



**AROUND
THIS
FIRE
4:**

**Responses
to
Mary
McCarthy's**

**THINGS
I
WAS
TOLD
NOT
TO
THINK
ABOUT**

Contributors:

Shelly Blankman, Jennifer Chinenye Emelife, Abigail George, Obiajulu Nwodo, Victoria Nwogu, Christy Ogbenjuwa, Nome Patrick, Trust Tonji, PJ Wren

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ATF4: Responses to THINGS I WAS TOLD NOT TO THINK ABOUT



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Introduction

What is “praxis” anyway? According to Random House’s *Dictionary.com*, it means:

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1. *practice, as distinguished from theory; application or use, as of knowledge or skills.*
2. *convention, habit, or custom.*
3. *a set of examples for practice.*

When reading the poems submitted in response to Mary McCarthy’s chapbook *Things I Was Told Not to Think About*, I found myself thinking about *praxis*, not as the title of a journal, but the word that is its basis. What is a *Praxis* chapbook? What is a *praxis* chapbook?

When I have difficulty putting things into words, I often turn to poetry as the language that can move me from isolation and silence into expression, then from expression into action. Stanzas 1, 2, & 4 of the poem that follows are a cento built from lines in each of the poems of this chapbook and parts of the dictionary.com definition. (Numbers in parentheses give the page number where the original poem appears.) Stanzas 3 & 5 are where the reading and the exploration took me.

practice, as distinguished from theory

In this fight to keep a fire of truth burning (4)
let us take those / Dim pictures out again (3)
Broken vessels / In need of the potter’s touch (5)
seeing our own faces in their multitude (21)
dark brown eyes / Molten pools of fear (8)
Don’t wear mascara / When you’re depressed (6)

convention, habit, or custom

I climb into myself and then / there is a disturbance. (22)
she is shut doors and windows (10)
to avoid being b r o k e n (11)
we all lose the taste of our bodies to the tongues of the same fire... (14)
This curse we must shake off / That we may love freely (16)

application or use

The compassionate question is the same
whether I am asking for someone else
or asking for me.

The compassionate question is:
What’s most needed?



a set of examples for practice

somewhere in the city square the rain is washing tears (18)

there is a woman in a sturdy storm (19)

I feel our souls touch. (25)

Reach for me over the waters (20)

take my hand, come back to her kitchen (13)

I had to borrow grandma's spirit (12)

she teaches me how to break life into the lyrics of (12)

A dying song – without dying with it. (12)

praxis

Ask, then answer.

Answer, then act.

-Laura M Kaminski (Halima Ayuba)
Poetry / Chapbook Editor, *Praxis Magazine Online*
February 2017



Abigail George: That Museum

*I saw my face
In your mirror
Found my prints
On your fingers
– from "Survivor" by Mary McCarthy*

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Let us talk. I know
You. I feel you. I inhale pain.
Exhale the 'excitement' of
Hospital life. Its dogged
Religion. Its half-lie and
Truth. Its factory push
And pull towards nothing
And having a 'beautiful
Career'. Let us talk about
Sickness, chronic illness,
Disease. Let us put it
Away in a box and call it
'Pandora'. Hide it in
A corner of the attic and
When we are reminded
Of the width of a thread
Of life let us take those
Dim pictures out again. That
Museum of photographs
From our past and ask ourselves
Again, 'Heaven, where
Art thou? Have I offended thee?'
I must be strong and carry on.



Obiajulu Nwodo: Our End After Struggle

*"why you had to try so
hard to die
stopping the liar
to stop the lie"*

- from "Survivor" by Mary McCarthy

We are tossed and torn by weightless wind
In this fight to keep a fire of truth burning
Sometimes we dim only to flare up in a split second
Gentle, mild, then loud, high and angry
With our spittle as ink and our fingers as swords
Our bodies are candles lighted
A kiss from God's breath fills us with
Health, strength, and air
Fills us with fire!
As the clock ticks, we wait
Till freshness of God's kiss is
Erased
Fire fears water
A lighted candle is afraid
Of the wind
We are not afraid to survive
We are afraid of death.



Christy Ogbenjuwa: New Roads

after Mary McCarthy's "Seeing In the Dark"

I took a journey,
A journey through the ruins of me.
Through cracked surfaces
With holes that bleed.
On broken glasses
Scattered fragments of dreams.
Torn drapes
Carrying stories of rage.
Broken vessels
In need of the potter's touch.

I took a walk,
A walk through the ruins of me.
Through the garden,
A garden that once brimmed with life
Now lay bare
In faithless mare.

I flipped the pages,
The pages of the ruins of me.
Through pages with missing titles.
Letters screaming in agony
From a pen dripping with pain.
Ripped pages.

I hear that voice,
That voice even in the ruins of me.
Saying,
Do not sit in the ruins of you.
New road's ahead.
To take it is to make a change.

It took me awhile
But I did it
I took a step,
A step out of the ruins of me
And that made the difference.



Abigail George: The death in the family

after Mary McCarthy's "My Sisters"

They don't tell you anything about depression.
They tell you that it happens to women more
Because they are the weaker sex. They tell you
That boys don't cry. Sticks and stones will break
Your bones but words will never hurt you.
Abuse. It hurts but they never tell you that.
Yes, they don't tell you anything about abuse.
Whether it's verbal, domestic violence, sexual,
Emotional, mental, physical. (Am I getting my views across?)
Trauma will leave its mark on you. It always
Does. They never tell you that you will spend
Days in bed not wanting to get out of bed to
Wash or bathe or shave when you're depressed.
That you won't hug your children, make love,
Have sex. They don't tell you that sometimes love is infatuation
And infatuation love. They don't tell you anything
About sudden loss. That it can harm your soul.
Erase parts of your short term memory. They don't
Tell you anything about grief. That it can break
You. Yes, they don't tell you anything. That absence
Makes the heart grow fonder. Don't wear mascara
When you're depressed. I can hear it in their
Voices. See it on their faces. When I answer
The telephone that I have 'bipolar' written all
Over my face. They don't tell you anything about
Hospital life, hospital food, making friends in the
Ward you find yourself in. They don't tell you anything.
Instead they keep telling you that everything is
Going to be okay. That big girls don't cry.
And when you ask for help you think you'd be
Treated with concern not toleration as if you were
A pet or a creature from a faraway country in the zoo
Like a Bengal tiger or as if you were from a
Faraway place like the Serengeti. Yes if you're
Depressed you will ask for understanding. You
Will ask for the milk of human kindness but they
Don't tell you what to prepare for. They don't tell
You how to love for a lifetime or eternity, how to
Take those vows, choose the dress you father will



Give you away in. They don't tell you how to go on a first date,
Lose your virginity. I wasn't told any of these things.
Instead I read about it in books. Gained my
Knowledge there. Made it up as I went along.
I guessed just like everybody else on the face
Of this planet. Ask me how I am coping. This
Is how I am coping (by pretending that everything is okay).



Victoria Nwogu: Haunted

response to "At Home", "Bad", "My Sisters", and "Survivors"

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She haunts me still
That broken little girl
With the dark brown eyes
Molten pools of fear
Torn flesh, seared skin, soiled clothes
Blood stains clouding her vision
She haunts me

That broken little girl
Whose heart would not fail her
No matter how hard she cried or begged
That heart kept right on beating,
Drumming out her shame
Mocking her, condemning her
With every passing day

With each encounter,
She shrunk a little
Until one day, she killed her soul
Then she could live with the pain
Her tears turned to smiles,
Her protests to gaiety
And so she lived a shadow
That broken little girl

That little girl, now woman
Many a heart, ensnared by her laughter
Yet beneath the gaiety,
A hollow heart beat
Yearning to be cut again
Addicted to pain,
Humiliation her food
Torment becomes her
A chameleon of sorts

That broken little girl
Confronts me each day
Demanding a requiem
For blows I could not evade
For pain I cannot unfeel



For wounds I will never understand
No matter how hard I laugh
No matter how freely I dance
I cannot outrun her
This broken little girl

She sits on my soul
She haunts me, she haunts me
Weep for me, she commands
Weep!



Jennifer Chinenye Emelife: poem not written

there is a poem not written
about the woman
who leaves her home
with a foreign tongue
that folds in and out
spewing words that are not hers

there is a poem not written
about the woman
standing before a mirror
bulging eyes
like the stomach of her dreams

the rivers, the trees –
her reminders of a lost life
so she sits behind shut doors
she is the stillness in the room
the large sculpture at the corner
she is shut doors and windows

...

red love, red skin
a rosary slid in between fingers, hiding a ring
sore lips whispering Hail Mary
a clock on the wall
ticking and ticking
waiting for the last hour –
the man with fangs



Trust Tonji: Blushing on lies

*I found some things called love
were best avoided
like the sweet faced liar. . .
— from "Choices" by Mary McCarthy*

It is not a question of if I carry
rain within my members
It is of how many times this rain might
beat my fragile heart to a shiver
Of laying bare before a cracked wall
and shedding my pain in bits of tears
Everyone is looking for a route
to a peace within their souls
We stop feeling cold the moment
we unlearn giving our hearts to men
whose delight is in reaching out for
the flesh that clothes our hearts
This
is learning to lick lies like lollipops
it is learning to live with the lie
behind a feigned smile
to avoid being b r o k e n
like the body of Christ
Tell me about how my eyes take you to
places that taste like nectars
How I am gold - sparkling;
Waiting to be discovered by you
Say your heart is the home
for an angel like me
and watch me look like a starved cat
I've got no time to waste blushing on lies



Nome Patrick: Grandma

after Mary McCarthy's "And Then There Was"

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Grandma is a strong shield –
The one I run to when the storm comes
And when life wraps me into a paperball
And throws me into the eyes of a dancing fire...
She is great without spots of weakness,
And she teaches me how to break life into the lyrics of
A dying song – without dying with it.
Yesterday, when the sun hasn't slept yet,
The telephone grumbled in dings and dongs:
'Your grandma is nursing pains in a town hospital'
The receiver's words launched dynamite into my body.
I knew a storm was on my trails now
And my tiny legs were sinking into shores of sorrow
I knew life was already folding and refolding me into a ball
Ready to be buried in the eyes of a dancing fire
I knew my stronghold was lost somewhere in a path,
And I had to borrow grandma's spirit
To bear the news of her sudden illness
Before it bears me into the body of a vacant bed
Lying lifelessly close to her...
Before that day rolled off into nocturnal elements,
I got a news that grandma had fallen off into
the cold hands of death.
She was a soldier – her children were her barracks
She was a dreamer – her children were her dreams
She was a true beauty, a strong queen –
A woman the world should see and feel.



PJ Wren: Daron

with lines from Mary McCarthy's "And Then There Was"

His Poppa says he'll kill him,
if sees his pansy face again,
and Daron says
Poppa's just drunk, when he sleeps it off
he won't remember,
but I'm scared,
I've seen the bruises,
maybe this time he will,
this time he will

***And was a strong woman
In the old ways***

Women were strong

A bulwark

Can Daron stay here, Nana?

A fortress

"Child, weren't we once strangers in Egypt?
You know our Lord said turn the other cheek,
but if my old pellet gun can scare a deer from the garden
it'll scare off a drunk, too"

A refuge

Daron take my hand,
come back to her kitchen,
biscuit-warm,
cold milk and grahams,
soft quilts on the floor
she'll leave the light on,
and look over you
all night long

A safe place



Nome Patrick: black days

after reading Mary McCarthy's "6p.m."

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i coiled into the slender arms of mother
like a millipede reacting to a touch
on the crest of the couch in our living room.

we spoke in turns, our words sinking in the TV's
as we awaited the return of an opera 'Together we are one'
the news at six strolled out of the caster's mouth

like the lad running in the fuzzy TV screen
with yells hanging somewhere in his Adam's apple
as a blast boomed on the prints of his foot and swallowed him.

my eyes burnt now as hot tiny tears
found path on the map of my cheeks
'ndo, my little angelina' mama pulled my hair lightly

and i wished i could reach out into the soul of that lad
and tell him we all face the same fate
sometimes, we just are too drunk in life to know

we all drown in the same river,
we all lose the taste of our bodies to the tongues of the same fire...
i wish i could tell him i'm running too

just like him and my prints are fading into nothingness,
i wish I could tell him i'm sinking too
that his fate has planted a burden on me

and it's pressing me into the embrace of hallucinations,
nightmares and insanity...
last night they caught me eating the wools in my doll again,

last night i saw that lad in that TV running into my eyes
so i too ran out, arms flailing side to side above my head
and a horrible scream stood on my embouchure



as i ran out of the reality of that nightmare,
finding my breath interlocked in my stomach and chest
and drowning in the red sea of my own sweat...

sometimes i wake up like that: feeling like an angel
with broken wings: one north, the other south,
each soaked in an ocean of blood or salt water.



Victoria Nwogu: Give me Friendship

response to "In the wrong" and "Demon Lover" and "Considering Repairs"

My every word is weighed
In the scales of tradition
The words I do not speak
Yet mark me for your ire
To you I turn my desire,
In turn you oppress me

Oh these chains with which you bind me,
Hold you imprisoned too
As we gasp and strain against it,
We lose our best selves
The empty mirth
The loveless exertions
The hollow smile
That hides a burning bitterness
Until we emerge as monsters,
Gnawing and snapping at each other
Claws dripping with the blood
That cut our first romance

When I gave you my innocence
I dreamt of a haven of serenity
A place where we could both be
And grow to become truly one
One day, I awake from a painful dream
And find you've embraced me in a shackle
Clinched with the weight
Of your conflicted ancestry
It bears down on you and me
We fight for our very breath

You take, you tear,
You curse, you humiliate
And yet with each blow,
You lose yourself too
In my pain I feel for you,
I see your unshed tears,
You hold back your feelings
For that is the way it should be
What the world expects of us



And yet as my tears flow
Deep within its ripples,
I feel your yearning soul

Look at me my beloved
Do you not desire
The carefree days like me?
The days when our banter rang true and content?
When we were each as vulnerable as the other?
Loving, learning, letting go and cleaving?

Listen my beloved
This curse we must shake off
That we may love freely
Reach and I will yield
Bow and I will stoop
Hold back and we perish

Hold me my beloved
Lay aside this prism
Called marriage for a moment
Hello man, I am woman
Hello woman, I am man
Can we please be friends?



Trust Tonji: on cold nights

*pouring salt across
each window frame and doorsill
to keep you out
homeless in the cold
— from "The Breakdown" by Mary McCarthy*

how many times had a tear
crawled under the lid of your eye
when you cannot live but die away
in shaky bits of breaths that punctuate sober sobs?
here a blackout is leaving us
scampering in dark rooms like cigarette fumes
just when the cold of a rainy night is
seeking comfort beneath the flesh of our breasts...

somewhere in the city square the rain is washing tears
down the cheek of a homeless orphan
someone lucky is staring from the comfort of a passing car,
pointing to us, and whispering 'vagabond'



Nome Patrick: Untitled

276 girls kidnapped from Chibok school

by Boko Haram

Gone 500 days without rescue..."

- from Mary McCarthy's "Things I Was Not Told To Think About"

a mother sticks her flower into the soil
of western education and knowledge acclimatization
so she could sprout between letters
and blossom in variants of poeticism and literature.
she peels the layers of the sun
and finds hell crisscrossing illuminations.
(her flower being preyed)
if her flower zooms the sight of the sun
she would squirm into heaven.
this is not malarkey, it's finding imageries
to sail a ship bemused in a sturdy storm.

she pretends not to be dying;
fetches ashes and honey and little salt
trying not to expire before the red sea.
(holding her death aside a little bit longer)
there is a pruned path in her heart
where stars fall broken and shattered
like the train of tears dropping into the rail on her lips
and moon eclipsed behind obsidian beauties.

if her flower ever blossoms
from her persistency in petitions and prayers
a sun would eat deep into her brittle bones
and filigree the lump Bocos have planted in her heart.
there is a woman in a sturdy storm
seated at the back of a flaring fire
waiting for her fair flower to bloom again in her arms
wide open as the sagged breasts dangling on her bare chest.



Victoria Nwogu: Reach for me

A poem for Aleppo and all other 'forgotten' conflicts, in response to Mary McCarthy's "Your Apology" & "Things I was told not to think about"

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This hand on my throat
Squeezes life out of your soul
That kick to my head
Must have made your nose bleed
Did you feel the pain?
Of this punch in my belly?
And when the guns silenced my sons
How long did you grieve and mourn?

The salty taste of my tears
Wash through your being like fire
The hand you did not lift
Must now clutch your breast in regret
For now, we are companions
On life's rocky waters
Weeping unrequited tears
Clutching at lost hope

How did you think?
You could repose while I bled?
The fires that burnt me
Fill your nose with their stench
Now the crimson stream of my blood
Drowns you in your sleep

Flesh of my flesh
Our ancestry is marked by blood
We are born of one soul
Our destinies entwined
I cannot bear up without you
Together we can erase this
Terrifying, unending nightmare
If you would just reach for me

Reach for me over the waters
Open the doors of your heart
Let me stagger in and find solace
I bring the fragments of my life
I bring with me as well,
The hope of our redemption



PJ Wren: Refugees

this poem first appeared in After the Pause and is reprinted in this chapbook with the poet's permission

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Did we come to them at the fences, seeing our own faces in their multitude?
Did we interlace our fingers, and with bent knee, offer them footholds?

When a headscarf, lifted by the wind, snagged on the barbed wire,
Did we pull it down, shake it out, and let it settle as on a sacred temple?

Or did we turn away, leaving them to carry their hearts in bundles that bloomed
with red poppies?



Abigail George: Dear Mikale, some poems I wrote to you

*Come to me
When you have wrestled
With the angel
No one else can see
– from Mary McCarthy’s “Invitation”*

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In the blink of an eye,
forgive me, I thought
that you were someone else. A stranger.
Your mouth a harsh line.
Your tongue is a notebook.
My heart is quiet and so are my limbs.
It’s gone cold out. A
continent – continent of
ice like glass fragments
in my lungs. Your memory
is a city under siege.
At night the sea is water.
A sheet of black silk that swallows
the gulls that are lonely.
The fish that aren’t biting.

You no longer belong
To the moment.
To the present. You’re cargo.
You’re memory-language.
You’re the past. You’re too beautiful for words.
A translation that brings
tears to my eyes. A page
in a magazine with your
slick black hair swagger.
You’re something else you know that. You’re confined
to the moonlight. You
make me smile even though
my heart is breaking.

The seduction goes
something like this.
I climb into myself and then
there is a disturbance.
My hands go haywire
and grasp at everything.
I go inside my head.



I'm waiting for you to show up. My knight
in shining armor. Sitting
in a restaurant. You
show up. Hungry. Can't
wait to order. Is this a test?
The windows are dirty.

I'm feeling the blues.
You're telling me again
I should be myself. This is our game.
Mouse fingerprints against
the windows. Children
eating ice cream. Mouths
gaping wide like a shark's.
I ask your advice. You
tell me I need my rest.
You're always challenging me.
Telling me to put my best foot
forward but I never listen.

What I see in the rain is a
guardian made of wings. A fluid landscape.
I'm somewhere off the
beaten track. Give your
wealth to the mothers and
fathers of small children.
That's real magic. Cover
them with what is left of
the shroud of the sky. Heaven fills tomorrow's
itinerary. Fill the hours with worship.
A foot steps into the dark.
A country to call home. A
painted house. Caught inside a
painted drum I am not
an old woman yet. Not
reached those autumn years.
Leave me with stars. Blue clouds.

Winter does not burn like
the sun. Its philosophy is
to restore beauty to the
world in a way that I cannot.
It shushes me and makes me weep at the
same time. I am of the
opinion that the rain's philosophy



is made up of patterns.
Shadows dancing in front
of my eyes. Once my mother had magic
in her hands. Now, now
that is mine. All mine. My season.
My planting. My inheritance.



Shelly Blankman: Honoring My Grandmother

this poem first appeared at Social Justice Poetry and is reprinted in this chapbook with the poet's permission

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I sit in the grass by my grandmother's grave
as I do every year, leave a stone, a Jew's way
to show respect. I feel our souls touch.

I speak to her, about family events she never saw,
great-grandchildren she never met. I tell her how
much I love her, miss her, and I leave fulfilled.

This year, I tell her I'm sorry she is forgotten...
her pain, her struggles, her terror, her arduous journey,
her American dream destroyed in a cyclone of hate,

where swastikas and slurs swarm like bees, effigies
hang like ornaments, and Nazi chants draw cheers.
This year I mourn for her and for all those like her.

I am sad for those who say get over it.
Wounds have left scabs that are being picked open.
I feel chilled, my spirit broken.

The stone of respect I left behind seems crushed
like the fragile bones of fledglings under
Nazi boots in fresh dirt.

Don't tell me to move on. Not yet.
Don't judge, listen.
Don't tell me you know. Hold my hand.

I want to feel protected. I want to feel safe.
My grandmother sacrificed more than you know
so I could live unafraid. She deserves that.

I do, too.



About the Contributors

Abigail George's writing has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, most recently at SENTINEL LITERARY QUARTERLY and in MY AFRICA MY CITY: AN AFRIDIASPORA ANTHOLOGY, AFRIDIASPORA, NOVEMBER 2016. She has two books available as free e-downloads from Ovi Magazine: Finland's English Online Magazine's Bookstore (<http://www.ovimagazine.com/cat/56>). She writes from Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Christy Ogbenjuwa (also known as LifeasChristy) is a Nigeria-born writer and Spoken Word poet.

Jennifer Chinenye Emelife writes fiction, nonfiction and poetry. In 2016, she participated in the *Writivism* Creative Nonfiction Workshop held in Accra, Ghana. She is lead correspondent at *Praxis Magazine for Arts and Literature*.

Nome Patrick is a 20-year old writer, a sophomore studying English and literature in the university of Benin in Nigeria. He is shy, but finds boldness in writing and reading. He loves children.

Obiajulu Nwodo writes short stories and poetry. Her works have been published on some online literary journals and anthologies: Eagle on the Iroko Poetry Anthology (in memory of Chinua Achebe) and Total Writers Convention, 2016 Anthology (for short stories, poems and puns). She writes from Enugu State, Nigeria.

PJ Wren is the pen-name of a biomedical scientist and writer living in Maryland. She writes about philosophy and neuroscience here: glasstunnel.blogspot.com. Links to her published poetry and art can be found here: pjwrenwriting.blogspot.com.

Shelly Blankman and her husband are empty-nesters who live in Columbia, Maryland, with their four cat rescues. Her first love has always been poetry, although her career has generally followed the path of public relations/journalism. Shelly's poetry has appeared at *Silver Birch Press*, *Verse-Virtual*, *Ekphrastic: writing and art on art and writing*, *Visual Verse*, *Social Justice Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Trust Tonji is a poetry lover. He writes from Porto Novo, Republic of Benin.

Victoria Nwogu turns to poetry as a medium to explore her emotions and express her "womanity". A lawyer by training and teacher by calling, Victoria works in the human rights, peace and development sector and spends her time between Nigerian, Kenya and Somalia.

