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On Foot

dee Hobsbawn-Smith
alumna, University of Saskatchewan



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On Foot

Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgements I am grateful to my medical support team for helping me maintain the fitness and wellness sufficient to the needs of a writer who relies on movement as key to creativity, and who simply loves to walk and run. Thank you to physiotherapist Keenan Oberg, podiatrists Drs. Edward and Jonathan Hauck, GP Dr. Nico Kriel, optometrist Dr. Carla Matz, and ophthalmologist Dr. Gabriella Campos-Baniak.

DEE HOBSBAWN-SMITH

On Foot

I am still in bed at six-thirty a.m., cuddled close to Dave under the quilt and electric blanket, my left foot restlessly tossing about before it wraps itself in layers of warmth like a colicky newborn coming to rest. That foot is encased in a strange dual blanket of its own beyond my toasty covers, the blanked-out tingling of irreparable nerve impairment complicated by the dull ache and throb of damaged soft tissue. This double discomfort is my new normal. It has been thus for over a year and a half, ever since I was struck and knocked down and my left foot driven over by an elderly dude with a silver ponytail astride a black motor scooter bigger than a Vespa but smaller than a Harley. (He was distracted by the blaring bleep of a car alarm, and was looking over his shoulder at the source of the noise when he struck me. Amazing, what details persist, unforgotten through trauma!)

I want to get up, go outside, and move my body, but I've had a setback this past week: my left foot's formerly high and hard-to-fit arch is collapsing, with commensurate knee inflammation, muscle tension up and down my leg, and foot pain, as my body attempts to compensate for how my foot now strikes the ground. All of these results are unsurprising, according to my physiotherapist, but it means that I've had to stop running and walking while things heal, limit what exercises I undertake, replace my worn-down walking shoes, and be re-fitted for new orthotics. So I am nervous. Anxious about my foot. About running, and even about simply walking. How fraught, what I took for granted for so long, what I thought of as utterly simple and even mundane revealed to be of utmost complexity, in the doing, the balance, the reconstruction.

I slip out of the bedroom quietly. Dave is an owl, a late sleeper, but I love mornings, the peace and perfection of early light tinged with hope for a beautiful day. After I wash my face, I call my sister.

"I wish I was light-hearted," I say. "I wish I was silly. Goofy. Funny."

"You are all of those things," she says.

"Not when I'm not moving," I respond. Not today. Not when my foot feels fucked-up. When my knee is enflamed because of my changing gait.

My sister is no stranger to depression. “Write something,” she urges. “Get going! Take a little walk. Don’t be silly about it, forget about 10k, just stroll down that long driveway of yours.” She chivvies me gently for a few minutes before we hang up.

I lace on the new walking shoes, my renewed orthotics already in place. *I’ll be fine*, I whisper to myself, but doubtfully, then Jakie nuzzles my ear with his wet retriever’s nose, and I know I will be. I work hard to be the person my dog thinks I am and that person takes her dog out for walks, unfailingly. When her body lets her.

We go out. Jake leaps ahead of me, eager for the release of his ball from the chucker, a wanna-be shortstop with a hot glove-hand in the making. He soars, twists, catches the ball in midair, his furry golden body an airborne apostrophe.

“You’ll make an infielder with the Red Sox yet,” I tell him when he returns with the soggy ball in his mouth and relinquishes it in exchange for a tiny nibble of cookie. Then off he gallops again in pursuit of a bobbling grounder. “Get your glove on it,” I shout after him, laughing.

The sunlight is still that tentative early-morning rose, delicate cirrus clouds like moss across the eastern sky distilling the light into amber. Within a quarter-hour, I know, that amber will brighten into the quotidian brassy golden weight of a prairie summer. The morning smells of petrichor, that unique ozone-and-earth aroma of fresh rain, a fleeting remnant of last night’s shower that will soon dissipate in the day’s heat. But for now, remnants of moisture still gleam, wayward diamonds on the quackgrass and red dogwood lining the driveway’s verge.

In years past, I would loop Jake’s leash around my waist and snap the leash’s business end to his collar when we reached the driveway’s end, and we’d head south along the sand road. Dave and I live rurally, on the remnants of my family’s farm west of Saskatoon, on the edges of an area known somewhat ironically as the little sand hills. That means our sand-and-clay-gumbo fields roll upwards by a grand height of ten feet by the time we reach the south pasture and the cattle dugout where as a teenager I rode my horse daily. A scrubby mix of poplar groves, wild roses, buffalo beans, red dogwood, hay fields, pastures, and the occasional stand of grain line both sides of our quiet road. Most of the nearby farms have been subdivided into eighty-acre lots inhabited by commuters who work in Saskatoon. My daily walk is decidedly rural all the same, taking me past several pastures populated by Black Angus cattle, horses, ponies, and miniature donkeys. A wondrous range of wild birds, porcupines, white-tailed deer, skunks, coyotes, and the occasional cougar or moose populate the woods and fields, and it’s common for Jake and me to share our sandy road with deer on our early-morning travels. I hear magpies, crows, red-tailed hawks, meadowlarks, and chickadees daily, howl along with the coyotes and neighbourhood dogs nightly, smell skunks too often, pick rosehips each autumn, mourn porcupine-ravaged trees every spring. After twenty-seven years enmeshed in Calgary’s busy urban landscape, the sights, sounds, tastes, and smells of this Saskatchewan backwater where we’ve lived for thirteen years are my solace and strength.

Today our walk is a short one, one kilometer, out and back on the driveway, as my sister prescribed. To my utter relief, my knee does not flare up into hot knives dipped in acid, and my

foot does not begin to throb. Hope, then, fluttering ahead of me on a goldfinch's topaz-crusted wings still damp from rain.

*

Walking and running are good for me, a quotidian part of my life for decades. Movement keeps my brain focussed, my lungs and muscles toned, my emotions on an even keel, my heart healthy. But in 2023, my new GP renews an alarm that had initially sounded when my previous doctor read the results of my bloodwork in the summer of 2016. My cholesterol numbers are on the high side, then and now, but my ratio is fabulous.

"We don't prescribe statins for people with this kind of ratio. Keep moving. Keep running and walking," Doctor K tells me, and oh, I feel so virtuous!

A month later, I see my ophthalmologist to follow up on another occurrence of some frightening moments of *amaurosis fugax*, or temporary blindness, a grey screen that has descended over my right eye half a dozen times over the past five years.

"You are at risk of sudden blindness," she says. My loss of vision is caused by tiny blood clots, she explains, then tells me, "You need cataract surgery to widen the valve and to improve blood flow from brain to eye. Take baby aspirin and keep walking and running to reduce intraocular pressure until we can book you in."

I have terrific vision, but I don't doubt her diagnosis—my history of pulmonary embolism remains a mystery, unsolved when I was forty, come back to haunt me two decades later. On top of that, my elderly Mommy has the trifecta of eye diseases—glaucoma, macular degeneration, cataracts. I drive her to and from the local hospital and two eye clinics for regular appointments, including injections into her right eye that she stoically endures, unblinkingly observing, "Nothing to be done but to get on with it."

I don't have time in my life to lose my vision even a little bit, never mind go suddenly blind! How would I write or type? How would I run? Walk? Cook? Quilt? Read? Throw a ball for Jake? See my sons' faces? My husband's? The possibility tips me into near-panic. Such a huge fear, too big to unpack, so I fold it like a piece of unwanted fabric and tuck it away in a black mental box with a kryptonite padlock. I don't want to see so much as a thread.

*

Walking and its relationship to the creative life is well-documented. In their writing, Annie Dillard, William Wordsworth, Virginia Woolf, and many others intuitively drew on walking for inspiration. At the other extreme, in *Stanford News*, May Wong records that scientists at Stanford University employed a rigorously academic approach in their 2014 research into how walking increases creativity. Without the benefit of Stanford's research team to corroborate my opinions, I've learned that running—and other physical exertion that allows my brain to range freely while my body sweats—has the same effect.

But neither those writers nor the Stanford team were the first to celebrate walking as integral to intellectual exercise. In his article, "The Mind in Motion: Walking and Metaphorical Travel in the Roman Villa," Tim O'Sullivan observes that Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato were notorious walkers, equally famed for walking as for thinking. Cicero, writing in *De Oratore* about the *ambulatio*, or contemplative walk of the Roman elite in the late second and early first century B.C.E., describes the site where he is walking as an ideal locale for an imaginary conversation about philosophy and the intellectual life (O'Sullivan 136). O'Sullivan characterizes Cicero's fascination with walking as the manifestation of a Greek cultural metaphor that associated the movement of the body with the movement of the mind (139). I am amazed to be in such august company on the matter; I can but agree. Centuries later, in his famous essay on walking that first appeared in *The Atlantic* in 1862, Henry David Thoreau cited heavenly grace, a direct dispensation from God, as necessary for walking (658). Especially now, in my current risky, fragile, tenuous state, I clearly feel that sense of the sacred and transcendent, and the spirit of Thoreau's "saunterer," the "Saint-terror," the "holy lander," the one who loves the holy land beneath their feet, imbues my walking, my running (657). My living.

*

Sounding a winter morning

Snow crunches underfoot, crystal teeth biting
at the road's edge, empty

of anything but frettings,
those staccato violin notes.

Grain truck a mile away, tires and engine moan
along the frozen gravel road.

Double strand of wool unwinds behind a jet,
the growl of it unfurling two white breaths later.

Train filled with barley ten miles distant
whistles to clouds as if they were errant calves.

Chickadees in the willows remind each other
of an upcoming tea party. Sparrows chatter

in the pole barn, metal roof amplifying
conversation into argument.

Yelps unite into a single coyote voice
piercing the sky like a nail into timber.

In its wake, a telegraph trail of howls
across the horizon from unseen dogs

who catch the vibe, articulating
what you didn't know you needed to say.

*

At the time of my foot accident, I was on Vancouver Island, in the Comox Valley with Momsy on one of her bucket-list trips, showing her the mostly-still-recognizable venues of her—our—life there in the 1960s and early '70s. That morning, I ran 10k along the verdant banks of the Courtenay River, then we toured Mom's destinations: a market garden, which had thrived in the rich alluvial soil at the mouth of the river and where she'd been a field boss, but it was now under the care of Ducks Unlimited and a herd of Jersey cows; our favourite beaches, heavy with kelp-slick stones and beachcombers' drifted-in logs, where decades ago we'd dug clams, fished for salmon, and picked oysters; then a local butcher shop. Back in the day, Momsy had driven for the butcher shop, delivering meat and recipes weekly, driving up-island to rural clients who lived far from town. Like her, most were young mothers, but they hadn't learned much cooking, and Momsy found herself dishing out cooking advice and recipes while taking orders for and delivering frozen pork chops and t-bone steaks or ground beef. The shop is now owned by her former boss's grandsons, who were glad to chat with Mom against a backdrop of stained aprons, scimitar knives, hanging sides of beef.

Then we visited an organic winery. Of course there'd been no wineries on the island in the 1960s! But the wines we sampled and shipped home helped ease Mom's feelings of dislocation—the valley had changed as much as she had and there's no returning to your youth. In fact, I was walking across a grocery store's parking lot to buy more sparkling wine to enjoy with grilled salmon for dinner when the ponytailed motor-scooter-ist did his damage. My sister recalls that when I called her half an hour later to report the event—"You'll never guess what just happened!"—I was giggling, just this side of hysteria, clearly in shock.

When we returned home to Saskatchewan a week later, my injured foot was safely encased in a walking boot. My physio and my GP both ordered me to practice immobility for several weeks and Dave picked up the load, cooking and making tea, maintaining my supply of crossword puzzles, books, heating pads, and icepacks, chucking Jackie's ball.

I very slowly resumed an approximation of life, with pain as my constant companion: a battery of tests revealed extensive soft tissue damage, a bruised and swollen map of injury to everything but the bones. The foot is a complicated piece of engineering, with twenty-six bones, thirty-three joints, more than one hundred ligaments, tendons, and muscles, and over seven thousand nerve endings. A year and a half later, most of my foot feels simultaneously tingly and numb, clear signs of long-term nerve damage, and it either throbs or aches, especially if I exceed 15,000 steps in one day. I doubt it could withstand the rigours and pounding commensurate with the training necessary to run a half-marathon, my preferred running and racing distance. My feelings about the high probability of being limited to 5 and

10k runs change with the moment—anger, resentment, self-pity, resignation, grief, acceptance, denial, the whole gamut. Sometimes I send urgent messages to the supreme being I want to believe in: “I will be satisfied if I can walk every day, if I can continue to feed my writing practice with my moving feet,” I promise. But will I really? At the thought, a thread of fear slips free from the black metal box.

Soft tissue damage can be a life sentence of pain and reduced function: I thought I’d never run again. The slow road to recovery felt pointless on those days when I came home from physio sessions in more pain than when I’d left the house.

At one point, my podiatrist told me, “You’ll be permanently lame if you return to running now. It’s too soon.” The cuboid bone of my midfoot was displaced, jutting downward and out of alignment with the cuneiform bones. I remembered, searingly, my horse going lame after I’d moved away from home at eighteen; Mommy ultimately called the vet to put him down because he suffered from laminitis, where the central coffin bone of his foot drove down through the sole so he walked on its unprotected nerves, in excruciating pain.

Unlike my horse, I’m still above-ground. But I have lost my unthinking, entitled, athletic privilege, that unquestioning and uninhibited use of my body for my own ends. That life is gone forever. I painstakingly resumed my walking and running practice, but not on back-to-back days. My forced inactivity was followed by months of reduced movement, then re-conditioning in my upstairs studio, where, then and now, I lift weights and do yoga, write, sew, and read. My foot would tolerate very little initially: my physio and podiatrist prescribed strictly limited numbers of steps per day, and small but precise strengthening exercises. I lifted weights. I walked. Did yoga. Applied heat and ice. Eventually I ran again, very short distances that slowly lengthened. On the morning I came back from logging a 10k run, my first 10k since the accident and never mind its slow pace, I made my favourite chocolate dessert—molten lava cake, a famous French chef’s four-star classic—to celebrate my return to running.

While I was benched, I gained a few pounds despite Dave’s lunchtime salads. It could have been the dark chocolate I enjoyed daily, but I doubt it. Every chocoholic knows how uplifting endorphins are, and dark chocolate contains endorphins—the same chemical cocktail called “runner’s high,” and a mysterious part of why I love to run. Truth is, if you asked me which I’d more willingly give up, running or chocolate, I’d tell you that I rely on running more than I rely on chocolate.

*

Still

~ after “Wolves” by Lorna Crozier, from *The Wild in You*

The wild in you still walks out to meet
each morning. How hope persists! Despite
human deaths in their millions, despite dying oceans.

The wild in you still walks out to greet
the coyotes as they sing the day into existence.
Their song predates you, your ancestors.

Their tracks will outlive yours.
Humility arrives between their notes,
between their paw-prints in the snow.

The wild in you still walks out to hail
four-footed cousins coursing with lust for living,
aghast at human hubris and pride.

The wild in you still walks out to record
what we are losing. Say it plain – what we have destroyed.
To trace the stars placed one-by-one above us, saved only

by their distance. To chart the evils we have accomplished.
To list what we are killing. Our elders. Our children.
Nieces and nephews. Our future. Prairie grasses. Burrowing owl.

Piping plover. Sage grouse. Whooping crane. Sand verbena.
Mouse-ear cress. Honeybees in all their chambered sweetness.
Fishes and their fragile coral homes. Mangroves. Whales. Dolphins.

Bison. Bears. The last white rhino. All our cousins. The list, growing.
The wild in you still walks out to make a mourning song.
To chant the day into rest.

To sing our world to her beautiful terrible death
even as you hope for hope,
that the wild in you can still mend this beautiful broken fence.

*

The solitude of walking and running suits me—the withdrawal into an inner world through the physical one—as does the motion, the rhythm my body swings into, and those endorphins, that slightly stoned and wholly legal runner’s high that sneaks up on me after four or five or six or seven kilometres of movement. Those bodily sensations bring me pleasure, simple as that. I like the effort required, the mental and physical discipline of persevering, of muscles flexing, of strength. The mental room that running affords me to think is almost a by-product, a happy one for a writer, but I’d run even if I didn’t write. However, I *am* a writer, and movement is part of my writing practice. Dialogues have developed—complete with quotation marks and commas!—and narrative arcs have peaked and valleyed; poems have touched down with

feathered tips on my shoulder; essays' endings have emerged—all while running or walking. The words arrive, not in dribs, but as rivulets and gushes, and it's as if I am pregnant again, my water breaking so the life waiting within me can become its own self. I come home with words inked on my skin, phrases recorded on my phone, clutching wads of paper and smudged scribbles I can decipher just enough to remember their import.

*

I've spent years in an internal debate, weighing the merits of the creative life in a variety of forms, both intellectual and purely physical. So it follows that my current practice of walking and running did not spring from a vacuum; it emerged from the well-trodden and sometimes-converging paths of physical and creative activity that I have followed for most of my life, as have many other writers and creatives. In *Wanderlust*, her seminal examination of walking through the ages, Rebecca Solnit observes that walking is how the body measures itself against the earth (30). In that measurement, I inevitably find those places where I come up short. But—most joyfully!—I sometimes also find my fit—the place, intellectually, emotionally, or physically, where I belong, where words sing through my hands and onto the page, that state of being where, as Solnit puts it, the loneliness of solitary walking or running has a luxurious flavour (30). That flavour is made possible, Jean-Jacques Rousseau says—and I wholeheartedly concur—because the creative mind works best when legs are in motion (qtd. in Solnit, 24). While walking or running, I am of the world, but passing through, in a transient state, but one of grace, observing the world with some element of distance, as writers must.

But Solnit also observes that walking is inherently an action that flirts with falling—the precariousness of walking is its very essence, never mind factoring in the trauma and drama of damage (33). Each time I lift one foot and then the other, I am momentarily suspended in midair, relying on faith and balance, touchdown uncertain. So the unravelling thread, the source of my anxiety earlier this morning as I set out with Jake on my brief morning walk, was my own mortality. The frailty of my body. My fear that my walking and running days are numbered. If that, then are my remaining creative days likewise closely counted?

*

Faith-writing in the dark

i. Recall what the dream asked you to give up –
chocolate, tea, coffee, lemon cake, red wine,

your body as you once knew it.
In the mirror, your shape a stranger,

flesh more than just skin and lives you shed
while sleeping.

Snake arms, unknown breasts, damaged
hips and feet a jigsaw impossible to re-form.

ii. Legs of parchment,
how strong, how fragile.

Twenty-six bones in each foot, thirty-three joints.
Ligaments, tendons, muscles, nerves,

a complex map on your physio's table. Your body
re-written by pain, yoga poses you cannot strike,

not this month nor the next. The words you write
in your running journal – *one step at a time*.

If worry is the whetstone, fear the blade,
cast both aside. You are as nature made you,

and nature will heal you or take you
in good time.

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DEE HOBSBAWN-SMITH is currently serving as the 10th Saskatchewan Poet Laureate. Her award-winning poetry, essays, fiction, and journalism is at times influenced by her career in the food industry as a Red Seal chef, educator, Slow Food member and locavore advocate. Her most recent books include *Among the Untamed: poems*; the novel *Danceland Diary* (finalist, SK Book Awards Fiction Award); and *Bread & Water: essays* (winner of the SK Book Awards Nonfiction Award, and Taste Canada's Gold Medal for Culinary Narrative). She lives rurally, in Treaty 4 Territory, where she runs, quilts, and gardens. dee enjoys good wine and coffee, dark chocolate, historical novels and movies, intelligent detective TV series, and folk/bluegrass music.