Column of January 26, 2017: "US seems once again unwelcoming to immigrants"

Darold and I married in California's Santa Clara, a town within thirty minutes to Monterey Bay. A previous housemate having left behind some paperback novels set on the Monterey coast, my new husband showed off Cannery Row and Fishermen's Wharf along with Big Sur and Carmel-by-the-sea. At the time, the famous Steinbeck haunts weren't the tourist traps they have since become.

Darold disavowed reading—as engineer, he was devoted to science and mathematics. In spite of this proclivity, he was enrolled in law school at night. To me he attributed his lack of interest to eyes tired from drafting work. Still, he determined to put an end to his labors as missile engineer to engage in the practice of law. My job at a bank was 9 to 5 and we dined in the university's cafeteria; hence, before he set off for class I read his law books aloud. Steinbeck I perused while he was away.

In California recently, I came across a collection of stories that rang a familiar bell. Indeed, "Down to a Soundless Sea" was penned by the son of the above-mentioned author (sadly, he died last year) and set in the same locale. Thomas Steinbeck's stories date from the late 1890s to the early 1930s, and they often feature that period's figures of speech. Like many of his father's, the younger Steinbeck's tales have been gleaned from local acquaintances and storytellers; hence, they are bound up in popular culture. Nevertheless, the Thomas narratives, published in 2002, surpass his elder's in social critique. The title alone suggests confrontations with things—an ocean and its human flotsam—that rarely are what they seem.

"Soundless" may make readers presume an absence of noise, but "sound" has disparate meanings. For example, Mark Twain describes Mississippi shippers periodically "sounding" the depth of the river to avoid running aground; indeed, "mark twain" is one such depth-finding articulated. "Sound" can also describe something free of flaws, hence reliable. In this case, "soundless" can connote someone or something unfathomable and not to be trusted.

These stories tell of aging seamen reduced to begging for pennies. Young cowboys fall on hard times. Physicians visit their patients on horseback or in donkey-pulled carts, overnighting in drafty barns. But it's the manipulation of minorities that are caught in the author's prose. In particular the precarious existence of the Chinese, lowest within rigid American hierarchies, is driven home through protagonists who bear the worst of social inequities. Their tribulations are presented through the lens of speakers who are socially aware.

A Chinese healer collects herbs, barks, and mushrooms to soothe the ailments of illegally-imported mine laborers and impoverished fishermen. His own family perished from diseases inflicted by the "round-eyed barbarians"; hence, he is in need of an apprentice. The afflicted Sing Fat fits the bill.

Sing is the son of a once-powerful family in Central China, the sole survivor of massacres in a Middle Kingdom torn asunder by civil war. Now reduced to slave labor in California—as illegal immigrant, he is at the beck and call of his mine-owning bosses—the young Sing vows to escape his abysmal status. He knows of a Chinese contingent in Salinas, but how to get there? How to reach the safety of distantly-related clans?

On a hot August day at the Sacramento River a hundred coolies, Sing among them, are charged with "the dangerous transfer of loads from boat to dock." When a cargo sling snaps free, Sing and twenty of his compatriots are swept into the river. Unlike Sing, most cannot swim; appalled, he must listen underwater to "their shrieks of distress." To regain the surface, Sing grabs hold of a piling, finding himself hidden from view. Until the dark of night allows him to clamber ashore, he remains anchored to his piling. Now he sets off on foot to seek refuge among his coevals.

We follow Sing's ups and downs to his life's end. He dies a solitary individual who, in youth, had

hoped to marry and continue the line of his ancestors. His story is heartbreaking, but the younger Steinbeck does not blame far-away Washington as his father did in “Gapes of Wrath.” Young Sing may have believed his fate was ordained in heaven; readers know better.

In Steinbeck’s time Darold and I each sought a better world, my husband migrating from Indiana to California. Obliged to propel himself on crutches, he swore he’d never return to the Hoosier state’s frost-coated sidewalks and wintry college-dorm steps. As for myself, immigration allowed escape from a family rendered joyless through two wars and post-war hardships. The U.S. was the land of possibilities then. Today’s America, however, appears as unwelcoming to many of its citizens as it was a century ago to illegally-imported laborers. Darold did not live to see the change. Sometime I envy him for that.