

“I get this idea there’s something I need to find,” he’d tell me.

“What?” I’d ask.

“Not something like a thing. Just something. So I go look for it.”

“And you come back after you find it?”

He’d smile.

“No finding. Just looking. When I get tired of looking, I come home.”

When Uncle Thomas was at home he’d go off for hours in the afternoon, tromping around the hills by himself.

“Still looking?” I would ask him.

He’d smile.

“Under every rock,” he said.

* * *

The church was nearly full, family on one side of the aisle, townspeople on the other. Dad sat with his brothers and their wives in the front two pews, the rest of us spread behind. Cousins I barely knew whispered to each other while their kids played with devices in their laps, ear buds hooked into iPods. Everyone was sweating. The surprise was to see Cheryl Moreland standing at the back of the church. She nodded her head when she saw me staring at her.

It was hard not to stare. Cheryl was dressed in dark blue denim jeans and a checkered shirt. She was tall and thin-waisted, with breasts that stood out as straight and pointed as if she were a teen. Or had them fixed, I thought to myself, as I turned around and saw Preacher rise to begin the ceremony.

I hadn’t seen Preacher for years. He looked like he belonged here in church, the robes accenting his height. His deep voice carried down the aisles and commanded attention. He started the service by recounting the generations of Tempers who had left their mark on the town.

Uncle Aaron and Uncle Saul spoke briefly about Grandma and Grandpa’s dedication to the store. Dad’s homage was a row of photographs of Grandpa and Grandma that lined the altar. Preacher got up again at the end.

“Isaac loved this town. He was skeptical of outsiders. He did not suffer fools gladly, and he thought most people who disagreed with him were fools. But he was not unkind, at least not always, and not to everyone.”

Did I catch Preacher glancing at Dad? Dad turning his head down for an instant to avoid the glance?

“Not unkind, just impatient,” Preacher went on. “He didn’t have time to waste. He said to me more than once, ‘Preacher, I’m a dinosaur. I’ve lived too long. My world’s gone.’ But he refused to sell out. He never wavered.”

Preacher let the silence settle and turned to the closing prayers.

* * *

A backhoe waited alongside the grave. It was a smaller crowd now, the family in their suits and ties, a few older men in jeans and checkered shirts. The coffin was lowered into the ground and people took turns shoveling dirt over it from a mound of soil. Some stopped after their shovelful to mumble something. Dad didn’t take a turn and neither did I. At the end, Preacher picked up a large shovelful of dirt, put a pint bottle of bourbon on top, and dropped them onto the coffin. “For the journey ahead, Isaac,” he said, and all the old men laughed.

Then we stood quietly while the cement slab was lowered into place atop the coffin. I glanced sideways and noticed a woman standing alone about thirty yards away. She was wearing a white dress, white cloak, white hat and white gloves. It was hard to make out her features. I remembered seeing her in the church as well, sitting near the back on the family side. I elbowed Dad:

“Do you know who that is?”

“No idea. I noticed her myself.”

Just as he said that she turned and walked away.

This story is taken from the first pages of a novel, *Temper CA*, that recently won the Miami University Press Novella Prize for 2018. It will be published by MUP in January, 2019.

Paul Skenazy taught literature and writing at UCSC for thirty-five years. He has written critical pieces on writers as diverse as James M. Cain, Saul Bellow and Maxine Hong Kingston, and published more than three hundred book reviews in newspapers and magazines nationwide. He lives in Santa Cruz with his wife, poet Farnaz Fatemi, and an old cat and young dog who aren’t yet convinced about the value of coexistence.

JOSE DE JESUS RODRIGUEZ

Untitled, 2017

Acrylic, airbrush, oil, and textile, 48 x 58 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST