BLACKBIRDS IN SEPTEMBER
BLACKBIRDS
IN SEPTEMBER

SELECTED SHORTER POEMS OF
JÜRGEN BECKER

TRANSLATED BY
OKLA ELLIOTT

BLACK LAWRENCE PRESS
CONTENTS

Translator’s Preface 11

In the Wind 15
Poem about Snow in April 17
Once, in February 19
Belgian Coast 21
A Provisional Topography 23
Zoo District 27
Altenbeken 29
Otherwise Nobody 31
Autumn Story 33
Chronicle 35
Four Lines 37
Amsterdam 39
Daytime, a Connection 41
West-East 43
Once Again 45
Two Women 47
Sun or Moon 49
Sunday Evening 51
Oderbruch 53
A Worn-out Machine 55
An Almost Forgotten Thing 57
Suburb, Summer, Afternoon 59
What We Can
On Mouse’s Way; Street Construction
Shakespeare’s Country
Paris
A Foreign Affair
Dublin in Bloomtime
Report
From the History of Sounds
Nearby
The Window at the End of the Corridor
Near Andy Warhol
Soliloquy
The Situation in February
March in Cologne
Beginning of September
What You See
Past the Construction Site
In Memoriam Donald Barthelme
Hell, Sartre Said, Is Other People
Renaissance
Saturday Morning, Shortly before Breakfast
Around Four-Thirty
Tell Me How You’re Doing
Show Me the Season
The Thousand and First Street
Possibilities for Paintings
Timing
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hotel Belgica</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondent</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Warning</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostende</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of a Painting</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of the Many Stories of Sounds</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside, City Limit</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sooner or Later</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth of July</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village Outskirts with Gas Station / 1</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village Outskirts with Gas Station / 2</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Objectivity</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather Report</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Film</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Year 1932</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the editors and magazines that first published several of the translations in this collection:

*Absinthe*: “Amsterdam”; “Belgian Coast”; “Daytime, a Connection”

*The Adirondack Review*: “The Year 1932”; “Village Outskirts with Gas Station / 1”; “Village Outskirts with Gas Station / 2”

*Arch Literary Journal*: “Once Again”


*ĕm*: “Hell, Sartre Said, Is Other People”

*Indiana Review*: “Oderbruch”

*International Poetry Review*: “An Almost Forgotten Thing”


*Life and Legends*: “Old Film”; “Tell Me How You’re Doing”

*The Literary Review*: “On Mouse’s Way; Street Construction”; “Paris”

*The Los Angeles Review*: “Sun or Moon”

*The McNeese Review*: “Two Women”; “Near Andy Warhol”; “Sunday Evening”; “Zoo District”
Natural Bridge: “Correspondent”

Per Contra: “Autumn Story”; “Chronicle”; “Renaissance”; “Possibilities for Paintings”

Plume: “A Provisional Topography”; “Sooner or Later”; “One of the Many Stories of Sounds”

Prairie Schooner: “In the Wind”; “Correspondent”; “Oderbruch”; “Autumn Story”; “A Provisional Topography”; “Poem about Snow in April”

A Public Space: “A Foreign Affair”; “In the Wind”

In addition to the editors of the above journals, I need to thank many people. First and foremost, allow me to thank Jürgen Becker for his amazing work and his willingness to entrust it to me. Thanks to Diane Goettel, Daniele Pantano, and everyone at Black Lawrence Press for bringing the book into existence and believing in it. David Bowen has been, per usual, a pleasure to work with; his design skills and his patience with my many requests proved phenomenal. I would also like to thank Dick Davis and Andrew Hudgins for their encouragement during the early phases of my work with Becker’s poetry. Big thanks to Sanna Stegmaier for proofreading the German and double-checking my translation. And, looking further back, I would like to thank the study abroad program at UNC-Greensboro for providing me a scholarship to support my year abroad in Germany without which I never would have learned the language or been exposed to Becker’s work. Finally, a huge thank-you to my sisters Flora and Vickie who have supported me in everything—ohne euch, nichts.
Umberto Eco calls translation the art of failure, and I have failed variously in my attempts to render Jürgen Becker’s poetry into English—though Samuel Beckett’s dictum that one must try again and fail better comes immediately to mind as a counterpoint to Eco’s observation about the impossible task of translation. Over the past decade, I have followed Beckett’s advice, trying again and again to get at the spirit of Becker’s poetry, failing again and again, but, I hope, failing better along the way.

I first discovered Jürgen Becker’s work during a year-long study abroad in Germany while I was an undergraduate. When I returned to the United States, I continued to read his work with ever-increasing interest and began translating his work during graduate school at Ohio State University. Comparative literature scholar and critical theorist Gayatri Spivak has claimed that the best way to read a writer’s work is to translate it, and this is perhaps most true in the case of poetry. Once I began translating Becker’s poems, I had to find my way into the shape and feel of his lyric idiom in order to recreate it as accurately and effectively as possible in English. Translating his work forced me not only to read it with greater care but forced me to write it as I constructed the English versions of his poems. That comingling of my language and his makes my relationship to Becker’s work unlike any other I have with an author.

What is immediately striking about Becker’s work is his ability to track the oddities of consciousness, as well as the unexpected ways he makes ideas and images ricochet off each another. He also renders historically charged content in aesthetically nuanced language masterfully. Becker’s work often deals with his childhood experience of the Second World War and the political consequences of the postwar division of Germany. It is perhaps his deft lyric melding of the personal and the historical/political that makes him a truly great poet.
Becker’s work fits well in several disciplines, ranging from creative writing to various scholarly fields. For the former, it is often productive to engage with different literary traditions in order to enrich our own. We simply have to remember all that English-language literature has learned from other languages—sonnets from Italian, couplets from French, and, some argue, free verse from Chinese—to realize how true this is. And as for the latter, the fields of memory studies, trauma studies, and European literary studies in general could benefit from further investigation into Becker’s work. I hope Blackbirds in September proves to be an entry point into a wider consideration of Becker’s excellent and far-ranging output.

Finally, a quick note on the structure of the book: I have elected to organize the poems aesthetically as opposed to chronologically. I have, however, listed the poems included here by their German titles and the collections in which they initially appeared in the appendix. There is also the occasional footnote throughout the body of the text when I thought the cultural reference would be lost on an English-language reader, though I have made every effort to keep these to a minimum. I therefore hope to have created the maximum aesthetic pleasure in reading the poems while still offering a critical apparatus that will prove useful for further research.

May the reader enjoy reading these translations as much as I have enjoyed producing them.

— Okla Elliott
IM WIND

In the Wind

Blackbirds, then other voices. It doesn’t stop when it snows, when with the snow a newness comes that is entirely essential this morning. Or how do you see it? I see the pear tree and how it (the pear tree) reacts to the wind (to the wind). This morning, yet again, the decision fell. War between magpies and crows, only this war, no trappings, only this clear understanding. Yet another voice, the next commentator; it’s all about (yet again) the whole. Are you standing in the garden? Then you know, tsk tsk, the blackbird warned above all else, you know, I’ll say it yet again, in war, in the new snow, in the wind.
April-Schnee; schnell; noch einmal
ist fünfzehn Minuten
Winter und völliges Verschwinden
der Krokus-Gebiete
und
fünfzehn Minuten, in Zukunft,
sagt Warhol, ist Ruhm. Schnell,
ein Gedicht über Schnee im April,
denn schnell ist weg
Stimmung und Schnee
und plötzlich,
metaphorisch gesagt,
ist Schnee-Herrschaft verschwunden
im Krokusgebiet
und die Regierung des Frühlings regiert.
Nun Frühlings-Gedicht.
Und schnell. Winter ist morgen, wieder,
und neue Herrschaft,
nein,
icht morgen: in fünfzehn Minuten,
mit Schnee, wie schnelles Leben,
sagt Warhol, metaphorisch gesagt,
wie Schnee, Verschwinden, April.
POEM ABOUT SNOW IN APRIL

April-snow; quickly; once again
fifteen minutes
of winter and full disappearance
of crocus-regions

and
fifteen minutes, in the future,
says Warhol, is fame. Quickly,
a poem about snow in April,
for mood and snow
are quickly gone

and suddenly,
metaphorically speaking,
snow-mastery disappeared
in the region of the crocus,
and the regime of spring rules.
So, a spring-poem.
And quickly. Tomorrow it’s winter, again,
and new mastery,

no,
not tomorrow: in fifteen minutes
with snow, like quick life,
says Warhol, metaphorically speaking,
like snow, disappearing, April.
EINST, IM FEbruar

See-Wetter; aber die See nicht. 
Diese Erinnerung an Küsten; Küsten 
des Exils, die ich so nannte, 
einst, als ich hierblieb.
ONCE, IN FEBRUARY

Ocean weather; but not the ocean. This memory of coasts; coasts of exile, as I called them once, when I stayed here.
Toccata und Tango; der Nachmittag
nicht hell. Ein Hotel
nach dem andern verwittert;
Ansichtskarten der Emigranten.
Türen, Türen
verweht der Sand, verschwinden
hinter dem Sand. Ruhe der Angler.
Unsichtbares England; Nachrichten
der englischen Sender, im Krieg.
Kinder rennen
mit Bällen, Rädern, Propellern;
Fallschirmjäger da.
Toccata and tango; the afternoon
not bright. One hotel
weathered after another;
postcards of emigrants.
Doors, doors
are blown away by the sand,
disappear behind the sand. The calm
of anglers. Invisible England; reports
from the British transmitter, wartime.
Children run
with balls, wheels, propellers;
and paratroopers all about.
EINE vorläufige Topographie


In der Ferne im Dunkeln zwei Häuser. Obwohl es ganz hell ist.

Ob Seelen hier wandern . . . jedenfalls, fern auf dem Damm, sind unterwegs zwei Menschen, die sich abheben vom Horizont, mitten in dieser Vergangenheit.

Aber die Baumreihen setzen sich fort, bis sie verschwinden in einer Linie, die zurückkehrt auf der anderen Seite des Flusses.

Die Frage, ob so oder ähnlich Konflikte anfingen.

Bei Nacht, und nicht nur nachts, im Konjunktiv.

A Provisional Topography

On the Weichsel River, before the war. Now you see exactly where we could have gone farther on the path above the dam separating the Nothing of river-silver from those things that formed only shadows in the changing light.

The unmoved architecture of clouds: it is this moment that over decades has dragged itself and has adopted the color of newsprint.

In the distance, in the dark, two houses. Although it’s bright as day.

Whether souls wander here . . . in any case, distant, on the dam, two people walking stand out against the horizon, in the middle of this past.

But the rows of trees continue until they disappear in a line that returns on the other side of the river.

The question, whether such or similar conflicts began.

At night, and not just nights, in the subjunctive.

. . . as though the embankment were to come against us. Then it’s clear that you can’t steer anything in history. A progression, an altogether private movement stays undecided between the return home and a further absence. These years, it’s said, have left traces of bitterness.
Aber die Landschaft ist ziemlich still. Unsichtbar bleibt die Zerstörung, falls es Zerstörung gibt.

Und vorbei ist die Zeit, die die folgende, die folgende Zeit hervorgebracht hat.

Nur erzählst du vom Jetzt nichts.


Eine vorläufige Topographie. Du kannst sie verwischen. Du kannst sie Verändern, bis eine Serie entsteht, bis wir erreichen die Ufer der Wiederholung.
But the landscape is rather quiet. Invisible the destruction, if in fact there is destruction.

And the time is passed which the subsequent, the subsequent time produced.

But you never speak of Now.

Probably in the summer. At that time of year we remember. Fence posts follow the paths, or turned around, all of it belonging to the landscape . . . who owns it? The landscape leads into landscapes, from the visible ones to the invisible ones which await us.

A provisional topography. You can cover it up. You can change it, until a series emerges, until we achieve the shore of repetition.