

Toon Tellegen
Winner of the 1997 Theo Thijssen Prize

JURY REPORT

The story ‘Bright Red’ starts like this:

*Dear pike,
I’m a little bit angry with you,
but it’s hardly worth mentioning.
The carp*

After the pike had read this letter he thought: angry? the carp? with me? He felt his fins start to tremble and wrote a quick reply:

*Dear carp,
Why are you angry with me?
I’d like to be in on the secret.
The pike*

There, he thought. Let’s see what happens now. He gritted his teeth and waited for an answer. That answer wasn’t long in coming:

*Dear pike,
Am I angry with you? It’s news to me.
The carp*

After the pike had read this letter he really got furious. He slapped the mud with his tail, turning the whole river grey and murky, and wrote back:

*Carp!
You sent me this note! This note here!
Were you angry with me or not? Well?
The pike*

He wasn’t really happy with that *Well?*, but he didn’t know what else to put there.’

‘Bright Red’ doesn’t end there but this *Well?* is the climax and the crucial moment, right in the middle of the story. The carp started the hostilities but beats

a hasty retreat once he realises that his words have drawn blood. The insulting way he does so infuriates the pike even more. Bright red with rage, he lashes the river dry and leaves the stranded fish ‘staring big-eyed at the arid air around them’. In the end the river returns to its bed and all the fish, including the pike, go back to swimming around as if there had never been any violent fit of rage at all.

This story is exceptional for Toon Tellegen because anger and aggression seldom feature in the stories he writes. In general the animals that inhabit the special world he has created interact politely and amiably. They understand little of each other and their dealings with each other are fraught by misunderstandings but they still remain friendly. No matter how recognisable the animals’ conversations, feelings and thoughts, this gentle society is hardly a mirror to the world of humans. Their extraordinary way of relating to each other could serve as an example to mankind, but the special thing about Tellegen is that his stories never shove morals down their readers’ throats. These are no pious little speeches, they’re stories, and the way they’ve been written – the language, tight sentences and expressions and words that have been invested with new meaning – makes them literary stories par excellence.

With his animal stories Toon Tellegen has created a whole new genre. His animal world is a non-existent place, the animals are all wrong (they’re all the same size and there’s only one of each kind), and the lives they lead are anything but realistic. Readers do not feel as if they have been granted access to that mysterious world and can now participate in it, all they can do is watch, the way they can only look at a scene in a snow globe, fascinated but unable to establish any kind of contact. The reader remains a permanent outsider who witnesses very ordinary things happening to the animals and listens in on conversations about feelings he recognises and longings he shares. He watches these creatures’ attempts to break out of their isolation, establish friendships, to have fun together with someone who’s nice enough to want to be their friend.

This is all very special, but it doesn’t tell us what Tellegen adds to the vast number of animal stories to have been written over the centuries. Language. In his stories the careful reader discovers miracles of language. Tellegen’s choice of words is so meticulous and has such a facade of ordinariness that it often takes a second reading to reveal just how much one little word – it could be a conjunction or an exclamation – is crucial to a sudden twist of plot or characterisation. No matter how originally he describes a situation, his originality is never intrusive. In that same story about the pike and the carp, the fish stare at the arid air around them. Of course, ‘arid’ is the only word that fits here, but it was Tellegen who wrote it down.

Tellegen may not have invented the animal story (although he did find a very special form for it), but he has enriched the world of the literary letter with his so-called ‘auto-letters’, letters sent to the letter, like the squirrel’s letter to the letter which includes the giddy observation: ‘It’s very strange writing to you, because

as I write you get bigger and bigger. And if I make a new start you're suddenly really small again. So I never know exactly what you're like. What is exactly, anyway?'

An interesting question which we, as readers, would like to have answered, but Tellegen ignores our desire. Like his animals, he only raises the questions, readers just have to think about the answers for themselves.

Tellegen's stories are also absurd. It's interesting that the wind takes the role of the postal service: when the squirrel writes a letter on the elephant's belly (more or less as an experiment because the elephant can only get somewhere by falling) the wind delivers it. And then reports that it blew home safely and didn't get crumpled.

Now and then Tellegen's stories feature people, sometimes together with animals (as in the elephant story *Teunis*), sometimes on their own. That happens in *Juffrouw Kachel* (Miss Stove) and *Mijn vader* (My Father), in which adults are described realistically, but magnified, seen through the eyes of a very small and powerless child, so that the realism seems illusory. Do schoolteachers that gruesome really exist? And what about such all-powerful fathers? 'Yes. Everything exists,' says the ant in one of Tellegen's animal stories. They must exist then.

Can a writer identify with his creations? We, the members of the jury, don't know for sure but we suspect that Toon Tellegen sometimes paces his room like the ant, 'thinking about the unfathomable things he's going to write. Thoughts stream through his mind, in the strangest and most gorgeous words and sentences. My, my, he thinks, there's so much inside my head!' And the most beautiful thing is that Toon Tellegen's strange and gorgeous and unfathomable words and sentences seem to arise and get written down so effortlessly.

Because of this and because of much more: because of the special sense of humour and its intimate relationship with language, because of the timeless melancholy, because of the emphasis that friendship and love are essential to life, because of the inexhaustible stream of thoughts that pass through the minds of animals and people, and because of the brilliant literary form Tellegen has found for all these things, the jury has determined unanimously that the 1997 Theo Thijssen Prize will be awarded to Toon Tellegen.

The jury:

Aukje Holtrop, Rudy Kousbroek, Els Pelgrom, Jacq Vogelaar and Gerard de Vriend

Sample translation from

Brieven aan niemand anders by Toon Tellegen
(Amsterdam: Querido, 1996)

Translated by Susan Massotty

Illustrations by Mance Post

One morning, early in the summer, a letter blew its way under the squirrel's door:

Squirrel,
I'm coming to see you.
But I'm lost.
The elephant

The squirrel read it over several times, thought hard, and then wrote:

Elephant,
Where are you lost?
The squirrel

It was a strange question, he thought. But he couldn't come up with anything better, so he sent it off.

Before long another letter arrived:

Squirrel,
In a tree.
The elephant

After he had read the letter, the squirrel looked out his window and saw the elephant desperately trying to keep his balance at the top of the oak tree. He quickly wrote:

Elephant,
Hold on. I'm coming.
The squirrel

But the letter reached the elephant as he was halfway down the oak tree, and he barely had time to read it before landing on the ground with a big thud.

A few minutes later he opened his eyes, felt the bumps on his head with his trunk and started to count them: one, eight, a hundred. He was so dazed by the fall that he couldn't seem to count right.

The squirrel was leaning over him.

'I was coming to see you,' the elephant whispered.

'I know,' said the squirrel. And he sat down on the grass beside the elephant.

'I wanted to...' The elephant groaned. 'Do you want to dance with me?'

The squirrel didn't reply.

'Don't you want to?' asked the elephant, and he hid his face in the ground.

'Yes,' said the squirrel. 'I do want to.' And he gently pulled the elephant to his feet.

They put their arms around each other's waists and began to dance.

Actually, it was more like swaying than dancing, because the elephant couldn't lift his feet. Still, he was very, very happy and from time to time he let out a cheerful 'Ouch!'

The squirrel sat down at his desk. He wanted to write a letter. But he didn't know who to write to.

Dear

he started. He thought hard and put down his pen. A gentle breeze began to blow. The window was open, and the blank, white paper rustled impatiently. Okay, okay, thought the squirrel. Don't rush me, letter. I'll think of someone for you.

He frowned and suddenly wondered: Can you write a letter to a letter?

It was a strange thought. It was like being able to tap yourself on the shoulder when you were asleep and say, Squirrel... wake up...

His thoughts bumped and scraped and stumbled into each other.

According to the ant, he thought, you can write a letter to anyone, even to the rain, or to a heat wave, or to the night.

So he picked up his pen and wrote:

Dear letter,

I'm the squirrel. But I guess you already know that.

Writing to you is strange since the more I write, the bigger you get. And yet when I start over, you get smaller again.

So I never know your exact size. By the way, what's 'exact'?

He stopped writing for a moment. What a strange letter, he thought. He squeezed his eyes shut. How am I supposed to send it? And how is the letter supposed to read itself? Folded up? Smoothed out flat? And as for a reply, can a letter write a letter back?

The noise in his head got louder. As if a bunch of heavy crates were being dragged from one side to the other.

He quickly signed his name at the bottom of the letter.

The wind began to blow harder, and suddenly the letter to the letter shot up into the air, swirled around and burst into a thousand pieces.

It wasn't a loud bang, but it nearly knocked the squirrel over, chair and all.

Hundreds of tiny shreds of paper came fluttering down and landed on his shoulders, on his back, on the table, and on the floor. There were shreds of paper everywhere. And not one of them was big enough to hold even a single letter of the alphabet.

The squirrel shook his head. It's all my fault, he thought.

The wind died down.

Was the letter mad at me? the squirrel wondered. Or had it simply burst with joy because someone had finally written it a letter?

He stood up and walked back and forth across the room, careful not to step on any of the shreds.

‘Goodbye, letter,’ he whispered.

The shreds of paper rustled and stirred. For a moment the squirrel thought he heard them say, ‘Goodbye, squirrel.’ But that’s impossible, he said to himself. Some things just aren’t possible. He was certain of that.

Dear squirrel,

There’s sure to be a big cake on your birthday. May I, just this once, eat the whole thing by myself?

A honey cake, preferably.

Everyone can watch.

I’ll wolf it down in style, like nobody’s ever done before. They’ll all clap and cheer, I promise.

After that we can carry on as usual (singing Happy Birthday, unwrapping presents, dancing, getting ready to leave, saying how much fun it was, asking who’s birthday is next, etc.).

It’s just a wish, squirrel.

The bear

Dear bear,

Okay. But in that case I’ll make two cakes.

The squirrel

Dear squirrel,

Thanks for your letter. But once I start eating and everyone's clapping and cheering me on, you won't mind if I eat the other cake too, will you? They'll be so impressed with my performance that they'll jump up and down for joy. And croak and chirp and hiss... I'm sure they will. It'll be an unforgettable birthday. Especially if you make three cakes. I'm sure of it, squirrel: three big cakes. And if they're honey cakes, make four.

The bear

Letters? Me? I never get any letters, thought the mole. Never.

Grumbling, he began to dig a tunnel through the dark earth.

Not so much as a hello, he thought. Or an invitation to something going on under the desert. Or under the ice. Never.

He angrily pounded the dirt.

But there was no reply.

There's only one somebody who wants to write to me, he thought. And that somebody is me.

And so deep down under the ground, in the dark, he wrote himself one letter after another.

Dear mole,

Hello.

The mole

Or:

*Dear mole,
I miss you.
The mole*

Once he finished writing a letter, he hid it in the mud, where he'd accidentally find it a while later and read it. Sometimes he got tears in his eyes.

Thank you, mole, he'd think. Or: I miss you too, mole. Or: you know you're always welcome, mole. Always.

Sometimes he threw a party for everyone who had written to him. Then he'd race from one side of his darkest tunnels and rooms to the other.

And he'd dance.

But am I really happy? he'd think as he danced with himself.

At the end of one of these parties, he sat down in a corner and wrote himself a letter, which said:

You ought to take a trip, mole.

He nodded and set off on a trip. Upward. Toward the mysterious air. He held his breath, and when he saw the light shining through the dark soil, he climbed slowly further.

That evening he paid an unexpected visit to the squirrel. They drank black tea, and the mole told him about the parties deep down under the ground. Big, dark parties, without a glimmer of light. The squirrel shook his head in amazement. The mole stirred his tea and hoped that time would stand still. Just this once.

One morning the tortoise woke up and noticed to his dismay that he was in a hurry.

‘Whoops! he cried. But before he could do anything, he was already on his way. He shuffled on at great speed and by noontime he had covered quite a bit of ground.

He wept and wailed and gave himself a good talking-to, but nothing helped. He was still in a hurry. At his wit’s end, he wrote a letter to the snail:

*Dear snail,
To my regret, I am in a hurry.
What should I do? Quick!
The tortoise*

As evening fell, a slow, neatly written letter fluttered down in front of his nose:

*Dear tortoise,
What a tragedy.
Hurry is so cruel.
Fight it, crush it, wad it
into an insignificant little ball
and bury it in the dirt.
But stay calm. If you and I
can’t keep our calm, all is lost.
The snail*

The tortoise wadded up his hurry as calmly as he could. By the time he was finished, it was late in the evening.

He buried the insignificant, but still restless, little wad in the dirt.

It works, he thought. I’m not in a hurry anymore.

That night he stayed right where he was. He closed his eyes and even stopped sighing. Whew, he thought.

The next day he shuffled calmly back to the oak tree under which he lived.

Actually, he thought, I ought to thank the snail. Only not now. All in good time.

And calmly and quietly he forgot that he had ever been in a hurry.

One winter morning the squirrel received a letter.

It was a black letter. He had never seen anything like it. He frowned and read:

This is a gloomy message.

Everything is falling apart.

That's all it said. There was no return address. Nor was there a name at the top to show that it was addressed to the squirrel.

He sat down in his chair. He knew the wind never made mistakes.

He read the letter a few more times, but the more he read, the less he understood.

He put on a heavy coat and went to see the ant. It was snowing and the forest was groaning under the frost. Shivering, he knocked on the ant's door and showed him the letter.

'My, my,' said the ant. 'That is a gloomy message.'

'But what does 'falling apart' mean?'

'Falling apart ...,' said the ant thoughtfully. 'Well...'

He tried to explain to the squirrel what 'falling apart' meant. It turned into a long and complicated story, and by the time the ant got to the end, the squirrel felt

like he was carrying a big rock on his back and that he'd never be able to get out from under that rock. And he still didn't know what 'falling apart' was.

'Let's go have something sweet to drink,' said the ant. 'As long as we still can.'

'As long as we still can??' asked the squirrel in surprise, because he didn't know what the ant meant.

'Yes,' said the ant. 'It's an expression.'

'Oh,' said the squirrel.

They drank their sweet drinks in silence.

The wind whistled through the trees.

When night fell the ant said, 'It's time for you to go, squirrel.'

'I know,' said the squirrel.

He walked through the dark forest to his house. As long as I still can, I'll walk home, he thought. It was a strange, dark thought, and his knees were shaking. As long as they still can, my knees will shake, he thought.

That evening he sat in front of his window for hours. So this is what it's like to be in the depths of despair, he thought as he stared into the darkness.

Late that night his door suddenly blew open and a letter flew in. It was covered with snow and frozen solid.

The squirrel brushed off the snow, broke open the envelope and read:

This is a cheerful message.

Everything is coming together again.

It was a peculiar letter. But the squirrel climbed up on his table and said to himself, 'Look at me, I'm the elephant!' and he grabbed the lamp and swung back and forth until both he and the lamp came tumbling down. 'Never mind,' he called to the broken bits and pieces, 'It'll all work out in the end!'

Dear squirrel,

If you don't mind, I'd like to give a short speech on your birthday.

You see, I've discovered something called 'equilibrium.'

Have you ever heard of it?

I just learned the word.

Everyone's bound to be interested in equilibrium.

I plan to give my speech from the top of the beech tree, with everyone gathered below me, at ground level.

(I'll keep it short.)

The elephant

Dear elephant,

That's fine. But I'd rather you held your speech in the special chair I've made for you, which I'll put at the head of the table. Otherwise some of the animals won't be able to hear you. And that would be a shame.

The squirrel

Dear squirrel,

No, no. It has to be at the top of the beech tree. Because I need to illustrate my words. (I just learned that expression.) And I can't illustrate them in a chair.

I'll shout very loudly and lean over as far as I can. If you make sure they're all standing under me, they'll all be able to hear me.

Oh, squirrel, equilibrium is so interesting!

The elephant

It was spring.

The sun was shining and all the birds were singing. Even the crow and the magpie were singing, and, when they weren't tapping and pecking, the woodpecker and the nuthatch were too.

The water skipper, who fancied himself a writer, was sitting at the edge of the lake. The weather's much too nice today, he thought, to do any writing.

He nodded contentedly. And yet he couldn't sit still. You know what, he thought, instead of writing on the water as I usually do, I'll just doodle a bit.

So he stepped out on the water and doodled from one side of the lake to the other.

The swallow, flying high above him, looked down in surprise.

'What's that you've written?' he cried.

'Nothing!' the water skipper shouted back. 'I'm just doodling.'

'Oh,' cried the swallow and flew off again.

Look at me, I'm a doodlebug! thought the water skipper happily, and his doodles got even bolder. Round doodles, fat doodles, crooked doodles. I could go on doodling forever, he thought.

Just then the kestrel came by. He hovered in the air and peered down at the lake.

After a while he nodded and shouted, 'Yes, I think so too.'

And off he flew, swiftly beating his wings without a sound.

I think so too? thought the water skipper. I think so too?? But there's nothing there. I'm just doodling!

He flew to the edge of the lake and sat down among the reeds. Soon they'll all be thinking something is written there, he thought. But nothing is written there. They must know what nothing is when they see it?

But just to make sure, he stepped out on the water and wrote in big letters under the doodles he'd just made:

There's nothing here.

The water skipper

Before long the kestrel was back. He hovered in the air, peered down at the lake and shouted, 'Well, I already knew that.'

The water skipper sat hunched among the reeds. He would have gnashed his teeth, if he'd had any, and it was all he could do to keep his wings from getting crumpled.

He took a deep breath and blew out as hard as he could over the water. His words and doodles disappeared in great big waves that washed up against the shore and made the reeds swing back and forth.

Wow! thought the water skipper. Actions do speak louder than words!

He climbed onto the plume at the top of a reed, swayed back and forth and decided to be angry for the rest of the day.

After only a couple of tries, he could rub his feet furiously and angry sparks would go shooting from his eyes.

Now that's what I call angry, he thought, and he looked angrily and contentedly over the gleaming lake.

One afternoon the animals were sitting on the banks of the river. The sun was shining, it was summer, and they were talking about honey and the horizon and the birthdays of animals nobody had ever heard of before.

A gentle breeze began to blow. The willow tree rustled, and then a gigantic letter appeared in the air, stretching from one end of the sky to the other.

The sun disappeared behind it. The animals leapt up, stared up at the sky and read:

Dear everyone!

That's all it said. There wasn't even a signature.

It was written in the biggest letters they had ever seen. The swallow went soaring into the air, skimmed past the letter and came back again.

'You see that exclamation point?' he said, all out of breath. 'The one on the end?'

'Yes,' they said.

'It's really big...'

'As big as the moon?' asked the beetle.

'Bigger.'

'Bigger than everything all put together?' asked the ant.

'Even bigger.'

The animals shook their heads. The swallow wanted to tell them how big the D was, and the e, but they were too amazed to listen.

The wind came up and blew the letter away. It slowly disappeared beyond the horizon. The sun came out, and the river began to gleam again.

For a long time the animals sat on the grass in silence. Then they started talking and wondering who had written the letter. And if they were the everyone it was addressed to. But if they weren't everyone, who was? And was everyone

actually a dear? Surely someone somewhere wasn't very dear? But in that case everyone wouldn't be everyone anymore... And what about the exclamation point? There'd be a reason for it if everyone was a dear, wouldn't there? Or had the letter been written by someone who'd actually wanted to shout at the top of his lungs that everyone was very dear to him? But why did he think such a thing? And why didn't he just shout?

It was a mysterious letter, they all agreed. It must have been written by someone with a very complicated personality.

They couldn't imagine who that might be. Because who was complicated? they wondered. And who wasn't? They looked doubtfully at each other.

Ripples spread across the river. The stickleback fish stuck his head out of the water, looked at the animals with his eyes gleaming and said, 'Have you read the letter?'

'Yes, we have.'

'It was from me.'

'From you??'

'Yes, from me.'

'But how did you do it?'

'Wouldn't you like to know?' said the stickleback, and he disappeared under the water again.

Moments later the carp stuck his head out of the water and said, 'He really did write it, you know. The letter in the sky. He and I threw it into the air together.' And the carp dove back into the inky depths.

The sun went down and the animals went home. The ant and the squirrel walked back together through the forest.

The ant's brow was wrinkled in thought. He told the squirrel that one day he was going to write a letter that consisted of only one letter of the alphabet and took up the entire sky, and that it would fall down to the earth, and that everybody would be able to eat it because it would be so sweet. And so big that

you'd never run out of it. 'You'll see,' he said. He nodded, and started walking faster and faster.

'Sounds good to me,' said the squirrel. And he hurried to catch up with his friend.

Dear frog,

Thanks for the croaking lessons. I've finally got the hang of it. Everyone says I sound just like you.

Why don't you drop by to hear me sometime? Then you and I can croak together. I'll make sure it's my birthday, and I'll bake a cake. The two of us can celebrate it together. For some reason, my neighbours have all moved away.

Perhaps you and I could even take a trip together. To the moon or someplace like that. The two of us croaking together on the moon...

Doesn't that sound like fun?

By the way, do your jaws ache? Mine do. They never did when I just chirped.

Croaking is hard work.

Speaking of which, there are a couple of things I haven't figured out yet.

Such as how do you croak softly, and how do you let it fade gently away? I mean so gently that it makes everybody cry and think of something beautiful like summertime?

Oh, it's all so strange and complicated! (I wrote this last sentence and croaked at the same time! Can you do that too? I can also sleep and croak, and eat and croak, and leap into the air and croak, all at the same time.)

Your grateful pupil,

The cricket

Animals,

Who's celebrating a birthday today?

If nobody is, who's willing to celebrate his birthday ahead of time?

*If still nobody is, who's willing to celebrate something else and ask me
over for cake and pie?*

*If nobody is, who's willing to bake a cake (with honey and whipped
cream and custard and melted sugar) and ask me to come over and eat
it?*

If nobody is, what should we do?

Does anybody know what 'perishing' means? I am right now.

Help.

The bear

That afternoon everyone had a birthday, celebrated his birthday ahead of time, celebrated something else or simply baked a cake. The bear raced from one party to the next until he could race no more. Groaning and sighing, he lay down beneath the willow tree and slowly fell asleep while the sun sank into the horizon.

The stinkbug lived at the edge of the forest, in a house beneath the rose bush. He felt ashamed of himself. He didn't know why, but he had felt ashamed of himself for as long as he could remember.

In the morning when he woke up, he would blush at the thought of himself lying there in bed. And when he got out of bed, he would say, 'I'm sorry.'

He was sorry for everything. For every step he took, for every thought that came into his head, for every longing he had ever felt, even those that only lasted a second. He had carefully boarded up his doors and windows. What if someone were to look inside and see him standing there? What would they think of him? Nothing good, you could be sure.

One morning as he sat behind his boarded-up window he heard someone walking past his house. It was the squirrel.

The stinkbug lives here, thought the squirrel. I almost forgot. He tried to look inside. But he couldn't see a thing.

I really ought to visit him sometime, he thought. But not right now. That might scare him.

'Stinkbug,' he called. 'It's me. The squirrel. Shall I drop by to see you tomorrow?'

He waited, but there was no answer.

'Tomorrow morning?' he yelled again, and then continued on his way.

The stinkbug sat in the corner, trembling. A visit, to his house. He'd never felt so embarrassed in his whole life. 'I'm sorry,' he shouted, long after the squirrel was able to hear him.

That afternoon he wrote a letter:

Dear squirrel,

Don't come. I beg you.

The stinkbug

He shoved the letter through a hole in the wall. He'll think it's a disgraceful letter, he thought. And he'll be right!

A couple of hours later he received a reply:

Dear stinkbug,

Okay, I won't come. But I'd like to give you a present. You must have a birthday coming up. What would you like me to give you?

The squirrel

The stinkbug crawled under a chair in the corner of his living room. With his hair in a wild tangle and his cheeks crimson with shame, he read the letter over and over again.

Maybe he doesn't think I'm strange after all, he thought. But he's never even seen me! he thought a moment later.

I'll have to think of a present, he thought. If I don't, he'll turn up on my doorstep and shout 'Shame! Shame!' until I've crumpled myself into a little ball.

That evening he paced back and forth in his darkened living room. It's so awful to be me! he thought.

It was late in the evening by the time he got around to answering the squirrel's letter:

Dear squirrel,

I'd like the smell of honey.

Just the smell.

The stinkbug

The next morning he woke up early. He was just about to feel ashamed of himself, like he did every morning, when suddenly the smell of honey came wafting down through the chimney.

He blushed, and wave after wave of embarrassment passed over him. But it wasn't his usual embarrassment. That's strange, he thought. What was he ashamed of now? And with his eyes closed, he cautiously sniffed the smell of honey and was amazed at himself.

The squirrel was sitting in his house at the top of the beech tree. It was winter and it was raining. Stormy winds beat against the window, and the ant was off on a trip.

The squirrel leaned on his desk, sighed, and said without meaning anything in particular, 'Ho hum.'

The desk creaked. It was an ordinary sound, not very loud, but it seemed to the squirrel that the desk was trying to say something back. He could have sworn he heard it say, 'Oh... well...' The slow, hesitant words of an object that had never spoken before.

Actually, thought the squirrel, I never think about the desk. I never talk to it, I never take it on trips, I never celebrate its birthday, I never give it any presents, I never ask what it likes to eat. It's just there.

The squirrel sighed. Actually, he thought, I suppose I ought to do something for the desk. But what?

After mulling it over, he decided to write the desk a letter.

He got out a scrap of beech bark, put it on the desk and began to write:

Dear desk

Is there anything I can do for you?

He put down his pen. What else can I write? he thought. Maybe I should tell it something? But if you ask me, the desk knows everything I know.

He thought hard, but couldn't come up with anything. So he finally wrote his name in big letters at the bottom of the letter.

'For you,' he said. And he slid the letter to the middle of the desk.

The storm blew open the window, snatched up the letter, flipped over the desk with such force that it bounced up and down five times, and shut the window with a resounding bang.

Dazed, and with his hair blown every which way, the squirrel sat rooted to his chair. The desk lay upside down in the corner. The letter had disappeared.

After a while the squirrel got up and put the desk back where it belonged. The drawer was still lying on the floor. Inside it was a letter with curled-up edges that he had never seen before. He opened it and read:

*Dear squirrel,
I didn't fall over.
I was dancing.
For you.
Since you were thinking of me.
You've done more than enough.
Yours,
The desk*

The squirrel didn't ask himself how the desk could have written the letter. He put his head down on his forepaws, and his forepaws on the desk, and fell fast asleep.