

Speak

by Matt Mullins

I was not the first to hear the dog speak, though I was, I think, the first who thought to listen. The mailman was, in fact, the first one to hear the dog speak; he left a note saying exactly so impaled on the mailbox's red iron flag: "Your dog can speak." He'd scribbled the note with a shaky hand, something seemingly quite normal for a mailman who probably has a natural wariness toward dogs and is usually in a hurry anyway.

I was furious. "Your dog can speak." How dare that dog, that oddly silent creature who hadn't barked or mewled or whined or growled once in thanks or fear or protest since the day I saved him from the pound's needle -- how dare that dog, the one I'd been trying to teach to speak for months, speak to someone in my absence.

I could picture the bearded, pot-bellied mailman crouched in his uniform shorts at the chain-link fence that boxes in my small front yard. He's just finished stuffing the credit card bills and *National Geographic* and *Soldier of Fortune* and *The Nation* and my latest issue of *Juggs* into the mailbox that leans toward the mouth of my driveway, when he notices Sage, who I'd recently begun to leave outside because of the heat, sprawled next to his water bowl in the shadow of the maple, his head lolled across his dirty paws, the summer's flies circling tirelessly. He crouches down toward the dog's telling eyes, the wagging tail thumping the scorched lawn.

"Speak. Speak, boy. Come on, now. Speak."

"You know he only reads the titty mag."

How could that bastard dog say such a thing? I hadn't even told him I'd decided to clip his nuts yet. Of course, the absolutely false claim above need not be what Sage said to the mailman. It could have

been anything: "He rarely flosses his teeth." "He drinks port wine in his shit-stained underwear." "I'm sick to puking of Lucky Dog." The point is that the first time he spoke as my dog--*my dog*-- and after a considerably long silence at that, was not to me.

I confronted Sage immediately after finding the note, "What did you say, Sage? What did you tell the mailman?" Sage was holding out, playing dumb as usual, rolling onto his back, his long tongue flopping out wet with slobber, a pose that said only: belly scratch, chew-toy, ear scratch. I'm yours. Coy dog. Learning so quickly how to conceal his willingness to betray me

