

Thomas Lux: A Remembrance

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When I joined the faculty over a decade ago, one of the first people to welcome me to campus was Tom Lux. Passing by his office in only my second week, he motioned for me to stop: "I heard you were coming here. I don't know how much help I can be, but let me know if there is anything I can do. There's a reading soon. Come to the party afterwards. Here are the directions to my house."

Since then, I have spent many evenings at his legendary "after parties" following Poetry @ Tech readings. Climbing the stairs to the main living area, you could always hear Tom's booming laugh above the din of conversation. The next thing you noticed were the books. Everywhere. Books. To be a great writer, you must read. Few people have personal libraries the size of Tom's. For many writers, finding their own book in the stacks at Tom's house was a defining professional moment.

While Tom could have rested on his merits as a writer, he was not satisfied by only his own successes, and there were many. He was a dedicated teacher who loved to see his students succeed, too. He was also a passionate baseball fan, and you could often find him at the GT baseball diamond cheering on players who only a few hours earlier had been trying their hands at sonnets and sestinas. Whether his students became poets themselves, and many have, they all became better people because they studied with Tom.

To hear Tom "read" his work was an extraordinary experience. I hesitate to call his presentation style "reading" at all. Gripping both sides of the podium, leaning into the microphone despite his resounding voice, his gaze fixed on his audience—he could deliver a poem as few people ever have. He understood the power of poetry to inspire us, to challenge us, to change us.

He was also always ready for a laugh—believing strongly in poetry that was humorous and accessible. One of the first times I heard him read, he enthralled the audience with "Refrigerator, 1967." It is one of his most memorable poems. I share it here with the thought that while we are deeply saddened by his loss, his poetry remains with us—a full jar of beauty passed down to us all.

Refrigerator, 1957

More like a vault -- you pull the handle out
and on the shelves: not a lot,
and what there is (a boiled potato
in a bag, a chicken carcass
under foil) looking dispirited,

drained, mugged. This is not
a place to go in hope or hunger.
But, just to the right of the middle
of the middle door shelf, on fire, a lit-from-within red,
heart red, sexual red, wet neon red,
shining red in their liquid, exotic,
aloof, slumming
in such company: a jar
of maraschino cherries. Three-quarters
full, fiery globes, like strippers
at a church social. Maraschino cherries, maraschino,
the only foreign word I knew. Not once
did I see these cherries employed: not
in a drink, nor on top
of a glob of ice cream,
or just pop one in your mouth. Not once.
The same jar there through an entire
childhood of dull dinners -- bald meat,
pocked peas and, see above,
boiled potatoes. Maybe
they came over from the old country,
family heirlooms, or were status symbols
bought with a piece of the first paycheck
from a sweatshop,
which beat the pig farm in Bohemia,
handed down from my grandparents
to my parents
to be someday mine,
then my child's?
They were beautiful
and, if I never ate one,
it was because I knew it might be missed
or because I knew it would not be replaced
and because you do not eat
that which rips your heart with joy.