Back in the before time,
before I licked your nose
or sniffed your shoes,
before you bought my bed and bowl,
before the place you picked me out,
I ran with a mob of mutts.

We tipped over trash cans,
pawing for bones;
we barked;
we howled;
we wrestled
and fought
over scraps of pizza
while dodging the stones
thrown by boys
who thought the world was mean,
and so they had to be.

Then came the wind-blown day
when the man wearing jeans
and a bright green cap
lured me and my mob into the back of his truck
with the biggest steak we had ever seen.
He slammed the doors and we were stuck!

Next we knew we’d arrived at the place
filled with dogs locked in cages
and a woman who clucked
like a chicken when she saw us.
Just in case we tried to run away,
she put us in cages, too —
Hunter and Tugger, Digger, and Dice,
Big Bear and Sweet Girl, Curley, and Boo
were locked in cages and looked kind of scared.
We didn’t howl or growl.  
We lay down, feeling blue.

14-15  
We got water and kibbles  
from the lady who cared for us.  
We got walks,  
but wished  
we could race  
the way we used to.

16-17  
And every day,  
people stared at us;  
they smiled —  
some glared at us  
as they paced  
up and down,  
pointing,  
then taking Hunter and Tugger  
then Digger  
then Dice,  
then Big Bear then Sweet Girl then Curley —  
last, Boo.

18-19  
My heart was a cold, starless night —

20-21  
until your face  
shone through the bars  
like a mini sun.  
You whispered, “Good boy!”  
said what a great team we’ll make,  
then you reached in to pet me  
because you knew  
I wouldn’t bite.  
You were skinny as a string bean  
but your hand was gentle —  
it would never throw stones at me  
(maybe at a puddle or lake or tree).  
If only those boys from before could have seen  
how good you are.

22-23  
Before you found me,
I thought all kids were mean,
though dreamed each night
I might find just one
who didn’t mind so
much my hairy stump,
who liked the way I lean on those I love.

24-25
Now we’re home!
And here is my bowl
(it’s black, like me).
Here are my bones
to chew when I want.

26-27
Here is my bed
so I can be near you
when we sleep.

28-29
But let’s not sleep yet!
Let’s go lie down and eat some lunch,

30-31
then play outside —
a game called RUN —

32
and leave five footprints in the snow.

THE REAL-LIFE TROUPER’S STORY

In January 2005, the “real” Trouper was picked up running with a pack of stray dogs in the streets of Ponce, Puerto Rico. His back right leg was so mangled — probably the result of a car accident — that it was facing in the opposite direction. The dogcatcher brought him to a “kill shelter.” There, the man who was supposed to put him down was moved deeply by this dog who — despite being in pain — was sweet, handsome, and good-tempered. The man called the woman who ran the local shelter. “This dog is too good to put down,” he said, and the woman came to rescue him.

When the woman walked into the room, Trouper licked her hand, as if he knew she was there to save him. She brought him to her vet, who amputated the leg. By February,
Trouper had been nursed back to health and was getting around quite well at the shelter. The woman listed him on her website as being available for adoption. Month after month, people passed him over — until September of 2005, when Trouper found his home in New Hampshire.