

MARTIN AMIS (b. 1949) was born in Oxford, England, on August 25th. In his autobiographical introduction to *Einstein's Monsters* (1986), a collection of stories about nuclear destruction, he wrote that four days after his birth in 1949, "the Russians tested their first atomic bomb, and deterrence was in place. So I had those four carefree days, which is more than my juniors ever had." Growing up during the cold war led Amis to feel that our "life is completely different from everything that came before it. We are like no other people in history."

When Amis was five years old, his father, Kingsley Amis, became a best-selling writer with the publication of his humorous novel *Lucky Jim*. After Martin graduated from Oxford University with a degree in English, he also decided to become a writer. In 1972 he was hired as an editorial assistant at the *Times Literary Supplement* and began reviewing for the leftist weekly *the New Statesman*. Within a few years he was literary editor of these magazines and had published two novels, *Dead Babies* (1975) and *Success* (1978). In 1980 he resigned as a literary editor to write full time. Since then, he has published five more novels, four books of nonfiction, and a collection of short stories, in addition to several film scripts. A postmodernist sensibility marks his writing, as in the story "The Immortals" from *Einstein's Monsters*. His language is a verbal artifice calling attention to the narrator's anxieties and uncertainties, rather than leading to coherence and causality in the narrative structure.

In his memoir *Experience* (2000), Amis has written about his relationship with his father, who died in 1995. Once, discussing the "oddity of being father and son writers," Martin recalled, his father said, "It's something, the two of us (which is the highest compliment he ever paid me, really), both of us have some nerve." Believing that "we need all this vanity and egotism if you're going to write," Martin Amis feels that his central theme is the loss of innocence as human history progresses. There is a political cast to all his writing. He told a BBC interviewer that "The rhythms of thought about the world are always changing, heading away from innocence. That's all we really know about the world: that it's getting less innocent just by the accumulation of experience." Amis says that he writes short fiction as a respite from his work on his longer books. For him, stories "are always the biggest joy to write because you write them and they're gone. They're out. . . . The best short stories are the ones that not a word is wasted, and it's the perfect length for the perfect cargo."

MARTIN AMIS

The Immortals

It's quite a prospect. Soon the people will all be gone and I will be alone forever. The human beings around here are in very bad shape, what with the solar radiation, the immunity problem, the rat-and-roach diet, and so on. They are the last; but they can't last (though try telling *them* that). Here they come again, staggering out to watch the hell of sunset. They all suffer from diseases and delusions. They all believe that they are . . . But let the poor bastards be. Now I feel free to bare my secret.

I am the Immortal.

Already I have been around for an incredibly long time. If time is money, then I am the last of the big spenders. And you know, when you've been around for as long as I have, the diurnal scale, this twenty-four-hour number, can really start to get you down. I tried for a grander scheme of things. And I had my successes. I once stayed awake for seven years on end. Not even a nap. Boy, was I bushed. On the other hand, when I was ill in Mongolia that time, I sacked out for a whole decade. At a loose end, cooling my heels in a Saharan oasis, for eighteen months I picked my nose. On one occasion — when there was nobody around — I teased out a lone handjob for an entire summer. Even the unchanging crocodiles envied my baths in the timeless, in the time-mottled rivers. Frankly, there wasn't much else to do. But in the end I ceased these experiments and tamely joined the night-day shuttle. I seemed to need my sleep. I seemed to need to do the things that people seemed to need to do. Clip my nails. Report to the can and the shaving basin. Get a haircut. All these distractions. No wonder I never got anything done.

I was born, or I appeared or materialized or beamed down, near the city of Kampala, Uganda, in Africa. Of course, Kampala wasn't there yet, and neither was Uganda. Neither was Africa, come to think of it, because in those days the land masses were all conjoined. (I had to wait until the twentieth century to check a lot of this stuff out.) I think I must have been a dud god or something; conceivably I came from another planet which ticked to a different clock. Anyway I never amounted to much. My life, though long, has been largely feckless. I had to hold my horses for quite a while before there were any human beings to hang out with. The world was still cooling. I sat through geology, waiting for biology. I used to croon over those little warm ponds where space-seeded life began. Yes, I was there, cheering you on from the touchline. For my instincts were gregarious, and I felt terribly lonely. And hungry.

Then plants showed up, which made a nice change, and certain crude lines of animal. After a while I twigged and went carnivorous. Partly out of self-defense I became a prodigious hunter. (It was hardly a matter of survival, but nobody likes being sniffed and clawed and chomped at the whole time.)

There wasn't an animal they could dream up that I couldn't kill. I kept pets, too. It was a healthy kind of outdoors life, I suppose, but not very stimulating. I yearned for . . . for reciprocation. If I thought the Permian age was the pits it was only because I hadn't yet lived through the Triassic. I can't tell you how dull it all was. And then, before I knew it — this would have been about 6,000,000 B.C. — the first (unofficial) Ice Age, and we all had to start again, more or less from scratch. The Ice Ages, I admit, were considerable blows to my morale. You could tell when one was coming: there'd be some kind of cosmic lightshow, then, more often than not, a shitstorm of moronic impacts; then dust, and pretty sunsets; then darkness. They happened regularly, every seventy thousand years, on the dot. You could set your watch by them. The first Ice Age took out the dinosaurs, or so the theory goes. I know different. They could have made it, if they'd tightened their belts and behaved sensibly. The tropics were a little stifling and gloomy, true, but perfectly habitable. No, the dinosaurs had it coming: a very bad crowd. Those lost-world adventure movies got the dinosaurs dead right. Incredibly stupid, incredibly touchy — and incredibly *big*. And always brawling. The place was like a whaling yard. I was onto fire by then, of course, and so I ate well. It was burgers every night.

The first batch of ape-people were just a big drag as far as I was concerned. I was pleased to see them, in a way, but mostly they were just a hassle. All that evolution — and for this? It was a coon's age before they ever amounted to anything, and even then they were still shockingly grasping and paranoid. With my little house, my fur suits, my clean-shaven look, and my barbecues, I stood out. Occasionally I became the object of hatred, or worship. But even the friendly ones were no use to me. *Ugh. Ich. Akk.* What kind of conversation do you call that? And when at last they improved, and I made a few pals and started having relationships with the women, along came a horrible discovery. I thought they would be different, but they weren't. They all got old and died, like my pets.

As they are dying now. They are dying all about me.

At first, around here, we were pleased when the world started getting warmer. We were pleased when things started brightening up again. Winter is always depressing — but nuclear winter is somehow especially grim. Even I had wearied of a night that lasted thirteen years (and New Zealand, I find, is pretty dead at the best of times). For a while, sunbathing was all the rage. But then it went too far in the other direction. It just kept on getting hotter — or rather there was a change in the nature of the heat. It didn't feel like sunlight. It felt more like gas or liquid: it felt like rain, very thin, very hot. And buildings don't seem to hold it off properly, even buildings with roofs. People stopped being sun-worshippers and started being moon-worshippers. Life became nightlife. They're fairly cheerful, considering — sorrier for others than they are for themselves. I suppose it's lucky they can't tell what's really coming down.

The poor mortals, I grieve for them. There's just nothing they can do about that molten fiend up there in the middle of the sky. They faced the

anger, then they faced the cold; and now they're being nuked all over again. Now they're being renuked, doublenuked — by the slow reactor of the sun.

Apocalypse happened in the year A.D. 2045. When I was sure it was coming I headed straight for the action: Tokyo. I'll come right out and say that I was pretty much ready to quit. Not that I was particularly depressed or anything. I certainly wasn't as depressed as I am now. In fact I had recently emerged from a five-year hangover and, for me, the future looked bright. But the planet was in desperate shape by then and I wanted no part of it anymore. I wanted out. Nothing else had ever managed to kill me, and I reckoned that a direct hit from a nuke was my only chance. I'm cosmic — in time — but so are nukes: in power. If a nuke hasn't the heft to blow me away (I said to myself), well, nothing else will. I had one serious misgiving. The deployment fashion at that time was for carpet detonations in the hundred-kiloton range. Personally I would have liked something a little bigger, say a megaton at least. I missed the boat. I should have grabbed my chance in the days of atmospheric tests. I always used to kick myself about that sixty-meg sonofabitch the Soviets tried out in Siberia. Sixty million tons of TNT: surely not even I would have walked away from that. . . .

I leased a top-floor room at the Century Inn near Tokyo Tower, bang in the middle of town. I wanted to take this one right on the nose. At the hotel they seemed to be glad of my custom. Business was far from brisk. Everybody knew it would start ending here: it started ending here a century ago. And by this time cities everywhere were all dying anyway. . . . I had my money on an airburst, at night. I bribed the floor guard and he gave me access to the roof: the final sleepout. The city writhed in mortal fear. Me, I writhed in mortal hope. If that sounds selfish, well, then I apologize. But who to? When I heard the sirens and the air-whine I sprang to my feet and stood there, nude, on tiptoe, with my arms outstretched. And then it came, like the universe being unzipped.

First off, I must have taken a lot of prompt radiation, which caused major headaches later on. At the time I thought I was being tickled to death by Dionysus. Simultaneously also I was zapped by the electromagnetic pulse and the thermal rush. The EMP you don't have to worry about. Take it from me, it's the least of your difficulties. But the heat is something else. These are the kind of temperatures that turn a human being into a wall-shadow. Even I took a bit of a shriveling. Although I can joke about it now (it ain't half hot, Mum; phew, what a scorcher!), it really was rather alarming at the time. I couldn't breathe and I blacked out — another first: I didn't die but at least I fainted. For quite a while, too, because when I woke up everything had gone. I'd slept right through the blast, the conflagration, the whole death typhoon. Physically I felt fine. Physically I was, as they say, in great shape. I was entirely purged of that hangover. But in every other sense I felt unusually low. Yes, I was definitely depressed. I still am. Oh, I act cheerful, I put on a brave face; but often I think that this depression will never end — will see me through until the end of time. I can't think of anything that's really very likely to cheer me up. Soon the people will all be gone and I will be alone forever.

They are sand people, dust people, people of dust. I'm fond of them, of course, but — they're not much company. They are deeply sick and deeply crazy. As they diminish, as they ebb and fade, they seem to get big ideas about themselves. Between you and me, I don't feel too hot either. I look good, I look like my old self; but I've definitely felt better. My deal with diseases, incidentally, is as follows: I get them, and they hurt and everything, yet they never prove fatal. They move on, or I adapt. To give you a comparatively recent example, I've had AIDS for seventy-three years. Just can't seem to shake it.

An hour before dawn and the stars still shine with their new, their pointed brightness. Now the human beings are all going inside. Some will fall into a trembling sleep. Others will gather by the polluted well and talk their bullshit all day long. I will remain outside for a little while, alone, under the immortal calendar of the sky.

Classical antiquity was interesting (I suppose I'm jumping on ahead here, but you're not missing much). It was in Caligulan Rome that I realized I had a drink problem. I began spending more and more of my time in the Middle East, where there was always something happening. I got the hang of the economic masterforces and flourished as a Mediterranean trader. For me, the long hauls out to the Indies and back were no big deal. I did good but not great, and by the eleventh century I'd popped up again in Central Europe. In retrospect that now looks like a mistake. Know what my favorite period was? Yes: the Renaissance. You really came good. To tell you the truth, you astonished me. I'd just yawned my way through five hundred years of disease, religion, and zero talent. The food was terrible. Nobody looked good. The arts and crafts stank. Then — pow! And all at once like that, too. I was in Oslo when I heard what was happening. I dropped everything and was on the next boat to Italy, terrified I'd miss it. Oh, it was heaven. Those guys, when they painted a wall or a ceiling or whatever — it stayed painted. We were *living* in a masterpiece over there. At the same time, there was something ominous about it, from my point of view. I could see that, in every sense, you were capable of anything. . . . And after the Renaissance what do I get? Rationalism and the industrial revolution. Growth, progress, the whole petrochemical stampede. Just as I was thinking that no century could possibly be dumber than the nineteenth, along comes the twentieth. I swear, the entire planet seemed to be staging some kind of stupidity contest. I could tell then how the human story would end. Anybody could. Just the one outcome.

My suicide bids date back to the Middle Ages. I was forever throwing myself off mountains and stuff. Boulder overcoats and so on. They never worked. Christ, I've been hit by lightning more times than I care to remember, and lived to tell the tale. (I once copped a meteorite full in the face; I had quite a job crawling out from under it, and felt off-color all afternoon.) And this was on top of fighting in innumerable wars. Soldiering was my passion for millennia — you saw the world — but I started to go off it at the beginning of the fifteenth century. I who had fought with Alexander, with the great Khans, suddenly found myself in a little huddle of retching tramps; across the way was

another little huddle of retching tramps. That was Agincourt. By Passchendaele war and I were through. All the improvisation — all the know-how and make-do — seemed to have gone out of it. It was just death, pure and simple. And my experiences in the nuclear theater have done nothing to restore the lost romance. . . . Mind you, I was slowly losing interest in everything. Generally I was becoming more reclusive and neurotic. And of course there was the booze. In fact, halfway through the twentieth century my drink problem got right out of hand. I went on a bender that lasted for ninety-five years. From 1945 to 2039 — I was smashed. A metropolitan nomad, I lived by selling off my past, by selling off history: Phoenician knickknacks, Hebrew scrolls, campaign loot — some of it was worth a bomb. I fell apart. I completely lost my self-respect. I was like the passenger on the crippled airplane, with the duty-free upended over my mouth, trying to find the state where nothing matters. This was how the whole world seemed to be behaving. And you cannot find this state. Because it doesn't exist. Because things do matter. Even here.

Tokyo after the nuclear attack was not a pretty sight. An oily black cake with little brocades of fire. My life has been crammed with death — death is my life — but this was a new wrinkle. Everything had gone. Nothing was happening. The only light and activity came from the plasma-beams and nukelets that were still being fired off by some spluttering satellite or rogue submarine. What are they *doing*, I asked myself, shooting up the graveyard like this? Don't ask me how I made it all the way down here to New Zealand. It is a long story. It was a long journey. In the old days, of course, I could have walked it. I had no plans. Really I just followed the trail of life.

I rafted my way to the mainland and there was nothing there either. Everything was dead. (To be fair, a lot of it had been dead already.) Occasionally, as I groped my way south, I'd see a patch of lichen or a warped mushroom, and later a one-legged cockroach or an eyeless rat or something, and that lifted my spirits for a while. It was a good eighteen months before I came across any human beings worth the name — down in Thailand. A small fishing community sheltered by a cusp in the coastal mountains and by freak wind conditions (freak wind conditions being the only kind of wind conditions there were at that time). The people were in a bad way, naturally, but still hauling odds and ends out of the sea — you wouldn't call them fish exactly. I begged for a boat and they wouldn't give me one, which was understandable. I didn't want to argue about it, so I just hung around until they all died. That didn't take too long. I had about a four-year wait, if I remember correctly. Then I loaded up and pushed off and didn't care where the hell the winds took me. I just pushed off into the dying sea, hoping for life.

And I found it, too, after a fashion, down here among the dust people. The last. I'd better make the most of these human beings, because they're the only human beings I've got left. I mourn their passing. What is it to want others, to want others to be?

Once, finding myself in ancient China with plenty of cash and a century to kill, I bought a baby elephant and raised her from infant to invalid. I called

her Babalaya. She lived for a hundred and thirteen years and we had time to get to know each other quite well. The larky way she tossed her head about. Her funny figure: all that bulk, and no ass (from the rear she looked like a navvy, slumped over the bar in a Dublin pub). Babalaya — only woman I ever cared a damn about. . . . No, that's not true. I don't know why I say that. But long-term relationships have always been difficult for me and I've tended to steer clear of them. I've only been married three or four thousand times — I'm not the kind to keep lists — and I shouldn't think my kids are even up there in the five figures. I had gay periods, too. I'm sure, though, that you can see the problem. I am used to watching mountains strain into the sky, or deltas forming. When they say that the Atlantic or whatever is sinking by half an inch a century, I notice these things. There I am, shackled up with some little honey. I blink — and she's a boiler. While I remained stranded in my faultless noon, time seemed to be scribbling all over everybody right in front of my eyes: they would shrink, broaden, unravel. I didn't mind that much, but the women couldn't handle it at all. I drove those broads crazy. "We've been together for twenty years," they'd say: "How come I look like shit and you don't?" Besides, it wasn't smart to hang around too long in any one place. Twenty years was pushing it. And I did push it, many, many times, on account of the kids. Apart from that I just had flings. You think one-night stands are pretty unsatisfactory? Imagine what I think of them. For me, twenty years is a one-night stand. No, not even. For me, twenty years is a knee-trembler. . . . And there were unpleasant complications. For instance, I once saw a granddaughter of mine coughing and limping her way through the Jerusalem *soukh*. I recognized her because she recognized me; she let out a harsh yell, pointing a finger which itself bore a ring I'd given her when she was little. And now she was little all over again. I'm sorry to say that I committed incest pretty regularly in the very early days. There was no way around incest, back then. It wasn't just me: everyone was into it. A million times I have been bereaved, and then another million. What pain I have known, what megatons of pain. I miss them all — how I miss them. I miss my Babalaya. But you'll understand that relationships of every kind are bound to be fairly strained (there will be tensions) when one party is mortal and the other is not.

The only celebrity I ever knew at all well was Ben Jonson, in London at that time, after my return from Italy. Ben and I were drinking buddies. He was boisterous in his cups, and soppy too, sometimes; and of course he was very blue about the whole Shakespeare thing. Ben used to sit through that guy's stuff in tears. I saw Shakespeare once or twice, in the street. We never met, but our eyes did. I always had the feeling that he and I might have hit it off. I thought the world of Shakespeare. And I bet I could have given him some good material.

Soon the people will all be gone and I will be alone forever. Even Shakespeare will be gone — or not quite, because his lines will live in this old head of mine. I will have the companionship of memory. I will have the companionship of dreams. I just won't have any people. It's true that I had those empty

years before the human beings arrived, so I'm used to solitude. But this will be different, with nobody to look forward to at the end of it.

There is no weather now. Days are just a mask of fire — and the night sky I've always found a little samey. Before, in the early emptiness, there were pets, there were plants, there were nature rambles. Well, there's nothing much to ramble in now. I saw what you were doing to the place. What was the matter? Was it too *nice* for you or something? Jesus Christ, you were only here for about ten minutes. And look what you did.

Grouped around the poisoned well, the people yawn and mumble. They are the last. They have tried having kids — I have tried having kids — but it doesn't work out. The babies that make it to term don't look at all good, and they can't seem to work up any immunity. There's not much immunity around as it is. Everybody's low.

They are the last and they are insane. They suffer from a mass delusion. Really, it's the craziest thing. They all believe that they are — that they are eternal, that they are immortal. And they didn't get the idea from me. I've kept my mouth shut, as always, out of settled habit. I've been discreet. I'm not one of those wellside bores who babble on about how they knew Tutankhamen and scored with the Queen of Sheba or Marie Antoinette. They think that they will live forever. The poor bastards, if they only knew.

I have a delusion also, sometimes. Sometimes I have this weird idea that I am just a second-rate New Zealand schoolmaster who never did anything or went anywhere and is now painfully and noisily dying of solar radiation along with everybody else. It's strange how palpable it is, this fake past, and how human: I feel I can almost reach out and touch it. There was a woman, and a child. One woman. One child. . . . But I soon snap out of it. I soon pull myself together. I soon face up to the tragic fact that there will be no ending for me, even after the sun dies (which should at least be quite spectacular). I am the Immortal.

Recently I have started staying out in the daylight. Ah, what the hell. And so, I notice, have the human beings. We wail and dance and shake our heads. We crackle with cancers, we fizz with synergisms, under the furious and birdless sky. Shyly we peer at the heaven-filling target of the sun. Of course, I can take it, but this is suicide for the human beings. Wait, I want to say. Not yet. Be careful — you'll hurt yourselves. Please. Please try and stay a little longer.

Soon you will all be gone and I will be alone forever.

I . . . I am the Immortal.

[1987]