“The Poets in the Kitchen”
from Reena and Other Stories
by Paule Marshall (edited by Devin Ozdogu)

Marshall, an avid young reader, shares her joy at discovering the voices of black writers at her local library. The poems of Paul Dunbar connect so vividly to her own life experiences that she begins searching for more stories and books about “her people,” Someday, she thinks, she may try to write herself.

By the time I was eight or nine, I graduated from the corner of the kitchen to the neighborhood library, and thus from the spoken to the written word. The Macon Street Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library was an imposing half block long wall of heavy gray masonry, with glass-paneled doors at the front and two tall metal torches symbolizing the light that comes of learning on the sides of the wide steps.

The inside was just as impressive. More steps—of pale marble with gleaming brass railings at the center and sides—led up to the circulation desk, and a great pendulum clock gazed down from the balcony stacks that faced the entrance. Usually stationed at the top of the steps like the guards outside Buckingham Palace was the custodian. He was a stern-faced West Indian type who for years, until I was old enough to obtain an adult card, would immediately shoo me with one hand into the Children’s Room. With the other hand he could threaten me into silence with just a finger to his lips. You would have thought he was the chief librarian and not just someone whose job it was to keep the brass polished and the clock wound. I put him in a story called “Barbados” years later and had terrible things happen to him at the end.

I was sheltered from the storm of my teenage years in the Macon Street library, reading greedily, indiscriminately, everything from Jane Austen to Zane Grey, but with a special passion from the long, full-blown, richly detailed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tales: Tom Jones, Great Expectations, Vanity Fair.

I loved nearly everything I read and would enter full into the lives of the characters—indeed, would cease being myself and become them. But, I sensed a lack of something after a time. Something I couldn’t quite define was missing. And then one day, browsing in the poetry section, I came across a book by someone called Paul Laurence Dunbar, and opening it, I found the photograph of a wistful, sad-eyed poet who to my surprise was black. I turned to a poem at random. “Little brown-baby wif spa’klin’/eyes/Come to yo’ papy an’ set on his knee” (“Little brown-baby with sparkling eyes, come to your father and sit on his knee”). Although I had a little difficulty at first with the words in dialect, the poem spoke to me as nothing I had read before. It spoke of the closeness, the special relationship I had had with my father, who by then had become an ardent believer in Father Divine and gone to live in Father’s “kingdom” in Harlem. Reading it helped to ease somewhat the tight knot of sorrow and longing I carried around in my chest that refused to go away. I read another poem: “Lias! Lias! Bless de Lawd!/Don’ you know de day’s/erbroad?/Ef you don’ get up, you scamp/Dey’ll be trouble in dis camp” (“Lias! Lias! Bless the Lord! Don’t you
know the day has begun? If you don’t get up, you scamp, they’re will be trouble in this camp”). I laughed. It reminded me of the way my mother sometimes yelled at my sister and me to get out of bed in the mornings.

And another: “Seen my lady home las’ night/jump back, honey, jump back/Hel’ huh han’ an’ sque’z it tight…” (“I saw my lady home last night. Jump back, honey, jump back. Hold my hand and squeeze it tight”). It was about love between a black man and a black woman. I had never seen that written about before and it roused in me all kinds of delicious feelings and hopes.

And I began to search then for books and stories and poems about “The Race” (as it was put back then), about my people. While not abandoning Thackeray, Fielding, Dickens and the others, I started asking the reference librarian, who was white, for books by Negro writers. Although, I must admit, I did so at first with a feeling of shame—the shame I and many others used to experience in those days whenever the word “Negro” or “colored” came up.

Later in life, no fellow literature student of mine had ever mentioned Dunbar or James Weldon Johnson or Langston Hughes. I didn’t know that Zora Neale Hurston existed or that she was busy writing and being published during those years. Nor was I made aware of people like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman—their spirit and example—or the great nineteenth-century abolitionist and feminist Sojourner Truth. There wasn’t even Negro History Week when I attended P.S. 35 on Decatur Street!

…it was around that time also that I began harboring the dangerous thought of someday trying to write myself. Perhaps a poem about an apple tree, although I had never seen one. Or the story of a girl who could magically transplant herself to wherever she wanted to be in the world—such as Father Divine’s kingdom in Harlem. Dunbar—his dark, eloquent face, his large volume of poems—permitted me to dream that I might someday write, and with something of the power with words my mother and her friends possessed.