

## A Story

Translated from the German by Geoffrey Skelton

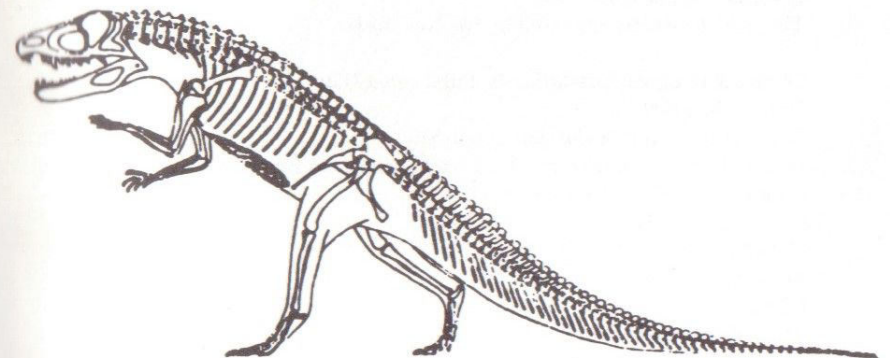
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A Harvest Book  
A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

# MAX FRISCH

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## Man in the Holocene



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It should be possible to build a pagoda of crispbread, to think of nothing, to hear no thunder, no rain, no splashing from the gutter, no gurgling around the house. Perhaps no pagoda will emerge, but the night will pass.

Somewhere a tapping on metal.

It is always with the fourth floor that the wobbling begins; a trembling hand as the next piece of crispbread is put in place, a cough when the gable is already standing, and the whole thing lies in ruins—

Geiser has time to spare.

The news in the village is conflicting; some people say there has been no landslide at all, others that an old supporting wall has collapsed, and there is no way of diverting the highway at that spot. The woman in the post office, who ought to know, merely confirms that the mail bus is not running, but she stands behind the little counter in her usual care-laden fashion, keeping usual office hours, selling stamps, and even accepting parcels, which she places unhurriedly on the scales and then franks. It is taken for granted that state and canton are doing everything in their power to get the highway back in order. If



necessary, helicopters can be brought in, unless there is fog. Nobody in the village thinks that the day, or perhaps the night, will come when the whole mountain could begin to slide, burying the village for all time.

Somewhere a tapping on metal.

It is midnight, but still no pagoda.

It started on the Thursday of the previous week, when it was still possible to sit out in the open; the weather was sultry, as always before a thunderstorm, the gnats biting through one's socks; no summer lightning, it just felt uncomfortable. Not a bird in the grounds. His guests, a youngish couple on their way to Italy, suddenly decided to leave, though they could have spent the night in his house. It was not actually cloudy—just a yellowish haze, such as one sees in the Arabian desert before a sandstorm; no wind. Faces also looking yellowish. His guests did not even empty their glasses, they were suddenly in such a hurry to be off, though there were no sounds of thunder. Not a drop of rain, either. But on the following morning it was drumming on the windowpanes, hissing through the leaves of the chestnut tree.

Since then, not a night without thunderstorms and cloudbursts.

From time to time the power is cut, something one is used to in this valley; hardly has there been time to find a candle, and then at last some matches, when the power is restored, lights in the house, though the thunder continues.

It is not so much the bad weather—

The twelve-volume encyclopedia DER GROSSE BROCKHAUS explains what causes lightning and distinguishes streak lightning, ball lightning, bead lightning, etc., but there is little to be learned about thunder; yet in the course of a single night, unable to sleep, one can distinguish at least nine types of thunder:

1.

The simple thunder crack.

2.

Stuttering or tottering thunder: this usually comes after a lengthy silence, spreads across the whole valley, and can go on for minutes on end.

3.

Echo thunder: shrill as a hammer striking on loose metal and setting up a whirring, fluttering echo which is louder than the peal itself.

4.

Roll or bump thunder: relatively unfrightening, for it is reminiscent of rolling barrels bumping against one another.

5.

Drum thunder.

6.

Hissing or gravel thunder: this begins with a hiss, like a truck tipping a load of wet gravel, and ends with a thud.



7.  
Bowling-pin thunder: like a bowling pin that, struck by the rolling ball, cannons into the other pins and knocks them all down; this causes a confused echo throughout the valley.

8.  
Hesitant or tittering thunder (no flash of lightning through the windows): this indicates that the storm is retreating over the mountains.

9.  
Blast thunder (immediately following a flash of lightning through the windows): this is not like two hard masses colliding; on the contrary, it is like a single huge mass being blasted apart and falling to either side, breaking into countless pieces; in its wake, rain comes pouring down.

At intervals the power goes off again.

What would be bad would be losing one's memory—

An example of something Geiser has not forgotten: the Pythagorean theorem. For that he does not need to drag out the encyclopedia. On the other hand, he cannot remember how to draw the golden section (A is to B as  $A + B$  to A; that he does still know) with compasses and set square. He knew once, of course—

No knowledge without memory.

Today is Tuesday.

Still no horns sounding in the valley.

Field glasses are no use at all in times like these, one screws them this way and that without being able to find any sharp outline to bring into focus; all they do is make the mist thicker. What can be seen with the naked eye: the gutter on the roof, the nearest pine tree in the grounds, two wires disappearing into the mist, raindrops gliding slowly down the wires. If one takes an umbrella and trudges through the grounds on a tour of inspection despite wet and mist, one can no longer see one's own house after only a hundred paces, just brambles in mist, rivulets, bracken in mist. A little wall in the lower garden (dry-stone) has collapsed: debris among the lettuces, lumps of clay under the tomatoes. Perhaps that happened days ago.

Still, one can get tomatoes in cans.

Lavender flowering in the mist: scentless, as in a color film. One wonders what bees do in a summer like this.

There are provisions enough in the house:

three eggs  
bouillon cubes  
tea  
vinegar and olive oil  
flour  
onions  
a jar of pickled gherkins  
Parmesan cheese  
sardines, one can



spices of all kinds  
crispbread, five packages  
garlic  
raspberry syrup for the grandchildren  
anchovies  
bay leaves  
semolina  
salted almonds  
spaghetti, one package  
olives  
Ovomaltine  
one lemon  
meat in the icebox

Later in the day there is more thunder; and shortly afterward, hail. The white stones, some of them the size of hazelnuts, dance on the granite table; in a few minutes the lawn is a white sheet, all Geiser can do is stand at the window and watch the vine being torn to shreds, the roses, too—

There is nothing to do but read.

(Novels are no use at all on days like these, they deal with people and their relationships, with themselves and others, fathers and mothers and daughters or sons, lovers, etc., with individual souls, usually unhappy ones, with society, etc., as if the place for these things were assured, the earth for all time earth, the sea level fixed for all time.)

No horns sounding in the valley.

Obviously the highway is still blocked.

When, occasionally, the rain eases up—it does not stop entirely, but becomes lighter, so that one no longer hears it on the roof, rain just seen as a noiseless shading over the darkness of the nearest pine tree—the silence is still not complete; on the contrary, one then begins to hear the rushing of water down in the valley; there must be streams everywhere, streams that normally do not exist. A constant rushing sound throughout the valley.

#### The Creation of the World

(Job 38; Ps. 33:6-9; Ps. 104; Prov. 8:22-31)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Geiser wonders whether there would still be a God if there were no longer a human brain, which cannot accept the idea of a creation without a creator.

Today is Wednesday.

(Or Thursday?)

One can hardly call it a library that Geiser has at his disposal during these days in which gardening is impossible;



Elsbeth read novels mainly, the classics and others, Geiser himself preferring factual books (BRIGHTER THAN A THOUSAND SUNS); the diary of Captain Scott, who froze to death at the South Pole—Geiser has read this several times, but it is a very long while since he last read the Bible. Besides the twelve-volume encyclopedia there are: gardening books, a book on snakes, a history of the canton of Ticino, the Swiss encyclopedia, as well as picture books for the grandchildren (THE WORLD WE LIVE IN), the Duden dictionary of foreign words, and a book about Iceland, which Geiser once visited thirty years ago, as well as maps and rambling guides that provide information about the geology, climate, history, etc., of the district.

#### CHAPTER I Ticino in Prehistoric Times The First Inhabitants

In the far-distant epochs of geological antiquity, the present canton of Ticino, like all else, lay for long periods submerged beneath the deep sea extending between two age-old continents to the north and the south. Massive layers of sedimentary rock were formed in that ocean, and these piled up on the crystal rocks of the ocean bed.

As sections of the earth's crust emerged above sea level, the natural forces of weathering and erosion at once began their work of shaping and displacing. Frost and wind produced ridges and peaks on the raised masses of rock, while water and glaciers ate into the furrows and carved out the first valleys. This was no continuous process: it was spread over various periods, widely separated in time. This we can discern without difficulty from the many terraces running parallel to one another along the valley slopes, each of which must once have formed the valley bed.

In the main valleys the force of the glaciers was far greater

than in the subsidiary valleys, and the rivers are in consequence deeper than their tributaries. For this reason the beds of the subsidiary valleys have remained higher than those of the main valleys, and the tributaries flow over sheer ledges into the main rivers. This explains the many waterfalls, which give the Ticino valley its wild and romantic appearance.

On the other hand, we know more about the people who came to live in this district during the *Iron Age* (c.800–58 B.C.). The discovery of graves from the earliest Ice Age,<sup>4</sup> the so-called Ligurian period, on the one hand; and place and field names<sup>5</sup> on the other, show that the Ticino district at that time was inhabited by the *Ligures*. History tells us that in earliest antiquity the Ligures made settlements, not only in present-day Liguria, but also in the valleys of the Western Alps, to which the territory of present-day Ticino belongs.

Finally, mention must be made of the many rockfalls that have occurred since the retreat of the glaciers, for they played no little part in giving many districts in the canton of Ticino the appearance they have today.

According to legend, one of Hercules's tasks was to lead a tribe of people across the Alps into Spain and then into Africa. On the march through the deep snow of the Alpine passes, a rear guard was left behind. Many soldiers froze to death, and the survivors were unable to re-establish contact with the main column, which had gone on ahead. They made no further attempt to advance, but settled down in Alpine lands. The word "Lepontine" means "those who stayed behind." That these Lepontines, whose name has in fact been applied in the course of time to a large number of other tribes, did populate both slopes of the Gotthard—this we know from completely reliable sources, such as the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23–79) and Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.).

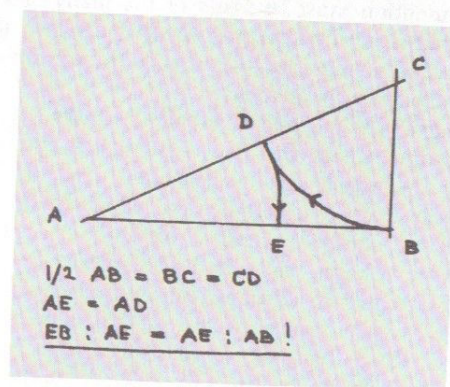
It is not true, incidentally, that no horns are sounding in the valley; it is just that the mail bus is not running, one misses its three-note horn, and the noisy trucks that usually carry the slabs and blocks of granite down into the valley



are not working; but above the spot where the highway has been cut there are still motorcycles.

One has just sounded its horn now.

The encyclopedia explains how to draw the golden section with compasses and set square, and even if there are no compasses in the house, Geiser knows what he has to do: a thumbtack, a piece of thread fixed to the thumbtack, and a pencil fixed to the other end of the thread replace the compasses after a fashion. At the moment Geiser has no use for a golden section, but knowledge is reassuring.



The little landslide in the garden (debris among the lettuces) has not grown any bigger during the night. And as far as Geiser can see in the morning twilight, there have been no new landslides, at least not in his grounds. The grayish clay beneath the tomatoes, which are still green, sticks to the spade in heavy lumps. And when Geiser tries without a spade, going down on his knees and clearing the

debris around the lettuces with his hands, the lettuces are in any case spoiled, and the time is not right to set about repairing the little wall. That will take days. Within an hour one is wet right through, despite raincoat and hat.

No sounds of a helicopter.

The collapse of a little dry-stone wall, built with his own hands by a pensioner who has spent his life doing other things, does not mean that the whole slope is beginning to slide. Presumably there are rivulets here and there and lumps of clay, these are usual in persistent rain. Presumably on the steep slopes a tree has toppled over here and there, an old pine or a rotting chestnut; its trunk will then be lying with its smashed crown pointing down the slope, the black roots spread out in the air and the rock exposed, gneiss or schist, elsewhere nagelfluh.

During the night of September 30, 1512 (at the very time the Duke of Milan was negotiating with the Swiss for the surrender of Lugano and Locarno), the peak of Monte Crenone overhanging Biasca exploded without warning on the side overlooking the Pontirone valley; the ensuing rock-falls buried a great many houses with all their occupants, while from the opposite slopes of the mountain huge masses of earth slid down and engulfed the village of Campo Bargigno in Val Calanca.

It was not until three centuries later that the Ticino bridge destroyed in that catastrophe was rebuilt (1812-1815). At one corner of the "büzza"\* near Biasca one comes upon the surprising sight of a church steeple poking out through the



rocks and gorse bushes: it is the church tower of Loderio. This curious ruin recalls another great disaster, one vivid to many people still living: the great floods of 1868, which buried the church of Loderio, destroyed all bridges in the Blenio valley, and brought terror and death to Malvaglia, Semione, Dongio, and especially to Corzoneso. During the night of September 27 a raging flood swept without warning over Cumiasca, in the district of Corzoneso, destroying the village completely and claiming eighteen human lives. The compassion of all Europe was stirred as it listened aghast to reports of the terrible distress caused by these floods in Blenio, in Levantina, in Verzasca, and in Vallemaggia. Aid funds totaling two million francs were collected. Pope Pius contributed several thousand lire, Emperor Napoleon twenty thousand francs, the Grand Duke of Baden ten thousand.

On March 23, 1851, after snow had been falling continuously for three days, several huge avalanches broke loose from the summits of the surrounding mountains and, following quite unusual courses, swept down with tremendous force on the unfortunate village, burying nine homesteads. Twenty-three human beings and over three hundred head of cattle perished. In connection with this event Lavizzari has written: "The disastrous masses of snow that had deprived them of their herds, their homes, and their families were hardly melted away before the survivors took heart again and rebuilt their huts in Cozzera, just as the people whose homes had been destroyed by the glowing ashes of Vesuvius hardly waited for the monster to close its flaming jaws before starting immediately to think of rebuilding their houses on the hot lava."

Last night there were stars to be seen, though not many, and even, for minutes on end, the moon between racing clouds, veils of whitish mist in the lower valley, the wet

cliffs above glittering in places like aluminum foil, and the moon above the black woods looked more arid than ever—

Today it is gurgling again.

But at least it is not snowing.

His rucksack is lying in the hallway, a leather rucksack that Geiser bought on his visit to Iceland, waterproof, and Geiser has thought of everything: passport, bandages, flashlight, a change of underclothing, Ovomaltine, a change of socks, iodine, a small book of travelers' checks, aspirin, Miroton (for cardiac insufficiency), as well as a compass and a magnifying glass for deciphering the map, CARTA NAZIONALE DELLA SVIZZERA 1:25,000, FOGLIO 1312 and 1311, though Geiser is well aware that to attempt an escape over the mountains (into Italy) would be madness. Something that maybe a young man might venture. Even the old mule track down into the valley, which Geiser once followed years ago, would probably be blocked now by streams full of debris, a perilous path—he does not need anyone to tell him that.

Today is Wednesday.

A summer guest from Germany, a professor of astronomy, knows a lot about the sun and, if asked, is not unwilling to talk about it, even to a layman. Afterward one clears the cups away, grateful for the short visit. Geiser understood more or less what is meant by prominences, which incidentally have nothing to do with the weather on earth, and the solar investigator's wife brought along a bowl of



soup, minestrone, to be warmed up. At any rate, one knows afterward that one is not crazy: other people have also noticed that it keeps on raining.

17 And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth.

18 And the waters prevailed, and were increased greatly upon the earth; and the ark went upon the face of the waters.

19 And the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high hills, that were under the whole heaven, were covered.

20 Fifteen cubits upward did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered.

21 And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man;

22 All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died.

23 And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark.

24 And the waters prevailed upon the earth an hundred and fifty days.

Geiser does not believe in the Flood.

The Zurich parson H. R. Schinz also made some interesting observations during the period September 1770 to September

1771: Sunny days in Locarno, 204; in Zurich, 61. Rainy days in Locarno, 60; in Zurich, 109.

"The advantages and beauties of widely distant climates are combined here in a harmonious whole, such as it would be difficult to find anywhere else on our section of the globe."

As already stated, Locarno enjoys an excellent *climate*. Compared with the average annual mean of 11.6°, Locarno is the warmest of all Swiss meteorological stations.

Until a short while ago, June, it was cloudless, the grass dry and yellowish; at six in the morning, when Geiser attempted again to attack the grass with a scythe, the sun itself was not yet visible, just its rays on the peaks and ridges of the mountains, the valley still in a blue shadow; shortly after seven o'clock, there was a flash on the scythe, and suddenly it was hot, a day of biting flies, lizards, butterflies, summer as usual, summer lightning in the evening, no rain, or just a few drops, the following morning also blue and hot, the white cumulus clouds dry as cotton wool. For weeks the use of a garden hose was forbidden, the soil gray and cracked. The little brook below the church was without water, a dry stone bed.

Exceptional water levels as the result of continuous rainfall were registered in 1764 (6.20 meters above normal), 1807, 1812, 1817, 1824, 1829, 1834, 1840, 1855, 1868, and 1907;



the most severe flooding during the XIXth century occurred in the years 1807, 1829, 1834, 1840, and—severest of all—1868 (on October 3/4, 7 meters above normal).

The historian Raul has recorded floods in the XIIth century (1177) in which the water level rose 10.8 meters above normal.

Geiser knew at one time what caused tides, just as he knew about volcanoes, mountain ranges, etc. But when did the first mammals emerge? Instead of this, one knows how many liters of heating oil the tank contains, the time of the first and last mail bus—that is, when the highway is not blocked. When did man first emerge, and why? Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous, etc., but no idea how many millions of years the various eras lasted.

Among the living creatures of the Triassic period the ammonites and the belemnites, amphibians, and especially reptiles attained great variety and widespread distribution, including very large forms, such as the long-extinct dinosaurs. There were also small types of mammals (*see* Triassic System) and birds (*see* Jurassic System). From the Jurassic onward there was a visible division into climatic zones. Plant life, showing a more marked development than animal life, was in the Late Permian Era already showing many Mesozoic characteristics. In the Cretaceous (*see* Cretaceous System) it was enriched by deciduous trees, which made their appearance from the very first in huge numbers. Today's mainlands began to assume shape in the Late Cretaceous, and in the Mesozoic geosynclines the mountains of the Alps

were already beginning to form, reaching their full development in the Early Cainozoic (Neolithic; *see* Cainozoic System). In the Tertiary (*see* Tertiary Era) mammalia developed in great variety, while many of the reptile groups, ammonites, etc., disappeared. Later in the Tertiary, conditions, including the climatic, came closer to those prevailing today, but the Quaternary (*see* Ice Age) has left its imprint on many parts of the earth's surface. According to present views, man first made his appearance in the Pleistocene (*see* Old Stone Age); the geological present is termed the Holocene (*q.v.*).

It is not enough for Geiser to draw a line with his ball-point pen against passages in this book or that worth remembering; within an hour his memory of them has become hazy; names and dates in particular refuse to stick; the things he does not wish to forget Geiser must write down in his own hand on pieces of paper, which he must then affix to the wall. There are thumbtacks enough in the house.

CAMBRIAN	100,000,000 YEARS
SILURIAN	70,000,000
DEVONIAN	80,000,000
CARBONIFEROUS	75,000,000
PERMIAN	75,000,000
TRIASSIC	80,000,000
JURASSIC	70,000,000
CRETACEOUS	20,000,000
TERTIARY	60,000,000
QUATERNARY	1,000,000



Two of the letters Geiser has written since Sunday are already out of date, since the news of a landslide turned out to be incorrect, and the third letter, to his daughter in Basel, will sound absurd if mail deliveries are restored tomorrow or the day after; there are sentences in it that sound like Captain Scott in his tent.

And all it is doing is raining.

One can watch television, TELEVISIONE SVIZZERA ITALIANA, though the reception is bad; at the moment tennis is being played in London, the shadows of the players can be seen clearly on the grass, then it suddenly flickers, and when Geiser turns the knobs, the picture suddenly slides off the screen; the sound is still there, overloud, but the picture slips slowly or swiftly upward or downward, and in the end there is nothing but a tangle of black and white stripes.

In London the sun is shining.

Actually nothing much can happen, even if it keeps on raining for weeks or months; the village lies on a slope, the water is running off, one can hear it gurgling around the house.

At least no mist today—

The valley looks unharmed.

The hot plate is not heating up—

A lake, the color of brown clay, gradually filling the valley, a lake without a name, its water level rising day by day and also during the nights, joining up with the rising lakes in the other valleys until the Alps become an archipelago, a group of rocky islands with glaciers overhanging the sea—impossible to imagine that.

In London the sun is shining.

Actually Geiser is not feeling hungry, it does not matter if the soup, the minestrone that the solar investigator's wife brought along, stays cold—

Probably the whole village is without electricity.

The icebox has not yet started to smell bad, but the butter is soft and runny; obviously the power has been off for some time. The cheese is sweating. Though not really hungry, he eats the last egg, raw—though with some revulsion, since it is not chilled.

The fuses are all in order.

Water in the cellar is not unusual when it has been raining a long time; the gravel floor gets damp because the water seeps up from the slopes.

Also the boiler is not working.

Plenty of wood in the house.



When the highway is not blocked by bad weather one can reach Basel in five hours, Milan in three, the nearest drug-store in half an hour—

One is not at the end of the world!

(—as Elsbeth often used to say.)

Luckily there is not very much in the deepfreeze, which is not working: three cutlets, meat for stuffings, a chop, packages of spinach, a meat loaf for unexpected guests, raspberries in packages, two trout, five sausages. Greenish and reddish drops are exuding from the packages; the meat, usually hard as iron, is flabby, and the trout are repulsive to the touch, the sausages soft as slugs. Geiser knows that foods once thawed out must not be refrozen, so there is no need to waste time in thought—they must be put in a bag and given away in the village, and the sooner the better.

Unfortunately the rain is streaming down again.

The villagers are also without electricity, but confident that it cannot last very much longer, that any minute, as it were, the electricity must come on again—

The church clock has also stopped.

Not even old Ettore, the laborer who has been working all his life on supporting walls, public and otherwise, seriously believes that the whole mountain could ever begin to slide; he just grins through his stubbly white beard. To

his face they are friendly, and they thank him for the meat, but basically they consider everybody not born in the valley to be either rich or a bit crazy.

#### IL PROFESSORE DI BASILEA

That is what they call Geiser, because outside his house he always wears a tie; in fact, they know very well that he is not a professor, and what he once was can be seen on his tax return.

#### CHE TEMPO, CHE TEMPO!

That is all they can think of to say.

When the sun is shining on the granite roofs, when the gutters are not overflowing, when the old walls are not wet, when there are no puddles, when it is not dripping and gurgling everywhere, when the sunflowers are not snapped in the middle, when the church tower rises into a blue sky, when the only splashing comes from the fountain, when one is not picking one's way through rivulets, when the surrounding mountains are not gray, then it is a picturesque village.

Today not a dog barking.

It is not until Geiser gets back to his house with the empty bag, places his dripping umbrella in the entrance hall, takes off his wet shoes, that it occurs to him he could have roasted the meat over the open fire himself, at least the meat loaf, which could also be eaten cold.



One is becoming stupid—!

Even in normal circumstances there are not many lights to be seen during the night, two street lamps (five in the winter, when there are no leaves to hide them) and a few living-room lights in the village, in fine weather one faint light from a lonely farm on the slope opposite; now not a single light throughout the valley.

AT THE END OF THE ICE AGE THE LEVEL  
OF THE SEA WAS AT LEAST 100 METERS  
LOWER THAN TODAY.

ALWAYS BE PREPARED.

SPEED OF LIGHTNING: 100,000 KILO -  
METERS PER SECOND. INTENSITY OF  
CURRENT: 20 TO 180,000 AMPERES

CHANGING OF HUMAN BEINGS INTO  
ANIMALS, TREES, STONE, ETC.  
SEE: METAMORPHOSIS / MYTH.

STONE AGE: 6000 - 4000 B.C.  
NEOLITHIC AGE: TO 1800 B.C.

More kinds of thunder:

10.

Groaning or lath thunder: a short, high-pitched crack, as if one were snapping a lath, then a groan, short or prolonged; as a rule, lath thunder is the first to be heard in an approaching storm.

11.

Chatter thunder.

12.

Cushion thunder: this sounds exactly like a housewife beating a cushion with flat hands.

13.

Skid thunder: this leads one to expect either bump or drum thunder, but before the windows begin to rattle, the noise slips over to the other side of the valley, where it coughs itself out, as it were.

14.

Crackle thunder.

15.

Screech or bottle thunder, often more frightening than blast thunder, though it does not make the windows rattle; this belongs to the unexpected thunders: one has seen no lightning flash, yet suddenly there is a shrill, splintering noise, like a case of empty bottles falling down steps.

16.

Whispering thunder,  
etc.



Geiser has not yet reached the point of talking to the cat when she rubs herself against his trouser legs. She has already had the last sardines, and the remains of the milk from a can, too; not even this was to her liking, and now she sits crouched in the middle of the room with narrowed eyes, waiting. Obviously she has found nothing in the grounds, no birds, not even lizards. Anchovies she finds too salty. When Geiser lifts her by the scruff of the neck (which does not hurt cats) and puts her in the cellar, where she will perhaps think of looking for mice, she yowls behind the door until Geiser lets her out again. Immediately she starts rubbing against his trouser legs. She just cannot understand that there is no more meat to be had.

The television has stopped working, too, of course.

No idea what is happening in the world.

The last news reports Geiser heard were bad, as usual, ranging from assassinations to unemployment statistics; here and there some government minister resigning, but there is no real reason to suppose that today's news would have been any better; all the same, one feels easier in one's mind when one knows from day to day that life is still going on.

Impossible to work in the garden.

One cannot spend the whole day reading.

The church bell, which chimes at seven in the morning

and six in the evening, can be worked by hand, and old Felice is taking care of that as usual; the older he gets, the shorter the chimes—

On the other hand, the clock has stopped striking the hours.

There is nothing to do but read.

Geiser is not in fact expecting a visitor, but somebody could have come to the front door. The bell does not work, of course, without electricity, and so it seems advisable to pin a piece of paper to the door, better still a piece of stiff cardboard:

SONO IN CASA!

Or perhaps it should be:

SONO A CASA.

(Elsbeth would have known.)

PLEASE KNOCK!

I AM AT HOME.

Or just factual:

CAMPANELLO NON FUNZIONA.

So now that is done.



And it is still only morning—

Geiser is not usually one of those people who become bored without a business to manage, when the telephone is not ringing all day; there is always something to do or to think about when one lives alone.

At times the encyclopedia offers precious little information.

The best way to avoid being struck by lightning is to remain inside a house fitted with a lightning conductor (*q.v.*). In the open air it is advisable to keep away from trees (of all kinds), fences, or enclosures made of metal. Protection against the indirect effects of lightning through current transmitted via the soil (dangerous up to 40 meters away) is best afforded by a metal net or pieces of metal laid on or under the soil.

There is no fear of a food shortage, though the little grocery store in the village does not have much in stock: salt, baking powder, onions, lemonade, laundry powder, tea, slug pellets, etc.; the butter is all gone, as are the eggs, and no milk even in cans. Obviously people have already started hoarding. Luckily there are still matches to be had—one box per customer! The little store has never stocked meat, except for smoked bacon, and that is all gone. Canned meat, for which Geiser does not usually care, is also gone. The cats in this district are seldom eaten.

CHE TEMPO, CHE TEMPO.

The little carpentry shop below the village is still open, the wet sawdust in front of the workshop dark in color, like tea leaves; not much ever goes on there, the saw is not heard every day.

At the moment the rain has almost stopped.

Here and there on the asphalt lumps of clay, rivulets, but no boulders. A yellow snowplow is standing where it always stands in summer. It is a comfort to Geiser to see no cracks in the asphalt. Somewhere along his way a Dutch family in blue oilskins, their faces pale, but cheerful. Not a word of greeting. They have a summer house here, and for four weeks of the year a Dutch flag is hoisted, even when it is raining. Their dog is wearing a blue oilskin, too. Otherwise there is no one out of doors. A construction site; no work in progress, since the workers from Novara have not arrived; planks floating in the cellar; sacks of cement lying in a puddle; the tarpaulin that was supposed to protect them from the rain has been blown away.

Geiser has his umbrella.

Unfortunately he has forgotten the field glasses.

Once before, in 1970, a piece of the highway below the village vanished in a landslide; on the following morning the iron railings were hanging twisted over the ravine; all through the summer the traffic was held up by repair work, but it was not blocked entirely. Landslides like that have always occurred in this district—



Somewhere along his way, three drenched sheep.

There is no point in asking why Geiser, a citizen of Basel, settled in this valley; he just did.

People can grow old anywhere.

Now and again Geiser stops: the gray sound of rushing waters from the ravine—but the iron railings are still there. When one can walk without an umbrella, when there are not puddles everywhere, when drops are not falling from every fir tree, and when the woods on the opposite slope are not black and the mountains wrapped in cloud, when one can work in the garden, when there are butterflies, when one hears bees and in the night a little owl, when one can stand beside the stream with a fishing rod and is in good health, consequently content, though hooking nothing all day, and when the highway is not blocked, allowing one to leave the valley thrice daily, then it is a picturesque valley—otherwise, German and Dutch people would not come here summer after summer.

The neighboring village is also undamaged.

Puddles here, too—

No dogs in the street—

The post office is open, but Geiser has no letters to send, and the man behind the counter has nothing new to tell, though he lives in hope, he says with a laugh.

#### RISTORANTE DELLA POSTA:

The red tables in front of it are gleaming wet; a truck that is unable to leave the valley is also gleaming and dripping, standing there for a week loaded with empty bottles:

#### BIRRA BELLINZONA

The church clock here has also stopped.

The store in which Geiser had hoped to buy matches is closed, the doorbell not working, but matches can be bought in the tavern; no need to sit down to swallow a quick schnapps and then, while paying, to ask casually what day it is.

Why is the landlord so friendly?

So it is Saturday—

That is all Geiser wished to know.

It is a gloomy tavern when one cannot sit outside, and what the few people at the tables are saying is nothing new. A bad year for wine; even for mushrooms the summer has been too wet. Nobody is reckoning on another Flood. The local youngsters, prevented from driving to work in the valley, are obviously set to spend all day working the noisy soccer machine. A second schnapps, courtesy of the landlord, takes up a little more of the afternoon. The youngsters are loud in their enjoyment; the erosion going on outside does not worry them in the least.



BETWEEN THE YEARS 1890 AND 1926  
THE MAGGIA WASHED AN ANNUAL  
AVERAGE OF 550,000 CUBIC METERS  
OF DEBRIS INTO THE DELTA, THE  
EQUIVALENT OF 55,000 LOADED  
RAILROAD CARS!

(SEE "EROSION")

Chopping firewood with an ax, carrying a basketful of it into the living room, then lighting a fire in the grate, carrying one bucket after another up to the bathroom, taking care not to trip on the stairs with the scalding water, pouring bucket after bucket into the bathtub, which in half an hour is still not full, not even half full, so that the water always cools before there is enough for a bath, in the end it is not even lukewarm, and other irritations—

A small apartment in Basel would be more comfortable.

It was not to drink schnapps, but to buy matches, a reserve of matches, that Geiser had walked to the next village, and in the tavern he forgot to buy the matches.

Obviously brain cells are ceasing to function.

More serious than the collapse of a dry-stone wall would be a crack across the grounds, narrow at first, no broader than a hand, but a crack—

(That is the way landslides begin, cracks appearing noiselessly, not widening, or hardly at all, for weeks on end,

until suddenly, when one is least expecting it, the whole slope below the crack begins to slide, carrying even forests and all else that is not firm rock down with it.)

One must be prepared for everything.

For a moment, viewed through the window, it really looked like a crack no broader than a hand across the entire grounds—

Even field glasses can deceive.

When Geiser went out into the wet grounds to find out what he must be prepared for, it turned out to be a track made by the cat through the tall grass.

Autumn crocuses already in August.

A huge crack in the cliff behind the village, rising almost vertically up to the gray clouds, is from neither yesterday nor today; there are fir trees growing in it. A crack from gray, prehistoric ages. At no time within human memory has a village in this valley been overwhelmed, and in a place where rocks once fell, burying some farm buildings, no new building was ever erected. The local people know their valley.

What the field glasses reveal to him:

Walls of rock, stubborn as ever and always—

Not everything that Geiser described as granite in the first years—above all to his wife, but also to guests from the



city who had no interest in stone—is in fact granite. Geiser has meanwhile come to know this, and not only through his son-in-law, who always knows everything.

Walls of rock, then, stone—

(Parts of them are indeed granite.)

An hour with the field glasses is enough to convince him that there is no new crack in the high and almost vertical cliff that is the only thing capable of burying the village; recent fractures would be lighter in color, gray and not faded like the whole rock face. The things that here and there looked at first glance like splits are shown up by the field glasses as black streaks on the smooth wall, discolorations caused by permanent rivulets, presumably algae. The ridge, the highest point, is admittedly hidden in the clouds; but Geiser knows it by heart: it is a sharp ridge free of loose debris, jagged for countless millennia, mountains that towered above the glaciers of the Ice Age, a trustworthy stone.

1)  
COARSE, OCCASIONALLY PORPHYROID  
GNEISS

2)  
MICA-SCHIST ALTERNATING WITH GNEISS,  
GRANITIC AND AMPHIBOLOGICAL ZONES,  
WITH GRANULAR LIMESTONE (MARBLE)

3)  
LAMINAR SLATE / SHALE

4)  
MASSIVE OR AMPHIBOLOGICAL LAYERS  
OF FELDSPAR

5)  
QUARTZ (VEINS, LAYERS)

It is idiotic to write out in one's own hand (in the evenings by candlelight) things already in print. Why not use scissors to cut out items that are worth remembering and deserve a place on the wall? Geiser is surprised that he did not think of this before. There are scissors in the house; all he has to do is find them. Quite apart from the fact that print is easier to read than an old man's handwriting—though he has taken the trouble to use block letters—no one has that much time.

Geological formations, layers that are clearly distinguished from the stratifications beneath and above them by the petrified animals and plants (*see* Characteristic Fossils) within them and that represent a (stratigraphic) unit. Among these belong the igneous rocks, which evolved at the same time. Related G. F. evolving successively are bracketed together in formation groups. Formations and formation groups reflect periods of the earth's history and are in consequence used as descriptions of time, the G. F. in the sense of periods, the formation groups in the sense of geological eras.



The glaciers of the Ice Age transformed these mountain ranges by acting on peaks and valleys according to new principles. Ravines, niches, sinkholes, cirques (basinlike hollows) were carved out at the head of the valleys, and the peaks, already shaped into ridges, sharpened still further. The massive rivers of ice transformed the valleys themselves into broad, U-shaped troughs. Large glaciers exerted more pressure than small ones, so that the main valleys generally lie deeper than the subsidiary ones. In many parts of the Alps individual mountains, all of them once covered with glaciers, reveal traces, not only of the grinding and polishing effect of glaciers, but also of erosion as a result of splitting or fracturing: round, knobbed slopes standing out against the sharp and jagged ridges that the glaciers left untouched, on flatter surfaces basins forming shallow lakes, features known as *roches moutonnées*, outcrops of rock with smooth reflecting surfaces, frequently striated by rough stones, scarred glacial scourings, here and there moraines in the form of dams, more often valley flanks adorned with moraines.

Such complicated structures are the result of prolonged development. Like all other mountain ranges formed in the same period (Alpine), this process extends over a whole series of geolog. formations and can be divided up into various fold-forming phases. The first orogenic movements occurred at the height of the Triassic period, also the Liassic. Several marked phases occurred in the Late Cretaceous and in the Tertiary, and movements have been continuing through the Diluvian (*see* Ice Age) up to the present day.

The diluvian ice sheet which rose even above the lower passes, leaving only the highest peaks jutting out like islands, did not begin to disappear until the arrival of the warm interglacial period, and disappeared completely only in the postglacial. It was then transformed into the present-day valley glaciers, hanging glaciers on the upper slopes, cirque glaciers in the hollows; a number of plateau glaciers have also been formed. This recent type of glaciation, now swiftly retreating, is responsible, along with the peak formations, the valleys and their openings, the crevices and ravines, the waterfalls cascading over the trough walls, and the lakes, for the remarkable scenic beauty of the Alps. The glacial undermining of the slopes combined with the disappearance of glacial buttressing has led to many landslides. The basinlike character of the trough valleys has been to some extent obliterated by erosion of the higher peaks and the consequent transfer of rock to the lower regions. This is the cause of marked silting in the larger valleys, where the mud flow frequently presents a danger to human settlements.

What Elsbeth would have said about these notes on the wall, growing daily more numerous, whether she would have put up with thumbtacks stuck in the paneling, is an idle question—

Geiser is a widower.

Not all the walls in the house are suitable for thumbtacks. These stick in the plaster only now and then and are by no means to be trusted; if one takes a hammer to them, they just buckle and fall to the floor, leaving holes in the white plaster, which would certainly not have entranced



Elsbeth, and all for nothing; not a single slip of paper remains on the wall. The best surface is paneling, in which a single thumbtack is enough, but only the living room is paneled—

Elsbeth would have shaken her head.

And this is only the beginning; the walls in the living room will provide nowhere near enough space, particularly since his paper slips must be affixed neither too high nor too low; otherwise, every time Geiser forgets what he so carefully cut out an hour ago, he will have to climb on a chair or crouch on his heels to read his pieces of paper. This is not only laborious, it also prevents an overall review, and once already the chair has nearly capsized. Where, for example, is the information about the conjectural brain of Neanderthal man? Instead, one finds oneself back with the drawing of the golden section. Where is the information about mutations, chromosomes, etc.? It is all so exasperating; Geiser is quite certain that there is an item somewhere about the quantum theory (as if it were not laborious enough, copying out texts full of foreign scientific words, sometimes even two or three times in order to get them right). What belongs where? Some slips, especially the larger ones, start to curl when they have been on the wall for a while; they refuse to lie flat. That presents another difficulty. To read them, one has to use both hands. Some curl at the bottom, others at the sides. There is nothing one can do about it. Each day they curl more and more (probably because of the humidity), and there is no glue in the house; otherwise he could stick them to the wall, though that would have the

added disadvantage of making it impossible for him to substitute an item when a new and more important one was discovered. The golden section, for instance, is not all that important, and he can remember how many people there are in the canton of Ticino, how high the Matterhorn is (4,505 meters above sea level), or when the Vikings reached Iceland. He is not so decrepit as all that. The paper slips will lie flat only if one uses four thumbtacks on each, but his supply is not large. So they will just have to curl; when one opens a window, creating a draft, the whole wall flutters and rustles.

It is no longer a living room.

So far Geiser has hesitated to take down Elsbeth's portrait (in oil) from the wall to make room for more items. But now there is no other way.

**Weakness of memory** is the deterioration of the faculty of recalling earlier experiences. In psychopathology a distinction is made between this and deterioration of the faculty of adding new experiences to the store of memories, though the distinction is only one of degree. In the brain diseases of old age (senility, hardening of the arteries in the brain) and other brain diseases, it is the latter faculty that deteriorates first.

Sometimes Geiser writes notes on things he believes he knows, without consulting an encyclopedia, things that also deserve a place on the wall, so that he will not forget them:



THE CELLS MAKING UP THE HUMAN  
BODY, INCLUDING THE BRAIN,  
CONSIST MAINLY OF WATER

THE EARTH IS NOT A PERFECT SPHERE

THERE HAS NEVER BEEN AN EARTH -  
QUAKE IN TICINO

FISH DO NOT SLEEP

THE SUM TOTAL OF ENERGY IS  
CONSTANT

HUMAN BEINGS ARE THE ONLY LIVING  
CREATURES WITH AN AWARENESS OF  
HISTORY

SNAKES HAVE NO HEARING

$\frac{3}{4}$  OF THE EARTH'S SURFACE IS WATER

EUROPE AND AMERICA MOVE TWO  
CENTIMETERS AWAY FROM EACH OTHER  
EVERY YEAR, WHILE ENTIRE CONTINENTS  
(ATLANTIS) HAVE ALREADY DISAPPEARED

SINCE WHEN HAVE WORDS EXISTED?

THE UNIVERSE IS EXPANDING

Sunday:

10:00 A.M.

Rain as cobwebs over the grounds.

10:40 A.M.

Rain as pearls on the windowpane.

11:30 A.M.

Rain as silence; not a bird twittering, not a dog barking  
in the village, the noiseless splashing in the puddles, rain-  
drops gliding slowly down the wires.

11:50 A.M.

No rain.

1:00 P.M.

Rain invisible to the eye, but, stretching a hand out of the  
window, one feels it on one's skin.

3:10 P.M.

Rain as a hissing sound in the leaves of the chestnut tree.

3:20 P.M.

Rain like cobwebs.

4:00 P.M.

No rain, just the ivy dripping.

5:30 P.M.

Rain with wind, drumming on the windowpanes, splash-  
ing on the granite table outside; this now looks black, the  
splashes look like white narcissi.

6:00 P.M.

Gurgling sounds around the house again.

7:30 P.M.

No rain, but mist.

11:00 P.M.

Rain as a glittering in the beam of a flashlight.

At least it is not snowing.



In winter, when it is snowing, the valley is black. The blackness of the asphalt between the mounds of snow pushed aside by the snowplow. The blackness of footprints in the wet snow as it thaws, of wet granite. Snow plops down from the wires; the wires are black. Snow in the woods, snow on the ground and on branches, but the trunks are black. There is also snow on the roofs; the chimneys are black. Only the mail bus remains yellow; it has chains on its wheels, the track they leave is black. Here and there a red willow, almost the color of a fox, the bracken rusty, and when the streams are not frozen, the water black among snow-covered stones. The skies like ashes or lead; and the snow-covered mountains behind the black woods do not look white, just pale. All the birds black in flight. The undersides of the gutters are black with raindrops. The branches of the fir trees are green, but the fir cones look black against the snow. The crosses in the churchyard are mostly black. Even the sheep in the grounds are not white, but a dirty gray. A white snowman with a carrot for a nose, built for the grandchildren, stands on black moss. The shoes one afterward places beside the radiator are black with wet. When it is not snowing, one can often go walking without a coat, so warm is it at mid-day, Mediterranean skies; no foliage, one sees more of the rock than in summer, and when it is dry the rock looks silvery gray. The vines are bare, the slopes of dried-up bracken brown, interspersed with the white trunks of birch trees. It is only the nights that are cold, during the day the soil beneath the rustling leaves of autumn remains frozen, but it is sometimes possible at Christmas to drink coffee out of doors in the sunshine. The glaciers, which once stretched as far as Milan, are now in retreat everywhere; on the shadowed slopes the last rags of grimy snow

have melted by May at the latest, even on the highest points. Just one ravine, which the sun hardly ever reaches, retains the remnants of avalanches a little longer; but these vanish, too. All in all, a green valley. When the canton's yellow bulldozer comes along to widen the highway here and there, one can see moraine, debris from the huge glaciers of the Ice Age; the moraine so hard that it has to be blasted. Men blow three times on a little horn and wave a red flag, and shortly afterward the bits come rattling down, pebbles and gravel from the Ice Age.

The village lies on a narrow ledge covered with ground moraine, the remains of a former valley bed that can be traced as far as Spruga.

This morning one can imagine for minutes on end that there is a shadow beneath the large fir tree—and at once two or three birds start twittering in the grounds; despite isolated showers, which glisten, it seems quite likely that the sun may suddenly burst through. The clouds, though they do not lift from the upper slopes, even during the afternoon, are fluffy and not really gray; indeed, here and there they show a bluish tint. Only the fir tree is still wet and black. All the same, one has the feeling of knowing just where the sun is behind the clouds, and for the first time in a week one can imagine that tomorrow or the day after (what is one day more or less?) the sun will be shining.

The sound of rushing waters is still coming from the ravine.



But in the evening, when Geiser returns to the window to look out for the moon, gray vapors are rising once more from the lower valley. It is not raining, but clouds keep drifting across; some break up into ragged wisps against the slopes and vanish again, but others do not. A quarter of an hour later the fir tree is no longer to be seen.

TRAINS WITH CONNECTIONS IN BELLINZONA

<u>LOCARNO</u>	<u>BASEL</u>
0943	1426
1157	1616
1548	2019
1806	2227
2329	0412

The valley has only the one highway, which has many curves but is protected almost everywhere by iron railings; a narrow but good highway that unnerves only foreigners, particularly Dutchmen. Fatal accidents are much rarer than one would think when seeing this highway for the first time. The constant awareness of ravines on the one side, and rocks with sharp edges on the other, the feeling that the iron railings would not resist the impact of a car, encourages drivers to be cautious and alert. When two cars are unable to pass, the driver coming from above must back his vehicle up to a place where he can pull over. An old laborer takes care of the highway year after year, cutting back the proliferating bracken on the slopes, clearing away the stones that have fallen on the asphalt, in the fall sweeping up the wet leaves. State and canton do everything

to ensure that the valley does not die; mail bus thrice daily.

All in all, no deserted valley.

There are snakes, grass snakes, which are harmless, and various kinds of vipers, among them asps, but whole summers can go by without one's seeing even a grass snake, one just hears a rustling in the nettles. The valley is swarming with lizards, which are also harmless; they bask on the stone window sills and flit up and down the walls of the house. There are no longer any bears or wild boars, foxes are rare, and there are not even rumors of wolves. Summer visitors from the big cities, claiming to have seen an eagle on their rambles, cannot be taken seriously; the last eagle observed over this valley is now hanging in the smoky saloon of a tavern, where it has been since the First World War. Higher up the slopes there are said to be marmots. Cows are few and far between; since the slopes are too steep, it is more a valley for sheep and goats and hens.

Garbage collecting is a recent innovation.

Only a short while ago people were still throwing their rubbish down the slope beside the church: bottles, old rags, cans and worn-out shoes, boxes, pans, stockings, etc., some of which got caught in the bushes.

The local people are Catholics.

There is little to suggest that the valley might once have been occupied by the Romans. No Roman paving stones,



let alone the remains of an arena. Forest and debris had no appeal for the medieval overlords, either; they preferred to set up their strongholds down on the plain or beside the lakes, where ownership was more rewarding. No Visconti or Sforza has ever trodden this valley. No robber baron has left even a tower behind. No place name commemorates a victory or a defeat, neither Hannibal nor Suvorov came this way.

A valley without through traffic.

Now and again one hears the flickering sound of a helicopter transporting building materials; somewhere construction work is still going on.

Otherwise little happens.

In earlier times the people lived by basket work, a cottage industry using child labor, but then cheap Japanese work took over the market in Milan.

The young people leave the valley.

There are no plans for a reservoir.

It is almost impossible to find a local person to mow a pensioner's lawn. Even grass has lost its value. All the same, the price of land is rising here, too; owning land makes one feel safer, even when there is no profit to be made from it. Figs do not ripen, but grapes do. Many of the chestnut trees are cankered. In the fall men come to cut them down, one hears the whine of their power saws

for days on end, though one never sees the men working in the woods.

All in all, a quiet valley.

What Geiser values most is the air, the absence of industry. The streams are as unpolluted as in the Middle Ages. Perhaps one might come upon a rotting mattress in some inaccessible gorge; but as a rule the water could be drunk safely.

BANDITA DI CACCIA/HUNTING PROHIBITED

Hunting is controlled by law.

CADUTA DI MASSI/FALLING ROCKS

This refers to the fragments of rock one occasionally sees on the asphalt; not to landslides; the slopes have a safe and solid gradient, and the ridges above remain as they always were. The glaciers have been retreating for centuries. The last patches of grimy snow in the shadows have all melted by July or August at the latest. The beds of the streams have not changed within living memory, and are large enough to cope with heavy storms. A fireplace beside the stream, built at one time by his grandchildren, vanished the following year, swept away by high water, but the hollows and indents in the rock which turn the water into foam, the large slabs, covered only when the water rises to flood level, and the sharp-edged boulders remain unchanged from year to year, though the bright and smooth round pebbles are presumably different ones.



Erosion is a slow process.

Now and again in summer a tent can be seen, yellow or blue, a car with a German license plate standing under a tree in some unexpected place, and people, tourists, bathing in the stream. But if one climbs up to the heights one no longer runs into contemporaries; one comes to the ruins of stone barns, roofs collapsed but the four walls still standing, within them a tangle of nettles beneath an open sky, and nothing stirring. No dogs barking. Other barns, not yet in ruins, have doors standing open; inside there may still be a faint smell of hay, the goat dung is dry, almost petrified. No bones of former inhabitants lying around. The water troughs, also of granite, are empty and dry, the faucet rusted, the view splendid, no different from thousands of years ago. Here and there a small chapel; a faded Virgin Mary behind rusty wire netting, a rusty can containing withered flowers in front of it, frescoes under the porch eaves, some of them spoiled, since the goats have been licking the walls for saltpeter.

A valley with no Baedeker stars.

At the end of the valley, where the highway stops, there are Italian border guards, youngsters from Palermo and Messina, standing with their hands in the pockets of their uniforms, glad when some woodcutter or angler stops to talk to them. These days smuggling is not profitable in untracked mountain areas. At the end of the valley there are some quarries, now and again a blasting operation, a series of explosions, then a cloud of dust over the forest; shortly afterward, trucks drive down the valley, loaded with

squared stones or slabs. Panning for gold in the streams has never been worth the trouble. In summer there are cranberries, also mushrooms. When it is not raining, the white trails of passenger planes can be seen high up in the blue sky above the mountains, though one does not hear them. The last murder in the valley—and that only rumored, since it never came to court—happened whole decades ago. Ever since the young men have owned motorcycles, incest has been dying out, and so has sodomy.

Women have had the vote since 1971.

One summer the woodpeckers got a sudden idea, as it were: they stopped pecking the bark of the old chestnut tree and started on the windowpanes; more and more of them came, all seemingly obsessed by glass. Not even strips of glittering foil frightened them off for long. It became a real nuisance. If one went to the window to shoo them away, they at once moved to another, and one could not be at every window, clapping one's hands. Geiser found it more effective to strike the granite table with a lath, which made a sound like the crack of a shotgun—then they flew off to wait in the surrounding branches. Later one would hear them again at some window or other; they could not get a grip on the smooth glass, and with their wings fluttering they could tap on the pane only two or three times, occasionally but rarely even four times. By the following summer they had forgotten all about it. Twice a week a blonde butcher woman drives the length of the valley, selling meat from her Volkswagen; she is of German extraction, married to a man from Ticino. Fishing produces very little. Many of the chestnut trees are cankered, but all in all it is



a green valley, wooded as in the Stone Age. The bracken grows almost head-high. In August, when it is not raining, there are shooting stars to be seen, or one hears the call of a little owl. When there is mist in the lower valley, the moonlight on the mist can give the effect of a lake with jagged bays, a fjord; all it would need is a ship lying at anchor below the village, a black cutter or a whaler.

**Before the highway was constructed in 1896, the mule track, built in 1768 by the Remonda brothers from Como-logno at their own expense, provided the only connection between the Valle Onsernone and the outside world.**

Despite the basic poverty of the soil, the shortsightedness of the provincial government, the damage done to communities through the continual partitionings and lootings perpetrated by the French, Austrian, and Russian armies at the time of the French Revolution and under Napoleon I, the people of Ticino performed veritable miracles in constructing good and practical highways; these extended from Chiasso to Airolo, from Brissago to the Lukmanier Pass; they even penetrated into the adjacent valleys and up the slopes of the steepest mountains, bringing the remotest Alpine villages into contact with civilization.

In Iceland there are moraines from the late Ice Age that are still not overgrown, whole valleys full of rock debris that will never be anything but desert. There, one would be lost without a Land Rover. Glaciers overhang the sea. One of these, VATNAJÖKUL, is larger than all the Alpine glaciers together. There are rows of volcanoes, cones of

ash; it is possible to climb them, only to find oneself looking down on a different kind of desert, where even a Land Rover is of no use, a desert of black and brown and mauve lava. No trees. What looks from a distance like a green oasis is usually a moor. One can drive for days without seeing a farm; now and again a few isolated sheep, what grows amid the debris is not enough to feed a herd. When one steps outside the tent at night, there is not a single light on land to be seen. Not a sound. During the day there are birds, many birds. When the sun shines, as it does once in a while, the flat crowns of the unending glaciers gleam in the distance. Usually all there is to see is clouds, beneath them the gravelly plains. Here and there on the plains large stones can be made out, round and smooth, lying just as the Ice Age glaciers shaped them. The weather changes from hour to hour, but the desert remains as it is, simply changing color—and there is no color that cannot be seen at some time during the long days. The wheel tracks left in the gravel or mud by one's own vehicle provide the only sign that there are people on our planet. There are flowers, small ones, as in the Alps, all kinds of moss and lichen. Elsewhere, a hissing on the surface, a greenish bubbling and splashing between crusts of yellow, and a smell of sulfur. There are whole ravines and hollows stained with sulfur, elsewhere a plain covered with clouds of white steam, somewhere else a waterfall. A broad river of glacier water tumbles down over a slab of basalt or a series of slabs, a thundering cascade of gray water; the wet basalt glistens like bronze, and a cloud of spray can be seen for miles, accompanied by a rainbow. The rain, when it comes, does not last very long. A blue sky is a rare sight. The clouds lie low over the highlands



and drift along the glaciers, turning them gray, and all one sees of the sky is a yellow stripe along the horizon, the color of amber or lemon, and toward midnight lilac. Dawn follows almost immediately, in the distance a reddish dust, a sandstorm. Somewhere else rivers tracing a shining network of veins across the plain. There are fjords without a single ship, without a single living soul, except for a young seal. No farm, not even an abandoned one, nowhere the works of man. Surf around a black tower of lava; the cone of ash has been washed away. Encircling the fjord, the horizontal mountains, identical slabs of basalt; the slopes down to the sea are green. A world before the creation of man. In many places it is impossible to guess in what era one is. But seagulls have already been created, their fluttering wings over the pale and leaden sea white against the ink-blue clouds. As a rule there are no icebergs visible, but the sea is icy. Despite the Gulf Stream. Strips of old snow, and not only on the northern slopes; summer does not last long enough to melt them. Despite the excessively long days. If the Arctic ice were to melt, New York would be under water. A sign that the Creation has already taken place is a lighthouse, somewhere else an American radar station. Here and there driftwood from Siberia. Beneath the deep clouds the sea is black with varying patches of quicksilver, for an hour it looks as blue as the Mediterranean, at midnight like mother of pearl. There are volcanoes covered with glaciers, HEKLA, the only volcano now emitting smoke. Another volcano, a new one, has risen from the sea, an island of ash and basalt; its first inhabitants, when the ash cools, are birds that feed on fish; their excrement will form the beginning of an oasis in which human beings can live, until the next stream

of lava smothers it all. Probably the fish will outlive us, and the birds.

**Man**, Latin *homo*. Gr. *anthropos* (see illustration, p. 685, and tables, pp. 676 and 684).

1) *Man's singularity*. Man has always been conscious of the mystery surrounding his origin and development as a species, and an inexhaustible field of inquiry is opened to him by his ability to regard himself (the "subject") in relation to the world in which he lives (the "object")—see Philosophy. This objective attitude toward the world is what gives M. his ability to conquer it, and is thus responsible for his special status in the universe.

Since M. is unable to understand himself through insight, he has from earliest times tried to reach out toward the idea of a divine being (see Religion) or some other nonhuman presence, to which he equates himself while at the same time distinguishing himself from it; it may be an animal (see Totemism), the spirit of an ancestor (see Ancestor Worship), or some other alter ego (see Mask); in rationalistic times it might even be a machine (LAMETTRIE: *L'Homme machine*).

That M. is a *historical being* is shown in the fact that he is shaped, both outwardly and inwardly, by inherited skills, arts, sciences, customs, standards of conduct, and value systems; toward these he adopts a critical attitude, which he then complements, improves, simplifies, complicates, modifies, and alters. Additionally, he is able to envisage different states of being and to plan these deliberately, to provide himself with purposes and aims, through the use of his productive imagination and will. The more highly developed animals display hopes and fears, but only M. works toward a "future."



Such abilities are brought about by a retrogressive metamorphosis of those fixed, innate behavior patterns which in animals we refer to as "instinct." M. does not live as an integral part of his natural environment, finding his bearings through instinct; his intelligence, his actions, and his labor enable him to modify and adapt his environment. This provides scope for innumerable varieties of behavior inimical to his survival, for errors and aberrations of planning and purpose, but despite this M. has succeeded in spreading his species across the entire globe and adapting his way of life to diverse conditions. He has transformed large areas of the earth's surface to meet his needs, and the proportion of civilized areas in the world is constantly increasing.

There have been some landslides; not here, but farther up the valley. It looks chaotic, he has been told: the stream has altered course, the birch grove has vanished, simply been swept away, the valley bed covered entirely with debris. Geiser knows the place from rambles with his grandchildren, but now, he is told, it is unrecognizable, the iron bridge leading to the saw mill gone, and no longer necessary anyway, since the stream has changed course. The road has disappeared. The saw mill, of which a third has been destroyed, is now on the left bank of the stream instead of the right, and the ground floor, where all the machines are kept, is full of pebbles and sand, the stream full of tree trunks, their bark torn away by the stones, and sheet iron. Nothing is left but a bare passage, the slopes stripped of trees and soil, from top to bottom nothing but naked rock; it looks chaotic.

There has been no loss of life.

Who could have told him that? Only the parish clerk Francesco, who came along yesterday to borrow his field glasses; apart from him Geiser has not seen anybody in the past few days.

CHE TEMPO, CHE TEMPO!

The old bridge over the Isorno is also said to have gone, which means that the former mule track is cut; an arch slung from rock to rock at least ten meters above the stream, a construction that has held for centuries; presumably the narrow gorge became blocked by tree trunks, which caused the water to pile up.

And it is still raining.

The German solar investigator has not returned; Geiser finds this quite understandable; a scholar cannot help being bored by the questions of a layman who finds the idea of curved space impossible to grasp but continues to ask questions. And in any case, he does not want anyone to come into the house and see his papers on the wall.

ALWAYS BE PREPARED.

SPEED OF LIGHTNING: 100,000 KILO -  
METERS PER SECOND. INTENSITY OF  
CURRENT: 20 TO 180,000 AMPERES



CHANGING OF HUMAN BEINGS INTO  
ANIMALS, TREES, STONE, ETC.  
SEE: METAMORPHOSIS / MYTH.

STONE AGE: 6000-4000 B.C.  
NEOLITHIC AGE: TO 1800 B.C.

The power is on again, and there is Geiser, candle in hand, unable to remember why he has his hat on.

The hot plate is glowing.

Light in the cellar, too.

Geiser has not forgotten that the deepfreeze, which is humming again, is empty, and he also remembers why he has his hat on: he meant to go to the post office. No point in the hat; he had forgotten that the highway is blocked and no mail is getting through. There is no point in the candle, either, since the power is on again.

One always forgets something.

Who told him about the damage in the valley?

While Geiser is failing to remember where he put the candle in case the power should go off again, the hot plate continues to glow; unfortunately the soup left there for warming, the minestrone, has gone sour; there is no point in the hot plate.

There have been some landslides—

Geiser now remembers what he was looking for in the closet—sealing wax—and as he at last turns the glowing hot plate off, he also remembers why he went into the kitchen instead of searching in the closet; he saw the hot plate glowing, evidently the power has been on again for some time.

Geiser is still wearing his hat.

The clock is also striking again.

3:00 P.M.

While Geiser is wondering why he wanted a candle in the middle of the afternoon, he remembers having intended to seal a document, his final instructions in case anything happened. His resolve, as he searches for a pan, is to clean out his closet one of these days. But the pan, the little one, is already standing on the hot plate, the water in it bubbling, though the hot plate is no longer glowing. He forgot, while thinking about the untidiness of his closet and about his heirs, that he had already drunk his tea; the empty cup is warm, the tea bag dark and wet.

In the closet he discovers:

income-tax documents, a land-registry plan of his property, receipts, the key for a Fiat that ceased to exist years ago, his polytechnic diploma, letters of all kinds that are no concern of his heirs, and an out-of-date X-ray picture of



his spine, his gray ribs, his white hip bones, plus sealing wax, but no seal; and there is also something else he cannot find—his passport.

It is 4:00 P.M.

At the moment he does not need his passport, but he could do with an aspirin for his headache, which is not raging, just irritating, and it would also be a good time to clean out his medicine chest, to throw away all the things of which he no longer knows the use: whether for itching or for acid in the urine, for heart troubles or for constipation, for gnat bites or for sunburn, etc.

A spotted salamander in the bathroom—

When Geiser sees in the mirror that he is still wearing his hat, he remembers where his passport is.

The headache is gradually fading.

The spotted salamander must have fallen in through the open window, and since it cannot climb up again on the smooth tiles, it is just lying there, black with yellow spots, motionless. One does not feel like touching it, though spotted salamanders are harmless. When Geiser prods it gently with the toe of his shoe, it just kicks out with all fours. Quite automatically. Then it goes quiet again, its skin armored, black with yellow spots, and slimy. The cat, Kitty, does not touch the salamander, either, but begins instead to rub against his trouser legs as soon as he returns to the kitchen.

The hot plate is turned off.

Cats always fall on their feet, but in spite of that she is now yowling outside the front door; perhaps Geiser said: Get out—but after that not a word in the house.

Outside it is raining.

There is no ladder in the house.

It is true the gray cobwebs on the ceiling have been there a long time; but when one becomes conscious of them, one finds no rest; an ordinary broom is not long enough, since the ceiling above the stairs is too high, and one cannot set a chair on the stairs.

Geiser finds no time for reading.

Some time later the spotted salamander is lying on the carpet in the living room, and that is a repulsive sight. Geiser picks it up with the small shovel and throws it into the grounds, but the cobwebs are still there above the stairs. There is only one way of getting them down: unscrew the long handrail of the banisters, then attach a little broom to the handrail with wire—

Kitty is still yowling outside the front door.

The cobwebs are gone.

Water in the cellar, but that is not what Geiser went to the cellar to inspect; he had already seen it. There, all of a



sudden, are the pliers, but no idea now what he wanted them for an hour ago. Instead, Geiser remembers the men in blue overalls and the tip he gave them, and he does not need to check whether the tank is filled with heating oil.

It can get cold in September.

Some time later, when his eyes again fall on the bent nail in the wall, he has no idea where he put the pliers.

The bent nail has to go.

In the process the scissors break.

Everything is breaking; yesterday the thermometer, today the banisters: the old screws refuse to return to their rusty sockets, and lining the stairs is now nothing but a row of upright posts without a handrail.

Man remains an amateur.

The spotted salamander on the carpet in the living room must have been another one; the first is still lying in the bathroom, black with yellow spots, and slimy.

The magnifying glass is in his rucksack.

Actually Geiser meant to take a bath, since the water is hot again, following his fruitless work on the banisters; it made him sweat, and his hands are covered with rust from the screws.

It would be time for the news.

When one examines a spotted salamander through a magnifying glass, it looks like a monster: a dinosaur. Its overlarge head, the black, unfocused eyes. Suddenly it moves. Its clumsy walk, rather in the style of someone doing push-ups, tail held rigid. It crawls doggedly in a direction in which it will never make any progress. Suddenly it lies still again, its head raised. One can see its pulse beating. An awful dullness in all limbs.

**Salamander:** member of the amphibian family Salamandridae. Land S.: 1) spotted or fire S. (*S. salamandra*); 2) black or alpine S. (*S. atra*). Water S.: see Newt.

**Newt:** tailed amphibian of the family Salamandridae (q.v.).

**Salamandridae:** amphibian family that includes salamanders and newts. The distinguishing mark of the newt is its tail, which is laterally compressed, whereas the salamander has a round tail. Both forms occur in Europe, and all possess 4 fingers and 5 toes. The spotted salamander (*S. salamandra*), black and yellow in color, occurs in two forms, spotted and striped, and varies in length from 10 to 20 centimeters. The black or alpine salamander (*S. atra*) is entirely black. The commonest varieties of newt are the common or spotted N. (*Triton vulgaris*), the great or crested N. (*T. cristatus*), and the alpine N. (*T. alpestris*). The crested N. is distinguished by the notched crest that comes into prominence in the