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The Tulsa Convulsion

June 1, 1921

North of Frisco Station, up Archer Street,
was what white folks called “Little Africa,”
the Greenwood neighborhood, Tulsa’s Harlem.
On Greenwood Avenue, “The Black Wall Street,”
were drugstores, grocery stores, men’s and ladies’ fine
furnishings, shoe shops, barbershops, cafés,
hotels, theaters, a beauty school,
brick churches, newspapers, a funeral home.
Greenwood’s houses ranged from simple to stately:
built by black people, on the rock of faith.
Some old folks remembered being enslaved.
Some young men were veterans of the Great War.
Tulsa’s prosperous black citizens
looked to the future through the lens of hope.

Civilization is a house of cards:
What else explains how all hell can break loose
if a black boy steps on a white girl’s toe?
Armed black rescuers hurried to the scene
to free the terrified boy from the mob.
Then the veneer of community
burst into a gasoline-fueled whirlwind
with a deadly deluge of machine gun bullets.
Carloads of white men robbed the hardware stores
of guns and ammunition; truckloads, armed,
surrounded Greenwood as the night deepened.
At 6:00 AM the city’s whistle blew,
and white men carrying high-powered rifles
invaded Greenwood, screaming like huns.

I dressed my little daughter, and we ran.
My sisters and I carried Mother out,
with bullets falling around us like rain.
About two dozen armed white men stopped us,
made us hold up our hands. *The boys with them,*
all armed, were told to go in the houses,
take what they wanted, then set them on fire.
Ten-year-old boys with guns pushed us around.
The fire department came out to protect
white homes on the west side of Detroit Street
while on the east side of the street
white women with shopping bags and white men
with torches stole or destroyed everything they could find.
A praying man, I asked God if He is just.

They dropped turpentine bombs *from aeroplanes.*
 They shot down fleeing people from above.
 They burned the hospital, with its patients.
 They stole Victrolas and smashed pianos.
 They tore up and burned family Bibles.
 If atrocities are measured in body counts,
 these three hundred dead equal Wounded Knee.
 Almost as many dead as at My Lai.
 And hundreds wounded, thousands made homeless,
 widowed, orphaned, indelibly traumatized.
 The possessed rioted for one day.
 Then laws were passed against rebuilding;
 insurance companies found reasons not to pay;
 the city auctioned off the burnt-out lots.

Ladies batting lashes around blue eyes
 wide as #WhoMe? accepted gifts
 of fine garments still reeking of smoke.
 Some white granddaughters must have inherited
 jewelry forfeited by a lady who ran
 barefoot, in her nightgown, wild-eyed, dragging

her children by their wrists, as a white man
squinted one eye, bit the tip of his tongue, and fired.
What forms groups into mobs of the possessed,
ordinary until struck by seizures?
Other American cities succumbed
to epidemic xenophobia
a hundred years ago: East Saint Louis;
Washington, D.C.; Omaha . . .

Because crackers think they're a superior race.
Because peckerwoods, buckras, honkies, ofays
believe Creation's best work leads to them.
If you're offended by these epithets,
think of a lifetime of equivalents.
Invisibility is a privilege.
White America forgets histories
like a blond child screamed awake from a nightmare
and patted back to sleep by a dark hand.
Our system hosts an anxiety disorder
characterized by irrational fear.
Reconciliation is not simple.
I saw men, women, and children treated like beasts.
The white Red Cross workers were angels of mercy.

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