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Cover Illustration by Todd Julie
three years ago, San Antonio poet H. Palmer Hall came across a notice that National Geographic was going to air a live video stream on its Web site that would allow viewers to watch a pond in Africa. The pond had been built on a game preserve in Botswana because poachers were killing elephants that left the preserve’s safety to drink at a nearby river. It was dubbed Pete’s Pond, after its builder, Pete Le Roux.

“I logged into it and became fascinated,” Hall says. “It was a three-year process, as the live stream runs from about May through December. I joined this discussion group, maybe 12 aficionados of Pete’s Pond; I began writing poems about what happened at the pond.”

Hall ultimately published Reflections from Pete’s Pond through Pecan Grove Press, the small publishing house he has run for almost 18 years. Pecan Grove will celebrate its 20th anniversary this fall. (The press has also published my work.) He struck up a correspondence with Le Roux, and the collection of poems wound up on sale at the Mashatu Game Reserve.

Pete’s Pond is one of the many wells from which Hall, 65, has drawn during a literary career that has established him as an icon in San Antonio. Hall has been library director at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio since 1978. One year after arriving, he also took the reins of the Louis J. Blume Academic Library as well as teaching creative writing and other courses at the university.

An accomplished poet in his own right, Hall has used his publishing house to help launch other poetic voices. Lately, he has begun drawing the accolades many think he has long deserved.

Hall was a recent nominee for a Pushcart Prize for his poem “Vietnam
Reflections from Pete’s Pond

Poems by H. Palmer Hall

Roulette,” which appeared in The Valparaiso Poetry Review. The poem begins: They thought a little game might be nice, / an American version of Russian Roulette, / ... Like the Texas / lottery, only you win, you lose, and the only / thing you bet’s your life. That’s how / the game works. Only, they forgot / the props. Hall also wrote an essay on John Balaban, a poet and conscientious objector to the Vietnam War who spent his life trying to understand the Vietnamese people; it appears in the same issue of The Valparaiso Poetry Review.

Hall’s seventh book, a collection of essays titled Coming to Terms (Plain View Press 2007), has just hit the shelves.

His Pecan Grove Press now enjoys a national and international presence, receiving approximately 300 manuscripts a year for consideration. The press has published 85 books, some by new poets, some by poets who’ve published multiple books: Glover Davis (professor emeritus at San Diego State’s MFA program); Patricia Fargnoli (current poet laureate of New Hampshire); James Hoggard (former poet laureate of Texas); Larry D. Thomas (current poet laureate of Texas), Thomas Whitbread (twice winner of the Texas Institute of Letters Poetry Award for best poetry book of the year), as well as new and promising poets such as Jill Esbaum.

Born in Beaumont, Hall lived there for 20 years, earning his bachelor’s degree in speech and English at what was then Lamar State College of Technology (now Lamar University). From a young age, Hall wanted to experience life with a keen eye, to take in the adventurous happenings of the world.

In his early 20s, Hall left for New York to experience the World’s Fair, where he found himself selling hotdogs. He then returned to Silsbee, Texas, a rural area at the edge of the Big Thicket, where he taught English for two years. The rest of his life would expose him to the stark realities that he documents in detailed and compelling fashion in his many collections of prose and poetry.

Hall went to Vietnam from Southeast Texas as a young man, which is why the subject of war is so present in his work. He spent 1967–68 (“probably the most important year”) in Vietnam: the year of the Battle of Dak To and the Tet Offensive and the siege of Khe Sanh. In his poems and essays, Hall feels safe enough to enter the political and personal explorations of a soldier in the midst of an unforgettable war.

Hall shares his entry into that space of war: “As soon as I had decided to go to grad school, I was drafted into the Army between my teaching deferment and my student deferment in 1964. I went to basic training and attended 74 weeks of language school in Washington, D.C., to learn Vietnamese, in which I was once conversational.”

After basic training, Hall was sent to Fort Hood, Texas, and trained for six months with the 198th Light Infantry Brigade. He was shipped to Vietnam via San Francisco and landed at Chu Lai in August 1967.

“I stayed till the end of July 1968, after which I was sent to Fort Meade, Maryland, to work at the National Security Agency, which later expelled me for marching in peace demonstrations and signing a petition against the war.” Hall received an honorable
discharge in December 1969.

Hall has also edited a Pecan Grove anthology containing Desert Storm poems, A Measured Response. A recent poetry collection of Hall's, To Wake Again (Pudding House Press), contains poems that deal with the second Gulf War and the current Iraq war. Robert Bonazzi, an accomplished poet-writer and literary critic, described Hall's poems as "deeply meditative and compassionate" in the San Antonio Express-News. But Hall is not limited to writing about war-gone-bad, as he also touches on a variety of other subjects from nature to racism.

In his new book, Coming to Terms, Hall offers essays exploring the year he spent in Vietnam; as well as growing up in East Texas in the Big Thicket; the unthinkable murder of James Byrd Jr.; and other topics including thoughts on "Getting Married" and on solitude and walking or driving alone. "But I have seen an eagle fly in the Hill Country and dolphins near the islands and leaves turn red on maple trees," he writes.

I have been alone with all this, free to be a part of it without having to tell anyone else what I am thinking. That's worth the long drives."

In "Driving through Milwaukee," Hall takes us into his own dream works. He exemplifies dream-telling in such a lucid way that the reader feels that familiar disassociation endemic to dreams, that place where things make sense only in a gray and discombobulated space.

Hall takes these dream moments that swim into each other, allowing the reader to wade through his dreams. His ability to create that place is astonishing, allowing the reader to feel the murky reality of non-reality, where nonsensical things make their own sense:

I am in the house on Rio Grande Street and I am in Milwaukee and I am sitting in an old chair. Linda, who never lived there, is on the floor, her cheek against my knee, her long dark hair flows down my leg as I drive past an exit sign that says Khe Sanh-20Km. We were never lovers, Linda and I, for some reason neither of us has ever figured it out, but it's right somehow that she is here in Milwaukee as the world is coming to an end.

... Dreaming of Milwaukee and thinking of the past I drive by some kind of flour mill, a strange building tall and not very wide or long, old red bricks and huge letters on the side, PIONEER FLOUR, perhaps. I am not married and I have no children and the top is down and there is no smog, no unpleasant smell as I drive through the city which is called Milwaukee but contains parts of Houston and Austin and San Antonio, the cities that bred me...

I question this dream from time to time, almost wake up, wonder why I am in Milwaukee and why I am driving and whether there is some destination and why the world is coming to an end, but the dream doesn't answer.

A big man in dreadlocks moans into a microphone as the walls move in and out and the green light hits my face ... I am dreamdriving through Milwaukee and I am on something ... and the city begins to shimmer ... where Milwaukee becomes something more than Laverne and Shirley ever thought it could be and Linda and I are making love, not moving, just the smooth vibrations of the car rolling over the freeways of the city and the world is coming to an end. When Hall reads this piece, it is mesmerizing; he is as strong a reader as he is a writer.

The essay at the core of the book is "The Big Thicket and the Death of
thinking mostly about poetry and only a little about surgical "procedures" and about how everything these days is a "process." ... is movement toward something or, perhaps, away from something else ... To walk across the street is a dangerous thing ... and to write a poem can also be dangerous, as dangerous, at least, as crossing a street with our eyes closed ... I was seven years old ... I did not think about poetry then, but the place was poetry and the place was dangerous ... Poetry is dangerous, I think, if it is poetry worth doing. Poetry is risk taking, pushing yourself and your words out there into water so deep ... a single wave can drown you ... that single moment of awareness.


As to poetry's current state, Hall says, "We have a very strong contemporary poetry scene. A lot of people lament the various writing programs in colleges and universities. I think it's a combination of some jealousy, a genuine feeling about a whole lot of bad poetry in the country, and there is a lot, but there always has been. It just hasn't survived for us to read. I have this book on Civil War poems, and 90 percent of it is sheer dreck, because the editors included poems for political reasons. It's not just an edition of the great poems of the Civil War, it tries to be all-inclusive, and there is so much crap in that book that's important for political and social reasons, but not for literary reasons. "Let's remember, in any generation, maybe 10 percent, if that much, of what's published is going to be really, really good."

Marian Haddad, MFA, poet-essayist-manuscript consultant, lives in San Antonio. Her chapbook Saturn Falling Down was published at the request of Texas Public Radio. Her full-length collection of poems, Somewhere between Mexico and a River Called Home, was published in 2004 by Pecan Grove Press.