**Streets I Have Lived**

**by Nikolai Torgersen**

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**Tromsøgata (2004)**

[Tromsø Street]

I’m in no rush to die any more. Right now, I’m comfortable knowing that my life will ebb away naturally. These things change all the time, I stopped taking my feelings seriously ages ago, it would be total chaos if I were to react to everything that presents itself to me as a truth. If I were to start to give weight to the fleeting thoughts that vanish before I can begin the process of understanding where they come from. Sometimes what is going on in my head seems quite random. I would love to have an overview, something with colour coding and key words, metadata on every single thought charging past with such speed that I’m unable to register it as anything other than a vague feeling, it’s impossible to associate it with any of the other stuff lurking in there, messing up all my ideas and experiences and even normal good manners when I meet other people. I’m not able to give a straight answer, a yes or a no, to the simplest polite remarks, my words always have to go through a grinder, as if I don’t trust people to understand that a *yes* can encompass a *yes*, *but*, and even a *no*. It’s probably not correct to say that I don’t take my feelings seriously, I am still constantly preoccupied with everything going on inside me. I can’t escape it, the engine starts automatically and doesn’t stop until my head is forced into a state of torpor. It annoys me that I’m not cleverer, then I might have managed to get to the bottom of everything that bothers me. I’m concerned that the foundations of how I experience the world have already been laid, it’s hard to have to try and rewrite what is already there. Occasionally, two worn out thoughts overlap each other and suddenly loosen one of the tangles, making everything a little clearer, but usually it just gets more murky and confused. Still, it feels like laziness if I don’t make an attempt to understand, it would be cowardly not to. The past is good that way, apparently quite harmless, complete in its imperfect form, I can’t put any more into the past than what has already happened. I wanted to die, but then I didn’t die, it’s quite harmless how it remains there now, in the past, now it’s just information.

Our apartment is relatively big. It has three bedrooms, but there are six of us living here, so we are divided into pairs and each pair shares ownership of their room. Me and my little brother share a room in the middle of the apartment. We have a green corner sofa that with a little effort we can turn into a sofa bed after removing the cushions. We don’t usually bother to pull out the bed part and just sleep on the sofa as it is, or else we pull it out and refuse to put it back again when we get up. Around our feet there are clothes and clutter, dirty plates, various piles of unfinished projects, there’s just a kind of path that has been trodden through the room from the door to the sofa and over to the big, cream-coloured computer in the corner. A few years ago, I punched a hole through the door, leaving a space the size of a small handball in the thin, moulded frame, with hardboard on the outside holding the cardboard on the inside in place, which I have now covered over with torn out pages from a magazine and some tape. The walls are painted almost the same dark green colour as the sofa, except for a white patch on one of the walls where there used to hang a big electric racetrack, which Dad had made for us. When we took it down and opened it out, it nearly filled the whole room. All that remains now is an outline of where the track once hung. The walls are all tagged with permanent markers and pens and crayons and pencil marks, and covered in stickers and posters.

Two girls started following me in the summer. I noticed them standing by the corner of our building looking down at the patch of tarmac below our apartment where I skated. I spent hours down there every day. We had nicknamed the place ‘Vella’ after Velhuset, the community hall that belonged to the local residents. One day when I came home, both the girls were sitting in my bedroom. They had found out where I lived, knocked on the door and asked my mum if I was home, and she had said no, but they could just wait in my room if they wanted to. They smiled up at me when I came in, and I suppose I must have looked back at them with a puzzled expression on my face. None of us said anything. I was in shock for several hours, probably several days, as I had never even had one girl in my room before, and now there were two. But after a bit the girls started asking questions, and I answered as well as I could. They wondered how long I had been into skating, which school I went to, how old I was, if I had a girlfriend. I sat on the office chair in the middle of the room, rocking gently back and forth, looking up at the wall behind the sofa bed where they were sitting. My mum had given them felt pens, and they had drawn big hearts on the wall where there was space and written both my name and their names inside. They wondered which of them I wanted to go out with. I couldn’t remember who was who, so I pointed at the one on the right. A few days later I saw them in town when I was skating down to the City Hall with some friends, and I did my best to avoid them, but they heard the sound of our skateboards and later commented that it wasn’t very nice of me. One day when we were all at my place, me, the two girls and my best friend, the one I was going out with and my best friend suddenly disappeared out of the door. Then they started going out.

The other bedroom belongs to my two younger sisters. There’s only two years between them, and two and four years between them and me. Their room is about the same size as the one I share with my little brother, just rectangular. They sleep in bunkbeds that Dad has made. He has built a slide down to the floor from the top bunk. There isn’t much room on the floor, and it isn’t a very complicated construction, so the slide doesn’t curve round to slow you down at the bottom, it’s just a board that goes straight down. If you use the slide without wearing shoes to slow you down, you’re thrown onto the floor. The slide is made of some kind of wood that is sanded and varnished, so the surface is shiny, and if you go down it without clothes on you get big burn marks on your skin. Children’s bodies, which withstand all kinds of physical violence and heal overnight, love the speed of the slide and the sudden thud on reaching the floor. We often exaggerate and extend the crash landing by pushing off when our feet hit the lino, throwing ourselves against the wall half a metre away with a shoulder or arms first. With the slide comes laughter and screams and attention and crying and the pushing of boundaries, and the status it gives when one of the siblings goes down head first, hitting their forehead on the floor to show the others that it isn’t dangerous. One night Dad comes into the room and goes over to the big box of toys next to the bed, I think he made this too, it looks like a basic kind of square-shaped car, with an attempt at round wheels on the sides and a small steering wheel on the front. It’s all carved out of wood and held together with big nails, the wheels and steering wheel are purely aesthetic. He pulls his shorts and underpants halfway down his thighs and pees into the roughly hewn cabriolet. Dad has worked with chemicals used in painting and decorating and done heavy physical labour all his life, and he suffers from the effects of solvent exposure as well as narcolepsy. He is sleepwalking, and my sisters shout at him to stop, but he can’t hear anything, he just carries on until he has finished then goes out again. Both the bedrooms are south-facing, and in the winter, when the sun barely peeps over the ugly new buildings further down the street, there are often orange and yellow and bright red sunsets, and it’s through these windows that we can see them in the sky.

The third bedroom in the apartment is the only room I don’t know, but it still feels like a part of me, in the same way as the other rooms it feels like something physical I carry around with me, as if the walls in here restrict and define who I am out there. It’s the only room in the apartment that is private, no one is really allowed in. Along one of the walls there are old brown wooden cupboards going from the floor to the ceiling, with doors unlike anything from my world, which have probably been there since the place was built. My parents say that the cupboards are over a hundred years old, and I believe them. Behind the cupboard doors are piles of clothes smothering everything in there that needs to be hidden. Like that spring day when I was looking for a hoodie in the cupboards and beneath some clothes behind the door found four big Easter eggs stuffed with sweets. There are two windows in here. On the longest side of the room is a French window that can be opened, leading out to a balcony crammed full of things that we have somehow managed to accumulate over time. There must be twenty black bin bags overflowing with old clothes we have grown out of, parts from radios and computers and record players and phones, shopping bags filled with lampshades and flexes and steel chains that rattle if you move anything. The balcony is on the corner of the apartment, facing northwest and open in two directions, or it could have been open in two directions, but the whole of the outside is wrapped in two enormous, dark green tarpaulins that obliterate what would have been a view. The tarpaulins are thick, and they are nailed tightly to the outside of the building, so not a ray of light gets through. The window out to the balcony is always shut, as is the window at the end of the room. There are big blankets or sheets nailed up in front of the windows so no one can look in and see the chaotic life we lead inside, and so none of us need to look out. In the middle of the room is the bed where Mum and Dad sleep.

When I tell people about my childhood, I sometimes say that we didn’t have any rules at home, yet not having rules can itself be defined as a rule, and even though my parents declared themselves anarchists and strongly believed that everyone should decide for themselves and should in theory do whatever they liked, there were rules. One of them was that we should always knock on the door and get permission to enter if we wanted to go into one of the bedrooms and the door was shut. My siblings and I used to break this rule the whole time, going into each other’s room just to be irritating or a nuisance for no particular reason. If we wanted to go into Mum and Dad’s room, we would almost always knock and wait until someone on the other side gave us the go-ahead: *come in*. The only time I can remember Dad coming into my room without knocking was while he was in the middle of a screaming row with my mum. My parents loved each other, I never heard them tell each other that they did, and I used to think that they maybe didn’t, because often what they said out loud was rather the opposite, but I know now that they did. They would sometimes throw plates and cups at the wall and slam windows so hard that the panes shattered, and it was quite normal that they yelled at each other at the top of their lungs over one thing or another. Mum was usually the most active. In a pile of documents I have, which contains everything the child welfare services have ever written about my life, there’s a report of an incident that was called in. One of the neighbours had seen Dad holding Mum over the edge of the balcony during a fight, and my sisters had apparently yelled at Dad and asked him to stop. I have never seen my parents hit or push or pull each other or any of us children, but I have seen both Mum and Dad hit and spit and kick and beat the shit out of other people on several occasions, and at times I have joined in myself. There were internal conflicts on a daily basis, loud and out of control: Mum versus Dad, Dad versus Mum, me versus my sisters and my sisters versus my brother, annoying things that blew up into physical arguments. I remember the shame bubbling up inside me when I called Mum a whore during a row, and the operation I had to have after fighting with my little brother and tearing my meniscus when I kicked him. I remember the outline of my hand that stayed on my little sister’s back all day after I hit her during a quarrel over the remote. At one point me and my two cousins were grounded, the only time it has ever happened to me, and I don’t remember why, but we were locked inside my bedroom and told we had to stay there for the rest of the day. My cousins on my dad’s side were a lot more violent than me, and we made a plan to beat up my mum and make a run for it. I was supposed to ask for some juice, and when she opened the door to give us something to drink, the three of us were going to take her by surprise, beat her up and disappear for good. Having overheard all our plans, Mum brought us a glass of juice, which she put on a bar stool on the other side of the door, and a straw, which she stuck through the key hole.

We had our conflicts, but above all it was us versus them. We, the family, all six of us, had to stand together against everything and everyone that tried to destroy us out there. Teachers, neighbours, child welfare services, the social security office, people who owed Mum money and people Dad owed favours. And while I sat in my bedroom with the door shut, listening to the screams from the kitchen and the echo made by the casserole dish hitting the wall (it was nearly empty, with just some dried up leftovers from the day before or the day before that), Dad suddenly came storming in. He quickly apologised for forgetting to knock and sat down next to me on the sofa, diagonally opposite, and went on talking before I got a chance to say anything. *You know I never normally come into your room like this but fucking hell, I hope for your own sake that you listen to me now! Be gay, Niko! The sooner you realise that all women are stark raving mad, the better! All women! Your sister, your mum, your auntie, your grandma! They’re all fucking loonies, the lot of them! I fucking hope you never have to deal with all the shit I have to go through every day here!*

Mum was born in 1961 and lived in Nesodden when she was a kid. When she died 50 years later in a hospice in Oslo, she had been suffering from cancer for some time. The doctors told us that she had had cancer for at least ten years, maybe longer. It was impossible to find out what kind of cancer it was because after a lifetime of pain, after years of screaming, now that she was finally forced to go into hospital it was too late, and impossible to distinguish one medical condition from the other. The doctors said that they couldn’t believe she had lasted so long. She had cancer in her lungs, skin, blood, brain, every single cell of her body had been taken over by something that was trying to take her life away, and it started to make sense to me how it was possible to yell the way she had done, all those years really, about things that had felt so meaningless to me, causing the kind of chaos that only she was capable of. In the months that followed, I began to wonder if I had actually known my own mother. If there was another person under the layer of pain that had defined her so completely for the last ten years. Are you really able to hold on to who you are when every single fibre in your body is being drawn towards death? I know how I am and how I think about life in periods when I feel energised, and I also know how quickly I stop being curious and patient when I’m forced to survive. I am not the same person.

In 1998 Mum was persuaded to go to the doctor’s about the pain she has in her back. The doctor thinks it’s stress-related, times have been hard and finances bad for some time now, and she has four children who grow out of their clothes every other month, so she is given something for the pain. The following year it’s her back and her stomach and her head, and all the applications she sends each week to the social security office for financial assistance for the kids, because we must have enough money for a holiday or at least some new winter clothes, of course it’s stressful, so she’s given painkillers again, but the pills she has prescribed don’t really help in fighting cancer or poverty, so she self-medicates in her bedroom, where the makeshift curtains of bedclothes covering the windows plunge the room into more and more darkness with each passing year. And while the room gradually gets darker, like the sky in October, November, December, at some point in the 2000s the damage becomes irreversible, and all the screams that follow are in vain.

I have an image of her sometime in the early 1990s, skating down the hills of St Hanshaugen, with me lying in the pram that she’s pushing in front of her. A few years later she teaches me blending techniques for mixing colours on paper using markers and hairspray, and later on shows me how to divide a face into equal parts from the pupil to the tip of the nose and the tip of the nose to the chin in order to find the correct proportions. She helps our Moroccan neighbour, who can’t write good Norwegian, to send job applications while the neighbour dyes her hair with brownish-orange henna that goes everywhere, and then they draw patterns on each other’s hands, like for a Moroccan wedding. She argues with the other neighbours, on my behalf, when they try to stop me from using my skateboard on the tarmac below the garden because of the noise. They can move out of town if they can’t stand the racket, she says. She teaches my friends how to drop into the quarter pipe we have built down there and cheers them when they pull it off. Me and my friends, *Vella Skate Crew*, spend hours each day on the little patch of tarmac*.* Especially me. Because although the unease growing out of the walls of the apartment passes straight into me and I really hate being there, ‘home’ is the only place I can stand. A feeling that the world outside is shrinking overwhelms me, and soon all I manage is to hang out on the tarmac.

The mental illnesses we have at home demand constant attention. Mum keeps doing things to deal with the chaos in her head, first by getting wasted and fleeing from reality, later also by isolating herself, but all her attempts just make things worse. The same woman who used to tell the neighbours to shut up and move to the forest if they couldn’t stand the racket now comes running into the kitchen and takes the cups and glasses out of the cupboards, she removes all the crockery, four or five plates at a time, quite a handful, then two more glasses out of the cupboard, hurls them on the floor with all her strength, or at the wall, so bits of china and glass go flying in all directions, and in only a few seconds she has smashed everything we had. She thinks me and Dad deliberately make a noise when we empty the dishwasher, causing the plates to clatter when we put them away just to annoy her, *to rattle her*, while she’s lying in bed in her room, and if that’s how things are going to be, then she’ll show us what noise sounds like. Dad’s health issues are also obvious, but in very different ways. He is stable and unstable all at once, but you wouldn’t know it from his behaviour, there is something in his eyes. Physically, he’s totally unassailable, fearless when confronting anything at all, yet at the same time his eyes tell a different story, something about the underlying problem, not what it is, because I never manage to grasp that, but there is something, and it’s easy for me to understand and justify the fact that he also needs to get wasted and escape it all. The shame caused by these illnesses distances us from the safety nets that are there to catch those who fall, our fear of the consequences of admitting that we’re unable to manage means we build a wall of lies around us. The lack of resources at every level means our health keeps deteriorating, as though we’re supposed to consume the money itself and we get deficiency diseases from the lack of coins to fill our stomachs with. My sisters want to leave home, but they don’t manage to say so when the child welfare services come to visit, they say everything is fine, though they still try to show it in other ways, like when one of my sisters left a suicide note at school and disappeared after breaktime up to the graveyard, where she stayed until some teachers found her. Other times they disappear for days, hoping that the threats of a foster home will come true. Occasionally, the police call and ask Mum to come and fetch them from the police station, they get into trouble all the time. Dad cycles down to Oslo Central Station every night to fetch my little sister, who is always at the same place, with the same people. My little brother is the youngest of the brood, he distances himself from the world the best he can, and thanks us for protecting him. I see my illness in the mirror and try to stare myself well, maintain eye contact and fix my gaze on the person staring back at me, but there’s nothing in his eyes I understand.

In 2004 I have my first episode of supraventricular tachycardia. Down on the tarmac, in mid-air, with my skateboard under my feet, flying off from the steps I have built out of planks and plywood, it’s like my heart is taking off too and exploding in my chest, so hard that the shockwaves thudding inside my throat make me squeeze my eyes shut in fear well before I feel anything but the irregularities in my chest and throat. When I instinctively push my board away in the air, stretch out both legs and land on the tarmac, and in an instant realise what is happening, I notice that my heart is beating unusually fast, it’s later measured at 220 beats a minute, it feels like a machine gun going off in fully automatic mode, shooting around wildly. My heart is thumping beneath my breastbone, pumping out excessive amounts of blood at a rate that doesn’t diminish, it’s so fast that it feels almost continuous, quivering in its monotony, like the feeling of scraping your nail over rough sandpaper, and for the first time, in my chest, throat and head, I feel sure that I’m dying.

My heart is like all other hearts, although I would rather not admit it. It’s easy to be fooled by this diligent and conscientious workhorse, to think that its autonomy represents something rational, but the heart’s extensive innervation reveals its lack of self-governance. The nervous system, which warns of all sorts of things, never considers whether the information is relevant before passing it on. Nerve fibres send loads of information about smells and sounds and light and movement down to the heart, from our sensory centre, the head. Mum is out in the garden pulling up the weeds that have spread along the walls of our building, and when she hears my screams she comes running down to the patch of tarmac, where I’m lying with my hands pressed against my head, then my face, then my throat, then my heart. She holds her hand against my chest, which is pounding so violently that her eyes would have been almost as good a witness as her hands, and screams so loud that my screams are drowned out by hers, she screams something about calling an ambulance, something about help, something about me dying. My description of the situation is all the doctors have to go on when they try to understand what is wrong with me. They ask if I have drunk enough water, if I eat properly, if I have a lot on my mind, how things are at school and at home, if there’s any illness in the family. The first five years, the doctors put the pieces together in a relatively logical and irreproachable way and conclude that I sometimes get severe anxiety attacks. It’s not an unusual consequence of the situation I’m living in, they say. It can manifest itself like that, with difficulty breathing, catastrophic thinking, a high pulse, the feeling of having a lump in your chest, dizziness. I know my body and I know my anxiety, it has been inside me as long as I can remember, I know full well how it feels when the ground gives way, how my head loses contact with logic and rationality and my cognitive faculties disappear, how in an instant, from one second to the next, I am stripped of all the love I have for myself, for life, for other people, I am stuck in a rut where my brain no longer answers me, and all I want is for it to stop. I get the diagnosis later, it takes five years for the doctors to find out what causes the attacks, which from that day on happen increasingly often, at their worst it’s each week and in periods daily episodes that prevent me from moving freely, they become part of a process that culminates in me getting so mentally ill that I can no longer get out of bed. They come quite sporadically and often last no more than fifteen minutes, which makes it hard to get proper ECG readings while my heart is pounding. Supraventricular tachycardia lies somewhere between hellish discomfort and death, says the doctor. But the tiresome, if relatively harmless rhythm disruption is not only confined to the heart, the illness envelops everything that is already troubling me, because the nerve signals that tell the head one thing and the heart another take these misleading threats seriously, in a continuous spiral, where my mental health issues hamper my physical abilities and my anxiety feeds off my surroundings; and the self-effacing self-consciousness I am subject to, as a punishment for trying to avoid my own presence, has enough to do logging minor changes in my frame of mind, and perhaps I’m not tough enough to tolerate a life like this, so after a while I get so ill that I can no longer do anything but turn over and close my eyes again when I occasionally wake up.

I am told there’s an extra electrical pathway in my heart that misinterprets the signals being sent around. The doctors make an incision in my groin and insert several thin catheters through my blood vessels and into my heart to close off, maybe *burn off* is what they actually say, the area disturbing my heart rhythm. I have to be awake during the procedure, the doctors need a response from me while they’re poking around in there. My body is separated from my head by a curtain that hangs down from the ceiling, hiding everything below my neck. There’s a camera attached to one of the catheters inside me. To the left of the bed, there’s a TV screen where I can follow the live video of what it looks like in there, and it’s just as chaotic as I imagined. There’s a tube going into my arm from a bag hanging on a stand, and my blood vessels are filled with morphine each time the anaesthetist sees a slight twinge in my face. My head is so light, I wish it was always like this. They have found several pathways that shouldn’t be there, she says. It has taken a few hours, and I’m not really listening any more, but then the machines I’m connected to start beeping, and one of the voices in the room directs one of the people to give me a general anaesthetic, and everything around me goes so fast that all I have time to think about is the fact that I’m dying again, but without the panic that usually accompanies this thought, then a mask is placed over my face and I disappear.

A year later it’s Mum who is lying in a hospital bed, as she waits for the last of her cells holding out against death to give in to peer pressure. She has never been religious, probably quite the opposite. She once made a pen drawing of a pregnant woman with a kind of hijab round her head and a pig’s foetus in her womb. She never visited churches, as far as I know, and from the way she spoke it was clear that she didn’t fear any godly figures or their punishments. But lying in bed, having lost her appetite and aware she is soon going to die, she asks the nurse if she could talk to the hospital chaplain.

I used to think that death was something that came at the end of your life. Some people believe that life precludes death, that death precludes life, that the two things are contradictory ideas, but life and death are overlapping conditions. I think about death, mine and other people’s, several times a day, yet I hardly ever think about life. The amount of room that death takes in life is absurd compared to how little room life takes in death. Life’s place in death is confined to a flower growing in the earth, fertilised by our remains. Death in life is always there as time runs out and your loved ones are taken from you as a constant reminder of what is to come.

As well as the three bedrooms, our apartment consists of a hall, bathroom, kitchen, dining room and sitting room. The walls between the rooms are old, in various places there are holes in the planks revealing the insulation behind them. There are cracks in the floor where it meets the wall in the kitchen, hall and dining room, and rats appear from the corners. They dig passageways between us and them, erasing the barrier that usually exists. Dad keeps blocking up the holes, but it only takes a few days before the rats have gnawed through the insulation again. We live side by side. They scurry around in the walls and run across the bedroom floor. Sometimes they wake me up.

**Diakonveien (2023)**

[Deacon Road]

It has been cold recently. In the mornings there are drops of moisture on the inside pane of the double glazing in the rectangular window that covers almost the entire end of the room. Outside to the southwest, there’s a row of linden trees, and the nearest one is just close enough to the sunlit building to receive some of the reflection it casts. There’s a faint glimmer in the dark grooves running down the bark, as though the light can’t bear to move much further, only just enough for the meagre rays to colour the bark a subdued reddish-brown so that the linden stands out from all the plain silhouettes against the grey-blue sky. In large patches further down the tree, the lumpy bark has formed hard cushions that resemble insulation foam. Dad has been given morphine, he doesn’t want to have surgery to remove the tumour blocking his bowel. When it has grown so big that fluids can no longer get past, he’ll die. He has a few days, or maybe a few weeks left. Then someone else will move into the room and be attached to the machines that enable anyone with insulation foam in their organs to live a bit longer, in less pain, so that relatives, if the patient is lucky enough to have any, can come and visit for an hour or two, saying they must remember the good times, and then one day the dying man asks for the chaplain instead of a glass of juice when he pulls the cord.

Usually, a few years pass between each time you see the people you love die. When I was little, Grandpa was my best friend. I was six and the only one in the apartment who didn’t know what alcoholism was, so he thought it was simplest to interact with me. We shared an interest in stupidity, pranks, massive mood swings and total honesty, things that lie as latent in a child as in a drunken old man. Once when Grandpa had consumed half a crate of lager for breakfast, he rang Grandma and said: *Could you buy me some beer on your way home? I wouldn’t mind a lager to wash down my lunch today.*

In the documents that the child welfare services have about me, it says that Mum has a beer or two with her meals. She has smelt of alcohol for 15 years, according to neighbours and teachers who call or write a report of concern to child services. According to Mum, it’s non-alcohol beer they can smell, but then she goes on to point out the double standards of these people who drink wine every night themselves, and anyway, no one should be telling anyone else what they’re allowed to drink or not drink. Mum knows full well who it is that keeps calling to report on the children’s difficult circumstances, it’s either her in the brown building next door, the couple on the corner, or the square guy on the floor below who works for the local council, and who with his immaculate way of life and naïve respect for the law causes his own children about as much strain as a lager or two. It’s quite normal to have a beer with your meal, says Mum, and paints a picture of supper being served at five o’clock, with all of us seated around the dinner table. With the exception of one day a year, Christmas Eve, we never have supper together, and even then neither Mum nor any of the rest of us last more than half an hour before we get up and go into another room. But that’s got fuck all to do with the neighbours or child welfare services, she says, if the kids have ants in their pants, if they’re so active that they can’t even sit still at the table, if they eat when they feel like it. In the same pile of papers it says that Dad is now sober, he admits that he likes the taste but says that he doesn’t see the point in getting drunk any more, and the child welfare services praise him each week he tells them he is sober. Then a neighbour reports to child services that Dad is sitting in the garden drinking vodka, and then he admits that it happened just the once, but that he doesn’t see the point of getting drunk any more, so now he’s sober again.

In 2001 Dad had heart failure as a result of his turbulent life, and we were told that he had a fifty per cent chance of surviving the operation that had to be performed as soon as possible in Bergen. Dad told the child welfare services that he didn’t think the four of us kids were particularly worried about it. A few weeks later I stood with the rest of the family on the platform at Oslo Central Station saying goodbye to Dad, and I knew this was very likely the last time we would see each other. He survived, and the doctors who treated him the following year called him a medical miracle. For 23 years he was given new diagnoses and medicines to alleviate his symptoms. Narcolepsy, sleep apnoea, alcoholism, PTSD, CPTSD, anxiety, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart failure, atrial fibrillation, sepsis, hepatitis C, cancer, diabetes, toxic encephalopathy, Valium, Stilnoct, Quetiapine, Sobril, Bevespi, Ksalol, fentanyl, morphine, Salbutamol, metformin, Duphalac, Metoprolol, OxyContin, Ritalin, Dexamil, Hydroxyzine, Kajos, corticosteroids, Vi-Siblin, sodium chloride. There’s something hopelessly hopeful about a reflection that attempts to convince me that the time we have had together has been borrowed time for a quarter of a century, a reflection that insists for just a second that I must remember life. It would be best if common sense could decide. My actual experience of the situation, whatever lingers in my body, is just emptiness, yet not emptiness like a blank sheet, the sense of a beginning, but as though the emptiness is something physical that is growing and filling all the space inside me. Rational reasoning is so defenceless against the authoritarian and expansive form of feelings, they really need the whole body to romp around in. I just can’t entertain the naïve idea that *this is life*, all I can see is that he’s dying, and that’s how it is, death has overlapped life in our family for some time now, ever since diagnoses became part of our personality, but before that too, when life was just meant to be life, death forced its way in then too, and now it’s here again, it occupies everything, the future, the past, this claim on the present that death always seems to make.

*This’ll be the fucking death of me*, my parents used to say. It was to do with all the stress the child welfare services caused them because I bunked off school, or the money they had to pay to replace the boy next door’s glasses because they smashed against his cheekbone when I hit him, or if any of us children complained about the stuff we had got from the food bank, the fact we were fed up with fruits of the forest yoghurt or didn’t want the big plastic boxes of dried salted cod that had gone past their expiry date.

Dad’s eyes roll back into his head as he tries to explain about the blood poisoning he’s got in the sore under his foot. The cancer growing inside him is about the size of his grandchild, who is growing inside my partner. I’m sorry that Dad will never meet my daughter, I’m sorry that I will never be able to show him the apartment I’ve bought, I’m sorry that he hasn’t been well enough for me to show him the picture I painted of him last year, and I notice that if I don’t write these things down my memories will deny that they are true, and lie about the world making sense, which my head always chooses to do with anything it can’t handle. Me and Dad have been dying together for nearly 25 years. I sometimes try to remind myself that I’m alive. For the time being, I just go back and forth between my apartment, my studio and the hospital. The hospital has featured as long as I can remember. At times my visits are so regular that it feels like a hobby. Remember that there’s football practice on Tuesday and Friday. Remember to go to the hospital and watch your parents die on Wednesday and Sunday. *They’re moving me up to Bjølsen Nursing Home next week, the place where Mum was before she died. It’s much cooler at Diakonhjemmet Hospital than Stovnerskogen Nursing Home, I can’t even fucking breathe there. I can stay here at Lilleborg Health Centre until I’m dead and gone.* Dad’s life is bound up with death. My memory of Mum is bound up with death.

When I went to visit Dad at Diakonhjemmet Hospital two months ago, he was lying there with a drip in his arm and a feeding tube through his nose. He was in a critical condition. The nurses had shaved off his moustache so they could access his airways more easily, and this made him look much younger than usual, as often happens when men remove their facial hair. But he was also dying, so his facial features were doing battle with each other, as though youth and old age were pulling in different directions, the past and the future taking about as much room. The ambiguity in his face confused me. He was slightly propped up in bed, with his chin resting on his chest, and his upper body leaning forwards, so he looked like a clock with the hands showing five to three. The hospital gown they had put him in was draped over one shoulder, and there was a bag of pee hanging from the bed rail, which was raised. He kept drifting in and out of consciousness without warning, and everything about him was so obviously affected by gravity, in a sort of silent combat with the earth, which was doing its best to pull him under. He had been driven here by ambulance two days earlier, with respiratory arrest and almost no pulse, then sent to intensive care, and I was told by my little brother that I should go straight to the hospital if I wanted to see him one last time. I sat on a chair beside his bed, and each time Dad woke up, he was ashamed he had fallen asleep, and pointed out every five minutes that I didn’t need to sit there wasting my time watching him sleep all day. And I actually agreed, but I wasn’t there to watch him sleep, it was to watch him die. I had felt his death in my own body for two decades and was used to the idea, but the feeling was stronger than ever now, almost unbearable, so after a few hours I agreed that I couldn’t just sit there *wasting my time*. I stood up, I said goodbye, he told me I was one hell of a guy, and I told him so are you, you old fucker, and I felt so incredibly sad that these would be the last words we said to each other, that for some reason or other I didn’t dare tell him how much I loved him and how painful this was, because we never said things like that, but we both understood that this hug would be our last, and I could feel the coal-black lump in my throat and the rock hard pressure inside my head and down my neck, and I could see that he was thinking the same thing. We have shared so much of life, but we have never cried together, so I turned round and went out to my car, where I sobbed so intensely and loudly as I drove to the studio that at times I couldn’t breathe, and each time I gasped for air I imagined Dad doing the same thing, in the hospital bed that was now further and further behind me with each passing second. Two days later, my little sister sent me a video of Dad walking by himself along the hospital corridor. I went up there, and he was sitting in a chair by the window with a big smile on his face, listening to music from his laptop and enjoying the view: *Can you fucking believe it – I nearly croaked in here on the weekend!*

Dad hates chatting to people, but he converses with an ease that convinces everyone otherwise. Whether he’s with one person, or five, or ten, he is almost inevitably the centre of attention. He tells stories with real passion, and chimes in with surprising comments and remarks when others are talking. I don’t like chatting either, but unlike people who are scared of small talk, or big talk for that matter, it isn’t that I’m unable to make conversation that makes me dislike it. I am never present in the actual situation when I’m with other people, I always see myself through a window, and only myself, so I might as well be talking to a wall. Dad is easier to talk to, because I know it’s like that for him as well. Many years ago we were invited to supper at my grandma’s, and I considered cancelling because I was hungover and had only slept for a few hours on a friend’s sofa. I borrowed a thousand kroner from my mate before he left for work, and went and bought a bottle of prosecco and half a bottle of vodka. After sitting on a bench for an hour, the bottles were empty and I was feeling a lot better, and the sense of adventure that grew inside me when the anxiety disappeared made me energetic and eager. Grandma’s apartment was on the Nesodden peninsula, and the prospect of taking a boat trip gave me a sense of accomplishment. As I started walking towards the ferry terminal at Aker Brygge, Dad called to say he would have to miss the meal, he was having a *real comedown* and thought he would only just make it to the supermarket to fetch some more beer. We used the expression ‘fetch some beer’, not because we always stole it, although sometimes we did, but because we regarded the supermarket as a place that stored *our* alcohol. Since it was ours anyway. I said I understood, because of course I did, and we agreed to see each other another day. Ten minutes later he called back in a completely different mood. A mate of his nearby had got hold of some *really good amphetamine*, so Dad was just going to cycle over there first, and then come down to the harbour in time to catch the next ferry. An hour after I had sat down at Grandma’s, he came in through the door. He smiled with all his face when he smiled, at least when he had got new teeth, and he stood there in the hall with his shoes on chatting to Grandma and my eight-year younger cousin for a couple of minutes before he asked me if I’d like to go outside for a smoke. In his packet of fags he had about ten grammes of amphetamine, minus what had disappeared on the boat trip. I stuck a key from my keyring into the bag and snorted the sticky pale yellow powder. Dad did too. We smoked half a cigarette each before we went back inside and sat down at Grandma’s tiny little kitchen table. There wasn’t room for the pan of mutton and cabbage stew, so it stayed on the stove, which was just possible to reach from where we sat. Dad told us about the new lights he had got for his bike, and that the night before he had dazzled one of the neighbours of the recovery centre in Bygdøy where he now lived. He kept running his fork over the mutton and cabbage he’d been served while he spoke. I had lost my appetite and just sat there cutting up the potatoes on the plate in front of me with my fork. ‘Uncle and Niko always tell such funny stories,’ said my cousin, looking enthusiastically at Grandma. He was innocence itself, having not touched drugs or alcohol yet, and for him there was nothing suspicious about our behaviour and restlessness. And we did tell a lot of funny stories, both together and separately, we could feed off each other’s energy, throw in punchlines and finish each other’s sentences. Dad had thousands of stories. They occasionally ended up as pure lies, but he was a storyteller, not a documentary maker. We could literally talk for days. Even so, I felt there was so much I didn’t know about him. And there was so much he didn’t know about me, things that had only come out in recent years, through interviews he read in magazines, or documentaries about my art, where I often talked about my childhood and everything around it. My little sister felt the same way, she bought a self-help book full of questions she could ask Dad on his deathbed. Like me, she understood the gravity of the situation, but unlike me she wasn’t afraid to say it out loud, that he was soon going to die, and there were still a lot of things she wondered about. The format didn’t suit him.

 ‘What did you enjoy most when you were a kid?’

 ‘Meatballs.’

 ‘No, I mean what did you enjoy doing most when you were a kid?’

 ‘Being with friends.’

When my little sister confronted Dad with the family tree she’d been working on, which showed that he had had a sister who died when he was in his teens, he just said that he didn’t want to talk about it. So I let my questions lie. Not only to avoid troubling him, so he didn’t have to think about the past when there was so little future left, but also because I was ashamed. Dad was so incredibly proud of me, one of the few people in the world that always thought it was just a matter of time before everyone else discovered my talents. But he also knew now that anything he did or said could potentially become raw material, because I used everything. I took a picture of him once on the balcony at Diakonhjemmet Hospital, we were out there having a smoke, and I remember the look he gave me, as though he understood that I would paint this situation, and that the painting would end up in an exhibition that would be seen and interpreted by thousands of people. That nothing any longer could remain between me and him.

It's cold outside, I have to turn up the heaters at home as far as they will go. The blue lamp hanging from the ceiling sways back and forth due to the warm air. There are four paintings of my dad in my studio, three sketches and one finished work. The linden tree outside the hospital leans to one side, reaching for the sun that has gone down, and there are still fragments of far-reaching light along the dark bark. As if the light in itself has an agenda and has decided to take these detours. Because everything is here all the time, and energy can never end, it can only change form, so when the people you love die and no longer exist, they take the form of grief and fill you up, like expanding insulation foam, to ensure that the emptiness never goes away.

**Paradisbukta (2016)**

[Paradise Bay]

I would so like to know what makes me scared, what makes me happy. No, I don’t mean what as in which situation or when during the day I feel lonely, I know very well *what*, but why the sun rising each morning can’t just be a sunrise, why the light insists on overwhelming me, or why solitude burrows its way inwards, revealing new inner lows whenever I experience quite ordinary stuff. I never come any closer to achieving order, it seems, even when I try my hardest. It’s such a hassle that the feelings that emerge inside me always have to go through a kind of analysis, but I really don’t think it could be any other way. So many things happen, and my feelings flow into each other so easily. It almost doesn’t seem right to live this way, with my experience of reality always having to go via some kind of bureaucracy, which twists and turns everything and keeps things at arm’s length.

A thin sprinkle of dry snow has blown across the smooth, sloping rocks. The patterns along the dark bedrock are filled with snow crystals in all the grooves and cracks, so the whole thing resembles a detailed black and white photo of the marbling in Japanese wagyu steaks. The peaceful, almost silent waves stretch undramatically up the beach, covering the stones down by the water’s edge with a nearly invisible layer of water, before they retreat, slowly but confidently, gathering sand and grit in the process. It all seems so incidental when the waves suddenly gain momentum and rise a metre higher than a few seconds ago. The sky is greyish white, hundreds of thin clouds cover nearly all the blue that lies behind, and the water reflects the faint light the best it can, and although the sea is hopelessly shallow compared to the infinity of the sky, they almost seem to fuse together on the horizon. Icy wind blows the frozen snow crystals back and forth across the stiffened sand and smooth blue-black rocks. The feeling I get looking out at the fjord on a grey day reminds me of this need I have to make things. The image itself of the sea, silence and beach, where everything is coloured bluish grey in the winter, is a visual parody, yet there is something brutally pent-up and relentlessly epic about the landscape in this form, apparently dead, totally meaningless, unlike everything else here in the world that finds its place more clearly. The emptiness of a lifeless beach makes me feel that I have to process what is happening on the outside through my own physical presence. It somehow feels impossible to let it be, not to try to understand. I feel like this about everything, not just the sea. Everything interests me, but just for a short time. Wherever I look, the feeling of meaninglessness is most powerful.

The same way I was never taught the importance of brushing my teeth or eating with a knife and fork, I never learnt to swim as a child either. I’m paying for the consequences of all this today, with the thirty dental appointments I have had in recent years to get my teeth back to a minimum standard, and the fact that I avoid eating in the company of others in case they comment on the way I hold my knife and fork. There are things that to a greater or lesser extent define my life and remind me of my past. For fifteen years, with a knot in my stomach, I had to keep finding new excuses not to join in when mates and girlfriends asked if I wanted to go swimming with them. It often felt like the things I missed out on were the very things that defined social status. As though these were the fruits of a tree with a network of roots that in its fundamental form was unwavering. Rotten teeth are an obvious sign that you have neglected your health, and this was something that linked me so strongly to my own background, not because it was too expensive in itself to buy a toothbrush, or that people on benefits forced their children to go to bed without brushing their teeth, but the chaos that accompanied our poverty never allowed for normality or routines, even when it came to apparently basic and simple things like personal hygiene. The fact that the boy next door had to wear glasses to compensate for the bad genes he’d inherited from his bespectacled father was not something that was looked down on, quite the opposite, especially from aged twenty and up, when glasses were regarded as something with a direct link to reading, writing and academia. Or when a classmate broke his arm and came to school in plaster from his fingertips to his elbow, having simply taken part in a healthy activity and met with an avoidable accident as a result of a childish urge to explore, not excessively reckless and irresponsible behaviour caused by a lack of parental presence and intervention. In my case, a black eye or any other injury or illness was at worst a direct consequence of neglect or a sign of mistreatment. Everything in the public sphere was interpreted in a different context when teachers and neighbours knew full well that your mother and father were unemployed, that they drank, and society silently communicated that not brushing your children’s hair could never be a deliberate fashion statement, but always a lack of proper care.

I will never admit that I don’t know how to swim. If teenagers my age can’t do a hundred keepie-uppies or bend crosses from the edge of the box with their right foot just as well as their left like I can, this never implies that being disadvantaged has anything to do with it. The fact that I’m the only kid at school who can do a kickflip might make me a bit more interesting to some of the girls, but it doesn’t lower the status of all the others who can’t. When there’s a record-breaking heatwave in Oslo in July and we can’t remember what clouds even look like any more, and for the seventh time in a week I say that I would rather skate than go swimming down at Katten, I’m bombarded with accusations from all sides. *Can’t you swim or what? You never come swimming with us! Just admit that you don’t know how to swim!* I have seen how the Pakistani kid in my class was treated after we went to the swimming pool with school and he was pulled up by a lifeguard after a frenzied attempt at floating. I had ‘forgotten my swimming things’ that day, and reminded myself that I would never return to the swimming pool at Møllergata School.

My fear of being by the water increased progressively with all the pranks that teenagers, young people and even adults indulged in if a friend was standing at the edge of a jetty or near a lake. As part of an everlasting, ongoing game with no defined rules, it was apparently acceptable to push unsuspecting victims over the edge and out into the deep water. Would I die if someone did this to me? Were my friends in danger of killing me in jest because I had never learnt to swim? I was scared of all kinds of water, all outings to the sea, the fjord, jetties, beaches, swimming pools, small forest lakes, and worst of all: islands. Boat trips were out of the question. I had a suspicion that the ferries that took people across to the islands didn’t always, or didn’t ever, dock properly, they simply stopped ten metres from the beach, so the passengers on board had to swim the last bit. Maybe I could fake a heart attack, pretend I was out of action. There are about ten islands in the inner Oslo Fjord, and several of my friends have a cottage on one of them, but I have never visited any of the islands. When I was older, someone was more likely in the summer to suggest going down to the Sørenga waterfront for a midnight swim, or insist that we should climb over the fence at Tøyenbadet outdoor pool and continue the party in the water after the bars closed. At times I was so wasted that I had already lost consciousness, so someone would call an ambulance and I slept over in one of the wards in the accident and emergency department, but otherwise I never went home after parties. This was often because I didn’t have a home to go to, for several periods of my life I have been homeless, and a consequence of not having a place to be was that I was always forced to join other people wherever they were going. The same thing happened all the time with different constellations of friends, I would go somewhere for a swim and be the only one not to go in the water. I said I didn’t like it, it was too cold, I didn’t see the point, I’d had a heart operation and the doctors had told me not to expose my body to cold shock, but the water was warm, the others said, so then I had to invent a stupid excuse to try and make light of the situation, say I was scared of Nøkken, the water sprite, or that a great white shark would bite my legs off, I had heard they’d started migrating from Australia up to Norway now because of global warming, but seriously, come and join us, it’s awesome, no, you just enjoy yourselves, I’ll look after our stuff up here, what do you mean, there’s nobody else here, I always get a cold from having wet hair, I’ve heard the water’s full of E. coli round here, no, stop being such a wimp, come on, I’ll pull you in with all your clothes on if you don’t strip off and jump in right now. I remember the jargon my friends used about borrowing their parents’ boat and going out on the fjord, and it made me mad how casually they could say they were ‘heading out’, as though it was a straightforward, commonplace, almost tediously normal thing to do.

In my mid-twenties I found I couldn’t keep lying any longer. My sense of shame was overwhelming, I felt a weight in my stomach each time I woke up to sunshine, it was exhausting to make up new stories each day the whole summer. It was also getting dangerous. A couple of times I had gone swimming with a mate in Trollvann near Grefsen, the only lake where I could gauge the depth, having been there many times on my own. I knew that it was quite shallow along the hillside closest to the dam. It was hopeless to lie on the shore there, the ground was rocky and uneven, full of roots, it was virtually impossible to find anywhere in the sun, and the water was murky. And that’s why there was never anyone around either. *I hate people,* I often said to myself, *it’s better to swim here, where there’s no one else around.* I had spent all summer going to the lake by myself, wading slowly around with a stick in my hand to check the depth of the water in front of me. I knew that if I took a wrong step and suddenly found myself in an area where the water came up to my neck, there was a danger that I would panic and drown. After a while I took some friends with me, three of them at least, and one girlfriend, I had carved our initials, D + N, in a tree down by the dam, and used it as an excuse for that being *our special place*, in case she wanted to lie on the sandy beach 150 metres away, where there was always more sun, but also a diving area that would have caused problems for me. To be on the safe side, I had checked out small sections of the lake, first Trollvann and later on Sognsvann too. The performance-like swimming trips that I went on with friends, where I navigated around in the water with exaggerated strokes and my knees firmly planted on the bottom, following tracks under water that I knew by heart, always acted as an alibi for me whenever people tried to expose the fact I couldn’t swim. During the summer months when I was drunk enough, I would take a six-pack of lager and try to learn how to swim in these places. Often at night, so I could be certain that no one would be there. It was harder than I thought, I had never met anyone before who couldn’t swim, at least as far as I knew, so I assumed that swimming was so easy that any idiot could learn how to do it. I have always had a lot of self-confidence when it comes to learning things, and very rarely feel that I won’t manage to do something if I just give it a go, but this was hard and took time. I tried to understand why. It was often dark, and when the sun had gone down it soon became cold in the forest, and in the water, so I struggled to breathe steadily, I was drunk, but my motor functions were used to being intoxicated, so it wasn’t that, maybe I was too full after all the lager, I’d heard it was dangerous to swim when you’d had a lot to eat or drink, though I didn’t know why, maybe it was the fresh water, it wasn’t actually possible to float in it, I had also heard that it was easier to float in salt water, and of course I was scared, scared of drowning and of the shame of being found lifeless in Trollvann the following day, with acquaintances standing around while the police fished my body out of the water, *I told you he didn’t know how to swim*.

It was always so clear to me how simple life was for others and how different it all was for me. Sometimes I was unable to defend my parents, why they didn’t just forget their own problems for a weekend and teach me how to swim, so I could join in the world that everyone else belonged to, but instead they left me standing on the outside once again, where I had to blame my exclusion on hate, just like they did with everything they didn’t have access to. I followed in my parents’ footsteps: hate came easily to me. Hate had various functions, it was above all an identity that positioned me socially, I was usually just poor or kind (I think the adjective most often used to describe me is ‘lovely’), but hate, being against something, or even better, fundamentally against everything, an automated solution where I associated hate with everything until it was proved otherwise, that was something to build relationships and friendships on. Hate also acted as a defence mechanism between me and everything the world consisted of that I needed to distance myself from. I hated capitalism, I hated rules, I hated the cinema, because we couldn’t afford to go, and anyway we had no interest in culture at home, so the only film I had seen was *The Pinchcliffe Grand Prix* because it was on TV, and I was worried that there were social codes for going to the cinema, like everywhere else, which I didn’t understand. I hated waffles, because having something to eat was mainly to do with survival, nutrition to be able to last a day at school, to grow (*you’re so skinny, Niko!*), and making waffles the way other people did derived from an enthusiastic passion project that we weren’t supposed to identify with. My little brother hated T shirts, it took me ages to find out that he didn’t wear a T shirt for several years because he was ashamed of his skinny forearms. I didn’t realise that shame could reach as far as your arms. I hated smart clothes and how other people’s smart clothes didn’t even fit, but they were still complimented on them. I hated swimming.

Now and then Mum would tell us anecdotes about her childhood. She loved telling us about the time Grandpa had tossed her over the side of the boat when they were out fishing. She wasn’t more than five or six. She said that it forced her to learn how to swim, and that she learnt quickly, in a couple of seconds, because the fastest way to learn was through the struggle for survival. She told us about outings to the beach at Ingierstrand and Hellviktangen, where she loved to swim when she was younger. A violent rage boiled up inside me each time she mentioned how much she enjoyed the fjord and swimming, and even that she couldn’t live without a sea view, just the thought of travelling further inland and away from the ocean made her feel claustrophobic. Didn’t she know that I couldn’t swim? How did she imagine I had learnt? She hadn’t ever tossed me overboard, at least given me the brutal opportunity to learn. Why didn’t she ever take me to the beach if she loved swimming as much as she said she did? I bet she couldn’t swim herself, she was probably scared stiff of water, just like me.

I moved my training camp from the fresh water of Trollvann and Sognsvann to the salt water of Paradisbukta, a bay in the southwest of Bygdøy. I had been sleeping in the woods there on and off, sometimes with a friend who was also homeless, and we found a little teepee we could use. The fjord was a few hundred metres below us, and this was where we washed ourselves before we went our separate ways each day. I felt quite at home on the Bygdøy peninsula, two of my girlfriends had come from there, one when I was sixteen and another in my early twenties, so I knew the area well. This calmed my fears of the unknown, which I felt by Trollvann and even more so by Sognsvann, where the surroundings were foreign to me, but in Bygdøy I was more acutely aware of the shame that still lingered from the times my ex-girlfriends had suggested we went down to the beach for a swim in the years we were together. After a day or two alone in the salt water, I could swim. No more than a few metres at a time, but enough to get away from the shore, lie on my back and float if I felt like it, then swim back to land. This opened up a new space inside me, as a human being in relation to the world, and I was able to access a new language. I remember how wonderful it was to say *I’m such a bad swimmer* after losing a swimming race against my girlfriend in the hotel pool on holiday in Tenerife one winter, and later tell some mutual friends of ours about the race, which I had lost by a wide margin. The sentence revealed so effortlessly that I knew how to swim. Throughout the summer I filmed myself out in the water and sent videos to friends and acquaintances, without making a big deal out of it, just disguised as a summer greeting from the beach, enjoy your weekend, as if to say *yeah, of course I’m swimming in the sea, it’s July and thirty degrees in the shade.* If it ever came up in a situation when I wasn’t there, *do you think Niko can swim, because he never comes with us when we go down to the fjord*, the videos I had sent could act as evidence that someone could use as a response: *I just think he doesn’t like being with people, I saw a clip of him having a dip just last week.*

In the weeks, months and years that passed, I felt much safer in the water. I bought a diving mask and a snorkel and would be out there for hours, even in the beginning of April, when the water wasn’t more than six or seven degrees, or at the end of September, when the other people visiting the beach or the lake just sat on the benches higher up, wrapped in big down jackets and with scarves around their necks. I still don’t know how I would react if I jumped in from a height. I still torture myself by taking slow, unsteady steps out into the cold water. When people talk about how the surface of the water can feel like concrete if you land all wrong, I just nod and use references I have from other kinds of pain. I imagine the panic as gravity slowly drags me several metres under the surface, with no guarantee that I’ll float up again, so I still haven’t ever jumped in. But the sea in its countless forms doesn’t scare me like it used to. If I fell in from the edge of a jetty and drowned, it would be because I’d panicked, and that’s completely normal, or I’d frozen in the cold water, hit my head on the side as I fell, maybe all of this. It wouldn’t be an issue that I didn’t know how to swim. The sight of a pleasure boat or a group of people with wet hair and swimming things, maybe a towel draped around the shoulders and clutched in one hand at the front, that no longer bothers me. The fear that someone will invite me to join them at the beach each time the weather forecast says it will be over twenty degrees, that fear has disappeared, even if I still don’t go. The emptiness I feel when I see the water washing over the stones is no longer filled with shame, the view of the fjord no longer tells me that I don’t belong, that I’m deprived of an experience that everyone else enjoys, it’s just there, apparently for no reason.