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JEAN VALENTINE
FEATURES

AN INTERVIEW WITH KATE GREENSTREET



Kate Greenstreet's second book, *The Last 4 Things*, is new from Ahsahta Press. It includes a DVD containing two short films based on the two sections of the book. Ahsahta published Greenstreet's *case sensitive* in 2006. She is also the author of three chapbooks, most recently *This is Why I Hurt You* (Lame House Press, 2008). Find her poems in current or forthcoming issues of *jubilat*, *VOLT*, the *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, *Court Green*, *Cannibal*, and other journals.

This interview took place in August 2009, in my apartment in New York City.

Well, Kate, I'm very happy you could come into the city on this hot afternoon so we could talk about your wonderful new book, *The Last 4 Things*.

I know you like blank pages, as I do. And you leave plenty of space in this book -- more than some poets might. I love the two movies on the DVD that comes with your book, and I wondered if the places in the film "The Last 4 Things" where it goes black were meant to represent the white pages in the book.

Ah, that movie is actually made up of 18 very short separate movies. Every time the DVD player moves from one to the next, the screen goes black for a few seconds. For me, that's kind of like moving from one page to another. But a few of those tiny films have no narration, only music -- I meant those to stand for blank pages.

Why is the screen so often split in "The Last 4 Things"?

I hadn't ever done video before, so I approached it more like a designer than a filmmaker. I wanted a look that would connect the movies to each other. I hit on the idea of a stripe, making the space more wide than tall, because that allowed me to easily fit two or more clips side by side. It ends up looking something like a widescreen movie, but that wasn't what I was thinking about. When Max saw the split screen, he was reminded of certain split screen movies from the late '60s and '70s, like *Woodstock*. If I'd thought of that, I probably would have done something different!

I wondered if the split screen related to something you wrote about these movies, that you'd been sent a pirated DVD from China in which people were saying one thing while subtitles said something else in the same language. I wondered if there was a relationship between that and showing two things at once in a lot of parts of "The Last 4 Things."

That's an interesting idea. I wasn't conscious of that, exactly. I did think, though, that the side by side images could be read as a translation -- like a bilingual book: the original language on one side, the translation on the facing page.

That reminds me of something you said about writing "56 Days" [the second section of the book] -- that you thought it might be able to serve as notes for the title poem, "The Last 4 Things."

That would've been great, but it didn't work out.

But I'm noticing the way you keep having or trying to have one part speaking to another: the two parts of the book, the two movies, the split screen. That doubleness keeps appearing and not only doubleness, but what happens between the two things.

You don't include any notes in this book. I thought there must be a reason -- because of course you did have notes in *case sensitive*.

People had some problems with those notes.

Did they? Although someone called them "luminous." What problem did people have?

Well, I thought the notes were important for *case sensitive*. I felt that the character, the person who was writing, would care about having notes, but some people found it distracting, especially my use of endnote numbers in the poems. Also, some people think that notes are pretentious in general.

Oh, like "Look what I've read!" Showing off your erudition.

Yes, but I was just thinking, you know, that I wouldn't want to steal people's lines and act like I'd said them myself. And I've always liked notes. I'm curious about where things come from.

This time, with this book, I thought I'd see how the other half lives. And having no notes seemed to fit the project.

Is there a connection between leaving things unattributed and the feeling you've expressed about wanting this book to seem unclaimed -- to give the reader as little information as possible about how it should be read or who thinks it's worth reading?

Yes. I wanted the book to be more like "a letter from another world," to use Dickinson's phrase. Might sound like kind of a grandiose idea --

No, I don't think so. If these pages are something we find left somewhere, and we don't know who the author is or why it was written, we don't have the same expectations.

And if a person is just writing things down -- not writing something for others to read. In a certain frame of mind, she wouldn't note where she'd found a phrase or who said what.

Anyway, the quoted material is short; I usually put it inside quotation marks or in italics.

Though, some of the stuff you have in italics I feel is probably not a quotation from a document in this world. [laughs]

Well, that's the trouble. That's the trouble with me. But mostly, in this book, anything in italics is taken from somewhere. A lot of times the things inside quotation marks aren't actually quoted but they're lines I thought should *sound* like they were. You know?

Yes. Could you tell me where this quote comes from -- I think it's a quote -- "Surely the people is grass"?

Isaiah.

I thought it might be. I had a question mark, I wrote "Bible? Walt Whitman?" Hard to tell sometimes.

[laughter]

I love the way you've worked the Bible into this book.

Yeah, what's with the Bible, right?

I was going to say, "Kate, I didn't know you read the Bible."

You know, I don't really -- much -- but it's just *there*.

Is that from childhood?

No. When I was a kid? We never read the Bible. We were Catholic! [laughter]

Did you have to go to Church?

I went to Mass. Until I was 15.

Maybe you heard them reading it.

Well, yes: the Gospels, the Epistles, but I tend to go for the Old Testament.

I think, in some basic way, I have a religious temperament. It's like being sexy, for instance -- some people just are, you know? They're filled with that thing that makes them sexy. Well, I'm filled with whatever it is that would make a person religious, except I just don't have religion.

The title "The Last 4 Things," does that go back to your Catholic upbringing? I used to hear about something -- I thought it was The Four Last Things. Is that what you're referring to?

I'm not exactly sure how the title "The Last 4 Things" got attached to the poem.

It's such a dramatic phrase, but I don't remember what The Four Last Things are. Do you?

According to the Church: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell. A strange kind of list -- starts out chronological, then it splits.

It goes into a split screen.

Now that makes sense of it!

Hell is just a note on heaven. Or a translation of heaven!

Or the other way around.

I didn't feel judgment in your book, but I certainly felt a lot of death. I don't know how biographical we want to get, but I wondered if that was partly connected to your brother's death.

Sure.

And maybe all the deaths that you've suffered, but I thought there was especially a brother moving through there.

Yes. I also meant the brother to be, as it developed, not my brother but brother in the larger sense.

Everybody's brother. Our fellow human. I did think of that. You've got war, death, the end of the world, all those things. "We shall not all sleep..."

"but we shall all be changed." Yeah.

We shall all be changed. That's very good news.

[laughter]

The Bible again: And I'm thinking of the beautiful way you've woven Proverbs 31 through "56 Days."

I had some of those sentences in my mind, who knows why. "She considers a field. She considers a field and buys it. Let her have the fruit of her hands." I looked it up then, and it was interesting to me because "The Last 4 Things," when I first started writing it, seemed to be a lot about marriage. Then it moved away from that. But later, when I was working on "56 Days," I had those lines in my mind -- I was thinking about women and money: property, autonomy. I was surprised to see when I looked it up that Proverbs 31 is a description of the righteous, God-fearing woman, the righteous *wife*. I thought: Can you believe what we're supposed to be? She's running the household, she's up before dawn, her lamp doesn't go out at night, she's spinning the flax, she's got the store, she's bringing in money --

And she's gorgeous.

[laughter]

But I was very taken with some of the language. And then I changed some of the phrasing too, and added things.

You're not providing an ordinary narrative in "56 Days," but you are giving us a life and a time. Do you think this book tells a story?

I *feel* it as a story, but I couldn't paraphrase it. You know what I mean?

Yes, I wouldn't be able to paraphrase it either, but I definitely get a human life in it. The shape of a human life.

Unlike *case sensitive*, "The Last 4 Things" wasn't written with a character in mind, but when I got into "56 Days," a character began to emerge. That was connected to doing the movie. I was making those shots from the window and I began to feel, "Oh, she sees this. She sees this every day. She's looking out a window."

In the movie of "56 Days," there are more languages, more voices, subtitles. There seem to be more divisions; more layers are apparent together. In "The Last 4 Things," there is poetry and there's music, there is the split screen, but it doesn't feel so -- What I wrote down about "56" was "all the consciousness is happening at once." Both movies share certain themes: deaths and fracture. Could you talk about how they're different?

It's something about looking out and looking in. In "The Last 4 Things," it seems to me that you're getting to look in at a consciousness. Whereas in "56 Days," you see a consciousness looking out. It's looking out and you're looking *out* too, seeing what it sees.

I like that. Personally, I found "56 Days" much easier to read.

Do you think it's easier because it's in prose?

No. That wouldn't really make it easier for me.

Do you think the diary aspect helped at all?

Not really. I did follow that, and you know, I'd think, "Hmmm, some days you didn't do anything."

[laughter]

But I don't know. It may have helped in some way. It certainly grounds you. And that's helpful.

I'm glad you put the two parts together. The two tonalities are different, and complimentary. There's a different voice in "56 Days" -- you said that maybe it's a later time. We know that you wrote it later, literally, but do you mean a later time in history, or a later time in your life, or a later time in someone's life?

A later time in someone's life.

It feels that way to me. And more reflective.

I've been listening to a CD of the interview in the movie that isn't finished yet, the one that will be online, *My Own Eyes*. I wrote some things down. You said, "Taking photos, we are all trying to see something." I would question that. I think *you're* trying to see something when you take photos. I don't think everybody is.

Oh. Maybe they're not, I don't know.

I think a lot of people are trying to get souvenirs to take home and show to other people. A lot of people are making a memory, too.

Someone said to me once, "It's all about making memories." And I thought, "What a strange way to live."

You know, I've never seen you with a camera. I've always thought of Max as the photographer. But suddenly you seem to have had this life as a photographer.

I'm an introverted photographer! I don't take usually pictures of people. I don't tend to take pictures *in front of* people. In "56 Days," practically the whole movie is shot from my studio window. The most I'm doing is going out into the yard a couple of times. Then right back inside.

[laughter]

You like taking pictures for yourself, but on the other hand you did make a DVD for the world.

I did. I wanted to learn about video and this was a good excuse. I wouldn't have done it without a reason, probably -- if I hadn't thought: This will add another dimension to the book -- if I can do it, it'll be cool.

It *is* cool.

It's a little scary though.

You mean it's scary now.

Yeah.

I get that.

[laughter]

I have known you to be a painter -- I've visited your studio. Thinking about the basic differences between painting and photography, painting doesn't involve a mechanism.

Well, with painting or drawing, you still have the brush or charcoal or the pencil -- you do have a tool. The great thing about photography is... It's very, very hard to get away from self-expression when you're painting. But with a camera, you can.

Though a photographer chooses what will be in the frame.

I do look at what I'm shooting, most of the time. But sometimes I just press the button. The same with the video camera: I'd often just point it out the window, capturing whatever the camera would give me. It's not quite as extreme as being given a pile of somebody else's photos to work with, but almost.

You said in your author statement for Ahsahta: "Photography is a way to relate to other people while standing apart." Among the notes I took while reading the book, I wrote down "distance and intimacy."

Yes, getting really close, seeing from a distance. I noticed a lot of near and far. I saw it later.

You live extremely quietly -- is that fair to say?

Yes.

And then you go on non-stop, all-out, very social reading tours. That's reflected in this book, isn't it? The traveling, then the being in one place.

That's an interesting observation. Although the kind of traveling represented in "The Last 4 Things" is very different from traveling to do readings. And the staying in one place in "56 Days" is different because I've imagined that the character is completely solitary. Though when I'm out in my studio, I *am* solitary. And solitude is an essential part of my life. So yes, those two states are represented -- I see what you mean. I never made that connection.

I have a last question. Dreams?

Yes.

That's my question.

That's my answer.

[laughter]

Are actual sleeping dreams playing a part in your writing? That's how it feels. Oh, I guess daydreams would do, but --

I don't daydream. You can quote me on that.

[laughter]

Really though, I don't. Even when I'm thinking about the future a lot, I don't ever daydream about how nice it'll be when this or that happens, or sit and imagine some pleasant outcome. If I'm thinking about the future, I'm working out the details.

Jean Valentine is the current state poet of New York (2008-2010). Her tenth and most recent book of poetry is [Little Boat](#) (Wesleyan, 2007). Her previous collection, [Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems 1965-2003](#), was the winner of the 2004 National Book Award for Poetry. Sarabande Books published her chapbook, [Lucy](#), in 2009. Break the Glass is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press in 2010.