The Art of Swimming
Dette er også vatn

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My husband sits in a chair below the pitched ceiling of the living room on a reindeer hide our daughter received for her baptism. In front of his face he holds a book. The reindeer was shot by my sister during a hunt in Suldal, the place where both my sister and I grew up. It must have been a beautiful reindeer, the hide is as white as it is grey. Up in the loft, the boys are playing FIFA, our daughter is lying on the living room floor and lifts her right hand up toward an orange monkey. She is encapsulated in a jungle world, but my husband is sick. His face is swollen, distorted. He has pain in his body, and the pain moves around. Where does it hurt now, I ask him, to begin. In my thigh, my hands, in my leg, he answers, but it is most often his knees and he often has so much pain it is hard for him to walk. At least, not very far. His illness has a name: Lyme disease. A tick bite, but some treatments come too late. He should have gone to the doctor earlier but in any case, he has already been through two intensive rounds of antibiotics, in capsule form. Zero improvement, so now the thing to do is to seek relief from pain in capsule form. Now the thing to do is to take time to help, and at the same time to just take each day as it comes.

In the morning I say Goodbye and Have a nice day to the boys who run off to school with backpacks bouncing up and down on their backs. Our daughter sits fastened to the chair, eating small bits of bread while drinking milk from a sippy cup with double handles. Three Elsa Beskow-illustrated siblings in the cranberry bushes, triplets with polka dot mushroom hats and blue sweaters. I remove the cap from the cup, dump the rest of the fluid into the sink. I turn on the faucet, wash the milk down. I put the carton and breakfast spread back into the refrigerator, the dirty cups and plates into the dishwasher, wipe off the table. Then I carry our daughter into the living room, place her down on the baby gym and go to the bathroom where I avoid looking at myself in the mirror.

The jungle noises from the baby gym in the living room carry in through the bathroom door that is cracked open. Bird-twitter, elephant-trumpet and monkey-howl. Our daughter jabbers to the animals in the jungle, inquiring and responding to the monkeys and birds in a language that perhaps neither animals nor babies understand. Ga-ga-ga, our daughter says into the jungle, over and over, multiple times. I take out the turquoise dress with green glitter that I wore when I was pregnant. I pull the dress over my head without knowing whether it is the dress or me that is wrong, though I easily convince myself it's the latter. I am not pretty. I am a machine. I am a dilapidated dam made from a tree. I am wood when I should have been a stone. I have a rasp that speaks but that does not own the place from which it speaks. To speak is not to act. Speaking is never enough. I am not writing. I work by holding things off and at a distance, all the while the thing I try to hold off at a distance moves closer. I try to think about life but cannot stop thinking about death. I brush my teeth. I am being hewn in the middle. My head gets hot, so I say to myself, With all those tree-

rings, now it is time to keep a cool head. The things I think go in circles before congealing somewhere in my body, like un-formed sentences. The sentences are in my body, in my head and mouth, but as long as the sentences have neither been formulated nor written down, they are worthless. I am a tree. I am the tree that spits out and washes down. No words should grow here or weave themselves into one another; life itself has uprooted enough.

Our daughter is crying. Or she is laughing. I am no longer sure. She still does a lot of both. I hurried back and forth. I carried and put to sleep. Breastfed and comforted, but I am still unsure whether I comforted enough. I went grocery shopping. I made dinner. I tried to keep the structured rituals of routine in motion while my husband sat quietly. He sat in the chair on the reindeer hide with the book in front of his face and gave no sign of putting down his book or picking our daughter up. His face was hidden behind a thousand sentences. His head was in another world. His universe was separated from ours by a clear, physical boundary: The book he held up. I had to get out. I turned off the baby gym, the animal noises faded. I picked up our daughter. Carried her into the bathroom where I put her on the changing table and changed her diaper. I went into the living room and bent down toward my husband, in under the pitched ceiling with our daughter in my arms. Bye, I said and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Do you want to say bye bye to daddy, I said to our daughter and looked at him, on the other side of the book. Mmm, he said and kissed her on the forehead. I'm leaving now, I said and he said Yes, but sat beneath the living room ceiling like the denial of life that was playing out between us. I carried our daughter down the stairs to where the strollers are parked. Put her into the stroller which I turned around and, with my back to the door, pushed us both outside.

It was a nice day. Our daughter lay in the stroller. She smiled while she gazed up at the trees and into the green, yellow and red leaf canopies we passed. It was a beautiful time of year. Then came the winter. And then everything was covered in white. No. That's not how it went. Rather, our daughter started to cry in the stroller and I picked her up. She wanted to be carried and this is how I often went around, pushing the little stroller with our daughter on one arm. It looked ridiculous but whenever I carried her, she could turn her head from side to side. She had to be able to see. She wanted to witness everything. And she would only calm down if I picked her up so she could view the world around her. It was the two of us. I kicked away a rock on the path. The stroller wheels were solid, they rolled easily, but I could not afford any kind of puncture. I rolled far, and I rolled farther than far. I rolled along the road, along the river across the bridge, on the path down toward the park, into the store outside the city. I rolled through the spring, through the slush and snow. I came to a harbor and there was a boat departing from the harbor. I bought a ticket and rolled on board. On board the boat were many other mothers with small and somewhat larger babies. And there were storms and tall waves. There were gusts and choppy winds, but on serene days the boat bobbed beneath a large, gleaming sun. The ocean unfolded and said Come! I sailed around on the ocean for seven days and seven nights and suddenly a half a year had passed.

The boys opened the door. Our daughter squirmed with her legs. I hugged them and said Home at last. Our little sister has grown so big, they said and stroked her hair and cheek. We went together into the living room where my husband was still sitting in the chair with a book in front of his face. Hi, I said. Hello, hello? I knocked on the ceiling just above where he was sitting. Didn't he hear us? Didn't he see we were finally home? I went closer, hemming

him in in the chair where he sat on the reindeer hide under the pitched ceiling with the book in front of his face. What book are you reading now? Still no answer. I looked at the spine of the book, it was the same book he had been reading when we'd left. Madame Bovary! I was angry at the book, angry at Gustave Flaubert, angry at my husband and thought I would also like to disappear into the first and best book. No, what I would prefer more than anything is to return to the manuscript I had been working on. I wanted to write. This is what I thought. The days passed. Summer came, soon it was fall.

I did the laundry, I tidied up and when the washing machine was finished I took the laundry outside to the balcony to hang it up. I wanted to be another and better person than this, but someone had to be present in this world too. The drying rack was too small, the clothes hung too close together, the socks were on top of the tights, the sleepers, the pants, the jeans, there was not enough air. Nothing was going to be dry by morning, I thought and turned to look in through the large windowpane from the balcony. The boys were sitting on the sofa up in the loft, each with their own individual wii controller. The TV radiated a pale blue light and, fastened to the ceiling in a cradle made of white, durable fabric, our daughter lay sleeping. Through the large window pane, the whole scene looked quite idyllic. I turned, walked straight to the balcony railing with melded metal flower boxes on it. A hardy mint plant the size of a shrub or a solid fist was the only surviving plant in the flower box. The sky above the roof was red, the sun was on its way down. I climbed up onto the chair. From here I could see far away, if I stretched, I believed I could see the ocean too.

Inside the living room, up in the cradle beneath the ceiling our daughter lay sleeping: I knew she was dreaming. In the dream, I heard the ocean calling to her, it was calling to both her

and me. What about the boys? What about my husband? I held my breath. I took stock. Soon the night would come with frost. So, I climbed down from the chair. I opened the door, went inside to the others and shut the balcony door again. In the living room I stood unmoving in the middle of the room, looking around. Alright, I said. There was no answer from the ocean. I got out a piece of paper and went into the kitchen where I sat down at the table. I wrote on the paper in capital letters: You have to finish writing your book. And then the writing began to flow out of me in a language that no longer felt stifled. No. That's not how it went either. It would take time. Weeks would pass, months and years before I could understand and was able to rest inside this realization that the person who was writing was I, but that this I is not me. I tried to breastfeed in the living room with two larger children around me while the child I was supposed to be breastfeeding kept turning away from the breast to see what was going on. I sat in the tiny living room with a swollen breast and stiff neck before I finally pulled down my shirt and took the child with me into the bedroom. Here, I said. Drink. Sleep now, but she refused, she wanted to come with me, and the evenings were long with little sleep.

Life on land is both heavy and light. And there would be days and nights where I asked myself whether the alphabet that most of us know still has all the letters in it? I exist, I wrote. I have borne a daughter. She has two big brothers, they are good boys, but my husband is sick. It has to get better. In the end everything is always better. It is just to endure, I wrote. Yes, I have to believe that, because up in the loft in the house by the fjord where I grew up there is a green diary. In the book my father wrote in cursive with a ballpoint pen, that truth is truth even if no one says it is true.

I

The water is a gift. The water is a mother. And the child has, like every other child, once thought that her mother is not her original mother. Then she has walked to the ocean, or if she grew up in a valley, perhaps she walked to the river that ran down from the mountain swollen with snowmelt. Here, on the riverbank or on land on a stone shore she stood staring across the deep fjord with her questions. If she lifted her head, she saw that the sky was low and closed in. The mountain shut out the sun, the clouds pressed themselves into the mountain. The mountain pressed out the water into clouds, twisted the clouds around like a dishcloth. And down in the valley, at the fjord, she stood with her face turned toward the sky, with her tongue out, waiting for the rain drops to fall, until the snow came. Then she went home to her parents and sat on the chair in the kitchen. Her father came toward her with a potholder and a pan full of potatoes. When he turned to put the potholders down on the countertop, she saw that his shirt billowed out like a flag in the wind. She looked at her mother, who said, Isn't it true that we see our own worst traits through our children? From the ladle, her father poured sauce over the potatoes. Her sister had skied down from the mountain top and was also sitting at the table. The sisters looked at each other from opposite sides of the table and with their gaze, without exchanging a single word, the sisters shared the same thought: Are you my sister? After dinner, the sisters went to the windows. Went from the kitchen window to the big living room windows. Their mother went and looked out. It would soon be completely dark. The mother asked both herself and her daughters Where was their brother? He will be here soon enough, said their father and turned the page in the book he sat reading. The sisters stood, each in their own living room window, looking out at the grass that was covered with snow. Then both sisters

remembered that they had once lived in a house of water, surrounded by flesh, and that the name of this house was Mother.

Our daughter was eighteen months old. Mommy, she says, gripping my hair as she pulls my face towards hers. My darling daughter, I whisper. One day I'll teach you to swim, I promise. It's October now, and cold outside. Before this weekend I swam every day. I've been swimming in the evenings while our daughter lay at home, sleeping. Swimming towards the wide open sea, I realised it was me and her. Me and my daughter, who was lying sleeping at home in her crib. One day she would come here with me. One day we would swim far, and afterwards, standing on the coastal rock slope, we would talk, sincerely and intimately. We would make a flag, or maybe we could put together a sign. Mother and daughter forever, the sign would read, and after resting our bikes on the high-grown scrub where the road ends, we would walk the final meters down to the beach.

I would teach her everything. I would teach her that swimming was actually work. I would tell her about when I saved imaginary lives from the pool during sports studies when I was sixteen. About how I threw myself from the diving board with my clothes on, from five meters up to five meters down, where I grabbed hold of the angular doll made of hard plastic. I would teach her how to grip the person you're pulling up from the bottom under their arms, and how to push yourself up to the surface using your feet. Look here, I'd say, as I opened my eyes and caught my breath. You need to crouch down. It's easy. You can do it. You, my daughter, will save many lives, because after all, you've already saved mine.

I would buy swimming goggles and armbands for her. She would have flippers and a diving mask. I would teach her mouth-to-mouth. I would teach her the recovery position and CPR. My daughter would learn to swim on her front and on her back, until she was confident as could be in the water. Then we would swim together, every single day, every single summer, perhaps until she herself became a mother one day. Then I would teach my grandchild to swim, and then we could all swim together, all three of us.

It was a lovely thought. It was a big promise, but when your child is still a child, you're the one who has to be the adult, because a child only has an adult to rely on. Your child doesn't yet know that there is a world outside the valley, that the fjord flows out into a sea where the sky is bigger and higher than it is here. Your child doesn't even know they're by the sea, even though at this point they can say Mom, Dad, and water. Mommy, my daughter said, sitting on dry land with a plastic spade in her hand as I swam to and fro in the sea a couple meters from the beach. Mommy, she shouted as I swam further away. The further out, the better, I thought since my daughter seemed to be just fine on dry land. It was warm in the sun, it was warm in the sea. The deeper water called to me. Was she building a sandcastle? She collected water from the sea in her bucket, adding a couple scoops of sand before mixing it all together. Maybe she was cooking. Tomato soup with macaroni?

I lengthened my strokes. The sea was like velvet. The sea said swim as far as you can. Swim over to the other side. There's a new country on the other side. I truly believed the sea was talking to me. I dreamed of swimming across the English Channel, thinking about the currents you'd have to fight with and against. I'd swum in strong currents before, had been just as scared each time, but had nevertheless enjoyed experiencing the forces that you also

encounter when skiing in the mountains, when you think it's a calm Easter morning and then a storm rolls in. So what was I afraid of? I was afraid I wouldn't be ready when those forces gripped me. I was afraid I wouldn't endure them. I was afraid I'd panic, get my head too involved in my body's work. I was afraid the currents would push me back or keep me swimming on the spot until I had no strength left. My grandmother's brother drowned. He fell through the ice on Lake Suldal. He skated over a hole. The fjord is deep. Due to watercourse regulation, it never freezes over. A ferry sank, and before she did, they filled her with dynamite. When the fjord froze over, it became a road. Before watercourse regulation and road tunnels through the mountains, the lorries could drive across the fjord, and here I was afraid of the shallows.

I fantasized about what it would be like to swim from Helsingborg to Helsingør, even as I tried to write a novel. It's not that far, I thought as I zoomed the area in on Google Earth. How many hours would it take? I wouldn't be able to do it alone. I'd need an escort boat, a lifejacket, maybe even a wetsuit. I went back to writing. How many kilometers was it? Four kilometers, so four thousand meters. I could do that! I was still writing, but then I stopped again. What was I thinking? Helsingborg to Helsingør? The currents in the Sound were very strong. It was also one of the busiest bodies of water in the world. How far did I actually swim last time I was in the water? Seventy meters, less? Now you're at a loss when it comes to both your life and your writing, I told myself. This is the calm before they both turn on you. I got up from my chair at my desk and walked across the room, over to the crib where our daughter lay sleeping. She's so beautiful, I thought, remembering the time I swam as far as I could, when I felt weightless and like my body had found a way. I had found meaning. Things back on land would once again be bearable. I just needed to swim away from myself,

then I would come back ashore as a normal human being, a calm and collected mother. That's how it was. The swimming made it easier for everyone to deal with me, so maybe I didn't actually need to swim that far. The swimming made me a better mother. The swimming made it possible to keep writing in a new way. I felt sure of it, that the swimming had given my writing a new dimension.

That was my train of thought as our daughter slept. I stood watching her. Surely this was around about when she usually woke up? Next summer we would swim together. Then she started whimpering, waving her arms, turning her head from side to side, then she was awake again. Through her cries I heard the voice from last summer, screaming at me: That's enough! Get out of the water! It was my husband. He was standing next to a small, pink dot in a white diaper running back and forth on the shore. I swam back as fast as I could. I heard her before I saw her face. My daughter was furious and hysterical all at once. Mommy! Where were you? Mommy? Still in my wet bathing suit, I reached for her. She turned away from me and said: I can't see you. I don't have a mom. My daughter stood on the shore screaming at the top of her lungs. My childhood came to me through her shrieks, when my father's uncle, Eirik, and his wife, Borghild, who had run the farm before us and who now lived across the yard, drove us up to the lake on the moor. Neither of them had learned to swim, so they tied a rope around mine and my sister's middles. One time we were given a car tire to swim with as well. The rope was perhaps twenty-five meters long, but we were allowed to stay in the water as long as we liked.

I am a daughter who is a mother who had a sister who spent the summer cutting grass. I was nine years old. The paddock was steep, but there was no road to this paddock, so we had to transport the mower by boat. Everyone who was going to help with the work was in the

boat: Dad, Granddad, Eirik, Grandma, my sister, and me. Gripping both sides of the boat, Dad kicked the boat away from the shore. No one in the boat was wearing a lifejacket. I peered over the side, looking down into the depths, where everything was so clear. Then it started to get windy. Sizable waves rolled across the fjord. The water churned. The mower rocked from side to side. The fjord was deep and cold. The wind picked up. It was strong. I couldn't see down into the depths anymore. Dad's face was pale. My grandmother twiddled her thumbs, her eyes glassy. Was she scared? Could she see how low the boat lay in the water, how high and frothy the waves were? Grandma was there, and she wasn't there. She slipped in and out of time due to what doctors call senile dementia. A wave crashed over the side and into her lap. My grandmother's dress was wet. No one in the boat apart from my father and I could swim. How would this play out? The small outboard motor droned and pressed on. Who among us would survive?

We made it back onto dry land. We climbed out of the boat and rolled the mower ashore as well. Dad, Granddad, and Eirik pulled the boat up onto the rocky beach. Dad moored the boat to a tree using rope. Now it was time to mow the paddock, to clear the glass away from the swathe Dad had cut so that the next swathe could be cut with the mower. After that we collected the cut grass using pitchforks, raking the paddock clear. Granddad cut the edges with a scythe. Eirik and Dad drove stakes into the ground and pulled wire between them. Grandma, my sister, and I gave the grass a good shake before draping it over the wires to dry. The wind hadn't died down. The grass would dry quickly as long as it didn't rain. Time for a swim? We'll see, Dad said when I asked. We might fit in a swim this evening before we go home.

Life in the water was just a dream. My daughter is right. She was fully within her rights to orientate herself in new and unfamiliar waters. She didn't have a mother, and that was painful for both of us. As I swam out there, she had learned to walk and to run. She had stopped using a pacifier, and she would soon be out of diapers too. She speaks in full sentences now. This is the start of the new time out in the white, empty space. How would we cope when we were separated from each other? Would I give into the will of a child who once asked why are you you and not me? Why did you swim away from me when I was standing on the shore waiting for you? For me it was white, for her it was black. Her perspective of time wasn't mine, it was a child's, and maybe she'd thought she would never see her mother again. I had to win her back, and quickly. I had to calm her down. I had to comfort her as I struggled to win back her trust. I'm here, I said. She looked at me, for a long time. She held my gaze until I had to look away. What was happening? In no time at all she had gone from being a completely dependent baby to an independent human being. Come here, I said, picking her up. There, there, I said, holding her close. Then the tears came. She's my daughter, and I saw myself in her. I thought of my time in the valley, and the path I took to see my best friend, which was also a long detour to avoid walking past three angry dogs. One of the three dogs was called Lyn, Lightning, but luckily he was tethered. To visit each other we had to cross the river, but when we crossed the river we were always terrified that we would be washed away. The sign up from the river, by the highway, said: WARNING! The level of regulated rivers and streams may rise suddenly due to the release and diversion of water. We crossed the river with our eyes bulging and our mouths hanging open as we looked for signs of the water rising because we seemed to remember reading that the water in the reservoir behind the dam further upstream might suddenly rush at us in a tidal wave, without any warning, at any time. I breathed in the scent of my crying daughter's hair and

skin. There was no end to it – it was as if she was releasing an entire landscape's worth of water that had been dammed up inside her.

In the book Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? by Jeanette Winterson, which I read when I was heavily pregnant in 2012, Winterson writes that fiction and poetry are doses, medicines. And that what they cure, heal, is the lack of imagination that reality creates: "So when people say that poetry is a luxury, or an option, or for the educated middle classes, or that it shouldn't be read at school because it is irrelevant, or any of the strange stupid things that are said about poetry and its place in our lives, I suspect that the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy. A tough life needs a tough language – and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers – a language powerful enough to say how it is".

Jeanette Winterson writes about her distrustful and deeply religious mother, who forbid her from reading novels because the problem with novels was that you could never know what they would say before it was too late. She read books in secret, and wrote about how every time she opened a book, she wondered whether the end was near and the ground would soon swallow her up. Would it be now? When would it be too late? She wrote about her mind, about how her mind was big enough to fill a house, and in her bed, under her mattress, she hid a collection of standard paperbacks. Like the bed from The Princess and the Pea, Jeanette's bed got higher and higher until she was sleeping closer to the ceiling than the floor, but as mentioned: "My mother was suspicious-minded, but even if she had not been, it was clear that her daughter was going up in the world". Winterson writes about the evening her mother discovers the books she has hidden under her mattress. Furious, her mother flings novel after novel out of the window down into the back yard, where she pours

paraffin over them and sets them alight. The flames light up the ice-cold and bleak January night.

The next morning there are snatches of text and scorched puzzle pieces from books all over the back yard. There and then, Jeanette Winterson realises something important: “whatever is on the outside can be taken away at any time. Only what is inside you is safe. […] I had been damaged, and a very important part of me had been destroyed – that was my reality, the facts of my life. But on the other side of the facts was who I could be, how I could feel. And as long as I had words for that, images for that, stories for that, then I wasn’t lost”.

Jeanette Winterson’s book is an autobiography, and the rules set by her mother, Mrs Winterson, are like the painful axis of insanity. The revolver is in the drawer, books are forbidden. Jeanette was shut out the house at night, or inside the coal cellar, if she gave even the slightest sign or suspicion of disobedience. She was adopted and lived by these rules until she was sixteen. Winterson talks about stories as a kind of compensation in a world that is unreasonable, unfair, unrecognisable, and uncontrollable. Winterson writes that when we tell a story, “we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening. It is a version, but never the final one. And perhaps we hope that the silences will be heard by someone else, and the story can continue, can be retold. When we write we offer the silence as much as the story. Words are the part of silence that can be spoken”.

It was warm and conditions were optimal for swimming. My sister had skied across the mountains, and now she was standing here, on the coastal rock slope, with me, in her brand new bathing suit. My sister is tough. My sister is a wall. My sister has always been my roof over troubled waters. My sister swims fast, she had swum past me, but when she

disappeared around the islet, I remembered what Eldrid Lunden had said about not choosing your motifs freely at the start of an authorship, about maybe not analyzing as much either. Then time passes, and eventually you can read things into earlier texts that you didn't have the chance to when you wrote them. I took the train to Bø, and I remember I was shaking, that I met Eldrid Lunden just after my debut as a writer. That our father had been diagnosed with cancer, metastasizing, and that on that same summer's day when I took the train to Bø, he caught the Haukeli Express bus in the opposite direction, bound for Oslo and the Radium Hospital. You can't be in two places at one, except in literature. I know that for certain now.