

february 12, 1963

I am born on a Tuesday at University Hospital  
Columbus, Ohio,  
USA—  
a country caught

between Black and White.

I am born not long from the time  
or far from the place  
where  
my great-great-grandparents  
worked the deep rich land  
unfree  
dawn till dusk  
unpaid  
drank cool water from scooped-out gourds  
looked up and followed  
the sky's mirrored constellation  
to freedom.

I am born as the South explodes,  
too many people too many years

enslaved, then emancipated  
but not free, the people  
who look like me  
keep fighting  
and marching  
and getting killed  
so that today—  
February 12, 1963  
and every day from this moment on,  
brown children like me can grow up  
free. Can grow up  
learning and voting and walking and riding  
wherever we want.

I am born in Ohio but  
the stories of South Carolina already run  
like rivers  
through my veins.

## second daughter's second day on earth

My birth certificate says: Female Negro  
Mother: Mary Anne Irby, 22, Negro  
Father: Jack Austin Woodson, 25, Negro

In Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr.  
is planning a march on Washington, where  
John F. Kennedy is president.

In Harlem, Malcolm X is standing on a soapbox  
talking about a revolution.

*Outside the window of University Hospital,  
snow is slowly falling. So much already  
covers this vast Ohio ground.*

In Montgomery, only seven years have passed  
since Rosa Parks refused  
to give up  
her seat on a city bus.

*I am born brown-skinned, black-haired  
and wide-eyed.  
I am born Negro here and Colored there*

and somewhere else,  
the Freedom Singers have linked arms,  
their protests rising into song:  
*Deep in my heart, I do believe  
that we shall overcome someday.*

and somewhere else, James Baldwin  
is writing about injustice, each novel,  
each essay, changing the world.

*I do not yet know who I'll be  
what I'll say  
how I'll say it . . .*

Not even three years have passed since a brown girl  
named Ruby Bridges  
walked into an all-white school.  
Armed guards surrounded her while hundreds  
of white people spat and called her names.

She was six years old.

*I do not know if I'll be strong like Ruby.  
I do not know what the world will look like  
when I am finally able to walk, speak, write . . .  
Another Buckeye!  
the nurse says to my mother.  
Already, I am being named for this place.*

*Ohio. The Buckeye State.*

*My fingers curl into fists, automatically*

*This is the way, my mother said,  
of every baby's hand.*

*I do not know if these hands will become*

*Malcolm's—raised and fisted  
or Martin's—open and asking  
or James's—curled around a pen.*

*I do not know if these hands will be*

*Rosa's  
or Ruby's  
gently gloved  
and fiercely folded  
calmly in a lap,  
on a desk,  
around a book,  
ready  
to change the world . . .*