

KALANI ENGLER

Savage Garden III, 2019
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in



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My Nuclear Apocalyptic

Reflections on the trend
of household bomb
shelters in the 1960s

I spent thousands of hours in a nuclear fallout shelter custom-built for the previous occupants of my house in 1961. From nursery school through the eighth grade, I liked hiding out in this crypt-like chamber, the only dark and clammy section of an otherwise bright, airy, and relentlessly cheerful Southern California house, with windows so clear and wide that migratory songbirds snapped their necks on them.

The twenty-foot-long, nine-foot-wide, seven-and-a-half-foot-tall shelter was my one escape from the sun as a child. The shelter shared a door and a wall with my downstairs bedroom; I could go inside it whenever I wished. I was shy, socially awkward, and quite unpopular, so this windowless, brutalist room suited me just fine. Nails twisted out of the ceiling. A light bulb swung from a chain. An air-supply pipe ran from the outside, with a metal grille at one end to keep out mice and ivy rats.

The steel-reinforced cinder block walls were eighteen inches thick and plastered with pages torn from old issues of the *Daily Breeze* and *Los Angeles Times*. My brother and I would look at the grainy reproductions of H-bomb cloud photos. A seam of crumbling plaster ran across the ceiling, which had strange shapes repeating across the surface. These dim impressions looked like clamshells or UFOs. Sometimes, we drew maps of made-up worlds, or acted out Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." Bent on revenge, I took up my guttering torch and lured my archenemy, the foolhardy Fortunato, through dripping catacombs under a river, leading to a crypt, where I walled him in brick by brick and left him to his doom.

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My shelter was an anachronism, a Cold War curiosity, though an international crisis, such as the standoff between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump in 2017, can cause brief upsurges of interest in newfangled shelters made out of solid steel. A Yahoo! Finance story, published in September 2017, quotes Gary Lynch, general manager of Rising S Company, a manufacturer and distributor of customized steel underground bunkers, who reports that his sales in 2017 are "probably upwards of 1,000 percent" compared to 2016. Even the name of the company refers to the end of days, it means "Rising Son." Apocalypse-minded preppers have options ranging from a basic \$10,000 model

to a 15,000-square-foot \$8-million-dollar version with elevators and ramps. One owner of this model concealed his shelter's entrance to the elevator inside a building that looks from the outside like a log cabin. But worried Americans who are thinking of ordering a bunker should remember that our country already has thousands of them, designed for previous generations and awaiting service since the early 1960s.

Perhaps the old shelters could be retrofitted to make them more comfortable and fallout resistant than the original models. Nuclear-savvy realtors might consider using these vintage hideouts as selling points.

But if survivalists decide to build new bomb shelters or recycle existing ones, they will run into the same issues that confronted Americans in the Cold War: for instance, if you build it, will the wrong people come? How can you keep such a thing a secret? Should you tell your neighbors at all? Would it make more sense to just lock them out and leave them to the nuclear winter and the zombies? Bunker builders might also consider a more likely scenario: if a nuclear war never happens, what are you supposed to do with your expensive, time-consuming, and space-hogging fallout shelter? If the war ends up being a bust, the occupants may one day forget its original use and allow it to turn into a forgotten relic, an indestructible and haunted space that will outlast the rest of the house.

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My childhood home took shape during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the closest the world has come toward nuclear war. Dr. Edward Teller, known as the “father of the H-bomb,” warned that “the United States would cease to exist” without sufficient civil defense (I once saw him speak at a Fourth of July celebration in my hometown). The Georgia senator Richard Russell said that bomb shelters would be America's best hope to start over again with “another Adam and Eve” in the event of a nuclear holocaust. Meanwhile, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev gave the American bomb shelter-building industry a boost in 1960 when he smacked his shoe against a table at a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, four years after bellowing “*My vas pokhoronim*,” or “We will bury you,” at a meeting of Western ambassadors in Moscow.

The original owners of our house in Palos Verdes,

California, moved in shortly after the place was built in 1961, the year the *Los Angeles Times* printed a speculative illustration of a Soviet attack on Southern California. The picture ran alongside a what-if story with the headline “The Nuclear Apocalyptic,” which described warheads whizzing over the Arctic Ocean at fifteen thousand miles an hour. In the illustration, an iron cross near the bottom of the picture, beneath the stem of the mushroom cloud, is the impact point; the newspaper reporter described this point as the center of a “circle of horror” that would spread out after the bombs struck, creating twenty-eight square miles of nuclear desert. That circle would encompass Palos Verdes, twenty-five miles from the center of Los Angeles. A nuclear attack would turn my exclusive peninsula on the Pacific Ocean into a floating island.

The year my house took shape, Navy ships were preparing to blockade Cuba. Kennedy warned that nuclear war could be imminent, but the occupants of my house had a plan to keep them safe. The bomb shelter, with its steel-reinforced walls, water supply, and storage area, would keep them cozy underground. So what if the rest of my hometown went up in a titanic fireball, pulling soccer fields, mansions, schools, and statuary seven miles into the sky? They would be reading *Mary Worth* and *Alley Oop* in their bunk beds and eating tuna tetrazzini from a Pyrex casserole dish.

In spite of widespread fears about nuclear attack, bomb shelters like mine were uncommon. Though a few Cold War celebrities endorsed and installed these things—Groucho Marx had one, and so did Dinah Shore, Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt Jr., and Pat Boone—relatively few ordinary Americans could afford the time, the space, or the money to build one. One reason was the federal government's inability to secure funding to subsidize the bunkers. Even President John F. Kennedy could not convince Congress to set this bomb shelter money, dooming a proposed national shelter initiative. Another problem was discomfort. Though *Popular Mechanics* touted a “bomb-proof House for the Atomic Age” that could be accessed through a swimming pool and featured a spiral staircase, water and oxygen tanks, a full kitchen, and electric generators, most available shelters were far more basic and quite grim; most were glorified caves. All but a few of them lacked running water, and most only had space for bunk

beds, a few supplies, and chlorine-sprinkled containers—essentially kitty litter boxes for human beings—in lieu of toilets. “People who spent time in test shelters, ranging from a few days to several weeks, complained of excessive heat, boredom, and foul smells,” wrote Sarah Lichtman in an article about bomb shelters that appeared in the *Journal of Design History*.

In spite of such disincentives, perhaps as many as two hundred thousand bomb shelters were homebuilt or prefabricated, shipped, and installed in the United States by the mid-1960s, according to Kenneth Rose, author of the bomb shelter history *One Nation Underground*, though he cautioned against putting too much stock in such a “highly speculative” number; many bunkers were built in secrecy, which makes it impossible to calculate the total number.

But even if this two hundred thousand figure is accurate, that works out to be just one shelter for every 266 households at the time, Rose notes. “In an era in which most Americans (53 percent in 1961) believed that a nuclear war with the Soviet Union was likely to occur, an even more forceful argument can be made that 200,000 is a small number,” he wrote. In 1962, the Marx Toy Company had few buyers when it tried to peddle tin dollhouses with fallout shelters, complete with toy axes, two rollaway beds, cots, sinks, and chairs. Images of towels and first aid kits were printed on the tin walls. The company soon discontinued the product, which now sells on eBay for \$1,899.

The fact that these shelters were relatively rare made them a status symbol for white suburbanites. I find it striking that the previous occupants of our house took it upon themselves to build a shelter in an exclusive suburb that was, in itself, a shelter for the well-to-do. Palos Verdes, one of the most exclusive residential communities in the United States, once had covenants that blocked owners from selling or renting a house to “anyone not white or of Caucasian race.” My father once told me, indignantly, that the original 1939 deed to the property—apparently another house stood here before ours did—said “don't sell to Jews, Blacks or Orientals.” (My family is Jewish; my father loved the idea that our presence in the house would be a torment to the city's founding fathers.) Because it was so exclusive, the bomb shelter became status symbol on par with a backyard swimming pool. Suburbs, in themselves, were a way of limiting one's circle, choosing friends carefully,

and screening out so-called undesirables. For those who used the suburbs to escape the perceived dangers of cities, a bomb shelter represented yet another level of escape, social selectivity, and exclusion.

By 1962, it became clear that the Soviets had the power to detonate nuclear bombs that were twice as powerful as the one that smothered Los Angeles in the speculative picture that ran in the *LA Times*. And yet the enthusiasm for these shelters—limited as it was—began to curdle soon afterward.

Editorial writers, academics, and letter writers began to attack and ridicule the shelter concept. Though widespread mistrust of the federal government, and insufficient funds, spurred a brief DIY shelter-building movement, the critics of the shelters ridiculed their reasoning; wasn't it the government's responsibility to keep the citizens safe, rather than the citizens? And what about the people who didn't have a shelter? What should you do if your neighbors tried to force their way in? Was it ever okay to kill them if they tried to do this? A story about bomb shelters that appeared in a 1962 edition of *Time* magazine included an interview with a self-possessed suburbanite who vowed he would slaughter anyone who tried to gain entry. “When I get my shelter finished, I'm going to mount a machine gun at the hatch to keep the neighbors out if the bomb falls,” he said. “I'm deadly serious about this. If the stupid American public will not do what they have to to save themselves, I'm not going to run the risk of not being able to use the shelter I've taken the trouble to provide to save my own family.”

I did not learn about the room's true function until I was a teenager, although I sensed that there was something peculiar and paranoid about it even before then. It was as if the builders not only foresaw a bleak and brutalist future, but were trying to evoke it. Years later, when I was in my twenties, I went to the city government offices of Palos Verdes to see if I could find the specifications for the shelter and get a better sense of how it had been made. But when a clerk showed me the plans for the house, the bomb shelter was nowhere to be found—just a blank space where it was supposed to be—confirming my suspicion that this was a bootleg shelter. As far as the city was concerned, the room did not exist. I found this puzzling; how did the owners keep such a big project a secret? Surely, they had to hire a contractor to help them build it. The shelter is

located directly under the garage. It could not have been installed as an afterthought.

Lately, all those obsolete bunkers have been subject to another round of backlash. During a 2011 interview with *The Atlantic*, Susan Roy, author of *Bamboozled: How the US Government Misled Itself and Its People into Believing They Could Survive a Nuclear Attack*, argued that the fallout shelter boom was the result of manipulation by the federal government to frighten Americans into building the shelters, which would rein in their fears by making them feel less helpless in the face of an attack. In the process, Roy argued, the shelters would help Americans “normalize” the idea of a nuclear attack, regarding a mushroom cloud in the same way as they would an earthquake or a mudslide.

Building materials have changed since then. Rising S, for instance, uses steel instead of cinder blocks. New-fangled bomb shelters often come with state-of-the-art amenities such as “blast hatches” and “missile doors.” These days, the public credulousness toward the federal government has given way to suspicion—an antipathy that helped fuel the bunker-building survivalist movement even before Trump took office. But in most respects, our newly resurrected twenty-first-century bomb shelter culture feels almost identical to the 1960s version. The high prices of Rising S’s product, and online stories agonizing over “who we should invite into our bomb shelter” if the big one hits, suggest that Americans are still at a loss about the answers to the same old questions. If you are a man or woman of a certain age, the sales pitch of Rising S’s owner, Clyde Scott, will sound familiar in a queasiness-inducing way: “We are the longest living government in the history of the world without a complete collapse, the United States. It’s our time.”

A few years ago, during the height of the Twitter tensions between North Korea and the United States, I went back home to Los Angeles with my young daughter to visit my mother and take another look at the shelter. When we woke inside it, I felt like I was popping the top off a can of well-chilled Cold War air. Time did not stand still in the fallout shelter—it stopped.

For a few minutes, I traced the holes that book lice or silverfish had eaten into old wire-service stories about

Vietcong terror campaigns, Mao Tse-tung’s militant wife, and a reduced sentence handed down to a First Marine Division commander who had slaughtered a Vietnamese man and woman during a combat recon mission at Chu Lai. I read some of the headlines out loud. “Atom Treaty in Balance,” “Bombs over North Vietnam.” My daughter and I read Sunday comics in sherbet colors: *Bugs Bunny*, *Priscilla’s Pop*, and *Captain Easy*. Then my daughter asked me to turn the lights off.

I killed the switch, and together we stood in the dark. Now that I was grown up, I thought my mind could adjust more quickly and take in all the blackness without conjuring strange visions. This wasn’t the case. After a while of standing with the lights out and holding my gaze toward the far wall of the fallout shelter, I thought I saw something cloudy and luminous rise from the floor like a little ghost. After a while, the effect got to be too much for me to handle. I hurried my daughter out of the bunker and I locked the door behind me.

Dan White is the author of *The Cactus Eaters: How I Lost My Mind and Almost Found Myself on the Pacific Crest Trail* (Harper Collins, 2008), an NCIBA best seller and Los Angeles Times Discovery selection, and *Under The Stars: How America Fell In Love With Camping* (Henry Holt, 2016), which Cheryl Strayed described as “the definitive book on camping in America.” His writing has been published in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*, *Outside*, *Poets & Writers*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, and the *Washington Post*. He has an MFA in nonfiction from Columbia University, where he was a Dean’s Fellow and taught in the Undergraduate Writing Program. White was a Steinbeck Fellow at the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies at San José State University. A writing lecturer, White teaches a popular Ideas Generator writing course at the *Catamaran Literary Reader* headquarters in Santa Cruz, California.

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