

In Memory

James Baker Hall 1935 – 2009

When James Baker Hall died last week he left behind a beloved family (wife and fellow author Mary Ann Taylor Hall, three sons) and a literary legacy as a UK Graduate, a Stegner Fellow, Kentucky's former Poet Laureate, and a 30-year tenure as director of the writing program at the University of Kentucky.

He was well-known for his writing, his photography, and his teaching. In these pages, friends and colleagues and former students share their memories of Jim. There will be a memorial service on July 11 in Gratz Park at 4pm (indoors at Carnegie Center if it rains). Reception follows at 5 pm.

The Elastic Trapezoid, Minus One

By Ed McClanahan

Wendell Berry, Gurney Norman, James Baker Hall, and I — fledgling writers all — became cohorts and close friends when we were students in the UK English department in the second half of the 1950s. (Bobbie Ann Mason arrived at UK just as I was leaving, and we didn't meet till many years later.) Between 1958 and 1962, all four of us snagged Wallace Stegner Fellowships in Creative Writing at Stanford University, and during those years and many more to follow, although we lived, variously, in California, Oregon, Seattle, Europe, New York, Kentucky, and Connecticut, we steadfastly maintained our four-cornered friendship—an "elastic trapezoid," Wendell cleverly labeled it — no matter where, individually, we happened to find ourselves.

Eventually, of course, we all "found ourselves" — figuratively as well as literally — right back in Kentucky where we started; the trapezoid had finally stabilized, and squared its corners. Over the ensuing years, as will inevitably happen within long, loving friendships, the strength of our brotherhood would sometimes be tested in ways that had nothing to do with geography. But the bonds between us and among us always held; our tight little four-member fraternity endured, and ultimately prevailed, every time it was tried.

And then, alas, there were three.

Jim Hall was a consummate artist. His aesthetic, both as a writer and as a photographer, was demanding and exacting; he was, in the best and truest sense of the word, a perfectionist, yet his work was sometimes fearlessly experimental, sometimes downright playful, but always adventurous, always testing the limits, pushing the line back. He could stand the language of poetry on its ear, and make his camera show you things you'd never even dreamed of. In the prose he was writing early in his career— I think particularly of his endearing first novel *Yates Paul, His Grand Flights, His Tootings* (available at last in a new edition at fine booksellers everywhere!), and also of a hilarious late-1960s short semi-fictional memoir called "In My Shoes"—he was better than the young Woody Allen at spinning pure gold out of personal free-floating anxiety.

Above all, though, Jim was a gentle soul, a sweet, tender-hearted man, a delightful companion, and a luminous blessing in my life for more than half a century. I will miss him always. ■

— EM

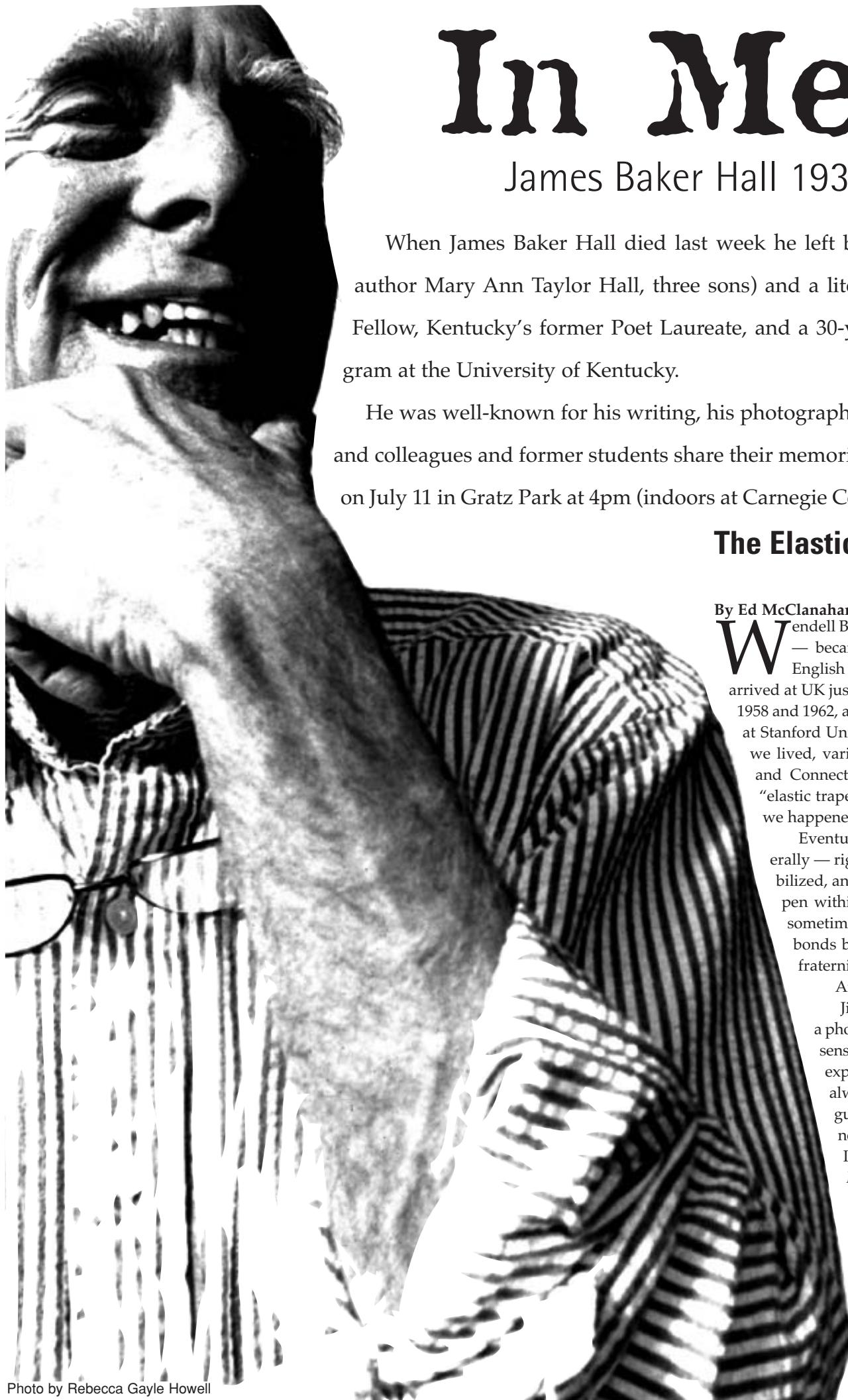


Photo by Rebecca Gayle Howell

A Hundred Visions and Revisions

James Baker Hall—Friend and Teacher

By Guy Mendes

James Baker Hall was a homebred. He was a quintessential local product, born and raised in Lexington, Kentucky. Sure, he went off to the left coast and then right—Stanford for grad school and Connecticut to live and teach at UConn and M.I.T., but it was right here that he came of age, that he learned to bleed Blue. Maybe it was his teenage stint in the darkroom of the Mac Hughes Studio, which had the UK Athletics Department account. If you were lucky enough to have gone to a Cliff Hagan steakhouse with Jim, he would proudly point to big prints of the former Wildcat All-American and say, “I made those pictures when I was a kid.” So eager was he to become a photographer that he saved up and bought a book called *Childrens Photography*, only to find it was a book about taking pictures of children, not how children could make photographs. And while he learned photography working with a commercial outfit, his later friendship with Ralph Eugene Meatyard would lead him down a different road, one where photographs functioned more like poems and talismans, more personal visions than renditions of the real world. Of course, writing was the other great passion of his life, and he found that calling at UK in creative writing classes with Hollis Summers and Bob Hazel (where he met kindred souls Berry, McClanahan,

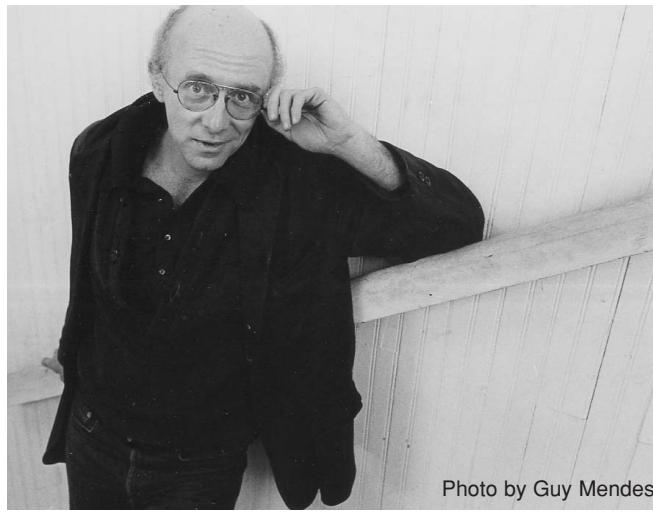


Photo by Guy Mendes

“Jim was a triple threat — an artist, writer and teacher, and he was a master of all three disciplines and was always pushing their respective envelopes.” —Guy Mendes

Norman and Mason). Jim claimed that he never read a book in high school. He had been a serious baseball player as a Henry Clay High School Blue Devil and was an athletic-kind-of-guy all his life, but his jock days were numbered when he encountered a piece of literature that forever changed his life: T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

Jim was a triple threat — an artist, writer and teacher, and he was a master of all three disciplines and was always

pushing their respective envelopes. Even though rooted in real world imagery, his pictures were often other-worldly and intensely introspective. His poems can be funny and candid, or serious and provocative, and they are always told in a distinctive, intense voice. As a teacher, he exemplified what he used to say about a good photographic portrait — that it is *given* as well as *taken*. Jim’s teaching was give and take. He was quick to give of himself, and he greatly enjoyed what he in turn received from his students. He opened his own life up for us, and we did the same in response.

I met Jim through Ed McClanahan and Wendell and Tanya Berry. I was on the staff of the underground newspaper, *blue-tail fly* in Lexington in 1969, and we published Jim’s words-and-pictures piece on Ed’s mythic alter-ego Cap’n Kentucky. Two years later, when I was casting about after college, Jim took me in as an apprentice in a small photographic business based in a former veterinary hospital in South Windsor, Connecticut. It was called The Dogrun Darkroom. There wasn’t any pay involved, but I was given room and board and film, chemicals and paper to use. It was a great learning experience for me. Thirty-eight years later and I’m still using the things I learned living with and working with Jim.

Someday there should be a statue in Lexington of Jim, hands in the air, talking, reciting, conjuring up the muse for generations to come. His influence will long be felt in these parts and beyond. ■

—GM

twisted leg (Why would anyone rip apart a mannequin, I wondered), and the head (“Let’s just leave the torso — I don’t think we can use that”), and we climbed the stairs.

In his studio, Jim rolled down the white, seamless backdrop and started shooting. I was struck mostly by his amazing agility. He’d sit cross-legged and click off two or three shots, spring up onto a chair for a few more, jump down, stretch out flat for the next shots. He was a gymnast wielding a camera.

“Just cross your arms and look straight ahead,” he said then. “No, there’s something missing.” At which point, he picked up the purloined mannequin forearm and hand, strode over, and stuffed the arm down into my jeans pocket. “That’s it!” he said, and clicked away. The result was a photo of me in t-shirt and jeans, a goofy expression on my face, and a bright white hand signaling for help from my left pocket.

This wasn’t the photo Jim chose for the exhibition. Instead, he selected one of me, wearing nothing but my own body parts, relaxing in an overstuffed chair. There the photo hung, on the opening night of the exhibition. I was also pleased to see that the writer suspended from the ceiling next to me, in our own private area of wall space, was none other than my friend Ed McClanahan, who looked to be somewhere in his 30s. Suddenly Jim’s hand was on my shoulder.

“I know you like to hang around with Ed, so here you two are,” he laughed. I asked him how old Ed was in this one. “Mid-thirties,” I’d say, Jim answered, after some thought. “Here, in this space, though, he gets to be a lot younger than you for a while.”

And now Jim is gone. As much as I hate that, I know that we’ll keep him with us in memories like the few I’ve shared here. And I know he’s eager to continue the conversation with us, which will happen every time we slide one of his books off our shelves and open it. We were lucky — all of us — to have a stellar artist and friend like Jim Hall walk among us. ■

Some Random Memories of My Friend Jim Hall

By Jeff Worley

I have two photos of Jim in my study at home. One is titled “James Baker Hall, Self-Portrait in Glass,” from 1982, where he’s pointing his camera at himself and us simultaneously and laughing at, I’d guess, the outright fun of the photo concept. This shot fronted the announcement of Jim’s photo exhibition of central Kentucky writers opening at the Ann Tower Gallery in 2002. I love the photo because it shows off Jim’s artistry and features his contagious smile at a productive, healthy and important time in his life — his second year as the state’s poet laureate.

The other photo is of my wife, Linda, lovely and tan in her short summer haircut, Jim, and me. Linda and I are looking directly at the camera. Jim, between us, is glancing up at me, his white, bushy eyebrows slightly flared, and he’s saying something. This shot was taken at the 2002 Ohio/Kentucky/Indiana Writers Roundtable at Hanover College. As a former director of the yearly conference and a friend of Jim’s, I was asked to introduce him that year when he was the keynote speaker. For some reason, in the photo I look huge; Jim looks smaller than he actually was. Maybe this was simply the effect he had on people: when you talked with Jim, he made you feel taller, better.

When I moved from Penn State to Lexington in 1986, I was eager to meet and get to know other poets. I had heard of Jim, of course, maybe even shared some pages in a couple literary magazines with him. And somehow I knew what he looked like, so when I found myself standing next to him at Kinko’s (now the Kennedy Book Store art department) one day, I said, “You must be James Baker Hall.” “God, I hope so,” he said, “or else I’ve just been impersonating myself all these years.”

Coincidentally, we were both having poetry manuscripts copied. His, the wonderful collection titled *Stopping on the Edge to Wave*, was destined for publication by Wesleyan

University Press the following year. This serendipitous meeting led to some immediate poetry talk and an invitation from Jim to have lunch soon. When we did meet at Alfalfa a week or so later, I recall that everyone there knew him; people were drawn to our table for a word or two with Jim. He was a people magnet, a home boy totally in his element.

I recall, too, a fine evening at Jim and Mary Ann’s house in 1992. They’d invited Linda and me for a dinner party with another couple, and the evening began on a sour note. Jim’s Larkspur Press book, *Fast-Signing Mute*, had just been reviewed that morning in the Herald-Leader, a very negative review that took Jim to task for “trotting out to the public,” I believe the phrase went, a collection of Kentucky-based poems that were written years earlier. That the poems weren’t new was, as I recall, the damning criticism. Never mind that they were engaging, well-crafted, and just plain fun to follow down the page. It was an odd and irrelevant review really, but it stung all the same (ACE also reviewed the book—but very favorably—calling it, in the headline, *Fast-Signing Muse*). Jim loved the typo and wondered if he shouldn’t have titled it that.)

After this small, literary speed bump, the evening went wonderfully. I can’t recall the conversation but can still feel the room erupting in a rosy glow over dinner soon after the red wine made its rounds. Jim and Mary Ann were always terrific hosts, as many of you reading this know, and there was never any shortage of conversation — or wine.

In 2001 when Jim asked if he could photograph me for his series of Kentucky writers, I was flattered, and of course said yes. I had never been to his Lexington studio and had never seen him in action as a photographer, so I was also curious about both.

Jim saw me drive up on the chilly December morning and met me at the door. In the corner by the long staircase leading up to his studio, lay, inexplicably, the disassembled body parts of a mannequin. Jim seemed as surprised as I was to see the pile of parts, but said, “Wait a minute. We might need some of these.” He scooped up a couple of arms, a

—JW

In Jim's Words

By Ann Neuser Lederer

These quotes from James Baker Hall were jotted by me while he led a poetry workshop I was privileged to attend at The Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning in the Spring of 2000. Although this sample inadequately portrays the full extent of his wisdom, knowledge, artistry, and kindness, perhaps it hints at the range of his influence, and the depths of our loss.

"If you can identify your fears, you know a lot."

"The sound of deep feeling in language is unmistakable."

"Language performs a priestly function — unapologetically sacramental."

"The language of a poem should sound as if it has been slept on."

"Poetry is to give birth to an object by blessing it."

"The sound of truth telling is undeniable." ■

—ANL

Goodbye Dear Warrior

By Pam Sexton

My friendship with Jim Hall began when my life changed significantly enough to allow the notion of myself as a writer to settle in. During formal study with him (three semesters at U.K. and two Master's classes at the Carnegie Center) plus the more important informal studies at Tolly Ho, coffee houses, readings and his studio, I came to regard him as not only a gifted poet, but as a musical guide. He was the only conductor, or person, for that matter, whom I had known who possessed involuntary muscles in his fingers—an attribute for which most conductors would pay dearly. For a poet, he talked a lot about music, about sound, about rhythm. "If it ain't workn' in your ear, it ain't workn'." Entering into one of the famous "conversations" with him was to riff with him, to begin to understand another more subtle layer of language not written on the page. And into the riff he brought every instrument he'd every heard — guitars, oboes, fiddles, saxophones, drums and voices, so many voices — you get the picture — a choir, an orchestra.

It is sadly true that this beloved Kentucky writer has left this place, at least his flesh has left, but that is all. If we should all be so blessed to leave a legacy such as his; a living body of words full of things working in our ears and in our hearts, down on the page, for you and me and for our grandchildren and their grandchildren. For Kentuckians in particular he left a world of light and sound filled with every creature and minute particle. And he knew of and told of the dark, less illuminated places as well. As for folks not of this place, well, he wanted you to know Kentucky like he wanted Kentuckians to know Paris (yes, France). You think he's not singing anymore? You think his fingers aren't dancing? Listen: "Under the surface/the sunset grows in tall stalks/of watery light, as though my legs/had come up suddenly under me,/I'm floating;/can see/in the way the shadows move, from the within,/deepening, each insect/is waving to me,/ I am waving back." Goodbye, dear warrior. ■

Pam Sexton is a poet and fiction writer who was the long time chairperson of the Kentucky Arts Council's Poet Laureate Selection Committee and of the Carnegie Center's board of trustees. After studying with Jim Hall and others at U.K., she received her MFA in writing at Spalding University.) Excerpt from "Pulse" out of The Total Light Process, New and Selected Poems by James Baker Hall, The University Press of Kentucky, 2004

From a Student

By John Wright

In the fall of 2000 I had the honor of sitting in "the circle" of Jim Hall's Autobiography class at UK. For those who never shared this honor, it's difficult to express the effect Jim had on his students. To say that he changed our lives is too easy. To say that his wisdom, advice, and nurturing forced us to change our own lives hits closer to the mark, but still doesn't get it right.

Inside Jim's classroom was a safety zone, filled with laughter, candor, tears, admiration, and sometimes heated emotions. He refused to teach in the sterile classroom of the Whitehall Building. Instead, he pulled a few strings and had our class moved to the homey and comfortable Gaines Center. Jim knew that writing, as it should be taught, had nothing to do with chalkboards, desks, or projection screens.

Jim's classroom was a creative space where any emotion, fear, fantasy, or desire could be expressed without judgment or incrimination. The only catch was that our writing, and our responses, had to be honest.

Jim made us better writers by demanding this honesty, freeing us from the burdens of academic pretension and self-censoring. To be part of Jim Hall's class you had to "show up" every week, and "showing up" meant far more than just warming a seat. I lived for Jim Hall's class that fall, and I recognized, even then, that what I was coming to know through my work with Jim was special. What happened behind those closed doors in the Gaines Center remains one of the most formative experiences of my life.

We began that semester as a handful of awkward, shy, and (in my case) insecure students. We ended the semester as a strong, confident collective.

The lasting lesson I will take from Jim Hall is that to be a good writer you must first be a decent human being. He taught that being a writer requires constant attention to your own life, a willingness to engage the fleeting and unknowable, and the humble acceptance that one lifetime will not be enough to get it all right. Being a writer means you have to try anyway.

It's difficult, now, to imagine the Bluegrass without Jim Hall in it. His commitment to the state, to local bookstores and writers groups, to everything that is strong and wise and worldly about Kentucky, and, most importantly, his commitment to the young writers he encountered along his way will be truly missed.

If those in Frankfort had any sense the courthouse flags would have sailed at half-mast on the day Jim Hall died, for he was one of the Bluegrass' finest and we're all a bit better for having known him. ■

—John Heckman Wright; Portland, OR; Student, 2000

An Appreciation

By Todd Hunter Campbell

James Baker Hall — Jim, to several generations of students, artists, colleagues and friends — leaves legacies far beyond the scope of any one name.

Already steeped in both the photographer's craft and UK basketball lore as a boy, when he shared the UK bench with the great Rupp teams of the 1940s — storing away game footage in camera and memory alike — he went on to weave those and other early experiences into a rich body of work which often pushed the edges of photography, poetry and prose.

His first novel, *Yates Paul*, gives full voice to the child's flights of imagination. Set in Lexington, Hall's hometown, the novel follows, at its full title suggests, the main character's *Grand Flights, His Tootings* — from his photographer father's darkroom, to the furthest reaches of his own inner life.

Hall's own life took him far from the "Dwarf, KY" noted wistfully in a later poem, written on return to teach at the University of Kentucky. From early days as a UK student under the guidance of Robert Hazel, to later graduate work with Wallace Stegner alongside fellow UK alumni and Stegner Fellows Wendell Berry, Gurney Norman and Ed McClanahan at Stanford — where his own early prose was said to light up a workshop which also included Larry McMurtry and Ken Kesey — Hall created a path for himself unlike any his upper echelon Lexington family might have envisioned. As he would often later say, once he read T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as a UK undergraduate, all of the traditional routes available — the law, the military — seemed suddenly hollow, as lifeless and inauthentic as Eliot's "Hollow Men."

An artist's artist from then on, Hall went on to share close associations with the photographers Minor White and Ralph Eugene Meatyard, the poets W.S. Merwin and Margaret Gibson, and a lifelong membership in the early Stanford-via-UK contingency which Ken Kesey dubbed "the Kentucky mafia," its numbers later expanding to include as honorary members fellow Kentucky novelists Bobbie Ann Mason and Mary Ann Taylor-Hall.

Thanks to Hall's other lifelong calling — as a gifted teacher and facilitator of workshop conversation unflinchingly devoted to offering faithful, honest readings and support of artists' work — that kind of expansion stretched far beyond the inner circle, and across many decades. From early work teaching poetry alongside Denise Levertov ("I was who they got once her class filled up," he joked), to his later 30 year tenure as creative writing professor at UK, Hall inspired and supported generations of students, writers and photographers alike, among them Guy Mendes, Rebecca Howell, Maurice Manning, Tony Crunk, Leatha Kendrick, Frank X. Walker and Patrick O'Keefe.

In his teaching, as in his own fearless work, Hall challenged students to "Grab hold of the live wire," and dive into the places that may have scared them. As the title of his poem, "Stopping on the Edge to Wave," suggests, Hall's own work did just that. And far from merely waving while looking over the precipice, his poems, like his novels and experimental photography, embraced and celebrated what they saw — held it close enough for all to feel and share in the known, human experience of love and pain, life and death.

On more than one occasion, Hall told his workshops he wished they could hold their first day meeting at UK's hospital ICU — the emergency room the best place for them to get face to face with the truth of what was real, and the ephemeral nature of life, so they might get right down to business. His own death, he said, he liked to keep close, perched on his shoulder like a hawk, so he might not forget to be present to the fleeting moment he was in.

A longtime practitioner of Zen meditation, he also invited students to wake up to the latent riches of their deep, unconscious minds, beyond the confines of day-to-day identity.

"If I had to be Jim Hall 24/7," he often said, cautioning against the limits imposed by the intellect and ego, "I'd go crazy." Fortunately, for a legion of students, and for untold generations of readers and viewers, he steered clear of such limitations — his unbound spirit made available to all as he daily dove into his own artist's studio, and into the imagination's deepest work.

Reported to be actively engaged in a number of projects — among them the much-anticipated Kentucky basketball novel — right up until a recent hospital stay, he never stopped being at least one thing he truly was. And that artist's legacy, like so many he leaves, lives on. ■

Todd Hunter Campbell currently teaches creative writing and composition at the University of Kentucky, where he was privileged to take workshop with James Baker Hall over many years.

A Memorial for James Baker Hall is scheduled for Saturday July 11th at Gratz Park (it will move indoors to The Carnegie Center if it rains). Service is at 4 pm; reception follows at 5 and will include an informal poetry reading for guests who would like to bring and share a poem.