James Nocito

Born in 1960, visual artist James Nocito grew up in the coal-mining country of northeast Pennsylvania. *Found Lives: A Collection of Found Photographs* is a small volume of human images selected by Nocito from the thousands of abandoned photographs that he has gathered and preserved through the first decades of his adulthood. “What were these people doing?” Nocito asks in the book’s introduction. “What were their relationships to one another? Who was behind the camera and what was he or she seeing at that moment? These pictures reveal their secrets slowly or not at all.”

AN ECCENTRIC FRIEND THAT I MET at a summer arts program in high school gave me my first found photo. I really liked her, but she was a bit of an outsider and very neurotic: she read Camus, was obsessed with Sylvia Plath, and wore her grandmother’s sweaters. Even so, I found it truly strange that she would fixate on this picture of a person she never knew, someone presumably dead. It was a picture of a foreign-looking soldier, stern and proud beyond his years and height, both comical and frightening. It was an object whose value had expired, as meaningless as a stranger’s memories. Yet there was a humanity about the picture of that little guy that was haunting to me.

I began to wonder: How did he manage in the war? How was he treated by the other soldiers? Did he return home? Was this picture taken before he left home or after he returned? Asking myself those sorts of questions got me going on collecting more pictures, really taking a good hard look and seeing what’s going on in them beyond the first glance. I would find them at garage sales, secondhand stores, flea markets, antique stores. Every once in a while I’d hit a mother lode with a photo album, but mostly it was one here and one there over many years. I got more and more avid about collecting them, and now I have tens of thousands organized in different categories, boxes and boxes of them.

While I was trying to figure out what to do with my pictures, I spent a lot of time with them, often coming up with stories to go with them. But when I first put the book together, I wrote only a title for each picture. One of the comments I got as I sent it around to publishers was that there was nothing to read. That made me realize that I really did have stories for all those people; I just hadn’t written them down yet.

Growing up, I liked to pore over our family photos, but when I was twelve we lost that box of pictures in a flood. They were mostly of my
immediate family, a few of my parents when they were children, and of my grandparents. I remember my mother saying after the flood, “Everything else is just stuff, but the pictures—we’ve lost the pictures.” I think that’s part of what drew me to collecting photos, wondering about the people in them, seeing what stories I could create, what gaps I could fill in.

On her dresser my mother had a picture of her father, who had passed away when she was quite young. Because he was dead long before I came around, it was always a very powerful little image in its round frame. Especially when we lost the rest of the pictures, it became an important icon. It was never mentioned, but it was imbued with so much meaning and value, you wouldn’t dream of moving it from its place.

We lived in a 1960s tract house and didn’t have a lot of money, certainly no fabulous antiques. My folks bought new things; new was good. You knocked down old houses; you trashed old furniture. My father was first-generation Italian American: you assimilated and you got new stuff because old stuff was just going to break. My mother had more of a sense of tradition, and she had some things that had been passed down to her.

I bought some old magazines at an estate sale near our house. Just the fact that they were old was enough for me. There was some kind of connection I was making when I was in the presence of something old, something with an accumulation of history or wisdom inherent in it. I’m not quite clear on what that connection was, but I really did seek it out. I had the same feeling about the few old things that my folks had, a chair and some jewelry of my mother’s and some old coins of my father’s. But it always seemed like I could never really get my hands on much of it. There was such a scarcity of that sort of thing, which only made me pine for it more.

There weren’t any antique stores around, except for one about ten miles away, in Kingston. Too young to drive, I would have had to get a ride, and I could never manage that. Riding my bike that far would have been kind of ridiculous, but I tried, then gave up, and turned around. If I could just get myself to an antique store! Somehow I knew that it would be the place for me, that I would find all the answers there. In high school I finally made it to the one in Kingston, where I bought some keys and magazines. It turned out to be a little junkier than I had imagined.

The pickings were so slim where I was brought up. I wanted to find an arrowhead more than anything in the world, and it seemed like there just weren’t any more to be found. Finding an arrowhead would have been a moment of that electricity that happens even now when I find photographs. The same as when I would find a fossil or a nice quartz when I was little. This may sound weird, but it feels something like a divine intervention: this thing I’m finding is meant for me. When I come across a picture, it still feels that
way. So, when I find a photograph I’m not just connecting with history and with the people in the photo; I’m connecting with something in my own childhood.

I started keeping a journal when I was in sixth or seventh grade. I still have them all, God help me, and I still keep a journal. When I was growing up my journals were like scrapbooks. I drew and painted in them, pasted in poems and pictures of artworks or nature that I would cut from newspapers and magazines. And I’ve collected quotes since I was young, when I would put them together in books.

There’s a picture in *Found Lives* of two boys standing in a stream, glowing in the sun. I found that one during a trip to Hawaii. At the only antique store in all of Kauai, there were four snapshots sitting in a little dish, and this was one of them. I nearly fell over. On that same trip I found a book of quotations with the lines from Wordsworth about being “apparelled in celestial light.” That photo and those lines were just meant to be together. It was that wonderful feeling you get when it’s all been prearranged, fated.

The place where I was raised had this dichotomy of a rich Colonial past overlaid with the more recent history of coal mining. I was really drawn to the Colonial part, and the old hitching posts that I’d see around were a tie to that period, like the old houses. I wanted to possess one of those hitching posts, something authentic, a remnant of a very different time.

I loved that my paternal great-grandmother was with us for so long. She died when I was in college, a teeny-tiny Italian relic who spoke very broken English. When I was in high school and would go to her house to visit, she would shower me with kisses. After a minute or two of conversation her vocabulary would be exhausted, and we would just sit together without talking. I had never experienced that with anyone else, the comfort of being able to just be silent with someone.

I also liked spending time with my grandmother, who lived across the street from my great-grandmother. We would cook raviolis together. I liked her old stone house because of its hand-built qualities. My grandfather, who died before I was born, built much of it himself. There was a canning cellar with jars of weird stuff that seemed like they had been there since the days of Mussolini. I loved that the place was old and that it had been around so long, but it was a little spooky because it was so raw, and it had an aura of hypermasculinity that was off-putting. I knew that deer had been dragged through the yard, gutted and butchered, and there was a special shower for the men down in the basement. It was pretty hardcore Italian male, a scene that I knew I wasn’t really party to.
During my college years in Pittsburgh I was intrigued by archaeological excavations. The paintings I did then looked like they had been hacked away or scratched out: I would pile on a whole bunch of paint and excavate the surface until I came up with something. Today the passage of time and the nature of memory are important themes in my artwork. I’m really drawn to layers, decomposing surfaces that look like they’re peeling away, old patinas, and lacquers that look like they’ve been worked over by time. I’m also attracted to scenes that could have been painted today or two hundred years ago. I’m drawn to that in life, too—contemporary landscapes where everything you see could have been there two centuries ago. I’ve found these seemingly timeless places in the forests of Pennsylvania and in remote coastal areas of northern California.

My boyfriend, Sal, gets a bunch of flowers from the farmers’ market each week and puts together arrangements for the house. Invariably the one that comes out best is the bathroom arrangement made of the leftover cuttings. He just kind of puts them together in a little vase (he collects old art pottery), doesn’t really fuss over it. For his birthday recently I secretly did a painting of each of Sal’s weekly “leftover” bouquets for a year and put them in an album. There was something about collaborating with him in that way that I enjoyed, creating a record of his evanescent endeavor, tracking the passage of the seasons. I was marking the passage of time and gathering memories that might be lost. Which is really what collecting the photographs is all about. I’m giving these abandoned, leftover, “worthless” pictures another life, noticing things in them that had been overlooked, finding all kinds of meaning in them.

The photographs that totally get me are the ones with the person’s handwriting on the back. There’s a picture in Found Lives of two women dancing together, and on the back of the picture is written “1930” and this note: “My guest for seven weeks who returned to her home in Havana, Cuba, for Thanksgiving. She is a rare delight—.” The woman who’s looking at the camera is presumably the writer of these words. She looks kind of prim, with her little collar and sensible haircut, and she lives in a place that reminds me of Pittsburgh. It’s autumn in 1930, the leaves have fallen from the trees, and there’s some snow on the ground. Into her dour world comes this tall, thin woman who wears a cape and dances with her in the backyard. God, what a wonderful treat that must have been! And here’s this beautiful record of when these two dear friends got together.