

"Change, when it comes, cracks everything open."

Class is defined in opposition, and to some extent in denial. Especially in American society, there is a lot of shame and refusal. To a large extent we have the bias that we are a classless nation, and that's just a frank outright lie.

The essential assumption of the working class is to be always inappropriate and embattled. You're always in an argument with the over-class about who and what you are.

We have very simple-minded ways we think about socio-economics in this country. We think in terms of the broad categories of **working class, middle class, upper class**, but if you ask someone to define herself it always gets more nuanced.

My sisters, for instance, never wanted anyone to know that we were poor, so there was a refusal to discuss our position in the class structure. If someone did try to talk about it, my sister Barbara would say, **"Well, we're really middle class."** Our stepfather always had a job. Our mama always worked, but the working poor is still a phenomenon, and I define the working poor as people who can't eat every night. I know it sounds trivial and petty, but the struggle was to go to school five days in a row without having to wear the same outfit three times. Kids are ruthless. They notice all those details. So all of the earmarks of being raised poor were there, but we pretended with the rest of America that we were part of the great middle. It's very hard to change something you can't acknowledge.

You know those famous pictures of the South in which dirty-faced kids are standing there with a finger in their mouths? They are not speaking because they aren't sure what to say or how to behave. You are aware absolutely that you are not as valuable or as *human* as people who speak easily and who are comfortable. .

Let's be clear. I came out of an enormous violent Southern working-class family. Most didn't graduate from grammar school. When I graduated from high school I was considered a freak. I had all of these boy cousins whose trajectory in life was to either become a mechanic or go into the Army. There wasn't a lot of room for anything else, but the third option, which really happened to most of them, was to go to jail.

I had a cousin who got picked up with another boy for breaking into telephone boxes. I should explain that there used to be phone booths where you paid for calls with coins. They got a tool that could open the lock box and get the money out, and they were caught by the sheriff and taken to jail. Now that was a petty crime. They didn't even get much money, but the police called their families, and the families came to jail. The other boy's father was a doctor and so the other boy went home with his daddy. My cousin went to prison.

He went to the boys' prison, where half of my cousins lived and learned their place in the world, because the goal of prison is to break you, and it did. When they came out of prison, which was called "the county farm," they were criminals. They learned to be criminals, that criminal was what their essential nature was.

Both of my cousins had their earlobes slit. The violence that was visited on them, the beatings, were things that middle-class kids never experienced, so in the South they were almost black. Black boys might be shot, but my cousins were taken to prison, and they might die there. So, you learn to be careful, to hold your tongue, but you're angry. You're always angry, and it isn't useful anger. It's the kind of anger that will blow back on you and get you killed.

What was tragic is that the most respectable option for my boy cousins was to go into the Army, but none of them could go into the Army because all of them had been arrested, and once you have a record you've been defined. It marks you. You go to jail then to deeper and deeper jails into long-term prisons.

In Literature the working-class hero is invariably male, righteously indignant, and inhumanly noble. What defines a working-class heroine? When I was growing up the portraits I found of working-class people were always very animalistic. The characters were portrayed as violent, physically dangerous, not very bright, and unreasonably angry, as if there were no reason for their anger. When I write these characters I try to take you inside what it feels like to be treated with contempt and to have such a narrow range of possibilities out.

That no-way-out is really the difference between boys and girls in working-class culture, because a working-class boy could run, or could when I was growing up. He could go West and change his name and start a new life for himself, and I know boys in my family did that. There is nowhere a girl can go. The only runaway position is prostitution and that can kill you about as fast as a violent uncle or a crazy daddy.

I've got one cousin who went the other way, and me, and that's also complicated to talk about, because we were really smart. To realize at an early age that you're smarter than most of the people around you is scary. The only person I knew then who was smarter than me was my mama and she was so damaged that there wasn't a lot she could do with it. But she used to tell me, "You can do anything." Now that was not true, and I knew it wasn't true, but I also knew that I was smart enough that there was a place I could go. The tragic cost of that is that it removes you from your own family.

Here's something I've never gotten over. When I was in sixth grade they did I.Q. tests. In Greenville, South Carolina, just before we moved to Florida. I got the highest score in the school. They made me take the test over again, convinced I must have cheated, but I took it over and scored higher the second time. The message was "You're not the kind of person who's supposed to be scoring that high." They had an assembly where they gathered everybody in the gym to recognize the high scorers. That they did this still horrifies me, but they put me up there with the boy who had the second highest score and they treated us as if we had the same score. So, the message is, "You might be bright but don't get ahead of yourself."

It was almost like I was a boy because I was being judged on intellect rather than the other standard for girls, which was to either marry well or to become a

Lesbian Sex Mafia. I was in New York City and working on the Sex and the Scholar Conference at Columbia University. We got picketed by Women Against Pornography. There were six of us they targeted, and we were called Pimps for the Pornographers, because we were feminists writing about sexuality.

They went after us like dogs after the conference, which blew up and became a huge fight within the feminist movement. People I'd known for years would cross the street to avoid me. One of the other women who got caught in that horrific situation killed herself. All of the sudden I lost the family in the women's community I'd been building for a decade, which had become a substitute for the family I'd essentially lost.

When that happened it coincided with my mother having a recurrence of cancer, so I went home to try to help take care of her. I was on the verge of collapse, but what I discovered is that when you do go home they're ready. My sisters didn't like that I was writing about poverty and incest, but they also couldn't deny that it was the truth.

And I loved my mother. She had never walled herself off from me as I had walled myself off from her. I was ashamed of her. My waitress mother with her bleached blonde hair and her bright red lipstick and her high heels. The only books she read were murder mysteries.

I wanted to be an intellectual and to have an intellectual mother, but instead I had my mom. There was a period of adjustment, but it rebirthed my sense of pride in being working class. In addition to the outrage and anger there is that sense that we, my people, my tribe are stronger and more resilient than anyone gives us credit for.

One of the strengths I derive from my class background is that I am accustomed to contempt. Being despised is very hard to survive as a child, but once you don't die, you gain a kind of resilience. And it generates in you a reverse contempt that undercuts it. But it can go bad. It can go sour. Remember that all of the ways you derive strength can cut the other way. It can wear you down. I've noticed



famously successful high-class whore. But the options for marrying well are limited, and if you're as angry and damaged as most working-class girls are you'll marry the first mean-assed boy who takes you up, so the next thing you know you have three babies and he's broken your jaw. They always break your jaw.

Instead, I went off and won scholarships. I applied for scholarships at church and ladies' circles. They're always service organizations run by middle-class women who are generous and kind to the poor. You win those awards by being humble and grateful. Gratitude can eat the heart out of you, because the first thing you have to do is acknowledge that you aren't as good as the people you're begging help from. That's one of the reasons why a lot of the very successful working-class kids who win scholarships drink themselves to death or shoot themselves in the head.

I know the damage. I can't even talk about it, because you're ashamed first because you had to beg and second because you had to treat your family very poorly. It's hurtful, and you're alone. When I go teach at small colleges I try to get the working-class kids to get together for a meeting, and I say, "Look, I'm older than you. You will graduate. You need to go back home and make peace with your family. If you move into these people's world—with these people being the middle and upper class—you will always be one down unless you've got somebody at your back."

It is very expensive, but it is a way out. I did it. I had one other cousin who did it. She became a pathologist. We were the only college graduates in my family. There weren't that many high school graduates. I was the first person in my family; she was the second. By the time I was living in New York in my thirties there were six. The cost of growing up working class is an unacknowledged dam on society. We pretend we have an egalitarian society where you can move up if you work. Doesn't mean shit if you go to the county farm or get pregnant at fifteen, and that's mostly what happens.

The point at which I was publishing and starting to win awards coincided with the work I was doing for the

that it happens about once a decade again where all of the sudden they start using that language of contempt, and I have to stand up to it all over again with a whole new generation with another vocabulary.

For me it's complicated by the fact that they seem to coincide with periods where I'm struggling with my own spirituality. I couldn't quite go back to the Baptist church, but I go to Quaker meetings. I have deeply complicated feelings about the concept of God, but I genuinely cannot believe that we are merely meat and electrical synapses. I believe in the spirit, and that has been a place of struggle, which is also about class because people say, "You just think that because you were raised with Pentecostal music." Maybe, but you know gospel music won't kill you. It'll give you some places where you can derive strength that isn't about hating yourself.

It's all glory at a difference from the mundane, and the mundane is mere survival. Gospel music, like poetry, like great literature, is glory. I'm reaching for glory. I wanted to live forever. I still do, but I have a much more complicated relationship to death than when I was younger. I am more accepting now. I no longer have that overwhelming impulse to live forever, but that's the impulse that makes art. That's the secret desire—that and the desire to separate yourself from those who hold you in contempt, whether that's your stepfather or your cousins or your church or people at the grammar school who made you take the I.Q. test again. You want to claim your right to be among not just the humans but among the best of them.

- Dorothy Allison

Describes herself as a feminist and a working class storyteller who writes to change the world
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