

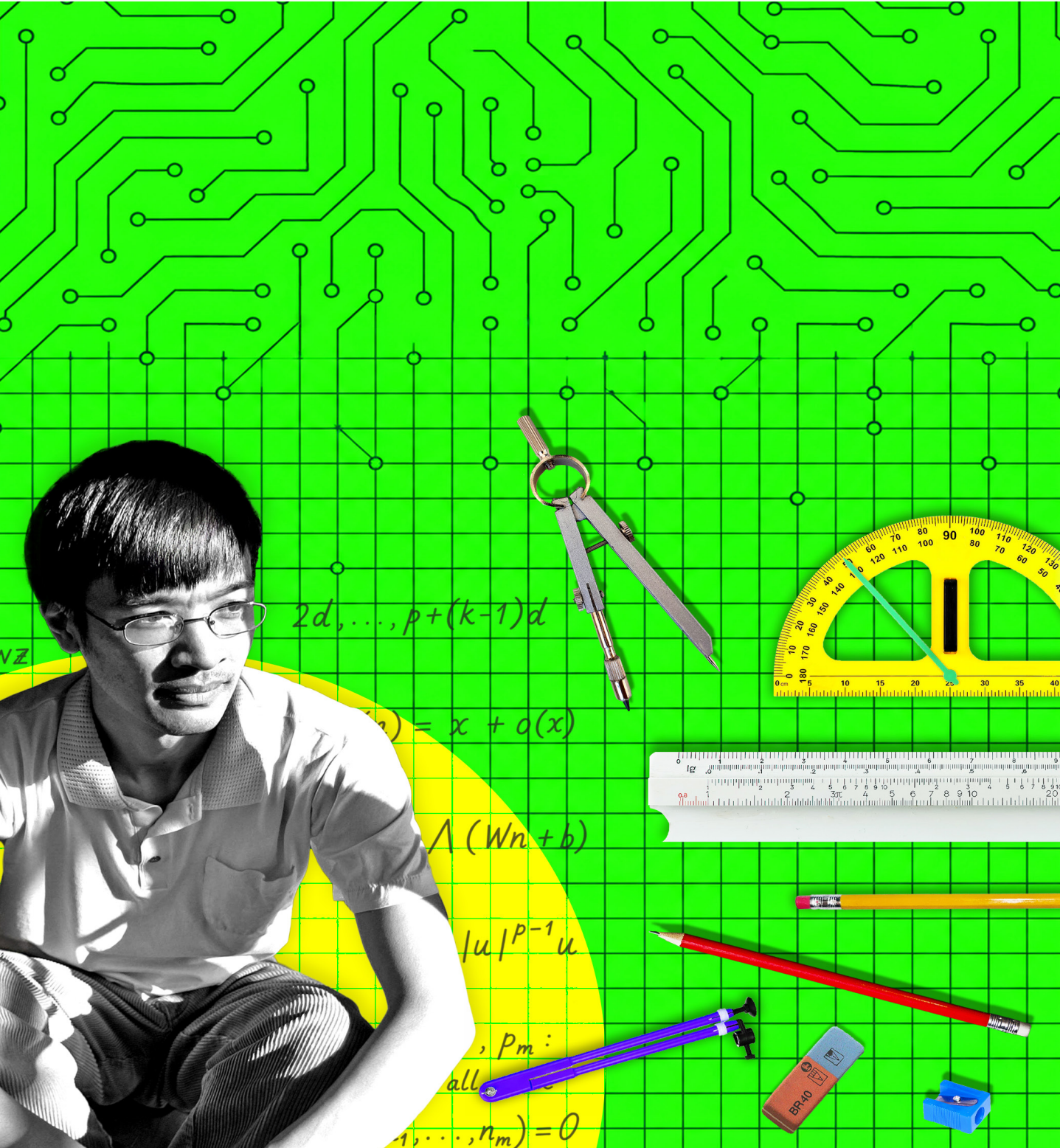
THE ● ATLAS

A NEWSPAPER

VEX MACHINA

As mathematicians
grapple with AI,
divisions are multiplying
P11

27 AUGUST 2026 | ISSUE 4





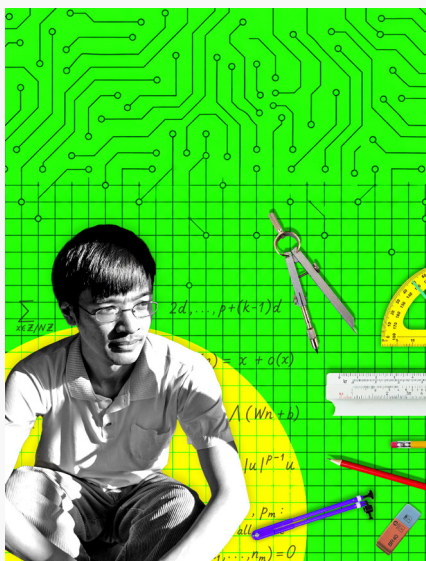
WELCOME TO THE ATLAS.

The idea that mathematicians are the smartest people in the world has its roots in ancient history. Plato, famously, had the phrase “Let none but geometers enter here” engraved above the door of his Academy.

This idea doesn’t need to be true to be powerful. It is the perception that matters – and, as a result, any other kind of intelligence, human or otherwise, must prove itself by knocking mathematicians off their lofty perch. And that is exactly what leading artificial intelligence companies are trying to do. Their efforts to “solve maths”, and co-opt leading researchers, are causing an existential crisis within the mathematics community – which sees a threat not just to themselves, but to the foundation of knowledge itself. *Page 11.*

▲ **WORLD MAP:** Reporting in this edition from these locations. Illustration: Yemsrach Yetneberk, based on the Equal Earth Projection.

▼ **CIRCUIT BREAKER:** Mathematicians, including Terence Tao – sometimes called the world’s greatest living mathematician – are calculating their response to AI. Cover illustration: Teona Tsintsadze



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CURRENTS

Hichilema all fixed for his second go-around

Incumbent Hakainde Hichilema has won Zambia's general election with a comfortable 60% of the vote. Or has he? Opposition leaders say it was rigged, and now one of them, Mutotwe Kafwaya, has been shot dead in a police raid on his home. Another, Brian Mundubile, spent two weeks in hiding before surrendering to police. And no one was able to challenge the result because all of Zambia's top courts were mysteriously closed for business. See Saturday's edition of *The Continent* for more. — *Pamela Kapekele in Lusaka*

▼ **Hakainde Hichilema gestures to supporters. (Photo: Gianluigi Guercia/AFP)**



Historic holiday in Haiti

The government of Haiti has declared 14 August a new public holiday, commemorating one of the most consequential gatherings in world history. On this day in 1791, about 200 enslaved Africans met, in secret and at great personal risk, in the woods of Bois Caïman. Here, they planned what became the Haitian Revolution – the first time that enslaved people successfully overthrew their slavers,

and seized power for themselves. “For generations of Haitians, Bois-Caïman has represented more than a historical gathering. It embodies the idea that people subjected to one of the most brutal systems of slavery in the Americas could organize, unite and challenge the political and social order imposed on them,” wrote the *Haitian Times*. — *Simon Allison*

▲ **Haitians celebrate Bois-Caïman. (Photo: Patrice Noel/Reuters)**

A man-made apocalypse hammers the Himalayas

On Wednesday, near the border between Nepal and Tibet, a huge chunk of glacier ice fell off the side of a mountain and crashed into the river below. The impact was so enormous that it was recorded as a magnitude 5.2 seismic event; displacing water at such volumes that, within 30 minutes, the water level downstream had risen by up to 9m. The floods washed away anything in its path: people, communities, wildlife. At least 359

people died, and another 1,300 are missing. “These sorts of large glacier collapses are really shocking,” Andrew Mackintosh, a glaciologist, told *The Guardian*. “It’s hard as a glaciologist not to be alarmed by these events that seem different to what we’ve observed previously.” Scientists have long predicted events like this are more likely to happen as we keep making the planet hotter. — *Shougat Dasgupta*

► **The aftermath of the flash flood in Devighat, Nepal. (Photo: Prabin Ranabhat/AFP)**



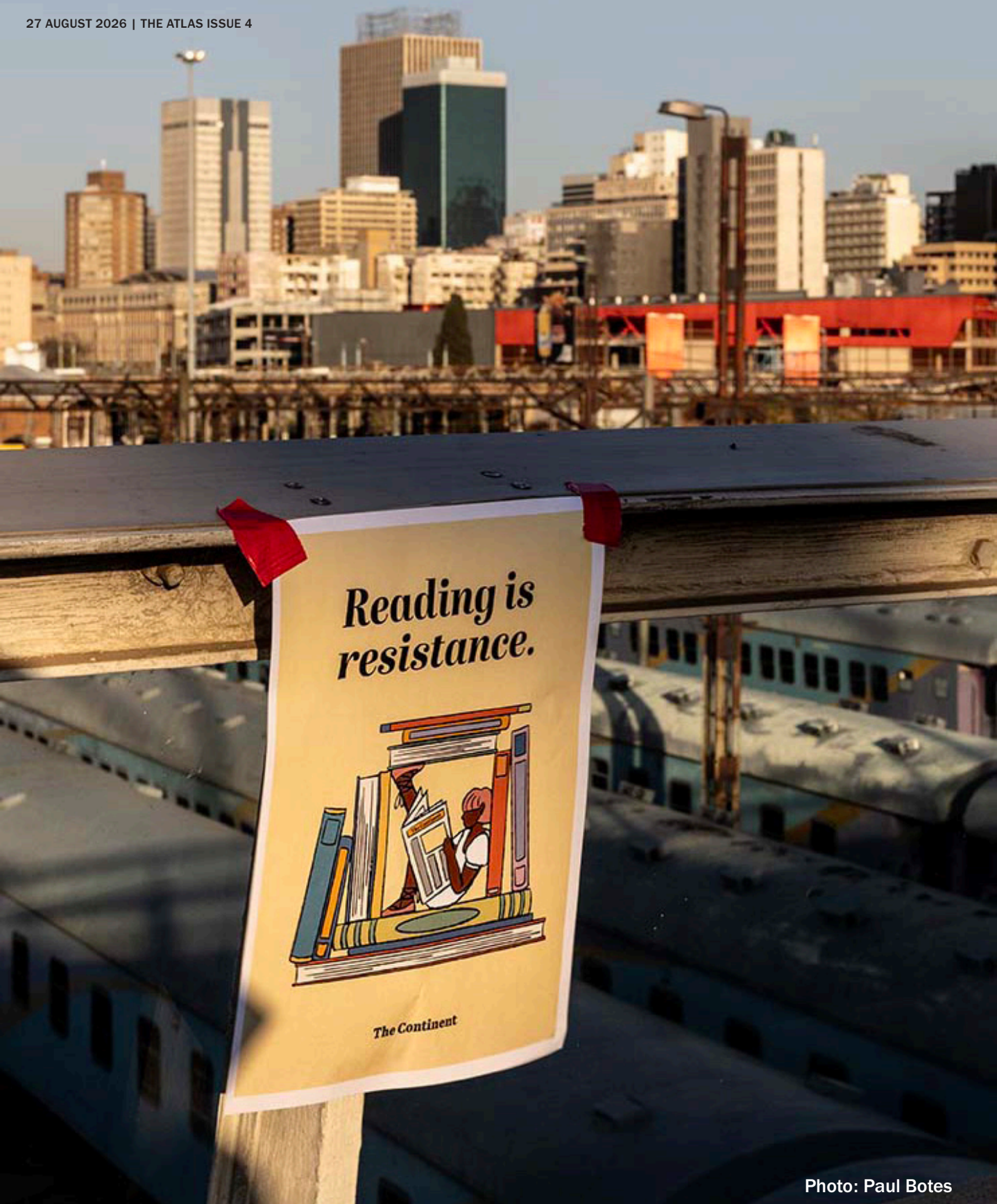


Photo: Paul Botes

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AKRE

Happy couples: On a mountainside in the Kurdish Region of Iraq lies Akre, one of the world's oldest continually-inhabited cities, dating back to the 7th century BCE. It has hosted many weddings. But maybe not so many on the same day. On 16 August, 90 couples wed in a mass ceremony held to coincide with the 80th anniversary of the Kurdistan Democratic Party. (Photo: Safin Hamid/AFP)

CURRENTS



Binance accused of snitching to the Kremlin

Binance is the world's largest marketplace for trading cryptocurrencies – and no stranger to controversy. Last year, its founder, Changpeng Zhao, was pardoned by Donald Trump, despite pleading guilty to allowing money laundering on the platform. Since then, though, Binance has been accused of allowing billions of dollars to flow through its platform to finance the Iranian government (allegations the company denies). This month, a *Reuters*

▲ Changpeng Zhao, Binance's founder and former chief executive. (Photo: Jason Redmond/AFP)

investigation revealed a new scandal: despite formally exiting Russia in 2023, Binance allegedly shared client data with the Kremlin – leading to the prosecution of Yuri Belenkiy, an IT professional who had donated around \$700 to Ukraine. One of the great benefits of cryptocurrency is supposed to be its anonymity – but not for Russian dissidents, apparently. – *Masbo Lomashvili*

Can Apple avoid Meta's 'pervert' problem?

A leaked video from Apple shows a man holding up a book while wearing AirPods. "See something you like," says Siri, "just ask me to save it for later." The footage hints that Apple's widely anticipated camera-equipped earbuds are nearly ready, fuelling speculation ahead of the company's September 9 product launch. The finished product is reportedly only scheduled for some time in 2027, however. But the question is: will the AirPods function as cameras and recorders, like the controversial Ray-Ban Meta "pervert" glasses? Or can Apple figure out a way to protect the privacy of both its customers, and all the people they happen to cross paths with? – *Victoria Jensen*



(Photo: Huy Vũ)

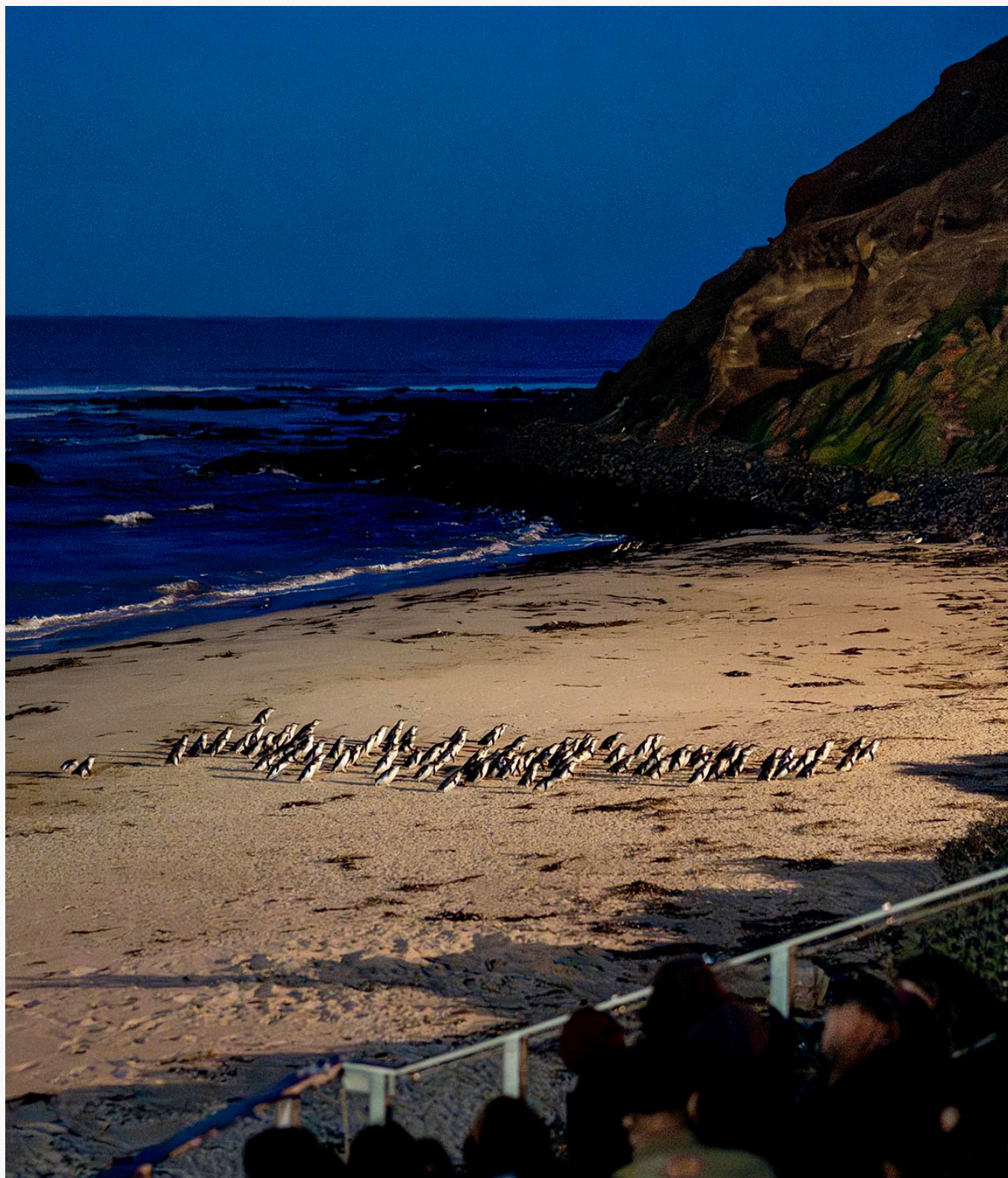


▲ Singer and philanthropist Dolly Parton (Photo: Jonathan Short/AP)

Dolly Parton, 1946 - 2026

Born in the poorest rural heart of Tennessee, Dolly Parton epitomised a life well lived. She was a musical genius, layering deceptively simple melodies with her signature inflections and trills. She played her complex guitar or banjo arrangements herself, even with inches-long acrylic nails. She was an actress, sparkling in women-led ensembles like *Steel*

Magnolias, *9 to 5* and *Joyful Noise*. And she never forgot where she came from. A childhood shaped by poverty fuelled a deep commitment to improving the lives of others, through initiatives like her Imagination Library, which delivered over 100-million books free to children up to five years old. "Find out who you are and do it on purpose" was her mantra – and she did, as the legions of tributes from all around the world affirm. – *Nanjala Nyabola*



PHILLIP ISLAND

Aura-farming kororā: *Eudyptula minor* goes by many names: fairy penguin, blue penguin, kororā or more commonly – given that it is the smallest species of penguin – the little penguin. Phillip Island, in the Australian state of Victoria, is home to around 40,000 of them. These ones appear unruffled by the presence of gawking humans. (Photo: Phillip Island Nature Parks/AFP)



In Mallorca, staring at the sun

Just before visitors jockeyed to 'gram the eclipse, fed-up locals threw down with the cops over over-tourism.

Isobel Cockerell in Sóller

The last total eclipse to hit the Balearic island of Mallorca, off the coast of Spain, was in August 1905. The spectacle was celebrated, in part, as an invitation to tourists. More than a century on, Mallorcans felt differently.

In late July, protests in the capital Palma against overtourism descended into violent clashes with police, who fired rubber bullets into the crowd.

“We feel expelled from our own homes,” Marc Palmer, 27, told *The Atlas*. “We feel like minorities within our own towns and neighborhoods.”

Mallorca has been a major tourist destination since the 1960s, when sleepy coastal towns were built up with holiday apartments. Each summer, these towns would teem with German and British guests, with restaurants selling fish and chips to the undiscerning Briton abroad. But since the pandemic, many Mallorcans have reached a breaking point.

Social media and Airbnb have pushed the island to the edge, said Eleanor Linton, 32, a biologist at a hospital on the island. “Everyone wants to come, take a picture and post on Instagram. Then they leave, without talking to the people. It changes the whole structure of the town. It just becomes a backdrop,

▲ **Throwing shade: Eclipsianados on Er Arenal beach watch the moon Hoover up the sun on 12 August. (Photo: Francisco Ubilla/Reuters)**

without culture.”

When the eclipse came just before sunset, tourists, locals, scientists and astronomers gathered on the cliffs. As the light dimmed, Americans, including a visiting Nasa physicist, applauded. A man proposed to his girlfriend. People held special filters above their phones to try to capture the moon taking a bite out of the sun.

When the moon swallowed the sun whole, the world went dark, and for a moment, people put away their phones. The stars came out. The crowd fell silent. After a minute and 36 seconds a false dawn broke as the sun peeped back out from behind the moon. The noise returned. Camera phones rose again as the sun sank into the sea and people poured back to their hotels on this spectacular, overwhelmed island. ●



FUTTSU

Precocious parasoling: The Momoiro Toiki – ‘pink sigh’ – is a petunia cultivar, known for the brightness of its petals, which grows only on the mountainside of a farm outside Futtu city in Japan’s Chiba Prefecture. The flowers blossomed late this year, their routine disturbed by a summer that is among the wettest and hottest Japan has ever experienced. (Philip Fong/AFP)



Photo: Eddie Botes

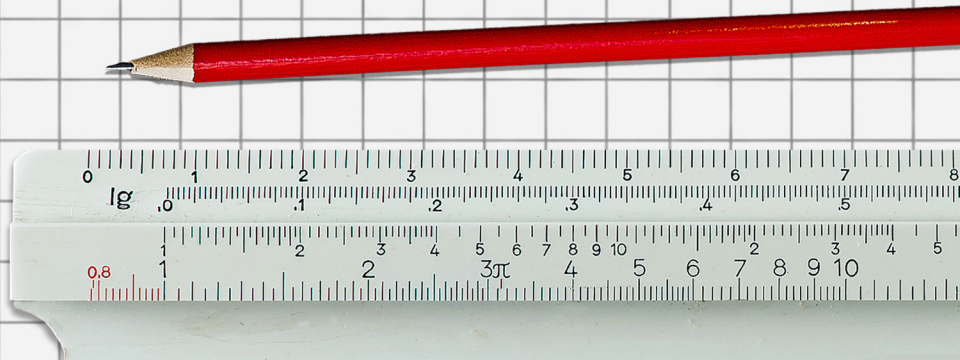
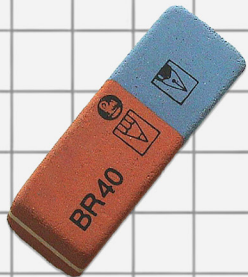
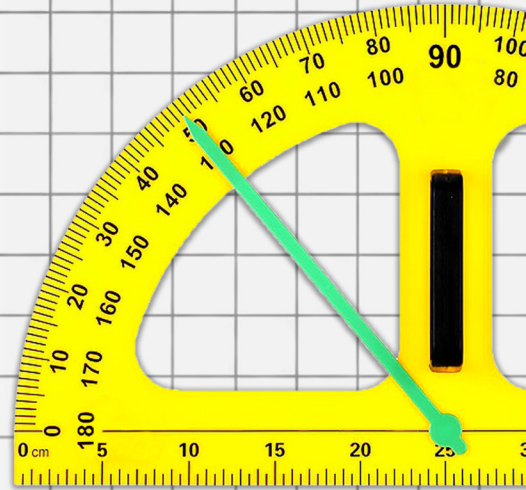
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The mathematicians' guide to the near future



Mathematics has long been considered – not least by mathematicians – to be the foundation of human knowledge. There is competition now: large language models are getting better at solving some puzzles. Mathematicians must decide if, and how, they will work with this new technology – and a quiet revolution is brewing.

Reporting team:

Simon Allison, Shougat Dasgupta, Masho Lomashvili and Irina Matchavariani

In late July, at the International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM) in Philadelphia, the mathematician Jacob Tsimerman was awarded one of four Fields Medals – the highest honour in mathematics.

A few hours later, Tsimerman announced that he was joining OpenAI.

Tsimerman's departure from theoretical mathematics, while at the absolute peak of his powers, highlights the fault line in a debate that is upending the normally quiet world of higher mathematics. "What a dick move," said one mathematics professor, speaking to *The Atlas* off the record.

Tsimerman, who has written extensively about his fear of "omnicidal futures involving artificial intelligence" – a fear that AI could wipe out humanity, closely associated with the AI "doomer" community – has said he will work on OpenAI's safety team.

Tsimerman and OpenAI did not respond to a request for comment.

In recent months, OpenAI has announced proofs of various longstanding mathematical problems, solved with one of the company's latest large language models. Other companies have also made

advancements: RedNote, a Chinese AI model, obtained a perfect score at the International Mathematical Olympiad in Shanghai in July.

Human mathematicians, at all levels of the profession, are reeling from the implications. Tim Gowers, a professor at the University of Cambridge who helped to verify one of OpenAI's proofs, has written that even if AI models fail to progress further, "we have still probably entered an era where it will become very difficult for humans to compete with AI at solving mathematical problems".

This is a startling assessment – and a marketing coup for the likes of OpenAI.

"Mathematicians actually have a special role in this," said Joshua Grochow, an associate professor in Computer Science and (by courtesy)

Mathematics at the University of Colorado Boulder. "The AI companies' PR pitch is essentially to say, 'Look, we have solved math, the intellectually hardest thing ever, therefore we can solve everything.'"

LLMs have not solved math – far from it. Nonetheless, Grochow added, recently some capabilities have improved. "They are legitimately able to produce real math, new math that they had not produced before. So you can't deny that utility. You can deny the extent of that utility, but you can't say it's all BS."

Miek Messerschmidt, a senior lecturer in mathematics at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, recently used Anthropic's Claude to take a crack at a problem that had stumped him. Claude solved it within 30 minutes. "How did I feel? You mean emotionally? I was relieved, because I didn't have to go down this dead end any more. But I was also disconcerted by what this entity could do in such a short amount of time."

▼ **This year's Fields medallists:** mathematicians Yu Deng (China), John Pardon (US), Jacob Tsimerman (Canada) and Hong Wang (China). (Photo: Erin Blewett/AFP)



NEW VARIABLES

Mathematics has been disrupted by technological leaps before. The abacus. The mechanical calculator. The blackboard, even, which played an instrumental role in standardising training and mathematical notation (“It’s hard to research, because most of what’s written on blackboards doesn’t stay there very long,” said mathematics historian Michael Barany).

But AI is a different kind of disruption. Where previous advances helped mathematicians expand the frontiers of their knowledge, large language models threaten the livelihoods, and purpose, of mathematicians themselves.

This matters for everyone: for thousands of years, mathematics has been considered to be the foundation of scientific knowledge. There is no physics without mathematics. No astronomy without mathematics. And there is no computer science – or AI – without mathematics. What happens if there are cracks in the foundation?

“I think that LLMs pose an existential threat to the mathematical community,” wrote Tasmin Chu, a PhD student at the California Institute of Technology, in an essay published on 2 August – the day after OpenAI released a set of ten new

mathematical results, resolving or making progress on various problems.

“This is a polemic, not a press release,” Chu continued. “I know that others feel the same way; I have spent today crashing out and learning that top mathematicians I know are crashing out.”

Some of what mathematicians are worried about is the same as what everyone else is worried about: that AI will take their jobs; that AI companies have absorbed everyone’s work, and are reproducing it without attribution or compensation; that students aren’t learning properly any more; and that there won’t be jobs for them when they graduate.

But some worries are more specific to the field. Like the fear that, if mathematics becomes too reliant on particular AI models, then AI companies will have the power to restrict access to a select few – or make it prohibitively expensive. That promising young mathematicians, instead of turning to research, will use their talents instead to refine proprietary algorithms, which may or may not be used for the common good. That there will be no one left to understand, let alone vouch for, the mathematics produced by the machines. That objective truth, or

Where previous advances helped mathematicians expand the frontiers of their knowledge, LLMs threaten their livelihoods.

anything close to it, is going to be much harder to prove – a fear shared with journalists, incidentally, who find it increasingly difficult to verify whether a photograph is real or fake.

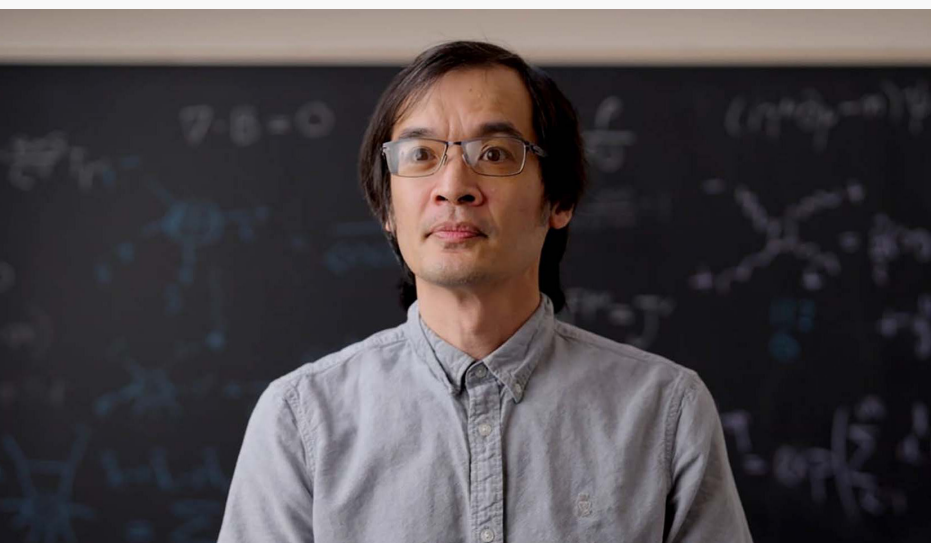
MATHEMATICIAN IN THE LOOP

After speaking with more than a dozen leading mathematicians from around the world, *The Atlas* can confirm that Chu is not alone with her fears: it’s all anyone is talking about. The crisis is existential – and mathematicians are looking to one man in particular to guide them through it.

There are no working mathematicians who are truly famous. The closest anyone gets is Terence Tao, a professor at UCLA, who is often referred to as the world’s greatest living mathematician. A prodigy, Tao skipped five grades of school, receiving his masters degree at age 16. By 21, he had earned a PhD from Princeton, and was awarded the Fields Medal just ten years later, in 2006, for his pioneering work with Ben Green on prime number theory.

But what sets Tao apart, in a field infamously incomprehensible to outsiders, is his ability to communicate to both mathematicians and laypeople alike. This has made him a de facto spokesperson for the mathematics community – and extremely influential in setting its norms. “From all accounts he’s a lovely man,” said one researcher, speaking anonymously.

◀ Terence Tao, often referred to as the world’s greatest living mathematician. (Photo: OpenAI Academy)



“But the social pressure to agree with Terry Tao is really strong.”

On July 24, the day after Jacob Tsimerman joined OpenAI, Tao gave a public lecture at the ICM titled “Mathematics in the Age of AI”. In it, he presents his “working hypothesis”: that AI tools for mathematics, which he already uses in his own research, will keep getting better. This will allow for collaboration on a vastly greater scale than has ever been possible before, Tao argues, and speed up the pace of research – revealing new, previously unimagined frontiers.

But it will also change, fundamentally, the role of human mathematicians. There will be little point in problem-solving – the computers will handle that. But the humans will still have to do the really hard work: understanding why AI-generated proofs are correct, and explaining this to others. The sooner they embrace this and plan accordingly, Tao concludes, the better.

AN UNSOLVED EQUATION

Not everyone believes in the inevitability of AI defining the future of mathematics. According to several sources, both organisers and funders were disappointed with the turnout at the ICM in Philadelphia. Despite the gravity of the occasion, the congress was not at capacity.

Ila Varma and Tarik Aougab, associate professors at the University of Toronto and Haverford College respectively, may have had something to do with that. In March, they launched a petition to boycott the ICM due to the ongoing war in Iran, increasing authoritarianism in the United States and the risks faced by visiting academics – if they were even allowed in. “AI companies were invited, but most African mathematicians who tried to attend couldn’t get visas,” Varma said.

More than 2,600 people signed the



◀ 2nd Century relief of a merchant using an abacus. (Photo: Musée de La Cour d’Or - Metz Métropole)

petition. For Varma, this is evidence that mathematicians may yet use their status to resist the influence – and the cash – of the big AI companies.

“There’s an idea that the positionality of mathematics in society is to decide who’s smart, who’s worthy of the most lucrative career opportunities and the privileges that go along with it. And now we are being asked to take this technology that is likely to be extremely unhealthy for users, that’s bad for the environment, this thing built on unethical labour, and our discipline is being used against many of our wishes to tell society that this thing is intelligent, and that you should let it do your thinking for you.”

Michael Harris, a professor at the Institut de Mathématiques de Jussieu in Paris, was at the ICM in Philadelphia. “The talks I attended on AI, starting with Tao’s public lecture, took pains to insist on the need for human mathematicians to make sense of anything produced in the name of the discipline, by machines or by humans,” he said. “There is a growing resistance to any use of AI whatsoever in mathematics, especially among young people, and this will become evident over the next few months.”

One of the clearest voices of dissent belongs to Max Weinreich, Assistant Professor of Mathematics at the City University of New York.

In an essay published earlier this

month, Weinreich makes the case against what he describes as “artificial mathematics”: “Mathematicians do not need to use AI, nor should we use AI; soon, I argue, you will not want to have your name associated with AI. Instead, we should use our intellectual authority to oppose its development.”

His opposition is about more than mathematics, he told *The Atlas*. In his view, the environmental and financial implications of the AI boom pose major societal risks – and mathematicians, given their privileged position, are one of the few groups of people who can do anything about it.

As John Fletcher, a theoretical physicist and mathematician, observed: “There is a lot of power in being perceived as the smartest people in the world.”

Po-Shen Loh, a professor at Carnegie Mellon and former coach of the US International Mathematical Olympiad team, backs mathematicians to figure it out – by treating it like a maths problem. “AI is making mathematicians engage with the real world. They are smart enough to realise they have an existential crisis. They’re quickly racing down to discover all the dead ends, to see what works and what doesn’t.”

And when they figure it out, maybe they’ll let the rest of us know. ●

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Mathematicians talk a lot about the beauty of mathematics. Tell us why mathematics is beautiful to you; or share an elegant example. Write to simon@codastory.com. Published responses will get a limited edition print of Teona Tsintsadze’s cover illustration. Open to laypeople and mathematicians alike.



Photo: Sogo Oladele

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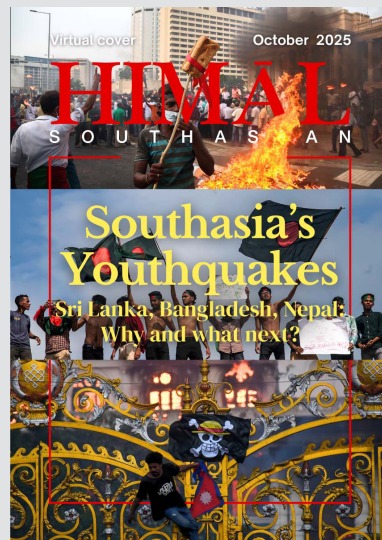
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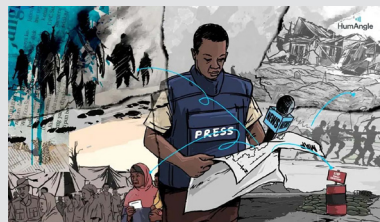
Last month, we introduced a donation button to The Atlas website. And you used it – thank you! Collectively, we raised exactly \$105. This is what we're going to do with the money: invest it back into independent media, by subscribing or donating to some of our favourite outlets around the world – and then advertising them in our newspaper. These are newsrooms that we love, and trust, and think you should know about too. And yes, you can help our nascent independent media investment fund grow: details on theatlasnewspaper.org.

In 2006, as a young reporter, an early magazine assignment was to go to Kathmandu and write about a city in the throes of joyous upheaval. People had taken to the streets to fight for the restoration of democracy, and they were winning. I arrived into delirious chaos, knowing little and understanding less. What I did know was to make a beeline for the *Himal Southasian* office, to find the people who were in the thick of historical change, reporting around the clock, and who would still take the time to help a naive colleague. The thing is, and always has been, that *Himal* cares. It cares deeply about the region that it covers so exhaustively and so carefully – a region where quality, independent journalism is in increasingly short supply. In its consistency, and in its depth, *Himal* is an outlier. Let's help it stay that way. – *Shougat Dasgupta*

The Atlas took out an annual subscription to *Himal*'s 'Southasia Insider' tier for \$49. This includes an invitation to a patrons-only WhatsApp group and quarterly calls with its editorial team. *Himal*'s current lead story is 'The Cockroach Janata Party's caste blindspot', by Ankush Pal.



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▲ HumAngle reports on Nigeria and Africa's conflict and development from the ground. Visit support.humanglemedia.com.

Two weeks ago, when I got the email announcing a major new investigation, I knew it was going to be good. Of course it was going to be good. For the last six years, *HumAngle* have been one of the most consistently excellent newsrooms on the African continent. Their coverage of northern Nigeria has always been exceptional, rooted in a deep understanding of a part of the world that receives only fleeting international media attention. But, increasingly, *HumAngle* too is an international media outlet – and their new investigation, led by Ibrahim Adeyemi and supported by the Pulitzer Centre, is a case in point. It examines how AI-powered drones are being used, and abused, by state security forces in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Mali – vital reading for anyone who wants to understand why, in much of the world, the AI revolution is being treated with considerable suspicion.

The Atlas donated \$56 to *HumAngle*. *HumAngle*'s current lead story is 'The Nigerian Highways of Horrors Where Terrorists Ambush Road Users', by Mohammed Babangida Mafara.



Photo: Vijay Pandey

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◀
La Pampa

Riding the highway to nowhere

Photos and words: Marco Garro

The Interoceanic Highway is a 2,600km concrete seam connecting Peru's Pacific coastline to Brazil's Atlantic Ocean. It scales the Andes before plunging through the Amazonian foothills. Completed in 2011, the highway cost more than \$2-billion, and was supposed to bring isolated communities in from the cold.

With better access to global markets, wealth was supposed to follow.

But economic growth has been uneven, with many small towns being excluded. Previously inaccessible areas have seen deforestation and illegal mining. Uncertainty and hopelessness have settled in, in some of these roadside towns; a different world has arrived, one over which they have very little control. ●



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RESTAURANT REVIEW

It's not just a shawarma

Welcome to the West Bank's favourite hole-in-the-wall.

The Atlas ordered:

Lamb shawarma (with sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, pickled cucumbers, jalapeños, onions, tahini and sumac)

Manadeel (spiced mince wrapped in lamb caul, with pickles and jalapeños)

Mirinda Orange (can)

Bill: 43 shekels (\$14)

In Al-Ram village in the West Bank, near the “separation barrier”, Saeed Adawiya and his two sons, Zaal and Ghandour, tend to a spit of turning meat. It is only a few steps from their small, unprepossessing sandwich shop to the grey concrete wall that slices through the landscape like a scar. The wall divides Al-Ram and the West Bank from East Jerusalem.

The tiny restaurant, Hab al-Rumman – “the seed of the pomegranate” – barely has a sign, never mind carefully-set tables or an elaborate menu. What it does have are long lines of customers from Jerusalem and Ramallah and all the surrounding villages. From 7am, they queue for grilled meat, vegetables and khobez taboon, the Palestinian flatbread that gets its distinctive texture and taste from the clay oven used to bake it.

The customers eat and drink in the street, or in their cars. And while they eat, they talk. On one recent morning, a group by the door were discussing the news: a man had fallen while trying to scale the separation barrier, and had broken both his legs.

“Thank God, it wasn't his neck,” said one, to grim laughter. The humour in these parts is dark.



▲ From 7am, customers queue for grilled meat, vegetables and khobez taboon (Palestinian flatbread)

◀ Customers eat and drink in the street, or in their cars.

The tiny restaurant barely has a sign, never mind carefully-set tables or an elaborate menu. What it does have though are long lines of customers, coming from Jerusalem and Ramallah and all the surrounding villages.

Regulars rib Saeed about prices: sandwiches have doubled in price in the last decade. But still they come. And in such numbers that by noon Ghandour has no meat left to slice. Zaal tidies up; Saeed puts out the fire. Tomorrow, they'll all be back. ●

Hab al-Rumman was reviewed by Aseel Mafarjeh, in collaboration with Egab.

BOOKSHOP REVIEW

Midland Books

Shop No.20, Aurobindo Palace Market, Hauz Khas, New Delhi

Shougat Dasgupta in Delhi

Delhi is not a city overrun with public lending libraries. Reading, particularly in English, is gated like so much else in the city – fenced off for those who can afford to buy books, or memberships to cultural oases like the British Council or the American Center.

Still, middle class or not, the relatively few bookshops in a city of over 30-million people are a refuge. And of these, Midland, in an ugly municipal complex in relatively affluent south Delhi, stands out as a haven of friendly, informed, quietly principled bookselling.

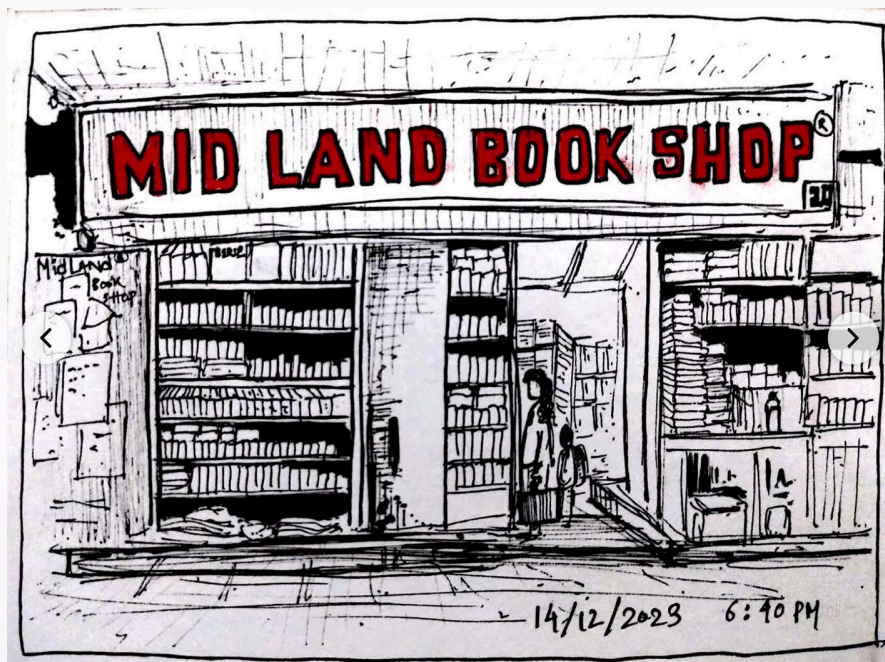
In June, Penguin Random House India cancelled plans to distribute Joe Sacco's *Once and Future Riot*, a book-length piece of graphic journalism about the 2013 religious riot in Muzaffarnagar.

The book had already been published in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Couched as legalistic pedantry, the decision was widely seen as an example of self-censorship: the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi didn't ban the book; the publisher just didn't want the hassle.

Midland promptly imported copies of the book from its US publisher.

It is in Midland that you will find essays by and on Umar Khalid, a student leader turned political prisoner in Delhi.

And it is in Midland that the bookmarks, handed out with the purchase of any book, feature watermelons – a widely recognised symbol of Palestinian resistance.



It is also in Midland that readers can find books that put forward the case for Hindu nationalism, and the work of Israeli writers – if the bookshop can be said to have a politics, it is about making books available to readers.

But it is also in Midland that readers can find books that put forward the case for Hindu nationalism, and the work of Israeli writers. If the bookshop can be said to have a politics, it is about making books available to readers.

The bookshop began life in the 1970s in Andhra Pradesh, a state on the southeast coast of India. But as separatist politics in the area began

to interfere with business, the owner Mirza Yaseen Baig moved his family from Hyderabad to Delhi.

There are four book shops in Delhi run by Baig's descendants, including the Midland branch described above. Each is characterised by its unfussy bibliophilic approach to bookselling: customers must browse through the piles, finding books less through organisation than through discovery and conversation.

Within these teetering towers, you will find the best of human thought, the most generous of human impulses. And also the worst and meanest.

That's what the best bookshops provide: a place where we come face to face with ourselves. ●

▲ Illustration: Midland Book Shop

TV REVIEW

Who you gonna call

Is South Korea banishing the ghosts of injustice, or swapping them out for a brand new batch of vengeful spirits?



Spooky in Love

Starring: Park Eun-bin, Yang Se-jong, Ong Seong-wu

Directed by: Lee Min-soo

Number of episodes: 12

Streaming: tvN (South Korea), Netflix (worldwide)

Spooky in Love finished its run this weekend past, capping off the overdue return to the drama limelight by *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*'s Park Eun-bin. It also likely marks the very last time a popular kdrama formula ever gets to see the light of day.

Park is Cheon Yeo-ri, a woman haunted by past trauma. Literally: after her fiancé saves her from drowning, but dies in her place, she is visited by restless spirits of the dead – and helps them find peace, mainly by solving crimes. Yeo-ri is aided (and serenaded) by Ma Gang-uk, a



dashing prosecutor who, under South Korea's justice system, doesn't just get to prosecute cases in court, but also do the detective work himself.

Played with golden-retriever energy by Yang Se Jong (*My Country: The New Age*), Gang-uk investigates, interrogates, cuts through red tape, and prosecutes in court. Combining investigation and prosecution is usually associated with autocracies – but it's long been a key part of South Korea's justice system.

Until now. The National Assembly passed a series of bills this year, splitting the investigative prerogative out from the prosecutions service and bringing the justice system in line with the separation of powers familiar to Western democracies.

This is meant to sever the perceived link between the concentrated power of the prosecutors' office and decades of corruption and political shenanigans. Critics say prosecutors have used (and been used for) their prerogative to conduct a sort of legal blackmail – digging up dirt on opponents and then "choosing"

whether or not to prosecute. In 2009, former president Roh Moo-hyun was driven to suicide after leaving office by a brutal prosecution campaign that by some accounts was revenge for trying to water down these powers.

You might suppose this year's reform would therefore be popular. Hardly. The changes remove an almost hallowed means of last resort in South Korean society. The supplementary power of prosecutors to investigate has brought real justice to people ignored by indifferent police or betrayed by the bureaucracy of the justice system – especially victims of sexual crimes. While new protections have been introduced, the public remains starkly divided on whether curbing abuse of power is worth risking the loss of this lifeline.

Of course, it also renders a handy protagonist archetype in kdramas obsolete – the most famous of which is probably 2017's *Stranger (Secret Forest)*, starring Cho Seung-woo.

With callous disregard for trope-based television, the ruling DPK party of President Lee Jae-myung made this reform a manifesto pledge. And now it has delivered. Whether it comes back to haunt them remains to be seen – the resignation last week of Justice Minister Jung Sung-ho, who championed the reforms, may yet serve as an act of sacrificial appeasement on the altar of public disgruntlement.

But any plans for another season of *Spooky in Love* are now most likely – like Cheon Yeo-ri's first love – dead in the water. ●



▲ Illustration: Anna Jibladze

A SHORT SHORT STORY

Who wants to live forever?

Dispatches from the future in 400 words or less

For secrecy's sake, the summit was in Gwyneth's house in Amagansett.

It was the same gray, shingled house where she had met Jeff. They'd kept the house all these years, for sentimentality's sake, even after annexing the Hamptons.

Peter was the first to arrive. Awkward! Peter had wanted the Hamptons too.

Jeff had insisted Peter be included, as a courtesy. Without Palantir, he said, Goopification could not have been achieved. The protests against Amazon *had* been intense before they'd merged.

Poor Jeff. Withdraw was really affecting him. He was only 109 but he looked at least 40.

Peter wasn't walking anymore, and getting his unit into the house was a hullabaloo. He was using his own leg fat on his face. Gwyneth didn't like to judge, but she thought this was kind of show-off-y.

Apple came next, with Blue Ivy and North West. They were all frozen

in their teenage forms, so no flaws were showing. How Gwyneth wished she'd been able to start de-aging at eighteen.

Blue Ivy insisted on "a moment" for her parents. Beyoncé and Jay-Z had let Withdraw take them more than fifty years ago — had made a whole thing of being *au naturel*. Blah, blah, blah.

Kim K arrived. *Were her ankles thickening?*

Mark, of course, was late, and then he wanted "a moment" for Elon. They'd voted to put Elon into Forced Withdraw last year. Too erratic. And, frankly, a dick.

Finally, Gwyneth was explaining just how severe the shortages were. But then Peter started shouting. He'd caught North West making eye contact with him.

"She's trying to destroy my cognitive functioning," he bellowed.

At which point, the left side of Jeff's face started to slide downward.

"What?" Jeff said, seeing them stare.

Within his hoody, Mark began to hyperventilate. He picked up an heirloom tomato from a bowl on the table and brought it to his nose, inhaling deeply.

This was too much. "Get off my fruit," Gwyneth hissed.

Mark put the tomato down. "I was self soothing," he whispered.

Jeff clutched at his chest. His prized right pec was deflating. His heart would be next. They all knew what happened if you went into Withdraw.

"Please," said Gwyneth. "Can we get down to business? Or we're all going into Withdraw. And I don't think any of you want to be old, do you?"

They looked at one another in horror. And finally settled down to business. ●

Heather Chaplin is the founding director of Journalism + Design at the New School in New York City and author, most recently, of *Reckless Years, A Diary of Love and Madness*

The Historical Record

with ZELDA PERKINS



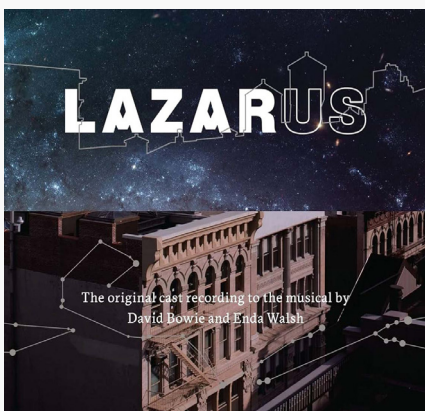
This month, *The Atlas* asks whistleblower **Zelda Perkins** what fragments of history – a record, a book, a memory, a turning point – she would preserve for posterity, if she was in charge of the historical record. Historians of the very distant future, human or otherwise, you can thank us later.

David Bowie's *Lazarus*, which a lot of you won't have heard of, is the album that goes with his last piece of work – a stage musical that I was lucky enough to work on called *Lazarus*. The album *Blackstar* came out at the same time, and some of the music from *Lazarus* is on *Blackstar*. But the *Lazarus* album, which is a cast recording, an album of a piece of theatre, for me is the last gift that Bowie gave us. And it's about hope, the dashing of hope, the hopelessness of life, the wonder of life and death. It's a piece of work that will hold up very well in history.

You'll have to forgive me. I am standing amongst giants of activism, politics, and geopolitics, and my book is going to be... *Winnie the Pooh* [by AA Milne]. *Winnie the Pooh* was the first very important book to me as a child. And there is now the *Tao of Pooh* [a 1982 philosophy book that uses the characters of the Hundred Acre Wood to explain core tenets of Taoism], which is extraordinary. But it's the books about Winnie the Pooh and Pooh Corner which highlighted the ridiculousness of life, the fear of life, how to be brave, how to be silly, how to be sad, but ultimately how to be happy.



ABOVE: Zelda Perkins.
(Photo: IMDB)



LEFT: Album cover for the 2016 original cast recording of *Lazarus*, the musical by David Bowie and Enda Walsh.

Again, I'm going to go back to childhood, because I think when you're young that's when you have your first experiences. For me, my grandparents brought me up so we didn't do new stuff – we didn't buy new clothes, I didn't get new books. They came from a war generation, so every week my grandmother would take me to the library in the little town near where they brought me

up in the countryside. It was a tiny library, and it just had one little corner of children's books. And she would leave me in there for an hour while she went and did the shopping. And that library was what gave me access to something other than *Winnie the Pooh*. It's what gave me the understanding that there were books on everything, and that libraries were a place that you could go and see and



read and find everything. And that was an amazing thing to discover as a child.

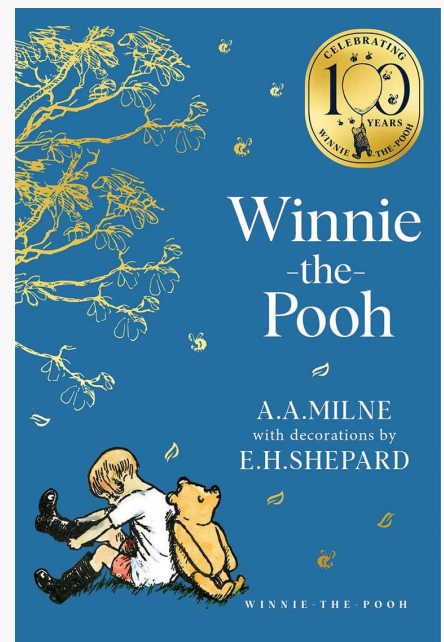
I was very lucky to spend a lot of time in Zambia. My dream meal is at five in the morning, breakfast by the fire, in the cold, just before the sun has come up on the banks of the river Luangwa. There is no more magical meal than that: hot tea, made on a fire, and toast toasted on a fire, with butter and Marmite. Love Marmite.

When I had to sign my non-disclosure agreement with Harvey Weinstein, I was only 25. I discovered after signing that agreement that it was going to be nigh on impossible for me to get work in the UK, where I lived, or in America. And so I went to Guatemala, to a friend's wedding. I had no idea of anything about Guatemala. And I turned up in Antigua, which is one of the most beautiful towns I've ever had

the privilege of being in, with a huge volcano beside it. It's a small town, but it's incredibly beautiful ... And that's what really kind of grounded me and helped me move on from what had been one of the most horrible experiences of my early 20s. And so, Antigua to me is a very magical place.

[A turning point in history?] #MeToo. Do I need to say anymore? #MeToo. ●

Zelda Perkins was Harvey Weinstein's assistant. She signed a non-disclosure agreement in 1998. Breaking that agreement cost her everything – her career, her relationships, years of her life – but helped put a serial sex offender behind bars, and changed the law in three countries. She was speaking on the sidelines of the ZEG Storytelling Festival 2026 in Tbilisi, Georgia. 'The Historical Record' is produced by Masho Lomashvili and Simon Allison.



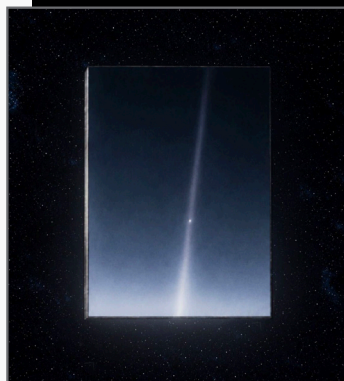
TOP: Luangwa River, Zambia. (Photo: Green Safaris)

ABOVE: *Winnie the Pooh*, by A.A. Milne

Right of reply

In Issue 3, we asked about your favourite memories of the night sky. Mwaniki Nyaga writes: “We’d driven 200km out of Nairobi to the slopes of Kirinyaga (Where God Rests), or what the coloniser called Mount Kenya. Being my first time ever camping and revelling in the night sky with the Travelling Telescope [a stargazing safari company], I found it all quite mesmerising. Through the telescopes, we spotted the Andromeda Galaxy (M31), the Pleiades (M45) and at the crack of dawn, just before sunrise, a crescent moon with earthshine around it (the old moon in the new moon’s arms). It was a restful, other-worldly weekend that ushered me into the world of stargazing, and a consciousness of light (and some Starlink satellites) as pollutants.”

Thanks and congratulations, Mwaniki! A very limited edition print – so far, there’s only one – of Anna Jibladze’s stunning cover illustration for Issue 3 of *The Atlas* (inset, right) is with the courier now. Send more stories, and all feedback, to simon@codastory.com.



▲ An image of the Pleiades, or Seven Sisters, a cluster of stars 444 light years away, from June 2025. Incidentally, in Greek mythology, the Pleiades were the seven daughters of Atlas. Coincidence? Probably. (Photo: Mwaniki Naga)

About Coda Story

Coda Story is an award-winning journalism studio that investigates the forces shaping the world. Through deep reporting, pattern-recognition journalism and storytelling innovation, Coda connects stories across borders and over time, revealing the systems beneath the headlines.

About The Continent

The Continent is an award-winning pan-African newspaper that began publishing in April 2020. Distributed as a PDF on encrypted messaging platforms, it is Africa’s most widely read newspaper, with subscribers in more than 140 countries.

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Becky Lipscombe
Elene Jvania
Emily Patton
Ines Vilares
Irina Matchavariani
Isobel Cockerell
Jennifer Healy Johnson
Kaizar Campwala
Ketevan Ebanoidze
Kristina Skupien
Masho Lomashvili
Nadia Beard
Natalia Antelava
Olatunji Olaigbe
Shougat Dasgupta
Sophiko Vasadze
Teona Tsintsadze
Victoria Jensen

For The Continent:

Ashleigh Swaile
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Dumi Sithole
Evania Chiza
Gado
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Matthew du Plessis
Paul Botes
Refiloe Seiboko
Simon Allison
Sipho Kings
Theresa Mallinson
Wynona Mutisi
Yemsrach Yetneberk
Yusuf Omatayo

BACKGROUND CHECK:

The Continent is on the Nelson Mandela Bridge in Johannesburg, South Africa

Coda Story is in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; see the Petronas Twin Towers in silhouette

HumAngle is in Lagos, Nigeria; the yellow danfo taxi gives it away

Himal SouthAsian is riding a rickshaw in Delhi, India

.coda
The Continent

The Coda

Natalia Antelava
in New York City

For most Americans, the border is an airport desk, a checkpoint, a line on a map. But for much of the world, the American border begins months earlier, under the fluorescent lights of a United States embassy.

This August, at the US embassy in my hometown, Tbilisi, a family ahead of me told the consular officer they wanted to take their nine-year-old son to Disneyland for his birthday.

For nearly half an hour, the officer questioned them through bulletproof glass: what they earned, where they would stay, who they knew in America, who was staying behind in Georgia, why they would come back.

Eventually, he granted them tourist visas, but on one condition: they had to post bonds of \$15,000 for each parent and \$5,000 for their child. They walked away.

Donald Trump promised to make it harder to enter America.

He has delivered.

The US can now demand bonds of up to \$20,000 from visitors carrying passports from 50 countries. Thirty are African. Georgia happens to be the only one in Europe.

The state department says countries are selected based on factors including visa overstay rates, and whether their governments adequately verify identities, screen



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applicants and share information with the US.

Making movement unaffordable has precedents. In the late nineteenth century, Canada imposed a head tax on Chinese immigrants specifically to deter them.

But watching the family walk away, I thought of another, reverse parallel. In 1972, the Soviet Union began charging people with higher education who wanted to leave the country for the cost of their degrees.

The official justification was reimbursement to the state. In practice, the tax became notorious for blocking Soviet Jews trying to leave.

Unlike the Soviet exit tax, American visa bonds are, in theory, refundable. A friend of mine is still waiting for her \$15,000, three months after returning from the US. The embassy tells her the problem is in Washington. ●

▲ Illustration: Teona Tsintsadze

**We live
in the
same world.
Let's read
from the
same page.**



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