



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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Poet Bio



Born in Michigan, Toi Derricotte is the co-founder of the African-American writers retreat, Cave Canem, and Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. A two-time poetry fellowship recipient from the National Endowment for the Arts, her literary memoir, *The Black Notebooks*, won the 1998 Annisfield-Wolf Book Award for Nonfiction.

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