

Cities & Memory

Diomira
Isidora
Zaira
Zora
Maurilla

Trading Cities

Euphemia
Chloe
Eutropia
Ersilla
Esmeralda

Thin Cities

Isuara
Zenobia
Chloe
Sophronia
???

Cities & The Dead

Melania
Adelma
Eusapia
Argia
Laudomia

Cities & Names

Algaula
Leandra
Pyrrha
Clarice
Irene

Continuous Cities

Leonia
Trude
Procopia
Cecilia
Pethesilea

Cities & Signs

Tamara
Zirma
Zoe
Hypatia
Olivia

Cities & Desire

Dorothea
Anatasia
Despina
Fedora
Zobeide

Cities & Eyes

Valdara
Zemrude
Baucis
Phyllis
Moriana

Cities & The Sky

Eudoxia
Beersheba
Thekla
Perinthia
Andria

Hidden Cities

Olinda
Raissa
Marozia
Theodora
Berenice

Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his.

In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them.

There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening, with the odor of the elephants after the rain and the sandalwood ashes growing cold in the braziers, a dizziness that makes rivers and mountains tremble on the fallow curves of the planispheres where they are portrayed, and rolls up, one after the other, the dispatches announcing to us the collapse of the last enemy troops, from defeat to defeat, and flakes the wax of the seals of obscure kings who beseech our armies' protection, offering in exchange annual tributes of precious metals, tanned hides, anti tortoise shell.

It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our scepter, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing.

Only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing.

“Cities Constructed Not of Steel, But of Thought”

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 springoperated drawbridges that span the moat whose water feeds four green canals which cross the city, dividing it into nine quarters, each with three

“300 Houses and 700 Chimneys”

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.”

“Only One of Many Paths”

“Cities in the Past, Present and Future”

From there, after six days and seven nights, you arrive at Zebdele, the white city, well exposed to the moon, with streets wound about themselves as in a skein. They tell this tale of its foundation: men of various nations had an identical dream.

“This Ugly City, This Trap”

They saw a woman running at night through an unknown city, she was seen from behind, with long hair, and she was naked. They dreamed of pursuing her, as they twisted and turned each of them lost her. After the dream they set out in search of that city, they never found it, but they found one another; they decided to build a city like the one in the dream. In laying out the streets, each followed the course of his pursuit; at the spot where they had lost the fugitive's trail, they arranged spaces and walls differently from the dream, so she would be unable to escape again. This was the city of Zebdele, where they settled, waiting for that scene to be repeated one night. None of them, asleep or awake,

“Well Exposed To The Moon”

New men arrived from other lands, having had a dream like theirs, and in the city of Zebdele, they recognized something of the streets of the dream, and they changed the positions of arcades and stairways to resemble more closely the path of the pursued woman and so, at the spot where she had vanished, there would remain no avenue of escape. The first to arrive could not understand what drove these people to Zebdele, this ugly city, this trap.

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 probably be bought here: agate, onyx, chrysopease, 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

“Your Desires Waken All at Once”

“Only to Stifle Them”

“Only to Force You to Stifle Them”

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, chrysopease, 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.

“Enjoying Only When you are its Slave”

“Grey Stone Metropolis”

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 Fedoras 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.

“Crystal Globes Containing Models of A Different Fedorda”

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

“Border Between Two Deserts.”

and red windsocks flapping, 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 unharmed, 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 flags break bottles over one another's heads, the lighted, ground-floor windows, each with a woman combing her hair.

“A Vessel That Will Take Him Away”

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 wineskins

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 yells, 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.