Emily May

Published September 17, 2017 on Entropy.com

Agee in the Backyard

I could have bought my own copy of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in the past eight years— whenever I'm in a bookstore I head straight for the A's, looking for other books by James Agee there, new volumes that he came back from the grave to write. But usually there's only another copy or two of that muscular paperback, the pale green of the spine greeting me like a friend with whom I've shared countless late nights and secrets. And I always think of buying it, nine or so bucks for a used copy of my own. So I flip it open, scan the pages. And they're untouched. No creased corners or underlines my friend Meredith made during class:

> *the eyes of a trapped wild animal, or of a furious angel nailed to the ground by its wings, or however else one may faintly designate the human 'soul,' that which is angry, that which is wild, that which is untamable, that which is healthful and holy, that which is competent of all advantaging within hope of human dream, that which is most marvelous and most precious...*

These strange copies have no lines that I've marked, and copied and recopied into my own journals since adopting (seizing, really) the loaner.

And somehow, between the years and the pages, my own story has been seared into this volume. Within the leaves of Agee's story, another narrative is woven from photos, postcards, plane tickets, a piece of California Madrone tree bark. Vital scraps stuck between these pages-- the ultimate safe-keeping place-- an impeccable record is kept of where I was, who I was.

A Frida Kahlo postcard from an exhibit I attended on my twenty-third birthday in a new city on the other side of the country, anticipating the world, for my life to start in it. A letter from my sister when we lived three thousand miles away from each other: "This weather reminds me

of last winter and how lucky we were to spend it together." And over the face of the first portrait in Walker Evans' series, a sticky note: a phone number of a student loan agency who keeps calling to collect money that I don't have. I've never called the number. There's a receipt from 2008: a Japanese restaurant in Seattle, a city I'd never been to before. The numbers have started to fade away, but I remember the dinner perfectly: I ate seaweed salad and sushi and stared out over the water. I had just graduated from college, was with adults and pretending to be one too. I was young enough to want to feel older. I teetered on the brink— of the world and what I would be in it. The sun set orange over the water and the warm June breeze sighed through it. I took a breath, found a home, in that.

In 1936, *Fortune* Magazine sent twenty-six-year-old journalist James Agee and photographer Walker Evans to Alabama to document the lifestyles of southern sharecroppers in the wake of FDR's New Deal. Agee arrived in Alabama as an apologetic outsider, a Southerner by birth living as a journalist in New York. In his resulting document, he recognizes the invasive nature of his work to the point of being tortured by it. He stumbles explaining himself to his subjects, some of whom are families of six who are lucky to clear any profit at all after a year of work, many remaining in debt to the land owners. "The least I could have done was to throw myself flat on my face and kiss their feet… I stood and looked into their eyes and loved them, and wished to God I was dead." Agee names himself a spy, admits that he may be clumsy in his endeavor due to either his youth or lack of talent. But, he tells his audience: those limitations are the only reason we will survive what we're about to read. "If I were [capable], you would not go near it at all. For if you did, you would hardly bear to live." He notes that a book is far from the

most effective means of narrative, and that he'd rather collect photos, cloth, cotton, earth, excrement, but "a piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point."

Agee's account was ultimately rejected by *Fortune*, and his findings eventually took the shape of the four-hundred-page *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. It sold 600 copies upon its release in 1941. An alcoholic, Agee died of a heart attack at forty-five. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *A Death in the Family* posthumously, and his writing on film is credited with influencing contemporary film criticism. A *Chicago Tribune* book reviewer said of Agee, over twenty years after his death, that he was "bent on achieving magnificent goals that he was never able to define, even to himself."

When Meredith gave me the book, I was hesitant at first. What could I find in a chronicle of the deep South during the Great Depression? My world was thousands of miles and many decades removed from that bleak black and white moment. But once I started to absorb the prose, *Famous Men* revealed itself as a sacred road map, a compass, a 400-page limb, because I was twenty-two and looking for all of those, anything. I was an American who had spent the entirety of my adolescence with George W. Bush in office: a dumb fake cowboy waging a false forever war, all in the name of an electorate that gleefully responded with a grotesque, cartoonish patriotism and ever larger cars. I had spent my college career studying in detail all the ways in which the world will end, and soon. I felt pummeled by the reactionary irony of the age. The naked sincerity of Agee's prose emerged as if from another world, one where humans could reliably hold onto a truth: *Human beings may be more and more aware of being awake, but they are still incapable of not dreaming.*

Meredith lent me her copy when we shared a drafty old house that let the cold Vermont winters in every crack, with a slanted front porch that held our bikes. Meredith and I built ourselves out of Saturdays at bookstores and record shops, at sticky-floored house shows and over coffee at our own kitchen table. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* had been assigned in her journalism class during our last semester of college. “You need to read this,” she said, and pressed it into my palm. I'd never heard of it, and it didn't cover my obsessions, which included the rebellions of Lou Reed, Joan Didion’s New Journalism and the student uprisings of 1968. But I picked it up and was immediately awed by its power. Agee’s voice seemed at once commanding and pleading: “this is not a work of art or entertainment, nor will I assume the obligations of the artist or entertainer, but is a human effort which must require human co-operation.” This plea struck me as simultaneously brazen and humble: an artist begging to be heard, and a human issuing a simple appeal for communication.

As far as rebellion was concerned, it was Agee’s own, as his collaborator and friend Walker Evans noted, that was “infinitely costly and ultimately priceless.”

Meredith and I had become friends the minute we met. We were both transfer students as sophomores, and had each taken a year off after high school. We were both aspiring English majors, had been the youngest in our class growing up, and Meredith was from the same small New Hampshire town where I’d spent every summer as a kid. It seemed like fate that we both found a room in the same apartment through an online message board. Soon after starting classes, we each joined the college radio station, and during our graveyard shifts sent our T. Rex albums echoing across the quiet campus into the endless empty darkness of the Vermont winter. Meredith schooled me in the New Wave cinema that she’d been studying in her film class, and I

made popcorn during our afternoon screenings of *Jules and Jim* or *L'Avventurra*. When I dropped everything to read ahead in *White Noise* for my postmodern literature class, I wouldn't let up until she read it too. We mixed orange juice with boxed wine and listened to Television on cold nights with the door of my room open to the balcony, covered in wet leaves. We spent weekends trying to live out the romance we'd witnessed in Godard and Truffaut. The boys we drank cheap beer with on Friday nights were too nice to try anything, even when we wanted them to. But it didn't really matter that they failed us; we had each other.

In describing his interactions with the sharecropping families, Agee employs an unlikely phrase for a man hell-bent on describing every object he encounters and experience he has: "what's the use of trying to say what I felt." With this, he seems to concede that the world continues on, and we are only observers. The more audacious among us will be moved to chronicle what we've seen and tell the world what we think of it: a shout into the wind.

I recognized the terror and urgency in Agee's prose as my own in post-adolescence: the knowledge that I was racing against my own imminent end to leave a mark, the bar of success or satisfaction with my own output residing somewhere above the clouds. Like Agee, I was bent on achieving magnificent goals that I couldn't define even to myself. I couldn't be bothered with envisioning a career, but at twenty-two I planned to become the voice of my generation, and achieve transcendence while living a life of moral righteousness. All of this would be tidily dismissed by Agee himself as "the frightening vanity of…would-be purity." And yet, Agee's own debilitating self-doubt resonated deeply, as I would venture it does with many young writers: "If I had as much confidence about writing as I have intention, everything might be much easier. I feel the well-known prison walls distinctly thickening."

And so I decided I wanted the narrative of my own life to be as breathless and messy as Agee's document. After graduation, I left Vermont first for California, then Portland, on to Michigan, Thailand and next, Boston. My copy of *Famous Men* is my perennial constant, always the first thing I pack. Its presence reminds me that I have a tangible history, even though the scene and characters in my own life constantly change. Like Agee, I became a voyeur, a perpetual tourist, a restless observer. The years grew into a sticky tangle of self-doubt, late nights, cross-country moves, calls from collection agencies, boys who left me wanting, blind hope and a despair that felt like home. I found it preferable to the alternative of inertia.

While delving further into Agee's biography, I learned that he left Knoxville to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, in Exeter, New Hampshire. Agee's father had died when he was young, and his mother shipped him off early to become a man. Because of this, he was rootless, always wandering. I spent every summer on Exeter's campus for the first twenty years of my life; my father coached at the summer hockey camp there. Due to my own father's specific incapabilities, our family moved constantly: I'd lived in five states and twelve homes by the time I left for college. Exeter was the only constant in our lives: the hot nights with the fan running in whatever dorm apartment we were placed in for those mid-summer weeks, the cloudy days my sister and I went to the library to read magazines instead of to the beach. The smells of pine and thunder and sun in the high New England summer felt like my real home. Then, I didn't know that James Agee had walked those same solemn corridors, sat in that same soft afternoon light, tasted the sweet air of the same corner of coastal New England. When I look back, I like to imagine he wandered the same trails on the edge of campus, to the vast perimeters of the far fields I used to run in the evenings, where the grass was always wet and freshly cut.

It's been years since I first read *Famous Men*, and sometimes the book feels too precious to open, with its prose like lace that seems it will crack and break if I touch it. What if I lift open the cover to find that it's changed, that I can no longer find a truth in there? In the intervening years, I have grown harder. I am still here: guess I'm not too pure for this world, like Agee was. I've made compromises with myself to make money. I check Instagram too often. I've grown infinitely weary of the blustery brand of mid-century White Male Genius that Agee so expertly personified. And after all those long work days, all those rent checks and regularly occurring heartbreaks, I became too busy and distracted to hold fast to Agee's declaration of the human soul, my own and those of everyone I'd met and everyone I'd never meet, as "angry, wild, untamable, healthful, holy, competent, marvelous and most precious." I had fiercely believed in that fiery and sacred soul, my own, and that I would never be buried by something as obscene as a gross yearly income. But I still find Agee's prose remarkable in its tenderness, and my own compassion is renewed by it. Today, like every other day, I'm buried under the news again: Another American body on the ground. Police weapons. The tears of a mother. The smirk of a congressman.

So I click 'retweet' on the more toothsome pronouncements of rage and grief I encounter.

What's the use of trying to say what I felt.

I wonder now if Agee was consumed with fear for the future of his nation, in his America of the Great Depression. Or if he acknowledged the tragedies of his America as merely the usual turn of the imperial gears, and saw his style of journalism as a means of disruption. Agee viewed the sharecroppers he lived with as being grossly exploited by an insidious system that had willfully consumed their humanity. Reading *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* almost ninety years after Agee reported from Alabama, it becomes too evident that in the interim, America has

not moved to lessen systemic oppression by poverty. Agee's sharecroppers still exist, in varied iterations: uninsured caregivers, migrant workers, single parents working multiple jobs and faced with eviction notices. Meanwhile, I have become concerned primarily, it seems, with satisfying the demands of my own debt and utility bills. I worry my senses have dulled, my fire dimmed by a full-time preoccupation with economic self-preservation in a country that won't forgive me if I miss one day. So I return to the text to be re-ignited by Agee's prose, so that I might burn a little brighter, a little truer.

On a recent summer afternoon in James Agee Park in Knoxville, Tennessee, I walked beneath the magnolia trees, the hot breeze my only companion. Knoxville honored Agee in 2003 with the dedication of the park in his memory on the street he was born, now also named for him. The park is a tidy, deep green acre, and I rounded it a few times, listening to the hum of August in Knoxville, imagining Agee languishing in that same song as a boy. *The whole memory of the South in its six-thousand mile parade and flowering outlay of the facades of cities, and of the eyes in the streets of towns, and of hotels, and of the trembling heat…*

In the park, consumed by the power of his life and work, and faced again with the question of my own, the tears that sprung to my eyes surprised me: was I crying for Agee's short life, and the way that his work meandered through me like a river for my entire adulthood? Or were my tears over a looming birthday, which served as a reminder that the integrity I could afford in youth and attempted to grasp onto still proved increasingly costly with every day I grew older? A stone at the entrance of the park is engraved with Agee's words: "To those who in all times have sought truth and who have told it in their art or their living." The letters themselves are staid and simple, as if the sentiment behind them ever could be.

“It sounds conceited,” he wrote to his mentor which in college, “but I’d do anything on earth to become a really great writer.

“That’s as sincere a thing as I’ve ever said.” He continued. “Do you see though where it leads me?”

I slipped through the gate and out of the park.

While on a summer break from college at Harvard, Agee decided to head west to work in the wheat fields of Oklahoma. “I’ve never worked, and greatly prefer such a job,” he wrote to a friend. “I like to get drunk and will; I like to sing and learn both dirty songs and hobo ones and will.”

“He couldn’t limit himself; he was oceanic,” said his friend. And what other way should anyone strive to be, I wonder now.

In the opening section of *Famous Men*, Agee references Beethoven’s proclamation that one who understood his music could never know unhappiness again. “I believe it,” he says. “And I would be a liar and a coward and one of your safe world if I should fear to say the same words of my best perception, and of my best intention.” When I re-read that passage after visiting the park, I recognized in it what had sparked my tears. I had spent my adult life treading in the murky cognitive dissonance that the vicious cynicism of American late capitalism demands: we were allegedly bestowed the chance to accrue so much wealth that we’d never feel any pain, but everything hurt. Every day it became clearer that the state didn’t care if we financially survived a sick day or a bike accident, which seemed benevolent compared to the deportations and state-sanctioned murders by police. With no god or religion to explain away the nihilist hubris devouring my era, I adopted Agee as my prophet of sorrow and compassion, and his voice became a crucial portal to something like grace. *Small wonder how pitiably we love our home,*

cling in her skirts at night, rejoice in her wide star-seducing smile, when every star strikes us sick with fright: do we really exist at all?

"I finally bought my own copy. For the second time." Meredith told me a few years ago. We've known each other for almost two decades now, and she's more family than friend at this point. Our conversation is like a drive home through familiar wooded back roads, and Agee remains a guiding landmark. I smile sheepishly at my blatant pilferage of her property. We live a country apart now, and I like to send her postcards, sometimes with quotes: "Acquaintances return books. Friends never do."

She recently visited my yard, now very far from her own. It was a warm May night like the ones we used to share together, when we might rouse friends to throw off all of our clothes and ride our bikes through town naked at midnight, the delicious taste of freedom on our tongues. We didn't know then just how rarefied it was. Now we wake up early for work, pledge allegiance to the twenty-two year olds we were, and attempt to map lives under different constellations. But the leaves still swing in the dark with the breeze and the lilacs bloom again, like they always have.

(We lay on the front porch: