American Working-Class Literature
An Anthology

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read the sports pages around here. What are you doing with a book?” I got pissed off at the kid right away. I said, “What do you mean, all these dummys? Don’t knock a man who’s paying somebody else’s way through college.” He was a nineteen-year-old effete snob.

Yet you want your kid to be an effete snob?

Yes, I want my kid to look at me and say, “Dad, you’re a nice guy, but you’re a fuckin’ dummy?” Hell yes, I want my kid to tell me that he’s not gonna be like me ...

If I were hiring people to work, I’d try naturally to pay them a decent wage. I’d try to find out their first names, their last names, keep the company as small as possible, so I could personalize the whole thing. All I would ask a man is a handshake, see you in the morning. No applications, nothing. I wouldn’t be interested in the guy’s past. Nobody ever checks the pedigree on a mule, do they? But they do on a man. Can you picture walking up to a mule and saying, “I’d like to know who his grandaddy was?”

I’d like to run a combination bookstore and tavern. (Laughs.) I would like to have a place where college kids came and a steelworker could sit down and talk. Where a workingman could not be ashamed of Walt Whitman and where a college professor could not be ashamed that he painted his house over the weekend.

If a carpenter built a cabin for poets, I think the least the poets owe the carpenter is just three or four one-liners on the wall. A little plaque: Though we labor with our minds, this place we can relax in was built by someone who can work with his hands. And his work is as noble as ours. I think the poet owes something to the guy who builds the cabin for him.

I don’t think of Monday. You know what I’m thinking about on Sunday night? Next Sunday. If you work real hard, you think of a perpetual vacation. Not perpetual sleep ... What do I think of on a Sunday night? Lord, I wish I could do something else for a living.

I don’t know who the guy is who said there is nothing sweeter than an unfinished symphony. Like an unfinished painting and an unfinished poem. If he creates this thing one day—let’s say, Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. It took him a long time to do this, this beautiful work of art. But what if he had to create this Sistine Chapel a thousand times a year? Don’t you think that would even dull Michelangelo’s mind? Or if da Vinci had to draw his anatomical charts thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, eighty, ninety, a hundred times a day? Don’t you think that would even bore da Vinci?

Way back, you spoke of the guys who built the pyramids, not the pharaohs, the unknowns. You put yourself in their category?

Yes. I want my signature on ’em, too. Sometimes, out of pure meanness, when I make something, I put a little dent in it. I like to do something to make it really unique. Hit it with a hammer. I deliberately fuck it up to see if it’ll get by, just so I can say I did it. It could be anything. Let me put it this way: I think God invented the dodo bird so that we get up there and we could tell him, “Don’t you ever make mistakes?” and He’d say, “Sure, look.” (Laughs.) I’d like to make my imprint. My dodo bird. A mistake, mine. Let’s say the whole building is nothing but red bricks. I’d like to have just the black one or the white one or the purple one. Deliberately fuck up.

This is gonna sound square, but my kid is my imprint. He’s my freedom. There’s a line in one of Hemingway’s books. I think it’s from For Whom the Bell Tolls. They’re behind the enemy lines, somewhere in Spain, and she’s pregnant. She wants to stay with him. He tells her no. He says, “if you die, I die,” knowing he’s gonna die. But if you go, I go. Know what I mean? The mystics call it the brass bowl. Continuum. You know what I mean? This is why I work. Every time I see a young guy walk by with a shirt and tie and dressed up real sharp, I’m lookin’ at my kid, you know? That’s it.

### Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995)

Fiction writer, filmmaker, and activist, Toni Cade Bambara was born in Harlem, named Miltona Mirkin Cade after her father’s white employer, Milton Mirkin. She changed her name after finding the signature “Bambara” on a sketchbook in her great-grandmother’s trunk. Coming of age during the civil rights movement and inspired by her mother’s example, Bambara’s creativity took shape with a keen consciousness of racism as well as appreciation for her black neighborhood with its talkers and musicians and community helpers. Her mother, she writes, “had a deep respect for the life of the mind.” Bambara dedicated her novel The Salt Eater (1980) to “Mama . . . who in 1948, having come upon me daydreaming in the middle of the kitchen floor, mopped around me.” Bambara attended Queens College, graduating with a BA in Theater Arts and English, and later—after periods of work and study in Italy and France—completed an MA degree while working as a social worker in Brooklyn. In the late 1960s, she taught at New York’s City College. Bambara’s first book, The Black Woman (1970), was a groundbreaking collection of fiction, poetry, and essays by Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Nikki Giovanni, among others. It made a double political and artistic statement characteristic of Bambara’s work: putting women writers at the center of the Black Arts movement and at the same time asserting the place of black women in feminism’s second wave. A second anthology, Tales and Stories for Black Folks (1971), gathered narratives from what she called “Our Great Kitchen Tradition.” Gerilla My Love followed in 1972, a collection of Bambara’s own stories focused on the lives of women and girls in the same New York neighborhood. “The Lesson,” reprinted here, is widely admired for its exploration of racial and class divisions through the perspective and language of a street-smart but curious and determined preteen girl. The stories in The Sea Birds Are Alive (1977) reflect Bambara’s travels in the mid-1970s to Cuba, Vietnam, and Atlanta, Georgia. In the 1980s, Bambara turned increasingly to theater and filmmaking. Her film The Bombing of Osage Avenue, about the 1985 police attack on the MOVE headquarters in Philadelphia, won an Oscar for Best Documentary in 1986. Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations was published in 1996, after Bambara’s death from cancer, a year that also saw the release of her film biography of W. E. B. DuBois. Those Bones Are Not My Child, a novel about the Atlanta child murders in the early 1980s, appeared in 1999, edited by Bambara’s friend Toni Morrison.

### The Lesson

Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup. And quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went about his business like he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary. And we kinda hated her too, hated the way we did the winos who clattered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn’t halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask. Miss Moore was her name. The only woman on the block with no first name. And she was black as hell, cep for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky. And she was always planning these boring-ass things for us to do, us being my cousin, mostly, who lived on the block cause we all moved North the same time and to the same apartment then spread out gradual to breathe. And
"Hey, I'm goin' to buy that there."
"That there? You don't even know what it is, stupid."
"I do so," he say punchin' on Rosie Giraffe. "It's a microscope."
"Whatcha gonna do with a microscope, fool?"
"Look at things."
"Like what, Ronald?" ask Miss Moore. And Big Butt ain't got the first notion. So here go Miss Moore gabbing about the thousands of bacteria in a drop of water and the somethin'orother in a speck of blood and the million and one living things in the air around us is invisible to the naked eye. And what she say that for? Junebug go to town on that "naked" and we rollin'. Then Miss Moore ask what it cost. So we all jam into the window smudgin it up and the price tag say $300. So then she ask how long'd she take for Big Butt and Junebug to save up their allowances. "Too long," I say. "Yeh," adds Sugar, "outgrown it by that time." And Miss Moore say no, you never outgrow learnin' instruments. "Why, even medical students and interms and," blah, blah, blah. And we ready to choke Big Butt for bringing it up in the first damn place.

"This here costs four hundred eighty dollars," say Rosie Giraffe. So we pile up all over her to see what she pointin' out. My eyes tell me it's a chunk of glass cracked with somethin' heavy, and different-color rods dripped into the splits, then the whole thing put into a oven or something. But for $480 it don't make sense.

"That's a paperweight made of semi-precious stones fused together under tremendous pressure," she explains slowly, with her hands doing the mining and all the factory work.

"So what's a paperweight?" asks Rosie Giraffe.

"To weigh paper with, dumbbell," say Flyboy, the wise man from the East.

"Not exactly," say Miss Moore, which is what she say when you warm or way off too.

"It's to weigh paper down so it won't scatter and make your desk untidy." So right away me and Sugar currty to each other and then to Mercedes who is more the tidy type.

"We don't keep paper on top of the desk in my class," say Junebug, figuring Miss Moore crazy or lyin' one.

"At home, then," she say. "Don't you have a calendar and a pencil case and a blotter and a letter opener on your desk at home where you do your homework?" And she know damn well what our homes look like cause she nosys around in them every chance she gets.

"I don't even have a desk," say Junebug. "Do we?"

"No. And I don't get no homework neither," say Big Butt.

"And I don't even have a room," say Flyboy like he do at school to keep the white folks off his back and sorry for him. Send this poor kid to camp posters, his specialty.

"I do," says Mercedes. "I have a box of stationery on my desk and a picture of my cat. My grandmother bought the stationery and the desk. There's a big rose on each sheet and the envelopes smell like roses."

"Who wants to know about your smelly-ass stationery," say Rosie Giraffe 'fore I can get my two cents in.

"It's important to have a work area all your own so that . . ."

"Will you look at this sailboat, please," say Flyboy, cuttin' her off and pointin' to the thing like it was his. So once again we tumble all over each other to gaze at this magnificent thing in the toy store which is just big enough to maybe sail two kittens across the pond if you strap them to the posts tight. We all start recitin' the price tag like we in assembly.

"Handcrafted sailboat of fiberglass at one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars."

"Unbelievable," I hear myself say and am really stunned. I read it again for myself just in case the group recitation put me in a trance. Same thing. For some reason this pisses me off. We look at Miss Moore and she lookin' at us, waitin' for I dunno what.

"Who'd pay all that when you can buy a sailboat set for a quarter at Pop's, a tube of glue for a dime, and a ball of string for eight cents? It must have a motor and a whole lot else besides," I say. "My sailboat cost me about fifty cents."
very closely at me like maybe she planpin' to do my portrait from memory. I'm mad, but I won't give her that satisfaction. So I slouch around the store being very bored and say, "Let's go."

Me and Sugar at the back of the train watchin' the tracks whizzin' by large then small then gettin' gobbled up in the dark. I'm thinkin' about this tricky toy I saw in the store. A clown that somersaults on a bar then does chin-ups just cause you yank lightly at his leg. Cost $35. I could see me askin' my mother for a $35 birthday clown. "You wanna that costs what?" she'd say, cockin' her head to the side to get a better view of the hole in my head. Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Granddaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars and the piano bill too. Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and $1,000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it? Where we are is who we are, Miss Moore always pointin' out. But it don't necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie and don't none of us know what kind of pie she talkin' about in the first damn place. But she ain't so smart cause I still got her four dollars from the taxi and she sure ain't gettin' it. Messin' up my day with this shit. Sugar nudges me in my pocket and winks.

Miss Moore lines us up in front of the mailbox where we started from, seem like years ago, and I got a headache for thinkin' so hard. And we lean all over each other so we can hold up under the draggy-ass lecture she always finishes us off with at the end before we thank her for borin' us to tears. But she just looks at us like she readin' tea leaves. Finally she say, "Well, what did you think of F. A. O. Schwartz?"

Rosie Giraffe mumbles, "White folks crazy."

"I'd like to go there again when I get my birthday money," says Mercedes, and we shove her out the pack so she has to lean on the mailbox by herself.

"I'd take a shower. Tiring day," say Flyboy.

Then Sugar surprises me by sayin', "You know, Miss Moore, I don't think all of us here put together eat in a year what that sailboat costs." And Miss Moore lights up like somebody goosed her. "And?" she say, urging Sugar on. Only I'm standin' on her foot so she don't continue.

"Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven. What do you think?"

"I think," say Sugar pushin' me off her feet like she never done before, cause I whip her ass in a minute, "that this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don't it?" Miss Moore is besides herself and I am disgusted with Sugar's treachery. So I stand on her foot one more time to see if she'll shove me. She shuts up, and Miss Moore looks at me, sorrowfully I'm thinkin'. And somethin' weird is goin' on, I can feel it in my chest.

"Anybody else learn anything today?" lookin' dead at me.

I walk away and Sugar has to run to catch up and don't even seem to notice when I shrug her arm off my shoulder.

"Well, we got four dollars anyway," she says.

"Uh huh."

"We could go to Hascombs and get half a chocolate layer and then go to the Sunset and still have plenty money for potato chips and ice-cream sodas."

"Uh huh."

"Race you to Hascombs," she say.

We start down the block and she gets ahead which is O.K. by me cause I'm goin' to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this day through. She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin'.