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a collection of déjà vus

Jill Di Donato is the author of *Beautiful Garbage*, a novel about a young female artist's sexual epiphanies as she explores downtown Manhattan's notorious art scene in the 80's — a world of parties, drugs, and high-class prostitution.

Jill says,

People categorize experiences by what's happened in the past, what's happening now, and what will happen in the future. Even a circular understanding of time retains this causal premise.

I'm no physicist, but what if time is not in fact causal?

I do think that causal narrative — if you understand time as narrative, which I do — has limitations. I tend toward a more episodic approach to understanding encounters people have with one another.

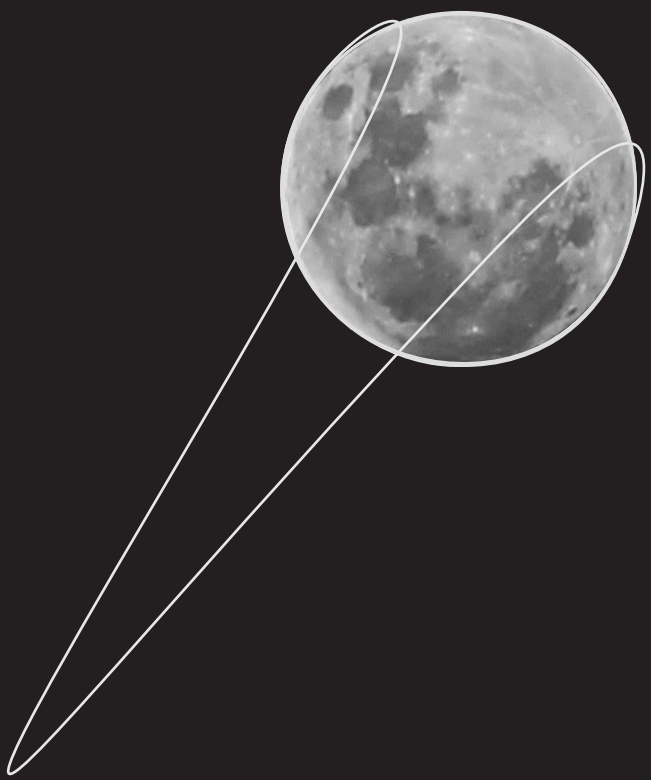
When it comes to zeitgeist, there seems to be a push to view time as linear, circular, and causal. And to a degree, this makes perfect sense. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and economists need a frame of reference. In other words, to say that X is happening because of Y, presents a clear narrative that makes whatever agenda you're trying to push easier to categorize and understand. So why are people speaking out about rape and sexual assault, and harassment in the film industry now?

Why is #MeToo a trending hashtag that resonates with late 2017? Has this happened before?

Of course it has. Just as rape, sexual assault, and harassment is not about sex, but power, so too is the decision to talk about it in a public forum. Certainly the Hollywood elite and media who decided to stay silent did so because of the need to survive, to succumb to the dominant power. The assailants, so too made a choice as to when and how to speak up.

This is not victim-blaming. There were actresses who chose to continue to work within the system despite being humiliated, and there are actresses (Rose McGowan and Rosanna Arquette come to mind) who chose to defy it.

As long as dominant power structures continue to influence social cues — *Stay silent! Speak up!* — culture will remain at the status quo, and time will keep on moving, into the future. It's only when resistance becomes weaponized that narratives crumble, and time as we know it can reject causality.



Philip Dray is an acclaimed civil rights historian and author. His most afamed book, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, examines the causes, perpetrators, apologists, and victims of lynching and tells the stories of those who fought tirelessly to expose and eradicate it. Philip was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in history shortly after the book was published.

Philip notes,

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About 20 years ago I published a book about the lynching of African-Americans, thousands of blacks (mostly men) put to death by mobs for alleged crimes, often sexual in nature, in the decades between the Civil War and the mid-1960s. One thing (among many) that stunned me was that at the worst point in lynching history black victims were being lynched every other day in America.

The practice, often abetted by police, was carried out by whites fearful of blacks acting with full citizenship rights and of other related changes in Southern communities.

Lynchings reinforced white dominance and terrorized all black Americans, especially those residing in the rural South, crushing their aspirations and discouraging their social mobility.

Today we live with a worrisome death toll from a new form of "every-other-day" terrorism — Americans killing other Americans in mass shootings. Here the cause may not be overtly racial (although statistically far more white men than blacks or Hispanics own guns) but the widespread ownership of ever more powerful weapons seems similarly based on a deep and profound fear — the fear of change, of crime, of losing one's job, fear of a loss of social dominance to women, gays, elites, immigrants, and non-white racial and ethnic groups, as well as pervasive economic uncertainty and a sense of insecurity.

The crusade against lynching was a major social change effort in the years before the Second World War. It succeeded slowly — in the press, in the courts, through shifts in public opinion — and in incremental stages, although one can argue that the lynching ethos (the presumption of black criminality and the willingness to deal summarily with a despised and feared minority) has never fully vanished — that it lingers today in racial profiling and the biased treatment of blacks by police and the courts.

Like the scourge of lynching, mass shootings and the uncontrolled proliferation of guns pose a problem even the most optimistic reformer must assume will be years in the unmaking.

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Julie Scott is a painter, printmaker, and author. She is currently writing and illustrating a children's book about the honeybee decline. She calls it a "bee soap opera."

Julie ruminates.

In 1972, there was a burglary in a Washington D.C. office building (that no one in Sacramento had ever heard of) called the Watergate. I don't remember that event making much news at the time. It was summer and the Vietnam War was still looming large. I was 15 and training for my lifeguard certificate and had a mad crush on Richard, the instructor. I had a collection of "McGovern for President" stickers stuck on everything I owned. Everyone in my circle, including Richard, hated the other Richard. Richard Nixon. If only we were old enough to vote, we certainly wouldn't be voting for him. Nixon was dark, brooding, weird and scary, way scarier than the vampire Barnabas in *Dark Shadows,* the go-to soap opera, which aired right around after-school snack time, when the Sacramento summer heat would peak at 105° or 110°, making it the perfect AC/TV time.

I might have glanced at the daily headlines of the *Sacramento Bee* on the kitchen table, but most of the news I consumed was at dinnertime, invariably with NBC News blaring on the TV. It was an appetizer of Vietnam, protests in Berkeley and Northern Ireland, or the Tuskegee Experiment discovery, just to name a few horrors of the moment. Rowan and Martin's *Laugh-In* followed right after.

The first time any of us paid attention to this Watergate business was when these two cool dudes named Woodward and Bernstein, who wrote for the *Washington Post,* exposed the possibility that Nixon had something to do with it. Now the daily horrors were getting very interesting. After dinner, I would crank up the radio in my bedroom; Rufus or Sly and the Family Stone or Curtis Mayfield's "Superfly",

Darkest of night
With the moon shining bright
There's a set goin' strong
Lotta things goin' on
The man of the hour
Has an air of great power...

Fast forward to the Summer of '73, not the Summer of Love, not the Endless Summer, but the Summer of the Watergate Hearings and my painfully boring part-time job as a page at the Sacramento County Library, just down the road from the pool, where I didn't get the lifeguard job. My time in the water that summer was tubing down the American River and Watergate — now this was a soap opera! Better than *Dark Shadows* and *All My Children*, we had all the president's men! Everyone was hooked, watching all these sleaze-balls and suits line up to testify, one after another. John Dean, the former White House Counsel, spilled

the beans on Nixon being in on the cover-up. Dean did a bad thing — and eventually went to jail for his part in obstructing justice — but during the hearings, he was a hero with his stunningly beautiful wife Maureen sitting in the background for the duration of his testimony. Maureen, or Mo, became a bit of a style-icon, with her tightly pulled-back platinum hair and perfect (some said icy) composure. All eyes on Mo! Mo stood by her man...or at least she sat behind him.

On to 1974 — dinner over, the TV drones more casualties of Vietnam, *Laugh-In* no longer. It was time to bike down to Tower Records on Watt Avenue, to scrape my summer job money together for Stevie Wonder, Bonnie Raitt or Elton John. The Beatles had broken up, with no hope for repair. We played Pong at the bowling alley and could catch a late showing of the Poseidon Adventure, still running at Capitol Cinema for what, 14 months straight?

But wait! The ship is going down! There are these White House tapes! Foul-mouthed Nixon refuses to release them, but the courts order him to. Impeachment proceedings, Nixon resigns! Maybe the Beatles will never get back together, but there is justice!

I have to admit, I felt a little sorry for him as we watched over a Swanson's Salisbury Steak TV dinner, a pathetic Nixon and his family boarding the plane back to San Clemente, waving bye-bye. Nixon with that hang dog expression: Tricky-Dick. "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore" (and don't bring up his long-ago dog Checkers). Tears. Relief. Pink Floyd, Average White Band, and Bachman Turner Overdrive.

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You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,
B-b-b-baby, you just ain’t seen n-n-nothin’ yet
Here’s something that you never gonna forget
B-b-b-baby, you just ain’t seen n-n-nothin’ yet.

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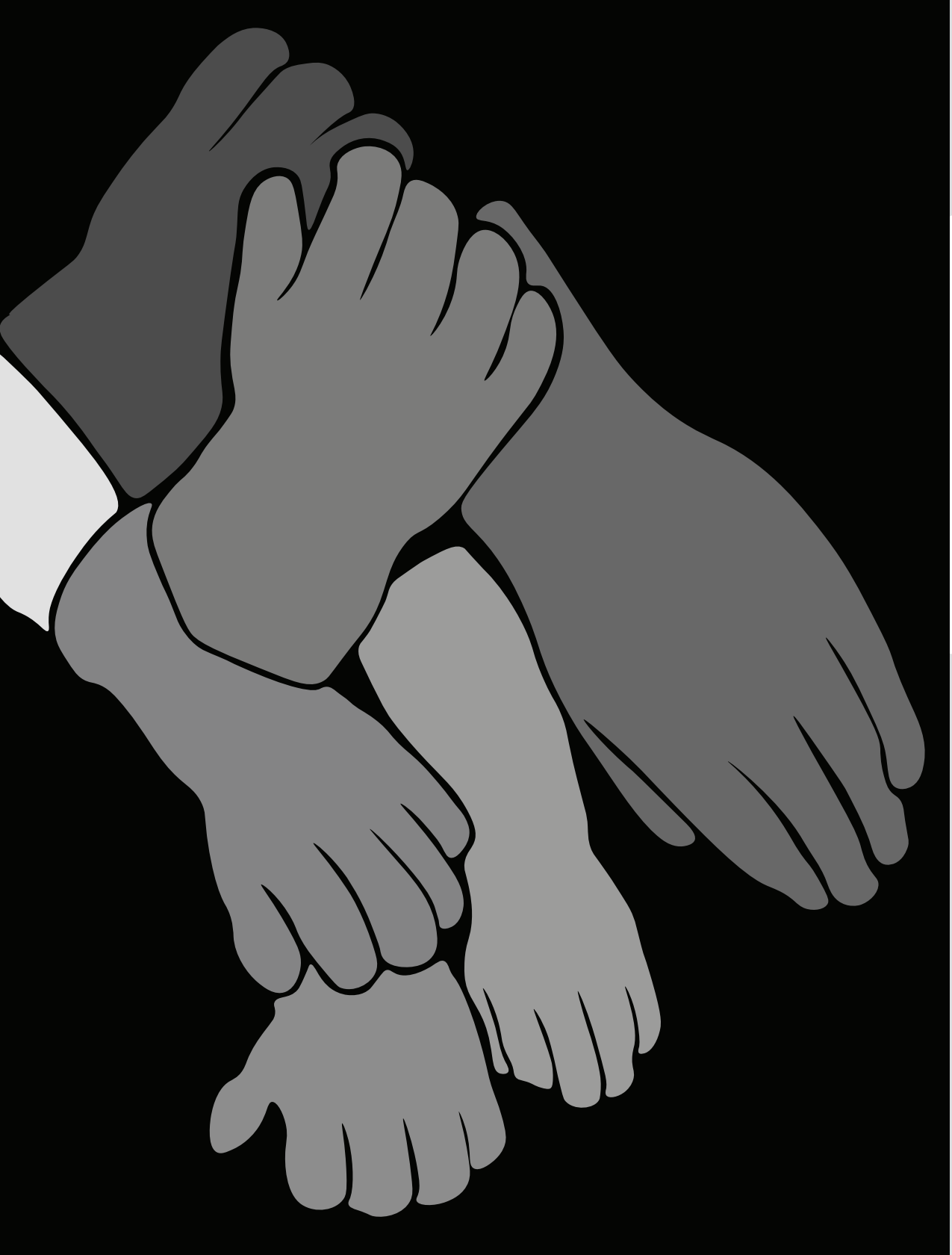

Delphine Schrank is an award-winning journalist, formerly the Burma correspondant for *The Washington Post*. In 2014, she published a book called *The Rebel of Rangoon: A Tale of Defiance and Deliverance in Burma*, which was listed as one of the "Best Books of 2015" by the *Kirkus Review.*

Delphine writes,

"It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palm-leaf, winding all over a steep hillside….We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. This is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said the elephant had gone in one direction. Some said he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant."

— George Orwell, "Shooting An Elephant," New Writing, 1936

To watch a humanitarian catastrophe grow and grow day by day from half a world away, or from so close you have to squint, is to wander through a corridor of mirrors, and we hapless witnesses can get lost in time and place, gnawed by a vague sense of déjà vu, except now we are new actors facing an old challenge for the first time. Should we look to those past episodes? Are they helpful? Do they delude us to the novelty of here and now? History can complicate as much as it can reveal, depending on which version of where we look for lessons.

I'm slumping as I wonder about this in a musty office in Sittwe, Rakhine State, in northwestern Burma, half-stupefied by sweltering mid-afternoon heat and a cacophony of crows and motorbike traffic. Add to that the strange fog, akin to incubating some mosquito-borne virus, that comes of indefinite waiting. I'm two hours into a second day of hassling a local satrap, in this case the Rakhine state information minister, to grant me the paperwork I need to pass through checkpoints into a grid of streets not three blocks away, where local inhabitants have lived confined for five years, surrounded by barbed barricades and roving police agents. This — as local and national officialdom would have it — is for their protection.

The people locked away are Muslim, and more particularly Rohingya, a minority that used to coexist with the Buddhist Rakhine in this grotty little town on the Bay of Bengal, until violence between them in 2012 left a trail of dead and razed whole districts. Now approximately 120,000 Muslims are spread among ten nearby camps, and a few more live in a ghetto of sorts that was once a downtown district.

Lest I doze off or give up on my attempt to visit, I am viscerally reminded of the urgency of that confinement because one of the ghetto's inhabitants just phoned me. His voice is gentle, full of melancholy, and suggestive of an age when he ought to be coordinating play-dates with his grandchildren, not encounters with foreign journalists across checkpoints.

"Have you received your permit yet?" Aung Win asks. This is by now his fifth phone call in two days. We have yet to meet in person but already we feel like old friends. Our meeting, when it comes – this he never doubts – will be warm and genuine. It has been some months since a journalist has been permitted to cross into the Muslim areas. Somewhat less hopeful than Aung Win, I imagine myself one of those crows, hopping from the rusting eaves beside this balcony here, swooping briefly over the abandoned mosque just over the road with its shattered stain glass windows and its police-checkpoint encasing, and alighting within seconds in Aung Win's home in locked-off Aung Mingalar district a few buildings to my left and left again.

And when I demur, as I will on two or three more phone calls to come, because I'm told the bureaucrats have stalled on my permit again, or have sent it now back to the state director, or now onward to the central government in the distant capital, Naypyitaw, Aung Win insists that he will find a way to come meet me. But how? "If I try to leave," he says, "the police say they will send me to jail."

Aung Win, now sixty, was once a translator at the local Bangladeshi Consulate. He is fluent in Bengali, Burmese, Rakhine, English, and Rohingya, the language of a people whose plight

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spiraled further into disaster after August 25 with a mass exodus from a city three hours north by boat. More than half a million people fled into neighboring Bangladesh with tales of indiscriminate shooting, gang rapes, lootings and mass burnings – in a military offensive whose enormity drew comparisons to events in Rwanda in 1994, when the massacre of 800,000 people from another locally reviled minority set a new world record for speed and number. Is such comparison valid here? Is it necessary? Why not, if the echo alone brings with it sufficient international condemnation to pressure a government to pressure its military to stop attacks on civilians that most outside the borders have little trouble seeing as wildly disproportional to the threat those civilians might ever have posed?

But the spread of responsibility for the purge of Myanmar's Rohingyas is more complex and nebulous than the Hutu genocidaires of Rwanda. And there's the rub.

What strikes me most at this juncture, as I wait for seven, possibly 15 copies of the right documents to visit camps that were meant only to be temporary, is the institutionalization of a situation that, at least in its most recent incarnation in Sittwe in 2012, began as mob-driven anarchy. In the years since the city's Rohingya were kicked out of their homes or lost their already narrow rights to move freely, their options have been constrained still further by the rise of a complex ecosystem of interlocking authorities.

Bureaucracy, as it happens, has often trip-wired routes to freedom. Here in this northwestern corner of an eastern country where palm-thatched bamboo huts still wind up steep hillsides

and savage military exercises in purging the inhabitants of whole villages are a regular feature of life for ethnic minorities in the border areas, the diffusion of political responsibility has the ominous undergirding of a stickiness facing every nation state since the dawn of red tape, which is to say at least since the mid-19th century.

There's more to this than the frustration of a heat-drained journalist trying to get a story on a tight schedule. In the 3.5 days I spend pin-balling between offices as they toss back and forth the granting of my visitation rights between state information minister, state security director, Emergency Coordination Committee and a ministry no one will name for me in the central government in the capital (Naypyitaw), that eventually says no and denies me any chance of appeal, it's possible to see something of the tensions in Myanmar's current government. In Rakhine state, that translates to a triangular conflict between Rakhine state authorities who oppose the civilian arm of the central government, who, in turn, are wrestling with more or less subtlety to unseat the all-powerful, many-tentacled military. Power, unless this is all a cunning trick on a foreign visitor, is spread across a vast and unholy alliance that is nothing of the kind.

And because of it, my failed bid to visit Aung Win is also a measure of a diffusion of responsibility so vast that in the end no one feels any moral resolve or need for it at all. Or am I a pawn in a political game in which the people in distant Naypyitaw are merely attempting to drain power from this frayed province? Only a year ago they held on here with such concentrated ferocity that journalists come to visit the camps had only

to find the right local official on whom to dole a fat bribe.

Bureaucracies, at least in the analysis of the 19th century sociologist Max Weber, would have a salutary effect on the governance of societies, for being meritocratic, and dependent less on whim and patronage than impersonal norms and laws. But most every authoritarian state depends on its bureaucrats too. Thoughts here turn, alas, to Adolf Eichmann, the senior SS officer tasked with organizing the mass deportation and extermination of Jews in Eastern Europe. His defense, in a 1962 trial in Jerusalem, hinged on the excuse of taking orders, of being so caught up in the machinery of German bureaucracy that conscience and free will were ultimately not his to muster at all. Post-war prosecutors knew to take that defense for barren. But of course the Third Reich's strength depended less on the word of its leader alone that its implementation through a barrage of laws and directives. On that point, Hannah Arendt, the Ur-witness to Eichmann's trial, wrote: "far from being a mere symptom of German pedantry or thoroughness, it served most effectively to give the whole business its outward appearance of legality."

Myanmar's form of government exists in a messy nether-zone between authoritarian and democratic. The final destination remains elusive, though Westerners schooled in Western textbooks have trouble seeing anything but a clean, linear vector gone suddenly awry. The ruling junta dissolved itself in 2011 and there is nothing much in history nor any other country, I'd warrant, to exactly reflect Myanmar's consequent hybrid accommodation between a civilian arm, unruly ethnic minorities, and a military who rule still

through institutions and entrenched mindsets.

Bureaucracy, though, is the constant – here, in Germany, as even in the Congolese jungle. "Rule of law," the mantra of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party that swept elections for the civilian seats of the national government in 2015, was always a synecdoche for a slow transfer to the Weberian state. So the country would at last be free of its debilitating corruption. But they never fired anyone staffing the institutions of state. Thousands would have had to clear out. So most all the bureaucrats from the junta's days, or many of them, simply kept their jobs.

Stuck somewhere in the midst of this dynamic are the Muslims of Rakhine state. The world anguishes in brief condemnations and with sensational reports at the knowledge of their plight. But who really has the power or the will to crack apart the checkpoints and simply let everyone roam free?

So history rhymes, and echoes, and offers pointers to understanding now. But none of it really fits. When you wait and wait in the torpid tropics, everything looks distorted. Franz Kafka, if he'd been in my seat, might have contemplated this bureaucracy, watched the crows on the coconuts shaking apart their black wings, and drafted some nightmarish tale about a trip by night to visit Aung Win who only seems further and further away.

Denied access, my perception of reality is a bit like Orwell too on hearing about an elephant gone 'must' and not being able to establish, once he gets close, where or if it exists. Turns out, it's the smaller details about the ways we organize, or how we seek and fail to find truths, that ring across the ages.

Some of the people said the elephant had gone in one direction. Some said he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant.

— George Orwell

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I compiled a "collection of déjà vus" in order to showcase just how repetitive history can be, the confusion it elicits, the disappointment, the wonder. Whether it be a report of sexual misconduct, the Paradise papers, racism, or ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, many recent events have all been, more or less, variations of history — things that have happened before. Perhaps I am especially cynical, but I think it is safe to say that we do not, cannot, will not learn from our mistakes. So, can we expect everything to, in one way or another, occur circularly?

— Trudy Hall