On Love and Labour, or a Journal of Work.

Journal of the translation of *Wie hoch die Wasser steigen* by Anja Kampmann

by *Anne Posten*

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Introduction

Anja Kampmann's *Wie hoch die Wasser steigen* follows a character alternately named Waclaw or Wenzel Groszak, a 52 year-old German of Polish extraction who has worked for over a decade on offshore oil platforms. At the beginning of the book, Mátyás, Waclaw's bunkmate and closest companion, disappears in a storm. The death sets off an odyssey of grief, along which we learn how the years of work gradually dissolved Waclaw's ties with the life he came from, replacing it with a single deep friendship and a hopeless cycle of long shifts on decreasingly productive oil platforms alternating with bouts of intoxication, gambling, and exhaustion on shore. As Waclaw travels to Mátyás' Hungarian village, to Italy to find an old friend of his father's, to the Ruhr Valley mining town where he grew up, and finally to the Polish village he'd lived in with his estranged partner Milena, the book charts a reckoning with loss—of a beloved person, of natural resources and a way of life that depends on them—and journey back to life. At every moment, the book is deeply poetic, in the sense that it is driven by the rhythms and sounds of language, in the sense that the story is felt rather than told, evoked through crystalline images and moments that demand scrupulous attention and reward with emotional impact. At the same time, it is built on immaculate specificity underlain by knowledge and facts: of the mechanics and social codes of the contemporary oil industry and the mining industry of the previous generations, of landscapes and cities across the globe, of various languages, and of too many other specialized topics to count, from pigeon racing to suit tailoring.

The project of translating *Wie hoch die Wasser steigen* represents several firsts for me. It is the first book that I ever successfully pitched to a publisher, which means in effect that it's the first book I've translated that I already loved before I started translating it; it is my first book-length project where love of the text was the reason. It is also the first book I've translated that was written by a friend, and the first book championed and edited by a friend: more love. In no other project have I spent even a fraction of the amount of time working with the author as I did on this book (which certainly also

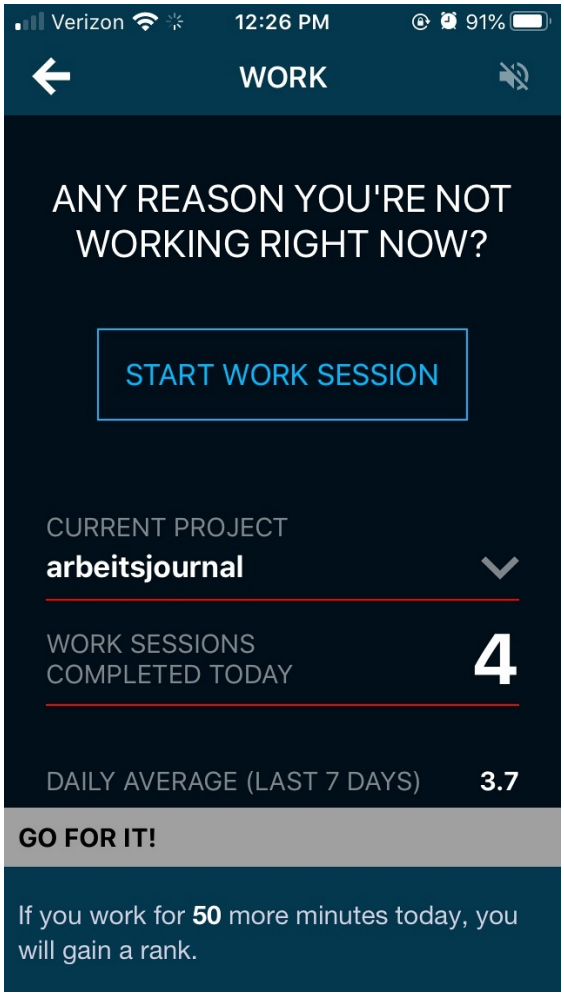
has to do with friendship) or doing research; in this way it was a much more polyphonic project than any other. It was the most difficult translation I've ever worked on, in the sense of the most work calculated by time spent. It is also the easiest translation I've ever worked on, in the sense that it is easy to do what you love.



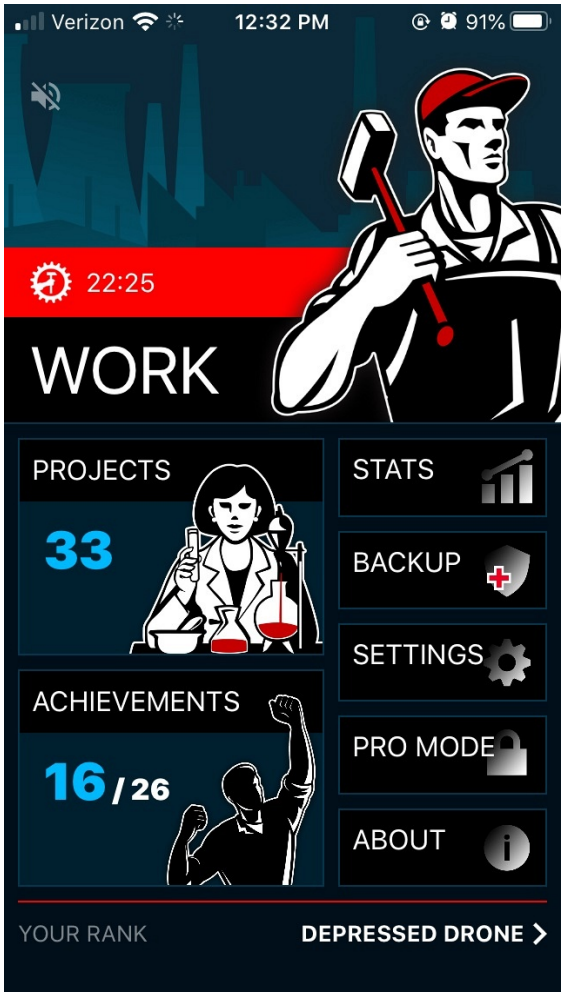
Some questions, I

What is work? Is it gratifying and pleasurable or self-consuming and destructive? Is writing work? Is translation? Is grief? Did Waclaw wreck and risk his body over twelve years of twelve-hour shifts so that I could spend my time playing with language, telling his tale?

A surprisingly popular question at readings—and not just from students or children—is: How long did it take you? The question has always stymied me. What does one count? The time spent reading, thinking, talking? Or only the time spent typing? Does the asker imagine a daily 9 to 5 routine and expect an answer in terms of months or years, taking into account the translator's need to sleep and eat, like other people? Or do they mean, literally, how many minutes did you devote to working on this project and nothing else, as if the division were that simple? This time, partly to satisfy my lifelong obsession with the idea of work, partly in homage to Waclaw's strictly clocked shifts and the world of labor that forms the backdrop of the book, I decided to count. I downloaded an app for the literal-minded, literally named "Productivity Challenge Timer" and decorated with vaguely Soviet-looking icons representing people who are, unequivocally, working. The timer is running as I type this; in a few minutes a gong will go off, signaling a five-minute break, should I choose to take it. When the break is over a sharp gym teacher's (prison guard's?) whistle will tell me it's time to get back to it, and the sound will repeat at diminishing intervals, accompanied by aggressive, guilt-inducing aphorisms until I "punch the clock" again. As average daily hours worked increases, one rises through ranks from "unrepentant slacker" to "bored attendant" and many more that I did not reach. As the book goes to press, sometime around now, I have worked 236 hours and 21 minutes on it, for an average of 1 hour and 22 minutes a day (the app is quick to point out that every day is a work day, so the figure is the average of time spend across *all days*, including those on which I did no work at all. However you look at it, it's laughably little.


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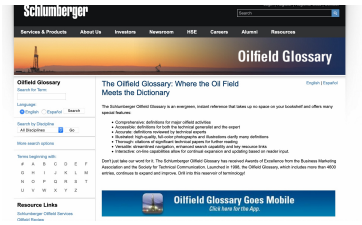


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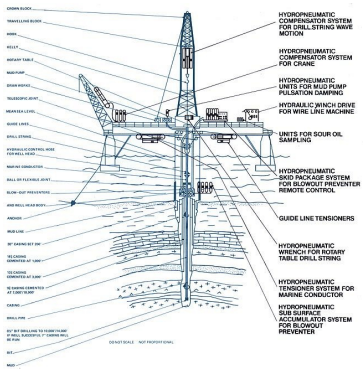
What was I doing all that time, at all those desks and tables, in all those trains and hotel rooms? Perhaps it makes sense, finally, to divide the work into two categories—research (work?) and writing (not-work?) and address them separately, though it was important to me not to separate them in practice. Maybe to assure myself, as usual, that I was truly "working" the whole time, maybe to keep the one from swallowing the other and vice versa.

Immediately in *Wie hoch die Wasser steigen* the reader encounters a world familiar to only a small percent of the population, and one particularly distant both to the world I inhabit as a literary translator and to the situation in which the book is predominantly received. I have several times heard readers or critics refer to Waclaw, an oil worker, as a figure "on the margins of society"—an ironic truth that rests less on his being a manual laborer than on his workplace being geographically on the margins and therefore inaccessible to most. Kampmann's language evokes this world in a way that makes the unfamiliar so present that it feels like a matter of course. Specialized vocabulary is used with such necessity and precision that it does not alienate or confuse but rather draws the reader in. It is made almost magically comprehensible; it never, ever feels like jargon. When in the course of my research I watched videos like this one, I had the odd feeling that I had already seen the images, been there, met the figures captured in the background. If the camera would have focused for a moment on the men in the hallways, the canteen, in the platform's gym, I could have named them: Petrov, Shane, Francis—supporting characters in the book.

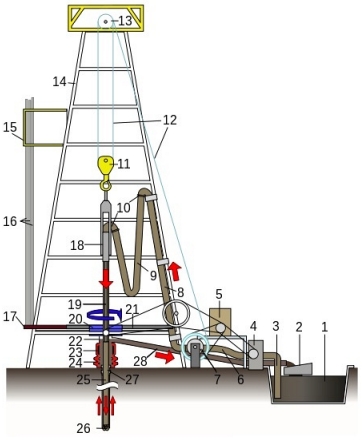
But it is one thing to experience this effect, and another to attempt to create it. An accurate reproduction of this feeling at least begins with a closer look than the one (hopefully, if the trick works) taken by a reader. First page of the first chapter: What are *Stahltampen,* what is a *Trittbrett,* the *Bohrturm* and above all *Inselbeine?* What kind of *Stiften,* what *Gurt*? These are questions that the reader needn't ask, because the meanings are as clear as they need to be. The translator, on the other hand, must know the answers well enough to keep the reader from asking. Then come hours spent comparing diagrams, matching picture to picture and word to word and realizing how little a diagram can tell you when you know nothing of the reality to which it refers, cannot imagine it in motion, cannot imagine where a man might be able to put his weight on a structure, or how he could get an arm caught in a machine. A diagram does not suggest how a man can disappear in a storm and never be found.



Anne Posten:
https://www.glossary.oilfield.slb.com/



Anne Posten



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I am still not sure how it all works, but I can say now without checking which part of the above drawing is the monkeyboard.[1]

Then there were times when, having painstakingly located the appropriate term in English, I opted not to use it, moments when accuracy in English would have betrayed the poetry and tipped into the realm of jargon, or created an effect that, for whatever reason, I perceived as different from that of the German. Or other moments when, for all the vivid truth of the language, it left me at a loss. It is tempting, especially as a writer or reader, having experienced the pleasure of language's magical successes, to imagine that a clear description must represent reality unambiguously if one only reads closely enough. To test this hypothesis, please draw the following apparatus:

> "Über dem Ring spannte sich ein spitz zulaufendes Netz aus groben Tauen, an denen sich die Arbeiter, wenn sie in die Höhe gehoben wurden, festhielten."

My answer[2] fulfills the description perfectly, but seems terrifyingly unlikely. Still, when I put my translation, born of the understanding depicted in my drawing, to a rig worker, it was not the description of the construction which alarmed him:

> *Anne: This is a section I had trouble picturing, and I don't know if what I've written makes any sense. Does it? Is slewing crane right, and all this business with the net and the ropes? "Waclaw had been out barely a year and watched anxiously as the slewing crane began to move, and lowered the big ring. Over the ring stretched a tapered net of heavy ropes, which the workers held onto when they were lifted up. Bringing prostitutes or others onto the platform wasn't allowed; the fear of piracy was great, and the possibility that instead of Caribbean rum the crates might contain a detonator had been drummed into their minds—particularly those of the younger ones."*
>
> *Andrew: Jesus, prostitutes and rum on a transport basket? Are they taking applications? Right so slewing is correct term, when the crane moves horizontal on its axis from left to right. The "big ring" is called a personell transport basket, which is a tapered design with stiff nets to hold onto as the crane moves you from rig to crew boat.*

The translation was fine, it seemed, but I could only let the problem go once I saw that the workers were safe — or at least marginally safer than I had been imagining.



Anne Posten

It is an odd experience, after spending so much time in world made of words, a world that mirrors the real one so convincingly that one feels as if one has actually experienced something new, to be confronted by representatives of the lived reality of that world. On a research trip to Aberdeen I somehow expected a picturesque working harbor, harsh perhaps but beautiful the way language is beautiful, and I was met instead with hulking industrial yards that seemed crushingly inhuman. They were not beautiful, and their effect on my mood was chilling. To me, the words of the book conjured a kind of vivid fantasy world, but when I put my questions to Andrew, the magical creature, as it were, could suddenly talk back, and the dangers became palpable.

> *Anne: Are "creeping gases" a thing? (Some kind of danger on an oil rig, something that could cause an explosion?)*
>
> *Andrew: Right, so what you are referring to is called a "kick". A drilling kick is an influx of gas or oil into the drilling fluid (called Mud which is a mixture of base oil and barite). So when you drill a well, the gases and oil that you are trying to find are under extreme pressure due to the weight of the earth, sea, ect above it. They settle in these little pockets (Called pay dirt) and compress*

> *into ridiculous amounts of pressure. As you drill into the pay dirt, or pockets, you are essentially relieving the pressure to atmosphere through your drilled hole. To keep mother earth from coming up the drilled well, and up through the rotary table, you keep dense fluid on top of the well. Hydrostatic pressure is essentially height x density, so you can calculate how much pressure you need on the pay dirt to stop a "kick" by increasing the density of the drilling mud, thus increasing the counter acting pressure on the gas/oil pocket. The opposite can also happen, where you have too much mud pressure, and the formation you are drilling in fails and you take a "loss" where the mud goes into the formation. Long story short, gas creeping into the mud is a pre-cursor to a kick, which could lead to a blow out.*
>
> *Anne: Does this make sense: "The big tongs, they said, had sprung back and smashed into his shoulder; his head had hit one of the structures as he fell." Are big tongs a thing? I think they're supposed to be tripping pipe here, but I'm not sure. And is there a more specific word for "structures"? Something someone's head could hit in the accident that's being described?*
>
> *Andrew: Manual pipe tongs are indeed a thing, and they are dangerous as hell. Current industry uses electro-hydraulic tongs, with no persons involved for tripping in our out. For structure, I would use "derrick" as every drill floor structure is a derrick.*

Though perhaps the most exotic and attention-grabbing, the oil industry was only one of the many topics of my research, and ironically, it was actually one of the more accessible realms, as far as translation is concerned. Oil and its extraction is, for better or worse, a universal reality; the processes and culture are unified, truly international. Though Kampmann's Waclaw speaks German, the "real" Waclaw would have spent the majority of his professional life, including his relationship to Mátyás, in English.[3] Global English is the industry standard; there are no pockets of cultural specificity that elude translation into Standard Written English because the terms and codes in Kampmann's book are in a sense themselves translations *from* English, if of a slightly different dialect.

The same cannot be said for the mining culture of the Ruhr Valley, which had its heyday at a time when the globalization of today was unimaginable. Though workers like Waclaw's father and the latter's best friend came from places like Poland and Italy, respectively, they did not, by and large, come from Australia or Iran, and Waclaw's alternate name, Wenzel, hints at a strong assimilationist tendency. The friend known to Waclaw as Alois was born in Italy as Enzo. The culture of the post-war *Ruhrpott* cannot be separated from its language, and these can only be compared to the culture and language of mining communities in English-speaking countries, not substituted or equated. The words *Vierspänner* or *Kniffte,* to say nothing of *Glückauf*, signal something much larger and more specific than a house, a sandwich, or a greeting. Kampmann exploits the totemic value of the language and a reader, in German or English, must accept this irreducibility and be led past these houses and no others.



Anne Posten

In any language, they must either recognize from experience what the words represent or travel into unfamiliar territory and learn through powerful and well-engineered prose to understand how a word meaning *smokestack* can contain a whole history and way of life. Does my writing succeed in this? I don't know. But I don't know whether Kampmann's does either. My understanding was won in no small part from conversation with Anja, and our skype conversations with were accompanied by a gallery of images and links that suggest the breadth and variety of the research that went into the book, on both her side and mine. I had a lot of help in my learning beyond what was on the page. Neither author nor translator can control the experiences of their readers. But I am optimistic for reasons that have more to do with love than with labor.

Some questions, II

What does it mean to love a text? And what does it mean to translate a text that one loves? Is it a selfless act, a service? Or is it, in fact, an act of extreme egocentrism and self-assertion, occupation, even possession?

Love travels through the body. When the love is between people, what this means is obvious enough. When the love is between a person and a text, what this means, to me, at least, is that the translation of a beloved text relies heavily on intuition, impulse—the kind of "knowledge" stored in the body rather than in the mind. An important reference point for my understanding of this process is music. Before I was a translator, I was a musician, and I have always been attracted to texts in which sound is important—a certain rhythm, a certain feel for how language can sing more than say: the understanding of language on which poetry rests. When playing a piece of written music, the performer makes choices in motion, on a subconscious level—what she has felt, heard, and experienced over a lifetime is stored in the memory of the body and is used to make physical decisions that convey her "understanding" of the piece, often referred to as interpretation. There is in the performance of music rarely the talk of betrayal or "wrong" interpretation that is often applied to translation, because in music it is understood that there is nothing to betray: before the musician plays the music, it simply has not existed in a form a listener can experience.

My experience of translating a beloved text is similar. I read Anja's text, I "hear" it in

my mind, and then I attempt to convey my “understanding” of it—the way it has worked on me, sounded to me, made me feel—back to the reader in a form she can experience. Less from calculation, conscious choice-making, than from intuitive execution based on knowledge stored in the body. Naturally, a solid logic can be reconstructed later—the body is not random or stupid—and naturally there are times of struggle and pause for consideration. But this consideration is farther from “what does this mean and how can I say it correctly in English,” and closer to “what do I hear, and how can I make that happen on the page? What resonates with my understanding, what feels right?”

I remember very specifically the beginning of my work on *High as the Waters Rise*, the warming up process of the first chapter. Knowing how it had to sound, but still having to train myself to produce that sound: finger exercises, work with the metronome, experiments with bow angle and attack. I remember the feeling of settling in, like matching a starting pitch, so that one’s own note becomes indistinguishable from those of the others. Slipping, thereby, into the consciousness of the character and understanding, mostly, why an image suddenly surfaces, to what an allusive comment refers. This was one of the most fascinating and challenging aspects of this text in particular and another moment of love. Though written in the third person, the story of *Wie hoch die Wasser steigen* is told through Waclaw’s perception: a narrative is constructed of what he sees, hears, and senses around him, and, crucially, of what he remembers. What he consciously thinks and feels is also reported—but what we are told of this is largely filtered through his emotional vocabulary, which is somewhat limited. There is almost no explicit mention of sadness or grief. Most often, what he knows is that he feels exhausted. The reader must therefore get close enough to Waclaw to understand what it means for him to have a memory surface at a particular time, and, more and more, even to catch from subtle hints what memory might be referred to when all that is given is an image.

Mostly, this works, and having the sense of being able to follow the character so closely—to know him, in a way, better than he knows himself—is exhilarating. But the technique is an extremely demanding one, and there are necessarily moments where the reader’s consciousness will be too far from Waclaw’s (Anja’s) to understand perfectly. As I have noticed encountering the readings of other translators, editors, and copyeditors, these moments are bound to be different for every reader. I struggled, for example, to make sense of this passage, which arises at a moment when Waclaw is close to Mátyás’ past, but reports a scene Waclaw himself could not have known about:

> "Mátyás was clammy and freezing when his mother found him at daybreak. She had laid firewood in the oven, her hands shaking as she tried to light the matches, she was barefoot and felt it running cold down her thighs, and while she squatted and stared in front of her, her gaze wandered out into the first light and the apple tree with its thin, knotted crown, and there was a shadow within it, her boy lay with his head on the moss and his arms like claws around the branch, and didn’t come down, after she had run up the hill in a soundless line and grabbed him and didn’t let go until the heat of the bathwater reached his neck, and he finally fell asleep under three down quilts and she looked down at herself, furtively and *suddenly old*, that’s what she thought as she stood knee-deep in the leftover lukewarm water, soaping herself until her hands were blue, and the scent of the fine lavender soap drove away all thoughts of uniforms and boots in the night and the cold emanating from the other person, of the hairy hand, after the door was

> closed and she just tried to be *quiet*, always *quiet*, *because of the children*, and on awaking a cold light, pale with rage, rose over the houses and the sheds, and only when she found her son clinging to the tree did she understand that the light wasn't angry but powerless, and her hair hung down in long strands in the lukewarm water, the soap helped nothing."

In retrospect, I can imagine a reader being sensitive enough to previous mentions of Mátyás family's exile to the countryside after the political murder of his father to understand that the passage deals with the mother's rape by a soldier. But this wasn't, until I spoke to Anja, where the images had led me.

Other moments felt perfectly obvious. Haven't you been paying attention? I sometimes wanted to demand of other readers. It's perfectly clear, how could you possibly have missed that the "propeller" referred to is actually a lowly ceiling fan? How could you take the "shadings" on a sea chart for lost souls rather than unfathomable depths? In fact, the possibilities of these sometimes fanciful "misreadings" is part of the beauty of Kampmann's text. Close attention and an ear for—a sympathy or love for—the language will lead a reader to a resonant understanding of the story, but this requires personal involvement, which sometimes leads to a reading different than the one imagined by the author. Waclaw and his story will sometimes break free.

By sheer chance, the day I sent *High as the Waters Rise* to my editor coincided with the day Anja Kampmann accepted a major literary award. I was there, in a cacophonous and incongruous beer tent outside of Frankfurt, rather undeservedly in a reserved seat at the front table, to hear her talk about poetry and storytelling and her book. I can't summarize what she said because I was close to tears as soon as she opened her mouth, and as soon as it was marginally appropriate to do so, I ran away and sobbed. I was moved, certainly, by pride and friendship, and also by a certain feeling of loss: the knowledge that the time I had spent with the text as my daily companion was over. Waclaw would never say or perceive anything new, ever again, and I already missed him keenly. But I think in retrospect that my tears also had another source. Watching Anja speak—the author, the consciousness who had created the book I had just translated—was to see the text embodied, the writing continuing, brilliant and alive and absolutely separate from me. The pain stemmed from having created a text that I felt deeply satisfied with, that felt deeply right and true, as if every word and rhythm were the only ones possible for Waclaw, Anja, to speak in English, but which at the very same time somehow could not possibly ever do them justice, I suddenly felt.

We talk, in art—in painting, photography, writing—of "capturing" something. Fixing a feeling, or some little chunk of reality, in the given medium so that it is there for others to see, as in a zoo—so that it cannot escape. This is surely a very satisfying feeling, for both maker and perceiver. I know because this is very much what it felt like to write this translation. I was making something happen in language, making out of language something that would resonate, that a person could read to feel or experience or understand something, and the success of this effect rested on my craft, on my—in the musical sense—interpretation. The problem is that capturing a book is not the same as capturing reality.[4] The "justice" one wishes to do to a text in translation is easily taken for some kind of final act, a transformative replacement: now that I have done my justice to this text, the case is closed, the original—problematic because not

universally accessible—has been solved. But my translation, in the end, cannot embody *Wie hoch die Wasser steigen* in the sense of replacing it. It can only, by definition, split off from it.

For literature and the world, this is a wonderful thing. But to learn that the beloved is not you, and can never be fully possessed, is no easy thing. As I watched Anja speak, I saw that the sorcerer's broom had been chopped in half, and the one half, the original, remained blithely sweeping away, dancing, living, doing whatever it felt like, when I had hoped in chopping to usurp its power. How to reconcile the joy of having a new broom with the sorrow that any number of other brooms can keep sweeping, outside of our control, perhaps even working against us? The relief that the work is over with the despair that the work will never, ever be over? The truth is that on some level I wanted to translate *Wie hoch die Wasser steigen* in the first place because I wanted it to become my own. It is not a nice impulse.

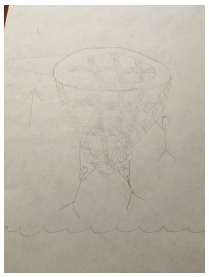
Conclusion

Is the love that leads one to translate the wrong kind of love? Is it the love of a child who wants to supersede its mother, a jealous partner, a patriot turned dictator? Would I be writing this if it were?

Translators are often thought of as very generous people: shying from the spotlight, devoted to the service of an author or a text, fostering the survival and distribution of literature with no expectation of recognition or personal gain, paid the bare minimum to make the job feasible and often not even that. There is still a whiff of spinsterdom about the activity. This has always struck me as odd. Not just because of the—rather passionate—feelings and motivations I've described, but because translation, regardless of the translator, is the thing that gives. Translation makes more brooms no matter what the translator wants. And it gives, as well, to the translator. It gives, over and over again, a lesson that one needs a lifetime to learn: how to love.

Endnoten

1 It's 15.
2



3 This is one of the few aspects of the finished book with which I am dissatisfied. How can one transmit, in hegemonic English, a fictional linguistic layering that has already to some extent been erased in the “translation” that is the “original”? Though in *Wie hoch die Wasser steigen* the characters’ words are presented mostly in German, they are often “spoken” in English—and frequently by non-native speakers to non-native speakers. The text hints at this: occasionally words or phrases are in English, but there is then no way to “leave” them in English in translation so that the difference, itself only a brief performance of linguistic complexity, will be legible. Other languages—Italian, Hungarian, Polish—also occasionally appear, sometimes glossed, sometimes not, further complicating the question of who is speaking what language when and what is being understood—though this is more easily made present in translation.

4 At the risk of belaboring the analogy, you don’t really hear people say that Mitsuko Uchida “captures” Mozart, much less reality. Music, again, seems to work differently.



Anne Posten translates prose, poetry, and drama from German. The recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship, her translations of authors such as Peter Bichsel, Carl Seelig, Thomas Brasch, Tankred Dorst, Anna Katharina Hahn, and Anja Kampmann have appeared with Catapult, New Directions, Christine Burgin/The University of Chicago, *Music and Literature, n+1*, and *VICE*, among others. Her translation of Anja Kampmann’s *High as the Waters Rise* was shortlisted for the National Book Award. She is based in Berlin.

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