

1954

Flood

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Recommended Citation

Feldman, Irving. "Flood." *New Mexico Quarterly* 24, 1 (1954). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol24/iss1/12>

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BY DAY OR WEEK

The street empties cold ash on phantom sky,
 Turns itself dustily to morning bars,
 Rakes a child's gilt slipper on the cinder heap,
 Composing blues, grays, brickyard reds.

The iris of day spreads, the sheets come down,
 Miranda boxes out a purple dream of boys
 Staring with glass slippers starting in their eyes;
 In a green gown begins tomorrow's days.

The red rush of buses eats a look,
 A drummer from a suitcase tries to see
 Green water drowning Sunday afternoon;
 The pavement breaks, and miracles a tree.

To the travelling eye Miranda's blouse disposes
 A downward thinking thought, divide and conquer,
 A hope of hothouse roses. Pigeons open evening out
 Like brothel doors, the clock grows longer.

JOHN DILLON HUSBAND

FLOOD

To Lionel Trilling

The first day it rained we were glad.
 How could we know? The heavy air
 Had lain about us like a scarf, though work
 Got done. Everything seemed easier.
 In the streets a little mud.

With the first faint drops, a tiny breeze
Trembled the cornsilk, and the frailest leaves
Turned on their stems this way and that.
Coming from the fields for lunch
I thought it my sweat.

On the second day streamlets ran
In the furrows; the plow stuck,
The oxen balked. On the third day
The rain ran from the roof like a sea.
I thought I would visit town.

Farmers from their farms, merchants from stores,
Laborers, we filled the town. I
stayed with a cousin. We were told
The granary was full, we could live
A thousand days should the river rise impetuously.

The fifth day the clouds seemed hung
From the tops of the tallest trees. The sun
We did not see at all. And the rain
Beat down as if to crush the roof.
I did not shave or write my wife.

On the sixth day, we moved the women
And children to the town church, built
On the highest ground hard by the granary.
We finished work on the levee.
The river was thick with silt.

A dark drizzle started in my head.
Next day it trickled on the walls of my skull
Like black earth drifting down a grave.
We resolved to stay in the church come what will.
That day I did not leave my bed.

From where the rain? and why on us?
 Not even the wisest knows or dares guess.
 Did we not plan, care, save, toil,
 Did we lay idle or lust, did we waste or spoil?
 Therefore, why on us?

The husbandman from his flock,
 Husband from wife, the miser from his heap,
 The wise man from his wit, from her urn
 The widow—are tumbled all, as a man might knock
 The ashes from his pipe.

And the days descended in a stream,
 So fast they could not be told apart.
 In the church all went black.
 Once I lay with Lenah as in a dream.
 Another time I found myself at Adah's back.

If no one gets up at dawn to wind
 The clock, shall not the state run down?
 If no one gets up to go to the fields
 To feed the cows, to sow the wheat,
 To reap, how shall the state grow fat?

One comes telling us Noah has built a boat
 That through the flood he may ride about,
 And filled it all with animals.
 Just like the drunken fool, that slut-
 Chaser, to think of no one else.

I feed my friends and kin; twenty-nine thrived
 In my home. But mad Noah harangues the air
 Or goes muttering in his cuff
 As though a god were up his sleeve.
 Who is Noah to get saved?

I am a farmer, I love my wife,
 My sons are many and strong, my land is green.
 This is my cousin, he lives in town,
 An honest man, he rises at dawn.
 We were children together.

Shall not the world run down?
 Why on us? Did we not plan?
 Does not black blood flow before my eyes
 And blackness brim inside my skull?
 Did we lay idle? Did we spoil?

Out of its harness the mind wild as a horse
 Roams the rooms and streets. There are some that say
 Noah sits amid the rude beasts in his ark
 And they feed one upon the other in the dark
 And in the dark they mate. And some say worse:

That a griffin was born, and centaur
 And sphinx hammer at the door.
 Groans and moans are heard, by some the roar
 Of giant Hippogriff. Still others cry
 That all about the earth is dry!

Dry as if no rain had fallen,
 As if we were not awaiting the swollen
 River, as if the clouds did not sit
 On our chimneys, or the waters
 Tumble past our windows in spate.

And some here say a dove has come,
 Sure, they think, the sign of a god.
 And others say that Noah walks the street
 Puffed with news. But bid him wait!
 We are busy with our flood.

IRVING FELDMAN