

ART BOUND

High & Dry: Caretaking the Ghosts of Cerro Gordo

High & Dry: October 30, 2014



The old Yellow Grade Road (dust storm on Owens Lake below) - Cerro Gordo, CA - 2014 | Photo: Osceola Refetoff

[High & Dry](#) surveys the legacy of human enterprise in the California desert. Together, writer/historian Christopher Langley and photographer Osceola Refetoff document human activity, past and present, in the context of future development.

*They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.
Samuel Beckett - "Waiting for Godot"*

No wonder Spiritualism, séances, mediums and visits with the dead took place in the dark of the 1800's. In the days when the streets, houses and buildings were not well lit, it was easy to experience the night full of spectral creatures, boogie men and things that go bump in the night.

In the daylight, I found Cerro Gordo, a mining camp that dates back to the mid 1870s, a charming rustic collection of period houses and weathered wood skeletons on the verge of tumbling in on themselves.

Ah, but the night is quite different. Darkness envelopes me, as I caretake the ghosts here. As the sun drops over the hills to the west and the Sierra Nevada crest behind, the landscape transforms into shadows of beasts and other phantasmagoria. It is peaceful as the thermal winds drop. The stars come out and satellites glide across the firmament. The Belshaw house cools. Footsteps cross on creaking floor planks in the house, tickling my over-active imagination. Mortimer Belshaw and Victor Beaudry were the first partners to own these mines. I know the silver from Cerro Gordo kick-started Los Angeles, as it was shipped out of San Pedro Harbor to be processed at the San Francisco Mint.

I think, *life is good if isolated at 8200 feet*. Then comes Wednesday night, and the first night of wind. The dark world here and days without visitors have made me sensitive to the environmental sounds I otherwise never hear in the noise of my every day life. The darkness makes me more able to hear each grate, rasp, creak or complaint of dry, boney limbs of the desiccated trees tapping at the window. There are the gusts that shake the old house, and the whistling, whining, grumbling, moaning, groaning gasps of the high desert winds. The world is alive with other worldly spirits.



Tramway Ramp Remains No.1 - Infrared Exposure- Cerro Gordo, CA - 2012 | Photo: Osceola Refetoff

Cerro Gordo can easily be filled with wanton regret of all those who lived and worked here. There are the prostitutes in the cribs, the starving Indians whose pinion crops were destroyed for firewood, and the miners who broke their spirits on hard rock and unfulfilled dreams.

I dismiss the suffering, the whining of those phantoms long dead and instead think, *Isn't this all so cool to be spending a week caretaking a ghost town?* But in the cemetery where the dead residents are buried, there are subtle signs hinting to me that nearly 300 forgotten souls are interred there in unmarked graves.

When the living departed after the mines played out, they took everything they could. They left only these decaying memories behind.

On the second night the sun starts to set, and shadows grow long. The mysterious deep shadows hide the entrances to the underground; I think about something. Suppose I have angered the ghosts by not truly remembering them and their lives, respecting their loves and losses. Tonight they will be about, and perhaps, just perhaps, come knocking at the door of the Belshaw house. What then?

Now the night wind keens my name. The only real corpse is the town itself. The wind soughs through the trees whispering to me. Loneliness creeps into Cerro Gordo softly on slippered feet following the shadows of the sun's dwindling rule.



Falling Down House on the Hill - Infrared Exposure - Cerro Gordo, CA - 2014 | Photo: Osceola Refetoff

Light a candle and wait for the ghosts and tommy-knockers to come calling, I laugh. Now I will welcome their humorless grievances murmuring in my ears, as long as it doesn't sound like the unsympathetic wind.

Earlier today, the second day of agitated weather, the south wind thundered in the eaves of this old house, but with the cooling evening, the hard gales are dropping temporarily to zephyrs. It is quieting down and my loneliness is filling my heart with the remorse of living too long without the assurance that loved ones will not die or fade away. The silence allows for thought, which cajoles remorse and disappointment instead of victory.

Deep in my past there is the ghost of a little boy who wasn't loved enough. I got him to come out and play with me but still he walks in the lonely dank alleys of the human heart. I now begin to think I have nothing to offer others: nothing to offer myself.

I feel a great personal sadness in this place of much human suffering. The winds return. I hear a knocking at the foundation in a gust of wind. Is that a lonely child who was murdered in his ancient bed? Is it a young man forced to walk the dusty streets, stumbling on hidden rocks, condemned to never have but temporarily what he needs continually. Loneliness can breed selfishness. I have lived well with many blessings. Bitterness is unwarranted yet must be constantly vanquished.



Hanging Chains - Cerro Gordo, CA - 2014 | Photo: Osceola Refetoff

There are chains rattling in the veiled night. Are they the ones I saw earlier, looped over the desiccated fence posts, now clanging in the dark? Or are they moldy bones loosely attached by dried sinews scrambling from the stony graves in the ancient cemetery on the hill? Have they come to mock my night of loneliness when they are condemned to an eternity of solitude?

Faith and hope are lovely in the daylight but seem wan and pale this windy tortured dry night. Now I hear the wind again, thumping at the shingles, asking coldly to come in and bring me comfort. The dead bring no comfort to the lonely. Nor do they bring the succor of faith or peace of tranquility.

It is a crowded night, filled with the ghosts of my long life. Some are people I loved and lost, some are people I failed to love enough. There is scraping, like the scourging of flesh from bones. Or is that simply leaves fluttering nervously against the windowpane? I am forlorn, but not totally alone for in the wind are other friendless spirits, forsaken and abandoned, unremembered by the living. These heartless phantoms can only bring cold comfort.

Tomorrow life will return to normal. The people I know will signal their allegiance and just maybe their love. But tonight the desert wind has vacuumed my heart empty of the solace of any other living human being with a warm and comforting touch nearby.

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