

# Written With The Ashes

Tom C Dylan

Presented by

*My poetic side* 



## Dedication

*As the title poem, *Written With The Ashes* suggests, these poems mark my coming back to writing  
poetry.*

## About the author

Tom C Dylan has been writing short stories since he was a child. These days he writes both stories and poems.

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## On His Retirement

Everybody crowded round Derek's desk  
on the day he was retiring  
the Office Manager said 'a few words'  
thanking him for his hard work over the years,  
and handed him the massive card  
everyone had signed.

He was presented with the silver watch,  
a token for all his efforts.

His colleagues clapped and cheered  
calling for him to make a speech.  
Derek gushed that it had been a pleasure working here  
and would never forget the friends he'd made.  
He wished them all the best for the future  
and said he'd keep in touch.

In the days that followed his retirement  
when his old phone would ring  
the telephone conversation was always the same.  
*I'm sorry Derek doesn't work here anymore. He has retired.*  
*Yes, he was with the firm twenty-five years, he really will be missed.*  
But all too soon the replies would change.  
*I'm sorry, I don't know anyone who works here by that name.*

## In My Life

When I listen to the Beatles  
I see my dad's old record player  
and going through his LP collection  
my seven year old self begging  
Please please let me listen to the Beatles.

When I listen to the Beatles  
I am a young teenager on holiday once more  
in the back seat of the family car  
driving rain on Welsh mountain roads  
cassette tapes playing, our ticket to ride.

When my dad listens to the Beatles  
his grey thinning hair once again a mop of dark curls  
sharp-suited in the smoky clubs of his youth  
the Sixties music is fresh, brand new and exciting  
and he meets my mother for the first time on the dance-floor.



## I want to be a rock & roller

I want to be a rock & roller  
rocking out to classic rock tracks  
cruising along on my Harley  
full throttle and not looking back.

I want to be a rock & roller  
clad in leather jacket and jeans  
just like the great on-screen heroes,  
like Brando in the Wild Ones, James Dean.

I want to be a rock & roller  
it's in my nature, I was born to rebel  
getting drunk with the rock musing blaring  
rocking out, living fast, raising hell.

I want to be a rock & roller  
and keep rocking till the day that I die,  
but I work nine-to-five at the office  
at my desk wearing this shirt and tie.

## The Other Dog

The other dog  
darts across the field  
before leaping high into the air  
to catch the thrown Frizbee  
in its mouth.  
My dog looks up from sniffing  
a particularly interesting  
blade of grass  
and gives me a look  
as if to say  
nobody likes a show-off.

## Next week I'm gonna write a poem

Next week I'm gonna write a poem  
that will blow the reader away  
there will be wonderful word-play  
and astounding alliteration.

Next week I'm gonna write a poem  
that will reduce readers to tears  
that will make them belly-laugh  
at the dry wit and humour.

Next week I'm gonna write a poem  
that blends the nostalgia of childhood holidays  
and the hopes and dreams for the future  
that we all share.

Next week I'm gonna write a poem  
that will wander lonely as a cloud  
and compare thee to a summer's day,  
if you can keep your head.

Next week I'm gonna write a poem,  
actually, I'm rather busy for the next week or so.  
If I don't get round to writing it next week,  
I'll hopefully do it the week after.

## An Irish Family Funeral

On the day of the funeral rain the fell from gloomy skies  
cousins and family friends we hadn't seen for years  
made their way over, descending on our town,  
some arriving by ferry, others catching early-morning flights.

After the church, our eyes still red with sadness,  
we headed to the pub where the wake would be held.  
We spoke of our loss and what she had meant to each of us.  
Sharing our memories both funny and sad.

Raising a glass of whiskey, *a drop of the pure*,  
Somebody pulled out their phone, let's get a photo.  
We all joined in the scrum, hugging, arms linked,  
sad smiles for the camera. Click. Click. Click.

The Irish music started playing, the whiskey flowed still,  
we sang *The Auld Triangle* at the tops of our voices,  
and told stories of the past, tall tales and family legend.  
We spoke of here and now, our lives, family, work.

The whiskey kept streaming, my voice becoming slurred,  
speaking to a relation about books, art and film.  
Then it was time to leave, saying good-bye, keep in touch.  
The exchange of phone numbers and updated addresses.

The next day my head hurt and the bedroom waltzed around me.  
Snap-shorts of the day poured back in double-measures.  
My singing, the bad jokes I told where nobody laughed,  
Breaking my heart in the church, then drunk at the wake.

I called my mother, letting her know I'd survived.  
Asking if I had disgraced myself with the Irish relatives.  
She replied saying that the family had already been in touch,

and that my name had been *mentioned in despatches*.

From getting emotional at the service, to slurring, singing drunk,  
talking broken biscuits, of how writing was my art.

How had that gone down? What had they made of all that?

They say, she replied, that you have a good heart.

## The Poetry Champion

I want to be the poetry champion of the world  
winning all my bouts by way of knock-out.

I want to be a second Dan black-belt in poetry  
with stanzas that can break wooden boards.

I want my poetry to win the Super Bowl, the World Series  
and World Cup, scoring touch-downs, home-runs and hat-tricks.

I want my poetry to climb the highest peaks of Mount Everest  
and then sail around the world single-handedly.

Actually, I'd be happy if I managed to write a poem every now and then  
and if anyone actually read it.

## When Dad Jokes

When his dad tells the same joke  
for the hundredth time,  
he groans, wishing he wouldn't.  
So embarrassing, heard them all before  
and not very funny the first time.

When he brings his new girlfriend home  
his dad reels off his naff jokes  
revelling in the new audience,  
he apologises to his girl.  
I think he's funny, she says.

His dad jokes about the hospital and the doctors  
You have to laugh, don't you?  
He calls it gallows humour  
but for his son it's another bad dad-joke  
and in awfully bad taste.

After the funeral service  
he raises a glass of whiskey  
realising that he would give anything  
to hear one of his dad's jokes one more time.  
And I'll laugh this time, he says, I promise.

## The Hospital Visit

We drink vending machine tea  
while our hearts shatter  
silently into a thousand tiny pieces  
we discuss football and the weather  
when all we really want to say is  
how much we love you.



## Night Terrors

You were shouting out in your sleep  
again last night, he says,  
another night terror.  
What were you dreaming about? He asks.  
She says she can't remember  
but she recalls every horrific moment of  
the nightmare  
of losing him.

## Modern Day Hero

When I was seven years old  
I wanted to be the Batman  
all caped and crusading around Gotham,  
the mysterious hero in the Dark Knight.

When I was seventeen years old  
I wanted to be John Lennon  
round glasses and army-shirt cool  
protest singing about peace and love.

These days I find it's a daily struggle,  
when everyone wants you to be just like them,  
to be and to remain, and to stay,  
true to the person I am.

## My Dad Has Never Told Me

My dad has never told me he loves me  
but he used to help me with my maths home-work  
and used to play football with me on the park.

My dad has never told me he loves me  
but when I ask for a minute of his time to help  
he gives me an hour, a whole afternoon.

My dad has never told me he loves me  
but that time I had car-trouble the week before pay-day  
he silently handed me a cheque.

My dad has never told me he loves me  
but he's the only one who has read all my stories  
marking and scoring them in blue ink.

My dad has never told me he loves me  
but the more I think about it as I get older  
he's telling me all the time.

## Ask a writer

Any ideas? My wife asks.

A poem with the title *I almost wrote a poem today*,  
I reply. A story about a guy who gets out of prison  
and wants to go straight. A story that has a Film Noir  
vibe. A poem about growing up and not quite  
fitting in.

I meant, she says, about what we could get your parents  
for Christmas.

## Christmas Marketing

The television advertisements show Christmas  
as this wonderfully perfect time of the year  
where large families all get on splendidly  
and smile lovingly at each other.

The turkey is the size of a Rottweiler hound,  
fully cooked and all juicy and gold,  
everyone receives the perfect gift,  
wrapped in red ribbons and bows.

The whole family joins in the board-games  
and carol singers perch on the door-step  
Christmas puddings and log fires burn  
and stockings hang over the fire-place.

Has anyone ever had a Christmas like that,  
like the ones the television adverts sell?  
They heap on the stress and pile on the pressure  
in the run-up to the big day itself.

Christmas in real-life is not perfection,  
things don't always go as we plan  
and the image of the snow isn't right either,  
it tends to rain more than snow around here.

I wish you a perfectly imperfect Christmas  
where things may not always run smooth,  
the turkey may be burnt to a crisp  
and the singing isn't always in tune.

## Sh\*tty Butty Night

(Note: Butty is Northern English slang for a sandwich, and tea is what we call our evening meal.)

When we were kids on those hot summer afternoons  
when nobody feels like cooking  
and the house itself is like an oven  
we headed inside for tea.

My mother told by brother, my sister and I  
that it would be a put-you-up kind of tea.  
When we asked what that meant, she told us,  
bits of everything, this and that.

We came to the dinner table that evening  
and stared at the cold food piled high,  
pork pies, sausage rolls, pickles and meats,  
flavoured crisps, and crusty cob bread rolls.

We tutted and huffed our disappointment  
at the lack of hot, home-cooked food on offer  
and half-heartedly picked at the trimmings  
barely hiding our disgust.

Get stuck in, you lot, it's a good spread, all this,  
insisted my father, piling his plate with cheese and crackers.  
Sh\*tty butty night, is what this is, I whispered  
to my sniggering siblings.

A week or so later, my parents dished up the same.  
Sh\*tty butty night again, my brother said with a nudge,  
as we reluctantly grabbed our plates,  
feeling malnourished, under-fed and hard-done to.

These days, many years later, when I have nothing in for tea,

there's nothing I like more than bits of everything,  
a put-you-up wonderful feast of food,  
just don't call it sh\*tty butty night.

## Written With The Ashes

On a recent day when life was really tough going,  
and I found myself at an awful low  
I reached for the book not the bottle,  
for the thin of poetry.

The words, the lines and the stanzas  
seemed to speak directly to me.  
Could poetry once again be the answer?  
To read and to write in verse form?

I had dabbled and experimented a few years back,  
before putting those books back on the shelf,  
declaring that it's not for me, all this,  
and stopped reading and writing poetry.

And yet here I was flicking through the pages,  
the very words touching my soul,  
like an ancient magic spell,  
I was hooked, I was in, I was back.

I had stayed away for over five years,  
refusing to acknowledge or engage  
with the poetic side of my nature,  
distracting and distancing myself.

But now here I am, drenched in words  
once again, it feels like I'm moving back home,  
the instrument feels familiar in my hands,  
its music bringing tears to my eyes.

I am not calling this a come-back,  
I want to draw a line and start anew,  
I am not getting hung up on my previous attempts,



now fully focused on the future, not looking back.

No, this is not a poetry come-back,  
this is a fresh start, a new beginning,  
a clean, blank page, starting at this very moment,  
going forward and moving on.

I am going to gather up all my old poems,  
and build a bonfire of the pages and set them alight,  
and compose brand new verses,  
written with the ashes.

## Poetry Analysis

The poem is dragged into the interview room  
in hand-cuffs.

The officer points to the chair  
ordering the poem to take a seat.

What have you got to say for yourself?

The cop asks the poem.

The poem replies,  
you have my statement.

It's all in there.

The officer dons a pair of reading glasses,  
and reads out a line.

What is the significance of colour?

Does green mean youth? Innocence?

The poem shrugs.

You tell me. It could mean everything,  
it could mean nothing.

I want you to tell us

what this all means.

It's about death isn't it?

It's always about death

with you lot, the officer says.

You are going to have to co-operate,  
you know? The cop insists.

The poem smiles and repeats  
the opening line of the statement.

Tell me what that means, says the cop.

Can you not just enjoy beauty

for what it is, for how it makes you feel?

The poem says.

When you watch the sunrise,  
you don't ask why the sky is blue.

A verse can be wonderful  
and make you feel things,  
you don't need to scrutinise  
every little detail.

The officer sighs and gathers up  
the stack of papers on the desk,  
before removing the hand-cuffs  
from the poem's wrists.

Okay, the officer says,  
you are free to go.

The poem stands on shaky legs,  
rubbing its sore wrists,  
and staggers from the room,  
a weaker poem than when it walked in.

## Lost for Words

To speak or not to speak, that is the question.  
Well, it's too late now, I've put my name down.  
I sit at home trying to come up with something,  
trying to find just the right words.  
Margaret Atwood once said:  
a word after a word, after a word  
is power.  
But what if my words need recharging?

I wander lonely as  
the first time poet up on stage,  
wanting this to be perfect,  
to have all the wonder of a Dylan Thomas childhood,  
to dig with my pen like Seamus Heaney.

My dad gave me words of advice,  
write something witty,  
write something edgy,  
write something dark.  
You're from Salford, son, he said,  
just like John Cooper Clarke.

It's only words, as the song says,  
but words are everything,  
words are life.  
Words *count*.

From will you marry me?  
and congratulations it's a girl,  
to my letter of resignation  
and I'm sorry for your loss.

I work on these words  
late into the night

writing these pages,  
telling myself over and over,  
that I *can* do this,  
that I've been writing stories for years,  
and that poems are simply,  
the other side of the same coin.

## Dead Day at the Office

In between Christmas and New Year  
the office is open for what  
management assure the staff  
is a normal working day.

Those who have not saved  
enough holidays, or have to come in  
to cover for those who have booked  
Christmas off first,  
trudge into the office, feeling as festive  
as a broken clock.

The clock on the wall seems stuck  
at ten to eleven  
and we're all here until  
four.

Drinking cups of tea,  
checking empty email inboxes  
for new messages and to answer  
telephones that are not ringing.

All office conversation and small-talk  
has been exhausted.

We all know who has had a good  
Christmas, who got roaring drunk  
on Boxing Day, who had a cold  
all over the holidays,  
who burnt the turkey.

Nothing to do and  
nothing to say and  
four hours left of our shift.

The rest of the world will not return

to normal until next week.

But we are here.

But we are here.

## Born 2nd Jan.

He would have been a hundred years old today.  
my grandfather, the one they named me after,  
the man who I played with as a child,  
playing rough, the way that only grandad's do,  
who made me the wooden cricket set,  
who would fill our glasses with ice-cream and lemonade,  
and white paper-bags crammed with sweets.  
They say he filled a door-frame with his stature,  
and that's where I get my height from.  
I will raise a glass for him tonight.  
*2nd Jan 2024.*



## Making My Debut

I was making my debut  
last time I was here.  
My brave resolution  
the first week of the year.

Like that sixteen year old lad  
who was smashing the darts,  
could I stand on that stage,  
and speak from the heart?

Clutching my poems so tight  
in these trembling hands,  
really wanting to be the poet,  
and live up to my plans.

My eyes fixed on the paper,  
I couldn't look out at the faces,  
but I think it went well,  
they laughed in all the right places.

Now I've read out my poems,  
does that make me a Bard?  
They call it Speak Easy,  
but, man, that sh\*t is hard.

## A Good Summer

We had a good summer  
spending time in the countryside  
looking out over the lush green fields and trees,  
sitting out in the sunshine, sipping wine and reading.

We had a good summer  
catching up with friends and family  
hosting lavish garden barbecues  
burnt burgers and sausages, tinned lager and laughter.

We had a good summer  
so good that you could almost forget,  
forget about the diagnosis,  
the treatment, the hospital and the doctors  
and the twelve months you were given.

We watched with horror and sadness  
as the leaves turned yellow, falling from the trees,  
falling like tears and breaking our hearts  
as our good summer, the best one ever,  
and our last, was drawing to a close.

## A Remembrance Promise

I promise not to remember  
the diagnosis, the doctors.

I will remember summer barbecues  
and caravan weekends.

I promise not to remember  
the agony, and getting affairs in order.

I will remember Boxing Day parties  
wine and signing ABBA.

I promise not to remember  
the oxygen, morphine and tubes.

I will remember the tapas and the fine dining,  
and one more round of drinks.

I will remember.

I promise.

## Reality TV

I was in the office canteen the other morning,  
chatting to a colleague while making a cup of tea.  
Did you see that reality TV show last night? I asked.  
No, she said, what was it about?  
Well, there's all these people in this big house,  
some are traitors and some are loyal,  
and they don't know who the traitors are,  
who is not quite what they seem,  
who they can trust,  
who will stab them in the back.  
Actually, I said,  
it's a lot like work.

## Don't be like me, she says.

He goes around to see his grandmother,  
for his weekly after-school visit.  
She offers him a cup of tea  
and they settle down at the table.

How's things? she asks.  
Yeah, okay, I suppose, he shrugs.  
As they sip their mugs of tea they chat  
and put the world to rights.

She mentions a new art exhibition  
at the Lowry gallery next month.  
We should go during half-term.  
That sounds like a plan.

Are you okay, love? she asks.  
You don't seem yourself today.  
He explains about the school restructure,  
how he doesn't fit in with his new class-mates.

Don't be like me, she says.  
Stop worrying about what people think,  
stop worrying and do what pleases you.  
Don't be like me, she says again.

He says nothing, merely nods in agreement.  
It's only when he's alone on the bus home,  
that the words start to flow,  
what he should have said, the reply that didn't come.

*Don't be like me, she says.*  
But he *is* like her, he has her interest  
in history, in art, in literature,

in museums, in writing and language.

She taught him about the Second World War,  
about Shakespeare and Charles Dickens,  
she has taught him more than any teacher,  
in any class-room, ever could.

*Don't be like me, she says.*

As the bus nears his stop, he shakes his head.

Way too late for that, he says aloud,  
and I wouldn't change a thing.

## On a clear night like this

On a clear night like this

The moon is glorious and white  
in the sky  
the stars shine and sparkle  
above the Tesco Extra  
and the kebab shop  
the milky white moon-glow  
reflecting on the shutters  
of the bookies  
on the corner.

## Dear Reader

A lot of writers have  
*the one*,  
this one reader,  
the one they are writing for.

Some write for their wives,  
passing them crumpled pages,  
others for their closest friends,  
reading their work aloud.

For me it has always been  
my father, my dad.  
He's read every single story,  
and marked each one  
with a school-teacher precision.

He's always on hand  
for writing support and advice,  
over a glass of whiskey,  
and to insist that this one  
particular story  
didn't quite make sense.

Don't ask me, I reply,  
I don't know what it means.  
I just wrote the thing.

If he says my story is *good*,  
that is high-praise indeed,  
a glowing five-star review,  
and that it has  
a beginning, a middle  
and end.



My one man reading panel,  
what would he say if he  
ever read this poem?

He would look at me  
over his reading glasses,  
a wry smile on his face,  
and insist that

*one man*

should have a hyphen.

## To A Lesser Degree

I never went to university  
I do not have a degree,  
I would have loved to study  
literature, history and art.

Without a clear idea  
of direction or occupation  
I drifted into the shackles  
of the office nine-to-five.

When I hear people talk of campus,  
degrees and graduations,  
I feel a deep yearning  
for the student years I missed.

I never attended freshers' week  
never stayed in student halls,  
never wore the cap and gown,  
in a graduation family photo.

Had I gone away to university  
I would have got it out of my system,  
scratching that academic itch  
and obtaining my degree.

But the fascination lingers still,  
for learning, literature and poetry  
for history, for language,  
and lectures I never attended.

These days I can't help thinking,  
had I gone to university  
I would have spent three years in study

instead of a life-time.

## The Poet's Birthdate

The great Robbie Burns  
the ploughman poet himself  
was born on 25th January,  
every year I raise a wee dram  
of Scottish whisky.

Another of my poetry heroes  
and the reason I got into poetry,  
the Bard of Salford,  
Dr John Cooper Clarke  
was also born 25th January.

If you think that is an  
astonishing coincidence,  
wait until I tell you, that, I myself,  
this aspiring poet, was born  
about three months later.

## With Phone in Hand

I was in the city centre the other day  
when a woman walking towards me,  
mobile phone in hand,  
eyes glued to the screen,  
scrolling and walking,  
walked right into me,  
bumped straight into me.

She looked up from her phone  
stared at me, like I was in the wrong,  
for getting in her way,  
for blocking her pavement,  
she then side-stepped around me,  
eyes back on her phone,  
and stropped off down the street.

Shocking, I said, out-loud,  
looking around for some support,  
for someone to have seen  
the incident, to agree and roll their eyes  
at the rudeness of some people.  
Instead all I saw was people  
head bowed, staring at their  
mobile phones,  
walking and scrolling.

I decided to get away  
for an hour or two,  
away from the city,  
out into the country,  
to the green Lancashire hills.

I walked and climbed,

hiked and trekked,  
before finally,  
breathing hard,  
I reached the summit.

In front of me stretched  
the wonder of the Lancashire countryside.  
On the wooden hill-top bench  
a young man was sitting,  
mobile phone in hand,  
busily tapping away,  
oblivious to the rolling green splendour  
all around us.

What are you doing on your phone?  
What could be so utterly fascinating?  
Why aren't you inspired by all this?  
I ranted, waving a hand at the scenery.  
He looked up and spoke with a smile.  
I'm actually writing a poem about it.

## A Burns Night Poem

On the twenty-fifth of January,  
this magical night of the year,  
celebrating all things Scottish  
and the Caledonian ploughman poet.

We toast the great Robbie Burns,  
raising a glass of fine single malt,  
reciting the Address to a Haggis,  
*O what a glorious sight.*

When I look out my window this evening  
the Lancashire hills are transformed  
becoming the Scottish Highlands  
of my distant descendants.

I can hear the bagpipe tunes playing  
ringing down through the generations,  
calling out to me in whisper and in song,  
speaking to my Highland heart.

## I'm Closing The Books

I'm closing the books,  
keeping the covers shut tight,  
recently I've been  
tearing out the pages  
handing them out  
to passers-by.

I'm closing the books,  
rather than letting people  
leaf through this thin  
dog-eared, yellow-page volume  
and criticise the character,  
the plot and the story.

I'm closing the books,  
from now on there will be  
only the black and white author photo,  
and the blurb on the  
back-cover to reveal  
a brief summary  
of the contents.



## A Mantra of Life & Death

The brochure for the retreat  
promised to give us  
peace of mind and tranquility.

I was shown down to the main hall  
and instructed to sit cross-legged  
on the carpet.

You need to repeat a mantra, the guru said.  
A word or phrase, to repeat to yourself,  
for relaxation and to focus your mind.  
There are lots of ancient words in Sanskrit  
I will give you your own mantra.

I explained that I would prefer a term  
I could comprehend, that I understood,  
rather than repeat something  
I didn't know the meaning of.  
I'll give you until the end of the day,  
my guru said,  
if you don't have a mantra  
by the morning,  
I will give you a word to chant.

In the small bedroom chamber  
that night,  
on the hard single bed  
I lay in the dark  
and thought it over.

Names and phrases went around  
and around in my mind,  
lines from poems,  
bits of film dialogue,

trying to find the perfect  
word or phrase to  
use as my mantra.  
And then I found it.

I repeated the words to myself.  
Yes, it was perfect.  
It spoke to me of relaxation,  
of calm, of unwinding,  
of switching off,  
and zoning out.  
Just perfect.

The following morning,  
my guru found me in the retreat  
kitchen, where I was eating  
my muesli and sipping green tea.  
Good morning,  
he said with a smile,  
do you have your mantra?  
Oh yes, I grinned.  
And what have you decided on?

Strawberry Fields Forever.  
I declared.  
For a moment he said nothing,  
closing his eyes and  
trying my 60's psychedelic mantra  
out for size.  
Then he opened his eyes  
and nodded.  
Perfect, he said.

## A Lesson Learned

I signed up for an online writing course  
forking out a fair amount of money.  
On the morning it was due to start,  
I clicked on the link, excited,  
feeling like a kid on the first day of term.

I joined the video chat,  
with the tutor taking the course.  
I was raring to go, eager to get started,  
to learn, to write, to develop,  
to hone the craft of writing.

We were told to spend an hour  
writing in our notepads.  
After that came a twenty minute break  
before another hour of writing on our own,  
and finally ending with ten minutes  
meditating, collecting our thoughts.

The only thought I was left with  
was how the course was  
a complete waste of money.

## One of the Lads

He wants to be one of the lads  
and although football bores him to tears  
he watches all the live games on TV  
so he can join in the talk with his friends.

He hates the taste of lager  
but he downs pint after fizzy pint,  
enviously eyeing the old man in the flat cap  
as he sips his pint of real ale.

He listens to loud lairy rock music  
with all its swagger and machismo  
but classical music speaks to him  
in ways he can't explain.

He refers to his local Indian restaurant  
as the curry-house and always orders  
the hottest dish on the menu  
even though he'll suffer the next day.

He wants to be one of the lads,  
he ticks the boxes and wears all the brands  
but inside there's a hollow emptiness  
he finds it best not to dwell on.

## Poetry Competition

Sometimes when I read  
a poem that truly takes my breath away,  
I wonder why I even try when  
I will never compose  
anything of such magnitude.

And then I remind myself,  
I play the guitar,  
happily strumming chords,  
my foot tapping away,  
without comparing my playing  
to Clapton, Harrison and Hendrix.

I read best-selling novels,  
with earth-shattering plot twists,  
and yet will happily while away  
an afternoon writing  
random short stories  
that I myself don't understand.

I lace up my battered trainers,  
and go out for a half-hour jog  
without stressing over  
my chances of completing  
a marathon or 10K.

I tell myself that I should  
adpot this attitude about  
the verse I try and compose,  
to just relax and go with it,  
but I can't help wearing  
my art on my sleeve.

## Monday morning office...

Grey skies, cold and bleak,  
white shirts and dark trousers  
under harsh fluorescent lights  
and the pale glare of computer screens.

Across the open-plan office,  
the photo-copier has a paper jam,  
the grey machine giving up  
refusing to take it anymore.

Trudge to the kitchen for a cup of tea,  
heaped spoonfuls of sugar  
and splash of milk,  
tired colleagues needing their caffeine shot.

*Good weekend?*

*Yeah, you?*

*Yeah.*

Back to the desk and the drudgery  
wishing it was weekend  
just hoping to make it to lunch-time.

## Initially Speaking

I've decided to add my middle initial  
as people call me by that name too,  
I find myself answering to both,  
forgetting who is who.

They call me by my middle name,  
I forget how it all began,  
I try not to let it bother me,  
I'm still who I am.

I tell them to call me Tom  
but people never change,  
they keep on calling me C  
but what's in a name?

It's a little known fact that  
Paul McCartney's first name is James  
but whether he's called Jim or Paul  
the music's still the same.

I'm adding my middle initial  
so it will feel like the real me.  
I hope my friends on this website  
don't get lost at C.

Tom C Dylan.

## The Clear-Out

The skip I'd hired arrived  
early on the Saturday morning  
dirty yellow and rusty,  
dressed in scruffy jeans  
and a faded t-shirt  
I set about filling the skip.

In went the old TV set,  
bashed up suit-cases,  
decades' worth of junk  
from the loft,  
instruments that I couldn't recall  
buying let alone playing.

I gathered all the rubbish  
from the garden, broken spades,  
brushes and deck-chairs,  
swept up all the fallen leaves  
I'd been kicking through for months.

There was something so therapeutic  
about the process, this spring clean,  
a clean slate. This clear-out  
would do me so much good.

They took the fully-loaded skip away,  
I gave the driver a ten pound tip,  
the least I could do,  
and waved the skip off  
down the street,  
as though it was a ship  
going off to sea.



I went back inside smiling,  
satisfied at a job well-done,  
looking around my  
newly clutter-free home.  
It felt like a new house.  
It was perfect.

My hard-work complete it was  
time for a nice cup of tea  
and to work on my latest poem.

The smile faded from my face  
as I noticed the nice, clean  
tidy empty space  
where my poetry book  
had been.

I swore and cursed and fumed,  
raged around my lovely empty room.  
Spic and span suddenly feeling  
like a chain, a noose around  
my neck.

All my notes and jotting and ideas  
were on their way to the junk-yard.  
Months and years of scribblings  
and half-thoughts, that would  
one day be turned into poems  
and stories,  
sent away with the trash.

What on earth would I write about now?  
Would I even be able to write?  
My muse had been packed up  
and thrown away.  
It felt like I'd gathered up

my lover's belongings  
in bin bags and dumped them  
out on the street.

I grabbed a pen and paper,  
needing to write something  
anything, craving the process,  
the feel of the words forming  
sentences and lines on the page.  
And so I began.

*The skip I'd hired arrived  
early on the Saturday morning  
dirty yellow and rusty,*

## Spread Too Thin

I spread myself too thin  
I don't know how it happens but it does.  
I have too many interests  
and seem to be adding  
more all the time.  
I go from writing stories and poems  
to films and TV series,  
to Karate and Martial Arts,  
and then there's the American sports,  
I've been into the NFL since I was a kid,  
and there's the baseball all summer too.  
Can a person have too many interests?  
Maybe I should drop some of my hobbies,  
maybe I should leave the NFL and focus on  
my writing for a while.  
But then I remember its Super Bowl  
weekend and my 49ers are playing.  
Maybe I'll keep going but I just worry  
that if I keep with all these interests,  
even the poem I'm currently  
working on will not be  
fin

## Prophets and Losses

### *Prophets and Losses*

I decided to take a year for my writing,  
and went to the bank  
to ask for a loan.

If I didn't have the stress of work  
I could devote myself to my writing.

I hoped that by the end of the twelve months  
I would have something I could publish,  
a novel, a collection of short stories.  
enough poems for a volume.

I was shown through to the bank manager's office  
and told to take a seat.  
As he glared at me, I detailed my plan,  
for pouring my soul into my writing  
to get it all down and out of my system  
and then to attempt publishing.

What's your estimated turn-over for year one?  
He asked, peering at me over his glasses.  
About two hundred and fifty. I replied, proudly.  
Is that pounds or Dollars?  
Pages. I said.

No, you're misunderstanding. What's your margin? he asked.  
It's a narrow column that runs down the side of the page.  
I said.

It was at that point I was thrown out of the bank.

## Monday, I can't do this

The five days of the working week  
stretch ahead in front of me  
like twenty-six marathon miles  
and my ankle is broken.

I feel your hands around my neck,  
Monday, choking and squeezing,  
I can't breathe and am  
losing consciousness.

Our relationship is toxic, Monday.  
Your demands are impossible  
and you're becoming a bore.  
Monday, you are a bully.

I'm done with you, Monday.  
I quit, I'm out, we're through.  
I've had all I can take from you.  
See you next week.

## I'm that kind of tired

I'm that kind of tired  
that would transform even  
the fondest birthday wishes  
into the most offensive  
insult imaginable.

My whole jaw hurts like  
a shooting tooth-ache,  
my limbs are heavy,  
my zombie feet drag  
along behind me.

Tiredness turns the  
afternoon office into  
a black and white film,  
a European movie,  
in a language  
I don't understand.

It feels like I'm drowning  
in a sea of exhaustion,  
a yawn brings tears to my eyes,  
and if I closed them  
I'd be snoring within seconds.

I check the clock.  
hoping its nearly home-time.  
Three o'clock. After what  
feels like an hour,  
I check again.  
Five past three.

## For My Teachers

This is a poem for my teachers,  
the people who almost  
knocked my love of literature  
out of me with a  
black-board duster

Who were bigger bullies  
than any of my class-mates,  
who would always report  
that I *could do better*,  
even though I was trying  
my absolute best.

This poem is for those teachers  
who thought it more important  
that we walk in the right direction  
down the correct corridor  
than what we actually learned in class.

This poem is for the teacher  
who spent most of the lessons  
drunk, taking hits of whiskey  
in the stock-cupboard,  
before teaching us last year's  
syllabus by mistake.

The teachers may have ruined  
Charles Dickens for me,  
by throwing the book at us  
and telling the class to have it  
read by the end of the week,

But Shakespeare and stories

and poems, they are still mine.  
My brother still cannot hear  
Seamus Heaney without having  
flash-backs to horror days at  
high school.

This poem is for my old head-master  
who on our last ever assembly, as we were  
about to venture out into the adult world,  
still addressed us as *boys and girls*,  
and without a shred of sentiment.

Today I read books and poems,  
and attempt stories and poetry  
of my own, and all this is  
in spite of, not because of  
my teachers.  
I might actually write about it  
one of these days.



## It's Not Cool. It's Rude.

I text you but you don't text back,  
I make you a brew, you don't say thanks,  
I say good morning, you just look blank.  
It's not cool, it's rude.

You drive like you're in a race,  
can't keep that look of disdain  
from your face,  
when it comes to dating, you don't chase.  
It's not cool, it's rude.

You ask a question and ignore my replies,  
when I talk you roll your eyes,  
you'd ruin your best friend's  
birthday surprise.  
It's not cool, it's rude.

On the times when you did not respond  
I felt like I'd done something wrong,  
now I see I was right all along.  
It's not me, it's you.

## On Meeting the Poet Laureate

I once met the Poet Laureate,  
attending the reading in a  
city-centre library.

The inspirational figure  
recited verse that moved  
myself and the entire audience  
to tears.

The poems he delivered  
cast a spell over everyone  
in the large room.

He seemed to capture  
the beautiful ugliness  
of life itself in words.

At the end of the recital  
I joined the line of people  
queuing to meet the  
great man and to express  
how much the poet  
and his words meant to them.

I don't know if he was having a bad day.  
or was feeling under the weather,  
or had signed too many books that afternoon  
but when I said I'd really enjoyed the reading  
and loved his work,  
he told me to f\*ck off.

## Making A Night of It

Come and help us celebrate  
our ten year anniversary,  
the flyer declared.

The Indian restaurant over the road  
was celebrating  
a decade in business.

We decided to go along,  
and show our support,  
hoping for a great evening.  
The flyer promised  
traditional music,  
drums and dancing.

As the waiter showed us  
to our table for two  
he explained that the  
dancers had phoned in sick.  
No worries, I laughed,  
we're here for the food anyway.  
The waiter said somebody  
would be over shortly  
to take our drinks order.

It was then that we took in the chaos  
going on all around us.  
The hostile atmosphere in the  
busy restaurant restaurant resembled the  
scenes of picket-lines  
you see on the news.

Angry customers storm  
to the bar, waving their

hands in frustration  
saying they've been sitting  
at their table for an hour  
and nobody had been  
near to take their drinks order.  
The waiter behind the bar  
dishes out an apology  
like it's the house special.

Waiters arguing and snapping  
at each other, running around,  
collecting glasses,  
taking orders,  
dishing out  
poppadums, chutneys  
and apologies.

The family on the next table  
have been waiting ages for their food,  
all hungry eyes and rumbling stomachs.  
They watch the waiters as they pass,  
expectantly, the same way you hope  
that slowing car is your late-night taxi-cab.

Finally the waiter approaches  
with a tray laden with hot food.  
Who ordered the Rogan Josh?  
the waiter asks, lifting a silver dish.  
The group look at each other and shrug.  
Nobody has. They groan and tutt.  
The waiter says he'll check,  
and retreats, taking the food tray with him.  
The family starts to drool,  
like Labradors wanting wafer-thin ham  
and crank their annoyance and protests  
up a notch.

A stressed-looking waiter  
finally approaches our table,  
pad and paper in hand.  
What would you like?  
he asks, pen hovering over the page.  
Actually, my wife says,  
I would like to go somewhere else.

## The Man in the White Coat

I went down to the chemist  
to see about getting some cream  
for a rash on my arm.

I joined the queue of people  
and finally reached the front.

The pharmacist leaned over the counter  
and asked what he could do for me.

I pulled up the sleeve of my anorak  
and showed him my rash.

You should go and see your doctor, he said.

I rang them and they said to come here. I said.

Go back to them and tell them I sent you, he insisted.

But they were quite adamant I come here,  
I explained.

I know what I'm talking about,  
the chemist said,

I'm the one in the white coat.

I raised the sleeve of the anorak

I was wearing, also white.

I'm wearing a white coat too, I said.

My coat suggests I study pharmacology,

he said, while yours suggests

that it might rain later.

## Out of Earshot

I would always wear earphones  
when I'm walking,  
listening to the radio  
and my music,  
while making my way  
along the street.

The chatter of the DJ's  
and the radio tunes  
becoming my soundtrack,  
I'd feel like I was  
starring in the  
opening scenes  
of my very own movie.

I used to joke that my  
legs wouldn't work  
without my earphones.  
But with my music  
I could walk for miles.

I would put my earphones in  
and set off, my feet beating  
the pavement in time  
to the music,  
clicking my fingers,  
as I briskly walked along.

One day, as I set off on a walk,  
marching along.  
I reached into my pocket  
for my earphones.  
I swore under my breath.

My pocket was empty.  
I'd forgotten them.

I could have gone back home  
but I knew that if I did  
then the pull of the sofa  
would be too strong  
and my intentions of  
a walk would go out the window.

Fuming and annoyed,  
I stopped down the street,  
in angry stomps,  
cursing my forgetfulness.  
I debated how far I should go,  
on this tune-less silent stroll.  
Maybe half-way, three-quarters,  
before turning back.  
In future I would keep my earphones  
in my coat pocket.

My anger subsided as I went on,  
and I started noticing the sounds  
all around me.  
A couple walking by, sharing a joke,  
laughing at the punchline,  
a helicopter thrumming overhead.  
a dog barking at it's owner to throw the ball,  
ice-cream van chimes ringing out  
from a near-by street,  
a man across the road,  
wearing shorts despite the cold,  
whistling to himself as he walked.

These days when I go for a walk  
I leave my earphones behind,



my wonderful soundtrack is  
the world around me  
and all that's in it.

## Of Irish Descent

She goes into the Irish bar  
and orders a pint of Guinness,  
and a double whiskey,  
Irish of course.  
She turns to the man next to her,  
who is leaning on the bar,  
drinking a pint of lager.  
*Slainte*, she says raising her glass.  
Cheers, the man replies.  
I'm actually of Irish descent,  
she says proudly,  
my grandparents were from County Mayo.  
He nods and smiles politely.  
Are you of Irish descent?  
No, he says.  
I am so very proud of my Irish heritage.  
It really is something special,  
to be connected to Ireland.  
I haven't missed a Saint Patrick's Day  
parade in years. Did you go this year?  
No, he says.  
Where are you from yourself? she asks.  
I was born in Dublin, he says.

## Of course I am

Are you coming with me  
to the appointment?  
she asks.

As if I'd leave her  
to go on her own.  
I squeeze her hand.  
Of course I am.

Am I worried about her  
how she's feeling  
about everything  
how she's sleeping?  
Of course I am.

What about you?  
she says,  
turning to face me.  
Are you okay?  
I give her my most  
optimistic and  
upbeat smile,  
and tell the biggest lie.  
Of course I am.

## The Waiting

It's the waiting that gets you,  
while you swim like crazy,  
thrashing and kicking,  
for the relief of the air  
at the water's surface,  
the waiting is the hand  
that grabs your ankle  
pulling you back down.

the waiting, while  
you can see your life  
veering ahead in two  
very different directions,  
the path to two futures,  
the new job and that promotion,  
house sale going through,  
the doctor's appointment.

The week stretches ahead  
as soulless and lost  
as a rainy Sunday afternoon.  
It's the waiting  
the not knowing  
the agony  
the ache  
the knot in your stomach  
the voice that whispers in the night,  
what if?  
what if?

## World Poetry Day

Here's to World Poetry Day  
when words count  
and stanzas stand tall,  
dressed up and showing off  
playing up to the flash of the cameras  
like film stars  
at an awards ceremony.

Let's raise a glass,  
beer, whiskey,  
or a nice mug of tea,  
to the words  
that touch our souls,  
that speak to  
that small space  
in each of us.

and says  
I undertsand,  
I hear you,  
you are not alone,  
there are others  
that feel the same.

Tomorrow poetry  
will be tired and hung-over  
craving junk-food  
and regretting that  
argument with a  
haiku.

## The Surprise Gifts

On my birthday this year  
my family call over,  
each one bearing gifts  
and gushing with birthday wishes.

I am handed the gifts in turn,  
all beautifully wrapped,  
tagged and bowed.  
I accept the offered presents  
with a *you really shouldn't have* look.

My uncle buys me a bottle  
of fancy American liquor,  
I nod and thank him,  
feigning delight,  
while thinking,  
I prefer Scottish and Irish whiskey,  
and am not a fan of Kentucky bourbon.

My sister buys me a CD by the Who,  
she's bought me their albums several times  
over the years, it's become as much  
a tradition as getting socks for Christmas.  
I don't recall ever telling her  
I like the band.

I force a polite smile on my face  
and enthuse about  
how each gift is just perfect  
how *I love it*.  
*How did you know?*  
I ask, while thinking,  
do you not know

me at all?

When the family have left  
and I have washed out  
the mugs and glasses,  
I turn to the random pile  
of presents.

I pour out a measure of  
the American bourbon  
and put the CD in the player.  
As the rock band kick in  
I sniff the liquor with suspicion.

The Who album  
turns out to be a classic  
live LP of the band in their prime.  
I sip the bourbon warily  
and as it wonderfully burns my throat,  
I can't help thinking,  
how have I never tried this before?

When my family were leaving  
the gifts had seemed  
perfect presents  
for somebody else,  
it was only afterwards  
that it dawned on me,  
they know me better  
than I know myself.

## The Line

I don't feel great right now  
like I'm all lost at sea  
I need to take some time,  
some time just for me.

These seas are so rocky  
it feels like my ship is sinking,  
my head hurts from lack of sleep,  
I wish I could stop thinking.

I throw myself overboard  
and swim for the beach,  
tossed around by the swell  
the shore looks so far out of reach.

Exhausted and drained  
I crawl out from the sea  
soaked to the skin,  
but feeling more like me.

Bare-foot in the rain,  
drawing the line in the sand,  
I've had all I can take,  
and all that I can stand.

Yesterday was theirs  
but tomorrow is all mine,  
I'm standing on the beach  
and I'm drawing a line.

I can't take this much more,  
I can't go on any longer,  
so I'm marking the line



and I'm coming back stronger.

Fourth of the fourth, Twenty-four,  
tomorrow is the date,  
I start all over again,  
and I cannot wait.

## Birthday Wishes

On the afternoon of my birthday  
I approach the packed pub table  
taking in the familiar faces.  
Ernest Hemingway regales the group  
with a tale of his Paris days  
James Joyce shakes his head,  
declaring that's not how it happened at all.  
Simon Armitage sips his pint  
insisting the best beer is made in Yorkshire  
and don't get me started on Yorkshire tea.  
Ted Hughes adds that there is magic in the Yorkshire rain.  
Emily Dickinson shares a poem  
beautiful moving and sad.  
Charles Bukowski says its time for another round  
of drinks, and he'll have a double.  
John Cooper Clarke checks the time on his watch.  
He'll have one for the road  
before catching his bus back to Salford.  
When it is time to leave  
I pack up all my poetry books  
Happy birthday  
I say to myself.

## First Day Back Syndrome

After a week in the Spanish sunshine  
the Monday morning alarm  
kicks my door down  
like armed police  
with a warrant for my arrest.  
I throw my arms in the air  
insisting I'll come quietly.  
And it's back to work,  
like an escaped prisoner  
being dragged back to his cell,  
I'm back in the confines of the office,  
my orange jump-suit  
a shirt and tie.  
By ten o'clock I'm on my  
third cup of tea,  
Spain and the week before  
seems like  
a million miles away  
and a decade ago.

## Off the Beach

I have a pebble on my desk  
from a holiday years ago,  
if anyone asks, I tell them  
it's a paper-weight,  
a small souvenir,  
but when the job  
and life in general  
gets on top of me  
and I feel the dull ache  
of stress and tension  
gripping my shoulders  
and crushing the  
back of my neck

I pick up that pebble  
closing my fingers  
gently but tightly  
around it  
and breath slowly  
until I can  
hear the crash of the waves  
and feel the sun on my face.

## Sixty Poems

This poem will be number sixty  
I don't know why that matters  
but it seems rather significant.  
Something of a milestone,  
like completing a 5 or 10 K run.  
A modest but personal achievement.  
Why is it we celebrate turning twenty-one  
but not twenty years old?  
Sixty seems a nice round number.  
The Sixty is the motorway ring-road  
around the city I live.  
I count the number of poems  
like the guy in the Great Escape  
marking in chalk the tally-count  
of the tunnels he's dug  
or like a footballer recording  
caps for their country  
or a competing quiz team  
totalling up their score.  
How should I celebrate  
completing sixty poems?  
I think I'll celebrate  
by writing  
sixty one.

## The Doctor Will See You Now

On a cold bright April evening  
I had an appointment to keep.  
I showed the doorman my printed ticket  
and dashed down the aisle to my seat.

I rubbed my hands together in delight  
as the Lowry theatre went dark,  
the sell-out crowd all gathered  
to see Dr John Cooper Clarke.

With his jokes, poems and one-liners  
the good doctor regaled the crowd  
and recited all his greatest hits  
while we cheered, whooped and howled.

The crowd spilled out onto the streets  
our ears still ringing with rhyme  
still laughing and repeating his words  
all agreed, we'd had such a good time.

His rapid-fire words stayed with me  
as I rode the late-night tram back home  
feeling motivated and so inspired  
to try and write verse of my own.

I would try and write a few poems  
of my own, and try to make a mark,  
just like my Salford-born hero,  
here's to you, Dr John Cooper Clarke.