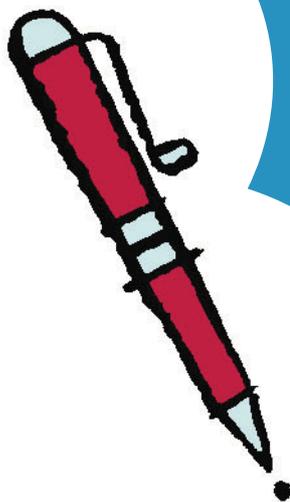


Voices On the Page

Award winners

'Voices on the Page' is a national writing event for adults in *Skills for Life* learning in England. Its aim is to get everyone writing and sharing stories and poems, true or fictional, about life, love, home, family, dreams, sadness, hopes, experiences – anything that expresses what it is to be alive.

Writers sent in nearly 700 pieces between December 2006 and March 2007. Eleven award-winners were chosen, using criteria created by the learners. The awards were presented at a reception at the Institute of Education in London at the end of last month.





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The award-winning entries are printed here exactly as they were received at *reflect*.

Voices on the Page

Aunt Elly

by Elisabed Abashidze

I am 49. I've been living in Britain for 5 years already. I enjoy studying English and I hope to do my best to improve it. I love reading and writing short stories. The only downfall for me here, in Britain, is that I am not sure what I do career wise. So I am not very sure about my future but doing English course is starting to give me back my confidence.

It had been twenty-five years since I last saw her and standing at the gate of a small, front garden it felt strange to know that I was about to meet her again.

Aunt Elly – I used to call her, though she was my grandmothers elder sister. I remembered her in her early sixties, then tall and slim and always smoking. I remembered her look, distant and stern, her voice, calm but reproachful.

Widowed at twenty-eight she never married again, wore only black since then and raised her two children, my aunties, quite strictly. I was nine, very shy, very polite and very afraid of her. I never liked to be near her, I did not know how to talk to her, she was so different from the grandmothers I knew, including my plump and giggly grandma, who, surprisingly for me, got on wonderfully well with her sister.

Aunt Elly's roughness was something I did not know how to deal with. I secretly wished that she liked me, but I felt as though I never behaved properly under her disapproving look.

Yet, in a strange way, I felt I respected her. There were little things I fancied about her. I liked the way she dressed, the way she walked. I liked her elegant posture, when sitting cross-legged, holding a cigarette between her long, slim fingers. I liked her smart, black hat with a veil which she wore with confidence, though it had been out of fashion long before. I liked her smile that came to her face so rarely and always surprised me with its pleasantness.

So there I was, passing through the low, yellow gate of her red roofed cottage in the village where she had moved so many years ago. She was over eighty-five already. I was on a business trip to a distant town and had to pass her village. My aunties had asked me to drop in and she knew I was going to visit.

I was curious to see her and little emotional remembering myself so young and vulnerable. As I approached the porch, the door of the house opened and she walked out. OH! She was so much shorter in size, bent forward like a young tree in a strong wind, making very short steps towards the porch rail. She shaded her face with her wrinkled hand to cover the eyes from the sun and see better who was coming, then she leaned on the chipped rail and looked in my direction.

A childish, shy smile lit her face and gave me an unexpected pleasant pang. A vivid picture of myself and her threw me back to the past for a second and I smiled too. Aunt Elly, greeting me with her eyes, said in an apologetic, but happy voice, as loud as she possibly could:

"Have you got a cigarette for me, darling?"

Tommy's Talking Trousers

by Kerry Davison

Tommy, the caretaker had a walkie-talkie to keep him in touch with everyone doing evening classes in the Community College. He kept it in a large pocket in his trousers. While checking security he passed through the Skills for Life class and was encouraged to join in. Often his trousers would magically talk, "Hello, Hello" causing much hilarity in the class.

On this occasion Tommy had lost his walkie-talkie. Had we seen it? He would go to the office and call his own walkie-talkie from there. If it was anywhere in our classroom (the library) could we report back to him.

All ears were cocked.

Three minutes later, Kerry heard, "Hello, Hello" from under a chair in the corner of the room. Cheers rang out.....this poem is the result.

Are you there?
Hello
Hello
My trousers have stopped talking.

Where is it Kerry?
Hello
Hello
Tommy's trousers have stopped talking.

Go to the office
Hello
Hello
My trousers are not talking.

Can you hear it Kerry?
Hello
Hello
Is anywhere talking?

It's under the chair
Hello
Hello
The library carpet is talking!

The Bull in the Well

by Salma Aroof

The last time I went back to visit my village in Pakistan something dramatic happened, which affected the whole village.

I was walking in my fields looking at the fruit trees and I heard some people shouting. Then we all went to see what had happened.

There was a big commotion in the field because a beautiful, precious cow had fallen into the well. At that time everyone was worried about what to do and what would happen to the poor cow and everyone was giving their own advice. Several of the men tried their best three times to pull that cow out of the well using strong ropes and a tractor but three times that big heavy animal fell back into the well.

There were a few men helping and waiting by the well who were very distressed because the animal was in fact a bull that one of the men had borrowed from another farmer. He knew that if he could not save this animal then it would be impossible for him to repay the cost of the bull to its owner because he was just an ordinary farmer with no other source of income or savings. After trying to work out how to save this poor, valuable animal, the villagers came up with an idea. They slaughtered the animal as it lay in the well and then they cut it up and sold the meat to everyone in the village. Obviously they paid the money to the man who had borrowed the bull in the first place so that he could repay its owner.

This event showed me how good it is when people unite to help each other. On his own that man would have been ruined but with the help of his fellow villagers, he was saved from ruin.

To My Sister

by Jennifer Jeanton

You are a sunny day
You are the sound of honey bees
You are a luxury limousine
You are feeling warm and safe.
You are chocolate ice cream
You are a wise elephant
You are reggae
You are a lava flow
I love you.

The Rats

by Mary Jennifer Duddy

I started coming to literacy class approximately 6 years. I have lots of brilliant memories but the one about the rats is one of my favourites.

My mother was looking in the vegetable rack that stood on the stone floor of the scullery. "Mary, have you had the potatoes". "No Mum", even though I often did play with them, because in the late 1940s we didn't have many toys.

In those days we lived upstairs and Nan lived downstairs in Ridgmont Road in Wandsworth. When we came downstairs the next day, Nan was running round the kitchen with a broom. Nan never ran anywhere, but now she was chasing something that looked to us like a very large mouse, but it was black and as big as the cat, who was on the dresser with her six kittens, looking very frightened. The cat was called Timothy, since Mum had been told it was a male when she was given it. She never changed the name after the kittens arrived. Dad always said that she remained very innocent even though she had three children herself.

Anyway, we were sent out of the kitchen, and collected up our little brother who was happily crawling around on the floor. Nan handed me and my big sister Ann some money. "You are to go up to Mrs Plumpton's and ask if you can use the phone. You are to phone this number." This was very interesting to us because we had no phone of our own. Ann was thrilled to be given the job of calling the Council because she wanted to use the phone. Nan said "You are not to tell Mrs Plumpton what it is all about."

As we returned to the house Mrs Plumpton followed us and Ann turned round to her and said we had rats down the cellar and that the pest man had said he would be round in about half an hour. And he was. My sister got a smack in the street for telling Mrs Plumpton about the rats. People didn't worry so much about smacking children in those days.

The man arrived in a van with something written on the side (so much for Nan not wanting everyone to know) and he went next door and got Mr Abraham and his daughter Tilly out, and Mr Owen on the other side, and Mrs Plumpton. The houses were terraced so if we had rats, so did they. In all about 6 households out of the twelve in the road, had to come out in their coats into the road. It was the middle of January and there was snow on the ground.

Then the pest man got on with his job. He and Nan and Mr Abraham went back into the kitchen. They went down into the cellar where one of the rats had gone, and when

they came back up they had found a large hole behind the cupboard of the built in dresser, and could see a broken sewer pipe through it. This was where the rats were coming from.

He asked Nan "Did you have the bomb damage repaired?" "No, we didn't. Mr McKenzie the landlord, had the repairs done while we were down at Midhurst staying with my sister. He put money on the rent to pay for it." "Well, he didn't do it properly" said the man. "There are several dead rats in here." Nan shouted at Mr Abrahams "You poisoned them. You are supposed to report rats to the pest control." Nan never shouted usually.

We had all the floorboards up in the kitchen, a wall had to be removed and then they repaired the pipe. The man said "I'm afraid we'll have to fine the landlord."

Tilly was crying because she was upset at being told off for poisoning the rats. Tilly didn't do much, not even read a newspaper. Ann and I called her Tilly Donothing. Even in the middle of all this activity, she asked my mother if she would take up a frock she had brought round. To be fair Tilly did have a job in a factory, but on the way there she would lose her purse, or fall off the bus, or something similar. Things were always happening to her.

While all these things were going on Ann and I and my little brother Phillip (aged 8, 6 and 3) were sent to the shop with the accumulator battery for the radio, which we carried in a big old pram, to get it filled up with acid. Nan wanted to listen to The Archers later

and we were happy to go because we wanted to listen to The Swarm after The Archers. We were never stopped from listening to things that were not really suitable for children, or from reading any of the books in the house. The house was full of books.

The kitchen couldn't be used for about 4 days and we were able to manage with a gas cooker and sink we had upstairs. The radio was in the front room so we were able to listen to The Swarm.

Timothy searched for her kittens which had disappeared, so she needn't have worried about the rats getting them. We were never told what had happened to them. But she had another lot the next year.

**The cat was called Timothy,
since Mum had been told it was
a male when she was given it.
She never changed the name
after the kittens arrived.**

My Father's House

by Wahiba Boudiaf

My dad went to live in the capital city of Algiers when he was about seventeen years old. He had a French certificate to get into college, but he had to work to help his father who was a court interpreter and a public writer. There was very little money to look after a family of eleven people. Dad was working and sending the money to his father until his dad died and his sisters got married. He lived for three years in my mum's house and was saving to build his own house. He was working beside the builders when he came home from the office. He used to spend his weekends working hard to make his house really special, mum used to say.

The house wasn't yet finished when my two uncles and their families moved in with us. My dad was very proud to offer them a temporary place, not only he was the oldest but also because he was the only one in the family to build his own house. Mum said that he was maniacally checking the job of the builders and architects. Sometimes they had to do the job again, like when the wall was too low and we could see the top of peoples' heads, my dad made it taller so that no one could see the women walking on the balcony.

We had two floors. Each floor had its own entrance. Each entrance had its own flower pot. The floor where my dad chose to live and where my five brothers and I were born had a green roof because of the wisteria tree. Its purple flowers used to drop down like a chandelier. In the same plot my dad planted a jasmine tree. The flowers covered the top of the door. Every morning we had a white carpet of jasmines on either side of the door. They weren't there for long because our neighbours' children would pick them to make necklaces. Early in the morning I would make one for my mum. I don't know why I didn't make one for my dad, is this why he started being silent with me?

The entrance to the other half of the house had a tree called Misk Aleel which means night perfume. It was an amazing flowering tree which offered a strong smell only at night time. Next to the entrance there was a red flowered climbing tree. Its flowers hid the windows, so once again my dad was joining beauty to the privacy of his house. The smell of flowers was in our home all day even at night time. I was really inspired by the decoration so I brought the idea with me to England and planted a jasmine tree at the entrance to my house which climbs beautifully to the top of my balcony.

My dad's house had stairs made of marble. They were very white and shiny. When we cleaned them my dad would always remark that chemical soap would damage them. We were not allowed to play any type of ball game inside the house. If we banged on the walls my dad would repeat his famous phrase "Dig deeply and you will find my blood inside the wall".

I remember in October 1980 a strong earth quake destroyed a town called Schleef which is situated a few

miles from the capital. As my house shook we ran to my dad's room seeking help and comfort. My dad, without saying a word went down to the garden and looked around the house. He came back with a big smile and said "There is not a single scratch on my house", while the neighbour's house was damaged, "I have done a good job", he added, not caring about us.

Two months before his death mum said that my dad was planning to sell the house. He said that his kids didn't deserve it. He was right.

Bill's Saturday Matinee

by Percy William Cox

When I was at school we used to go to the pictures on a Saturday. Cause in them days you couldn't get to one – you had to work for it. We used to go to people around (neighbours and that) and the corner shop Jennings, we used to go there and do errands for him, clean up for him – the garden, the back yard and that. We'd get a penny tuppence or thruppence and that.

Then we'd be off to the Saturday matinee and that, it used to be every week – the same show but it was different parts of it. It'd be Hop Along Cassidy – it'd be 'Gene Autry' or it'd be Roy Rodgers or it'd be a show like that. It could be other films like 'The Lone Ranger' and films and all that what used to be on. You'd get in the pictures and you'd pay your tuppence or whatever it was. You'd sit down on forms that were about eight foot long*, and you'd be all pushing up to each other and the one on the end used to fall off. So never get on the end, always get in the middle and don't get on the front one because you'd be looking at the ceiling! There was a musty smell cause there'd be dozens of young kids that hadn't had a wash sweating. Coughing and sneezing.

What we used to do, coming home, we used to gallop home after the film. It could be from The Junction Cinema, The Bug House, The Crescent or The Globe – any of them. We used to gallop home, slapping our backsides. We used to always have a bit of string (or we'd use our braces as the reins) and we put it round us and gallop home in them days – galloping along slapping your backside. I can look back at it now you know, in them days it was great. It would make me laugh my head off today.

* A plank of wood with a backrest.

Plethora of Money

by Paul Young

I am a student with dyslexia at Leicester Adult Education College. I am studying for GCSE Maths and have improved my English a great deal in the last 2 years. I am waiting for a national test result.

There was a family so rich if they broke a pencil they would ring the local carpenter to come and sharpen it. The family decided to have a baby. The family rang the local shops keeper to ask for a catalogue of babies. The book arrived later that day. They looked through the book. (It took a few minutes) They found the one that looked like their dog. The family are known as Algernon, Finolia and the dog Mormaduke. The baby arrived a few days later. The baby was named Bert. They drew up a contract between them self and the local shop owner for looking after Bert the baby. The months went by they showed off Bert to their neighbour and friends. Bert grew over the months to the size of a five year old. (But he was not one yet) The time comes to trade Bert in for a younger baby. Algernon phoned the shop. There was no answer. Algernon and Finolia decided to go down the shop but it had been closed down by the police. Algernon and Finolia don't want Bert any longer. They dropped him off in a field full of sheep. Algernon and Finolia wanted another small baby. They have been told that you can buy anything on the internet but they don't have a computer. The family wanted to buy a computer. Algernon phone the chips shop for a computer. They were told you could choose which chips to have in it. The chip shop man asked Algernon if he wanted the free mushy peas with his chips. Finolia cleared a space on the table for the arrival of the computer. The parcel arrived from the shop later that after noon. Finolia and Algernon are really excited. They rushed to open the door. Algernon told the delivery man to put the parcel on the table. Finolia opened the box to find bags of chips with the free fish. Algernon and Finolia took out the chips and fish and looked for the instruction to put the computer together. Algernon and Finolia could not find the instruction so they had a nice supper.

Jamaica Mi From

by Rashana Shirley

Jamaica wey mi com from
Dog yam man
In de land of Jamaica – to survive
Yu afi be strong
Our biggest problem a Babylon
No future fe de younger one.

First I have to tell yu, bout
De place mi from
A place call Riverton.
Inna Riverton, no normal man
Favourite sport a gun inna hand
Fail to live dat live, so mi com a
England.

Dis ah poem of my own slang
Chat different from ah English man,
Still don't change nottin, we all one
No matter wey yu com from,
Big up all Chinese an African,
An, every other nation.

Ugo gimme de inspiration
Fe write dis ah one
Thank God fe im motivation
Dis is where mi close dis one
Written by Shirley,
An Ugo de great man.

Lost Family

by George Cochran

I am George Cochran, I am a kind person, a bit quiet.

I was seventeen and my dad had a heart attack.

He got old. He really got old. And then he died and is buried in Archway.

I really missed him. I miss him and I miss my mum. It's not the same when you're in with foster parents. It's not the same. People want to move on.

I haven't got his furniture. All his stuff has been cleared. I don't know if he ever had any money.

I bought a grave stone for him and I put some flowers on it. I like to visit his grave because it's a memory of him.

A Dirty Little War

Anonymous

Sweat dropped from his face on to the blue issue envelope, 'Darling', he wrote, 'missing you like mad at the moment and it's not just...'

Suddenly there was an ear-splitting explosion. Dust and flies leapt off the mud walls. 'Stand to! Stand to!' shouted the Corporal. When weren't they bloody 'Stood to', he thought to himself.

There was no need to put his body armour on as he had not taken it off in the last five days. The smell that drifted out of the neck piece of his armour, up into his nostrils, was of very stale sweat. His uniform was greasy and he had the beginnings of a beard. He jammed his helmet onto his head. It felt cold and damp. He grabbed his rifle which was never out of arms reach. He started to move to his position on the 50 cal gun, but it had already come to life with a slow, methodical thud, thud, thud. Paddy was behind it. He was twenty two, a year younger than himself and did not tan well. He had on a thick layer of army issue sun block which made his face look like a death mask, a bit like a zombie flesh-eater, he thought.

Paddy and the rest of the platoon were firing at a huddle of mud compounds 300 metres in front of them. It was Summer and the mud had turned to the hardness of reinforced concrete. The lighter ordinance seemed to be bouncing off it and red tracer flew high up into the air before it burnt out. The heavy bullets sent chunks of hard mud in all directions.

Paddy pressed the firing lever on the gun. Thud! It went and came to a stop. 'Stoppage!' he shouted. He looked at his Number Two, who had just arrived at the gun. He still had the blue issue envelope in his hand.

'Bloody ammo again!' said Paddy and gave the ammo tin a kick.

'Check firing! Check firing!' shouted the Platoon Commander. The dust was stalling on the compounds. The sun was a bright red ball that would soon disperse behind the mountainside. It was going to be another long night.

He sat behind the gun. It was his two hours on duty. Two hours on, two hours off and the two off there were sand bags to fill for the new Sanger they were building, weapons to be cleaned, as well as 'standing to' every time they were attacked. He had been trying to write a letter now for two days. He had phoned her from Camp Bastion last week before they came here, but they only had ten minutes allowed them on the phone each week. Even if he were in Wormwood Scrubs, he would have got twenty!

What would she be doing tonight, he wondered? Friday night. She liked to go out on a Friday. She was an attractive

girl and did not lack for attention from the opposite sex, or her own sex for that matter! He thought of her cat-like features and her stunning blue eyes. She was always teasing him. She had once told him that snogging meant nothing to her. Six more weeks and she would be his again.

He was cooking the dinner. Two boil-in-the-bags were pushed into a metal cup on top of a small cooker which was heated with solid fuel tabs. They were so short of rations that they were sharing one man's rations between two. It was his turn to have the dessert meal for dinner tonight. It was not that the Army did not have enough rations for them. There were just not enough helicopters in country to bring the supplies around. They even had to divide the toilet paper up. In the Gulf War, General Jackson had said, when the press had asked him about the shortage of toilet paper amongst other things, that all good soldiers should carry a roll in their packs. But they had left their bloody packs behind as there was no room on the helicopters to bring them out!

She woke up. Her mouth was dry and her head throbbing. Her make-up was still on and it had left her impression on the pillow like a shroud. He had not phoned her. He always rang her on a Friday night just to check she had got home safely, he said. More like to check she was home in bed alone, she thought. She reached over for a cigarette and sat up in bed drawing her long legs up under her chin. She lit the cigarette and it glowed orange in the early morning light of her bedroom.

The orange glow coming from the side door of the Chinook helicopter was the Miney gun firing long burst. Red tracer was extending from the gun in a long arm towards the orange pin pricks which answered it back from the darkness. It seemed to him that everything was going fine on the re-supply. A few shots had been fired at them, but the Taliban had no night vision goggles. That was until the bloody door gunner had started to hose down the orange pin pricks on take off. Unwittingly, he had given his own position away by firing his gun.

'Bloody RAF!' said Paddy as they started to move back to the camp, a section at a time.

Angry bee noises hummed about them. He hoped it was not their own side. He was kneeling down firing his weapon towards the angry orange pin pricks as Paddy run past him and shouted to him to move. He felt a heavy kick in the side of his leg and felt angry that Paddy had kicked him so hard. He could see that it was his turn to move. His face was in the sand. He could feel the heat which the sand had retained in the day. He wanted to stand up but could not. His trousers were wet and strangely warm. Blood pumped out of his femoral artery.

Her feet were aching from dancing all night. She smiled to herself. He had been so tall with dark, curly hair and after all snogging was just fun. Her mobile phone rang. A voice on the other end told her how good her mouth had tasted last night...