

J. Chester Johnson

*Selections From:
“The Elaine Race Massacre: Drama In Verse”*

An Introduction to The Elaine Race Massacre:

Soon after the end of World War I, racial conflicts exploded through the United States – most notably during the “Red Summer of 1919”, the latter term being introduced to the nation by the African-American poet, James Weldon Johnson, to characterize the sanguinary nature of that moment. While outbreaks occurred in numerous big cities and other places, the deadliest attack against blacks – possibly constituting the most significant racial onslaught against African-Americans in our country’s history – took place during the first few days of October, 1919 in Phillips County, Arkansas along the Mississippi River Delta. More than a hundred black sharecroppers and family members were killed, but the figure could actually be in the hundreds. Five whites were also killed, two of whom may have been victims of friendly fire. A major precipitating factor for the assaults against blacks was the incipient efforts by the sharecroppers to unionize and increase their ability to negotiate for fair cotton prices with local white planters.

The largest number of deaths were inflicted by federal troops with their machine guns, brought to Phillips County at the request of the Arkansas Governor to the Wilson Administration, on the excuse that the military was necessary in order to quell a black insurrection. No investigation ever established that a real threat of a black insurrection existed at that time in Phillips County.

The Poet's Comments on The Elaine Poems:

This segment of poems from a volume, currently in manuscript form and preliminarily entitled ***The Elaine Race Massacre: Drama In Verse***, reflects episodes based on historical accounts of events that followed the cessation of violence and that resulted in the rapid (all-white juries often rendered verdicts in two minutes) and unfair conviction of 74, black sharecroppers for crimes ranging from first-degree murder to “night-riding” in connection with the Massacre. No whites were charged with any offenses.

Friday, October 3, 1919: Before Departing Phillips County, Governor Charles Hillman Brough Appoints A Local Committee Of Seven Leading White Men To Decide On The Blacks To Be Prosecuted; In Order To Justify Charges and Trials Against Black Sharecroppers, The Committee Fabricates An Untrue “White” Narrative.

We cannot be touched; fingers do
Not connect so far to control places
We go and choices we can make
Freely without so much as a whisper
Or tilt to deny routes we choose;
It's a trick getting here without
Trickery. Some tried, even smart
Interlopers who last about as long
As it takes to decide to crush them.

It all began innocent enough, I
Guess, with wealth and old people
Teaching left from right and right
From everything else, old after
Young until we were old all of
The time; folks came to us for odd
And same alike, as we led them
Our way, until our way had only
One way, found time and again.

We serve each other too well;
We know where dark skies are
Buried beneath the corncrib or
Underneath the azalea bush,
Enough to be led to ruination
For us all if we don't concentrate
This secrecy and harsh fortune
Into pacts for the status quo that
Wrests a future from the future.

Blacks mean nothing and nearly
Everything to us: a glad voice
To make us feel better than we
Even should; a stronger hand
To feed the riches we squander

Under every moonlight. Yet,
They're mirrors of what we keep
To ourselves, of what we've done,
So easily stirred by daily practice.

Tuesday, October 7 – Mid-October, 1919: Incarcerated Black Sharecroppers Are Tortured To Tell, On The Witness Stand, The “White” Version Of The Massacre: It Had Been “A Black Insurrection”, Targeted To Assassinate Whites.

They first whip us with vengeance,
A reminder of how wills are tamed,
And then they apply “strangling
Drugs” to make us think there is
No more air to gulp; for some of us,
That’s enough to open our tongues
In any way the white man wants
Our tongues to waggle, but there’s
More for those who’ll take more.

Eying us to eye them, they charge
Up the chair with hot damnation
Running through, running currents
Like coals through veins, muscle –
Higher still until we’re close to
Smoking, our teeth clinching like
Sprung bolts, our jaws clamped,
Grinding up to a tip – they call
It electric’s chair, a devil’s tool.

The name’s Frank Moore, and I
Don’t give a shit at all: I’ll not lie,
I’ll not lie, just for spite, though
They can tear this muscle right
Off the bone if they think it’ll
Work, but it won’t, not unless
They want a dead man to carry
Into court with limbs twitching,
Lips setting to say what I’d say.

Tuesday, October 7, 1919: Walter F. White Of The NAACP, Who Could Pass For Caucasian And Would Later Head The Organization For A Quarter Of A Century, Goes To Helena To Learn About The Conflagration, Panics, And Boards A Train To Mississippi, Writing Later “I Shall Never Take As Long A Train Ride. . .”

The longest trip can be around
The block or across a river, from
Black to white, from silence to
Yelps of a mob – distance cannot
Be measured, for it's the extension
Of the gut, when I'm speaking to
Another without a face, who mutters
Mutilation in an airless room
Until I admit who I am not.

The longest trip is that fraught
Return to the unalterable reason I
Seek a fast escape from less friable
Winds at my back, with nothing
Else to say in hollow moments.
Who also would hide before they
Ran? . . . knowing absolutely all will
Be lost once caught, placating eager
Hands that seek an unfree voice.

Why was I born to plod the
Unreachable? For the others, it's
Found on the morning step after
A good night's sleep; and yet, for
Us, it shall never be in hand, even
For an intrepid leap or the facile
Mind or salient tongue – for us,
A talent extrudes the desire more
But instead thwarts a way there.

Between Tuesday, October 7 And Friday, November 21, 1919: Sallie Giles Repeatedly Visits The Phillips County Jail To Dress And Tend To The Gunshot Wounds Of Her Sons, Albert And Milligan.

I return to become a difference;
You know, the other side, obverse
Reflection of the insane and absurd;
Boys, men, they hurt so much
From holes now at obvious places
That cannot be filled – not with
Attention nor my kisses through
The bars on open wounds, spaces
That choose not to be re-seen.

Daily, I walk among the dead
And possessed, those omnipotent
Beings who control day and night
Among the rows; I wait to pass
Until invisibly I walk unfolded
Alone to be with what remains
Of my remaining sons, shot to
Pieces and almost dead to me,
Their silences risen opaque.

The stories of torture greet us
Everywhere, my good boys not
Saying one way or the other;
For I like not knowing, we who
Thought there was much we'd
Never see regret the seeing of
What we have. What can they
Take from my boys that has not
Been taken, the fate I've given?

Tuesday, November 4, 1919: An African-American Sharecropper, Albert Giles, Hunted Down In Govan Slough On October 1 And Shot Several Times, Is Convicted Of The Murder Of A White Man, James Tappan, Who Was More Likely Killed By Friendly Fire Across Or Along The Slough.

Yeah, sure, I shot the man as I
Hugged the safe ground like it was
The last woman of the world. Folks
Just don't have time to think about
Killing when they're being killed –
Before my head broke open like
A gourd, and a bullet passed on
Through another side; my arms
Falling away, a dream unflexed.

Yeah, sure, I shot Tappan, while
I'm rabbits in the underbrush, letting
The white man pass me by, a sound
Hidden among branches as noise
Sought me out into the open, hunted,
Not hunting, among bogs, a world
Wet with its own sweat and temper
Mixing ever faster unfaithfully into
A special fear I'd never tasted once.

Yeah, I shot him in the face a load
Of buckshot, just like the rabbit
Rules the world and I'm free to
Leave court and never go to jail
And my shadow will win the race
And I'll make it out of here alive.
They kill one to justify killing
Another: the ends almost meet,
A simple circle wound in the dirt.