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## Dead Language

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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.