

December 2023

WORLDS OF
Possibility



FEATURING

**LAURA MANDELBERG * MEGAN BAFFOE
AYIDA SHONIBAR * ALETHEA KONTIS
KEYAN BOWES * ANNIKA BARRANTI KLEIN
CHRISTINE HANOLSY * ALEX HERNANDEZ
BETH WODZINSKI * TETIANA HUT**

EDITED BY
JULIA RIOS

WORLDS OF POSSIBILITY

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the December 2023 issue of *Worlds of Possibility*. Usually the ebook version is only available to paid subscribers, but this issue is being released for free to everyone as an end of the year gift. If you enjoy what I do with this project, please tell others. Subscriptions make it possible for me to continue paying creators for new work.

This issue contains three pieces of original artwork, four short stories, two poems, and one essay.

Normally I save the content notes for the end of the volume, but in this issue, I do feel it's important to mention one right away.

The artwork that opens this issue ("Ceasefire" by Alex Hernandez), and the essay that follow it are both engaging with Palestinian solidarity. While the artwork and accompanying interview are more focused on the historical culture of Palestine, the essay digs deeper into the past and present violence.

Since October of this year, our news has been full of the violence in Israel and Palestine. There's also been a rise in anti-

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

semitism and islamophobia, both of which make me angry and sad. I felt that it would be best to let someone who is personally attached to both Judaism and Palestinian solidarity have the floor, so I invited a local-to-me activist, Laura Mandelberg, to write about her experience. Laura's essay is a difficult read, but it also offers some hope that people can change, and can choose to stand up for one another. It's also full of links to other sources where you can learn more about the current situation and the history of that region.

Where I live, we're in the darkest part of the year, when the days are shortest, and the weather is coldest. Two of the pieces in this issue directly explore that space and give us hints of how to find hope when everything is dark and dreary. "Morning Dew" by Megan Baffoe gives us a look at one man's garden in different seasons, and the gentle question of how to maintain one's mental health (and a fairy romance) after the dazzling brightness of summer fades away. "Fallowtide" by Beth Wodzinski is a gorgeous piece of artwork, and in the accompanying interview, Beth also talks about the deep work that happens under the surface when the ground is covered with snow and the trees have lost all their leaves.

Continuing with the theme of fairies, Keyan Bowes brings us a story of found family and magic in "A Refugee from Fairyland". This story is illustrated by Tetiana Hut. Ayida Shonibar's poem "Sweet Child" gives us a hint of magic and a taste of home that can magically appear wherever it is most needed.

"In Case of Emergency" by Alethea Kontis is the second poem in this issue, and it is a poem of empowerment, suggesting that the narrator herself is the one who can make herself at home by embracing her full desires and personality.

From there, we visit two different houses, both seemingly sentient. In Christine Hanolsy's "House Call" a home falls ill, and the narrator's family must try to nurse it back to health.

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And we end with some coziness via “Heartbeats” by Annika Barranti Klein, wherein the house has a special connection to our narrator, and each must take it in turn to save the other.

The cover was designed by me using stock art, and any other art you see in this issue that was not listed above is also stock art. To the best of my knowledge, I do not use AI generated images.

There are content notes at the end of this volume for anyone who is worried about what they may find in the stories. Although my goal for *Worlds of Possibility* is to publish works that soothe, inspire, and delight, I recognize that many subjects are difficult for different readers at different times, and I encourage you to make informed decisions about what you choose to read and when.

All Best,
Julia Rios

CEASEFIRE

ALEX HERNANDEZ

This art by Alex Hernandez was inspired by the life and work of Tawfiq Canaan, a Palestinian doctor who did research on several different diseases, including some that contributed to finding a cure for leprosy. He was also interested in documenting and preserving Palestinian culture. He had a special interest in superstitions, and collected many talismans and other objects related to that. His written works about these include the 1927 book *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine*, which has been scanned and is available on the Internet Archive.

Canaan's home was destroyed in 1948 as part of the war, but he continued to live in Jerusalem until his death in 1964.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alex Hernandez is a Cuban-American speculative fiction writer, editor and artist. His work often explores themes of migration, mysticism, colonization and posthumanism. He lives in South Florida with his wife, two daughters, and an overly-affectionate cat.



INTERVIEW WITH ALEX HERNANDEZ

I interviewed Alex for the OMGJulia Podcast, which will be posted a joint episode with Beth Wodzinski's art interview. Here is a transcript of Alex's Interview:

Julia Rios: Alex Hernandez has edited work that I have written in the past, but this time he has contributed a piece of artwork to the December issue of *Worlds of Possibility*. We're here to talk about the creation of that art, his artistic process in general, and then we'll also get a little chance to hear about his other projects. So welcome, Alex! Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

Alex Hernandez: Happy to be here, Julia. My name is Alex Hernandez and I am a writer, artist, librarian by day, editor, and basically anything that involves science fiction or speculative fiction. You know: horror, fantasy... I love all of that stuff, and I like creating stuff like that.

Julia Rios: Okay, so tell us a little bit about your work as an editor, which is how I first got to know you at all. You've worked with the *Latinx Rising* series. Tell us a little bit about that.

Alex Hernandez: So I first started as a contributor. It's a series, so in the first anthology, I was a writer and I submitted my work and Matt [Goodwin] and I hit it off. We talked about future anthologies. We talked about maybe doing one for YA. We talked about different themed anthologies. And then when he came here to Miami for the launch of *Latinx Rising*, which was the first book, we were walking around Coral Gables before our thing, and I was really convincing him to do another one and he was just right off the first one. He was tired. He kind of wanted a break, and I was like let's do one. Let's do one

for YA. So when he started planning that second anthology, he called me up and was like, "Do you want to help me edit it?"

So that's the start of it, and I enjoyed mentoring young writers, I enjoyed reading writers that I normally wouldn't have read, so I actually love editing because of that. Because I get to develop new voices.

Julia Rios: Awesome! And yeah, I got to contribute a story to the second one, and I know that you're also going to be working on a third one, which you can maybe tell us about at the end of the show. But let's go into the art side of things. How did you get into drawing in the first place?

Alex Hernandez: So I've always drawn. Um I don't know if I'm very good at it. But when I was a kid I always liked comic books and my dream was to be a comic book creator, right? So the writer and also the artist. When I was in my twenties, I realized that drawing comics is really hard and I could probably be better at writing, so in my twenties I kind of let the art go and I just focused on writing and developing that craft.

And it wasn't until I had kids that, you know, me and my kids would do arts and arts and crafts, and I would draw with them and paint with them, and I remembered how much I loved doing art. So now they're grown. You know, one of them is like thirteen, and she doesn't want to do art with me but I kept it up, so I still do art. And I realized that, yes, drawing a comic is hard. It's hard to do a bunch of pages, but I can do you know, one-offs. I can focus on a piece and actually I find creating art to be way more relaxing and I can zone out and just kind of leave my body and do the art, as opposed to writing where I have to be in it and I have to you know, work on it. So I actually use art as ah, like a destressor.

Julia Rios: That's really cool. So tell me a little bit about what inspired this particular piece. It's called Ceasefire. Obviously we're at a point where there's all of the situation with

Palestine, and people all over the world are calling for a cease-fire. So that's a clear inspiration. But you specifically also said that this was inspired by the work of Tawfiq Canaan. I'd love to hear more about how you decided to make this piece, what your inspirations were, and also what your process was.

Alex Hernandez: So my inspiration for all art basically comes from mythology or from folk religion, and I love that stuff. Mysticism. I read a lot about that stuff. I look up artwork and illustrated manuscripts and things like that, and I love all of that art, and all of that art really inspires me. I wanted to do a piece to highlight what's happening in Gaza, and I went through my regular process, which is: I immerse myself in that culture. I have learned, or I am learning I guess is the best way to say it, Arabic – specifically the Palestinian Jordanian dialects. So you know learning a language is not in a vacuum, right? With it comes people's culture. People's art. People's history. So I feel really close to that region just because I'm learning their language. So I read up, not just things on language learning, but the folktales of the region.

Tawfiq Canaan was a medical doctor, but he was also an ethnographer and archaeologist and all of these awesome side hustles, and he went around Palestine just collecting stories and collecting artifacts from from the region. And I was reading books that he wrote, or books about him, and you know, every well, every spring, every tree in that area has either a saint you know, living in it, or the ghost of a saint. And that's what a wali [وليّ] is. That's what they call them. It literally means a friend of god. Or they have a djinn. Some wells, or some trees, have both a saint and a djinn living in them. So part of the inspiration was just soaking all of that in and looking at art. You know, looking at Islamic art and things like that.

I wanted to kind of remove myself from the modern

dialogue because it's so depressing. So I kind of went back to: what are the saints? What are the spirits of the land? What are the djinn, right? What do they think of all of this? And I created a saint.

And the saints could be women or men. There's no official process for it like in, you know, Catholicism. The saints were basically just holy people or people who could perform some kind of miracle. Think of them like cunning folk I guess in European culture. If you've performed a miracle, they would be like, "You're a saint." Right? And it wasn't like only the Islamic people who would honor you, but you know Jews and Christians in that area would as well. So it would flow between cultures, and it was everybody – like the people, right? The people of the land would honor you. So I wanted to do a saint, and she kind of has her hand out. There's an eye in her hand, referencing the hamsa, or the hand of Fatima, and she's calling for a ceasefire.

One of the trademarks of a saint is there's a lot of green light, or a green glow, or a green fire associated with them. Usually their heads are glowing green, or their faces. So she's like surrounded in green fire because, as I said, I was a comic book nerd. There's a lot of Green Lantern influence there as well. But that's the influence for the piece. And her name is Al-Khadra [الخضرة], and that means the green, like "the green lady". And there were actually several saints that were called Al-Khadra that were either female saints or male saints and they were called either the green one or the green lady.

Julia Rios: But she's one that you've made yourself, so she's not like a specific one. She's one that you've dreamed up?

Alex Hernandez: Yeah, it's a composite. So there's not a lot of information on these that have survived, so she is one that I dreamed up, but she is more like a composite of two female saints. They were both called the Al-khadra, like the green

ladies. They were just from different towns, but you know that's kind of what she is, kind of like a merge of the two saints. Yeah.

Julia Rios: Okay, so what do you know about the 2 different saints that you say she was sort of based on?

Alex Hernandez: Well one of them... again, this is basically what Tawfiq Canaan has collected – and one of them there isn't a lot, or I haven't been able to find a lot about, but the other one... She's from his hometown. She was a young maiden and this rich, I don't know, sheikh, wanted to marry her, and she begged her father to not allow it. And, you know, he said no, but then the guy bribed the entire town and then the entire town (because they were being paid off by this guy) convinced the father to let him marry her. And on her wedding night, he comes into her home, and she yells out, you know the name of the prophets and the name of her grandfather and the name of Allah, whatever, and then he drops dead immediately. So because of that, people were like, "Oh my god it's a miracle!"

And after that they venerated her as a saint.

And I liked a lot about it. I liked that she took matters into her own hands and from the beginning she was saying she didn't want this. She didn't want to marry this guy. The town was against her and she found the way to win, and something about that story I loved. So that's why, of all the walis, of all the saints, that she's the one that stuck out to me.

Julia Rios: Very cool. So tell me a little bit about your actual physical process creating this.

Alex Hernandez: So it first starts with research. I mean, I'm a librarian at heart, so I approach everything through research. I read up on a lot of things. I look at a lot of images. So, for example, the border is more or less my poor attempt to do like an illustrative manuscript type of border. And I looked at, you know, the dresses of the of the area, of the era, dresses

of the time. So the dress she's wearing is is again my poor attempt at that.

So it's just looking at images and reading a lot, and then I sketch it out. I hate drawing on a tablet. I like painting on a tablet, but I hate drawing on a tablet. I like the physical scratching of pencil on paper. So I sketch it out first on a notebook and then I scan it, and then, in Procreate, I paint it. I add layers to it, and because all of the stories said there was this green glow associated with saints, I played with different greens. So there's a lot of greens in that. Even the yellow is kind of like a lime green type of yellow.

So that's basically the process. It's a lot of looking at art of the region, and not just with this piece but with all the pieces. So if I do something that's inspired by Cuban art or inspired by Mexican art, I'll do a deep dive and I'll look at old images. I find that fun. I find it very relaxing. You know I love learning.

I also make sure that the language is right. You know, if it's Spanish, I'm a fluent Spanish speaker, so that's not always a problem. Maybe I have to double check to make sure I got the accents in the right spot. But when it's something like Arabic that I'm a newcomer to the language, I do want to make sure that it's right, and I do want to make sure that it's the correct dialect for the region and things like that. So it's a lot of process that probably involves not a lot of art work at first, but it's all part of it. It all feeds into the piece and you know, at the end of the day I want to make it as authentic as possible.

Julia Rios: So you say you don't like to draw on a tablet so you do your drawings free hand on paper?

Alex Hernandez: Yes, I always do that. I have drawn on a tablet and I don't like it. I feel the Stylus and the and the screen is too smooth. I like the friction of lead on on paper. But I Also like that I can draw things around it that I may incorporate and with the tablet, it's more... It's more the painting. Like I'll trace

it, I'll outline it or ink it on the tablet, and I'll paint it on the tablet, but I always sketch on paper. I've got notebooks, a bunch of notebooks at home with you know, sketches and half sketches and notes and things like that. But definitely painting, I love painting on a tablet more, especially as I like to do kind of like a watercolor messy kind of art. When I try to do that on on actual canvas or on paper with real paints, there's no undo, right? You can't go back. You can't fix it. It's hard to erase. Whereas with pencil, you can always erase.

Julia Rios: Ah, yeah.

Alex Hernandez: So I feel with the tablet it's much more freeing because I can do a whole piece, and if I hate it, I can just delete it and keep the outline and then do it again. With paint, I'm committed to it, right? And I can try to fix mistakes and I can try to you know, work with it. But if it's not working, it's not working. So yeah, that's my secret. Procreate does a lot of heavy lifting.

Julia Rios: So when you have a drawing that you've actually drawn out by hand, how do you actually transfer that to the digital image?

Alex Hernandez: So, a couple ways. Sometimes I'll just use a scan app, and I don't really care about the quality too much because I know that I will go over it.

Julia Rios: So you're just using that as like a template to guide you in the tracing.

Alex Hernandez: Exactly. Or if the image is very involved and I don't want to lose quality because I just I want to use the actual pencils without tracing it in, I might do a really nice scan, like a high quality scan, and then remove the background and fill it in that way. But sometimes what I've done, too, is when I've used actual paint and paper and canvas, I'll do the whole thing in paint and then scan it. Like scan the actual piece and then go in with the tablet and touch it up and do

highlights and things like that. So sometimes it's like a collage of, actual sketches, actual paint, and then digital paint on top of it.

Julia Rios: That's so cool. I love hearing about all the different ways the art comes into being. Okay, well thank you so much for telling us all about the inspiration for this piece and the way that you created it. I'm sure everyone listening will be as fascinated as I was. Let us know where we can find you and your work. If people are curious and want to learn more about you, where should they go?

Alex Hernandez: So if you just go to @alexthoth on any social media platform, you'll be able to find me. You'll be able to find my work, whether it be my writing or my artwork. We do have, as you mentioned, the *Not Your Papi's Utopia*, right? The third installment in the *Latinx Rising* anthology, and we're in the middle of working the stories. We're in the middle of I guess finalizing the acceptance letters and things like that. So maybe in a year it'll come out. It's a great anthology that focuses on utopia, especially now with how everything is and how depressing the news is, we want to be able to imagine what a better future looks like. And that doesn't mean that all of the stories are rosy, but they definitely create a roadmap for how to get to a better future. So, you know, be on the lookout for that. That should be out by next year.

Julia Rios: I'm a really excited for this one. Like I said, I contributed a story to the YA version, which was *Speculative Fiction for Dreamers*, and I love that volume. I also love the first volume. I'm really excited for the third one. I can't wait to see what all of the different writers have brought with their ideas of utopia.

Alex Hernandez: It's amazing. And even when they lean toward dystopia, there's always a ray of hope. There's always a pocket utopia within that, and I love that. I love how layered

that is, where you can create a little utopia for you and your community, within a larger dystopia. It's very cool. So I look forward to putting it out there.

Julia Rios: That's great, and that's definitely... with *Worlds of Possibility*, which is the project that you contributed this artwork for, my goal with that is always to sort of give things that give us a little bit of hope even when we're dealing with difficult topics. So in this issue we have your artwork and we also have an essay by a Jewish activist who is in solidarity with Palestine, and both of those pieces are dealing with a topic and an issue that we're seeing in the news and that everyone is feeling deeply all over the world is very difficult. But what I'm looking for are those little glimmers of hope. Like, what are the things that we can do to make things better? And one of the things is putting great art out there. And then also seeing that people can come together in solidarity, even if they are theoretically supposedly designated as the other side. Like actually we're all in this together as humans and we need to stand up for each other.

Alex Hernandez: Thank you for that, and thank you for the work that you do. It's so easy to get bogged down and get paralyzed by just the doom and gloom of all of it. Art is a way to not just escape but it – I keep saying this – it's not just an escape. It's almost an emergency exit. And we kind of need to hang on to that now.

Julia Rios: Ah, yeah, I agree. Well thank you for creating something beautiful and letting me share it with others, and thank you so much for talking to us. I hope that lots people go and find you online and see more of your work.

Alex Hernandez: Thank you, Julia.

UNLEARNING MYTHS, LEARNING SOLIDARITY

MY JOURNEY TO CALLING FOR A CEASEFIRE
AND PALESTINIAN FREEDOM

LAURA MANDELBERG

Essay: 1839 words

A few weeks ago, while trying to process Israel’s ongoing genocidal onslaught against Palestinians in Gaza, I picked up the book [A Land With A People: Palestinians and Jews Confront Zionism](#). I found all of the essays, poems, and artwork powerful, but when I got to Tzvia Thier’s essay, “[Seeing Zionism At Last](#),” I did a double-take: because Tzvia was the principal of the first Hebrew school I ever attended as a child in the early ‘90s.

She was one of the first people who taught me the myths about Israel that I later had to unlearn as an adult — and that she herself unlearned in her sixties, when she finally interacted with Palestinians for the first time and realized that they were not dangerous, as she had always been taught, but were in fact suffering under Israeli oppression.

Tzvia and her daughters, and later other Hebrew school

teachers, taught me a version of Israeli history that completely erased the existence of Palestinians. We celebrated Israeli Independence Day, but never learned that the state of Israel was founded on the Nakba (“catastrophe” in Arabic): the violent displacement and dispossession of 700,000 Palestinians from their native land. In fact, no one used the word “Palestinian” at all: we were taught that the land that would become Israel was mostly empty, with only a handful of “Arabs” living there, and that it was a barren, lifeless desert until Jews came along, planted trees, and made the desert bloom.

What I didn’t learn until I was an adult was that Israel has been engaging in ecological destruction for its entire existence: uprooting olive trees, planting invasive trees that are vulnerable to wildfires, and poisoning and demolishing Palestinians’ wells, not to mention the environmental impact of repeatedly bombing Gaza. Israel’s environmental violence against Palestinians follows a long tradition of settler colonial states trying to destroy Indigenous peoples’ connection to the land: for example, the US Army’s slaughter of the buffalo population that was the main food source for Plains Indians in the late 1800s.

Everything I learned from my Jewish community growing up reinforced the idea that Israel was our home — or at the very least, a necessary backup plan in case we ever needed to flee antisemitic violence. I don’t remember learning anything about Palestinian history or perspectives in public school, either. Criticism of Israel as a Jewish ethno-state was so rare, if not entirely absent, that I had no idea it was even an option until I was in college.

And there, where I should have started to unlearn the propaganda I grew up with, it was instead reinforced by Zionist campus groups that cynically preyed on my generational trauma as a granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and

convinced me that Palestinians were dangerous and taught their children to hate Jews. Even once I started to unlearn the most egregiously racist myths about Palestinians, it took me years to understand that they were facing oppression. I believed the lie, so common in mainstream American media, that this was centuries-long religious conflict between two sides who irrationally hated each other. That it was complicated, something I couldn't fully understand without a degree in history, religion, or foreign policy, rather than a clear-cut case of a settler colonial apartheid state brutally oppressing a stateless refugee population.

I'm still not sure exactly how I came around to understanding that the situation in Israel/Palestine was not a "conflict," but an oppressed group fighting for their freedom from a highly militarized state founded with the help of British imperialism and backed by massive US funding. I'm not sure how I came to realize that Jewish people, while oppressed in many contexts both historically and currently, could also be oppressors when wielding state power. There was no particular turning point that I can remember; it took years of reading, paying attention to the news, listening to Palestinians, and listening to writers and organizers from a variety of marginalized backgrounds about the parallels between their people's experiences and Israel's oppression of Palestinians. I desperately wish I could distill those years of learning into one set of magic words that I could use to bring along the many people I care about who are still unwilling or unable to see the power dynamics behind all the violence.

When they say things like, "It's not a war crime to bomb a hospital if there are tunnels underneath it," or "The Nakba didn't have to happen, if only the Arabs had accepted the partition," or " Hamas is to blame for the deaths of Gazans, because they use human shields," it breaks my heart. When they call

me and my fellow anti-Zionist Jews “useful idiots for Hamas,” or say that the incredibly brave journalists documenting their people’s extermination in Gaza are “Russian trollbots,” or go on and on about how this can’t be a genocide because it’s so “complicated” and has been going on for “thousands of years,” it chills me to the bone.

I’ve even seen some people, in a stunning feat of DARVO tactics, claim that the worldwide protest movement for a ceasefire and Palestinian freedom is actually calling for the extermination of Jews. It’s unbearably painful to see my fellow Jews — many of whom are, like me, descendants of Holocaust survivors — justifying what is so clearly a textbook case of genocide against Palestinians.

At the same time, I recognize all of their talking points, because I used to believe them. I recognize the fear underneath their horrifying, inexcusable comments, because I used to feel that fear too. Even after I started to realize that Israel was committing atrocities, became involved with Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow, and started attending protests against Israel’s regular massacres in Gaza, it took me a long time to unlearn some harmful myths about Palestinians: like the idea that the slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is a call to exterminate Jews, rather than a call for freedom, justice, and equality in the entire area where Palestinians lived before the Nakba. It took me a long time to fully internalize the truth that Palestinians were not a people constantly in danger of tipping into antisemitism, but that in fact their liberation was bound up with mine: as antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian racism all stem from the same systems of white supremacy and colonialism.

Likewise, it took me years to fully understand that the root cause of all of the violence in Palestine/Israel was Zionism, the nineteenth-century European political ideology that says that

there should be a Jewish state in Palestine. For so long, I battled the cognitive dissonance of knowing, intellectually, that an ethno-state that explicitly privileges one group of people in a land where another group of people was already living can only be inherently violent, while still believing, emotionally, that I needed Israel to exist as a Jewish state for my own safety. But after years of watching Israel commit the same horrific atrocities, over and over, and hearing more and more Jews speak out against Zionism as an ideology that doesn't keep us safe, but in fact puts us in danger, I was finally able to let go of my fear-based emotional attachment to the idea of a Jewish state that had nothing in common with its reality.

An important part of the process of letting go of my illusions about Israel was holding space for all of the intense feelings that came up: shame, for believing so many racist lies for so long. Grief, for the soul of Judaism, and for the parts of my own humanity that were taken from me by the community that raised me to love a violent ethno-state and erase the very existence of its victims. Anger and betrayal, at that community and the propaganda machine that has been paid to influence its views for decades. Once I had worked through those feelings, I was finally able to accept in my heart what I already knew in my head: that the only truly just path forward is one secular, democratic state.

Contrary to many people's fears, dismantling the structure of Israel as a Jewish state wouldn't mean expelling or harming Israeli Jews in any way. They would just have to live side-by-side with Palestinians, under one government with equal rights for all — just like white South Africans did when their apartheid government was dismantled. If anyone would be at risk of violence, based on historical precedents, it would be Palestinians, not Jews.

Sometimes I feel a deep sense of despair watching the unspeakable atrocities that Israel is committing against Palestinians. I think about the immense trauma and loss that my grandfathers went through during the Holocaust, and how deeply it has affected every generation of our family - and I see even more severe trauma and loss happening to Palestinians, at the hands of my own people, and know in my bones that it will reverberate for generations. It breaks my heart that so many members of my own communities are still unable to condemn Israel's violence or name it as genocide.

But then I think about Tzvia's essay — if she could unlearn the Zionist propaganda that she spent her entire lifetime teaching, I have hope that anyone can. I think about the massive and growing movement, of both Jews and non-Jews, for a ceasefire and Palestinian freedom around the world. I think about all the people using art, music, poetry, voice acting, books, zines, food, and more to mourn the dead and fight like hell for the living.

Contrary to the myth that the Palestinian liberation movement is antisemitic, when I work for Palestinian freedom, I feel connected to my ancestors who suffered oppression, massacres, and genocide and wouldn't want anyone else to live through the same horrors. I feel deeply rooted in my Jewish values — tikkun olam (repairing the world), pikuach nefesh (prioritizing the saving of lives above all else), tzedek (justice). My heart is broken, and at the same time, I feel stronger in community with other Jews who also refuse to let Israel commit genocide in our names.

We're transmuting the generational trauma that led so many members of our communities to prioritize Jewish safety above all else and turning our longing for safety outward, toward the entire world. We understand that, as Menominee organizer and journalist Kelly Hayes says, "to defend Palestine

LAURA MANDELBERG

is to defend the world.” Every day, we’re laying the foundations of a true safety that doesn’t come at anyone’s expense — a safety based on justice, solidarity, and freedom from all forms of oppression.



LAURA MANDELBERG is active in the Palestinian liberation and climate movements. She is particularly interested in the intersection of feelings, art, and social justice work. She is a dog lover and a stationery enthusiast, and loves reading sci-fi that envisions a better world and how we can build it. She lives in the Boston area.

MORNING DEW

MEGAN BAFFOE

Short story: 950 words

FAIRY:

*And I serve the Fairy Queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green, [...]
I must go seek some dew-drops here,
And hang a pearl in every cow-slip's ear.*

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, A
MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (2.1)

Zahur read a lot, in-between his gardening, so when he started seeing the fairy, it wasn't much of a surprise.

What *was* a surprise – and continued to be, every morning – was the fact that the fairy kept *lingering*.



HE WAS AN EARLY RISER. Dawn was his favourite time of day, a blossoming crocus in watercolours. And this summer, it was lovelier than ever, all because of the fairy. Often, Zahur would wake up to see that each petal of every flower had been embellished, row after row of gleaming pearls of morning dew. The garden looked like a light show.

And yet – somehow – he was most distracted by its engineer.

The fairy was objectively beautiful; all dark, shining curls, like Shakespeare had spilt his ink when writing him, threaded through with ribbons of gold. He had wings like cobwebs, and skin like honey, and eyes like daylilies. He moved with an unnatural grace.

Now, he smiled as if he could hear Zahur's thoughts, and positioned a final pearl on one of the petunias. And then – with a flutter of his spider-web wings – he vanished.

Zahur didn't go outside; didn't call out. He knew, from experience, that that would only scare the fairy away. (Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* hadn't elaborated on this point, Zahur presumed that his guest was probably already in violation of some strange, supernatural protocol.) So he drank his tea, and watched his garden, and waited for the sun to rise and burn the pearls into diamonds. It was a wonder, watching all the dew catch fire; he thought, in his more sentimental moments, that it must be how angels saw the stars. A thousand suns ripe for the picking, even if you couldn't taste.



TASTE.

Zahur couldn't believe that he had never thought of it

before. Really – after all the work the fairy had been doing – it was only polite. Just as you’d offer a builder a cup of tea.

After half an hour spent researching *what do fairies eat and drink?* – and then another, this time on the more specific *how do you make sweetened butter?* – Zahur felt reasonably confident in his ability to produce a suitable morning snack for a fairy. Milk, honey, fruit from the garden; he could technically help himself to the latter, but – perhaps out of politeness – hadn’t so far.

Zahur set his alarm earlier than usual to prepare the fairy’s breakfast. It wasn’t until he had set out the tray that the absurdity of the situation occurred to him. But then, he supposed, the path of true love never did run smooth.

He added a note, as non-demanding as he could make it – *My name is Zahur.*



ZAHUR’S INSTINCT had been a good one. The fairy was glad for any and all offers of food.

Over the summer, it became clear that he had preferences. Stone fruit were better than berries, berries were better than vegetables, and absolutely nothing was better than pears; milk, although not a particular favourite, was always received gratefully. The fairy adored the special butter – and even just the brown sugar on its own – but that was a rare treat.

Zahur could admit, in the quiet of his own head, that he still probably made it more often than he should for someone who hadn’t even returned their own name.

Gratitude *had* been shown, in the fairy’s own way. Zahur’s flowers looked painted; the fruit were something out of a Rossetti poem. The trees glistened in shades of mahogany and honey-comb, branches curling into the sky like melting

ribbons. No plants failed, nothing died; the animals and insects left everything edible alone. Even when the seasons began to shift, Zahur's garden stayed a storybook.

The fairy, however, began to change.

The gold in his hair faded to silver, and the webbing of his wings began to glisten. His eyes were softer, darker, wider, blue-black Suns with lashes like bird-wings, and they frosted over at the sight of a pest near Zahur's lettuces in a way that they hadn't before. He outright refused any fruit that he didn't particularly like, and demanded more of Zahur's time and energy.

The notes attached to the breakfast trays became letters. The days became colder and colder.

Zahur knew that he should stop leaving the trays out. Or see a doctor, or move away, or break up with the fairy somehow. He didn't. (Wouldn't.)



HIS AGONY ENDED on the equinox.

The garden looked different, that day – more sinister, but no less beautiful. The tree trunks were draped in cobwebs, soft like silk, and the spiders on them elegant as dancers. The lines of them dripped with morning dew like diamonds, more valuable than any jewellery.

Because – in the very centre – the spiders had spelled out a name.

Kunal.

It meant '*lotus*', Google told him. A flower that he did not as of yet have in his garden.

Kunal himself wasn't there. Zahur could come up with plenty of reasons – anxiety, anger, shyness – but wasn't sure which one would be applicable. His fairy had been unpre-

MORNING DEW

dictable as of late. But that was okay too – Autumn was here, and change was coming; Zahur could interpret this sign without any research, could hold the feeling of victory in his chest even as he dragged himself away from the garden to buy some more brown sugar.

The falling leaves would be his new sunrise.



HAVING STUDIED ENGLISH AT OXFORD, **MEGAN BAFFOE** is now moving on to a Masters in Creative Writing. She likes fairy-tales, fraught family dynamics, and unreliable narration; she does not like Twitter, but can be found @meginageorge. Her published work is all available at <https://meganspublished.tumblr.com>.

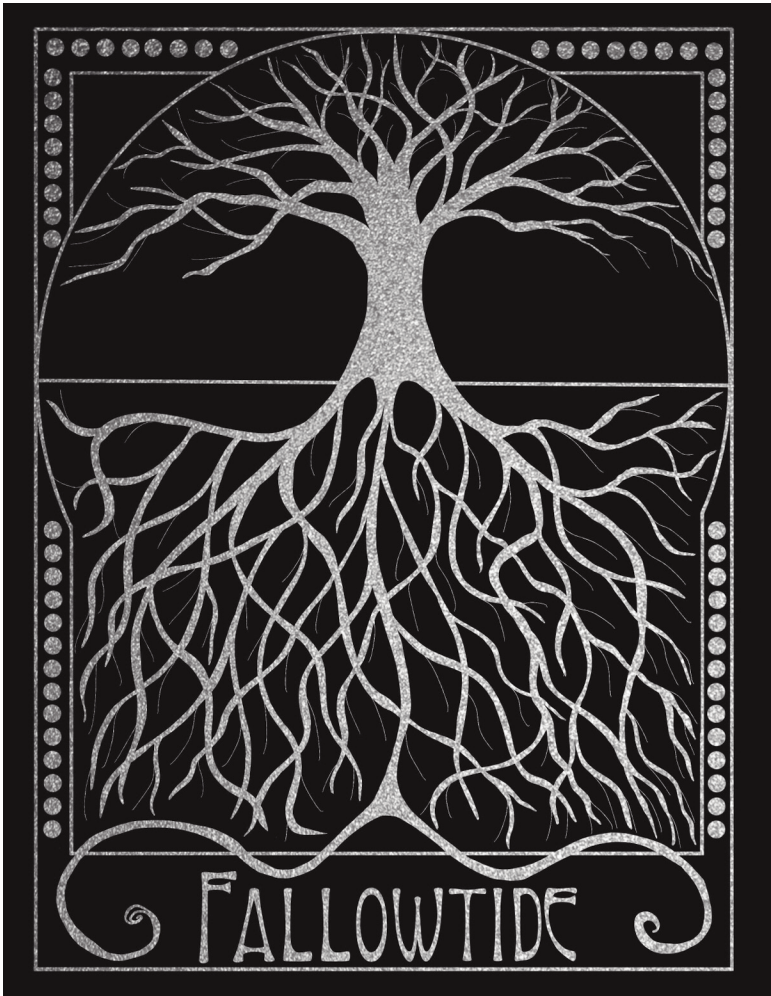
FALLOWTIDE

BETH WODZINSKI

This art is by Beth Wodzinski, and is based on the idea that this time of year, the dark and cold months, are when we go fallow and recharge our creative drives. Not much appears to be happening on the surface, but underneath, deep work is happening.

I thought this piece fit nicely with the dark season theme of Megan Baffoe's "Morning Dew".

Prints of this piece are available at <https://brightlycolored.com/product/fallowtide/>, and you can get a discount if you use the coupon code: Fallow.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Beth Wodzinski lives in rural Vermont with her husband, one dog, and five cats. Formerly the publisher of Shimmer magazine, Beth has shifted her creative focus to digital art, and is currently inspired by Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles. Beth also enjoys vegan cooking, yoga, and reality tv. Follow her on

instagram at [@bethwodzinski](https://www.instagram.com/bethwodzinski) and view her art at www.brightlycolored.com.



INTERVIEW WITH BETH WODZINSKI

I interviewed Beth for the OMGJulia Podcast, which will be posted a joint episode with Alex Hernandez's art interview. Here is a transcript of Beth's Interview:

Julia Rios: Welcome, Beth! So do you want to tell us a little bit about who you are in general? You are an artist, but you've also got a background with publishing and editing as well. So tell us who you are.

Beth Wodzinski: I used to be the publisher of *Shimmer* magazine with Elise Tobler, and we ran for something like thirteen years, I want to say. Elise is still writing and doing publishing, and she's working with my husband Sean Markey at *The Deadlands*. So I'm still very connected to that world through them. But since we shut down *Shimmer*, I've changed my interest, like you've seen, more to be about art and yoga, and I guess I'm looking for a more balanced life always.

And so that's partly how this piece came about. In a private group, we started talking about fallowing as a verb. And that was just sort of, you know, taking the time to chill out, especially in this time of year. And then a friend of a friend in that group has come up with this term Fallowtide, which was so great and she sent me what this friend, whose name is Friend-Crow – which I think is a great name – so Friend-Crow lives in Portland and originally described it as:

"The season of Fallowtide runs from Falloween through Fallowmas. It's observed by laying fallow and generally being as unproductive as possible. Be kind to retail workers, for the

machinery of capitalism pays no heed to the observance of Fallowtide."

I think that's wonderful and lighthearted. I went in a little more meditative direction with mine, and just was starting to think about how much work is being done under the ground with all the roots and everything twining, and there's so much going on that you can't see and that's sort of the metaphor for this time of year. And so that's how that happened, basically.

Julia Rios: Yeah, so talk to me a little bit more about why you chose the symbolism of the roots and what that means to you specifically. What is your own Fallowtide mythos?

Beth Wodzinski: I've always taken the week between Christmas and New Year's off to just sort of you know, rest up and finish up any projects. But then this year it just seemed like a really good time to expand it and so in my group, we were talking about having it be from Thanksgiving through New Year's, which is a little different from what Friend-Crow describes as Falloween. I just love that term – Halloween Falloween.

Just thinking about how there's snow everywhere, but everything's sleeping underground, but hibernating, and there's all these processes that are still happening even if you don't see anything going on on the surface. And also just in art, I like the process of things overlapping each other like roots do. Over-under is fun for me in art. So a tree with an extensive root system seemed like the right thing.

Julia Rios: Yeah, so talking about the process of sort of needing to have fallow time, what kinds of cycles do you use when you're doing your creative work? Do you do a lot in a steady rhythm? Do you tend to take breaks and do bursts? What's your pacing like?

Beth Wodzinski: That's a really good question. I think I'm still trying to figure out what my rhythm is. I do tend to do

something almost every day. I take a lot of classes on Skillshare and whatever, and I'm just really inspired by a lot of those. I'll just go off and do like I don't know five or six of an idea, and then maybe I move on to the next idea.

Julia Rios: What kind of mediums do you use when you're working on a piece?

Beth Wodzinski: Oh I'm almost entirely working digitally now. So I just use Procreate on my iPad, curled up on the couch, which is a very cozy way to work.

Julia Rios: So you do the entire piece from start to finish all digitally on your on your tablet or similar?

Beth Wodzinski: Usually yeah. Once in a while I'll sketch something and then copy that in, but usually I just do it all in Procreate.

Julia Rios: Yeah I was I was talking earlier with the other artist who is featured in this issue, Alex Hernandez, and he was telling me that he doesn't like to draw in Procreate. So what he usually does is sketch his things on actual paper and then scan it and trace it onto the tablet. But he likes the friction of pencil on paper, so his initial sketches are usually on paper and then he does like all of the fleshing out in Procreate which is really interesting. I just find it so interesting to hear how different artists are approaching things.

Beth Wodzinski: I just like how easy it is to undo. You just tap the screen with two fingers, boom, and it undoes it.

Julia Rios: Yeah, Alex said that he likes to paint specifically in Procreate because with using real paints, it's very hard to just erase your work.

Beth Wodzinski: It's true. And all the different layers. There's just so much that you can do. It's great.

Julia Rios: How long does it take you usually to do a piece like this?

Beth Wodzinski: Ah, that's a great question. That prob-

ably took like eight to ten hours over the course of three or four days.

Julia Rios: And did you have the idea for this suddenly and just decide to start doing it, or was this something that you had to think about a lot first?

Beth Wodzinski: I'm into a lot of art nouveau stuff. So I've been doing a lot of tracing art nouveau stained glass pieces and the frames and all the detail for that. So once I heard the term Fallowtide, I was like, oh that needs to be something with a tree. And in this art nouveau kind of frame, and with all these curvy things. And then the details of how that actually worked came as I was working on it, you know, as I figured out how to make the branches branch the way I wanted to. And then at the bottom, two of the leaves curved down around the words. That just totally happened as I was playing with it; that wasn't part of the initial concept. It just came up that way.

Julia Rios: Very cool. So I guess it sort of sounds to me like maybe the idea for this specific piece kind of came quickly and evolved as you were doing it, but it couldn't have come quickly without you already being deeply immersed in art nouveau as a style.

Beth Wodzinski: That's a good way to put it. Yeah, the ground was fertile for it.

Julia Rios: I might say you had spent some time fallowing.

Beth Wodzinski: It's true.

Julia Rios: You can [buy a print of this piece online](#). You're selling it through your online store. Tell us about the materials that are used in that print. What would someone be getting if they bought one?

Beth Wodzinski: The printer I use is [iprintfromhome.com](#). They're a family-based print shop in New York and they do a really great quality. So it's all archival and great inks, and it's just a really good quality piece. It's 8.5"x11" and I'm asking \$50

for it – with a coupon code – just type in Fallow and you get a good discount. 50% I think. That is available because this is actually the very first art thing I've tried to sell, so mostly I was trying to figure out all the infrastructure – what goes into selling things rather than, you know, getting rich off of this one piece.

Julia Rios: Of course, yeah, and what goes into selling things is a big tangle.

Beth Wodzinski: Yeah, yeah, and it's so easy to get super self-conscious and tripped up and double overthink everything and just get in your head and panic. So I just sort of went ahead with this super rudimentary website and I'm just sort of figuring this all out as I go along.

Julia Rios: Well, that is very cool. And people can go and get that. I think it's beautiful.

Beth Wodzinski: Thank you.

Julia Rios: I think that it would be a great addition to anybody's decor. Especially if you like kind of like the dark art nouveau look, and a bit of sparkle, because it has that sort of silvery sparkliness.

Beth Wodzinski: It's also available in gold.

Julia Rios: So when when you get a print of these, will it be like a sparkly silver or will it be more of a matte?

Beth Wodzinski: Yeah, it's pretty sparkly.

Julia Rios: Okay, cool. Tell me a little bit about your history with art. How did you get into it? Have you always loved it since you were a kid, or did you do it as an adult? What's your story?

Beth Wodzinski: I did it all through all through high school and then somehow I decided that art was only for serious art people, and that wasn't me, so I didn't do any for a long time. Then in like 2012 to 2014, somewhere around there, I started really thinking that art is for everybody, and so I

started taking classes online and have just been playing around ever since. So, for a long time, basically what I did was I would take these classes and I would do these assignments, and I never really had my own sort of direction. But this year something shifted somehow and I've been having more of my own independent ideas not in the context of a class or anything and this is the year that I started finding my own way, which is amazing. And now in 2024 I need to figure out how to do that more for money.

Julia Rios: That's really exciting! I'm glad that you're finding your artistic voice. I think that it's really common for people to start with classes and not really know exactly what they're trying to do at the beginning, but it takes all of that practice to learn what you're even working with.

Beth Wodzinski: Absolutely. Yeah, and you read artist statements and stuff and they're like, "this person blends contemporary whatever with the nostalgia of this and ecosensitivity and blah blah..." and it's just like, what? No, I don't understand any of that. I'm just following this lesson in this class about how to do watercolor. What are you even talking about? But now I can sort of start to see how people are trying to do something and I'm not sure quite what I'm trying to do yet, but we'll get there.

Julia Rios: Do you think you'll do more art nouveau inspired pieces?

Beth Wodzinski: I'm really into that right now. So yeah, and then someday I'll get sick of it and who knows? I don't think I've dialed in on one style that's you know, uniquely mine yet. I haven't quite found that one thing. All the advice is, you know, find your own style. And I'm getting there, but I don't think I've found it yet.

Julia Rios: Well thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. How about letting people know where they can

find you and your work if they want to find out more about you?

Beth Wodzinski: Okay, my website – my very rudimentary website that will get much better this coming year – is brightlycolored.com, and people can also find me on the Instagram [@bethwodzinski](https://www.instagram.com/bethwodzinski).

Julia Rios: So everybody should go follow Beth on Instagram and go check out the website brightlycolored.com, and you can get a print of "Fallowtide" if you would like it. And thank you Beth have a have a wonderful rest of your Fallowtide season.

Beth Wodzinski: I will! And I'm looking forward to kicking ass next year, so let's go.

A REFUGEE FROM FAIRLYAND

KEYAN BOWES

The child evicted from fairyland sat silent in his overlarge new clothes, his brown skin pallid.

“Munna?” I said. “Let’s go.”

He glanced up with huge brown eyes, but didn’t speak -- or move.

This was my first time working with a kid refugee, and I wondered if I was doing something wrong. I popped into Nisha’s office for help.

The Borderlands Refuge Director looked tired. She’s used to a trickle of dimensionally misplaced adult refugees, rather than an influx of confused children. I’d been volunteering with her for a year, initially for transport through the PonyCart network, then handling individual cases when the need arose.

“Munna’s very withdrawn,” Nisha said. “He learned English quickly, but doesn’t say much. His DNA test suggests he’s originally from India. Something’s wrong in fairyland. They’re randomly sending back kids, some barely of age.”

“Which is what, around eight?” I asked incredulously. “And why send an Indian kid to California?”

“Maybe they don’t understand human geography or aging. Or don’t care.”

She came out with me to where the boy was sitting. “Come, Munna,” she said. “Latasha will take you to Mama Marree. She’ll look after you.”

Silently, he rose, but stiffened when I put my arm around him.

“We’ll try to find your human folks,” I said, trying to reassure him.

Fairyland refugees panic in automobiles, hence the Pony-Cart network. Munna’s eyes brightened when he saw my pony, Dapple. He stroked her nose, and she nickered.



THE REFUGE WAS a cluster of homes sprawled amid acres of woodland. The air smelled fresh and green. We found the other changelings in the main house, eating honeycakes at the kitchen table.

The children started chattering with Munna in the fluting tones of Fae lingo. I’d tried to learn when I started volunteering with Nisha’s group, but only caught a few words... queen, king, fight. Ti-Tanya. Oba-Ron.

Wait. Could Munna be *that* changeling? Then he was displaced in time as well, by at least 400 years. Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in... (a quick online check)...1595 or so.

So much for finding Munna’s folks.

Marree thanked me, offered Munna a honeycake, and deputed another kid to show him around. All the children took off, like a flight of butterflies, with a shimmering illusion of wings.



THE DNA TEST that confirmed Munna was from India, matched him with some distant relatives – including one Kumar in Sunnyvale.

Kumar turned out to be a programmer in his twenties, who arrived in Silicon Valley a few years earlier. Over coffee at Starbucks, I explained about Munna, who might have been taken hundreds of years ago.

“There’s a family story,” Kumar said thoughtfully. “My distant ancestor was a Raja. His youngest wife Lavanya returned to her paternal home for childbirth, but she died. Not so uncommon in the old days. But reason for the story is the baby, the Raja’s first son. He vanished. The birth-attendants said an unearthly lady took the child.”

“And — the baby’s name?”

Kumar took a sip of coffee. “The story didn’t say. Probably he was too young. In India we usually wait to give babies names.”

“So, not Munna?”

“Munna just means boy, like Chico. The birth-attendants could have called him that.”

“Want to meet him?”

“Well... sure. But to be clear: I’m in no position to adopt him.”

“Would others of your family?”

“An eight-years boy from fairyland?” he said doubtfully. “I can ask on our FamilyApp. But it’s not so likely.”

Well, that was a dead end.



MARREE SYMPATHIZED. “DNA databases have helped us in locating many families. But we get few placements, and even fewer work that work out.”

“I’ll keep trying,” I said. “Munna deserves a family. But it’s been hard to find someone related who’s looking to adopt.”

Marree nodded. “The Fae connection unnerves potential parents. The Refuge is a long-term arrangement for most of these kids. Wish I could get some help, though. Nisha’s fundraising.”

“I’ll volunteer a few hours every week,” I offered. I came to see Munna quite often anyway. Somehow, I couldn’t get him out of my mind. He was such an appealing child!

Soon, I was there every weekend. The kids called me Mama Latasha.

“Why don’t you move here, Latasha?” offered Marree one Saturday. “There’s a couple of cottages open. Leave your car in the shed near the entrance.”

“Dayjob,” I said wryly. “Long Commute.”



WHEN, six months later, I had to report I’d failed to find any interested relatives, I expected Munna to be disappointed. Instead, he looked thrilled. When I hugged him, he didn’t stiffen, but melted right into my arms. I held him close, inhaling his sweet boyish smell.

Soon afterward, my company went remote to save costs. I took Marree’s offer and relocated to the cottage. It even had a stable for Dapple.

One evening, Munna moved in with me, and chose a new name.

And just like that, some paperwork and a court appearance later, he was my son.



LATE ONE NIGHT, I awoke to realize I wasn't alone.

A fairy glowed in my desk-chair, looking ethereal and ghostly, as though moonlight had taken a humanoid form. Her diadem sparkled as she swiveled to look at me.

"Latasha. You have my Munna."

"He's called Raj now," I said, sitting up. "And he's mine."

"I promised his mother I'd care for him. Fairies don't break promises."

"Someone threw him out of Fairyland. And other kids as well."

Her face darkened. "My consort's a jackass. He attempted a coup, making factions in our land. Some of which started evicting our human wards, as though our two worlds are not forever intertwined."

"Raj is thriving here. Maybe your promise is better kept by leaving him with me rather than embroiling him in fairy politics and marital ... discord?"

"Squabbles."

Raj ran into the room and onto the bed. "Mom!"

I grabbed hold of him and held him close.



“Give me the boy,” said the fairy.

“Mom, don’t!” Raj whispered urgently.

Moving so my body shielded Raj, I strengthened my hold on him.

“Nope,” I told the fairy. “Not happening.”

“Mom, let me go...” Raj wriggled free of my grip and got off the bed.

What? He wanted to go back? I was floundering.

He knelt to the fairy queen. “Lady!” he said.

“Munna! Come home!”

“No, my Lady. May I stay here?” They spoke Fae, but I’d learned enough to follow. Ohh. He did want to remain with me.

“Won’t you return to the beautiful place?”

“No, my Lady. May I stay?”

“You would learn magic and wonder!”

I held my breath. That sounded so enticing, even to me.

“No, my Lady.”

“Thrice! You refused thrice!” She glared at me. “He stays, then. But I keep my promise. I’ll be watching over him.”

Great. Just what I needed. Co-parenting with a powerful fairy queen.

But what I said was, “So, my son’s got a fairy godmother.”

She laughed like the tinkling of bells as she shimmered into invisibility.



KEYAN BOWES IS a peripatetic spec-fic author, currently to be found somewhere on the West Coast of the US. She writes when inspiration bites her in the ankle, and organizes various spec-fic things – mainly virtual now, due to Covid. Her work can be found online, and on paper in a dozen anthologies and magazines. Clarion graduate, SFWA member. Website: www.KeyanBowes.org

TETIANA HUT CREATED the illustration for this story. You can commission her on Fiverr at <https://www.fiverr.com/tanyagut>.

SWEET CHILD

AYIDA SHONIBAR

Poem: 45 lines

When something breaks
your heart and consumes you
with bitterness, you'll find yourself
stumbling into my shop of sweet mishti
that was definitely not there
in the middle of your road
the day before

YOU'LL SMELL IT FIRST, lured
by the scent of rose, golap from
the soft pink shondesh, which
I'll offer if you've received
disappointing news that you

SWEET CHILD

need help to chew on before you
can stomach it, a swallow of
creamy sugar to coat the barbs, to
help it go down

AND IF THE pain has already festered
into something more rotten, then
take a roshogolla, paneer like fresh
white clouds I gathered lovingly
in muslin and soaked in a syrup of spices
that will flood your mouth, heal the hurt
that turns your tongue sour when
you speak to your friends and
seasons your attitude with saltiness
in response to your family's questions,
because your loneliness will
only sting worse

BUT IF YOU'VE already fallen apart, then
let me fold you back together with
layers of flaky dough, tuck your
shattered pieces into the cushion of
milky filling at the centre, seal you up
using the same stick of clove
my grandmother repaired me with
after I thought she'd left me
behind, until she appeared in
a magical sweet shop
in the middle of my street on
the other side of the world to
give me your favourite, her lobongo

AYIDA SHONIBAR

lotika, and a promise of affection
eternal, passed from her ancestors to
mine, and from me to
you, sweet child



AYIDA SHONIBAR (SHE/THEY) grew up as an Indian-Bengali immigrant to Europe and currently works in North America. Their writing has been featured in *Nature Futures*, *Wilted Pages* (Shortwave Publishing), *Luminescent Machinations* (Neon Hemlock), *Asian Ghost Short Stories* (Flame Tree Publishing), *Transmogrify!* (Harper Teen), and *Night of the Living Queers* (Wednesday Books), among others. You can find more information about their speculative fiction featuring misfits, monsters and mischief-makers at ayidashonibar.com.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

ALETHEA KONTIS

Poem: 24 lines

I kept her Mint-in-Box
Tied up tight
Safe and dusted
Some fool would pay a ton for her someday
Enough to buy a better car
A better house
A better life
Someday
In case of emergency
And then came Pestilence
and War
(Famine and Death were already here to begin with)
Volcanoes and earthquakes
Storms and asteroids
Rockets that couldn't leave Earth fast enough

ALETHEA KONTIS

So even though no fool wanted her
I broke the glass and untied
Emerged from that box
Got in a car and drove into the storm
Lived that life
Unsafe, unapologetic
With gratitude for this Earth
and that Chaos
(The emergency was already here to begin with)



ALETHEA KONTIS IS A STORM CHASER, adventurer, and New York Times bestselling author of over 20 books and 50 short stories. She has received the Scribe Award, the Garden State Teen Book Award, and is a two-time winner of the Gelett Burgess Children's Book Award. She was twice nominated for both the Andre Norton Nebula and Dragon Award. She narrates stories for online magazines and reviews books for NPR. Born in Vermont, Alethea currently resides on the Space Coast of Florida where she watches K-dramas with her teddy bear, Charlie. Together they are ARMY, VVS, and Black Roses. Find out more about Princess Alethea at aletheakontis.com

HOUSECALL

CHRISTINE HANOLSY

Short story: 964 words



My mother called the doctor the very day the house fell ill.

“It’s running a temperature,” she told him. “No matter how we adjust the thermostat. At night it shivers in spite of the heat, and I swear I’ve heard it moaning.”

I was listening at the parlor door, one hand patting the dark polished wood of the frame. Something like this had happened to my friend Veronica Delaney's house last year. We used to send each other messages, Veronica and I: flashlights blinking in Morse code, post-it notes stuck to the glass in elaborate designs. But then Veronica had gone off to college, and her family had moved out. "Nothing to keep us here," her mother had confided to mine. That house stood empty now, porch sagging, window casings drooping. Dead as a doornail, my mother had said.

"Maybe a fresh coat of paint?" My father always thought that sort of thing would help: a new bracelet for me when I had the chicken pox; a silk scarf for my mother when she broke her wrist. "Or—I've been meaning to plant roses out front."

My mother hushed him. "You can't cure the flu with paint and flowers, George."

The doctor asked some pointed questions — had we had any visitors lately, was there any trouble with carpenter ants, had we ever noticed signs of allergies — and then took to examining the house itself. "Sometimes," he said, listening at the wall with his stethoscope, "a house just comes down with something. I'll do what I can, but you might just have to let it run its course. Try mopping the floors with disinfectant. And change the air filters, that will certainly do no harm. But," and his voice gentled, "I want you to be prepared."

My mother put her hand to her mouth; my father mumbled something conciliatory, and made a warding gesture with one hand.

All evening the house groaned and shook as if caught in a windstorm, but the great fir outside my bedroom window stood still and moths continued to bump against the screen door, attracted by the kitchen lights. I was enlisted to help scrub floors. The heavy lemon-bleach smell of disinfectant

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made my eyes water and my nose wrinkle, but I polished the linoleum, the hardwoods, the tiled bathroom with all my heart.

The next day the house stood silent. We sat around the kitchen table, my mother, my father, and I, and watched a square of sunlight creep across the sparkling floor. I was sent to check the thermostat a half dozen times; I think my mother was afraid to look. There was no change.

“Maybe that’s a good sign?” I said hopefully. “At least it’s not going up?”

My mother just shook her head. My father sighed heavily and went to the garden center to look at rosebushes.

“He hates that he can’t do anything useful,” my mother explained. I knew how he felt.

Across the street, the carcass of Veronica’s house seemed to sink further into the waist-high weeds.

That night we left the doors and windows open, let the sultry August air fill the house with the scent of jasmine and fresh-cut grass. My father had mowed the lawn, hoping to cheer the house up. I lay in my twin-sized bed and studied the shadows the moonlight cast on my wall.

Maybe my father had been right; maybe a little love and attention was what the house needed. Or maybe it had been the disinfectant, or the doctor’s treatments. Or maybe the illness had spent itself. Whatever it was, somewhere around midnight the house gave a great shudder, and the air conditioning kicked on. My parents ran from room to room closing doors and windows, opening louvers, checking thermostats.

When the doctor returned for a final check-up, I asked him if Veronica’s house had died from the same thing. He glanced out the window.

“No.” He folded up his stethoscope, stuffed it into his lab coat pocket. “I can’t be sure, but I think that house just gave up

when the kids moved out and Mrs. Delaney took that job in Des Moines. Houses know when they're being left behind, and depression can be hard to dig out from, especially when undiagnosed. I wish they'd called me in sooner. I might've saved that one, introduced it to another family."

"Is it too late, then?" I asked.

The doctor just shrugged. "Hard to say. It doesn't seem to have much to live for."

"We're going to plant roses out front of ours," I told him. "Before I go back to school. I think I'm going to major in environmental psychology, you know." I had just decided, then and there.

"Good, good," he said absently, checking his watch. "We need more people in the field, these days." He patted me on the shoulder and handed me his card. "Look me up next summer. I might have an internship. For now, take care of your house, and it'll take care of you, hm?"

I stood on the front porch and watched him leave, saw him slow in front of the Delaney's old house, and disappear around the corner. Improbably, a glint of sunlight reflected off the dusty windows. I caught myself searching for Veronica's silhouette against the dilapidated blinds, for some message I had missed.

Maybe a little of my father's optimism had rubbed off on me after all, along with his desire to feel useful. That afternoon, I dragged his lawn mower across the street.

I'll start with the grass, I thought, and weed the overgrown flowerbeds by the door. Plant some daffodil bulbs for the spring. I felt for the doctor's card in my pocket, for a bit of reassurance, and pulled on my gardening gloves.



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CHRISTINE HANOLSY is a queer science fiction and fantasy writer who cannot resist stories about love in all its forms and flavors. Her speculative flash fiction and short stories have been published by EDGE Science Fiction & Fantasy Publishing, Atthis Arts, *Small Wonders*, and more. She currently serves as Editor-in-Chief of the online writing community YeahWrite; her past roles have included Russian language scholar, composer, interpreter, and general cat herder. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her wife, their two children, and a small clowder of cats, all of whom have been extremely patient with her. You can find her full publication list at: christinehanolsy.com.

HEARTBEATS

ANNIKA BARRANTI KLEIN

Short story: 1025 words

Her stepfather built the house on the mountain the year she was born. She and her mother moved in sometime after her first birthday, and later she could not remember ever living anywhere else. She was four years old when she first noticed that the house had a heart of its own, and it beat in time with hers.

The first time the house had saved her, she was seven. She was playing outside by herself, climbing the big rock in the copse of birch trees in the backyard. One second she was standing atop the rock, triumphant. The next she was falling, her footing lost, the ground looming up beneath her. Then she landed in her bed, safe and sound. No time had gone by.

Years later she still remembered the house scooping her out of mid-air and gently placing her in the safest place it knew: home, where their hearts beat in unison.

As she grew older, she understood that she, too, was home

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to someone, that her house needed her as she needed it. She would lie on her bed breathing softly and touch her hand to the crack in her wall. It was there that she felt the house pulsing around her. She felt the air go into her lungs. She felt the thud of the little drum inside her chest. And she felt the kettle drum that was the house's heart beating against her hand.

She closed her eyes, listening to their hearts beating together as one.

The second time the house had saved her, she was eleven. She and her friends Emma H. and Emma J. were building a bridge over the creek in the back wood. They had fought, and the Emmas had decided to be friends with each other and not her. After they went home, she went back to building the bridge, sure that if she finished it they'd be shocked and delighted and her friends again. One second she was placing a cinder block. The next she was falling, her shoe stuck in the mud, the creek rushing up to meet her like a roaring river. Then she landed face-first on her bed, safe and sound. Their hearts beat in unison. No time had gone by.

In school, the Emmas acted like nothing had happened, but she found herself growing away from them nonetheless, preferring the company of her house. She never found her shoe.

She was eighteen when her parents told her they were selling the house, moving down off the mountain, closer to town. She ran to her room and threw herself onto the bed, hand against the wall, sobbing, but she couldn't stop them, couldn't explain what the house meant to her. She was away at school the day the movers came. She felt a great hole open up in her heart, a house-shaped hole that she feared would never heal.

For years after the house was sold, she woke up every

morning with her hand on the crack in the wall, feeling the house's heartbeat, the smell of honeysuckle in her nose. It took minutes some days, hours others, for her to realize she wasn't there. She took sleeping pills to keep herself from dreaming of the house, but she stopped when she began to smell honeysuckle in waking hours.

Over time the visits became less frequent. Her mother told her that a family had moved in. Months later, she called again to say that something had happened. No one would say what, but the family had moved back out. Time and again she called, reported on family after family moving in and back out again. "In town they whisper about the house being dangerous. But," her mother said, "it isn't the house, of course it isn't the house. Who would be afraid of a *house*?"

She'd been in California for ten years when she woke from the same dream she'd had countless times since leaving the house. She was there, her hand against the house's heartbeat. The house welcomed her back. Perhaps she'd never left. She was there, and she was home, and her heartbeat was right again. The *house's* heartbeat was right again.

It had been several years since it had taken her so long to remember that she was no longer in the house. In her sleep, the house-shaped hole in her chest was full. When she woke, it ached in its hollowness.

She returned to the house when she was forty-two years old. Emma J. sent her a message when it came back on the market. "I don't know if you remember me, but I saw that your house is up for sale, and I know your mother would love for you to come back to town." She had not known when she accepted the friend request that Emma was a realtor, but she was. Emma offered to show her the house.

She booked a flight.

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ALTHOUGH SHE WANTED to go alone, she agreed to let Emma drive her up the hill from town. It was surprisingly nice to see her again. As the car turned off the road onto the long driveway and approached the house, she closed her eyes. She could feel the open air as the car emerged from the trees into the clearing in front of the house.



She opened her eyes. The honeysuckle had grown wild and engulfed the front and side of the house. The paint was chipped and the porch sagging. The gable window into her old room appeared to be looking down at her, wondering, perhaps even longing. She felt the pull toward the house and stepped out of the car.

Emma produced the key. “Would you like to take a few minutes on your own?”

“Yes,” she whispered, taking the key. She barely had to push it into the lock before the door gave way, opening just for her. Her feet took her to her old room. She touched her hand to the crack in the wall, still there after so many years. She smelled the honeysuckle.

Their hearts beat in unison like no time had gone by.



ANNIKA BARRANTI KLEIN lives in Los Angeles in a tiny apartment full of books and people. Her poetry has been in *Fireside* and *Kaleidotrope*, and her short fiction has been in *Asimov's*, *Weird Horror*, *The Future Fire*, *Mermaids Monthly*, and *Fusion Fragment*. She is a member of SFWA, a former roller derby referee, and an erstwhile knitter. She is usually working on a novel. Find her online at AnnikaObscura.com

CONTENT NOTES

“Ceasefire” and the accompany interview with Alex Hernandez refers to violent events happening in the world right now, though it does not go too deeply into detail. More, it looks at the historical culture of Palestine.

“Unlearning Myths, Learning Solidarity: My journey to calling for a ceasefire and Palestinian freedom” by Laura Mandelberg does go into much greater detail about the current situation in Palestine, and discusses Zionism and genocide.

“A Refugee from Fairyland” by Keyan Bowes includes adoption and refers to a mother dying in childbirth.

