

Dog is God Spelled Backwards

by Denise Benitez

I've always had an uncommon empathy for dogs. A friend once christened me "The Patron Saint of Lost Dogs" because so many of them find their way to me. Eight years ago, I impulsively drove to the local animal shelter one day and brought home with me a cropped tail, short hair, basic black and tan German Shepherd Rottweiler mix. I named her Tori. I imagined us as best friends, like in the pet food commercials, frolicking in the sun. Tori, however, has her own personality independent of my needs. She is a hunter, not a cuddler. She is a fighter first, then a lover. She dreams of ripping squirrels limb from limb and wakes up disoriented with her eyes crossed in blood lust. She is squirmy, pushy and dramatic. She is also loyal, forgiving and completely devoted to me. I love her deeply.

A year later I took a trip to a little town in Mexico called Sayulita. Little did I know that this trip would lead me to an even deeper destiny with dogs, and initiate a spiritual passage that had been simmering in my life for years.

The first day in Mexico the surf was too high for swimming. So much for languid floating in the sea. As I strolled on the beach, I noticed a little dog following me. He was bone skinny, and had those large doe eyes that come with constant hunger. This little dog was well practiced in straining for attention and food, without getting too close, without eliciting a kick or a blow.

Wherever we went in Sayulita, there were dogs; in every restaurant, sitting upright, half asleep, waiting for the hour when the tourists got drunk enough to begin dropping food, or the owner of the place got impatient enough to kick them away. Dogs were sleeping out in the hot sun, covered with sores, flies and sometimes live maggots.

I bought a bag of Purina dog kibble and resolved that everywhere I

went, I would feed the dogs. Most of them were ravenous and ate as much as I would feed them. Even so, I sometimes wondered if I was doing the right thing feeding these dogs. Most of the street dogs in Mexico are infected with heartworm and intestinal parasites. Even if they eat, they are always hungry and don't absorb nutrition. Perhaps I was just prolonging their suffering by feeding them.

One night I noticed a little white terrier sitting primly on the corner across the street. I said hello to him in a high voice, and he stood up, tail wagging. This was unusual; most of the dogs I'd seen were too far gone to wag their tails and did not respond positively to the human voice. Now here was this cheerful little terrier, wagging his tail in spite of the fact that he was losing half his fur to festering sores, was covered in motor oil, and had a few deep bite wounds around his neck and chest. I put a pile of kibble on the sidewalk and stepped six feet away. The white terrier looked at me and delicately ate while watching me every moment.

The next day the little terrier was at his post outside the cantina. When he saw me, he smiled and wagged his whole rear end. I was utterly charmed by him and gave him a big pile of kibble, which he ate without looking at me. I decided in that instant: I'm going to bring this dog back. I'm going to save the life of one little Mexican dog among the thousands.

But how to get the little white terrier back to Seattle? I had no car, the nearest veterinarian was an hour's drive away in Puerto Vallarta, my flight was leaving in two days, and how would I get him on the plane? I found the only rental car in Sayulita, and drove it through the dusty narrow streets to the white terrier's corner. It wasn't our usual time of day to meet; it was early afternoon, when his habit was to disappear somewhere to sleep away the heat of the day. But oddly, he was sitting on the corner as if waiting for me, and odder still, jumped into the car when I opened the door as if to say, "Step on it, amiga! Get me outta here!"

Now the only thing between us and the veterinarian was a typically treacherous Mexican highway. Feeling like I was carrying the most precious bundle of life to its destination, I swear that I kept that ramshackle car together with pure intention and prayer. We can-canned down the road, buses passing at breakneck speed in the opposite direction, weaving trucks tailgating me at high speed.

As I sped down the highway with my own life and the dog's left purely up to the chance that around the next corner, there was not a truck passing, or that the brakes on the car would continue to function, I suddenly felt a huge pressure in my chest, like a flower of the oddest shape wanting to burst its way out of my ribcage. My heart expanded. I looked at the little terrier, wagging the tip of his tail and calmly watching his whole world rearrange itself.

Even with his shrunken belly, he oddly reminded me of the Buddha. With his dirty white fur, his hopeful erect little ears, like seashells fuzzed with white inside, he exuded a serene and timeless presence. This little dog heightened my ability to see and feel. It was as if I had been pulled out of ordinary existence and given supernatural vision. I saw my hands gripping the steering wheel, the beaded bracelets sparkling on my tan freckled wrists; I felt the hot air blowing through the car, scented with diesel and frying tortillas and the everpresent thick stench of sewage.

I noticed a cassette tape sitting on the dash and popped it into the player. The most godawful music blasted out--off key, out of rhythm, typical Mexican oom-pah-pah bar stuff played by a very amateurish band. To me, it was beautiful, unearthly. I felt love for the men who had made it in some concrete basement recording studio. As the music filled me, I couldn't find the difference between me and the terrier, me and the hot highway, me and the Mexican band. I felt the presence of the ocean miles away, as if I had the soaring vision of a seabird. I sensed the many eyes of the fly that was clinging to the dashboard, tucking his wings onto his body to avoid being flung out of the car. The ocean, the fly, the music, the dog, my skin, my blood pulsing in my

body so rhythmically; all was made of the same sacred stuff. How had I missed this all my life?

When we cleared customs in L.A., everyone in line was amazed that I was bringing a dog back from Mexico. "Oh, he's so cute and calm," they all said. The little Buddha dog never whined, never wondered, never worried. The plane flew out of L.A. in the fading February sunlight, the dog in the cargo hold, me in my window seat, both of us awaiting a new life.