Odysseus in the Magic City

John Beardsley
Published in *Lonnie Holley (2025)*

In the early years of his long career as a visual artist, Lonnie Holley created some work that was perplexing, even frustrating. He used commonplace materials—typically cast-off objects, very little modified, in seemingly random juxtapositions, as if he casually collected and arbitrarily combined things he just happened to come upon. For those fortunate enough—as I was—to first encounter Holley's work where it was initially made—in the yard of his house near the airport in Birmingham—there was the added complexity that it was not entirely clear where one sculpture ended and another began. Nor was it clear if the sculptures were finished or still in process—if his collections of materials were already manipulated or awaiting transformation. Compounding this complexity was the artist's habit of plundering existing assemblages to make new ones, continuously repurposing his already salvaged objects. His yard seemed like a language in formation, with words, phrases, sentences, even whole paragraphs resolved, but with a great number of inchoate utterances in between.

For those with a background in art history, Holley's sculptures might evoke the traditions of assemblage art, but for two crucial factors: these traditions were not known to him when he started making art, and the materials and forms are not ends in themselves, as they so often are in assemblage art, but narrative devices. His interest is less in the character of his materials and their formal relationships with one another and more in their cultural and historical associations. They carry their own meanings, often attributable to the people who made or used them; to recycle materials in Holley's view is to pay tribute to the labor and lives of those who passed the objects down to us. In this respect, Holley taps into the deepest traditions of African American yard art and cemetery practice, where objects are assembled to create a transfigured and sanctified space, one that honors the ancestors. This has been an attribute of his work from its beginnings, as he memorably told the artist and curator Judith McWillie in interviews for a 1992 Artforum article. "The earth is made up of the dust of the ancestors," he told her. "We are living off their bodies. I dig through what other people have thrown away . . . to get the gold of it—to know that grandmother had that skillet and stood over that heat preparing that meal, so when I go home with that skillet, I've got grandmother."[1]

All this is to say that every aspect of Holley's work tells a story—his art, his music, his spoken words. Holley may have been culturally predisposed to this: the author and Birmingham native Imani Perry suggests that "storytelling is a critical feature of African diasporic culture."[2] But Holley puts his own spin on the practice. Unlike the narratives of his friend and fellow Birmingham yard artist Joe Minter, for instance, whose environment includes evocations of a slave ship, segregated restrooms, and the cell where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. composed his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Holley's stories stand at the intersection of the personal and the political. While Minter's yard addresses history, Holley's work evokes the individual experiences behind that history. It is no less political, but its politics are intertwined with autobiographical narrative—he makes art that we might describe as political autobiography. Moreover, his stories can be triggered by the most mundane things. This was driven home to me in one of my early encounters with the artist. Walking along a street in Atlanta, he picked up from the ground some wire resembling a broken coat hanger and fashioned it into a face in profile. He dropped it onto the sidewalk next to a flattened piece of chewing gum. "This," he announced, directing my attention to the gum, "is your sticky situation. And this," he added, grabbing a piece of electrical cord discarded nearby and laying it over the gum, "this is your power over the sticky situation."

What is the genesis of Holley's stories? And how do they help us make sense of his art? The arc of his life is both commonplace and extraordinary, narrated by the artist many times with only slight variations almost as a stream of consciousness, governed by accident as much as intention—think James Joyce's Ulysses in the new Africa of the American South. His early life in Birmingham was central to the formation of these stories. To some extent, his experience was typical of an African American child in the Deep South in the Jim Crow era— enforced segregation, racial violence, environmental pollution, social and educational inequities, and unequal justice. Birmingham was not unique in this regard—its institutionalized racism was a national phenomenon but honed to an especially lethal edge in the city. The place had a history of so many racially motivated bombings—culminating in the murder of four girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963—that the city earned the moniker "Bombingham." It had the archetypal brutal cop, sportscaster turned Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, who—among his other excesses—deployed attack dogs and firehoses against children protesting apartheid in America. And it had its executioners in the form of the Ku Klux Klan.

But the strictures of race and caste, geography and generation, tell us only so much. Holley's sojourn through the city's social history had its individual inflections. Separated at a young age from his birth family, he endured the abuses of the informal foster care system and incarceration for truancy at what

was essentially a prison camp for Black children. Nor was he passive in the face of these challenges—he retained an agency that led him ultimately to turn his stories into art. As another Birmingham native—activist, educator, and author Angela Davis— asserted, people are shaped by their environments, and Holley is clearly no exception: "The forces that have made my life what it is," Davis writes, "are the very same forces that have shaped and misshaped the lives of millions of my people."[3] But Holley proves the reverse is also true—people have a way of shaping themselves and their surroundings whatever their political and social ecosystems.

In an effort to map the contours of those ecosystems, I have relied extensively on narratives that Holley has already provided as well as my own interviews with the artist. In what follows, Holley is the main narrator; I interpolate details of history and geography in an effort to situate his stories in the political and social history of Birmingham. I focus on his life in that city because, as Davis says, it is the place that most shaped and misshaped him, providing the experiences that impel his work to this day. We all live with memories, but as we will see, most of us have the good fortune to have fewer traumatic ones than Lonnie Holley.

The man we now know as Lonnie Holley would not have answered to that name as a child. The seventh of an unimaginable twenty-seven children eventually born to his mother, Holley began life in Birmingham on February 10, 1950. He remained with his birth mother for about eighteen months, when she gave him to another woman for temporary care. As Holley would later recount to historian Theodore Rosengarten, who has recorded the most extensive and authoritative interviews with the artist to date, "Mama said she let the lady carry me off to keep me a couple days, but she took me away and did not bring me back. I'm thinking it was a pretty hard time for Mama."[4] The woman, a carnival worker and burlesque dancer whose name Holley does not recall or never learned, took him on the road and kept him for three years. Back in Birmingham and apparently with a severe drinking problem, she reportedly traded the child to the owners of a speakeasy for a pint of whiskey. "That's the way I got into the McElroys' house. I was undernourished and Mrs. McElroy fixed me a plate of food." They called him Tonkie. "I was raised in a honky tonk and they called me Tonkie." Tonkie McElroy.

Lonnie's years with the McElroys, who lived in a shotgun house on Lomb Avenue west of downtown near the old state fairgrounds, were a decidedly mixed bag. Mrs. McElroy, "Big Mama," treated him well and encouraged his education. She took him to nearby Rising Star Baptist Church and started him in school at six at Princeton Elementary. He simultaneously began a process of self-education. He was exposed to church music and the blues—his bed was by the jukebox at the whiskey house. He wandered the ditches behind the McElroys', in which water flowed down to Valley Creek and eventually the Black Warrior River, teaching himself about nature and the weather (he was especially intrigued by worms). He built rock dams to observe minnows, tadpoles, and crawfish, and he commenced a lifelong habit of object accumulation, collecting and sorting things he found in the ditches. He typically wandered east, up Valley Creek toward town. As he told the producer of a recent podcast, "It was like an adventure, a child on an adventure down the ditches and the creeks. And seeing the broken material, the closer you got to downtown, you got a chance to see more and more and more and more waste material that had been flushed down the creek and the ditches."[5]

Holley took advantage of proximity to a drive-in theater next to the fairgrounds to catch every film it showed, watching from a shack on top of the McElroys' back porch and listening through a pair of speakers liberated from the drive-in and connected to the house by a long wire through a drainage pipe. He also became a regular at the fairgrounds itself. Unable to afford an entry ticket, he snuck in through another drainage pipe; eventually apprehended, he asked for and was given a job collecting litter. He recalls seeing and learning about all kinds of domesticated animals, agricultural commodities, and industrial products. "For Birmingham, it was the day of who made what, how strong it was, and how long it would last. I learned all of this, and I was like a walking encyclopedia by the time I got to first grade." Both fairgrounds and films commenced his visual education. "What I grew up with were the state fairground images. Painted billboards, colorful painting, saying 'Step right up, come on in to the main attraction. Come see the serpent head on top of the human head.'"

McElroy, however, did not like him, and the feeling was mutual. The situation deteriorated when Lonnie was about seven. Big Mama died, and McElroy began beating him—he blamed Lonnie for her death. She had become disabled and bedridden; her husband went away and left her in Lonnie's care. When he returned to find her dead, he whipped Lonnie with an electric cord and made him chop wood for the rest of the day. As night fell, Lonnie decided to take his chances on running away. On the street in front of the house, he was struck by a car and dragged, as he recalls, two and a half blocks before the driver was stopped by the shouts of bystanders. His recollection of the events is understandably fuzzy, but he reports he was in a coma and hospitalized for more than three months. Finally released, he was returned to the custody of McElroy, and it was not long before he began running away again. The first time—he was now eight—he just hid in the trunk of someone's car overnight; when he banged on the trunk to be let out in the morning, the car's owner took him back to McElroy. "I got an ass beating that

day. I remember it very well," he recalls wryly.

The second time, he guesses he was about nine; he inadvertently made it as far as New Orleans. Wrapped in quilts, he lay down on the roof of a train in a Birmingham rail yard and went to sleep. When he woke up, he was crossing Lake Pontchartrain. "I had never heard of New Orleans," he reports, "but I was almost there. Got there, and I backed down off the train, thinking, I'm still in Birmingham somewhere." Rescued by rail yard workers, he was taken in by a man who peddled vegetables and kitchen equipment from horse-drawn wagon and had a houseful of homeless children. Lonnie's tenure with the vendor was brief—when he encouraged the man's horse to run away, spilling goods all over the street, the man turned Lonnie over to juvenile services. They finally deduced that Lonnie was from Birmingham and transferred him to juvenile services there. They returned him to McElroy—again.

The third and last time Lonnie left the McElroy household, he figures he was about eleven. Birmingham was then the epicenter of racial conflict in America. Founded in the Jones Valley in 1871 to exploit expansive local deposits of iron ore, coal, and limestone along with the low-wage labor of children, convicts, and the formerly enslaved, Birmingham grew quickly. By the middle of the 1880s, two of the city's most enduring industrial operations were established: Tennessee Coal and Iron (TCI) and Sloss Iron and Steel. Notwithstanding its name, Sloss concentrated on supplying high-quality pig iron to local foundries, where it was converted into cast iron for pipes, stoves, radiators, and engine parts; Sloss Furnaces would eventually become one of the largest producers of pig iron in the world. The city also became a railroad hub and manufacturing center for rails and railroad cars. The steel industry was slower to mature and hit a snag when TCI was acquired by United States Steel at distress-sale prices after the financial panic of 1907: U.S. Steel would use discriminatory pricing practices to favor steel it produced in Pittsburgh. Nonetheless, Birmingham hopefully christened itself "Magic City" and "Pittsburgh of the South." Although its economy contracted during the Depression, it rebounded during World War II; its population grew from around three thousand in 1880 to more than three hundred thousand in 1960.[6]

By then, Birmingham had become "probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States," as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."[7] A 1926 zoning ordinance began de jure separation in the city, effectively restricting African Americans to living in and around industrial zones. The city's General Code of 1930, revised in 1944 to include more specific segregation policies, was among the most restrictive in the country. Blacks and whites could not use the same toilets or drinking fountains, parks or pools, schools, theaters, libraries, or restaurants. While Blacks and whites could shop in the same clothing stores, Blacks could not try on the clothes. Interracial marriage was outlawed, even mixed-race "cards, dice, dominoes, checkers, baseball, softball, football, [and] basketball."[8] Birmingham had no Black police officers, firefighters, store clerks, or bus drivers, and Black secretaries could not work in white businesses. As in South Africa during apartheid, Black workers were effectively limited to jobs in coal mining, steel mills, and iron furnaces or to yard work and domestic service.

Birmingham by then was also one of the most polluted places in the country. The 1941 WPA Guide to Alabama already described the floor of the Jones Valley as "smoke-begrimed."[9] By 1971, soot and smoke levels had become so bad that a federal district court invoked the emergency powers of the 1970 Clean Air Act, forcing the city's major industrial operations, including U.S. Steel, to shut down until air quality improved. Well into the twenty-first century, pollution from coking ovens—used to produce a high-quality fuel for iron smelting—contiued to plague North Birmingham, which is now a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site. In recent years, soils contaminated over the past century with arsenic, lead, and hydrocarbons such as benzo(a)pyrene—a Group 1 carcinogen—have been removed from large areas in the neighborhood. Waterways were also polluted. Iron production consumed enormous quantities of water, which was then discharged untreated into the city's creeks. Toxicity was compounded by flooding, which increased in proportion to urbanization. Like everywhere else, pollution and flooding in Birmingham disproportionately impacted low-income residents and people of color. The Black labor force was concentrated in shotgun houses in low-lying areas, much like the McElroys'. Heavy rains caused toxic waters to rise into family homes, a problem that "became more damaging and more deadly" through the 1960s and 1970s, according to a Birmingham Historical Society report.[10] Holley himself recalled recently that "the water always got high."

Moreover, Birmingham was governed by fear. When the New York Times reporter Harrison Salisbury visited the city for a story that ran on April 12, 1960, he noted that modest attempts at integration "have sent convulsive tremors through the delicately balanced power structure of the community." Taking note of bombings of Black homes and churches—as well as attempted bombings of the city's two principal synagogues—he thought that prospects for the peaceful resolution of racial tensions looked dim: "Fear and terror are common in the streets of Birmingham."[11] Meanwhile, the city administration commissioned a "Metropolitan Audit" that was delivered in September of that year. As reported by Diane McWhorter in Carry Me Home, her epic history of the civil rights revolution in Birmingham, "the essence of Birmingham was fear," which was pervasive not only among those who suffered racial violence but also among the

elites. “Able persons with excellent qualities,” the report said, “fearfully watch outsiders and the public.” Their fear was “of what others may think; of innovation.” Race was “much on Birmingham’s mind,” but any discussion of change elicited “defensive measures.” The lowest priority for civic goals listed by those interviewed for the audit was “bringing about general social progress.” The auditors were fired.[12]

Given the combined effects of housing inequities and environmental pollution, Blacks started to try to integrate previously whites-only neighborhoods in the years after World War II. Their initiatives were answered with violence. The area around Center Street in the Smithfield neighborhood was ground zero. In 1946, a TCI ore miner and union man named Samuel Matthews built a home on a block previously zoned for whites and was denied an occupancy permit. With the assistance of attorney Arthur Shores, who was initially active in the Civil Rights Movement, Matthews filed suit against the city’s zoning ordinance; in the summer of 1947, a district court judge ruled the ordinance unconstitutional. But before Matthews could move in, the uninsured frame house was destroyed by dynamite. No one was ever charged with the crime, although it is commonly attributed to a sometime quarryman, mechanic, bootlegger, and Klansman named Robert “Dynamite Bob” Chambliss, a Connor informant and lackey who would ultimately be convicted for involvement in the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

This was just the first of literally dozens of such attacks in the neighborhood. There were so many that the area came to be known as Dynamite Hill. Two houses of Bishop S. L. Green, chancellor of Daniel Payne College, a now-shuttered historically Black institution in the city, were bombed in 1949. The home of a schoolteacher named Mary Means Monk was destroyed in 1950; she, too, had challenged the zoning laws, which stayed in effect for another four years after the decision in the Matthews case. The home of Arthur Shores was targeted three times. Angela Davis grew up in the Smithfield neighborhood; she would recall in her autobiography that “every so often a courageous Black family moved or built on the white side of Center Street, and the simmering resentment erupted in explosions and fires. On a few such occasions, Police Chief Bull Connor would announce on the radio that a ‘nigger family’ had moved in on the white side of the street. His prediction ‘There will be bloodshed tonight’ would be followed by a bombing.”[13]

The 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case of Brown v. Board of Education, which outlawed segregated schools, deepened the conflict. While whites responded with a strategy that came to be known as massive resistance—which included the creation and public funding of all-white private schools known colloquially as segregation academies—Blacks stepped up their efforts against segregation. In 1956, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth of Bethel Baptist Church in Smithfield Estates founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) after the state outlawed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The ACMHR organized “Mass Meeting Mondays” to instigate bus boycotts, integrate schools, and provide training in nonviolent action. Shuttlesworth paid dearly for his role. On Christmas night in 1956, Chambliss lobbed six sticks of dynamite at the church parsonage, which exploded directly behind Shuttlesworth’s bed. The wall and floor exploded, “and the mattress heaved into the air, supporting Shuttlesworth like a magic carpet,” as McWhorter so memorably put it in Carry Me Home.[14] Shuttlesworth was miraculously unharmed, though his church would be bombed again in 1958 and 1962. When he took his own family to integrate Phillips High School on September 9, 1957, they were assaulted by a mob of Klansmen. Shuttlesworth was beaten with wooden clubs, chains, and brass knuckles, and his wife, Ruby, was stabbed in the hip.

Shuttlesworth’s commitment to integrating Phillips is all the more remarkable given that just a week before, in one of the most gruesome incidents in Birmingham’s racial history, a Black man named Judge Aaron was abducted at random by a posse of six Klansmen, beaten, castrated with a razor blade, doused in turpentine, and dumped by the roadside. Despite massive blood loss, he survived; it was reported at the time that the men told him to tell Shuttlesworth that the same thing would happen to any Black man who tried to send his children to a white school. Two of the six Klansmen turned state’s witnesses and were sentenced to five-year terms in exchange for testifying against the other four; the latter were convicted and received twenty-year sentences, affirmed by the Alabama Supreme Court in 1959. However, soon after George Wallace became governor in 1963, famously pledging, “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!” in his inaugural address, the State Parole Board voted unanimously not to require the four Klansmen to serve the mandatory minimum of one-third of their sentences before parole. One of the four was paroled almost immediately. Phillips would not be desegregated until 1964.[15]

Through all this, national attention was increasingly focused on Birmingham. When the Freedom Riders, a mixedrace group trying to desegregate bus transportation, arrived in the city on Mother’s Day, 1961, police held back while a white mob beat them with iron pipes and baseball bats. A few days later, the documentary “Who Speaks for Birmingham?” aired on CBS. Narrated by Howard K. Smith, it helped bring nationwide notice to the city’s particularly violent brand of racism. Shuttlesworth continued the boycotts of segregated businesses, public facilities, and schools. Frustrated by the slow pace of integration, a group of civil rights leaders converged on Birmingham in the spring of 1963 to initiate

what came to be known as the Birmingham Campaign. Organized under the umbrella of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Shuttlesworth, Wyatt Tee Walker, and James Bevel, among others, the campaign included sit-ins and marches designed to provoke mass arrests.[16] King was arrested for his part in the demonstrations on Good Friday and, criticized by some of his more cautious fellow clergymen for actions they perceived as "unwise and untimely," penned his famous "Letter," in which he speculated that white "moderates" might be as great a stumbling block to racial progress as White Citizens' Councils or even the Klan.

To accelerate the campaign, SCLC organizer Bevel instigated a novel Children's Crusade. He asked elementary, high school, and college students to skip school and attend demonstrations. They were to assemble at downtown churches (including Sixteenth Street Baptist) and march on businesses and public buildings in an effort to integrate them. The campaign climaxed on Thursday and Friday, May 2 and 3, 1963, when hundreds of students walked out of school and marched in timed intervals on the downtown area. The first day, Connor used squad cars and fire trucks to barricade the streets and school buses and paddy wagons to take the children to jail—as many as twelve hundred of them. The second day, with the jails full, he used police dogs and fire hoses to disperse the protesters, turning the hoses on the children with such force that they were tossed to the ground and rolled like logs—actions captured in horrifying photographs that were seen across the country and around the world. Protests continued on May 4 and 5, and by May 6, the jails were so full—police estimates put the number at twenty-five hundred—that Connor put people in pens outside the jail and commandeered facilities at the fairgrounds for eight hundred girls. On May 7, thousands of protesters massed on the streets and occupied stores; firehoses were deployed again, severely injuring Shuttlesworth and other demonstrators. The bombing on May 11 of the Gaston Motel, which the SCLC had been using as a campaign headquarters and where King had been staying, resulted in a riot that was quieted only when federal troops were deployed to the city on May 13. The aftershocks continued for months—the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church did not occur until September 15. It killed not only the four girls—Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Addie Mae Collins—but injured about twenty others and resulted in the deaths of two more Black youths later in the day. Thirteen year-old Virgil Ware was blown off the handlebars of an older brother's bicycle by a sixteen-year-old Eagle Scout with a pearl-handled pistol. And in an episode that foreshadowed events that continue to plague us to this day, sixteen-year-old Johnnie Robinson was shot in the back by police as he ran down an alleyway after throwing rocks at a car bearing slogans like "Negro go back to Africa."[17]

Holley recalls being aware of these struggles against white supremacy. He remembers there was a restaurant across the street from where he lived called the Constantine that was "a meeting place for people that were contending, where they would gather together to get ready to go downtown." But he says, "I was more on the sideline of those activities." Our young Odysseus was still barely out of his first decade, and he had his own mission—he was trying to find his way back home to his mother. By the early 1960s, he had hints of her existence from a woman named Miss Claudia, who came to live with McElroy for a while. "Miss Claudia had told me I had a big family, and a lot of sisters and brothers." Meanwhile, two men who came to buy whiskey from McElroy and worms from Holley for fish bait let slip that they knew where she was— she apparently also ran a bootlegging business where you could buy alcohol when the state stores were closed. "In my brain every day, every night, I couldn't think of nothing else but getting back with Mama," Holley recalls. "The drive-in wasn't the same for me anymore. The fairground didn't hold my attention. All I wanted to do was find Mama."

But Lonnie was inadvertently caught up in the chaos. "The day I left to find Mama," he recalls, "Bull Connor had put a curfew on the city. . . . I didn't know nothing about the curfew. I'm trying to find my mother. I was downtown at the wrong time when I got picked up." Holley recalls there was a perimeter around the center city and that police had been instructed to keep a particular eye out for children entering the zone at night. He can't recollect exactly when this all took place—it may well have been in the lead-up to the arrival of the Freedom Riders on Mother's Day in 1961. But it could have been anytime—curfews and vagrancy laws were part of the standard arsenal for controlling people of color, especially when they tried to assert their rights. In any event, Holley recalls being apprehended for truancy and taken to what he describes as juvenile jail. The next evening, some older boys tricked a janitor into opening their cell door by dropping some money and asking the man to return it. They overwhelmed him, took the keys to his car, and sped off. They did not get far: It was a rainy night and they collided with a telephone pole. The police took them back to juvenile detention and the next morning, without a hearing, took them to what was then called the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children, colloquially known as Mt. Meigs, near Montgomery. "The next morning, they just loaded all of us up. Put us in a paddy wagon and down the road to Mt. Meigs we went. No court, no judge, no mama, no nothing."

The subject of a recent podcast, Mt. Meigs was called a school but was more like a labor camp or prison.[18] Conditions were deplorable—ramshackle buildings and open-pit latrines. Residents had to use fertilizer sacks for towels; they were issued oversized army fatigues to wear, and many went without shoes. Lonnie was put straight to work—chopping cotton, tending livestock, milking cows, picking wa-

termelons, collecting pecans. The place had its own cotton gin, cannery, and slaughterhouse; it was chronically underfunded and was expected largely to cover its own expenses from farm income. It was overseen by a man named Holloway; fieldwork was supervised by another named Glover. Enforcement was vicious. The first time he picked cotton, Lonnie was whipped for failing to pick the mandatory one hundred pounds in a day. Moreover, being new to the work, he had stuffed the whole plant– roots, stalk, and all–into the sack. When Glover saw what he had done, he drew a circle in the ground and told Lonnie to lie down and "put your dick in the hole." He then beat him with a white oak lash soaked in tractor oil. Lonnie recalls many days when he failed to meet his quota and got similar beatings. "You wasn't allowed to go to the nurse. You just had to wear your whupping. Didn't nobody discuss how bad your ass got beat or why you got beat, you just got beat."

Once, he tried to run away. He was pulling corn stalks and asked to go relieve himself in the bushes. He stayed away long enough that the rest of the group worked their way over a hill; he took advantage of the distance and began to run. He ran into the night, stopping only when he fell into a hole in the dark. Coming around in the morning, he saw he had fallen into an old grave in a cemetery. He climbed out and kept running. "I started running because I was scared. I was really, really afraid. I had to deal with all kinds of thoughts about what's going to happen to me? Where am I at? I didn't know where I was."

At dusk, tired and hungry, he came upon a Farmall tractor dealership; he broke a window, went in, helped himself to food from the refrigerator, and fell asleep. "The next thing I know, this big white man jerked me up, took his fist, and knocked me out." Holloway came and knocked him out again with another blow to the head, took him back to Mt. Meigs, and put him in a cell unconscious. The next morning, he received the severest beating of his time at the institution. He was strapped to a bench with his arms stretched over his head and tied to a tree. All the other residents–boys and girls–were made to watch the lashing. Glover took his oak stick soaked in black oil and began whipping Holley from his neck to his thighs. After 150 lashes, they cut his shirt and pants off and dressed him in white clothes, the mark of shame for a runaway or troublemaker, which were soon caked with blood. For a time, he could not walk: "I had to crawl around by pulling myself on my arms." Holley would later memorialize this episode in a series of works–he calls it an exhibition–created entirely from black-colored objects. "I remember I did a whole black exhibit. Everything I could find. Everything was black. Dolls, shoes, painted furniture. I was trying to get this memory–I still have nightmares about getting beaten to death. I hear the stick constantly whuppin'. Memories hurt."

After the beating, Holley was sentenced to what was called the rock pile, a heap of stones cleared from the fields and whitewashed, where boys were punished by being isolated. "They put me on the rock pile during summer, winter, rains, snow. I got fed one square of bread and a cup of water each day. No fruit, no vegetables." Initially, his wounds continued to bleed–he remembers seeing his blood on the white rocks, something he would later commemorate in one of his sculptures: Blood on the Rock Pile (2003; p. 246). The months dragged on. "Day and night, winter and summer," he confirmed recently, "there was nothing you could do but sit there." Eventually–Holley thinks it might have been more than a year later–he was pulled off the rock pile and sent to the kitchen, where he was taught to cook and bake. From the other kitchen boys, he heard rumors of a cemetery at the back of a pasture, down by a swamp. The sight of black birds circling over the wetland was sufficient proof for Holley that there were boys buried down there who had not survived their beatings.

By comparison to them, Lonnie got lucky. Sometime in late 1963, he was suddenly released from Mt. Meigs to the custody of his paternal grandmother, Hixie Canady, and her youngest son, Jesse. "My grandmama came and got me. . . . It was right after the girls got bombed in Birmingham, because . . . Grandmama was digging graves and helped bury them." He had never met her. "I just wanted to get out of there, and this lady come to get me. I didn't know who she was. And I didn't know who was the man she come with. I don't know these people, and I am seriously not trusting anybody. . . . I was just a ball of emotions." His grandmother greeted him with his birth name, Lonnie Bradley Holley: Bradley for his father, Holley for his mother. "Up to that time, my name was Tonkie. I'd never heard Lonnie." Coincidentally, Lonnie had described his quest for his mother, whom he knew to be a Holley, to another Mt. Meigs resident, who said he knew the family. Through the other boy, word got back to Holley's grandmother about where he was; she had his birth certificate to establish his identity and his connection to her. "That's what got me released; otherwise, I could have been Tonkie McElroy pretty well all my life. Now I am Lonnie Bradley Holley."

Holley is still haunted by the experience of detention, which he likened to shell shock in the recent podcast about Mt. Meigs. "It was just so horrible that I couldn't get it outta my memory. It was almost like you having to go through shell shock, like you being in the military and . . . it's just constantly going through your brain. And this is something that you just can't forget about."[19] He later made other sculptures inspired by the trauma: In one piece, he padlocked together eight forks and called it Chain Gang: Mt. Meigs (2019; p. 56). Another, titled Whitewash, features seven broken, dirty mops, evoking both forced labor and filthy conditions.

Holley's grandmother, whom he called Momo, took him to her house in the Woodlawn section of Birmingham, near the airport. She got him clothes from the Salvation Army and started him back to school. She and Uncle Jesse also honed his skills at salvaging. They made almost daily visits to City Lights, the trash facility, where they would comb through the debris and collect food scraps for the animals and copper, aluminum, and brass for resale. "My whole family was recyclers and know how to reuse things, so it weren't hard for them."

While staying with Momo, Lonnie finally reunited with his mother. She was living with her father, a sharecropper turned steelworker, on some land he owned in the hills by the airport. "First time I saw Mama, I just went walking, because it wasn't far to leave Woodlawn and go . . . straight out." He ran into one of the men who had bought worms from him at the McElroys and asked for directions to Dottie Holley's house; he was told to go around a corner and look for all the children playing in the street—his many siblings. He walked up to the porch, gave his name—Lonnie Holley, not Tonkie McElroy—to a man sitting there, who hurried inside and reported it to Lonnie's mother. "Mama came running to the porch. She burst out crying and threw her arms open, and said 'my son, my son, my son.'" Holley recalls the moment's profound impact on him: "Mama's excitement made me feel welcome. I was not that lost son, that lost child. That was the first time ever I felt loved. . . . I felt welcome in another human's presence."

Lonnie lived between the two houses—his maternal grandfather's and his paternal grandmother's—for a year or so before trouble caught up with him again. One night with two of his cousins, he broke into a sporting goods store; they filled up brand-new suitcases with watches and rings, sporting equipment and clothing, soda and chips. Walking down First Avenue with all their booty, they were quickly apprehended and taken to juvenile detention. Momo and Uncle Jesse got them released, but they determined it was time for Lonnie to get out of Birmingham. His mother suggested he go to Florida to be with an older brother, Sonny. "There was something about Mama and Momo; they understood me, they didn't force me to be something different. They know that if I go to Florida, I'm already more of an adult than I was a child."

Sonny had a job in the kitchen at a country club in Orlando; Lonnie worked as a groundskeeper on the golf course before moving into the kitchen, first as a dishwasher, then as a prep cook—putting his Mt. Meigs skills to work. He was maturing, albeit the hard way. "How you act in a relationship—these things I had not been taught to deal with. It was like I had to learn everything on my own that I was going to have to live with for the rest of my life." He met and fell in love with a woman who became pregnant with his first child. Thinking he wanted to support them as best he could, and against his brother's advice, he accepted what he thought was a lucrative offer to get on a bus with other migrant workers and go to Ohio to pick tomatoes and cucumbers. The landowners would pay the driver, who would pass on the earnings to the laborers. But the driver turned out to be a grifter, withholding a significant percentage of the wages from the workers. When an altercation erupted between them and the driver, they were all driven off at gunpoint. Lonnie returned to Florida almost broke and found work at Walt Disney World—from the Magic City to the Magic Kingdom—as a breakfast cook and spaghetti chef at the Contemporary Resort. He also found his girlfriend gone; he was unable to find her, which made him feel all the more unmoored. "Ever since I left Florida, it's almost like I have been a roamer in all these other relationships, because that had been my intent focus point."

Lonnie stayed in Florida for about five years, first in Orlando and then Jacksonville, "hip-hopping from job to job," he said recently. In Jacksonville, he ran a window-cleaning service for a while, commuting to jobs on a bicycle loaded with a ladder and buckets—which landed him in the Jacksonville newspaper. When his grandfather became seriously ill in 1971, he returned to Birmingham, where he found his mother and siblings living in dire conditions "My mama and them were still living in the 1800s, with slop jars, and outdoor bathrooms, and no running water." The house was cold and wet. "If it rained, we got under plastic." He had come home because he wanted to help his family and his neighbors, "to show them that there was so much yet we could find and we could use. We don't have to get drunk and deteriorate our minds, or get loaded with drugs, or kill ourself." But he found he could not force the people around him to change; he felt increasingly depressed and useless. He worked for a time in the lunchroom at Elyton School and ran a lawn-mowing service. He hit bottom around 1978, when he drank too much, led police on a car chase, hit a tree, and found himself in lockup again. "Good God Almighty," he said to himself, "if Lonnie Bradley Holley don't make a big change he going to be a dead man soon."[20] He sobered up, got married, and—without entirely realizing what he was doing—turned to art.

As he recounted to Ted Rosengarten, his sister had lost two children to a house fire. She was inconsolable. "All of us crying, crying, and crying. Seeing my sister crying. I thought she would die. I said 'Lord what can I do? What can I do?'" He had salvaged some industrial sandstone, used to make molds for iron casting. He started cutting at it with knives and spoons, scraping and digging. "I started working it, but never did know where it would have me to go. . . . I kept a-working at it, until it was two gravestones to place on the tomb." It was the beginning of his life as an artist. He collected materials, both metal and sandstone, from nearby sources like Thomas Foundry or Birmingham Stove & Range, once one of the

largest-producing cast-iron foundries in the United States. He brought the materials back to his grandfather's— now his mother's—house and set to work in the yard.

Another house fire, this time next door to his mother's house, brought him his first recognition. One of the firefighters, impressed by Lonnie's carvings, called a local television station. "Man, y'all need to come see this," Lonnie recalls him saying. "Bring your cameras. This man's using foundry material and making beautiful carvings from trash. I told him he is an artist and he says he's just a peace-bringer and a way-maker." Before long, Holley was filling his yard not just with sandstone carvings but also with the found-object assemblages for which he is now better known. Holley had found his way home, and found his mission. "Art was my savior. Art kept me from killing myself. My art was my new love affair." Art had brought him full circle. "I am doing the same thing now that I was doing when I was a little boy. I am grabbing the rock out of the ditch. This is the way Lonnie Holley come from the ditch, the creek, the nasty, the garbage, the greasy, the muck."

Holley would work on what he came to call his "one square acre of art" for about twenty years. But Birmingham was not finished with him. In anticipation of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Holley was commissioned in 1993 by the Cultural Olympiad to create a largescale sculpture for installation at the Sloss Furnaces historic site. He and his children scoured the city for materials, which they brought together in an enormous assemblage called Goal of Creativity, which Holley says was "tall as a telegraph pole and bigger than a house." But, Holley says, "it wasn't up maybe three months." The city decided it needed the space for the state fair, deemed the sculpture hazardous, and removed it. A bigger blow came when the Birmingham Airport Authority announced plans to expand its facility. Despite the fact that his yard was filled with sculptures that adorned the house and trees and could not be moved, the property was condemned. Bulldozers came in 1997 and leveled his yard show. "I mourned over that," he recounts. "They made it into an art graveyard." The sculpture Mule Trying to Feed Himself (2008; p. 73) was made in the wake of such episodes, a time when he says he felt like a "broken-ass mule."

Holley eventually reached a settlement with the city and relocated to a rural site near Harpersville in Shelby County. There, he faced repeated harassment by neighbors and police. Having found both his family and his calling, he was in exile again. He was rescued this time by a community of like-minded people. In about 1987, Holley had met the collector William Arnett, who—inspired at least in part by seeing the landmark 1982 exhibition Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980—had shifted his focus from African and Asian antiquities to contemporary Southern African American artists. Arnett would go on to curate exhibitions, write books, and establish a foundation, Souls Grown Deep, devoted to preserving and promoting the work of what he called African American vernacular art of the South. Arnett arguably did for American art history what folklorists John Lomax and his son Alan, who compiled an extraordinary archive of folk, blues, and pioneering jazz music for the Library of Congress, did for American musical history. Arnett convinced Holley of both the financial and artistic value of his work, and tried to help him resist the condemnation of his property for the airport expansion. "My place was filled with art that belonged to the place and could not be moved. Bill was the first one who appreciated it and said this is important." Meeting Arnett, Holley says, "opened up my mind," like opening "clogged vessels." Arnett gave him "the freedom of being able to create in an unobstructed way, being supported that I didn't have to have a job, I could go on and create."[21] Arnett also introduced Holley to other African American artists across the South, like Joe Light, Purvis Young, Mary T. Smith, and Hawkins Bolden, convincing him that he was not some sort of outlier but part of an unheralded and profoundly significant visual tradition. Holley repaid the favor by introducing Arnett to still more artists, including Thornton Dial, whom Holley had met in 1987.

Given his lack of formal training, Holley is often characterized as a folk or self-taught artist. These are categories he chafes at. "I want to be an artist of America," he says, "not an orphan in a storm . . . not a self-taught artist, not a folk artist. I just want to be an artist." The self-taught designation is indeed problematic. Despite his educational disadvantage, Holley is neither geographically nor socially isolated, nor is he cut off from either his cultural heritage or an increasingly pervasive digital world. Moreover, the designation carries hierarchical connotations of work less accomplished and technically less sophisticated than fine or high art. It is particularly problematic among artists of color, especially those from the South, whose distance from mainstream or "official" culture might be as much oppositional as educational. Indeed, for some observers, to be self-taught is by definition to be oppositional. Amiri Baraka writes that "the most significant artists of any nationality are 'self taught.' That is, they do not submit to the formal mediocrity of bourgeois (or feudal or slave) culture and art. Powerful art," Baraka continues, "is not the expression of lifeless social convention, political reaction and opportunist imperatives masquerading as aesthetics." Instead, he insists—in what might be the most succinct expression possible of Holley's particular magic as an artist—that "powerful art, as the ideological reflection of social life, is also the recreated emotional and intellectual life of the artist and of the time, place and condition of the artist's world."[22] Holley's world in Birmingham was severely limited economically and politically but otherwise almost limitless, spanning rural and urban, agricultural and industrial, music and the visual arts. In this sense, Holley is emblematic of Black Belt culture, the fruit of rural sharecroppers and tenant farmers

who migrated to cities not just up North but across the South as well, who found creative purpose at the turbulent intersection of personal and social circumstances.

Paradoxically, Holley's identification with this culture was probably heightened, not lessened, by what schooling he did receive. Writing of Black schools run by Black people, Angela Davis wondered if "it was precisely those conditions that gave us a strong positive identification with our people and our history." She does not idealize segregated schools, noting decrepit facilities and inadequate textbooks, but notes that she learned more "Negro History" in Birmingham than many African American children she would meet on summer visits to New York. "Without a doubt," she insists, "the children who attended the de jure segregated schools of the South had an advantage over those who attended the de facto segregated schools of the North. . . . Black identity was thrust upon us by the circumstances of oppression." In a passage that precisely foreshadows Holley's youthful experience, she observes, "We had been pushed into a totally Black universe; we were compelled to look to ourselves for spiritual nourishment."[23]

What are the implications for us, Holley's audience, of the fact that his stories originate at the intersection of personal experience and social history? How legible are they? Some of the emotional and spiritual content of his work is elliptical, even enigmatic; some of the nuances of the social history he evokes—"the time, place and condition of the artist's world," in Baraka's words—are surely being lost as the decades and the generations pass. Perhaps this does not matter, as Holley has grown increasingly masterful in his handling of material and form and more self-aware in the creation of finished works of art that are satisfying in their own right. But his works are surely enhanced by some knowledge of their narratives, clues to which can often be found in the titles or encoded in the materials themselves. The stories often go deeper than this, however. As author and curator Roger Manley notes, Holley's explications don't necessarily "begin with the piece itself, but with the feelings and events that led up to it." Without his explanations, Manley says, we are unlikely to read the sculptures completely: they exist "as a half-text to be completed only by the words (the story) that must accompany it and flesh it out."24 Those steeped in literary reception theory might say that no work of art—or literature—is complete until it is read, but non-narrative or abstract art presents fewer challenges of interpretation than an art— like Holley's—that is generated by storytelling traditions. So do you have to know Holley's stories? Not everyone is going to be fortunate enough to hear him explicate each of his works, or even read a version of his personal history. Instead, is it enough to know that his sculptures come from a richly narrative tradition and signify way more than meets the eye? I would say so. Holley digs deep into his own past to generate his art, but he expounds a social history in which we are all implicated, one that is still largely unreconciled and unreconstructed. Our Odysseus is trying to point us toward home as well.

---

1 Judith McWillie, "Lonnie Holley's Moves," Artforum 30, no. 8 (April 1992): 80.
2 Imani Perry, South to America: A Journey below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation (New York: Ecco, 2022), 248.
3 Angela Davis: An Autobiography, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021): xxix.
4 Theodore Rosengarten, "Blackbirds: Lonnie Holley as Told to Theodore Rosengarten," in Something to Take My Place: The Art of Lonnie Holley, ed. Mark Sloan (Charleston, SC: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, 2015), 181!207. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from this source.
5 Josie Duffy Rice and Taylor Vaughn Lasley, Unreformed: The Story of the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children, episode 1, produced by the School of Humans and iHeartMedia, podcast.
6 This narrative is condensed from a "Selected Chronology of Birmingham History" in Julie Buckner Armstrong, Learning from Birmingham: A Journey into History and Home (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2023), xv–xix. For more on Birmingham's industrial history, see W. David Lewis, Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994); and Bobby M. Wilson, America's Johannesburg: Industrialization and Racial Transformation in Birmingham (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
7 King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is widely available; for a digital version, see www.africa.upenn.edu/ Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.
8 Armstrong, Learning from Birmingham, 30.
9 The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 311.
10 The Birmingham Historical Society report about flooding is cited in Armstrong, Learning from Birmingham, p. 169. Coincidentally, Valley Creek, which ran by the McElroys' neighborhood in Birmingham, also passed through Pipe Shop, the community in Bessemer, Alabama, where Thornton Dial lived. Dial would later commemorate its flooding in a painting titled Valley Creek Disaster Area.
11 Harrison Salisbury, "Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham," The New York Times, April 12, 1960.
12 Diane McWhorter, Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution, paperback edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 155-56.
13 Angela Davis, 82. An account of many of these bombings can be found in Armstrong, Learning from Birmingham, 30-34
14 McWhorter, Carry Me Home, 96.

15 The Judge Aaron episode was widely reported at the time; for a digital file of newspaper clip: digitalcollections/files/original/4/452/ burger0447"Judge-Edward-Aaron.pdf.
16 The climactic days of the Birmingham Campaign are narrated in detail in McWhorter, Carry Me Home, 347-436 from which this account is drawn.
17 McWhorter, Carry Me Home, 513.
18 The conditions at Mt. Meigs are described in Unreformed, episode 2. The precise dates that Holley was there have not been determined. A preliminary review of the papers of the Alabama Department of Youth Services in the Alabama Department of Archives and History turned up no specifics. ADYS annual reports don't list individuals by name; they just give a general accounting of numbers they serviced. The producers of Unreformed were told that no records were kept at Mt. Meigs; if they existed, they would not in any case be open for public use.
19 Unreformed, episode 8.
20 Quotations in this paragraph are from "The Best That Almost Happened, Told by Lonnie Holley," in William Arnett and Paul Arnett, Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, vol. 2 (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2001), 556-57; 565.
21 "The Best That Almost Happened," 566-68.
22 Amiri Baraka, "Revolutionary Democratic Art from the Cultural Commonwealth of Afro America," in Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, vol. 1, ed. Paul Arnett and William Arnett (Atlanta: Tinwood Books in association with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 2000), 505.
23 Angela Davis, 78-79