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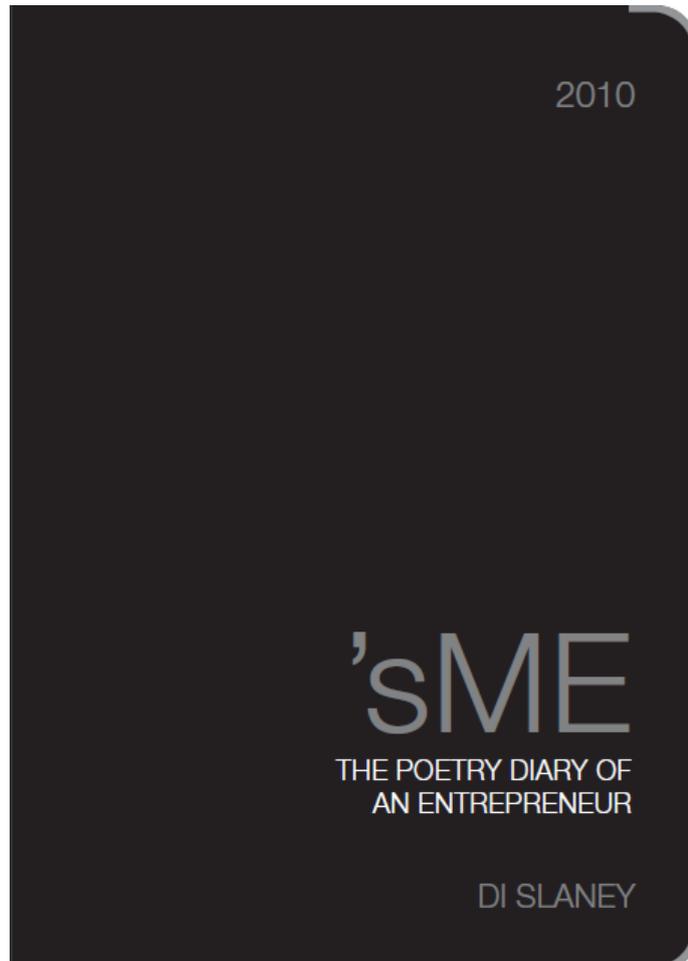
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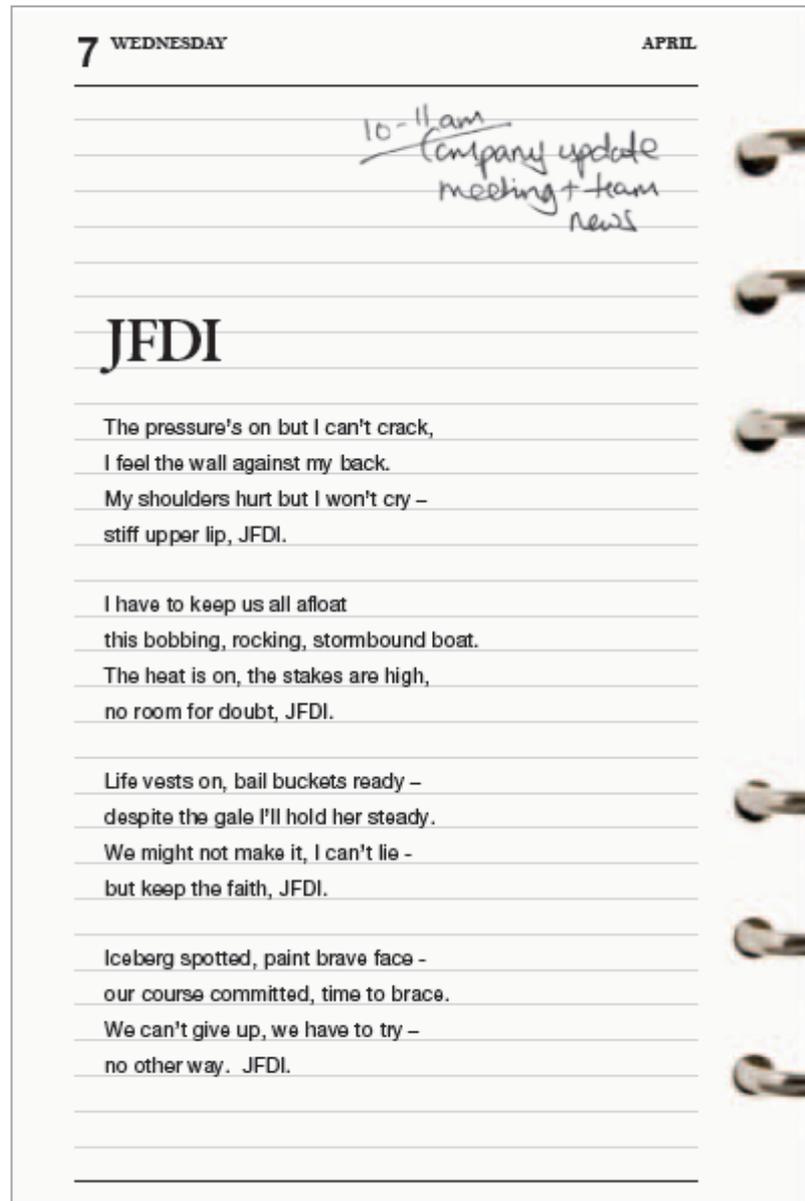
## Reflections on the Poetry Diary of an Entrepreneur: Restorying the Entrepreneurial Experience

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## Setting the scene



Entrepreneurism has much in common with poetry, according to Tom Ehrenfield in 'The Start Up Garden' (2002). An online article explains his premise that starting a business is basically the equivalent of writing a poem:

'There's an important, albeit indirect, link between proficiency in poetry and mastery in entrepreneurship, one that is instructive to anyone founding a company in the digital world. Essentially, entrepreneurs are people who are creating value by inventing or discovering new ways to connect people, ideas and organizations to one another – in much the same way that poets surprise and inspire us with their ability to make the world new through language ... the art of trusting the intuitive leap and of creating meaning in a place where it didn't exist before – and then communicating that to an audience – are fundamental to both.'<sup>1</sup>

In this reflective piece, I comment on a creative writing project that I have just completed, entitled '**'sME: the poetry diary of an entrepreneur.**' 'sME is a sequence of poems in diary form that I have written about my personal experience of building a business. It is a collection about my working life as an entrepreneur for the past 11 years, and how I have developed professionally and emotionally through the process. I chose the diary form as a visually creative way of

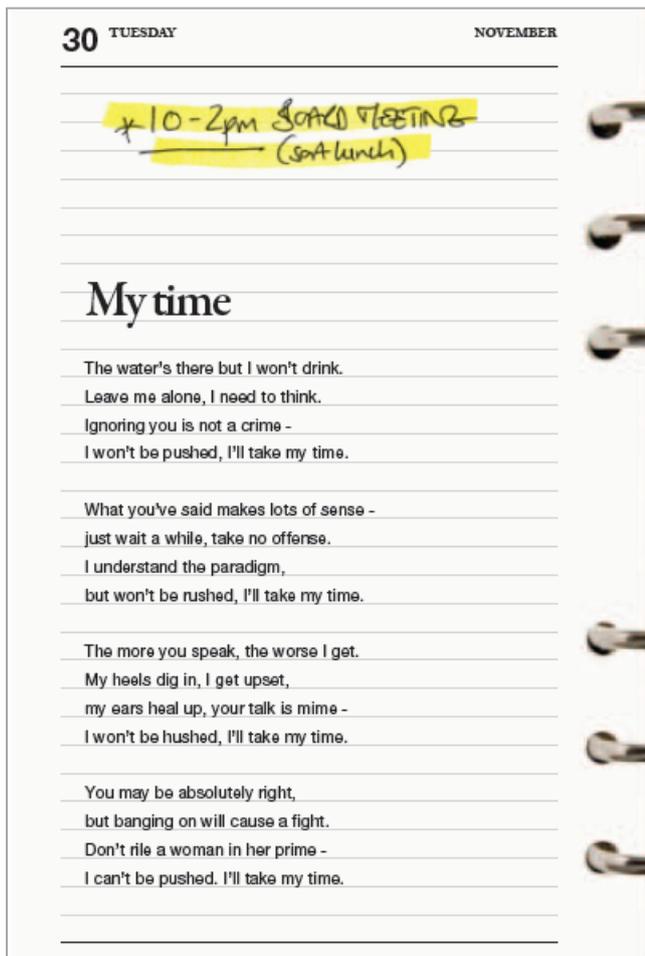
signposting my business life, using poems as punctuation points or ‘notes to self’ on the diary pages. I will discuss three of the poems in detail later on in this article.

The ‘sME poems take a frank look around my working environment, focus mainly on the work place and work relationships but also relationships outside. I co-own my business with my husband, so our professional and personal relationships are complicated and intertwined.



The poems are full of changing moods and different speeds, reflecting the reality of working life in a competitive, commercial sector. Using long and short structured forms, I make choices and take risks in the same way that I arrive at business decisions. In experimenting with traditional forms in a modern, everyday context, I try to set up a conflict that is enjoyable to me and for the reader. And although I deal with some dark times and brutal truths, I try to balance this out with humour and irreverence – two key qualities that have helped me survive both the best and worst of times in business.

The title ‘sME announces “Here I am, warts and all” – and also puns on the business acronym SME (small to medium sized enterprise). In common with other SME owner-managers, I’ve had to deal with a wide range of challenges in running my business, all of which have helped me get a better sense of my identity, my capabilities and also my limitations. Personal growth through the process of business development really interests me as a subject area, and my aim has been to give an authentic commentary of my experience of developing as an entrepreneur.



## Why creative writing?

I started the Creative Writing MA course at NTU on a part-time basis in October 2008, following a period of convalescence after major surgery. Feeling more introspective than usual, I had reached a significant point of reflection about my life having worked hard for a decade building up my business to the exclusion of almost everything else. It was a dynamic, well run machine that nevertheless sucked me dry. I began to query the worth of it all, and looked to find something ‘other’ in the writing process to restore balance.

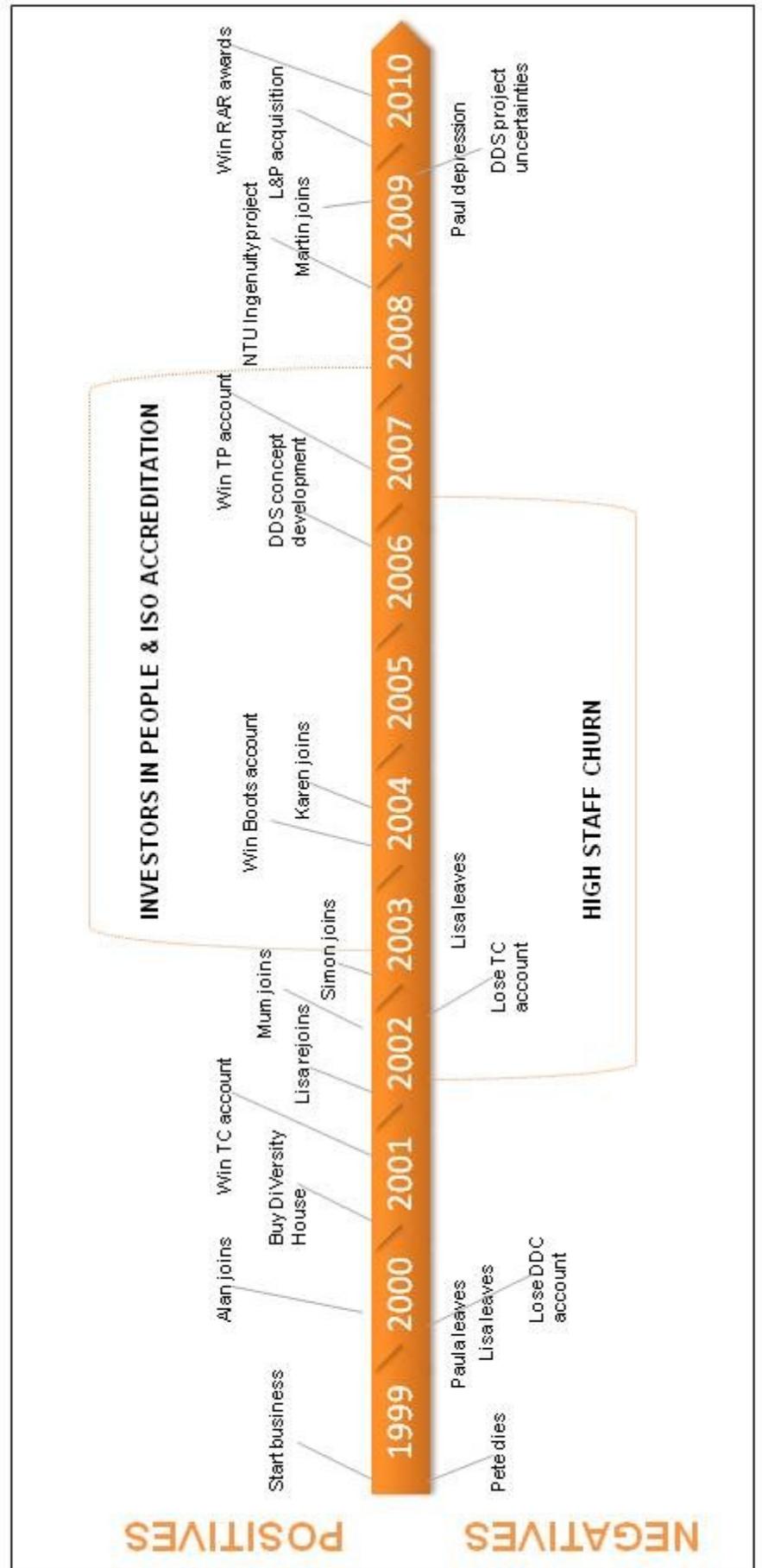
It was therefore ironic to end the MA course with a dissertation collection of poetry about that experience of entrepreneurship and building a business. And in the process of writing about it, to fall back in love with my business and the opportunities it affords me. Retelling my business story – to myself as much as to a potential audience – helped me to make sense of some of my more difficult experiences, synthesising emotions and events through the filter of the poetry process to produce something communicable, not just with personal meaning but also hopefully some wider relevance. Working full time in the business and studying part time forced me to produce the commentary of poetry as a parallel line to my work life, giving a different perspective that was somehow more observant, and detached.

The poems in the ‘sME collection attempt to convey the emotional trajectory of running a business, where people delight and disappoint on a daily basis, and the pressure to deliver financially is relentless. I have tried to write openly about my experience, to present issues such as risk, error, isolation and determination in an accessible way. I have always had in mind that my audience is likely to be people like myself who run a small business and share the basic tenor of my experience. In writing for this niche, I have taken care to talk to these people in a language that they will understand, and in a way that they might find stimulating.

To start the process, I sketched out an emotional time line for my business, tracing back key events of the past decade by how they had made me feel at the time. I have recreated this more formally here:

**People & roles:**

- Pete – creative business partner
- Alan – husband/co-business owner
- Paula – account manager
- Lisa – graphic designer
- Mum – Alan's PA
- Simon – operations director
- Karen – client services director
- Martin – creative director
- Paul – account manager





These marker events then became the catalyst for poems, particularly the staff-related section in the collection. I have found dealing with staff and their emotional fall-out the most difficult part of my business. For a period of about three years I was in a no-man's land of high staff wastage, with no idea how to stem the tide and get people to stick with us. This was all good poetry fodder.

Other stimulus for the collection came from unexpected quarters. A chance remark with a client about the geography of our office building led to a train of thought about how strange it is that I have ended up running a business so close to where my great-grandfather had his shop, and where my SME owner-manager grandmother used to live. This turned into a productive segue into business heritage – an angle that I had previously overlooked, despite a high proportion of my immediate family also being entrepreneurs.

## Why poetry?

"Most people ignore poetry because most poetry ignores most people." (Adrian Mitchell)<sup>ii</sup>

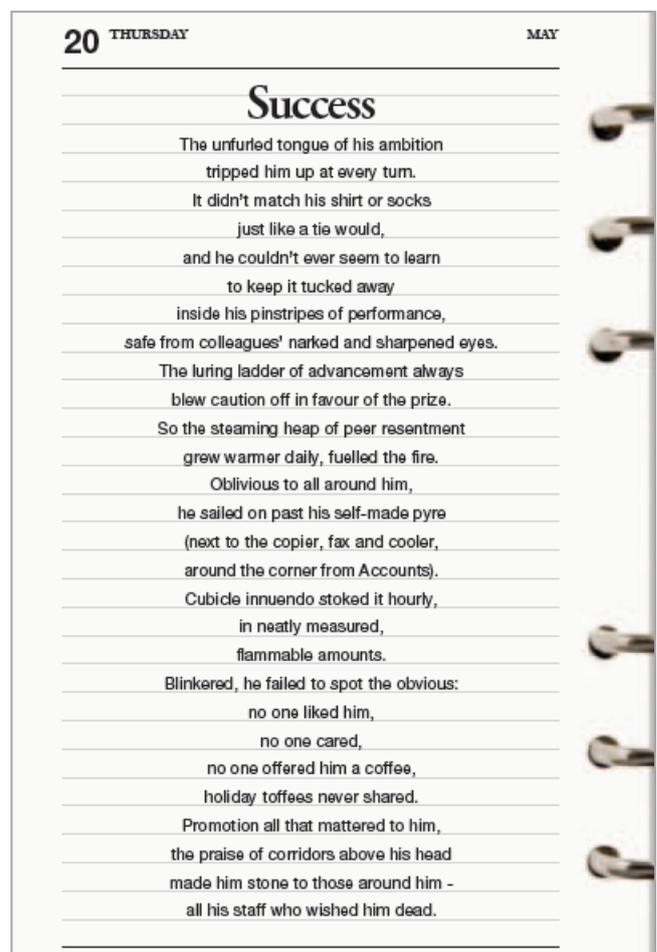
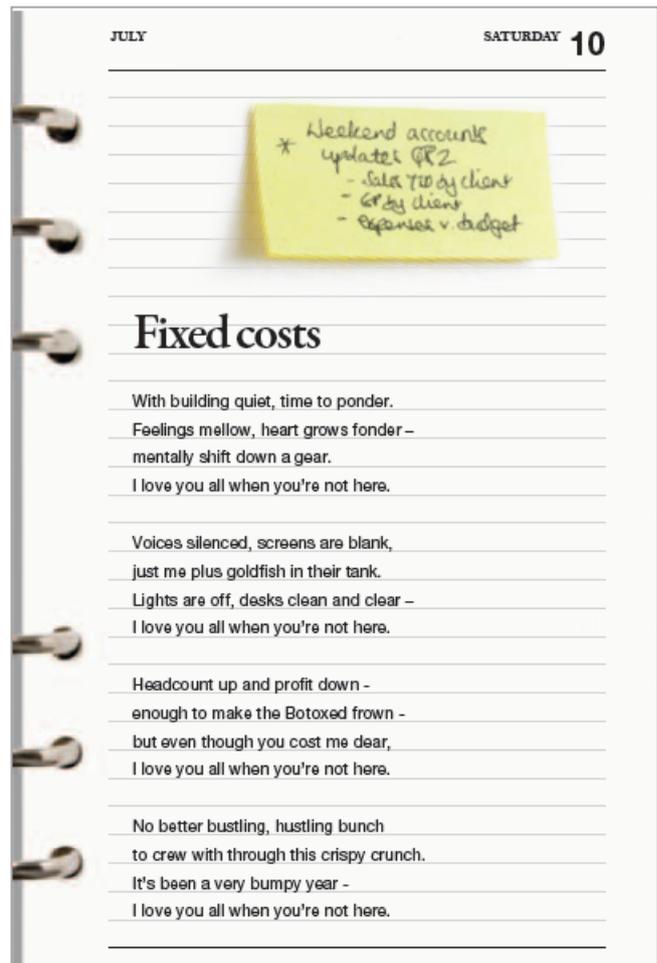
My personal belief is that poetry should be inclusive and accessible to a broad audience. Not that it should be 'easy' or without challenges for the reader, but that the majority of people should be able to 'get at it', and also 'get it', in the same way that other creative forms receive wide exposure in the modern digital world. A natural consequence of this belief is that I feel passionate that poetry should be able to embrace a business audience in an inclusive way. In choosing to write poetry for business people like myself, I have tried to practice what I preach.

Poetry allows me to capture everyday activities from the personal and entrepreneurial perspective, so themes like risk, error, moral dilemmas, determination, hesitation, frustration, negotiation, delegation emerge, as do key relationships and pivotal events. I explore the juxtaposition of personal and business identity and in particular being independently in business. I examine working with wide range of people, handling complex tasks, leading a team, creating structures and making money. My poetry allows me to contrast this with my private self and how I work things out in a way that does not necessarily arrive at resolution, but often at reconciliation.

Poetry works for me as a mode of expression because it helps condense my thinking into structures, and heightens awareness of the impact of my words. Writing a poem forces me to form my thoughts in the best possible order, echoing a sense of preparedness that is equally important in organising my business life. And in the same way that I might create an elevator pitch<sup>iii</sup> for my business, writing a poem about it helps me condense into a few words what might otherwise take paragraphs to be said.

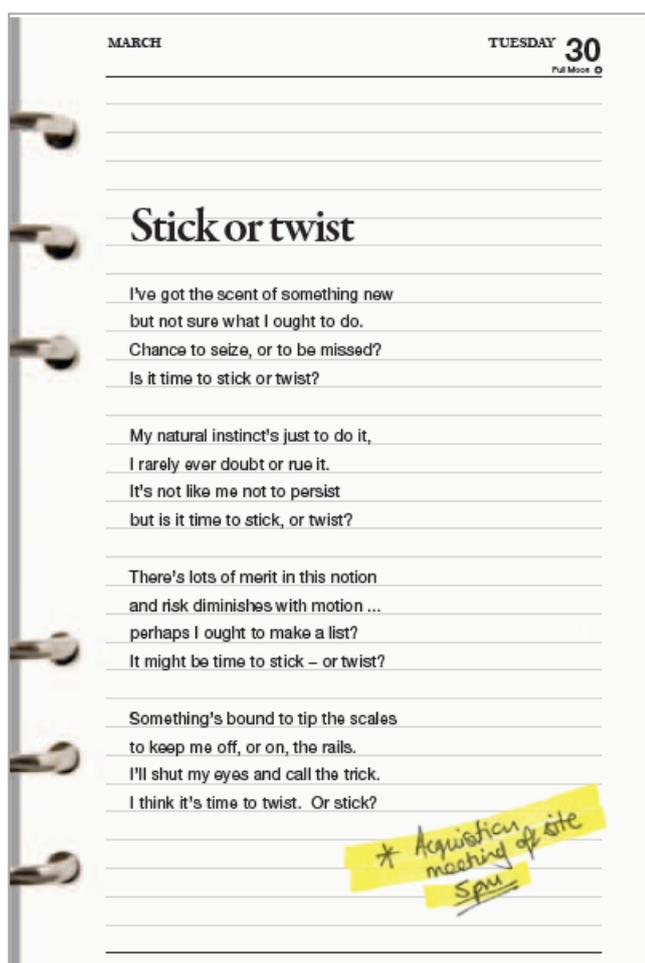
Symbolism in poetry is also a useful inspirational and motivational device for both the poet and audience. Just as case studies help bring 'business lessons' to life in more formal academic texts, finding the right symbol, image or metaphor for a poem helps to cut through some of the barriers that language creates in business. Barriers like jargon, cliché and empty sentences –parroting glib repetitions of everyday mantras that may be comforting, but are actually devoid of meaning in their own right. I enjoy subverting some of these barriers in my poems, turning a familiar cliché into a parody of itself, setting it up not just for ridicule but also greater understanding.

I found that a particular obstacle to understanding that SME business owners like myself face – despite being personally involved with their teams on a one to one basis – is that they can often be perceived as genderless,



impersonal figureheads. In order to survive some of the more bruising experiences during business growth, I tended to put on an impassive face and gave no outward indication of emotional engagement. Writing about these tough times allowed me to retrospectively admit to, and reveal, the feelings created by the experience. And in allowing staff, friends and colleagues to read my poetry, they became more aware of what had been going on below the waterline in my business life.

Part of the enjoyment of writing poetry for me is creating something memorable that can be shared with others. This harks back to the early days of poetry as a troubadour form – where the court poet earned his keep through entertaining recitation, building up a common fabric of shared understanding through storytelling to the court community. I have come to appreciate the importance of communal anecdote and myth in modern business life – shared jokes and magnified incidents, creating heroes and villains in the process. Hearing some of my staff retell some of our best and worst client moments created mini-dramas that made great stories second or third hand, growing larger with each telling. Turning some of these incidents into poetry makes it more likely that the retelling will have a sustained life beyond the oral tradition, and that the particular culture of our business can be perpetuated beyond the individual actions of myself as business owner. I have tried to create different voices and perspectives in my poems, giving pen portraits of characters and descriptions of events both comic and serious to give tonal variations to the work. I am mindful that serious messages are often best received when dressed as light entertainment.



## Poems in focus

Here are three of my 'sME poems in more detail – *Stick or twist*, *The thing is* and *Moving on*. I have chosen these particular examples to provide points of contrast in form, style and subject matter. A short commentary follows the presentation of each poem.

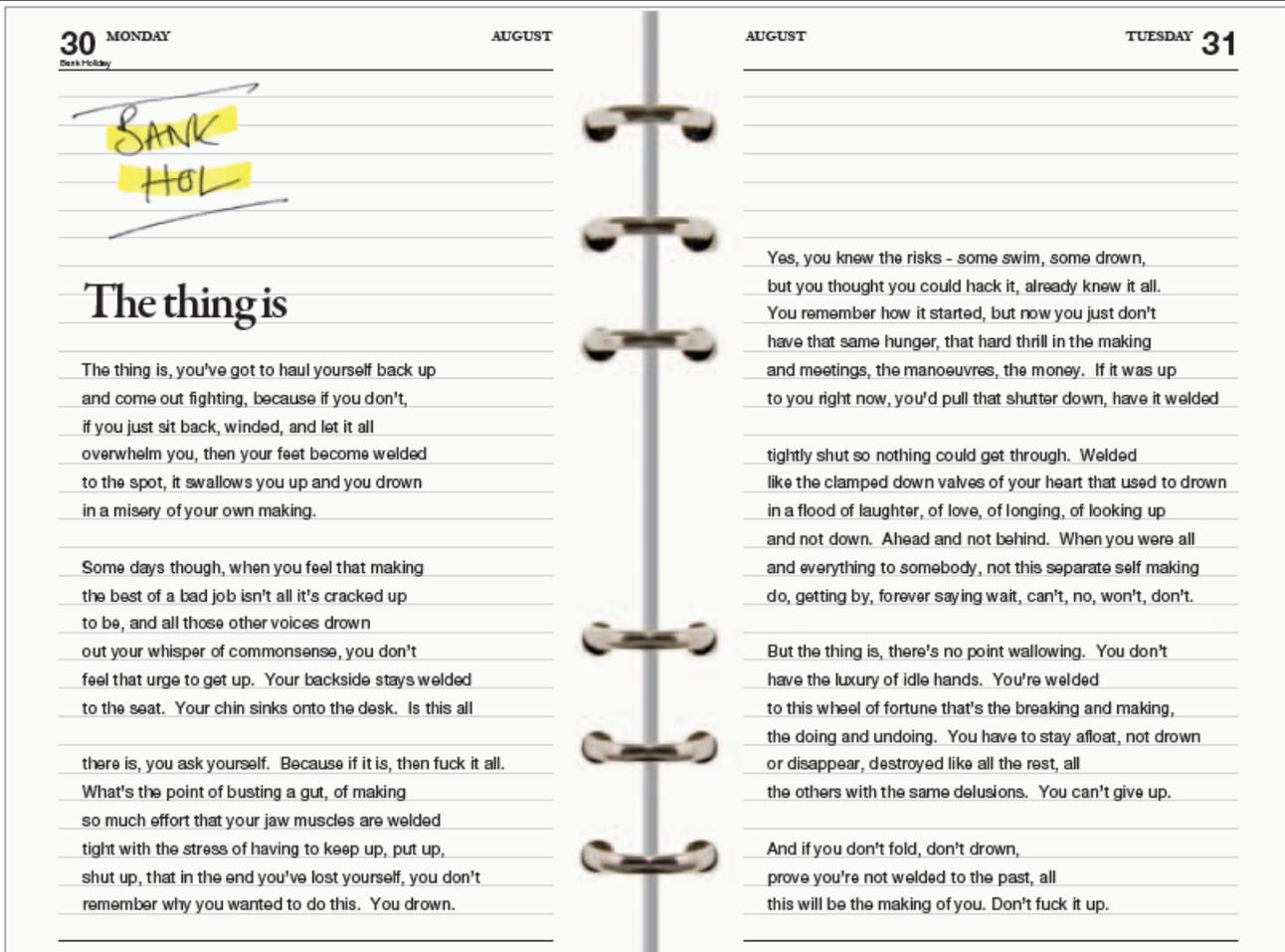
### Stick or twist

This short poem is written in form of a *kyrielle*<sup>iv</sup> with a tight, light and strict rhyme scheme. Given that the subject matter of risk-taking is very serious for any business owner, I wanted to undercut the message with a superficially jaunty tone. The implied visual imagery uses the metaphor of a card game – with all the associations of chance, playing your hand, being dealt a fair hand, gambling, quitting while ahead - providing rich subliminal background detail.

I hoped that the title and repeated refrain of *Stick or twist* would imply that going bust could be the consequence of making the wrong move, and the gravity of that decision making moment. These four short stanzas are all about the dilemma of risk taking – deciding to move on from a safe and static position to something more dynamic, but inherently not secure. I try to present all the states that I have experienced in weighing up the odds when making a significant decision in business - doubt, self-doubt, reassurance, test of nerve, keeping my bottle, stepping over the edge. At such times, I feel isolated and out on a limb – and in the end, it usually

comes down to a debate with myself as to how much to risk, and how much could be gained by making the decision, or leap of faith. In such an internal debate, there are usually two positions of heart v. head, irrational v. rational – and I hope I have done these positions justice here.

I thought that for a business audience, pitching straight into the reality of being in business might be a good way to start the collection. *Stick or twist* is a strong metaphor for the whole experience of entrepreneurship, and so I decided to make this the opening poem to hook the reader in.



## The thing is

This poem is written in the form of a sestina – a 39 line poem with six repeating end words that fit a strict rotating pattern of positioning<sup>v</sup>. Another traditional troubadour form, ‘the sestina becomes a game of meaning, played with sounds and sense’ (Strand & Boland 2001 p.22), and this greatly appealed to me in writing about something as intensely private as sacrificing my personal life for my business. Within the finite structure of repeating end words, six line stanzas and final three line envoi, I saw expanding possibilities of tone and pace, as punctuation and enjambment could be deployed to good effect, without the use of rhyme.

With *The thing is* I wanted to talk about moments of insecurity where the loss of self is felt most keenly in running a business, putting the needs of the team and the enterprise above all else. I wanted to show how it took dark moments of inner despair to kick start the spirit to persevere, no matter what. This is a poem about personal loss v. business gain, and I thought that the sestina form would allow me to spiral around the issues, reaching a point of uncomfortable reconciliation with reality by the end, in a concluding circularity of ideas. The tone needed to be very down to earth and accessible, a tough conversation with myself where I would give myself a good talking to, after some indulgent wallowing.

The form of the sestina allowed me to restory and retell this experience (which could be subtitled ‘Bank Holiday Blues’) in an elliptical, gyrating style which gradually reveals itself to be much deeper and bleaker than it originally appears. It could be viewed as a deterrent to starting your own business, but I would prefer to think of it as a healthy warning to anticipate all the stresses and strains that entrepreneurship might bring.



## Moving on

This poem is different to the other two in that it does not follow a traditional formal structure. Instead, it uses a gently deceptive rolling rhyme scheme (aba, bcb, cdc etc.) to unfurl a quiet message down the page. I tried to adopt a more reflective tone, as if standing apart and looking back, as befits the subject matter and title of *Moving on*.

The title is intended to work on three levels: triggered by the departure of a member of staff who is literally moving on, the narrator encourages herself to leave behind all the negative emotions of the past when people have left the business, and the rollover from line to line to the end point of the poem facilitates this psychological shift. The length of the poem allows time for the sentiment behind the stanzas to play out. As the tone is gentle and calm, it lulls the reader into a sense of security about what is essentially insecure subject matter – the loss of people within an organisation, and the physical and emotional impact that can have on the business leader.

When I wrote this poem I was feeling pensive and wistful, as someone I respected was leaving us for a job elsewhere. The pragmatist in me took over by the end, to intentionally show that everyone in a business continually learns from experience, and that business owners are not exempt from having to find alternative coping strategies to address weakness. Of all the poems in the collection, *Moving on* is the one I feel achieves most of my intentions, and was the hardest to write. This mirrors the fact that achieving a sense of equilibrium about team arrivals and departures has been the most difficult aspect of building my business, and protecting my heart.

## On reflection

If starting a business is like writing a poem, then by the law of reciprocal trade, starting a poem is also like writing a business. This is essentially what I have tried to do – ‘write my business’ in the most creative, accessible and memorable way I know how.

Has it been easy to do? No – getting to grips with some of the personal subject matter has been difficult, stretching and excoriating. Has it been rewarding? Definitely – I have found ways to talk about things that I would never have discussed with anyone outside of the writing experience, and that in itself has been cathartic. Would I recommend it to others in business? On balance, yes – irrespective whether part of a taught course or not, working out how to express in writing what you are going through is a great self-coaching and development exercise.

In a small business it is very easy to disappear into the engine of your own machine, never to be seen again. Your business consumes you in ways that you could never imagine if you are employed by somebody else. You are the business, the business is you. In giving a voice to my entrepreneur experience, I have regained my faith in my business – and my ability to have a creative life beyond it, which is an unexpected privilege.

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*Poetry Archive* URL: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singleInterview.do?interviewId=1383>, Retrived 12/19/2011.

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<sup>i</sup> *The startuo garden*, URL: <http://www.startupgarden.com/articles/poetry.html>retrived , Retrived 12/19/2011.

<sup>ii</sup> *An interview with Adrian Mitchel*, URL: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singleInterview.do?interviewId=1383>, Retrived 12/19/2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Summarising the main proposition or selling point in one sentence which could then be delivered succinctly during the time it takes for a ride in an elevator.

<sup>iv</sup> A traditional poetic form derived from the Latin Mass, with the repeating final line of every stanza being identical or with slight variations of repeat, as shown here. There is no set length, but most English kyrielles are written in iambic tetrameter.

<sup>v</sup> Stephen Fry explains the attraction of the strict patterning of the sestina rather well: 'If you want to understand the sestina's shape, you might like to think of it as a spiral ... I was rather fascinated by why a sestina works the way it does and whether it could be proved mathematically that you only need six stanzas for the pattern to repeat ...I approached my genius of a father who can find formulas for anything and he offered an elegant mathematical description of the sestina, showing its spirals and naming his algorithm in honour of Arnaud Daniel, the form's inventor, who was something of a mathematician himself ...' (Fry 2007, pp.234-235).