

# From Each Skull, A Story



Rik Roots

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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  
and 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 keep 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,  
scrying cascades of bagged garbage  
waiting for collection day, or Harry  
- whichever claims them first.

## **Roadkill**

Car horns on Christmas Eve: a feather slaps the road  
as traffic snuffles through the windchilled rain towards  
Whitechapel. *Fox'll 'ave '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, tintured 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  
daisy-ing 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 Maureen  
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 Thora, 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:  
petals 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, bullpoints: 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.