

The Silent Rider

Four of the eight sides are the earth's and four of heaven. These are chosen to stand for the earth: David, because he was just. Solomon, because he was wise. Ezechias, to whom God accorded years through Isaias, his prophet. And Christ himself who became man, the King of Kings.

The four sides of heaven, however, shall radiate like the four walls of Hierosolyma. They shall be of pure gold, twelve pearls marking the gates engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, twelve gems with the Apostles' names for the foundation stones, as John was foretold by the seventh angel.

The gems will sparkle with the colours of the sky, with hope and heavenly rule, and they shall merge into the Trinity and the cross on which He died.

The sign of the word shall be above the forehead, the four corners of the world into which the message will spread shall stand above the neck. And, just as one of Jacob's sons excelled, hence one shall be different, and as one of the apostles abandoned the Lord, a singular gem shall take his place, combining all of man's virtues, joining heaven and earth, past and present and the, empires of the world. No mortal shall ever forget the sight of it. (p. 4)

Given at Nürnberg the day after Benedicti, on the Wednesday following Reminescere, in the year of the Lord 1424 ...

Ringling their bells and blowing their bagpipes, they marched out of town to meet the fish cart, this morning. They will claim, in time, to have removed condemned men from their gallows, freed prisoners from gaol and to have been followed by all the townsfolk. This is the plan the citizens of Nürnberg intend to follow in order to lure heaven's benediction and the merchants' swelling purses into their town: Behold the coachman jump from his box and prostrate himself, as if he did not know what was hidden in the barrels beneath the salted fish; and both legates alight from their horses with grave faces. The council will applaud their courage using chiselled words. And, of course, people will cheer - they will holler as they are wont to - and they will crane their necks in the firm belief that they will glimpse orb and sceptre pulled from the barrels, and the crown. Boys in white tunics will sit on top of the cart that now contains the imperial insignia, each carrying a white candle. They are forbidden to betray the slightest movement, even to their mothers waving along the road, even if the wind smothered the flame.

"Irrevocably and forever", King Sigmund's charter says, shall Nürnberg guard the insignia of the Empire; the council's envoys paid the King's chancellor a thousand florints for it. And now they escort the cart laden with acquired graces into town: crown, sceptre and sword, the tooth of John the Baptist, a splinter from the cradle and the Holy Lance which pierced the bosom of our Saviour. "Blessed be who cometh", they shout through Nürnberg's lanes as if the Lord incarnate had ridden through Our Lady's Gate.

The relics will now be shown on Friday week after Easter on Nürnberg's market square, traders will offer their wares for sale in the lanes. And even though the crown can only be glimpsed at briefly, who would care about its sparkle when all sins are forgiven at this moment? - A pure soul as if nothing had happened, and nothing between baptism and death but a blank sheet?

The old scribe rests his quill on the manuscript, his hands trembling. His sentences used to wriggle across the page like siblings of the winged serpent on the apothecary's wall, their tails swallowed, reborn in themselves. Given at Nürnberg, in the year of the Lord... Such was the beginning of every letter. So, too, of his account, which he had written incessantly during those summer days thirteen years ago, the din of the pan smith reverberating in his ears. And when the sheets ended up buckling in the flames, he had assumed their contents to have turned into ashes as well. He had left the town clerk's house with a void in his head.

Faithfully he has copied whatever was laid in front of him ever' since, stroke following stroke, oblivious to what the words narrated. In silence he sat amidst the Poor Friars while they spoke of the Church's demise, of quarrel between the emperor's sons and of discord tearing apart the realm. Rain dripping from the roof of the washhouse reminded him occasionally of the stream in which he used to search for coloured pebbles as a boy. He used to hide the pebbles under a tree trunk by the bank. Some were yellow with a rough touch. He could spot those in the water from afar. Others appeared darker under the waves, raven's feathers and oxen's blood. As they dried, however, their colours faded. He threw them back into the stream before climbing the hill to return to the friary. His hands smelted of soil. The friars in the kitchen hardly noticed his absence and even then they would not have dared to report his disappearance to his uncle, the abbot. They called him "the wee son" or "the wee boy". Once he had found a milky white stone with a red vein and he hid it in the hollow of a tree. Years later he would return, he thought, and retrieve it.

WATER

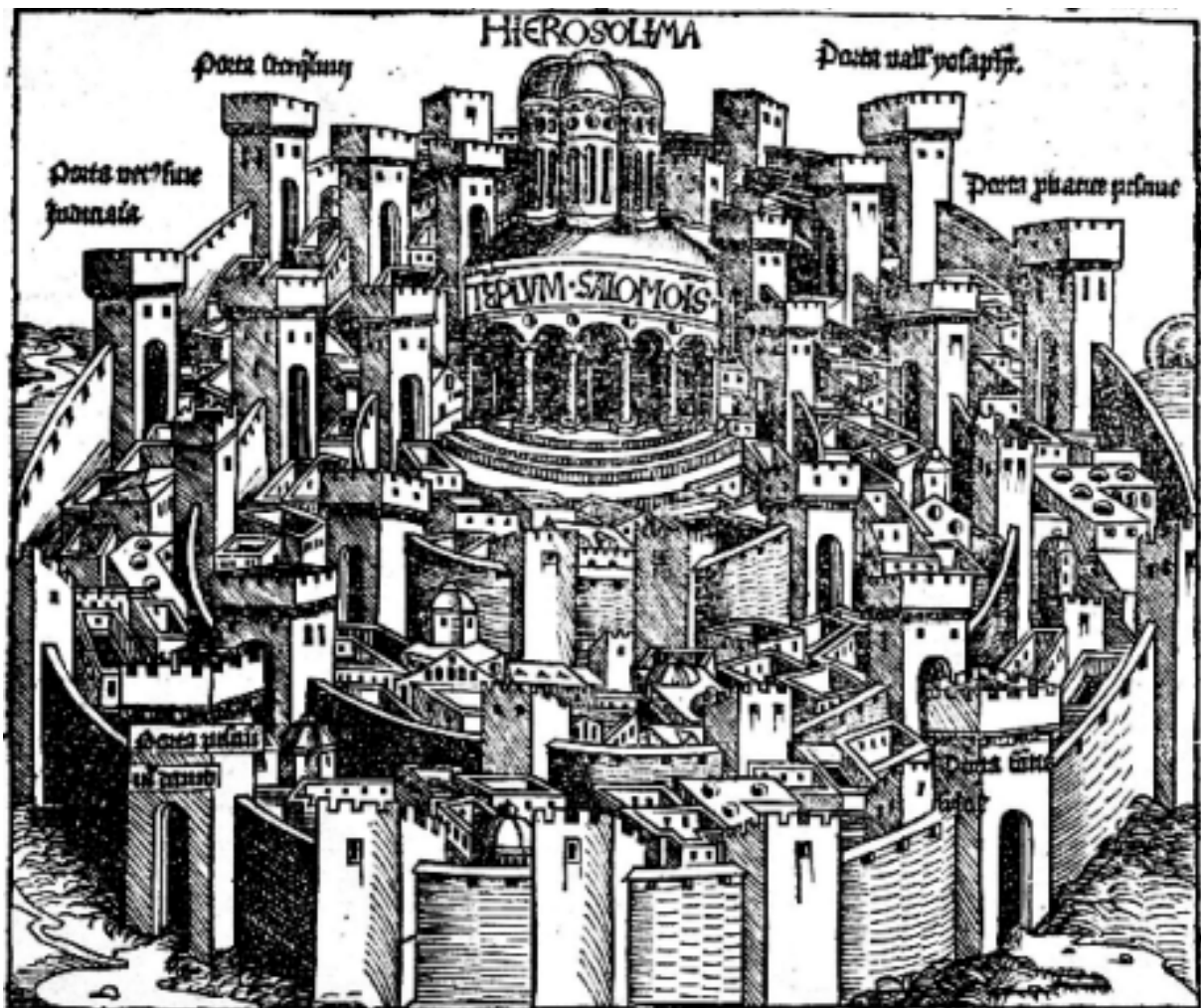
Come forward, my lark, come to me, set your foot into the sling, in the name of the powerful, the supreme being.. and lo, he walks into my trap. Blinded by the light, he falls into darkness. Tied by seven ropes, says Samson, I shall succumb to human frailty. Just skin and bone under your shirt, and yet, temptation nesting in your heart. There you are, dangling head first, and the more you fidget, the deeper the ropes will cut into your flesh. Let me look at you, my lark.

There are not many who make it up to here. Most of them are cut down by the soldiers in the yard. Simpletons dying of their simplicity. Where did you leave your clothes? You don't even look like the others, too slight, too small, your white knees torn and hands like a girl. Did you mean to break the nine locks of the iron door with these? With these ink stained fingers? They used to worship a god with a golden hand and they said: hills and heaven alone are eternal, the days that are numbered and the night... Night lies ahead of us; who knows how they will find you at dawn?

You have not seen me, my lark, of course you did not, the likes of you can only see the light. Where there is light, however, there is darkness, and most, my lark, get lost in it, forgetting what they were looking for.

Guardian, you say? Yes, I am the guardian. Black watching over white, and I have trapped many before, blinded by the glow of gold.

Water, I hear you saying. Yes, it springs from the water and in water, it perishes, too. There are places, however, where the flow of time moves endlessly in spirals. Since that day when the creator banished the most resplendent of his angels and the gem dropped from the heavenly crown, mankind is searching for it, and many are those who believe their name to be among those entitled to find it. Yet, believe me, my lark, few have succeeded, most have paid the ultimate price. Do you not know the stories? The tale of the gem, the story of emperor and duke? Have you not understood their meaning? (p.52)



The coils will turn inward and at the moment of their closure, what was put asunder shall be rejoined; old laws will be revealed to new laws, and those redeemed shall see the heavenly Jerusalem. "Then, I shall give them a white stone engraved with a new name and they alone will know it." Your name at the centre of the circles is but a reddish glow. The colour of the beginning, the master said, is the colour of the ending. I have crossed meadows and forests and I have traversed the lanes of towns, recording, as I was bidden, what I heard and saw, pleading words in hoops and coils - and who knows what people will read out of them. It may be that my senses were clouded long ago, in the fire or in the darkness of the dungeon, and you never sang with Relindis' voice, you never wrote with my hand. The old tanner women called you "daughter". Did she wear the scarf so that I would not see the mark on her neck?

For now, my destiny leads me back into darkness. The silent rider will drape her cape around me, and I shall smell the earth. They say there is a small, narrow cave under the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where Joseph of Arimathea is buried, who brought the Lord's word, and perhaps the chalice, too, to the white northern land. The cave is not far from the Saviour's tomb, and yet untouched by the candles' light. That is where I should like to rest in the heavenly city, when the seventh seal is broken and the dishes of anger spilt.

"His power shall be complete as soon as he rejoins the earth", the emerald slab claimed. Perhaps I held the gem in my hands, perhaps I saw Relindis again and did not recognise her. You may read these pages one day, even if you are not my daughter. Imperfections endow the song with its lustre. The shine and the terror described by our words pass us by, and in the centre of the coils we find not faith, love or bliss, but the moment in which life turns still, when time sets us free. Then we might stand on the riverbank under trees, as in that valley, and while the basket weaver cuts his reeds, the sun glistens in the stream. (p. 250)