

## Priscilla Washburn (Tilly) Shaw

1930 - 2015 | Obituary |



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Sept. 25, 1930 - July 21, 2015

Resident of Santa Cruz

Priscilla (Tilly) Washburn Shaw, born in Massachusetts, September 25, 1930, died peacefully at her home in Santa Cruz surrounded by her friends, July 21, 2015. A literary scholar, poet, and UC Santa Cruz faculty member in Literature from 1966 to 1993, Tilly Shaw arrived with the opening of Stevenson College in 1966-67, as a visiting faculty member from Yale. She was hired by the Board of Studies in Literature in 1967, one of few tenured women in UCSC's early days and the only tenured woman in literature. In addition to her published work on Valery, Yeats, and Rilke, she developed a specialist interest in Conrad and Lawrence in the '70s and Levertov, Plath, Sexton, and especially Adrienne Rich in the '80s. She particularly loved the stimulating interdisciplinary atmosphere of those early days at USCS.

She was a daughter of the academy. Her father taught at Boston University and her maternal grandfather at the University of Pennsylvania. Her mother, with an ABD in French, was an esteemed teacher of French language at the progressive Cambridge School of Weston, and Tilly's three years of high school there were extremely happy and stimulating. This was her springboard to Swarthmore College and then to Yale where her graduate work in comparative literature led her to UCSC.

As a child, Tilly was influenced by a debt her parents contracted during the Great Depression and by their marital struggles. For example, her family grew all their vegetables for the year in a huge Victory garden during the summer and canned them for the winter, to save money. As an undergraduate, she studied psychology, including Freud, relatively new in this country at the time, which deepened her understanding of herself, her family, and of literary texts. She often said that she heard unspoken conversations more loudly than spoken ones, which was also true of her uncanny ability to get inside literary texts. One of the first among her peers at UCSC to become interested in feminist studies and women's writing, she determined to teach half her classes on women authors every year from the '80s on. She brought her gifts for close reading—of people as well as texts—and for listening, to her students and to those she counseled for years in Santa Cruz' Co-Counseling program.

An astute and generous critic and editor, Tilly also became a serious poet and devoted supporter of poets and poetry. She met for many years with three poetry groups, was an active founding member of the Board of Poetry Santa Cruz, and authored two collections of poems,

Swimming Closer to Shore (2004) and the forthcoming Hanging Out in the Ordinary, both published by Hummingbird Press. Tilly was an avid lover and mainstay supporter of all the arts, especially film, live theater, and musical performance, in addition to literary readings. She herself sang for a number of years in the Westside Community choir, and loved listening to the harmonies sounding around her.

Tilly was a passionate ocean swimmer—in the Atlantic, where she summered in a little cabin in the woods her father had built on the coast of Massachusetts, in the Caribbean where she went every January with her old friend Ruth Perry, and in the Pacific near the wharf in Santa Cruz. In her retirement she was an intrepid traveler with her beloved friend, Audrey Stanley, founder of Shakespeare Santa Cruz.

Tilly leaves cousins and a brother, with niece and nephew on the East coast, and dear longtime friends there and in Santa Cruz and abroad who will miss her deeply. A celebration of her life is being planned for late September. Donations in her name to Poetry Santa Cruz are most appreciated.

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