RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Visiting Mrs Nabokov

Martin Amis

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Fuelled by innumerable cigarettes, Martin Amis provides dazzling portraits of contemporaries and mentors alike: Larkin and Rushdie; Greene and Pritchett; Ballard and Burgess and Nicholson Baker; John Updike – warts and all. Vigorously zipping across to Washington, he exposes the double-think of nuke-speak; in New Orleans the Republican Convention gets a going over. And then there's sport: he visits the world of darts and its disastrous attempt to clean itself up; dirty tricks in the world of chess; and some brisk but vicious poker with Al Alvarez and David Mamet.

Sex without Madonna, expulsion from school, a Stones gig that should have been gagged, on set with Robocop or on court with Gabriela Sabatini, this is Martin Amis at his electric best.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Amis is the author of two collections of stories, six works of non-fiction, and fourteen novels.

ALSO BY MARTIN AMIS

Fiction

The Rachel Papers
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To Joe, Isabel, Roland,
Frankie – and Dolores

Martin Amis

Visiting Mrs Nabokov

And Other Excursions

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Warily looking back through these pieces, I glimpse a series of altered or vanished worlds, including those of my younger and much younger selves. Things change. Graham Greene is dead. Véra Nabokov is dead. Salman Rushdie is still alive, and still in hiding: if writing fiction is, among other things, an act of spiritual freedom, then Rushdie is a man who has been imprisoned for the crime of being free. Graham Taylor, one-time manager of Watford Football Club, is now manager of England: for the time being. Monica Seles, whose professional debut I witnessed (she was fourteen), has since won eight Slams; as I write, she is in hospital, recovering from a knife attack at a tournament in Hamburg (her East German assailant was a Steffi Graf fan, and his intention was to pave the way for Steffi's return to the number-one spot). Nuclear deterrence is dead. Or at least Mutually Assured Destruction is dead: this extraordinary edifice – at once massive and notional, and, it appeared, impregnably self-sufficient – was unseamed by three words of diplomacy, from Mikhail Gorbachev (the three words were: 'This isn't serious.' As a planetary arrangement, four tons of TNT per human being wasn't only uncomic. It wasn't serious). The nuclear age has survived its Deterrence period and is entering a new phase, one which we can confidently – though not safely – call Proliferation. John Braine is dead: as a writer, his dream was to make a great deal of money; but he died in penury.

George Bush and Dan Quayle are dead, politically. The star interview is dead, as a form. Sent to New York to interview Madonna, I felt no significant disruption in my plans when Madonna refused to see me. The great post-modern celebrities are a part of their publicity machines, and that is all you are ever going to get to write about: their publicity machines. You review the publicity machine. Even the humble literary interview is dying, or growing old: 'It was with dread/detachment/high hopes that I approached X's townhouse/office/potting shed. The door opened. He is fatter/smaller/taller/balder than I expected. Pityingly/perfunctorily/politely he offered me instant coffee/a cigarette/dinner. Everyone told me how modest/craven/suave/vain/charming I would find him, so I was naturally unsurprised/taken aback by his obvious charm/vanity, etc., etc.' Darts is dead. Its decline followed an opposite course to that of nuclear deterrence. It tried to sanitise or detoxify itself (no alcohol, no tobacco, no obesity); but then it transpired that the prospect of messy self-destruction was the only thing anyone liked about it. Isaac Asimov is dead. Topless sunbathing is no longer remarkable. Roman Polanski no longer makes interesting films. V.S. Pritchett isn't ninety any more: he will soon be ninety-three. I have now been doing this sort of thing for more than twenty years. I don't get around as much as I used to.

Not long ago I saw a book of this kind described by a reviewer as 'a garage sale': the writer was selling off his literary junk, in informal surroundings. Certainly it is considered a nice gesture if, in introducing such a book, the writer abases himself for having assembled it. Actually the authorial motive – or vice or weakness – we are examining here is, I think, dully clerical: an attempt at order and completion. John Updike, an obvious hero of the genre, took this tendency too far, perhaps, when in *Picked-Up*

Pieces he reprinted a sixty-word citation to Thornton Wilder, together with a fifty-word footnote doggedly justifying its inclusion. All I can safely promise the reader is that, though much has been left in, much has been left out.

After university I worked in an art gallery (for three months), then in advertising (for three weeks), then at the *Times Literary Supplement* (for three years), and then (for four more) at the *New Statesman*. In 1980 I quit going to an office and became a full-time writer. The main characteristic of this way of life, it seemed to me, was that nothing ever happened to you. Being a novelist, in those days, was not in itself a distraction, as it can be now. Now, if you're not careful, you can spend half your life being interviewed or photographed or answering questions posed by the press, on the telephone, about Fergie or Maastricht or your favourite colour. Nothing ever happened to you – except journalism: the kind of journalism that got you out of the house. Getting out of the house is the only thing that unites the pieces in the present book – an unrigorous arrangement, which I didn't quite stick to anyway. *Not* getting out of the house will be the controlling theme of a subsequent volume, one devoted to the lowest and noblest literary form: the book review. Novels, of course, are *all* about not getting out of the house.

And so, equipped with some kind of assignment, you get out of the house! This might mean a fifteen-hour flight or a ten-minute drive to the other side of Regents Park. Things can go well or they can go badly. When things go badly, you are simply an embarrassment to your destination. You return hours or weeks later with half a page of notes and the prospect of much cloistered contrivance. When things go well, the necessary elements come together with little or no encouragement. Writing journalism never feels like writing in the proper sense. It is essentially collaborative: both your subject and your audience are hopelessly

specific. But the excursion itself (the solitude, the preoccupation, the solving of successive difficulties) – *that* sometimes feels like writing.

I am grateful to all the journalists who commissioned, retrieved, subbed, improved, bowdlerised or fact-checked these pieces, but I am especially grateful to the late Terence Kilmartin, of the *Observer*. I think of him as my first and last editor. He started me off and made it easy for me to keep going. Now he too is dead, and I miss his guidance and his friendship; but I will never finish a piece without mentally sending it past his desk.

Special thanks are also due to George Brennan, Emily Read, Pascal Cariss and Chaim Tannenbaum.

GRAHAM GREENE

‘All my friends … are dead. One finds that one’s acquaintances die at the rate of nineteen or twenty a year. That would include only about four that one has known well. I keep a rather morbid list. Yes, with a cross against the ones I knew really well.’

‘How do you feel when another one goes? Does it leave the life that remains feeling thinner?’

‘I think it does a bit. Evelyn – I was shocked by his death. One is shocked when a bit of one’s life disappears. I felt that with Omar Torríjos [the Panamanian leader]. I think that’s why, in the case of Torríjos, I embarked on what I hoped would be a memoir but turned into a rather unsatisfactory blend of things.[1] I felt that a whole segment of my life had been cut out.’

‘That list of yours. It must be quite a long list by now.’

‘Oh yes.’

It is, I believe, fairly common to feel a tremor of intimate recognition on your first glimpse of Graham Greene. Like most literate residents of the planet, you have known this presence (cool, fugitive, slightly sinister) all your reading life – and now here he is. He stands at the entrance to his Paris apartment, erect and inquisitive. The pale, headmasterly face is impassively well-preserved and, in its outlines, seems no different from the photographs on the three-shilling Penguins of the Fifties: long upper lip, frowning forehead, the moistly clouded stare. His clothes,

too, are the expected mixture of greens and browns, the lank tie heavily knotted (with the thin end out-dangling the thick). The only obvious infirmity he suffers is an arthritic little finger; his handshake is gently, and appropriately, masonic.

'Do you have any particular feelings about turning eighty?'

'No, except annoyance at all this fuss and halloo. That business in *The Times* … One thing I did enjoy was going up to Bury St Edmunds to the Greene King Brewery and doing a *mash* – the first stage of brewing. By October there will be 100,000 bottles with a special label with my signature on it. It's their strongest beer. They're very good, Greene King. Now *that* I liked … Otherwise, well, I get tired more easily, I begin to forget names. I'm in rather better health than I was five years ago, when I had a cancer and an operation. I'm on a plateau. I'm not as manic and I'm not as depressive.'

The flat is spacious but not airy. Through the closed second-floor windows come the usual sounds (triumphant and hysterical) of mobilettes on the Boulevard Malesherbes. The English Sunday newspapers are fanned on the table, along with a copy of the *Spectator*, open at the correspondence page. Greene's accent is now thoroughly European, and the *r*s are candidly Gallic; when he says, 'Belief is *rational* and faith is *irrational*', the stressed words sound exactly the same. He has the demeanour and habitat of a retired civil servant or (just possibly) an exiled spy – a quiet Englishman, a confidential agent, a third man.

Veteran interviewees have a repertoire, and to begin with Greene relied fairly heavily on his anecdotal store. The time he joined the Communist Party with Claud Cockburn 'in hopes of getting a free trip to Moscow', the time he requested electric-shock treatment from a psychiatrist

friend, the time he was deported from Puerto Rico by the American authorities, his experiments with benzedrine while writing *The Confidential Agent* (in the mornings) and *The Power and the Glory* (in the afternoons) before the war. Sensing my familiarity with these stories (I had just read the collected essays and the two volumes of autobiography), Greene said:

'As you see, I've got nothing new to say. One's said it all in one's work. It was embarrassing at the National Film Theatre the other day. I'd just received Quentin Falk's book about my experiences with film and films, and I had time to read it beforehand. Luckily it had been published only the day before. Because every *word* that I uttered in response to questions at the NFT had been taken from this book. I'd got absolutely *nothing* further to contribute.'

'You certainly get about a good deal.'

'I haven't much this year,' said Greene, who has visited Switzerland, England, Italy, Spain, Antibes and now Paris, all in the last couple of months. 'I've resisted the temptation of Panama, at least. I love long plane journeys, especially if I'm being paid for and I'm travelling first class. I used to go to Panama via Amsterdam to avoid going to the United States – a fifteen-hour journey, which I loved. I drank a lot of Bols gin, and I read. And there were no telephones and no letters. It's like being in a hospital. I'm very happy in a hospital. Nobody can really get at you.'

The telephone rang. 'Another professor,' sighed Greene.

'You say you avoid going to the United States ...'

'Well, I don't *like* the United States. And I don't like New York. I don't like the electricity – I don't *like* getting an electric shock whenever I touch a door handle. I don't like the dirt, and on the whole – with many exceptions – I don't like Americans. They strike me rather as the English abroad strike me: noisy, and incredibly ignorant of the

world. I had a woman who came to see me from Houston the other day, and she was the most incredibly stupid woman I've ever known. And she was a graduate. We talked about the Central-American situation. She'd never heard of it. She'd never heard of any troubles down there. Later she wrote to me saying that she'd talked to her colleagues about what I'd said and she found, to her astonishment, that a lot of them agreed with me.

'Reagan is a menace. I'm very disappointed by the death of Andropov. I had great hopes of him. I preached for some years that any reform in Russia could only come – not from the old men or the army – but from the KGB. A Polish film-director told me that the KGB let the army go to Afghanistan in order to get their feet in the mud ... Despite the obvious noises Reagan has been making he's as extreme as anyone in the Kremlin. I'm amused and interested by the fact that he's meeting Gromyko, but I have a feeling that Gromyko will not be helping the re-election. He will have a clever move to damage it. I don't think he will allow Reagan to pass himself off as a peacemaker.

'I felt the shadow darken when Reagan came to power. But perhaps we're all getting used to the idea. Perhaps the next generation will live under this shadow even more equably than your own. I've got a secret dream that Colonel Gadaffi will get hold of a couple of nuclear bombs and drop them somewhere. America and Russia will come together to extinguish the danger, and might never entirely separate.'

At one o'clock we tiptoed through the *merde de chien* and lunched in moderate bourgeois splendour at a Right Bank brasserie. 'We're stinging the *Observer* for this, are we? Good.' The lordly waiters seated Monsieur Greene with some reverence and listened shrewdly to his request for a '*martini-dry. Sec*! *Très*, très *sec*.' He added, 'I never do

what the doctors tell me. I think the body knows better than the doctor. I never eat vegetables. Castro was shocked. He said – what regime do you have? His was very strict, you see. I said, I don't have one. I eat and drink what I like.'

'So if the body says – have a drink ...'

'Then I drink.'

*

Greene was drinking – moderately but with relish – the following night. By a fairly extraordinary coincidence, he has befriended *my* best friend in Paris, a youngish (English) artist who went down to Antibes several years ago to paint Greene for the National Portrait Gallery. So a picnic dinner was arranged at the private wine-cellar of another common friend. Old friends die but new ones are born – and it is clear that Greene has something like a genius for friendship. Friendship is complicated too, however, and nothing about Graham Greene is uncomplicated. There are contrary impressions to be dealt with.

He is an ideologue. You sense that his beliefs are embedded in past struggles and ascendancies. (In Catholic Central America, with its hot and cold wars, the old polarities are still vivid.) His life and work have been grounded on faith, and on its opposites and counterparts: loyalty and betrayal, stoicism and doubt. He is fond of quoting Browning: 'Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things./The honest thief, the tender murderer,/The superstitious atheist ...'; and he has always been drawn to moral bandit-lands. 'Human beings are more important to believers than they are to atheists,' he has said. But they are less important too, in a sense; and we remember Bendrix's remark in *The End of the Affair*, that even with love we get 'to the end of other people', and must look for something else.

‘There is a certain sympathy,’ he told me, ‘which the present Pope doesn’t seem to recognise, between the believing communist and the believing Catholic ... I don’t feel as though I’ve changed much since I joined the CP at the age of twenty-seven. Curiously enough there’s an Indian woman who’s writing a book claiming that I’m the only one of the Thirties group whose beliefs remained unchanged. Orwell changed, and Auden changed. Isherwood changed. I retain this sympathy for the *dream* of communism anyway, though I agree that the record is very discouraging. We’re all unbelievers within our own faiths.’

I taxed him with his oft-misquoted remark that he would rather end his days in Russia than in America.

‘What I meant was that I would end my days *sooner* in Russia because there they pay writers the compliment of regarding them as a danger.’

‘But if it came to it?’

‘All right. Yes. I would rather end my days in the Gulag than in – than in *California*.’

‘That’s a very typical remark, if you don’t mind me saying so.’

But he didn’t seem to mind at all.

Observer, 1984

Postscript: Geopolitical change has made Greene’s opinions and preoccupations sound rather more antique than they sounded in 1984; but I suspect that his legend will increasingly tend towards the nostalgic, the romantic, the regressive. It is, as Communists used to say, no accident that his novels work most powerfully on the adolescent. For my generation Graham Greene was inevitably the first serious writer you came across: he seemed exemplarily

adult and exemplarily modern. Now he seems neither. Now *he* seems adolescent, though in the richest and (again) the most romantic sense. It is a commonplace to say that his novels, for all their geographical variety, did not 'develop'. Greeneland stays the same. What happened was that he got older as he wrote about it. His manner changes (the surprising poetry of the early novels, the gaunt and sober maturity of the Forties and early Fifties, the more playful and forgiving later work), but the oppositions, the relationships, the moral trade-offs are all recognisably constant. I do not find this world 'over-schematic' so much as weirdly suspenseless. The faithbreaker must die. The policeman's pistol will tend to be phallic. The adulterer will never be redeemed ... Greene's influence, none the less, will remain deep and formative. We happened to read him before we read anybody else. He was an awakener.

Two additional memories survive this visit. When we exchanged the man-made earth-colours of Greene's apartment (he *did* look like a headmaster, and his sitting-room looked like a headmaster's study) for the bright lights and tuxed waiters of the prosperous Right Bank brasserie, there was a third person present: Greene's woman friend, whom I had agreed not to mention (and shall not name here, even though her identity is well enough known). As we were being seated by the *maître d'hôtel*, or some comparably exalted personage, the lunchers fell silent; then came a surge of agitated murmurs. This had nothing to do with Graham Greene. It had to do with the removal of his friend's overcoat, revealing: a woman of a certain age but still fiercely gamine, in purple angora sweater and skintight shiny black trousers. Greene enjoyed this frisson, this minor *épatement*, as clearly as he enjoyed his pre-lunch Martini – and his friend's conversation: we had several acquaintances in common, and she proved to be a passionate and talented gossip.

When I returned from the Boulevard Malesherbes to my hotel in the Latin Quarter I entered a scene from one of Graham Greene's darker entertainments. In the lobby people were wielding mops and buckets with an air of resigned and weary lamentation. A member of the staff had just been decapitated in the lift-shaft.

[1] *Getting to Know the General*, The Bodley Head, 1984

EMERGENCY LANDING

When it comes to flying, I am a nervous passenger but a confident drinker and Valium-swallower. And although I wasn't exactly goosing the stewardesses or singing 'Viva España' (this was a BA flight to Malaga), I was certainly in a holiday mood. In fact I had just called for my second pre-lunch cocktail – having enjoyed, oh, I don't know, a good three or four on the ground – when I began to sense that something was up.

Suddenly withdrawing the half-dozen meal-trays she had just laid out, the flustered blonde stewardess told me that the bar-service had been suspended. In answer to my very anxious enquiries, she told me that the bar-service would soon resume. I was still grumbling to myself about this when the Captain's voice came on the public-address system. 'As you have probably noticed,' he began (I hadn't), 'we have turned full circle and are heading back to Gatwick. For technical reasons.'

Now I saw that the sun had indeed changed places, and that we were flying north over France towards the Channel. Unworriedly I resigned myself to the usual frustrations: the six-hour wait, the free orangeade, the bun-voucher. Now I saw also that the stewardesses were systematically searching the overhead compartments. So. A bomb scare. But this bomb didn't scare *me*.

The Captain came on again. In a bored voice he levelled with us about the 'alert'; then, more urgently, he added

that, in view of the time factor, it was now thought necessary to make an emergency landing, at Dinard. At this point, still feeling no more than mildly devil-may-care, I took the second half of my Valium 5, helping it down with a swig of duty-free whisky. I offered the bottle to the girl in the window seat, whose clear distress I began, rather grandly, to pooh-pooh. The bottle was taken away from my hand by the stewardess and fondly restored to its yellow bag. We speared down on Dinard, not in the cruising, wallowing style that aeroplanes usually adopt for landing, but with steep and speedy purpose.

Seats upright. Place your forehead on the back of the seat in front of you. There will be more than one bump. Don't be alarmed by the reverse thrust. Leave all your hand-baggage. Move as quickly as you can to the exits and slide down the escape-chutes. When you are on the ground – run.

I glanced, for the first time in my life, at the benign cartoons of the safety-procedure card. Then I hunkered down for the final seconds. I thought of my wife and eight-month-old son, whom I was flying to join. I had escorted them to Gatwick ten days previously, on the same morning that an Air India jumbo had been blown to pieces (or so we then thought) over the seas of south-west Ireland. My apprehension at Departures that day had been far more intense than anything I was feeling now. What I was feeling now was, mainly, relief that my wife and child weren't with me. Had they been, everything would now be different. For a start, I wouldn't be drunk. I placed my wallet on my lap (I had no jacket), and waited.

The 737 landed like a skimmed stone, like a bomb itself, like a dam-buster. The reverse-thrust came on with such preternatural power that the tail seemed to lift, as though the whole aircraft was about to start toppling end over end. In this weird squall of gravity and inertia, my wallet shot off

my lap and slithered along the floor, four or five rows away. Now the plane was quenched of its speed; seatbelts clicked, and immediately a pressing queue had formed in the aisle.

My paramount concern at this point was, of course, to find my wallet. Coolly lingering in a vacant three-pack, I was well placed to watch the passengers flee past me to the end of the aeroplane. As they awaited the stewardess's order (the doors had to open, the chutes had to inflate), the passengers pressed forward, four or five women – perhaps those with children – in the forefront. Physically they showed no more agitation than, say, people in fairly desperate need of a bathroom. But their voices contained an edge of panic. In those few seconds I remember only one word being spoken, and often repeated. 'Please ... Oh please.' Soon the stewardesses were urgently shooing them down the aisle. I waited. Then, grumbling and swearing, I crawled around in search of my wallet and scattered credit cards, which had themselves been torn loose by the Gs.

At last I strolled to the door. 'Sit and jump,' said the stewardess. Those elongated dinghies are a lot less stable than they look, but down I went – wheee! – and jogged away from the aircraft, which, I saw, had reached the very brink of its runway and had jarred to a halt midway through a ninety-degree turn. Five yards from its nose lay the edge of a lumpy brown field.

Around me was being enacted the formless drama that perhaps invariably succeeds every incident of mass crisis or jeopardy. I can only describe it as a scene of peculiar raggedness, with sights and sounds somehow failing to coordinate. A man keeled over in the grass, clutching his heart and moaning loudly. A girl with a sprained ankle was being helped away three-legged to safety. Busily the stewardesses gave comfort where they could. I myself – with, no doubt, egregious nonchalance – attempted to

console a weeping woman. There was a good deal of crying in the air, brittle, exultant. Soon the French security guards were shepherding us tenderly across the field to the terminal.

After a shock (I later learned), the body needs a lot of sweet tea. But the drinks were on BA, and most people drank a lot of brandy, which (I later learned) is the very thing the body needs least. I compromised by drinking a lot of whisky, and remained in capital fettle throughout the five-hour wait. The evening soon became an exercise in maximum *esprit de corps*, with the passengers informally dividing into two camps: those who were saying, 'I've never been so scared in my life,' and those who were saying, 'You think this was bad? This was nothing. Let me tell you about the time I ...' My position was, I suppose, unusual. I had not felt fear; but I knew that fear would have been an appropriate feeling.

Now, all writers secretly maintain a vampiric attitude to disaster; and, having survived it, I was unreservedly grateful for the experience. Here I sat, not in Gatwick but in Dinard, enjoying a good free dinner and pleasant camaraderie. And when I flopped into bed at five the next morning – replacement aircraft (the original was later searched, fruitlessly), baggage identification on the dark tarmac, the incident-free completion of the journey – I felt like a returning lord, a man who had come through a testing time, without a scratch, without a wince.

And I was wrong. For the next few days, although outwardly cheerful enough, I was pretty sure I was dying – and of natural causes, too. My body was subject to strange tinglings. Throughout my tragic siestas I lay there trembling and boiling, as if a tram station or a foundry had established itself beneath the bed. I watched the world through veils of helplessness. This was no hangover. This

was old age. One morning I found a brief report on the Dinard ordeal in the *Herald Tribune*. Incredibly, there was no mention whatever of the quiet and simple heroism with which I had borne it ...

My wife suggested that I was suffering from delayed shock – which, I admit, gave me quite a turn. Although I had privately diagnosed a brain tumour, I was still reluctant to identify the malaise as an after-effect of something that had bothered me so little. My body, however, continued to insist on the truth. Hoaxers and other operatives in the terror business will be relieved to learn that, when it comes to fear, there's no such thing as a free lunch, or a free dinner.

So much, then, for my valour on the fields of France. I emerge from the incident with another new experience, and no credit whatever. I was as brave as a lord, as brave as a newt. Chemically numbed at the time, my fear – of which there had clearly been plenty – had just burrowed deep and waited. I had sneaked out of the restaurant without settling the bill. The body's accountants had redressed the ledger, with interest. And for nearly a week I was wearily picking up that tab.

Observer, 1985

NUCLEAR CITY: THE MEGADEATH INTELLECTUALS

Washington is nuclear city. In any imaginable exchange, however ‘surgical’, ‘splendid’, ‘cathartic’ or ‘therapeutic’, Washington would go (and so would San Diego, Seattle and San Francisco). Washington would be ‘taken out’. Its well-forested malls would go, the silver masonry of its imperial buildings would go, its museums and monuments would go; a good deal of such history as America has would go, along with all the random life that any great city contains: the jazz bars of Georgetown, the residential follies of Capitol Hill, the beggars (lobbyists of the street), the graffito saying NO NUKES, the bumper sticker saying NO FAT CHICKS, the National Gallery’s Matisse: The Early Years in Nice (and that particular interest in human form and posture), the Rose Garden, the day schools – all would go. Washington stands there, like a king on a tumbrel, awaiting decapitation.

When nuclear weapons become real to you, when they stop buzzing around your ears and actually move into your head, hardly an hour passes without some throb or flash, some heavy pulse of imagined supercatastrophe. Staring at the many-eyed helmet of the Capitol, you see the clouds above on fire, the winter sky ignited, taken out. Now is the time to see this, and your head is the place to see it in. The reality won’t be seen by anyone. Certain Virginians, I suppose, might get to view the lit brain, the scorching

shower, the moronic fist of the mushroom cloud. But no one will ‘see’ the bursting city. To this crime there will be no witnesses; there will just be innocent bystanders, in their millions. Many times the cinema has tried to imagine a nuclear attack upon a city. What the cinema cannot get, what *we* cannot get, is the simultaneity: everything becoming nothing, all at once.

Washington is nuclear city, is Thermopolis, in another sense, too. With famous prodigality and greed, nuclear weapons squander resources, gobble money, hog know-how. But what of the intellectual resources, what of the thought, the acuity, and concentration they hourly consume? In institutes, foundations, committees, endowments, and in a thousand offices along the corridors of power, people are sitting around all day thinking about these man-made objects, nuclear weapons – the strangest subject, with its squalor, profanity and nausea, its addictive fascination and terrible glamour, its unique inclusiveness and complexity. Having read a yard of books on the question, I had come to Washington to read a yard more, to talk and to listen, to peer into the nuclear campus. People came up with all these nuclear weapons, and then nuclear weapons came up with all these people – thinkers, minders – to wonder what to do with them, what to do about them, how to do without them.

‘Some of these guys’, one expert told me, ‘are nukies for life. Only one subject. Nukes this. Nukes that.’ Their office walls are sandbagged with nuclear literature, their floors are heaped with nuclear dossiers and printouts. They like maps, graphs, blackboards. They tend to talk with almost inhuman rapidity: you sit there listening to cascades of acronyms, blizzards of abbreviations. In some of their faces you can make out the orbits of strain, of moral care; but many of the boys in the school have the superanimation, the robust esprit of the gratified hobbyist. Two things

immediately strike you – or they struck me. There are no women here. And there are no smokers.

This last point exercised me above and beyond the familiar torment of nicotine denial. Halfway through an afternoon of intense discussion, with my lungs starting to sob and plead for their customary half-hourly snack, I would sometimes master the usual feelings of shame and criminality, and say, 'Would you mind if I had a cigarette?' 'Yes, I would, actually' was the standard reply. With shared embarrassment we would then lurch back into our X-ray lasers and hard-kill capabilities. Even if you get them out of the office and into a bar, they cough and gag and fan themselves the instant you get burning. It seems discrepant that these connoisseurs of thermal pulse and superstellar temperatures, these fireball merchants and inferno artists should all go green at the sight of a Marlboro. But you are going to get discrepancies – comic, tragic, pathetic – when your subject is nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are everything and nothing. This is their genius. On the one hand, they are bargaining chips, pawns in a propaganda contest, peace-keepers – mutually cancelling, a double bluff we all go along with. They are nothing. How can anyone get hurt by an 'umbrella'? On the other hand, nuclear weapons are what they are and do what they do: they multiply matter by the speed of light squared; they deal in tons of blood and rubble; they are instruments of mass destruction. They are everything, because they can destroy everything. It's just as well, for their sake, that they sometimes look like nothing.

Marcus Raskin, who is now at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, tells the following story about his time with the 'strategic community' under Kennedy. This was 1961. Word came through that the Soviet Union was about to test a fifty-megaton hydrogen bomb. Everybody

reached for their circular slide rules. ‘Fifty thousand tons,’ people were calmly muttering. ‘Four times Hiroshima.’ It took several minutes before they realised what they were dealing with: not the equivalent of fifty thousand tons of TNT, but the equivalent of fifty million tons of TNT. And these were experts who thought about little else. As Raskin says, if you stare at nuclear weapons long enough, you start to lose your grip on what they are, what they do.

Actually, it was more like *sixty* million tons of TNT: fifty-eight megatons, the biggest bang ever. A train carrying the Hiroshima yield in TNT form would take up four miles of track. A train carrying the equivalent of the Soviet H-bomb would put a girdle round the earth at the latitude of London with a three-thousand-mile overlap. Military strategists, of course, have a special contempt for such Believe-It-or-Not formulations. And that contempt is understandable. For at moments like these, nuclear weapons edge out of their shadowland; they edge out of nothing and start heading for everything. We see them, but do we really believe them? Believe it or not. Believe it or else. Luckily for them (but not for us), nuclear weapons are unbelievable: they defy belief, they are beyond belief. Do we really see the train – do we really see the preposterous savagery of fifty-eight million tons of TNT?

The atom bomb, said J. Robert Oppenheimer, who put the first one together, ‘is shit’. It’s just ‘a big bang’. He had felt rather differently after the Alamogordo test: ‘I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture … “Now I am become death, shatterer of worlds.”’ Both intuitions are quite accurate. Everything and nothing. If they become everything, we become nothing. If they become nothing, we become everything, all over again. So which is it going to be?

One flight down from Marcus Raskin at the Institute for Policy Studies you will find William Arkin, who describes himself as America's 'most troublesome nuclear weapons expert'. His office resembles that of an ecstatically disciplined academic – the room is information-crammed, yet orderly, alphabetical, fingertip. Behind the cover of his beard and glasses, Arkin seems at first to exude the brusqueness and glaze of the far-gone nukie: you feel you are keeping him from higher things. And so you are.

There is a kind of nuke chat that sounds like masochism – amused, collusive, cheerfully scandalised. You talk about government policies as if you were talking about your children, their pointless delinquencies, their cute inanities. (You know what they did? Have you heard what they're doing now?) For a while Arkin and I did this kind of nuke chat. He told me about the $6,000 nuclear-hardened coffee pot, the 'readiness to test' facility at Johnston Island, south of Hawaii. Then his manner changed, and I sensed what I was to sense many times in Washington: a desire to escape complexity, to escape detail and the proliferation of detail, a desire to change the language, to edge back toward first principles.

'What you have to understand, what you have to make clear, is that the nuclear arsenal is a living organism, constantly adjusted, refined, alerted, programmed, mobilised. Under Reagan we have shifted from prevention to preparation. They're not interested in World War III. They're interested in World War IV. The nuclear war plan spans 180 days. It's a confession of inevitability – "it can't not happen" – though it's so fucking complicated that they can't even see it ... Nuclear war is not just an idea. The whole planet is wired up for it.'

Nuclear geography – or cosmology – is a pressing theme in Arkin's work. You read him and listen to him with scepticism, with trepidation, because he is telling you that