

PROLOGUE

The Journey

The tale *The Conference of the Birds*, by the Persian mystic and poet Farid al-Din Attar (650–1220), details the journey of a group of birds in search of a mystic leader, the Simurgh, who lives behind the mountain Qaf in an inaccessible place hidden by veils of light and darkness. The Simurgh manifests itself neither physically nor through knowledge or intelligence. Only through the imagination is the Simurgh made visible. This tale is a metaphor for a mystic journey, which begins with a guide, the Hoopoo, who is both a messenger of the world invisible and a being practiced in divine warfare. Hoopoo claims to have hidden knowledge of the Simurgh, and she serves as a guide for the birds who choose to journey to the world of the Simurgh. At one point in Attar's tale, the Hoopoo states: "Do not imagine that the journey is short; one must have the heart of a lion to follow the unusual road, for it is very long and the sea is deep . . . Wash your hands of this life if you were to be called a man of action. For your beloved, renounce that dear life of yours, as worthy men. If you submit with grace the beloved will give his life for you." In so speaking the Hoopoo wins the trust of the birds, and for years they travel over mountains and valleys. But the journey is a difficult one. The only way to understand what they suffered,

Attar tells us, is to journey with them. Along the way, many birds find the journey too painful and make excuses to quit. The Hoopoo weaves their excuses, along with her replies, into a web of mystical tales that forms the heart of this lyrical quest.