

AT SEA:

Swimming in the Sea

From S. Yizhar

Translated by Miriam Shlesinger

That rock over there? Is that where we're going?

You swim over, he said. I'll wait for you.

Why? Look, it's not far at all. It's that one right over there.

To you it's not far, but I won't make it. He said

Why not? Look where it is – half of the way there is in low water, and then, there really isn't much left.

Never mind, you go, you swim, and I'll just stretch out here.

You're funny, I swear. There's the rock. Look, the first half you can walk across, and then you swim a little, and in no time you're up there, lying on that flat rock and the little waves will wash over you. Just picture the thrill of it.

Don't be so lazy, Benny said. Look what fun it is.

It's not that I'm lazy. I'm a terrible swimmer and I'm liable to sink on you, halfway there. What do you need that for?

What nonsense, Avi said. Come on – I'll be over here and Benny will be over there, and we'll keep an eye on you, okay? And you'll get there like a king, you'll see. You'll see, Benny said, the water's just knee deep. No wind. No waves. Anyone can do it, so why couldn't you? Come.

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The water really was just knee-deep, and the waves were barely more than soft, lapping eddies... and pretty soon it grows cool and ripples around your waist... Like feathery pillows, it burbles and bellows in that soft, drifting motion that you've already begun to blend into, and flailing your arms above it, pushing your way through and spraying and splashing through it with your body, you pirouette forth....

And then he started swimming. It really wasn't hard after all, and he was glad that he'd given in and come along with them, and they would swim just a little bit ahead of him.... Just swimming along and talking to one another as if it was really nothing, just a poised and easygoing stroll in the water... and looking back from time to time and kicking up a little water in his direction from time to time, just for fun, just for fun, just to make sure he knows that their friendship is as strong as ever.

It was only after a few minutes, maybe because he'd been so worried or because he knew he *ought* to be worried, that he started swimming with all his might, panting and spouting water and kicking, even a little more than necessary.

And then he began to try different styles, switching from one kind of motion to another, all of them rather clumsy and uncoordinated, feeling very clearly how inadequate his arms were and noticing how they were growing heavier and heavier. Under his feet, he discovered there was no ground at all... and there was nothing left for him to do in the water except flail about desperately, like a stranger who suddenly finds himself in unfamiliar surroundings.

And even the sun -

Was suddenly filling his eyes with the wickedness of a direct glare, too bright to handle, not taking account of what was happening to him or of his gasps that were turning into breathless gulps, spewing bitter water and feeling that he was more than fed up. And only barely managing, and reminding himself: stay calm, not so fast, loosen up, keep your motions small so you don't lose your strength, and make sure to move your arms in sync with your legs.

And there's the water, the terrible, gigantic water, that has become unbearably gigantic, gushing on all sides and even if you're not strong enough to fight it or to hold yourself up above the surface as it keeps swirling and leaping up and touching the air and the sun with a smug frivolity, and every movement of the turquoise and the green and the blue-green and the purple-green...

Rich green, venom green, bottle green,
Turquoise, turquoise green, and purple, and blue,
And green that's turned yellow, and green that's turned pale,
And shiny green, almost golden
And gold that's turned greenish and green that's turned deep.

Light little mounds are whisking along, seeming to make headway. Tugging away, and lugging and hugging anything and everything in sight, with the enormous force of a grand orchestra churning and turning into one single wave, (*that swells and staggers and swaggers and all at once implodes like a tree whose trunk has been felled, unraveling in the foamy puddles and overflowing into the gushing waters of its hasty fall, with its white crests and broadening ripples that wash over each other, and it too drifts and shifts and lifts itself ashore in tiny burbles*)), maybe even carrying some seashells along with it. And then there is silence. As if it is really all done.

All done? No way! Everything is full. And in motion. Done is no way to describe it. Except perhaps you yourself... and suddenly there are all those unflappables. Nothing fazes them. They don't seem to care, seeing that it's all about turquoise, pure turquoise, and as if that's the last thing they need to know, that it's turquoise or turkwaz, or turkoise or maybe terquoise...

But suddenly the rock is right there, very close. Just a few steps away, except there are no steps left in you, and in truth you haven't a drop of strength left, and no reserves to take it from, to move an arm or a leg. You muster whatever willpower you have left, and beg what remains of your hollow muscles to work up enough energy for you to raise an arm, to lift a leg, and you mobilize something that's no longer even in you, to lift your gaze towards the rock and see that it is really there, right in front of

you, almost within reach, incredibly, and you're about to touch it, except that you don't even have what it takes to ask yourself how you'll overcome that "almost", how you'll succeed in thrusting yourself far enough forward to eliminate the "almost" and whatever else you have within you that will allow you to do it.

You've stopped thinking, you've stopped knowing, and maybe that's what happens before the final drowning. Not knowing how a part of you can still do something to make you able, and let you move ahead that tiny bit more – except that suddenly you're touching it, and it is the rock itself.

And there are Avi and Benny, already dipping their feet in the water, amused and smiling at the sound of his stammering efforts to reach the rock and touch it, laughing kindly, and generously holding out their friendly hands to him so that – upsy-daisy – they can reach down together, and pull him up in one swift swirl, and lay him down on the rock.

So you did it! Avi said and smiled.

We told you you could, Benny smiled at him too.

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Half sitting, half sprawling, and not knowing quite what he was, what they were, and what the gigantic fluid body was that had consumed him earlier until he was no more, until nothing had remained of him...

The rock is not much higher than the surface of the water, which cavorts across it and keeps washing against the sand – one shallow wave licking another shallow wave licking another shallow wave – as if they had taken an oath to go on licking each other all day long, superficial licks, lick after lick,
And as if it wasn't really you who are here. And in truth, the other person has long since sunk and drowned and now he is way down deep... turning and sinking ... into the depths.

And the one who is up here is no more than an illusion of your survival, when in fact you have drowned, and you're lying there on the ocean floor, crushed by the weight of the indifferent water that pulls down on your petrified body which has not yet grasped that it has been defeated, that it is no longer alive... and that the fish... they are gathering round... to get a taste.

When all of a sudden it hits you, full force: God! You still have the entire way back to do!! But that is impossible! Out of the question, no! Avi, Benny, no. It just can't be, not me, not me, impossible... get a boat, please, get something, a buoy, a board... (Afraid even of turning onto his stomach, just simply turning without moving anything else and just...)

The little waves approach, burbling as they go. One shallow wave washes against another shallow wave washing against another – and in the distance, the sea lies in ambush, waiting, all around, surrounding them, yet staying out of sight, so frightening that it would be better to die than to see it or to cross through it. God, what now?

And suddenly he sees the shore, right over here, with a bolt of surprise at how near it is, and all the people too, strolling along the beach, and some are dipping their feet in the water too, and others are running along the solidness of its edge... and even playing ball, happy souls with colorful towels and baubles, and none of them knows, and Benny and Avi seem unconcerned too, ...except that it's just too far, too hard to grasp, and there is nothing left of him but an empty shell, an embarrassed empty shell, a frightened empty shell, embarrassed at being frightened ...

In a minute, they'll start urging him to come, talking him into not being afraid, telling him it's not so bad, it's really nothing, just a few dozen meters to swim, and that as soon as he gets that far he'll be able to walk the rest of the way. But he's not about to give in, he's not moving. No way. They might as well save themselves the trouble. There's no point in nagging him, or begging him. ..No, definitely not... no. Finally and categorically. Sorry, but he just can *not*. Don't you see? He cannot.

The sun is behind him. All around us is the sea, and God only knows how you got here and how you wound up being perched in the middle of it. And the sea is looking

at you in amazement, and you're looking at it, mesmerized, even when you don't dare to look, because it's too horrifying...

A web of wrinkles keeps traveling up and down, criss-crossing and slicing the surface with all sorts of diagonals and making precise little diamond shapes for a quarter of a minute and then disappearing, with new ones appearing in no time, hundreds of squares and diamonds, as if preparing for the grand parade, except that no sooner are they formed than they vanish...

And it's only this jostling that seems to control everything here, with all the turkwaz water all around.

All right then. So we're heading back? Benny's voice says out of somewhere.

All right then. So you've had a bit of a rest? Avi smiles at him.

All right then. And you'll see that the way back is always easier, the waves carry you towards the shore, Benny smiles too.

All right then, you ought to be smiling at them now yourself.

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And once again, this time too the beginning is easy, and seems to just happen, as if it's nothing. And once again, surprisingly, the water is soothing and cool, burbling and gentle and free of all anger, and utterly about turquoise, pure turquoise, even up close. And you can float in it comfortably, and swim along easily and it's quite pleasant, not using up energy, as if he had memorized the right lesson during those small rhythmic movements and tiny breaths. And Avi and Benny, slightly ahead, close to each other, continue their light conversation as if there is no end to what they have to say to each other, at leisure, things that people may only say to each other as they swim side by side in the sea. (And that there wasn't time enough for when they were on the shore or as they were swimming here, or on the rock, or now in the sea). Folded over slightly and swaying on top of the wrinkled upper surface of the water that slithers silently off the back of

the abyss which lurks underneath those dense and dungeony depths, and it's as if the water really is different here – much more solid and certainly much heavier and more powerful, hovering large and silent above what must be a petrified cauldron of earth

resting underneath, deep within that darkness, so very deep underneath that all we have here is its uppermost tip... a deceitful and misleading outer layer that keeps falling apart and coming back together, over and over, in an infinity of wrinkles and reconnections,,,

...and in one fell swoop that seems to be headed straight towards a very important destination when it isn't simply rising and falling in place in an infinite series of pointless moves, *and mustering all the strength of an ambitious urge (about which we cannot say a thing since by the time we do, it has moved on, nomadically nesting in the flow)*, to create right-angled bowls of water to retain their straight shape through almost one whole heroic near-quarter-of-a- minute, before everything collapses and loses its shape and almost disappears, *but then it starts once again to recover, to regain its strength, to be reinstated and to realize its ambitious secret wish...* And no amount of water can construct an angle, a right angle, or all it can create is those flimsy, droopy, round and puddly bowls...

How can a person have the time to see all of this when he is somewhere between swimming and drowning, with no breath left, unless it is precisely either – or.

Because at this very moment the l-e-t-h-a-r-g-y sets in again, wrapping itself around him and forcing him to take it into account, and no longer to disregard it and to feel ever so clearly the heaviness in his limbs and in his empty muscles and how his arms are no longer the ones that had known enough to swim quietly. And although you seem to be pushing forward in the water and overcoming its silent resistance, the whole time, not yet lashing at it in a panicky frenzy, and it is good and merely rises gently and laps the lip line around your mouth as you inhale and the rush of air as you breathe it, with its salty licks...

Still soon enough – too soon – you are no longer able to shed the weight of the water all around you. It collects insistently (and you are put off by the ease of its presence), and starts ganging up on you and creating a barricade against you

Even though without paying any attention to you and without including you but only themselves, filled only with themselves, and you're not even being considered, except as a mishap of sorts that has risen to the surface by chance, above the elusive lip line

that bobs up and down, settling accounts with the wind and with the sun and with the back currents.

And why is he here in the middle of all this, when it is all too clear that the water is forever, and that whatever happens in the water now is no more than what always happens in water, with him or without him, and that it isn't staging anything especially for him, and that it cares nothing about him and he is of no consequence to its movement, and that it has always been and will always be, and he is just an uninvited passerby who has chanced along, and has somehow been lodged in place for a short while, a momentary stalemate, a fleeting speck, where even his panic and his fecklessness are transient and even his drowning in a short while will be nothing more than momentary – drowned and gone – and everything will fall into place in an instant, easily, where many before you have assumed they were worth noticing, a few have come through easily, making their way back to shore, and some were so inept that they kept lagging behind, struggling as best they could, empty and alone, holding on for dear life until they drowned into the denseness of the water underneath the shimmering of the sunshine that would not notice a thing.

But maybe he ought to try them again now, Benny and Avi, swimming in great camaraderie and seeming not to grasp the depths and the enormity of the water underneath nor to appreciate the life-or-death battles being waged. Why should they? They merely indulge in their little swim-chat and drift along at leisure and propel themselves forward in an easy swim, bantering away with an affability that seems so far removed, behind some glass pane that lets through the light, but no sound, on top of which Benny is turning over on his back now, and the only thing he moves is the very tips of his toes. His face is taking in the sun, his eyes are apparently shut and he is supremely content, at ease, without a care, like all the people strolling along the beach right now, completely at ease and at rest, amazingly at ease.

Tell me something, Avi and Benny. Tell me, do you by any chance have any solid ground under your feet yet? My God in Heaven, tell me – come on and tell me, come, my friend and give me a hand, here, hold me, tell me, go ahead and say Look, you're almost there, you've almost made it, just try to get your foot down and feel the bottom, say it, say you're stepping on solid soil already.

So should I scream? Scream and scream, ahoy, scream, can you hear me, people? Over here. Hurry! Come on. Please look this way. Here I am. Help. With one last shout filled with water and silenced, with the kind of scream that he, of course, would not produce. As if it were inconsiderate or disrespectful – or mournful or scornful. Not you. You'd rather drown than do that.

The water lashes up against you as if you'd been taken by surprise, slapping you, but with such gentle cat-licks, its soft tongues brushing against you as if everything was merely in jest... tapping lightly... with bubbles of foam and gentle laps, and it doesn't even know that this is you ... or someone, and it stretches out its tongue towards every surface...

And that even if you scream, they won't hear you. Useless shows of panic that are not targeted and do not help you escape from the waterhole that was prepared for you within the denseness of the body of water burbling all around you...

..., and in a moment, an enormous belly of water will swell beneath you, and there will be nothing but water on all sides...

And you no longer have the strength to breathe and there is nothing for you to breathe in any case, you only barely seem to be breathing and you feel nothing but the stifling of bitter water choking you and you cannot relieve yourself even slightly of what those breaths take in and force you to drink.

One minute, and the drowning person knows and sees it all, that embodies the very essence of losing control, the epitome of blindly flailing limbs screeching for help, those uncoordinated, self-defeating movements, when nothing whatsoever remains – not a person, nor even the trace of a person, not anyone who knows and not the knowing itself, nothing but the horrific realization that has hit him and he has been defeated by, and the drowner's cry that he does not emit – Help! – because even now he is embarrassed to call out, in what must be a sort of poor man's pride, and all that remains is a creature whose limbs are empty, lashing out blindly, **crazed in its search for something to hold on to**, desperate at the realization that most people do not believe there is this thing and that that's it and that this is really what a that's it looks

like. Half of him has already lost his mind and his other half, which still knows, continues to observe from the sidelines, to look at the crazed half watching as it tries to get a grip, tries to get a grip, tries to get a grip on what remains of his entire being – a fate that any drowning person can expect.

Another minute. It's just a few meters away, isn't it? And can't you just muster the strength that you had and no longer have and make it oblige you now by fusing itself into whatever it takes, whether you have it or not? Can't you muster it? And can't you let them know too and cry out more loudly than before, demanding that they come quickly and hold out their hand for you. That's wouldn't be so hard, would it? Just to hold out their hand. Just to hold out a board, why not – aren't there any boards in the world? Or lifesavers or just one good swimmer who'd come along with the greatest of ease and hold out his hand to you, like that, and make sure you don't sink into the depths? Which isn't just a turn of phrase, and they're really so indifferent, those depths, just look around and see, the water rolls on, a flat and droopy substance susceptible to the wind, and utterly moronic when it comes to anything else and maybe even indifferent to being hit, and knowing nothing other than how to lie flat and be what it is shaken into being.

And this must be the point when we ought to admit that it's over. And that we give up, that this is defeat. And this is enough. Now is enough. And let them. And they already know exactly what they will do next, and the moment comes when you give them your permission and they grab it as if this is what they've been waiting for and it is really their permission... and that is enough. And to make peace with your exhaustion. Let your exhaustion have its due, let it. Why not? Let them gather you up, all of you, with your exhaustion. And everything now boils down to the moment when you concede, when you concede that this is it. That you, there, the one who is you, is here, and cannot take it any more.

Where does this strange patience come from, the patience to wait and to look and to see now, at the last minute, the few bubbles that appear around him and to suddenly harness the calm of the gods and to capture the full reflection of the sunlight...

And what part of you is it that grasps what is happening, and knows that this is how it is? That fully grasps the infinity of this tranquility of the bubbles now reflecting the splendor of the sunlight? **And how is it that they have no *now*, when it is all right to play with the reflections of sunlight and when it is not**, and there is nothing on them now except just those reflections of the sunlight and nothing else, each and every time the ray of sunshine hits them, whether the timing is right or not, always, whenever the sun hits the edge. Who could have known what would fill the final moment, the one that is traditionally supposed to be so very special (when destiny seems to stand up tall in all its grandeur, and clash its large cymbals for the finale). And none of it should have anything but the sublime grandeur of the moment if not of the final cry. Who could have known?

And what do you discover all of a sudden? That when it comes to what really matters, if there is such a thing, it is not a fight for your life, and you've never fought for your life, and what you are engaged in is a battle for the most primary and simple kind of survival, not a battle over setting out on a search, nor a battle over reaching the right place, but everything with you is always about the assets of this survival, not about breaking loose once and for all, but about persisting and surviving that stupid survival of yours, and after you do survive what else will you have? What will you have then beyond what you have had all along, always, in abundance and in excess? It's always about survival and never about redemption, if possible, or just a moment --

What does a person actually lose when he ceases to exist? The truth: when a person loses, what is it exactly? Or on the other hand, what in the world would be missing? Nobody could care less anyway. **Quaking here as we approach land, knee deep in water**, drowning in a glass of water. And now he has become their prey, the prey of the great sea. But what on earth does the sea need the prey for? **What would be the point? What would the sea do with that prey?** It has no use for it, and it's all just a lousy coincidence, just because he hadn't the strength, and ran out of breath... you've entered a place by mistake,... and you cannot get out... who needs any of that?

Who built the stage for this lousy theater which is about to swallow you up and be done with it? Curtain. So pointless, just pointless, so pointless, god, what was the point of the sea coming to take you, what does it need you for, it's pointless, God,

pointless. No sea really needed to come and take you, what use are you to it, **what would be the point, pointless, so help me, pointless,** and just because, and that's all there is to it, just because, just pointless.

And if there were to be a single wave, an enormous wave, a generous wave, grabbing you and simply hoisting you onto its magnificent arched back and scooping you up with one powerful gesture, with a giant hand and leonine curls, and the magnificent wave would not even notice that you had been inserted into it, and it would travel on, carrying within itself this oh-so-tiny package

In the hubs of its rolling wheels, the waves go on rolling, and pulling you along in its innards, like Jonah the Prophet, and soon enough you are rolled out onto the shore

Or what if God were to descend from the heavens and to issue an order to the sea, God in all His almighty splendor, and what if He were to have the sea gently pick up one tired man and deposit him on the shore. Take one man and deposit him, safe and sound. Or at least order those legs to do it after all, and those arms to find the strength. Or at least order the sea's to become less and less resistant, until its resistance disappeared. This one, this entire sea

Bits of nonsense come to mind in no particular order and it is as if these bits of nonsense are what you have always kept to yourself, never shared, and suddenly here they are, all of them, rising to the surface of your mind. What the hell, here we are...

And your only problem is the saltiness in your throat, Cooking salt, is it? Three percent of the water, isn't it? The water is H₂O and the salt is NaCl, isn't that right? And on top of that there are the magnesium salts, if we remember correctly, or calcium, and potassium, hurray for potassium, he cheered suddenly, hurray for potassium, he sang suddenly. Let's hear it for little potassium, he chanted suddenly with a strange merriness, let's hear it for potassium dissolved with sodium chloride, let's hear it for the waves of the big sea, three percent, thirty thousandths of a percent, which are so difficult to distill out of the water, and that is not all. This is the Mediterranean Sea, after all, isn't it? Hurray for the Mediterranean Sea, let's hear it for the Mediterranean Sea, let every wave sing its praises, it spills into the Atlantic and

drips into the Red Sea, the Gates of Hercules and of Port Said, hurray for Port Said, and right in the middle is Malta too, little Malta, let's take a trip to Malta, why not go to Malta, we've always wanted to go to Malta, let us go to Malta, soon as we get out of this mess,....Want to go to Malta? We do want to go to Malta, we do.

And suddenly it is so hard that we cannot take it any more. Suddenly there is nothing left except the final hold on what no longer offers anything to hold on to ...

((Because suddenly, for a moment, you know that it is the afternoon sun there, behind you, casting its rays of light over the water, and over the entire world that is still out there, carrying on as usual somehow... and wasting so much of its abundant reflection on someone who has the strength to turn his head and to look at it and to glance w-e-s-t-w-a-r-d for once... were it not for the fact that it is more than a person can endure, and it stands to reason that it will continue to be more than a person may hope for, and he will not have the privilege of turning his head westward, what a terrible conclusion, a person who has been sentenced never to have a westward again, and he won't stand a chance, and he will never have another sunset and his final sunset took place yesterday, or some other time, and there will be no more, and in a minute, there will be nothing left, and it sounds too dreadful to fathom, and he will never have another chance to look westward, and looking westward is something he will never have again, like a person sentenced, who will never see the sunrise again nor the morning after the sunrise, nor the day, nor the days, and he will run out of days, and you cannot really fathom it, or the beautiful pathway he created at the entrance to his house a very short time ago, once, when he still had the time, when he still had the time and a purpose and a later, and all kinds of time landmarks.))

And suddenly there is a moment for accurate thinking... and as if in a magnifying lens that magnifies the fullness of the moment. And it is as if you can see the greatness of the moment, see it in minute detail with the utmost precision and with amazing clarity, ..., and know exactly what it is all about and that it is going to be gone forever, and to see clearly and irrevocably that this is it. That this is really the end

And suddenly there is nothing, and all that remains is the white nothingness or maybe that will not remain either, and the only thing that will be left will be the muttering of a final prayer, sort of, or a kind of "God, do not let it come to pass", or what else is there on what remains of the mind of a person who knows that this is it, a minute before the light goes out, who will know nothing more. And how will it be? Will it simply be darkness? Or is there a great light? Or just the nothingness? And only please, let me, let me be, God, leave well enough alone, and that's that, yes, simply let it be, and that's that, or nothing, no thing, and just shocked and just dumbfounded and just thunderstruck and there is no thing. Just whiteness and nothingness and if there is no thing, what is there then?

What is the nature of the moment that lies between yes, still yes, and between no, no more, what is it, what is there at each point in this single moment of nothing to follow, after which there is no thing and there will no longer be any thing or maybe it is a sort of why

A sort of why. A why without end. Why, why, only why. Why or maybe God, why me, a kind of why me that may come too late, and there is nothing, there is only the this-is-it, the now, the this-is-it, and this is all, and this is all that is left when the last and final impossible closes in on you.

Nothing really matters any more, and you are just cold all over, and you just do not want to, God, you do not want to, and looking at it from the sideline you don't really know how or why you got yourself into this, or why you aren't trying, for heaven sake, to stretch out your legs, both of them, and to feel for the ground down below, but yes, so help me, look, look, yes, God Almighty, it really is, solid ground, there it is, this is it, touching it. Yes, so help me, touch it and see for yourself

And suddenly, suddenly as if this is the entirety of the Great Truth, that underneath everything there is always solid ground... right down here. It's so very simple that it's downright funny...

A little like a frog, a little like a wet dog, and with arms and legs and the tips of these forgotten toes, just don't let go of the ground, and without a bit of knowing or a bit of

not knowing or of not not knowing, the body just propels itself of its own accord and tries to get a good grip, to- and to- and very –

Somehow... the water is receding now and letting you go, this hero, as if a wild animal has just turned into a little ball of contented kittens licking themselves...

And there is the shore already, and all kinds of people are hanging around for some reason, as if there were supposed to be people who hang around and do things, and it seems as if there used to be those Avi and Benny Whoever, or so it seems, and nobody here knows and nobody has even seen the stooped and dripping man who is coming right out of the jaws of death, cold and black ...but he already has more solidness about him, and those are jagged seashells and this is ground, truly, yes, and this is simply ground and not water, not at all, no more, not of any sort, neither burbling nor devouring, and it is so very sort of solid... and strong and good... and it supports you without stopping to feel whether you are there or not there, which is of no consequence to this solid ground. And when all knowing stops, there is only this one knowing: that it is ground, that it is solid, and that it is.