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I am the one in the mask
because of dust allergies particularly
sensitive to centuries’ old documents,
and, when I look, I see our reflections
in the gloss of the table and also see the buds
of light from the hanging lamps above us.
We each have a box of old letters from a back room—
their folds are stiff, and the paper has the weight of cheesecloth.
I am reading a letter from a shopkeeper in London
to his business partner. It is the same as countless others.
Business is good, he says, many customers
though no new shipments to place just yet.
Family, fine—Beatrice is to marry soon, a butcher
who makes a good living. I scribble a few notes—
though have found nothing.

The other man holds the letters
to his nose, inhaling deeply.
One letter after another he lifts and smells,
making two piles. He doesn’t read or even unfold them,
and my eyes water just to watch.
He is tracing the plague through England
by smell—stricken households sprinkled correspondence
attempting to prevent the spread of the disease.

I turn back to my piles of letters and notes,
remove my mask, lift the letter from my merchant
of silks and ribbons, and detect a faint stench.
I ask, and he says, Vinegar.