ON SILENCE

1.

Every great adventurer knows that there is no such thing as the absence of sound. That even at the farthest reaches of the earth, there will always be some sound for us to hear. I imagine this must be what gives hope to those who set out to see if the world really does end, or to those who travel to flee the end of the world: finding signs of other lives.

2.

When I spot my youngest daughter, she's already standing on the chair pushed up against the window—the open window.

The house had suddenly gone quiet. I'd gotten up to look for her, for no other reason than that I couldn't hear her chatting with her dolls or talking to herself in front of the mirror or singing tunes from *Frozen* to an invisible audience.

3.

I've lived on third floors for over a decade, none of them with elevators, of course. Before becoming a mother, I lived on the third floor, a walk-up; and even after the advent of babies with their carriages, bags stuffed with fresh diapers, fresh clothes, and other paraphernalia, I went on living in third-floor walk-ups.

I had my reasons—reasons the elderly and other more practical people couldn't make sense of—for always choosing the third floor: there was more light and less noise, which is essential for anyone working from home; and, most of all, the possibility of a view. When I moved back to Lisbon from London, I dreamed of having a view. Not just any view, but the slow, harmonious cascade of rooftops, the near-motionless blue of the river seen from afar, and looming above all that, the thick ribbon of sky. This view would breathe new life into me, as well as inspiration and, who knows, maybe even joy.

It took me a long time to realize that the landscape doesn't affect the silence that sometimes lives inside me.

4.

In Arroios, too much silence is a bad sign. A sign, for example, of tragedy. A sign that you can't go outside. A sign that a kind of exile is taking place, an exile from normal life—that noisy

life that asserts itself over the din of other people, that allows us to be noticed, even in a crowd.

5.

Later, when I was pregnant with my second daughter, practicality finally won out, and I moved to the neighborhood where my eldest went to school and where I could do the whole family routine on foot. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I wound up back on the third floor, though this time without a view of the river.

The small things that now make up my view: a pot of red carnations that belongs to the old man across the street; the frenzied way a young drug user—her pregnant belly beginning to show—rummages through the parish council's donation bin on the street corner; the inertia, so ambitious, of the young male roommates who are always smoking on their balcony; the police officer standing guard outside Bank of Portugal ("Mom," my youngest asks me, "does the building belong to that man?" "No, sweetie, it belongs to all of us," I reply, not really sold on what I'm saying).

6.

Not London, nor New York, maybe not even São Paulo. The countryside—with its particular brand of silence—is the place that feels most distant to my daughters. Whenever we go to the

country—and I make sure to take them to a house in the middle of nowhere at least a few days every year—I always know the first night is going to be difficult. My eldest can't get to sleep because she doesn't hear any sounds. And why is it so dark out there?

On the first night, even when she's in paradise, she always wants to go home to Arroios.

7.

I'd be lying if I didn't say there are visible silences every day in my neighborhood. Silences louder than the unease caused by the ambulances that speed past us all too frequently on their way to hospitals in the area, louder than the constant hubbub on Avenida Almirante Reis. Silences that span the distance between people, in a place where we all live on top of each other—and that reminds me a lot of London.

I could speak of the silence between my daughter and some of her Chinese classmates who, three years on, still don't have the words they need to make the most of their time at school, not like the other kids. Or the silence of the young Nepalese man standing outside the corner store on my street, always empty, as people walk past without looking at him. The silence of immigrant men, strolling down the sidewalk in twos or threes, even as they talk to each other.

8.

It doesn't matter if we know several languages or just one or two. We all learn to master silence. It may well be our only common language. The language of smiles, looks, gestures, of the small acts that sometimes express things we can't put into words. Even when we have a language to communicate in—in a city, in a neighborhood like this one—we show kindness in these small acts of silence.

In this case, a silence that is less the absence of sound than a form of listening.

9.

I can also see rooftops from my new window, but given that I'm not at the top of the hill, they don't descend so much as climb. They rise over my sightline. I can barely make out the higher windows, the ones farthest from the street—quieter, but also lonelier, far from the city's live soundtrack.

10.

Lately, my three-year-old has started responding in gestures. As if, now that she speaks so well, she has to perfect the art of silence.

11.

There are many experts who say that, before the age of around seven, children aren't capable of understanding death, even if they can say the word *death* and conjugate the verb *to die*. So how do I explain to my daughter what would happen if she fell from our third-floor window?

I tell her about life. About all the things she wouldn't be able to do anymore if she fell. Life she understands. She can grasp running, jumping, talking, singing, hugging, dancing, making noise.