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Race

Sometimes I think about Great-Uncle Paul who left Tuskegee, Alabama to become a forester in Oregon and in so doing became fundamentally white for the rest of his life, except when he travelled without his white wife to visit his siblings - now in New York, now in Harlem, USA - just as pale-skinned, as straight-haired, as blue-eyed as Paul, and black. Paul never told anyone he was white, he just didn't say that he was black, and who could imagine, an Oregon forester in 1930 as anything other than white?

The siblings in Harlem each morning ensured no one confused them for anything other than what they were, black. They were black! Brown-skinned spouses reduced confusion. Many others have told, and not told, this tale. When Paul came East alone he was as they were, their brother.

The poet invents heroic moments where the pale black ancestor stands up on behalf of the race. The poet imagines Great-Uncle Paul in cool, sagey groves counting rings in redwood trunks, imagines pencil markings in a ledger book, classifications, imagines a sidelong look from an ivory spouse who is learning her husband's caesuras. She can see silent spaces but not what they signify, graphite markings in a forester's code.

Many others have told, and not told, this tale. The one time Great-Uncle Paul brought his wife to New York he asked his siblings not to bring their spouses, and that is where the story ends: ivory siblings who would not see their brother without their tell-tale spouses. What a strange thing is "race," and family, stranger still. Here a poem tells a story, a story about race.

Ladders

Filene's department store
 near nineteen-fifty-three:
 An Aunt Jemima floor
 display. Red bandanna,

Apron holding white rolls
 of black fat fast against
 the bubbling pancakes, bowls
 and bowls of pale batter.

This is what Donna sees,
 across the "Cookwares" floor,
 and hears "Donnessa?" *Please,*
This can not be my aunt.

Father's long-gone sister,
 nineteen-fifty-three. "Girl?"
 Had they lost her, missed her?
 This is not the question.

This must not be my aunt.
 Jemima? Pays the rent.
 Family mirrors haunt
 their own reflections.

Ladders. Sisters. Nieces.
 As soon as a live Jemima
 as a buck-eyed rhesus
 monkey. Girl? Answer me.