

Ian McEwan

ATONEMENT

ALSO BY IAN McEWAN

First Love, Last Rites

In Between the Sheets

The Cement Garden

The Comfort of Strangers

The Child in Time

The Innocent

Black Dogs

The Daydreamer

Enduring Love

Amsterdam

Saturday

The Imitation Game
(plays for television)

Or Shall We Die?

(libretto for oratorio by Michael Berkeley)

The Ploughman's Lunch
(film script)

Sour Sweet

(film script)

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Seven

⑥ 11th 7E M 21E

The island temple, built in the style of Nicholas Revett in the late 1780s, was intended as a point of interest, an eye-catching feature to enhance the pastoral ideal, and had of course no religious purpose at all. It was near enough to the water's edge, raised upon a projecting bank, to cast an interesting reflection in the lake, and from most perspectives the row of pillars and the pediment above them were charmingly half obscured by the elms and oaks that had grown up around. Closer to, the temple had a sorer look: moisture rising through a damaged damp-course had caused chunks of stucco to fall away. Sometime in the late nineteenth century clumsy repairs were made with unpainted cement which had turned brown and gave the building a mottled, diseased appearance. Elsewhere, the exposed laths, themselves rotting away, showed through like the ribs of a starving animal. The double doors that opened onto a circular chamber with a domed roof, had long ago been removed, and the stone floor was thickly covered in leaves and leaf mould and the droppings of various birds and animals that wandered in and out. All the panes were gone from the pretty, Georgian windows, smashed by Leon and his friends in the late twenties. The tall niches that had once contained statuary were empty but for the filthy ruins of spider webs. The only furniture was a bench

carried in from the village cricket pitch - again, the youthful Leon and his terrible friends from school. The legs had been kicked away and used to break the windows, and were lying outside, softly crumbling into the earth among the nettles and the incorruptible shards of glass.

Just as the swimming pool pavilion behind the stable block imitated features of the temple, so the temple was supposed to embody references to the original Adam house, though nobody in the Tallis family knew what they were. Perhaps it was the style of column, or the pediment, or the proportions of the windows. At different times, but most often at Christmas, when moods were expansive, family members strolling over the bridges promised to research the matter, but no one cared to set aside the time when the busy new year began. More than the dilapidation, it was this connection, this lost memory of the temple's grander relation, which gave the useless little building its sorry air. The temple was the orphan of a grand society lady, and now, with no one to care for it, no one to look up to, the child had grown old before its time, and let itself go. There was a tapering soot stain as high as a man on an outside wall where two tramps had once, outrageously, lit a bonfire to roast a carp that was not theirs. For a long time there had been a shrivelled boot lying exposed on grass kept trim by rabbits. But when Briony looked today, the boot had vanished, as everything would in the end. The idea that the temple, wearing its own black band, grieved for the burned-down mansion, that it yearned for a grand and invisible presence, bestowed a faintly religious ambience. Tragedy had rescued the temple from being entirely a fake.

It is hard to slash at nettles for long without a story imposing itself, and Briony was soon absorbed and grimly content, even though she appeared to the world like a girl in the grip of a terrible mood. She had found a slender hazel branch and stripped it clean. There was work to do, and she set about it. A tall nettle with a preening look, its head coyly drooping

efficiency, as though preparing for some hazardous journey or military exploit, he accomplished the familiar little chores – located his keys, found a ten-shilling note inside his wallet, brushed his teeth, smelled his breath against a cupped hand, from the desk snatched up his letter and folded it into an envelope, loaded his cigarette case and checked his lighter. One last time, he braced himself in front of the mirror. He bared his gums, and turned to present his profile and looked across his shoulder at his image. Finally, he patted his pockets, then loped down the stairs, three at a time again, called a farewell to his mother, and stepped out onto the narrow brick path which led between the flower beds to a gate in the picket fence.

In the years to come he would often think back to this time, when he walked along the footpath that made a shortcut through a corner of the oak woods and joined the main drive where it curved towards the lake and the house. He was not late, and yet he found it difficult to slow his pace. Many immediate and other less proximal pleasures mingled in the richness of these minutes: the fading, reddish dusk, the warm, still air saturated with the scents of dried grasses and baked earth, his limbs loosened by the day's work in the gardens, his skin smooth from his bath, the feel of his shirt and of this, his only suit. The anticipation and dread he felt at seeing her was also a kind of sensual pleasure, and surrounding it, like an embrace, was a general elation – it might hurt, it was horribly inconvenient, no good might come of it, but he had found out for himself what it was to be in love, and it thrilled him. Other tributaries swelled his happiness; he still derived satisfaction from the thought of his first – the best in his year he was told. And now there was confirmation from Jack Tallis of his continuing support. A fresh adventure ahead, not an exile at all, he was suddenly certain. It was right and good that he should study medicine. He could not have explained his optimism – he was happy and therefore bound to succeed.

One word contained everything he felt, and explained why he was to dwell on this moment later. Freedom. In his life as in his limbs. Long ago, before he had even heard of grammar schools, he was entered for an exam that led him to one. Cambridge, much as he enjoyed it, was the choice of his ambitious headmaster. Even his subject was effectively chosen for him by a charismatic teacher. Now, finally, with the exercise of will, his adult life had begun. There was a story he was plotting with himself as the hero, and already its opening had caused a little shock among his friends. Landscape gardening was no more than a bohemian fantasy, as well as a lame ambition – so he had analysed it with the help of Freud – to replace or surpass his absent father. Schoolmastering – in fifteen years' time, Head of English, Mr R. Turner, MA Cantab – was not in the story either, nor was teaching at a university. Despite his first, the study of English literature seemed in retrospect an absorbing parlour game, and reading books and having opinions about them, the desirable adjunct to a civilised existence. But it was not the core, whatever Dr Leavis said in his lectures. It was not the necessary priesthood, nor the most vital pursuit of an enquiring mind, nor the first and last defence against a barbarian horde, any more than the study of painting or music, history or science. At various talks in his final year Robbie had heard a psychoanalyst, a Communist trade union official and a physicist each declare for his own field as passionately, as convincingly, as Leavis had for his own. Such claims were probably made for medicine, but for Robbie the matter was simpler and more personal: his practical nature and his frustrated scientific aspirations would find an outlet, he would have skills far more elaborate than the ones he had acquired in practical criticism, and above all he would have made his own decision. He would take lodgings in a strange town – and begin.

He had emerged from the trees and reached the point where the path joined the drive. The falling light magnified

the dusky expanse of the park, and the soft yellow glow at the windows on the far side of the lake made the house seem almost grand and beautiful. She was in there, perhaps in her bedroom, preparing for dinner – out of view, at the back of the building on the second floor. Facing over the fountain. He pushed away these vivid, daylight thoughts of her, not wanting to arrive feeling deranged. The hard soles of his shoes rapped loudly on the metalled road like a giant clock, and he made himself think about time, about his great hoard, the luxury of an unspent fortune. He had never before felt so self-consciously young, nor experienced such appetite, such impatience for the story to begin. There were men at Cambridge who were mentally agile as teachers, and still played a decent game of tennis, still rowed, who were twenty years older than him. Twenty years at least in which to unfold his story at roughly this level of physical well-being – almost as long as he had already lived. Twenty years would sweep him forward to the futuristic date of 1955. What of importance would he know then that was obscure now? Might there be for him another thirty years beyond that time, to be lived out at some more thoughtful pace?

He thought of himself in 1962, at fifty, when he would be old, but not quite old enough to be useless, and of the weathered, knowing doctor he would be by then, with the secret stories, the tragedies and successes stacked behind him. Also stacked would be books by the thousand, for there would be a study, vast and gloomy, richly crammed with the trophies of a lifetime's travel and thought – rare rain-forest herbs, poisoned arrows, failed electrical inventions, soapstone figurines, shrunken skulls, aboriginal art. On the shelves, medical reference and meditations, certainly, but also the books that now filled the cubby hole in the bungalow attic – the eighteenth-century poetry that had almost persuaded him he should be a landscape gardener, his third-edition Jane Austen, his Eliot and Lawrence and Wilfred Owen, the complete set of Conrad, the priceless 1783 edition of Crabbe's

The Village, his Housman, the autographed copy of Auden's *The Dance of Death*. For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructive folly or sheer bad luck that drive men towards ill-health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall – this was the doctor's business, and it was literature's too. He was thinking of the nineteenth-century novel. Broad tolerance and the long view, an inconspicuously warm heart and cool judgment; his kind of doctor would be alive to the monstrous patterns of fate, and to the vain and comic denial of the inevitable; he would press the enfeebled pulse, hear the expiring breath, feel the fevered hand begin to cool and reflect, in the manner that only literature and religion teach, on the puniness and nobility of mankind . . .

His footsteps quickened in the still summer evening to the rhythm of his exultant thoughts. Ahead of him, about a hundred yards away, was the bridge, and on it, he thought, picked out against the darkness of the road, was a white shape which seemed at first to be part of the pale stone of the parapet. Staring at it dissolved its outlines, but within a few paces it had taken on a vaguely human form. At this distance he was not able to tell whether it faced away or towards him. It was motionless and he assumed he was being watched. He tried for a second or two to entertain himself with the idea of a ghost, but he had no belief in the supernatural, not even in the supremely undemanding being that presided over the Norman church in the village. It was a child, he saw now, and therefore it must be Briony, in the white dress he had seen her wearing earlier in the day. He could see her clearly now and he raised his hand and called out to her, and said, 'It's me, Robbie,' but still she did not move.

As he approached it occurred to him that it might be preferable for his letter to precede him into the house. Otherwise he might have to pass it to Cecilia in company, watched perhaps by her mother who had been rather cool towards him since

Because Arabella almost learned too late,
That before we love, we must cogitate!

We made a rowdy applause. There was even some vulgar whistling. That dictionary, that *Oxford Concise*. Where was it now? North-west Scotland? I wanted it back. The boy made a bow and retreated a couple of yards and was joined by four other children who had come up, unnoticed by me, and were waiting in what would have been the wings.

And so *The Trials of Arabella* began, with a leave-taking from the anxious, saddened parents. I recognised the heroine immediately as Leon's great-granddaughter, Chloe. What a lovely solemn girl she is, with her rich low voice and her mother's Spanish blood. I remember being at her first birthday party, and it seemed only months ago. I watched her fall convincingly into poverty and despair, once abandoned by the wicked count – who was the prologue speaker in his black cloak. In less than ten minutes it was over. In memory, distorted by a child's sense of time, it had always seemed the length of a Shakespeare play. I had completely forgotten that after the wedding ceremony Arabella and the medical prince link arms and, speaking in unison, step forwards to address to the audience a final couplet.

Here's the beginning of love at the end of our travail.
So farewell, kind friends, as into the sunset we sail!

Not my best, I thought. But the whole room, except for Leon, Pierrot and myself, rose for the applause. How practised these children were, right down to the curtain call. Hand in hand, they stood in line abreast, taking their cue from Chloe, stepped back two paces, came forwards, bowed again. In the uproar, no one noticed that poor Pierrot was completely overcome and put his face in his hands. Was he reliving that lonely, terrifying time here after his parents' divorce? They'd so much wanted to be in the play, the twins, for that evening in the library,

and here it was at last, sixty-four years late, and his brother long dead.

I was helped out of my comfortable chair and made a little speech of thanks. Competing with a wailing baby at the back of the room, I tried to evoke that hot summer of nineteen thirty-five, when the cousins came down from the north. I turned to the cast and told them that our production would have been no match for theirs. Pierrot was nodding emphatically. I explained that it was entirely my fault the rehearsals fell apart, because halfway through I had decided to become a novelist. There was indulgent laughter, more applause, then Charles announced that it was dinner. And so the pleasant evening unravelled – the noisy meal at which I even drank a little wine, the presents, bedtime for the younger children, while their bigger brothers and sisters went off to watch television. Then speeches over coffee and much good-natured laughter, and by ten o'clock I was beginning to think of my splendid room upstairs, not because I was tired, but because I was tired of being in company and the object of so much attention, however kindly. Another half hour passed in goodnights and farewells before Charles and his wife Annie escorted me to my room.

Now it is five in the morning and I am still at the writing desk, thinking over my strange two days. It's true about the old not needing sleep – at least, not in the night. I still have so much to consider, and soon, within the year perhaps, I'll have far less of a mind to do it with. I've been thinking about my last novel, the one that should have been my first. The earliest version, January 1940, the latest, March 1999, and in between, half a dozen different drafts. The second draft, June 1947, the third . . . who cares to know? My fifty-nine-year assignment is over. There was our crime – Lola's, Marshall's, mine – and from the second version onwards, I set out to describe it. I've regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing – the names, the places, the exact circumstances – I put it all there as a matter of historical record. But as a matter of legal reality, so various

editors have told me over the years, my forensic memoir could never be published while my fellow criminals were alive. You may only libel yourself and the dead. The Marshalls have been active about the courts since the late forties, defending their good names with a most expensive ferocity. They could ruin a publishing house with ease from their current accounts. One might almost think they had something to hide. Think, yes, but not write. The obvious suggestions have been made - displace, transmute, dissemble. Bring down the fogs of the imagination! What are novelists for? Go just so far as is necessary, set up camp inches beyond the reach, the fingertips of the law. But no one knows these precise distances until a judgment is handed down. To be safe, one would have to be bland and obscure. I know I cannot publish until they are dead. And as of this morning, I accept that will not be until I am. No good, just one of them going. Even with Lord Marshall's bone-shrunk mug on the obituary pages at last, my cousin from the north would not tolerate an accusation of criminal conspiracy.

There was a crime. But there were also the lovers. Lovers and their happy ends have been on my mind all night long. As into the sunset we sail. An unhappy inversion. It occurs to me that I have not travelled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play. Or rather, I've made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place. It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away. All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. That I never saw them in that year. That my walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common, and that a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital,

unable to confront her recently bereaved sister. That the letters the lovers wrote are in the archives of the War Museum. How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. I'm too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I have remaining. I face an incoming tide of forgetting, and then oblivion. I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism. When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions. Briony will be as much of a fantasy as the lovers who shared a bed in Balham and enraged their landlady. No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love.

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.

I've been standing at the window, feeling waves of tiredness beat the remaining strength from my body. The floor seems to be undulating beneath my feet. I've been watching the first grey light bring into view the park and the bridges over the vanished lake. And the long narrow driveway down which they drove Robbie away, into the whiteness. I like to think