The Line of the Horizon

Amadeu Lacerda Pessanha

ANESSAY

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Essay. First edition attributed to Oficina do Maralto, Recife and Lisbon, 1974. Amadeu Lacerda Pessanha is a literary persona created for this book. The house is fiction. This is the first book attributed to the author. There was no historical edition in 1974. The text does not know the later volumes.

I

The line that meets nothing

There is a mistake the school repeats in all innocence, and that I myself repeated for too long: calling horizon the line on which sky and sea meet. Anyone who has spent an afternoon before the reef at Olinda knows that this line meets nothing. It is the limit of what the eyes can reach, an agreement between the curve of the water and the height of the one who looks. I climb, and the agreement retreats. I go down, and it draws near. The sea did not draw that border. We did, with the short measure of the body.

I say this and already feel the sentence wanting to grow larger than the afternoon. Written this way, the line looks like a discovery. It is not. It is a small correction, the kind any man at the stall would make with his chin, and without paper. It is the paper that takes offense at being small and asks for a nobler name. I do not yet know how to refuse that request every time. I know how to refuse it when I see it, and even then the refusal arrives a second late, when the noble word has already sat down at the table.

I was born in this city, on a street from which the reef can be seen. My mother calls what lies beyond, without poetry, “the open.” My father sells fishhooks and line at a counter that smells of salt and cardboard. I do not come from captains. I come from people who stayed. That origin forbids me, or ought to forbid me, two gestures maritime literature likes too much: longing for a ship that was never mine, and contempt for those who never went aboard. I will write the line one sees from the sidewalk, and the way it lies when a person climbs.

The sidewalk, it should be said, is not a lookout. It is uneven stone, with a puddle that dries slowly and a boy pushing a bottle cap as if it were a boat. From there the line fits between a coconut palm and whatever the reef lets through. Infinity does not fit. Infinity is a word the school lends early, before it lends the ruler. I gave it back late. For years I thought that giving a word back was a loss of breadth. It was hygiene.

I climb the hill and the agreement retreats. I go down to the sand and it draws near. The sea did not move. I did. The sentence fits inside a walk of a few minutes, if a person does not stop to improve it. I stop. Halfway up the slope I am already looking for an adjective the sand did not ask for. The adjective is almost always large, blue, final. I crossed out several in this working notebook before letting into the book the ones I could not kill. The reader has a right to see the scar. Without it, the sentence arrives washed and lies about the path.

I spent years in Coimbra explaining to fellow students in the seminary that infinity, seen from the beach at Olinda, ends at a coconut palm on one side and a trawler on the other. They did not give me a high mark. They found the remark picturesque, which is the polite way of saying that a sentence does not deserve to leave the ground where it was born. I, in my early twenties, wanted to agree with them and write a line without a coconut palm. I could not. The palm came back, stubborn, as things come back that were seen and not merely thought. Today, at forty-three, I am grateful for the stubbornness. The line did not need the mark. It needed the palm.

I repeated the walk this week, in the morning, before class in Recife. The light was whiter and the sentence came out more easily, which ought to have frightened me. An easy sentence, before the sea, is almost always a sentence that already knew the answer. I wrote that the line was a lesson. I crossed out lesson. I wrote that it was an image of the human condition. I crossed out human condition, which is a sack in which any laziness will fit. What remained was the agreement between the water and the eyes. It is little. It is what I have without lying. The book begins in that little, though several pages will try to escape it. I give notice now, so as not to seem innocent when the escape happens.

Yesterday there was a small and instructive escape. I had written that the line teaches us humility. The word came in without knocking. Humility is comfortable: it absolves the author and still grants him a virtue. I crossed it out. In its place remained what the walk actually did, which was to tire the leg and contradict an adjective. It is not a moral. It is a physical effect. If the book forgets the body, it goes back to being school, and school is where the mistake began.

Nor do I want the opposite extreme, that of the person who describes the leg and thinks he has described the world. The leg climbs. The line retreats. Between the two sentences there is an interval in which a person, if he does not watch himself, installs a soul. The soul may exist. It is not what I measured on this slope. I measured the retreat. The retreat does not comfort, does not promote, does not fit in a graduation speech. It fits on a page if the page will agree to end before the promotion.

That is why this first chapter insists. Not because the reader is slow. Because I am the first who wants to leave it. Each time the sentence threatens to serve for a whole life, I bring it back to the coconut palm. The palm is not a symbol. It is there. If one day I write as if it were a symbol, let the hour be noted. It is still day. I am still in Olinda. Class in Recife is soon, and the hurry to leave already wants to turn hurry into an idea. The hurry is only the bus.

II
The height of the eyes

The distance of that limit, for someone standing on the sand, is not the eternity of posters. It grows with the height of the eyes. A few kilometers, not a life. Light may lengthen the sum a little. Desire lengthens it without shame, and that is where the essayist gets lost, because desire also writes well. More than once I wanted the sum to yield a number large enough to fill the end of a chapter. The sum did not cooperate. The chapter would have to learn to end nearby.

There is an experiment anyone can make without an instrument. Crouch. The line comes. Rise onto the toes. The line goes. It is not philosophy. It is the body. The surprise, if any remains, is in seeing how much literature is written as if the author had a fixed height, an official balcony from which the world fits whole. I had borrowed balconies, in Coimbra and in Lisbon, and I liked them. The chair was good. The mistake was to think that the goodness of the chair was a property of the sea.

I remember a class in which a professor drew on the board a circle and a point outside it. He said philosophy began when the point understood that the circle was its own, not the world's. The sentence was elegant and, applied to the sea, incomplete. At sea the point grows sick. The point is hungry. The point may die if it misreads that circumference. On dry land we confuse depth with the freedom of not paying for the mistake on the same day. On deck the mistake is paid at sight. I, who write in Recife, at a table that does not rock, ought to distrust my own chair. I distrust it late, and the delay is also a datum. I do not hide it in order to seem more watchful than I was.

I have taught for years in a room where the floor keeps its contract. The students come in, sit down, and expect knowledge to have the stability of tile. I expected that too, and sometimes I still do, which is more serious. When I bring the story of the line into the room, someone always asks what it is for. The question is fair. It is not for navigating, because I am not training pilots. It is for distrusting a sentence that calls itself vast. If the student leaves with that distrust

and without a better sentence, the class has not failed. The class that fails is the one that trades the coconut palm for a pet infinity.

My father, when I was a boy and already talked too much, counted fishhooks while I explained the open. He did not correct me. He did not applaud either. His silence was a measure, and I was slow to read it. I thought it coldness. It was craft. A man who counts small pieces cannot grant the sentence the right to float. I went back to the counter this year, already a man who teaches, and I repeated, with moderate shame, the explanation of infinity. He said: then how many meters. I did not know in meters. I knew in steps to the coconut palm, and in vanity. He went back to the count. The lesson was not spoken. It was the way of not interrupting the work for the sake of a word.

There is a hygiene of looking that I still cannot say without beautifying it. To see far, one must allow what is near not to take up the whole sentence, but also not to be erased. The reef, the stall, the hook, my mother's voice calling the open without metaphor. If I erase the foreground so that only the line remains, the line becomes noble and false. Noble is the word I distrust most at this point in my life, and the one that comes to me most readily when the afternoon is fine. A fine afternoon is a professional danger. The light collaborates with the adjective. The adjective thanks it and lies.

So I note the position, still without a method that deserves the name. Morning or afternoon. Sand or hill. Olinda, or the room in Recife, where the line is not and is invoked even so. A sentence without these data is a map without a scale. I have signed maps like that, in student work, and received for them the praise given to a talent for not dirtying the paper. I do not want that praise for this book. I want it to be seen from where it was said. If on some pages the place is missing, that is not style. It is a fault. I leave the fault visible before some future reviser, myself or another, files it away for love of cleanliness.

The height of the eyes also changes when one is seated. On the sand, with the knees bent, the line drops so far that a small boat cuts it in half. I stand up and the boat fits beneath it again. Neither of the two views is deeper. They are two positions. Culture is horrified by this, because position seems less glorious than

essence. Essence does not have to say whether the author was sitting down. Position does. I stay with position.

In Lisbon, years ago, the same water had another wind and another administration of fear. I will not make of that contrast a chapter of travel. I did not have a traveler's life. I had study. What study gave me was the distrust of the way the word sea unifies too quickly. Two men say sea and are not facing the same distance. One has the reef a few steps off. Another has a sky that seems, falsely, more philosophical. The sky of Lisbon was not truer. It was easier to quote. To quote is not to see.

I bring this into the room in Recife with care, so as not to turn the class into a nostalgia for someone who studied abroad. The students do not owe me my Coimbra. They owe, if they owe anything, precision. When one of them says he has understood, I ask him to say from what height. Some laugh, and the laugh is the embarrassment of a person caught without a ruler. One said, last week, that he had read the text standing in the corridor, and that standing up the sentence seemed larger. It may be. The corridor is narrow and pushes the sentence upward. It is not a defect in the student. It is a datum.

III

Opening horizons

Literate culture has turned the horizon into a lazy synonym for hope. To open horizons has come to mean almost nothing: an invitation to feel vast. I hear the phrase in speeches, on the covers of books, in the mouth of anyone who wants to cheer a room without committing to a number. No one asks: open from what height, as far as where, and who is left with the bill. The sentence works because it does not work. It has no gunwale. What has no gunwale does not founder. It does not arrive either.

A student, weeks ago, used the phrase in good faith, which is the hardest case to correct. He said the course had opened horizons for him. The room smiled the smile of people who recognize a coin in circulation. I could have thanked him and gone on. To thank him would have been kind and false. I asked what line he could see now that he had not seen before, and from what ground. He blushed, not from stupidity, from having been caught in a rite. Then he said something concrete: he had learned to distrust a text that explains the sea without ever saying at what distance. That, yes, was a horizon, and it was small, and it served. The rest of the phrase could go back to the end-of-year speech.

But the horizon of someone looking at the sea does not widen the chest. It imposes a discipline. One does not arrive at it. One pushes it, and it forms again farther on, indifferent to the effort. There is in this indifference no moral lesson ready to be framed. There is a fact. Effort is not paid with arrival. Whoever needs effort to be paid will trade the horizon for a goal, and will do well, so long as he does not call the goal by the wrong name. A goal is reached. A line is not. To confuse the two produces oratory.

I want, even so, this discipline to serve a life, and not only a beach. I want the one who measures the line to know also how to measure what he desires, what he promises, what he teaches. I write this from the hill, where the limit looks cleaner than it is, and life, seen from above, accepts the comparison without taking offense. Down below it would take offense. Down below there is the

accounting of hooks, a class that did not come out right, people who did not leave, a shoe that takes in water. The comparison is too pretty for that ground. I leave it even so. I do not yet have another that will fit on a page and in a house. The reader has just seen me give in. I will not pretend, two lines later, that I did not.

The giving-in has an excuse I myself do not wholly accept. Without it, the essay would be only the description of a walk, and a walk, however exact, does not by itself justify a book. To justify a book is already an author's vanity. I note it. At forty-three I still want the pages to serve for more than the reef, and that wanting is the hill disguised as intellectual ambition. Ambition is not a crime. The crime is not to say from what height it looks. It looks from above. From above, wet shoes turn into a symbol far too quickly.

Knowledge that lets itself be reached all at once, and that poses at the point where it was reached, was generally not a horizon. It was furniture. This sentence I would stand by in front of a student, and I already have. The one before it, the life measured by the line, I would stand by only while the light helped. I note the difference and do not resolve it. To resolve, at forty-three, still seems to me a form of height: a person climbs, sees the pieces, and comes down announcing an order. The order was in the view. In the courtyard the students had already gone, and the sentence was left without a witness. A sentence without a witness becomes good with ease.

There are days when I close the room and go to Olinda only to undo a formula the morning produced. It is not a ritual, though the risk of its becoming one exists, and the ritual would be another kind of nobility. It is correction. The day's formula almost always begins with open. Open the mind, open the sea, open the future. I would cross the verb out of the language if I could. I cannot. I can refuse to use it when what happened was a walk, a middling class, and a line that did not move because of me. The book, if it has any judgment, will be the long refusal of that verb, interrupted by the times I myself conjugate it.

The interruption deserves an example, or else it becomes another announcement of virtue. The day before yesterday I wrote, in a draft that nearly got

through, that a man opens his own horizon by recognizing the limit. The sentence has an easy music. Recognizes, opens, his own: three invitations to applause. None of them says how far off the trawler was. I crossed out the whole period and kept the trawler, which opens nothing. The trawler passes or it does not. The page became poorer and more usable. Poor, here, is not an insult. It is the opposite of inflated.

Some fear that a book without an opening will be closed, and contrary to life. Life on the sidewalk is not closed. It is occupied. The boy with the bottle cap does not need me to open a horizon for him in order that the cap may float. It floats or sinks according to the puddle, not according to my verb. If I write a luminous career over him, I will have used the child as a ladder. A ladder is a portable hill. I decline it.

One may say that a sentence opened something when, after it, a person sees an object he did not see before, and can point to it. The student pointed to the distance. That is enough. It is not enough to say that the soul grew wider. I teach better when I promise less. At forty-three, promising less still costs me, because the room expects a man who elevates. To elevate is the teacher's name for climbing the hill. I come down on the blackboard whenever I catch myself elevating.

IV

Two operations

Every nautical chart tries to turn the limit into a calculation. Every longing of someone who stayed tries the same conversation, with fewer numbers and more stubbornness. To confuse the pilot and the one who waits on the sand produces a great deal of literature and some shipwreck of ideas. The pilot needs the line in order to act before it shifts. The one who waits needs the line in order to name an absence. It is not the same gesture. One calculates in order to arrive. The other looks in order to bear that he did not arrive, or that someone else left. I, the son of people who stayed, write from both sides, and I should not. A biography is not a safe-conduct for confusion.

In the room I have a modest chart of the coast, printed, already worn at the folds. It is not an archive treasure. It is a classroom instrument. I show the students where the line of the chart lies by an excess of cleanliness. The coast, on paper, has no stall, no smell, no boy with a bottle cap. It has a decision: what fit, and what was left out. That decision is honest when it is owned. It becomes dishonest when the blank of the margin is sold as if it were the sea itself, smooth because that is how nature is. It is not. It is smooth because no one marked there what he did not see, or because he saw and did not know the name.

So I separate the operations, and I ask that the separation last at least for this chapter. On one side, the one who holds a course and needs the mistake to cost early. On the other, the one who looks from the sidewalk and can postpone the cost until the sentence turns beautiful. I belong to the second group for most of my hours, and to the first only by imagination, which is an unworthy way of enlisting. I will not promote imagination to a voyage. There was not, in this book, a deck I commanded. There was reading of those who did command, and there was the sand. Between the two things I put a sentence, not a uniform.

I will not go past this separation. There are, at sea, stories that do not fit in a line seen from the sidewalk, and I do not yet have them with the precision the sentence would require. To invent them in order to give the chapter weight

would be comfort. It would also be an injustice to those who lived them, because borrowed weight is usually rounder than real weight. Comfort is what I did not want to receive from the sea. I did not inherit the sea. I inherited the stubbornness of looking at it until it answered me with precision, not with comfort. The sentence was written when I was younger, and it still stands. The book, for now, obeys only as far as the view obeys. Where the view ends, I stop, though I stop badly, with the feeling of having left the chapter without the gravity an author desires.

That feeling is a temptation, and it is worth describing it so as not to obey it. The temptation says: if you stay only with the sidewalk, the book will be light, and a light book does not last. I do not know what lasts. I know that a book heavy with a loan lasts even less, because the loan charges interest in falsity. The attentive reader feels the interest even without knowing the name. He feels that the sentence arrived at a quay where the author did not land. I prefer true lightness to visited gravity. The sentence, just now, turned almost proud. Pride in being modest is still the hill. I go down one step: I do not prefer. I try.

I leave out, on purpose and for lack, what I have not measured. I do not turn the lack into a mystery. A lack is a lack. An essay has a gunwale too. What lies beyond that gunwale does not become truer because I point at it with a large word. There are those who point and call the gesture courage. Often it is a haste to seem complete. Complete, at forty-three, would be a lie of a curriculum. I am still learning the edge of my own view. The worn chart in the room represents me better than a treatise: folds, a blank that was not filled in, and weekly use, which prevents the relic.

If some student asks me, next year, why the chapter ends early, the answer will have to fit in one sentence. It ends early because I did not see the rest from close up. Not because the rest does not exist. The distinction is all the honor this essay can offer. To exist is not the same as to be within reach of this page. I may know that the sea continues past the trawler without having the right to narrate what I neither witnessed nor measured. To narrate from hearsay, here, would be to go back to infinity: a large word in place of a coconut palm.

The worn chart taught me a second thing, smaller and useful. At the folds, the printed line breaks. The student sees the break and thinks the coast broke. It did not break. The paper broke. I leave the fold, instead of asking for another chart, new and smooth. The smooth one would hide the accident of use. Use is what makes the chart true: it was opened many times, by hands that wanted to know where north was, and not where the sublime was. Sublime is a word that does not fit in a fold. So much the better.

When I separate the pilot from the one who stayed, I am not distributing dignity. Both may be dignified, and dignity is not the subject. The subject is the gesture. Whoever waits on the sand and writes as if he held the helm makes a novel without having declared it. Whoever held command and writes as if he had only looked hides the cost. I did not hold command. If some sentence of mine sounds like command, it is wrong, and the error will be one of tone, not of experience. Tone can be corrected. Experience that did not happen cannot be corrected: it is erased.

Erasing costs, because the sentence of command is often the most presentable. It has a firm verb and a sure subject. The sentence of the one who stayed has more hesitations, more smell of cardboard, more of a father who does not lift his eyes from the count. A book wants the first, by an instinct of the cover. I want the second, by biography, and I distrust that wanting too, which may be only the reverse of the cover: a humility for the shop window. The way out, today, is not to choose a portrait. It is to keep the two operations separate and not to costume myself as either of them until the end. The end, if it is honest, will still try a costume. I already know it. It likes one last clean sentence.

V

Without the line

At night the line disappears. The world does not vanish: it changes regime. The ear takes up the post the eye has left. A motor far off, the water on the reef, a voice on the slope, a dog that has no opinion about infinity. I stayed an hour, this week, sitting where by day the line is obvious, only to verify the lack. The lack was not dramatic. It was work. The eyes, out of a job, insisted on inventing a stroke in the dark. The ear, more honest, delivered sounds without a drawing. I wanted to draw even so. The notebook, on my lap, received two sentences about the abyss, and I crossed them out before I got home. Abyss was infinity again, dressed in black.

If there is a gleam in the dark, from a lighthouse or from some other light I will not turn into a symbol, a man keeps in memory, between one and the next, the line he does not see. That keeping deserves respect. It does not yet deserve the discourse I would be capable of hanging on it. I know little of the craft of those who spend the whole night in that attention. I visited the idea more than the shift. A visit does not authorize a portrait. A portrait made from a visit is almost always flattery, and flattery is a way of not looking: the person is so busy praising that he does not ask at what hour the body fails.

I will not make a moral out of that craft. I have not yet spent in it the hours that would authorize the sentence. The sentence, if I let it grow, would say that we should all live as one who keeps an invisible line. It is the kind of statement a book applauds and a real night does not confirm. On the real night I went home when tiredness grew larger than curiosity. Tiredness is not a method. It is a limit, and in this chapter the limit arrived early. I note only the fact. Without a figure, attention goes on a little, and then asks for bed. And I stop. Stopping, here, is a piece of information, not the pose of an author who knows how to dose a mystery.

I was tempted, in the dark, to go on. Going on would have been easy: to say that the ear is more faithful than the eye, that night educates, that whoever

could not bear one hour without the line does not know what attention is. All of that may be true in another book, written by someone who worked the shift. It is not true that I can sign it today. One hour is not a craft. It is a visit, and a visit that goes on in the sentence becomes an intrusion. I went back. The slope, without the line, was only a slope. The feet knew the stones better than the eyes did. That, too, I could promote into a wisdom of the body. I do not promote it. It was dark, and I wanted to get there.

VI

The descent

I came down from the hill at the end of the afternoon. The line drew nearer, as it had to. The sand was warm and then cold, because the shadow arrived before I decided the page was ready. People were coming back with fish, an argument about price that was not a metaphor for anything, and a boy who was not looking at the horizon because he was looking at the bucket. In the bucket, two small fish and a little dirty water. Measure returned to the body by that vulgar path. I should have ended here, at the bucket, on the sand, at the height of the eyes of someone who has already come down. The book would be shorter and more just.

I did not end that way. At home, at the same steady table as always, I wrote that the descent had given me back exactness, as if coming down were a virtue and not a path the legs take even without character. The sentence came out clean. The afternoon was not clean. There was the smell of the stall, the argument, the tiredness of a man who had taught a class in the morning and still wanted the class to become thought before supper. I called this a return to measure. It was, in part, a return. It was, in part, the hill coming down with me, disguised as humility. Humility that announces itself has already climbed again.

I left the clean sentence in the book. Not because I agree with it. Because I thought that erasing it would be a second cleaning, worse than the first. The reader sees the bucket and, next, sees the author improving the bucket until it means something. That interval is the subject, more than the line. If I offered only the bucket, I would seem raw. If I offered only the clean sentence, I would seem wise. I am not raw enough or wise enough to deserve either portrait. I am a man of forty-three who measures better than he lives, and who publishes the measure even so, because publication is the way he found not to leave the sentence only in the notebook.

The notebook, it should be said, would still have been enough if I had not had the vanity of a volume. The vanity does not shame me to the point of omit-

ting it, and it does not please me to the point of cultivating it as a theme. It is here as the salt is at the counter: it is part of the goods, it is not the goods. The goods, if there are any, are the distinction between the line and infinity, repeated until the repetition itself denounces my taste for it. I like this idea. The liking is suspect. An idea the author likes asks for double vigilance, because he will protect it from objections as one protects a child, and a child is not corrected with a ruler.

The book remains in this contradiction, and I do not baptize it with a name that would resolve it. The line is a modest measure. I still speak it from a place a little high. Whoever reads me years from now, if anyone does, should note from what height of the eyes these pages were written. I do not ask for agreement. I ask for the note of position, which is the least a pilot would write in the margin and which an essayist pretends not to need. Today I know only that it was not from the sand the whole time. It was also from the hill. And the hill, in Olinda, is not a mountain. It is a rise that already thinks itself quite enough.

The next morning I went back to the counter. My father did not ask about the book. He asked whether I had seen the fishing line a customer swore was rotten, and was not. It was only dirty. I cleaned a piece of it with him, for the sake of doing something with my hands, and the dirt came off without the line becoming something else. I will not compare that minute to the essay. The comparison would be the day's last climb, and I have already come down. The fact remains, without a frame: there was a dirty line, and the dirt was not the material. The material was still line. I go back to Recife with that smaller sentence, which opens no horizon at all, and which for that reason may be allowed to stay.

On the bus, though, the smaller sentence was already asking for company. I wanted to add that thought should be the same: dirty first, line afterward. The comparison is almost good, and for that reason it is dangerous. Almost good is the state in which the author lowers his guard. I did not add it. I looked at the traffic, which means nothing beyond traffic, and left the sentence alone in my pocket, like the piece of line my father gave me without ceremony. He did not say keep this. He said only that the rest would still serve. To serve is not to

shine. I, who spend my days among people who want to shine on a test, need this sentence without shine more than I need one more hill.

If the book ends here, it ends low, and low was what I asked of the descent. I am not sure I obeyed on every page. I am sure I marked the times I climbed. That, at forty-three, is the most honesty I can publish without turning honesty into a style. The style of an honest man is the last mask, and I have already tried it on. It was too wide. I take it off in this last line, or I try. Tomorrow, in the room, someone will say the sea is infinite. I will ask from where he is looking. If the question comes out in a tone of victory, I will have climbed again. The tone, at least, I already know how to watch.

COLLECTION NOTE

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

Margem 37 — For stories in search of a margin.