


Classroom Observation
Susan Somers-Willett
ENWR 312:01: Writing: Poetry
April 26, 2010

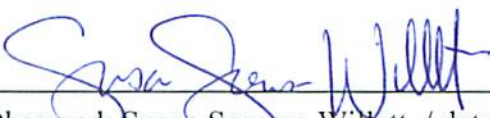
Susan Somers-Willett is a vibrant presence in the classroom, from her genial opening remarks to her playing a cut of Leadbelly's "Good Morning Blues" to show how a caesura works with a five-beat line. This poetry workshop is a well-structured class, which is to say that it moves right along, from literature-related announcements at the start to comments about portfolios and revision. The main event in a class like this, the workshopping of student material, went quite well. In this instance, a student's blues poem was up for discussion, and the students participated with remarks on everything from rhymes and meter to the title and theme. Susan is particularly adept at mediating and supplementing the discussion, adding her own comments to the mix without coming across as too authoritarian, yet at the same time providing observations that come from a professional poet. An interlude in which the students broke up into pairs to discuss each other's writing strengths and mannerisms also seemed to work well, with a sum-up effect appropriate to the last class of the semester.

In line with her teaching, Susan's syllabus and requirements are both clear and edifying. The weeks are divided into sections on metaphor, list poems, sonnets, free verse, repetition and musicality in the villanelle, and so on, with a wide range of illustrative reading attached, both poetry and material about poetry: Bishop, Szymborska, Rilke, Pound, Gioia, and many others. Everything from classroom etiquette to grading policies is spelled out. The class also has a performative element, fitting for any poetry workshop but especially apt, given Susan's interest in slam poetry. To his end, the performance poet Tyehimba Jess features as part of the semester's material, not just on the page but in a campus visit for a reading.

Susan's comments on her students' work is detailed and informative, as in "I know you're trying to capture a 19 c. voice, but does adding more adjectives and inverting syntax achieve that?" This is the kind of criticism students can really *use*. It's also encouraging in the right places, to keep budding artists plugging along.

Life and art being what they are, not all good poets are good critics or teachers. Susan is clearly all three.

 4/27/10
Observer: David Galef / date signed

 4/28/10
Observed: Susan Somers-Willett / date signed