

in the dust

Me and Elmer had to get out of town.

We barely made it to the rail yard for the 4:35. We had to crawl through one hundred feet of underbrush and burs and thickets. We had to race for the train as it tugged away from us.

The cops had been out looking for us all day. We had been stealing dogs again. I'm not really sure why we stole dogs. It was just something to do. Something to lull away steamy summer days like this.

Me and Elmer would herd the dogs together in a ditch and get 'em all riled up. We weren't mean to 'em 'r anything, we just liked herdin' 'em an' runnin' 'em through the dusty back alleys and gardens and yards of town - a hundred dogs in a great dog stampede, a great stream of smelly fur flowing through yards and gas stations and the supermarket. If you've ever seen a hundred dogs racing through an alley, you can attest to what a moving and inspiring event it can be - if done properly. The sight was so winsome, so captivating, that's why I couldn't understand why the authorities found it to be so disruptive. So what if we raced a stream of dogs through the supermarket, the church, city hall? This was our art, and we were providing them a moment of beauty, a respite from their monotonous, bland lives.

The train clickity-clacked us out of town as a couple of older, out-of-shape cops tried to catch up, waving their batons to bust our heads clean open. And who could blame 'em, really? I mean we'd taken a couple of their dogs an' gone an' gotten 'em all worked up. Dang, if I had dogs an' some bored, unemployed guys with nothing' ta do took 'em an' ran 'em 'round town, adding dog after dog to their temporary collection, . . . Well, dang, I don't know what I'd do. I mean, that's the type a thing that could really set a guy off.

Elmer whistled as we gently swayed to and fro, back and forth, rocking side-to-side like the wind blowing waves in the amber fields of grain.

I liked Elmer. He'd talk for hours about how each of the great poets had met their end. He knew all the little details, many of which I bet not even the family members were aware of. Many of these circumstances were quite embarrassing, or perhaps they were all just made up.

“Take us to the end of the world!!” I called, hanging out the boxcar’s door, the wind blowing in my hair and on my face like freedom, until Elmer pushed me out with his foot and the cops caught up as I tumbled in the dust.

They broke my arm with an old two-by-four that was layin’ there in the ditch. Said I was resistin’.

The cell was empty. Just a little sink and a cracked and chipped jumble of porcelain that passed for a toilet. Least they had indoor plumbin’.

They only fed me dog food. Seemed fitting.

I spent my days on the cold cement floor, daydreaming of the day of the great dog flood - me leadin’ a thousand, no wait, *three* thousand assorted dogs, all types and sizes - all breeds racin’ through town to Elmer’s grave. A thundering stream of wild beasts and me, gigglin’ and runnin’ in victory - finally pullin’ off the greatest dog run in recorded history. We’d dig ol’ Elmer up an’ scatter his bones throughout the dusty town, throughout time.

I picture Elmer now, sittin’ at the end of the world, maybe catchin’ a nap in the shade beside a gentle little creek. Maybe he’d even have a dog beside him in the grass there. Or maybe I was the one at the end of the world, sittin’ here while he was in some boxcar gently rocking from side-to-side, on his way back to the world, back to excitement.

My excruciating loneliness is broken periodically by a random dog barking in the distance. This is the only thing that keeps me going now, that gives me hope. The only thing that gives me faith - as if each dog were calling out to me, looking for me in the weeds and tall grass, in the dust of the alleys. All this time in here, I hope they’re out there lookin’ for me.

By Tony Rauch – copywrited material