Performing and Media Arts

Plans for Work

When I was in college—and living in a two bedroom apartment with my two best friends, which meant I actually paid rent for (and slept in) the “landing” of the spiral staircase—I kept a Xeroxed sheet of paper above my desk. It was a list of potential projects the writer James Agee had made in his application for a Guggenheim grant, in 1937. He’d already spent months in Hale County Alabama, with the photographer Walker Evans, documenting the privation of sharecropping families for what would become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

This list is brilliant, under-baked, absurd—Agee didn’t get the grant—but the spirit of it, the range and curiosity and intention, was relentless. A *story about homosexuality in football. A new type of sex book. A true account of a jazz band. An account and analysis of a cruise: "high"-class people. Conjectures of how to get "art" back on a plane of organic human necessity, parallel to religious art or the art of primitive hunters.* (So many, in fact, came to be, though not by Agee.)

James Agee—journalist, screenwriter, novelist, film critic, spy—was a literary father figure for me, the kind who shows up at holidays, changes your life and then vanishes. He’d started out at magazines, *Time* and *Fortune*, and became proof that you could rescue yourself from sentence-manufacturing jobs at the glossies where, after college, I supported myself as a “reporter/researcher/fact-checker/numbskull”. It was on assignment for *Fortune* that Agee and Walker Evans embarked on a trip through Alabama and lived with three tenant-farming families, families that owned little more than mules and a few farming tools, in an attempt to capture their daily lives with a new level of intimacy and directness. What the two men produced was an ungainly, exuberant record of human resilience in the face of economic and educational disenfranchisement. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was brave, lyric, discomfiting, wickedly-overwritten, and yet in its constant questioning of its own intentions, unquestionably humane. It mesmerized me.

The idea of this book, as much as the book itself, moved into my private canon. It offered not just a way of making work but a new evidence of what the work itself was. Art did not require a remove from the material of life; it could actually seek to dissolve the boundary between the two. Writing could, maybe should, transform you. Agee’s range as a writer astounds; he wrote screenplays (*Night of the Hunter*, among others), film reviews for *The Nation*, and won the Pulitzer for his novel *A Death in the Family*. Just look at his Guggenheim grant. This torrent of his interests, so intimate, offered a model of just how far you could go or broadly you could see the world. (Though it was, perhaps, not a way of bagging a Guggenheim.) We like to categorize our artists by their form — say, film, journalism, novels, music — but those categories don’t always honor our
capacities, the full dimension of our empathy and curiosity. Agee became a model for me, combining journalism, fiction, filmmaking, and film writing.

Fifty years after Agee and Evans arrived in Alabama, I drove down to Hale County to see what he saw, or at least what remained. At 21, I’d won a travel grant (thank you James) to take photographs of the legacy of the sharecropping families and their properties in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. I bought a 2¼ format camera and promptly drove over the light meter my second day there. The photographs I took, and I was never very good, seem to be taken during an unceasing twilight: silvery waves of kudzu, a moonscape of corrugated tin. Finally, I met someone who knew someone who knew one of the daughters of the families Agee had lived with. She was dying of cancer in a hospital in Tuscaloosa. I went to meet her, perhaps to take her photograph, and she stared at me, confused and unblinking, her mouth gaping open while someone who knew someone tenderly patted her hair. I went back to my hotel room and started a new journal. I began with a “Plan for Work,” my very own. It begins with Rilke: “there is no part that does not see you. You must change your life.”