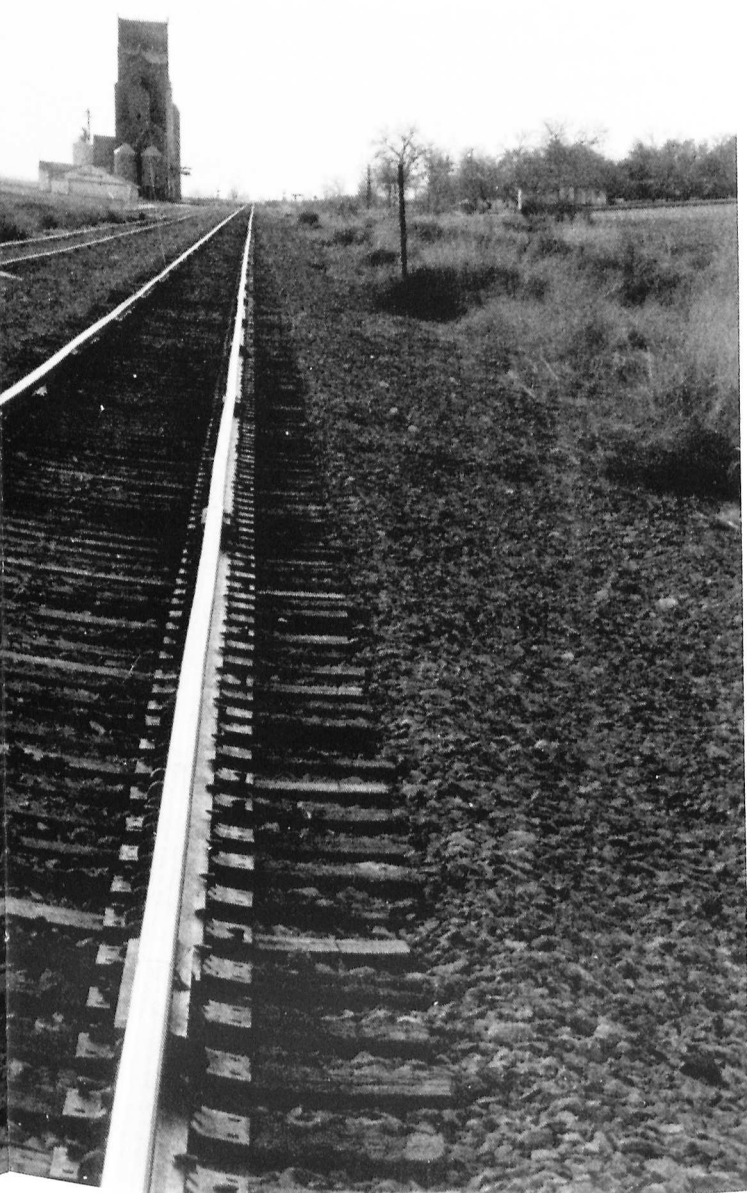


# IN THE WAY

*Nicholas Triolo*



HEADING WEST, BRAD BENKE

**S**IN MIN KOOS, OR “THING THAT’S IN THE WAY.” This was the indigenous name given to Mount Jumbo by the Salish tribe before copper miners came through Western Montana in the 1800s and viewed the 4,768-foot mountain instead as a reclining elephant. For several years, they designated it “Elephant Hill,” until the name changed yet again, inspired by Barnum and Bailey’s most prized circus captive at the time:  
Jumbo the Elephant.

**I**’M SITTING HERE, HALF-NAKED atop this oversized thimble of departing grass and geologic possibility. From Mount Jumbo’s summit, I peer west into primordial lakebed as the sun loses itself behind the Bitterroot, and Missoula’s glacial creep of development—no signs of melting—butts up against an unkempt mountain fingernail. Big sagebrush, *artemisia tridentata*, takes a cleansing lap through lungs with every inhalation; running the steep ascent, I had rubbed a handful of sage into my mustache.

From this sweeping vantage, I watch as a mile and a half of westbound coal train slithers to a standstill into the station. My eyes track the defeated serpent’s arrival, his distended stomach dragging 125 undigested bunnies of bubonic coal, lurching forward towards some unthinkably distant place. What a peculiar chapter in the life of a substance crockpot-cooked for 400 million years.

400 million years.

400 million years ago, a tree decided that it was time. 400 million years ago, a tree saluted the sky, then splash-splash-dashed to her boggy demise. Embalmed in peat, Earth’s undertaker heaved mountains upon mountains over this swamp and a great mummification commenced: heat from below, pressure from above, and what’s created is something dark, dense, and dangerously delectable.

Bearing witness to this train from my evolutionarily advantageous perch, prey is indeed visible but not to these modern eyes, eyes much more attuned to hunting down sale prices than elusive fauna. Salt and sweat flirt with eyelids as my gaze sharpens, trying to make sense of the last 24 hours, and, most importantly, how today began:

In a cold jail.

**J**UMBO WAS AN AFRICAN BUSH ELEPHANT. *Loxodonta Africana*. Largest living terrestrial mammal in the world, and strong as hell. Their trunks alone house more than 40,000 different muscles. Bush elephants grow up surrounded entirely by female herd members, an impermeable matriarchy that nurtures and protects them until adulthood. Highly social, elephants are known for displaying strong emotional responses—grief, joy, love, empathy, and play—and have even been caught weeping for several hours. It's not unusual for them to revisit gravesites of deceased herd members, take a long moment of pause, then toss twigs, dirt, and leaves on top of the body in respect.

The African Bush Elephant is also known to act out in fierce rage and anger when their herd or home is threatened.

**I**'M SITTING HERE TOGETHER with 13 others, after trespassing onto Montana Rail Link property in Helena, Montana. We form a human horseshoe in the crotch of dirt between train tracks, and we wait. Sun is sitting front row to spectate, unflinching and direct. And this dirt—this dirt feels poisonous. I can feel it searing the red handkerchief in my pant pocket. Fingering some rail yard gravel, I drop it immediately after recalling the high mercury levels associated with coal dust residual from passing trains.

We are all here because of coal. Earlier that morning, over 70 concerned citizens, old and young, congregated in Helena's main park to hold a demonstration resisting new proposals to export coal overseas. Burning this stuff has become one of the single biggest contributors of anthropogenic climate change. Montana houses more coal in the ground than any other U.S. state, and we intend to keep it there: *in the ground*.

Following the rally, our large contingency marched towards the railway station where a faction broke off to risk arrest by sitting down in between the tracks and impeding the passage of coal trains, until the police came to arrest us.

Spiral sits next to me. His frame is long and strong, gregarious and playful. Fish-stick-shaped dreads shoot skyward from his scalp in every possible direction. Our interchange unpacks his vision for a better world, one of intricate design and great abstraction. With every word, Spiral's eyes combust with hope then simmer with uncertainty, a common recipe when meeting fellow heart-bleeding activists:

1 cup passion, raw.

2/3 cup creative imagination, air-whipped.

1 heaping teaspoon pain and loss, coarsely ground.

A lone bird feather dances in the dirt a few feet from us, so Spiral picks it up, pokes it through his earthen hair, then looks at me with toothy satisfaction. Though different personalities, what landed both of us here is something intimately shared.

A railway officer arrives to explain the consequences of criminal trespassing, giving us two chances to reconsider. No one budges. I feel sturdy, like a mountain, and witness this shared infallibility, a burning incandescence in the eyes surrounding me. The man returns ten minutes later with a gaggle of policemen and we are slowly, individually detained, taken off private property through a thicket of chanting protesters, news reporters, and confused onlookers. My hands tremble; blood and vein shuttle conviction through my entire body.

**J**UMBO THE ELEPHANT was an international sensation in the late 1800s. Stolen from Sudan and held captive, this unusually large African Bush Elephant was shipped to the London Zoo where he lived for several years, amusing thousands of young British imperialists-to-be with rides and laughs and trepidation. In 1882, circus owner P. T. Barnum became obsessed with acquiring Jumbo for "The Greatest Show on Earth." And so it was. Purchased for what would today be nearly a quarter million dollars, this tusked behemoth traveled with the Barnum and Bailey Circus for over three years, contributing much to its success. Everything was going exceptionally well—for the humans, that is—until one September morning in 1885.

**I**'M SITTING HERE IN HELENA, it's 2 a.m., and I can't sleep. I was expecting to be in a jail cell, reading some moldy romance novel and mulling over thoughts of revolution. But I'm not. Instead, I'm here, in some volunteer's cold basement, waiting for tomorrow's court hearing after being cited for trespassing. Blinking blue modern lights illuminate the room just enough for me to notice hundreds of Transformer toys littering the carpet.

The mess reminds me why I'm here, why we sat on those train tracks earlier, and why fighting for a more honest future matters. It matters because of these toys. It matters because of the sustained vitality and imagination of our children, and of us. It matters because, as responsible "adults," we must be creative in our response and do what

is necessary to stop further abuse of the global commons. It matters for these future ones, for the lives that will extend well past our own. To expect them to mop up our ecological bloodbath is unacceptable. We are fully, entirely, culpable.

So it is here, sitting in my underwear on a dying air mattress—they always die—draped in blue light and witnessed by 1,000 Transformers, where I vow to never give up on this fight, to never fall back asleep.

**O**N A CRISP-COLD SEPTEMBER MORNING in 1885, Jumbo the Elephant was in Ontario, Canada for

contact?

A female officer escorts me to another room to take fingerprints, more of my personal details now woven into a cobwebbed matrix of records, surveillance, and fear. Just doing her job. She thanks me for stepping up to take action, disclosing that her family lives near the railroad track and she “sure as hell ain’t wantin’ no more trains coming through.” I share with her what I know about the dangers of mercury, asthma, and lung disease related to long-term coal dust exposure, and she shudders in solidarity.

She’s one of us. They all are.

## **WE MUST PUT OUR TONS OF WEIGHT, OUR 40,000-MUSCLED TRUNK, ON THE LINE TO STOP SUCH ANTIQUATED WAYS OF BEING, OF CONSUMING.**

a circus performance. While Jumbo and his younger comrade Tom Thumb were being escorted across train tracks, a freight train accidentally struck them both, killing Tom Thumb immediately. Aged 24, Jumbo was 11 feet tall and weighed over 6.5 tons. The impact was so powerful that it derailed the train, a steam engine freight line sustained on a steady diet of coal.

Fatally wounded, Jumbo had completely taken a train off its tracks.

**I**M SITTING HERE, AWAITING ORDERS in this county jail processing room, a most sterile and uncongenial space. Carcinogens spritz through a gap-toothed air freshener, attempting to cover up this leprous face of humanity. A prison guard enters me into the system, his belly spilling onto the keyboard, doing most of the typing. I peer into one cell and come pupil-to-pupil with a man similar in age, reading a book with legs crossed. I wonder what he did: Shoplifting? Rape? Stopping trains? Stopping terror? Causing it? He looks comfortable, contemplative, surrendered.

I rest quietly in this space, inhabiting our heritage of incarceration. Walls of concrete and steel and impediment. The judge prescribed no jail time for me: only mug shots, fingerprints, and fines. Yet part of me wishes jail had happened. Part of me wishes to experience the coldness and emptiness and loneliness of cement everything, if only for a night. Where might your thoughts go? Would you lose contact with the wild animal within, tusks shiny-sharp, romping through thick-canopied forest? Would you lose

**A** NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE in 1885 vividly described Jumbo’s last minutes:

*After the accident, when the noise and confusion had somewhat ceased, so that the examination could be made of Jumbo, it was found that there were deep gashes in his flank, his feet were torn, and the blood ran out of his mouth, but Jumbo looked more majestic than ever before. The great beast gave one groan after being struck. Then he assumed an attitude of determination, which he maintained until the sands of his life ran out.*

**I**M SITTING HERE ON MOUNT JUMBO and evening invades quickly. I begin my descent along Jumbo’s backbone as golden grasses synchronize a Death Dance, directed by the wind’s calligraphic twirl. Emboldened after the weekend’s action, I wonder if, perhaps, the native Salish had it right the whole time: “Thing That’s in the Way.” When the triad of science and reason and morality agree that burning coal is a core violation of Earth’s vitality, and yet still it persists for profit, we must get in the way of this development. We must put our tons of weight, our 40,000-muscled trunk, on the line to stop such antiquated ways of being, of consuming. We must.

Before re-entering the civilized waffle iron below, I take one final look to see if the coal train has moved. It hasn’t. It is almost as if something strong yet desperate, something tamed yet inherently wild, and something large yet barely visible has impeded its passage. ♪