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# Rites of Passage

by

James Hall

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# Rites Of Passage

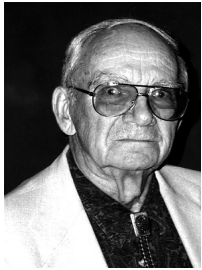
Poems 1940 - 1999

By

James Hall

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## Author's Preface



I have been writing since about age 12. My first efforts appeared in school newspapers, and in the Yale Literary Magazine. At various times, I have written non-fiction, fiction, poetry, stage plays and scripts. I have published a lot of poetry, here and there; my first book is on the way. I have won several awards and prizes. Two short stories have reached print, one in the Yale Literary Magazine, one in The Writer's International Forum.

I was an editor of The Yale Literary Magazine during my Junior and Senior years. After graduation, I followed advice which Thornton Wilder once gave me. He recommended teaching as a way to pay the bills while learning my trade as a writer. I taught French and Spanish at several schools, one public, the others private.

Tom McMahon, who was Editor-In-Chief of the Lit, kept asking me when I was going to stop fooling around and write something. Tom took a post graduate year at Yale with Robert Penn Warren as his mentor. Once, when I visited him at Yale, he harassed me into writing a short story which he pronounced well-seen and worth polishing. I went on teaching for thirteen years, writing something occasionally.

My fluency in Mandarin Chinese landed me in an off-the-wall military intelligence venture in Korea, from which I have written a couple of short stories, and may work on a novel eventually.

In the Sixties, when Timothy Leary and his cohorts convinced kids to tune in, turn on and drop out, I left teaching for a different, more lucrative avoidance strategy; I became a programmer/analyst. This lasted twenty years. When downsizing struck, I gave up avoiding the issue. I have been writing ever since.

As I readied these poems for publication, the title sprang full-blown from my forehead. The poems span the years 1940 through 1999, years in which I did many things other than write poetry. The Muse kept harassing me, however, and a number of poems appeared.

These are not the collected poems. There are many more which I have lost along the way, some of which I remember imperfectly and wish I had kept a copy. They are not even selected poems. I grabbed a bunch of manuscripts and put them in an order which was and is mysterious to me. Yet they seemed to belong that way.

The ordering brought forth the title; "Rites of Passage." I began to see my life as a continual rite of passage. I have always been wary of rites, and of those who take the rite for reality. In a sense, every rite is a poem and every poem a rite. Further, a rite moves one from one state of awareness to another. Some state of awareness along the way may turn out to be enlightenment. One hopes these poems might do as much.

James Hall  
Pueblo, Colorado  
May 2000

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## Acknowledgements

*Ars Poetica*, the Prologue, first appeared in the Anthology of the CompuServe Poetry Forum.

*What is the Butterfly?*, page 4, appeared in the 1999 issue of *Touchstone*, an anthology published by Professional Touch Press.

*Alternate Realities*, page 13, appeared in *Chaos: The Crestone Literary Review*.

*After The Storm*, page 14, first appeared in *the eleventh muse*, the journal of *Poetry West*, and was subsequently reprinted in *Footprints*.

*The Last Dispatch*, page 15, appeared in the Anthology of the CompuServe Poetry Forum.

*Time Out*, page 16, appeared in *Chaos: The Crestone Literary Review*.

*Back Lots*, page 17, was published in *The Spider’s Web*, the literary magazine of Jonathan Edwards College, Yale University.

*The Lopped-off Word*, page 20, also appeared in *The Spider’s Web*, where it won The Master’s Award for Best of the Year.

*Environmental Protection*, page 26, is in the 2000 edition of *Touchstone*, (Op Cit.)

*Nolo Contendere*, page 27, appeared as *Plea* in The Yale Literary Magazine.

*Italiam Fato Profugus*, page 29, won Fourth Prize in the Rhymed Poetry Category of the Writer’s Digest Literary Competition in 1997

*Prelude to a Tale of Voyages*, page 30, appeared in The Yale Literary Magazine, along with *Back to Sorrento*, page 33.

*A Brief History of Time*, page 45, presumably was published in one volume of The International Library of Poetry, although I have never seen it in print, since that publisher does not give authors copies or tear-sheets.

*The Catacombs at Palermo*, page 65, winner of first place in the Humorous Verse category of an annual competition by The Oregon State Poetry Society, was published in that organization’s newsletter and displayed publicly at an exhibition which that body sponsored.

*Cave Dwellers*, page 71, and *Look Both Ways*, page 74, both appeared in the Thanksgiving 1999 issue of *Möbius*.

## Prologue

### Ars Poetica

Poetry knows that the wave  
which splashes the rocks in Connecticut  
once was stirred by the oars  
of a Phoenician galley lying off Sidon.

Poetry is the forgotten  
lore of a long-dead wizard.  
Words on a crumpled parchment,  
meaningless, or magic.

Poetry lurks in the barberry  
border between sleeping and waking.  
Red berries, guarded by thorns,  
inedible, almost unnoticed.

Poetry upsets the trial balance,  
is neither debit nor credit.  
The accountant shouts at his children.  
An owl hoots, unheard, in the bay tree.

## After the Storm

Having digested what it can, the sea  
spews on the beach all inedible parts  
of the ship, odd bits of sealing wax,  
left-over cabbage leaves, a fragment of  
the lost king's crown.

It is not likely anything we salvage  
will help us reconstruct the world that was,  
or build a new one. If the wind  
is not too strong, perhaps some bits of this  
will make a fire.

This beach was not our landfall. How we came  
to be here, dragging flotsam from the surf,  
is best forgotten. Our arrival  
was only a departure from what was, at first,  
our destination.

This small, green bottle, empty now of rum,  
stopped with a bit of wax, could hold a message.  
Reverse the chart, which now is useless;  
the blank space there has room for words enough,  
but in what language?

## Epilogue

## Spring Tide

A poem is an urgent message  
stuffed in a bottle, thrown in the sea.  
Perhaps it will ground on a beach  
where someone speaks the same language.

A boy with a sling-shot  
is always patrolling that beach.