FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

The Mother on the Other Side of the World
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Ezra Pound's wry dictum that poetry be at least as well written as prose has ever had its rebels: poems sheared of punctuation, capitalization or cadence; a poet's narrative I of prosaic artlessness that both desires and denies the comforts of a story's enclosed world.

Hall, in this fifth volume of poetry, keeps a spare and weathered word palette (he teaches at the University of Kentucky). But tellingly, his rural settings are domesticated: a pick-up truck at a McDonald's; skittish deer and horses stalked by flashlight; a yellow school bus riding the far hills like a roller-coaster as seen from his kitchen window. That is, perception framed (and imprisoned) by a restless, modern world.

Like a wood whittler working out an animal, Hall occasionally glances up at the self-important poetic tradition passing by. Thus, "Ars Poetica": four lines of foxes? tails disappearing "like a pen running out of ink." Quick, graceful, casual. With his run-on lines without punctuation breaks, one has to read slowly to catch the enjambments, to find the caesuras of pause between thoughts. W.S. Merwin, whose cover quote endorses Hall, similarly stacks his poems with such running lines. Yet Merwin's are packed as boughs of fresh snow, trembling with the felt observation. Hall's tone is discreet, to the point of risking blandness. "That was a lot in those days," said of his smiling romance of his teacher. Yet in context it's exactly right, a sigh that says just enough.

"Those days" comes from "God's Prelude," the volume's most successful poem, a ninety-three line spiral from the black void of evolution's charred cosmos to a fallen soldier to a stillborn fetus hidden in the school lab to his terrified discovery of masturbation in 1948, a MÃ¶bius strip of time that deftly connects back to the poem's quiet beginning.

Such sureness is lost in the eponymous last poem. While the line itself, "the mother on the other side of the world," echoes Wallace Stevens? "The Palm at the End of the Mind," it's as generic as a computer-generated koan, inadequate to buttress the mother-haunted earlier poems. Set in a description of two cats, one feral, one tame, he is attempting to feed as he is "beginning the plot of this story," it reduces his manner to mannerism. No poet escapes the self-

consciousness of choosing forms, but successful poems show how the true art is to hide art.