

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a black fountain pen with a gold nib. The pen is positioned over a white surface, and the nib is in the process of writing a cursive word. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

**Teachers  
Writers  
Poets**

**The ELT Online Reading Group**  
Writing Competition 2009

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## Foreword

To celebrate the second anniversary of the ELT e-Reading Group, the British Council invited English Language teachers worldwide to use their imagination and become short story writers and poets themselves.

Participants were asked to submit short stories and poems inspired by one of the stories read in the group.

WordPowered (<http://www.wordpowered.org/>) were asked to contribute as part of the selection panel.

The best three pieces of writing submitted by the ELT e-Reading Group members in the following categories are being published here, and on WordPowered.

Thanks to everybody who has submitted a piece, it was a hard task for the judges to select just a few. Congratulations to the ones who have been chosen.

We hope you enjoy the stories and poems.

Chris Lima  
Project Coordinator

## On the Landing

Iris Devadason - Bangalore, India

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And then one day it happened, the realization of my hitherto vague fears. He called out to me and said: "...and so you decided to come, at last. How long I have waited for you. Of course, you are from a different world, a different time and so much younger than I am but we are soul mates aren't we? When I looked upon you, your time was the time of love; I swore to you and entered into a covenant with you and you became mine."

My heart froze in despair. It can't be real I said to myself. Did I really want him to appear? Do lustful dreams and desires become embodied at last if you wish for them desperately? Is this not a sin? But then those beautiful liquid-brown eyes! The crooked smile and those delicate long hands with fingers like a painter's or musician's! I ached to see him now but where was he?

How was I to enter the blocked-up room or vault behind the wooden panel that I had long suspected of leading to somewhere in my consciousness. Dare I reply? Even before I could think of how and what to say I felt someone behind me, so close, so warm. He still smoked and his perfume was the same...the bottle of lotion I had sneaked into his room one day those many years ago...the pile of cigarette butts in the ashtrays. I turned without hesitation and looked but it was too bright suddenly and I couldn't focus my eyes on anything. 'Please', I prayed to no one in particular as I had never believed in any God anyway. 'Please let him be seen'. After all these years one glance, one touch, one word fitly spoken might wipe out the pain of centuries of unfulfilled desire.

The light grew dim and I thought I saw him now.... That familiar stance and that teasing smile. As I forced myself to move towards him to the room below where he seemed to have fallen suddenly the wooden beam supporting the panel fell down with a crash and another bright light from there blinded me temporarily. Firm hands grasped my throat. I struggled to be free but I saw that it was Uma, his wife. She was always the pretty one with her huge big eyes and wide smile and fun and laughter. She dressed to kill too and men fell for her easily. She could pick and choose and then discard and she had done so. He had come back to me and so why is she here

again I reasoned, as earthbound as I was. But as we struggled on that landing, the only sane place for me at the moment beyond time and space and love and hate, I realized the foolishness of my desires. He was weak-willed. He might have stifled my soul forever. He deserved his fate and I my freedom from foolish lust. My writing had fed my soul all these years and this house had beckoned me to do more. Now Uma's hands on my neck seemed to loosen the pressure of her hate and I was free.

.....

They found her next morning crumpled on the floor of the landing. Why had she come here to write, this strange woman from another world? Did not love and hate transcend mortal lives? The coroner's report was simpler. 'The loose beam projecting from the wall on the landing had crashed and hit the unsuspecting tenant on the forehead and she had died instantly', it said. The family had been intimated, the beam restored to its original position and fixed securely now. The landlord put in another advertisement for the house the next week. Life goes on, indifferent to individual aspirations. Some of us land on our feet, others on the landing.



## Scratchy

**Miriam Mascaras - Martinique**  
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Nails scratching my skin,  
Limb from limb,  
My sinews revealed,  
Your lips exhausted  
resting on the dry peel  
That anger! Tormented!

My slough on the cold  
floor, trampled.  
Your feet...on me  
On epidermis, holed  
Last gasp  
That anger! Greed!

Asthmatic circles,  
A cough, a whisper  
Crumpled yellow, see?  
Now, your claws  
Why?...what left of me?  
That anger! What for? Decipher?

Hanged paper splits, bilious blood

Slashed bone, saltpetre tears  
Tiger! Tigress!  
A foaming odour,  
The taste of lunacy,  
That anger! Desperate eyes, pallor.

At last, a sound panting...  
Your muscles surrender...  
A tremble,  
the relief of a shriek  
There! Lie on me,  
On the wall you streaked  
That anger, gone!

Let it go! Let-it-go...  
Stop fighting. Let reason escape  
There, sneak into me  
See? You're safe  
There, Shhh!  
You're gone.

(Sigh!)

## At the bus stops

**Francisco Langa (Tanguene) - Maputo, Mozambique**

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We better bring our chairs,  
You'll bring our stools!

Women bring your mukhume ni vemba  
And sisters come with capulanas  
Mother bring your mat  
You'll need it  
To stretch it down  
To sit on with your children!

For centuries it takes  
While we're waiting  
Waiting,  
Waiting  
For a chapa  
To come!



## **Billy Elliott – the other side of the coin**

### **San Down - Finland**

‘How did it come to this?’, thought Billy, as he gnawed distractedly at what was left of the nail on the middle finger of his left hand. It would be incorrect to say, he ruminated, that this was the only nail he had left to chew, because there wasn't really anything left to chew – but it was the only finger that had anything his teeth could grip onto besides flesh. Of course, he could have stopped nibbling his nail – in fact, that was without any doubt the most sensible thing to do. This was going to hurt in the morning, once the dull sedation of the now mandatory post-performance alcohol and cocaine had worn off. But then, didn't he deserve a bit of pain?

Billy had seen his father and Tony, his brother, in the audience – caught a glimpse of them in the front row – rapturous, along with the rest of the crowd that had assembled at the Royal Opera House for the opening night. Rapturous, oblivious, teary-eyed, so proud. So proud. After all the difficulties, all the fights, arguments, all the hardship, they were so proud of little Billy, who, not so little any more, had risen up and, in their eyes, surpassed them in every way, become a beacon for the family, a bright light saying “Here we are: The Elliotts. We exist. We'll have a place in history, thank you very much”. If only they knew the truth. The bitter, agonising truth. He looked over at Janie, his co-star and sometime lover, semi-naked, bedraggled in the remnants of her performance gear, love-stained, floating in a narcotic haze, barely aware of her surroundings, and he felt genuine disgust. Not for her – she retained a certain sweet innocence, despite all her indulgences and her insatiable sexual appetite (rumour had it that for new male members of the troupe it was practically part of the initiation ritual to take a piece of her dignity, although when Billy had jealously tried to ascertain the truth of this gossip, astonishingly his inquiries had been met almost exclusively by coyness from the usually brash young bucks). Sweet, innocent Janie, nineteen years old, still with a hope in life. For all her misdeeds, a grain of purity ran through her very being. Billy couldn't find anything but tenderness in his heart for her. He felt a deep, gut-wrenching disgust for himself alone. He didn't deserve her affection. He was worthless. Pitiful. He screwed his mouth up as he spat the word out several times, becoming increasingly vehement each time, ending with a shout so forceful that it caused Janie to stir, although not to wake: “Pitiful, pitiful, pitiful, pitiful, pitiful, PITIFUL!” But don't pity me, thought Billy, just in case there was a god listening at the time. I don't warrant your pity.



He started to wonder if things would have been different if he'd followed in the footsteps of his father and brother, rather than going into this line of work – if that's what you can call it. Constant parties and revelry, debauched behaviour was rife amongst the dancing community, and it was a well-known fact. And he, now a veteran, practically the Grandfather of his troupe, nay, the Godfather, the leader of the pack, revered, respected, for what? Being better at it than them? Having more experience of this kind of depravity than any of the youngsters in his charge combined? He should be teaching them how to live properly, to learn from his mistakes, not nurturing their youthful, inquisitive, hormonal fervour. Pitiful, pathetic. The words whirled around his empty, alcohol-numbed head. People around him had told him not to worry. That's just the way things are, the lie of the land – you can't alter it, they'd said. Well today, things were going to change. Maybe not for the whole world, but at least for Billy. He was going to become the Billy Elliott that his friends and family thought they knew and loved. The Billy Elliott he should be. He was going to go straight to rehab, on Monday. No, today. After just one more line, to make it easier to approach, to admit that he had a problem. No, now. Now! It was now or never, and for the first time in his life, Billy really knew the meaning of the word “challenge”



## On true lust (Sonnet 6/11)

**S. S. Sundaresh - Bangalore, India**  
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Let me to the meeting of untrue minds, admit impediments;  
Lust is not lust, which does not alter when it alteration finds,  
Or does not bend with the remover to be removed.

O, no! `Tis an ever-shifting mark,  
That causes tempests and leaves us shaken,  
It is the rock to every straight bark,  
Whose worth's exactly known; whose depth cannot be taken.

Lust is Time's fool; though painted lips and cheeks,  
Within his bending sickle's compass come not,  
Lust alters with its brief hours and weeks,  
And wears itself out in a few moons.

If all this be not error and upon me shouldn't be proved,  
I have often writ and all men have lusted.



## **In the National Portrait Gallery**

### **Peter Grundy - UK**

Another week, another gallery. My protégé unbidden to join me. A gallery where I hope not to be disturbed by a schoolgirl reminding me of a summer all those years ago. Yes. I was, if not her Third Man, certainly not her first either. And if today I sit, I'll avoid all benches that are resting places for little ladies with tied-back hair.

My intention is simple. I have a free hour. Instead of spending it going from picture to picture until the time runs out, I will find just one picture - a picture already known to me - and I will sit quietly and look at it. Undisturbed.

The room I'm heading for is probably my favourite in the gallery, and strangely unvisited considering that it contains the portraits of our Romantic poets. Though the painting I like best in the room is that of John Dalton, whose atomic theory every school-boy (and I daresay nowadays, school-girl too) knows by heart: grey, slightly open-mouthed, that aquiline nose, the Quaker bearing. The face of a scientist. Alongside him, the Romantic poets look, well, to be honest, absurd. Byron with that ludicrous Albanian head-dress and botox-ed lips. All the more ridiculous for adopting the pose of someone who might be looking in a mirror and finding the reflected image so immensely admirable. Coleridge, lips also botox-ed, and with slightly bulging eyes, their pupils dilated by not a little of we-all-know-what. The fit-to-be-hung-only-over-the-mantelpiece portrait of Wordsworth at seventy-two, arms folded, a few months away from becoming Poet Laureate. Can this really be the skater who hissed along the polished ice in games confederate, and crossed the Alps without realising it?

But this is all beside the point. The picture I've come to see is a tiny pencil and watercolour sketch. A picture protected from the destructive light by a small case, like an object in a museum. A sketch of little aesthetic merit, whose colours have faded over the two centuries since the artist put brush to paper. Said to be a poor likeness too. The portrait of an observer of manners. The portrait of a realist in an age of romanticism. Her portrait, like her writing

and its anonymous publication, an antidote to the charmless self-publicist with the head-dress.

"Can she really have looked like this?" (I have a tendency to speak aloud when it's really myself that I'm talking to.)

"Perhaps she never sat for the portrait."

I find myself answering: "How do you mean?" And I turn to look at the visitor of whose presence I'd been unaware until that moment. Her hair is fair and falls in curls over her forehead. She is dressed demurely, with blouse buttoned to the neck.

"I mean that her sister knew her so well that the portrait must be a distillation of many images, and so not a true likeness of any. I mean that such 'sitting' as there may have been was for the form only."

Yes, of course. This is the difference between a portrait and a photograph - a photograph captures a fleeting moment, a portrait generalizes over many such moments. Its subject-matter is character, not physiognomy. How silly not to have thought of this before!

I notice that my companion wears no ring - and such a very, very engaging person.

"She is hard to place," I say. And feeling encouraged to explain myself - "in the sense that she doesn't look like a daughter, or a wife, or a mother."

"Yet her characters are observed from the perspective of their relatives. Mr Bennet is a father seen from a daughter's perspective, is he not?"

I'm tempted to say that it isn't as simple as this. Or to ask from what perspective we view Emma, for example. Not it seems from that of her self-absorbed father. And being motherless...

As though reading my mind, my companion continues, "Although of course the time comes when we see a young woman from the perspective of someone of their own generation."

"Or in some cases from the perspective of someone a little older?" I venture. I am thinking of Emma, of course.

Once again, a look of sharp understanding passes across my companion's face. Yes, I am undeniably older than she.

We look silently at the portrait. At the folded arms. At the small mouth. At the thin lips. At the once-pink cheeks. At the brown-green eyes that appear to be mounted on swivels. I wonder whether it's the poor skill of the artist or whether she did indeed have crooked features.

My companion makes as if to speak, and as I turn in anticipation, I see the answer to my unspoken question.

I turn back to the portrait.

That bonnet! So shapeless! I suppose she wasn't artist enough to draw the full head of curly hair.

Silence. Long, long silence.

And such exhilaration! At this moment I would surely throw away everything for the companion who views this tiny portrait with me.

No, that is not well put. Rather, no moment until this moment has meant so much or been so intense. As if there is nothing until now.

But how to proceed? We cannot talk for long about so tiny a portrait. And no other portrait seems worth a look.

Perhaps we could go to the Gallery café? Or for a drink across the road? Or perhaps even to the Club, where we might talk over dinner in a setting that would surely seem congenial to my companion?

Yes, this is the way.

"Jane," I say, turning to her..

But she has gone. I am alone in the National Portrait Gallery.

*Yet still there is a wildness in the air, unexpressed and raw, and dangerous.*



# **This is my poem which I feel is no longer mine**

**Mostafa Mouhibe - Fes, Morocco**

Words wouldn't tell my feelings;  
Language is as lame as most of me,  
My me is not the usual I,  
For this world has split my entity.  
So please don't think that me or I is me!  
It may be you, she or even we.  
Don't jump to conclusions ...  
when you see me,  
Or read me.

Be sure you traverse the luring light of appearance,  
Don't give heed to the sirens' lethal sweet voice,  
Your heart is your guide,  
Your mind is your friend,  
The other is not a wolf;  
Rather another emanation of yourself;  
Sorry Sartre, I love the other  
For with him or her  
We are made to live together.

And you Huntington or Lewis,  
Who told you the world is apart-poralis?  
"Clash of civilizations"?  
"Conflict of cultures " !  
To make a new world order !  
Why not marriage, fusion of theirs?  
Some so-called "untellectuals"  
Do but add fire to oils.  
And make deeper the wounds  
You see Why my I is you or he  
Cause my poem is no longer mine.

## The ELT Online Reading Group

The ELT Online Reading Group was created by a collective of English language educators from all over the world with the technical support of the British Council. It aims at encouraging ELT professionals to read literature in English, helping to build bridges between cultures and contributing to build tolerance and intercultural competence through the discussion of works literature.

The group meets online and participants post their comments to a discussion board, sharing their points of view on short stories and poems written in English.

The ELT Online Reading Group was launched in August 2007, being originally hosted at the British Council enCompass website and moved into **TeachingEnglish** in August 2010. It was created having especially in mind those English language professionals who work in special conditions; teachers who have little access to libraries and books in English; who work in remote areas or conflict zones where it is almost impossible to guarantee safety and the right to public gatherings and/or who count on little support to start a reading group in their workplaces.

### About the project

Over the past few years the popularity of Reading Groups has dramatically increased in the UK and around the world, becoming a place to cultivate dialogue and discussion along distinct themes. The enCompassculture website, the British Council worldwide reading group, provided the main inspiration for this project; however, the difficult access to reading material faced by some English language teachers and educators working in different countries prompted us to create an online reading group instead of a group meeting in a specific place or time.

The group for is open to all ELT professionals who want to join it. A text, usually a short story or poem, is chosen each month and participants are invited to post their comments to the group discussion board.

### Our objectives

- To encourage English language teachers to read literature in English, creating opportunities to get in contact with texts from different countries, periods and authors;
- To promote debate and an in-depth engagement with relevant issues through the discussion of works literature;
- To provide opportunities for teachers to talk to each other online underpinning the reading habit and building an ELT community of readers;
- To help English language educators to see other points of view connecting them to a wider world, other philosophies and new ideas building bridges between, and insight into, other cultures thus contributing to build tolerance and intercultural competence;
- To create opportunities for English Language teachers to develop their own language skills, increasing vocabulary, improving pronunciation and increasing their understanding of idiom and expressions as well as their command of the language as a whole.



## **Our resources**

To make the reading material widely accessible, the texts are chosen from free online sources. A link to the text of the month is posted to the group discussion board and participants can download it. Texts are chosen based on their accessibility, interest and potential to raise debate on complex and relevant issues.

## **Join the debate**

To become a member of the ELT Online Reading Group, you first need to register or log in on TeachingEnglish. You can then join in and talk to other readers around the world. It's easy to do. Read the postings, then choose which to post to and click on reply.

**BBC/ British Council TeachingEnglish**

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>

**The ELT Online Reading Group**

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/group/elt-online-reading-group>