

*WHY DOES*

*SHE*

*CRY SALTY TEARS  
WHILE*

*HE*

*TOUCHES  
THE SEA*

*JENNÝ MIKAELSDÓTTIR*

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## PROLOGUE

*For you, the reader*

In order to understand where a fascination towards sea swimming comes from, you need to get an insight into my culture and upbringing. Parents still together, healthy and motivated, they urged all their children to play sports. I tried every teamsport available in my neighbourhood. Swimming was the one that stuck. Well, until it became obvious that I was not in it to win it. Medals and prizes meant nothing to me. I swam for my own joy and to see my friends outside of school.

During my regular visits down the hill to my grandparents, my grandma would ask me why I quit swimming. I would never have a clear answer for her, but she kept pushing. She continued to tell me I was one of the best and shouldn't have quit. Something shifted when my mom started swimming in 10 degree sea. My grandma would focus on questioning that activity. She would always say that she would never in a million years do that herself. Even though she came from a small village in the east right by the sea, she was crystal clear in her refusal. I never dared questioning my grandma why she was encouraging me to keep swimming but displaying fear when faced with swimming in the sea.

So, this goes back generations.

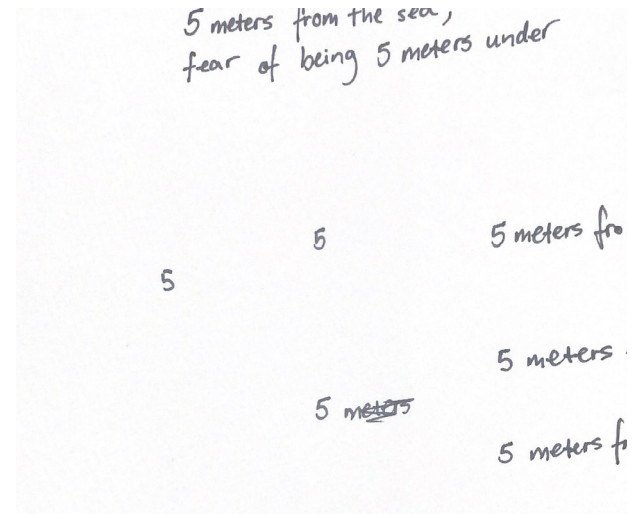
To my grandma, who I was named after, Jenný.

Now you know mine, what's your name?

And most importantly, do you fear the sea?

I asked her...  
It's the fear.

You should also know that swimming is what we do... I mean as Icelanders, this is what connects us. Still, I know both of my grandmas don't or at least avoid it. We were all taught young, we all had to learn aid swim, where you hold on to each other in case someone needs to be rescued. So why aren't they swimming? Might be the fear of it. I have noticed a pattern of people near me fearing the sea, they won't touch it or even go near it. Though I had this swimming experience as a kid, it only became clear to me why people were forming groups to meet at seafronts to have a little swim later on in life. The vision was clear, but I did not fully understand.



## INTRODUCTION

Writing, swimming, floating, that is what I will be doing for this period of time. You're welcome to spend your time here navigating through these words. As you read through my words, I invite you to join me on this journey.<sup>1</sup>

To the north, there are tales to be told, to the south, there's a sense of community, to the east, there are rituals to be discovered, and to the west, there's saltwater waiting to be explored. With these directions, together we won't get lost in an ocean full of information.

To move forward I need to spur out my thoughts in every direction, don't be afraid of it. Fear is the fuel of this investigation. It all started as a trigger, or a desire to understand how my mother feared the sea for decades, then later finding herself regularly swimming in it.

<sup>1</sup> I hope the compass as a table of content will guide you in the right direction.

Let's take a deep breath

i i i i i i i i i i n  
out  
i i i i i i i i i n  
out

and dive right in.

Unfold layers of human interactions with their environment, specifically to water and the sea. It has for a long time been a place of mystery. Mentioning the sea becomes geographical, rather than the general idea of cold water. So touching upon my heritage will be needed to give context or motivation to investigate a sea swim. There's a small island up in the North Atlantic Ocean, maybe you have heard of it, it has become famous for its regular eruption of volcanoes and explicit untouched nature. It's an island, surrounded by sea. With a strong swimming culture that's visible in the heated swimming pools, made for habitats to rest and unwind. I have noticed a shift of recent acknowledgment of being in cold water. Whether it's "dipping", "cold shower", "ice baths" or "cold sea swim". These phrases are not bound to location. But it's critical to know that Iceland is a place where you need to make a friend with the cold to survive the dark, cold winter months. When making a friend of the cold air, how did we end up thinking about going into cold water? The thought of it does come with more force, discomfort even and mental power to prepare the body. You can try to control your body but it's harder to control the cold water, even harder when talking about a big natural force that the sea is. It's a place of constant change and movement, and it can inspire us to see the world in new ways and explore our own limits.

Finding comfort in nature itself, regardless of outside so-

cietal pressures.<sup>2</sup> To the power of nature to bring people together and foster a shared sense of purpose and belonging.

It sparks my curiosity when people who actively go sea swimming have days they don't go. Being a critique of binary oppositions. Considering the body, nature, environment, the unknown. Fear could be a biproduct of the unknown, the sea as a place where most of its part has not yet to be explored fully. With a great distance yet to be mapped out and even seen. Taking it as a matter in advance that invites us to navigate with our senses; with what we see, what we hear, what we feel. By finding examples of how visual artist have dealt with natural forces in their works. And ask ourselves:

Can we be in the sea or is it not for us to be in?

SPUR OF THE MOMENT FOR TEN MINUTES IN  
DEN HAAG, SEPTEMBER

We were by the sea, after the swim she started leaking. Not only from period blood, there were also salty tears running from her cheek. From an outer perspective this was beautiful. Imagine this scenery. Blue sky is turning red pink, the sun is setting so it creates this beautiful golden light on my friend's face. I didn't want to stare, so I gazed at the waves, noticed she did too. There was a calm in the noise the waves made while it hit down not only in the sound but also in the moving blues. Taking a peek on her face I noticed heavier tears; no words were needed. These were clearly tears of pain. We shared this space, a place that offered a moment in silence with the loud waves. I find that the waves make you leak, sometimes it makes it even unbearable to hide so you gotta let it out in some way or another. Salty tears are what stuck with me. If we would have dived right in, the tears would've blended in, with salt water.

"I'm too sad to tell you" is a title of a mixed media artwork by a Dutch conceptual artist, Bas Jan Ader made in the 1970s. A man who found it difficult to verbalise his own feelings, so he made an artwork visualising it.

It includes photographs, a silent film and a postcard to a friend. The film is in black and white and goes for three minutes of his face tearing up, crying. It's all silent. That adds mystery yet a concern. What is behind his tears is an appearing question while watching it. He made sure to withhold that information away from the viewer. A bigger element plays a role and it's his intense sadness.<sup>3</sup> That becomes visible in his eyes, facial expression and movement. This film being black and white also adds to the sadness touch. A lot of his works were left unsaid and then forgotten, leaving it up to us to fill in the blanks.<sup>4</sup> More so in his final work. For his attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean in the smallest boat ever at the time, named Ocean Wave. More on that in chapter Tales.



Figure 1. Bas Jan Ader, *I'm too sad to tell you*, 1970. Photographs.

<sup>3</sup> Doyle, *Hold it against me*, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Daalder, *Here is always somewhere else*.

Looking into the fascinating and mysterious element of the sea that has captivated human beings for centuries. It surrounds us, when there's more water than land on the Earth you would think it cannot be overlooked. At any time, you can be faced with the sea so therefore people have stories about it. There's nothing new to want to write about the sea. When it's so dominant in our environment. So enormous that's too hard to grasp. Poets have tried, scientists have also, it's a motive that touches many. The sea is not just a physical element that surrounds us, but it also has a deep emotional and spiritual connection with us. It represents the depths of our subconscious mind and our innermost feelings. We try to understand. Because all roads lead back to water and we shall return to the sea. How although looking at how our ancestors are reproduced in the watery womb of our mother, so it is chemically related to it; the sea and mother. First sound heard was touch of the waters.<sup>5</sup> We cannot ignore the fact we do have relationship with water from early age on. It continues through our adult life. Gets even bigger when faced with life challenges, water or the sea can be a great solution to find the rhythm again. In the sea the rhythms are many; a wave performing rhyme as the same as pattern of heart and lung. Corresponding to each other, it seems so obvious that we need the sea to slow down. Nothing is set in stone - everything is fluid and flows.

<sup>5</sup> Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 15-28.





Figure 2. "Voir la mer" by Sophie Calle. © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris 2022. Image source: <https://www.sophiecal-le.com/voir-la-mer-2011>.

Istanbul in Turkey is surrounded by salty water, which means that the locals have daily interactions with it. However, this belief was challenged by conceptual artist and writer Sophie Calle. By finding people in the area of Istanbul that had never seen the sea. She managed to find diverse people willing to participate in her experiment, not bound to age; as seen as young girl to an old man. There were more, or about 15 selected. Their first time was captured on film. She filmed them from behind, separately, they face the sea so at first only the backside shows and then slowly turn around facing the camera, where true emotions become visible. Depth in their eyes tells a lot.

When taking their picture she chooses to only show the subject's backside as photographs. That is an interesting decision because many feelings are left out in the process of the film. What makes this artwork so strong is the subject's subtle first reaction. As the French title suggests "Voir la mer"<sup>6</sup> you cannot help but wonder what they are feeling in the moment. This work was also installed in Times Square. The opposite of what the sea brings, there's never a calm moment on Times Square. It's usually filled up with people, mainly tourists. She emphasised in many interviews that unlike most people who take part in her projects, these people were very poor. Calle makes her best work by finding unique moments to share. Her observation mixed with investigation on human relationships, which often confronts complex issues in a simple manner. It gives a different atmosphere to only look at the photographs. Where the back of each person is only shown. A space to imagine, to think, most of us has stood at this threshold before. Our point of view is from standing land, looking into infinity that the sea provides. The long distance between the body and the unknown creates a sense of wonder; this work made me think for days. How could one not see the sea is still beyond my wonder. In a way this is in fact a privileged matter.

6 The French title translates to "see the sea"

“To be at sea”

is an idiom from English language. It suggests that you’re confused about something.<sup>7</sup> Twisting some words around it could be better to be in the sea than at it. But what does it really mean to be in it?

### *A SALTY COMPANION*

The changing relationship between the geography of water and our own emotional and physical needs is worth exploring. Intertwined are our human and natural environments and they seem to be interacting all the time. When it’s focused on watery places there are many, rivers, lakes and while writing that I’m listening to a playlist filled with water sounds, inside my home. It does a trick on the brain – the focus comes in handy and I can imagine I have a salty companion. It being the sea, finding it as a place to slow down and feel at peace with one another. Things start to run smoother in a liquidy space where everything flows. We have created modern terms, correlating to our need to be connected in the present moment and connected with others. We shall call it a ‘bluespace’<sup>8</sup>. Nowadays the need to find one has never been so urgent. The body and mind calls for it when under stress. The longing to be near watery spaces makes me think if people were more in touch with nature and their elements back in

7 Neimanis, “We Are All at Sea,” podcast episode.

8 See the book Bluespace, term used to describe the watery places in our world; it offers us opportunity to get in touch with our bodies, pause for a moment and reconnect with present moment. In the present of the sea, we are invited to just be.

the days, than we are today, if it’s so rooted in us now to construct these spaces. It’s popping up as a thought I have while in the sea, swimming or looking through archives, or reading. In today’s world there seems to be no room to imagine anymore, we are fed with information all the time. We are constantly being watched or we assume that we are being watched and this idea comes from a French philosopher Foucault. Panopticon<sup>9</sup>; we don’t get a break from the “higher man” watching us and he represents this notion within the prison system. The goal of it is to give the inmates the idea of they are constantly being watched. Even though one prison guard cannot keep an eye of all of them. The structure would be a tower in the middle and only one guard in it watching over the surrounded cells. This is what holds the theory valuable because sometimes there would be no guard watching over. So the illusion of the guard becomes the feeling of being watched and therefore we behave. Why I mention this is because the sea gives room for the opposite. There’s no guard, no cameras, no tower, for you as a human being to be in the sea. For sure we have it for boats coming into the port, in dark there’s a Lighthouse guiding the way but it’s tricky when you are in the sea with no infrastructure. We are allowed to enter the seas – our bodies are free in there to float, swim and be. It can allow you as a person to break free from social worries or responsibilities. Therefore, it’s also a great place to disappear into. Much like Bas Jan Ader, we are not going there with him. We cannot overlook the fact it has been a place for some to escape, whether it’s their

9 Foucault, Discipline and Punish.

lives or countries. Let's say it's a place for being free but at the same time it's a place for an unknown endpoint. It will hold unspeakable mysteries and respectfully we will leave it there.

How do you see the sea?

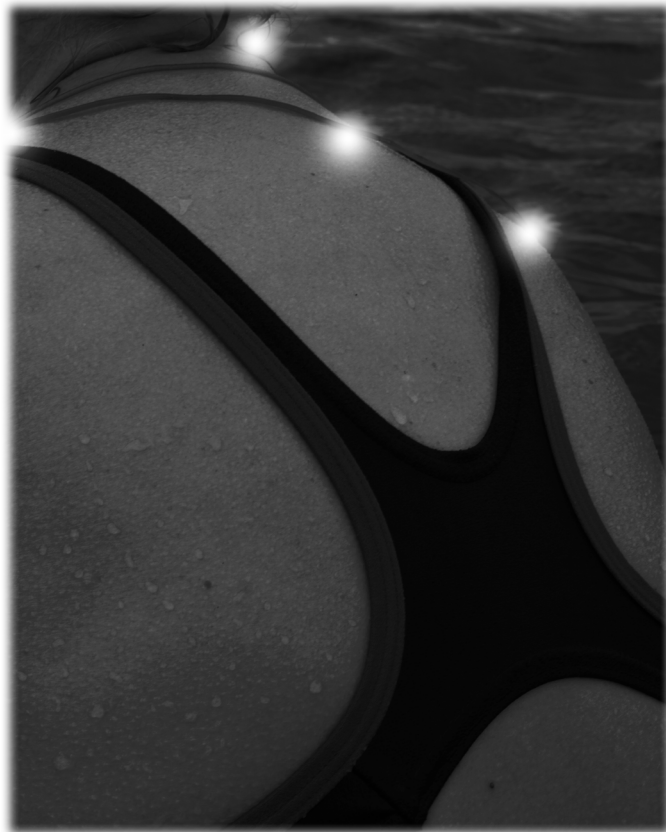
deep

vast

cold.

*SELECTION OF GRADUATION WORK*





[S] COMMUNITY  
50°49'50.8'' N

SPUR OF THE MOMENT FOR TEN MINUTES IN  
HASTINGS, ENGLAND.

Who protects whom  
while in the water  
the cold will hold you by your throat  
the community will give you a lifeline.

I got introduced to a sea swimming group the first week during my 10 weeks stay in St. Leonards-on-Sea, a small town, part of Hastings on the south coast of England. It's a universal thing to want to be part of a group in a new foreign place (I think). So, I joined in, early spring morning, for a really cold swim. How they talked about the sea made me excited, vocabulary not so familiar to me. Told with an amazing British accent and to be read with it as well: "Low tide, brings the rocks, high tide gives the best waves...". To be honest it was too wavy for me and indescribably cold that made us scream. So to guess I didn't last long in the sea like the others, but staying in one of their beach huts for a hot tea and sharing this experience was truly uplifting. One of the girls had brought the book 'Why we swim' by Bonnie Tsui. So of course, I noted it down in my endless reading list, to read later. And wow... when I read it, it covered a lot

*of my heritage, Icelandic swimming history. What I took out of it is the survival tale. How a man swam through impossible conditions for so long and survived it. Scientists have studied him and called him a miracle. This Icelandic sailor did not drown as other members of the ship when it was sinking, instead he swam in the ice-cold sea. Outstanding our body's ability to be in it for so long. He was called a seal as his skin mimicked it, a seal for not getting injured or getting hypothermia. Maybe we are moving towards having abilities as a seal... Looking at our species, mankind. It's no doubt to say we are land mammals. Therefore we have not been developed enough to be in water. Creatures that swim can teach us one or two tricks on how to navigate it. Still the need to be in it has taught us that we can learn to be in it, with swimming lessons, we can now stay above the surface.*

## *THE COLD FORMING COMMUNITIES*

Now, this specific location I mentioned above provides space for individuals to gather and collectively agree to swim as a group in the sea. Forming a small community of likeminded people. How I see the group forming by the seafront; Desire to conquer what we fear the most, individually and come together. It is a form of trust between people and the sea. What people seem to have in common and is written so loud on them is their love for the sea. When you have so much love, there's less space for fear. In a sense it's hard to control the fear instead we let go and face it. It's also hard to control the sea, impossible even. It's in constant circulation – never taking a break. Today there's this guy who everyone brings up when I talk about sea swimming, his name is Wim Hof, a Dutch guy better known as 'the Iceman'. He invented the 'Wim Hof method' which consists of three pillars: cold exposure, breathing exercises and meditation. To be completely honest his way of breathwork is not ideal for everyone, it should be approached with caution. From a first hand experience, trying it made me hyperventilate. It is the unnatural breathing that doesn't fit my liking. Involving extreme practices of prolonging the stay in the cold, testing endurance with this long exposure in cold water. A recipe that can go wrong pretty quickly. There's still an element in his method that I admire, the element of community building; with what looks like one common goal, that is to conquer the cold. So the cold is a factor of creating communities. Interacting in low temperature



with only one layer of clothing (most likely a swimsuit) will get the heart pumping and the blood running in a way that people have described to feel alive again. When the watery fluid is cold and touches the bare skin there will be a reaction – visible in goosebumps, redness to name a few common things on the skin. For these reasons feeling of discomfort is normal. No one in the sea swimming group guarantees comfort in the act of swimming or dipping in. It's rather the feeling that comes afterwards that is most spoken of and draws people to it. I have been having conversations with sea swimmers as a method of researching, it can equally tell you a lot of information as in reading an insightful book... Having those conversations in the communities is what keeps me excited and real throughout here. It has become a working method of mine to observe the act. Usually with my digital camera around my neck. By accident while having a conversation with one of St. Leonards regular sea swimmer, my camera was recording. You can get a better grip of the dialogue by reading through here.

He will remain anonymous as speaker 2 and my friend and I are speaker 1...

00:00:06

Speaker 1: How was the swim?

00:00:08

Speaker 2: Yeah. Yeah, it's lovely it's picking up. Yeah.

00:00:14

Speaker 1: Should get a move on, then.

00:00:15

Speaker 2: Yeah, exactly. Get a move on. Get in there... because you never know. That's from yesterday. It was too. Too wavy. Really.

00:00:24

Speaker 1: ...Jenný is doing a thesis... about it. Like, if the sea is meant for us to be in or not?

00:00:35

Speaker 2: Good question. That's a very good question. I ask myself that a lot.

00:00:39

Speaker 1: Yeah?

00:00:40

Speaker 2: I'm on my own. A lot.



00:00:41  
Speaker 1: Okay.

00:00:41  
Speaker 2: Down to  
about a mile down there,  
the other side of the pier.  
And sometimes I think if  
the sea is supportive of  
my getting into it. Or is it  
saying, What the fuck are  
you doing here? Get out.  
Yeah. Sometimes I feel  
like he's kicking me out,  
and sometimes I feel like  
he's inviting me in.  
00:00:59

Speaker 1: Yeah.  
00:01:00

Speaker 2: And some-  
times I feel really like a  
part of it.

00:01:02  
Speaker 1: Yeah.

00:01:03  
Speaker 2: And I'm  
like, I'm just this... And  
I have conversations  
with it where I feel that

I am. I am meant to be  
here, and I'm just part of  
nature. And other times  
I feel like, Oh, that's all  
this stuff behind, which is  
so not part of nature on  
the surface. Anyway, at  
least I feel like I'm part of  
that and I'm imposing this  
natural world. So I think  
it's for me, it's a personal  
thing that changes on a  
daily basis.

...

00:04:05  
Speaker 2: And so I  
spend a lot of time filming  
the sea. I spend hours  
filming it, and sometimes  
it must be very, very  
boring for other people to  
look at. But I get sucked  
in.

00:04:18

Speaker 1: Wow, good  
catch!

00:04:19  
Speaker 2: Wow. Yeah  
a fish!

00:04:28  
Speaker 1: Sorry to cut  
you off.

00:04:29  
Speaker 2: No, no, no.  
I'm just saying I love  
filming this sea. Because  
every... every time you  
look at it, it's different. It's  
noticed all those nuances  
and subtle changes. But  
maybe other people don't  
pick up on. But you get  
attuned to it when you  
live by it.  
...And when you swim  
in it.

00:04:48  
Speaker 1: Today, it  
looks a bit like it's melted

00:04:51  
Speaker 2: Yeah. Yeah.  
We're saying it's like  
lead.

00:04:53  
Speaker 1: Yeah.  
Lead. Yeah.

00:04:56  
Speaker 2: I love that  
scene. Yeah. It's kind of  
silvery moonlight, almost,  
it looks like to me.

00:07:08  
Speaker 2: Yeah. Anyway.  
Well, you should get in  
there now.

00:07:12  
Speaker 1: Yeah, I  
should.

I resonate with the man, speaker 2 from the conversation. It made sense that he thinks that some days he feels like he's not invited to go into the sea. Where he sees it changing daily. It truly does something to us to be near the sea, even living nearby it offers constant inspiration. He says that others could find it boring to watch his recordings of the sea. Made me wonder for myself, if that's the case then what's the point of following our passion... our inspirations. If we would listen to these comments, people's judgements, we wouldn't do it. Rather shift our focus for listening in to our exciting heartbeat and waves that follow it. Tune in with what excites us and proceed with it.

Funny to look back. How I found my passion at the beach. I collected shells in the same manner I'm now collecting stories on the seafront. During a field trip in The Hague as part of the study, in the beginning of the pandemic in 2019, I created a project called "The world is my mussel." I explained it as; using photography as a tool, collecting as a method my aim is to understand how I can reflect my emotions to natural objects. While walking on the beach, collecting mussels I simultaneously collect my thoughts. I wonder why these mussels are empty. Eager to bring them to life. To be alive is to feel alive. They become a reflection of feelings such as happiness, sadness, playfulness and loneliness. In this work, I give the mussel a new value, my emotional value... Looking at it now helped me understand my fascinations towards natural elements that the sea brings to us. Forming a relationship with the environment. I brought my shell findings in a photo studio and constructed images as if I was speaking to them. How would they want to be photographed as if they had human-like feelings. Depending on the mood, some were situated in bright light and others in the dark. It came down to figuring out a storyline. Something I continuously do, today, I want to tell stories of sea swimmers and belong to their community. Admiring them from a distance as well as up close. Maybe back then I wanted to belong to the community of seashells, I just didn't know how to verbalise it.

we come to the beach as kids,  
tiny world filled with shiny shells  
inviting for small fingers.

When fingers grow longer  
Do we stop picking up these  
small fragments of the world?

I come to the beach now, older than yesterday  
to seek thrill  
for my body, my fingers,  
to shock it  
with cold sea.

I don't pay much more attention to  
the shells I share the landscape with.  
Rather forced to notice them when my feet  
step on them, how they break and  
make a cracking sound - stealing  
my attention for a split moment.



## *A PLACE THAT BECOMES PART OF YOU*

Thinking again about those in-between spaces to be in a limbo. In relation of belonging, I don't know for sure where to be at the moment. I have my foot in multiple places, that I resonate with. I find this uncertainty rather beautiful. It allows space to wonder. I figured for me; all these places have in common are being next to the sea. To a point where I think the sea has become a part of me. It calms my mind when I'm near it. Genuinely think I'm most myself when I see it, hear it or feel it.

If you can, I would like to challenge you to go near the shore and observe sea swimmers. Try to find a person not smiling after their swim. I promise it's going to be a challenge. My observations have led me to the thought of how it affects our mood. There's this idea how being in or near water can make us more connected, calm us and they named it 'blue mind'<sup>10</sup>. A meditative state of mind that helps to reduce stress and anxiety. It's even argued that our brains are "hardwired" to respond positively to water. The attention towards well-being and how to be in sync with our bodies and mind. What can trigger this syncretizations is to be fully absorbed by an activity and there you can find the sweet spot, the notion of being in a flow.<sup>11</sup> So looking at the act of sea swimming from a flow perspective where they are totally absorbed into the activity and therefore nothing else matters in that moment. They

<sup>10</sup> Kelly, Blue Spaces.

<sup>11</sup> Idea explained by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Hungarian psychologist and introduced in the book 'why we swim'.

would do it again and again, even at great cost, ignoring the danger of the act for the sake of doing the thing that brings out the flow. It's a momentary state and one must find the motion and stillness at the same time to experience it.

Being in a flow sounds lovely, don't you think? So we might as well ask ourselves will the water absorb me or resist?

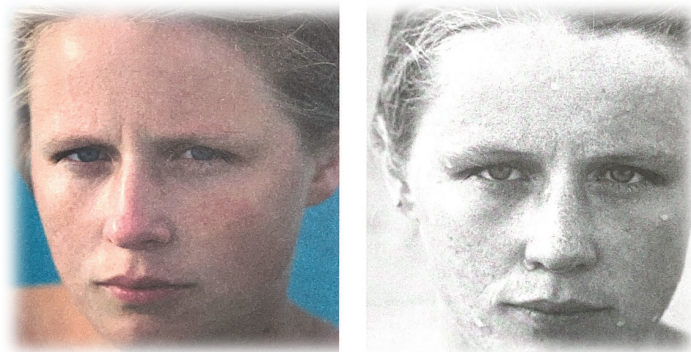


Figure 3. "You're the weather" by Roni Horn.

Reflecting on photography as another state of being in a flow. I see it as where things are physically present in the space, the environment, the people, the objects and it can be played with, rearranged, constructed and when the light hits just right, I pick up my camera. Sharing

a space with these things allows creation to exist. Roni Horn's work is a good example of this 'flow' approach to photography. By focusing on a single subject (a woman's face) and using the changing weather and water as a backdrop, she is able to create a series of images that capture the fluidity of our existence in relation to our environment. "You are the weather" said Roni Horn an American visual artist and writer, as a title for her photo-book published in 1997. She created a body of work in different waters in Iceland. Where the subject was always the same woman, for over 100 images we see close ups of her face. The repetition of the same subject in different conditions allows us to notice the subtle changes that occur over time, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to the details in our surroundings.<sup>12</sup> The weather changes from photo to photo, with the weather the water also changes. Therefore, the woman's facial expression changes. Roni says with this project we are changeable as the environment changes. It's brilliant yet so simple to use this person's face as a place. Roni's connection to Iceland is also significant, as it shows how a sense of place can inform and inspire an artist's work. Her experience of living in a lighthouse for six weeks on the south coast of Iceland is a testament to the power of isolation and connection to nature in the creative process. By being tuned in to the sea and focused on her writing, she was able to tap into a deeper sense of creativity and inspiration. In a sense her work reminds us of the importance of being present in the moment and attuned to our surroundings,

12 Voorlinden, Highlight Voorlinden.

as well as the potential for art to capture the essence of our experience in relation to the natural world.

Artists based in Nordic countries have a sense of the climate, how they approach it and work with it. Photographer with Nordic blood like myself, is Elina Brotherus from Finland. Her photographic practice is evolved around situating herself in different environments to make visual discoveries. Time and space play an important role in them, as well her female figure. By situating herself in different environments, she allows herself to discover new visual perspectives and create a unique narrative. It's also interesting how she uses her own body as a key element in her images, often in subtle ways, which adds a personal and intimate touch to her work. She's not afraid of being in the cold. As we see her lying on a rock in a snowy landscape with only a shirt on. "The long coastline of Norway winds in and out of fjords, between the mountains, snow, sea, forest and rocks. 'Seabound' describes how Elina felt constantly drawn back to the sea throughout her journey."<sup>13</sup> The Nordic climate and environment can be challenging, but it's impressive how Brotherus is not afraid of working in cold temperatures and utilizing the snow and rocks to create beautiful and striking images. Her work seems to reflect a deep respect and appreciation for the natural world, and her exploration and curiosity towards nature are evidence of it.

13 Kynoch, "Visual artist tours."

The approach of artists like Roni and Elina, highlights how the natural world, specifically the sea and climate inspires their work. By being present in the moment and paying attention to the details around. It can remind us how our environment shapes our creativity and wellbeing.



Figure 4. "Seabound" by Elina Brotherus.





Figure 5. "Seabound" by Elina Brotherus.

The water becomes a nest for people in Nordic countries. Growing up there, there's no denying it becomes a part of you. So maybe it's no surprise some of us feel the need to swim in open waters... How do you navigate the sea? We are held by the community – and also the water. In a sense we are all bodies of water. Looking at the connection between being at sea and learning to swim and learning to float or learn to become a whale. Navigate with different kinds of compasses and with different senses of gravity. Constant movement, it never rests. As long as the sea is there it will forever teach us something. We are not so different from one another, and it can tell us that many things are similar. Take a break from looking at things so black and white, if we are the same or different. We can all enter it as a space that will hold you. It will hold the memory of you. We can take from it that we share many things with others. So seeing this from the perspective of ourselves, we as watery beings are less as isolated entities and more as oceanic eddies.<sup>14</sup> Seeing this through this lens can help us feel at place and belonged.

What Andri wrote on time and water: We must be reminded that we belong. For in the skins of our loved ones is the very soul of the world. Connections through these landscapes. Our survival depends on it, we cannot isolate ourselves, there's a human need to come together as individuals and form groups together. In his storytelling, he makes a clear connection on landscapes, and cultures, across generations. It stresses the importance of being

<sup>14</sup> Neimanis, "We Are All at Sea," podcast episode.



aware of the role of culture and community in shaping our sense of identity and belonging. He suggests that our relationships with our loved ones and the broader community are important to our understanding of who we are and our place in the world. The importance of seeing how dependent we are on delicate networks in our landscapes for our survival. They are not only physical, but also social and cultural, and we must come together as individuals and groups to ensure their continued health.

I liked the isolated... community... At sea the crew is collectively alone and that's your whole world... (limbo)

SPUR OF THE MOMENT FOR TWENTY FIVE  
MINUTES IN DEN HAAG, AUGUST.

My mom told me over the phone that she has not always been fond of the sea. This came as a surprise, because I have always looked at her as a mermaid. Every summer she would tell me to join her for a sea swim. It wasn't until I hit rock bottom, I considered it. I guess that's when you're willing to try anything to make things better. No matter how ridiculous it sounds, you will try anything even when the act in question is voluntarily being ice cold. The rock bottom you may ask? I won't go in depth, but it corresponds to living during Covid times with anxiety. Loss of social interactions leading to fear of being outside. For a photography project I kept a visual diary through these times. It still hurts to look at. There's one page more painful than others. It's recollecting thoughts of when I was last outside. Counting to 4 weeks. This is no joke. I didn't go outside my front door for so many weeks. Time was blurry and it's hard to remember that this is how it was. My visuals/images hold the memory of it. So when I could travel again, I went back home to Iceland. There was a moment; when I couldn't even walk up a mountain without rising heartbeat and

longing for air; then I really noticed something was off with my body and mind. That I thought I needed to address this to my mom. My mental health was so bad it was getting in the way of enjoying my favourite thing, walking up a mountain. Breathing was the obstacle, and it was becoming a chore to keep up with a regular breath instead of the fast, almost a panicking breath. Not breathing in, nor out as we are meant to do so easily.

So when I couldn't be up high.  
I asked mom to take me low

...To the sea, she had brought special gloves and socks. With the explanation that hands and feet are known of becoming the first part of your body reacting to the cold. As in you feel it first there (I should fact check this). So when that's covered what is left and needed is for the mind to be wired right. Being there, faced with nature so much bigger than yourself. To be honest I was afraid, not of the cold, but of losing control of my breath. Grasp for air. Against my bodily signals of discomfort, it got easier, each time going deeper than before, then achieving the goal of swimming in the waves. I had to keep my mind busy and breathe on track. I was

screaming numbers out loud. A tactic my mom told me to do. Going "einn...tveir...þrír...fjórir"<sup>15</sup> and so on counting to twenty. I remember it being extremely cold that it felt almost natural to be screaming. Followed with movements of my hand taking the wave in its palm. Palm full of waves. Conquering the fear; and pushing the body further from land. I see now that the open sea held me.

(In a similar way that my mom used to hold me as a kid.)

side note: During my visit back home. I spend most of my time in the sea.  
on a good day it's about 13 °C

<sup>15</sup> one, two, three, four, in Icelandic

"In the arts, to 'break boundaries' is virtuous to the point of cliché. Some rejoice at this whilst others entrench in fear. New, stronger partitions are called for by those scared of change and what they do not wish to understand."<sup>16</sup>

The longing to be upside down. In that way it offers to see the world from unusual angles. Even to be more open for new perspectives. So let's talk about it. We are so comfortable in our little routines that we forget to challenge ourselves with discomfort, in how we act. When the act has a repetition, it becomes a ritual. Looking at it in a way that it can be divided in three parts; body, mind and spiritual. With that in mind tuning in and switching off, can be done in water. Connecting mind and body with rituals. To align with yourself again.  
Following the rhythms of the tide;  
following the rhythms of the moon.

Have you tried to count the waves?

<sup>16</sup> Fox, Dan. Limbo.

## OBSERVATION

Standing on the shore, watching sea swimmers prepare for their dip or swim. It's hard to pinpoint what type of persons are here - there's no stereotype – the sea doesn't ask for your age or to look in a certain way. Preparation starts with a little small chat, then stripping off clothes, with swimsuits underneath, clothes are scattered all over the beach. People walk slowly towards the sea. A moment of doubt where they stand awkwardly on the shoreline recognising how strong the waves are. An interesting moment to observe. The body keeps the evidence of their thought process. They jump or crawl down, a dancing fight of overcoming the fear of getting in. As if they were birds preparing to spread their wings and fly. I watch them watching the waves. This tiny moment of actually getting in, is probably the biggest thing. While in the water, either swimming or floating they become a reflection of light. They are the shadows of the waves. How deep does the light actually reach... They are carried by the wave, going up and down, swimming follows this rhythm. Corresponding to our lungs, how they become part of the sea's breathe, one with it, embodies each other. When do sea swimmers decide to break it and continue their normal breathing on land?

Post swim, rushing out of it to get a dry robe on. Followed by a silence, while the water dries off the skin – a moment of appreciation towards the sea, to be back on land with a smile on. We are here and nowhere else.

Crucial to know what plays a role in the experience, it's the duration of your swim, your health and the temperature of the sea. I recognise the sensation of what cold does to you. Bodily shock that makes it impossible to not be aware of everything around you. This might be what mindfulness is all about. Being in the moment. In this case the awareness of uncomfortable sensations. All your senses are aware of the cold, almost as if it's giving you signs to get up, out of the situation. Therefore, the first minutes are the most critical. Cold water swimming can boost the immune system and increase endorphin levels, which can promote feelings of well-being and reduce stress. But at the same time while going into cold water activates the flight or fight system, familiar term to us/people with anxiety. In this sense it's talked about as a cold water shock. Where our bodies try to protect itself from environmental harsh conditions; that the cold water does. It's possible to train our system – through the Wim Hof's training. One of the main takes on his method is if you get your breathing right than you can go into freezing waters. We all have it in our abilities to conquer our survival instinct that our body signals. There's science behind this, studies done on people, big terms that I find hard to wrap my head around. What we can take out of this is human adaptation to repeated cold is well possible...Just like Wim Hof puts it beautifully in his book... the cold is our warm friend, our mirror and our teacher and it can also be dangerous<sup>17</sup>. So I wonder when is the moment

<sup>17</sup> Wim Hof, *The Wim Hof Method: Activate Your Full Human Potential* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2020)

when our bodies accept the fear of that extreme coldness and feels it is not so extreme anymore and allows us to breath normally in cold water?

We either sink or swim – was said in a symposium held in Amsterdam where various researchers met to share their worries and statements concerning the sea.<sup>18</sup> In a less serious way a duo performed a song, they sang in Dutch about rising sea levels that is visibly affecting the Dutch landscape; it's all constructed for floods not to happen. The idea that people living in the Netherlands are taught to be aware of the risk of living below sea level, possibly sinking with floods. Therefore they learn to swim to survive the water, to be able to live without worries of it. For an international student coming from a Nordic landscape this issue is not talked about or a concern - yet. While sitting in the audience I began to realise it depends on the land where your foot is in at the present moment to be influenced with different worries around you. Hearing contemporary issues that affect us, the people living on that land will discuss as the most important to aim our focus on. The sea is so big so of course people will have something to say about it. Their own views on it. We could go into political issues, environmental and even social issues concerned about it. The need for us to share our concerns was urgent in this Symposium; Leaving Traces. The opening song had English lyrics displayed on a beamer behind the two singers. So, most people would

follow along what they were addressing. So when they said, "Everybody wants to survive, everybody has a survival instinct." a part of me was triggered, in a good way – is it truly rooted in us to want to survive? Is that the reason why our bodies send signals if we are in dangerous situations? Is that why when I first tried cold sea swimming, I thought my lungs shut off?

18 "Leaving Traces: The Sonic Acts Biennial Symposium," symposium held in Amsterdam, October 16, 2022.

*HOW CAN WE BE BRAVE, FEARLESS EVEN  
- HOW FAR IS IT POSSIBLE TO GO AGAINST  
BIG NATURAL FORCES.*



Power dynamics between human beings and nature that are often present in Endurance art. When artists push their body or mental endurance to its limits. The Dutch artist Guido Van der Werve, performance is a powerful example of it. By walking on ice in front of an enormous ship, he is testing his physical endurance and challenging the power of nature. The use of silence in van der Werve's performance emphasizes the idea that nature does not need human language or communication to exert its power. The cracking of the ice beneath his feet speaks for itself, reminding us that nature is not something that can be easily controlled or tamed. By approaching the

Figure 6. Guido Van der Werve. Nummer acht, everything is going to be alright. 10'10", 16 mm film to HD, Golf of Bothnia Finland, 2007.

water with a sense of respect, and alarming presence in the landscape, he acknowledges the overwhelming forces bigger than humans. A powerplay that challenges our perceptions of the relationship between human beings and nature. By testing his own physical limits and confronting the power of water, he invites us to reflect on our own place in the world and our relationship with the natural environment.



Figure 7. Aftermath of a cow swimming. Escaping. Júlía Margrét Einarsdóttir et al., "The hero who escaped the butcher and swam across the fjord," video, 00:22 / 02:42.

Every autumn the tradition is for farms to slaughter cows to make meat. A rather unusual event happened back in 1987, in Westfjords of Iceland, to be precise in Önundafjörður. When a cow named Harpa knew where she was headed on the farm, she took off, broke free and headed for the sea. To escape her destiny she swam three kilo-meters across the fjord. You would think a cow would drown or turn around. That was not the case, her escaping plan was successful and on the other end of the fjord waited people who would later take care of her. These people thought her swim was a miracle, so they let her live, under the new name of Sæunn; a female given name that translates to the sea. Sæunn reached old age, with kinder new owners. Turns out that later in the

spring she was pregnant with a calf when she swam. In an interview with the Icelandic National Broadcasting, it was mentioned that knowing it long after her swim made them believe that was the reasoning for her great will to live. This long route the cow took over the sea, offered her another chance in life, the sea facilitated it.

You will hear quite a lot of stories of how animals have saved themselves in incredible ways, but this is the most famous animal rescue in Iceland. Her story has spread far and wide. Including to India. "Cows are seen as sacred creatures there, so it rained letters of thanks, gifts of money and good wishes to the couple. On the other end, rained threatening letters to the couple who were going to lead her to slaughter."<sup>19</sup>

The hero who escaped the butcher and swam across the fjord, is somewhat relatable to other aspects of life. We are trying to escape our fears, not facing them. Sometimes we need to jump into the water. See it as a escape route. It sure is a pity we cannot communicate with the cow and simply ask her how she managed to not drown. There's an overwhelming statistic of people who lost their lives at shore. Around the period this article was published, Fishermen, wouldn't know how to swim to save their lives. (Maybe a bold statement to make?). They would still go on board, for the sake of their job. Those men and generations after developing a fear of drowning.

<sup>19</sup> Guðrún Gunnarsdóttir and Gunnar Hansson, "The Hero Who Escaped the Butcher and Swam Across the Fjord," Ruv, September 17, 2020.

This magnificent story also reached the sea swimming community. Sea swimming is a no new thing. It has just gotten more attention recently. Now every year they honour the swim of Sæunn by swimming it themselves. This has become a great social ritual and happens in the autumn. I have heard other stories about rituals concerning similar act.. Jumping into water as a form of cleansing. So it isn't so crazy to think about going after a feeling concerning a ritual cleanse. It can be translated as wanting to begin something with fresh body. More recently, cultures have adopted this and have started to use nearby waters to start the new year. A sociable ritual. During the months of December/January the temperature has dropped increasingly. Nine...ten...eleven degrees, not so pleasant. For that reason swimming in cold water happens really fast. If you say it's 10 degrees, recommended time is maximum 5 minutes, you see it's divided in half. Matter of minutes. More time goes on preparing, travelling to the location or even gaining heat after the swim. These things we are in control of and every one of them takes more time than the swim itself. It starts with a decision, to go. And when you are in it, you give in on the control you had before diving in. The sea doesn't allow us to have control. So people must do it for the sake of doing it with others. By establishing social activities or these rituals that sea swimming is, it can hold our community together and give us a sense of belonging.

[N] TALES

64°08' N



SPUR OF THE MOMENT FOR FIFTEEN  
MINUTES IN REYKJAVÍK, AUGUST.

We took a walk along the seafront. From her house it's a fifteen minutes walk to the best spot to sea swim. What makes it the best, are the facilities. We can have a hot shower before and relax in a hot tub afterwards with prepaid coffee we pick up in the lobby. Anyways, the walk is like a preparation or meditation to face the sea. Meditation in a form of conversations. Randomly she told me about her fear of whales. I remember being surprised. Because I have known her for almost 10 years, and I didn't recall knowing this fact of hers. The sea might have brought it up. Whales have brought some heated discussions in Iceland. It's a fight for banning to "hunt" them and eat whale meat. I agree they should be protected from eager tourists that go on whale watching tours and end up at a restaurant eating whale meat. Absurd scenery. I wouldn't want to eat a whale; it goes against all my beliefs that animals deserve to live peacefully in their habitat. I would rather want to be a whale. Swim around unbothered. Or even a mermaid. How cool would it be to have a tail?

Back to the day with my friend.

O k a y f o c u s . . .

Asking my friend "so if you're afraid of something that lives where we swim, why do you swim in it?" A very honest answer said with a tone of sarcastic and a bit of laughter; It makes me stronger, not in this dramatic sense but overcoming this fear every time we go sea swimming gives me energy and power, that uplifts me back to life.

Kaldur sjór, við töluðum ekki saman, við vissum eftir á að við værum að berjast fyrir lífi okkar að hræðast ekki, ég átti erfitt með að anda en sagði ekkert, hélt áfram að synda í kraftmiklum öldum, sólin var farin og það var orðið dimmt. Á örskömmum tíma breyttust aðstæðurnar. Ég var fegin að hafa lært sund sem krakki og hafa góða vinkonu mér við hlið. En hugsunin um að sjórinn væri kraftmeiri en við og gæti á augabragði tekið okkur var efsta hugsun. Ég fann fyrir varnarleysi. Í minningunni var erfiðara að berjast við þessar neikvæðu hugsanir en að synda í öldunum.<sup>20</sup>

20 Cold sea, we remained silent, we knew afterwards we were fighting for our lives to not panic. I struggled to breathe but said nothing, as we swam against powerful waves. The sun had set and it was getting dark. In a very short time the situation changed. I was glad to have learned to swim as a kid and to have a good friend by my side. But the thought that we had no control over the sea, knowing it was more powerful and could take us in an instant was the top thought. I felt the weight of our vulnerability. In memory it was harder to fight these thoughts than the waves.

The sea can be a source of recreation, leisure, transportation for humans, as well as important resources for food and energy. However it's important to be aware of the risks associated with being in the sea. Such as drowning, hypothermia, marine animal attacks and exposure to extreme weather conditions. A simple Google search of "who was mysteriously lost at sea" will show and give access to a list made on Wikipedia. Many names have stumbled on this list so when scrolling down it seems to be an endless list. It's still up to date. Who is behind updating this list remains unknown. Wikipedia is perhaps not a reliable source. Mentioning this is only for the insight that it's not so uncommon for people to vanish into oblivion. Leaving unknown traces of them and even bigger question marks for people on land. This also goes for Bas Jan Ader, a Dutch conceptual artist. When in his last artwork was an attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean in the smallest boat ever - the year of 1975. In a documentary it sets the tone that Bas was always on the lookout to see behind the horizon with his work. Performances of him falling; from his bike in the canal, from the roof and so on... Speaking on falling the sea of course represents the great unknown that lies beyond the horizon and hard to look under the surface, how deep it really goes for a naked human eye to capture. His friend explained that in his final work he might have achieved it - what he had been trying all these years with previous artworks on gravity. Going beyond the horizon, he left a mark of mystery when he went on his boat named Ocean Wave. Like the true artist Bas was, he took with him some notebooks and his camera. None

of it was recovered. Not even himself, sadly. The sea took him along with his things. People wondered if that was his intention all along, to vanish into the void with his art.

[...]To be we need to know the river  
holds the salmon and the ocean  
holds the whales as lightly  
as the body holds the soul  
in the present tense, in the present tense.<sup>21</sup>

In the example of Bas Jan Ader, it clearly shows us that the sea is not reliable. Ignoring how small we truly are against the forces of it. What can be dangerous for some and then safe for others. Surely it can provide duality of perspectives, not in a black and white manner but rather where two aspects meet and create contrast. This notion took me back in time. Could images support these findings? On a visit to Reykjavík Image Archive, my aim was to find the earliest moments of people swimming outdoors. Within mind this pattern of fear towards the sea. How a nation fixed a big generation's fear, by simply focusing on teaching young kids to swim. In a fully controlled environment, as in heated pools. A national goal to be safer in water. Maybe it does tell us that the opposite of fear can be safety. We fear the unknown, feel helpless against not knowing. So when you know at least how to save yourself if the worst happens then it becomes a bit easier to become fearless. Also turns out kids were sometimes taught outside in cold pools and weather.

21 Le Guin, Ursula. 1999. Sixty Odd: New Poems.

WITH THE MINDSET OF DUALITY LET'S LOOK  
AT TWO ARCHIVE IMAGES.



Figure 8. Swimming lesson. AGH Hafnarfjörður mannlíf 07, Hafsteinn Hinriks-son. Amatörvinnustofa G. Ásgeirssonar. Ca. 1944 - 1950.

What immediately attracts the attention is the action happening cross over the image. We see a man on the left, standing uneasily on a rocky ground. He's holding a stick leading to a kids head. It seems to have a purpose but further background details is needed.<sup>22</sup> There are other kids in there as well, one seen standing in the water, so it must be shallow.

<sup>22</sup> I got background information from the researcher at the archive centre in Reykjavík. Apparently, the man on the left, was a priest, a well-known from a small fishing town (Grindavík). He taught the kids how to swim in an outside water. This image is dated to be taken anywhere between 1944-1950.



Figure 9. Sea rescue. ÖSG GLE 259, Öskar Gíslason. 1948.

What we see on this image is a boat in top right corner and waves hitting it hard from left. The sea takes up a big space in the middle, but as we look from the boat we see a rope coming from it and across the middle and cuts out of the image on the left. A person has it's body attached to this rope and another person slightly bigger or is standing, assisting the other one. It seems like a struggle, they are situated right around the shoreline with big rocks covering all the foreground. Some bigger splash of waves hit the rocks and overall it is a chaotic water movements. Unlike the other image the rocks here show us how chaotic weather but on the other image they serve a purpose for the priest standing on them to assist a young girl with a stick to stay above the water. The stick and the rope have similarities to them. For both of the images they serve as a notify for us viewers to question the act. The image has deep contrast of black and white, it's tone makes me think of mystery and a bit of danger. A situation that you wouldn't want to wonder up in. In the image archive online there are some hashtags for it; sea-accident, ship. With a description of: 1. - 2. December 1948, men rescued from the British ship Sargon, unfortunately it sunk in a fjord west of Iceland.

## MODERN STORYTELLING

Even though tales give the idea of untrue stories, I also began email conversations with my dad, for the reason to ask him about his time at sea. Give the element of truth an equal weight here. Sailors are more isolated communities on the sea. They go there to make a living. Sea Swimmers on the other hand do not.

hi dad

I miss you, on the other side of the big ocean. Do you still go swimming with mom? Or is it too cold now? I had a nice call with her the other day, it surprised me a little to hear her side of things since you were at sea back in the days, catching the fish. She said she was very afraid of the sea and even more so with you in it. Knowing this now so many years later. Makes me think how you managed to convince her it was okay to go out to sea, I mean you're still here today, for the good of us all. And from your side how do you remember this time at sea, were there moments you felt

unsafe?

I read the book LIMBO by Dan Fox and it mentions that when you have been at sea for a long time you start to hear voices, noises that replicate a train passing by but are actually just the waves. Do you recognize this?

I can't possibly imagine being at sea for so long, I just feel like taking a swim with mom in Iceland when I'm visiting. But to spend many days staring into the void that the sea creates, day after day nothing new, always the same, is an interesting thought. Do you remember this time well enough to write back to me? And at last would you consider going back to fishing?

Your eldest daughter, Jenny

To which he responded:

Your mom and sister sea swim but I'm not going.

It's rather cold 🥶 I was mostly at sea during the summer time on hand boats and in the spring on nets on weekends and holidays with College. Also worked on fixing the nets for my dad in between. Sew new nets and cut the old ones from the rails but they kept the net apart; one sank (it had lead in it) and the other floated (it had floating holes in it).

I wasn't at sea much after your mother and I met. Went for one-on-one rowing mainly at Easter. Was enrolled in construction technology... I always felt comfortable and safe in the sea, but there were still some incidents that scared me.

Write more later, hard to tap the phone.

And continued

I would not go to the sea again for commercial purposes, but to fish for food for the rest of my life. My experience was more adventurous, and no two days were the same. It's always exciting to observe what the sea would give that day and to be out in nature among all the birds and sea animals. I had profound respect for the sea and what it gave and especially where it saved the family. I was also more aware of the dangers that come with seafaring as a result. Everything with us was well done and as safe as could be imagined at that time. My father and I were also remarkably close and worked well together. Dad was always incredibly happy if I could come row-

ing along attending school.  
My mother used to make  
lunch, and there was never  
a shortage of food.

thank you <3  
Oh what fun to read over,  
I can envision these memories  
of yours so well. I Find  
it interesting that you recall  
the good ones, what the sea  
gave you. I'm curious to hear  
about the other side of the  
coin, the opposite. But understand  
if you don't want to recall it!  
Like this sentence ;) "I always  
felt good in the sea and felt safe,  
but there were still some incidents  
that scared me."

Hugs to you

He took days to reflect on my question  
and got back

Hi  
Still writing?  
These incidents were now  
rather brief moments that  
passed quickly. Once we



were on our way to land  
after a nice fishing trip at  
Grímsey. We had managed  
to get the fish to the train,  
but we had the nets on the  
deck. It was freezing cold  
in the northeast and the  
waves were high, and it  
seem to be getting worse. I  
took the first helm shift and  
everything went well to begin  
with and I made sure to let  
the waves overtake the boat,  
also sometimes hitting off  
to keep things going well.  
The weather worsened and  
the so-called breakers began  
to arrive, which had to be  
reacted to in order not to  
lose control, but it still went  
well. Then suddenly the boat  
turned approx. 90 degrees  
and lay completely on the  
backboard and sailed  
sideways down the wave.  
The tilt was so great that I  
fell over in the wheelhouse,  
but managed



to hold the steering wheel and turned it all the way to the backboard and gave way to the bottom, and in an amazing way the boat righted itself and regained its balance. My dad woke up and came up to the bridge and saw that I was in shock. I explained what happened and we made up. Dad looked at the weather and there was a gust of wind. We were halfway to Dalvík when this happened, and dad now took over the steering wheel. The transport ship Drangur was on its way to Grímsey at the same time and was hit by a breaker that broke 3 windows in the bridge. MbK. Dad<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Email correspondence with Mikael, my father. November 2022 - february 2023. (translated)





My dad shares stories of how life was tough but simpler when they had to rely on the sea to make a living. He describes how they would brave the rough waves and spend long hours catching fish, which they would sell at the market to earn their daily bread. They didn't have the luxury of choosing what they wanted to do. They had to do whatever it took to survive. But now things have changed. There's the option to go or not to go; to the sea. My dad says it's too cold for him to swim, but my mom loves it. She often goes to the sea to swim and relax. They both have the freedom to wander, to explore the beauty of the sea, and to flow in the moment without any worries. For my dad, the sea represents a time gone by, a reminder of the sacrifices he and grandpa had to make to survive. But for my mom, it's a place of peace, where she can forget about all the worries of the world. Regardless of their reasons for visiting the sea, one thing is certain - it brings them both a sense of joy and contentment that they can't find anywhere else.



Words change the world, stories we tell also have power of painting a picture of world views. Throughout history, stories have been passed down through generations in books. What is common to read is this notion of higher forces in control. It's so fruitful whether it's a world view from the Greek, Egypt, Azteks, or the Nordic... Myths sprouted from it can help us reconnect to nature. The use of gods to personify elements in nature, both good and bad, has been widespread in many myths such as the Norse mythologies where the sea is personified by the god Ægir and his nine daughters, each named after a different aspect of the waves. It creates a picture of someone is in control of it, the waves, the tides. Different ways to describe the waves tells us that we use words to paint a picture. We see now and probably also back then that waves, with subtle changes, a scenery of ever-changing factors and therefore different look. Each daughter being

unique and different from each other, the nine sisters representing this idea that we can try to make words from the elements of the sea, but because it's so alive so fluid... words or names can be limited. Then how we tell stories have a hard time grasping it all. Distinction of what is real and what is fiction, under the surface, allows room for imagination and fantasy. We can fantasise about creatures that live among us. When thinking about the open sea it is shared with other living things. We can grasp the idea of it because we can see it for ourselves with our own eyes, as in kelp, shells, and it's even touchable. Somehow it becomes trickier to discuss what is not so obvious for the eye. Not because it's invisible but in a way that someone else has painted the picture for our eyes and then what to believe is up to us. This idea might have been planted when we were kids, still learning how the world functions, but more with room to play and imagination. In memory of being a kid, and watching kids play there's a lot of attraction towards creatures that we have not seen before, being part of the mythical worlds, pretending to be somewhat other than human or kid, they can easily mimic being a mermaid. This fantasy world is part of the great imagination kids have, which slowly fades away in adulthood but reappears in mediums such as cinema. Stories and the language we use to tell them have the power to shape our perspectives and understanding of the world around us.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence, Natalie. "There be monsters: From cabinets of curiosity to demons within." Aeon, 23 February 2018.

Throughout the journey of looking at the sea, I have collected imagery of what has been painted for my eyes of creatures that could live beneath the surface and live among us underneath. Mysterious creatures that have been visualised in different forms. What they do for me is this ever wonder how throughout the years people had a common idea of how to visualise mermaids. As seen here with this selected material from children's books and movies...<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Mermaids have been looked as creatures who either save or destroy people especially sailors on sea. So often seen as dangerous creatures, yet in children's books they come across as beautiful. How come they're usually pictured with female features (?).



the trident, Ariel set out to look for her daughter. King Triton changed Ariel back into a mermaid so she could search the seas, while Eric joined the search from his schooner.



## CONCLUSION

A quest that started as a look into the communities of sea swimmers lead to trying to understand the relationship our humanity has with their environment and how some of us feel the need to test their ability and limits. Going back to the base of our existence, as a human figuring out their place and time. With these moments of uncertainty state, the moment of doubt. Where you don't know where to navigate yourself. In that sense how some people find themselves in places or dangerous situations, that others might find unreachable. Others might not necessarily feel this need. But in a moment for the other half, some might find their survival instinct kick in. That allows them to test their limits of overpowering the powerful nature. In the example given of Bas Jan Ader for his attempt to cross the sea, a room for imagination is also part of seeing under the surface. For the fictional world of mermaids or the real. Two perspectives of ideas are ever present throughout the research paper. How the main question was asked might be at fault... is it for us to be in or not... allowing multiple perspectives but coming down to the duality of looking at the sea. The sea can be a place for humans to be in, but it also poses certain risks and dangers that need to be taken into consideration. Given examples from the art world, still images as well as moving images, it can be argued that danger is often involved or a sense of belonging in a safe nest, as well as a touch of emotions. That creates a strong relationship with the subject. Seeing the example of how Roni Horn approaches her photography

in close contact with the elements of water, with different mediums that using photography did make the most visible of her concept, the power of continuous images of the same woman framed in different waters and weathers. It shows us that one image can speak more than words can. There are subtle changes in each continuous photo and it is somewhat relatable to what the sea swimmer explained in our conversations. Where he notices all the subtle differences in the notion of the sea - he's so attuned to it by living near it that he can't help but film the scenery.

It's becoming clear with investigating the subject, that people who are more in touch with nature will try to capture it; through mythologies, stories, and filming. For me it's with photography, collecting elements to be constructed, deconstructing sceneries, and emphasising contrast so elements that are framed challenge the balance. It's also very much about finding a good flow, a mindset to be in where things come together naturally, and intuitively. This state of mind becomes my method, some days for creatives and some days to rest. Being in a nourishing environment helps. In able to create something magnificent you will be able to let go, be in a flow and find a blue-mind. It has emotional value to us, bringing up fear when seeing a man walking on breaking ice and, I mention the act of sea swimming as a way of letting yourself go and flow at the moment together with others and the waves. Come to realise by observing the seafront, people come together and form an understanding of trust to go into these situations. Sea swimming can be seen as a ritual

act, a call to our bodies to keep going. Whether they might participate; some might only stand on the seafront and observe them from a distance. I was pushed to come closer thanks to having a camera with me.

Sea swimmers do feel compelled to use this activity daily. Establishing social activities or rituals can hold our community together. Much like water is indispensable it can also be the sea to this community. It's a bodily need that requires so little from you and so much (trust) towards the other; nature. We can test our boundaries as far as our soul carries us - for the poem by Ursula reminds us so well that it's a place where creatures belong. To be we need to understand our place in the environment. So if we know we can be. In the sea as well as in our bodies. The salty companion gives souls a landscape. The sea can therefore be a place for us humans to be in.

I give Jenný, my grandma that, there's no judgement of fearing something so big when we are so tiny against it. In our differences, we find the strength to share our fears. This has allowed me to face my fear of going into the sea, without hyperventilating and see this as an activity that won't judge your troubles or your state of mind.

The sea will continue to breathe long after we take our

last breath.

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Supervisor: Ingrid Grootes

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and Jenný Mikaelisdóttir

Typeface: Sabon LT Pro

For more info or get in touch:  
[www.jennymikka.com](http://www.jennymikka.com)  
[jennymikka@gmail.com](mailto:jennymikka@gmail.com)



A quest to understand how being in (cold) sea water has a relationship with humans. With a focus on sea swimming. The upbringing stories from a Nordic background is noticable in how the subject of the sea is approached.

Through the lens of visual art and photography, I investigate the power of nature and its ability to bring people together, as well as the dangers and risks that come with being in the sea.