

The background is a detailed landscape painting. It features a massive, dark mountain range with a prominent waterfall cascading down its left side. The sky is filled with dramatic, golden-yellow clouds, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. In the foreground, a calm lake reflects the scene, with a small cluster of trees on the left and some rocks and foliage in the bottom right corner.

THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

# A Therapeutic Atlas

Destinations to inspire and enchant

## Introduction

Ideally, we would never have to leave the house, or even our bed. It would all be to hand – everything one desired, needed and hoped for would be within immediate reach, as it might have been when one was very small and at peace in a comforting cradle.

But as we mature, our needs invariably develop in more complicated ways and so the ability of a single environment to meet them must falter. We start to dream of ‘elsewhere’; we want to go places; we crave a change of scene.

We’ve been doing this for a long time. The Ancient Greeks were among the first to know about therapeutic places – the word stems from their term θεραπευτικός, *therapeutikós*, meaning curative, helpful, healing – and constantly took to the road in the hope of finding relief: they went to the Sanctuary of Asclepius in Epidaurus to beg for help for piles and cancer, wind and earache; they went to the Oracle at Delphi in search of wisdom and advice on marriage and career; they went to the Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion to derive courage and counsel on seafaring; and in addition had a hundred or so major shrines around the Greek world to choose from to address problems ranging from impotence and infertility to depression and insomnia.

Our species has continued to look out for therapeutic places to travel to. In the 1840s, the German doctor Hermann Brehmer discovered that patients with tuberculosis might be helped by spending many months at high altitude, largely lying horizontally on an outdoor terrace facing the sun. And so, for over a century, until the discovery of streptomycin, the Alps were dotted with imposing sanatoria

with large glazed balconies overlooking pastures ringing with the sound of cow bells and dedicated to the management and eradication of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*.

Other places have been recommended to treat ailments of a more diffuse psychological nature. Eighteenth-century doctors prescribed that the bereaved should visit Karlsbad in Bohemia (present-day Karlovy Vary) to drink at least ten glasses of water a day from the springs; the mineral-rich waters at Baden-Baden were reputed to have the power to console the childless and those abandoned in love.

We don’t need to be convinced believers in religion or adherents of the woollier ends of medical treatment to recognise the overall point: that there are places that can help, parts of the world that can assist us with our troubles in a way that our own homes cannot. This book is a compendium of therapeutic places that may offer us a holiday or respite from certain difficulties of our psyches; places that can help us to reframe our difficulties, shed new light on our mental blocks, lift our moods and restore us to a measure of calm and purpose.

We are all patients in various states of distress, some of us hobbling, the rest of us bravely keeping up appearances. Every worthwhile location is – in a sense – a sanatorium to which we should repair for moments of rest and inspiration; a place where we might stop for a while, in our imaginations or in reality, in order to rebuild our strength and identify a few new reasons to live.



Remondini Family, *Description of the Land of Cockaigne, Where Whoever Works the Least Earns the Most*, 1606.

We should fantasise about what our land of happiness might look like.

## The Land of Cockaigne

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, one of the most popular travel destinations was the land of Cockaigne. It was sometimes believed to lie on an island below Spain; at other times it was situated in the Caribbean. More usually its location was left pleasantly vague – though there was general agreement that the weather there was always mild and the flora and fauna perfectly suited to human needs (often, as here in the top right-hand corner, guinea fowl would fly right out of the sky and onto people’s plates for dinner).

According to one depiction produced by the Remondini printing firm in Italy in 1606, in Cockaigne money rained down from the sky, the lakes were filled with wine, crops harvested themselves, oxen ploughed fields unattended, the mountains were made of sugar, trees grew candied fruit, castles were fashioned out of ginger bread, streets were paved with pastry, ships were laden with pasta – and anyone who tried to do any work ran the risk of being arrested for disturbing the peace.

It might sound merely eccentric, but that would be to miss the significance and psychological importance of that much-neglected and unprestigious activity: day-dreaming. Our era thinks of dreams only as things we should conjure up in order to bring them to fruition through immense hard work. But that is to misunderstand what dreams are for. Our far wiser ancestors knew that many dreams have no chance of ever coming into being – but that we need to spend time with them nevertheless, in order not to go wild with frustration at our constricted conditions and the inevitable delays between desire and

gratification. Dreams keep us going; they immerse us in more bearable scenarios so that we can return with greater strength to those obstacles we can’t, for now, avoid.

It is part of the genius of the way our brains are structured that we don’t necessarily need direct physical contact with things to derive their benefits. The thought alone can – sometimes – be enough. You can imagine a balmy afternoon in a field in Cockaigne and, for a moment, feel the sun’s reviving rays while hearing the distant sounds of a gurgling brook of Chianti or Barolo and anticipating eating a mattress-sized snack of panettone.

Our medieval ancestors knew very clearly where their dreams took them: towards food, warmth and rest. Whatever its fanciful excesses, the land of Cockaigne provides us with an only-too-real map of everything that was missing from their desperate lives. Different things will be missing from ours. Each of us has a land of Cockaigne in our mind already, even if we haven’t necessarily yet explored it or recognised it as such. When despair weighs on us, we should ask ourselves naïve but critical questions: what’s Cockaigne for us? What do we want to gorge ourselves on? What would our lakes be filled with? What do we want to grow on trees? We should beware of surrendering our dreams too brutally or quickly in the name of realism or so-called maturity; daydreaming about what we really long for is a sensible way to get through the barren stretches.



Stuart Franklin, *Cocktail Bar at the Sofitel Hotel. Abidjan, Ivory Coast*, 2004.

A place to overcome shyness and diffidence.

## The Foreign Café

Let's imagine that we are, by nature, shy and have been since childhood. We try hard to avoid unfamiliar situations. We don't go to parties where we know no one. We're awkward around strangers. We blush if we're singled out. Going into shops or conveying our intentions to busy, indifferent officials is a trial. We're always keen to try to get someone else to ask for directions.

But no such diffidence will work here, in the largest city of Côte d'Ivoire on the Gulf of Guinea. No one will pay any attention unless we find our voice. The assumption is that if it's important, surely we will say so – even if that's never quite the way it has been for us.

It's Mariame's role to change the tablecloths after the breakfast sitting and prepare the room for morning snacks and lunch. She's originally from Bounkani in the northeast and has been working here for six years. She has two children and lives with her uncle in a high-rise in Abobo, an hour away by bus.

We may need to leave home in order to expand our personalities and harness new skills. It won't work to look sheepish and hope to be rescued, now that we're on our own here. We have to gather up our courage and speak – and can stand to make immense discoveries, about ourselves and others, if we do so.

It turns out that Mariame is only too keen to chat; we just had to dare to start. She has a ready laugh and a wry manner. She fetches us a slice of pineapple and coconut cake – though the kitchen is officially shut. She tells us about her brother who is setting up a building company in Koumassi after studying in Germany for two years. She wonders if it's

our first visit and what book we're reading. She supports the city's football team, Stella Club d'Adjamé, and loves Miriam Makeba and Beethoven.

It no longer matters how different we look and how distant were our introductions to life. The similarities are, in the end, of far greater significance. This is what the shy person refuses to accept. They are repeatedly fooled by appearances; they make too much of the externals. It's our provincialism of the spirit that a visit to Abidjan (or Trondheim or Amarbayasgalant) has an opportunity to correct. We can learn that we all suffer and long in similar ways, that anyone could be our friend, that we are a single human community, constantly hemmed into small tribes by fear.

The next day, we go back and Mariame is there again. We greet each other like old friends. She mentions that she isn't too bad but her knee is giving her trouble. She's brought along a photo of her little Seydou, recently turned five, in the green stripes of his favourite local team. The universe has expanded.



Two dinosaurs of the *Gallimimus* genus in a fight. Fossil at the Central Museum of Mongolian Dinosaurs, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Ancient ornithomimids politely renewing our sense of our own absurdity.

## Central Museum of Mongolian Dinosaurs

They got into a fight one day, 83 million years ago, on a bleak ridge in what is now the Gobi Desert, 600 kilometres south of the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar – which was then part of a lush forest teeming with *Therizinosaurus*, *Ankylosaurus* and *Velociraptor* and echoing at night to the martial cries of *Protoceratops* and armoured *Tsagantegia*. It's unclear what got them into their conflict. Perhaps they were arguing over a nest of flavoursome *Quaesitosaurus* eggs, or both had their eyes on an identical baby *Nemegtosaurus*. Whatever the dispute, it proved to be the end for both of them; they took bites out of each other's thin necks with their sharp toothless beaks and then fell into a mortal tangle, their bodies disappearing into the sandy ground until their discovery – by an all-female team of Polish palaeontologists from Warsaw – in the early 1970s.

Today they have pride of place in the main hall of the Central Museum of Mongolian Dinosaurs (formerly the Lenin Museum) in central Ulaanbaatar. Beside them stands a perfectly intact skeleton of a *Tarbosaurus bataar*, the Asiatic twin of the more famous *Tyrannosaurus rex*, as well as a full skeleton of an Oviraptor, known for its unusually large brain and tenderness towards its children (they have been found hunched protectively over nests full of eggs).

Mongolia's desert floor is a graveyard filled with the corpses of *Achillobator* and *Udanoceratops*, *Pinacosaurus* and *Erketu*. None of these were a brief presence; they collectively thrived in the region for 79 million years (between 145 and 66 million years ago),

until the disastrous day more coldly known in science as the K-Pg extinction event, when an asteroid 10 kilometres wide slammed into the Gulf of Mexico and brought matters to a sharp close.

Our brains aren't well suited to holding on to the idea of how precariously positioned our species is; we assume things to be more or less solid. We're not expecting anything to fly in from outer space. We think it's an achievement that we date back 200,000 years. Those 6-metre-long *Gallimimus* combatants in the Ulaanbaatar museum held out for 17 million years, yet still they have gone. There have been five mass extinctions since the earth began. Five times, a majority of living things have been wiped out and most of complex life has had to begin anew. Any sober assessment of our future has to acknowledge the unlikelihood that we will ever make it in the long term.

Sooner than we might think, we will be dug out of the earth and shown off in an exhibit – and may appear as puzzling and as incidentally sweet to our successors as the parrot-beaked *Psittacosaurus* and speedy little *Mononykus* seem to us.

The Ulaanbaatar museum isn't trying to make us give up; yet it might well encourage us to approach ourselves and our squabbles with a little more generosity of spirit and lightness of heart, underpinned by an awareness of how ridiculously and inconsequentially brief it will all be.



## Calvary Cemetery

Behind the cemetery are some of the most driven, clever, productive, ruthless and cynical people ever to have been gathered into a single space in the history of humankind. On the island of Manhattan, we don't exist beyond the money and fame we accrue; there is no friendship or pity; everyone is longing to see everyone else disgraced; people are proud of their cynicism; we need to triumph rapidly or leave town.

It's to defend ourselves against the fear and panic induced by this terrifying piece of real estate that we should take a subway out to Calvary Cemetery in Queens, 365 acres tightly filled with the bodies of military heroes, Wall Street titans, Fifth Avenue princesses and the ordinary heart attack and cancer victims of the northeastern United States. It might sound sad to spend a few hours communing with the dead in this way, but it may – in these parts – be a great deal more reviving than attempting to connect with the living. Amidst the graves, there is at least room for sympathy; there is space for thoughtfulness and tenderness; no one mentions an IPO.

Everyone – whatever their wealth – slips into a similar-sized coffin. The most famous and awe-inspiring are reliably forgotten within two generations, and every corpse, however large its last tax return, is quickly gnawed at by similar armies of indiscriminating worms. Death is beautifully democratic; to microbiotic life, the upper East Side tastes much the same as the Bronx. The former leave exclusive penthouses on Park Avenue feet first in the morning and, by evening, are interred for eternity in a plot no larger than one of their former bathtubs.

Everyone is silent; there is no more gossip; the journalists have gone; the invitations dry up.

The largest cities of modernity excel in their power to shatter our sincerity and peace of mind. It becomes impossible not to worry that we have been excluded, and not to wake up from nightmares about our downfalls. We know that we should leave time for introspection, creativity and vulnerable conversation, but we are too scared to remember how to begin. We forget all that is gentle and touching and that we understood so well when we were five. We cannot turn away from a media which appals us with news of never-ending threats to our reputations and livelihoods. We know we can never be loved outside of what we can boast about at dinner.

The cemetery cares nothing for all of this. It bids us to sit on a bench and commune for a while with its stable and heartfelt verities. It asks us to live in such a way that we do not dishonour ourselves from the perspective of death. We should worry only about those things that still seem serious when contemplated from the far side of the grave. We should measure our thoughts against the implied verdicts of a skeleton.

We can be grateful for the dead of Queens for trying to save us from the living of Manhattan.

Paige Lipsky, Calvary Cemetery,  
Queens, with the Manhattan Skyline,  
2017.

The dead of Queens providing  
protection from the living of  
Manhattan.



Harald Sohlberg, *Våraften, Akershus* (*Spring Evening, Akershus*), 1913.

A time of day that acknowledges our frailty and ushers in relief.

## Dusk, Akershus Fortress, Oslo

Our thoughts are – nominally – free to go in any direction at any time of day or night. In practice, perhaps far more than we dare to admit, they remain tightly tied to wherever we happen to be on the earth's twenty-four-hour axial journey around the sun. There are ideas which make most sense to us at daybreak; others which have to wait for high noon; and others that require the night to convince us.

There can be no more resonant span in this rotation than the interval we know as dusk, when the sun slips below the horizon and throws its beams across the lower atmosphere, rendering the sky – for up to forty minutes in the northern latitudes, and as little as twenty in the equatorial ones – neither quite light nor dark.

Dusk fascinated the Norwegian artist Harald Sohlberg, who painted it dozens of times in locations around his native Oslo – not only because he found it 'beautiful', but in order to focus our attention on the transformations this time of day can perform for us psychologically. There might be many sorts of dusks around the world, but what they whisper to us tends to be very similar.

Throughout daylight hours, we are invited to be purposeful. Our horizons are limited to the human world. The shadows are short and our perspectives can grow so too. We push our miniscule part of history forward a few more millimetres: we send emails, call for meetings, attend a conference, write a paper. With the sun high in our meridian, we grow tall in our own estimations. We make plans, we accuse someone of disrespecting us, we get frustrated with our progress.

But then comes dusk with its range of

contrary messages. A narrow band of cloud many miles away turns a brilliant crimson. Distances we had forgotten about make themselves felt. We are no longer the measure of all things. Whatever has agitated us recedes in importance. The moment bids us to loosen our mind's fervent hold on the memory of the missing document or the course of the tetchy meeting; for the first time in many hours, we know viscerally that these things, too, will pass.

Dusk invites all of us – the desperate, the anxious and the arrogant – into the shelter of night, where grown-up priorities can weigh less heavily on us. There is nothing more we can do to alter anything now; we will have to wait and keep faith. We must stop grandstanding. And for a few especially pained ones among us, dusk is there to confirm that it might all be OK, despite the hatred, the shame and the ignominy.

The miraculous thing about every day – often missed by people who are extremely busy, content or conceited – is that it will inevitably end. However dreadful it has been, and some days are mightily so, it will reach a close. And all the things that draw their seriousness from the height of the sun will be dimmed by the approach of night.

How unbalanced we would be if – by some technological innovation – we managed to banish night altogether. Dusk saves us through erasure. Without dusk, there would be no more recalibration and no time for our arrogance to abate nor for our anxiety to be absorbed. We can be grateful that, despite all our gadgets and our pride, the wisdom of dusk is only ever a few hours away.



## Paranal Observatory, Chile

The four 8.2-metre-diameter telescopes that sit on top of Mount Paranal in Chile's Atacama desert were constructed (by a coalition of European countries) ostensibly in order to study the universe, in particular to explore gamma-ray bursts, detect gravitational wave forces and search for exoplanets. More accurately, however, these masterpieces of science have excelled at quelling our spirits and reconciling us to our fate by artfully reminding us of our beautifully negligible place in the totality of cosmic space and time.

In the rainshadow of the Andes, it is clear almost every night in this part of Chile, and as soon as twilight ends, the most sublime and redemptively terrifying display begins. The atmosphere seems to peel away and we are left standing on a small promontory on the edge of galactic infinity. There are more than 100 billion stars above us. Light takes a hundred thousand years to pass from one extremity of the Milky Way to the other. At the centre is a black hole, millions of times more massive than our sun, around which we are spiralling once every 240 million years. Our galaxy is one of many huddling together in what is sweetly called the Local Cluster: itself a tiny, forgettable, random province in the vastly grander scheme of the comprehensible cosmos.

The brightest star in the Chilean night sky is Sirius, 8.6 light years away. The nearest – Proxima Centauri – is still an utterly unreachable 4.2 light years away. With the naked eye, we can see Omega Centauri, a 12-billion-year-old globular cluster packed with 10 million stars. Through a modest pair of binoculars, we may study the Centaurus A galaxy (NGC

5128), the fifth brightest in the sky, 12 million light years away, and containing at its centre a supermassive black hole of 55 million solar masses, ejecting X-ray jets thousands of light years long.

All this is not a fantasy or a dream or a mystic vision. It's a sober, accurate, slowly assembled description of reality. We can make no personal sense of why the cosmos exists; it is governed by rules of almost unimaginable complexity and abstraction that make no reference to anything we can touch or feel. There is no human reason why we are here, no goal we are supposed to reach, no task we are required to fulfil. From the point of view of the galaxy and of the whole universe, our hopes and regrets are of no importance, our blunders can do no harm, our errors will have no impact. Our actions count for zero; it doesn't matter what we do.

As we contemplate the Milky Way from our Chilean vantage point, we shrink down to size. By recalling that we, and our world, are of no ultimate significance, we're not really saying that we should stop caring. Rather, we're reducing our responsibility to bearable proportions. We're not preaching complacency to ourselves; we're keeping our panic and gloom at bay so that we can turn our more settled minds to a proper analysis of what we are capable of. There are people who don't care enough, and they may need a very different intervention; but we may be among those caught up in a poignantly odd situation. We may regularly need to care less for a time, in order to best serve those we love.

Alberto Ghizzi Panizza, European Southern Observatory's (ESO) Very Large Telescope (VLT) at Paranal, Chile.

The sight of the universe returns us to manageable proportions.

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Remondini family (Bassano), *Description of the Land of Cockaigne, Where Whoever Works the Least Earns the Most*, 1606. Hand-coloured engraving, 16 5/16 x 21 7/8 in. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2014.PR.72)

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