

# Ropes

By Mary Oliver, from *Upstream*

One morning a puppy arrived in our yard with a length of rope hanging from his collar. He played with our dogs; eventually he vanished. But the next morning he showed up again, with a different rope attached. This happened for a number of days—he appeared, he was playful and friendly, and always accompanied by a chewed-through rope.

Just at that time we were moving to another house, which we finished doing all in one evening. A day or so later, on a hunch, I drove back to the old house and found him lying in the grass by our door. I put him in the car and showed him where our new house was. “Do your best,” I said.

He stayed around for a while, then was gone. But there he was the next morning at the new house. Rope dangling. Later that day his owner appeared—with his papers from the Bideawee home, and a leash. “His name is Sammy,” she said. “And he’s yours.”

As Sammy grew older he began to roam around the town and, as a result, began to be caught by the dog officer. Eventually, of course, we were summoned to court, which, we learned quickly, was not a place in which to argue. We were told to build a fence. Which we did. But it turned out that Sammy could not only chew through ropes, he could also climb fences. So his roaming continued.

But except for the dog officer, Sammy never got into trouble; he made friends. He wouldn’t fight with other dogs, he just seemed to stay awhile in someone’s yard and, if possible, to say hello to the owners. People began to call us to come and get him before the dog officer saw him. Some took him into their houses to hide him from the law. Once a woman on the other end of town called; when I got there she said, “Can you wait just a few minutes? I’m making him some scrambled eggs.”

I could tell many more stories about Sammy—they’re endless. But I’ll just tell you the unexpected, joyful conclusion. The dog officer resigned! And the next officer was a different sort; he too remembered and missed the old days. So when he found Sammy he would simply call him into his truck and drive him home. In this way, he lived a long and happy life, with many friends.

This is Sammy’s story. But I also think there are one or two poems in it somewhere. Maybe it’s what life was like in this dear town years ago, and how a lot of us miss it.

Or maybe it’s about the wonderful things that may happen if you break the ropes that are holding you.