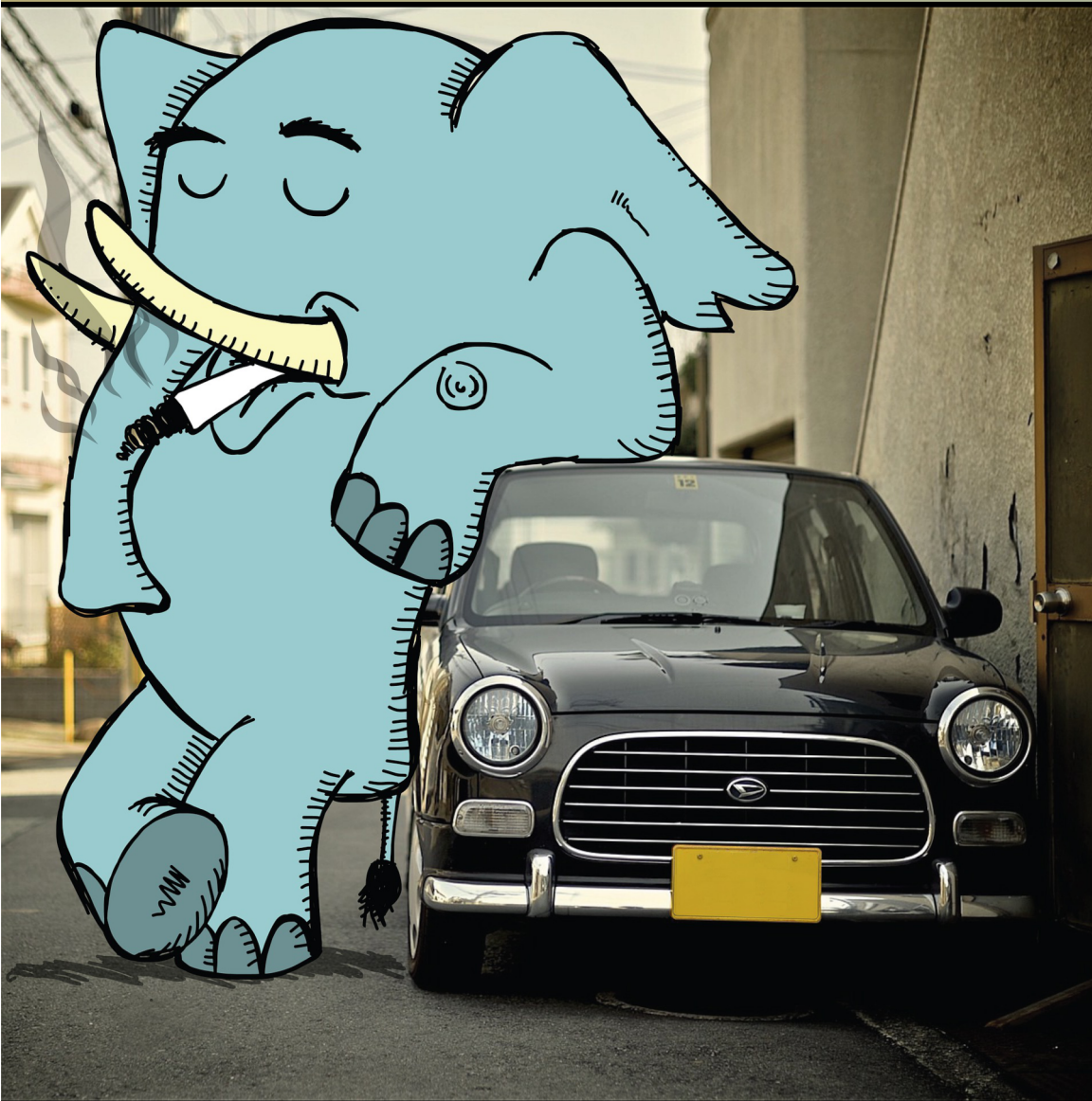


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Editor's Note

We've got spice cookies on the hearth, apple cider in the cauldron, and cozy slippers on our hooves—and you know what that means. That's right, gentle weirdos; it's time to climb into your oversized yard skeleton's lap with a checkered blanket and snuggle into that October feeling as you turn the leaves of our 118th issue. Metaphorically speaking. Unless you printed it out, I guess. Or hand-painted all the words onto the backs of autumn leaves. Which is a pretty cool idea, honestly.

Anyway, 'tis the season for death verses, and we've got two real coffin-bangers for you: Jessica Lee McMillan's "Funeral Flowers" and Chris Bullard's "La Poesie Me Volera Ma Mort." Looking for a story that gets kid logic and motives just right? Check out Ryan Warrick's "Skulliosis." And in a true spirit of something-for-everyone-ness, we are pleased to furthermore present Christopher Collingwood's "Worlds Crossing the Palm of Reality," a virtually poetic speculation; Greg Sendi's "A Compass for Ariadne," a poignant reimagining of a Classic myth; and Alexey Deyneko's "Comma fortissimo," a musical meditation on punctuation.

It's a bountiful harvest, friends. Read up.

– Laura Garrison

La Poesie Me Volera Ma Mort

Chris Bullard

Writing from the grave is a pleasure.
Everything is monumental here.

There was a single word on my lips
when I expired. Now, novels

scroll from my corpse. You are
the central character of my fiction.

I direct praise to you as a tree
sends its roots into the soil.

Transmission is difficult,
but the purest line is never the line

that is written. Whatever I hold
back, that is yours, too.

CHRIS BULLARD is a retired judge who lives in Philadelphia, PA. Grey Book Press published *Continued*, a poetry chapbook, in 2020 and Moonstone Press published *Going Peaceably to the Obsidian Knife*, a chapbook of environmentally themed poetry in 2021. Main Street Rag released his poetry chapbook, *Florida Man*, this year.

Comma fortissimo

Alexey Deyneko

The orchestra is ready
To start its performance
Some dog is unhappy
And barks.

It's hard to stay steady
Disturbed by those slogans
And some punctuation
And Marx.

What's in this capital K
In Das Kapital?
Who's in the Capitol?
How do I swap it all?
Is it engraved in some stone?

From dog's point of view
Music needs no notation.
It causes frustration.
What's wrong with this nation?
Hell out of tune this trombone!

And chorus (long waiting)
Now enters fortissimo:

Comma is all you need!
Comma is guaranteed!
Go ask your momma -
You must do the comma!
Let's do the comma!
C'mon!

Comma is nice and sweet!
Comma is there indeed!
Even in coma
You must do the comma!
Let's do the comma!
C'mon!

Bravo! Bravissimo!
Comma fortissimo!
Bark me some comma!
C'mon!

ALEXEY DEYNEKO was born in Moscow and has been writing poetry in Russian since he was nine years old. Some of his poems were used as song lyrics by himself and other people. He lives in Sydney, the city that inspires him in a variety of new ways.

Worlds Crossing the Palm of Reality

Christopher Collingwood

My world is a string
of proverbs – a chain of
of 1's and 0's, an electronic
mosaic offering vision,
a wave of immersion
finding shape beyond the senses;
binary growth becoming
the lattice of a reality, a world in
birth by formula, coexisting
to a biological tangent.

Simulation brought to truth,
symphony by a linear key,
units deciphering meaning,
consciousness declining breath,
accepting a new reality –
a physical absence; an abstract
harmony escaping cells, inspiring an
artificial conversion, intelligence
on the wake of a photon, conceiving
the first digital sunrise.

Descendant of the circuit,
two worlds divide – held in your
palm is a world gaining
sustenance by digits,
knowing serenity of the bit
in continuance; the other world
expands out by the helix,
a mitosis of conception,
cellular boundaries in motion,
engaging existence with the
senses, a chaotic realm – finding
warmth in textures.

Synergy in aspiration,
no map truly separates the
two worlds; a breeze
seducing skin, may find a
path to a virtual cheek,
*'in the reality of a dream no
language is different'* – and in
the embryo of a smile, we find
common ground, emotion pleading
for the prophecy of sentience,
allowing the space
between a 1 and a 0
to become much closer.

CHRISTOPHER COLLINGWOOD was born and raised in Sydney, Australia. He completed university in Sydney and graduated with a degree in business studies. Chris has devoted his spare time to writing, with works published in *Not One of Us*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Hexagon*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, and the recent *Smoke in the Stars* anthology, among other dimensionally unstable places.

Funeral Flowers

Jessica Lee McMillan

cut for the dying, funeral flowers
make shoes for descent.

I trim away curling leaves,
leave fresh petals.

repurpose scent
to chase after death.

their sweet is a disappearing
of snowflakes drowned

as ocean submerges earth balms;
the florist shop in torrential rain

is mere watercolour—my rippling beacon
—a drop caught in the pores.

a greedy minute for beauty
is death. I can't keep.

never these fingers catch a fragrance
where fragrance is sent.

fingers swollen river logs, tin-ringed;
their metal tint and tree bled

met with obsolescence. its true perfume
written in runoff from the mountain.

JESSICA LEE McMILLAN is an emerging poet with an MA in English. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Train Poetry Journal*, *Gap Riot Press*, *Blank Spaces*, *Antilang*, *Tiny Spoon*, *Pinhole Poetry*, *Dream Pop Journal*, *SORTES* and others. She writes from New Westminster, British Columbia.

A Compass for Ariadne

Greg Sendi

1

To true the walls, we put a drib of oil in a shallow cup and lay on top an olive leaf and on the leaf a flake from off the Anatolian hammers we use to set the lintels and split beams. Those shards lay everywhere, peppering the floor, like beetles scuttling in the dust. They would recollect, each to the others, in a clot.

2

You hear princess, you think some child. She was not young. She lived a life apart at Gortyna, away from palace things, more like a nun almost, to tend her brother. She spoke to him like others couldn't, calmed, perhaps, by the tea-scent of her hair, her nails on him, the gentle way she poulticed mud to salve the wounds he gave himself.

3

Suffice to say the suitor who appeared that year in autumn in his dark-beaked galley took her by surprise. Her father sent no herald. But she liked his plumpish northern face. He gave her splendid non-promises: *I've come to make these things all right again and I come to you with mercy of the gods for him and thanks to you the sad fellow will at last be free.*

4

So the halfmoon past his coming she made gifts of sage and beeswax, tallow soaps and stones to tell the gods her eagerness (she never could do goats or even birds) and told him secrets one-two-three and showed him threadwork from her girlhood. With confiding hand she traced love plans upon his chest and abdomen of meals they would share and abundant teeming garden hives.

5

I know you think you know.
But I am just the beam and
chisel guy. I built a portico as
would befit a prison. Full
stop. The rest are fairy tales
told by swindlers. This much I
can tell you: No magic ball of
string or ball of magic string
what have you rolled forward
like some schnauzer snout-
down de-vermining the cave.

6

She was the magic. She
herself. And when the day
came, she tied onto the high
doorframe a hem- thread of
her bleachwhite gown and
danced him forward,
unraveling until at last the
dress was gone, and they
stood where he sat in
cowfilth, allayed to hear her
breathing near, she now
naked to both. Then it was
one-two-three and afterward,
spindling the thread around
the bludgeon, he walked out.

7

The desolation calls are hard
to tell. The cave could not
contain them. The insects
stopped their skittly hiss.
After some time alone she
must have found one of the
cups with olive leaf and
hammer shard and learned its
art: However she might turn
amazed in gyral darkness, in
frenzy pandemoniac, bereft, it
trued her dismal course and
pointed her the other way.

8

As she emerged, I found a
painter's tarp to wrap her
body in. She was from head to
foot enameled in cattle blood.
She had torn her tea-scent hair
in sheaves and plastered it
with gore along the cavern
walls. I gave her water from a
skin. She tightly held the little
cup and went its unremitting
way, the leaf and shard
recoiling by degrees and
pointing her through Knossos
to the Cyclades.

GREG SENDI is a Chicago writer and former fiction editor at *Chicago Review*. His career has included broadcast and trade journalism as well as poetry and fiction. In the past year, his work has appeared or been accepted for publication in a number of literary magazines and online outlets, including *Apricity*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Clarion*, *CONSEQUENCE*, *Flashes of Brilliance*, *Great Lakes Review*, *The Headlight Review*, *The Masters Review*, *New American Legends*, *Plume*, *Pulp Literature*, *San Antonio Review*, *Sparks of Calliope*, and *upstreet*. He is done with this shit. So done.

Skulliosis

Ryan Warrick

On skulliosis day, we found out that Sasha had skulliosis.

Classic fucking Sasha!

About an hour before lunch period, Miss Beverly lined us up outside this one weird door near the back of the Jameson Academy gym and said that we were all getting checked for skulliosis. “Just a good clean check,” she said. “Because you don’t want to find out when it’s too late.”

Nelson, who was standing right behind me in line, put his chin on my shoulder and whispered, “balls.” He was totally right.

Miss Beverly paced up and down the line watching over us as she explained the rules of getting checked for skulliosis. “No fidgeting!” she said. And then this one nitwit doctor lady—or whoever she was, and whoever she was she sure did have a whole lot of moles on her face—she took us one at a time through that weird door. During the short intervals when the door was held open to release the previous victim and capture another of us to probe to her heart’s content, you could see that the inside was a little white room with sterile white tile and a single chrome stool in the middle. A skulliosis stool, obviously. The second you got a good look, she’d slam the weird door shut fast.

“Balls,” Nelson said again.

Everything felt like everybody was somehow half naked and about to be all alone, like waiting in line for a waterslide.

A single skulliosis exam lasted for as long as it takes to start suspecting that the kid currently inside was infected. Poor Kenny

Guava who never went anywhere without his Naruto headband. Poor Robby Cain who was always so sleepy all the time and it just made you want to tell him that he better learn to tighten up, bucko. Poor Lyle Letterman who would still sometimes pee at the urinal with his pants and underwear all the way down to his ankles, even though it had been abundantly clear to all of us for quite some time that the correct method is to only unbutton and untuck, never pull all the way down to the ankles, that illiterate nitwit Lyle. But so just when you thought that they were for sure doomed, that they wouldn't be sticking around much longer due to skulliosis, they'd come out sucking on a lollipop and smiling as smug as they could muster. Me and Nelson—we quietly thought to ourselves that at least one or two of these nitwits deserves to take a spill on the blacktop later for hogging all the non-skulliosis-having luck. Because, statistically speaking, if these nitwits got clean bill after clean bill then that meant it'd be a whole hell of a lot less likely for Sasha, Nelson, and Yours Truly to get to stick around.

Me and Nelson really needed Sasha to stick around.

Sasha was much closer to the head of the line than we were. When it was his turn, I remember watching the heavily mole-faced doctor lady step out of the room and receive him with much grace and a tender, sure hand. But once he'd gone in, she had him for like way too long. Finally she came out of the room but did so completely alone, utterly Sashaless, and gave Miss Beverly a single solemn nod. Then she jetted away from the gym and around the corner without even looking at any of us still waiting in line. Her high-heeled gait gave off this like super serious air, and she had an expression on her face that seemed to say, "Do not look at me. I have just found out something very bad. I am so full of anxiety that

my thoughts are literally buzzing right before my eyes. I am blinded by bad news. It is my sole duty to notify an official of this really awful thing and I simply just do not have the time to expend any attention elsewhere until the notification has been delivered. I do not care if you are confused and scared. This is serious and it is too late.” We all knew.

“Help!” Sasha said, peeking out at us from behind the weird door slightly ajar. “There’s something wrong with my skull!”

Miss Beverly—whose face was also sufficiently moled, now that I think about it—walked fast in Sasha’s direction and said, “ahp!” Sasha went as white as a hypochondriac’s over-bleached sheets and quickly retreated back into the skulliosis room. The door made a ka-click noise that made everything seem like he was never coming out.

“Balls!” Nelson said.

And so here was the fucking problem with that shit dealio:

We needed Sasha to stick around because, well, me and Nelson... We needed Sasha’s turban. Did I mention Sasha always wore a turban? Well, Sasha always wore a turban. He was a turban guy I guess. I don’t know. But we needed it, okay? We needed it by lunch that same day, in like thirty short minutes. But then that day turned out to be skulliosis day, and Sasha was in there and it was too late.

You see, me and Nelson, we’d fallen in on a promise we thought we could deliver up until Sasha went in there. Little bit of back story:

Me and Nelson were sort of way too cool for our peers to, like, get. Instead of eating and playing b-ball with everybody down on the blacktop during lunch, we always opted for the outskirts up

near the fence that separated Jameson Academy from the thick California orange groves that surrounded it. Nobody ever went up there, not even the security guards who were supposed to be keeping an eye on all of us. You could go up there and smoke your first cigarette naked if you wanted to and nobody would ever notice, but that kind of stuff wasn't really our thing, me and Nelson. We liked to light leaves on fire and catch lizards. In fact, and now get this, we were so good at catching lizards that eventually we decided we needed to find a way to make a memory of each one, like a trophy, so that's when Nelson started pulling off their tails and keeping them in his pencil box like a little treasure chest for remembering battles fought and won. And eventually we took it a step further when we'd catch a bunch of lizards and pull off their tails and set them free, and then we'd put the tails in the pencil box with some dry leaves and light it all on fire. The lizard tails would flop and leap through the smoldering leaves, catching singes on their scaly edges and they'd curl and coil like little snakes in a forest fire. We wanted the lizards all for ourselves, to preserve a healthy population for heartier hunts every time, and that's why we decided to keep the lizard tail pencil box up by our spot at the fence, out of classrooms and off our tongues—you know, like a secret. It was something the rest of the kids down on the blacktop would never have. The leaves and the lizards were *ours*. We'd sit over the smoking pencil box and shoot the breeze, just me and Nelson, and we found out that we had a lot in common in terms of family life. Nelson was a really cool dude and we had some good clean safe fun burning leaves and lizard tails and watching their ashes drift up into the wind and across the sky. The other kids would've never understood. They were nitwits.

All of this is to say that, the day before skulliosis day, me and Nelson were up at the fence with our leaves and lizards when out of nowhere this much older kid with stringy hair and a beard and tattered jeans—and who smelled really bad like a dirty dog and eggs or something, and you could smell it from quite a ways away—well this older kid walked out of the orange groves and got as close to us as the school’s fence would let him. He put his hands through the chain link like he was waiting for his turn to bat, and that’s when he asked us if we wanted to make a deal.

“Listen guys,” he said. “I’ve got a pretty sweet fort back here in these trees. Me and my friends built it. I’ll get you out of here and show you where it is if you do just one thing for me. You’ll be honorary members.”

Me and Nelson—we fucking loved forts.

“I just need you to get me *that* kid’s hat,” he said.

The older kid sprung one finger through the fence and pointed it down toward the blacktop where all the other kids were running around annoyingly smiley-faced and eating lunch together and playing b-ball. And there in the center of it all was Sasha, standing still and straight as a flagpole in the middle of a b-ball court just sort of staring off into nothing, one pinky securely nostrilled. I remember thinking in that moment that his turban looked really great on him.

“Sasha’s?”

“Why do you need it?” Nelson said.

“Guys, guys. Your friend, Sasha? Sasha. That’s not his hat. That’s *my* hat. It’s a special, magic hat, and Sasha is using it without my permission. So, tomorrow, get me my hat, bring it back to me,

and you can consider yourselves both honorary members of my club. See the fort.”

It goes without saying that me and Nelson really wanted to see that fort. So we planned to steal back Sasha’s turban the next day during lunch and then we’d bring it back up to the older kid and we’d be honorary members just like that. We were going to corner Sasha and tell him what was what. You know what I’m talking about? *A sorry, Sasha, but business is just business* kind of speech. And then Nelson—who was always fairly agile and chimp-like—was going to jump on Sasha’s back and push his neck down to make him bow and I would unravel it clean off his head. *Just business, Sasha*, we were going to say. *Really sorry, Sash*, we’d say, so that he’d get it wasn’t personal and that the world is just that kind of doggy dog.

“But if you don’t get me my hat,” said the older kid. “Then I’ll come looking for your houses in the nighttime, guys. I’ll find you both and Sasha too. Got dads? Doesn’t matter. I’ll beat your dads blue in the moonlight. I’ll give them a quick handy J ‘round back dead or alive, okay? You won’t see the fort.”

“Okay,” Nelson said, scrunching his eyes at the older kid, the kind of eye scrunch that looks worried and confused but could also maybe just be a squint in the sun.

“Bring the hat, see the fort.”

This is why we really needed Sasha to stick around.

But then the next day turned out to be skulliosis day and Sasha turned out to be infected with a bad skull from all the skulliosis, and that’s when Nelson said balls.

Everything was starting to make a lot of sense. Me and Nelson were such nitwits not to see it from the get. It was so obvious that

Sasha had known about his skulliosis for who knows how long and somehow he'd stolen the older kid's special turban to hide his bad skull. Sasha had worn that turban for as long as we could remember; the crime was deep, a long game. It was classic Sasha. But, despite his efforts, it hadn't worked. They'd trapped him fair and square. They got him. As far as we could tell, they'd discovered his skulliosis anyways, magic turban or not.

And I was glad that Sasha had been brought to justice, but there was just one big problem.

"What are we going to do now?" Nelson said.

Well, there was nothing we could do, sweet Nelson, I'd said. Sasha was in there. It was too late. We were finished, done, dead, doomed. Only thing me and Nelson could do was stand around in the skulliosis line and try to forget about ever getting to see that fort, about ever being honorary members. We started to feel more trapped than Sasha was. All hope went up into the air like the ashes of leaves and lizard tails.

But then, out of nowhere, Nelson asked the question that changed everything: What did I think was under Sasha's turban? Like, what exactly *is* Sasha's skulliosis, he'd asked. So we played pretend and imagined what we would find under his turban if we'd actually had the chance to make him bow and rip it off and expose his skulliosis naked in front of God and everybody else. Nelson said we'd find an infected third eye. I said we'd find his deceased conjoined twin's skull embedded in his. Nelson said we'd find a knife. I said we'd only find Sasha's head, but Sasha's head without any ears. Nelson said we'd find some magic beans. I said we'd find the beating heart of Jesus Christ. Nelson said that if it was truly a special magic hat, then maybe Sasha's turban was

hiding a key to a new world, like maybe we'd find a connection to a whole other dimension under there, a portal to a better planet, a link to the multiverse and every timeline that exists, an electrical shock wave that leads straight to the center of a place nobody wants us to enter. Nelson said that maybe Sasha stole the older kid's magic turban because it was the only thing in the whole world that could contain his inter-dimensional universe-jumping condition. Nelson said that, without the turban, maybe Sasha's head would just like suddenly explode.

That's when it zapped me straight in the goshdamn face:

What if Sasha doesn't even have this "skulliosis"? . . . What if when they took Sasha into that weird little room and unraveled his turban, they like, you know, found something? . . . What if "skulliosis" was some kind of excuse? — a way to scare us . . . What if they found something they don't want the rest of us to know about? . . . What if, for Sasha, it wasn't actually too late? . . . What if, under that magic hat, Miss Beverly and the mole-faced doctor lady had found *a weapon*?

"Holy fucking shit," Nelson whispered.

"Hey!" It was Sasha again, peeking. "There's something wrong with my skull!"

By this time he had tears in his eyes. He looked the way your puppy does right before your mom takes him to the cleaners. The line hadn't moved in quite a while and the mole-faced doctor lady still hadn't come back. There probably wasn't much time left. He'd been in there for a while and she could have returned at any second. I made eye contact with him. I mouthed, *Don't worry, Sasha, we got you*. He squinted at me like a squint in the sun. Sasha had an

inter-dimensional portal under his turban and everybody wanted it for themselves.

“Sasha!” Miss Beverly said, walking in his direction again. “Ahp! Ahp! Ahp!” Then Miss Beverly turned to all of us in line and said, “I’m going to find Mrs. Johnston,” meaning the mole-faced doctor lady. “Everybody sit still and be quiet and I’ll be right back.”

This nitwit Miss Beverly thought she had us—had Sasha—but she sure as shit didn’t. And so the second she was gone, I nodded to Nelson. *Let’s do this.*

We got out of line. We walked straight up to the skulliosis room’s weird door and knocked. “Help!” Sasha said, his voice muffled. He said he was locked in from the outside now. He said he didn’t understand. He said he thought he wouldn’t be sticking around much longer. He said there might be something wrong with his skull.

“That is *your* hat, Sash.” I said. .

“Nobody is going to take it from you,” Nelson said.

“We’re here, Sash.”

“What?” Sasha said. He couldn’t believe our kindness

Me and Nelson positioned ourselves on either side of the weird door. We stood there strong, looking all of the other kids in line dead in the eye. They asked us what was wrong, what we were doing. We told them not to worry and that everything was going to be okay. Me and Nelson were like the King’s guard. *Sasha’s* guard. Sasha and his turban were not to be taken advantage of. We didn’t care what Miss Beverly or the mole-faced doctor lady or even what the older kid from the orange grove thought or said or did about any of it. Sasha was special cargo, the kid with the magic hat and the portal in his head. Our dude, our way out.

“What?” Sasha said.

“We’re not scared of Miss Beverly, Sash. We’re not scared of the older kid.”

“What? What?” he kept saying. He was blown away.

“Nobody is going to steal your hat.”

“We’re not scared anymore, Sash.”

“What?”

In that moment, we truly weren’t scared of anything. Nothing could stop us. No nitwits of any threatening degree would be beating us or anybody else blue in the moonlight. We were sick of leaves and lizards, of forts we’d never see and honorary members we’d never be, and we weren’t scared. We’d risk it all for Sash; me and Nelson had nothing to lose. We didn’t even have dads.

What?

RYAN WARRICK likes to hide notes for strangers in unexpected places and wonders why nature has pretty much decided against blonde raccoons. In 2017 he earned a BA in English Literature and eventually went on to pursue an MA in English Composition. When he’s not out there trying to spot a blonde raccoon, he is either writing web copy for the tech company he works for or writing fiction for friends, family, and strangers.

On the cover:

“Elephant Smoking”

RICHARD DUIJNSTEE is a Dutch-Canadian illustrator. He was born with a pencil in his hand and graduated to a fountain pen after art school, but his tools now include all kinds of pens, markers, and digital brushes. His drawings are happy, since he can't draw “mean things.” He is available at <https://richardsdrawings.ca>.

