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The Ohio River

This is the Big One—the showstopper:
the Mississippi is claimed by too many
as it murders; the Colorado becomes too big
for its thin-hipped britches. Here,
my river slices Louisville from its ex,
idiot Indiana, and glistens in its endless sludge.
This is not what Mason and dull Dixon envisioned:
an under-the-weather God making arbitrary borders,
keeping the ham hocks and sour mash south, goth girls
and anorexia, north. No easy task
these days maintaining territorial peace, what with cable
and cyberspace classifieds, but after dinner
we still pass the harp from one to another,
monks and whores alike, and sing songs
that measure out our acrid mind-plans
of plump consonants and bottomless reveries,
and we who come to this river's edge—empty
of desire—watch the sacred ravens gloat,

weary from sloughed-off forgivenesses,
leaning against trees that once hosted lynchings,
but now revealing shadows to distant shores.
We should substitute saintliness
for Aaron's Rod, refusing to adopt
the text's drought-ridden maize, hissing pests,
uncivil exchanges between husbands and wives.
Let us live in this muck and peat and ashy ooze
and late at night eavesdrop
on the river's echoes
of ring-laden Judith creeping tick-burdened into her enemy's tent,
becoming a lean wolf
barking down the ancient agonies of now,
and we who seek grim peace become lost,
alone, out from the tree's shade forever. What
did I know of faith's stabbing pain?
O, Moses: Open your broken fingers
and make me moist again.

Michael Baker

Michael Baker, once from Ohio, now New Jersey, is an award winning poet, a teacher of university composition classes, a frequent contributor to *Trouser Press* and *Zisk*, and a writer of extended Perfect Sound Forever essays on The Kinks, Cleveland in the 1970s, and Alex Chilton. He is working on essays about Rita Dove, Family, John Ashbery, and the use of doorways in the films of John Ford. He has a perfect son.