One day a hoopoe was digging for worms. ‘Tuk’, went her beak into the ground. ‘Tuk tuk tuk’. And out came a fat and juicy worm. The hoopoe quickly swallowed the worm. ‘Tuk’ went her beak again. ‘Tuk tuk tuk...’ There was plenty to eat.

But just as the hoopoe had dug up another worm, something came out of the sky and flew straight at her. Missing her by inches, it sailed past her and fell in a heap near a bush.
“Hoo-po-po, hoo-po-po!” cried the hoopoe, frightened almost to death. Her crest flicked open and shut in terror. She dropped the worm and flew away as fast as her wings could beat. In a flash she had found shelter in a babul tree.
Slowly her heart stopped thudding. What was it that had flown at her? Suddenly the hoopoe made up her mind. She had to find out what it was. “Hoo-po-po,” she cried and flew straight back to where she had been feeding.

The hoopoe alighted softly on the other side of the bush. She craned her neck and looked from between the branches. There was something on the ground. A large bundle, white in colour. The hoopoe picked up courage and went around the bush. Slowly, till she was close to the bundle. It
had two feet sticking out from underneath. Large, webbed feet.

What she saw surprised her, so she forgot herself. “Hoo-po-po,” she cried loud and hard, for the bundle had a beak, too. Deep yellow in colour. It was the largest beak the hoopoe had ever seen. The hoopoe alighted close to the beak and ran up and down the ground measuring its length. “Ten paces!” she cried. “The bundle has a beak ten paces long! Hoo-po-po!” She would have made off again but a voice behind her said, “Don’t go away. Please.”

The hoopoe spun around and saw a pair of eyes looking at her. Big, shiny, golden eyes. The hoopoe stepped back a bit. “Hoo-po-po,” she said softly. “Who...who are you?”

“A pelican,” came the reply. “A bird, like you.”

“But you are so big.”

“There are big birds and small birds,” said the pelican.

“But your feet are not like mine. They are webbed.”
“That is because I need to swim in the water and catch fish. My beak is big so that I can hold the fish fast.”

“And why do you have that bag under your beak?”

“To keep the fish safe till I can eat them.”

“Oh, I see,” said the hoopoe, “a kind of built-in shopping bag.”

The pelican nodded. “I am hungry,” he said. “Can you get me something to eat?”

“But, of course,” replied the hoopoe, “one minute. I will be right back.”

She flew away and was soon back, carrying a worm in her beak. “There,” she said proudly, “how is that for a snack?”

The pelican looked away. “I don’t eat worms,” he said. “I only eat fish.”
“Isn’t that being rather fussy? Now we hoopoes will eat anything—worms, termites, insects, grasshoppers. But if it is fish you want, you have come to the wrong place. There is no water anywhere around.”

The pelican shifted a bit as if in pain. “I didn’t come here of my own free will,” he said. “A hunter shot a pellet at me and I fell to the ground.”

“Oh, how terrible for you! Does it hurt much?”

“It does, but it will heal. Thank heavens, the pellet went right through the wing and didn’t break any bones.”

“But where were you going?”

“Ah, that is a long, long story,” said the pelican.

“A story!” cried the hoopoe. “Oh, do tell me. Hoo-po-po, hoo-po-po.”

“I am only a visitor here in India,” began the pelican, after shifting into a comfortable position. “My real home is in Central Asia. I was born there one summer, in a nest, high up in a tree. The tree stood near a lake. My father and mother looked after me and brought me fish to eat all day, day after day. There were lots of other nests in the tree too, each with a pair of pelicans bringing up their babies.
“All through summer the pelicans stayed there while their babies grew up and learnt to fly. But slowly summer came to an end. Winter was coming. I knew I would have to go, flying thousands of miles down south, to India, where winter was not so cold. All the other pelicans also knew it. And one fine morning, when the eastern sky had just turned pink, we rose on our strong wings and flew away.
“We flew over lakes and forests, over the mighty snow-covered Himalayas, and deep valleys where rivers ran their course. At last we reached the plains of India. We settled down near a lake full of fish. And there we stayed till the weather began to turn warm and a dry wind began to blow. Then we took wing again and flew all the way back to our home in Central Asia.

“That was the first time for me. Since then I have done it every year of my life, along with my family and friends. Summer in Central Asia and winter in India, six months there and six months here.”
“It must be tough, flying thousands of miles twice a year,” said the hoopoe.
“It is tough, but we pelicans have done it for many hundreds of years. Other birds have done it, too. Swans and cranes, ducks and geese.”
“But why?”
“Because we can’t live the year through in one place. Winter in Central Asia is too cold. All the lakes and rivers freeze. We get no fish to eat so we come away to India. But summer in India is too hot. Many of the ponds and lakes dry up, so we must go back. Besides, Central Asia is our homeland. We must return every year to build our nests, lay eggs and raise our families.”
“Hoo-po-po,” said the hoopoe. “So you are a visitor here and you are hurt. We must look after you.”
“Just find me a lake close by with fish in it. Do you know of such a lake?” asked the pelican.
“Not me,” said the hoopoe. “I am a land bird... But some of my friends would know.”
“If only I could get to a lake with fish in it, I could stay there till my wing heals and I can fly again.”
“And then?”
“And then I will fly away to join my family and friends. I know just where they have gone. We go there every year. It is a lovely, large lake, further south from here and it is brimming with fish...”
“What is all this talk about a lake and fish?” said a voice from the grass. And out popped a giant toad. “Who wants to go to a lake with fish in it?” he asked. “I know exactly where to find one.”
“Do you?” cried the hoopoe.
“Do you?” cried the pelican.
“Yes, yes. All my cousins live there. And lots of water birds, too—herons, paddy birds, cranes and kingfishers.”
“Take me there, please,” begged the pelican.
“Sure,” said the toad. “I will start hopping eastward right away and you follow me. By tomorrow we will be there.”
The pelican looked at the hoopoe. “Thank you for everything, my friend,” said he. “I will come and see you again next year. Same time. Same place.”
The hoopoe cocked her head to one side. “Next year,” she repeated. “Same time, same place. Hoo-po-po, hoo-po-po.” And she stood watching for a long, long time as the pelican turned and walked away after the toad.
The Visitor won first prize in the Picture Book category of the Competition for Writers of Children’s Books organised by Children’s Book Trust. The other books by the author, published by CBT, are Barber at the Zoo, A Bowl of Water, Havildar Oopi, and Titbits for Tiki.

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