A thousand years ago, a group of Vikings led by Erik the Red set sail from Norway for the vast Arctic landmass west of Scandinavia which came to be known as Greenland. It was largely uninhabitable—a forbidding expanse of snow and ice. But along the southwestern coast there were two deep fjords protected from the harsh winds and saltwater spray of the North Atlantic Ocean, and as the Norse sailed upriver they saw grassy slopes flowering with buttercups, dandelions, and bluebells, and thick forests of willow and birch and alder. Two colonies were formed, three hundred miles apart, known as the Eastern and Western Settlements. The Norse raised sheep, goats, and cattle. They turned the grassy slopes into pastureland. They hunted seal and caribou. They built a string of parish churches and a magnificent cathedral, the remains of which are still standing. They traded actively with mainland Europe, and tithed regularly to the Roman Catholic Church. The Norse colonies in Greenland were law-abiding, economically viable, fully integrated communities, numbering at their peak five thousand people. They lasted for four hundred and fifty years—and then they vanished.

The story of the Eastern and Western Settlements of Greenland is told in Jared Diamond’s “Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed” (Viking; $29.95). Diamond teaches geography at U.C.L.A. and is well known for his best-seller “Guns, Germs, and Steel,” which won a Pulitzer Prize. In “Guns, Germs, and Steel,” Diamond looked at environmental and structural factors to explain why Western societies came to dominate the world. In “Collapse,” he continues that approach, only this time he looks at history’s losers—like the Easter Islanders, the Anasazi of the American Southwest, the Mayans, and the modern-day Rwandans. We live in an era preoccupied with the way that ideology and culture and politics and economics help shape the course of history. But Diamond isn’t particularly interested in any of those things—or, at least, he’s interested in them only insofar as they bear on what to him is the far more important question, which is a society’s relationship to its climate and geography and resources and neighbors.

“Collapse” is a book about the most prosaic elements of the earth’s ecosystem—soil, trees, and water—because societies fail, in Diamond’s view, when they mismanage those environmental factors.

There was nothing wrong with the social organization of the Greenland settlements. The Norse built a functioning reproduction of the predominant northern-European civic model of the time—devout, structured, and reasonably orderly. In 1408, right before the end, records from the Eastern Settlement dutifully report that Thorstein Olafsson married Sigrid Bjornsdotter in Hvalsey Church on September 14th of that year, with Brand Halldorstson, Thord Jorundarson, Thorbjorn Bardarson, and Jon Jonsson as witnesses, following the proclamation of the wedding banns on three consecutive Sundays.

The problem with the settlements, Diamond argues, was that the Norse thought that Greenland really was green; they treated it as if it were the verdant farmland of southern Norway. They cleared the land to create meadows for their cows, and to grow hay to feed their livestock through the long winter. They chopped down the forests for fuel, and for the construction of wooden objects. To make houses warm enough for the winter, they built their homes out of six-foot-thick slabs of turf, which meant that a typical home consumed about ten acres of grassland.

But Greenland’s ecosystem was too fragile to withstand that kind of pressure. The short, cool growing season meant that
plants developed slowly, which in turn meant that topsoil layers were shallow and lacking in soil constituents, like organic humus and clay, that hold moisture and keep soil resilient in the face of strong winds. “The sequence of soil erosion in Greenland begins with cutting or burning the cover of trees and shrubs, which are more effective at holding soil than is grass,” he writes. “With the trees and shrubs gone, livestock, especially sheep and goats, graze down the grass, which regenerates only slowly in Greenland’s climate. Once the grass cover is broken and the soil is exposed, soil is carried away especially by the strong winds, and also by pounding from occasionally heavy rains, to the point where the topsoil can be removed for a distance of miles from an entire valley.” Without adequate pastureland, the summer hay yields shrank; without adequate supplies of hay, keeping livestock through the long winter got harder. And, without adequate supplies of wood, getting fuel for the winter became increasingly difficult.

The Norse needed to reduce their reliance on livestock—particularly cows, which consumed an enormous amount of agricultural resources. But cows were a sign of high status; to northern Europeans, beef was a prized food. They needed to copy the Inuit practice of burning seal blubber for heat and light in the winter, and to learn from the Inuit the difficult art of hunting ringed seals, which were the most reliably plentiful source of food available in the winter. But the Norse had contempt for the Inuit—they called them skraelings, “wretches”—and preferred to practice their own brand of European agriculture. In the summer, when the Norse should have been sending ships on lumber-gathering missions to Labrador, in order to relieve the pressure on their own forestlands, they instead sent boats and men to the coast to hunt for walrus. Walrus tusks, after all, had great trade value. In return for those tusks, the Norse were able to acquire, among other things, church bells, stained-glass windows, bronze candlesticks, Communion wine, linen, silk, silver, churchmen’s robes, and jewelry to adorn their massive cathedral at Gardar, with its three-ton sandstone building blocks and eighty-foot bell tower. In the end, the Norse starved to death.

“The Vanishing” continues
Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers is the first episode of Stranger Things and the first episode of the first season. It was written and directed by the Duffer Brothers and premiered on Netflix on July 15, 2016 along with the rest of the season. On his way home from a friend's house, young Will sees something terrifying. Nearby, a sinister secret lurks in the depths of a government lab. November 6, 1983. Hawkins, Indiana