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Vallon de l'Ermitage

1980/83 [1964-1987]

From: **Friedrich Dürrenmatt** ***Werkausgabe, Bd. 36: Versuche / Kants Hoffnung***
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As time goes by, the entangling web it spins around us becomes denser; already the first girl I fell in love with came from Neuchâtel. Her name was Claudine, or maybe something quite different, and she was beautiful. I was only eight, or even only seven, and my love was not requited. I was angry about my age, and so it's actually only this anger that I remember now, more than I remember the object of my affection, who was seventeen, eighteen or already twenty and a young woman. She was spending the holidays with us, dressed in white she sat at a table in our garden, reading. The table stood in front of a fir tree in which I was climbing, eager for insights. It wasn't until June 1940 that I came to Neuchâtel itself, the Germans were overrunning France. I had cycled from Berne and was on my way to La Tourne, above Rochefort, to a Protestant minister with a lot of children in order to improve my French; I still haven't managed it. Except that it has been widened, the Berne-Neuchâtel road is essentially unchanged (unless you take the motorway to Murten), although a new bridge now stands beside the old wooden bridge in Gümmenen, the curves in Gurbrü have disappeared and in the flat section after Kerzers the avenue of poplars has long been cut down. Neither could I find the old road from the River Ziehl to St. Blaise, as I remember it led past a long wall and was very narrow. My memory of Neuchâtel itself, as it was then, is of an endless road leading upwards, it must have been the Rue de l'Ecluse, which squeezes its way up between the castle rocks and the south flank of the Jura, towards Peseux and Corcelles. The midday heat was fierce as I pushed my bike up the hill, the last houses of Corcelles are still there today. I didn't dream that I would be living in Neuchâtel twelve years later. My origins on my mother's side should have made me suspicious, but I'd never paid much attention to them, they were too complicated, so I only recently heard from my ninety-year-old aunt, from my mother's sister, that my grandmother who, as a widow with children had married my grandfather, a widower with children, came from Neuchâtel, where she had landed with her two sisters, and that a nephew of my grandmother had gone to the Dutch East Indies and had become the conductor of a military band there. But his artistic career had come to an abrupt end, when, overcome by home-sickness he had decided to return to Neuchâtel, and his wife, a native, had poisoned him after his farewell concert in Bandung or Surabaja or some other Javanese town. It seems this great-nephew was a popular man, and on a detour via my great-grandfather and my great-grandmother on my mother's side, the genes which made his life difficult have also had a hand in my life, insofar as one is allowed to talk about hands in connection with genes, and it is conceivable that, if the bandleader had any children, other genes of the same type are still floating around in Java. The legend, like all legends, is a dark one, there was also a d. P. family mixed up in the early history, they could be the de Pury family, my aunt suspects, as she still has some heirlooms with those initials. But I'm not just more or less a product of Neuchâtel; on the Neuchâtel-Valangin road lies one of the country's sperm banks: large, clean stalls, an office building, the waiting-room for guests - insofar as they are humans – like at the dentist's. There are catalogues lying around. Outside a delegation of farmers is being shown round. Primitive sounds penetrate the window: the mighty bulls are trotting around an oval track under a roof, about thirty of them, a chain leading from a ring in their nostrils to a long rope attached under the roof. And so they trot around for an hour; when they are released, the

keepers lead them to a small adjoining hall. The device with the pouch kept at 38^0 does not look like a cow, but the bull takes it for one, the bag is the same temperature as a cow's vagina, it only takes a second, hup! the test-tube under the pouch is changed and the next giant leaps, hup! until all the bulls have ejaculated, while outside more bulls are trotting around the oval track under the roof, mooing numbly. After each leap the test-tube with the valuable liquid is passed through a window into the laboratory. Whereas the atmosphere in the hall under the command of the keepers is rough and down to earth, like in a technical bulls' brothel, almost military, it's different in the laboratory, things are not just done in a scientific-clinical way but also in a nimble, feminine manner, the laboratory assistants are impressive in their white coats: they label the test-tubes, enter the numbers in a report, take samples of the potent juice, place the slide with the layer of semen under the microscope: a teeming throng, the bearers of the genes in which are pre-programmed the characteristics described in the catalogue. One ejaculation contains 6.8 billion sperm, the laboratory assistants check whether these are fertile enough for use; if the bull was in form, the sperm count good, everything runs automatically after the test. 25 million sperms are required for artificial insemination (I'm quoting this from memory), about 250 potential head of cattle can be produced by one thrust of the bull in the artificial vagina. The bulls are now lying blissfully in their stall after a good day's work while the laboratory assistants and their apparatus are still at work, cautiously you pass by the powerful giants, their performance makes you thoughtful. And the stalls have a Northern touch, something Valhalla-like, here you can come to rest, you feel like lying down with the heroes. Only away from the huge buildings there's a small stall, practically hidden, more like a hut, someone lives there, someone whose sperm is only occasionally required: a brown, bearded billy goat, with primeval dignity, stinking to high heaven, both avoided and admired, a mixture of Pan and the Devil, a sperm producer to whom, in a burst of human love for animals, realizing how uniquely lonely he was, they gave a lady goat, and indeed, the pair seem to me like Philomena and Bacchus. We've been living not far from this idyll for a little more than a quarter of a century now, up in a small valley above Neuchâtel, in the Vallon de l'Ermitage, lured here by a letter, it said there was a house with a "built-in library" for sale. The carpenter was still working in the house when we moved in, the electricity had not been connected and I cooked soup in the washhouse. The path leading past our house climbs up the Chaumont along the edge of the woods, disappearing into them. The small valley is closed off by a ridge, the Rocher de l'Ermitage, which gave the valley its name. At its foot, there are several low-roofed caves, more like wide niches, some facing the valley, in which students from the University and the commercial school celebrate on summer nights. It gets quite lively then. Wild talking, singing, later bawling. The girls squeal. The Swiss-Germans are the loudest. They have come to Neuchâtel to learn French, resulting in that Swiss-German patois which is called 'Français fédéral'. Sometimes a religious group can also be heard in the caves: *"Jésus, sauve-moi!"* they call, followed by long drawn-out Aves, Hosiannas, Amens: when I once shouted up *"Jésus, donne-moi le silence"*, it had no effect. It is said that a certain Nicolas de Bruges lived as a hermit in one of those caves, seemingly only occasionally bothered by piety as he also kept a flat in Neuchâtel and made gunpowder. Not much is otherwise known about the history of the valley itself: that the Jewish cemetery used to be there was reported by Abraham Amiest in 1692, but the pious Queen Bertha, who reigned over the Kingdom of Burgundy at the close of the 9^{th} century from Payerne, on the other side of the Lake of Neuchâtel, at that time Peterlingen, banned the Jews from Neuchâtel "sans jamais leur permettre d'y r'entrer". After the disappearance of the cemetery, the vineyards must have stretched up to the rocks, judging by the crumbling vineyard walls. Several centuries later, the small valley probably came into the possession of the de Merveilleux, who were actually called Wunderlich and whose ancestor Hans Wunderlich was a cook for the Count of Neuchâtel in about 1430; the region has an inclination towards culinary pleasures anyhow; in former times before the Celts came, the first lakeside dwellers are said to have been cannibals, as we probably all were ages and ages

ago. When the counts of Neuchâtel died out, the countship was stranded with the house of Orléans-Longueville. When this also came to an end in 1707, the “King in Prussia”, Friedrich I, inherited the territory, his claim based on the one hand on a legal document written by the philosopher Leibniz, encouraged on the other hand by the policy of the Chancellor of Neuchâtel, Georges de Montmollin, one of whose descendants – he has a lot of them – lives down in the valley, at the top of which I live. In 1848, Neuchâtel freed itself from Prussia and declared itself a republic; but whether “it has sunk back into barbarism” as an inevitable result of this New Order, as prophesied by a document printed in Berlin in 1848, is not up to me to decide, the Vallon de l’Ermitage is too remote. The land drops steeply below our garden, our side of the valley is wooded, but we can see over the top to the lake; on the other side lies farming land in the Cantons of Fribourg and Vaud and wooded hills reaching up to the Alps, from our house, on clear autumn and winter days or when the föhn wind is blowing, you can see the Alps, from the Finsteraarhorn over the Blümlisalp to the Montblanc, the Matterhorn is also visible, one tiny peak; all the summits a part of the Massif which shot out of the Tethys Sea 100 million years ago, in several enormous thrusts, the last of which forced the plateau and the chain Jura into existence. On the southern slopes of the latter, both Neuchâtel and I settled. Observing the few million year-older Alps and their foothills through my telescope, I espy the church tower of Guggisberg; my family comes from this village, and I am still a citizen of this commune; the telescope I am using in this case is a large binocular Zeiss on a tripod. I sometimes use it to watch the Swiss Air Force at firing practice. About 20 km away, near Estavayer, targets have been erected in the lake. Through the Zeiss they look like a settlement of pile dwellers, the Mirages thunder past over my head and I can clearly recognize the hits. But mostly I use the Zeiss to observe the moon and the planets. With it I can see Jupiter and Saturn as clear as day. When hunting for spiral nebula, I attach a twenty-two centimetre reflecting telescope, it looks like a primitive cannon, an unwieldy instrument which I used to set up awkwardly and point at the people out for a Sunday walk when they stared down at me from the rocks with their binoculars: the walkers would hastily leave their observation posts. That was years ago. In the meantime, our garden has become overgrown. When we moved into our house, the garden and the steep Alpine pasture in front were treeless as far as the rocks. In the upper garden towards the rocks there were a few fruit trees: cherry, plum and quince, but the birds ate the cherries and the plums, the forest was too near. Round the house were vegetable beds, bordered with white Jura stones. The beds looked like graves. The owner of the house had lived from the garden and wouldn’t have any trees round the house, the house was exposed to the blazing sun, a yellow cube with a flat roof (the first one in Neuchâtel), which looked like a squashed hat. It was too remote for the people of Neuchâtel, said the owner on selling it to me, in order to reassure me, as somehow I sensed another reason, and hardly had we moved in when all was revealed: the flat roof was not watertight. We called in an architect. The roof would have to be replaced. It would cost one tenth of the price of the house. Having already had to borrow the money for the house I couldn’t see my way to replacing the roof. In anticipation of the imminent floods, a few weeks after the first performance of *The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi* in Munich, I was sitting in a café, feeling depressed, when an enormous old man sat down and introduced himself. From his name he must have been from the same commune as me and he did, in fact, come from Guggisberg; furthermore, he had just left Witzwil prison and was enjoying his first hours of liberty after several months. In the course of our conversation, I told the man from Guggisberg about my leaking roof, as he had formerly been a master builder. Whether a door led to the roof, he asked. I said it did. Whether the door was made of iron, he then asked – we were already on our second carafe of Fendant – I nodded again. Then he knew what the trouble was, said the man who came from Witzwil. He would repair the roof for me, it would cost me five Francs. We drank our third carafe of wine, then he bought sailor's putty from Schneitter the chemist's and we made our way to the leaking house. He hammered the concrete under the iron step, used up the sailor’s putty and the roof was watertight and stayed

watertight until I had the house renovated thirteen years later. I'm still grateful to the man today. Later we began planting trees, redesigning the garden over and over again, building a swimming pool and a studio, instead of vegetables came flowers, then instead of flowers bushes and new trees, and now, after more than twenty-five years, our garden has become a part of the forest. But not only our garden, the valley is becoming overgrown, too. Although the woods above our house, on the other side of the path, seem to have remained the same, the pine, beech and oak trees which make up the main stand have grown; when you go up there, it is less tended, more overgrown than before, only with difficulty can I get through to it. Private property. The woods on the other side of the rock belong to the commune. My daily walks lead through them, in the past ten years accompanied by my two Alsatian dogs, with whom I speak Bernese dialect. For the last three years they have been another pair, but I haven't changed the names. The walk is always the same: a circular walk, whereby I sometimes change the direction. I like to think things out during my walks, I hardly notice the woods; in one place still lies the same decaying tree trunk over which I stepped the first time with my not yet five-year-old son holding my hand. A forest changes only imperceptibly, but ours has been thinned out in the last three years. It was as if I had lost the forest. Whereas before I went through thick undergrowth with my dogs, now the ground emerged, erratic blocks of stone appeared, unnoticed before. It is only recently that I've got used to the thinning out. But not only the woods have changed, also Neuchâtel, even if I only noticed this change gradually, too. Not for nothing did someone seem surprised recently that I never use the German name 'Neuenburg': if I was able to say 'Neuenburg', I would have accepted the town, but as 'Neuchâtel' I keep it at a polite distance, we have never become quite intimate. There are still parts of the town that I don't know, as once, with a psychiatrist friend of mine, when I was wandering down from the station to his flat, down the steps, through arcades of which I had no idea, past a niche in the wall full of messages written in chalk: 'Cherche jeune fille, 15 ans, pour faire l'amour', etc. And when I drive from the main post office towards the station, on my left, hidden behind the houses, I also come across a little palace, which I planned to have a closer look at some while ago, however it took more than twenty years for me to notice it, and so I've never had a closer look at the little palace and will probably never do so. As far as the main post office at the harbour is concerned, however, it was the ugliest building in the town when we first moved to Neuchâtel. The palace-like construction made of yellow Neuchâtel sandstone, built at about the turn of the century, is permeated with a belief in the postal service's mission to unite the peoples of the earth, under its gables, above the top row of windows are chiselled the names of long-extinct states, names like Serbia and Montenegro, here they have survived. Today, the post office, having been renovated, has become one of the most beautiful buildings in the town, transfigured by the magic of nostalgia, as a pleasant contrast to the new buildings, which couldn't be halted in Neuchâtel, either: they have taken root here, as in other towns. The original town is no longer visible from the motor-boat of my theatrical producer; it has become one of the suburbs of the suburb of Sérrières, which dominates with its skyscrapers. It is difficult to make out where Neuchâtel lies, the castle and the cathedral can almost only be discovered by chance and the Old Town is as if buried. I sometimes take people to the cathedral, the 'Collégiale'. The tomb of the last counts of Neuchâtel is not without its comical side. As it was formerly at ground level, the once recumbent and praying counts, still in their armour, have taken on importunately homosexual attitudes now the tomb has been placed upright, and in the castle where Parliament used to meet, my son, who refused to continue doing his military service, was condemned to three months in prison because his decision was not compatible with the categorical imperative of Kant. When I then asked the judge what he understood by Kant's categorical imperative, he looked at me suspiciously, and then decided that it was not up to him to discuss this with me, Berne had ordered it. That Neuchâtel has been covered with a stone carpet in other respects, too, has its reasons: as the town climbed up the rocky ridge of the Chaumont, it threw all that was hacked and shovelled out into the lake, whose shores are

gradually making it narrower. The town also has the peculiar characteristic of turning its back on the lake. Although the boats and yachts bob about on its surface, at night the banks, the ‘école de maturité’, the post office, the art museum on its bank look like dead blocks of wood with their lack of light. Neuchâtel is a town of walls. Not for nothing were there two building contractors among their its rulers, whose families came from Italy and Ticino. One of these secret rulers, who is also under the earth now, I often saw in the “Rocher”, the restaurant of my friend Liechti, I mean in the part where I go for a glass of wine, and not the room at the back where it becomes an eating-place, a well-known restaurant. At first sight, he looked like a foreman from one of his many building-sites, but he radiated a rare air of calm and confidence: the calm of the really powerful – that’s how I imagined Ernst Jünger’s head forester. He greeted me politely. The malevolent remarks I made to him from time to time about F.C. Xamax were met with equanimity. With this football club he and his clan were trying to curry favour with the population; and this club means something to me too, as among the few rudiments of Neuchâtel that are visible from our garden are, besides three house roofs, also the football ground, to be seen over the trees of the opposite side of the valley and the tower of the Catholic church down by the lake. The shouts of the spectators resound in our direction when there’s a goal, when the club loses it’s deathly quiet. But not only the noise of the football fans reach us, also that of the festivities in the town: brass bands, drums, the music of the fairground in the square next to the post office, and sometimes, when returning by car from Zurich or Berne at night, I see people sitting packed together in front of the ‘Escale’, or opposite, outside the Café ‘Du Théâtre’, I remember the times when I used to try to feel at home in Neuchâtel. There are several reasons for the failure of this attempt: I had never had a special relationship with French culture, and whatever took place outside the latter did not count for Neuchâtel. In addition, the writer Ludwig Hohl lived with us during our first year. Not voluntarily, a sculptor we both knew had phoned from Geneva, saying that Hohl was in Bel-Air psychiatric clinic, I should get him out. He had, either out of protest against the city or as a protest against the humiliating conditions in which he found himself, started firing around wildly in a Geneva street, whereupon the police had taken him to the municipal psychiatric clinic. I had known Hohl since the years I had spent above the Lake of Bienne. He had phoned me one night, he was in the Hotel ‘Kreuz’. As the funicular had stopped for the night, I walked down through the vineyards to the village and found Hohl in the 'Kreuz’. But I’d hardly said hello than we were arrested by two policemen. Trying to phone me, Hohl had twice mistakenly dialled the number of the police station in Twann and said angrily that there was a murderer sitting in the ‘Kreuz’; only then had he succeeded in dialling my number. With difficulty I was able to calm down the policemen, not without a fine, but I was glad that I could at last climb up with Hohl to the ‘Festi’, where I lived with my family. It was a bright full-moon night, the vineyards were lit up almost as by daylight, if with a more blue-white light. I walked on ahead, uphill towards the ‘Festi’, Hohl a few metres behind me, constantly reciting in a loud voice: “That you can’t come to an end makes you great.” Suddenly, the Goethe quotation sounded somehow muffled. I turned back. Hohl was nowhere to be seen. I went down the vineyard, shouting: “Ludwig, Ludwig!” Faintly, as if from below the earth, I heard: “That you can’t come to an end makes you great.” Finally I found him, he had fallen down a drain-hole, and I could hardly get him out again. But otherwise his stay on the ‘Festi’ at Ligerz was not totally uncomplicated either. He had a daughter from his divorced wife, she was in a children’s home in a village in the Jura. Hohl devised the most complicated plans in which he climbed a mountain from where he could watch his child through a pair of binoculars, he made calculations about when he should set out, etc., but he did not carry out any of his plans, once it was the weather, then it was the binoculars that he didn’t trust. Then he went back to Geneva. The news that he had been taken to the psychiatric clinic worried me. I went to Geneva. I found my sculptor friend in a bar, fat and drunk between two equally fat and drunk prostitutes, the four of us proceeded by taxi to the psychiatric clinic to save Hohl, somehow I managed to persuade the prostitutes not to go

into the clinic with me, the drunken sculptor was enough of a liability. The senior consultant did not receive us too cordially either, especially when the sculptor started to rave. I was finally glad to get out of the clinic at all – albeit without Hohl, but with the cursing sculptor. It was not until a week later that I succeeded in getting Hohl out. I went without the sculptor this time. I had to promise to take Hohl with me to Neuchâtel. Hardly had we left the clinic than he stopped the taxi and disappeared. I thought he had made off when he returned with two bottles of rum. He spent the journey to Neuchâtel in a third-class compartment, asleep above me in the luggage-rack. Living with him was not easy. The children were still small, my mother-in-law lived with us, the house was overcrowded. Hohl lived in a room on the ground floor, towards the path which led up to the Rocher de l'Ermitage. He had criss-crossed the room with string, to which his aphorisms were attached by clothes pegs and under which he moved around like under a spider's web. His work consisted not of rewriting his aphorisms but of reordering them. He worked in the morning, then we weren't allowed to speak to him, even my wife's morning greeting was considered an affront. I worked at night, when he wanted to talk to me. We were each other's downfall. As he used to shout his aphorisms out of the window, wildly gesticulating, and because he loved to recite Rilke's *Requiem* loudly in the woods under the rocks, he amazed and frightened the mostly aged people from the old people's home who used to stroll up the Vallon de l'Ermitage: the first summer we spent in Neuchâtel, the Neuchâtelois thought Hohl was me, pitying my wife for being married to such an eccentric man. Hohl also had difficulties with my children: he loved playing with them, but he did this so intensively that they were afraid of him, sometimes he howled like a wolf, sometimes he roared like a lion, only louder than the original. I spent the afternoons levering up with an iron rod the stones my predecessor had spent his whole life placing in the earth to make a border for his vegetables. I then threw them out of the garden, from where to the joy of my children they rolled down the slope. Hohl often wanted to help me, as he felt a passion for stones, which he found more human than humans. Laboriously he levered one of the stones out of the earth, rolled it onto the lawn, lay down beside it and fell asleep. Thoughtfully the children stood around Hohl and the stone. After about three months, Hohl went back to Geneva. It was a release for him and for us, too. On the last evening he spent with us he acted out all the encounters that he thought he might have with the police in the streets of Geneva. He was incomparably comical. His imminent arrest seemed inevitable to me. He wasn't arrested. Only after the event did I realize what bothered me about him: Hohl was an actor who had banished from his life the comedy that was his nature. His poverty, his low living were an act. He aimed at tragedy. That also explained his style: sentences chiselled as if in marble, sentences demanding universal validity. He was a person I admired, against whom I had nothing, but in whose proximity I didn't want to live. Who wants to remain shut up in a Cheops pyramid? I needed freedom. But subsequently it does not seem coincidental that Neuchâtel confused me with Hohl. It confused something incomprehensible with something even more incomprehensible. For this town a Swiss-German writer was inherently something mad. Hohl corresponded to this image more than I did: for them he was the Swiss-German 'poète maudit'. For them I was too normal, especially when I began to earn. A woman who asked my children, as they were playing in the street, what their father did for a living, only got the answer: "He tells stories." The woman was confused. Rightly so. In Neuchâtel, writing was done by teachers or other serious people as a part-time occupation. The fact that I was just a writer was something suspicious. My plays were at the best a 'succès d'estime' in Paris, not exactly flops, in any case, so that once, after the performance of *Fous de Dieu (It is Written*) at the Théâtre des Mathurins in Paris, a baker's wife spontaneously clapped me on the back as I was buying bread, benevolently calling out in Berndeutsch. "Keep it up." The first recognition I received in Neuchâtel. Only Yvonne Châtenay made me feel at home in this town. Once as I was about to leave the Café 'Strauss' in the Rue St-Honoré, a woman of about fifty approached me, with a drooping lower lip and Louis XVI face. Her movements were unusually slow. She said something about Wattenwil, a village at the foot of the

Stockhorn near Thun. I didn't understand what she meant, shook the hand she proffered me and answered that my mother had also been born in Wattenwil. I then took my leave. When I entered the Café 'Strauss' a week later, I was invited by the lady from Wattenwil to sit at her regular table, which was in a niche next to the entrance. I sat down with her. She had obviously noticed that I still hadn't managed to place her and introduced herself a second time: she was a von Wattenwyl by birth (they also occur in Balzac's novels), married to a man from Neuchâtel, who I also met that evening. André looked like one imagines a French nobleman, the ancient nobility of his wife had literally gone over to him. The two of them had led a life in great style between the two world wars, and her fortune was used up when the war swept them back to Neuchâtel. He became the representative of an old wine-dealer in Bordeaux, the owner of several castles, who only drank Château d'Yquem and ate oysters and whose wine-list André always carried around with him in his crammed-full wallet. In addition he framed engravings; what else he dealt with, I don't know. They lived in Auvernier in an old house, half a castle, a circular staircase led to the second floor where they lived, they had rented out the first floor. They lived in three rooms full of ancient furniture; the house had belonged to André's father. Unfortunately a painting aunt had intervened from the von Wattenwyl side, her pictures almost covered the walls. I often teased Yvonne about her origins, then she would command imperiously: "Schwygg, Untertan!" (Silence, vassal!). They both had another passion besides music: football. As they didn't have a television set, they came to us whenever there was a match on. Then Yvonne would sit motionless in front of the screen, and when the Swiss approached their opponents' goal, she called out: "Schutt!" (Shoot!). Mostly Andrè visited me alone in the evenings, we used to drink a glass of wine and listen to music without saying a word to each other, then he would drive back down to town in his old Citroën and collect Yvonne, whom he had accompanied to the Café 'Strauss' around midday. I don't know any details about Yvonne's childhood. I think I might have seen her once. I was about seven when my parents had the sad idea that I should be taught to play the piano. They sent me to a piano teacher, to the daughter of the minister of Oberdiessbach, a clergyman's son can't get away from his background that easily. Every Saturday I had to do down to the neighbouring village. Thereafter, each year towards Christmas, the piano teacher gave a concert in the vicarage, where the proud parents watched her pupils perform, among them two or three girls from Wattenwyl as I seem to remember, whether they came from nearby Oberdiessbach Castle or from somewhere else, they were all considerably older than me, but treated with respect, as if they were something extraordinary. To me they seemed incredibly beautiful, noble and unattainable. Yvonne may have been one of them. I played 'Hoch zu Ross' (High on horseback), what Yvonne played I don't know. Later Yvonne moved through high society with the confidence and self-possession of a 'de Watteville', undertook grand journeys, became friendly with a Maharaja, then she was overcome by illnesses as if by marauding wild beasts: sleeping sickness, Bang's disease, Parkinson's, she became heavy, immobile, engrossed in herself, but she had the gift of drawing people to her. With Yvonne I got to know the eccentrics of Neuchâtel, odd characters such as only a small town can bring forth, a large town doesn't let them shine. Above all, it was striking that the regular circle that built up around Yvonne's table at the Café 'Strauss' only depended on whether somebody was something, not on what he was. Thus you would find the poor Russian émigré next to the Cantonal councillor, a taciturn, cantankerous inventor next to the rector of the University, people of whom I had no idea what they did, beside men of letters and teachers from the 'école de maturité'. This table was Yvonne's home, and we began to feel a little more like Neuchâtelois, even though I knew they made fun of my impossible French. But Yvonne was not to spend the rest of her life in the Café 'Strauss': the house in which the café was located was pulled down to make way for one of the boring new buildings that now blemish the town of Neuchâtel. The Café 'Strauss' went under in grand style, its death was also the death of the old Neuchâtel. Already in the middle of the afternoon we met at the 'Strauss', all determined to empty the kitchen, the storerooms and the cellar to the last

drop. Well, it's senseless to pretend that a memory of a certain event has remained intact, what remains are details which merge into one another, losing their contours, but also becoming confused with regard to time. What I remember about the death of this café, or rather about its dying, is a spiralling baccanal, which lasted into the small hours: at first it went as it always did, we sat at the table with Yvonne, André, contrary to his habit, was already there, that was the only unusual thing. The Russian émigré, the "career Russian" as I called him, was maybe a tad more boisterous than normal, a teacher from La Chaux-de-Fonds had, in order to celebrate the farewell, possibly partaken of more Dutch courage than usual. Admittedly, this is all relatively easy to reconstruct, also the fact that I, normally a wine drinker, was drinking 'Pflümli' because the schnaps was being offered by the landlady, is fairly certain. So I was drinking back-to-front from the start, probably all of us were, as from the Pflümlis, the Kirsches and the Marcs we went over to Neuchâtel wine, which had indeed been James Joyce's favourite tipple in the 'Kronenhalle'. Yvonne sat enthroned on her chair like a queen. André complained about the downfall of the art of violin playing, he only accepted Isaac Stern and possibly Nathan Milstein. The forestry and lakes inspector founded a political party with me – and that during the Bernerplatte that was now being served, which I subsequently consider improbable, but everyone who took part in this farewell dinner will, provided he's still alive, name a different dish. The object of the political party was to make the town of Neuchâtel into a small independent state on the model of Monte Carlo. We decided to set La Chaux-de-Fonds free, it was to become the capital of the Canton of Jura, to which the Bernese Jura could be added at the same time, a proposal that was strictly rejected by a separatist leader who was present, while – we had by now reached the red wine – the career Russian was forcefully demanding to be appointed Prince of Neuchâtel, he was of more ancient lineage than the Romanovs, Genghis Khan having been one of his forbears. His proposal was rejected. In the meantime, the first speeches were being held, the cheese was served, the more select wines made their appearance. First we toasted the landlady, then Yvonne. Then the mood became patriotic, in a grand speech the inspector defined the three important parties which ruled Switzerland, the Christian, the Radical and the Social Democrats, as follows: the first believed in God, the second in the Fatherland and money, the third only in money; the Cantonal councillor held a speech against the Vaudois, who were nothing but Bernese pretending to speak French; the bookseller, a Vaudois, claimed that the Neuchâtel-Lausanne express train had recently been derailed because it had run over a bunch of grapes shortly after Neuchâtel. Then, on the arrival of the sausages, the career Russian began to vent his rage, which had been simmering for years against Neuchâtel, where he led a miserable existence. His tirade of hate was filled with unrestrained venom, he enumerated all the faults of the people of Neuchâtel, added up their sins, raised their vices to a higher power; his Russian soul bubbled over, poured over Neuchâtel, gushed over Switzerland, over this monstrous nest of philistines, which had produced such pitiful dwarves as the heretical Calvin and the blasphemous Zwingli. But the Neuenburgers didn't get angry, on the contrary they spurred him on, they clapped, shouted bravo, the more the career Russian foamed at the mouth. The whole restaurant was crowded, from where I was sitting I couldn't make out what was going on at the other tables, all of a sudden champagne was served, everyone was blind drunk, even the police. The party which the forestry and lakes inspector had founded with me split up into him and me, he wanted to set up a second Vatican in Neuchâtel, which I condemned as an unrealistic policy; my translator held a speech against French music; the rector of the University addressed me as "Notre Aristophanes", I called him "Mon cher Hérodot", a form of address that we also retained later; a quiet Swiss-German bank clerk who never said a word, but for some reason had won Yvonne's favour, demanded to sleep with the waitress instantly under the table; the teacher from La Chaux-de-Fonds, a Jew, held a speech in the style of a local Federal councillor, and we all joined in the national anthem. I don't remember much about the end of the café, only a vague groping around in the now empty cellar to see if there were any bottles left, then the arrival of the workmen early in the morning

to begin their demolition work. The tables and chairs were carted off, the Café 'Strauss' was dead. We went on the search for a new meeting-place and found this in the Café 'Du Théâtre', but it wasn't the same any more, people only visited Yvonne occasionally, the food was mediocre, Yvonne's table became sadder and sadder, many of the regulars died, she let in people that she hadn't let in before. She was also confined to her bed more and more often, and as the passion of the Neuchâtelois is anyway to be found in Bridge, her table was often deserted, only the new rector of the University, a theologian, sat there then and played chess with the head of the Jewish community: Ormuzd and Ahriman, whereby I didn't know which of the two was Ormuzd and which Ahriman. When I think back to this time, I become aware how much I have been forced into my interior world: writing becomes more difficult the more that which one has experienced, repressed and not experienced, piles up. This is probably the reason for the difficulties I have with Neuchâtel: my work has inserted itself more and more relentlessly between myself and the town. I'm not conscious of it any more. Not due to neglect, but out of self-defence. And not only the town. Visitors often ask me how I am able to write with the nine over-dimensional figures of the 'Salvation Army' by Varlin, with this large painting, in my study: how could I stand them when I write (they're in my studio now). And who doesn't admire our view? I'm only rarely conscious of it, for short moments, suddenly. From the farm at the bottom of the valley the cows used to trot up to the pasture in front of my garden on summer evenings. At night, their bells sometimes sounded near, sometimes farther away, and two years ago they pushed their way in through the open garden gate in the early hours of the morning. The dogs barked and raged, drove out all the cows but one. Helplessly, the huge animal was standing half in the kitchen when I came down, she glared at me, then fled to the pergola, however the cow didn't then go through the open garden gate but stood, mooing gloomily, having half broken through the protective roof over the dog kennel. The farmer that I called and who came with his tractor, stared at the cow in amazement, he'd never seen anything like it before, then he released the cow from her predicament. It was summer, 5 a.m. I went through the now cow-free garden, looked down the Vallon, the lake was shining like a mighty mirror, I saw everything as if for the first time, I was part of a vast landscape, not as formerly in the labyrinths and caves of my youth, when I was surrounded by the Emmental, with its fir-woods. This year the cows didn't come, the nights are even quieter than usual, now and again a plane, only towards morning can you hear the sounds reverberating from the station. The changes in the Vallon occur imperceptibly: I used to be able to watch the football matches on the Maladière through my telescope, now the trees down on the Rue Matile and in my garden have become too tall; the Catholic church from the end of the previous century has long lost its rather English pseudo-Gothic appearance, the merlons of the red tower became the victims of an architect who wanted to modernize the tower, thus making it really ugly. The soothing power of nostalgia just won't come, it'll take another century. The town, however, is not only concealed from our house by the wooded slopes of the little valley, over which I can see the lake, but above all by myself, as I moved here so as not to have to take part in cultural life. I make culture myself, and I dislike going to the theatre in Neuchâtel as much as I do in Zurich or in Munich. I don't like going to the theatre at all. But there are always social obligations and so I fled from the Swiss-German culture to Neuchâtel. Not that I'm completely free here. It's true that the theatre next to the Town Hall is small and in need of repair – and I was glad that the Gala Karsenty used to play there, nobody expected me to go – but when the Théâtre de l'Est from Strasbourg came with *Romulus the Great* and *The Visit*, my attendance was indispensable; I sat there as if on needles, as a vehicle of culture so to speak, although the performances under the direction of Gignoux were admirable. But it doesn't speak against the town that the plans for a new theatre have not yet been realized. Better no theatre life than a heavily-subsidized mediocre one, as it the case in the Swiss-German part of Switzerland. Our modern times have driven the theatre from the stage. But is it not thanks to me that the natural order of the Vallon de l'Ermitage has been preserved for so many years. I owe this to my neighbour, the notary, an

old bachelor who lives in an old villa about two hundred metres below me, before the valley starts to rise. We have only recently begun greeting each other again when we eat, as far apart as possible, in the ‘Rocher’. I acknowledge him, politely nodding; he responds unctuously, overdoing the politeness: an old man with character. Besides the steep meadow below my garden and under the rocks, he owns almost all of the Vallon, including the dilapidated farmsteads, whose inhabitants are reduced to sighs by his moods as were the peasants under the bailiffs in former times: the present farmer must be the fourth we have experienced. The first time I visited the Maître in his office in town in order to buy my present house with my borrowed money, he eyed me suspiciously. He was merely the owner’s notary, but still the crucial man. Nobody in town dared to gainsay him, and certainly not the old municipal engineer who wanted to sell me the house. I saw my chances sinking. The Maître’s suspicions were not unjustified. My appearance was dubious. I was wearing a long coat that was far too loose on me, a present from an opera singer, it had become too loose for him, too. The Maître was displeased. But into his sceptical expression there came a gleam of aloof benevolence when, in reply to his question, I assured him that we didn’t have a dog – a man had been to his office before me, wanting to buy the house to set up a dogs’ home, and because the Maître hated dogs he had prevented the sale. My doglessness meant that he didn’t put up any legal resistance in my case. A certain friendly neighbourliness developed, in accordance with the naturally reserved Neuenburg manner, admittedly; the Maître was, like many others in the Canton, Bernese by origin. We visited him once, and once he visited us. We dined in the ‘built-in’ library by candlelight. Then an old colonel who we knew from Berne gave us his old dog. The friendly patrician parted unwillingly from his pet, but it gave him an allergy and we couldn’t resist his pleas. It was a cocker spaniel, a dog that could make you really mad, so fawning was it. It never wanted to be separated from me, followed me around. I unintentionally shut doors in front of it and a constant whimpering filled the house, in the garden it would bark. The Maître regarded this dog as a breach of trust. I freely admit that this yelping also made me irritable. Unfortunately, the Maître began his campaign against our dog with registered letters, he sent us one after the other into the house, instead of persuading me over a good bottle of wine to give the dog to some other dog-lover, all the more as I wasn’t actually a dog-lover myself, instead of this his registered letters made one of me. And I was so careless as to talk in the ‘Strauss’ about this war of dogs between the Maître and myself, and in answer to the question as to what I had replied to him, I fibbed – more out of embarrassment, because I never answer letters, than out of arrogance – that I had written to the Maître saying that I had read his letters to my dog in the hope the dog would take them to heart. My fib appeared in the newspapers and relations with my neighbour deteriorated. We no longer greeted each other. The cocker spaniel grew very old. He lived together with the cats that we had at the time. At first there was just one that we had brought with us from the ‘Festi’, but she had up to sixteen kittens each year. I gave the first eight to a the farmer down in the valley to kill. He looked at me and then took the animals, without saying a word. At that moment I knew that I was a coward in his eyes: anyone who keeps cats must also be able to kill them. The farmer went off with the kittens. From then on I killed the kittens myself. I examined them, left one tom for the female cat and took the others to the orchard, dug a hole, threw them in, shovelled earth on top, stamped down the pit, over the course of six years I had killed over eighty kittens, I felt like a feline Eichmann. Our house was teeming with tom cats, the she-cat kept on having kittens. When her time came, she crept around me purring, finally placing herself on my typewriter. Then I knew what I had to do. I prepared a box for her, filled it with rags, put milk at the ready, she began to produce the kittens and I to kill them. Then came the great cat epidemic. A doctor in the South of France had released a bacillus. He wanted to get rid of the rabbits that were ravaging his garden, they no longer ravaged it afterwards but the doctor had started an epidemic: the bacilli also attacked cats. Not only French ones but also ours, the borders did not offer any protection. First the cats became lame, crept round the house, crying pitifully and dying after three days. This gradual death

went on for two weeks. Only the she-cat stayed alive. I had her doctored. From then on she changed, began to stray, finally going away for good. The cocker spaniel was alone, blind, even his sense of smell became weak. He like to stay in the kitchen best. We bought a Bernese mountain dog from a farmer in the Jura. An enormous animal. But the way the farmer handled the Bernese mountain dog should have made me suspicious: he treated him like a dog, hitting him brutally, kicking him. Buddy was fearful and later became dangerous. We built a kennel for him. The first day he ranted and raged in it, gradually he got used to us, but it was too much for the Maître. He filed a suit against us with the local authorities. Directly between the two plots, between his and mine, I had erected a building. The local authorities informed him of their decision whereby the building only consisted of one wall and an asbestos roof, the kennel below this could not be described as a building. My neighbour's animosity grew. The Bernese mountain dog could not be controlled, from the roof of his kennel he could easily get to the road. He sometimes trotted into town, lying down in front of any old front door. We got phone calls from people saying that they didn't dare leave the house. With difficulty I would take the dog back home. Then the beast settled down behind the Maître's hedge, the children called me, people out for a walk and small children were staring through the hedge at this mountain dog, almost as big as a St. Bernard, in the garden stood the Maître, stiff and furious. I wanted to lead the dog back through the hedge, the hedge was impenetrable, I had no choice but to make a detour via the farmhouse at the bottom of the valley. But the Maître ordered me to go through his garden. I hesitated, the children were on tenterhooks. What was Papi going to do? The enormous dog was quivering with fear, for his sake I obeyed the Maître, went through his garden, pulled the dog out from behind the hedge, and went back with him through the garden. The Maître had won and greeted me, enjoying his victory, in perfect German. I shook his hand, ashamed of my 'lack of character', and decided to ignore him from then on, and so we ignored each other. The fate of the Maître, mine and that of the Bernese mountain dog took their course. We all three remained true to our principles, all three of us being after all Bernese by origin. The mountain dog slowly developed into a beast that guarded us fanatically. When my father went for a walk, he was refused entry to the garden by Buddy; a director who was staying with us and went for a dip in the swimming-pool between the lower and upper houses was not allowed to leave the water until the maid rescued the half-frozen theatre man; then he started to attack people, first a Danish journalist. I hadn't wanted to receive him originally, then agreed to half an hour and – after I had taken him to hospital – he had to stay with us for three more days. Then he bit a sculptor, then a teacher who entered our garden in spite of my warning – he claimed he knew how to get on with Bernese mountain dogs – then one of my son's friends, then the sculptor again, after that the two daughters of our garage-owner – that they were collecting our car for a service must have seemed like robbery to the brute – he also bit the beekeeper and finally he bit the gamekeeper, four hours it took to sew him up in hospital. In spite of my wife's pleas, there was no other way, I had to do what I should have done long before: it was Christmas, the tree was lit, I took the Bernese mountain dog to the same vet who had arranged for us to have the dog in the first place. The dog followed me willingly, he loved sitting in the back of the car. He didn't suspect anything at the vet's either, he licked my hand as the vet gave him the injection, then he lay down in an orderly way, slowly, as he always did, as if to go to sleep. "When will he be dead?" I asked. "Now", answered the vet. But his death troubled us less than that of the little three-coloured papillon who was run over a few metres below our house. The butterfly dog was a kind of small fox with enormous bat-like ears and a mighty tail that fell on his back like a waterfall of white hair. If I have ever truly loved a dog it was him, although he actually kept me at a distance. Only when there was a storm did the little dog press himself against me and scratch me impatiently, probably expecting me to stop the storm. In 1969 my wife went to the USA with my daughter and my sister. I had completed my first year in Basel. *King John* had been premiered, later *Play Strindberg*, I was irritable, full of plans, I wanted to work. I felt that I was neglecting my

family, they should do something: a trip to America would be good for them. Now they were away, Easter came, then Easter Monday, the maid was free, my mother had come over from Berne. On Tuesday evening, I was sitting in the study with my son. We were taking about theology. As my father had once tried to persuade me to become a Protestant minister, I was now trying to persuade my son not to become one. Both attempts ended unsuccessfully. Towards one o'clock I went to the lower house, accompanied by the little dog. I was tired. I got undressed. On the lavatory came the pain. Like a sudden onslaught. At first I thought it was heartburn, took Ebimar, went to bed, the little dog cuddled up to my neck, his warmth did me good, although the pain increased. I got up, went down to the library, fetched *Wendepunkt* by Klaus Mann – a book that had once bored me – to check a point that Peter Bichsel had mentioned a few days before. The little dog accompanied me. Back in my bedroom I lay down again. The dog cuddled up to me. The pain became sharper. I tried to distract myself by reading, the book didn't appeal. I was angry that I hadn't taken a different book, and didn't have the strength to get another one. My abdomen was distended. I kept going back to the bathroom to sit on the lavatory. The dog followed me, fearful, restless. They I lay down in bed, with a piercing pain from the middle of my chest to under my chin, my left armpit hurt, also my left arm, my left hand was itching. The dog slid higher as if he didn't want to burden my left shoulder. I knew that I had had a heart attack but went on calmly reading the book that didn't interest me, stubbornly – I could just as well have read the telephone directory – the little head of the dog nestling against my cheek. Sometimes I walked up and down the bedroom, the pain filling me so relentlessly that I had to concentrate on it to stay alive. I was completely apathetic, hardly aware of the dog which, as I walked up and down the room, sat down in the middle of the room. I didn't think of calling my mother, who was sleeping in the next room. I had forgotten her, and I didn't call my son in the upper house either, I had forgotten him too. I just didn't think of it. Only the thought that I wouldn't see my wife again made me feel sad, if I wasn't too apathetic to be sad. The thought crossed my mind that it was actually best to take French leave. Then I reached out again for the book, a little surprised at what was probably to be my last reading matter – what was Klaus Mann to do with me? – found that Peter Bichsel had been mistaken, went on reading mechanically all the same in order to dull the pain. I had imagined death differently. Towards half past six I fell asleep, at half past seven I woke up, the absence of pain woke me. The little dog lay rolled up in a ball beside me. I stretched, happy: false alarm. An indescribable feeling of health flooded me as suddenly the pain hit me again, with full power. It was as if my chest was being lacerated by a knife, but at the same moment I became active, maybe because there was no protection against this pain. I took the phone book, tried to find a doctor, there was a name at the back of my mind, but I couldn't remember it. I phoned my son, he should take me to a doctor, any doctor, I got dressed; went downstairs, accompanied by the dog. The maid had come back from her holiday, looked at me full of fear: I was ill, I shouted at her – senselessly – asking where my son was. He was already waiting in the car, drove me to town. It hadn't been easy to find a doctor, most of them were still on holiday, and then I was already lying on the examination table: electrocardiogram, blood sample, lengthy prodding and pressing around my lower abdomen, at last I was told the diagnosis: inflammation of the stomach, but that wasn't the dangerous part, my liver was swollen, with a blood sugar level of 600, a sanatorium was urgently recommended. The only healthy organ was my heart. An irrepressible joy overcame me. The pain hadn't actually stopped but the doctor prescribed me some medicine, I bought two bottles at once of a milky liquid, Maloxon, I'd be able to deal with the sugar. At home I went to bed, feeling relieved. The little dog cuddled up to me again. The pain was still there. I finished off one bottle of the milky liquid, but couldn't sleep. In the evening I went to the upper house, I wanted to be distracted, to watch 'The Avengers' on television. Going up the hill was difficult for me. I tried to have a conversation with my mother – starting the second bottle of Maloxon – my mother was in a good mood, I only had a harmless stomach upset, didn't I? The little dog lay on my lap while my mother told me about

my grandmother's death, reporting amid laughter how I, aged three, had come to her worried that Grandmother wouldn't go to heaven, she was so fat she would surely get stuck in the chimney. As she was chatting, I thought of Varlin and how he had painted with his little dog on his lap, hardly listening to my mother. I went to bed with the little dog, took Valium and Peroben, the pain diminished, only sharp stab now and then, I fell asleep, the dog nestling close to me. Next day I woke up without any pain, stayed in bed until nearly midday. At lunch I was so weak that I was hardly able to life the spoon, now I did become suspicious. I tried to phone my doctor in Berne, he was on holiday with his family, the hospital wouldn't give me his address, suddenly I guessed where I could reach him. It was like an inspiration, that evening I had him on the phone. He said my son should drive me to his surgery in Berne in the morning. My son drove me there, I didn't take anything with me – I was still convinced by the Neuenburg doctor's diagnosis – the only thing I feared was an increase in the daily insulin units. The doctor, an old friend, examined me, first of all measured my blood pressure, contrary to his habit he said nothing, took some blood, gave it to his laboratory assistant, prepared the cardiogram, still saying nothing, then cut up the cardiogram results, laid the various pieces on a cabinet, looked at them, said: "Come." I got up, went to him, stared uncomprehendingly at the cardiogram, asked: "Well?" "Heart attack", he answered. But the sugar was in order. The diagnosis was a shock. The doctor acted cold-bloodedly: if I had already survived for three days, I could very well go home to his house for lunch. I didn't eat much. Then my doctor went shopping with me. He played the unconcerned physician, but I felt him studying me. We entered a bookshop. "Pick out some books for the next six weeks", he ordered me dryly. I chose *Fischer's World History*, 30 volumes, whereupon a taxi drove us to hospital. I felt miserable and depressed. My son had meanwhile returned to Neuchâtel and came back with the necessary, among other things also a few volumes of Proust, so far I'd never been able to finish him. Later he brought me a crate of the best bottles from my cellar. The first night passed restlessly, the doctor was called to my bed again. Although no-one knew where my wife and my daughter were in the USA, they were with me two days later. My wife had happened to visit the Swissair office in Chicago and, hearing the news of my illness, had phoned my doctor, they had also already prepared everything for the return flight. The long weeks in hospital began, a grim battle to regain my mobility, the unfortunate visits of writers who did not understand that they couldn't interest me in my condition, neither their writing nor mine, that I talked to myself in self-defence in order not to have to bother with them. The first part of *Fischer's World History* that I read was Volume 16, 'Central Asia', it seemed best to start with something as unfamiliar as possible. Proust proved to be unsuitable reading matter: I read myself into a state of true animosity towards the ego that is pretending to be Proust. Finally, back in Neuchâtel, my wife drove me to Schuls in Lower Engadine. It was June, with snowstorms on the Vorarlberg. The hotel was in the middle of the village. I found it hard to get back on my feet again. The difficulties that the Basel Theatre was getting itself into began to penetrate to Schuls. Frisch, who had already visited me in Berne, was staying in Tarasp. The last evening we spent together is described in his *Journal* as follows: "It's not true that he isn't able to listen. When the publican in Schuls sits down at our table and wants to tell us something (how the people of Engadine fleece the Aga Khan, for example) and then, however, just talks nonsense, Friedrich Dürrenmatt is a Hercules at listening; it depends on the partner." It's a pity that Frisch didn't listen either. I have actually forgotten the Aga Khan story, but not what the publican said about the inhabitants of Schuls, for example about a carpenter the publican thought to be the only one who spoke just Romansch and didn't understand German. One morning he found the man standing on a stool, pressing the palms of his hands against part of the ceiling. The publican asked in Romansch was the carpenter was doing. The man removed his hands from the ceiling, looked up and said in German: "Gott gebe, dass es klebe." (God permitting, it'll stick). Then, getting down from the stool, he added, while looking up at the ceiling again: "Und Gott gab, dass es klab." (And God permitted that it sticked). After this evening, Frisch and I were not to meet for eight

years, we only met again at Varlin's funeral. In July, my wife and I returned to Neuchâtel. It was probably some time that summer that André visited me again, once again we listened to music, my wife laughed at our silence. He died a short time later, I can only remember the circumstances in a confused and contradictory form. He had called me, saying he had been in Barcelona, at the 'Ritz', and had suffered a dizzy spell, whereupon he had drunk champagne, which had cured him, he often had a feeling something was pressing down on his chest, but champagne relieved this feeling. I felt that it was the last time I would hear his voice. Yvonne was taken to an old people's home in Berne. I hardly ever went back to the deserted table in the 'Du Théàtre', there were mostly strangers sitting there. This just left us with the Maître. Once a letter had come from him, I couldn't decipher it, maybe I didn't want to be able to decipher it either. Once I had seen him in Venice, we walked past each other. He's a character, I'm a character, and so, due to sheer character, we didn't have much to do with each other for almost thirty years. I admit that it all worked out better for me: I owe him a lot, he doesn't owe me anything. Thanks to his insight that you live where your house is, and in order to give his life, which like all life is transitory anyway, a certain feeling of permanence, he left the Vallon de l'Ermitage untouched and did not sell any building land. The valley has been preserved for the old people from the home near his entrance, for Sunday walkers and young lovers; and I bought the steep meadow under my houses to beat the speculators to the winning post. But time is mightier than man and his intentions. I've already had to have several trees cut down that I once planted. The town did develop along the lake, past the Cantonal Hospital and up the Chaumont, but there are also signs of changes for the Vallon. Neuchâtel is planning great things: unlike other Swiss towns, it doesn't just want a motorway link, but a motorway tunnel; it's not clear why. In the direction of Bienne, the plain between the Lakes of Neuchâtel and Bienne has already been marred by a motorway, which is actually senseless because it leads into a highway in the region of Berne. It is as if Neuchâtel, whose charm lies in having missed the present, does not want to miss the future. But to be fair, it's just a case of a ravaged region being doubly ravaged: years before, the Cressier refinery was in the plain between the two lakes, showing the sense for which the Swiss are generally renowned: constructing the most dangerous thing in the most dangerous place. The canal between the Lakes of Neuchâtel and Bienne sends the water, either to the Lake of Morges or vice versa, depending on the level, and finally, after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, it ends in the River Aare; Cressier is one of the many time-bombs ticking away in Switzerland. Now the motorway that already runs past the refinery is to be interrupted at St. Blaise, to continue only after Neuchâtel. Hoping to reach Yverdon some time in the next ten years, or even Lausanne, you can race along it almost to Boudry, about 12 km, with pompous exits for the wine villages, which simultaneously place these under quarantine, then it comes to a bitter end. The town is obviously in the way of the project. For the ten minutes it takes you to cross it twice a day in the rush hour, they decided to build a tunnel. Thus the town will also disappear, as I have to explain when I'm abroad anyway where Neuchâtel is. Soon the foreigners will race under the town and past its shores, without noticing Neuchâtel. The planners moved cautiously. First of all, they banked up the shores of the lake under the pretext that the motorway would be built there, knowing that the townspeople would put up resistance. They did. The newly-acquired asphalted area serves as a parking lot that has insinuated its way between the town and the lake. Then they let the Federal Council in Berne decide in favour of the tunnel that the planners in Neuchâtel wanted: if anything can actually be planned, then it is by our highest authorities – they are anyway in the process of changing the country of shepherds into a population of moles. Trusting that this would work, they started drilling everywhere, and because a motorway tunnel needs an evacuation chimney for the exhaust fumes, this was planned near my house above the Vallon de l'Ermitage. But the little valley is much loved. A committee was set up against the chimney and one day we gathered on the rocks, about fifty of us men. The weather was unfriendly, rainy and cold. We stood on the Rocher de l'Ermitage, at our feet my property, the valley, the town, the lake, over all of which

the rain clouds were rolling. The municipal engineer and the representative of a Zurich company that was to build the tunnel explained their plan. Over my house there fluttered a little flag, seemingly deep in the woods. As it was a rainy day, said the municipal engineer, it would be an imposition to go there, which is why he had organized the meeting on the rocks, the view was best from here, the flag could be seen, we could all convince ourselves that the location was out-of-the-way and would not disturb anyone. But the committee was not to be intimidated, we had all come together and wanted to inspect the location of the chimney. The municipal engineer had to give in. We went down the stone steps which lead up to the rocks, and walked along a narrow forest path to the place where the chimney was planned. We were standing in a little clearing, in the middle of which a flagpole had been erected. Round the flag there were small bushes and shrubs, and next to each of these plants a brown-painted post, on the slanting surface of which the botanical name of the bush stood on a green shield. Two men came running along the forest path, one in a blue and one in a white tracksuit, joggers, the wood belonged to a Vita-Parcours. The municipal engineer became unsure, the chimney had not yet been finally decided on, nor its location, it would take weeks before they could determine its location, but the road tunnel project had to be submitted to the vote. A notary interjected that the project of the chimney belonged to the tunnel project, if these two projects were not submitted to the popular vote at the same time, the chimney could be built without asking the people. The municipal engineer asked if the notary possibly mistrusted the authorities. The notary answered that he mistrusted all authorities on principle, and a professor of geology suggested building the chimney near the Carrière de Tête plumée. He was the only one who knew anything about this stone quarry. There were a lot of them on the southern slopes of the Chaumont, the Jura stone is cut from them; when the quarry reaches a certain size, it is closed down. The stone quarry ten minutes from my house had also been closed down. One of the secret rulers stores his huge machines there. But now everyone wanted to see the Carrière de Tête plumée. It was very near, said the professor, we could go there by car. It wouldn't have been necessary, the Carrière de Tête plumée was in the woods, hardly five hundred metres above my house. I just hadn't noticed it because a badly-asphalted path led there and on my walks in the woods with my dogs I hated tarred paths, I like to feel the forest floor under my feet. The column of cars stopped. I steered my car into a side-path and with my lawyer followed the men up the road on foot. In order to avoid it becoming too steep, a wall had been built, over which the asphalted road led, it looked like a kind of ramp, at the end of the wall the road was able to readjust to the conical terrain. The fact that the column had stopped, however, was due to the fact that at the end of the wall the road was blocked with an iron rod that served as a barrier, beside the barrier there was a ramshackle building. The iron rod could only be raised by means of a key, which meant that the lorry team – if they didn't have the key or had forgotten it or if they were too lazy to drive on – dropped off the rubbish over the wall into the woods; the hideous rubbish had almost covered the wall, too. We went round the barrier, which prevented only the cars from driving further, followed the now black and sloppily tarred road, which no longer merited this name, it seemed as if the tar had been poured on it from above, on our left the woods, dead branches, trees suffocated and killed by ivy, on our right lay piles of yellow Neuchâtel stone, in between more tar, asphalt slabs, plastic, scrap metal, in wild confusion, ahead of us the horizon, towards which we were climbing, single larch trees against the over-clouded, rainy sky. Then we were at the top and found ourselves on the edge of a crater, an impression which was created by the fact that the southern end of the stone quarry, which had been carved out of the mountain ridge, had been closed off by a banked-up wall of earth. Having come up there from the west, we now stood where the wall of earth joined up with the natural terrain again. Opposite us lay the east wall of the stone quarry, naked Jura rock, white limestone in parallel layers, bent like the mountain ridge as if thick, mouldy carpets had been piled up, one on top of the other, the north side of the stone quarry also consisted of naked Jura rock, over which a concrete ramp had been erected, on which stood an orange-coloured monster of a tank lorry,

surrounded by rubbish disposal workers in orange-coloured overalls, from the lorry a huge gush of filthy black liquid was shooting over the concrete ramp and over the white Jura rocks into the crater at our feet. It was as if a dinosaur was suffering from diarrhoea: the liquid splashed into a black, oily lake, covered with plastic bottles. A strange silence had overcome the men. It was an embarrassing sight for everyone. The stone quarry was Neuchâtel's rubbish dump. The rubbish dump: such places touch everyone's patriotism. What the street workers pumped out of the canalization or out of the drain-holes came into this enormous disreputable hole, probably the sludge from the sewage plant, too, in former times also the dregs of heating oil, which have not yet seeped away. Slowly, this dark and filthy brew was trickling down between the layers of rock, further down on which stood my two houses, eating its way to the lake, on whose stony slopes and banked-up shore the town stands. Silently, we made our way home. When I went back again later, a cloud of large black birds flew up, crows, the smell of blood hung over the rubbish dump. It stank of murder. I threw a stone into the black brew, it sank slowly. Forming air bubbles, it became a slow-moving black whirlpool which acquired a reddish tinge. From the edge of the rubbish dump you could see the lake almost as far as Yverdon, it would be difficult to imagine a more idyllically located rubbish dump. And if I keep on going back to this place and showing it to friends, it is only because I am overcome by memories of the village where I grew up. We children had often played on its rubbish dump, the rusty spokes, the corroded milk pail, the broken sewing-machine etc. were transformed by us into fantastic toys, and in the evening I loved riding there on my father's bike, the sun going down, past the old cemetery, over the bridge, past the new cemetery; there were no houses as yet, a field path led through the open countryside to the rubbish dump; I used to imagine I was sailing in a ship over the immeasurable ocean, talking loudly to myself as I cycled now back again and now towards it again as the first stars became visible and then riding home. And only as I stood there, the first time on the edge of this lost crater, filled with this revolting slurry, composed of faeces and sludge, sunk into the woods above the place where I live and work, did I realize where I actually lived, a quarter of a century after having landed here, near this lake and above this town. I knew even more: the actor Hans Christian Blech told me once that he had been attached to a delinquent company in Russia in the Second World War during the advance of the German army. One late afternoon, having advanced into emptiness, without supplies, he had gone off at nightfall to forage for food. A farmer had directed him towards a forest, where he found a clearing full of chanterelles, never had he seen so many mushrooms before; loaded down with chanterelles he had returned to the delinquent company. Two years later, during the retreat of the German army, being near the forest at the same time of year, he had set off again to try and find the clearing, the clearing had been fenced in, and over the entrance gate was written 'Katyn', the name of the forest in which Stalin had ordered the murder of thousands of Polish officers. He was always reminded of that, said the actor, when he played Woyzeck and came to the part where he had to say to the doctor: "The mushrooms, Doctor. There, there it is. Have you ever seen the patterns formed by the mushrooms on the ground? If anyone could read that." Now we can read those patterns. Through the associations that they evoke. The rubbish dumps of my childhood could still be transformed by us children into a playground, but not the gigantic rubbish dump above the Vallon de l'Ermitage. The rubbish dumps of my childhood are not the same as today's. These are signs that evoke other associations, images of murderous acts, visions of human rubbish dumps such as Auschwitz. The patterns of the mushrooms have become the figures which people will leave on the earth: atomic waste dumps as the only witnesses that the predatory ape man once existed. Only when these are annihilated, will the planet which was given to us in order to produce us become virginal again.

Postscript 81: The winter didn't do the new Alsatians or myself any good. The snow came too early, stayed on the ground, became ice. Already at the time of my walks, the deer came down into the woods, the male dog – he has been with us for three years – had to be put on the lead,

the bitch – the same age as the male and only with us a few weeks longer – I let go: she is too playful to endanger the deer. The police thought otherwise. I gave up the walks. The ice and the excited dog on the lead made them too bothersome. So, on my sixtieth birthday, I was not in a particularly good mood, I was also embarrassed that Neuchâtel was celebrating me, but then I suddenly felt that I had become a Neuenburger, you don't spend half your life in a place without being punished. In Zurich, for whose theatre I had written and worked and where most of my friends are to be found, I felt five days after leaving that I was certainly not a Zürcher. I had never felt that I was one, not a native of the city of Berne or of Basel, either, moreover the theatre was guarded by the police, outside the "youth" had lined up as the Cantonal and town presidents were there. So I was celebrated behind closed doors, in quarantine. If it was all rather official in Zurich, in Neuchâtel it was intimate. Not only that the grandson of the Protestant minister – to whose holiday home in La Tourne I had cycled more than forty years before, crossing Neuchâtel for the first time – played Bach's 'Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue' at the beginning of the festivities, the yodellers from Konolfingen suddenly suited me better with their down-to-earth manner than the performance of *Romulus the Great* in Zurich. While the young pianist was playing, I remembered seeing my grandfather for the last time: he had moved to Zurich from Rochefort and lay dying in a bare ground-floor room towards the street in some spooky little hospital; and when the yodellers from Konolfingen were on, I wondered if one of them could have been among the sturdy farm-boys who had beaten me then, who had been able to beat me as they were older than me, and then I realized that I was now older than most of the yodellers in their cream-coloured national costumes and the flat black hats and that only a few could be my age or nearly as old as I am. After the hall of the Cité universitaire in which the celebrations took place had slowly emptied, I noticed an old man in the back row, I didn't immediately recognize him, he had changed so much. It was the Maître. I went over to him. "Je suis un encore là" [sic], he said. Later I went up to town with the rector of the University and a few friends, after the celebrations the authorities had invited us to a meal at Liechti's in the 'Rocher'. My doctor from Berne was with me, we climbed up the steps towards the station, they seemed never-ending, I felt in my doctor the same concern for me as before when he had accompanied me to the bookshop to choose my reading matter for the stay in hospital. At Liechti's, where the others were already gathered, I met the Maître again. He had been invited at my request, but he insisted that the town had invited him. "Nous payerons quand-même", he observed. Then he stayed until nearly eleven. One of Liechti's friends, a publican in whose restaurant I sometimes eat, took him home. I bade him farewell: "Au revoir, Maître." And he said: "Le Maîre, c'est vous, car je ne suis qu'un centimètre." The first time that he made use of understatement. When the publican had taken him home, the Maître ordered him to go in. The publican, a good-natured Swiss-German, obeyed. The Maître sat down on an armchair in his hall, placed his feet on another chair and commanded: "Enlevez-moi les chaussures!"

Translatetd from the German by Jenny Haller