates the origin of Earth. They are distinctly human and have human drives. Ursula is a woman who toys with the emotions of the Fenimore and Qwfwq, and Fenimore is a super-macho military man (prior to the existence of anything resembling a military mind you) with his bandoliers and decorations. Both “men” want Ursula, neither wants the other to have her. As they are all falling on a parallel course, they will never meet until a far off reaching point where the parallel lines meet. And this brings not only hope, but fear to Qwfwq.

“Even the most beautiful dreams can suddenly turn into nightmares, and then it occurred to me that the meeting point of our two parallels might also be the point at which all parallels existing in space eventually meet, and so it would mark not only my meeting with Ursula H’x but also – dreadful prospect – a meeting with Lieutenant Fenimore. . . . This thought was enough to plunge me into the most tormented jealous hallucinations” (Calvino 115)

As particles falling on a parallel course, neither could influence the other. Frustrated as any person would be in this situation, they did what they could and took turns sniping at each other through Ursula. Qwfwq gains an understanding of how space works and uses it to try to kill
Fenimore by attacking him. Like many people, Qwfwq became fixated on something that opposed him, rather than using the same knowledge to seek meet up with Ursula. Fenimore and Qwfwq fight back and forth, struggling in the fabric of space. They never kill each other yet constantly fight while Ursula pays no attention to them. Neither of Qwfwq's desires will be fulfilled, he will never kill Fenimore, nor will he meet up with Ursula. Stuck on their parallel paths, they will always see each other, but never be able to affect the other.

With a focus on interaction between people and the appearance of one within society, Qwfwq plays a dinosaur in Calvino's “The Dinosaurs.” The story starts off with Qwfwq’s idle musing as to what brought down the great race of reptiles. There are numerous explanations, though most are descriptions of things that plague societies everywhere: plague, pride, and outside pressures to name a few. In the story, dinosaurs are still feared by the New Ones, but it is obvious they have never seen a dinosaur.

‘Hey, you!’ They had spied me, and I was amazed at this familiar way of addressing me. . . . ‘Hey, you!’ They came over to me casually, neither hostile nor frightened. . . . ‘What made you run off?’ one of them said. ‘You looked as if you’d seen . . . a Dinosaur!’ (Calvino 94)

The irony is that the New Ones were addressing a dinosaur. He is brought to their village and they welcome him tentatively. This raises a question on what a dinosaur is, and the definition of the word. How does one describe that which he has never seen? Over the course of the story Dinosaur means many things. At first it is something to be feared. “The Dinosaurs were portrayed as so many monsters . . . and depicted as intent only on harming the New Ones.” (Calvino 97) Then there is the use of Dinosaur in rivalries depicted when Qwfwq and Zahn fight:
“Then one of the observers yelled: ‘Give it to him Dinosaur!’ . . . Convinced I had been discovered, I couldn’t get my bearings; it was only later that I understood the cry ‘Dinosaur’ was a habit of theirs, to encourage the rivals in a fight, as if to say: ‘Go on, you’re the stronger one!’ and I wasn’t even sure whether they had shouted the word at me or at Zahn.” (Calvino 100)

With the discovery of a Dinosaur’s skeleton in the mountains, the word then came to imply pity and loss. Dinosaur came to represent the fear of the unknown, the vigor of conflict, and then it became a specter of death. The evolution of the word, like the world, showed that words have form and shape and are mutable. Dinosaurs were dead, yet they still lived on in the imaginations of the New Ones as the ancient and unknown. We give words meaning to define our world around us, to make it a more familiar place.

Italio Calvino’s “The Complete Cosmicomics” shows that with enough personality one can tell a story from anything. When we pick up a book, we try to find ourselves in it and as long as we can recognize the human elements we will never be lost. Whether it is the conflicts between characters or the recognizable desires between them, they provide a foothold for the reader. Qwfwq’s mutability and character allowed for truly bizarre situations to be explored, from the evolution of life to the interactions of particles in space.

“How does a potato experience life?” Well, first you have to start looking through its eyes.
Works Cited


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