

Things I Was Told Not to Think
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Mary McCarthy

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Foreword by Romeo Oriogun

My first encounter with Mary McCarthy's poetry was on the internet, that big place that has become a country without an anthem or border. Her poems held me spellbound by their simplicity and beauty and how words in their barest form can hold our emotions, our hope, our dreams, our memories, and even what lies in our silence.

Now that I've read *Things I Was Told Not To Think About*, I can say that Mary is a seeker, she searches for what makes us human, what makes us broken, what heals us, for roads that shape the future of our thoughts, and for a way back into the beginning, back to where it all started; at the center of her poetry is a city of tears and pain wrapped in a beautiful wall of hope. It is her brilliant poem "Considering Repairs" that shows us the way into that city. It begins with these lines:

*I run my hands over
the fabric of our days
examining the pattern
the small knots and errors
in the weave
the missing stitches
the places where a bright
color, a familiar shape,
has faded
leaving a blank space
white as grief.*

For most of us the way forward is often hidden in memories and Mary's poetry searches that space for hope only to find grief, but there's also a desire not to live in sadness and it is contained in the concluding lines of the same poem:

*Maybe not a good fit
for most-
too rough and shabby
and irregular
but it suits me well
and all my study
could not find one thread
to pull and make it all
come smooth.
It is what we made
with what we had*



*together.
And it seems best
to leave us here
imperfect but content
with our usual devices
and not much regret.*

It is this tone that sets the pace for this chapbook, it is this hunger for joy, peace, and empathy that fills Mary with so much love that from her poetry we can find out what it means to survive.

In today's world where people prefer to let sadness lie in dark places, it is refreshing to see a poet going against the tide. Perhaps her gift to us is one that unravels us into beings that feel and look at others through their eyes, not all of us come from abused homes or have experienced the loss of siblings but with Mary's poetry we are showed how it feels to be abused, the poet does not hold back, no room is too sacred not to be talked about.

In poems like "At Home," "Bad," and "Pre-Schooling" Mary introduces us to what it feels like to grow up with a violent father:

At Home

*There were always some things
we could depend on
the rages exploding
like gas well fires
splitting the quiet sky-
knowing they would come
but never when
no warning
no time to prepare
always caught by surprise
until we trusted nothing
to be what it seemed*

She writes about fear with a beautiful cadence. Most poets falter when it comes to writing poems about fear but Mary knows how to give a poem life and set it free, she knows where to let it run wild and when to trim her words until they become like salt left after boiling sea water, more potent and piercing. We meet her at her best in "Bad" – I spent a day going over these lines:

*We curled up like dying
flowers beneath those blows
hoping for escape
knowing no one would stop*



*you and you could not
stop yourself.*

She also talks about loss, about memories and the things we wish we could have done, and how we respond to life when we are left with regrets:

*...then I set her up,
a perfect lady,
in her own spot
where I could see her
and admire her
new condition
every day.*

*Mama would have liked that.
And I wonder why
I let her wait so long.*

Mary's poems are like wars going on in the body, there's no hiding place, to read her is to witness bullets hitting you from within, her words do not pity the reader. She wants us to live inside her poems, she snares us with beautiful words and leaves us wondering how to survive, she lets us know that this is reality for quite a number of people. Her poems teach us the meaning of empathy: she allows us to follow the character in her poems, she allows us into her most vulnerable state, where silence often follows each turn of her poem, leaving us walking behind in a shaken state as she takes us into a topic forbidden in most spaces. She takes us into the streets of depression and here again Mary does what she knows best, she lets us in, there's no obligation to love or pity the character, she allows her words to lead us wherever we want to go and often we do not get to our destination, we break down and stare at her words. In "After the last apocalypse" she tells us:

*I shine
radioactive
my pulse erratic
as the light of some
unregulated star
beating out its own
disordered time
at the furthest edge
of the universe.
Outlawed, expelled,
ungrammmatical,
left alone
where no gentle angels come
to guard my sleep*



Ultimately Mary's poetry leads us into becoming seekers, she gives us the lamp and allows us go on our journey. In "My Sisters" she says *I have never found a woman/ without one/of these stories/ so all-alike/ so full of fathers/ and uncles and husbands/ and strangers*. We are left alone to ponder why women are made into sad stories, we are left alone to look at our hands and try to find the answers within ourselves.

Mary is a gift to us, a gift we need especially in these times where it is easy to forget what makes us human. I hope this chapbook does for you what it has and is still doing for me. In the title poem "Things I Was Told Not To Think About " Mary bares her open heart, she shows us how love can link hands across oceans and blossom, how my fear and loss is also yours; hear her:

*and I know only one way
to avoid defeat
not by evasion or denial
but in acknowledgment*

*these losses are my loss
these words my words
to forever witness and refuse
lies and injustice
anywhere they rise*

It is words like these that remind us of where we are coming from, of the need to unite and leave the world a better place. It is poems like "Invitation" that leaves me with hope in our shared humanity, it is in lines like these: *When you speak words of fire/ That burn your tongue/ And turn to ashes on the air/ Come to me/ When you wear death's kiss/ Like a badge on your body/ And hear his voice inside you/ Intimate and/ constant/ As your own heart beat/ Come to me/ When nothing's left/ To look at all familiar/ And I will meet you there*, that reminds us of the gift of love.

Mary has shown us that although there's sadness and pain in the world, only in love can we find joy. She has opened a world to us, invited us in, and left us to run wild. This is a chapbook that will haunt you for a very long time.

Romeo Oriogun is the author of Burnt Men, a digital chapbook published by Praxis Magazine Online. His poems have appeared at Brittle Paper, Afridiaspora, Expound, and elsewhere. He lives and writes in Nigeria.



Contents

Misfit.....	1
At Home.....	2
“Bad”.....	3
In the Wrong.....	4
Pre-Schooling.....	5
Your Apology.....	7
Seeing in the Dark.....	8
Survivor.....	9
My Sisters.....	10
Demon Lover.....	11
Choices.....	12
Dressing Up.....	13
And Then There Was.....	14
6 p.m.	16
My Brothers.....	17
Tears of Rage.....	18
Inheritance.....	19
The Breakdown.....	21
Technical Error.....	22
Things I Was Told Not To Think About.....	24
Break.....	26
Considering Repairs.....	27
Translations.....	28
Invitation.....	29
Acknowledgements.....	30
About the Poet.....	30
About the Cover Art.....	30



Misfit

Before we start
I have to punch a few holes
in normal
just to let some air in
just so I can breathe
while you unpack
the rules and expectations
measuring me for a box
that won't be big enough
and shoes I'll never wear.
Where I come from
madness was often
a sort of gift
not rare enough
to scare anyone away.
Here even the best
allowances
are too poor
and I spend too much time
watching the doors close
behind you.



At Home

There were always some things
we could depend on
the rages exploding
like gas well fires
splitting the quiet sky—
knowing they would come
but never when
no warning
no time to prepare
always caught by surprise
until we trusted nothing
to be what it seemed
knowing even the earth
could slip out from
under our feet
so that each step
became more and more
uncertain
and we ate fear
with our bread
like lead in water
arsenic in rice
poison and sustenance
at once
impossible to avoid
as dependent on each other
as the sea bird's wing
and its shadow
moving over water



“Bad”

Where did it come from—
that rage exploding like your
fists against our small
bodies? We curled up like dying
flowers beneath those blows
hoping for escape
knowing no one would stop
you and you could not
stop yourself.
But it was the words—the worst
you called us hurt us
more than your hands.
The lights went out
in our eyes our hearts
dried up and our tongues
burned to cinders in our
mouths, we could not
stand up under their weight
our necks and shoulders bent
with shame
our hands were empty
forever
knowing we could never
be more than nothing
in your eyes.



In the Wrong

"Can't you even," you said,
your face darkening
like a bruise. "Sorry,"
I said, "I'm so sorry."
But it was not enough
to stop the loud rush of words
hard as fists
against my flesh.
I hurt for days, after,
nursing the worst spots
and keeping my eyes
on my feet.
Watching, watching,
even though
you never touched me.



Pre-Schooling

First lessons stay with you
Seeded beneath the skin
Like vaccinations
Invisible tattoos
Nothing will remove
Memories set in flesh
In the webbing of synapses
In the automatic flinch
Before the anticipated blow
In reflexes conditioned
By the prison of your own
Helplessness

You learn
In a body too small
To stand against
His enormous
Unpredictable rage
Too big to hide from
So sudden it can't pause
To get the belt
Too intimate
To use any instrument
Coming down bare-fisted
With a man's strength
Enough to fling
A too small body
Up against the walls
And furniture
Away from any open doorway

You learn
Not to ask shelter
From someone with too much
To protect
A fine house and good carpet
Can't allow trespass
By any barefoot orphan
Who might bleed
Or track mud
Across a cherished floor

You learn
Your place in the very
Pattern of your sentences



The sounds of words
The roots and limits of desire
Shaped and set
By unexamined circumstance
Again and forever
As the twig is bent
The shadow cast
Not god but some
Incidental player
Throws the die



Your Apology

Even if it came today
would be too late.
I've had too long to remember
how you saw, and turned away,
how even the smallest space
was more than I could take
in your good life, already full,
and rich, with nothing out of place.
There was no room in you for grace,
to see my awkward, mad mistakes
as small faults, and no cause to flee
in fear that you might share my fate.
Such grief is not contagious—
you were always safe.



Seeing in the Dark

Shadow on shadow, so black
it makes your eyes ache,
sends your heart skittering,
wild to escape, where nothing
breaks like morning
at the world's edge.
And this is not a room
but a bowl you can't climb out of
a tunnel with no end
dark answer to your worst
conclusions,
ringing with echoes
of unfamiliar voices
that won't show their faces
or stop their dull mutter,
going on and on until
your eyes invent
something to see—
a kaleidoscope of splintered light
cold as witchfire
spinning lies you can't believe
as you try to make yourself
as small as possible
so small and still
even the great white owl
with her silent wings
and reaching claws
won't find you.



Survivor

No one had to tell me
Your secret
I saw its shadow
On your face
How it pushed you
Into desperate corners
How your life broke on it
Like a body falling
From a cliff
Onto the rocks far below
How nothing else could explain
Why you had to try so hard
To die
Stopping the liar
To stop the lie
I saw my face
In your mirror
Found my prints
On your fingers
And your dreams
Under my pillow
I know what you didn't tell
It came from the same place I did
The same rough clutch
We've tried never
To remember
Still there for anyone
With eyes to see



My Sisters

Just under the skin
at the pulse points
where the blood comes
up close and hot
repeating stories familiar
to every woman
regular and unremarkable
as her heartbeat
private undisclosed
carried like a shame
she was particularly
right for

I have never found a woman
without one
of these stories
so all-alike
so full of fathers
and uncles and husbands
and strangers
and strangers
memories left
like poison in the blood
a bad taste we spend
our lives trying
to spit out



Demon Lover

None of those were gifts I could refuse
strange sweetness wrapped in innocent disguise
a game of chances I would always lose

Dream or nightmare, nothing let me choose
each step might twist into a dark surprise
Yet none of those were gifts I could refuse

I had nothing good enough to prove
against the glamour of your golden lies
a game of chances I would always lose

I could not sort the false words from the true
caught by my small reflection in your eyes
And none of those were gifts I could refuse

All my heart was there for you to use
you told the moon to set, the sun to rise
In a game of chances I would always lose

Until I found the key at last, the secret clue
to name the spell and break your chain of lies
none of those were gifts I could refuse
a game of chances I would always lose



Choices

I found some things called love
were best avoided
like the sweet faced liar
who robs you blind
and leaves you behind
disposable
as a used tissue
or the one you pick up
like a bad rash
that blisters and torments
and never heals
or the handsome stranger
who puts his mark on you
deep and obvious
as a cattle brand

I would not be caught by love
in crooked definitions
not kept in a closed room
or on a short leash
not loved in teaspoons
or inch by inch
not with a blueprint
or by the book
not with requirements
to recite a catechism
or rehearse a script
but wait for you to come to me
freely
with an open hand
and no great expectations
I would be perfection
or carry your salvation
or do more than meet you here
in the open
where we both can stand



Dressing Up

You came with your arms
Full of gifts
An elaborate costume
So fine it seemed
Spun of air and moonlight
But I could never
Make it fit
Those yards of lace
Held me in a heavy twist
I could not walk
Away from
That ruffled hem
Caught every step
In a cruel hobble
Those heavy rings
Made my fingers stiff
That lovely mask
Fit like a blindfold
Paring vision to a narrow strip
And curbed my tongue
Til each word stumbled
Through those rigid lips

So I have decided
Not to wear your gifts
All beautiful and wrong
As the embroidered slipper
For the bound foot
But to return them all
And keep to what I have
Warm and soft
Loose and comfortable
And plain enough
To let me do
The dancing



And Then There Was

Grandma
Who was the only one
With her own room
Where she kept odd treasures
Pins and fancy handkerchiefs
Hats in boxes
Perfume in a glass bottle
Shaped like a tiny crown
A fur stole with the feet
And head of some small
Glass-eyed animal
Still attached—
Who sat with us to watch the rain
Who taught us Chinese Checkers
And Canasta
Who read to me when I was sick
And cried at all the sad parts
Who had her hair done Saturdays
And brought home cookies
In boxes shaped like houses
Who did her books on Sundays
Sitting at her big desk
With her green ledgers
And bills on a spindle
Who took us to the movies
And did jigsaw puzzles
Who sang us hymns
And German lullabies
Whose word was law
Who said the same prayers
Every day
And played late night Pinochle
For money
Who tended bar alone
A widow longer
Than a wife
Who could erase unwanted strangers
With a regal stare
Who hung on to see my
Graduation
And died one week later
Who did not complain
Who kept her own counsel



And was a strong woman
In the old ways
Women were strong
 A bulwark
 A fortress
 A refuge
 A safe place



6 p.m.

We watched at the dinner table
war and assassination
the planes unloading cargoes
of flag draped coffins
brought home like ruined
treasure
and I dreamed of a world
beautiful as Leonardo's
angels
where flesh did not spoil
and children did not run
screaming
toward the cameras
that never stopped
recording them
burning to death
in napalm halos
nightmares escaped from sleep
interrupted like any other show
by frantic ads for nothing
that could save us.



My Brothers

The two we lost so early
may have been the best of us—
hearts clear and simple
as morning light,
no room for dark intention,
no spiteful corners
of accumulated hate.

Under the weight
of undeserved blows
they sought no vengeance,
answered violence with love
again and again,
faithful as the saints
before a wrathful God—

And when He took them,
swift as a lightning strike
or after months of pain,
they left no bitter aftertaste
from lives as clean
and sweet as honey
on the tongue.



Tears of Rage

It is the smallest lives I choke on.
The child smothered by her mother
and left in the dirt in an empty lot
while mother cried and carried on
calling for her return
with all the wild urgency of grief
until they found the body
with her mark on it
and she went to prison
with her head down and hands cuffed.

Or the boy beaten and broken
by his mother's lover
who never wanted him
around anyway
and boiled up into
a murdering rage
at some small childish fault
-he ate the cake
-he wet the bed
-he wouldn't stop crying.

Or the baby whose father
threw him off a bridge
then stopped long enough
to call his wife and say
"he's dead now"
before jumping off the bridge
himself-not the first man
to kill a child to spite his wife

Children are small and
easy to use.
Disposable and easy to subdue,
they have no weapons,
no voice, no money.
They do not vote,
They look like property,
dependent on tormentors
they can't ignore
or walk away from,
They suffer and
they wait for mercy
while their bones accuse.



Inheritance

Mama had an old China head doll
with a stuffed straw body
and china arms and legs.
One arm had come off
the body where it had been
sewn on, brittle straw
leaking from the wound.
And one china leg
was completely gone
Mama said she'd never
seen that leg,
or had any clothes
on that doll.
Her Aunt Lula
bought it as it was,
naked and broken,
for a dime.

But Mama said she loved
that little, broken doll.
Still had it 65 years later,
folded in white tissue,
kept with other treasures
in a drawer.

Paring down her baggage
in her last years
she gave it to me,
her first daughter
and I kept it in
white tissue
in a drawer.

The year after Mama died
I took it out
and found the parts
I needed to replace,
sewing on two new
china legs, restoring
the arm, tucking all
the stuffing back in place,
and even finding clothes—



ending her long nakedness
with a white petticoat
and a green print dress,

Then I set her up,
a perfect lady,
in her own spot
where I could see her
and admire her
new condition
every day.

Mama would have liked that.
And I wonder why
I let her wait so long.



The Breakdown

Comes when you wake up
and see the room's
been subtly rearranged
and you know
you've fallen down a hole
or climbed through a mirror
once again
and when you try to get back
again you find
that someone's stolen home
before you got there
changing all the locks
pouring salt across
each window frame and doorsill
to keep you out
homeless in the cold

without credentials
even your name suspect
an excuse no one will take
leaving you to search
for an empty box
and a warm grate
with nothing for company

but the sharp tormenting voices
in your head



Technical Error

Like when your brakes fail
halfway home,
late at night on a dark road
and somehow you still
make it
feeding the gas
in tablespoons
the pressure of your foot
so light you're barely moving
mile after mile
hoping there will be no
cross traffic, no stop
you can't ignore
until you drift
into your own driveway
and set the emergency brake
and get out
your muscles trembling
your legs weak
but safe, safe home—

Like when you can't
find the brake
to stop your thoughts
in their wild unregulated spin
moving fast as furies
turning unpredictable
as those spring winds
that suddenly become
tornadoes-
when the joy of their
irresistible
impetuous motion
carries you off
off the road
off the map
off kilter
all your energies riding you
outside the rules of order
in a riotous explosion
that will let you down
worn to rags and patches
with nothing left



to take you back
out of the dark
cold wilderness
to anywhere like home.



Things I Was Told Not To Think About

75 people in a locked truck
abandoned on a highway
somewhere between hell
and freedom
found only when their decaying bodies
captured attention with a powerful stink
and a wet oozing effluvium seeping
onto the clean road

276 girls kidnapped from Chibok school
by Boko Haram
gone 500 days without rescue
maybe killed, maybe sold
violated over and over
by men who call rape
a sacrament
and murder an act of faith
blessed by a bloodthirsty
and unforgiving god

here in my own country
too many men and women
killed casually
on any small pretext
or none at all
other than the color
of their skin
and their accidental presence
in the path of someone
armed and uniformed
who sees them only
as moving targets
no more important
than fleeing deer
or a trophy lion
caught in the crosshairs
of power and desire

my doctor has advised me
against engaging in such thoughts
against attention to such tragedies
common as salt
reported every day
ordinary as the air
we all must breathe—



she claims it is a threat
to my tipsy equilibrium
and invites another
personal disaster
I'd do better to avoid

But I can't help but find
the thought police lethal
as their official brothers
destroying hope
and life and possibility—
in a world gone dark
what light we make
goes far beyond
its moment of ignition

and I listen
to the poets of Nigeria
refusing silence
raising their voices
in words of love and longing
of suffering and hope
and I listen to the secret
forbidden poetry
of Afghan women
who have found one place
to keep the truth
of their lives

and I know only one way
to avoid defeat
not by evasion or denial
but in acknowledgment

these losses are my loss
these words my words
to forever witness and refuse
lies and injustice
anywhere they rise



Break

After the last apocalypse
I shine
radioactive
my pulse erratic
as the light of some
unregulated star
beating out its own
disordered time
at the furthest edge
of the universe.
Outlawed, expelled,
ungrammmatical,
left alone
where no gentle angels come
to guard my sleep,
where crows have more mercy,
bringing only a keen appetite
for corruption
and not a burning sword.

Crows suit me well.
Their polished blacks a comfort
to eyes tired of staring into fire.
Quiet now,
kneeling in the cinders
of my burnt out star,
I drag a finger
through rough ash
trying to remember how
to write my name.



Considering Repairs

I run my hands over
the fabric of our days
examining the pattern
the small knots and errors
in the weave
the missing stitches
the places where a bright
color, a familiar shape,
has faded
leaving a blank space
white as grief.
Maybe not a good fit
for most-
too rough and shabby
and irregular
but it suits me well
and all my study
could not find one thread
to pull and make it all
come smooth.
It is what we made
with what we had
together.
And it seems best
to leave us here
imperfect but content
with our usual devices
and not much regret.



Translations

I drew my first angels
in fingerpaint
on sheet after sheet
of cheap newsprint
taking them home from school
in brittle stacks
of treasure for my mother

Even the rarest visionary gifts
come in degrees
my untrained hands
pushing bright paint
into the shape of wings
were reaching for the same
translation
of spirit into substance
pulled into the world

when Blake clothed
the morning stars in bodies
so they could sing together
and when Leonardo gave us
angels with human faces
so exquisite
flesh became soul
incarnate—

allowing us to see at last
ourselves reflected
in the angels of creation



Invitation

Come to me
When you have wrestled
With the angel
No one else can see
When nightmare stalks you
In the daylight street
And you go dark
As a bulb one turn
Too loose
Come to me
When the road twists
Into knots you can't resolve
And the faces you see
Stare coldly out
Of stiffened masks
With painted smiles
And sharp teeth
Flashing as they pass
Come to me
When you have forgotten
How to read
When all you see
Are turned backs
And raised eyebrows
When the signs don't make sense
And you've gone outside the lines
Of every map you had
Come to me
When you speak words of fire
That burn your tongue
And turn to ashes on the air
Come to me
When you wear death's kiss
Like a badge on your body
And hear his voice inside you
Intimate and constant
As your own heart beat
Come to me
When nothing's left
To look at all familiar

And I will meet you there



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About the Poet

Mary McCarthy has always been a writer but spent most of her working life as a Registered Nurse. She has been a Pushcart nominee, and has had work appearing in many print and online journals, including *Gnarled Oak*, *Visions*, *Expound*, *Caketrain*, and *Third Wednesday*. Currently she enjoys writing and drawing, and is happily engaged with the community of writers and poets active on the internet. She writes as a feminist and proponent of social justice, hoping her voice can help achieve a better world for all those who seek justice, equality and peace.

About the Cover Art

The background for the chapbook cover is a drawing made by the poet.

