

# Remembering Thelma Hall: Teacher, Mentor, Wife, Mother, and Poet

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“I think Thelma always wrote poetry,” says Wilson Hall.

“Her teaching was a kind of poetry,” says Jennifer Sikes.

So speak two authorities on the late Thelma Hall, long-time Shorter College English teacher and Alpha Chi sponsor, who also happened to be a poet. Since the *Recorder* is dedicating this issue to her memory and featuring her poetry, we consulted people who qualify as experts on both her relationships and her work as writer.

Wilson Hall, her husband and colleague at Shorter, a small college in Rome, Georgia, had known her since 1954. Ms. Sikes, now a teacher herself at Shorter, dates her acquaintance from a sophomore World Lit class, about seven years ago. Their reminiscences about Professor Hall make it clear that the poetry you will read in this issue welled up from a soul that observed life carefully in all its guises and decided to embrace it anyway.

For one thing, both her husband and her former student agree that Thelma Hall made quite an entrance.

In 1954, Wilson Hall, a new army recruit who was proud in Humphrey Bogart fashion of having no human entanglements, looked forward to three years of stoic freedom in Germany as a Cold War warrior. Then Thelma walked onto the stage as his blind date and Wilson’s life as heroic loner “went out the window.” After two years, on his first extended leave, Wilson married her. A year later they attended college together and eventually raised a family while serving as colleagues on the faculty at Shorter. A quiet man, beloved for, among other things, his course on William Faulkner, Wilson usually won’t say much more about his early connection with destiny. But when he implies it was love at first sight, the sheer understatement conjures all the details needed by the imagination.

In 1995 Jennifer Kellogg sat in a World Literature class at Shorter, with no idea whatsoever of being an English major. Then Professor Hall walked in. She engaged in no histrionics and did not raise her voice. Yet in her smile and in her voice the undeclared sophomore saw and heard—and felt—the joy of someone in love with her discipline. The energetic woman at the lectern might as well have had “Mentor” stenciled on her forehead. By 1997 Jennifer had graduated from Shorter with a degree in English.

As Jennifer recalls it, the first masterpiece taught in that class was *The Odyssey*, and her relationship with Thelma Hall launched her on one of her own.

Not only did Hall guide her protegee through an undergraduate program, she pushed her to go away to graduate school. There Jennifer labored with the dream of returning to Shorter as a faculty member alongside Thelma. Fittingly, when the call from Shorter did come a few years later, it was her mentor on the line. And Jennifer thought she was the one who had done the selecting! Professor Hall had also liked what she saw that first day of class and made plans of her own.

Maybe Thelma Hall did not change other lives as dramatically as she changed those of her husband and her prize pupil, but it was part of her style to have an impact.

Alpha Chi learned as much during the years she sponsored the Shorter College chapter. She took on the role of her region's secretary-treasurer and looked forward to the annual meetings, to which she eagerly shepherded as many of her Alpha Chi students as possible. Her long hours of mentoring and traveling and working with these honor students were rewarded in 2000 when she received a Distinguished Service Award from the organization. Standing in front of an applauding audience on her special day, Thelma Hall looked as joyfully radiant as she had her whole career and life.

Jennifer Sikes recounts a private incident that measures her mentor's dedication even better than an award. In the spring of 2002, when Thelma was diagnosed with leukemia—her second bout with cancer—she had to miss the annual convention. When Jennifer visited shortly before the trip was to occur, the bed-ridden sponsor wanted to talk only of whether the students would be able to go in her absence. Jennifer had come on a mission of comfort to Thelma, but left with a mission *from* Thelma to check on funds for the trip. Sponsor by proxy, but still sponsor more than patient.

Thelma would not live to attend another national convention, and it was hard for the Shorter community to watch her die. After all, her years of teaching, guidance, and service had taken root in the very heart of the college family. In fact, her career embodies the strength of Alpha Chi schools. Most of them smaller, student-centered, and intimate, these colleges and universities flourish in part because so many graduates never really leave in spirit, and because such a crucial minority make it their goal to return as faculty. These alumni may have the ambition of scholars, but they want to emulate a person as much or more than they want to conquer a discipline. Jennifer and many others demonstrate that Thelma Hall was a teacher worth emulating.

As Mitch Albom says of his kindly mentor, Morrie Schwartz, in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, "The teaching goes on."

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If her life was a homily on joyful service, a kind of flesh-and-blood poem, what she learned from life often found its way into the poems she put to paper. Wilson says she became serious about poetry after they arrived at Shorter. As a young mother, she converted the dramas of the day into verse. The title poem of her volume *Sunlight and Stones* derives from such an occasion. One day, as from a kitchen window Thelma watched little daughter Laura pick berries, she saw the child reach for a berry and lose her balance. The fall, though not dangerous, naturally distressed Laura, who bellowed for mom's attention. Inside, Thelma could not resist pausing a moment to jot down the image of that straining hand. Then she ran to comfort her child. Thelma's good instincts about the relative severity of childhood injuries were matched by her instincts as a true poet, always desperate to record the words that capture the moment.

Years later, Thelma could blush good-humoredly about her struggle between poetry and motherhood. Laura survived nicely, and her fall is preserved as an insight into the passage from innocence to experience:

How could she have known  
that the stone she was standing on  
to help fill the distance  
from fingertips to berries

would tumble her headlong  
into the tangle of briars?

Those lines say something about how the roles of parent and poet coalesced in Thelma. Only someone who was a poet *and* a mother could see in the accident a prophecy of the pain all children must suffer as they enter the world of opportunity and risk. She saw Laura that day and at the same time saw all children. This dual vision explains much of the power of poetry. As Wilson puts it, “Whatever affected her central core of feeling would find a place in her poems.”

Thelma’s writing became more important to her over the years, and Wilson supported her, even serving as editor when asked, but maintaining a respectful distance at other times. In his mind, the poetry helped their marriage. It became part of who she was, and on reflection, he says, it gave him insights into her mind that might have otherwise been lost to him.

“Our conversations showed me her thought process and feelings. Her academic work revealed her mind’s scholarly orderliness. But her poetry opened up subtleties and depths of feeling as nothing else did. And strength. The poems show a strength in her that gave me comfort during her last days. She was aware of her own strength, her own fight, and of the strength of those around her. I knew that she was not simply dying, that she was aware of the significance of her dying.”

If the poems of *Sunlight and Stones* can be summed up in one word, perhaps “significance” will do as well as another. In a very brief introduction to the book, Thelma characterizes her work as a “journey through remembrance and imagination.” Moving from joy to pain and back again, the poems arrive, as Thelma did, at what she calls a “Center Place,” where the significance of life becomes clear, and a cause for “joy and thanksgiving.”

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This selection of poems from *Sunlight and Stones* (Shorter College Press, 1998), chosen with the help of Wilson Hall, attempts to capture something of the woman and life about which she wrote. We begin, however, with a poem by Wilson (yes, he is a poet too, though refreshingly modest about his work), one he read at a special service for Thelma at Shorter. It echoes Jennifer Sikes’ remark that Wilson and Thelma Hall “fit together” like no other couple she has ever known.

### **I Lit a Candle, Dear, Today**

I lit a candle, dear, today.  
It burns in Nevski Dom.\*  
A place you never were to see.  
It sends up prayer for your peace and mine  
In separate worlds, together.

Just as chorale music lifts and echoes  
In the cathedral’s vaults and chambers,  
Dying away softly to God’s ear.

The thing that divides us  
Is not a wall, not a valley, not a river,  
Not even an interface between two worlds.

The division is but the limit of my knowing,  
The sum of my experience,  
The totality of my mind.

My ignorance spreads, thus, an illusion  
Over the mystery of God  
As insubstantial as reflection on water.

From your side,  
Where no earthly limit is,  
Nothing is between us.  
Only transition  
Without break or interruption.

I made a poem, dear, today,  
In Nevski Dom  
To pierce the dark  
To lift a prayer  
To cross a barrier that does not exist.

*\*Dom* is a German word for *Cathedral*.  
Nevski Cathedral is in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Poems by Thelma Hall from *Sunlight and Stones*:

### **Sunlight and Stones**

In a world where sunlight warms  
to a rich purple fullness  
the blackberries hanging almost  
within reach  
of the small warm hand straining  
to win them,

where things are as they seem,  
where stones are firm things,  
and where toes that clutch  
to their rough strong sides  
feel in this firmness a sense of security,

How could she have known  
that the stone she was standing on  
to help fill the distance  
from fingertips to berries  
would tumble her headlong  
into the tangle of briars?

### **Rhythm in Wood**

On the top of a hill where oaks still endure  
Are remnants that once were a home.  
The walls hang loose from the center beams  
While the rocks of the chimney stand straight.

Small birds build nests in its rotting boards  
And mice multiply in its walls.  
My children now sit in its hollow eyes  
And dangle their feet down its face.

And when they are told of their grandparents' ways  
In the house when the house was whole,  
They identify more with the wind in the trees  
And the rhythm of their heels hitting wood.

### **The Merging**

Along the path  
blackberries hang heavy with dust.  
Below, water gurgles and splashes  
cool drops upon my feet.  
As the sun quivers  
over red laurel and gray stones,  
I lie down in cool-warm grasses  
and remember your touch.  
The heavy sun burns  
into my flesh  
and bird songs wrap about me  
as tight as pain.  
Then it no longer matters  
where the path leads  
or who walks there  
or why.

### **The Passing**

"I ran away with your father  
in a buggy," she said, reminiscing.  
My mind lifted pavement  
to see the slow dropping of hooves  
and the steady churning of dust.  
"I remember Mama turned  
from hanging clothes and squinted  
against the sun to watch the buggy  
out of sight," she said.  
This frowning grandmother has no face,

and the woman pressed close against the man  
in the buggy is herself half unreal.  
“We married in the parlor  
of a stranger,” she said.  
Time blurred the sparse and musty room  
and the strange, youthful faces  
of these, my parents-to-be.  
I rose to go  
then felt a keen, sharp pain,  
seeing my mother’s hand,  
and not my own, reach out  
from the sleeve of my new coat.

### **Deception**

Houses keep nature out.  
The green carpet copies grass  
and beams of light hop about  
like crippled birds.  
Leaf shapes play as shadows through the curtains.  
Rain knocks at rooftops, at windows, but  
it can’t come in.  
Sunlight diffuses through windows  
seeking pale-leafed plants  
that have never felt the wind.  
My red-flowered hibiscus smiles at me by day  
and dies at night.

Outside, we pick up pieces of nature  
and put them in our pockets:  
a perfect red maple leaf to brown in a book,  
a stone, sparkling with stream water  
to dull in a vase.  
Fine bright thoughts of things that last forever  
mingle with brilliance of leaves  
until they, too, fall in wind.

### **Evicted**

I can’t keep guard forever  
over damask scraps and silver spoons.  
I no longer remember the time of their use.  
Inside, mice leave black trails,  
and roaches flee, frustrated,  
from empty rooms.  
Stacks of old news  
now sog in winter’s drizzle—  
I read my eighty years  
in their mottled blur.

I watch as strangers close trunks  
over treasures only I had prized,  
and listen as motors race away.  
Bits of me will rot in strange rooms  
farther away than I have ever been.  
In nearby houses, neighbors  
lie beneath the covers in clean rooms.

### **Betrayal**

The sun freezes the upturned roots  
of the largest oak tree in the yard.  
Its limbs once swept down  
upon the roof and sent leaves  
reeling bright as hope  
over the browning yard.

The moon is a black snarl  
in an orange sky.

Outside my window  
birds sit dull-eyed and silent.

Your eyes on me see bone, not flesh,  
and my eyes looking back  
are the owl's, the dove's,  
the mockingbird's.

In the valley an eagle circles,  
looking for its mate.

### **Auschwitz, 1996**

*For Alina, who survived*

Within the walls of Auschwitz  
I met you, my sisters.  
Your pictures line the walls  
of my heart.

As I hold the iron railings  
that shut you from the light,  
I feel my body being pulled  
into your cell.

I stand stripped bare.  
Only clothes, shoes, hair  
speak of my outer being.  
I assert my soul's pride.

It needs no outer cover.  
I stand, one body with many,  
waiting for the cleansing shower  
but drown instead  
in my lung's blood.

My flesh becomes bone,  
then ash, sprinkling  
the countryside.

\* \* \* \* \*

My mind calls back my flesh:  
When I breathe again,  
I am no longer ash  
falling like black snow.  
I float over the fence  
where yellow flowers  
embrace me, saying  
"Come, the soul is  
no longer blackened  
with pain."

My heart constricts  
but will not harden—  
someday, it will  
sing again.  
Oh Helena, Magda, Maria,  
look up—  
Alina's bird hovers overhead.  
We will live again.

*\* Alina, to whom the poem is dedicated, told of the experience that makes up the last stanza. Alina and her mother were standing in front of the firing squad to be shot, when Alina's mother covered her daughter's head with a coat, so she would not have to look at the rifles. Alina said the last thing she saw before the coat covered her head was a bird flying, and she thought, "that is the last thing that I shall ever see." But for some reason the soldiers were called away and Alina survived the death camps. (Wilson Hall's note)*

### **To Wake Up Singing**

What does it take  
for us to wake up singing,  
feeling joy rise  
from the Center Place?

Through a clamoring  
in the wind  
and a hammering  
in the rain,  
we have to listen

to our hearts  
though they speak as softly  
as the falling snow.

To wake up singing  
we have to feel hope rise  
so warm we want to touch it  
and hold it in our hands.

Though the sunlight flirts  
with the beckoning dark,  
we have to bend our wills  
to the voice inside  
pushed by the force  
that asserts "I am."

To wake up singing  
we have to feel God's grace  
touch our souls  
like a cooling mist,  
see His love  
in the rain and dark,  
find our voices  
through the rumbling thunder,  
then sing our songs  
from the Center Place.