

DUSTY ATTIC

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...dio
...dales
...arius vel.
...que habitant
...eu sem integer.
...ras. Mi bibendum
... Ut tortor pretium
...or vitae. Quis viverra
...ius duis at consectetur
...el pretium lectus quam
...ut tellus elementum.



A Letter from Jenna

Hi readers,

It's good to be back in the attic!

After a decent hiatus, where one of us moved to another country, we're back with the fifth iteration of Dusty Attic! We are very excited to bring you a wonderful collection of stories and poems, including one of my own.

As always, I want to thank everyone who submitted their work to Dusty Attic. Every time we get another submission, I'm blown away that anyone would think of our tiny publication. I'm so grateful that you give us this opportunity to make this little zine and share it with the world.

I want to especially thank our contributors, the amazing writers whose work is being showcased today. And a huge shoutout to Daithí Kearney who donated his fee back to Dusty Attic. All the money we get goes back into the publication and any donation means the world to us.

As things are operating a little different this year, because life continues to be life, we are only releasing two publications this year. Our next submission window is in the month of July, so submissions will open July 1st. We're hoping to do something fun in the winter, so keep an eye open for that.

We continue to be so grateful for everyone who supports Dusty Attic in any way, whether you're a paid Believer on Patreon or just follow us on Twitter. We're so glad you're here in the attic and we're looking forward to bringing you more literary goodies.

Enjoy the fifth issue of Dusty Attic!

Jenna

EIC





The Ghost on My Shoulder

WRITTEN BY RICHARD M. ANKERS

There's a ghost on my shoulder, a momentary breeze.
The softest weight, it settles across this almost-soul
like a spectral gravity and engulfs all I've ever been.

Breathing is overrated. Breathing is a chore.
Compared to that final inhalation we take crossing
into the endless night, breathing pains the chest and
dilutes the energies we take a lifetime to build.

Will I have enough in which to see her again?

Time is immaterial here. Time is a burden too far.
There are those who count and quantify time, try to
capture its spirit if not its heart. I was never one of
them, though. Life's too short to worry, and death's
too long to care. I know.

God, I know!

They come for me like moonbeams, clear and white.
An armada of floating shipwrecks lost to eternity's
undulating oceans, I am their lighthouse and they are
my bane.

Skittish things, they hesitate. I neither welcome nor
shun them. They patrol the periphery as if children
tiptoeing along the shore, scared to get their feet wet,
yet desperate to dip their toes. Like frothing breakers,
they multiply, until the rise and fall of the tides of the
forever dominate instead of trim. Still, it's nice to have
this companionship if companionship is what it is.

Perhaps it's more?

I want. I need. Whereas they only want and need one
thing, and that one thing's me. But why this necessity

to proliferate around the unusual, the rarely seen, this
dream?

I am a dream, I think? Aren't we all? I am the dream that
frightens the fearless and soothes the rest. When the
first flickers of consciousness creep upon the unwary
like wolves in the night, I manifest behind the sleeper's
eyes.

How the tables have turned.

She, for my intangible friend is a she, though knowing
this should be impossible, beyond all known laws. My
laws. Her curtain of gossamer hair streams out into the
unforgiving evening like a shaken sheet, as her
incorporeal form gathers, regathers, fades, and gathers
again. Most would discard her as a reckless moment.
Others would see her, twitch a smile, and then run. I do
neither. I merely offer her my hand.

Her touch sends electric prickles down my fingers, up
into my shoulders, and then pulsing through my heart
to my toes. Tidal, the tingles realise it the end of the
line and return; it's an endless circle. The ghost smiles a
nothingness.

What is this game she plays?

Sensation. I always thought this the most overrated of
all. Emotion. Now, emotion is something to get your
teeth into. The difference is slight, yet massive. One,
you want. The other, you feel. And I've forgotten what it
is to feel. Perhaps she's come to show me the error of
my ways.

Eventually, she settles. Not across my heart, my torso,
or even my mind, as I might have predicted, but lightly



upon my shoulder. Like the last silvered leaf on a winter tree, desperately hanging onto the life it once lived, fearful of making that final plunge entire generations of its kin have already taken, she clings to me in her desperate weakness.

I have strength for us both.

Familiarity breeds contempt, they say. Although, I'm not entirely sure who they are? I certainly never said such a thing. Boldness has never been my calling. Subtlety is a skill for the divine, one I wield with compassion. One must practise compassion in my trade. After all, if I don't, who will? Yet, this ghost upon my shoulder is familiar. If I might be so bold as to admit. She is many things if the truth is known. She... is... everything...

And there it is. *Revelations, not revolutions.*

Words imparted upon me at the beginning by those higher than myself. Yes, there are those higher than me, or lower, dependent on your view. It took until now to realise the full implications of this statement. You must live certain things to understand them, and Death has never lived a day in his life. That's me, by the way. I hate to break straight into it, for most just pallor and flee. Being Death is a lonely business. Or rather, it was.

She has granted me the greatest gift. Not from imparted words. Not from promises written in the vaporising mists of a cold window glass. No, hers is the subtlety I spoke of, that which I thought only misled to use. Maybe she's watched and learned, unlike those multitudinous others. They swirl a windswept agreement but are still too scared to approach.

I wear her as a badge. She is my royal insignia.

I was royal once. Not so long ago to me, though

eternities to you. I was many things to many people, many worlds, and many universes. I was. Yes, I was.

When you're one of the first, you think nothing of it. You simply are. Nothing more and nothing less. One minute you're the fleck of darkness in a celestial eye, the next, that darkness made manifest. It was neither asked for nor wanted.

The others have no idea how hard it's been. The Pantheon have ever taken their gifts for granted.

She compresses my shoulder with further reassurances, like a hummingbird landing to sleep. I am her nectar, and she is the beautiful blur slowly materialising in vibrant colours from the longest monochrome sleep.

That's it, I'm waking. Have I been asleep all along?

"Yes."

They are the first words I've heard since that first obsidian night brought the lost and the dreamers to my doorway. I wrap them closer than the tightest shawl.

"I'm here."

I melt.

Relaxation. The impossible calm. The stilled breath. There are many names, and many more terms for bliss. Whichever takes your fancy, she is mine.

"Will you...? Could you...?"

"What?" The question scratches at abyssal lips.

"Take me into the light one last time. I just want another chance to remember. To recall."



Hers is the frosting breath. The cosmic rainbow. The untold lie.

I don't even hesitate. "Yes."

I claw and scrape and pull and climb and haul and slip and slide and crunch and, finally, drift. Drifting is an underrated enjoyment. So many just hurry to fly.

Light comes like spilled milk seen from an awfully long way off. It pools as I close upon it. The agitation at my shoulder suggests my ghost sees it too. Up from the endless darkness, we rise, until the milk is spun moonlight and latterly all.

Not white, but silver, the singsong night unveils itself in nightmares and crickets, owls and more. And I weep at its unarguable majesty. Yes, Death has aeons of tears to shed.

I expect to guide her. To lift her as a precariously balanced feather from my shoulder and show her the world she has always known better than me. But when I offer my palm to her, she is gone. I know not where nor when, only that she has. Through the devastation of this realisation, the sheer unbridled heartbreak only Death can know, come her parting words. "I'm sorry."

Not a, "Thank You." Not a, "Goodbye." Just the truth.

She has cheated me. Cheated Death! And I'm uncertain if it's me she's even talking to, or you?

Death now makes harbour in the land of the living, with no ship on which to sail home. Death now dips his toes in the endless sea. So know this, my friend, the spoiled love of the one has spurred a revulsion for the many. May you feel my unparalleled wrath for the rest of time.

Count every second if you wish. I know I am.





One for sorrow, two for joy

WRITTEN BY AVA LOOMAR

for Julia

Lately, I stretch my limbs
to reach low hanging fruit.
What I mean is: grief
is my resting position like child's pose.
Look how the red clay piles fine grained
at the foot of a ladder, how the aspens gaze
with their godly eyes, quaking
in the turn of the seasons.
Don't I already know
what hides in the tall grass? The insects
chitter and will die tomorrow.

The oil rigs stand sentinel over bone-dry wells,
like gravestones of steel and cement.
Can't I be a good omen, even when I'm alone? A magpie
who mourned not for Jesus, oblivious
to how all things end.
Look as I pick the bluebills,
the valerian and press them in a page,
mummifying life so it lasts
in the limbo of dead but not gone,
alive but lifeless, ghosts
of a perfect summer day
when I stared an eclipse in its winking eye.
What I mean is: I want to reach
for what is ripe, not easy.
Unfettered by bitterness,
molding my body to a shape that can hold more
of that thing called joy —
lacking the dull pain of this phantom
ache I've come to call Friend.





When a Dragon Dreams of a Lizard's Life

WRITTEN BY M. WEIGEL

The ancient green dragon sat beneath the waters waiting for the right sign. She was not looking for a falling star to signal the birth of a king. She did not await a hero. She waited for the magic holding her together to fade. The dragon sighed in the stillness; she waited to die.

She remembered a time with friendship and laughter, but those memories were long ago. Her home through the centuries would be empty soon, her service ended. The dragon was sleepy, wanting to finally join her ancestors. She would have such a story, for she had taken part in magic. Yes, she had paid for that miracle, but it had been special all the same.

Once, the great dragon had been a tiny lizard, ordinary, common even, just curious about the world. Her only distinction was the love of a young princess. The little girl was lonely. With no siblings yet and rarely around someone her age, the girl latched on to the first small thing that did not run far from her, unlike the elusive castle cats or her father's hunting dogs that she must not approach.

The girl was so young that she could barely pronounce "Isabeau" as she christened the lizard, but the green being did not mind. She sought warm rocks and spare bugs. She was not concerned about the little girl who squealed in delight when the lizard darted from one safe space to another. Isabeau was always just out of the child's reach, but the reptile also grew to like the young one's voice. The girl dutifully practiced the poems the tutor made her memorize for the lizard, and while Isabeau did not aspire to be Ozymandias, she enjoyed the privileges of royal favor and a child's laughter.

The transformation began four years later. By then, two siblings shared the garden, and the lizard had spent the past two years dodging the clumsy steps of a hound. When the dog died after an accident, the children understood that animals leave faster than people when life is kind. The boy did not want his sister to lose her friend who had to already be several winters old. He stole a pouch of magic dust from their godmother, distracted by the formalities of a third royal child's christening.

The children cornered Isabeau, but they did remember to ask. Children sense and return love so easily, but they did not understand what they offered an ordinary lizard. The small friend agreed to a few more years, but the children had little sense of proportion. The bag was overturned, and a protector was born. Receiving enough magic dust for 1,000 lizards, Isabeau felt nothing unusual at first, but everyone noticed the changes the next day when she was an inch longer than before.

The godmother fretted about the missing bag but did not think of it until she said goodbye to the children in the garden and saw them feeding chocolate to a lizard the size of a hunting dog. She cried out, "How much did you give her?" The children's answer was met with a gasp and a small shriek. The godmother canceled her travel plans, staying through the winter to watch the transformation and to explain the care that would be needed down the ages.

By spring, the lizard was the size of a horse, and she could spit fire if startled by someone stepping on her tail. She followed the royal children as much as possible and slept in the princess's bed. The royal family fed her from the main table, and the parents watched Isabeau, now formally named and included,



carefully. She loved stories, and although she did not speak, she could clearly follow conversations.

As the decades passed, the lizard, now a dragon, played with more royal offspring. Guards grew used to green claws appearing in windows to return a dropped doll or to snag a sausage off a servant's tray. The equally long-lived godmother returned to attend the weddings, to celebrate the births, and to provide comfort at the funerals.

She was the one who petted the dragon as its clicks sounded like tears when the child who had become the old king died. The dragon filled the moat now, only its head or a claw occasionally appearing. It rarely ate a cow anymore, and only the sight of children playing seemed to bring it joy. The godmother offered what solace she could, "They did not mean to be cruel. They did not want to say goodbye and could not understand they gave you too many partings instead. I will stay with you. Do not despair."

The godmother came often, and the centuries passed. The pair growing ever older together. The capital moved, and the castle became a hunting lodge, then too antiquated, and then empty. The dragon in the moat had finally gained white scales along its snout and eye ridges, and the godmother asked Isabeau to put her head in the magical woman's lap as she sat on the drawbridge one last time. The woman stroked the dragon's head, and it sighed in its sleep. The godmother wept as she cast her final spell, and the dragon shrank and changed, form spooling out of the water into cupped hands. Isabeau was again the size of a small green lizard when she breathed her last. The godmother kissed the top of her head. She said, "Let's go and see your family — both kinds," glowing ever brighter before leaving only empty air.

The castle collapsed a few years later, and men told tales of reptiles in the lakes. Theirs were only stories though, dreams of people who wanted the love of a princess and a lizard, a love of innocence and endless joy, like the feel of the sun on a perfect summer day.

ec
tis,
non
iat
nulla

Sed at
entesque
nc ac
ne cursus
u, nec
us a mi.
abitant
nte vitae
Sed velit

inceptos
modo.
us. Cras
tellus
lacus,
get
ist.



Sitting on the Stairs

WRITTEN BY DAITHÍ KEARNEY

Surrounded by chairs, we sit on the stairs
My child's mind running wild

Out windows see swallows speeding
Fast as they fly past

Mouths open catching flies
Mighty dragons in disguise

In the distance eucalyptus
Sway beside wide fields of hay

Where fairies hide the princess bride
Whose hair like corn they have dyed

To keep her safe in their estate
Before they venture beneath the lake

In the middle of the forest
Where we once ventured on a quest

Trying to find a treasure chest
Left by pirates who got lost

Once the river they had crossed
We'll go fishing with our rods

Casting out beyond the frogs
Who all line up to kiss the pretty

Princess surrounded now by dogs
Whose barks we hear as if they're near

As we sit here upon the stairs.





Face of Lace

WRITTEN BY GALE HUXLEY

Victoria was looking out of the kitchen window like an inhabitant of a space station when she first sensed the tugging at her cheeks. She placed the tip of her middle finger against her face and felt the slow movement of skin melting toward the kitchen tile.

"What are you doing?" Ian asked, grabbing a muffin from the bread box.

"My face is slipping off," she said, turning her neck as if she had whiplash.

"You're just getting old," he told her, patting her hips from behind, then brushing crumbs off her silken robe. "I'll go get the tape."

She went to look at herself in the bathroom mirror and sensation was confirmed. She touched her nose and a piece of skin stuck to her finger, stretching like hot cheese as she drew it away.

Lacelike skin swung towards the floor as she bent over to heave.

Ian placed a plush folded towel beneath her neck because she'd fallen to the green tile of the bathroom, which reflected the light of the morning as if she was surrounded by a hundred meadows populated by nymphs, adolescent summer flings, and Renaissance fancies. He held up a strip of fallen skin beneath her chin with his fingertips and said, "My great-grandma's curtains looked just like this."

Victoria's transformation was complete by the next week.

Her wheat-blond hair had been shed all over the house, revealing a smooth skull frothed by pinkish

matter.

At first, the loosened skin was the pale, freckled olive it had been when it clung to her skull. She'd found the hanging shade of skin against pink-red satisfying—a well-chosen palette of colors.

She'd panicked when her skin had sunken to shadow beneath her eyes as a younger woman, but when her bloodless garlands tinged lavender, she pressed her hands to her lips and squealed. This touching made her shiver because all of her felt as sensitive as a clitoris, always an intensity of sensation that left her gasping as she touched her shoulder or a mug filled with lukewarm coffee.

She even loved the mottling of bile yellow and dirt-plum that began to saturate the wings that hung from shoulders, thighs, and triceps. Ian liked the palette so well that he decorated the living room based on the pattern beneath her chin.

Her facial skin hung in arcs and crescents from the curves of her bones, still mostly hidden by muscle that left red stains wherever she lay her head.

One morning, she opened her eyes, and it was as if she was looking through pinholes projecting a sky packed with living stars.

She lifted her thin skin and saw the concentric muscles around her eyes when she looked in the mirror. She thought that the muscles looked like coiled ropes of candy her father bought at the corner store for her when she was a girl. The delicate under-eye skin which lay like doilies against the peaks of her cheekbones glistened with caught tears.

Victoria embraced her veiled vision, but Ian made



small, pale pink bows with a strong adhesive for her so that she could hold the fine skin up if she wished to see clearly. She rarely used them because she'd discovered constellations to story her private galaxy.

Beneath her eyes, the skin draped from each cheek possessed holy detail, tiny flowers, mandalas, and spirals. It was as if her skin had been penetrated by the most skilled and steady hand.

The bands that swung from her jaw reminded her of the filigreed necklaces she'd seen in museums, once worn by those who couldn't imagine that one day, they'd be ancient, nearly inhuman to visitors who viewed their things with unfocused eyes.

She no longer needed earrings. Carved tear drops, tiny to the size of her almond-shaped thumbnails, descended from the cartilage top of her ears to the hollows of her collar bones, where they came to rest.

Her nose was her favorite part of her adornment. She'd always wanted a hooped nose ring, but her parents, school, work, then, self-consciousness of her age, prevented it. Now, she had two rings she could stick her ring finger through.

Finally, she saw someone when she looked in the mirror. She had seen youth, ugliness, beauty, age, and plainness, but never had she seen an individual, no matter the makeup, hairstyle, or clothing she wore.

Victoria observed a muse, the kind who was illuminated from within and whispered masterworks in the ears of great artists. She would have been the artist if only she'd been plainly human enough for that. She felt like a goddess from the universe of Hellraiser films as she planned her return to the outside. It had been a year. Her transformation had begun a month earlier.

She imagined the shock and disgust but also the intrigue and the following she'd quickly accumulate.

It wasn't fame she desired. Victoria wanted what she, activists, and biographers considered to be a life. The thought of what her reality would be occupied her consciousness and unconsciousness with a previously unexperienced excitement, which for her meant certainty.

But then her skin began to dry. She noticed the loss of plumpness, which had been a soft cushion of flesh between her thumb and finger. All the thin adornment around her forehead and eyes no longer reminded her of expensive prosciutto.

A garland that hung from her knee ripped when she pulled up her jean shorts after peeing one afternoon. Two days later, she woke from a nap to an earring stuck to the leather of the armchair.

Victoria ordered beef tallow from a farmer in Michigan who also had a skincare line that consisted of nothing but the same fat repackaged in various ways.

She began applying it morning and night. Then, she started keeping a pot of it in her pocket and would moisturize absentmindedly, even in her sleep, until she dripped like sap. Ian made sure that no fold or crevice was too parched to leave a print on the furniture.

Her skin softened, but every pore was plugged with grease. She could no longer see the details that made her a work of devotion.

Victoria resolved to wait for her identity to be restored before joining the world for the first time.





The Hunger

WRITTEN BY TRACY DAVIDSON

the creature likes campers...

it likes the warmth of the fires they light,
the enticing smells of the food they cook,
the sound of their screams

the creature doesn't care

that Jeff and Amy are trying to mend
a broken marriage, that grief for a lost child
has nearly torn them apart

the creature knows nothing of love

it breathes and sleeps and eats and kills

in the morning, rangers will blame bears

even though no bears come here any more

the creature likes bears too





Essential Workers

WRITTEN BY ASTRA CROMPTON

“Magic grows on trees,” Mama says, “and we are all its branches.”

So I complete my two years’ training and get my casting certificate. Working in the light factory is supposed to be a respectable job for a low-born girl like me.

When I arrive at Blooming’s, I get to design my very own caster’s mark. This symbol will anchor me in the fabric of the world, enabling Blooming’s clients to connect to my energy. I’ve dreamed of this moment for two years and more. Approved by my foreman—they have to check the records, you know, to ensure my mark isn’t too similar to another caster’s in the region—they slip the talisman around my neck on its rope cord. I choose a black branch with three green leaves: for Mama and little sister and me. Such a bright green, too—bright like my future, bright like the light I’ll soon make.

They show me to my bench where I’ll be working the daylight hours. It seems so simple: sit where my mark is carved into the stone table. Channel my lifeforce into those grooves and charge it, fill it like a pool from which all those who have a copy of my sigil can draw. If I pour out enough, the overflow will last even once I’ve finished my shift.

What a momentous day to know that I, in my small way, will provide power to my city. How many of the citizens I pass at market might be drawing from my magic to light their homes, warm their bedrooms, heat their kettles? Would they look at my shabby worker’s dress differently if they knew? Would they regard me better if they understood that four full city blocks siphoned their power from my meagre soul?

Five years in at Blooming’s, and I’m tired all the time. No one warns you how the constant pull wears you down, erodes at your roots until you fear the world will crumble out from under your feet. The sigil empties but people keep pulling. How many times have I been jolted awake in the night with the pain of another light lit or left burning? To them, it’s a lantern to chase away a darling child’s nightmares, but to me, the shadows pile up at the edges of my vision, creep through my dreams like ravenous leeches.

I always wake exhausted, dragging my limbs back into the cold of a cramped attic room. My little sister groans as I take my scant heat from our shared bed. No caster’s sigil here to power our home. Couldn’t afford one, not on Blooming’s wages. And even if I could, whose pain would I be causing? No, the toes numb with frost and my sister’s smile and the mealy extra comforter will have to do until I get into the factory. At least the morning gruel they offer is hot.

I see my bench-mate Tandi waiting at Blooming’s gates for me. Her eyes are red with weeping. I dutifully pretend this is fine; in whispers we jest that puffy eyes are just part of our uniform. Her smile cracks and I grip her shoulder to steady her.

“Johales collapsed this morning. Right on the bench.” It should shock me, but it’s the sixth worker this month. Instead, I wait for what I hope—what we all hope—is coming: a break, a curfew, a reprieve from the constant pull on our souls.

“Foreman says they’re splitting up Johales’s district. You and me,” Tandi tries to smile but the tears are coursing down her cheeks afresh. “We’ve both got seven more streets to service. Our caster’s marks were sent ’round this morning.”



“Seven more?” I feel sick. I can barely manage my workload now.

“We’ll get a bonus, at least.” Tandi barely gets the words out through her constricted throat. We both know better than to hope the increase in pay will be enough. Enough for what? Is there a price for a good night’s sleep? A body that does not constantly ache? Vision that does not swim with colour and static by the eighth hour of our shifts, or the squealing echoes that distort my hearing by the time I get home?

The whistle blows and I hurry in. I am not paid to think or feel.

The extra streets demand much of me. Several large families mean tiles are flickering on and off rapidly—each one a knife prick in my mind, drawing my essence to light their lives. I can’t see them, of course, but I can guess at their routines: my magic heating their water pipes, my magic illuminating their lanterns, my magic banishing their waste.

A bustling breakfast hour has me gritting my teeth as the energy sears through me. Are we all so hungry for convenience that we’ll chew up those we can’t see to get it?

The whistle blows, but they keep on pulling. I try to rise to fetch my own meal from the hall, but I still can’t see through the swirling stars.

My jaw clamps so hard, I feel my teeth crack. The pain of it, lancing up my cheek and into my eye distracts me. The trance lifts and I stagger off the already vacated bench.

But as I stand in line with the other near-ghouls, my mouth throbs like a thunderstorm. Hungry as I am, I cannot chew. I suck on boiled carrots and all the while I feel the countless tethers of magic hovering around me as wasps about to sting.

When will it end? Eight from my bench are dead, including Tandi, but Blooming’s keeps bringing in new recruits. They seem younger and younger. I hear they’re offering an accelerated training certificate too now.

I used to know every caster’s mark in my district with pride, but now they seem to change every other day.

“There’s such demand,” I hear. Yes, I know it well. The work is demanding, the demands made of us ever-growing, the demands of the city ever more dire.

We’d thought the caster’s marks such an ingenious solution, a renewable resource that would provide for us all. As if we casters had no limits. Such a ludicrous thought; I start cackling at the bench. I turn to tell Tandi but a stranger sits in her spot, a yellow flower on a blue tile hanging around her neck. I don’t know her, don’t know her mark. I gnash my remaining teeth at her and she begins to cry. Good that she’s wearing the proper uniform now.

The earthquake hits and the city riots.

Homes without power by the hundreds. Blooming’s puts out a statement about the damages at the light factory—the epicentre.

Then they put out the call to replace the broken caster’s marks. Easier than calling us people. Renewable energy, replaceable. Just as they’ll replace the bricks in the shattered factory nine floors above me. They’ll bury any connection between our concentration of energy and the quake.

Will they bury me and the other casters’ limbs tangled about me? Or will our battered bodies form the foundation of a better future?



Ten weeks without power and I drift.

There's talk of a strike among the younger, newer,
fresher casters. A refusal to return to the bench. Some
smash their talismans. "Blooming's can't fire us all,"
they say.

Can't they?

My world has become full of flickering icy flame. No
day or night, no rest or peace. At least I don't weep
anymore.

I see a young woman with eyes large enough to hold
hope. She stands on a box in a packed courtyard,
shouting words that roll through the crowd, a quake
of society. Their calls rise, merge with hers, echo all
those casters we've lost.

She chants my name, and for a moment, my tattered
soul focuses. A battered talisman hangs from her
throat: a black branch with three green, green leaves. I
let the last of me flow into her.

Oh, little sister, let a better future grow!



*Lorem ipsum
 sed do eiusmod
 aliqua. Nisl su
 pendisse in est
 eu. Quis ips
 Pharetra mas
 ut eu sem inte
 lutpat sed. Ris
 ra orci sagitti
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Indigo Fingers

WRITTEN BY JENNA GOLDSMITH

It started off as hints—whispers of hints—in books and papers. A mention here and there, a turn of phrase, a question posed. The existence couldn't be proven, but maybe that's why we knew we had to try.

Marcus and I met in a third year class on transcendental object impermanence or something like that. We were to cowrite a paper on the properties of stardust and we ended up down this rabbit hole on the unknown potential influence of constellation magics.

Our shared academic curiosity paved the way for a friendship that involved many late-night study sessions, hastily scribbled notes passed in class, co-authored papers sent with crossed fingers to the best journals, and the shared rejection letter collection.

Marcus made school easier; not that I ever had any trouble with the learning and the application. He was the one who got invited to parties, secured seats for exclusive lectures and seminars, and went on dates. When he asked me why I never showed any interest in any of the pretty girls in our classes, I always responded that books were my one and only love. This wasn't completely true.

By the time we made it to that fateful fourth year class where we decided we were going to do it—following clues like we were charting heavenly constellations—we were well entrenched in our routine of living half our lives in a ramshackle apartment in the attic of a historic home downtown and in the many libraries on campus. Slowly, though, our combined time at the libraries grew exponentially as we combed through tomes and archival documents and letters and diaries and scribbled annotations. Despite the enigmatic nature of what we were trying to achieve, the fact that no one else in recent history was trying to do what we

do surprised us.

"Maybe there's a reason," I said one crisp early winter evening. The frost was just starting to creep up the windowpanes, though the wood-panelled reading room was cozy and warm. "A reason why no one has attempted this."

Marcus barely looked up from the pages he was flipping through. Every few minutes he would stop to take notes. I watched the way his strong hands gripped the fountain pen and studied the way his letters smoothly looped and swirled on the page in ways my chicken scratch could never match. There was a small indent between his brows from their concentrated furrowing. He was someone who could be so singularly focused, but all I wanted to do was reach across the table and run my fingers along the curve of his jaw and brush them across his downturned lips.

"Don't be so pessimistic," was his response. "Someone has to be the first, why not us?"

The more I read, though, and pieced together this arcane puzzle, the more I wondered—and started to doubt—if we were really the first.

This was clearly magic as old as magic itself. In all the history of time, why would two nerdy university students be the first to try? But, I couldn't find any evidence to the contrary. Threads that might've lead me to an answer turned up with nothing but more questions.

Marcus would not be swayed either. Despite my doubts and this gnawing feeling in my gut that something could go wrong, my curiosity was something that would not be ignored. Our combined



hunger for the truth, for knowledge, for power was leading us down this winding path of no return.

Either we would be the greatest sorcerers of all time or we'd go on looking until we could claim that title.

Unfortunately our last year was quickly coming to a close. Every missed class and half-thrown together paper was another lost grain of sand. I knew I was just barely managing to stay afloat, but I wondered about Marcus. He barely worked on anything else but our secret project.

"Once we've shown this to the dean and the upper faculty, our academic careers won't matter at all," is what he told me in another of my bouts of worry.

So the grip of winter tightened on the campus; the ice on the river mirroring the strength of our resolve as we began to weave the tangled threads of knowledge and secrets into some sort of coherent tapestry of magic.

I was writing so many notes, trying to keep up with the constant whirling of Marcus' mind, that my fingers became almost permanently tinged with deep indigo from the ink.

As much as I wanted to finish this mission or project or quest, whatever it was, for the sake of curiosity and knowledge, I wanted to finish it to free Marcus from its chains. While I'd always been the recluse, more comfortable spending days amongst bookshelves and words, Marcus seemed to be attempting to outdo me in that respect. This wasn't him, I knew it. And it pained me to see him become someone else... someone even I didn't recognize.

"This is going too far," I whispered into the darkness to no one in particular during a rare moment where I was actually trying to sleep.

The next day, though, sitting alone while Marcus was

off at the one class he still attended regularly and a cold wave of realization washed over me. I flipped back through my countless pages of notes to be sure I wasn't mistaken. The almost unintelligible notes from days, weeks, months ago confirmed what I already knew.

I'd just found the missing link.

It was almost comically simple, but in a way that wasn't obvious to anyone without all of the knowledge that Marcus and I had amassed over our months and months of constant study. Was this the reason there was no evidence of previous attempts at this magic? I wanted to think so.

There was an unimaginable surge of joy—an urge to throw my pages of notes into the air and yell "eureka"—but it was quickly replaced by a sense of dread. I had to tell Marcus what I'd learned, but what would become of us then?

"Shouldn't we take a moment to think about the implications?" I asked that night in our apartment, while Marcus moved the sparse furniture to the edge of the room, piece of chalk for sketching the circle already in his hand.

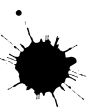
"The implications of us being the most revered sorcerers in the world?"

For us, I wanted to say. For how this could rip open our friendship and reveal things I can't stand to have revealed.

"I only mean," I start explaining, forcing my voice to stay low and calm, "if this magic becomes widely available, what could it mean for the future?"

"There's only one way to find out."

The floor had been marked and the air buzzed with





anticipation. I could only stand and watch as Marcus rummaged through the cupboards, pulling out glass vials of herbs and tinctures. His eyes darted back and forth between our notes and what he measured out into small wooden bowls. He was so meticulous it made my hands sweaty.

He laid out seven bowls around the circle and, with my help, drew the arcane diagram in the centre. The symbols were strange and ancient, but Marcus was nothing if not precise and I knew our work was solid. If this didn't work, it wouldn't be because we did something wrong.

"Now the incantation," Marcus said, holding out his hand for the scrap of paper I was holding onto. The last puzzle piece.

Without a word, I handed it to him and our finger brushed for just a moment. I wanted to linger. I wanted to grip his hand with mine and tell him that we didn't need to do this. We could have a life without the power and the glory and maybe it would be enough. It would be enough for me. Maybe it wouldn't be enough for him.

I bit the inside of my cheek as Marcus recited the words on the page. The spell I'd pieced together was a translation of a translation from ancient Sumerian to Proto-Celtic to Welsh and Marcus could speak Welsh much better than I could, so it seemed like destiny that he should be the one to be first.

He read the final words and my world shattered.

First, the bowls all caught fire and the chalk marks began to glow. There was a blinding light and a scream of such incomprehensible horror it would haunt my nightmares for years. When I could see again Marcus was gone. The bowls each had small smouldering flames still inside them, but they went out one by one leaving nothing but ash.

Marcus was gone. Marcus was gone. Marcus was gone.

I screamed his name. I recited the incantation backwards to reverse whatever had been done. I scrawled to try every reversal spell, cleansing ritual, location magic I could think of. Nothing worked.

He was gone. And worst of all, I'd made it happen.

The fundamental truth was that, despite knowing how to enact the magic, neither of us knew what it would do or what its purpose was. This was unknowable information and it had been so painfully clear, but I'd ignored it so easily.

Marcus had wanted this and I wanted what he wanted. I thought I did.

The only thing I wanted, really, was to take it all back. If only I could take it all back.





About the writers

Richard M. Ankers

Richard M. Ankers is the English author of The Eternals Series and Britannia Unleashed. Richard has featured in Daily Science Fiction, Love Letters To Poe, House of Arcanum, and feels privileged to have appeared in many more. Richard lives to write.

Astra Crompton

Astra Crompton (she/they) is queer author and illustrator dabbling in all flavours of fantasy. Their speculative fiction has been published in anthologies, magazines, comics, and TTRPG modules. Her debut novel, First Born (2009), and forthcoming Legend of the Quill (2025) are both set in an elaborate second-world fantasy setting she's been developing for over 25 years. By day, she's an editing and illustrations coordinator who lives in Victoria, Canada, with their queer platonic partner and three dysfunctional cats. Follow Astra's work at www.astracrompton.com.

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Tracy Davidson lives in Warwickshire, England, and writes poetry and flash fiction. Her work has appeared in various publications and anthologies, including: Poet's Market, Mslexia, Modern Haiku, Femku Mag, The Binnacle, Black Hare Press, Shooter, Journey to Crone, The Great Gatsby Anthology, WAR, and In Protest: 150 Poems for Human Rights.

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Gale Huxley lives in Atlanta, Georgia. Her work has been featured in Tangled Locks Journal, The Plentitudes, and Gravity of the Thing, among others. Gale is currently working on her first novel.

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Daithí Kearney is an Irish poet and musician. From Co. Kerry, he now lives and lectures in Co. Louth on the east coast. His poetry is inspired by his surroundings and his young family. His poems have been recently published in Martello, Drawn to the Light and Field Guide.

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Ava Loomar is a Jewish, bisexual writer and award-winning journalist. Born and raised in South Florida, she's now based in Atlanta, producing daytime shows with CNN International. Her previous poetry has appeared in Wussy Magazine and Atrium Magazine, with upcoming poetry in Sky Island Journal. You can find Ava on instagram @whosava or on various sunlit patios eating oysters.

M. Weigel

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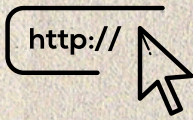
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