

Shelter

When I was a boy the neighbor
across the street built a bomb shelter
for three thousand dollars. One evening
while watering his lawn he told my father
about the air filter and chemical toilet,
the water purification system and dried food.
He said in a nuclear war all of us
would come running to him, begging
to be let into his shelter. But he'd be firm.
There was room for only his family. If others
tried to force their way in, he'd shoot them.

There in the yard I pretended to play
with some stinkbugs on a mulberry tree
and run around in the fading heat, but really
I listened. My father said nothing.
Like others, he wanted to protect his family.
But who could tell if a hole in the ground would?
And even I knew he didn't have three thousand dollars.

Sometimes in the summer, after I'd gone to bed,
when the air was still very warm, the neighbor
would go outside and fire his rifle at the stars.
The sound of the shot came through the walls
of my room. I closed my eyes and saw
the bomb shelter we didn't have.

My father outfitted our bathroom with a box
of canned soups and large jars of water.
Sitting on the toilet I faced the box

and wondered how a bathroom could be a bomb shelter.
Twice we all went in there together to practice.
We turned out the light and tried not to collide.
Mama slept in the bathtub, Papa on the floor
beneath the sink, Sister and I, facing each other,
our legs tucked behind the toilet bowl.
Time passed and we forgot our precautions. One day
the water and canned soups were gone. But even now
when I sit on a toilet I see that stuff. And when I hear
a sharp noise, it's the neighbor shooting the stars.

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