

Every book I've ever read says that death smells sweet.

It doesn't.

Death smells sour and putrid; it smells of decay, of the breaking down of vital body parts and functions, of the lack of control over your own body, of the inability to speak, or even move; it smells of chemicals, of failed chemotherapy, of drugs that are supposed to reduce the pain; it smells faintly of the disinfectant that does nothing to mask the overwhelming sourness of death, nothing to make the house seem clean.

Death smells of loss: the loss of energy, the loss of security, the loss of control, the loss of freedom, the loss of hope, the loss of humanity.

I smell all these things as I enter the house. I do not approach the bed; I don't want to be in the way; I don't want to see. But I cannot stop myself from smelling. And the smelling tells me all that I don't see, and much that I probably wouldn't be able to see. The smell whispers to me of what is under the sheets, of what is inside; it forces me to imagine what I would see if I moved closer, if I dared. I do not.

So I stand there, trying not to see, but forced to smell. And I think that smelling is worse than seeing, because the smell enters my body with every breath I take, and every breath I take emphasizes that I am alive, that I am living, while she is so near the end. Every breath of life-sustaining air is easy, except for the smell, seemingly mocking her labored breaths, each a struggle more difficult than the last. The smell invades my nose, leaving no room to deny the reality of death. It is inside me; it is becoming part of me as my lungs use the oxygen that is carried to them with the smell. My lungs use it to keep me alive; I live *because* I breathe the smell, the death.

The smell is what I remember most clearly about that day. But it is not contained in that day. The smell invades my memories, attaches itself to her. It clings to her, wanting to define my recollections of her. I resist, but I cannot forget the smell. The way death invades everything, clings to everything around it. The way it refuses to be ignored. The way it defines us.

They say that death smells sweet. I say that death smells, that death is contained in the smell, unavoidable, unforgettable. The smell of death: the smell *is* death.