

SMOKES

Every year for as many years as I can remember, and this year is no different to any of the many preceding years piling up behind me, they keep on asking me, always with the best of intentions, with good and generous loving hearts I don't doubt, what I want for my birthday, presumably hoping that I will at last have changed my mind for the better, will have finally come to my senses. And each year, including, as ever, this year, I tell them that all I want, all I've ever wanted and will ever want, is a plentiful and continuing supply of smoking materials or smokes as I've become accustomed to calling them over the years, these many years now. But they always balk at my perennial response, showing irritation, disgust, horror even at what they see as the utterly perverse and apparently driven self-destruction that seems to lie behind my so-often-reiterated request. Each year on this self-same day, this universally celebrated day, this first day (although some would undoubtedly add that it is also the first day on which things started to go badly wrong for me and those associated both closely and remotely with me), I am the recipient of unwanted gifts from all corners of the planet, from close but widely scattered relatives, distant but near relatives, old and almost lost friends, new found intimates (at least one) and passing acquaintances whom I had assumed to have long since passed out of my ever-narrowing circle. The number, whatever it is, and it does vary ever so slightly by the year, never fails to take me by surprise as does the obvious coupled fact of the continuing inexplicable affection, betokened by the gifts' unending flow, which seems nevertheless to be matched precisely by an equally inexplicable complete lack of understanding of my o'erweening vital and visceral needs. Condemned, or rather condemning themselves by their very inappropriateness, to lie forgotten in drawers, cupboards, closets, wardrobes, bureaus, tall-boys, glove compartments, larders, pantries, any container in fact that has a lid, door or covering, awaiting the occasional (roughly biennial) grand spring clean, although the choice of a cleaning season

seems arbitrary and rarely coincides with spring, following which they are gathered up in tough but roomy plastic containers kept specifically for the task and dispatched to the nearest charity shop, they only hope some good, some return, will accrue somewhere along the line. Why not humour an old man, I say to them (to those, that is, that actually hand over the gifts in person or with whom I manage to speak on the phone after the gift-event (there are few of these latter as I have to rely on the goodwill of others (a goodwill often at rather a low ebb by this stage) to bring the phone to me, stuck, as I more or less permanently am in my waking hours, in my faithful old short-legged armchair with the broken springs and by-now indelibly soiled anti-macassar)) when they refuse point blank to consider spending their admittedly hard-and- slowly-earned cash on my heart's desire. Surely it's not too much to ask of you to feed what is virtually my only remaining pleasure as I have long since given up on the larger pleasures, at least those which money seems to be able to buy, I say to them. Can't you see that, by satisfying my one craving, my last burning desire, you will be giving my life some very concrete sense of purpose, for, towards the end of each smoke I could, and undoubtedly would, be already thinking about the smokes to come, and specifically the very next one whose timing I could myself decide. Don't you see, I try to persuade them, that they would provide me with the means for giving my life a structure and a kind of loose time-table quite unrelated to the physiologically driven micturitic and parturitic cycle (not, I hasten to add, that there isn't some physiologically and biochemically groundable element in my commitment to the smokes but, for me this is relativised by the overpowering spirituality of the experience) which has a stern and unavoidable rigidity that can only be foresworn or brooked with considerable and often humiliating consequences. After all, I suggest to them, in more or less the same words on each and every occasion that they put the why question to me, if you can't stand the smell or if you think it might damage your already frail health to remain even for a short, the shortest, period in

my vicinity you don't have to stay in this small cramped room with me when I'm smoking; don't worry, I add, I shan't feel offended if you only pop your head round or push a note, birthday card or gift under or around the door. I shall be happy enough on my own provided I can puff away on the smokes at indeterminate intervals while I look out of the window opposite my chair and across to the grey brick wall on the other side of the yard, I assure them. You never need worry about me as long as I've got my smokes near to hand, I say to them, although if there are more than one of them present when I say this or something very much like it, I've noticed that they tend to exchange what might typically be called meaningful or even knowing glances and to raise one or another of their eyebrows in what seems like some kind of disbelieving quizzicality, even though, for whatever reasons, misguided or otherwise, they don't actually pick me up on this or contradict me. I sense all too plainly from these unspoken, perhaps unspeakable, gestures, that they don't quite believe my assertions about my own happiness, the smokes-derived, and, yes, smokes-grounded-and-delivered if you like, happiness, if happiness isn't too strong a word for the gently relaxing satisfaction that seems to suffuse my entire being almost immediately following the first dragging puff and inhalation, for they invariably seem to facilitate a falling away of the desperate anxiety that wracks my failing faulty system the rest of the time. And it's not as if, from my visitors' viewpoints, I am a dirty smoker. Far from it! I make every effort, in spite of all the difficulties under which I labour, to direct the smokes' ash (of which it goes without saying there is a fair amount) into small receptacles to one side of my chair. Naturally, being almost weightless, the ash's final destination is dependent on a complex of factors, and specifically the relation between the room's ambient air pressure at the moment of hoped-for ash disposal (via a brief flicking or tapping movement) and my persistent *tremens* (whether delirium or something less easy to label). In its turn, of course, the air pressure is bound to both local and global contingencies such as the finally unanalysable ties between, say,

the sharp draught caused by an overhasty opening or closing of my door by some relatively thoughtless visitor and the ever-shifting effects of the as yet putative global warming process with its accompanying paracatastrophies (el Nino, Hurricane Abel, Tornado Adorno, Typhoon Fiona, Whirlwind Hirwaun, Sandstorm Jameson, Plague Eugalpa, Avalanche Gardner, 'Quake Eartha, Blizzard Eddie, Flood Ulf, Iceberg Reg, Tidalwave Evita, Pyroclastic Flo, and others too numinous to mention but similarly comfortingly humanised *in nomine patris* and brought into the family's welcoming bosom). In addition my *tremens* comes and goes, according to its own lights and preferences, so that I never know until the very instant of ash-flicking/tapping whether I am in or out of control of said tap-flick. At that very moment, quite beside myself, I become a fascinated (well by now, perhaps, only ever so slightly fascinated for the novelty has begun to wear off down the years) but anxious spectator of my own (although, as pointed out, I do not seem to actually possess it, more the obverse) flicking-tapping, caught up in the spectacle, the ritual drama laden and reverberating with the symbolic over-(and under-)tones borne by all ash-making, ash-disposing, ash-scattering praxes. And it's all over in less than a trice. Anyway, given this unpredictability at the point of delivery, it is hardly surprising that some ash, quite without warning, often does actually drift off, up and away across the room, eventually covering (over the weeks and months, in between the biennial spring cleans) all surfaces (including much of myself) with a fine pallid grey patina. Obviously, as I'm perfectly prepared to accept, this state of affairs is not to everyone's taste (although I myself have learned not only to accept it as a necessary constituent of my life conditions but also to see a certain self-understating reserved beauty, perhaps somewhat slow to reveal itself, in the delicate pastel unity it gives to my space) as several of my visitors, the most forthright (one might almost say the rudest), have made abundantly clear to me on several, perhaps many, occasions. You don't have to come if you don't want to, or some such, I say to them. At which there would be

barely audible sighs, snorts of disgust (Hermine is the worst culprit here) or heads turned towards the window in apparent attempts to focus, if only for a few distracting seconds, on the thin strip of typically grey sky, still probably just visible above the opposite wall, as a way of taking their minds off (I think that's the phrase, yes, taking their minds off) the troubling combination of embarrassment, frustration, annoyance, and sheer distaste (a heady mix) which most of them undoubtedly felt. And, as I've now hinted to them on several occasions, if not most probably said so quite explicitly at least once or twice (although I can't actually remember any specific time when I did make this perfectly clear to them, that is to say, did get confirmation that I'd actually got through to them), smoking the smokes seems to help me form the sentences. I don't know whether you fully appreciate this, I try telling them again (and again), but without their, the smokes' that is, support I'm really struggling when it comes to the sentences. Words, some phrases even, I can just about manage, but forming and shaping these into even something remotely like a simple coherent sentence, a decent respectable sentence that should seem at the very least, to be on the way, its way, towards or giving rise to a subsequent and, hopefully, partially related sentence, a sentence that picks up on the one that's just preceded it, even if only to flatly or partially contradict it, seems to be simply beyond me. Or, if not quite beyond me, to be almost beyond my grasp so that, in desperation, I have to struggle to over-extend my already limited and declining reach to even touch its edge, let alone get a sufficient grip on it to pull it close enough for significant reshaping, refinement and, perhaps, eventually, more delicate honing, to allow it, in short, to take its place within and contribute to the generation of some as yet inchoate and barely emerging sequence. After all, I ask them, gesturing with a halting sweep of my by now somewhat withered left arm (attributable in part, doubtless, to my post-traumatic shovel-pen disorder), for my right is invariably engaged in gripping the wooden arm of the low armchair, the one with the legs sawn down to ease both

my rising and crawling, my rising to crawl, in which I'm usually sitting, for without this clamping grip of my right hand my whole frame would, I suspect, be trembling so much from the nervous energy I need to generate and expend in order to take part in this kind of talk in the first place that I would be quite unable to get a word in or out either edge- or any other ways, just look at all the balls of crumpled paper scattered around my chair, are they not evidence enough of my unending and as yet unendable struggle and my continuing utter dissatisfaction with virtually all of its upshots? Naturally enough they treat this as an essentially rhetorical question and, looking vaguely if perhaps slightly uncomfortably past me, do not reply. I plunge on and suggest to them that the disproportion between this huge collection of scrumpled sheets of paper (which now seems to stretch out over and virtually cover what would otherwise be almost (this 'almost' as an acknowledgment of the ashen patina) bare floorboards) and this small neat pile of sheets right here to the left of my chair, each of which hosts a few as yet sparse sentences, will give some idea perhaps of the extent of my self-acknowledged failure. It's not so much that I am some kind of brutal task-master towering over myself, but most of the sentences simply refuse to be formed, for as soon as I set them going and they are off and on their apparent way, they turn against both me and themselves with impossible-to-locate strategies of resistance, subversion or denial, so much so, in fact, that I simply let them go, or let go what little there is of them for they are, as yet, poor shrivelled, self-shrivelling, identityless fragments that can only inchoately presage and hint at what they might just have been able to turn themselves into with slightly (or greatly) more or different midwifery (a delivery and nursing expertise in whose finer points I appear to be signally lacking) from me than I have been able to manage in a way, ways, that would release them from their all-too-premature crumpledness. Then, if they even deign to respond to what they undoubtedly hear as the baleful ramblings of some sad decrepit (for as often as not they ignore my words completely), they say

something like, oh don't be so silly, or, perhaps, they say, so precious, what is this writing you claim to be so busily doing anyway, aren't you just deceiving yourself, leading yourself up the garden path, living in some wastrel's cloud-cuckoo land, or, putting it more harshly, living a lie, (and so on) they say, with all this talk about writing? It's only then that I feel obliged to remind them once again, for they have heard this from me many times by now, about the coking ovens, the boilers, the stoking work, and the challenges that all these have always represented, and still represent but now very differently, for me. Don't ever forget that someone, and I'm trying to take on this task myself, needs to get the coking ovens down on paper because soon the last of the last few cokers, amongst whom I count, but not I hope necessarily with some kind of misplaced hubris, some o'erweening pride that blinds its bearer to his/her own essential failings, myself as a member, will have passed away without any kind of record of their life and time (a time and life being rapidly outstripped and displaced by technological revolutions that are quite beyond our comprehension), let alone an encomium, elegy, *in memoriam*, or even minor *requiem* having been set down, without justice having been done or been seen to be done to them. I may well not be able, I say to them, to rekindle, for example, the passion you say you felt for *The Horse Whisperer*, *Iron Horse Days*, *Iron Mined*, or *Eye and Mind*, but somebody has to try to make a real stab at it, to make an effort on their behalf, for surely we owe it to the countless coker-stokers, nay to the very ovens and boilers themselves, now that they are on the verge of oblivion, of being overtaken by events and by history's ever-purging tide, to offer up some remembrance of coking's truth, its truth from the inside, the inside outwards, from the coke-face and the searing oven doors themselves don't you think? My question, for I have now put it forward on several occasions under different guises, provokes, typically, glazed eyes, short, perhaps discomfited, shrugs, bouts of distracted coughing (of just the kind for which in the old days we would have been slippered by our crusty gym master soured by a life made miserable

by the vast majority of non-gymnasts among us and by his enforced participation in a war to which he'd given the best years of his life for no reward other than the dubious one of being on the winning side as he never tired of reiterating), and heads that turn away in either boredom or embarrassment from my less than penetrating gaze. For my gaze, the gaze that used to be so penetratingly acute before the coking fumes began to cloud my envisioning, has itself grown increasingly weary, perhaps even milkily cataractic, over these last few months of trying to recapture and sustain again, in the face of less than lukewarm responses, its initial burning intensity, its piercingly unwavering vitality. The likelihood of rekindling even the faintest echoing spark, if indeed it is within a spark's, or sparks', grasp(s) to effect such an echo, of the above-cited passion would seem realistically to be nil. But, just as realistically, in the light, that is, of the very real, my very real, drive to find the right words and then to form them into just sentences (and perhaps just phrases alone if phrases can do, be up to, the job required of them), phrastically loaded sub-sentences then, that do a simple and, where necessary, complex justice to the realities of coking as it was lived through and sustained at uncountable personal costs, the need to spring something of all this, to release it from whatever ligatures are holding it in check, cannot be gainsaid. After all, even those, and they are often those one might expect to be the closest to me and my needs and thus to be the most sympathetic to the criticality of my situation (I hesitate to call it a plight although I might hope to live up to the promise of such a plight, if not to the worst effects of plight-as-predicament), in whose eyes I am all too accustomed to watch the glazing process getting under way at the merest hint of coking as a conversational topic, even they surely could not deny the need, even if they will not encourage let alone augment his smokes habit (in spite of its being so blatantly essential to his inner peace), of an old man to have, finally, his say, even if this means his making, however inadvertently, a fool of himself for, every now and then, of course, fools can show us things that the wise have passed

over or mislaid. And especially so if having his say might most possibly, probably even, turn out to be his very last say. For this, when one thinks about it, is what it might well amount to. Old cokers, ex-cokers, coker-stokers, boiler men (the task appears until very recently to have been gender-specific, I know no old or ex- boiler women), know implicitly and through and through that, precisely because of coking's legacy, its quite specific and peculiar all-suffusing after-effects so to speak, in spite of those effects, both unquantifiable and untabulatable *per se*, that is if they remain, in the (always elusive) last analysis, simply incalculable, nevertheless any and every word articulated by them after finishing with coking, after they thought they had finished with coking forever, when that is, they have been retired, made redundant, or forcibly ejected from all contact with coking for reasons, whether disciplinary or health related, quite beyond their comprehension, when they have washed their hands of it and it has flushed them out of its unboundaried system, may very well be their last word. Such is the devastating property or properties, albeit completely as yet invisible, of coking's life. And this, of course, is the reason why there is such an urgent need, urgent that is for the self that feels itself to be, or feels the need to stand up for coking, to be coking's representative, to allow coking to come out into the light of things, to find ways of enabling coking to become as good as, no better than yet no worse than, its word. Yet however desperate the need, the need does not seem to be able to realise itself, to bring, as it were, itself to some sort of, however half-boiled, fruition in the world (and in so doing to be rid of itself for the time being, always the time being), without the generative support of an essential catalyst from same world, in my own case said catalyst being the smokes themselves, the very smokes others were so keen to withhold from me for reasons best known, yet of which I do have some inkling as they have obviously dropped more than broad hints on several occasions, to themselves. This is what they seem unable to accept then: that without aforesaid catalyst nothing will come of it, the overwhelming need that is, the need

that rivets, wracks and scours ceaselessly, the need that will remain locked writhingly torturingly within, the need that will, if left to its own devices, very soon destroy by self-consumption, by gnawing the heart away, its very bearer, in this instance myself. It's not too much to ask for is it, I say to them, but it seems from their response that that is precisely what it is, quite simply too much. The costs are too high they imply, the costs, that is, to me, for they talk, each time with slightly different emphases, of my self-induced end, often adding lurid details doubtless intended to scare the living shit out of me as one of them succinctly put it little realising that my unflinchingly harsh materialism provided absolute immunity against the supposed scarifying effects of such a coprolitically inspired threat whose oxymoronic casing I saw through immediately, being only too well aware of the mutual exclusivity of life and shit and that the latter is the universal destination of all things living. And the cost sometimes became a price, the price I would have to pay, according to some of my concerned well-wishers, for an activity of such unmitigated self-destruction, an activity which they have, as has become clear to me over recent years (the very years of my greatest need), no intention of either participating in or colluding with. For they make it variously clear to me that to go down that particular track, the one-way street of collusion that is, would inevitably result in they themselves being held partially but nevertheless personally responsible for whatever pathologies or traumas might subsequently redefine the terms of my already restricted, some might say severely restricted, way of life. After all, look at you, one of them said to me recently, thus echoing something similar that at least one, maybe more, of the others had already tried to persuade me of, look at your current predicament, surely you don't want, or you can't afford (I forget which), to let things get any worse than they already are, you've got quite enough on your plate without heaping it even higher as if you were greedy for troubles. But if that's the way you want it, she concluded, be it on your own head, your own head, yes, that is precisely how she

expressed it, why you can barely even get by now in spite of the vast amount of support we've all given you down so many years, and at no little cost to ourselves I might add, she added. Had I the energy I might have intervened with some vehemence at this as I felt that the case was being overstated on both fronts, for I was both more sanguine about my own situation than either she and they appeared to be and at the same time less convinced about the level of aid of which I was, according to her, reputed to be the beneficiary, but, at that moment, the moment that is of what I felt were her unbounded contentions about my failings, I lacked sufficient energy to take up the cudgels on my own behalf. I let it pass, as is my wont, without a murmur. And, as I look down and around at the scattered detritus of my all too puny efforts over many many months, I can indeed see how she and they might just feel slightly let down, if not despondently aggrieved, by my apparent inability to take advantage of, let alone make the most of, the constant supply of succour with which they felt they had inundated me for so long now. The case for the prosecution seemed at first sight to be strong, if not quite open and shut, but of course one person's succour can be another's anathema, and it did not seem to have occurred to any of them, or if it had they had apparently dismissed it without a second or third thought, that their continuous purveying of what they had taken and were still taking to be help, help in a myriad material and spiritual guises (smokes included), might turn out to be nothing of the kind to the recipient, here myself. Such supposed intended help might end up in fact doing far more harm than good by saddling said recipient with both a sense, senses, of obligation and also such an overwhelming multitude of distractions (distractions that might well be interpreted as forms of meddling do-gooding) that the whole project itself would be in jeopardy, if not leopardy (thinking here of the awkward spot the leopard was in before it acquired its camouflaging spots courtesy of dear old Rudyard). It was almost as if, plied with multiple supports, I had begun to collapse under their very weight and the weight of understandable but quite misplaced

expectation which they simultaneously carried within themselves, weights that together were quite simply so heavy that they pinned the frail and self-doubting recipient to the very spot from which it had been his lifelong desire to move, the spot in fact from which he had looked from the very beginning to the words, phrases, sentences (although not yet paragraphs for these broached a level of complexity which was still way beyond his ever-lowering capacities) to transport him. Touched in the beginning, from the very start of things that is, by words, all the words, words that seemed to offer the possibility of going to an elsewhere, a somewhere that was other than the spot in which he found himself (the spot that was very soon to be occupied by coking alone), where said spot felt like the hole of a trap set by cunning hunters for unwary or ailing animals, he heard (yes, it was always hearing that gave him the first erotic internal caress) and tried to respond to their call to leap clear. Now it seemed it was touch and go for, in accepting the generous assistance of others without reflecting on the coming consequences of such acceptance, assistance which had undoubtedly made the daily struggle to come to terms with his need slightly easier to bear, he had been pulled, seduced, away from the harsh discomforts that the needs imposed on him if they were to be met on their own several clashing terms. Not that he bore any grudges, I can assure you, no certainly not, not at all, none whatsoever. Far from it in fact for he could see all too clearly that any falling away from the strictest standards that his, my that is, needs had required from the very beginning (a beginning that despite its enormous distance from the present exigencies frequently feels to him, me, as if it were only yesterday, this very morning, a minute ago) was entirely my own fault. The blame for this failure to live up to the needs' exacting requirements, to feed them to the full as it were, to stuff their clamouring gullets with gobbets of nourishment rushed in from the good earth's four or four-and-twenty corners, to smother them with enough love and devoted attention to abolish them entirely (for the time being, always for the time being) for they are past mistresses

at raising their ravishingly teasing little heads above the parapet just when one (I) least expects any such resurgence from the depths, depths as yet completely unfathomed by any (all) known branch(es) of the sciences of man, woman, child, nature and pataphysics (is that how you write it?), could be laid at no other door. And, naturally enough, being prepared to admit (to myself alone, never to others, even in written form) that I was, still am, entirely responsible for my own failure(s), failure(s) to get it all out and down in a form, forms (by this stage any combination would have sufficed), that do(es) justice (even scant would be a start) to both coking and the untangleable twists of my thrall to it, brings with it a certain (grim perhaps) satisfaction, untainted, I like to think, by the least trace of continuity. For the satisfaction stems from a sense of failure(s) well done, failure(s) accomplished with no little skill, commitment and, dare I say it, panache, failure(s) in fact whose unending repetition over the years would undoubtedly have induced the vast majority of others undergoing similar trials and hand-and-heart-wringing-and-wrenching anguish to have abandoned their projects many years ago and to have turned to pastures new in the hope of establishing terms and routines for achieving simpler pleasures, more easily accessible successes (if any such exist). What's more the satisfaction stems, at least partially, always partially, from the fact that my failures are common knowledge. I seem to derive quiet (I don't, that is, make a song and dance of it or go around shouting it from the rooftops of even the lowest shed or kennel let alone from the roof gardens of the highest skyscrapers) gratification from the clear evidence readable and hearable in others' (both those closest to me and those at greatest remove) looks, gestures and comments, that the very consistency of my by now routine failing is a matter of public remark, although this remark has not yet taken the form of admiration even of the grudging kind. My reputation on this score is thus, I feel, already secured and it would take a massive turn around in fortune, a by now well-nigh impossible enormous success, a huge 'hit' as they say, to undermine public perceptions of

what many would call the admirable consistency of my performances. Let's face it, I often say to myself as reassurance rather than self-congratulation, you've put on a pretty convincing show of abjection and committed worthlessness, your eternal scrumpling has worked wonders in showing people and allowing them constantly to reaffirm just what you're made of and the depth of your scrumple-dedicaton. Yes, you were obviously in just the right place at just the right time to make the least of yourself, of your inorbitant gifts as it were, or rather, perhaps, to make the most of your gift of the gabless, the most of the least of yourself. And yet, equally often, I find myself, consumed as I all too frequently am by an apparently unquenchable doubt, questioning all of this, questioning every particle of what I had taken even a moment before to be firm evidence, evidence presented to me (I had assumed) by my own incontrovertible senses, of both others' and my own responses even though it was precisely my interpretation of these responses which had formed the basis for virtually everything I have ever done (or thought, come to that). Perhaps I have completely missed the cues, I say to myself, perhaps all those usually little but occasionally larger psycho-bio-socio-happenings and babblings that I tend to take to be subtle but nevertheless unequivocal pointers to and comments on myself and my undoubtedly 'odd little ways' (as my mother used to call them), things that I habitually, routinely use to gauge and confirm, typically without a second thought at the time, my own ways through the world's constant niggling challenges, were in effect making no difference to me whatsoever, were nothing to do with me and were saying nothing about me despite all appearances to the contrary. Thus it could well be that Hermine's raised eyebrow and accompanying slight, barely noticeable even, nasal-and-oral snort, for example, which I had so speedily taken as her quizzically critical response to one of my (many) remarks about the unalloyed and revivifying pleasures to be derived from a slow-paced smoke inhalation if only, as I emphasised to her, one had the smokes to do it with, was but the residual surface manifestation of some micro-synaptic disjuncture, a

genetic inheritance perhaps, something that, running in the family (our family that is, for we are ever so distantly related), provided for a bottomless familial reservoir of snorting brow-raisers, something that never quite leaps ahead of itself into a clear diagnostic category (such as incipient Tourette's) yet about which she (and possibly I) could do nothing (no not even via research-grounded programmes of operant conditioning) and of which in any case she was and still is completely oblivious (so far as I am aware). On the other hand it could be that, far from being genetically over-determined, Hermine's raised brow (together with much other of her to me unusual if not to say occasionally outrageous behaviour) was simply one element in some local and quite temporary disturbance such as electrolytic imbalance, doubtless arising from the years of self-neglect for which she was all-too well known and which massive amounts of care-input had been unable to rectify due to her sheer cursed obtuseness in the face of all attempts to help. Of course her 'moaning minnie' (a label often applied to her by those in close if occasional contact) personality, if that's the right term to pin down something so elusive as the self's continual becoming, acted as a spikily effective off-putter to many, if not all, of even the hardiest of would-be philanthropists, myself included, although under the current circumstances (the room, the chair, my legs, the scrunpled paper, the missing words) I was (am?) in no state to undertake such charitable work. Indeed I suspect I would be more of a hindrance than a help to poor Hermine for, whatever the depth and range of my coking and stoking skills they are but poor preparation for all forms of human relationship let alone so-called people-work. Even were I able to get over to her place, a task made more difficult by its rural isolation and the complete lack of a reliable transport service (public or even private) in those (and these come to that) parts, I suspect that I would be quite unable to find the appropriate succouring and euphoria-generating words and would doubtless end up putting my foot in it yet again by saying something that would have quite the opposite effect to that which I would have intended with

the upshot being a radical exacerbation of her already sadly deteriorating condition. No, I should steer well clear and, all too familiar with my own far-reaching shortcomings, concentrate solely on those few, so very few, things which might still, just, seem to hold out a slight though necessarily slim prospect of at least completion, if not yet success or even heart-warming satisfaction. At my time of life one has to preserve and concentrate one's few resources and now rapidly dwindling energies if there is to be any hope at all of arriving at some kind of conclusion to the few remaining (I nearly said outstanding but that could far too easily be mistaken as evidence of some hubristic claim on my part about what I had already achieved and indeed still hoped to achieve) tasks to which one has had to limit oneself. Remembering my mother's homily from the earliest days (I can hear her saying it even now as she bent over a sink full of soaking grubby underwear in our damp cramped scullery (that of necessity doubled as a pantry and coal store) - never start something you haven't got it in yourself to complete - an exhortation which, with its sole emphasis on the 'in yourself', signally failed to take account of the effects of those all too real surrounding conditions that inexorably played the major role in aborting all my subsequent projects long before their possible completion was even horizontally visible) and taking its message to heart, I had already settled, as will surely be clear, for what might seem like very little, for apparently the least of tasks, in order to maximise the slim possibility of their completion. For the years of my maturity (supposedly the best years of one's life, when one is supposed to have the time of one's life) were consumed entirely by the requirements of coking-stoking. I had felt from the beginning that, by limiting my horizons and concentrating on this quite specific task with its seemingly narrow functional range (it didn't occur to me at the time that trying to mimic the sun was an act of possibly the most gross and obscenely misguided hubris) and relatively undemanding (if viewed from the outside) duties, I would stand a very real chance of living up to ma's homily, of bringing it full circle, my life describing a meridian

as it were, and to effective completion by relying completely on my own inner resources. Here was a task which would, in essence, be down to me and where I wouldn't need to be constantly going cap in hand to others, whether authority figures or underlings, to beg for various forms of practical and spiritual assistance. There seemed a genuine prospect that, at the end of my working life, I would be able to congratulate myself on successfully overcoming or, at the very least, learning how to cope with coking's quotidian demands and conditions and bringing this phase of my life to a more or less satisfactory conclusion. But, as I have found out latterly, in trying to make an in-depth retrospective assessment of my involvement with the task, life is never that simple, however simple it may seem to be at the time of its passing. For, in trying, from this latter-day position of what must seem from the outside like a place of recollective tranquility, to get back inside coking again in order to recover and bring to the surface (my own undulating, nay precipicial, surface in and as a cast of language) the significance for me of the whole coking experience, I have found myself (or perhaps lost myself would be more apposite) wandering across a retreating and drifting sandscape-inscape whose vague shapes, mirages and all too distant oases slip away through my mind's febrile fingers as soon as I try to raise and word it. I sit, just as I'm sitting now, in my sawn-down chair, my trusty but by now hardened alpaca cushion at the base of my back to comfort my spine misshapen by the too many (far far too many, as I'm only now, with hindsight's dubious benefit, beginning to understand) years of a stoker's bending, gnawing desperately at the red-raw knuckles of my left hand, the hand that tries so hard to grip and guide this pencil to pointed but so far pointless effect, undone by the collapsing contingencies of a progressively dementing doubt about the task's worth, a doubt whose spiralling trajectory, drawing me down, down, down, infuses my entire becoming, a becoming-less-and-less-and-less, with an unquenchable anxiety, an anxiety that rivets me to the spot, my chair spot. And that's where the smokes come in, provided I've got some ready to hand

under my chair when I'm wracked by anxiety's inexorable tide. My smokes soothe, calm, me ever so slightly. Whatever they may do to longevity, in the very short term, for the time being, this being's immeasurable moment, the gentle arhythm of puffing's inspiiry-expiry allays somewhat the pounding of my disheartened heart. I cease momentarily to gnaw. My knuckle gets a breather. The grip on my pencil eases. Distracted by a manic fly that keeps smashing into the window opposite my chair, I look past it to the darkening yard outside where a light drizzle is beginning to mottle the far wall above which a thin band of brownish grey sky is still just visible. Silhouetted against this sky strip are jagged shards of glass flounced into the wall's top to deter would-be intruders, although any such intruders would discover soon enough that all they could take back from such a foolhardy expedition would be a faint, or possibly vivid, memory of the adrenalin-rush that carried them up and over the wall in the first place together with the all too real bloody gashes made by the spikes of broken glass, but then the game itself, the *Eindringspiel* if you like, just like dedicated smoking time (and perhaps even coking itself, provided one can contort oneself into a position from which to see it this way), is its own reward. Puffing is an end in itself, as Lord Blerrock often reminds me when, in defiance of all pleas to the contrary from my nearest and so-called dearest, he insists on calling in on me whenever he is passing, which is not that often actually, and replenishing my invariably dwindling and often all-but exhausted supply of smokes, for he, perhaps alone of my visitors, has some inkling, however vague, of the smokes' significance for me. Indeed he is the only one of my benefactors who have had the courtesy to ask me *which kind of smokes I prefer*, which I would obtain for myself were I able to get out of this chair and room, and when I told him it was the little known and difficult to obtain Cadmus twist rich flake (with its reputed faintly hallucinatory properties) he assured me that it would be no trouble at all for him to obtain supplies of it, in fact he knew the very place where it was stocked routinely. He has turned out

to be as good as his word and never lets me down, always arriving with a stout little bundle of the Cadmus blend. For old time's sake, he always says as he hands it over, for indeed he and I go back an awfully long way, in fact to long before his relatively recent elevation to the peerage which came, of course, as a recognition for his masterminding of the design and development of the National Gaming Board responsible for regulating and monitoring all games of chance. In our college days (so many years ago now) he was just plain (for even such a pairing of fore- and surnames subsides into the dullness of the very plain when repeated obsessively often enough) Flanesby Bleroc and indeed there was little in his demeanour or habits at that time to mark him out from the crowd, whether the in- or the out-crowd. The recent doubling of the r and the addition of the ultimate k were done, I suspect, in an attempt to perform some kind of Anglicisation on a name of altogether uncertain origin (despite its hints towards the slavico-transylvanian axis) and provenance in the hope of easing his entry into the ranks of those who might wish for reasons entirely unknowable to cut dead anyone whose surname ended in ic, oc, uc, ac, or ec. As far as I know, as plain (Lord) Blerrock he never had, or at least he never reported to me his having had, any such problems. He did once confide to me though that the Bleroc by which I first knew him was simply the most recent of a string of changes his family name had undergone during its centuries long participation in the diasporic flow from east to west; the earliest patrinomic he could recall being mentioned over the samovar as part of the family's pre-caucasus oral memory was Blerocostikovskaya. Every hundred years or so, he said, it would lose a couple of letters from the end to encourage a more receptive accepting response in the latest country of resettlement. Whether this achieved its purpose is unclear, although it is, perhaps, interesting to note that the family did keep on moving, which might indeed suggest that the name changes were, in the slightly longer run, entirely in vain. The Flanesby may, however, be quite another matter for however many times one repeats it (even to the point of virtual

insanity) in my experience it seems to remain stubbornly awkward, refusing to collapse either into the anonymous invisibility of the utterly ordinary or into a simply foreshortenable nickname (I never heard anyone calling him Flane or Flay, for example, let alone Fsby (hear this as Effsby)). But even in those far-off hard-up penny-pinching but still heady days he always displayed a generous spirit for I well remember the small but often vital and very low interest rate loans, loans which I always made a point of repaying as soon as I was in funds again, he would make to me to tide me over my all too frequent pecuniary *aporia* as I was something of a youthful spendthrift, running up debts on all those opportunity-knocking occasions (the bridge lounge, the bookmaker's, the billiards hall, the snug, my lodgings, close friends (very few) and passing acquaintances) where things could still be had on what was known then (and still may be in some more isolated regions) as tick. Of course Flanesby exemplifies the virtues of a college career for, from the very lowliest of beginnings he has succeeded in turning the very little of his natural talents, the boundaries of which he clarified with a considerable sharp-eyed acuity during his college days, to continuing, and it seems endless, profit (of which on a small scale in the shape of my smokes I am an occasional but always grateful beneficiary) as his subsequent steady progress up the ladders of corporate influence (sometimes undoubtedly aided on the sly by shady not to say shyster lawyers) undoubtedly attests. Yet he is no snob. Far from it. For he seems to retain a soft spot for me in spite of what from the generally distributed perspective on success in our culture must seem like my unending sequence of pathetic failures. For, to cap it all, my ending up (many would see it as dead-ending up) devoting the major chunk of my waking life to the acutely restricted and restrictive boiler-and-oven-centred practices of coking and stoking could hardly be seen (seeable) as making the most of the opportunities and openings afforded to me by my college career, the most of what my elders and betters used to call my potential, as when they'd say to me at regular intervals and odd

moments, you must realise your potential, as if that was the point, the very point, of it all. But such public stereotypes clearly mean little to Flanesby for he seems, to judge from the persistence of his occasional generosity, to value me for something in myself, some indefinable little remnant maybe, of an early promise, something he'd spotted perhaps without ever putting it into words, something about which he was now reluctant to change his mind for that might call into question the quality of his earlier judgment, yet something certainly elusive enough for virtually all others, including, for ninety nine point nine nine per cent recurring of the time, myself, to have been completely blind to and perhaps they would argue, if it ever came to it, if push finally came to the shove that was waiting just round the corner for it, that Flanesby was quite mistaken if he thought he had found such a little something for they themselves were convinced there was, is, indeed nothing there of any consequence, and certainly nothing to celebrate let alone reward, whether by smokes or any other positive acknowledgment, encouragement or inducement. And I must admit that the weight of all available evidence does seem to be on their side, so that in the light of which it is even more praiseworthy of Flanesby to stick to his guns by maintaining, however occasionally, this relationship with an old buddy, an increasingly decrepit old chum. In fact that was often his very word, or one of them, one of the few as he never had the time to stay for long, for he would say, typically just as he was leaving, something like, sorry it's been such a short visit, must dash now, I've an important meeting, and, finally, don't forget - chum's the word! Playing it back to myself as I do, repeatedly, for reassurance, I can still catch the hearty verve of his exhortation, fully justifying, I feel, the appended exclamation mark which serves to emphasise too its clipped finality as he turns on his heel and closes the door behind him without a second glance towards me still slumping to one side of my short-legged armchair. Goodness knows there's precious little in it for him, and in fact, the gaps between his visits are, I think, getting longer, so much so that I really can't

remember when he last came it's now so long ago, although I have managed to eke out the supply of smokes he, as usual, brought with him. I'm down to my last few again and I'm trying desperately to make them last as I have no idea when or indeed if my supply might be replenished and I have a foreboding that these may be my very last. Odd to think though that I'm trying to make them be, do, what they already are, last that is, as if, by making the last few really last, by stretching them out over the entire period of their ending, their lasting ending, their actual disappearance when they literally go up in a puff, puffs, of smoke, exhalations on the breeze, I am, without realising it, effectively aligning my utter dependency upon them with the world of reason, reconciling, however haltingly, craving's desperation with the quotidian's rational requirement of careful and resourceful husbandry-and-mid-wifery of the world's all too scarce (and ever dwindling) resources. And implicit in this stretching out, my brave (as I'm now coming to see it) attempt to widen, ever widen, the already large (for me always too large, far too large) gap between smokes, precisely because of not only the unknowability of their future replenishment but also my increasingly strong, but still sneaking suspicion, based on something he said in passing, that Flanesby, making it appear like a seemingly inconsequential throwaway remark to the effect that he was shortly expecting to receive a long-term foreign posting, has paid me his last visit, is my tacit assumption that my smokes' supply is indeed finally on its last legs, shrinking to nought. It seems as if, unbeknownst to myself, something is managing on my behalf a withdrawal from the abjection of my absolute dependency, from the visceral craving to which I have been in thrall for so long now, for I feel I have almost got to the point where I could manage without the smokes, where I could make the next smoke the very last one, one which indeed it might have to be in any case for there is only enough material under my chair now, the remnants of Flanesby's last gift, for one last go, a go which I keep putting off and off and off. You see I've begun to see exactly what I'd be missing were I to give up the smokes or,

better perhaps, if they were to give up on me. For the brief and tiny glow that is bellowed into life in the course of each inhalation and the reverie consequent to the glow are precisely what have kept me in touch with, plunged me back into, the burning life of my coking-stoking days, the very days in which, despite being so absolutely drained and consumed by the intense heat and light of the fire for which I was responsible that outside the place of stoking I was good for nothing else whatever, I nevertheless had the time of my life. Ever since I ceased coking only my smokes' glow has been able to restore within me some fractional memory-charge of the intensity that infused my being at that time. This very glow is exactly what I need, it is the re-awakening prompt, in order to bear witness to coking's paramount importance for, even as I am lighting the match, I am thrown backwards into that blazing heat-light that completely consumed me in and as my coking life. Through the smokes' spark I am whisked back to that site for whose singular intensities it is now my life-task to become the conduit so that the unendurable heat-light can sear its way onto my sheets in an irrefutable word torrent. But no such luck. Hence the scattered balls of scrumpled paper. For it has begun to dawn on me recently and so very slowly that, precisely as a result of the extremity of the conditions of coking, the draining heat, the blinding light, the interminable utter exhaustion of the daily round, the string of violent and abusive foremen, I had seen, taken in and held on to, almost nothing throughout those many years, nothing that would enable me to make coking, coking's place, truly sing, singe even, its way into the ever-open arms and heart of the empty but awaiting expectant present, a present, this very present, which I have desperately wanted to brand with coking's final mark for so long now. Looking back on my coking life from this as yet unmarked present, this present that I can light up only through the dull glow of one of my late smokes, I can see nothing but vague shapes, hear faint sounds, feel slight tremors that merge with each other into an undifferentiable miasma, a drifting boundaryless cloud lacking identity and

compulsion. Coking's particulars, all those charged details through which I was the very embodiment of coking and by which simultaneously I made coking coking, made coking into coking's veryness (if you will allow me this little suffixed extension), are untouchable, have slipped away through time's icy fingers leaving me only with a welling sense of irreparable loss, for my project of bringing coking into words is entirely dependent on those details spontaneously re-igniting themselves under the aura of the smokes' glow. It is as if coking itself is, at the last, outfacing me or turning its back on me, stubbornly refusing at all costs to give itself away. Or maybe it knew all along, and thus had no worries on this score, that it was no preparation for words, let alone sentences. For I have begun to realise, so very belatedly, the mutual exclusivity of coking and words, and thus that my later-life task of bringing coking to book has been utterly doomed from the very beginning, for it is not so much that coking ill-prepared me for the coming struggle with words but rather that coking is always already and endlessly torching itself out of language, leaving behind nothing but a still smoking hole as it passes through. And that is the hole in which I am now finding, and consequently losing, myself, a hole in which I am reduced to scrabbling around amongst the ashwords, the cinders of sentences, without a hope of sifting out of the crumbling embers materials that might form the basis of a revivifying fire, a fire to fill the hole that now seems to be coking's only legacy. The sieved scraps that I come up with lie all about me for they always refuse to conjoin and work their way into some kind of vital and heated, self-heating, sense flow, disintegrating instead into dust motes that drift away on the edge of the random draughts that chill my room. No matter how I try to sift and sort out the remains of coking's fiery life (and I have resorted to many approaches over the years from one-large-coke-word-at-a-time placed meticulously on its own spot through to over-full shovels of coke-word-dust flung violently in the general direction of the oven-text, from slow a-rhythmic depressive shovelling which endangered the fire's very

continuance through to a manic shovelling which in its turn threatened to over-heat the oven-book with potentially disastrous consequences for the vast array of associated pipework and oven-dependent machinery above my head, way above my head) I have never been able to find the one right way, a word-shovelling that would be my and only my word-shovelling. Unable to recharge the very details which, in those long lost days, made coking and I coincide, I now know, I can feel it pulsingly in my marrow, that there will only be the endless return of a still and ever-chill waiting. Yet the eking out, nay the desperate rationing, of my little glows (glows that were, yes, I can freely admit it now, my last hope), the widening of the gaps between smokes (there is barely a memory trace now of my last smoke and its reawakening effects) seems to be steadily dousing the already faint embers of my once desperately driven intense dependence. With some effort I stretch my arms out in front of me and open my palms as if to warm them in front of my oven, but no suffusion takes place. Resignedly I slip back into my by now relatively fixed slump. With my right hand I feel around under my chair and pick up the bits and pieces; sorting them out on my lap I see that, yes, there's still just enough for one more smoke. But what's this? Not a match to be found. My already lolling head lolls even further to the right, a tidal wave of exhaustion (although in some ways exhaustion might seem to be the epitome of a tidal wave's absolute absence) surges over me, through me, and the pencil in my left hand (for, although completely ambi-dextrous, I've always chosen to write left-handed while keeping my right hand free for essential smokes-related activities) begins to slip slowly from my fin