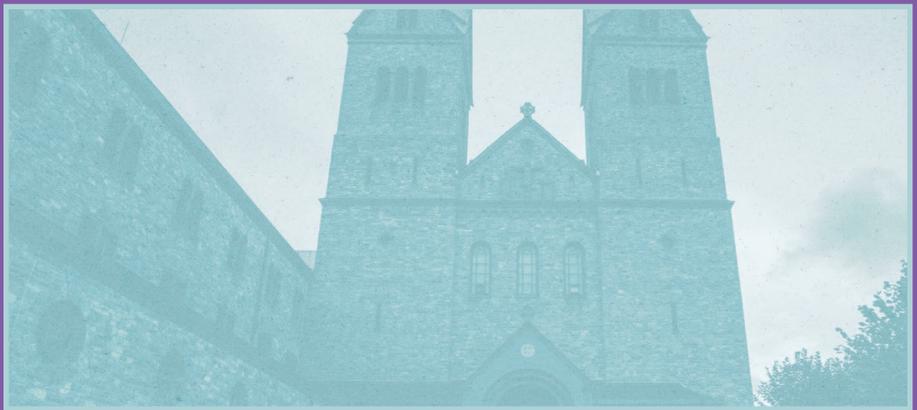




ASHLEN 
RENNER



Abundance & THIRST



NONFICTION 

010 PAGES

Abundance and Thirst

by Ashlen Renner

In the backyard of the house where I grew up, an old, crooked tree heaved branches full of fat, long berries. I picked them, staining my fingertips a deep purple. *Don't eat them*, my mother said. *They could be poisonous*. A cautious child, I threw the berries I had picked into the woods even as my mouth watered for a taste. I wouldn't know until adulthood that the berries were mulberries and that they were common in the Maryland countryside where I grew up. My parents were raised on the blacktops of the suburbs. I can't blame them for their lack of knowledge of the earth, but under the tree, I was at the age where I believed everything my parents said was true. Still, every morning when the dew glistened on the yard, I watched whole herds of deer gather around the mulberry tree, crane their necks up, and pluck the fruit with their lips. The babies snuffed the ground and lapped up the fallen berries. In the afternoon, I ran to the spot where the deer fed and squashed the berries on the ground until the bottoms of my shoes turned crimson. I pretended that I was making juice.

I think of this as I pick blackberries by the handful on the side of the Hildegard of Bingen Pilgrimage Trail while on an eighty-five-mile trek through southwest Germany. I have run out of water, so I walk while sucking the juice out of the berries, pressing them to the roof of my mouth with my tongue. This is the last leg of the trail from the small town of Stromberg to the site of Hildegard's twelfth century abbey—or what's left of it—in Bingen.

In the twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen was one of the only female writers who was widely accepted by the Church, publishing three books of her mystic visions, a guide on healing plants, a morality play, and seventy-seven songs. When she was alive, she was most known for her visions, which she declared were direct messages from God. Hildegard began to write them down: stories of mountains rising and falling, the universe in the shape of an egg, angels cradling her favorite female saints, and the fall of man.

I am on a pilgrimage not because I am particularly religious but because I have been captivated by Hildegard's writing for years, the way her words dip and rise like the Rhine, how her songs soar above my head when I listen to them. I want to know what's left of her. Maybe some remnant from the twelfth century will tell me why I have gotten attached.

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Two miles outside of Stromberg, I find myself on the edge of a field of chopped wheat. A week ago, I saw farmers harvesting in a town not far from here, giving the crop a buzz cut. The earth looked rough with the wheat's stubble, but where there was wheat, there were often blackberry brambles, producing plump, warm fruit.

Before this hike, I read that Hildegard always kept a garden full of native plants—basil, cabbage, lavender, cornflowers, mint—and over the years, she began to discover the healing power of plants.

In Europe, Hildegard is most known for her herbal remedies and her philosophy of *Viriditas*, or the greening power of the divine. To her, greenness was a metaphor for physical and spiritual health, and so she often encouraged her followers to tend to their bodies as they would to their gardens—with care.

Hildegard wrote of the connection between body and earth in her book, *Physica*, in which she compared the sap of fruiting plants with the human bloodstream, how the fruit grows out of the heart of the root, veins branching out to the leathery tips of leaves. Every part of the plant could be used to heal all sorts of ailments. The bramble on which blackberries grow could be used to ease a toothache when chewed. When pulverized into a paste and placed on the skin, the bramble could kill worms. The juice from mulberry leaves, when added to wine and boiled, could save someone who has been poisoned. The fruit itself was reserved for making juice and jams, its sweetness adding flavor to the hard crust of bread. *There is a richness in its fruit, and the fruit harms neither a sick nor a well person*, Hildegard wrote.

When I read this, I was struck by a flash of anger at what I had lost—a childhood with purple-stained teeth, of sweet jams and mulberry leaf tea. I wanted to go back and taste the fruit, to grow up knowing its sweetness. As I wade through the wild grass next to the wheat field, gently thumbing the blackberries into my palm, I think of how easy it must have been for Eve to pick the fruit. I think to be alive is to pick the fruit.

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After her death, Hildegard was briefly lost to history; the people of Germany were concerned with more pressing matters like the Rhine receding and the Black Death. Hildegard's writings were revived in the sixteenth century as scholars latched onto her visions of the apocalypse.

I imagine her struck by visions in the dark catacombs of the abbey in Bingen, the snarling teeth of five beasts snapping in her ear. As long as humanity has lived, the beasts have been there, growing in number, all signaling another epoch of sin has passed. God told her that this was what came from the flesh, all roped to a mountain of carnal desire. I imagine Hildegard turning away from the beasts, pulling her black robes closer to her body. She then faced a woman in gold. She had seen this woman before in other visions: Ecclesia, the Lady Church. Her arms were bent upward, her eyes skyward, her face twisted in anguish. From the waist down, her skirts were gone, replaced with scaly blemishes that festered down her bloody legs. A more menacing beast, one with crooked iron teeth and rotted-brown wiry hair, grasped Ecclesia in between her legs. This was Hildegard's apocalypse.

In the Middle Ages, it was believed that virginity was a divine power; it was one of the few things that women could wield during a time when they had little agency over their own lives. Was Hildegard's vision of the apocalypse a reflection of a fear of being overpowered?

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My hands are filled to the brim with blackberries, but no matter how many I eat, my tongue stays parched. I must pick more. I walk five more slow miles of constant berry picking until I reach a park where I hear a man sobbing somewhere in the woods. I try looking through the trees for him, but the bramble is so thick I can't see more than a few feet inside. His breaths heave and hiccup; his cries sound like he is pushing them out of a fully open mouth. It is just him and me in the woods, and part of me wants to find him, while another feels like a voyeur. We are miles away from the nearest town, and I wonder what drove the man to come all the way out here to cry alone in the woods.

I understand. I did that, too. Out past the mulberry tree into the thicket behind my house, I crouched down by the small creek where

the natural red clay got into the ridges of my sneakers and in the beds of my fingernails. I was leaving this place for a suburb in North Carolina, one where the woods were replaced by manicured, unnaturally green golf courses. At twelve years old, the departure from my childhood home felt so final, something that would alter my brain chemistry. After the move, I would spend that humid summer reading books instead of playing outside. I would escape into the world of fairies hiding in an enchanted forest, a teenager marooned in the Canadian wilderness wielding a hatchet, a boy floating in the ocean with a tiger.

Later, I would think about the sound of loss, how the crying man's throat let out the breath until there was no more.

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit describes loss as “the familiar falling away.” Perhaps the crying man, driving through the stubble of chopped wheat fields, looked back and saw past objects and people left behind in his exhaust trail. He experienced the pain of time rushing forever forward. As I turn away from the wall of bramble that separates me from him, I think of a loss of place, a loss of belonging. It is how I seemed to meander like a detached balloon through every place I've been. It is what drew me to Germany and Hildegard in the first place. Here, I have a final destination, and it may be lost to time and war and collective forgetfulness, but Hildegard's Abbey seems like a convergence. I walk faster down the trail, leaving the crying man behind, throwing more blackberries into my mouth and squishing them. The juice tastes bitter—I'm becoming less picky about the berries I pick as I am faced with the impending end of my journey.

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Hildegard came to Bingen around 1150 from a monastery thirty miles south. By the time she had written her first book of visions,

she had gained a large following of nuns who had outgrown the monastery they shared with a brotherhood of monks. I imagine the nuns rising at dawn with a prayer for safe travels, descending the mountain on which their previous home stood, and trying to pray away the uncertainty that lies ahead. The landscape would have been different—more wild, even less populated, with smaller wheat fields—but I imagine the blackberry brambles kept them fed. They must have followed the twisting shore of the Nahe River, seeking the place Hildegard had seen in a vision—a corner of land where the Nahe and the Rhine met. They arrived there at sundown, feet muddy and tired, only to see that the place Hildegard had pictured was an abandoned church, the stone crumbling. As Hildegard oversaw the construction of the new abbey, many of the nuns, who were born from noble families, left the convent, unused to living in tents. Years passed. Stone towers rose from the ground, a new church was constructed, and Hildegard, with her eighteen remaining followers, moved into the new abbey. It was here where Hildegard became even more fascinated with healing plants. Outside the abbey, there was a large garden fed by the rich soil of the confluence of two rivers. She grew enough to feed her convent and then grew massive rows of grapes for wine. Hildegard had created her own kingdom with God as her only ruler.

Once the nuns were settled, Hildegard called on a feast. In her new, simple, stone quarters, she removed her veil, shaking out her long hair from her tight braids. She shrugged off her black robe and replaced it with a white one embroidered with shining gold thread that matched the golden rings she had slipped on her fingers. With delicate hands, she unfolded the silken white veil from storage and draped it over her head, letting her hair flow free with the fabric before adding the last embellishment: a golden crown made of stars, embossed with the emblem of the lamb of God. She crowned herself and descended the steps of the tower in a billow of white. She entered the church with its lofted ceilings specifically made for

singing, her palms clasped in prayer. Walking down the aisle, her veil trailing behind her, Hildegard sang psalms to the Virgin Mary as she looked to her fellow nuns, all in white with their hair loose, smiling at what she had built. At the altar, she would raise the golden chalice of the wine she grew.

Virgins were not subject to man. They were entities of the divine, brides of Christ, and because of this, they were forever green, forever flowering, even after death. This was *Viriditas*—the greening power of the divine. The virgins raised their glasses and drank.

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In Latin, the roots of *Viriditas* contain layers of meaning: *vir*—male power, *virtus*—virtue, *virga*—branch, *virgo*—virgin.

Growing up, I learned that losing virginity is like plucking the flower off the single stem of life, its beauty captured to then wither and die. But there was also the shame of keeping the flower to one's self—a late bloomer—selfish with the vanity of refusing to be plucked.

I have never been interested in romantic love. It is as if that part of the brain was never wired inside me. It is the reason why I started identifying as asexual from an early age, since middle school. It was the age when teenage hormones were supposed to bounce around in my body like a cup of dice, but the only thing I remember from that time is trying to make myself disappear. In high school, when I was in that field of picked flowers, I wanted to sink back into the ground. Now, I want to become a tree. Something sturdy and broad, not labeled virgin or un-virgin, but its own being—an existence outside of the harvest. I want a life free of ridicule, free of the expectations attached to my birth gender.

I read somewhere that nuns don't have bodies; they are not objects of desire. Part of me wants to become a nun for that reason. I want to be a bride of Christ, except, for me, there is no Christ. It's

just me with my arms stretched out in my white, shapeless gown. I am not a body anymore. I am an entity of the universe. I answer to no man, no God. My world is green, green, green.

The Rhine is ahead, and I clear the forest to find myself on a mountaintop looking down at Bingen. The town is pressed up against the wide neck of the Rhine, tall concrete condo buildings blotting the landscape like beached whales. Ferries slide back and forth to the town across the river. The bridge to the other side was destroyed during WWII and never rebuilt. Long, flat cargo ships slog along with river cruises filled with white-haired tourists snapping photos.

I try to imagine what Bingen would have looked like in the twelfth century—probably just as bustling. Houses built with stone and red-shingled roofs lined up in neat rows inside the town walls. The main town was on the far side of the Nahe, and Hildegard's abbey on the other, sitting on its solitary hill. Boats carrying things to trade and sell still would have traveled these waters—the ferries, too. Later in Hildegard's life, she built another abbey across the river in the town of Eibingen, Bingen's more mountainous mirror, as an overflow from her first abbey. It still stands today, and it is where her bones rest in a golden box behind glass. It is now a church for pilgrims.

The sun softens, and the shadows of the mountain grow long. I know I must continue if I want to make it to the abbey's remains before dark, but I find a bench and sit anyway. A tinkling of bells whispers from the valley. It is six o'clock and, all at once, all of the churches in the valley chime in a symphony of hymns, echoing like the call and response of psalms.

For a moment, the thirst extinguishes on my tongue. My body is full of something more nourishing than water. It isn't God, I don't think, but a connection to the land and to time, to a woman who

in centuries past saw the same hills and the same river. I think of Solnit again, of how she described loss as the shedding of things and the mourning that comes with it. However, one only needs to turn forward to feel the lightness of being untethered.

“The wind blows your hair back and you are greeted by what you have never seen before,” Solnit writes. “The material falls away in onrushing experience. It peels off like skin from a molting snake.”

When Hildegard turned away from her old, solitary monastery she once called home with her nuns nearly nine centuries ago, I like to believe she felt something like this. The echo of the bells bounces off the mountains, and I wait for the last of the echoes to fade before climbing down.

Soon, I hit the streets of Bingen on the side of the Nahe where Hildegard lived. I walk past the towering brick churches where the bells sang and rows of post-war townhouses squashed together on the quiet side streets. I follow signs with a silhouette of a nun in the center. This way to the abbey, it says. I cross a busy road past a grocery store to a parking lot where a flag flies with Hildegard’s name. Below it is a tanning salon called Sun 4 You, where a cartoon sun wearing sunglasses gives a thumbs up in the window.

I stand there blinking, hoping that this would suddenly make sense. There must be something else. I round the building where a narrow row of herbs serves as a feeble reminder of Hildegard’s once abundant gardens. The exhaustion of hiking over twenty miles hits me suddenly, and I lean heavily on a railing overlooking the Nahe River. A train dislodges from its platform in the nearby Bingen Main Station and rattles by directly below me. I remember reading somewhere that the abbey was blown up in the 1800s to make way for this railroad. During that time, the abbey was in ruin, having been burned down and pillaged in the seventeenth century during the Thirty Years War. The nuns fled to the Eibingen Abbey across the river, taking Hildegard’s manuscripts and bones with them. They would reside there until World War II when they fled again to more rural abbeys out

of reach from the bombs. Hildegard's manuscripts, her life's work, were taken to Dresden for safekeeping. Then the city was bombed beyond recognition. Many of her manuscripts were lost.

I shouldn't be surprised that nothing survived, but I sink down on the ground in the small bricked-off garden, my legs splayed out in a pulsing sore mess. I cannot move. The sky grows dark and the streetlamps illuminate the parking lot. I feel like crying. I've lost Hildegard under the asphalt. The thirst returns with a crinkle in my pocket. It is burning now, blaring insistently like a siren. I take out the remaining blackberries I have stowed in a sandwich bag, now mashed to a deep purple pulp. The juice drips slowly. I squeeze, sucking the plastic into my mouth until my saliva becomes a viscous wine, the grooves in my chapped lips turn black, the bag runs dry, there is no more air to inhale.

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Ashlen Renner is a writer and journalist based in Northern Virginia currently working on a hybrid memoir about retracing the life of the German 12th Century Abbess and writer Hildegard of Bingen. Ashlen's writing has been published in the *New Ohio Review*, *Phoebe* and *Feels Blind Lit*, and nominated for a Pushcart prize, and has been a finalist in the Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction prize. Ashlen holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction writing from George Mason University.