

Rhythms of Experience: An Introduction

by Rhonda Pettit

Rain had been predicted for the tri-state area, but it hadn't reached Blue Ash, Ohio, where I'd spent a long day working on, among other tasks, a promotion file. In fact, the sky there was clear except for the shades of rose and gold offered up by the setting sun. As I headed south on Interstate-71 toward home, toward Kentucky, I could see from the top of the Kenwood hill the storm line below. The contrast was ominous and beautiful. It was the kind of moment that James Baker Hall had taught me to—not notice, but *take in*. I have been doing so, or trying to, for more than twenty years.

I descended the hill, crossing the storm's border, moving from dry to wet pavement, from light to darkness. But no rain – the storm had moved east. About that time I received a phone call from Ann Merritt, a friend who had taken several of Jim's writing workshops with me in the 1980s. She was calling with the news: Jim Hall had died.

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This image has never left me. Late afternoon, autumn 1982 or so, the plaza outside the University of Kentucky Patterson Office Tower and Whitehall Classroom Building, crisp air, low and golden light. Through it strides a thin man in jeans and a hat, carrying a thin leather satchel and a brown paper bag masking a gallon jug of Gallo red wine. White styrofoam cups poking out of somewhere. Long strides, spine and shoulders a perfect T, blue eyes far beyond. Determined. Who he? Where he go? What he after? Is James Baker Hall a Poet on a Mission to Save the World through the Minds of His Students and Their Writing and His Own Poems and Fiction and Photography, or What? I follow to Miller Hall. I argue and resist. I open and learn.

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Sometimes the 1980s seems like The Lost Decade, an era of Reagan policies, yuppie kingdoms, and social conservatism. Too often I felt out of place, out of touch, meaning: the soil (or soul; choose your preferred vowel) was ready for transformation. Jim's writing workshops were an essential part of that process. When Ann Merritt took a workshop without me, we met so I could find out everything Jim was teaching. Sometimes I caught up with the workshop I wasn't taking at High on Rose, and Jim generously included me in the after-workshop beer & conversations about writing, as he did with any of his former students who were serious about their work.

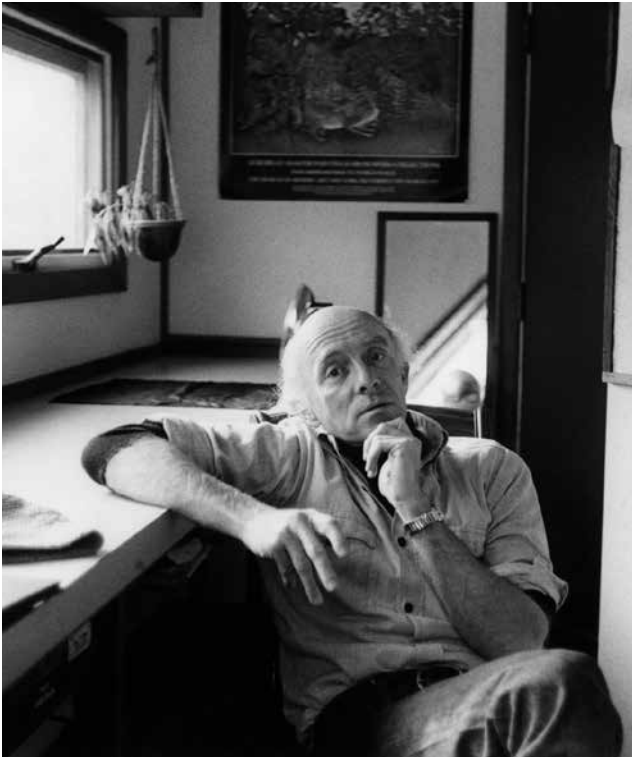
The pedagogy of teaching and learning is a major force in universities and colleges today. The field is full of scholarship and theories, full of good intentions and assessment tools with which to measure success and failure. But there is nothing like the journey one takes with a teacher who is himself on a journey, using craft and knowledge about the tradition for fuel, ears and eyes for rudder. And no way to convert that kind of learning into numbers on an assessment rubric—unless you want to count the number of Jim’s students who went on to become published authors, artists, teachers, and university professors. “You, the caretakers of literature,” he called us in his graduate poetry seminar.

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Jim exuded an energy that said: *There is plenty of work to do. It’s time to get on with it.*

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This special section is designed to demonstrate and celebrate the work and life of James Baker Hall, as well as serve as a starting point for future readers and scholars of his work. It gives Jim the first and last word about his work, opening with a portfolio of his poems and photographs, and closing with the last poem he wrote, “The Spirit Stays.” It is also somewhat framed by the last two interviews he gave, both with Arwen Donahue, which chronicle among other things his development as an artist and his relationship to Buddhism and the poet W. S. Merwin. The most complete to-date bio-bibliography of primary and secondary sources regarding Jim’s writing, photography, and films, compiled by Sarah Wylie A. VanMeter, appears early in the section, rather than at the end as might be expected. The reason: it is as much a testament to his career as it is a source for scholars. The need for additional scholarship about his work is also part of the story in which Jim Hall



James Baker Hall

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lived. Critical and personal essays, as well as poems honoring his memory by Wendell Berry, W. S. Merwin, Frank X Walker, Frederick Smock, Mary Ann Taylor-Hall, Gray Zeitz, and others round out this project.

We solicited these items via a Call for Papers sent to Kentucky colleges and universities, distributed at the 2009 annual meeting of the Kentucky Philological Association, and sent to other individuals and groups we thought might be interested. We had no idea what we would receive, so it was amazing to discover the extent to which items spoke to and echoed each other. First one, then a second poem using the image of a horse was received, followed by Sarah Wylie's recommended cover photograph, by Jim, featuring a horse. We had W. S. Merwin's poem* dedicated to Jim and Mary Ann Taylor-Hall before we knew that Jim's last interview focused on Merwin. *Yates Paul, His Grand Flights, His Tootings* is discussed in an interview and a critical paper, and *Music for a Broken Piano* comes up in two brief essays, one personal and one critical. The issue of censorship hovers above an interview, an essay, and two poems, one of them Jim's "The Approaching Sky." The portfolio includes two poems that are analyzed in a critical paper. None of this was planned or is merely coincidental. We seem to be dancing. The spirit stays.

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Jim Hall's photography documents and explores. His work overall ranges from early sports journalism, to documentary and portrait photography, to art photography and photo-montage. He photographed horses and cows, twigs and leaves, nudes and tobacco, people he knew and loved. With shifts of light, line, color, focus, and composition, he captured not just an image, but the moment of and behind it. His close-ups leave room for the viewer to explore further, to look beyond. Compression and expansion simultaneously.

Jim was long fascinated by picture/word combinations. He taught a class on the subject at MIT in the early 1970s, and in 1995 published *A Spring-Fed Pond*, which combines his photographs of five Kentucky writers with their words. So it seems appropriate to give back in kind, to include a portfolio of Jim's photographs and poems in combination. We have offered an arrangement of our own, but follow Jim's advice in *A Spring-fed Pond*: "... move the words around and about among the pictures, and watch and listen to what happens."

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What do the documents here collectively tell us about James Baker Hall? He was appreciated in Kentucky where he was born, raised, and then educated at the University of Kentucky (and later Stanford). He was part of the UK era that produced Wendell Berry, Gurney Norman, Ed McClanahan, and Bobbie Ann Mason, but his voice and orientation were distinct from theirs. He was a southern writer for whom interior regions, not geographical ones, were the focus. He published six books of poetry, three novels (one of them an epistolary novel in verse), and four books of photographs. He filmed and produced two art films. His poetry and fiction appeared in prestigious journals: *Poetry*, *Paris Review*, *American Scholar*, *Kenyon Review*, *Field*, *Southern Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, and the *New Yorker*, among others. John Frederick Nims, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Parisi, Gerald Stern, and Richard Tillinghast are among those poets and editors outside of Kentucky who

admired his work. His photographs appeared in books, anthologies, journals, and exhibits. His work garnered several awards, including the prestigious NEA Fellowship in Poetry, the O. Henry Prize, the Pushcart Prize, and a Wallace Stegner Fellowship. He was named the state's Poet Laureate in 2001. Versatile and prolific are two words that come to mind. He tapped the power a form or genre had to offer without being restricted by its rules. Yet if his work has yet to receive the broader appreciation it deserves, it is nevertheless here. People who need to experience it are everywhere.

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To this day, when I need to have a serious conversation about a poem I am reading, writing, or teaching, I have it first, in my mind, with Jim Hall.

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It is no accident that many of the authors in this special section of the *Journal of Kentucky Studies* are Jim's former students ("Jim" always; nobody knew a "Professor Hall"). When it came to literature and art, Jim was a rare earth magnet, a 12-volt battery. We were drawn in and charged. He would read our work, and listen to our conversation, and know when we were lying to ourselves, know when we were blind to how our unacknowledged pain was bleeding us of insight and compassion. And he would tell us. He spoke of craft and discipline; honesty and focus; integrity, imagination, and rhythm. "The writer trapped in his or her hurt can't imagine the lives of others, and thus can't write," I wrote in my journal following one of his classes. As he was working his way out of such entrapment, creating *The Mother on the Other Side of the World* and *Orphan in the Attic*, he was showing us how it's done. Showing us the way. Not telling. Showing.

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Where to go from here? My guess is that Jim would much prefer a poem about *anything* to a critical paper about his work, but an informed analytical exploration about his writing and photography is long overdue. His work, combined with the documents collected here, suggests a number of roads to thumb. What does it mean to be a "Kentucky" or "southern" writer in light of Jim's poetry and fiction? Is his rejection of the regional approach a kind of southern postmodernism? What other postmodern elements are found in his work? What might a comparative analysis of Jim's writing with that of other Kentucky writers—of his or previous generations—yield? Jim's approach to nature compared with that of his close friend, Wendell Berry, or his connection to the pastoral tradition could be explored. What constitutes Jim's poetics as demonstrated by the poems themselves, and his comments about them? How has his poetry changed over time, and what are its phases, its use of voice? What might his poems teach us about writing poetry? Can lines of influence from the poets he read be traced? (I think of Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, Eliot, Merwin, Glück, but there are others.) What is the role of feminine imagery in his writing? (Notice all those moons!) Motifs of light, memory, seeing, and the passing of time also should be investigated. How do autobiography and craft interact in his poems in contrast to those of other lyrical poets? How do these elements work in his fiction? A focused analysis of his fiction, generally, is needed. How might we understand his use of written imagery

in light of his work as a photographer and filmmaker? How can we understand his photography and films? What role does humor play in his work?

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The poetry of laughter. In the workshop, Jim was Serious and Intense. Art was nothing to make light of. But as the semester proceeded, as you attended his readings, as you watched him in conversation with others, another side emerged. When wit beckoned, Jim would erupt with his strange, deep, bellowing laugh, a monosyllabic “Huh! Huh! Huh!” combined with glee that trailed off like tires on a gravel road. *Glee!* How did he manage to combine vowel sounds from opposite ends of the frequency spectrum?

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No doubt the contents here will trigger additional memories and connections of readers who knew Jim, thus linking these pages to a broader script. For example, I was struck, in his November 18, 2008 interview, by his recognition of the negative influence of patriarchy on his family story. It reminded me of the time in one of his workshops (early 1980s) when he and other, ahem, “gentlemen” of the class questioned the poetic quality of Adrienne Rich’s feminist, anti-patriarchal poetry. The “approaching sky” of Poetry & Politics had enveloped us.

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Patience. Humility. Silence. Discipline. Listening. Observing. “Meditate without judgment, without expectation,” I wrote in a journal after a Jim Hall workshop. Who among the cell phones, lap tops, I-pads, I-tunes, and X-boxes, among texting, twitting, and Facebook, teaches this now? How?

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From one of my journals, after one of Jim Hall’s workshops: “Experiences have rhythms. You’re not deep enough into the experience if you haven’t gotten in touch with its rhythm. Rhythm is related to voice.” Yes—and death has a rhythm.

Some deaths encapsulate others, bring home to the mind persons who, for different reasons, were just as important in their own way as the life just passed. The singular loss can bear light on the whole of which you are a part—you see it and feel the weight of it from within. In life, the instant you have comprehended this kind of loss, you have already begun to move beyond it. But in art, as Jim taught it and lived it, you dwell there long enough to create. After the poem, the book, the exhibit, you move on, but “the spirit stays.”

* W. S. Merwin provided the poem “Variation on a Theme” to be read at the memorial service for Jim Hall in Lexington, Kentucky on July 11, 2009. The poem was not available for publication in this issue, but an earlier one from Merwin’s volume *Travels* is included.