

LINDSEY WILSON

## Constellations

The judge who handled my parents' divorce thought that visitation should occur on alternate weekends and Wednesday nights, so every Wednesday and every other Friday after school, our mom drove my sister and I to our dad's house. From age four, my life always had two sides; A side and B side—get in the car, flip the tape. Repeat. I pressed play, reciting lines from one song on the way, another on the way back, always listening, but never understanding how the two sides could have played at the same time. Such discordant melodies we made before they decided each song needed its own side. In a small metal box filled by the radio, racing across rural nights, we sat with one another—first with mom, then with dad—enveloped by the inky dark beyond our windows.

I knew every tree, every fence, and every roadside ditch along the thirty mile route, etched in my memory like many hooves on a path. With closed eyes, I kept a foot in the trench and followed my rut back and forth. Home one, home two, home one, home. We moved quickly, covering ground as swiftly as we could take the curves and hills, dodging lakes and following streams. Ideology and geography, twins, split my halves with heavy hands and exhaust fumes as we kept crossing county lines and political boundaries.

Viewed from space, we drove in constellations drawn across Michigan, that endless farm country of corn and soy. Peninsular and hand shaped, rising out of Indiana's narrow wrist and Ohio's flat shoulder, Michigan wears its reclusiveness with pride—an isolationist state. The Great Lakes' embrace confined my childhood geography to a map on the palm of my right hand. This line for Grand Rapids; that swell for Detroit; my tallest finger the tip of one peninsula; its fingernail the bridge umbilical cord connecting siblings. It is natural, in the mitten, to know the state as the inside of your hand. A duty, perhaps, to place, the definition so well defined. I traveled across many roads, life lines and love lines, palm reading my future, past, and present on glacier-sculpted terrain. When I was a child, gazing at field after field of moonlit snow punctuated by shabby houses and snowmobile trails, I imagined some giant's hand, in a fit of spiteful rage, closing suddenly, fist crushing everyone

inside just to hear the crunch.

The stars shone so clearly on the drive, and if I pressed my face against the cold glass of my dad's gray hatchback, windows cracked to toughen us Northern children, I could almost make out the pattern of Orion's Belt. I was terrible at spotting constellations from the car—we always seemed to turn a curve before I could find the right dots—preferring to gaze at bright patches reflected on the underbellies of clouds. As distant light pollution cast an ethereal glow onto the skies above, I wondered if the people in those cities felt alive, felt lonely. Wrapped in perpetual daylight, would there be any monsters? My forehead numb and sticky from window breath condensation, I sat in the back seat and felt myself drifting, floating on the voices of talk radio hosts to the lands of distant rivers.

There was a gas station on the north end of Gun Lake, two miles from my mother's house, and seeing its bright corrals never failed to send a lump to my throat as I faced the inevitable paternal goodbyes. Parting, though routine, was never easy; someone was always leaving, always driving out of sight with tears in their eyes. It started with a kiss on the cheek, part of some awkward car-hug, followed by a series of pleasantries, my cheeks flushing and my dad's voice thickening. Then I would push the confusion and anger and sadness into a neat fist in my stomach, walk across the driveway, and, turning to wave goodbye, put a hand on the doorknob. The episode wrapped up, but in the middle of the plot line, almost as if someone botched the editing, rolled the credits too soon. No commercials, just sudden, lengthy silence. On the other side of the door, there were usually a few scorched logs in the fireplace, their embers twinkling like stars, like the tail lights of my father's car fading down the driveway.

My life took on a fluid motion of comings and goings, of restless stirring in the dark. I got used to flowing, just cells, water sloshing against hollow walls while trying to find the path of least resistance. When we left the car I would run headfirst down the hill to the lake, a tumbleweed gathering momentum. By the time I reached the dock, the lactic acid flushed my thighs, and, gasping for air, I dragged the kayak toward the lily pads and pushed off the dock with my paddle. Escaping to the deep water, where tiny waves lulled my boat to rest and gently patted our sides, I caught my ragged breath. So maybe I was always trying to run away but never got very far. Where could I go? I could paddle across, but the lake was clearly bounded—interrupted by land.

Sometimes the lake was locked by the winter with ice that lasted for

months; it stiffened our joints and made our molecules slow to a halt. On those days, I slid to a stop on the slippery wooden dock planks, crusted snow crunching underfoot, and looked straight up at the stars, daring them to look back. An insomniac child, I used to drift into the empty night coatless, just to see how long I could stand. How frozen—how still. I trekked up the driveway to the middle of the road, straddling counties and begging for headlights, for a vision to race closer. But the only light shone dimly from a nearby barn, devoid of contact. Perched on the hood of a car, I shivered until the skin under my nails purpled and my teeth stung from the wind. I wanted to lie down in snow and let the flakes paste my eyelids open to drink the stars forever.

Barely illuminated by space dust and ice, the promiscuous darkness faded in the circle of light outside the garage. My skin upon entering, red and plucked, glowing with the heat of innumerable neon needles, strained at the sudden loss of vibration, a small but distinct grief. Crystals of ice defrosted on my lashes and dampened my braids, wrapped tightly against the night, their ends dripping tears. I grabbed a blanket and hid from the monsters, from the giants and their angry hands. As I thawed, a puddle on the floor, I dreamt of cities and stars and eternal licking waves.

We pressed stones into crumbling roads to fill the old ruts, a decade of back-and-forths, of conversations in the darkened car threading behind us, unraveled. I could finally drive myself, so I bought a beater, that Midwestern rite of passage, erring toward mobility. The heat stopped working in the winter, but if I sang loud enough the steam from my breath melted peepholes on the frosted windshield. I only had one tape: *Simon and Garfunkel: The Concert in Central Park*. I flipped the tape a thousand times on those last drives from home to home, trying to gather the lines to finish our dangling conversations. After another year of singing and driving, small tears formed on the black strip inside the tape, the garbled music just loose syllables announcing our shredded lives. I bought a CD player and rolled down my windows, shouting my rebellion to the open landscape so gracefully folding our failures into its fallow fields. Travel weary, I felt the frosty air freezing my toes, and my right foot gave up the pedals and fastened to the floor.

Old bloody myths are populated by giants who crush the little people with impunity, scattering their limbs like leaves on a path. My dad, a smallish giant, met me a final time in Michigan and peered into my high tower, blinking one eye, then the next, deconstructing my carefully laid plans, my

braided sheets, my poisoned apples. Between winks, there was a small opportunity for escape and, fearing strangulation, boa constricted by time and place without end, I fled for the coast. The old Saturn, more plastic than planet, hung low from the weight of my belongings; together we chugged through a day on fumes. Dying car and sleepless driver carved a path through the mountains, the dam finally broken. I flowed out of Michigan, draining the Great Lakes in my wake, spreading their depths across Ohio and Pennsylvania, until only a trickle remained when I reached the Delaware River. Carving shallow pools, I glistened with sweat, humid air evaporation renewing each day, each starless night.

My shoes still squeaked with sand stolen from the dunes, and I let the tiny grains exfoliate my cells, rubbing away the well-worn paths, muscle memory and mucus membrane. Orion could not point his arrows at me anymore; just another shape in black, I moved through a city of nighttime daylight and forgot stars hovering so close they vibrate, forgot the moon making its own luck. But water surges in me anyway—cellular memory—called by the tide to new highs and lows, to dark places where the stars creep through the ozone to meet me.

Lindsey Wilson is a non-binary trans farmer who fled rural MI for big-kid dreams on the East Coast, but still calls the Midwest home. They write best when they are outside, learning the names of forgotten creatures and scribbling heedlessly on scraps of paper.