

DEFENDING HOME

A DREAM DEFERRED

Dr. Ossian Sweet's brother, Dr. Otis Sweet, who had recently moved to Detroit and was setting up a dentistry practice, was the last person let into the house before sundown on September 9, 1925. He was returning with William Davis, who was a Howard University alum, like Ossian, and joined a team of ten others to defend the house that night.

Dr. Ossian Sweet opened the deadbolt to let his brother and Mr. Davis in.

In his testimony in trial a month later, he recalled this:

"When I opened the door and saw the mob, I realized I was facing the same mob that had hounded my people through its entire history. In my mind I was pretty confident of what I was up against. I had my back against the wall. I was filled with a peculiar fear, the fear of one who knows the history of my race. I knew what mobs had done to my people before."

– Dr. Ossian Sweet testimony, November 1925

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Shortly after letting his brother in, Ossian Sweet went into his bedroom, with a revolver in his hand, and he laid on his bed and closed his eyes.

Maybe he tried to wish it all away. But a stone broke one of the bedroom windows. Gladys came in, and the newly married couple whispered to each other. We can only guess what they discussed.

Gunshots rang out from another room. After a brief pause, several more shots were heard.

Police broke in, and everyone in the house was arrested and charged with first degree murder.

The Sweets and the other nine people defending the house that evening were eventually exonerated and freed by the justice system. And with that, the right to defend one's property became enshrined in American law.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore —
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over —
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

– Langston Hughes, "Harlem"

