



## Our Interview with Poet Thea Schiller



*“A bird flies, a fish swims, an ocean flows,  
a fire burns, a sun shines—  
and a writer writes.”*

—William Packard

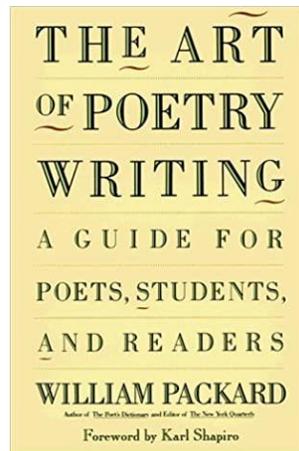
**Sally from the Norwalk Public Library:** Welcome to the **Poetry Page**, Thea! You have a beautiful poem, “Still Life,” in the Norwalk Public Library’s **Art & Text** booklet. In your bio, you state you are a New York poet and psychotherapist who facilitates a poetry workshop at the Somers Library in Somers, NY.

I recently featured poet/physician, Divina Santos, on a Poetry Page, and she talked about your Workshop at the Somers Library. She loves it!

Please share with us how you manage being a therapist, poet, and teacher (or workshop leader, if you will)? It seems like a lot to take on.

**Thea:** I have been writing poetry since the age of twelve, so it’s like breathing and eating, sleeping and living, coming so naturally. One of my poetry mentors, the Late **William Packard** said:

*“A bird flies, a fish swims, an ocean flows,  
a fire burns, a sun shines—  
and a writer writes.”*



Sharing my love of poetry, and facilitating a workshop at the Somers Library (which I’ve been doing for the past five years!) is a joy. Helping others find their poetic voices keeps me involved in the life of poetry. I am semi-retired, and work one day a week as a psychotherapist. This keeps me engaged in an important professional life.

**Sally:** Do you feel poetry helps you to be a better psychotherapist?

**Thea:** In my opinion, a quality that makes a good psychotherapist is the ability to connect and form relationships with others. If one's ability to write poetry assumes one has a sensitivity to life, nature, and others, then I would say that being a poet has helped me in my profession as a psychotherapist. Poetry is involved with the world of subjective feelings, as is the process of psychotherapy. Being a poet has helped me guide others to uncover—and reveal—their innermost feelings. Poetry is a validation of one's thoughts and feelings in much the same way that psychotherapy provides a witness of a client's reality.

**Sally:** In turn, I would think being a psychotherapist would help you to read poems more deeply? Do you think so?

**Thea:** To the extent that, as a psychotherapist, I am a keen listener to underlying messages, I think my reading of poetry can be surprising. I may see underlying themes that someone else not trained in my field might miss.

**Sally:** Do you think there is a connection between a certain mental fragility and creativity? I am thinking now about Sexton, and Roethke...Robert Lowell, so many! I have always thought, though, that their breakdowns occurred—in part—because of their heightened sensitivity, and that their deep sensitivity also made them creative people (artists). I think, during their time, there was a bit of a misguided notion that “madness,” if you will, made one a brilliant poet, or artist. I think that is dangerous thinking, especially for the young and impressionable. There are a lot of personally-troubled people who are not artists, for example. Have you any thoughts on this? It's a huge topic, I know!

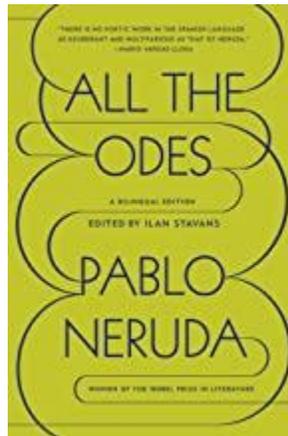
**Thea:** Quite the contrary. I think creativity is a strength, and a sublimation one can utilize during life's twists and turns. Those individuals who are able to participate in writing, art, music, architecture and all the other industrious and creative fields, are resilient. For sure, there are people in the arts, just like people in educational, business, or medical fields, etc., who suffer life-tragedies and succumb to them; but, I don't feel there is a mental fragility in creativity. Creativity is a gift, and a strength.

**Sally:** Your undergraduate degree was in Creative Writing. Why did you pursue a degree in psychotherapy afterwards?

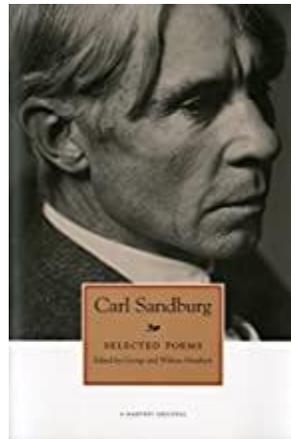
**Thea:** I worked for ten years before starting college. My last job without a college degree was as an associate editor on a medical journal. When the company merged, and I was let go, I decided it was time for University. I majored in my two loves: creative writing, and English literature. Shortly thereafter, I obtained a Masters degree in education, propelling me to become a special education teacher. For nine years, I helped students with dyslexia learn to read and write. My second Masters degree in counseling was a natural outgrowth of my life's work in education, working with challenged students, helping them to achieve success. Becoming a psychotherapist afforded me an opportunity to build on my previous role as a change agent, and expand that work to also include adults who wanted to learn new coping mechanisms and make significant modifications in their lives.

**Sally:** Who are your favorite poets? What are a few of your favorite poems?

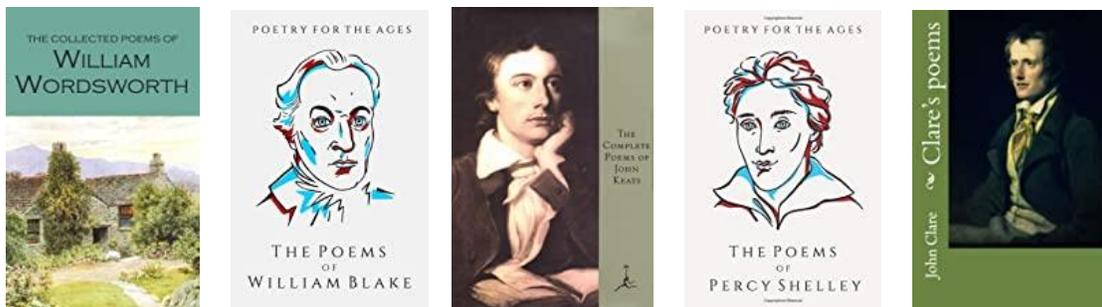
**Thea:** I would say there are so many poets I love for different reasons. Pablo Neruda's odes establish the myriad of ways one can appreciate objects, people, and institutions.



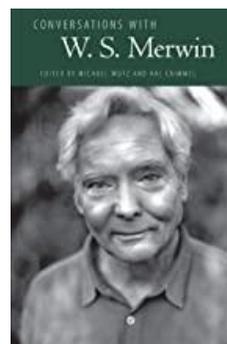
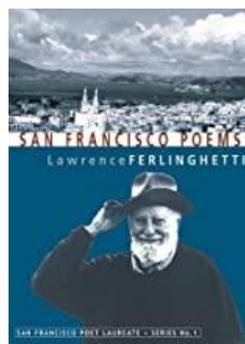
Carl Sandburg carries for me the Whitmanesque image of the common man and humanity.



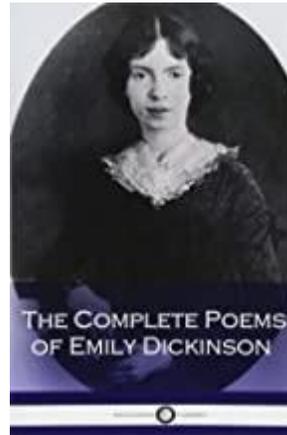
All the Romantic poets—Blake, Wordsworth , etc.—still hold a place in my heart, and allow me to think philosophically, and to appreciate old-fashioned ways of being, and, especially, to love.



During the Sixties, I frequented live poetry readings in New York City, and heard poets such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and W.S. Merwin.

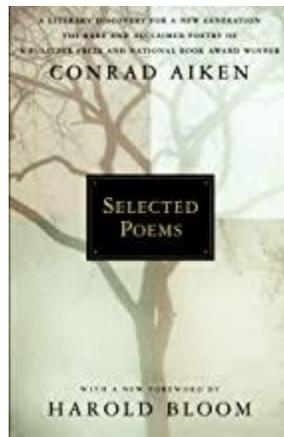


Sara Teasdale and Emily Dickinson are my mainstays.



**Sally:** Did you read and write poetry as a child, or did it come to you later in life?

**Thea:** I had a 7th grade teacher, Mrs. Stein, who gave us an assignment to create a poetry folder. I found the poems, “At a Concert of Music,” by Conrad Aiken, and, “On Gay Wallpaper,” by William Carlos Williams. I wrote my first poem at age twelve after the demise of my mother.



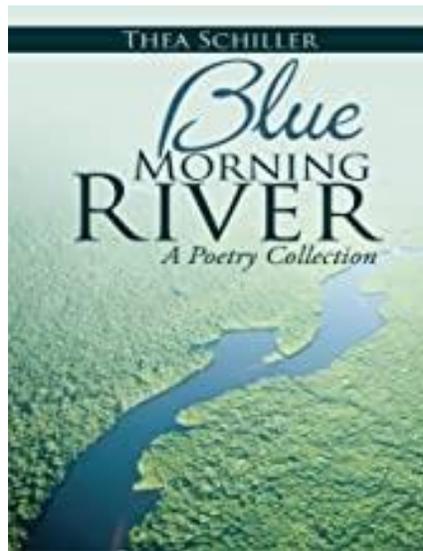
**Sally:** Please tell us about publishing. I understand your poems appear in many literary journals?

**Thea:** Getting published is much like winning the lottery. I have been fortunate to have done so in the 1970s, and 2019 was a record year for me. I have been published in University publications, such as the *Suny Purchase Poetry Review*, *The Tenth Muse* (Clarke University), and *Furrow* (University of Wisconsin). I have a poem published in the *San Diego Poetry Review 2017-2018*. Poems of mine have been published in Canada

and Wales. Some online journals include *The RavensPerch*, *Page & Spine*, *Hevria*, and *the Scarlet Leaf Review*.

**Sally:** Do you have a collection of poetry?

**Thea:** In 2016, I self-published a poetry book— *Blue Morning River: A Poetry Collection*— which is available on Amazon.



In those days, I was part of a small literary group called **Blue Ink**. Myself, and three other writers, gave readings at local libraries in Westchester, New York.

**Sally:** What advice would you give writers about publishing? It is such a unique journey for everyone.

**Thea:** When sending out poetry, writers need a “thick skin” in regards to rejections, so they don’t become discouraged. Poetry is a subjective experience, and one journal may love one of your poems while another would not give it the time of day. Ultimately, one writes to express oneself. If you are happy with what you have worked on, keep that success in your heart, and don’t let it depend on publication. We are also living in an era of self-publishing; so, if you want to be out there, you can.

**Sally:** What role does poetry play in your daily life?

**Thea:** Poetry is a way for me to take my life's experiences, and make sense of the world. I love words and language, and it affords me an opportunity to make literary music. My mother was a musician who instilled in me a sense of rhythm that appears in many of my poems. Poetry assists me, not only in keeping my priorities straight, but it helps me to expand my philosophical understanding of life, and to continue to find and sustain its meaning.

**Sally:** In your private life, what other things do you enjoy? Gardening, nature? Family?

**Thea:** I used to enjoy swimming, but haven't been able to do that lately because of the pandemic.

Now, I enjoy walking in nature, and I am especially loving the Hudson river views. Recently, I discovered a marvelous creek in North Salem to amble by, and watch.

I enjoy knitting, and knowing just one stitch has made it possible for me to make over a hundred scarves for myself, friends, and family.

I have two grandsons, whom I cherish, and any opportunity I have to play with them is beyond wonderful.

**Sally:** Finally, in your poem printed in our Art & Text booklet, you include the epigraph:

*There is actually no place in this village for a work of fine art, if any had come down to us, to stand, for our lives, our houses and streets, furnish no proper pedestal for it. -- Walden, Thoreau*

Please explain for us what Thoreau meant by this? Why were you drawn to this particular quote?

**Thea:** I was drawn to this quote because no “work of fine art” can substitute for life. Nothing artificial can replace or “stand for our lives.” Thoreau lived in the woods in a house he built by himself for two years and two months, and nature was his palette. While I’m not sure, to be honest, exactly what Thoreau meant by this quote, it resonated with me and prompted me to write my poem, “Still Life.”

In my poem, the quality of my relationship with my late husband, and all our experiences, would supersede any work of art. Any poem I could ever write could never approach the beauty and tremendous vitality of our union, and our experiences. One may look at us as a couple and see a “Still Life,” in much the same way one sees a Chagall painting. And that will be true and untrue simultaneously. For stillness will be achieved by loss, but the reverberations of love will remain in memory the way one can access its beauty when looking at a painting.

**Sally:** That is so beautiful, Thea. Please close with anything else you’d care to mention! I am so happy to feature you on our Poetry Page!

**Thea:** The following are three poems I would like to share with your readership. Thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts, my poems, and my inspirations...



**Now, Thea’s poems...**

## Still Life

Like Chagall,  
I lift up my yellow couches,  
with friends listening --  
my husband recounting our mirth and pathos --  
about his bride, me, walking next to him in Ceriale, at  
the Train Station.  
He was in a hurry, but  
I was talking Spanish to an Italian conductor.  
And Manny got on the train without me and saw me sauntering on the path,  
Screaming out my name so fiercely,  
I threw myself unto the open car of mail sacks;  
and until the ticket man came up and  
shook me like a bad cat,  
I was laughing,  
but then dissolved in tears,  
my love berating me for not following,  
but finally a half hour later,  
both of us rolled raucously through the aisles,  
touching all the other passengers with our giggles.  
Or later, when we shared the bountiful fruit  
Of our daughter squirming under the cherry-mahogany table,  
because children don't know what to do with their resting limbs  
unlike us adults dancing without moving in our minds,  
swirling dervish in pinks, indigo,  
and flamingo gold and silver,  
plated in perpetuity,  
remembering our train story,  
before placing it to the right of the glass sliding door,  
this love, a still life,  
finally stilled.

Thea Schiller

Discussed in this interview,  
printed in 2019 ART & TEXT booklet, Norwalk Public Library

## Meeting the Queen

Americans, we do not live in England.

“Taxation without Representation is Tyranny,”

I see my ancestors throwing boxes of tea into Boston Harbor,

But this is not 1773.

I bring hot café au lait to my lips, even though I’m not in Paris,

nor walking the Quai of La Seine, or the time we went to Italy,

and I stood at the pretty mosaic counter in Domodossola,

(an Italian industrial city across from Switzerland) who went against the Nazis in W.W.

II.

The years fled away like a dirty thief. Grandma always

said, ‘don’t wish your life away,’

but every winter my brother and I prayed summer would come sooner than the one before,

And today I’m free of seasons,

Because I’m done with wishing,

And going with what is,

And is, is the two grandsons holding my heart,

And is, is the memory of those who did not want to depart,

But departed leaving to pine in the dark for their light,

And is, is my brother and I in the back seat of my mother’s black Chevy

Convertible sleeping in each other’s arms

While dad had smoked cigarettes to the World Series playing on the radio, and our sleep keeping away the nausea,

And is, is spring fever hurrying up to burn itself out to rid us of Spring allergies

But before that, is, is

remembering Hereford and the Three Choirs Festival, and

Meeting a bishop,

Hoping to see Queen Elizabeth.

And is, is being an American,

Still dreaming of meeting her,

Looking at the waters in the harbor,

(brown and murky),

with tea leaves still floating by.

Thea Schiller

*PAGE & SPINE*, July 5, 2019

## **A Song for San Diego and My Father**

A New York businessman retires in San Diego,  
Making a trip, which delays his retiring in the earth,  
for 40 more years.

“I’m taking you to Balboa Park, and the Embarcadero,  
as long as you don’t go home and start telling people  
about the weather here. We don’t want more new comers  
than we can handle,” my father tells me.

But you dear are my exception.  
You can ride your bicycle out to Pacific Beach,  
Or watch the seals sunning on La Jolla.

I visited him and San Diego twice a year for 30 years,  
carrying a bouquet of flowers for my handsome father,  
Who met me at the airport smiling,  
but cried at every parting,  
“How do I know, this will be our last.....”

Each time, she wondered, since he was not a navy man,  
How he ended up leaving the tenements,  
the skyscrapers, the congested bridges, his  
dependent siblings, and the memories of his parents  
almost not making it to Ellis Island.

Capistrano, San Diego’s mission  
proved to be more competitive than my lure  
To have him return to New York,

It was as if San Diego was the next world,  
And New York was just  
Another New European state.

Thea Schiller  
*San Diego Poetry Annual: 2017-2018*

## Not a Narrow Squeak

Grindstone of words cut into pieces of Bissel and spittle.  
The slivers of sapphire, fall in love with themselves --  
refusing to find a finger to place a ring,  
Because the circle of poems speak in bright sunlight

Walk around and pretend to be a peacock preening,  
astonished by resplendent color,  
and fearless to take frenzied flight  
off each stanza.

If I knew the satisfaction of internal acceptance, was the purchase  
Of my poems,  
I would have been spared the grief of trial and error  
(in my younger years)  
to find a place in the outside world to matter.

Becoming a pictograph on the side of a mountain,  
the sheaves of my poems on the stone,  
are a reminder,  
Of love emanating from the sender  
To you my darlings,  
The recipients of years of burnished work  
and fevered care.

Thea Schiller

*The RavensPerch*, January 28, 2019

