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Two Radio Plays by Günter Eich: The Hundredth Name of Allah and Zabeth

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TWO RADIO PLAYS BY GÜNTER EICH:
THE HUNDREDTH NAME OF ALLAH AND ZABETH

TWO RADIO PLAYS BY GÜNTER EICH:
THE HUNDREDTH NAME OF ALLAH AND ZABETH

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Translation

By

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ABSTRACT

This is a translation of two radio plays by Günter Eich, the most celebrated author in this genre. They have been translated from the original German into English. These two radio plays illustrate Eich's examination of the limits of language in negotiating the chasm between the spiritual and physical worlds.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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Finally, I am indebted to the staff of the Graduate School for advice and help in the preparation of this thesis.

DEDICATION

This translation of Günter Eich's radio plays is dedicated to those who, while yet unsure of their footing, continue in their individual searches for a spiritual basis of our physical existence. Though the goal may sometimes be unclear, though the ends may be unwittingly confused with the means, though the search itself may seem fruitless and hopelessly frustrated at times – there is comfort in the undeniable fact that more will always be revealed if we but continue on our “speechless, seeking trail.”

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I. INTRODUCTION

Wir übersetzen, ohne den Urtext zu haben.

Der Schriftsteller vor der Realität (1956)

Günter Eich remains the undeniable maestro of the German radio play. Despite the ongoing accrual of years between current readers and Eich's original context, despite the rapidly changing media of dramatic art, despite recent controversies surrounding Eich's writerly activities in radio during the Third Reich, his reputation and accomplishments in the genre of the *Hörspiel* are undiminished. Though chiefly known outside Germany for his poetry – most notably his stark *Inventur* – Eich's radio plays are as yet almost wholly untranslated, and thus inaccessible, to the English reading world. It is for this reason, as well as for a compelling personal attraction to these radio plays on the part of the current translator, that these English translations have been attempted. In brief, it is the belief of the translator that Eich's radio-dramatic writings deserve a wider readership. To put it another way, it is my belief – as well as my experience – that English readers will discover in these radio plays much to value, for there are in them the seeds of reflection which will grow in contemplation to yield glorious fruit.

Günter Eich's name will always be connected with those of his famous – in some ways, his considerably *more* famous – co-members of *Gruppe 47*, the small but extraordinarily influential band of writers who tasked themselves with the resurrection, if any resurrection were possible after the totalitarian years, of German literature. These included writers such as Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, and Ilse Aichinger, Eich's future wife, in the early period, and expanded to count among their members and adherents Paul Celan, Martin Walser, Peter Handke, and many others.

It is for his membership in *Gruppe 47*, and his winning of the organization's inaugural prize for literature in 1950, that Eich is most generally known. But in the years when German writers were trying to find out how to help each other stand up again collectively and individually *as* writers after the tremendous beating administered by the Hitler regime's literary policy of *Gleichschaltung* and the aesthetic subjugation demanded by the *Reichschriftumskammer*, Eich seems to have found legs of his own. Indeed, he seems to have steadied himself through an acknowledgement that he knew not where he stood. In his writing after 1945 – including instances of fascinating, yearning short fiction – there is a continual move in Eich to find his bearings, to get himself oriented. Rather than pressing forward to chart his course within the new post-war reality, Eich's writing – especially the radio plays translated here – displays a halting attempt to first *establish* reality through words. “[Die Wirklichkeit] ist nicht meine Voraussetzung, sondern mein Ziel,” he offers in 1956, midway through the decade that saw his greatest output of *Hörspiele*.

Eich's own disorientation is reflected, perhaps even clarified, in the disorientation of his characters. Interestingly, it is a disorientation that intensifies the more Eich writes. In short stories such as “Between Two Stations” and “An Unusual Night,” both written around 1946, the protagonists' search for meaning – equating in Eich with the search for the right words – leads to confused frustration; for the main characters in the radio plays *Zabeth* (1951) and *The Hundredth Name of Allah* (1957), the search results in total bewildered disarray. The fiction of the immediate postwar period displays a confusion as to one's place within society and to the possibility of interpersonal communication; the radio plays of later years deal in the more fundamental realm of epistemological uprootedness and existential uncertainty. The soldiers in the short fiction cannot understand reality, but *Zabeth* and *Hakim* cannot even *describe* it. Eich's

work here represents the journey of a writer moving progressively further into a language of silence. The longer he writes, the less certain he grows. But this silence that defies description, rather than negating action, allows for actions that are unlimited, unhemmed, and transcendent owing to their unspokenness, its indescribability. The giant raven in *Zabeth*, for example, traverses the inchoate space between the concrete world of descriptive language and the spiritual world that is beyond language. Hakim, in *The Hundredth Name of Allah*, learns to interpret – literally, “to translate” – the language of God.

It is Eich’s repeatedly voiced concern for the need to translate an original that we neither possess nor understand that lends the task of translating Eich an air of challenge and a whiff of dare. And it is a challenging enterprise, to be sure. Each of the plays translated here culminates, for example, at a point that I term the “hinge” of the *Hörspiel*. In *Zabeth*, this occurs when, as the subject of a final, intense interview, the giant raven repeats over and over “I don’t know” in answer to a battery (a battering?) of insistent questions. In *The Hundredth Name of Allah*, the hinge is likewise a lexical one, in this case, the message from the Prophet Mohammed that the Hundredth Name is identical with statement, “A date palm is a date palm.” Eich’s narrative gift lay in his ability to establish a problem – centered upon and created by language – that, while ultimately frustrated, is somehow *resolved* by the very thing that frustrates the anticipated solution to the problem. The task of the translator is to combine linguistically the abstract and the vital, the philosophical and the narrative, in such a way that is complex, intriguing, and rich enough to compel the reader forward, while at the same time lean and muscular enough to survive the simplest of linguistic resolutions and still remain charged with the energy of mystery. For Eich seems to be describing, in the present two plays, the symptoms of a metaphysical illness – the quest for certainty in uncertainty, for answers where the questions are meaningless, for

descriptions of the indescribable – and the translator must not fall into the trap of prescribing a cure. He must leave Eich with his characteristic blend of perplexity and clarity, for an Eich *Hörspiel* is a spiritual experience: it can be described after a fashion, but it cannot – it dare not – be explained. Eich, in dealing with problems *of* language *with* language, runs the risk of a blacksmith hammering his metal too thin, and the translator must be very careful not to allow Eich's plays to lose their structural, linguistic, and mystical integrity.

Since, as mentioned above, Eich is *establishing* reality with language, his surest move is the plain description of events, and here the translator must find a simple diction and register to convey Eich in English. Yet such a translation must be supple and deft enough to describe Eich's mysteries of untrusted experience rather than to overtly interpret them. This seems to be the only option Eich allows himself and the only one he grants his characters. I hope the present translation come close to achieving this most difficult task. Here and there, for instance, I have opted to “first personalize” the 3rd person impersonal pronouns in the German original in the belief that such a move conveys the sense of urgency felt by Eich's characters without making them inappropriately colloquial. If I have at times loosened the formal stiffness or aloofness of Eich's dialogue, it is in the conviction that the radio play, consisting solely of dialogue, must be aurally congenial enough to keep its listener's attention.

If Eich's writing is to be saved from being subsumed within the towering shadow of the historical significance of *Gruppe 47* and thereby relegated to the footnotes of postwar German literature – and it must not be so lost and relegated, if only to preserve his arresting, intriguing formulations of the spiritual conundrum before which we all stand as speechless as Stonehenge – then it is hoped that translations such as the present one will continue to contribute to a library of Günter Eich's work available to the English reader.

II. THE HUNDRETH NAME OF ALLAH

Voices: a Youth
 Hakim
 the Voice of the Prophet
 a Girl, Fatima
 the Imam of Alamut
 Dupont
 Waiter
 Restaurant Owner
 Restaurant Owner's Wife
 Janine
 a Madame
 Ninon
 Mrs. Dupont
 Bank Official
 Female Postal Official
 Odette
 Ambassador

In the stairwell of the Egyptian embassy in Damascus

Youth: A word, Father of Wisdom!

Hakim: I'm no Father of Wisdom. I'm a janitor in the Egyptian embassy in Damascus. Don't disturb me, young man; I have steps to sweep.

Youth: Don't send me away! I have come from far away. My feet are raw.

Hakim: You walked? How ridiculous! There are boats, cars, planes.

Youth: The Prophet said to me: Go! He did not say: Drive!

Hakim: Mohammed died in the tenth year of our calendar.

Youth: He appeared to me and said —

Hakim: He appeared to you? Now that's something different. Sit here next to me on the steps.

Youth: He said: Get up and go to Damascus to Hakim the Egyptian. He will tell you how he learned the Hundredth Name of Allah.

Hakim: Has the Prophet appeared to you often?

Youth: Just this once.

Hakim: How did you know that it was him?

Youth: I don't know how I knew it, but there was no doubt.

Hakim: Did he appear to you in bodily form?

Youth: He didn't actually appear. I heard his voice.

Hakim: Just as it was with me.

Youth: As it was with you?

Hakim: Earlier. Not for decades now.

Youth: That's because you already know everything.

Hakim: Me?

Youth: The Hundredth Name of Allah!

Hakim: Young man, you're mistaken. I don't know it.

Youth: But the Prophet said —

Hakim: Then the Prophet is mistaken, too.

Youth: Never!

Hakim: Tell me exactly what the Prophet said.

Youth: Get up and go to Damascus to Hakim the Egyptian. He will tell you how he learned the
Hundredth Name of Allah.

Hakim: You have certainly done the “Get up and go.” But the Prophet didn’t say I would tell you
the Hundredth Name of Allah.

Youth: You don’t want to tell me?

Hakim: No, O my very young man.

Youth: Why not?

Hakim: Because I don’t know it. But I will tell you how I learned it.

Youth: What is the difference, Father of Wisdom?

Hakim: Janitor of the Egyptian embassy.

Youth: Not *that* difference.

Hakim: It’s the same one. Now listen.

Youth: But the steps. You said something about the steps.

Hakim: Do you want to listen or to sweep the steps with me?

Youth: I’ll listen.

Hakim: I was 17 years old when I heard the voice for the first time.

Voice: Hakim, don’t eat the mutton! Don’t eat the mutton! Don’t eat the mutton!

Hakim: At the time I heard that, I found myself in the palace of the Imam of Alamut. I was the youngest of a delegation of 16 men, who were supposed to negotiate some conflict about an inheritance the Imam was having. Incidentally, the other 15 were all uncles of mine; my grandfather had 123 sons, but I don't know exactly how many daughters. I had been taken along so I could finally learn something of the world. Now, I was in a room on the palace getting cleaned up for the banquet. I was all alone, and although I knew right away the voice hadn't actually come from anywhere, I looked in front of the door, anyway. Just then a girl in a veil came down the stairs. And it was enough to see her eyes, for they were like the sun and the moon.

In the stairwell

Hakim: Did you call me, most beautiful?

Girl: Call you? Why should I? I don't know you.

Hakim: I am Hakim the Egyptian.

Girl: Hakim the Egyptian? So you're one of the foreigners who are —

Hakim: Who are what?

Girl: Who are dining with us today.

Hakim: Yes. There's going to be mutton, is that right?

Girl: There is always mutton.

Location shift

Hakim: Although it was of course very inappropriate for her, she stood there a moment gazing at me intently. Then she turned around and went on her way. But before she disappeared into one of the rooms, she called out something strange.

Location shift

Girl: Hakim, don't eat the mutton.

In the stairwell

Hakim: It was a completely different voice than before, but it said the same thing. Maybe there actually *was* something to this warning. I sighed deeply, for two reasons. First, because I had been saving up all my hunger for the banquet, and second, I didn't know whether my 15 uncles had also been warned. I ran down the passageways to the courtyard, where the banquet table had been prepared. But I was too late. The meal was already in underway. I was rather ungently shoved to an empty place at the end of the table and a steaming piece of mutton was put into my hand. But I didn't need to decide to eat or not to eat, because in that moment my first uncle collapsed. *A dull thud, like a drumbeat.* It was Uncle Ibrahim, the leader of our delegation. The other 14 fell in rapid succession. *The same sound, fourteen times.* The Imam of Alamut had resolved the inheritance contentions all by himself. But not entirely, of course, because in addition to the 108 uncles I had in reserve, I was still standing there. The Imam and his men looked at me tensely, obviously waiting for me to collapse, too. I felt warm, and my hunger had disappeared completely. For my part, I looked the Imam spitefully in the face. My situation was hopeless. The Imam winked first his left eye, then his right, whereupon from my left and my right a

giant African slave with a dreamy smile marched towards me. And even if I didn't know *how* they planned to do it, I knew *what* they were planning. In that moment, I heard —

Voice: Hakim, collapse and play dead. *Hakim collapses.* And now, Hakim, now jump up! Between the feet of the Africans! *Yelling.* Through the door and up the stairs! *Hakim's breathing as he runs.* Now right! Left! Now through this door! Into the alcove! Wrap the curtain around you. Now hold still. *We hear Hakim breathing in his hiding place, while at the same time he narrates from the Egyptian embassy stairwell.*

Hakim: It was the room belonging to the girl with whom I had spoken earlier. I saw her without her veil as I rushed through the room. She was startled, but quickly composed herself. Through the alcove curtain I saw her pull the veil over her face again. She did it calmly and very slowly.

The room

Hakim: Fatima!

Girl: My name's not Fatima.

Hakim: You look like a Fatima. It is a name I especially love.

Girl: Then call me Fatima.

Hakim: I wanted to thank you, Fatima.

Girl: For what?

Hakim: "Don't eat the mutton!"

Girl: That doesn't mean anything. It's just something I said to myself without thinking.

Hakim: It's thanks to you I'm still alive.

Girl: Don't thank me too soon. I assume my father is looking for you. I will tell him where
you're hiding.

Hakim: Who is your father?

Girl: The Imam of Alamut.

Hakim: In the future, they'll call him "The Hospitable." *Noise within the house.*

Girl: Be quiet!

Hakim: Why shouldn't I betray myself since you're going to betray me anyway?

Imam: Hey, hey, hey!

Girl: What is it, Father?

Imam: Haven't you heard him? Haven't you seen him?

Girl: Who?

Imam: The milk-face.

Girl: Who?

Imam: The one that ate the mutton but didn't die.

Girl: Who?

Imam: The Egyptian, the son of a dog, the legacy hunter, the —

Girl: Who?

Imam: So you haven't seen him?

Girl: Who?

Imam: Haven't heard him?

Girl: Who?

Imam: Why am I so afflicted with my offspring! You are blind, and you are deaf, — in short,
you are a woman.

Girl: Allah willed it so.

Imam *raging*: Bah! Allah, Allah — *as he exits* Allah should...

Girl: What do you think Allah should do?

Hakim: He's gone!

Girl: Quiet, milk-face!

Hakim: Quiet, blind eye!

Girl: Legacy hunter!

Hakim: Deaf ear! Deaf, deaf!

Location shift

Hakim: For three days I stayed hidden in Fatima's room. Although we wiled away the time with caresses, I still had enough leisure to ponder the voice that had saved me so miraculously. Is it amazing that I trusted it so entirely? In truth, I was waiting for it to tell me how and when I should escape the Imam's palace. But since I had entered Fatima's room, the voice had gone silent. Presumably, it supposed I could help myself now. On the fourth day, I lay in the alcove Fatima's behind bed and looked up at the ceiling, where a spider was building a web, a big beautiful web, a web for eternity, so to speak.

In the room

Hakim: Listen, Fatima.

Girl: My love.

Hakim: I have to go, Fatima.

Girl: Why must you go?

Hakim: I can't stay here forever —

Girl: Not forever, but for a while.

Hakim: It is already the fourth day.

Girl: It is only *just* the fourth day.

Hakim: I am afraid for you.

Girl: Really?

Hakim: Don't misunderstand me. Are you crying?

Girl: Yes.

Hakim: Oh, Fatima.

Girl: There are guards at the door day and night. You can't go.

Hakim: Guards!

Girl: Five giant Africans.

Hakim: And they never sleep?

Girl: Never at the same time.

Hakim: And there's no other way out?

Girl *hesitating*: No.

Hakim: And will the five giant Africans stand at the door all year long?

Girl: Yes.

Hakim: And will there never be any other way out?

Girl: No.

Hakim: Then I'm going today.

Girl: Then I will call my father, the Imam of Alamut, at once, so that you can take your leave of
him!

Hakim *reproachfully*: Fatima!

Girl *cooly*: Hakim!

Voice: Hakim, take her with you and make her your wife! Take her with you and make her your wife! Take her with you and make her your wife!

Hakim: And if you should come with me, Fatima?

Girl: Yes.

Hakim: And I were to make you my wife?

Girl: Yes.

Hakim: Then there would be no more five giant Africans at the door?

Girl: No.

Hakim: And there would also be another way out?

Girl: Yes.

Location shift

Hakim: So Fatima went with me and became my wife. However, I split with my family because of this marriage. Of my 108 surviving uncles, and from some half of my innumerable aunts, the suspicion was even voiced that I was the author of those 15 murders, that I had advised the Imam of Alamut to do it, and his beautiful, favorite daughter had been given me by way of payment. I have to praise my five or six hundred cousins that almost all of them stood by me in this family dispute. But what did that help! There was nothing left for us to do but put some distance between us and my family's land. Since we couldn't, of course, go to Alamut, to my father-in-law, and since the voice which had otherwise advised me so excellently now made matters worse by stubbornly keeping silent, I

decided upon a pilgrimage to Mecca, which is the best way out in such cases. We paraded around the Black Stone and covered it with kisses and prayed to Allah to enlighten us with many prayers. But at night in the inn my wife said to me:

In the inn

Fatima: Let's go to Damascus and get in the fish business.

Hakim: Go where? Get in the what business?

Fatima: To Damascus. The fish business.

Hakim *mocking*: It takes a brilliant mind to come up with that.

Fatima: Over here is Damascus, and over there is fishing. All you have to do is bring the two together.

Hakim: Oh yes, this is how great plans get realized.

Fatima: Do you know Damascus?

Hakim: Do you know about fish?

Fatima: I've eaten them.

Hakim: Then we've met all the requirements! Oh Fatima, my wife!

Fatima: Oh Hakim, my husband!

Hakim: To Damascus! The fish business! If you had any idea how far away Damascus was from the sea and fishing.

Fatima: Even because of that.

Hakim: What?

Fatima: Even because of that. There is small profit selling fish by the sea. It's good that Damascus is far from the sea.

Hakim: So you want be in the spoiled fish business.

Fatima: Is it that far?

Hakim: It's farther. Not even spoiled fish reaches Damascus. At most it's the bones. Everything else has been long since digested by vultures and jackals.

Fatima: Well, maybe river fish, then —

Hakim: From the violent currents around Damascus? Oh Fatima, Fatima. I thought I had a clever and intelligent wife, but I almost have to assume your father was right: you are blind, you are deaf —

Fatima *pitifully*: It seemed like such a good idea to me.

Hakim: In short, a woman.

Fatima: Yes.

Hakim: Don't you understand that you're babbling foolishness?

Voice: Hakim, your wife is right, and you are wrong. Go into the fish business in Damascus.

Hakim, go into the fish business in Damascus.

Fatima: I understand that it's foolishness.

Hakim: Fatima, let's go into the fish business in Damascus.

Fatima: I understand.

Hakim: Listen to what I'm saying to you, Fatima. Let's go into the fish business in Damascus.

Fatima: What?

Hakim: Do I have to say it a third time?

Fatima: Please!

Hakim: Let's go into the fish business in Damascus.

Fatima: The vultures, the jackals, the distance from the sea —

Location shift

Hakim: I listened somewhat impatiently for what the voice would say about my wife's objections, which at the same time were my objections. But the voice said absolutely nothing, and since no man on earth is obliged to give his wife the reasons for his decisions, I contented myself with a gesture of my outstretched hand and calmly remarked:

In the inn

Hakim: The Prophet will help us.

Fatima: The Prophet — ?

Location shift

Hakim: — asked Fatima and looked at me strangely. At the time, I interpreted her look in this way: she wished to express that I had lost my mind. I probably looked back at her quite absently, for in the same instant an overpowering thought came to me: the Prophet *would* help us — I had just said it without thinking, but he would help us, because after all, he was the voice! He was the voice, none other, the Prophet Mohammed, and he spoke to me; he had chosen me from among the faithful! He had something great in store for me, there was no doubt about it. Fish mongering in Damascus was no lofty goal, but I reflected upon the fact that Mohammed himself had been a merchant in Mecca until his fortieth year. But I was just 18. All of this shot through my head much less logically but also much quicker than I'm explaining it here. In pleasant daydreams, I merely repeated:

In the inn

Hakim: The Prophet will help us.

Fatima: We don't know a soul in Damascus.

Hakim: The Prophet will help us.

Fatima: The money, Hakim!

Hakim: The Prophet will help us.

Fatima: I thought I had a clever, intelligent husband —

Hakim: The Prophet will help us.

Location shift

Hakim: And he helped us.

Location shift

Voice: Hakim, go to Okba, to the director of the Mecca Transport Company, on the left behind the Kaaba. He will lend you 5 camels if you leave him your wife as a deposit.

Voice: Hakim, sell the 5 camels to Ormuzd the bandit in the caravanserai of the green flag. Ask 1,000 pounds for them. He will give it to you, because he intends to steal it back from you in the morning.

Voice: Hakim, go to court and demand the five camels. Say that Ormuzd, who is just now on his way to the gallows, stole them from you.

Voice: Hakim, take the 5 camels and exchange them for your wife at the Mecca Transport Company.

Voice: Hakim, now journey to Damascus with your wife and the 1,000 pounds.

Voice: Hakim, rent Ismael the baker's meat pastry shop for one pound per month.

Voice: Hakim, order 3,000 tins of sardines in oil from the Minhos e Filho Company in Setubal in Portugal, and 100 tins of smoked herring from the Mönkenpuhl Company in Cuxhaven in Germany. They are the only companies that ask payment only after delivery.

Voice: Hakim, set up your wife in the shop and mark up the wholesale price 500%.

Voice: Hakim, go through the streets and call out cheap fish to be had at Ismael the meat pastry baker's shop.

Voice: Hakim, order new tins.

Voice: Hakim, buy a truck.

Voice: Hakim, get fresh fish from Beirut.

Voice: Hakim, build a cold storage.

Voice: Hakim —

Voice: Hakim —

Voice: Hakim —

Voice: Hakim, turn the fish business over to your wife. Turn the fish business over to your wife.

Location shift

Hakim: By and by Fatima acquired 12 trucks, set up branches in Beirut and Aleppo, and I saw the time approaching when we would supply the entire Near East with fish. Meanwhile, I lay on silk pillows in the beautiful house we had had built in the midst of blooming gardens. I smoked the water pipe and awaited further instructions from the Prophet. For

me he had ordained leisure, and that is one of the most demanding occupations in the world. I conceived strange thoughts and made odd discoveries.

House in Damascus

Fatima *tenderly*: You are lazy. Lazy, lazy, lazy! My lazy husband!

Hakim: Allah created women so they could work for men.

Fatima: You also know some other things he created us for.

Hakim: I don't know any.

Fatima: Sometimes you do.

Hakim: I don't want to know them.

Fatima: You then. What did Allah make you for?

Hakim: To think.

Fatima: About what?

Hakim: That you're a foolish woman.

Fatima: Then help me to think.

Hakim: Yes, I notice it more and more. You are foolish.

Fatima: An English airplane company wrote to us. They're sending a representative.

Hakim: How could I have missed it before? An odd creature. Clever and stupid at the same time.

Or perhaps it's alternating. Sometimes stupid, sometimes clever.

Fatima *shocked*: Now you've seen it!

Hakim: Earlier I was struck by the cleverness. Now the stupidity.

Fatima *hurriedly*: A cargo plane. 5 tons capacity. Maybe we really *should* change with the times.

Dejected. Then we could always have the catch of the day, fresh goods — *She bursts out in tears*.

Hakim *shocked*: Fatima, what's — ?

Fatima: Because I can't do anything, because I don't know anything.

Hakim: I'm supposed to defend you.

Fatima: Because I'm foolish.

Hakim: I said that to upset you. And I wanted to upset you because I'm upset with myself.

Fatima: Hakim, it's because you didn't see it sooner.

Hakim: Your only foolishness is in insisting that you're foolish.

Fatima: Everything clever I have ever done and said in my life didn't come from me.

Hakim: Didn't come from you?

Fatima: The Prophet told me what I should do and say.

Hakim: The Prophet?

Fatima: When I saw you for the first time he spoke to me for the first time. "Tell him that he shouldn't eat the mutton."

Hakim: Ahh?!

Fatima: "Take down your veil so that Hakim can see you."

Hakim: Ahh?!

Fatima: "Do not hurry when you draw the veil before your face."

Hakim: Ahh?!

Fatima: "Tell him that you should go into the fish business in Damascus."

Hakim: And I thought *myself* a chosen one.

Fatima: And he just spoke to me: “Fatima, tell him that you hear my voice.”

Hakim: He didn’t command any of that to me. Always, always, he is silent to me.

Fatima: But all this is no reason to cry.

Hakim: That’s what I think.

Fatima: But I can’t do anything *but* cry.

Hakim *tenderly*: Fatima! Fatima!

Fatima: He said: “Hide him!” But would I have hidden you if he hadn’t said it?

Hakim: Of course you would have.

Fatima: He also said: “Be tender to him!” and I was tender to you. But would I have been tender

—

Hakim *sadly*: If he hadn’t said it?

Fatima: Do I love you, Hakim, or did the Prophet command me that I should love you?

Hakim: There’s no difference.

Fatima: It torments me that there could be a difference.

Hakim: Your eyes are clear, your skin is smooth.

Fatima: Oh, if only I had withered skin and a cheerful heart!

Hakim: And you order tuna from Beirut and sardines from Portugal. Oh Fatima, how odd the

world is! Let’s go back to the English airplane. Did you say 5 tons?

Location shift

Hakim: A deeper and deeper melancholy came over me while I considered the expansion of our fish business. I submerged myself in the Koran and our holy writings. I don’t mean to say that I would have become a wise man, or a holy man; in fact, I even discovered a vice in

the Koran and the holy scriptures, to which I had become addicted: the vice of reading. I read about astronomy and the practices of the fakirs; the writings of Averroes and the sayings of Omar the tentmaker; I delved into the teachings of Al-Farabi and learned Persian and French. Meantime, the Prophet kept silent. During this time, he seemed exclusively interested in business and trade, a fact I concluded from our company's balance sheets.

The day Fatima bought the 15th truck and the 8th airplane was the same day I understood the direction in which I was to bend all my thoughts and desires: to the Hundredth Name of Allah. In it lay hidden all the mysteries of the world. But for everything I read, nowhere was it written down. We were continually enlarging our house because of all my books. I took on three secretaries to read foreign languages for me; I entered into correspondence with all the learned societies and every library on earth. The Prophet held his unrelenting silence throughout.

House in Damascus

Hakim: What's that noise outside?

Fatima: It's three trucks driving through the courtyard.

Hakim: Are we storing fish in our home now as well?

Fatima: No. The cold stores do just fine. A surprise for you. I had an airplane sent to Germany.

Hakim: Cuxhaven?

Fatima: Not fish. Books. The German philosophers.

Hakim: Three truckloads.

Fatima: Volumes of collected works. I figured, since you've got a secretary who reads German now.

Hakim: You are an attentive and darling wife! Come, let me hold you.

Voice: Hakim, leave the books unread. Hakim, leave the books unread.

Fatima: What is it, Hakim? What are you looking at?

Voice: Hakim, travel to Paris, to the Rue Geoffroy 17, to master shoemaker Albert Dupont. He knows the Hundredth Name of Allah! Hakim, travel to Paris —

Hakim: Rue Geoffroy 17, master shoemaker Albert Dupont.

Fatima: What are you talking about?

Hakim: I'm leaving, Fatima. Have my bags packed. European cut suits, white shirts, colored shirts, cufflinks, warm socks — it's a frigid land — and a check for the Crédit Lyonnais —

Fatima: If you should happen to be traveling to Bologne on this occasion...we have business with —

Hakim: No fish, Fatima! Rue Geoffroy 17, master shoemaker Albert Dupont.

Pause.

In Paris

Hakim: Rue Geoffroy 17, master shoemaker Albert Dupont. *He enters the shop, a door chime rings.* Mr. Dupont?

Dupont: That's me.

Hakim: I don't know if you're expecting me.

Dupont: Is it a repair? What was the name?

Hakim: No, not a repair. I had thought I would have been expected.

Dupont: Made to measure shoes, right? I'll just look in my book. Won't you take a seat?

Hakim: Thank you. I don't know if you'll find me in the book. This is my first time here.

Dupont: Then we'll just take the measurements.

Hakim: No, no!

Dupont: Do you always wear sandals?

Hakim: Usually.

Dupont: Not healthy! Causes rheumatism, and the foot doesn't have enough support. I take right
and left measurements; feet aren't always the same.

Hakim: Certainly. But feet aren't actually —

Dupont: Do you also find feet to be quite curious things?

Hakim: It's never occurred to me before.

Dupont: I don't know how I can express it. But, just that some feet have high insteps, and then
the toes themselves, with wrinkles and nails and veins! And precisely five on either side.

Hakim: I've heard that there are people with six toes.

Dupont: I've heard that, too, but I've never run across any of them. That's the right foot.

Hakim: Are you a Christian?

Dupont: But of course. How do you mean that?

Hakim: I had thought —

Dupont: I was baptized Catholic and was married in a church.

Hakim: You're really the master shoemaker Albert Dupont, Rue Geoffroy 17?

Dupont: Dupont, Geoffroy, and 17.

Hakim: I had thought you'd be a Muslim.

Dupont: You're the first to think that of me. *He laughs.*

Hakim: It's inconceivable for the Prophet to send me to an unbeliever.

Dupont: Who is your Prophet? Do you belong to a sect? *Suddenly.* Oh, I understand... I didn't notice it at all here in the dim light. The gentleman is obviously not from Paris?

Hakim: You finally recognize me? You may speak openly with me. I am Hakim. The Egyptian. From Damascus.

Dupont: You're putting me on the spot, sir.

Hakim: Don't be afraid. You were expecting me, weren't you?

Dupont: That may very well be. I can't remember everything. To be honest, I'm not terribly interested in heads. Now, when it comes to feet, you understand, I am an outspoken foot supporter!

Hakim: I come because of the Hundredth Name, Mr. Dupont, because of the Hundredth Name.

Dupont: Now if I may do the left —

Hakim: Go ahead.

Dupont: Your ankle is unusual.

Hakim: How so?

Dupont: It sits further forward than I had expected.

Hakim: Expectations about my ankle?

Dupont: About the gap between your toes as well, and the shape of your nails —

Hakim: Stop it!

Dupont *hurt*: I had expected some degree of understanding, especially from you.

Hakim: Especially from me? Why especially from me?

Dupont: Because of the unusual situation with your ankle.

Hakim: Mr. Dupont, quit holding back! What is it, what is the Hundredth Name of Allah?

Dupont: I don't know why I should have the honor —

Hakim: Because the Prophet sent me to you. There has to be a reason.

Dupont: Certainly. Or else your Prophet wouldn't have sent you specifically to me...now I must
note the left. I'd also like to sketch of that ankle —

Hakim: Just think for a minute.

Dupont: I must admit I'm somewhat forgetful about everything that doesn't have to do with feet.

Hakim *hopefully*: Of course you are! Try to remember!

Dupont: I know too little about your religion. I had always thought Allah was called Allah.

Hakim: Allah is Allah and has a hundred names. Ninety-nine of them are known.

Dupont: Oh? For instance?

Hakim: Allah is the Only One, the Eternal One, the First One.

Dupont *slyly*: I've know it.

Hakim: Yes?

Dupont: The Last One.

Hakim: That's name number four in the list of Ibn Madja.

Dupont *disappointed*: A fortress must be taken in the first assault; a siege spells defeat. Let's turn
back to feet.

Hakim: No.

Dupont: For your left shoe I have a support I designed myself —

Hakim: Please, sir!

Dupont: Pointless. You don't need anything special for the right.

Hakim: Try harder!

Dupont: I'll work the uppers somewhat high. Midway between a shoe and a boot.

Hakim: For all I care.

Dupont: Would you like brown or black? Or perhaps a fashion color?

Hakim: I don't *want* any infernal shoes!

Voice: Hakim, tell him green, and you will pick them up in eight days. Hakim, tell him green,
and you will pick them up in eight days.

Dupont: There must be some misunderstanding.

Hakim: Green.

Dupont *delighted*: Green! Green is the right color!

Hakim: And I'll pick the shoes up in eight days.

Dupont: Green is the color for you. Why didn't I think of it sooner! You are something special,
sir. Green in person, so to speak.

Hakim: And now you have eight days to think it over.

Dupont: Green, green —

Hakim: He'll drive me to distraction! *He goes out, the shop bell chimes.*

Dupont *calling after him*: Goodbye! And the uppers worked high, right?

Location shift

Hakim: That was Mr. Dupont in Paris, Rue Geoffroy 17, the Prophet's master shoemaker, and obviously a mistake of the Prophet's. What should I do with green shoes? And was this appointment really reliable? In Damascus, among us, the expression "eight days" could mean eight weeks, or also eight months, and not infrequently eight years. The Prophet

possibly meant that in eight days I would find out the Hundredth Name from Mr. Dupont. So what did I do the whole time in Paris? It's really puzzling to me what the inhabitants of *Paris* do in Paris. For someone who knows Cairo, Mecca, and Damascus, this city is really out there on the edge, on the border of the bearable, so to speak — but already on the other side of bearable. Of course, I could fly to Damascus and Fatima and be back in eight days' time, and in doing so still avail myself of the Damascus interpretation of "eight days." Unfortunately, the Prophet interrupted these cozy dreams and jolted me mercilessly back into the frosty reality of Paris.

Voice: Hakim, go to the restaurant Au Poisson Rouge in the Rue de la Harpe and ask for Janine the chef. She knows the Hundredth Name of Allah. Hakim, go to the restaurant Au Poisson Rouge in the Rue de la Harpe and ask for Janine the chef.

On the street

Hakim: Rue de la Harpe. The restaurant Au Poisson Rouge. *He enters the restaurant.*

Waiter: Hello, sir.

Hakim: Hello. Nobody here?

Waiter: If you would like something to eat —

Hakim: Actually, um, do I absolutely *have* to eat?

Waiter: The kitchen is closed. Not back again until six. But you could have a *choucroute alsacienne* — perhaps at this table?

Hakim: The kitchen's closed? That's convenient.

Waiter: The viewpoints are most divergent. In the Chamber of Deputies they say lately —
they're introducing a bill, you understand — the radical socialists, now, these aren't my
friends —

Hakim: Then could I perhaps speak with Janine the chef?

Waiter: What?

Hakim: Janine the chef?

Waiter: Hm.

Hakim: Why are you looking at me so strangely?

Waiter: There's no Janine the chef here.

Hakim: Yes there is.

Waiter: If you know better —

Hakim: I do know better.

Waiter: If you don't care to eat anything, the rational thing is for you to leave.

Hakim: I'm staying.

Waiter *unsure*: Hm, hm, hm! *Calling*. Boss!

Owner *in the background*: What?

Waiter: Someone wants to speak with Janine the chef.

Owner: Who's this someone?

Waiter: A young gentleman, dark brown.

Owner: Another black?

Hakim: I'm Egyptian. What does he mean, "another"?

Owner *approaches*: Your name? Are you related to Janine?

Hakim: Related? Is Janine an Arab?

Owner: A Creole.

Hakim: Then she's not related to me.

Owner: But she is also brown.

Waiter: But darker.

Owner: Perhaps distantly related.

Hakim: No.

Waiter: So much the worse for you if you're not related to her.

Owner: Very true.

Waiter: There's no Janine here.

Owner: That's the way it is. Anything else, sir?

Hakim: I want to speak with Janine the chef.

Owner: A stubborn one.

Waiter: Recently during the vote over agricultural credits — think what you will about the import tariffs — *Coming back to himself*. What do we do with this guy?

Owner: Mother!

Owner's Wife *in the background*: What is it?

Owner: There's a black here wants to talk with Janine the chef.

Owner's Wife: Janine the chef? A black? That's suspicious.

Owner: We think so, too.

Owner's Wife: But then again, maybe it's not suspicious. One moment!

Owner *to Hakim*: One moment.

Waiter: Where do you stand?

Hakim: What do you mean?

Waiter: Politically. The frightful thing here is that no one's interested in politics. So the cart is stuck in the mud forever.

Hakim: You might just be right about that.

Owner's Wife *entering*: So, now we'll see —

Owner: Now we'll see —

Waiter: The Near East, well now, our interests there —

Owner: The gentleman is from Egypt.

Hakim: Damascus. Hakim's my name.

Owner's Wife: And you wanted —

Hakim: Janine the chef.

Owner's Wife: What is it regarding?

Hakim: A question.

Owner's Wife *dubious*: I know these questions.

Hakim: Not likely mine.

Owner's Wife: "Wouldn't you like to come be with us?" Or something like that. Have I guessed it?

Hakim: I don't know what you mean. It has to do with Allah.

Owner's Wife: With — ? He's harmless.

Owner: He's harmless.

Owner's Wife: With Allah?

Owner: An oriental deity.

Owner's Wife: If he's not lying. *Calls*. Janine!

Waiter: There's no Janine here.

Owner's Wife: We're past that. *Calls.* Janine!

Waiter: Stupid! Whenever I hear the name Janine I automatically say, "Isn't one." *Calls.* Janine!

Hakim *calls:* Janine!

Janine *from back:* I'm coming. *She enters the scene puffing and groaning. Her entrance resembles that of an asthmatic elephant. She stops.* Yes?

Owner's Wife: Visitor, Janine.

Waiter: From Egypt.

Owner: A relative.

Janine: Yes, a nephew of mine.

Owner's Wife: A nephew?

Janine: Hello, Hugo.

Owner's Wife: He's called Hakim.

Janine: That's foreign for Hugo. Leave me alone with him. *She sits down groaning. The others except Hakim exit.*

Owner's Wife *going:* Just so you know, the front door is locked.

Janine *contemptuously:* Yeah, yeah, yeah! *To Hakim.* Sit down, Hugo.

Hakim: Hakim!

Janine *whispering:* So what's up?

Hakim: What?

Janine *imitating him:* What?

Hakim: Are you maybe mistaking me for someone else?

Janine: With who, then? I don't even know who you are.

Hakim: With Hugo.

Janine: I only said that so those fools wouldn't get suspicious. Come on now, out with it.

Hakim: It has to do —

Janine: We already know what it has to do with.

Hakim: Ah! So you've been expecting me?

Janine: Of course.

Hakim: Then say it!

Janine: What? Me? *You* say something, you little fool.

Hakim: I was sent by the Prophet.

Janine *frowning*: Prophet? Prophet?

Hakim: Mohammed.

Janine: Ah. A new prospect? Where's the bar?

Hakim: The bar? *Angry*. I think I'll be going.

Janine: Why? We've just now starting talking. An oriental restaurant, right?

Hakim *bitter*: You talk of restaurants!

Janine: Or a hotel?

Hakim: Ridiculous.

Janine: Now, now, I'm allowed to ask.

Hakim: I'm talking about the Prophet Mohammed.

Janine: What's his offer?

Hakim: Offer?

Janine: Does he want me as a chef or doesn't he? Pst! Them back there can't know about this!

They do everything to force me to stay here. Of course, if they lost me, The Poisson Rouge would be done for. Their world famous cuisine? Monsieur, that's me!

Hakim *indifferent*: I believe it.

Janine: Have you ever eaten here?

Hakim: Never.

Janine: Then you don't know what eating is.

Hakim: Hm.

Janine *mischievously*: In a certain respect, I've committed a terrible mistake. I've raised my own competition.

Hakim: Apprentices?

Janine: Sons, eleven sons.

Hakim: Eleven! And how many daughters?

Janine: Only four.

Hakim: Eleven and four.

Janine: That's fifteen. And all chefs. My school. There's a garlic soup named after me: á la Maitresse Janine.

Hakim: Fifteen. A beautiful little family.

Janine: It was. They've all got jobs. The eldest is a ship's cook; Eglantine takes care of the food wagons in the Belgian Congo.

Hakim: And we can talk about the other thirteen next time.

Janine: What?

Hakim: The name, Janine! Allah's Name, the Hundredth! You know it!

Janine: A password?

Hakim: Possibly a kind of password. But not the usual ninety-nine, Janine. You're not going to get me to swallow any of those.

Janine: Nobody has to swallow anything from me. On my honor as a chef!

Hakim: The Hundredth Name of Allah!

Janine: Hugo, tell your client – Mohammed, is that right? – tell him it’s hard to negotiate with you.

Hakim: The Hundredth Name of Allah!

Janine: Such mental leaps. For someone as short as me.

Hakim: The Hundredth Name of Allah!

Janine: If it would calm you down, I could call a dish after that. For a long time now I’ve had a mussel ragout in my head. They’re all *compositions*, you understand. I call them compositions. One is, of course, also an artist.

Hakim: You disappoint me, Janine.

Janine: Oh!

Owner’s Wife *from the background*: Janine!

Janine: The evening shift, I know. *To Hakim*. We didn’t get to the point at all.

Hakim: No.

Janine: You’re a muddle head, that’s why. In spite of that, I really like you.

Hakim: I really like you, too. But —

Janine: Before we negotiate any further, you have to eat here at least once. Not today! I’ll cook you something special.

Hakim: That isn’t necessary.

Janine: Of course it’s necessary, you fool! A day when we can talk undisturbed. Next Thursday, okay? *During the following, she gets up and goes out.*

Hakim: Next Thursday.

Janine: And you're my guest.

Hakim: Thank you.

Janine: Do you have a girlfriend?

Hakim: No.

Janine: Perhaps you will by Thursday. And then bring her along!

Location shift

Hakim: The hope of brightening up my stay in Paris with a few days in Damascus changed after this second failure into the despairing question of whether it wouldn't be better to leave Paris altogether. This thought was ultimately of a theological nature: Could Mohammed make a mistake? Neither Dupont nor Janine had had the slightest inkling about the Hundredth Name of Allah; they didn't even know the other ninety-nine. Why should I wait around in Paris for a pair of green shoes or for a dinner that probably contained foods that were forbidden to me?

I began to study timetables and flight schedules and spent many hours at various travel agencies. A certain innate indecisiveness prevented me from coming to a decision between a ship, an airplane, or a train. At the very moment when, after much inner wrestling, I had decided upon the afternoon express to Brindisi, the Prophet intervened again. He was apparently interested in reestablishing his reputation for infallibility, which had suffered some damage within my breast of late.

Voice: Hakim, go to Mademoiselle Ninon Dufresne in Rue du Beau Soupir 18. She knows the Hundredth Name of Allah. Go to Mademoiselle Ninon Dufresne in Rue du Beau Soupir

18 —

On the street.

Hakim: Rue du Beau Soupir 18. *He enters the house.*

Madam: Hello, Sir.

Hakim: Hello, Madame. If you please, does Mademoiselle Ninon Dufresne live here in this house?

Madam: Mademoiselle Ninon? But of course! Most men only know her first name. *With a small laugh.* You, sir, even know she's called Dufresne. A special degree of intimacy! Curiously, I cannot remember having seen you before.

Hakim: No.

Madam *suddenly taken aback*: Or are you from the authorities?

Hakim: No, not from the authorities.

Madam: A client then?

Hakim: A client? Sure, that is —

Madam: No reason to be embarrassed, sir.

Hakim: Actually, they forgot to tell me what line of work Miss Dufresne was in.

Madam: Aha. Would you care to sit down?

Hakim: Could I perhaps speak with Miss Dufresne right now?

Madam: Right now isn't possible. Ninon is still sleeping. It's a strenuous time so soon after the first —

Hakim: I'm sorry that I'm here at an inconvenient time.

Madam: Inconvenient? How frightfully mistaken, good sir. We're delighted. Ninon will be especially delighted. Would you care to step into the parlor?

Hakim: The parlor?

Madam: Since you requested Ninon straight away, I didn't presume to make another suggestion.

Do you know the other girls?

Hakim: I don't even know Ninon.

Madam: Ah, then we're dealing with a recommendation?

Hakim: Yes, we're dealing with a recommendation.

Madam: Now, concerning recommendations, I think you had better leave that to me. I think that for you, it's almost more a question of Geneviève than Ninon.

Hakim: Ninon is the only one in question.

Madam: We've got twenty girls. I would advise you to vary. Does this have to do with a specialty?

Hakim: Yes.

Madam: You may speak openly.

Hakim: It's the Hundredth Name of Allah.

Madam: It's — ? I've never come across that before. Could you go into some specifics?

Hakim: Actually, no. I don't know anything else about it either. But Mademoiselle Ninon Dufresne does.

Madam: Oh? Then I'll have to ask her. And who recommended you to us?

Hakim: Mohammed.

Madam: I don't know anyone by that name either. *Bell rings.* Ah, that's Ninon's ring. She's free now. You're in luck, sir.

Hakim: I'm not so sure yet.

Madam: Wait, I'll take you upstairs; it's on the second floor, room 11. Hello? Ninon?

Ninon: Yes?

Madam: A visitor for you. This gentleman claims that the Hundredth Name of Allah is your specialty.

Ninon: Tell him to come on in.

Madam: This way, sir. *Hakim enters and closes the door behind him.*

Hakim: Hello, Ninon.

Ninon: Hello —

Hakim: Hakim.

Ninon: Hello, Hakim.

Hakim: The name means nothing to you?

Ninon: What should it mean to me?

Hakim: I thought you'd know I was coming.

Ninon: I didn't know, but I'm pleased.

Hakim: To clear up any misunderstandings right from the start —

Ninon: There won't be any misunderstandings.

Hakim: I didn't come to this house because of the kind of house it is.

Ninon: But rather?

Hakim: Do you know the Hundredth Name of Allah?

Ninon: If you would explain it to me —

Hakim: Not the ninety-nine names that everyone knows. The Hundredth, the Name that grasps everything, that moves heaven and earth —

Ninon: Don't be angry with me, but I don't know what you're talking about.

Hakim: Then this is another misunderstanding.

Ninon *genuinely concerned*: I'm terribly sorry.

Hakim: I don't understand the Prophet.

Ninon: But, you're not asking *me* to understand him, are you?

Hakim: Actually, I am.

Ninon: And that's why you came?

Hakim: Yes.

Ninon: And came specifically to me?

Hakim: Yes.

Ninon: I hate to disappoint you. To be perfectly honest, I'm not especially clever.

Hakim: It doesn't have anything to do with cleverness, either.

Ninon: I often regret it. Lots of men want to have a conversation. You wouldn't believe how many problems there are in the world that I get asked about. Allah is one of the least of them.

Hakim: He is the greatest of them.

Ninon: I beg your pardon.

Hakim: The Only One!

Ninon: And I *never* have an answer. If only some clever person could handle them for me.

Hakim: As I said, a misunderstanding.

Ninon: It's a shame.

Hakim: The wrong address, perhaps.

Ninon: About the house – there's none better.

Hakim: I'm not interested in the house.

Ninon: You said that.

Hakim: Then I'll leave again, Mademoiselle Dufresne. Forgive me for taking up your time.

Ninon: It's a shame you want to leave again.

Voice: Hakim, spend the night with her. Hakim, spend the night with her. Hakim, spend the night with her.

Hakim: That's surprising.

Ninon: What's surprising? You look disturbed.

Hakim: I'm completely miserable. I don't know what the Prophet is doing with me.

Ninon: Do you feel okay? Sit down.

Hakim: The Prophet even commands me to lie down. Order some dinner for the two of us, Ninon.

Location shift

Hakim: As I pondered over everything thoroughly the next morning, I also weighed the possibility that what had seemed to me disappointments could have been a kind of test. Perhaps the Prophet had deliberately made a mistake; maybe my soul was in need of lengthy preparation in order to be worthy or able to receive the Great Name. But the departure time of the afternoon express was in direct conflict with this thought. The result, as it so often is, was a compromise. I still wanted to pick up the green shoes early that afternoon. But I wanted to go directly from there to the station and forgo waiting to have dinner at the Poisson Rouge. The Prophet, however, again without saying a word, ordained something completely different.

Hakim enters the shop from the street.

Hakim: Hello, Madame.

Woman: I thought I had locked the door. Excuse me, sir, but you've come at an inconvenient time.

Hakim: I beg your pardon, too, but I was told to come.

Woman: You were told?

Hakim: Should I come back later?

Woman: What is it concerning?

Hakim: A pair of green shoes, made to measure, high uppers —

Woman *lively*: The green shoes. He talked about them the whole time. They're done. Here.

Hakim: Very beautiful.

Woman: They captivated his every thought.

Hakim: I'd like to speak with Mr. Dupont myself.

Woman: Too late. Everything happened so unexpectedly, you know. But up to the last minute, it was your shoes that occupied him. Isn't it strange how that word "occupy" also applies to his trade? Oh, everything in the world is connected to it.

Hakim: I'm not sure I understand. Madam Dupont, if I suppose correctly —

Woman: I gave him the green shoes and he looked at them and said, "Madeleine," he said, "it's a kind of *l'art pour l'art*. Because no one on earth, except myself, knows what an insole is." *She sobs.*

Hakim: Do I understand you correctly? Has Mr. Dupont died, perhaps?

Woman: You didn't know? My God, I assumed the whole world knew.

Hakim *dismayed*: Then I really have come too late.

Woman: This morning. Unexpectedly, although he had been suffering for a long time.

Hakim: And he left no message for me?

Woman: A message? No, just the shoes.

Hakim: No word?

Woman: He was holding them in his hands when he died. He just murmured a little
unintelligibly.

Hakim: That's exactly what might be important.

Woman: Don't you think? It's like with Mozart. Not long ago, I heard that he was composing
even in his final moments. But no one knows the notes.

Hakim: You should have paid attention, Mrs. Dupont.

Woman *somewhat annoyed*: Well, as far as you're concerned, he said all there was to say. He
said they cost twelve hundred fifty francs.

Hakim: Twelve hundred fifty francs?

Woman: Yes. Shall I wrap them?

Hakim: No, don't. I'll take them like this.

Woman: He had nothing else in his head but these shoes.

Hakim: Yes, that's a shame.

Woman: A shame?

Hakim: It's as if there were a intent behind it.

Woman: Behind what? What intent?

Hakim: I get right up next to the Name, and then at the last minute — *Suddenly in another tone.*

Damn it!

Woman: Would you like some shoe polish to go with them?

Hakim: Yes, why not.

Woman: Green or clear?

Hakim: Green or clear. What do you think?

Woman: When I look at you. What's the matter?

Hakim: My wallet —

Woman: Now don't get upset. Check all your pockets.

Hakim: It's got all my money in it!

Woman: That's pretty careless. Do you have it?

Hakim: No.

Woman: When did you use it last?

Hakim: Not once today. That means — hm —

Woman: Surely you left it back at your hotel.

Hakim: That's possible. Well, at any rate, I'll have to pick up the shoes later.

Woman: Nonsense, take them with you. I trust you.

Hakim: You don't even know me.

Woman: *These shoes* could only have been ordered by someone worthy of them.

Hakim: Thank you, Mrs. Dupont. I promise you —

Woman: Here's the shoe polish. Take the clear.

Hakim *sighing*: And shoe polish, too. Thank you, Mrs. Dupont! *He pushes the door open. The*

ringing of the door chimes tinkles quickly.

Street in Paris

Hakim: Rue du Beau Soupier 18. *He enters the house.*

Madam: Hello, sir.

Hakim: Hello, madam.

Madam: Oh, it's you!

Hakim: It's me.

Madam: Right on cue.

Hakim: You raise my hopes. Has something been found?

Madam: Not a single trace.

Hakim: Room 11. May I go up?

Madam: So it's Geneviève after all. I said as much to you.

Hakim: I meant Ninon.

Madam: Ninon? Room 11 is Geneviève.

Hakim: It was Ninon yesterday.

Madam: A minor relocation. I've placed Geneviève in eleven. I thought the wallpaper better suited to her complexion.

Hakim: And Ninon? Which complexion, which wallpaper —

Madam: Ninon? I thought *you* —

Hakim: Me?

Madam: At any rate, I suspected you.

Hakim: I would have thought suspicions were my prerogative.

Madam: Ninon isn't with us anymore. I had thought you and she had gone — at any rate, you were her last visitor.

Hakim: Didn't she say anything? No message for me?

Madam: She left without saying goodbye. An ingrate. I'm disappointed. I have forever banished her from my memory.

Hakim: What? She just disappeared?

Madam: Just disappeared. A slip of paper on the table, that was all. Here, read it.

Hakim: “Madam, I had a very lovely time with you. A thousand thanks. I’m retiring back to my private life. A kiss from your Ninon.”

Madam: What do you think about that?

Hakim: She’ll be back.

Madam: Do you think?

Hakim: I can practically calculate when.

Madam: When?

Hakim: When her private life is spent. 128,000 francs.

Madam: I really have to admit, Ninon was very skilled.

Hakim: Oh, yes.

Madam: The clients were always satisfied with her.

Hakim: Depending on how you look at it.

Madam: How do you look at it?

Hakim: Dispassionately, Madam.

Madam *reflectively*: Dispassionately? I’m not sure that the right attitude — Geneviève is more your type. I saw it at first glance.

Hakim: Goodbye, Madam.

Madam: Oh, no, sir! What a barbaric departure. Wait, just let me call Geneviève. Sir! Sir! *Fade out.*

Location shift

Hakim: It occurred to me that all was not lost. I still had the check for the Crédit Lyonnais. I had always carried it folded up in my wallet, but O miracle, yesterday of all days I had taken it out and laid it in my copy of the Koran, where the sixth Sura ends and the seventh begins. I went to my hotel and then to the bank.

At the bank counter

Bank Official: The check is in order.

Hakim: I didn't doubt it.

Bank Official: What I mean is, although the check is in order, I cannot cash it.

Hakim: Why not?

Bank Official: The account has been closed.

Hakim: How? By who?

Bank Official: I'm afraid that information is not possible.

Location shift

Hakim: In my Koran, between the thirteenth and fourteenth Suras, I found another bank note, a smaller one. Faith is a help in the most difficult situations .

At a post office

Hakim: A telegram.

Woman Official *objective during the entire conversation*: Damascus. I'll have to look up the charge.

Hakim: If you have a heart, Miss, you won't look up the charge.

Woman Official: I could have a heart.

Hakim: If only we could put this together with the fifty francs I have.

Woman Official: That's easy enough.

Hakim: Thank you. For my part, if dinner would interest —

Woman Official: Gladly.

Hakim: The Poisson Rouge, Rue de la Harpe. Tonight at eight.

Woman Official: Poisson Rouge, Rue de la Harpe. Tonight at eight.

Hakim: Please don't confuse that with the telegram. It should read —

Woman Official: "Check not cashed. Request urgent wire transfer."

Hakim: Thank you.

Location shift

Hakim: A few hours later, I received Fatima's reply telegram. It read, "Transfer not possible.

Await speedy return." I put a toothbrush and a bar of soap in my pocket and pulled on Dupont's green shoes. I tucked the Koran into my breast pocket. Without my suitcase and without asking about the bill, I left the hotel with the firm intention of never setting foot in it again. Everything indicated that the crucial moment was near, the hour in which I would hear the Hundredth Name whispered to me. Not unintentionally, I made my situation more drastic, for example by leaving my passport lying in my hotel room. The Prophet had to be coerced, so that in the end he would have no other options. To this end, I ordered a rather expensive bottle of wine with dinner at the Poisson Rouge, not knowing if drinks were also included in Janine's invitation, and well knowing that the Prophet had forbidden Muslims wine. The Prophet was completely free to say a word about this, a

word of consent or disapproval, thank you very much. I was waiting for it: He had my ear.

In the Poisson Rouge.

Hakim: Chinese silk?

Odette: Yes, Chinese. A girlfriend of mine can get it cheap.

Hakim: Lovely! Yellow becomes you.

Odette: Do you think? When you sit in a smock the whole day behind a counter —

Hakim: The black becomes you, too.

Odette: Black and yellow are my colors. That's related to the zodiac. I'm a Sagittarius.

Hakim *not understanding*: Ah.

Odette: My birthstone is amethyst.

Hakim: Oh?

Waiter *approaching*: Forgive me. Janine wants to know if the roast veal is good.

Odette: The best I've ever eaten.

Hakim: The best I've ever eaten.

Waiter: Janine wants you to know the following, as well, in the interest of a better understanding:

in the culinary arts, she represents the school known as purism. Unadulterated dishes, you understand?

Hakim: I don't understand. Why doesn't Janine explain it to us herself?

Waiter: She make it out here. *Odette giggles*. Not until the middle tables are cleared, when

there's room to push back the chairs

Hakim: We'll wait until the middle tables are cleared. I absolutely have to talk with Janine still.

Surely she'll want to say the truly important thing to me herself.

Waiter: Very well. I continue: no cauliflower that tastes of bay leaf, no rabbit that tastes like veal. In general, the avoidance of sauces —

Hakim: Commentary substituted for spices.

Waiter: Forgive me. I was only relaying what I was asked to. I shall retire.

Hakim: Thank you.

Waiter: But my word, this Janine! Up to today, I didn't know what dining could be.

Hakim: Her promise doesn't disappoint. Let's drink a toast in her honor. *They drink.*

Odette: Ah! I was never so happy as I am today.

Hakim: Really? Never? Not even when you were in love?

Odette: I've never been in love.

Hakim: What?

Odette: Never, until today.

Hakim: Odette, my dear Odette.

Odette: Although I've had plenty of time, of course. Next January — I'm an early Sagittarius, you understand —

Hakim *does not understand*: I understand.

Odette: Next January I celebrate — that is, I won't really *celebrate* — my 60th birthday.

Hakim: Are you really turning 60, Odette? You look at least twenty years younger.

Odette: Thank you, Hakim. Still too old for you. But Janine's roast veal and the red wine have me dreaming I was forty and looked thirty. It's a lovely evening, a lovely evening, a lovely evening...

Hakim: Yes, Odette.

Odette: An evening that — without my being able to say how — an evening that resolves all mysteries.

Hakim: For you, too?

Waiter *approaching breathlessly, whispers*: Monsieur, monsieur —

Hakim: What's happened?

Waiter: You are *too* related to her!

Hakim: Related? To Janine? Why?

Waiter *in utmost agitation*: Related or not — you must tell us where they've taken Janine.

Hakim: Me?

Waiter: A car at the back door. They kidnapped her! The competition, sir — *Hakim jumps up*.

Odette: Where are you going, Hakim?

Hakim: After Janine! The mysteries, Odette! The resolution kidnapped! I have to find them!

Fading in the distance. Janine, Janine!

Location shift

Hakim: But Janine was long gone. I ran desperately through the streets, so consumed with the thought of finding her that I wasn't even searching for her at all. What did cars matter if Janine wasn't in them? What did other people matter when this was all about Janine? I would have to run into her arms, and she into mine, or else meeting her would be impossible. It was out of the question to pick her out like I was sorting peas.

But then I started having trouble breathing. I had lost the waiter and Odette, who had followed me at first. As I stood there catching my breath and trying to get my bearings, I

found myself on one of the wide boulevard, not far, so it seemed, from the Rue de la Harpe and the Poisson Rouge. I must have run in a circle, but, in this case, a circle wasn't any better or worse than any other shape. At that hour the streets were full of people. Leaning against a lamp post, I observed them. Maybe Janine would come floating along in the current before me like a sumptuously laden freighter and drop anchor before the same lamp post. This hope was as futile as my hopes had been for Ninon Dufresne and the shoemaker Albert Dupont.

Suddenly, though, I discovered a different face in the crowd. A woman walked by right in front of me; I don't know if she noticed me. She was humming something to herself but the tune didn't matter. Her face conveyed a happiness that needed no further explanation. There was no doubt: Odette was now thirty and looked twenty.

As she disappeared into the crowd, I shoved off from the lamp post gently with my back and set my feet in motion in the opposite direction. In that moment my trip to Damascus had begun.

In Damascus

Fatima: You've been gone a long time, Hakim.

Hakim: Ten days in Paris, and the path back.

Fatima: Three months to the day.

Hakim: A car brought me from Vöckelmarkt to Vienna, or else it would have taken longer. And the shoes, Fatima, they walk by themselves. Green, with an ankle support of Dupont's own design. The uppers pulled high. When I repeat those words to myself, they're like a

Sura. May Allah forgive me this sin, but I suspect Dupont was on a good footing with him, in spite of his false belief.

Fatima: That was the right way: through Vienna, Belgrade, Constantinople.

Hakim: The way just happened like that. I didn't realize your geography had gotten so good.

Fatima: I don't mean it so much geographically.

Hakim: Oh ho! Then has the Prophet —

Fatima: The Prophet doesn't speak to me anymore.

Hakim: To me either. The last thing he said was, "Spend the night with her." Repeated it three times. For the Prophet, those are not particularly great final words, if you ask me.

Fatima: Maybe something will still happen.

Hakim: I hope not. He put me in some tight spots. Of course you know about that. What did he say to you?

Fatima: He told me that he wasn't going to say anything more.

Hakim: Not particularly great, either.

Fatima: But closure, at any rate. His exact words were, "Fatima, you are now poor enough that you can help yourself."

Hakim: Ridicule.

Fatima: Oh no, Hakim.

Hakim: I still don't understand. How can someone drive a company like this into the ground in four or five days?

Fatima: I couldn't have accomplished it so quickly by myself, but with the Prophet's help —

Hakim: This is what I say: he misguided us always. And this malicious way of his, to waft a little word to us and then leave us in the lurch —

Fatima: One day they called for an audit by the state attorney.

Hakim: And on top of that, to never show himself! If I could get my hands on him, well, I'd give him a piece of my mind, anyway. And good.

Fatima: An hour later it had turned into a Syrian national incident. And as foreigners — at any rate, the exact wording was: Personal enrichment of Syrian national assets. There were demonstrations. They stormed our house. Your books —

Hakim: What about my books?

Fatima: They were further evidence against us. Anti-Islamic subversion, they said.

Hakim: The scholastics? Schleiermacher?

Fatima: They burned them all. A bonfire. No one read them.

Hakim: Our house?

Fatima: The Syrian economic minister is living in it.

Hakim: The branches in Aleppo and Beirut?

Fatima: Closed. I only just made it to the Egyptian embassy. That bank accounts were frozen.

Hakim: I noticed that.

Fatima: The airplanes, the car park —

Hakim: All of it gone?

Fatima: All of it.

Hakim: No jewelry, no cash?

Fatima: Nothing. The ambassador didn't want to take me in, but then a job as a cleaning woman opened up, and I was an extra-national.

Hakim: And me? What do I do?

Fatima: Well, in the meantime there's a new ambassador. I spoke with the new one's wife.

You'll be the janitor here.

Hakim: The Prophet has brought us so marvelously far.

Fatima: Be glad you're an extra-national.

Hakim: And not allowed out of the house. I have no idea how I made it through the city.

Fatima: Luckily you're so ragged that no one recognized you.

Hakim: Funny the things you can call being lucky!

Fatima: Don't be unfair. Allah willed it.

Hakim: Hm.

Fatima: The ambassador is at a reception just now. You could use his bathtub. It's not quite as beautiful as ours was, but almost.

In the bath

Fatima: And you know, of course, the whole thing is political. There's no telling how it's going to proceed. Notes gets passed back and forth; maybe our case will come before the Court of Justice in The Hague.

Hakim: Lather up my back.

Fatima: Besides that, I can file for my inheritance in Alamut. They've discovered oil there.

Hakim: Oh, Fatima.

Fatima: We've got so many prospects, Hakim!

Hakim: "A hot bath to ward off melancholy." Now where did I read that? Are we going to have enough hot baths?

Fatima: That depends upon the receptions, and the receptions are innumerable.

Hakim: Oh, Fatima!

Fatima: So much possibility!

Hakim: That you don't believe. It's all been in vain: the trip to Paris, the fish business, and the words of the Prophet. Run more hot water.

Fatima: That reminds me: on the day I sent you the telegram —

Hakim: That black day. Dupont dead, Ninon gone with my money, Janine kidnapped!

Fatima: The Prophet said something else to me that day —

Hakim: Concerning the business?

Fatima: At eleven o'clock the message concerning the business said, "Call a press conference and declare that the Syrian interpretation of the trade agreement is absurd." And at four o'clock it was, "Turn over a list of bribes and the names of those receiving them to the United Press."

Hakim: Enough, enough! And never serve me fish ever again. These sardines with their light salty taste!

Fatima: But at two o'clock, when my nerves were so wound up that all my limbs were trembling, at two o'clock he said something wholly and totally unrelated to business. I burst out in tears.

Hakim: His words went so straight to your heart?

Fatima: Oh no. I was expecting help and advice from him. Instead of that, he started talking about botany.

Hakim: A new field.

Fatima: "A date palm," he said, "is a date palm."

Hakim: O wisdom!

Fatima: “O miracle, I say it into your ear.”

Hakim: What?

Fatima: He said, “O miracle, I say it into your ear.”

Hakim: That’s no great miracle. He said a word into your ear. Naturally. All there are are words,
no date palms.

Fatima: And then he continued, “O miracle of miracles, that which has never been heard is a date
palm.”

Hakim: Now it’s only date palms and no words. Is that supposed to be more botany?

Fatima: A kind of oracle, isn’t it?

Hakim: Hm.

Fatima: It occurred to me just now.

Hakim: And why did he say it? And to you?

Fatima *joking*: Maybe so it would occur to me just now.

Hakim *shocked*: Fatima!

Fatima: And I’d tell you.

Hakim: I have a hunch you might be right, Fatima.

Fatima: Back then, I thought it over for a long time, how the date palm could help out our
sinking fish business. I couldn’t see the connection.

Hakim: Which day was it? When you sent me the telegram!

Fatima: The day Dupont died, when Ninon left with your money, when Janine was kidnapped.

Hakim: It was a different day!

Fatima: But you just said —

Hakim: It was the day I woke up next to Ninon, when I got the green shoes, when I ate the roast veal.

Fatima: The same day.

Hakim: The same day and a completely different one! Oh Fatima, Fatima!

Fatima *unobtrusively*: Do you want the shower?

Hakim: Yes, the shower. First warm, then colder. What was it the Prophet said at the end?

Fatima: “O miracle of miracles, that which has never been heard is a date palm.”

Hakim: And he didn’t say anything about a pair of green boots?

Fatima: Why should he?

Hakim: And then, if there weren’t any date palms to see in Paris!

Fatima: What? Do you mean to say —

Hakim: Yes.

Fatima: The Hundredth Name of Allah...a pair of green boots?

Hakim: A roast veal, a beautiful night.

Fatima: Such blasphemy! Enough! *She turns off the shower.*

Hakim: Maybe the Prophet thought it would easier for me to understand blasphemy in Paris than simplicity in Damascus.

Fatima: At what cost!

Hakim: *Tant de bruit*, to be more precise. I have to admit the Prophet overestimated me.

Fatima *angrily*: And you the Prophet!

Hakim: So that’s it. The Hundredth Name of Allah: A roast veal. How disappointing.

Location shift

Youth: I'm disappointed, too, O Father of Wisdom.

Hakim: In the meantime, thirty years have gone by, O young one, and it doesn't disappoint me any longer.

Youth: The shoes, for example. What was so special about them? They seemed to walk themselves, isn't that right?

Hakim: As much by themselves as good shoes always walk.

Youth: Janine's roast veal?

Hakim: Good the way a good roast is.

Youth: The night with Ninon?

Hakim: As lovely as a lovely night.

Youth: Never anything that's beyond the scope of the thing itself.

Hakim: Granted.

Youth *unrestrained*: Or else you didn't notice it.

Hakim: I won't detain you, young man, to look for the miracle somewhere further, but don't keep looking for it here with me.

Youth: The night with Ninon is over, O Father of Wisdom, and the roast veal eaten. But the boots, if it's permitted, could I see the boots?

Hakim: I tossed the boots out when they no longer served me.

Youth: The Hundredth Name of Allah tossed out?

Hakim: Oh incorrigible fool! A fool, or course, as I myself was one. When the cataract was pierced for me, I saw and heard the Hundredth Name of Allah translated a hundred- and thousand-fold. In a bird's call and a child's gaze, in a cloud, a brick, and in the stride of a camel.

Youth: But that's all —

Hakim: It can be!

Youth: Shadings!

Hakim: That your impatience renders invalid.

Youth: O Father of Wisdom, you're translating.

Hakim: That's what I call it.

Youth: But I want the Name as it is.

Hakim: You have to translate when the original cannot be understood.

Youth: I insist.

Hakim: Be patient, young man; you insist upon your death.

A door is thrown open

Ambassador *angry*: What's all this muttering in the stairway? Have I got a janitor or a storyteller? What? You call these stairs swept? Descendant of a jackal, excrement of a brown rat, Bacillus in the intestines of a horn viper! Not enough that you use my bathtub, you filthy up my stairs with the imprint of your backside, too. May Allah turn you into a dung beetle! *He slams the door.*

Hakim *respectfully*: May Allah will it as you wish, master.

Youth: Ambassador?

Hakim: Himself.

Youth: He scared me so much my heart almost stopped.

Hakim: He's a charming old man.

Youth: Really?

Hakim: Very interested in folklore. At the moment, we're writing an academic work together.

Youth: On theology?

Hakim: A collection of Arabic curse words, with a special consideration of the Damascus dialect.

A publisher in Cairo is already interested.

Youth: Oh?

Hakim: With all this talking to you, I've neglected to translate the Hundredth Name of Allah
once more.

Youth: I'm all ears!

Hakim: In the shine of these steps, young man. Pick up that broom and help me!

III. ZABETH

Voices: Therese Weisinger, the teacher

 Child

 Elizabeth Fortner, eight or nine years old

 Mrs. Fortner, a farmer's wife

 Joseph Fortner, a farmer

 Farmhand

 Farmgirl

 Zabeth

 Eginhard Woturba, a school principal

 Reinicke, an editor

 Secretary

 Man (Dr. Schlefink)

 Woman (Mrs. Schlefink)

Chapter 1 – The Teacher's Story

Teacher: *My name is Therese Weisinger, and I'm a teacher in the village of Reiskirchen. The village itself consists of only a church, a school, and a few big farms, but a number of small family farms scattered in the surrounding area belong to the village, too, so my classes are actually quite large. In addition to me, our principal, Eginhard Woturba, also teaches at the school.*

One day last October I was teaching third grade science. I wanted to explain the children about migratory birds; this was occasioned by our having observing some the previous week while we were outside. However, I was distracted from this topic by great flocks of crows out in the fields I could see through the window. It wasn't a major distraction, and I'm not saying it was anything more than a coincidence, but the coincidence was remarkable nonetheless, because it signaled the beginning of the strange events that would preoccupy me not only for the next few weeks, but for the rest of my life.

As I was talking about the cleverness of crows, I noticed an unusual commotion in a back corner of the classroom.

Teacher: What's going on back there? *pause* Do you need something, Ilse?

Child *hesitating*: No.

Teacher: Well?

Child: Elizabeth says there are some that can talk.

Teacher: Some what?

Child: Crows.

Teacher: Crows that can talk? Yes, maybe so. Crows are very clever; sometimes when they're kept in cages, they learn to say a word or two. Ravens are especially clever. They're much bigger than crows, but we don't have them around here. Did you say something, Elizabeth? *Pause*. Why won't you answer?

Elizabeth: I didn't say anything.

Child: Yes, you did! She said, "We've got ravens that can talk like people!"

Teacher: Oh, don't be silly. No, there's no such thing as that. Did you really say that, Elizabeth?

Pause. You made that up, didn't you?

Elizabeth: No.

Teacher *laughing*: You've seen them? These ravens? You've heard them talk?

Elizabeth: Yes.

Commotion.

Teacher: Quiet down. Tell me what they look like, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Big and black.

Teacher: How big?

Elizabeth: Really big. As big as you, teacher. No, even a little bigger.

Commotion and laughter.

Teacher: Quiet down. Where did you see them?

Pause.

Elizabeth *sobbing*: It's true.

Teacher: Elizabeth, what's wrong?

Bells begin to chime outside.

Okay everyone else, it's twelve o'clock. That's all for today. *Noise of children* Elizabeth,

I'd like you to stay a moment, please.

Elizabeth: Yes, teacher.

The noisy children run out. It becomes quiet.

Teacher: Why were you crying, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Because I said that to you.

Teacher: Yes, that's right; it isn't nice to lie.

Elizabeth: I'm not lying.

Teacher: What would your father and mother say if I told them about it?

Elizabeth: Don't tell them, teacher! They said I wasn't allowed to.

Teacher: Wasn't allowed to what?

Elizabeth: Talk about the raven.

Teacher: Have you told this story before?

Elizabeth: No, never.

Teacher: Then why did they say you're not allowed to?

Elizabeth: I'm afraid because I told you, teacher.

Teacher: What's going on with this raven, Elizabeth? Tell me.

Elizabeth *matter of fact*: In the evening, after the Angelus, he comes into our living room.

Teacher: He comes into your living room? Elizabeth! Where does he come from?

Elizabeth: I don't know. I think maybe from the woods.

Teacher: Who lets him in?

Elizabeth: No one. He opens the door himself.

Teacher *wryly*: So he just walks in and starts talking?

Elizabeth: Yes.

Teacher: What does he say?

Elizabeth: I don't know.

Teacher: Aren't you frightened by him?

Elizabeth: No, I like him.

Teacher *muddled, pensive*: You like him. Okay, Elizabeth. Okay —

Elizabeth: Teacher, everyone else is gone already. Can I go now, too? I'll have to catch up —

Teacher: Yes, of course you can.

Elizabeth: You won't tell my parents?

Teacher: No, of course not.

Elizabeth: Thank you, teacher.

Teacher: Goodbye, Elizabeth.

Teacher: *Imaginative children are difficult; they tend to fib. Imagination is a lovely thing, but if you don't watch it closely, it can steer a weak character towards dishonesty. I decided to keep an eye on little Elizabeth Fortner. And I wanted to have a little talk with her parents, too. The Fortners' farm is the farthest one from Reiskirchen, about an hour's walk away, out in the open countryside. Which is to say, it's actually nearer the outside world than Reiskirchen is. If you leave the farm and walk ten minutes through the woods, you run into Highway 299. Of course, it's a tenuous connection to the outside world: you might be able to hear the sounds of semis or a honking horn from the road at the farmhouse on rainy days.*

About a week later, my daily walk took me out in that direction. The fields were covered in silver gossamer, the bright day tinged with melancholy, as I thought about my life. I was so glad on that day to have a purpose! The farm was silent beneath the autumn sun — no dogs barked in the yard, no doves cooed in the dovecote, no hens scattered before my footsteps. The house, too, seemed forsaken as I made my way through a cool, tiled hallway, but then I found the farmer's wife in the kitchen.

Teacher: Mrs. Fortner!

Farmer's Wife: Oh, it's the teacher!

Teacher: May I come in?

Farmer's Wife: Of course, of course! Come in where it's warm.

Teacher: Yes, it's getting cool out there.

Farmer's Wife: Here, please, sit down.

Teacher: Thank you. I was just in the area and decided to stop by.

Farmer's wife: Yes, of course. Of course. That's fine.

During the following, she becomes more awkward, but tries to hide this.

Perhaps you'd like a glass of milk?

Teacher: No, thank you, Mrs. Fortner.

Farmer's Wife: My husband is out in the fields.

Teacher: And Elizabeth?

Farmer's Wife: Elizabeth, too. What a shame she's not here when her teacher has come by. She likes you very much.

Teacher: Oh...I didn't know that.

Farmer's Wife: Maybe...maybe you'd like to go out to the field to see her?

Teacher: I'd rather stay here and talk with you a moment.

Farmer's Wife: Of course. It was just an idea.

Teacher: I'm also very fond of Elizabeth. She daydreams a little, now and then.

Farmer's Wife: Maybe I should go out to the field and call her.

Teacher: Oh no, of course not.

Farmer's Wife: I think maybe it would be better...

Teacher: What's wrong, Mrs. Fortner? *laughing* I feel like I may have come at an awkward time. Would it be better if I left?

Farmer's Wife: Yes. I mean...excuse me, Miss...it's just that people talk about us.

Teacher: What do they say? I wouldn't know. And besides, I wouldn't let it bother me.

Farmer's Wife: If it were only talk...

Teacher: Now you've made me curious.

Farmer's Wife: They say we've got the devil coming and going out here.

Teacher *laughing*: The devil? No, Mrs. Fortner, I don't believe that.

Farmer's Wife: Maybe you'd believe it if...

Teacher: If ...?

Farmer's Wife: Would you like to meet him? Yes, Miss, perhaps it would be better if you left.

Teacher: Of course, Mrs. Fortner, if you like.

Farmer's Wife: Hush!

Teacher: What is it?

Farmer's Wife: Oh, it's too late now, Miss. Can't you hear the steps?

A sound from the stone hallway floor is audible.

Teacher: Steps? But what's making them? Those aren't a person's footsteps.

Farmer's Wife: It's Zabeth.

Teacher: Who?

Farmer's Wife: Close your eyes if you're frightened.

The door creaks open slowly.

Teacher: No, I want to see it.

She suddenly screams and falls silent.

Farmer's Wife: Stay outside, Zabeth. She's scared of you.

The door closes.

Teacher: *When I came to again after fainting, I saw Mrs. Fortner's face bent over me. The kitchen was empty, the horrible creature was gone.*

Teacher: My God...

Farmer's Wife: It's my fault; I knew he was coming. He said it to me just as you sat down.

Teacher: Who said what to you? There was no one there.

Farmer's Wife: No, he wasn't there, but he can say things from far away. He wasn't expecting anyone to be here, but he must be wanting something special. Normally he waits until it's dark.

Teacher: He says things from far away?

Farmer's Wife: Used to be, he could do more. Now he's as poor as a beggar.

Teacher: Am I dreaming, Mrs. Fortner? The alarm clock is going to ring any minute now.

Farmer's Wife: It won't ring, you're not dreaming.

Teacher: From far away? How does he do that?

Farmer's Wife: How would I know? But he does. Not in words, but suddenly you know he's coming. That's why I wanted you to go. Do you believe it's the devil?

Teacher: I don't know.

Farmer's Wife: I'll tell you the whole story.

Chapter 2 – Mrs. Fortner's Story

Farmer's Wife: *It was last winter, just after Candlemas. Everything was still covered in snow. It was a day like any other, and we were having lunch.*

Farmer's Wife: Some salad, Joseph? Dig in.

Farmer: When I sat down, I swear I had a powerful hunger. But now...I feel like I've forgotten something.

Farmer's Wife: Forgotten?

Farmer: Can't you feel it, too? I mean, you have to feel it, too.

Farmer's Wife: I don't feel anything.

Farmer: Must be in the stalls.

Farm Girl: I'm all finished with the cows.

Farmer: And the horses?

Farm Hand: I didn't forget anything.

Farmer: No, it must be me. Need to set the plow.

Farm Hand: The plow? I don't think there's any rush.

Farmer's Wife: If you forgot something, do it this afternoon. Have some meat.

Farmer *pushes back his chair*: Someone's calling.

Farmer's Wife: I didn't hear anything.

Farm Girl: I didn't hear anything.

Farm Hand: There's no one calling.

Farmer: You heard it, didn't you, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Yes, Daddy, I heard it.

Farmer's Wife: What did you hear?

Elizabeth: I...no, nothing, I guess.

Farmer: I heard something, but I didn't really *hear* it.

Farmer's Wife *her fork falls with a clang*: You're scaring me, Joseph!

Elizabeth: I heard it. It was like a hand touching you.

Farmer's Wife: A hand touching you?

Farmer: Yes, a hand touching you.

Farmer's Wife: Holy Mother of God —

Elizabeth: It's nothing to be scared of.

Farmer: I have to go.

Stands up.

Elizabeth: I'll go with you, Daddy.

Farmer's Wife: Where, Joseph?

Farmer: To harness the horse, I think. Hitch the plow. There was calling.

He goes out with Elizabeth.

Farm Hand: Is he sick?

Farmer's Wife: Hush up and eat!

Farm Girl: How gloomy it is. In the middle of the day.

Farmer's Wife: It's because it's winter.

Farmer's Wife: *I tried to hide, from myself and from the farmhands, how frightened I was. I couldn't swallow another bite. My heart was pounding as I looked out the window to see what would happen. We saw my husband leave the farmyard with the horse and plow. Elizabeth was with him.*

Farmer's Wife: Where's he taking the plow? To the blacksmith?

Farm Hand: The plow's not broken.

Farm Girl: Look, he's taking the path out to the field.

Farmer's Wife: To the field? Is he going to plow it?

Farm Hand: The ground's frozen.

Farmer's Wife: I'm going after him.

She goes out.

Farm Hand: This smoked ham is so good. We never had so much.

Farm Girl: Let's finish eating first. We'll get there fast enough.

Farm Hand: You want to go, too?

Farm Girl: The farmer's acting crazy. I want to see it.

Farm Hand: You're being ridiculous.

Farm Girl: Look, now *she's* going out there.

She drops her fork suddenly.

Farm Hand: What wrong?

Farm Girl *whispering*: Look out the window.

Farm Hand: I don't see anything.

Farm Girl: On the roof of the barn. Cross yourself!

Farm Hand: It's a giant black bird, a raven.

Farm Girl: Holy Mary, Mother of God —

Farm Hand: It's Old Scratch, in a black coat. Look, he's flying away.

Farm Girl: Don't look!

Farm Hand: I'm leaving. I'm leaving today. I'm gonna look for a job on another farm.

Farm Girl: Me, too. I'm telling the farmer today.

Farmer's Wife: *I went through the farmyard and then out along the pathway. I saw something like a shadow on the ridge of the barn roof, but I hardly paid attention to it. For what was it compared to the spectacle on the snowy fields that filled me with terror! There were giant ravens everywhere, sitting or strutting around, alone and in flocks. But they didn't pay attention to me and they didn't approach me. And suddenly I knew they weren't going to do anything to me. So I went on after my husband and my child. And as I went further, something happened that was even stranger – it was like things had always been this way, like there had always been giant birds like this walking around in the fields. Like it was nothing new. No, it didn't just seem that way to me, it really was that way. I had known these ravens a long time. And in the moment that thought came to me, and I started remembering, they began coming up closer and I looked one of them in the eye. He looked at me solemnly, and I remembered that I knew him. No, not him. His eye. He opened his beak, but not a single sound issued from his throat – it was like he was struggling to speak. And at the same time, not like he was struggling – the word was on the tip of my tongue, and I couldn't say it. I was close to some great happiness, closer than ever before, and yet I was also certain that it was out of reach.*

I couldn't see my husband and Elizabeth, they had disappeared behind a knoll. I didn't catch sight of them again until I came up upon the woods. My husband was plowing into the frozen, hard ground. The furrow's black stripe grew behind him. One of the black birds sat upon the plow and looked down at the plowshare as it cut into the

earth. Others were standing or walking around, and all of them seemed to be watching the plow. I tried to count them and figured about a dozen. But there were also others in the woods behind the tree trunks, and since they were all moving and shifting about it was hard to count them. Elizabeth stood in the middle of them and she gave a happy laugh when she saw me. She gazed up at the big birds and peered into their throats when one of them suddenly gaped its beak at her. And it didn't seem to worry her at all when one, as if to testing her, snapped at her pigtails. I wasn't afraid, either. No, we were all unafraid; even the horse, which was normally a skittish animal, did not betray any disease. And it was also strange – if anything in the midst of all these strange things could still strike you that way – that the giant ravens were all silent, unlike the crows and jackdaws they resembled.

At the end of the first row the plow stuck, and as I stamped up to it through the snow I saw that the plowshare had broken in the hard ground. The raven that had been sitting on the plow hopped down and bent down next to my husband over the damage. All the while he frowned at him slantways, like he was waiting for an explanation. “The plowshare’s broken,” said my husband, and he looked over to me and his whole face was beaming, like he was telling me something truly wonderful that had happened. Yes, these ravens, that had appeared so out of the blue, had the power to radiate joy. Even though the plow had broken, even though our help had abandoned us – there was no misfortune and no hardship came to us! And even if we suddenly had to do the oddest things – everything turned out well for us. What weird goings on we had on our farm. We’re very remote, so no one really noticed that we were doing things that would be foolish in the eyes of the world. Not only in the eyes of the world, but also in our own. But we couldn’t

do anything about it; we were driven by a dark compulsion. The ravens had power over us and made us do things that were childish or ludicrous or insane, and yet — we were happy doing them. Can you imagine, one day we loaded up the piano onto the cart and hauled it out into the woods? Elizabeth had to play what she had just learned in her piano lesson, and we sang along.

Farmer, Farmer's Wife, and Elizabeth *sing*:

The farmer in March takes the harness in hand,
He plants and he prunes all the trees on the land.
He tills and he harrows, he plows and he sows,
From sunrise to sunset his hand never slows.

Farmer's Wife: *We sang for the trees, the grass, and the empty air. There was no sign of our black-coated visitors. Unlike on the winter's day when they appeared, when we saw them now it was only as timid wild birds – dark feathers in the branches, a wing beat in the twilight. Only Elizabeth had closer dealings with them, and eventually she habituated one of the ravens to the house.*

She'll tell you about that herself.

Chapter 3 – The Story of the Child Elizabeth

Elizabeth: *I went to the woods every day, because I wanted to see the ravens again. But I couldn't find them and figured they had flown away. But then I also thought they were*

just hiding from me to tease me. Because it always seemed to me they were standing behind the thick tree trunks and sitting in the dark spruce tops where you couldn't see them. As long as there was snow, I looked for tracks from their feet – they would have to be big and clear – but I never found any. Then the snow was gone and I didn't know how to look for them anymore. One day I had walked very far and was tired and sat down on a cut-down tree trunk. It was all quiet and empty, and the sun was shining, and I looked at a branch that was already turning a little green, and thought I didn't want to look for the ravens anymore. Then all of a sudden I noticed that there was a raven standing behind the branch, and I wondered why I hadn't seen him there sooner. I raced up to him.

Elizabeth: Hello, raven! Where have you been? I've been looking for you for such a long time. And my parents wonder why you don't come anymore, too. Have I seen you before? I can't tell – you all look the same. *Pause.* My name's Elizabeth.

Zabeth *slowly and with effort*: Za – beth.

Elizabeth: You can talk!

Zabeth: Zabeth.

Elizabeth: No, not Zabeth. Elizabeth.

Zabeth: Zabeth.

Elizabeth: Zabeth! Okay, I'll call you Zabeth. Is that what you want to be called?

Zabeth: Zabeth.

Elizabeth: When you learn how to, you'll have to call me Elizabeth. But your name's Zabeth.

Elizabeth: *He quickly learned to talk. He talks like us, like he was a person. But actually, he also talks differently, because he's a lot cleverer than all of us are, of course. A lot of times I don't get what he's saying, especially now that he is so sad. But otherwise he's a lot more a human than a raven, and sometimes I wonder why he's all black and feathery. He helps out Father like a farmhand now, but earlier on he would come into the house. He used to play games then, but he's forgotten them. Once I went flying with him. If I only knew where it was we flew to! I still remember it perfectly. It was May or June when I went out to the woods one afternoon looking for Zabeth.*

Elizabeth *singing artlessly to a made-up melody:*

Ravens in the woods,

Ravens in the field,

Ravens in the house –

Calling.

Zabeth! Zabeth!

Echo.

Zabeth *distant, approaching:* Elizabeth! Elizabeth!

Elizabeth: There you are!

Zabeth: We should go flying, Elizabeth!

Elizabeth: Flying? You can fly, but I can't.

Zabeth: Take my feet.

Elizabeth: Okay.

Zabeth: Hold on tight! And listen – before we take off, I'll call your name.

Elizabeth: Why?

Zabeth: So that you can laugh afterwards, Elizabeth. I always want you to laugh.

Calling.

Elizabeth!

Swoosh of wings.

Elizabeth: Oh! You're flying!

Zabeth: We're both flying! Are you scared?

Elizabeth: No. But where are we, Zabeth? The fields and the trees are gone all of a sudden.

Where are we, Zabeth?

Zabeth: Don't ask. What do you see?

Elizabeth: Nothing.

Zabeth: Nothing at all?

Elizabeth: It's dark and blue all around us. It's so dark and blue it's blinding.

Zabeth: So dark and blue...is eternity, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: *That's what he said, but I don't know what it meant. But it was beautiful flying through the blinding darkness. We sailed so silently within it, it seemed to me for hours.*

Zabeth: We should go back, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Okay, Zabeth, if you say so.

Swoosh of wings.

There's the trees, the fields!

Zabeth: And bump! the ground. Now listen!

The raven's voice echoes.

– beth!

Elizabeth: What was that?

Zabeth: The echo. I *told* you I was going to call your name.

Elizabeth *laughing*: You're lying, Zabeth! That was hours ago.

Zabeth: But don't you like it?

Elizabeth: Very much, sweet raven.

Chapter 4 – The Teacher's Sleepless Night

Teacher: *When I returned that evening to the Reiskirchen schoolhouse, I was so baffled by the Fortners' incredible stories that I simply had no other need than to forget it all for a while and go to sleep. It could be dredged up from memory tomorrow and be sorted into some kind of rational order.*

Before going to my room I listened at Principal Woturba's apartment door, but it was all quiet there. He had probably gone down to the inn or was chatting with the pretty girl from the grocery. Either one was bad, especially the second, but other thoughts distracted me that night, and I wasn't as sad as I was on one of my solitary evenings. I didn't eat dinner, but went straight to bed and turned out the light. My hopes of going straight to sleep betrayed me. I was tormented by the sense that I had missed something. What had I missed? It wasn't my fault that I had only today learned about Zabeth. And it

wasn't my fault that I had only seen him for a brief moment. I would have to go back to the Fortners' tomorrow and try to see the raven and speak to him.

There was another thought that was worse: that I had encountered him in a situation which probably made him more uninteresting than he'd been earlier. I had to find out more about this earlier. I had to ask him himself. Inconceivably, the Fortners had neglected that. But had they, in fact? Much indicated that while Zabeth had learned to speak, he had perhaps forgotten all the important answers. I had to salvage whatever precious information could still be salvaged. It couldn't be gone yet. It couldn't. I remembered what I had been told of the awful day in Zabeth's life. He came in to Mrs. Fortner one day, they said.

The door opens

Mrs. Fortner: Zabeth?

Zabeth: They're gone! They're gone, do you hear?

Mrs. Fortner: Who's gone?

Zabeth: The others.

Mrs. Fortner: The ravens?

Zabeth: They're gone.

Mrs. Fortner: Why? Where have they gone?

Zabeth: I don't know. I searched for them. But I can't find them any more.

Mrs. Fortner: What do you mean? They must have flown a little a little way further on.

Zabeth: Then they wouldn't be gone.

Mrs. Fortner: I don't understand. Surely this is nothing new. You must have had to go searching for them before.

Zabeth: I've never had to search for them. Even when they were far away. I always knew where they were. It's no use trying to console me. I know they're gone. The fact that I'm searching for them proves it. It's not just that I'm searching for them because they're gone; they're also gone because I'm searching for them. I have no more contact with them. Everything just snapped – and then it crossed my mind that I had to search for them. Oh, I didn't use to know that word, but now I've learned it: searching. A sad and hopeless word.

Mrs. Fortner: You mustn't worry, Zabeth. They'll come back.

Zabeth: The awful thing is, maybe they're still there but I don't know it.

Mrs. Fortner: If they're still there, then everything's all right.

Zabeth: But I don't know it. All I can do is fly over the fields and over the treetops calling:
Where are you, Brothers? All I can do is scream in my new language that they don't hear.
They have other ears, and I am as out of reach to them as they are to me.

Mrs. Fortner: You still have your eyes; you have sharp eyes.

Zabeth: The sharpest eyes are no good to me. My brothers are gone and they've left me behind.
They've kicked me out because I'm worthless to them. I'm no longer a raven. I'm nothing.

Mrs. Fortner: Oh, Zabeth, Zabeth! Why aren't you human?

Zabeth: I have learned your language. I'm no longer a raven and I haven't become human.

Look, I've got a black coat and a beak and claws. That's what's still raven in me. But I

also have something else, something in common with you: starting today, from my searching, I'm afraid.

Mrs. Fortner: No, Zabeth, don't be afraid. Stay with us if your brothers are gone. We love you.

Zabeth: Love? Yes, you can love. I think that's what lured me to you, you poor magnificent people who love.

Teacher: *Could there be much hope after this conversation? Actually, I thought there could. So the connection, as Zabeth said, had snapped. In this he was really only characterizing his own sad state. It didn't mean that it was impossible to still establish scientifically significant findings. The most important question had to be answered with all haste: Where had the ravens come from? Were we dealing with inhabitants of other worlds – of Mars, for example? If this or something like it were so, then how and why had they come here? What was the milieu in which they normally lived? Did they possess culture, and if so, of what kind was it? How did they exercise their strange powers, and why? All of this must be asked with all due haste, for how could we know if Zabeth too wouldn't disappear, or die of worry? Maybe he couldn't bear up to long term exposure to the climate or the work he did around the Fortner farm. I was very annoyed at the Fortners for having so little concern for it all, the result of which was that scientific inquiry into the incident was only still at the very beginning. And as I said, it could be too late. In this regard, little Elizabeth had related something that made me stop and think, something that didn't speak well for Zabeth's memory. She had been in the woods one day after the other ravens had disappeared.*

Elizabeth: Zabeth, I'd like to go flying again.

Zabeth: Flying? Do you have wings?

Elizabeth: Zabeth! Like we went flying before. The two of us.

Zabeth: The two of us? I don't know anything about that.

Elizabeth: I held on to your feet and you flew.

Zabeth: I flew? That sounds very reckless. What if you let go?

Elizabeth: I won't let go.

Zabeth: You might get dizzy and not know what you were doing. No, I'd be frightened for you.

Elizabeth: Oh, please do it, Zabeth. It was so fun when you called my name in the woods, and
when we came back we heard the echo.

Zabeth: What strange things you talk about!

Elizabeth: Zabeth, stop pretending you don't know. Don't you remember it was so blue and dark
it was blinding?

Zabeth: No.

Elizabeth: I think about it all the time. Oh, do it, Zabeth!

Zabeth: If you really to want to.

Elizabeth: I have to hang on to your feet. Like this.

Zabeth: What now?

Elizabeth: Now you have to call out, "Elizabeth!" into the woods.

Zabeth *calls*: Elizabeth!

Echo: Elizabeth!

Elizabeth: No, you have to fly away as soon as you call it. Now!

Zabeth *calls*: Elizabeth!

The echo sounds under the wing beats.

Elizabeth: That doesn't matter; keep flying!

Zabeth: You're heavy, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Fly into the blinding darkness. Oh, Zabeth, where is it?

Zabeth: I don't know.

Elizabeth: I'm frightened.

Zabeth: I am, too. Wait, I'll fly to that spruce tree. Grab the branch!

Elizabeth: Okay, I'm sitting on it.

Zabeth: I'll sit next to you.

Elizabeth: Oh, Zabeth, why can't we get any higher?

Zabeth: Were we higher?

Elizabeth: It must have been very high. You couldn't see any trees or fields anymore.

Zabeth: I don't know what you're talking about.

Teacher: *Maybe it really was too late for some things. On the other hand, a man-sized raven who could talk was astonishing enough, even if there wasn't a great deal to be learned about his origins anymore. I resolved to collect all that I could. It meant a lot to me that I would be the actual discoverer of the strange visitations on the Fortner farm. I would give my story to a magazine, to start with, and my name would be in print. It might cause a sensation. In a single stroke I would rise above the confines of my little Reiskirchen world and become someone of general interest. But could I do all this alone? Should I not perhaps take Eginhard Woturba, the school principal, into my confidence? Ah, it's for him that I wanted to become more than I was. I wanted him to notice me in the crowd*

– me, who had lived next door to him for over a year but was apparently less interesting than a foreign continent. Of course I needed him, too, above all for the photographs. I didn't own a camera and didn't know anything about them. First, of course, I'd have to investigate as much as possible myself – I'd have to have the upper hand from the outset. Then he would collaborate. It's often been the case that intimate collaborations like this had developed into something more.

Around midnight Woturba returned home. I heard his footsteps. Sleep eluded me still. Finally, I got up and began writing down what I had experienced firsthand and come to learn today. And it was right to do this before I talked with Zabeth himself. This I determined to do the following day.

Chapter 5 – Interview with Zabeth

Teacher: To be perfectly honest, I've never had a conversation with a raven before, not once.

And so, I don't know whether I should address you formally or informally?

Zabeth: You may proceed as you like, Miss.

Teacher: Yes, perhaps formal is better. You've been on familiar terms with the Fortners for some time, but you and I are strangers. Besides, your speech is so impeccable I always think you must be a disguised person. And can you be so informal with people right off the bat?

Zabeth: You see me as a person in disguise?

Teacher: Yes.

Zabeth: That's how I feel, too.

Teacher: See there? We've already arrived at what I wished to ask you about. You'll have to excuse my curiosity, but it's all so strange. At least on first glance. And also, I don't know if you have any desire to answer me.

Zabeth: Why not? I have no secrets. Just ask me. I will tell the truth and answer your questions honestly.

Teacher: That's good. Then I've one less thing to worry about. Here is my first question: What world do you come from?

Zabeth: What world? I don't understand.

Teacher: Well, I mean from Mars, or from Venus, or the moon?

Zabeth: No, not *from* anywhere. That is, I don't want to lie. Or maybe. I don't know.

Teacher: You don't know. Have you never known, or have you forgotten?

Zabeth: I don't know that either.

Teacher: Perhaps you've only forgotten. Couldn't you try to remember?

Zabeth: Oh, I try all the time.

Teacher: In vain?

Zabeth: In vain.

Teacher: You could be suffering from an impaired memory, if I may call it that. Think for a moment. Since when did you forget it?

Zabeth: I don't know, that is, I believe since the others left me. No, that's not right, either. I believe it started earlier than that.

Teacher: But when?

Zabeth: I think since I began to speak.

Teacher: Aha!

Zabeth: In the moment I articulated the first word, I started to have a memory and at the same time started forgetting. At first, just slowly, a little detail. But when the others flew away, I forgot everything.

Teacher: You said you started having a memory when you articulated the first word. So, before that you had no memory?

Zabeth: No, I don't think so.

Teacher: Oh. That is very strange.

Zabeth: Yes. Sometimes it seems very strange to me, too.

Teacher: You said when the others flew away. Do you know that they've flown away?

Zabeth: You're right. I expressed that inaccurately. But I already think like a human now and believe that if ravens disappear that must have flown away.

Teacher: You think they could just as well have walked?

Zabeth: Yes, that's possible.

Teacher: Aha.

Zabeth: But I don't believe it.

Teacher: Why don't you believe it?

Zabeth: My understanding of ravens is completely different.

Teacher: But how else should a raven get around? He can only fly or walk.

Zabeth: Yes, that may be. But I am not at all sure that I am a raven. I *am one now*, naturally – but did I *used to be* one?

Teacher: The Fortners all saw you.

Zabeth: Certainly, certainly. But perhaps to people we only appeared to be ravens. Maybe that's the form in which we can be seen by them. Or perhaps it's one of the forms.

Teacher: Excuse me, I'm a little bit confused now.

Zabeth: You mustn't take what I say too seriously. It's all potentially mistaken. I've just been thinking about it a lot now that my life plays out in the darkness. Sometimes I get the feeling that the darkness lightens for a moment. Sometimes, but not often.

Teacher: And are they simply coincidence, these moments?

Zabeth: They can't be coincidence if they lighten the darkness.

Teacher: I don't find any of this very easy. Can you give me an example?

Zabeth: For example, the other day I was looking at a tree.

Teacher: And?

Zabeth: It was like that then.

Teacher: What, the darkness lightened?

Zabeth: Yes.

Teacher: Was there something special about the tree?

Zabeth: No.

Teacher: Was it a pine tree?

Zabeth: A plane tree.

Teacher: Plane trees aren't common around here.

Zabeth: They plant them to line the roads here.

Teacher: That's true. But tell me what it is that happened.

Zabeth: Nothing, or rather, a great deal. It shot right through me like lightning.

Teacher: And?

Zabeth: Then it was gone again. It was a great, sudden rapture. I knew everything.

Teacher: Ah! You knew everything! What did you know?

Zabeth: I forgot it in the same moment.

Teacher: My God, we'll never get anywhere like this. I'm confused. What else did I want to ask you? Yes; you don't believe the ravens will return.

Zabeth: I don't know. I don't even know if they're gone. But the fact that I don't know is a sign that I won't see them again.

Teacher: Then what is different now than it was before?

Zabeth: I'm going to die.

Teacher: Die? Did you use to be immortal?

Zabeth: I don't know. That just popped into my head and I said it. But if it's something I notice about my present life, then perhaps earlier I *was* immortal. Oh, I have to ponder over it.

Teacher: Yes, ponder it. Perhaps by tomorrow it will come to you.

Zabeth: I don't know if immortality can come to you by tomorrow. Besides, pondering makes me sad.

Teacher: Because you notice that you're not a raven anymore?

Zabeth: Yes. I no longer am that which I am. You have it good.

Teacher: Oh. I understand your being sad.

Zabeth: Don't tell Elizabeth I'm sad. I'm making an effort not to show her. I want her to be laughing. But – surely she noticed it long ago.

Teacher: *After this conversation, it was plain to me that I couldn't do this alone. And my feeling that we urgently needed to have photographs moved me to take Woturba into my confidence right away. The next day when I told him about it, I could see that he thought I was a crazy person. Luckily he shared the conventional view: that you shouldn't*

contradict a crazy person or you might provoke an attack. So he indulged me, promising to accompany me to the Fortners', to bring along his camera and take pictures. He also wanted to help me with my report, so he said, and for starters he took what I had already written down. He wanted to read it before he went to bed. I was fine with his wanting to occupy himself with me before he went to bed. I'd rather he think me a lunatic than ignore me. In any case, he was going to have to change his opinion.

Chapter 6 – An Interview in Photographs

Teacher: *As Eginhard Woturba and I left the schoolhouse in Reiskirchen to go to the Fortner farm, he slipped me my manuscript, and as he fixed me with an inscrutable grin, he said:*

Woturba: I don't know what I should think of it. It sounds utterly convincing. It could be you're an imaginative author.

Teacher: Me? Ha. I'm nothing. A school teacher.

Woturba: Or it could be you're nuts. Forgive me for being blunt.

Teacher: Oh no, I understand. It really does seem rather crazy. But...you'll soon see whether I'm just imagining things.

Woturba: At any rate, if there really should be such a raven, I am not going to faint. I'll behave as though I dealt with creatures of his sort every day.

Teacher: Still – amazed or not – don't forget the photos.

Woturba: I've got three rolls. That should do for now.

Teacher: Do it as inconspicuously as you can. I don't know if it's all right with him.

Woturba: You really do act as if it's all true. And God knows, it's gradually starting to seem quite natural to me, too. I even admit that reading your report has suggested a theory to me. *He laughs* An indication of the persuasiveness of your style.

Teacher: You're making fun of me.

Woturba: I like that you didn't ask about my theory, that it's more important what I think of *you*.

Teacher: Well, what is your theory?

Woturba *laughing*: Too late! Wouldn't it be better if I was first convinced you weren't really –

Teacher: – nuts? I hope I'm not.

Woturba: Everyone's allowed to be a little bit, you know.

Teacher *sighs*: Yes – do you think so?

Woturba: How else could we be walking along this path, completely serious about going to have a conversation with a raven?

Teacher: Help me not to forget the important questions.

Zabeth: You wanted me to ponder how ravens die, Miss.

Teacher: Or whether you were immortal.

Zabeth: I have thought it over, but haven't come up with anything definite.

Teacher: Nothing definite...but something?

Zabeth: They're things you could have thought out for yourselves. Really, anything you could make of me is no less correct than what I could make of myself. That's how little I know. But when I contemplate the things I've seen and learned among *you*, images arise in me that are so surprising that I *take* them to be memories. Death, love, conception, birth, immortality – I don't find anything that truly corresponds.

Woturba: Forgive me for stepping in. Your existence here in our midst is so incomprehensible that we are plagued by curiosity and the need for scientific clarity.

Zabeth: Oh, was I unclear? I'm doing my best.

Woturba: Death, love, immortality – these are, for now, very nebulous things. First we must get acquainted with the *realia* of your world, for example to speak not of love, but of sex.

Zabeth: You want to know whether we sit in nests and hatch eggs the way dun crows do?

Woturba: Yes, for example.

Zabeth: If I only knew. You demand clarity where I myself have only guesswork.

Teacher: And what's your guess?

Zabeth: That we ravens are sexless.

Woturba: Sexless? But –

Zabeth: I will tell you something I find strange myself. I believe that none of us is conceived and born, to say nothing of nests and eggs, or males and females.

Woturba: A sexless world? How does the raven fit with that?

Zabeth: I've already told you I'm not sure if we really *are* ravens. But even if we assume this, I don't even know if there are several of us ravens – twenty or thirty or a hundred. Perhaps we're all just one.

Teacher: What? So you wouldn't be Zabeth, or rather, you wouldn't be *one* of the ravens that were seen here, you'd be...all ravens.

Zabeth: I wouldn't go that far.

Teacher: But isn't it a possibility?

Zabeth: Anything you think is possible; why couldn't this be? But let's assume there were several of us. There would have to be a much more lucid and universal raven-existence over and above this individual existence.

Woturba: I understand. Just as, perhaps, the termite colony is an entity that has split itself into separate individuals.

Zabeth: I don't know. Possibly. I'm not a termite.

Teacher: If you don't know that you're a raven, you very well could be a termite.

Zabeth: Pit that I'm not a human, otherwise I would kiss your hand for that observation. What a pity I'm not. Perhaps Mr. Woturba would do it for me?

Woturba: Gladly.

Zabeth: Thank you.

Teacher: I thank you, too. But how do you know you're not a human?

Zabeth: Can't you see my raven cloak?

Woturba: We interrupted you. You supposed the ravens had a shared existence which was more powerful than their separate one?

Zabeth: Anyway, it seems to me as if there are moments when they are only a single raven. I mean, it's a very rare and intense moment, a brilliant, all-consuming lightning flash of a moment.

Woturba: And then?

Zabeth: Then we're many again. Should that be called death or birth?

Teacher: Love, immortality.

Zabeth: Yes, perhaps it's all these.

Woturba: What a terrible existence!

Zabeth: I long for its return. Often recently I've been on the verge of despair. But I have a little hope, because a comforting thought has come to me. Perhaps it was my mission to live among you and learn to speak your language. My mission, as it were, to forget.

Woturba: A scientific mission?

Zabeth: I don't know for what reason it's been given me. I don't know if there ever are reasons where I come from. But it would be comforting to assume that the thought that I've been cast out was only a product of human speech. Couldn't this be a mission?

Woturba: You're asking us?

Zabeth: You could know as well as I. Aren't we speaking the same language?

Woturba: From that you would have to conclude that we are as ignorant as you are.

Zabeth: But now my hope is also a fear. For however greatly I long to return to my world, I would find it just as terrible to leave yours.

Woturba: What? You cling to this world where you are nothing?

Zabeth: Yes. *The door opens.*

Elizabeth: Zabeth? May I come in?

Zabeth: I've been waiting so long for you, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Are you happy, Zabeth?

Zabeth: Very happy, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Then I'm happy, too.

Zabeth: I am happy because you're here.

Chapter 7 – Zabeth's Death

Teacher : *Mr. Woturba and I made our way back to Reiskirchen in the misty November evening. I had my arm in his due to my poor night vision. Being so close to him, I found it hard to focus on Zabeth or pay attention to the theories Mr. Woturba was explaining on our walk that night. I was also distracted because he called me by my first name.*

Woturba: Once I had seen Zabeth, I thought everything would become clear to me. But it's just as unclear as if I hadn't seen him at all.

Teacher: You thought that because you took me for a hysterical crackpot, right?

Woturba: Of course not, Therese. I believed we were dealing with a mass suggestion.

Teacher: And that's no longer a possibility?

Woturba: I'm loathe to accept it, as it would mean that I, too, was under the spell. And who could it emanate from? Naturally I thought of you, Therese, because I learned about the matter from your report. However, I'm satisfied that you are only marginally involved in this business. In the end, it had to be Elizabeth and no one else. But what Zabeth says – are these the thoughts of a nine-year-old girl? No, this cannot be a case of mass suggestion.

Teacher: A paranormal experience then?

Woturba: Here again, assuming there really were such things, Elizabeth would be the only possible medium. Yet the same reasons argue against this. Zabeth is not a creature conjured up by Elizabeth. There are but two possibilities: either we have all gone crazy overnight...

Teacher: Or?

Woturba: Or Zabeth is real.

Teacher: I don't have any more doubts.

Woturba: But where is he from? What sort of being is he? We still don't know anything.

Teacher: Maybe the photos will tell us something.

Woturba: What should they tell us? Anyway, I'll drop them off to be developed tomorrow.

Teacher: How many did you take?

Woturba: Ten. Number one: Zabeth, entering through the door. Number two: Zabeth alone, talking. Number three: Zabeth and Therese. Number four: Zabeth and I, taken with the autotimer. Number five: the three of us. Number six: the two of you again. Numbers seven, eight, and nine: Zabeth and Elizabeth. Number ten: Zabeth alone again.

Teacher: I'll continue writing my report. And when we get the photos...

Woturba: I know an editor. I'll send it all to him. Obviously, we'll have to speak more with Zabeth. Our conversations, though, are anything systematic. I'll write down some precise questions tonight, ones that must be taken one after the other. Tomorrow we'll go back to the Fortners'.

Teacher: *We did go back to the Fortner farm the next day, but in the meantime a great deal had changed and concluded. Elizabeth was not at school that morning. On my desk I found a slip of paper marked in a clumsy hand: Zabeth is dead. I didn't know if it was from Elizabeth. What had happened? Eginhard and I set out that afternoon very unsettled. We met with Mr. Fortner this time.*

Farmer: Yes, he's dead.

Woturba: Where is he? Can we see him?

Farmer: He's not here anymore.

Woturba: Did you take him away?

Farmer: No, he just disappeared.

Woturba: Do you suspect who might have taken him away?

Farmer: You don't understand. There never was a body.

Teacher: Nonetheless, he's dead?

Farmer: It was last night around nine. We were sitting at the table, my wife and Elizabeth and me. Elizabeth was doing her school work. Zabeth had helped her get started, but then he went over to the stove. He'd been suffering from the autumn chill lately. My wife was knitting, and I was reading the paper. It was completely quiet, except for I could hear Elizabeth's pen scratching in her workbook. Then all at once Zabeth said in a totally unfamiliar voice: Elizabeth! He didn't say it loud, but all the same he was screaming it; yes, it was as though he was calling for help. We all looked up, we looked at him. We were looking at him, and in that same moment he disappeared.

Teacher: Did he run out the door?

Farmer: No, on the spot where he was standing there was nothing there. But none of the windows or doors had opened. Still, it wasn't really like that. He was there and the same moment he was gone, true, but then again they were different moments. There was an eternity in between them.

Woturba: An eternity?

Farmer: My wife put it like this: it's like when you wake up and don't know you've been sleeping at all, or only for a short time. But in the meantime the whole night has passed by.

Woturba: Did Elizabeth notice it, too?

Farmer: Elizabeth says it was like the time she flew with Zabeth through the blinding blue darkness.

Woturba: Yes, it must have been like that.

Teacher: What must have been like that?

Woturba: I think I understand something. We should question Elizabeth.

Farmer: You can't do that.

Teacher: Where is she?

Farmer: Running through the woods looking for him.

Teacher: Yes, running through the woods looking for him. And why shouldn't she? How do you know he's dead?

Farmer: He's dead, all right.

Woturba: We may call it that since he's never coming back. But dead? No, he isn't dead; he has returned to his other life, which has no contact with us.

Farmer: Isn't that the same thing as death?

Teacher: *In the woods, from the path that led us back to Reiskirchen, we heard Elizabeth's voice in the twilight, calling for her lost friend. There was no answer but the echo.*

Elizabeth *calling*: Zabeth!

Echo: Zabeth!

Call: Zabeth!

Echo: Zabeth!

Teacher: *It was like the calling of inescapable separation, and I felt the tears well up within me.*

I clasped the arm of my companion more tightly.

Over the next days we finished writing the report together and produced a final manuscript that awaited only the addition of the photographs. Unfortunately, we did have a lot of changes to make, because when the photographs came at last, we saw that something strange had happened.

Woturba: First picture: Zabeth, entering through the door. What do you see?

Teacher: Nothing.

Woturba: That's an exaggeration. I see the open door very plainly. It is an excellent, clear photo.

Teacher: But Zabeth isn't in it.

Woturba: Right. But let's keep going. Picture two: Zabeth, alone, talking. You see very plainly a dresser with a glass bowl on top of it, apparently with some letters in it.

Teacher: And no trace of Zabeth.

Woturba: Picture three: Zabeth and Therese. It's a good photo of you. And then there's me in the fourth.

Teacher: Also a good photograph.

Woturba: Picture five: the two of us.

Teacher: And Zabeth? He's not in a single one?

Woturba: Not a single one.

Teacher: What now? So he wasn't there at all!

Woturba: Why should he not have been there? Because the camera couldn't capture him? What does that prove? He exists in such a way that it was as if he didn't exist. I believe he lived

in a world in which our world is contained as a portion of his. That's why he's inexplicable to us; that's why neither we nor our devices can reach him. Do we not have an inkling about this in the puzzling thing, that terrible thing we call time? It is the residue that cannot be integrated into our space. For Zabeth, there was no time as we understand it. He lived in it as we do in space. He lived in eternity. Consider Elizabeth's flight into the blinding blue darkness; consider that eternal moment when Zabeth vanished; and also consider his suspicion that his raven form was not absolute.

Teacher: So would that mean he was perfect?

Woturba: We don't know what might be lacking in the place where we see perfection. The gods and angels still have God above them.

Teacher: And what happened to us? We are ones who have had a glimpse of the other side.

Woturba: That glimpse would mean death. We merely saw the curtain masking it.

Teacher: Still, it seems to me that everything points to that world. But where is it? Where?

Woturba: Everywhere. We ourselves are in it. We know nothing and we don't understand the signs that are sometimes given to us.

Chapter 8 – Evidence of Zabeth's Existence

Teacher: *Some time later we sent the manuscript with the meaningless photographs to the editor that Eginhard knew. We didn't suspect that in doing this we would encounter a further trace of Zabeth's earthly existence.*

Office.

Editor *dictating*: Dear Mr. Woturba: Thank you for your kind submission, which, I'm
afraid... Wait. Stop.

Secretary: Do you want me to take out the paper?

Editor: This is a ridiculous story that we can't do anything with. And those pictures! But still...

Secretary: Maybe we could add a raven into them?

Editor: What does all this remind me of? What was someone telling me? Wait a minute – it was
Dr. Schlefink. Find his number. What was it again? He was driving along with his wife...

In a moving car.

Woman: What's that on the road up there? A top?

Man: A three-foot-tall top? *He brakes*. That thing was whirling towards the car.

Woman: Where did it go?

Man: Wait! *He opens the car door*. Look what's lying here in front of the radiator, Elfriede.

Woman: A feather? It must have been an enormous bird.

Man: Do you suppose this was the top?

Woman: It was standing upright on its quill spinning.

Man: What about the wind gust that set it going? The air feels perfectly still to me.

Woman: Well, tell me what kind of bird that's from.

Man: An ostrich.

Woman: That's not an ostrich feather

Man: A black swan.

Woman: I'd say a giant raven.

Man: There are no birds with feathers like that. Someone probably made it.

Woman: No, it's not man-made.

Man: This is all kind of strange, isn't it?

Woman: A little eerie. I have the feeling like someone is standing behind us.

Man: What?

Woman: An enormous black bird. He could grab me and carry me off.

Man: Stop imagining things. There's no one standing behind us. We're taking the feather with
us.

Woman: Do we have to?

Man: You don't leave something like that just lying there.

Woman: Come on, let's keep going.

Man: Just a minute. I want to jot down where we found it. Highway 299 at mile marker...

Woman: There's a stone marker: ten.

Man: Ten. What else? Fields, woods not far from the highway. Plane trees along the roadside.

No farmhouses that I can see.

Woman: Maybe that black thing will bring us bad luck?

Man: It could also bring good luck. Probably neither one.

The car drives off.

Editor *dialing*: 2 – 1 – 6 – 1 – 5.

Telephone sounds.

Woman *on the phone*: Schlefink residence.

Editor: Hello, Mrs. Schlefink; this is Mr. Reinicke.

Woman: Hello, Mr. Reinicke.

Editor: I have a question, Mrs. Schlefink. Your husband told me recently of a bird feather, a giant black feather that you found on the road.

Woman: Yes, certainly. It was a bit strange. The feather is hanging on the wall, as a decoration.

In a changed tone Now wait a minute...yes...

Editor: What is it, Mrs. Schlefink?

Woman: Now that *is* strange. It was hanging there a minute ago.

Editor: Did it fall down?

Woman: No, there's something else hanging in its place.

Editor: What is it?

Woman: A plane tree branch. The leaves are fresh and green.

Editor: A plane tree branch?

Chapter 9 – Epilogue

Teacher: *It is winter, like it was when Zabeth came to this place. Everything is following its usual course: the farmers sit around in their snowy farmyards, the snow falls, the trees are bare. Word of the black visitors didn't reach very far. Once in a while you hear that someone had seen the devil, but no one really knows where that rumor started. Our report never appeared. It isn't so important to me anymore, of course. My life has taken a happy turn. For the present, I still work at the school. I like to teach, and the children and dear to me, but I make an effort not to show that Elizabeth is my favorite. I'm concerned about her. More often than not she's inattentive and absent-minded. Days like this, when the snow lies upon the ground outside, she often stands up from her desk in the middle of the lesson and goes to the window. I can see her peering at the misty whiteness and at a*

flock of crows that has settled down somewhere. I don't wish to startle the child, so I call her under my breath:

Elizabeth!

And she turns round and looks at me, wild and sad, the way only animals can.

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