Translation Tuesday: An Excerpt from *Lord of the Waters* by Giuseppe Zucco

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So, this was where all the rain we'd been missing for months had got to...

*For this week's **Translation Tuesday**, we bring you a story of the calm before the storm. Picture the sky moments before a fierce downpour: dark, oppressive, hanging over your head like a threat. This excerpt, taken from **Italian** writer **Giuseppe Zucco**'s novel* Lord of the Waters*, imagines a life suspended in that moment, where the rain never comes. As the external world slows to a standstill, one family's internal world begins to change. Freed from the obligations of social conventions, work, and school, they quickly descend into a chaotic, easy existence of games, junk food, and neglect, rewriting their familiar dynamics. Beneath their frantic cheerfulness is a persistent anxiety, as they wonder when the amassed rain will finally hit. Translator **Antonella Lettieri** smoothly captures these currents, refracted through the child narrator's unaffected voice.*

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Amongst all the children, I was the first to look up at the sky and see it rear up. I didn't quite see but rather felt a vast wave soar above me.

I ducked immediately, covered my head with my arms, and, thus crouching, prayed that that wave would not pull me under and wreck me upon the lamp posts and the buildings.

As I closed my eyes, I tried to picture my mother and father, hoping it would help me muster up some courage. All I could see, though, was that gurgling scene, which yet had a certain cheerfulness to it: all the other children and I doing mad somersaults inside the roiling heart of a wave fallen from the sky, our little heads bobbing atop the horrific crests of that brilliant white foam.

My sorrow lasted a second or two; then, since no water came upon us and no dreadful flood crashed down on my head, I opened my eyes again.

The other children, too, were crouching down on the ground with their arms over their heads, except for a couple who were still sitting on the swing, rigidly clinging onto the chains, complying with its mechanical squeaking. Unable to speak, unable to breathe, we stared at each other: it was just an instant, then we darted off. Moments ago, we were a flock of birds frozen onto the cement of the forecourt—a ball bouncing away the only sign of life—but now we were scurrying chaotically, scattering in every direction like hares before a lurcher.

I reached the building where I lived, rang the bell, rang again, banged on the front door because it wouldn't open, and as soon as I was let in, I devoured the seven flights of stairs, slipped through the open door, and ran into the corridor, which now seemed oh-so-long to me. Mum, I shouted, Dad, I shouted, and I didn't stop shouting until I finally reached the kitchen and saw them.

But as soon as I touched my mother and buried my face in her T-shirt, I was struck dumb, not only because I was so happy to be with her, but mostly because I was ashamed, pained even, to have shown fear despite having repeated till I was blue in the face that I was a big kid now, and I wasn't scared of anything—not even of those middle schoolers who had once threatened me with a penknife and bound me by my wrists and ankles to a rusted gate.

My mother put a hand on my head and kept it there, coldly, as if I wasn't myself, and my head wasn't the head she'd always tended to, given she was the one who cut my hair—a detail I was careful not advertise, considering that all the other children went to the barber, just like my father did, and one of them had already had a certain little moustache of his shaven, a thing that wasn't even a real moustache, more like a gross string of big hairy spiders crawling across his upper lip.

So I broke away from my mother and took a step towards my father. Now, nothing stopped me from seeing what was bringing them together, making them speechless, leaving them transfixed in the kitchen, and the TV entranced me too, steeping us all in the pale blue light dripping from its screen.

So, this was where all the rain we'd been missing for months had got to: I learnt there and then that, rather than falling down, as was natural, it had been inexplicably amassing up there, getting stuck and flooding the sky, and now was hanging above our heads like a sea of fresh water rippled with waves.

So, as I turned white and then got some of my colour back thanks to the clean, pacified image of that thing building up in the sky that the TV offered me, a thing that was so terrifying but also so beautiful to look at, I'd have wanted to explain to my parents that this was indeed what I'd seen out there with the other children, that this was what had forced me to retreat shamefully inside the house, but the news anchor, who was reporting live, said, in a little squeak, It's unbelievable, he said It can't be, he said Lord, have mercy on us, and so he left me utterly speechless.

My father turned off the TV. He stepped to the window and hooked his eyes up there, where the water was sharpening its most horrific crests. He turned around, and his face was so expressive that we could almost hear him. He began pacing around the table, once, twice, three times, his head hanging low, almost as if looking for something on the floor.

When I said Dad, you're making my head spin, my father kept marching around the table, then stopped right in front of me, staring at me with wild eyes, as if I'd just said something out of order and all that water heaping up in the sky was my fault.

And you, my father said, pointing at me and speaking as if he'd just conquered the last word in a long, well-reasoned conversation. From now on, no more school. Is that understood?

Then, as he breathed hard and rubbed his hand on his balding forehead, my father said that, should the dreadful water come crashing down from the sky, that water would snap us apart, that water would tear us asunder, and so we had to stay here, shut up in the house, sticking together, so that, were the end of the world to come, then the end of the world would be on our terms: Mum, Dad, and I, so close we could hold hands. Nothing could ever divide what had forever been bonding us.

My mother said You can't even pay the bills, and now you want to dictate your terms to the end of the world.

Two transparent rivulets sprang from my father's eyes. He let his hands flop down and cried his eyes out, the disgrace of a trickle of spit drooling from his rickety lips further adding to all that childish water.

Had it been down to me, I would've passed out so that I didn't have to see any more. Between the water stuck in the sky and my father crying, my father crying was more frightening, as if the person who was standing in front of me babbling without knowing what to do with his hands and smearing the collar of his shirt with tears and spittle were the diminished, repugnant version of my father, the very same man who had once got into a brawl in garage because he couldn't afford to pay for a new carburettor: better to be taken for a son of a bitch than a beggar, my father had explained at the time, having taken me with him to teach me an important life lesson.

However, though in tears, my father had just said that I would no longer go to school, and I became happiness incarnate. I would no longer be forced to wake up early in the morning, I would no longer have to endure my father calling me a little girlie and hooting at me when my school smock happened to twirl like a skirt around my knees, I would no longer have to flee from the middle schoolers who used to chase me and the other children around and would surround us in the street, bar our way, and lift us upside down by our feet, shaking us in the hope that little brooks of jingling coins would fall from our pockets, as if we were their own piggy banks.

Moving in slowly, I put a hand into my father's, and his juddering propagated from his shoulders to mine.

Spurred by all that shaking, I, too, might have started crying, if my mother hadn't come closer to us and said That's enough now, as she undid my father's long tears, which were tied like laces in a shiny knot under his chin, by wiping his cheekbones with her thumbs and polishing his face with her open palms.

Little by little, my father calmed down and stared at my mother. His gaze was puzzled, though, as if he didn't recognise her, and his glassy eyes must have affected my mother more than anything else, given that she immediately turned her back to us and went to the window, looking at the sky to accept the fact that that dreadful block of water was still up there.

It's so fucking humid today, my mother said in a small voice as she lit a cigarette, her hands shaking, and leant her forehead against the glass.

So I stopped going to school, took to waking up later and later in the morning, and never even opened my books. The poems and the multiplication tables we had to learn by heart became more remote than the rumbling of thunder after a storm.

Now I had a whole new time that was all for myself, and I could fill as I pleased, so I indulged my every whim. Amongst the many games I invented, the one I liked the best and gave me a pleasure that reverberated like whiplash across my happy little body was to run up to the window in my room, aim my gaze up there, shout The sky is *wetting* its appetite, and then run away to hide under my bed as I tried to suppress my laugh.

My mother, too, was infected by my high spirits: she'd chase after me, shout I'll catch you, I'll catch you, snatch at me with her long hands, torture me with her tickling, and then rub her forehead against mine.

Once, my mother took her lipstick out of her handbag, which was always overflowing with receipts and cigarettes, and, her eyes wide open, said Come here, you two, then drew red marks on our cheeks, first me, then my father, and we played cowboys and Indians, flapping our hands in front of our mouths and howling from room to room.

Another time, we played statues in the corridor until we collapsed to the floor, totally spent, and remained piled one on top of the other until we eventually closed our eyes and fell asleep.

I'd never seen my mother behave like this, and maybe even my father had never seen her skip around like a little girl. This delighted him so much that, like a game amidst other games, my father would lick my mother's neck when she least expected it, or press his lips onto a new, utterly surprising spot on her body.

Perhaps my mother realised right away the endless possibilities opened up by our new circumstances, the odd paradox of it all. The more the water in the sky weighed down upon us, the more it relieved us from all duties and commitments: indeed, my mother quit her job at the dry cleaner's the day after my father forbade me from going back to school.

My mother said she was done with the swollen ankles, sore back, and scalded fingers, and with the oppressive heat and that smell, so sweet, that clung onto her, onto her skin and hair, to the point that, on the bus home, everyone resentfully shuffled away from her, craning their necks the other way and lifting their noses in the air, so much did she stink of cleanliness.

If we must die, it's better to die in freedom than in servitude, my mother said as she smoked a cigarette. In uttering these words, she stared at my father, she stared at me, as if she was finally in the position of settling a score with both of us. From that moment onwards, she stopped cleaning the house, washing our clothes, and cooking our meals, and neither did she again devote any slice of her time to my body, that is, to tending to my most intimate recesses under the shower, taming my hair with the hair dryer, and forcing me to brush my teeth before bed.

So I discovered that she'd harassed me for so long, scrubbing me in the tub, making my eyes sting with soap, cutting my nails so short that no black substance could ever nestle beneath them, indeed because she loved me—the flesh of her own flesh eventually becoming as perfumed and shining as the whitest of ceramic cherubs on a church altar—but mostly because she didn't want to lose face with the other children and their mothers. My white school smock, always starched and smelling so sweet and pulsating so bright, was the mark of a different destiny from everyone else's, as if I were the Christmas star of my own self, announcing, amongst the teeming mass of dirtier, needier children, the radiance of my own future.

But now that she no longer had to take me to school in the morning, now that she was no longer comparing me to the other children and herself to the other mothers, the danger of being shamed had subsided all of a sudden and my mother had stopped washing me obsessively, effectively losing any interest in the matter, and I experienced an utterly new elation.

Soon, my flesh started ringing the rancid note of curdled sweat, and my hair escaped the tyranny of the side parting to rise in tall crests.

I stopped brushing altogether now that my mother was no longer checking on me, and soon started feeling a rough, almost grainy patina when I ran my tongue across my teeth. Further inspection in the mirror showed they'd turned a revolting pale yellow.

There it is, I thought as I savoured that sourish, pasty taste fermenting in my mouth. This is the taste of freedom.

I'd sleep poorly at night, a muggy, sticky sleep, and dream about the middle schoolers wearing soaking-wet clothes, and about puddles dotted around the kitchen, and about the drawers in my wardrobe being full of water. Sometimes, when I flushed the toilet in my dreams, water would overflow from the bowl and flood the bathroom.

The problem was that, as I dreamt, I knew perfectly well where all that water came from: for days now, I'd seen nothing else in the sky and on TV. It was as if my mind didn't want to admit it openly, as if it were hiding it or speaking in riddles: I believed that I feared nothing, yet in my dreams I was such a scaredy-cat that I couldn't even call things by their own names. We were all going to be crushed by that immense block of water, so what? Why not just acknowledge it and at least find some pleasure in this new awareness of ours?

In the morning, though, when I peeled myself out of bed, I was a new person, and, in this regard, my mother helped me more than anything else. Because she'd quit her job, my mother no longer had bags under her eyes or bad skin. Now, a loud blush set her cheeks ablaze, as if she'd come to me after a wild run. And she was always cheerful, and I cheerfully responded to such cheerfulness. We had breakfast together and watched all sorts of documentaries about animals, ancient Egypt, the Second World War, and films where the police were particularly trigger-happy. We skipped rope and played blind man's buff, and once, when I was blindfolded, I thought I was about to catch my mother, or my father, but instead I smashed my face against the wall. Still, I didn't cry, I tried hard not to cry, as there was no need to add more water to the water already weighing down on our heads.

In the evening, it could certainly happen that, as we looked at one another in the face, we might avert our eyes because we could feel this was not genuine cheerfulness, as if there was something forced, something quite intentional, in the way we laughed, as if the real purpose of our cheerfulness was to cover up the weeping and gnashing of teeth brought about by the water hanging in the sky; but this only ever lasted an instant, and in the end it was always my father who pulled out the whitest of bunny rabbits from that black top hat, coming up with one silly idea or another.

For example, it was his idea to have my mother pierce our lobes with a sterilised needle so we could wear an earring like pirates, and it was also his idea to teach me how to smoke. My father lit a cigarette and handed it to me. Breathe in, breathe in, he said. And how my mother and my father laughed when I started to cough desperately, positive that my eyes were about to burst from their sockets.

But I must admit that it was one of the best games my father ever came up with. After all, it was like a second baptism, wasn't it? I had smoked, I had become a man, and now I could die under the crash of that dreadful water, as if I had skipped ahead and already had hair on my chest and legs, and had already squandered every joy from life, and already nursed inside me only certain delusions as acrid as that smoke that didn't want to leave my lungs.

One afternoon, we killed time looking out of the window. Giant helicopters, like shiny blowflies, were climbing in the air. We learnt from the news that a team of scientists was going all the way up there to take some water samples so they could study it and try to understand why it'd got stuck at that altitude in the sky, jammed like a guillotine.

My parents observed the whole thing with amused looks. I too laughed and pointed at the helicopter that, for a moment, looked as if it was swerving wildly and losing control. However, I was trembling at the thought that, as soon as the scientists touched the water, a mysterious balance would be broken and an unspeakable disaster would be inexorably set into motion.

But nothing happened, so I joined my parents on the sofa, who were watching the manoeuvres of the helicopters on TV and were caressing each other from time to time, or French kissing, or munching on popcorn and crisps. I touched none of that stuff, not even when my mother put it right under my nose and said Come on, have at least a crisp, why don't you? You haven't eaten a thing since breakfast.

My mother had stopped cooking altogether, and my father, who didn't even know how to boil an egg, had been raiding the supermarket for reduced items. So, for days and days now we'd been eating nothing but snacks, popcorn, crisps, and a whole array of meals that the rectangular mouth of the microwave swallowed frozen and then spat out cooked and smelling of their sickly smell.

Late at night, feeling utterly queasy and with a tummy ache, I'd grind my teeth and even dream about soup, boiled vegetables, or that greenish thin broth where even more putrid vegetable fibres floated, all that stuff I used to loathe with all of myself and in which I'd now be ecstatic to plunge my entire body, as if it were some miracle water.

The scientists—bald, their cheekbones prominent on their faces—sat down at a long table covered by a green cloth. My mother, my father, and I never stirred from that endless live coverage, not even to go to the bathroom. We even held hands, at one point.

Before the spokesperson returned his verdict, the microphone amplified the rustling of the cuffs on his white coat, causing an electrostatic crackling that instantly parched my lips, as well as those of billions of viewers all around the world.

The most accurate testing had come up with a result beyond doubt. That water was just water, and nothing else. This caused even more bewilderment: had that water been made of alien particles, we could have at least attributed this inexplicable event to the certainty of a cause. Indeed, there was a TV host who had gathered a multitude of followers by coming up with a theory so evocative as to even sound plausible. According to him, some mysterious inhabitants of a galaxy far away had had the courtesy of delivering to our sky that calling card of sorts before descending upon us and taking over the planet, thus making it known right away that they were in charge, and leaving us to foresee the impending extinction of our species.

But no, not only did this occurrence remain silent, inexplicable, devoid of even the shadow of a cause, it even inevitably took a turn for the worse. It was as if the whirling of the rotors from the helicopters up there truly had tickled that belly of water, rousing a creature that, until then, had been horribly present but dormant.

All of a sudden, the water thickened, congealed, darkened, making the sky heavier. Just moments before, sunlight had been piercing through that block of water without issue, turning to gold the baby leaves on the trees and the wing mirrors of cars; now, instead, it'd become murky, choppy, impressing a bluish pulse onto everything, as if we were all at the bottom of a colossal swimming pool.

I turned white. My father started crying so impotently, so powerlessly, that in the long run he'd have certainly melted into a puddle of tears. My mother walked up to him in a huff and was forced to wipe his cheeks; my father took a long time before calming down, and when my mother was finally done soothing him, she was so bewildered she couldn't even light herself a cigarette and had to sit down on the sofa, sinking into it like a rock into a water darker than the one stuck in the sky.

After a short while, having noticed that I was just standing there, not knowing where to put myself and my fear, my mother said Come here, and her words were accompanied by her hand patting the sofa. I immediately went to sit next to her, and my mother pulled me closer, stunning me with the acrid warmth of her terrified body, and started caressing me, caressing me slowly, meticulously, until not even the tiniest spot on my face was left devoid of her caresses.

Perhaps it was then that I realised the nature of my mother's caresses. Or maybe not, it was a few days later, when we all seemed to have got used to that watery atmosphere that soaked the cats, the trees, the cars, and the buildings with blue. As she rubbed her hands on me with indescribable maternal rapture, and notwithstanding my own dejection, a spark would course through me and I'd be immediately enveloped in such flames that not even all the water in the sky could ever extinguish, flames that, rather than consume me, would ride up my arteries like fresh blood, making me alive amongst living things.

But the insistence of my mother's hands, the obsessiveness of her caresses that seemed to reach me in any room I entered—as if little birds were constantly taking wing from my mother's body to then alight onto mine at the end of their mad arcs—also made me realise that, by caressing me and doting on me, my mother was using me as an amulet, making of her love for me one of those underground shelters I'd seen in a documentary about the Second World War, a shelter into which she could lower herself never to come out again, no longer touched by the threats of the outside world.

My father, too, caught wind of the opportunity and followed my mother into that underground shelter.

And I was no less despicable than the two of them. Though I knew how foetid the well was from whence gushed the made-up stories my mother and father told me to lull me into slumber, I availed myself of them every night to fall asleep, entirely at peace. And when my mother started cooking again, given that my stomach had taken to rumbling something awful at the mere smell of crisps and ready-made dinners, tingeing my cheeks with a deathlike yellow, I polished off everything and benefited immensely from the clear broths, the boiled vegetables, and the soups that slowly but surely loosened the clenched fist of my stomach and eventually allowed me to conquer the much greater heights of fish fingers, lasagne, stacks of cutlets and pumpkin fritters, and the supreme delight of custard pies with strawberries on top.

Some days, I'd observe my father coming back from the supermarket laden with bags, having just climbed the seven flights demanded by our liftless building. He was so red and sweaty, and hurting everywhere, that even a heart attack right there and then would have been a pleasant surprise to him, as it'd at least put an end to his agony.

And I'd almost cry, almost laugh, as I felt my vile little heart wallow in that and other circumstances. But using each other and being used was so sweet that, for a while, as we lunched and dined cheerfully, as we made frenzied war cries echo throughout the house, the water hanging in the sky pulled back from us, and the bluish air became paler and lighter.

Translated from the Italian by Antonella Lettieri

Giuseppe Zucco *was born in Locri, Italy, in 1981. He works for the national public broadcasting company Rai. His short stories have appeared in Nuovi Argomenti, Nazione Indiana, minima & moralia, Colla, and L'inquieto. He is the author of the novel* Il cuore è un cane senza nome *(The heart is a dog with no name; minimum fax, 2017) and of two short story collections,* Tutti bambini *(All children; Egg, 2016) and* I poteri forti *(The strong powers; NNE, 2021). His most recent novel,* Il signore delle acque *(The Lord of the waters; nutrimenti, 2025), came out earlier this year. English translations of his work have previously appeared in* The Arkansas International *and* ZYZZYVA.

Antonella Lettieri *is a translator working between English and Italian. Her translations include Maria Grazia Calandrone's Your Little Matter (Foundry Editions, 2024), Roberta Recchia's All That Is Left of Life (Dialogue Books, 2025), and Matteo Melchiorre's The Duke (Foundry Editions, 2025). She was the National Centre for Writing's Emerging Translator Mentee for Italian in 2023 and won the John Dryden Translation Competition in the same year. Your Little Matter was granted the 2024 PEN Grant for the English Translation of Italian Literature. Her work has also appeared in* Asymptote, The White Review Writing in Translation Anthology, The Southern Review *and* La Piccioletta Barca.