

Paul Revere's

by
CARYL PAGEL



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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#28

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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“There are some days where everyone I see is a lunatic.”

(Renata Adler)

Introduction:

There is perhaps nothing more frightening than that bleak volta near the end of “Goodbye to All That” when a despairing, clarifying Joan Didion reminds us (of our youthful transgressions) that “some things are in fact irrevocable,” and that “it had counted after all, every evasion and every procrastination, every mistake, every word, all of it.” In these snippets I was interested in quick scenes, mood slices, the games we play, home as a seed of tone and material, and how stories weigh like weather in the souls of their speakers. *Paul Revere’s* comes from an otherwise dense collection of linked essays concerning the Midwest, vacancies, rumor and coincidence.

Paul Revere's

I didn't watch the whole thing but I wanted to. It was over six hours long. When I walked into the room he was chest-deep in his prospective grave, digging diligently. In the video, to the side of the growing hole, sat the rectangular red plastic cooler like those a TV doctor might use to transport a heart or a liver. I assumed that inside was his noon lunch (a tuna sandwich? root beer? grapes?) packed by someone who worries. The digger, a man who looked about my age, was wearing a sky-blue T-shirt sans logo and yellow work gloves similar to those my father used to don before rotating dirt in the garden. On another wall of the gallery, in another room, hung a charcoal rubbing of the digger's future headstone. Once, in art school, my professor impressed upon the class Sir Thomas Browne's eerie observation (appearing first in *Urn Burial* and later repeated by Sebald) that "a man may carry his own pyre." Now I can't recall exactly what we were talking about. Too, a human body might hollow out its own grave, excavate a friend's skull or pledge to someday appear beneath the reader's boot soles. Clouds blustered toward me from the distance in the image. I admired the colors, the concept, the plot. I touched my phone for any new texts.

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The child might never have come out of the woods of his own accord. His family was attending an outdoor Boy Scout ceremony for his older brother, and the little boy was playing sweetly with several children his own age in a clearing behind them. The boy followed another kid after a ball that was tossed to the edge of the field and when he arrived there, at the boundary of the forest, he stepped in. The mother and father, when they eventually noticed that their youngest son was missing, instigated a frantic search involving the entire troop of Scouts and the local police force. It took several hours to retrieve him. They combed the woods in organized clusters, calling his name at the top of their lungs, but the boy never thought—never even considered—that he was lost or in trouble. He had by then adjusted to the dim low glow of the forest, clawing shallow holes in the earth and chatting with fallen branches. He was, and still is, the sort of person who is instantly content being nowhere.

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Steve McGuire thrashed through freezing river water (through floating chunks of detritus and muddy December ice, still wearing his bike helmet) until he reached the nearly submerged red Volkswagen Passat, and with some difficulty dislodged a young woman trapped underwater in the driver's seat. He slowly towed her body back to shore. According to *Talk of Iowa*, when he revived a then-33-year-old Michelle Kehoe, she shivered and sat up pleading: "My babies!?? Where are my babies?" as, unknown to him, there were two children strapped into the backseat. McGuire briefly wondered if his body, numb from the cold, was capable of diving in again, when he turned around and saw (*only here, we later bragged, only in a small town*) that four other men had leapt into the frozen river and were saving Michelle's young sons. On March 13, 1964, in Queens, New York, Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death with 38 neighbors nearby, all supposedly in full knowledge of the crime as it occurred. Each of those 38 witnesses remained unresponsive, not wanting, according to one onlooker, "to get involved." For years we re-told the story of Steve McGuire as absolute proof of small-town kindness (until we later learned that Kehoe had been trying to commit suicide).

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Directly before their first date (if you could call it that, which they did with starry eyes months later, although she hadn't imagined it that way at the time because *did* he have a girlfriend?—no one would tell), she fainted hard into the arm of an insurance nurse. It took several moments longer than it should have to revive her. She absented her body, and when she came to after a long and tangled while her mind was vacant: she couldn't recall her name, where she was or anything that had occurred before that instant. Some would claim that she had briefly died. In a cold sweat, clammy and confused and having greatly alarmed the insurance nurse, she stood up and walked out the door, then continued more than a mile in the blazing summer sun to meet him at a dive bar down on Market. She was polite, and had thought it unseemly to cancel with such short notice.

•

We forget nothing. When one person does, we remind him. In some ways, in this booth, washed up from different cities, separate institutions, various affairs (here perhaps at first for school, then just sticking around or returned after some dumb job or dirty split), our entire purpose, our total responsibility, it seems, is to remain

in a constant state of telling (repeating this story or that, maintaining the notorious gory details, keeping various histories alive, afloat, aloft, within so-called *earshot*, performing dramatic finales—terrible gossip, that it is), with the hope that someday these tales will reveal an essential truth, that someday our stories might explain us.

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It was Halloween night and D.'s girlfriend had thrown a party at the house she shared with two roommates on Church Street. They dressed as Stevie Nicks and Mick Fleetwood, posing in front of a printed-out replica of the *Rumours* cover. Someone had smashed a beer bottle in the bathroom, first-year girls were getting groped in corners, and as D. and his girlfriend left around 3 a.m. they spotted a roommate gleefully tossing the splintered limbs of a dining-room table into the flaming fireplace. When D. got out of the car at his apartment (a first-floor unit on the corner of Market and Governor), he halted on the path that led to his porch, glimpsing in the partial dark a curled-up shape—a *body?*—propped against his front door. He realized that the phantom was in fact a passed-out undergrad who had stumbled into the wrong place, presumably assuming in his wasted

state (as students regularly do here) that this was *his* home. D. shook the young man's shoulders and asked if he was alright as the girlfriend looked on from a bottom step. The kid was only wearing a T-shirt and jeans even though at that late point, and in that season, it was extremely cold and close to freezing. He was conscious but staring at nothing, not responding, not even, she noticed, wearing a costume. Regardless of what anyone said that night (D., the girlfriend, the EMT., the police), the young man just flashed a feral grin and refused to answer. Who knew, they said to each other later, next semester he'd likely be one of their students.

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One morning in a high-rise in Chicago I watched a man crawl down the ladder beneath a stopped elevator and into the mysterious underbelly of the interior to fetch the car keys of a woman who had dropped them in the slim one-inch crack between sliding door and tile floor. There are some things I am vigilant about: minding the gap, crossing the street, slowing down, holding on.

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Her siblings had in common a particularly bizarre sort of face blindness. Whenever they were charged with the task of collecting someone at the airport, especially a close friend or loved one, each would panic, concurrently losing all understanding or memory of what that person looked like. In Washington, D.C. they attempted to pick up a small Mexican man whom they assumed was their mother. Another time, in Florida, they waved to every friendly gentleman with a sand-colored beard who might be their brother. Individually it proved a problem, but together they were hopeless. A friend, the mom of a toddler, explained that she experienced a similar sort of anxiety when leaving her son at daycare. She worried that when she returned at the end of the day she would have lost the ability to identify her child, that he would have transformed beyond recognition, or that the children would all look the same. She learned, she said, to put some psychic distance between herself and her fear, to search for the teeny tiny human that most resembled her husband.

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The misogynist employee, she later told me, was upset that the woman manager hadn't rehired him

after years of offensive behavior. So was the other one. They both wrote threatening emails, one referring to her in a correspondence cc'd to her boss as "cold," "patronizing" and "bureaucratic." Abuses of this nature weren't new, not even terribly exciting, but in this case it was agreed upon among office staff that justice had been served—after all, the man was an infamous bully whose bald head and shiny skin made him look like a penis. The other jerk looked like a thumb.

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The magic of living in a bubble is that people still, if reluctantly, converse with one another. At times this constant talk (manifesting as drone, whir, buzz or hum) becomes claustrophobic: all that data, opinion, hearsay, history, gossip. Living here can feel like being trapped in an elevator with an army of inmates. Like being one of a hundred peasants in a late-Renaissance landscape. Tonight we invent random rumors to test how swiftly they will ricochet: Carver Stadium was named after the writer; Kurt Vonnegut once worked at Pagliai's; the best food, it is "widely known," can be found at I.C. Ugly's. This town has a remarkable memory. Stories congregate and compress (grow dense, tangential, complex), seeming to levitate above the crowd as an imposing

mass, a *third thing* that one is practically required to contribute to, and (like twine for a nest or facts in a census) this data is meticulously gathered and archived. It's true, I will tell you, we know about your arrest record. We're familiar with your horrid divorce and we're aware of the night you went out back with the boys to shoot down multiple streetlights. We know you made out with a psychopath. It's no secret you lied about rehab; some of us still recall the afternoon you ate mushrooms and imagined a passing helicopter was a gigantic vulture descending from the heavens to devour you. We know, perhaps better than you, who you really love—your *one and only*—but are also conscious of your crush. We gave you tips on handling that rash. We supported you after the crash. We were there when your ex-boyfriend made you vomit up a pop-top after he worried it would cut up your stomach.

•

You get back to work. You make notes for a hypothetical essay: a study of Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* and other homes, nests, caves, hideouts, various organic and protected made spaces. *Merzbau* and Nazism. *Merzbau* and psychosis. *Merzbau* and childhood. *Merzbau* and the fort. Mostly: obsession. You will engineer your own

replica of *Merzbau* (performance art and claustrophobic sculpture as research! no associates allowed in or out!). Instead of incorporating white plaster sections, bus tickets, old wire, doll heads, scraps of newsprint and poems, you will decorate your space with pebbles from the cemetery, phone chargers, a skull-and-crossbones hand towel, kalimotxo, triangles and a pile of miniature speedboats. You will build a moat. You will continue life in a self-made facsimile *Merzbau* until death, bombing or memo. The bibliography will include strident memorized screaming recitals of poem-songs by the *Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*, Patsy Cline, Daniel Johnston, and wolfsong accompanied by the percussion of fork tines beat against a clean tin bean can.

“I’m trying...” he’d purr prettily, believing himself at three or four in the morning, drunk, high, blacked-out, as they leaned against each other in front of Mercy making jokes about the sign that said EMERGENCY. “What *more* can I do?” *Well*, she’d think, holding the torn corner of his coat sleeve, not wanting to know, but knowing—(of course knowing!)—that the answer should be *a lot*.

M. leans in conspiratorially. She manages the only great restaurant in town, the one on Linn Street across from the paper, the one with the gorgeous wait staff. We go to their theme parties, leave big tips and try foolishly to seduce them. Unlike writers, you see, they have jobs. “My *mother*,” M. confesses, after telling a funny story involving a miscommunication at the train station, “won’t stop eating gummy bears. They’re making her *sick*. She’s posted signs all around the house, on the mirrors, the furniture, the doors, instructing: NO MORE GUMMIES!” I laugh out loud. The buildings in this town used to be other things. Mostly hospitals.

Everyone shares a therapist. This means, it seems, that we are obligated to manipulate stories when discussing one or another of the people the therapist also sees, most of whom happen to be the very people we wish to speak about, the very people who are making us ill. Pills lace the water. Tableaus of mental illness appear everywhere. On our couches, in the booth, walking

slowly, glancing down, we are swallowing Klonopin, Xanax, Zoloft, Paxil, Nardil, Adderall, Ativan, Dexedrine, Abilify, lithium and Zyprexa. The songs we hum are sad songs. For a year now there has been a pronounced gas leak in the apartment where we congregate for late-night dance parties. Someone passes out on the lawn. Occasionally the medicine helps, but mostly it is the process that confuses things: we are continually finding doctors, calling back, leaving messages, driving to the pharmacy, feeling better, slowly plateauing, definitely drowning, looking like shit, mixing medications, drinking too much, developing addictions, sharing prescriptions, stealing drugs, lying to our loved ones, searching for better insurance. We are barely ever “ourselves,” and our personalities are verbal in the worst ways. We are suffering from unforeseen side effects. Once, many years ago (before her first book, her teaching job and the birth of her now-young son) L. discovered and promptly popped a random pill she found on the fuzzy floor of the Paul Revere’s women’s restroom. She returned to the table and we all stared at her beautiful face waiting patiently for something to happen.

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Someone calls me a bitch. It’s “a joke.” At the front table, by the window, flush in neon, the lot of us is some mix of depressed, hysterical, bored, drunk, hungry, psychotic and pregnant. I walk outside through the back door and cry for a while against a brick wall with the phrase “WHITE DEVIL” spray-painted in scrubbed black letters as tall as I am. After a bit I go back inside. I find my chair. I sip a drink, and reenter the conversation. Everything is exactly as I left it.

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Three days before she returned to town—invited by her boyfriend to live with him and be his love in a four-bedroom house on her then-favorite street in the world (Ronalds), with a carpeted attic, ‘50s-style breakfast nook, soft morning light and lemon walls—he overdosed on opiates and nearly died. He stole some of her money; they broke the lease. But still, hadn’t he taught her the two-step? After a while, she decided to go on living anyway. Some questions lingered. Should she have taken him to the hospital? Should she call the police?

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In this episode of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* the cast has gone to a castle to sort things out. The characters keeps mentioning trust falls. Even though she was invited, Jacqueline has decided not to join because—so she says to the camera—she’s “so over it.” Meanwhile, the group counselor looks upset. The entire family is roaming around the grounds with their spray-tanned skin and overdressed children, and Teresa’s husband says something seriously offensive about autism. When your parents die, a character remarks, all you have left are your siblings. I’m briefly touched. And later, after further inexplicable drama, someone throws a half-hearted punch at someone else and a third person calls: “It’s like speaking to a wall!!” in the direction of nothing else.

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One of the first times they spoke the woman guessed nine out of 10 of his “top influences” (she skipped Marianne Moore—he didn’t look old enough). It’s not difficult to pick up on some trends. When I lived here the first time “surrealism” was all the rage, or at least a type of poetics rife with non sequitur and deadpan,

shape-shifting and irony. In those years we were thrilled by André Breton, *Lost*, Cy Twombly, writers named Matt or Mark or Kyle or Zach, whiskey, western shirts and jokes. The year after adored Spicer, pot and staying in. Recently I’ve noticed the writers appreciate Ivy League educations, painkillers, Alice Notley, not eating, robots. Some things never go out of style. One week I walked into the Foxhead and overnight all of the guys had acquired frayed tank tops and ratty, fratty baseball caps. It was a case of abropriation. This is my life but this isn’t all of it.

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(Michelle Kehoe and her children, sailing through the sky—what a strange sight that must have been for someone driving by...)

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It was a Wednesday night at George’s. The boys were competing via jukebox (Bill Withers preceding R. Kelly, Joy Division trailing Smog), and although most of the faces I saw appeared swollen and drowsy, we were each

faithfully present that evening—we were all *loyally there*, in order to pretend that someone else wasn't. It was like harvesting the wreckage of wild fun. M. told us of the recent dearth in a long tradition of Korean female divers while, out of the corners of our eyes, we watched who walked in, who walked out, and who sat down next to whom and in which booth. At a certain point I stood up and J. grabbed my ass. It was OK; it was his birthday. A. pushed J.'s hand away. J. smiled widely and slapped A. hard across the face. Then the scene, from the very beginning, repeated itself. Once, I pitched the idea of a complementary periscope arriving with each drink, a tool with which to better spy on other booths. Another time we invented a touch-screen table from which one could only access documents pertaining to the person being gossiped about. We floated the idea, too, of adding a lobby managed by '40s-era hostesses (red lipstick, lined nylons, pin curls) who would deliver a rotary phone to the table for communication with out-of-towners or for hearsay on behalf of those staying home. It turned out that there was always a lot to think about while posing patiently in plain sight, helping your designated ignorer ignore you.

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Games we play: Cracker, Lime, or Nothing; M v. W; The Fake Goodbye; Cannoli/Pepperoni; Bags; Beads, Beads, Beads!; Inside or Outside?; Small or Far Away?; Euchre; The Podcast; P.O. __; The Chart; Cards Against Humanity; Team Babes; Act Natural; The All Crawl; You've Put Me In A Situation; Secret '80s-Era Hairspray; Didyou Know?; *The West Wing* Whistle; In Racine; Soft Gs; The Deepest V; What's More Similar; You Dropped A Dot; Diminish; Old Man Dance; Who's the Bossy; Better One...Better Two?; Face Shuffle; Option Man; Internet Sensation; Little Women; Boop!; The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson.

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Pink and red wash. Copper scribble of a passed-out drunk. Faint green pressing up from the lower left-hand corner. Hair-thin charcoal scratches in soft gray light to the right. Pronounced, perfect bourbon bottles rendered in oil...pencil lines...canvas grain. I once saw it in person. Now I click on these links. I am watching young men throw boiling pots of water into the air. Some stand on a patio, some in the yard, and one leans over what appears to be a 10-story balcony in eastern Russia. Water flies into the ether and (due to scientific principals I don't understand) instantaneously

morphs into smoke. A thick and cottony frozen cloud. A billowing snow wall. We're living in a so-called "polar vortex" and are waiting it out inside, patient and safe from nature. In Hendrik Avercamp's *Winter Landscape with Ice Skaters*, an entire town drifts aimlessly across the icy field. Yesterday morning at the corner of Gilbert and Davenport I slid for an instant on the sidewalk and nearly split my skull. No one saw. I examine the backs of two children perched on a boat in the foreground. I stare at a skater dressed in a fool's yellow hat and matching pantaloons. Crows peck at the corpse of a frozen horse. When I saw this painting for the first time, many years ago, in the dim and artificial light of an art museum in Amsterdam, I swore to myself that I'd never forget it. I did though, for two years, and then I remembered.

•

Winter sun seeps through the snow on the angled panes of the farmhouse. "What's so funny?" *Mmmm. Mmmhm*. A drowsy wiggle. "What are you laughing at?" "The fruit," he responds from some remote interior location, some distant foreign scene that I will never reach. "The fruit" ...more laughter, a deeper sleep. "There are just so many...different...types...of fruit."

•

S. unfolds a mid-sized cardboard flat from the twined bulk batch propped against the reception desk, pops open the segments and turns down four rectangular panels in quick succession. He bends each tan appendage so that the two longer exterior edges match in the middle, and slides packing tape across the ensuing gap—twice—for extra strength. I try to lesser effect: the joints where the sides meet are still attached. The tape repeatedly rips mid-swing and I cut my thumb (*a thrill!*) with the serrated edges of the tape gun. The Dean has demanded that we move. It's political and out of my purview. Once the boxes are formed, I'm an expert. I fit rectangles in with like rectangles, small boxes of staples or paper clips along the edges, and I can swiftly identify which ancient furniture is bound for donation. Last week, A. spoke at length with the night custodian in the morgue. He wants to be a writer. Little does he know that we must now close our imaginations to the places we inhabit. Say goodbye to familiar ghosts!

•

The chief sentiment is shame. Shame and secrets; secret shame. An all-purpose excuse and punishment, both accurate and self-indulgent; a terrifying purgatory; a weather vane. So-and-so won't speak to so-and-so because she betrayed him; she broke his heart. Now no one can be in the same room. But oh, don't blame so-and-so for ditching you outside of his locked house, he was messed up, he *can't recall*. Please, will you try to forgive so-and-so for acting brisk and distant, he's prone to distrust. Don't expect too much of so-and-so, she doesn't know what she's doing, she *feels bad*. The shame, he says, has *shut him down*. It's hard not to feel at times that the point has been missed. Amidst the confusion, the humiliation, the angst, the bodies in this town will still march several times a week toward H., steady H., and she will deliver unto legions one Jameson on the rocks with a Guinness back. A soldier of the plains, a Viking queen, we'd follow her to the ends of the earth; we'd enlist. *Nurse*, wrote our only knowing predecessor, the one who couldn't save us.

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It becomes harder and harder to leave the house. Shards are evidence. The shovel's missing and there is no salt. This need not be overly believable.

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That girl's a bore. A total drag. At first I didn't think (with her frantic manic senseless anecdotes, her hysterical sitting-in-the-center-of-this-coffee-shop laugh) that she knew. But she knows. I am irritated by my own sad malice. Those gestures, those dirty hipster '80s glasses, that cloying tone—it comes from a place of pain I hope that I never know. The interesting thing about the girl being such a bore is not that she *is* a bore but that she has the *exact same name* and *exact same haircut* and *exact same tedious affect* as the biggest bore in town the last time I lived here. So in some ways, although she is a bore, by being an eerie replica of another bore she is also incredible. It seems impossible that there could exist so many similar versions, so much meanness (me), and the perpetual cliché of a simpering insipid manipulative lady. An abandoned cruise ship filled with cannibal rats drifts unmanned through the high seas. What is this news?

•

Chris Kraus writes “empathy is not a reaching outward. It is a loop. Because there isn’t any separation anymore between what you are and what you see.” I fold the white wax paper around my burger. I pick at the cheese. Once I saw a film reel burst into slow flames, a black rainbow, through the projection of itself on the screen.

•

They laughed so hard they cried. They almost died. They were so hilariously “in love.” They broke up. It took the better part of an hour to find the woman’s used blue Rabbit at the Coralville mall, both of them having forgotten where they’d parked it. The man most likely filled the time by telling her the story (one she’d heard several times before) of how his grandfather, adrift in a Colorado blizzard for days, survived by chewing on slices of the elk he’d shot at the start of the whiteout. In the mall the woman had tried on a short gold dress made of glitter. The man bought two shirts. “This wasn’t a good place to be,” wrote Leonard Michaels in his diaries, “but I couldn’t leave.”

•

I turn on the television. I see an adult man watching television. An adult woman is watching the adult man watch television. She asks: *Is there anything that you want? Is there anything that I can get you?* He doesn’t respond. I came here in a charitable mood. I turn it off.

•

Once, P. was riding the El to work when a man, he noticed, was watching him from a seat across the way. P. returned to his book. When he looked up again he caught the eye of the watcher, still watching. This time P. realized that the man, this watcher, was someone he had gone to high school with several years ago in a suburb of Chicago. They had been neither friends nor enemies. When P.’s stop grew near he stood and walked across the jostling train in the direction of the sliding doors. The man turned his face to P. and performed a look (one that we’ve all seen) of elated, animated recognition. “P.!” he exclaimed, “P.—it’s so good to see you!” P. met his eyes and smiled. “No,” he said, hopping onto the wooden platform, “I’m sorry but you must be mistaken.”

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Chicken with lemon, onion, garlic, sriracha, mustard, salt, pepper, oil, burnt. Add avocado, apple, almonds, goat cheese, any fruit, vegetables, lettuce, herbs.

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I want to understand more than I do. You should too. I walk to the campus library and leaf through books on alcoholism and dependency, mood disorders, drug abuse. I research pathological behavior and depression, rehab, psychopaths, and the neurological links between art and madness. There's proof enough. I'm the only one here. I can't tell you how to get better. I can't help you more than I tried. You nearly died. That summer, in the evenings after I would return from visiting you in the hospital, from calling doctors, delivering a toothbrush and change of clothes, A. would sit across from me in the hot gloom and listen. She would order a crème de menthe and Sprite, then lean across the table, like an angel, and sing what was already always those days on my mind: "I'll follow you *down* 'til the *sound* of my voice

will *haunt you*." And it was true. Perhaps it was clearer to everyone else, but I knew. At every single turn you lied.


•

K. finds a key in the rock. D. throws a butterfly knife through the crowd of drunken dancers. L. pops E.'s blow-up giraffe hat. Someone barfs in the garden. M. dons straw wine glasses and performs a series of Ella Fitzgerald songs. A. makes mimosas for the shower. We got ourselves into this mess, that's for sure. We're the only ones to blame. Day after day it's the same routine. A few of us have jobs, no one money. We sleep past noon! One day I am thinking of a young Martin Sheen dashing with high knees through the woodlands, cradling a shotgun against his bare chest, while Sissy Spacek, all freckles and calm, waits for him in a tree house. They've recently murdered. The famous poet is sitting next to me while we watch a famous novelist read. Afterwards, I am introduced to everyone. Then we walk to the bar and a large group of glow-in-the-dark skull-masked strangers jump out at me from the shadows. "Surprise!!" they scream.

AUTHOR BIO



Caryl Pagel is the author of two collections of poetry: *Experiments I Should Like Tried at My Own Death* and *Twice Told*. Caryl teaches in the NEOMFA program in eastern Ohio and is the Director of the Cleveland State University Poetry Center. She is the co-founder and editor of Rescue Press and a poetry editor at *jubilat*.

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