

# ROWAN MCCABE'S LOCAL POEMS



South Tyneside Council



# ABOUT ROWAN MCCABE

Rowan McCabe was Poet in Residence at The Word from February – May 2019. During this time, he explored what South Shields means to local people by visiting local landmarks and areas, speaking with the public and recording his own experiences.

Using words from the Word Bank of Lost Dialects, Rowan has created seven poems about his experiences.



# 1. AN ODE TO A SEASIDE TOWN

Hello and welcome to South Shields,  
where skies are filled with seagulls squeals,  
where market traders flog their wares  
and kids play dodgems at the fair.  
Where mouth of Tyne meets open sea,  
where Souter Lighthouse guards the quay,  
where dogs gan akka on the sands  
past happy couples holding hands.

I was born in this seaside town  
and I've heard people put it down,  
they snide and turn their noses up,  
point to shops that have been shut.  
But I have travelled far and wide  
and my heart still swells with pride  
when I come back to this fair place  
to feel the sea breeze on my face.

Sandhaven beach is paradise,  
its golden sands stretch past the eye;  
Minchella's ice cream can't be beat,  
their coffee matches Italy's.  
The Great North Runners triumph here,  
The Steamboat pub does proper beer,  
there's Colman's famous fish and chips,  
The Word, the parks, an endless list.

I won't deny that times are hard,  
the cuts were deep, I've seen the scars,  
there's many battles left to fight,  
injustices we need to right.  
But from Roman forts to smoke and pits

the people here have strength and grit  
and one sight that there'll always be  
is the sunrise dawning on the sea.

## 2. SAND DANCER

Who cares about the sunshine?  
Who cares about the warnings?  
We're going to South Shields beach  
in the middle of a storm.  
Cos we're proper Sand Dancers!  
Hardcore pier prancers!  
We're going to build a castle  
in torrential sideways rain,  
we're going for a splodge in a tidal wave.

Who cares about the hurricane?  
Great weather for a kite.  
We're going to spin across the sand dunes  
and laugh as we take flight,  
use our ice cream cones as lighting masts,  
our towels as parachutes,  
pretend we're in a desert storm,  
or on a trip to Jupiter.

You can spend your whole life  
waiting for the perfect day.  
At the end you'll see  
all that you've done  
is wish it all away.  
Any weather can be wonderful,  
nature's always pretty.  
(Plus, when the sun is out  
the beach is full of divvys.)





# 3. DREAM JOB

Some dream of being pop stars  
who fill out Wembley Stadium.  
Some wish they were explorers  
who hack their way through jungles.  
Some want to be professors  
who are experts in their field,  
but all I want to do  
is drive the ferry to North Shields.

Just sit there in the Captain's seat,  
as the sun comes beating down,  
making glitter on the river,  
what job could be more sound?  
I'd get a little parrot,  
grow a beard, smoke a pipe,  
and subscribe to monthly magazines  
like *Mariner's Life*.

Cos the staff look proper chuffed  
and, call me idealistic,  
but I don't think you'll get shipwrecked  
on that seven minute trip.  
I don't think that you'll get scurvy,  
or attacked by angry pirates  
and, even if you did,  
it still beats working in an office.

Yes, if I was a ferry driver,  
that's where you'd always find me,  
but I was sick on there last Friday night-  
I don't think they're going to hire me.



# 4. MARSDEN ROCK

Marsden, you're more than a rock to me.  
Up close, you're a temple built to change.  
I watch the restless chiselling of the sea  
as I stand inside your ever-growing caves.

Concertina pillars mark the arches;  
rooms that could be built by grafter's hands;  
twisting tunnels hidden in the darkness,  
snaking off to strange and distant lands.

How many feet have stumbled round inside here?  
How many smugglers made the night their home?  
How many teenage hands tipped back their cider?  
How many couples came to be alone?

Before you crumbled under steps persistent,  
the people scaled up to the top of you.  
But, though I now feel almost non-existent,  
I think in here I much prefer the view.



# 5. THE GREAT MINI RAILWAY ROBBERY

It's story time, so shut your gobs a minute, I'll explain  
how a group of little rebels tried to steal a mini train  
and how the town of South Shields nearly lost this famous landmark  
that toots its horn and blows out steam round old South Marine Park.

It was years ago, in the dead of night, next to the park's blue lake,  
the ducks were dreaming in their nests of bread that's freshly baked,  
the roundabouts and swings were still, the children tucked in bed,  
and, after a busy day, the train was cooling in its shed.

Now, those who know the park will recognise the train I mean,  
it's not a car with rubber wheels, this engine runs on steam,  
it's got pistons and a chimney, along a track it glides,  
the only difference being that it's one tenth of the size.

And there it stood, in the pitch black, when there came this chiselling  
sound,  
a flashing light, some figures quickly leaping out the ground,  
some began to fire the engine, to fill it full of coal,  
while others grabbed the front and back and dragged it to a hole.

You see, for months before this happened, in total isolation,  
this gang had dug a tunnel all the way from South Shields station.  
They planned to pull the engine underground from where they came,  
to stick it on the Metro lines and make their getaway.

But who would want to do this? What motivates them? Why?  
Would it not be easier to steal a train full-sized?  
And who would have the skills to dig this tunnel all unknown?

Well, the answer's pretty simple really: The train robbers were gnomes.

An expert team of thieving gnomes, they were jealous, they were bold. They wanted the mini train themselves for carrying hoards of gold. They were filthy, wrinkly, selfish, greedy, nasty, radgie gnome men; they didn't care if it wasn't theirs, they were taking it to Boldon.

They slowly heaved the train along the tunnel to the Metro, they dragged it up the station's stairs, it wasn't long to go, they made it to the platform, with sweat and pounding hearts, but this is where the robbery began to fall apart.

You see, it seems the gnomes had overlooked one very simple fact: This little train was ten times smaller than the Metro tracks. The coppers found them in the station as the sun came up, trying to forge some bigger wheels from empty cans of pop.

And that's the story of the thieving gnomes and their evil, wicked ploy, how it was foiled before they stole the people's pride and joy. The moral is: Be kind, think of others and their futures, and before you do some DIY, make sure you buy a ruler.

# 6. COLMAN'S

Colman's Seafood Restaurant.

This, my Grandparents explained,  
is where they went on their first ever date,  
fifty years ago.

Of course, you didn't call it a date then,  
it was just called *Gannin Oot*,  
but the premise, as far as I can gather,  
was basically the same.

I find a seat and order the fish cake.  
Beyond the window is the open sea.  
Waiters move past effortlessly  
in starched white shirts,  
silver trays,  
glasses of champagne.

I think about them both,  
sat here, in their Sunday best;  
him 18, her 16,  
nervous,  
trying to blag themselves through  
a situation neither is familiar with.

I wonder what they ate.  
Maybe it was the fish cake?  
Maybe that first bite of fish cake  
made it all seem less scary?  
Made them catch each other's gaze,  
smile,  
and for the first time think, "This,  
this is how I want to spend the rest of my life."

And what if there was a mistake?  
What if it got left in the fryer  
just a little too long,  
at the end of the night  
they went their separate ways  
making vague plans  
they knew they'd never follow up on.  
What if they came on a different day  
and the fish cake was off?  
So they ordered the haddock, or the cod  
and, no matter how much they wanted it to,  
it just wasn't the same.  
What if it had a bone in?  
Or one of them turned out to be allergic?  
My entire family's existence  
could have been balanced on this singular fish cake.

I think about how the biggest changes  
begin inconsequentially,  
how all those in-between bits in the days  
are the beating heart of them,  
how these four walls are potentially  
the most important building in my family's history,  
more important than any house, any delivery room,  
any school.

Then I look down at the menu.  
It says this place was built in 2017...  
And I remember there's another Colman's,  
the one on Ocean Road.  
It's too late now to leave.



# 7. THE FIRST PROM

We were the first ones  
to have a prom  
in our school.  
I didn't really want to go,  
but everyone else was  
and, when you're sixteen years old,  
that's enough.

The boys rented tuxedos,  
pretending to be James Bond.  
The girls begged their mams  
for expensive, floor length dresses.

Me and my mates got a limo  
to The Sea Hotel,  
sat down in the restaurant  
at white circular tables,  
the boys on one side of the room,  
the girls on the other.

But what to do?  
We'd seen *Saved by the Bell*,  
we knew there was meant to be  
dates...  
bouquets...  
first dances...  
But who was going to be brave enough  
to suggest something like that?

In the end,  
we just drank pop  
and listened to Shakira,

awkwardly playing the part  
we'd watched on televisions,  
wearing somebody else's clothes  
and trying very hard to fit them.

