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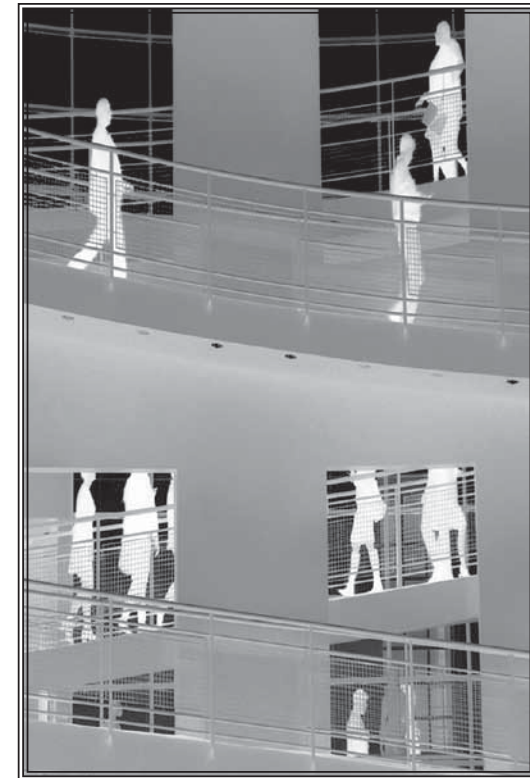
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THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

SURPRISED BY JOY

**CROSSING CLASS**

*THE INVISIBLE WALL*



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*Editors*

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## DEDICATION

*To the gymnasts of class—  
those who climb,  
those who tumble,  
those who do the heavy lifting  
with an open heart*



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## HEATHER TOSTESON

### INTRODUCTION

#### *CROSSING CLASS: THE INVISIBLE WALL*

For our press, dedicated to Finding the We in Them, the Us in You, class is the biggest elephant in the room. We keep wanting to talk about it and have tried unsuccessfully several times to create an anthology exploring the subject, but the interest wasn't there. However, this year was different. Numerous writers responded. How we are all shaped, individually and as a country, by class and by other potent, often polarizing, categorizations as well, may be a question that is more alive to us now than at other less socially tumultuous times.

A remarkable number of Americans, around 70% in some surveys, consider themselves middle class, although perhaps only 50% would actually meet the economic criteria. This identification with the middle class reflects a strong belief that the United States is a meritocracy, that with hard work we can all get ahead. This remains true despite the rapidly increasing inequality of income and wealth in our country and a rate of social mobility that is actually less than that in many other developed countries (see Appendix on social mobility and inequality). In contrast, 60% of Britons identify as working class when only 25% of them are actually engaged in manual labor and express doubt about the possibility of social mobility even when they have experienced it themselves.

But what we have asked people to think about and write about is not class in the abstract, rather the felt experience of it, which is, whether imagined or real, always personal and narrative.

This is the call we ran for this anthology.

*CROSSING CLASS: THE INVISIBLE WALL*

*CLASS: It's the great unspeakable in a society dedicated to the proposition*

*that all people are created equal, with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that believes in the redistributive power of personal ambition, hard work, self-intention and self-definition. It might be the most powerful and intractable of social divisions, its effects potent even within culture, race, or gender. Whether we buy in consciously or not, we are all subject to the shaping power of class.*

*But what exactly does it mean to be shaped by class? How does this shaping affect what we long for, strive for, believe is possible—not just for us but for those around us and the world at large? We are interested in what happens to our understanding of class, of our society and of ourselves, when we cross class boundaries upwards or downwards, willingly or unwillingly, through education, employment, marriage, divorce, friendships and other meaningful relationships, immigration or emigration, illness, economic or political upheaval. How does our experience of class mobility, wanted or unwanted, change our understanding of ourselves, our social relationships, our sense of social agency, our sense of our society? How does it change our understanding of the possibilities and challenges of living out E Pluribus Unum?*

We hope you read the stories, memoirs, and poetry here with these questions resonating in mind, resonating with your own personal experience too. As we have read and selected the pieces that make up this book, I've found different scenes from my own life flashing up as well, in both agreement and counterpoise. I've decided to focus on them here because it feels to me the most trustworthy way to ground my own thoughts on class.

X X X

"Every time we come here, I feel I am betraying my people," my sixteen-year-old son said, looking out at the large white sprawling country club in Chestnut Hill where we had come to have dinner with my father and his second family.

"You are," I told him. "I'm glad you realize it."

I said this as a striving artist, a working single mom. When we had moved to the Boston area the year before, it was because I was offered a job that would support us and get us out of Mexico where my own poor judgment had sent us. Proximity to my father, who had become more wealth and status-oriented as he aged, and whose children from his second marriage, the same age as my son, had been raised with a very different level of material

wealth and a very different sense of entitlement, was actually a concern to me, not an enticement. I wanted to protect my son from the values this large white building, with its history of restricting its membership to white Christian men, represented. These were certainly not the values I had been raised with, nor the values I lived by, nor the ones I was raising my son to respect. I was relieved to see my son could protect himself.

I had purposefully chosen to live in Watertown, a working community with a high immigrant population, primarily Armenian, partly because of its fantastic fruit and vegetable markets and its complex multicultural vibe, but mostly because it had a high school with an independent school imbedded in it and an enlightened policy to assure its students graduated. They would create an individualized course of study for any student in danger of dropping out. My son, very bright but dyslexic, was increasingly frustrated with school, and I welcomed that assurance.

Within a year, we had invoked that dropout clause, allowing my son to take college level art and writing classes at local universities and to have his other classes through the independent school. He also worked as a host at a pizza parlor in Harvard Square on weekends, a job he got with the help of two resourceful young Armenians he met through his evening art classes, aspiring artists in their twenties, who had been on their own since the age of fifteen. They fostered his drive for self-sufficiency. They taught him how to dress, all the expectations of the job. They taught him how artists pay their rent.

So when my son talked about "my people," these two young men were part of his personal class structure. So was the young African-American cook at the restaurant who confided in him that he would like to be a host, but that he knew that was never going to happen.

"Why does he think that?" my son asked me. "I keep telling him, if I can do it, why can't you?" He would brood on this at night when he came back from work. "I bet his family's income is no different from ours," he said. "So, it's not money. I don't think it's that he's black either. There are black waiters there."

He looked around our flat, all the pillows we used for sitting, the raw boards and bricks we still used as bookcases, the used novels and poetry books from my doctoral program that he was reading his way through for the pleasure of it. "These *create* something," he said. "You don't notice it, but there is this set of shared references you're kind of born into. I mean you learn them, but not consciously, so if someone says something, you know what it