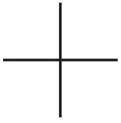

ELEPHANT STATES

Jacob Shell

I AM A GEOGRAPHER by training; this means, so I persuade myself, that I should pay close attention to those zones of the inhabited earth that do not show up on Google Maps. Among these zones are the tangles of elephant trails that wind their way through the Burmese teak forests, hidden from satellite view by cover of forest canopy and thick brush, shifting their position in yearly and seasonal cycles, too rough, narrow and quagmire-prone for motorized vehicles. If contemporary maps are to be believed, the trails stopped existing once modern cartographers traded in their boots and mosquito nets for software manuals and company subscriptions to the latest satellite imagery databases. Contemporary maps are not always to be believed. The elephant trails are still there. So are the trained elephants who trod these paths, carrying on their big necks and backs their human riders, called *oozies* in Burmese, *mahouts* in English (a loanword from Hindi).

These are Burma's timber elephants, who to this day make up the center of the Burmese teak-logging industry, which produces some 80 percent of the world's traded teak wood. The wood is purchased primarily by construction, furniture, and boat-building companies that prize its water-resistant resin. Teak grows best in forest soils unscarred by trucking roadways; elephants can go where roads cannot. The relative comfort and ease with which trained work elephants can move across sodden, monsoon-soaked landscapes also makes them optimal transportation during floods: in one famous incident during World War II, elephant convoys from Assam, a state in northeastern India that borders Burma, rescued hundreds of Indian, Burmese, and British refugees

trapped at an upland river confluence near the Burma-India border. The area had flooded during heavy rains and was unreachable by boat, train, or truck. The British officers charged with running the operation took movie cameras with them; footage of the remarkable "emergency relief elephants" shows the animals and their Assamese mahouts fording a torrent of white-capped floodwaters on the approach to the refugees' camp. The elephants can be seen using their trunks—remarkably sensitive and powerful devices—to gauge the stability of the submerged ground before progressing in the march. More recently, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, elephants assisted in cleanup efforts in some parts of northern Sumatra and western Thailand, where the damage to local road infrastructure was so severe that wheeled relief vehicles could not be used.

Elephants have also participated in more underhanded, or subversive, pursuits. An elephant that can go where the roads cannot is an elephant that can move people and supplies in secret through the forest, across wet, mountainous borders, beyond the view of regular military patrols or modern mechanisms of surveillance. For millennia, elephants were used for warfare in this part of the world, and as transport vehicles they were crucial to both the British and the Japanese sides in the Burma theater of World War II. The postwar period, despite its increased mechanization, did not render the transport elephant obsolete. To the contrary, during the past half century elephants have proved instrumental in the country's numerous ethnic wars, especially in Kachin State in the far north and Karen State in the east. In the 1960s, an ethnic rebel group known as the Kachin Independence Army—which in 2013 is still fighting what is in all likelihood the world's longest currently running civil war—sent a secret mission across the remote and precipitous Patkai Range to India by elephant convoy, attempting to secure aid from ethnic Kachins in India. When the Kachins of India proved unable to help, the resistance fighters turned eastward, to China. Sympathetic groups there—Chinese Kachin and likely Party Communists distrustful of the ruling regime in Rangoon—proved more willing to cooperate, and loaded the elephants with weapons and other contraband in exchange for the jade, gold, opium, and teak native to Burma's Kachin State. This trade kept up throughout the 1970s and '80s. Meanwhile, the Karen National Liberation Army made similar use of elephants in the eastern hills, running Burmese gems into Thailand and manufactured

goods back into Karen State. Smuggling by elephant provided a lifeline for rebel organizations like the KIA and KNLA, and kept Burma's ruling military regime in continuous trouble.

Burma is at a major crossroads in Asian geography: it is "where China meets India," as one recent book title has it. The country is crossed by major rivers, in whose paddy-filled valleys live most of the ethnic-majority Burmese (sometimes called the "Burman" ethnic group). This valley core drains into the Indian Ocean to the south, while in all other directions the fertile valleys are surrounded by large hill ranges and dense thickets of forest, where most of the country's ethnic minorities live: the Shans, Kachins, Rakhines, Karens, Kayahs or "Red Karens," and many others.

Nineteenth-century British imperialists coveted Burma. It was the geographic key to overland trade between Britain's Indian possessions and the immense resources and markets of China. British naval and shipbuilding interests also wanted access to Burma's vast supplies of teak. The British conquered Burma piecemeal, in three separate wars, in 1825, 1852, and 1885, carving away and ultimately displacing the Burmese kings who had ruled the country from an immense teak palace in Mandalay, in Middle Burma.

The old Mandalay kings had never fully controlled the hills surrounding the main river valleys of Burma. The people of the valleys were, as they are to this day, mostly Buddhist, as well as Hindu and Muslim; the people of the hills, mostly animist. The British took advantage of the religious divide: colonial administrators encouraged Christian missionaries, many of them American, to proselytize in the hills. This strategy set in motion long-lasting allegiances between many of the hill peoples and the English-speaking world.

Britain's control over Burma came to an end during World War II, when the Japanese Imperial Army launched an invasion from Singapore that caught the British defenses in Rangoon completely by surprise. The Japanese gained full control over Lower Burma and the Irrawaddy Delta, as the British fled to Assam. From 1942 to 1944, the Japanese seemed likely to gain full control over Upper Burma as well. In a sense, the invasion of Burma reflected the same overconfidence that had led to the invasion of Soviet-allied Mongolia, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the offensive deep into the interior of China earlier in the war. But

the invasion of Burma had a compelling strategic rationale. If the Japanese could control Upper Burma, they could block the overland supply route running from British-controlled India to the anti-Japanese armies of Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong in China. The strangulation of the Chinese resistance, and the creation of a lasting empire in East and Southeast Asia, seemed within the Japanese generals' grasp; they poured vast combat resources and manpower into the battle for Upper Burma. This conflict (peculiarly forgotten in the US) quickly became among the most violent and destructive theaters of the war—"the Stalingrad of the East," as some wartime journalists put it. Both sides employed elephant-based labor extensively: to build wartime supply bridges and road causeways on the fly, to conduct escapes and rescues, and to run logistical convoys across Upper Burma's trackless and muddy hills.

During the war, many of the hill peoples of Burma, such as the Kachin, maintained their loyalty to the British. Lowland Burmese alliances often shifted depending on which side seemed likelier to grant Burma independence after the war. For a time, Burmese independence leader Aung San (the father of democratic activist and politician Aung San Suu Kyi) sided with the Japanese, who provided Aung San's followers with modern military training. But later in the war Aung San grew distrustful of the Japanese generals. A shrewd politician, he was able to realign his faction with the Allies. Aung San shored up his political strength after the war and negotiated Burma's independence from the British Empire (by then financially shattered) in 1947.

To the minority peoples of the Burmese uplands, the constitution of the newly independent Burmese state promised a referendum on secession, to occur within a decade. This promise was not kept, as civil strife in the late '50s and an eventual military coup in 1962 nullified the constitution and replaced Burma's young democracy with a military dictatorship. Following the coup, pro-independence armies began springing up in the country's peripheral mountain regions: in Karen State and Kayah State in the eastern highlands, in Shan State and Kachin State in the mountains of the north, in Rakhine State where the western Chin Hills meet the Bay of Bengal. Today, the resilience and staying power of Burma's military state both hides and exacerbates a deeply unstable political situation. Balkanization seems as likely a long-term outcome as the eventual emergence of a genuinely peaceful and pluralistic nation-state. Or there may be no such endgame at all—just a continuation of

the perennial fighting, the slow campaigns of ethnic cleansing, and the streams of frightened refugees into neighboring countries.

In the last few years, the military regime ruling Burma has made moves toward opening the country's economy to foreign investment and permitting more democratic political participation (though international observers have charged that, so far, the elections have been rife with fraud, and that the government has systematically prevented voting in the minority regions). But some of the rebel armies—and their elephants—have remained, still fiercely contesting the legitimacy of the state.

I had arranged to visit an elephant village in the Bago region, some eighty miles from the border with Thailand. But to get there, I first had to go through Yangon (which the BBC still calls Rangoon), Burma's largest city and former capital. There are no elephants on Yangon's streets (as there are in the cities of Thailand), but in Yangon I had elephants on my mind. The old city is laid out in a grid of long and narrow blocks, much like Manhattan, except in Yangon the long blocks are oriented north-south rather than east-west. The British laid out this street plan in the mid-19th century, filling in a muddy sandbank of the Rangoon River, a major delta branch of the Irrawaddy River, Burma's largest river and principal waterway. The British planners should have known better. Lying virtually at water level and experiencing near daily rainfall from late May through October, the streets of old Yangon flood constantly. Since the blocks are so long and narrow, I often found myself suddenly stranded mid-block without a dry side street to escape into, the intersections both behind and ahead of me submerged in murky water. Nearly everyone I saw in Burma wore flip-flops (sneakers are hard to come by), and most Yangon locals simply waded through the flooded intersections barefoot. Looking at the dark urban floodwaters, I wished for an elephant to get me across.

Yangon's infrastructure is in terrible shape—the sidewalks everywhere in some state of sewer-bound collapse, the city's circular rail line nothing more than a narrow-gauge track carrying rusty, colorful train cars from a bygone era. I was told that until very recently, the city's streets were full of cars from the 1950s, but new trade agreements have stocked the Burmese automotive market with Japanese and Korean sedans from the '90s. The abrupt influx of newer cars has expanded Yangon's fleet of

taxicabs, and many of the new drivers seem as perplexed as any tourist by the prospect of navigating the city's choked streets. Constant power outages render the few traffic lights useless, and I had to acclimatize myself to the lane-by-lane dash necessary to get across major streets on foot. Again the British street grid was to blame: it effectively divided the old city into a checkerboard of traffic-lined corrals.

Street signs in Burma are occasionally in English and often use Arabic numerals, but both were rare sights in old Yangon. Burmese letters and numbers appear to the ignorant observer like so many repeating curlicues and *O*s with slight variations in breakage and curvature. The contemporary alphabet is based mostly on the Mon script of the old Burmese kings. One of the major political achievements of American missionaries in Burma during the 19th century was the simplification of the Bamar-Burmese script, dominant along the Irrawaddy valley; this allowed for the alphabetization of the many upland minority languages, which until that point had not been written or systematically codified. Reproductions of these early missionaries' dictionaries and grammatical treatises were being sold at a bookstore in old Yangon, and I found that the shop also had a copy of James C. Scott's superb *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. The owner of the store, U Htay, was a geographer himself; he told me he got a degree in the subject from Yangon University in the '70s, the university's political and intellectual heyday. In response to the 8888 movement, a largely student-based movement for political democracy in the late '80s (similar to the contemporaneous movement in China), the government relocated many of the university's departments to outlying provincial cities throughout the country, destroying both the movement and what had been one of the great universities of Asia.

My base point from which to see the upcountry was a provincial town in Middle Burma, at the confluence of two moderately important rivers, with virtually no tourist appeal. The town had been the capital of a mighty empire many hundreds of years ago, but the only trace of this legacy was a chain of undistinguished, duck-filled lily ponds, the remains of the imperial city's grand moat. I stayed at a teak bungalow overlooking a rice paddy. In the distance a *zedi*, a Burmese stupa or pagoda, jutted above a line of palm trees, and beyond it the silhouette of far-off hills occasionally showed itself through the summer

haze. The spot might have had a serene placidity but for a village adjacent to the rice paddy, where the inhabitants, all farmers, were in possession of some cows, many structures of bamboo and thatched straw, and a powerful stereo. They worked, rested, and even slept to rapper Psy's "Gangnam Style," which was played more times in a row than you would think possible.

The elephant logging village I'd arranged to see was several hours away, a truck drive past mud-soaked water buffalos pulling plows, villages with bamboo-matted walls and dried-leaf roofs, and a great many Buddhist shrines and army checkpoints. Nestled midway up a large and sparsely populated hill range, it was inhabited by some five dozen trained elephants and several hundred people. Our truck arrived near noon, and there were hardly any elephants around; most were off in the forest and would not be back until later in the day. One elephant was nearby, though, in a stream just behind the village. It was a female, maybe 20 years old, being bathed by an oozie likely the same age. Through the dense brush along the stream bank, I watched as the young man, with tools strapped around his shoulder and wearing a beaten old cap, commanded the giant to lie down and roll around in the stream bed, splashing up waves of tan and brown. The oozie used a metal bowl to scoop water upward and scrape the sticky layers of dried mud caked onto the elephant's sides and legs. The elephant's skin, once clean, was dark, approaching black; the light reader on my camera, acclimatized to the midday sun, registered the elephant as a great shadow. The oozie shouted directions with studied abruptness, and the elephant serenely seemed to anticipate each command. It was hard to gauge just who was in charge of the relationship, the man cleaning or the creature being cleaned. The duo had probably performed the ritual thousands of times.

Teak wood is best in quality when grown on undisturbed soil and harvested every six to eight decades. The elephant's life span is roughly the same as the teak maturation cycle: sixty years, sometimes a bit more. This same period also describes the life span of many of the oozies who tend to the elephants, and it is not uncommon for an oozie and elephant to work together their entire lives, growing up together as children, reaching peak work age at roughly the same time, enjoying retirement and old age side by side. The oozies are paid just below the Burmese average income of roughly $200 per year. The elephants receive a more feudalistic form of "payment" for their labors. They are protected from

ivory poachers, since the Forest Department considers the tusks more valuable on the elephants (who use them to hoist and balance heavy logs) than on the black market for tusks in Hong Kong.

Almost every family in the village has an oozie as its house-head and is responsible for one elephant. This formula can be complicated by the birth of a new calf. An elephant calf is typically raised by two female adult elephants, the mother and an "auntie" whom a neighboring oozie family must share for this purpose. The oozies are all men, and I was told that the women can never ride the elephants. This contradicts several accounts I read from World War II, which tell of elephants who, grieving for their oozies lost in battle, permitted only the widows as replacements. I suspect many of the oozies' wives absorb much of the craft when walking behind their elephant-mounted husbands in the forest, carrying baskets of tools at their side and a bucket of water balanced overhead.

It is normal for the oozies to ride their elephants without aid of a saddle or pannier. I found the bareback riding difficult. The Asian elephant is extremely mobile on steep, muddy paths, and one ride through the forest in the direction of a freshly cut heap of bamboo brought on uninvited memories of being caught in a small boat during a choppy storm. At first I tried crouching on the elephant's back, as the oozies did. But the constant rocking back and forth and sudden bursts of speed as the elephant galloped up and down thickly vegetated ravines made me feel like I was going to fall off, and I found myself instinctively shifting to straddle the elephant's spine, as one might position oneself on a horse. Of course, an elephant's back is significantly wider than a horse's, and this new position was uncomfortable and awkward. I could feel the elephant's vertebrae shift and rub together against my legs, and her skin would tighten and loosen to crush over-interested flies. After several ravines, we reached the bamboo stockpile deep in the forest. "*Maht!*" yelled the oozie, "Sit down for the visitor!" With a bored gesture, the elephant obeyed. But the spot was too rocky and there was nowhere stable to land if I jumped off. Seeing the problem, the oozie cried, "*Yjo!* Pull in!" The elephant momentarily had me perched over a possible landing spot on the stream's muddy bank, but then she overadjusted. "*Hown! Myown!* Stop that, and pick up your hind foot to get lower!"

The elephant seemed to harrumph, but she dutifully complied and moved back over the soft muddy spot. I leapt off—running through

several scenarios in my mind in which I might have to drag myself to a Singapore hospital with a snapped or stampeded leg—and landed gently enough on the mudbank, my sneakers sinking down several inches in the mire and creating a weak suction. The oozies looped a long chain around the elephant's back to haul a large pile of bamboo, likely two or three tons in weight, up the streambed and through the forest back to the village, which was perhaps a little over a mile away. Freeing myself from the mud, I scurried after on my own feet, taking pictures.

Most logging elephants learn some twenty-five command words, and the smarter elephants learn around a hundred. The terse commands—which are not from Burmese and in effect constitute their own elephant language—can be strikingly specific. "*Moh!*" is "Those bamboo stalks are in our way. Take them with your trunk, hold them down, and stomp them out of the way." I saw one elephant carefully arranging logs in a neat pile, using her feet and trunk to make the heap as symmetrical as possible, without any human guidance. I saw another elephant, this one a tusker, grab with his trunk a big branch full of dead leaves to swat flies off the midsection of his back. Having cleared this area, the elephant discarded the branch, paced along the edge of a ravine until he found another, longer branch, and used it to swat flies from his posterior.

The startling intelligence of the Burmese elephants is attested to in James Howard Williams's *Elephant Bill*, a World War II memoir whose gorgeous if bumpy writing has hints of Orwell, Kipling, and Melville. Williams was an elephant logging official in the Chindwin Valley in the 1920s and '30s. During World War II, he coordinated the British use of elephant-based transport convoys. Williams reports an incident he observed while overseeing the construction of a teak bridge in Burma during the war: an especially large tusker elephant was asked to heave a massive log onto a platform lying atop one of the bridge pylons. The log first had to be balanced on the animal's tusks, a job the oozie and elephant had done enough times together to get through efficiently, the oozie shouting out commands, the elephant already knowing perfectly well what to do, but reassured by the sound of his oozie's voice. The elephant picked up one end of the log with his trunk (the command for this is "*Pweh yoo!*") and eased his tusks underneath the great beam. Then with a brief jerk the elephant hoisted the entire log upward with

his tusks, but only for a few seconds, to check the balance of the load. The log was too heavy on one side, so the elephant put down one corner of the beam, held the other upright with his trunk, and readjusted the position of his tusks. This process was all routine enough, and having correctly balanced the log the elephant and oozie finally approached the bridge, with many of the construction workers (Burmese and Indian) and several British officers watching keenly, transfixed by the spectacle of this human-animal partnership.

When the elephant began to approach the pylon, however, he found that the ascent to the high platform was so steep that the log began to roll slowly backward, away from his tusks and onto his head, and it seemed likely to roll even farther, onto the oozie mounted on his neck. The elephant refused to go forward until this danger was addressed. The onlooking humans, for whom the experience of building wartime bridges on the fly in Upper Burma was quite new, were at a loss as to how to proceed. But the elephant had an idea. After a few moments, he paced around the nearby brush until he found a short but sturdy club-shaped branch. Urging the oozie to let him balance the log on his tusks again, the elephant grabbed the branch with his trunk and pressed it diagonally between his tusks, effectively using the branch as a safety lock. The humans were astounded, and wondered why they hadn't thought of this first. Williams writes:

> This time the club-shaped bit of wood was there . . . so that the log could not roll back over his forehead onto his rider. An oath came from the Major, a murmur of admiration from the Brigadier. I could feel my heart beating, as the animal moved toward the bridge platform, carrying the balanced log. . . . It was one of the most intelligent actions I have seen an elephant perform.

Asian elephants are most in their element in the mud and rain, and the Forest Department saves all the heaviest logging work for the wettest months, in late summer. In spring, the ground is already extremely muddy, and it is the kind of mud that cakes onto shoes in many layers, so that after a hundred paces one is walking around with several pounds of stratified muck glued onto each sole. One afternoon, when I stopped midway through a light rain to free my gait of the mud, a small "jumping snake" hopped by like a rabbit, startling me. I was stuck for a good minute and a half, poking clods of cemented mud off my

shoes with a bamboo stick. This sort of thing does not happen to the elephants, whose feet expand and contract to optimize mobility on the mud. Much of why the British and Japanese militaries found Burmese elephants to be such a valuable resource during the war was the impossibility of moving jeeps and tanks across the wet, steep, muddy terrain. Oftentimes, even war mules would get bogged down, their hooved feet piercing the mire like signposts.

IN *THE ART OF NOT BEING GOVERNED*, James C. Scott argues that the primary political division in Southeast Asia from ancient times through the 20th century was not between kingdoms but between the lowlands and the uplands. The lowlands—places like Yangon—were rice-growing regions. Rice agriculture was labor intensive, so these areas depended on corvée human labor, which in turn required large armies and bureaucracies to capture and control the workforce. All this gave rise to what Scott calls the "padi-state," a political form organized around the coerced gathering of manpower to cultivate wet rice on a massive scale. The uplands, by contrast—places like the Kachin and Karen Hills, the Shan Plateau, and the Patkai Range—functioned more as "fugitive spaces," absorbing those who managed to escape the valley-filling padi-states. Scott argues that many of the cultural traits and practices of the ethnic minorities of the Southeast Asian uplands, from Assam to Vietnam and from Malaysia to Southwest China—the emphasis on oral memory-keeping, fluid shifting of ethnic categories, embrace of millenarianism, swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture, and so on—are strategies of state-resistance.

Scott doesn't discuss systems of upland transportation as also constituting a form of state-evasion; his history stops around 1945, and he declares his framework unsuitable for the postwar period. But he only needed to follow the elephants to see that everything he described continued well into the 20th century: look at the Vietnamese, Kachin, and Karen uplands in the late 20th century, and you see the unmapped elephant trails, leading deep into the forests, where the forces of the state are unwelcome.

Clandestine transportation by means of elephant was a recognizable enough feature of life at the logging village in late spring. Officially—and not coincidentally—this is a time of year when the Burmese government prohibits logging oozies from working their elephants.

Forest Department officials cite the elephants' well-being as a rationale for the late-spring seasonal work prohibition; another likely incentive is to maximize the timber industry's profits during the major teak harvest later in the year. The better rested the elephants are in the spring, the greater the number of high-quality logs they can drag to the timber industry's trucking depots during the wet, cool months of summer.

The oozies and their fellow villagers have a very different set of needs. Since their village homes are made primarily of lightweight materials—bamboo, straw, and some timber—the structures need to be reinforced before the summer rainstorms, or even rebuilt from scratch. Last spring, logging oozies could be seen marching with their elephants deep into the forest to cut and gather large stockpiles of bamboo, as well as the occasional teak log, to cover the basic needs of the village. Certainly, the official ban on this practice places the oozies and their families in a double bind. But the law is difficult for officials to enforce, as the elephants are able to haul bamboo and timber through sections of the forest that are more or less inaccessible to police patrols or any viable system of surveillance.

The administrators of the Burmese logging industry and Forest Department seem, for now, committed to the long-term use of elephants to harvest teak. The industry is profitable—though the regime could likely make even more money, at least in the short term, by simply selling off the entire forest to various international sugar and palm oil conglomerates. There appear to be added incentives for the state to continue its investment in elephant-based logging. One, perhaps, is an appeal to national pride; a logging elephant is artfully displayed on the Burmese 200 *kyat* note. Another may be that every elephant working at a teak-logging village is an elephant that is not being recruited by upland militias to assist in secret transport operations through the forest. Of course, the oozies of the logging villages are in a position to employ the elephants for this purpose, too; but the elephant logging villages give the state bureaucracy several direct levers over these oozies' lives—wages, health inspections, education—to minimize the odds that they do.

Elsewhere in Burma, in the uplands of the north, Western journalists have observed and photographed rebel elephant convoys moving weaponry as recently as 2012. They entered Burma not by flying into Yangon, as I did, but rather by going overland, crossing the porous Burmese border with China's Yunnan Province. In the hills surrounding

the logging village where I stayed, it is unlikely that such use of elephants—for the clandestine transport of not just bamboo and timber but weapons and rebel soldiers—has occurred at any point since the 1980s, the last time this particular hill range was drawn into the theater of one of the country's numerous ethnic wars. If conditions in the area were still unstable, I would not have been able to access the village with the relative ease that I did.

On a few occasions in the village, I encountered elephants well over 50 years old; they would have been in peak physical condition during the 1980s. I wondered what memories this elderly generation of elephants might have of the fighting that took place in the area during their younger days: what tasks they had performed during the conflict, under whose charge they had fallen. I met only one villager old enough to have been an oozie during that time; I did not have a chance to speak with him about the subject, which struck me as an extremely delicate one.

Most of the other oozies, being in their early thirties or younger, had little or no recollection of the fighting during the '80s. At any rate, many of them had been born not here in the hills but in the towns of the lowlands. They'd sought work in the elephant logging industry during the '90s, as teenagers, hoping to become established and respected as elephant men rather than becoming farmers, taxi drivers, and store clerks. For some, the choice to leave town life and come to the hills does not seem to have been a merely personal whim. They had parents or grandparents who'd been oozies during much of the postwar period, but who'd left the elephant-driving trade as the country modernized. Often such people instilled in their children and grandchildren an impression of the oozie's craft as the height of attainable social prestige; in turn, the newer generation grew up filled with a desire to lead a familial return to the elephant trails of the forest.

THROUGHOUT MY STAY at the elephant logging village, I found the tension between the oozies and the bureaucrats, veterinarians, and other professionals who stop by the village to be quite palpable—a feeling not too different, perhaps, from the resentment of British colonials that Orwell described in "Shooting an Elephant." The forestry officials drive in from a large town many hours away, showing up every few months, usually unannounced. One of these surprise visits occurred my last day at the elephant village. A Forest Department manager arrived in

a large jeep, wearing a fine white hat and pants. He came with an entourage of clerks, who unlike the boss wore *longyis* and baseball caps. Each clerk was responsible for a stack of black record books. The manager and clerks were there to conduct an inspection of the elephants, as well as, ostensibly, to distribute wages.

Just above the village, on the highest outcrop of land along the lone trucking road, stood a large police station and prison, fenced by bamboo stalks sharpened into spears pointing outward at every angle. Whether this was to keep prisoners in, or elephants out, I was unsure. Or perhaps the fencing was to keep the villagers themselves out; logging oozies have been known to go on strike, though I was not able to learn the last time this happened. The prison was lined with many dogs, but as there are more stray dogs in Burma than cars or telephones, I was not sure whether these were actual prison guard dogs or simply canine beggars who'd correctly identified the village's true center of power.

The village's other institutional structures included a small Buddhist monastery, out of which appeared each day two small robed monk boys, carrying between them a long rod with silver buckets dangling down, to gather rice. Along the single trucking road there was an undistinguished hut which, I was told, was the school. The only structure with any electricity was a roadside shop with a noisy diesel generator. The shop shared the electricity with a few adjacent huts each night between 7 and 10 PM. This was the full extent of the village's power grid. The village had no hospital or clinic. The nearest health facility was a thirty-minute drive down the trucking road, which becomes impassable during the monsoon season. My first afternoon in the village, I met a boy of about 16, recently married, who had a nasty gash across his chin from falling off his elephant the week before. My guide, Pon-ge, encouraged me to find some antibacterial ointment from my bag; he also gave the boy a bottle of rum he'd brought along from the valley. Accompanying the adolescent with the gash was an older oozie with one leg, the other having been trampled by an elephant in an accident. This man was in his mid-twenties. In the evening he walked through the village on a wooden crutch built by him and his family; by day he rode on an elephant's back.

I was later told that if it's discovered that an oozie has lost his elephant, that oozie goes to prison for many months. The risk of losing one's elephant is a constant feature of village life, because at night the

elephants are not tethered or held fast in corrals but given free range of the unfenced bamboo forest to find forage on their own, a liberty not permitted to the world's other remaining captive elephants. Each morning the oozie must find his own elephant in the jungle. The elephant has a bell tied around his or her neck, which is carved of wood and produces an identifying sound not unlike the babbling of water in a rocky stream. During the night, the elephant drags a chain through the forest, which leaves a long mark on the ground. The oozie has little else to go on besides this. And yet, almost invariably, the oozie manages to find his elephant. The oozies and their families seem to be able to detect their elephants at great distances.

One afternoon, I was in a temporary satellite camp, made up of four bamboo dwellings, about an hour's march from the main village. This was the home of the retired elephants—those who had made it to age 55 or so, and were now permitted to live out their remaining years feasting on leaves in shady bamboo groves. An older oozie, one of the few I met with gray hair, went off to find his elephant, whom he guessed was several miles away, though in which direction he was not sure. Pon-ge and I waited over an hour for the oozie's return, Pon-ge chatting in Burmese with the families in the outpost. One family had a battery-powered radio playing and was cooking a freshly killed lizard over a slow fire. Amid the clamor of the radio, as well as two babies crying and several chickens clucking beneath the stilted huts, the oozie's wife declared that she heard the elephant being retrieved, about a twenty-five-minute march away. Soon the men in the camp declared they too could hear the distinctive note of the elephant's bell. Pon-ge and I strained to hear, but there was no discernible sound. Twenty-five minutes went by—the time it took to travel a little over a mile by elephant in the thick jungle. Suddenly the face of an elephant appeared in the middle distance, on the slope opposite a gully that skirted the camp. It was a big, old tusker, and he peered out from the dark spots in the leafy brush, his gray-haired oozie walking just after. The pair reached the camp's only trail, and as they came closer I could see the marks of the elephant's years: the discolored tusks, the swollen eyes, the big tattered ears and mouth sleepily agape. The aged giant had a big scar protruding from his abdomen, an old logging injury, or perhaps from a fight with a wild elephant in the forest.

One of the dilemmas faced by the Japanese in Burma was that, not yet having had a chance to establish any loyalties in the region, they

did not trust their hired oozies enough to allow them to engage in this practice of daily elephant fetching. Fearing their oozies would simply use the occasion to flee, the Japanese commanders kept them under careful watch each night and tethered the elephants to trees. The result was that the elephants did not receive adequate forage, and this in turn undermined the Imperial Army's maneuverability in the Burmese forests. In India, meanwhile, British commanders employed every shred of their operational ingenuity to maintain control over their own elephant convoys in the Chin Hills, which divide Northeast India from Upper Burma. These convoys were desperately needed for secret transport operations in the forest: the westward evacuation of refugees out of Burma and into Assam, as well as the eastward shipment of Allied war supplies back into Burma. The effort was a triumph—but a short-lived one. The British regained the country only to lose it again, this time for good, two years after the war's close.

In Kayah State, a minority region in the eastern highlands, I visited a Padaung village nestled deep in a hill range where the ground was red with laterite. Alone, I approached a church at the village promontory by foot. Next to the church was a gated garden yard, where a Padaung couple stood. They noticed me and the man excitedly came running to offer a friendly greeting. He spoke a few words of English, and was able to say I was the first Western visitor he'd seen who was not a missionary connected with the brick church across from his garden. I might have been the first tourist to enter the village. He and his wife were laying out corn mash in the yard, and they brought me some of their homebrewed whiskey. Elsewhere in the village I passed a young man who was carrying several rifles and avoided eye contact. He was a former Kayah resistance fighter, I was told, likely with more time on his hands since the 2012 cease-fire between the central government and the Kayah liberation army.

My guide had not brought me to this village deep in the eastern mountains to see moonshiners or rebel soldiers, but to see the village's older generation of women, who have lowered their collarbones away from their heads by adding an extra gold hoop around their necks each year. They do this, I read, to look like *nagas*, or dragons, considered an ideal of feminine beauty in Padaung culture. I found that their gold-ringed, elongated necks also resemble elephant trunks. The word *naga* in Sanskrit

has a number of meanings: a serpentine deity or powerful dragon; a many-headed serpent associated with water, not unlike the many-headed hydra slayed by Hercules in Greek myth (and which Thomas Hobbes uses as a metaphor for anarchism); and an elephant. In Hinduism, the god Indra is carried by the naga Airavata, an elephant often depicted as having many heads, or multiple trunks, which spray clouds into the sky using water sucked up from the underworld. Airavata and his mother Iravati bestow their name on the Irrawaddy, which is prone to great variation in water level due to the powerful monsoon rains.

One afternoon on the way to the Karen Hills, I passed through Naypyitaw, Burma's new capital city, built by the military government between 2002 and 2012. It is the only major urban settlement in Burma far from any waterway. Billions of dollars have gone into the rapid construction of the sprawling new metropolis, and at every turn the place begs comparison with the previous capital, Yangon. While Yangon is forever suffering power outages, Naypyitaw's bright, tall lights are kept on through the night. Yangon's streets are asphyxiated with honking, endless traffic, while Naypyitaw is planned around empty superhighways of absurd width (one is twenty lanes across). The government has built an entire diplomats' district in Naypyitaw, but so far the diplomatic community in Burma has refused to leave Yangon.

Naypyitaw is a kind of first-world oasis in one of the poorest countries on earth. It hosted the World Economic Forum a few days after I passed through. The metropolis is equipped with high-end supermarkets (unused), sweeping office parks (mostly unused), and an army of landscapers and gardeners to keep the many highway medians looking trim and pristine. Precious little street life was anywhere to be found, except at an unplanned open-air market at the edge of town, used by the capital's workforce and by the inhabitants of Pyinmana, the district's preexisting town, which Naypyitaw has swallowed up and annexed. No one I spoke with cares for the new capital city; one person told me curtly, "It's a sore subject," and left it at that. Another voiced his frustration that for years no one besides those in the upper levels of government even knew what this massive construction projection at the base of the Bago Hills was for. It was only when construction was nearly complete that the government made its abrupt announcement that all capital activities would be moved out of Yangon.

Some told me the idea for the new capital came to one of the generals' astrologers in a dream. Another said that during the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq, the Burmese regime's leading military officials convinced each other that they were next, and Naypyitaw's position between the Bago Hills and the Karen Hills seemed easier to defend than Yangon, which faces the sea. Another theory holds that the key is the new capital's relative proximity to Kayah State, a poppy-growing upland district that the government has been struggling to control.

At the end of the trip, I was back in a hotel in Yangon, going through notes and photographs. I considered Naypyitaw's landscape of vacant superhighways alongside various scenes of transport by elephant: the logging village's well-trod elephant trails, the elephant convoys of the rebel armies during the 1980s and in 2012, the "relief" elephants who rescued refugees in Assam in 1942 and who cleared tsunami wreckage in Indonesia and Thailand in 2005. Naypyitaw's planners intend the new capital, more exurb than city, as a vision of a modern, newly opened Burma. But in the contrast between landscapes of mobility, the freshly hardened ribbons of asphalt appeared regressive and constricting. The animals and their riders seemed to be carving out unknown frontiers, which were ghostly, and everywhere. +