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## What I Left, Unknown

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Barbara Cecelia Harroun

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### **What I Left, Unknown**

One client chain smoked, her oxygen tank  
standing sentry at her stooped shoulder.  
Cigarettes and urine,  
so I breathed through my mouth  
as I did the assessment.

She could not tell me the day or month  
or year, but as she stabbed her butt out  
in the heavy glass ashtray atop her afghan  
covered lap, she called for her husband to help.  
When I explained he had died four years ago  
the grief swallowed her face, and she sobbed  
until I turned on her television to Maury  
and made her soup and a grilled cheese  
in a kitchen filthy enough to frighten me.

I was an hour behind by the time I left her  
asleep in her wheel chair, certain her last smoke  
was not smoldering. The trailer a tinderbox,  
and her isolation within it, haunted me.

I was 23. I knew nothing, nothing  
about the back roads that trailed  
like tributaries through rural poverty—  
houses within my own county  
made of plywood, insulated by newspaper.

Before cell phones, a son sat with a shotgun  
on his lap as I asked for his mother's last bank statement.  
He snorted, and then motioned with his bald head toward the door.  
I drove, chain smoking, my hand shaking so bad  
the ash dropped in my flower-printed lap.

I was 24. I knew nothing, nothing. I bobbed  
my long, blonde hippy hair, and wore ankle  
length dresses and sensible shoes that lent  
me the air of a social worker. On the way home  
to my new husband, I would stop for booze  
and a fresh pack of smokes. Once home,  
before I did anything, I'd shower off the old people.

Once I sat in my car, in the parking lot  
of the saddest nursing home in the county,  
weeping. Once he had played piano for silent films.  
In his tuxedo, his slicked back hair, he  
was more devastatingly beautiful than Valentino.  
He had shown me his photographs in a yellowing  
scrapbook. He had lived down the block from me, would place  
Strawberry candies into my palm and wink before walking  
me out. Dapper and quiet, a life of chosen celibacy,

he was now dying alone, too sick to answer any questions  
or place me. I sat in his foul smelling room on a hard  
backed chair, held his hand, then watched him sleep,  
seeing how he would look in two days upon his death.  
In my weeping, I mourned him, but I mourned even more  
that my parents would someday die, my husband, even  
the children we were imagining—we would all grow old,  
(if we were lucky), our bodies failing us, and we would die.  
I leaned my seat back, spent, and took a nap in early  
spring sunlight until a nurse knocked on my window,  
her cartoon scrubs absurdly cheerful, relief on her face  
when I came fully awake, and reassured her I was fine.

I was 25, and I knew nothing, nothing  
about how to explain that I loved driving  
farther out, on a road no one knew existed,  
around a bend of white gravel, where a fog lifted  
in the sultry August around me; and then beneath  
a massive tree that seemed to bend down to protect  
a small, white cottage, so kept and tidy

I would slow to blink, look again, blink—  
the glider swing, measured flowers,  
an old push mower leaning against  
a pristine shed, so crisply white.  
It was a pleasure to look at, to walk through  
the deep silence that lived there with her, my client.

I felt a longing and a loss before she stepped  
to the front porch. Her gray cotton dress  
pressed with an iron she heated on her  
ancient stove. Her yellow white hair braided,  
then bunned tightly under her koppa. Her bare  
feet naked and clean. Blind and alone, she offered  
me respite in the cool dark of the drawing room,  
well water in an aluminum cup, so cold my eyes

watered with gratitude. Grateful too that she could not see me, so moved by her gift. She touched my face with such gentle grace. I would close my eyes, silent as she saw me. And when I revealed

I was leaving, going back to school, she clasped her hands in her lap, and smiled, saying plainly, "I am so pleased for your happiness." Her own tears tracking down the fine creped wrinkles of her face.

On the porch we held each others' hands, in the way I had only ever done with my mother. Perhaps she prayed for me, and then I let go, stepped off the porch, already gone.

I was 25 and knew nothing, nothing but that my skin was too thin, I had no professional distance, and this place and its people were my own and I had to leave them.