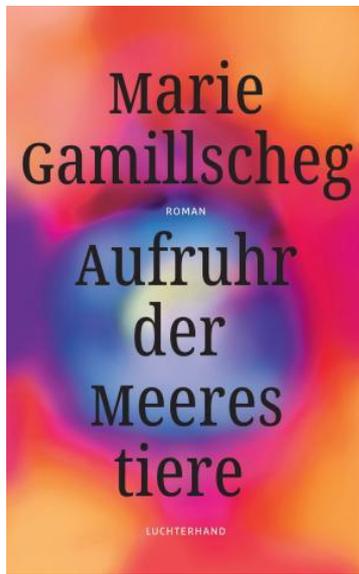


Marie Gamillscheg

An Uprising of Sea Creatures

[Aufruhr der Meerestiere]

Outline + Sample Translation



Literary Fiction

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On fathers and daughters – the tale of an impossible relationship

Luise is intelligent, Luise is independent, Luise is an island. She has also gained a reputation as an excellent marine biologist. Her specialty is the sea walnut, a ghostly illuminated jellyfish living in the dark waters of the oceans. When Luise is asked to go to Graz for a project with a famous zoo, she says yes right away. But Graz is the town she grew up in and the town where her estranged father, who is ill, still lives – and where the silence between them began, long ago...

Marie Gamillscheg writes compellingly and vividly about the process of freeing ourselves from our childhood, our body, and the rules that we believe to be our own – but which others have determined for us. At the same time, this novel is an attempt to describe the inherent impossibility of father-daughter relationships.

Marie Gamillscheg, born in Graz in 1992, lives and works in Berlin, freelancing as a journalist and contributing to *ZEIT Campus* and other media. She was awarded the city of Graz literature promotion prize in 2015 and the New German Fiction Prize. In 2016 she took part in the Klagenfurt Literature Course and was awarded a working stipend by the Berlin Senate. Her works have been published in many magazines and anthologies. Her novel *All That Shines* topped the ORF list of best books, was nominated for the aspekte Literature Prize and won the Austrian Book Prize for the Best Debut Novel in 2018.

Sample Translation

By Anne Stokes

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When speaking about her work, Luisa had, in recent years, constructed for herself a womb-like cave. Although its contents, that is the findings of her research, constituted highly pessimistic prognoses for the future, they had a calming and salutary effect on Luisa. Even now, as she walked up and down in front of the students in the lecture theater in the basement of the institute, they helped her feel where she was, made her conscious of the fact she was pressing her shoulder blades together as she stood before a group of people, lecturing them on her research: this was where she felt at home. Like most of her colleagues, over time, she had shed all ties to her birthplace like a winter pelt, except for an accent that occasionally dwelled overly long on vowels, but otherwise did not betray a particular place of origin. She and her colleagues never spoke about the Christmas holidays they spent elsewhere, or about small-town customs and dalliances. Here in the institute, they led an island existence. They felt no bond to a particular city or region, only to their work and whatever they were trying to prove at any specific moment. Luisa wanted to be someone people remembered. She was an island. Her work was a cave on that island. Luisa was an island, and a cave on that island in the world was her world.

The thin heels of her shoes clicked crisply across the glossy floor of the lecture theater. As when you broke off the handle of a fine, delicately patterned porcelain cup: something broke loose, burst open with every step, and was amplified as sound in the room. The dimmed lecture theater, lit solely by the projector and the whites of the eyes of the freshmen, which radiated from their faces as though they were glowing from within. They still knew nothing of short-term contracts and furtive glances from male colleagues, or about unfinished papers, whose publication receded further and further into the future. They didn't ever ask for clarification if Luisa's argumentation grew fuzzy. They still assumed a truth in science independent of funding and patrons. All they knew was that, back in the day, Luisa had been one of the best.

Luisa looked into their faces and wondered what clever thoughts had recently been going through their heads. What they had eaten before class. Who they were sleeping with, and whether they had that certain something that was connected in some way to how carefully they packed their notepad away in their backpack and whether they occasionally lit a candle in the evening just for themselves. That student there, who never took her jacket off during the lecture. Last week, her hair had been long and dark. Now it was blond and shorter with a fringe that framed her face. Was she brokenhearted? Had someone left her? Did she want to take leave of herself, or had she perhaps really discovered something in that blond hair that suited her better? Luisa didn't understand this tendency people had to metamorphose. Wasn't it already challenging enough to go to bed in the evening as the same person you were at the start of the day?

The relationship between people and animals functions only on the basis of fear, Luisa said.

Even if you consider the history of the sea walnut, it is, first and foremost, a story of fear, as humans tell it, she said as she clicked up and down in front of the students, attempting now to leave everything extraneous behind - the weather, their first names, her upcoming appointment with the director of the institute. It is, of course, true that the greatest danger for our oceans is not posed by species extinction but by the species that proliferate explosively, she said. But if we view the sea walnut's proliferation only as a problem to be overcome, then we overlook the fact that it is humans themselves who, since the advent of international commodity trading, have brought the sea walnut into different waters in the ballast tanks of their ships. In its new habitats, the sea walnut has no natural predators. What is more, the oceans are warm, fished out, and acidic, she said, and the sea walnut can reproduce excellently.

Now a hand is up:

But why didn't she use the term invasive species? He still didn't fully understand that.

Luisa stopped and tried in the dark to find the head that went with the hand. She had noticed him during previous lectures, when he had almost made her stumble as she spoke: a completely unremarkable face. She had never seen anything quite so bland and ordinary, anything so in keeping with the norm.

A good question, she said. What do you think, then?

He shrugged.

You could maybe have said that his eyes were memorable, Luisa thought to herself. His eyes may have receded into their sockets in a particular way, or the symmetry of his cheekbones and eyebrows may have been somewhat striking, or the section around his chin pleasantly soft. But as she studied him, she could see that there was nothing remarkable about these features either. After the lecture, she would pass him hundreds of times or never at all. She turned around and made her way back to lectern.

Then give it some thought!

Luisa placed her hands on the plastic surface next to the computer keyboard. She immediately felt uncomfortable. That feeling again of having simply borrowed words, as though they didn't belong to her, and then, as she uttered them, the shock that it was, in fact, she herself who was standing in the lecture theater, speaking to students, who had no choice but to attribute the words to the body in front of them.

Would one of you like to help your colleague out?

Luisa was standing between the screen and the projector, and could sense the colors on her face. No one raised their hand or attempted to say a word, or even the start of a word. What an awful place high school was, she thought. The vast majority really did arrive at college with stunted brains.

The fact is that people encroach much more on the habitats of animals than the other way around, Luisa said, trying again gingerly with the borrowed words. So we don't want to designate creatures as invasive if it has been proven that they don't move voluntarily into new ecosystems, but are brought there by people. And, you know, if we look behind the fear, she said, if we don't term the sea walnut invasive, or even predatory or bellicose, then we may be able to learn from it how we ourselves might adapt to the worst living conditions, indeed how we can not only survive in them but can thrive.

She clicked the small remote in her hand. Then she turned around and watched the screen behind her along with the students. From a distant reality bubble, a transparent, luminous figure burst through the wall onto the black background. Something within Luisa calmed down. There:

A floating lantern with wide, delicate wings.

A transparent plastic bag lost at sea.

A delicate string of lights in a clear night, touched lightly by the wind.

Or: a moving x-ray image. A pear-shaped form with a milky surface with thin thread-like markings. At the edges and in the center, thick, rib-like lines shone brightly. They also pulsed, flashed, flickered, reported, raised the alarm. And in the center, where it was growing increasingly bright, the light getting more and more dense, spectral colors raced wildly up and down.

Mnemiopsis leidyi, said Luisa. The sea walnut. The most dangerous predator in the world.

A lantern, a string of light, a flickering robot.

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Luisa bought a bar of chocolate with nuts and a candy bar from the machine next to her office, and tossed the wrappers straight into the trashcan. She didn't want to be reminded by them later. She stuck the unwrapped chocolate into her coat pocket and devoured the candy bar in a few hasty bites on the way back to her office. She hurried up the stairs. In front of her door stood a student, whose thesis she was supervising. Later, Luisa said, I don't have time right now. During the lecture, the cherry tree in the quadrangle of the institute had shifted into her office. Its trunk now lay plump and heavy on the carpet, and the shadows of its branches quivered on the walls. She tried to recall that average face, but it was gone already. Anyone who didn't work constantly on their reality disappeared straightaway. She knew that about herself, after all. Luisa poured water into the small plastic basin beneath her desk, then added the saline solution, stirred it with her finger, hastily removed her shoes and socks, and placed her feet in the water. Then she looked at her cell phone.

A text from Yuri from two hours ago:

Do you like fennel? Because of this evening.

And another: How are the jellyfish doin'?

She broke off a piece of chocolate, clicked through her unread emails, and finished the bar. Not one of the emails was directed at her personally. They were from various university and journal mailing lists – calls for proposals, research news, new appointments. A research team in Copenhagen had once again received millions from an EU pot for a project on the

processing of plastic in the oceans. Her colleague from Marseille had still not responded to her request to preview his new study on the genetic modifications of the sea walnuts that had migrated to the Caspian Sea. She picked up her cell phone again and placed her left heel on top of her right foot.

I don't eat root vegetables
and comb jellies not jellyfish

In the institute director's office, the blinds were halfway down. Narrow strips of light came through from outside, painting lines on the director who was sitting across from her. Unfortunately, she didn't have any progress to report, Luisa offered straightaway. Leaning forward slightly with her hands folded on the table, she said she was in close contact with her colleague in France, and that, although her own research on eel catching had not yet yielded any results, she remained convinced that the eel subsisted mainly on sea walnuts.

I'm sure of it, she said.

Listen, said the director. He, too, now leaned forward, and Luisa drew back. You have already proven yourself to be an excellent researcher, he said, and you've got an astonishingly focused research profile for your age. He added that he valued her as one of the most ambitious and hardworking associates in the institute. But, nonetheless, she should, please, and soon, indeed as soon as possible, produce some initial results. He was, though, actually wanting to speak with her again about the project in Graz before she went there.

Luisa wiped her brow with the back of her hand, as though there were a film of sweat there that she had just become aware of, or as if to briefly reassure herself of her physical existence.

Sure, she said.

You know, of course, that Dr. Schilling and I have known each other for a long time, the director said, and that such a close cooperation between a zoo and a research institute is extremely unusual. You do understand that?

Yes, I get it, Luisa said.

When it came to representing the institute in Graz, he did, of course, have complete confidence in her. She was the expert. He just wanted to give her a few pointers before she left.

She was to appear open to the zoo's public focus, even though this was not her main concern.

But she wasn't to forget the research institute's objectives either.

She was to stress and promote the interdisciplinary nature of the planned research center.

And she should, please, not emphasize her own research interests, which differed quite substantially from the established research on sea walnuts, as this could detract from the current relevance.

She should also not necessarily mention that they were still experiencing some difficulties breeding sea walnuts over several generations in the lab.

And she wasn't to worry if the project got too large for her. It was just a preliminary discussion, and she could, of course, call him whenever she needed to.

We do, after all, want to promote our institute women in particular, he said.

Luisa pressed both hands against the armrests of the office chair as she got up, and resolved not to look back as she left, knowing he'd be sitting small and motionless behind his desk.

An island: no dependency at all on the coast, just loose visual connections to the shore and the vegetation beyond. Also an island: vis-a-vis natural catastrophes, such as volcanic eruptions or floods more robust than the mainland, much less so against anthropogenic influences. The slightest change could cause the entire ecosystem to collapse.

Luisa pushed with both hands against the armrests, and walked out of the room. She didn't look back.

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From a scientific point of view, Luisa had been born into a good era. When the sea walnut was first observed in the Baltic Sea on 17 October 2006, she was still working on her doctoral dissertation. But suddenly there was enormous interest in her research, since nothing was known about the sea walnut, or about comb jellies in general. How did the *mnemiopsis leidyi* reproduce? Why did it glow? If comb jellies were, in fact, the first to branch off from the genealogical tree of living organisms, how did they develop their sensory and gravitational perception and a separate nervous system? And what did this look like, that is how could it look any different from the one we knew, from which our very thoughts emerged, and could this even be conceived of by the latter? Did the sea walnut stand at the beginning or the end of evolution? Would it fundamentally alter the ecosystem? How did it come to be in the Baltic?

How could it survive in the polluted harbor water? Was it, in fact, immortal? Why did it glow?

In the basement of the institute, which could only be reached via a set of stairs next to the elevator, Luisa sat in front of the aquarium - in the dark, behind a heavy door, and with her hair frizzing up from the humidity. The water-processing unit droned loudly, as in the belly of a ship. Luisa drew the plankton up in a dropper, squirted them into the water, and placed the dropper back on the little tray on her lap. She looked on as the plankton formed fine threads in the water. She had, meanwhile, managed to get the sea walnut to survive in the lab aquariums. But while it reproduced in the sea before it was even fully grown, it simply did not want to do so in the aquariums. Luisa fed them, changed the water, regulated the temperature and the salt content, but the comb jellies died before her very eyes. Or when she returned to the basement early the following morning, there was nothing but water in the aquariums, as though they had never been there at all. As though Luisa had not fished them out of the sea, had not fed them plankton on the survey ship, had not carried them in a bucket from the harbor down into this very basement and carefully scooped them into one of the basins, and then hadn't observed them for weeks in order to understand what they needed, and in what quantities, as if Luisa had not existed either. She herself disappeared without a trace along with the jellies. Since it had already been established that the sea walnut could most definitely propagate in the North Sea and the Baltic, and more and more scientists were now studying them, Luisa not only had the feeling that something was being taken away from her and that she herself wasn't making any headway, that she was standing still while others took over the field, but also that out there, there had for a long time been a present, a today, on which all others had agreed in a secret treaty, a present that was no longer of concern to her.

You're thirty-two and have a PhD, Simon had said.

What more do you want?, Ben had asked her.

I wouldn't mind your permanent job in the institute, Ali had said.

The only relationships you have are with your jellyfish, Yuri said.

She was ungrateful, people had repeatedly told her, and she had never denied it.

Luisa lifted the dropper again, and trickled some more plankton into the water. She leaned back. The fact was, she had recently responded to Yuri on his balcony, that she didn't give the jellies names or, in contrast to her colleagues, had never referred to them as sweet or beautiful. Because, Yuri said, this causes a shift in perspective, which is dangerous and actually began already with human settlement, when humans no longer lived with nature, but from it. I know, I know. And later, he continued, philosophers nailed this down, and the

Christians even more so, of course, by declaring people godlike beings who were supposed to subjugate animals. But in the end, people were simply afraid of animals, which is why they maintain that their pets look at them devotedly. Isn't that the case?, Yuri had said. Then, leaning across the table, he added: So, what are you afraid of, Luisa? I'd like to know why you've never spent the night at my place, or why part of you is always somewhere else, or in another time zone, I dunno. Luisa had looked across the street. A park, people in orange lantern light. She had wondered which of them went off to bed on their own at night, and who was having a good time and who simply wanted to spend time with the others. He had never got the irony of it all, she had wanted to say to Yuri, namely that people, over the course of time, had rendered themselves completely superfluous in the natural cycle, and yet believed themselves to be indispensable. You are every bit as dispensable as I am, she had wanted to say to Yuri. But Yuri didn't understand a thing about disappearing.

The pump bubbled. The polyps were barely visible. It looked as though it was merely the lamplight that was sculpting the water. Luisa turned off the light, and left the institute. Outside, night had already fallen. From the darkness of the basement to the darkness of the world. At home, the noises from the other apartments set her up for sleep. The woman with the dog who lived in the floor above was still vacuuming the corner of her bedroom late at night, and moving the wardrobe. Someone in the student apartment next door was clipping their nails. The neighbor on the other side lay down next to her and pulled the cover off her.

Ghostly forms drifted into the black room. Luminous, milky creatures, so delicate they could barely be differentiated from sleep, floated towards each other, and joined up. They slipped into each other, over one another, as they had done for millennia. They grew into one gigantic body. The light became increasingly dense. And whiter and whiter, soon blindingly white, painfully white.

It will pass, a friend had once told her. You cannot live from longing forever.

[...]