

From Each Skull, A Story

Consisting of a peculiar set of poems committed by
Rik Roots

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With thanks to the many folks
at the [Poetry Free-For-All](#) website

who have helped me hone
these verses over the years.

Especially during the fluff
of NaPoWriMo.

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[Faith](#)

His fortune lies in heaps
before her front door.

They sit like old lovers
to watch the sun paint clouds.

*"When we burn the offerings,
do You consume the smoke?"*

She pours them wine from the jar,
drinks her portion unwatered.

*"I married You when I was nineteen;
I was a virgin, once."*

His hands that heal choose
not to smooth her wrinkles.

He sips her libation, watches
her eyes recycle the world.

Acolyte

He's tall in his pew, this ladding man:
his eyes are constant, blue beneath
a buzz of hair, soft as the sins
the preacher warns him about. He listens

with concentrations of lines embossed
faintly around the edge of lips
wasted on kissing: they want to worship
God – his God – with shapes and sounds.

*"... this evil works by magic. Look!
It moves by curse to curse and teach
a lesson. God can not be bought
by sinners praying. God will not*

*"forgive the hateful sodomites
their lecheries, nor welcome home
the scum who rip the innocents
from wombs. For God will not forgive ..."*

An image of fire curls in the eye
of the lad in his pew, a fire to take
the snoring congregation out
of their comfort, sloth. Redeem their souls

like the preacher riding his pulpit now:
a stallion galloping across the hills;

a trawler hauling fish from the storm;
a martyr thanking the Lord for his tortures.

*"... that we atone for Adam's sin,
forsake our knowledge, learning; start
afresh, become as pure as steel
and sharp as swords. That we become*

*"His instruments to cut away
the cancer – slice the sins from flesh
to heal the people, strip apart
the souls of Idolators fit*

*"to clean them, make them fit for His
inspection. Nothing less will do!
The world is sick and we must make
it better! God will love us then!"*

His fingers grip and bend the book,
his knees are locked: he will not bow
to worship – God demands he cleanse
his life; he knows the world must burn.

Dad, Something's Wrong with Nanna

"Son, you know it takes some time to see
the truth from fiction: Tom don't die for real
and Jerry's just a cartoon mouse. He feels
no pain when caught beneath a knife. But we
are real: you bleed when a door traps your thumb
and bumps don't disappear when tea trays smack
your head (and I apologise for that –
an accident I swear!) So please, my son,
re-latch the safety, lower the gun and tell
me what your Nan has done to make you mad
like Butch who's lost his bone? And why
insist on silver slugs? I know Nan smells
a bit like dogs, and yes she howls. It's sad!
But she's your Nan, and you are part of our tribe."

Stanley in Moonlight

He lopes slow-motioned, each footstride
matched by the seesaw dance of shoulders
humping over his nape. He keeps his ears

pert: black tips scanning tufts and twig-tumbles
for scuffles, volesqueak. The morsels whistle
warnings ahead of his thoughtless trek –

then silence. Odour sources tangle colour
through his greytone bush-scapes. He sits,
sniffs his tailpit tag glands, tongues clean

his fur-pursed wolfhood: still the gift-disk shines.
When he howls, his bones recall the loss, the pain
of change, complexity; the moult of flesh.

Coots

Look at you, sloven shortwings, your nests
a dereliction of twigs poked in sludge
beyond the gardened soils of the pond.

Tourists gather to watch you fornicate,
those grub-chain toes scouring oil from plumes:
her head dives to avoid his bloodeye leer.

Last year I watched you hatch four cuties,
bundles of floating chirrups, watched you peck
each to death in turn when you tired of them.

Still you flirt your jaundiced legs, squabble
as you wave your saddle-white heads like liars
while scrumping breadcrumbs from goose-beaks.

The Place Maker

I met Mother Drum when she came for beer,
her hair in a net and her tongue in gear:

she believed the mayor took backhanded cash
and offered his friends good contracts for trash;

she knew that the sewers were stuffed with snakes
which fed on pet cats and poisoned the lakes;

she witnessed the vicar steeped in sin
teaching the alterboys how to drink gin;

she heard that the doctor killed on demand
and sold newborn kids for ten thousand pounds;

she once found a needle stuck in a bun
bought from the grocer who had a bent son;

her son was a waste of time and good space –
one day he'd kill her, inherit her place.

Rogues

A grift of sunshine teases bulbs to bloom
through snow, whose cold wheeze huffs
through a jemmied window; men with badges
paint the frame, looking for clues. Who
dumped the fridge across the driveway,
let its vapours heist ozones from the sky?
Breeze-blocks hold up a car where kids
play out their game of cops and fathers –
they'll harvest the world for a laugh.

Serving the Muse

I chose to dine at A's establishment:
a restaurant well marked for style, panache
and quality, a place for nourishment
of soul and sense – at least they kept the trash

at bay when one's inclined to eat good food –
or so I was informed. I ordered boar
and settled back to contemplate the crude
parade of riff-raff shambling past the door.

"My deeply felt apologies," a voice
beside my elbow murmured. Looking down
I saw the chiselled bones of service hoist
into my view. *"Why so?"* I asked, a frown

across my brow. *"We've had to bar the boar,"*
the waiter cringed: *"It charged around the place
creating havoc, carnage! Such a chore
to clear the mess – we turfed it out, disgraced!"*

Nonplussed, I checked the menu once again.
"What else is there to eat?" The old man smiled,
his lips a gruel of soup. *"The chicken, plain,
is rather good – a filling dish, par-boiled."*

"But rather boring, I'd have thought?" He shook
his head and said: *"You do not understand, young sir,
but plain is best – no sauce to hide the look,
no herb or spice disguising taste! The bird*

*served bland delights the plate. Just try a breast
or two."* I was intrigued, I have to say:
"You use no salt? No stuffing? Just undressed?"
"Oh yes!" he said. *"It is the only way*

*to exercise the muse! We don't allow
ingredients to spoil the meal, the chefs
must work in peace and comfort – once the row
of discontent is banished, gone, they're left*

*with harmony in which to hone their skills
and arts! A space where they can learn to shape
their honest, soul-full heart-wrought chicken meals
to feed our guests: a dish you can't escape!"*

Harry

Ecce Homo

Harry has found a niche for the afternoon.
He has furnished it in card
and now houses himself
beneath the starling roost
close to the cathedral piazza;
attempting to close away the buses
churning their fumes yards from Harry's head,
and hunger stammering Harry's stomach,
and so sleeps.

Rus in Urbe

Harry coughs in his slumber, squeezing out
the diesel motes trying to tarmac his lungs.
The sharp hacks break the lullaby clatter
of London's August siesta,
distracting a mob above Harry's form
from politics. They rise in purpose,
a unity dabbling concretes in guano showers,
and wheel their shadows across Victoria Street's
pedestrian brick artwork, then settle once more.

Post Harry

Harry is gone. He woke to
the shunting groans of London's evening stampede
and has migrated to richer streets:
alleys behind bakeries and takeaways,
screaming cascades of bagged garbage
waiting for collection day, or Harry
– whichever claims them first.

Roadkill

Carhorns on Christmas Eve: a feather slaps the road
as traffic snuffles through the windchilled rain towards
Whitechapel. *Fox'll've'im, see me right.* The croak
of nicotine and MaxStrength lager rasps a throat,
coating my face in spittle. I kneel back from jaws –
a smile of yellow teeth in whiskers, cotton coat
caught up on shoulders thinned to bone. I touch the sores
that screen his face and ask: *can angels really fall?*

Faces can lie, my mother told me once
and this one's stubble over bliss. It hides
nothing from me: my vendor's eye has scraped
it up for sale in bottles, tinctured grace
priced for a festive gift. A useful find
of angel camouflaged as car-trashed tramp.

Mad Mary

She plucks history from the soil –
a poison-blue bottle here, a clipped
coin for which a man was hanged. Each gives
her fingers a fuzz of images, a chain
daisyng back from disposal to creation.

She does not touch people: the immediacy
of their sweat hurts her temples. Instead
she collects their detritus to review
their stories; keeps a library
of her favourite episodes in her pocket.

She Forgets and Remembers by Touch

She hums for Jesus as she cleans
the bath, sponges and wipes, strokes dust
from shelves and loops towels
on their proper rails. An orchid

arches in bark on the window's ledge,
straining to bloom. Soon leaves are polished
clippings trashed, and Vera
turns her mind to sprucing herself.

When she steps from her shower she towels
dribbles from her skin, takes care to wipe
the soft cloth along the lines
of her folds. Veins in her hand
arch through her skin, their net
morphing as she wipes lower, slower
to take pleasure in the scrape
of wool through white wire. Today

she will call herself Betty, and she'll
make an effort to forget the names
of her nephews and nieces. A memory
taps her cheeks, tightens her lips. When the sun
slips a beam through the window she smiles,
knuckles her puckered fingers into the cloth
and polishes, polishes until she hums:
sepals unfold.

Lucy Plays with her Friends

She lines them up in rows,
pretends to be a teacher.

Today she'll teach her friends
about the world of adults –

the need to shout and cry
and writhe and snort in bedrooms.

Her friends look on and nod,
agreeing. One has dustmites;

another's eye droops down
unthreaded from its socket.

One asks: does Lucy play
these games? *'Oh, no,'* she whispers.

She much prefers to let
her fingers make her happy,

but only when she's safe
and hid beneath her table.

The Knife

"She's messed me up, again: my shiny blade
a tarnished map of haemoglobins. Look
at how she spoilt my spine, my bolster glued
with fingerprints! She's crying now, as if
the cuts are my responsibility –
like I should care; she hasn't sharpened me
in days, not since she last kissed me, my scales
and tang held fast between her breasts. I know
she can't love me – I'm just the tool. But still
there must be something there, a hint of care
in choosing me repeatedly to mark
her skin with messages, her runes of loss
and hurt and farewell notes, the secret pains
she takes to wrap me safe in swaddling cloth."

The Micro Mule

*(or, On Hearing The News That Scientists Have Discovered A Way To
Harness Single-Cell Organisms To Perform Micro-Scale Mechanical Work)*

"There must be laws against this sort
of thing! I mean – there's me, you know,
right there in the Spot, the sugarmill
just ticking over nicely when
some bastard 'god' just pops along
and sticks a stack of beads across
my back, you know? Like I'm a giant
of multicellularity!
Yeah, right! And then the bastards steal

my heat and light, evict me like
some virus scum. And now they play
their games – a sweet light here, a smell
of toxins there and I'm away:
go up this channel, round that bend –
it's like a bloody maze in here!
My poor flagellae beat like strips
of, well, flagellae I suppose
and if I had a set of nerves
I bet they'd scream in pain by now!
I mean, I ask you, mate, for what?
Nirvana ain't supposed to be
like this!"

The Charity Collector

She stands in the wind with a tin in her mittens
and calls for donations – some coppers will do.
Shy shoppers are caught with their purses mid-pocket:
they clatter their change in the pot and move on.
Though eyes will exchange a brief look of compassion,
the gale is too chill to allow a quick word
and somehow the act doesn't mend the impressions
that photos of children in rows in a pit
have lodged in our heads. But still that tin rattles,
now loud as I put my bare hand on loose change
and add to her pile. Her smile is infectious:
a spread of the lips to reveal crooked teeth
that tell me that though we can't stop the tsunamis
we still change the world with a copper or two.

City Hall

A welcome now for London's fair unlauded Mayor
and his new house that slumps its arcs by Tower Bridge:
this tit beside the Thames, its windows strung in scales
of tinted glass upon the structured spiral stage;

this glint of governance so kindly offered us
by Foster's Follies, landmarks offered at a price;
this grand metallic bollock landscaped in a truss
of path and park environmental in its grace.

No ravens fly across the Thames to guard its flank
and old Magog still grins his spell in London's heart.
From power plants flows art, and cash breeds gilts in banks
and I still walk, my step unchanged by this new start:
an office grown to service London – hamstrung serf.
A beacon of our city shackled at its birth.

Hutton

Now the fair lord has parsed the story's text and let
the peasants view his judgement. Kelly is dead, the hand
that slashed is still, no shame of mind for a man who set
the story right, who barked at giants, stalked the lands
of Ur and Muscovy for sight or sign of death
in tubes of flame. Who teased the facts from steppes and sand
and set them down in statements sought by princes, truth
pinned down and bound. A wholesome work by a trusted man.

Watching the lord as he mouthed his words of silk
I feel we've lost – the facts are spinning apart
already, clipped in soundbites, highlights flashed
across the globe in headlines, bullet points: feel
the story crash across the newsdesks, spurt
in columns inching from the op-eds to the trash.

Sniper

Focus just here – I'll frame you in the street.
A question: did you choose to wear that dress,
that cardigan this morning? Or was its leaf
knit pattern just there, slung across a chair
as you hurried past, an afterthought plucked

and strung around your shoulders? And your shoes –
they look un-scuffed, the polish hints through dust.
Your basket kept its shape as you fell, culled.

A camera stops. From a shop a hen waves
her wattle into the air, steps from the door,
clucks once, then pecks. A man runs to the corpse,
his angle feet kicking some apples away –
apples bought by his wife a minute before
spilt from her wicker basket, witnessed by all.

Culling a Dog in June

Put down the messenger, the dog who barked
a phosphate storm: tearing this foot from this leg,
slipping a shoe from a strawberry sock;
dusting that kid in a film of concrete
and glass, still eyes open, snapped in the act
of gathering. Leash the mutt and cull it,
the tightly trained weapon who listened
to a master's voice – sniffed out and tracked down,
took out the hate-full enemy. Then sat, loyal dog,
through the courtroom storm. His pleasure mute
at his attested translation into the Lassie
who never came home.

Whitehall

*"A fire destroyed Whitehall, the largest and ugliest palace in Europe",
Duc de Saint-Simon, 1698*

When I walk drunk through Saint James's Park
late, late at night I can smell the flames.

There was a map of this palace, but it burned
with the Dutch maid who fired her master's bed.

The ambassador kept an office above a room
where pigs were stalled; they paid a better rent.

I see these things when I'm drunk in Whitehall,
walking straight within the machine gun's sights.

Ghosts pack this street like grenades in a box:
horses trot through taxis soliciting trade.

I wave to Guido. He's waiting to be strung up
and disembowelled. Charles shakes in the cold air.

Still the starling cloud wheels, their parliament
an exercise in precision, beauty and noise.

Trespasser

My Gran, she warned me of you:
'an absence of a man,' she said. *'A taker
of breath and life.'* And here you are
outlined at my door. *Back away,*

I think. *Jump!* My legs don't shift.
They lie in sheets, slack meat strung
on hingeless bones. *Wake up* – but I'm not
asleep. My hands won't lift. I sweat

as you trespass, my breath lung-tight.
You come near, a wireframe face skinned
in shadows. *'This death is a bastard,'*
Gran told. Your hands touch my chest

and press down hard, the weight a stroke
of pain, a stripe of fire along my arm.
You grin a question: *"do you want me?"*

Yes, I agree. *You I can love.*

You freeze; your lips – so close – crack.
My hand grasps your head as you collapse,
a slow avalanche of skin and hair. Bone
arcs across the room, flakes and breaks

down to the knots of the carpet tufts.
I heave cold air inside my ribs, consume it.
Snarl it out. Jabs and stabs grief my arm

as I turn and clasp my lover tight, claim
his sweat, his traffic-in-the-distance
snores.

About these poems

Welcome to this, my second collection of poems. This set of poems may (or may not) be about marginal people and marginal societies. None of the people described in these poems are real – they've all emerged fully formed from my imagination. Feel free to draw whatever conclusions you like from this admission.

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 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 ...

