

# Claustrophobia

Gaia Holmes

## Key

Questions 1, 2 and 3 in this section each require the student to examine their own imaginations and experiences to suggest answers. In short, there are no right and wrong answers. The purpose of the activities is to sensitise students to their own feelings so they can more easily engage with the poem.

Many students might work better in small groups.

In question 3, there are 2 descriptions which stand out from the rest because we don't always associate them with smell – 'lust' and 'stale love'. It is a good idea to encourage students into thinking 'poetically' at this point: once they have grasped the concepts, ask them what these *might* smell like in their opinion.

### Glossary for Q 3

old garlic, weak tea	● Collected together, these four items refer to the previous evenings meal (old garlic) and breakfast. Porridge is a hot cereal made from barley.
cornflakes, porridge	● sexual desire
lust	
almond breath	● sweet smell (in this case caused by someone not eating enough)
jam	● concentrate of fruit and sugar
raspberries and loneliness	● soft fruit (from the jam)
muesli	● breakfast dish of dried cereals, nuts & fruit
milk	● milk
straw	● dried stems of cereal grass (corn, wheat etc)
violets and sulphur	● sweet smelling flowers & pungent smell (contrast)
sweat, skin ,soap	● unwashed and recently washed bodies
stale love	● evidence of previous night's embraces (!)

### Language box

Use both before and after listening to the poem, checking to see if there have been changes the second time. Don't use dictionary until students have tried both these methods.

## **The Poem.**

**Note:** *Do not use the text with your students until they have heard the poem at least twice.*

### **Claustrophobia**

Gaia Holmes

On the morning bus  
I can smell  
a hundred lives  
in the breath  
that crowds the air;  
old garlic, weak tea,  
cornflakes, porridge.  
The man sitting behind me  
has the sap  
of last night's woman  
clinging to his beard,  
relics of lust  
gunking up the cracks  
in his lips.  
The office girl opposite  
has the almond breath  
of forced hunger  
and rusty nail-head eyes  
that wolf down  
the passing hills.  
The old woman beside me,  
with a scab of jam  
on her chin,  
smells of raspberries  
and loneliness,  
I sniff wisps of grief  
every time she moves.  
There is the stable-scent  
of a muesli breakfast  
coming from the back,  
hot straw and skimmed milk  
pushed out by the heat vent.  
Someone reeks of guilt,  
like violets and sulphur,  
like dentists gas  
it makes me gag.  
This invasion  
of sweat, skin, soap  
and stale love  
is too intimate  
for this time of day.  
I press myself  
against the window,  
suck clean coldness  
out of glass.

@ Gaia Holmes

Taken from *Dr James Graham's Celestial Bed* (Comma, April 06)

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## After Listening and Watching

**1.** Students will be expected to use their own words to capture the gist and not necessarily remember the text. However, you might expect students to use vocabulary they worked in exercise 3 above.



3	Office girl with 'almond breath' caused by hunger, hungry eyes looking out at the hills
	<i>The breath of a hundred lives ... smell of tea, garlic, cornflakes .....</i>
5	Muesli, hot milk, straw smells coming from the heat vent
6	Suck clean coldness out of the air
2	Smell of the previous night's woman stays in beard
4	Old woman smells of raspberries and loneliness

**2.** Students make a list emotions and their smell – (e.g. fear, hope, love, tenderness, hate, desire, longing, etc). Once They have six or more they can be asked to turn this list into a simple poem (use verbs meaning smell and taste). For example:

*Fear tastes like dried lemon*  
*Hope smells of warm bread*  
 etc