



THE  
WORLD

Scrap, Treasure, and Songs of Apocalypse

IS ON

FIRE

Joni Tevis

"A whale of a book, bringing us the most wonderful things from the ends of the earth."

AMY LEACH

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MILKWEED EDITIONS

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And for all this, nature is never spent...

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things...

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GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS (1844–89)

“GOD’S GRANDEUR”

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If a thing is iron, then what? It rusts, you see. That's fire, too. The world is on fire. Start your pieces  
the paper that way. Just say in big letters, "The World Is On Fire."

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That will make 'em look up.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON,

"A MAN OF IDEAS," WINESBURG, OHIO

# OVERTURE

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The rust and the dust hold tales untold.

ROSS WARD, CREATOR OF  
TINKERTOWN FOLK ART INSTALLATION,  
SANDIA PARK, NEW MEXICO

# What Looks Like Mad Disorder:

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## The Sarah Winchester House

*San Jose, California*

Midnight, she knew, tasted of bitter water but smelled good as damp dirt. The dark hours had taught her that as she'd slid from room to room. A big house creates its own sink of nighttime silence ponderous as weather; how quiet the place back east had been. But these rooms were as noisy as she wanted, alive with the ring of dropped nails, chuffing saws. Hammers swung all night at her command.

She slept, if she slept, in a different bed every night, or else waited patiently at the little desk in the séance room. She went over accounts and sketched plans for the next day, chewing on dried apricots grown in her own orchards. Tough little suns, flat and orange—they caught in her teeth. One night she drew a spiderweb on a sheet of paper. It would become a design for a stained-glass window.

She must have seen something she recognized in the spider. How every night she spins herself home, and every dawn destroys it. How she anchors herself in a sturdy spot, reels out a loop, and adds the weight of her body. From this triangle, everything begins.



Once upon a time there lived a baby girl, the only child of parents rich beyond measure. But when she was just a few weeks old, that baby died. Some years later, her father died too, and her mother was left alone. The mother had been the hub of a small family and now was the center of nothing, drifting from room to room, eyes dimmed by grief, hands empty. Maybe she felt a curse had fallen upon her, and maybe one had.

So she went to Boston and found a soothsayer who told her to move west, begin building a house and never stop, lest the spirits that had taken her daughter and husband come for her. There were legions of those ghosts, the medium said, all the people killed by her husband's guns. For this grieving woman had inherited the vast fortune of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Sarah was her name, Sarah Pardee Winchester, and this was her house.



We're standing in the courtyard, my husband, David, and I, waiting for our tour to start. The fountain beside us sparkles and spurts. We hear occasional honks from the traffic outside on Winchester Boulevard, and kids squealing as they horse around in the Victorian Gardens—it's a busy place, and we squint in the sun, tickets in hand.

We're between jobs, all our things stacked in a storage unit across the country in a new state, in a town called Apex. *You have to go where the work is*, people say. Well, we've done that, following jobs from Texas to Minnesota to North Carolina. Will one of us get a steady job when the hiring season starts up again next month? If not, what then? "We'll get by," David says, but right now, I can't see how.

In the meantime, we're taking a few days off, finagling frequent-flyer miles and a spot on our friends' sofa into a California junket. When we started packing, we couldn't find our suitcases—the were buried too deep in that storage unit. So we stuffed our clothes in a box that a coffee pot had come in, taped it shut, and heaved it onto the baggage belt. An awkward fix, but it would have to do.

The intercom crackles: *Tour number seventy-one, prepare to depart from the side entrance.* Twenty of us line up, a mixed bunch: retired couples, a father with two children, a boy in a *Zapa Vive!* T-shirt. Our guide, a stony-faced college student with dark hair cut in sleek wings, lays down the law. "Keep up," she says. "Stay with the group. If you get lost, you'll have to find your own way out. Nobody will ever find you."

With that, we step inside, through what used to be a service entrance. Nothing grand, just the threshold over which Sarah used to walk, sometimes with her favorite niece, but most often alone. And entering here, I feel off-kilter—will feel off-kilter for the whole mile-long tour, through the 24,000-square-foot mishmash of a house. No time to ponder that as we shuffle up the shallow East Riser steps—built late in Sarah's life to help her arthritis—into the \$25,000 Storeroom, as it's now called, still stocked with expensive wallpaper and stacks of stained-glass windows; along endless rubber-runnered halls, stopping here and there to hear paragraphs of the guide's spiel; and occasionally passing other groups, whose guides repeat the same anecdotes with the same scripted language. Does anybody believe this stuff?

Here's the first story they tell: workers left nails half-driven when they heard of Sarah's death. She paid them three dollars a day, in cash—double the going rate. Many of them lived on the property, either in regular servants' quarters or in apartments below the water tower. And she kept them working at all hours. The Boston medium's prediction included the warning that Sarah had to keep renovating her new house constantly. If the hammers fell silent, the spirits would come for her. So she made sure that never happened. When she moved into the house, it had eight rooms, and she was three years a widow. When she died in 1922, thirty-eight years later, it had 160 rooms, some of which she had remodeled six hundred times.

Right away someone asks, "Was she crazy?" The question sticks in my craw. It feels too knee-jerk, too dismissive. What can you call that level of revision but obsessive? And yet something in it resonates with me; maybe she just wanted to get it right. I tuck the question into my notebook and hurry to catch up with the rest.

We don't know which eight rooms comprised the original farmhouse; we don't know where Sarah began. So start with a nail, one end blunt and the other end sharp, ready to bite its beam. I wonder if nails pleased her as they please me; if she found them waiting for her on the sidewalk or in the street, if, when she bent to pick one up, her dark veil belled around her face. If, all day, her fingers worried in her pocket. Nails were newcomers here, in the Valley of Heart's Delight, as she was. Resourceful people had whittled pegs before. Now they prized crates apart and hammered nails free. A good nail could be used more than once.

How different things might have been had she married a maker of nails. But she had married a gun man, William Wirt Winchester, and after his death she became the weapon his family had perfected, repeating, her hammers' plosive stutter reshaping the rooms. Walking these hot halls, past oscillating fans that don't do anything to move the air, I shift beneath the weight of the guilt Sarah chose to bear. What stories do we tell ourselves about who we are? If we repeat them often enough, we'll start to trust them.

"Recently," our tour guide says, "a psychic contacted Sarah, and do you know what she said?" She flicks her eyes over us, waiting. "*What are all these people doing in my house?*" As soon as she says

the words, I know they're true.

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It started with a man's dress shirt: funny to remember that. Her father-in-law had found a way to make it fit better through the shoulders. From shirts he moved to guns, shot, bullets: the Winchester rifle, the Gun that Won the West. Eventually, Winchester factories would turn out products as diverse as meat grinders, scissors, fishing tackle, and roller skates—"The Skate With a Backbone"—but then and now the company was best known for its firearms. Back in 1866, the year baby Anne was born and died, the Gun that Won was underwriting Sarah's life in New Haven, Connecticut. That gun paid for roast duck, hothouse greens, down-stuffed bedticks; it kept her servants in board and uniforms; it paid for doctors, ministers, and, at the end, the sexton. That gun hired a stonecutter and paid for a small casket, lined with silk.

And a few years later, after her husband died, Sarah must have known she couldn't build the \$25,000 Storeroom without the warehouses of guns, ready to be loaded into crates, into railcars, into waiting hands ready to shoot Apache and Pueblo by the thousands. Lead soldered water pipes and joined panes of glass; lead made ammunition. In the Winchester shot tower, seven stories of carefully engineered furnaces and molds terminated in the water tanks where hot shot was dropped to cool with hissing and steaming. Soothsayers used to employ lead rings to divine your future, holding the circles aloft with threads, burning through the threads, and marking where the rings fell. But Sarah asked her questions of the Boston medium, who scratched out answers with a planchette one letter at a time.

By all accounts Sarah's days in California were busy ones. The weight of her body anchored her here, on thick rugs that showed no wear and polished floors that glowed like gunstocks. Sarah became an entrepreneur, buying real estate, running her farm, selling walnuts by the barrel. She stored up spade and mattock and blade, oil and whetstone, homing pigeons and ivory leg cuffs, screws cast from solid gold. She invented a sink with a built-in washboard, and a window clasp modeled after a rifle lock, paying homage to both cleanliness and defense. And although she set up the house to be self-sufficient, with its workshop, water tank, and gas reserves, still she answered the call of the outside world—rosewood and teak for the floors, German silver inlay for doors, pipestone for a fireplace.

In the end, she knew none of it mattered. She signed her thirteen-page will thirteen times, leaving provision for the house to be sold at auction and the furnishings to be left to Francis, her favorite niece, who took what she wanted and sold the rest. A practical way to dispose of things: leave the gaslight chandelier with thirteen jets; leave it all, with minimal instructions, so that mountain of stuff won't hold you back. Set aside a sum to hire a man to deal it all out once you're gone.

How I love a good auction, the auctioneer's chant braiding buyers, goods, price. His chant is a ballad that lasts all day, and each lot is a verse. *What will you give me*, he cries, *what'll you give me*. More, always more: rugs scrolled like scripture, bareheaded lamps shorn of shades, books of orchardcraft, cobbler's tools. Sales used to be regulated by candles; bidding lasted, like a séance, until the flame guttered dry.



But for the kitchen, the Grand Ballroom, and the séance room, it's hard to tell what most of the rooms were used for, and that's not the only thing that gives the Winchester House a rickety, kaleidoscopic feeling. There are shallow cabinets an inch deep, and others large as generous rooms. One door opens onto a one-story drop, another onto slats instead of flooring. A staircase ends blind in a ceiling, and

another forks into a Y, eleven steps up and seven steps down. Despite the fortune Sarah spent, the house feels temporary as a badly pitched tent.

Here we stand in the Hall of Fires. It's lined with hearth after hearth, strange for central California but the guide tells us that Sarah craved the heat to ease her arthritis. I think of her sitting on the bench, listening to her house: a medium taps out a message from the dead, coins snick like knitting needles, and a gun-shaped latch snaps home. Two swings tap a trim nail true. A burning log hisses, freeing drops of old rainwater. A signal card drops into a slot: Mrs. Winchester needs assistance in the Hall of Fires, and a nurse heads toward her to help. Radiators knock, carrying waves of warmth. The rim of a plate kisses its kin, and the maid clicks the cupboard door closed.



By April 1906, Sarah had lived in her house twenty-two years. During that time, her workers had built, among many other rooms, the Grand Ballroom. Whereas the rest of the house follows no rules—chimneys stop shy of ceilings; an extravagant rock-crystal window receives only slantwise light—the parquet floor in the Ballroom is precise down to the hair.

“The floor builder used no nails,” our guide tells us, “only glue.” He would have worked a section at a time, fitting one piece of smooth wood against another in a neat herringbone. This must have been the hushed corner in a house constantly worried by sound, and even now I'd like to stand here awhile quiet, in this sunny corner.

I wonder if he heard the remembered racket of other workers when he slept at night, as I have in my own dreams, the carnival jingles of the theater-lobby arcade, the burr and shriek of machine parts turning and dropping off the lathe.

Above the glowing floor hang two stained-glass windows with quotations from Shakespeare. From *Troilus and Cressida*: “Wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts”; from *Richard II*: “These same thoughts people this little world.” According to legend, only three people ever entered the house through the richly carved front door: Sarah, the man who delivered it, and the door-hanger. When Theodore Roosevelt dropped by one afternoon to express his admiration for Winchester rifle, servants sent him around back.

But on April 18, 1906, just after sunrise, the earth shook. In San Francisco, the ground liquefied and houses crumbled, their fronts peeling off and their walls buckling and kneeling. There must have been screams and silence—people shaken from sleep and too surprised to speak. When the gas line ruptured, walls of flame pushed up the city's hillsides; pictures taken just after the disaster show buildings planed open, whole city blocks of blackened rubble where houses had stood, rifts carved into the countryside, oaks riven, fences fallen, barns sucked flat.

Later, some witnesses told of hearing “an approaching roar” at dawn, or feeling a cold touch upon the cheek. Others said dogs pawed at doors and birds flew strangely; earthworms wriggled to the surface and tied themselves in knots. In the Daisy Bedroom, a fireplace shook loose and collapsed, and Sarah was trapped alone.

“Sarah believed she caused the quake,” our guide says. “She thought the spirits were rebuking her for spending too much time on the front part of the house.” So, the guide goes on, she ordered the rooms to be boarded shut and never went there again. No one danced across the Grand Ballroom's smooth parquet, no chamber orchestra warmed the walls with music, and no friend paused in front of the Shakespeare windows and asked Sarah what she meant in choosing them.

But the guide hustles us away too quickly from the earthquake-wrecked rooms, with the

crumbling plaster and naked studding, lengths of ship-lathe and dusty little cobwebs. Light bends from a curved window. Torn wallpaper and scrawls of glue stain the walls, and I think of that old line from Pliny the Elder: "Hence also walls are covered with prayers to ward off fires." The floor creaks companionably, and there's no armchair to distract, just the bones of the tired old house. I'd stay here all day if I could.



A telling detail hides in the house's thirteenth bathroom: a spiderweb window Sarah designed. The artisan rendered the web's arcs in balanced curving sections of glass, but this is shorthand; in any real web, something more pleasing than symmetry develops. After all, symmetry leaves gaps, and if prey escapes, the spider starves.

Jean-Henri Fabre, a French naturalist writing during Sarah's lifetime, noted that the orb-weaver spider works in a method that might seem, to the untrained observer, "like mad disorder." After the initial triangle, spokes, and spiral, she rips out the preliminary threads, whose remnants appear as specks on the finished web. (In one added room of the Winchester House, you can make out the slope of a previous roof, a vestige of what the house used to be.) The spider fills out the web, testing its tension as she goes, finally building up the "sheeted hub," a pad near the web's middle where she rests and waits. Fabre calls this area "the post of interminable waiting." When night fades, the spider destroys the web, eating the silk as she goes. Says Fabre: "The work finishes with the swallowing."

The spider carries within her belly a store of this strong, pearly stuff, which nobody has yet been able to replicate. She dashes along an invisible line to bind a fly with bights of silk; she bluffs her foe by "whirling" or "shuttling" her web at them. Naturalists used to carry scraps of velvet to the field, so they could have a better backdrop for examining the webs they found. An entrepreneur once made wad-cork-padded cuffs and fitted them to a spider's legs, then wound skein after skein of silk from his spinnerets until the creature ran dry. He repeated the process with thousands of spiders until he had enough material to weave a gray gown of spider silk, which he then presented to Queen Victoria. During World War II, British gun manufacturers used black widow silk to make crosshairs for rifle sights.

As for me, when spring comes, I keep a lookout for the "sea of gossamer," as it's been called when spiderlings take flight. In summer I have spied many a tight purse or reticule in which a swaddled grasshopper still struggles, staining the silk with dark bubbles of tobacco juice. And in fall I watch big garden spiders move from holly bush to camellia, spooling out guy lines and waiting under the streetlight for miller moths. With articulate legs, they pluck strands of silk and load them with gum. When dawn comes they finish hunting and tear down their webs, swallowing the golems a line at a time.



The Winchester House was once a living thing, Sarah's shadow self, breathing in and swelling out as tough as twice-used nails. There are many threads to this story; many entrances, but only one safe exit. Not the door that opens onto a one-story drop, or the one that opens onto slats above the yellow kitchen. Sarah knew the way out; she designed it. After she died, movers needed maps of the house to empty it.

The house's largest cabinet is the size of a generous apartment. A cabinet is a container, a room with single-minded purpose. Pliny tells of a house built of salt blocks mortared with water; how the



sun shining through those walls must have glowed red at sunset. A fitting shelter for ghosts: crimson translucent, walled with tears.

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Sarah knew her house to be founded on blood, invocations written on the walls, looping script glue holding the heavy wallpaper tight. Such a house, built for the dead, turns itself inside out, night after night. Windows mutter curses, drains align with Saturn rising, nails turn from gold to lead. She moved veiled through her nights, knowing what others did not, and placing a coin on every tongue her guns had stopped. Some jaws opened easily, others she wrenched apart, still others (blown away) she could not find: for these she placed gold on the breastbone, flat as a plectrum. The hum of voices grew. Sarah heard them all.

Step through a little door. “Welcome to the séance room,” the guide says, and something about the room does feel mysterious. Not just because of the thirteen hooks in the closet, or the three entrances and one exit (two doors only open one way). Here was where Sarah moved the flat planchette across the divining board, spelling out messages from the dead. The room feels like a sheeted hub, a knot.

Samson spoke false when he said, *Weave my hair into the web of your loom, and I will become weak as any man*, but it would have been natural for Delilah to believe him; superstitions about weaving have been around as long as knots themselves. Part a bride’s hair with the bloodied point of a spear. Forbid pregnant women from spinning, lest the roots of the growing child tangle. To treat infections of the groin, tie the afflicted person’s hair to the warp of a loom, and speak a widow’s name (*Sarah, Sarah, Sarah*) with every knot.

Move from legend to artifact and find hair jewelry, a practice that reached its obsessive height during the Victorian era, a way to keep a scrap of an absent loved one close. Women wove locks of hair into watch chains, button covers, and forest scenes, or braided ribbons from forty sections of hair, weighting them with bobbins to pull them flat as they worked. In Boston, a man had two hundred rings inset with locks of his hair and had them distributed at his funeral; their inscriptions read “PREPARE TO FOLLOW ME.”

When Sarah searched for the center of her life she found her child, quick breath in her ear, war weight on her heart. She remembered the slight rise and fall, remembered counting the breaths standing in the dark nursery past midnight, holding her own breath to better mark her infant’s.

She tucked a simple lock of baby’s hair in a safe and knitted a house around it. Whose grief could be more lavish than hers? She wove a row of rooms—hummed calls toward the dead, boxes made music, measure upon measure. Began, like a spider, with three: herself, her husband, their child. Cut herself, the rifles, those slain. The séance room has three entrances, but only one exit. The Fates hold three lengths of line and a keen edge to cut them.

From three points, she moved outside of language, opening the priceless front door, stepping over the threshold and bolting the door behind her. Spoke notes and rhythm and commerce (per box of dried apricots, less the cost to grow them). In her youth, she had spoken four tongues, but now she spoke the language of nails, to which no one could reply. While her carpenters built, she spoke through them, though they remembered nothing beyond *Worked on the kitchen today*. They cracked jokes about ghosts while they worked, but that wasn’t what made them uneasy; it was the way she used them to get outside speech. A good enough reason for paying them double—once for building twice for hiding her secrets. Her army of men, working day and night, could drive a nail for every bullet sown and not feel the debt of guilt she had to bear. No wonder she kept them working throughout the dark hours.



In a gravel-floored aviary, Sarah kept tropical birds. To understand the speech of sparrows, touch marigold to your bare foot on the appointed day. Tuck a bittern's claw into your lapel for luck. The blood of a pelican can restore murdered children to life.

I read Aesop's little-known fable, "The Lark Burying Her Father." The lark lived before the beginning of the world. Water stretched out before her; she hollowed a home in the mist. When her father died, she was forced to let him lie unburied six days, because there was no earth to cover him. Finally she split open her head and buried her father inside. To this day, her head is crested like a burial mound.

Spared the problems of the birds who would come after her—the myrtle tree to ensnare, the genet to distract from food—the lark's difficulty was elemental. Just the primary problem of grief, and not a bit of dust to hand to help. Later, Aesop relates, she would tell her children, "Self-help is the best help."

The problem of what to do with the dead was one Sarah also confronted. She buried her bodies the usual way, then moved across the country and built a living house in which she buried herself again and again. Pliny records that magpies, if fed on acorns, can be taught to speak. Going further, Pliny claims that they develop favorite words, "which they not only learn but are fond of and ponder carefully. . . . They do not conceal their obsession." Did any of Sarah's tropical birds possess the power of speech? If so, what did she long to hear them say? *Help* or *home* or *Mama*, a name no one had ever called her? We don't know if they were toucans or macaws or quetzals, whether they screamed or croaked, only that they were tropical and that they came, like Sarah, from far away.



After a quick pass through the basement with its ancient furnace and rust-stained cement floor, the tour ends and we're escorted out a low door. Our guide takes her leave, and we're free to wander the grounds, crunching along gravel paths between the carefully clipped boxwoods, the thirteen palm trees, and the bronze sculpture of Chief Little Fawn. Press a button by the fountain and listen to the talking box tell its story. A boy of twenty, probably a guide-in-training, studies a stapled script underneath an ancient grapefruit tree. It's a lot to remember.

You can see anything you want in Sarah Winchester. Craft a story from what bits and scraps you know. Her house is the primary document left to show us who she was, and it's so easy to read wrong. What was she trying to say? Was the house a letter to herself, or a cryptic message to the outside world?

Whatever the place is, it makes people uneasy. I heard it in the nervous banter of the other visitors ("I think we should visit the firearms museum," a man said to his son. "I think *that* would be interesting.") ("She might have been *too* educated," a woman said to our guide, who ignored her.) I can't say whether the house is haunted or not, but it got under my skin.

Her naked display of long-term grief makes me flinch. Could I do any better? Could any of us? When her husband and child died, she mourned them the rest of her life. All that buying and selling couldn't distract her. She did not hope for heaven—*what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?*—but let the world pass through her fingers: imported stone, brass smelted in faraway furnaces. Cared for none of it except as material bulk, something to make the house more than what it had been. Ordered the gardener to put in a new bed of daisies and hawthorn; page through a catalog offering English yew and monkey puzzle, catalpa and persimmon, whose bitter fruit she craved.

For me, the stories about Sarah are the worst of it. All the easy myths, free of real life's halting measures; the tour guide's flip answers, and the dismissive chorus: *She must have been crazy*. In fact, in Sarah's constant rebuilding of the house—an occupation with roots in the daily and domestic, but which she was able to take to new lengths because of her tremendous wealth—she looks a lot like an artist at work. If she'd been like her father-in-law, perfecting one object and mass-producing it, we would remember her for her innovation and engineering. If she'd been like most upper-class women of her time, creating House Beautiful around her and then living out her life there, we wouldn't remember her at all.

But Sarah Winchester did a bit of both when she created her house. Because she didn't leave any explanatory documents behind, all we have is the coded message of the house itself. Linger over its crooked lines, fish-scale shingles, and old-growth redwood painted over to look like birch, and you can see she was doing what an artist does—leaving her mark and seeing what happened; working through an idea via metal, wood, and space; expanding the notion of what life is all about.



After we left the Winchester House, we stopped at an Army Navy store and bought a duffel bag to replace the battered coffee-pot box for the trip home—a step in the right direction. But long after I dragged the duffel through the door of our new place and started unpacking, I couldn't let Sarah go. Dangerous, maybe, to take a big trip like that, when you're between stages of your life, looking for work, unsure of who you are. I kept coming back to a postcard we bought in the Winchester House gift shop, a reproduction of the one extant photo of Sarah. She's seated in a carriage behind a driver, and even though she's at some distance, there's a smile on her small, expressive face. She looks content with someone with work that needs doing. In that moment, she's far away from the morning she buried her child, farther still from her husband's rattling sickbed, and just like that she passes through the ordinary safe exit into the realm where time shunts away and hours, days, thirty-eight years pass and she follows the unspooling line of her thought to its ragged end and looks up to see the marks she's made. Floor, ceiling, wall; this covers me; this crowns me; this pushes me forward. *Self-help is the best help*, perhaps she believed it. But Sarah's story ends not with a tidy moral but a dashed-off map. The movers, at least, would find that useful.

She could have filled scores of rooms with visitors. But in the end, the memory of her lost one was enough for her. We are the crowd she never invited. (*What are all these people doing in my house?*) Now every day is filled with the tread of feet, the whisper of hands sliding along banisters, the hum of conversations she can't quite make out.



We signed a year's lease on a brick cottage outside Apex. I spent my days running among libraries: a small elegant domed one with a smooth marble floor, barrister's tables, and an echo; the main one, eight stories and two sub-basements crammed with no-nonsense metal shelves; the zoology one, where I read Fabre in a cozy little carrel; the geology one, with maps of historic earthquake activity and potted succulents growing in deep-silled windows. I read an article about scientists feeding LSD to spiders to see how it affected their webs. I read that earthquakes leave coded messages in the earth around them and that San Francisco politicians tried to deny the 1906 quake after it happened. That an old Roman myth tells of a gown made of moonbeams, and of the pages, with eyes sore and bloodshot, who carried it to Hera. That barbed wire used to be called "the devil's rope," and that you can tell the construction

date of a house by the nails that bind it together.

~~At the time, it didn't occur to me that I was obsessing over the details of someone else's house,~~ even as I craved a place of my own. When our year's lease was up, we moved to yet another state where we've been ever since. Now we live in a tidy little bungalow with green shutters and a tight roof we paid for ourselves, with gleanings from those steady jobs we scoured the country to find. From this place of greater stability I see the Winchester House in another light: maybe an art installation, as I initially believed, or maybe just something to fill Sarah's time.

Still, nights when I can't sleep, I walk the halls of a darkened library, a place Sarah bequeathed to me. Her ramshackle house provided me plenty of work, paragraphs to draft and revise again and again, dry little suns to gnaw on, morsels sweet and tough by turns. Even now, telling these secrets, sliced pages whisper beneath my fingertips and I smell marvelous old dust and glue. I breathe in air that carries with it words tucked between heavy covers, tales spelled out one letter at a time.

# ACT ONE

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Remove this sheet and keep it with you until you've memorized it.

*SURVIVAL UNDER ATOMIC ATTACK,*

OFFICE OF CIVIL DEFENSE, 1950

# Damn Cold in February:

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## Buddy Holly, View-Master, and the A-Bomb

OK. So then when you get sent out to the test site, first of all I'm curious what your impressions of that were, because you are now in the middle of a desert compared to a—  
*It's damn cold.*

Yes, the desert's cold in the winter.

*In February, it's damn cold.*

First impression: cold.

*And it's dry, except when it rains.*

—Robert Martin Campbell Jr.,

atomic veteran (Navy), describing his initial

impression of the Nevada Proving Grounds, 1952

Click through the images, one at a time. VIEW-MASTER ATOMIC TESTS IN 3-D : YOU ARE THERE! reads the package. The set's reels show the preparations for the 1955 Apple-2 shot, its detonation, and the Nevada Test Site today. Three reels, seven images each.

Of the hundreds of atomic devices exploded at the Nevada Test Site from 1951 until 1992, the ones that stand out are those featuring Doom Town, a row of houses, businesses, and utility poles. It makes sense: the flash, the wall of dust, and the burning yuccas are impressive on their own, but without something familiar in the frame, the explosion can seem abstract. Doom Town—also called Survivor City, or Terror Town—makes the bomb anything but theoretical. These are the images I can't forget.

Click. Here's Doom Town's iconic two-story house, a classic Colonial with shuttered windows balancing a front door. Neat and tidy, with white-painted siding and a sturdy red-brick chimney: if this were your house, you'd probably feel pretty good about yourself. But something's wrong. The vehicle parked in the drive isn't a Dodge or a Packard but an Army jeep; on the chimney's edge, a bloom of spray paint shows the siding was painted in a hurry. This is a house nobody will ever live in. Its only inhabitants are mannequins with eyes like apple seeds.

All part of the plan, and the planning took far longer than the event itself. A crew unloaded telephone poles, jockeyed them upright, and drilled them into the alluvium. Down in Vegas, men bargained for cars and stood in line for sets of keys. Imagine the hitch and roar of a '46 Ford, '55 Hudson, '48 Buick, and '47 Olds as they pull onto the highway, headed for the proving grounds. Click. Here's one of the cars now, a pale-blue '49 Cadillac with 46 painted on its trunk in numbers two feet tall, marked like an entrant in a demolition derby.

You could say the whole country pitches in. Fenders pressed from Bethlehem steel, lumber skidded out of south Georgia piney woods, glass insulators molded in West Virginia, slacks loomed and pieced and serged in Carolina mills. And mannequins made in Long Island, crated and stacked and loaded onto railcars.

Click. In an upstairs bedroom, a soldier tucks a mannequin woman into a narrow bed, the mattress's navy ticking visible beneath the white sheet. Outside the open window, the white glare of the desert at noon. Downstairs, another soldier arranges a family, seating adults around a table and positioning children on the floor, checking the dog tags around each of their necks.

What's a plan but a story, set not in the past but the future? Someone in the Civil Defense Administration already decided how many mannequins this house will hold, what they'll wear, whether they'll sit or stand. But surely this soldier can allow himself the freedom to choose, say which game the children on the floor will play. For Brother and Little Sister, how about jacks? A good indoor game. And Big Sister, let's set her off from the rest, next to her portable record player, its cover lying on the floor like a limp snake. Father leans toward the television, one hand on his knee and the other on the pipe resting in the hole drilled in his lip. The blank television reflects his face; he could be watching the news.

\*

The tremendous monetary and other outlays involved (in testing far away) have at times been publicly justified by stressing radiological hazards. I submit that this pattern has already become too firmly fixed in the public mind and its continuation can contribute to an unhealthy, dangerous, and unjustified fear of atomic detonations. . . . It is high time to lay the ghost of an all-pervading lethal radioactive cloud (to rest). . . . While there may be short-term public relations difficulties caused by testing atomic bombs within the continental limits, these are more than offset by the fundamental gain from increased realism in the attitude of the public.

—Rear Admiral William S. “Deak” Parsons, 1948

In 1945, Manhattan Project physicists exploded the first atomic device, Trinity, in the desert outside Alamogordo; a little more than two weeks later, the *Enola Gay* dropped Little Boy on Hiroshima, and three days after that, *Bockscar* dropped Fat Man on Nagasaki. Scientists predicted that the United States' monopoly on atomic weapons would hold for at least twenty years, but in 1949, the Soviets proved them wrong, exploding a bomb named First Lightning. In response, Harry Truman authorized the building of Mike, the first hydrogen bomb, tested in the South Pacific. The logistics of testing so far away made the process costly, so a public relations campaign was conducted in order to convince Americans that testing closer to home—at the Nevada Test Site, an hour or so north of Las Vegas—was desirable and safe. By and large, the public got on board with this campaign, and although much of the evidence generated by the tests was kept classified for decades, the Department of Defense and the Atomic Energy Commission made it a priority to publicize some of the information. Broadcasts of the tests were shown on television, newspaper reporters and photographers documented them, and civilians were encouraged to witness the explosions.

In the summer of 1957, an article in the *New York Times* explained how to plan one's summer vacation around the “non-ancient but none the less honorable pastime of atom-bomb watching.” Reporter Gladwin Hill wrote that “for the first time, the Atomic Energy Commission's Nevada test program will extend through the summer tourist season, into November. It will be the most extensive test series ever held, with upward of fifteen detonations. And for the first time, the A.E.C. has released a partial schedule, so that tourists interested in seeing a nuclear explosion can adjust itineraries accordingly.”

Hill's article suggests routes, vantage points, and film speeds, so that the atomic tourist can capture the spectacle. But is there anything to fear from watching an atomic explosion? Rest assured, he says, that “there is virtually no danger from radioactive fall-out.” A car crash is the bigger threat, possibly caused by the bomb's blinding flash or by “the excitement of the moment, [when] people go careless in their driving.”

In the article's last paragraph, Hill writes, "A perennial question from people who do not like pre-dawn expeditions is whether the explosions can be seen from Las Vegas, sixty-five miles away. The answer is that sometimes enough of a flash is visible to permit a person to say he has 'seen an atomic bomb.' But it is not the same as viewing one from relatively close range, which generally is a breathtaking experience."

That summer, after winning the title of Miss Atomic Bomb, a local woman poses for photos with a cauliflower-shaped cloud basted to the front of her bathing suit. Thanks to trick photography, she seems to tower over the salt flats on endless legs, power lines brushing her ankles. With her arms held high above her head, the very shape of her body echoes the mushroom cloud, and her smile looks even wider because of the dark lipstick outlining her mouth, a ragged circle like a blast radius. Not only do Americans want to see the bomb, we want to become it, shaping our bodies to fit its form.

A studious-looking young man who totes his electric guitar like a sawn-off shot-gun.  
—Review of a Buddy Holly performance in Birmingham, England; March 11, 1958

There's a lot going on during that atomic summer. Buddy Holly, for instance. His career's taken off by 1957, thanks to hits like "That'll Be the Day," "Peggy Sue," and "Everyday," songs that combine country inflections with rock's insistent rhythm. He looks ordinary, like someone you went to high school with; in fact, you were born knowing him, the bird-chested guy, sexless and safe. But look more closely: at the story of how he gets into a "scuffle" with his buddy Joe B., the bass player, before a show, and Joe B. accidentally knocks off Buddy's two front caps. Buddy solves the problem by smearing a wad of chewing gum across the space, sticking the caps back on, and playing the gig. Or the story of how he met dark-haired Maria Elena in a music publishing office and that same day asked her to marry him—and she said yes. Or look at this, a clip from a TV show he played in December '57.

"Now if you haven't heard of these young men," the hostess says, "then you must be the wrong age, because they're rock and roll specialists." The camera's trained on Buddy, and he doesn't waste time: *If you knew Peggy Sue, then you'd know why I feel blue*, giving it everything he's got, and as he moves into the second verse, the camera on stage right goes live, and he pivots smoothly, keeping up. I'm staring back from better than fifty years out, watching as he follows the camera with a studio intensity magnified by the frenetic speed of his strumming. His fingers are a blur, but he doesn't make mistakes, and as I watch the clip, I'm startled by the distinctly handsy look in his eye. This is not what I expected.

The whole song's a revelation, from the rapid-fire drumming, to the stuttering *Pretty pretty pretty pretty Peggy Sue*, to the way his falsetto warps the words of the last verse. *With a love so rare and true*—you know he doesn't mean a word of it. He's just telling you what you want to hear, and the tamped-down sex—how had I missed it?—burns in his eyes. And there's something about the way he stares at the camera that sets him apart from his contemporaries. Elvis, the Big Bopper, Johnny Cash all play to the audiences they have at the time, mugging for the camera and making the kids squeal. Jerry Allison, the drummer for the Crickets, said later that playing on TV made him nervous: "There was something different," he said, "an audience that wasn't there." But watching Buddy, you'd never know it. He's playing to the fans of the future—to the camera, to now.

First floor, living room. First floor, dining room.  
Children at play, unaware of approaching disaster.



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