[alt text: a photograph of a terminally ill man seated at home. he is smiling at the camera. no part of his head is visible.]

Peering through the open window over breakfast at Takashi my elderly neighbour taking carefully punctuated beats of his doormat, a slow spaced ferocity rarer in his later years, I think of the unsourced odour of finality that's stalked my morning like an ink stain, or a house spider, or a first-of-many seizure, and my dot-to-dot mind goes on its way. It's not the smell of my great-uncle's eventual flat—that sickly artificial air freshener purchased for the benefit of neither himself, senses dulled since the last stroke, nor his visitors, who had generally tolerated worse in their respective workdays—and it's not the more ammoniacal air of the day they found him; but closer to the lemon-umami-vinegar of his breakfast microwavable meal twelve-hours before the terminal fall. A nausea builds regardless and I push away my plate.

The so-called Stench of Death, that vibrantly tactile cliché, seems to stubbornly resist abstraction more than its peers. Few phrases as well-worn are able to tread such a brief and direct route in their reader from image to experience to idea; is the mind's-nose simply a sharper vehicle, or is there something about this drug less liable to antimicrobial resistance, no matter how often we prescribe it to every tired literary omen? If we add to our lexicon the Stenches of Dust, Smoke, Sweat, and every other monosyllabic evocation—those building blocks of trite written primality—will they too outrun abstraction from the ideas they conjure? Or is there something unique about that ancient recipe of putrescine, cadaverine, and dimethyl sulfide uniquely able to take us back to childhood, standing gormless be it over a sheep carcass or in the back of Morrisons?

I draw a mind's-breath and savour the air, imagining Takashi's *kareishū*, carried by his fanning, over his bins and through my window, not having noticed him head back inside after his smile-and-nod at me went unregistered some seconds ago. Stifling a gag, I seal the window, as if to guard myself from the miasmic creep, and note that I do observably feel better. The finality-stench has become an old friend by now, deftly avoiding olfactory fatigue with its ever-adapting dance, this season's flu-strain; lately beyond the alternating boredom and indulgence thereöf I've noticed in myself the ability to switch it off entirely at will—a self-deceiving Spiritualist, an ideomotoric Idiot—and my kitchen table is a wordless Ouija to communicate with the olfactory.

I never had a great-uncle. I've four grandparents, no prescriptions, and abstractly conjure agonies and Agony in terms of noughts over nullspace, nausea over mnesia, nicely categorisable Odours. I've lately noticed myself in these indulgences latching onto these images, considering miseries not out of some deathwish or dysthymia but out of an idle yearning for some fucking hardship, some ogled facet, some moguled asset for my pain-portfolio, some hand-on-hob root-minus-one i-coëfficient pain to send me hurtling irreversibly into $\mathbb{C}$ space for once and for ever saying you, you, Argand astronaut you, zero-summed Leesonic dot-to-dotter you, welcome, take a seat, but of course I know to put down the planchette, inhale, smell not an astral vacuum but bland zero air.

Takashi survives his loving wife of forty-one years, 1936–2018. My grandmother wasn't old enough to remember her father before he lost his battle. My best friend knows far more baseline qualia of pain than just i. A category error: of course, I think, the Stench of Death has no chemical recipe, literary baseline, supermarket image. Satisfied with my answer, I stand, open the window, wave at Takashi's daughter as she parks for a visit. Her car, with its ever-leaky injector seal, and has always emitted a strong scent of diesel. Like every visit prior, I have never noticed it.