

Western University

From the Selected Works of Donald Morrow

2012

His Majesty

Don Morrow, *Western University*

His Majesty

by Don Morrow

*To-day, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town.*

~ A. E. Housman

I saw his muscles move, marveled at them, as though in living *bas relief*, every day for more than 10 years. Temba lived in his body and I lived in wonder and awe of how he moved. And greatest of all, I was privileged to move with him, to run with a *being* who exuded grace, power, fluidity, and just the sheer joy of movement. He wasn't about how or why, rather he was all about what; he knew his own magnificence; he knew his body; he reveled in his incarnate royalty; and he ran unbounded, unfettered by anything else in his life, pure jollification in motion.

Our runs were a daily ritual, every day, except Saturday, our day off. Sunday was our long run, 15, sometimes 20 km. He would be dozing on the bed or he'd come to my office, bring me his toy, Mr Frog, or just lightly paw the carpet with one limb; he'd look at me, turn his head slightly sideward just casually and yet clearly asking me, 'when,' while simultaneously declaring 'now.' I'd kneel down in front of his face resting sideways on the bed or respond to his presence in my office. I'd begin *the* question to his inquisitive ears, 'do you know anyone who'd like to...' and I never had to finish the entreaty. He would raise his head off the pillow, eyes wide-open, and those lithe deltoid muscles would arc into prominence on his shoulders seemingly pushing his torso upward and he would bound off the bed, his whip-like tail penduluming his anticipation. He was set, completely devoted and bodily committed to the magic of the meaning

of his five favourite words, 'let's go for a run.' His adrenaline wasn't pumping fight-or-flight, it was just coursing every canine blood vessel, thrilling him inside out.

And then he had to wait. He never once complained because every action I did he knew was funneling toward the run. I'd get changed, do 150 crunches, stretch my adductors, do a few cobras to loosen my back, all under his watchful eyes while he lay prostrate, his head tucked between his outstretched forepaws, his haunches gathered, his breathing quiescent, his patience posted. And then the moment of transition to the reality of the run when I laced up my running shoes; then, glancing furtively at him, moved to his treat-cupboard and grabbed a handful of Old Mother Hubbard, oven-baked, bone-shaped, small dog biscuits and tucked them in a pocket, tossing one deliberately a few feet above his head and saying, 'Big up' and his biceps femoris muscles fired to propel his torso and head upward to gobble the treat always as though it were the one thing he craved most and might never get again. Then, my anterior tib stretches against the doorframe usually brought his body into that cat-like, animalistic full-body arching stretch, sliding his front legs forward in their knowing of the next event. He'd listen, and I'd call to Jen that we were going; she would come out of her office, be ecstatic in her voice to him by acknowledging he was going for a run 'with his don' and giving us both kisses and bidding us a good time.

Sensing the moment, he'd nose the back door urging me to open it. Once released, it was 4-legged euphoria, nails skittering on the wooden planks of the deck, body bent for the stairs and the few springing strides up our backyard hill to the latched Simpson-gate. I'd follow slowly and long-step my way to our access, teasing him intentionally. When I reached the gate, I set my index finger on the clasp, looked down to him and did what we both knew was the last restraint and subsequent release of his body; I'd count in ridiculous non-sequence, 27...64...17...— nearly

frantic with excitement, he'd scratch the black, cross-hatched wires of the gate with his front paws – ...43... ...91...and always (we never knew why), 56... and as the 'ix' sound reverberated in our ears, I would whip the gate inwards and his pure spirit leapt into the lawn-mowed path, the strange growth-defying cleft between bushes and weeds that ushered us into the farmer's fields and our running trails.

The open paths, the fields, the copses of trees, these were Temba's domain, the landscape of our shared passion. While he sniffed for dead animals, live ones, any scent he could stream and filter through his nostrils, I'd walk through the first patch of thorns and scrub brush to get to the outer rim of the farmer's field planted in alternate years with sugar beets or hay or red peppers. 'Are you ready,' I'd call and he'd pretend not to hear or care, too busy with his spoor, even sometimes tracking a slow, fat groundhog, pouncing on it, if he caught it, grabbing it by the scruff and shaking it side-to-side, snapping its neck from some instinctual place of hunter. When he dropped the lifeless animal, he'd nose it, prodding it to play, never understanding what he'd done or why the hunting-dance didn't continue. Downfield, jogging to find my stride and avoid the ruts and rocks, I'd glance back and then awe in the beauty of what I'd see next: 95 pounds of essence and bliss in full stride. In my mind's eye and in subliminal real-time, I digitized every nuance of movement, his physicality framed in honour for me, mirroring rapture for him. Not a sound did he make; his body hunkered down, gravity lowered into a stride that Muybridge proved with his cameras in the late nineteenth century meant that his paws only lightly touched down – like Bojangles – but he was, at deft intervals, completely airborne, ears back, head forward, running from his hips, his withers the tallest point over the sleekness of his frame. Like a greyhound – one of the few dogs who could outstrip him in a short-distance race – he reached both front paws forward and pulled the earth under them while his lithe gluteal muscles brought

his back legs frontward, in sync, to propel him headlong only to repeat the sequence for as long as he wished. And when he slowed to earth-time, raising himself back to my normal, he pranced his self-exhilaration demurely – there was no cheering throng – and resumed his hunt for anything – he knew.

Out back, behind and west of our home was our most common run, perhaps not our favourite route but the one closest to where we lived, the one that was our normal, our route-in for 8, non-winter months of the year. We would go out the back entrance, most often, and when I was bored – he never was, or he never told me – we'd reverse the route. On those occasions, I'd walk him on leash to the end of the street to enter the back end of the route by the river's edge. For a special treat, distinctive because I'd ask him if it was time to do so, we'd take the car (to avoid running on the highway and the narrow bridge over the Thames river – he scoffed that it was the Tems river) to the Komoka Woods provincial park-grounds about 2 kilometers from our place. Always comfortable in the car (in cooler weather, he far preferred being left in the car, somewhere near us I suppose, than being left alone at home), he'd lie down in the back seat until he sensed the turn into the parking lot and then his expectation stood up awaiting me to open the car door for him. Whose woods were these I think I knew; he certainly knew his forested realm. Wide trails canopied by tall maples and oaks, rivulets winding throughout and for him, a veritable cornucopia of smells. Someone once told me a dog's nostrils are comprised of so many folds that if one were to flatten them out, they would be the size of a tennis court. Scent guided him, vision was just passing time, a secondary sense to support what his nose-radar revealed clearly to him. And so we would amble, he and I, at first getting a feel for the run, the crisp air or the humidity, an easy run, one we'd have to work for, one where the run came with us or stayed just ahead of us. In these woods, I followed the path, stopped for him to drink in the streams or

to swim or cool off in the river; he used the path only for reference. He criss-crossed it, nosing the ground, taking himself on either side of the trail seemingly at random. He never lost track of me; my job was to sight for him, alert him to any squirrel, tell him when we got to “chipmunk alley,” that place before the first wooden bridge where little animals lured him to the chase. Most precious of all in the Komoka woods was the prospect, he always remembered – he knew the infinite potential for spotting deer. He never saw them first. I did. And I would call him and tell him and point to the deer and his eyes and nostrils would scan his horizon until he saw them dart. Instantly, he accelerated from standstill to full stride in pursuit of what he could not catch nor ever fathom. Within seconds, the deer would disappear, faster than the speed he knew, beyond his comprehension, even sniffing their trail was useless. He’d stop, look back at me in disbelief, circle the area he was in and wait for me to ask him, ‘did ya get ‘em, did ya get ‘em?’ There was always more deer for him, just down the trail or on another run.

Winter brought quietude to our runs but never a ho-hum hiatus either to our running rituals or his joy of our bodily crusade. The routine at home was the same just more clothing and for him, more Mother Hubbard treats could be carried in my jacket rear-pocket than in my summer shorts. We’d go on the back roads, he on a retractable leash. For four months of the year, we ran side-by-side, at least, I ran, he pranced, barely more than a fast shuffle for him. We had 4 or 5 different routes all of them converging to the railway bridge on Vaneck Road. That overpass was the venue for our greatest joke; trains zipper over the countryside and through our small town where we live and locomotive whistles can be heard day and night. As he and I approached the viaduct, or even when distant to it, inevitably we’d hear the unmistakable sound and I’d say, ‘do you hear that, do you hear the train...maybe it’s the Big Train.’ It was my humour – he tolerated it always – an allusion to Lionel ‘Big Train’ Conacher, one of Canada’s

superb athletes during the first half of the twentieth century. When we reached the crest of the overpass, we'd stop and I'd urge him to put his front paws on the abutment and mock-look for a passenger or more likely a freight train on the tracks below, rewarding him with a Mother Hubbard.

We talked more on our hibernal runs, even in the crackling cold of silence; we really didn't have to talk, we just ran communicating with our bodies in motion, feeling the run, settling into rhythm, being with each other. How do you tell the runner from the run? We were both. When there were no cars, he'd prance on the pavement with the click-click sound of his long toenails on the asphalt; all I needed to say was 'car' when a vehicle approached and he moved to the side of the road, gently...for winter runs were hard and gentle. If it were very cold, Jen or I would dress him in his purple fleece coat, velcroed over his ridge, the hirsute hallmark of his breed that ran from the two whorls between his shoulder blades to taper down to a distinct point at his hips. There is no more appropriate name for his breed, Ridgebacks, perfectly characterizing the purebred, piloerected trail of hair that mavericks a different direction from their reddish-brown coat. I always teased him that wearing the lilac jacket didn't really call into question his sexuality; Jen's refrain was to tell him how stylish it was, and we always had to gather it over his rear end and tie a rubber band around the clump of coat in order to allow him to pee or poop when he needed to do so. Sometimes the wind drove the snow into his face; sometimes the wind alone countered his momentum. When these weather vagaries hit him, he'd pull the leash as far out of the retractor as I would allow and then lower his shoulders into the wind, sled-dog like and prod me ever so subtly to increase my pace to get home. If we paused – he pawed – on winter runs, it was usually at the half-way point for me to stretch and for him to sit by me until I gave him two or three more Mother Hubbards. And when we stopped, we'd

assess the run – cold, windy, hard, easy, fast, tiring – acknowledge each other, share a hug, clean any crust or snow or ice from around his eyes until I would say, ‘let’s take it home to Jen,’ his cue to point and start us toward home, he always knew the way.

Out back, behind our home was his running soliloquy – I was his companion but he was free to be, to communicate his body and move however and wherever he wanted to run or jog or race. For his body-truth was that he was an amalgam of fast-twitch and slow-twitch muscle fibers, able to recruit whichever filaments and myofibrils he needed in whatever combination. We’d cover the two fields of crops then descend the hill, often through an entanglement of weeds and underbrush, toward the first quarry. The gravel road we both loathed; it felt too harsh, one of the few sun-exposed parts of our run, so he trotted behind me biding his time and his energy in this waste land of terrain. We’d turn onto the only automobile access road, though vehicle entrance- restricted, into the gravel quarry area, baked clay in consistency and be back into shade and softer ground. Soon, moving past the solitary, brown-and-yellow provincial park sign, intuiting the run, taking stock of where we were, he would increase his pace enough to come up beside me and ever so gingerly, nudge my hip, quietly asking for a treat which I always gave him, Pav-lovingly. We’d reach the first quarry, a pond he and I called Long Pond in remembrance of my dear friend and colleague, Sandy Young, who died the year our dog was born; Sandy, a true Bluenoser and effervescent historian, always claimed hockey was first played on Long Pond near Windsor, Nova Scotia. And so we memorialized the quarry out of respect for Sandy’s penchant for things maritime. Temba would head into Long Pond, normally just to cool down, although occasionally, he’d venture into deeper water and swim. Retrieving was lackluster unless it were for the treats I’d toss just beyond his reach but never further than his capacity to get them. He swam easily, but water was not his element, he was earth and wind, he knew.

Hydrated and baptized, he would rise up and out of Long Pond, do the Every-dog water-shake from occiput to the tip of his tail and then lope up the hill to the straightest part of the now-dual trail and his continued exploration of whatever he could vacuum through his olfactory organ. We both loved this stretch of the route; we'd fartlek in cooler weather, speed-play our way along the narrow double-path – it was play-work for me, frolicsome for him. Alternating our pace, we'd round the last turn, and in the lead, he knew to go to the right on the tear-drop triangle around the water purification buildings. Sometimes we'd encounter other dogs entering the trail from the western end of the quarries, his chance to cavort, but most often to cower behind me if he was feeling anxious or uncertain about the other dogs' intentions; little dogs were the bane of his existence, we never knew why. Taking a wide, loping berth around any potential pooch-predators, we drew near the rusting metal gateway, a tubular, locked bar about two-and-a-half feet high. My approach was to decrease my stride and kind of half-hurdle it; his method never varied and I always stopped on the other side of the bar and crouched to the ground to watch grace-in-motion. He'd gather his stride, take some measured, skittered steps as he approached the bar and then smoothly stretch over it, arrow-like. From my vantage point, looking at his underside, the curve that he created from the tips of his forepaws to the ends of his back legs was like seeing, in kind of upside down perspective, the arch of a porpoise's back as it breaches its sea-home. It was, he was beautiful to watch in that moment of suspended flight, nonchalant when he landed and veered into the meadows to lick the water from and eat the long grasses. He never caught on, though I pestered him, 'remember boy, what goes in as grass comes out sharper from your ass' – normally the next day, I'd have to help him extract the undigested remnant.

A short jog past the line of elms and we reached the two massive, pre-fabricated cement barriers that marked the halfway point of the trail and for him, 3 more Mother Hubbards

delivered to 'Big up,' after my calf, hip, and back stretches. 'Shall we take it home to Jenny.' I'd inquire and he'd tilt his head to the side knowingly. We'd head back along the tree-line, dodging the ruts in the crudely created parking lot where fisher- men, women, and children left their cars to angle in the largest of the quarries, the one the beavers dammed years ago. If we could, we'd go through the bracken and short brush along the top of the tear-drop to the edge of the upper woods; if there was construction or the way was blocked in Spring run-off, we'd go on the margin of the Komoka Road. He knew it was the only part of the run where traffic danger loomed; so he would move to my side, his head just in front of my left knee – I'd reach down and stroke his pate, acknowledging his sage presence – and he would not leave me until we turned through the rectangular guard-posts into the trail at the bottom of the hill. Scaling the short climb onto the back of the tear-drop, we traversed the narrowest part of our route and the beginning of some two kilometers where we had to run single-file.

Rhodesians were bred to herd lions toward hunters in the African veld. They did so, presumably, by circling their prey to move them, in ever-tightening rings toward the human predators. Though they can bark, rarely do they exercise their vocal cords. With lions, if the animal resisted, the dogs were fast enough to dash at the lion and trip the animal using the power of the Rhodesian's relatively massive chest and strong neck. Second to the characteristic back-ridge, a Rhodesian's torso defines and sculpts his body, tapering to his hips at the sides and back and sweeping exponentially upward to his underbelly. When Jen and I first ran the training short distances with our Rhodesian puppy, the lion-tripping instinct created comical events; seemingly for no apparent purpose, his head would appear suddenly between my unsuspecting legs or Jen's in his quest to herd his humans. Curiously, once he and I got into long-distance running, not once did he ever interfere with my stride, never bumping me or crowding me, almost gentlemanly in

running etiquette. And occasionally, when Jen ran with us, he knew his herd-job was to shepherd her, leaving me to lead the run but making sure she stayed with our pack.

With me, on this or any other narrow part of the trail, he would either take the lead or follow – there was never any apparent rhyme or reason for his choice – about 3 feet behind me until I could sense he needed to pass and I'd step slightly sideward off the trail. Always, he breezed by me sensing something he needed to discover or merely finding the fullness of his running stride. Invariably, after one of these passes, usually on the flats after we descended the steep grade to his stream in the marshes and on into the tall-grasses of the river-meadow, he played me with his 'hunt.' Bounding ahead after his pass, he'd gather up his legs under his body, grind to a halt, turn almost into himself, and then do the strangest thing – he'd stop in the middle of the path, leave his bum high in the air – literally in downward-dog yoga pose – tail still, torso grounded, forelegs stretched out, and his head tucked between those limbs, as he 'hid' himself in plain view. My role was to say, 'oh-oh, where's my boy, where is he.' As I got closer to him, at some moment only he fathomed, he would bound from his hiding spot and attack me. Often, it seemed to me he was possessed of some primal urge; just as regularly, he softly bit my hand or arm, on occasion, he'd rip my long-sleeved, memory-precious canoe shirt or my Goretex jacket with a slight corner-tear from his cuspids. He'd flit away and then come back again to repeat the mock-assault. My only refuge was to stay close to a bush or small tree off-trail, but the energy of the hunt was all humour – he was having me on, engaging me in dog-play, probably the highest compliment he could have paid his running buddy.

We'd swish through the meadow, flood-plain foliage and in summer, both fall victim to the bites of deer flies who knew exactly where to nibble on us, in the center of our backs; he never yelped at the flies, instead, he'd slow his pace, let me catch up, cast a glance over his

shoulder and up at me encouraging me to smack the offending insect while I angrily laced the 'son-of-a-bitch' on my own back with my peaked, running-hat. Reaching the dead tree, the Sleepy Hollow one devoid of leaves or life 12 months of the year and our marker of the end of the meadow, we'd slow our pace to ease round the mud and move furtively into the densest part of the path to skirt natural barriers into the water-well access road. He would take the slippery gully part of the trail to the road while I fast-walked and high-stepped or crawled over fallen aspens. Once on the road, we shared a full, eye-contact, all-knowing glance and I said, 'home stretch Boo,' the latter my term of endearment for him. Along this part of the route, the river was clearly visible, only 20-feet to the right of us, closer when swollen in the Spring; to our left was flat-forest, his territory to explore for the last part of the run. Just before the Komoka wells that prime and pump our community's water, there is the terminus of a perpetually flowing creek of cold water that flows through the culvert, under the road down to the river. It was his favored resting place for the canine equivalent of the pause that refreshes. Wading right into the shallow river-bed, he'd slurp his fill while I sweated and waited on the bank above him. One quick pee and we were off again, skirting the bizarre, boarded up building to walk up Prickly Hill. He named it for the nettled vines that worked to scratch us on our way up. At the top, we'd reconnoiter, he passing around the land-developer's log barrier while I climbed over it. Kilworth houses now in view, we eased our pace along the back fences marking the lot boundaries of the bigger houses, often stirring up dogs. He'd chase each dog, seemingly his moving mirror image thinly separated along the length of the metal enclosures.

Approaching the boulders at the end of the trail, we reined ourselves in, drawing our run, his run to a close. 'Good run Handsome,' or, on humid days, 'we did it Boo, well done.' Lightly panting, he slowed to soft-walk across his speed eyeing me, knowing what was next. I kept about

a dozen Mother Hubbards just for this time, our cool-down. Crossing the street, he'd move right behind me as I dug the treats out of my back pocket. I'd take one and toss it high and far along the sidewalk and he'd propel his body in swift pursuit, pouncing on the bouncing biscuit, gobbling it off the concrete, then letting me pass to repeat the biscuit-dance for the 3 blocks home. It was just something we did, part of our ritual.

Several times over our running career, I needed to take time off in order to recuperate from some minor injury, like a muscle strain or ligament sprain or back pain, but only once did he have to take a break from our seriatim running routine. We had just finished a late-Winter run at the north end of our subdivision and started our cool-down for the last few blocks and I tossed the first Mother Hubbard. Instead of hopping onto it, he barely walked to retrieve it – something was wrong. I checked his paws for clumps of frozen snow, nothing there. We walked the rest of the way home, me worried, he with his head hung low. He spent a tired afternoon and struggled to rise from his bed in the dining room. It was the beginning of a painful 4 months when his hips rebelled arthritically and his anal glands inflamed. Glucosamine, a mild corticosteroid, along with a synovial fluid booster-injection we gave him with a hypodermic needle about every three months, seemed to clear up, albeit slowly, his movement debilitation. I ran alone those 4, long months; if he saw me preparing – often, I'd sneak into the garage thinking that if he observed me getting ready to run, it would hurt his feelings – he rarely acknowledged me doing so, or else he'd look sheepishly, almost embarrassed as if willing me not to invite him into sacred running space. I feared he'd never run again and even achingly questioned – as I still do – if I had caused this pain with the long distances we had done. Jen and I would walk him during this time but it felt a token gesture and he rarely wanted to do more than 10-15 minutes. One day, some 16 weeks or so into his running doldrums, he came down to my office and just stared at me. I

missed the cue, asked him what he wanted and followed him upstairs thinking he needed out to pee. I let him out the back door; he went out and turned back into the house. The same sequence of events was repeated 3 or 4 times, during the last of which he at least went to the top of the deck stairs; I was perplexed about what he wanted. The fifth time, he came down to me, moved deliberately toward my chair and reached out one leg to smack my calf with his paw and he softly whined, something he had never done to me before. What is it, I asked him and followed his lead upstairs. This time, he went out the door, softly down the deck- stairs, sauntered up the backyard hill and stood sideways at the Simpson gate, staring back at me. We had not been out that gate in weeks. And it hit me – he wanted to run, he knew he was ready. I briefly entertained the idea of me taking him for a walk out back but there was something in his body-carriage, something synaptic between us that told me I needed to don my running togs. I left the back-door ajar, changed as fast as I could, no stretching. He didn't move from the gate. I felt my smile right down to my toes and opened the gate sans the cacophonous count-release. He bolted into the fields, the first time I had seen him move like that in months. I figured, incorrectly, that we would do a short run, ease him into his dominion. He would have none of any abbreviated version of our route, refusing to turn off early; instead, he led me the full run, all 5 miles, my body and his exalting effortlessly together all the way home. Gradually, we got back into the ritual, at first every other day, until he told me he needed to run each day. It was such a gift from him to me, from him to his body and his body to him, his return to his ecstasy, his majesty of motion and many, many more runs out back.

At the end of each running event, we'd enter the side-gate casually, say nothing and everything to each other, he and I having shared something so special, his run, his *being*, his ethereal and precious presence. We didn't merely respire together, we conspired on our runs,

breathing each other. Unlike the assertion in Hazlitt’s famous lament and tribute to fives’ player John Cavanagh, he “who does any one thing better than anyone else in the world,” my dog was not the world’s best runner. Rather, he was an exceptionally fast dog equally blessed with limitless endurance and a kindness and companionship, a canine creature who knew who he was and what he could do over land. I will remember. He knew – *nous courons donc nous sommes* – we run therefore we are.

