

Italo Calvino (from *Invisible Cities*)

Cities & Eyes

1

The ancients built Valdrada on the shores of a lake, with houses all verandas one above the other, and high streets whose railed parapets look out over the water. Thus the traveler, arriving, sees two cities: one erect above the lake, and the other reflected, upside down. Nothing exists or happens in the one Valdrada that the other Valdrada does not repeat, because the city was so constructed that its every point would be reflected in its mirror, and the Valdrada down in the water contains not only all the flutings and juttings of the facades that rise above the lake, but also the rooms' interiors with ceilings and floors, the perspective of the halls, the mirrors of the wardrobes.

Valdrada's inhabitants know that each of their actions is, at once, that action and its mirror-image, which possesses the special dignity of images, and this awareness prevents them from succumbing for a single moment to chance and forgetfulness. Even when lovers twist their naked bodies, skin against skin, seeking the position that will give one the most pleasure in the other, even when murderers plunge the knife into the black veins of the neck and more clotted blood pours out the more they press the blade that slips between the tendons, it is not so much their copulating or murdering that matters as the copulating or murdering of the images, limpid and cold in the mirror.

At times the mirror increases a thing's value, at times denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored. The twin cities are not equal, because nothing that exists or happens in Valdrada is symmetrical: every face and gesture is answered, from the mirror, by a face and gesture inverted, point by point. The two Valdradas live for each other, their eyes interlocked; but there is no love between them.

The Great Khan has dreamed of a city; he describes it to Marco Polo:

"The harbor faces north, in shadow. The docks are high over the black water, which slams against the retaining walls; stone steps descend, made slippery by seaweed. Boats smeared with tar are tied up, waiting for the departing passengers lingering on the quay to bid their families farewell. The farewells take place in silence, but with tears. It is cold; all wear shawls over their heads. A shout from the boatman puts a stop to the delays; the traveler huddles at the prow, moves off looking toward the group of those remaining behind; from the shore his features can no longer be discerned; the boat draws up beside a vessel riding at anchor; on the ladder a diminished form climbs up, vanishes; the rusted chain is heard being raised, scraping against the hawsepipe. The people remaining behind look over the ramparts above the rocks of the pier, their eyes following the ship until it rounds the cape; for the last time they wave a white rag.

"Set out, explore every coast, and seek this city," the Khan says to Marco. "Then come back and tell me if my dream corresponds to reality."

"Forgive me, my lord, there is no doubt that sooner or later I shall set sail from that dock," says Marco, "but I shall not come back to tell you about it. The city exists and it has a simple secret: it knows only departures, not returns."

Cities & Desire

2

At the end of three days, moving southward, you come upon Anastasia, a city with concentric canals watering it and kites flying over it. I should now list the wares that can profitably be bought here: agate, onyx, chrysoprase, and other varieties of chalcedony; I should praise the flesh of the golden pheasant cooked here over fires of seasoned chery wood and sprinkled with much sweet marjoram; and tell of the women I have seen bathing in the pool of a garden and who sometimes - it is said - invite the stranger to disrobe with them and chase them in the water. But with all this, I would not be telling you the city's true essence; for while the description of Anastasia awakens desires one at a time only to force you to stifle them, when you are in the heart of Anastasia one morning your desires waken all at once and surround you. The city appears to you as a whole where no desire is lost and of which you are a part, and since it enjoys everything you do not enjoy, you can do nothing but inhabit this desire and be content. Such is the power, sometimes called malignant, sometimes benign, that Anastasia, the treacherous city, possesses; if for eight hours a day you work as a cutter of agate, onyx, chrysoprase, your labor which gives form to desire takes from desire its form, and you believe you are enjoying Anastasia wholly when you are only its slave.