above/ground press
c/o rob mcleman
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an assemblage of writing in response to the work of Pattie McCarthy
Report from the McCarthy Society
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Laynie Browne
Barbara Cole
Sarah Dowling
Jenny Drai
Al Filreis
Sarah Heady
rob mclennan
Elizabeth Robinson
Edward Smallfield
Han VanderHart
Kevin Varrone
Divya Victor
Elizabeth Willis

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Backs of Quiet Houses: “The Fourteenth Confinement” of Pattie McCarthy’s Sonnet Life

Al Filreis

Philadelphia as culture, even as geography (if only circumstantially), is just below the surface of much or most of Pattie McCarthy’s language—but further, I would argue, the idea of this city (I reside here as I write this retrospective) finds its moments to emerge as a signal meta-poetic force, a prompt for a writer’s preferred creative means and her reflections upon the very lines she is making. “Geography—meaning here the physical features of Philadelphia—is very important to my work,” she once told rob mclennan, “if only because this is a very walkable city, and I spend an awful lot of time walking it. Walking is a kind of thinking toward writing.” Wifthing (which in 2021 gathered three chapbooks published in 2014 and 2017) “travers[es] Medieval England to post-millennial Philadelphia,” as fellow Philly poet Jenn McCreary notes, and the latter serves not only as an end of a timescale but as an aesthetic focalizer, a tonal and verbal frame.

Perhaps the notion of Philly as metatext is not surprising since the writer researching and rewriting medieval women’s political-familial lives for Wifthing is indeed situated where she is, here and there in the text—parenting children, drinking coffee on the porch, riding the regional rail, walking and hearing the ambient human noise, surrounding herself with the lovely coarse rhotic sounds of the vital MidAtlantic “vulgar tongue,” trying to remember to bring an umbrella on yet another sleety wintry day, and constantly having her patience tested as experimental autobiographist and mother. The latter challenge becomes her strongest source of connection to figures like Margery Kemp, the former her connection to the Philadelphian present.

So in certain passages of this astonishing double history of women it’s as if the research the poet is conducting discloses that Kemp miraculously experiences one of her many experiences of restriction in the city. Every sonnet—and Wifthing is all sonnets—is its own instance of civic confinement, an expression of constraint barely tolerated. Kemp birthed fourteen children and now in this book we have episodic fourteen-line tellings. The size of the problem being presented by McCarthy in Wifthing has a fourteen-by-fourteen dimension. When pressed hard into maternal service, the sonnet” invents in vulgar tongue” because, after all, “it’s better to marry than to burn / & I meant with my heart when you do with your mouth.” The queen (“qweyne”) historically “makes her body by making other bodies,” and yes, those made bodies are
first and foremost the beloved (and obstreperous) offspring, the inexorable lineage—yet, too, Wifthing regularly points us toward the bodies of text, one fourteener at a time. For here, powerfully, writing like wifthing is “the process of knowing one’s / own fear & grief” (emphasis added). The sonnet in particular is a form in a thematic tradition that has stressed a sense of constructed “infinite time,” sometimes for better and often for worse. McCarthy’s experiments in making a sonnet—directly influenced by Bernadette Mayer’s commitment to the sonnet as a radically quotidian scheme, and by Laynie Browne’s *Daily Sonnets*—achieve their localist iconoclasm by doubting the idea of eternity in the tradition of which Shakespeare’s generalizing sonnet 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”) is said to be an examplar, where the word “lines” can be read as referring to the poem itself as well as to the unexamined premise that a man’s love, gazy and aspirational, exists just always:

When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st.
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see.

For McCarthy the rebuke of this logic is personal and local. This is why the speaker-researcher-writer, who makes more or less constant slant appearances, must speak to the book’s protagonist wifhes as herself a vulnerable daily sonneteer: “you are the shape of my midlife crisis / margery kemp.” You here is Kemp of course, but the addressed you is also the sonnet itself, hailed as a crucial singular second person. The sonnet redefined: always daring a formalistic close-call escape, always forcing a verbal crisis, always an act of writing your way out of good and bad trouble. “You test my patience,” McCarthy says to the fourteen lines of her own poem as she further researches Margery Kemp’s tribulations, finding “figures in her fourteenth confinement.” “This sentence is from several failed attempts,” she agonizes forward in one opening line; through this special agony we come to understand, as we encounter a series of successful failures, how the poet working under the sign of wifthing can “shatter herself into a shardy mess.”

Philadelphia is a shardy mess. This quality—demanding new broken views of an old whole situation—has long led its formally innovative poets (Chris and Jenn McCready, Tom Devaney, Jena Osman, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, among many others) to draw non-narratively from the modernist fragment or scrap and marry this form of disjointedness to an enduring civic mess. The depiction of Margery Kemp’s incessant mystical tribulations benefits from this demotic attitude: “You get what you get & you don’t get upset.” Domestic particulars form a basis in the poet’s heartfelt imagination, a savvy maternal memory. One of McCarthy’s several medieval queens, Elizabeth
stacks, too: reading alongside the researcher-poet who studies the “condescending text[s]” required by this project, and discovers dishearteningly (yet helpfully) that “someone’s underlined...in this library book” a man’s expression of his tendentious belief in (Salem) witches; our poet is guided toward not away from the documentary “suffocation of the mother” because she is motivated by having “written over” in this rude, illiberal way. (No wonder Susan Howe, the poet denizen of archives, thinks highly of Wifthing.) The state of goodwifthing in part entails what McCarthy is doing in the writing’s present (“I’m reading this” now) situated in a Philadelphia library—fulfilling her task of writing over the written-over. And writing for the beloved vulnerable daughterting, herself an avid reader and interlocutor: “my daughter asked me how babies are made / I told her / they’re made when a tudor twice / your age fucks you.”

For parent and poet both, all this localization is bravely frank. McCarthy’s contemporary “she”—again we take her to be the poet herself, approximately—is radically direct in speech and at the same time unduly modest in tone. “[L]ike all mothers,” she explains, “she both over- & under- / estimates her own importance & or influence.” The Philly day was raw and chilly and she found herself unprepared for its bleakness. I cannot quite account for the repeated trope in Wifthing of the train that takes her home, but its urgency is alluring to me, and strong, and does not seem intended to counteract the difficulties encountered by these historical mothers. The impulse is somehow originary. “I grew up (from the age of 3 until I left for college at 18),” she tells mclennan, “in the Philadelphia suburbs.” The speaker of one of the “qweyne wifthing” sonnets begins with a return, via “the long suburban hymns of winter,” in a plainly autobiographical moment:

I
get off the train & the whole neighborhood
smells of woodfires & laundry detergent
our common body she makes her body
making other bodies the body begins
imperfectly as it must the snow starts
as rain

On the way home she realizes the pure poetic value of “the backs of houses” as seen from the train carrying her home—the density of the human built environment that seems naturally quiet, its domestic particulars exposed from behind, the view backgrounded from one intended as a public facing. There is a surprising intimacy
there, seen from the train, and tellingly it is the occasion for a contemplation of the
"tell-all" genre.

margery kemp invents the autobi-
ography & vernacular tell-all
the backs of quiet houses from the train

John Ashbery, once writing semi-confessionally about this view, did not for a
moment believe in the ironic promise of that poem's title ("The One Thing That Can
Save America"), but he did nonetheless derive a poetics (as Pattie McCarthy has in
relation to her home city) of "civic pride" by means of (queer) "civil obscurity."
Ashbery's speaker rides an interurban train and sees the passing backs of houses from
the nearly hidden tracks, and

they concur with a rush at eye level
Beating themselves into eyes which have had enough
Thank you, no more thank you.
And they come on like scenery mingled with darkness
The damp plains, overgrown suburbs,
Places of known civic pride, of civil obscurity.

McCarthy's version of this democratic insight, more sincere—and more political—than
Ashbery's, brings together the wild autobiography of Kemp's radical pre-feminism with
the "tell-all" impulse of vernacularity, and what is for her the powerful memory and
image of the quiet house. It is commonly agreed that indeed Margery Kemp produced
the first autobiographical work in English. McCarthy in Wifthing affirms this primary
status and adds three realizations derived from a long, devotedly local experience—
first, intimacy created through poetic form loaded up with linguistic realism; second,
the rarely realized dream of the quiet house, best seen by the radical local; third, the
hope of goodwifthing, a fundamental concept, in the daughter who is herself "a
vocabulary." Something about imagining perhaps her own home seen from its quiet
back, the precocious free-speaking daughter awaiting her, causes an overflow of
pathos:
Wydeville, to do her any much-due credit (her quasi-dynastic power outlasted her king-husband), must be described bodily in out-of-order language, for the abuse wrought upon her ("where my body makes a carapace / for his safety") is best conveyed by poetic disruption and danger, in "the manner of every sinew nonlinear / the old English chyster is probably / related to clot." (The chyster was a medical enema for removing coagula—grimly one can imagine the supposed need for its application—with a linguistic hint of cloister, that haven-prison serving as model for the idea of a sonnet-sized refuge for consorts and queens.) When the Wydeville sonnet is done reporting this abuse, we hear from an "I" who is surely the poet, beseeching the abused regent with an empathetic yet tragic historical belatedness, teaching herself to bear secondary witness to the original witnessing of the traumatic effects of archaic involuntary patrilineage:

I mean it by rote
& I speak it into your mouth a worried
language an old language an odd language
& other domestic vernaculars

At such doubled moments, we are right to ask: Where exactly are we? Sometimes we’ve just gotten off the commuter train and are heading back home. Or we are starting out the day and soon regret forgetting the umbrella. Or we are trodding stinkingly upon the city’s notorious Ginkgo gymnosperm pods, smelling like sex and rancid butter, or gamely avoiding them—the sources being Mary Maslin of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and Pat Loeb who aired a ginkgo story on CBS Philly. Our children, whether stinky purposeful trodders or chaste acrobatic avoiders, require infinite patience and know how to resist being renditioned to the status of "daughterthings." They prompt local comedy:

there were two types of daughterthings the ones
who purposely stepped on ginkgo ovules
& the ones who picked their ways around them

Again, where are we? We are surrounded by our smart chattering children, sweetly mothered and open-heartedly heard. Is listening to them involuntary? “My daughter made the pun about ‘good wyvern,’” McCarthy recalls when giving out credits for the many appropriations in this book’s collaborative construction, “in response to Catheryne Valente’s series of Fairyland novels.” Then we are with her in the reference
your little girl is a vocabulary
the main function of the goodwifthing is
the backs of quiet houses from the train
there there now these cryings are excessive

This presents an utterly beautiful consolation. I hardly mind, as her persuaded reader, being comforted by there there now, despite its seeming patent maternalism—for the power of there is indeed its sense of now. Pattie McCarthy, wyfe, mother, poet, teacher, encourager, Philadelphian, has her good ear to a particular ground. She interprets the sound and is generous. “I turn my best ear to you” even if—indeed because—“its / echotexture is slightly coarsened.”