

• FEATURING TALES FROM •
DAVID BOWLES • SEANAN MCGUIRE • L. PENELOPE
GREY YUEN • ZIN E. ROCKLYN • SHANNA SWENDSON
GWENDOLYN N. NIX • GLENN PARRIS • ALETHEA KONTIS
LINDA ROBERTSON • CARLOS HERNANDEZ
MINSOO KANG • C.S.E. COONEY
• FORWARD BY JIM C. HINES •



AN
ANTHOLOGY
OF FAERIE
TALES

WHERE THE VELLUS THIN

• EDITED BY CERECÉ RENNIE MURPHY & ALANA JOLI ABBOTT •

WHERE THE VELLIS HIN

Edited by
Cerece Rennie Murphy
& Alana Joli Abbott

WHERE THE VEIL IS THIN

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i> , by Jim Hines	5
<i>The Tooth Fairies</i> , by Glenn Parris	8
<i>Glamour</i> , by Grey Yuen	19
<i>See a Fine Lady</i> , by Seanan McGuire	33
<i>Or Perhaps Up</i> , by C.S.E. Cooney	44
<i>Don't Let Go</i> , by Alana Joli Abbott	65
<i>The Loophole</i> , by L. Penelope	90
<i>The Last Home of Master Tranquil Cloud</i> , by Minsoo Kang	102
<i>Your Two Better Halves: A Dream, with Fairies, in Spanglish</i> , by Carlos Hernandez	113
<i>Take Only Photos</i> , by Shanna Swendson	139
<i>Old Twelvey Night</i> , by Gwendolyn N. Nix	152
<i>The Seal Woman's Tale</i> , by Alethea Kontis	164
<i>The Storyteller</i> , by David Bowles	182
<i>Summer Skin</i> , by Zin E. Rocklyn	186
<i>Colt's Tooth</i> , by Linda Robertson	196

— INTRODUCTION —

by Jim C. Hines

Like many children, I learned to save my lost teeth for the tooth fairy. My mother even made me a little tooth-shaped pillow with a tiny tooth pocket. At the time, the tooth fairy was a whimsical story told by parents and innocently accepted by us kids. We all looked forward to finding those shiny coins the following morning.

If I'd known then what I know now about fairy lore, I would have told my mother to burn that damned pillow and get those cursed teeth as far away from me as possible. Fairies and spirits aren't generally known for altruism and charity, and a fairy bargain—even one so simple as trading a coin for a tooth—is a dangerous thing.

Most cultures have stories of fairies and spirits and otherworldly creatures living in the mist and the shadows, gliding into and out of our world to interact with humans. Sometimes, if the human treats those fey creatures and their powers with respect, and if the human is fortunate, those interactions are to their advantage. If, on the other hand, you dare to disrespect a fairy's power? Your role in the story is likely to be brief, noted only as a lesson to others.

Specific powers and magics vary from one story to another, from illusions and transformations to an endlessly inventive inventory of curses, but their strongest power, the power that grips us to this day, is Story. These beings from beyond the veil enchant us through the stories we share and pass down from one generation to the next. But what is it about these stories that capture and hold us?

One answer is that they help us to make sense of the universe, to impose rules and order and explanation on cold chaos. Your child becomes sick and behaves strangely? Perhaps they're a fairy changeling. The crops all died? Someone must have angered the guardian of the fields.

Even fairies themselves, often creatures of id and chaos, are bound by certain rules. Human laws are fragile, easily-broken things by comparison, but fairy rules are inviolate. They provide order, and even control. No matter how terrifying and powerful and chaotic that strange, beautiful/ugly being might be, it's bound by rules. Through

those rules, a clever human can triumph. In that way, these stories not only help to explain chaos, they give us hope to overcome it.

Many of these tales teach us that the universe itself is a place of hope, and that ultimately, the universe favors justice. Fairies and spirits are known to reward the just and punish the wicked. In a world where wealth and power so often triumph over fairness, who wouldn't find comfort in the idea that other beings wait just beyond the shadows to ensure justice is done?

Hope goes hand in hand with warning. For every story where kindness and cleverness are rewarded, we also see cruelty and selfishness punished. A lecture on right and wrong is easy to shut out, but stories pierce us like slivers of glass. It's one thing to tell children to respect women, for example. It's another to tell a story of those who didn't, and how those women returned as animal spirits to devour their tormentors.

Or maybe the true power of these tales is less about lessons and understanding the universe, and more about the sense of wonder that comes from things beyond our understanding. The discovery that our world is so much more than our senses suggest, with magic waiting beneath every shadow, just out of reach. When you finish reading these stories, you return to our world with new eyes. Every new-budded flower, every firefly, every raven watching you from its perch, becomes *more*.

Perhaps most importantly, these stories hold a mirror to ourselves. J. M. Barrie of *Peter Pan* fame wrote that when the first human child laughed, that laugh shattered into countless pieces, and those pieces became fairies. He was far from the first to note the inseparable bond between human and fey.

Through these stories, we examine who we are. We see our joy and our rage, our kindness and our greed. We laugh at Rumpelstiltskin's tantrum at the end of his tale, even while (hopefully) recognizing that we've all had our moments of melodramatic tantrum. We empathize with the suffering and inner strength of characters like Cinderella. We discover facets of ourselves in spirits and fairies and clever beasts and even the lowliest goblin.

It's hard to find a story that's truly universal, but the best fairy stories come close. Like fairies themselves, they defy efforts to pin them to a specific time and place. Instead, they draw on archetypes and collective belief, shapeshifting from one telling to the next, all the while luring us closer with riddles and knowledge and magic and insight.

Or maybe there's an even simpler reason why these stories are so prolific, why we've continued to tell them for so many centuries. Maybe in their wisdom, our ancestors made a fairy bargain many lifetimes ago to protect us. That the fairies would leave us in peace—mostly—so long as we continue to share stories about them. Fairies are known for being quite vain, after all. I imagine our fascination, our compulsion to tell tales of those magical beings from the other side of the veil is quite flattering to their egos. Maybe the sharing of these stories, the magic of our own storytelling, is what keeps us safe at night.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's nothing more than daydreams and whimsy and wistful longing.

But if it were me, I'd keep reading this book, just to be safe. Because if there's one thing I've learned, it's that the last thing you want to do is risk insulting a fairy.

THE TOOTH FAIRIES:
— QUEST FOR TEAR HAVEN —
Glenn Parris

The little brown girl's six-year-old tongue licked at a tooth. It wiggled in her mouth but refused freedom. Slight in stature, Shanny Prentice slept curled up on the sofa in a long T-shirt. The room was cozy and warmed by the hearth's waning fire. She cuddled up with a lap blanket; her head nestled gently into a soft down pillow. That tooth wobbled tantalizingly loose.

Dusk languidly faded to shadows as twilight ushered cool evening into deep darkness. Night always invited wayward blood thirst in one form or another.

Thumb-sized figures flitted about Shanny's head, anxiously stalking that dentine prize. Raz thought all little girls breathed through their mouths at night. While the fairies pondered their challenge, Shanny hummed a sigh and rolled over on her other side. This complication was unexpected.

"I almost 'ad it!" Hilde griped, her cockney accent out of place in the central Louisiana home. "Look at 'er massage that precious tooth... back and forth, back and forth." Nearly hypnotized by the movement of the tongue through the girl's cheek, Hilde added, "She's tormenting us on purpose, I tell you! Why won't she open 'er mouth?"

"She did open 'er mouth," a jovial declaration welled from near the others, "very wide in fact!"

Dressed in torn, hand-me-down Confederate-era mismatched doll's attire, Fin stood at his post by the window and made an honest effort to stifle his laughter at Hilde's expense. Drenched, she wiped clear mucus first from her face, then from the old English-styled hat and tattered outfit, weather-beaten over two centuries since she'd first wore them new. She fluttered soggily.

"Bad vantage point, lass," Raz said. "Downwind from that itchy little nose."

"Let's pour ice water in 'er ear," cackled Old Molly. "Just a few drops! Heh, heh, heh."

"Careful, she's a real sneezer, that one!"

“Yes, Hilde, we can all see that,” Fin chuckled.

Cross, Hilde silently stomped her foot on the girl’s forehead without the least disturbance to Shanny’s slumber. Humans might measure a fairy’s weight in nanograms.

Raz grew impatient despite Fin’s good humor. “In all my years, I’ve never seen a brat go so long breathing through her nose.”

After more than an hour of scrutinizing the little girl, the fairies’ tempers had grown short. Even Raz, the leader of the band, second in age only to Old Molly and usually up for a good Tooth Hunt, grew eager to put this business behind him. The whole team inhaled together then sighed in unison. The fairies could almost taste the blood in the tooth socket.

Hilde buzzed around the sofa, flailing arms and legs to dry herself. Her gyrations fostered the semblance of a twisted, angelic hobo.

Fin was farthest away from the sofa, perched on the windowsill, safe from the girl’s nasal squall. As sentry, he kept watch for the spider, his fairy staff at the ready.

“She’s not dreaming,” Raz complained as he noted the absence of rapid eye movement.

Like Rodin’s *The Thinker*, Raz modeled the picture of monumental study; he brooded, chin on his fist, elbow on his knee, and foot propped angrily on the girl’s forehead now. A moonbeam weighed more.

The blood would taste so much sweeter infused with liquid *fear*, the mead of adrenaline and endorphins. Fairies wielded magics apt to stir pleasant dreams into night horrors. If they got to the socket while it was still freshly bleeding, each could fill his or her second belly full of blood for their kinfolk. All four fairies felt their own rotting, flimsy fangs aching with drool.

“Let’s pour ice water in ‘er ear,” Old Molly chimed again. “Just a few drops! Heh, heh, heh. That’ll give ‘er a nice nightmare!” she laughed. Molly’s rags, a collection of cast-offs faded grey centuries ago, rendered Hilde’s appointments glamorous by comparison.

Old Molly sat on the edge of a teacup resting on the coffee table between the girl and the fireplace. The cup was full of strawberry Kool-Aid diluted by melting ice cubes. Old Molly kicked the small icebergs away when they floated near her gnarled, crusty toes bathing in the crimson beverage. Most thought the 300-year-old fairy was getting addled in her old age, and her feet had grown numb from so many harsh winters over centuries past.

Old Molly held the dime they'd use to prop Shanny's mouth open when they finally got to the loose tooth. Molars were always the hardest to harvest, but they bled the best. The coin gleamed from Molly's neurotic polishing.

"Let's pour ice water in 'er ear," urged Old Molly again. "Just a few drops!" It became more of a chant than a suggestion. She rubbed absently at the silvery disc with her sleeved elbow.

Ignoring Old Molly's exhortation, the posse continued to mull thoughtfully over their little challenge. The security and glow of the fireplace comforted the girl even in sleep. Only its crackle broke the room's silence as the gathering sank into their hunger.

Despite the magical rules that bound other paranormals, fairies were allowed to enter a victim's house uninvited, as well as handle crucifixes with impunity. But in conjunction with other iron-clad limitations, each species of blood-drinker was saddled with at least one compulsion. Tooth fairies were neat freaks. Except for the coin used to prop the mouth open, fairies left no trace of their presence.

The perfect opportunity for the drainage of blood from a loose tooth came as it followed its natural course during the night. If the tooth was never found, the parent attributed its absence to a child swallowing the tooth in her sleep. The kid, of course, always believed the traditional explanation and cherished the little silvery treasure.

Shanny's useless little brother—TommiLee, as they'd heard him called—lay curled up on the floor. His head full of healthy, firmly implanted teeth rested on Rusty, the old Labrador retriever. The two were so inseparable that when the boy was called home, the dog often ran inside, too.

The hound was of no interest to the fae visitors. The dog raised his head up momentarily, then laid it back down again. Fin knew the animal by name, an unnecessary detail in his reconnaissance report. Who cared about dogs? The real purpose of the scouting mission was to make sure there were no witches and no cats on the property. Dogs they could always handle. Canine eyes couldn't see fairies anyway, and the dumb critters always fell asleep on a whiff of fairy dust if necessary.

Cats, on the other hand, were wily creatures with an innate sense of the occult. No one in either world ever rested certain whether felines boasted supernatural powers or not. Magic worked on them occasionally, but one could never be sure of the outcome. Whatever bore out, every vampire knew cats as witches' servants.

A savvy cat could make short work of a bunch of fairies, but a witch? Practitioners-noir could enslave them all and track them back to their village. A fairy village made for powerful magic potions. Such a wily conjurer could endanger not only fairies, but all kinds of enchanted folk.

The Lycan would be none too happy about such a development. Wolf-folk were not to be trifled with for sure. But fairies' larger kin, the Vampyr, would be furious.

The true vampires had seethed when a fairy village allowed several scouts to be captured by a class of fourth graders on a nature walk fifty years ago. The thought of a fairy-enriched stew nourishing a coven of invincible witches would enrage a pride of Vampyr. It could be all out war! Every fairy settlement in the southeast would be collateral damage of their wrath—and witches or other supernaturals would claim the enchanted girl as a prize if the fae safari were found out.

No, a fairy could never be too careful around cats, especially in mid-autumn when their feline powers peaked. Yes, dogs were much safer to deal with. Still, Fin did not trust *this* dog: it smelled funny.

Fin also didn't trust spiders. He kept staring through the cracked window at their little team of mounts. Trained in pairs to carry plump fairies long distances, the eight fireflies tethered to a web were vulnerable. Even the mosquitoes guarding them didn't bestow any confidence. Fin had hoped it was a cobweb, an abandoned spider web for which there was no resident spider. Before entering Shanny's house, the fae troupe had jiggled the web hoping to waken the spider and lure him to the center of the web. They got nothing.

Perhaps this beast had died, moved on, been killed by a larger animal, or run afoul of a human. Whatever the case, the spider was not in his lair when they tied the flies. Fin's greatest fear was that the spider was on the prowl down on the ground or in a nearby tree. If he came back unseen, there would be no way to save the fireflies. The mosquitos guarding them would be little deterrent. It was a long walk back home.

Although all four of the fairies could fly, their abilities were best suited for quick, short-range sorties. Sustained, endurance flights could easily wipe them out. They'd barely make it with four bellies over-filled with blood-mead if they successfully completed their mission before dawn. On the ground, they were much, much slower. Short fairy legs were just not made for running. Even young Fin

wouldn't fare well on such a trek. The eighty-year-old youth maintained his vigil at the window.

The remaining three fairies ignored the other two occupants of the room, their attention firmly on the little girl. Limited psychic abilities revealed much. Her daddy was the only human who called her Shanny. Everybody else insisted on calling her by her given name, Sharon.

The fairies knew that. They knew what she liked, and they knew what she feared.

"Let's pour ice water in 'er ear!" hissed the old fairy again. Molly's voice was barely a whisper, less than a breeze. "Just a few drops. Not much."

Raz floated effortlessly in place, his wings just tickling the air, holding his position. He held one hand to his chin and the elbow on his other hand, which lay crossed over his bloated belly.

"She hasn't opened her mouth in over an hour," he exclaimed and belched loudly. "How does she do it?"

"We'll starve at this rate!" rattled Hilde, her figure finally dry, but nearly as deformed as Old Molly.

"Ever since the Hurricane that the juicy, big people called Katrina, it's become hard to find poor children with loose teeth," Raz moaned. "Ripe for feeding,"

Modern dentists had learned their craft too well for fae liking. It was over a mile to the rotting oak they, along with six dozen other hungry fairies, called Tear Haven. The trophy would be licked and polished of all blood and pulp, then set in place to contribute to the fortification, becoming one of over eighty thousand teeth that made up the hovels, roads, stairs, and towers of the hidden village.

Just then Shanny's eyes began to move erratically beneath closed lids.

"Now's our chance!" Molly said. "Make 'er open 'er mouth! You know we all have to eat. And we have hungry mouths to feed back 'ome."

"She's having pleasant dreams, curse her," Hilde scowled. "Why won't she have a nice nightmare to season that precious tooth? What's she got to be so bleedin' happy 'bout anyway?"

Grabbing at the rune staff Raz held tightly in his fist, Hilde implored him. "Go on, poke 'er hard. Maybe you can stir some adrenalin in 'er little head."

"That's how you broke your staff in the first place." Raz knew they all recognized the importance of the loss, but he still felt obliged to emphasize the need for caution. "We only have two left."

"Let's pour ice water in 'er ear," the old crone implored once again. "Just a few drops?" By now the chant had a rhythm to it. Old Molly seemed to derive great pleasure from just the thought of the despicable deed. Molly caressed the rim of the cup sensuously as she recited her litany. She still sat on the teacup's edge. The few remaining ice cubes still melting in the sweet strawberry Kool-Aid, provocatively reminiscent of the blood they all craved. The old fairy's little feet seemed impervious to the cold.

"Hush Molly!" Hilde followed the sharp admonishment by mocking, echoes of Old Molly's chant: "'Let's pour ice water in 'er ear.' She says. We don't want 'er to wake up. We just want a little nightmare."

"She's right, Molly," Raz said. "If she wakes up, we'll all have to wait for her to go back to sleep. There are only a few hours before dawn. We don't have time for this. You know how slowly little girls drain."

Hilde urged Raz again, "Use the staff."

Reluctantly, Raz nodded in agreement. "But we can't just 'poke' her. We need to craft a nightmare." He smiled now for the first time all night. "A nice, nasty charade. We'll use an incantation, an old one. Molly, I need you for this. Fin, it takes two staffs. Hilde's is gone and old Molly just has a wand. Come close."

Fin had his back to the whole affair. He was still peering nervously out the window. The large web was sturdy.

Where is that spider? Fin knew if anything happened to those fireflies, Raz and company could be stranded. Fin hesitantly joined the group.

As fairy hands clasped around the two staffs and raised them, Fin's nose crinkled. He looked back at the window. The fireflies rested, glowing at leisurely intervals. He looked at the lazy dog snoring, again motionless. Somehow, something about that dog still bothered him.

Raz and Old Molly began the incantation. Hilde and Fin bowed their heads. They began to whirl faster and faster around the axis of the two magic staffs. Fairy dust spouted out above them from the misshapen heads of the rune staffs, showering down upon Shanny's sleeping face. The incantation complete, Raz lit gently by her left ear.

In her father's voice, the fairy leader whispered, "Shanny, the wind is coming. So is the water." He followed the lie with a cool, damp puff of his foul breath.

"It's another hurricane, Shanny. Remember, like before? We have to hunker down, ride it out. Hope we don't drown like the Devereuxes did."

Shanny frowned frightfully in her sleep, her eyes moving frantically now through closed eyelids. Her father was an engineer and knew better than anyone how to survive a gale like Katrina. Still, they'd barely made it to safety that time. Shanny had lost her friend, Tessy Devereux, who'd perished along with her whole family.

The little girl began to tremble in her sleep.

"Yes, that's it," Old Molly slurred in anticipation, as if drunk with ale. "Now, let's pour ice water in 'er ear, just a few drops! The music is just right."

It was only when Molly broke the circle to fetch the ice water from the teacup that Fin noticed the piano tinkling in the other room. Shanny's father crooned a slow tenor blues rhythm accompanying the keyed notes. The raiding band of fairies ignored the music—everyone but Fin, that is. The sound was distant and difficult to make out. The accompaniment's discordant arpeggio was as strange as the wordless lyric that followed it.

The fairy dust still glowed on the little girl's cheek, ear, and exposed neck. Raz thought greedily, *If only we had our bigger kin's fangs, we could all bite through the skin and suck the life-giving blood right from the child's veins.*

Alas, their little fangs were too limp and short to penetrate the skin. Graced with uninvited access to residential or holy ground, fairies were limited to drinking untainted, virgin blood from an open source. Jilted teenaged cutters were the best, but they almost always had layers of heavy bandages over open wounds by the time the fae came a-calling. Teens who were seldom serious about suicide slit shallow. The cutters left just enough blood-quickening to tease, not satisfy.

Shanny's distress reached a feverish pitch. The singing stopped, but the tinkling piano continued to resonate into the living room. Hilde moved to divert the girl's father. They didn't need him coming in and spoiling their carefully cultivated nightmare.

Mr. Prentice had risen from his piano seat and just made it to his easy chair when Hilde doused him with a generous portion of fairy dust directed by her wand. As his eyes grew heavy, Hilde smiled. Hovering over him, she cut across the piano's air space, intent on rejoining the group, when she realized that the piano was still playing with no particular tune or rhythm.

Hilde hesitated only a moment, just long enough for the cat to leap off the keys and grab both her wings. As the cat dove down behind the furniture clutching its prey, none of Hilde's kin saw the horror grip her face as the feline devoured her. Hilde was gone before the cat landed softly on the carpet.

Raz, Molly, and Fin were dumbfounded. One would have thought they were paralyzed, too, for their lack of action.

Shanny awoke with a start. "Rusty!"

Fin broke first, heading for the window. Finding the crack in the glass, he beckoned his surviving comrades to hurry along. Raz and Molly were cut off by the calico beast.

The puss could see them!

"No wonder that mongrel smelled so funny," Fin muttered to himself. "All that musty dander masked the feline scent." Before mounting his firefly, he sought his comrades.

Raz and Molly disappeared under the sofa to evade the furry hellion's onslaught. They both emerged from beneath the far edge, just ahead of razor-sharp claws. Fear gave gossamer wings strength like never before, and they reached a zenith near the chandelier.

"Fin, go. Leave us. The town must know to stay away. Warn them!" Raz shouted the orders as the cat leaped off furniture from every angle to gain altitude, paws swinging wildly. The chandelier swung gently, an asylum yet just out of reach.

Adrenalin waned, and the fairies lost elevation. Finally, Raz and Molly stole refuge in a narrow-necked wicker basket. Rusty followed, hissing and winding his way as far down the basket as his lithe body would allow; then he was stuck. Barely out of reach of those claws, Raz used his staff to pry through the reeds.

"Hurry, Raz." Old Molly cowered from each swipe. "The beast is close!"

Raz cringed at the sickening crack below him. The reeds parted, but only at the cost of his staff. He got Molly out first.

Shanny raced to rescue the distressed Rusty from his predicament. Raz led Molly on foot under a closed door to another room.

"We need to find a window," Raz commanded. He saw the only window in the room even as he said it.

"Give us a minute, Raz," Molly pled. "These old bones don't move like they used to, you know."

Raz climbed the bedpost, huffing and puffing, nearly as exhausted as Old Molly. He reached the sill in time to witness Fin's fate.

Fin must have resigned himself to his doom when he saw the mosquitoes wrapped in sticky webbing in the dull, pulseless glow of the fireflies. Still, steady, dead glint. Their mounts were as dead as any chance of escape for Fin or his friends now. Stuck fast to freshly spun strands, Fin felt a gentle tug on the web from separate corners.

Knowing he would soon share their fates, Fin reached out to caress the two nearest firefly corpses. The three spiders, giants by arachnid reckoning, closed in on him. They must have driven off the old spider and roamed, surveying the territory before weaving webs of their own. Fin's body was divided evenly between the deadly triad without fuss.

"Don't look, Molly," Raz turned to hug her neck as she reached the windowsill.

Although the youngest member of their party, Fin may have been the bravest. Both Raz and Molly remembered when he was just a sparkling mote of fairy dust in the night.

Molly wept into Raz's shoulder. "What do we do now, Raz?"

The cup came down over the two of them before he could answer. Red Kool-Aid droplets splashed them both as a bingo card slid under the cup, trapping the fairies. Movement jostled them off their feet before they tumbled into a clear glass jar that smelled faintly of peanut butter. Old Molly clutched her leader as the grinding sound of a lid screwing on tightly dashed their hopes.

"Don't worry Molly, I'll think of something." Raz's fingertips began exploring the walls of the jar for a defect he knew would not be there.

A flashlight's beam danced through the jar as Shanny assessed her two new pets. "What shiny wings! I'll take you in to class on Monday for Show-and-Tell. Maybe Mrs. Walcott can tell us what kind of bugs you are." She smiled. "She's my science teacher."

The little girl set the jar on the floor beside her bed and climbed under the covers. An uneasy peace settled over the room.

"This doesn't look good, Molly," Raz said. The strawberry Kool-Aid became sticky as he smeared the glass with his hands.

"It's cold, Raz," Molly said and sat on the floor of their new home. "I don't like being cold. I can still feel the breeze of his claws when that beastly cat swiped at me."

"You've had your rotten old feet soaking in that icy drink for hours. Your back is soaked with it now," he said, looking at his hand.

"You must be right, Raz. Look at me sweater. It's dripping wet. But doesn't the drink feel warm to you?" Molly yawned as she palmed