Flood Songs, Dylan, and the Mississippi Blues

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One does not appreciate the sight of earth until he has traveled through a flood. At sea one does not expect or look for it, but here, with fluttering leaves, shadowy forest aisles, housetops barely visible, it is expected. In fact a graveyard, if the mounds were above water, would be appreciated.

—Anonymous, New Orleans Times-Democrat, 29 March 1882

One sunny day in September 1968 I set off for school from our family house on the outskirts of London, walking up the road in the direction of the station, and I met a trickle of water in the gutters coming the other way, as if a pipe somewhere had burst. But it increased as I advanced, and soon I thought I should turn back. The authorities mobilized, and in due course issued us with sandbags to put across our driveway, Second-World-War style. But, as the hours went on, the waters rose, lapped against their brim, and finally broke through. After a while there was a foot of water in the house; it was several feet deep in the garden. Things disappeared or began floating about.

With the coming of this flood routines changed. We lived entirely upstairs, although it was crowded with the objects we’d rescued from below once it became obvious the water would get in. To heat food or make tea we had to put on Wellington boots and wade from the stairs to the kitchen, where we used a camping stove. Sloshing
down a neighboring road, where the water swirled in over the top of my Wellington boots, I caught a goldfish, which I decided must have come from our own pond. My brother stored his canoe at the side of the house. I paddled it, like an Amazonian explorer, up the road and out across the public golf course. There, when I unthinkingly hopped into the water to see how deep it was, I was up to my neck. One road near the woods on the common had an alarmingly strong current, but otherwise it didn’t feel dangerous. For a child of ten, it was thrilling. No school, and a whole new medium for play on my own doorstep, or in fact well over it and climbing the walls. It was different for my parents—especially when it subsided. Carpets were ruined, much had to be thrown away, the parquet floor had to be replaced. It was over a year till, with the help of RAF-supplied burners under the floorboards, the house dried out and the smell went away.

Our flood was an act of man as well as of God, in that the local rivers had been allowed to overflow: the locks had been closed in order to protect the Thames and Central London. Although doubtless most of those affected by the flood enjoyed it less than I did, no one died (as far as I’m aware): there were no bobbing corpses, only a few stray goldfish and footballs, in the relatively clean, calm lake that had risen suddenly in our decorous suburb. But it does not take a Katrina or a Sandy to cause disorientation; even a well-behaved Surrey flood heightens one’s awareness of the contingencies that may, with their surreal displacements, disrupt what we have come to think of as our firmly grounded reality.

Even without direct experience of floods, there are good reasons to be interested in them: as natural phenomena of seemingly increasing frequency, as historical events, and also as subjects of art and sources of metaphor.

A year before my flood in 1968, Bob Dylan, holed up in the basement at Big Pink near Woodstock with The Band, had been down in his own flood. Here is the text of his “Crash on the Levee (Down in the Flood)” as he recorded it in the first of two takes in 1967 (he re-recorded it in 1970 for More Greatest Hits with a harmonica solo):
Crash on the levee, mama
Water's gonna overflow
Swamp's gonna rise
No boat's gonna row
Now, you can train on down
To Williams Point
You can bust your feet
You can rock this joint
But oh mama, ain't you gonna miss your best friend now?
You're gonna have to find yourself
Another good friend, somehow

Now, don't you try an' move me
Mama, just gonna lose
There's a crash on the levee
Mama, you've been refused
Well, it's sugar for sugar
Salt for salt
If you go down in the flood
It's your own true fault
Oh mama, ain't you gonna miss your best friend now?
You're gonna have to find yourself
Another good friend, somehow

Well, high tide's risin'
Mama, don't you let me down
Pack up your suitcase
Mama, don't you make a sound
Well it's king for king
Queen for queen
It's gonna be the meanest flood
That anybody's seen
Oh mama, ain't you gonna miss your best friend now?
Yes, you're gonna have to find yourself
Another good friend, somehow

In performance, Dylan's soaring, swooping voice, full of expression—animus, and a certain glee—rides high on this musical tide as it
drives forward, combining something ominous with the jauntiness and energy of release (signaled by Garth Hudson's happily thrilling organ in the background) from a failed relationship. The song is very economical, mysterious, suggestive, and catchy. Its energy comes in part from musical ventriloquism, from a return to origins. Behind Dylan's second verse stands Richard "Rabbit" Brown and his 1927 "James Alley Blues," which Dylan would have heard on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, though probably also elsewhere:

I'll give you sugar for sugar
Let you get salt for salt
And if you can't get along with me
Well, it's your own fault.

The revision of "If you can't get along with me" to "If you go down in the flood" is a daring leap, but floods are entirely within the blues tradition. Regionally, too, there's a leap or a stretch; one feels in the swing of the performance an intense enjoyment of the *southernness* of it—by Bob Dylan of Hibbing, Minnesota, and the four-fifths-Canadian Band.

As so often with Dylan, there's something going on, but you don't know what it is, and that's part of the point. Somehow, puzzlingly, the singer himself of this celebratory rejection song doesn't seem very troubled by the imminence of "the meanest flood / That anybody's seen." Michael Gray in *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (2002) calls it "spacey yet exuberant," Tim Riley in *Hard Rain: A Dylan Commentary* (1999) describes it as "a good-bye song that is equal parts condescension and threat," catching something of its elusive tone: "condescension" seems apt for the seven uses of "mama" in the song, three of them in the last verse, and as for "threat," flood songs deal in urgency, and the *anticipation* of a flood makes it imperative to pack up your suitcase—if you even have the time. "Well it's king for king / Queen for queen" seems a grand way of saying that with the coming flood, it's every man (and monarch) for himself. Why "no boat's gonna row" isn't clear; maybe the torrent will be too wild. The song invites manifold speculation—about to whom it's
addressed, about the occasion, about what kind of relationship we’re seeing come to an end.

Dylan’s interest in floods and their possibilities goes right back: in his memoir, Chronicles, he enumerates seven uncommercial things his early songs were about, lodging “floods” there as the central item in the list. A sense of floods as historical cataclysms and the human and cultural damage they cause is perhaps what lies behind the prophetic threat that “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (1962):

I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warnin’,
Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world.

Then there’s the flooding at the start of “The Times They Are A-Changin’” (1964), where Dylan, at his most formally prophetic, predicts an inundation that represents a world-altering cataclysm:

Come gather round people wherever you roam
And admit that the waters around you have grown
And accept it that soon you’ll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth saving
And you’d better start swimming or you’ll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changing...

This reminds us that the flood is a metaphor of biblical proportions, going back to the deluge in Genesis, where God “saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” and decides, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth”—with the exception of Noah. Resolved that “every thing that is in the earth shall die,” God brings “a flood of waters upon the earth”: “all the fountains of the great deep [were] broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights... And the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high hills, that were under the heaven, were covered.” The consequence? “And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping
things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark." This is an image of annihilation.

When the blues singers of the Mississippi Delta make songs about the floods in the South, especially that of 1927, they, like Dylan, pick up on this biblical inundation, finding a more or less explicit typological depth in their own disasters. (There is also a distinguished tradition of Southern prose writing about floods, including the 1927 flood. The epigraphs in this essay are drawn from some of these magnificent accounts of inundation.) The blues scholar David Evans elaborates this biblical understanding of floods in "High Water Everywhere," his compendious and authoritative 2006 essay on the Mississippi flood of 1927. Thus, for instance, "Flood Water Blues" of 1937 by Lonnie Johnson (1899–1970) begins by taking those "forty days and forty nights" of rain and giving an extra edge of chill to Genesis: "It's been snowin' forty days and nights, lakes and rivers begin to freeze." Ten years before that, Johnson's potent cover version of Bessie Smith's original "Backwater Blues" includes the line, "I went up on some high high lonesome hill," also echoing Genesis ("and all the high hills").

The spot of light caught the house full; it seemed like a living thing, spinning slowly with a long, indrawn, sucking noise; its doors, its windows, its porch turning to the light and then going into the darkness.

—Richard Wright, "Down by the Riverside," 1938

In Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues (1960), Paul Oliver, the veteran British historian of the blues, gives a clear and vivid account of the ecology of the Mississippi River:

Seasonal flooding is anticipated but the levees are constructed to control it to some extent. As the height of the water is excessive, however, breaches in the levee walls are deliberately made at
certain points to allow particular areas to flood and thus lessen the pressure of water. These are the "backwaters," which occur in the St. Francis basin to the west of the river between Memphis and Helena, in the great Yazoo-Mississippi Delta north of Vicksburg, in the Tensas Basin west of Natchez, and at other selected points. When freak circumstances occur and the overflow periods clash through the delay of the Ohio floods [normally January] or the early appearance of the Missouri flood water [normally June], even the backwaters cannot take all the excess. By extraordinary ill fortune all these phenomena occurred together between April and June in 1927 causing the worst flood disaster ever recorded on the Mississippi, when millions of tons of water burst through the levees after a period of heavy rainfall and drowned the land.

The same conditions occurred again in 2011, though the impending flood, which was being compared beforehand to those of 1927 and 1937 (the slow buildup of anticipation and pressure before floods take full effect is striking), was effectively controlled. Oliver, whose comments on the 1927 flood on a 1960 album sleeve we know were "hand read" by a young Bob Dylan, evokes its horror poignantly in *Blues Fell This Morning*:

Houses were washed away with their terrified occupants still clinging to the rooftops; the carcasses of cattle and mules floated in the swirling, deep brown water; isolated figures whom none could rescue were last seen crying for help as they hung in the gaunt branches of shattered trees. Dressers and table tops, clothes and toys were caught in the driftwood and floating timbers, to twist madly in a sudden whirlpool, and then sweep out of sight in the surging, eddying, boiling waters which extended as far as eyes could see....The level had risen some sixty-five feet and with such a tremendous volume of water that the devastation was on an immense scale. Breaches—or "crevasses"—in the levees were recorded in fifty places and twenty-eight thousand square miles of land were under water.
The decisive event in the flood, on 21 April, was the bursting of the levee above Greenville, Mississippi. (The fullest account of the whole disaster is John M. Barry's magnificent *Rising Tide* [1997].) The disaster lasted six weeks; five hundred died; more than six hundred thousand people were made destitute; the homes of seven hundred fifty thousand people were flooded; about $350 million of damage was caused.

With what appeared to be uncanny foresight, Bessie Smith had recorded her "Backwater Blues" on 17 February 1927, before the waters of the Mississippi fully rose, and released it in March, to great success. (It probably referred to different floods she had witnessed on the Cumberland River in December 1926.) After the flood, on 3 May 1927, Lonnie Johnson recorded his own, very intense version of "Backwater Blues"; and it was Johnson's version Dylan played in his role as inspired disc jockey on his *Theme Time Radio Hour*, when it took on the theme of "Water" on 4 October 2006. (Dylan has said the aging Lonnie Johnson showed him some guitar techniques in the early 1960s.) This is the song as Johnson sings it, with several small but significant changes from Smith's original:

When it rained five days, skies turned dark at night
When it rained five days, skies turned dark at night
And trouble takin' place in the lowlands at night

I woke up this morning, couldn't even get out of my door
I woke up this morning, couldn't even get out of my door
There's so much of trouble, make a poor man wonder where he wants to go

They rowed a little boat about five miles 'cross the pond
They rowed a little boat about five miles 'cross the pond
I packed up all my things, threwed 'em in, and they rolled me along

When it thunders and lightning, the wind begin to blow
When it thunders and lightning, the wind begin to blow
And thousands of people ain't got no place to go
I went up on some high, some high high lonesome hill
And looked down on the house where I used to live

Backwater blues done caused me to pack my things and go
'Cause my house fell down and I can't live there no more

Mmm mmm I can't move no more
Ohhh I can't move no more
There's no place for a poor poor man to go

The song starts with general disaster in verse 1, then in verse 2 the first person of the singer experiences the general “trouble” we've already heard announced. “Couldn't even get out of my door” is ambiguous: it could be the pressure of water, it could be the weight of misery. The song's hero is tragically caught—and caught, we might say, in the bleak realities of the social and economic trap that led to the great black migration north: “Backwater blues done caused me to pack my things and go,” but “There's no place for a poor poor man to go.” And the trouble is such that it “make a poor man wonder where he wants to go”—the psychological and the social are inter-fused. The third verse, bringing the first person out into the general flood, implicitly deals with the experience of the evacuee, rescued by an unspecified (and not recurring) “They” who “rowed” him “about five miles” (the five echoing “it rained five days,” as if each day's rain carries you a mile farther from home). “Rowed” is taken up in the rhyming “thowed” and then transformed into “rolled”—which makes the action of the rescuers in the boat sound like the action of a wave, sweeping the singer away, while it's also what “thunder” (in the next verse) can do. Such small word-choices can be powerfully resonant in the blues (there are under 150 words in this song, excluding repetitions). A rich word like “lonesome”—in “some high high lonesome hill”—connects the solitude of the unfrequented place with the emotionally bereft state of the singer looking down.

Bessie Smith's piercing, commanding original version of the song, with its accompaniment by the master of the stride piano James P. Johnson, who rumbles tremendously to convey the “thunder and lightning,” is admirably strong and fast moving; and there's a fine,
slightly theatrical version of "Backwater Blues" by Big Bill Broonzy, with some verses elaborated and others cut and reordered, and the lines stretched to make space for guitar virtuosity; but Johnson's version touches the greatest emotional depths—although, as Dylan notes in Chronicles, "A folk song has over a thousand faces and you must meet them all if you want to play this stuff. A folk song might vary in meaning and it might not appear the same from one moment to the next. It depends on who's playing and who's listening." At any rate, Johnson introduces plaintive, affecting repetitions that fit his more inward, sorrowful delivery ("some high high lonesome hill" for Smith's "some high old lonesome hill"; "no place for a poor poor man to go" for Smith's "no place for a poor old girl to go"). Even if it doesn't stem directly from personal experience, his gravity makes the lament penetrat Ingly individual.

About May 1927, in Chicago, Blind Lemon Jefferson wrote or performed his slow-rolling, mournful "Rising Highwater Blues," a potent distillation of various strains of the flood:

Backwater rising, Southern people can't make no time
I said backwater rising, Southern people can't make no time
And I can't get no hearing from that Memphis girl of mine

Water in Arkansas, people screaming in Tennessee
Ohhh people screaming in Tennessee
If I don't leave Memphis, backwater been all over poor me

People since it's raining, it has been for nights and days
People since it's raining, has been for nights and days
Thousand people stands on the hill looking down where they
used to stay

Children stand there screaming mama we ain't got no home
Ohhhh mama we ain't got no home
Papa says to children, black water left us all alone

Backwater rising come in my windows and doors
Backwater rising come in my windows and doors
I leave with a prayer in my heart, backwater won't rise no more
There’s a delicate balance in this song between the single self, the defeated couple, and the “people,” the “thousand people,” and their fate, rendered in complex shifts of syntax and temporality. “Southern people can’t make no time”—they can’t make good time, or any time, they have no time to lose, or they can’t get any “hourly or daily wage work” (as Evans suggests)—because of the backwater rising, ineluctably, insistently (“I said”); but amid this general, regional urgency the single plight of the singer and his “Memphis girl” is given equal importance. The “Memphis girl” is mentioned only once—“can’t get no hearing” could mean she won’t listen to him or we can’t agree (as in “I hear you”); but it could also mean that practically, tragically, she’s not to be found. Has the backwater yet come into Memphis, Tennessee, a state in which people are “screaming”? “If I don’t leave Memphis, backwater been all over poor me” makes it ambiguous: that black verbal tense or mood, “been,” could be “will be” or “would have been.” The “screaming” of “people” of verse 2 becomes in verse 4 that of “children” to their “mama,” lamenting—but it is the “papa” who replies—as if the “mama” here, who doesn’t answer, has been traumatized into silence or has gone down in the flood. “Backwater” becomes (as I hear it) “black water,” the technical term transforming into a sinister descriptive one that evokes the opaque, muddy, or polluted water that is well on the way from crystalline symbol of life toward the deathliness of slime. (There may, too, be a thought that black people are more grievously affected by the flood than white: compare Richard Wright in “Down by the Riverside,” where “He wished that their white bodies were at the bottom of the black waters.”) The song ends in the moment of the flood’s inrushing and the singer’s departure. The final prayer is thus framed in the face of adversity—a hope that the tide will be stemmed. Jefferson’s clean strong voice contains these multitudes.

Even if Jefferson’s phrase “black water” is raising the thought that black people suffered more from floods than white, “Southern people” generally, white as well as black, were suffering, and the white community had also its songs of woe. “The Story of the Mighty Mississippi” by Ernest Stoneman (1893–1968), of 21 May 1927, pious
and McGonagalesque in its account of disaster, has its own clumsily appealing sincerity, though the sentimental children’s prayer of this public, consciously official narrative with no first-person singular can’t match the inwardness of Jefferson’s “prayer in my heart.” Consider the third and fourth verses:

There were children clinging in the treetops who had spent a sleepless night
And without a bit of shelter or even a spark of light.
With their prayers going up to the Father for the break of day to come
That they might see some rescue party who might provide for them a home.

Stoneman’s song ends by veering from images of stranded and wading flood victims to an all-purpose devotional resolve that simply sidesteps the flood and asserts God’s benevolence:

Let us all get right with our Maker, as He doeth all things well,
And be ready to meet in judgment, when we bid this earth farewell.

“The Mississippi Flood 1927” by Vernon Dalhart (1883–1948), recorded on 27 April 1927, after describing how “brave men knelt to pray / As all that they had cherished was swiftly swept away,” likewise points its religious moral, albeit with a more detailed theology:

We can’t explain the reasons
These great disasters come,
But we must all remember to say “Thy will be done.”
And though the good may suffer
For other people’s sins,
There is a crown awaiting
Where eternal life begins!

Again there’s only a first-person plural, not a singular: a community of “the good” at one in pious patience. The black blues, with their
shifting, ambiguous, fragmentary modus operandi, and play between
the "I" and the many, are less preachily unidirectional.

"The Flood Blues," for instance, by the female jazz and blues
performer Sippie Wallace, who sang with Louis Armstrong among
others, is another 1927 lament addressed, till its last verse, to God—but
with more "I" than "us" in its troubled composition. Recorded
in Chicago on 6 May 1927, and plangently sung with jazzy trumpet
and clarinet, it starts with first-person immediacy:

I'm standing in this water wishing I had a boat
The only way I see is take my clothes and float

The water is rising people fleeing for the hills
Lord the water will obey if you just say be still

They sent out a law for everybody to leave town
But when I got the news I was high-water bound

They dynamite the levee thought it might give us ease
But the water still rising do you hear this plea

I called on the good Lord and my man, too
What else is there for a poor girl to do.

The religion here feels like a more directly spiritual support in adversity than that of Ernest Stoneman or Vernon Dalhart. The ambiguity of "I called on the good Lord and my man, too"—does her man also call on the good Lord, or does she call on both?—makes for a touching intensity. God here is the only recourse when human beings (white authorities) seem unable to help, for the futile efforts of the presumably white "They" in verses 3 and 4 are answered by "But": their "law" and "dynamite" are no use against the rising water.

The topic was, then, already familiar by June 1927, so the variations on it by Barbecue Bob (Robert Hicks) in that month's extraordinary "Mississippi Heavy Water Blues" perhaps represent a quest for novelty (Hicks was from Atlanta, Georgia and seemingly had no direct experience of the 1927 flood). Its singer starts in the
conventional bowed-down posture of grief, going along the levees where refugees from the floods had been crowded:

I was walking down the levee with my head hanging low,
Looking for my sweet mama but she ain’t here no more
That’s why I’m crying, Mississippi heavy water blues

The second verse adds an economic reason for tears:

Lord lord lord, I’m so blue, my house got washed away
And I’m crying how long ’fore another payday
That’s why I’m crying, Mississippi Heavy Water Blues

The third verse announces the loss of the singer’s loved one (“my gal got washed away in that Mississippi flood”), but the fourth, focusing more on the physical aspect of the relationship, chooses to insist on the singer’s own sexual potency (“Can’t no one satisfy her like her sweet papa do”). By the song’s later stages Bob is preoccupied with the need for not just this lost “gal” but any sexual partner, and the whole flood is lamented as having caused a lack of sex—the twist being that “That’s why I’m crying”—not really the loss of home or the devastation of a whole region. The loss of an original individual (“my gal”) is reduced after a while to this general lack of sex: “All I need’s some sweet mama, to send me jelly roll,” as if anyone “sweet” will do. This Bob’s a survivor, and the song may have a therapeutic intention, deflecting attention from grief to lust. But the ending leaves aside the washed-away “womens” for a climactic piling up of internal rhymes and half-rhymes on present participles—shaking, sinking, ringing, singing, crying—and a flourish of self-referentiality as a final signature. The individual and the wider world both find a voice here again—“Robert Hicks” and “the whole town” (and two whole states).

...Nothin’ but muddy water far as I could see
I need some sweet mama come shake that thing with me
That’s why I’m crying, Mississippi Heavy Water Blues
Listen here you men one more thing I'd like to say
Ain't no womans out here for they all got washed away
That's why I'm crying, Mississippi Heavy Water Blues

Lord lord lord, Mississippi shaking, Louisiana sinking
The whole town's ringing, Robert Hicks is singing
That's why I'm crying, Mississippi Heavy Water Blues

Two years later, in 1929, there were more floods—and more songs. The white singer Andrew Jenkins (1885–1957) wrote his "The Alabama Flood" and recorded it on 21 March 1929, just a week after the town of Elba was flooded to a depth of forty-three feet and while rescue efforts continued. This further flooding probably inspired one of the most famous of flood songs, "When the Levee Breaks," said by Clinton Heylin to be traditional, but at any rate first recorded by Memphis Minnie (Lizzie Douglas) and her husband Kansas Joe, who sang it in his first known recording session on 18 June 1929. (It was covered by Led Zeppelin in 1971.) It seems consciously to call on and synthesize the 1927 songs in its mixing of tenses and persons, of lost homes, loves, hopes, directions.

If it keeps on raining, levee's going to break
If it keeps on raining, levee's going to break
And the water gon' come and have no place to stay

Well all last night I sat on the levee and moaned
Well all last night I sat on the levee and moaned
Thinking 'bout my baby and my happy home

If it keeps on raining, levee's goin' to break
If it keeps on raining, levee's goin' to break
And all these people have no place to stay

Now look here, mama, what am I to do?
Now look here, mama, now what I to do?
I ain't got nobody to tell my trouble to
I worked on the levee, mama, both night and day
I worked on the levee, mama, both night and day
I ain't got nobody keep the water away

Oh crying won't help you, praying won't do no good
Now crying won't help you, praying won’t do no good
When that levee breaks, mama, you got to move

I worked on the levee, mama, both night and day
I worked on the levee, mama, both night and day
Done worked so hard to keep the water away

I had a woman, she wouldn't do for me
I had a woman, she wouldn't do for me
I'm going back to my used to be

Oh mean old levee caused me to weep and moan
It's a mean old levee caused me to weep and moan
Gonna leave my baby and my happy home.

The fast and lively guitar picking by Memphis Minnie drives the song forward, sustaining an energy that contrasts with the threat of the flood and of personal loss. The coming of the water seems to mean the loss of “my baby and my happy home”; but maybe it was already lost and is the singer’s “used to be”—and maybe the “water” (which might connote tears) is a metaphor for the singer’s untellable “trouble.” It’s also tougher in its secular bleakness—“praying won’t do no good”—than Sippie Wallace or Blind Lemon Jefferson or Ernest Stoneman or Vernon Dalhart or even Barbecue Bob, with his cynical plea for the Lord to send him a sweet mama. “She wouldn’t do for me” may express regret that the singer left her—and maybe she’s the absent “mama” the song is addressed to—though why then is he “Gonna leave my baby and my happy home”?

At any rate this blues seems to lie behind Dylan’s “Down in the Flood,” both in its address to “mama” (though “When the Levee Breaks’ also has, richly, a “baby,” a “woman,” and a “used to be”); and in Dylan’s picking up of the word “mean” (from the compacted thought that “Oh mean old levee caused me to weep and moan”) in
"It's gonna be the meanest flood / That anybody's seen." Overall, too, the urgency of its insistence on non-negotiability, as the song's initial "if" becomes "when"—

Oh crying won't help you, praying won't do no good
When that levee breaks, mama, you got to move

—points to "Down in the Flood." Kansas Joe: "The water gonna come"; Dylan: "Water's gonna overflow." The song's "I ain't got nobody keep the water away"—as if the flood embodied life's disasters, which a loved one can save us from—may give the initial impulse for "Down in the Flood" and its premise of the "good" or "best friend" who will now, with the flood, be missed. (Though it may also glancingly refer to [black] forced work on the levees to protect the homes of [white] others.) The obscure association of the flood with love trouble—floating free of the immediate emergency to make the situation an image of life in crisis—contributes to a rich interfusion of disparate elements in both the 1929 blues and Dylan's 1967 variation.

"When the Levee Breaks" not only lies behind "Down in the Flood," but just short of four decades later it is also behind and indeed directly quoted in the title of Dylan's "The Levee's Gonna Break" of 2006, the same year Spike Lee released his Katrina documentary, When the Levees Broke. These titles bring home both how full a musical continuity there is across seventy-seven years, and how richly the temporalities of flood—before, during, after—are charged, so that fluid shifts between them allow potently kaleidoscopic, fragmented representations of doom and disaster.

When the engine shut off the faint plinking of a guitar came across the water. The skiffs warped in and unloaded; the convicts watched the men and women and children struggle up the muddy slope, carrying heavy tow-sacks and bundles wrapped in quilts. The sound of the guitar had not ceased and now the convicts saw him—a young, black, lean-hipped man, the guitar slung by a piece of cotton plough line about his neck. He
mounted the levee, still picking it. He carried nothing else, no
food, no change of clothes, not even a coat.
—William Faulkner, “Old Man,”
The Wild Palms, 1939

There was another major flood in 1937 (less disastrous than a
decade before, probably because of federal flood defense projects),
which inspired at least two classic blues songs. One is “Flood Water
Blues” by Lonnie Johnson, where his rich, sad, smoothly sonorous
voice constructs a spellbinding recreation of the panic of flood.

It’s been snowin’ forty days and nights, lakes and rivers begin to
freeze.
It’s been snowin’ forty days and nights, rivers and lakes begin to
freeze.
Some places through my old hometown, water’s up above my
knees.

Storm begin risin’, and the sun begin sinking down.
Storm begin risin’, the sun begin sinking down.
I says, “Mother and Dad, pack your trunk. We ain’t safe here in
this town.”

When it lightnin’ my mind gets frightened, my nerve begin
weakenin’ down.
When it lightnin’ my mind get frightened, my nerves begin
weakenin’ down.

And the shack where we was livin’ begin movin’ round.

Women and children were screamin’, sayin’, “Mama, why must
we go?”

Women and children were screamin’, sayin’, “Lord, where must
we go?”
The floodwater have broke the levees and we ain’t safe here no
more.

And begin cloud as dark as midnight, keep raining all the time.
I say, “Oh, I wonder why the sun don’t ever shine?”
And the way it keeps rainin’ it’s drivin’ me out my mind.
The repeating second line of the usual blues verse starts firmly in place, then in the fourth verse gets dislodged; there’s a small variation (“Mama, why…” / “Lord, where…”), then for the last verse it floats free completely—the pressure unsettles the form in a deeply eloquent way. Johnson pitches elements and their processes against each other: lakes and rivers begin to freeze, but the water flows uncontrollably, “up above my knees”; the storm begins rising while the sun is sinking down. The singer sounds commanding at first in addressing his parents, but then as the storm produces lightning he seems to succumb to fear—a fear that even seems to cause their shack to “begin movin’ ’round.” Now the manly statement that “We ain’t safe here in this town” is subsumed in the screaming of women and children, saying “we ain’t safe here no more”; and we note that the “women” themselves are on a level with the children, reduced to appealing to their “Mama” for answers before turning to the Lord. In the last verse, the first person and present tense return (after “Women and children were screaming”), so we end in mid-flood, with the water rising and the rain falling—and with the singer’s out- loud question about the sun and his inner confession about the maddening effect of the rain. Here, as in the best flood songs, the outer penetrates the inner, the trouble of the world impinges inescapably on the individual and unsettles the mind.

The second classic flood blues of 1937, the magnificent “Floating Bridge” by Sleepy John Estes (later covered by Ry Cooder and Eric Clapton), records a personal trauma, no doubt fictional, and takes us inside the speaker’s head—which, here, is almost literally filled with the flood waters: there’s “nothing but muddy water running through my head.”

Now I never will forget that floating bridge
Now I never will forget that floating bridge
Now I never will forget that floating bridge
Tell me five minutes time under water I was hid
When I was going down I throwed up my hands
When I was going down I throwed up my hands
When I was going down I throwed up my hands
Please take me on dry land

Now they carried me in the house and they laid me ’cross the bank
Now they carried me in the house and they laid me ’cross the bank
Now they carried me in the house and they laid me ’cross the bank
About a gallon of muddy water I had drank

Now they dried me off and they laid me in the bed
Now they dried me off and they laid me in the bed
Now they dried me off and they laid me in the bed
Couldn’t hear nothing but muddy water running through my head

Now my mother often taught me quit playing a bum
Now my mother often taught me quit playing a bum
Now my mother often taught me quit playing a bum
Go somewhere settle down and make a crumb

Now people standing on the bridge screaming and crying
People on the bridge was screaming and crying
Now the people on the bridge they’re a-screaming and crying
Lord have mercy where’s we gwine?

Estes sings this magnificent song in a high, plaintive, expressive voice, accompanied by jaunty guitar and wailing harmonica, with what Michael Gray in the Dylan Encyclopedia calls “a distinctive jerky rhythmic strut, an Estes trademark.” The first line of each verse comes not just twice but three times, with slight variations: a test of tone, but also an opportunity for drawing out and intensifying an emotional line as we climb to a climax each time, often with rhythmic variation, as in the third iteration of the first line of the penultimate verse, where it becomes “my mother often taught me Son, quit playing a bum.”
The greatness of this song lies partly in its plotting: first the mysterious, incantatory recreation of a near-death experience, an immersion in "muddy water," that mixture of elements so important to the blues. In cold print this may read as a kind of surreal comedy, but it takes on a serious stoicism in Estes's delivery. It is only at the end that we hear about what's happening to "people"—after the individual's ordeal. The "Now" that starts five out of six verses is only partly a storyteller's refresher; it also marks the temporal confusion that confronts the singer on his return to life and consciousness and takes us back to the floating bridge of the title and the first line in an extraordinary compressed image. The singer has been in the water—the people are on the bridge, floating, being rolled away on the water: "screaming" here not "Lord, where must we go?" as in "Flood Water Blues," but, as the current carries them off, "where's we gwine?" We end, that is, with a twist on the tragic bind in "Backwater Blues," where the problem was having to go yet having nowhere to go. Here it's "Go somewhere settle down and make a crumb"; then "Lord have mercy where's we gwine?" The beauty is partly the subtlety of Estes's refusal to draw attention to the connection between the superseded imperative and the desperate question.

It's a beauty not lost on Dylan, who said in 1993:

The people who originated this music, they're all Shakespeares, you know?...There was a bunch of us, me included, who got to see all these people close up, people like Son House, Reverend Gary Davis, or Sleepy John Estes....Those vibes will carry into you forever, really, so it's like those people, they're still here to me. They're not ghosts of the past or anything. They're continually here.

There was another bluesman Dylan got to see close up. In one of his earliest opportunities in New York, Dylan opened for John Lee Hooker at Gerde's Folk City in April 1961 in a two-week residency. Two years earlier, in April or so of 1959, Hooker recorded the highly mannered, and historically very inaccurate, "Tupelo Blues," a
low, slow, minimalistic, ominous growling talking blues, a halting, elliptical exercise in the transmission of oral history, which constructs a generic flood narrative out of elements we’ve already encountered:

Did ya read about the flood?
Happened long time ago
In Tupelo, Mississippi
There were thou’and o’ lives
Destroyed
It rained, it rained
Both night and day
The poor people was worried
And had no place to go
Could hear many people, cryin’, “Lord!
Have mercy! ’Cause you the only one, that we can turn to”
Happened a long time ago.
A little town
Way back in Mississippi
In Tupelo
Mmm [etc.]
There was women
And there was children
They were screamin’ an’ cryin’
Cryin’, “Lord, have mercy! You the only one now, that we can turn to”
Way back down in Mississippi
A little country town
I know ya read about it
‘Cause I’ll never forget it
The mighty flood in Tupelopa, Mississippi.
Been years ago
Mmm [etc.]
Lord, have mercy!
Wasn’t that a mighty time?
Tupelo is gone
As Luigi Monge has shown, Hooker was in fact far from Tupelo and was near Cincinnati, Ohio when Tupelo was struck by a tornado (not a flood) on 5 April 1936. The song, perhaps correspondingly, is formulaic, very similar in manner and even content to Hooker’s improvised and less impressive “Natchez Fire [Burnin’],” also of 1959. The flood is referred to—it’s “the mighty flood”—and looms and lours throughout the song, but never actually arrives in any particularity—except for a reference (in a nod to “Backwater Blues” and others) to the fact that “The poor people...had no place to go.”

In the Big Pink basement sessions in 1967, Dylan and The Band performed a loose, indeed parodic and drily amusing version of this song called “The Big Flood,” consciously overplaying its intensity of understatement. In it, with The Band raggedly twanging along in the background, Dylan improvises a reductively basic and surreally nonsensical flood narrative that ironically amplifies Hooker’s minimalism and didacticism. As I make it out (I’ve not found a transcription), it runs:

```
Ah, the little children were crying in the schools
All cried when they heard about the flood
If you don’t know about it gonna tell you about it
Yes just a little country town
Down in Mississippi
That’s M, I, M-I-S-S, I-S-S, I-P, P-Y. Mississippi
Everybody expected a flood
But nobody knew it would happen
I was just a little boy at the time
Twenty-two years old
I was just walkin’ around when the flood started
Mindin’ my own business
Tending my cows
Didn’t have no sheep down in Mississippi
That’s M, M, M-I, M-I-S-S, M-I-S-S-I-P-P-I
Big flood
Happened long time ago
I remember it well
```
I was there
I was there but I didn’t want to be there
Tupelo
Tupelo, Mississippi
That’s T, T-U, T-U-O, T-U, POLO
Tupelo
Big flood
Terrible

As in “Crash on the Levee (Down in the Flood),” Dylan and The Band savor the musical world that the bluesmen open up, and enjoy pushing Hooker’s “I’ll never forget it” further, inflating it into the claim of an eyewitness—absurd for the twenty-six-year-old Dylan.

4

Another man clung to a cypress tree on a tiny island. A tin roof of a building hung from the branches by electric wires and the wind swung it back and forth like a mighty ax. The man dared not move a step to his right lest this crushing blade split him open. He dared not step left for a large rattlesnake was stretched full length with his head in the wind.

—Zora Neale Hurston,
Their Eyes Were Watching God, 1937

“The Big Flood,” though acute and splendidly inventive, is relatively frivolous. Dylan’s fullest engagement with, and most deeply felt tribute to, the flood song tradition of Mississippi bluesmen is his song, “High Water (for Charley Patton)” of 2001, on Love and Theft. (“Blind Willie McTell” [1983], arguably Dylan’s greatest song of tribute to the blues, is not a flood song.) It refers most directly to one of the greatest blues songs ever recorded: Charley Patton’s “High Water Everywhere”—a song in two parts, or perhaps a pair of songs, which dates from December 1929, so was not recorded until well after the 1927 floods themselves (indeed, after the Wall Street Crash of October 1929). Here is the beginning of part one:
The backwater done rose all around Sumner, Lord, drove me
down the line
Backwater done rose at Sumner, drove po’ Charley down the
line.
And I’ll tell the world the water done jumped through this
town.

Lord, the whole round country, Lord, creek water is overflowed,
Lord, the whole round country, man, it’s overflowed
(Spoken: You know I can’t stay here. I’m...I’ll go where it’s
high, boy.)
I would go to the hilly country, but they got me barred.

David Evans nicely describes the powerful, tumultuous effect
of the performance: “Patton moans, growls, beats his guitar, snaps
the strings, stomps on the floor, and carries on conversations with
imaginary fellow flood victims.” Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow, in
their 1988 book on Patton—they use the term flood song and I owe
my title to them—comment that “the hallucinogenic effect of ‘High
Water’ is enhanced by the way Patton stages the song: it poses a
desperate scramble for survival that recalls the flood’s first thirty-
six hours, when no part of the Delta promised a safe refuge.” Pat-
ton’s lyrics kaleidoscopically move between places, jumping from
Sumner to Leland to Greenville to Rosedale to Vicksburg to Shar-
key County to Issaquena and the Tallahatchie and finally (in part one
alone) on to “the Jackson Road.” Calt and Wardlow note Patton’s
pennant for place names and that the trajectory here doesn’t exactly
match the progress of the actual flood. The mixing of tenses (“done
rose,” “drove,” “I’ll,” “it’s overflowed,” “is overflowed,” “I can’t”) and
address (“Lord,” “man,” “boy”) and person (“Po’ Charley” in the third
to “I” in the first) relentlessly piles up the accumulating panic of the
disaster. The bewildering confusion leads to the final resolve: “I’m
going back to the hilly country, / Won’t be worried no more”—only
for part two to kick in with a plunge back into the panic, more deadly
than before:
Backwater at Blytheville, backed up all around
Backwater at Blytheville, done took Joiner town
It was fifty families and children. "Tough luck—they can drown"
The water was risin' up in my friend's door
The water was risin' up in my friend's door
The man said to his women folk, "Lord, we'd better go"
The water was risin', got up in my bed
Lord, the water was rollin', got up to my bed
I thought I would take a trip, Lord, out on the big ice sled.

Patton's performance is intensely dramatic, distinctive, passionate: his strong, rasping voice, syncopated beats, irregular movement, rapping on his instrument and spoken interpolations ("You know what I mean," "look-a-here," and "Lord have mercy") bring it to energetic life. Taj Mahal in Martin Scorsese's fine documentary on the blues, Feel Like Going Home, observes appreciatively of Patton's technique that "he includes you way up inside his mind as to what's going on, and what he's thinking and what it's like at that time." Part two ends with death—the image of the empty home here registers with unusual finality.

Man, the water was rising at places all around
[spoken: Boy, they's all around]
It was fifty men and children come to sink and drown
Oh Lord, women and grown men drown
Ohhh, women and children sinkin' down [spoken: Lord, have mercy]
I couldn't see nobody at home and wasn't no one to be found.

Taj Mahal's comment that "he includes you way up inside his mind" might apply also to Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rising Highwater Blues"—or Sleepy John Estes's "Floating Bridge" with "muddy water running through my head." And they would chime for Dylan, who in Chronicles talks about how the blues of Robert Johnson "were so elemental in meaning and feeling and gave you so much of the inside picture."
Dylan knows the blues intimately and finds it of enduring value. In *Chronicles* he tells us that studio recording, around 1988, "was tedious and I didn’t like the current sounds—mine or anybody else’s. I didn’t know why an old Alan Lomax field recording sounded better to me, but it did." *Chronicles* suggests that there are tangible geographical facts behind Dylan’s symbolic topography of the United States—two lines of force above all directing Dylan’s identifications:

I was into the rural blues as well; it was a counterpart of myself. It was connected to early rock and roll and I liked it because it was older than Muddy and Wolf. Highway 61, the main thoroughfare of the country blues, begins about where I came from… Duluth to be exact… The Mississippi River, the bloodstream of the blues, also starts up from my neck of the woods. I was never too far away from any of it. It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood.

Dylan has described himself (in Scorsese’s *No Direction Home*) as a “musical expeditionary,” but there are ways in which he has a direct connection back. In John Lee Hooker’s New York hotel room, Sonny Boy Williamson heard Dylan playing and said, “Boy, you play too fast.” And, as already mentioned, he also learned a lesson from Lonnie Johnson (1899–1970), a lesson that according to *Chronicles* he remembered in the late 1980s when he needed to find a new guitar style, “something more active with more definition of presence.”

I didn’t invent this style. It had been shown to me in the early sixties by Lonnie Johnson. Lonnie was the great jazz and blues artist from the thirties who was still performing in the sixties. Robert Johnson had learned a lot from him. Lonnie took me aside one night and showed me a style of playing based on an odd- instead of even-number system.

It’s remarkable that Dylan, who was still touring in 2012, was taught a guitar style by the same man who influenced the legendary Robert Johnson (1911–1938, no relation to Lonnie). It completes a circle,
since in the early 1960s the young Dylan heard an advance copy of
the first reissue of Robert Johnson's music, given to him by his first
producer, John Hammond of CBS—who in 1938 had tried to book
Johnson for a concert at Carnegie Hall that December before discover-
ing that Johnson had died in August. Dylan says in Chronicles that
"Johnson's words made my nerves quiver like piano wires"; and that
it was the combination of Johnson's "dark night of the soul," Woody
Guthrie's "hopped-up union meeting sermons," Brecht and Weill's
sardonic style in "Pirate Jenny," and the nineteenth-century French
poet Arthur Rimbaud's surreal dislocations that allowed him to find
his own voice.

Dylan has written in Chronicles of what he found so revelatory
when he heard Robert Johnson's blues for the first time in 1961:

The songs weren't customary blues songs. They were perfected
pieces—each song contained four or five verses, every couplet
intertwined with the next but in no obvious way. They were so
utterly fluid. At first they went by quick, too quick to even get.
They jumped all over the place in range and subject matter,
short punchy verses that resulted in some panoramic story—
fires of mankind blasting off the surface of this spinning piece
of plastic.

Dylan has made Robert Johnson, who bobs up again here, an ele-
ment in his creation of a new kind of song, one which "High Water"
strives to exemplify: "I could see that the type of songs I was leaning
toward singing didn't exist and I began playing with the form, trying
to grasp it—trying to make a song that transcended the information
in it, the character and plot." Dylan was building, we could say, on a
blues aesthetic in entering this process, in which the word "trying" is
essential, because "transcending," never easy, is always questionable.
The 1984 preface to what is now Michael Taft's Pre-War Blues Lyric
Poetry: A Web Concordance suggestively declares, about the reser-
voir of "maverick stanzas" that is central to the shared heritage of the
blues, that
the essence of the blues is the blues couplet. Indeed, the nature of this type of song is such that one might very well define the genre as one big blues composed of a large but finite number of couplets, lines, and formulaic phrases; each individual text is but a subtext of these couplets... the concordance reveals formulaic and linguistic repetitions in the corpus.

It is not just the blues that operate in this way. In Invisible Republic (1997), his book about the 1967 Basement Tapes, Greil Marcus summarizes Harry Smith’s speculative account of the formation between 1850 and 1875 of the “folk-lyric” form, which includes white as well as black music:

There were enough fragments, passing back and forth between blacks and whites as common coin, to generate more fragments, to sustain within the matrix of a single musical language an almost infinite repertory of performances, to sustain the sense that out of the anonymity of the tradition a singer was presenting a distinct and separate account of a unique life.

This view matters here because Dylan himself pufffs Invisible Republic, though rather equivocally (“Greil Marcus has done it again,” says his blurb), so there seems reason to wonder if he was encouraged by it to the procedures of his album Love and Theft—and of the patchwork that becomes “High Water.” (He was more blatantly inspired by Eric Lott’s 1993 book Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.) For Marcus expounds a stimulating way of understanding the white banjo picker Clarence Ashley’s magical 1929 song “The Coo Coo Bird” (a track on the third volume of the Anthology of American Folk Music), which Dylan powerfully covered at the Gaslight in 1962. Marcus writes:

Like many of the numbers on the third volume of the Anthology, “The Coo Coo Bird” was a “folk-lyric” song. That meant it was made up of verbal fragments that had no direct or logical relationship to each other, but were drawn from a floating pool of
thousands and thousands of disconnected verses, couplets, one-liners, pieces of eight.

In the Dylan song we now turn to, “High Water (for Charley Patton),” that song is directly invoked.

5

“Well, it makes you think sometimes, to see the water come over all the world,” said the postmaster.
—Endora Welty, “At the Landing” 1943

Dylan’s “High Water (for Charley Patton),” though not itself a blues tune, resonates for us here as a flood song in relation to the blues tradition, and as a subset of the rather idiosyncratic Dylanesque offshoot of Harry Smith’s “folk-lyric song.” As in “Crash on the Levee (Down in the Flood),” “high tide’s risin’”—but there’s a more detailed, panoramic vision of what this “meanest flood” amounts to.

High water risin’—risin’ night and day
All the gold and silver are bein’ stolen away
Big Joe Turner lookin’ east and west
From the dark room of his mind
He made it to Kansas City
Twelfth Street and Vine
Nothin’ standing there
High water everywhere

High water risin’, the shacks are slidin’ down
Folks lose their possessions—the folks are leaving town
Bertha Mason shook it—broke it
Then she hung it on a wall
Says, “You’re dancin’ with whom they tell you to
Or you don’t dance at all”
It’s tough out there
High water everywhere
I got a cravin’ love for blazing speed
Got a hopped-up Mustang Ford
Jump into the wagon, love, throw your panties overboard
I can write you poems, make a strong man lose his mind
I’m no pig without a wig
I hope you treat me kind
Things are breakin’ up out there
High water everywhere

High water risin’, six inches ‘bove my head
Coffins droppin’ in the street
Like balloons made out of lead
Water pourin’ into Vicksburg, don’t know what I’m goin’ to do
“Don’t reach out for me,” she said
“Can’t you see I’m drownin’ too?”
It’s rough out there
High water everywhere

Well, George Lewis told the Englishman, the Italian and the Jew
“You can’t open up your mind, boys
To every conceivable point of view”
They got Charles Darwin trapped out there on Highway 5
Judge says to the High Sheriff,
“I want him dead or alive.
Either one, I don’t care”
High water everywhere

Well, the Cuckoo is a pretty bird, she warbles as she flies
I’m preachin’ the Word of God
I’m puttin’ out your eyes
I asked Fat Nancy for somethin’ to eat, she said, “Take it off the shelf—
As great as you are a man
You’ll never be greater than yourself”
I told her I didn’t really care
High water everywhere
I'm gettin' up in the morning—I believe I'll dust my broom
Keeping away from the women
I'm givin' 'em lots of room
Thunder rolling over Clarksdale, everything is looking blue
I just can't be happy, love
Unless you're happy too
It's bad out there
High water everywhere

The song's current—its relentless threatening movement and ominous buildup—pulls us in, partly through the rapid country picking by Larry Campbell on banjo, drawing on Clarence Ashley's hard, tight, fierce clawhammer style in his ominous nonsense song “The Coo Coo Bird,” but also through the recurrent crescendo crashes of cymbals and drums which lend urgency, and the choric moans (over, for example, “It's tough out there”). Dylan's voice is expressive, touching a note of self-parody in “make a strong man lose his mind” and finding a wonderful pause for the Judge speaking to the Sheriff: “Either one, I don't... care.”

“Everything is looking blue.” In this song Dylan is systematically indebted to the blues, among numerous other sources—as shown by several Dylan scholars to whom I am grateful—and the accumulation and interrelation of borrowings or allusions are quite dizzying. Thus the second line of verse 1—“All the gold and the silver are bein' stolen away”—immediately nods not to Charley Patton, but to Ashley's fourth verse: “Jack of Diamonds, Jack of Diamonds / I know you of old / You've robbed my poor pockets / Of my silver and my gold.” But the third and fifth lines of verse 1 refer us rather to the blues shouter Big Joe Turner, who became an early rock star in 1954 with “Shake, Rattle and Roll” and sang Leiber and Stoller's 1952 song “Kansas City” on his 1984 album Kansas City Here I Come: “I'm going to Kansas City, Kansas City here I come / They got a crazy way of loving there / And I'm gonna get me some. / I'll be standing on the corner / On the corner of Twelfth Street and Vine / With my Kansas City baby, and a bottle of Kansas City wine.” Kansas City, in fact, had
a major flood in 1951—but anyhow, it seems Turner isn’t going to get him some in Dylan’s vision of things. The refrain, finally, is straight from Patton—though it is Patton’s title and appears nowhere in his song’s lyrics.

In line 3 of verse 2 we’ve moved away from the blues a little: the name Bertha Mason points to the madwoman in the attic, Rochester’s Creole first wife in *Jane Eyre*. She’s escaped again, though, and at once slips into another Charley Patton song: “Shake It and Break It (But Don’t Let It Fall, Mama),” a song full of innuendo, with terrific verve and speed: “You can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall.” She seems to become a domineering madam, adapting an old Southern song for lines 5 and 6, which, as scholar-detective Scott Warnath notes, points even further back in time: “The blackface minstrelsy song ‘De Boatmen’s Dance’ (1843), by Daniel Decatur Emmett, composer of ‘Dixie,’ has the line ‘When you go to de boatman’s ball, / Dance wid my wife or not at all.’”

For line 3 of verse 3, Warnath finds “Jump into the wagon” in a popular rebel song from the Civil War: “God bless our noble army, in Him we all confide / So jump into the wagon and we’ll all take a ride”; and even more brilliantly traces “throw your panties overboard” to *Castle to Castle* (1957) by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, as translated in 1968 by Ralph Manheim, which draws on a passage about women’s promiscuity in wartime: “hats and heads in the whirlwind! panties overboard!” (the phrase being *slips par-dessus les moulins*).

The vivid fourth verse seems less complicatedly allusive, unless the presumably floating coffins (a not infrequent occurrence in floods) allude to Ishmael’s survival on the waters at the end of *Moby-Dick*, for Vicksburg occurs in Patton’s original flood blues (“Well, I’m goin’ to Vicksburg”). But then verse 5 again challenges the audience: while “George Lewis” could be a misspelt G. H. Lewes, partner of George Eliot, he could equally be the New Orleans jazz clarinettist or, after all, Oscar Wilde’s solicitor. His attitude to alien points of view in the third line, perhaps those of the Englishman, the Italian, and
the Jew (who sound like the personnel of an uncompleted joke),
seems to connect invidiously with the treatment of Charles Darwin
in the fourth line—presumably by creationists. But we seem far from
the South: Highway 5 runs from New Haven to Vermont, in Ivy
League territory.

Patton is the named inspirer of Dylan’s song; but Ashley’s “Coo
coo Bird” reappears in verse 6: the first two lines of Ashley’s refrain
in his intense, baffling song—“Oh, the coo-coo is a pretty bird /
She warbles as she flies / She never hollers coo-coo / Till the fourth
day July”—become the first line of the sixth verse of “High Water.”
And another bluesman appears in verse 7: “I’m goin’ get up in the
mornin’, I believe I’ll dust my broom” is the first line of Robert John-
son’s 1936 blues of the same name. It’s likely “dust my broom” means
leave, though I’ve heard sexual meanings alleged. In this dazzlin-
gly eclectic song, it’s apt that the last name invoked is “Clarksdale,” for
Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Bessie Smith died, houses the Delta
Blues Museum.

These sources (not that this enumeration is comprehensive) in-
cite speculation about the thrust of these verses: verse 1, success is
hollow; verse 2, desperation and exploitation; verse 3, swaggering
warmongering machismo; verse 4, death by water; verse 5, murder-
ous creationist intolerance; verse 6, aggressive patriotic Bible Belt
cynicism; verse 7, retreat from the world.

As in Patton’s original blues, then, we shift from place to
place—Kansas City to Vicksburg to Highway 5 in New England to
Clarksdale, Mississippi. And as in the original flood blues we’ve
looked at, there’s a complex interplay here between first and third
persons, between external and internal trouble, between the individ-
ual singer’s personal situation and emotional state, and the wider vi-
sion. Here, after the first two verses giving a picture of the scale of
the flood, we meet a strange first person, whose abrupt, clashing, al-
clusive utterances suggest moral and psychological fragmentation—if,
that is, the “T” is the same from line to line and verse to verse. It’s not
only Big Joe Turner who doesn’t find “lovin’” in this song: “I hope you
treat me kind” is rebuffed a verse later—“Don’t reach out for me”—
and, after a further seeming rebuff from “Fat Nancy,” at the end the singer is “keeping away from the women / I’m givin’ em lots of room” (an echo, as Heylin points out, of a “traditional nagging song,” “Bald Headed End of a Broom”). But then perhaps at the last there is a single loved one—“I just can’t be happy, love, / Unless you’re happy too”—though even if there’s some protective bubble around this loving pair it still seems vulnerable: it’s rhymed with “everything is looking blue.” Is this the same “she” as the one who said, “Don’t reach out for me” in the fourth verse?

The suggestion that intimate contentment is impossible for a couple while the world is in such a bad state clarifies something about the song’s movement. For it’s possible to be puzzled by the apparent emphasis in Dylan’s repeated phrase “out there” (where it’s “tough,” “breakin’ up,” “rough,” “bad”). The great characteristic of floods, after all, is their implacable invasiveness, that they come pouring in here too, that they “come in my windows and doors.” That, then, may be the point of the refrain—correcting any hope that it’s only terrible “out there”—because, actually, it’s “High water everywhere.”

In 1984–1985, in the London Review of Books, the critic Michael Neve identified a characteristic of Dylan’s lyrics of that time, that they were “entirely to do with homelessness and not belonging,” which Neve suggests “must, somewhere, connect with Dylan’s Christian concerns”—by which I take it he means with human fragility and apocalyptic destruction, with the longing for truth and justice and for a spiritual home. One place where they connect, I am arguing, is the flood blues, not always but often Christian in their emphasis. These songs strike home, one might say. “There’s no place I can call my home” (Lonnie Johnson, “South Water Bound”); “thousands of people ain’t got no place to go” (“Backwater Blues”); “mama we ain’t got no home” (Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Rising Highwater Blues”); “all these people have no place to stay” (“When the Levee Breaks”); “I
couldn’t see nobody at home and wasn’t no one to be found” (Charley Patton, “High Water Everywhere”); “Lord have mercy where’s we gvine?” (Sleepy John Estes, “Floating Bridge”); “Women and children were screamin’, sayin’, ‘Lord, where must we go?’” (Lonnie Johnson, “Flood Water Blues”).

The floods and the displacement they brought were among the precipitating causes of the first so-called Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North and Midwest (Muddy Waters and Lonnie Johnson among them). One result was the Chicago blues. To play it, well before Dylan at Newport, many Mississippi blues players electrified (and citified) their own acoustic blues. Jazz guitarist Bill Frisell and filmmaker Bill Morrison, in their moving 2012 collaboration called The Great Flood, tell that very story, flowing from the tragic turbulence of the 1927 flood to the resulting influx of Southern blacks to Chicago, using newsreels showing bluesmen joyously performing in the Northern metropolis. For Frisell and Morrison, as for Dylan—as, in fact, for many of the blues musicians who have inspired him—such floods and displacements have a significance that spreads even beyond the vast Mississippi valley and the history of popular music. Indeed, insofar as the spread of the blues inspired rock, and rock has changed our world, the 1927 flood can be seen as bearing a cultural significance even greater than its immense physical scale would have suggested.

Flood songs, whether evoking the flood’s imminence, presence, or aftermath, unsettle our sense of home. They also dramatize anxieties about, and positively invoke, influence literally: floods are a phenomenon of overwhelming permeability; of things seeping through, over, and under the usual boundaries and barriers. The OED offers us an obsolete sense of the word as its first sense: “Influence: The action or fact of flowing in; inflow, influx; said of the action of water and other fluids, and of immaterial things conceived of as flowing in.” The classic flood songs are focused on the anxiety of influence in this palpable sense; in drawing on them as they draw on each other, as part of his eclectic self-creation, Dylan manages to avoid the grander, Bloomian “anxiety of influence.”
This essay has immersed itself in this element, six inches above its head perhaps. Even at that, it is only a dip of the toe in the deep water of the history of Bob Dylan’s metaphors—in the real, shifting waters of the Mississippi, always rolling down toward New Orleans from way up near Duluth, always liable to spill over their margins and swallow our world; and also in the fluid medium of the Mississippi blues, which can also overrun their bounds and seep into our thoughts, words, and lives. If, as seems likely, with rising sea levels and increasingly extreme convulsions of the elements, floods become more and more present to our consciousness, the heritage of the flood song will be all the more valuable, as it comes closer and closer to home.