



THESE DAYS

KATHLEEN RITTER ON THE BEACH

On the Beach, affiliated works: Neil Young, *On the Beach*, Warner Bros. Records Inc., 1974; Nevil Shute, *On the Beach*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1982 (first published 1957); Kristan Horton, *Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove*, Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2007; Stanley Kramer [Director], *On the Beach*, MGM, 1959.

Photo: Blaine Campbell

"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.¹

My four-room grade school was neatly 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 bottle came out for the drill and we each lined up and pretended to take a pill, swallow, 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 let out three different sounds: one for fire, one for nuclear disaster, and one for recess. I remember the anxiety I felt in trying to memorize 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.

I can't actually remember if this story is true, or if it is one of many fabrications of the over-active imagination of a 10-year-old having grown up reading dystopian literature on account of my father's extensive library of post-apocalyptic pulp fiction. Either

way, the new drill lent credence to my belief that doomsday, in one form or another, was imminent.

These and other such memories are triggered by the exhibition *On the Beach*, a curatorial foray into the complicated relationship between disaster and leisure that takes its cue from the 1957 Nevil Shute novel by the same name. The rationale behind the selection of objects is associative and skillfully leaps across both time and disciplines—a methodology current with many contemporary strategies, curatorial and otherwise, charting unique trajectories of similarity and signification over a number of traditional bounds. *On the Beach* is a novel, a 1959 film by Stanley Kramer, a song and an album by Neil Young. It is a story that gains currency today, as everyday activities carry on amidst increased global violence, war, and the persistent threat of nuclear warfare.

A Gripping Novel, A Tender Love Story, A Terrifying Prophecy... reads the byline on the cover of my well-worn pulp edition², the text wrapping around a mawkish illustration of a couple holding each other against a backdrop of menacing clouds. The narrative begins at the moment atomic war is over, yet references to the event itself are sparing. Most of the novel is peppered instead with allusions to the inescapable advance of the zone of radioactivity, eliminating all traces of life from one latitude to the next, indicated by such expressions of resignation as, "anyway, there's not so long to go,"³ or, as in the more subtle film adaptation, "these days."⁴ Characters carry on their quotidian activities while occasionally drifting into sober moments of personal reflection, pondering the days left to humanity's inevitable doom.

Shute's novel was one of the most widely read and influential stories in its day. Surprising, considering that the book, by most narrative standards, is lacking: its plot is unconvincing, its protagonists wooden, its love story tepid. Yet what makes *On the Beach* one of the most compelling accounts of nuclear war is its singular and relentless insistence on the fact that everyone—without exception—is going to die. From the first page to the last, there is no chance of survival whatsoever: no protective shelter for the last remaining humans, no shuttle to launch survivors into outer space, no miraculous finale. There is simply a couple struggling with the impossible decision to euthanize their only child and commit suicide as the rest of the human race expires alongside them.

But their lives go on. The two also spend their days planting a garden (which they will never live to see bloom). They listen to music and throw parties. Their friends learn new trades (for which they will never have use). They race cars and sailboats to pass the time. And everyone, of course, lounges on the beach.

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 in Vietnam; and John Lennon and Paul McCartney met.⁵ In a strange twist, the premise of the novel *On the Beach* resonates with conflicting global tendencies in 1957 between the rise of rock and roll and the acceleration of the Cold War, a phenomenon which repeats itself today.

I write these notes with Neil Young's voice on repeat. His song *On the Beach*, likely inspired by Shute's story, is a 7-minute somber ballad that lurches from one melancholic lyric to the next, as if the tune itself is drugged on "honey slides" (the concoction of honey and sautéed marijuana used heavily by band members during its recording in 1974). The song captures the eerily apocalyptic tone and conflicting desires in the foreshadowing of nuclear winter, evidenced in the following selection:

*Get out of town, think I'll get out of town.
I head for the sticks with my bus and friends,
I follow the road, though I don't know where it ends.
Get out of town, get out of town, think I'll get out of town.
'Cause the world is turnin', I don't want to see it turn away.⁶*

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1 Nevil Shute. *On the Beach*. 1974 ed. (New York: Ballantine, 1957) 79.

2 *ibid.* cover.

3 *ibid.* 12.

4 "It's a reasonably important appointment, as things go these days. It's getting to be quite a phrase, isn't it? 'These days.' You find yourself using it?" *On the Beach*, dir. Stanley Kramer, perf. Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire, Anthony Perkins, MGM, 1959.

5 Wikipedia, www.wikipedia.org, accessed December 10, 2007.

6 Neil Young, "On the Beach" rec. July 1974, *On the Beach*, REPRISE / WEA, 2003.