

When Raindrops Travel Up Instead of Down

Jackie Taylor

I pause on the landing outside the door to your flat, breathless from the climb up the stairs. I breathe through my nose, trying not to taste the smells of the stairwell; cabbage, disinfectant, frying onions. The metal-framed window on the landing outside your door is steamed up and I clear a rough semi-circle with my forearm. The view sparkles. Strings of lights loop along both sides of the quay, swaying gently in the lullaby breeze. The tide is rippling in, pushing sea water steadily up-river; there has been an invasion of compass jellyfish this week, something not usually seen this late in the year, and I wonder how many are catching an unexpected ride inland.

I used to run up to your third floor flat, taking the stairs two at a time, no problem, proud of being in good shape for my age. Now I am snail-slow and I stop on each floor and pretend to look at the view. The water tonight is black velvet, diamonded by the streetlights and bright raindrops. On the quayside below me, the cobblestones shift and flicker. I start to feel dizzy, the disconnects between my eyes and ears and body widening, the spaces filling with darkness. I lean my forehead against the cold concrete wall. I put your bags of shopping down and breathe as deeply as I can manage without gagging on the taste of the smells. I catch and kill the thought that I'd rather have gone straight home, had a bath, watched the telly for a bit, rather than coming here.

The nausea recedes. I enjoy the moment of wellness that follows and pick up your shopping – two bags, a few bits from the Co-Op by the Hospital. I gather my energy, and I smile. 'Petrichor!' you shout, as soon as I open the front door. 'Hang on, Dad!' I shout back in the direction of the living room. In the kitchenette, I unpack 2 Heinz tomatoes, a couple of bananas that you probably won't eat, a small Toastie, a pint of semi-skimmed. You didn't need tea bags but I can't resist an offer; we both enjoy a 2-4-1, it runs in the family. I put on the kettle, put your lunch dishes away, check the post, put the junk mail in the recycling. I am quick and efficient, my normal self.

I carry your tea into the living room. 'Go on then,' I say. 'Amaze me.' You've written 'petrichor' on the notepad you keep on the table by your chair, the letters spidery but carefully formed. Your eyes are shining. 'The smell of hot pavements in the rain,' you say. 'Really?' 'Look it up. Go on.' I can't find petrichor in your old, soft-paged Collins, but I don't tell you that. It doesn't really matter if it's a real word or not, because I know exactly what you mean – that scent of raindrops on a hot pavement when it hasn't rained for weeks. It deserves its own word. Yesterday, your new word was mansplaining, which made me laugh. You heard it on Loose Women.

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It's been a long, heat-stained summer, the streets absorbing and radiating, absorbing and radiating. Good for the tomatoes, good for arthritis, good for the spirits. Bad for air pollution and breathing, bad for hanging baskets. The unseasonably hot weather has carried on into autumn. Then today, suddenly, a storm, and excitement on the weather forecast, and –voilà

- petrichor. A sweet, treacherous smell, carrying with it the promise of fresh, clean starts. The first fat drops fell just as I was leaving the hospital. I squeezed into the bus shelter and listened to the rain banging on the roof and over-shooting the gutters. The bus was already full by the time it arrived. A man offered me his seat, and I refused, amused and slightly offended, but then...but then, I asked him if he'd mind...and for a moment I thought he was going to refuse. I'd had my chance. But people are kind, generally.

The raindrops pooled on the bus window, and some overflowed in streams like veins, as you'd expect. But some raindrops juddered upwards, defying nature and gravity. It was so hot on the bus, with damp bodies pushing in against me, and sweat rolling down my neck, between my shoulder blades, between my breasts, down my cleavage. My cleavage. A strange, queasy word, part soft, forgiving flesh, part wide-bladed, hacking knife. Sickness is always so close to hand these days. I had to concentrate on the raindrops rising up against gravity because the thought of being sick on the bus made me sweat even more.

I sat on the plastic seat and sweated and shivered and watched the raindrops, and I was clutching your shopping on my lap as if my life depended on it. The man next to me smelled of chemical cherries, like he'd been vaping or eating sour cherry cough drops or drinking the last of the cherry brandy from a long-ago Christmas. Cherries are now on the list of things that I can't even think about without my stomach churning.

The Consultant said to expect - amongst other consequences that she dropped into the small print of our conversation - she said to expect that my sense of smell might be affected by treatment, making it more acute, or topsy-turvying it so that good smells become bad, and vice versa. She warned that taste would follow suit, the two senses being intimately connected. It would be temporary, and it was barely worth mentioning, in comparison...she didn't finish the sentence, leaving a disconnect, a space for me to fill with my own imagined outcomes and prognoses.

There are words for these olfactory conditions. They are in your soft-paged, well-thumbed Collins dictionary. Hyperosmia. Parosmia. Phantosmia. Smells are magic, mainlining memories. When your sense of smell is awry, your memories are churned up too; all those madeleine-moments corkscrewing around.

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'Aren't you having tea?' you say. I lie, saying I've only just had a cup, when in truth, just the smell of tea makes me gag. I swallow hard and make beans on toast. It's difficult to get you to eat anything; you say that everything smells off, and if it smells off, it tastes off, and you're right, of course. You eat half a slice. It's an effort for you to swallow; you close your eyes and force it down. This struggle to eat is the thing I find most difficult to see in you. That, and your shrunken body, fragile and lost somewhere in your clothes. The sleeves of your jumper hang down over your bony wrists, everything sags and flaps, however much I try to tidy you up and tuck you in. You don't want to waste money buying new clothes, not worth it, you say, not now. Tonight, half a slice of beans on toast is more than enough, and nail-polish pink Angel Delight. Tea, strong, two sugars.

We always play one game of Scrabble in the evening, and you always win. I don't challenge your made-up words. They usually have some basis in fact, words that have just got a bit diverted somewhere. You keep me on my toes, flummoxing me sometimes with real dictionary-worthy words that you drag out of some far corner of your memory. Tonight, you sort through the pile of tiles and find the letters you need to spell 'hubris'. A brilliant word and you spell it correctly and I don't try to explain that that's not how Scrabble works. You can't just choose the letters that you need to make it work out how you want it to. 'You're looking peaky,' you say to me. 'You're always so busy.'

I snap something back at you – I don't remember what I said - and you bite your lip and look away. 'Hubris,' I say quickly, trying to catch your mood before it topples away. "But the word hasn't stuck. The look you give me is trusting, like a dog. It's a look that says, I don't know but I trust that there is such a word and I trust that, if I needed to know this word, then you would find it for me. This is how we rub along, with gaps and cracks and small absences.

You look at your notepad, then borrow an 'h' from hubris and sort out the rest of the letters you need to spell 'petrichor' and you put the tiles on the board, in a line, the word correctly spelled but unconnected to any of the other words. 'Hah! Gotcha!' and you laugh, triumphant. 'Tomasz Schafernaker said it at lunchtime.' We're back on safer ground again. 'Well, if Tomasz Schafernaker said it...who am I to argue?' I say.

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It's been a long day. Getting you up. Hospital. Shopping. Back for the evening. There's something about hospitals that drains every last ounce of energy out of you. I sat on the bus and watched the raindrops collecting and falling, collecting and falling, and some of them unexpectedly juddering upwards. There is probably an equation that governs the trajectory of the raindrops on the window of a moving vehicle, something to do with the mass of water, speed, the frequency of the juddering of the bus, and the effect of the surface tension that holds the drops into their drop-shape. I sat on the bus, and I was clutching your shopping so tight, as if my life depended on it, and all the time my throat aching with the effort of holding back tears. I thought I could hear the raindrops screaming, but it was just a child, somewhere behind me at the back of the bus.

I walked from the bus stop by the harbour up the hill to the new estate and your flat. There was buddleia pushing under the site fence around the new houses they're building, pushing through cracks in the pavement, and I could smell its pollen as I walked past, fizzing in the misty rain.

'Petrichor!' you shout, as soon as I open the door. I hang my wet coat on the hook in the hall. Your flat tastes of stale air and fabric softener. Your flat smells of boiled eggs, even though I can't remember when I last made you a boiled egg. Your flat smells of Dettol, chrysanthemums whose water needs changing, Heinz tomato soup and value range air freshener. The bin in your kitchenette smells of stale milk, however much I wash it out. The smells live in the cushions and the sofa and the curtains. The smells are deep in the tea-stained carpet, in the underlay, in the piss-dribbled bathroom mat. However much I wash and clean and disinfect, the smells just seem to get worse.

It's been so long since Mum was here. Her smells are long gone. Elizabeth Arden and Elnett. Elnett! I'd forgotten. A sudden vision of the three of us at the kitchen table, playing Scrabble. A wet Sunday afternoon, the three of us at the Formica table in the kitchen, the smell of roast pork, sponge pudding, custard.

'I love you, Dad,' I say. You cough. We don't normally, you know...Your eyes are yellow, blurry...rheumy? Is that a word? I'm too tired to think. Who needs the right word anyway? 'Another cup of tea?' I pass you a tissue and get up to put the kettle on again.

I can't stand tea anymore' just the smell makes me want to gag. They gave me a leaflet today at the hospital. Some people lose their sense of smell completely, and things they used to be able to smell disappear. For some people it just changes. Hyperosmia: increased olfactory acuity it says in the Collins. Side effect of all sorts of illnesses, and some treatments too. Smells are very complex, apparently.

'You don't look right,' you say. 'You need to start looking after yourself.'

'I'm just tired,' I reply, briskly, efficiently, my normal self. What should I tell you? What are the words? I wish I could offer up my illness to you, like a grazed knee, for you to spit on your hankie, clean away the grit, kiss it all better.

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The hospital is 30 miles away, on the outskirts of the city. It's bus-train-bus, or two buses and a walk. None of the times are convenient, but I'm old enough to have a bus pass, which is something, I suppose. I am retired but I still have a job – carer – that goes on to official documents and forms, although I reject that catch-all label of convenience.

On the way back from the hospital, the bus passes alongside the high brick walls of the city's naval dockyard. Silhouetted against the pink, dusking sky, a line of black crows, or maybe barbed wire, I can't be sure. Behind the walls, nuclear submarines await decommissioning in their compounds. They've been here for years, waiting until it's safe, but in the meantime they are mothballed and safe and secure. When we cross the bridge, I look down into the eddying water. There are shadows and glimpses of lights deep below the surface.

Raindrops moving upwards. I wonder if the phenomenon is common, if it has a name, and if it does, can I Google it? If it doesn't have a name, perhaps I should invent one. Or ask Tomasz Schafernaker, email the BBC.

A lot of 'If's. Such a tiny word. If the worst comes to the worst. If. Who will care for you? It's not the practicalities – the feeding, the euphemistically polite 'personal care'. If it comes to the worst, the very worst, who will play Scrabble with you, if not me? It's against the laws of nature for a parent to outlive their child, regardless of the age of the child.

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'I'll see you tomorrow,' I say. 'Carole'll come in first thing. I'll be here about 11.' You turn away from me, angry suddenly. 'You know Carole. You like Carole.' You're struggling with the remote. I try to kiss you on the forehead but you won't have it. I can't force you to let me kiss you. Going down the stairs is easier than going up, but still, by the time I reach the

bottom, I have to rest. The stairwell smells - cabbage, disinfectant, onions - and I can distinctly taste each separate smell.

At the hospital today, the Consultant said things had changed. For a brief moment, everything was as bright and light as early summer, and full and generous, and I felt a rush of relief and release. But it wasn't that sort of change, that's not what the Consultant meant. Things hadn't gone the way she'd hoped. She gave me a new word. I tested it out, rolled it round my mouth, swallowed it whole. I've decided not to remember it, not yet. I need time to understand the weight and significance of this new word before I use it, even to myself. And anyway, one new word is enough for today.

From the pavement, I look up at the yellow oblong of your living room window. There is movement, a shadow behind the curtains. You are going out to the bedroom. You have a secret. I don't begrudge you trying to keep something from me; there is no other part of your life now that is just yours, unshared. I will never let on that I know that there is another set of Scrabble on the top shelf of your wardrobe, lying flat alongside the old wedding photo albums.

I suspect it takes you weeks to be sure of your next word. You are going for the highest possible scores, and decisions aren't to be rushed. But once you've decided, you get the superglue that you keep in the same place, the top shelf of the wardrobe, and you fix that word onto the board. I'm sure that returning to these fixed, secured words makes you happy. I'm sure the feel of the Scrabble tiles also makes you happy, and I imagine that sometimes you do little more than turn the letters round and round between your finger and thumb, working each tile as carefully as a rosary bead.

Each time you fix a word, the number of choices you can make gets smaller. You are working your way out slowly towards the farthest corners of the board and the prized, scarlet, triple word scores. The cardboard is soft and heavy with glued-on words and I worry that it may not hold.

It has stopped raining and the breeze is fresher now, but it's still warm, as if there's more rain on the way. It's slack water. Loose islands of seaweed are marooned in the harbour. There are flashes of phosphorescence, and the pulsing of compass jellyfish just below the surface, ghostly, mesmerising, like memories. The streetlights sing into the puddles. It smells beautiful out here. Petrichor. I laugh out loud. Petrichor, for God's sake! I need to find the word for when raindrops travel up instead of down, and tell you tomorrow about my new word.

The scent of heavy, fat raindrops on a hot pavement when it hasn't rained for weeks. This is a wonderful thing. And it's wonderful that there is a particular, specific word for that particular, specific smell. It's the sort of word that's worth remembering.

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