

Foxtrot in the Erfurt Stadium

SAMPLER

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Jürgen Becker

Foxtrot in the Erfurt Stadium

*translated from German
by Martyn Crucefix*

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Jürgen Becker, *Foxtrott im Erfurter Stadion. Gedichte*
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Jürgen Becker, *Gegen die Erhaltung der literarischen status quo* (1964)
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Lutz Seiler, *Nie hört die Nachkriegszeit auf. Über Jürgen Becker*
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Lutz Seiler, "'The Post-war Era Never Ends': on Jürgen Becker"
taken from Lutz Seiler, *In Case of Loss* (Sheffield: And Other Stories, 2023),
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Translator's Preface

In her Afterword to Jürgen Becker's monumental 1,000-page *Gesammelte Gedichte* (2022), Marion Poschmann praises the poet as being 'the writer of his generation who has most consistently exposed himself to the work of remembrance, who approaches the repressed with admirable subtlety and is able to reconcile his personal biography with the great upheavals of history.' Becker grew up in the German region of Thuringia which, after World War II, was in the Soviet occupation zone, later the GDR. By then, his family had moved to West Germany and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Becker often returned to his childhood landscape.

It is, in part, such biographical happenstance that has made Becker a poet of historical change which, as he says in the poem 'Dressel's Garden', is 'not yet / a completed process'. The poems achieve their ambitious goals through a layering of time periods, a multiplicity of voices, strands of association and networks of memory. He collages fragments and juxtaposes elements of everyday speech, popular music, neutral description, higher tones, and historical quotation. What holds the poems together are recurring leitmotifs, focal points of personal and historical memory, familiar places, to such a degree that it is 'possible to read 17 volumes totalling 1,000 pages as a single, enormous poem' (Poschmann). I first encountered Becker's work while translating an essay on the poet by Lutz Seiler (published in *In Case of Loss (And Other Stories, 2024)*). Seiler reads Becker's work as 'a process that integrate[s] both immediate and more distant modalities of language, his own voice as well as materials drawn from other sources such as events, photos, maps, as well as interjections from neighbouring rooms, from the mail, the news, weather conditions and whatever else stray[s] within range.' I am very happy that permissions have been granted to enable Seiler's brilliant essay to stand as an Introduction to this volume.

Selecting from the 1,000-page poem that Poschmann envisages would be difficult indeed, so I have chosen to present the whole of Becker's crucial 1993 collection, *Foxtrot in the Erfurt Stadium*. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and reunification the following year, this is the collection in which Becker explores his relationship with his own childhood in Thuringia and the continuing impact of the Second World War and the division of Germany. I have also included

a substantial extract from Becker's important 1963 lecture, 'Against the Conservation of the Literary Status Quo', because it suggests clearly the poet's dissatisfaction with the literary forms of that time and his belief that a form of 'journaling' was to be his own way forward. Becker's baggy, comprehensive, allusive, meditative, brilliantly detailed poems (surely at their best at length) can also be viewed as a response to Czesław Miłosz's lines in the 1968 poem 'Ars Poetica?': 'I have always aspired to a more spacious form / that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose' (tr. Miłosz and Lillian Vallee). These then are poems of great historical importance, but my interest in them has also been sustained by the belief that they are extraordinary technical achievements and present an extension of the concept of what makes a poem, an extension too long absent from the English language poetry world.

My heartfelt thanks to Tony Frazer at Shearsman Books for his enthusiasm for Becker's work and ensuring this book came to be. Also thanks to Karen Leeder for her encouragement and advice. Also thanks to Tim Turner for comments on 'Dressel's Garden' in particular.

MC – London, July 2025

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What you can do

Draw out this line once again, nobody else will see it.

You cannot expect more than a few indications of having been here.

What do you do, in the evening, when you have withdrawn to an isolated house?

An illusion, the prolongation of silence, since you cannot start and cannot stop.

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Once again

Preparations for what will drag on and on
until a start that will pass in complete silence.

No one notices a thing. It makes no noise
when traces appear across a field
of indiscernible outlines.

Too much revealed already. Immediately, and later,
an endless search, and usually something
is discovered, the wrong thing.

If doubts are to be permitted. Or a device
with a memory.

Long ago, it came to an end, and the grass has
grown tall into the evening.

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Possibly how it goes on

Debris, rubble: the changes soundless, without our noticing the controls, somebody's intervention, the plain impact of theory; what was *changed* simply came round the corner; the abrupt image of a road, on the edge of which field poppies once stood.

In sight of the barricade, the beginnings of the story of daybreak, which sometimes sits at the breakfast table, reading the paper, sounding on occasions like a fairytale, and adults stood round, embarrassed, at a children's birthday party. It's chilly; motorbikes loom out of the morning mist; a sleeping cow is not even mentioned; the flashlight under canvas.

A straw poll taken among rediscovered friends, and some are still able to smell the odour of soup that hung round the sports hall after lunchbreak. Some try whistling like Ilse Werner — what did the poll uncover? Who had qualms about setting a cross by the name of the Reich capital; who heard anything other than the wind stirring the reeds?

No one was really drunk after the class reunion; flustered in the car over an old flirtation, about a few mixed-up names. That certainly wasn't it; nettles on the edge of the embankment kept us from adventures that were adventures no longer; we gazed at unlit windows and waited for something to happen.

Plenty happened, but not as expected, just what was feared; once the question arose, whether each day the newspaper wrote the next part of the novel... and what the flak-helper betrayed in his poem, in which *Buna* served as a rhyme for *Leuna*.

The train on the local line whistled round each bend;
it ran, sounding, beyond the sawmill, past the fodder
store. Then first signs of disappointment; plenty of
room on the bed of the wagons. Soot-smudged, the white,
Sunday-best shirt; you only dared go further at night.

Whoever phoned so late slurred their words a little,
apologised immediately; only when there was a knock,
leather coats standing in the doorway, and sheep
on the unmetalled road held up the limousine.
Where were we going... let me describe for you
the path to one, then to another barbarity.

Children from those days have grown old, it happened
very quickly, once the milkmaid, the postman
were dead; then half the choir had a cough; not all
the papers burned at once. Who shot Rex, the sheepdog,
shot Ruth, the compulsory year girl? Just go ask
the attendant again, at the desk, over there, in
the barracks, in the foyer of the library.

Parka drenched; a pack of tobacco goes round,
before the theory's on the table. The cocks crowing;
there's still some conversation; on a tape, a selection
of beautiful sounds. If evidence falls short, you
can order at a forty percent discount, and the sky will
be bright, and we can go for a swim before dinner.

Temporary lull

The storm was yellow, the following day, blue, one of the many that blended their names with the voices of America, the shades of the Marseillaise, radio beacons from around the British Isles. Other colours appeared only when fishing boats and post-boxes, goods trains, became the focus of attention, a period of time that briefly reminded us of a potentially vast spectrum. That was

a situation that to the present continues to invigorate the grammar, though for how long? Is it, as usual, all about quotas, about pensions, and about adventures that are subsidised? Since those days, it is not only the sky standing open again; you can now choose, one way or another, whether the long-intended journey into remembrance is to be postponed, whether the listening device is to be re-wound once again, back to Platform 7. The memory is of the interior of a carriage, the entrance into the bunker under the city park, the gramophone, and the box seat in the Ufa-Palace; all this

is true. Just give the recruitment office a call, ask them which year, before jurisdictions are changed; not even this full moon is timeless, this grey rock, against which the sea of my daydreams recoils. It gets more difficult to breathe; washed up on an island that grows smaller, lower, and smaller still, holding on, after waking up, a castaway, who has not yet surfaced anywhere. Not one of the missing, but

more like a fiction that cannot be placed
anywhere else, but who now plays their part
in the next instalment of the story. Isn't that

how it should be? In the ensuing storm, the spruce
tree crashes onto the roof; unequivocally green, and
we report it immediately: this is a quite
different situation. And the dying man reaches
for a brand of cigarette which is still on sale
only because of him. And the memory
is struggling; it cannot rid itself of any
of the freight trains, even though they've long
since ground to a halt on overgrown tracks. Nor
even of digging, and digging again, with the lid
of the canteen; ants crawling, crawling
over the face that lay amongst the wild

berries. Give me the camera... sorry, the job is
still not filled? Again they're looking for people
who make landfall with their feet dry, and
if no one turns their stars very quickly
to money then the guards are stood down
along the chalk cliffs. On the way, there are still
a few picture postcards from the white decades
of the summer vacation; till we meet again, there
are railings, patios, cabins that need painting;
then, there we are, on a Sunday in springtime,
sitting on wicker chairs that a conservative

majority has set there for us. It maybe you
forget yourself again, and knock over some
of the furniture; the backdrop to those feelings
might surface after you've opened
the next studio door, after you break
an agreement that was mere procrastination,
just an excuse. The fruit trees that litter
the meadows after the storm are now beginning

to blossom and, in the midst of the monologue,
the back and forth between dissidents, the homeless,
the secret service, and the people in the village,

starts up again. In the dance hall, evacuees
lie on straw; the petrol station below says nothing;
ask the community of heirs of the blacksmith:
stork's nests, we used to have them here, and we'd
really like to see them back again. Your own voice:
a sound from the pedestrian precinct that
swerves across the desk. At the window,
the fluttering of moths; a photograph taken
in front of the cottage of the abandoned woman;
there are those dateless letters that set the phone
ringing all over again. But are the lines
clear: can you free yourself so quickly from
the undergrowth that has grown up between
the uprooted trees? A temporary lull, although

not every road is navigable even now,
and all you can hear these days is
the buzzing of the power saws. Don't talk
so much and only come back here again when
the ravaged gardens have been cleared. Spring
has got off to a cool start; we have
only let ourselves get fooled again; it's still
too early to be sat outside in front of the houses.