

One Moment with James Baker Hall, circa 1975

by Normandi Ellis

He lived on East Maxwell Street behind a tall hedge in a house that he designed as if it were his own Bollingen Tower— a sanctuary to the creative process, grounded in memory and spiraling upward. He filled this house with people. He was generous with his students. I remember more than once meeting a “great poet” who had come to the university to read—Richard Wilbur and Diane Wakowski in particular I remember.

He filled the white walls on the lower floor with his photographs, black and white. The camera’s eye liked to linger on the detail of a line or the texture of a whole. His look into image seemed simultaneously micro-and macroscopic. I recall that his house had but one door inside, a concession even at that. It separated a private space, his darkroom. Upstairs his walls were lined with books; it was a kind of Borgesian library in that wherever one walked, one walked among books. His writing desk was up there and his bedroom. Image at the ground floor—transcendent metaphor above. All this was corralled by a railing on the second floor landing. The banister was all that separated the poet and photographer from the chasm below him.

Words and typewriter clacks, epithets and exclamations all veered off the bookshelves, pinged and tumbled onto the hardwood floor downstairs where I sat on this particular day with our friend, Susan. She and I were writing in journals. Jim was above us clacking away on his typewriter. We three were separated by our separate internal spaces, but writing together. I heard above me, a loud slap of annoyance, the flat palm against a glistening forehead. Slap! like swatting an idea of pesky fly.

I heard Jim exclaim, “He said *That!*” I could almost feel the palm of his hand sliding over his bald head and scuffing the ruff of white hair at the back of his head. “Well, *That* changes *everything!*” Here came the grinding whiz-zip of a sheet of paper being snatched from the manual Royal typewriter and whisked away. A few seconds later came the crick-crick-crick, the slow turn of the platen as a fresh sheet was cranked into place. Slowly, light collected itself in the skylight and streamed in. The typewriter keys tap-tapped a staccato, halting at first, then soon fell into a rhythmic sound. He found a stride between keystrokes and so moved on through the afternoon sunlight until his other students dribbled through the front door and it was time for class.

This was how I learned what it would mean to write a novel. The very scary reality of creating characters that began to talk and then would take off all on their own, veering from their intended dialogue, turning a wry smile and letting unheralded words drop from their jaws—characters who darted into bathroom stalls inside previously unknown places. “He said *That?* He did *That?* *That* changes everything.”

I was twenty years old and James Baker Hall (from what he'd let on in class) had been trying to write this novel for nearly ten years. Here, he thought he was nearly finished, coming around the last bend in a sprint, but during a crucial final scene, the character had taken an impractical leap off the page and grabbed him by the ears. As I listened to the commotion upstairs I thought then, "I will never make a novelist. I'll write a short story or two—maybe, but I couldn't bear to put in all those years into something that at any moment I might have to start all over again."

While I lived out west, I wrote short stories and published them. I once tried to create a book of interwoven short pieces, but it didn't quite work out as I planned. I wasn't ready for a commitment that, it turned out in my case, would last longer than the average marriage. I couldn't say that particular literary "N" word. I wasn't working on a Novel—I was working on a "n-n-n—long piece."

I came back to Kentucky some ten years later to find myself attending a reading and publication party for Jim's new novel. I was excited to hear what he'd been doing since I'd been gone. At the reading I met his wife Mary Ann Taylor Hall—a tall, elegant, woman, as talented as she was beautiful. Gurney Norman was there, an old friend, and assorted students, some of whom I knew and others whom Jim had influenced through his writing and classes in the years since I'd been gone. His classes were notorious for inflicting artistic honesty and integrity on the student. Those who survived the grueling honesty of Jim's classes adored him for having made them not just better writers, but in some way better persons.

When Jim began to read from his novel, I recognized it as from the same piece I had first heard, now almost fifteen years earlier. Only there was a difference. The other version had been driven and intense, and so was this one, but it was also heart-breakingly beautiful. This was the eloquence that his character must have insisted upon and which Jim summoned from his depths in order to tell that story in *Music for a Broken Piano* (1982). When the reading was over, the party began, but I walked out to my car by myself. I remember sitting there, listening to the talk, talk, talk that scatters onto the sidewalk after the intensity of a good reading. I rolled up the car window. I sat in the silence and then I banged my head against the steering wheel, thinking, "God, I wish I had written that. I wish I could write anything remotely like that."

Then came a quiet little voice that said, perhaps for the entire twenty years that Jim was writing that novel and the character was whispering in his ear, Jim might once have thought, "Damn, I wish I'd thought of that before he did."

This is one of those lessons I learned from Jim. Let the voice come. Let the narrator run loose inside your head and just follow it. Let the voice live wholly inside your art—inhabit it as if it were inside a house and a life you built for it. Live up close to the ceiling where the words are about to rise up and float out the window toward blue sky. Live deeply inside the images. Learn to see not just photographically the images, but all the patterns, the unfurling curtains and fern fronds and clenched fingers, all the texture of bodies and shafts of light that fall not so much like arrows pointing the way, but like curtains that billow, lifting and falling through a scene. And let there be a witness, an innocent. Every scene should have a poignancy made palpable by the presence of the innocent. That might be the young son walking quietly on his tiptoes through the hallway, or the cardinal cocking its eye back at you as he perches on a windowsill.

And whatever else you do, you have to be willing to change in concert with the life you've created.

Em-hotep, James Baker Hall (1935-2009)