

VOCATION

"... only if you have the vocation for it," he'd said to me and I'd jotted it down to remind myself to explore in greater depth the whys and wherefores of this so-called vocation-possession, for at that stage I couldn't flesh out its potential significance in terms of my own experiences and inchoate needs. I was, still am, an inveterate jotter, driven to try and catch words, broken phrases, names, notes, the not-quite-heard, the indistinct, just before they evaporate. Who knows when I may need to consult them, I say to myself, trying perhaps to justify the so far useless jottings through giving them a portentous value which their utterly fragmentary thinness certainly and immediately negates. Be all that as it may, as I glance at this jotted half-sentence it instantly re-calls Old Slipper's (he was our supposed careers master whose only qualification in career selection and advice, apart from the very occasional twenty minute trawl through the school library's pesky selection of career leaflets, had been his own time, both too narrow to meet our multiple burgeoning needs and already far too long for his own now declining inclinations and strengths, served as our and generations of our predecessors' gym master) gravel-voice, saying when I mentioned, in some desperation as a way of keeping our discussion going after I had rejected his suggestion of apprentice bank teller as being quite beyond my paltry accounting skills, the possibility of earning a living if not making a career with my trusty basset horn (a.k.a *cornò di bassetto* - no tip of the wink here intended in a shawards direction, after all what did the old codger, or any other sly wordmonger come to that, really feelingly-know about music's churning withinness, about music's lower gut?). "Priest, nurse, artist, jockey - one has to have a calling for these things you know," he added, a dreamy-eyed pathos clouding his eyes (suggesting to me that somehow his gym-engorged years had never quite compensated for some now long-lost longing for a life of dedication to some good beyond gym-being's wall bars). "A calling and more than a modicum of talent," he further added (as I'd also noted), as if to indicate to me that this extra criterion would be quite sufficient to rule out any question of my ever earning a living let alone forging a career through and with my basset horn. "There are certainly plenty of failed basset horn players around who could attest to the near impossibility of joining the ranks of the professionals unless you are touched, graced would perhaps be a more apposite word, by genius. I could introduce you to a few who never made it if you think it would be a help." I had never heard him speak at such rhetorically charged length, for his gym classes were of the short-sharp-and-body-shocking variety in which his barked instructions mimed and were

essential complements to the disjointed sequence of brief and often violent exercises we were required to perform (to the best of our weak abilities). I declined his offer of extensive chats with self-acknowledged basset horn failures feeling that confrontation with the apparently insuperable difficulties of access to frontline work in basset hornery was likely to result in the immediate mothballing of my basset horn. What I really needed, or, more appositely perhaps, desired (for what had need got to do with unstoppable urges from the heart's and mind's unutterable depths?), was, I felt, an unsubtle mix of high praise and exaggerated encouragement, however undoubtedly misplaced they would certainly have been and would still be to this day. I simply wasn't ready for a reality-based critical appraisal. Nor have I ever been. No, as far as critique and analysis are concerned I have always made it a point of principle (even honour) to stick rigidly to my Avoidance-At-All-Costs Rule, a rule which I try to ensure also encompasses every kind of teacher, teaching, trainer and training, all of which I have eschewed as if they were plague-bearers. And a plague of a particularly pernicious kind, for every form of education invariably seems to present itself as purely beneficent, as if the so-called educator had nothing but the interests of the recipient at heart, whereas what we discover steadily over the many, many years of our enforced exposure to education-mongers, a discovery which surely arrives far too late for us to do anything about the problem, is that education is carried out solely according to the needs of the educators themselves for they have to protect and maintain at all costs all those seemingly innocent little things, micro-bargaining-chips in the power market, that allow them to claim legitimacy for that sickening voice of apparently unquestionable authority they routinely adopt. Yet another case of self-interest passing itself off under the guise of community benevolence I'm afraid. So you will understand that I have always given lessons a very wide berth, steered well clear of any master (let alone mistress) class. The sad drudgery of learning according to another's rote, of subordination to the voice of claimed and presumed (but always deeply groundless) authority, of hacking away at the most tediously dense undergrowth of exercises dedicated solely to the fetish of technical accomplishment (acquisition of which inevitably and simultaneously guaranteed the loss of every last scrap of the sensual), of having someone else tap out a time- and a life-rhythm which would be in direct competition with my own necessarily utterly personal internal time consciousness (a time which I have never quite been able to square, to force a coincidence, with that of anyone else on this (or any other, I suspect) planet), have always stuck in my craw. Yes, from the earliest days I determined to strap on my blinkers and my ear muffs and set off without the least deviation on self-tuition's so lonely

highway, the direct road to perdition according to the supposed professional experts whom I occasionally brushed, still brush, up against in the course of my (according to them, pathetic) endeavours. They would, still do, shake their heads as they turn on their heel(s) and walk sadly away muttering to themselves phrases such as 'so short-sighted', 'sad fantasist' or '...as well give up now'. I remain undeterred, and sometimes even call after them with an edge of self-justificatory defiance in my voice, 'I'm in this for the long-term' or some such. Often I can just hear their snort dying away on the breeze's cusp. Of course they have a point, maybe several, as I'm the first to acknowledge, for I know only too well that I may well be condemning, may indeed already have condemned, myself to a ludicrously drawn out lingering death by abject failure. But this is failure, I am convinced (indeed I have staked my life on it), as organised and managed by the state - state-certified failure. Somehow I just cannot reconcile, and this is what none of the teachers who have occasionally and mistakenly tried to persuade me of the error of my ways cannot seem to grasp, music's sensual flood-beyond-rhythm-rhyme-and-reason with state-sponsored-and-managed certification (for which, incidentally, the teachers (themselves shadowed at every turn by the hovering brood of skin-flint-eyed inspectors desperate to curry political (and thus economic) favour through the handing down of punitively low grades) are routinely responsible for replicating, despite their denying as 'absurd' my charge, when I put it to them, as I occasionally have at the end of some heated exchange, that they are, at the last, nothing more than state lackeys, ring fencers of desire on behalf of a monstrous and monstrously arbitrary power that will be, nay is, the death, the living death, no, better, the living-and-dying-death of all of us). Nevertheless (a nevertheless providing us with an instant textual duplication of aforesaid state power but here on a hypo-micro-structural level through its immediate opening up of the possibility of severely qualifying and perhaps even completely contradicting everything just put forward) Old Slipper (so called because of his regular invocation of utterly arbitrary rules specific to his management of the gym environment licencing him to punish some infringement visible only to him through requiring us to remove a gym pump, hand it to him, bend over and receive as many slipper (a.k.a. gym-pump) thwacks across calves or buttocks as he deemed appropriate to scale of said invisible infringement, thus exemplifying on a slightly larger and higher micro-structural level to that of the afore-mentioned 'nevertheless' the very arbitrariness of state violence to which I have just referred) may have had a point in drawing my attention to the questions of vocation and calling. Lacking both, any aspirant basset horneer might as well give up. But were vocation and calling one and the same thing as Old Slipper seemed to imply in his

apparent elision? Perhaps they pointed in different directions. To know that one has a vocation is to be convinced that the call has already come and gone, has been embraced with open arms and has secured one's commitment on certainty's home ground, all doubts left way behind: it puts everything in place and ensures that they remain there. With a vocation one never needs to hear that call again for everything one continues to do in its name becomes a simple reinforcement of the rightness of the original accepting response. A calling, however, is of and in the present and as long as it keeps on sounding it draws one, siren-like, towards some indefinable elsewhere, refusing to leave one alone. Nagging and goading, sometimes loud sometimes faint, it gives nothing away about its source. Is it a call from without, from within, or from some coalescence of the two taking its placeless place as it turns one inside out and outside in? One never can know or get to know it. All one knows is the driven necessity of an eternal listening-out and listening-in in knuckle-gnawing anticipation of the merest whisper of a call, an interminable checking that the calling continues, is not temporarily or finally deserting one, leaving one alone. So, as long as it goes on, calling shadows one simultaneously with a doubt that will not go away, for whereas vocation is convinced that it has already been chosen and that the entire matter is cut and dried, calling says only that one is still being called but that one will never know if one has been chosen. What Old Slipper didn't seem to appreciate was that under the sway of a calling one has no alternative but to proceed in hope alone, and quite without expectation, irrespective of either being touched by the sable-brush of genius or acquiring a fair-to-middling, let alone a fabulous, technique. He was, however, right to draw my attention to the problem for, when I reflected on it, it became clear to me that I lacked a basset horn vocation: as far as I could remember (and with the aid of my jottings that was indeed a long way back) I had never received some unequivocal and doubt-banishing call to basset horning's elysian meads. And yet I thought I heard, or rather kept on hearing (for I was frequently interrupted by it), a call, no, calls, faint but insistent, issuing from some nowhere hard by, that reverberated through me and left pins-and-needles of desire stabbing away across all my throbbing parts. Naturally I could, still can-, not resist their goads, although they provided, still provide, me with no confidence about the rightness of my choices. At that time, however, all I could do was to try to stumble (or better, maybe, fall over backwards for I knew not where I was heading) into the basset horn zone and try to grope my way forward while holding tight to said horn. My thrashing around there soon caused general annoyance and specific niggling troubles for the zone's clearly vocation-driven incumbents. They quickly made it clear to me that I was, quite simply, as they put it, a fly in the basset horn unguent, matter out of place,

a.k.a. dirt. I could take a hint. I did take their more-than-a-hint. Reflecting on my plight as I shambled back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, in the marches of basset-hornia, I could see no way of reconciling my response to the calls' seeming insistence on the primacy of the doubt-impregnated-but-gut-wrenchingly-sensual (and its consequent generalised suffusion of the whole of my becoming) with the basset-hornia gauleiters' utterly reasonable insistence on the intertwined norms of technical-proficiency-at-all-costs (working itself out in literal practice as fifteen drudgy-sludgy hours a day in the company of scales, arpeggios, chromatics and their ilk and all under the punitively oppressive thumbs of teaching's involute fraternities/sororities) and exclusive commitment to basset-hornia-and-nothing-but-basset-hornia. I had already caught a whiff around the calls' edges which seemed to suggest that there were other things in life apart from basset-hornery and, roiled, moiled and turmoiled, I was already being drawn towards their many scents, stretched this way and that on the rack of desire-and-doubt. Naturally enough, subjected to such contra-extrusions, I became highly suspicious of the nothing-butness of the one-horn life. And slowly my suspicion began to spawn possible solutions, for it forced me to listen much more closely to what I had thought of as my calling, the calls to which my basset horn toying had so far been my taken-for-granted response. What I began to realise for the first time was that this calling lacked any singularity. Yes, indeed, the -ing of calling anchored it in and as the very present, a call's presence, a call caught *in flagrante* as it were, but my (and, I strongly suspect, that of all others responding to a calling) calling was far from being a continuous calling. It was not some ever-present background hum, a humdrumming that never went away and to which I could always tune in to if I had half a mind, a quarter of an intent, or some other immeasurable fraction of some other metaphysical construct of my supposed being, conveniently brought into play to enable myself and the rest of us to hide the blank we straddle. Rather it was a self-fracturing sequence of unanticipatable calls. The calls were occasional, coming now and again but often enough to be considered a sequence, as having some kind of consistency and thus a relation to each other. Each call seemed to be overlapped ever so slightly by one of its predecessors reminding it, perhaps, of where it had come from and where it ought to be heading-bodying. And certainly they did seem to keep on coming but I could never quite tell if, when or how they would arrive. They kept me in the dark. So the realisation that what I had thought of as a, my, calling, was no more than a convenient short-hand for the hiccupping trail of visitations (the so-called calls), stole up on me slowly and it took me some time to adjust to this dawning and its implications. For I began to see that, in spite of their apparent overlaps, they

seemed to have no singular urge. I could locate no principled reason (indeed their lack of any kind of reason was in any case their most, perhaps their only, singular virtue) why they should be directed towards, attached to, any one thing, one activity. Rather it was the insistent vagueness of their multiplicity, tumbling through from all over the place, or, rather, from many no-places, from many nowhere-in-particulars, that drew me unavoidably into itself: so many calls, unpinpointable on any map of mindland or heartland, drifting sirens, each seeking to withdraw me from myself and gather me in its wake but without offering me any clues as to the direction I should follow or the steps I should take. Sometimes their reverberations were faint and on other occasions they were a pack of ferocious hounds baying and snapping insistently at my heels. Dogged by them and disturbed by the doubts they engendered I often felt like screaming at their kennel master (or mistress) (for surely they were only carrying out the instructions of some as yet ungraspable authority) "Call off your dogs, sir (or madam)!". Enwrapped and muffled as they were by a penumbra of the very-vague, they left me distracted, thrashing around in my own confusion, pulled this way and that by their clueless multiplicity. None was sufficiently dominant, winningly persuasive, to o'er ride the cacophonic chorale. Yet each, surfacing briefly and rising above the ruckus, had attractions, that, catching me unawares, could not be denied, held me in their sway. Yes, their reverberations resonated alright, struck a surface-fracturing chord down into the inner recesses and pockets where, invariably dissonant, its unsettling attractions began their niggling goad, a goad unsettling enough both to crack me up, an empty glass shattered by the queen of the night's topmost note, and to shake loose the securities of down-here. And the over-and-across-there from which they seemed to issue always sounded as if it were on a different plane, very near certainly, near enough to tempt me to reach out towards it, but interminably just beyond my reach as my endless succession of failed reaching-attempts attests all too well. I sensed from the beginning that if I were to respond to them I would be involved in some serious plane-clambering, doubtless for most of the time on my hands and knees, on my stomach even, desperately stretching and scrabbling for any slight handhold on the all too smooth and precipitous incline. I resigned myself early on to constant backward slippage. For I soon realised that, although I was a faithful and delighted recipient of the multi-directional calls (so glad to be disturbed by them), their very multiplicity increasingly confused me. The many seemed to arrive within and emerge from a large cloud of doubt that soon, all too soon, engulfed the very possibility of my response. Coming from their particular nowheres they drew me towards nothing in particular. Or rather they scattered me all over the place. Resonating within me across an

enormous range of pitches, timbres and densities they generated a plethora of circling contra-reverberations that either cancelled each other out or simply gave up the ghost and faded away, unable to get a toe-hold on my ravaged surfaces. Apparently unable to call in unison and congeal into a unitary summons they would circulate briefly, then, getting no reply or at most only a confused and questioning babble from me in response, they just disappeared. Somehow the calls could not find answering responses that were on their wavelength. Endlessly broken up into smaller and smaller particles by the incoming many, I was, it seemed, only giving out weak signals in return, faint s.o.s.'s tapped out falteringly into an unheeding night and too under-charged to combine with incoming calls. Of course I can see now that responses have to be given a bit of a push, have to be encouraged to gather themselves together and puff themselves up somewhat as part of their up-welling. If only I'd found a way of ramming them into over-drive! They might just have been able to match and coalesce with whatever they seemed attuned to in the invading calls. No, I'd definitely let the calls down badly, failed them without realising it. For what they wanted was a warm welcome, an answering response in the shape of a fervidly sticky embrace so convinced of its own rightness that nothing could stand in the way of its answering response. Instead I'd allowed myself, as lumpenly awkward as ever, to get in the way of my responses through drifting into a sea of doubt. Oh, I can see how it happened alright! Call it a failure of nerve, a crisis of confidence, if you like, but I (or rather the many bits that were picking up the incoming calls) held back from precisely the giving-up which any embrace necessitated because I lacked any evidence from my past life that I could meet and match the calls with an uncontrollable upwelling, a self-saturating pour-forth, in whose torrential flow I would be swept along, off and away, will-me-nill-me, towards the call's source. In fact, far from the calls from over there resonating perfectly with the wave-lengths of inner responses, dormant and still torpid urges that had been lying in wait yearning for these very moments to heat them into sudden furious action, they seemed on the contrary to generate the very cloud of dubiety that, enshrouding me, prevented the escape of whatever inner resonance might just about have managed to vibrate its way desperately through to and out from the all-restraining skins of my doubting surfaces. The calls, it appeared, succeeded only in summoning my gnawing self-doubts. Not that there wasn't a minor element of compensating relief for I was absolved of any purely dutiful longer term commitment to one-track basset hornery. I gradually consigned my trusty horn to the fringes to become merely one among many as I began tentatively to explore the possibilities of the multiple. And my early explorations were suffused with confusion for it was all too clear to

me that my inchoate desires were being parcelled up and distributed, seemingly at random, across many sites without any obvious hints, let alone unequivocal directives, as to which, if any, should be given primacy. I recognised both the calls' urgency and the frustrated struggles of my buried responses, seemingly incapable of forcing their ways through to the surfaces, which lacerating conjunction drove me all over the place as I tried to find ways out of the thicket. But at least I had begun to acknowledge my plight and to thrash around for escape routes. Ah-haaaah, I almost said to myself, and, had I been the talkative type, would doubtless have gone on to say to myself something like, so that's what's been going on all this time! Far from being summoned to something in particular, specifically the one and only basset horn, my calls (although the use of the possessive here may be misleading for I have never felt that they were in my possession, only that I was the one who happened to be in the vicinity when they arrived) appeared to be dragging me in to the play of the general, the absolutely non-specific, even though, in those early days I had no idea how to respond. But at least some kind of room for manoeuvre seemed to be opening in front of me for there was no getting away from the calls' insistence. Stretched across their chopping board I was being disposed of whimsily in the fits and starts of their visitations. Yes, that was it! I was to be, was already being, sub-divided, chivved, divvied up, multi-schizzed. Hardly surprisingly I didn't know whether to laugh, cry, scream, moan, foam at the mouth, spit blood, faint, become cataleptic, go for a jog, take physick, utterly relax, sing or take a leaf out of someone else's book (yes, but 'which book, whose book?' I began to ask myself). But this was a start. For I could now appreciate that the calls were calling to me on behalf of, if not quite everything in general, then, at the very least, the several, or even, perhaps, in a collective sense (without for a moment wishing to imply some kind of unifying force) the manyness of the several. Their multi-layered reverberations, sounding a chord (or maybe an un-chord) way beyond the discordancy of a simultaneously sounded dodecaphonic note row that successfully squelched the dominance, the audibility even, of any one note, were trying quite specifically and obviously to drag me away from any kind of sparring with a specialism, a one-track-life. Taken together, the calling's entire cacophonics seemed to be saying to me, look, follow the path of the several: not for you the life dedicated to singularity, to the one right way. Of course, it seemed to add, you will get no real recognition for your multi-directional efforts, for rewards, fame certainly, accrue only to the briefly scintillating star of brilliant singularity. If it's fame and lucre you're after son, forget it, I thought I heard it say with some force and not a little conviction. And I think it went on to add that there was no longer any call for the several: "They only want the one now - applied

specificity, applied specificity..." it seemed to be saying as it faded on the breeze's edge. It was a lesson in real-politic that I was to be reminded of many times subsequently as I endeavoured to develop my severalness to the best of my sadly limited abilities and found myself smashing hopelessly into the impregnable defences of Fort Specificity. Indeed it occurred to me on many occasions (said occurrence thus becoming the provocateur of continual bouts of knuckle-gnawing depressive anguish) that perhaps I was only claiming to have heard the call to the many because I knew deep within (or even perhaps at every disturbed point across all my surfaces) that I simply would never hack (a.k.a. make) it as a specialist at anything under the sun (whether our own dear little heat ball or any other sun in any other universe whatever), that I was cut out to be nothing but a dilettante (if indeed the amorphous form (perhaps one should say the unboundaryable form if not the formless form) of dilettantism lends itself even remotely to the possibility of anything so precise and sharp-edged as a cut-out), one who moved capriciously between many nothing-in-particulars without the staying-power, sublimely singular vision, taste, or commitment so vital to the distinguished performance of anything worth performing, anything worth distinguishing, at all. Overtaken by such distressing doubts I learned haltingly over the following years that the only way of putting off the nagging anguish for a while was to immediately drop whatever I had just been engaged with (the frustrations of which had no doubt contributed to said anguish) and throw myself quite at random into another of the many. It was, is, a life of sorts, all sorts. And it had, has, its virtues, of sorts, some sorts. For over time, as I began to find practical ways of exploring the (all too narrow as it turned, is still turning, out) limits of my severalness, I learned to chance my arm (and/or fingers, feet, lips and lungs according to the requirements of whatever opportunity or instrument chance had thrown up), to remain open to the idiosyncratic challenges of whatever came or was thrust in my way and, in turn, develop my own matching idiosyncratic responses to said challenges. I found that I had a certain (a certainty hemmed into quite the tiniest corner of my being by the raging uncertainty that completely surrounded it) flair for taking things only so far, but just far enough to get by (a getting-by that was, is, entirely context-dependent, for the context had to be one in which no great demands were made, in which the low-level requirements were still just, even if only just, within the limited limits of my all-too-restricted capabilities). The modicum became my metier. Or rather I made it so, made it my very own by binding myself to it, heart and mind, hands and feet. People would acknowledge, if pushed, that I displayed some panache in achieving the modicum necessary for getting away with it (whatever the context-dependent 'it' in question turned out to have been, to have been

recognised to have been that is, after I had accomplished 'it', for naturally my paymasters could only know after the event that I had indeed managed to produce a recognisable and, more to the point, to them payable bankable 'it'). After the event they would often say, with perhaps a tinge of grudging admiration in their voice, something like, 'well we didn't think you were going to, but in the event you just about made it.' I became an adept at just-about-enoughness. Indeed, and further, I tried to make a virtue out of my insufficient command (according to any wider and culturally agreed and established criteria of proficiency and accomplishment) of whatever it was (instrument, task, instrumentally specific task, subsidiary contribution to group project, wholly personal obsession for no foreseeable short- or long-term gain) I took up, seeking to exemplify if only to myself (for there were few interested spectators or observers of any of these activities, or at least few sufficiently interested to pass either negative or positive comments on performance quality) the good of pursuing a thing to the very limits of one's (my) own indubitable ineptitude (an ineptitude, incidentally, which rapidly became self-confirming and self-validating both through the frequent repetition of its display and the all-too utterly obvious gap between the level of my actual achievement and the usually socially certified standard of adequate secure a minimal economic reward, enough, that is, to get by, to make out (although the out I made was just enough paradoxically to keep me in with my hirers). And perhaps my relative success at just-enoughing was only secured (and then only tentatively and temporarily) through training and styling myself to become an inveterate hustler, a necessity in the hobbesian world of occasional self-employment where being able to talk oneself into (and therefore someone else out of) the next gig, cash opportunity or fast-or-slow buck, through brash ungroundable but slyly and superficially charming claims about past achievements, current abilities and future prospects, was the make-or-break factor in survival. And surely it was the factor of economic survival that, in the early days, the days under consideration here, contributed to my rather narrow reading-hearing of the frequent calls, for, in the wake of my assessment of Old Slipper's assertion of vocation-as-necessity, turning away from the basset horn's singularity, I confined my self-pluralising largely to the realm of musical practice. It didn't occur to me in those days that the calls could be coming from all over the place (or, rather, the placeless). With my tunnel-hearing, engendered out of the union of a culture-free upbringing and my own over-determined cussed obstinacy, I seemed to have identified the whole calling process entirely with some vague and unquestioned but seemingly all-encasing urge to generate for myself the same kind of spine tingled in me so far by other threnodists (for undoubtedly it was above all the lamentational, the

ululational, the wail, within music's broad fold that boxed my already be-saddened ears, be it liebestod, death-and-the-maiden, two-nineteen blues, a timmonsish moan, or number forty in G minor). Not that said sad threnodes did not possess another, other, side(s) of the laughing-shouting-stomping-snook-cocking-cock-snooking kind, which may have been equally vital in my case to their pulling powerlessness. Dragged along more or less helplessly in the undertow of their plural tides, my low-level (some, possibly myself included now, would call it half-baked) response was to try to reflect something of their plurality with an odd severalness of my own. I began to scavenge the outer margins of music-making (although outer, I have to admit, only in relation to some westocentric vision of music's possibilities) and curiosity shops in a constant search for little-played, quirky, anachronistic, one-off, hybrid, off-key, para-musical, instruments that had been allotted no abiding place in the canon, instruments for which there was virtually no call and even less dedicated music, instruments which composers and musicians of every sub-tradition and taste had rejected out of hand as essentially irrelevant to the enhancement of their, our and music's lives. On the rare occasions when they now put in an appearance, were given a look-in, a spot, it was invariably to point up their status precisely as outrageous or ludic exceptions to the rule, for they smacked of piers' floral halls, fairgrounds, novelty acts, sub-musical jokes, music hall's bygone days, sawdust rings, and mad inventors. Most had lived lives of pathetic neglect and were frequently in poor states of repair and I had to become an adept at bricollaged mending, for lack of funds precluded recourse to specialist repairers. But in the light of my emerging project all I needed was to get them in a condition in which they and I together could just about perform, perform in a way which would meet the demands of the context in which I would play them. And my hustling was almost entirely devoted (and was frequently stretched to the limits of both this devotion and its wheedlingly persuasive rhetoric in this cause) to creating such contexts. Fortunately, as outsiders, the instruments lacked the qualities that might tempt would-be virtuosi, so that in the fields of technique and expressivity, in spite of the mere modicum of operational skill that I developed on each instrument, I had no competitors. I needed only to acquire a proficiency sufficient to pass muster in the contexts in which I set up my performances, and I made sure that the instruments' fleeting appearances did just enough to whet audiences' curiosity without inviting the criticisms which would undoubtedly have followed from any longer exposure of my modicum and their sad state of repair. Over the months, nay years, I acquired a small travelling museum of abandoned and para-musical instruments each of which made distinctive and heavy demands on my by no means robust physique and on my means of

transport (a rusting Bedford van, circa early 'sixties, of the ilk that used to trundle up and down the M 1 throughout the abyss years loaded with priapically inclined rockers). Indeed for any specific gig I had to ensure that, apart from my main instruments (my trusty basset horn, naturally, and my long-outdated C-melody saxophone) which went everywhere with me, only a small collection made the trip, for two or three at a time were all I could manage. Selection was made, according to programme needs and anticipated audience reaction, from, among others, my ophicleide, Dorset pipes, Aeolian harp, glass harmonica, cimbalo, sackbut, Irish bagpipes, melodeon, serpent, miniature harmonium, folding balalaika, soodlums whistle, Pakistani pocket cornet, Kentish bugle, metal clarinet in D flat, crumhorn, rebec, manzello, glockenspiel, lyre, zither, banjolele, strich, mellophone, mellophonium, numerous jaws harps of different size and pitch, assorted saxhorns deriving (who knows how or why) from the long-disbanded town bands of Central Carinthia and the Lower Dolomites, and miscellaneous saxophones (including a sopranino and contra-bass). No drums you'll notice, tuned percussion - yes, in small doses, but drums - no thank you, for it was always and only the possibility of lines, however fractured or submerged, rather than a hammered-out pulse that drew me in to the instruments. It was the near-song, the elusive almost-melody, for which I was (still am occasionally) in some ways, searching but rarely, so rarely, so very rarely, making contact with, a contact perhaps pushed even further away by the enormous toll taken of my already dwindling energy store by simply getting to and setting up the necessary conditions for the performance to come. For not only did I have my selected instruments to carry but, unable to afford any roadies, I had, naturally, to hump my own sound system everywhere, set it up and then check and monitor acoustic balance throughout the performances in order, for example, to deal with ear-dissolving feedback from my wheezing and clanking bombardon (to name but one threat to listeners' comfort let alone possible aesthetic delight). Most of my necessarily wallet-restricted investment had to go on this, to me, ancillary electronic equipment, and, ironically, apart from the moog, mixing console, mikes, amplifiers, speakers, and tangled bundles of cable and plugs, my collection was relatively worthless, for the instruments generally were in a state of heart-rending (well, my heart anyway) decrepitude, often being held together by little more than fuse-wire, elastoplast, parcel tape, twine, raffia, pond-liner, tacks, racquet gut, staples, puncture repair patches, nylon fishing line, and various gums (rabbit skin primarily), resins, varnishes and japanese lacquers (providing at least a veneer, a modicum of a veneer, of respectability to their so dilapidated appearance), and not least the eponymous so-called 'gaffer' tape. But why leave them in this parlous state, you're probably

asking, why would an apparently muse-summoned being leave the main means for realising the calls, for converting them into action, on the very brink of disintegration? Surely such carelessness over the hardware betrayed a cavalier refusal to treat the muse's resonance seriously that would vitiate my entire project? Well that was not at all how I responded to the calls. No, having realised that said calls seemed bent on drawing me towards some site of the general rather than particular, the several and not the one, it seemed clear to me at the time (although now of course I'm not so sure, being, as ever, hounded by retrospective doubt) that, far from being called to these instruments in particular, that is, because of what was specific, unique, to each of them, they were actually nothing but possible and interchangeable means for bodying me (and maybe one or two others too along the way) into music's enchantingly concrete vagueness. Far from searching desperately for these specific instruments, I had come across them quite fortuitously in the course of casual junk shop perusals. Serendipitously acquired, my amorphous collection existed purely to service my calls' summons to the multiple, to dive into my own unfathomable multiplicity, and its sole gathering principle was that of absolute musical marginality. Somehow the pathos of their appearance, their being on the verge of disintegration, aided my attempts to draw others towards my own thralldom to the several, for the instruments had already given up on all pretension. It was all too obvious that they had given up all hope, were lost souls having, so it seemed, nothing left to offer. Dredged from the detritus of music's abandoned past they met my insistently summoned need to heed and develop some kind of felt response to my dispersion across some seemingly as yet (and perhaps forever) unreachable multiple sites, sites out of place, aside from any sites with which I was familiar. And their very fallenness seemed to make it easier for me to get beyond the initial incredulity and guffaws that the sight of the instruments provoked, for all I had to do then was to reveal that they still retained their potential for striking music's essential spark into being. I found that it was a short step from laughter to tears, to tip the farcical into the tragic, or, at least, the near-tragic. With sudden twists, lurches, changes of musical gear as it were, from the clownish to the mournfully dolorous for example, I could woo audiences away from the ludicrous and plunge them, in what seemed like no time at all, down the abyssal chute into the quavering vagueness of music's at heart simple but unspeakable otherness, in other words into the very drift of the several, to which my calls had already condemned me. Realising, thus, that the instruments' parlous state was a hidden strength, for it was both part of their charm and also, quite possibly, a crucial facilitator of my own ear-catching endeavours, I determined to spend only the absolute minimum necessary time on their repair and service. I maintained them in

a barely, an only just, playable state, and this of course served to mark them (and me) off even more clearly from the shining examples purchased by those would-be bravura performers in cold-hearted hot pursuit of virtuosity's so bankable rewards. All in all we suited each other down to the ground, although, looking back, I'm not at all sure that this shared ground was any kind of musical ground, a shared harmonic space from which something emanated to which agreed criteria of musical judgment could be applied. What the instruments and I did, aided often enough by little groups of others who had fallen by music's wayside, was, by common consent it seems, just another example of not-music. The consensus was that whatever we were about it was just not music. At best, they said (yes, the eponymous 'they' to whom so much can be attributed with such apparent certainty and yet so little hard evidence - yes, it was them alright), you have simply adopted some of music's trappings but nowhere in your performances can we find the least trace of music as such. It seems to us (they would say, or something very like this) that under the cloak of these trappings you are doing something quite alien to music *per se*, be it light entertainment, surface therapy, theatre of the ridiculous or some kind of hoped-for social catharsis. But who is to say what the *per se* of music is I would say *sotto voce* (not wishing to engage them, shy as I was, in an irresolvably polarising discussion about music's in-itself-for-itself). Of course I recognised that in their terms my seemingly perverse determination to travel the uncertificated track of the multiple, quite to one side of the royal road of single-minded virtuosity, had condemned me from the outset to plodding failure, an endless back-and-forth along the underside of music's nethermost. Indeed, for my part, I had long suspected, nay assumed, that music's *per se* was, paradoxically, in some sense general, over-arching, was indeed made up of the several. Surely, I asked myself, it can't only be displayed by singular virtuosity? Might not an audibly and visibly pathetic performance, spreading itself weakly across music's multiple possibilities, open us ever so slightly to this so elusive *per se*? I needed to cling to this possibility in order to keep going. And I certainly didn't need reminding of my occupancy of the failure slot, for not only had I, as you will remember, quite explicitly chosen failure's way, I had gone at it with a driven gusto, a feverish commitment. I had dedicated myself to long term musical failure with a heart-searching honesty, admitting from the earliest days that I would simply never cut (a.k.a. hack) it in the aether of sublime euphonics. I knew I could deceive neither myself nor others. I had had to be up-front about it, lay my cloth- and dog-eared musical cards on the table and leave the scales and arpeggios to those whose aural and digital equipment seemed to give them an unmediated connection to the universal (hoped-for and assumed) extra-terrestrial vibes which they could then translate

enharmonically into spine-tingling wails for the rest of us. Once I'd come to terms with the puzzle of the calls this was no problem for me. Embracing my several, I had no hesitation in openly admitting to and abjectly staying within the severe limits of my by now endemic musical disabilities (for whose steady emergence I was, am, willing to take full responsibility, having recognised that I am my own best disabler) while nevertheless seeking to use these to turn a more-or-less honest rent-contributory crust. Nevertheless I continued to hope (though with no expectation of a positive outcome) that somewhere along the line, now and then maybe, my scrapings, blowings, wheezings and tappings in the country of the several might just crack open, however briefly, the quotidian carapace of indifferent comfort that seems designed precisely to protect us, permanently seal us off, from music's self-and-world-sundering shudder. For some time, then, in this cata-musical mode, I felt myself to be living both up and down to the challenges of my emergent ideal (becoming ever more audibly visible by the day) of convincing weakness, of accomplished failure. At least as far as failure was concerned no-one could accuse me of dilettantism. It was surely obvious to all that I had embraced it with enthusiasm and alacrity, had delighted in taking in great draughts of its stale richness and perfervid chill. Soon enough it and I were indistinguishable - it colonised and etched itself deeply across all parts of my so mundane becoming's surface. This I could at least celebrate (quietly and entirely to myself, naturally, as I had been well groomed in the humble arts of hubris avoidance and the follies of crowd-baiting) not only by simply getting on with my life as a fourth or fifth grade (or lower still perhaps, a lower grade always rising to meet me as I staggered down the lower levels of success's precipitously steep and moss-slimed steps) dedicated failure-with-conviction but also by trying to keep a record of the significant and the insignificant events (the eventless events as it were) that constituted the life of my failure, the subtleties of its progress. In the little musipad (it had a couple of small lines of musical staves on each page for noting phrases, melody fragments, chords, that might arrive of a sudden - I had to be prepared for calls at all times) which I carried, still carry, everywhere, I tried to keep on top of it, abreast of its developments, and thus be in a position to hone my failing's ways. I needed to be able to track its every move. *Aide-memoires* in this monitoring process, my jottings helped me to keep the details of my life-defining and inescapable obsession with the hunting down, capturing and subsequent celebratory memorialising (in cata-music's elegaic mode) of failure's ever-present traces at the fore-front (which, speaking (writing) metaphorically, is possibly also the centre) of my cerebrum. Once bagged, stuffed and englassed in memory's fantastic vitrine (courtesy of musipad and stubby carbon pencil), said traces could be called up

almost at will and subjected to reverie, scrutiny, elaboration, critique, and, just now and then, the odd very small self-directed pat on the back (always provided no-one was looking). In fact I sometimes got so wrapped up in the jottings that it took a violent wrench to tear myself away from their solicitings and return me to my musical mode, a mode in which, as the years drifted by, my explorations of the many faces of failure became, I fear, increasingly leaden and circular. It was as if failure's forces, having battled back and forth across me for years and encouraged perhaps by my more frequent jottings-inspired periods of self-reflection, had begun to tire slightly and were on the way to a stalemate of sorts, on the way to letting failure down, failing it even. Of course, whenever I was in a (I hesitate to call it 'my' mode as this suggests a security of personal possession which, as ever, I singularly lacked) musical mode, in thrall to some passing call, I was still subject to the long-familiar bouts of finger-chewing self-doubtings which focussed increasingly on my ability to sustain the by now deeply ingrained ethic of performative failure, of seeming to be making music while always falling just short through my (no doubt over-) zealous pursuit of the several. Yet the intensity of these doubt-fits did steadily decline as the constant effortful tensions of continually testing myself against failure's swingeing criteria began to take their toll. I seemed to develop habits of response to the now perhaps over-familiar challenges I had to put to myself under the pressures of self-questioning. Repetitions began to creep into my interpretive and what I hoped were expressive musical gestures and practices. I could see that a repertoire of typical responses was emerging which, dulling the edges (and maybe sadly edging their way centrewards too) of my performances, seemed increasingly to entrap the latter in mediocrity's comfort zone. Obviously they had always lacked even the merest whiff of the bravura brilliance of the virtuosic but now they had begun to lose contact with the sublimely disturbing anarchy that can flow from immersion in the turbid tides of self-absorbed weakness. In short I was failing in all too familiar ways, as if the effort of responding in ever new ways to failure's demands was simply too much for me. Perhaps I was losing my zestful commitment to and my soul-scouring need for constant renewal through the challenges posed to me by the multiple calls. It was becoming too obviously easy to fail. And, to a degree this was compounded by the economic securities, slight but steady, that I had somehow won from my sheer pig-headed (as it must appear to a casual observer peering in at me from the outside) persistent embrace of musical weakness. Just enough others were willing to pay to hear my performances (invariably supported by fellow-musicians at more or less the same level of musical accomplishment, although typically with very different aspirations to mine) to provide me with a (bare) living.

Clearly, through my submission to the economy of need (as opposed to that of desire (though the question of whether economy and desire could ever be even minimally reconciled seems to have foxed the so-called greatest minds of our (and any other) time)) and the emergence of my repertoire of repetitive responses to failure's challenges, I was selling my failings short, letting them down badly. I realised that, if I were to continue to try and treat my calls with the seriousness they appeared, from their tone and urgency, to demand, I needed to take myself in hand, find ways of disrupting the doldrums of habit into which my pathetic little coracle of not-quite-music seemed, albeit unknowingly at the time, to have drifted. Yet I could see no obvious way through the maze which I had constructed for myself. I continued for some little time to thrash about within these self-generated tensions, surviving precariously on the skimpy rewards of lack, and hounded by an angst-ridden dissatisfaction that was a doubtless deserved reward for my plight (for the lack, mired in comfort's backwater, was becoming steadily less convincing, its lustre dulled incrementally by the habitual gestures of the quotidian's dead hand). The gig scene (on whose scaffold our musical activities were condemned to hang out and be played out) sadly exemplified, indeed was a living-dying monument to, the pathos of eternal repetition. It was not a site on which my commitment to the free-play of satisfyingly convincing failure could be adequately explored. Indeed its tolerance limits seemed specifically set up to rule out any such thing (and especially the things emerging from my struggles with the suchness of my calls' multiplicity). Even music's supposed aficionados, let alone its hoi-polloi, no matter what pockets of territory they occupied on music's taste battlefield, only wanted, it seemed, to hear the same old songs, the songs of the masters, again and again. We (the band and I) felt, indeed knew definitively, gut-wrenchingly, across all parts of our various beings, that the instrumental greats (yes, but great according to what, to whose, criteria?) had long since squeezed the last possible drops of conventional (that is, virtuoso-derived) otherness from these tired old favourites. Yet in order for us to stay on the road our programming had to be seen and heard to be responding to audience desires even though our, or more precisely my, to say the least, idiosyncratic renderings-in-weakness could only ever be shrivelled husks of once fruitfully ripe song-lines. Just now and then we, I, would slip in a threnody of my, our, own among the war-horse favourites, seeking to get away with it by, say, a fictive dedication, an *in memoriam*, to a supposedly recently deceased family member. Our interruptions in the flow of the known-and-loved were not popular but we, I, felt we, I, owed it to ourselves (myself). By and large, though, we stuck to our task. Ours not to reason why, ours but to perform and die, which we did nightly for the most meagre of

returns! For my part, I was trapped in a vicious circle: I needed to secure the means of survival in order to maintain my failure habit, to provide myself on a regular basis with some kind of near-musical context so that I would at least be in a position to meet the calls' challenge. My little group of assembled musicians and I had different but mutually supportive needs. With my hustling skills I was able to provide a steady enough drip of work for them and, in turn, they tolerated, nay even supported, my musical decentricities, accepting as the price of regular work the superficially absurd effects of my over-determined commitment to just-failing. Nevertheless things were getting increasingly precarious. The mutual suspicion pertaining between state benefit officials and self-employed musicians continued to swell, to the detriment of said musicians (a.k.a. 'layabouts' and 'skivers' by said officials). Our little communal jug on the familial mantelpiece, set aside for occasional treats and slight enrichings of all our mundane rounds, was empty more often than not. The regular replenishment it was used to receiving from the small change remaindered from essential purchases had all but dried up. We were all subject to and felt the pinch. My fellow musicians, essentially the skirted (though slacks were equally favoured on the bandstand) rhythm section of Rita, Conchita and Anita, were scarcely any better off than myself in spite of part-time day jobs. Yes, the calls were still coming, as ever at different velocities and frequencies, but often they seemed to now include demands for money. I was unable to respond to these in effective musical terms, a long wail on my leaky manzello being the best I could manage. Thus flattened neath the buttocks of the economy's deep grey cloud, and despite being a confirmed, principled and strictly practising non-joiner, I decided reluctantly to seek outside help. Perhaps, after all, I told myself, I needed to consult the musician's union's local representative about regional rates of pay for the up-coming St. Agnes Eve gig (conventionally triple time - but for us sixth rankers more likely to be time-and-a-quarter or -third at best) in order to ascertain the tolerance limits within which I should pitch my request for payment at all our usual haunts. Royalties from our 'My Home is my Caravan' (copies of which we hawked from gig to gig in an ancient and battered leather suitcase in which Conchita's father, it turned out, had once carried all his worldly possessions when making his hasty getaway from his pursuing employer (a Brazilian mambo bandleader of some repute) with whose wife he had been having a clandestine but suddenly (caught between numbers *in flagrante* behind the bandstand) all too public affair) had tailed off rapidly after the brief post-release sales' flurry and were barely enough to cover our transport costs, let alone make a significant contribution to rent, rates, and the food needs of five by now very hungry children, especially as I had had to pay our

chanteuse on the aforementioned track, Eustachia Nervenda (her stage name only alas), her disproportionate cut. Indeed it was doubtless she who was largely responsible for the unexpectedly (though still only luke-) warm reception afforded to the threnody (a quaintly dolorous piece in 7/4 time owing more than a little to Bartok's field researches into the Magyartic song-book) on its release, for a photo of her in full songflight and naked to boot (at her own insistence) featured on the record cover. An a-musical call somehow seemed to issue from the environs of her image, a call whose specificity, despite the erotic provocations of its reverberations, was impossible to locate, for she was no obvious beauty. Yet her features did exert a strange attraction hovering above and haunting, as they did, the boundaries of mere plainness. She floated in a zone somewhere between the nearly-pretty, the off-handsome, and the less-than-beautiful, a zone which often, although not, I hasten to add, in this particular case, turns out to be the trawling ground of the essentially plain, though not of course the downright ugly, precisely by being neither one nor the other, a plainness simple in its very mereness, always seeking and often succeeding, through pushing out its grasping feelers, to extend its empire through a conquest of both the almost-ugly and the sub-pretty, an almost-ugly that undoubtedly (as exemplified by this case) exerts a strong attraction on voyeurs of both (or more) sexes. The very ambivalence of these boundaries seemed to increase her attraction, for no one appeared, appears, to know or to recognise when or why precisely the merely (this merely already having proleptically accomplished some of the hideous's work for it) ugly drifts, or leaps even, into the quite simply, for all practical purposes, hideous (or, for that matter, going in the opposite direction, the truly plain). Perhaps the secret of her apparent attraction lay in this very not-knowing. At any rate one, I, might at least say that she was quite striking. And doubtless it was this striking uncertainty about her appearance (and something of the same might also be said about her singing performances) that was the nub of her wavering attraction for not a few of her neophyte admirers whose emergent familiarity with her finally unremarkable contours had not yet bred a nascent contempt. But perhaps I'm making too much of all this; after all I had already decided to ditch her after the St. Agnes Eve shindig, after which her contract would, in any case, have expired. Subsequently I intended to perform all vocal parts myself, although stage-fright and an overlong uvula with a tendency to distort notes at the extremities of pitch by turning them into braying gurgles persuaded me to pre-record all vocal lines with a view to miming in all live (which henceforth would thus become partially dead) performances. Reflecting at this difficult (dis)juncture on the interplay of music and life, with the calls as some kind of vague mediators

and intercessionists, I concluded that, as ever, life was turning out to be a bitch-pup of sorts, of licker-ish allish-sorts, a breedless mongrel, subject to no known canine (or any other species-specific) commands, controls, lashes or leashes. As per usual it was going its own grapeshottish ways, leading us what on its terms is a right merry dance (hear this 'right merry' in a plain north Manchester or even broad Lancastrian accent, please, to give it its full effect and weight) but which on our flailing terms is a merriless insane partnerless *landler* lacking in any of the gentle communal and pastorally symbolic bonhomie of the Morris dance, dragging us along in its wake without giving us the least clue as to where it's heading-and-hearting. From the general tenor and tone of these last words you will doubtless already have received some inkling sense of the incipient, if not already radiantly visible, depressive aura that had begun to enclose me at this time. Misgivings about the entire life-project had been creeping up on me for some time without my ever having put them into so many words. Uninvited questions, rather similar in appearance to the calls, invited themselves into my perennially disturbed and self-doubting meanderings. Some formed niggling blisters across my taut thought-skin. Was I cut out for this sort of thingy-demi-life? And if so, had I cut myself out, or had life cut me out from its own cardboard model book preparatory to sticking me down in its *memento mori* album according to whatever vicar-of-brayish whims it was following at the time? Was my project-in-lack one mission too many, a night-sea-crossing dream too far? Or was it simply an all too pathetic emission, yet another nocturnal voiding into the full and fully baleful glare of the all too harshly brief half-life of night's doubt, falling onto neither white sheet nor black ground, onto nothing earthly, and apparently for no earthly reason other than the bulging opulence defining my becoming's (by now so weary and so long over time) pregnancy. It seemed I was yet again heavy with foreboding's childlessness. It hovered about in the wings commingling with the ropes, drapes, pulleys, flats, backcloths, and prompts that together (in an unfathomably disjointed way) assembled the set of my despair. Perhaps, the musician's union regional organiser suggested, I needed an agent, someone to handle the business side of the business, someone with figures for a head, someone to take the weight of management off my by now bedrooped shoulders (it was already becoming difficult for me to keep the heavier of my instruments up to my mouth long enough to even get through the first chorus, let alone maintain my half-developed embouchure throughout an entire threnody, due to the drooping's rotator-cuff side-effect). Someone, that is, to replace my mother who, Jill-and-Jack-of-all-trades bless her, had to date been handling the bookings, taking phone messages (at least on the strangely few occasions when she had turned on

her rarely worn hearing aid), and generally touting for business in the local tea-rooms where the reputation of her unquenchable thirst had, for many years now, preceded her and often provoked the management, on catching sight of her approaching, to undertake feverish stock-checks, especially of the more arcanelly flavoured tea-bags of which she was a known, almost registered, addict, or to hurriedly turn the 'open' card in their window around, switch off the lights, and to turn the key in the lock.. In any case she deserved a break from the cut-and-thrust of contractual negotiations; juggling with and putting to appropriate work phrases such as 'the party of the first part' had never exactly been her forte (nor mine either). Thus, without further ado or a backward glance at my dear old mother (now casting around somewhat despondently for ways of filling the time hanging with increasingly heavy looseness on her sadly arthritic hands, hands no longer so easily wringable), I signed up with Bootlad Miscaf Svenssonbury, a long established high street agency that specialised in placing the more unusual types of performer and entertainer. It had been founded originally by Desbert Bootlad as a one-man concern, but when the good times had started to roll, as they did occasionally even in those benighted parts and times, there was more business than he could ever hope to handle alone and expansion through amalgamation seemed an attractive proposition, especially in the light of the lucrative finely honed and cultivated client accounts brought by Eli Miscaf and Gunnar 'Sven' Svenssonbury. But, most important of all, Bootlad needed their names. To gain entry to the agency big league it was essential to have a tri-part name that could both trip off the tongue with an idiosyncratic hint of syncopation and yet still be simple enough for telephone receptionists to remember without a second thought while their minds dawdled along in neutral down some side track (nail-painting for example) far away from the gridlock of receptionism's main highway. Euphony was the key here - slick euphony as the means to suggestive associations in the ears of potential clients and customers. Bootlad's stringing together of Bootlad Miscaf Svenssonbury struck, he thought, just the right balance between youthful go-getting virulence and suavely exotic internationalism, earthed close to home through persuading Gunnar to change his name, purely for business purposes, from Svenssonberg to Svenssonbury. Nowadays (I loved, still love, that 'nowadays' for its opening up the vastest of space-times for freeplay while seeming to hold to a direct connection with surrounding realities and the relatively recent as well as the more distant past), Bootlad had convinced the others, it was necessary to dispense with commas, hyphens, conjunctions, in fact all the formal civilities of grammar and punctuation, in the service of pure publicity and the latter's insatiable desire for the profits that could flow from what he termed 'Succinct Resonance'. To be 'out there', 'up front',

leading the charge of the 'agency brigade' as he called it, one needed only tiny gaps, slight pauses, enabling name run-ons that would suggest a unit bonded tightly together, self-sufficient, a nippily mobile phalanx able to cruise the market and the info-high-and-by-ways, shooting from the hip, protected by the name-shield and warding off all comers. This resonance was thus the prime condition for agency-becoming - it made agency life possible. It was, in short, what set an agency apart from other business combinations and Bootlad was ruthless in his pursuit of the essence of agency. Having acquired their names, funding and client accounts it wasn't long before Bootlad began to sideline Eli and Gunnar; they were seen less and less frequently in the office and more and more often on the golf course. He had all the resonance he needed from the combined names of the fathers without their resounding voices as potential interferences in routine decision making and his longer term agency development plans. They were pensioned off, and handsomely rewarded for ceding rights of use of their names. With Bootlad now firmly in charge the agency played to its strengths in subtly corroding and turning inside out the taken for granted fixities of sense and trust in others that have enabled us for millennia to go about and just about get by in our everyday struggles for survival. The agency's deranging (could one even call it decreation in a strictly Stevensian sense?) of the relations between language and sense was allied to a sharp technical know-how that kept it abreast with, and often a jump or two ahead of, its rivals in the client-grabbing lists. Bootlad was renowned for his acumen in bringing together the silicon-whizz-kids and top level punsters (amphibologists to a womb-man, *petits calembours* dripping from from every pore) with first class degrees in eng-lit from our ancient universities. Together they had a happy knack of anticipating the ways critical technological shifts and un-called-for products could be subtly shaped and placed by high- and low-level word-play so that their audience's taste for whatever went into their life-recipes-and-packages was continuously undermined and redefined. In this sense Bootlad was the true heir to earlier but now failed politico-economico-socio-cultural revolutionaries. His agency was invariably the first to latch on to the latest nascent fad, find ways of overdeveloping it and pumping it up to bursting point and beyond, as happened, for example, when, following the cultic explosion of Celtic Little Rock founded by one Yfor 'Dynion Fawr' Bach, B.M.S. soon became the market leader in the placement of virtual (in this case initially bagpipe, then, almost immediately, every other manipulable instrument) ensembles, abolishing at a stroke the need for live performances through projecting moving holograms dubbed with octophonic sound systems into whatever spaces would ensure the largest audiences: what many of their competitors had dismissed as an

unsustainable ephemeral fancy turned out to be one of their longest running and most profitable promotions, due largely to their empirically grounded readings of taste-formation derived from on-the-spot reports from their team of heavily disguised opinion researchers who would pass unrecognised among the throngs of pleasure seekers drifting aimlessly of an evening through the enfolding city's heaving erogenous zones. Whenever necessary the researchers would become *agents provocateurs* on behalf of whatever entertaining product the agency needed to push to maintain its market position. They became past-masters-and-mistresses (for the agency operated a strict policy of gender equality) at fomenting levels of expectation, desire, animated curiosity, and even passing interest in whatever products (for Bootlad everything, everybody, was always already a product, had product coded into every cell of its being) the agency currently needed to push into the limelight but intensely over-exposed inner circle of temporary, always temporary, publicly validated stardom. Naturally, Bootlad saw himself as the limestone source, the rock on which the agency's possibility was erected, of the white light of fame which shone on the disparate whom he thrust before a public gulled into gullibility by his very own methods of taste formation and promotion. And for a time I became, along with my little band, one such disparate. After listening to samples of our work and considering my collection of musical marginals he assured me that, with an image face-lift and slight shifts of emphasis in our content and presentation, he foresaw a rosy future that need not entail any substantial sacrifice of my commitment to exploring the inner and lost boundaries of convincing failure, failure, as he put it, that wears its heart-wringing pathos on its sleeve. "Your trouble to date has been," he said to me "that you are at heart and in essence a comedian, but a comedian who, for reasons that are doubtless deeply buried and of no concern to me, has so steeped himself in the mire of self-loathing that you have been unable to find, let alone explore, play upon and thus milch, that delicate balance between delirium and the near-tragic which will always have the capacity to touch, with but the merest of subtle strokes, the world's hearts. I have no doubts that, provided you follow my advice to the letter, I and my agency staff can speedily establish a market niche for you. As you know our culture has always had a soft spot for self-deprecating failure provided it is laced with something slightly sharp, bitter-sweet even. The top slot for such performing is currently vacant. I have no doubts that we at the agency can soon enough re-present you to a potentially adoring public as just the luminously translucent and heart-rendingly convincing failure, tinged with exactly the right amount of self-mocking humour, to make that slot all your own, at least for the time being. The longer term is, of course, another matter and your position will be entirely

dependent on the strength of your commitment to the very fickle, for an ability and willingness to endlessly re-invent yourself, at least at the surface, as something entirely different from what you were yesterday and today, is the only constant the market recognises. In the end you will have to decide for yourself whether the fickle and the failing can be reconciled. In the meantime, however, you'll find, if you stick with us, that the agency and I take our theme songs from the Darwin-Einstein songbook - Absolute Relativity and Survival of the Fittest! Adaptability to context is all, especially where every context's teetering collapsing self-disordering order emerges from the primacy of the raw struggle for survival. But from what I've seen of the strength and depth of your commitment to failure's true pathos you should stay the course for some time. Incidentally, I note that while I was talking you were jotting down some of my words. Now, just so that you are clear about this from the word go, I never give interviews and I make a habit of suing anyone who quotes me without my personal authorisation for their very last sou." I took his message but was, am, constitutionally unable to stop jotting. Indeed, they were a vital resource for the projects that came out of my association with Bootlad's agency. His team persuaded me that the odd scribbled scraps and fragments already provided me with enough material to generate and sustain several major products (in my, at that time, unboundable naivety I went along with this even though I found it impossible to see anything I did as first and foremost a product). But he was as good as his word(s). I soon had a string of albums out in my own name that broadly occupied the field of so-called ambient music, pieces (I hesitate to call them works), sometimes brief, sometimes extended (taking their cue from various sub-fields of psychotherapy), that circled around mood-establishment and enhancement. Bootlad had spotted ways of matching up my panoply of odd-ball lost-cause instruments with the full range of human 'surface feelings' (as he called them). Using much of the material, the snatched half-phrases, fractured lines and bare notes from my jottings, I developed a form of orchestration that owed not a little (but not too much either) to the Adams-Reich minimalist legacy. With extensive over-dubbing, multi-tracking, pitch-raising and pitch-lowering (and a fair amount of repetition – the true key to the heart of 'the popular'), together with careful selection from my instrument collection, I was able to simulate previously unheard orchestral effects, for no-one had, so far as we knew, assembled whole sections of striches, ophcleides, zithers or whatever screwball combinations I chose, to produce near-concertoes, sub-symphonies, para-suites. My 'Above Us The Waves' suite, performed entirely on what I made to sound like whole sections of jaws harps of different pitches and based on Bootlad's belief that the plight of the whale would help to make this a particularly popular

album, sold very well over many weeks (there was, apparently, a very positive response to it in Iwo Jima). Of course, I and my fellow musicians knew that this couldn't last, that I, with their and Bootlad's help, was in some senses, a fad. But, musically speaking, I tried to wring the least out of it, almost managing to convince myself that to be a relatively short term fad, however briefly successful, was itself iconic of, the mark and public warrant of, true failure. My orchestrations did gradually drift out of public ear-shot, but for some time Bootlad kept me going through slight re-jiggings of my public profile. He and the agency were nothing if not completely dedicated inventors of bizarrerie, something of which was manifest, not surprisingly, in his own ways of being. Now getting on in years but still nimble enough to run fractured and fracturing rings round clients, colleagues, budding starlets, and office juniors, he had all at his beck and call, held in the palm of a hand (the left - he used the right for his currently favourite silver-knobbed and chinese lacquered cane, the knob being embossed with a scaled down model of Foucault's cranium) soiled through excessive buck-passing and palm-greasing. His fabulous personal cane collection (itself redolent, perhaps, of Bootlad's very personal response to the call of the several) had an international reputation (at any one time several were invariably out on loan to foreign galleries or touring group shows) and was especially renowned for its coverage of the late-modern period. Solidly based on his extensive purchases of examples from the earlier and market-guaranteed depressionist and suppressionist movements, he had subsequently built it up through following his own idiosyncratic taste which seemed to vary from week to week, although he claimed that he always applied his personal 'practico-aesthetico-inert' test before making a purchase of any cane. He had once told a journalist-cum-cane-critic that, 'A cane not only has to look right it has to do its job of supporting my now not inconsiderable weight. It has to enable me to stand my ground, walk my walk, while offering me materials for, hopefully, sublime contemplation. I want each cane to carry me to its other side, the cane's beyond. Every can has to be able.' Drawn from every possible contemporary trend, school and tendency, including many tendencies consisting of only one cane maker, his seemingly exhaustive (exhaustive in the sense that it was devoted to examples: he wanted at least one of every type of cane precisely because each was first and foremost for him an example, an exemplary cane, a cane to exemplify the group-type of which it was presumed (by the sub-community of cane critics-come-collectors) to be a member, rather than a cane as such, a cane in and for itself) collection thus included the most clean-lined simple canes devoid of any distinguishing mark other than their sheer plain but strong elegance, through a vast array of machine-moulded, hand-modelled/carved/inscribed (with

organic or geometric motifs and patterns and sometimes combinations of the two, sometimes with apparently random marks and scrawls, sometimes with indecipherable endless baroque curlicues), monotonal/multi-coloured, bricollaged, multi-materialled, light-/heavy-weight, sans-ferrule/ferruled, and even one or two, unrecognisable as canes, that he claimed had been made to undermine the whole concept of cane-ness but which nevertheless met his criteria of corporeal support. It was a frequent habit of his before leaving the office, having staggered doorwards, to stop, swivel clumsily round using his current cane as precarious support, and deliver a brief but pithy peroration to the staff on some aspect of the firm's business or his own peculiar interests. Swaying on his cane, while seeming to lean for support with his right hand on his favourite secretary's shoulder, although in effect, as was plain for even the most casual observer to note, undertaking, searchingly, probingly, cutaneous massage of the nearest available pleasure (or at least what gave him pleasure; whether the recipient was pleased is rather less certain as straight faces were the order of the day according to the informal office code of response to boss's up-touchings) zone with his already bony fingers, he would declaim with his customary peremptorily authoritarian charm something such as (and I transcribe here an actual, but at the same typical and well-remembered speech, that I had jotted down at the time, as was and is my invariable wont, in my little musipad), "It's cane time folks. I have an insatiable desire for another cane, a cane with a difference, and I need it now. In fact, I need many canes to give me grounds for choice. Yes, bring me many canes forthwith if you please. Canes with different weights, balances, responses - rubber-ferruled, metal-ferruled, ferrule-free even! Canes concealing slimline mobile phones or games consoles within their capacious hollows... doubling canes concealing razor sharp rapiers or the smoothest of rolling pins... canes caparisoned in decorative folderols... pliable canes, canes for the disabled-at-heart, useless canes, cool canes, canes for the emotionally labile, therapeutic canes... canes fresh from the hippest of caning studios and dust-caked canes from distant cultures where the hand-loom and the euonymous crutch still rule! Canes, thus, for every terrain and eventuality, especially now that I limp slightly. Yet surely, like all of us in one way or another, I have always limped, nay on occasion positively staggered through life. Looking back I find I have always needed the comfort of a cane's support for the finally unsupportable. Furthermore, my cane is my distinction, fulfilling the dual function of support and drawing attention to, accentuating, the difference of my limping being. Aaaah, if only they made canes purely for the spirit instead of these hybrids that fill my many-roomed mansions and galleries! Yet today I shall make a break with habit and select a cane

entirely on practical criteria - strength, flexibility, weight and cost! Never before has it occurred to me to seek out and select from the entire range of canes, one just for getting, simply for hobbling, by. Yes, and perhaps even for defending myself against the occasional passing raffish rascal, rogue or vagabond. Indeed, in these blighted inner alleyways hereabouts, knobkerries, trusty ashplants, pandy bats as such, have their uses do they not? Times are brazen. Yet I shall continue to tap-tap my way across the humpy-bumpy steppes that constitute agency terrain, always in the hope of stumbling upon new shards of undeveloped talent to which I, together with your own inestimable contributions, could apply my indubitable shyster skills in market-foisting. My limp, I believe, helps secure the sympathy vote." And so on, and on, and on... In other circumstances such an outburst might have been taken as clear evidence of incipient if not an already englobing dementia, but in the agency office, surrounded by blind hagiographers, and simpering hangers-on (from whom, on my occasional visits to the office, I always tried discreetly to distance myself), Bootlad was batting on an easy wicket. Within a few minutes an underling would (and did in fact in this particular case) return with a casket of new canes of every shape and hue from which the maestro (for that is how he liked to be addressed and referred to both in and out of office hours, as in 'Maestro Bootlad will see you now, sir' or 'Maestro Bootlad requests the pleasure of your company for highballs on the terrace at...' and so on) could select at his leisure and in the more or less certain knowledge that whatever he chose would turn out to be a freebie, 'on the house' of whatever supplier might be seeking to curry favour and preference in advance of some as yet unknowable future commercial occasion. Occasionally too, as he was leaving the office, he would turn round and, framed in the penumbra of the office doorway, but picked out by a spotlight installed for that very purpose, eyes wandering vaguely across the far wall above eye-contact level, he would deliver a brief homily addressed to all in general but no-one in particular in which he would raise some mundane clause of company policy to great rhetorical heights, presumably in the hope of concentrating his employees always wandering minds in ways that would enhance both their own careering and the agency's fiduciary power. Here is a typical example drawn at random from my musipad, for I still maintained my avid jotting even under those bureaucratically constrained and all too public conditions: "Beware, my dears, of the swamping powers of the all-too-ordinary... there will be points along the multitude of your ways, inevitably, where the immeasurable and always incandescing pre-mercurial sublime self-involutes into the oh-so-countable busmile of the journey-to-and-from-work. Do not blame this on yourself. Simply make a resolution to turn things, whether outside or in, inside out. It may not quite do the trick

but it should, fortunately, make you late for work, and we, your friendly family agency, always delighting in celebrating the exceptional, will, in spite of your tardiness, stand to make great gains from the fresh imaginative input that will undoubtedly be sequent to your enforced but brief delay. We shall all, folks, in short, be quids in!" So saying he would turn on his heel, arms akimbo and cane jutting rakishly if clumsily out to one side (thus, while giving his performance a jauntily dramatic edge, giving the lie both to his declared need for canely support and, by extension, any trust we might have placed in his judgments and assurances), and head off for his personal horse-drawn buggy (an effete affectation, given the traffic-choked streets of the encasing metropolis, yet whose conspicuous display he felt would assist in marking him and the agency out from its more mundane competitors) to be whisked at no more than gentle amble homewards to their crumbling manor beyond the *banlieu* by Old Ned, his faithful ostler. Company rumour had it that Ned used to be Bootlad's batman in the days when men had an opportunity to be real men. After demob, a lost soul, he ended up offering his services to his old superior in exchange for board and lodgings. They were made for each other, for Ned enjoyed nothing more than flexing his own linguistic muscles, often, one felt, not with the hope of advancing human understanding or for sheer pleasure but more as a goad to Bootlad, to urge him on to more and more verbal floridity. One evening - it seems another world away now - the three of us were squashed together in the buggy (they were to drop me off at 'The Haywain' where I was due to be playing that night) with Ned in the middle, vaguely in charge of Hoof (for that was their nag's name). Ned began to clear his throat, a gob of catarrh-weighted spittle flew past me and hit the kerb with the customary inimitable and self-scattering splat. I immediately reached for my musipad (in spite of the all too cramped conditions making writing a task too far, nevertheless...), licked my blue carbon pencil and waited in eager anticipation. I was not to be disappointed. Gesturing vaguely with his whip (never yet used on old Hoof who could have done the journey to and from work blindfolded and hobbled) towards the distant horizontal line of blue and largely unremembered hills (for we 'dwelt' (oh if only such true dwelling were possible now, here!) in an essentially post-urban culture in which the rural-beyond and the truly distant, the awesomely mountainous and mountainously awesome other, had been effectively collapsed into and were represented as an ephemeral virtual category, mouse-clickingly available in what seems like no time at all as a polychrome shimmer of substanceless pixels entirely dependent on the all-encasing info-spectacle), he began to speak slowly but clearly and with no little intensity of expression. I scribbled as furiously and furtively as the buggy-crush would allow. This is the gist of my

transcription re-framed ever so slightly to rectify slips of the pencil due to Hoof's somewhat ungainly (he was after all some three score years and eleven in horse-years-equivalent) perambulations: "Very occasionally through the fogs, seemingly flung far to the side of our paths worn into familiarity by the horny feet of need, lost blooms of isolation can just about be made out...", here he seemed to indicate a distant grove of withered pawlonias at the edge of a long-abandoned estate, their leaves, as big as the ears of Indian calf-elephants, plummeted irregularly on to the dessicated loam beneath, "... still glowing with the after-burn of the energy they had to generate to cut themselves off, to put themselves beyond conversation, beyond repair. Ungatherable, they scintillate their separation, glinting dully with the virtue of their selfless loneliness. It's for our own good." This assertion about the relation between what was supposedly good for us and the pawlonia's definitive otherness (yes, but to what, to what, I kept asking myself) distracted me and before I knew it I was deep in some aberrant reverie that left Bootlad, Ned and Hoof far behind even though we couldn't be closer (I could barely breathe and my spirations were not helped by the all too regular halitotic waves, issuing doubtless from the shreds of stale beef tucked, since lunchtime, between Ned's ochre-flecked molars, upper and lower case, that, cloudlike encircled our little party as we jogged along). When I began to come to, Bootlad was already well advanced in some answering disclaimer whose point, as far as I could grasp, was that it was not merely the melancholy pawlonias, nor even the plant king-and-queen-dom itself as he put it, that were constitutively lonely but that indeed every form of non-human life was encased in its own specific loneliness. Further, he suggested, we supposed human beings are now beginning to realise practically our own fundamental isolation as we hurl ourselves so furiously ahead of ourselves into our own inhumanity, a process he and the agency, he added, were only too pleased to contribute to, considering the appalling legacy of everything that has been done to date in the name of the human. He seemed to stop just short of invoking a radical anti-humanism, of taking up a position from which everything we gather within the word 'human' might be shown to have been overtaken and overcome by, subsumed under, some extra-human but infinitely superior form (yes it would have to have a form even if said form would inevitably not be amenable to all the processes we humans employ to recognise and plot form) which might have required him to treat us all, all us all-too-human humans that is, as inhuman. Clearly he was stepping back from the brink on this one perhaps because, as a good clubman, a confirmed joiner (army, agency, and club as witnesses to this joining), he believed that the human (as long as it was not treated as both the habitual standard bearer and barbican of an essentially male fort), and thus

its attendant humanism, seem typically to have borne within themselves, however inchoately and implicitly, some passing sense of a necessary togetherness, of a vital being-at-one of babies, children, women and men, of, dare I say it, community (although always and still a far distant community-yet-to-come). I strongly suspected that he wished at all costs (it would certainly be bad for agency business) to sidestep the debilitating post- or anti-human alternative (admittedly as yet some way beyond the foreseeable future but still nevertheless on the cards, and, perhaps implicit in our unstopably driven bewitchment by speed, our one-out-all-out fixation on getting away from any here that we find ourselves in as fast as we can) in which we poor un-humans, a rag-bag of singular lonelineses, would be condemned (or, better perhaps, would have condemned ourselves) to an eternal planet-hopping vagrancy (and all this still managing to avoid the spiky problem of language (Bootlad's, Ned's and Hoof's (other-directed neighings) and my own (not that any one or more of us owns it in any sense whatsoever) necessarily included). At least he left a glimmer of hope for the com- of community without expatiating on the possibility for any actual accomplishment of same. It was as if he recognised, tacitly perhaps, just what a disaster every previous attempt to found and ground a community amid the ruins of its struggle with its immediate predecessors had been. We had in any case reached 'The Haywain'. I alighted with thanks. The buggy began to fade in the gathering gloom, its two gesticulating passengers talking as usual over and past each other with cheerful gusto but without either of them showing the least interest in finessing the other. Such animated talking-past appeared to be the very point of their versation and itself seemed almost intended, as it were, to exemplify the very lack of community's com- that had been their recent topic; the quirky spark that kept their relation alight came from the constant clash of two ancient rusting flintlocks which endlessly re-generated and highlighted their agreement only to disagree, and thus their particularising of the universally necessary non-contractual basis of every contract - trust in and some kind, however temporary and contrived, of affection (and maybe even love in whatever convoluted and strange form) for the other party. And party did indeed seem appropriate to the case for it suggested that each side was already a gathering of several parts, a coming together of these bits on each occasion to form a party's fleeting unity, or, if not unity, at least an alliance that might hold for the time being, always just for the time being, through a holding that could have no definable locatable boundaries, for the holding-in-check, -in-place, of the parties would enfold both of them, and in this enfolding be outside, beyond, each. Moreover, party hinted at the celebratory, the fall-about-time of the memorialising piss-up, the shared and dizzying lash-and-lush-up that at the

time, but always only at the time, seems worth a googleplex of migrainous hangovers and which is entirely sufficient to the occasion and decaying moments of its passing. I felt dizzy myself. I could still just hear the arhythmic clipfer-clopfer of Hoof's hooves, as he, bless his muddied old fetlocks, stumbled (he was still recovering from his most recent bout of sallenders (a.k.a. sellanders) in the treatment of which Ned had, over the years, the many, many years, become a dab hand through dabbing on a range of herbal remedies and poultices the recipes for which he kept close to his chest) on, deaf as a stone, in the general direction of home and the cane mausoleum. I clung on to a lamp-post to steady myself. I thought I could hear voices, several voices, simultaneously. Were the calls finally getting their acts together and beginning to converge on me in and as one babelic scream, out to get their own back for the years of totally inadequate responses which I had so pathetically dished up? Had the combined movements, smells, sights and insane sounds (Bootlad's and Ned's self-absorbed ramblings) of my recent buggy-ride begun to jolt me out of my, to date complete but mystifying, thralldom to the so-called calls? Perhaps an answer was lying right there, here, well - here and there, in my own very words, for had I not just said to myself that I thought I could hear voices, only thought, not had actually heard them? And then again had I not just referred to the calls as 'so-called' calls? Only, after all, after all these years of calls, 'so-called' calls! Could I have been fooling myself all this time through slights of speech, all too hasty and unquestioning slights of speech, slights of speech weighted down by thoughtless thoughts, in which I had so casually elided calls and voices, treating them as interchangeable, as one and the same? Had I endlessly and without a moment's thoughtful reflection translated those odd take-overs I named as 'calls' into voices, which I then assumed (pretended?) I was hearing gabbing away to themselves and me simultaneously? The awful possibility was beginning to dawn on me that all this time I had only been listening to myself, to my own all-too fictive voice-throwings. Perhaps what I (and of course many others, but maybe they knew this already) had been calling calls had nothing whatsoever to do with any kind of voice. For of course coming from within they were always necessarily silent, could not have been already resoundingly vocal. No, it had been I who had forced voices and words into and through them, changing them doubtless beyond recognition, stopping them dead in their tracks. There couldn't have been much left of them, poor things, whatever they were, after I had finished my impositions, projections and voice-hurlings. The multiple, the many, the several, indeed! What could I have been thinking about! Too much, yet nothing like enough of what the calls, whatever they were, called for, whatever that might be! And I still didn't know. Didn't have the

least idea. Nor did I have any idea how to get off this utterly mistaken track which I'd been following for so long now. I'd definitely become set, nay - deeply rooted, in the error of my life-ways. The vague but minatory outline of a sense of an upcoming ending seemed to loom before me, a no-shaped hollow drawing me inexorably into itself. It was crisis time again, but this time it felt like a crisis of a different order to those passing events, essentially trivial hiccups in the resolutely stable order of the everyday, which I had been used to labelling as crises and which were invariably related to the peculiar challenges laid down by the calls as I tried to interpret them. This time though it felt as if 'being', using me as its medium, was trying strenuously to bend itself out of shape, forcing itself back through itself, and thus through me (the little that was left of little old 'me' after all these years of donation to the several), almost to the point of implosive collapse. I needed time to think, but I was in no state to undertake the both ever-so-wide ranging and yet vertiginously narrow surface dialectic the situation seemed to be screaming out for. And I was due on the bandstand for the evening's first set (we were once again the supporting act) in five minutes. Glancing over to the car park I could see the empty cars of Anita, Conchita, Rita and Eustachia; even now they would be tuning up, warming up, doing their Alexander technique routines to defray the worst costs of the stage-fright endemic to all fourth rankers and below. I remembered the blue unremembered hills towards which Ned had so recently gestured and which, as I turned away from 'The Haywain', I could still just glimpse in the far far distance through the by now rapidly darkening gloom. Perhaps, a voice seemed to whisper to me, this was a *carpe diem* moment (although I had always thought it odd that one was instructed to seize an entire day, for surely the essential challenge was to grasp the fleeting instant, however small or grand it was taken to be; *carpe momentum temporis* might thus be a more apposite, although undoubtedly less succinct apophthegm; and if slightly more time was needed, as well it might be, why not hour-seizing - *carpe horam*? Further, might it not be even more challenging and necessary to grasp the night in all its unfathomability in some kind of incandescent *carpe noctem* flash? And then there were those zone-times of transition and mutation - dusk and dawn - when things no longer subsist in their cold-light-of-day clarity; how wonderful to seize them in their essential ambi- or multiguous vagueness. But could one even think of seizing something so lacking in dimension? Probably not. And in any case (in every case?), why seizure? Were we not now adrift in times when something more subtle, less brutal, than seizing's sudden brazen and raptor-like violence was called for? Should we not be considering much more seriously a different kind of relation to the day, one maybe that sought to make the most of the day and its moments by caring

for it, embracing it, protecting it from itself perhaps? In so doing might we not release more, and thus find and eventually make more, of ourselves than seizure, in its self-insulating hardening, could ever hope to deliver? Shouldn't we be trying to save, not seize, the day both on its and our behalf? If so, *serva diem* might fit the bill more appositely). But how was I to know? Pondering these things I tried to stand off from and glance back at myself from somewhere a little to one side. I was not a pretty sight. Still clinging to the lamp-post, my jaw gaped, my left leg was askew and jerking spasmodically, bearing no obvious relation to the catatonia gripping my right. From this distance I was finding it difficult to focus on my eyes as they lolled this way and that apparently independently and, in any case, they were what I was trying to use to catch this very glimpse of myself - I was obviously asking too much of them and myself. Eyes are not cut out for this sort of work if work it can be called. Clearly I was in no condition to seize anything other than the lamp post. Yet it did seem, as luck would have it, as if Chance, seemingly passing by in all her delightfully opportune finery at that very, but still unseized, moment, was trying to tell me something, something like, "...this maybe your last chance, son, I can't guarantee I'll be passing your way again..." Perhaps I was indeed being called, called away even. But not by any voice, no, there was no sound to be heard. Rather I was overtaken by and succumbed to an urge, a sucking force that was withdrawing some crucial part of me from myself and towards a zone of response. The part dragged the rest of me will-me-nill-me in its wake leaving me with no choice but to cooperate with being's apparently successful attempt to turn me inside out. Still clinging to the post with my right hand, I stretched out tentatively with my left and felt for chance's proffered hand. There was nothing there but an unfingerable gap through which I was being drawn, will-less by now and newly ductile, towards the nearby phone booth into which I was sucked, as if by a vacuum. The door closed gently but firmly behind me. So this was what it was to be called! Voicelessly. Truly. Truly? I could never be that certain. But it seemed clear enough, almost unequivocal - the several intoning as one and in utter silence for the first time! Not even a hum, a drone or a whisper, just a reverbless suck-urging drawing me into the calling zone, urging me to make a call, perhaps a definitive call. Most people seemed to wait all their lives for someone, anyone, to give them a call, only to receive it at, as, their very last moment. Now perhaps I was to be graced with the one right call, the call that the moment itself called for on my behalf. But, make no mistake, this wasn't a matter of my seizing some moment which would otherwise have passed me by. Far from it, for the initiative lay entirely with and in the moment. Believe me I had nothing to do with it. The moment, for unreasons of its own, singled me out. Before I knew it the receiver

was in my left hand and my right hand was, unbeknown to myself, already dialling. Stammering into the mouthpiece I asked the barman at 'The Haywain' to call Eustachia to the phone and almost immediately I heard myself, or someone sounding very like me, babbling with a seemingly stage-managed incoherence that would surely help to strengthen what had already begun to feel like, to jell into, a rock-hard case. Feeling more confident, I began to get a grip of the bits that were left of my former self, and, still somewhat haltingly and gingerly, I played the sympathy card (drawing here somewhat on my admiring memories of Bootlad and his distinguishing cane) and explained to Eustachia (soon, I later heard, to become Eustachita in order to give the by-then all-girl band a certain euphonious singularity, but I jump ahead of myself) that my doctor had ordered me to have a complete and long-term rest in order to give myself the best chance of recovery from the incessant round of debilitating nervous migraines, the latest of which I was even now in the throes of, and which so frequently made me late for gigs (the band was often in the middle of their third or fourth number before I would stagger on to the bandstand rubbing my temples and claspng an ice-pack to the back of my throbbing neck). As I had anticipated, although suitably condoling about my current apparent plight, she sounded quietly satisfied and then overtly delighted when, to smooth my exit, I offered her the band leadership, promising to forward to her the gig book containing details of our few remaining bookings. She positively gushed and, in her turn, she promised to hold my chair (as it's called, although, no matter how cumbersome the instrument on which I was performing, I invariably performed standing up in order to better project the dynamics of failure to an often restive audience) open for me in case I should want to make an earlier return than I currently anticipated. Reeling slightly from the momentous seizure, I put the phone down and left the booth. Chance was nowhere in sight. I was very much on my own. But, looking back towards 'The Haywain', from which the muffled and slightly off-key sounds of the opening number were now drifting, I realised that this break with the daily effort of generating a hopefully rounded performance of convincing weakness (a quotidian cycle about which, I could now see, I had become far too matter-of-factly complacent), could be just what I needed to revivify, to take into entirely new meadows (Datchett's other), my waning involvement with failure's weak allure. Why, the phone call might even, I thought to myself, recalling Old Slipper's words, have dragged me at last out of doubt's clutches and thrust me towards a vocation (although what that might be was as yet a closed book). It could be my final make-or-break break and I knew I had to give my performing life, a life whose performances had of late become almost completely lifeless, moribund even, a last chance (always provided

chance would go this one step further with me down what had already begun to appear as my newly chosen, though my role in the choice was strictly marginal, path) but this time elsewhere, on a different site. My head spinning with confused thoughts, provoked doubtless by the several who, not quite realising the sea change I was undergoing, still had designs on me, I staggered back to the apartment. It was empty but spick and span. It was obvious to me now that the children could fend more than adequately for themselves, more adequately indeed than I had done for them (I constantly and pathetically used to excuse myself to them by saying that my mindbody was elsewhere, on other things - they were very tolerant). I left a brief but heartfelt note on the table assuring them that I would be in touch very soon and giving them open access to my bank account containing what was left of the dwindling, ever dwindling, family legacy and gig fees which I knew inchoately somewhere deep down in my slackening surface I could manage without. They were all, in any case, economically active (although not necessarily at work) in divers indescribable ways. Ramming a few mementoes and what I hazarded might be utilities into my trusty tubular-framed Bergen, the eponymous *monsterbeskyttet*, I closed the door behind me and headed for the hills. Long before they came into full view I had turned, or perhaps, rather, was suck-urged, to the left after remembering and pondering briefly some doubtless paternally inspired advice Bootlad had given me not long before in which he had suggested that, in spite of the agency's market provocations, my near-musical careering might be nearing the plateau of its lowly peak and that I should perhaps consider cutting my losses-to-come now while failure and I were still on friendly terms. "I have always found it best not to get too intimate with failure. Over-exposure will undoubtedly lead to you being overwhelmed by an ineffable irremediable sadness in the years of your decline, should you last that long," he had said to me. And he had pointed out that while the agency was willing to hustle for engagements on my and my fellow travellers' behalf just as long as his considerable but well-deserved rake-off could be maintained, he could see the moment coming in the not too distant future when the agency might no longer be able to sustain its commitment to me and the girls (although, he added, he foresaw a definite and bright future for Eustachia should she choose to 'go it alone' - a very striking young woman he had called her without elaborating on his conception of the strike). He had noted, he said, that I seemed to be forever scribbling things down into a notebook and that my eyes, on such occasions, took on a glazed look, as if annealed by some inner-heated phantasm that sealed me off from my immediate surroundings. He suggested that, if I felt that I had had enough of marking time on the middle rungs of musical failure, perhaps I might consider a lateral move and try my hand at

word-merchanting, for agencies were always in the market for those with even half a talent for making something out of nothing and *vice versa*. "They look for twisting bloaters, you know, those who have the talent to swell things up out of all proportion and beyond recognition. If your self-bursting sub-musical extravaganzas, despite their occasional lapses into a certain debilitating long-windedness, are any guide to your potential for turning the verbal world against itself, you could, with a little appropriately channelled goading, have a bright future among the soul-selling poetasters of our obscenely voracious global economy," he said to me. He went on to remind me that his younger brother, Bartleby Bootlad, who had preferred not to join him when he, Desbert, established B.M.S., now ran a seemingly flourishing publicity agency catering to the word needs of several prestigious and word-sensitive clients. Should I wish for it at any time in the future, he had said as he placed a firm hand on my knee, he would be delighted to effect an introduction (not 'to introduce me to' but 'to effect an introduction to' - this was how he talked) to Bartleby. "You've only got to say the word and I'll give him a call," he promised me. Squirming away from his grip, I had thanked him for his kind offer and promptly forgotten all about it until this very moment. But now was surely the time to follow it up. I began to walk with a steadily firming resolution and a lighter spring in my step than I had had for some little time towards Cane House. The hills could wait. Their turn would come.