

May 13th 1985 – “This is America”ⁱ

By Fred L. Joiner

I was 10. I remember this because my	blood
brother was not yet 2 years old	
& I had	nightmare
of myself carrying his	body out
of a bombed-out	house
both our bodies	aflame.

Let me back up.

I was born in Philly. April 14th 1975.
All my Dad’s people are from Philly.
North Philly. 25th & something,
North Philly. For some reason,
I came three months premature.
I was in a hurry to jump
Into the teeth
of one of the most segregated
cities in America. Still.

In this city, my Dad stayed skinny,	
because he was always	running
for his life, chased	
through downtown &	white
neighborhoods back	North
for music lessons.	

In this city, my ever sober,	never-
took-a-drink-in-his-life	
Uncle John, whom I never met,	
was said to have hung himself	
in his cell, publicly drunk,	
in police custody - in this city.	
My blood lies in this city,	
this city of lies & said Brotherly	love.

On that day in May,	
you could see the	smoke
from miles away	
from blocks away	
you could feel the	heat
in the already fresh asphalt	heat
of the	day.

What do you reach for	
when your	
whole neighborhood	burns
down	
<i>you can run from it</i>	
<i>and still be in it</i> ⁱⁱ	
when the scent of everything	
you thought you	owned
is now seared on your	skin
or trapped in every thread	
of the only clothes on your	back?

Days later,	
for blocks	
the heat-cracked	streets
are	still
wailing,	
& the city's	skin
is a layer of ash	settling
into	mourning
& denial.	

April 23rd, 2021ⁱⁱⁱ

Today we learn	
Remains	remain,
the	children;
a museum of	boxed
charred black	bones
No one wants to	claim

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What human	burns
The already	burned
& calls it	procedure?
What beast answers	death
With yet more	death?
Whose exceptional	anthem
calls to meet	fire
with yet more	fire
& expects there to be	peace?

ⁱ The first sentence of Police Commissioner Gregore Sambor's bullhorn speech was "'Attention MOVE: This is America. You have to abide by the laws of the United States' after which bombs were dropped on the MOVE residency. This was after the home had been flooded by fire houses.

ⁱⁱ A reference to poetry collection by Fred Moten, *I ran from it, but was still in it* (Cusp Books)

ⁱⁱⁱ Skeletal remains of children killed in the police bombing of the MOVE residency were kept by UPenn and Princeton and may have been used in a forensic anthropology course, without family permission.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/22/move-bombing-black-children-bones-philadelphia-princeton-pennsylvania>

<https://billypenn.com/2021/04/21/move-bombing-penn-museum-bones-remains-princeton-africa>

<https://www.foxnews.com/us/upenn-princeton-apologize-1985-philadelphia-move-bombing-remains>

^{iv} <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/05/13/philadelphia-health-official-thomas-farley-resignation-move-cremations-victims/5084626001/>