

ways of swimming

to Adam Zagajewski

to Eva Vevere

Three paths lead to the sea. You can go straight down, passing houses whose windows are slaves to the sea, chained to the sea, devouring the sea every day unceasingly, or are its passive reflection, indifferent, apathetic, sleepy. If it's the beginning of summer, raspberries are growing on the left, along the fence, you have full right to their sweet and sour juice. Or maybe someone is with you and offers you a raspberry in an open palm as if sharing with you some story from their life, confusing, a bit funny, and a bit not. A few steps further you have the chance to repay with the red currant, which grows wild here, sown generously by the wind. It looks exotic among the rocks. Further along the path shrinks, goes steeply down. You arrive at a rocky beach where there is no one in the morning. The feet can regain their sense of touch, entering into a *liaison* with the stones.

You can choose the path to the right, instead, the longer one, along the shore. At the fork, you can go down, right behind the cherry tree, whose carmine fruits fall onto the street, spattering an action painting. From here you can already see the old wooden fish shop. No longer in use, veiled with fishing nets, sticking out the tongue of the pier from which a young boy jumps. Yes, right now, he's that boy from Paestum. His name is Borge or Sven. He is in love with a girl whose hair the wind is playing with. Maria, or maybe Marme. It's a hot afternoon, the girl sits on the pier with her legs lowered, letting the sun steal her thoughts. Maybe she thinks about leaving soon, starting studies far away, the boy holds it against her and jumps broken, bitter, into the

water, as if it will save him. His body is smooth, he is suspended between the pier and the water, and for a moment he is nowhere. I see him on a postcard on the refrigerator in my friend's kitchen. It is featured on many postcards and magnets, reproduced on the covers of books and notebooks. Simulacrum to infinity. The eternal jumper who never touches the water. The fresco is as simple as if drawn by a child. The sea looks like a bubble of a puddle, the column our *tuffatore* jumps from is uneven and bends seaming to leap after him, nearly collapsing into the water. To the left, there is a spindly tree fluctuating as if it were a sea polyp or a multi-armed Shiva on one leg, caught by a frescoist in a dance of life and death, to free us from the fetters of illusion. The jumper, on the other hand, has a perfect body, it is one streak, almost a line, a long snail with a head instead of a shell. His bright eye betrays the limestone background of the tomb wall, an eye from another world, a look into the past or the future. However, this does not interest us. It is not about the moment of suspension or abeyance, but about meeting the water, immersing yourself, giving yourself to the water.

You may also go further, do not turn at the cherry tree. The long path takes you to a small port where you will take the ferry. In a country with a peasant background, allergic to Danish and Swedish imperialist tendencies, the ferries are proudly named "Kongen" or "Dronningen". A flash of self-irony or evidence of unfulfilled ambitions? One of these royal machines will take you to the island.

A small bridge will welcome you there. There is probably an empty mug of morning coffee on the railing of a house whose owner is catching bees and flies. The strong smell of herbs will guide you, you will not get lost. Veronica, meadowsweet and hogweed are in bloom. Go to the

very end, along the ridge of the island and continue down to where the face of the sea opens. Each day it is different. Scratched by currents, fastened with wind, like the face of Beckett or Auden, who sang that love is worth giving in to, for although it may deceive us, it is worth entering the river to know that we have lost something: "O plunge your hands in water, / Plunge them in up to the wrist; / Stare, stare in the basin / And wonder what you've missed." But maybe not all is lost. Perhaps, it is worth entering the water to find out what we would have lost if we had not entered it... And look, "look in the mirror, O look in your distress: / Life remains a blessing / Although you cannot bless." Is the face of the sea not our reflection? Flecked with rocky islands, skerries, mutons - intricate signatures, initials of a glacier that passed this way twenty thousand years ago. We can sail through such a speckled passage continuously from Stavanger to Nordkapp, just think. At other times the face of the sea is as smooth as the way back for the tired man missing home, homesick—that is. But who is he whose home is the sea, who longs for the sea? After all, we cannot call such a man seasick, can we?

But let's go back to the tip of the island. Today, the water resembles a Japanese woodcut, the wind carves it with a chisel. Algae sway with the rhythm of the waves like old Jews in a synagogue. Water is velvet, satin, a smooth animal. It is transparent, your shadow flows along the bottom with you, an aquatic doppelgänger. If swimming were a song, it would be of songs. If it were a dream, then the hard, short, intense dream into which we suddenly fall while on a tram for a quarter of an hour after a hard day. If it were a portrait, it would be Chaim Soutine's Lady in Blue, an image of a non-existent person, a portrait of a melancholy that haunted and “persecuted” him, like the Jews were persecuted in Tsarist Russia, where he was born. Banned from a community of Orthodox Jews who did not accept portraits after he had tried to paint a

rabbi. Rejected, misunderstood, he found a home in Paris like so many other Jewish painters from Eastern Europe. The lady in the portrait looks inward, into herself. Her eyes are the colors of her dress, of the background, of the colors of the seabed. They are an elegy, nostalgia, and a mystery. The Lady is holding the red poppies that have grown from her mouth, or it is her pursed lips that have taken the color from the poppies. If swimming were a landscape, it would be the Tuscan landscape that Piero della Francesca smuggled in, depicting John the Baptist pouring water over Christ's head from a river winding down the hills, reflecting the sky and the bright dresses of the figures in the background, almost faithfully. Piero della Francesca was an architect among painters, his figures are columns, vaults. Their complexion is marble. Piero was a mathematician and painter, scientist and artist. Each gesture is repeated, and each is an echo of the landscape. The bent leg in the Baptist's knee repeats the bend of the river, the folds of the garments align with the light roads running down the hills in the background. The dove over Christ's head is one of the clouds. The fresco seems to be symmetrical with the central figure of Christ. But with Piero, nothing is obvious and every symmetry is calculated, slightly shifted. Our master of the second plan attracts attention. He is the perfect counterpoint to the meandering of the river over which he leans down, taking off his shirt. He is wearing only underwear, we cannot see his face, leaning forward, pulling his shirt over his head as if he was about to submerge himself in the water, cleanse himself. "Take me to the water" sings Nina Simone "To be baptized".

Entering the water is giving yourself in. The water takes you to dance. The sun paints waves with gold. For a while, lying on the water, you turn into Danae. But maybe it is naivety, we have succumbed to the interpretation of Messrs. Titian and Rembrandt, who showed us Danae

welcoming Zeus under the guise of golden rain almost in exultation (Titian), and in curiosity, extending a hand in the gesture of invitation (Rembrandt). However, it is possible that today Danae would have joined the *me too* movement, fought for women's rights. She would accuse Zeus of rape, she would sue a god if there was a tribunal for the gods somewhere... Someone in the press would call him a narcissist, a chauvinist, and a megalomaniac. So maybe it is just Titian and Rembrandt's *ways of seeing*, as John Berger taught us, while it is yet about *ways of being*, the moment of existence. Nudity should be distinguished from Nude. Being from existence. Existence directed towards itself, as Heidegger would say, and not directed towards something, or perhaps nothing.

Norwegian summer is capricious, perhaps a huge fluffy tail of fog has covered the fjord. Or the falling rain kisses the water. The sea then electrifies and the salt water is not at all like wine, as the old sailor Herman Melville wanted (after Homer), but rather like vodka - it stirs the blood, hits hard to the head. But Melville was also right, wherever you are, any road will take you to the water. "Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever." [sic] The sea is an endless session of hypnosis. It is aberration and delight, relief and madness. "Nature is energy and struggle" tells us the same John Berger who taught us to look and see. The sea is not always beautiful or noble. It is an inscrutable potential of a terrifying force, an immeasurable source of permanent danger. Children in Dutch schools learn to swim fully clothed, just in case. The sea is democratic, it treats everyone the same, sometimes ruthlessly the same. So you must find shelter. "The first prayer is for protection. The first sign of life is pain." However, in this gloomy context of nature, Berger further comforts us, there is a possibility that we will encounter beauty. And it is a completely unexpected meeting, when the heart of the sea opens before us, when we rake it

aside with our arms. Pulling it out like a water jungle, we open the great, cavernous wardrobe of the sea, swimming forward, when the feathers of the forest surround us, when a grebe bobs up just before your face (its underwater itinerary will remain the greatest mystery for me forever). When at night, swimming on our backs under a starry sky, we are for a moment a reflection of the swan as we pass the colon of the moons. Maybe it is the same colon from the poem by Adam Zagajewski: "Swimming is like prayer" says the poet, who made friends with the Mediterranean Sea. Is this the prayer Berger recommends us? There is a refuge, a way to reconcile nature. Aquatic prayer is simple, "palms join and part, / join and part, / almost without end." (trans. C. Cavanagh).

However, you are not there. You are in your apartment, on the top floor, in a tower overlooking a small park. The only source of water is a fountain with sculptures of two boys - or are they the amors of socialist realism, Soviet guardian angels? One holds a turtle, the other a crocodile which spit water in summer. The sculptures have broken noses. Small, socialist realist sphinxes, poor in puzzles. There is a pandemic, we are all learning a new word: lockdown. I can't fall asleep at night and hear how young people refuse to let themselves be locked down, how their youth tells them to go out, run away, gather in the park around the fountain and, like in *Decameron*, drink, laugh, share stories. The back of one of the sculptures served as a "pillow book". Maybe the young boy captured the euphoria of his erotic conquests with red paint on it: "This baby belongs to me," he announced triumphantly. Although it is not known, perhaps it is a subtle litote, an ironic ode to the figures, because the author did not fail to adequately sign the parts of the body, that is, the bottom and the limbs, so that we have no illusions...

It's getting late, I can hear the rain hitting the roof, my only water blessing. Chasing the youth away from the park more effectively than the police, who are now circling the city, hunting for people who stand too close together or for those without masks. Once a masked man was dangerous, a veiled face meant he was hiding something, he had bad intentions. Today, the other way around. I am lying in the bedroom under a big map of Vestfjorden, a huge amount of water stained with the ink of the land, as if the glacier did not cross the terrain, but some large animal left traces of mud that dried. It did not occur only to me. The Lofoten archipelago takes its name from the lynx foot: "ló" in Old Norse means lynx, and "fótr" stands for foot. The neighboring island in the same archipelago, Flakstadøya, was previously called Vargfót, meaning "Wolf's Foot". But what am I doing here, me "Lady of the Sea"? Ibsen would laugh at me. Or Derek Mahon, who, paraphrasing the Norwegian playwright, put such a pathetic, mocking song in the lips of Lady of the Sea, the sea Lady Bovary: "Born in a lighthouse, I still find it hard / as wife to a doctor ten miles from the coast. / My home is a pleasant one but I get bored; / the mountains bother me." Indeed, it is very comfortable here in my safe cage. But what is life without water, without the sea?

However, the Sahara was once probably green, ten thousand years ago there was a huge beach that could possibly compete with Copacabana. It was an extensive structure of interconnected three meter shallow lakes with sand spits - a Palaeolithic lake. On the wall of a cave in the Jabal al-Uaynat mountain range in the Libyan Desert, there are rock paintings of swimmers. Perhaps they are not swimmers. Andras Zboray, looking through his archaeological magnifying glass at the paintings from seven thousand years ago, sees hunters floating in the air, following prey. They are only symbols, human stamps, not faithful drawings trying to represent reality, the

archaeologist says. The cave was discovered in the 1930s by László Almásy, a Hungarian count who fought in the hussars during World War I and was a spy during World War II. He witnessed the collapsing Austro-Hungarian Empire and discovered the "Cave of the Swimmers" during his desert explorations. László Almásy inspired Michael Ondaatje to write the famous novel *The English Patient*, but its main character is a pale shadow of our true protagonist. The English patient relates to a real count, like a Trotskyist to a real communist, as a *real* communist would say. Or like a Pewex shop in Communist Poland which accepted payment only in United States dollars (illegal then) and where, one could buy forbidden "Western" goods - compared to an embassy from an anecdote about a man who ran into Pewex one day in the People's Republic of Poland, jumped over the counter and asked for asylum.

There are some black and white photos preserved of the count. Tall, slim, in a leather jacket with a cigarette, a narrow, oblong face, hair slicked back, he could play alongside Greta Garbo in an old film. In another photo, I see him in a pilot hat with an obligatory cigarette, they seem to have been inseparable, he resembles Antoine Saint-Exupéry. In another, dressed like a Bedouin, he stands in the desert with a geodetic device looking like a Jewish bride. However, Almásy was a homosexual, he wrote passionate love letters to a German officer whom he wanted to save from fighting on the Russian front. He was also in love with the monarchy, he wanted the Habsburgs to return to the throne. He was like the protagonist of Agnieszka Holland's film "Europa, Europa". He sympathized with the Nazis, but was open, offered his services to the British, Italy, and the Soviets, his proposals though were rejected. The count received his title from Karl, the grandnephew of Emperor Franz Joseph, whom he helped get to Budapest in 1921 to rebuild the monarchy. Later, he would travel three thousand kilometers of desert sand on a captured British

Ford, along the oasis trail he remembered so well. Just like Ned Merrill, the protagonist of John Cheever's short story "The Swimmer", who at a party in a Connecticut suburb in the garden of an American middle-class healing itself from hangover and disenchantment with life, decides to "swim home" through all the pools in the neighborhood. Neddy, as old friends call him, in the pouring rain, cold and tired, reached his own house, now abandoned, where he must have been happy a long time ago with his wife and daughters, of whom there is no trace. Unlike our count, thanks to "sailing" along the "water holes", Operation SALAM (Almásy's anagram) was a success and Rommel's German spy, Hans Eppler, was able to set up German intelligence headquarters on a boat moored on the Nile. Ondaatje later explained that he was inspired to write the novel only by the count's desert passion, his investigative stubbornness, and desert mania. Bedouins were to ironically call him the Desert Father. Indeed, he lived almost as if according to one of the apophthegms: "A man who has death in front of his eyes will always overcome his own cowardice."

The rocky swimmers look like little red beetles, carefree, with large torsos and thin limbs raised upwards, like circus performers jumping from rope to rope. Their bent bodies, heads protruding forward, arms raking the water - they are aquatic harlequins, water pierrots, Giotto's diving angels. If the Etruscans could swim, instead of just lying, this is what they would look like in the water. The figures of the swimmers are made by a master, they reflect the neat movement of their bodies, the movement of the arms that disperse the water. They resemble the watercolors of the desert people of the Catalan painter Miguel Barceló. Subtle bodies, singing, flexible. After all, the word sea, old Latin *mare* comes from the Sanskrit "mar" meaning "to die", as sea meant a barren space devoid of vegetation. When was it filled with water?

I get an email from you, *almost* like a letter in a bottle, with photos of the lighthouse in the Lofoten archipelago. The lizards' and crocodiles' backs of the islands peek out of the water, the waves grow white beards, and the seagulls take the sky in quotation marks. You are like the sailor from Mahon's poem (after Ibsen's drama) who comes for his Sea Lady and tempts her: "come away with me / to the Spice Islands, the South Seas; anywhere. / Only the force of habit keeps you here." And, me stealing Mahon's verses, I could answer you: "Even up here, enclosed, I sniff the brine, / the open sea out there beyond the beach; / my thoughts are waves, my dreams are estuarine / and deeper than an anchor chain could reach." I joke that I am not afraid of lockdown or closed borders, that I will swim to you. Like Leander who swam through the Hellespont every night on the light of the lamp lit on the tower by his beloved Hero on the other side. The beautiful Hero was reserved for the goddess Aphrodite as a temple assistant, hence the lovers kept their water romance a secret. As we know, it did not end happily: Hero either overslept and did not light the lamp, or the lamp extinguished and Leander drowned in the sea during the winter, and the despairing Hero jumped into the water after him. Byron was so inspired by their story that he also decided to cross the strait, though he needed neither a mistress nor a lamp light. The American Richard Henry Dana Jr. must have known this mythological story well. Before becoming a lawyer and politician in Massachusetts, he enlisted in a brig called Pilgrim, nomen omen, and, as Melville claims, he masterfully described Cape Horn in *Two Years Before the Mast*, presumably with an icicle in his hand instead of a pen. From this book comes the anecdote about the cook on the ship who became so attached to his sow, "Old Bess", who had stayed aboard the vessel all the first months of the voyage, that after the sow had been taken ashore in San Diego, the cook "could hardly have been more attentive, for he actually, on several

nights, after dark, when he thought he would not be seen, sculled himself ashore in a boat with a bucket of nice swill, and returned like Leander from crossing the Hellespont."

But what does this myth actually tell us? Is it just one of the many unhappy love stories? Is Leander reckless or heroic (though so grotesque in his heroic act of proving his love for Hero)? Is it far from two Syrian young men - Hesham Modamani and Feras Abukhalil, who managed to swim to the Greek island of Chios from the Turkish village of Cesme? Modamani was supposed to tell afterwards how he felt terror, how cold he was, but as night fell and he looked up, he saw a starry sky, he felt that "they must be one of the few who experienced something so rare." Indeed, hardly anyone decides to flee from the regime of their own country's dictator by swimming. Has their story become a myth? For the Greeks, the myth was a story about divinity, about a divine element in the world, that is, a break in reality, a moment of increased awareness, or maybe a beautiful story explaining our mortality?

Roberto Calasso, one of the most outstanding contemporary connoisseurs of myth, writes in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* that this moment is not just about self-knowledge but is also about aesthetics. And, "the first enemy of aesthetics is meaning". A myth is an aesthetic story, an interpretation of a creative act between horror and beauty. The beauty experience is not deprived of meaning, but it is not necessary and does not run first to the finish line - if only we could imagine how different levels of experience compete against each other in a marathon. It is possible that poetry, a creative act that does not need to adapt to the needs of the market and society, would win. Poetry and swimming have no purpose as such. We may choose to swim from Cesme to Chios or via Hellespont, but the very act of swimming, the experience of

swimming, is a creative act that makes us realize both beauty and mortality. There is a kind of longing for the absolute moment in both of them, it is a resistance to external force.

Each creative act, according to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, resists something. His thought is recalled by Giorgio Agamben, who does not fully agree and looks for a hint from Aristotle, who, as we know, introduces the concept of potentiality and actuality into philosophy. Anyone who has the potential for a certain creative act may or may not fulfill this act - thanks to Aristotle's generosity, all poets can still call themselves poets, although most of the time they do not write at all, only go to demonstrations and protest against *some* politicians, are late to work, lose their wallets, and argue with their lovers. But potentially they are still poets, potentially they can still write a poem, maybe even a good poem as they would wish. Hence, Agamben concludes, and let us lean into his insight, each creator exists in both potentiality and impotentiality. Each ability is confirmed by its lack, *via negativa*. Each person is a potential and an impotential of possibilities.

But how does this impotentiality become actuality? To resist, "resisto" or "sisto" in Latin, means to stop something, to hold back, and also to stand still. We have the potential and the strength to stop something. "It means," helps us understand further Agamben "that to be a poet means to be fully and helplessly delivered to one's own impotentiality, this is a poet: A man who is completely abandoned to its impotentiality. (...) [T]he resistance of the potentiality-not-to, inscribes itself as an inner mannerism always present in every true artwork, every true masterwork." The creative act would therefore be something that exceeds the creator himself. Poetry says what it says, what it potentially was meant to say, and something else that was not its

intention, but rather its impotentiality. The contemplation and inoperativity of man, as Agamben wants, is the metaphysical factor that makes human a human. The poem thus becomes a contemplation of language. Calasso adds that there is no single definitive definition of poetry and that every poetic act requires a creator, his voice and a divine element, meaning a breach, a moment of beauty, a moment of delight in the world of horror and disorder. The moment when two Syrian refugees, swimming across the Aegean Sea, see the starry sky above them. The etymology of the Norwegian word sea - "hav" - refers us to the proto-Indo-European "*keh₂p-", meaning to lift, seize. It can be the cold of the water that seizes us, or the wave that lifts, grasps and presses us, and it can be us who, while swimming, can also "seize" the sea.

P.S. Dear Eva, please don't turn off the light of the lighthouse there on the island of the Lofoten archipelago.