

GHOST TOWN

Author(s): SARAH CYPHER

Source: *The North American Review*, SUMMER/FALL 2020, Vol. 305, No. 2/3
(SUMMER/FALL 2020), pp. 20-27

Published by: University of Northern Iowa

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27152570>

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GHOST TOWN

SARAH CYPHER

The guys on our street do nothing. They gamble over dominoes; they sleep in vans and nap outdoors in a ratty chair. They claim a line of four grills and a barbecue pit, all rusting against the north façade of somebody else’s church-apartment-tenement thing. They don’t cook on them. They throw empty Cheeto bags in the street, along with the curled foils from Swisher Sweets, and Jolly Rancher wrappers, and tiny, empty zip bags.

They hide whatever they’re selling in the overgrown weeds along the sidewalk. Afternoons, their friends drive in and stop their cars mid-street. One of these guys will sidle up to the window and lean in—shaking hands, talking. Talking yards and yards of nothing. Nothing, on repeat. There are four older ones and a grubby kid who is high enough to be an FAA problem.

Once, Andrea complained about the garbage, but the oldest one looked through her, bored as a house cat. “God is good all the time,” he said.

You buy a house, you buy a stake in the neighborhood. The tract between Adeline and San Pablo all around McClymonds High is called Ghost Town, which should have been a clue. We paid over a half-million dollars for a house in the Reaper’s backyard. The week before we closed escrow, a twenty-one-year-old woman was found stabbed to death on the next corner, by the liquor store.

“Her body was *dumped* there.” Andrea gave a huff of something like laughter. “So, it’s not a murder block. It’s just where people get rid of bodies.”

It was a bad joke. They all are. Three other guys were shot leaving the West Oakland BART, in three separate incidents, within three blocks of our house. Two of the vans had trash-bag windows. Later that summer, on the other side of the school, at 5 P.M. on a Tuesday, two women started an argument that their boyfriends and cousins finished with forty bullets. A neighbor who was rushing her kids to safety got shot in the head.

People who know nothing about Oakland pick on it, so let’s get it out of the way right now: Oakland is trying. Oakland is like any of us. She has her bad nights, and her bad habits, but



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she's also somebody's mother. Somebody's friend. She cleans up okay, and what's happening to her isn't really her fault. You have to believe in her, or she will wear you out.

I say this now.

"This place doesn't make sense." I was programming the driveway gate with my back to the street, poking at a control panel that was fancier than an airplane cockpit. The dog lay in the driveway, and Andrea was pulling weeds, but really watching the tenant next door, a kid with a dirty blond bun, as he arranged a pale mannequin on a folding chair beside a cage in his backyard.

"Lower your voice."

"What?" The gate finally shuddered open, whining. "Just—we should go inside soon."

My wife Andrea claimed a clairvoyance that her mother called the Sight. She was a white-looking Mexican who had inherited her father's metallic green eyes and her mother's faith in the unseen. Superstitions, most of them: don't bring

We are all regugees from somewhere or something.

an old broom to a new house; hang a crucifix over the door; throw salt or you'll argue with someone. But she could also sense the haunted places, and could be more reverent with death than

most people. Yet since moving to Ghost Town, her clairvoyance demanded compliance: Watch me as I go to the car. Set the alarm. Walk the dog a different route, not past the liquor store. Don't walk the dog here, at all.

I was annoyed. "Is this necessary?"

"I don't like the look of those guys' friends."

The friends were leaning in a car window across the intersection, but I whispered back, "The neighbor? His friend is white and looks like she's made out of plastic."

Where my family had been indifferent and aloof, hers had been violent. You might be thinking this is a whole other story, but it is not. In our experience unhappy families were all very much alike, so that in the quiet years—the years without sibling drama or parental implosions or sudden deaths—we two women lived our life together as if we were the first couple on earth. We didn't have misunderstandings; only refusals.

"You know what I mean," she said. She didn't talk for the rest of the day.

We were taking salsa lessons the last time I tried to get pregnant. *We're having a rough patch.* Saying the words out loud was the only progress

we made toward fixing whatever it was that was disintegrating between us. I said it first, because it was the most tentative way to put words on the way that in our worries, during our dinners at the coffee table, even during sex and our first waking thoughts in that big master bedroom that overlooked the street, we brushed so smoothly past each other.

"Stop thinking about the beat," Andrea said, in our second class. "Try again."

Her hand hovered past my waist, and we began again—a series of steps that led her around and away from me.

The year we moved in, one of the Afghan grandfathers wandered down as far as our house. We were washing the car, she and I. "Sisters?" he asked again.

"Not sisters. Wives," we repeated at the same time.

"What? What? Where are the men?" he cried, helpless. "Your husbands?"

Soft, unshaven jaw. Feet planted on the cement. In his face was a wildly collapsing laughter, a friendliness turning to disbelief as fast as an orange goes rotten. And he wouldn't leave us alone about it: "Where are the husbands? Where?"

We were helpless, too, to explain that there are no husbands. Just her brother sometimes, who is gayer than us and borrows a few thousand dollars a year.

We are all refugees from somewhere or something.

Andrea can hide her reasons behind the Coast Guard, which moves us every four years, and she keeps her mouth shut about everything else. I suppose she has a very high security clearance for a reason. When we moved to Oakland, her job was not a deployment; it wasn't even considered hazardous duty. She transferred to Sector San Francisco for a job that appeared to amount to pulling suicides from the water. I don't know how this qualified as "sensitive information," but she told me she could only talk about forty percent of what she did at work. From what I could see, she directed a boat in locating whatever was left of people who had lost their faith in whatever had been keeping them alive.

Nine months into all this, her feelings at home began to shift—at first, toward me.

"Maybe we could have a kid, after all," she said, hunkered over the counter of a yuppie barbecue joint on San Pablo. She's from Texas, where meat bathed in meat sauce with a side of meat is not an abomination. "What do you think?"

I was thinking of Thursday, actually. It was fall, and on Thursdays ten-year-olds in skinny white uniforms practiced baseball beside the McClymonds track. The team had a catcher so small that he disappeared inside his pile of pads. How sweet and serious they were, these clumsy Pinocchio-jointed kids, who had no reason to suspect the future of false advertising.

"Just say when," I said. "That paperwork is still somewhere."

Last time, the hitch was in the process of choosing a donor. Race, age, family history, height, eye color; I said we had the same conversation, structurally speaking, as deciding what to order on a pizza. The whole process was a problem. To get pregnant, the average woman had to be two out of three: straight, young, fertile. Otherwise, your miracle of life was reduced to a refrigerator of bar-coded sperm. I ended up with two fruitless incursions on my cervix, and a feeling of violation so powerful that I'd left the clinic the second time and gone straight to the bar. Millions of healthy children a year are conceived while drunk, so I didn't see a problem in it.

But now I dusted off a memory of where we'd stopped and offered it to her afresh. "I'll get the papers out and make an appointment to switch over my blood pressure pills again."

"It's my turn," she said.

Her lips went terse. Her ancestry was in her strong mouth and chin, where all the expression in her face resided. I should have let it rest. But I think we still both heard me saying, *Never mind, this is stupid. It feels like a bad imitation of starting a family.*

"You don't have to. I know you said—"

"It's my turn. I have a feeling about it. And it's fair."

"It's not chores."

"It's fair," she repeated.

Andrea is a Gemini and organized into two compartments: blind love and an almost robotic sense of duty. Her whole childhood had been a series of small and unjust surrenders to a family always on the verge of losing its mind. I was supposed to be the one person who didn't need rescuing.

"I'm happy to try again," I said. But Andrea had a nose for bullshit subtler than military-grade lie detectors. The server came around with another dose of molar-shattering sweet tea. I smiled at him in thanks, for a moment turning my face into the sort of lie I was trying to tell less often. We were not always happy anymore. Not everything was fine. I thanked him a second time, anyway, and asked for more napkins.

When he went away, I fumbled for the last thing we were talking about. "What exactly changed, anyway?" I was still wearing that dumb smile, and my voice still had the note of polite request I'd used with the server. It was not what I meant. "We just bought a house, I mean. I thought you wanted to wait, and you seem...about the neighborhood."

Her head came up and she answered, "Nothing. We never decided against kids. It was you who stopped bringing it up."

Deny, deflect, deliver the blame back to me unopened. We had the same argument, structurally speaking, every single time—twice that week alone. The server brought our meat, which glistened unpalatably. This was such a familiar argument that we'd resorted to finishing it in our heads, having lost faith that either of us could be persuaded. She wanted to make a better family than the one she'd grown up in, and she believed that our child absolutely needed be biological. But it seemed like a ridiculous science experiment. We had shouted at each other about this three or four times over the years, slammed doors on occasion, but you have to understand: we have no proclivity for combat. We were not helpless, but we never aimed the weapons at each other. For good or ill, we had never been each other's catharsis.

A few more silent minutes and my stomach felt like dry rubber.

"I'll just wait in the car," I said, and got up.

Outside was the triangle-shaped traffic island that was overrun by dealers and their drunk friends, a few prostitutes, and a number of penniless seniors from the retirement center who came for the beer. A half block away, our car window had been smashed and glass littered the leather backseat. A sign overhead said,

*Do Not Feed The Thieves!
Take Valuables With You.*

The only thing valuable in the car had been my old baseball glove.

Where do they go, meals served during arguments? Or the ones laid in front of you when you're too sad to eat?

When people say that cooking is praying, they refer, I think, to the workaday optimism that goes into preparing a dish of food. To reject the meal is to somehow disappoint the universal order of things. You scrape your plate into the trash and send that little prayer for nourishment

spinning off toward the other displaced energies of the cosmos.

When I got like this, I baked. I tried my grandmother's recipe for Syrian bread, which cannot be made with fewer than five pounds of flour and required more freezer space than we had.

In my twenties the process had still been instinctual, and the loaves would rise on my studio apartment's high counters, on the round glass tabletop, on my desk, on a cutting board laid across the sink, the dough draped with light pieces of muslin, each loaf transforming, each one drawing in its slow breath of life. The room smelled of yeast and that single cup of sugar, pulling in a sweeter note from childhood—my grandparents' long table, a table meant for big families.

This was near Pittsburgh, by the way; another constellation of immigrants, a whole other universe. Grandma was *Sitto*, distinguishing her from my father's mother, a hard root of an Irishwoman nobody really liked. And *Sitto*'s bread-making was as careful as her makeup. Nothing out of proportion. Teach your daughters how to discern. A woman's bread is just another reflection of her character.

I had small, square hands and long fingers. My mother bought me jewelry and showed me how to identify real crystal and care for real silver, in preparation for a life among a different class of women who would, I guess, possess these items. *I won't have you running around like a boy*, she would tell me. *Stay inside and set the table*.

On baking days, my grandmother would at last step down from the porch, her hair fluffed and redone, holding several of the flat, round loaves. I'd lounge wide-legged on the hot porch, watching her go door to door between the few neighbors she liked, offering them her bread.

When my mother asked me if it was her fault, I told her this:

It's like a preference for the color orange. You might be born liking orange a little more than the other colors. Then maybe something happens to you, and orange becomes the only color that can ever make you happy again.

That winter, twelve people jumped the bridge in January, a record.

Andrea and I started the salsa lessons again because we had run out of places to hide. On the days I worked at home, I googled sperm donors, and Andrea saw naked bodies coming up in the nets when she tried to go to sleep, and also when trying to stay awake in traffic across the bridge.

We were having a rough patch, each of us being dragged under a private swell. While she was at work, I watched cop cars fill the intersection; the old man living in his camper had OD'ed. A few weeks later, his ancient aunt, who was living inside the house, died of a heart attack. I wondered why goddamned OPD needed to grill the whole grieving household about a deeply geriatric woman with no money who'd died in her bed. I stressed my bewilderment and outrage as we drove to salsa lessons. Andrea cruised for open parking spots, unbothered by this latest doorstep cop-show: "They always ask. Elder abuse, etcetera."

There is nothing to say about the dance lessons themselves except that I was raised in a family surprisingly indifferent to music, with predictable effects on dancing ability, and that these sessions with Andrea felt like a pale imitation of having actual fun. This was too awful to say out loud.

Our relationship had begun in a confessional rush. At the end of our first months, we'd laid our histories out for each other like disclosure packets. In some ways, it really was exactly like committing to buying a house, right down to explaining which rooms people had died in, and of what causes, and whether further investigation was needed. For instance, in high school, her brother made three attempts to kill himself. She'd walked past his bedroom as he was sitting cross-legged on the floor, knotting his T-shirts into a rope. *What are you*—she'd started to say, and he shot to his feet, his face red and his dark eyes sparking with unreasonable rage. He'd slammed the door, and she went downstairs and said in a flat voice, "Mom, he's trying to kill himself again." That time, he spent a month in inpatient. The family underplayed everything: *It's Texas and he's gay. He has a chip on his shoulder. He's fine now. Why are you still crying?*

Part of Andrea's job, then, was being a deputy mother to her siblings. We learned each other through the content of these stories, and how they were told, and by how many times we revisited them. Then we traveled: the Halloween trip to Salem, a blue tent full of sunlight on the McKenzie River, a weekend hotel room in whatever city we were living in. She proposed these trips with the zeal of a travel agent, plugging us into cities and places we didn't belong. In our disorientation, nothing felt familiar except each other's body in the hotel sheets, her face in the candlelight of a two-top in New York or New Orleans, reviewing the day with a joy

slightly ridiculous but between us like a solid piece of light.

Our happiness felt earned.

Then we bought a house, and then dead bodies started popping up everywhere, and we started putting a lot of energy into pretending to have fun, because it was easier than admitting we used to be a little happier before the house.

White hipster artists live inside the church-apartment-tenement thing across from our house. One of them was friends with somebody who died in the Ghost Ship fire—along with thirty-five others who met a horrible end in a baroquely remodeled warehouse. About the same time as the fire, a real estate agent bought the neighboring building and started filing fire-hazard complaints like she was filling out a bingo card.

Months went by, and one Saturday morning, a rip saw began churning sawdust across the sidewalk. All five of them were working, hard, frantically. Someone's taxidermy bobcat snarled from the roof of the girl's old buttermilk-colored truck, both of them looking rotten in the sun. The guys in the street moved their chairs and their barbecue pits to the opposite corner of the intersection and watched the proceedings from there, under a rising cloud of skunky smoke. Our neighbor explained to me that the artists had till Tuesday to fix everything, or the fire marshal was going to evict them.

"And where you going, all fixed up?" he asked me, as I turned to go inside.

Boots with heels, a little jewelry, a decent scarf—the salsa lessons were an excuse to dig out the clothes I never wore because I worked at home.

"Just a little date night. Maybe dancing."

"Oooh, some dancing. Well, y'all have fun." He wore sandals year-round, and he shuffled back through his gate, giving a low, rumbling chuckle.

We called him Dad. He'd lived here all his life. It was his mother who'd died. And after the first shooting, he'd come to check on me, and he'd stood too close, demanding, *What do you think of this neighborhood? What do you think now?* Like he wanted me—and everyone else who didn't belong here—to finally understand how much he hated it.

"Forget these stupid lessons," I said. "What do we actually want to do? What about a cooking class?"

"I don't want to spend money on cooking in someone else's kitchen with a bunch of yuppie strangers on my days off. And I'm not hungry."

She got like this after a bad case. Yesterday, something secret had happened. She'd come home from duty and gone straight into the master

bathroom, standing for twenty minutes under the rainfall shower, rinsing herself and mumbling in low, staccato bursts. Her job involved being on the radio and conferring with law enforcement over the phone. Also notifying next of kin. It could have been anything. *I can't say what happened yet.* A night's sleep did nothing—she muttered in her dreams and got out of bed early. Sullen and upset, she refused to eat. These periods were like hunger strikes, and she'd already been losing weight.

I kicked off my heeled boots and fell onto the couch. "Fine. Fuck food."

Her knee slipped away and she slid to the other side of the couch. Her foot rested against our dog, who predated me in our life by almost ten years. Across the street, the rip saw screamed into another piece of wood.

"What?" I asked.

"I was thinking of buying a shotgun," she said, which was not what I expected.

"Oh?"

"A 20-gauge. The guys at work said to get a Mossberg."

"And what do you want this shotgun for?"

"Home defense."

"Oh." She liked watching zombie shows, and I did not. She enjoyed shopping in malls, but I did not. She liked and admired pickup trucks with impractically large tires, which was sort of a Texas thing, and whenever she mentioned any of these subjects I often said *oh* the same way. I loved her, so I loved that she loved these things, and I didn't mind subjecting myself to any of them. But she did not like guns, and even when I pushed my imagination to the extent of its powers—doors banging open, voices in the basement, armed junkies dropping over the fence—I could not imagine either Andrea or myself pointing this thing at another soft-bodied human. The logistics of it didn't make sense, anyway. *Hang on, pal, while I unzip my tactical home defense weapon and fumble for the safety.* It sounded like a confusing kind of sex. Also, I had bad eyes. So did she. We'd probably kill each other.

"If we have a kid," I said reasonably, "you don't want guns in the house."

She opened her hands, closed them. "Oh. You're probably right."

The rip saw shrieked again and someone shouted.

I said that I hated to point out the obvious, but if she was thinking of armed bandits overtaking the house, was she also still thinking of kids? Kids who would be on the front porch, kids who would play with Dad's grandkids next door, kids who would want to go for a walk, kids who

would grab things off the sidewalk and taste. As I pictured all these hypothetical kids and their kid behaviors, I also saw all the dead bodies in the neighborhood—the OD guy, his aunt, the three guys coming home from BART, the young woman who was stabbed. It was not a place, I said, to raise children who could enjoy the luxury of innocence.

Andrea's mouth turned to a seam. She acted like she'd been betrayed somehow, and it was my fault—the argument, the noise, our whole life. She looked away. In the dark, wood clattered to the sidewalk, the sound of things separated, things discarded.

"I think I hate this place," she said.

"But I don't think we need a shotgun," I repeated, hoping that much was obvious.

The next morning, when the light was still a pink sliver behind the Oakland hills, a truck with an

Oakland city logo pulled up across the street. Men in reflective jumpsuits rang certain doorbells, leaned ladders against certain façades, and went about installing devices that were the size and shape of large bird boxes. Our avian demographic was mostly

gulls, pigeons, crows, and doves, none that needed government housing. The boxes were part of a new EPA study to monitor air quality. Ghost Town nuzzles in the armpit of several highways and is a checkerboard of light industrial sites. The study, according to a post on the neighborhood forum, was seeking data on particulates from truck traffic, exhaust, emissions, and off-gassing from the nearby sewage treatment plant. In Ghost Town, what doesn't kill you makes you die eventually, slowly, of various cancers.

Two doors up, our neighbor Darlene was swiping hard at her front steps with a broom. As the dog stopped to pee, I asked her if she was getting a box on her house, too. She huffed and jabbed her broom across the next step. A thick cloud of dust sparkled in the air like powdered metal.

"Like I need the government to tell me something I already know."

"Maybe we should look at adoption instead," I suggested that night.

"It's expensive."

"It would give us another couple of years to get settled. Figure things out."

Andrea lay in bed next to me, reading the news on her phone. "I don't think we'd pass the home study. And I think you have to actually want children."

"I want kids. I think we'll make good parents. You will make an amazing mother. I want to watch our kids learn to read." My defensiveness and the fact that I mistook her sarcasm for a fair point were clues, belatedly, that sarcasm was indeed a way of telling the truth.

"Hang on," I asked, "should I take offense to that remark?"

She shrugged and put her phone over. "You don't need my permission to be offended. Do what you want."

Yes, it was a ridiculous question. I was ridiculous when I was trying to demonstrate to her that it was possible to be angry without being mean. I got out of bed and slammed the door, went to sleep on the couch, and when it was clear she wasn't coming out after me, caved into myself, succumbing to a kind of despair. It was like a hole growing wider behind my belly button.

Six hours later, she was just a uniformed silhouette against the predawn window, slipping out in the neighborhood's quietest hour for duty. The heavy blue fabric of her shirt smelled like coconut body spray and something else, the almost-sour, industrial newness of a fresh uniform. She held my hand a moment too long while I tried to remember what she'd said that had made me so angry. I fell back to sleep thinking she was at my side.

I woke alone to a hazy white sky. The hole in my gut expanded to a chasm holding all my doubt from last night, dense and crushing. Actually it hurt, a faint twinge and ache, like a hook catching.

I didn't want to call Andrea at work. I sent her a text message, still half-angry and knowing she wouldn't get it until she left the command center at lunchtime. You try to explain things to yourself. To connect events so that you understand why your plans are disintegrating in front of you; but what I really wanted was to ask someone else to explain it to us. A doctor. A priest. Her brother, but only if he was on his meds. I wanted to tell them about our child that didn't exist but which was already torn apart between us.

Duty was a twelve-hour shift that should have ended at 6:00 P.M. Andrea came up the stairs before four.

In Ghost Town, what doesn't kill you makes you die eventually, slowly, of various cancers.

“The command asked me to take a few days off.”

I waited. She said nothing. “Is it the same top-secret reason you didn’t answer my text, or a different top-secret reason?”

I regret my sarcasm. I couldn’t help it.

“I thought we could go to Texas,” she said.

I didn’t want to go to Texas.

“Then I’ll go to Texas,” she said. “You stay here and do what you want.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing,” I said, emphasis on *maybe*. “I’ll make some progress on the garden. You can bring back some of those chocolates.”

We began some kind of pantomime of making dinner, but I couldn’t bear the sight of the knife and Andrea gave up and cooked macaroni and cheese out of a box. It sat on the table, steaming in front of us, until it cooled, and then I fed it to the dog.

I liked the idea that these lost meals made their way to the afterlife, nourishing our dead, but I knew it was just one of those things I thought to make myself feel better.

The smell of coconut and new uniforms permeated the bedroom. Andrea’s ODU cargos lay heaped against the laundry basket, and her backpack and boots were by the door. She was on leave, I suppose, but she was gone.

I know, because I searched. From the antique finials on the porch railing to the polished concrete floor of the basement guest room, the household consisted of me, a museum of Andrea’s belongings, and our ancient, balding cattle dog asleep in the sunlight. The big suitcase was missing. So were several pairs of her shorts, most of her chancas, and her Longhorns baseball shirt, which she only wore during football season or when she went home to Texas.

I baked. I sat on the stairs and waited for the bread to rise, staring up at her collection of calavera masks and painted crosses, the pictures of her whole enormous family she hadn’t seen more than twice a year since boot camp. How could I compete with that? I don’t think I felt angry anymore. It was beyond me, in her own hands.

She’ll come back.

Her sense of duty will bring her home, at least for a while. We will step back from this ledge and try again because no matter the losses between us, existing alone is unlivable. I know we agree on that much. She’ll leave the Coast Guard if she can. We’ll sell the house and move. We’ll stay here. We’ll have kids, adopt kids, remain childless. We’ll go forward together, surrounded on every

side by past and future ghosts. It’s the same path it always was. We are just now noticing how weirdly it moves.

These futures repeat like Hail Marys as the dog and I go to the front porch. Out into the cool air, bearing still-warm loaves of bread, watching the sun trim the shadows. It is Saturday. Girls toss a softball in the corner park. Hammers pound in the hipster house. The guys from the street are a few doors away, gathered around the neighbor’s primer-coated Mustang, weaving him into their long-winded talk. From under an awning across the street, a leathered, gray-skinned woman lifts her elbow from her lawn chair, and after a hesitation, she waves at me in greeting. At the foot of her stairs is Dad, talking up to her, and I cross the street to offer them some loaves.

“Did you see the new school?” Dad says, tucking the loaf under his arm.

“Around the corner,” the woman says. “They finally done with it. Go on and look.”

The dog seems up for it, so we head to the next block and take in the new yellow fence, the white corrugated walls, the fresh concrete, the play structure in a perfectly deserted courtyard. The tufts of pampas grass are so fresh the dirt is still black around their base. All the classrooms overlook the playground; all their windows are brand new. Their glass still bears the factory stickers and adhesive warnings, waiting to be peeled away by so many little fingernails. ●