

Notes from the City

Vivek Vellanki



Denticun

HACIENDA REAL
DEL CARIBE

Cancún

Chalchoapa

Alfredo
V. Bonfil



In December 2018, I travelled to the other side of the wall. I crossed the borders of Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala by air and by land. My Indian passport and my U.S. visa allowed me to move freely across these borders. While I was there, I met several U.S. Americans and Europeans, some of whom had been travelling across the region for months. On my plane ride back from Cancun, I sat next to a mother and daughter from Texas. The mother told me that as a child she and her family would drive across the border to eat tacos. She said something nice about the tacos and something shitty about Mexicans. Shit I have heard elsewhere and don't care to repeat. On the other side of the wall, I saw everyday things and everyday people living everyday lives. I learned the histories of Jade and Chocolate, which are histories of colonialism. I saw a migrant "caravan" of Europeans and U.S. Americans move freely across borders while their countries establish rules about who can and cannot move. I learned that some people can cross borders to eat tacos while others are killed by the desert.











Puerto Cancun

Playa Tortugas

Playa Langosta

Museo Subacuático de Arte

HOTEL ZONE

Aquaworld Cancun







As we drove towards my grandfather's village, in the middle of a scorching summer, I noticed the dry soil in the farms, ploughed and ready to receive the rains. Closer to the village, the farm lands give way to the statues that line the sides of the road. Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Vivekananda, Subhash Chandra Bose. These are the obvious ones, common in the caste-hindu parts of villages across India. As we get closer to my grandfather's childhood home I see a statue of a white-man in gold face. Who is that? I ask him. Sir Arthur Cotton Dora, he replies. I ask him to tell me more. I learned that statues of Cotton Dora are dotted all across the coastal region of the state of Andhra. There are annual processions in his honor. I learned that Cotton Dora served the British Empire but challenged its negligence of irrigation projects, which would years later lead to a devastating famine. He worked with the farmers in the

region to transform the irrigation system despite the limited resources. Searching online, I find that Cotton Dora also appears on idli mix packaging. I never learned about Cotton Dora in school. I never learned the complicated histories of a white-man, an imperialist, who is also remembered as a local hero who fought the empire to irrigate farm lands. In my grandfather's village, and other villages in India, the water is always impure—contaminated by the ongoing legacy of Brahminical supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism.





NEW BETHESDA
TEMPLE
NEW బెతెస్దా
ఆలయం
Temporarily closed

Tenali Cherukupalli Rd

Andhra Bank
ఆంధ్రా బ్యాంక్

Chakrapani Hotel
చక్రపాణి హోటల్

Kishore Medicals

Hymavathi kirana shop

Siva Naga Raju
Yarlagadda

Branch Canal
బ్రాంచ్ కెనాల్

తెనాలి ముకువపల్లి రోడ్డు

Kuchipudi - Govada Rd

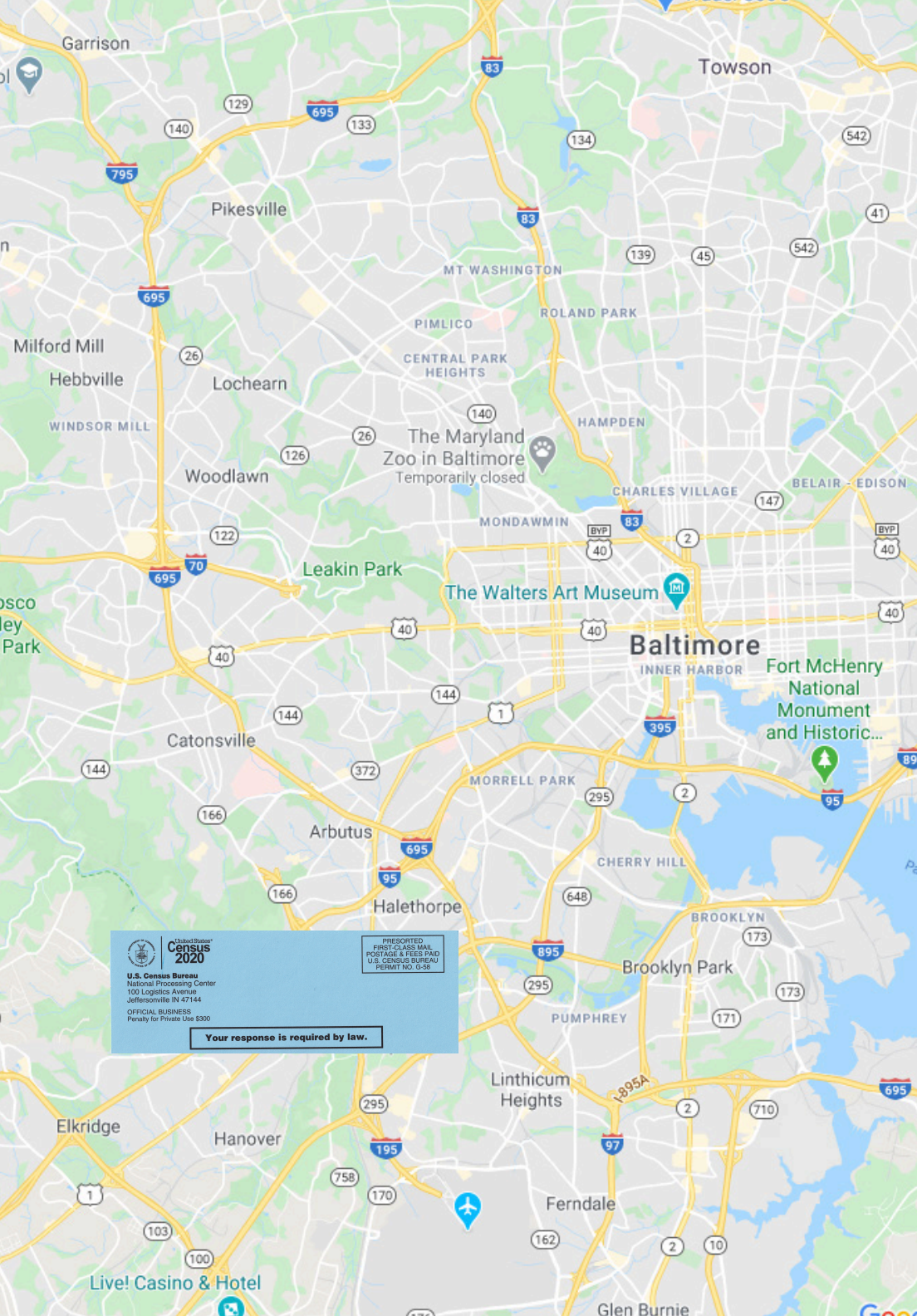
Balakoteswara Swamy Gudi Rd

Elavaru Donka Rd

Swamy Gudi Rd

Dasari Gunta

87



U.S. Census Bureau
National Processing Center
100 Logistics Avenue
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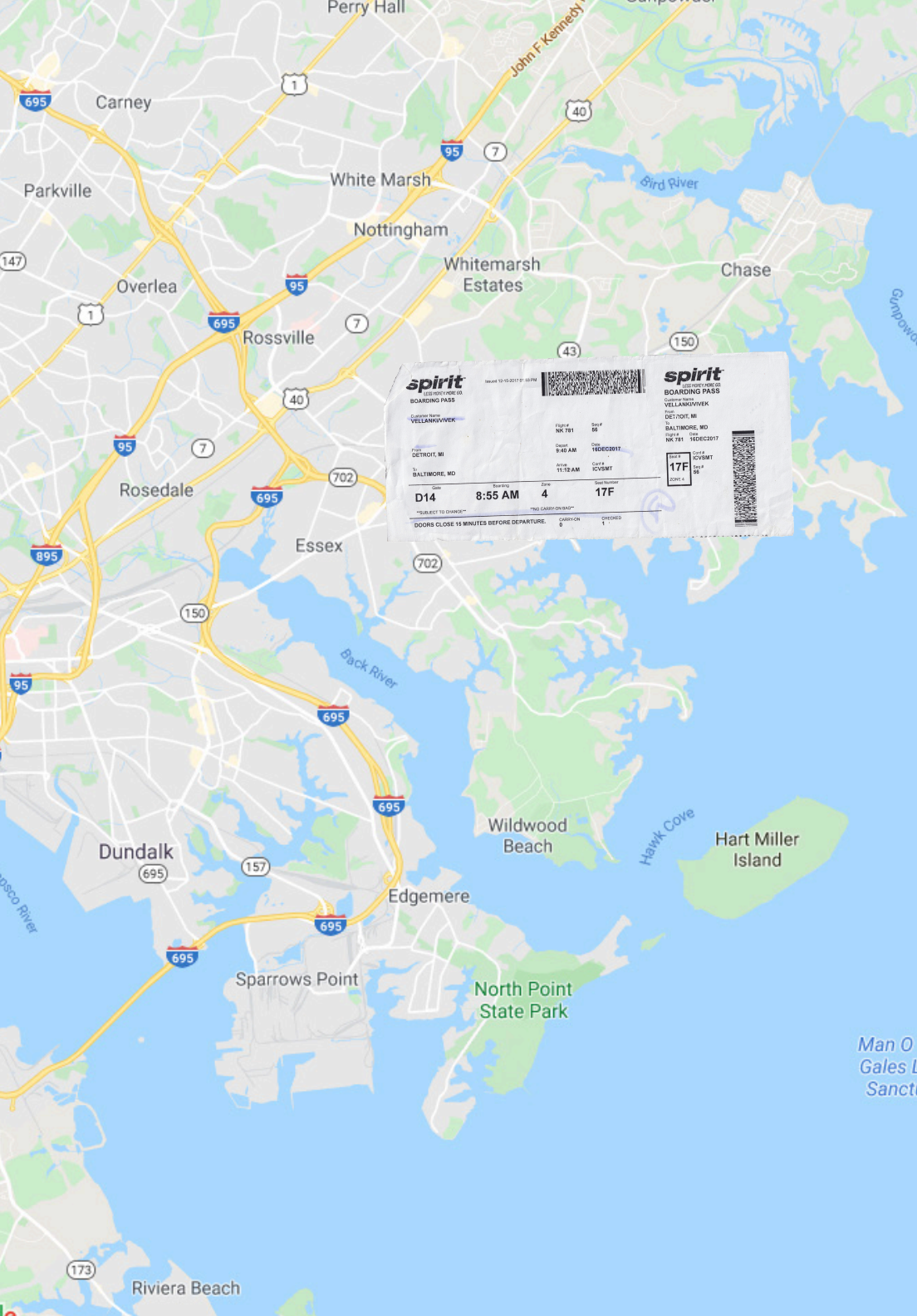
Baltimore had 600,000 people a hundred years ago and it still has the same population. Amir started the conversation with that little statistic he had picked up on NPR earlier that day and wondered out loud, doesn't that say something about the city? I didn't have an answer, not a coherent one at least. How long have you lived here? I asked. 27 years. Do you like it here? No. He was certain, his responses, quick. I followed up with, if you could be

anywhere, where would you like to be? I have lived here a long time and my daughter goes to school at Johns Hopkins. So, don't get me wrong, I love this country. But, there is no place like home. A gentle sigh from all of us in the car. I asked, so do you go back home often? No, I came here as a refugee from Iran. I have never gone back home. As we watched the buildings pass us by in a blur, I wondered about the other 599,999 stories of longing and belonging.









spirit
FLIGHTS FOR GO
BOARDING PASS

ISSUED 10-10-2017 07:00 PM

Customer Name: VELLANKUNNICK
To: DETROIT, MI
From: BALTIMORE, MD

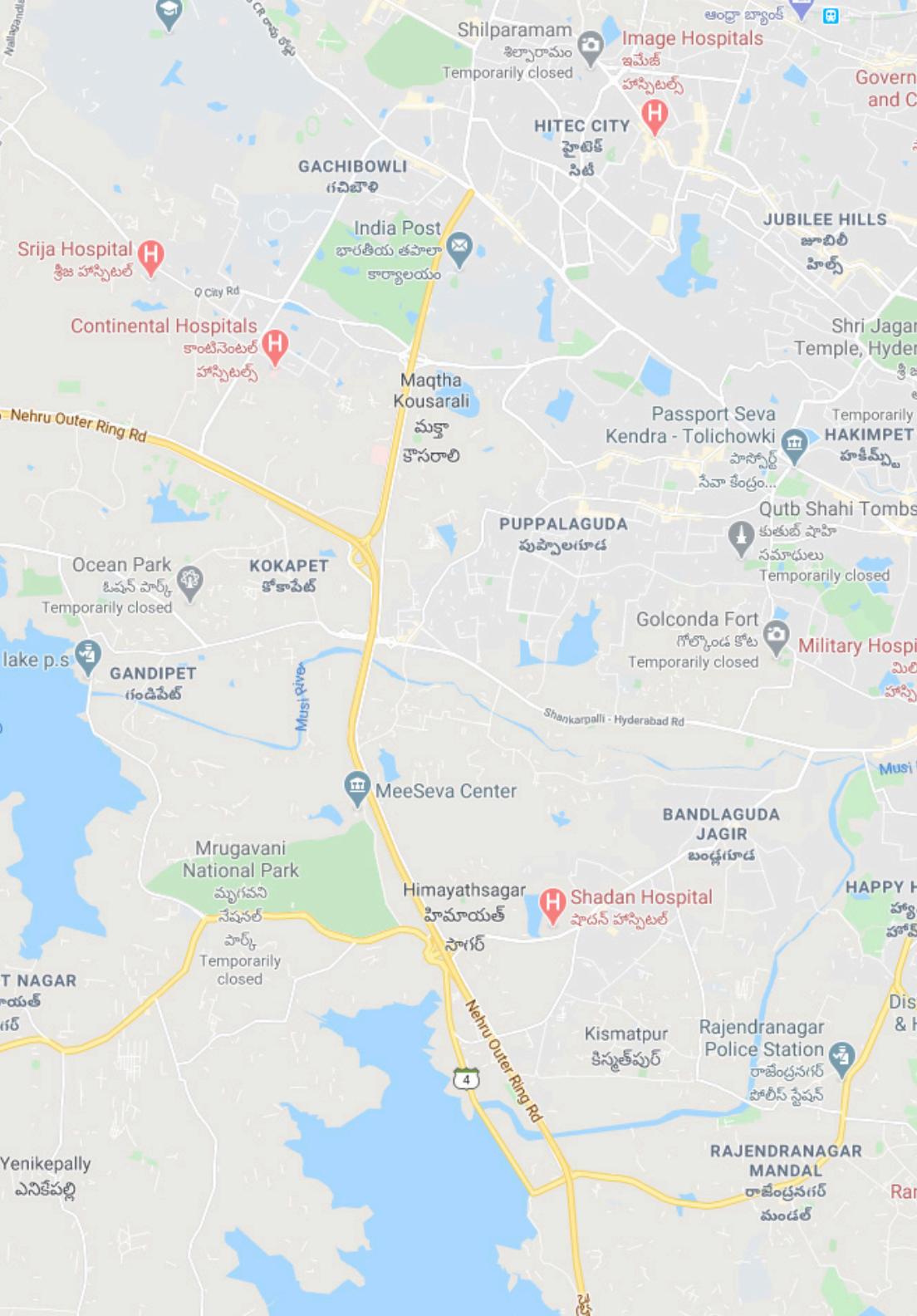
Flight # NK 781
Seat # 17F
Class Y
Status OK

Depart 9:45 AM
Arrive 11:50 AM
Date 10DEC2017
City DET
City BAL

Row 17F
Seat 4
Zone 4

D14 8:55 AM 4 17F

SUBJECT TO CHANGES *NO CARRY-ON BAG*
DOORS CLOSE 15 MINUTES BEFORE DEPARTURE. CARRY-ON 8 CHECKED 1



Shilparamam
శిల్పారామం
Temporarily closed

Image Hospitals
జిమెట్
హాస్పిటల్స్

Government
and C

GACHIBOWLI
గచిబౌలి

HITEC CITY
హైటెక్
సిటీ

JUBILEE HILLS
జూబిలీ
హిల్స్

Srijia Hospital
శ్రీజి హాస్పిటల్

Continental Hospitals
కాంటినెంటల్
హాస్పిటల్స్

India Post
భారతీయ తపాలా
కార్యాలయం

Magtha
Kousarali
మక్తా
కౌసరాలి

Passport Seva
Kendra - Tolichowki
పాస్పోర్ట్
సేవా కేంద్రం...

Shri Jagar
Temple, Hyder

Temporarily
HAKIMPET
హాకిమ్పేట్

Nehru Outer Ring Rd

Ocean Park
ఓషన్ పార్క్
Temporarily closed

KOKAPET
కోకాపేట్

PUPPALAGUDA
పుప్పలగూడ

Qutb Shahi Tombs
కుతుబ్ షాహీ
సమాధులు
Temporarily closed

lake p.s
GANDIPET
గండ్డిపేట్

Golconda Fort
గోల్కొండ కోట
Temporarily closed

Military Hospi
మిలిటరీ
హాస్పిటల్

MeeSeva Center

BANDLAGUDA
JAGIR
బండ్లగూడ

Mrugavani
National Park
మృగవని
నేషనల్
పార్క్
Temporarily closed

Himayathsagar
హిమాయత్
సాగర్

Shadan Hospital
షాదన్ హాస్పిటల్

HAPPY H
హ్యాపీ
హౌస్

T NAGAR
తానగర్

Kismatpur
కిస్మాత్ పుర్

Rajendranagar
Police Station
రాజేంద్రనగర్
పోలీస్ స్టేషన్

RAJENDRANAGAR
MANDAL
రాజేంద్రనగర్
మండల్

Yenikepally
ఎనికేపల్లి

4

Nehru Outer Ring Rd





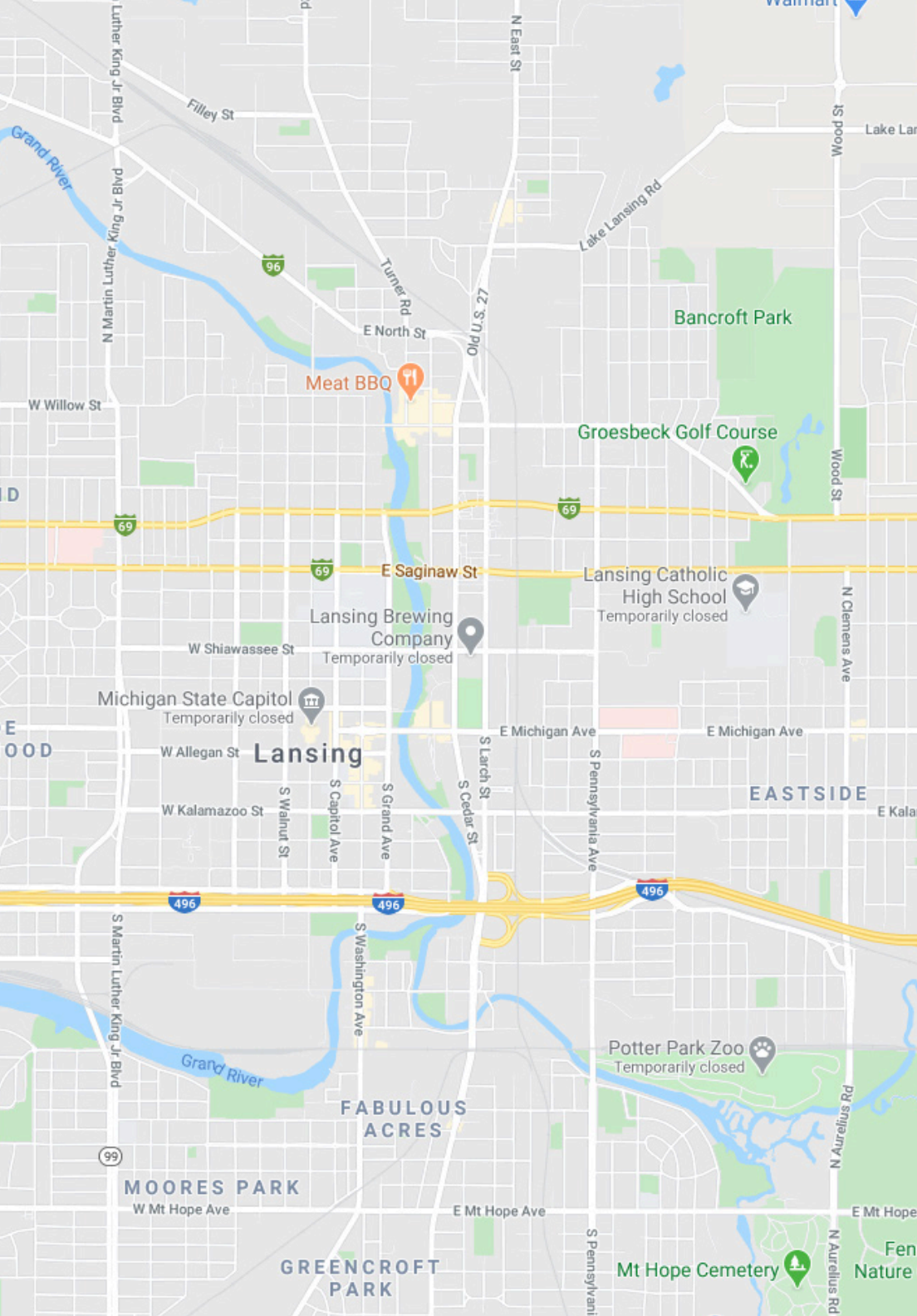
I no longer recognize the city that I grew up in. This city always felt like a fortress, the edges surrounded by rock formations that seemed insurmountable to an eight-year-old. Now, most of the rocks have been razed to the ground and replaced by brick and mortar. From almost every corner the horizon is dotted with concrete structures that look like lego blocks. It looks like any other city; hollowed out by the desires for taller buildings and shinier lights. Its transformation has been dramatic and is nearly complete. This city hides another city within it, one that is fleeting and seasonal, inhabited by workers who migrate here from villages near and far. They break the rocks. They bake the bricks. They paint the newly poured concrete, they built this city. And yet, they live in the crinkles of city life—under

staircases, in one-room houses that are poorly lit, far away from their families. Anjayya from Warangal. Rudramma from Nizamabad. Mahmood from Adilabad. Samuel from Prakasam. Recently, I learned about the legend of Hyder Mahal, beloved queen of the city in its early days, after whom the city is named. How do we name a city after the people who make the city? Who gets to name a city? This city has many names, etched across its staircases, plastered walls, wooden poles, park benches, tree trunks. This too, makes the city.











As an outsider, the City of Lansing has always felt like a shell of another city. The freeways, brick buildings, tall chimneys are a living archive of what this city used to be. I notice these markers all around me: six lane freeways where now the traffic only needs two, blocks of homes that are starting to lean in from their own weight, stretches of strip malls that sit empty and dark. I can only imagine this other city, alive and bustling a few decades ago. Today, on

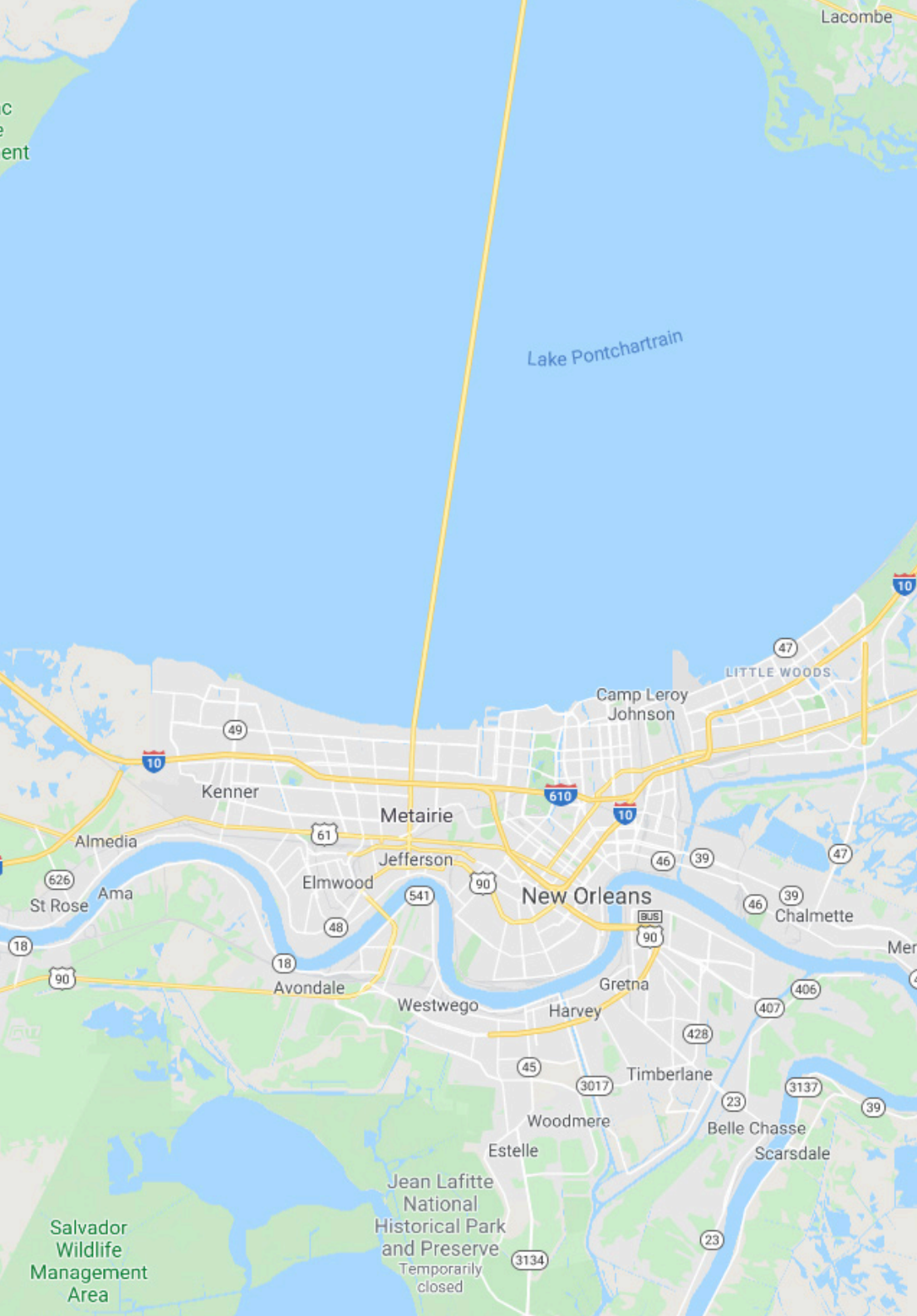
the other side, closer to campus, I also realize that East Lansing repeats the long term cycles of human existence based on the academic calendar. Those of us who come here in August, in the hopes of an education, leave in May. The city then becomes a shell—bare, quiet, and sunny. These cities remind me that what we see, live, and are surrounded by is a fleeting moment in geological time. I wonder if those who have stayed here through the changes are tired of all this coming and going. We take, take, take from here before finding other homes. What do we leave either of these cities? I hope it is something more than abandoned buildings and freeways that separate two shells, hollowed and disjointed.











Lacombe

Lake Pontchartrain

10

LITTLE WOODS

Camp Leroy Johnson

Kenner

Metairie

Jefferson

New Orleans

Chalmette

St Rose

Avondale

Westwego

Harvey

Gretna

Timberlane

Woodmere

Estelle

Belle Chasse

Scarsdale

Jean Lafitte
National
Historical Park
and Preserve
Temporarily
closed

Salvador
Wildlife
Management
Area



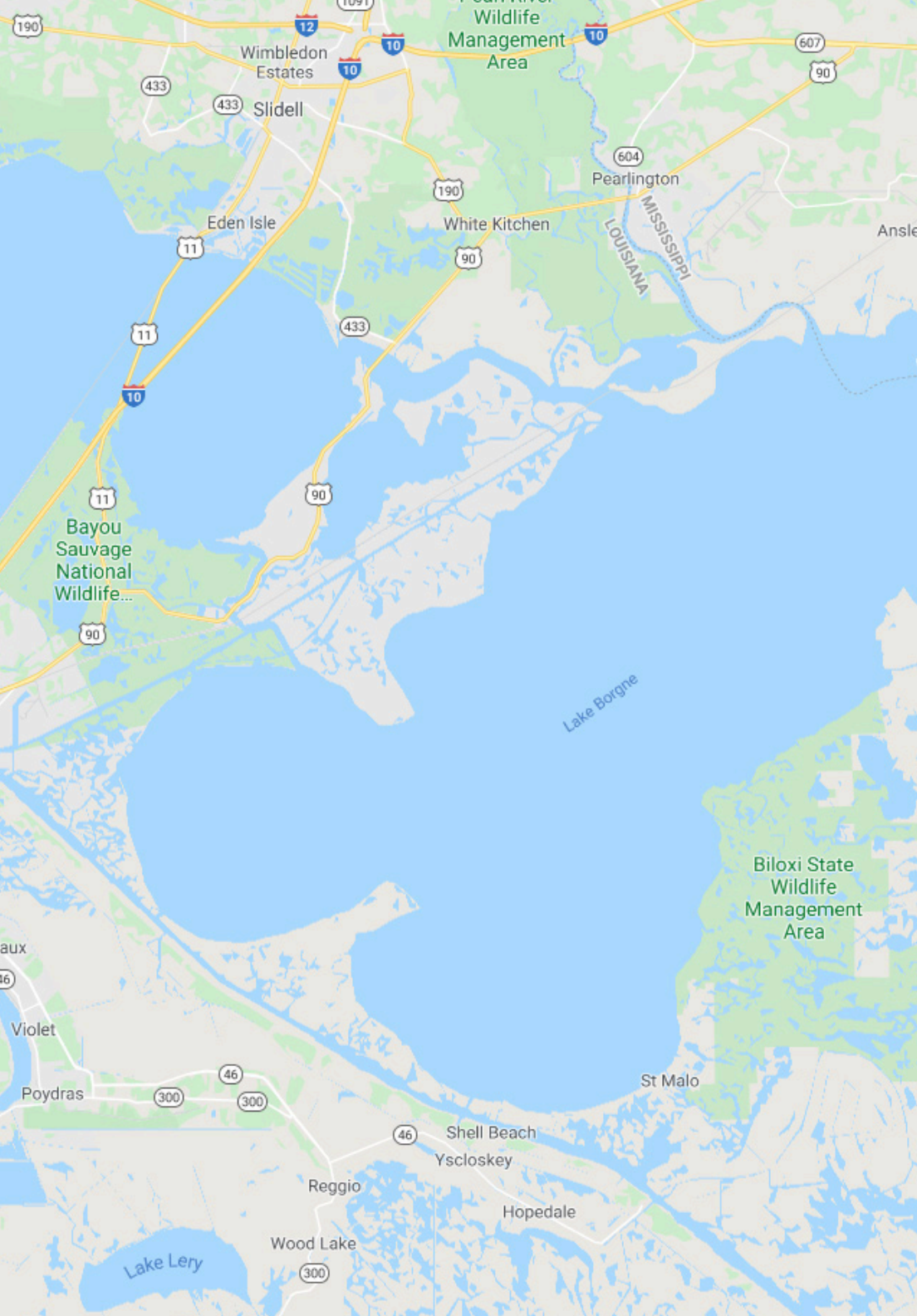
After spending the evening at the banks of the Mississippi, we went on a ghost tour. I was not afraid of dead people haunting us but instead the weight of a past, a history so gruesome and brutal that I couldn't help but also think of the present, that moment, that street which is built on the graves of many people, many lives, and many stories that are yet unknown. Our tour guide recounted tales of slave owners with candor and a measured calmness. Her disapproval to be made evident through her narration. Here, Delphine LaLaurie hosted extravagant soiree's and tortured the humans she owned. A fire in the French Quarters on April 10, 1834, would lead to the public finding out about her torture chambers. Enraged by this brutality, the people of New Orleans decided to do something but before they could, she fled to France. But isn't owning human beings gruesome enough to begin with? On Friday,

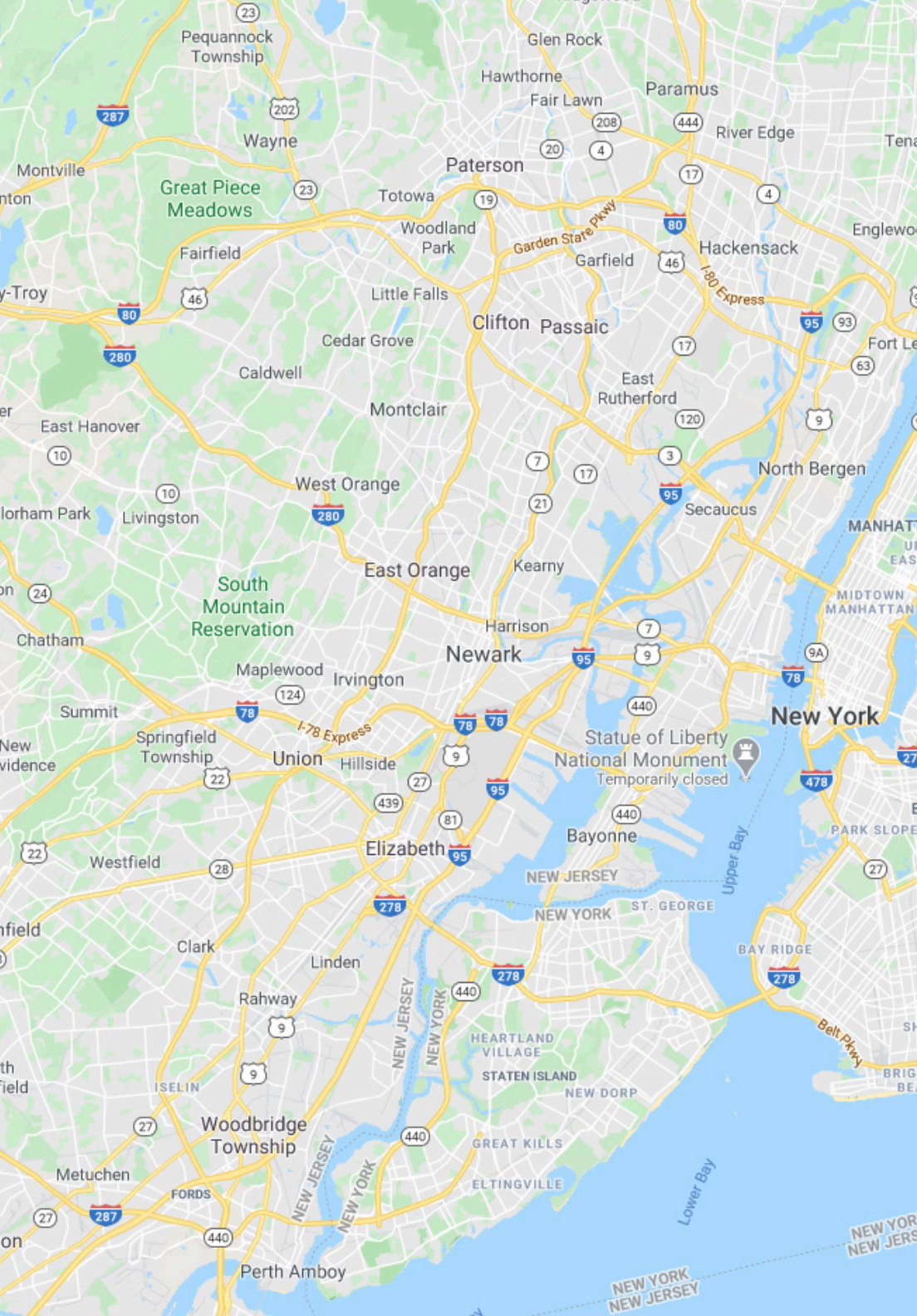
from our cab I saw the top three floors of a skyscraper demolished. A yellow crane protruded awkwardly atop the tower. The building stood there like a misshaped lego, pieces still stuck in strange places like it was an eight-year-olds work in progress. Later, I would learn that the building, Hard Rock Hotel, had collapsed on October 13th, 2019. Delmer Joel Ramirez Palma, a construction worker, had expressed his concerns about the safety of the building on several occasions prior to its collapse. On November 29th, 2019, he was deported to Honduras, forced to leave behind his son, family, and the debris of a broken building that he had tried to save. Another ghost story.

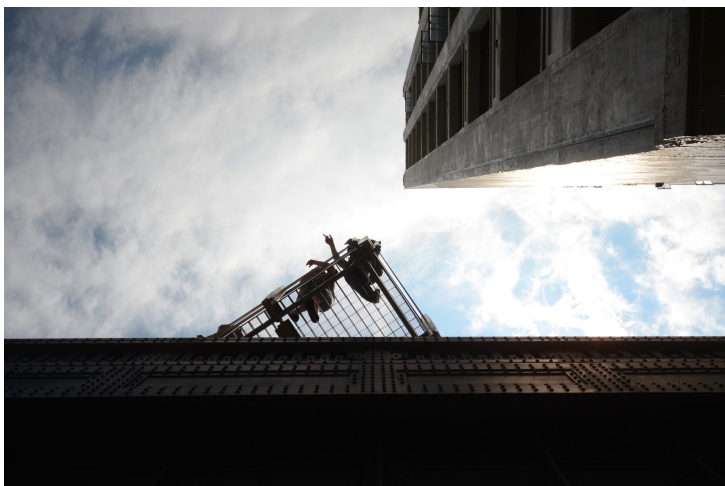












Two blocks away from the memorial, I saw a sign which read “9/11. Never forget.” Never forget what? The first time I saw the twin towers on the frontpage of the newspaper? Or how my parents frantically called my cousins in Dallas to ask if they were ok (we didn’t know that New York and Dallas are 1500 miles apart). Or the fact that upon learning about the tragedy, several men shaved their beards. Or the feeling that I had at the memorial? A feeling of grief and anguish. Or what happened after 9/11?

The wrath of the US-empire unleashed on other parts of the world. More than 400,000 lives have been taken since then. Does someone leave flowers at those places? Are pieces of bricks from the bombing of Kabul put on display in Islamabad? In New York, just like every big city in the world, people continue to live their lives in a state of dream-like-suspension. Lonely and together, forgetting and remembering.











Ruta Paraisos Yepocapa

CHIMALTENANGO DEPARTAM

SACATEPÉQUEZ DEPARTAMEN

CHM-11

CHM-11

Santa Catarina
Barahona

Santiago
Zamora

San Andrés
Ceballos

San Lorenzo
El Cubo

14

10

San Miguel
Dueñas

10



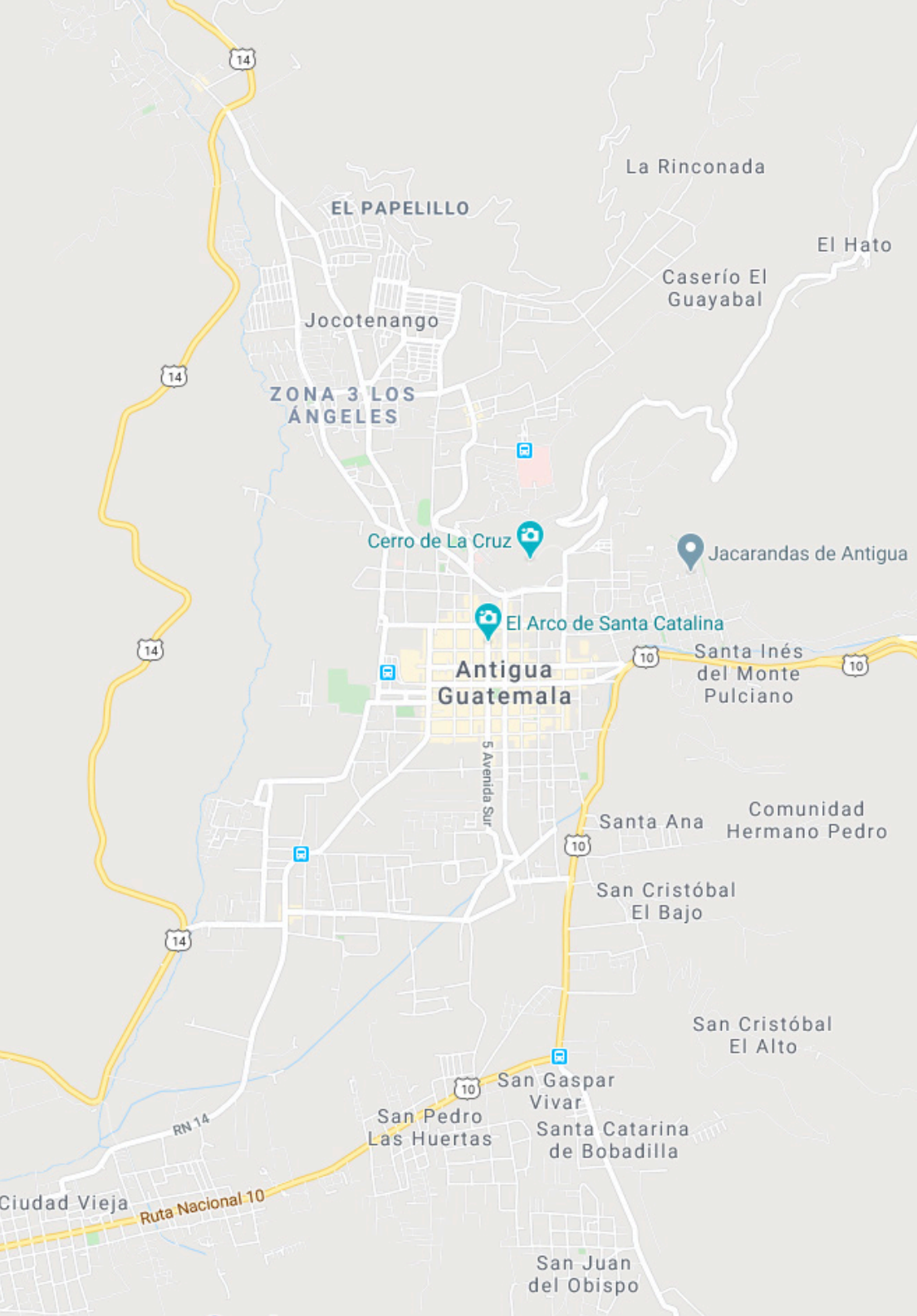


Here, I learn again, that the specter of colonialism and capitalism is all around us. I learn that the history of jade, naturally occurring here, is another part of this story. It is a history of a precious stone turned demonic object turned once more back into an object of desire. The stones remain but the stories told around them are altered. In a dingy room, an elderly man excitedly relays these stories to me, stringing together a history of a stone that I only knew as jade/precious/green. In fifteen minutes he tells me that the Mesoamericans made ornaments and burial objects out of jade. They traded it for cacao until the Spanish colonized these lands and mocked the use of stones as ornaments. Metals and not rocks are for the gods, the colonizers said.

Centuries of stories, lives, and love turned into stone. It was not until the 1950s, he continued, that Jade was revived to its old glory. Here, in this room with pale brown walls, this man educates me about things being other things and becoming other things. About how greed and power can turn stories to stones. And how a retelling of these stories can breathe life into them again.







14

EL PAPELILLO

La Rinconada

El Hato

Caserío El Guayabal

Jocotenango

ZONA 3 LOS ANGELES

14

Cerro de La Cruz

Jacarandas de Antigua

El Arco de Santa Catalina

Antigua Guatemala

Santa Inés del Monte Pulciano

10

10

5 Avenida Sur

Santa Ana Comunidad Hermano Pedro

San Cristóbal El Bajo

14

San Cristóbal El Alto

10

10

San Pedro Las Huertas

San Gaspar Vivar

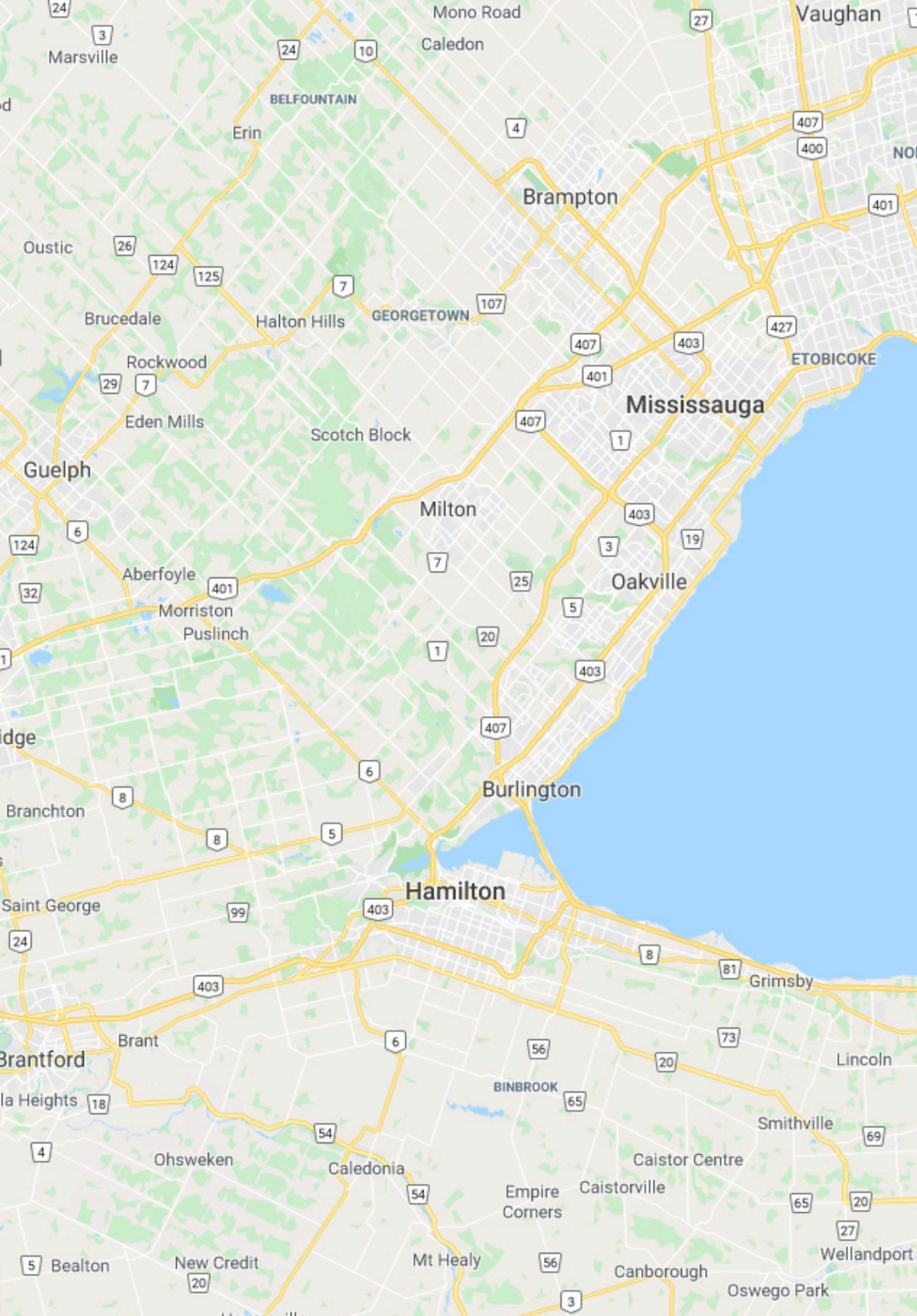
Santa Catarina de Bobadilla

RN 14

Ruta Nacional 10

Ciudad Vieja

San Juan del Obispo

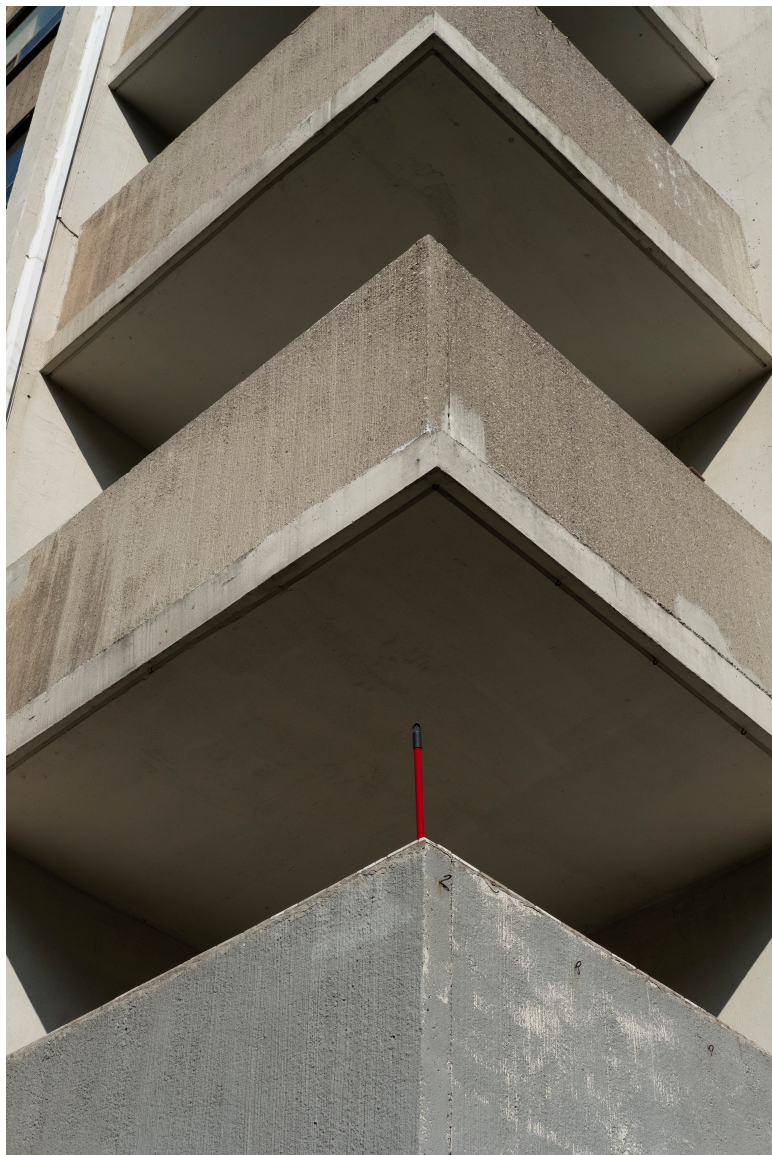


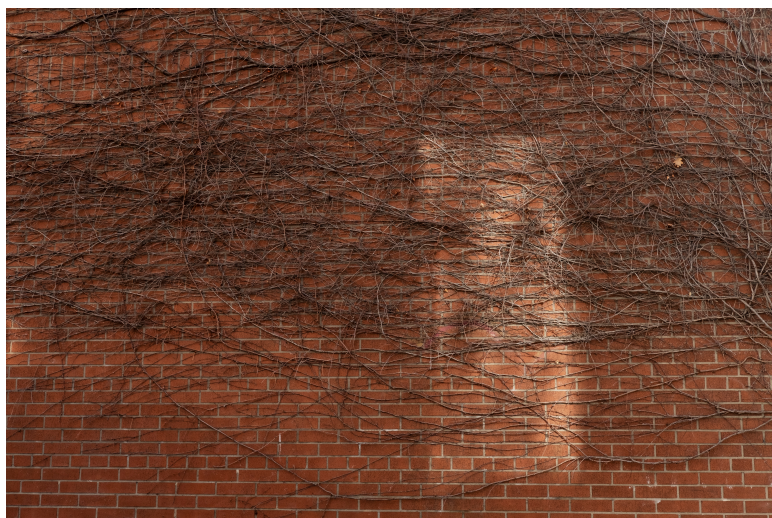


I think about borders, maybe because I cross them often. At the Canadian-US border, sitting in my car, I contemplate what questions the visa officer might ask. Each time I cross a border feels like the first time. I drink some water, turn down the radio, and sit up in my seat. And then I remember the time I drove from Germany to Austria. A sign, maybe as big as a window, read “Welcome to Austria.” I screamed, in joy, disgust, and amusement. No checkpoint. No border officers. No questions. In near unison, my friends in the car said, “Yeah, this is the usual in Europe.” In the same breath, I think about Kashmir. A state under siege and whose borders have been turned on their head. The people put on house arrest, made immobile in their own homes, in their own lands. I think of the woman on the plane who told me that as a child she used to cross the U.S.-Mexico border to eat tacos. For. Fucking. Tacos. I think of the children

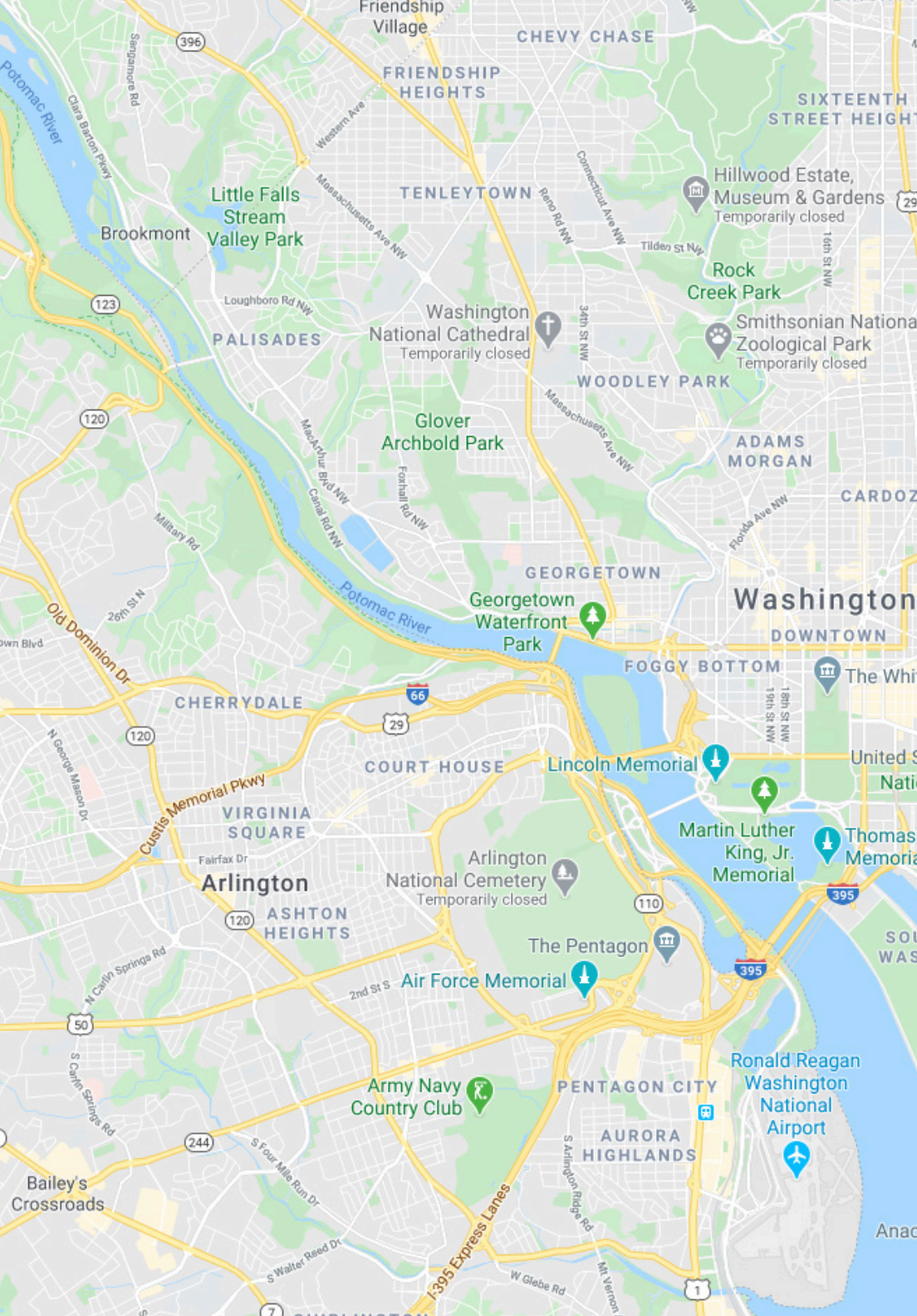
being held at the border, separated from their families, and caged. I think of the time in the Boundary Waters when the border between Canada and the U.S. is somewhere on the water's surface, shimmering and moving with the current. The canoes seamlessly traversing the imaginary line, we were in Canada one moment and then a few paddles later in the U.S. The officer held up the passport to my face and asked me, so why are you visiting Canada today? I am here for a conference, I responded and he waved me through. I think about borders but I don't think I understand them.













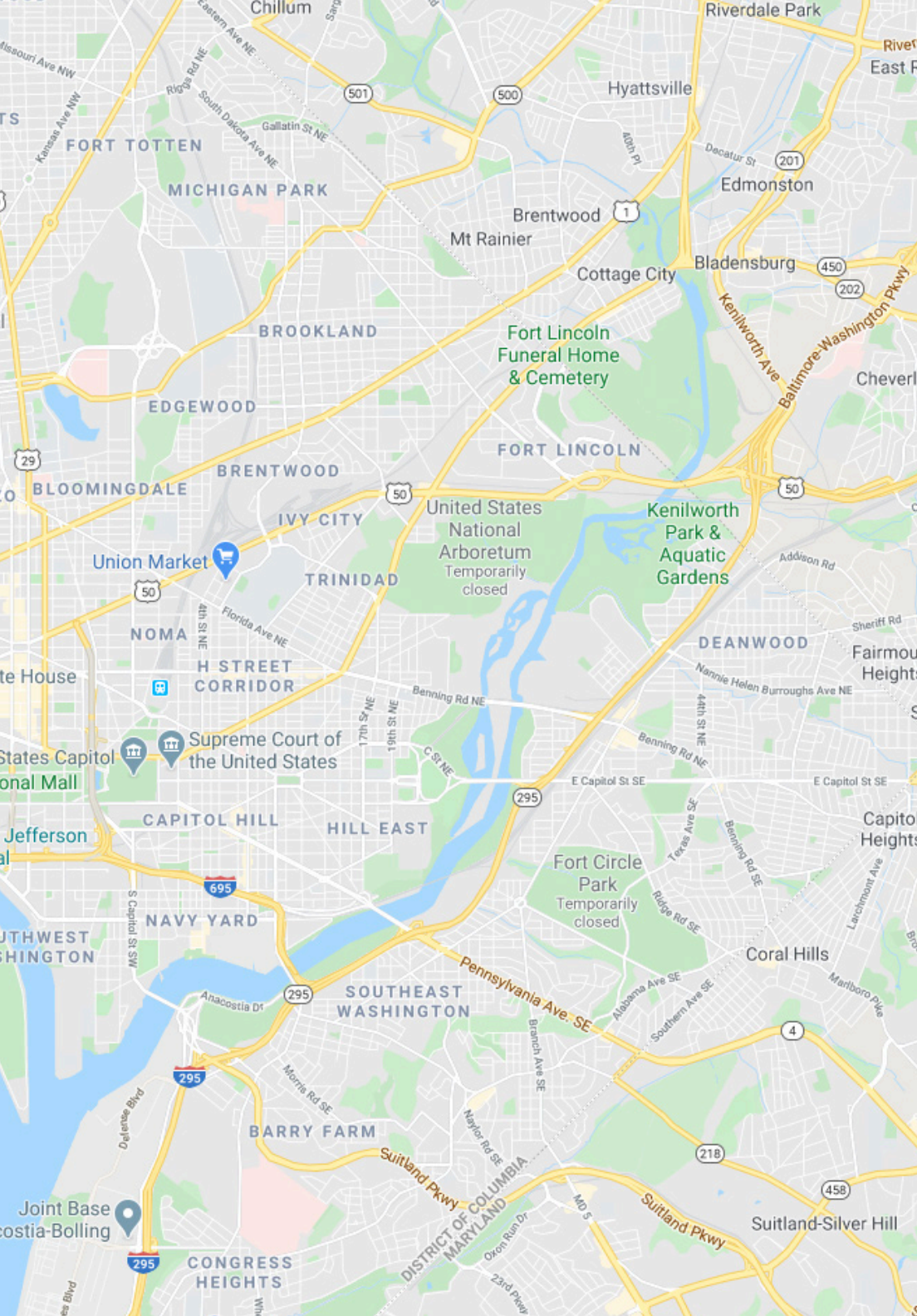
Outside your house the cars lined up in neat rows on either side of the street. The gap between the bumpers was small. I wondered if a bird looking down at the street might have confused it for a giant metallic caterpillar, a creature out of its nightmares. We saw some young girls at the first crossing. They sat around each other, their faces and voices giving away their worries. We chatted with them. Their story was not unusual. It is the kind of story that cities are made of and made on. Stacked on top of one another. Two-bedroom stories and three-bedroom stories. Pent-house stories and condo stories. Stories that all of us walk past every day. Never stopping to ask, seldom stopping to share. I don't know why we stopped that night. Actually, you did. We didn't see them on our way back. Later that night

I asked you if I could tell that story, write about it, share it with the world. You reminded me, gently, that it is not my story to tell. You asked me why I wanted to tell their story. I didn't have a good enough answer (is there ever one?). You asked me, what will your recounting of the story do for the young girls? Nothing, I said. I went to sleep with that thought. As we walked out the next morning, the cars were gone. The metallic caterpillar had crawled away or maybe it magically transformed into a butterfly. We didn't stop this time, not at the crossing, not at the bus-stop, not at the park.









Acknowledgements

Notes from the City started as a scribble in a notebook, a conversation in a cab, and a walk with a friend. It has grown because my friends and mentors have nurtured this idea with their time, care, and love. The stories that I share here are not mine alone, they emerged alongside travels with friends and family. I am forever indebted to all of you who saw and heard early drafts of this work in hotel rooms, on plane rides, in living rooms and dingy restaurants, over phone calls, in classrooms, over shared meals, and encouraged me to keep going. I am grateful to the people and places that helped me see anew.

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