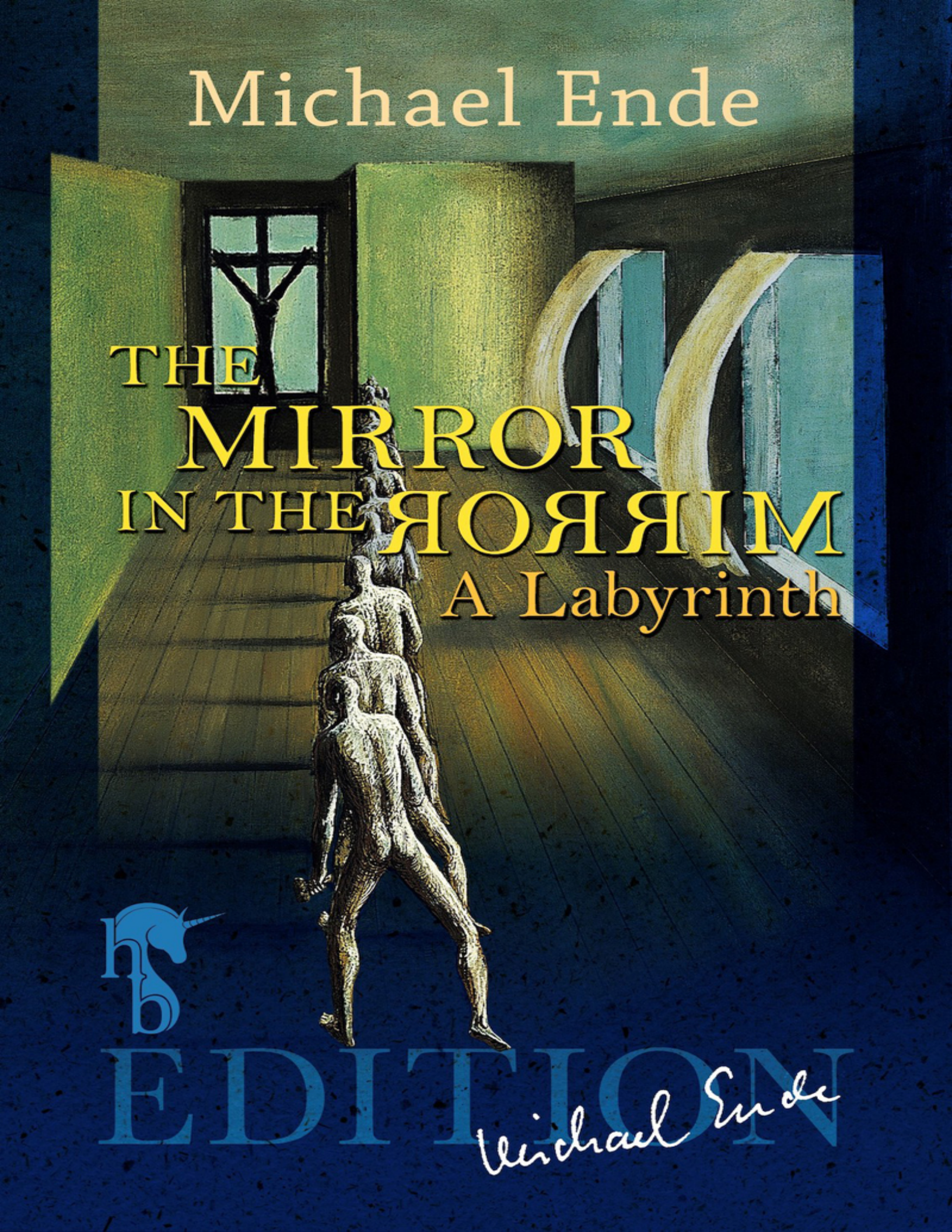
Michael Ende

THE MIRROR IN THE MIRROR

A Labyrinth



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EDITION

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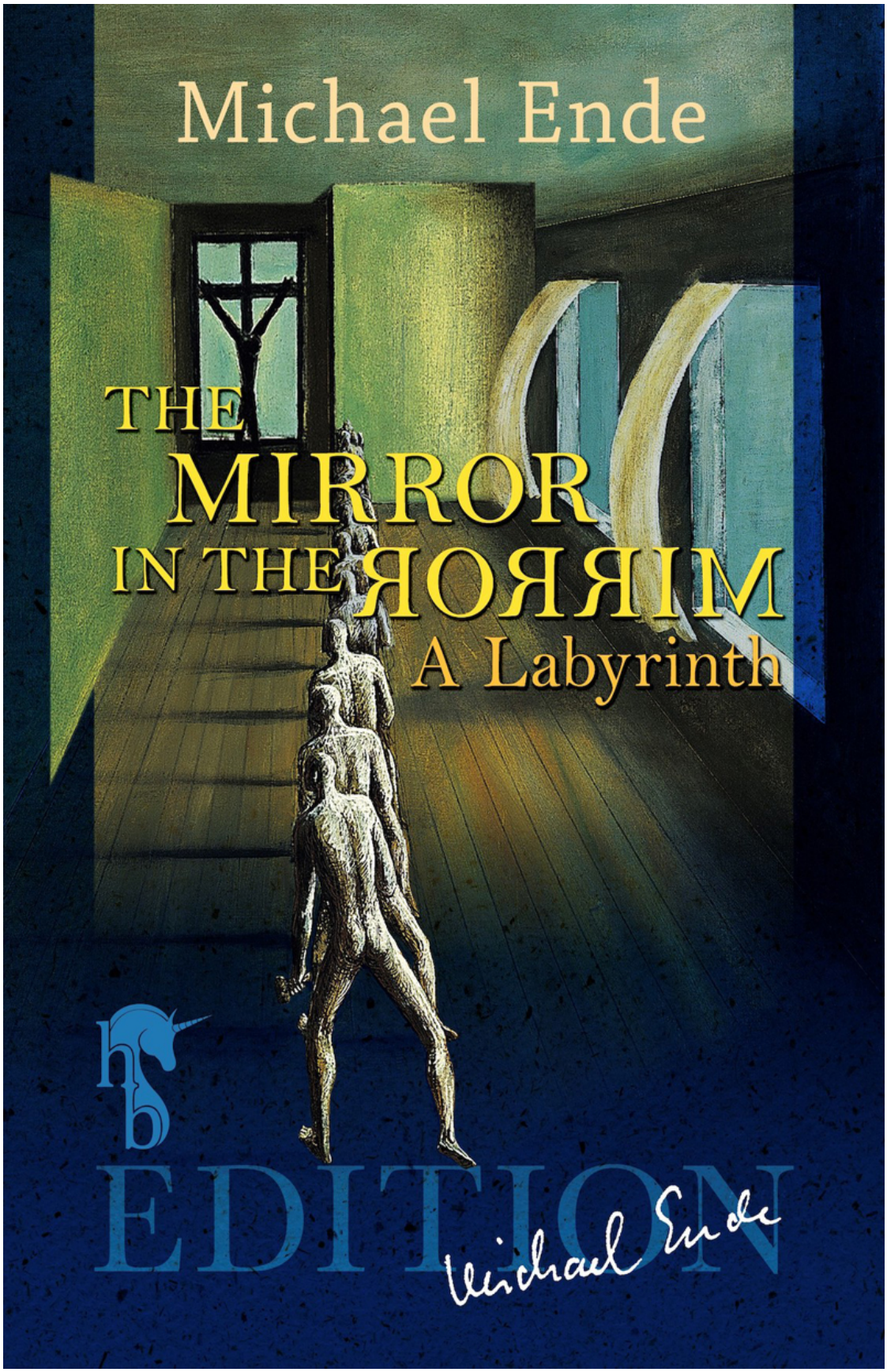
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The Mirror in the Mirror

A Labyrinth

Translated by
Lucas Zwirner

To my father
Edgar Ende

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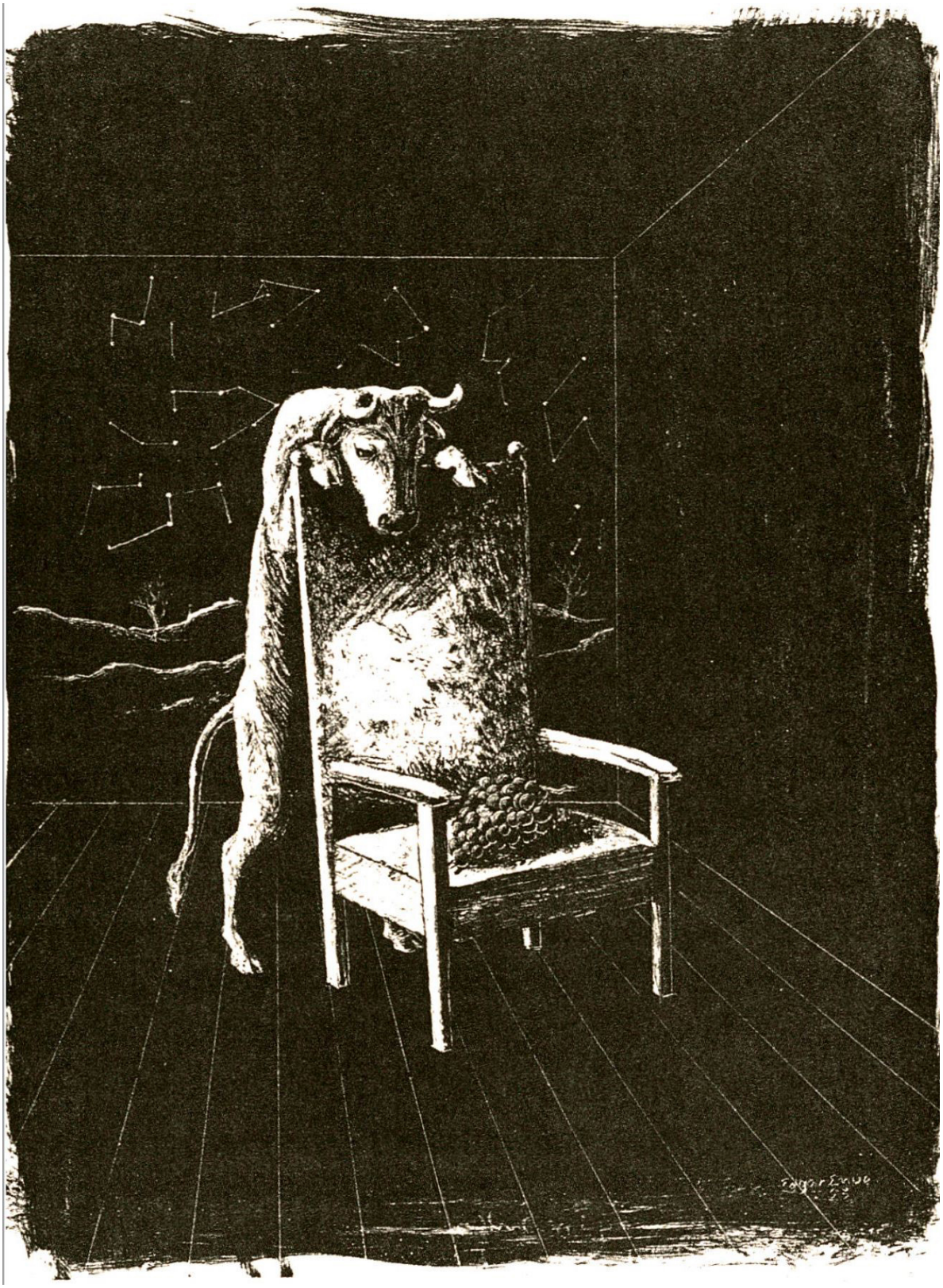


Forgive me, I can’t speak any louder.

I don’t know when you’ll hear me—you, to whom I’m speaking.

Will you ever hear me?

My name is Hor.

Put your ear up close to my mouth, regardless of how far away you may be right now or forever. Otherwise I won’t be able to make myself heard. But even if you do come close enough to grant my wish, there will always be enough kept secret, something you’ll have to create for yourself. I’ll need your voice where mine fails.

Maybe this weakness is caused by the way Hor lives. For as long as he can remember, Hor has inhabited a giant, empty building in which every spoken word releases a nearly never-ending echo.

For as long as I can remember. What does that mean?

During his daily wanderings through the rooms and corridors, Hor occasionally encounters the reverberations of a cry that he unthinkingly emitted some time before. It causes him great pain to encounter his past in this way, especially because the word that escaped back then has since lost its form and content and has become unrecognizable. Now, Hor no longer exposes himself to this senseless babbling.

He has become used to speaking in a voice so quiet—if at all—that it remains below that shifting line marking the beginnings of an echo. The line is not far from complete silence because the house is terribly sensitive to sound.

I know I’m asking a lot, but you’ll have to hold your breath, too, if you care about hearing Hor’s words. His vocal organs have disappeared in all the silence—they’ve changed form.

Hor will never be able to speak to you with more lucidity than the lucidity belonging to the voices you hear shortly before falling asleep. You will have to maintain that delicate balance between sleeping and waking, or float like people for whom up and down mean the same thing, in order to hear him.

My name is Hor.

It would be better to say: I call myself Hor. Who besides me calls me by my name?

Have I already mentioned that this house is empty? I mean, it is completely empty. To sleep, Hor rolls himself up in a corner or lays himself down wherever he is, even in the middle of the room if the walls are too far away.

Hor doesn’t have to worry about food. The walls and columns are made of an edible material—edible to him at least. It’s a yellowish, slightly transparent mass that quickly satiates hunger and thirst. Besides, he requires very little in the way of sustenance.

The passing of time means nothing to him. He has no way of measuring it except for the beat of his own heart, but his heartbeat is quite irregular. He doesn’t know night from day because a permanent twilight surrounds him.

When he isn’t sleeping, he wanders around, never pursuing any specific goal. It’s simply an urge, a desire, whose satisfaction brings him pleasure. It only rarely happens that he finds himself in a room that he thinks he recognizes, a room that seems familiar to him, as though some unthinkable age ago he had been in it. But there are often unmistakable signs that make him conclude that he is indeed passing a place he has been to before: a wall with a piece bitten out of it, or a pile of dried excrement. The room itself, however, remains as strangely foreign as any other. Maybe the rooms change in Hor’s absence. Maybe they grow, bend or shrink. Maybe it is Hor’s passage

through them that triggers the changes, though he doesn’t like that thought.

I consider it impossible that someone else besides Hor could be in the house. Naturally, given how unimaginably vast the structure is, there’s no proof—it is just as likely that there is someone else as it is impossible.

Many rooms have windows, but these windows only ever open onto bigger rooms. Although he has never seen anything else, Hor is occasionally struck by the idea that he may at some point arrive at an outside wall whose windows open onto a view of something completely different. Hor doesn’t know what that might be, but he sometimes gives himself over to long deliberations on the topic. It would be wrong to say that he yearns for views like this. It’s more of a game, the purposeless invention of many different possibilities. Meanwhile, in his dreams Hor has occasionally enjoyed these views without being able to say anything about them when he wakes. He only knows that he saw something, and that he often wakes with tears in his eyes. But Hor attributes little meaning to these dreams. He only mentions them because they are strange …

I misspoke. Hor never dreams. He has no memories of his own, yet his entire being is filled with the terrors and delights which flood his soul like sudden memories.

Not all the time, of course. Sometimes his soul is as still as motionless water, but at other times these experiences come flooding in from all sides. They oppress him, they strike him like lightning bolts, so that he chases through the empty halls until he staggers with exhaustion, falls and lies down silently, giving himself over to them. Hor is defenseless against them.

Just like sudden memories. Did I say that?

My name is Hor.

But what is that: I—Hor? Am I one person? Or am I two people and have the experiences of the second person? Am I many people? Do the others who comprise me live out there, beyond that outermost wall? And they don’t know anything about their own experiences or memories, because on the outside they don’t linger? But here with Hor they do. Those memories live in his life. They attack him without pity. They grow together and become part of him. He drags them along behind him like a train that already stretches endlessly through the rooms, yet still continues to grow and grow.

Or does something move from me to you out there—the other person, or the many others? To you who are one with me, like bees are with their queen? Do you feel for me, limbs of my scattered body? Can you hear my inaudible words—now, or beyond time? Are you searching for me at the end, my other? Are you looking for Hor—you who are him? Are you looking for your own memories, which are with me? Are we drawing together through infinite rooms like stars, step by step, image by image?

And will we meet each other—one day, or beyond time?

And what will we be then? Or will we no longer be? Will we cancel each other out like Yes and No?

There’s one thing I know you’ll see: I have guarded everything faithfully.

My name is Hor.

With the expert guidance of his father and master, the son had dreamed himself wings. For many years he had built them in his dreams, long hours at a time, feather by feather, muscle by muscle, little bone by little bone,. He had let them grow out of his shoulders at the proper angle (it was particularly difficult to see his own back properly in the dream), and he had slowly learned to move them correctly. It had been a trying ordeal: patience and practice until, after countless failed attempts, he was finally able to briefly lift himself into the air for the first time. But then he had gained confidence in his work, thanks to the constant kindness and strict support with which his father guided him. As time passed, he became so used to his wings that he saw them as part of his body—so much so that he began to feel pleasure and pain in them. Finally, he needed to erase the years he had lived without them. Now he had been born with them, as he had been with eyes and hands. He was ready.

Leaving the labyrinth was not forbidden. On the contrary: whoever succeeded was considered a hero—someone with exceptional gifts—and people would tell stories about them for many years. But this was only granted the happy few. The laws that governed the people in the labyrinth were paradoxical but immutable. One of the most important ones read: *Only someone who leaves the labyrinth can be happy, but only a happy person will be able to escape it.*

But happy people were rare, even over millennia.

Anyone who was prepared to make an attempt had to undergo a test beforehand. If he didn’t pass it, he himself wouldn’t be punished, but his Master would be, and the punishment was harsh and cruel.

His father’s face had become very stern when he told him:

“These wings can only carry someone light, but lightness comes only with happiness.”

Afterward, he had looked searchingly at his son for a long time and finally asked:

“Are you happy?”

“Yes, father, I am happy,” had been his answer.

If that were the only issue at hand, then there would be no danger at all! He was so happy that he thought he would be able to float even without wings. He was in love. He loved with all the fervor of his young heart. He loved without the shadow of a doubt, wholeheartedly, and he knew his love was being returned unconditionally. He knew that his beloved was waiting for him, that he would come to her in her sky-blue room at the end of the day, after having passed the test, and that she would throw herself into his arms, light as a moonbeam. In this endless embrace they would rise over the city and leave its walls behind them, as though the whole thing were a toy that they had outgrown; they would fly over other cities, over woods and deserts, mountains and oceans, further and further until they reached the edge of the world.

He wore only a fishnet over his naked body, which dragged behind him through the streets and alleys, corridors and rooms, like a long train. It was what the ritual demanded for the final test. He was certain that he would accomplish the task given to him, even though he didn’t know what it would be. He only knew that it was always matched to the specific qualities of the test-taker, so that no person’s test was like any other. One could even say that the task consisted of discovering, through true self-knowledge and awareness, what the task actually was. The only strict order that was given to him was that he could not, under any circumstances, visit the sky-blue room of his beloved during the duration of the test, meaning before sundown. Otherwise he would immediately be excluded from the test.

He laughed a little to himself at the nearly furious strictness with which his honorable and affectionate father had delivered this order. He didn’t feel the least desire to go against it. There was no danger here for him; he was certain of that. In truth, he didn’t really understand all the stories in which, simply because a commandment like this one is made,

the person feels an irresistible urge to break it. While walking through the confusing streets and buildings of the labyrinthine city, he had often passed that tower-like building where, on the very top floor, just beneath the roof, his beloved lived. Twice he had even passed her door: Number 401. He passed it without stopping, but that couldn't be the real test. That would have been too easy, far too easy.

Everywhere he went he met unhappy people who looked at him and watched him pass, eyes filled with admiration or longing or envy. Many of them he had met in the past, even though such meetings could never be brought about intentionally. In the labyrinthine city the arrangement and order of the houses and streets changed ceaselessly, so that it was impossible to make plans to meet people. Every meeting happened by chance or by fate, all depending on how one interpreted these things.

At one point, the son noticed that his fishnet had caught on something and he turned back. In an archway he saw a one-legged beggar who had tied his crutch to the mesh of the net.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Have pity!" the beggar answered in a hoarse voice. "It won't burden you a bit, but it will lighten my load considerably. You're one of the happy ones! You're going to leave the labyrinth. But I'll be here forever because I'm never going to be happy. So, I am begging you: at the very least, take a little of my unhappiness out with you. That way I'll have the tiniest little piece of your escape and that will comfort me."

Happy people are rarely hard-hearted. They tend toward pity and want to let others have a bit of their overflowing positivity.

"Okay," the son said, "I'd be happy to do a favor that requires so little of me."

At the next corner, he encountered a haggard mother dressed in rags with three half-starved children.

“You won’t deny us what you just granted him!” she said hatefully. And she tied a little iron grave cross to the net.

From here on, the net became noticeably heavier. There were countless unhappy people in the labyrinthine city, and each one the son encountered tied something that belonged to him or her to the net—a shoe, an expensive piece of jewelry, a tin bucket, a sack of money, a piece of clothing, an iron stove, a rosary, a dead animal, a tool of some kind, and finally even a door.

It was approaching evening, the end of the test. The son was moving forward slowly step by step; he was hunched forward, as though he were moving against a powerful, silent storm. His face was covered in sweat but still full of hope because now he believed he understood of what his task consisted, and despite everything he felt strong enough to complete it.

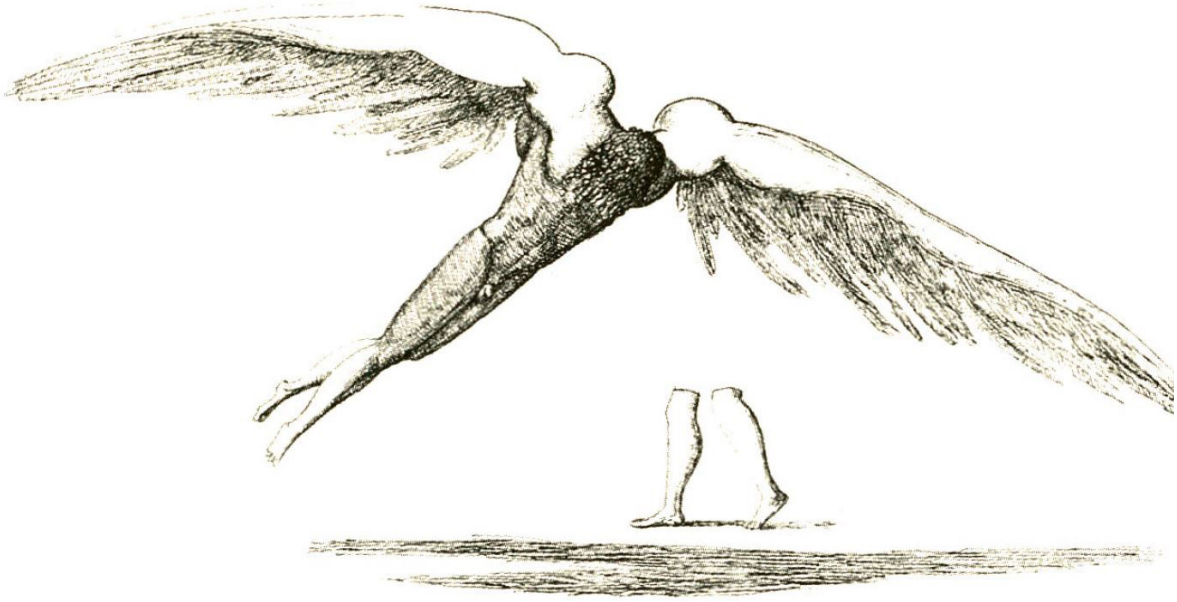
Twilight came and still no one arrived to tell him that it was over. Without knowing how, he had arrived at the roof terrace of the tower-like house with the sky-blue room of his beloved, despite the infinite weight that dragged behind him. He had never noticed before that you could see down onto a beach from up here, perhaps because the beach had never been at that precise location before. The boy was deeply troubled that the sun was sinking down beneath the hazy horizon.

On the sand stood four winged people just like him, and he heard, though he couldn't see the speaker, how they were being set free. He screamed down, asking whether they had forgotten him, but no one took any notice. He jerked at the net his hands shaking but he couldn’t free himself. He cried out again and again for his father, begging him to come and help, leaning as far as he could over the railing.

Down below, in the final sliver of daylight he saw his beloved, covered in a black veil, being led out the door. A carriage drawn by two black horses appeared; on its roof was

an image of his father’s face, filled with sorrow and despair. His beloved got into the carriage and the vehicle began to roll away until it disappeared into the darkness.

In that moment the son understood his task, that he should have been disobedient. He saw that he had failed the test. He felt his dream-built wings wither and fall away from him like autumn leaves, and he knew that he would never again fly, and that he could never be happy again. And he knew that however long his life lasted, he would remain in the labyrinth. Now he belonged with the others.



The room in the attic is sky-blue, the walls, the roof, the floor, the few pieces of furniture.

The student sits at the table and holds his head in both hands. His hair is messy, his ears are glowing, his hands are cold and damp. The entire little room is cold and damp, and now even the electric bulb has stopped working.

He pulls the book closer and starts again from the beginning. He must—he *must*—get through the assignment. The exam is next week!

"… The special theory of relativity is based on the constancy of the speed of light … Let *P* be a point in vacuum … a distance *d sigma* away *P'* an infinitely near … infinitely near … suppose a light pulse starts at P at a time *t* and reaches *P'* at a time *t + dt* …"

The student's eyes feel hard and dry like horn buttons. He rubs them for a while with his fingers until they begin to tear up. Leaning back, he looks around the attic, a shed-like structure made of wooden planks that he himself had built two years earlier in one corner of the big loft. Back then he liked sky-blue; now he doesn't like it anymore, but he has no time to change anything. He has already wasted so much of it.

Would they even let him keep living here? He pays rent, but only very little. That is why he chose this room in the first place. Without money you can't make demands. But now that the former owner has died, would they raise the rent? Where would he go? And now of all times, right before the exams! How can you concentrate on your work when you don't even know where you'll be living the next day. If only the heirs could come to some agreement, so that at the very least he knew what he was up against.

He pushes the book away and gets up. He is pale and tall, far too tall. He has to bend to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling. He wants some certainty, right now, so that he

can finally get back to work without these worries troubling him.

The giant loft through which he walks is chock-full of all sorts of objects—furniture, massive vases, taxidermy animals, life-size puppets, inscrutable machines and gears. He descends the wide staircase, then walks through a long hall with thousands of dull mirrors, large and small, flat and crooked, which reflect his blurry image a thousand times over.

Finally, he arrives in one of the large halls. It looks like a museum of ethnology after a plunder. The glass vitrines are thrown about, broken, and the jewelry and other expensive objects that had been put on view inside them have been torn out. Sarcophaguses have been broken into, jars and vessels lay in piles of shards, armor hangs crookedly on their stands, and ceremonial Aztec garments made of hummingbird feathers are falling apart and moth-eaten.

The student stands still and looks around, shocked. How could all of this decay have happened since the last time he was here?

But when was he last here? Was the former owner still alive then? Yes, probably. To be honest, he hadn't ever seen him face to face. Only his old butler, a man with a stern face and of solemn dignity.

While the student is thinking, the butler steps into the room. He has a large feather duster under his arm, his livery is dirty and ripped, the white hairs on his head are disheveled, and—yes, it’s true!—he sways a little as he walks and moves his hands erratically while mumbling to himself.

“Hello!” the student says courteously, “could you please tell me …”

But the old butler just walks by, gesticulating as he goes, and seems not to see him. The student follows him.

“Pointless!” the butler murmurs with a definitive gesture, “it’s completely pointless to begin in the first place! God bless you, my dear young man.”

The student is somewhat confused. “What do you mean by that?”

“Who cares!” the butler screams at him. “A beginning is always monstrously pointless. Why? Because it doesn’t really exist. Does nature have a beginning? No! So it’s unnatural to begin. And in my own case? The same: pointless. You want proof? How about right now.”

He takes a bottle out of his suit pocket, takes a gulp, shudders, burps and carefully replaces the bottle. The student wants to present his question, but the old man continues.

“You need to think,” he taps his finger repeatedly against his forehead, “think objectively, that’s what you need to do! Understand, young man? When I think objectively, I am forced to tell myself that there isn’t the slightest hope that a single pitiful man like me is capable of changing anything at all. Who am I to allow myself an undertaking like that? I’m an old fool, exhausted from a life spent trying too hard to think. That’s what I am. Don’t argue!”

Once again, he takes out the bottle, drinks, and wipes his mouth with his sleeve.

“You need to make life come from your spirit, understand, young man? You need to live off of your understanding! But that isn’t so easy, especially in your daily life. Let’s assume for a moment that I might hurl myself into a hopeless battle against the overwhelming strength of all this sleeping dust—what would I accomplish? Nothing. Nothing at all. That’s what my logical mind tells me. Except that I might make my desperate circumstances even worse. For example: I’m going to draw

this curtain to the side and it's immediately going to fall apart."

He pulls a heavy curtain to the side of the window and it immediately rips off its beam and falls to the floor in a pile of dust.

"Another example," the old man continues unperturbed. "I will try to open this window and it will immediately fall in on me."

He tries to open the window and it immediately falls in on him. The panes shatter onto the floor.

The butler looks at the student triumphantly.

"Just as I said. That proves everything. Chaos grows with every attempt to overcome it. The best thing would be to stand perfectly still and do nothing at all."

He takes another swig.

"I think I see," the student says. He looks around, distractedly. "You want to clean up here?"

"Dust!" the butler corrects him. "I want to dust the room the way I have done my whole life. But you can see for yourself what remains after all our hard work: dust. Or rather, it looks like the only thing left at the end is ash. Dust in the beginning and ash in the end. That's all the same. In any case, it's as if we had never existed. You leave without leaving a trace, that's the worst part."

"Still," the student replies kindly, trying to say something uplifting, "still, now we get a little fresh air in here. You can hear the snipes whistling across the moor. That's something, isn't it?"

The old man snickers and coughs.

"Oh yes! Mother Nature! She just goes her way. Our troubles don't mean a thing to her. She doesn't have to make decisions, like me. But no, man is not a bird since he doesn't have wings. Man needs to live based on objective

facts! That's what he has his head for, young man. That's the moral. The moral, meaning: things are not that easy. Pay attention, young man! I need to begin to think through this problem again, from the beginning."

"I can already tell that you aren't easily swayed from your decisions," the student says. "But could you first give me a little information about something?"

The butler doesn't listen to him. He simply walks on into the next room, speaking to himself.

"The problem is this: if it really is pointless to begin, then there is a point to not beginning. Ergo: I'm better off leaving things be."

"Exactly!" says the student, who's following him. "Just leave it be."

"A convincing conclusion!" The old butler laughs slyly. "But now pay very close attention, young man. What is human life?"

The student looks at him with a perplexed smile.

"Well … to be honest, I wouldn't want to make any final claims about that …"

The old man taps his finger against the student's chest and breathes heavily into his face.

"To fight a losing battle, that's life," he says, enunciating each word. "And what does our grand morality, our ethical imperative consist in? Let me tell you, young man. Even if everything is pointless, we still need to begin! Why? Because we need to do what we can!"

"Bravo," says the student, trying to dodge the old man's breath.

"I'll openly admit," the butler continues, "that I really worked myself into a corner there. An inevitable one. And that's saying something."