INDIGO
CLEMENS J. SETZ
TRANSLATED BY ROSS BENJAMIN
Dear Clemens Setz,

I assume you would like to know everything that happened after you lost consciousness. First we tried to lay you down on the sofa. But the sofa was too narrow, and our physical strength is, as you’ve seen, very limited, and so you rolled back onto the floor. That’s how you got the wound over your right eye. Of course, we immediately put something on the injured spot (ice, wrapped in a dish towel), but your forehead swelled up quickly anyway. We had, to be honest, not expected you to slide so easily off the sofa. From your external appearance, we wouldn’t have thought that even in a horizontal position your body’s center of gravity is somewhere near your belly. After all, you’re such a dainty, almost fragile-looking person! Be that as it may, when we saw the lump over your eye, we immediately decided to take you out of the zone and into another room.

You asked my husband and me about the difficulties we have to contend with since our decision to bring Robert back home—and now you’ve experienced those difficulties for yourself. Please be assured that we’re very, very sorry about that, but I think that the situation has perhaps provided you insight you probably wouldn’t have gained from a conversation alone. As a teacher at the institute, you might have been cut off from experiences like that.

We quickly carried you out of the room, because the lump looked really alarming, and you also hadn’t responded to our attempts at resuscitation. In the kitchen your condition was clearly improving. You opened your eyes and let us sit you down on a chair, but then you suddenly keeled over again and began to sweat, and your left
arm cramped, but, thank God, we were familiar with that, we’ve all felt that way before. Iceberg—that’s what we call it. That feeling as if you were buried under tons of ice. We’ve all had to go through that. Of course, that’s relatively easy to say now, because we’ve lived with it for a long time and developed a certain resistance, or at least know what to expect. But on an empty stomach—as in your case—it can certainly knock someone down.

Robert sends you his warm regards, by the way. At least I interpret his behavior along those lines. You never know with him. He probably won’t be returning to the institute next year.

We drove you to the hospital. You were a little confused, but we had expected that too, because my father, for example, who visited us shortly after Robert’s birth, couldn’t speak right for a whole day, he slurred his words and babbled, and he was alternately hot and cold, and he had attacks of vertigo. At first we were worried that he might have suffered a stroke or something like that from shock, but he insisted on holding Robert anyway. There’s a photo of that, taken from the yard through the window.

It’s all in the head, Indigo nonsense, my father said. You know, the people of his generation and the way things were in those days, the low level of awareness in the general population, so . . . Okay, we also wanted to believe that it was all nothing. Nothing lasting, nothing that truly had to do with our child. Nothing real.

You take children by the hand, you touch them, my father said back then, and I just showed him my back, the scrapes I had from falling down so much at that time, the rash on the nape of my neck. I also showed him the burst blood vessel in my left eye. Back then I could still see a bit with that eye, and of course I didn’t go to the doctor until it was too late, when the sight was already gone.
Herr Setz, we hope you’re doing better. And we want to assure you that we don’t harbor any prejudices against you—whatever the reason for the premature termination of your work at the institute might have been, we don’t presume to judge. If you’d like, we can continue our conversation elsewhere. It goes without saying that our house remains open to you, and we welcome your visit, but my husband and I would also understand if you no longer want to expose yourself to what we have constantly had to deal with for almost fifteen years.

With our best regards,
Marianne Tätzel
University Hospital of Graz
Department of Trauma Surgery

Outpatient Unit

Patient: Setz, Clemens Johann
Date of Birth: November 15, 1982

Case History/Medical Report
Pt. entered ER accompanied by two self-described acquaintances.

Mental state: alert, clear, oriented, slowed. According to his escorts, pt. lay unconscious on the floor for about 10 min. after accidental fall. Beforehand pt. mentioned a bright flicker at rt. edge of visual field. After collapse no layperson CPR was deemed necessary. At time of hospitalization pt. not in life-threatening condition, cardioresp. system stable. Rt. frontal bruised tear and gaping, bleeding occipital CLW. Several small hematomas on upper body. Pupils round, medium width, isocoric, no facial paresis or hemiplegic symptoms. No other neurol. abnormalities. Pain on percussion of skullcap. No nausea, but slight disturbance of equilibrium. No other external signs of injury. Joints have full active/passive range of motion, no pain.

Treatments
Frontal wound: cleaning with Octenisept, steri-strips. Suturing of occipital CLW with three stitches. Tetanus shot. Cranial CT scan ordered. Results: No recent hemorrhage, fracture, space-occupying lesion, no sign of recent territorial infarction. Pt. discharged AMA. Informed of poss. complications and symptoms resulting from fall. If general condition should worsen, pain should occur, etc., pt. advised to proceed immediately to emergency room.

10/16/2006

Dr. Uhlheim
PART I

In a field
I am the absence
of field.

—Mark Strand
1. The Nature of Distance

On June 21, 1919, the scuttling of the German Imperial High Seas Fleet took place at the British naval base Scapa Flow near the Scottish coast. The Treaty of Versailles, signed by Germany shortly beforehand, provided not only for the return of the skull of Chief Mkwawa to the British government, but also for the immediate surrender of all ships. But German Admiral Ludwig von Reuter chose to sink his ships rather than relinquish them to the British, whom he regarded as an uncultivated people. The warships have remained ever since on the seafloor at a depth of about one hundred and fifty feet. And that's fortunate for modern space travel, as high-grade steel salvaged on diving expeditions from the wrecks of these warships—which have been underwater for almost a hundred years now—is used in the manufacture of satellites, Geiger counters, and full-body scanners at airport security checkpoints. The rest of the steel in the world is—after Hiroshima, Chernobyl, and the numerous atomic bomb tests carried out in the earth's atmosphere—too radioactive to be used in the production of such highly sensitive instruments. Sufficiently uncontaminated steel is available only in Scapa Flow, at a depth of one hundred and fifty feet.

With this story begins the remarkable book The Nature of Distance, published in 2004, by the child psychologist and education theorist Monika Häusler-Zinnbret. On a Saturday in the summer of 2006 I visited her in her apartment in Graz's Geidorf District with its abundant villas. At that time I had already broken off my six-month internship as a mathematics tutor at the Helianau Institute. The principal of the institute, Dr. Rudolph, had warned me never again to set foot on the premises.
I sought out Frau Häusler-Zinnbret to ask her under what conditions, in her view, Indigo children live in Austria today, two years after the appearance of her influential book, which strikes hopeful notes in its opening lines. And whether she knew what the so-called “relocations” I had often witnessed uncomprehendingly during my internship were all about.

On the old front door with the three doorbells there was also an ornamental knocker, which looked as if it might once have been real—but then, on a hot day, it had simply fused with the darkly painted wood of the door and turned into an ear-shaped adornment above the heavy cast-iron handle. Next to the unusually magnificent house, in the little yard enclosed by a brass fence and a hedge veiled by many spider webs, stood a few quiet birches, aquatic-seeming and practically silver, and in front of a ground-level window I spotted a single sunflower, straining its head attentively upward as if listening to soft music, because it felt the morning sun coming around the next corner. It was a warm day, shortly before ten. The door was open. In the stairwell it was cool, and there was a faint smell of damp stone and old potatoes in the air.

A month or two earlier, I wouldn’t have noticed any of that.

Before I went upstairs to the practice, I checked my pulse. It was normal.

Frau Häusler-Zinnbret kept me waiting for a long time outside her door. I had pushed the doorbell—under which her two last names were inscribed, linked by a wavy ≈ instead of a hyphen—several times, and, as so often in my life, marveled at the fact that female psychologists and education theorists always have double names. I heard her walking around in her apartment and moving furniture or other fairly large objects. When I at one point thought I detected her footsteps very close to the door, I rang again, in the hope of finally catching her attention. But the footsteps receded, and I stood in the stairwell and didn’t know whether to go home.

I gave it another try and knocked.

A door behind me opened.
– Herr Setz?

I turned around and saw a woman’s head looking out through the crack of the door.

– Yes, I said. Frau Häusler?

– Please come in. I’m in a . . . well, a transitional phase at the moment, as it were, please excuse the disorder . . . yeah . . .

Impressed and intimidated by the fact that her apartment apparently extended over the entire floor, I stopped right on the other side of the doorway and was only reminded by a clothes hanger that Frau Häusler-Zinnbret was holding out in front of my chest to take off my coat and shoes.

Frau Häusler-Zinnbret’s physical appearance was impressive. She was fifty-six, but her face looked youthful, she was tall and slim, and wore her hair in a long braid down her back. Apart from her black boots, she was rather casually dressed that day, a knitted vest hung over her shoulders. When she spoke, she mostly looked over her glasses, only when she read something did she push them up a bit.

She led me into her office, one of three, she told me. Here she usually received her visitors—from all over the world, she added, and then flipped a switch on the wall that first lowered the blinds a bit and then raised them; a strangely hypnotic process, as if the room were blinking in slow motion. The morning sun entered the room. A sunbeam shining like cellophane crept across the floor, bent at the wall, and ran up to a large-scale abstract painting in which round forms vied with angular ones.

– Oh, dear, said the child psychologist. Did you hurt yourself?


– Nothing serious, Frau Häusler-Zinnbret repeated with a nod, as if she had heard that excuse many times before. Tea? Or maybe coffee?

– Just tap water, please.

– Tap water? she asked, smiling to herself. Hm . . .

She brought me a glass that tasted strongly of dishwashing detergent, but I was still glad to have something to drink, for the walk from my apartment near Lendplatz to Frau Häusler-Zinnbret’s had
made me tired and thirsty. The night before, someone had dismantled my bicycle into its component parts. They had been left neatly in the yard that morning, the wheels, the frame, the handlebars, in an arrangement roughly corresponding to a quincunx pattern.

— So you’re doing research for a book, is that right? she asked, when we had sat down at a small glass table.

Frau Häusler-Zinnbret took a fan out of a box that looked like an enlarged cigarette pack and unfolded it. She offered one to me too, but I declined.

— I don’t know what it’s going to be yet, I said. More of an article.


— And why that?

— Well, I said, the subject is, I mean, it’s sort of in the air, so to speak . . .

The psychologist made a strange gesture as if she were waving a fly away from her face.

— Until recently you were still at the institute? she asked.

— Yes.

— You know, I’m acquainted with Dr. Rudolph, she said, fanning herself.

— I understand.

I was about to get up.

— No, said Frau Häusler-Zinnbret. Don’t worry. I’m not one of his . . . Please, stay seated. Dr. Rudolph . . . I’d like to know what sort of impression he made on you, Herr Seitz.

Sounds of people on the stairs, an itch by my eye, a loose shoelace . . .

— A difficult person, I finally said.

— A fanatic.

— Yes, maybe.

— Did you live there, I mean, on the premises? Near the . . .

— No, I commuted.

— Commuted.