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## Woke Up Screaming: On Kate Greenstreet's *Young Tambling*

*Young Tambling*, by Kate Greenstreet. Boise, ID: Ahsahta Press, 2013.

"Woke up screaming? Woke me up screaming.  
I have a translation for you.  
A dark corner, lit."

A nearly square book from Ahsahta whose back cover claims it is "Based on a true story," *Young Tambling* engages in a documentary poetics of process and a reinvention of memory in the self. Part photographic collage, part discrete poems, and told in six parts, the "she" in Greenstreet's poems seems "unaccompanied" by men or women as she seeks out a room "to be alone. To think." We watch this girl accept "The Eucharist. The Host" into her body while a page away the "she" is diagnosed with "It's like having a cat in there." The self in these poems is strange and familiar, rooted both in traditions unique to Greenstreet's individual as well as the known trappings of religion and society.

In the first line, "They say you're a headstrong girl. You run into the woods / and pull a double rose." Here, an undefined *they* presumably of some master narrative labels the girl as outside of acceptable definitions of femininity an assumption further exemplified because the rose, a traditionally female archetype, is up-rooted. Such threads in Greenstreet's book carry me into my mother's memory, her struggles with how to be the "right" kind of woman. 1948, rural South Dakota, a little town called Volga, where girls were sent home from school if they weren't dressed enough like little girls. Near summer. My mother on the blacktop playing a game of jacks. A boy named Daniel steals the ball. She chases him down, pins his arms to the ground with her knees, and hits him over the head until he says uncle. On the other hand Greenstreet's "she" protests through an alteration in aesthetic in a literal challenge to the uniform of the female: "The belt was cloth— / you were supposed to let it just hang on you, loose.

But I wanted to have a figure. You know. I wanted to / be like an older girl." Choosing a new shape, she wants to embrace her body and makes the art of her dress reflect it.

Her choice to foreground the ballad of "Tam Lin, Tom Line, Tam-lane, Young Tambling" lets "For once, the hero" be "the girl." This is particularly interesting because most often "women in the Child ballads are nearly always depicted as victims of male social domination" (Hixon 71). Francis Child, nineteenth-century American scholar, recorded fourteen variants of this particular narrative with deviations in names of people and places and the role of minor characters, but in all fourteen, the young woman (called Margaret or Janet most commonly), made pregnant by a human knight who is then stolen to serve the Queen of the Faeries in Hell, must rescue her love by holding fast to him no matter what he transforms into: a hot coal or a raging lion. We see the sexual act on the first page after she picks the rose and the man appears: "If you were warned not to come here, he's / the reason why. He pulls you down. Is it wrong? When it's / done, according to the song, you turn 'to ask your true love's name.' But he's gone, and the woods grow dim." Our litigious brains want a definition for this encounter and as such the slut-shaming phrase *she had it coming*, the screeds against young women in provocative dress most recently evident in the internet conversation about Miley Cyrus's explicit performance at an awards show scrawl through my brain. On one level, the ballad of Young Tambling is a cautionary tale against premarital sex; however, as Hixon notes, "a young girl's defiance of socially accepted standards of sexual behavior is ultimately rewarded, not punished" (Hixon 71). "This ballad / is an exception" in its empowerment of the female and of female sexuality. The young woman picks the rose which causes the man to appear. She does not apologize for or hide her sexuality.

Greenstreet familiarizes us with the form of the ballad: "Traditional ballad / narratives are episodic, relying on dialogue and action" and we watch the poet negotiate with and transform these expectations. Like Janet holding fast to her love as he changes, we, as readers, hold Greenstreet's text through its own potent morphologies. The six sections as seen in the table of contents as NARRATIVE, ACT, MEMORY, FORBIDDEN, SUNG, and WE, have been chosen from within a series of quotes. First each quote appears as a partial erasure where the title of each section (NARRATIVE etc.) is the only word given its full typography. Such partial erasure is reminiscent of Greenstreet's title page where the lower part of her last name is missing which thus encourages readers to complete the word however they can. On the

title page, I watch the outline of a hand shining through from the page beneath and how it intersects with the incompleting letters. Name becomes picture. Picture becomes name. The letters themselves take on shape and force us to consider the pattern they make beyond the fact that we know they are letters and what the letters mean. After its initial incarnation as an erasure, the quote reappears toward the end of each section in its complete form. While, in each section the distance between the erasure and the complete varies, Greenstreet uses them to book-end her more prose-like meditations and foreground the poetic call and response to follow. The continual inversion and re-creation which happens throughout the text however does not leave the reader stranded for solid ground. We are anchored by these quotations and ready for change and for all the things we do not know.

In these interview-like call and response sections, I am reminded of the stock character who never actually appears: Maris in the sitcom *Frasier* or Godot in *Waiting for Godot*. Such individuals create gaps and offer the promise of answers with no actual fulfillment. They only have voice and body through others' description. While different in that he or she is not just given presence by others but is actually given a small speaking part, Greenstreet's use of the interview/conversation archetype (for example below)

"The shoes were a new addition that year. They were very round and heavy—and blue, like the uniforms, just to make it worse. I had my little red flats that I liked.

—Hat?

The hat! I forgot. I hated the hat, so I'd forget about it then / too"

does leave us with a bodiless character who appears throughout the book to question and prod Greenstreet's "she" into further disclosure or clarification. We get the feeling that this interviewer already knows the stories Greenstreet's "she" is about to tell and his or her role is to help the stories out and into full flesh. Rather than seek a singular voice, Greenstreet embraces the multiple people needed to tell single stories even or especially when the stories are our own.

While Greenstreet's Other, the interviewer, is full of voice and knows what Greenstreet's "she" wants to say before "she" gets near it, the deer, another recurring character, "apparently sawn in half, lengthwise" and "like the back of an old-fashioned radio" lacks its own voice. Rather, it broadcasts "A taped record of a trial" which "she" thought "might be evidence." Evidence of what? For or against?

Was the deer a witness to the earlier sexual encounter between Janet and her elven knight? Does he offer evidence of blame? The deer participates in the call and response throughout the whole book; for an example, he "in his halfness, that / part done" asks

Do you have a question?

Some say it's the heart, some the brain.

You can't decide which of three people will live and who will die, but I can

The mutilated deer becomes a sphinx with not only the power to riddle but also to control the outcome of his evidence: who will be punished and how. On the next page, Greenstreet acknowledges that "This story" of a young woman and her body "takes place everywhere."

Reading this book again. I keep coming back to my mother in Greenstreet's "she." When I went away to college. She told me. "Sarah, I do not regret being a wife and mother, but I have nothing that is my own. My whole life has been built because of what others needed. Build something that is yours." Greenstreet's book is full of homage to this process of building. To how to make something that is of yourself as in how writing happens and how it takes others to help you tell your stories. The final two pages are a photograph of Greenstreet's studio with *Young Tambling* tacked up on the wall and captioned as

*"Although I was thinking in two page spreads, at some point I realized that I wasn't actually (physically) making a book. I was making a big rectangular piece of temporary art"*

I value Greenstreet's willingness to include her readers in how a manuscript begins to make choices. How each step in the process is a moment of what she calls "temporary art." Sometimes poets desire to mask process and present the finished product as an immaculate conception, but Greenstreet wants to lead us through the mess of how she got there and wherever there is. She asks us to draw such things together "that didn't belong with each other until / they were arranged, by me, in just the right way": our memories, her memories, our mother's memories, and a mutilated deer's testimony. Her attention to self, family, and story speaks to the histories within ourselves. Read this book. It is an illumination of the traditional female all women writing in contemporary America struggle to define themselves against and within.