

the beagles of arkansas



MIKE FINLEY

THE BEAGLES OF ARKANSAS

published by mudborn press, 1978

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CALIFORNIA

it is sad not being loved
in arizona

the stars shine on the tops
of mobile homes

the ring around the moon
means something

the compassionate buddha
wobbling on a fart

switch off the radio, stop
and listen

a diesel whines a mile away
on highway one

ARKANSAS

The unnecessary crash
through the bramble at night
resounds in the scraggly hills,

and in the wake of
every out-of-state plate
the beagles stampede you yapping,
adopt me, get me
out of here.

Scorpions crane their tails
like dance partners,
peacocks explode for passing cars,
mud daubers chew cabins
on rear-view mirrors.

Everything seems to want out,
yet it stays, prisoners
of the minimum wage.

A DRIVE IN THE COUNTRY

Summer was dry but the
Farmers forget and plow
The dead stalks under.
Today the wind is lifting
The first loose dirt away.
The elms in the Mahnomen
Park are striped for
Felling, and sugar beets
Litter the roads at sharp
Curves. Tree trunks lay
Scattered where they
Landed after the tornado
Of 1958. Outside
Crookston a yellow dog
Just made it to the ditch
To die, and farther
Ahead, a mile from the
Border, old shoes line the
Shoulders. Canadians are
Home now, wearing new
Ones.

AT THE BALL PARK

Ball Day at the ball park
and before the game
Lyman Bostock throws
out a couple dozen balls,
and all us fans
stand on our seats and
reach for them.

When Carew's turn comes
everyone cheers, even
the kids stop scouting
for ice cream in
a cup for a minute.

And when the vendor
does come by he stands
in everyone's view, so
we watch him instead,
pouring two bottles
of beer at a time, holding
his dollars in his teeth.

GRASSFIRE

The farmer spatters the grass with gas,
Shambles forward with lit match,
Stoops and unrolls a carpet of flame
And smoke as black as rubber.

The idea is to burn the weeds the snow
Would hang on, drift from, would smother
The road, keep pheasant and jackrabbit
Out from under the wheels.

* * *

Animals knew fire before they knew men.
The cattle groan across the plain,
Suspicious as they have always been.

People give us a running chance,
Should fire approach, undo the cord
That ties us to this balsam tree

IN KANSAS

spring flows all around us or ought to
each field of corn is taut
with its arrows and bows
our hands can't contain
all the good gifts
of appetite and war

I keep counting the day
that shakes the calendar
It is me between you
making eager X's

We subsisted on shucks
and gathered in the sheaves
to the animal earth
living outside the retina
like a secret

Blind as corn and armed
to the eyes
Stethoscopes hang from every ear
Everyone wants
the combination

The road accelerates
below us, a country
of plumb lines
the only curve the
telegraph swell

In all this flatness we
try anyway
learning to jump

as best we can

(1974)

DETAILS

When news of my grandmother's death came,
we clustered by the phone,
confused looks raced
from face to face. I was seven.

When my sister died, and I was
eleven, my father
sat on the edge of the bed,
and all I could see was
the rip in his
underpants.

When my grandfather died,
when I was thirteen, I went over
each word in the letter
again and again,
mouthing the syllables.

THE BALE-DOOR LEDGE

This place is neither
Here nor now and
Neither are the two bare
Legs dangling from the
Bale-door or the
Congregation of
Sunflowers craning
Below for the holy
Glimpse.

Twenty years since these
Boards saw a broom, and now
The mud climbs under
The roosting beam in
Strutting sharps and
Flats.

This place that is no
Place at all is a mile
And a year from what we
Know, lifetimes of
Thought from the twitch
Of the paw of the
Injured dog lying on the
Shoulder of the high-

Way in,
Or farther on, a car
Upside down and standing
Beside it a man,
Scratching his head with
His cap.
It all dissolves, a
Dream from which the
Sleeper awakens to two
Hornets clutched and
Teetering on the wrist's
Soft skin,
And outside the terraces
Swelling and snapping.
I think of my mother in
Her old yellow house-
Coat, shaking out rugs on
The porch.

(1980)

LIKING AND LOVING

Last night my friend and I sat up
discussing the difference --
liking as discovery,
loving as recognition.
You have had that kind of talk.

You know I love you,
at least I always try,
but sometimes I find myself
not paying attention,
and then I see you
peculiarly.

Something about you
has nothing to do with me
or our house or our bed
or our family or our times.

It is more as if I were digging around
in the yard and come across
a jar,
with half a face and one good eye
looking in another direction,
green.

Can you please say to me
what you are looking at
that puts this face on you
that says one year
two years three

years and counting?

**ANXIOUSLY APPROACHING HIS THIRTIETH
BIRTHDAY, HE GETS IN HIS CAR**

Drive down the mountain
or drive night and day
across country like this.

Some things are beautiful,
others are not.
How in this world
do you keep from forgetting
which is which
and which not.

How do you bear it
approaching the bridge
on the road up ahead,
stretching from cliff to cliff
as though a stick
about to snap.

I feel like that
turtle I saw on the road
yesterday.
He had several feet to go
and he heard
traffic.

(1980)

TWO CITIES

A few leaves are yellow along the River Road. At Lake Street I cycle across the Mississippi. Now I'm not in Minneapolis, I'm in St. Paul, and Lake street becomes Marshall Avenue. And below me is the river.

There is a lot of water in the Mississippi River. Millions of tons of it, all in one direction. It would be funny if this water were the last if it -- this summer's shipment to the Gulf complete.

There is also a lot of traffic here. I sit on the cliff and unwrap my sandwich. A bus goes by, and the people in it look at me, and I look at them. Under the bridge the women's crew slides its shell through the water.

There are about a million people living on the banks of this river. That is a lot of people. It includes the people on the bus on top of the bridge, and the four women in the shell below the bridge. And of that million, just about all of us have looked at this river, listened to it, and thought about how special it is.

It would be funny if everyone had their special thoughts all at once. The cliffs are suddenly swarming with people. There are a million people on the edge of this river, looking down.

But it only lasts a minute. Soon the people of Minneapolis look eastward with feelings of

superiority, and the people of St. Paul look westward with feelings of their own superiority. Everyone looks out at the suburbs with feelings of superiority. And the people in the suburbs look back with feelings of superiority.

My sandwich is tuna, although I would prefer corned beef. There is probably someone in town right now who is having corned beef, who really would prefer to be dining out, in West St. Paul maybe. And there is probably someone eating at a restaurant in West St. Paul right now who can't understand why the waitress is ignoring him. The waitress would rather be home eating with her family, while her husband wonders what life would have been like with that other woman with brown hair, from the same graduating class, who is right now serving her husband roast beef, only he wishes he were sitting under a tree, with a sackful of tuna sandwiches under the tackle box.

Today I'm on my bicycle. Yesterday I drove. The day before I took a bus. Tomorrow I think I will walk. However I travel, there's always a crowd. Looking out bus windows, staring at the fronts of elevator cars, watching the highway's dotted lines. And all of us have been to the river at least once. The river is special.

And when something is special, it's more important than money. If only everyone could be special, and feel special, all the time.

I polish off my apple and throw it down the bank, It was a biodegradable apple.

A hundred years from now, we'll all be dead, the whole million. Well, maybe twenty people will be alive, but they'll be dead pretty soon, too. But these two cities will still be here. Changed, but not completely.

A few leaves will be yellow already again. And the river will still not have run out of water.



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