Oliwia Hälterlein
Daughterhood (Wir Töchter)
368 pages | Hardcover

What does it mean to be the first daughter after migration — and the last daughter of a family line?

When Waleria learns she cannot have children, the news awakens something unexpected — even though she never longed for motherhood. She must confront not only her own desires, but also her heritage, her family's history, and the responsibility it carries. She discovers: Women's stories are rarely lost—they are often left untold. What legacy does she owe the women who came before her? With delicacy and vitality, Oliwia Hälterlein weaves the intergenerational story of three women. Marianna, the grandmother, born at the end of the Second World War, lived as a peasant in the Polish countryside. Her daughter Róża, shaped by the socialist People's Republic of Poland, discovered Gdańsk and the fervor of the Solidarność revolution. In the late 1980s, Róża moved to West Germany with her daughter Waleria. Growing up in reunified Germany, Waleria gradually lost her mother tongue — and with it, the language of her babcia (grandmother).

Daughterhood is a novel about migrant daughterhood, inheritance without homeland, language as both shelter and fracture, and the responsibilities and legacies passed on across generations.

With poetic clarity and narrative finesse, Hälterlein entwines everyday life and memory, body and language, origin and future — illuminating the invisible thread that binds the women of a family across time.

Themes: migration and daughterhood, reproductive self, intergenerational inheritance, identity, language and belonging, social mobility and classism

For readers of Iris Wolff, Emilia Smechowski, Sasha Maria Salzmann (post-Soviet diaspora narratives, Eastern European female lineage, language loss literature)

We are maid, cook, wive, mother, daughter, sister.
We are circling ourselves and others until our heads spin.
We live in sand, in time worn thin, on paths without footprints.
We are sisters, we are daughters — and yet, not bound by blood.
We have grown in sand.
Under birches, spruces, and weeping willows.
Rooted in sand.
In the sand lies our kinship.

***We Daughters* (*Wir Töchter*)**
By Oliwia Hälterlein
Translated by Jen Calleja
Excerpts from pp. 9-45

They call us *dziewucha* and *baba*.
If we're young and *flat*
as a washboard – chłopczyca.
Herod Baba they shout after us if we're taller than they are,
if we've got broad backs and legs like tree trunks.
Babula if they want something from us.
They call us *baba-chłop*,
if we're old, if we can
withstand their stares.
Stare pudło, if to them we're nothing more than
an old bag they no longer want to stick
something in.
That's when they say the cart would be lighter if we
fell off the back.
If we know too much, have too much *wiedzę*, then we're a
wiedźma, a witch, a *baba-jędza*, *baba-jaga*,
a hunchbacked old woman, with a long nose, warts on her face.
Something evil, if we're a thorn in their side or
give free rein to the Medusa in our mouths.
They have many names for us when they claim that we
cast a glance at horses and they keel over, we make billy goats dance,
and cows talk.
They say we make people weak, the fields barren,
the earth dry, and make the fruit burn.
They say we make it rain until the seedlings
drown. We have all this power, they say, when we're
shivering and hungry in winter, sitting with a bowl of cabbage
in front of the stove.
Fanaberia is what we're accused of if we lean too far out
of the kitchen window. They ask us if we have forgotten
our place. They say we're making fools of ourselves
if we raise our eyes –
Gdzie się porywasz z motyką na słońce?
Where are you going with your hoe towards the sun?
Our eyes should be down at the hoe, for there, in the earth,
is where we belong. Looking up at the light is not for us.
Kto się pod ławką urodzi, ten nigdy na nią nie
wejdzie – anyone born under a bench will never climb onto it,
meaning the church pew: We should kneel
with complete humility, beating our chests with our fists
moja wina, moja wina, moja wielka wina.
my fault, my fault, my terrible fault.

The others sit up above.
Panią nie będziesz – you will never be a lady,
they tell us that from the very beginning.
The village unites and divides us.
We grow rye and wheat, cabbage and potatoes.
We are *chłopki*.
We are peasant women, born into a house without a piano,
without books.
Without Chopin and Mickiewicz.

We see ourselves binding and braiding, darning, mending, and
patching. We shear sheep and spin sweaters from yarn.
We line up linen threads on the spinning wheel, weave on the
loom, sew shirts and dresses.
We peasant women are born into a house with a needle and thread,
running and slip stitches, thick flounces, braided tassels,
and frilly embellishment.
Our fingers speak their own language.
We use needles like a magic weapon.
A net is destroyed and we keep weaving, we mend until it's
babie lato – gossamer.
We spin old wives' threads and fly away.
We girls in peasant families – we are not children.
We are born and called *zbędne* – useless.
Our right to exist, to food, and a place to sleep
must be earned.
Our names are not entered in the birth register,
they just put *córka* – daughter –
next to our brother's first name.
We peasant girls are *pasionki*.
We spend our childhood with geese and cows
in the meadows, staring holes in the clouds, picking peas
from bushes.
We do not lie in the pasture in a white dress, yellow headscarf, and red
and blue coral beads around our necks.
We do not play dreamily with spider silk.
We are not allowed to go to school because animals are more important
than reading and writing.

We inherit calluses and corns.
We have broad shoulders and short arms.
We have small, square hands with muscular fingers
and rectangular nails like spades dipped in milk
that grow wide instead of long.
We see the dirt under our fingernails, the dark
deposits in the creases of our skin, smell the oniony chopping board
and the malty sweetness on our fingertips.

We women have nimble fingers. Flies are caught
with bare hands, dogs and cats are deftly rid of lice
and ticks.
We watch ourselves working with our hands.
We watch ourselves, the way we clean, the way we tear, the way we cook
and bake.
We watch ourselves carrying full buckets across the yard.
The pig is butchered, the cooked vegetables chopped small
and the pasta dough rolled out. Our fingers race across
the kitchen table. They pluck, wash, peel, cut,
and core everything with a rusty silver knife.
They mix mayonnaise and mustard into the salad.
The beetroot, cherries, plums, strawberries, blueberries
stain our fingers pink.
With our fists, we squeeze the juice from a tomato
into an enamel pot. The goose's blood leaves brown
stains on our aprons.

We women do not have beautiful legs.
Our legs are tools, used to pound cabbage and grapes
in troughs and to squeeze water from peat bricks.
They do not fit into fashionable knee-high boots.
They are stocky so we can walk kilometre after kilometre
behind the plow and support our pelvis
in a deep squat while picking
onions for hours. We run after the scythe, gather the straw,
chop the feed for the cows, horses, and pigs.

We are thin because there is not enough to eat.
Being thin is a disgrace, we get beaten up
by the boys, so they can prove how weak we are.
We women are not valued for our beauty.
We girls must be *robotna*, have bodies
for work. Their strength is a given, we have
to prove ours.

We peasant girls go barefoot for most of our childhood.
We run barefoot among the ducks
and chickens, the pigs, and on the gravel
in front of the house.

We walk on sandy paths, with the horses and cows,
the geese and dogs. We don't have pavement, nothing
fancy for us, nothing that might be used as a stage –
only a single path leads from the house to the church, from the house
to the bus, from the house to the shop, from the house to the *boisko*,
from the house to the *remiza*.
The sticks and roots hurt, but that is just how it is.

This is the lot of the barefoot, the soles of our feet
are marl. We girls only wear shoes after they are worn by the brothers
and men.
We fetch the milk can, we deliver the milk.
We do not drink the milk ourselves. The paths are troublesome,
the sand is deep and dry, twisting our feet
and causing our wheels to get stuck. There are pinecones and thorny
branches, and in our bags we carry wild *jagody* that
stains our tongues dark blue.
They call it *babska robota*, all the work we do.
Worthless, he says, as he lies down
in front of the stove and falls asleep, and we don't ask why
this work is meant only for us.
We scrub the laundry in the river until our fingertips
stain the linen bloody. We perform this
women's work without praise.
We do not say: The house on my shoulders.
We carry house and farm *na głowie* – on our heads
we haul about garden, fields, cows, pigs, calves,
children, husband.
Szmata – they call us.
We are only worth as much as the rag hanging
in the milking parlour we use to clean the udders
before squeezing out the milk.
We work and hear *nie chciało jej się,* she didn't want to – what is done
remains invisible because it is never enough.
We are maid, cook, wife, mother, daughter, sister.
We do everything at once, orbiting ourselves
and everyone else until we're dizzy.
We feel sharp needles under our cracked feet.
We feel them burning and throbbing.
We live in the sand, on crushed time, on paths
without tracks. We have grains of sand between our toes, under our
nails, in our earlobes, they rub under our
eyelashes, grind cracks into the corners of our
mouths. We sweep the sand out of the house with willow branches
and carry it back in under our headscarves.

We are sisters and we are daughters and we are not
related by blood. The water forms muddy furrows,
it weathers.
We grew on sand. Under birches, pines
and weeping willows. We are rooted in the sand.
Our kinship lies in the sand.

1. Future

I open my eyes and it's still dark. Only the indirect light from buttons and the LED strip lighting allows me to make out a room. A nurse approaches and asks me in a friendly voice to sit up.
I touch my stomach.
Three bandages.
One on my navel, the other two slightly offset on the inside of my hip bones. The right one lower than the left. Stretched over them is high-waisted mesh underwear. A thick bandage is stuck between my legs, and one tube drains fluid from my wound, another my urine.

Did they get it all? I croak.

I breathe laboriously, as if trying to swallow angular pieces of air. Each chunk of it hurts.
I'll remove the catheter, then you can get up.

The nurse encourages me to walk a few metres with her. The pain in my collarbone makes me fall back against the bed.

The urge to pee wakes me hours later, my mouth dry, my tongue a shrivelled lump. It's light. Another nurse helps me sit up. I shuffle along the wall into the bathroom, my knees trembling. I hear my blood rushing, louder than her words. It's as if I were holding large seashells to both ears. For a long time, I thought I could hear the ocean in them.

On the toilet, the smell makes me nauseous. I feel hard stubble on my chin and upper lip. In the mirror, I discover black bristles, like a cat's. My eyebrows are bushy, and my face is yellow. The surgery has accelerated hair growth. My body seems to have been here longer than I have. *My* body? What had it experienced while I was absent?

The orange colour is difficult to wash off the insides of my thighs and my stomach. I sit on the toilet and scrub the marks with wet toilet paper. I see bright red blood in the toilet bowl and pick up one of the thick sanitary pads that are on the shelf next to the sink. I remain seated on the toilet, my limbs weary, dreaming of endless trips in a lift that press down my body. I nod off and fall off an operating table. I jolt awake and clutch my stomach. The three bandages are still there.

[…]

As I push myself up, my pulse hammers from inside my neck, which feels like crumpled paper. Though I've never drunk a one-and-a-half litre bottle of cola before, I picture the curved bottle in front of me, a Father Christmas driving a truck, drinking it in large gulps.

I fear the fragile skin could tear at any moment. The blood loss will soon be replenished, he reassures me, and I think: I never want to go where the air is too thin to walk and think.

Even three days after the surgery, I try to avoid any exertion. I postpone getting up and going to the bathroom. My body is still busy getting rid of the gas; I breathe it out of my abdomen with great difficulty. My pelvis feels simultaneously so full and so empty,

the few metres to the toilet like a marathon. I spend my time in bed overthinking details. Why wasn't I prepared for this? What warning signs did I miss? I go over Sunday again and again.

[...]

I was at a loss for words to describe what I felt.

The doctor didn't seem much older than me and feigned surprise at the pain I was familiar with, at the fact that I'd experienced something similar several times before. Had I ever spoken to a doctor about it? Everyone, was all I said, because I didn't have the strength to tell my story. Though her reaction didn't surprise me, it made me sad, as it had every time before, that she couldn't understand what I went through during my period. Did she really not know what I was talking about? Was I the only one who had these problems? She suspected that my pain was a sign of internal bleeding, probably caused by a ruptured cyst. We interrupted the examination two more times. I had no control over my bowels or bladder. I couldn't hold it in anymore, as if I wanted to get rid of everything beforehand. I said that I knew cysts were forming on my ovaries. My gynaecologist kept talking about fluid in my abdominal cavity, that this could be caused by the cysts that clung to my ovaries like strings of pearls. I had done my research, diagnosed myself: *Polycystic ovary syndrome*. *But nobody cares about that if I don't express a desire to have children*. *I could always take ibuprofen and magnesium for the pain… eat cinnamon and ginger…*
I broke down sobbing.

[...]

I asked the anaesthesiologist, whose face I couldn't see because of the mask and the blinding light, if he'd had a break yet today. It was just before midnight. I thought about all the exhausted people here, talked about the working conditions and the instruments forgotten in abdomens. I could only bear this situation by confronting it with words. The anaesthesiologist explained to me again that the doctor would be inserting small probes into my abdomen and told me not to worry. They did this several times a week here. Then he injected me with something that silenced me, and the metallic smell of fresh liver filled my nostrils, a smell I hadn't experienced in years, and I saw Babcia on her milking stool. I was still wondering how I could explain the situation to her, what 'cyst' was in Polish. Maybe *torbiel*. A bag filled with all the things from Babcia's house: the window frames made of broken glass, her skin flakes and wild yeast, the knitting stitches and the bed feathers. Then I heard her say: *dziecko moje*. And I was her child again.

Babcia and I are in the outer part of the pigsty, sitting on milking stools. A small fire burns in front of us, we throw in some old newspaper, and Michu and a reddish-brown cat prowl around us. Babcia whistles a warning through her teeth, and the two of them retreat, both driven into a corner. I'm holding a stiff chicken between my thighs – it's

about to be transformed from a *kura*, a living chicken, into a *kurczak*, edible meat, and I'm trying my best to pluck it with vigour. It's tiring, my fingers ache and are numb from the cold water, but I'm copying Babcia. Quickly, but carefully, so the skin doesn't tear, she explains, her fingers plucking with lightning speed. She glides her hands over the bird without looking at it. First, we tackle the long tail and wing feathers, the ones with the thick quills, then the back, and lastly the fine breast feathers. *Puch* – she says – and yes, the breast feathers are soft. We collect them all in a grey cotton sack. She repeats that I should take my time, it's more important to be precise. A little later, three naked chickens lie before her.

My right hand fits completely inside the chicken, and I slowly pull out the gallbladder, liver, heart, lungs and intestines. Babcia jokes that she's glad I'm not wearing my ten rings today. I proudly show her that I haven't damaged the intestines and say that I want to become a vet. Babcia picks up an orange plastic bowl and explains what's good for our kitchen and what's good for the waiting animals. The metallic scent attracts more hungry cats, especially the smell of the fresh liver, which Babcia scrapes clean of its yellow-green symbiosis with the back of her silver knife, making the hunched animals meow greedily. The fat and secretions encase the small, brown organ like tree lichen – even the fine grooves on the back are clogged with it. This liver looks good. It's coming with us.

In the corner behind us, the cats huddle together, their impatient mouths wide open. In my hand is a tube coiled in loops. It contains three yellow, runny yolks. *Jajka?* She shows me an empty uterus. The hen had been slaughtered before a protective shell could form around the yolk. I stretch out the tube and hear the word *miesiączka* for the first time. I only understand *something monthly*, and that hens lay eggs constantly, much like women bleed constantly. What bleeding, and does Babcia bleed too? She waves her hand dismissively and throws the filled oviduct and the chicken gizzards to the cats. They fight over the flesh, tearing small holes in it with their sharp teeth and lapping up the liquids. We clean the entrails and carefully singe the carcasses over the open fire, it's the only way to make sure all the quills are removed and the meat smooth enough for chicken soup, I learn. We pull the last of it from the skin with our fingernails, as if using tweezers. The metallic smell of the dried blood mingles with that of charred quills.

[...]

Even after eighteen hours on the bus, Marianna refused to lie down. The five large bags had to be unpacked, the meat refrozen, and the bread immediately stored in a dry place to prevent mould. Before leaving, Marianna had slaughtered a piglet, butchered it, and distributed the meat into preserving jars. In another wool blanket, she discovered six cold chicken carcasses, four ducks and forty eggs. Not a single one was broken. She had wrapped the eggs in newspaper, crocheted doilies and embroidered table runners. Her luggage weighed almost a hundred kilos, she laughed, as she piled up jars of pickled gooseberries, blueberries and apple compote. Róża knew she wasn't joking. She discovered coleslaw, pickles and beetroot salad. A light blue plastic statue of the

Virgin Mary was placed next to the television, filled to the brim with holy water from Częstochowa. Within minutes, the kitchen table and the hallway were filled with jars and boxes. Róża was surprised that there wasn't a box of baby chicks among it all. She had never mentioned her financial situation to her mother in letters or over the phone, nor had she ever asked for help. She had been surprised during their last phone call when Marianna unexpectedly announced her visit. Róża was torn. She needed the help. On the other hand, she didn't want her mother to see their small apartment and her and Waleria's living situation. But her mother didn't ask any questions – she simply informed her of the arrival time and added that Róża should find her a job, because she wanted to go *putz-ować* too. After all, she wasn't coming for a holiday.

While unpacking the box of thawing *pączki*, Waleria impatiently took one from the package and licked the moist dough. The cherries inside were still a little icy. She sucked them warm and spat out the pits one by one onto her plate. Before each bite of the cold yeast doughnut, she pressed it into a mound of *sugarpowder* as her mother always said. Róża and Marianna immediately put ten of them in the oven and put the kettle on for tea.

Halina and Wacek, the older couple from the apartment building who were originally from Katowice and often looked after Waleria, had picked Babcia up from the bus station in their car. As a thank you, they were invited to dinner. Although they vehemently shook their heads and refused to take off their shoes and jackets, in which they had been standing in the hallway for several minutes, and repeatedly insisted it wasn't necessary, they eventually sat down at the table and ate the smoked Polish ham. You can't get *szynka* like this here, they repeated, smacking their lips, and thanked their hosts countless times for the dinner.

After everything was put away, the sofa bed was prepared for Babcia. Róża wanted to sleep in the kids' room with Waleria, but Waleria objected, never leaving Marianna's side for a second. Without a word, she took her bedding and left the small room to her mother. She wanted to be with Babcia.

Róża usually left the apartment early in the morning, and Marianna would get Waleria ready for kindergarten. Her granddaughter often threw tantrums. Once, she screamed that she didn't look like Puss in Boots. Not the way she wanted to. No *German* Puss in Boots looked like that, Babcia really had no clue. Waleria stomped into her room, fetched the coloured-in picture from kindergarten into the bathroom, and pointed at it. That's what Puss in Boots looked like, that's how Babcia should do her makeup. Marianna patiently drew on the whiskers with eyeliner to make them look thicker, and then Waleria slipped into her mother's boots, which came up to her thighs. Just like in the picture on the sheet of paper.

Every day, after Marianna dropped her off at kindergarten, she went to clean for two hours. Róża had got her a job in a delicatessen. The owner was the sister-in-law of a woman Róża had been cleaning for the last year. The shop was located on Königsstraße –

Konik –
no, *König* – corrected Waleria,
Keeeenik –

no, König – said Waleria,
Kutwa! Królewska ulica – Royal Street, Marianna concluded – in the city centre. The products there were expensive, and the fruit baskets were wrapped in cellophane. Marianna initially thought they were real bananas and strawberries until she realised that they were made of a sugar or marzipan. People called it a 'Tante Emma' – Auntie Emma – shop, and Marianna, not knowing this nickname for a corner shop, initially thought the owner's name was Emma, so she called her *pani* Emma. Then it was explained to her that only the expensive shops selling gourmet food in Germany were run the same way as her village shop, with just one counter and one saleswoman.

The owner was thrilled with Marianna from the start; she knew what to do without any instructions. She first cleaned the areas customers saw, like the glass fronts of the refrigerators, the counter by the till, the windows next to the entrance, and the shelves with the fresh tropical fruit. Unprompted, Marianna tackled a different section of the shelves each day, thoroughly removing dust and adhesive residue. She even vacuumed and wiped down places no one ever saw.

For the first week, *pani* Emma was still in the shop every morning, but by the second week, she was either retiring to her office or leaving the shop when Marianna arrived, visibly relaxed. After the first month, *pani* Emma pressed the green banknotes into her hand for the first time, along with a bag of expired food. From then on, several times a week, *pani* Emma placed a plastic bag on the counter, wrote *Marianne* on it with a thick marker, and stapled the top edge shut.

In the evenings, the three of them would try the food from the surprise bag and find curious things like very salty pickled fish in colourful tins, unable to identify the origin of their *ã*; or bitter chocolate in the shape of a cigarillo; or a spicy jam that tasted neither like mustard nor jam. Most of the time, they didn't like the dried fruit or the alcohol-soaked dough with raisins and nuts, so Marianna gave away the tins and boxes she increasingly received unsolicited. She felt bad about this because *pani* Emma always used many words and gestures to describe her products, which Marianna didn't understand, to explain what precious things were inside. Marianna suspected it wasn't easy for *pani* Emma to give them away for free. Marianna respected her boss and called the businesswoman a woman in *biznes*. She saw the price tags with their double-digit figures and calculated how many hours she would have to work for each can of food. She was afraid *pani* Emma might think her arrogant, so she thanked her effusively for all the gifts and brought *pani* Emma some of her crocheted table runners as a token of appreciation. She had Waleria translate the words for her, and since she had a feel for music and melody, she repeated what she heard, which came out something like: *I make hand, love lacy*.

The next morning, she saw that *pani* Emma had placed one of her lace runners under a lamp in the office, and that eased her guilty conscience.

But when Marianna brought home a jar of herbal vinegar, of which there were already two unopened in the kitchen, Róża lost her temper. Were they some kind of dumping ground for unwanted food? On the one hand, she only got a few pennies for cleaning, and on the other hand, all these *biznes*women thought they were starving?

She spoke indignantly about one of her *szefowa*, as Róża called her bosses. The

Tuesday *szefowa* brought her a Leberkäse roll from the market every day at lunchtime. At first, Róża ate it out of politeness, her boss, after all, was so pleased to be able to offer her lunch. But every time, the greasy mass of meat and the sickly sweet mustard on top made Róża feel nauseous – what was it anyway? A pâté of liver and cheese? But the *szefowa* sat next to her, what could she do? She had no choice – she ate it and smiled. From then on, the *szefowa* brought her a Leberkäse roll every Tuesday, and Róża would put it in her handbag and say *I'll save it for later*. Since Waleria didn't like the roll either, she started throwing it away on her way home. But with terrible pangs of conscience. Full of shame, she admitted to herself: she would have gladly received the money spent on it. Then she could choose what to eat herself.