

YARDBIRDS  
SQUAWKING  
AT THE  
MOON

NEW AND VINTAGE POEMS  
REGGIE SCOTT YOUNG



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## SOUL DEFROSTED

We spent the 1970s in  
the shade, believing the rev-  
olution was still coming with such  
certainty, we didn't bother  
playing our numbers. We  
found what we had always gone  
to church for, but the fire  
next time was still raging in  
our own streets.

Jesus came, tried to  
turn himself black, but  
the Roman Saints decided to kill him  
again; Muhammad came, to the mountain  
he went, got his ass kicked in  
Cabrini Green.

## WINSTON MACK: ALL-AMERICAN BLUESVILLE BOY

His touch was  
a winner's—

he'd launch pig-  
skin carrier pigeons for  
six points,

roll a curve off the table for a strike,

moonwalk for a  
fingertip hoop.

His touch was a touch  
too good for class, gave him  
professional ambitions:

made him Walmart's  
first pick in  
the baggage boy.

## CRIME IN BLUESVILLE

On the West Side,  
no one complains about  
the heat: there  
isn't any; but  
folks do be trying to grab  
a little warmth.

People naturally  
don't want to freeze,  
but sometimes  
that's a little more  
than they can afford.

Sometimes,  
we light the oven,  
those of us with gas,  
or turn on an old electric heater  
after running an extension cord  
next door,  
we even burn old wooden chairs  
in the tub, or  
bring a garbage can in and  
let it be our fireplace.

We know not to relax in-  
to comfort in  
the winter of the night,  
we might get drowsy and  
go to sleep.

Too often  
we are the burning story in  
the morning news.

## IT KEEPS GROWING, NO MATTER WHAT

It was one of those midsummer afternoons  
when the dusky air felt like a wet  
sheet, but in it I had to mow the  
same bayou grass that gave birth to  
such ideas as Chia Pets and  
Swamp Thing.

It is a repetitious act,  
week in and week out,  
and you dare not miss your appointed day  
because it's like skipping Sunday church,  
and the way it grows will make you suffer for  
your transgression unless you're blessed enough  
to own your own John Deere, one that will let you sit  
and ride over the cover of green earth with a cold drink  
in the holder and Geno Dellafoese jamming in your earbuds;  
of course, the one I have is the "push me" type and  
not at all self-propelled.

But during the cutting season, from Fat Tuesday to  
the Winter Solstice, you get used to the sight of dis-  
membered blades shooting out of the mulcher and in  
to sun so bright that they gleam like jade before snuggling  
back in the ground to begin their cycle anew,  
and that's when you think most of God, mystery, and  
wonder, and the silliness of words and the people who  
use them to express inexpressible ideas by  
reducing them to the evolution of intelligent  
design with neither party willing to stop,  
sit, and marvel over what Whitman tried  
preaching to us about all those many  
decades ago.

**REGARDING THE PEOPLE WHO DON'T  
RESPOND TO THE ALTAR CALL . . .**

At the Macedonia  
Mount Baptist Church  
it can be like  
the popping of pop  
corn, which resists any  
theological ex-  
planation as to  
why, no matter the degree of  
heat or the saturation of oil,  
a few kernels always remain  
unpopped.

## **“OH, HOW I LOVE JESUS”**

1.

(The Holy)

In the upper pews of Bayou City's  
Finest Baptist Church, I listen to the  
Song that revives early memories of  
Bluesville melodies in that poor and run  
Down place up/South where folks would wear God's word  
Like badges on hearts and could spit it out  
Inherently, as long as they were not  
Confronted by different translations.  
But in this O, Holy edifice of  
Affluence I am now in, I look and  
See there's no one else as lowly as me—  
Not one who is able to sing those words  
Without broadcasting not-so-reverent  
Smiles about ownership and royalties.

2.

(The Profane)

In Bluesville, keys from a solitary  
Piano dance in concert with gold-toothed  
Congregation shouts of blue hosannas  
Rising up in arms of phantom limbs to  
The Mercy Seat where He adorns the robe  
Worn into ascension millennia  
Ago. There are few outward smiles, and the  
Generated tithes will likely include  
Little more than copper and few worn bills,  
But in that storefront tabernacle, He  
Who grants rhythmic beats to pumping hearts while  
Shunning lavish demonstrations of self-  
Reflective praise, parties with those who can  
Camel Walk their way through a needle's eye.



REGGIE SCOTT YOUNG

Overcomed  
(A True Story)

I remember reading a poem by a woman who became famous for writing what was then known as the New Black Poetry. That particular poem was about how she felt growing up poor while living in Woodland, a neighborhood on the city's South Side. It ended with her saying she hopes no white person ever tries to write about her because they would never understand she had been quite happy all along while living in the ghetto.

I thought I knew what she meant, but we, too, lived in the ghetto, the one on the city's West Side, and we were not happy. At least, we had been told we weren't and we were quick to believe it; after all, it was the late 1960s. If we hadn't been taught who we really were by our new Black leaders, if we had been allowed to continue believing we were Negro or colored, we might have continued to think we were happy like the girl in that poem said she was. The revelations we received about our covering of Blackness served to lift a veil from our faces or, maybe, encumber us with a new one. After our awakening, we knew better than to base how we felt on what we already had in our lives; instead, we learned to focus on what we lacked in comparison to people we only knew from Dick and Jane books and black and white television programs. Something had swept over us like a fire consuming a dry forest, but I'm not sure many of us understood what it was. That peculiar something, the rage that everyone was calling Black, had been set ablaze in our minds and we willingly allowed it to engulf us.

That's why we marched that day. No one told us to do it, unless it was those ancestral spirits that the long-bearded and dashiki-clad cultural nationalists told us we needed to be in tune to, the Swahili speakers who'd get on your case if you did something that wasn't in the spirit of the Motherland—like eat meat. But none of us believed those old Africans didn't eat meat, because they had to use those spears they carried for more than knocking down coconuts. Nevertheless, we set

out to march without much debate or prompting. I wasn't the leader, but I was the one who grabbed the mic during the special assembly in the school's auditorium and said let's get the hell out of here.

I was among those in front of the line for most of the way, and me and the others who were in earshot of each other decided we'd march by Harrison High to pull all the brothers and sisters out of there and then go over to Marshall and get them. It didn't matter that they were our basketball rivals in the Red North Division and that each of our districts were separate territories for warring gangs. Nobody had to say it, but we were all one tribe that day. When we showed up, no negotiations were necessary, and no one jockeyed to find places for themselves near the front or to be in clear view of the trailing TV cameras. That night while under interrogation, I found myself quoting from a book I had once picked up from my sister's bookcase, one with a pickaninny character who'd answer everything by saying "It just grew." I was being truthful when I explained how our march just grew, but before I could get the words out of my mouth the big black dick in the room threatened to slap me upside the head if I didn't stop talking doo-doo. "If I'm lying I'm flying," I said, something I wish I had learned how to do.

The last school we planned to stop at earlier that day was Austin; after that, we planned to assemble in nearby Columbus Park. We had no agenda for what would take place, but the same impulse that told us to beat our soles on the pavement would make clear how to best express grief for a fallen king that most of us had never followed in the first place.

It wasn't until we approached Pulaski Road during our journey down Madison Avenue that Mod Squad showed up with freshly sprouted razor bumps peppering his face. Some called him Link, but most of us knew him as Mod Squad because he dressed like a television hipster with layers of beads worn over an always-present turtleneck and exaggerated flares tapered above fleshly shinned platform boots. He hadn't been at the school assembly, and nobody remembered seeing him with us along the way, but all of a sudden he was there in the front acting like the title character of the old song "Leader of the Pack," leading us right up to a battalion of squadron cars and cops, each one of them decked out in battle gear like they were ready to engage the Viet Cong in the middle of Hanoi, or We Shall Overcomers on their way into Selma. We had been singing hymns in serene and passionate voices along the way and the pigeons flying about could have all been doves, but this

student, the one who never attended classes and spoke in lingo so hip that it sounded scripted, was the one who shouted “Smash the pigs!” He threw a Coke bottle that he pulled from the inside of his leather coat after winding up his arms like Bob Gibson, but he hurled it like it was a two-ton shot put. It didn’t come close to smashing anything other than pavement, but on cue the cops broke into our ranks with their niggerbeaters smashing into startled skulls. Just moments later a voice cried out from the middle of our line “Fuck this shit—burn this mother down!” By that time, I was trying to use fingers and hands to damn up the crimson flow from both nostrils and above my left eye while being handled like a piece of contaminated meat and thrown into the back of a wagon that was soon filled with so many students that it felt like the hull of a ship about to embark upon a trip over endless waters. The trip wasn’t that long, and being underage and with preachers and teachers willing to testify on my behalf, I was back on my way home in time to smell the still-burning embers from the new vacant lots that now dominated the landscape of our once happy neighborhood like newly sprouted holocaust flowers.



Students marching from Farragut Career Academy High School, December 5, 1969, the day after Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were murdered. Image courtesy of Reggie Scott Young.