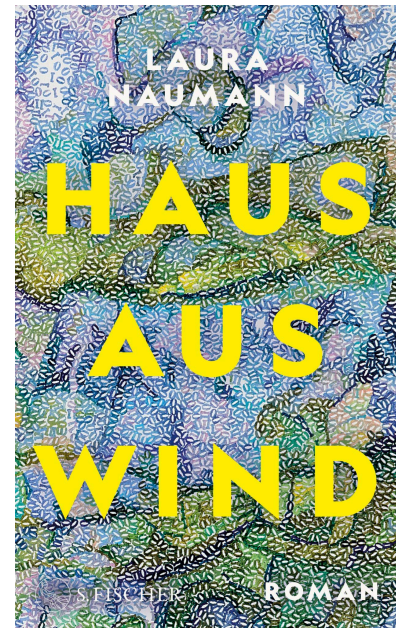




Laura Naumann

House of Wind

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Driven by gloomy thoughts and anxiety, Johanna gets stranded in a surf camp in the Portuguese Algarve. She does not return to Berlin after two-weeks of summer holiday, resume her career as a voice actress, and save her relationship with Rosa. She decides to stay on the Atlantic coast and starts working at the surf camp, falls in love with two women at once, and seems to feel a little lighter with every day in the waves. But with the onset of autumn, what she actually wants to leave behind catches up with her.

"House of Wind" is a surf novel without surfer boys, a summer novel with a stormy winter. It's the belated coming of age of a child who grew up too early. And the story of a queer East German woman searching for her own voice.

"It's such a pleasure to inhabit this novel, which laughs, breathes and is full of saving thoughts. An affectionate favourite debut." Daniela Dröscher

Laura Naumann, born in Leipzig in 1989, studied creative writing and cultural journalism at the University of Hildesheim and has been studying screenwriting at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin since 2022. Her theatre plays have been performed and awarded numerous times in German-speaking countries, including commissioned works for Schauspielhaus Bochum, Schauspiel Frankfurt and Staatsschauspiel Dresden. She is co-founder of the performance collectives machina eX and Henrike Iglesias. "Haus aus Wind" is her debut novel. Laura Naumann lives in Berlin.

Sample Translation: Alexandra Berlina

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[...]

We put our surfboards down on the sand and gather in a warm-up circle. Jerry from the UK, Angelo from Ireland, Celine and Sophie from Switzerland, Camille from France, Sanne and Roos from the Netherlands, Andi from Bavaria. And me. I'm already exhausted from the hundred metres I had to walk on the sand schlepping my board, my arms still so sore from yesterday that I can hardly hold it. The bloody beginners that we are, we all practice with boards so big that Luz affectionately calls them our Titanics. Sanne's arms are too short to carry that ship of hers between hand and armpit, or hand and hip, as we should, she's been dragging hers across the sand, earning Luz's displeasure and the nickname 'Grandma'. Me, she calls 'Puto', which means something like rascal or little fellow if I understand correctly: she thinks I have the haircut and posture of an eight-year-old. Her nickname for Andi is 'Bavaria'. Luz is famous. That's what prompted Bavaria to book this particular surf course and not one of the many others in the region, as he explained at length during the introductory round, where we were only supposed to say our names and which country we were from. Luz – Lúcia Oliveira – should have been the first female Portuguese world surfing champion, he says. Later, as we practice take-offs on our boards, propped up on the sand next to each other, I ask Andi why she didn't. He tells me to google it.

Luz turns surfing theory into a show. Her gestures sometimes subtle, sometimes wild, she explains all the things she believes we need to know to move safely in the waves. Now and then she throws in a few acrobatic tricks, such as a handstand on one hand, and when she's just explained something and we still give the wrong answer about it, she throws sand at us.

– Listen to me, children!

She speaks English, of course, raising her voice, clearing her throat as if into an invisible microphone. The line-up, she explains, is the place behind the breaking line where surfers wait for their green wave. Green wave is what you call a wave before it breaks. When it does, it becomes whitewater. It's in whitewater that the beginners surf (or rather practise), easily recognisable and distinguishable by the different coloured jerseys of the various surf schools. Only when you can stand on your board with sufficient confidence, she says, only then are you ready to join the line-up. She gives me a glance. From the line-up, surfers catch the green waves at their highest point, jumping onto their boards at the peak, riding the wave before it breaks. In the line-up, as everywhere else, there are a few rules of etiquette. Such as: one wave per person to avoid crashes. Unfortunately, not many people stick to this. The person who is closest to the peak gets to paddle into it, then the rest moves up. If you jump the queue, especially if you also drop someone else in, the least you can do is get the wave and not waste it. Paddling well helps. If you are too nice to insist on your place in the queue, it's your own fault if people keep passing you by. The locals have priority. If you're wearing a surf school jersey, your place is always last.

I feel queasy. I didn't have to return to this beach, didn't have to squeeze my limbs into neoprene. I could have stayed in my comfortable hotel bed. Or at home, even. I should have pulled myself together and gone back to work. Maybe I should have booked a wellness weekend on some peaceful mountain pasture instead of this adventure sea holiday, complete with risk of injury or death. This is obviously not what I need, certainly not what will help me. Wasn't yesterday enough to prove that to me? I had no business being here.

– Very good conditions today, my children.

says Luz, nodding toward the halfmoon-shaped bay. We seem so tiny between these rocky walls of rusty red and chalky yellow. I wish I'd find their size reassuring. I imagine the rocks putting their arms around me. It's warm, and a light wind is blowing offshore, but not too strong, that's good, says Luz,

and the way the waves break is also good: even, clean. I nod in agreement.

The air smells of herbs.

– Is that oregano?

I ask, and Luz raises her eyebrows. Huh?

The embarrassment of it.

– Like in love, you have to choose your wave carefully.

This is Luz's final piece of wisdom before she send us in. After an hour and a half of safety instructions and dry runs, everyone is having trouble concentrating. Celine has reapplied sunscreen to Sophie's face three times by now, and I can hear Bavaria's stomach rumbling with hunger while he tirelessly practises take-offs next to me like some roly-poly toy. We are sweating in our wetsuits, which keep you just as warm on land as in the water, alas, and the bright green surf school jerseys are starting to smell musty. But as soon as someone says the word love, everyone is back on board . Maybe now she'll divulge the parable that everyone has been looking for their whole life. Or longer. No one would want to miss that.

– LISTEN TO ME CHILDREN!

Luz continues, raising both index fingers. Behind her back, blue waves foam into white, backlight blurs her silhouette.

– Don't you burn out going after every single one. Picking a wave is like picking a partner – we have to be selective! Not every one is good for you.

Roos and Sanne exchange a meaningful look. Bavaria gives a nervous chuckle, then pulls himself together.

– Take a single one. Don't take two at the same time. Take the one that comes straight at you. Make a decision. And then go for it. Okay?

Silence. Applause. And we're off.

I'm clinging to my board for dear life, any second the waves might tear it away from me or pull me down along with it. Luz has prepared us for this, saying it's only to be expected what with insufficient body tension and lacking core muscles; you just have to get through it – in the truest sense of the word. I wade through the water, calf-high, knee-high, then hip-high, trying to imagine myself as stable as a lorry when the next green wave explodes into a giant brush of white foam before me. The word carwash plops up in my head; I remember a children's series in which I dubbed a talking rubbish truck that was terrified of water. I manage to withstand a wave or two, then I'm thrown back again. The current is pulling the board away, the current is pulling my legs away, the current is pulling my self away. I'm swept back to the shore as

if I had no weight at all, land on all fours in the sand, spit out salt water. Luz is in the water with us, wearing sunglasses and a cap, shouting instructions, whistling us back when the current takes us too far, and helping us to get our boards into a good starting position for rolling onto them sideways so that we can start our excited paddling at the very right moment and have a chance to catch the wave.

– You need to get over your trauma, Puto!

she yells at me after what feels like an hour in the water, during which I have fallen in every single time after positioning myself on the board. No surfing the wave for me. I should stop thinking, says Luz, I could get my thinking done at home while sitting on the can, she thinks it's funny, I don't, well, how could she know what's inside my head. A little later, she turns up behind me and gives my board a hefty push. I can't do anything about it. And then it happens: I'm carried up. I'm gliding. On the wave? In the wave?

– NOW GET UP! GET UP!

Luz shouts at me as if she was my father. What I'm supposed to do now is lift my hips slightly to the left, raise my left foot toward my right knee, bring my right foot down between my hands while holding my balance, ending up squatting on the board, my feet turned sideways. That's what we'd practised on land. But I can't do it, I can't move, it's all going too fast. I slide down the wave, I'm a board on top of a board, until the real board burrows its nose in the sand. I turn around, but Luz's gaze is already elsewhere.

– Where are you staying?

Luz asks me after the lesson. She is sitting on the roof of the van. She'd asked me to hand her the surfboards one by one so that she could stack them on the roof and then strap them down with a ratchet strap. My arms feel as if they were made of eraser synthetic, my upper body and neck are sore. Clearly I've overdone it. But I just didn't want to stop, didn't want to give up, didn't want to add yet another item to the list of things I fear. And it was a good decision, too. In the end, Luz even praised me.

– I'm staying at the hotel by the port.

I reply, trying to make it sound effortless, casual, as if the boards weighed nothing. Luz takes the last one.

– Funny.

she says.

– You don't look like a hotel person.

– How do I look?

– I don't know. Like a couch surfer? A backpacker?

I laugh. It's the second time today I find myself laughing, to my surprise. The thing is, I hate contact with strangers. Some days I can't even manage a hello. I'd never voluntarily spend the night on someone else's couch. Luz is surprised by my laughter, but joins in.

– Full on, Puto!

she chuckles.

– You look like a hostel girl. Makes friends in every city, loves to party, flirts with everyone. Maybe it's the nose ring. Or your weird style.

My style consists of sports bras (an attempt to hide my tits), basketball shorts (for guys), black and grey t-shirts, my father's old windbreaker and Birkenstock cork sandals. I really don't know if you can call that a style. As for making friends... I don't have any, really, since Rosa is gone. I was never good at making friends myself. My parents have no friends, either. Acquaintances at most, every now and then. But they do have each other. Why is Rosa gone? All I have now is the nose ring. She'd find it daft.

– About 15 years too old for that.

she'd comment, and maybe ask me if she could attach a little leash to it, say, one made of dental floss. And then she'd actually take out a box of dental floss, pretending she was about to fulfil her threat. The nose ring is one of the very few things Rosa doesn't know about me. She doesn't know that I'm here now, either.

– I love hotels.

I say to Luz while she's strapping the surfboards to the roof of the van. I tell her how safe and secure I always feel entering a hotel room. A freshly made bed with white bed linen, the non-smell of cleanliness, interactions via a door sign. Minimal communication. Comfortable practicality. No responsibility.

- I hate hotels.
- says Luz.
- They make me sick.
- And flirting?
- Flirting makes me sick, too.

I'm two or three or maybe four, and we are on holiday for the first time, my parents and I. Palma de Mallorca. The hotel has twelve floors, and there are palm trees all around, and the largest swimming pool ever, with a little island in the middle, my mother is swimming toward it. The deep turquoise surface separating her from me keeps growing. I'm left behind, stuck in an inflatable turtle, water wings on my arms. The turtle is tied with a string to a sun lounger close by edge of the pool, on which my father is sitting. Many children die in pools every year, mostly girls, as he explained to my mother: their ponytails and plaits get caught in the drain grilles when they dive. Their hair gets sucked in, the children are held under water until they drown in agony. No other parents seem to be aware of these horrors. They pitch their kids back and forth in the water like balls, let them dive and frolic and dunk each other. We spend the day walking the island; my parents take photos of every house, every street, every palm tree, every boat and every beach. In the evening, we eat white bread and cheese and thick slices of salami in our room, which my father cuts with his pocket knife and hands to us, sometimes also tomatoes or figs, which grow everywhere here, on the cacti, which my father says is the correct plural. I ask him why we don't eat in the canteen like other people, like the children I met in the pool, we don't speak the same language but we understand each other well.

- Because we're still Osis.
- says my father. It means East Germans.
- Because your father miscalculated.
- says my mother. My father puts a piece of salami in his mouth.
- Restaurant.

he says after a while.

– It's called a restaurant.

My muscles are sore.

They come from all directions. They splash all over me and crawl into my wetsuit and run in icy rivulets down my back. They hit my eyes. Come out of my nose. They keep roaring. I can't stand the waves anymore. Luz shakes her head, half sternly, half amused, as I drag my board back to the beach on day five. I drop down next to her onto the sand, where another woman is sitting. I don't notice her until she says:

– Tired, love?

and something about the way she says it sounds so tender that it almost makes me uncomfortable. How long has she been sitting there? Diagonally behind Luz, wearing big, square sunglasses. Was she sitting there back when I was in the water and Luz kept shouting at me:

– It's not a toilet!

Did my position on the board remind her of a person squatting over the loo? Was she laughing at her clever comparison? Or at me? Did she think I looked ridiculous? Untalented? Pitiful? A hopeless case? And this other woman, does she always sit here and say this to everyone about to give up, just this: Tired, love? Without judgement, without pressure, like a perfect mother for adult children.

– This is Robyn, the Australian lady I told you I was teaching.

Robyn has very white teeth.

– Hi,

says Robyn,

– guess I'm the Australian lady.

Robyn winks, then lets the sunglasses sink back onto her nose. Robyn, her bony shoulders. Robyn, her pale, almost translucent skin, freckles on her shoulders, her arms, her décolleté, her face, everywhere. Robyn, her platinum blonde hair chin-long, smooth, perfectly symmetrically parted, falling with effortless elegance – an expensive-looking hairstyle. Robyn, her age difficult to estimate, but older than us. Robyn, a silver ring on almost every finger. Robyn, a huge scar along her spine, from her shoulder blades to her bikini bottoms, it catches my eye as she stands up to put on her wetsuit. It's over her hips now, her arms and upper body are still bare, her back covered in

freckles. She tries to thread an arm into a neoprene sleeve. She notices my gaze.

– Sorry!

– Don't be. It's an eyecatcher. Has to be good for something.

she says, reaching behind her back for the zipper, failing to catch it. Then she's standing right in front of me, turning her back to me.

– Zip me up?

Her bottom almost touches my right hip bone. I zip up her wetsuit and fasten the Velcro at the back of her neck, taking care not to touch the scar and not to catch her hair in the zipper, which means I have to touch it, to lift it slightly. It smells good. Luz punches me in the arm.

– You're always looking down! You need to stop that shit! Listen to me! I'm your coach!

Meanwhile, Robyn is lifting her board from the sand, carrying it towards the water. She walks slowly, deliberately; slowly, without turning back, she vanishes into the haze. It is misty today, the stones and rock walls that border the beach barely visible. After sunrise, a blanket of fog has moved over the cape, swallowing up the whole place. The air is humid, droplets are suspended in the air, but it isn't raining. Robyn is no longer visible, but her scent is still there.

– Look at me! You're distracted!

Luz punches me again, this time in the shoulder.

– You drive a car looking at your feet? Do you? Eh? Watch the fucking road! See, it's easy: If you look up and face the world – you arrive. If you look down you fall. You crash, you die. You hear me? End of story.

The scent is jasmine, as I'll learn much later.