

Interview with Dr. Somers-Willett

by Katherine Milsop

photos by Katie Winters



There is no home, only
postcards.

No relationship unmarked by
distance.

Of all things I am the same
photograph taken at different
times of the day: me, the lyric of
truck tires in a deluge or
me, those years of dark
water in a plant's heart or
me, that small animal
blooming in a hawk's fist -
not drowning, not waving,
but falling out of the sky.

– excerpt from “Self-Portrait as
Interstate 10,” from *Roam*.

She radiated a warmth and energy from behind her dark-framed glasses. Short blond hair framed her face. Her office was bright and welcoming, and reflected her personality. Dr. Susan B. Anthony Somers-Willet currently teaches creative writing and literature classes as an assistant English professor at Montclair State. Though she's been “surfing around for a little while,” she admits she's happy to make her home in Montclair. Somers-Willett spent the first 10 years of her life in Ohio, until her family moved to the New Orleans area, where she stayed until graduating high school.

She did her undergraduate work at Duke University and graduated in 1995 with a degree in cultural anthropology and

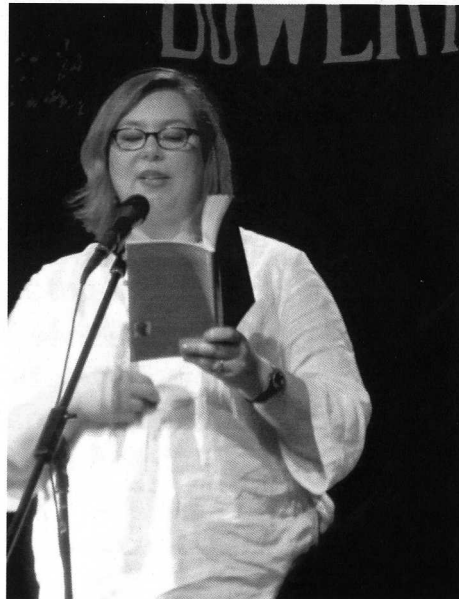
women's studies. "Cultural anthropology very much influences how I see the field of literary studies," she said. "I'm very much interested in what poetry does in the world, what relationships we have with poetry and how society and culture influence that relationship between poetry and the public."

In college, she'd become interested in production while working on the newspaper, "back in the days of cutting and pasting...doing graphics, designing advertisements," she laughed. Shortly after graduating, Somers-Willet moved to New York and worked at a small book company as production manager.

Somers-Willett explained that even after she joined the workforce, poetry was something she felt very passionate about. "I didn't think at first, 'I want to be a teacher,' I just loved writing," she said. She entered a graduate program in creative writing at the University of Texas at Austin. Her graduate fellowship stipulated that she had to teach some literature classes. She received her masters in creative writing in 1998, and her Ph.D. in literature in 2003 from the University of Texas.

"I really enjoy teaching. I really enjoy seeing the light bulb go off. I like being someone who can shepherd the students through the learning process," Somers-Willett said.

Before teaching at Montclair State, Somers-Willett taught at the University of Texas at Austin, Carnegie Mellon and the University of Illinois. In addition to her work at universities, Somers-Willett has published two books of poetry and a scholarly text titled *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*. Her first book of poetry, *Roam*, a Crab Orchard Series in Poetry award recipient, was published in 2006. This book, she explained, is organized



around personal experience.

"I lost my dad to cancer when I was 19," Somers-Willett said. "My first book is about the weight of that loss and feeling sort of homeless after that.... It marked a period where I was really on my own." Throughout the book, she takes on voices and characters from history and myth. "I have a character in the voice of Eve that's very scathing," she said, smiling coyly. All of the characters deal with some sense of loss.

Somers-Willett's second book of poetry, *Quiver*, was published in 2009. Much more exterior than her first book, she explained that this one deals with, "reconciling emotional truths that we know with scientific proof." They're poems about science and mathematics. She writes a series of poems, for example, in the voices of Marie and Pierre Curie and how their discovery of radium mirrors their own relationship.

"Personally," she said, "It stems from the fact that I believe in science...I believe in empirical data and proof, and that the world works in a very scientific way. And yet there are some things I can't explain."

"In its biggest sense," Somers-Willett said, "It's about the human condition. Love and spirituality set against a background of scientific discovery and mathematics."

Somers-Willett feels that *Quiver* is characteristic of how she sees herself as a poet. "I'm invested in how poetry can work across disciplines and bodies of knowledge," she said.



Somers-Willet's passion for poetry also extends to the performance aspects of verse. She's been on several national poetry slam teams as a competitor and a coach. Her 2009 book, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, is one of the first scholarly investigations of the art. "I like to think of poetry as something that's off the page as well as on," she said. "Not just speaking a poem aloud but embodying its voice in a theatrical way."

One of Somers-Willett's favorite poets and influences is Lucille Clifton, who she had the opportunity to interview in 1998.

"She [Clifton] is often misinterpreted as a simplistic poet," Somers-Willett said. "What she does with form is really innovative. The way you can read her rhymes backwards and forwards fascinates me."

Some of her other favorites include Adrienne Rich ("a perennial feminist fore-mother"), Audre Lorde and Anne Carson.

Somers-Willett is married to screen writer Ernie Cline. They have a daughter named Libby. "She's two, and precocious!" she said, laughing.

Her latest project is a collaboration of poetry, photography and journalism called *In Verse: Women of Troy*. It is the recipient of the 2010 Gracie Award given by the Foundation of American Women of Radio and Television. For the project, Somers-Willet went to Troy, N.Y. to interview women living below the poverty line. "I wrote a suite of poems," she said, "the radio producer and I conducted interviews, and we put together a piece that aired on Studio 360." For her, it illustrates how the poem exists across media and print. It morphs and changes into something else.

This summer, Somers-Willett hopes to work on a project that engages poetry and photography, similar to *Women of Troy*, but on a different topic.