

JOSE DE JESUS RODRIGUEZ

Untitled, 2016

Acrylic, airbrush, sculpy, and oil on canvas, 49 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

PAUL SKENAZY

Temper CA

A memorial? Grandpa was a crotchety bastard who made Dad's childhood a horror and put an end to mine. It would be good to see the old man six feet under.

I told Dad I'd be there by Friday afternoon.

"Come to the house," he said.

"What house?"

"Ours."

The last time I saw our—Dad's—house in the mid-1990s, the windows and sliding doors were gone, the paint chipped and yellow. The roof split under me when I tried to climb to the second story. The surrounding woods were a tangle of broken branches and narrow paths that led nowhere.

"Are you camping out?" I asked.

"Just come to the house."

* * *

I was sitting at a stoplight that afternoon when I burst into tears. Once the crying started, it didn't stop. I couldn't predict when the bawling would come on: at my desk, cutting radishes and jicama, watching Jon Stewart. Bourbon didn't help.

I thought of calling Mom for sympathy but she was off on her annual month of volunteer work in Yosemite, far from a phone line. My one and only Angie was in Houston. She'd become the golden girl of the American Culinary Institute, financial handywoman who patched up accounting leaks that were costing the company tens of thousands of dollars. Her rescue missions for ACT were lined up like planes waiting for a runway: Houston, Las Vegas, Boston. She'd disappear for three- or four-week immersions in one school after another, then fly home for a week in town with me. I felt pinched into the intermissions of her life like someone stealing a kiss during TV commercials.

The two of us had learned long ago that we ended phone calls feeling farther apart than when we started talking. Saturday night I called her anyway.

"I don't get it. You hate the man."

"Right. The tears are crazy."

"Do you need me to come home?"

I paused, staring at the calendar. It told me that Angie was off to Las Vegas in less than a week.

"I'm not even sure I'll get out of here on time," she said. "There's talk of a law suit."

It was July—not the skin-scorching July I knew as a child growing up in Temper but the overcast chill of San Francisco summer mornings. I was at my kitchen table feasting on my usual Saturday breakfast of self-loathing, wondering why I needed to drink myself into a hangover every weekend Angie was away. Dad's call was a relief.

"Joy, your grandpa died last night."

"He finally drank himself to death?"

Grandpa Isaac presided over Temper General, the family store, and the mines and houses my ancestors accumulated over the last 150 years. When I knew him he smoked cigars and drank bourbon, every day. "Never before noon," he liked to say, though only about the cigars.

"Seems that way," Dad said. "I wanted you to know. You used to be close."

"Not that close," I said.

"Don't rewrite the past on my account," Dad said.

I let that go.

"How's Boise these days? The camera store? Madge?" Madge was wife number three.

"Fine, fine, and fine. But I'm in Temper. Been here for a few weeks."

"Doing what?"

"Visiting old friends," he answered. "The memorial and burial will be next Saturday so your uncles and their families can get here. Come. Stay a few days."

I ended up holding Angie’s hand, virtually at least. It took her ten more days to sort through the mess. By then I was with Dad in Temper—sleepless, but not from grief.

* * *

That Sunday I had a gig photographing a wedding. It was after-hours work I did to supplement what I earned writing grants and handling newsletters and publicity for the local food bank. Temper Photography, my card said. Weddings, bar mitzvahs, christenings, funerals—whatever you paid me for. The extra money let me travel, buy clothes that weren’t on sale, and eat out when I wanted.

This one was standard stuff: a large hotel ballroom, tuxedos for the groomsmen, pale-green dresses for the bridesmaids. I wandered the room, took portraits of everyone who would stop long enough, and sat at a table with kids playing tic-tac-toe during my breaks. I was packing up my equipment when one of the bridesmaids came over to me, introduced herself as Penny, and asked me for my card. I’d noticed her, and noticed her looking at me. She was tall, thin, narrow shouldered, and small breasted. She took a great photo: a lean, sharply featured face with unusually full lips that looked even better on my DSLR screen than in real life. I found a card, handed it to her.

“Do you have an event coming up I can help with?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “How about a drink downstairs in the bar, or I call you in a day or two?”

What is it about weddings? This wasn’t the first come-on, woman or man. But it was the first time I said yes. Do I thank Grandpa for that, or my ongoing if unexpressed loneliness with Angie and her travels? I’m still not sure.

The bar led to her room, which led to a game of spin the bottle, just the two of us. I left with my clothes on, hers mostly on, the bed messed, a hickey when Penny’s lust turned aggressive, and a date for drinks two days later. The drinks led to her house, an introduction to her roommate, Alf, and another evening of almost before a last, long goodnight kiss. We took little time to fill in biographical details but I found out that Penny grew up in Virginia, escaped to college in Austin, and worked in IT. I let her know about Temper, my recent flood of tears, my job, my divorced parents—and Angie. She didn’t blink—just gnawed at a new spot on my neck and went to see if she had any more wine in the kitchen.

I knew if I went back to Penny’s again I’d stay the night. So I made a date with her for a downtown bar the Thursday before I left for Temper. We sat next to each other, our hands resting softly on each other’s thighs. When we walked to our cars, we held each other for a long time.

“I’ll miss you,” I said.

“You don’t have to. At least not yet.”

I smiled and repeated her words back to her.

“Not yet.”

She hugged me.

“Text me,” she said before she rose on her toes and opened her mouth briefly against mine.

I kissed her back. She reached into her pocket to pull out a miniature silver railroad spike on a chain.

“I saw this. It made me think of what you’ve told me about Temper.”

I let the chain dangle from my hand, then put it around my neck.

“There was no railroad running through Temper,” I told her.

“That’s okay. It’s there now. Or will be once you arrive.”

I hugged her, rubbed my hand down the length of her back, to her butt, then back up to her neck before I let go.

* * *

I loved to dazzle friends with stories about Temper.

“You really lived in tie-dyes and overalls? Built your own house? Smoked dope all day?” I’d nod and add tales of black bears and wolves—some of them true.

The Temper where I grew up in the 1970s was a far cry from the mining town it once was. My great-great-great-grandparents Constance and Solomon founded the place in 1848 when they opened a general store to cater to the gold seekers who poured into the Sierra foothills by the thousands. When the placers gave out, most of the miners headed elsewhere. Hard-rock mining followed and left the area honeycombed with underground tunnels famous for their ghostly moans. For my fifth birthday, Dad and Mom gave me a human skull they claimed came from one of the deserted mines. I called it Solomon, after the family patriarch. I’d rub the top of its head for luck and talk to it every night before bed. I left it behind when I took off with Mom.

I hadn’t been to Temper for thirteen years, hadn’t lived there for thirty. When I last saw it in 1995, it still seemed

a backwash bypassed by time—rundown and vacant, almost as tiny as when I grew up there. But as I turned east off Highway 49, my car air-conditioner on full blast in the ninety-eight-degree heat, I passed two billboards advertising new housing developments. One offered glimpses of townhouse units encircling small pools; the other pictured two- and three-bedroom luxury homes alongside a golf course. Where would the water come from for the lawns and fairways, I wondered: all I saw around me were the dry, late-summer hay-colored California grasslands. Moreland Properties offered both developments. Cheryl Moreland, the real estate mogul Dad ran off with. I didn’t drive all this way to have to deal with her again.

Temper circa 2008 was . . . a town, not the jumble of worn roadside buildings I remembered. A small park of young oaks and sycamores had replaced the grocery. There was a stoplight where Main and Vein, the renamed county roads, met. I drove by a candy and ice cream store, a wine bar, and a bank—a real bank, not the counter and metal grate in a corner of Temper General that had passed for a bank in my day. The former filling station was a two-story building, Temper Historical Museum and Jail. The sidewalks were filled with men and women in shorts and tees carrying packages and holding children’s hands. Temper General was a comforting eyesore: the front porch with its wooden steps, the double doors, and the worn exterior in need of paint. It was the only thing that looked like I remembered. I drove through as fast as I could, anxious to find Dad.

* * *

In the 1970s, Bitter Root Road was a thin dirt byway to and from town: two miles of muddy, potholed swamp in the winter and a parched, dusty, rock-strewn path in the summer heat. It dead-ended at our house, an A-frame surrounded by a forest of oaks and pines.

When I turned onto Bitter Root that Friday, I found the road had been paved and renamed Ivy Lane. The entry to our house was surrounded by two gated, brick-walled properties that sloped uphill where no hills had existed when I lived here.

I braked as soon as I turned into our gravel driveway. The house had had a face-lift. Redwood steps led up to the deck. Sliding glass doors reflected the late-afternoon

sun. There was a coat of fresh paint on the outside walls. The roof looked new.

Dad was sitting on the deck, dressed as always—jeans and a T-shirt, wire-frame glasses slipping down his nose. He’d lost some hair since Christmas when Angie and I had visited him in Boise. He got up and headed my way. There was more pride in his smile than he usually let show—or felt, if I knew anything about him.

“Surprise!”

“You did this? When? How?”

“The last five or six years.”

“Why?”

“I’d rather you’d have said, ‘Wow!’”

“Sorry. Wow. Wow. Wow! Now why?”

One of Dad’s shrugs.

“It seemed the right thing to do. And I could finally afford to rebuild.”

“Someone die? Besides Grandpa, I mean.”

He smiled. “Sort of.”

He turned to look at his work, then down at me, still sitting in my car.

“There’s watermelon and fresh lemonade inside,” Dad said.

I grabbed my bag and camera. Dad led me through the sliding glass doors into the kitchen: a table I’d never seen before, new Mexican tiles on the counter, a polished oak floor.

I was in shock. I sat and picked at the melon and drank a glass of lemonade.

“Want a tour?” Dad asked.

“How about I just wander?”

He nodded.

* * *

I walked through rooms that no longer resembled my memories: 2009 upscaled versus 1979 dropped out. The raw plywood floors of my childhood had been covered with oak. The living room was spotless. A large metal storage cabinet and a folding table stood in one corner. A few enlarged photographs of Grandpa and Grandma were spread across the table. The fireplace sparkled. Dad or someone had ground out the dirt and black stains from the brick hearth. There was a mantle now, with two photos of me: one as a child, one from last summer. Director chairs sat across from the couch, a small oak veneer coffee table in

between. They made a discreet social arrangement in an otherwise vast room that used to be stuffed with oversize pillows and mattresses.

The rest of the house followed suit—open space, new floors, repainted walls, clean windows. There was nothing in Uncle Thomas’s old room. Mine had a twin bed and frame with a chair alongside, a lamp sitting on it. Upstairs in Mom and Dad’s room there was a platform bed, two low night tables, and a few clothes hanging neatly in the closet. There was a towel drying over the shower curtain rod, a throw rug on the bathroom floor. The bed was made.

This was not where I grew up.

* * *

Though Dad left Temper when he was sixteen, the town never left him. It lingered in ways Mom had no hint of until the opportunity to return arrived in a letter from his grandfather’s lawyer, along with a two-sentence note from his father.

Mom and Dad met in Berkeley and fell in love working for McCarthy in the ’68 campaign. (Dad still has a McCarthy pin on the denim jacket he wears everywhere.) When they graduated in 1970, they got married and went off to Europe to lick their political wounds. Nixon was in the White House, MLK and Bobby Kennedy were dead. Altamont had turned Woodstock into a sentimental memory. Vietnam went on and on.

“We had to get out,” Mom said to me when I’d ask about those years. “The U.S. wasn’t the world we wanted to live in. So we went looking for another one. Little did we know it’s just the same crapshoot wherever you go.”

It was the spring of 1974 when the letters found us. We were living somewhere in Spain, a small town between Barcelona and Valencia. It was one of many European villages we wandered in and out of those first years of my life, almost interchangeable it seems to me when I try to recapture that time through Dad’s photos.

I was supposed to be asleep. Mom was sitting at the table, her hands folded in her lap. Dad was walking back and forth, papers in his hand.

“This is our chance to make a home for ourselves. For Joy,” he said.

“We’ve got a home, David. Here. The three of us. Wherever we are.”

“But Temper is where I grew up. It’s me, my roots.”

“It’s not you, not anymore. And certainly not me. You left Temper because you hated it. And your father.”

Dad didn’t answer her, just continued to walk back and forth, slapping the envelope and letters with one hand while he held them with the other. I lay there quietly, not wanting either of them to notice me.

Mom got up and stood in front of Dad so he had to stop moving. She tried to hug him but he pulled away, stepped around her, and went over to the table. I watched him put the letters down, then pat them again and again. Then he banged his fist down on the table. I let out a cry and sat up, so suddenly that they both turned to stare at me. Mom came over and hugged me.

“It drives me crazy that my father stands in the way of us moving back to California and living off the land the way we’ve always dreamed we might,” Dad said.

“Then don’t let him.”

Mom said that softly, in a whisper. And with so much love, I’ve always thought, looking back. Dad must have felt it, that heart offering itself to him.

Mom stared at him.

“Just answer one question,” Mom said.

“What?” he asked.

“Are you going back to make a home for us or to spite your father?”

“You know the answer, Harriet.”

She did, pretended she didn’t, and we moved to Temper.

* * *

It was Mom, not Dad, who kept those letters and showed them to me years later. I was thirteen, we were moving to San Francisco, and Mom was sorting through boxes of photos and papers. Dad’s grandfather Amos left Dad five thousand dollars and a parcel of prime farmland. Along with the behest came an offer from Dad’s father, Isaac, to buy the land from him for ten thousand dollars. “The money should support you and that socialist you married until you both grow up and get jobs,” he wrote. I’ve often wondered what Dad and Mom would have done if Grandpa had just offered the money without needing to needle. But that was as impossible for Grandpa as it was for Dad not to return to Temper.

When I finished reading, I looked up at Mom, who was wrapping a small perfume bottle in paper. At that moment in time, 1984, Mom the socialist worked in a yarn shop in Sacramento. Her hair had turned white. She spent her nights knitting afghans in front of the TV.

I asked Mom why she agreed to live in Temper.

“We were young enough, or I was, that I thought we could do anything. Even handle Isaac.”

She paused for a moment, staring down at Grandpa’s offer.

“We wanted out,” she continued. “Any way we could. And there was not much more out than Temper, California. It was horse and buggy in a convertible world.”

“More rusty pickup if you ask me,” I said.

“Your dad wanted to show Isaac he could make a home for himself and us. Something better than the way he grew up.”

“How did that turn out?” I asked, knowing the answer.

* * *

At the end of my tour, I stood on the deck outside Dad’s bedroom, looking out to the trees and creek. Dad came up behind me and leaned in the doorway: “You approve?”

“It’s not something to approve or disapprove of, Dad.”

“But it’s not what you remember.”

“No. No one is where they used to be.”

“You don’t like it.”

“I don’t not like it. I don’t know it. It’s come back from the dead like in a zombie movie.”

“It’s yours. I’ve rebuilt it for you.”

I stared at him, looked back at the bedroom, then at him again.

“I wasn’t there a lot of your life, Joy,” Dad said. “That haunts me. I know those years can never be reclaimed. But building is what I’m good at.”

“What am I going to do with a house in Temper, Dad?”

“I don’t know. Live in it, I hope. Or use it as a way to get out of San Francisco when you need to. Or sell it. I suspect Cheryl would be happy to take it off your hands.”

That let me change the subject.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Cheryl is in town?”

He was surprised by the question.

“Did you see her?”

“No. Just her billboards. New housing projects, a golf course?”

He nodded.

“And she wants to buy Temper General,” he said.

“What does she plan to do with a general store?”

Dad stopped me.

“How about we postpone that topic until dinner. That will give you time to get used to your new home. I opened some wine, put out chips and salsa, and bought a rib eye to grill. You used to like to shuck corn when we lived here.”

I smiled, went over, hugged him, and told him how amazing the house looked.

“It’s a beautiful gift, Dad. I’m just in shock.”

“Good. Stay that way for the time being. At least until after dinner.”

* * *

We ate quietly, both I suspect waiting for the other to start.

Finally I said, “Okay. Before we get to Temper General: the money for this remodel? And what are those monstrosities where the woods were?”

“They’re the money. About ten years back, Madge and I were strapped. So I called Cheryl. I had heard she was doing a lot of real estate in town. I asked her to put most of my land up for sale. She told me I’d get a lot more if I sold it all instead of holding on to the area right around the house. But I said no, and she managed to make me more than even she expected on the deal. Madge and I paid our bills and the rest went into rebuilding. Unfortunately you don’t have control over what people do once you sell.”

I nodded.

“Now back to Cheryl and the store?”

“From what I hear, Cheryl wants to convert the store and the warehouse buildings around it into a mini-mall. Dad wouldn’t sell. You know Isaac when he’s decided something.”

“Uncle Aaron and Uncle Saul will?” I asked.

“First chance they get. I’ve been trying to talk them into holding on to the store until the dust settles. They won’t listen. The recession hasn’t been good to either of them. They could use the cash.”

Dad started piling dishes in the sink. I pushed him away, told him to sit, and found the soap.

I found him sitting in the living room sorting through his photos.

“I’ve made copies of all the Temper photos for you;

I thought you might like to have them around once you start using the place.”

The world through a viewfinder: Mom and Dad bought a banged-up Airstream for us to live in while they built our house. Once the house was livable, the Airstream turned into Dad’s darkroom. Dad’s camera turned into his life obsession.

I was looking at some photos from the years after we first moved here when Dad glanced down at his watch and put his hand on my shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re here. Really glad. Keep looking at these. I have to go.”

“You needed at the Nugget?” I teased, mentioning the local bar.

“Something like that,” he said with a smile. “I’ll see you in the morning. The funeral is at nine.”

And that was that. Out the door, into his truck.

I went to the kitchen, opened a bottle of beer, and went back to the photos. They brought back the smell of Mom and Dad when they’d take me on their lap at the end of a day, with sweat wetting their T-shirts, a beer in hand, Mom with her cigarettes, me with sawdust powdering my hair. They bought me a miniature tool set—hammer, screwdriver, ax and saw—and let me help pull out bent nails and have my way with scraps of board. I would carry sandwiches out for the crew and munch my way through my days on potato chips and Kool-Aid. Late afternoons I’d try to escape the heat by standing in the creek or wandering off into the woods.

In the few photographs Dad let someone else take of him, he wears shirts torn at the neck, has a Paul McCartney beard and John Lennon glasses, and grins awkwardly at the camera. What I didn’t notice when I was younger is how much he looks like his father. I stared at the blowups Dad had made of Grandpa Isaac for the funeral service. The resemblance was unmistakable. Dad did his best to disguise it with his beard, glasses, and long hair. But the pointed shape of his face: that was Isaac. The eyes weren’t quite the same: Isaac’s were round and recessed, Dad’s more narrow, almost pointed ovals. But the nose, the slightly protruding ears, and the forehead and receding hairline were a match. I wondered if Mom recognized the similarities those years we lived here, and if she ever mentioned them to Dad.

My Polaroids: where were they? I think it was my sixth birthday when Mom and Dad bought me the camera. All their friends chipped in for what seemed an unlimited supply of film. I would snap pictures for a while and then forget about it. I’d find it again and shoot everything I could, night and day. Then I’d misplace it. Eventually I lost it somewhere, or left it behind when Mom and I left town.

I hadn’t thought about those photos for years. I couldn’t imagine Dad getting rid of them; he was meticulous to a fault.

* * *

I felt disoriented: Dad, the house, Grandpa, Temper. I took an Ambien and texted Angie: *Surprises. Could use you and your bookkeeping skills.*

Houston was two hours ahead, so I didn’t expect an answer that night. Then I sent another text, to Penny: *You’re on my mind.*

She wrote back immediately: *Too heady. Let me know when I’m on your lips.*

* * *

Temper, Saturday morning. A perfect day for a funeral.

It was already hot when the sun woke me at 6:00 a.m. I heard Dad upstairs. A bag of coffee and a French press were waiting on the counter. While the water boiled, a beep told me I had a text. It was from Angie.

Crazy here. Might get to SF next Wednesday if you’re there.

I texted back.

Depends on Dad.

Angie must have been near her phone.

Let me know. If not I’m going to Vegas. A hint about the surprises?

I’m house rich. And Cheryl’s around.

OMG!!! Can’t wait to hear.

Dad had showered and was dressed for the funeral.

“I didn’t know you owned a suit, Dad.”

“This is your Uncle Saul’s. I asked him to bring an extra for me.”

“The tie and shoes?”

“His too. Shoes are a little tight but otherwise a good fit, right?”

“You’ll do,” I told him, giving him a hug before I went off to dress myself.

* * *

As we drove through Main Street, I saw that all the stores were closed, with signs saying they’d open again at noon. Black ribbons were draped over one entrance after another, the flag in the park set at half-mast.

Dad saw my surprise.

“It’s always been this way for the Tempers, though I’ve never been sure if the town closes down from respect or fear. Doesn’t matter, I suppose. This is likely the last time.”

“Last of the Mohicans,” I said.

“What?” Dad asked.

“Grandpa said that to me once, about himself. We were walking in the cemetery. I didn’t get what he meant. ‘The end of the line,’ he told me.”

“Sounds like him,” Dad said. “Managed to forget me and my brothers, and you.”

He didn’t forget. I decided not to tell Dad the rest of what Grandpa said to me then. “Aaron and Saul ain’t coming back here except to put me in the ground,” he told me. “Your dad—I don’t know where he came from. And you’re a girl. Not your fault.”

I changed the subject.

“I couldn’t find my Polaroids in the photos. Do you remember where they went?”

Dad didn’t say anything for a moment.

“You gave those to your grandfather.”

That rang a vague bell.

“Why would I do that?”

“Your mom and I wondered the same thing.”

“What’d he do with them? Any idea?”

“No,” he said. “I can’t say.”

* * *

When we arrived in Temper, Dad’s high school friends awaited us: Amy and Bobby, Gwen and Charlie, and Preacher, who moved through too many women those years to keep track of. Josiah Baldwin II was his full name but we already called him Preacher because of his dad, minister of the local Congregational church we went to each Christmas Eve. I remember nights around an outdoor fire when I would fall asleep with my head in Mom’s lap while

the adults imagined their utopias. Next morning I’d wake up huddled between my parents, encircled by three or four couples sleeping on mattresses strewn across raw plywood.

Dad liked to say he was a redneck by day, a hippie by night, a student in his dreams. Mom hadn’t so much as nailed picture hooks to the wall, but she learned fast.

They designed as they went. You could do that in Temper then—no one to inspect, or no one you didn’t know. Work halted for days at a time from lack of funds, then would leap forward in more flush times. Downstairs consisted of a kitchen and living room along one side and two bedrooms on the other. Steep stairs led to a narrow hallway, bedroom, and bathroom. We had a small garden where Mom grew broccoli, beets, lettuce, tomatoes, and corn.

And cannabis. Dope was our cash cow. We didn’t bother with details: CBD, THC, ACDC. Life was simpler then: plant, nurture, harvest, sell. In plastic bags or Saran Wrap. At the Nugget, our local tavern; at Tony’s Diner; behind the grocery; at our front gate. Even behind Temper General if we were sure Grandpa wasn’t around. Everyone knew, no one said.

Mom’s brother Thomas arrived the summer after we settled in town. He’d just come out of the Navy. Mom told me that in his twenties, Uncle Thomas had been a good amateur boxer. Those days were long gone, though he still looked muscular. But he was slow, vague. Soft in the head, Mom said. Will-less, it seems to me looking back. He had a way of holding my hand that I cherished—not squeezing, not asking for anything, just holding. He called me Miss Why because I asked so many questions.

The day we met he walked up to me and formally introduced himself: “Hello. I am Thomas. Your uncle. I am coming to live with you.”

I giggled, then curtsied, as I was learning to do in kindergarten.

“I’m Joy Constance Temper. Your niece.”

Then I hugged him and we were friends.

* * *

Uncle Thomas moved across our lives erratically, like a listing ship in need of a port for repairs. He’d leave, return, and leave again. No one except Mom and me took much notice. I asked him a few times where he went but got no good answer.

“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