

I. Original Breath (birthed, New York City, 1942)
In Chicago, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)
was founded.

Birtherd I was, to gasp in breaths of white air
 (air in that hospital white for whites only),
colorless, odorless as the presorted airs
 of an iron lung.

Untainted was I by breaths of any one
 smit with black lung disease or faces
swabbed with coal-dust; no blackface grease
 for an onstage mime that aped any bodies
with black skin disease.

I needed, so, no extra scrubbing
 (nor my back a whipping),
since I breathed out no black breaths
 from any black lungs that screamed
 for air in rage