

2015

Dead Language

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Recommended Citation

Weaver, Anna L. (2015) "Dead Language," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 26.

Available at: http://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol2/iss1/26

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dead language

Sixty-five years a smoker—
I say he knows. My sister
holds faith in his powers of denial.
After each monthly call, we compare
notes—how retching the cough,
how stale the scent on upholstery,
how yellow the three fingers
on his cigarette hand, how much longer
it can possibly go on. We count lies
of omission after each trip to the VA.
They said my liver numbers are really good.
We rehearse the call—the hospital
or sheriff or landlord who will ask our name,
confirm our status as next of kin, wonder
why we don't ask after the cause, prove
we were right all along. The way
we've planned it, our trip north to settle
his affairs will happen like a flashback.
Until then, we practice missing
him, shift to past tense, trade euphemisms,
and believe ourselves already fluent
in the language of grief—
the end of judgment, the blanching
of memories, the complete
conjugation into past perfect.