at this stage of the night

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Introduction

About the Author

Maylis de Kerangal, author of *à ce stade de la nuit,* or *at this stage of the night,* was born in 1967 in Le Havre, France, where she lived until moving to Paris to study philosophy. She did not publish her first novel, *Je marche sous un ciel de traîne*, until 2000, after working for several years at the publishing house Editions Gallimard, which she left to write full time. Like *à ce stade de la nuit,* this book has not yet been translated into English. In fact, none of her early novels have been translated into English, as de Kerangal did not gain literary acclaim until the publication of her sixth novel, *Naissance d'un pont,* in 2010, which received several literary prizes and was consequently translated into English by Jessica Moore in 2014. Her most well known novel, *Réparer les vivants,* was published in 2016. There are two different English translations of this book, *Mending the Living* and *The Heart,* translated by Jessica Moore and Sam Taylor respectively. It has also been adapted into a feature film.

Due to her success, de Kerangal has become very well known in France, particularly for her style, which is very different from that of classic French literature. In 2014, an article in *Le Figaro* named her the "new literary phenomenon", exclaiming over the number of literary prizes she had won[1]. However, her deviance from the literary canon is controversial among critics. Many believe that de Kerangal's work combines aspects from so many different disciplines, such as pop culture, journalism, and science, that it can no longer be considered literature. However, in response to such criticism, de Kerangal argues that "literature must be in dialogue with the contemporary world"[2]. She does not confine herself to the traditions of French literature; by bringing so many exterior cultural references into her books and frequently changing registers, she creates something much more universal than the traditional novel.

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[1] Aissaioui, Mohammed. "Maylis De Kerangal, Le Nouveau Phénomène Littéraire". *Le Figaro*, 2014

Historical Context

Maylis de Kerangal's *at this stage of the night* revolves around a real-life event. On the morning of 3 October 2013, a fishing boat supposedly transporting over 500 illegal immigrants, the majority of whom were from Somalia, Eritrea, and Ghana, sank only a quarter mile from the shores of the Italian island, Lampedusa[3]. After an engine failure, someone started a small fire to signal for help. However, the flames ignited gasoline that had seeped into the boat, and the fire spread, causing panic, and consequently, capsize. Most of the immigrants aboard did not know how to swim and drowned, despite the boat's proximity to land. The Italian Coast Guard managed to rescue 155 people. The death toll reached 359, but this number does not include the many bodies that were never recovered. Unfortunately, shipwrecks of this kind are not uncommon in the Mediterranean. In the past year, of the 115,000 migrants traveling by sea from North Africa and the Mideast to Europe, 2,299 died, which is actually a significant decrease from 5,143 in 2016[4]. Many shipwrecks occur near Lampedusa, as the island, located only 70 miles from northern Africa, is a very common stop for migrant boats. However, the wreck in October 2013 was by far the most tragic.

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[2] Delistraty, Cody. "Maylis De Kerangal: France'S Unlikely Literary Rebel". *The Millions*, 2016

[3] Yardley, Jim, and Elisabetta Povoledo. "Migrants Die As Burning Boat Capsizes Off Italy". *Nytimes.Com*, 2013

[4] *Missing Migrants Project*, 2019

Synopsis

Although the 2013 migrant shipwreck off Lampedusa is the focus of Maylis de Kerangal's, *at this stage of the night,* it seems surprisingly absent from the plot. De Kerangal writes in first person from her own point of view, describing the night of 3 October 2013 when she first hears of the tragedy in Lampedusa over the radio in her Paris apartment. Listening to the story over the radio is the only connection between the writer and the migrants and others who experienced the event first-hand. There is little plot, as the novel is completely interior, following the narrator's train of thought as it evolves throughout the night. Drawing from memories, films she has watched, and books she has read, she tries to comprehend this tragic event and what it must be like to have experienced it first-hand and urges the reader to do the same, instead of allowing themselves to remain ignorant.

Analysis

An "Histoire d'Écoute"

When asked in an interview on the France 5 show "La Grande Librairie" about the origin of *at this stage of the night*, Maylis de Kerangal explained that "it was born from this *histoire d'écoute*", or story of listening. The novel is built around her endeavor to transform a voice into a written account. In a world dominated by the visual, it is incredibly easy to forget to listen as well as look. Therefore, the voices of those who have been made invisible in our society, such as the migrants involved in the shipwreck at Lampedusa, are almost never heard. De Kerangal emphasizes the importance of using all of our senses to fully comprehend the world around us. She quotes gardener and writer Gilles Clément: “To the question: what is a landscape? We can respond: that which we keep in our memory after we have stopped looking; that which we keep in our memory after we have stopped using our senses in the space our bodies once filled”. In response, she writes that she likes “the idea that the experience of memory…transforms places into landscapes, metamorphosing illegible spaces into stories” (de Kerangal, 14-15). Unable to see the events that unfolded on October 13 with her own eyes, de Kerangal must rely on another sense, the auditory, to envision what happened. One can close their eyes, just listen, and imagine a landscape without ever seeing it. Through this very process, de Kerangal is able to transform the landscape of the shipwreck, created only from what she heard on the radio, into a story that she can more easily comprehend. Her words, like all literature, become a new “histoire d’écoute”, through which the reader can listen and, in turn, create their own landscape of the story.

In bringing the migrants’ story to light and trying to understand their experience as an outsider, Maylis de Kerangal invites the reader to do the same. In the “La Grande Librairie” interview, she says, “what I would like is for the reader to also put themselves in this ‘wake effect’…and to listen to the voices. For me, what is important is that the reader can live, can exist, by trying to listen”[5]. She argues that in the process of writing *at this stage of the night,* she was able to place herself in the “wake effect”, or the aftermath of the tragedy, and she believes that the reader must also do so through the same act of listening to understand the world from multiple perspectives. However, one must ask if it is truly possible to recount a reality that is not one’s own without usurping the voices of those to whom the experience belongs. De Kerangal claims to be giving voice to the voiceless, but she has only what she has heard second-hand to draw from. As she has not spoken directly with any survivors of the wreck, she can only make assumptions about what the experience was like. She tries to put herself in their shoes, using the pronoun “on”, which, in this context, can best be translated into a second person narration, in an attempt to capture the terrifying urgency of the situation. She writes, “You falter…terrified, weary, raped, beaten, defeated, pushed, the barrel of a rusty submachine gun sweeping the bottom of the trawler, much too small for this human load… you might swim for hours, maybe floating for several days, gripping a beam, finally letting go only to sacrifice your exhausted body to the waves” (de Kerangal, 17). Between the passionate language and the use of “you”, this passage is incredibly effective in drawing empathy from the reader, as they have no choice but to imagine themselves in the place of the victims. However, while it is clear that de Kerangal’s intention is to express empathy by imagining the event in this way, she is also committing a form of “epistemological violence”, or the interpretation of empirical data as showing the inferiority of the Other[6]. By replacing the migrants with herself and her readers, she reproduces their erasure, despite her intention to let their voices be heard. In reality, it is impossible to describe the experiences of those we don’t and will never know.

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[5] "Maylis De Kerangal Nous Parle De Son Livre 'A Ce Stade De La Nuit'". La Grande Librairie, 2015

An Invisible Existence

Despite its immense size, the sea so often escapes us, as if it is a vast, empty space, void of humanity. When the narrator locates Lampedusa on a globe, she at first sees it as “a place in a non-place…land defined against the fluidity of the sea where time and topography are extinguished" (de Kerangal, 18). It is as if the sea does not exist as a space that can be occupied. Therefore, the migrants themselves would not exist until their arrival on Lampedusa. They were invisible until tragedy forced us to acknowledge them. However, as she contemplates this, she comes to realize that "the sea is not a non-place…it cohabits different spaces ruled by maritime law…it is crossed by many routes, maritime highways…navigated by migrants as long as the sea has existed" (de Kerangal, 19). The sea is not unpopulated; it is full of topography, of people, and of stories. The sea exists in a continuous state of transformation, but all of this movement occurs outside our sight, so it is easy to ignore in a way that terrestrial politics are not. The migrants that occupy this space are completely invisible, as if shrouded in the darkness of night, like the narrator, alone in her apartment.

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[6] Teo, Thomas. "What Is Epistemological Violence In The Empirical Social Sciences?", 2010

Maylis de Kerangal begins the novel with these words: "Night, a kitchen. The only lamp lit creates on the tablecloth a cone of light that materializes the suspended particles—once the light bulb is out I always doubt their existence" (de Kerangal, 1). With this statement, she introduces immediately the question of visibility, inviting us to consider: who is visible and who is not? Migrants are like the particles that remain even after the light has been turned out. They are invisible, existing in the darkness that is the lack of hospitality that meets them upon their arrival in Europe. This darkness or inhumanity is in contrast with the humanism that was the basis of the philosophy of the *Lumières,* the major figures of the Enlightenment, which translates directly as "lights". However, this darkness can also be considered a metaphor for our ignorance of these migrants' stories. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator shares this ignorance, as she is in the dark, still only associating the name Lampedusa with literature and cinema. But as the night and the novel draw to a close and the sun rises, she emerges from this ignorance, finally beginning to truly comprehend the tragedy at Lampedusa. Morning light begins to spill in through the kitchen window, reflective of the narrator's newfound state of enlightenment about the issue.

The Migration of a Name

When she first hears the name *Lampedusa* over the radio, the narrator of *at this stage of the night* immediately thinks of *The Leopard,* a 1963 film starring Burt Lancaster. This is the first association that she makes with the name, as the film is based on a book written by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. This first image becomes the starting point for what Maylis de Kerangal refers to as the "migration of a name", a process of association and derivation that occurs when a name is first spoken. She explains that when the narrator first hears this name, she "seizes it and passes it through imaginary resources like fiction and cinema…and also through her own memories"[7]. For her, Lampedusa is Burt Lancaster*,* aboriginal songlines, and her first trip to Stromboli. To create a new association with this name, that of the deaths of hundreds of migrants, the narrator must first work her way through everything that it has previously signified for her. In doing so, she finds that all of these associations are interconnected, weaving together to create her own mental landscape of the island, to create a single story.

Although it seems, at first, that Burt Lancaster and migrants are in no way related, the narrator slowly begins to find connections between the two, using her preexisting associations as references to help her comprehend the tragedy that is the shipwreck. As she envisions Burt Lancaster in *The Leopard,* another film, *The Swimmer,* comes to mind, and these two versions of a man start to merge into one. De Kerangal describes Lancaster's face as "an actor's face, otherwise known as a face hidden by scripts, consulting one another and fusing together into a story in which Burt Lancaster is absent" (de Kerangal, 3). Lancaster's true identity is hidden beneath all the roles that he has played; we have projected these films onto his character and, in doing so, we have erased the man himself. She describes him as if even *he* no longer knows which character is the real Burt Lancaster. For the narrator, this paradoxical anonymity of a celebrity is a connection, although in a very metaphorical sense, to the invisibility of the migrant. The identities of these migrants are not only a mystery to us, but also to themselves. By leaving their entire lives behind them to start anew on another continent, they give up almost everything with which they once identified. They now inhabit the frontier between two identities, trapped in an indefinite state of invisibility.

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[7] "Maylis De Kerangal Nous Parle De Son Livre 'A Ce Stade De La Nuit'". La Grande Librairie, 2015

Mental Archaeology

During her interview with "La Grande Librairie", Maylis de Kerangal describes the images that arise during the process of association as part of a "mental archaeology"[8]. All of these images, when combined, create a single landscape of thought. The landscape, in both its conceptual and literal forms, has a place of great significance in *at this stage of the night.* The physical landscape of Lampedusa, an island, is not unlike the mental landscape that de Kerangal creates through her writing. She compares these two landscapes, writing, "Islands, especially deserted islands, are already the beginnings of a story…They emerge suddenly, finite forms in the middle of an infinity…it's a clear space that imposes its contours, thus creating an inside within an outside: islands are like ideas" (de Kerangal, 16). Lampedusa appears as if out of nowhere amid the indefinite expanse of the sea in the same way that Burt Lancaster's face "appears in a flash" in the narrator's mind when she first hears the name Lampedusa spoken (de Kerangal, 2). Lancaster's face is the first piece that arises of the narrator's mental landscape of Lampedusa; it marks the beginning of her account, bringing to the surface other memories that build upon this foundation. Each new association that she makes with the name Lampedusa is topography added to this landscape.

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[8] "Maylis De Kerangal Nous Parle De Son Livre 'A Ce Stade De La Nuit'". La Grande Librairie, 2015

The narrator is able to find parts of herself in Lampedusa, associating the name with her own memories and experiences, but migrants are not granted this privilege. They cannot identify with any physical space except the sea, the frontier between two continents and two lives. Colonizers were once migrants, too, but through violence and oppression, they created new landscapes of the ones they "discovered". De Kerangal describes a priest who arrives among Columbus' men in 1492, "blessing the earth, he names it; this is the act of conquest, the seizure of lands, of earth offered to God, to the king, to the Church, the conquest of a territory rechristened, and the names of those who were found there are erased, covered up so well that they fade from the surface of the earth, but they continue to haunt the space" (de Kerangal, 10). These men claimed the land as their own, and in doing so, erased the indigenous people who were already there. However, those migrating to Europe are the colonized, not colonizers. Although they are now the ones arriving, they cannot claim the land as their own, as they get erased upon their arrival in the same way that these indigenous peoples were erased. Their presence remains unacknowledged by most, excluded from people's mental landscapes of Europe, including the narrator's until this moment. The migrants' stories are instead written in the sea. De Kerangal associates this idea with a book that she read on songlines, which are aboriginal creation myths that are considered as much a part of the landscape in Australia as geological aspects of the topography, forming a path that can be followed in the same way that one might follow a dirt road. She writes, “each musical phrase of a songline brings to life a segment of this path…I asked myself if the alliances between the aboriginal clans changed the length of the songs, if they elongated the path, expanded the limits of memory, or if, on the contrary, they created bifurcations, new routes” (de Kerangal, 11). Just as aboriginal people add their own stories to the songlines that their ancestors began, migrants add their stories to the sea; many of them may never be heard, but they are there, as much a part of the sea’s topography as its islands, shorelines, and trenches. The sea is not a “non-place” at all, but an ever-changing landscape of voices crossing one another, creating new routes.

Style

Maylis de Kerangal’s unique style is evident from the very beginning of the novel, as she has chosen not to capitalize the title, *at this stage of the night.* The “a” remains un-capitalized as this phrase is repeated throughout the novel, marking the start of each new chapter and step in the narrator’s journey toward comprehension. This unusual stylistic choice reinstates a certain informality, reminding the reader that, despite the literary register in which she writes, which at some points is very formal, the narrative is made up entirely of a single stream of consciousness. De Kerangal breaks the thought process up into chapters so that it can be more accessible to the reader, but by keeping the “a” lowercase in this repeating phrase, she is also able to preserve its fluidity and continuity. This continuity is also reflected in the sentence structures. De Kerangal frequently uses nominal phrases: lists of thoughts as they arise, completely void of verbs. Many of her sentences are incredibly long, sometimes as long as three pages, spliced with commas, colons and semicolons. However, these rambling sentences are interspersed with sentences that are abruptly short, sometimes made up of only one or two words. They are also frequently interrupted by parentheticals set off by em-dashes. All of these jarring changes in the flow of the narration create an account that is fragmentary, not unlike a natural train of thought.

Process

Due to Maylis de Kerangal's intricate writing style, *at this stage of the night* proved a difficult text to comprehend, let alone translate. The text relies so deeply on metaphor that its meaning lies hidden beneath a veil of poetic ambiguity. Preserving this ambiguity was one of the more difficult parts of the translation process, as it was sometimes hard to determine whether a passage was unclear because it was mistranslating or because it was de Kerangal's intention. It was also difficult to replicate her tone, as word choice is an integral aspect of her poetics. A large portion of the many hours put into this project was spent scouring a thesaurus for the perfect word to best fit the style, as direct translations hardly ever sounded as elegant. I often attempted to translate word for word, simplifying the text as much as possible before rearranging and rewording phrases to put them back into de Kerangal's voice. In some cases, however, direct translation was not possible, which complicated my process, but also allowed me to take some liberties. For example, when de Kerangal describes how she imagined the shipwreck, she uses the pronoun "on", which does not exist in English, and can be translated in many different ways depending on the context. Although, in this circumstance, I could have translated it as "they", I chose to use "you" instead: "you might swim for several hours…" (de Kerangal, 17). I think this translation works well because it places emphasis on de Kerangal’s plea with the reader to listen and empathize, allowing themselves to be immersed in the “wake effect”.

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Night, a kitchen. The only lamp lit creates on the tablecloth a cone of light that materializes the suspended particles—once the light bulb is out, I always doubt their existence. I get home late and my feet are dragging. Sitting on the edge of the wicker chair, flipping through the paper spread across the table, I slowly sip the morning's coffee, poured into a mug and reheated in the microwave. Everyone is sleeping. I take long drags of a cigarette. The radio broadcasts at a low volume a thread of sound that murmurs throughout the space, twisting and turning like a gymnast's ribbon. I don't react immediately to the agitated voice which, after the twelve chimes of midnight, stammers out the news of the sinister tragedy that took place this morning, I only notice an acceleration, something exciting. Soon a name is uttered: Lampedusa. It resonates between the walls, stagnates, seeps among the specks of dust, and suddenly it is there before me, solidifying as the minutes pass—a slide of bubbling lava plunging into the sea.

I gather and organize the information that swells on the waves of sound, saturating them, I extract a single phrase: *a boat coming from Libya, loaded with more than 500 migrants, was shipwrecked this morning less than two kilometers from the shores of the* Isle of Lampedusa; *we mourn the deaths of nearly 300 victims.* It now seems to me that the sound of the radio increases as other names are listed—Eritrea, Somalia, Malta, Sicily, Tunisia, Libya, Tripoli—while the names proliferate, overlapping one another, coming together and dividing, while they compare: 283 drowned during a shipwreck on Christmas morning in 1996, almost 3,000 dead or missing since 2002, around 350 today, October 3, 2013.

at this stage of the night, I turn towards the radio to examine the neon-green lines that rise and fall on the display, which describe and analyze the voices I am hearing, their intensity, their frequency, but there are so many people in the studio that the luminous lines become panicked and trip over one another—shouting.

The first image that comes to mind is Burt Lancaster's face. It appears in a flash, and I immediately identify it: An American outline, face and chest majestic, an elegant jacket draped over his shoulders, a white ascot. He is Don Fabrizio, prince of Salina, he is Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard*: it is him.

I watch the ballet of dust particles in the ray of light cast by the orange lampshade: night has fallen, and Don Fabrizio, having returned to his summer home in Donnafugata, is preparing to receive Don Calogero, a villager soon to be richer than he is, the eager and badly dressed incarnation of the rising bourgeoisie, agent of a new social order by which the prince will soon be replaced: "everything changes so that nothing changes". The prince is standing at the top of the stairs which lead to the palace's salons, torso turned, overlooking the flight of stairs, he holds himself nobly with all the brilliance of his name and emanates the charisma and authority of his rank, of his blood. Soon, surrounded by his son and nephew—youth, succession—his eyes rest on the small, wise man climbing the staircase, bundled up in a tailcoat inappropriate for the season—he greets him in a loud, warm voice, welcoming him into his home, although his expression remains strangely distant—a moment that is perhaps the second-most important of the film, this shifting of the scales swallows up the old world; the moment in which the prince is veiled in melancholy, he is already dead.

Burt Lancaster was fifty years old in 1963, the year in which the film was made. Athletic body, chiseled jaw, straight nose, legendary smile—whiteness, health, optimism, desire for power—which contradicts his eyes, almost too clear, a liquid-blue, eyes that peer beneath the world's surface into a space of indecision and pain. A body built for cinema, sculpted by the machine that is Hollywood, split into many incarnations—75 films in fifty years—and an actor's face, otherwise known as a face hidden by scripts, consulting one another and fusing together into a story in which Burt Lancaster is absent.

Suddenly, the immobile aristocrat, majestic on his island, is erased by another figure, that of a man in swim trunks emerging from the outskirts of an American forest. It seems as if he is born of nature, wild; it is Ned Merrill in Frank Perry's 1968 film *The Swimmer*. Or the odyssey of a man who comes up with the strange idea to get home by swimming, traversing one by one the private pools on the gorgeous properties in the Connecticut valley where he lives—the pools form an imaginary river that become a sort of baptism, purifying his body of his wife, Lucinda. On his journey, Ned Merrill crosses paths with many people he knows and claims to be delighted to see them again after all this time, but these individuals are really empty, lifeless containers floating on superficial luxuries, who spark nothing in him but a palpable feeling of inanity and disgust, an impression of morbidity.

Maybe feeling an urge to flee, to reinvent himself and be liberated from the world, or a longing to return to an earlier life, a purifying desire to be reborn, new and chaste, in order to go back to ground zero, the man swims to the end of his unusual project. Burt Lancaster portrays him as a damaged traveler on a journey that becomes harder and harder, a process that tires out his body, allowing himself to suffer and deteriorate so that he may know the feeling of being a stranger in the world that surrounds him, doubting his reality.

Little by little, Prince Salina and Ned Merrill appear to me as two versions of the same humanity, the recto and verso of the same man. Although they are situated directly opposite one another, appearing as ornamentation and nudity, reality and dream, continuity and the immediate, they share the same bodily strength that diminishes little by little over the course of the film, the same cold loneliness under a blistering sun, the same feeling of aging and of the empty spectacle of wealthy society, closed-minded, self-centered—dinner parties and balls, huge cocktail parties—this same unfathomable sadness. I envision them as two brothers. And the more I think about it, the more extraordinary I find Burt Lancaster. Often called an “aristocrat” of cinema, Lancaster, born in New York in 1913 to English and Irish immigrants, unifies these two identities that live together within the name Lampedusa: the prince and the migrant.

at this stage of the night, I am still flipping through the paper. Skimming, I take notice only of the titles, the captions of photographs, words that are italicized and capitalized. I dive a bit deeper into the blocks of text—the montage of articles, a cryptic logic, an assemblage of perspectives, the readability of the world, an adventure dismantled—while a radiophonic voice gradually intensifies, espousing the essential news of the night: mostly Somalis and Eritreans; a fishing boat; overcrowding; conditions on board like those for black people during the slave trade; men, women, children, babies; a breakdown that brought the crossing to an end; migrants without papers; a blanket set ablaze to alert other boats; packed together, unable to move; around seven in the morning; fire; the boat, capsized, sinking; fleeing political insecurity in Somalia and dictatorship in Eritrea; fuel.

The coffee burns in my tightening throat. The last time that I saw *The Leopard* was at the Reflet Medicis on Rue Champollion. *Il Gattopardo.* A remastered version. The masterpiece, winner of the Palme d'Or in 1963—in four years, I would be born. I decided at the last minute, by chance, to draw out the day after many hours compacted into a single sequence of work and maybe find some closure in its final form. I spiraled my way down the service stairs and exited, coat open, hair dry and skin taut from the electric heating that was on high since the morning. I went down the Rue des Tournelles until the Rue Saint-Antoine before waiting at the Place de la Bastille for the 86, a bus decked in red on each side and above the windshield. The light was green and, in the bus lane along the Boulevard Henri IV, the bus was rolling at a lively pace, the floor and windows vibrating—one might have thought that the vehicle was on the verge of falling apart. In less than seven minutes, I had arrived at the Rue des Ecoles.

The restoration of the film justified its re-release: it was as if seeing it for the first time, as if it had never been shown before. A colorful brochure insisted that by the work of technical experts, the film had been modernized, revived, and refreshed. It was time to rediscover it: the work of Visconti updated by archeologists in laboratories had once again found its place among us. I didn't pay much attention to all the publicity; the original colors didn't bother me, not more than the voice of the epoch, a voice like a duck's, slightly tense and nasally. I was moved by these anachronisms that gave tangible form to the time that had passed. I only wanted to see the film again so I could have a perfect ending to that spring Monday before it plunged into night.

The theater was practically deserted. The recognizable odor of neighborhood cinemas hung in the air, not exactly the smell of a multiplex, or of popcorn and processed sugar, not the smell of pink powdered marshmallows, but that of human emotion or ennui, a precipitate of synthetic velvet, of tears and sweat. I chose a seat in the third row, so as to be completely captivated by the image on screen.

The room went dark and I watched *The Leopard.* I recognized the places. I once again saw Sicily, unmoving. The palaces, the immense salons, the rows of empty bedrooms, the vast spaces, terraces and gardens, the blazing countryside. I rediscovered the dilapidated baroque, the peeling facades, the walls that fell to ruins as if molting, old skin tumbling to the floor to reveal the new; I examined the decrepitude that signified the slow degrading of time just as much as the lack of money, the lack of power; I squinted at the gently sloping fields, their infinite undulation, at the olive trees and horse-drawn carriages lurching on dirt roads, at the dust and aridity, at the heads of women bobbing under black umbrellas, overwhelmed by the heat, getting lost in the landscape, at all of it eroding; I heard anew the dog barking and Angelica's laugh during dinner at the prince's table, that throaty laugh, excessive and sexual, lasting an obscenely long time, this laugh that pulverized the propriety of a petrified society, breaking the social order like the shrill sound of shattering crystal, a laugh in the form of an execution.

And I saw the ball again. The grand scene of the ball at the Ponteleones'. And that night, I saw it differently, both more radical and more cruel. A stretched-out version that I had not seen before, like a meditation on nostalgia, a tracking shot of significant length, almost impossible to sit through. It was then that I discovered its paradoxical violence: converting an opening into a closing, accession into downfall, turning respiration into total asphyxiation. Or how an initiation scene, that of Angelica into the high society of Palermo—she is the beautiful daughter of Don Calogero, the peasant turned parvenu, and recently engaged to Tancredi, the prince's cherished nephew; she is the body that illuminates and contaminates the gathering, a stranger, seizing the power—the scene in which her metamorphosis inevitably occurs is filmed at dusk, a signifier for the world that is rapidly declining around her. The ball deploys a macabre dance, as ritualistic as an execution, a slow encircling maneuver that, little by little, strangles its object, and the prince, elsewhere, who begins to feel sick at the sight of this nobility eroded by its endogamy, corroded by its own vacuity, by the vanity of its existence, he chokes, suffocates, burdened with fatigue: the presence of death and the end of time physically manifest themselves in his being. In search of air and silence, fleeing the crowd of guests, he takes refuge in the library where a Greuze painting takes him back to the vision of his own demise, as if there is no possible end to this ball except for Angelica's hand, that pure, supple flesh, inviting him to dance.

Due to its anxiety-inducing duration, stretched to the limit, the ball scene aims to break the structure of the film. It makes up most of the third and final act, disturbing the equilibrium of the film as it draws to an end, like a ship's cargo, too heavy or tied down poorly. In fact, everything here is a question of gravity, of heaviness, of overloading, of ineptitude, of nausea at watching a world rot. The image is saturated with breathtaking decor, paintings, and authentic objects loaned by noble families from Palermo, an abundance of colorful costumes, swishing hoop skirts, candelabras and lit candles, lush plants and flowers, the blinding brilliance of crystal, silver, and jewels—so much that the ballroom buckles under the weight of it all, twisting and turning unpleasantly so that the waltz between the prince and Angelica is at once both the driving force of the scene and part of the background. In the dazzling epicenter of the party, the couple, immersed in the crowd of guests, progressively detach from one another and begin to take up space, each now surrounded by emptiness. Little by little, guests stand frozen to watch them, consequently becoming the spectators of their end. This all indicates that their waltz is the last of its kind, a swan song.

When I left the theater, dazed, it was night. I asked myself if my new outlook on the film was a result of the restoration, of the revivified colors, of the more distinct contours, or of the renewed 1960s vintage. I walked down the deserted Boulevard Saint-Michel at a quick pace in the direction of the Seine, and stopped in my tracks when I crossed the river and found myself in front of Notre-Dame, where I realized that Visconti had filmed the ball in *The Leopard* exactly like a shipwreck.

at this stage of the night, Burt Lancaster's face dissipates and I want to smoke. I must have a cigarette somewhere. There's one in the apartment, I know it. Yet I don't want to stray too far from the kitchen where there is still a continuous stream of international reactions to catastrophes, the crescendo of political voices among which are those of the president of the European Parliament, the president of the Senate Commission for Human Rights, the minister of Integration: *dramma senza precedenti; uno prima ed uno dopo; esprimiamo la nostra tristezza e la nostra solidarietà.* Italian voices, metallic, full of emotion, resonate flatly beneath those of the interpreters. They keep Lampedusa in its original language so I can easily locate it—it's strange to see at which point the proper noun becomes irrelevant to the words around it, rolling between them like a pebble propagating poetry.

Burt Lancaster is now covered in a different layer of signs: nine letters, though one is repeated. Now, Lampedusa, when I see it, when I read it aloud, brings to mind four words that form a name on the cover of a book: Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa.

I examine this name, exploring all its possibilities, evaluating it and breaking it down. I hear the toponym, those four syllables that create a new space, catalyzing the sun and the history, the dryness, the gunpowder, the war, the gold and the red, the debris, something archaic and languid. This name already has a story. I discover that it refers to, among other things and titles of nobility, the eleventh prince of Lampedusa. It makes me think of a border with defined edges, surrounding land like a fiefdom, and I don't know if it's the island—Lampedusa—which belongs to the man, or the man himself, Giuseppe Tomasi. I am digging deeper, wanting to know what it means, when finally a man appears, Giuseppe Tomasi *di* Lampedusa, otherwise known as a man born and raised on this island.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa is the author of a single novel, *The Leopard,* published posthumously in 1958—the book that became the classic film.

All that we can know about him is taken from the ample and precise description that gives the Sicilian aristocracy their familial power, which is founded on property and the corruption through which it is attained. Prince Salina's family is purely a reflection of his own. Solitary, well-read, author of literary essays on Flaubert, Stendhal, Byron, and professor of literature, Giuseppe Tomasi spent many long years on *The Leopard.* He began writing in the mid-1950s and finished it in 1956, not long before his death. An autobiography of a family, the novel seizes the "moment" of a man and his loved ones, weaving together a book of politics, a saga of a social class, and a meditation on the time period. It is from the point of view of Prince Salina, who, although the author considered this an unnecessary specification, is based on his great-grandfather: Giulio Fabrizio Tomasi di Lampedusa.

Lampedusa/Salina. Salina/Lampedusa.

I put side by side the two names that refer to the same man. The two men share a first name: Fabrizio. I try to intercept whatever is passing between them, the comings and goings, the whirling loop of meaning. The real name drifts into the fictional name, migrating from a historical title of nobility into that of literature; the fictional name can reclaim the real name. I tremble with pleasure and rub my palms against each other when I remember that Salina is also a toponym, the name of an island in the Mediterranean, one that is not situated south of Sicily like

Lampedusa, but to the north, in another archipelago, the Aeolian islands: two names for two islands. From one name to the other, from one island to the other, the migration continues.

at this stage of the night, feeling around in the bottom of a cluttered drawer, full of old things that archive daily life in this apartment, I fumble through buttons, dried-out pens, Playmobil debris, hand cream samples, packets of sugar taken from cafés, bills, packs of gum, a dead cellphone, a packet of tissues, various coins, stained photos that I linger on briefly, and finally a crumpled cigarette, but no matches, so I have to turn on the stove in the kitchen and bend over, cigarette hanging from my lips over the blue flames. I hold back my hair and light it, smoke curling from the corner of my mouth.

I now think of these proper nouns that are toponyms, of these anthroponyms, of these cities at different latitudes like Athens or Lisbon, of these characters named Quixote or Gargantua, Guermantes or Meaulnes, I think of Havre and Bouville, of the route from Flanders to Ellis Island, of Cards and of Lascaux, of the Sargasso Sea, I utter Lake Baikal and Wyoming, I utter Sahara and Cape Horn, and the Strait of Gibraltar and the Mekong Delta, I murmur Grandes Jorasses, Guadalquivir and Loire, Liège-Bastone-Liège, I murmur Zanzibar, Endoume, Kamchatka, and Mont Aigoual, the Millevaches plateau, Massif des Maures, I whisper Black Forest, Epeluche and Les Fougeres. The names push against one another, vibrating and multiplying, and among them, on a road in the Landes, in the buzz of summer, a rectangular sign with red trim and black letters on a white background that say *Maylis,* and a photograph in November in Finistere that says *Kerangal* under a black sky.

I think of the names written in these landscapes and I think of the landscapes moving in the names.

Suddenly, I asked myself how men had named the Earth—weary schooners reach the shores, the anchor is dropped in a sandy cove around which vibrates a lush forest, the rowboats are lowered into the water and hungry men rush to disembark, in a daze of contradicting emotions, terrified, while relieved to be returning alive to solid ground, silent before the *terra incognita* that stretches before them on this day in 1492, excited by gold promised at the end of their journey; they have scabies, scurvy, lice, their clothes are stiff with grime, their sex itches, they have scratched their sores until they bled, they have lost their teeth. They rot like carion. The rowboats pitch and the men salivate; when the bow of the skiff touches the sand, they throw their legs over the gunwales, plunging one foot into the water up to their mid-thigh, then the other; the boat becomes unbalanced, splashes, shouts, some fall into the water and get up, only to fall again, soaked, the salt already corroding the iron armor that weighs them down. Reaching the sand, they fall to their knees, crossing themselves as a gaunt preacher floats among them in a ragged surplice, his chasuble in tatters but his eyes burning. He waves a crucifix, revealing his pale wrists, as thin as those of a young girl, and, blessing the earth, he names it; this is the act of conquest, the seizure of lands, of earth offered to God, to the king, to the Church, the conquest of a territory rechristened, and the names of those who were found there are erased, covered up so well that they fade from the surface of the earth, but they continue to haunt the space, and those who observe the newcomers, those crouched in the undergrowth, those who whisper in their language, faces contorted in astonishment, those whose names are Small River or Horse Flying on the Plain, Fire Rock or Hill Curved Like the Breast of a Young Girl, those who hold their breath, now, in a panic, passing on names, all the names of their land—, I asked myself from which reservoir men had drawn the signs and sounds that mark, define, identify, situate parts of the territory, how they had invented words that could suggest something other than themselves, their stories, a miracle that in truth was domination, exploitation, political violence. I thought about the ghosts living in those names, and I asked myself how I could ever perceive them, understand them.

The night grows hollow like a basin and the space of the kitchen begins to breathe behind a fibrous veil. I think of the silence left behind as names slip away, as if written in invisible ink. Sitting up straight in my chair, my hands flat on the table, I say it aloud, delicately: Lampedusa.

at this stage of the night, I am under the impression that everything around me in the kitchen—furniture, stainless steel cutlery, waxy rinds of citrus fruits, salt crystals, earthenware, a cup lacquered with the morning's coffee, square floor tiles, a window framing the street—has been precisely carved out of a precious metal. Something starts to sway, moving slowly, dazzling me. Eyelids.

I read *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin while I was crossing Siberia by train—April, melting. Its title, so beautiful, a melody of voices and spaces, burning at the bottom of my bag like a sun, dusty. As the rails carried me through the taiga forest, I gradually discovered the existence of songlines, those of the aboriginal Australians.

As the train travelled at 50 kilometers per hour through the biting cold, the songs began at a murmur and then grew clearer and clearer, and I listened: they described a land of winding paths, travelled on foot. Reliefs, hills and plateaus, cliffs and deserts, rivers, plants, animals, rocks, all create an oral map of a sacred path. Each songline also retells a fragment of a creation myth: at the origin of the world, an ancestor started on a path, conceiving all things by singing their names, so that today, the aboriginal who follows this path, and sings, might reconnect with his origins and thus recreate the world. Each musical phrase of a songline brings to life a segment of this path, each element of the landscape reignites a moment from an ancestor's life, a moment from the history of a race—I asked myself if the alliances between the aboriginal clans changed the length of the songs, if they elongated the path, expanded the limits of memory, or if, on the contrary, they created bifurcations, new routes; I smiled.

The train passed through deserted stations, never deviating from its route, and I swayed in my bunk as voices blended together in the narrow corridor that ran the length of the car—exclamations, shouts, laughs. Two lone reindeer had suddenly appeared at the banks of a stream, as if they were the forest's only inhabitants. They were indifferent to the passing train, moving slowly along the treeline. I straightened up a bit, pressing my forehead into the glass, trying to keep them in sight—maybe if I had opened the window I would have heard the rumble of the invisible herd.

Having finished the book, I looked out at the landscape. Majestic forest, hypnotic monotony. The train's speed remained constant as I contemplated each gap of light between the the trees. Despite the stroboscopic light that streaked the compartment, I could see something growing denser at the heart of the forest, something thick and unknown. Night was falling. The darkened window reflected the decor of the cabin like a mirror, small curtains, articles of clothing spilling from my suitcase, plastic bottles of water, covers of books and magazines, and then me—a face lit by the bulb in the ceiling, eyes and cheeks in shadow, but forehead, cheekbones, and nose splashed with light.

Later, rocking in my bunk, I slept and dreamed of songlines that absorbed the DNA of a clan, playing like proper nouns: a lyric of a song depicts an earthly path, myth, or poem to remember, these cartographic psalmodies form an identity. To belong to a clan is to know and pass on the ancestor's song, is to hand down the memory of a single path; to belong to a clan is to sing its landscape. That night, I imagined that the aboriginal songlines, once brought together, composed an almost complete representation of Australia and served as a topo-guide for whomever desired to penetrate it; I visualized the innumerable paths that crossed each other on the surface of the earth, a choral network spread across all continents, establishing identities and a link to the world conceived not in terms of possession, but in terms of movement, transfer, trajectory: terms of experience. I came across a song that brought together all the songlines into a single form, a song of the world.

Towards the end of my journey, when I had lost all points of reference, when the time and space around me had dissolved, when the train passed over wide rivers on ringing metal bridges, finally approaching the Pacific coast, I saw a novel in the songline. It was there, lying within the oral tradition, pulsating in the midst of the movement, in the song that rekindles memory, myths, and gods. To write it, I knew I must capture this song that survived from a time when the written word did not yet exist and I told myself that it was time to go look for the nomadic woman.

at this stage of the night, I begin to feel antsy, so I get up to stretch and move around a bit. I go to open the kitchen window and lean out over the street—leathery night, yellow-haloed street lamps, pale light behind windows.

I look toward the end of the street, which narrows at Boulevard Voltaire: if I could extend this street in a straight line, it would cross the Seine just north of Charenton-le-Pont, then, without a doubt, touch Ivry-sur-Seine, Orly, Draveil, Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Ouzouer-sur-Trézée, Sancerre, Montmarault, Clermont-Ferrand, Brioude, Florac, Concoule, La Grand-Combe, Anduze, Vauvert, Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, and then finally the sea, blue and impetuous, in the middle of which float the islands.

I arrived in Stromboli for the first time at five AM one Thursday in August, 1994. I had disembarked from Naples on a Sirenmar liner and I remember going out to the bridge a half hour before the estimated arrival at the island, the first stop on a maritime route that spanned the whole archipelago—Panarea, Salina, Lipari, Vulcano, Alicudi, Filicudi.

The air is humid, the rail cold against my palms, and I shiver in my t-shirt, the night is a deep blue, conducive to ambiguities, grainy like a photograph taken on an old film camera that can shoot at low light, but then changes the graininess of the image, lowering its resolution. All of my surroundings are in this filter. Then, a landscape materializes amid the double movement of the boat drawing nearer and of the night turning to dawn, splitting the horizon, a nearly isosceles triangle, it floats in an indefinite space—liquid, solid, gas, I don’t know—but its base is parallel to what must be the surface of the water, the sea and the sky weaving into a single substance, a corpuscular space, lilac, violet, and there it is, the island, the volcano. All of a sudden it's all becoming clear, the landscape emerges from the obscurity where the distance and the night were keeping it secret. The island develops, lines and mass, scale and depth of field, colors glistening in the morning light; I can now distinguish the column of gray, sulfuric smoke curling from the summit of the volcano—it gains height as if an invisible hand is pulling it skyward. I take in the traces of basaltic flows, the shadowy slopes, the visible remnants of ancient cultures, sleeping households spread across a third of the volcanic cone, bougainvilleas in bloom, lemons in the trees, bathing suits laid out to dry, fishing boats lying on the black sand. Soon there are human silhouettes moving among them, tan, bearded men in sandals, golden manes tucked under caps, light eyes; they wait for the boat and then toss heavy lines that uncurl in the air, lassos. Their gestures, splendid as all dockworkers and all boats, they remember, splitting the continuity of time to evoke the memory of the island through their movements, and they are doing so at this very moment; when I place a foot on the concrete pier, my breath is short, my heart is beating wildly, and I remember this moment exactly, it is ingrained in my memory like an opening scene.

Since then, I have frequently returned to Stromboli. I move throughout the archipelago, heading out to Lipari, coming back to Salina—the Pollara bay, the pumice quarries, the capers, and the wine. Small migrations within a day, sometimes two. When I leave the island at the end of my stay, something tugs at me, a sort of nostalgia, and when I come back, I feel as if I am reuniting with a place that is mine, where I am at home even though I am a stranger there—which is maybe precisely because when I arrive there, it is as if I am entering a book. I like the sensual fatality of Stromboli, its explosive activity and its sleepiness, its aura that is at once mythic and pagan, its calm disposition toward the volcanic Mediterranean islands, all of them arid and wild, melancholic, emerging from the convergence of the African and Eurasian tectonic plates, rubbing against one another, making sparks, hurling from the rifts islands where we count stars in the indigo while the earth trembles, archaic islands. But maybe I also like Stromboli because of its first appearance in my life—I was holding a child in my arms, on my way to find a man who had made me a promise.

I visualize the pieces of memory left here—pollen, touch, breath—, they coat the reliefs, the regions, the territories, all the spaces that we can experience, I scan this invisible stratigraphy that forms and deforms them, that decomposes and recomposes them, both over time and at this moment. In his first lecture at the Collège de France in 2011, Gilles Clément said that a landscape defines itself both in terms of physical experience and in terms of memory: "The landscape, in my view, refers to that which is found within our range of sight. For the unsighted, it has to do with everything within the range of all the other senses. To the question: what is a landscape? We can respond: that which we keep in our memory after we have stopped looking; that which we keep in our memory after we have stopped using our senses in the space our bodies once filled."

At this moment, the window slams shut with a bang, the panes rattle and I fear they might shatter: a strong, mysterious wind, coming from the street, transforms the kitchen into an echo chamber. I close the window again and soon the silence returns, as thick and resonating as it had been a moment before. I listen to the vibration. I like the idea that the experience of memory, or the *action* of remembering, transforms places into landscapes, metamorphosing illegible spaces into stories.

at this stage of the night, I move to the hallway to place myself in front of the stacks of books that lean against the wall—I leave all the doors open, the jingles of *Newsflash: catastrophe on Lampedusa* sounding at regular intervals like the bell in the elevator—I lower my head to decipher the titles on the spines, I crouch, stand up, crouch again, move to another stack that has collapsed, looking for one of my books, *Neither Flowers nor Crowns,* a collection comprised of two short stories that each take place on an island, Ireland and Stromboli. I restack the fallen books, which migrate from one pile to another, distributing them according to size, thickness, and color. Instinctually, I move quickly, shifting and reorganizing, now kneeling on the floor, I build a new wall of books without omitting a single one. After which, sweating, I fall back against the hallway wall, and I look: in the dark, the columns of books climb like plants, like caryatids, a silhouette of a currant-black forest, a temple haunted by ghosts and songs.

I sometimes tell myself that to write is to create a landscape. Islands, especially deserted islands, are already the beginnings of a story. Spread throughout the sea, islands emerge like crucibles of fiction, dispersed across the imaginary. They emerge suddenly, finite forms in the middle of an infinity, forms that we can contain in a single gesture, like we hold a pebble in our fist, like we frame an image in the objective of a camera, it's a clear space that imposes its contours, thus creating an inside within an outside: islands are like ideas. Deserted, they mesmerize. Like reserves, they have guarded stories and sheltered men since the creation of the first poem. Accommodating fugitives, murderers, megalomaniac generals, visionary captains, misanthropic actors, thousands of naturalists, disease-ridden men, rebellious children, convicts and deviants of all sorts, hallucinatory painters, melancholic queens, and all those who society sent back to the sea. Heterotopias, they are different spaces, “these other places [create] a sort of contestation, at once real and mythical, of the space in which we live”, writes Michel Foucault.

You are run aground by siren song after a tempest that has splintered the ship’s hull, after fleeing from an enemy ship where you were held prisoner in the hold, after the ship sank, after being torpedoed by a german submarine— Friday January 13, 2012, the *Costa Concordia* lay to rest before the island of Giglio: it is said that the captain was flirting—, after having dived from a sailboat to follow a multicolored fish that had fled through the corals, after having lost his cap. You falter, having been forced to board with others, equally as terrified, weary, raped, beaten, defeated, pushed, the barrel of a rusty submachine gun sweeping the bottom of the trawler, much too small for this human load, and which will never reach the port; you might swim for hours, maybe floating for several days, gripping a beam, finally letting go only to sacrifice your exhausted body to the waves; you might moan, eyes closed and clothes torn, or naked as the day you were born, and oblivious of this fact until a shepard comes along and shows hospitality, until a queen opens her bed; later you wake up there, you have survived, as if it was all a dream. There, you recreate the world, fire and forge, hunting and gathering, you reinvent politics, the regime of power and of property, you take inventory of everything, identifying, classifying, and sometimes even drawing with natural pigments, diluted in a calabash, you are alone. You might meet another human creature, a monster, cannibals, Indians and parrots that sing *The Barcarolle*; one day you remember a treasure map from another life—a continental life—you recreate it, hoping to find fortune without knowing why, you think of your wife, of your father, of your son, you obsess over a lover lost at sea, like Ulysses, Jim Hawkins, Long John Silver, Robinson

Crusoe, Vendredi, Sarah Woodruff, Theodora Dawn, and you think of Calypso, Napoleon, Captain Nemo, Edmond Dantes, Marlon Brando, Finbarr Peary, Adele H. or Antonia.

Suddenly a voice hurls itself into the kitchen like a ball of fire, archaic and out of place, *vergogna, vergogna!* It asks the entire world to come and see, to come see what has happened here at Lampedusa. I have decided to leave the room.

at this stage of the night, the globe glows softly in the bedroom, a dim light illuminating it from the center like the molten outer core broiling beneath the earth’s crust—a glass sphere covered in a thin layer of paper saturated with words, shapes, and colors. Grid lines traced in drypoint mark coordinates, hundreds of names dancing among them, overlapping them, old style capitals and cursive italics, all organized in a typographic code—continents, oceans, countries, seas, rivers, capitals, mountain ranges and notable summits, deserts, cities,—; the names are sometimes so long, so stretched out, that the last letter has migrated hundreds of kilometers from the first.

First, my eyes went immediately to Paris, but my gaze then zigzagged southward, resting on the Mediterranean, Naples, Etna, Sicily, then stopping on a blue, translucid space—an irregular, puddle-like shape—and I hovered there a bit longer to see if the golden sponges that are fished in the area were carpeting the sea floor, if the bodies of the divers were deforming under the surface of the water. I located a microscopic point, a dot unbothered by the continents, on which I could just make out nine letters, pale and thin: Lampedusa.

It is one of the most southern points in Europe, at about the same latitude as Cyprus and Malta. I wanted to see if the island was closer to Tunisia or Sicily, as it was one of the Pelagie Islands between them—Lampedusa, Linosa, and Lampione, a scattered trio of sisters—and, as a means of calculating the distances, I placed my thumb and index finger on the globe, my thumb resting on Lampedusa. But the tips of my fingers took up too much space and I ended up burning them. So I took a step back to locate the island and establish its position in the space without letting it leave my sight—it was so small: a single blink and it would disappear, erased, engulfed by the sea—and I confirmed that which is visible to the eye: Lampedusa is alone in the world.

The night advances. I am now clinging to the island of Lampedusa the way one might obsess over a speck of dust on a blank sheet of paper. I have the feeling that it exists as a place in a non-place, emerging steadfast like a pebble against the liquid space, land defined against the fluidity of the sea where time and topography are extinguished—it must have taken a long time to call to the heavens to determine a route, an alignment of stars signaling a direction—, a toponym imprinted in the middle of empty space, with no writing other than the wakes of boats, the foaming white crests of waves, the traces of birds—feet, beaks, wings—when they graze the surface to catch a fish, and the reflection of the clear sky when the sea is calm and mirror-like: clouds, planes, squadrons of seagulls.

Everything happens like this in Lampedusa, miniscule and coalesced, resisting the vagueness that encompasses it.

But the sea is not a non-place, no more than it is an undefined space, a fluid continuity—this is a thing you should know, no? my father would have said, mocking or irritated—diverse areas coexist within this familiar chasm of the unknown—shore, breaking waves, coastal sea, then free, unending waters—it cohabits different spaces ruled by maritime law—territorial sea, economic zones, continental plates, high seas.

It is also crossed by dotted lines, thick and thin, ocean currents provoked by winds, or changes in depth, temperature, density, salinity, movements that all recreate a topography. It is punctuated by caves, volcanoes, shallows, and oceanic trenches—the Mariana trench, or the Tonga trench that reaches depths greater than 10,000 meters, the Calypso trench, which plunges 5,121 meters into the Ionian Sea. It is crossed by many routes, maritime highways by which streams of resources, dry and liquid, are trafficked—oil, liquified natural gases, iron ore, coal—travelled by sailors and others: workers on freighters, passengers on looming cruise ships, amateur sailors, mingling out at sea—navigated by migrants for as long as the sea has existed. New routes emerge with new traffics, which increase the number of trades and export of labor as globalization grows—all sorts of hands for all sorts of work, feet too, young boys' feet and arms, young girls' breasts, young men's shoulders, and women's backs, laden with sleeping infants. Violence intensified, poverty amplified, war spread; it is also full of wrack, populated by human cadavers, haunted by ghosts.

My heart accelerates. Locating Tripoli on the Libyan coast, I trace a path toward Lampedusa. 13,000 migrants and asylum-seekers landed there this year. I caught sight of Malta to the right of it and I suddenly remembered that one third of merchant ships navigating the seas of the world fly the flag of Malta: this is a dangerous zone.

at this stage of the night, the voices on the radio grow quiet. I return to the kitchen, groping for details. The sheer number of victims is evidence of revolting violence, revealing a shocking lack of ethics, an indifference toward the masses, the poor, the hungry, and all those who have fled. I adjust the dial on the radio, sliding from one station to the next in search of more information. Around 350, more than 350, at least 350—they haven't yet found all the bodies, and counting the survivors, 166, doesn't indicate the exact number of people on the boat. It is impossible to make an exact calculation, as there was no documentation, nothing in writing to confirm the number of passengers that boarded in Tripoli, to confirm their names and identities: for now, we know only of the disappearance of an unknown number of anonymous persons.

Nocturnal hours, beads of light at the tips of my lashes, lucid exhaustion, thoughts flitting across my mind: the event slowly takes shape, a scene is established, precise, distinct, horribly clear. I could see the wake of the boat, its moving imprint on the surface of the water, slicing it, white, marking its speed and direction; I saw them boarding a work boat painted blue and yellow, a cursory caulking, metal parts spotted with rust, windows caked with dried salt. I recognized a human cargo swarming in the dark—dawn on the sea in October, dripping humidity, cold, wet clothes; an indistinct mass flooding narrow gangways, a compression of gray bodies where only heads move, bobbing. Some were sleeping standing up, others rest their chin on their chest or on the consenting shoulder of a neighbor. I could make out eyes, egg-white and bulging, pupils dilated—and I began to put together faces, lips tightened—terror, fatigue, exhaustion. I heard the sound of the motors, their regulated humming mixing with that of the sea, flowing against the hull, with that of the boat's radio, I could smell the gas—black pools shimmering rainbow like prisms. Suddenly, everything goes wrong, the rumbling of the motor cuts out, sputtering, a few hundred meters more and the boat ceases to move forward, floating, carried by the inertia of the waves, it drifts. I keep the trawler in sight as the boat is gradually swallowed by the sea, until the end of movement marks the end of everything. A gray cloud of smoke rises toward the sky like an indian signal—a code, a language—and little by little, all trace of the boat is erased, ash falling to the water's surface, shouts, splashing, chaos—the boat sinks very slowly, but at the same time incredibly quickly, suddenly slipping beneath the surface, like a sunset, it disappears. It's all there, the singularity of the event, its extreme morbidity—; I thought of the passengers waiting, praying for help, some aware of the maritime law decreeing that one must come to the aid of boats in distress, while others panicked, thinking of the fight to stop illegal immigration, aware that, as far as they were concerned, the law no longer existed, or they were outside of it. The sailors who came to save them were sanctioned by inflexible authorities, solicitous about the law—without a doubt, others asked themselves how long they could watch them drown. I assumed that most of the passengers did not know how to swim, having seen the sea for the first time only two days prior. Some made it, it's true. Stronger than others, healthier, they survived. And the islanders, isolated and poor themselves, took them in, a blanket over the shoulders, a place to sleep, a meal: they housed these strangers, poorer than poor, these beings who had lost everything and could no longer pronounce their own names; they showed them humanity. Hospitality.

at this stage of the night, the day is creeping in through the window, illuminating the kitchen. For twenty years, I knew that Lampedusa had been the name of an island since the first migrants' arrival, and the first shipwreck. At that time, for me, this name was that of Burt Lancaster, of a prince, of a darkening world, of a writer, of the month of August, of a child. In my mind, I turn over these many layers of meaning, activating disparate imaginings, establishing discontinuous scenes, writings that all tremble in the density of its shadow. I am no longer able to associate this island toponym with these fictional meanings that had once been my only attachment to the name—this name of legend, this name of cinema. This morning, the morning of October 3, 2013, Lampedusa only brings shame, indignation, and grief, revealing the state of the world, a whole other story.