

'Still involved then?'

'Still.'

'Lovers?'

'The works.'

*'Maybe we could make
this an annual event.'*

*Winner of the
5th International
Three-Day Novel
Writing Contest . . .*

STILL

STILL

bp nichol

PULP PRESS

*for Ellie
in the midst of all these years*

CANADIAN CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Nichol, B.P. 1944—

Still

ISBN 0-88978-146-X

I. Title

PS8527.N53S74 1983 C813.'54 C83-091393-9

PR9199.3.N53S74 1983

STILL

COPYRIGHT © 1983 bpNichol

PULP PRESS BOOK PUBLISHERS

986 Homer Street, No. 202

Vancouver BC Canada V6B 2W7

Division of Arsenal Pulp Press Book Publishers Ltd.

TYPESETTING: *Baseline Publication Trades Co-op.*

PRINTING: *First Folio Printing Co. Ltd.*

PRINTED AND BOUND IN CANADA

STILL

THE FRONT PATH, MARKED BY THE CRUMBLING RED BRICKS HALF buried in the ground at forty-five degree angles (so that, in the dark, wandering across the wide lawn from the huge oaks that marked the river's course, more than one set of feet had tripped over them, dislodging some of them, breaking the brittle surface of others, scattering bits of burnt red clay among the white pebbles of the path), winds from the wide wooden steps of the house down towards the distant banks of the river. Between the bricks & the lawn in carefully spaced groupings are circular areas of brown earth, where, at indeterminate times to which some seasonal patterning attempts to attach itself, flowers appear. Nearer the river the circular areas become larger, are marked by clusters of boulders in the middle of which dirt has been piled & more flowers planted, again occasionally, in the brief & unpredictable growing seasons of the year. In winter, covered in thick layers of crusted snow, these larger beds merge into the natural slope of the ground as it falls towards the water's frozen edge. The path curves for no visible reason, tracing perhaps an older footpath or animal run or some image, lost now, of how another path once looked, some other yard in which huge willows or maples had forced a more precise construction thru & around them, & from which this path has taken its form, evoking memories, lost now, happy or tragic, or some bittersweet combination of the two, winding

& unwinding across the long & sloping yard. Certainly the white pebbles are not as white as they once were, nor as tended, nor are the twisting lines of bricks as complete, and yet, tho years have passed, the path still holds, the white pebbles remain, & the red bricks mark the course all the way from the slippery grass banks of the river to the wide wooden steps of the distant house.

“Is this the way you want it to begin?”

“No.”

“Well then?”

“You never begin thinking it’s going to end. It’s not like that.”

“But it is like that this time. Isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is. But that’s not what I intended.”

“That doesn’t exactly matter now does it?”

“God I’m so sick of you & your ‘intentions’! The world isn’t held together by them! You can’t ‘intend’ a relationship with the world, or me, or anyone. You have to have one. It has to exist. All the contradictions intact — but it has to exist.”

“I said I came here with something different in mind.

“Okay?”

“No. It’s what is that counts, what actually happens between us. That’s all that’s ever mattered to me & and that’s all I ask. Let’s just deal with what actually happens between us. Not your intentions. Not ever just your intentions.”

At night, just beyond the flower beds that edge the verandah, the lights spilling out thru the windows become diffused in such a way that, from the old couch or easy chair, both of which stand just to the left of the door, the beginning of the lawn is barely visible, & the trees, because they grow lower down nearer the river, are invisible — unless the moon is up & the sky exceptionally clear. From the roof of the verandah hang baskets of ivies & ferns that, if a breeze springs up, or a wind, swing back & forth in the dim light, swing back & forth & threaten to fall, threaten to crash against the cocomattng that covers the porch floor, earth & shattered bits of pottery piling on the matted fibre. To the right of the door the old porch swing swings too, & the ivy that covers the front of the house rustles, & the long grass ripples, & the distant indistinguishable leaves of the oaks rustle, faintly, above the almost inaudible sounds of the river. And in the stillness that follows, or that is there in any case, has been there all night or day, has been there all week in the oppressiveness of the summer heat, other sounds distinguish themselves or become garbled, unclear, lost in the dull torpor of the still night air.

“I suppose when she died I didn’t know what I felt really. That I’d loved her. I knew that. I don’t think I ever loved anyone as much as her. But the stupid numbness in myself! I was cracking jokes half an hour later. Then I started reading this journal she had kept & there was her voice speaking & I just started crying & crying. I don’t know. It always seems like the really strong emotions have to be built up in some way, as if we have to make the situation extreme before we can ac-

tually feel what we feel. Why isn't it enough that it just happens & we feel it? Why do we need some crisis or goddamn drama to make us aware? It sure as hell wasn't that I didn't care about her. But there's that sense that I didn't let her know strongly enough, didn't really get across to her what she meant to me. You know when that happens you're left with this monstrous feeling that you've neglected someone dreadfully important to you, so important that at times you'd felt you'd rather die than lose them. And you've lost them. You've really lost them. And there you are going on without them. But then comes the even more horrible realization that you've gone on without them for years, that they're as important to you now as they ever were but that at some point you gave up on them. You just fucking gave up! You said somewhere well hell it's all a bit unreal, or overstated, or imagined yourself as not being yourself in some way, & you cut off from all that feeling. That's what kills me! No wonder it feels overstated by the time you finally get around to feeling it. God I loved her. I can't even say that strongly enough now. I just went & put that feeling on other people, went & spread it around, diluted it all to hell & called those my 'passions'. Fuck!"

From under the trees by the river's edge, in the dense shadows thrown by the trunks & leaves, the ground rises sharply towards the house, & the path appears & disappears as it makes its way across the broad sweep of the lawn. The verandah seems empty, the angle of the rise making all but the hanging baskets & the front door invisible, & the columns that support the verandah roof, & the half columns that flank the house's main entrance, shine whitely in the late af-

ternoon sun. But the house itself, covered as it is with ivy, appears like an extension of the lawn, like a terminal moraine left behind by some retreating glacier. Yet the glimpsed interior appears warm, almost inviting, some trace of white sheers hung in the windows, too clearly a dwelling, lived in, to be mistaken.

Somewhere behind the house a screen door opens & closes repeatedly, swinging back & forth in the almost non-existent breeze. From this angle the black trunks of the oaks, the white columns of the house, the canopy of leaves surrounding both of them, suggest two clumps of trees, the one clustered near the visible river, the other sending roots down into some hidden source. And of course the invisible world pointed to by the sound of the door's activity is simply the invisible world that any wood suggests — a cool, dark place reached by paths whose entrances appear only at the taking of some optimal position or the conjunction of stellar bodies & specific times of year.

From the shadowed clearings of grass across the long & sunlit lawn to the cool dark interior of the house, the air is a current within which things are carried — sounds, bits of leaf or paper, the spray from the rapids in the river — winding as randomly as any path, everywhere at once & continuous. It is this quality or feeling that most permeates the specific view & gives to each element in it that precise sense of crafted composition.

"Did you want something else to drink?"

"No. Thanks anyway. I just don't feel like it."

"Yourself?"

"I'm fine."

"Sure."

"So."

"Yeah. Funny, I really didn't think this would upset me so much. It's not exactly unexpected."

"It isn't?"

"Of course not. I'm not an idiot. I can see when things are coming to an end. It's just that saying it out loud somehow makes it all much more upsetting."

"I really didn't expect it."

"I know."

"I came here intending to talk about where things had come to, where they could go, that sort of conversation. I mean I wasn't looking forward to it but I felt open to possibilities. I find it difficult to even absorb the idea."

"You did bring it up. It was your suggestion."

"I know but..."

"Here."

"Thanks."

"Christ I just can't believe it!"

"So."

"Yeah."

"Maybe I will have another drink. Can I fix you one too?"

"That'd be nice."

"Lemon?"

"Please."

"Right."

"Here."

"Thanks."

"Cheers."

"It's still not a bad idea."

"What's not?"

"Talking. You said you came here to talk about where things had gone to & where they could go to. Let's have the conversation. I'm still interested."

"But it's so hard to begin now."

"So?"

"C'mon. You just begin anywhere. Right?"

"Right."

"So begin. Anywhere."

The lawn stretches from the river to the house, bounded by those two points, encroached on by the wood near the river's edge, moving out, on the left, toward the still distant field of wheat. The field merges with the horizon, becoming, at its juncture, a shimmering transposition of haze & cloud, air & invisible ears of wheat. The line between the lawn & the field is more distinct. There is a clear edge of turned earth, a marked shift in colour, green to gold, an obvious change in the levels & surfaces of the image. The river, before it disappears behind the trees, winds along the far edge of the wheat field defining its boundary, disappearing, tho we know it is there, marking the end point of the field, an element in the shift & blur of the horizon across the whole width of the wheat's growth. The colour & texture of this huge irregularly

shaped area is absolute, consistent even in the patterns the wind makes blowing thru it. And the sun, as it sets below it, adds an element that changes constantly within the fixity of the composition.

“Do you remember the afternoon we met? It was here wasn't it? I remember it quite clearly considering how long ago it was. It had been snowing all day, huge flakes that clung to our clothes & turned them white. That was the thing you remarked about when we first saw each other, that we looked like figures made of snow, that we'd both merged with the day.”

“Romantic thing to say, eh?”

“It was. I was charmed. It was nice to meet someone who had that gift for words & wasn't ashamed to use it. I liked that about you. It wasn't intentions then. You were thinking & seeing things & telling me about them. I liked that. And then we decided to go for a walk.”

“I remember.”

“We walked for hours, talked, about everything — our families, our various loves, the things that were important to us, silly to us, anything that made some kind of difference to us.”

“You got upset.”

“I was feeling things, stupid. It was such a relief to talk in that way. I was so sick of the lack of connection I'd been experiencing, the emptiness of the relationship I'd just ended. It was a fantastic day.”

“There was an instantly comfortable feeling between us wasn't there? I felt, almost for the first time, certainly for

the first time in years, that I could be silent or talk or move back & forth between the two states without feeling self-conscious as I usually did.”

“You had such a lot to say that day.”

“I did, didn't I?”

“No one had ever talked to me about themselves in such detail. I felt you wanted to share everything with me, that you were concerned to hold nothing back because you wanted me to understand you completely.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not. You never can the first time. But you get a sense, an image of what you're reaching for, where it is getting involved might lead to. I liked what I saw. You weren't afraid to show me all your flaws. You really did seem to lack any self-consciousness about them that day. That was the other thing I really liked. It wasn't that old scene of putting your best foot forward in order to impress someone, or your worst foot in order to win their sympathy. It was just you. That's why I fell in love with you. You seemed so perfect & so flawed. So complete.”

“I suppose I was at that moment. Something about you & the day, the way everything seemed to blend into one feeling of continuity. You told me things no one had ever bothered to tell me. Stupid things. What you didn't like about certain kinds of trees. Why you'd collected string as a kid. Absolutely useless information. And then you'd turn around & start talking to me about someone's death, something that had really torn you apart, just like you did here earlier, & everything seemed part of one thing. I loved that. There was no separation anymore. I had a quick sense of how I fit or could fit into your life. That was what I was looking for, someone with that range, who wasn't going to idolize one thing at the expense of another.

I felt a permission from you to be myself, even as you said, with all the contradictions intact. I like the contradictions."

"I know."

"I like the fact that the mind's focus can be large & small at the same time, that you can giggle when you're having sex, that life isn't either a comedy or a tragedy but a strange dizzy dance of the two. I really like that."

"It really was an amazing day."

"Yes."

"But so long ago."

"Yes."

And the moon, when it began to set, added yet another element.

"How did that fight begin?"

"Something about a lack of response."

"To what?"

"I don't really recall."

"We'd gone to a movie. I didn't like it. You liked it. We started discussing, then arguing, & finally you accused me of being insensitive."

"Sounds silly."

"Neither of us was particularly brilliant. I think I said that if that was your idea of sensitivity then I was happy to be insensitive."

"Deathless!"

"Exactly. Anyway we went to bed not talking & woke up not talking."

"I don't think I slept actually."

"By that night we'd 'forgotten about it', as they say. But of course neither of us had. We were just a little more careful with our opinions. I don't think we've seen another movie by that director since."

"It's always humbling to see how one follows thru in one's convictions."

"It's coming back to me now. I liked his handling of the actors. You said he treated them like mannequins, puppets he could place anything he wanted in the mouths of."

"Something like that."

"God I don't even think I'd like the film if I saw it now."

"It was definitely pretentious but then I didn't really strengthen my argument by getting pretentious in turn."

"Two wrongs."

"Right."

"And that was what that fight was about?"

"Unfortunately."

"It's completely embarrassing to remember this! What a little intellectual prig I was."

"We both were."

"God!"

"Mortifying isn't it?"

"God!"

The lawn reaches from the river to the house, edged by the wood near the river's bank, stretching out on the right towards where the river empties into the sea. The sea is hid-

den below the green horizon line that marks a sudden drop down bluffs towards its rock & driftwood strewn shore: but the sound of waves & the scent in the air mark its presence. The rapids in the river, concealed behind the dense mass of the oaks, are the river's final drop before it slows its movement, mingles & becomes lost in the endless surfaces & depths of the vaster body of water. On long summer afternoons or grey wintry evenings, winds spring up that tease & pummel the wooden verandah, the shuttered windows, the old brick walls of the house.

Along the path to the sea the vast expanse of grass grows coarser & wilder the nearer it comes to the bluff edge. From this perspective the house seems tiny, lost in the middle of the huge lawn, & only the edge of the wheat field peeks out from behind its diminutive bulk. Below the bluff's edge the exposed clay banks fall steeply, & here & there plants cling, even tho the face crumbles a little more with each passing year, a little more clay lost in the rain that falls, the snows that melt & run down it to the shore, scoring it, the whole face of the bluff rippled, fluted like the white painted columns of the verandah.

From the shore the sea stretches out towards another horizon line & no other land is visible, no island or imagined continent, simply the water, waves, still again, as the wind rises & drops & the sea moves back & forth against the strewn beach. And from the shore there is no difference between sky & sea, water & air, & everything appears to curve back towards the bluffs, the house, high above, out there.

"But you changed somehow!"

"Of course I did. What did you expect? No one remains the same forever."

"That's not what I'm talking about. We stopped having these kinds of talks, the way we're talking now. You got more introspective, more silent, kept wanting more time to yourself, time of that you kept saying, & now I feel like a fool for having given it to you."

"Why? I wasn't lying. I needed that."

"But look what's happened!"

"What's happened has nothing to do with that!"

"Then what does it have to do with?"

"Maybe you're just a sloppy thinker."

"Thanks a lot!"

"I'm serious. I keep getting the feeling, actually I've had it for a long time now, that you don't really use the time to think. You just use it to withdraw, to crawl inside yourself & lick your wounds. And if you're crawling around licking your wounds what can I think but that I caused them?"

"The two things aren't connected!"

"So you keep saying! But they must be connected in some way! You sure keep getting into it when I'm around."

"Something just happened...that's all."

"What?"

"It's hard to explain."

"Well do us a favour & try eh?"

"I can't really pinpoint it. There wasn't just one thing, one big spectacularly bad thing I can blame it on. I wish there had been. That'd make this whole stupid business a lot clearer. It was just one minor episode after another. Like that movie business. Or the sock episode."

"The sock episode?"

"You remember. I got really upset because you threw out my favorite socks."

"But no one has favorite socks! They have favorite skirts or shirts but they don't have favorite socks!"

"I did."

"But how was I to know that?"

"You just shouldn't have touched my stuff."

"I was trying to do you a goddamn favour! I can't believe this! That's still bugging you after all these years?"

"Not really. But you asked me to tell you what it was, & like I said it wasn't just one thing!"

"Okay. Okay, continue, I'll try not to take it personally. But favorite socks? I mean what are we talking about here?"

"Can I go on?"

"Sorry."

"I know some of these things seem silly, they seem silly to me too, but they're all that come to mind. I didn't even realize what was happening but I can see now that I've been collecting these little incidents, minute as they are, for years, & in my mind they've all run together to form larger stories, novels even, a body of that which has as its central premise the notion that if you *really* loved me these sorts of occurrences wouldn't even take place, that I shouldn't *have* to mention them to you, that you should already understand everything about me perfectly if you really loved me &, of course, you can't *really* love me since these things keep happening."

"That's a hell of a premise & a hell of a big order."

"I know. But I didn't even realize I was asking you to fill it. And of course on those occasions when you did happen to fill it I took it completely for granted, after all that was the way it was supposed to be, & when you didn't...well that was a sign & I made a mental note of it & waited for other signs. From my point of view I was being quite generous in delaying my judgements & not jumping to any hasty conclusions."

"Very magnanimous."

"I like to make my petty gestures as big as possible. Gives them a certain largeness of spirit."

"So when did you figure all this out?"

"I don't know if I have yet. This just occurred to me when you asked me what happened. Sounds good tho doesn't it?"

"It makes sense."

"I can't say I'm proud of my part in creating this situation. But it's the way it happened. That's what you asked for wasn't it? 'What actually happened between us.' Am I quoting correctly?"

"Yeah, you pass."

"But these things all seem so silly & petty & inconsequential!"

"They are."

"And they went on so long!"

"That's the problem really."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I thot I did. Now it's obvious I didn't. And you couldn't read my mind. You couldn't know what I didn't know myself. I fucked up. It's that simple. I fucked up."

Following the curve of the horizon across the field of wheat, far out at the edge, a range of mountains begins, rises above the horizon more & more until, even at such a distance, its peaks begin to dominate the landscape. The wheat field is edged on its right by land that gradually becomes more hilly, rises in gentle steps & curves from the end of the lawn to the abrupt slopes of the mountains. It is a huge distance but not unimaginable. There is the lawn & the flat scrubby land in between until the hills begin to rise, a vast distance of such

hills hidden behind the horizon line, & then the mountains of which only the tips are seen. The river begins in the mountains, makes its way down the sheer rock faces in huge spraying falls of water tumbling into the valleys below, winding its way thru the hills, out, along the farther edge of the wheat field, disappearing behind the trees, flowing over the rapids, slowing, finally, as it nears, enters, the sea. And the lawn, carefully trimmed, marks the left & bottom edges of the wheat field, moves up the right side until it is supplanted by the longer, wilder grass which, side by side with the wheat, continues to the banks of the river. At a distance the wheat & grass merge, in August when the sun burns them both yellow, or in spring when it is all green (tho even then the wheat appears more formal, precise, & the wild grass even wilder, more extreme). From the river's edge, at the boundary between the wheat & the wild grass fields, the house is invisible, the hills closer, more extreme, blocking all but one or two of the peaks from view, & the measured precision of the lawn invisible too. But from the upper windows on the left side of the house the mountains become clearer, more massive & even the river is visible occasionally beyond the wheat & the long grass. And the hills stretch back farther, take on more of their true dimension & width, & the wild grass & the scrub curve on around behind the house, beyond the lawn & the hills take up more & more of the horizon.

"Cigarette?"

"Sure."

"Light?"

"Please."

"Thanks."

"So what else?"

"Well?"

"It does seem to help if we talk."

"I know that. I'm trying to get it clear in my mind first."

"Okay."

"I was telling you about how I felt when she died, how it seemed to awaken something in me, or at least made me aware of how much she'd meant to me, & how I'd done nothing about that, had let all these other things intervene."

"I think that's what tipped me off."

"What?"

"When you started to talk about her I realized I'd been doing the same thing with you. In a different way I suppose but the effect was the same."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No. That's okay. You just got me thinking about something else."

"Anyway. I began to think about you & me, how much there had been between us, how much you meant to me. I realized again how I love you & how I haven't said that to you for such a long time. I don't know why. Almost as tho there

hadn't been the time or the occasion. Stupid eh? If love-making isn't the occasion what is? But I hadn't. I had to deal with that somehow. I had to understand that. When you said 'let's talk' I felt relieved but worried. I knew what was on your mind even if you didn't. It seemed like maybe the time had passed me by, that here was another opportunity I'd..."

"Sorry."

"Don't be."

"It gets a little exaggerated in my mind. Of course I'd said 'I love you' lots of times, but I realized so clearly how much of the real strength of the feeling had been missing. Not that I didn't feel it somewhere, but that I didn't let myself feel it with you, treated it all jokingly, that same asinine tendency to crack a joke rather than crack inside."

"You're not the only one."

"God don't I know it. I've sure snarled at you enough about that. But so what? It was me this time, or all of those times, and all at once I really felt it, really felt how I'd loved you, still love you, & haven't told you with anything like the real feeling behind it until now."

"Couple of fools eh?"

"Not a bad description."

"You always said I had a gift for it."

"Another cigarette?"

"Sure."

"Another drink?"

"Great."

"Well here's to us."

"Whatever us is at the moment eh?"

"To whatever us is."

"Cheers."

The lawn surrounds the house. From the river it stretches left & right towards the wheat field & the distant bluff above the sea, sweeping around the house towards the rear, the back yard, stretching out there, farther, so that the house appears to sit in the very centre of the vast expanse of green grass. From the back door a sidewalk composed of perfect squares of paving stone runs straight out to where the lawn ends at the garden. In the garden, at different times of year, flowers grow: azaleas, begonias, chrysanthemums & alyssum, rows of corn & carrots, radishes & lettuce. At the back of the garden is a small orchard & beyond that the fallow field of wild grass stretches away into the foothills towards the horizon above which the mountain peaks appear, snow capped, & the clouds, the sky. To either side of the path are play areas, the one housing a sand box, the other a set of swings, & from the area beneath the swings the lawn fans out toward the distant line of the bluff, continuing to the right around the house & down as far as the river. Each day the sun rises above the point where the river & sea meet, casting the long shadows of the trees over the lawn, the shadow of the house over the back yard, all these shadows disappearing as the sun moves overhead, reap-

pearing across the front path's white pebbled surface, across the moving face of the river, as the sun sinks, sets below the peaks on the left side of the mountain range. At night only the lights from the windows cast shadows, or the moon, as it moves its trace over the widened circle of moist grass, as it rises & sets & the lights are turned off & on in the barely glimpsed rooms of the house.

"What were you just thinking about?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"It was just this expression that crossed your face."

"What expression?"

"Funny. Sad. A mixture of the two."

"I was thinking about my little brother for some reason."

"Which one?"

"The one who died."

"Do you remember him?"

"A bit. He had blond hair, hazel eyes. He looked a lot like my mother."

"It must have been hard on her."

"It was."

"So what were you thinking about him?"

"Sorry. What did you just ask me?"

"It's okay. I asked what you were thinking about your brother."

"Just about him. I was remembering the way he looked, the one clear memory I have of him, playing in the yard.

He was wearing overalls & a little plaid shirt."

"How old?"

"Must've been five. I'm sure the memory's from the day he died. I can't think why else I'd remember this."

"How did he die?"

"Something fell on him, I can't remember what, I don't think mom ever told me, something heavy tho, & it fractured his skull."

"I was there that day but I don't have any memory of it. I must've been in a different part of the yard. All I remember is that image of him dressed in those clothes & then later everyone running around very excited & upset."

"Mom was different after he died. There was always this sadness in her that you couldn't seem to do anything about. We had fun & everything, she was good that way, but there was this sadness in her that you couldn't touch. And she'd talk about him. Not a lot. But she'd remind us of his birthday when it came around, mention him in prayers at Christmas & Easter, things like that."

"Why were you thinking about him?"

"Eh?"

"Why were you thinking about him?"

"All this talk of death, of things being over I guess. Seems to stir all this up."

"Where're you going?"

"Just thot I'd open a window."

"Still thinking about him?"

"Yes."

"Help to talk some more?"

"Nothing more to say really. Just that image. It makes me feel like crying but I'm not crying am I?"

"It was never one of the things that came easiest to you."

"I always feel like some ham actor when I start crying. It never flows. You know what I mean?"

"Remember who you're talking to?"

"Right. It's like I'm holding onions under my eyes or something. It always seem to lack conviction."

"But you're not trying for an acting award! You're just crying."

"Sometimes I wonder. It's like what you were saying earlier; if the only time I can feel anything is at some extreme moment of crisis then I begin to doubt the validity of it. Maybe I'm making it up."

"You've got it ass backwards!"

"Thanks for not saying 'as usual'."

"Its not actually usual for you. You're a pretty sharp person most of the time. But when it comes to crying you're definitely in reverse gear. For you the very unusualness of the act is what makes you so self-conscious. If you did it more..."

"I'd get better at it. Right."

"Well you would."

"Yeah I suppose I would. It seems like a silly formulation tho."

"Helps the eye muscles relax."

"Great. I can see it now. I go for my doctorate in Applied Crying."

"Could get a dynamite thesis topic going."

"*Crying In the Middle Ages.*"

"You're just getting silly because the whole idea of crying makes you so uncomfortable. If you feel like crying why not cry? It's human. It's part of how people survive the atrocities & horrors they encounter. It keeps you from becoming numb."

"*From Numb to Dumb: A Confession.*"

"Your autobiography?"

"Something like that."

"I'd agree with the title's summation."

"I have to. I wrote it."

"Kiss me."

"You didn't ask 'why?'."

"I liked your train of thot."

"An interesting approach to ending a relationship."

"You know me. I favor the unorthodox."

"Mmmm."

"So what now?"

"I thot the next step was obvious."

"I mean with us!"

"So do I."

"Ah."

"C'mon. You started this. Kiss me."

"Nice quotation."

"A favorite author."

"Mmmhmm."

From the river's edge the path of white pebbles curves across the lawn to the verandah's five wooden steps from the foot of which a coco-matting runner follows each angle in the stairs to the top, running across the full width of the porch to end at the front door. The front door is panelled, the eight exact squares forming a larger rectangle of white painted wood, each square clearly framed & then contained again within the larger frame of the full door. To either side stone vases full of flowers sit between the half-columns of white wood & the door frame, & beyond the columns the huge leaded windows open into the diningroom on the left, the livingroom on the right, the two windows framed in their turn by ivy & then the full wooden columns that support the verandah. The door's hinges are brass, & when the brass handle is turned the door swings open, quietly, perfectly balanced, swings open into the cool dark interior of the house. In summer a screen door is attached to the door frame & the interior door left open to allow the air to circulate, the breeze to move across the wide lawn thru the long hallways of the house. In winter the front door is never used, the back one being favored because of its enclosed mud room, its storage space for boots & coats, those items of clothing which in summer simply hang there, unused, as the front door opens & the summer air circulates, cooling the room & corridors. By the river or among the trees, or even from the edge of the bluff or orchard, the house appears warm in winter, cool in summer, the imagined rooms appropriate to the shift in seasons, & the doors, front & back, open & close, the windows raise & lower, & the house stands there in the middle of the wide yard.

"We should've done this a long time ago."

"We did."

"You know what I mean."

"But that's the funny thing. We aren't doing anything we didn't do a long time ago. It's just that it was such a long time ago."

"You're thinking of that first summer."

"Yeah. It was great. Things seemed so alive. We had so much to talk about. Plans. Issues. You gave me a lot. There were things we talked about then that completely changed my thinking."

"Like what?"

"Philosophies. Points of view. Like that time we met that man who was in such a foul mood & I was just completely judgemental, said what an asshole I thought he was, & you said 'Suppose this is the worst day of his life?' It seems so second nature to me now I feel foolish saying it out loud but at the time it was a real revelation."

"I think we were less afraid in the early days. We didn't spend a lot of time defending our points of view. You wanted to learn. That was how you used to define conversation — as a learning experience."

"I was full of those little epigrams wasn't I?"

"But that's exactly what I mean. Now you feel self-conscious about saying it, as tho to be human &, in some way, if you can forgive the expression, 'vulnerable', were in itself embarrassing."

"Why does that word make us wince?"

"Maybe that's part of it. Maybe the language of feeling has become co-opted in some way. It's that same crisis mentality. Everything gets so blown-up, so aggrandized. Maybe if we were all as large as figures on a movie screen & had a full seventy piece orchestra behind us we could say some of these things & feel we had the proper scale."

"I know what used to bother me, long before I met you, was the way sitting around with friends we kept having these 'serious' talks. There was something quite nuts about it. We were all depressed out of our skulls. We'd talk about real issues but from such a dark brooding point of view that I began to feel we had this really fucked-up idea of what 'profound' was all about."

"Now maybe if we'd put the emphasis on the the 'found' & not on being so pretentiously 'pro'..."

"That sense of surprise."

"Something like that."

"That's what we need isn't it?"

"Surprise?"

"Yes. Tho this has certainly been a find."

"I wasn't expecting it...any of it."

"You keep mentioning that."

"Recapturing my sense of surprise."

"Is it getting cold in here or is it my imagination?"

From the threshold a carpet runs down the hall toward the kitchen which occupies the back half of the house. The carpet is patterned, a dark red frieze of leaves, does not cover the floor entirely, an area of polished hardwood flooring left exposed on either side of it. Two sets of french doors open off the hall, the ones to the left into the diningroom, the ones to the right into the livingroom, & to either side of the french doors are old gas fixtures designed to look like candelabra &

now refitted to hold tiny electric lightbulbs in the shape of flames. The walls are panelled in dark oak for half their height & above that a dark red flock leaf-patterned wallpaper has been glued. The left side of the hall has tiny paintings of landscapes in ornate gilt frames spaced evenly along its length between the french door & the end wall of the hall, four of them, their style suggesting they were painted near the turn of the century. The first shows a copse near the edge of a river. The painter has been concerned with the play of light & mist rises from the river giving the scene a blurred formless quality thru which, nonetheless, distinct forms show. The effect is of a landscape viewed at dawn & the trees & grass appear to glisten, forming one continuous surface with the river. The second painting is of a field of wheat, which occupies approximately the bottom third of the canvas, above which a clear robin's egg blue has been painted to represent the sky. The technique, the detailed painting of the ears of wheat which because of the use of perspective appear "closest" in the painting, identifies the period of composition, but the effect, at a distance, is abstract — two bands of colour in bold strokes across the painting surface. The mountains in the third painting seem more traditional; the snow capped peaks, rugged billowing clouds, the sheer fall of water down the rock face, all these seem familiar. Only along the bottom edge is there some struggle to give the composition a sense of freshness. Here the few visible foothills are rendered in muted browns & golds, abrupt reds, & the mountains appear to form, not from the ground up but from the paint itself, pointing towards some struggle between representational & abstract modes of painting. The fourth painting, like the second, appears utterly abstract when viewed from a distance, & the gold frame, if not gaudy, at least inappropriate. Two almost identical blue rectangles divided by a

thin & only slightly darker blue line resolve themselves, as the painting is approached more closely, into an image of the sea on a still day, & the frame, far from being inappropriate, seems to have been built by the painter in order to complete the painting, to surround & permeate the canvas with a glow of golden light. On the right side of the hall a wide, ornately trimmed mirror has been hung & in its surface, depending on the angle, one or more of the paintings can be seen reflected in reverse, & the red flock wallpaper, the dark oak panelling, artificial candelabra, the hinges of the french doors. Below the mirror a small table has been placed upon which a letter lies unopened. In the end wall the door to the kitchen has been hung & the wall has been left blank, except for the panelling & the wall-paper, whereas the front wall has a clothes rack, a place to hang the hats & coats of visitors, & there is a slim black ceramic umbrella stand just to the right of the door as it opens into the hall. Both sets of french doors are closed, but the door to the kitchen lies partially open & at the point where the carpet & the hardwood end the red clay tiles of the kitchen floor can be seen to begin. To the right of the kitchen door a set of stairs rises towards the second floor & on the landing, at the top, the circular legs of a chair are visible.

“Did you mean what you said earlier about me & my ‘intentions?’”

“I guess I did. Yes.”

“I think what I was trying to get at is what we’ve been talking about here tho. I just want things as they are, the relationship as it is. I can live with that. What drives me crazy is you

feeling guilty because you didn’t follow thru on your intentions, & me feeling like there’s something you’ve been holding back on me. I can deal with the contradictions, the shifts in mood, but that continuous feeling of pressure! It really does get to me & it’s just so completely & utterly unnecessary.”

“I’m not sure I know how to change that.”

“So that’s a real problem then.”

“Yeah.”

The french doors on the left open onto a polished hardwood floor on top of which no rug has been placed. To the left the large leaded windows look out onto the verandah, the front lawn, the pebbled path that winds towards the distant curve of the river, and to either side of the windows hang dark blue velvet drapes, white sheers hung between them & the wall so that, when pulled, the velvet is protected from the bleaching rays of the sun. Across the top of the window runs a canopy made of the same dark blue velvet as the drapes, & below the window, its back facing the back of the easy chair on the front verandah, a large formal diningroom chair with ornately carved arms has been placed, large potted palms to either side of it. In the wall opposite the french doors, but centred, is a large red brick fireplace with a dark oak mantle, & above it a large mirror hangs, the brass colour of its frame matching the brass screen that has been placed on the hearth in front of the grate to catch straying sparks from the wood or coal fires that burn there. The hearth is composed of the same red clay tiles that cover the kitchen floor, & the

brass tongs, the brass handled poker, the brass shovel for the ashes, have been set on their stand to the right of the screen. To the screen's left is a small brass bin for holding kindling wood & logs, & to the left of the fireplace on the white papered walls, the wallpaper stippled here & there with tiny blue flowers, a large still life has been hung, a painting of a bowl of blue Japanese irises among which clusters of primroses have been arranged. To the right of the fireplace is a window, almost exactly the same dimensions as the still life, thru which the lawn & the distant field of wheat are glimpsed. Along the wall to the right of the french doors a row of four diningroom chairs has been placed, & along the end wall of the room another three, all armless, all part of the same set as the large chair beneath the front window. Neither the wall on the right nor the end wall have pictures hung on them tho both are interrupted by doors, the french ones into the hallways on the right, & a swinging door with large two-way hinges in the end wall which, when open, reveals the kitchen beyond, the red of its floor picking up the red of the hearth, accenting the red brick of the fireplace. To the left of the kitchen door is a sliding hatch thru which food can be passed & under the small window in the fireplace wall a serving table. In the exact centre of the room is a large oak dining table, the ornate carving of its legs matching the design of the diningroom chairs, & in its centre a lace doily on top of which a bowl of purple & blue flowers, primroses & irises, is sitting. Centred directly above the table is a large chandelier made of the same cut glass as the bowl, as the candlestick holders on the fireplace mantle. The blue velvet curtains are worn. In the chandelier two of the tiny bulbs have burnt out. The light switch for the chandelier is to the left of the door.

The french doors on the right open onto a polished hardwood floor on top of which a burnt orange rug has been placed. To the right the large leaded windows look out onto the verandah, the lawn, the grove of black oaks beyond which the river lies, and to either side of the windows hang dark brown velvet drapes, white sheers hung between them & the wall so that, when pulled, the velvet is protected from the bleaching rays of the sun. Below the window, its back facing the back of the front porch swing, a large brown couch has been placed, & to either side of it small end tables with ash trays & coasters on top of them & underneath each table top racks for magazines. In the wall opposite the french doors, but centred, is a large red brick fireplace with a dark oak mantle, and above it a large portrait of someone, man or woman, difficult to tell because of the darkening of the varnished surface in the centuries since it was painted & because the usual clues, the style in which the hair is arranged, the shape of the lips, have become damaged, bits of paint flaking away, the canvas stained with smoke, at some point, by a fire from which the painting was obviously saved, reframed, but never restored. The frame of the painting has been stained a dark brown to match the mantle, to be compatible with the black iron screen which has been placed on the hearth in front of the grate to catch straying sparks from the wood or coal fires that burn there. The hearth is made of black stone, & the iron tongs, the iron poker, the black tin shovel for the ashes, have been set on their stand to the left of the screen. To the screen's right is a small black bin for holding kindling wood & logs, & to the right of the fireplace another set of leaded windows, framed, once again, by dark brown velvet drapes, & thru which the edge of the bluff can be seen & the

clear blue sky above & beyond. Between these windows & the fireplace, & between the fireplace & the bookcase to its left, are equal stretches of white painted wall upon which, above the mantle, their bases level with the bottom of the painting, two light fixtures have been mounted. The oak bookcase fills the rest of the wall, runs completely across the end of the room wrapping around to cover the other wall all the way back to the edge of the french doors. Glass doors, which are now closed, have been built to cover the cases, enclose the books, & the doors have been fitted with locks tho no keys are visible. In front of the fireplace three armchairs have been arranged & a throw rug lies on the floor between them in front of the black stone hearth. There is a small ladder in one corner & some books are piled on top of it. Beams criss-cross the ceiling &, in the nine squares created, small electric light fixtures have been installed. The light switch, which has been flipped up, is mounted in the wall to the right of the door.

"I can't seem to stop thinking about her."

"Maybe it's only really hitting you now."

"That's what I think every time I have this reaction. No it's more than that or..."

"It's more like I can only handle it a bit at a time. Maybe that's the way it is. Maybe you cry a lot & eventually you're actually crying less but each time feels so intense, the feeling of loss is so intense, you don't realize you're getting over it."

"Here."

"Thanks."

"I just keep thinking how much I loved her & how little I saw of her for so long."

"There were reasons for that tho."

"I know. But if I'd let myself really feel what I felt for her..."

"Anyway, you know."

"Sure."

"Shouldn't we think about having a bite to eat soon?"

"What time is it?"

"A long time since we last ate. If I have another drink without eating something I'm going to be sick."

"So let's eat."

The red clay tiles of the kitchen floor extend thru the back door of the house into the mud room. To the left & right of that door cupboards cover the walls from floor to ceiling, cupboards in which dishes, pots & pans, baking supplies, jams & spices & cereals are stored. The cupboards are white, their handles red & the counter, which runs from the hallway door towards the windows in the left wall of the house, has a red top with more cupboards below it & more red handles. Along the counter are arranged tins of flour, rice, raisins & rolled oats. There is a toaster, a number of large cutting boards, a knife holder &, nearest the door, a set of cookbooks. On the wall between the red-topped counter &

the full-length wall cupboards is another counter with sinks & a stove which has been built into it. The sinks are in the centre of the counter, the stove to the far left flush against the hallway door wall, a metal hood above it to carry smoke & steam away, & to the right of the sinks a wooden dish rack, a preparation space & yet another cutting board. The window is in the centre of the same wall just above the sinks. Framed by cotton curtains in a calico print, the mountains are visible thru it in their beginning, march away to the right, while between the lawn & the distant peaks the wild rolling scrubland gradually becomes hills. Across the kitchen in the opposite wall is another window curtained in the same fashion, thru which the end of the mountain range is glimpsed, the last straggling peaks, & the distant line of the bluff beyond which the sea, invisible from this angle, beats upon the hidden shore. The left half of the kitchen has a preparation table & the right an old pine one, painted red, around which eight red wooden chairs have been arranged, & on top of which are a butter dish, salt & pepper shakers, a sugar bowl & a napkin holder. The walls & ceiling have been painted the same white as the cupboards & the light fixture in the ceiling is covered with a white globe. Between the hallway door & the right wall of the house is a large white refrigerator which emits a continuous humming, & beyond that the door to the cellar lies open, revealing a steep flight of stairs which disappear into a darkness below.

“Then there was that horrible vacation we took together.”

“A model of non-communication.”

“I think that was probably the worst period in the whole time

we've been involved. I'd decided you might have been a sweet person when we met but that living with you was a bit too Jekyll & Hyde for me.”

“I thot I was being myself.”

“So did I!”

“Right.”

“What was happening? I've never figured that one out at all.”

“More of the same I think. I was making these little judgements, acting accordingly, & then congratulating myself on how objective I could remain in emotionally loaded situations.”

“And there I was screaming for a ‘real’ response to *me*.”

“What is a ‘real response’ anyway?”

“I think in that case you could've defined it as ‘the one *I'm* looking for!’”

“I knew what you meant I suppose. You wanted a more feelingful approach from me. But it's funny isn't it the uses of language that go on. I mean I was giving you a ‘real *good* response’.”

“It's all such shorthand! Why couldn't I have said something semi-intelligible like: ‘Okay, you're being objective here are there any more subjective feelings you could come across with?’ I could've at least fished around a little.”

“You sound too formal tho. I don't think I would've responded any better to that.”

“So what do you think I should've said, Touchy?”

“How about: ‘Hi, good looking!’”

“The old sense-of-humour ploy.”

“Tends to work.”

“But I wasn't in a laughing mood!”

“Neither of us were.”

"Part of the problem eh?"

"I think so. When I become a sombre, prissy little idiot, the last thing I need is someone coming on in the same way."

"Thanks a lot!"

"Don't mention it."

"Want some more salad?"

"Thanks."

"So it's that same old problem of balance. I don't want to be cracking a bunch of silly jokes when what I feel is something else, but I don't want to be the last word in sombre when what's called for is some humour."

"It's not always easy to recognize a call for humour, but then separating the counterfeit emotions from the real ones is part of the struggle I guess."

"Did I get too profound there for a moment?"

"No. I got something stuck in my teeth."

"Tell the food to watch it. I'm sensitive after all."

The cellar stairs are wooden & open. From the kitchen door a rail runs down the right side & the stairs fall steeply all the way to the dirt floor at the bottom. The cellar is lit by two bulbs that dangle from the ceiling on fraying cords. The furnace is on a raised concrete platform to the right of the stairs, pipes running away from it in all directions. The barely visible walls are piled stone & crumbling mortar, & the wooden columns which must have once supported the

two storey house have been replaced by stacked cinder blocks. On the left side of the stairs is a wooden wall, part of an enclosed storage room in which are kept preserves & a small freezer containing meat & vegetables. The rest of the basement is empty.

"What're you thinking?"

"About us."

"Hmmm."

"I feel totally confused about us now. I figured it was over. I expected it, I didn't expect it, and then when you said it well I felt both relieved & upset. Now I don't know what to think."

"When I try to think of not being with you anymore I just get upset. One could always get by I suppose but I keep wondering what I'm doing ending the relationship."

"We sure haven't been behaving like it's over."

"We haven't been behaving."

"Cute."

"A definite failing of mine. I'll try to get more trenchant."

"So why are we breaking up?"

"I don't know."

"Things had become pretty static between us."

"Yes."

"But that wasn't the *real* state of things."

"It just seemed that way you mean."

"Yes."

"Which unfortunately does real damage."

"Do you think real damage has been done?"

"I don't know what to think."

"I know talking about ending the relationship is completely different from thinking about it. Something happens when you & I start to talk. I get, well, excited. I see possibilities."

"When we talk this way?"

"Exactly! I don't mean snarling at each other or quoting

our little prepared speeches, I mean *talking to each other*."

"But on the other hand you can't make talking about breaking up the basis for a relationship."

"Doesn't promote security."

"No."

"Confusing."

"Yeah."

From the hallway a runner of the same dark design & material as the rug follows the stairs up to the second floor hallway. Between the top of the stairs & the window facing it is an area the width of both the stairwell & the hall that runs beside it, a square area in the corners of which, on either side of the window, two small white wooden chairs have been placed, & between them, under the window, a small circular maple table atop which a bowl of chrysanthemums is resting. White curtains frame the window, & the walls to either side, continuing thru both the second floor hallways, have been papered in a red rose pattern. The stairwell is enclosed by a dark oak railing & from the window facing the top of the stairs to the turn in the hall, all the way along the long hallway to the front of the house, the dark red carpet continues. Along the right wall in each hallway, beginning at the doorway to the right of the white chair & ending just before the other wall ends at the window overlooking the

front lawn, the same imitation candelabra as on the ground floor have been refitted with small flame-shaped light bulbs. The doorway to the right of the white wooden chair opens into a small bedroom & is the only doorway in that wall. At the juncture with the second hallway the carpet runs left towards the front window & right towards the door to the back balcony. In the long wall that runs from the front of the house to the back are three doors, the one nearest the balcony half-open to reveal a large bathroom, the other two opening into bedrooms. The short wall which runs from the junction of the two hallways to the balcony is bare, while the longer one, ending at the short stretch of black oak balustrade, contains the door to a large bedroom &, between that door & the oak railing, a hanging persian rug. There are no curtains on the window in the balcony door, but the front window, thru which the oaks & the river are glimpsed, is framed by the same white material as the stairwell window.

"Sometimes I feel like it's all too much, that I can't live my life at such a level of intensity. I realized that when she died. It's like we spend our lives tuning half of it out, damping down, trying to get some kind of control over what we permit to hit our nervous systems, what we're willing to respond to."

"Maybe it's a necessary adaptation."

"Insensitivity as a mutationally developed capability?"

"Not precisely what I was thinking. No it's more like a way of dealing with an environment & a scale we were never equipped to deal with in the first place. It's that old question you & I used to debate. How many people can

you really know in a lifetime? Look how many times we've both moved, the people who've come & gone. How many? Hundreds, right? It always amazes me. If I sat down & tried to write a list it feels like it would never end. And when we meet again, after months or years, it's astonishing how much of the original feeling is still intact. And yet there're only a few of those people we really keep in touch with. Do I miss them? In a way. Could I walk around in a continuous state of missing them? No. I'd be utterly incapacitated if I did."

"Did I ever tell you about my favorite uncle?"

"I don't know. Tell me again."

"He was in the war & caught this wasting disease, one of those ones like Parkinson's that causes your body to shake more & more as the years go by. Shortly after the war his wife left him, I don't know why exactly, no one would ever talk about it they were so angry with her. He spent the last twenty years of his life in hospital. It reached the point where he couldn't even talk because the muscles in his jaw & tongue shook so much. He was the kindest man I ever met & the only one of all my uncles who didn't feel uncomfortable around kids, who'd accept us completely on our own terms. He never lost his sense of humour or his sensitivity. You never felt like he was talking down to you or trying to be one of the kids, he was just being himself & you were free to be yourself in return. I remember visiting him in the hospital the year he died. His face lit up when he saw me. He knew who I was & I didn't see him that often because he lived over 500 miles from us. Even tho he couldn't smile with his mouth he smiled. It was completely clear to me. And whenever I think of him I remember his eyes on that day, the complete intelligence in them, & the

fact that he wasn't focussing inward on the tragedy of his condition but outward on me & conveying the pleasure he felt in seeing me."

"It doesn't seem fair does it?"

"It's not really fair or unfair. It's what you were saying earlier — it's the way it was or is. And he astonishes me every time I think of him precisely because all of it, the war, the illness, the loss of a wife whom he'd loved deeply, never seemed to dull him, never became an excuse for him to become insensitive. God knows he would've been utterly justified if he had. But he didn't."

"So you think it's just excuses then."

"In a way. That's certainly what it is with me. I feel like I can't take anything more, can't feel anything more than I already feel. It reaches that point & then I cut off. I might not appear insensitive to someone else but in the terms I've set for myself I know I am. Acceptably insensitive."

"But then that's what I'm not sure about. Is there a balance point of some kind, some point at which it really does become too much? Torture teaches us there is. But in daily life, just in terms of dealing with this thing we call the real world?"

"And the relationship?"

"You already described it pretty well. I buy myself off with my intentions. I say I need time to think but what happens mostly is I use the time not to think, to try & find a way to shut down. But of course I feel like a good person who's misunderstood because my intentions are always *very* honorable."

"Crazy isn't it?"

"I'm beginning to think it's the most common kind."

"I felt almost exactly what you're talking about when she died. But that's weird isn't it because at the same time as I was feeling like I couldn't feel anything more I was actually feeling more than I had in ages, I was actually getting in touch with what I felt. And not just around her but around you & everyone who's ever meant anything to me."

"So maybe that's what we mean when we say it's getting too much for us. Maybe at those times we're just beginning to encounter the world as it is."

The window in the small bedroom at the top of the stairs looks out over the back garden, the orchard, the final slope of the mountains towards the sea. The blue in the curtains that frame it is a darker blue than the painted walls, a lighter blue than the flannel bedspread, & on clear days, from certain angles, when only the blue sky fills the window, the whole scene begins to resemble elements in the paintings in the first floor hall. To the right of the door is a small dresser whose top is covered by a white lace cloth. The mirror attached to the dresser reflects the shelves on the opposite wall on which a collection of small dolls, dressed in various national costumes, is displayed. The bed, pushed tight against the window wall, almost fills the space to the left of the door, leaving a narrow space to the left of it to permit access to the bed & to make it possible to open the closet door. There is a lamp attached to the brass headboard, & above the bed a sewing sampler, letters of the alphabet & a red schoolhouse, has been framed & hung. Between the window

& the end wall two shelves run the whole length of the bed & on the shelves books have been haphazardly piled. The old wooden box at the foot of the bed is open & blocks, jigsaw puzzles, & one or two stuffed animals are visible.

"It's getting late."

"I know."

"I don't want to stop yet tho."

"Something hot to drink?"

"Tea?"

"Sure."

"I love you you know."

"I know."

The two bedrooms on the left side of the house are almost identical. From the doorway of each a window is visible, almost in the centre of the opposite wall, both equipped with blinds & both blinds up. Thru the one the wheat field & the sky above it are visible while thru the other the beginning of the mountain range is seen. To the left of the door in the first bedroom a large window looks out over the roof of the verandah towards the river while in the second bedroom, in

the middle of the identically placed wall, is a large painting of an orchard, crudely done, the trees almost childlike in their execution, & the apples painted on in hasty splotches of green & red. To the right of each door, hugging the hallway wall, is a single bed covered in a white bedsheet, the pillows placed on top of the sheets, their cases in each instance having a pattern of red flowers. A black tin light fixture with a small string cord is attached to each bedstead & beside the beds are small night tables on which pitchers of water have been placed. The walls are a uniform white & in the middle of each room a throw rug has been placed, while against the left wall of the house identical small writing desks with identical lamps & chairs are situated directly in front of the windows. There is a closet door in the right wall of the front bedroom, between the foot of the bed & the window wall, while in the second bedroom the door is located on the left between the painting of the orchard & the hall wall. There is a connecting door between the two closets.

"Enough milk?"

"Fine."

"There doesn't seem to be much more to say does there?"

"For the moment."

"I love you too you know."
"Yes."

Thru the large windows in the bedroom on the right side of the house the massed oaks are visible, their huge branches & thick canopies of green leaves, a scattering of acorns on the ground below them, & thru their intertwining limbs occasional glimpses of the white foam & spray of the rapids. On either side of the windows have been hung drapes made of the same dark blue velvet as those on the floor below, & under the window is a large oak desk cut down from an old buffet, the lower cupboards removed & the cut wood stained & varnished to match the natural aging of the rest. On the desk is a large blotter, some dictionaries, a goosenecked lamp, a scattering of file folders, pens &, in front of the desk, a chair similar in design to the ones in the diningroom. Under the window in the wall facing the door is a sewing table with the machine, its cover removed, slightly recessed into the surface so that the cloth to be sewn can slide smoothly

over the machine's free arm. Another chair, the same design as the first, sits in front of it. The window is framed by more of the blue drapes & thru the glass, from this angle, the sea is visible beyond the edge of the bluff. On the wall to the left of the door a painting of the house is hung, executed in winter or early spring before the ivy had covered the red brick tho the runners are visible as a network of fine brown lines criss-crossing the entire face of the building. In the painting the front door stands open, the hall within partly visible, the curtains in both the livingroom & diningroom drawn. The flowerbeds in front of the verandah are empty & the effect of the painting is strange, as tho the house had been painted in a deliberately misshapen manner when in fact the style is starkly realistic & highly detailed. The walls of the room have been painted a pastel blue, & the bed, whose head lies against the right wall of the house & on either side of which small night tables are set, is covered with a light blue bedspread atop which four light blue pillows, piled two & two, sit. In the end wall of the room, on the side nearest the hall wall, the closet door lies open & within are glimpsed dresses, suits, dressing gowns & a number of shoes, both men's & women's, in varying styles & colours. The closet appears deep & seems to extend the width of the room. Just inside the hall door, on the left, their backs to the hall wall, are two small easy chairs, a table between them atop which a lamp rests. The lamp is of dark blue ceramic & the shade, chosen to match, is covered in a clear protective plastic. There is a brown carpet covering the floor. On both bedside tables are reading lamps, a few books &, on the one, placed carefully on the side nearest the bed, a small writing pad & a pencil.

"I wouldn't want it to be the same & I wouldn't want it to change."

"Sounds like a stalemate."

"Well I wouldn't want it to reach this same point again & yet I like what we have between us."

"So you want it as is but more as is than it's been."

"Something like that."

"You think we should stay together then."

"If we're together yes."

"Sounds like a series of bizarre paradoxes."

"Aren't paradoxes by their nature bizarre?"

"Not necessarily. But they are paradoxical."

"Getting cute again."

"Sorry. Just can't resist it sometimes. Think of it as my fatal flaw."

"Don't you think we should stay together?"

"I do, yeah, but I feel dislocated by everything."

"The conversation you mean?"

"What else? Maybe this is part of the problem. The moment I begin to feel more fully what you mean to me I also begin to panic. I can feel it even as we're sitting here talking. The more important you begin to seem to me, the more I acknowledge I love you, the more a feeling of caution begins to grow in me. It's like the two feelings exist in exactly the same place within me, as tho I were thinking & feeling two absolutely contradictory things at exactly the same time, believed both of them to be true, & were trying to act on each of them at the same instant."

"I want things to continue between us. And I don't want

them to change either. But if I get a little glassy-eyed from time to time feel free to holler yoo-hoo & see if anyone's home inside here. I don't want to make excuses but on the other hand I am the way I am for the moment & it helps if we're both aware of that. Who knows. Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm always going to be this way."

"Gosh! You mean there's more than one fatal flaw?"

"I'm beginning to sense a bevy of them in there."

"But I do love you. Just remember that the next time you have to send a search party in to find me."

"So you've forgiven me for throwing out your favorite socks?"

"Please!"

The cast iron bathtub is white & sits under the window in the left wall of the house. The windowblind is up & from this angle the mountains dominate more of the scenery, more of the foothills are glimpsed, & the clouds that gather above the distant peaks appear part of the snow that covers them. The iron taps at the end of the tub have been enamelled white & to the left of the hot water tap has been hung a wire basket in which a used bar of soap rests. A wet orange washcloth has been thrown over the tap & the facecloth & the towels that are hung to the right of the window are the same shade of orange. On the wall to the left of the bathroom door a floor to ceiling mirror is fastened. Some of the silvering has worn off the back of the glass & the reflection of the shelves in the open cupboard on the opposite wall lacks certain items which the shelves contain. To the right of the bathroom

door, against the hall wall, its top lying on the tiled floor beside it, is a clothes hamper, out of which towels, socks & underwear spill. In the wall which backs against the balcony, & upon which the cupboard containing the shampoo, toilet paper & extra towels is mounted, there is a white ceramic sink supported by a white ceramic base. To either side of the sink taps are indentations in which bars of soap sit & above the sink a small cabinet whose door contains yet another mirror. The cabinet door opens to the right & at a certain point in its opening arc picks up the reflection of the full-length mirror, which picks up the reflection of the cabinet mirror, which picks up the reflection of the full-length mirror, back & forth, & in which objects multiply & curve away towards some invisible & infinite point. To the left of the sink, its tank against the same wall, the toilet, lid closed, has been fastened to the tile floor. A toilet roll, already half gone, sits on top of the tank. There is a bathmat in front of the tub & an old scale, its weights set at zero, stands at the end of the tub to the left of the window. There is one large light fixture in the white ceiling & the walls are white, the blind white, & the tiles, which cover the bathroom floor, are also white.

“Well?”

“I don’t feel like stopping yet either.”

“Not a lot else to talk about tho.”
“Didn’t I say that awhile back?”

“Still involved then?”

“Still.”

“Lovers?”

“The works.”

“I like it.”

“Maybe we could make this an annual event.”

“Breaking up?”

“Seems to help.”

“Weird but it might do the trick eh?”

“Want a last drink?”

“Sure.”

“To us.”

“As is?”

“As is.”

“Us.”

From the banks of the river, the spray from the rapids making the grass & clay slippery, thru the dark shadows beneath the oaks, the ground worn bare in spots, packed hard from the comings & goings of unnumbered feet, an old footpath makes its way to the edge of the lawn. From the mouth of the river where it loses itself in the larger waters, where the rock & debris strewn shore is daily washed by the movement of the waves, another path winds its way up the bluff face, turns left along the top of the bluff, right along the banks of the river, joining the older footpath as it nears the wood or, if the other direction is taken, losing itself miles later in the long grass that overlooks the vast body of the sea. To walk that way, to look first to the right towards the distant horizon of sea & sky, then left towards the house, makes the house appear as it really is: a small two-storey building to which a front verandah & a back balcony have been added; a farmhouse whose barn has long since disappeared; a house built for a different time & thus a different purpose & place. From the bluffs in a direct line with the little orchard another path winds its way towards the house, bypasses it to loop thru the orchard & then, almost as if continuing the back sidewalk, turns to the right & runs straight out towards the middle of the mountain range. Nearing the beginning of the foothills the path winds & twists, making its way thru ravines & gulleys, old river beds, finding its way to the valleys that run into the heart of the mountains. From those same mountains numerous trails snake out & join to make two main ones: the one that finds its way eventually into the orchard & a second one that follows the course of the river, joining, finally, the older path that runs towards the

house thru the oak wood. The path to the orchard takes three days by foot, & the one that follows the twists & curves of the river six days, sections of the trail continually being obliterated by collapsing river banks until, finally, as the wheat field is reached, the edges of that more precisely defined area can be followed straight across towards the lawn on the left side of the house, the long grass & wheat making passage easy even tho no path exists. From the edge of the lawn, from the point where the old footpath ends, the white pebbled surface of the winding path that leads to the front door begins. In spring & summer the flowers blooming in the large & small flowerbeds flood the air round the walk with perfume, & the distance from the edge of the lawn to the front verandah is marked by a shifting & blending of fragrance & colour. It is this path & the path from the sea that are favored in these seasons. Returning from the beach in late July thru the long grass at the bluff's edge, or emerging from the dark wood into the bright sun of the lawn, seeing the house, the house appears larger, more imposing, & the curtained windows seem inviting, mysterious, holding forth a promise that is never articulated. In fall the trails to & from the mountains are more frequented, the mud room providing an area in which to remove boots & coats, a place to deposit the sprays of dying leaves, the bits of fossils. As these routes are travelled, the house disappears then reappears as the path dips, turns, moves in behind the hills & rock outcroppings, out again, up, the roof now visible, then the whole building growing larger or smaller depending on the direction travelled. In winter all this is altered, the paths curving around the house & across the lawn from various directions to reach the back door, the front door ignored again until spring. But in the other three seasons of the year unmarked continuations of all these paths, of other

paths only temporarily established, criss-cross the lawn toward the front verandah, all of them joining at the foot of the verandah stairs. The coco-matting that covers the stairs is worn & in places, the staples have worked loose, causing the matting to slide dangerously. The strips covering the porch are worn too & the legs of the couch whose back faces the front railing of the verandah, whose cloth surface is also worn from years of use, first in the livingroom of the house & now, for years, on the front verandah, have worn thru the matting completely & rest on the grey painted floorboards. Only the swinging seat appears new because of the coat of white paint that has been given to it sometime in the past year, sometime in the spring so that the winter snow & frozen air have had no change yet to chip & crack the surface. But the easy chair & the couch, part of the same set purchased when the house was newer, are comfortable & inviting, make sitting on the porch in the warm summer evenings more pleasurable, & the hanging baskets & stone vases give the porch a garden air that the surrounding flower beds accent. Seen from the foot of the verandah stairs, surrounded as they are by the scent of flowers & the distant murmuring of the river, the front door seems less inviting or, more exactly, a thing to be postponed, something to keep closed, sealed, until the moment it is absolutely necessary to use it. As fall turns to winter & the wind from the sea blows in flat across the bluffs, the door is something longed for on returning from skating on the cold ice of the river, longed for precisely because it must remain sealed & the path around the house to the back door seems infinitely long & difficult of access. Running up the path from the river thru the falling rain, reaching the porch, the porch is something to linger on while watching the lightning dance across the sky & strike the distant ground, the front lawn at least three times, the

lightning rod on the peak of the house once, & the front door, closed or open, is a source of security, the knowledge that it exists, can be opened, that the house is there & can be entered, reassuring, a presence that embraces by its very familiarity, its nearness & in reaching for the brass doorknob, turning it, opening the door, a ritual is reenacted whose meaning deepens with each passing year. Pulling the screen door open to turn the handle of the inner door or, the inner door already open or, the screen door not yet in place or already removed & only the one door then to open, crossing the threshold as the door swings inward & entering the ground floor hallway, turning back to watch the lightning or to close the door quickly because it is winter, because it should not have been opened in the first place no vestibule to absorb the chill air, or leaving it open because the screen is in place & the house is still hot from the day's accumulations & standing in the front hallway as the screen door or the front door swings shut, one enters finally, or for the first time, the inside of the house. In the diningroom to the left the table has been set. Viewed thru the french doors the place settings appear, momentarily, as if painted onto the surface of the oak table, the precise arrangement of the blue cloth napkins, blue china plates, silver cutlery to either side, & the blue candles in the cut glass candlestick holders (removed from the mantle & placed in the centre of the table) forming, with the cut glass bowl of white chrysanthemums, a perfect still life. Thru the leaded windows the back of the easy chair is visible, the couch, the white pebbled path winding off between the flowerbeds towards the river. The armchair that had sat in front of the window has been placed in front of one of the place settings & a number of other diningroom chairs have been moved from places against the wall & arranged around the table. The window

that looks out on the wheatfield is open & a sliding screen has been placed in it to both hold it open & keep any straying insects out. From the fireplace, thru the french doors in the opposite wall, the front door is visible, the clothes rack, the umbrella stand, the french doors across the hall &, from the one doorway into the other a continuing view of the front lawn is seen thru each succeeding window, each frame (those in the diningroom, the leaded ones in the livingroom, the open doorway of the house in between) recapitulating part of the earlier scene while adding fresh elements to it. In this way the beginning of the woods is first glimpsed from the diningroom (a few trees on the left side of the frame), dominates the whole of the open doorway & then continues to dominate the landscape as seen from the livingroom. A number of magazines lie scattered on the couch to the right as that room is entered: recent numbers of technical journals devoted to particular issues in physics & philosophy, a poetry magazine, a copy of a national gossip monthly & copies of various international news weeklies. The books that were on top of the ladder at the far end of the room have been put away & a number of new volumes have been removed from the shelves & stacked on the floor as if the system by which the books had been arranged is now being reorganized. More volumes are stacked by the easy chairs in front of the fireplace. Along the hall from the front door toward the kitchen nothing has changed. Each painting retains its location, the frames dusted but the arrangement undisturbed, & the letter on the little mail table under the mirror remains unopened & has been joined by a second one. As the door to the kitchen is pushed open, the hinges squeaking as the door swings inward, the hum of the fridge is audible in the hall until the door swings shut again. Here the counter shows signs of food preparation: flour sprinkled on the red

top; a cutting board on which a knife rests exactly in the middle of a scattering of small cubes of diced green pepper; a bowl to the right of them containing lettuce, tomatoes, & shredded strips of carrots; in the sink, a number of pots, only their handles visible above the white mound of suds. The preparation table has the largest of the five cutting boards lying in the middle of it & in the middle of the cutting board a roasting chicken has been placed awaiting the toasting of the bread for the stuffing. The chairs around the red table have been pulled back as if in haste & the door to the mud room & the door to the basement are both lying open. From the top of the cellar stairs the basement is too dark to allow any details to be visible & neither the light switch there nor the light switch at the foot of the stairs to the second floor is working. As each of the carpeted steps is climbed, the view that is possible thru the window at the top changes so that first only the sky is visible & then the edge of the bluffs, more & more lawn &, finally, the top stair being reached & the landing stepped onto, the sea beyond all of them. One of the dolls has been removed from the small bedroom & placed in the white wooden chair to the left of the window. The curtains in the small bedroom are drawn, the covers of the bed thrown back, & one of the pillows has fallen off the bed onto the floor & is blocking the door to the closet. The new dolls have been added to the shelves on the right side of the window & the books on the shelves to the left have been rearranged in alphabetical order & stood upright, shiny new blue bookends holding them in place. The mirror in the dresser is tilted so that the back of the top edge is pressing against the wall behind it & the hairline cracks in the painted blue plaster ceiling are reflected. The red carpet in the hall clashes slightly with the blue in the bedroom, more because of the intensity of the pattern than the colour, & here & there

has begun to wear thin. In the front bedroom on the left side of the house a suitcase has been thrown on the bed, the contents already taken out & hung behind the closed door of the closet. A dictionary has been borrowed from the bedroom across the hall & placed on the small writing table along with a portable typewriter whose case rests on the floor beside the chair. The window at the front of the house has been thrown open & the fragrances from the various flowerbeds have begun to fill the room & to move thru the open doorway into the hall. The second bedroom is empty. The door to the closet lies open & inside it a number of boxes have been stored, some labelled 'books', others labelled 'winter clothes', 'knickknacks', as if someone were moving or had moved, the process of packing or unpacking not yet finished & the boxes placed here until they could be dealt with. The curtains in the room have been drawn & the light filtering thru them gives the room a quiet, forlorn feeling which the faint perfume of the flowers only intensifies. Across the hall the door to the large bedroom lies open, the window facing it looking out over the bluffs & sea, & in the distance, almost at the very horizon, storm clouds are forming, lightning crackling & dancing on the surface of the distant waves, tho on the lawn around the house the sun is still shining & the breeze has not yet shifted in intensity or direction. The cover on the sewing machine in front of the window has been replaced, even tho the basket which has been brought into the room, & now sits to the left of the sewing machine table, contains a number of torn pieces of clothing, & a package of small white buttons has been placed on the right side of the table. A file folder lies open on the desk to the right of the hallway door, the folder's exposed top sheet appearing to be part of a journal or novel, difficult to determine exactly from such a small fragment, to which a number of revisions have been made,

the different dates of the revisions hinted at by the shifting colours & shades of ink. A dictionary lies open on the desk to the left of the folder tho the significance of the pages revealed is not immediately apparent since none of the words defined on those particular pages of the dictionary are written on the exposed page of the folder. There are a number of pens lying to the right of the file folder & a small message pad, devoid of writing, in the surface of which the indecipherable indentations made in the course of writing many now non-existent notes appear. Here too the bed is unmade, the pillows having fallen on the floor & a book, a mystery novel, lies open face down on the rumpled sheets. The closet door is open & a number of items of clothing have fallen on the closet floor. The closet light has also been left on. From the hall window at the front the rapids in the river are clearly visible, the white foam of the water as it smashes against the rocks creating tiny whirlpools, easily seen beyond the leafy green branches of the oaks. Down the hall thru the open door of the bathroom, the clothes hamper is visible to the right of the door, is empty when the top is lifted, when the threshold is crossed the top of the clothes hamper is lifted up, placed on the floor, & some article of clothing is or is not dropped into the open basket. The window in the wall opposite the door looks out on the mountains, & the bathtub, wet from recent use, appears as white & cold as the distant peaks. The bathmat is wet & water has pooled on the tiles near the tub & sink. Bits of hair have been caught in both drains & if either set of taps is turned on there is a long wait before hot water comes. The towels which had hung on the wall to the right of the window are now lying in a clump on the floor between the toilet & the end wall. The weights on the scale have been moved, pulling the balancing mechanism down because of the lack of a counter-balance. In the hall the red carpet just

outside the door of the bathroom is damp & a number of darker damp spots appear in a semicircle around the larger wet area. Along the hall the door to the upper balcony lies open, the balustrade visible thru the screen door, the orchard beyond, the mountains over which the storm clouds that only a short time ago seemed a safe distance out at sea are now massing. On the inside wall just to the right of the balcony door is the switch which controls the frosted light fixture in the ceiling of the porch and, at night, because of the bug lamp inside it, it casts a muted yellow light. From the hallway of the house looking out onto the balcony a table is visible on the right, two wicker chairs, an ashtray & a deck of cards on the table top &, to the left, thru the thick mesh of the screen door, the porch light not yet on tho the sky is darkening as the storm clouds begin to move closer to the house & the sun to set behind the distant peaks, in the quickening dusk we are aware of two other chairs, another table, & two people who suddenly begin talking.