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VIGIL
Nancy K. Jentsch

winter’s last snow
trims the city
tricking streets
into playgrounds
slipping sleeves
over branches
capping and masking
gaslights that
retreat into sleep
their vigil extinguished
over sprinkles of sparrows
and whispered trysts

’til the thaw
bemoans ice
and winter’s tears
drip from pole-bound
lamps, fueling
spring’s impatient
metronome
U-TURN
Katrina Slavik
NIGHTS ARE LIKE THIS
Bruce Robinson

Sullen gaslight,
dreams slip through the radio, fracas
of early AM, maybe it’s Long John Nebel

in your head, fumbled metronome
of the linear dial, or less simple
when the pulley slips, because who’s not

without priorities, and nights like this—
gaslight shadows on the
bedroom ceiling, a scowl of paint

or sneer of shredding plaster, the dog I’ve
not been kind to asleep beside me snoring,
his slumber a monotone or let us hope

that’s so, what broken dreams can
anyone save, his cares now not of me
but hares, hocks of rabbits he will outrun.
INTERMISSION
Kristina Harrison
MY cabin isn’t like ones in the movies, all glistening wood and rustic features. This one’s haunted. It’s got a leaky roof, some floorboards you shouldn’t quite trust to hold your weight. Mold in the basement too. But the haunting’s not something you can fix with a trip to Home Depot and a spray bottle of bleach solution.

The previous owner died here. A neighbor told me this the first day. Probably in the main bedroom, I’d guess. They told me the previous owner had dogs, two German Shepherds, and that makes sense from the holes scattering the yard like confetti.

If confetti could break your ankle. That’s what my girlfriend Shazi says, when she refuses to go outside with me to smoke something by the fire in camp chairs.

Those German Shepherds were quiet for a bit. A day or two, the previous owner’s body sat here, probably in the master bedroom, slipping away. Becoming star stuff. That’s another one of Shazi’s sayings. We all return to the stars. But she won’t come look
at them with me because of those dogs.

You can imagine, once they got proper hungry, they opened up and howled. That’s how someone found the body. Heart attack or stroke or what’s the one called when blood that’s all knotted up releases from its home, plugs your vessels, and in a minute, no more, you’re done. Gone like gaslight. The neighbor couldn’t be sure what took the previous owner.

I don’t know why I’m telling you this, since the previous owner’s not the ghost. According to Shazi. She tells me this ghost is young, female. Shazi dabbles in tarot, likes to read my cards. Past, Present, Future. Sometimes the Celtic Cross. Never the True Love spread. Shazi likes to say there’s no need, since mostly, other than my inability to poach an egg, things are copacetic between the two of us.

Copacetic, that’s her word.

For the longest time, I thought when menus said poached eggs with hollandaise or poached eggs, cheesy grits, greens, and bacon they were just being fancy, so I’d order but say fried eggs because that’s how I like my yolks. Poached was for people who had travelled or liked to put on airs. People who knew what a metronome was for. Like Shazi.

She’s been everywhere. A free trip to Israel after she graduated high school because she’s Jewish. A summer on the beaches in Croatia, Dubrovnik, and Split too, where she told me she lived in rooms where she was sure there’d been a death—she hints at hauntings all over. She caravanned a season from festival to festival all across the U.S., drinking and dancing, and that’s where she picked up her worn tarot deck. I figure she learned about
poached eggs somewhere out there.

It’s become the one thing with us that doesn’t work. If I leave my laundry unfolded for a week, sometimes all month, I’m a slob because I don’t know that poached eggs are different from fried. If I’m late to pick her up, it’s because a combine was taking up the road into town—and poached effing eggs.

She says it with a smile, when she does. But I’m not dumb. She’s laughing at me.

Sometimes I think Shazi made the ghost up. Sometimes I think she’d do that to me. Other times, the cabin seems to scream.

It’s the mice when the pressure plate snaps. Sometimes, it sounds like they’re screaming as they die.

Once, on the couch, the tornado siren wailed, and Shazi looked at me and said, “Sounds like poached eggs in space.”

I have no idea what she means, but she’s hinting at something. Lately, I’ve been thinking, it’s time to change something about my life. I bought a big old bottle of white vinegar the last time I was in the Walmart. Forgot eggs, but when I make Shazi poached eggs, it’s going to be something special. Candles, a ring, and then I’ll make Shazi my wife and she’ll have to stop saying it.

That’s what she’s after, I’m sure.

But I was lying in bed yesterday—Shazi’s at her place—and I hear her, yelling at me about poached eggs in space again. Now, I’m sure that wasn’t the mice screaming. It was too clear, too much like Shazi. Too damn much.

When I see her next, I say, “Shazi, I’ve been hearing your voice.” I tell her about the poached eggs, mention space, and the mice, and she’s laughing the way she does, and she pats me on the
inside of my thigh and says mice can’t scream.

She told me about those rooms in Croatia and how her friends special-ordered white sage so they could cleanse the spirits. I don’t think burning some spice you’re supposed to add to a pork roast does anything to ghosts.

Anyway, I’m starting to think this ghost ain’t haunting my cabin, it’s haunting Shazi. All she can say is eggs are causing her problems, all the poached eggs in space.

I’m not sleeping well.

I buy a carton and those over-the-counter sleeping pills, in case this doesn’t work.

I fill the pot to the top, pop out the safety seal on the vinegar, pour a good bunch into the pot. While I wait for it to boil, Shazi’s nagging. Poached eggs in space! Like a riddle, like she’s trying to tell me she’s not really into *Star Trek*, like she’s mocking me for wanting, like every other kid who grew up around here, to walk on the Moon. I suggested once, just once, that we apply to move to Mars, that our love could last the trip. Shazi laughed, like she does. Now I don’t know how to read her, how to unpack these words.

When I tip the egg into the vortex, two things can happen. I’m going to poach or I’m going to come apart into the water, in strings of froth, and Shazi will laugh.
Metronome Morphs Time
Vani Alana Winick
I leave kitchen scraps and star charts—maps of glass
that broke in the sky.

They slip gifts near my door: paper cups / bright buttons /
bent wire. Tokens so simple I wonder if I’ve lifted them in sleep.

Barefoot under the gaslights.

* I read about houses shored with whale bone & timber washed
up on sand and structured into a stable compound—cement,
or stucco. Every woman knows

that even beauty is surrounded by hard.

* The most difficult days, I wait to sleep until I hear the metronome
of crows, frenzied by a cast of hawks that screech nearby.

In the morning, crow bones, chewed clean, drop
from the trees.

Their feathers make dark doorways in the snow.
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DUSTING
Elizabeth Landrum

_We do not know until the shell breaks what kind of egg we have been sitting on_
—T.S. Eliot

Dusting a bookcase is nothing like the quick slips of cloth across baseboards, windowsills, and toilet tops. Try lowering the metronome tempo, slow the dance to notice the mysteries, histories, poetry, and art — artifacts begging for excavation like eggs you’ve been sitting on, shells ready to break.

Not ashamed to say I stayed all day to re-read Grandmother’s memoir, her voice clear and present with notions foreign, yet familiar. We settled in our easy chairs, her cheeks aglow in gaslight, mine whitened by LED, shared tea and talk of propriety,
politics, and family while I took notes for my future memoir. 

Once, a clay teapot jostled as my hand reached for the microscopic detritus. 

It nodded approval, then spouted questions about its origin, form, and finish, so I traded the cloth for a pencil to trace the unusual shape, research its history for answers to calm its unsettled position.

It was uncovering Grandfather’s papers that led to a deeper fall — weeks down a rabbit hole, chasing archived letters and clippings, a trove of invitations into a den of Appalachian culture, violent times between world wars and tales of a man I believed I knew — discoveries, like dust, ever-building.

Easy to understand how Alice felt. Too tall for the door, too small to reach the key, then to encounter a caterpillar asking

*Who are you?*

when you’ve already changed several times since morning.
GASLIGHT & VINTAGE SIGN, PARIS

Roger Camp
THE SLIP
Pam Kress-Dunn

In the fitful glow of the bedside gaslight, he spies her tantalizing new garment. Sewn of silk the color of a conch shell’s curved interior, hung by one lace strap on the bathroom door’s brass hook, it beckons. Lingerie, he thinks. Finally she has purchased something sexy. It could be something from that siren shop at the mall, or maybe she sent for it, choosing its warm color, its brief length just to the thigh, intercepting the tender package at the door. She must have hung it there to entice him, a signal as forceful as a quiet metronome, making his heart beat a seductive hymn to the underthings of women, of wives, of girls all grown up and ready.
Spying her as she slips into her usual flannel, he asks with studied calm, *Why not wear that peignoir tonight?* 
*That?* she says, confused. *That’s my mother’s old slip; I found it in her things at the nursing home.* The light dims, the silk turns sour and twisted, and the beat of his heart goes all uneven.
MY aunt and uncle’s grandfather clock lives by the back door. With its mistimed metronome, never chiming on the hour but always chiming every hour, consistent, at least, in its mistakenness of time, the grandfather clock sings, 3:06, 4:06, 5:06. My aunt and uncle inherited both the clock and the house from my grandparents. With peeling paint and whining floorboards, the house holds time. In my mother’s childhood, it once stood stoic and silent and strong and young. Beams uncracked, foundations solid. The clock sings of passing hours, passing weeks, passing years; the house collects the songs like memories in its bones. The people go about their days. Once the grandparents, until they passed, then the children, until they grew. Now the great-grandchild, my cousin once removed, runs and plays and lives and loves in this house. The clock sings. An errand to run, a bus to catch, a meeting of most importance. It’s all of most importance. All busyness and urgency. For years my aunt kept a magnet on the fridge of a cartoon woman
calling a friend while writing a card while cooking a meal while helping with homework while wearing high heels. My aunt hung a note below which read: “It’s okay to say no.” Time slips and we allow it, busy busy, preoccupied by a busyness we never invited in but also never sent away. The guest that just won’t leave. Grandfather remembers every hour off the hour; 6:06, sings the clock. The characters have changed, but the set remains the same. The grandfather, William, once played the lead. Now his great-grandson, William, takes the stage. Age three, he does not know he steals the show. Or maybe he does know. The master bedroom, once painted cotton white, now the color of chamomile. The stove, once gaslit, now electric. An addition added. A staircase repaired. The driveway paved. William laughs. Grandfather sings, 7:06.
GASLIT NAPALM FIREPOWER DEMONSTRATION EXPLOSION 1968

Robert Gersztyn
VISION TEST
Devon Balwit

I thought I remembered ordinary folk—mothers, fathers, hip-slung babies in straggling clusters, down at the heels, nothing to warrant soldiers marching like metronomes. Wrong, wrong, wrong, he says. Like plague-infested blankets, like severed heads, they are coming over the walls, he says. Like cholera, they will slip in with the tap water. He tweaks the knobs until, gas-lit, I see malevolence. I thought I remembered Mickey Mouse backpacks and Velcro shoes, slung duffels and tired faces, my own great-grandparents seasick on boats. Wrong, wrong, wrong, he says. You’ve always been here, shining like gilt, like the righteous in the fiery furnace. I thought I remembered gratitude, someone lifting me when I was done in, a fold-out couch in the spare room. Wrong, wrong, wrong, he says. You are self-made, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. I thought I remembered a child’s instinct, shared fear, shared comfort. If I squint, I can almost make it out.
Say God is the music we strain to hear
above the cries of Rachel (Maria,
Sethe) mourning her comfortless children.
the phantom tone huddled behind false walls.
the melody whispered, yet quickly hushed,
when following stars north by the rivers
of Babylon and the Mississippi.
the flat rhythm we fear: a merciless
metronome taps the haunting tempo, keeps
quarter notes aligned like necks in nooses,
or bodies slipping below placid waves.
we tilt our heads to hear it: the lament
demanded in a strange land, the hope-song
so sweet, so faint, we fear it gaslights grace.
SWIMMER WITH PLANT
Katrina Slavik
I remember the way it was and who I wasn’t. Time has a way of tricking you to believe the thought that you can peel apart the sack in which you were raised and emerge from it without the blood. We’re all a just a little bit ashamed. All determined. Each of us waiting to lick the finger and pinch the flame, bury the gaslight away. Mother plants herbs to remind herself that some dirt is pretty, some things grow, slip quickly out of the shells in which they first breathe. So she paints a picture, understands me. Despite what she gives me, despite what I don’t want, maybe we’re the same. Two hearts beating like a metronome you can’t hear over the fire.
NIGHT
Katrina Slavik
picked him up just past Elk City. Starry night was ahead, but the sun was sneaking up behind, lifting the veil. It’d be cold for another several hours, though. He didn’t have a coat, and his body was shivering.

When I pulled up beside, he struggled with the door, so I reached over and swung it wide. He bounced heavily on the seat and started blowing on his hands to warm them, filling the truck with the stale odor of cheap whisky. His cheeks were ruddy, flushed by the cold and covered with red stubble that resembled a flared-out porcupine around his mouth and neck. His eyes were bloodshot and jittery.

“Where you going, brother?”

“Goodnight, Texas.”

His voice was sorta hollowed out, like he was speaking from down a long, empty tunnel.

“I can drop you at Groom, where they got that giant cross.”
He cackled loudly for several seconds and then nearly whispered, “Sure, I got sins to repent anyway.”

I revved the truck and lurched back onto I-40.

I came in from Memphis, had been driving since after dinner the night before. Headed home to see my pa, who was slowly withering away. Relentless, his sickness was taking things one at a time, and he’d asked my brother if I was gonna come before the end, so despite everything he done, here I come a-running. The hitcher patted my leg, and the strength in his grip was unsettling. He winked.

“You know, you really shouldn’t be pickin’ up road ramblers like me, but I ‘preciate it nonetheless. You mind if I catch a few z’s while we go. I been walkin’ a bit, see. My bones are groaning and my spirit’s numb.”

“Sure.”

I’d hoped for some conversation. My momma used to cry, “Drive on, don’t stop,” but I always disobeyed, and I’d met quite a few interesting characters through the years. Oh, well.

“You mind if I play the radio, then?”

“Nope.”

And quick as a light switch, he was out, head and face smashed against the cold window, and he didn’t move for over an hour.

I clicked on the dial, and there was Sawyer Brown crooning away about a daddy who understood just what his son was going through ‘cause he’d walked in them same shoes, and I chuckled to myself, thought about Pa, and how he left us when I was a child. He didn’t know nothin’ ‘bout me.

After a long while the guy started kind of stinkin’ it up in there
if you know what I mean, and I had to open my window for a bit, and the music from the radio was temporarily muffled by the wind. But after a few minutes I rolled it up and there was a news report about a family who’d gone missing up at Foss Lake, north of Elk City. When they dredged up the car two days later, each of the five members of the family was carefully seated and strapped in, and every one of them charred from head to toe.

You ever get that tingly feeling somethin’ ain’t right? Well, I did, and started lookin’ over my partner there leaning against the window, noticed the knife at his belt, and a deep staining at the lower end of the sheath. Coulda been paint, moisture, simply wear, but I got it in my mind it was blood. Then I started seeing smudges all over his skin. Was he just dirty, or was it smoke?

After a while I saw that giant white cross in Groom gleaming ahead, all lit up, and scared as I was, it was like a beacon. I felt ridiculous but started to pray, asked God to save me from serial killers, you know, and also for the heart to forgive my pa. I said “amen” just as my passenger woke with a jolt, and he smirked and gave a chuckle.

“You prayin’?”

I couldn’t get rid of this guy quick enough, but then I did the strangest thing and offered to take him all the way home. He clapped that big hand on my knee again, hard, and that tingly disquiet swelled into full terror. I forced a calm demeanor, though, tried to carry on a conversation.

“What’s in Goodnight?”

“My ol’ papa. He in the ground there, but I been thinkin’ a lot on his passing, and wondering if it coulda been different, if I
shoulda maybe let him hold on a little longer. I wanna go sit and talk with him awhile. I gotta say I’m sorry for a lotta stuff.”

My eyes were straight ahead, my knuckles white. My voice was unsteady.

“It’s tough when the end is near, and it hurts to see family suffer. What was it killed him?”

“I guess that bastard got what he deserved, and to be truthful, I didn’t much mind watching him suffer. He was reapin’ what he sowed. I guess we all will, even you. Speaking of—where you headin’?”

Now a gentle rain started to fall, and clouds down south near Goodnight started rippling with lightning, which came to us later on as a low rumble. I turned on the wiper blades and their metronome swooshing sameness sounded like the marching boots of a death battalion. My shoulders and chest were tensing, my blood pressure rising.

“My pa lives down near Dawn, southwest of Amarillo. He’s dying.”

“Death is relentless, and hungry. Sometimes it comes sooner than we think. I’ve seen the peckerwood up close a few times, even got his heavy soot all over my hands before, but he ain’t nabbed me yet. Maybe soon.”

A long silence, except my heart was beating fast. I was too afraid to look at him.

“Where you from?”

“Well, I grew up in Goodnight. But lately I been up in Foss, out by the lake.”

“Foss Lake?”
“Yeah, pretty place, nice and quiet, red dirt right up to the waters. I was staying with a nice family up there, but like always, I started drinkin’ and acting like an angry fool, so they asked me to leave. I don’t much blame ‘em, but it still got under my skin being tossed out like that. I’m afraid we didn’t leave on good terms.”

He quieted and there was only the steady patter of the rain, the trudging swoosh of the wipers, and a pounding ringing in my ears. It was lulling, and even in the terrified moment, I was dazed. Then the gas light came on with a loud ding, and I jumped.

“Looks like we’re near the end of the road, brother. Take this left.”

Like a fool I obeyed, turning onto the country lane, and mud squirmed under my wheels. For ten minutes we proceeded along the chilling solitude of an unpaved road, its bumps and ruts jostling the truck like a boat in a riptide. The storm increased to a roar, pounding like the wrath of God, and the truck tires slipped and swam left to right from gully to gulch until they spun with a whine and we finally yielded to the storm.

We were on the outskirts of Goodnight, and it was morning, but there was no light. I knew then I wouldn’t make it to Dawn and my pa.

“Get out,” he said.

My eyes were on the knife, but I opened the door. I wanted to run, but where? We were miles from anything. He pointed toward a dark shadow looming against the struggling light of morn.

“Up the road there on the left is my uncle Billy’s place. Tell him Earl’s finally come home, and I’m over at my papa’s grave confessin’ all my sins. He’ll fix you up, get you out of the mud and
on your way with a full tank. Thanks for the ride, brother. I been pretty deep underwater lately, and you’ve helped me more than you know. Try and make peace with your pa, before it’s too late. I never did, and it’s made an awful bastard outta me.”

Then he stumbled down into the fields, and I saw a small square cordoned off by barbed wire. Inside the fence were several haphazard stones. A large cross stood taller than the rest, and tears of relief wet my cheeks. I silently offered gratitude to the Divine, then slogged through the mud to Uncle Billy’s.

By the time he had me out and filled up, the rain was gone, the sun was up, and the murmuring clouds were in full retreat. Earl was hunched beneath the cross, quaking with regret. I waved and drove away, toward Dawn.
HURRICANE LAMP
Geri Mathewson
ICH BIN EIN KIND
Robert Michael Oliver

Guns bark outside my window, a siren swoops low over linden and oak, the moon spits its light.

I cuddle my wife, spoon her crescent belly; her breath a metronome to my yearning.

A child sleeps tucked in a bed two stories high; she dreams of lessons taught by brown bears.

A neighbor rails: “Get out! Get out!” His girlfriend slips into her Nissan, disappears.

The window rattles; its glass stutters a symphony of riot. I hug my wife even tighter.

Across the world a gaslight flickers, my daughter wakes, and the mockingbird sings.
The whistle blows.

And she pulls away
from the last town for the night.
Blurring clouds slip across
the rusty seams in her skin,
cooling the steam in her breath,
as she chugs past midnight trees
and newborn snowflakes
burying their day-old kin.

She sways
to the metronome beat beneath,
re-tracing twin lines
of outstretched steel,
her path lit by the gaslight shimmer
of old moon’s glow
framed within the borders
of a tired winter sea.
AFTER YOU LEFT
Lora Keller

She mothers your son,
the metronome of his needs --
Breast, swaddle. Swaddle breast. Until she can’t.
She tucks towels beneath his door. The oven valve

in her palm hisses.
She kneels, bows, exhales, her white slip bared. Once gaslight

fuel for street lamps,
now tinder for another fury raw, unbound.
UNTITLED

Guilherme Bergamini
A ballerina spins across the library on the tips of her boots, clad not in tutu, but in coat and hat. Her exuberance the evidence she’s new to class. Fresh lesson muscle memory needing to express as it had when I paused on walks in half-moon poses, attempting to inhabit what I’d learned in yoga.

In Zumba, we were metronomes swaying back and forth, ticking in sync with the instructor and the novelty of harmony. Even when I sideways slipped and chipped my ankle, I tried to keep the momentum, knowing I’d need to wait to start again.
The only year I lived alone,
the gaslight on my stove
made a stuttered click. Slow-to-ignite
flame beneath concocted stews.
I was afraid, not of the dark entrance
leading to my stairwell,
but of solitary shapeless hours.

Instead of waltzing a pen across the card table
I used for desk and dining, I loitered
at my boyfriend’s basement apartment.
He grew grapefruit trees from seeds.
A clamor of sprouts extended
toward the window.
THE summer was hot and dry as usual, and we were bored. Jeff and I crouched in a patch of gravel next to the back fence, hunched over an enormous white plastic bucket that brimmed with a putrid mustard-colored mixture of expired motor-oil, discarded anti-freeze, stagnant paint-thinner, and whatever other noxious chemicals eight-year-old boys could get their hands on. It smelled horrendous and we loved it because we had created it.

Jeff stirred the concoction with a large stick as I cupped a large green grasshopper in my hands. I had met Jeff at the fire hydrant in front of my house when I was two, and we’d been stuck together like barnacles ever since.

Our plan was simple: pull the fidgety creature’s legs off one at a time and watch it drown in the homemade ooze. Countless insects had shared similar fates, but before we could even remove one leg from its socket, my older brother sauntered outside.

Matt wore a pair of cut-off shorts and a gray t-shirt, along with
a smug look. He watched us, disgust mounting on his face.

“You’re doing it wrong,” he said, grabbing the stick from Jeff.

“This is the proper way you stir the brew.”

He snatched the grasshopper from my hands, pulling one of its legs off. Matt had impeccable technique. I couldn’t peel a banana as well as he could amputate an insect leg.

He flicked the grasshopper into the bucket. The poor creature kicked with its remaining hind leg, making tiny circles in the slime.

“You want to know something else?” he said, drowning the grasshopper in the mixture with the end of his stick. He stood silent for a moment, relishing his power. Then he stated, “Sarah is a robot.”

Jeff and I stared at Matt, dumbfounded. Because Matt was three years older than us, we deferred to him on almost everything. If he could teach us how to torture a grasshopper, perhaps he told the truth about Sarah being a robot.

“She is not,” Jeff said. “She’s not a robot.”

“It’s true,” Matt said.

“No, it’s not.” Jeff said, dismayed. “She’s my sister.”

“Why are you defending her?”

“I’m not.”

“Do you love her or something?”

“No!” Jeff screamed.

“Do you want to marry her?”

Jeff looked at Matt with horror and swallowed. My brother had a way of silencing people. Jeff knew he would be ridiculed for days, weeks, months—perhaps even years—if he admitted to loving his sister.
“That’s gross,” Jeff said. “I don’t want to marry anybody.”

Sarah was ten—a year younger than Matt—and had two long brown braids that stretched down her back. She played with My Little Ponies and Glo Worms and Cabbage Patch Kids. We didn’t like her very much at all.

Matt and his best friend, Mike, had seen Sarah biking down the middle of our street. She had created an intricate slalom course with her colored chalk and had crashed into a lamppost as she attempted to maneuver the tight turns.

“Mike says she should’ve been bleeding out her eyes and ears. But she just brushed herself off, climbed back on, and biked away like nothing happened!”

We stared at him, mouths agape as he dispensed his wisdom.

“Mike says only a robot could have survived that kind of crash. He says robots don’t feel pain and they don’t bleed and they don’t cry.”

Mike was a wily character with cowlicked hair and a mind like a snake. He went to the same school as Sarah and he either hated her, or he loved her.

“I’ve seen her bleed before,” Jeff said. “I pushed her into the coffee table and she bled on the carpet. She cried and everything.”

“Mike says some robots have fake blood to make them look like they’re humans. It was probably tomato juice.”

Matt continued divulging Mike’s theories about Sarah. He explained how Sarah had a metal skeleton underneath her skin and a computer for a brain. How robots didn’t have any friends and how Sarah didn’t have any friends either. How robots drank oil for food and their batteries had to be recharged every night. By the end
of his diatribe, he had convinced us Sarah was a robot.

“Why didn’t I find this out sooner?” said Jeff.

“It’s because you’re an idiot,” Matt said as he dashed out the gate.

Jeff and I didn’t say much after Matt left. We stared into the heavy greenish-yellow sludge, meditating on his words. Jeff sunk into deep thought, perhaps contemplating his robot sister like I was. I had never thought about Sarah being a robot. But it made sense. She didn’t have any friends. She always pried into our business. She wandered around the neighborhood doing strange things with skipping ropes. But sometimes she sketched us pictures of lions and tigers, and convinced us to dance to the Beach Boys, and it wasn’t so bad.

The next day was Saturday, and like usual I bounded down the street to Jeff’s house to watch cartoons. We had the house to ourselves because his parents went for breakfast on the weekends before disappearing for the day. Sarah tagged along with them.

On this particular morning, just as Cobra—an evil organization bent on world domination—was about to enslave GI-Joe and the human race with a top-secret machine that controlled the weather, there came a knock at the door. Matt and Mike stood on the doorstep.

“Can we watch cartoons?” Mike asked.

“Why don’t you watch them at your own house?” I said.

“Why don’t you shut your face before I beat you,” Matt said, mashing his fist into his hand.

Jeff and I darted glances at each other. My shoulders and legs had taken countless beatings as my brother held me down and
pummeled away. Matt often blocked the hallway and forced me to fight him so I could get to the bathroom. I had developed some immunity over the years, but I tried to avoid beatings. Matt was even more aggressive when Mike was around. He wasn’t bluffing.

We stepped back as they walked past us like they owned the place; it didn’t take long for the true nature of their visit to manifest.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Mike said, disappearing for an entire cartoon.

When Mike got back, Matt announced, “Now I have to go to the bathroom.”

Doors opened and slammed shut. Cupboards were emptied. They rifled through nooks and crannies and knocked things over. At one point, I went upstairs and saw Mike lying in Sarah’s bed.

Eventually, a loud bang rang out, followed by a deafening crash. A fury of footsteps clamored down the staircase.

“Where is it?” Mike demanded.

“Where’s what?” said Jeff.

“We know Sarah’s a robot. Show us her underground lair and no one gets hurt.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Look in her room if you want to. But she doesn’t let me go in there.”

“It’s not in her stupid room,” Matt said in a huff. “All we could find were her stupid novels and ponies. I found a stupid coloring book. It’s full of stupid pictures of horses and eagles.”

“I broke a shelf off the wall,” Mike said. “I tried putting it back, but it’s really broken.”

Jeff covered his face with his hands—there would be hell to
pay when his mom and dad got home.

Mike held a pair of yellow panties.

“Why do you have Sarah’s underwear?” I asked.

He ignored my question, scrunching them into a ball, shoving them into his pocket. “Where does that go?” he said, pointing to a doorway in the kitchen.

Jeff said, “The basemen—”

Matt and Mike bounded downstairs, rummaging through everything all over again, ransacking the place—overturning sofa cushions, scouring boxes, even emptying the pockets around the pool table.

Soon they found the clammy darkness of the furnace room, with its uninviting concrete floor and unfinished patchwork walls.

Mike convinced himself the furnace was important. He approached the mammoth contraption, peering into its many vents. The gaslight burned a deep blue, giving off a faint hiss.

Mike pronounced, “This is the door to Sarah’s underground lair.”

“That’s the furnace,” Jeff said.

“This grate leads to her underground tunnels.”

“I’ll bet her tunnels stretch everywhere,” Matt said. “You can probably get to other basements from here.”

Mike agreed. “Basements, schools, the confectionary…the center of the earth.”

I gazed at the furnace, imagining Sarah’s labyrinthine tunnels snaking and sprawling helter-skelter under the neighborhood.

Mike grabbed a screwdriver off Jeff’s dad’s workbench to pry a grate off the side of the furnace. He wedged himself inside
but inhaled a bunch of dust and hair and coughed until his eyes watered. Then he got his arm stuck.

Matt helped wrench his arm free.

“I need my dad’s power tools,” Mike said.


They scrambled up the stairs and the front door slammed shut.

Jeff and I stared into the furnace for a long time. I stuck my head into the vent, gazing around, convinced I could see Sarah’s tunnels. There were wires and knobs that looked robotic, vents and pipes stretching deep into the bowels of the earth. Jeff inspected it, too. A moment ago, it had been a simple furnace, but now he scratched his head with a forlorn look in his eyes. When Matt and Mike didn’t reappear, we slinked upstairs and finished cartoons.

Eventually, Sarah came home, parading through the living room and into the kitchen. She looked un-robotic in every way, which made it easier to believe she was hiding something.

“Why are you staring at me?” she asked, as she grabbed some bread with peanut butter from the fridge.

“No reason,” Jeff said, his eyes glued to his sister.

“Stop staring at me!”

We sat silently, watching.

I examined Sarah carefully, trying to glimpse wires or circuitry she’d forgotten to conceal. From the incredulous look on Jeff’s face, he did the same.

“STOP STARING AT ME!” Sarah screamed.

We continued staring at her until she grabbed her sandwich and stormed out of the kitchen, yelling for Jeff’s mom.

I walked home and opened the gate around the back of the
house, where Matt hollered from the garden. Fledgling tomato plants and snap peas surrounded him, along with a hubbub of bugs and birds. Shirtless and covered in grime, Matt held a shovel, digging furiously like a rabid groundhog. A substantial mound of earth had piled next to him and he stood in a hole up to his knees as the sun raged overhead.

“Get another shovel and help me dig,” he said, wiping the white, filmy sweat caked on his brow. “Mike’s digging at his house. You should call Jeff and get him digging too. With all of us digging, we’ll find Sarah’s tunnels faster.”

Without thinking, I ran inside, called Jeff, and told him to start digging. I returned outside, found a shovel, and joined in.

As my shovel broke the earth, I pictured Sarah’s tunnels zigzagging underneath the neighborhood. I shuddered at the fact that she could creep into my basement—sneak into my bedroom.

“How deep do you think they go?” I asked.

“That depends,” Matt said.

It was strange how friendly he could be when it was just the two of us, almost like a different person. He was even more convincing when he was nice.

“How deep do you think they go?” I asked.

“One many things.”

Matt pitched a load of dirt over his shoulder.

“Like what?”

“Let’s just say Sarah’s probably been to China.”

I had watched enough cartoons to know that was pretty deep.

“What if she’s in the tunnels when we find them?”

“Don’t worry,” Matt said. “I’ll protect you.”
It was comforting that Matt cared enough to save me from a robot.

We dug for a solid hour, with the steady beat of a metronome, taking turns in the sweltering heat. While one person slaved away in the dirt, the other rested and fetched water. We were a good team when we wanted to be. The hole opened wide enough for both of us to stand inside with the tops of our heads exposed. We made steady progress, until we hit a layer of clay. That’s when my parents got home.

“Sarah’s a robot,” I said.

“We want to find her tunnels,” Matt added.

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

My mom said, “You’ve ruined the cucumbers and dug up half my potatoes!”

“Did Mike put you up to this?” my dad asked. “What’s his obsession with Sarah? You’re lucky you didn’t cut a gas line and kill yourselves.”

That was the end of our digging.

“Fill in the hole,” my mom ordered.

“Then go to your rooms,” they said in unison.

The next day I tended the grasshopper stew in the late afternoon heat. My dad had mowed the lawn and left the remnants of a can of gas mixed with oil. There wasn’t much left, but it had an intriguing stench and blended nicely with the rest of the concoction. As I crouched beside the bucket and mixed, Jeff slipped up beside me with a carton of eggs he swiped from his kitchen.

“My sister’s a robot,” he said.

“I know.”
“She filled the hole I dug with water and floated some paper boats.”
“That’s because she doesn’t want you to find her tunnels.”
“What am I going to do?”
“I don’t know. We’ll figure it out.”
“I guess,” he said, rubbing his neck.

We spent the next half hour stooped over the giant white bucket, cracking eggs, mixing, and ruminating. I worried for Jeff. Living with a robot couldn’t be easy, or safe. When we finished with the eggs, we took turns sifting handfuls of sand into the mixture. The sun blazed above, bleaching everything, parching the weeds, burning our skin.

It didn’t take long before Matt and Mike appeared. They had spent the afternoon trailing Sarah around the neighborhood. She trekked to the park, the confectionary, and had played by herself in front of her house.

Mike said, “We hid in some bushes across the street and she screamed at us to stop following her!”

Matt added, “Only a robot with laser vision or radar hearing could have uncovered our hideout.”

“I can’t believe she tricked me for so long,” Jeff said.
“I can,” Matt said. “You’re an idiot.”

As Matt and Mike prattled on, Sarah traipsed into the backyard.

She wore a purple summer dress—covered in dirt and colored chalk—and bare feet. Her hair wasn’t in pigtails anymore; instead it fell in one long braid stretching well past her elbows.

Everyone stopped talking as Sarah marched forward, feet
crunching the gravel.

“Jeff,” Sarah said. “Mom says come home. You’re late for your haircut at Magicuts.”

“Tell her I’m not going,” he replied, crossing his arms, standing his ground.

Sarah stuck out her tongue and said, “Tell her yourself.”

She grabbed him by the shirt collar and tugged like she planned to pull him home.

“Go away, robot!” Jeff screamed, kicking her in the shin.

Sarah dug her nails deep into Jeff’s neck until his knees buckled and he fell to the ground, squealing.

I don’t know what came over me. Normally, I probably would have enjoyed watching Jeff and Sarah fight. But ever since I had found out Sarah was a robot, things were different. I needed to protect my friend.

“Die robot!” I screamed, flying at Sarah, tackling her.

Stones sprayed everywhere as we flailed around, a tangle of legs and arms and nails and teeth. Matt and Mike grabbed desperately at Sarah’s feet in an effort to subdue her. Sarah did her best to fight off the onslaught, screaming and wriggling. She might have freed herself, had Jeff not come to his senses and joined the fray. He wrestled with his sister’s arms, eventually pinning them to the ground with his knees.

When the dust finally settled, Sarah was hog-tied with an extension cord from the shed. She sat in the middle of the gravel patch, the sun beating on her, and nowhere to go.

I was surprised at how easy it was to catch a robot. But as Sarah writhed around in the rocks, I figured we’d made some sort
of mistake.

“Let me go!” she screamed, thrashing around, flaring up a cloud of dust and hot air.

“Calm down,” Mike instructed.

Sarah scrunched her face, shrieking uncontrollably like a banshee. I worried the neighbors might hear, so I tried to cover her mouth but she bit me.

It took her a long time to realize we weren’t going to let her go, and she tired herself out rolling around.

Matt said, “We know you’re a robot.”

“What are you talking about?” she said, out of breath.

Mike listed the evidence: “The bike accident, the fake blood, the secret tunnels, the underground lair… ring any bells, robot?”

He walked over to the white plastic bucket. Mike put on my mother’s gardening gloves and grabbed a can from the ground, dipping it in the toxic sludge. The ooze trickled over the brim, dripping on the ground. He took it over to Sarah and put it in front of her face.

“Drink it,” Mike commanded, shoving the container under her nose. “Prove you’re not a robot.”

The potent mixture filled the air. The situation had escalated quickly. It all felt wrong. I hoped Sarah was a robot, for her own sake.

Sarah evaded the container, twisting her face, tears staining her cheeks.

“I’m not drinking that,” she said.

“Yes, you are,” said Matt. “Robots can drink anything.”

“I’m not a robot!” she screamed. Sarah tried regaining her
composure. But she couldn’t. She fell over in a heap and cried.

Matt grabbed Sarah by the hair and attempted to tilt her head back as she struggled against his will. Mike put the container to her pursed lips. There was no way she would willingly open her mouth.

Mike had hold of Sarah’s face—squeezing her cheeks with his thumb and forefinger in an effort to pry her mouth open—when my dad strolled into the backyard. Had he not arrived, Sarah probably would have had to get her stomach pumped. Maybe worse.

Instinctively, I ran, but he grabbed me before I had even gone three steps. Matt played innocent, while Jeff and Mike stood stunned. Sarah lay, sobbing.

“Untie her,” he said.
We untied her.
“Say you’re sorry,” he said.
We said sorry.
“Say it again.”
We did.
Sarah didn’t say anything the whole time.
A look came across my dad’s face I’d never seen before. A terrifying look.
“If I ever see you touching Sarah—or any girl for that matter—without her permission, I’ll spank you until your noses bleed.”
He apologized to Sarah and sent her home.
“What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you always following Sarah?”
“We’re not,” Mike replied, shifting nervously, looking at his feet. “I don’t. I don’t know.”
“Do you like her or something?”
“No.”
“I’m calling your parents and telling them what happened. Now get out of here!”
Jeff and Mike turned and ran.
“You need to pour out the bucket. But not here. Biohazards have to go to the dump.”
We protested the destruction of our life’s work, but once my dad made a decision, he never changed his mind.
The next day, Matt and I stood in the backyard with an empty bucket and nothing to do. We needed to get out of the blaring sun and the clouds of grasshoppers, so we undertook building a fort at the side of the house. We created a rudimentary plan and raided the shed for building materials. We actually built a pretty good fort, with a roof and everything.
Jeff’s mom sent him over after supper to search for Sarah’s favorite wristband. It had fallen off in the scuffle, tangled in some weeds next to the back fence. I showed Jeff the fort, and he went back home.
To our surprise, Sarah came over a few minutes later. She wore a clean yellow dress and her hair was swept back with a blue headband. She dragged an enormous green plastic bag. Jeff walked sheepishly behind her, staring at the ground in front of him.
“Jeff told me about your fort,” Sarah said. “I brought something for it.”
Jeff shrugged his shoulders and stared at his feet.
As Sarah inched toward us, I cringed. Matt’s face went white. She had revenge in that bag, and I knew we deserved it. I almost
hoped for it.

Sarah ripped the bag open and started spreading grass seed on the ground. Soon we were all spreading grass seed and talking about the lush carpet of greenery that would shortly be growing. At one point, Sarah went home and brought back some lawn chairs and a little table. She really fixed up that fort.

Sarah wasn’t a robot.

She simply had the misfortune of being the only girl on the block.
CHOOSE AUTHENTIC

GJ Gillespie
There’s the peace that eludes us: moon slipping out of view, silver-sheathing itself in coiled mountain-vined sky, and there’s pain that presses down: breaking tide smoothing rocks, ancient metronome carving sunken valleys. A turtle carries its spine within its shell. Every movement a miracle in the pleasure of simple things, of jutting your head out from under the home you spent a lifetime building, the sun flattening its palms against your mottled skin. There’s the warmth that forgives whatever you ask of it: gaslight heat that remembers every touch, fire flickering blue, ghost tails leaving yawns of ash.

A hand leaves something of itself on every rock, every brick that once was earth, once was clay.
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End