

The Ohio River

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I swam in the Ohio River many times growing up. People always joke and say a green pool ain't safe to swim in and I'll tell them I have already swam in the river and Lord knows what's in that. My parents remember swimming in it, too. They could've got baptized in the water and been reborn as a hillbilly. I prefer the name hilljack; it's less stereotypical.

Can someone own the river? If so, who owns the river? Is it God or humankind? Does that mean they own me? Do they own the people who were before me and before those people?

Do the creeks in Lake Vesuvius run into the Ohio river? If so, did the water that flowed through my toes as a child cascade somewhere in Illinois? Why is it that the water that was between my toes at the age of 10 traveled further than me at 20 years old? I'm the one who has feet. But unlike water, I can't erode my way through the hardest things. I have to dig, pulling only a fistful of dirt out of my path.

When I say I am from Southern Ohio, people think Cincinnati or Chillicothe. I have to draw the state of Ohio in the air with my fingers, showing them the most southern tip: the town known as South Point. My town overlooks the two states across the river, Kentucky and West Virginia.

I remember Kentucky as a Girl Scout: going to Ken-O Valley Day camp, seeing shows at the Paramount Arts Center, exploring caves and riding horses along the trails at Carter Caves State Resort Park. My childhood friend and I would beg our mothers for a trip to Gattiland; our arcade and pizza paradise. In Summersville, WV, in 2015 after my Pops passed, Dad and my stepmother took my brother and me camping to escape Facebook posts and sympathy cards. I enjoyed kayaking through the lake that summer and later going to more places, finding peace on the water's surface.

At the end of the day, I can't name one state. I rather tell people I am from the hills that rest along the Ohio River. And when night comes around, if it's warm enough, we play euchre outside with lightning bugs and candles illuminating the card table. My grandmother tells us stories of growing up and seeing the land and the Ohio River change as she has gotten older. We sit in our lawn chairs at the bottom of nature's feet, our hills, singing Tyler Childers and drinking moonshine.