

such.waltzing
Sonora Review



MARCH WALTZ:
coakley+madden

(MC)

That summer, family vacation, I watched my one-day-could-be step-sister Kerry swim laps across the motel pool in her pink two-piece. She was two months a college graduate, but the way to torpedoed shapeless through the water made her look seventeen. She'd left for Ole Miss four years earlier a Jersey Girl in spaghetti straps and had graduated that May a full-throttle southern sweetheart, betrothed to a man born and raised in the Bible Belt. I was twelve when she first flew away, and I started writing love poems I never planned to show her. Sentimental bullshit, nothing pornographic. I liked to think they got better as I went along, not that I ever had the balls to give any objective eyes a look. I didn't stop when she met Jim, didn't stop when he proposed to her on a beach in southern Florida. I don't think I could've if I tried.

While she swam, her fiancé Jim talked Army with three kids at the pool side. It was the five of us down the Jersey shore: Jim, Kerry, Mom, Mom's boyfriend Roy, and me, all holed up in a dingy Wildwood motel, three blocks down from the free beach. Jim talking Army was never a surprise, especially once he realized it wasn't his destiny to fight for his country. He found a way to bring it up daily, with friends, with family, with strangers. Did we know a thirty-soldier infantry platoon on a three-day mission needed four hundred pounds of batteries to power their equipment? Did we know the Army owns over fifteen million acres of domestic land? Did we know that fifteen million acres is bigger than the entire state of New Jersey? One night I ran a search and found most of his fun facts online, lifted right from the U.S. Army website. A real connoisseur of research, that Jim. A knockout.

But Kerry, she loved him. They both majored in marketing at Ole Miss, and she flew back home that first Thanksgiving break smitten with this guy who had a drawl and wicked biceps, both bodybuilder and bookworm—the rare, sensitive jock-philosopher. Reads some essays, gets thinking about civic duty, never goes active. Not as rare as people think. Anyone can read some books and get big ideas. But that's Kerry, always seeing the best in people.

“You should swim,” Mom said to me. She turned to Roy, her five-year boyfriend. “Cody used to love to swim.”

Roy nodded and sipped his beer. Hofbräu Dunkel, out of a pint glass. Mom sipped hers. Ever since our trip to Germany last summer, they were on this European beer kick. Roy couldn't just throw back Buds like a normal guy his age on vacation. The previous spring they removed a scaly splotch of melanoma from his back, and ever since he'd been championing originality, looking for ways to leave his mark. I was sixteen. I was pretty sure no such thing existed.

Pivot: Summer 2010 (MM)

That was the year everything changed:
step, pivot, step.

The course of a life—redirected—
the new route incarnate
of unlikeliest means
(whoever heard
of a life lesson learned
in an ensemble role
on a community theatre stage
in an all-volunteer production
of *Singin' in the Rain?*)

Thirty-year-old Mel
would never have dreamed
she could dance
choreography;
Thirty-one-year old Melsaid *fuck it,*

took classes,
started auditioning.

Landed a role.
Rehearsals were brutal
(remember, I'd never danced before)
(I mean, I was the worst)
but I learned I could do
more than I knew.

Step. Pivot. Step:
step forward, knees slightly bent—
on the balls of your feet,
swing, shifting your center of gravity
from front leg to back,
toes turning, whole body follows.

Take another step.

That summer of rehearsals
was the summer I moved out
from the one-bedroom that I shared

with my boyfriend of five years
and into my own studio apartment
I only half-jokingly called
The Temple of Love and Magic.

Rehearsals Were Brutal (MC)

Curly-haired Marjoe Gortner began preaching fire and brimstone at the young age of four, twenty-six years younger than Christ at the beginning of his own ministry. Every year, Marjoe memorized fifteen forty-minute sermons. He introduced himself to grown men with a firm handshake, and told crowds he'd come to give the Devil two black eyes. His devout parents, both of them evangelists, said their boy had seen a vision of Christ one night during his bath. They called him their miracle child, and the title stuck with the masses. Marjoe led countless sinners to the Lord.

I've only led five children to the Lord, all of them at summer camp. I prayed with Will and Bobby in the sports shed, and they were saved. Two years later, Ryan and Brett came to God, and I purchased them their own study Bibles. Zach approached me last, out of jealousy. "I want my own Bible too," he said, and we stooped forward to pray.

Whenever he messed up during one of his sermons, forgot a word or a sweeping hand gesture, Marjoe's mother smothered her boy with a pillow until he got the point. Beating him—"textbook" abuse—might have left visible bruises, might have ruined the illusion. In 1972, Marjoe became the focus of a documentary that won an Academy Award. He exposed himself to have been a fraud all along, smoked cigarettes on camera. At twenty-six years old, he admitted to cameras that he never saw Christ in the bathtub, and he hadn't believed in God a single day in his life.

After I show my friend an excerpt to a memoir I wrote about my religious upbringing, he wants to know where "the speaker" stands now. Either he is actually curious about the speaker on the page and wants context, or he is curious about me—Michael Vincent Coakley—and worries that I might try to convert him.

Even a name as particular as "Marjoe" exists in context; it contorts, fissures, and kaleidoscopes. Marjoe himself claims it to be the chimera of "Mary" and "Joseph." But his father insists it was newly coined apropos of nothing, cast down from on high perhaps, its own immaculate conception of sorts.

When we speak, and put pen to page, what do we believe? Some days I think there is a real being called God, and some days I don't. Every time I sit at my desk to write, I try to make up my mind.

Children Led to the Lord (MM)

Immaculate conception

Marian devotion

Salve Regina

Hail, Holy Queen

Hail Mary:

Your rosary, a garden of mysteries and sorrows
your intercessions, grace: *blessed are you among women*
I wonder where that leaves me.

maculate (spotted, stained, blemished,
polluted)

grace-less

pray for us sinners

Teen Mom:

Your reality show was the gospel. Remember when I prayed to you that fourth Sunday of Advent when I was seventeen when I was heavy with the fruit of my womb? Remember how I cried during the Gospel reading when you said to the angel,

“You see before you the Lord’s servant”?

I was a Good Catholic Girl who would carry the baby to term.
did you know

Mary,

just how bad losing your son was going to hurt?

It Begins (MC)

Henry Abel's son Charlie went under first. The fifty-some members of the church congregation looked on from the pool deck. Not Greg, though. He stood behind his son in the pool, the water lapping at the hem of his t-shirt. He watched the other five children, each bearing his or her witness with gravity and folded hands, knowing that they soon would be going under too. The men each took one of the boy's shoulders—his father the left, the pastor the right—and together they gently lowered him beneath the water's surface.

Baptism: the symbolic cleansing, the sinner made new. Greg had been baptized himself thirty-two years earlier, in a wading pool in the auditorium of his childhood church. He'd been twelve, and the way old Pastor Stan had described it, the person that broke the surface was entirely different the one submerged seconds earlier. That rascal remained underwater, bloated, drowned, eternally sinking. Less like a cleansing, more like an exchange. Even twelve and skinny, Greg had understood the metaphor of it all, that the literal work of renewal was internal, unseen, buried beneath a more ethereal kind of surface. His father had always called him an abstract thinker, explaining to family friends that his son was a chronic woolgatherer, then making sure to throw Greg a quick wink, to remind him that this was actually a characteristic worthy of a father's pride. Now Greg's own son—twice the blonde little daydreamer his dad had been—would be himself baptized. Now the pride was Greg's.

Instead of a wading pool, Greg's son and the other children were having their ceremony in the Mays' swimming pool—the giant, gated, in-ground baptismal font surrounded by gaudy patio furniture and flanked by a hot tub. The brick, Georgian mansion loomed behind them, casting its breezy shadow over the backyard. A smiling, inflatable giraffe floated behind them in the deep end, closer to the action than the real, flesh-and-blood spectators at the poolside. And then there was the booze table for the after-party, fully stocked by the grill. Two or three of the congregation members were already sipping colorful cocktails. Still new to the area and the church, Greg had yet to grow used to how casual a ship Pastor Jim ran. The captain himself admitted to nursing a whiskey ginger or two while he wrote his sermons by hand.

Whiskey, Ginger (MM)

Holy water
cools
I prefer
the warming agents:
whiskey, ginger.

Whiskey:
the rub on teething
baby's gums
the taste of soothing
of Seagram's 7 sours,
Jack and Coke giving way
to the present—favorite.
Irish. On the rocks.

Ginger:
the heat of Thai food, or
the sweetness in a cookie. Also,
the color of my lover's beard, and
the color of his partner's hair.

Well, I prefer most warming agents;
some heat I cannot bear.

Current Contributors

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