



SPRING 2024

Acknowledgments

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Cover art and journal design
by Samantha Ray

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Nouvelles de Cankville

a poem en français
by Melanie Dugas

Il y avait un temps
la galerie avait beaucoup de monde
toujours de café et gossip en français
les enfants voulaient savoir
pourquoi tout le monde
Connaissait la nouvelle de Cankville
Mais, nous sommes restés avec les oreilles anglaises.
Tous les enfants ont pu faire
Chercher de coquilles de locuste
Et jouer au foot
Tu avais toujours déjeuner fini pour nous
Et du thé et pas plus de toi
Traditions perdues
Qui connaît ce qui se passe à Cankville?
Et qui voudrait prendre ta place
Qui sait comment tu as fait?
Il y avait un temps
la galerie avait beaucoup de personnes
Avec le français parlants
Asteur, nous n'avons pas de compagnie
Et seulement des mots anglais.

Nouvelles de Cankville

English translation
by Melanie Dugas

There was a time
When the porch had many people
always coffee and French gossip
the children wanted to know
how everyone knew the news about Cankton
But we stayed with English ears.
All the children could do
Was search for locust shells
And play kickball
You always had lunch ready for us
And tea for us to drink.
Now, we are older
No more tea and no more of you
Lost traditions
Who knows what's happening in Cankton?
And who would want to take your place
Who knows how you did it?
There was a time
When the porch had many people
With the French conversations
Now, we have no company
And only English words.

Ordinary

a poem
by Clara Hall

People tend to use the words "rare" and "beauty" together,
when they are not even related.

I see beauty everywhere--

glass crunching underfoot on a narrow side street,
sunlight creating a shatter-sparkling
mural in the mud,

the woman in line at the grocery store,
carrying heavy bags and dark shadows
under her eyes soft blue,

a forbidding winter day,
where tree branches stand out like bold strokes
against the dry-erase board sky,

a boy furiously pedaling a bike uphill,
smiling wide once gravity takes over,
the ride down worth the struggle.

People often speak about "rare beauty,"
but it is all around, it is so close.
Look outside--

it's your next-door neighbor sitting on the porch,
holding a calico cat,
stroking it with the rhythm of the rocking chair.

Ellipsis

a poem

by Dr. Garrett Jeter

For the unsaid...

E...llip...sis
Between the lines...of space
Lies...meaning unsaid
An understanding...between the lines
An agreement...not to tell
Eternal pact...with no ink
What it says...what it means
Fantasy...Reality
A notion...What is really Truth
Looking...seeing
Hearing...listening
One speaks...one knows in resonance
One sighs...One knows without learning
Across the divide...Unity
Separation...without separateness
I speak...You know already
You speak...I capture your thought before you rescue it from The Unconscious
Boundless space...bounded
Bounded space...unbounded
Between the lines...its own Tongue
Between the lines...its own Nous
Between the lines...its own Will
Between the lines...its own Universe
Between the lines...Space Eternal
El...lip...s...is

Where to, Worm?

a poem

by Dr. Neil Johnston

(*Hamlet* Act 5, Scene 1)

Does that
wet Tarmac
call out worms
onto Route 12 South
this wet, mild morning?
Why, Worm, now clean
from all signs of soil
--your native, natural state--
Now slick and glistening,
Why slide along, searching
For...for what? Why
forsake your dark,
Nutrient-laden land for
this dark, we desert?
Are you drowning from
weariness with
your daily earthy diet?
Do the bitumen and stones
Promise some celestial menu--
A Nirvana for nematodes?
Have you a date with
your mate to copulate
And make some more of you?
Who knows the mind,
motives, and worth
of a worm?

I know the wet asphalt holds
The contract on your hours.

That right-front mounted
Eighteen-inch Yokohama
Steel-belted radial spins
Down the road with its
Lethal partners, ready to
Transpose you into a shape
More suitable for microbial
Life living in the cracks and
Crevasses of your
tarmac grave.

Mortal Amenity

a poem

by Keirsten LeJeune

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." -Mark 10:25

My throne has manacled me with its vice.
My mirrors mock my thin withering veins.
I moan for amenities I don't own.
I cling to every cold clock I conserve.

Did I delay, or do I have more time?
My Mentor must be many miles far,
Too far for me to ever further meet
beyond my meaningless mortal confines.

Much more I crave but consider the cost.
Do I dare to distribute and depart
from the comforts of my massive domain
to carelessly flee from my mortal bane?

I crave.

But is it too late...?

A Letter to Louie

an elegaic poem
by Samantha Ray

Black and white,
a sweet sight.
Now ashen powder and in blue,
I can't believe that you
are in there,
your final resting place of clay.

When I think of you,
I feel joy,
your memory soothes me.

When I think of you,
sweet boy,
my grief overwhelms me.

You are the shadow in my periphery,
the sound that I almost heard,
the subject of my dreams.

The moment you slipped away,
I shattered,
and I miss you.

Siempre Tuya

a prose poem en español
by Aiora Rivas Preciado

Durante años me sentí sin valor y perdida.

Sentía el dolor de despertar sin un propósito y dormirme entre lágrimas.

Pensé que nadie me amaría jamás ya que ni siquiera podía amarme a mí misma.

Mi terapeuta lo llamaba "ansiedad con potencial depresivo".

Yo lo llamaba lección de Dios. Más tarde lo llamé ira de Dios. Eventualmente empecé a creer que era obra del diablo.

Representaba un alma pobre en un cuerpo golpeado fuera donde fuera.

Hablaba desde la ira y amaba desde el miedo.

Hice todo lo que estaba en mi poder para escapar de los oscuros pensamientos encerrados en mi mente y pronto me di cuenta de que no había a dónde ir. Todo ya estaba tocado por la oscuridad.

Le pedí al Señor que tuviera misericordia, que detuviera la obra del diablo en mi cuerpo humano y que me bendijera con Su gracia.

Le pedí que terminara con mi sufrimiento como si se tratara de un caballo enfermo al que hay que sacrificar.

Y entonces... comenzó la verdadera pesadilla.

Durante más de una década estuve en una relación tóxica.

Me agotaba.

Me mataba un poco cada día, como beber una cantidad diaria de veneno durante años.

No tenía a nadie con quien enfrentar esto. Nadie con quien hablar o incluso llorar.

Mi única escapatoria era escribir y así decidí ser honesta por primera vez y escribir esta carta a mi compañero:

"Nunca te amé, nunca.

De hecho, te evitaba.

Mis amigos decían que no eras para mí, y me convencí de ello.

Cuando esos amigos, tan temporales como tú, me dejaron, fue cuando viste tu oportunidad para volver a mí.

Sabías que no podía decir que no... Sabías lo profundo que era mi dolor. Estaba perdida y tú dijiste que me ayudarías a encontrarme.

Después de acostumbrarme a tu presencia, empecé a respetarte, amarte y entenderte.

Vi tu deseo de mostrarme una nueva forma de vivir.

Eramos tú y yo. Yo y tú. Y nadie más.

En algunas ocasiones tuvimos que separarnos.

Durante mis clases, en el gimnasio, en el trabajo, durante las visitas de mi familia...

Pero realmente sentía que estabas muy conectado a mí. Pensé que éramos uno.

No era yo misma sin ti a mi alrededor.

No podía estar sin ti aunque no quisiera. Aunque no te quisiera.

Eso es lo que tú me decías, y me convencí de eso.

Te conozco desde hace una década ya.

Los fines de semana de este último año fueron todos tuyos. No los pasé con nadie más. ¡No me dejabas!

De cierta manera, pensé que así debía ser.

De hecho, eras extremadamente celoso.

Cada vez que alguien entraba en mi vida, discutíamos.

Cada vez me dejabas prometiendo no volver.

Siempre volvías.

No sé qué me dolía más... Acostumbrarme a vivir sin ti y encontrarte de nuevo cuando ni siquiera me reconocía o vivir contigo pensando que era un castigo que merecía.

Si realmente debe ser así para siempre... Si no importa lo que pase, voy a terminar siendo tuya; sin escape, sin alternativa... Aprendamos a convivir.

Disfrutaré nuestro tiempo separados y más el tiempo que pasemos juntos.

Respétame y dame tiempo para aprender a amarte.

Sé que ahora no te valoro, pero algún día lo haré.

"Con amor para ti, SOLEDAD."

Y me liberé.

No sané mentalmente de un día para otro. Fue un proceso y un desafío, pero estaba decidida.

Necesitaba entenderme para saber cómo arreglarme.

Y así es como comenzó mi viaje porque finalmente tenía una razón para seguir adelante.

Tenía que encontrar respuestas a mis preguntas y soluciones a mis problemas.

Tendré fe por encima de mis creencias y amor sobre mis miedos.

Ese ha sido mi mantra desde entonces y mi legado.

Siempre Tuya

English translation
by Aiora Rivas Preciado

For years I felt worthless and lost.

I felt the pain of waking up without a purpose and going to sleep in tears.

I thought no one would ever love me since I could not even love myself.

My therapist called it "anxiety with depressive potential."

I called it God's lesson. Later I called it God's anger. Eventually I started to believe it was the devil's handiwork.

I was representing a poor soul in a beaten body everywhere I would go.

I would speak from anger and love from fear.

I did everything that was in my power to escape the dark thoughts enclosed in my mind and soon I realized there was nowhere to go. Everything was already touched by darkness.

I asked the Lord to have mercy, to stop the devil's work on my human body and bless me with His grace.

I asked Him to end my suffering like a sick horse that must be put down.

And then... the real nightmare began.

For more than a decade I was in a toxic relationship.

It drained me.

It killed me a little every day, like drinking a daily amount of poison for years.

I had no one to face this with. No one to talk to or even cry with.

My only escape was writing and so I decided to be honest for the first time and write this letter to my partner:

"I never loved you, ever."

In fact, I was avoiding you

My friends told me you were not the one for me, and I convinced myself of that.

When those friends, as temporary as you, left me, is when you saw your chance to come back to me.

You knew I could not say no... You knew how deep my pain was. I was lost and you said you would help me find myself.

After getting used to your stay, I started to respect you, love you and understand you.

I saw your desire to show me a new way of living.

It was you and me. Me and you. And nobody else.

On some occasions we had to be separated.

During my classes, at the gym, at work, during the visits of my family...

But I truly felt you were very connected to me. I thought we were one.

I was not myself without you around.

I was not able to be without you even if I did not want to. Even if I did not want you.

That is what you told me, and I convinced myself of that.

I have known you for a decade now.

The weekends of this last year were all yours. I did not spend them with anyone else. You would not allow me!

In a certain way, I thought that is how it was supposed to be.

Indeed, you were extremely jealous.

Every time someone would come into my life we argued.

Every time you left me promising not to come back.

You always come back.

I do not know what was more painful to me... Getting used to living without you and finding you again when I did not even recognize myself or live with you thinking that it was a punishment I deserve.

If it really must be this way forever... If no matter what I am going to end up being yours; without escape, without alternative... Let us learn how to coexist.

I will enjoy our time separated and more the time we spend together.

Respect me and give me time to learn how to love you.

I know I do not value you at this moment, but one day I will.

With love to you, "LONELINESS."

And I freed myself.

I did not heal mentally from one day to another. It was a process and a challenge, but I was determined.

I needed to understand myself in order to know how to fix myself.

And that is when my trip began because I finally had a reason to keep going.

I had to find answers to my questions and solutions to my problems. I will have faith over belief and love over fear.

This has been my mantra since then and legacy.

Overflow

a short story
by Bethany Nichols

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a small store that sold clay household items, and in that store lived a little clay gravy boat named Gary. He was small and tan with brown trim. His handle was chipped, his body was cracked, and he had lost his saucer long ago. But the little gravy boat still lived, so he did the same as every other clay piece in Mr. Carl's Shop. He sat still for customers and showed his best side, hoping to someday be bought and taken to a home where he would serve his purpose of holding and pouring gravy. But nobody wanted an ugly, broken gravy boat. Perhaps Mr. Carl felt sorry for him, and that's why he wouldn't throw him away. So, Gary mostly just sat, always conscious of his emptiness.

The other clay pieces in the shop were beautiful colors with intricate designs. The tea pots were bright colors with painted flowers, and the vases sported colorful stripes or polka dots. While waiting to be bought, the merchandise spent their free time partaking in a variety of activities. Some listened to music or sang in quartets, some played sports, mostly boxing and other dangerous games such as the wildly popular Tip-or-Totter competition in which participants would move as close to the counter's edge as possible without falling. Still others posed for the local newspaper photographer, who came once a week to take pictures of the more beautiful items for advertising. They did these things to fill their hours of loneliness and to feel important. But Gary wasn't interested in music, he couldn't risk injuring his fragile frame through sport, and he certainly wasn't beautiful enough to be photographed. So, what was the poor, sad, pitiful gravy boat to do?

One day, as he was taking a lonesome hop around the shop, Gary overheard the beautiful vase, Sondra, talking to Bill, the soap dish.

"What are you doing over the weekend, Sondra?" asked Bill. He was one of the more popular guys because he carried a new soap fragrance every day.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Sondra. "The new Spanish figurine, Carlos, asked me out to dance this Saturday. He says he'll teach me Flamenco! But I don't know. I'm so tired from the last photoshoot, you know." She fanned herself with an embroidered handkerchief. "I might retire to the back room for a while." The back room was where pieces went to be cleaned or to rest from the hubbub of the store's customers.

Sondra was by far the shop's most beautiful piece. She was a vase, but not just any vase. Her round form and exotic indentions called for more than simple color. She was painted gold, outlined in metallic gold, and embellished with a large, blush colored flower with a diamond for its center. Everyone knew the only reason Sondra had not been sold ages ago was because of her price tag. While she ached to rid herself of it, she agreed that she should not leave for as meager a price as the others. Sondra came in a set of two, but Katrina had already been sold to an expensive art collector. Gary saw Sondra's beauty and wondered why Mr. Carl bothered keeping *him* at all.

One day, Gary was sitting alone in one of the shop's corners, feeling sadder than normal when he heard Mr. Carl talking in the back room. Gary didn't see any customers around. Gary crept to the edge of the doorframe and peeked in. Mr. Carl held a polishing rag and was cleaning some antique teacups he had just received. Gary hopped through the doorway and slipped behind a big empty flowerpot to watch. Mr. Carl talked aloud as he chose another cup to polish. Nearby a man stood, leisurely listening with a peaceful yet understanding expression.

"I don't know how I'm going to make it. If I don't start selling everything I have soon, I'll be bankrupt by the end of the year." Mr. Carl's voice was low, but he sounded desperate.

The man nodded sympathetically.

"It's so hard," he continued quietly. "Without Emma." A single tear slid down his cheek, but he hastily wiped it away. "I know you promise to provide, Lord, so I will trust you." The discouraged storeowner laid down the rag and covered his face with his hands.

Poor Mr. Carl. He didn't deserve to struggle this way, losing his wife and now the store! He was always kind to the customers and never threw any of the merchandise away, even when the Tip-or-Totter athletes fell off their shelves and shattered.

He would always gently pick up every little piece and glue them back together the best he could. Now, the unfamiliar man was gently patting Mr. Carl's shoulder. It looked like he was crying too.

After a moment, the man walked away, and Mr. Carl continued polishing. When he finished cleaning the last teacup, he walked to the corner of the room and picked up the flowerpot from in front of Gary.

"How did you get there, little fellow?" asked the old man. He picked up Gary and held him in both of his hands, examining his damaged surface, his kind brown eyes roaming not with distaste but with compassion. "You may not be the prettiest thing, but in a way, you remind me of myself. Nothing's too broken for Jesus. He can take the most shattered gravy boat or the worst sinner and put us back together again." He set Gary back on the table and returned to his polishing work.

Gary's heart shifted slightly. What was loneliness before had turned into longing! If Jesus was good at fixing things, then Gary was in desperate need of his services! He needed to find Jesus!

That night when the shop was dark, Gary decided to start searching. He wondered if anyone else might know how to find Jesus, so he carefully hopped down from his shelf, and crept over to where the mugs were playing a card game.

"Do you know where to find Jesus? Have any of you ever seen him?" Gary asked. But they just grunted and ignored him. Then, he went to the soap dishes and repeated his request. Bill looked up from his magazine and said, "Who do you think I am, the Pope? Nope! I'm a bar of soap!" Then, he laughed his bubbly laugh.

After a couple more inquiries, Gary was just about ready to give up. Everyone just laughed at him or ignored him completely. "Jesus probably doesn't have time for me anyway," he mumbled miserably.

"Who are you looking for?" said a voice.

Gary turned and saw the same man who had listened to Mr. Carl earlier. He was very tall, but he bent down, and Gary could see his eyes shining, bright blue with flecks of green and yellow.

"I'm looking for Jesus. Do you know where He is?" Gary asked, close to tears.

"Why do you need to find Him?" the man asked gently.

"I need Him to fix me."

The man picked up the little gravy boat and said, "I am Jesus."

"Oh! Can you fix me?" Gary exclaimed. "Can you make me handsome like the other gravy boats?"

"Your cracks are scars from the pain in your life. I don't see them as ugly. Do you really want to be like the other gravy boats?" His eyes shone with compassion.

Gary paused. Of course, he wanted to be like the other gravy boats - didn't he? They were always laughing and joking with each other and playing games...But, Gary realized they weren't really happy. Underneath the laughter was a hardness, a superficial joy that soon evaporated into frustration and fights that often led to more cracks and scars. Jesus waited patiently as the little gravy boat pondered the unexpected question.

"Well, I want to be whole again," Gary answered at last.

"Ah... Wholeness. A good request." Jesus paused. "You will be whole again, Gary. Soon. But not now. Even if I were to fill in every crack, you would still be empty.

Gary whimpered a little. Why can't I be fixed now?

Jesus continued, "But I can give you something better, something that will fill you...LOVE." As he said the word, a bright blue liquid poured out of His mouth and splashed into the little gravy boat. Gary suddenly felt lighter and full. "Now, go share Me with everyone." Jesus's command struck joy into the little clay dish.

Gary went back to his shelf with a new perspective. He was so full of the special liquid that as he walked, he noticed that some spilled out onto the floor. He paused, slightly horrified to see some of it leaking out of his cracks! But rather than emptying, he felt the same amount still swishing near his brim. A little giggle came out, then another, and soon Gary was chortling with laughter, spilling more with each step. He had never felt so full of joy!

The next day, Gary went to tell the other plain or chipped clay items about what Jesus had given him. He no longer wished to be beautiful or popular because the gorgeous blue light shone like the sun. Soon, Gary noticed a brown mug and a chipped teacup also filled with love. Eventually, the beautiful pieces took notice! They wanted to know where these primitive objects had found something so spectacular to carry around. Some of them strategically stood near the love-carriers so that it would splash onto them, but those drops only made them desperately want their own supply. Finally, even Sondra went to Jesus, and the next morning, everyone saw her beauty from within.

As the light gradually filled the building, the shop began to attract more customers. While no one knew exactly why, the newspaper photographs of Mr. Carl's merchandise seemed to glow! After a few months, customers filled the shop daily, and now each one left with a brown bag, carrying home a bundle of love.

Mr. Carl was overwhelmed with the success. Bewildered and ecstatic, he praised the Lord, but only his merchandise could see that Jesus was smiling back at him just as brightly. After paying all his expenses, Mr. Carl still had enough to buy more antiques. He began to purposely invest in the broken clay pieces no one else wanted. And Gary made it his mission to splash them with love and tell them about Jesus. Gary still wondered if he would ever have a home of his own, but he decided to be content in Mr. Carl's shop and to continue spreading love for the rest of his life.

One morning, the bell above the shop door clinked, and a woman with two children entered. "Can I help you?" asked Mr. Carl from behind the counter.

"My family just moved to town, and some of our dishes broke in the move. Do you have a set of plates and bowls for ordinary use?" Mr. Carl showed the woman to a set of dishes near Gary. As the woman examined them, one of the children, a boy, looked around, and his eye fell on the plain little gravy boat.

"Mama, I like that! Can you get it down for me - please?" The mother reached up and set Gary down on the counter. "Don't touch, Arnold. Just look." she instructed.

While he probably couldn't see the blue liquid, Gary felt sure that the boy saw at least a blue glow. "Can we get this?" the boy asked. The mother contemplated a moment. "I suppose so. We don't have a gravy boat." A few minutes later, Gary lay in a brown bag, wrapped snugly in thick paper. He was so excited! He could hardly believe that after all these years he would have a real family!

At home, there was a father, a toddler, and a little black dog. Instead of a shelf, now Gary sat on the dining room table, and every time the mother cooked gravy, he got to hold it and pour it onto everyone's plate. It was a wonderful job, and Gary enjoyed it thoroughly. Gary still carried the blue liquid, and anytime he poured some out, it automatically refilled, so he never ran out of Love.

The Guest

a short story
by Clara Hall

He was the boy nobody invited.

The birthday party was carrying on full force. The doors onto the back patio were flung wide open to let in the breeze and allow guests to mingle inside and out. The pink-frosted birthday cake perched untouched on a table under the lattice, surrounded by a tempting number of unopened gifts. Children zigzagged about the backyard playing a game of hide-and-seek while the adults lounged in wicker chairs on the patio.

"We've never had a lovelier summer!"

"Why yes, it couldn't be a nicer day for Millie's party."

Millie was turning ten, and she was It for hide-and-seek. She had not wanted to be It— she almost refused and made someone else, on the grounds of being the birthday girl. But since she was now double digits, she thought it was her duty to be the bigger person. After all, some of her party guests were her baby cousins, and the last thing she wanted was a fit thrown at her party. Millie squinched closed her brown eyes, sat on a swing, and began counting. Her guests dispersed like confetti.

When she opened her eyes, he was the first thing she saw. He wasn't trying to hide. He looked like he had just dropped out of the sky and onto the middle of the lawn, where he stood still and small. He looked uncertain and a little bit lost. His head of wispy dirty-blond hair swiveled around, and then his gaze seemed to settle upon something.

Millie watched from her swing as he strolled over to the patio. The parents barely glanced at him, distracted by Millie's baby brother Jack toddling around. Millie ignored her friends as they took advantage of her stillness and peeked out from their hiding spots or bolted to base. The boy stood facing her birthday cake. He lifted his arm and began to reach towards the prize. Millie watched helplessly as his stuck-out finger crept closer and closer to the icing, ready to swoop down for the kill.

"Oh! You must be ready for us to cut the cake," Millie's aunt laughed as she walked over, having observed the near catastrophe. The boy's hand darted back and fell to his side. He gave a single nod.

The parents were already activating, as the dads had been eyeing the cake for a while. "Time to have cake and sing happy birthday!" Millie's mother, Mrs. Reynolds, called out. The game of hide-and-seek forgotten, children scrambled out of their hiding spots and flocked towards the patio. Millie found herself being dragged over and plopped in the special birthday chair behind the cake table. Birthday balloons tied to the back of the chair bumped against each other playfully in the breeze. Millie's mom began sticking all ten candles into the frosting in a perfect semicircle. The cake was so tall on its pedestal, Millie had to stretch up straight to see over it. She craned her neck, seeking out that one odd face in a sea of familiarity. There! But then her towering uncle blocked the boy from view.

Millie tapped her mother's shoulder and started to say, "Mom, that boy right there behind Uncle Da—" but was cut off by another parent asking Mrs. Abbott where to put the ice cream. Millie's dad hovered over her, snapping photos like the paparazzi as her mom lit each birthday candle. "Dad, see that kid—" she said, but it was too late. The partygoers burst into a rousing rendition of the birthday song, at more than one tempo and many different keys. As Millie's eyes went out to the warbling crowd, they settled upon the boy's face. He was now directly in front of her, surrounded by her friends and family on all sides. He wasn't singing at all; he was just standing there already clutching a paper plate and plastic fork he must have snatched from the table. There was a strange expression on his face, and his hair was in his eyes. Nobody seemed to notice that he was not singing. Nobody seemed to notice that he was out of place at all.

"Make a wish!" her dad said, grinning as he videoed. Millie glanced down at her cake and knew if she didn't blow soon, the flame on the candles would sputter out in the wind. Already wax was dripping down the sides of the candles and onto the frosting. She tucked her brown curls behind her ears and leaned forward, lips primed and ready as she struggled to come up with a good wish.

For a moment all Millie could think about was Owen. They used to always tell each other their birthday wishes, even though people said that meant they wouldn't come true. She and Owen thought telling your best friend your wish made it even stronger. Millie looked up to where Owen should've been standing, front and foremost, and her eyes instead met those of the strange boy. He raised his fork and plate with a look that said, "Will you get on with it already?" Millie gaped at him in disbelief and huffed out a breath, inadvertently blowing out her birthday candles. Everybody clapped and said hooray— except him, of course. He was already getting in line for cake, and Millie hadn't even been able to make her wish.

The rest of the party passed in a blur. Millie lost track of the boy after he had gotten his piece of cake. As soon as she finished her own slice, she was handed gift after gift. At last, when Millie got the chance to stand up and scour the backyard, the boy had disappeared. Millie picked her way back through the discarded bags and bows to find her mother. "Mom, did you see that blond kid in the blue? I didn't invite him."

Mrs. Abbott thought for a moment. "Oh, him? I thought he must be a friend from school I haven't met yet."

"I thought maybe you invited him," said Millie, perplexed.

Her mother shook her head and shrugged. "Never seen him before."

Once the party was over and everyone had gone home, Millie crept into her favorite corner of the living room to get some space to herself. It was a little nook behind the couch where she had covered the floor in well-worn cushions and blankets. It used to be her and Owen's hidden clubhouse. Now it was mostly where Millie fled when she was upset or needed privacy. She pulled out one of the new books she had unwrapped, and idly scanned the cover.

She couldn't stop thinking about the strange boy, how he came and went so quickly. Even though she had asked several of her guests if they knew him, everybody said they had no idea. They all thought someone else knew him. Millie was just glad to know that she wasn't the only one who saw him, that he wasn't just some odd figment of her imagination.

The doorbell rang, startling her. Millie's mom walked out of the kitchen and to the front door, swinging it open. Millie peeked out of her hiding place and recognized Mrs. Abbot, their next-door neighbor, in the doorway speaking to her mother.

"Ada, I am so sorry about Henry. He just got here last night, and I already caught him coming back in after wandering over to Millie's party."

"Oh! I had no clue you and Tim got a placement already! To be honest I thought he was one of Millie's school friends until she told me she didn't know him. He just wandered over without telling you?"

Mrs. Abbott sighed. "Yes! I tried to make clear to him that we want to keep him safe, and that means we need to know where he is. I know he's just adjusting to being in such a new place. But I'm so nervous— nothing about raising Owen prepared me for taking on Henry."

Millie stopped listening. Her heart was beating too fast. New placement? What did that mean? She felt a sickening realization in the pit of her stomach. Placement. Replacement. The Abbotts were trying to replace Owen with Henry, the boy who had shown up at her party and ruined her wish. This is crazy, Millie thought. But what else could it be? She felt hot tears boiling up and crawled out from her hiding place. Bolting to her room, Millie slammed the door behind her. She flung open her closet door and stood on her tiptoes to reach her beat-up shoebox that held her most treasured possessions. She ripped off the lid and pulled out the photo book Mr. and Mrs. Abbott had given her after Owen died. To Millie, our favorite girl and Owen's best friend, they had written on a note attached to the gift. Millie had only been eight, but she knew even then what a special gift it was. Her heart now ached— how could they already want a new boy in just two years?

Millie couldn't bring herself to look through the photos. She put the album back in the box and closed the lid. She had already memorized them all, anyways. But instead of the regular photos appearing in her mind, Millie kept seeing Henry's face. He carried the same lost expression he had worn as he stood in her backyard, surrounded by strangers.

The next day, Millie's mother announced that the Abbotts had invited them over for dinner. They wanted everybody to officially meet Henry after his unceremonious appearance at Millie's party. Millie tried faking a stomachache so she didn't have to go, but when her parents threatened her with a doctor's visit she miraculously recovered. It looked like she was just going to have to get through the night, but she was determined not to say a word to Henry.

Before she knew it, Millie was wearing an uncomfortable yellow dress and standing on the Abbotts' front porch. She tugged miserably at the stiff fabric and let out a small sigh. Here we go, she thought. Her dad lifted baby Jack so he could press the doorbell. Mrs. Reynolds smoothed Millie's curls and said, "Make sure to be kind to Henry. He needs it." Millie grunted, and before her mom could press her point the door opened. Mr. Abbott, the same gangly man Millie had known since she was three, greeted them. Ever since Owen died, Mr. Abbott carried heftier bags under his eyes and less hair on his head, but tonight he looked genuinely happy to see them.

"Come in, come in," he welcomed, ushering the Reynolds family through the door. Mrs. Abbott greeted them with warm hugs.

"I'm so glad you all could come," she said. "It's been too long since we shared a meal together." Millie helped set the table as the last-minute preparations were given to the meal. Jack made trouble by chasing around the Abbotts' cat. Soon everything was ready for dinner. "Henry is back in his room. Would you mind getting him, Millie?" asked Mrs. Abbott. Actually, Millie did mind very much, but seeing no other choice, she turned down the familiar hallway. She paused to stare at the pictures on the walls. Owen as a baby. Owen holding his mom's hand. Owen and his dad at the T-ball field.

She knew the Abbotts didn't have a spare room, so that meant Henry could be found in only one place. Down the hall and to the left, Millie stepped on the notoriously creaky floorboard and into Owen's old room. The door was open, and Henry sat at the desk thumbing through a magazine. Millie felt her eyes burn. There was still so much Owen in this place, though his special things had been packed away. Millie remembered his small teetering bookshelf, his gingham curtains at the windows, the neon green alarm clock on the bedside table. Her gaze was drawn back to Henry, who had finally noticed her and spun around in the desk chair to face her with wide eyes.

"It's time to eat," she said flatly, pivoting around and walking woodenly to the table. Henry followed, sitting where Owen used to sit. Millie didn't hear the prayer or any of the conversation. She shoveled down her food, making quick sharp jabs with her fork at noodles that kept slipping off. "May I be excused?" she asked. Mrs. Abbott nodded, though Millie's parents frowned.

Millie retreated to the living room where she sat down and pretended to read her book. Henry walked past her and back to Owen's old room with a soft tread on the floor. Millie ignored him, nose in the pages of her book. As she fake-read, she couldn't help overhearing the adults talking at the dinner table.

"Has it been difficult having a placement so close to the age Owen would be?" Mrs. Reynolds asked gently.

"Yes," Mrs. Abbott answered quietly. After a pause she continued, saying "But it has also been good. It's not such a shock as if we had started foster care with a toddler or teenager. I feel awful about the number of times I've almost called him Owen." There was an empty silence around the table, broken only by the clinking of ice cubes as someone took a sip of water.

"What is Henry's situation?" asked Mr. Reynolds.

"He was removed from his mother's custody at age eight because of drugs. She's in jail right now but is getting out soon. It all depends on if she works the case plan if she can get Henry back. Since he went into care, Henry has had several different foster homes, but none of them have ended up working out. That's why we got the call," Mr. Abbott told them.

Millie slowly closed her book. She did not totally understand what had been said, but she realized that Henry was away from his family— that he was a guest at the Abbotts because his mom was in jail. She hadn't known anything about Henry before, she realized. All she had thought about was Owen and herself. Henry had seemed like a paper doll pasted messily over all the places Owen belonged. In an instant he became a real boy. She stood up and, without meaning to, found herself back in the doorway to Owen's room. Henry sat hunched over on the edge of his bed holding a well-worn birthday card, the shiny trace of a tear on his cheek.

Millie sat down beside him, twisting her hands in her lap. He flinched, as if her closeness hurt. "What's that?" she asked.

Henry looked at Millie for a moment, and silently handed her the card. On the front it was blue and had a cartoon birthday cake. On the inside it read in smeared handwriting, "Happy 8th Birthday Henry! XOXOXO, Mama." Millie closed it gently and handed it back to Henry, who carefully placed it on the bedside table. She turned towards Henry with eyes full of questions.

"Mama gave it to me before I got taken," Henry explained.

"She said she was going to throw me a birthday party. But then they came, and I never got one."

"Who are *they*?" asked Millie.

"Grown-ups who said Mama couldn't take care of me anymore," said Henry.

"Oh," said Millie softly. "I'm sorry." She thought about her parents and how they always took care of her. She would never want them to be far away. She thought about her own birthday party, about Henry's expression as everybody sang to her and made her feel special. Millie stared at her feet next to Henry's on the floor. His left foot was tapping nervously.

"Can you tell me about the boy who used to live here?" asked Henry hesitantly. "I see his pictures. I hear his name—Owen." Millie felt her heart squeeze uncomfortably.

"He was my best friend," Millie said after a long breath. "He came to all my birthday parties. He always sat beside me. He shared his wishes." There was so much more—so many more memories, so many bike rides, so many firsts with Owen, but Millie didn't know how to say it. She couldn't find words to explain what Owen had meant to her. "I miss him," she whispered.

"I know," replied Henry. And Millie knew that he did. Henry understood loss; he knew better than anyone she had ever met. Millie sensed that Henry was someone she could share her hurt with. He was hurt, too. Millie decided that as long as Henry was with the Abbotts, she would be his friend. He might just be a guest, but she would make him welcome.

"Maybe I can show you some of the places Owen and I used to explore, like the old creek," she told Henry. His eyes brightened.

"I would like that."

Millie started filling Henry in on all the best places in the neighborhood and the woods behind, and before they knew it Mrs. Abbott was calling down the hall that it was time for dessert. "We brought over what cake was left from my party," Millie told Henry as they walked down the hall together. For the first time Millie had seen, Henry actually smiled.

"Birthday cake is my favorite."