

THE NIGHT WE LANDED ON THE MOON: ESSAYS BETWEEN EXILE & BELONGING

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POSTCARDS FROM BOOMTOWN

In 2008, the US Geological Survey sparked a fracking boom in North Dakota when they announced that 3 to 4.3 billion barrels of recoverable oil rested under the state in the Bakken/Three Forks formation. Estimates of additional oil reserves that are not recoverable with current technology are between 18 - 24 billion barrels. At present, over one million barrels a day are extracted from the Bakken shale.

1.

Things go boom in the Bakken. Daily. A minivan burns to cinders in the Williston WalMart parking lot—someone's living room/bedroom/kitchen, someone's illegal and unwisely used propane heater. Temperatures hover at 15 below and people are living in small throwaway RVs held together by duct tape. Nowhere to put all the people, and the arsonists aren't helping.

A half-built apartment complex in Minot burns down one week. And the next week, another half-built apartment complex burns down in Williston. Workers and even sometimes families live in man camps, military rows of paper-thin aluminum storage pods the size of jail cells—a bed, a sink, a five step walking space, a chair in the corner.

Meanwhile, back at WalMart, explosions of other kinds. A few years ago, WalMart made the decision to just put merchandise out in pallets. Mountains of women's pants and blouses, scattered piles of toys, bundles of Carhart jackets, steel-toed boots balanced against walls, thrown in corners. The pallets empty and fill, empty and fill. No one to hang things up, straighten, sort, put out displays. WalMart can't keep employees, and the goods keep coming along with people sifting through piles looking for things they need, things to buy.

The post office can't keep employees because rent is too high and roads are too dangerous. In December of 2014, six postal workers in Williston walked off the job in one day. No one knows where anyone lives anyway—forwarding addresses are only rumors. (Later, a discovery that postal workers were simply throwing mail away in dumpsters, to dispose of undeliverable mail.)

Even murders start as rumors. Last week the police announced they were investigating a murder. They had no crime scene, no body. Just the rumor of a murder, so they asked the public to keep an eye out. Sure enough, a day later a body turned up under a bloody mattress in the ditch 13 miles east of Williston. Welcome to Boomtown.

And the roads are dangerous, not only for little postal worker vehicles creeping along the shoulders. In one location on Highway 85 just south of Williston (a town of about 14,000), a traffic count was conducted a few years ago. In one 24- hour period, 29,000 vehicles went through the intersection— 60% of which were semi-trailer trucks.

To run to the grocery store in your Civic Honda because you forgot to buy beans for your chili is to take your life into your hands. You must make careful lists. You must try not to forget anything. Because things go boom in the Bakken. Daily.

The oil has been down there for millions of years, a worker named Sven tells me, but suddenly we are in such a hurry.

2.

A Facebook page titled, “Bakken Oilfield Fail of the Day,” records daily mishaps. Pictures of oil spurting in the air or recovered fracking water, known as flowback water, on fire shooting out of a rig. Pictures of overturned semis, water tankers, belly dump trucks inditches.

Any photo of a vehicle on its side in the ditch will cause someone on the FB page to write, “sleepy, had to take a nap” or “that’ll buff right out.” A caterpillar being loaded off a platform slips a wheel on the ramp and falls on its side. Under the picture, someone’s written, *Musta been a woman driver.*

Women drivers and southern drivers are a big topic of discussion in the Bakken, as are wind and weather. A picture of a trailer home blown on to its side has the caption, “Wind, 1, Trailer, 0.

Beside a photograph of several 20’ tall water storage tanks blown over in a field like playthings, someone has written. *Do you know why North Dakota is so windy? Because Montana blows and Minnesota sucks.*

3.

Driving through the Bakken at night is like moving through an enemy encampment of biblical proportions; it’s like seeing what Alexander the Great saw when cresting a hill and coming upon the thousand campfires of the Persian Army.

All around in the darkness are the pumping arms of oil rigs, or the tall well-lit fracking towers, or refineries in the distance like small bright cities. Beside each oil pad is a four-to-five-foot plume of fire burning straight out of a pipe coming out of the ground.

This practice, known as flaring, allows oil companies to burn off 30% of the natural gas that comes up to the surface along with the shale oil they are extracting. No infrastructure yet exists in the region to collect the natural gas, and the practice of flaring—in addition to being wasteful—increases the amount of greenhouse gas emissions released into the atmosphere.

How much waste is this? At present, oil companies are extracting a million barrels of oil a day in the Bakken. And in one average month 9.4 billion cubic feet of natural gas will be flared off into the atmosphere. One blogger, Jim Fuglie, tried to do the math. He got out his Montana Dakota Utilities bill to see how many cubic feet of natural gas it took to heat his home during the coldest month of the year. The number was 12,000 cubic feet. By his calculations, the state could heat 780,000 homes a month with the natural gas that's been flared off.

Ironically, just this week, a woman in Fort Yates froze to death inside her home on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation because the tribe is facing a shortage of propane to heat homes.

The state legislators don't seem interested in slowing the boom by forcing infrastructure improvements to correct these imbalances, and none of these problems are going away. Conservative estimates are that there are between 20 to 40 billion barrels of extractable shale oil in the Bakken and Three Forks formation.

4.

The stories that involve children stay with you the longest. It's one thing to listen to Jim tell you about how he lost his job as a state archeologist because of budget cuts in Kansas and how he blew through their savings, just trying to maintain some sense of normalcy for their daughter, who is now nine. They kept thinking something was bound to come through for Jim, and then his wife, Ida, lost her job, too, and now their retirement money is gone.

And it's hard enough to listen with averted eyes and murmur something about the "downturn of the economy," which causes Jim to actually sneer at you a bit even as he hears it, because Ida was the one who finally got the job teaching Special Ed in Williston (because they can't keep teachers in Boomtown either, so there's always a job for someone desperate enough to move there).

And now Jim and Ida live in a small RV because rent for a two-bedroom apartment is somewhere around \$3,000 and Jim has to sleep over at his buddy's trailer at night, so that Ida and their daughter can have a little privacy.

5.

Everyone on the Bakken has a story about children, it seems, and usually they are stories of separation—children being raised in Texas, in Montana, in Wyoming by someone else.

“Every time I talk to her she says “daddy when you coming home,” one wildcatter tells me one night sitting by the fireplace in the lobby of the hotel (he’s just come from the strip club and is very drunk).

He’s already told me how much he makes an hour (\$48/hour, 164,000 year with overtime), how much he lost tonight at blackjack (\$500), we’ve talked about his mother, his ex-wife, his wife, and his girlfriend, and now we are on to the subject of his daughter. “She misses me, sure,” he says, “but she’s going to have a great Christmas.”

The next day, a waitress tells me about one night when she was working and a man came in with his two little kids. They were maybe 8 and 10. The man was still in his muddy work clothes.

It was late, she said—about 11 PM, but he had toys for him. They sat together in a booth and played and colored on the placemats. When the waitress took their order she smelled alcohol on the man, really strong. She went back in the kitchen and tried to decide what to do. Should she call the police?

Stay out of it, the older waitress said to her.

No, the girl said, “if something happens to those kids, I won’t forgive myself.”

So, she pulls the man aside and says, “I smell alcohol on you and I’m not going to let you leave the restaurant with those kids. Give me your keys.”

I’m not giving you my keys, the man says.

Well, then I’m calling the cops, she says.

He said, don’t do that. I drive for a living. I can’t lose my license. Then he begins to tell her how his wife left him and he has no one to take care of the kids. He just picked them up from daycare. I can’t lose my job, he says.

So, she told me she ran back to the kitchen and thought, “what would mom do?”

Then she struck on this idea to let the man go ahead in his car, and she’d follow behind in her car with the kids. When they got to the man camp, the guy came over to her car to gather his

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kids, and he said to her, "Thank you. No one's ever done something like that for me. I promise this won't happen again." But the waitress told me, she doubts it.

"I just wish they would never have found that oil," she said. "I just wish they'd go get oil somewhere else."

I tell her how this oil has changed the national economy. Politicians are saying it's lessening our dependence on oil rich rogue nations—all those places we've been going to fight wars in for the last few decades.

"They call it "conflict-free oil," I tell her.

"It doesn't feel conflict-free to me," she says.