

## **22 Facets of my Father**

Consisting of a set of poems  
investigating a father-son relationship,  
as committed by  
Rik Roots

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First published in the United Kingdom  
and worldwide in 2010  
by Rik's Sparky Little Printing Press

Smashwords Edition.

This chapbook forms part of the [RikVerse](#).  
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Dedicated to the memory of  
Walter James Roots  
1927 – 1982

My Dad

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### [Fool](#)

The present you conceived for my mum  
one deliberate-drunk New Year's Eve came  
early morning, scorning your breakfast  
routine. Women draped the dining room  
in clean white sheets  
to welcome me home.

When more neighbouring wives came  
to take control, you barked  
– but slipped back into your manly role,  
your concern no more than labourer's sweat,  
soon wiped away.

Your mum said it would be quick: she was right.  
The screams breached barriers and I arrived, slimed  
and quiet. You took me later, held nine pounds  
of chaos in your grip. Only then,  
mum tells me,  
did I cry.



### Showman

I am wonderstruck by the way  
two people live within your eyes.

Neighbours adore you. Take your face  
for its value. Welcome your smile.

I keep my face guarded, my fear  
of your limits sharpened by years.

I learn to read you, your rages  
foretold by the level of blue

pills in your bottle – one taken  
each day to take the edge from you.



## **Priestess**

A friend of the family had a donkey  
whose stone coat would change hue  
to measure the weather. He said

the tail would part from her arse to mark  
the start of an earthquake.

A blue-vein, wet, windstrap day  
takes me walking broad Dymchurch Wall.  
The wave chopped sea ebbs, exposes the renovated  
sands and shingles where cousins once exercised  
donkeys on winter days like this. I'd run, too,  
with my dog. Watch as she chased seagulls  
through the gusts. You never chased me here:

this beach was my beach. Renewed  
each day by the grey Channel tide. Bright  
shells to collect, rank kelps to kick. A time  
for thoughts to tick in my head. Navigate  
between sand and silt, land in water quick  
to suck a foot deep. But today

I keep to the wall, walk away from the village,  
balance between brown fields below the tide line  
and the salt foams beyond my yellow strand. I balanced  
too long. Settled, like the wall, between you and the wife  
strapped in your coastcarving, shapeshift battle.  
Waiting for the brush of a donkey's tail,  
detached.



## Empress

The night your mum died I slunk  
after you to watch you cry, hiding  
from family, bolted in your shed  
at the end of the yard. Your head backlit  
by the bare bulb picking out tears  
and saltflats matched on each side  
of your screwed, stubbled face.

I cried, dad. Sobs surprised me as school  
gathered for lunch the day you disposed  
of gran. I sat, breath pressed  
in a chest coopered in unseen hoops.  
Tears shunted across my kid skin. Mates  
stared at my face shading red. Laughed at me,  
fingers pointed, and I laughed at me, too.



## **Emperor**

You bought the first calculator  
the village had seen. A brick  
of a machine with hard plastic  
buttons and American batteries.  
All the way from Texas. We  
took turns to test the new toy:  
magic arithmetic at the clack  
of a click.

The smallest telly money could buy  
was yours. Four inches of screen  
packed between radio and tape deck.  
We lined up to view the almost  
picture, guess at the grey-grain shapes  
flattering within.



Your eight track tape cassettes still saw  
good use, even after the fashion passed.  
You liked the music, the shape,  
the selection switch.

You left us too soon:  
computers are constructed  
with you in mind.



## **Hierophant**

This morning we work together: I need  
school books, you want beerchange.  
As we enter the stables to fork horse dung  
into corners I listen to the way you speak,  
flat vowels flagging statements in the flow:  
must have a wife, then sons come. Work

for a wage to pay the rent, a roof overhead.  
Food on plates – yes, I nod, hungry to finish  
the job, straw stalk between my teeth.

Moving to the next job you string up  
more thoughts. I look to where you point:  
a pond hedged in yellow iris, puckered  
out of the marsh by bombs that failed  
to rocket London. We hang hay for the horses  
on the fence by the train tracks and I ask you,  
why? You sigh, remind me of familiar facts: place  
makes money, money makes status. Your brothers  
fighting out of England for fuck-knows-what  
and you digging roots for farmers.

You try to explain, how for a while it worked,  
the world worked but then it stopped, a man  
rocketed to the moon yet no-one would tell you  
why, or how to fix the world, except to take the pills  
that raked out your feelings, made you sweet  
like rotting hay and horse shit – clipping  
your sentences now to bare clause, word  
on word, repetitive like the piston chudder  
of the little train rushing past us to Dymchurch  
station. The smoke stings your eyes to tears  
and haychaff makes your lungs heave.



## Lovers

Your habits are a comfort. Tonight, Tuesday,  
I watch you drink your six o'clock tea, slurp it  
from the side of your mouth. The teardrop snot  
dangling from your nose hypnotises me,  
a translucent pendulum, a gamble to guess  
where it will fall: the carpet, the cup.

The other curve of your maw clamps on  
a hand rolled splinter of tobacco,  
sucked every minute or so. Ash drops  
onto the pools coupon you complete,  
the same each week, regular ranks of crosses  
bet to bag a million quid: Stockport County,  
Manchester City, York.

I leave to eat in the lounge, switched to BBC.  
You settle where you sit, clamp headphones  
to your ears and zone out to ABBA, Queen:  
disco dazzlers who shimmer across the carpet,  
hips loose and hands held high. By seven your head  
slumps: a doze before you tour the pubs.



## **Chariot**

In grey overalls, you are the greatest car  
mechanic of all, fingers lubed in oil  
as you tweak and tinker, fix and fine tune  
village engines to precision in our yard.  
Neighbours watch in awe as you restore the roar  
and the purr to aged, upholstered frames.

Early morning sees you leave your devotion  
in the yard and choke your way to work,  
moving fuel to garages across the county, road lord  
in your yellow, six axle articulation, daring  
the men of Kent to compete with you  
in the only race that counts.



## **Strength**

Evening arrives with a clear sky and a hard frost  
to etch white glass scabbards on each grass blade.

Horses graze in their stables, too cold to start  
at my dog, running her rheumatic hip to warm ease.

Your caravan is warm – chilblains itch when I enter. You force  
your bones to stand, to greet me: our backslaps hug us tight.

We speak easily this evening: records and radios,  
school, work, food and fodder. Other men's wives.

You mention doctors, a bladder infection. No fright  
in your voice, a rare acceptance of your current state.

An odour vents from under the sink. A commode of piss  
and clotting blood. No worry, you say: herbs will clean the air.



### Hedgeman

We wake before dawn, a welcome-mat frost laid  
across the floor. We dress quietly. Break  
shotguns and shells from their safe place.  
Leave home with the dogs and drive  
winding marsh lanes to a farm.

Beside the bullock pens you meet friends,  
discuss the hunt. When talk is done we shiver  
away, trek across ploughed fields to find  
a hide deep in a reed bed or willow thicket:  
you reject several as the wide skies flush red.

We settle in a wet ditch, mostly silent. Your whisper  
points me to an owl, a bat. Fish waking to feed  
between the reed roots. Your hand signs teach me  
the rules of this, your real world: baptising me  
in the mists of Romney Marsh.

I stuff my hands deep into dog fur, her warm head  
resting on my knee as I listen to your litany. Above us,  
ducks honk their formations seaward: a few fall  
to shots in the distance. You miss. I sit still,  
dreaming of food, a fire. My bed.



## Fortune

I cracked the foundation of mum's love. Ten weeks after you smashed her face, I stopped running. I told her, with my teenage certainty, no more sofa beds, guest rooms, launderettes. She didn't cry.

You said: the sun shines on the righteous, when I asked to come back. That you had won. Mum negotiated her return two days later, her conditions set out in a quiet, even tone.

This isn't home anymore. It's like the house has grown a new front door. I check each knock and redirect visitors to you hiding in headphones in the dining room, or to Mum chat-polishing friends in our lounge.

I go out more: meet friends each evening by the storm-worn shelter on the seawall, no longer the big prize, nor your referee.





## Justice

On the carpeted court I place the players. First you.  
Starting with your fist, sinews bunched across your arm,  
shoulders driving you to the centre of the scene. Your face  
is slack. Your eyes, white rimmed, say all: you know it ends here.

Others square up the room: brothers bursting from the sides,  
heroes caught standing, adrenaline barely pumped through veins.  
The dogs are quicker. I hang them carefully, mid-leap now,  
teeth tearing the air, not caring what they attack.

Mum is mid-tumble towards the table that will break her fall.  
She doesn't scream. Her mouth slits in a grin of shock. She sees  
nothing, her vision blocked already by your act, the cut brow  
flushing red, her broken lenses hinged away from her ear.

I am here, too. High behind the stairwell banisters,  
a fifteen year face around a stretched, silent mouth.  
Eyes caught stranded between "*watch*" and "*know*",  
trapping a tableau where two decades of seeping rage  
end, when the purpose for my birth fails, my family  
shatters, the maelstrom stops.



## Hangman

I'm hunting you down – drafting a list  
of events and evaluating you  
in my memory of them. To verify  
my truths I turn to independent proofs.  
Super eight cine film was the craze  
when I was six. You filmed everything:  
edited and spliced. Directed. Topped  
and tailed the evidence with credits. Dates.  
I squirm as I watch again my fat legs trot  
through the safari park. Here, we are a family.  
Mum smiles, I giggle. You laugh. We feed  
ostriches with sandwiches, dodge their preening beaks.  
We watch elephants bathe, wallabies graze,  
peacocks display. We tame each other.

As a finale you film me pissing  
on the trunk of a sycamore tree  
in Windsor Great Park. In the film I watch,  
your thumb is shadowed in the lens,  
hiding my naked quarters. Perhaps that  
was planned. Perhaps I remember you  
wrong.



## Death

I wake to find a ladybird trundling  
across my arm. Another trots the length  
of a finger laid straight on the blanket,  
hunting greenfly. More cascade from my hair  
when I shake my head, a red hail bouncing  
onto the hard, tan lawn. Beetles  
are everywhere, blood-glazed shells

spotting yellow piss on mum's laundered  
white bedsheets hanging on the line.  
This everlasting summer is baking change

into every leaf and crack. You've changed.  
As if planting gran in the ground last spring  
has set new sap seeping through your veins:  
hair creeping past your collar, sideburns spreading  
across your cheeks. You work on a friend's car  
wearing a string vest and fresh gold chains.  
I turn the volume down on anarchy – punk rockers  
spitting through my radio, and see you've grown  
four inches: another pair of wedge soles, cream  
against grey overalls dotted with oiled, dying bugs.

I relax back on my front, arse to the sky, tanning  
a line for fashion. I don't want to move. New  
uniform for a new school. New music, shouting  
into my blood: kick it up, smash it out. Fuck, I've  
got down tufts sprouting where yours are bleached,  
like a fungus erupting over my puckered skin. Soon  
I'll be bald like you, wrinkled like you. Cooked  
by this bastard summer into you and I hate it.  
Toss you! Burn my hide red, with black hair swirls  
and piss the sheets yellow in a dream.



## Temperance

Winter Sundays are the best time. I rise  
out of bed with the smell of burning bacon  
and twitch my passage through the day by smells.

Music floods the house. Mum tunes her ears to easy listening  
radio, sets her hands to dicing carrots, peeling taters.  
Dressed, I hide in books, chasing bookworms

across the pages of fantasies and monsters. Gusts of iced  
air alert my back to the open and close of the front door,  
tracking your departure to set England right with friends in pubs

and the arrival of neighbours who pop by for the gossip,  
sharing mugs of tea with mum as she stuffs the chicken  
with sage and onion, crumbles the stock cube into oil,

rips cabbages into pots. They soon steam, heating  
the atmosphere, gauzing the windows in a fine mist:  
I break from picture books to finger-sketch

on the panes: stick models, happy families. In time  
the cooking is completed. Plates are heaped with meat  
and greens, fed back into the oven to keep warm.

The family arrives back in drabs, to be sat at the table  
for the weekly ritual. My brothers joke, make bets  
on your behaviour. You will soon be back home,

determined to sit at the head of the feast, act  
the part of Dad when the blue pills balance your brain.  
Or dangerous entertainer, if the kilter is bad.



[Devil](#)

Wally's World is a wonder of the art,  
its ingenuity held together with scaffold  
and cable, pins and paint. We can erect this show  
in fifteen minutes: homecrafted lightboxes,  
secondhand strobes, the decks, the great front  
board, with Wally's World written in red  
across its length. And we are set.

Afternoon or evening, birthday or wedding  
we pack halls across East Kent with our rhythm,  
entertaining spruced, scented hordes with disco  
and soul, with two-tone and motown. You start  
on the light and bitter, to oil your joints.  
I start with a shandy and a shaking fit,  
knowing the hall will watch me play, waiting  
until the alcohol kicks in and the chat gears up.

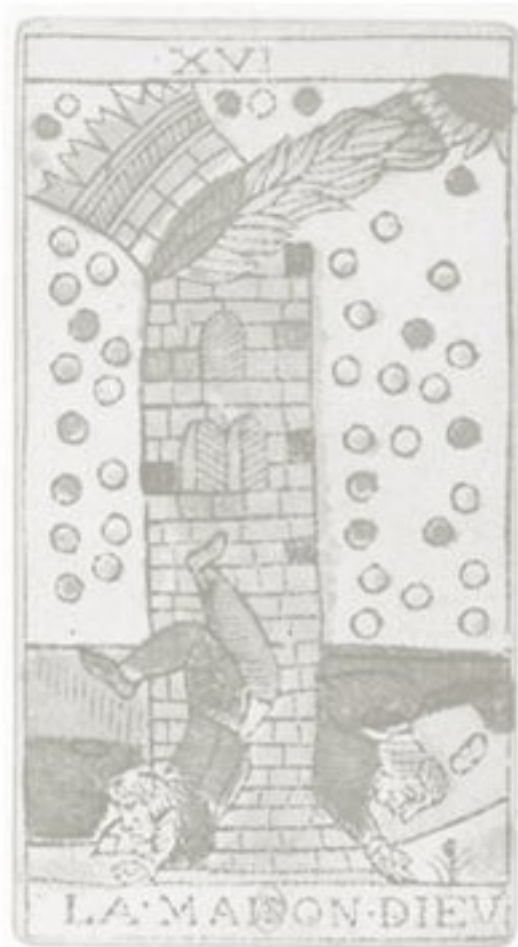
You work the front: kiss bride or birthday girl.  
Assess your audience, drink, then dance. Snake  
your neck chains across your chest. Whip  
your hips tight in their jeans. Swing. Pick  
the lady. Pounce. I play. Professional  
in my intros, my dedications. Master  
of the microphone. Devil of the decks.



## Tower

The martello gun points to France, a long  
sleek defiance, and I astride its breech.  
Nothing in this ribbon village can top  
its crumbling guard: from this roof I can see  
the curving line of dressed wall, built to deny  
a tide whose storm blown high mark would bury  
my own birthspot in four feet of cold brine.  
Dymchurch straggles alongside, a heavy  
traffic clotting the High Street. I ignore  
it all. Fix instead on your home, a van  
in a field past which the toytown trains roar.  
I want to turn this cannon to the land.  
Aim at the road, the shops, fairgrounds and fire:  
level and clear. Heal. I have you in my sights.





## Star

Blackmanstone: your first home, a tumbled house  
at the crossroads where the tracks march flat  
by miles, sketching their courses around ditches  
and boundaries long forgotten, like the churchland  
mansions that once gloried beneath this rounded sky.

Orgarswick, where I was conceived, carried,  
birthed into a land grand in its narrow time. A street  
named for a farm that was once a village, living  
by the tides and mists and the endless breeze. Bricks  
in fields break ploughshares, prove the land has changed.

Churches pucker the Marsh into spires, their arches  
wide to span the leagues of life and death  
that litter our once and sometime world. Weeds

grow high within the boneyards. Colour spotting  
between the factory fields of sulphur rape.

In the ruins of Blackmanstone, I can stand  
at the centre of the galaxy, watch the earth  
change. I asked you once, here: why do villages  
die? You smiled, said nothing. Let the Marsh  
echo her misty gusts through my head.



## Moon

You share a little secret with me, a monstrous  
gift, padded sweethearts holding hands under a nylon  
moon. You show me inside its front door, where  
you've painted a question mark, then spelt out below:  
with love from Wally. Allowed by your rules, you say.

Two days before the big dart date you task me to deliver the gift, sheathed in its lilac box. Edgeways, the card is taller than me: two rubber boots and a bobbly hat pushing the wall d'amour against a bucking wind to the post office squat centred in Dymchurch High Street, in front of the turfed sea wall.

Inside the office, a duffel-coat queue of old women and gossiping men nudge me as I wait for the counter, test me: who's the card for, lad? Who's it from? But I won't answer, hide the address tighter to my chest. Wish I was walking on the moon, like a secret.



## Sun

You made me in the end. You found a key, tuned it to my lock and then,

without knowing why, I opened for you.  
Chatting music and snapping exotica  
we learnt to talk together. There,  
in the zoo on the hill, perched over the Marsh,  
we fed peacocks and flashed cassowaries.  
Together we discovered the restored house,  
its history and gardens. We rebuilt our past  
during that summer as we touched the tame  
elephants, when I stopped hiding from  
your eyes, accepted your story in me.



## **Judgement**

This was not the way for a man to die,  
tied to your cot in a room away from sight,  
tubes trickling relief from pain into your veins,  
guiding your mind deeper into morphine dreams.

I tried to listen to your wandering conversation,  
but all I could focus on was your tongue, bitten blue  
as you chewed your words, your fears, scabbing  
around your mouth, tipping truths and lies past  
yellowing teeth – a reptilian rogue in your head.

Six weeks it took, from father to corpse.  
Forty five days for that new life to spring  
from obscurity to attention, to feed on  
your blood, squeeze your bowels, stretch  
your stomach tight and round to flatten  
even your navel at the end.

That last night you regained your youth. Visioned  
the abattoir in which you once worked. You woke  
the ward with your terror: convinced the bed opposite  
was a bullock bought to the cull, and you to drag it  
shit and baying to the stall to shatter its head. Its  
carcass to fall, hooves clattering the gutters  
and you left to shovel gore from the floor.

Doctors would not let me witness your final fight.  
Instead you were tied tight to your cot and wheeled  
to a solitary room, to let the morphine drip evenly  
into your arm, to let your scabfucked tongue slip still,  
to let nature take its paced time to ease you  
from life.



## Worlds

A long while later I found your sixties-style  
wetsuit, rubber disintegrating as quick  
as I touched it: an aged, grey skin of yours.

You told me you did it for the peace. Diving  
was your release from the noise of the world.  
You took me with you, sometimes, to the flooded  
gravel quarries at Hythe, or Lydd, with your friends.  
Land-safe, I would watch you skin-up, strap  
bottles to your back and a mask to your face,  
wave, and then sink. Gone from sight,  
your bubble stream diminishing  
until no sign remained  
of your place  
in that lake.

I'm gay, Dad.

There. Said it now. I bet you're spinning  
in your plastic ash pot. You, who made it  
your life's remit to refurbish the female half  
of East Kent: no wife safe from your guile.  
I'm gay, and I can't swim, and I've never  
had a driving lesson in my life. I live  
in the biggest city I can find and still  
it's your exact face that stares back  
from the mirror – except for my mother's  
eyes. Like I'm bound within your skin,  
no escape, none sought now. I am your legacy,  
you my history. Done and dusted.  
Stored with love.

One day I will drive back to Romney Marsh, dive  
deep into that pit. Check for myself our depths.  
Watch my bubbles heave towards the surface,  
perhaps to leave a trace, perhaps not.  
But not yet. London calls me:  
no man is safe  
from our smile.



### **About these poems**

I first had the idea for the facets series of poems in January 2000, produced first drafts fit for criticism in March 2000, and continued to revise and review over the following months. Final drafts started to be produced late in 2000, with the last poem completed (if these things can ever be "completed") in May 2001.

I could not have honed these poems without the helpful advice and critiques of a large group of regulars (you know who you are!) over the past year and a bit, in particular from the rec.arts.poems and alt.arts.poetry.comments newsgroups, and from the pffa and Gazebo discussion boards – thanks, peoples, for putting up with me and my old man for sooo long!



## **About the author**

Rik was born in the small village of Dymchurch on the Romney Marshes in Kent, England. Dymchurch has three Martello Towers and a station on the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Light Railway. This was Rik's world for the first 24 years of his life, except for those six terms away at college - the North East Surrey College of Technology, that is: Rik somehow managed to fail his final school exams and thus never made it to university.

Poetically, Rik has been writing since he was 14 or 15. He happily acknowledges that no work from that early period survives, thanks to a fortuitous kitchen fire which may or may not have been started deliberately. The kitchen was relatively unharmed, in case you were worrying.

Rik's major claim to 'proper' poetic fame is being part of the group that established Magma Magazine - he even edited Magma 6, for his sins. The magazine's subsequent success has nothing to do with Rik; he left the Management Board a few weeks before Magma 7 was published.

Rik's main publishing credentials are, strangely enough, in Magma Magazine. Nowadays he rarely submits poems to journals and has no plans to seek 'proper' venues for his chapbooks and manuscripts - Rik has a website, after all, which makes him very happy!

On a broader note, Rik is currently studying for that elusive degree with the Open University, and writing science fiction novels. Rik used to work for Her Majesty's Civil Service which is, he says, a perfect training ground for people wanting to write novels based on alternate realities and fantasy.

Rik currently lives in London, for his sins. His hobbies include causing trouble in various online venues and inventing languages. He also codes up websites - like this one.

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[The Rik Files](#) blog

## **Other books by Rik Roots**

### **The Gods in the Jungle**

'Maeduul? What's wrong?'

He turned to look at the woman. She was staring at something just above them. Intrigued, he made to turn around to see what she saw.

'If you love life: don't move!' the woman hissed.

Suddenly, a flutter of fear tickled in his stomach. He could feel Delesse searching along his arm for his hand. When she found it, she grabbed it tightly.

'What is it?' he asked the woman, his whisper as loud as he dared.

'Turn your heads very slowly. Don't make any sudden movements! Don't shout or scream!'

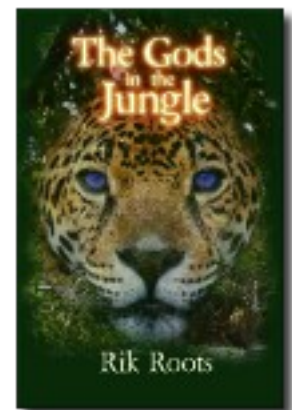
He complied with the Servant's orders.

It was sat on its haunches no more than a couple of metres away from them, with only the boulder they had been leaning against between them. It took all his resolve to stop his muscles throwing his body down the hill.

Delesse breathed next to him: 'She's magnificent!'

He could see the outlines of muscles beneath the creature's fur; the long, sharp fore-claws resting on its hind limbs. It seemed ... interested in them.

'Dear God,' he whispered, 'it must be almost as tall as I am!'



'Maeduul, what are we going to do? Can you stand up and get the guards' attention?'

The woman didn't answer. He could see clearly now the alien-ness of the animal; the fur-clad scales that lay over its skin. From its mouth a thin, blue tongue emerged and waved through the air, as if tasting it.

'Maeduul!' he hissed. 'Do something!'

'I think,' said the woman, 'that it's up to you to do something. This little god has come visiting you for a reason.'

'What?'

'I think your contract is being blessed by the jungle itself. I think this might be a good time for you two to make a baby ...'

He couldn't move, but the woman's words seemed to mean something to Delesse. Slowly she leaned her head towards his and whispered in his ear.

'It's certainly a novel way to die ...'

Her hand let go of his, moved down to the leather enclosing his crotch. Not believing what was happening – not believing he could stiffen so rapidly while the demons of fear beat on his chest with hammers – he did as the Servant suggested: slowly; silently. Relentless until his release.

~~~

*The jungle city of Bassakesh holds the keys to the future of the Vreski Empire. It is the sole source of the valuable Vedegga dye; it is also home to the mysterious Servants, who harvest the dye.*

*Delesse, the Bassakesh Governor's daughter, is marrying Loken, heir to one of the most powerful Clans in the Empire - whose leaders, Loken's own Father and uncle, are plotting to disrupt the dye harvest as part of their wider plans to win the aged Emperor's throne.*

*When those hasty plans go awry a terrible plague is unleashed across Bassakesh, bringing widespread death and chaos.*

*Aided by a collection of survivors and Servants, Delesse and Loken must travel through the jungles to face down and defeat the people who not only threaten the Empire's stability, but also ruined their wedding.*

*Set on a planet far from Earth, The Gods in the Jungle is an investigation of the drives and desires, fears and beliefs of the various peoples and classes in a crumbling society, through the eyes of those most immediately involved in events which threaten to bring an Empire to its knees.*

### **Snowdrop – A Story in Verse**

For most people, Christmas is a time of joy; for some it has become a time of lonely sorrow.

For Snowdrop, Christmas is about to become a timeless place of fear, horror – and unimaginable loss.

On the hill above the Marshes, someone watches;  
*some thing waits ...*

