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EXCERPTS
FROM
Invisible
Cities
Italo Calvino

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Anastasia. 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 cherry 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, 12 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.

Dorothea. There are two ways of describing the city of Dorothea: you can say that four aluminum towers rise from its walls flanking seven gates with spring-operated drawbridges that span the moat whose water feeds four green canals which cross the city, dividing it into nine quarters, each with three hundred houses and seven hundred chimneys. And bearing in mind that the nubile girls of

each quarter marry youths of other quarters and their parents exchange the goods that each family holds in monopoly-bergamot, sturgeon roe, astrolabes, amethysts – you can then work from these facts until you learn everything you wish about the city in the past, present, and future.

Or else you can say, like the camel driver who took me there: “I arrived here in my first youth, one morning, many people were hurrying along the streets toward the market, the women had fine teeth and looked you straight in the eye, three soldiers on a platform played the trumpet, and all around wheels turned and colored banners fluttered in the wind. Before then I had known only the desert and the caravan routes. In the years that followed, my eyes returned to contemplate the desert expanses and the caravan routes; but now I know this path is only one of the many that opened before me on that morning in Dorothea.”

Fedora. In the center of Fedora, that gray stone metropolis, stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one' reason or another, it had not become what we see today. In every age someone, looking at Fedora as it was, imagined a way of making it the ideal city, but while he constructed his miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what had been until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe. The building with the globes is now Fedora's museum: every inhabitant visits it, chooses the city that corresponds to his desires, contemplates it, imagining his reflection in the Medusa pond that would have collected the waters of the canal (if it had not been dried up), the view from the high canopied box along the avenue reserved for elephants (now banished from the city), the fun of

sliding down the spiral, twisting minaret (which never found a pedestal from which to rise).

On the map of your empire, O Great Khan, there must be room both for the big, stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in glass globes. Not because they are all equally real, but because all are only assumptions. The one contains what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so; the others, what is imagined as possible and, a moment later, is possible no longer.

Despina. Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveler arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea. When the camel driver sees, at the horizon of the tableland, the pinnacles of the skyscrapers come into view, the radar antennae, the white and red windsocks Bapping, the chimneys belching smoke, he thinks of a ship; he knows it is a city, but he thinks of it as a vessel that will take him away from the desert, a windjammer about to cast off, with the breeze already swelling the sails, not yet unfurled, or a steamboat with its boiler vibrating in the iron keel; and he thinks of all the ports, the foreign merchandise the cranes unload on the docks, the taverns where crews of different Bags break bottles over one another's heads, the lighted, ground-Boor windows, each with a woman combing her hair.

In the coastline's haze, the sailor discerns the form of a camel's withers, an embroidered saddle with glittering fringe between two spotted humps, advancing and swaying; he knows it is a city, but he thinks of it as a camel from whose pack hang wineskin and bags of candied fruit, date wine, tobacco leaves, and already he sees himself at the head of a long caravan taking him away from the desert of the sea, toward oases of fresh water in the palm trees' jagged shade, toward palaces of thick,

whitewashed walls, tiled courts where girls are dancing barefoot, moving their arms, half-hidden by their veils, and half-revealed. Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts.

Zirma. Travelers return from the city of Zirma with distinct memories: a blind black man shouting in the crowd, a lunatic teetering on a skyscraper's cornice, a girl walking with a puma on a leash. Actually many of the blind men who tap their canes on Zirma's cobblestones are black; in every skyscraper there is someone going mad; all lunatics spend hours on cornices; there is no puma that some girl does not raise, as a whim. The city is redundant: it repeats itself so that something will stick in the mind.

I too am returning from Zirma: my memory includes dirigibles flying in all directions, at window level; streets of shops where tattoos are drawn on sailors' skin; underground trains crammed with obese women suffering from the humidity. My traveling companions, on the other hand, swear they saw only one dirigible hovering among the city's spires, only one tattoo artist arranging needles and inks and pierced patterns on his bench, only one fat woman fanning herself on a train's platform. Memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist.

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Zaira. In vain, great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet; the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen's nuptial procession; the height of that railing and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn; the tilt of a guttering and a cat's progress along it as he slips into the same window; the firing range of a gunboat which has suddenly appeared beyond the cape and the bomb that destroys the guttering; the rips in the fish net and the three old men seated on the dock mending nets and telling each other for the hundredth time the Story of the gunboat of the usurper, who some say was the queen's illegitimate son, abandoned in his swaddling clothes there on the dock.

As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past.

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the Bags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

Maurilia. In Maurilia, the traveler is invited to visit the city

and, at the same time, to examine some old post cards that show it as it used to be: the same identical square with a hen in the place of the bus station, a bandstand in the place of the overpass, two young ladies with white parasols in the place of the munitions factory. If the traveler does not wish to disappoint the inhabitants, he must praise the postcard city and prefer it to the present one, though he must be careful to contain his regret at the changes within definite limits: admitting that the magnificence and prosperity of the metropolis Maurilia, when compared to the old, provincial Maurilia, cannot compensate for a certain lost grace, which, however, can be appreciated only now in the old post cards, whereas before, when that provincial Maurilia was before one's eyes, one saw absolutely nothing graceful and would see it even less today, if Maurilia had remained unchanged; and in any case the metropolis has the added attraction that, through what it has become, one can look back with nostalgia at what it was.

Beware of saying to them that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves. At times even the names of the inhabitants remain the same, and their voices' accent, and also the features of the faces; but the gods who live beneath names and above places have gone off without a word and outsiders have settled in their place. It is pointless to ask whether the new ones are better or worse than the old, since there is no connection between them, just as the old post cards do not depict Maurilia as it was, but a different city which, by chance, was called Maurilia, like this one.

Isidora. When a man rides a long time through wild regions he feels the desire for a city. Finally he comes to Isidora, a city where the buildings have spiral staircases encrusted with spiral seashells, where

perfect telescopes and violins are made, where the foreigner hesitating between two women always encounters a third, where cockfights degenerate into bloody brawls among the bettors. He was thinking of all these things when he desired a city. Isidora, therefore, is the city of his dreams: with one difference. The dreamed-of city contained him as a young man; he arrives at Isidora in his old age. In the square there is the wall where the old men sit and watch the young go by; he is seated in a row with them. Desires are already memories.

Zora. Beyond six rivers and three mountain ranges rises Zora, a city that no one, having seen it, can forget. But not because, like other memorable cities, it leaves an unusual image in your recollections. Zora has the quality of remaining in your memory point by point, in its succession of streets, of houses along the streets, and of doors and windows in the houses, though nothing in them possesses a special beauty or rarity. Zora's secret lies in the way your gaze runs over patterns following one another as in a musical score where not a note can be altered or displaced. The man who knows by heart how Zora is made, if he is unable to sleep at night, can imagine he is walking along the streets and he remembers the order by which the copper clock follows the barber's striped awning, then the fountain with the nine jets, the astronomer's glass tower, the melon vendor's kiosk, the statue of the hermit and the lion, the Turkish bath, the cafe at the corner, the alley that leads to the harbor. This city which cannot be expunged from the mind is like an armature, a honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember: names of famous men, virtues, numbers, vegetable and mineral classifications, dates of battles, constellations, parts of speech. Between each idea and each point of the itinerary an affinity or a contrast can be established, serving as an immediate aid to memory. So the world's most learned men are those who have

memorized Zora.

But in vain I set out to visit the city: forced to remain motionless and always the same, in order to be more easily remembered, Zora has languished, disintegrated, disappeared. The earth has forgotten her.

Diomira. Leaving there and proceeding for three days toward the East, you reach Diomira, a city with sixty silver domes, bronze statues of all the gods, streets paved with lead, a crystal theater, a golden cock that crows each morning on a tower. All these beauties will already be familiar to the visitor, who has seen them also in other cities. But the special quality of this city for the man who arrives there on a September evening, when the days are growing shorter and the multi-colored lamps are lighted all at once at the doors of the food stalls and from a terrace a woman's voice cries ooh!, is that he feels envy toward those who now believe they have once before lived an evening identical to this and who think they were happy, that time.

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Tamara. You walk for days among trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing: a print in the sand indicates the tiger's passage; a marsh announces a vein of water; the hibiscus flower, the end of winter. All the rest is silent and interchangeable; trees and stones are only what they are.

Finally the journey leads to the city of Tamara. You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer's house; a tankard, the tavern; halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer's. Statues and shields depict lions, dolphins, towers, stars: a sign that something—who knows what?—has as its sign a lion or a dolphin or a tower or a star. Other signals warn of what is forbidden in a given place (to enter the alley with wagons, to urinate behind the kiosk, to fish with your pole from the bridge) and what is allowed (watering zebras, playing bowls, burning relatives' corpses). From the doors of the temples the gods' statues are seen, each portrayed with his attributes—the cornucopia, the hourglass, the medusa—so that the worshiper can recognize them and address his prayers correctly. If a building has no signboard or figure, its very form and the position it occupies in the city's order suffice to indicate its function: the palace, the prison, the mint, the Pythagorean school, the brothel. The wares, too, which the vendors display on their stalls are valuable not in themselves but as signs of other things: the embroidered headband stands for elegance; the gilded palanquin, power; the volumes of Averroes, learning; the ankle bracelet, voluptuousness. Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with

which she defines herself and all her parts. However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. Outside, the land stretches, empty, to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant...

Hypatia. Of all the changes of language a traveler in distant lands must face, none equals that which awaits him in the city of Hypatia, because the change regards not words, but things. I entered Hypatia one morning, a magnolia garden was reflected in blue lagoons, I walked among the hedges, sure I would discover young and beautiful ladies bathing; but at the bottom of the water, crabs were biting the eyes of the suicides, stones tied around their necks, their hair green with seaweed. I felt cheated and I decided to demand justice of the sultan. I climbed the porphyry steps of the palace with the highest domes, I crossed six tiled courtyards with fountains. The central hall was barred by iron gratings: convicts with black chains on their feet were hauling up basalt blocks from a quarry that opened underground. I could only question the philosophers. I entered the great library, I became lost among shelves collapsing under the vellum bindings, I followed the alphabetical order of vanished alphabets, up and down 47 halls, stairs, bridges. In the most remote papyrus cabinet, in a cloud of smoke, the dazed eyes of an adolescent appeared to me, as he lay on a mat, his lips glued to an opium pipe.

“Where is the sage?”

The smoker pointed out of the window. It was a garden with children's games: ninepins, a swing, a top. The philosopher was seated on the lawn. He said: “Signs form a language, but not the one you think you know.” I realized I had to free myself from the images which in the past

had announced to me the things I sought: only then would I succeed in understanding the language of Hypatia. Now I have only to hear the neighing of horses and the cracking of whips and I am seized with amorous trepidation: in Hypatia you have to go to the stables and riding rings to see the beautiful women who mount the saddle, thighs naked, greaves on their calves, and as soon as a young foreigner approaches, they fling him on the piles of hay or sawdust and press their firm nipples against him. And when my spirit wants no stimulus or nourishment save music, I know it is to be sought in the cemeteries: the musicians hide in the tombs; from grave to grave flute trills, harp chords answer one another. True, also in Hypatia the day will come when my only desire will be to leave. I know I must not go down to the harbor then, but climb the citadel's highest pinnacle and wait for a ship to go by up there. But will it ever go by? There is no language without deceit.

Zoe. The man who is traveling and does not yet know the city awaiting him along his route wonders what the palace will be like, the barracks, the mill, the theater, the bazaar. In every city of the empire every building is different and set in a different order: but as soon as the stranger arrives at the unknown city and his eye penetrates the pine cone of pagodas and garrets and haymows, following the scrawl of canals, gardens, rubbish heaps, he immediately distinguishes which are the princes' palaces, the high priests' temples, the tavern, the prison, the slum. This—some say—confirms the hypothesis that each man bears in his mind a city made only of differences, a city without figures and without form, and the individual cities fill it up. This is not true of Zoe. In every point of this city you can, in turn, sleep, make tools, cook, accumulate gold, disrobe, reign, sell, question oracles. Anyone of its pyramid roofs could cover the leprosarium or the odalisques' baths. The

traveler roams all around and has nothing but doubts: he is unable to distinguish the features of the city, the features he keeps distinct in his mind also mingle. He infers this: if existence in all its moments is all of itself, Zoe is the place of indivisible existence. But why, then, does the city exist? What line separates the inside from the outside, the rumble of wheels from the howl of wolves?

Zirma. Travelers return from the city of Zirma with distinct memories: a blind black man shouting in the crowd, a lunatic teetering on a skyscraper's cornice, a girl walking with a puma on a leash. Actually many of the blind men who tap their canes on Zirma's cobblestones are black; in every skyscraper there is someone going mad; all lunatics spend hours on cornices; there is no puma that some girl does not raise, as a whim. The city is redundant: it repeats itself so that something will stick in the mind. I too am returning from Zirma: my memory includes dirigibles flying in all directions, at window level; streets of shops where tattoos are drawn on sailors' skin; underground trains crammed with obese women suffering from the humidity. My traveling companions, on the other hand, swear they saw only one dirigible hovering among the city's spires, only one tattoo artist arranging needles and inks and pierced patterns on his bench, only one fat woman fanning herself on a train's platform. Memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist.

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Zemrude. It is the mood of the beholder which gives the city of Zemrude its form. If you go by whistling, your nose a-tilt behind the whistle, you will know it from below: window sills, flapping curtains, fountains. If you walk along hanging your head, your nails dug into the palms of your hands, your gaze will be held on the ground, in the gutters, the manhole covers, the fish scales, wastepaper. You cannot say that one aspect of the city is truer than the other, but you hear of the upper Zemrude chiefly from those who remember it, as they sink into the lower Zemrude, following every day the same stretches of street and finding again each morning the ill-humor of the day before, encrusted at the foot of the walls. For everyone, sooner or later, the day comes when we bring our gaze down along the drainpipes and we can no longer detach it from the cobblestones. The reverse is not impossible, but it is more rare: and so we continue walking through Zemrude's streets with eyes now digging into the cellars, the foundations, the wells.

Baucis. After a seven days' march through woodland, the traveler directed toward Baucis cannot see the city and yet he has arrived. The slender stilts that rise from the ground at a great distance from one another and are lost above the clouds support the city. You climb them with ladders. On the ground the inhabitants rarely show themselves: having already everything they need up there, they prefer not to come down. Nothing of the city touches the earth except those long flamingo legs on which it rests and, when the days are sunny, a pierced, angular shadow that falls on the foliage.

There are three hypotheses about the inhabitants of Baucis: that they hate the earth; that they respect it so much they avoid all contact; that they love it as it was before they existed and with spyglasses and telescopes aimed downward they never tire of examining it, leaf by leaf,

stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence.

Phyllis. When you have arrived at Phyllis, you rejoice in observing all the bridges over the canals, each different from the others: cambered, covered, on pillars, on barges, suspended, with tracery balustrades. And what a variety of windows looks down on the streets: mullioned. Moorish, lancet, pointed, surmounted by lunettes or stained-glass roses; how many kinds of pavement cover the ground: cobbles, slabs, gravel, blue and white tiles. At every point the city offers surprises to your view: a caper bush jutting from the fortress' walls, the statues of three queens on corbels, an onion dome with three smaller onions threaded on the spire. "Happy the man who has Phyllis before his eyes each day and who never ceases seeing the things it contains," you cry, with regret at having to leave the city when you can barely graze it with your glance.

But it so happens that, instead, you must stay in Phyllis and spend the rest of your days there. Soon the city fades before your eyes, the rose windows are expunged, the statues on the corbels, the domes. Like all of Phyllis's inhabitants, you follow zigzag lines from one street to another, you distinguish the patches of sunlight from the patches of shade, a door here. a stairway there. a bench where you can put down your basket. a hole where your foot stumbles if you are not careful. All the rest of the city is invisible. Phyllis is a space in which routes are drawn between points suspended in the void: the shortest way to reach that certain merchant's tent, avoiding that certain creditor's window. Your footsteps follow not what is outside the eyes, but what is within, buried, erased. If, of two arcades, one continues to seem more joyous, it is because thirty years ago a girl went by there, with broad, embroidered

sleeves, or else it is only because that arcade catches the light at a certain hour like that other arcade, you cannot recall where.

Millions of eyes look up at windows, bridges, capers, and they might be scanning a blank page. Many are the cities like Phyllis, which elude the gaze of all, except the man who catches them by surprise.

Irene. Irene is the city visible when you lean out from the edge of the plateau at the hour when the lights come on, and in the limpid air, the pink of the settlement can be discerned spread out in the distance below: where the windows are more concentrated, where it thins out in dimly lighted alleys, where it collects the shadows of gardens, where it raises towers with signal fires; and if the evening is misty, a hazy glow swells like a milky sponge at the foot of the gulleys.

Travelers on the plateau, shepherds shifting their Bocks, bird-catchers watching their nets, hermits gathering greens: all look down and speak of Irene. At times the wind brings a music of bass drums and trumpets, the bang of firecrackers in the light display of a festival; at times the rattle of guns, the explosion of a powder magazine in the sky yellow with the fires of civil war. Those who look down from the heights conjecture about what is happening in the city; they wonder if it would be pleasant or unpleasant to be in Irene that evening. Not that they have any intention of going there (in any case the roads winding down to the valley are bad), but Irene is a magnet for the eyes and thoughts of those who stay up above.

At this point Kublai Khan expects Marco to speak of Irene as it is seen from within. But Marco cannot do this: he has not succeeded in discovering which is the city that those of the plateau call Irene. For that

matter, it is of slight importance: if you saw it, standing in its midst, it would be a different city; Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes.

For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name; perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene.

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Beersheba. This belief is handed down in Beersheba: that, suspended in the heavens, there exists another Beersheba, where the city's most elevated virtues and sentiments are poised, and that if the terrestrial Beersheba will take the celestial one as its model the two cities will become one. The image propagated by tradition is that of a city of pure gold, with silver locks and diamond gates, a jewel-city, all inset and inlaid, as a maximum of laborious study might produce when applied to materials of the maximum worth. True to this belief, Beersheba's inhabitants honor everything that suggests for them the celestial city: they accumulate noble metals and rare stones, they renounce all ephemeral excesses, they develop forms of composite composure.

They also believe, these inhabitants, that another Beersheba exists underground, the receptacle of everything base and unworthy that happens to them, and it is their constant care to erase from the visible Beersheba every tie or resemblance to the lower twin. In the place of roofs they imagine that the underground city has overturned rubbish bins, with cheese rinds, greasy paper, fish scales, dishwater, uneaten spaghetti, old bandages spilling from them. Or even that its substance is dark and malleable and thick, like the pitch that pours down from the sewers, prolonging the route of the human bowels, from black hole to black hole, until it splatters against the lowest subterranean floor, and from the lazy, encircled bubbles below, layer upon layer, a fecal city rises, with twisted spires.

In Beersheba's beliefs there is an element of truth and one of error. It is true that the city is accompanied by two projections of itself, one celestial and one infernal; but the citizens are mistaken about their consistency. The inferno that broods in the deepest subsoil of Beersheba is a city designed by the most authoritative architects, built with the

most expensive materials on the market, with every device and mechanism and gear system functioning, decked with tassels and fringes and frills hanging from all the pipes and levers.

Intent on piling up its carats of perfection, Beersheba takes for virtue what is now a grim mania to fill the empty vessel of itself; the city does not know that its only moments of generous abandon are those when it becomes detached from itself, when it lets go, expands. Still, at the zenith of Beersheba there gravitates a celestial body that shines with all the city's riches, enclosed in the treasury of cast-off things: a planet a-flutter with potato peels, broken umbrellas, old socks, candy wrappings, paved with tram tickets, fingernail-cuttings and pared calluses, eggshells. This is the celestial city, and in its heavens long-tailed comets By past, released to rotate in space from the only free and happy action of the citizens of Beersheba, a city which, only when it shits, is not miserly, calculating, greedy.

Perinthia. Summoned to lay down the rules for the foundation of Perinthia, the astronomers established the place and the day according to the position of the stars; they drew the intersecting lines of the decumanus and the cardo, the first oriented to the passage of the sun and the other like the axis on which the heavens turn. They divided the map according to the twelve houses of the zodiac so that each temple and each neighborhood would receive the proper influence of the favoring constellations; they fixed the point in the walls where gates should be cut, foreseeing how each would frame an eclipse of the moon in the next thousand years. Perinthia—they guaranteed—would reflect the harmony of the firmament; nature's reason and the gods' benevolence would shape the inhabitants' destinies.

Following the astronomers' calculations precisely, Perinthia was constructed; various peoples came to populate it; the first generation born in Perinthia began to grow within its walls; and these citizens reached the age to marry and have children.

In Perinthia's streets and square today you encounter cripples, dwarfs, hunchbacks, obese men, bearded women. But the worse cannot be seen; guttural howls are heard from cellars and lofts, where families hide children with three heads or with six legs.

Perinthia's astronomers are faced with a difficult choice. Either they must admit that all their calculations were wrong and their figures are unable to describe the heavens, or else they must reveal that the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters.

Thekla. Those who arrive at Thekla can see little of the city beyond the plank fences, the sackcloth screens, the scaffoldings, the metal armatures, the wooden catwalks hanging from ropes or supported by sawhorses, the ladders, the trestles. If you ask, "Why is Thekla's construction taking such a long time?" the inhabitants continue hoisting sacks, lowering leaded strings, moving long brushes up and down, as they answer, "So that its destruction cannot begin." And if asked whether they fear that, once the scaffoldings are removed, the city may begin to crumble and fall to pieces, they add hastily, in a whisper, "Not only the city."

If, dissatisfied with the answers, someone puts his eye to a crack in a fence, he sees cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffoldings that embrace other scaffoldings, beams that prop up other beams. "What meaning does your construction have?" he asks. "What is the aim of a city under

construction unless it is a city? Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?"

"We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over; we cannot interrupt our work now," they answer.

Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. "There is the blueprint," they say.

Andria. Andria was built so artfully that its every street follows a planet's orbit, and the buildings and the places of community life repeat the order of the constellations and the position of the most luminous stars: Antares, Alpheratz, Capricorn, the Cepheids. The city's calendar is so regulated that jobs and offices and ceremonies are arranged in a map corresponding to the firmament on that date: and thus the days on earth and the nights in the sky reflect each other.

Though it is painstakingly regimented, the city's life flows calmly like the motion of the celestial bodies and it acquires the inevitability of phenomena not subject to human caprice. In praising Andria's citizens for their productive industry and their spiritual ease, I was led to say: I can well understand how you, feeling yourselves part of an unchanging heaven, cogs in a meticulous clockwork, take care not to make the slightest change in your city and your habits. Andria is the only city I know where it is best to remain motionless in time.

They looked at one another dumbfounded. "But why? Whoever said such a thing?" And they led me to visit a suspended street recently opened over a bamboo grove, a shadow-theater under construction in the place of the municipal kennels, now moved to the pavilions of the

former lazaretto, abolished when the last plague victims were cured, and—just inaugurated—a river port, a statue of Thales, a toboggan slide.

“And these innovations do not disturb your city’s astral rhythm?” I asked.

“Our city and the sky correspond so perfectly,” they answered, “that any change in Andria involves some novelty among the stars.” The astronomers, after each change takes place in Andria, peer into their telescopes and report a nova’s explosion, or a remote point in the firmament’s change of color from orange to yellow, the expansion of a nebula, the bending of a spiral of the Milky Way. Each change implies a sequence of other changes, in Andria as among the stars: the city and the sky never remain the same.

As for the character of Andria’s inhabitants, two virtues are worth mentioning: self-confidence and prudence. Convinced that every innovation in the city influences the sky’s pattern, before taking any decision they calculate the risks and advantages for themselves and for the city and for all worlds.

Eudoxia. In Eudoxia, which spreads both upward and down, with winding alleys, steps, dead ends, hovels, a carpet is preserved in which you can observe the city’s true form. At first sight nothing seems to resemble Eudoxia less than the design of that carpet, laid out in symmetrical motives whose patterns are repeated along straight and circular lines, interwoven with brilliantly colored spires, in a repetition that can be followed throughout the whole woof. But if you pause and examine it carefully, you become convinced that each place in the carpet corresponds to a place in the city and all the things contained in the

city are included in the design, arranged according to their true relationship, which escapes your eye distracted by the bustle, the throngs, the shoving. All of Eudoxia’s confusion, the mules’ braying, the lamp-black stains, the fish smell is what is evident in the incomplete perspective you grasp; but the carpet proves that there is a point from which the city shows its true proportions, the geometrical scheme implicit in its every, tiniest detail.

It is easy to get lost in Eudoxia: but when you concentrate and stare at the carpet, you recognize the street you were seeking in a crimson or indigo or magenta thread which, in a wide loop, brings you to the purple enclosure that is your real destination. Every inhabitant of Eudoxia compares the carpet’s immobile order with his own image of the city, an anguish of his own, and each can find, concealed among the arabesques, an answer, the story of his life, the twists of fate.

An oracle was questioned about the mysterious bond between two objects so dissimilar as the carpet and the city. One of the two objects—the oracle replied—has the form the gods gave the starry sky and the orbits in which the worlds revolve; the other is an approximate reflection, like every human creation. For some time the augurs had been sure that the carpet’s harmonious pattern was of divine origin. The oracle was interpreted in this sense, arousing no controversy. But you could, similarly, come to the opposite conclusion: that the true map of the universe is the city of Eudoxia, just as it is, a stain that spreads out shapelessly, with crooked streets, houses that crumble one upon the other amid clouds of dust, fires, screams in the darkness.

After Word.

THE FOLLOWING IS A LECTURE GIVEN BY ITALO CALVINO TO THE STUDENTS OF THE GRADUATE WRITING DIVISION AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY ON MARCH 29, 1983.

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Invisible Cities does not deal with recognizable cities. These cities are all inventions, and all bear women's names. The book is made up of a number of short chapters, each of which is intended to give rise to a reflection which holds good for all cities or for the city in general.

The book was born a little at a time, with considerable intervals between one piece and the next, rather as if I were writing poems, one by one, following up varying inspirations. Indeed, in my writing I tend to work in series: I keep a whole range of files in which I put the pages I happen to write (following the ideas which come into my head), or mere notes for things I would like to write some day. In one file I put the odd individuals I bump into, in another the heroes of myth; I have a file for the trades I would like to have followed instead of being a writer, and another for the books I would like to have written had they not already been written by somebody else; in one file I collect pages on the towns and landscapes of my own life, and in another imaginary cities, outside of space and time. When one of these files begins to fill up, I start to think of the book that I can work it into.

This is how I carried on the Invisible Cities book over the years, writing a piece every now and then, passing through a number of different phases. At one stage I could only write about sad cities, and at another only about happy ones. There was one period when I compared the cities to the starry sky, to the signs of the zodiac; and another when I kept writing about the garbage which spreads outside the city day by day.

In short, what emerged was a sort of diary which kept closely to my moods and reflections: everything ended up being transformed into images of cities the books I read, the art exhibitions I visited, and discussions with friends.

And yet, all these pages put together did not make a book: for a book (I think) is something which has a beginning and an end (even if it's not a novel, in the strict sense of the word). It is a space which the reader must enter, wander round, maybe lose his way in, and then eventually find an exit, or perhaps even several exits, or maybe a way of breaking out on his own. It may be objected that this definition holds good for a novel with a plot, not for a book such as mine, which is meant to be read as one would read a book of poems, or essays, or at most short stories. But the point I am trying to make is that a book of this sort, if it is to be a real book, must have a structure of some kind. To put it another way, one must be able to find a plot, a route, a "solution".

I have never written a book of poems, but I am no stranger to books of short stories; and I can safely say that the ordering of the various stories is always a brain-racking task. In this case, I set out writing the title of a series at the top of each page: Cities and Memory, Cities and Desire, Cities and Signs; there was also a fourth category which I started off by calling Cities and Form; but this title turned out to be too generic, and the pieces ended up under other headings. For a while, as I carried on writing city after city, I was not sure whether to step up the number of categories, to cut them down to the bare minimum (the first two, Cities and Memory and Cities and Desire, were fundamental), or to do away with them altogether. There were many pieces which I was unable to classify—which meant that I had to hunt for new definitions, new categories. A number of cities, for example, were rather abstract,

airy creations, and in the end I grouped them as Thin Cities. Others could be classified as Twofold Cities; but then I found it was better to redistribute them among other groups. Other series, Trading Cities, which were characterized by various kinds of exchange—of memories, desires, routes, and destinies—and Cities and Eyes, characterized by visual properties—I had not provided for to start with. They sprang into being at the last moment, as the result of a reallocation of pieces which I had previously assigned elsewhere, especially under the headings of Memory and Desire. The Continuous Cities and the Hidden Cities, on the other hand, were two series which I wrote with a special purpose in mind, once I had begun to see the form and the meaning which I wanted to give to the book. I tried to work out the best structure on the basis of the materials I had collected, as I wanted these series to alternate, to interlace one another, while trying to keep fairly close to the chronological order in which the various pieces had been written. In the end I determined to write eleven series of five cities each, grouped in chapters comprising pieces from different series which had a common climate. The system of alternation is the simplest possible, though some people have not found it so.

I still have not mentioned something which I should have declared at the outset: Invisible Cities is in the form of a series of verbal reports which the traveler Marco Polo makes to Kubla Khan, Emperor of the Tartars. (In fact, the historical Kubla, a descendant of Genghiz Khan, was Emperor of the Mongols; but in his book Marco Polo referred to him as Great Khan of the Tartars, and thus he has remained in literary tradition.) Not that I had any intention of following the itinerary of the thirteenth century Venetian merchant who traveled as far as China and who, as ambassador for the Great Khan, visited much of the Far East. For the Orient is nowadays a topic which is best left to experts; and I

am not one. But throughout the centuries there have been poets and writers who have drawn their inspiration from // Milione, as an exotic and fantastic stage setting: Coleridge in his famous poem, Kafka in *The Emperors Message*, Dino Buzzati in his novel *The Desert of Tartars*. Only the *Thousand and One Nights* can boast a similar success—that of an imaginary continent in which other literary works find space for their own particular worlds: continents of the “elsewhere,” now that there is no longer any “elsewhere” in the world, and the whole world is becoming more and more uniform (and for the worse).

In my Invisible Cities, Kubla Khan is a melancholy ruler who realizes that his boundless power is of little worth because the world is going rapidly downhill. Marco Polo is a visionary traveler who tells the Khan tales of impossible cities—for example, a cobweb city suspended over the abyss, or a microscopic city which gradually spreads out until one realizes that it is made up of lots and lots of concentric cities which are all expanding. Each of the chapters which make up the book is preceded and followed by a sort of commentary from Marco Polo and the Khan. In point of fact, the first of these introductory episodes was written before I started on the cities; and it was only later, as I went on with the cities themselves, that I thought of writing some other short introductions or epilogues for them. To be more precise, I had put a lot of work into the first piece, and had a lot of material left over; and as time went on I went ahead with some variants of these leftover pieces (the languages of the ambassadors, Marco’s gesticulations) and found that new reflections were emerging. The more cities I wrote about, the more I developed my thoughts on the work in the form of comments from Marco and Kubla. Each of these reflections tended to pull things in a particular direction; and I tried to let them have their own way. Thus I ended up with another collection of material which I tried to let run

parallel to the rest (that is, the cities proper). I did also a certain amount of cutting and mounting work, in the sense that some of the conversations are interrupted and then resumed. In short the book was discussing and questioning itself at the same time as it was being composed.

I feel that the idea of the city which the book conjures up is not outside time; there is also (at times implicit, at others explicit) a discussion on the city in general. I have heard from a number of friends in town planning that the book touches on some of the questions that they are faced with in their work; and this is no coincidence, as the background from which the book springs is the same as theirs. And it is not only towards the end of the book that the “big number” metropolis appears; for even the pieces which seem to evoke ancient cities only make sense insofar as they have been thought out and written with the city of today in mind.

What is the city today, for us? I believe that I have written something like a last love poem addressed to the city, at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to live there. It looks, indeed, as if we are approaching a period of crisis in urban life; and *Invisible Cities* is like a dream born out of the heart of the unlivable cities we know. Nowadays people talk with equal insistence of the destruction of the natural environment and of the fragility of the large-scale technological systems (which may cause a sort of chain reaction of breakdowns, paralyzing entire metropolises). The crisis of the overgrown city is the other side of the crisis of the natural world. The image of “megalopolis”—the unending, undifferentiated city which is steadily covering the surface of the earth—dominates my book, too. But there are already numerous books which prophecy catastrophes and apocalypses: to write another would

be superfluous, and anyway it would be contrary to my temperament. The desire of my Marco Polo is to find the hidden reasons which bring men to live in cities: reasons which remain valid over and above any crisis. A city is a combination of many things: memory, desires, signs of a language; it is a place of exchange, as any textbook of economic history will tell you—only, these exchanges are not just trade in goods, they also involve words, desires, and memories. My book opens and closes with images of happy cities which constantly take shape and then fade away, in the midst of unhappy cities.

Almost all critics have stopped to comment on the closing sentence of the book: “seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, and make them endure, give them space.” For given that these are the last lines, everybody has taken them as the conclusion, the “moral.” But this is a many-faceted book, and there are conclusions throughout its length, on each of the faces and along each of the edges; and there are others, no less epigrammatic or epigraphic than the final one. Certainly, if that sentence is to be found at the end of the book rather than elsewhere, there is a reason; but we ought to begin by saying that the last little chapter has a double conclusion, both parts of which are equally necessary: on the Utopian city (which even if we do not catch sight of it we cannot stop looking for); and on the infernal city. And again; this is only the last bit of the section on the Great Khan’s atlases, which has been somewhat neglected by the critics, and which from start to finish does nothing but propose various possible “conclusions” to be drawn from the entire book. But there is also the other thesis, which says that the meaning of a symmetrical book should be sought in the middle: thus there are psychoanalytical critics who have found the deep roots of the book in Marco Polo’s evocations of Venice, his native city, as a return to the first archetypes of the memory;

while scholars of structural semiology maintain that one must seek at the very centre of the book and by doing so have found an image of absence, the city called Baucis. Here it becomes clear that the author's view no longer counts: it is as if the book, as I have explained, wrote itself, and it is only the text as it stands which can authorize or rule out this or that reading of it. As one reader among others, I may say that in chapter five, which in the heart of the book develops a theme of lightness that is strangely associated with the theme of the city, there are some of the pages I consider the best as visionary evidence; and perhaps these more "slender" parts, the Thin Cities or others, are the most luminous areas in the book. There is no more I can say.

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