

DISTRACTION

I came across him quite by chance. Though it could have been fate. Perhaps my churning restlessness fated my disparate stumblings, my seemingly endless attempts to undo and slip out of the hems into which I had been so successfully stitched. For I am only too well aware that I continually collude with (and sometimes (perhaps more often than not even) instigate) all that hemming work, thus fating, in a rather steadfastly workmanlike way, the not-to-be-denied particulars that define, all too domineeringly, my situation.

Yes, in some ways I am the architect and master-builder, in the weakest possible way of course (for few would recognise the least trace of either architecture's techno-aesthetics or the confident workings of mastery here), of my own downfall, if downfall is not too clear a term to describe the flailing which seems to constitute such a large portion of my daily activity (though there are, I sometimes think, deeply hidden within the flailing's apparent disorder, some passing elements of possible subtlety awaiting their chance (or fate), and it is these very elements that I am hoping to excavate as a result of my quite-by-chance-fated meeting with him). Of course, if this ongoing flailing is seen to occupy a lower level to that of whatever preceded it then downfall will indeed do for the time being. And it is certainly true that, before flailing became the defining characteristic of my response to seething restlessness, to the maddening frustrations of aforesaid hemming, I occupied, superficially at least, a flat spot (if not yet a plateau) where the seducing comforts of continuity and stability were, sad to say, the order of the days, weeks and years (or longer).

Doubtless there has been some slippage from this so slightly elevated plain, a slip that could, in some eyes, already presage a coming downfall, a tumble, a headlong headfirst hindrance-free fall into nothing's shaft. Indeed I feel that I am already down on my hands and knees leaning over the edge of and peering into this shaft - hence the seething. For neither the shaft's offer of nothing's blank, nor the choking reassurances of the flat spot's comforting sameness, are any

longer options for me. I have to get out, slip away, loose the stitches' binds and be off. But how to release these binds, how to make seething creatively generative in its anti-stitchery rather than merely a blind thrashing around?

In my emerging mania I had searched the length, breadth, height and depth of what might be termed the comfort zones (the global but always locally and so concretely experienced (on the ground, as it were, by each and every Tom and Tomasina, self included) flats and the plains with their bright day-and-night-glo interlocked and unending urban and urbanised-rural settlements - the very same self-illuminated lowlands which had been and perhaps still are my apparently permanent stamping ground(s)) for models, examples, paradigms, icons, which might offer hints on finding and/or making ways out. But so far, alack, to no avail. The cities of the plain, of the forever-orange-night-and-day, the entire glomerate of out-strung lowland sub-communities, seemed entirely turned in upon themselves, designed precisely to stitch themselves up and in, to turn all the light in the world inwards, to keep themselves in the spotlight as its only subject and focus. By making light of things they made light of themselves, became steadily weightless under the consuming brightness of their self-illumination. But for me, it was a brightness whose dazzling glare blotted out entirely the substance of everything on which it fell. Flesh's pliant solidity and the gritty resisting thickness of things gave way to harshly reflecting surfaces on which we could see nothing other than our own by now paling disappearing reflections.

Needless to say we strung-out lowlanders found these illuminations endlessly fascinating - they consumed all our energy time, for we found ourselves more than enough to be going on with. Who needed to go anywhere else when there was so much to see and when the surfaces of even that which was furthest away could be brought into such magnificently illuminated focus that we could see what little was left of ourselves ever more clearly?

In my agitation I began to ramble, an aimless rambling lacking models. And, naturally enough, rambling of a restricted kind, being a form of circular sight-seeing that brought one back to one's starting point without making a jot of difference to either the sights or to one's self, was actively

encouraged in lowlandia. I went round in circles. I began slowly to sense that I needed to escape from the glare, to find a different kind of light, a sub-fusc barely-light, that, by de-lighting, would let me feel my way around the contours of things. My rambling began to take everso slightly different turnings as I threaded my way out between the stitches of lowlandia's marches and beyond its outlying settlements into the grays of its outside. My forays, tentative at first, gained in confidence as I realised that I could feel-see in the outside's almost-dark. I began to sense inchoately, and very roughly, things' vague rough shapes. Often the ground rose steadily. I began to go further and further afield, although I had left the fields themselves far behind.

It was on my last such excursion that I bumped into him. Almost literally, for I was still looking, almost inevitably, with lowland eyes, eyes all too reliant on sharp beams of revealing light being cast upon and making instantly available whatever confronted me, whatever I needed.

As far as I could see I had reached some kind of rough plateau interrupted by irregular rocky outcrops and it was in these apparently harsh (though it was a harshness softened by the gentle de-lighting) surroundings that I met him. Fortuitously for me as it has subsequently turned out, for the words he left with me, though entirely without tutelary intent, have proved to have some exemplary value for me in my attempts to come to terms with lowlandian conditions, with the white-out life in dear old Alba. They seem to hold out some hope still for any project searching for cracks, rents, tears, ways out, for departures from the known, marked and all-too well lighted paths and routes of the cities of the plain. Of course the whether and the how of the pursuit of that nugget of hope remains an entirely open matter; nevertheless to have exemplary support, from whatever off-beat source, may, at the least, contribute to one's resolution to push ahead with the search, even in the face of the most dismissive and virulent pressures to the contrary. As just such an example, you can take it from me that, almost certainly, he'll still be up there now, at it, at his project that is, suspended in his eyrie, his 'spot', as he calls it.

I met him only on that one occasion but I am convinced that he will still be up there. Short of some catastrophe he has no reason to leave. In fact he has every reason to stay for that's where,

as he explained to me, his task lay, where he could (or better perhaps, had to) pursue his 'little conceits'. "I'm filling in a hole," he told me after I had explained that I had lost my bearings and had enquired as to the reasons for his own presence in that lonely spot, "a little gap in the care package that nobody else seems to have noticed or, if they have, then its overwhelming import has not yet struck them, so bound up are they with the urgent pressures of just getting by. But, in trying to sidestep the demands of the everyday, I believe that I can sense the threat that it's under. It requires urgent protection before the predators get to it. I have taken this task upon myself. Certainly there is no pressure group to represent the poor thing, no state aid to tap on its behalf."

I couldn't imagine what he was talking about, perched as we were, high up in the hills, hills that were rarely if ever either explored or exploited by us lowlanders whose explorations and exploitations were now almost exclusively turned in upon ourselves. From down there we tended to regard these distant hills that were not yet quite mountains as rugged, bleak, unforgiving, repelling, as definitely not for us. Now here we were, he and I, above, well above, the tree line. Not a soul for miles - nobody (except perhaps the very occasional lost rambler like myself) and nothing, as far as I could see, in need of any kind of succour, care, or protection, let alone the stultifying promise of supposedly reassuring sameness seemingly guaranteed in the lowland settlements. Even the highest struggling hill farm was several miles away back down a track which had long since petered out. In any case who would want, be able even, to survive, let alone live, way up and out on the far westerly edges exposed to whatever the invariably inclement climate (from whose worst effects we urbanites had become extremely skilled at insulating ourselves) hurled down and through?

"It's managed on its own for millions of years but is now in desperate need of protection from collectors," he went on and added: "Superficially there seems to be nothing here for them, but in their increasingly desperate searches for that new little something they are beginning to wander further and further afield. Even such a little known, rarely visited and isolated a region as this is at risk. Once they get a whiff of a possible collectable, or better still, an exploitable, they'll stop

at nothing you know. Compulsive. Insane. Destroy the source of the very thing they desire in the process of collecting it. As with the ruined scapes scoured out and abandoned by coal- and gold-takers so with eggs: ospreys, sea eagles, kites - all at risk. It seems, doesn't it, that it is a fundamental constituent of our species-being to endanger all other species."

I felt constrained by circumstances and the force of his rhetoric to concur, although I wasn't sure that I would have gone quite as far myself, for that seemed too fatal, too fixed, a view of the beings we are. I merely nodded as he plunged on in the following terms: "But they're not my concern here for I've only got the choughs for company. Nobody's threatening them - yet." Pausing for breath he then gestured towards a huge boulder in the middle distance. It was in the lee of a lowering escarpment. Sheltering in its shadow and merging into it I could just make out what looked like the end of a stone hut. "That's my sentry box and my quarters. In short, my dwelling. It's a long-abandoned hunting lodge, although lodge overplays its scale and facilities, and it must be many years since there was anything to hunt in these parts. Everything huntable has been hunted to extinction. Now perhaps I'm the last hunter, but a hunter with a difference, a protecting hunter who would hunt only its predators." But what was this 'it' that he claimed to be protecting for there seemed to be nothing but stones, rocks and gravel to protect here? What on earth could be worth risking oneself for in this inhospitable terrain?

"Apart from the usual riff-raff, compulsive collectors driven by some utterly personal obsession, the real threat is from bio-terrorists and the agents of the multi-nationals for they will soon see the world-shaking potential it contains - the secret of life, of power, of force, but this time quite unlike any such secret we have previously so ruthlessly ripped out and transformed for own violent ends, for it's to be found, I believe, in a cold and infinitely slow form that's quite unlike anything we're accustomed to handling. It's been ignored so far perhaps because it leaves us non-plussed. So used are we to the coincidence of heat and might that we cannot imagine cool force, let alone cool gentle force, delicate energy. Imagine getting the patent on that! An almost completely cold bio-power - that's what they'll be after! No more desperately destructive burning consumption - life's, and thus energy's, secret, to be abstracted from the tiniest, the apparently

simplest, and then to be transformed into a world-shaking power, but shaking only through and as its tremulous weakness."

This all seemed utterly far-fetched, absurd. The sooner I left this nutter, for that was what I took him to be, behind the better. I glanced at my watch. It was hard to get a precise reading in the less-than-gloaming but I knew that I needed to be making tracks plainwards, if tracks there were in these parts. But he seemed to want to take me into his confidence as he continued to elaborate his concerns. "They'll come in the night, almost certainly. But I'm ready for them. I saw you from afar, tracked you, checked you out. I could soon see from your shambling gait and wandering attention that you were no threat. A typical lowland rambler, a surface scanning tourist, I thought. You seemed to have no inkling." No inkling of what I wondered. As if reading my thoughts he went on. "No inkling of the treasure you might be treading on, destroying with those seemingly aimless feet." I looked down at my feet, which I had always regarded with some affection and certainly not as bearers of aimlessness, and then turned slowly around taking in the whole of our surroundings. There was nothing but grey rock. Not even spots of lichen celebrating the ever-fresh, over-fresh, too fresh perhaps, air. I was at a loss.

Then, seemingly apropos of nothing, he said, "It splits the rock you know." I could see no drills, no machinery of any kind, lying around. In any case how could such tools be brought up here - there weren't even animal paths let alone haulage tracks. And what would be their purpose in this karstic scape? There were already split, slivered, fissured rocks as far as the eyes could see in every direction, more, far more, than any splitter, builder, road mender, shaleman, sculptress, dry-stone-waller, landscape gardener, dyke builder, dam maker or mason would need in a lifetime's single-minded or cooperative pursuit of their separate or conjoint goals. I began to doubt his sanity, for, whatever the it was that splits the rock, there didn't seem to be a lot left for it to do.

Sensing my confusion he guided me gently but firmly by the elbow towards an area of flattish rock a few yards from his cabin and in full view of its one cobweb-shrouded window. He

pointed down at the rock face on which we were now standing. "Well, what do you think?" he asked me. Again I was non-plussed. The rock's surface was unremarkable, indistinguishable from its surroundings, its blank purplish-grey surface-smoothness striated here and there by a few barely visible hairline cracks, echoes, doubtless, of the fault lines from which the hills themselves had been formed so long ago, and premonitions too, perhaps, of further catastrophes yet to come to these parts. I shrugged. "I'm afraid I'm long-sighted and haven't got my reading glasses with me," I responded feebly.

He sighed, and, crouching down over the slab, indicated that I should do the same. He pulled out a pocket magnifying glass, handed it to me and ran his finger lightly along one of the tiny cracks. "Get close. Take a look at this." On my hands and knees by now, I peered through the glass into the fissure. There nestling in this finest of cracks was a cerulean star of a flower; I could just make out some greenish filaments beneath and to either side of it snaking down into the rock's seemingly brutally repellent solidity. "It splits the rock," he repeated, "Saxifrage. This particular one is unique, site-specific. Never seen anywhere else. A sub-variety absolutely specific to this place and making this place into something special. Yet, strange though it may seem, it has the potential to undo this place, and maybe any place, every place, yes, place itself even, by splitting it apart, opening it right up, making it give way entirely."

But what on earth could he mean by 'place itself' I thought to myself. His wandering abstractions were beginning to lose me; I preferred to stay with the particular, the detail; I knew where I stood with them. Or at least I thought I did; I put my trust in them and felt that they were what enabled me to get by, gave me some kind of purchase on things, some almost firm, if albeit temporary, foundations. If something did go wrong then it was always only something particular, something on a scale big enough for me to cope with, and not the immeasurable and terrifying vagueness of things in general. Place itself indeed! I needed to bring him down to earth and so I asked him what he meant by this particular saxifrage's splitting potential, for I was unwilling to acknowledge that the whole saxifrage family (if such an apparently loose conglomerate could be reasonably called a family, Linnaeus notwithstanding), either as

individuals or as some organised family project, had this unearthly fearsome latent power.

He went on. "Left to itself, over aeons, this apparently insignificant, barely visible, hair-thin growth, exemplar of the life force in its stellar beauty, can split mountains, generate earthquakes, turn the world upside down, possibly. Given minimal damply cool succour, virtually nothing in fact, its roots reach down, across, down, across, down, across, through, constantly but imperceptibly forcing the rock, however infinitesimally, to give way. Gradually the cleft is widened, deepened, by the plant's immeasurably weak force until eventually, who knows how or after how long, the rock gives up the struggle, is sundered, and place as we know it, yes even this particular place, collapses in on itself. But can we even call this weakest of charges a force? Is what this seemingly insignificant plant does gatherable in the word 'force'? Isn't it, in fact, doing something, living by something, for which we have no terms, about which we are utterly clueless in spite of our seeming to have conquered distance and time through our bravura brilliance with speed?"

I didn't know whether these were rhetorical questions or questions to which I was supposed to respond in a measured way by trying to recall long-lost and never used fragments of my schoolboy knowledge of elementary (although not yet elementary particle) physics. I quickly found out, for he raised his hand towards me indicating, I took it, his need for my complicit silence. With an increasingly vacant but dreamy look in his eyes, which were by now turned vaguely towards the western horizon, he plunged on with the following words. "Heat and speed - our means to our own absolute undoing! Fission - the fastest and the hottest! We career ourselves sunwards, cinderwards. We are sun apes, splitting nuclei to generate mini-(but always already too grossly maxi-)suns on earth. And after fission, hot fusion perhaps, forever and only following the blazing paths of hard energy. But what about the cold and the soft, or even the very slightly warm and the soft?" I didn't even attempt to answer, realising by now that it wasn't, at this moment, conversation, the rejuvenating liveliness of sociality, that he was after. "If only we could suspend our need to get there in an instant," he went on, "wherever our there is, a need which we satisfy by burning all opposition, everything there is, off, ourselves included, in the

very process. Oh, if only we could be happy with the infinitely slow!" His voice was now tinged with an increasingly tender yearning wistfulness. He went on, "For there it is, right at, right beneath, our feet: cold fission, cold fusion, or at least, if there be any heat there at all, only exceptionally tepid, barely warm, fusion - the saxifrage. As it renews itself through fusion by its cellular agglomeration and rhizomic spread, simultaneously the measureless charge of its almost non-existent life-force is fissuring the place to bits, but everso slowly. If only we had time to wait, to wait on it, to get out of our time and into the difference of its very-very-slow, an absolutely unimaginable time for us at the moment but to which we may just have to retreat when we eventually realise just how wrong we have been about speed and heat, always assuming, of course, that there are still a few of us left behind in the wake of the big burn currently consuming us. But we are filled with and fuelled by a desire for an always distant 'over-there'. Getting by here is simply not on the cards for us, for we are defined by our desperation to get over-there, a somewhere-else that, in all its vagueness, is always beyond us, up ahead. And we're forever trying recklessly to reach it in no time at all, to eliminate any spare time, the time of our lives, by the exorbitant resources we exhaust in fuelling this big burn whose instant heat burns us off along with all the rest. Could we not, finally, before we incinerate ourselves, learn an essential something from that slow minimal depth charge that has made of this inhospitably resistant rock a true and perfect dwelling? Of course it would mean turning our over-heated world and our speed-and-heat-scrambled brains inside out, exchanging the hard and fast and very hot that has penetrated every sinew of our becoming for an as yet unimaginable cool slow softness. And maybe we are just not up to it, for there are few signs of even the tiniest of chinks in our quotidian insulation through which another kind of light might shine. Meaning's pile-driven surfaces, seemingly mighty but perhaps more brittle and inflammable than we are accustomed to believe, have a reassuring familiarity which acts as a comfort barrier between us and the possibility of living differently, of living softly and slowly. Indeed the word-lines that we routinely live by and that seem so easily available to us, words whose lines enmesh us even as we fall into them without thinking, are entirely inadequate for disclosing and spreading out before us the kind of event that is this strange conjunction of the inert and the seemingly barely alive, this coming together in which an epitome of weakness can

cleave the very exemplar of foundation itself. We don't seem yet to have, or to be able to make, ways of saying through which our devastating relation to this very place, a place whose limits we still believe we can overcome through speed-heat, could be utterly displaced and begun all over again."

All this was said with gathering heat and momentum, exemplifying ironically the very things which he seemed to want to most distance us from; his increasingly delirial abstractions were beginning to carry him and his words further and further away from me, yet I could find no way of intervening in the flow for, even as he was speaking, I felt increasingly as if his words were drawing me into the problem, implicating me directly in the hot speed of the plot's spiralling dynamic. It was as if, in some vague way, I was being held responsible for the very crisis he was laying all about us.

"And yet this is not some kind of war of opposites," he continued in a more measured way, "not some struggle to the death. No, certainly not. For the rock is an essential partner, it participates in its own splitting. What is taking place here is a long-term collusion, the strangest of collaborations to scatter place itself: the rock divides, gives way, and in so doing gives up, however briefly, its rockness. For at the point of fission, simultaneously the plant inevitably loses its hold, its place, and is dehisced into uncertainty, its scattered seeds and hair-thin rootlets having to take their chances on being blown, dragged or carried into some new ninth-part-of-a-hair fissure where the cycle might, just might, begin again, fate willing. Yes, perhaps it is everything that we intend in that apparently simple and so casually and frequently used phrase 'taking place' which is itself being put into question, put out of place, by the saxifrage's strange becoming."

I was lost, all at sea. What could he mean by 'rockness', 'foundation itself', 'place itself', 'fate willing', or 'strange becoming'? Surely, even if there were such a thing (and here even I am assuming that it makes some kind of sense to call fate, lacking, as it surely must, any defining thingy-like characteristics, a thing) as fate, it would have to be will-less? As for the '-ness' of a

rock, and the 'itself' of any foundation or place, I couldn't for the life of me understand how we could have or locate any such qualities for, as far as I could see, we could only ever have particular rocks, specific places, and definite and firm foundations, just like the very spot we were occupying or even the hole that he was digging for us with his catastrophe-laden words at that very moment. I tried to return him to earth (my earth although I'm not sure it was his) by asking him why, if this cycle was so driven and yet so independent of any human time scale, he felt he was needed here?

"To prevent extinction by theft," he replied, "although, to be accurate, taking the plant away from here cannot be theft because there is no law against it. Anyone can pick and collect flowers, and many do, to extinction (think, for example, of the late lamented bluebell), for they are driven to distraction by their compulsion to collect. Think of birds' eggs, toby jugs, nazi memorabilia. Everybody collects something and what they collect defines the parameters of their becoming. In the face of this by now almost universal predation, this viral spread of collecting for collecting's sake, progressively metastasising to all parts of the social body, I have taken it upon myself to step outside the law, to go beyond it, to be there before the law in order to become the protector of this singular yet paradoxical partnership between life and rock, between weakly striving thriving and dour resistant hardness. I'm always on guard here, never off-duty. My daily round is focussed absolutely on that stellar plant, that soft gem whose infinitely slow esemplasticity has the forceless force to move mountains. Life for me has become a vigil-wake compounded of various wary strategies of espial, defence, observation and gentle nurturance. On the assumption that every passing stranger, of which fortunately there are very few for this is not a place of common passage, is a potential threat, I put up a front of nonchalant couldn't-care-lessness, while actually watching them like a buzzard; I have a range of defensive and attacking gambits in reserve with appropriate equipment concealed around the site. All these aids and trappings need continual maintenance, testing and up-dating. Much of my time is spent in the most detailed observation and recording of the precise terms of the constantly evolving relationship between plant, rock and the enfolding environment and climate. And things get pretty complicated for, naturally, I have to include myself, being currently a key

constituent of said environment, as one more object to be topicalised. I am all too well aware of the ways the presence of the observer and his (and all too rarely her) instruments may, indeed most certainly do, affect the putatively independent object under observation. Obviously observer-effects, given their unknowability, both initially and in the last analysis (a last at which we never have and doubtless never will actually arrive), may entirely vitiate whatever tentative findings I may come to. For I have to admit that this charming little plant and I have already developed a degree of intimacy and interdependence, nay symbiosis, if not indeed mutual affection or even love - terms which would be absolute anathema to any peer review which might be called upon to pass some kind of professional-technical judgment on the value of my eventual writings. Yes, this 'one-off' of a plant and a relation, a particular, in other words, of exactly the kind after which you no doubt hanker, [Somehow he had spotted my weakness...], will, I don't doubt, exceed the capabilities of any measuring equipment or analytical model that I, let alone any bunch of post-doctoral technicians, might develop to try to fix and frame these all-too-local relationships. My activities thus generate an enormous amount and range of diverse materials that require continual collating, sorting, juxtaposing, classifying, and, eventually, writing-up, a writing-up that is and will be, receding far into the indefinite future, I have to admit, subject to endless revision as new observations and hunches inevitably undermine the halting conclusions that I had previously put some store by. Thus whether any of my researches and imaginative projections will ever get beyond the draft stage seems to me at the moment extremely doubtful. But there is absolutely no point in trying to rush into print on these matters, for is not the very cultural ground on which we stumble so routinely and unthinkingly, without, apparently, a care in the world, strewn with the rubble of prematurely promulgated so-called knowledge, most of which has turned out almost immediately, when taken as justification for and the basis of some self-interested practical human project, to have had absolutely disastrous consequences for ourselves and our little once green but now purplishly-greying planet? Moreover the very idea of the rush and rushing practices, whether into print or anywhere else, would be, as you are no doubt sharp enough to have perceived by now, the living denial of my consuming need to show the virtues of the very slow. In addition I have, of course, to attend to the usual range of bodily functions."

His sudden switch into the utterly mundane took me somewhat by surprise. In any case I didn't really want to hear about any of this for I found incretion and excretion, when formulated, as they all too frequently are, in the vernacular's banal repetitions, amongst the world's most boring conversation-stopping topics surely best reserved for the privacy of the walls of public latrines, or of the doctor's surgery to be presented in a few carefully rehearsed phrases, unless (and of course there must always at every juncture, every such juncture, be an unless) the speaker-writer had radically re-constituted these processes, brought them before us anew as if for the first time, through some extraordinary new way with word-lines that revealed the circle-cycle of drinking-eating-fucking-pissing-shitting as something entirely different from that which we had always taken it to be. I felt this was unlikely to be the case here, for I gauged that his obsession with the plant and its conditions of existence would have blinkered out any sidelong but yearning glimpses at the possibilities of a radical poetics for any re-positioning of our relation to either bodily function or a saxifrage life. Could he, I wondered to myself, have been fired by Bill Williams' bravura wee poem which, turning the saxifrage into a performative self-divider, cajoles language into disclosing itself as the, our, transcendent master-splitter? But there was no stopping him now for he was again in full flow.

"Having few needs, a small appetite, and sleeping little, I require only the occasional hasty expedition down to the nearest village to replenish my minimal provisions. And when away I keep in direct touch with the site through a range of electronic monitoring and recording devices that can alert me to any disturbances or potential threats. Over there," he gestured in a vaguely easterly direction, "just to the east of that escarpment, a tiny spring wells up out of the rock; it has never yet dried up and provides for all my liquid requirements. Anyway, I have already talked too much, a bad habit of mine I'm afraid, exacerbated, doubtless, by the extreme isolation of my life up here. Let me offer you some light refreshment to set you up for your descent. Sadly this is no sushi bar, although you may, if you are attuned to such possibilities, get the occasional shintoic overtone as you familiarise yourself with the site's atmospherics and open yourself to being graced, however fleetingly, by its elusive spirits. In the meantime (but isn't it

always a mean time in which we are all permanently mired?) I can at least provide you with a cool drink. You must be parched after all your exertions."

He guided me towards the cabin, offered me a rock on which to sit, and, removing a flat stone covering a hole in the ground, pulled out a flagon of clear liquid from which he poured me a glassfull. It was still, ice cold, and slightly sharp. It seemed to course instantly to all parts of my body. Tingling, I perked up. Glancing back at the rock into which the minuscule plant had locked itself, and knowing that it was the convention for discoverers and breeders of new varieties to have their discoveries named after them, I asked him whether he had given his name yet to his precious find.

"I'm afraid that's not possible at the moment; indeed it may never be possible," he replied, "besides, it was not I who found this lonely little recluse but my mother, many years ago in the course of one her foraging trips to these parts. She used to forage for many things, rare fungi, long-forgotten herbs, semi-precious stones, Welsh quilts, barks with curative properties, obsidian and other mineral deposits, abandoned proddy mats and so on. When she could no longer manage the regular walk up to this spot she asked me if I would shoulder the responsibility. I did so willingly, little realising what I was taking on nor just how radically my life would change as a result. At first I just used to pop up occasionally to make sure it was still thriving, but then, as the threat of collection became increasingly obvious, I devoted more and more of my time to it. It soon became my way of life."

I said that, in spite of his mother's initial discovery, it was surely he who had ensured the plant's survival and that it was certainly his due to have the plant named after him. "It's not quite as easy as you seem to imagine. You see I have no name to give," he said. "But how can that be?" I responded, "We are all pulled into and under the law of the name in the name of the law aren't we? Our state - good old Albion, your and my state, the state, the state we're in now, ensures that from birth onwards it can keep its tags on us, press-gang us into its service at any time it wants, thus making us subservient and responsible to it, indeed sacrificing us if need be, through

linking our name to a number. Surely no-one is allowed to be nameless now. You could just use your surname, give it a latin ending and donate it to your little protectorate."

"Aaah..." [this is the nearest I can get to the wistful little sigh he emitted at this point] "...there's the rub," he replied, "and this is where matters get more complicated, for when my father left us soon after I was born my mother excised, excoriated might be a better word, his name entirely from all our affairs. She would go around the house muttering to herself, 'no more patronymics', 'no more "in the name of the father",' and, further, 'no substitutions either', 'no "*in nomine matris*"', 'no more inheritance texts'. At the earliest age, long before I could appreciate what it was I was committing myself to, she made me swear with my hand on her heart that I would never take or use either my father's or her name. The whole point of my life, she told me, would be to find my own name."

What a strange woman I thought - fancy wanting to abandon the name of the mother as well as that of the father - most unusual! I warmed to her even though knowing about her only at this second-hand distance. I needed for my own sake to find out more about her. Indeed she began to sound more interesting than her clearly obsessive-compulsive son whose constant drift into the aether of generality, bordering on the pathological, I found so indigestible.

He continued. "It's possible, she warned me, that you will never find it or maybe only at the very end; at any rate you will know when the time comes, but it will not come until you have managed to gather the scattered fragments of your life around some project or projects that will provide for the good of, give a warrant to, your name-to-come. Only when this begins to become clear to you, she said to me, will you find or make, yes, invent if you must, a name that will be shaped to fit that very same good, and that's when you will have made a name for yourself, your very own name that won't be anyone else's, just yours, pure invention, from out of nothing. Your name, she asserted (on more than one occasion and usually with a voice rising in intensity), wrested from your passions, wiles and struggles, will truly enfold the multiple meanings of your life, bearing within itself the means and the meanings by which you will have shaped and placed your becoming. As you can imagine, all this was a bit much for me at the time. But, after turning

this oracular command round and round to myself over several years and trying to anticipate some of its, possibly awesome, consequences, I began, slowly at first and then with increasing conviction and self-donated authority, to make the greatest efforts to take up the cudgels of my anonymity with a certain baffled militancy, a cussedness whose origin could doubtlessly be pinpointed somewhere on my personal double helix. I sought to resist at all turns and squirm out from under any attempt by others, notably school teachers and the lads of the village, to saddle me with a name, nick-, sur-, first, second or whatever. I was, as I grew older and more familiar with the ways of the world, much more interested in the small details of her name-resisting scheme, such as what she had done at the time of my birth registration at the town hall. She confessed that she had told a harmless but necessary white lie by calling me Noel Affin-Matta, at which the clerk, adhering strictly to the bureaucratic rule of impersonal inscrutability, failed to bat an eyelid, turn a hair or raise an eyebrow. She hadn't, she said, felt any pangs of conscience about this deception because she had, as she reiterated to me on several subsequent occasions, no respect for or fear of the state for which, she asseverated with some emotion but no quavering, we were nothing more than a soft amalgam of milch-cows and cannon-fodder, a sentiment with which I later identified myself completely. But, as far as the challenge of my anonymity went, she was true to her word for I never remember her calling me anything but 'love' or 'dear' (and very occasionally 'chucky-egg'), apart from the occasional 'you little perisher', or some suchlike, in response to my all too regular peccadilloes, and, as often as not, even these labels functioned as terms of affection as well as mild rebuke. I was quick to learn the subtle differences of intonation and emphasis in her speech that marked the gap between sincerity and irony, truth and subterfuge. Indeed it seemed to me, as I grew into her ways of speaking, that she was in some way showing me in her word-ways just how the world and its troubles struggled teeteringly along, swaying from side to side in this gap, never really knowing what it was doing or where it was going, all the time just making sure that it was, at least, still moving and moving ever faster in some direction assumed to be forwards. Since then, as I am sure you will appreciate, my days and years have been spent on the trail of my name-to-come. To date, I fear that there have only been false leads and clues and all too numerous ill-judged detours and side-tracks. I remain a blank, a cipher, to myself. Whether all this shadowy

stumbling, this night errancy, will eventually bring me to the threshold of a name through which I might pass into and hollow out a livable space of my own remains to be seen. Who knows but that the saxifrage nurturance may eventually prove to be the clearing within which my name might just emerge into and as the full light of my day, a light which, I hope, will have a quite different clarity to that of the so-called enlightenment light which now so shrouds us with its artificial brilliance. However blurred my sight may have become by that, doubtless all too late, cataractic stage, I like to think that I would have the percipience to recognise the difference its rays will make to things."

Adrift in wistful contemplation of this hoped-for light to come, he looked steadily out across the shaly grey shoals into the fading prussian-blue-black distance. I could not help being put out of joint by his strange account and, lacking a name for him, I felt deprived of just that common term which enables us to place a bridge over the absence that lies forever between all of us. Yet I was oddly touched by his apparent dedication to a life-project appearing to have emerged out of his idiosyncratic relation to his mother and her perhaps odd but by no means unusual baby-talking ways. I wanted to know more, much more, about these early days relationships, about the problems thrown up by his namelessness, about the subsequent sequence of events which had led to this self-castaway lost-hill-fort existence with its bizarre focus on that most insignificant of plants. At some as yet (and maybe forever) indecipherable level there seemed to be the haziest and still inchoate parallels with the very memories and dilemmas around which my own halting life had endlessly circled. But it was by now almost dusk and I still had to find my way back down to the path from which I had unknowingly wandered hours ago.

I knew I needed to find out more about what had sparked off his trajectory out of the lowlandish binds that kept me and the rest of the cast of millions tied to the high-and-byways of the cities of the plain and so, explaining that my own ramblings in search of possible ways out seemed to resonate at some as yet unlocatable level with his own project, I asked him, tentatively, if he would be prepared to tell me in greater exemplary detail (for, as he had so astutely (this to butter him up somewhat) guessed, it was precisely the little details around which

my life turned) about his earlier years and some of the more crucial moments in the formation of his critical path through the world's ways and through to this so lonely spot.

He seemed pleasantly surprised and agreed at once, saying that his mother's "way with words", as he put it, and especially her insistence that he cultivate as intensely as possible what she called a "carefully creative listening" or "anti-listening-listening" whenever she engaged him all unsuspecting in off-beat conversations (whose significance he still puzzled over, he added), had drawn him into a relation to words and saying that seemed to have landed him permanently beyond the margins of state-language ("jingo-lingo" was his actual phrase) wherever it seized place, be it in classroom, playing field, newscast, lounge bar, board room, operating theatre, gallery atrium, bus-stop, foundry floor or shopping precinct, wherever, in short an 'I' was surrounded by and bound itself to an authoritative 'they'. He explained that ever since he had served his time in this subversive hearing apprenticeship, odd words, split words, combi-words, word clumps, unformed and part-formed sentences, fractured texts, worded-faces, -stray emotions, -bodies, -trees, -dust, -bugle-calls, -barks, -whispers, -paeans, -clear images, -rivers, -cloudy graphics, -smells, -puddles, -puddings, -vague happenings, -letters, -names (many, many names), -near-incidents, -wells, -upheavals, -unequivocal events, -milk bottle tops, and whatever-else-worded, each plucked by some unaccountable force (if force it be for it seemed to take no effort, consume no locatable let alone measurable energy) from his earlier days, overtook (overwhelmed even) him quite unbidden and formed themselves instantly into intimately detailed composites of imaged-sounding-words. Very often these would turn in on themselves almost immediately, implode self-scatteringly, and then recompose themselves into something quite different in what seemed like no time at all.

Although he lacked anything remotely resembling a photographic memory, he had, he said, for a long time now, tried to hang onto these self-disintegrating interruptions and explosions that seemed to burst of their own accord through convention's skin by jotting them down as quickly as he could. In their turn they would generate further associations, linkings and responses so that he now had this ever-growing pile of elaborated jottings which seemed, quite spuriously he

assured me, through "the unquestioned linkages which all words seem to have it in themselves to effect" (his words), to be laying down an account of his early life's key moments and experiences. "When, out of the blue-black, these little burst-outs came to me I recognised instantly, though without quite knowing why, the pertinent criticality of the past moments to which they referred and into which they pulled me", he said, "but the terms in and on which they broke through seemed to bear a wholly unascertainable relation to those moments. Sounding me out as they arrived untimely, the words, the worded-images, the little fractured composites stringing themselves out through and for me, were entirely bound to the moment of their appearance to me - they plunged me directly into those past occasions yet remained utterly distant from them. Each time I'm seized I think that, yes, this is exactly how it was, and yet it's always ever so slightly different, a yesterday, a past, as it was but framed, coloured and enphoned euphonically by today, an apparently seamless doubling but with the double invisibly and inexplicably different. And of course I was, am, inclined to attach some significance to these little intrusions, for, in bursting their way back into my current stream in the face of convention's resistance, they show no little enterprise, cunning and resilience. But I remain utterly in the dark about what this significance might be."

I could see that he was at a loss about the relation between the present of his charged writing and the past it both referred to and instantly sought to fix and evoke for him. It seemed, from the way he was describing the emergence of his written scraps, that, in the way that he kept track of the burst-outs, he was constructing, almost accidentally, an inchoate narrative made up of nuggets of his past and running parallel to it yet bearing an unknowable relation to it. Clearly this wasn't just a case of looking back at past events from a position of relative tranquility in which the very distance from said past allowed the cold eye of detachment to appraise what was and what was not, now, significant (significant, that is, for the life as it is now being lived through). Had he not been sucked back into the midst of those past occasions in ways that enabled him to feel right there again? Yet the very back-suckings, the instant throw-backs, were nothing other than the terms of the all-too presently fixed word-image-recalls. Yes, he was indeed back-there-then but,

simultaneously in an all-at-once, only on and in the terms of a right-here-now.

As if to warn me off reading too much into any emergent narrative his jotted scraps might seem to live by and treating it as some kind of document of the highs and lows of a life-as-lived he elaborated his puzzlings about its intertwining of past and present. "These heated (although the heat they may generate for you, if any at all, may be tepid in comparison to their fervency for me) notes may indeed open onto what have been place-times of some consequence in the way my life has out-panned itself and is still panning out, for, as you will perhaps see, they offer my transports (not necessarily of uniform delight) back to long-buried previously unconsidered moments; but of course they can have no such significance for you", he said, "for, as images, wordy-picturesque-(one might almost say quaint-)-tonally-pitched images, they arrived, seemingly from nowhere, as nothing but now fully conscious remnants, and as such they could say nothing about what might have been going on below the surface of my becoming. If, for example, you are interested in the unconscious, as, sadly (since there is still so very very much of the conscious of which we are, apparently, completely oblivious and which we persist in ignoring at our peril, a peril that already suffuses every moment of our passing becoming), so many seem to be these days, that is the apparently deeply buried, the so-called underlying and supposedly subtly distorted meanings of these events, then I'm afraid that I and they can be of little help and you will undoubtedly be disappointed. As I have intimated, my jottings deal only with, in and on surfaces. They are written (if that's not too grand a term for my jotting practices) only from within the immediacy and thrall of my heard-seen-and-felt little composites. I just string these little planar movements together as and when they take me over. They may indeed have some of the appearances of biographic criticality (were there to be any such thing!) but this could, of course, be no more than a purely epiphenomenal side-effect of a quite accidental sense of narrative continuity, a continuity that accrues through the handling of junctions, disjunctions, conjunctions,

associations, dissociations, cross-overs, fall-backs, forward-castings, hints, whispers, repetitions, mimings, echoes, glitches, corrections, rents, slips (of the tongue, head, heart and hand), elaborations, undoings, stitch-ups, asides, exclamations, comments, interjections, punctuatings, accidental-losses-and-additions, etceteras, and so forth. With all this and much more it soon piles up you know."

Unable to anticipate when the overtakings would occur, he tried, he said, to be ever-ready for them with stubby pencil and jotting pad always as close to hand as circumstances would allow. I asked him if he ever undertook any editorial work on the ever-expanding sheaf and he admitted to a limited amount of expungeing which took place, he said, always and only in the very course of the writing down itself when he might excise what felt like excessive repetitions or, on the other hand, splice in further repetitions in order perhaps to capture something, however indirectly, of the mood and rhythm of the event-occasion to which the jottings were a response. Perhaps, too, he said, he might omit some of the all-too frequent asides which seemed to come from neither then nor now nor him and which he might judge to be detracting from the central thrust, the specificity, of the recall. "I look upon these unattributable asides as a kind of static interference, as grey noise that troubles and interrupts my hearing of the recalls. Doubtless you would, in any case, have your own all too and likely much more pertinent asides were you to scan through the scribblings. But don't worry", he continued, "I'm sure that enough contextual detail concerning my earlier years and exemplifying the write-up (or is it write-down?) itself remains, utterly idiosyncratic though it is, to drive you to some kind of minimal distraction (if it's distraction-through-details-of-particulars you're after) if not bananas. Actually for me there is nothing but detail here. Don't forget though that what is detail to me may not be so for you; for the devil of the detail is in, nay is, the very words themselves, clumped or otherwise, that make up the recall. You don't

need to look beyond the words for the detail. Mind you, if it's thesis material you require for some research project (an analytical, clinical, psycho-pathological, socio-historical, or whatever case-study) you'll be wasting your time, for my little stock of uncalled-for image-texts arose entirely fortuitously, doubtless nudged into being by something in my current situation of which I was and still am entirely unaware. In fact," he continued, "I make a point of never even considering, let alone actively searching out, after they have finished having their way with me, whatever it might have been in my relation to my immediate surroundings that could have triggered them, flashed them up onto my inner audio-video-touchy-feely-screen. Without knowledge of such triggers they can only be taken as patternless one-offs, disconnected from whatever it is that makes up what you or I might call life in all its linear but so entangled continuity, where one thing always and without exception leads to another, life in its utter inner-outer (but simultaneously perversely contrary) connectedness."

Somewhat taken aback by his foray into the intangibles of scribbling's relation to life (whether of the linearly tangled continuous variety or not) I hastened to assure him that it was precisely distraction and the little details (little details entirely unhinged from any round-anchorish attachment to moorings so frequently but so ill-advisedly roped to them by all and sundry in the course of everyday explanations of the course and causes of anything said to be an event, an occasion, a happening, a happenstance or whatever may be said to have just taken place as just such an event/occasion/happening/happenstance (after 'it' has happened, always after the little darlings have passed away)) for which I was now so desperately searching, having tried and abandoned (either through my own inherent failings or theirs or some combination of mine and theirs) so many other -tractions (ex-, abs-, at-, sub-, con-, in-, to name but a few) down the years. I emphasised that nothing else counted for me now but distracted details and particulars. I craved, slavered after, nothing more, I told him, than

distractions entirely made up of details, no matter how tiny or seemingly insignificant, cut off from anything that sought to ground them in some scene with which we were all too familiar and which we thus thought, through the absurd over-confidence, if not downright hubris, spawned by this very familiarity, we could encode, classify, frame, box-file, archive, and thence explain, explain away in comfortingly simple ways. To the extent, I told him, that his instant responses were nothing more nor less than such detailed distractions I would be happy indeed.

"Just so long," he said in response to my fawning attempt to ingratiate myself with him, "as you appreciate that these scrawled scraps are no life-story and, indeed, bear, as I have been trying, somewhat tiresomely you may feel, to stress to you, an entirely unknowable (unknowable that is both to you and to me) relation to anything that actually happened to me in the course of both my formative and my subsequently-formed, I might almost call them my sclerosed, years. All you need to know is that, from the earliest days (and it is these, is it not, that are the most crucial in fixing us into our life-pattern?) I discovered that to get by, yes just to get by (let alone to begin to scintillate), I had to be on my toes, ready for anything she, ma, would throw in my direction. For, as I began to get the hang of her ways, it became clear to me (but only insofar as and in the way that anything is ever clear to one in childhood (let alone later when things begin to get muddier and muddier) - with that sharp bright clarity haloed and framed by a rigid but utterly misplaced certainty) that getting by was utterly dependent on what I later came to see as some kind of word-dancing, a terpsichorean euphonics. Not that she ever said as much. Actually she said very little, very little indeed, far less than you may be expecting from the inordinately influential weight I may seem to have placed on her words as my life-guides. No, she was gnomically brief to say the least (and the most), almost to the point, indeed, of enduring silences only rarely interrupted by all-too-brief

exclamations and asides. But of course, because of their rarity, I treasured and made as much as I possibly could of her interjections, trying endlessly to unravel both their ties (if any) to the surrounding context and their implications for my own ways through the life-wood. My learning, then, necessarily a kind of stumbling self-tuition, was almost entirely by example and in practice, in, that is, the rough and tumble of the diurnal, and not through some set of prescriptive rules that were being handed down from on high in subservience to the supposedly revered authority of generations long gone but still, sadly, holding the whip hand. So I tried to train myself to become, with a few nudges and wrinkles from her that served to push me in what I hoped was the right direction (although in these early stages I couldn't know, and indeed still remain unsure about, right for what), a rudimentary word-dancer. And sadly I have never got beyond the rudiments, as you will see all too clearly if you pursue your light reading project through a few of my loose-leaf scraps. Indeed I set my sights no higher than the rudimentary for I have come to realise over the years, the now so many years, that they, the rudiments that is, the apparently very simplest elements, already stretch me, strain and struggle though I might, to and probably beyond my limits, my admittedly so very limited limits. After all it's taking me all my time to come to terms with, to plot and find, the least means through which that tiny saxifrage maintains its bare life, its rudimentary getting-by. And when I try to apply the same constricted, some might almost say self-strangling, focus (a focus that seeks to eliminate all but the essential details, all those tiny bits, nothing in themselves, which, it would seem, apparently draw you forwards too) to the transporting images in order to hold on to nothing but the rudiments, I fear that this very effort of staying as close as possible (I hesitate to invoke some version of 'truth to appearances') to their stark vividness founders on the rock of my all too obvious, self-imposed in part perhaps, but now certainly over-determining enwrapment by the rudimentary. Not that I experience this as an incapacitating limitation, no, not by a long chalk, for my problematic (if I may borrow that

seemingly pretentious term from a completely alien and alienating discourse) is to find the simple, the simplest, in the apparently rudimentary, the least that makes it what it is (or seems to be). And, far from my searching being some kind of problem, this urge, my urge, to find and disclose, or, in the case of the saxifrage, to find and protect, is quite simply a, if not the, reason for being. Problems might only arise *ex post facto* when, as is almost invariably the case, someone might try to put the finding to work, to apply it to something outside itself, as if it wasn't completely sufficient in and unto itself! Fortunately I was never encouraged to approach the world or life as a problem to be solved (although, as I'm the first to admit, my life has not been exactly a problem-free stroll through the paradise gardens). No, ma never set me problems (no doubt an over-zealous analyst, using his best transforming tools, might locate somesuch tucked away behind her self-fragmenting word-lines). Rather, I got the feeling almost from day one (if you can imagine that...) that she wanted me to engage, to take on as it were, the world's utter quirkiness: the unparalleled strangeness of felt-thought's tides and floods as they well forth in endless but barely formed pulsing admixtures of phonic graphisms and graphic phonisms. It was as if her thought-feelings, her upwelling outpourings (although this perhaps overstates their volume if not their importance to me), were being offered to me as examples of world-thought-feelings, as if her microcosmic streaming somehow represented, on its admittedly minute scale, the way the world kept itself under way and on the way. She was not, of course, any kind of theorist, being a strictly empirico-practico-touchworth-feelinghammer sort of person, so none of this resumé comes directly from her; but down the years this is the way I have come to see her legacy to me. It seemed to me that her off-beat word-lines (although all too frequently falling way short of something recognisable as even a half-complete line) were cast in my direction in order that we might both, together, try and find our way to that unplaceable spot in between the beats, life's beats. For is not this little no-where, this out of place and out of time, this in-between, precisely

where we need to get to in order to catch something of what it might be that presses up against us eternally, both from within and without, simultaneously turning us into and setting us against ourselves? The challenge, towards which I believe she was trying by example to draw me, is surely to grasp something of the flavour of this swirling in-between before it trickles away, as it always so speedily did and does, out of the gaps between her and our words. So, no problem-solving exercise here then - just the unendable challenge of passing through life's protective skin into the gappy turmoil and engaging for ourselves, however fleetingly, the particularity of life's vagueness."

As he rambled on I began to warm to his particularity. But I wasn't sure about the vague that he'd just thrown in, itself all too clearly exemplified in his vagrant speech. Could I have located him behind the wall of vagueness he was erecting I might well have clobbered him one, if only to bring him back to the details I so craved.

With barely a break he took off again. "Eventually I tried to act as a co-habiter of her region, to map myself across her site, so that I might become, perhaps, a provocateur or goad to further up-wellings. I can't say I was very successful - she was a law unto herself, or rather she was always in advance of her own law (if indeed there ever could be, could have been, such a rule-to-come lurking in the background of her mumblings), a law that she condemned to an agitated trotting always some way behind her, desperately trying but forever failing pathetically to ever catch up with her to show its weaselly face to her (and the world of course)."

By now my head was getting fuzzy. He'd paused at last if only for breath and a glance towards the darkening horizon. Listening to him I had been at-tracted by, gently but firmly

drawn towards, what he described as ma's and his site, a site apparently unmarked by any brush with or taint by the law and which he had presented to me as his mother's peculiar territory. So far I was unable to locate it on any map of the heart and mind with which I was familiar. And the very site which he himself was guarding here, this lost dourly grey expanse of broken rocks, seemed to be similarly marginal, if not off the edge. Certainly it had not been shown on the rambler's map which I had used earlier in the day to guide my tramp through these deserted hills. Perhaps his singular and zealous protection project had arisen out of his attempt to work out the long-term implications for his own predicament of his mother's apparently exemplary ways.

Seemingly stateless, nameless and unmapped, his apparently self-subsistent detachment resisted my attempts to place him, yet goaded my curiosity to breaking point. For while his trajectory seemed to have carried him far beyond and put him down somewhere well to the side of the quotidian's demands, his obsessions and activities were, superficially at least, rather similar to those which routinely sustained that very lowland quotidian, including myself and those with whom I came into occasional contact: he had identified a task and was pursuing, with care and commitment, the quite specific means he had worked out as most appropriate to that task's needs and ends.

But the task itself was off the map. He inhabited an elsewhere that even I, seasoned map-reader though I am, would almost certainly be unable to find again since I had only stumbled across his site by chance long after the track I had followed earlier had petered out. And now it was dusk; I needed to leave immediately if I was not to be stranded in the hills. Yet I knew I had to question him further, much further, about his strange trajectory from ma's words onwards and through to this most elsewhere of sites. I asked him if we might meet again and

talk further. He gave a wry smile and said that he preferred, nay needed, for the saxifrage's sake, to keep what was left of himself to what was left of himself, and that, in any case, it was most unlikely that I would ever be able to find my way back up to his spot as he called it.

"I am, though, as I hinted earlier, prepared to loan you some of my scribblings if you're really that interested." he said "They are, of course, nothing more than rudimentary notes, little nothings, jotted down, often all too hastily, on the heels of the up-wellings when they were still fresh enough for me to register something of their clarity. This clarity may, of course, relate to something which is vague through and through, but surely it is precisely these things that we need to get as clear as possible in our own minds isn't it?" He didn't wait for a reply but plunged on as I glanced at my watch (it appeared to have stopped): "Nevertheless my near-narrative transcriptions do seem to delineate events from some life or other, and maybe, here and there, there are seemingly clear connections, lines of continuity and joinings of the contiguous, between the phantasmagoria and some actual past event. But do not be taken in by these conjunctions and inter-threadings - I'm sure they are purely coincidental, tied to the occasion of their use in the upwelling recalls. Certainly the image-events I have tried to scribble down as they took me over did indeed come from somewhere way-back-when and, as I have already tried to suggest, they do, when I reflect on them, bear some kind of tangential relation to incidents (relations, so-called events even) in which I remember being deeply embroiled so many years ago. But at the same time there is a yawning chasm between the results of my halting attempts to reconstruct these things through active memory work now and the image-texts as they flashed before me from out of nowhere. And I know which I prefer. I'm afraid you'll also find that that there are no clear lines demarcating my attempts to dash the images down and the local musings which followed hot on their heels. For, apart from the unattributable asides mentioned, the images continuously provoked passing

thoughts, comments, interpretations, sometimes directly related to the recalls and sometimes not, and these were, indeed still are, so closely entwined with the recalls that it is impossible to separate them out; you will probably find that these interleaved comments give a quite false sense of continuity to the essentially disparate provocations-from-nowhere which gave rise to them. Sifting through these loose leaves, as I occasionally have done, even I have been hard put to it to distinguish between what came to me all at once as one of those image flashes and the much more leisurely, but equally disparate, responses, comments, asides, further rememberings and associations. And after all what does it matter, for you, are you not, are only interested in, driven towards and by, details, by the nitular-gritular of word-clumps, irrespective of their origin? My sheaf of scrawlings comprises nothing but such clumps, little chunks that bump and grind into and against each other, sometimes sharing the journey for a short distance, almost seeming to get along with each other, but more often careering off on their own for no good or bad reason other than their own inexplicable will. There is, despite any sense of continuity or underlying themes which you may believe you can sense trundling along in parallel just below the surface lines, I can assure you, no larger scheme of things underpinning or overarching these isolated particulars that, if searched for carefully enough, would enable you to draw the loose leaves into some satisfyingly tightly bound volume that presented a united front, a mappable region in which everything might eventually be allotted its rightful place. There are no rightful places here, no clump has precedence; any such mapping and placing will be entirely your own responsibility and a creation of your own imaginings. Given this caveat, you are most welcome to make of and do with this collection whatever you will. I ask only that you preserve my authentic anonymity. I feel no proprietary rights over it and ask only that you return the original hand-written sheaf to me when you have finished with it, for, as a serial jotter, I will undoubtedly be adding to the pile sooner or later. Besides, as a transcription of moments of my mis-spent youth that offers me salutary

reminders of where I took the wrong turnings, it helps me to focus more clearly on the task at hand for me here. Personally I have never seen the assembled fragments as anything more than my own way of clinging on to the outer edge of sanity by trying to snatch at the few, the very few, revelatory moments that seem to have offered me an opportunity of planting a teetering toe-hold, however briefly, into the mush of the infinitely vague."

I cut in quickly saying that, on the basis of his earlier remarks, I was particularly interested in the jottings that related to his earliest days with his mother and asked him if I could borrow a few of these; of course I couldn't tell him that the last thing I wanted at this critical juncture in my own cracking-up life was to be overwhelmed by a huge pile of sheets filled with random and doubtless inconsequential thoughts, whereas the ma-related material did seem, from his description, to promise some clues as to his peculiar life-trajectory. Surely they would be more than enough for the time being!

Turning swiftly on his heel he went into his hut and returned almost immediately with an oilskin-wrapped package which he handed to me. "Here, take these. I've snatched them from the bottom of the pile - they're the early days word-wellings which brought ma's life-words back to me. These are the words that spun me round on myself and then, with a centrifugal force from nowhere, flung me out and away on my own trajectory. To jog my own memory I always underline the particular word or word-clump which brings an image and other stringy associations in its train. Such particulars are my form of the little details of which you seem to be so enamoured, although, as you will doubtless see, there seems to be no earthly reason in many cases why they deliver anything at all, let alone something as graphically complex as an image-word-feeling combine. We are, or perhaps I should say I am, condemned to acceptance, for analysis will never undo them, never undermine them, will not even touch

them tangentially. No, they pass analysis serenely by on the other side. But that's another story, a little hobby-pack-mule of mine which it's as well not to get me started on."

I nodded in agreement, feigning a smile and shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, hoping desperately that I wouldn't be subjected to yet another spiralling diatribe on the mushiness of the gap between his words and his memories. I looked down at my stopped watch and shook my wrist violently in a show of partly false irritation. "Aaaah, yes, I mustn't keep you any longer, you have a long journey ahead of you. Look", he said, "when you've finished with the sheets please deposit them in the *poste restante* section at the post office in the village with three corners below this line of hills. I can collect them on one of my occasional trips down for essential provisions. You must leave now or you will not get out of these hills safely tonight. My dog will take you to the nearest path some miles down the hillside. Don't worry, he knows his own way back and will turn around of his own accord when he's put you on the path."

He whistled sharply and a small terrier leaped forward, seemingly from out of nowhere's shadows, wagging his tail and obviously anxious to be off. It was as if he'd performed this service many times before. "Well, nice to have met you. Good reading. Off you go Sprott!" I thanked him and assured him that the sheets would be returned just as soon as I had had an opportunity to do them justice [without at this stage quite knowing what such a sense of justice might involve or indeed whether justice had the remotest relevance to the reading-to-come]. Sprott was already disappearing down the darkening scree slope. Tucking the parcel safely inside my knapsack I hurried off, anxious not to lose sight of my guide for there was no moon.

The Loose Leaves

[Here is a literal transcription of the words as they appeared consecutively across the sheets comprising the sheaf. I undertook no editing. My only transcribing rule was 'contiguity': the words appear here in the order in which they occurred as I worked my way down the pile of disparately-sized sheets. Given the absence of identifying or ordering marks on the sheets, the transcription gives no indication of breaks between sheets. The, perhaps chance, continuity of the words may thus suggest that any possibly resultant 'sense' arises solely from one word following another. Fortunately the writer had registered his words in a beautifully lucid cursive handwriting that was a simple joy to work with. Sadly my attempt to train my own hands (yes, I essayed both right and left) to generate here a tolerable pastiche of his exemplary model handwriting reveals itself as yet another performative of my talent for failure, for which I duly apologise.]

'I'm mattering, mattering out of place. All over the place, spreading fluidly, in runnels, rill lines across surfaces, lining surfaces, resurfacing whatever has already surfaced, with my unending spillage, condemned (but by whom, by what - questions asked but always unanswerable) to permanent flow-forth. There's no stoppering me up. I am outing, will out, it seems, forever netherwards of knowing. From the nowhere of my year dot onwards. Unbeknown to myself, as I subsequently and all too belatedly discovered, I had, knowing nothing of where I was (how could I?) at the earliest age been drizzled into the alembic of sad becoming, not so much against my will as to one side and all around, thus haloing, will's orbit. Only recently (but when was this, how recently was this recency? - I forget) has will learned in all its steadfast recalcitrance, as I have haltingly discovered (was it I who discovered or did will turn me out in this way all by itself?),

just to shrug in the face of this discomfiting fact, no longer even putting up the ghost of a struggle, as if willed into acceptance of a lot, the lot, my lot. I still bear though, as an unreadable and as yet unhealed mesh of tribal marks slashed across all knowable (and also, most probably, unknowable even to me) surfaces, the scars of struggles past and continuing. I run my fingers over them constantly, my own fingers tracing back and forth, up and down, down and across. Braille scars - courtesy of St. Ruggie, my matron saint. Unreadable, yet to be touch-read, fingered out, figured out, but only outside of any grammar lesson and out of school's hours and way beyond its walls. They are my constant, my travelling companions - were the world ever to see them they would represent me to that world. Yes, but which world, whose world? The world of the country of the blind only. Yet such struggles were always, always will be, belated - always necessary, inevitable, but always too late. They came after the sadness had, in its non-violent silently pacific way, worked its way in and through and taken up residence in the vitals from where, having familiarised itself thoroughly with its surroundings, it was able to make frequent forays to all surface parts whenever the mood took it. And the mood took it unceasingly. No zone was insulatable, every plane was slithering spongiform. There was only its thorough seepage into and through, followed, eventually, by its stickily rampant dispersal. Forever. I could make no bones about it. My bones, great absorbers, were already thoroughly saturated and I had no grounds for complaint, for I could not attribute its arrival and permeation to anything or body out there. And I certainly hadn't invited it in - my body had neither the intention nor the desire to offer itself as steward to itself-as-street-party. Yet I had no grounds other than it.

Without retreating an *inch* it made way for me. *Taking place* (yes, but where ma, how ma? give me a clue ma...) on its terms, I had to find ways of rubbing *along* with it, accompanying it on its divers journeyings, giving it something to think about on its days off (all too rare), becoming its good companion, maybe even cheering it up a little (almost impossible), bringing every now and then perhaps the faintest *glimmer of a demi-semi-smile* to its otherwise morose lips. It seemed to want this, recognising perhaps that we needed to get on. With life, our life, together. At least it didn't complain at my pathetically feeble efforts. How else were we going to survive? Ma was blameless in all this. She *did her very best* with the scarcest of resources, among which I count myself as the least and the most intractable. In the early years and always in *the shadowy background*, subtly, invisibly - though I see her perfectly clearly now *bending over the low stone sink* sluicing out her chipped blue enamel milk jug after decanting the milk she had just collected from Grundy the Milk whose fading cry of 'Milko!' I can still hear as he guides his horse and cart (or was it a trap, for I see only a pony and a milkless trap?) *through the pot holes of our rutted lane*; her mother ('Gramma' I distinctly remember calling her) provided regular supple but always precisely *opposite* support in the absence of my father who had left us only his name, the legacy of which would have been more than enough to cope with had we accepted it, which we did not, no, not for a moment. Ma made sure of that. "Never again! Not that *malphonic* label!" she said, leaning back into *the armchair in front of the kitchen range* and gazing fixedly up at the insatiable flies *crawling slowly around the lamp* in search of whatever stale flecks of sustenance the grimy ceiling offered. I am *stretched out tummy-down*, head

supported on chubbly hands, on the cinder-pocked hearthrug struggling to locate the story line in an ageing wordless fading rag-book and trying to catch her half-mumbled words. "Not past my lips or yours! Not that suffocating blanket enshrouding us, shadowing us, dogging us, suffusing, infecting and inflecting our every last particle! If the name, his name, matters give me anti-matter every time." She was as good as her word - we simply expunged it. What was it? I can no longer remember and, thanks to her, I do not care. Ma had a way with words. More than that, she was her way with words. Just the same words as anyone else of course, but somehow suddenly cut off, released from their ties and stays, their familiar moorings, freed, asking, needing, to be heard differently, as if they came from very far away, an untimely zone. And yet they remained very very close. The gap between me and them was too close to call (call, ball, scream, yell though I did). Of course we all have ways with words, but there was something about ma's way that inveigled one (me) without one (me) ever knowing it was happening into its own inner workings, its spirational cavern, a space as immediately there and concrete as the surgingly pleasurable surprise tremors that, from the earliest days, coursed through my body in apparent response to her ways of forcing sense through her strange phonic hoops, her audio-mincer. Something happened to it on the way through and out, some estrangement from and simultaneously newly-mixed re-alignment with itself. Fortunately (it was only much later that I realised that I was indeed fortunate in this legacy, at the time it often left me frustratedly thrown into and floundering about within a strange area of half-being) it came out the other side both the same and ever so slightly different, recognisable but immediately

recognisably different, as if cocking an ironic snook at itself - doubled up, mobiusly *stripped*. Had she been a cornet player I don't doubt that she would have been a double-tongueing, nay triple-tongueing, diva, tuh-tuh-kuhing her way to a brilliant solo career. Yet she always seemed eminently sensible, sometimes serious, deadly serious even, and rightly so with such an uncoordinated bundle of contradictory energies as myself to handle. It was as if *she had some secret pact with the underside* of commonsense that enabled her to keep some minimal sense-gobbets *moving steadily forward and holding firmly to their rightful place* as practical guides for all our everyday doings, whilst in that very same movement completely *undermining everything* that was proposed and acted out in her saying. Needless to say I never recovered from this. Indeed I gradually came to see that it might be just what my sad-becoming (forever working away on its own behalf (which perforce had to become my behalf) *behind the scenes*, my scenes, my sense scenes, and thus largely unknown to me) was secretly pining for without ever having the courage to come out and say so. Yet this was not a cure, no kind of therapy, for there was no pathology, no illness, no sick-mind syndrome *here* (no, nor there, over there, either). There were only my parlous, parl-less, states (some much steadier than others) of becoming, states assembled through the generalised but small surface disturbances, maladapted head-plate tectonics, that seemed to characterise the inclines, declines, reclines and synclines of my think-feels. Indeed to characterise such instability as a 'state' may already have given it (was it an 'it' even?) a coherence it certainly lacked at the time. Take my word for it please, just as I learned to take Ma's word for whatever 'it' was being put into play, for I sensed even then through her that the

place, the place she and I were in together, was always a *place for playing*, where we were to be played out. "If you really *must play out*," she said as I tied my laces, "at least take some time to play yourself in to the out-playing. Stalk it from down-wind." At the time, of course, I didn't get it for I couldn't see how to apply it to 'Queenie-o-co-co', but I attributed my later success with an unplayable 'chinaman' to the long term corrosive effects of ma's gnomesic instruction. And her odd way of throwing sense into some kind of confusion with itself seemed to offer a state - no, that needs qualifying as a *stateless state* - of becoming that was a becoming-other, other that is to the permeating insanities (largely unrecognised or provoking at best a kind of resigned shrug of the shoulders presumably intended to seal the shrugger off from their worst deprivations) of *the all-encasing worlds*. It was as if there was a latent invitation in her words to *join her and them on some unfixable spot*, a spot in name only (for her 'it' was nowhere in particular), where nothing would ever again be quite what it seemed. Not that she seemed to have the least clue that this was what she might be doing. She just did it, flowed, euphoned, intuitively. But as for me, lacking in the wit which seemed to comprise her natural course through the world, I knew that I would have to train myself to *jump through chance's flaming hoop* as she proffered it. For chance is, indeed was, what she was about. Did she not exemplify the uncertainty principle? After her, could I (we) any longer even think of it as a principle? Could we still have something recognisable as a principle, some fine upstanding construction secured and unassailable on its own ground? Might not each apparent principle be *busy undoing itself* in the very course of its being promulgated? I began, inchoately, to see this as

the limit position towards which the course of my self-training needed to set itself, and it began to dawn on me that it was precisely the idea of a course of training that needed to be turned inside out as a matter of practice. Practically ma could be little or no help of course (except by being the proto-example) because she did not know what she was doing. Analysis, of the self or of anything else, was a closed book to her. On the odd occasions when I did attempt to elicit some explanation of what she had intended by a particular turn of phrase, piece of advice, instruction or whatever, she would give me a peculiar look and murmur something to the effect that I should just "let things lie". "Analysis is not my bag." she said. I soon gave up and resigned myself to relying on my own limited resources. I could see, even in my earliest fumbling stumbling groping moping days, that it was going to be a rocky road to follow with no visible signs of success or reward along the way. Indeed it might just be that there could be no criteria for success, for what would count as achievement? Might one get to the end of the road and still not have even the first inkling whether any of what had been desired and hazily sighted in the early years had even been brushed up against, let alone gained? Possibly so. I had to take that chance. Life was to be a chancy affair. But was I up to it? Was anyone? Failure seemed built in in advance. Perhaps, in trying to sniff out this strange trail, I was condemning myself to a life alternating between significant failure and perpetual beginning again. But that might have its own advantage, for surely one could incur no general censure if indeed all one did was to deliver the failure with which the project was already heavily pregnant. Perhaps the training I required was in learning to start all over again, each time, finding the new

beginning among the most recent failure's detritus. To remain a baby at heart, kuh-kuh, coochy-coo, hushabye, hushabye... bough breaks... imploding bassinet. Perhaps I gave off a whiff of this very early on, which might account for the "Cherub" ma sometimes called me right from the earliest days (and continued to do so long after all signs of pudg had departed); but sometimes she called me what sounded like "Beruch" or it could have been "Baruch"... Where did that come from I asked myself. Questioning her about this much later (always a fruitless task as I have indicated) I did at least discover that she'd never even heard of, let alone read, Spinoza. "My little cherub! You're like putti in my hands," I hear-see her saying as she arm-cradled me, gently tweaking my still burgeoning rolls of pudgworth. The r of cherub would be rolled so slowly out, frenchwise, deep-throat, culminating in a full-throttle throat-all glot-all which would die away into the ub. It was as if something quite extraordinary was taking place in the gap between her epiglottis and her uvula - meaning shaken to its core through this rattling-rolling, vibrated out of its fixities by this high speed glottal stopping-and-releasing. For, right there, the words' sounds were quite suddenly and immediately being put on a par with their supposed references and in this very moment meaning teetered, evaporated. For ma everything turned on spiration, on the peculiar qualities of her spirating; flowing seemed to be crucial, nothing was to be forced. I remember her murmuring her motto, her mantra, to herself, repeatedly, almost but never quite under her breath: "Breathing not blowing!" she would say over and over again. I tried to take it to heart, to work on it myself. On other occasions she'd wink and, putting her raised index finger to her lips with that slight exaggeration which she would otherwise

have reserved for the *amateur stage* and which is intended to encourage the hearer (in this instance myself) to take what was about to follow *with a pinch, or more, of salt* (needless to say, *at that stage* I had no idea about the purpose of such salt-pinchings; salt stood solely for free-running-never-cakes), she would say, "Mum's the word!", the exclamation mark mimes her raised finger which nevertheless lacked a comparable *subtending dot*. Being the simpleton I was, I took her literally at that time and, I believe, have held fast to this injunction for the rest of my life. It seems a better life-motto than most. Now and again, as if wanting to banish some private passing fantasy, she would exclaim with a slight side-to-side shake of her head, "Perish the thought!". It had an oracular ring. One could hear, *ides of March* or *no ides of March*, the silent echo of a 'Beware' surrounding it. She was the Cumaean sybil, wild haired, *staring fixedly*, boggle-eyed, one might almost say 'distracted', *at a non-existent spot on the cave's roof*, or in our case the kitchen ceiling, Mrs Delphi herself. Or so I was induced to imagine after an early *if facile descent* into the Avernus of Virgil's sixth Aeneid tract (getting into it was easy but the struggle to get out from under the dizzyingly bottomless *latinate compactions of possible senses* was infinitely harder, as my delphic projection of mum and my subsequent life-project may indicate). On one occasion she was sitting in her recliner *staring into the fire's dying embers*, apparently perfectly at peace while I lay stretched out, tummy down (as usual), across the hearth's length reading 'The Wind in the Willows' for the thirteenth time. "Perish the thought!" - I could immediately *enaudiovisage* (hear-see as it were) the capital P and the french-rolled r of *perish* giving a certain gravity (although at that moment not obviously

accompanied by a complementary grace) to the otherwise banal phrase. I felt the weight of the thought about thought, the rhetorical desire to abolish a particular thought or even thought-in-general, pressing down on and leaching into my weakly pliant cerebrum. At almost the same moment I got wind (it seemed that, as ever, I was downwind of whatever niffs were in the air) of a whiff of umbral melancholy, a cloud issuing from and enshrouding the 'perish' word. I heard quite distinctly the exclamation mark as it brutally cut-off thought's tailing away. In short I was, quite unself-consciously, touched, both by the words' sounds and the aura of vague sense that, hovering around and pinning down the sounds, pushed them into some sort of contact with the homely ground (the cinder-pocked once-blue hearth rug across which, as so often in those days, I was again sprawling) apparently supporting me. Even then, in the days long before any dawning, I took this oft repeated homily as a warning to be on my guard against both thought's corrupting wiles and insane controls and also those who would straightjacket thought for their own ends, those who sought to eliminate the precious gap between delirial sounds and dullard meaning. In the cause of self-protection it seemed the key was to find and then create the means for staying within the, doubtless illusory, space between these two (or three) threats. But was I, perhaps, reading (or was it hearing, for didn't hearing delineate the region within which reading might emerge? or is this to open yet another reekingly indigestible worm-laden can?) too much into her throw-away line? I think not, for over the following long years I was to discover the wisdom of the unformed (and possibly unformable) theory (not that she herself had the remotest contact with this or any other such theory) behind her exclamation. For

what better way could there be of dealing with the nagging inwittishness that agenbitingly snaps away, seemingly without end, at one's achillean heel-of-a-mind than simply to turn on that same heel and bark out the order for it to perish, by saying (silently, of course, to oneself), 'Come on, snap out of it!', and then, hey presto, courtesy of some occultish combination of speech and will, as soon spoken as done, the snapper snapping snapped. Sadly the history of the praxis of self-critique has amply demonstrated the gap between itself and the aforesaid theory, for are not culture's highways and byways (in short every weedy detritus-strewn path ever trodden by us and our forebears) littered with failed attempts to stop thought's baskervillean hound, its slabbering snout ever on the scent of whatever foibles it can find to sink its teeth into, taking us in its jaws and shaking us, rag-doll like, into complete submission to whatever it decides to put over on us. In spite of every law, myth, structure, therapeutic, curative, common-or-garden nostrum and self-help group, it dogs us into perpetuity, seemingly determined to worry us to death. Either it simply won't help us or, more deviously, two(-or-more)-faced Janus-huckster that it is, in seeming to help us it leads us even further astray than we were when we began to think. In consequence, whatever it is we can't help it. This is in spite of our bravura skills at reading every surface under and way beyond our very own and every other traceable sun. Perhaps it is these very skills that blind us, so blinkeringly directed and focussed are we by our o'er-weening self-confidence, to the undersides that constitute all surfaces, the subcutaneous facets, rifts, channels, tunnels, grooves, mounds, knolls, hills, banks and vales of meaning's underneath, the versoes of all its less-than-waferly-thin rectoes - a.k.a. its backside - a.k.a. its arse. Once we allowed the

straitjacketeers (following the all too lengthy successive reigns of musketeers, privateers, racketeers, and puppeteers so ably backed up by lesser -eers (such as time-serving muleteers) whose -eering contributes ceaselessly to the maintenance of said rigid processional succession) to take over, our chances of *staying with the sound of words*, or of trying to live in the *verso tight space between this sound and the words'* prescribed and approved meaning, diminished by the minute. Perhaps this is the *plight* ma was contemplating as *she stirred the ashes* on that waning fateful afternoon so many years ago. She'd always been a one for poesy, for the word (potentially every word) that, in the inimitable weakness of its poetic context, focussed all its powerlessness on banishing *the 'cloying prosaic'* as she once called it. 'Get back to the *dessicated ground!*' she declared on a subsequent ember-gazing occasion which I can recall as clearly as if it were yesterday for the late afternoon light, dappling in through the *distant birch copse* and scintillating the hairs (*rigidly vertical*, consequent to their electrification via her violent, and by then obsessive-compulsive, combing of thinning locks with a large broad-toothed tortoiseshell comb which she carried with her *virtually everywhere* in her by now tattered mock viper-skin reticule) on her *thinning scalp*, made a vivid impression on my still, at that early stage of my perceptual development, impressionable young mind. What she seemed to intend by this 'dessicated' became slightly, perhaps, clearer during the minutes following the exclamation when, glancing alternatively at me and the embers, she intoned seemingly to herself (although obviously fully aware of my rapt attention) the following phrases, "...and can one speak for all... yes... perhaps still now... the words as if drained... on the line... out to dry... dried

*out... moon-singed... long-lost emotion words... what words
emotion words... who to say... any more... empty of sticky warmth or
chill... even... to find words inside the words... in spite of... years of
subtraction and suck-drainage... lance surface dessic... probes...
not a pinch of punch-in remains... could release sticky... wound-
puss drain loss away... threats all to surface line intact... necessary
self-preserv... all costs... but... who requires enarting... who not
relevant only if is needed... only if... none immune... ". Naturally
these jerky fractured incantations, still today gnomie (or, to be
fair, and to repeat - gnomessic perhaps) to a degree, largely passed
me, so tender in years then, by. And yet something of their thrust,
carried along by the hoarse verve of my mother's sing-sprech
(owing more perhaps to her idiosyncratic take on Ma Rainey and
Nellie Lutcher (and her rhythm) than Schoenberg) and quivering
liltngly on the edge of her lolling tongue (for ma was, finally, her
tongue, the tongue was ma), undoubtedly managed to pierce the
still largely unhardened uncrisped crust of habitual suspicion that
was to become such a feature of my later worldly pretence. Although
still wide of its mark it undoubtedly made a mark, a wee nag of a
scratch (or was it a sublime goad? perhaps my struggles tend to
cohere around my inability to distinguish between these
alternatives) with whose niggling legacy I still strive to come to
terms. But obviously this wasn't just my problem, for if what she had
called emotion-words had, for whatever reasons, had their
stickiness (all that enabled our mutual adhesion - them to us and
us to them) drained away (had their day, as we tend to say), then
we were all paddle-less in the same leaky dingy dinghy drifting
towards the weir at Deepmidden Creek. And then what? She offered
no solutions, no ways out or through, only an exemplary display of*

dogged refusal to go with the flow (the flow of others of course, for her flow was her very own and entirely independent), a clear determination to drive herself (and, by *unavoidable proximity, myself*) to a stateless state of distraction, an infinitely preferable state somewhere beyond the quotidian suffocations of the State we are all already in. "Distraction!" she once said to me as, waiting for the bus to take us *the short hop* from our satellite village up to Cattleigh, our nearest marketless market town, we sat on the iron bench at the stop *at the end of Verdant Lane* staring vacantly (until that moment) across the local brown field *sites ear-marked for light-industrial development* (and the consequent end of our local para-rural idyll; but why ear-marked? and why not eye-marked or at least ear-and-eye-marked? or pock-marked come to that? I never did find out.). "Be true to it son. Let it get you down, get on top of you, infuse your vitals. Just succumb." It became clear to me, *sitting on that bus-stop bench* (we were rather early for the scheduled and invariably late-running nine forty eight), that she was in deadly earnest and that she was scattering the seeds of a life project upon the still receptive but so far *infertile ground of my as yet aimless and formless becoming*. It seemed that if I were to make any headway in the world I would have to find ways of taking her at her word, of turning my subsequent *sallying forth* towards a grasping of distraction's nettle. And, as ever, there was no time like the present to make up for time already lost, for that past time in which distraction had been put on permanent hold while, as a requirement of State ordinances, I had had to be initiated into the ways and means of *life-as-chore*. For, as luck would have it, minutes later as we sat on the bus clasping our punched *sugar-bag-blue and faded naples-yellow tickets* (tickets that would now

qualify as museum-collectables packed as they were with arcane indecipherable mixed numerical and littoral codes relating to long-abandoned fare structures, routes, and accounting requirements) and looking vacantly at the rows of mars-brown-bricked bungalows steadily receding behind the ambling bus, her "Distraction", in all its ineffable weakness, came into force, or should one say play, for the process appeared utterly divorced from anything to do with displays of workly strength, power, concentration or contestation. Be that as it may, distracted by whatever (perhaps even in this case literally by ma's clipped and all too brief (she had already dozed off on the inside seat, head lolling against the window and mouth slightly ajar) exhortations about distraction itself), I was whisked back to her "Perish the thought!". For I could now see that my attribution to her of an intention to eliminate some distressing fantasy or image might be entirely on the wrong track, a pathetic single track to which I was still at that time condemning myself instead of the double- or multi-track towards which ma's tonguey strokes sought to guide me. Could it be that with this apparently casual remark to no-one in particular she was actually naming thought itself (always assuming that thought can have an or be an in-itself, thought-as-such)? Was she giving thought, perhaps for the first time, a proper name, identifying it? Perhaps she had seen through to the vacant heart of a thought, of thinking, and named it according to its prime quality, in much the same way as we might endow a person with one of their attributes or skills (one need only think of Richard a.k.a. the Lionheart, Miss Jump the Jockey, Winnie the Pooh, Mick the Miller, Edward the Confessor, Peter the Great, Rosie the Ryvita, John the Baptist, Thint the Humble, and so forth). If so

then a thought, the thought, any thought, every thought, would be first and last - nothing but - *Perish*: that which was only ever perishing, never quite arriving or coming into its own, a pure dying away even before it had arrived at any scene - an almost-absence. Surely this was the manifestation of the tragic, of our being as nothing but a continuous tragic enactment - an endless tragedy from start to finish. For, as thinkers of all-sorts, we would never be quite *there* under this perishing rule. And thus *thinking's* presence-as-absence, its *falling short* of ever quite arriving, its default, would always nevertheless be in advance of any of what she had earlier called the 'emotion words', those words we fall back upon when trying to force out into the open, onto the surface, to *wring out* of ourselves, the ultimately unsayable *deeps* (even though, most likely, these 'deeps' are nothing but further surfaces whose planes we haven't yet quite been able to plot on any map of our knowable life-world) that we gather under the word 'feelings'. Cripes! She seemed to be swimming in deep waters here, even though all the words she kept bumping into and then tossing in my direction were what made up the only surface life that we could have either together or apart. That 'perish' word itself, no matter how many times it might be repeated, was the dying embodiment of every word's (and hence of ours too) fate - in its very saying it disappeared! But had I, as per usual, jumped the gun, leaped to an all too premature conclusion? Could I have misheard her? Had she silently indicated a *hyphen* between the 'per' and the 'ish? Was a thought *per-ish*, *through-like*? Something (yet not quite a 'thing' perhaps) that one passed through and that passed through one simultaneously as it were? And even if she had omitted the silent hyphen maybe she had drawn out the first

syllable fractionally further than I had given her credit for. It suddenly occurred to me that she might just have said "Pearish" - every thought pear-like while never quite being subsumable under the name pear: fruity, juicy (hopefully!), grainy, with a core, and when sucked almost dry having string-like extensions emanating from the fruit end of the stalk, strings which might in time be woven into some kind of dried pear-ish textile, place mats or coasters perhaps. Or even a pear giving up on its pearness, rotting, perishing even, before our eyes. I had to stop; the whole thing was getting out of hand, going, in a sense, pear-shaped on me, for I realised, belatedly as ever, that she could have said "Parish [no, not 'parish' (although she just might have taken thought to be akin to a church-centred district I suppose) - but par-ish, pare-ish] the thought!", pointing, perhaps, to thought's way of constantly putting itself on a par with or of pareing itself and its objects down, trimming, fining, and honing them. And then, just as I thought I'd had had the last word on the matter, I realised that she'd probably intended "Pairish...", thought's necessary tendency to think in twos, and more particularly in oppositions and negations where every apparently positive thought only ever took its place in any sequence of thoughts by silently implying, and thus resting upon, its opposite or alternative - thought as the bearer of a two-in-one, thought and its double. I was spiked, spooked, dizzied. It was all too much, a tomb-hutch from which I could see no means of escape. There seemed no resolution, no grounds for choice. I could ask ma but I didn't like to disturb her for, worn out by her early morning labours (vacuuming and cooked breakfasts for eleven - we, or rather she, ran a small guest house catering mainly to a never-ending stream of travelling salesmen (they were invariably men -

at this time there was a clear gender-divide in the world of hard-and soft-sell)) she was still snoozing beside me obviously unaware of the virus she had insinuated into my by now feverishly thrashing mind. An associative leap forced me to consider the significance (and we still had not reached Catleigh where I was due for a short back and sides while ma shopped for winter greens and beef tea) of her epithet, often directed at me after some minor peccadillo of mine had come to light: "You little perisher!" she'd exclaim (and I soon began to realise the awesome implications of my perishing reverie, as the multiple possibilities coursed through my by now hyper-fervid mind. But enough was enough. For reasons of economy and sanity I decided with regret, perhaps, to stick with "perisher" - it was more than enough to be going on with), sometimes with a wink as if admiring my cheek, sometimes, more often perhaps, with an unequivocal tremor of disapproval resounding through both her lips and the body of the words. Thus casually assigned to the species of already diminutive perishers, I took it that on such occasions I was being confronted from the tenderest age with the unavoidable tragedy of existence, of my existence and of the ending of my existence. Following my dawning endarkenment on the Catleigh bus, it became dramatically clear to me that I was already on the way out, my way out. Going to Catleigh could only, surely, hasten my inexorable disappearance soon to be complemented by my forthcoming hair loss. Yet Catleigh wasn't all that bad, although one would be very hard pressed to come across its good points, for they had been increasingly well camouflaged if not entirely expunged during its rapid transformation from laughing cow country into by-pass-urban-neo-variegated. And here I was, tragically passing away, perishing, without even having

ventured, essayed my luck, beyond the hazardous Cattleigh marshes so well known locally for their fen-sucked fogs and treacherous turbid grimpenmirish pools in whose oleaginous slimes so many unwary visitors had met untimely ends, ends that themselves thus exemplified the perishing tragedy. Once you left **the main road** you took your life in your feet; there were ways through but you needed a trusty local guide, one whose family had passed down the recondite lore, part of the unwriteable oral tradition, through generations, refining and modifying it continuously to take account of subtle climatic, geologic and botanic shifts. The very experience of the daring trek through the bog's multiple threats was said to be 'character-building' in itself, even though **one might well end up** in exactly the same place as one would had one travelled by road or rail which in any case only took one to places more or less the same as Cattleigh and what would be the point in that? The marshes at least promised romance, excitement, danger for a time, whatever the eventual destination of the journey. Perhaps this was what mum was referring to when, emerging from her doze as we entered the Cattleigh margins, she murmured, *sotto voce* but loud enough for me (and possibly the guard who glanced quizzically across at her) to hear, "**Back to the swampy ground.**" Here then was something perhaps to confirm me in my intention of branching out without yet providing me with any clear sense of direction or goal. As we descended from the bus I felt at least that I, perishing perisher or not, was beginning to think **along the right lines**, that there might just be something like a world beyond Cattleigh once one had faced up to the challenge of its encasing groundless swamps. And if I was indeed disappearing, already caught up in the throes of my own personal perishment, then I'd best be getting a

move on sharpish before I became a whimperless dot, a soundless mote crushed under eternity's jack-and-jill-boot. Alighting (for surely we made the bus a lighter place as we stepped off its platform) at the bus stop just outside 'The Eagle-Eyed Buzzard', an infamous local hostelry renowned for its covert trade in hallucinogenic chanterelles, a specialty of the region due to the unique qualities of the climate, I left mother to her shopping at Chandley's Deli and skipped away towards the barber's (a Mr. Sevilski, half-Croatian, half-Spanish with a dash of Polish on his paternal grandfather's side) whistling, somewhat tunelessly for I had not yet realised that somewhere deep within I was the possessor of perfect pitch, "Something to remember me by" more or less in time to the broken rhythms of my skip. Free at last! For ten minutes at least. Of course there were no marshes hemming Catleigh in. In fact Catleigh was no wetter, its ground no slimier than any of the other provincial dormitory settlements of the region. All the talk about swamps and escape via secret unmarked paths was simply the product of a child's all-too febrile imagination working overtime on whatever unrelated scraps it could lay its hungry fingers on during a singularly uninteresting trip to the barber's. And yet (yes, an 'and yet' or it's unspoken equivalent is essential at such junctures in order to give this line something to react against, to turn ever so slightly to one side whatever kind of coherence, narrative even, may have been taken to be developing along the usual steady lines, thus enabling it to generate text-extension through contra-indications, unanticipatable interruptions, reasonless detours - yes, what an extraordinary conjunction the meeting of 'and' and 'yet' is; we believe we know so much about 'and', yet 'yet' is quite another kettle of fish, distantly Frieslandish yet contrarily

*originless in the end - what would we do without it?) mum's words, her clipped, halting and seemingly random phrases, had left their marks, audible spoor, to be tracked down at a later date perhaps somewhere through and beyond the under-and-over-growth of my inner ear - future comestibles for subsequent idling thoughts casting around for sustenance in bulimic times perhaps. Certainly they did not appear to invite response or dialogue in those days. Although I was the no-one-in-particular to whom they were addressed, *in passim* as it were, I could find no way of engaging with them, taking them on on their own (or anyone else's come to that) terms, probing them, when they occurred. Surely they deserved, demanded even, some kind of wifful return for were they not pleas for help, often masking their fundamental melancholy under irony's balefully translucent tissues? Feather-weight blows against the granite cliff-face of the quotidian, they seemed resigned to their fate, shrugs in the face of what must be the case. Listening carefully one could hear each outburst accompanying itself with the unspoken question, "... after all, what else is there to say...". It was the possibility of this 'what else' that I clung to (although without having the least idea that I was so clinging during the dormancy years) and was, so very much later, to return to time and again when the season for emergent dialogue eventually fell due, its maturing seeds ripe for a general dehiscence of the logos, or at least a specific manifestation of said dehiscence under the particular cyclical conditions peculiar to the generational relations between Mother Tongue and her spring-offs. Had there been at that stage any deep tonal departures, audible shifts to elsewhere as yet unplottable through sounds broken down into one or more syllables, into single or bundled phonemes, I*

couldn't have told you. I was entirely reliant on taking my soundings from seemingly endlessly jangling chains, loop-tape song-lines of the generally known, chanted into that insane state beyond tedium but as direct result of tedium's dull plod by the boys of the village. I hadn't yet learned to lose my bearings, to give myself up to and be scarified by the unmanageable yet almost inaudible sound-lump-combines that were the eternal, yet always submerged and drowned out, accompaniment to reason's ever so convincing and long-running surfaces, surfaces which reason insisted must always be both on time and coincident precisely with its own presence of mind. From an early age this brutality of the **punctual** outraged me (my symptoms included extensive over-night deep-sleep teeth gnashing resulting in curiously sculpted milk teeth whose forms I was to return to much later in one of my darker studio periods) for it entailed a brazen violence to time itself. Time was treated as a necessary victim, a hostage to reason's way of arriving exactly on time. No longer free to come and go as it chose, to fade away, drift off into the shades of its own reverie, to rest awhile in the welcoming cool of the calendar's leafy arbour, before leaping out to catch and fling us headlong and unawares into our all too imperfect futures, to have its own last laugh at our expense, time succumbed to reason's lash. It felt punctuality's weight as its own eternally recurring disaster. Feeling time's fate as my own I knew I had to get outside reason's purging pulse, to find ways of becoming impulsively untimely in order to catch some faint echo of those sound-knots (the para-round-turns, hemi-demi-semi-half-hitches, cata-cloves and re-reefs that together resisted all undoing) buried under reason's crushing tread. Sadly the chances of finding some sounds-put-into-words that might offer pulsing evidence of

this crushed unmelodious region seemed slim. Even were a few sonic chips to be dredged up, and in so doing distorted sufficiently to allow them to be worked into and to interrupt reason's familiar passing surfaces, they would be condemned to wander, placeless, their lot a permanent purgatory, recognisable only as matter out of place, at home neither below nor at the surface and certainly not in the inner and outer suburbs across which it was my lot to wander searching for goodness knows what (for at this slack time I hadn't yet realised that my wandering was already, however latently, itself search's own true form, a structureless form lacking all direction and heteronomously mutable). I sensed only, and inchoately, that the what known by goodness would be uncoverable somewhere very close to, if not overlapping perfectly with, my wit's end, somewhere just beyond whatever it was that continued to tether me so unequivocally to meaning's stake. Perhaps the struggle to insert myself into the gaps between ma's words was itself already a hesitant broaching of the search to come, for were they not beginning to drive me to a nascent form of distraction, on the way towards my wit's end, right there just beyond (or maybe just before) the end of my tether? I say 'my' tether although it is by no means clear to me (either then or now) that the personal possessive is appropriate to the case. Indeed the ownership of said tether might be the crucial question gnawing away at the liver of the entire matter-in-hand's still quick body. Was there a who or a what that was doing the tethering? Did it have a leash of determinable length that, arriving at its end, one could break by some superhuman show of strength or guile or combination of these? And if one did free oneself from its restraint where would that leave one, for isn't some kind of tethering crucial to survival in a world

dependent upon minimal sociality? As earthly beings (still, just) weren't we *tethered to the ground*, grounded, by unfathomable forces whose tethering ends we could never hope to approach? It was slowly dawning on me that *mother's tongue doubled as both a lash and a leash*. At first glance her words appeared to be perfectly ordinary, but as I strove to place myself under their wing, to become their knowing ally, they became to my childish mind, stranger and stranger, retreating from my puerile attempts to grasp them into a beyond where they seemed to undo themselves, and thus me too, entirely. Later, in the first and subsequently second and even later flushes of lusting adolescence, as my wanderings increased in confidence, I began to entertain the possibility that *such out-words, sub-words*, might be able to remind us of what we routinely shut off in our on-rushing surface trajectories in the name of *sweet reason*. Perhaps their subliminal jolts to the passing of common sense might just nudge us into some halting recognition that *every surface's word-lines* (that is, the very process by which every surface becomes recognisable as surface) perform a cover-up by hiding the little somethings that cannot break through on their own. Poor quiddities! Their very inconceivable possibility is vested in their absence from being, in their subtendance to what goes on, what gets brought off at and as the play of our forever teetering yet absolutely secure surfaces, for isn't everything we do set up to confirm to ourselves that we are nothing but that which surfaces - that we are *only-surfaces*? As we grindingly and somewhat grudgingly learned, there is no depth, no sub-, into which we can plunge searchingly, but *only-surfaces*, membranes lacking all thickness, with occasional slight almost invisible rents, splits, gaps, delays, hesitations, which we try

desperately to repair or hide while no-one is looking, and across which we then slide, jump, or tumble without, typically, so much as a backward-sideward-or-onward glance. I was to discover all too soon that, mired in this dilemma, any making that wants to hear-see through the gaps can only devote all its energies to immersing itself in the surface's depthless shallows in order to pay the most acute attention to how this never-ending surface-stretching by reason's ever-tightening rack is the most profound, but endlessly ignored (for mind-bent anguish speedily ensues), accomplishment of any-world-whatsoever. In doing this, such making learns to recognise, as its very point, that this whatever-world includes, and is thus partially, and therefore essentially, made up of gaps-in-that-same-world. Committing itself to *homelessness* it seeks to carry on (one could not call this 'living' or 'dwelling'), to sur-vive (to live-on as the after-word of living?), in these gaps. Far too hesitant to take up the brazen cudgel of making, or of making making itself, in these days of prematurity (a prematurity that has, alas perhaps, remained with me to this very day), I nevertheless began to sense that the things issuing from making's intensive attention (an attention that seems to value above everything else the inattention eternally accompanying and permeating every attentive act) - we might call them gappy undwellers - are out to flip into the separateness of the fully alone. They've been encouraged from first light to make do with themselves. And their makers, often to be found recumbent before some local shrine to the uncanny, offer them as cut-outs, cut-offs, incised out of and drawn away from the drifts of togetherness. Unrehearsable they have slipped quietly out of earshot of all known (and perhaps knowable) conversations. Naturally, as all this crept up on me without my ever

realising such up-creeping was under way, the narrow band of moods characterising my daily round (generated, supported and exemplified by the liquified camaraderie arising nightly so freely and effortlessly inside and outside 'The Eagle-Eyed Buzzard') was steadily eroded and replaced by dramatic and inexplicable shifts: one moment I'd be **beached** on the sinking grey quick-sands of depression and the next riding atop the highest wave of mania flinging strings of seemingly nonsense syllables larded with home-grown obscenities (lunt, sleb, blug, shapping, brike, bestercot, skrike, to name but the mildest, many of the others being simply unprintable, far worse than the fucks and cunts of this or any other world), into the face of the Catleigh gales. Whirled into some other non-world by dervish thought I became a pariah, shunned by those with whom I had previously shared the home-school-club-pub-kerb round. Late-mates jeered, teachers scratched their pates while shaking their heads with an air of resigned sadness (although in reality glad to see the back of me as I was shunted from class to class to special unit), while ma stoically tried to sustain things on **the home-front** refusing point blank all offers and pressures of outside so-called 'help'. She had harboured a deep suspicion of all things clinical or therapeutic since a course of electro-convulsive therapy had transformed her merely cranky maiden-aunt into some kind of half-being hovering between a gibbering drawler and a renegade extra from "Dead Fingers Talk"; she refused absolutely to commit me to any treatment programme, realising in her own vague way that I had, in effect, **already committed myself**, although neither she nor I had, at that stage, the least inkling of what this nascent commitment was committing itself to, for I had only the most mother-hubbardish sense of what a committed life

might involve, and I certainly had no intention, mired in my own inarticulacy as I was, of sharing *my formless troubles* with someone as distant as and old enough to be my mother. Yes, indeed something was certainly going on that was *quite beyond me*. But what? Beyond the all-too obvious recognition of this shapeless something's movements around the outskirts and inskirts of my half-baked becoming (I was incessantly bumping into it, without, as far as I could see, having given it the least provocation) I had no idea what was happening to me; all I knew was that I had to find ways of responding to whatever the it would turn out to have been. It (here a different 'it', a more generalised 'it', standing in for everything that at that time of my nascent life (little more, as we have seen, than a sur-vival strategy) seemed to be the case) seemed that, from my earliest formless fumbblings with ma's pronouncements, the search for this something was already, without my knowing or even becoming *passingly familiar* with it (let alone how to come to terms with it) under way. It was a search, if search it was, that lacked either goal or means, that, although on its way, having neither thread nor sign, was both *clueless and clueless*. I had little option but to *thrash around within the bottomless zone of searching-in-general*, in a kind of search for searching, all the time hoping, although lacking the emergence of anything which might count as the grounds of hope, micawber-like, that something-in-particular would at last just turn up. And as you will appreciate, in those days of dubiety, of that suspicion of both others and the contextual particulars of my own plight generated by my experiences of increasing exclusion and derision, such a turning up seemed highly improbable. Somehow I intuited that what I needed were props, props and at least a minimal

structure. The props might give me something to fall back on in the (likely) event of failure to get anywhere in my search for searching's sake (for it was, don't forget, this inner sanctum of the search, what charged it - its very sake - that gave rise (an extraordinary phrase, pregnant with barely concealed yet finally indecipherable senses from the culinary, through the blatantly erotic and beyond) to my undirected searchings) and a structure could just, like blinkers, serve to keep me for at least short periods on the same pathways, thus giving **the paths themselves** a chance to come up with something of possible passing relevance to my unreasoning search. But what on earth could possibly serve as prop or structure for such an open project, a project that was unable to project anything of itself beyond its blank wall-eyed stare? Looking down at the spot to which it was rooted (the 'it' being the unplaceable subjectless I in this instance) it saw only **the spotlessness of its 'own'** (apostrophised because surely no it could possess its own absent spot) spot, the spot it was in. Or rather not in or on, for the concentrated stare downwards in the expected direction of the possible spot could see nothing there which it could remotely identify as a spot. It could only derive the possibility of a spot by recognising and being overcome by same spot's all too obvious absence, spot here thus being a derivative, an epiphenomenon, of and sequent to spot's lack. I believe that it was precisely the realisation of this spot-lack's present absence which, by conveying me, teetering, to **the cusp of distraction**, began to force to my surfaces (as a kind of all-over welling of a generalised insurgency) probes needling me to confront the need for a **random mutation**, a break in the inexorability of my evolution from boy through yoblad to bloke. Of course if it was to be random I could

play no intentional part in it although I could try to foster situations which might leave me open to fate's by-chance blows, out of which perhaps I might find some way of applying my wits to luck's gift."

And that was where the loose leaves finished!

For me it was not a moment too soon. In the last few sheets he seemed to have left his ma's words some way behind him. It's only too obvious that he had already taken off into that same aether of abstraction which had earlier dogged and threatened to suffocate our hill-top conversation.

All those words and phrases may indeed have constituted the details of his life for him but they were, are, not the details that I crave - delirial they might be but they leave me, lover of the utterly concrete that I am, with little to hang on to.

Nevertheless, as I was forced to admit to myself, he had eventually, no matter what might have taken place in the meantime between these early-days-sheets and now, found a way of grounding himself. The saxifrage project, with its apparently intense focus on the life and needs of that tiny plant, seemed to be some kind of practical resolution of the dilemmas posed by his ma's euphonic provocations. He had, in his own idiosyncratic way, whether or not one believed his saxifragile cold-fissionish nonsense, found a way of reconciling words and not-words, lingo and thingo. And certainly I could still hear echoes of his ma's voice (a voice I could only catch by going through and beyond the vibrations of his own words to the now inaudible sound traces that might have animated them) resonating somewhere in the distant background as, following his to say the least quirky interpretations of and responses to her words, he began turning them inside out and pitting them against themselves as he cranked up his rambling self-dementing abstractions.

Yes, she certainly had a lot to answer for. Indeed there was more than a crumb of evidence here,

I thought, to support the by now seemingly discredited (yes, but by whom, on what grounds I asked myself) hypothesis of the schizophrenogenic family. For a moment I hallucinated and glimpsed through a haze the sign for the Bates Motel, as if to suggest to me that my hill-top scribbler was son of Bates, and his language a language (the same as ours only ever so slightly different, lumpily twisted perhaps, almost knotted), a lung-wedge. Yet maybe I could learn something from his seemingly willed and perverse twisting of his ma's words, for had he not, in the unearthly light of that afternoon on the rocky plateau, through his words and actions, held up a mirror to myself?

Certainly it was a distorting mirror. I could see only disparate fragments of my self (the little drifts of slivered selves) that never quite resolved into a coherent image. But though they didn't add up to any one thing they formed a glomerate gathering that whispered only me, me. Whatever ma's words had been responsible for in the scribbler it seemed that they had something of me too in their sights, in their cataphonics. Perish the thought, her thought, her words! But it wouldn't, they haven't. They still haunt and patrol my margins, refusing to leave me alone.

At least I could, I should, as I had promised, hand the loose leaves back. Maybe out of sight, out of mind I thought... I determined to return the sheaf to their author as soon as possible. Having taken a photocopy and taking advantage of a break in the weather I set off for the tiny hamlet of Tricoignton, the only settlement I could find on my ordnance survey map that was anywhere near the area where I thought the path had brought me out on my evening descent some days ago.

It was indeed tucked under an escarpment forming part of the line of hills into which I had previously strayed. Moreover a capital P on the map indicated the presence of a post office. It wasn't hard to find for I could see immediately when I arrived that the post office was the village. Apart from said P.O. all that remained was a row of ruined cottages whose roofs, walls and gardens had already been colonised by rampant buddleia. Not a soul was in sight. On

entering the post office I apologised to the post-mistress for disturbing her rural idyll. She gave me an icy stare. I knew I had got off to a bad start. It should have been obvious to me that rural post mistresses and masters craved nothing more than continual disturbance. Nothing was worse for business than the idiocy of rural quietude.

Placing the oilskin parcel on the counter I explained that I wanted to leave it in her *poste restante* section for collection by its owner who lived some way away up in the hills and whom she would doubtless know as he had told me he was an occasional visitor here. Her still icy stare turned rapidly into a look of pitying incredulity. "I can assure you," she said, "absolutely no-one lives up in those hills. They are far too bleak to sustain any kind of life. They have been uninhabited for centuries. Do you have a name for the parcel's intended recipient?" I began to stutter, realising how ridiculous it would sound to say that the addressee was, for apparently sound reasons, nameless. Eventually I managed to blurt out that I believed he once used the pen name 'Mr. Affin-Matta' and wondered if she'd come across him in the last few months. I could see her right hand feeling for the emergency button under the counter's edge, doubtless thinking she might need hubby's help to deal with the pathetic nutter who might turn violent at any moment; behind her, leaning against the wall, was a hefty pandy or baseball bat at the ready.

"Now look here," she said, her voice rising and taking on a harder edge, "this may only be some kind of practical joke to you but it's no laughing matter to me. Attempting to deceive an officer of the crown is a criminal offence and I'd advise you to either state your business plainly or move on please." I decided to try another tack. "This is the village with three corners is it not?" I asked. "So the name would lead one to believe," she replied drolly. "Yes, but is it known locally as the village with three corners?" I persisted. "It all depends on what you mean by locally," she responded, "for, as you no doubt observed on your way in, there are very very few locals around here anymore. I am just about the only local left, and I'm known solely as the Tricoignton Post Mistress." I gave up.

"Would it be possible, then" I asked her in the most contrite tone I could muster, "just to leave

this parcel with you on the off chance that it's owner may indeed call in to collect it at some stage. I'm perfectly happy to pay your *poste restante* fee." Waving the offer aside she said, "Very well then, providing you don't treat this as official post office business. There can be no record of this transaction for I cannot deal in unaddressable packages. Just leave it there on the counter. I'll keep an eye on it for a few days. Mind you I can't give it much longer than that for we are due to be closed down within the fortnight. After that it will be out of my hands, for anything still here will be sent to head office for storage in the dead letter section."

I felt I had no option but to accept her offer. Thanking her profusely and apologising, as was my wont, for being such a nuisance, I beat a hasty retreat and headed homewards. Dead letters! Was this to be the fate of ma's words, of her son's post-ma (but not yet, perhaps, post-manly) words? And had I even been in the right village? I had to admit, on reflection, that I hadn't actually counted the corners in that village, I had simply, and perhaps quite mistakenly, put my trust in the name. I should have known better! I had been far too naive, had taken my responsibilities far too lightly (gulled, most probably, by my attribution of some totally spurious (as I now see) romantic sense to the project). Whatever would the scribbler say! And would I ever know?

Two days later, munching desultorily on existence and my frugal cold collops supper, I was half-listening to the regional news bulletin when my attention was caught by an item referring to the latest in a series of arson attacks. Apparently over the last few months several rural post offices had been torched in protest, according to anonymous telephone calls received afterwards, at the government's closure programme. Misguided perhaps, but certainly effective in drawing attention to the problem. The latest casualty had been the listed building at Tricoignton which had, without a word of warning, been completely gutted that day. As in the previous cases the post-mistress had escaped without injury. Indeed there had been some mischievous media speculation (as ever unsupported by evidential shreds) that the post masters and mistresses themselves may have colluded in the attacks as they had been particularly active and vocal in the campaign against closure. But the scribbler's words, ma's words, dashed down in the black-and-white heat of memory's intense moment, now, thanks to my bungling incompetence, consumed

without a trace - now nothing but ashes, ashes without remainder, not even a smoke signal wafted up into the hills.

Yet perhaps this heat driven apotheosis was preferable to the living death, the dying without end, of the dead letters section. And at least the matter was out of my hands now. Just as I was sweeping the bits of gristle from the edge of my plate into the bin there was a knock on the door. I certainly was not expecting anyone for I never had any visitors in the evening (nor, as I come to think of it now, in the day either). I opened the door to two men in dark raincoats with their collars turned up and trilbies slightly akimbo. "Good evening madam," said the taller of the two, "I'm Inspector Spinortec and this is my colleague Constable Turner. We're investigating a series of arson attacks on rural post offices. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to accompany us to the station. We'd like to ask you some questions about an unaddressed parcel you deposited in suspicious circumstances at Tricoignton Post Office shortly before it was fire bombed." It immediately occurred to me that pleas of innocence were likely to fall on deaf ears in the light of my recent conviction for shop-lifting (I'd cherished the lovely stiletto-heeled thigh-length plum-velveteen suede boots for many months before plucking up the courage to venture on this my first lifting expedition; the judge's overly charitable sentence of a conditional discharge had been awarded, I suspected, only on the basis of medical evidence (quite spurious I believe) suggesting that my blatant theft had almost certainly been due to confusions induced by the inexplicably early onset of my 'change of life' (as the banally misleading phrase has it). My barrister had claimed I was all at 'sixes and sevens' although I had made it perfectly clear to him that I always took size fives). As I put on my coat I reflected that if I went down for this one at least I'd have time to get down to some serious writing. And after all, although it couldn't possibly be the same as working from the original, I still had that photo-copy.