

Passing

By Toi Derricotte

A professor invites me to his "Black Lit" class; they're
reading Larson's *Passing*. One of the black
students says, "Sometimes light-skinned blacks
think they can fool other blacks,
but / can always tell," looking
right through me.

After I tell them I am black,
I ask the class, "Was I passing
when I was just sitting here,
before I told you?" A white woman
shakes her head desperately, as if
I had deliberately deceived her.
She keeps examining my face,
then turning away
as if she hopes I'll disappear. Why presume
"passing" is based on what I leave out
and not what she fills in?

In one scene in the book, in a restaurant,
she's "passing,"
though no one checked her at the door—
"Hey, you black?"

My father, who looked white,
told me this story: every year
when he'd go to get his driver's license,
the man at the window filling
out the form would ask,
"White or black?" pencil poised, without looking up.

My father wouldn't pass, but he might
use silence to trap a devil.

When he didn't speak, the man
would look up at my father's face.

"What did he write?"
my father quizzed me.

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