

INTERVIEW

'I rarely close my study door. I am not one of those hush-Dadd's-working writers'

Kate Kellaway interviews Ian McEwan

RATHER than arrive too early on Ian McEwan's doorstep, I walked around the block. Actually, it is not a block at all: he lives in an early Victorian crescent in north Oxford, the two sides of which close in graceful parenthesis around a garden. The houses, I observed, are the colour of toast, black at the edges. I half expected, at any moment, to run into Craig Raine, one of McEwan's neighbours. But there was no one about. It was absolutely quiet, sequestered, a perfect place in which to write.

In my handbag, heavy as a stone, was McEwan's new novel, *Atonement*. It had been weighing on my mind, too, since I finished it. It is, I think, the best thing he has ever written and I read it (at first) as one might drink a good wine, relishing every word, not wishing to swig too fast, not wanting it to be over. I rang the doorbell, stared at blue double doors and waited.

The first thing I would say about Ian McEwan is that he looks well. I noted his fine blue shirt (to match the door). But his face - ordinary, thin, bespectacled - I could easily resist describing because its interest depends upon the vitality of what he says. (His own hang-up about his appearance, he offers later, is that his eyebrows tend to the 'vertical'.) His publicity photograph is unfair. He looks worn out, his smile to order. Today, he is different - light, curious, receptive.

Inside, the house is virtuously ship-shape. He shares it with his sons, William, 18, and Gregory, 15. Their stepmother, Annalena McAfee (journalist and writer of a first-rate children's story about an extended family), spends the week in her home in London and her weekends in Oxford. Beyond the kitchen, I saw a single magpie on the lawn. One for sorrow. And I wondered about the emotions this house must have seen. For since McEwan won the Booker Prize in 1998 with *Amsterdam*, the fight over the custody of his sons has earned him even more publicity than his professional success.

It is an ordinary story with extraordinary details, as if a theatrical author had become a little deranged and decided to give it extra colour. McEwan's marriage to his first wife, Penny Allen, ended in 1995. She blamed his success and the negative pull of the 'glitterati'. She worked as a faith healer in Oxford but seemed to have no power to heal family relations. She vilified McEwan's name, took him to court and lost repeatedly, until, as if by a law of diminishing returns, the courts eventually awarded McEwan sole custody of the children and fined her £1,000 for defamation of his name.

And still she did not give up. She petitioned the Lord Chancellor (in vain) and published confidential documents about the breakdown of her marriage on the internet. At one desperate point, she ran away with the younger of the boys in defiance of a court ruling. She lives in France with her partner, a mineralogist who changed his name from Steve Brown to Ismay Tremain because he thought it sounded more distinctive. Brown/Tremain has played a troubling role throughout the story. Most outlandishly, he turned up at the High Court in London, gagged, brandishing a brief case bearing the words: 'Ian Russell McEwan. My next novel is entitled *The Destruction of Penny Allen and Ismay Tremain*'. You could understand it if, under the circumstances, there had been no 'next' novel at all.

We went up to the study on the first floor, a large room with fresh green walls and two sash windows with a desk between them. McEwan apologised for its untidiness. But it is an intriguing space, the physical equivalent of unrelated thoughts, with no linking plot at all. Here are just a few of the objects my eye alighted on: a wooden Pinocchio, an electric guitar, a lamp with a yellow ivory dragon looking ready to pounce, a retro telephone. There were small piles of books on the floor, like deposits of pebbles on a beach. The computer - should he turn it off? - sounded like a distant lawnmower.

We talked, at first, about the book. What was the seed from which *Atonement* grew? 'This book was written on the back of a fragment. I had been doodling for 15 months. I had a number of good descriptions of novels, as if they had already been written.' Then, one February, he took his sons to 'of all places, a Dutch Center Parc. I sat and gloomily wrote while they had a fabulous time'. What he produced was only a paragraph and a half (now the beginning of *Atonement*'s second chapter).

'It was about a young woman standing in a doorway, with wild flowers in her hand, looking for a vase. She was very aware of the young man who is a gardener. For reasons I couldn't define I felt really excited.' Like the young woman herself, he sensed that he was on the threshold of a story.

But the novel turned out to centre round a second girl, 13-year-old Briony, sister to the first and a writer in the making. 'I was in love with Briony and all her mistakes,' he says, relieved to know I had felt the same way (an American reader has written to him describing her as 'monstrous'). 'She seemed to walk on to the



page unannounced.' He did not know, then, who she was but she will go down in literary history as one of a select band of children. Like Maisie in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* or Leo in L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, Briony is a child who becomes implicated in an adult sexual relationship she does not understand.

The word 'know' rings through the book in an admonitory way. Was McEwan implying that we should be more alive to the limits of knowledge and look round the corners of what we think we know? He acknowledges that there is no such thing as 'the full story' about anything. He explained that he wanted to look at 'the inner life that is not driven by surface rationality but by a spectrum of hints, certainties that have no base...'. He wanted to describe the same experience from several points of view, it would be a 'polyphony... I was writing with as much discipline as I could to give an unruly sense of what the mind is.' For him, novels are not about 'teaching people how to live but about showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else. It is the basis of all sympathy, empathy and compassion. Other people are as alive as you are. Cruelty is a failure of imagination.'

He wrote *Atonement* with intense fear as well as excitement. He knew he was exploring new ground, another country. He has travelled a long way since *First Love*, *Last Rites* (1975), the first collection of stories that won him the nickname Ian Macabre. The private names he gave this book spell out the distance. He thought of *Atonement* (the first part of it) variously as 'my Jane Austen novel, my country house novel, my one-hot-day novel'. He knew it was a book he had been waiting years to write.

He agonised over the writing of a sexual encounter in the country house (upon which much depends): 'I knew that the making-love-in-the-library scene had got to be a glorious, transcendent experience. But I told myself: you're going to have to describe a fuck.' Should he tackle it like Updike, who overcomes the problem like a technician? 'He names and describes the glistening parts, mucus, membranes...' His solution was different and intensely, decorously erotic.

He writes slowly, is 'painstaking'. He lies awake at night and worries. He worries about the book, about the characters, about what they will say to each other in the morning. He worries that if he does not sleep well, he won't be able to write at all.

McEwan has understandably always brought down a polite portcullis when asked about his personal life. I suggest, expecting to draw a blank, that there has been much else to keep him awake since 1998. How has he coped? Was he able to close his study door on his anguish? Or did he find his writing galvanised by his troubles? To my surprise, he answers at once, as if he is no longer under the self-censoring constraints of the past: 'I rarely close my study door. I am not one of those hush-Daddy's-working writers. And I don't take the Freudian view that you get driven by neurosis into art. I work by necessity. But I can't shut things out; I go on working only because it is torture not to.'

And does he find that work can go on regardless, as if it ran on a different engine? He finds it extraordinary what the mind is capable of, the ability to think beyond grief: 'I went recently to comfort a friend who had lost a child. She asked me "How are your boys?" I could barely bring myself to tell her that they were very well.'

What he is actually proposing, though, is not easy at all. He believes you have to absorb everything into the family, that you cannot enforce a separation between writing and children or you will become 'irritable, beleaguered, self-pitying'. You must embrace division. 'Some-times, I accept that I will have to write in 25-minute bursts.' It is a 'discipline', he adds. Often, he gets up for his boys at the 'unbombed hour of 7.30' and knows that in a school day there is a limit to how much he can do. And yet he is still

able to find amazing stretches of uninterrupted time: 'If I think I am on to something, I'll just keep going for 12 or 14 hours.' It is a thrilling feeling, everything is 'accelerated, heightened. Like a love affair?' Yes, he says.

When he stops writing, he likes to cook because, although 'not very good with my hands', he enjoys it so much. He puts it rather curiously, however: 'I like taking a sharp knife to a tomato.'

His children are the centre of his life. And before long, all custody battles will be a memory. Perhaps this explains his relaxed manner: 'William turned 18 yesterday. He had a good send-off, I think.' He had two parties: one 'for his mates' and one with his half-sisters (Polly and Alice, now young adults in their twenties). 'It went on until four in the morning with all of us round the kitchen table.' He seems happy, expansive at the thought of it.

He goes on to tell me that he wrote his son a letter for the occasion, 'as one does - when a child crosses those shadowlines'. It contained 'a bit of advice', a quotation from Freud, he thinks, only he can't find the quote anywhere. I challenge him with making it up (he fooled many a shrink with his bogus report, at the end of *Enduring Love*, published in a psychiatric journal that never existed). He laughs sheepishly and resumes: 'Freud asked himself what the ingredients of a fulfilling life were and - with amazing practicality - decided that they were good health, interesting work and fulfilling personal relationships.' William, he felt, was scoring high on all counts. It is a useful checklist for life, he believes.

McEwan's own checklist may have three ticks on it - but there are two crosses - one for each of his parents. Early in the interview, he described himself growing up as an only child (he had two much older half-siblings). He used, like Briony, to make 'metaphors and parables' out of his solitary games. He gave as an instance: 'If this stone falls, my mother will never become ill.'

It was a poignant example. For McEwan's mother is ill with vascular dementia, an insidious disease that gradually erases memory (and plays a part in the novel). It is harrowing, he says, to watch someone die within a living body and 'terrible watching the mind empty'. There was a stage when my mother knew what was happening and felt: 'let me not be mad'. And yet now she is beyond self-knowledge and there are days in the nursing home when she appears 'quite cheerful. She thinks she is in a hotel and says she is off to see her own mother [who died long ago] in her childhood home'.

McEwan's father, an NCO in the Army all his life, died in 1996, and it is another 'great sorrow' that he will never read the book. The second part of it describes Dunkirk, where his father fought. Indeed, McEwan's father even appears fleetingly in a walk-on - or ride-on - part in the novel, a tiny figure in a landscape. 'He was a despatch rider, wounded in both legs by shrapnel; he found another man wounded in both arms and together they managed to ride a Harley-Davidson to safety.'

McEwan grew up with the 'detritus of war' around him. 'My babysitters were corporals,' he insists. Was there anything positive about the experience of war? 'I wondered. 'Id rather be born in 1948 than 1928.' He could find nothing positive to say about war. (We were talking on 11 September, an hour or two before the twin towers fell.)

Almost as an afterthought, I mention 'atonement' itself, a difficult concept for an atheist such as McEwan. For him, it is about a 'reconciliation with self.' I like the word, I say. He does too. He was looking at it one day when he saw, suddenly, how it came apart: at-one-ment. As I left, I felt that at-one-ment is exactly what Ian McEwan has achieved.

BOOKER

Atonement by Ian McEwan

From this week we will run one chapter from the novels shortlisted for this year's Booker Prize. We want to call it 'make your own judgement' series.

Chapter one

THE play - for which Briony had designed the posters, programmes and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crepe paper - was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch.

When the preparations were complete, she had nothing to do but contemplate her finished draft and wait for the appearance of her cousins from the distant north. There would be time for only one day of rehearsal before her brother arrived. At some moments chilling, at others desperately sad, the play told a tale of the heart whose message, conveyed in a rhyming prologue, was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed. The reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera during an impetuous dash towards a seaside town with her intended. Deserted by him and nearly everybody else, bed-bound in a garret, she discovers in herself a sense of humour. Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor - in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy. Healed by him, Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on 'a windy sunlit day in spring'.

Mrs Tallis read the seven pages of *The Trials of Arabella* in her bedroom, at her dressing table. With the author's arm around her shoulder the whole while. Briony studied her mother's face for every trace of shifting emotion, and Emily Tallis obliged with looks of alarm, snickers of glee and, at the end, grateful smiles and wise, affirming nods. She took her daughter in her arms, onto her lap - ah, that hot smooth little body she remembered from her infancy, and still not gone from her, not quite yet - and said that the play was 'stupendous', and agreed instantly, murmuring into the tight whorl of the girl's ear, that this word could be quoted on the poster which was to be on an easel in the entrance hall by the ticket booth.

Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project's highest point of fulfilment. Nothing came near it for satisfaction, all else was dreams and frustration. There were moments in the summer dusk after her light was out, burrowing in the delicious gloom of her canopy bed, when she made her heart thud with luminous, yearning fantasies, little playlets in themselves, every one of which featured Leon. In one, his big, good-natured face buckled in grief as Arabella sank in loneliness and despair. In another, there he was, cocktail in hand at some fashionable city watering hole, overheard boasting to a group of friends: Yes, my younger sister, Briony Tallis the writer, you must surely have heard of her. In a third, he punched the air in exultation as the final curtain fell, although there was no curtain, there was no possibility of a curtain. Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony's services as a bridesmaid.

She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so. Whereas her big sister's room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony's was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way - towards their owner - as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled. In fact, Briony's was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table - cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice - suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders.

A taste for the miniature was one aspect of an orderly spirit. Another was a passion for secrets: in a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention. In a toy safe opened by six secret numbers she stored letters and postcards. An old tin petty cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years, to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant double acorn, fool's gold, a rain-making spell bought at a funfair, a squirrel's skull as light as a leaf.

But hidden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets. Her wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have it in her to be cruel. Her effective status as an only child, as well as the relative isolation of the Tallis house, kept her, at least during the long summer holidays, from girlish intrigues with friends. Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding; no one knew about the squirrel's skull beneath her bed, but no one wanted to know. None of this was particularly an affliction; or rather, it appeared so only in retrospect, once a solution had been found.

At the age of eleven she wrote her first story - a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folk tales and lacking, she realised later, that vital knowledge about the ways of the world which compels a reader's respect. But this first clumsy attempt showed her that the imagination itself was a source of secrets: once she had begun a story, no one could be told. Pretending in words was too tentative, too vulnerable, too embarrassing to let anyone know. Even writing out the she saids, the and thens, made her wince, and she felt foolish, appearing to know about the emotions of an imaginary being. Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What other authority could she have? Only when a story was finished, all fates resolved and the

whole matter sealed off at both ends so it resembled, at least in this one respect, every other finished story in the world, could she feel immune, and ready to punch holes in the margins, bind the chapters with pieces of string, paint or draw the cover, and take the finished work to show to her mother, or her father, when he was home.

Her efforts received encouragement. In fact, they were welcomed as the Tallises began to understand that the baby of the family possessed a strange mind and a facility with words. The long afternoons she spent browsing through dictionary and thesaurus made for constructions that were inept, but hauntingly so: the coins a villain concealed in his pocket were 'esoteric', a hoodlum caught stealing a car wept in 'shameless auto-exculpation', the heroine on her thoroughbred stallion made a 'cursory' journey through the night, the king's furrowed brow was the 'hieroglyph' of his displeasure. Briony was encouraged to read her stories aloud in the library and it surprised her parents and older sister to hear their quiet girl perform so boldly, making big gestures with her free arm, arching her eyebrows as she did the voices, and looking up from the page for seconds at a time as she read in order to gaze into one face after the other, unapologetically demanding her family's total attention as she cast her narrative spell.

Even without their attention and praise and obvious pleasure, Briony could not have been held back from her writing. In any case, she was



discovering, as had many writers before her, that not all recognition is helpful. Cecilia's enthusiasm, for example, seemed a little overstated, tainted with condescension perhaps, and intrusive too; her big sister wanted each bound story catalogued and placed on the library shelves, between Rabindranath Tagore and Quintus Tertullian. If this was supposed to be a joke, Briony ignored it. She was on course now, and had found satisfaction on other levels: writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturisation. A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm. The childhood of a spoiled prince could be framed within half a page, a moonlit dash through sleepy villages was one rhythmically emphatic sentence, falling love could be achieved in a single word - a glance. The pages of a recently finished story seemed to vibrate in her hand with all the life they contained. Her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so. A crisis in a heroine's life could be made to coincide with hailstones, gales and thunder, whereas nuptials were generally blessed with good light and soft breezes. A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of house keeping, the former being set aside exclusively for the morally dubious, the latter a reward withheld until the final page.

The play she had written for Leon's homecoming was her first excursion into drama, and she had found the transition quite effortless. It was relief not to be writing out the she saids, or describing the weather or the onset of spring or her heroine's face - beauty, she had discovered occupied a narrow band. Ugliness, on the other hand, had infinite variation. A universe reduced to what was said in it was tidiness indeed, almost to the point of nullity, and to compensate, every utterance was delivered at the extremity of some feeling or other, in the service of which the exclamation mark was indispensable. The *Trials of Arabella* may have been a melodrama, but its author had yet to hear the term. The piece was intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief and instruction, in that order, and the innocent intensity with which Briony set about the project - the posters, tickets, sales booth - made her particularly vulnerable to failure. She could easily have welcomed Leon with another of her stories, but it was the news that her cousins from the north were coming to stay that had prompted this leap into a new form.

That Lola, who was fifteen, and the nine-year-old twins, Jackson and Pierrot, were refugees from a bitter domestic civil war should have mattered more to Briony. She had heard her mother criticise the impulsive behaviour of her younger sister Hermione, and lament the situation of the three children, and denounce her meek, evasive brother-in-law Cecil who had fled to the safety of All Souls College, Oxford. Briony had heard her mother and sister analyse the latest twists and outrages, charges and counter charges, and she knew her cousins' visit was an open-ended one, and might even extend into term time. She had heard it said that the house could easily absorb three children, and that the Quinceys could stay as long as they liked, provided the parents, if they ever visited simultaneously, kept their quarrels away from the Tallis household. Two rooms near Briony's had been dusted down, new curtains had been hung and furniture carried in from other rooms. Normally, she would have been involved in these preparations, but they happened to coincide with her two-day writing bout and the beginnings of the front-of-house construction. She vaguely knew

that divorce was an affliction, but she did not regard it as a proper subject, and gave it no thought. It was a mundane unravelling that could not be reversed, and therefore offered no opportunities to the storyteller: it belonged in the realm of disorder. Marriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its formal neatness of virtue rewarded, the thrill of its pageantry and banquetting, and dizzy promise of lifelong union. A good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthinkable - sexual bliss. In the aisles of country churches and grand city cathedrals, witnessed by a whole society of approving family and friends, her heroines and heroes, reached their innocent climaxes and needed to go no further.

If divorce had presented itself as the dastardly antithesis of all this, it could... easily have been cast onto the other pan of the scales, along with betrayal, illness, thieving, assault and mendacity. Instead it showed an unglamorous face of dull complexity and incessant wrangling. Like re-arrangement and the Abyssinia Question and gardening, it was simply not a subject, and when, after a long Saturday morning wait, Briony heard at last the sound of wheels on the gravel below her bedroom window, and snatched up her pages and ran down the stairs, across the hallway and out into the blinding light of midday, it was not insensitively so much as a highly focused artistic ambition that caused her to shout to the dazed young visitors huddled together by the trap with their luggage, 'I've got your parts, all written out. First performance tomorrow! Rehearsals start in five minutes!'

Immediately, her mother and sister were there to interpose a blander timetable. The visitors - all three were ginger-haired and freckled - were shown their rooms, their cases were carried up by Hardman's son Danny, there was cordial in the kitchen, a tour of the house, a swim in the pool and lunch in the south garden, under the shade of the vines. All the while, Emily and Cecilia Tallis maintained a patter that surely robbed the guests of the ease it was supposed to confer. Briony knew that if she had travelled two hundred miles to a strange house, bright questions and jokey asides, and being told in a hundred different ways that she was free to choose, would have oppressed her. It was not generally realised that what children mostly wanted was to be left alone. However, the Quinceys worked hard at pretending to be amused or liberated, and this boded well for *The Trials of Arabella*: this trio clearly had the knack of being what they were not, even though they barely resembled the characters they were to play. Before lunch Briony slipped away to the empty rehearsal room - the nursery - and walked up and down on the painted floorboards, considering her casting options.

On the face of it, Arabella, whose hair was as dark as Briony's, was unlikely to be descended from freckled parents, or elope with a foreign freckled count, rent a garret room from a freckled innkeeper, lose her heart to a freckled prince and be married by a freckled vicar before a freckled congregation. But all this was to be so. Her cousins' colouring was too vivid - virtually fluorescent - to be concealed. The best that could be said was that Arabella's lack of freckles was the sign - the hieroglyph, Briony might have written - of her distinction. Her purity of spirit would never be in doubt, though she moved through a blemished world. There was a further problem with the twins, who could not be told apart by a stranger. Was it right that the wicked count should so completely resemble the handsome prince, or that both should resemble Arabella's father and the vicar? What if Lola were cast as the prince? Jackson and Pierrot seemed typical eager little boys who would probably do as they were told. But would their sister play a man? She had green eyes and sharp bones in her face, and hollow cheeks, and there was something brittle in her reticence that suggested strong will and a temper easily lost. Merely floating the possibility of the role to Lola might provoke a crisis, and could Briony really hold hands with her before the altar, while Jackson intoned from the Book of Common Prayer?

It was not until five o'clock that afternoon that she was able to assemble her cast in the nursery. She had arranged three stools in a row, while she herself jammed her rump into an ancient baby's high-chair - a bohemian touch that gave her a tennis umpire's advantage of height. The twins had come with reluctance from the pool where they had been for three hours without a break. They were barefoot and wore singlets over trunks that dripped onto the floorboards. Water also ran down their necks from their matted hair, and both boys were shivering and jiggled their knees to keep warm. The long immersion had puckered and bleached their skin, so that in the relatively low light of the nursery their freckles appeared black. Their sister, who sat between them, with left leg balanced on right knee, was, by contrast, perfectly composed, having liberally applied perfume and changed into a green gingham frock to offset her colouring. Her sandals revealed an ankle bracelet and toenails painted vermilion. The sight of these nails gave Briony a constricting sensation around her sternum, and she knew at once that she could not ask Lola to play the prince.

Everyone was settled and the playwright was about to begin her little speech summarising the plot and evoking the excitement of performing before an adult audience tomorrow evening in the library. But it was Pierrot who spoke first.

'I hate plays and all that sort of thing.'

'I hate them too, and dressing up,' Jackson said.

It had been explained at lunch that the twins were to be distinguished by the fact that Pierrot was missing a triangle of flesh from his left ear lobe on account of a dog he had tormented when he was three.

Lola looked away. Briony said reasonably, 'How can you hate plays?'

'It's just showing off.' Pierrot shrugged as he delivered this self-evident truth.

Briony knew he had a point. This was precisely why she loved plays, or hers at least; everyone would adore her. Looking at the boys, under whose chairs water was pooling before spilling between the floorboard cracks, she knew they could never understand her ambition. Forgiveness softened her tone.

POEMS

Three poems by Afsan Chowdhury

Room - 1

There were books lying on the floor like unkempt corpse of homebound cockroaches,
Piled on each other like musty blankets of early winter suns.
Furniture strewn around like the chaos of an unslept mind,
Watching the unfed sky burst in small doses of austere light of a fading dawn.

Everything is wrapped with the urgency of a late night second print of desperate news and desperate readers watching books and cockroaches
piled on the floor like unkempt corpses in the austere light of a fading dawn of an early winter sun.

Room 2

Mosquitoes fly in the room like tired butterflies
soaring in the stale air and fetid light that had stolen into the room at dawn. Nobody measures clocks and ticking watches are silenced by the humming computer waiting to expire.

Friends and cities live inside the machine buzzing like tired butterflies waiting to be caught, saying hello

in cheery voices like a glass of hot lemon in a cold restaurant
in a nameless city soaking in the early winter sun.
Hello, darkness my old friend.

Hello, hello, hello.
Goodbye, goodbye , goodbye.

Room 3

When I die, pry my room window open.
From the bed I can hear the whir of an AC
on a neighbour's window,
nails punched into boxes with an angry hammer,
the sound of a cheerful baby taxi chortling,
the ferrywallah chanting useless rhymes on veg and fish.

When I die pry my window open.
I can hear the din of the office next door,
the tap tap of my landlord on the solitary typewriter,
the clumsy gates clanging close as someone leaves,
the rickshawman discussing infinity and fares,
heroin addict's forlorn song.

When I die pry my window open
For I want angels buzz like insects in my fetid room
Just once in my life.