Hildegarde

Cologne

This is Helendrude.

You may prefer to call her Elyndruda, sounding as it does, perhaps, more natural to our ears. You may choose, with absolute impunity, to conceal her features, describe her in one way or another, and build around her a world of imaginary materials, the shadows of rocks, of waters and giant carp; the shadow of the shadow of century-old trees. Helendrude is a nun. She lives outside her era, in a cyclical time punctuated by the hundred and fifty psalms of the Old Testament and the passage of the stars. Like her world of reflections, she moves in ever larger circles towards the colourless shores of the end of time, that pebbled beach where we stand in stasis, all, patiently awaiting a verdict unlike any other.

Helendrude likes dogs, the grey hares of the pale-wood convent, and bare earth beneath her bare feet. In spring, dressed in white, she and her sisters head to the deep straggly woods of the fens, and there cut, from morning to night, armfuls of rushes to spread over the stones. She is not very skilled with her hands, nor very pious, and her Latin stumbles over the most everyday terms. Her virtues consist largely of shortcomings: discreet through being rather dull, obedient and simple. She lives in a closed world, no bigger than one's fist, without any real curiosity about where the birds in the sky come from, or where the river flows, or what grows on its far side. Helendrude is nourished by her sisters' affection and slowly grows old. It is difficult to determine her ancestry. She is depicted alone, in the centre of the canvas, kneeling on the ground, her lips and eyes closed, forehead lowered, radiating humility.

Once, she saw a dog give birth to a litter of stillborn puppies, not yet fully formed, in a confusion of warm flesh that she took at first for entrails. Things too small to live, too indistinct, and yet, here was an eye, here an embryonic paw, and the mother whimpering as she licked herself to prevent the loss of her own blood. Another time, although this was more a vision, as in a dream, one that causes you to wake gasping for air, she saw a splendid virgin, sliced open from pussy to throat. A young girl with brown eyes, red hair, and a green dress, lying on the grass, talking.

The dead girl told Helendrude who she was and what she wanted from her, and the young nun with the unreliable memory, poor at needlework, inept at manual labour, the paltry singer and greedy sleeper, repeated the vision to the mother superior, who in turn recounted it to the abbot. She had to tell the whole thing again to many others, repeating to very learned men the exact words of this disembowelled woman, for the greater glory of God, until her own name, Helendrude, Elyndruda, was itself engraved as witness in the great book of human memory, beside that of Saint Cordula, whose martyrdom has been celebrated since this day on the twenty-second of October, guarding thus against her being completely forgotten, denying her forever the respite of anonymity.

But as far as her story goes, we are already at its end.

This is Cordula.

You can see her on a number of panels at Cologne Cathedral, in unsubstantiated portraits. She is in the midst of her sisters, a crowd of beautiful women who are all, it seems, travelling down the Rhine. She wears her hair loose, held back by a headband set with stones. Her posture is reserved, and a bag hangs from her left forearm. She appears to be wearing a velvet dress. Her deep pink cheeks betray her emotional nature. A few images later, we find her naked, plunged up to her waist in a vast baptismal tub, while the Pope Cyriacus, in Rome, blesses her along with the many thousands of her companions from her final voyage. She is the only one not concealing her breasts, her hands instead clasped in capitulation. No more than the others does she see the enigma, the black face framed with black, hovering above the scene.

Cordula is not on the twenty-first panel, the final one, depicting the slaughter at the gates of Cologne. Hidden in the hold of one of the ships, she is the only one to escape the massacres, which saw so many irreproachable women perish, as well as a few men, according to some, and children, according to others. Black night in the depths of the hold. The boat is moored and rocked by the current. Damp wood. The smell of freezing blood. How can one believe they all died on the spot? That the cloud of arrows, the striking of the mallets and clubs, the daggers, the swords, brought an end to the thousands

of Christians from this expedition in just half a day? That a soul left every body? That Cordula, alone, still breathes the air of this world, still feels the cold of its nights, and the pain in every part of her body touching the floor, as if it were inside her, in the fluctuating, unstable images that she cannot stop herself from conjuring?

There is no whimpering, no sobbing, No one asks for water, for someone to end their suffering, or bring their child, or pray for the salvation of their soul, an eternity in Hell is unimaginable. Cordula has for company nothing but the sound of her heart, her lungs, her teeth that she cannot stop from shattering. The water beneath the hull. The conversations of the lookouts, on the bank, sitting by their great fire and the sleeping mass of their fellow butchers. Cordula does not sleep, does not dream. She will never dream again. She wishes she could feel the flames, their heat, and perhaps understand what this strange, dark face was that hovered above them all at the moment of their baptism.

In the morning, she comes to a decision. She stretches and sits up, drags herself upright, and hauls herself out of her recess, her hiding spot among the wooden beams. The dead are pale and dishevelled. She wishes she could not recognise them, that she were incapable of finding their names. She climbs the few rungs, surprised by the sweetness of the air through the trapdoor and the brightness of the day. The deck is littered with bodies. Near the bank, a dull blue fog rises from the Rhine, and beyond it: Cologne, not so far off, its ancient walls covered in ivy, its closed gates that no one had opened to stop the slaughter. The barbarians have set up tents. Cordula observes as much as she can: the canvas sheets, the beasts, the siege machines, the clumsy movements of a waking army, so as not to see the rest, so as not to think, despite the smell.

You know those grey heaps, the pieces of dead bodies, the chopped-off bits of human: fascinating, absurd. Decimated corpses float, crushed between the hulls. Others lie in piles. Others are slightly burnt. Some are seated, bent over one or more arrows. And then the heads. Fragments of heads. Those who have been dismembered for the pleasure of the living. Thousands of bodies bleached by the night and by the gravity that draws down towards the earth that mass of now inert blood. There had been no time yet to play with them or dispose of them. One solider who has come aboard to shave spits at a priest floating and spinning in a pool of water, bearing a single bulging eye. The soldier lifts his gaze and sees Cordula. He is bearded, poorly dressed. He smiles. Cordula walks ashore, oblivious to the cold skin brushing against her bare legs.

When the voices from Heaven pronounced my name as martyr, I blocked my ears. I hid myself away. Seeing all this will have been my punishment.

Cordula, in all likelihood, is speaking a language incomprehensible to the barbarian, a dialect from Cornwall or some other far-off land. And he, undoubtedly, the day after so much blood, can see only the life in this girl dressed in green, with red hair and brown eyes, gorgeous tits, pale skin: a model for the fine painter. He left his sword in the camp, but still has a curved blade in his boot, held in place by a piece of cloth, given to him by his father's father, far away in his country among the hills, a piece of sharp steel as long as his open hand. He is the only one to have noticed the girl. He hears the first hubbub of voices breaking the morning quiet, laughter, the bellow of a horn. Cordula advances, arms and eyes open. She gazes beyond this world, towards the golden light, the doves, the curling smoke of burning incense. The soldier draws his weapon. It is a long road to sainthood, and Cordula will need every one of Helendrude's words.

The knife on the foggy shore. Blood like rose petals. Suffering. The inexorable cruelty. Love. Who knows? Cordula's scull is preserved in Cologne, in the gold chamber of the cathedral. Her body lies in the church of the Jesuits. A disembowelled maiden fleeing the scene to better bear witness to it, she is but a minor character in the legend of Saint Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins, a heroine of few words, whose story has already reached its end.

This is Ursula.

Young. Blond. Pale. Honey and porcelain, a shard of glass in perfect water. A receptacle for celestial light. Ursula is fourteen years old, her father is king, her mother queen. She lives in a palace of high ceilings, at the heart of a country of culture and faith. It is difficult to love Ursula: she is much too perfect and in this way alone appears a little endearing. Ursula is an ideal, an unresolved tending towards the absolute, a narrative role. She is a crystal ball in which the highest aspirations come to be reflected. A recipient. A mask.

The king of the Picts is announced. Ursula's reputation has surpassed the boundaries of the kingdom: he wants her for his son. In Britain, the Great, that of Hadrian, the Picts have a bad reputation: naked and painted, furious, hairy, cannibalistic, making sacrifices to horrible godless religions, or to amoral gods. Ursula's father, promised by the emissary treasures, game, marvels and black magic, is loathe to hand over the purity of his only child to savages. So the ambassador, a dwarf with irregular limbs and a grotesque face, endowed with such a voice as has never been heard by human ears, offers threats that ring out and echo beneath the limestone ceilings.

If you do not allow our Conan to marry your Ursula, at the Picts' command, forests will be set in motion. The rivers will swell and sweep everything away. Hordes will spring from the earth and trample your broods. Dogs will eat their masters. The dwarf withdraws. The king, alone, writhes with fear and indecision. War? Or submission?

Fear not, my father. I have had a dream. In the council chambers, at sunset, Ursula is an apparition. We have already said enough about her beauty. That is the first step towards sainthood. You will have Conan come, she continues, with his family, and ours. You will select ten virgins of the highest birth to keep me company. To each of these eleven, you will assign a thousand virgins as servants, and you will make ships capable of housing all these women and their belongings. For three years we will live on these boats, during which time my fiancé will discover the Scriptures and convert to our faith. When this time has passed, I will, at last, be able to marry him.

Ursula is trembling slightly, like a bird just emerged from its egg, or a musical instrument played by unfamiliar hands. She does not tell her father the end of her vision: the promise that an angel had made her in that paradoxical, amber half-sleep of the late afternoon. We will take care of you, he assured her. You will be made a martyr. Ursula has heard of Christians eaten by beasts. Torture, over and over again. Fire that burns and refuses to consume. Eternal grace. She is fourteen years old, and her life has already been written for her.

We know nothing of the meetings at court between the two families, of the accords signed, and the compromises and friendships, perhaps, that emerge between civilised citizens and the black-nailed nomads. What is admired, above all, is the construction of the eleven ships: the arsenal and ornamentation of each one, the gilding of the wood, the fabric of the sails, the shape of the oars and the benches. Ships unlike no other; trees cut, dragged, pruned, turned into beams, sails sewn, ropes spun and woven. The workhouses struggle to keep up. The gigantic arches are mounted before the watching eyes of snotty-nosed children. The tumult of the striking hammer, and the carpenter, bathed in sweat, spitting off the warehouse roof.

In the courtyard, it is a stampede of girls, with their hairstyles and dresses, teeth rubbed with cuttlefish powder, and half-closed painted eyelids. Maidens from all across the kingdom and far beyond are to be taken: from the slender to the voluptuous, the savage, the anaemic, the well-born and the social outcasts, the daft and the wily. With open arms, Ursula and her ten companions welcome their thousands and thousands of murmuring, fervent followers. They dress them and comb their hair, wash them and perfume then, and when the ships are ready, they board their ships, free of men, for three years of sailing.

Every day, from the shore, the people admire them. Hat in hand, brow furrowed: eleven identical vessels in the low evening light, floating on the tides as if on solid ground, in which these young women sailed, innocent and secluded, taken into the hands of God. Every day for a thousand days, Ursula and her companions play the wind and the oars and grow tough battling the sea. Each of the boats is a self-contained, harmonious world. Their rounds are a dance of perfect love, the manifestation of a greater harmony. In the harbour, people squint still, trying to make out the masts, the hulls, moving ever further away. Luckily, they will all soon return to land.

Ursula has another dream. The same angel, or perhaps a different one, comes to dry her tears. Be not afraid, he says again, we have heard your prayers. There will be no need for you to bend before the laws of men, for it is a celestial marriage that awaits you beyond these waters. You have been chosen, never doubt this. Now, open your eyes. Ursula wakes. Long through the night the wind had blown, pushing the ships towards new coastlines. Coloured tiles on pointed roofs, fishermen with bright red hats, the tumult of a thousand bells, the breath of a foreign town in the early morn. The virgins land at Tiel, in the Netherlands. They lower the sails. From the prow of the first boat, Ursula reassures her sisters. We are going to head up the river, she assures them. We will sail along the Rhine to Cologne. No one will be able to stop us. We are free, as none of us will return from this voyage, for what we will become is written in what we are. Give thanks! And the virgins sing and pray and take to the oars.

From mariners to pedlars, their reputation precedes them down the Rhine. In Cologne, the people prepare a festival below the fortifications in honour of their arrival, raising trestles and building bread ovens and broilers. The eleven ships in procession, rowing against the current with their eleven thousand oars: the ambassador of dusk. Torches are lit. Bouquets of flowers are thrown into the waters. There are fifes, tambourines and bells. Pennants flying on poles and curious onlookers perched in trees to welcome the voyagers, the virgins of Cologne. The white fairies appear and throw ropes to the youths who strain to tow the boats to their pontoons. Then the gangway is put in place and the beauties, one by one, descend onto the great pasture, curtsy, and join the festivities.

Ursula is the last to step ashore. The sun, at last, has set. Naked white lights expose strange worlds. The angel waiting for her on the shore slips a hand around her waist. You knew I would be here, he says, and here I am. What is going to happen? Ursula asks. You will continue on to Basel, where you will leave the boats. You will walk to Rome, where you will be sanctified. Then, accompanied by the crowd of those who wish to join you, you will return here. To this very spot. Thousands of virgins beneath a moon as fine as an eyelash. The fields are green and lush, the night joyous. The meat drips fatty drops into the embers and sizzles, the bread is passed, there is wine and music. All will die. The angel leaves. Ursula, alone, a reflection, thinks.

In Basel harbour, the boats are towed ashore and tied to blocks of wood. The bishop provides donkeys, guides and guards to accompany them. He himself would have liked to follow, but Ursula discourages him. When we return, then you may accompany us, if you still wish. Pray while you wait, and cleanse yourself. The women, alone with their beasts, cross the mountains, the glaciers, trace steep ridges and descend again, in single file, towards the lakes and gentle hills, until they meet the round cobblestones of the ancient road. Cyriacus, the Pope of Rome, welcomes the pilgrims. Their baptism is the grand finale. It is said that the Holy Father then renounced his duties and accepted having his name withdrawn from the list of Saint Peter's successors. So it is as an anonymous Christian that he is accorded the privilege of leaving for Cologne with the eleven thousand virgins and joining them in their walk with the martyr.

Over the course of the return journey, the procession grows ever bigger. The Queen of Sicily joins them, as well as the daughter of the King of Constantinople, Jacob of Antioch and Cardinal Vincent, a black Florentia princess and the great Pantalus, and the Bishop of Basel, his head shaved, having spent the time of Ursula's absence in fast and worship. It is said that the young girls, now anointed by the Holy Church, were even more beautiful, lighter at every step, and that their arrival was preceded by joyous coincidences, gentles odours, sighs of contentment. The ships take to the see once more. All there is to do is to let them waves carry them. The Huns are pillaging the German country, but the noise of their war stops at the water's edge. The peasants stand, leaning on their shovels, watching the astonishing crew pass by, these boats all in a line, all murmuring with hymns.

In Mainz, the fiancé, the eldest son of the King of Picts, awaits them, accompanied by Cordula, Ursula's mother, and Deonatus, her father, as well as Papunius and Barachius, her uncles, brothers of her father. The bishop of the city baptises Conan in the true faith and, according him Etherius as his Christian name, pours water over his head. Then all the people of the city, and many others still, join the cortege of the thousands upon thousands, which swells as it approaches the field of the final sacrifice, this fervent crowd of worshippers of Christ. Cologne, which they reach one windless midday, has by the Huns been besieged, and there is in their hearts no place for mercy. Hardly were the ships in range of their weapons when they took to massacring with an inhuman heart the assembled innocent.

Do they still sing, these beautiful souls cut down in the prime of their lives, too soon welcomed by the angels of light come to comfort them and guide them into eternity? One chronicle displays a list of some ten thousand names of these martyr voyagers, marvelling at the survival of children, born on the road and nourished by the Lord when they could not find enough milk at the breast of their mothers, sucking on their own fingers. The same history depicts this foreclosed world as a blessed society, adrift, commanded by women and delivered from both desires and fears, but not from ordinary passions. A place of discussions and squabbles, where one lives as a philosopher for the short time one is separated from death.

The field of the festival is that of the slaughter. They died by the water, beneath the walls of Cologne. They push and press against one another, desperate to pass through the queue or to be struck by arrows. The impious do not weaken, their insanity is bestial. Then Ursula appears, and a cry freezes all movement. Attila, King of the Huns, holds back the weapons in a moment of captivation. The virgin

shines. She burns. Haloed by virtues, she glows. The barbarian strides towards her. The executioners cease to growl, the dying to bleed, as Attila throws himself at the feet of the young girl. He grovels like an old dog before his mistress and begs, trembling: I pray you, be my wife.

Time is frozen. It is Ursula's moment. The angel, at her side, strokes her cheek. For him alone, the virgin smiles. In the eyes of the world, she remains unblinking. The dead around her, the birds frozen mid-flight, Attila with his nose in the mud, not daring to brush the hem of her skirts. This moment will last forever.

With the tip of her toes, Ursula pushes the barbarian away and an arrow immediately pierces her heart. Blood gushes. The saint collapses. Thousands of innocents, that night, will follow her to the hereafter.

Some weeks later, it appears, the assassins are attacked in the middle of the night by eleven thousand ghosts and flee in great disorder, putting an end to the siege of Cologne. The inhabitants give thanks to this miracle then bury the Christian martyrs to whom they owe their lives. Clematius, from the Orient, has a basilica build right beside the site, but the passing of generations leads the site of the monument to be effaced completely, until the time of Emperor Henri IV and the construction of the new grounds and the highly enlightening visions of a sister of the Abbey of Schönau, the story of which begins now, just after the story of Ursula.

This is Elisabeth.

We know of her only the echoes of a voice. No one yet has painted or described her. No one has taken the time to delimit her sunken body, destined for absence and internal infinitude. Elisabeth dies from deprivation, from an asceticism taken beyond all reason, and corporal punishments inflicted upon herself. She is the magistra of the Schönau Abbey and one of the most renowned visionaries of the Rhine Valley. Her books, at the time, had a readership of three to four times those of her elder and councillor of the Bingen Monastery. Elisabeth dies at the age of thirty-five. It is difficult to imagine a time during her existence that was not devoted to pain or anxiety, in dark valleys and fog, in the cold of night terrors or the mad fervour of fevers, in the infinite reflections of opposing mirrors.

She takes holy orders at the age of twelve years, pubescent, tall for her age and already slender, with long bony limbs, flat breasts and hips, a calm face with full lips, soft eyes, and a wide, pale forehead. She has lived, previously, in the city, or as a poor noble. She has learnt a little Latin, and already knows a few psalms. Eckbert, her older brother, is a theologian: he is in Paris studying the paradoxical benefits of all the divine virtues. It is Elisabeth herself who chooses to take the veil. It suits her family well, for they are sufficiently pious and wealthy to permit her to follow the mandated path to salvation. Perhaps the young girl, the little girl, genuinely felt herself called by the mysteries of this closed world, this reflection of the heavenly city, where men and women live according to the codes of a transcendental order. Opaque, virtuous harmony, that prepares one only for eternal life in the hereafter. Perhaps she was pushed to it by a powerful injunction, a message audible to her alone. Perhaps the vision of an angel, as is not uncommon, decided her future. Twenty years at the service of disbelieving men, unbearable punishments of the flesh to appease the evils of the soul, and her blessed death; a frail abbess, her lovely cheeks blue and sunken, her eyes wild, talon hands knitting nothing but air, and then salvation. Most likely, she is simply terrified by what she senses, by that of which she feels herself capable.

In the convent, for many years - ten at least, and certainly more - she does not speak of what her body is doing to her. She is seen as absent-minded, sickly, emotional, susceptible, and, at times, haughty. She seems to daydream. She asks incongruous questions: Where am I?, When is the next service?, Is it winter?. Tears roll down her cheeks. At night, her cellmates hear her speaking, sometimes crying, but are unable to wake her. The visions that ravish her freeze and rack her body. Her ecstasies wring her flesh, contort her features, and crush her bones. Elisabeth is a toy in the hands of greater powers. She does not know how to bridle her gifts.

Soon Elisabeth slips into her bedding a small book with virgin pages onto which, in the dark, she notes what she learns, the lines packed tightly together to banish the terror and solitude of her condition.

For if she sees and hears saints, ancestors, cherubs and angels, she also sees, and hears, beasts, demons and Satan, prince of darkness, accompanied by Pontius Pilate on his right, and Judas Iscariot on his left. In her cell, alone, Elisabeth bears witness. She makes note of the passing of time, and creates points of reference in her own story as her only consolation.

She has been unable to take communion today because she has her period, despite her vital need to renew her alliance with Christ. She remains in her cell, bowed over, watching the robes and feet of her sisters pass by, to and from the consecrated host, the voice of the abbot, abdominal pains, a light trembling of her legs, a heat in her face. She lifts her head. The light has changed: it is brighter, the shadows sharper, whites blinding. A man in the middle of the choir, a few feet from her, turns away. He is wearing a habit, his belt is undone and hangs, a thick rope, with its knot brushing the floor, and the brother fidgets, bobs up and down, wriggles and jiggles in the middle of the chapel, dancing before the altar. The saliva in Elisabeth's mouth turns to acid. She wants to close her eyes, to not see what will follow. She does not want him to turn around, this mysterious dancer. He turns around. And immediately against her. Face of hair. Breath of shit. You, he says waving his clog, I'm going to break the teeth in your mouth.

Elisabeth is at the bottom of a valley. It is night. Every inch of the earth trembles and groans. A stampede of thousands, millions of hooves. Elisabeth is naked, she tries to hide herself with her hands, but her arms conceal nothing. Something is coming. Something is moving in the darkness, and it is growing. The word is shifting, a thick, dark mass, overflowing. She glimpses eyes, horns, and then the goats overwhelm her, engulf her. She screams. It is pain that drags her from her trances, for the panic is not enough. Alone, in her cell, bathed in sweat, jaw still tight with clenched teeth, Elisabeth writes down her visions. Then she prays. Then, with her remaining strength, she strikes the inside of her thighs, the soles of her feet, her back. The lascivious monk will return. He will always return, with the goats, and the evil kin.

Some time later, an angel presents her with a set of scales on which are balanced the book of her good actions and the book of her faults. The lower pan condemns her to damnation, but a small piece of bread on the other side manages to bring the scale back into balance. How can I make it tilt the right way? Elisabeth asks. The messenger takes a long whip out from behind his back, of the kind used to compel an ox down the fields, and he strikes her with all his might, one, two, three times. Like this, he says. And he strikes her again. The pain is unbearable. Like this. Like this.

Tongues begin to wag throughout the nunnery: so strange, so quick to beat herself. Dried blood stains her clothes and clogs. She faints in the physic garden and the snow covers her without melting, as if she were dead. She is heard speaking Latin. For what sin is she so tormented? the sisters wonder in solitude. What must she pay for with her terrible convulsions?

On her knees in the chapel, Elisabeth prays, encircled by a crowd of apparitions. It is October, Saint Ursula's Day, and all the virgins, and all their companions, have invaded Schönau, delicate as glass figurines, miniatures that escaped their parchments. Their wounds are simple red lines, inflammations interlace, the faces smile and glow with celestial light. The nun recognises Ursula, of course, and Cordula, and Verena at her side, the martyr's companion whose relics guard Schönau Abbey. Elisabeth is filled with a brutal joy that overwhelms her like a flood, and she weeps and weeps. She wishes she could join these visions, dissolve into their light. She wishes for arms, around her, to console her body. In the shadows of her cell, under her woollen blanket, the young woman writes blindly.

The following spring, the punishing angel returns to see her, as well as the dark monk and the red-faced bulls with twisted forms. Days and nights blend into one. Rays of sunlight on the eternally cold stones. Miniature worlds suspended in the air. Elisabeth plunges iron spikes into her stomach and groin, into her breasts. She whips, on her back, the lacerated skin from the day before. The angel returns, again and again, telling her, You must speak, Elisabeth. Tell everyone what you have learnt from us.

The little nun has glimpsed the end of time, a four-headed creature has shown her Judgement Day: she does not wish to repeat a thing. She writes in silence. She falls sick. I am the prey of demons, she thinks. And then: No one will believe me. Then: What pride you have to think yourself a prophetess. The angel thunders. If you stay silent, you will die. Elisabeth no longer rises. Grey-faced on her bed, she trembles. The yellow of July in the skylight is feverous and shivering. She sweats and trembles. Abbot Hildelin is at her bedside. What is it, my child? Speak! the angel cries, grabbing her by the hair, smashing her face against the walls of her cell. You must eat, one sister says, trying to force a spoon through her closed lips. Speak or die!

A week later she calls for the good father. She entrusts to him her notes hidden beneath her pillow. Everything is there. She says nothing more. Barely a few hours later, the Schönau mastiffs enter the room, barking, and rush to great her. The nightmare goats that had remained under her bed are chased away: they flee, whimpering, out the doors and windows. Elisabeth is free from sorrow. She sits

up. Bring me paper, is her reply when, later, she is asked what she desires. I must write to my brother to tell him what has happened.

It is December once more. Eckbert will come, he is doing his best, the outside world is detaining him: a promising ecclesiastical career, and advances in every field, whether scholastic or political. The older brother takes his time abandoning everything to devote himself to Schönau Abbey, take the collar, exist only for Elisabeth. The visions and torments return unexpectedly. In the barn, the nun begins shouting what the voices whisper to her – Penitence! Repentance! – to the astonishment of the lay brothers. In the church to which she is dragged, she continues to thunder: Heaven's anger is upon earth, it rolls as a cloud; sinners, you have committed too many sins!

It is a storm that sweeps through the abbey. It spreads through the villages, in the evening, at supper, in the morning, at the mill, at the wash house, the kiln. The sister who sees angels has predicted the end of time. We must leave this world, prepare for the great voyage, cleanse ourselves. The gloomy gather together as the joyous gossip. She is neither the first nor the last person to claim they are a visionary. How many warnings have there been already? The wine is in the cask. The frozen lake is blue and sings beneath the children's feet. The forest cracks under the piles of snow, but the mild weather will return. The angry even grow indignant. Who does she think she is? Since when have virgins awarded themselves the right to preach? How can Hildelin let his girls attract all this attention? In no time at all, Elisabeth's notoriety spreads beyond Schönau.

The abbot summons her. Who inspires you? The Lord. Who speaks to you? An angel. Silence. Please, Father. Are you sure that it truly is the Lord? That it truly is an angel? I beg you. I have repeated your words in the pulpit and before the clerks of Worms. Before the bishop. Father, I bear so much. They must have proof, my child. The next time this angel speaks to you, ask him. Face up to him. I will do as you request, Father. It is not a request, Elisabeth. Hildelin is a very tall man, and broad as a butcher. He knows how to be and how to stop being gentle. Elisabeth, torn in every direction, pressured from the outside and from within.

Many weeks pass during which she does not dare question the angel. The sisters whisper as she passes by, hissing behind her back. They say she is intemperate. They say she is possessed. Curious visitors at the borders of the abbey fields come to see the nuns at work, hoping just to get a glimpse of her. Do it, Eckbert orders in his final letter. Prove to them your good faith. I am coming. The cursed angel is furious at the question. His eyes, his hair are flames. How can you doubt, after all you have seen, all that you have felt and suffered? he growls. Look what we give you, and see if I have not been sent from Heaven! In an immense hall Elisabeth discovers, assembled before her with welcoming smiles, the saints and the blessed, the virtuous dead, the prophetesses Hilda, Deborah, Judith and Jael, the Evangelists, Saint Jean the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Michael the Archangel, and the Lord's voice says: You have seen, I have confirmed it for you. How did you see it? You saw into My secrets and beyond that which men see. And what did I hide from you? Nothing.

Eckbert leaves Bonn for Schönau. This older brother, out of touch since their childhood, is a slim man, almost frail, all lines and angles, with squinty eyes, a great internal strength and a faith like fury. He is a man of remarkable intelligence. He loves his sister enormously, in his own way. He also sees what he can get out of this business. Eckbert knows society and studied in Paris the great questions of faith. His friendships and his gifts open many doors for him, and temporal powers lie behind each one. He renounces all this for a more tenuous but still precious good: the truth. Having become a simple monk, detached from worldly constraints, he effortlessly displaces Hildelin to establish himself as the guardian of his little sister. He has realised that Elisabeth, she who is capable of questioning angels, is in intimate dialogue with Jean the Baptist and the Mother of God, and that she can bring indisputable responses to as yet unresolved questions.

Elisabeth has her feet on the ground and her head in the skies. Her eyes, rolled back into her head, see the spheres beyond this world. Her feeble voice whispers the foundations of the sacred mysteries. Eckbert appoints himself scribe of these revelations. He becomes the patron of pain, the reason of madness, the logic of the great question. And Elisabeth grows stronger, ceases to worry. Her brother protects her, keeps her away from the rumours, teases her, terrifies her all at once. Between shadow and light, this woman seems to live only ever in hesitation. She investigates. She asks the ghosts of nuns that she sees walking along the bed of a stream to intercede on her behalf to the Virgin. A few questions, in exchange for a few pains.

This is how Eckbert learns that Mary rose to the heavens with her flesh, and that she was aged fifteen years and six and a half months when she welcomed the Word into her virginal breast. From Verena, the martyr of Cologne, he obtains long explanations about the presence of the bones of men and children among those of the eleven thousand martyrs, and of a tomb stone in the name of Etherius, the protector of Deutz Abbey. This enables him to have Ermenricus and Brother Gerard buried - Schönau monks left without graves for centuries. Angels carry Elisabeth over the ravines to allow her to hear the Lord's voice once again. From these trances, she authoritatively relates anti-Cathar theses that resemble point by point those developed by her brother. The saints and the blessed rule in the theologian's favour.

That is not all, of course. The absences of Elisabeth are not reducible. The water is not concerned with making the mill turn, the wind changes direction on a whim or by chance. Only man can imagine that this fire is born from that lightning. Elisabeth loses the hand that holds her back, Eckbert's voice becomes distorted, fades away. She sees their uncle, Theodoric, burning in a flaming cave. Their cousin, Helid, her mouth marked by torture, begging with bestial cries the right to lick away her tears and drink them. In the middle of a scorching ocean, a delightful island emerges. Souls, powerless to reach it, slide through the asphyxiating waters with grey, unstable bodies dragging behind them like wet cloth.

Elisabeth rubs herself to remove the muck and blood that covers her, laments being unable to take communion, and the angel pummels her with blows. Eckbert, on the other side of the door, reads the Books of Psalms as he waits for the cries to cease. When she appears at services, all eyes are upon her. Elisabeth is alone. She no longer has any sisters in the community. She is revered or she is feared. People come from all over the country to consult her. Wash the corporal! she cries out, interrupting the Easter service. The blood of the Lord, can't you see? The immaculate sheet is changed. She grinds her teeth. She has fevers. She refuses to eat. She cries for days, unable to stop.

John the Baptist takes her to the city of the Sovereign Lord, the white doors are splattered with blood and the underworld deserted since Christ came down to empty it. Heaven is still being built. She takes a few steps. It is a world of peace and abandon: luxuriant, harmonious, with prairies and light woods, wide rivers, and a blue sky in which angels work silently, effortlessly, to build the immense cathedral that will welcome humanity at the end of time. The archangel Michael directs the construction. On the last day, he says to his visitor, The low will be united with the high. Elisabeth regains consciousness on her bed, her arms and legs stiff with cramps, her mouth dry, and, without a sound, she laughs. She was dreaming as she was dying. It would be nice for it to end that way, to leave one's flesh, abandon oneself. Then she hears footsteps on the other side of the door, a chair scraping on the floor. Everything will go one: life, the visions, the pain.

Hildelin insists that Elisabeth has foreseen Judgement Day. Hildegarde, the abbess of Saint Rupert, sends a courier bidding her to cease her penitences. Abstinence, fasting, and self-inflicted punishments are as much signs of pride, she writes. The visionary's condition demands retirement and submission, *discretio*. It is the devil who pushes her to asceticism, to darken her days. Elisabeth agrees. She would like to be able to submit and obey, bend before the authority of this wise woman. But her visions transport her and exhaust her. They drain her. The dead, the saints and the living, the angels and the demons, they all exist together in a single time and in the space of her perceptions. Elisabeth is not the mistress of herself, she is a moronic woman, a tool in violent and inept hands. She is a world in distress, an arid swamp. She is dying at a great speed. She is thirty-five years old.

By the end of her days, Elisabeth has won the respect of those around her. A magistra of Schönau, she sits at the bedside of dying sisters and accompanies their souls as they depart from this world. She knows when the time has come and, bent over their pale faces, drenched in sweat or worn down from pain, over the wide open mouths, gasping for breath, she rocks and cradles, murmurs with closed lips, her eyelids drooping, her face contracting, she appears entirely outside of herself. Then suddenly she sits upright, lifts her arms towards the ceiling of the cell, stained with black, and, for those who are there to hear her, proclaims: All is done.

Elisabeth assists her brother in his preaching. In the early hours of the morning, in unfinished churches covered with scaffolding and wet straw, she echoes all that the angel murmurs to her: The error of the Cathars is to believe that God is two. The error of the Cathars is to think Him absent. The error of the Cathars is to live without the Church. They lie. They persist in error. They mislead those who listen to them. I have seen these people, after their deaths, and I know their suffering. Eckbert

watches his sister rail. She appears immense against the shimmering grey of the stones, and her voice, transformed, mixes bits of Latin verses in with the German. She stands bolt upright before the altar like a teacher at his dais, moving very little. Her eyes look elsewhere, towards the vault where the pigeons nest, beyond the wooden ribbing. The monk struggles to recall her as a child: bathing in the big barrel, the rabbit races, the silence of the great bed when the snoring stopped and the entire household whistled with the absence of noises in the prison of snow. These attentive men and women, their hands open, will soon break down doors, shatter fasteners to drag their heretical neighbours into the street to burn.

A strike, an absence, then pain. A blow, then absence, more pain. More dull this time. Slower to hatch. Blood and arms are weakening. Elisabeth's narrow way grows narrower still. The mists grow thicker, become luminous and shifting. The fogs sing. The visions are too much now. Elisabeth no longer needs to be ravished to rise up against the simony of the priests, the influence of the antipope, the Emperor's wars against Rome, the roaming of the clergy, the vanity of the people, the ignorance of the powerful. She no longer requires the expertise of the dead, the saints, the angels, the eleven thousand women quartered in Cologne to understand the reality of this world, its inevitable dereliction, its deep dive into the darkness of the coming ages. Time is running out. Eckbert no longer questions her; he writes books so that everyone may know. So that those who have been unable to see and hear the visionary of Schönau may judge with their imagination the depth of her presence. The older brother, in turn, becomes the instrument of another's will. In turn, he bears witness to a story.

Elisabeth takes an inconceivably long time to die. She sprawls, overflows, relives every memory from her years of life. Lying motionless, her features drawn, cold as a river stone, the mother superior, so unskilled in existing in this world, persists in refusing all food. She no longer sighs nor weeps. Lifeless, she speaks little. Some say they saw her glowing. Others that they smelt, in her breath, the buds of spring. Other still say they heard her predict the date of her salvation. We know nothing of the visions that accompanied her final days but we hope that nightmares were not among them, that since the weakness of her body prevented her from mortifying herself, she was able to reach the hereafter without jolt nor torture. Eckbert is at her bedside. Hildelin too, perhaps, if he has not yet died. Before the abbey walls, in the courtyard, people gather. They come for news and pray confusedly beneath the sky for the mother of Schönau, for the salvation of their own souls, for their children to grow, for the wheat and the nightingale's song. Elisabeth is dying. Elisabeth will not stop dying.

In the texts that will survive her, translated into German, French, Icelandic, on the basis of her books of visions and Marian theology, her hagiography of Ursula, that Voragine will take up in his halcyon adventures, she is given the quality of saint. Elisabeth, celebrated on the eighteenth of June, is not, however, canonised, and four centuries pass before she is recognised as a martyr. Her heritage is, for a long time, more vast that that of her fellow sister, Bingen, who never knew ecstasy and never saw the Lord in his majesty, nor the humanity of Christ in the form of a young woman. Elisabeth's books are more often copied and much better diffused. Of Hildegarde, we retain above all the warnings to her younger sister. May those who desire to accomplish divine work never forget their human condition, she writes. May they always have in their minds what they are and what they are led to become. May they leave their celestial affairs in the hands of celestial beings, for they remain exiled from and ignorant of these subjects. They will only ever be able to sing the divine mysteries in the manner of a trumpet, that produces sounds but can only be played by blowing through it.

From the thousands of corpses of the *Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium,* beneath the new walls of Cologne, Elisabeth made as many holy relics. How could she have lied or made these things up? She lies in Saint Florian Monastery. Her story, here, has come to an end.