

WALKS WITH RED DOG

by

Jim Conrad

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DEDICATION:

This book was written for my mother, Edna Taylor Conrad.

Red Dog on the Porch

Red Dog was special.

He was not one of those dogs who with other dogs ran howling into the wind. He just loved walking with me. Sometimes, on the gravel road, he walked so close that his bright red fur brushed against my leg.

"Red Dog," I'd say, "each morning when we meet for the first time, why do you always look so glad?"

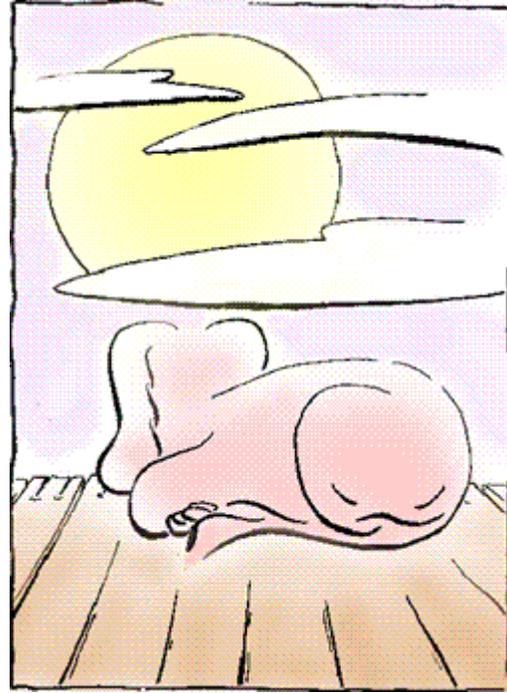
Of course, Red Dog never did reply with words. If he wanted to say something, he spoke with his eyes, or the bend in his tail. However, since we were friends, that was enough.

At night, Red Dog slept on the front porch. Lying there, dreaming dreams of long summer days and endless walks, his night-world filled up with the moon and stars, hoot-owl hoots, and ghostly white fogs that crept silently into the fields.

Between dreams, I think that Red Dog must have awakened, raised his head, and looked around. Maybe then he became a little lonely. And probably he wondered why I got to sleep inside, but he had to sleep on the porch...

But, you see, Red Dog lived in a time when country dogs such as he were not allowed inside their masters' homes. In those days, most people didn't even believe that dogs had feelings, though I did.

Yes, during those days when we walked in the fields and woods, Red Dog and I helped one another see things in special ways. Weedy roadsides were like museums and the fields of corn and beans around us were like circuses with many rings.

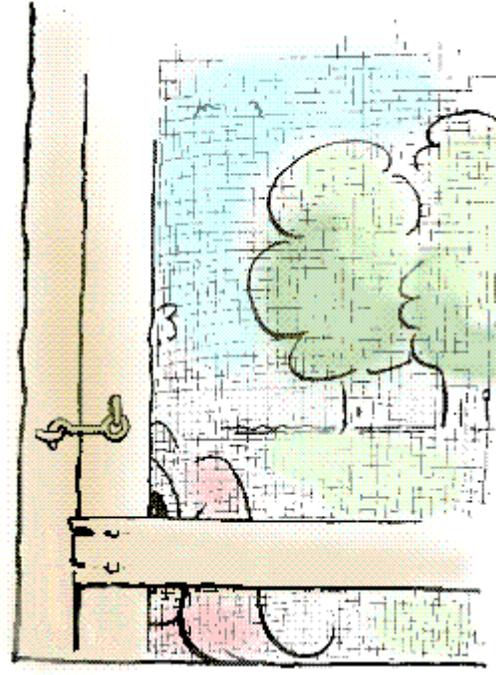


Mysteries

In Red Dog's life, no mystery was greater than that of *the house*.

Though Red Dog could romp in any field or woods, or take a nap beside any road or ditch, never could he enter *the house*. The only place I ever went without him was into *the house*. If I came outside wearing clothes different from those I had worn when I entered *the house*, Red Dog would look at me in amazement.

"Red Dog," I'd say, "do you think that when I go inside the house I become someone else? Do you think that inside the house I travel to other worlds, or do magical things? When you stand beside the screen door hearing voices and music on the radio, do you think that inside I'm having a party with elves and gnomes?"



Sometimes I laughed when I thought about what Red Dog must have imagined as he sat outside the screen door. Yes: What went on inside Red Dog's mind was *my* favorite mystery.

Once I thought about letting Red Dog come inside -- just for a few moments -- so I could watch his face as he looked around.

But, I never did.

Cricket Chimes & Sunlight

"Nowadays," I said to Red Dog, "I think that every single moment, day and night, we can hear crickets chirping."

Walking along the gravel road, I saw yellow sunlight and cricket chirps mingle together so that they became just one thing -- a beautiful kind of *sunlight-music*! And this sunlight-music was something that we could *walk* through...

"But, sometimes I forget to listen to the crickets, and I forget to feel the sunlight," Red Dog heard me say. "For example, Red Dog, sometimes I have thoughts that make me sad... "

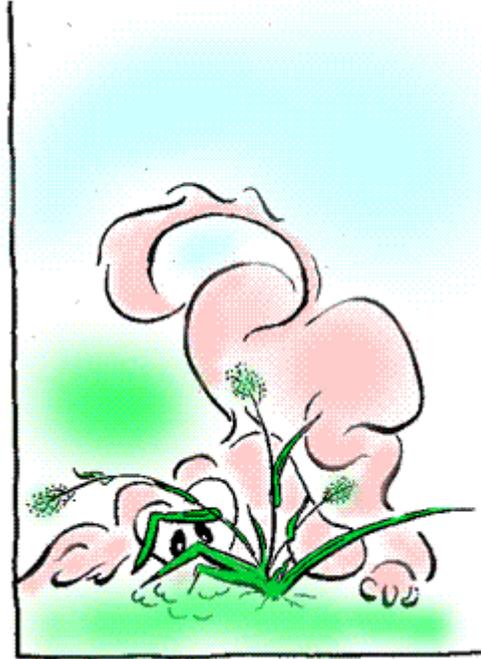
For a second a sad thought crossed my mind. However, then I remembered that sunlight mixed with cricket chirps becomes something cheerful to walk through, so I just kept walking, feeling good again.

"Red Dog," I said, "whenever we want to be happy, we should just listen for crickets, and walk outside so that sunlight can play on our faces and arms. Why, maybe if we'd pay attention to crickets and sunlight *all* the time, we'd *never* feel sad. Red Dog, what causes us sometimes to forget to listen to crickets, and to notice how cheery the sunlight around us is?"

To see what Red Dog thought, I glanced down to see the expression on his face. But, he wasn't there. Then I looked behind me. Far away, with his nose poked into the grass, Red Dog was sniffing at a mouse's trail.

"He hasn't heard a word I've said," I whispered to myself. "However, just because I *thought* he was listening, I spoke all those words about sunlight and cricket-chirps, and that made me happy. Yes: Red Dog is good for me, even when he's just being himself and not thinking about me at all... "

I waited for Red Dog to catch up. Maybe he didn't understand why I knelt beside him and hugged him when we were together again.



The Pond

The whirligig-beetle spun its whirlpool on the pond's surface. Of course, when Red Dog reached out with his paw to touch the whirlpool, the whirlpool shattered and the whirligig-beetle skittered toward the pond's center.

When the water's surface was quiet again, it reflected the bright, silvery sky. Seeing this, I remembered last winter when the pond was bright and silvery because it was covered with ice. Oh, Red Dog and I remember what a hard winter that one was!

In fact, when March came and the pond thawed, we couldn't find a single live fish in it. They'd all frozen and died... !

Therefore, one morning in April, Red Dog and I went to Semiway Lake and caught a dozen pregnant, mother minnows. We carried them home in an old pickle jar and we let them go in this pond.

And then, before long, each minnow mother gave birth to dozens of minnow children, and soon those minnow children were grown, bearing their own children. Now *hundreds* of minnows played at the water's surface. Now the pond was *alive* with minnow-made ripples and all kinds of cheerful gurgles and splashes.

"Red Dog," I said, "the fish we turned loose here last April seemed lost and afraid. But now that summer is here they know that this is their home, and they are happy. In March, this pond was such a sad place, but now it is happy again... "

Below, reflected on the water's surface, Red Dog saw me drawing close to hug him.

"Before you came to me, Red Dog," I said, "I was like this pond in March. But, now I have you..."



June Apples

"*Curse* those June apples," I growled. "June apples... June... June... applesssssssss..."

And then I slept until another awakening.

However, Red Dog did not sleep at all. He worried about *who* or *what* was making those horrid noises. He whined and scratched at the screen door.

Usually, with a touch of my hands or the look of my face, I could tell Red Dog what he needed to know. However, that night, no hands or eyes could say, "Red Dog, it's just June apples falling onto the shed's tin roof."

When morning came, Red Dog and I ate breakfast in a place different from usual. As the sun burned dew off spiderwebs and grassblades, we ate beneath the apple tree beside the tractor shed. It was not long before the thing I was waiting for happened:

Bang!

A June apple dropped from the tree, rumbled across the tin roof, fell over the shed's eaves and plopped onto the ground at Red Dog's feet.

In an instant Red Dog understood the *who* and the *what* of the night before. He looked at me and his face laughed in a way that said, "So, now I understand...!"



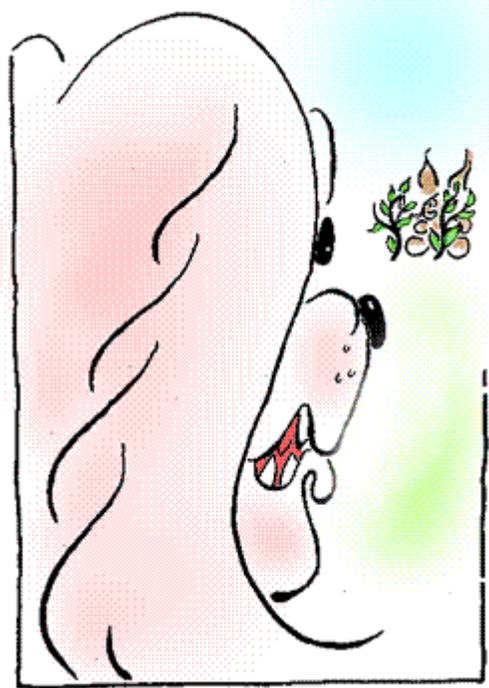
Garden Rabbit

"Woof?" Red Dog asked.

I knew exactly what was on his mind.

That spring, every day blackbirds had come to our garden pulling up our corn-sprouts. Each evening, groundhogs had stuffed themselves with our sprouting bean-plants, and during the nights cutworms had chewed down our cabbage sets.

Then all summer Red Dog and I had worked hard in our garden. We had replanted every cabbage plant and each evening we had stayed outside chasing away groundhogs. We'd even put up a scarecrow to keep away the blackbirds. So now, at summer's end, the corn stood tall, and heavy clumps of beans hung from all the bean-vines.



That evening animals were visiting us again. Taking dust-baths between rows of corn, a dozen noisy house-sparrows fluttered on the ground. Above the big, round heads of cabbage flitted a dozen white cabbage-butterflies. And among the pepper plants at the garden's far end, a rabbit reared on his hind legs gazing at us, sniffing the air with his little black nose...

"I see him," I said to Red Dog. "Well, if he needs something from our garden, let's let him take it. Maybe this summer we haven't shared enough with our neighbors. You know, Red Dog, when I see these animals, I become even happier than when I gather tomatoes, squash and beans... "

Red Dog sniffed the air, then sent a low growl toward the rabbit. It was clear that he didn't like my new garden-sharing idea.

However, before long Red Dog lay sleeping in the low-slanting afternoon sunlight, stretched between two rows of onions... while a white cabbage-butterfly perched playfully on his wet nose.

Lightning Bug

At night, a lightning bug should hang like a star above the bushes, or swoop like a meteor above the grass. Its brilliant yellow light should flash on and off like an eye blinking again and again.

However, that night, our lightning bug was not like that at all. It floated in the water at the pond's edge, and its light was nothing but a sad glimmer. Who knows what misfortune had put it there?

Kneeling in the darkness I dipped the firefly into my hands. When all the water had leaked through my fingers, like a piece of dead, waterlogged wood, the poor beetle lay on its back in the palm of my hand.



But then in the darkness a warm night breeze began stirring and streaming around us, helping the bug to dry out. Finally, hesitantly, the creature rolled onto its feet, turned off its dim glow completely, and pulled itself to the top of one of my fingers. As the minutes passed I felt the grasp of six tiny feet upon my finger slowly growing stronger.

Therefore, I was not surprised at all when from its belly finally there exploded a bright flash of light. It was a yellow light, brilliant as a daffodil in spring.

Then came a second, even stronger, flash. If Red Dog could have seen my face then, he would have seen me smiling.

Then in the darkness I heard the whir of tiny wings and suddenly a splendid yellow light streaked from my hand. Like a statue in the darkness I stood watching as our lightning bug's flashes became lost among the soft, yellow callings of ten thousand other lightning bugs.

"Red Dog," I whispered, "in tonight's darkness, carrying a beautiful yellow lantern, we have a tiny brother..."

Grasshopper Dances

Chewing green leaves, grasshoppers perched on every plant. The fields and roadsides were like too-crowded grasshopper cities.

All around us grasshoppers jumped into the air, fluttered their bright yellow and black wings, and made crackling noises. Like crazy Ping-pong balls not caring where they went, sometimes they smacked into my legs, and the bottom of Red Dog's belly.

"Oof!" Red Dog grunted when that happened. Then he'd snap at those grasshoppers as if they were horseflies trying to bite.

That afternoon I carried in my shirt pocket a small radio. As hot afternoon wind blew through tall corn in the fields around us, the music played and like brown popcorn popping out of the earth grasshoppers sprang all around us. Sometimes, when the music was prettiest and fluttering, crackling grasshoppers swirled around us like autumn leaves, Red Dog *lept* into the air, grunted and snapped and I... I found myself *dancing*.

Ah, that day the whole *world* wanted to dance!



Emergency!

"Red Dog!" I yelled, "what are you *doing?*"

Fluttering their wings and screaming in terror, four baby robins cowered helplessly in the grass before Red Dog. Their mother flitted above them screaming and snapping her wings in the air, but she was too afraid of Red Dog to do anything else.

Red Dog's eyes laughed at what he thought was a funny game. His wet, pink tongue dangled from a broad dog-smile. Then, as if to say that he really liked to meet young birds, he planted a generous tongue-lick upon one of the nestlings. The lick sent the baby bird tumbling backwards in the grass.



Aooooouuuuuuuuuuu... !!!! Red Dog howled.

Thinking that Red Dog was trying to *eat* her baby, the mother robin had overcome her fear, dropped from the sky, and dug her sharp claws into Red Dog's scalp!

Yelping more from surprise than from being hurt, Red Dog escaped around the corner of the house, his tail crooked between his legs.

"Red Dog," I called, laughing, "today you have discovered that certain things are not to be played with!"

And then the brave mother robin dropped toward my own scalp and I, too, yelping more from surprise than from being hurt, escaped yelping around the corner of the house.

The Bullfrog

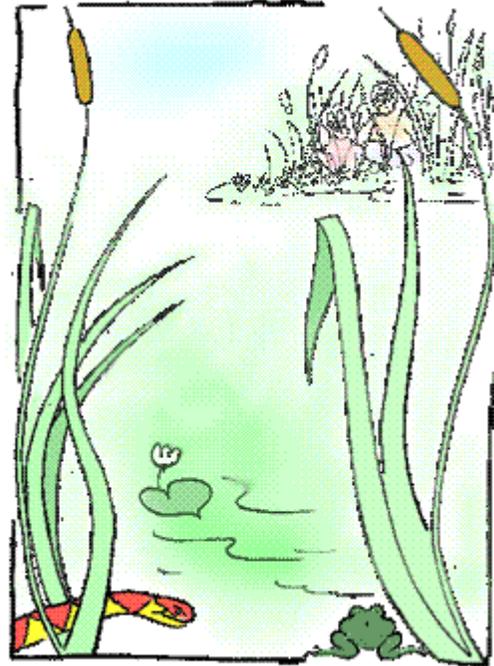
"Harump! Harump! Harump!"

The old bullfrog's powerful *harumping* boomed upward, filtered through the willow tree's slender branches, and blossomed into the blue sky. Even if we'd been standing deep inside the bean field we'd have heard it:

"Harump! Harump! Harump!"

On the pond's opposite bank, maybe I was smiling a little. Maybe in Red Dog's eyes a special glister shined. But, then...

The dark, stiff, shiny head of a water snake emerged from the pond's surface. Red Dog's eyebrows tensed and I held my breath. Neither he nor I moved or made a sound.



Silently as a shadow the snake swam to the opposite bank and slithered into the grass. So slowly that we couldn't see him moving at all he began inching toward the harumping bullfrog. For ten minutes he got closer and closer and closer... and the old frog just kept harumping. Red Dog's eyebrows quivered as he glanced toward me in a way that said he didn't understand why I wasn't doing something to save the old frog.

Splash!

A mighty leap carried the old frog far into the pond. By the time I'd moved my eyes from the pond back to shore, already the snake had disappeared. Red Dog and I stood up.

"Red Dog," I explained, "to me that water snake was as beautiful as the old frog. If we had tried to save the frog, then I would have felt bad for having taken the snake's meal from him."

I doubted if Red Dog understood my explanation. However, I am certain that he sensed how relieved I was that the old frog had escaped.

Thunder Runner

Sometimes, before summer rainstorms arrive, you hear a special kind of thunder. It's thunder sounding like a hundred sleepy cows walking slowly across a long, invisible, wooden sky-bridge.

Red Dog liked to chase that kind of thunder.

One afternoon, from a storm coming from far beyond Clint Nall's tobacco field, *sky-bridge thunder-rumble* made Red Dog's ears stand straight up. He stopped dead in his tracks and gazed across the field with his "searching-for-something-special" look. I knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Red dog... *no!*"

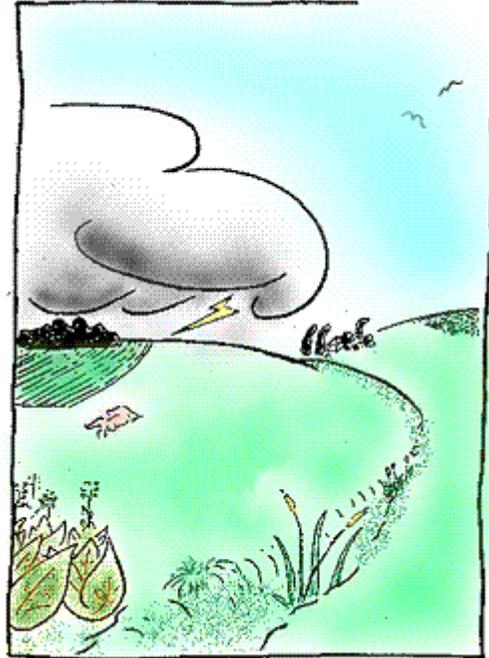
But already he had leapt across the ditch. Already he was bounding like a mad-dog through Clint's tobacco field, his head thrown back, laughter-like barks gushing from his throat, and his scrambling paws throwing up dust.

The tobacco plants were tall as a man's head and every leaf was broad as a kite. As Red Dog ran through them I heard leaves tearing and being trampled onto the ground. Every step that Red Dog took caused poor Clint to lose another dollar.

"Red Dog!" I called, "*come back!*"

But, there was no reason to call. Already Red Dog was too far away to hear. Now he was rampaging across Clint's soybean field. I knew that Red Dog would keep going until the thunder stopped. I knew that when the time came for him to catch his breath, he'd stop, look around and then understand just how far he'd run. He'd have to walk a long time before catching up with me.

I thought of Red Dog chasing thunder and of his running through Clint's tobacco. I thought about my standing all alone on the gravel road. And as I turned homeward I laughed a laugh so unexpected that, up on the telephone wire, the mockingbird paused while singing his before-the-rain-comes song...



Rain

Across the bean field, sweeping toward us like a thundering waterfall, the fantastic white curtain of rain poured from a dark cloud. As in a dream when something huge and terrible comes chasing, the rain was catching up with us as we ran toward home.

"Red Dog, go on home!" I commanded. I was too slow to outrun the rain but maybe Red Dog could.

Of course, Red Dog stayed with me.

When the air began smelling of ozone, and huge, widely spaced raindrops made mud-craters in the dust along the roadside, we understood that soon the flood would catch us. Yes, this rain would drench us and soak us to the bone. Causing ear-splitting cracks of thunder, the lightning began striking all around us.

"Red Dog," I said, "let's sit at the road's edge. This lightning frightens me. If we stay low and don't go near tall trees or telephone poles, it won't hurt us. Let's just sit here and let the rain come... "

There was nothing bad about the storm. The rain was *warm* and it made everything so *fresh*. A billion, billion friendly raindrops washed us and tickled our backs. Lifting my face, I let raindrops explode inside my whiskers. Raindrops splattered into Red Dog's eyes, making him blink and smile.

The lightning stopped before the rain did. Without thinking, I stood and looked across the fields, and Red Dog stood with me. We saw waves of wind and rain making a *joyful* storm. And how *alive* the whole world seemed!

"Rain," I called, throwing open my arms and laughing, "Red Dog and I *thank* you!"



Rainbow

And what happened even before the rain ended? The sun began shining. When that happens, you need to look for rainbows, and that is exactly what we did.

With my back toward the sun I looked up. There, in front of me, shining like bright ribbons strung across the sky, hanged a perfect rainbow.

"Red Dog," I whispered breathlessly, *look!*

Red Dog glanced in every direction, then into my face. He seemed to be asking what I was seeing.

"Don't you see the rainbow?" I asked. *"Look!"*

Again Red Dog searched in every direction. However, still he acted as if nothing in the sky seemed very special.

Finally I remembered. Once, long ago, I read something in a book that even then made me sad. It said:

"Dogs do not see colors. For all practical purposes they are colorblind."

"Red Dog," I said, with great sadness in my voice, "I'm sorry that you do not see this rainbow, for beholding it fills me with a kind of joy I would like to share with you... "

When Red Dog heard the sadness in my voice, he also became sad. He leaned against my leg and gently licked my hand. He was saying that he felt the same way I did, even though he did not understand what was wrong.□

"Red Dog," I said, feeling much better, "to you my *voice* is like a rainbow, and you hear every color in it."

I laughed and the rainbow grew brighter. Hearing my laughter, Red Dog's eyes became cheerful again, and themselves became like rainbows.



The Dewdrop

Sometimes, on the tip of a blade of grass, a droplet of dew reflects sunlight in a special way. Like a diamond bursting with rainbow colors, it makes you stop and look.

That morning I was searching for a droplet of rainbow dew. When I found one, however, it wasn't on the tip of a blade of grass.

"Red Dog," I said, "look at that dew-drop on the long black hair of my big toe. Look at how it sparkles yellow and green, then red and blue..."

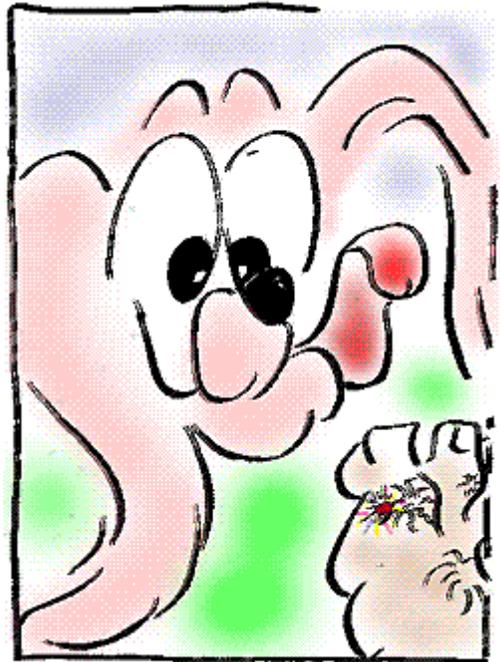
I held my foot out of the grass so that Red Dog could see. My toe looked as if it wore a sparkling diamond ring.

Slurp!

Red Dog hadn't understood. He had thought that I wanted my big toe licked. He had licked away my rainbow dew...

"Some things," I thought to myself, "like special kinds of dew-drops, a human cannot share with a dog, even a dog like Red Dog.

I laughed and patted Red Dog so that he never knew what he had done wrong.



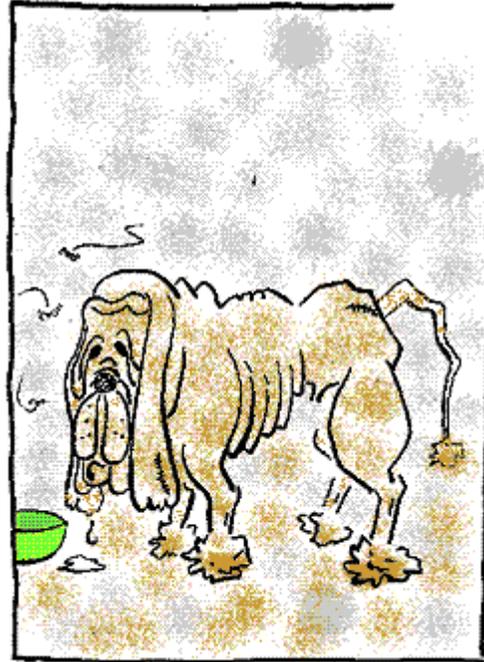
Hound Dog

As if he had every right to be there, the old hound dog rushed into our backyard and sniffed at everything he found. When he saw how empty Red Dog's food dish was he frowned at us in a way that said we should have had food waiting for him.

Red Dog and I could not believe that any dog could be so rude!

His ears and jowls hang so loosely that every step he took his face shook and made sloppy sounds. He stank and drooled. His huge feet were caked with mud from wandering all night in the fields.

And in his eyes there was the look of being *lost*.



I was so used to Red Dog's good manners, dignified appearance and self confidence that as I watched the old hound I felt queazy. Even Red Dog seemed half afraid and half ashamed. Quivering, he sneaked around to stand behind me.

"Red Dog," I said, "he's run away from that 'coon hunter we heard last night in Bryant's Woods. I'll see if the owner's name is on his collar... "

Holding out my hand, I walked toward the old hound.

"Aoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo... !"

On legs that could not carry him fast enough, the sad-looking dog shot into the cornfield, his eyes ablaze with fear, his pitiful howls sounding as if they came from something dying. Only when he was deep inside the cornfield did he quieten down.

"I'm glad that this happened, Red Dog," I said. "Every day we should remember that the lives you and I share are very special, and that at any moment things could change. Today we must live every second as if tomorrow our own lives will become like the life of that poor old hound.

The Cornfield

Like two bugs daydreaming in tall grass, Red Dog and I sat in the middle of the cornfield.

"Red Dog," I said, "I feel as if we are in a beautiful cathedral. Sunlight filtering through these corn blades is like light streaming through stained-glass windows. These long, straight corn-rows are the cathedral's rows of seats and the wind rustling through the corn's leaves is the shuffling of a thousand people as they kneel with their heads bowed in prayer."

Red Dog looked at me in a way that let me know just how bored he was with simply sitting in the middle of a big cornfield.

"So why do I tell *you* these things?" I asked. "How can you know what I'm talking about when you've never even seen a cathedral?"

I stood up and began beating dust from my britches.

"Oh-oh," I said. "Red Dog, I've forgotten which way we came from. The sun is right overhead so I can't use it to figure out which way is east or west. Red Dog, I don't know which way to go!"

Red Dog wasn't upset at all. He didn't even seem to notice that I was lost. He just stood up, shook the dust from his red fur, sniffed the ground and found the odor of our trail. Then he began leading toward home without any fuss.

"Red Dog," I said as I followed, "I know many things that you do not. However, so often, you are the one who must lead..."

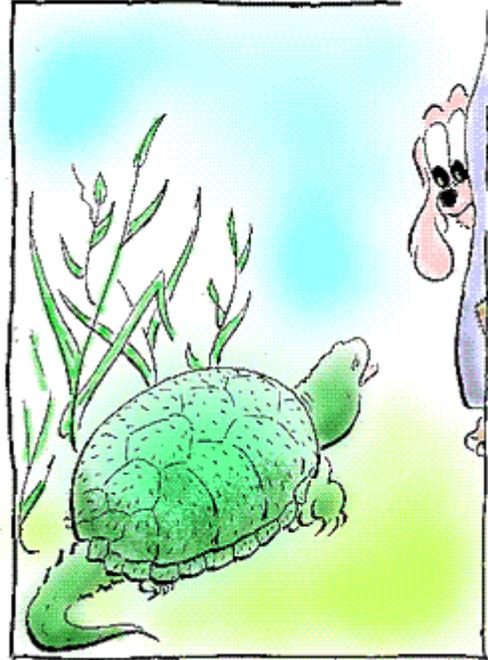


Snapping Turtle

Red Dog's ears stood straight up as the rustle in the tall grass grew louder and louder. When the grass began swaying his ears drooped in uncertainty. When at last our visitor plopped onto the gravel road, Red Dog was standing behind me with a nervous look in his eyes.

"Welcome to the gravel road," I laughed, speaking to the turtle. "Mr. Snapping-Turtle, meet Red Dog, a dog who used to believe that all turtles were small and always stayed in ponds. Red Dog, meet Mr. Snapping-Turtle, the biggest, crankiest turtle in these parts. His ditch has dried up so now he's out exploring and looking for a new home."

With grassblades and dust sticking to his wet, moss-covered shell, the big, green turtle just sat on the road and looked at us. When Red Dog stepped from behind me, I knew that he wanted to see what this new discovery smelled like.



"No! Red dog," I warned. "If you sniff this critter, he'll snap off your nose!"

To teach Red Dog an important lesson, I held a stick in front of the old turtle. In half a second his powerful jaws snapped the stick in two. The bite made such a loud crunching noise that Red Dog jumped with fright, and I did, too.

"Grrrrrrrrrr..." Red Dog complained, as if to say, "We can't let this monster stay loose! What are we going to do about him?"

Then I taught Red Dog another important lesson: I just walked away, and called for him to follow.

Doebuck

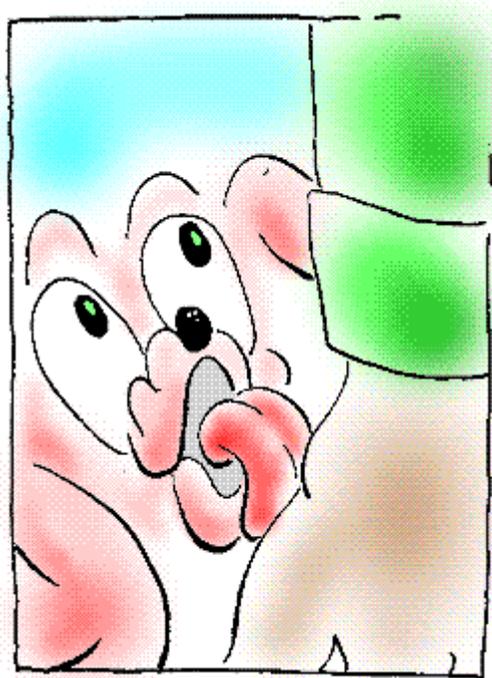
In coveralls and a baseball cap the old man came riding his bicycle down our gravel road.

"Doebuck," I greeted, "what brings you to Semiway?"

Red Dog ran up and licked Doebuck's hand.

"Yessir," Doebuck replied, "I come to see The President! This morning, I go take Miss Nette her mail, and Little-Bear Austin, he stop and ask me if I see The President, and when I say no, he say, well, The President, he out in Semiway politicking and people like Doebuck, they need to go see him. So, here I am... "

Doebuck grinned and looked across the wide field of soybeans, looking for The President.



"Doebuck, The President didn't come today," I said. "It was very nice of you to want to welcome him, but here there are only Red Dog and me."

Doebuck looked a little hurt.

"Well," he finally said with a smile, "I see a lot of pretty country today so now I go back home.

And then he simply mounted his bicycle and began the five-mile journey back to town.

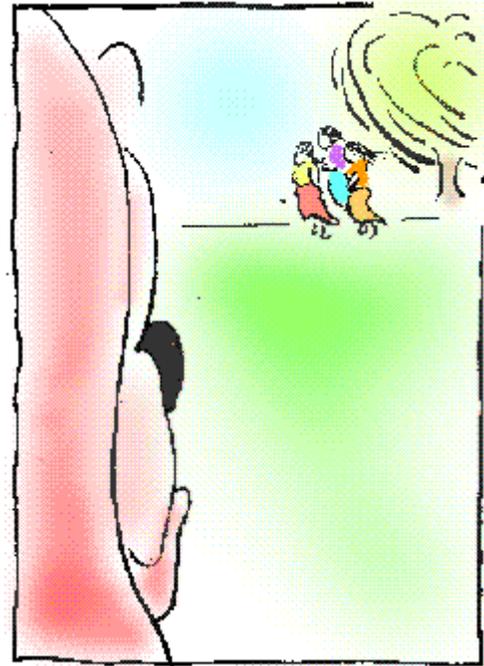
"Red Dog," I said, "everyone plays tricks on Doebuck. But there is no one better than he in all the world. He is gentle as a child and wiser than any of us. The President should have come here just to meet *him*."

"And you, Red Dog," I continued, "you licked his hand. No one needed to tell you what a good person Doebuck is."

Afternoon Wind

Like curtains at an open window, the Weeping Willow's long branches billowed in hot wind. In front of the house, the sunny fields of tall corn made a green ocean, and the wind in the corn made green waves. Beside the porch, wind blowing through the maple tree's quaking leaves sounded like a soft rain falling.

Also that day, just to have something to do, the three Dukes girls came walking down the gravel road in front of our house. They joked and laughed with one another, and their long dresses and long hair swirled and danced in the hot breezes. As they walked on the road they reminded me of bright little clouds sailing across the blue summer sky.



"Red Dog," I said, "why do these girls walking down the road seem so lovely to me? When they laugh, even though I don't know what's so funny, why do I also laugh?"

With a special look in his eyes, Red Dog gazed toward the gravel road.

"Ruff!" he replied with what obviously was a dog-laugh.

"Red Dog," I laughed in return, "maybe you and I have invented a new kind of laughter. If we have, let's call it 'joining-with-laugh-that-are-carried-in-summer-wind-laughter'."

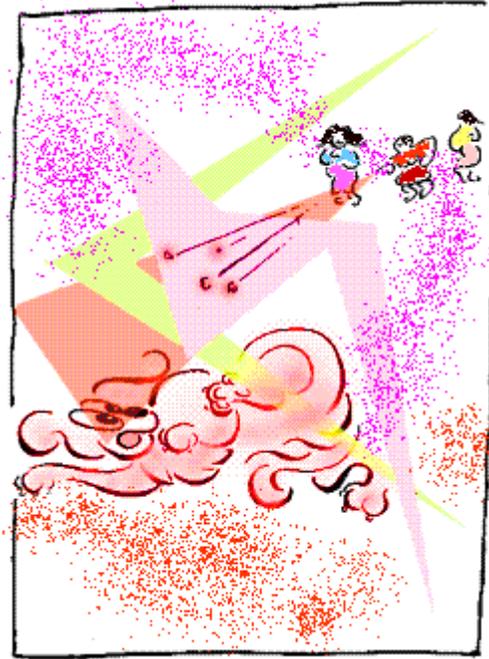
Then Red Dog laughed again, and I did, too.

Being Natural

One afternoon the Dukes Girls were passing by just as Red Dog returned from a short walk. Red Dog carried something in his mouth and it didn't take me long to figure out what it was. I heard Maggie Dukes cry:

"Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! What's that dog gotten in to?"

It was just that in the woods that day, Red Dog had found a dead, rotting raccoon that smelled terrible to human noses but, to him, smelled like Heaven itself. He had wallowed in the raccoon's stinking corpse, and now he was carrying it home. Maybe he wanted to give it to me as a present. *This is something a country dog will do, even a good one like Red Dog!*



Maggie picked up a handful of gravel and threw it at Red Dog. Mattie ran behind a tree, holding her stomach. Rene hit her fist in her hand and screamed that Red Dog should go away.

Red Dog couldn't understand why everyone was angry. One of Maggie's gravels hit him on the ear, hurting his pride so much that he dropped the raccoon and ran toward the house.

I understood why everyone was so angry. I could smell Red Dog's prize a hundred feet away!

Yet, also, I understood why Red Dog was so hurt and confused. I wanted to hug and pat him when he came onto the porch. However, I was a *human* like Maggie, Mattie and Rene...

Holding my nose, I ran around the house's corner. Seeing me run away, Red Dog's feeling were hurt again.

Red Dog was just being natural that day. But, so was I.

The Trick

"*Buenos días Señor Red Dog,*" I said.

"*Anoche soñé que éramos pájaros, y que volamos con alas por la música. Cada vez que oímos los violines y cellos, volamos por nubes de colores distintos...*"

Red Dog's eyes sparkled with what at other times I would have considered to be understanding. My trick was working...

"*Y, ¿es que me entiendes, aunque sé por cierto que nunca has oído ninguna palabra de español en toda tu vida?*" I asked with a mocking laugh.

Thinking I had said, "Let's take our morning walk," Red Dog led toward the gravel road, glancing at me over his shoulder.



But... Red Dog was not catching on to what I was doing. I began feeling ashamed for tricking him.

"And I even use a language I learned when every day I lived my life without you, Red Dog," I said in English. "I thought it would be funny to see what you did if today I spoke nothing but Spanish. But now I feel as if I've *betrayed* you..."

Hearing the remorse in my voice, for the first time Red Dog sensed that I was saying something different from what I always say. He came and stood close by me, for this was his way of comforting me.

I hugged the big red dog, and then we walked on the gravel road.

Church Hill

From the cemetery atop Church Hill, everything for miles around could be seen. In the summer sky above the hill, every day swallows came chattering, swooping for insects. Even on the hottest days cool breezes moved among the tombstones.

That day, even before reaching the hill's top, from deep inside the woods, we smelled something special. It was the odor of freshly broken earth mingling with smells of crushed grass and wilting roses.

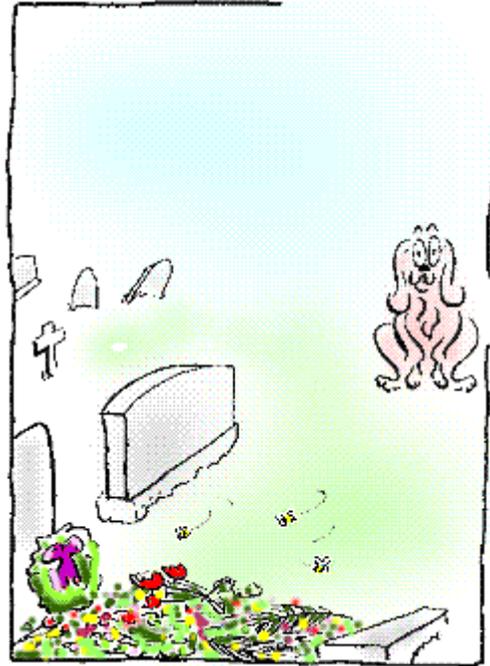
"Funeral..." I whispered to Red Dog.

Reaching the woods' edge we saw that the funeral was over and the hearse was pulling away. Red dirt already had been piled atop the casket and now wilting flowers made into wreaths and bouquets lay strewn atop a grave. Maybe Red Dog, who knew nothing of funerals and graves, imagined that the people in the hearse had just planted a flower garden among the tombstones.

As I stood wondering what Red Dog was thinking, honeybees came visiting the fading roses.

"These honeybees know that they have found something special," I mused as Red Dog listened, "but they will never understand *why* all these flowers are here today."

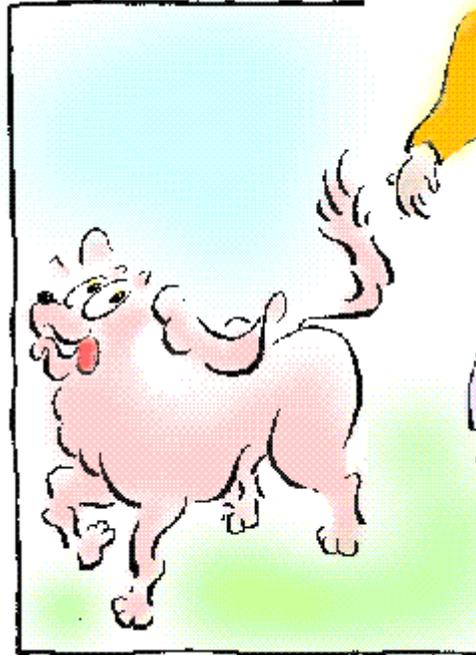
"Red Dog," I continued after thinking for a while, "in so many ways you and I are like honeybees who every day find heaps of beautiful flowers. Yet, neither do we understand the reason why..."



Feeling Old

On a windy afternoon when the cornfields were green oceans and hot wind made green waves... *I felt old...*

"Red Dog," I said, "sometimes when I rub my whiskers, I feel my father's face. Sometimes when I look at this sun-browned, tough, old skin on my arms, I remember how when I was a child I sat beside my father as he drove a team of horses through these fields. To make this farm, my father and grandfather drained a swamp and cut and burned its trees. When I was young the dirt in these fields smelled like swamp mud and wood ashes, but now that odor is gone. Red Dog, sometimes when we walk through these fields I feel like dried-up ink in an old book."



Red Dog walked beside me. His red hair glowed in the afternoon sunshine like a fire in the woods. His lips and tongue were wet and his eyes sparkled like cold water at the surface of a forest pond... like stars on a clear, winter night when the wind blows. And when he looked at me, his face was like that of a baby squirrel seeing the sky for the first time.

"Red Dog," I said, "walking with you keeps me young."

Sad Clowns

Red Dog was not the same dog every day. Some mornings he'd greet me on the porch with a funny look on his face. I could only guess what was happening inside his head.

If he had been a human, we'd have talked. However, he was just a dog so all we could do was to look at one another in a way that said, "Everything is OK; don't worry."

That day, I also felt different. Who knows why?

"Red Dog," I said, "the sky is bluer today than it has been all year. Last night the air was more crisp than on any other of summer's nights. Summer is changing to fall, Red Dog. Can that be why we feel this way today?"

Red Dog looked at me, then turned away.

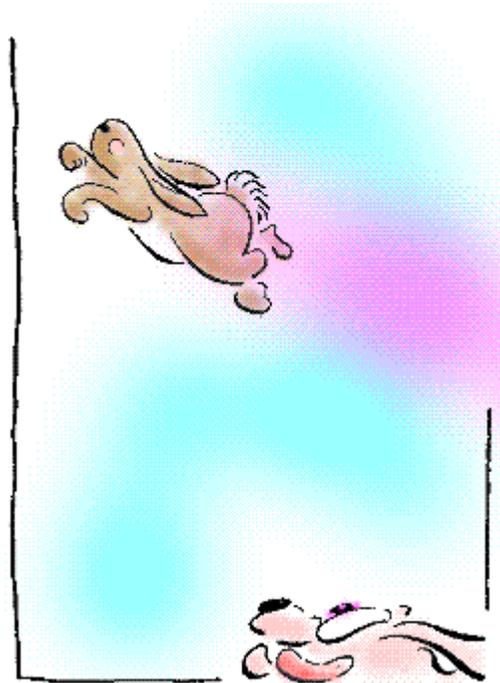
"Today the Monarch Butterflies fly high in the sky, migrating south for the winter," I continued. "How *beautiful* they are against the blue sky! Why... yes, Red Dog, that's how I feel. It's so beautiful today and the weather is so good and gentle, but somehow it seems to me that the sky is a huge blue eye crying hundreds of tiny, orange tears. Red Dog, if that is the way the sky seems to me today, then I must feel like a sad clown!"

I was glad to express the exact way I felt that day, but I still had no idea how Red Dog was feeling.

"Arf!"

With a sparkle in his eye, Red Dog took off down the gravel road, chasing a rabbit.

"Ah," I laughed to myself, "whatever he felt like a moment ago, right now he feels like chasing a rabbit!"



Orange & Silver Moons

"Red Dog," I said, "when the moon lies low in the sky, it's usually orange. However, when it rises high, as it is tonight, it becomes silvery white. Do you know why?"

Red Dog lay at my feet as I swung beneath the maple trees. He cocked one ear and looked sideways at me. He didn't even bother to lift his head from the ground. He knew from the tone of my voice that I was saying nothing worth listening to.

"When the moon is low and close to the Earth," I began, "it hears what people are talking about. It hears people laughing and crying and singing songs. Red Dog, when the moon hears the earth's people so close beneath it, what else can it do but glow a cheerful orange?"

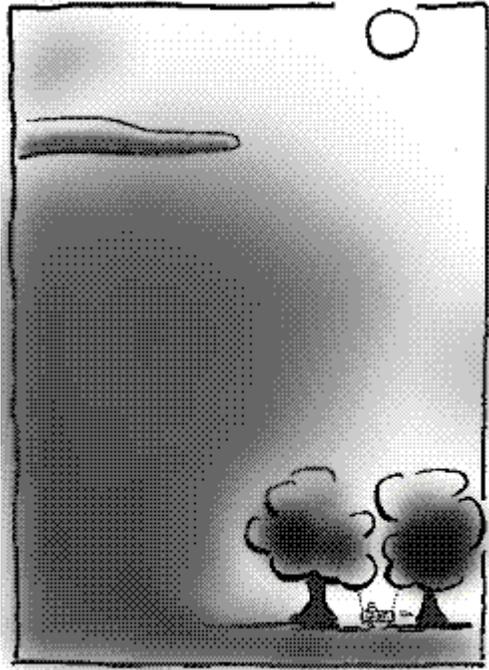
"But, when the moon is high... "

I looked beyond the maple's highest limbs and saw again that the moon was very high and very silvery white.

"When the moon is high," I continued, "it is so *alone*. Then it hears only the stars whispering and what it hears is from so very far away. Red Dog, silvery white is the color of loneliness... "

Red Dog stood and looked at me. Seldom had he heard me speak so long when I sat alone in the swing at night.

Looking high into the sky, Red Dog saw the silvery-white moon. Then he looked into my face. I am sure that he understood what I had said.



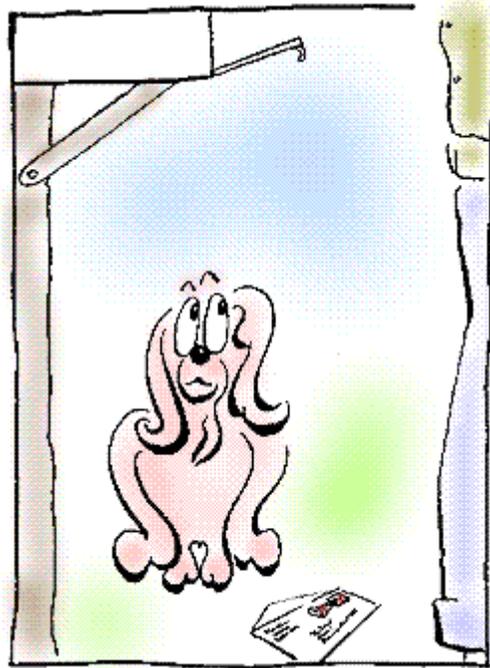
The Letter

At 10:30 that morning, as on every weekday and Saturday morning, a long, straight feather of brown dust rose on the gravel road. Where the feather began, a blue car rumbled. When the blue car stopped in front of our house, the dustcloud seemed to catch the car and eat it...

"Mail's in," I called to Red Dog as the blue car pulled away.

Red Dog and I walked to the mailbox at the end of the lane. Until that moment, not a word, not a step or motion had been different from the way it had been at 10:30 on hundreds of other mornings.

I took a letter from the box, tore open the envelope, read what was inside, and returned to the house.



Red Dog knew that something unusual had happened. Because, *never* had I read the mail before returning to the house. Because, *never* had I dropped an envelope onto the ground without retrieving it. Because, *never* had I neglected to close the mailbox's door...

Yes: When the envelope fluttered to the ground, Red Dog's eyes had opened wide. As if to see if I were still myself, he came and sniffed my foot. When I returned to the house with the envelope still on the ground and the mailbox door still open, Red Dog just stood looking at me without following.

Never had Red Dog let me walk away without following...

That day, at 10:30 AM, the long, straight feather of brown dust had brought me something that for the rest of the day would keep Red Dog and me from sharing our hours as easily as we had done hundreds of times before.

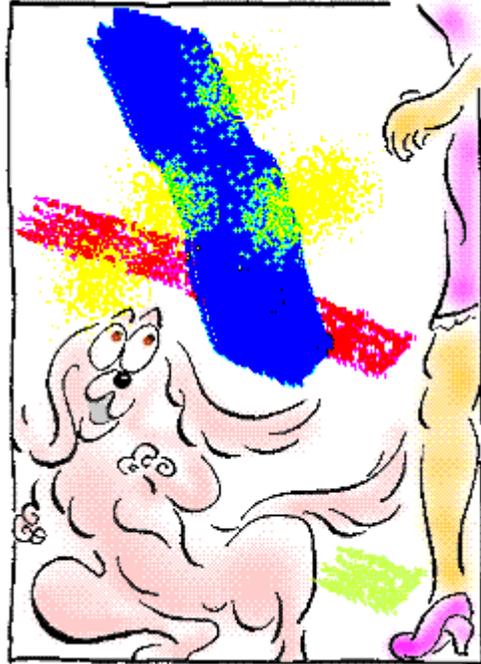
The Visitor

Red Dog knew that something special was happening.

That morning we had picked from along the road a large bouquet of frilly Queen-Anne's Lace and we had placed it in a blue vase on the picnic table. I wore clean clothes and I stood in the backyard, every half minute glancing up the road.

And so, just one day after her letter had come, the visitor herself came. Red Dog ran to welcome her.

However, the moment she stepped from her car, Red Dog awkwardly drew back. Never had he seen any person who looked like this.



Surrounded by fields of beans and corn, she wore a pink dress and pink high-heels. Her fingernails were long and painted the color of grapes, and her lips were red like wet cherries. The air, which during those days smelled faintly of rose blossoms and crushed grass, now tingled with the odor of perfumed talc. Beneath the old birdbox, where thirty generations of Purple Martins had reared their young, she opened her arms to greet me.

All that day Red Dog looked as if he were lost. I didn't take him on our usual morning walk. The visitor and I talked and kept him awake in the afternoon when usually he slept. I forgot to rub him between the ears and I forgot to reassure him that everything was alright.

When late that afternoon Red Dog understood that finally the visitor would go, he almost seemed to laugh.

But when the visitor's car pulled away and Red Dog looked into my face, all the gladness in his eyes disappeared.

That night we sat silently in the swing beneath the maple trees thinking about everything that had happened that day.

Ribbons

A red leaf fell from the top branch of the old Blackgum tree. It landed at Red Dog's feet as we walked in the front yard. Red Dog looked at me as if to ask what it meant. I almost said, "It means that fall is coming, Red Dog" but, instead, I said:

"Red Dog, this summer, nature has worked hard growing corn and trees. Every day nature has been busy and serious, but now it's beginning to smile. When fall really comes, Red Dog, nature will act plum *crazy*. Red Dog, I believe that that leaf is just a *nature-giggle!*"

I laughed to myself and Red Dog seemed to laugh, too.

"Red Dog," I continued, "maybe this summer we have been too serious."

Wondering what was on my mind, Red Dog lifted his eyebrows. I went into the house and quickly returned with two long ribbons -- a blue one and a red one -- and tied them around Red Dog's neck...

"Red Dog," I said, "let's run on the gravel road!"

Together we ran. Like carnival banners on a castle's tower, the long red and blue ribbons streamed from Red Dog's neck. I laughed and Red Dog barked, and the red and blue ribbons flew in the wind.

"Red Dog," I called, "not everything always has to make sense... !"

