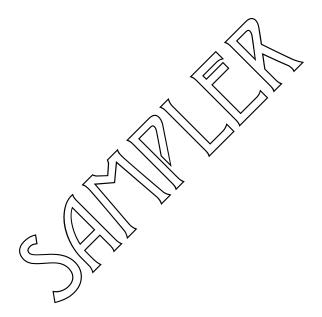
# Foxtrot in the Erfurt Stadium





# 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), with permission of the publisher.

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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 poen 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, local 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)). Soller reads Becker's work as 'a process that integrate[s] both immediate and more dispant 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.

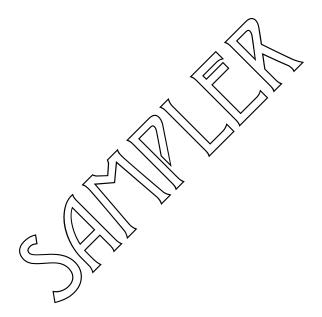
Selecting from the 1,000-page poem that Poschmann envisages would be difficult indeed, so I have chosen to present the whole of Becker's crucial 1993 collection, *Foxtrot in the Erfurt Stadium*. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and reunification the following year, this is the collection 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 'journalling' 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.

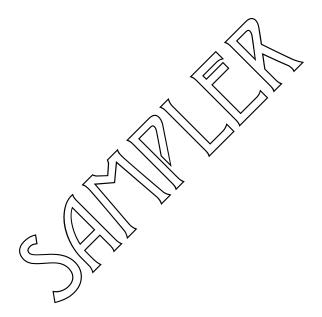
My heartfelt thanks to Tony Frazer at Shearsman Books for his enthusiasm for Becker's work and ensuring this book came to be. Also tranks to Karen Leeder for her encouragement and advice. Also thanks to Tim Turner for comments on 'Dressel's Garden' in particular.

Me London, July 2025

# Foxtrott im Erfurter Stadion



# Foxtrot in the Erfurt Stadium

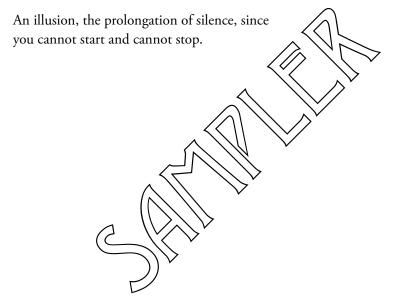


### What you can do

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?



### 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 dewith a memory.

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

### 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 canyas.

A straw poll taken among rediscovered friends, and some are still able to smell the odour of soup that hung round the sports had after lunchbreak. Some try whistling like Ilse Werner what did the poll uncover? Who had quartus 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 drunt 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 olds 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 Next the sheepdog, shot Ruth, the compulsory year girl? Just go ask the attendant again, at the desk, over there, in the barracks, in the forer 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 Iull

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 slav standing open again; you can now choose, one way or another, whether the long-intended journey into temembrance 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 fa-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. For 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 teet dry, and if no one turns their stars very quickly to money then the guards are stood down along the chalk diffs. 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, parios, 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 athough

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.