

*Flood, Columbus, Ohio 1913*  
*A Poem for Synthesizer and Piano*

The rain descends, with the sound  
of heavy weeping. . . The floors at the asylum  
glisten, and the inmates slide, their gowns  
billowing, like gray canvas. . . At the penitentiary  
water the color of rust wells up in the drain holes,  
the bricks leak, the guards in the tower  
blow steam from their cigars. — Across Broad Street  
in the telegraph office, the telegraph girl  
hikes up her skirts. . . Heavier  
than J. P. Morgan's heavy breathing, the rain  
descends, bursting radiator pipes,  
breaking off fire hydrants while firehouse dogs  
swim desperately in whirlpools.

The bridge over the Scioto at Town Street  
is swept away. —The Olentangy heaves  
and gives birth to corpses, iron bed frames,  
and tubs of potatoes. . . Frantic women rise  
from second floors, to third floors, to attics  
where they put on overcoats and kneel in prayer:  
“There were ninety and nine. . . but none of the ransomed  
ever knew, how deep were the waters they crossed.”  
The Dispatch Reporter sees thirteen people  
clinging to the same tree. —In shipwrecked ballgowns  
and drenched tuxedos they cling,  
Their fingers petrify, their eyes become lumps of ice  
and still their mouths move: “Throw out the lifeline,  
someone is sinking today.”

A five year old girl and her cat  
ride a cellar door over Sullivan Avenue.  
The neighbors hear her call, “Jesus, Jesus,  
come down, save me and kitty!”

A black man  
jumps off the steps at the Spiritualist Church  
and tries to save her and is drowned.

A policeman  
jumps from the window above the yard goods store  
and tries to save her and is drowned.

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!”

—The firefly voice vanishes  
in a canyon of the storm, . . . And the rain

continues to fall, no longer with the sound  
of heavy weeping, but with the sound  
of tears, the way the black poet, Dunbar,  
heard the rain as angels' harp strings, or like the way  
rain drips on black umbrellas at a hanging.  
The girl at the telegraph office  
begins to wear death casually, as perfume.  
All day the reports come in: Dayton, Findlay,  
Youngstown, Fremont, Cairo.

At six, she puts on the watchman's extra trousers  
and, using a clothes rod for a balance pole,  
steps through the open transom onto the freezing wires,  
and walks safely home.