The Ear of the Tides

Amadeu Lacerda Pessanha

ANESSAY

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Essay. Edition attributed to Oficina do Maralto, Recife and Lisbon, 1998. Amadeu Lacerda Pessanha is a literary persona created for this book. The house is fiction. There was no historical edition in 1998. The text knows The Line of the Horizon, of 1974, and The Moral Atlantic, of 1986, and does not know the later volumes.

I

The hour that was not enough

In 1974 I spent an hour sitting where, by day, the line of the horizon is obvious. I wanted to verify the lack. The line had vanished; the world had not. The ear took up the post the eye was leaving. I noted a motor, the water on the reef, a voice on the slope, a dog with no opinion about infinity. The notebook received two sentences about the abyss, and I crossed them out before I got home. Abyss was infinity again, dressed in black. I went back when tiredness grew larger than curiosity. I wrote that one hour is not a craft. It was a visit. A visit that goes on in the sentence becomes an intrusion.

The sentence was just, and it also served as an alibi. For years I treated the short hour as if it forbade me the whole subject. It forbade the portrait of the one who works the shift. It did not forbid study. I confused the two things, as I had already confused, in the book of the line, the gunwale of the view with the gunwale of the sea. Method is to come back with more hours. Omission is to call prudence the fact of having gone to sleep. I went to sleep. The sleep was real. The prudence, only in part.

In 1986 I refused the tower in writing. I said I would not go from the hold to the lighthouse, that I knew little of the craft, and that a visit does not authorize the moral of the light. That, too, was true on the date. I had seen towers as one sees a postcard, from below, in a hurry for a sentence. The book of the Atlantic could not carry that postcard without becoming an outing. It stayed out, and it was right that it stayed out. What was not right was my turning the refusal into a permanent rest. A dated refusal is not a perpetual vow. Twelve years after that volume, and twenty-four after the hour on the beach, the account changed. Not because I had become a lighthouse keeper. Because I stopped treating one hour as if it were a life of attention, and a life of attention as if I had lived it.

Long before I had the right, I noted a definition in the margin of a notebook. The keeper does not possess the horizon. He keeps a luminous sentence so that others may read it in passing. The sentence did not speak of solitude, a word

already worn out. It spoke of an addressee. I liked it too early. Liking early is my old vice: the sentence closes, and I protect it. I protected this one for years without having spent, in the tower, the nights it supposes. Now I can use it without pretending that the margin of the notebook was already experience. The margin was the wish for a clean idea. The experience, what there was of it, came later, incomplete, and does not confirm the idea at every point.

I write in Recife, at sixty-seven. The room still exists, in part. The legs already argue with the stair, and the argument is a datum, not a complaint. A complaint would give the chapter a tired hero, which is another form of the hill. I am not the hero of the tower. I am a man who taught the line, then the hold, and who postponed the ear because the ear does not pose for a portrait. The student asks what one sees. He rarely asks what one hears when there is nothing to see. The question about the view is easier to satisfy with a blackboard. The question about the dark obliges one to say: for a long time, nothing. Nothing is a bad spectacle. It is the core of the craft.

I will not repeat here the traffic, nor the geometry of the few kilometers. The two books are written. Whoever wants the road should go to the one of 1986. Whoever wants the height of the eyes, to the one of 1974. This volume begins where those stopped on purpose. If I drag in the hold to give weight, I will be using a crime as ballast for a subject that has its own. If I drag in the coconut palm to give charm, I will be on the hill again. The weight of this book, if it has any, is the weight of the attention that does not happen. That seems little. It seems little because our school measures the extraordinary. At sea, the extraordinary without a code is often the shipwreck. The code is repetition.

There is a temptation to open with the storm. The storm justifies the lighthouse for anyone who has never needed it. I have seen bad weather, from below, and I will not narrate it as if I had held the lantern. The danger that interests me, because I could observe it without lying about presence, is another: familiarity. The light keeps its period. The mechanism repeats. The ear grows used to it. Consciousness can sleep with its eyes open. To keep watch is to fight the very habit of keeping watch. That sentence I would repeat to a student. Almost no other have I kept every day. Keeping it every day was not my

job. It was other people's. I write from the side, and the side has to stay visible, or else the essay puts on a uniform that does not fit me.

The uniform would be easy to put on now. Age lends gravity, and gravity looks like a license to speak of the night as one who made it. I did not make it. I spoke with those who do, I read what they noted, I stayed awake less than they did and more than in 1974. That intermediate account does not make a romance. It makes an essay. If the reader wants the man who does not sleep, there is a literature ready, and it does not need me. If he wants to know why I postponed the subject for twenty-four years, the reason fits in one sentence: I had a pretty definition and few hours. The definition waited. The hours came short, and enough for me not to repeat the refusal of 1986 as if it were still current.

Current does not mean complete. I did not spend a winter in a tower. I will not write the winter. Whoever writes the winter without having done it produces the fog the reader confuses with truth, because fog is damp and the truth, in this craft, is often dry. Dry as the service book. I come to it in the middle of the volume, not in the first chapter, on purpose. The first chapter is the correction of the postponement. Without that correction, the tower would enter as an author's novelty, and it is not a novelty. It is a debt of attention, in the modest sense of something I should have listened to earlier. Not in the sense of the other book. Here the debt is mine, of hours, and it is not paid with a sentence about millions.

II
Without a figure

At night the line disappears. I have said this and I repeat it because the whole book fits in that sentence, if I do not ornament it. The world does not vanish. It changes regime. The eye, out of a job, invents a stroke in the dark so as not to confess the dismissal. I invented one, in that hour of 1974, and crossed it out. The ear, more honest that night, delivered sounds without a drawing. The honesty of one hour does not found a theory of the ear. It founds a warning: when the figure is missing, attention does not end at the same instant. It goes on a little. Then it asks for bed. Both times matter. Whoever keeps only the first makes a mystic. Whoever keeps only the second makes a skeptic of the pillow. The craft, if it exists, lives in the interval in which attention goes on without the figure and has not yet asked to leave.

Since then I have spent other nights near the water, not one. They were not shifts. They were stays longer than the visit, shorter than the life of someone who is paid to remain. I state the duration because without it I would go back to stealing. There were nights of two and three hours, on a terrace, on a quay, once at the foot of a tower when they would not let me climb. What reached the ear was banal and, for that reason, useful. A motor drawing near that was not what I feared. A conversation of people who were working and not of people who were philosophizing. The beat of water on a hull, regular until I stopped hearing it, and present again when something failed in the rhythm. The failure of the rhythm wakes. Regularity puts to sleep. In that, the water and the lantern are alike, and the likeness is technical, not poetry.

Poetry wants to make the ear a soul deeper than the eye. I refuse the hierarchy. The ear is not truer. It is what remains when the line goes out, and what remains can be wrong. A distant motor seems nearer according to the wind. A voice on the slope seems to come from the sea. I once assigned to the open a radio that was in a house. The assignment lasted a little while and served me. It served so that I would not write that the ear, free of the figure, reaches the thing

itself. It reaches an indication. The indication asks for correction, like the chart. Whoever romanticizes the ear dispenses with correction. I, who have spent my life distrusting the sentence that does not fit a measure, will not hand over that distrust only because night has fallen.

There is an old use of listening among those who fish and those who sail small, and I do not turn it into a chair. I do not have the craft. I have what they told me when I asked less than I should have, and what I understood late. I understood that they do not listen to the sea in general. They listen to a stretch, a bar, a known motor, the way the water changes sound when the depth changes. The general is the essayist's word. The stretch is the word of someone who gets home if he is wrong. I write the general with moderate shame, and I mark the shame so it will not become a style. The style of a man who confesses his own limit is already the hill. The limit stays, without music: I do not know the bar as they know it. I know that their knowledge does not fit in a sentence about the universal night.

My father, at the counter, asked for silence when he counted small pieces. He was not romantic. It was craft. His ear was in the count, not in the open. I was slow to connect that to the tower. The connection is simple, and I complicate it if I do not watch myself. To count without error and to watch without sleeping are kin in attention, not in landscape. It is the landscape of the lighthouse that seduces the book. Attention is what matters, and attention has the face of boredom. Boredom does not sell. That is why accounts of towers prefer the storm, madness, heroic isolation. I saw little of that. I saw people keeping a period. The period does not tremble. The book trembles if I force it to. I do not force it.

On the beach, without a tower, the ear also works, and that work is what the title calls the tide. Not the tide as a metaphor of life, which is laziness. The tide as a change of sound. The water rises and the reef changes its voice. Whoever knows the place does not need to look at the clock to know that it changed. I do not know enough to do without the clock. I know enough not to call the change a mystery. It is physics, with an hour, and the hour can be lost if the talk is loud. Loud talk is the domestic enemy of listening. At home, in class, in the essay, I talk too much. This book is an attempt to write from the side of

someone who would have fallen silent in time. The attempt fails each time the sentence turns good. A good sentence, here, is one that listens to itself.

There was a night when I did not cross out. I left in the notebook that the dark returns the body to sound. The sentence is not false. It is early. It returns a part: the foot on the stone, the ear more awake than the eye. It does not return a wisdom. I wanted the wisdom and I stopped at the part. Stopping at the part is what I asked of the descent in 1974 and did not always do. At sixty-seven I still want the whole sentence. The difference is that I see it coming and, more often, I leave it in the notebook. More often is not always. The reader of this volume will find pages where the whole sentence got through. I did not wash them all. The scar remains a right of the one who reads.

A scar I leave on purpose is in the word tide. I could have called the book lighthouse, and the lighthouse would have fitted on the cover. Tide is less photographable. It is what changes without asking leave and without letting itself be reduced to the tower. The tower is a human instrument, with a schedule and a human fault. The tide is not a moral. It is a condition. The ear the title names hears both things and does not confuse them: the code someone lit and the sound no one lit. To confuse them would be to say that nature also flashes in order to guide us. It does not flash. What guides is the craft, when it works. The water informs whoever has already learned the place. They are two schools. I attended both as a visitor.

As a visitor, I insist, so the word will not grow in the next chapter. It grows if I describe one more night with adjectives of permanence. An adjective of permanence is this: I kept vigil. I did not keep vigil. I was awake, cold or not, and at a certain hour I wanted the bed, and I went. Going away does not cancel what I heard. Nor does it promote it to a shift. Whoever promotes the leaving into a wisdom of the limit is already making a literature of farewell. I do not take leave of the tower. I return to it on paper because paper is my shift, and that shift, I have already said, has a lamp. The lamp stays for the end. Here only the cut remains: sound without a drawing, error possible, bed at the end of the account.

III

The tower

I visited lighthouses out of a duty of study and out of a curiosity I do not disguise as method. What impressed me was not the isolation. The novel had already prepared the isolation to the point of nausea, and I arrived with that nausea ready, which is a way of not seeing. I saw a machine and a schedule. The light does not exist for the one who inhabits it. It exists for a third person, unknown, who may pass that night or may not. To work for an unknown person who will not come to give thanks is a rare school. The cities are full of the opposite: the gesture made for someone who already knows us and can repay. I do not condemn repayment. I condemn the belief that, without it in view, the gesture loses its sense.

The lighthouse is a practical objection to that belief. It is lit also on the nights when the bar is empty. The sentence is good, and for that reason I watch it. Good, in my craft, means ready to be quoted without the tower. If I quote it without the tower, I go back to the margin of the notebook, where the definition lived for years before the stair. The stair is what corrects me. At the top, the sentence remains right and grows smaller. Smaller because beside it there is oil, there is glass, there is a man who wants to come down and cannot, there is the boredom of an hour equal to the one before. The quotation has no boredom. The craft does. I stay with the craft, even while writing, which is the paradox of this chapter: I use sentences to defend an attention that distrusts sentences.

I do not turn the keeper into a saint. There was drink, abandonment, a fight, a tower badly kept, an administration that treated a man as a piece of the lantern. Idealization is a way of not looking. Whoever needs the saint also needs the villain, and both are characters. I have already said, in another book, that a character is a form of property. Here the property would be still more indecent, because the man is alive, or was when he received me, and he did not ask me for an altar. I apologize for the or was. I will not make an effect of the uncertainty. I do not know about all of them. I know of one, whose name I will not say,

because I did not ask him to enter a book. He showed me the service book with a frankness without pose. There were faults. There was the handwriting of someone fighting sleep. There was a stubborn regularity, almost without heroism.

He said that it had saved he did not know how many, and he did not want to know, because knowing brought bad luck. I accepted the superstition. It protected the craft from statistical vanity. Statistical vanity is cousin to the round number I refused in the Atlantic. There, the single figure washed the complexity of the count. Here, the number saved would wash the boredom and put a medal on the tower. He did not want the medal. I, if I published the number, would want it in my chapter. I do not publish it. His superstition serves me as a gunwale. Beyond it begins my wish for a result, and the wish for a result is what makes a teacher turn a class into a victory. I have watched that tone. I watch it again.

Even so the function contains a lesson that survives its bad servants. There are lights that serve only if they are regular. Intermittent heroism guides no one. A kindness that lights when there is an audience and goes out when the night is ordinary is not a lighthouse. It is a bonfire. The bonfire warms those nearby and confuses those far off, who do not know whether that is a port, a party, or a fire. Regularity seems poor to temperaments that respect only the exceptional. I was of that temperament in the sentence, though I condemned it at sea. I liked the period that closes. The period that closes is a bonfire of prose. The useful light is the one that returns without asking whether I am inspired. Inspiration is not a code. A code is what the other, in the dark, can recognize without knowing me.

I climbed stairs that no longer suit me. Not many. Enough to know that the view from above is a dangerous prize. From above the line comes back, farther off, and the man forgets that he climbed in order to tend a lamp, not in order to possess the horizon. The definition in the margin was waiting for me in that forgetting. I confirmed it and, in the same minute, distrusted the confirmation, because it flattered me: the old notebook was right. To be right is an author's joy. The joy lasted until the wind and the lack of breath. I came down more

interested in the step than in the sentence. The step is an honest corrector. It does not publish.

There are towers that are no longer what they were, and I will not make an elegy of them. An elegy is a hill with moonlight. Some lights have passed to another system. Some have remained for the outing. The outing is not a crime. It is a daytime use. What lies is to confuse the daytime use with the nighttime craft. I myself, a teacher, live a great deal in the daytime use of ideas: they exist in order to be shown. The tower interests me because it has a half that is not a showing. If this essay has any right, it will be the right not to illuminate the author. To be recognizable in the dark, regular, useful to whoever passes offshore without the obligation to land. I do not need to have been in every lighthouse. I need not to lie about the nature of the light.

To lie about the nature of the light would be to say that it wants the good. It does not want. It keeps a period that men arranged so that others would not die, and sometimes it fails, and sometimes the administration treats it as an ornament. The good, if it occurs, is a result, not an intention of the lamp. I insist on this because the luminous sentence in the margin of the notebook can be read as the keeper's personal goodness. Sometimes there is goodness. Sometimes there is only the job done, and the job done is already a great deal. To demand an extraordinary soul in order to validate the signal is the ingratitude of someone on land, dry, asking for heroes. The signal is worth something if it returns. The soul of the one who keeps it does not belong to me as a theme.

Nor will I measure the tower by the view it offers the one who climbs. That view is the daytime prize, what gets photographed. I climbed and I looked, and the looking was good, and the good is not the post. The post is with its back to its own emotion, turned toward a sector of the sea that may be empty. Turned toward the empty without switching off: in that I recognize a discipline my writing rarely sustains. Writing switches off when there is no answer. The light does not switch off for lack of an answer. The difference humbles me a little, and I distrust that humiliation too, which is a way of becoming interesting. Interesting is not the aim. The aim is not to trade the empty sector for a sunset.

IV

The service book

The service book is not literature. It is a sequence of hours in which almost nothing is narrated, and for that reason it narrates the essential. Came in, checked, the light kept its period, went out. When the handwriting worsens, the night is on the paper without anyone describing it. I read pages like that with the wrong emotion at the start. I wanted a drama between the lines. The drama was the absence of drama and the maintenance of that absence. Maintenance is a word without shine. Shine is what the reader asks for, and what the lantern gives the sea, not the prose. The prose that imitates the shine of the lantern makes a bonfire. The prose that imitates the service book runs the opposite risk: to become minutes. Between the minutes and the bonfire I would rather fail on the side of the minutes. I failed less than in 1974. I failed.

There were nights noted in a single sentence, and nights in which the sentence was missing. The lack may be carelessness. It may be that nothing changed and the nothing did not deserve ink. The two hypotheses cannot be told apart on the paper, and that indistinction interests me. In the essay, the blank is usually a confession of ignorance, if the author is honest. In the service book, the blank can be the success: the hour passed without incident. A mute success. Our public moral does not know how to read a mute success. It wants the rescue, the name, the thanks. The man who showed me the book did not want the number saved. I, a reader of essays, still want a sign that the page was worth it. The service page is worth something precisely when it does not need to convince me.

I asked, with too much tact, whether he felt solitude. The word came from my education, not from the tower. He looked at the mechanism and said that solitude is when the light fails and no one on the bar knows that it failed. It was not a definition for my notebook. It was a correction. The solitude the novel loves is that of the man alone with his thought. The one that matters in the craft is that of the addressee without a signal. I had inverted the axis. The axis is not

the feeling of the one who stays. It is the reading of the one who passes. If no one passes, the light goes on, and the going on is not absurd. It is the contract. A contract does not warm the sentence. It holds another's helm, perhaps. Perhaps is obligatory. I was not on the bar.

There was a fault noted without a long excuse. A delay. A glass. An hour in which sleep won. He did not turn the fault into a moral chapter in front of me. He said that it happened. I, in his place, would already have been explaining the fault until it became interesting. To explain until it becomes interesting is the essayist's vice. The service book explains until it is clear, and stops. Stopping is a technique I admire and do not possess. This paragraph, for example, should already have ended at the word happened. It goes on because I want the reader to see the continuation as my defect, not as depth. Depth would be my falling silent. I did not fall silent. I note the I did not beside his fault, without equating the two. His could cost a hull. Mine costs one page more.

Stubborn regularity is not a virtue of character in the sense in which school hands out virtue. It is a result of the shift, of a wage, of fear, of habit, of a chief, of a superstition, of a woman or of no one waiting on land. I did not open the private life of the man who received me. It was not offered to me, and I do not deserve it as material. What was offered to me was the book. In it there is no soul. There is the hour. The hour arrives. That, for a culture in love with secret motives, seems little. Little is the right size. A secret motive I would invent with ease, and the invention would have the face of a lighthouse romance, a genre I no longer endure. The genre wants the exceptional man. The service book wants the man who came back the next day.

Coming back the next day is what I asked of my class, not always under that name. A class that saves on Friday and goes back to being a postcard on Monday is a bonfire. I gave classes like that, above all when the subject was beautiful. The beautiful collaborates with forgetting the shift. The hold, in the book of 1986, obliged me to a sequence I could not interrupt with a sunset. The tower obliges another sequence: not to interrupt with the storm. The two obligations resemble each other in form and not in content. I will not fuse them. To fuse them would be to say that the lighthouse and the traffic are the

same lesson, and they are not. One lesson is not to omit the use. The other is not to omit the repetition. Whoever makes of the two a single pretty sentence is on the hill again, now with two subjects under his arm.

I kept, without copying the name, the handwriting of the worst hours. Not in order to publish it. In order to remember that attention has a body and the body fails before no public, only on the service paper, which almost no one reads. Almost no one reads is also the condition of a great deal of light. It is not written for the critic. It is written for whoever needs it that night and will not review it. I review. It is my limit, said without charm. The charm would be my claiming that, by reviewing, I become the addressee. I do not. The addressee is on the water, or is not. I am in the room, with a notebook, late in relation to the hour the light has already kept without me.

The lateness has a concrete form. I read in the morning what was night. The morning organizes, puts in a comma, chooses the episode of the trembling hand and sets aside three equal nights. The three equal nights are the true book. The trembling hand is the exception the prose prefers. If I tell only the exception, I betray the man who showed me the notebook, even without saying the name. That is why I write the equal nights here, knowing that they yield less. They yield less and they weigh more. The weight is not dramatic. It is the weight of a repetition that did not have me as a witness and that even so I refuse to turn into a legend of absence. My absence is not a legend. It is a position. I was somewhere else, sleeping or reading, while the period was kept.

Some would call this the humility of the researcher. I do not accept the praise. A researcher who praises himself for his own absence has already returned to the center of the sentence. The center, in this chapter, is the service book, not my virtue in not having falsified it. Not to falsify is the minimum. The minimum does not deserve a paragraph of self-congratulation. It deserves, at most, this dry note: where I did not see, I said I did not see. Where I saw the handwriting, I did not copy it in order to ornament. Where he did not want the number, the number did not enter. Three refusals. With them the chapter can end without a hero and without a heroic author. Ending that way is harder than it seems, because the last paragraph always asks for someone standing against

the wind.

V

The interval

The lighthouse's light is not a continuous brightness, and the continuity that matters is not that of a shine without pause. It is the continuity of the code. The period, the eclipse, the color, the number of flashes distinguish one tower from another. Whoever is at sea does not want just any brightness. He wants that one, in order to know where the land waits for him and on which side the danger is. Even the dark between two flashes is part of the message. Not every silence is a fault. Some silences are a signal. I was slow to understand this. I was educated in a culture in which to fall silent always seems an omission. There are omissions that are a crime. The book of 1986 was written against one of them. There are intervals that are language. The difference lies in knowing whether someone, on the other side, agreed the meaning of the interval. Without that agreement, the dark goes back to being only dark.

The distinction matters to me because I got it wrong in both directions. In the direction of the crime, I called a gunwale what was a silence. In the direction of the signal, I feared every blank of the page as if it were dishonesty. Not every blank is the covered Valongo. Not every full sentence is honesty. A page without a pause can be a panic of seeming omissive. I know that panic. It produced, in my prose, periods that do not let the reader breathe, and the lack of breath imitates gravity. Gravity without a code is fog. The flash lets one see and lets one not see, on purpose, in order to be identified. The essay, when it only insists, does not let itself be identified. It becomes a generic light. A generic light does not save. It is confused with a party.

I am not saying that this book is a lighthouse. The comparison, if I press it, becomes vanity: the author as a tower. I refuse the post. I say only that the ethic of regularity judges me, and that I lose many times. I lose when I write for the audience in the room and not for the unknown person who does not give thanks. I lose when I light a formula and put it out the following term. I lose when the interval of the text is laziness and I call it suggestion. Suggestion is an

elegant word for the blank I did not work. The blank of the code is worked. Someone counted the seconds. I, many times, did not count. I leave the difference written so as not to take shelter in it.

The ear comes in here again, because the code is not only visual. There are sound signals, and there is the sound of the water itself, which was not agreed with me and still informs whoever learned the stretch. I will not write a treatise on signals. It is not my competence, and a feigned competence is a uniform. What fits in the essay is the principle: an agreed meaning is not the same as an empty silence, and an empty silence is not the same as a crime of omission. Three things that haste calls by the same name, to fall silent. The haste belongs to whoever needs a single moral for every case. A single moral is a cardinal point. The sea, I once said apropos of courses, happens in the compound degrees. Here too. Each silence asks the question: agreed with whom, and for what.

A student, not long ago, said the lighthouse blinks because it is undecided. It was a joke, and the room laughed with justice. The joke contained the error I wanted to undo without spoiling the laugh. Indecision would be the light that changes its period without warning. The stable blink is the opposite: a repeated decision. I said so, short, and the laugh did not die altogether. Better. A class that kills the joke in order to install the truth is already in the pulpit. The pulpit is a false tower, because it speaks to those who are inside and can applaud. The lighthouse speaks to whoever may not hear the explanation, only the period. I would like to teach that way and I know how many times I explained too much. To explain too much is not to trust the code. It is the fear that the interval will be read as a fault of mine.

In the old notebook, beside the definition, there was a mark in the dark that I did not memorize. It must have been a scheme of flashes, badly drawn. I cannot find it. The loss is small and it serves me as an example. I kept the sentence and lost the code. It is the summary of a life of letters: what can be quoted remains, what would have to be counted in seconds disappears. At sixty-seven I still quote better than I count. Counting seconds is someone else's craft. My correction is not to pretend that I count now. It is not to call deep attention what was

only a well-kept sentence. A well-kept sentence is furniture. The period, if I did not measure it, is not on the shelf.

That is why, when I write that not every silence is a fault, I ask that the sentence not be detached from the rest. Detached, it absolves any omission, including that of 1974. It does not absolve. The silence of the code is recognized because it returns the same. The silence of omission does not return as a signal. It returns as the absence of a subject that could already be read. It took me years to separate the two returns. The separation is what this chapter has to offer, and it is less than a navigation manual. A manual I do not write. I write the distrust of a single word, to fall silent, when it covers crimes and codes with the same ink.

The single ink is a habit of those who teach by a quick contrast. I myself told students, in lazy years, that silence is complicity, and I stopped at that sentence because it sounds firm. It sounds firm and it errs in the cases where the silence was agreed. The lighthouse obliged me to undo the firmness without undoing the book of 1986. There, to keep silent about the hold was complicity with the view. Here, to keep silent between two flashes is speech. The two sentences fit in the same life if I do not force them to become a slogan. A slogan is what the room repeats without the case. I have supplied slogans. The correction is slow and without an audience, which, for once, resembles the craft I describe. To resemble is not to be. I correct on paper. He corrects in the hour, with the light on or with the lack noted.

If a reader uses this chapter to justify an omission, he has read badly, and the fault is also mine if the sentence about silence-as-signal travels alone. That is why I repeat it tied. The silence that is a signal has a period, an addressee, a return. The silence that is an omission has no agreement at all. It has only the comfort of someone who did not dirty the page. I know that comfort by name, because I lived in it. I will not lend it to an elegant theory of the interval. An elegant interval is almost a but. The but I already distrusted in the other book. Here the equivalent is the reticence that thinks itself deep. Deep reticence, without a code, is fog again. I prefer the second counted. If I did not count, I do not pretend the pause was wise.

VI

For those who need it

In the last tower I climbed, the keeper showed me the sea by day, which is when the lighthouse seems useless. By day we exist for the tourist, he said, without bitterness. By night, for whoever needs it. The sentence divided the world better than many treatises. I did not ask him to improve it. To improve it would be to put my prose into it, and my prose already has too much of a workshop. I kept it as it stood. There is a daytime existence of ideas, made to be photographed, and a nighttime existence, in which they have to work without an audience. I would like mine to belong to the second. I know how many stayed in the first, including pages of this book, which are born daytime because they are a book. The book is a visit. The shift is something else. I will not erase the difference in order to promote myself to a paper keeper.

The tourist says what a view, and by day he has a narrow reason: there is a view. The narrow reason becomes a lie when it occupies the whole night, that is, when the place exists only in order to be seen. I wrote against that in the Atlantic volume, apropos of another price. Here the price is one of attention, not of cargo. The two prices do not pay each other. A fort may have been the quay of a crime and, centuries later, the support of a light that guides. To say both things does not reconcile them. I have already refused the reconciliation. I refuse it again, lower. Low because at sixty-seven a long indignation tires me, and the tiredness is not wisdom. It is a limit of breath. Short breath does not authorize me to mix the subjects. It authorizes me to treat one at a time. This time, the light and the ear.

Whoever needs it, in the keeper's sentence, is not a moving abstraction. It is someone on a bar, with a course, on a night when to err costs. I am not that someone. If I write as if my nighttime reading, in the study, were the same necessity, I steal the addressee in order to enlarge the author. The study has a lamp. The lamp is the opposite of the lighthouse: it illuminates whoever is inside. I have spent my life under lamps, in Coimbra, in Lisbon, in Recife, and I

called it a vigil when it was study. Study is necessary and it is not the shift. The shift goes on when the study closes the notebook. That going on without me is what it costs me to admit, because the essay wants to be present at the grave hour. The grave hour, often, has no essayist. It has a mechanism and a man who will not be quoted.

The ear of the tides, then, is not my ear made universal. It is the name of an attention the water demands when the figure disappears, and which other people exercise better than I do. The title promises more than I fulfill, as The Moral Atlantic promised. Titles promise. The fulfillment is not to flee into the adjective. If in this volume the tower turns noble, I will have climbed again. Nobility is the word I have distrusted since the slope at Olinda. It comes back disguised as service to the unknown, which is a better disguise than the old ones. Service to the unknown can be true in the lantern and vanity in the paragraph. I make the paragraph. The lantern is not mine. The distance between the two sentences is the gunwale this time. It is not the fear of 1974. It is the division of labor.

Tomorrow, if there is class, someone will speak of the sea at night as of a state of soul. I will let the sentence stand and I will ask for the sound, the period, the hour. If I ask in the tone of someone who owns the tower, I will have used another's craft as a height. The tone I have watched for decades and it still escapes. It escapes more when the subject is beautiful and nocturnal, because the night lends a depth for free. A depth for free is a loan. I do not want to leave the room satisfied. I want to leave having said, without an orchestra, what fitted here: the line disappears and the ear does not become an oracle; the light is for whoever passes, not for whoever inhabits it; silence is sometimes a code and sometimes an omission; the service book is not a romance; by day, the tourist; by night, whoever needs it.

There is no proposal at the end. A proposal would return me to command, and I do not command the bar. There is a habit I can try, small, and that saves no one: when the sentence closes too early, to count to the next interval before believing it. It is a discipline of the table, almost ridiculous, and I prefer it to a final image of a tower against the sky. The final image is daytime even when it

describes the night. It exists so the reader can see me seeing. I would rather the reader, if he is ever in a dark that is not a metaphor, remember only this, and not even need to remember me: the light that serves is the one that returns the same, and the sound that informs is what someone learned on a stretch, not in a sentence. The rest is a lamp.

The lamp, I say so as not to leave the word loose, is the light that lets me write badly or well without anyone, on the bar, depending on that quality. That independence is an indecent privilege and it is also the condition of the essay. Without it I would have no page. With it I have no right to confuse the page with the rescue. The rescue, if there is any tonight, will not come from Recife, from a man of sixty-seven closing a chapter. It will come from a light that returns, or from an ear that knows the stretch, or from no one, and the no one is also a possibility I do not ornament. To ornament the no one is the last bonfire: the tragic as a cover.

I stay with the small habit, repeated so that I will not trade it for an image. To count an interval before believing the sentence. To ask whether the silence has an addressee. Not to call a shift what was a visit. Not to call a view what was a code. If tomorrow I fail at this in the room, the book does not absolve me. A book does not absolve its author the next morning. That is the only honest likeness I accept between the essay and the service book: both can register the fault, and the register does not undo the hour. The next hour is what decides. I do not write it here. It has not happened yet.

COLLECTION NOTE

Amadeu Lacerda Pessanha is a fictional literary persona created with Grok, and The Ear of the Tides is a work produced from that persona.

Margem 37 — For stories in search of a margin.