Wolfgang Borchert's *Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch*

A Study in Responding to Injury

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As *Die Küchenuhr*, *Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch* was published in *An diesem Dienstag* and belongs to the same sequence: »Und keiner weiß: wohin«.[1] Consequently, it was also penned between the fall of 1946 and the summer of 1947, Borchert's final year.[2] More precisely, Peter Rühmkorf maintains in his volume, *Wolfgang Borchert*, that the narrative was composed in January 1947 (the same month he wrote *Draußen vor der Tür*), before Borchert left for the Clara Hospital in Basel. Rühmkorf gleaned this information from a list the writer had compiled, while already in Switzerland and consequently in the final stages of his illness.[3] It may be recalled that Wolfgang Borchert died in Basel on 20 November 1947.[4] Rowohlt published *An diesem Dienstag* posthumously, i. e., in 1947, shortly after the author's death.[5]

As several Borchert stories, at slightly more than three, its pages are few. Therefore, the reader doesn't anticipate detailed character development or a wealth of artistic detail. The reader would be mistaken on both accounts. So reminiscent of the writer's style, the plot line couldn't be more straightforward. A nine-year old boy, mourning the recent death of his younger brother, anticipates reuniting with his parents, thanks to the intervention of a well-intentioned stranger. Though himself initially at a loss as to what he might do to mitigate the youngster's acute distress, the older man does ultimately chance upon a solution. It may not qualify as ideal, but it does hold promise. In a world as shattered as this one, in a world where children die and violently so, before their parents or even older siblings, one cannot hope to garner ideal; feasible will have to do.

1 | Wolfgang Borchert: Das Gesamtwerk. Reinbek bei Hamburg 1985, p. 4. All citations from *Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch*, refer to this edition, pp. 216–219; *Die Küchenuhr*, pp. 201–204.

2 | Ibid., p. 168.

3 | Peter Rühmkorf: Wolfgang Borchert in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten. Reinbek bei Hamburg 1968, pp. 132–133.

4 | Borchert: Das Gesamtwerk, p. 323.

5 | Ibid., p. 168.

As is his wont, Borchert wastes no time in setting the scene in all its rampant desolation. The first paragraph of *Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch* leaves no doubt as to the desperate situation confronting this nine-year old. »Das hohle Fenster in der vereinsamten Mauer gähnte blaurot voll früher Abendsonne. Staubgewölke flimmerte zwischen den steilgereckten Schornsteinresten. Die Schuttwüste döste.« (216) The four personifications within these three lines infuse life into this utter destruction, this utter devastation. Though the sustained use of this literary device may be readily apparent at first glance, the significance of the sunlight, even if the receding light of sunset, may not be fully understood until somewhat later. For the moment, suffice it to say, that two of the verbs, »gähnte,« »döste,« are associated with sleeping, a theme already announced in the title and mentioned again when we see Jürgen for the first time; »Er hatte die Augen zu.« (216) This story lends itself to a multitude of interpretations, but one of its main themes indubitably revolves around a change of perspective, an altered way of seeing, in short, a conversion.

In contrast to *Die Küchenuhr*, it is not the bereaved, who seeks contact, rather the uninjured individual, the older man does so. But as in the earlier story, the ensuing dialogue involves strangers. Therefore, the fact that Jürgen's initial reaction to the man's approach constitutes fear does not come as unexpected. The older man seems to materialize suddenly out of nowhere. »Jetzt haben sie mich!« (216) Jürgen doesn't verbalize this response; to do so would require some measure of trust. Fear and trust cannot coexist. For the moment, Jürgen opts for the former. How can he be expected to do otherwise? »›Unser Haus kriegte eine Bombe.‹« (218) Cognizant of his situation, he can only expect more of the same, more pain and disillusionment, more loss and sadness. For the religiously inclined, this encounter epitomizes a moment of grace. It is the gift not only unearned, but thoroughly unanticipated.[6] Jürgen's eventual willingness to take the hand held out to him, as it were, to accept the man's ministrations, will eventually lead him home.

Given not only the challenging, but at times battered, nature of our lives, whether these injuries are self or other-inflicted or an admixture of both, occasionally we all wish to be led home. We wish to be welcomed into a place where even our subliminal needs are met, our wounds are bound up and we can speak our

6 | Robert Farrar Capon: Between Noon and Three: Romance, Law, and the Outrage of Grace. Grand Rapids (MI)/Cambridge (U. K.) 1997, pp. 290–295. Borchert did on occasion make judicious use of religious imagery as his *Die drei dunklen Könige* (Das Gesamtwerk, pp. 185–187) aptly demonstrates. In his essay *Das Gras und der alte Mann*, Alfred Andersch relates the following. A journalist, working for the Hamburger newspaper, *Die Welt*, asked Borchert during an interview, whether he considered himself a religious writer. »Natürlich bin ich ein religiöser Dichter«, antwortete Borchert. »Ich glaube an die Sonne, an den Walfisch, an meine Mutter und an das Gras. Genügt das nicht? Das Gras ist nämlich nicht nur das Gras.« (In: Frankfurter Hefte: Zeitschrift für Kultur und Politik [ed. by Eugen Kogon] 3 [1948], No. 3, p. 927.

minds or not; home is a place where we don't have to talk at all, if we don't feel like it. Explanations are not required. Most folks may remember Robert Frost's lines in his *The Death of the Hired Man*: »›Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in.‹« Far fewer tend to recall his ensuing observation: »›[…] Something you somehow haven't to deserve.‹«[7] Surely Jürgen shouldn't have to earn reentry into what's left of his family.

All children deserve a loving home. It qualifies as their birthright. They should repeatedly be assured in both word and deed that they matter; this all-encompassing acceptance should reach into their very bones. »Care is a state in which something does *matter*; care is the opposite of apathy. Care is the necessary source of eros, the source of human tenderness.«[8] Rollo May continues to insist on this fact even more cogently in recounting a scene from the Vietnam war. A TV cameraman focuses on a soldier looking down at a bewildered child, »now beyond crying,«[9] much as the older man looks at Jürgen. »Der Mann sah von oben auf das Haargestrüpp.« (218) In reflecting on this encounter, Rollo May draws the following poignant conclusion.

> […] I think he only sees there another human being with a common base of humanity on which they pause for a moment in the swamps of Vietnam. His look is care. And the cameraman happens to see him – happens almost always now to see them so – and keeps his camera, trained on his face; a subconscious reaching-out only for human interest, rendering to us an unconscious expression of the guilt of us all. […]
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> This is a simple illustration of care. It is a state composed of the recognition of another, a fellow human being like one's self; of identification of one's self with the pain or joy of the other; of guilt, pity, and the awareness that we all stand on the base of common humanity from which we all stem.[10]

Furthermore, Jürgen has not only incurred significant and sudden, but also multiple losses. Though he as well as his parents survived the blast, his younger brother and home did not. This totally understandable reaction marks the first of his five psychic developmental phases. (Let it be stated at the outset of this interpretation, these are not equivocal to nor representative of Kübler-Ross's five stages of mourning, as pervasive as these may have become in grief studies.)[11] Jürgen's initial reluctance to disclose his thoughts to the older man does not serve as the only sign of his acute apprehension. Several times in the course of

7 | Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays. New York 1995, p. 43.

8 | Rollo May: Love and Will. New York 1969, p. 289.

9 | Ibid., p. 288.

10 | Ibid., pp. 288 f.

11 | Elisabeth Kübler-Ross/David Kessler: On Grief and Grieving. Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss. New York 2005; Ruth Davis Konigsberg: The Truth About Grief. The Myth of Its Five Stages and the New Science of Loss. New York 2011.

the first two stages of his transformation, Jürgen grasps a stick firmly with both hands. »Er hielt die Hände fest um den Stock.« (216) Should he need to defend himself, he holds a weapon at the ready.

To make even some headway in reaching the youngster, the older man begins in asking him a series of questions. At this juncture, the burden of establishing and maintaining the exchange clearly rests upon the more mature individual. There it will remain for the preponderance of the narrative, as well it should. As evening draws near, it seems logical for him to wonder: »›Du schläfst hier wohl, was?‹, fragte der Mann.« (216) In the course of the nine-year old's initial developmental phase, the older man – we never learn his name – makes seven inquiries. Jürgen answers each of them, but his words as well as his tone of voice betray his heightened anxiety. To that first question, Jürgen replies emphatically to set the record straight: »›Nein, ich schlafe nicht. Ich muß hier aufpassen.‹« (216) A monosyllabic, a simple »›Ja‹« (216) constitutes the answer to the man's second question. And though the affirmation is clear and described as courageous (»mutig«) (216), obviously Jürgen still mistrusts this passer-by. »[Er] hielt den Stock fest.« (216) In total contradiction to his feelings, he attempts to project a brave image. To underscore that impression even further and to create distance between himself and the older man, Jürgen answers questions four and five affecting scorn at his suggestions. »›Nein, auf Geld überhaupt nicht‹, sagte Jürgen verächtlich.« (216) And some moments later: »›Pah, kann mir denken, was in dem Korb ist‹, meinte Jürgen geringschätzig, ›Kaninchenfutter.‹« (217) The man's seventh inquiry, asking Jürgen to multiply three by nine, elicits a response, which, while not projecting disdain, intends to convey a sense of authority, of control. »›Das ist ganz leicht [...]. Das wußte ich gleich.‹« (217)

The older man's assertion that he owns exactly twenty-seven rabbits motivates Jürgen to set aside his false bravado and brings him to the threshold of the second stage of his change of heart. »Jürgen machte einen runden Mund [...].« (217) Finally the man manages to pierce the boy's protective shell. He relaxes enough to allow his imagination free reign, to visualize this plethora of rabbits, and he simultaneously formulates his first question: »›Siebenundzwanzig?‹« (217) Intrigued he wishes to know more, permits himself to become attached, to believe. »[...] faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.«[12] The older man immediately not only recognizes, but consequently capitalizes on Jürgen's interest and makes an offer a young boy might be reluctant to refuse. »›Du kannst sie sehen. Viele sind noch ganz jung. Willst du?‹« (217) Jürgen responds to this suggestion in repeatedly stating that he cannot leave, cannot abandon his post, not even at night. But even as he does so, his replies become more and more tentative. Gone are the bravado, the pseudo courage, he tried to convey earlier. »›Ich

12 | The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: An ecumenical Study Bible. Ed. by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy. Oxford/New York 1991, Hebrews 11, p. 1.

kann doch nicht. Ich muß aufpassen‹, sagte Jürgen unsicher.« (217) And again: »›Nachts auch. Immerzu. Immer. [...] Seit Sonnabend schon‹, flüsterte er.« (217) Though still addressing questions to Jürgen, the older man no longer focuses his attention exclusively on the multitude of rabbits, but rather on Jürgen's immediate physical needs: going home, eating, resting. The nine-year old answers each of these inquiries politely and reveals that he has evolved into someone far older than his chronological age suggests.

Amidst and perhaps due to his recent as well as grave losses, he has become rather self-sufficient. »To a child his or her parents are everything; they represent the world.«[13] Nine-year olds tend to assume that their parents will protect them, can mend the broken segments of their lives. Obviously, Jürgen has just learned that on a significant level this assumption has proven illusionary. In coping with this undeniable reality, he epitomizes so many children of the war and post war years, Borchert characterizes in his essay *Generation ohne Abschied*: »[...] unsere Jugend ist ohne Jugend.«[14] On the one hand, as adults we may concur with Sam Keen's observation in his *To a Dancing God*: »We become human on leaving Eden, mature in realizing that childhood is over.«[15] Nevertheless, we should never lose sight of the fact that Jürgen is only nine, and that the gravity of his losses left a nasty looking gash in his childhood. The wound is still fresh. The scar tissue has not yet had time to form.

Beneath a near-by stone lies half a loaf of bread to satisfy his hunger. When asked, whether he prefers a pipe to rolling cigarettes, his determined answer still bears witness not only to his anxiety, but also to his doubt in continuing his vigil. »Jürgen faßte seinen Stock fest an und sagte zaghaft: ›Ich drehe. Pfeife mag ich nicht.‹« (217) Perhaps the promise of all those rabbits begins ever so gently eclipsing the memory of his deceased brother and the final moments before his death. Jürgen may act older and be more aware than his scant years would suggest, but even he cannot hold two contradictory images in his mind simultaneously, cannot reconcile death and life. He must release one in order to embrace the other.

To this juncture the man has asked Jürgen thirteen questions. No one could fault him for lacking the perseverance to find a method, any method at all, to extricate this boy from his seemingly intractable predicament. No one, no matter how well-intentioned, can alter the youngster's dismal past, but now his immediate future also looks bleak. The older man concedes defeat. »›Schade‹, der Mann bückte sich zu seinem Korb, ›die Kaninchen hättest du ruhig mal ansehen können. Vor allem die Jungen. Vielleicht hättest du dir eines ausgesucht. Aber du kannst hier ja nicht weg.‹« (217) In summarizing the nine-year old's dilemma, he also makes

13 | M[organ] Scott Peck: The Road less Traveled. A new Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth. New York 1978, p. 48.

14 | Borchert: Das Gesamtwerk, p. 59.

15 | Sam Keen: To a Dancing God. Notes of a Spiritual Traveler. San Francisco 1990, p. 27.

his initial offer even more tempting. Jürgen's response tells us unequivocally that he ardently wishes he could choose one of the rabbits for his own. Doubtlessly, the bond has been forged between the rabbits and himself. His consistent negations, his intense sadness confirms that observation. »›Nein‹, sagte Jürgen traurig, ›nein nein.‹« (217) Sadness always implies loss.

Significant injuries cast very long shadows. Perhaps we no longer have whom or what we once cherished; we may well know neither again. We may also mourn the loss of something we never knew and now realize we will never know: a carefree childhood, reconciliation with a deceased family member or friend, a coveted position. Our present world looks fractured, looks dim and we cannot visualize, let alone begin to actualize, a meaningful, a fulfilling future.

The man retrieves his basket and turns to leave. He simply cannot fathom another method whereby this boy would agree to abandon both his dead brother and the ruins of his former home. He has simply run out of options. Or has he?

Phase three. Jürgen senses this man's good will, his steadfast, his undeniable concern, for just as he turns away, the nine-year old risks trusting him. »›Wenn du mich nicht verrätst‹, sagte Jürgen da schnell, ›es ist wegen den Ratten.‹« (217) At last the truth behind his tenacious vigil emerges. In fact, it spills out. For two reasons. The man has turned his back to him and proceeds to leave. If the youngster wishes to slow his departure, now would be the moment to speak up. The second motivation may be even more compelling. If Jürgen hadn't spoken quickly, he might not have spoken at all. There are times, when what, we might like to say, matters so much, that we either elect not to express it or we do so quickly. We dare not become fully conscious of our dread of being misunderstood. The pain of that disappointment would far outweigh our willingness to pay its price.

Not understanding the implication of what he just heard, the older man turns back and asks: »›Wegen den Ratten?‹« (218) Jürgen's detailed answer (by far the longest of the dialogue) proves telling on a number of levels. Though still assuming a sitting position, he is now totally engaged in this conversation and reveals his new-found trust with the simplest of gestures. To this juncture, he grasped his stick tightly on three occasions. »Jürgen faßte seinen Stock fest an […]« (217). Now he sets this protective stance aside and uses the stick, as a pointer, to indicate the place his brother lies buried. »Jürgen zeigte mit dem Stock auf die zusammengesackten Mauern.« (218) Jürgen reveals that his teacher had indicated that rats eat carrion and that fact motivates him to guard his brother's body round the clock. All of sudden the older man, trying against formidable odds to help this youngster, chances upon a possible solution and poses question seventeen: »›Ja, hat euer Lehrer denn nicht gesagt, daß die Ratten nachts schlafen?‹« (218) If he cannot dissuade him from relinquishing his sentry duty during the day, perhaps he can at least persuade him to do so at night. Though not the most sophisticated of strategies, it may just work, even if it is an outright lie. Jürgen is only a fourth grader; perhaps, he will not yet be able to distinguish truth from fiction, at least

not in this instance. Perhaps this »barmherzige Lüge,« as one critic called it,[16] will cast its spell just long enough for the healing of this nine-year-old soul to begin.

There are those, of course, who insist that even the youngest be told the truth, no matter how tragic the circumstances, and a case can be made for that suggestion.[17] Nevertheless, Jürgen does acknowledge his brother's death and does so without equivocation. The blatantly false assertion, that rats sleep at night, may work just long enough in order to foster the mending of his injured soul. This »constructive lying« intends »to redeem an otherwise impossible situation [...].«[18] Jürgen's continued vigil serves no reasonable purpose, does not facilitate his recovery.

Jürgen's reaction to the older man's statement in the guise of yet another question – »›Ja, hat euer Lehrer euch denn nicht gesagt, daß die Ratten nachts schlafen?‹« (218) – heralds the fourth phase of the youngster's psychic and eventual physical transformation. »›Nein‹, flüsterte Jürgen und sah mit einmal ganz müde aus, ›das hat er nicht gesagt.‹« (218) There's no way of knowing how long Jürgen has been keeping his vigil, but he has been there since Saturday. (Though this narrative is included in the collection, *An diesem Dienstag*, does that imply Jürgen has been keeping watch for three days?) Consequently, he could have shown his fatigue much sooner. Surely, he felt tired long before. Only now does he realize the uselessness of his actions. Only now does he allow exhaustion to overwhelm him, to gain the upper hand. Once we realize the futility of our pursuits, do we allow fatigue to overwhelm us. As long as we visualize our goal, desire, adrenaline fuel our efforts. If that motivation disappears, we surrender. That moment of surrender tells us not only, that Jürgen believes what the older man says, but also that he no longer agrees with his teacher's assertion. Either rats do or do not sleep at night. Both assertions cannot be correct. Switching allegiances, leaving outdated mental maps behind and reconciling conflicting assumptions require faith, insight as well as the willingness to adopt heretofore untried methods of being and doing. In other words, trust greatly facilitates a conversion or »a significant, sudden transformation of a person's loyalties, pattern of life, and focus of energy.«[19] He also has to abandon the premise that he can survive and do so successfully on his own. Jürgen must not only believe the older man, he has to trust his own judgement in doing so. Though indispensable to change, trust alone does not effect change. The desire, the willingness to strike out in a previously untested

16 | Ferdinand Piedmont/Hans Dieter Bohn: Kurz belichtet. New York 1973, p. 18.

17 | Kübler-Ross/Kessler: On Grief and Grieving, pp. 159–170.

18 | Gordon Burgess: The Life and Works of Wolfgang Borchert. Rochester (NY) 2003, p. 200.

19 | Lewis R. Rambo: Psychological Perspectives on Conversion. In: Pacific Theological Review 13 (1980), No. 2, p. 22.

direction, to take a risk, these also play a significant role. Is it any wonder Jürgen is exhausted? Many adults encounter considerable difficulty doing the same.[20]

Jürgen finds himself at a crossroads. In the final analysis, he must decide whom to believe: his teacher, whom he has known for some time, or this well-intentioned stranger, whom he has just met. But Jürgen's difficulties in choosing between alternatives don't end there. He can see the place where his brother died; no matter their number, he can only visualize the rabbits. Does he throw his weight, so to speak, with the known or the unknown? Particularly in a stressful situation, how many of us would not opt for the concrete, as flawed as it might be, rather than the abstract. This human predilection might also explain why Jürgen believes the older man rather than the teacher. The former stands in front of him; the latter does not. (In the conversion process, we tend to focus more on the belief we are trying to set aside rather than the ideal we wish to reach. »A man's conscious wit and will, so far as they strain towards the ideal, are aiming at something only dimly and inaccurately imagined.«)[21]

The older man senses the youngster's indecision and attempts to win him over for the duration in denigrating the teacher's version of events. »›Na‹, sagte der Mann, ›das ist aber ein Lehrer, wenn er das nicht mal weiß. Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch. Nachts kannst du ruhig nach Hause gehen. Nachts schlafen sie immer.‹«[22] (218) As if already anticipating the second offer he would make, he adds: »›Wenn es dunkel wird schon.‹« (218)

Though still sitting, Jürgen loosens his grip again and sets his stick in motion; through his gestures he reveals his thought process. »Jürgen machte mit seinem Stock kleine Kuhlen in den Schutt.« (218) Initially he visualizes these as beds: »Lauter kleine Betten sind das, dachte er, alles kleine Betten.« (218) And then again as pits or depressions in the soil, as graves, ultimately to see rabbits, to see life where once there had been only devastation. »Jürgen machte kleine Kuhlen in den Schutt. Lauter kleine Kaninchen. Weiße, graue, weißgraue.« (218) He still so unsure of his decision, still weighing his options. »›Ich weiß nicht‹, sagte er leise [...] ›wenn sie wirklich nachts schlafen.‹« (218)

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20 | Peck: The Road less Traveled, pp. 46–51.

21 | William James: The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature. New York 1902, p. 209.

22 | Several sources indicate that Borchert's father was a teacher. Alexandre Marius de Sterio: Wolfgang Borchert: Eine literatursoziologische Interpretation. In: Wolfgang Borchert: Werk und Wirkung. Ed. by Rudolf Wolff. Bonn 1984, p. 12: »[...] ein feinfühliger, hochgebildeter Mann, Kunst und Wissenschaft zugeneigt.« Burgess, The Life and Works of Wolfgang Borchert, p. 10; Gordon J. A. Burgess: Wolfgang Borchert. In: Hamburger Bibliographien 24 (1985), p. 21; Rühmkorf, Wolfgang Borchert in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten, p. 7: »Sein Vater war Lehrer an einer Volksschule in Hamburg-Eppendorf, ein zurückhaltender Mann, leise, duldsam, ein wenig verschlossen und von hoher Sensibilität.«

Phase five. The man leaves and from the street casts yet another aspersion at the supposed ineptitude of Jürgen's instructor: »›Natürlich‹, sagte er von da, ›euer Lehrer soll einpacken, wenn er das nicht mal weiß.‹« (218) That last criticism would seem to seal the youngster's decision for he arises from his seated position and asks not one, but two rather specific questions, concerning only the rabbits and nothing else: »›Wenn ich eins kriegen kann? Ein weißes vielleicht?‹« (219) Of course, the man now calling out to Jürgen assures him that he will do what he can.

Several critics point out that Borchert's stories frequently feature studies in contrasts; this particular scene serves as yet another example.[23] When the nine-year old and his visitor faced each other, they spoke softly or in a normal conversational tone and represented divergent points of view; now that they are of one mind, they practically shout. The more aligned their beliefs, the greater is the physical distance between them.

While departing the older man not only promises Jürgen that he will make every effort to fulfill his request, but in the same breath adds a specific request of his own, making the agreement doubly reciprocal, even more binding. Jürgen must wait till the man returns at dusk and accompanies him home. »›Ich muß deinem Vater doch sagen, wie so ein Kaninchenstall gebaut wird. Denn das müßt ihr ja wissen.‹« (219) Of course, Jürgen's parents know how to fashion a crate. The war time situation in which they are immersed has doubtlessly tested their ingenuity and resilience way beyond these basic parameters. And continues to do so still. This lie only serves as a cover for the one told earlier. We can assume Jürgen's parents attempted to persuade their son to forgo his exhausting vigil. The older man is wise enough to realize that if Jürgen comes home alone and consequently without a plausible explanation for his sudden return, inadvertently they may blurt out that everyone knows rats forage primarily under the cover of darkness. Therefore, Jürgen would rush back to resume his vigil immediately and forfeit his hard-won, if tentative, sense of security once more. If the older man accompanies the nine-year old, he will have time to explain just what he said to facilitate his return. In other words, this second lie will assure that the first one will have time to do its healing work.

Jürgen's mind is made up. He not only opts for life; he opts for a resurrection. He has been guarding his brother's corpse from Saturday to Tuesday; for him this salvific turn of events may legitimately represent a resurrection. Since time immemorial rabbits symbolize Easter. Though almost any young animal, e. g., kittens, puppies, would enthrall a nine-year old, Borchert deliberately chooses rabbits. Given Borchert's relentless, searing and ultimately lethal war time experiences, he cannot afford to remain only on the level of the religious symbol. Particular-

23 | Fulgentius Hirschenauer: Interpretationen zu Wolfgang Borchert. München 1966, p. 77; Hans-Gerd Winter: Wolfgang Borchert: Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch. In: Interpretationen. Klassische deutsche Kurzgeschichten. Ed. by Werner Bellmann. Stuttgart 2004, p. 48.

ly during and after the war, food proved a scarce commodity and rabbits served as a convenient source. A glance at his masterful vignette: *Das Brot*[24] suffices to underscore the point; even the most elementary form of sustenance could not be taken for granted. As so many Europeans, the French suffered under war-time deprivations as well.

Above all, Paris was a hungry city. It had become the largest country village in the world, and each morning it woke to the crowing of roosters [...]. It was a city in which little boys and old women crept out each morning to chop a few forbidden blades of grass in its parks for the rabbits they kept in their bathtubs.[25]

Yes, Jürgen opts to live. His body position tells us so as does the strength of his voice. No longer sitting, but rather standing, he calls out to the man three times now even further removed from him. »›Ja‹, rief Jürgen, ›ich warte. Ich muß ja noch aufpassen, bis es dunkel wird. Ich warte bestimmt.‹« He opts for building something from the rubble. »Und er rief: ›Wir haben auch noch Bretter zu Hause. Kistenbretter‹, rief er.« (219)

Among the many painful tasks awaiting the bereaved, (these vary not only from person to person, but also with the type of loss) one task can neither be circumvented nor suppressed. Portions of the former life must be left behind and new priorities of both time and space formed, in order to achieve even the most rudimentary recovery. Obviously when Jürgen resumes living with his parents, the rabbit will in some measure attempt to supplant the role of the four-year-old. Many parents would readily agree with Beverley Raphael's observation, concerning an older child's grieving process. »In losing a sibling the child loses a playmate, a companion, someone who is a buffer against the parents, someone who may love and comfort him [...].«[26] Play Jürgen will, but differently.

When we fall in love, the ground shifts beneath our feet, we lose our equilibrium and we wonder, if we will ever be able to restore it. The entire tapestry of our lives is torn into unmanageable, even if glorious, shreds.

When we love, we give up the center of ourselves. We are thrown from our previous state of existence into a void; and though we hope to attain a new world, a new existence, we can never be sure. Nothing looks the same, and may well never look the same again. The world is annihilated; how can we know whether it will ever be built up again? We give and give up, our own center; how shall we know that we will ever get it back? We wake up to find the whole world shaking; where or when will it come to rest?[27]

24 | Borchert: Das Gesamtwerk, pp. 304–306.

25 | Larry Collins/Dominique Lapierre: Is Paris Burning? London 1965, p. 16.

26 | Beverley Raphael: The Anatomy of Bereavement. New York 1983, p. 114.

27 | May: Love and Will, p. 101.

Paradoxically enough, when we must forfeit someone close to us and particularly when the loss occurs without warning, the same fate befalls us. The dizzying depths of sadness and despair replace the dizzying heights of happiness and wonder. We seem to pitch forward into a yawning abyss and, indeed, the ground beneath our feet not only shifts, it disappears. In both sorrow and joy, we tend to relinquish our orientation and, consequently, we ask the familiar, the bedrock question: how will I ever regain some measure of stability? Or more to the point, how will I manage to continue?

In mentally reaching for the rabbits and visualizing the building of their hutch, Jürgen sets about the arduous task of journeying out of the abyss. He takes some of the threads of his past life and attempts to weave them into a pattern, he has never seen before, would not have chosen and could not have anticipated. His life will never be, cannot be the same, but perhaps tenable after all. To phrase it another way, he will cross over from darkness into light.

It would be erroneous to assume that Jürgen's ascent begins only in the story's last paragraphs, even if paradoxically his dawn will begin at dusk. »›Ich muß ja noch aufpassen, bis es dunkel wird.‹« (219) Those words summarized his promise to the older man. However his awakening began in the second paragraph, when he dares to open his eyes just a bit. »Aber als er ein bißchen blinzelte, sah er nur zwei etwas ärmlich behoste Beine.« (216) That assertion is immediately followed with a statement telling the reader of this narrative's two major themes: the lie and the light. »Die standen ziemlich krumm vor ihm, daß er zwischen ihnen hindurchsehen konnte.« (216) German speakers would readily recognize the colloquial expression: er geht krumme Wege. That phrase conveys the image of someone engaging in dubious or even illegal activity. And as for the light, just a few sentences later, we are told what Jürgen sees when he looks through the man's bowed legs. »Jürgen blinzelte zwischen den Beinen des Mannes hindurch in die Sonne [...].« (216) In other words, through the means of a lie or two, the nine-year old will regain the light. Whether by way of a noun or pronoun, Borchert mentions the older man's legs no fewer than thirteen times in the course of this brief story. And each time, whether they are overtly entwined with the sunlight or not, this leitmotif reappears and sometimes more than once during every one of the five phases of Jürgen's psychic reentry into the world of the living.

As he is sitting when we first encounter the youngster, the man's well-worn trousers constitute Jürgen's immediate field of vision and consequently help him identify the stranger approaching him. »Aber als er ein bißchen blinzelte, sah er nur zwei etwas ärmlich behoste Beine. Die standen ziemlich krumm vor ihm, daß er zwischen ihnen hindurchsehen konnte. Er riskierte ein kleines Geblinzel an den Hosenbeinen hoch und erkannte einen älteren Mann.« (216) They are mentioned again when Jürgen reflects momentarily upon the number of rabbits the man has. »Und er sah durch die Beine des Mannes hindurch. ›Dreimal neun, nicht?‹« (217) They are cited once more when Jürgen abandons his pseudo courage and begins to visualize the promised rabbit. »Jürgen sah an den krummen Be-

inen hoch. ›Seit Sonnabend schon‹, flüsterte er.« (217) When finally he consents to trusting the man with his rationale for not abandoning his brother's remains even at night, the latter's return is indicated by an example of this leitmotif used as synecdoche: »Die krummen Beine kamen einen Schritt zurück […].« (218) In phase four of Jürgen's change of heart, his moment of decision, when images of beds and rabbits supplant those of graves, the man's crooked legs are mentioned twice. First when Jürgen is still weighing his options and the man assures him of his return at dusk: »[…] seine krummen Beine waren ganz unruhig dabei […].« (218) Perhaps his impatience threatens to get the better of him; perhaps he is simply wondering, how long Jürgen will believe the lie. A few moments later, Jürgen's focus on the man's legs signal the dubiousness of the just told lie: »›Ich weiß nicht‹, sagte er leise und sah auf die krummen Beine, ›wenn sie wirklich nachts schlafen.‹« (218) Finally in the fifth and final phase of Jürgen's development, the two principals in this dialogue strike the salvific deal and the man manages to leave. »Aber das hörte der Mann schon nicht mehr. Er lief mit seinen krummen Beinen auf die Sonne zu.« (219)

Much as the young man in *Die Küchenuhr* joined the strangers sitting on a bench with his old face, in this instance the older man races toward the ultimate light source with his legs. In both cases, synecdoche focuses our attention on the critical issue. To reinforce the juxtaposition of lie and light, Borchert adds: »Die waren schon rot vom Abend und Jürgen konnte sehen, wie sie durch die Beine hindurchschien, so krumm waren sie.« (219) However the resemblance with *Die Küchenuhr* doesn't cease with this example. As explained in the interpretation of *Die Küchenuhr*, when the twenty-year old rummages around for something to eat in the dark kitchen during the morning's wee hours, it is his mother, who turns on the light. Of course, she does. As the time-worn formula of a typical German birth announcement mentioned in the earlier interpretation states: »das Kind erblickte das Licht der Welt.« The twenty-year old's mother was the source of his life and consequently his light. In *Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch* Jürgen also connects the images of light and life in the third and consequently middle phase or apex of this conversation, this conversion. He tells the older man of his brother's death as a result of the bomb blast, using the simplest of metaphors. »Mit einmal war das Licht weg im Keller. Und er auch.« (218) With an older brother's compassion for the younger, hence more vulnerable sibling, he continues poignantly. »›Wir haben noch gerufen. Er war viel kleiner als ich. Erst vier. Er muß hier ja noch sein.‹« (218) In the manner of so many experiencing the earliest stages of mourning, he regresses somewhat and readily slips from the past into the present tense.[28] »›Er ist doch viel kleiner als ich.‹« (218) His emotions do not yet consistently mirror the irreversible reality his rational mind attempts to grasp so valiantly. Who would find fault with him?

28 | Raphael: The Anatomy of Bereavement, p. 46.

Aside from the sustained connection between the man's crooked legs and the fading sunlight, another set of recurring images bear witness to Jürgen's resurrection and they also begin with the second paragraph. In his *Waking the Tiger*, Peter Levine posits the theory that immobility characterizes one of the fundamental, one of the instinctual defense mechanisms to impending danger. Jürgen loses his home and his younger brother and now a stranger stands in front of him. How much more can he handle in such a short period of time? »Er hatte die Augen zu. Mit einmal wurde es noch dunkler.« (216) Why wouldn't he be afraid? Fight or flight are readily acknowledged as two possible responses to »inescapable or overwhelming threat.«[29] But the third – freezing or, in the vernacular, playing dead – does not always come to mind as quickly, though we share it with much of the animal kingdom. Perhaps because we share it with animals, we tend not to give its due. If it is a question of survival, the method employed to do so becomes irrelevant. Only survival matters.

Though acknowledging his fear only to himself as this older man stands in front of him, Jürgen dares to open his eyes just a bit. »Aber als er ein bißchen blinzelte [...].« (216) The movement of his eyes progresses to that of his mouth, while answering the man's questions, to the relaxation of his mouth in wonderment at the sheer number of rabbits and finally reaches his hands, as instead of holding onto the stick tightly, he uses it as a pointer. Ultimately his entire body arises in response to the man's offer. »Da stand Jürgen auf und fragte: ›Wenn ich eins kriegen kann? Ein weißes vielleicht?‹« (219) The transformation from virtual paralysis to joyful anticipation reaches completion as he calls out to the retreating older man. Or as Hans-Gerd Winter summarizes: »[...] es wird plötzlich eine kleine Zukunftsperspektive sichtbar, die ihn aus seiner Erstarrung löst.«[30]

Borchert concludes this resurrection narrative with some of the same literary devices he selected at its outset. Four personifications managed to lend some life to the initial scene's utter desolation. Jürgen's promising resumption of at least some aspects of his former life, requires only one. As the older man hastens to leave, of necessity his basket moves in his hand. »Und der Korb schwenkte aufgeregt hin und her.« (219) Motion spells life as the rabbits did and Jürgen's dream of them in all their wild profusion. If *Die Küchenuhr* spoke simply and yet eloquently of paradise lost, *Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch* suggests a parable of paradise regained, albeit at the price of a smudge or two. That last flawed aspect, its author readily acknowledges. »Kaninchenfutter war da drin. Grünes Kaninchenfutter, das war etwas grau vom Schutt.« (219) Even in this last line, Borchert never forgets that symbols must rest on a literal foundation. Given the whereabouts of this basket – »die Schuttwüste,« (216) while the older man and Jürgen converse

29 | Peter A. Levine: Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences. Berkeley (CA) 1997, p. 17.

30 | Winter: Wolfgang Borchert, p. 49.

and grow closer, the grasses, in their green vitality so emblematic of hope, would be covered in dust. Inevitably.

A multitude of reactions, of tasks await those experiencing the loss of someone close. One way or another, step by deliberate step, these injured psyches, these battered souls reach out for some mitigation of their pain, for some measure of healing. In this vignette, Borchert delineates five essential phases which tend to facilitate reentry into life, into reality, albeit an altered reality.

We manage more readily when facing a challenge, we have chosen, but the death or serious injury of someone close does not respect those parameters. Nor could the nine-year old Jürgen have anticipated the sudden death of his brother. Those two factors alone – severity of the loss and its unpredictability – render his eventual adjustment even more difficult. Gradually, ever so gradually, trust edges out fear, a debilitating apprehension; his visualization, his belief in a viable future begins to overshadow a single harrowing moment of the past; a verifiable self-assertion replaces both immobility and a tentative attitude; his considered decision, his willingness to try once more, to risk once more eventually override all inherent misgivings.

Amidst this promising, this life-giving shift in Jürgen's perspective, one critical, one underlying issue could easily be overlooked. Sometimes we tend to overlook the obvious. Jürgen may only be nine, but on an emotional as well as a rational level he realizes that to heal properly, he must mourn properly. Only in that manner can he fully acknowledge the significance of the sibling irretrievably lost to him and the role he played in his life. Only in that manner can he honor him, give him his due. Now Jürgen knows a way forward, a way out of his misery; consequently, he could opt to cut his vigil short. He elects not to do so. He will wait until nightfall and fulfill his duty toward his brother, as he understands it. He will not shortchange his brother, even if that means Jürgen must endure somewhat longer. In other words, he chooses on his brother's behalf and not his own. After all he gave his word that he would wait and wait he does. Jürgen is wise beyond his years. How many of us could say the same?