



VINTAGE

INVISIBLE CITIES
ITALO CALVINO

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Italo Calvino was born in Cuba in 1923, and grew up in Italy. He was an essayist and journalist and a member of the editorial staff of Einaudi in Turin. His other novels include *If on a winter's night a traveller* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. In 1973 he won the prestigious Premio Feltrinelli. He died in 1985.

ALSO BY ITALO CALVINO

The Path to the Spiders' Nests

Adam, One Afternoon

Our Ancestors

Why Read the Classics?

Marcovaldo

Cosmicomics

Time and the Hunter

The Watcher and Other Stories

Italian Folktales

If on a winter's night a traveller

The Castle of Crossed Destinies

Mr Palomar

The Literature Machine

Six Memos for the Next Millennium

Under the Jaguar Sun

The Road to San Giovanni

Numbers in the Dark

Difficult Loves

Hermit in Paris

INVISIBLE CITIES

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
William Weaver

Italo Calvino

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1

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 despatches 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, and 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 & MEMORY • 1

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 multicolored 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.