

THE SIREN

Interview with Kate Greenstreet by Katherine Gwynn

[Katherine Gwynn] You didn't start to try to publish your poetry until much later in your life, but you spoke of how you'd always been writing. What made you start actively seeking outside engagement with your writing, rather than keeping it for your eyes only?

[Kate Greenstreet] Poetry is a conversation. I realized that kind of suddenly. I was 49 years old and everything I'd tried to do in my artistic life had apparently failed. Then I heard something tapping on the surface of what I felt buried beneath. The tapping was coming from contemporary poetry, which is to say: from living poets. Like a miner on the wrong side of a cave-in, I wanted to tap back.

I'd like to use the introductory quote for the first section of your book of poetry, *Young Tambling*, to discuss what I see as an important component of your poetics. It's by Frank Kermode: "The narrative inhabits its proper dark." I know that the "dark" in your work is important to you, not in the sense of subject matter, but in the idea of not making everything transparent—in the light. What draws you to leaving certain things in your writing in the dark?

I'm not really a storyteller. In a poem, I can leave out most of what would usually be called for in a novel or in an anecdote told over lunch. Instead I can arrange elements that have something invisible connecting them like an underground stream. That hidden thing can support more than one plot simultaneously. There's room for disagreeing interpretations, even though what's visible is very specific. I know a poem is finished when that underground stream moves through with nothing interrupting its flow. I'm making my way in the dark the same as anyone else. Have you ever tried to navigate through a room at night and just instinctively closed your eyes so you could see better?

You told the story of how one year you and your husband Max stopped watching T.V. and only watched tapes of poetry readings. How does the listening of poetry differ from the reading of it, to you? How do the two ways to engage poetry affect your own work?

Reading poetry in books made me want to write poems. Listening to poets say their poems made me want to say mine.

How a poem looks on the page conveys meaning. Sound elicits feelings, regardless of word choice—we know about this from the way we often mishear lyrics in a song we love. I'm always trying to make a poem that satisfies me visually and invites me to embody it vocally. A videopoem combines both visual and sonic elements. I'm curious to find out what else it can do—that's one of the things I'm exploring now.

You referred to yourself as an artist, without a notion of either self-denigration or egotism—as a fact. I find that revelatory, when I think we live in a time where calling oneself an artist is looked at sometimes with derision. Would you agree with that? Do

you consider it important to claim this label, and ignore the (often self-inflicted) negativity that can come with the taking up of it?

I didn't always feel comfortable calling myself an artist because the word "artist" felt elevated, above me. But it seems to be the most accurate term for a person who does the different things I do—so I use the word now for its width rather than its height.

On the other hand, your question brings to mind something I read the other day and really liked. It's from a talk (a commencement speech) that was given by the painter Sam Gilliam:

"Let's look at the artist this way. They tell me that once upon a time in a very mythical land that was filled with small huts there existed a huge volcano. It had an amazing fire that came from within it. This was such a great fire that it kept the valley warm, lighted, and always with pleasant weather. What was not known was that behind the volcano was a team of little people armed with bellows and logs, fanning the fire and making it blaze higher. These little people formed a long lineage. I will name only a few: Rembrandt, Leonardo, Monet, Van Gogh, Eva Hesse, Cézanne, Pollock, Avery, and many others. And now you have been called to join that team—for the illusions, the spaces, the forms that you create will keep your fellow persons warm, lighted, and always in good weather."

You said something in our class that I scribbled furiously in the margins of my notebook in order to make sure I got it word for word: "It took me a long time to get over the idea that I had to be in the cracks between people." Could you expand on this, in terms of your artistry and your life being a person who is an artist?

I grew up believing that the best place for me was behind the scenes, as a supporting player. I felt more comfortable in the background and I made choices based on how I felt. I wanted to be free as an artist, which is part of why I'm mainly self-taught. I did things like housecleaning for work because being a servant felt more "natural" than having a better job. There's nothing wrong with cleaning houses or being a dishwasher—I'm good at cleaning—but I had to get over thinking of myself as "under" other people. It took a while. I used writing and painting as a refuge and as a way to communicate with myself and, eventually, with others.

I wanted to mention—with *Young Tambling*, there's the title page, with a handprint illustration on the page beside it. When you signed my copy of *Young Tambling*, you took my hand and traced my handprint over the title page before signing within it. I noticed you did this with all the other books you signed for people. I think it's, just, lovely. It's a tender thing almost—do you consider this a part, this interaction with those who read your poetry, to be part of your poetics?

I do.

This is maybe a bit of a cheesy question, but I hope you'll humor me. So, *Siren* is an undergraduate journal, meant to showcase writers—artists—who usually fall in this late teen, 20 something time-frame of life where uncertainty seems to smack you in the face constantly. You didn't have a clear and linear path to becoming an artist.

What words of wisdom would you give the twenty-something you about being an artist, if you could?

What would I say to the person I was when I was 20? I tried to picture what would happen if I actually walked into her room. Would she recognize me? As soon as I saw her, I'm sure I'd start crying—in a minute we'd probably be laughing too—but what would get said?

She feels called to write and paint, but she wonders if she will be good enough. I try to think of advice and it all sounds like something that everybody already knows. But does she know?

You have to keep believing that something amazing can and will come through you. You'll always be learning, always starting over. No matter what's happened, success or failure, you will have to be convinced again that what you're working on now could really matter. I can't help you avoid mistakes, but one thing about being an artist is that you can use experiences that might have been a waste of time in some other life. Surprising things will turn out to be valuable.

It's not impossible to escape from the ideas that are holding you in place, but it's going to take a really long time. Don't give in to despair. What you're ashamed of now won't be important in the long run.