The worst race riot in the history of the United States occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921 when Greenwood, the prosperous black district of the city, was burned to the ground by a white mob.

Grandmother Ruth—Last Day of School

It’s still an hour before first bell on the final day of school, and the ceiling fan is stirring a little breeze

so papers on Mr. O’Malley’s desk rise and walk down the aisle, as if they, too, had someplace better to be.

I’m daydreaming of dancing with Jimmy Dolan when I hear something rolling down Cincinnati Avenue—the tearing sound of old metal wheels and an axle that needs grease, and even in 1921, when the trolley carries me home each evening along downtown streets paved for fleets of Ford Roadsters, the sound of horses’ hooves is not unfamiliar, though part of a world we’ve all outgrown.

Now, I can just make them out, Percherons, pounding steel shoes into asphalt that by midday will be slicked with tar, and pulling an old buckboard wagon bearing too much weight on its springs. So I’m wondering what’s in back? What’s stacked under the heavy tarpaulin?

Maybe cordwood for the big boiler in the school basement. On the first of June, there’s still a chill in the air when the sun is still waiting, and I’ve got the school to myself. and because I’m surrounded by old poets stuck to the walls,
I glance back at Wordsworth and Shelley peering over my shoulder, and Byron who’d dance the Texas Tommy all night long.

And now the wagon’s almost underneath the window, and a little light is just creeping over the Edison Auto Hotel,

when I notice something sticking out from under the canvas—feet, shoeless, lots of feet, some turned up and others down.

Manikins for the windows at Vandevers? But these are black. And oh lord, now I smell smoke and wonder if the school is burning,

and from this second-floor window, I can see a dark cloud rising from the far side of the railroad tracks—Little Africa,

in the first fingers of gathering light. And later in class, I smell ash and kerosene on Mr. O’Malley’s hands as he smooths the semester final on my desk. Now, all the students are turning to stare out the window as sunlight reveals the death of the Dreamland Ballroom

and a thousand homes rendered in flame. And I remember the feet in the wagon passing Central High and turning at McNulty Field,

where Babe Ruth clubbed a baseball so far over the right field wall it rolled an extra hundred yards to settle by a gravestone

in Oaklawn Cemetery. And now I know where that wagon was bound, and by tomorrow no one’s ever going to speak of Greenwood again.