

A Portfolio of Photographs and Poems by James Baker Hall

The James Baker Hall Archive of Photographs and Films represents over fifty years of Jim's image-making.* It is clear, through careful notation of the many sleeves of negatives we have, that Jim was very rarely without his camera. *His* fascinations were people he knew; the nature that surrounded his house in Sadieville, Kentucky; Paris, France; and the history of his family. These subjects run through many of his bodies of work, and his method of working evolved many times over his decades as a photographer, which allowed him to revisit photographs from earlier periods and utilize new techniques to articulate his deepening vision.

Jim's earliest photographs are portraits of people he knew and respected. Because they were all writing students at the University of Kentucky together in the late-50s, he took many photographs of Wendell Berry, Bobbie Ann Mason, Ed McClanahan, and Gurney Norman. Beginning in the mid-60s, and continuing for the rest of his life, he photographed a number of writers—Larry McMurtry, Bob Holman, William Merwin, Louise Glück, Ai, Gerald Stern, and Maurice Manning, among many others. These photographs show a deep connection to the person, and great commitment to the medium. Relying on natural light and the available surroundings for background, they generally bend toward documentation with casual staging of person and place, and at times reveal the influence of his friendships with photographers Minor White, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Bob May, and others.

He worked primarily in black & white portraiture until the mid-80s. By this time, Jim had been making Super 8 films for several years with a lot of dedication. He was shooting with the eye of an experimental filmmaker, which is something like extreme observation, and using the fields around his new home in Sadieville, Kentucky, as the subject. He said that while watching the films with Mary Ann he would want to make the moving images stop, and so he took up still photography again, beginning a series he called Nature Pictures. Dreamlike and cinematic, they are like nature happening but stopped in time. Many of the photos record movement with slow shutter speed and soft focus.

Around the same time, in the late-80s, Jim began sorting through his family's history, particularly as he found it represented in the family album of his childhood. He began using reproductions of the images he found there, which he cut into paper dolls, re-photographing them in more and more intricately staged three-dimensional arrangements. He called this body of work *Orphan in the Attic*. It shared some of the

character of the nature pictures—muted color, shallow focus, movement—but these images are weighted by hindsight and revelation.**

Jim continued to work on nature pictures and the Orphans through the late-90s and early-2000s. Around 2001, he began renting a large warehouse space in Lexington, which he made his photo studio. The space was big enough to accommodate a traditional darkroom, a portrait studio with lighting and backdrops, and a digital printing lab. Jim put all these pieces together: he would sprinkle and paint photo developer on exposed black and white paper resulting in one-of-a-kind calligraphic prints. These prints were scanned, then printed digitally in large sizes with a lot of white space around them. He mined his own vintage black & white negatives to find images suitable to be treated this way. At the same time, he was making new studio portraits of friends and writers and making prints like this out of them. Bodies of work such as *A Spring-Fed Pond: My Friendship with Five Kentucky Writers* and *Appear to Disappear* came from this time.

Around 2004, Jim turned his attention back to color, which opened his vintage color negatives back up to him, and he began making new portraits with color negatives. He scanned the prints and digitally manipulated the images into boldly imagined color-scapes. When he revisited nature pictures in this way he called them Creatures; when he revisited Orphans in this way, he called them Elegies. The image, *White Horse with Another*, which appears on the front of this journal, is a Creature picture, from this last season of his work.

Examples of all Jim's bodies of work may be seen on www.jamesbakerhall.com.

—Sarah Wylie A. VanMeter, with Mary Ann Taylor-Hall

* Jim began making photographs at age eleven, when he worked for his cousin Mack Hughes, a commercial photographer who had the UK sports account. He was paid in darkroom time and use of materials. It was during this time that he was introduced to the idea that he could be an art photographer because of the art magazines that his uncle subscribed to. Jim's work from his youth was not saved, and therefore The Archive's earliest negatives and prints date from the late-'50s.

** Because these are all made in color, no images from this body of work appear in this essay.



Shawn, on Bed

photograph by James Baker Hall



Shayla

photograph by James Baker Hall

The Family of Man Resides in the House of Philosophy

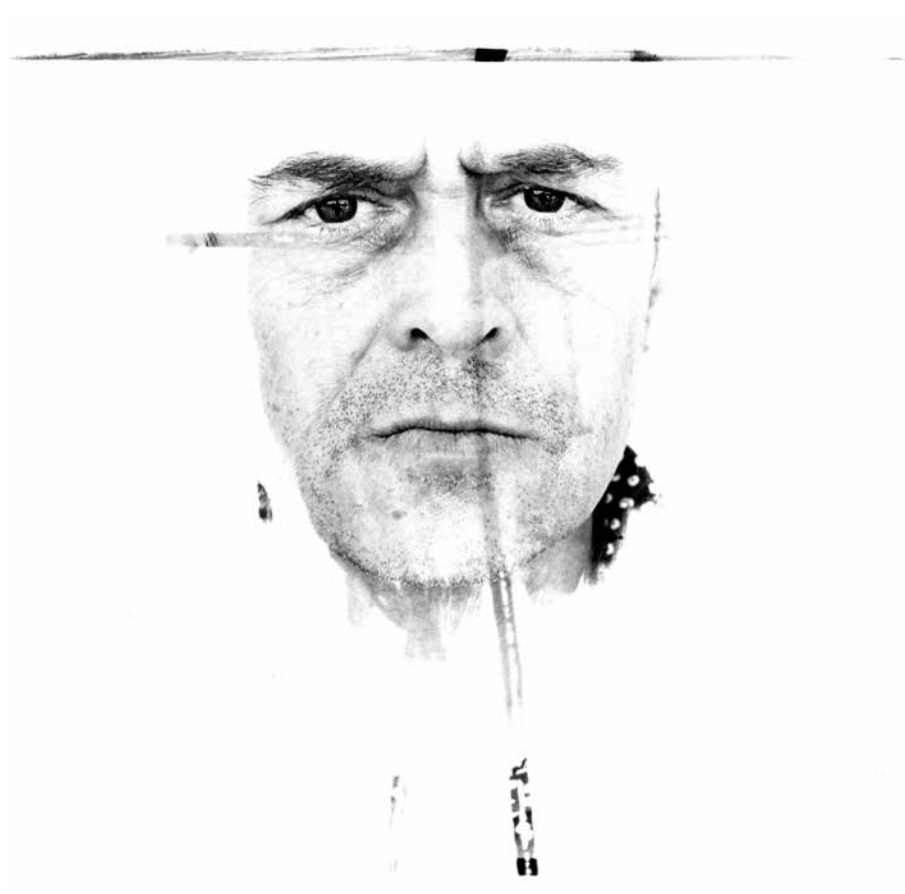
When the six year old asks
the ten year old why he keeps
opening and closing the stove
on his grilled cheese sandwich,
the ten year old answers
by asking the six year old
why he keeps spreading butter
on his bread, and when they keep
asking one another those same
questions over and over, the parents
get into it, asking them over and over
why they keep asking one another
those same dumb questions —

and
it is decided finally that nobody
has the slightest idea why
he does anything —
which seems
to make them all feel a lot
better, so they shut up
for a while, and eat.



Boy in Cape

photograph by James Baker Hall



Ralph Eugene Meatyard

photograph by James Baker Hall

That First Kite

in memory of Ralph Eugene Meatyard

That first kite was made of newspaper and strung
with fish line. I was lying next to it, alone. Sunlight
in the bright shape of a window, X-ed once
with the shadow of the sash, moved

slowly across the floor toward
me. A way had to be found

to make it work. We were trying. All this
took place in the attic where the cat brought
the birds.

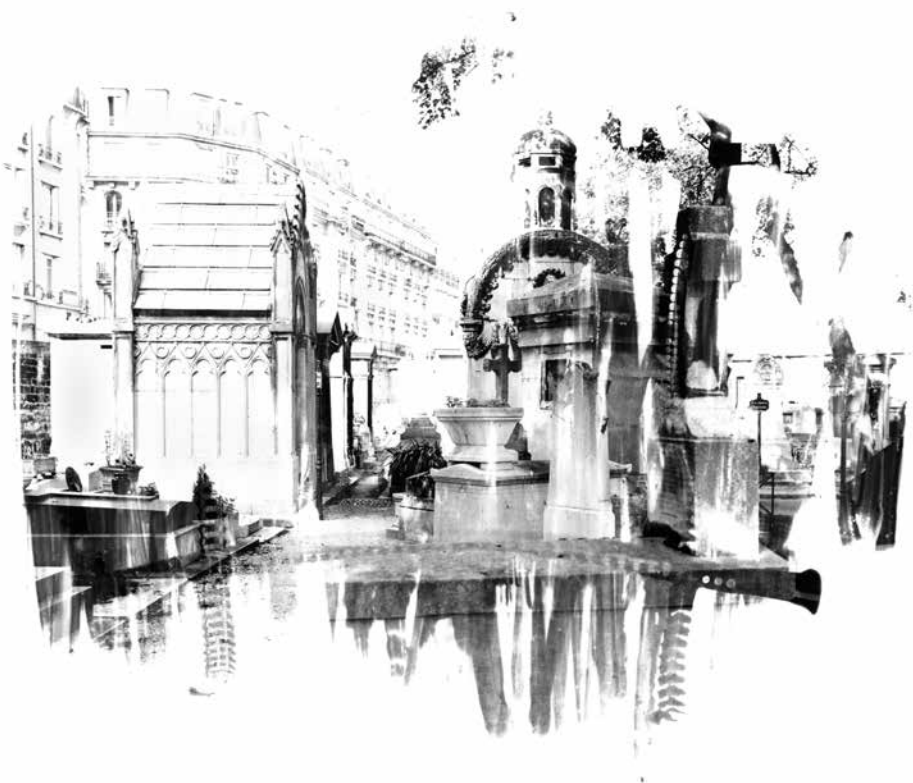
My mother was downstairs
or out back in the cornfield
with a gun.

I didn't move. Who knew
where my father was.
Nothing ever worked.
I kept my eyes closed

whenever I thought
I was asleep
or flying. I awoke

when I felt the light touch
my feet, perfect, still.

I didn't move. When it touched
my eyes I opened. The crosshairs
were on my chest, breathing. I saw
my heart. A cold wind rattled
the kite.



Paris, Les Croixes

photograph by James Baker Hall

The Maps

All those years he was married,
frequenting the map stores.
The eight quadrangles surrounding the house
in which he lived and worked, he saw them in relief;
he pinned them over his desk like messages, justified.
He spent long hours studying them. He fell in love

with maps. At night he would lie on the couch
with his hands, in the dark, memorizing
the mountains. He would lie
on the floor in his son's room,
in the moonlight, the maps
between them. His hands
loved the waters, an island
at a time. His voice loved
distances. At some point
he quit, I quit

calling myself he.
I fell in love without maps.
I carried everything I thought I needed
in the back of a truck or in a knapsack,
I spent night after night lost in the darkness,
huddled on a beach somewhere, or asleep
on a stranger's floor. It took years.
I had to go all the way

to the white undersides of the leaves
before I knew when my own veins were shaking,
in the dog's ears, in the wind,

and it could occur to me, more often now,
that I need nothing. That I can, even yet,
quit calling myself anything.



Stopping on the Edge to Wave

photograph by James Baker Hall

Organdy Curtains, Window, South Bank of the Ohio

I lived the whole time with my hands cupped to the
open eye,
the light advancing like a flock of turkeys.
If the shadow of the catalpa touched

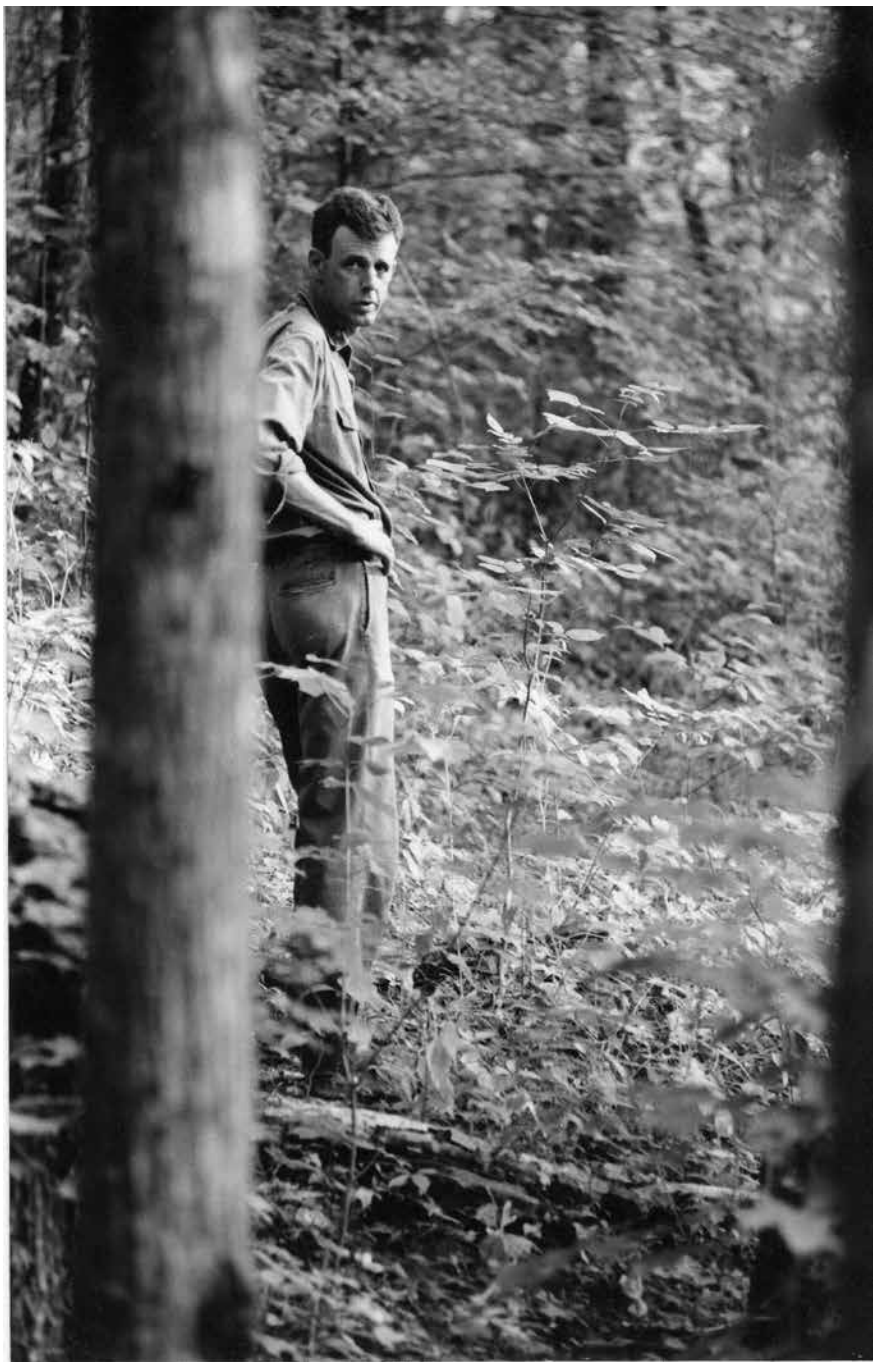
the sun wall of the house at 3:30
I waited several minutes
and entered behind it,
branching out slowly,

respectful of such a broad expanse of white, of silence,
the one small window, a mother's hand, that once,
at the curtain. I knew when to look head on,
when to squint. Things happened, beginning with her,

the way things happen on a clothesline, flashes
of this or that against the sky,
colors, faces, lips moving, snatches of faces—

Then suddenly no wind at all. Light hangs in the organdy,
south bank of the Ohio, I don't remember the year.
I can tell by the way my protective hands move
which eye is open, how vast the orphanage
of silence, how still
each blade of tall grass.
Once inside I am alone

briefly, hanging here,
in the light.



Wendell Berry in Clearing

photograph by James Baker Hall

Old Places

—for Wendell Berry

When the sun reaches the flat rock
on which the cat sleeps
the heat dreams her.
It's as though she is
remembering something.
She stands up
and changes

shape. On the margins
of the yard gnats fly out
of the tall brown grass

brushing the light. The cat stretches as she
enters the shadow of a tree, pulling her last leg in
slowly. She crosses the yard as though it were her
condition

to change shape with every move. She moves through
the shadow
of a tree as though it were within her, slowly.

She is the only thing
This is the only world
Each time she moves

it's as though something further is remembered
and brushed away. I'm in Kentucky, early August,
Harrison County. A mile and a half down the road,

in an old place between two ridges, there's a pond.
The slopes around it are dry, pocked
with the hoofprints of cows. The light
is flat, unrelenting, threatening

to slap, again, anything that moves.
The older a place is
the more ways it has

not to move.

The cows are there, some

in the water, dreaming themselves.

They are black. Already their legs are gone. Even
their tails have stopped moving. The longer they

stand there

the blacker they become. This is only the world.

Sometimes they are not there at all.

It's as though they open all the way

to the end of something and I follow them

until I cannot move



Mad Farmer

photograph by James Baker Hall

Spring

I was all up in the eyes
when the sun fell upon me
shutting me down in the pupils
Light and dark became my sudden work
I'd been there before
among the names
of several things
I took the closest
new firepole of air
and spun downwards
When I reached stability
again the crocuses
had arrived
Were moving
Some one color
Others another



Winter Bush

photograph by James Baker Hall

In the Middle

The wind comes back. She sits
at the table, all the doors open.

Through the back screen she sees the flat stones step
across the yard, the four bales of straw
at the garden wall, the striped canvas lawn chair
blown on its side under the five elms—the woods
on the hillside beyond, glimpses
of the next ridge over, hazy.
The wind is in the heavy foliage, a flock

of shadows: it scares up: it settles back: the bells
catch it on the other side of the house.
Even in the middle

of the summer she can hear the cold.
The wind rises to a slow whistle
in the kettle as though it were coming
through the walls. At dusk
it's the house sitting there
in the middle with a cup
in its hands, not her.
She can see it

as from the garden: the house cups
its windows in the corner
as though the light within
were always on, signifying
most clearly at dusk,
palm to palm. She
approaches,
up the slope, drawn
always by the way the windows seem to rise,
out of the ground, to eye level, the house
kneeling down so that one can look in.
The light gathers

its colors from its source,
from the rough wood of the walls
and ceiling, from the way she sits there
at the table in the middle of it

as though it were hers, warm,
low to the ground, bells
in the wind. Fireflies appear
under the trees and on the slopes. Cassiopeia
rises over the lip
of her cup, low
in its sky.



SW Tree

photograph by James Baker Hall

Where We Wait

If the heaviest creature
capable of flight weighs
forty pounds, only
on the moon will we be
light enough to fly.

We have always known that
for like any creature
heavy with death we are
forever trying
to forget—
 as witness
our dreams: when at the moment
of flight we try to rouse
the loved one to go
with us.

It is frightening
what she does to me,
waxing & waning
as though I do not
exist.

There is a side
to the moon that never
shows, but we know
that it's there,
like grace,
in the old dreams
of falling



Mary Ann Taylor-Hall

photograph by James Baker Hall

The Fox

the blind side
of the hill came through
an opening in the trees it opened
out into the pasture like light poured
from a pitcher we were waiting
to see what forms would evolve
thus the fox appeared gathering
its eyes in to drink
over both shoulders and
straight ahead everything was
gathered in it stopped in front of us
as though it saw
we were not there
not even a body
moved where would it go
for years we've watched this pasture
coming through that opening
in the guise of different seasons each
with its name it takes our eyes away and brings
them back blue and blue and again
blue these bodies mouths and thoughts
these conditions around them
when I am restless
I think it must be the fox
trying to come back
but it's a breath
on my face my neck
of old my heart
beating has come for each thing



Tombstone Shadow
photograph by James Baker Hall

Time

Here

Here

Here

Need I say more

How can I

Who could

It will be left
there in time



Paris, Le Select

photograph by James Baker Hall



Ai, Face in Hand

photograph by James Baker Hall



James Baker Hall

photographer unknown

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