

For the Land of the Free

By Christine Kiefer

I am wrapped up in a map of the United States of America.

I have an artsy map of the country hanging above my bed. I look at it when I lay on the bed backwards to pet my cats. When I drift off to sleep, I see myself, smack dab in the middle of the U.S. of A.

Missouri is tricky. We touch six other states. Just a slight brushing against Tennessee and Oklahoma, in addition to the obvious ones. Of course, I am aware that many people in The United States of America can't find Missouri on a map at all. I have no hard feelings about this. I know its body, its jagged lines, its little "bootheel" at the southeast corner, how one could travel along Route 66 and find kitschy historical landmarks, like "Gary's Gay Parita," where the "gay" is actually a woman's name, not a queer person like me.

For a time, I pictured my body on the map straddling Iowa and Missouri. The foot in Iowa is married, the one in Missouri is not. Missouri isn't exactly progressive, but to have a place like Iowa come to their senses about same sex marriage before us was surprising, comical almost. The red state to the north of me said, "Don't take our guns, no big government, and nobody gives a damn what the gays do."

This wasn't the first time that maps made me restless. Anytime I was away from home, when it was time to go to sleep, the imagery began. I was in a bed, in a room, in a hotel, or a house, in a city, in a state. I saw that place on an old map of the United States of America, like the one that pulled down from a roll in the ceiling of my childhood classroom. I would picture me in that place and then look to where my family was at the exact moment. It was like the maps in magazines on airplanes, where a line is drawn from city to city. The longer the route from my bed to my mom's or my sister's, or later, my daughter's, the worse my agitation. How could my body be this far from the other bodies?

Later, it was easy for me to keep an anxiety map in my head of the gay marriage states, imagining a different kind of distance. The long-held American principle of "leaving things to the states" always played a role in drinking laws, juvenile justice, the death penalty, taxes, and whether a person could ride a motorcycle without a helmet.

On the Martin Luther King bridge from St. Louis, my hometown, to Illinois, motorcyclists would stop, pull over halfway across the Mississippi river on the wobbly bridge, and remove their helmets. They sure as shit weren't going to have their rights trampled on for a second more than required. They went from the oppression of Missouri to the "die if you want to" freedom of Illinois like they were removing shackles.

When I passed over state lines with a marriage certificate on the dashboard, we didn't pull over to remove our rings. I didn't announce, "Now you are just my girlfriend." But I wanted to.

It's American to travel over state lines for tax perks, cheaper cigarettes, abortions. The imaginary lines have always ruled us. People travel to Oregon for the right to die and dip their toes into Nevada to buy a brothel blowjob. Breaking polygamy laws in Utah is now only equivalent to getting a traffic ticket. The sister wives lobbied for the right to have a husband in their bed every Monday and alternate Fridays.

The polygamists and I have things in common. They only felt married sometimes.

Prior to 1967 Mildred and Richard Loving, an interracial couple, were married in Washington, DC, and then not married when their bodies walked into Virginia. On a map, this is such a short distance. They could take a walk and go from married to not married and back again. Then the Supreme Court decided that they were married regardless of the placement of their bodies. This was because of the Court's interpretation of "Due Process," which is a very unromantic way of saying we all have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In my mind's map, the Lovings were birds, flying everywhere with little baby birds behind them, getting little bits of liberty from Rhode Island to Arizona.

My parents would not have to fight as the Lovings did to have their marriage recognized wherever they went, and they probably did not see their significance in their lives or the lives of their children even if they did eventually go on to have two gay daughters. Unlike with my state, coming out to my family was a simple, smooth, I-love-

you-no-matter-what conversation. My mom does sometimes quip, “What are the chances that both of my daughters are gay?” I tell her I hear it has something to do with testosterone left over in her uterus from also having my four brothers.

Meanwhile, my country, and especially my state, made my sister and I not so sure about being “loved-no-matter-what.” From 1967 to 2015, our Due Process was up for grabs. Especially if our bodies were in Missouri.

Many years ago, I drove towards a road blocked by people with signs saying, “Marriage = One Man + One Woman.” Interesting math. Even the “God hates fags” folks were out in force. There is still a billboard on Highway 70 with the same message. It’s a jarring experience, to go along your normal day, not thinking about sex or who you prefer to have sex with, not worrying about love contracts, just keeping the grocery list in your head. Then there are humans taking up space to say you’re disgusting.

While the straight world worried about me getting married, I was in law school. This was the period when I was having have Map of the United States of America anxiety. Law school was all about the Feds versus the States, the Commerce Clause, the Supremacy Clause. All fancy ways of figuring out what to do with a government that was both united and divided. To memorize cases, I put them on my imaginary map. Little Matchbox cars traveled across state lines, or a bus of people would travel north, gaining more rights along the way. I had figurines on my map, yelling “fire” from a theater in a state I can’t recall now.

I understood that we are a United States confused about our unity. I sympathized with my America. Autonomy was sweet when I had it: selfish decision making, freedom to ruin myself if I so chose was a right I flexed throughout my life. Hell, I went without a helmet every chance I got. But when I got sick, I still called my mom. When I was lonely, I still walked into a gay bar looking for my people.

My individualism didn’t quite work when I had a partner, one I let chip away at my self. I allowed a coming together that felt like being squeezed out of clown car. In another kind of clown scenario, she was always chasing me, trying to lasso me with an imaginary rope. I’d give in and then she’d say, “But wait, there’s more.” She was an all or nothing type of arrangement.

I know now that I held a weak, desperate fear that I'd travel my map alone if I didn't acquiesce to her romantic notions of marriage. After all, it was I who proposed to her. I did so in the traditional way of surprise in a romantic setting, giving her a diamond while we overlooked the river and the autumn trees. My proposal was extended at a place in the country where queers weren't welcome, let alone allowed to tap into our own due process.

I was a liar, saying words like "soulmate" or "perfect match" when I just didn't want to travel into the next state alone.

We drove four hours north in the bitter cold to get married outside a cabin in Iowa, in front of a fire. The route on my map heads straight north and then veers just a touch to the west once you get into a state where license plates read, "Our liberties we prize and our rights we will maintain." Good on you, Iowa.

We lit paper lanterns. They all floated directly into a nearby tree and were shredded by its limbs. We had a marriage license that we should have used as kindling for the fire that hosted our ceremony, but my Iowa wife held onto it like a prize, all the way into Missouri, a symbol to her of love and commitment. I passed the drive picturing myself on a train, seeing the border of Missouri ahead, where I would be asked to "show my papers" as I entered. Instead of the warmth of the fire, I thought I felt a burning in my arm, a brand burnt there.

I came home to a shrinking map. In my little town, gay existence was denied. Ten miles away, we had "domestic partnerships" and employment and housing protections. When I sat on my porch, I was free game.

My suffocating discomfort grew like too many blankets piled on my bed as I struggled to find sleep. In my bedtime map images I morphed too much I was one person when I left the driveway and another when I arrived at work.

It may have been my underlying disgust in these United States, in being only half-way married, or not even married at all, that drove her away. She said we could take up a fake address in Iowa, a suggestion that made me laugh and hurt her feelings.

I tried to get a divorce after she left me. Funny thing about being "kind of married." No judge will "kind of divorce you." Missouri said we weren't married at all. Iowa said we weren't residents. And so it went, my due process and me. We were kind

of living, kind of liberated, and just a little bit pursuing happiness. My map was a blur now. When I traveled, I didn't see the anxiety bedtime map. I wasn't anywhere.

My dad called me on June 26, 2015, the day the Supreme Court came to their senses and used the same logic from 1967 and applied it to same sex marriage. Recognition of marriages like mine suddenly blanketed the entire United States of America. My mind's map tried to be a cool aqua blue sigh of relief. On that day I was all-the-way married. My due process was so glad, I could feel its goosebumps all over my body. But I sobbed and shook telling my dad, "Now I'm married to someone who left me. I don't get to celebrate this!" He said it was a huge victory nonetheless and that I should go for a hike to clear my mind.

I was officially married to a woman who told our friends I needed medications and a nice long stay in a hospital. She probably was right about that. One day she was not my wife and the next she was. I lived in the United States of America, and nowhere could I go to change my marital status. I was married everywhere. The map became just a big blob of gray country, with no states, no borders, no change in landscape.

Thank you, government of The United States of America, for giving me a right I wasn't born with. Thank you for letting me be in a love contract with someone who left me for a younger, prettier woman. I had gotten over the betrayal, even feeling relief that she met someone else and left me alone. I lacked the self-awareness to be a good wife. I didn't love her. Truth is, I didn't like her much, even before things went awry. She wanted to fight, and I wanted to pretend she didn't exist. I slammed doors when I was with her. I yelled and screamed and then sat silent, refusing to apologize. Ours was a bad marriage, even when it wasn't one. I was a terrible kind-of wife.

I proceeded to get divorced like every other straight person has done in the history of straight people. I've been told that mine was the first same-sex divorce in Missouri. I imagined my divorce as a walking piece of paper, pissing all over the state, all over every Missouri rainbow flag parade. I told my dad I wanted to publicly apologize to all the Missouri gays. I had terrible timing, and I didn't get to celebrate what was a huge victory for me and so many people I care about. My dad said I needed to move on with my life and then asked how things were at the office.

The United States of America is a strange place, where so much of what we can do is decided by nine people in black robes. I'm what due process looks like one day and doesn't look like the day after. I am the beneficiary of the right people getting the law right. And I am the beneficiary of those who spent years demanding that the people in black robes apply a part of the law that has been present since the U.S of A was founded. I'm living with the right to liberty and happiness, but I do so within the reminder that, at any time, those in black robes can take it away. Or at least they can take it away in Iowa and give it in Missouri. Our bodies are pins on a map. The pen marking your position, that space you take up in the world, it's not yours. It never was.



Christine Kiefer is an attorney in the middle of the U.S. of A. She has self-published a novel and a collection of poems but now is accepting that nonfiction and memoir may be her niche. She is an MFA candidate in the Creative Writing Program at Lindenwood University.