

JANE ZICH

Letting Go of the Script, 2019

Acrylic on printed mulberry paper affixed to canvas, 16 x 12 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

NANCY DEVINE

Thick Sagebrush

A father's advice

I hunker beneath a broken tree branch in the pathway, and come up for air, testing the constriction in my chest. Perhaps it's city syndrome, not an illness. I avoid two sharp rocks by stepping diagonally, my feet reacting animallike to the choices visible on the path. I continue through a rising cloud of pungent pinesap and sagebrush. Thin fern fronds reach at my ankles with curled green fingers. Now to the left, and right at this fork. Tromping trails helps me clear my thoughts.

Years ago, my parents documented our family life with black-and-white photographs. Let's get a snapshot of this, my father would say. There's one with my mother sitting on a large granite rock, pregnant with me, taken by my father after he lit a fire in the campground at G. L. Bliss State Park. In the picture my older sister wears a white cowboy hat and a striped T-shirt and points at the fire she pretends she built. I'm there, but not there. If I look at the photo long enough I feel as if I have a memory of hearing them around the fire, discussing the people in the next campsite. Why bring that ugly outdoor aluminum furniture, my mother would say. There's a perfectly good picnic table right there. I imagine I feel the heat of the fire, hear the snap of burning branches, and smell the smoky ashes.

After the fork, the path narrows, trees pushing closer, manzanita bushes thrusting their hips out over the orange soil. Slithering through into a tiny meadow, I make the cross to a steep hillside. Up on a barely visible path again, and then through a stand of thick sagebrush to a clearing. Here before me stands the heavy wood bench, built by someone desiring a hidden perch overlooking the waving treetops pointing toward San Francisco. I come here to sit and talk to my father. It's where I think he can hear me. When he died six years ago from Alzheimer's, I fled up here and poured my heart out. I knew he could hear me. I think he still does. Now I give him the update, my current conundrums, my longings.

The wood slats scratch the backs of my thighs as I sit. cutoff jeans are all I could stand in the August heat. I brush the dust off my arms and I tell my father I've made myself stay in a job that drives me bonkers. My eyes sting, but do not spill. I tell him that it's not simply the sameness of each day beginning and ending in the colorless office complex. It's more the person I've had to become to survive the day. I rub my shoulders and neck, tight from work.

Initially, I had been overjoyed to be offered this job that could staunch my desperation to cover rent. Over time, I'd felt myself morph into a slumping, servile personality to survive my boss's outbursts that seemed clinical. I'd also become numb, less responsive to the daily drama. Part of the job, I'd told myself, but I felt trapped. I told my father I knew I wasn't stimulated or learning. I finally told him I didn't need a letter of recommendation from Mr. W. My future wasn't in his list of contacts. I needed to leave and support myself.

A red-winged blackbird emerges from the trees below, arcing effortlessly through the sky. Why do I still come here to tell my father everything? I do know my father made a point of speaking to me as an intelligent individual with ambition. And beyond that, when I was in fifth grade, he'd made a comment that left me breathless.

At dinner one night he described a slideshow he'd seen during a lunch meeting given by one of the partners in his law firm. It seems the slideshow was about a college education abroad program that the partner's son had participated in. It had changed the son's mind about his career and life. That night, my father had said, "If either of you two girls wants to do something like that, I'd support you going." His hazel eyes had sparkled. "You would have liked those slides of Europe."

I'd gazed into his eyes as he spoke to my sister and me, and noticed my mother's quizzical look, as if she hadn't been in on this offer. I'd felt a surge of energy and sat up in my chair. I'd seen photographs of Switzerland and Italy at school.

I'd clapped my hands at the invitation to adventure. "I do, I do!" I'd said. My mother had shaken her head, dismissing me, so young and foolish, but not my father.

"To apply, you'll need to learn and speak a new language," he'd said.

"I will," I'd said.

I'd kept the idea hidden deep inside, where it glowed. In seventh grade I began French classes that I continued through high school and into college. The sound and rhythm of French was mellifluous, so fun to learn to speak. Over time I heard patterns and learned rules to decipher the meanings. My sister took Latin, so French was my private world. Later in college, I'd applied to a study abroad program, been accepted, and had happily traveled

to France, immersed myself in French university classes speaking and writing in French, living in France for an academic year. I'd worked diligently, and my father had made good on his offer. I'd earned the chance to leave home to grow into a new me. I'd leapt at the chance. The year was challenging, amazing, and mind-blowing in the best ways.

How many people have the power to give that gift? I may never reciprocate such a transformative gift, but as I sit on the bench I think the reason I speak to my father is to keep him in the conversation he started. To return the respect he gave me.

I push off the bench and shake out my legs, grown stiff from dangling in the air. I tell my father I know he wants me to grow into yet another new me, out of the numb one. I wave farewell, knowing I'll return soon. My hiking boots crunch softly in the loose gravel and I head into the sagebrush stand, tall stalks surrounding me in an exaltation of piquant promise.

Nancy Devine explores what connects us all as writers and readers and what we can build together. Earning an MFA from California College of the Arts brought her alive after a career in journalism. She writes stories and essays inspired by the feisty artists and students in her world. Find her work at *Revolution House*, *Latitude 2.0*, *Eleven Eleven*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Flash Fiction Forum*, among other journals.

JANE ZICH

Sleepwalking, 2019

Acrylic on printed mulberry paper affixed to canvas, 16 x 12 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST