

TLC Showcase

Ruby Cowling



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Introduction to *Is In the Air*

I fell in with The Literary Consultancy this autumn, as a participant in the Literary Adventure. Writing is solitary, and though actively seeking "writer friends" can be hazardous I booked this working holiday as an antidote to the creeping lonely-writer-madness, as well as hoping for a productivity boost. Now, having experienced TLC's genuine passion and expertise in person, I have submitted the manuscript of my first novel – abandoned a couple of years ago after one too many (or, probably, five too few) rewrites – for assessment.

On the week-long Literary Adventure it was a privilege to work, talk and breathe writing in the company of other completely non-hazardous writers and Jacob Ross, who is as gifted a teacher as he is a novelist. We were also shepherded by Rebecca Swift of TLC; I treasured the opportunity to discuss the current situation in publishing in an informal way, with no sense of guardedness, with someone "in the industry" who nevertheless champions the writer. At Casa Ana in southern Spain there were mountains, bees, exquisite plates of food, searching discussions, and work – and more work, but the deep, satisfying kind, as if we'd had our hands in the earth. And, by the way, it was a ton of fun.

Is In The Air

By Ruby Cowling

This piece, written to be read aloud, grew out of an exercise on the TLC Literary Adventure in response to the opening of Jon McGregor's 2002 novel *If Nobody Speaks Of Remarkable Things*.

Is In the Air

You breathe out. You breathe in.

You emerge from the station and you breathe out the airs of Saturday night's last tube: ethanol fumes and pheromones, and the overwarm scent of *person*, like the inside of an old man's hat. Coming out onto the concourse you breathe in the acrid tale of eight urgently lit cigarettes. You try to dodge the cloud, not wanting your dad to detect it in your hair, but this biscuity blue smell will weave itself into your night walk home like a bassline you can't shake from your ear.

You're on your own now; you left the other girls in the club. Sickened by their show-off cocktails, their laughter too hearty to have come from the heart, you took off, knowing you've outgrown clubbing even though you're still not old enough, so they say, to drink.

You breathe in and think *sheep*: your coat's got wool in it and you got rained on yesterday and now it speaks of the farmyard whenever you move. You step off the station concourse and cross the road toward the lit shop fronts. A cluster of bull-headed men are spat from a doorway, all of them in shirts and jeans, and they roar as one of them throws chips at another and takes him in a headlock. There's a way you know, down behind the take-aways, and before they see you you take it. It's a half-street, thick in the air with elderly fat and salt and five-spice. From black bags at your feet creep knuckles of chicken and split chips and stuff that's been scooped and

scraped and smeared, and you are oddly shamed by the intestinal heat of the gaping industrial bins. You breathe out and hold it until you get round the corner.

From off the spine of the high street grow ribs of terraced houses, a window here and there lit by a lamp or the alien beams of a television. Dad'll still be up, probably. You'd hoped to stay out late enough for him to have fallen asleep sideways over the arm of the sofa by the time you got in, but now you're earlier than you meant to be and you might have to say to each other *hi, how was your night, good thanks*, which will be a lie neither of you wants to tell. So although there's a quick way home now, you don't take it; instead you walk down to the canal. You stand for a moment, under the bridge where it's cool and mossy and it's like having your lungs swabbed with damp cotton wool. It's darker but you've found recently you don't worry so much about being safe. People live down here, on narrowboats. The painted boats are lined up, angled to the towpath, and you imagine the people lined up in their beds in their boats, warm little dolls tucked in for the night by their mothers and floating, and it pulls at you hard behind your chest. You breathe out, with control, with control, counting the streetlights to bring back the calm.

When you climb the steep concrete ramp from the canalside back to the road it makes you breathe harder and you can't ignore the strip of wild green beyond the handrail, persisting there low down and loamy, nature saying to the city *yeah? screw you*. Even after you're back on the treeless streets between the houses, the air stays rich and heavy with the garlicky stink of fox.

You breathe out. You breathe in.

Fox fades as you move into a cleaner part of town. Your head brushes a viny shrub slouching over a high garden fence and it's sweet, like birds singing around your head. You can't believe the tiny white flowers are awake at this time; it's good to know you have allies in the long nights. Dad used to tell you not to bring her flowers, something about them taking up the oxygen from the room, which he wasn't sure

was true but he didn't think you should risk it. But once you took some freesias, her favourite, just to hold them to her chest for a few minutes, and she pulled in as much breath as she could and looked at you and you knew you'd done a good thing.

Behind these fences are *big* houses; the houses of plump-skinned people who soften their problems by bathing them in money. You are half the height of their garden gates. A light clicks on as you pass, and someone calls to a pet before closing a heavy door. It's not so cold tonight. You breathe in, note the freshness here: the air within the air. You could have this. You *should* have this, living as you have done in a world of *no*. We've got each other, you heard your dad say to your mum, and it made you sick that he thought that was enough, when soon he wouldn't even have that. You find you're hitting the side of your thigh with a fist.

But you are not far from home, just circling now, putting off a moment you can't put off. Home has been drawing you back since you left it. You breathe out. There's a moon. And just for a moment, you stop, and allow yourself to think of her as she was. The unnameable scent of her life.

Then you step up, step on, and your building's just ahead there and solid and you head for the front door. At the top of the stairway you pause with your key in your hand. The flower-chemistry of Persil has seeped into the corridor. It's one a.m. and inside your father is pulling warm clothes from the blossomy washer-dryer, folding them in a way that breaks your heart, because he tries his best and because he will give them to you with a smile.

About the Writer

Ruby Cowling was born and brought up in Bradford and now lives in London. Her flash fiction and short stories have been published in various literary journals including *The View From Here*, *Waterhouse Review* and *Punchnel's*. A short story was highly commended in the Bridport Prize and appears in the 2012 anthology, and she has been



longlisted in the Fish International Flash Fiction Award and shortlisted in the Writers' Forum short story competition. Her non-fiction is somehow rarely credited but ranges from charity annual reports to jokes for a BBC4 game show. She is currently working on a collection of short stories provisionally titled *The World Expects You To Smile*, and is in the early stages of a novel which, as usual, is about the beguiling illusions of normality.

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