

STONE

I place the stone on a table-top, and stare at it for a long time. I have already found that it can settle in three positions, which I have decided to call 'on the back', 'nose down' and 'upright'. It seemed somehow natural to describe these positions by analogy to postures I could adopt myself on a level surface such as the floor. I could lie on my back, I could roll over and hit the floor with the tip of my nose, or I could stand up. But just as I feel more comfortable lying on my back than with my nose pressed to the floor, so with the stone, on-the-back seemed like the obvious position for it to adopt. So when I now lay the stone on the table, it is with the back down and the nose up.

The nose is a strange protuberance that sticks upwards and outwards from one side of the stone. Even more strangely, a linear notch around the base of the nose gives the appearance that it has been stuck on. The region of the Langhe Hills, in northern Italy, from which this particular specimen comes, is notorious for its peculiar stones, which are shaped like squishy blobs pressed together and cemented where their surfaces come into contact. As these composites were further ground down by the forces of erosion, the plane of contact would be outlined in cross-section around the surface. In the case of our stone, only a tiny piece remains of what must once have been a more sizeable blob. This is the nose, and the line at its base surrounds all that is left of the contact plane.

But laying the stone on its back reveals another odd feature. About a third of the way across, the upper surface is bisected by an absolutely straight line. Perhaps, when still embedded in its rocky matrix, the stone was fractured, and later resealed. In its subsequent erosion, it has worn more along the join than beyond it, leading to a slight but nevertheless perceptible 'valley' that cuts through the surface along the fracture line. Investigating further, I turn the stone over and find that the line goes all the way round. It is there on the back as well. The back itself is rather flat, if slightly pockmarked. But the line is clearly visible. Intersecting it, however, at an oblique angle, is a faint groove; maybe caused by some hard-edged object having scraped the surface. Yet the point at which the groove meets the line on one side is displaced by around a centimetre from the point from which it continues on the other side. This tells us not only that the scrape happened before the fracture - when this face, at least, was already exposed to the elements - but also that the fracture itself must have been longitudinal.

Now, following my detailed examination on the back and nose down, I place the stone in its upright position, standing on the only side that is sufficiently level to afford a balance. I soon discover, however, that there are actually two positions, one - let us call it position N - leans slightly towards the side of the nose, the other - position B - leans rather more towards the backside. A light touch with a finger is enough to tilt our stone from one position to the other: a touch from the back sends it from B to N; a touch from the front from N to B. But these movements are not quite the same. With B to N, the stone settles instantly into its new equilibrium. But with N to B it always rebounds just a little, and again and again in a rapidly diminishing series that fades out after less than a second.

As I tilt the stone back and forth between its two upright positions, touching first from the backside and then from the nose-side, and listen to the alternation between the single tap with N and the series with B, I close my eyes. At that moment, everything changes. The stone, as a solid object, vanishes. In its place is just the sound. 'Tap ... did-didlid', it says; 'tap ... did-didlid'. But then I find that if I touch with slightly greater force, from the nose side only, the rebound on landing at position B is enough to send it right back to N. Then the stone says: 'De-di-tap, de-di-tap'. And if I keep touching after every 'tap', with just the right force, I can keep this going indefinitely. The stone, no longer an object that I stare *at*, face-to-face, has become a movement I join *with*. We, the stone and I, are going along together, oriented in the same direction. With my finger, it beats to the same rhythm. Yet the rhythm is all too easily lost. Apply the finger a moment too soon, or with insufficient force, and the stone settles in position B without rebounding to N. 'Didlidl', it says - 'you've lost it'. But apply too much force, and it tips right over, crashing onto its backside. 'Bang!'

And that's where I find it now, collapsed on its back, apparently stone dead. Still with my eyes closed, I feel all over for signs of life. Can it be revived? Touching the tip of the nose, I discover that I can press it down a little, and that as I do so a momentary vibration is set up which I can not only hear but also feel through my finger - which acts, in this case, as a damper. But as soon as the pressure is released the stone tips back to its equilibrium position, delivering a tap on the table-top from near the other end, furthest from the nose. That's all it can do. So I decide to turn it over to the nose-down position; perhaps this will open up greater possibilities. The stone is now balanced on a crest that divides the nose and the valley, on the one side, from the rest of the body, on the other. Press along the line of the crest, and nothing happens. To press and release on either side of this dividing line, however, sets up a see-saw movement that can continue for several seconds, beginning with loud taps as the body of the stone strikes the table-top, and then fading into a gentle rocking about the rounded crest. The stone, in my ears at least, has come back to life.

Who says that stones cannot speak? Most of us, if asked. We are pretty convinced that stones are inanimate objects, and that they are therefore incapable of moving of their own accord. And without movement, how can there be sound, let alone speech? We only have to close our eyes, however, for this argument to fall apart. For at that moment, the stone ceases to be an object. It exists in our awareness only as a going-on, as it is caught up in the relations and processes of the world in which it occurs. Even our visual examination of the stone has revealed traces of these movements - of compression, fracture and erosion - from long before there were humans to inspect the consequences. Now, of course, it is we who set the stone in motion. But as the finger-rhythm of 'de-di-tap' shows, the stone moves us as much as we move it. The stone, then, resounds. But does it speak? Not if we think of speech as a means to communicate information or ideas. The stone, indeed, has nothing to say. But we know that there's more to speech than that. For it is by the sounds of speech - by our voices - that we make ourselves heard. Everyone has a different voice, and is recognisable by it. And so, as our

experiments have shown, does the stone. It too speaks when provoked, announcing its presence just as we do. 'Tap ... did-didlidl!'