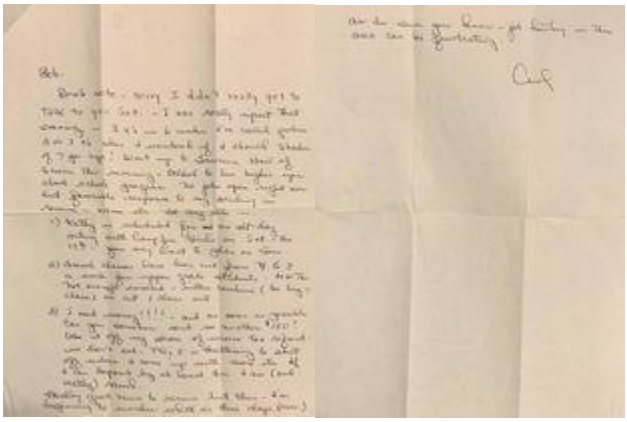
evidentia.

Creative Nonfiction by Kathryn DeZur

I find a note in my father's things as I help him sort items before a move. It is from my mother, dated March 13, 1979, eight months before she died. I do not know why he kept it, but I am grateful he did.



Bob—

Brief note — sorry I didn't really get to talk to you Sat. – I was really upset that evening – 3 x's [times] in 6 weeks I've called police – 2 or 3 x's when I wondered if I should. Shades of 7 yrs ago! Went up to Laurence Hall of Science this morning — talked to two higher ups about school program. No jobs open right now but favorable response to my sending in resume — name, etc. At any rate –

1. *Kathy is scheduled for an all-day outing with Campfire Girls on Sat. — the 17th — you may want to plan on Sun.*
2. *French classes have been cut from 4 to 3 a week for upper grade students — M W Ths. Not enough enrolled – either combine (too big a class) or cut 1 class out.*
3. *I need money!!!! – and as soon as possible – can you somehow send me another $150? take it off my share of income tax refund. – we don't eat –*

PG&E is threatening to shut off unless I come up with more etc. If I can deposit by at least Fri. I am (and Kathy) saved.

Hardly great news to receive but then – I'm beginning to wonder what is these days. (over)

As I'm sure you know – job hunting in this area can be frustrating.

Carol

This note, in my mother's handwriting, encapsulates, embodies her desperation. Her fear of crime in our neighborhood. Her frustration with job hunting and unemployment. Her need to synchronize schedules because of their divorce. Her—our—poverty. Those four exclamation points. *I need money!!!!* She sends the letter on a Tuesday. She needs the money by Friday.

This note seems a strange thing to be grateful for. It brings me back to a childhood filled with uncertainty and the potential for violence on every street corner. It brings me back to a childhood where food is scarce, where I depend on free school lunch for a full meal. The very day my mother discovers that we are under the annual income limit for free lunches, she sends me to school with instructions. I suspect that what this really means is more money for her alcohol. I go through the lunch line, and when I get to the cashier, I say "low income," just as my mother told me to. The cashier, taken aback since I am not a regular, looks at her co-worker with a raised eyebrow. The other cafeteria lady, a large Black woman with a kind, round face, looks at me intently, sees my blush. She nods. The cashier pushes whatever button she needs to push. I sit down.

I don't remember the food. I remember the humiliation.

This note brings me back to my childhood, where I am sometimes a parenthetical aside, as I am in my mother's letter. But it also confirms for me something I have

sometimes questioned: *it was real*. It really happened. It really was like that. Sometimes I scoff at myself, say, *it wasn't that bad*. Sometimes I wonder: *am I making some of this up?* After all, how many times have I been told that what I think is going on is not going on? How many times have I heard that the whisky is tea? Or that my mother is sleeping, not passed out? With enough training, it becomes easy to convince myself that I can't trust my own experience. Besides, who wants to admit that it really is that bad? But here it is, in my mother's own handwriting. The way I experienced my childhood is not some fantasy, some fiction. The note proves it.

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Some things I remember clearly, bright and vivid. Other things that must have happened are simply gone. Then there are the things that occupy the in-between, the liminal: what I remember but doubt. What I remember, but don't know the meaning of. All memories contain fiction, are active constructions of experience. I feel compelled to discover to the extent possible how nostalgia and trauma have distorted or preserved my memory. I must do the research, find the evidence.

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Evidence (n): the facts, signs, or objects that make you believe something is true. Middle English via Old French from Latin, ēvidentia: obvious to the mind or eye.

What I find in this note: evidence. What is not evident—the truth of my memory, the truth of my experience—becomes so.

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In her note to my father, my mother mentions something that happened seven years ago. She writes it when I am nine, so I must be two when our house is robbed for the first time, maybe even while we are there. Television gone. Record player gone. They

do not get to my mother's bedroom where her jewelry is, maybe where we are hiding. Or maybe she has taken me out the back door as they come in the front. They take my mother's sheepskin rug. That upsets her most. She brought it from Montana, where she first met and fell in love with my father. Where they were married. Even before that, where she spent time on her cousin's cattle ranch. Where, I think, she was happiest. She loved that rug. She buys a new one.

I know this story because my mother tells me when, four years later, she and I come home from somewhere, grocery shopping or a swim lesson at the YMCA. We have been robbed again. This time I remember vividly because there are lots of police officers in our house. They press my fingers against ink pads and then against fingerprint cards. The detective takes the time to explain to me about fingerprints, how they are unique to each person. They will use the card to eliminate my fingerprints, my mother's card to eliminate her fingerprints, see if they can find the fingerprints of the criminals. The police are looking for evidence. I have no idea if the burglars get caught. I do know that they've taken the sheepskin rug. Again.

My mother is furious. She is sad. She drinks in the dark.

Maybe it is my mother's birthday. Maybe it is Christmas. Maybe just an ordinary day. I don't remember. I ask my father to buy her another sheepskin rug. I write a note to my father:

Dear Daddy

I'm glad that you bought me the rug

for mommy

Thank you

good-by

Love Kathy

A new sheepskin rug is surely not an inexpensive proposition for my father. I doubt he would do it except that I ask. I also doubt my mother will be properly grateful, so I thank him on her behalf, which is really my behalf, because I may need his help again.

I am already the go-between between my parents. I am already trying to manage my mother's moods, to make her happy, to give her back what has been stolen from her.

The note proves that I remember that correctly.

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Childhood amnesia, the typical absence of many clear autobiographical memories before age seven and none from before age three or four, derives from a combination of factors: the continuing development of the hippocampus in the brain, the development

of language, and a culture's emphasis on narrativizing memories as demonstrations of social ties.

Doris Lessing begins her memoir *Under My Skin* with a consideration of memory:

> *We make up our pasts. You can actually watch your mind doing it, taking a little fragment of fact and then spinning a tale out of it. No, I do not think this is only the fault of storytellers. A parent says, 'We took you to the seaside, and you built a sandcastle, don't you remember?—Look, here is the photo.' And at once the child builds from the words and the photograph a memory, which becomes hers. But there are moments, incidents, real memory, I do trust. This is partly because I spent a good deal of my childhood 'fixing' moments in my mind. Clearly, I had to fight to establish a reality of my own, against the insistence from the adults that I should accept theirs.*

The vivid memories I trust come from very early childhood, indeed. I know they are my own because no one told me later stories of them and there are no pictures to document them. Instead of external evidence, I rely on embodied memory, sharp and clear.

I.

I sit in the warm, soapy water in the kitchen sink as my mother bathes me. The cat jumps onto the window sill just above the sink to sit in the sun.

II.

I sit on my mother's lap on the rocking chair, curled into her left arm. I put my head on her breast as if it is a pillow, fall asleep.

III.

I am five and in the front yard, playing alone. My mother is inside. I hear shouts from across the street and run to look. Our neighbor from across the street, Fran, is in front of her house, yelling *Fire, fire!*

I run to the door of our house, call to my mother: *Fran's house is on fire*.

My mother stumbles out and into the driveway, where she lists to the side, unable to stand upright because she is drunk. *Do they need help?* she asks.

I make a quick evaluation. She cannot be a help to anyone. *I don't think so,* I say.

We watch as another neighbor, Michael, dashes into the house, where Fran has gone. We learn later that when he finds her, her arm is on fire. He thrusts her into the shower, turns on the water, then gets her outside. Michael is a hero. My mother is not.

IV.

A year later, Fran comes over to introduce us to her new baby. I am enthralled. I offer to babysit. Fran smiles, says, *maybe when you are sixteen*.

I do a quick calculation. When I am sixteen, the baby will be ten—certainly not needing a babysitter anymore. I am resentful and incredulous. After all, I already take care of myself, and I take care of my mother.

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And I pray to the well-robed daughter of Ouranos,

Mnemosyne, and her daughters,

to give resourcefulness,

for blind are the minds of men,

whoever without the Heliconians

seeks .... the steep path of wisdom. (Pindar Paean 7b15-20)

Mnemosyne spends nine nights with Zeus, gives birth to the nine muses: history, music, epic poetry, love and lyric poetry, comedy, tragedy, divine hymns, dancing, and astronomy. Memory births knowledge; births civilization; births humanity. She accompanies us every moment, from our first breath to our last, though she slips from our sight sometimes in dreams, in reveries, in senility. We make from memory. Sometimes memory unmakes us.

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Even what I remember vividly is sometimes wrong. When I visit my childhood home in Oakland with my first husband, I am surprised at the accuracy of my place memory. I remember rightly the house and how it looks. I remember exactly the White Horse Liquor store on the corner where I bought candy, my mother's liquor and cigarettes (it was the 1970's), and once a shot glass for her birthday: its gray cobblestone exterior, the tiny parking alley in back, the dumpster, the yellow and orange sign out front.

Except for one detail. The White Horse Bar, where I spent so many days, spinning on bar stools and drinking Shirley Temples while my mother sipped her whiskey neat, is on the wrong side of the street. Before my visit, if I had testified in court about its location, I would have sworn under oath it was on the east side, not the west side, of Telegraph Avenue. I vividly remember walking past a chain link fence, a stick in my hand bumping along the wire diamonds, then passing the bar and taking a right down 66th Street to our house. But I could not have done so. The memory is so strong that I am tempted to claim the bar must have moved across the street in the intervening twenty years, though how it could look exactly the same if it moved buildings is a mystery. It is a small detail, but it bothers me. What else have I misremembered?

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Memory is a net, its mesh uneven, in some places tightly woven and in others containing wide gaps. Chris Brewin, psychological researcher, says *Contrary to the belief that high levels of emotion only serve to enhance memory, there is persistent evidence that emotion can have detrimental effects as well.*

There are large blocks of my memory missing, especially near the end of my mother's life. I do not know if this is because I suppressed what I could not bear or because life seemed ordinary and therefore unremarkable. Live with illness long enough, whether yours or someone else's, and it becomes the new normal. Much later, on a therapist's suggestion, I look up pictures of people suffering the final stages of cirrhosis of the liver to see if they will jog my memories. I see distended abdomens. Swollen feet. Red palms.

Nothing. I remember nothing.

What I do remember: a conversation in the front seat my father's baby blue Lincoln Continental as he drives me to Denny's for lunch:

I say, *I need help taking care of mom. I can't do it by myself.*

I know, he says. *We'll hire a private nurse.*

I know immediately and with total certainty that he is lying. There is never any nurse.

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I know enough about memory and its foibles to recognize the potential pitfalls of depending solely upon it. But my doubt feels more profound than that, a product of living a split life that wavered between the reality of living with an alcoholic parent and the performance of everything's being fine. Finally, I internalized others' continuous

messages, sometimes explicit but more often implicit: *surely it is not that bad. Surely you are exaggerating, looking for attention. Surely, as a child, you must be misunderstanding the situation.*

It's not that bad: we say this to ourselves as we live through a difficult experience, and then again in past tense when we recall it. It wasn't that bad. It wasn't that bad. Say it often enough, and we believe it. But when a detail surfaces that contradicts that conviction—my mother dragging me home from the bus stop, furious, yelling that I had humiliated her by forcing her to spank me in public because I insisted I wanted to go to the playground and then her downing several shots in succession—I immediately question it. Am I exaggerating? I might be. After all, It Wasn't That Bad. Even now, telling this story, my impulse is to say, it really *wasn't* that bad—after all, I did not, like many who live with alcoholic parents, experience violence at my mother's hands more than twice, and both of those incidents were minor.

And then, sometimes, it was easier, better, for me—for my mind—not to know what my body knew. But after a split like that, it is hard to live whole. It can be hard to tell a lie from the truth, even—especially—when you tell it to yourself.

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Memory is collaborative. We often look to others to confirm what we remember—if not the exact details, then at least that *something happened*. After my mother's death, no one discusses her, mentions her. As if she never existed. My father never speaks her name, and when I ask about her, he often can't remember. *How did you propose?* No idea. *How long were you together before getting married?* Don't know. *When was your wedding?* Sometime around Thanksgiving? He can't recall the year, though. The only

thing he does remember: *your mother was a good cook*. There are few other people alive who knew her, and those left, when I've asked, have chosen not to answer.

I am left to my memory.

At a talk Toni Morrison gave at the New York Public Library, she compared writers to rivers:

> *You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places to make room for houses and liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.*

My memory is more like water in the desert. Some days, something will happen and the skies will open, monsoons sweep through, filling dry washes and flash flooding. Most of the time, though, the water remains under the surface, or hidden in the secret pockets of cacti.

I began life born of water, as we all did. Now, a middle-aged woman, I am only half water. The farther I get from the beginning, the less I remember. But the longing to be whole in memory is a well deep and wide within me.

I am left to my memory, but I am also left to the documents I have scrabbled together from boxes in basements, ancestry databases, old newspapers. The water within keeps returning to the banks of the archive, looking for evidence.