



Our Interview with Poet Diane Meyer Lowman, Westport's First Poet Laureate



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form of expression!**

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Thanks for joining us on the Poetry Page, Diane! You are the first poet laureate of the town of Westport! That's so exciting, and is such an honor.



Before we get into your writing—which from what I've seen is so lovely—could you tell us a little about how you were selected for the laureateship? During which year were you selected, and how long is your term?

Diane: Yes! First of all, thank you so much for supporting poetry with this Page; it's an honor to be featured!

First Selectman **Jim Marpe**, and the town's **Arts Advisory Committee**, felt it important to augment Westport's already deep commitment to the arts by establishing the position, and put out a call for applicants. I had no intention of applying because I lacked confidence in my poetry skills (we all suffer from impostor syndrome to some extent, don't we?). My sweet spot is creative nonfiction.

But a few friends, including my former husband, kept sending the notice to me and encouraged me to go for it. I have been writing a daily haiku for over five years, and I'd just returned from thirteen months in Stratford Upon Avon, where I'd earned an MA in Shakespeare Studies from the Shakespeare Institute there. I'd been bathing in the Bard's verse all year, and I suppose that bolstered my confidence, as well.

I submitted what felt like a college application, including an essay, samples of my work, and recommendations, and had an interview with a panel that included representatives from the town, the schools, and the library. I was over the moon when they chose me – it is an incredible honor to be the inaugural poet laureate – and I felt it gave me great purpose after having been overseas for the year. It also allowed me to give back to a town I've lived in for twenty-four years.

I was selected in June of 2019. The term was initially two years, but with COVID, which has curtailed so many activities, the town has extended it to three.

Sally: That's so wonderful. It's great that Norwalk and Westport have a laureate now, along with Ridgefield! I'd love to host a laureates panel at the Norwalk Public Library once we get back to live programming.

What have you accomplished as laureate, and is there more that you would like to accomplish? Do you do work with local schools, and young people? What has been your focus, and why? I'm sure it must be hard not to become overwhelmed with things you would like to do as laureate!

Diane: In addition to doing some research about what poet laureates do, I met with **Norwalk Poet Laureate Emeritus [Laurel Peterson](#)** at the beginning of my term. She was incredibly generous with her time and wisdom, and helped me to approach the new position feeling more prepared.

In reality, though, every laureate has to make the position their own. I reached out to as many organizations in town as possible to see how we could make poetry more accessible, and use it to create community.

I've run haiku workshops at the Senior Center, Westport and Bridgeport schools, and [MoCA](#).

I have curated and written poems to present at town ceremonies. I've invited other poets to perform in town (sadly many of these events were cancelled due to COVID).

I wrote an article about [Everyday Poetry](#) in Westport, highlighting how poetry shows up all over the place: in cemeteries, in the streets, in the town's archives. That was really fun to research.

We replicated about twenty of my poems (on photos that I take) on lawn signs, and put them up around town during the height of the pandemic to bring poetry to the people! We hope to continue that practice featuring students' work.

So much more... yes, it's easy to get overwhelmed because I feel very enthusiastic about the work, but there is so much potential! I'd really like to host open mic/poetry cafes once we are allowed to reconvene.

Sally: Are you holding virtual workshops and events during the pandemic?

Diane: The pandemic has made things so difficult for so many creatives.

I haven't held virtual workshops because so many other organizations in town have worked so hard to fill in that gap, and I sensed that many people had "Zoom fatigue."

But I did compose haiku in gratitude to the frontline workers in town, recorded a PSA to "mask up," and have approached the library and local press about posting a weekly haiku/photo which they've both done. The work I did in [MoCA](#) with their educational pods took place during the pandemic, too.

Sally: One question I always like to ask—because I find that I am a very private person—does the social/public world of laureate conflict with the more private world of creating poetry? Some U.S. poet laureates—though their responsibilities, of course, are a bit more daunting than those of city/town laureates—have said that they have had to put their own writing on hold during their laureateship. What are your thoughts on all this?

Diane: What an insightful question.

For me, **the daily haiku**, which began around the time my mother died, are a kind of journal for me. They reflect what's going on inside and outside. Often friends will call and say "are you ok?" after a particularly dark haiku. But I post them on social media daily, and so they are out there already.

This may sound trite, but I find the joy that comes from someone who tells me at the beginning of a workshop – be it a seven or seventy year old – that "I can't write poetry," and then see them beam as they read the seventeen syllables in the three lines that they've composed – priceless.

What I do find is that my creative nonfiction has taken a back seat for sure. I have one memoir out about a ten week journey on a German container ship during the summer of my sophomore year at Middlebury College. My resolution for 2021 is to get to work on the next one, about my year in England. Not happening so far.

Sally: In our 2019 **Art & Text** booklet, you have a lovely haiku—"Cycles":

Cycles

And the sun rises
And the fog begins to lift
And it sets again

What about the form attracts you?

Diane: I write exclusively haiku (poetically speaking). I find the form intriguing because while it seems simple and easy at first (and in some ways it is), it is actually quite complex and challenging to encapsulate a moment or emotion into seventeen syllables that sound good together.

I had dabbled in longer poems during that trip I wrote my memoir about, actually, and every now and then since. My paternal Greek grandfather wrote poems to me, my sister, and our cousins, and I fancied I'd follow in his footsteps.

But I sent a few to my older son, who is a real poet (he recently received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago), and he very kindly told me that they were not very good, and that I should stick to something shorter or just to creative nonfiction. Out of the mouths of babes! So I found haiku – as you know, originally a very old Japanese form that normally spoke of nature.

As that same son told me, rules don't apply with contemporary poetry, so while I stick to the seventeen syllables for structure and discipline, I write about everything and everything. From the sublime to the ridiculous.

I find haiku just such a sweet, powerful, condensed form of expression! I've written over two thousand haiku now.

Sally: Do you find a recurring theme in your poetry, a preoccupation? Something that keeps popping up?

Diane: Yes, at times. At times like this, I have vented a lot of frustration with the current political situation, and with the pandemic. If I am struggling with something personally, I will certainly write about it, as examination and catharsis.

But sometimes I goof on elaborate high fashion ads, or the enormous spider that visited me one night, or my newly adopted very cute, very mischievous kitten, **Romeo!**



Like I said, it's really like a journal for me, so whatever impacts me most in any given day is likely to show up in the haiku for the day.

I take photos all the time on my iPhone, and so sometimes they inspire the poem – like the bags of dog poop that people like to leave all over town, or the personal protective equipment (PPE) that has littered the streets, or a magnificent sunrise or sunset, or anything and everything at Compo Beach where I walk often.

Sally: Did you write poetry as a child? Did you read it? Were you drawn to a particular poet or poem?

Diane: I was actually afraid of poetry because I felt it was difficult and obscure, but I loved the poems my grandfather (papoo in Greek) would compose for us.

Sally: Who are your favorite poets and writers currently, and what are a few of your favorite poems? Why?

Diane: **Shakespeare, Joyce, Beckett, Woolf.** I love [T.S. Eliot](#) because he's complex and difficult, and so rewarding. "[The Waste Land](#)" – I love. [Wilfred Owen](#) from WWI has such moving poems about his experiences. And [Ada Limón's "The Raincoat"](#) makes me cry because it's about a mother's love, and my son sent it to me. And, of course, I revere the haiku masters; [Basho](#), for instance – his frog haiku epitomizes what haiku can do.

Sally: Have you had formal training in poetry?

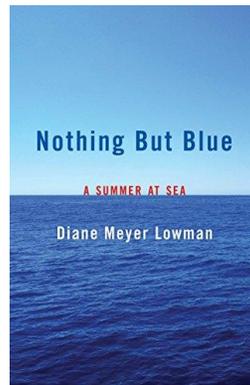
Diane: I actually did not study poetry formally (except in English classes), but studying the sonnets, and poetry writing, with Don Paterson in Stratford, and then T.S. Eliot and Blake at Cambridge the following summer, gave me a deeper appreciation and better understanding.

But I have honestly not delved into poetry as deeply as I have since becoming poet laureate, and that's a wonderful fringe benefit.

Sally: In terms of publishing, I know you have many credits, and not only in poetry. Please tell us about your many publications in various genres.

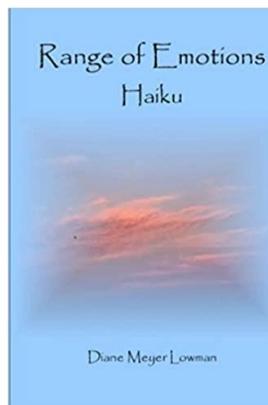
Diane: Thank you! I have had several essays appear in publication, online and in print. The greatest honor was having *O, The Oprah Magazine* choose to publish one I'd written during a difficult, but revelatory, time after my divorce.

My memoir, *Nothing But Blue*, came out in 2018, just after I returned from England.



My poetry appears online and in print in the magazines *Dark Poets Club*, *Connecticut Bards*, *Southwest Poetry Review 2020*, *Better Than Starbucks*, and others.

And I have two chapbooks of haiku: *Range of Emotion* and *Thirty in Thirty*, the latter for winning honorable mention in an April poem-a-day writing competition.



Sally: What advice would you give to writers about publishing? How important is publishing to you?

Diane: Ah, my thoughts have changed so much about that over time!

The enormous number of outlets and content online, and ease of self-publishing make traditional publishing routes really challenging. I think the most important question any author should ask themselves is what their objective is in publishing their work.

In my case, with the memoir, I just wanted to see the book in my hand and to share the story with my children and make them proud. I was pleased that a hybrid publisher chose to publish it because it gave it a bit more visibility and distribution options, but I did not aspire to the New York Times bestseller list!

With the poetry, I honestly just want to put it out there to share. If it ends up on an online site or in a book that might get it to a wider audience, that's a bonus.

Sadly, I think it's really difficult to reap substantial financial reward from writing unless you have a very rare combination of talent, luck, and timing. I would, however, of course encourage everyone to write! The good thing about all the ways to get your work out there is that it is easier than ever!

Sally: You write a weekly column. Can you tell us about that?

Diane: Yes! My friend [Sally Allen](#) – an incredible academic, Homer scholar, and author, hosted a site called **Books, Ink**. She offered to publish my weekly essays on that site in a column called *My Life on the Post Road* (which shifted to *My Life Off the Post Road* when I was in England). I wrote the column weekly for over seven years. She has since decided to shutter the site, but I've moved the weekly post to my own site on [Substack](#) and the new iteration is called *Everything's an Essay*. Just like with the haiku, it is simply my take on issues big and small that make up my days!

Sally: Aside from poetry, you teach yoga, provide nutritional counseling, and tutor Spanish! Please elaborate! How do you fit it all in? Do you find that each of these nurtures the other?

Diane: I am so fortunate right now in that I get to do the things I love. That sounds cliché, but it is very true.

When my dad died nineteen years ago, I developed an interest in how lifestyle affects health, and pursued a PhD in Holistic Nutrition and a Yoga Teacher Certification.

Right now I do only pro bono nutritional consulting for local charitable organizations.

I was teaching yoga to Westport Town employees before the pandemic hit, and look forward to being back on the mat with my students. Keeping active in both of these activities reminds me to be mindful of my choices, and—as with the poetry— gives me

the opportunity to share with others something about which I feel so passionately. It feels very rewarding when I can see a positive change—even if it's only for the few moments in Savasana at the end of a yoga practice—in a client or student.

As for Spanish, that is another life-long love, like Shakespeare. I have studied it since I was eight years old and have always wanted it to be part of my life in some way. I substitute taught in the schools while my boys were there, and have tutored students for over ten years. I'm happy to be able to continue that now during the pandemic with Zoom!

Sally: Finally, please share with us some of the things you enjoy outside of writing, teaching, providing, and tutoring. Nature? Gardening? Hiking?

Diane: I love literature, and I love to read, of course. I lead a **book group for the Weston Library**, which gives me a great opportunity to read, and then have really interesting discussions with the wonderful members.

I have tremendously enjoyed getting to know my little imp **Romeo**, and am happy to have someone else in my house to keep me company again.



Romeo!



Romeo!

The pandemic has brought so much suffering, but it has also brought my adult children home – they're with my ex and his wife and son – and all of us, in our bubble, are happy to spend most dinners together.

I also comb Compo Beach for sea glass any day that it's nice enough to do so! I have quite the collection after twenty-four years of strolling.

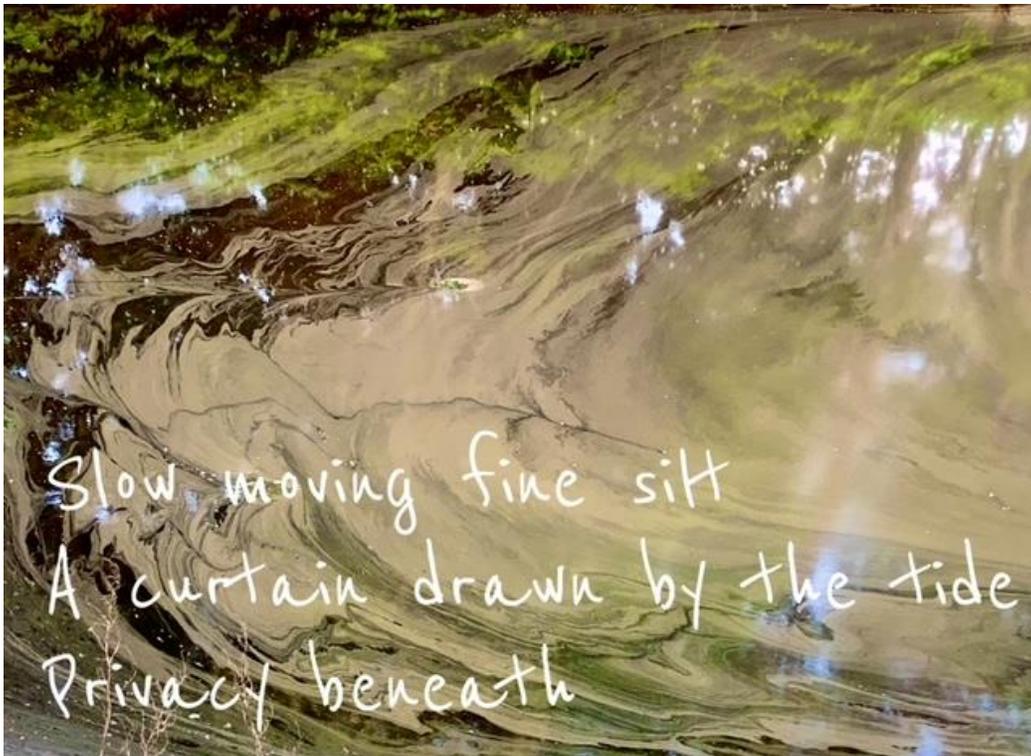


Now, three haiku by Diane...



Look up at the sky
After the rain clearing clouds
A rainbow surprise

—Diane Meyer Lowman



Slow moving fine silt
A curtain drawn by the tide
Privacy beneath

—Diane Meyer Lowman



—Diane Meyer Lowman

