

*these
terrible
sacraments*

colleen s. harris



These Terrible Sacraments

Colleen S. Harris

For my brother, Patrick

who lets me snip threads from his stories
and weave them into my own.

Thank you for sharing.

Thank you for coming home safe.

May battalions of angels stand over your dreams.

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This is Not Tragedy

I am home, on my wooden
front porch, watching
planes garland the sky

with smoke and the maple
die of some gnawing
green disease. This is not

tragedy. In my kitchen
I trip over the dog's bone.
I am also out of milk and

beer, but this is not
tragedy. I put my hands
inside men's bodies and

prayed, a disciple to
violence. This is awful,
but it is not tragedy.

I wore cordite like
cologne, and I know
that water weighs eight

pounds per gallon but
feels like much more.
The same weight as

my daughter, but less
than a human head,
which can be crushed

like an orange. And we
live, or we die, or
something in between,

and still it is not
tragedy, because we
were the ones with the rifles.

THIS IS NOT TRAGEDY

And when he gets to Heaven,
Saint Peter he will tell:
one more Marine reporting, sir,
I've spent my time in Hell.

~excerpt from Marine Corps cadence

The Send-off

You think I am being silly.
I am not religious, but you are

going to war. I sit at your feet
with a basin of hot water,

scrubbing your sturdy sole,
working sudsy fingers between

your toes, memorizing each
toeprint whorl, kneading

muscles and skin over
your most delicate bones.

If my hair were long enough,
I would dry your feet with it.

I understand that impulse
now, kneeling before you,

why women pray by ironing
a lover's flesh with our own,

as though we are an armor.
I understand the need to press

hands to a body not in love,

but as an anointing, the impulse
to hang hope on a whisper of sun
through clouds and call it God.

Bored

Marines training at 29 Palms
set each other on fire, duct
tape unsuspecting buddies
into the driver's side of Jeeps,
leave them in desert heat with
open cans of tuna fish for hours.

Look Closer

at the uniforms gathered
for mail call. This guy gets
a letter or three every time
without fail, that guy gets
none. This corporal has
a mom who bakes like
a battalion of angels ride
beside us. We crowd her
for a taste, but not of cookies
(though we'll each get two).
Look closer, see how we lean
in, greedy for her to open
the container so we can
breathe some air from home.

True Stories

1.

He wrote about dull mountainside detail,
said they wanted books on anything but war.

Ecstatic the way only a librarian can be,
his sister mailed ten boxes and promised more.

It was her fault the sergeant was confused, men
strewn across the mountain, bewitched by dead

writers. Patrick stood at attention, handed a dog-eared book to the sergeant, who scratched his head.

Paradise Lost? he asked, baffled. *Are you kidding me, Marine?* He spat by his boots and cursed.

The man who hated to read as a kid said, *Sir!*
I wanted Beowulf, but Livaudais got to it first.

2.

His sister spends her time shopping at the dollar store.
Soldiers don't complain, they each grab three more

sticks of deodorant, chapstick, cheap romance
novels and chocolate. At night, they dance

to bad music: tribute bands, discount CD songs about fast cars and pretty girls. They sing along

until their throats are dry and attrition drags them to their cots. Each thin mattress sags

as they tear through books like zealots, like fault lines, dreaming in whispers, *Who is John Galt?*

Please Send Crayola

Deodorant is on the list, and chapstick to keep mucous membranes from cracking in the heat.

Chocolate, he says, and don't mind warnings that it will melt, we will lick the wrappers and be happy.

But mostly, he says, send crayons, because the streets are the same color as the buildings are the same

color as the midday sky. Because the women all wear black, and everything is the color of duty, or earth.

He wants to give children something fierce like fireworks, like Atomic Tangerine, Cotton Candy

and Tropical Rain Forest. He wants them to create new landscapes, to overwrite the sullen mountains.

Mail Call

The mail can be delayed days, or weeks.
Sometimes I get stacks of letters
all at once. She writes every other day,
small news and apologies
that her life is not exciting.
I told her some guys get jealous,
who get no mail at all. She cried,
and because it was February,
bought seventeen boxes of valentines,
and wrote messages in every one.
Thank yous, love yous and miss yous,
her stilted handwriting to the edges
of flimsy colored paper notes.
Everyone in 3rd Battalion 3rd Marines
got three. Everyone has cartoon
Mickeys and Minnies, pink hearts
swimming over mousey heads, taped
to their bunk or tucked into their bag.
She is everywhere now, like the flag.

The Post-script She Doesn't Write

Send me the spent shells
of your enemies. I will string
the brass of the bullets

that missed into a necklace
of luck. I will wear it until
the greenblack stain creeps

around my throat like a bruise,
a death-echo. A reminder of my
promise. Where you go, I follow.

Always.

Pickles

When they ask him about home, he doesn't think of Robert Moses or Jones Beach, the bodegas of Brentwood

or the smell of powdered sugar from the Entenmann's plant a few blocks from his high school. He doesn't

name his dog, or his sisters, or mention his mother's recipe for homemade stuffing with bacon and sausage.

He doesn't think of his father's wounds bound with black electrical tape so that he could still bend his fingers

to rewire traffic lights. The first thing that comes to mind are pickles. Obscenely large, a dollar each at the flea market.

Better than churros. Better than chocolate, the garlicky burn at the back of his throat, ghosting his fingers

until lemon juice burns away the last lingering whiff. He hasn't had one in years, and now he has lost his name,

his parents, and the small house with the neat yard. He holds on to pickles, one more reason to get home.

There Is A Land Where Cherries Are Dangerous

Where glowing tips of lazy
cigarettes destroy night
vision, become flares,
invite rockets to dinner
to gnaw on soldier bones.

Where virgins are prized
more than breath, the gate
to heaven between their thighs
locked and barred by fathers
and brothers bearing stones.

Where the magazine showing
plump lips suckling sweet fruit
will be confiscated because
the woman on the page is all
invitation, breasts heavy as stones.

Finding Beauty

The way tracers move, like stars
kissed by gun muzzles and tossed

out into dark seas. Even blood,
the way it runs black at night,

but jeweled under an unshaded sky.
A lone fox beneath fawn-colored

stone as the convoy grumbles past.
Sometimes, we hold the supplies

a little higher than we must, and the
women have to raise their eyes to ours.

These Terrible Sacraments

Bodies piled like cordwood, stacked so that we had to move great gouts of earth with our hands, lest we tear what was left. They came, guardian angels, or picky anthropologists, moving among bones, as though they had been born to wander mass graves, collecting pieces of what had been alive, puzzling them back into meaning.

I go back, lie on a cot, think about how the wretched survivors – mothers collecting teeth from their sons' crushed skulls, husbands looking for buttons matching a wife's last dress – walked the chaos in straight lines.

I pick up a pen. I start calling her Rebar in my letters, she doesn't ask why and I don't say. I don't tell her she is my scaffolding, the grid laid to help me hold these piles of buttons and bracelets and bones, keeping me from buckling under the weight of these terrible sacraments.

Domestic Soldiers

When there were no
blankets, we wove fine tapestries
of profanity to keep our sluggish
blood from freezing.

We sewed each other's ravenous
wounds with the delicacy of women
embroidering wedding gowns.

Whoever packed the field stove
we called *Ma* until we were fed,
food cooked with the same gas
that ran our truck, tasting like
furtive movement in the dark.

And when it came time to sleep,
we found the luxury of warmth
against a neighbor's body,
feigning sleep, finding comfort
against the oily foreign night.

Letter Home

The call to prayer is more accurate than the stars here. I could navigate by *adhan*, if I were so inclined.

Sometimes I am tempted to drop to the ground and pray. Every day I find something new to give

thanks for. Today it is my knees, these unloved pistons, hard hills down the long strands of my legs.

I take it for granted, I know, that I will always be able to step, crouch, bend, to rest my elbow on the left one,

put my chin in my hand and watch you washing dishes beneath lace curtains in the sun. But for now

these bone-springs are still mine. I will run the course seven times, once for each letter in your name.

And if I have enough breath at the end, I will bellow. Perhaps the walls of this war will fall down.

Come, the Hunters of Men

Unshy and unquiet, boarding metal
warhorses, climbing like plague
into the bloated bellies
of helicopters, and the snipers
invisible, patient, snake-sliding
into the corner of your eye. Boldly
we watch them watch us: flicker
of curtain, trembling lashes beneath
the draped *hijab*, a child's wide eyes
above a storefront window, young wolf
in the path of new hunters.

IN PRAISE OF KEVLAR

Marines don't die, we go to hell and regroup!

~ Unknown Marine

Bedtime Story

There was a twelve-year-old boy
with sea-dark hair and light eyes
who stood across the street, holding
an AK-47. His thin arms absorbed
the recoil well. He made a good lookout,
never stood in the same doorway too long,
never lit cigarettes after dark. He wore
a jacket our lieutenant's son mailed from New York,
for the boy who pulled his father to safety,
Brentwood Indians sewn on the right breast
in white thread over green wool.
The lieutenant died of his wounds.
The boy would not sell that warm coat
even though he lived in the desert,
even though he needed the bullets.

Roadside Pietà

No shroud dampens
the indignity. She is undone
when they lay him in her lap –
heavier than he was when alive,
as though his God replaced
his soul with a stone the size
of desire. She is unable
to lift him from the ground.

When I offer, she refuses.
She strokes his head as I imagine
she did when he was a quiet toddler
at sea in her skirts.

The coins smell of blood,
the heavy amber note
of the sun on sand,
her brown hands against
the new white of his face.

Her husband makes tables.

The boy is a carpenter's son.
I wonder if they will carve his name
and wait for him to walk again.

The old story reborn:
a fallen son, of woman as much as of God,
and only one of them has come
to carry the broken vessel home.

The Civilian Problem

And the women, weeping, wailing, tugging our arms
too close to our rifles, nails gouging their cheeks,
howling names that sounded like curses, or charms.
Bodies strewn everywhere. We could have searched for
weeks

and not found them all. The staff sergeant took pity on one ragged man, walking him to stable ground, making soothing noises, blocking the burned city from view. Startled eyes, not understanding the sound

like wavewash, or cotton sheets whispering over skin, he barely heard the *ish'Allah* as the knife slipped in.

In Praise of Kevlar

It weighs the same as steel
and costs more than blood.

He puts it on quickly, betting his life
on a fiber developed for bicycle tires.

He trusts it to halt enemies before
they hit the tender meat of his heart.

It guards the slick spools of his humid intestines.

It promises him his daughter's face.

When it catches a bullet,
it leaves a halo on his chest,
proof that angels travel by ammunition.

Chopper at Night

Spectral, ill-defined.
A woman's hair
again moonlit skies.
Black on black, like war.

This Poem Takes Liberties

with the truth. He was not thinking about
how the IED sounded like God
bellowing after stubbing a toe. He was not
whispering his sisters' names aloud

while still deaf from the blast. It is true
that the shrapnel shredded the mail,
including a letter from his mother in blue
ink. But he was not thinking of family,

or noise, or about how the mangled truckbed
looked like a ruin. This poem takes liberties
because what ran through his head
and stumbled out of his mouth was not a poem.

*Oh Eddie oh shit oh God Eddie, the blood,
what will I tell Myra, where is the rest of you Eddie?*

Conversation with the Dead Man to My Left

Don't just lay there, B.,
come here, I'll still
call the medic. For me,
man, come on, we can see
daylight over that hill.
Don't just lay there. B.,
what am I going to say
to your wife? She'll
call the medic for me
after beating me silly,
you know she will,
don't you just? Lay there, B.,
rest up, breathe, stay
with me, man, until
I call the medic. For me,
man get up! I'm hit, three
times, bullets hot angry bees.
Don't just lay there, B.,
call the medic for me!

Confession

I rolled him a little to the left,
to shield my flank.
I put his mangled tags
in my right boot against my ankle
so if I made it, they'd know who he was.
If I didn't, they'd find him with me,
and us a big pile of meat.
But we would have names.
We would not be unknown.
Our mothers would have something to bury.

The Stillness

So still, you couldn't have been anything other than hunkered down, waiting to weather the next barrage of shells. I was sure of it. You were tucked tight, and dead men sprawl the way men do after incredible sex.

I snuggled up next to you, hip to hip, nudged your arm and whispered, *Don't be an ass, Tom, move over.* Quiet, so quiet I knew they would never find us, that I would owe you a beer or seven for playing statue so well. Hours, not a whisper, and I got angry, poked at your side, needing to know you were scared too, but you weren't. You were silent. I couldn't even hear you breathe and I hated you. I hated you until my pant leg was soaked through, and I figured you finally turned human and were terrified like me, and I loved you again. I laughed at you for pissing yourself, but looked down to see it was blood.

Battleground Crosses: Roll Call

We stand in a row and answer the roll.
Captain Kelly calls the names of absent men.
We can almost believe that they are
late, tired from reading all night,
playing hooky, on the phone, staring
at the bottom of the bunk above
at photos of their daughters, dogs
or cars. Opening cans in the mess
to steal a sniff of air from home.

Kelly yells the names of three missing men.
The wind tries to answer for them,
and is ignored. The wind has not
bled into coarse sand. The wind has not
covered us from fire with the soft parts
of its body, whispered *brother* in our ears
or plugged our bleeding holes with gauze.
The wind does not wear tags in case
it comes home missing its face.

He screams the names of three fallen Marines
and now it is not funny, because they are not
playing football. They are not scratching out
letters to mom, not calling through howling wind
to say Happy Thanksgiving to their nieces.
They are not napping, or eating, or short-sheeting
our bunks. They are not late. They are not

wearing their boots, which stand here without them.
They are not wearing their tags, wound
around their rifles.

They are not wearing their helmets, hung
on their rifle butts.

They are not holding their rifles, which have become
spines
for these silent battleground crosses.

Bargaining with Gods

for Joanne K. Harris

Saturday mornings she wakes early, rides
the siren downtown, pours blood back
into bodies, winds plastic pipe into the soft

tissue of the throat, every life she saves marked
in the column of mercies God owes her son.

Sundays, the soldier's mother lays prostrated

on the lawn, collecting every seventh blade
of grass, a bouquet for belligerent Mars
reeking of violence done by domestic hands.

The Refusal

My brother is three years old, spaghetti
smeared across his face, chubby fists
waving. He is too young to wander

deserts with uniformed men. He is
a shaggy teenager who refuses to
wash his socks, playing hair-bands too

loudly. He is not blasting mortars
or catcalling to the cadence of fifty
calibers. He would never lie so

quietly – he hums even in his sleep.
That still thing is not my brother.
My brother whoops with joy, sings

with Sinatra at the top of his lungs,
swings from a star at sixty miles
an hour across wild Hawaiian terrain.

The body in that box is not my brother.
You better put this back where you
found it, because I am not taking it home.

No Relation

Most folks don't know that
the size of the coffin birthed
from the belly of the plane
bears no relation to the size
of the pieces of the body
brought home. No matter
how much your pieces weigh,
or how much of you they save,
you still get a full casket,
twenty-one guns, and eight
men to carry you to the grave.

Lessons Learned

1

We learned not to speak of lost love, lost dignity, or lost souls. We learned quickly
that complaining we had nothing left
was inviting God to take a limb.

2

We learned to hoard packages
of ramen, the difference
between dull stripped rations
and a feast.

3

No man left behind.
The fine print:
*but we might lose your finger
as we carry the rest of you out.*

4

We learned not to grow attached,
and did it anyway.
It was better than the neon danger

of being forgotten,
the safety net of memory.

5

We learned to be vigilant,
listening for the flesh-soft *thunk*
of pieces falling
into hungry sand
from the trucks we drove
through hostile nights.

6

War is never really over.
Rare steak bleeds
like an animal, or a man,
when you slice it open.

7

Some of us sleep with helmets on.

It takes only one hit to ruin
a perfectly serviceable skull.

The helmet won't help,
but we sleep better anyway.

It doesn't matter how deep
you dig in the desert.
There are no green-glass bottles
with messages, no moldering maps
to guide you home.

PROOF OF PASSAGE

Fortuna Fortes Juvat
(Fortune Favors the Brave)

~3d Battalion, 3d Marines

The Way War Comes to Me

His stories are filtered, weak coffee,
bleached of blood and culled of language

sisters should not hear. I listen between
the lines, in the quiet before his words

where there used to be brash energy,
the waterfall spill muted. Miserly, he doles

out those pieces of his life, hiding the fresh
pink of new scars on pale skin, afraid

he loses too much of himself with speaking of it,
that the magic of silence might cure him.

Kaneohe Bay

for the 3rd Battalion 3rd Marines

Fortuna Fortes Juvat – fortune favors
the brave. But she also likes the smell
of blood, which is why you train the way

you do, with full field carry and live
rounds, acrid smoke rising against
cerulean skies, sharp contrast to yellow

hibiscus. After two tours in-country, you know
that Fortune is fickle, so it is just as well
you can defend the girl's honor

now, her crying on the curb as you pound
the boy who put rough hands
on her skin. Others look the other

way or cheer, because those are the rules.
Tourists have no idea, confused
at the pidgin *Melli Kalikimakaa* greeting, not

knowing hookers are easy to spot in their
clear-heeled sandals at Dunkin' Donuts.
This is terrain you know, familiar battles

already won and lost. You steer your wayward

mother and sisters toward less tropical
footwear, laughing, without explaining why.

An Affection for Absinthe

Afterimages of tracer rounds
scarred into his retinas
and headaches ricocheting
between his temples, then resting
behind his eyes like scattered
shrapnel are the only souvenirs
he brought home from the war.

Language Lessons

“Do you know how they say
get back in Arabic?” He flicks
the safety off, shouts “*CLICK!*”
and waits for us to laugh.

Faded

He sees the dirty aluminum underside
of a plane too long without a wash,

the dull underside of a gull's wing,
mist over slate. The color of rain

on pavement, of empty nothing,
the hue of a smog-choked sky,

a fog-bound sea. The bleached
tint of a man who knows the taste

of death, and makes it dinner.
He sees a sky faded into glass.

He remembers women loved his eyes.
Before the war, they were blue.

Negative Space (The Homecoming)

No checkpoints where
I must decide if a woman
is in labor or intent

on sending a chaplain
to my mother. A cell
phone will not detonate

the stop sign at the end
of the block. No snipers
like crows crowding

rooftops. No reason not
to feed beggars. No bombs
strapped in stray dogs' bellies.

Lament of the Lance Corporal's Wife

Cameras show children
hunkering under their desks
and praying to whatever gods
their parents told them were true.
A lone dandelion blooms
on my manicured lawn,
it cries out for the company of brothers
and the wind whispers *wait – I will build you an army.*

The reporter's words are lost in chaos
and shouts in a language I don't speak.
Have you learned it?
Does its flavor dance on your tongue
in the long nights you spend in desert cold?
If you whispered its slithering rhythms in the dark,
would I feel safe again?

I pull a dress over my head
because it is Monday.
Because the bills on the table scream I must go to work.
Because the schools charge one hundred seven dollars
for our son's textbooks.
Cold blue satin spills down my cheek
and the fabric settles, heavy on my shoulders
like a widow's shroud.
I want to spend my nights unraveling it.

I will call myself Penelope.
I will pray to Poseidon to carry you home.

This is your third tour of duty.
I comfort myself with that number, three:
terrible times do not travel in fours.

I watch the news the way zealots pray.
You taught me how to count stripes, and stars –
some woman will be missing her sergeant.
Some mother will receive the chill comfort
of bullets shot into clouds and a well-folded flag.
They have not reported any lance corporals dead,
I have bargained with God to keep chaplains away.
Between six and two, I am married to the news,
armrest worn threadbare where I have traced
your name with my finger as I learn
the color of blood is everywhere the same.
I am shocked and awed in our living room
as I dully slice green beans, zucchini,
summer squash, sometimes my thumb.
The color of blood is everywhere the same.

You told me a soldier's ears ring
with the echo of every round he fires.
I wonder if you will remember
my voice, if the lines will ever be clear
long enough for me to say my *I love yous*,
to say I was wrong for not maiming you
in our warm Kentucky kitchen

when I had the chance to keep you safe.
A simple slip of the filet knife
and I could have kept you home.

The news is gore splashed across
magazines at the grocery store, headlines
singing how yesterday's boys become men
trying to keep their insides in.
I wait for the homecoming,
the safe and sound. I expect a man,
but the war comes home to me in the shape of love,
and I must learn language all over again.

Young Veteran

He met his wife in
a fender-bender, says
he could tell she had
a lovely behind and
wanted to meet her.
He does not say
he missed the brake
because of his surprise
at a stranger's eyes
looking back from
the rearview mirror.

When You Came Home from the War

your body was a war-torn city.
We rubbed against each other
and it sounded like violins scowling.
We loved like October maples scream in red,
and we loved like kudzu, overtaking all things.
We were lovers because there was nothing else
we could think to do with our bodies
but burn them.

Inside Out

I am raw with it, this need to know why
you treat me as though I am on the verge

of breaking. Why you sleep on our faded
couch, a firearm under the pillow, dog chasing

dream-rabbits at your feet when I need
to feel you warm beside me, to hold

the hard meat of your thigh between mine
as I sleep. Instead, you tuck me in, kiss

my forehead and walk away whispering,
I know what you would look like inside-out.

Hands

Asleep, he keeps his hands
under the pillow, waking
immediately if one slips nude

into moonlight. He holds me
crossing his arms at the wrist,
as though I am satin, easily

marred. When he first came
home, reluctant to skim my body
with his hands, angry, I forced

his palm to my breasts. He pulled
me into the shower, sobbing,
soaping, as though by touching

me with war-stained hands
I was soiled beyond cleaning.
I try not to hate things

made of metal that he handles
with ease. I try not to wish
to be a rifle with an easy trigger.

Monday Morning School Crossing

The neon crossing guard puts out
her cigarette, then her hand,
motions to three young boys
across the street. We sit, warm
and dry in the Jeep, lulled by lack
of motion and the rhythmic sweep
of the wipers, watching them walk
across sharing a ragged maroon umbrella.
A blue Chevy, late for work, or court,
or a wedding, slides past the guard
despite her furious wave and whistling.
I see your lips tighten, your eyes narrow,
your knuckles whiten on the wheel.
I know you are thinking *a different
place, and I the guard, and you would
pay for your hurry with your life.*

Patrick Speaks of Wealth

*They are so poor, he says, they sit
on rough patches of dirt
stacking rocks to pass the time
while goats scavenge the garbage
and eat what they could not.*

He watched a boy shoot a man
for taking a fist-sized rock
from the boy's side of the mountain.

*It was just a rock, he says, looking
at his hands. Not a gem, or shiny,
or something you could trade
for food. It was just a rock.*

He places a smooth gray stone
at the base of our bonsai tree.

He Asks Me Not to Bind My Hair

says beauty should
not be covered, says
bindings and shrouds

give him nightmares.
He kisses my chestnut
locks, breathes that he needs

to see the liquid swing of
my freedom to remember
that he made it home.

This House is Not a Desert

Leave your thick-soled
boots beside the daffodils
encroaching on the porch,
lay down the knife

in favor of a spoon for your soup.
Turn the radio off. Hang
your helmet in the closet.
I will turn on the bathroom

light so you can move
without turning furniture
into so much kindling.
If you try not to wage war

on anything greater than
the plucky dandelions
dotting our front lawn,
I will make sure my words

do not become landmines.
This house is not a desert.
The sound of the wind against
the window is not an accident

of architecture or angles.
The glare of the sun

from the west on your way
home is not a warning,

but a beacon. This place
is as safe as we make it.
Put down your gun and come.

You Are Only Happy When It Rains

When the green things are fed
and fruit hangs heavy in pregnant trees.

When lush curtains billow
and our home feels like a garden,

everything alive, growing. You find
new joy in color, the brash azaleas of summer,

pleased most when the air is warm enough
to lay me down naked at noon.

Proof of Passage

A dark expanse of desert, no lights, driving
all the way back to the base in tarry night.

Once there, safe, breathing easy, someone
(maybe Bobby) notices the taillight is lost.

You draw straws for who has to backtrack
to find and erase proof of passage. In the end,

you all go, no man left behind, no man willing
to wait in safety. And this, you tell me, is war,

brothers making their way together in the dark,
searching for a light you are never allowed to use.

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