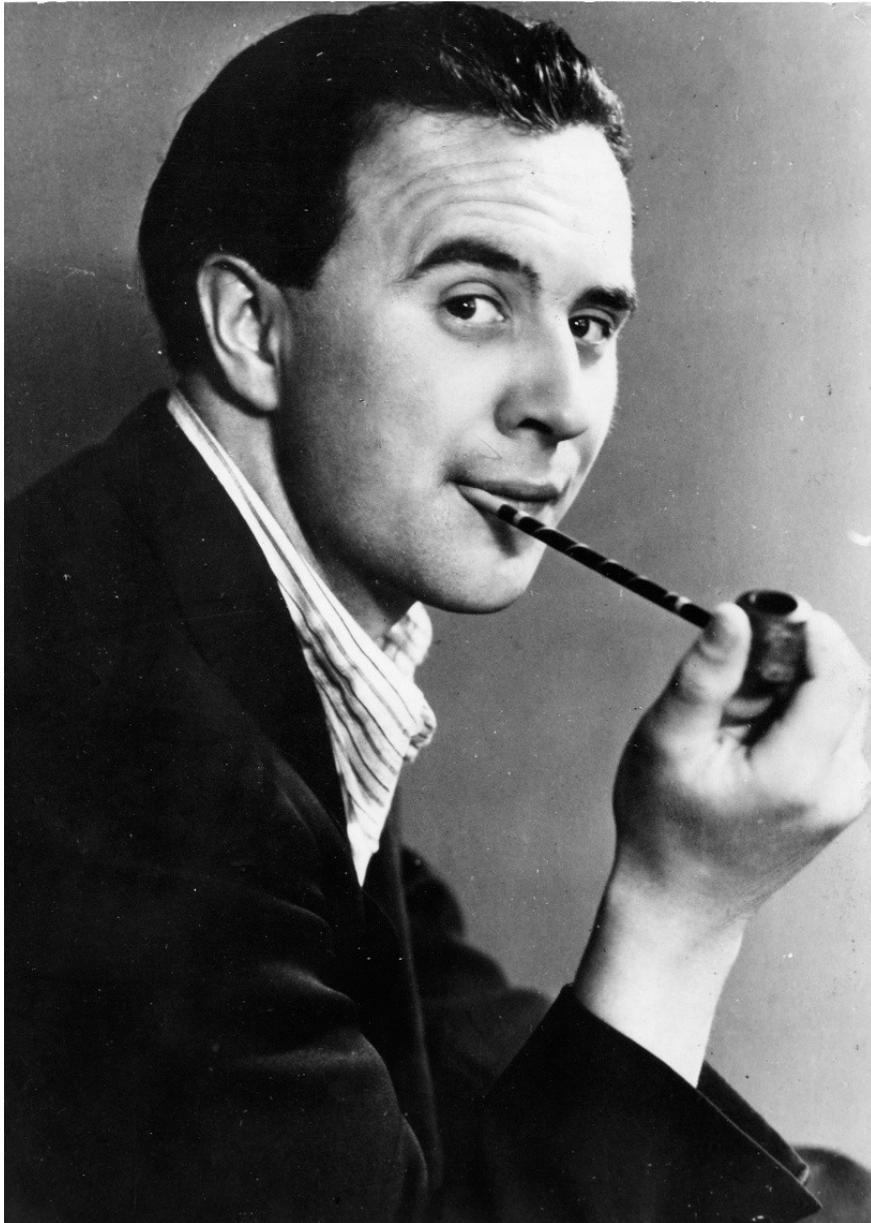


Wolfgang Borchert: Selected short stories

Sample translation by Jennifer Busch

NB: The original German works are in the public domain



“Wolfgang Borchert 1940,” *Galerie*, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky

‘IN WARTIME, ALL FATHERS ARE SOLDIERS’

– Wolfgang Borchert, ‘That Tuesday’

Wolfgang Borchert (1921–1947) is a renowned figure of *Trümmerliteratur*, the German literary movement in the direct aftermath of the Second World War, which is known for its unflinching criticism of the period and the powerful associations it evokes through simple language.

Borchert wrote prolifically and is credited with setting the style of the German short story. His themes are as relevant and emotionally resonant as ever — authoritarianism, disillusionment, survival, guilt, and the difficulty of returning to civilian life after conflict.

‘An electric pulse’

– Dieter Wellershoff, German historian and author, on Borchert’s writing

Borchert’s work is raw, angry, poignant, occasionally tender, always honest and often infused with a wry humour and thread of hope. His radical rejection of tradition and authority is keenly present in his work; he disdained the ‘polished grammarians’ of his parents’ generation, favouring a sparse, accessible style that nevertheless conjures vivid images, realistic characters and strong emotions.

Nazi jokes

Borchert was a literary giant, but he was also a boy caught up in something bigger than himself, rebelling where he could. He was born in Hamburg in 1921 and grew up in a liberal family during the rise of National Socialism. After a far-from-illustrious school career, he trained as an actor; his few months in the profession were the happiest of his short life.

As a brash young man, Borchert refused to hide his disdain for the Nazis, and in 1940 he was briefly arrested by the Gestapo. He was later conscripted to the army, where he was court-martialled various times for attempting to evade military service, making statements against the regime, and telling parodies of Joseph Goebbels. He narrowly escaped the death sentence.

Still iconic

The war broke Borchert’s health but that did not stop him from writing over forty short stories, a slew of poetry and a seminal radio play before he died in 1947, at the age of twenty-six. He features in German literary history textbooks and is still studied in schools and universities.

Borchert was an important spokesperson for a betrayed generation. His short stories, poems, play and completed works are regularly reissued.

Sample Translation

The following extracts have been chosen to give an impression of Borchert's varied style and themes and were translated from his complete works, as published by Anaconda in 2022.

The original German works are in the public domain.

That Tuesday

A week has one Tuesday.

A year, fifty-two.

A war has many Tuesdays.

That Tuesday

at school, they were practising their capital letters. The teacher was wearing thick glasses with no rim. They were so thick they softened her gaze.

Forty-two girls copied from the board:

FRITZ THE GREAT HAD A TIN-CAN MUG. BIG BERTHA'S SHELLS SHOOK
PARIS. IN WARTIME, ALL FATHERS ARE SOLDIERS.

Ulla stuck her tongue out, all the way up to her nose. The teacher prodded her. There's no 'J' in 'soldier', Ulla. It's spelt 'D', 'I', 'E'. How many times do I have to tell you? In her book, she made a cross next to Ulla's name. You'll write that out for me ten times by tomorrow, and no mistakes, understood? Yes Miss, said Ulla and thought: Her with her glasses.

In the yard, crows gobbled down chunks of thrown-away bread.

That Tuesday

Lieutenant Ehlers was called to the unit commander. You'll need to get rid of that red scarf, Ehlers.

Herr Major?

Well, Ehlers, they don't like that sort of thing in the Second.

I'm being sent to the Second Company?

Yes, and they don't like that sort of thing. It just won't do. The Second are very proper, you know. You wear that red scarf and you'll get nothing but cold shoulders. Captain Hesse didn't wear that sort of thing.

Hesse's wounded?

No, he's reported himself unfit for duty. Wasn't feeling too peachy, he said. Since he's become captain, he's been a bit slack, old Hesse. Beats me. Used to be so proper. Nothing doing – Ehlers, see to it you keep the Second in check. Hesse trained them well. And you'll take that scarf off, understood?

'Course, Herr Major.

And mind they're careful with the ciggies. Must give the snipers itchy trigger fingers, seeing those little glowworms flitting about. We had five shot in the head last week. So you just be careful.

Yes, sir.

On the way to the Second Company Lieutenant Ehlers took off his red scarf. He lit a cigarette. Company Commander Ehlers, he said out loud.

There was a shot.

--- *End of first extract* ---

--- *First published in An diesem Dienstag, Rowohlt, 1947* ---

But rats sleep at night

A gaping window in the solitary wall yawned blue-red, full of early evening sun. Clouds of dust shimmered between the teetering remains of a chimney. The rubble-wasteland dozed.

His eyes were closed. Suddenly, the blackness intensified. He realised that someone had come, was standing in front of him darkly, quietly. They've got me! he thought. But when he peeked, all he saw was a pair of shabby trousers. The legs were so crooked he could see through the gap. He risked a quick glance upwards and made out an old man with a knife and basket in his hands. And a little soil under his fingernails.

You're sleeping here, is that it? asked the man, looking down on the scruffy tangle of hair. Jürgen blinked away the sun coming through the man's legs and said: no, I'm not asleep. I'm on guard. The man nodded: And that's why you've got that big stick?

Yes, answered Jürgen bravely, clutching the stick.

What are you guarding, then?

Can't tell you. He clutched the stick tighter.

Oh, I see. Money. The man put his basket down and started wiping his knife on his back pocket.

'Course not, scoffed Jürgen. No, you're way off.

Well, what then?

Can't tell you. Something else, that's all.

Well, don't tell me then. But then I'm not going to tell you what's in my basket. He tapped the basket with his foot and clapped the knife shut.

Bah, I can guess what's in your basket, said Jürgen dismissively. Rabbit food.

Good grief, so it is! The man sounded astonished. You're a smart lad, eh. How old are you then?

Nine.

Crikey, nine years old, just think. Then you must already know what three times nine is, won't you?

'Course, said Jürgen, and to win time he added: That's easy. And he looked through the man's legs. Three times nine, that was the question? he asked again. Twenty-seven. I knew right away.

Spot on, said the man. That's exactly how many rabbits I have.

Jürgen gaped: Twenty-seven?

Lots of them are still babies. You can come see for yourself, if you want?

But I can't. I'm on guard, said Jürgen, uncertain.

--- End of second extract ---

--- German original first published in An diesem Dienstag, Rowohlt, 1947 ---

Firewood, for tomorrow

He closed the landing door behind himself. He closed it quietly, without any fuss. Even though he wanted to take his own life. His life, which he didn't understand, where he wasn't understood. The people he loved didn't understand him. And that's exactly what he couldn't bear, this ships-in-the-night-ness with the people he loved.

But there was something more, something that had grown so big it was suffocating everything, something that refused to be brushed aside.

It was that he could cry at night without his loved ones hearing. That he saw his mother, who he loved, getting old before his very eyes. That he could sit with other people in a room, could laugh with them and feel lonelier than ever. That the others didn't hear shots when he did. That they couldn't. That was the ships-in-the-night-ness with the people he loved which he simply couldn't bear.

And now he was standing in the stairway, on his way to the attic to take his own life. He'd been up all night figuring out how, and in the end he decided the main thing was to go up to the attic so he'd be alone. That was the first step. He didn't have anything to shoot himself with and poison was too hit-and-miss. Being brought back to life by some doctor and having to face the reproachful, pitying looks of the others, in all their love and concern, that would be the ultimate shame. And drowning was so melodramatic and jumping out of the window too much of a fuss. No, going up to the attic was best. He'd be alone there. It would be peaceful. Up there, everything was understated, calm. And, of course, that's where the beams were. And the laundry basket with the clothesline.

Borchert tr. Busch, 'Firewood, for tomorrow'

Once he'd closed the landing door quietly behind himself, he reached straight for the banister and began his slow ascent. The glass dome above the stairwell let a pale sky through its criss-cross of spidery wire mesh; it was lightest at the top, right under the roof.

--- End of third extract ---

--- First published posthumously in 'Die traurige Geranien', Rowohlt, 1949 ---

Translator biography

Jennifer Busch is a translator and editor who particularly enjoys short and short-short stories. She has BAs in English Literature and Modern Foreign Languages as well as MAs in French and Translation. Her writing and translations have been published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Asymptote*, *Little Fruits Magazine* (forthcoming), *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Fun Lovin Liminals*, *Fifty-Word Stories*, and *101 Words*, and in 2025 she was shortlisted for the John Dryden Translation Competition for a co-translation of Ilse Aichinger's 'In the mirror'. She lives near Munich, Germany, with her husband and two small boys.

Rights and copyright information

Originals

Borchert died in 1947; his work, which includes short stories, poetry, and the play *Draußen vor der Tür*, is in the public domain.

Three collections of Borchert's short stories were published postwar, *Die Hundebblume* and *An diesem Dienstag* in 1947 and *Die traurige Geranien* posthumously, in 1949.

A collection of selected short stories would showcase Borchert's work to a modern, English-speaking audience.

Translations

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