Elegy for a Thousand Books Drowned in Floodwater

This was the den.
Maneuver through stinking,
soggy sofa cushions.
Adjust your bulky mask
to deflect the poisoned air.
Tiptoe, breath held, beside warped
interior walls. Perceive the quiet
of decomposition, black mold
on once-busy wooden spoons; wonder
at how the high water rummaged
through drawers, swiped
the heavy fruit bowl, the toaster
off the custom high counters. Run
the treacherous funhouse length
of the eat-in kitchen, take
your steps twice—toe test,
then quick and light, then next,
on buckling strips of wood;
open jaws of skewed joists below
would swallow what falls through.
This was the foyer. Move
the dank, leaden mattress that
has floated off its frame
and into the hall. Marvel at
the power of dark, quickly
rising bayous. Smell the dead
before you see them, Homer
and H.D., Walker and Morrison,
Flannery and Eudora and Ursula,
and oh! that rare Dickinson,
Cantos and cantos and cantos,
Ezra and all his letters
to parents and poets and lovers
unbound from their soggy covers,
rotting in the northern rooms
where you slept and wrote.
Pick up the hardbound Heaney
and feel it turn to oatmeal in your hand.
Hear these books tell you what
gone forever feels like.
Remind yourself of their replaceability,
their just-thingness, but do not
believe a word of it.
Step around the mounds
of all those other authors no one
would recognize, even dry.
Watch for snakes
hiding in the pulp that was pages
and poetry flowing out of the holes
where white doors used to hang,
keeping all of you safe inside.