

LBRIS

We know
books

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

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Saturday

On Chesil Beach

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IAN McEWAN

What We Can Know

VINTAGE

LIBRIS

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PART ONE

On 20 May 2119 I took the overnight ferry from Port Marlborough and arrived in the late afternoon at the small quay near Maentwrog-under-Sea that serves the Bodleian Snowdonia Library. The spring day was warm and tranquil, and the journey had been smooth though, as everyone discovers, sleeping in a sitting position on a slatted wooden bench is an ordeal. I walked two miles up a picturesque track towards the water-and-gravity-powered funicular. Four library users joined me and we small-talked as we were carried a thousand feet up the mountain in the creaking polished oak carriage. I ate supper alone in the library canteen and afterwards phoned my friend and colleague, Rose Church, to let her know I had arrived safely. That night, I slept well in my cell of a bedroom. It did not bother me, as it had on my first visit, to share a bathroom with seven others.

After breakfast, one of the assistant archivists, Donald Drummond, showed me to my carrel. His domain included my period, 1990 to 2030, and he took a strong interest in my topic, the ineptly named Second Immortal Dinner and its famous lost poem, 'A Corona for Vivien' by Francis Blundy. It was useful to have someone fetching this and that from the stacks, but Drummond's well-intentioned manner, his habit of pausing mid-sentence after minor words like 'of' or 'the' while letting his mouth hang open, made me tense. I suspected that he was ferociously clever. He spoke too often of his fourteen-year-old niece, a maths prodigy. He wanted to pick my brains, which suggested he was writing something of his own. I made matters worse by being exaggeratedly pleasant to conceal my aversion.

As requested, he brought to my desk the twelve volumes of Vivien Blundy's journals from her archive, which, for reasons scholars have never resolved, once rested marsupially within her husband's. As soon as I was alone, I opened the airtight folder and found volume five. I turned to page thirty-two. I needed to see this again. 'Things are settled between Francis and me. I'm mostly happy here. An achievement.' She is referring to the tragic case of her first husband, Percy Greene, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease.

She believed Francis loved her and, though neither was young and he was ten years older, they had 'a decent sex life' and there was always plenty to talk about. Nowhere in the journals does she regret marrying the great poet, though he spent much time in his study. Elsewhere she writes, 'I wonder if I sometimes enjoy disliking him.' By volume seven they had been married nine years. Early on, she had kept herself 'sensible' researching her second book, which she abandoned. When she had her job at Oxford, she had published a scholarly biography of the poet John Clare, a reworking of her doctoral thesis. She had enjoyed teaching. Several years later, her situation prompted wonder among her friends. By her own successive decisions, she had ended up above a small valley in rural Gloucestershire, without paid work, four miles from the nearest village, in a cavernous barn with 7,000 books. She would never have guessed that she would abandon a career, a vocation even, to serve another's genius.

One early afternoon in October 2014, 'with a strong wind roaring in a tree beyond my window', Vivien Blundy was in her study, which was in a converted old dairy separate from the Barn. She was probably making a shopping list of ingredients for the meal she would cook the following day to celebrate her birthday. She would serve the dishes at a gathering to which eight friends had been invited. She would have already devised the placement. Later in the evening they would listen to her husband read a long new poem, which was to be her present. The shopping and cooking were not acts of self-effacement. Vivien had a

generous nature, and she liked to please. She enjoyed producing a well-turned meal. An orderly household gave her satisfaction. Francis had never pressured her to become his secretary, never encouraged her to disengage from her career, though it clearly suited him. At each successive move, she had made decisions for her own good reasons, though they seemed weaker now. The process took years. She was once a don, a candidate for a professorship, then she was part-time, then an occasional lecturer at an American summer school and working on the second book until she accepted it was going nowhere. Abandoning it was a liberation. She always felt herself to be in control. But it surprised her how, in caring for her first husband, and then in the name of freedom, of disenchantment with the university administration or of delight in the poetry of Francis Blundy, she had emptied herself of ambition, salary, status and achievement.

Perhaps it was by default, a failure to make provision in time, that her journals ended up among the poet's papers in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, later Snowdonia. A long time ago, a librarian had sorted husband and wife into separate boxes placed side by side. I have paid close attention to Vivien's sporadic and sad references to her first husband, Percy, a violin maker whom she nursed tenderly and who died after a bad fall. Many entries are bafflingly mundane and fail to tell Blundy scholars and others what they most want to know concerning the evening of her birthday, the famous poem dedicated to her, and what happened to the special copy – the only copy – that was the gift Francis presented to her after reading it aloud.

We can assume that on the afternoon of her list-making, she drove eight miles to the market town of Cirencester to collect from the butcher 'five brace of prepared quail, unnaturally plump'. She would wrap them in bacon and roast them in red wine and herbs, along with ceps picked in the beechwoods of the Chiltern Hills and brought to the Barn by a friend. She also bought eight pounds of potatoes for the oven and, in the same greengrocer, three cauliflowers whose florets she would cook in a large paella pan with 'olive oil, garlic, chopped green

chillies, anchovies, cherry tomatoes, black pepper, thyme and breadcrumbs'. Those were the days.

On the way home, the single-track country lane was blocked by an oak sapling brought down by the October gales. In the Severn Estuary, winds had gusted at 105 miles an hour. She and another motorist, a farmer she vaguely knew, lifted the tree clear and 'set it down in the long grass tenderly, like a corpse, which I suppose it was'.

Among the homely details are sporadic intrusions, bleak, faint cries of honest feeling, generally overlooked by the Francis Blundy hounds. I turned to an example now, also in volume five. The handwriting tips forward and is smaller than the rest. The punctuation is freer. 'I've never hated him. Never! But.' You might try to guess at the truncated final sentence or gaze at the middle letter of 'but' as though it might swing open on its hinges to reveal a peephole through which you could see a disappointed heart, reduced by lost opportunities.

Beyond the recipes, gardening notes, mentions of their nephew Peter, Vivien makes frequent references to the weather as the Barn years passed. A succession of mild winters oppressed her. For three weeks in one February, the temperature did not fall below nine degrees. She couldn't remember when she last saw icicles hanging from a gutter. Even snow was unusual. She noted the premature appearance of daffodils, of her roses, of the apples and pears in a neighbour's orchard. She is relieved when the stream below bursts its banks and floods the meadows, 'just as it should'. Two years later she is indignant when she sees that its clear water has turned 'a disgusting milky green and smelled'. Run-off from the farms or a sewage discharge or both. Neither she nor Francis was what they called 'political people'. They would not have joined with the local environmental groups, or the anglers and ramblers to protest and campaign for change. It was enough to observe and make a journal entry. Vivien keeps a lookout for the 'usual hedgehogs' and is disappointed. She is outraged by the badger culls. The strong winds that now streak down the valley make her irritable. When a short heatwave in July

tops thirty-five degrees, she writes that it is 'impossible to sleep at night'. These various anomalies were not gathered into a larger pattern of concern for a changing climate or degraded nature, though a word she uses about the heat – 'sinister' – suggests that she was beginning to take a larger view and was troubled.

The birthday was her fifty-fourth. Apart from the shopping, we know little of the preparations for the evening that would come to be known as the Second Immortal Dinner. The first, so named by its host, the painter Ben Haydon, took place at 22 Lisson Grove, London on 28 December 1817. Among the guests were William Wordsworth, John Keats and Charles Lamb. According to Haydon's account, written and no doubt polished up more than twenty years later, it was an evening of wit, profundity, laughter, sarcasm and goodwill. There was a fine account of it in a highly regarded book by P. Hughes-Hallett published in 2000. It is likely that Vivien started preparing the night before, perhaps by tidying and cleaning the dining room and fetching greenery from the garden to make a table decoration. A visitor to the Barn the year before wrote a description of her doing just that one Saturday evening ahead of a Sunday lunch. As she did most afternoons after four, Vivien would have attended to the poet's business – the letters and emails from scholars and fans, invitations to speak, good causes wanting Blundy's support, complicated summaries from his agent of anthology rights. Younger guests especially were surprised by the domestic arrangement whereby an educated bookish woman took on so many tasks. Francis would no longer drive, so she took him everywhere he wanted to go. She cooked, she cleared away, she washed the dishes while Blundy worked, read, talked or dozed. She topped up the drinks for him and his visitors. She still mowed the lawn, in winter she brought in the logs. A woman friend said in an interview years later, 'It was medieval serfdom out at their place and after a while you got used to it. If you offered to help, Vivien cheerfully refused. Francis never stirred from his chair, never did a thing. I don't think it crossed his mind that the household, the meals or even

the state of his underwear might have something to do with him. He was, after all, a genius.

The friend who gathered the ceps heard that interview and wrote a light-hearted piece for the *Spectator*, a weekly political magazine. The men, the young poets, who came to sit at the master's feet, were quietly envious of Blundy's 'no-finger-lifted life. It was common among the generation that came of age in the 1950s and early 60s and, of course, in every generation before it, for the men, especially the writers, to sit back and dream while the women busied themselves around the house. No one complained or even noticed. Then, poor chaps, along came feminism's second wave in the early 1970s, determined to sweep away such civilised arrangements.' The Blundys were genteel survivors from another age and, according to the writer: 'The awkward truth was, she was a good deal happier and physically fitter than he ever was. She was bound to outlive him.'

The records show that by 14 October the wind had dropped and the day was cloudless and warm. The thermometer on the north wall of the old dairy would later give a high point of twenty-three degrees. That morning, while Vivien was in the garden cutting late roses for the table, the postman appeared in his van and brought a heavy parcel which he kindly carried into the kitchen. It was addressed to Francis. She guessed what it was. She also guessed that someone had made a mistake and thought it was Francis's birthday, not hers. Before lunch she showed the package to Francis and removed the wrapping for him. It was a rectangular box in pale wood with a sliding lid, like an oversized pencil case. As she opened it, he groaned.

He believed he had everything he needed, and he did not need much. A gift not only represented clutter, it took up room in his thoughts as one more distracting obligation of gratitude, as an unwanted requirement to think of someone else, of their goodwill bearing down on him like a low cloud. Vivien generally wrote his thank-you letters, which he sometimes signed.

But this was different, a magnum of champagne from their nephew, Peter. He was in Pasadena, California at the Huntington Library for a conference on loop quantum gravity. No one understood what that was, despite Peter's patient explanations. Francis believed he had grasped what 'background independent' meant but had already forgotten. It was decent of Peter to tell them, one summer's evening when they sat out in the garden, that barely a hundred people in the world really understood LQG.

He or his mother had arranged for a wine shop in Oxford to select and send the bottle. Blundy was relieved. The champagne was not from some young poet wanting his work read. Vivien, irritated that her husband had not wished her a happy birthday, recorded this exchange.

He said, 'Better stick it in the fridge.'

'There won't be room. I'll put it in the ice bucket later. Or in the chest freezer. As long as I can remember.'

Francis probably took an apple from a bowl as he left the kitchen. He went along the passage to his study to write something down and make the final preparations of the birthday gift. The papers fill 135 document boxes. I hadn't called them up from the stacks on this visit, but I had already made notes on October 2014. Most of the entries concern ideas for poems, working notes and drafts, and thoughts on his own processes. References to other people are rare. Family dramas, personal relations never make it into his field of consideration. On the day of the Corona dinner, he clearly remembered something of Peter's descriptions. He was making notes towards his poem 'String'.

Space and time are woven from minuscule loops into a fabric a trillion trillion times finer than silk. The loops are as small as physics allows things to be.

Over the page he acknowledges some of the serious players in the field.

Ashtekar, Rovelli, Smolin, like expensive brands of gin . . . Apparently, the field of speculation is 'the nature of the universe'. In which case it's also a matter for poetry. The impenetrable concepts don't need to be understood to be made to sing. Not necessary to know anything about the brain to enjoy a sonnet or a sunset. A black box! But if Wystan got his mind round physics, then who can't?

I saw Drummond heading my way. It was mid-morning and many had left their desks for acorn coffee in a communal room. As he came closer, I winced. The archivist must have thought I was in Snowdonia for a holiday.

He leaned over my partition. 'Tom. About the numbers.'

That again. 'Sorry. I completely forgot.'

In Vivien Blundy's last journal, in the right-hand corner of the penultimate page, was what looked like a phone number, 05144 142418. But the area code didn't exist. No one but Drummond was interested. He thought we could work on it together. I wasn't drawn but I had said on my last visit that I would take his problem to our Communications Department. It was an empty promise, which I immediately forgot. I would be wasting my time. It was also depressing to visit what we in the humanities called 'the other side'. The Science and Technology buildings were vast and beautiful compared to ours.

'I've had an idea. Might interest you.'

'Of course, but not now Donald. Got to get on.'

'Quite. After dinner perhaps.'

I nodded. He did not appear offended as he left. I wondered if he was used to people turning him away. Suppressing my guilt, I went back to my long-ago world.

When public interest in the Blundy dinner began to spread, there was much righteous media scorn. The National Press Library in the Pennines holds a lot of it. It was not the poetry

that fascinated people at first, it was the guest list. Most barely noticed or cared, but a minority took issue. They did not like the 'Barn set' – straight, white, an influential and comfortable literary elite drawn from the London–Oxford axis. Why, journalists and bloggers asked themselves, this preoccupation with a gathering of elderly, self-satisfied mediocrities? This was even worse than the long-forgotten Bloomsbury obsession. Twelve years after the event, an article in the *Telegraph*, a national newspaper, made a defence. It was a private party, with no social obligation to regulate its own composition. The Blundys invited mostly friends they had known for years and had known them before they published. Blundy ranked with Seamus Heaney as one of the greatest poets writing in English in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Granted, one of Blundy's friends was the novelist Mary Sheldrake, and another guest was his editor and brother-in-law Harry Kitchen. But two of the guests were gay, two were well under forty, none was rich or had political influence and half of those present had never published at all.

But this could not settle the matter. The evening may have once been a private affair, but it no longer was. The issue was not a lost birthday poem read after dinner, it was what the poem by its non-existence had become: a repository of dreams, of tortured nostalgia, futile retrospective anger and a focus of unhinged reverence. Blundy's choice of form, it was said, told all. A corona was an ornate anachronism in the twenty-first century. The poem, through no merit of its own but the folly of its admirers, had leapt its bounds to plunge into the mire of political economy, global history and suffering. Comparisons with the 'immortal dinner' of 1817, so the argument went, were baseless. Wit is largely the preserve of the agile-minded young. There was no one at the Blundys' that evening who could have matched Leigh Hunt or Keats, only four years from the end of his short life. No one in that well-appointed barn could have competed with Wordsworth for learning, memorised verse or force of personality.

And so the debate has limped on, and the fame of the Blundy evening has grown through the years as cities, landscapes and institutions have drowned or withered. But so much information, in countless strata of unimportant detail, has survived. It could bury us. Many scholars have suffocated under the weight of trivial facts. We know, for example, that Francis Blundy was fond of apples. He had a good supply each late summer and autumn from the generous neighbour with an orchard. There are three Blundy poems about apples, the best known of which is often anthologised. 'On Floral Street' is about a long life shrinking, gradually divesting itself of friends, family, possessions – and ultimately, meaning. The central image is of a street juggler Blundy saw once in a quarter known as Covent Garden. In place of balls or clubs tumbling in the air, there were apples. The juggler snatched a bite out of each as it descended, until there were barely visible pieces of rotating skin and flesh, memento mori circling above his head. As a finale, the juggler tossed the remnants up high into a vertical column, tilted back his head, opened his mouth wide like a welcoming god – then nothing remained but the performer's bow. So it went, a merry poem about death.

After he had walked away from his conversation with Vivien, Francis ate his apple as he sat at his desk and made the notes towards a first draft of 'String'. By his elbow was the gift, a large rectangle of vellum, bought from the only producer of treated calfskin in the country, William Cowley of Newport Pagnell. On it Blundy had written in minuscule handwriting and black, durable ink a fair copy of the long poem he had put through many drafts over the previous five months. There were about 2,500 words on a single expanse of beaten, softened skin. 'A dead animal has conferred novel sensuality on my words. Now they are alive.' Also on the desk was a length of green silk ribbon. He had promised himself in a notebook (dated 2013–14 in box number 110 in the Snowdonia archive) that he would destroy all his notes and drafts so that his gift would be

uniquely precious. After he had read it aloud, he would roll up the vellum, secure it with the ribbon, make a short speech and present it to Vivien.

He thought the poem was among his best. He looked forward to reading it that evening among friends and he would not need to rehearse. He had given many readings of his work to audiences in dozens of countries during the previous forty years. People thought he read well. He didn't adopt the derided high-priest sing-song of Yeats or Eliot's bogus crooning, and he despised the shambling apologetic tone that was the current fashion. He liked to be dramatic. He could be urgent or humorous or scathing by turns. He was gratified to read somewhere that he appeared to have a hundred modes at his disposal. Like his contemporaries, James Fenton and Alice Oswald, he knew his poems by heart. To come away from the microphone, go to the edge of the stage, to look into the eyes and minds of his audience as his baritone words flowed between the expressive swoop of his hands, to *perform* – was what he liked.

For this birthday present – he rarely gave gifts, but this one was also for himself – he had chosen another kind of performance, a Renaissance (some say rococo) form, a sequence of sonnets governed by demanding rules of composition. The medium pleased him. Vellum has served well the Magna Carta (now in the Mendips Historical Collection) for nine centuries. His shrunken handwriting, which he could not read without his glasses, ended just before the bottom of the page, in the right-hand corner and had 'an ancient, permanent look'.

A corona was a formidable undertaking. This one consisted of fifteen sonnets. The last line of each had to be repeated in the first line of the next. The fifteenth sonnet, the 'crown', must repeat the first lines of the preceding fourteen and make sense. Francis had chosen the Petrarchan sonnet form: two stanzas, the first of eight lines, the second of six. The rhyme scheme was the traditional ABBAABBA CDECDE. Simple enough. The task was to write a long poem – conventionally addressed to one honoured person – that flowed naturally and did not

buckle under the constraints of the rules. Blundy believed he had succeeded. We know this from a triumphant entry in notebook 2014–15, box 111. 'Concede the fact. My fifteen are superior to John Donne's humble seven.'

He wrote, 'That morning I lifted the parchment from the desk and brought it close to my nose. No smell of blood or flesh. Only the faint memory of a boarding-school inkwell sunk into a lidded desk of gouged obscenities. I felt the friendly weight of the skin in two hands. I don't remember when I last felt so innocently, serenely, unambiguously pleased with myself.'

He would have been satisfied but not surprised to learn that a century later his 'Corona for Vivien' would still be discussed. Perhaps not satisfied if he had also been told that the one copy in existence vanished. As far as we know, his wife has been its only reader. He must have assumed that the poem was bound to leak out and be published, if not in his lifetime, then inevitably after his death.

During his lifetime, some critics compared Francis Blundy's poetry to T. S. Eliot's. It was a shallow comparison based on a strain in only a few of Blundy's poems that lamented, as Eliot had, a supposed rupture in civilisation between feeling and the intellect that could never be repaired. But there were other parallels. Both poets had a Vivien in their lives, however spelled, and, on the surface, a comfortable kind of English existence that masked turmoil and carelessness with the lives of others. *Of things ill done and done to others' harm*. They shared a dangerous fate that all writers should hope to avoid. It was expressed by one critic, a contemporary of Francis, who, writing about the popularity of literary biographies, regretted a trend towards a fascination with the life but not the work. The affairs and penury in the lives of poets, the drunken lost weekends, professional jealousies, status anxieties and crises of self-doubt relieve a wider readership from engaging with the poetry.