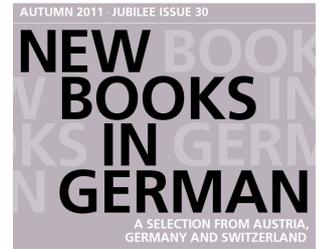
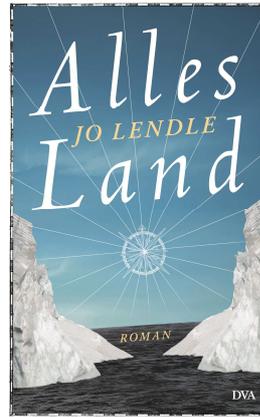


The All Land

Jo Lendle

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Sample translation by Imogen Taylor for *New Books in German*

Extract from pp. 14-16 and pp. 125-137

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When their mother did the washing in the morning, she would lay her youngest son on the floor of the parental bedroom on the first storey of their house on the Friedrichsgracht. Alfred was now nine months old. It was summer and everything was stirring; only Alfred was not. He spent his mornings on the blanket of pure new wool without moving. Sometimes his parents worried he might stay lying like that forever and would argue quietly over whether they should help him to move his limbs, or whether the movement would come of its own accord, from God.

Alfred lay on his stomach on the blanket, holding his head up high. The dust was dancing in a streak of light which shone into the room between the curtains. Above the dark bed hung the faces of his grandparents looking down on him. In the open clockcase the pendulum kept time going. There was an excess of smells in this room. It smelled of lavender, of dust, of the woollen straps under his chin. It smelled of the taste in his mouth and his parents' bodies when they hugged him. Between the bedposts was their chamberpot, covered with a grey cloth.

Then suddenly, right before Alfred's eyes, something moved, a black speck. He screwed up his eyes. It was an ant. Alfred gave a gurgling laugh; he was pleased. The ant

lifted its head too and stretched out its forelegs. Eventually Alfred also managed to lift up his arms. He wished he could touch the creature, and kept clenching his fist, banging his temples and punching the air. It was only after a while that he finally hit the creature, squashing it with a shriek of joy.

Behind it there was another ant, and behind that one were yet more. It was a small column, a busy creeping line of little quivering dots, stretching under the bed, around the chamber pot and along the skirting board all the way up to the door.

A thin thread of saliva ran out of Alfred's mouth onto the back of his hand. He braced his arms on the blanket and pushed himself up. His little body, swaddled in a nest of white nappies, reared up and fell to one side. Alfred rolled off the blanket, and the whole room wrapped itself around him until he hit the edge of the bed and was left lying on his back. He could hear himself breathing. His grandparents watched his exploits from their wooden frames.

Alfred stretched out his hand and reached for the leg of the bed. His fingers clutched the dark brown wood, then he tensed his arm and turned slowly back onto his stomach. That way round he recognised everything again. Carefully he pulled at the bed and instead slid forward himself. How easy it was. He used his hands to push himself along. His forehead was already touching the bedstead, and he bent his head until he vanished underneath, plunging into the stream of ants.

The bottom of the mattress was torn. The net of steel springs sagged in the middle and scratched his skin, got caught on the cloth of his nappies and tore them. He pushed himself on and on without stopping. It was dark down here, and when Alfred bumped his forehead on the chamber pot, it emitted a dark tone. For a long time now he had been padding on ants with his hands, and there were ants crawling over his body and face; they disappeared in the folds of

his nappies and bit into his skin. Alfred was crying, but he kept going. The bright gap in front of him showed the way out into the room.

When he had pushed himself out from under the bedstead into the open again, Alfred laid his cheek on the wood of the parquet floor for a moment and tried to get his breath back. He wiped his face with his fist and lifted his head.

The door before him stood open. His mother left it open so as to hear him when he cried. Alfred saw how the column of ants continued in the shadow of the doorframe, a creepy-crawly line disappearing into the distance. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see he was being followed by the gaze of his grandparents. They were not going to stop him.

He got into the corridor without any trouble. The landing banisters were narrow, and Alfred pulled himself along to the top of the stairs on his stomach.

He got down the first steps headfirst, breaking his fall by turns with his forehead, nose and chin. He turned head over heels, the impact cushioned by his nappy. For a moment he lay there without moving, then he let himself down step by step.

He did not know what was awaiting him at the end of his journey. Never before had he been anything like as alert as he was now. On the edges of the stairs was a layer of dust which vanished when you ran your hand over it.

At the foot of the stairs he found the ants again. Their trail ran across the stone floor, but he could no longer be bothered to follow them. Not until the end of the hall did Alfred come across a door that was painted white. He pushed himself up against it, but it would not open. Only the ants squeezed their way through a crack under the skirting board.

Alfred watched them disappear and was suddenly overcome by a surge of misery, cold and hunger. He pressed himself up against the crack as if he could warm himself at it.

Tony, his elder sister, found him when she got home from school before the others. No one could work out how he had managed to get there. From then on, when his mother put him down to sleep, she would leave the door shut.

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[...]

Slowly but constantly, the ice crystals were growing, and even the air was now becoming more inert. Only the ice groaned, heralding the approaching tide. It was an as yet undecided battle. During the day Wegener thought that the heat of his will could cause all this to melt, the firm landscapes, the whitely glistening edges of the hills, even the icebergs themselves. But in the evenings, he could feel the cold closing in on his hut, edging patiently nearer like a pack of wolves. And in the mornings, when it would have been time for a new day, he would lie in his tight sleeping bag, waiting until he had mustered enough strength to ring in the day, the day which only he could call into being, for there was no noise, no human bustle, not a single ray of light. Some days he would lie there for hours on end, fighting against his doubts as to whether all this actually existed. What would happen if he simply stayed in bed and did not have this day happen? Would he have triumphed over the day, or would the day have triumphed over him?

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At the end of November, the precipitation increased as the barometer fell. The air was now so filled with snow that he could not even see a metre in front of him out of the little window. Even that was only a guess; there were no landmarks of any kind. In any case, Wegener had to admit to himself that the limited visibility hardly made a difference to the view.

On his way to read the measuring instruments one evening, he stepped out of the hut and simply saw nothing, literally nothing. The air was filled with fresh snow; fifteen odd

metres of wind and pitch black night lay before him. On his way back, the hut was no longer there. He wandered about, forwards and back again, or in the direction he thought was the way back, walked up a bank of snow he did not know, and realised that he was going to get lost this way, realised indeed that he was long since lost. Unable to decide what to do, he stayed where he was and observed his surroundings for a while. Then, right in front of him, he saw a gleam of light shimmering through the snow: he was standing just outside the snow-covered window of his hut.

Before setting off to read the instruments the next morning, he threw some coffee grounds at the snow-covered wall, in order to get his bearings by the dark stain on the way back.

What a lot of effort went into coping with the little chores, keeping things in order, mending clothes, keeping clean, talking to himself (as he had now begun to), going out. Just getting up in the mornings demanded a degree of practical energy which was sometimes too much for him, not to mention the moral energy it required.

More and more often he had to repeat his readings, because his mind was on other things. There was plenty of time to think of this or that. Mostly he would take up some memory of Europe and knock it about for a while, thoughts of Else, professional questions, and other things that were not so easily shaken off.

To be on the safe side, he had equipped the thermometer hut with the three clocks his fellow-explorers had given him for the winter, so as to ensure that the measurements were precisely charted. A spring drive chronograph, a pocket watch, and a small pendulum system. At first he was relieved at the consistency of the timepieces; he had feared greater deviations. But when weeks went by and the temperature continued to drop, and he was still only having to make minimal readjustments, he became suspicious. What if the cold were to damage all three of them in equal measure? One morning, he tramped through the snow, tired and

freezing cold, and the clocks tried to tell him it was already getting on for midday. He clenched his teeth together to stop himself from cursing, pulled off his gloves, and turned them all back a little with his bare hands.

As he was falling asleep, he often thought that he could hear a sound, a humming or pumping noise, which could not be possible. Was it the others, come to fetch him? Was it animals, but then what animals could it be? Sometimes he would walk to the window and stand at the pane without seeing anything. In the end he would tell himself it was the wind or a kind of ringing in his ears until he fell asleep. Later he was woken with a start by a droning noise. Cold shivers ran down his back, and he held his breath to hear what it was. In the end it turned out to be only the pounding of his own heart.

It sometimes happened in the mornings that he would walk out to the thermometer hut to read the temperature, only to realise, when he pored over the list on his return, that the figures had already been entered. Had he really been out already? It was some time before he could be sure he had not mixed up the days. Certainties could start to slip on all sides, and once this had begun to happen, you could no longer tell what was still standing and what was long since adrift. Wegener had the impression he was part of a larger movement, but he could not make out what course it was taking.

He saw his weakness before him like an enemy to be defeated. He imagined them wrestling with one another, he and his tiredness, and got completely caught up in the duel, until in the end he realised he was the only one fighting. His opponent was just standing by, watching him all the time, unmoved. As if he could just wait until Wegener was overcome by exhaustion.

At the end of every reflection, he arrived at the point everything now revolved around: the utter lack of impressions. What relief he felt when the top of the hill opposite once came

into view in the midday twilight, what energy he drew from it. Then night again. He smoked constantly now. The comfort of the small flame when he had to relight his pipe. The comfort of the warm smoke as it lined his freezing body. He sat there brooding, staring at the small glow in his hand.

It was frightening how far one's desire for external events could go. It was with intense pleasure that he looked at the few photographs he had taken and developed at the beginning of his stay. There was nothing to see on them other than what he saw every day: the snow, his room, the flag on the thermometer hut, blurred. But then there was one picture he particularly looked forward to as he leafed through the little pile of photographs with his gloves on. He had set up a remote shutter release in order to have a picture of a human being with him. The shot showed Wegener himself standing outside the door, quite grey from the lack of light, his face half hidden beneath his hood. As he looked at the picture, he smiled at himself, and the photograph smiled back cautiously. He looked a little tense, maybe because he was concentrating all his attention on the remote shutter release. The last picture in the pile was a shot of Feldmann; it showed the dog running up with his tail in the air, his bright eyes turned to the camera. Where had he got to? Wegener wondered when he had last seen his companion, when they had last been out together, when he had last put down food for him. In his mind's eye, he tried to conjure up the rituals they had shared, but the pictures blurred. Slowly he got into his fur shoes and set off to look for him. He found him outside, in a corner of the thermometer hut, cold and rigid in the darkness. No trace of the puppies. His open eyes stared into space. How long had it been?

Wegener had to confess to himself that he had underestimated the difficulties of overwintering. Strange that the other expeditions had failed to mention the distressing nature of the situation. Soon his tobacco supplies began to run out; he had squandered them on the winter nights. He would spend half a day at a time studying the northern lights, stimulated by

their brightness, their shapes, their presence. He discovered figures in them which came and went and interacted with one another; he let them tell him stories, luminous pictures, which he believed more readily than his own doubts about them.

Once he thought it was his father's birthday, but he was no longer sure. Would they be sitting together now with all his brothers and sisters, singing? He hummed the beginnings of some of the songs they might have sung and was startled by the sound of his own voice. Were they thinking of him, could they picture him, sitting around here? In his supplies were a few candles. In order to save on paraffin, he fixed one of them to the top of his desk with a little wax, and read for hours by the light of its trembling flame.

Because of the lack of alcoholic drinks on New Year's Eve, he had to make do with imaginary punch. Instead he ate red wine chocolates until he reached a state of imaginary tipsiness. He treated himself to a few rods of tin-lead solder and played lead-casting fortune telling by himself. It was afternoon when he began; he had secretly brought forward the evening reading. In a pan he melted a little snow. Because he could not immediately find the pincers, he bent the rods until they snapped, put some of the little pieces into a dessert spoon and held it over his candle. After half an hour everything was black and sooty, but the pieces still had not melted, so he lit the blowlamp and held the spoon in its flame. How seductively the metal began to melt, how it glittered, how warm it looked. Wegener wished he could bathe in it, in the silver glow. He carefully poured the liquid into the pan; it set in the water with a sharp hiss, motionless as a fly in amber. Wegener fished out the shape and looked at it. A snake with a flat, somewhat swollen head. What did it mean? That he was being seduced?

He repeated the experiment and laid the results next to one another. Looked at them at great length and held long, fruitless debates with himself on the interpretation of their shapes. In front of him on the table, in this order, were a snake, an earthworm, a small mouse with a long tail, a ball of wool, which had already unravelled quite a lot, several teardrops, and a handful of tadpoles. He could have come up with any number of possible prophecies for

himself. But if he was honest, it really only made him think of one thing: it looked like a spermatozoon.

Wegener was glad that his fellow explorers were not with him. Maybe they were now playing the same thing on the coast, sitting together around a table which was gradually filling up with these little silver things. They would be vying with one another at the tops of their voices to discover meaning after meaning in them, anything not to have to admit that they were sitting in a sea of sperm.

At half past eleven, he decided to call it New Year local time, and lay down to sleep.

The sexual urges were a problem no one had prepared him for. In the first weeks of his Pustervig solitude, he had not been able to get enough of himself. As soon as he shut his eyes, he was surrounded by women. He filled his hut with them; they were at his disposal whenever he was in the mood. They were blonde, ginger or dark, stout or lean, but they all had their eyes closed. There was hardly one he knew. Sometimes he thought he recognised Else in a corner, she too naked like the others, but with her eyes open. She looked at him; that is how it was every time she appeared. She would watch him.

Then he would quickly try to drive away the other women, and one after another they really did just vanish until he was left alone with his bride. They were silent for a while. It was mostly Else who would eventually begin to speak.

What are you doing here?

I'm doing research.

I can see that. Are you making progress?

I was on the point of making a discovery.

Until I came along. What were you aiming for?

Their conversations went something like this and were soon turning in ever tightening circles.

What did he want from Else? What was he afraid of? Would he really marry her? Did he want to say of her she was his wife? Did he want to say that of anyone?

And finally: did he want children with her? When he stepped out into the semi-darkness outside the hut after his activities and rubbed himself clean with snow, he was overwhelmed by the number of fatherings he was so heedlessly squandering here.

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For the first time, the thermometer fell below minus fifty degrees Celsius. Wegener had to bend down low to read it; the hoar frost obstructed his view. What a short distance it was from his eyeball to this small column of mercury, and yet between the two was a difference in temperature of ninety degrees. It was a miracle that he still managed to keep the cold out of his body. On the way back to the hut he saw himself from a great height, fighting his way slowly through the snow. The only movement in the stillness all around, the only warm point in the middle of a never-ending field of cold. It was a strange sight from up there, and he enjoyed it, until it occurred to him that it was the point of view of circling vultures, a realisation that could not be dispelled by the knowledge that there were no vultures here.

On a hard ship's biscuit he broke one of his eye teeth.

He hit upon the idea of using an empty lunch box as a hot water bottle, and clung to it as he was falling asleep, his legs drawn up to his body. Unluckily for him, the lunch box was still in his sleeping bag when he realised in the middle of the night that the lid did not shut properly. He had woken up in a warm puddle, as in long-forgotten childhood days. He was gripped by fear at this thought – where did the fear come from? Then he remembered where he was instead: in a small hut on the east coast of Greenland, alone, surrounded by never-ending ice.

Had he decided to come here himself? He could not at once recall what he was doing here. It took days to get the sleeping bag dry.

His broken tooth was soon inflamed, and there was no doctor nearby. So in the gloom of his room he began to reforge a pair of flat tongs to get the root out. He annealed the tongs in the flame of the blowlamp, then he beat and filed them into shape. But even after two hours' digging around in his gums, he could not get a grasp on the root. Even preparatory drilling with a screwdriver got him nowhere.

One morning outside the hut, he caught himself drawing a clumsy figure in the firm with a ski pole, in order to have a fellow explorer. He heard himself talking to him and wanted to shake his head at such a lot of nonsense, but did not move. He added Feldmann to the picture, sitting on his haunches, looking up at his snow master. Wegener reproached himself for not burying him; the wolves had taken him. He wept a little, and his tears froze on his eyelashes.

Freezing was now his chief occupation.

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When he sat at his little table, he would sometimes let his chin drop down, so that his mouth hung open – out of laziness, and because no one could see him anyway.

At night, he dreamed he was a giant dog. He had torn free of his sledge and was running out into the emptiness which was all white. When he awoke with a start on his bed, it was dark. How pleasantly heavy his limbs were. It took a moment for him to realise to his surprise that he was still a dog; he could feel his exhaustion not just in two legs, but in all four. He remained lying like that, recalling the pleasure it had given him to run about on all

fours. He lay there until daybreak, letting himself sink back into this canine feeling, stroking his haunches and cleaning himself.

Sometimes he would roll in the snow; there was no one watching him anyway. Sometimes he would bark.

When the dream recurred, Wegener tried to stay awake in order to avoid the violence of these impressions. He convinced himself that his guard protected the hut from the attacks of wild animals, but he had long since reached the stage when the sight of a wild animal would have pleased, not frightened him. In the end he succumbed to his dreams too without resistance.

It was only in his sleep then, that he got more done than at home. He had now seen the northern lights often enough to have a vivid idea of them, so he mostly lay down again straight after the short midday brightness. In the end he fell into a kind of proper hibernation, only getting up to eat.

You had to eat as much as you could swallow – he would recite that to himself like a mantra, as he indiscriminately broke open one tin after another in his wakeful moments. One night he opened all the remaining meat depots around the hut, imagining for scientific reasons that he was a wolf; he wanted to investigate their way of life from within, a mimetic process of which he possessed only dim recollections when he woke up in the morning. When he set off on a tour of inspection immediately afterwards, he found the depots laid to waste, pieces of meat torn to shreds in the snow, the odd scrap bitten out here and there, and in between, drops of red liquid and regurgitated meat. Wegener cleared the larger pieces back into the depots and covered the rest with snow. That day he made three extra readings; the figures remained unchanged.

His tooth was now suppurating so badly that he was able to pull it out with almost no resistance in the end.

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At last it grew lighter. At the beginning of February, Wegener cast a shadow again for the first time; he could have flung his arms around the frighteningly narrow, fuzzy contour in his exuberance, had it not run away from him. The return of daylight gave him back a little of his peace of mind. At midday he took long walks across the firn towards the sun. When the terrain permitted, he walked with his eyes closed, enjoying the light on his lids. Best of all he would have liked not to have turned round at all. In moments like these, he had no fear of getting lost in the ice. He would follow the slowly westwards moving sun in a wide arc, trying in his head to calculate the curve left by his tracks in the snow. At some point though he always called himself to order. And wondrously enough, on the way back he would be blessed once again with the reflection of light on all sides. He could not get enough of that either, of this tremendous, but absolutely dead nature.

What a lot of noises could now be heard in the general thaw. Although he hardly had reason to expect visitors, he would sometimes run to the door and look out, he was so sure he had heard the crunch of footsteps in the firn. But no one was there. Or only the wind and maybe a kind of ringing in his ears.

He lacked the composure necessary for longer work. Often he would stand at the telescope for hours on end, checking to see whether any one was appearing on the horizon to find out how he was getting on. The knowledge that he might return any day now gave him strength.

He was now only waiting in general for something to happen. There were too many possibilities for any particular hope. Or too few.

In spite of all he longed for, he remained somewhat in awe of his return home. How would he cope with getting used to the old world? For a short time he toyed with the thought of becoming a bon vivant on his return to Europe. After all, a keen thirst for life was building up in him. He longed for Else and every day he was glad all over again how clearly he could see her features before him. But somewhere lurked the worry that what mattered to him was perhaps the passion for this longing rather than the passion for its fulfilment. As if the clarity of Else's image might begin to fade in the very moment he stood before her.

It was now almost permanently light.

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