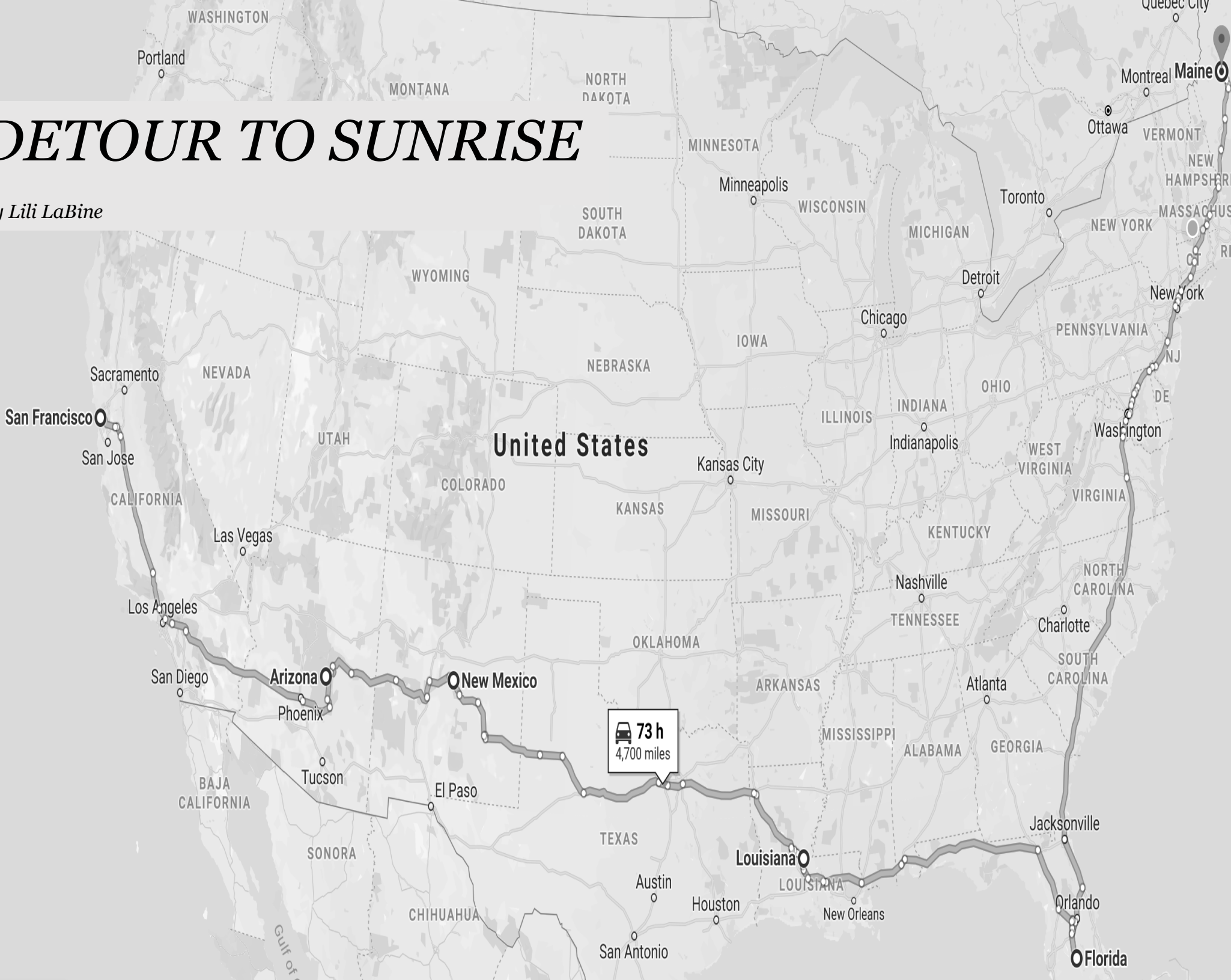


DETOUR TO SUNRISE

By Lili LaBine



United States

 73 h
4,700 miles

CALIFORNIA

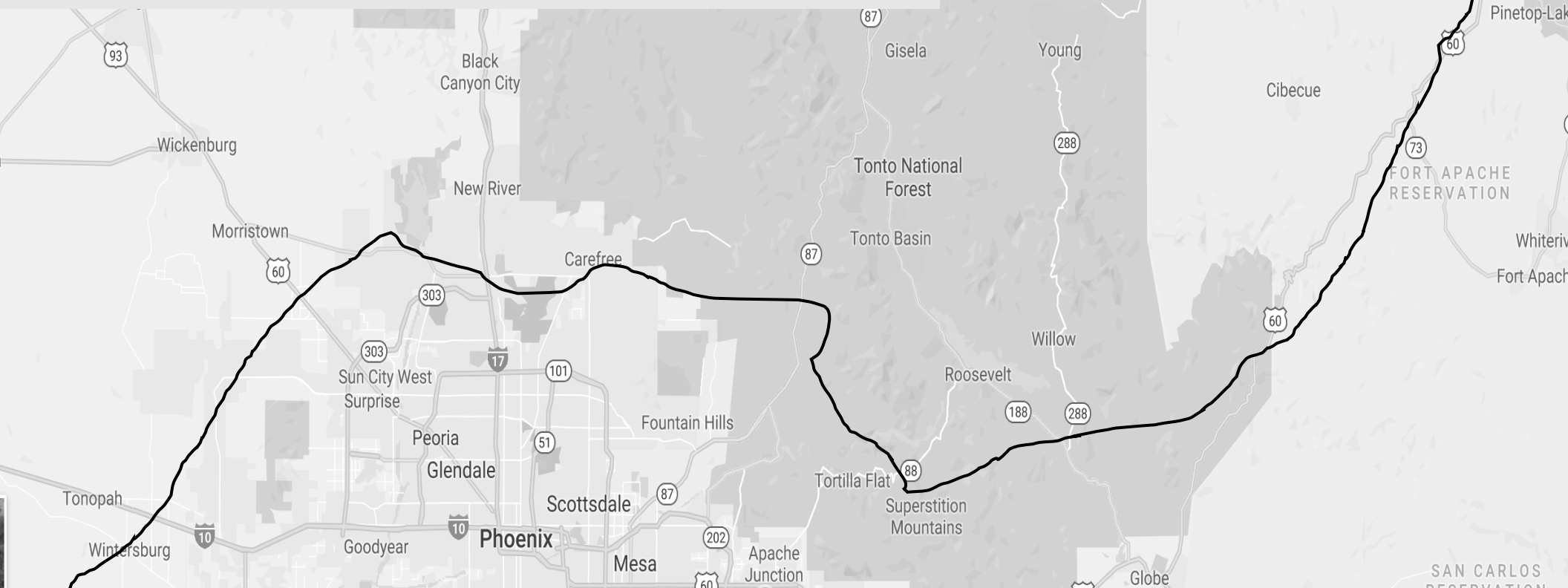
I wish I could see which of my bones were broken so I could know which ones to put in casts. I can't see the cracks, but I can feel them. They poke and stab and scratch, not enough to make me scream but enough for me to constantly feel the pain. I want someone whose shirt I can soak through with salt and they won't even flinch. I speak like a fifteen-year-old stuck in an emo phase.

I think today I'm going to the greenhouse. It will be nice to see some flowers.

Smog settles in my lungs, condensing into thick clouds. The hills get steeper the more you climb, barely passing the trolleys that pant and groan, wheels squeaking in desperation. I fell in love with rain and thunder when I was a child. Sitting on my knees in bed, nose pressed against my cold window glass, trying to catch a glimpse of lightning, giggling at each clap of thunder. At the end of my first year in high school a summer shower settled above the amphitheater, holding hands my friends and I danced together, and all were sick within the week. I want it to rain. Clouds hang heavy in the sky, disguising the tops of skyscrapers. The edges of the buildings blurred by the fog makes me think they must go straight into space, never ending offices full of people who each have their own lives, families, thoughts, the protagonists in their own stories. I want the rain to break up the clouds, give us all a chance to see the moon again. Even with all this gray I still wear sunglasses when I go outside, my shades drawn in my bedroom, I strive to be warm and dark in every space. If ever I find myself in an empty room I fall asleep next to the heater, on the floor, getting sand and dirt tangled in my hair, breathing in the cobwebs woven into the heating vents. "You're just like a cat" followed by sympathetic smiles. Everybody is tired, this is normal, this is normal THIS IS NORMAL. I have a lot to do. I heave my body through the humid air, unsticking my feet from the gluey moisture that has settled into the pores of the concrete sidewalk. I'm dragging, slower and slower. I'm not going fast enough. I need to be running; I need to be flying.

ARIZONA

If I were the president I would make a new form of community service where big men would take big sticks and knock down every single gypsy moth nest that can be seen from the highway at 90 miles per hour. And if I had a choice about what to do with my life I would buy the shiniest trailer money can buy and park it in the middle of the desert. In my trailer I set up Christmas lights powered by the sun at every angle, so nobody ever gets lost again. People in the closest town to me, three hundred miles away, tell travelers not to worry on their hikes. If they get lost all they have to do is climb to the highest peak and look for my desert disco oasis. I give them sweet cactus juice and coyote soup and introduce them to my family of lizards and hand them a guide of which scorpions to avoid. A mythical bed and breakfast so that anybody who dreams of seeing just how bright the stars can be can do so without being afraid of who else might be out in the night.

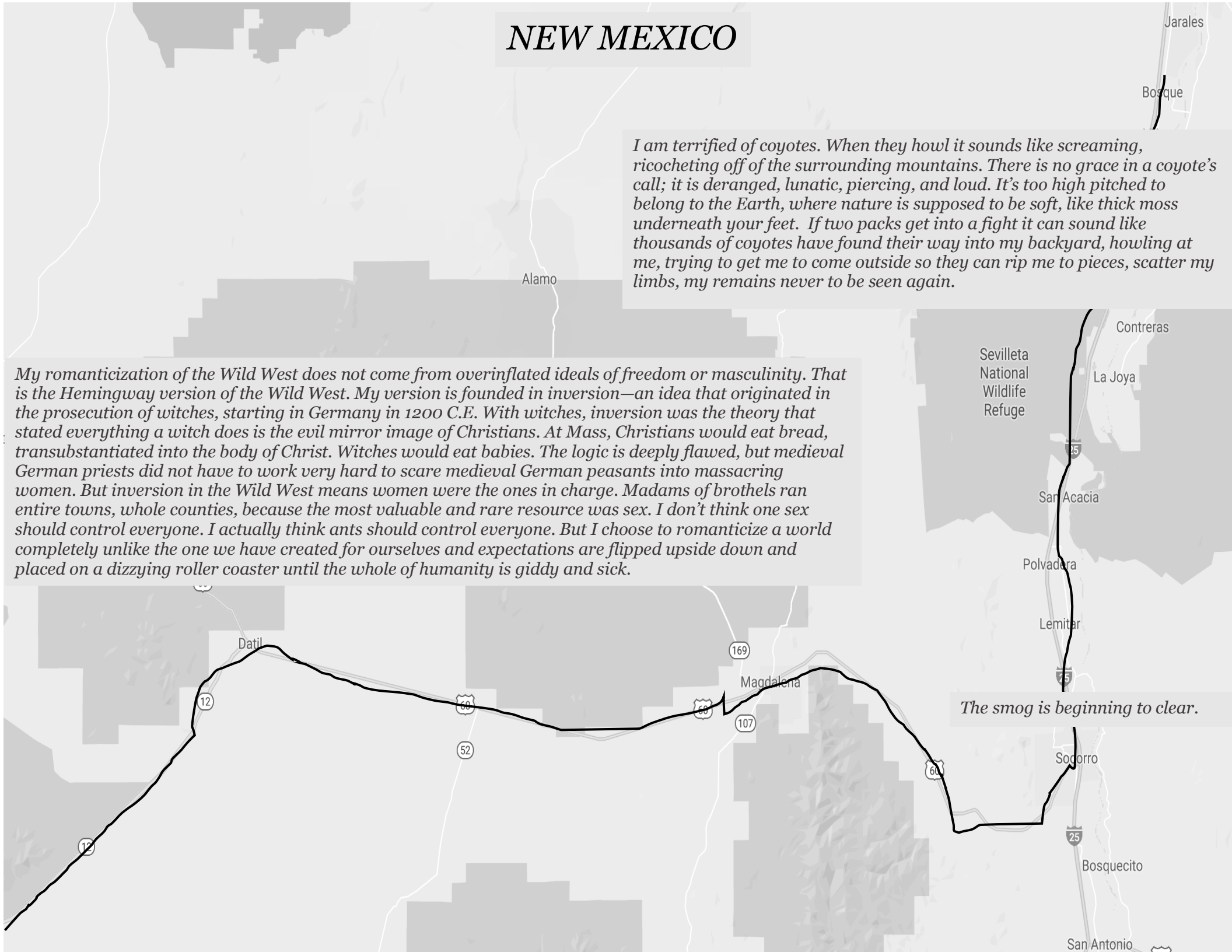


NEW MEXICO

I am terrified of coyotes. When they howl it sounds like screaming, ricocheting off of the surrounding mountains. There is no grace in a coyote's call; it is deranged, lunatic, piercing, and loud. It's too high pitched to belong to the Earth, where nature is supposed to be soft, like thick moss underneath your feet. If two packs get into a fight it can sound like thousands of coyotes have found their way into my backyard, howling at me, trying to get me to come outside so they can rip me to pieces, scatter my limbs, my remains never to be seen again.

My romanticization of the Wild West does not come from overinflated ideals of freedom or masculinity. That is the Hemingway version of the Wild West. My version is founded in inversion—an idea that originated in the prosecution of witches, starting in Germany in 1200 C.E. With witches, inversion was the theory that stated everything a witch does is the evil mirror image of Christians. At Mass, Christians would eat bread, transubstantiated into the body of Christ. Witches would eat babies. The logic is deeply flawed, but medieval German priests did not have to work very hard to scare medieval German peasants into massacring women. But inversion in the Wild West means women were the ones in charge. Madams of brothels ran entire towns, whole counties, because the most valuable and rare resource was sex. I don't think one sex should control everyone. I actually think ants should control everyone. But I choose to romanticize a world completely unlike the one we have created for ourselves and expectations are flipped upside down and placed on a dizzying roller coaster until the whole of humanity is giddy and sick.

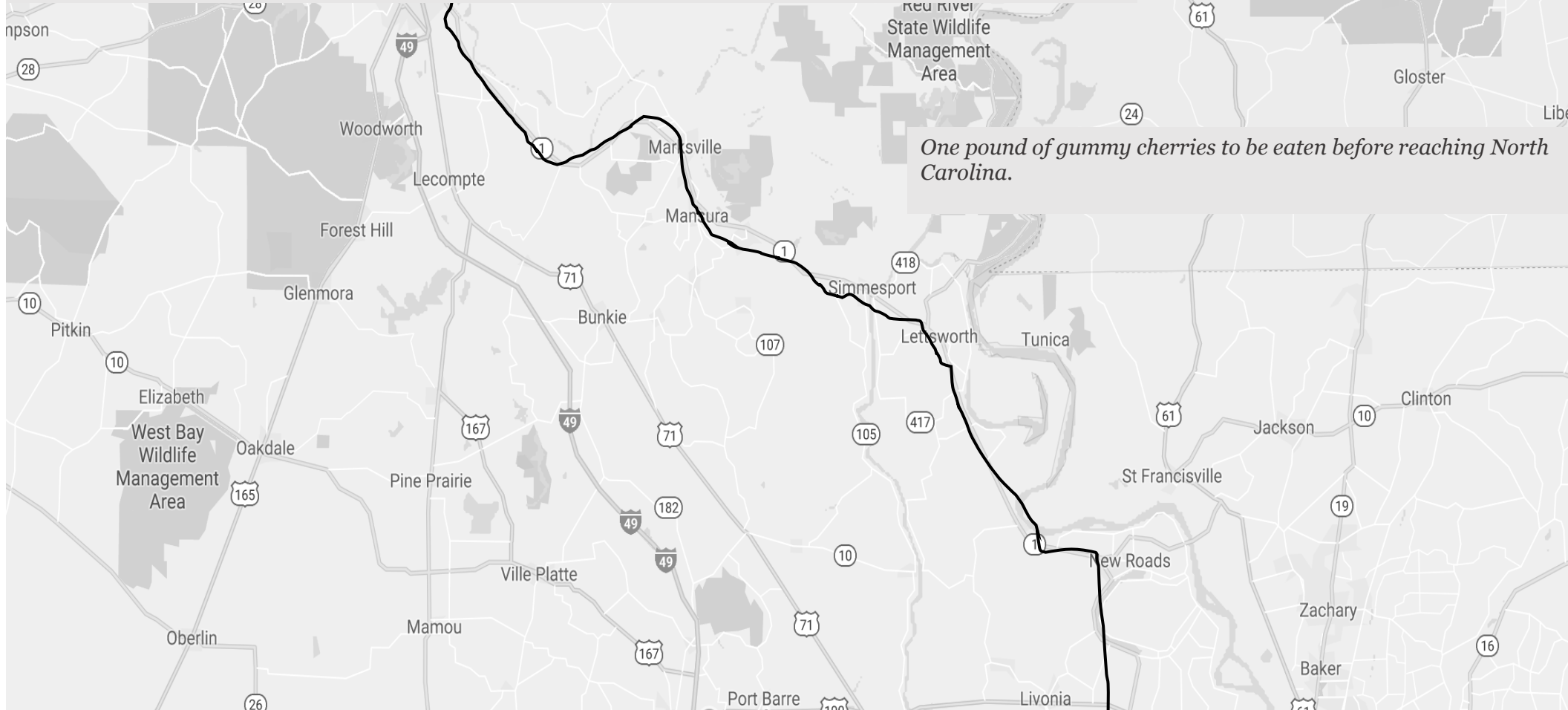
The smog is beginning to clear.



LOUISIANA



Wrought iron fences jail every single person in this city into their two-hundred-year-old mansions, freshly sharpened spikes warning them that if they jump, there's nowhere safe to land. I cling to the fences, my adult hands become pudgy toddler's again clenching themselves around safety gate bars, desperate to know what could be hidden behind the poorly constructed prison. I have never felt as small as I did in the shadow of those Louisiana mansions, not next to skyscrapers, not next to monuments, not next to my father who towers a full foot above me.



One pound of gummy cherries to be eaten before reaching North Carolina.

FLORIDA

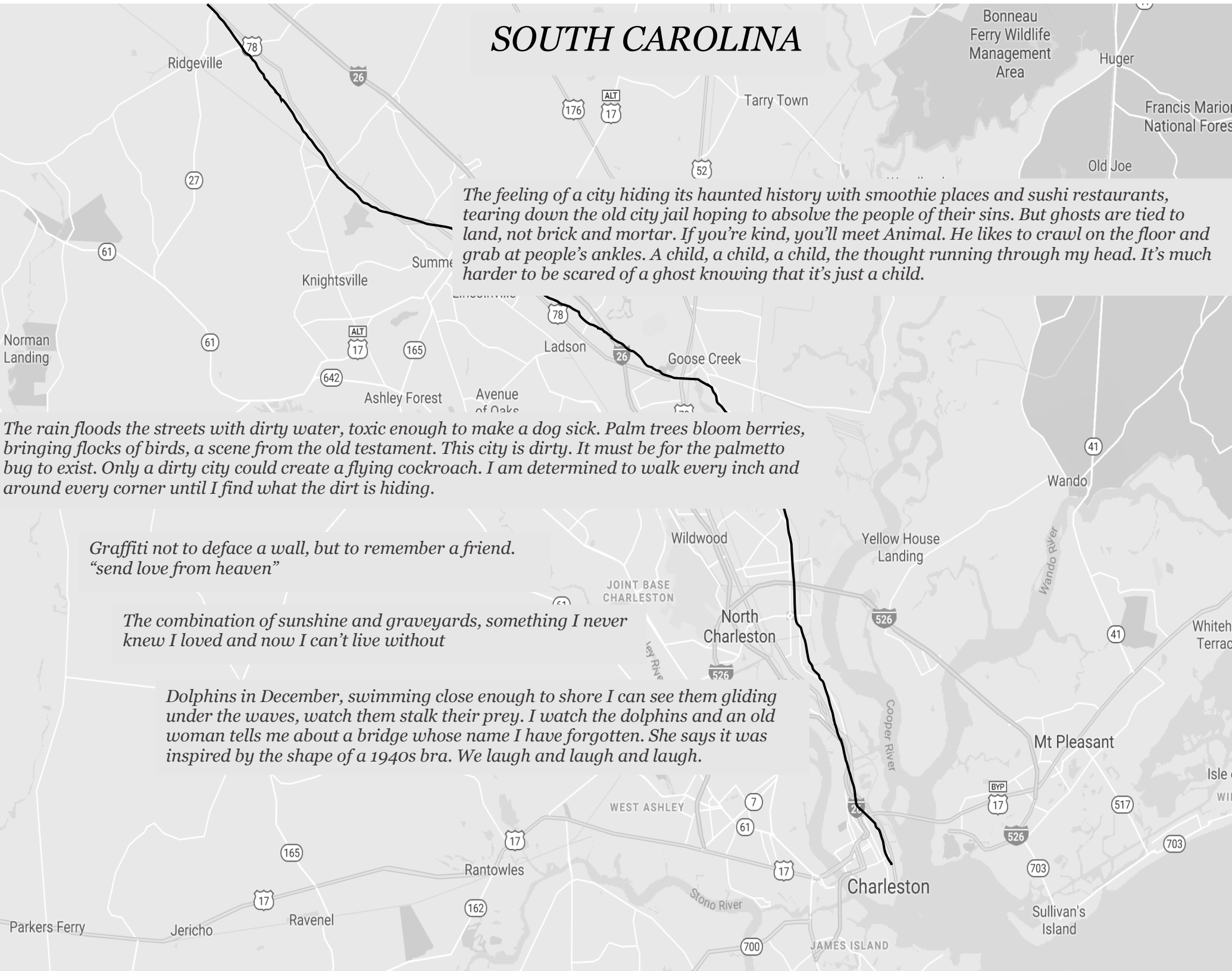


“Have you ever been to the beach in March? Before the winter frost has melted and the sand is cold and dark, frozen all the way down. It can be the most violent place on Earth, wind battering you to a pulp, each blow landing harder than the last, pushing you back away from the shore, tangling your hair, turning your hands and ears bright red; the ocean full of storm, waves swelling with rage carving canyons into the sand and mud.

Or it's calm, quiet. You can be the only person for miles. In the summer, when the beach is pulsing with vacation energy, it's easy to lose sight of the ocean. You should try it sometime. Sit in the sand and just listen. I think it might be the only place anybody can really think.

Anyway. I'll take the check when you get the chance. Thank you very much.”

SOUTH CAROLINA



The feeling of a city hiding its haunted history with smoothie places and sushi restaurants, tearing down the old city jail hoping to absolve the people of their sins. But ghosts are tied to land, not brick and mortar. If you're kind, you'll meet Animal. He likes to crawl on the floor and grab at people's ankles. A child, a child, a child, the thought running through my head. It's much harder to be scared of a ghost knowing that it's just a child.

The rain floods the streets with dirty water, toxic enough to make a dog sick. Palm trees bloom berries, bringing flocks of birds, a scene from the old testament. This city is dirty. It must be for the palmetto bug to exist. Only a dirty city could create a flying cockroach. I am determined to walk every inch and around every corner until I find what the dirt is hiding.

*Graffiti not to deface a wall, but to remember a friend.
"send love from heaven"*

The combination of sunshine and graveyards, something I never knew I loved and now I can't live without

Dolphins in December, swimming close enough to shore I can see them gliding under the waves, watch them stalk their prey. I watch the dolphins and an old woman tells me about a bridge whose name I have forgotten. She says it was inspired by the shape of a 1940s bra. We laugh and laugh and laugh.

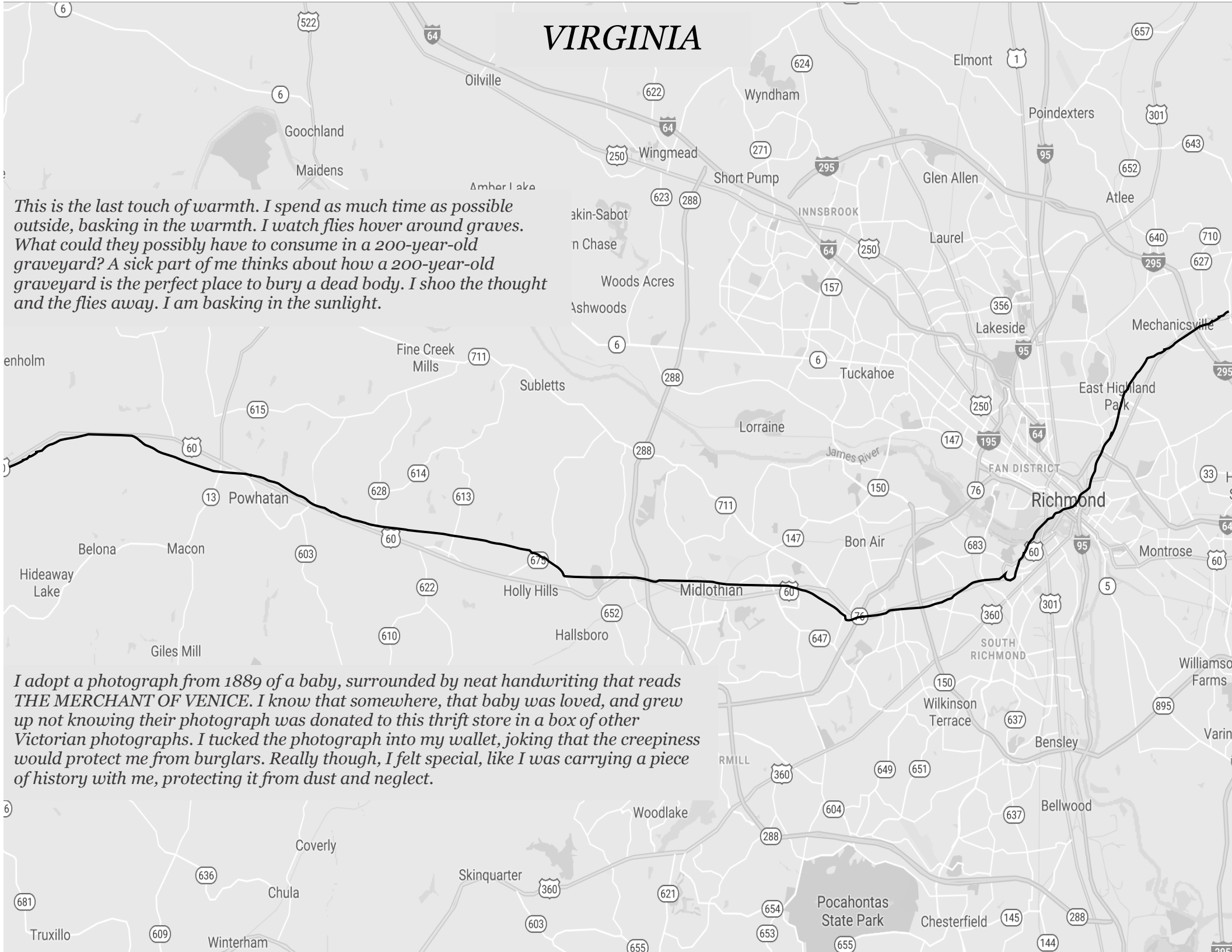
NORTH CAROLINA

A grayscale map of North Carolina with a thick black line tracing a travel route. The route starts in the northeast near Spruce Pine, goes south through Burnsville, Cane River, and Micaville. It then turns west through Weaverville, Woodfin, and Asheville, heading south through Arden, Fletcher, Mills River, Hendersonville, and Flat Rock. From Flat Rock, it goes west through Etowah, Wolf Ford, and Wolf, then south through Tuckasegee, Argona, and Balsam Grove, ending near Burnsville. The map includes various towns, cities, and counties, as well as highway shields for routes like 40, 25, 19, 74, 107, 23, 215, 276, 280, 64, 191, 25, 176, and 108. A semi-transparent gray box at the top contains the title 'NORTH CAROLINA'. Two other semi-transparent gray boxes contain descriptive text about travel experiences in the state.

There are champagne bar book stores set down in the middle of deserted streets, a haven for the pretentious traveler who underestimated the number of photogenic locations in the United States.

I'm finding spots of civilization in an otherwise deserted state, like a build your own burger bar featuring every meat alternative known to man, or a Victorian inn and restaurant with clementine peel candles as center pieces. My hands now smell like citrus from holding the tips of my fingers over the candle flame, watching it dance. In the car, hidden in the mountains, I hold my hands to my face, holding onto the warm citrus scent before it fades away.

VIRGINIA



This is the last touch of warmth. I spend as much time as possible outside, basking in the warmth. I watch flies hover around graves. What could they possibly have to consume in a 200-year-old graveyard? A sick part of me thinks about how a 200-year-old graveyard is the perfect place to bury a dead body. I shoo the thought and the flies away. I am basking in the sunlight.

I adopt a photograph from 1889 of a baby, surrounded by neat handwriting that reads THE MERCHANT OF VENICE. I know that somewhere, that baby was loved, and grew up not knowing their photograph was donated to this thrift store in a box of other Victorian photographs. I tucked the photograph into my wallet, joking that the creepiness would protect me from burglars. Really though, I felt special, like I was carrying a piece of history with me, protecting it from dust and neglect.

WEST VIRGINIA

The car swerves and the front left tire hits the embankment. I watch in the side mirror, laughing at the near fatal error. This is as happy as I'll ever be.

David Bowie serenading abandoned hills full of Mardi-Gras-bead green grass, dotted with rotting barns, a hand fully extended moving with the speed of the wind. This is as happy as I'll ever be.

Underneath layers of mud hidden between concrete benches of this amphitheater are years of trash and plastic shovels, left behind by children who became bored by their sloppy sand castle piles. I think about making a joke about keeping an eye out for hypodermic needles but stop. My boots sink deeper into the dirt of this riverside sanctuary and I choose to sink, wriggling my toes inside my socks, imagining the feeling of cold, grainy mud caking them, solidifying like plaster. I laugh at every piece of hay I crunch under my feet, left behind by wind or tired landscapers. I wind my way up an unused, trash covered handicap ramp, moving faster until I'm running, breathless, opposite the river current. An act of rebellion against the sleepy winter day that insists I retreat inside, out of the harsh sunlight and cold wind. I touch every bluebell and violet I see and name every one of them. The first flowers of spring deserve to know how much they mean to me. It takes me an hour to realize I cannot, will not, be able to take a picture of their tiny petals, even with my belly pressed to the ground. I offer an invitation to the spiders who live underneath the benches to include me in their webs but run to climb the rocks before they can respond.

Sometimes you just need to say fuck it and go to a dive bar. Ignore the locals who stare at you with your overly expensive camera and doe eyed expression as you whisper hopefully to your friend "hey, if you want to bail, that's fine with me". Wander in while all the waitresses are three shots in trying to play pool and dancing to the same Bruno Mars song that's playing on repeat. Laugh at the fact that this is the second dive bar you've walked into thinking it was a restaurant. Hope to yourself that your server doesn't recognize your voice from calling to ask if they take reservations because the website looked really fancy. Sit and eat your grilled cheese. Nobody's looking at you.



MAINE

Monsters live in the ocean. A thought that itches at our minds as we step inch by inch into freezing water, a jump at each brush of seaweed. I stared into the shallow waves waiting in anticipation for a green crab to scuttle into sight, spring out from under the mud, and claim a toe as his own. Now I watch as deep-sea worms become the ocean surface, writhing in their bioluminescence, gorging themselves on phytoplankton who believed they were safe so close to the sand.

Roots that once posed a threat becoming stepping stones down the mountain side. There's always a pause on the cliff's edge outside the cabin, the first breath of morning. It's hard to lose myself, truly. I wait for somebody to interrupt the silence, to remind me that I have people waiting for me at the bottom of the hill. But as I settle into my anxiety, seconds and minutes pass uninterrupted as the sun rises over the bay. It's cold outside. I huddle in my sweater, but refuse to leave. Not yet. I'm watching the sunrise.