

# Subterra Castle



Jenny Perlin

# Metode

*Don't be frightened, I wasn't going to close you into this missile bay...I just thought it would be more dramatic that way..*

The audio meter peaks at each staccato “ha” as I laugh nervously from behind the camera. Weeks later I climb beneath the surface of our voices as I transcribe every word of every hour I've been filming.

I'm here, alone. Twenty feet underground in a disused missile silo outside Topeka, Kansas. Edward Peden has spent the past 30 years transforming this 14,000-square-foot site into a New Age paradise. He named his home Subterra Castle. There's a sign above the door as you enter.

Everywhere you look there are displays, crystals, crosses, wagon wheels, Native American flutes, drums, photos for memory and for effect. Ed made a modest living as a real estate broker for other missile silos around the Midwest and sank the money into salvaging the space and the stuff in the space.

Since the stroke, Ed doesn't work as a broker anymore. He supplements his Social Security check with the five-dollar entry fee per person coming for the occasional site tour. Most visitors are interested in the Cold War history and aren't aware their fee also includes Ed reading poetry and playing flute along the way.

*May I read this thing on spiritual use of cannabis? Sorry. Okey, let me just check this. This is warming up, this is warming up. Okey. Do you want more light here? Okey, just check this, is it better? Could be just a cozy fireside look here.*

*When I come home here, I feel in a very sacred space, a unique space with a strong message, a powerful space. And this missile that was down here, down that tunnel, had a range of 6000 miles. They could strike anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere. That's power, so much power, used in a destructive and harmful way. We want to transform that. We want the power, but we want it to be used for peace and to foster love. I'm not afraid to talk about love. Love is the answer to abolishing the need for these missiles and for these warheads, and love is the only engine of survival and if we can't get that right, we are in serious jeopardy. And when I come home here, all of this energy, all of these thoughts are around me and I've lived and slept 23 years in this underground space with all of this energy around me—*

We talk on the phone the day before I fly to Kansas. Ed wants to assure me it is perfectly safe here; that I don't have any reason to believe anything bad will happen; that he respects women and that he wants me to feel comfortable. I am oddly calm—for the moment.

Fear surges on the road only after I've driven three hours west through the yellowed landscape to get to 215513 Missile Bay Road. That's where I stop the car outside the front gate.

Strong winds rattle dried leaves on a scrawny tree.

Frosted glass panes in a wood door hung with windchimes.

Hand-carved sign: *Welcome to Subterra, Namaste.*

I ring the bell. It takes a long time. Ed opens and greets me and we are both jumpy. He peppers me with questions and begins talking. He continues talking for the whole four days I am staying there.

*Do you work for any government agencies? Have you ever worked for any government agencies? You know, you could be a CIA plant here. Okey. Are you open to being involved in a big project to assist the human family, species, the human family is in trouble.*

*We are off track, way off track, lost and we are being taken advantage of by dominators that do not love us. And they are using us and they are pressing us down more and more and more. They are giving us less and less more and more, and it's not getting pretty.*

*I mean I'm financially strapped here. I've got way too much house—and you've seen most of this in pictures. Now. Tell me a snippet of your philosophy of life and your belief system.*

Months later I am transcribing this material and hear how ridiculous my philosophy of life sounds as I am trying to calm down and make Ed comfortable too.

Ed asking: *How do I know you're not from the CIA because there are many things that go on at Subterra that are not exactly legal in Kansas. I mumble back: Well, you can't be absolutely sure but I can tell you honestly that I am not with the CIA.*

Ed suggests I stay in the "upstairs" apartment. He thinks I'd be more comfortable sleeping there than in the silo itself. The apartment is almost at the surface. Some of the windows are buried, some at ground level. Weak winter light filters in. Ed's recent tenants stole a bunch of his stuff and skipped rent.

*Okey, there was a couple renting, I'm sorry I think they were meth addicts. They did me wrong. Did me wrong. They found me through a friend who probably is a meth addict—like attracts like. I need to upgrade my affiliations...*

Ed and his ex-wife Dianna built the upstairs area on the surface in the early 1990s. Up here's a sitting room, hot tub, plants, and crystals. In the middle of the room a spiral staircase punctures the floor and twists down. When you clank your way down the 20 steps you are at a balcony, and down below that is the massive open space that used to house the power source for the nuclear missile.

Ed and Dianna used to use that space for drum circles, ayahuasca ceremonies, and huge parties marking the winter solstice. Hundreds of people used to attend and enjoy a bowl of Dianna's famous chili.

No more parties these days. Ed had a stroke a couple of years ago and Dianna moved back to Topeka.

*For years, she gave herself to following my dreams. And I think she maybe needs a little break to do things for herself. She's really interested in community. We always wanted to get a community established here, and we just never did, never could do it. And I think part of me was not ready for that.*

The reason I'm here in the cold Kansas January is because Ed told me a month ago that he's selling his castle and I'd better get there quick because by Friday he's signing papers at the lawyers' offices.

Ed doesn't want to sell, especially not to this guy. The buyer is a man from New Jersey who wants to turn Subterra into a neo-Nazi survivalist compound. Ed doesn't want to let them move in and destroy all the work he put into cleansing the site of its negative energies.

Ed thinks the deal will fall through. But Dianna really wants to sell. They're getting old and need the money. Ed only gets a couple of hundred dollars a month from the government. To earn a little more, he rents out some rooms from time to time to people who find him through a network of truck drivers, solstice-partiers, and musicians.

He saves money by heating the whole silo with a single wood stove. To get the wood in, he pushes heavy wheelbarrows filled with logs through the long entrance tunnels into the living room. He also doesn't eat much, mostly homemade smoothies and oatmeal and chips.

The first night I'm there we eat Fritos and ranch dip for dinner and it is delicious.

While at Subterra I find myself often sprinting up the spiral staircase to absorb the pallid winter light filtering in. I throw the door to the compound open without even realizing my hand's on the knob.

Coming up for air; psyche about to burst. But I don't step over the threshold.

Below ground, my ears overflow with hours of Ed's stories. Legacy. Diatribes. Tears, jokes, flirtations.

*And I just wish I had, I shouldn't say this, I would really like to live in a harem of women, maybe five, maybe ten, that's just a fantasy dream. I sense powerful energy, I sense that with you, just being in your presence, feminine energy. I study feminine energy. I just love being around women. I like nurturing women, especially those who know who they are and who deserve to be nurtured.*

In the room where I try to sleep at night, I lie motionless on top of the bedcovers wearing all my clothes and my coat. The car keys in my jeans pockets poke my legs. But in the transcripts, I don't sound fearful at all.

Ed often thanks me for letting him share his stories; he never gets to talk like this. After a day of being there, he and I start speaking honestly to each other.

*I really like this, what you're doing here. Well, thank you for just being receptive to all the music, all my talk, all my philosophy, I'm very thankful to you for your receptivity, your willingness to receive it. I feel overwhelmed with just happy joy at what you're doing.*

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When I come back down from yet another break for some outside air, I join Ed in the TV room. Ed watches a lot of CNN and local weather so he knows if he can go up and out that day or if he should stay in or has to watch for ice when he gets the wood from the woodpile. He's already had a stroke. A broken arm or hip could mean the end of the life he knows.

On CNN, two stories are playing in alternation that would seem to justify anyone's moving into a bunker. The first one is about the 2018 nuclear alarm that followed a worker's mistaken use of a computer dropdown menu in Honolulu: for 40 minutes after the incoming missile alarm, parents scrambled to get their kids so they could shelter together, surfers ran to the ocean to catch their last great wave, and...nothing happened. The other story playing on CNN is about the chaos caused by yet another government shutdown. I film Ed watching TV.

In the early 2000s, Home and Garden TV chose Subterra Castle for its Featured Makeover edition. The TV team came in and redecorated the generator room. Now the massive concrete space buried under twenty feet of soil is draped with red and purple cloth banners, carpets, and paper lanterns. All the solstice parties and drum circles, the chanting and the dancing ended about ten years ago, and the vast room sits empty.

Ed uses “stroked” as a verb—“when I stroked”—rather than the way I’ve learned it said, “had a stroke.” Stroke doesn’t happen to you, your body strokes, a physical rebellion. He’s supposed to exercise his weakened side for 15 minutes a day.

Off in one corner of the generator room there’s an exercise bike. It’s in the small square of weak daylight that comes down from the spiral staircase opening. Ed rides in place, underground, every afternoon.

Ed’s kitchen looks like any suburban kitchen in Kansas: all the requisite appliances, a long wooden table covered with the books he’s reading about alternative spiritual teachings and cannabis and nutrition. He tells me in a hushed voice that he has secret storage with twenty years’ worth of canned foods and ancient grains but he won’t show me where the storage space is located.

He doesn’t want to talk much about the stored food in case there’s a crisis and people try to storm the compound to get his supplies. Same goes for the weapons, which he assures me are there and that he’d hate to use them but he would if he had to. There’s a small group of people he has instructed to come to Subterra when things get bad. Even after he’s gone, he says.

*It could be an explosion in Yosemite, could be an explosion that casts a lot of dust in the air, there could be global winter, nuclear winter where the climate changes for two or three years where food is very hard to grow. There’s a whole lot of things that can happen. We don’t want to be afraid but it’s okey to make conscious preparation.*

Later, Ed invites me to join him in the former missile control room. Now it’s a warmly-lit wall-to-wall carpeted living room with an immense stereo system and a long Persian rug hanging from the ceiling behind a high-backed carved wooden chair. Salvaged stained-glass panels fuse regal and religious sentiment.

Ed takes his place on the throne and plays a flute along with a recording of his band’s originals. Songs about dreams and all-love pour through the enormous speakers. Next, he plays me a recording of a 1990s live performance by the psychedelic guru Terence McKenna. McKenna’s reedy voice invokes the archaic spirit and the biological necessity to return to the ways of the ancients. The monologue pours its thin frequencies into my ears. The weight of earth above the ceiling exerts merciless pressure. I am panicking, but I stay and film.

One button pressed by a 20-year-old soldier sitting here in the 1960s was capable of destroying tens of thousands of lives halfway across the globe. Ed tells me that the control room, more than any other space in Subterra, required the most psychic cleansing when he first moved in.

*So from this place, we issue a call for a NEW approach to life on the planet. We share the planet. We are one family. We will succeed or we will perish together. So from Subterra we issue a call for nurturing, for acceptance, for love on the planet, for everyone, for everything. Love all, love it all, because everything is holy now. Everything is whole and holy now.*

I've been reluctant to go to the Man Cave. Ed's been trying to get me to share some cannabis with him since I arrived. I am nervous about smoking with him for a lot of reasons, not least of which is that I'm not really up for being high while sitting with a stranger in an underground missile silo that has no cell phone reception.

We try to film something in the Man Cave but it doesn't go too well. Without his rituals, Ed is awkward, camera-shy, and I don't know what to ask. There's no magic.

The Man Cave is stuffed with racks of costumes, kimonos, bookshelves, photos, a mini fridge, more flutes and crystals, candles, and a golden Burger King crown hanging on a nail way up high above the door. Later on I ask Ed about the crown, and what it's like being the sovereign of Subterra Castle.

He laughs first, then responds seriously about the kind of state he would lead if he could:

*I avoid claiming to be a sovereign, but I think I may have been in the past, and I do have a crown from Burger King [laughter]. Okey, it's very important to be humble as a sovereign, and a sovereign's primary role is to serve. Is to serve. Is to give, and to be an example of things that can be mutually beneficial for all to share in. And to have the real power, the real power in it all is a non-power of loving. Loving is the ultimate power. To love.*

Here's a man living all alone in a missile silo dreaming of being the sovereign leader and servant of a state ruled by love. The powerful disconnect seems to be the result of wanting to live in safety to do whatever you want within a very particular kind of stake-your-claim American sense of freedom.

Ed's story of finding the flooded missile silo in the 1980s, pumping all the water out of it and reclaiming it from decay: no wonder he feels like now it's mine and I can do whatever I want with and inside it. An extreme version of how I

felt growing up in a left-wing house in a conservative right-wing town; hiding opinions, burying difference; siloed emotions, shuttered feelings, bunkered imagination.

What strikes me is how Ed's always talking about his desire to build community but at the same time he insists that it's his hard work that has made his castle possible.

*I gained permission from the owners, it was a salvage company and I called them, I got a phone number and I said can I go in and visit the site, I've already seen it. I would meditate here. I would inhale cannabis and I was just thinking what's supposed to happen here? This place just intrigued me. I knew it was so big and so flooded, and I knew I could get the water out of it.*

*And then I started removing the water, pumping the water, cleaning up. And then when the water was gone there was so much—all the government sheetrock on the floor, black, smelly, wet, very wet, slushy slushy, many many wheelbarrows—I did a couple hundred wheelbarrow loads up the ramp, out the tunnel out the door and up around and dumped it in a hole on the west side...And so I just developed a love for this place. It was like no place I'd ever seen and ever imagined owning...*

The third night, I smoke weed with Ed because he's asked me so many times it's too awkward to say no. Cannabis is one of the most important things in his life. I take one toke and say that's enough, I'm super lightweight.

Later that night I am standing with the tripod thinking what to do next and Ed puts his hands on my head to invoke a higher spirit or something and when his hands touch my head I leap back out of the way with a loud shout STOP! He apologizes and I go back to filming. The next day, Ed wants to talk about it but I dissemble and change the subject.

The next day Ed tells me about his childhood dreams and we decide to go through the tunnels and see the missile bay.

*I swear though, when I was a boy I had dreams, I remember having dreams about a house with tunnels. And it's like—gotta be careful what you dream, now! Not really, not really. I just remember. I wanted a unique house and a house with tunnels and secret rooms and all that.*

I'm wearing one of Ed's old leather jackets as we trudge up the frigid tunnel towards the missile bay. It's a thick brown leather jacket from the 80s with huge shoulders and snaps and zippers that always feel damp. It's hard to carry the camera with it on. Ed says it looks cute on me.



Back home, watching the footage, I hear myself say *I'm kind of scared* but I don't know if I am telling the truth or speaking for effect so Ed can feel empowered. As he limps quickly up the steep tunnel, he reveals that this is where the camera crews film him the most. And it's true. Internet searches for Subterra show a lanky younger Ed standing proudly in the tunnel. Sometimes he's with Dianna, sometimes not.

The one tunnel branches off into two: one leads outside and one to a door to the now-empty missile bay. We go in.

*I'm gonna close the door here. Just listen to this door, listen, listen. That make you more scared or less scared? [laughs]. I promise that everything is safe. The scariest thing is I could fall down. I used to run back and forth in this tunnel I was so excited about being here, I was never afraid.*

The missile bay consists of two massive spaces joined by thirty-foot metal doors. The first room is filled with open metal shelving filled with well-organized—everything. Paint cans, boxes of nails and screws, dozens of skis, bikes hanging from ceiling hooks, wood-burning stoves, wagon wheels, piles of ropes.

Then we go into the launch space, where the missile used to be. It's empty except for a 1960s tractor, a multi-ton door on a chain, a large photograph of the erect missile, and a metal plate on the floor in the back space that I'm trying not to look at.

Ed walks me over and scrapes open the heavy steel floor plate. He tells me this is where the missile would shoot its flames straight down into the concrete-lined earth to boost itself into the stratosphere on its way to the Soviet Union.

*This we're just looking at this now, I do want you to see this. Now this whole thing is very phallic. This missile, a 75-foot-long missile. And there's a plate there, they called it the erection mechanism, because the door opens on the top. And then the thing has to be stood up. The missile had to stand straight up here. Now check out what's down here. Yes, the flames and exhaust for the missile goes out, way down there. And the concrete is probably eight feet thick.*

I imagine myself dropped into the concrete-lined floor hearing the slow scraping closing above me. I change the subject and turn towards the 47-ton sliding door that had been used to truck the missile in and out. I tell Ed I want to film him opening and closing the door and then to walk back out of the room toward the tunnel. Happy to oblige, Ed holds a red button down and the door screeches and scrapes along the track, slowly revealing the outside world.

Through the widening opening I see my rental car parked up the ramp. I see the late afternoon light is blue and wonder how it's going to look in the image. I wonder when I can go home. Then I see Ed pushing the other button to close the door. It takes a long time. A hollow clank, it's closed, and Ed limps over to the light switches and turns them all off. Then he walks out and closes the door and I am left alone in the pitch-black missile silo.

*I will be brave, my heart pounds to me, instant surging panicked urge to run screaming to the door and bang on it with fists body feet head. Instead, I'm silent. I keep the camera running in the dark. This is all they'll find, I think, a video with no image, filming the image of nothingness until the camera runs out of battery.*

I start to count seconds and swallow my breath. Maybe he's kidding. The camera's time code counter says ten seconds. The wooden door squeals open. Ed limps back in, laughing.

*Don't be scared, I wasn't going to lock you into this missile bay, but I thought it would be just a little more dramatic if I turned the lights out. I hope you weren't frightened. It was fun. So what do you want to do now?*

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My body is a surface and I bring this surface with me under the surface of the earth. The camera allows me another surface to hide behind. I exchange surfaces with the people I am filming. Their stories come through me thanks to their trust. The process of filming and transcribing their stories and writing essays and editing the footage into films is exhilarating, exhausting, transformative. These works are projected onto flat screens that translate for me and transport you into an illusion of another world.

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I wrote this essay while making my feature documentary film BUNKER, released in 2021. More and more American men are deciding to live alone in decommissioned military bunkers and nuclear missile silos, even as an upscale industry begins to cater to "preppers," people who fear the imminent breakdown of society and the destruction of the United States. You can read more about BUNKER and view the trailer at <https://hoosacinstitute.com/BUNKER-FILM>.

BUNKER is distributed by Grasshopper Film and available to stream on demand on their streaming site Projectr.tv.

“Jenny’s essay takes on surfaces from a different perspective, not just in terms of going literally beneath the surface of the earth, but of going beyond superficialities of getting to know another person beyond first impressions.”

“The narrative ethnographic approach is similar to my own, and I enjoy this as a challenge to stylistic norms of academic writing.”

- Nick Walkley, author of “The Matter of Illusion: Seeing the Surface Facismiles,” *Metode* (2023), vol. 1 Deep Surface

“Jenny’s experience being underground in a disused missile silo in Kansas unveils a bodily and political understanding of surfaces. The surface becomes something that hides and lays open at the same time. Firstly, reading between the lines, Jenny points out that the binary between female/man bodies and the apocalyptic anxiety in a weaponized society are both (still/also) performed underground. The fine line between under-and overground becomes a much contested and competitive field of survival. Secondly, in her essay, the bunker is doubled-faced: it is a safe and spiritual space (in the case of Ed), and at the same time a highly controlled unpersonal and violent space.”

- Beatrice Zaidenberg, author of “Epidermitecture: Co-Existing on the Surface,” *Metode* (2023), vol. 1 Deep Surface

“To me, this speaks of society, politics and relations as a veil, and as surface. The journey down becomes, for me, a metaphorical one, one that burrows beneath the surface of life and politics.”

“Lastly I think this is about alternative modes of living, the perceived survivalist, who is, on the surface, an outcast, but in depth, only looking for love.”

- Marius Moldvær, author of “I will acknowledge the Shallowness of my depth. An autoimmune, spontaneous prose essay,” *Metode* (2023), vol. 1 Deep Surface

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