"I suppose I haven’t got any imagination," said Peter thoughtfully. "It’s — it’s the end of the world. I’ve never had to imagine anything like that before." My four-room grade school was newly situated between two major nuclear power stations in Southern Ontario. A new emergency drill came into effect circa 1986, after Chernobyl. We were prepped on a duck and cover routine that had us hiding under our desks with our heads down, performed on the cue of a special alarm. Teachers were instructed to keep a supply of Potassium iodide pills and bottle of ginger ale in the top drawer of their desks. The battle came out for the drill and we each lined up and pretended to take a pill,exsanguine, and return to the safety spot under our desk. Seemingly implausible, these measures were to protect us in the unlikely event of a nearby nuclear meltdown, its immediate effect however, was terrifying.

The institution of this new drill then meant that the schoolhouse loudspeakers were programmed to blast out three different sounds: one for fire, one for nuclear disaster, and one for recession. I remember the anxiety I felt in trying to remember their auditory differences, which were at best subtle. Two rings, line up and walk outside; three rings, hide under desk; one ring, run outside and play. Or was it the other way around? This odd conflation between the signals for emergency and for leisure was deeply troubling. The oscillation between leisure and disaster is teased out in the narrative in much the same way it played out that year on the world stage. In 1957 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was founded; the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, Sputnik, while U.S. attempts to do the same failed; Elvis Presley appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show for the third time; the U.S. military sustained its first combat fatality; and our membership during its recording in 1974). The song captures the early apocalyptic tone and conflicting desires in thereshadowing of nuclear winter, evidenced in the following selection:

Get out of town. I think I’ll get out of town. / head for the sticks with my bus and handbag. / follow the road, though I don’t know where it ends. / Get out of town, I think I’ll get out of town. / Cause the world is turning, I don’t want to see it turn away.

Kathleen Ritter is an artist and a curator currently based in Vancouver.

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Kathleen Ritter on the Beach


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On the Beach


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