



## **Our Interview with Poet Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Nins**



As with other artists, images, inspiration and connections  
can occur to me at any time, in any place.  
I don't look for a word or a thought to come  
as much as I try to be in position to receive it when it does.

**Sally from the Norwalk Public Library:** Thanks for joining us on the Poetry Page, Rev. Nins!

You have a poem— a powerful tribute to Gil Scott-Heron—in the Norwalk Public Library’s 2019 **Art & Text** exhibit booklet. On reading your biography in the booklet, I was so impressed with your educational background. Please share with us your various titles, as it were.

**Thomas:** Thanks for asking. I have a variety of titles, depending on the environment & occasion: Pastor. Preacher. Reverend. Doctor. Dad. Son. Chaplain. Author. Poet & “Rev.”

**Sally:** I hope you don’t mind if I call you by your first name, Thomas, for the sake of this interview! It is how I address all of the poets I feature here.

You earned your Bachelor of Arts degree in Broadcast Journalism. From there moved on to Theology. That is such an interesting shift!

Could you share with us the process involved in that shift? I remember my own pastor— at the church I attended with my family in Wisconsin— talking once about his calling. I imagine this is what you may have experienced?

**Thomas:** Your pastor articulated the shift very well. I had no interest or intention of going into ministry. My school, Virginia Union University, held MLK Oratorical Contests each year. I decided to enter as a freshman & won each year. Simultaneously, I was entering the University’s poetry contest & winning each year under an alias.

At one of the speech competitions, the Dean of the seminary approached me and congratulated me, and then said, “I want you to come up to the seminary.” I thanked him for the congratulations & told him, “Doc. I’m not a preacher.” He, in turn, said, “That’s ok. I want you to come up to the seminary.”

I told him, “Doc. I’m not a senior.” To which he said, “That’s ok. You’re coming to the seminary.” I called my pastor back home & told him about the conversation, hoping he would tell me to take my time and think about. He said, “Pack your bags. You’re going to the seminary.”

When I told my parents, my mother was ecstatic. She told me she had always hoped I would go into ministry. I was like, “Couldn’t you have hoped I would become a doctor or a lawyer?” My mother developed cancer before seeing me in ministry & passed. My father died one year later. They never heard me preach. Never saw me in a robe. I hope they are proud of what I have done.

**Sally:** I'm sure they are incredibly proud of you. I'm so sorry they passed away so early. That must have been very hard.

Your biography in our Art & Text booklet states: "He is a gifted, prolific, and powerful preacher, outstanding teacher, and visionary leader." Could you explain your roles as preacher, teacher, and leader?

**Thomas:** I am a hybrid. Some people have the good fortune of being good at one thing. I am fortunate that I am in a position that allows me to exercise multiple aspects of my being. I am a leader. I am an educator. And I am a messenger.

**Sally:** I see at one point your thesis was on Leadership Development in the African American Community of Lower Fairfield County. Please elaborate on the work you do with the African American community.

**Thomas:** As the "ex-officio" leader/representative of Greenwich's dwindling African America community, I have stood in the gap for the disenfranchised, fought to secure low income housing beyond "public housing," volunteered for the Greenwich Boys & Girls Club, served as the first African American on the Executive Board of the Greenwich Boy Scouts, served as an assistant Boy Scout leader & assistant little league baseball coach. I've co-facilitated the re-establishment of the Greenwich NAACP Youth Division, served on the executive board of the Greenwich NAACP, served as moderator for the Judah Baptist Association, led & facilitated "Lunch with Rev." (a diversity initiative for African American students at Brunswick School), served as Social Justice Chair for— & Presidential Advisor to— the President of the CT State Missionary Baptist Convention...to name a few. In other words, I've tried to be available & impactful.

**Sally:** When did poetry begin taking place in you? Did you read or write poetry as a child? Or did it come later?

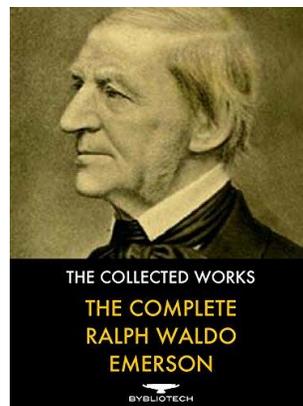
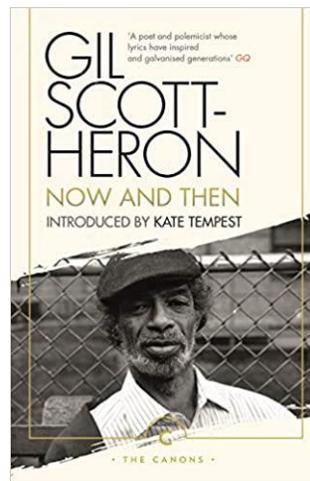
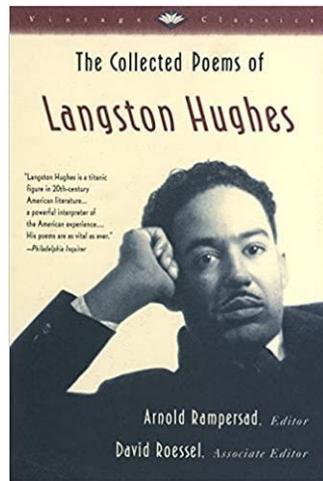
**Thomas:** I became socially conscious in the 6th grade. I wrote my first poem that year, entitled "Who Am I." It is included in my first book, *A Ballad for the Dawn*.

**Sally:** I imagine you are very skilled at reading poetry aloud, and find myself wondering if you incorporate it into your sermons. Do you?

**Thomas:** Thank you for the compliment. I would have to say yes; at times, to the chagrin of those who are accustomed to a certain type of sermonic delivery!

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

**Thomas:** Langston Hughes. Gil Scott-Heron. Emerson. They each speak to me in a certain way. Hughes: Personal. Heron: Political. Emerson. Philosophical. Favorite poem – ever - “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” by Langston Hughes. Period.



**Sally:** A favorite poet of my own is Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest. I think because of the nature of a true poem being so holy, I am intrigued between the relationship between religion and poetry. Do you feel there is a connection?

**Thomas:** I think young David would agree with you. He wrote some things we call *The Psalms*.

**Sally:** Poetry in itself is a particular calling, I think. Do you find sanctity in poetry?

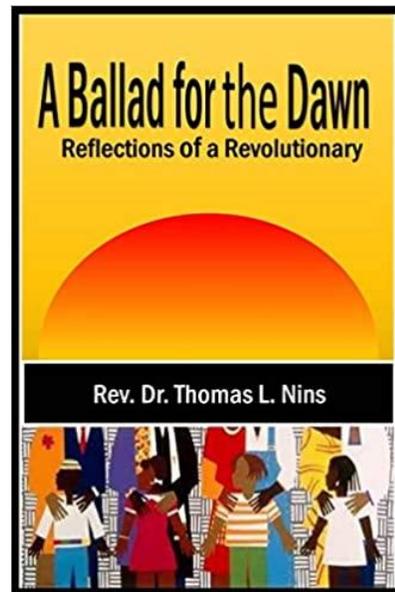
**Thomas:** Never thought in those terms. I write because I'm a writer. It's how I interpret the world, & it's my invitation to the world to see itself through my eyes. Sanctity? Possibly.

**Sally:** Do you ever publish your poetry in journals?

**Thomas:** Not yet.

**Sally:** You said earlier that you have a collection of poetry?

**Thomas:** Yes. *A Ballad for the Dawn: Reflections of a Revolutionary*



**Sally:** Was poetry a part of your education? Workshops, craft, analysis, etc.? Or is it simply a part of you that comes naturally?

**Thomas:** My one & only poetry class was taken at the University of Minnesota. The young, enthusiastic professor likened my writing to that of Bob Dylan. He brought some

writings of Dylan for me to look at, & songs for me to listen to. I had no idea who Bob Dylan was. I thought the instructor was overlooking my authentic Afro-Centric self. I was offended. I dropped the class. I did not know Dylan in the pantheon of powerful political voices of his time. Now I know.

**Sally:** Please share with us poetry's presence in your daily life.

**Thomas:** As with other artists, images, inspiration and connections can occur to me at any time, in any place. I don't look for a word or a thought to come as much as I try to be in position to receive it when it does.

**Sally:** Ah, yes. Receiving. Poetry is very much about that.

I see you grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota! I lived in the twin cities for six years. Did you know the book store Odegard Books of Minneapolis?

**Thomas:** No. I don't believe so.

**Sally:** It was a remarkable store. And the owner, Dan Odegard, was remarkable.

What brought you out here to the east coast?

**Thomas:** I was called to the East Coast. Not like Abraham to a foreign country. Long before I ever left North Minneapolis, my spirit had already left. My soul was looking elsewhere.

**Sally:** Please share with us a little of what you enjoy in your "down-time." Gardening, sports, reading, being with family?

**Thomas:** In my spare time, which is a rare commodity, I remain a Vikings Fan— so I suffer a lot!

I have shifted from working-out to living a "fitness life," which I thoroughly enjoy.

In the summers, I use to take my youngest to Yankee Games. Really enjoyed hanging out with him.

I love the game of golf, and have come to experience personal frustration in a public forum in a multitude of inexplicable ways. Then there is that one good shot, and I experience redemption.

I also enjoy relaxing at the beach – where no one knows who I am. Anonymity is underrated.

**Sally:** I agree!

This has been an enlightening conversation, Rev. Nins! Thanks so much for participating in the Norwalk Public Library's Poetry Page!



Now, three of Thomas L. Nins's poems...

## Pieces

By Thomas L. Nins

### **Revolution in Rhyme (Tribute to Gil Scott-Heron)**

Long before cats were getting' paid for it  
You were already writtin' and sayin' it.  
Layin' down one word, one line.  
One thought. One rhyme.  
Soarin' it. Pourin' it.  
Past the unconscious mind.  
You were the beat of the drum  
And the roar of the cat  
Shook the jungle when you rumbled.  
Hell. We all heard that.  
Long before I'd ever seen or heard  
You were already teaching us Johannesburg.  
Long before my first hit or puff-  
You were already warning about angel dust.  
Long before any of us totally knew  
You had broken the silence of the Watergate Blues.  
You were our teacher, preacher, brother and friend.  
You were the voice - Our choice.  
And we all tuned in.  
Funny how the thing we fight against hardest  
Often becomes the very thing that breaks and defeats us.  
But you will live on as you continue to teach us.  
You were the beat of the drum and the roar of the cat  
You shook the jungle when you rumbled.  
Hell. We all heard that.  
Peace go with you my brother.

## **My Gift from God**

When I was hungry God sent me manna.

When I was thirsty

He brought water

From a rock.

When I was lost

He lit a fire.

When I was unsure

He sent a cloud.

When I needed a message

God sent me an angel.

When I needed love

God sent me you.

**The Sounds of My Children**  
**(For the Families of Sandy Hook)**

My house is filled with the sounds of my children:  
Laughing; fighting; screaming.  
Each trying to get their own way  
And right now.  
My house is filled with the sounds of my children:  
Reading; playing; praying; Staying glued to cartoons  
And far from their rooms when clean-up came around.  
My house is filled with the sounds of my children:  
Dreaming about Christmas; Ripping open presents.  
Racing through the hallway; Hide and seek behind doorways.  
“Ready or Not:” “Here We Come!”  
Even now, I see them smiling in the morning.  
Resting in the evening.  
Breathing sweetly in the mid-night  
Once the sun went down.  
Funny how much time we spent telling the children to be quiet.  
Now that it is what I wouldn’t give, to hear their sounds again.  
To see them smiling in the morning, Resting in the evening.  
Or hear them breathing sweetly in the mid-night  
Once the sun went down.  
Now that it is quiet; What I wouldn’t give  
to hear my children’s sounds  
Fill this empty house again.

