

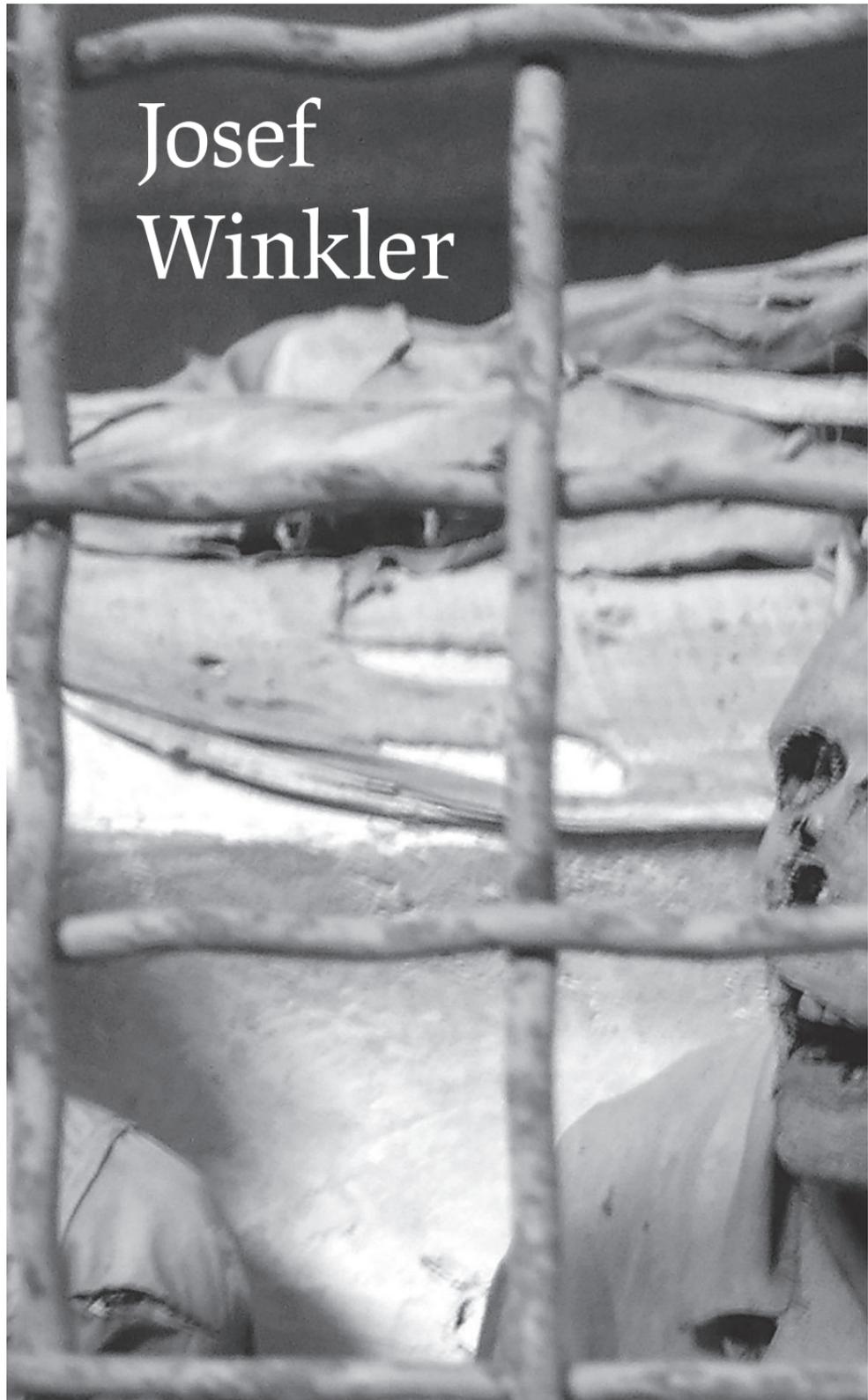
# Josef Winkler

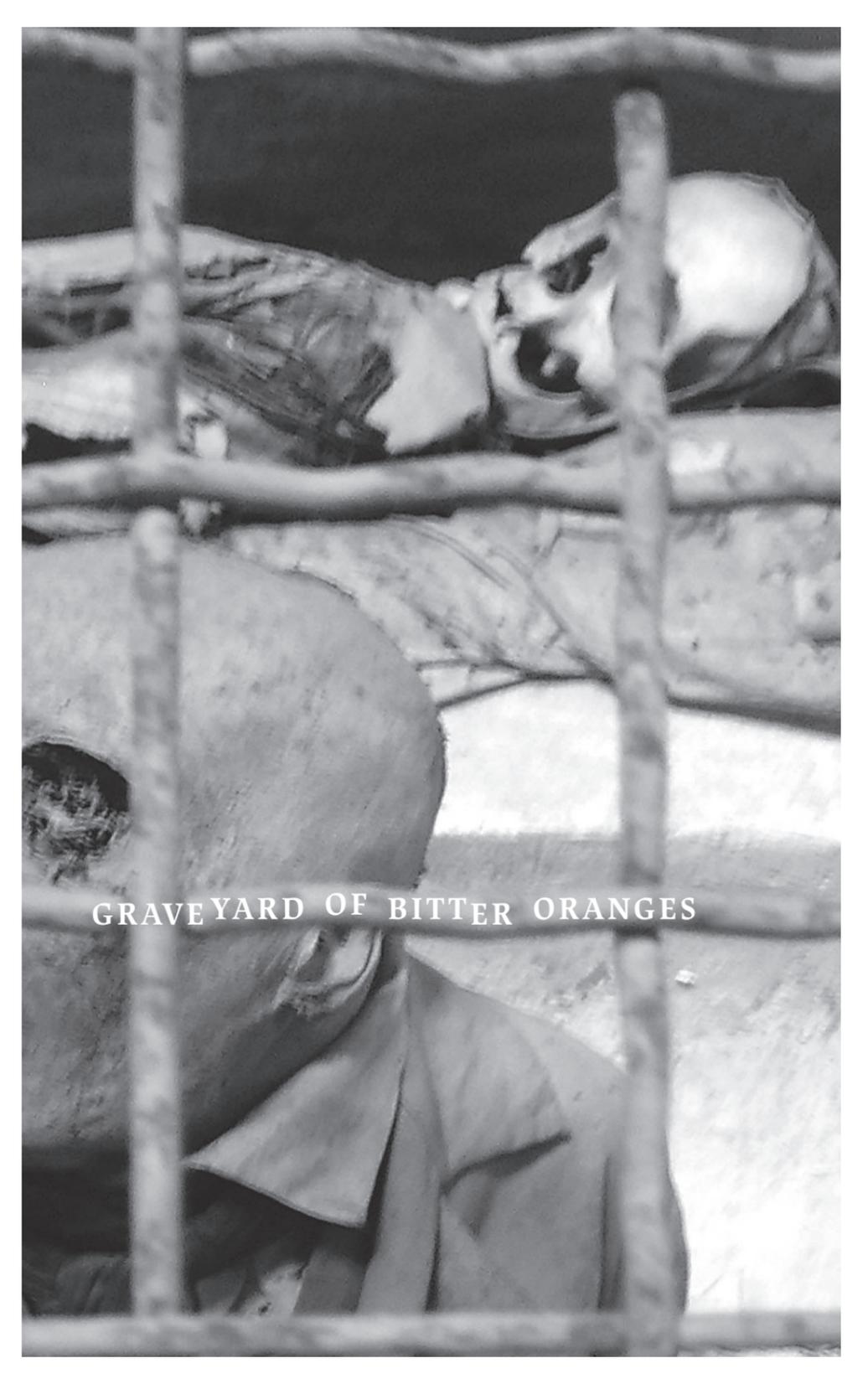
GRAVEYARD OF BITTER ORANGES

Translated by Adrian Nathan West



Josef  
Winkler





GRAVEYARD OF BITTER ORANGES

*Selected Other Works by*

Josef Winkler

*When the Time Comes*

*Natura Morta: A Roman Novella*

# Josef Winkler

## GRAVEYARD OF BITTER ORANGES

Translated by Adrian Nathan West



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

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Contra Mundum Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support  
received for this translation from the Austrian Ministry of Education,  
Arts, ☪ Culture.

Library of Congress  
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
Winkler, Josef, 1953–  
[Graveyard of Bitter Oranges.  
English.]  
Graveyard of Bitter Oranges /  
Josef Winkler; translated from  
the original German by Adrian  
Nathan West

—1<sup>st</sup> Contra Mundum Press  
Edition  
486 pp., 5×8 in.

ISBN 9781940625140

- I. Winkler, Josef.
- II. Title.
- III. West, Adrian Nathan.
- IV. Translator.

2015953089

# Graveyard *of* Bitter Oranges

On the little balcony you showed me a Persian pen case covered with a lacquer painting the color of blood coagulated with gold. It was offensively empty. I wanted to smell its venerable musty little panels which had served Sirdar justice & the instantaneous sentencing of men to have their eyes put out.

Osip Mandelstam

*The Journey to Armenia* (tr. by Clarence Brown)

No one thinks, looking at that body dressed in white: he is my son, he is my brother.

If your thoughts had a body, they would start to hoe, to rake, to yoke the beasts, to chat, to scream at their family, to play cards, to piss, to count money around the coffin of this tiny corpse brought up in accordance with your way of living.

Pier Paolo Pasolini

*The Nightingale of the Catholic Church*

For fourteen-year old Pino Lo Scudato, who was slain by his father with a hatchet in June 1988, in Caltanissetta, in Sicily, when, instead of watching over the ten cows on their remote farm, where there was neither electricity nor running water, he connected a television set to the tractor battery to watch Italy play soccer against Ireland. And for Pope John XXIII.

*Atop Monte Celio, one of the Seven Hills of Rome, where Piazza della Navicella opens up, to the left of the high ruins of the aqueduct raised under Emperor Claudius, begins 'Via Santo Stefano Rotondo. On this street lies the entrance to an esplanade where the church of Santo Stefano Rotondo stands, one of the oldest churches in Rome, built following a round floor plan, probably in the fifth century, and christened by Pope Simplicius. On the inner walls of this church are thirty-four frescoes by Pomarancio, Tempesta, and others, which portray the torments of the Christian martyrs. To him, who was laid between two heavy blocks of stone & crushed, we pray to thee, heed our words! That thou mayst humble the enemies of the holy sacrament. To him, whose hands were severed, tied with a cord, and hung around his neck like medallions. Holy Mary! Chaste lily of virginity, Queen of Angels. We pray to thee, heed our words! Through the suffering caused thee by the circumcision of thy son. May the blood that spilled from thee bless thy congregation; in circumcision, through thy woe, may we find our salvation. To him whose flesh was torn away by starved & rabid dogs. We pray to thee, heed our words! That thou rightest the strayed souls to the true faith. I beg thee, for the sacred blood that fell from thee in the garden, redeem those flaming souls that beseech thee with thy pardon.*

*To him who was laid in a sarcophagus and showered with molten lead. We pray to thee, heed our words! May you infuse us with the love for chastity! May the blood from the scourge that rent thy noble flesh lead the souls of your flock to heaven truly blessed. To him who was laid on the rack and whose skin was cut away in strips. Have mercy on us! Thou Jesus, who sweated blood from fear. To him whose right hand was hacked away on a blood-specked block of wood. Have mercy on us! To him whose breast was rent with a two-pronged pitchfork. Have mercy on us! In the name of thy precious blood, spilt by heathen scorn, that flowed from thy sacred flesh beneath thy crown of thorns. To him who carried his head, crowned with a bishop's mitre, in his hands. We pray to thee, heed our words! Mayst thou eradicate the cursed heresies! To those whose flesh was harrowed from their bodies with an iron rake. Redeem them, O Jesus! With thy nakedness & modesty, with thy scourges and rods, and thy cross and thy nails. With thy disgraceful disrobing, through which man brought thee shame, & the blood that streamed from thy wounds to man's eternal blame. To those who were cast into pits of embers, who were broken on the wheel, torn apart by bears, buried alive, stoned to death, and quartered. Lord, have mercy on them! To him who was boiled alive in a cauldron full of oil. Redeem him, O Jesus! With thy painful circumcision & thy rose-colored blood. By the crucifixion, and by the blood that was spilled, free them, God, from their affliction, let them know thy will. To her whose breasts were sliced away.*

*Holy Mary! Thou ivory tower, thou Queen of Martyrs, plead for us! To him who was torn apart by bulls. Redeem him, O Lord! To him who was hurled in a pit of hissing vipers. Redeem him, O Lord! By holy water, by sacred blood that flowed from out thy side, I beg thee, quench this burning, that our souls by thee may abide.*

May the wax drops from a blessed candle spill over my navel to seal my corpse. Lay the large sacred image that hung for decades over my deathbed — Raphael's Madonna della seggiola — on top of my open coffin, so the mourners around the casket, come to pray & chant and pay their respects, may no longer see my face in death. The needles that wove my death shroud, stick them in my cold, blue heels, to keep me from running down the village street and returning, as a vampire, to the homes of my children and grandchildren. And if I do come back to suck the blood of my kin, do not hesitate to cut my head off with a spade and lay it between my legs. Catch the blood that flows from my head in a goblet, and drink it down, for this is my blood, which I have spilled for you, and whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, shall remain in me, & I in him. O Jesus, humbly entered into Jerusalem, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who wept from compassion with Jerusalem, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who washed the feet of thy disciples, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who strengthens us as living bread,

*have mercy on us!* Do not forget to pick fresh daisies, still damp with dew, if possible, to adorn the board that will bear my mortal remains over the sixteen steps of the staircase down into the parlor of the farmhouse, where I will be laid in my coffin, & later, if my corpse lies long in the wooden box with its lining of black crepe paper, inscribe it with my name and my birth and death dates, & lay it in the leech-infested moss, to make a footbridge over the stream, amid the marsh marigolds. If you step across this footbridge, now & then, to pick snowdrops, Christmas roses, or marsh marigolds, and lay them in your mother's lap, or at the feet of the Crucified, be careful not to tread the small, carved cross on my memorial, lest you wound my poor soul, and from high in heaven, or trapped in Purgatory, curled up like a fetus, I let loose cries of pain that can be heard from ocean to ocean, far above the airplanes & clouds. *O Jesus, who consoles us with thy sacred blood, have mercy on us! O Jesus, sold for thirty pieces of silver, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who grieving prayed to his father until the hour of his death, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who from fear sweated blood in the garden, have mercy on us!* Even if the cemetery dirt should lie more than a meter thick upon my face, still, I dread the crabs with the tiny lights around their necks that will crawl not once, but many nights to my mound of earth and say to me: farewell! *O Jesus, fortified by the angels, have mercy on us! O Jesus, betrayed by Judas with a kiss, have mercy on us! O Jesus, bound with ropes*

and chains, have mercy on us! O Jesus, abandoned by thy disciples, have mercy on us! Beat thrice on my coffin with the communal whip that torments the children in the village, so the leaves & petals of the flowers will scatter, my soul be chased away, and my corpse be borne more lightly and not tumble out over the soil of the village strewn with the petals of peonies. During the exequies, may those I left behind be seated on the mourners' bench, and let the priest in his black vestments lay holy wafers draped in mourning veils upon their outstretched tongues. With long burning candles, have the black-clothed acolytes kneel, one to the coffin's left, the other to its right, at the head, of course, and not at the foot of my mortal remains. O Jesus, dragged before Annas and Caiaphas, have mercy on us! O Jesus, smote by the palms of hands, have mercy on us! O Jesus, by false witnesses betrayed, have mercy on us! O Jesus, by Peter thrice denied, have mercy on us! If I should perish of a stroke — a stroke went & took Grandma away! — and my heart should burst and my eyes cloud over in one and the same moment, think, then, that it was the middle one of the three drops of blood that everyone carries in his head that now has fallen to the floor. Should my health fail me — See, O Lord, here is my body, here is my soul, I lay them in thy blessed hand, do with them what thou wilt — then be sure that feathers, bundled together like wreaths, are laid in abundance on my pillow. You know, I told you many times, *funeral wreaths* is our

name for those white feathers bundled together like garlands. They are an infallible omen of death. Or run a crust of bread over my forehead and feed it to the dog chained out in the yard. If he eats the bread, I will live longer, if he eats it not, then I must soon die, in just an hour perhaps, for the sweat of the dead tastes sharper than the urine poured into the milk of faithful hounds, so that, when their masters or mistresses die, they may at last be freed from their chains to crouch at the edge of the grave, to howl, and to die their wretched death. *O Jesus, prisoner handed over to Pilate, have mercy on us!* *O Jesus, falsely accused before Pilate, have mercy on us!* *O Jesus, mocked in thy garments of white, have mercy on us!* *O Jesus, passed over for the killer Barabbas, have mercy on us!* Just imagine, only yesterday I saw a man's shadow without a head, wet clothes — my death shroud? — swimming upstream. For three hours or more, without interruption, while I lay helpless on my back, open-mouthed, and wheezing, I heard the heartbeat of a bat that crouched on a mirror frame, staring at me without cease. Just imagine, the hole in the church wall, the one the devil flew out of, was sealed by the priest and the villagers with the bones of my cranium. Wafers were sunk in the stone fonts of holy water and fished out with Christ's umbilical cord. Fireworks blazed in heaven in cruciform sparks. A boiled red crayfish lay on an overturned deathbed. The steps of a staircase, eternally winding, were nailed together from coffin lids. On a

bishop's cap I saw a lightning rod and a crown of thorns on the glans of the Christ child come to me make of me a happy boy my heart is pure no one may enter but you my dear little Jesus. With the top of an elongated crucifix, my decapitated shadow bored into the grave of my child untimely dead, until it reached the coffin and knocked there three times. Slowly, on the gravedigger's shovel, there spun a globe besmirched with cemetery dirt. My limbs fell from the chimney, reassembled, and started to dance, Lost, lost, like a stone on the road, that's how lost I am! *O Jesus, whose flesh was shredded mercilessly with scourges, have mercy on us! O Jesus, clad in thy purple robe and mocked, have mercy on us! O Jesus imprisoned, have mercy on us! O Jesus, crowned with thorns, have mercy on us!* If the Grim Reaper, who now & then can transform into a bat festooned with flowers, grabs my leg as it twitches for the very last time, do not forget to shut the window of my death chamber, or else the windowpanes will shatter. The people of the village should not touch the obituary with their bare hands, and when they have read it through carefully, sheathed in their mittens, they should throw it into the fire. Bring the sheet I lay on in life, which I will no longer care to lie upon in death, set it out in the fresh air, and look to see whether the death-bird flies *crosswise* overhead, only then may you sink it in the village stream and wash away the sickening scent of my corpse with a bar of turpentine soap stamped with the head of a deer.

To drive away my death scent, walk for hours with blessed palms all throughout the house, starting in the room where I died and lay exposed. I will not be sore with you if, a mere week after my burial, you have already whitewashed my death chamber, and if the summer houseguest lies down at night to rest in my freshly made deathbed. *O Jesus, whose holy face was defiled with impure spit, have mercy on us! O Jesus, struck with a cane, have mercy on us! O Jesus, condemned, though innocent in death, have mercy on us! O Jesus, thrown upon the malice of the Jews, have mercy on us!* If ever you must stand before the court, tie the cloth that wiped the corpse clean around your body, it will baffle the judge, & he will set you, the accused, free. Gather the shavings from the coffin, the angels' locks, as we used to call them, from the floor of the carpenter's workshop, and lay them at my feet in the coffin. Go not to the supermarket for coffins and cushions for the dead, instead have a woodwright take care of the casket. With the castoff bits of coffin wood, on Holy Saturday, a few hours before the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, set a fire in the graveyard. Each household should receive a few smoldering bits of wood from the fire built with my coffin, and they should take them home to light their kitchen stoves. For the love of God and Christ! you must say to Peter Obermann, the one who will frame my coffin, that he refrain from building beehives while he does so, because you know, the honeycombs look like tiny coffins. To no other

person, save my mortal remains, will the industrious bees go near, and they will dig up the soil of my grave. But they may not suck at the blossoms on my grave mound while I chew the roots of the red & white *flesh flowers*, the ragged robins planted in my grave mound and swaying over my head, which will be my only nourishment. *O Jesus, who bears the heavy burden of the cross, have mercy on us! O Jesus, taking leave of thy grieving mother, have mercy on us! O Jesus, innocent lamb led to slaughter, have mercy on us! O Jesus, stripped bare on the hill of Calvary, have mercy on us!* Fill the cushion where I will lay my head in death, a few days before uttering my dying amen, with dew-damp earth from Fox Meadow. It would be nice if my head lay on a cushion full of earth where many clumps of grass have grown. Of course I would gladly have my death-cushion filled with earth from Jerusalem, but I cannot demand you board a plane to the Holy Land a few days before my death, with black mourning bands around your arms and legs and a jute sack in your hand. But do not forget to sprinkle holy water on my shrine in the presence of the black-robed priests and the acolytes in mourning clothes, before my corpse is placed inside, & to bless it with the smoke of consecrated herbs, for my coffin must be pure as the Virgin Mary before it can receive my body. And let a few drops of consecrated wax fall in the coffin as you utter Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed

art thou amongst women, & blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Dip a cloth in the water that was used to wash my corpse, embroider it with a black cross, and lay it over my face, to keep my body from rotting too soon, so the hungry cats and farm rats will not eat away my nose, and perhaps my eyelids. Just imagine if I lie in the casket open-eyed, stare during the viewing at the white plafond of the farmhouse sitting room & afterward at coffin lid, which shifts constantly from side to side, right over my head, and is papered over with the rotting, cloven tongues of angels that will recount, forever and ever without end, the sins I failed to whisper in the confessional, when nothing lay between my confessor and me but a sheet of tin with cruciform holes. *O Jesus, nailed to the cross through thy hands and feet, have mercy on us! O Jesus, pleading for thine enemies on the cross, have mercy on us! O Jesus, mocked on the cross by the Jews, have mercy on us! O Jesus, taunted by the thief to thy left, have mercy on us!* For the three days when I lie exposed, place a bit of turf from the high meadow on my breast, then take it back to the field & plant it where you first dug it up. If you lament my death, summoning angel and devil with upraised hands, then put on your winter mittens, but if the sky is cloudless, do not point your bare finger toward heaven, lest you poke out your guardian angel's blood-shot eyes and he fail to see you there all alone, striding across a bridge without railings, a basket full of death masks in your hand. Just think, the rapids rush past

endlessly beneath your naked feet. If you still despise Jogl Kranewitt, and if he threatens you with a blood-smearred sickle & an earth-smearred scythe, then fetch a rusty coffin nail from out of my grave, go to your enemy while he walks carelessly across his fields, and drive the coffin nail into one of his footprints. So long as he lives, he will hear & feel screaming and the gnashing of teeth, in his soul and in his bones. If you have a toothache, poke your sick tooth with a coffin nail until it bleeds, and then push the still-bloody nail into the apricot tree by the wall of the horse stables with the peening hammer that belonged to your grandfather. If my mortal remains — I do not care to say the word *corpse*, it is not so nice as *my mortal remains*, or better still, the refined term *cadaver* — if, to continue, my mortal remains must be carted off by the death-lackeys, then go to the stables and rouse the beasts. All the animals should be in motion, taking leave of me on their feet, in accordance with the demands of dignity. Make the sign of the cross over Onga and the bay, my two favorite horses, on the *star*, the white spot on their foreheads. While the death-lackeys take my confined body from the house, let all those who live there, Jogl, Hansl, Seppl, Peter, Mitze, Papa, Mama, the maid and the manservant, be blessed by an altar boy in purple robes with a burning bundle of juniper. Serve cold meat glazed in honey to the guests at the funeral banquet, especially to the ladies-in-mourning brought in for the occasion, but also to the coffin

bearers, the lantern bearers, the priests & the two altar boys in black. May the master of ceremonies take care that no gaps appear in the funeral train, lest another villager die soon, because there is room for another coffin. *O Jesus, who promised paradise to the penitent thief, have mercy on us! O Jesus, entrusting thy mother to John from the cross, have mercy on us! O Jesus, commending John to thy mother from the cross, have mercy on us! O Jesus, forsaken by thy father on the cross, have mercy on us!* Sniff the sweat of the horses as they heave with the hay cart covered in peonies, hauling a coffin over the village hill and passing under the blossoming cherry trees into the cemetery. Take care that the mourning cross be seared in the hooves of the pale horses with a red-hot bar of iron. But if the white oxen have yet to be slaughtered & sold, & instead of the draft horses, you prefer that the oxen bear my body to the graveyard, then be sure the coachman does not strike the oxen if they happen to stop — listen! — at some *crossroads* or elsewhere for a few minutes, to commemorate me. The coachman, who must wear a black flower in his hat, may not bring a whip, but only a braided rod of hazel, wrapped in black crepe paper, taken from the churchyard. Drink the water from the furrows left behind by the wheels of my hearse, and think of your sufferings, then you will be healed. *O Jesus, sodden with vinegar and gall, have mercy on us! O Jesus, whose death on the cross redeems all, have mercy on us! O Jesus, whose father heard his cries from the*

*cross, have mercy on us! O Jesus, obedient till your death on the cross, have mercy on us!* Instead of a funeral wreath with Christmas candles, set a burning lantern on my coffin, and for the love of God & Heaven, make sure it doesn't fall over, that the oil doesn't spill, and that my coffin doesn't catch fire. Just imagine how the stiff black crepe paper would crackle, and the flustered white oxen would run away with the flaming hay cart, until at last my coffin fell to the ground, my burning cadaver rolled over the patch of earth and came to rest at the feet of a scarecrow set up to keep the death birds at bay, and it too — as my flaming corpse-tongue licked at its tattered garb, we say that, don't we, *tongues of fire?* — would catch fire, and the two of us, my cadaver and the scarecrow for the death birds, would lie there, a single ash heap in the middle of a smoldering field. Have the last one in the funeral train shut the gate to the graveyard loud & clear with his heel, so that death — just think, death is a *living corpse* — will remain outside. Quickly, throw down several crowns of thorns before the cemetery gate, so the barefoot grim reaper will not enter the graveyard and seek out one of the mourners. *O Jesus, who commended his soul to his father's hands as he hung on the cross, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who died with his head hanging low, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who died for the sake of our sins, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who was pierced by the lance as he hung on the cross, have mercy on us!*

If the child is tall enough, and can see out over the head of a calf, let him walk with the funeral train holding burning wax candles as long as my cadaver, I insist. Do not forget to leave these candles beside the bouquets of flowers on my grave, naturally with the black wicks close to my head, so that now & then, in the depths of night, when the heavy grave mound has laid long over my coffin, I can light them again and seek out bits of holy wafers in the catacombs beneath the church's floor. With crumbs of holy wafers on my dark blue lips, I will lay my head again on my death-cushion, which may yet be filled with earth from the holy land. *O Jesus, taken down from the cross and left on thy mother's lap, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who hath saddened thy mother unto death, have mercy on us! O Jesus, interred in thy linen shroud, have mercy on us! O Jesus, laid in a freshly dug grave, have mercy on us! O Jesus, who freeth our ancestors from limbo, have mercy on us!* On All Souls' Day, do not forget to hang the pretzels from the crosses & the gravestones, for at night, the poor will come take them away. On my gravestone, which will be sweating blood, fasten hen eggs filled with holy water, and let them hang there thirty days and thirty nights, because the water, as it drips down, will quench the fires of Purgatory.

IN PALERMO, a cadaver wrapped in an old, dusty cloak was set in a sedan chair & carried to the Capuchin catacombs. The porters, exhausted from the long march in the midday summer heat, set the conveyance down for a quarter of an hour, to drink iced water with lemon at a kiosk. For a while, people walked up to the sedan chair, pushed aside the leather curtain, then walked on, convinced they were unacquainted with the bundled deceased with the sunken head & the silver crucifix on his chest. On the litter's front and back were paintings showing the birth and crucifixion of Christ. On a trunk borne by four men, containing the burial candles, were portraits of the Madonna & Saint Peter.

FROM THE DETAILED REPORT in an Italian newspaper, there was only one section of interest: an eyewitness told the reporter that the first communion candle, which was still in the hand of the girl who was struck and killed, had been crushed and scattered over the asphalt. The round drip guard had a band that held the upper part of the candle in place, and this kept the candle from rolling away on the asphalt. A mere half-hour after this bride of Jesus, for the first time in her short life, had been allowed to ingest the body of Christ, she lay on the asphalt in her blood-soaked white dress, which had been chosen specially her first communion, and the host, impressed with a watermark of the crown of thorns, had not yet been digested.

IN NAPLES, on All Soul's Day, the bakers along the road to the cemetery were selling sugar skulls the size of a child's head, and small sugar skeletons, particularly to the children, who sucked and licked at them doggedly. Young boys with cloth bags painted with skulls approached the passersby carrying wax candles and chrysanthemums on their way to the cemetery, shouting repeatedly, For the souls of the dead! A pittance for the souls of the dead! On All Soul's Day, the crypts were lit up and the skeletons suspended from the walls were dressed in fresh grave clothes, the casket lids were opened and the moveable glass panels in the coffins slid aside so that the relatives of the rotting dead could see their faces, caress them, and make the sign of the cross over their heads. The mummy of a priest dressed in sacramental robes sat at the deathbed of a mummified new mother pressing her dead, embalmed nursling into her dead, desiccated breast.

IN GIUGLIANO, near Naples, in June of 1988, during a festival in honor of the Madonna, more than ten thousand people followed a statue of the Virgin Mary pulled on a cart hitched to ten oxen, and a few kids decided to play a joke, shouting, An earthquake! An earthquake! Hundreds of people surged onto Via Licante, the street that leads out of the city center, running madly back and forth, fleeing the side streets with this same admonition on their lips, and the screaming and the running frightened the ten oxen, which just then were pulling the cart down Via Licante and into the town center. The startled oxen began to run with the Madonna down the narrow street, dragging people along with them. Maria de Rosa, an eight-year-old girl, was knocked down by the fleeing mass of people, and screamed and cried until she was trampled to death by the ten oxen and run over by the cart bearing the statue of the Madonna. In despair, the girl's family looked for her amid the whirling mass of people, until they found her on the ground drenched in blood. They ran with her horribly mangled body to the hospital in Giugliano. The high point of the festival, the *Volo dell'angelo*, was not celebrated that year; the angel's flight had become the angel's spite. A girl dressed as an angel was to have flown across the plaza, suspended in the air by a steel wire. The father of the slain girl, who was in Sicily delivering building materials at the time, found out over the radio that hundreds of people had trod over his dead,

bleeding daughter before her relatives, holding this clump of flesh in their hands, had hurried off to the hospital. *O Jesus, most comely of all children, have mercy on us! Thou art the glory and the joy of the angels — who shall not relish thy beauty? O Jesus, how noble, how lovely thou art, more lovely than the angels, whiter than the lilies, redder than the roses, brighter than the suns. Every creature wonders at thy beauty. And even the holy angels gaze on thee with joy.*

IN THE WINE CELLARS, the ash from the volcano disgorged the wine from the bottles & barrels and filled them back to the brim. In the tombs, it displaced the ashes of the dead, settling down their place. The mouths, eye sockets, and skulls were filled by the rain of ashes from the volcano. A stream of lava, fifty meters wide and two meters deep, descended the slope of Mount Etna at six meters per minute. The lava flooded the stone houses, where pious images were hung, and submerged the black crosses on the roadsides commemorating murders that had taken place. All night, ash fell over the neighboring villages and the next day, the air was dull brown. Monks wore the image of an erupting volcano on their breasts, and stopped at each window, waiting until they'd received alms for the homeless. Boys ran through the shadowy side streets with lanterns on sticks, looking for cigarette butts that smelled of the fires of Purgatory. Street urchins hurled oranges and lemons at a train covered with a film of hot ashes. Peasants leaned sacred images against the still-undamaged trees to stanch the searing flow of the lava. A tourist led an ass to the summit of Mount Etna to hurl it into the lava's dreadful deluge. Swimming against the current, the animal let out horrible cries before bursting into flames and blackening like a thicket of broom. The tour guide cooked the tourists fresh hen eggs in the scorching cinders from the volcano. English tourists pressed coins bearing the head of the queen into the warm lava,

pulled the chunks of lava away from the mass, & took them back home as souvenirs.

A BLACK CHURCH FLAG embroidered with silver carcasses and naked skeletons fluttered in the wind. On a cushion of red velvet lay the livid, bloated head of a fifteen-year-old girl, frothed blood on her lips and a white rosary braided into her hair, rocking back and forth with the pallbearers' swift steps. Boys and girls in white clothes, with paper angels' wings on their shoulders, white daisy wreaths in their hair, and the image of the Christ child on their breasts, walked alongside the girl's open coffin. Relatives carried black sticks capped with little flags embroidered with the first and last initials of the deceased. Boys flocked to the torchbearers, gathering up the fallen wax in paper sacks for later sale.

ON GOOD FRIDAY, peasants glued red and gold stars to the foreheads of small sheep & carried them on their shoulders through the street, offering them for sale. A priest walked at the head of a funeral train, holding a staff bearing a crucifix draped in black. The portraits of Mary in the churches were hung with black mourning ribbons & the crucifixes covered with black cloths. On Easter Sunday, children walked from house to house with rods of vine shoots knotted seven times, beating them against the doors, windows, and pots and pans and shouting, *Sciù, sciù, porcu diavulu!* During Holy Week, at a cheese shop in Campo de' Fiori in Rome, next to a crystal vase with goldfish with cruciform fishhooks dangling from their mouths, stood a life-sized Christ made of butter, modeled by a German sculptor, a fellow of the Villa Massimo. The wound in its side was a slice of red marzipan, and four chocolate nails with a blood red glaze poked from the holes in its hands and feet. Marzipan catkins with branches of baker's chocolate, blessed on Palm Sunday in Saint Peter's Square, pierced the life-sized cross of bishop's bread, also covered in chocolate, standing at the entrance of a pasticceria. *O dear, O good, O sacred cross! Resting place of my dying lord. I embrace you, I kiss you, I take you up with joy and will not let you go until you have opened me the gates of heaven and through you, most worthy cross, I am united with my Lord Jesus in eternal bliss.*

AFTER THE ELECTION of a new pope, a float passed through Florence, forming part of the carnival procession, with relief figures by Baccio Bandinelli and paintings by Jacopo da Pontormo. In its center stood a large sphere meant to represent the globe. On one side, a man lay face down with a rusty gun in his hand, and a naked boy with golden skin emerged from a cleft behind him, to signify the revival of a golden age. The boy, the son of a baker, who endured this spectacle for a little while, died a short while later, suffocated by the gold glitter covering his flesh. *Lay thy fragile head in my lap, and let thy weary limbs rest. O ravaged body! I wrap thee in my arms in love and press thee to my breast. O angelic face, how thou art marred! O lovely eyes, how ye are blinded! O mellifluous cheeks, how ye are scratched! O benevolent Jesus, how thy body is broken!*

A SHIP framed from the untrimmed fingernails of the dead, carrying more than two hundred bishops and cardinals in their sumptuous mass and procession vestments on the *crossing* from Palermo to Jerusalem, sank in the Mediterranean Sea. A few bishops' mitres and cardinals' birettas from the swollen corpses of the prelates, which floated on their backs or bellies over the surface of the sea, washed ashore or got snagged amid the fish trapped in the weirs. Weeks later, more bishops' robes were found inside the entrails of sharks. It is said that millions of quails descended on the ship, causing it to founder. *Heavenly father! How the earth repels me, when I turn my eyes to heaven! The church tower points upward, to where my heart & soul shall aspire, upward, to God and my Lord Jesus Christ!*

DURING THE FEAST OF THE RESURRECTION on Easter Eve in Calabria, a life-sized crucifix lay veiled on the steps of the altar, so the faithful could kiss Christ on his nailed feet. As it was hoisted upward, to be returned to its rightful place, the rope slipped and it fell to the floor, striking three men dead. The crown of thorns, threaded through with fresh red roses, was torn from Christ's head in the fall and landed at the feet of a small girl with a wreath of daisies on her head, who immediately snatched it up and replaced it on the wooden skull of the Crucified. *Hear my greeting, most sacred cross of my Lord Jesus Christ! With my two arms I embrace thee, and I kiss thee with my unworthy mouth. O sweet Jesus, most noble fruit of the cross's tree! Through thee am I redeemed, through thee my sins forgiven, and my path to Heaven won.* The pope sat in a cardinal's carriage upholstered in red velvet, adorned with gold trim and pulled by six white coursers. Behind the papal carriage followed twenty cardinals dressed in purple, mounted on hinnies. In Santa Maria Maggiore, a commemorative archway was raised before of the altar, and the pope, in his mitre, was carried through it in an armchair. Forty girls in white veils walked in pairs to the altar to kiss the red slippers on the pope's outstretched feet.

AGAINST WHICH WALL of the farmhouse did they lean the large black lid and the two small white lids of the coffins? In an old house in ruins, in a pile of magazines, I rediscovered, in an issue of the *Bunte Illustrierte*, a photo essay I had torn out as a child and kept for years in the drawer of my night table. In one of the photographs, an old woman dressed in black lay inside a black coffin, with white gauze cradling her chin and a rosary threaded through her hands, which were joined in prayer. To her left and right, in two smaller white coffins, were two children, their hands threaded through with rosaries and joined in prayer, & their jaws likewise held shut by a white cloth tied around their heads. In front of the three coffins, at the old woman's feet, a small family altar had been raised. A large vase with magnolias and a smaller vase with three roses, two white and one red, stood on the table. To the left and right of a cross on a pedestal, to which a white Christ was nailed, there burned two wax candles. On the catafalque bearing up the three coffins, made of two tables pushed together, and covered with a white cloth that hung down in copious folds, sprays of periwinkle had been attached with pushpins. Johann Pignet, a farmer from Dreulach in the Gail Valley in Carinthia, was coming home from a funeral with his wife Maria when he saw a group of on-lookers waiting for him in his yard. What is it? What's happened? the farmer shouted, then climbed the steps to the hayloft, entered the silo, which was more than

half-full of fresh corn, picked up the bodies of his four-year-old son Hermann, his eight-year-old son Wilhelm, and their grandmother, carried them out of the silo and into the yard with the help of his brother-in-law, Johann Mörtl, and tried to resuscitate them. The two children and the grandmother had choked to death on the toxic fumes in the silo. Standing before the corpses of his two children & his mother, the farmer Johann Pignet shouted in tears: If I hadn't gone to that funeral, none of this would have happened, I always kept the boys close by, but out on the cornfield, I still had two cartloads left to fill, and then this burial came up! Hardly had Johann Pignet left his farm, in the company of his wife Maria, to attend the burial of an acquaintance, when Hermann, his little boy, had said to his siblings: I've got an idea, let's go up to the silo and trample the corn! Hermann climbed up to the high edge of the silo and jumped down onto the fresh, fuming corn, lurched after a few seconds, intoxicated by the gas in the granary, hit his head against the cement wall and collapsed. His little sister Elisabeth started screaming and went for the help of their handicapped grandmother, who sent the girl to her uncle on the neighboring farm. In the meanwhile, Wilhelm, the oldest child, had jumped into the silo to help his brother. When the grandmother climbed with her crutch up the hayloft steps and saw the two boys laid out unconscious in the silo, she went in as well, hoping to pull them both out. Little Hermann, whom she

tried to save first, had his arms around the neck of his grandmother, who was lying on her stomach. The three bodies lay exposed in the main room of the farmhouse: the grandmother in the middle, eight-year-old Wilhelm to her left, and four-year-old Hermann to her right. Over the body of the old woman they had stretched a translucent black funeral shroud, & over the bodies of the two boys, white sheets, also translucent. Two years before the Pignet family lost their sons Hermann and Wilhelm, both of whom choked to death on gases in the silo, their son Leopold died of leukemia. A year later, a reckless driver killed their son Andreas.

EYES UP, YOU MINERS, young and old, be glad & raise your voices bold. Soon you'll find your riches! To make us miners God saw fit, so sing it loud, & never quit. Eyes up, eyes up, eyes up! In the sulfur mines in Sicily, thousands upon thousands of naked boys, from eight to twelve years old, with deep circles under their eyes and each rib clearly visible in their ribcages, carried sacks of stones weighing thirty to forty kilograms up the high and narrow stone stairs. If they collapsed on the stairs beneath the burden, overseers swinging whips would singe their knee hollows with oil lamps. O Mary, our lady of sorrows! Thou wouldst rather have walked with bare feet over a path strewn with sharp knives than follow thy son as he bore his cross. O blessed flanks, how the lash has flayed you! O hands and arms anointed, how ye were torn apart and pierced! O most holy corpse, how werst thou disgraced and maimed, and all this for my sins and my salvation! With love & compassion I kiss thy sacred wounded limbs. The great landowners promised high wages to lure the peasant farmers into harvesting in the malarial regions. After forty days, the peasants returned to their miserable dwellings with a handful of money, but also infected with malaria. But reapers we are, and reaping we do, to earn our bread, to pay what is due. We swing, we slice, the whole day long, none but a reaper could be so strong. The Lord our father makes the wheat grow, and from it the farmer makes bread and gold. The women who stood barefoot in the rice fields, in water up to their knees,

would stop to tear the leeches from their legs, and if, in these few minutes when they had set aside their work, an overseer happen to see them, he would beat their backs and legs with a whip made of dog leather. In this way, more than one overseer must have managed to tear apart a leech as it clung to a woman's leg. *Thou hast but one God! Disobey him, and thou art a serf of Satan.*

IN MODICA, a man who appeared dead, and who, according to local superstition, could only be roused by the devil, opened his eyes during his funeral just before the lid of his coffin was sealed to its underside, sitting upright, grabbing onto the coffin's edge, and looking around confused, until the sexton beat him to death with an iron cross in the presence of the priest, the acolytes, and the funeral guests. The blood-soaked corpse and the iron cross were shoved back into the coffin, which was sealed, lowered into the grave without a prayer, and covered with shovelfuls dirt. *Think of the ineffable joy your most blessed body will receive when it returns to life, in the blink of an eye, and is reunited with your exalted soul. Think of the ineffable beauty that will shine from your maimed and wounded body when it bursts from the grave like a rose from the bud.*

IF THE DECEASED were an adult, the people beat the drum with the bones of an old man; if the deceased were a child, they did so with the bones of a child. Black fabric covered the edges of the drums, and in black letters, on the drum skin, were the letters PAX. For three days, nothing was cooked in the homes of the dead. The neighbors sent hot chocolate and cold fish to those left behind. The bodies of the poor were submerged, stark naked, in a canal, and from there they drifted out to the sea. Large fish lurked around the mouth of the canal. Beggars offered the tourists black silk stockings from the newly dead, who were thrown naked into a mass grave. A small boy with pasteboard wings on his shoulders scared off the flies trying to creep into a dead girl's half-open mouth. When a coffin nail fell to the floor while the undertaker was sealing a casket, he did not pick it up with his bare hands, but only with a cloth, before pounding it with a hammer until it pierced the coffin's upper and lower sides. The head of the funeral procession struck a horses pulling a fiacre with a long-stemmed copper crucifix, because its driver had tried to avoid yielding, though the hearse had right of way over all the other traffic.

IN A CHURCH in Catabiano, hundreds of people stood around a seventeen-year old boy standing bare-foot on the cold church floor, naked save for a shirt that hung down to his thighs. Take off your shirt! the priest shouted, and when the boy was stark naked, he held a prayer card under his nose. Kiss the image and shout, Evviva San Filippo! — Louder! — Evivva San Filippo! the boy murmured again, softly, to himself, before two nuns threw a white bed sheet over his shoulders & led him to the sacristy, where he put on a new suit of clothes. His old clothes were burned outside the cemetery walls. Two men shook the arms of a fourteen-year-old girl, naked and standing on the church floor as well, and pointed all the while at the statue of San Filippo, patron saint of the mad, which stood on a catafalque under a golden baldachin. Kiss the saint! they shouted in turn, you will kiss him! and they stuffed the mouth of the mentally ill, deaf-mute girl with a prayer card bearing the image of San Filippo. They continued shouting, Evivva San Filippo! before finally turning away from her, shrugging their shoulders, & walking over to a woman seated on a chair beneath the balanchin beside the statue of the saint, who stared ahead, lethargic and crestfallen. The priest, in the meantime, took a strip of red silk from the shoulder of the statue, laid it on the deaf-mute girl's head, and muttered a few inaudible words to himself, pressing the palm of his right hand into her forehead. Five times he sprinkled holy water on her head with an

aspergil brought over by the altar boy, before replacing the ribbon on her head and praying further. *O most bashful Jesus! Remember thy disgraceful disrobing, when thy clothes were stolen before so many men and thou werst left standing nude at Calvary. O most chaste Jesus! It is I who am guilty of this disrobing, for it is my wantonness & shamelessness, in word & deed, that thou must expiate!*

FUCK OFF! Pack her up and send her off to the morgue in Feistritz! said a man from my home village when he was informed by telephone that his wife, off to fetch milk from a farmer on her bicycle, had been hit by a truck & fatally wounded.

ON A KITCHEN TABLE covered with a white cloth lay the corpse of a four-year-old Neapolitan boy with a bundle of violets in his joined hands. His tiny fingernails were black with rot. On the table, between two burning wax candles, stood a crucifix with a red baldachin. Before the Crucified stood a vase with fresh yellow and white chrysanthemums. The room was imbued with the aromas of the corpse, the yellow and white flowers that lay at the boy's feet, and the burning wax candles. The mother in mourning, who had fallen asleep, laid down her head by the cold head of her child, while the three other women, also in black, turned their heads and stared at my face, unnerved. Paper angels were attached to each of the four corners of the miniature casket, holding flowers over the dead child in its coffin between their hands of braided wire. The faster the funeral train moved off, the more the angels swayed, and with them the flowers over the dead child's whitish blue visage. *Imagine now, you are kneeling on the mountain of Calvary beneath the cross of Jesus Christ, where your soul is bathed in his streaming blood and cleansed of all its sins & blemishes in the sacrament of penitence.*

THE PARENTS tied a rope around the naked corpse of their child and lowered it into the mass grave, among the hundreds of cadavers and skeletons rotting there below. In Naples, if the deceased were poor, they were brought to the *Campo santo della Pietà*, a cemetery bereft of any sort of ornamentation, consisting of 365 numbered pits in which, according to the date, the dead who arrived that day were buried, without coffins and completely nude. On the first of January the following year, the grave marked with a 1 would be opened back up, and the newly dead thrown over the rotting corpses and skeletons from the first of January of the year before. Naked children and old people were piled up, one atop the other. Instead of a few fistfuls of earth, quicklime was shoveled over the dead. In Naples, beggars sold the clothing stripped from the dead in the cemetery. An exposé described it as a dung heap where the daily harvest from the *fondachi*, the hospitals, and the prisons was strewn. When this means of burial was abolished, an orange grove was planted over the dead and the former *Campo santo della Pietà* was rechristened *Campo santo delle cedrangolette*, the graveyard of bitter oranges. Today it is known as Cimitero delle Fontanelle.

NOT ONLY did the inhabitants of Nicolisi, in Sicily, take with them the sacred images in the church, the altars and the relics, the bones in glass phials and glass coffins, when the lava came near, threatening to engulf the whole village. They also received authorization from the church to dig up their dead from the village cemetery, load the rotting corpses, skulls, and bones onto their carts, which were hitched to four white oxen, and bury them in a neighboring graveyard that the lava from the volcano will never reach.

IN SANTA CHIARA, the archbishop pointed to the church's relics, arrayed on a number of golden plates: among them, a piece of the crown of thorns, the holy sponge, and the rope from Christ's crucifixion. With his right hand, he shook a golden phial; an eighth-liter of milk from the Virgin Mary sloshed back and forth inside it. In the Sistine Chapel, the newly appointed cardinals, in purple silk cloaks with long trains and white ermine shoulder capes, held their mitres in their hands and took their oaths at the altar in the presence of five other cardinals. Large fans of white peacock feathers were placed on each side of the pope's throne. After the assembled cardinals had come forth to kiss his hand, the three newcomers fell at the pope's feet & kissed his red slippers. A lizard with two tails, which recalled the two outstretched fingers of a bishop's hand during the performance of the last rites, darted from the open mouth of Monica Petrovič, a thirteen-year-old gypsy girl murdered by a seventeen-year-old Roman boy in the autumn of 1987, after thousands of people in Rome had blocked the streets for weeks, bringing traffic in the wide lanes of Via Nomentana to a standstill for days on end, in protest against the two thousand gypsies living on the outskirts of Rome. *I offer thee this sacrifice in the name of the never-ending torments rained upon his head, the many wounds from the blood-streaked thorns, the quivering of his nerves, the rending, his precious blood that flowed from his blessed head, his sighs, his prayers, the bottomless devotion*

*he showed for thee in his bitter coronation.* In Santa Maria Maggiore, the pope raised the umbilical cord of Christ aloft, thrice making the sign of the cross, then laid it on a red silk cushion, and the faithful fell to their knees in order to caress the sacred object with their rosaries or the bones of their dead.

A NUN — extra vergine — opened the two chest flaps of a wooden Virgin Mary, revealing an image of Christ's crucifixion inside, then knelt down and began to speak: *O dearest mother, thy breast pierced by the seraph with the arrow of love, pierce my sinful breast as well and wound my carnal heart.* The newly appointed bishop pulled tight his white bishop's gloves with their embroidered cross and made a swift and soundless up-and-down movement with his outstretched fingers, as if readying them to strangle the wooden Jesus to a quick and painless death. The drought stretched on more than six months in Sicily, and the gardens in Palermo withered and food grew scarce. Processions led by the archbishop holding the monstrance with the host inside wandered over the Palermo streets and through the fields. Women, men, and children knelt or lay for nights on end before the images of saints, praying their rosary. Holy candles burned day and night in the church. In Palermo, the relatives of the dead went into the Capuchin catacombs, dusted off the corpses, changed the clothes of those whose garments had been half-eaten by the moths, combed their hair, washed them, perfumed them, put aromatic grains of lavender in the pockets of their garments, lit candles at their feet, and appealed to the deceased to send them rain. The peasants hung blessed palm fronds from the branches of the peach, lemon, & fig trees. The dust the sacristan swept from the church on Palm Sunday was strewn in the dry fields with words of prayer & incantation.

After shaving three crosses into the hides of their cattle, the peasants nailed hundreds of skeletons from the children of nuns, fished out of a pond in a cloister in Rome and transported to Sicily with a papal escort, to the dung-spattered ceilings of their stables. A farmer who had already lost ten head of cattle to the drought blessed his stables with the smoke from a fetid dead crab, making the sign of the cross. A woman swaddled her premature baby in the fat of a freshly gutted swine; a few days later, when the child was dead, she tied its big toes with stalks of straw and shouted, It is the corpse of a vampire! It is the corpse of a vampire! before girding its tiny body with wild roses. *O sacred Virgin Mary! Blessed is the fruit of thy womb. What joy befell thee as thou borest God's only begotten son in thy chaste womb over the mount to Saint Elizabeth? How thy heart was set alight when thy virgin breast embraced the fire of love.* Bareheaded & barefoot, the citizens carried decorated crucifixes through all the hospitals in Palermo. In Caltabellotta, a sixteen-year-old boy hanged himself in his father's sheep stall with the rope that he wore, like everyone else, around his neck as a sign of penance, and had used to beat himself on the thighs and genitals during a religious procession. Do not pluck the *flesh flowers* from my grave, not the red ones and not the white, or my shriveled fingers, their skin fallen away, will grow & pierce the soil! Such was the answer, or so it was said,

of a deceased son to his mother, after she had besought him for hours to tell her when the first raindrops would finally fall. On the way home, she picked up the fallen slats from the decaying fence, which were nailed together crosswise, and pried them apart with a pole. She could not bear to leave a cross lying there on the ground. Every spring, the bishop, holding a monstrance with a holy wafer, led processions through the vegetable gardens bearing a statue of San Francisco di Paolo, who was said to bring forth rain miraculously each year, but even San Francisco did not help. Not the Christian concerts with fiddling nuns & singing boys, the wounds of Christ daubed on their nude bodies with red paint, not the vesper prayers, when the hosts were dropped in holy water & retrieved from the font with the umbilical cord of Christ, none of it could soften the hard heart of the wooden statue of San Francisco di Paolo. Chocolate covered holy wafers were crammed into children's mouths amid reverent prayers and appeals to the saints. In Catania, the people dug up the corpse of a recently deceased priest in mourning robes, tore open his coffin, pounded his chest with an iron cross, and cried, Give us rain! Give us rain! Near Palermo, the peasants dug up the body of a fortuneteller who had laid more than half a century beneath the earth, carried her bones to the village's Calvary, reassembled them, and hanged the skeleton from a cross. After they had placed a crown of olive branches around the head of the deceased, they prayed,

offering her a lamb, smearing its blood on the white bones of the soothsayer and imploring the dead woman's remains to send them the long yearned-for rain. *Jesus Christ, who anointed the earth on the Mount of Olives with thy sweat of blood, and on the holy cross, from thy five holy wounds, spilled thy rose-colored blood over the hill of Calvary, we pray thee, let rain fall on this dry land, a benevolent rain from the hand of God to wet and quench the burning land and the barren, bitter fruits of the earth. We pray to thee in the name of the countless burning tears that poured from thy eyes & cleansed the earth.* The farmers began to lose patience, stacked statues of saints in a pyre, stood Saint Florian, the patron saint of fire, at the summit of the mound of holy men and set them all alight. Others were turned with their faces to the wall and shot, and still others were stripped of their costly garments, tied to four oxen, and dragged for two hours naked upriver, harried by hunting dogs. The Crucified was stripped of his crown of thorns, & the corpses of six serpents were wound around his eyes, so that he could see not a single sinner more, and with blood-smearred gauze they tied the halves of a broken pomegranate to his bare head. In the Chiesa di San Biagio, the Virgin Mary was robbed of her garments; obscene slogans were carved with a knife on her naked wooden thighs. The golden wings of the archangel Michael were torn from his shoulders and replaced with wings of pasteboard. They took his purple cloak and covered him in rags. Sant'Angelo, the patron

saint of Licata, was dragged out naked, put in irons, and threatened with drowning or hanging. Rain or the rope! the peasants bellowed, shaking their fists at him. The saints were taken from a church during a procession in Rosolini, led to a scaffold, and decapitated, one after the other. The heads of the holy were hung from a cross until the first raindrops fell. Then the saints' heads were screwed back down on their corresponding torsos, blessed by a priest with incense and holy water, and praised with prayers & psalms.



## COLOPHON

GRAVEYARD OF BITTER ORANGES

was typeset in InDesign CC.

The text & page numbers are set in *Adobe Jenson Pro*.

The titles are set in *Escritura*.

Book design & typesetting: Alessandro Segalini

Cover design: Contra Mundum Press

GRAVEYARD OF BITTER ORANGES

is published by Contra Mundum Press.

Its printer has received Chain of Custody certification from:

The Forest Stewardship Council,

The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification,

& The Sustainable Forestry Initiative.



Contra Mundum Press New York - London - Melbourne

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## About the Author

Josef WINKLER (Kamerling, 1953) is one of the most important contemporary German-language authors. His work has been praised by figures as diverse as Günter Grass, W.G. Sebald, Elfriede Jelinek, & Alberto Manguel. The winner of numerous prizes, including the Grand Austrian State Prize in 2007 & the Büchner Prize in 2008, he is the current president of the Austrian Arts Senate. Winkler resides in Klagenfurt with his wife & two children.

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Adrian Nathan WEST is a literary translator & author of *The Aesthetics of Degradation* (forthcoming from Repeater Books).

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*“Graveyard of Bitter Oranges* is a monstrous book, written with unequalled intensity.”

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“Reading Winkler is like peering harder and harder into one of those painted Flemish hells that seethe with horribly inventive details of sin & retribution.”

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In 1979, Josef Winkler appeared on the literary horizon as if from nowhere, collecting numerous honors & the praise of the most prominent critical voices in Germany and Austria. Throughout the 1980s, he chronicled the malevolence, dissipation, and unregenerate Nazism endemic to Austrian village life in an increasingly trenchant & hallucinatory series of novels. At the decade’s end, fearing the silence that always lurks over the writer’s shoulder, he abandoned the Hell of Austria for Rome: not to flee, but to come closer to the darkness. There, he passes his days & nights among the junkies, rent boys, gypsies, & transsexuals who congregate around Stazione Termini and Piazza dei Cinquecento, as well as in the graveyards & churches, where his blasphemous reveries render the most hallowed rituals obscene. Traveling south to Naples & Palermo, he writes down his nightmares & recollections and all that he sees and reads, engaged, like Rimbaud, in a rational derangement of the senses, but one whose aim is a ruthless condemnation of church & state and the misery they sow in the lives of the downtrodden. Equal parts memoir, dream journal, and scandal sheet, the novel is, in the author’s words, a cage drawn around the horror. Writing here is an act of commemoration and redemption, a gathering of the bones of the forgotten dead and those outcast and spit on by society, their consecration in art, & their final repatriation to the book’s titular graveyard.

 Contra Mundum Press
ISBN 978-1-9406251-4-0

9 781940 625140
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