

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
THOMAS BACON WHITBREAD**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Professor Thomas Bacon Whitbread, Department of English, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary
General Faculty and Faculty Council
The University of Texas at Austin
Arthur J. Thaman and Wilhelmina Doré Thaman Professor of English and Comparative Literature

**IN MEMORIAM
THOMAS BACON WHITBREAD**

Tom Whitbread was born in Bronxville, New York, August 22, 1931, and died on October 1, 2016, in Austin, Texas after a long and consequential career as Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin.

As a boy, Tom lived in West Cummington, Massachusetts, where he spent much time exploring, playing Cowboys and Indians, figuring out how to walk across a frozen pond without endangering his life, investigating the crystal radio, and developing a love of trains. Taught piano by his mother, Tom greatly enjoyed singing Gilbert and Sullivan with his sister, and music remained a mainstay throughout his life.

Tom was ten when he began to publish a self-made gazette, "The Whitbread Bugler," with accounts of family stories and adventures, local events, and historically accurate war news. Tom always demanded accuracy of himself and encouraged it in others. At the same age he traveled by bus to his first of more than seventy annual gatherings of the National Amateur Press Association (NAPA), where he made life-long friendships with many like-minded people.

In the spring of 1944 Tom's family moved to Amherst, Massachusetts. Tom went to Saint James Preparatory School in Hagerstown, Maryland before attending Amherst College, and then Harvard for his Ph.D. in English literature. In 1959, Tom began his career in the English Department at The University of Texas at Austin, where he taught English literature and creative writing until the last year of his life. He arrived in Austin late that summer after a long car trip that included a night in Memphis (where he saw North by Northwest in its original run) and a side excursion to the West Coast.

Tom always enjoyed travel, at first by railroad (he couldn't resist counting the cars of trains he saw going by) and then by car. He usually spent summers driving around the country, vacationing by visiting friends and family, and attending NAPA conventions. An avid tennis and bridge player, Tom enjoyed good books, poetry, *The New Yorker*, classical music, riffs on language, sports, good food, and Travis Club Senator cigars. Extremely sociable, he would engage animatedly in conversation, offer quirky insights and aperçus, then often go quiet before bursting out with an appreciative comment, or even a poem or aria. He was generous-spirited and kindly toward family, friends, students, and colleagues, and he assumed, without being presumptuous, that a similar spirit motivated others. For example, Tom had a habit of mimeographing poems in progress and distributing them to colleagues with a modest request for criticism and editing. On one now faded purple mimeograph sheet he wrote, "Friends: Here are two poems on which I've been working for five and three years, off and on. I give them to you as an end-of-academic-year manifest, hope you enjoy them, and would very much welcome any suggestions for improvements."

Tom had a gift for memorizing poetry, a talent he displayed often in his conversation and teaching. He commonly quoted lines and stanzas from a variety of British and American poets; his favorite writers were twentieth-century American poets. Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Frost appeared regularly in

his conversation, represented not just by lines from their anthologized pieces but by relevant passages from the full range of their works—so well did Tom know their verse. Although he did not recite poetry primarily to impress—he clearly felt that poets’ wisdom offered valuable assistance in making decisions—students and colleagues alike were invariably impressed by Tom’s ability to summon up and cite. Analogous to this talent was Tom’s formidable ability as a close reader: given a book, poem, or file, Tom would read it assiduously and home in on the most significant features of a given text.

Tom’s published books of poetry include: *Four Infinities* (winner of the annual Poetry Award from the Texas Institute of Letters), a title that encapsulates the four dimensions of both the book and Tom’s vision of life: “To Observe,” “To Remember,” “To Enjoy,” “To Be”; *Whomp and Moonshiver* (winner of the Voertman’s Poetry Award and co-winner of the Texas Institute of Letters annual Poetry Award); *The Structures Minds Erect*; and a special issue of *Lucille Poetry Journal* devoted to his poetry. He also published poems in dozens of journals and magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Paris Review*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Texas Observer*, and *Virginia Quarterly*, as well as in numerous anthologies, including the *New York Times Book of Verse* and *The New Yorker Book of Poems*. A poetic short story, “The Rememberer,” won *The Paris Review’s* Third Aga Khan Prize, and was reprinted in *Prize Stories 1962: The O. Henry Awards*. In addition to five short stories Tom also published six works of criticism, including his edition, *Seven Contemporary Authors: Essays on Cozzens, Miller, West, Golding, Heller, Albee, and Powers*, that Tom collected from a series of lectures that he generously organized for seven of his untenured colleagues.

Tom’s poetry was appreciated and admired by fellow poets. Jeanne Emmons, for example, writes: These are poems as we’d forgotten poems could be, intricately formed, tightly woven, reminiscent of Donne and Wilbur in naturalness and craft. Whitbread jitterbugs, jazzes, and slow dances in iambic pentameter, astonishes with wit and self-deprecating wisdom. His language strikes out and turns back on itself in curlicues of ambiguity. These virtuoso performances are clearly “ink spent in the paper’s love”; however, the love that most informs these pages is that of people in all their knotty imperfection. Of friends, he writes, “They give you the help and love you need to live.” Poems do the same, especially ones like these. What Whitbread says of Georgia O’Keeffe might well apply to his own work: “Art is love.”

And Richard Wilbur comments, “it would take a very ordinary reader to find a culpable artificiality in Thomas Whitbread’s poems. Their language has a supple openness, as of an amiable and intelligent man talking; both in its playfulness and in its gravity, it avoids the stagey; and it easily enlists any suitable form in the pursuit and sharpening of its point.”

As well as a widely admired poet, Tom was a beloved and award-winning teacher, and especially proud of awards given by students for his teaching, including a scholarship that carries his name and a colleague’s, endowed by a former student who had been “profoundly impacted” by their teaching. The awards underscore how closely Tom integrated his writing and his classroom activity, for he brought his poetic sensibility into his teaching, inspiring generations of students. He was also mentor, colleague, brother, uncle, great-uncle, and friend. He is survived by his sister Reed, niece Beth, nephews David and Nathaniel, and many friends, colleagues, and students whose lives he touched and enriched, and who will continue to remember and be inspired by him.

The following comments are representative of the many warm and grateful tributes offered by Tom’s students:

Elizabeth Johns: “Through his unbridled enthusiasm for the written word, Dr. Whitbread was the one person who changed the course of my academic and professional life. The world is a much less delightful place without him.”

Frank B. Ray: “Dr. Whitbread’s Shakespeare course at UT Austin in the 1960s was one of the most treasured moments of my education. I’m so lucky to have been, even so briefly, in the presence of this gifted and generous poet.”

Allison Walsh Trosclair: "In 1966 at UT Austin I took a course on modern American poetry from Dr. Thomas Whitbread. He greatly contributed to my lifelong love of poetry -- so much so that I purchased six copies of *Four Infinitives* to give to friends. He was a delightful and entertaining teacher."

Several lines in this Memorial Resolution were adapted from the obituary published in the *Austin American-Statesman*, Jan. 26 to Jan. 27, 2017.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Douglas S. Bruster (Chair), Alan W. Friedman, and Joseph E. Kruppa (emeritus).

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts on July 2, 2018, and posted under "Memorial Resolutions" at <https://wikis.utexas.edu/display/facultycouncil/Wiki+Home>.