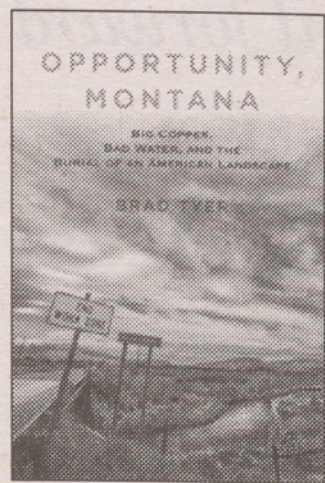


A wasted opportunity in Montana

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Opportunity, Montana: Big Copper, Bad Water, and the burial of an American Landscape By Brad Tyler

Montana might be one place in the Lower 48 where you wouldn't expect pollution problems. Its image, fostered by ads around the country, is of an outdoor paradise. Unfortunately, Montana is also home to the largest Superfund site in the country, the legacy of decades of uncontrolled mining.

A central problem of our industrial civilization is the disposal of waste. Opportunity, Mont., is the poster child for that problem. Located just outside of Anaconda on the Clark Fork of the Columbia River, Opportunity grew up around a smelter that rendered various kinds of ores — copper, manganese, zinc and phosphates — from surrounding mines while generating acres of tailings and wastewater. The tailings, or leach residue, had high concentrations of heavy metals, including arsenic, often used as fill for driveways and streets around town.

The smelter itself produced arsenic dust that settled into people's yards; the paint used by the company (appropriated by employees and used all over the town) had an 8 percent lead content. Drums of carcinogenic chemicals were buried without documentation and dug up at random years later. Floods deposited contaminated soils downstream, leaving acres along the river where nothing grows. More recently, the Environmental Protection Agency, as it cleaned up other contaminated sites in the watershed, decided that the Opportunity smelter site was the best place to dispose of contaminated soils because the soils there were already too contaminated to clean up.

As often happens, it's hard to prove that people's health has been affected by all the pollution around them. However, as Brad Tyler puts it in "Opportunity, Montana:" "One old-school environmentalist friend ... responds to the question with a directive to 'just take a walk through the Anaconda Safeway.' The preponderance of palsied shuffles is all the evidence he needs."

Tyer is at his best when he focuses on Opportunity, its history and the people there, and the broader story of copper mining in the area. However, he structures the book as a personal memoir. Hanging over his narrative is his bitterness about his relationship with his father, whom he calls "Bob."

The idea sounds promising — work out your issues about your father while working out your issues about industrial civilization — but the result doesn't gel. One might expect some kind of epiphany about the father, or the narrator, or the relation between the two; one might expect that epiphany to give some insight into the larger issue.

The epiphany might have occurred on Tyer's final float trip with his father. But Tyer remembers only three things from the trip. The first is the weevils in the instant soup Bob brought for lunch the first day. The second is an argument about nuclear power, of which Tyer says, "It was just a handy divide to disagree across." The third is that because "Bob had neglected to bring a map," he pushed them faster than they needed to go, and they "spent six hours huddled out of the wind, waiting for our ride to show up."

Tyer was 27 at the time but, judging from his story, he was still thinking like a teenager who expects the adult to take care of him: He doesn't write, "We both forgot to bring a map," for example. Seventeen years later, he clearly feels guilt, but not forgiveness — for his father or himself.

As far as what happened to Opportunity, the narrative is hurt by Tyer's unwillingness to commit himself to outrage. Outrage is the only reasonable response to the story, and it's clear that Tyer himself feels that. Yet, at least half a dozen times, he essentially writes that, given industrial civilization, given our need for the minerals that came out of the ground here, there had to be a waste dump somewhere.

In a similar vein, he writes, "As crimes go, the cleanup of the Clark Fork ... and the sacrifice of Opportunity belong firmly in the category of First World Problems." He recalls describing his story to a reporter in Russia whose closest colleagues had been murdered. "She said, of my country, 'You are so far ahead of us.'"

Early deaths from cancer, poisoned earth and ongoing arsenic dust should not be trivialized by the fact that the people in the town have some access to relief through the political process. Nor are the deaths excused by the fact that many of the workers still living in the town were themselves complicit in the degradation of their own health.

Tyer is an accomplished writer. But his ambivalence about what happened to Opportunity seems to cause him to circle his subject throughout the book, giving it a degree of repetitiousness that sometimes annoys. This actually does seem related to his unresolved feelings about his father: "I learned from Bob how to be disappointed, and how to parse imperfection. ... There's a voice in my head that sounds like his. It says that Opportunity's story isn't even worth telling."

The story was worth telling. If Tyer could have shut off that voice, it would have been a better story.

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You

By Shannon Andrews

You are the brightness of my heart
You make the sun shine on the dreariest days
You move the mountains
And you crash like the ocean waves
You are my hope
You are my static
You are my best friend
You taught me how to love
You are you
That makes the best of you

Breakthrough

By Ron Sanford

It's my own very unique project
No meter, no structure involved
I choose the subject and prompt
Writing about nature and such.

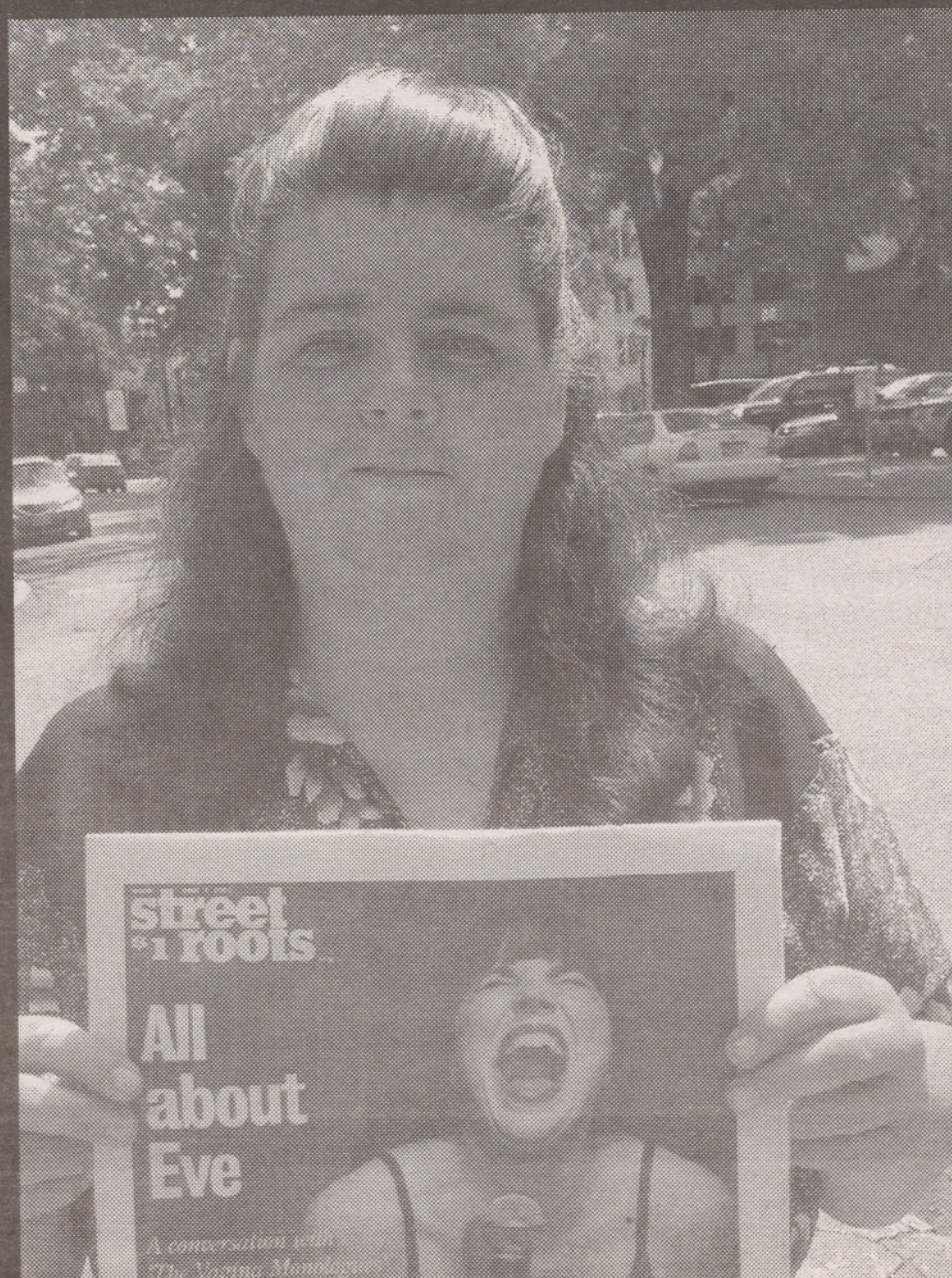
Leave it to the breeze
The facets, methods, devices nothing new,
Lest I should think on edge of a breakthrough.

Multitudinous waves ebb and flow
Past the perimeter once imagined
There are no bounds or limits
To the creative genius of the human mind.

Music music music called universal
Let's make another set of rules to break.



Let's get Medieval on greed's ass.



This
woman
works.
So does
Street
Roots.