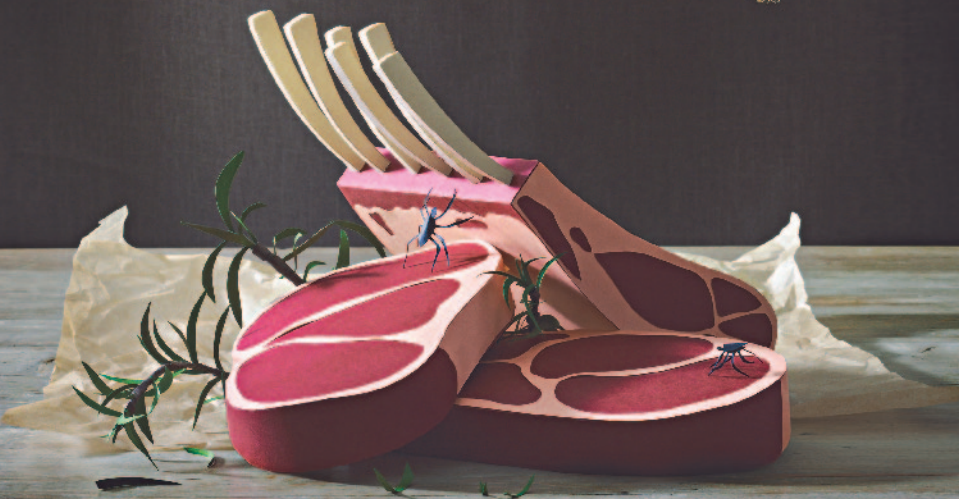


JOSEF WINKLER

# NATURA MORTA

A ROMAN NOVELLA



Winner of the Alfred Döblin Prize

## ENCOMIUMS

*Natura Morta* catalogues a day among vendors in Rome — & then, bubbling up out of this perfectly rendered setting, a young boy loses his life. A *natura morta* is both a still life and a dead bit of nature, and this hypnotic novel explores both sides of the expression.

— Edmund White

Magnificent. A poetic study of the transience of being. A deeply sensuous book.

— Marcel Reich-Ranicki



# NATURA MORTA

JOSEF WINKLER

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Josef Winkler

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*Roppongi: Requiem für einen Vater*

*Natura Morta*

*Domra, am Ufer des Ganges*

*Friedhof der bitteren Orangen*

*Die Verschleppung*

*Das wilde Kärnten*

In English Translation

*Flowers for Jean Genet*

*The Serf*

*When the Times Comes*

# JOSEF WINKLER



Contra Mundum Press New York - Berlin


# NATURA MORTA

A ROMAN NOVELLA




TRANSLATED BY

ADRIAN WEST

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Ha un cesto di rugiada  
il ciarlatano del cielo

*The charlatan of Heaven  
Bears a basket of dew*

# NATURA MORTA I

‘Nessuno, mamma, ha mai sofferto tanto...’

E il volto già scomparso  
ma gli occhi ancora vivi  
dal guanciale volgeva alla finestra,  
e riempivano passeri la stanza  
verso le briciole dal babbo sparse  
per distrarre il suo bambino...

*‘No one, mother, has ever suffered so...’*

*And his face, already dead, turned  
Its still-living eyes,  
From the pillow to the window,  
And sparrows filled the room  
Where papa had strewn crumbs  
To distract his little boy...*

WITH WHITE PEACHES & a bouquet of red broom, an old man ran after a crippled woman hobbling toward a metro entrance in Stazione Termini carrying the *Cronaca vera* in a clear plastic bag among her fresh vegetables, gave her the flowers, and shouted at the astonished woman, who turned around to receive them: "*Auguri e tante belle cose!*" And she thanked him for his attention before carefully descending the steps to the metro, dragging her feet, with her sack of white peaches, a bouquet of red broom and the tales of broken hearts and adversities, murders and suicides, related in the *Cronaca vera*. In front of the escalator knelt a soiled beggar with a cardboard sign reading: *Ho fame! Non ho una casa!* At his bare feet lay a large prayer card bearing an image from Guido Reni of the archangel Michael running his sword through a demon lying at the edge of Hell, his face sharing the features of Cardinal Pamphili, later known as Pope Innocent X. Near the prayer card, atop which lay a couple of crumpled lire, a candle flickered in a red plastic holder. Of the three pomegranates tumbling down the escalator, one split open, spilling red pomegranate seeds over the concrete steps. To the colorfully dressed Somali women standing in a group around a flower shop in the subway

vestibule, who work as domestics in Roman households, live with their acquaintances, and still have no fixed address, a man distributed a thick sheaf of letters covered in Arabic script. A black-haired boy, around sixteen years old, whose long eyelashes nearly grazed his freckle-studded cheeks and who wore a silver cross around his neck, read aloud the scrawls on the subway station wall: *Luisa ama Remo. Ti voglio bene da morire!*

In the metro, a man kissed a woman in greeting and patted her kneecap several times with his flattened hand, while she tapped him on the thigh with her right fist. Just afterward, before getting out at the next station, he kissed her balled-up fist and took leave of her with the word "Auguri!" A feeble-minded boy, hanging his head, a whiff of moustache on his upper lip, sat next to his fossilized grandmother, who waved a black fan in front of her glimmering sunglasses. When he noticed a man staring at his hips, he pawed his pants, making sure his zipper was closed. He wore a bracelet with the Roman colors on his right wrist, embroidered with the word *Roma*. With his right index finger, he touched a hollow pivot tooth and smeared pink Labello on his lips. Over the boy's head, on a fire extinguisher, *L'AIDS nel mondo, il Lazio in Italia!* was written in black marker.

The black-haired sixteen-year-old, with a silver cross around his neck, his long eyelashes nearly grazing his cheeks, sat under an advert for horsemeat and pulled a white puppy to his breast, beside his younger sister

on the metro headed to the market in Piazza Vittorio Emanuele. *Ho scelto la carne equina, perché i bambini ne vanno matti* was written on the left-hand side of the poster, under the image of a mother looking worried for her children. On the right, a doctor in a white coat wagged his finger, & over him stood the words *Consiglio la carne equina, perché contiene ferro in misura quasi doppia delle altre carni*. A suntanned woman, loaded down with gold-plated jewelry, sobbed quietly and tugged at her nose each time she took another photo of two one-year-old twins from an envelope. Before leaving the metro, at Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, she stretched out her ten fingers and looked cagily at her rings. A man holding a small briefcase of fine red leather got out along with a Moroccan teenager and mounted the escalator, a few steps behind the boy, to Piazza Vittorio Emanuele.



A **MACELLAIO** in Piazza Vittorio, with a white surgeon's glove stretched over his right hand, two fat gold rings on his left, & a gold watch on his left wrist, broke open a sheep's head that had already been split with a cleaver, pulled the brain from the skull, and carefully laid the two lobes of the brain, one beside the other, on a pink sheet of watermarked wax paper. In the right eye socket, glimmering silver — the extracted eyeball lay over a mound of offal — a violet-glimmering fly roamed about. A red kerchief poked from the breast

pocket of the butcher's bloodied apron. He wrapped up the brains for a negress & placed them in a plastic bag. In the gutted belly of a lamb hanging head-down from a meat hook lay fresh sprigs of rosemary, & next to it, a chocolate horseshoe in its gold paper wrapper was tied with a red garter. A plastic sun on a wire sat in the eye socket of a sheep's head resting on a slipshod mound of yellow chicken feet garnished with sprigs of rosemary. His head tilted — revealing a large mole on the nape of his neck — a butcher's apprentice, his tongue poking from the left corner of his mouth in concentration, stuffed heart, lungs, spleen, & kidneys indiscriminately back into the carcass of a gutted hare and laid it back in the blood-specked display case. Strung up by its lower jaw, a black, bloody goat's head with curved black horns dangled beside a house key.

The small child of a gypsy girl brought a beer bottle to his lips and sipped from it greedily. Pink bras for purchase hung off his young mother's left forearm. A group of women swarmed in on her, testing the pink bras' size and elasticity. Butchers pressed in with bloody hands, whistling and commenting on the underwear, and stretched their necks over the women's shoulders in curiosity. Another gypsy girl — two gold upper teeth shone in the void of her harelip — lifted her right breast slightly and placed her nipple in the mouth of her child, whose eyelids were sealed shut with pus. Waving their knives about and egging one another on,



the meat merchants called grinning from one stall to the other, louder and louder, declaiming in the tone of the Catholic liturgy the price of their beef and pork, and then in the tone of a soccer fan the price of the lamb, sheep, and turkey. Only the tongue of a lamb's head poked out from a plastic shopping bag, and the bloody tip of its chin. The shopper laid down her burden to catch her breath, then lifted back up the bag with the blood-covered chin of the lamb's skull poking out and carried on through the various stalls in the direction of the poultry vendor.



“VUOLE UN CHILO DI TACCHINO per 2500 lire,” a young poultry vendor in blood-spattered jeans called out, “forza, andiamo, forza!” As he repeated the word “forza!” once more, he took a step back and threw his butcher knife to the floor in front of his feet. The knife stuck in the wood floor and wobbled a long time. Pinning a ticket to a skinned turkey thigh, he called out, with his head tilted, “Prego, Madonna!” to a black-clad nun ordering kilos of tacchino, a black rosary looped around her right wrist. *Pollo alla diavola* he called the pieces of chicken on display, which he had garnished with bloody cockscombs, flat and pale red. Between the thin, delicate cockscombs, dark red at their edges, that lay over the skinned chicken breasts and drumsticks, a fresh sprig of green rosemary decorated the cuts of meat. With bloody holes in its bill,

a dead duck — *L'anatra muta* — lay on a silver tray garnished with turkey hearts.

A gypsy selling shampoo, her forearm tattooed with a blue heart, squatted near a group of gypsy girls resting on the ground with their children. A child lay crosswise — his head lolled over her thigh — on the lap of the gypsy girl holding up a yellow egg shampoo for sale. A woman stood in front of the stall with her dog, a clean-shaven dachshund-pinscher mutt. Only around the ears and on the tail did she have a few clumps of hair, even her teats were clean-shaven. The young poultry vendor raised his shoulder, squeezing the telephone between his collarbone & cheek, and as he spoke, he severed the head of a still-living chicken that was staring straight ahead, its beak agape. He threw the bleeding head on the floor among the other chicken heads and bones. Grinning, to the other butchers' amusement, he stuffed the abdomen of a gutted chicken with a fistful of cherries.

The border of a wicker basket full of fresh eggs was adorned with purple violets. The vendor, who sold white eggs and live chickens, cracked a damaged egg against the rim of a large mason jar and spilled the seeping yolk into the jar half-full of egg whites & round yolks. Turning back, she laid two still living brown chickens — the four clenched yellow chicken feet scratched at the air with their long, filthy nails — on the scale, pinning their wings back, then placed them in a box and gave them to a young Indian. A gypsy girl who had bought a live

chicklet imitated the bird's cry, running its yellow beak back and forth over the cheek of the dark-eyed child sucking at her breast with a bleary gaze.

Near the stall of the drug addicts selling live animals, just in front of the caged white doves and guinea pigs, sat the old, toothless, half-blind *rughetta* vendor, holding a bushel in the air with her bad hand, where only the thumb & middle finger remained, calling out "Signora, vuole rughetta?" over & over. A black crucifix was tattooed on the back of her left hand. Two blue birds of paradise hopped incessantly from one perch to the other, while a sick Amazon parrot stared down at the nearly featherless bantams enclosed in the same cage, pecking at grain. Young ducks, coal-black, similarly confined, pecked the red flesh from a carved watermelon. A five-year-old boy and a ten-year-old girl, whose mother was shopping for chicken, grasped a big red water pistol. Before they left, the boy cried to his mother: "*Aspetti!*" stuck the barrel of the pistol in his mouth, pulled the trigger several times, & mounted his bicycle, while water ran down from his mouth over his chin.



A BLACK-VEILED NUN, holding plastic bags full of cucumbers, apricots, and onions in one hand and pressing two tall blonde Barbie dolls wrapped in plastic to her breast with the other, stopped before the tomato vendor, whose vegetable knife hung from a lanyard around his

neck, laid the dolls on a wooden crate, and asked for a few kilos of tomatoes on the vine. The clothes of an old gypsy, dressed in black & kneeling on the ground, were laid out for sale over an open black umbrella. A sixteen-year-old gypsy girl made her younger brother grimace when she pulled a pair of boxer shorts printed with red hearts from a bundle of underclothes, pressed them into his hand, and shoved him on the shoulder, making him walk from stall to stall, offering the underwear for sale. A woman stood before an open jute sack destemming lavender and placing the dry, aromatic blossoms in blue sachets of mesh plastic. The wind stirred the onion skins lying on the ground, blowing them, red and white, in a circle. A gypsy standing over the white and light brown onion skins, counting money, screamed when a gypsy boy at play threw a jagged, crumpled soda can at her right ankle. In a winter coat and hat — it was over thirty degrees Celsius — an old Arab with five roses wrapped in cellophane walked along the stalls, hawking his wares to the vendors and to the visitors to the market. The woman selling red beets and potatoes crossed herself, her hands in orange plastic gloves, as a bearded monk in a long brown cowl walked by her stall peddling prayer cards. An old gypsy woman dressed in black, having failed in her attempts to sell it, gave a shirt to the market musician, a Neapolitan who walked, singing & begging, through the market. A motif of snakes and arrows was tattooed on the Neapolitan's hairy forearms, and his bearded

face was red as a crab. Between the vegetable stalls, among various castoff garments in good repair, he found a jacket & tried it on, contemplating his reflection in a car window. He left his old blue track jacket beside the pile of clothes and went, taking nips from a beer bottle, further down the rows of stalls.



LUIGI, THE CAPO of the fish stand, who bought fresh fish and seafood from a wholesaler in Fiumicino in the early hours of morning, was known as *Principe* among his coworkers. In blue letters over the image of a crab, his shirt read *Damino Rosci. Pesce fresco. Piazza Vittorio*. A habitué of transvestites, the fat fishmonger with three days' growth of beard, wearing a shirt printed with the word *Hawaii* and the image of a surfer with his hands aloft, answered to the nickname *Frocio*. He bragged endlessly of picking up drag queens in Piazza dei Cinquecento and Piazza della Repubblica, driving off with them in his car, & finishing up in the park of Villa Borghese. A bald-headed young fishmonger, who only worked the stall when he wasn't locked up in a Roman prison, was called *Nazi-Skin*. Last of all those who worked at the Damino fish stand was the sixteen-year-old son of a fig vendor who stood at the gates of the Vatican on Sundays offering fresh figs from her garden to the tourists and pilgrims streaming by. The boy, whose coworkers called him *Piccoletto* and whose long eyelashes nearly grazed

his cheeks, wore a crucifix on a fine gold chain around his neck. His cheeks were dotted with countless freckles. From his right wrist hung colorful plastic pacifiers.

"Signori, buon giorno! Un chilo di salmone originale, soltanto dieci mila lire," called Piccoletto, and chewed at his fingernails, smelling of fish slime and fish blood & blackened with squid ink at the edges. In knee-high rubber boots & a white Rolling Stones T-shirt, the boy grabbed a salmon weighing several kilos beneath the gills and laid it on a scale. His right thigh was smeared with rust-brown fish gall. Open-mouthed, his tongue jutting between his lips, he slit open the fish's belly with a small, sharp knife with a curved blade, pulled out its innards with a deft movement of the hand, and wrapped the fish in white wax paper stamped with a watermark. He threw water from a bucket over the cutting board and washed the remaining viscera onto the floor. In Roman dialect, Piccoletto recounted that on his last day off, he had taken his Vespa to the sea at Lapislazoli and seen a nun on the beach dressed in black chaperoning naked mongoloid children. One of the mongoloids, holding a Barbie by her blond hair, had wandered off into the breakers. A female cripple, with wasted legs but a powerful upper body, had crawled from the sea & onto her beach towel, which was spread out on the hot shore. Her breasts skimmed the sea foam & the hot grains of white sand.

Men from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka walked among the fish stalls offering Bic lighters, strands of garlic, and

that summer's trendy trinkets, multicolored pacifiers in various sizes. Bosnian refugees were selling used cameras, Russian dolls, green toy tanks, old soaps and tawdry icons. A young man speaking Serbo-Croatian offered a few pairs of surgical gloves to the boy with the long black eyelashes and the freckle-dusted cheeks while he was shouting out the prices of the fish. An old gypsy woman dressed in black, leaning on a cane, with gaps between her gold teeth, uncapped a beer bottle and poured the first sip on the ground before bringing the neck of the bottle to her lips. She screwed a handle onto a walking stick — a golden horse's head — and offered it to the fishmongers. Proffering not the ten or fifteen pairs of used glasses in her possession, but rather her own small daughter, a gypsy whispered to a horrified passerby who tried to sidestep her, "Quanto mi dai!"

Neither ferns nor algae covered the five small sharks, ten to twenty centimeters in length, lying prone in their white styrofoam coffin, their gray skin coarse as sandpaper. A bee sucked greedily at a viscid white calamari ring, and a fat fly, blue-green and shimmery, roamed through the eye socket of a swordfish, glinting silver beneath the sun. With the long green nail of her index finger, a humpbacked woman pulled open a fish's gill to check it for freshness. A sparrow with a piece of fish meat in its mouth, nearly a third of its weight, flew faltering to the tin roof of the seafood stand before taking off again to light on a pine tree branch in the park of Piazza San

Vittorio where it began to tear the flesh apart. While a nun, her face covered in warts, was passing her payment for the mussels she had selected to Piccoletto, the end of the white cord she wore looped over her hips fell over the neck of a slimy squid. Indignant, unnoticed by the fishmonger, she pulled the cord from the white styrofoam crate of squids.



IN THE MARKET BAR, not far from the fish stall, a tall, thin black man in a long brown and white smock stood at the counter and stirred an espresso. Around his neck hung a pendant in the shape of the African continent, divided in three sections bearing the colors of the Italian flag. On a shelf behind the barista's head were three heart-shaped candy boxes covered in red velveteen. Beside one of the boxes, wrapped in a paper ribbon with plastic violets sticking out, a red toy car was parked, a Ferrari. The plastic violets had been sprayed with a violet-scented perfume, and in the driver's seat, a squashed, heart-shaped chocolate oozed from inside its red paper wrapper. In a religious picture to the left of the chocolate box, the mother of God passed a blue bunch of grapes to the Christ child. Beneath the painting, on an electronic calendar with a built-in speaker, a mulatto woman whispered "Café do Brasil," sometimes softly, sometimes loudly, when the jolly barista pushed the button to show off his toy to his guests, the blood-smeared butchers &



fishmongers who came by on break to quench their thirst with cappuccino, wine, and grappa. Under the calendar with the speaker, a praying nun, watched over by two winged angels, knelt before a cross. To the right of the candy box, on the same shelf, stood a pink and blue porcelain statuette of the Virgin Mary accented with gold; her head bowing humbly, with a meditative gaze, she looked over the fingertips of her clasped hands toward a box of Mon Chéri chocolates.

Under the Madonna, the barista, his eyes bulging from their sockets, bit into a tuna tramezzino, then took an ice cube from the cooler with a pair of tongs, ran it under water and dropped it into his Coke. An electric light cut on and off as he pushed the button on the cola dispenser and the brownish liquid roiled into his wax paper cup. The barista passed a steaming hot espresso in a plastic cup to a filthy, stinking beggar in a black vest emblazoned with the motto *Team Skul*, who was banned from entering the bar and had to wait at the door. On his vest, between the words *Team* and *Skul*, a white death's head was printed. The barista tried to scare off a small black child by waving his hands, but when the child slapped the panes of the glass-covered bar with his little hands, the man came out from behind the bar and dragged the screaming child by his ear out the door to the butcher's stand across the way. "Questa borsa per il mare! Quanto mi dai!" a young gypsy girl called into the market bar, offering a fake leather bag to the butchers

and fishmongers who turned to face her, and who had previously been talking contentedly among themselves, drinking espresso, cappuccino, grappa, and wine. "Café do Brasil," the mulatto whispered once more.



IN THE CLEANED-OUT, already darkened display case of a butcher's shop lay two beef hearts which the butcher's apprentice wrapped in blue wax paper and set down beside his motorcycle helmet with its sticker of a winged blue death's head, before the cats that slunk around the vacated stalls could take note of them. A man picked out the cast-off chicken hearts from a mound of intestines, chicken feet, and chicken heads, lining them up neatly, like bonbons, in a plastic box, & flipped them back over — the broad side of the heart facing upwards, the narrow underneath — whenever he accidentally upturned one of the chicken hearts in the box. He spit on the ones that were sprinkled with sawdust and wiped them clean with a handkerchief. A Bosnian refugee emptied the viscera from the slaughtered chickens from a plastic bin into a plastic bag, crossed himself, and kissed his fingertips.

Two pigs' heads with bloody, sawdust-speckled ears lay in a large black trashcan among sheep's heads, chicken bones, chicken heads, and beer & soda cans. A gypsy girl held her child, who was eating peanuts, in one hand, & with the other gathered the chicken heads,

chicken bones, and poultry entrails from a waste basket and stuffed them into a plastic bag. After she had half-filled the blue plastic bag, and had taken a sad-looking goat's head, black and bloody, in her hand and gazed at it a long time, the butcher, a Sri Lankan, shouted "Basta! basta!" and made her throw back into the wastebasket the chicken necks & chicken bones that had spilled to the floor while she rooted about. A man in his fifties, a large growth between his legs, wearing a woman's blue stocking as a hair net, his face half-hidden by his graying beard, portioned out the offal by kilos in two plastic bags. Without removing his socks or shoes, he stood at the fountain, glancing at his Mickey Mouse watch — Pluto, the second hand, ran backwards over the dial — and let the water splash over his ankles. In a rickety old stroller covered with a blood-smeared plastic sheet, a fat, squalid-looking old woman carted chicken heads, chicken bones, white calves' feet, lungs, kidneys, and cast-off intestines. His clinking keys hanging from a fabric banana that served as a keychain, with the pink *Gazzetta dello Sport* tucked between his inner arm and ribcage, a macellaio took leave of the other meat vendors who were wiping down and tidying their stalls with the words, "Ciao, ragazzi." After the fish stalls had been cleaned out as well, Piccoletto showed up on his Vespa — a yellow plastic pacifier hung from the key of the scooter — riding it among the stalls, over the rotten fruit & vegetables, the spoiled tropical fruits, over chicken necks and chicken hearts,

yellow chicken feet, the trampled and rotting lobes of lungs, and dodging the scattered sheep's heads, from which the skin had been stripped away, with a laugh; he rolled past the horned goats' heads, black and bloody, and drove cackling over the sheep's tails, matted with dung-caked tufts of hair. The meat vendors, polishing the windows of their display cases with damp rags, lifted their heads and watched their young companion, who sped off on his Vespa, laughing, between the stalls. "Ci sono tutti bambini," a gypsy woman called out, as a lamb butcher, pushing aside the entrails strewn in front of his stall with a broom, tried to chase off a gypsy child blowing into a trumpet; she snatched her son by the chin and boxed the ears of her daughter, who was blowing into a trumpet as well, before the two gypsy children, blowing into their trumpets once more, descended the steps of the subway at Piazza Vittorio.



## NOTE

The citation that opens the book is from Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Vita d'un uomo III*; the remaining citations are from *Giorno per giorno* by the same author.  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOSEF WINKLER is the author of nearly twenty books, among them the award-winning trilogy *Das wilde Kärnten*. His major themes are suicide, homosexuality, and the corrosive influence of Catholicism and Nazism in Austrian country life. Winner of the 2008 Büchner prize and current president of the Austrian Arts Senate, Winkler lives in Klagenfurt with his wife & two children.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

ADRIAN WEST is a writer and literary translator from the western Romance languages and German. His work has appeared in numerous journals in print & online, including *McSweeney's*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Words Without Borders*, and *3:AM*. He lives with the cinema critic Beatriz Leal Riesco.

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"Magnificent. A poetic study of the transience of being. A deeply sensuous book."

— Marcel Reich-Ranicki

WHITE PEACHES, red broom, pomegranates tumbling down the escalator steps: with these delicately rendered details, Josef Winkler's *Natura Morta* begins. In Stazione Termini in Rome, Piccoletto, the beautiful black-haired boy whose long eyelashes graze his freckle-studded cheeks, steps onto the metro and heads toward his job at a fish stand in Piazza Vittorio Emanuele. The sights & sounds of the market, a mélange of teeming life amid the ever present avatars of death, is the backdrop for Winkler's innovative prose, which unfolds in a series of haunting images

and baroque, luxuriant digressions with pitch-perfect symmetry and intense visual clarity. Reminiscent of the carnal vitality of Pasolini, and taking inspiration from the play between the sumptuous & fatal in the still lives of the late Renaissance, *Natura Morta* is a unique experiment in writing as stasis, culminating in the beatification of its protagonist. In awarding this book with the 2001 Alfred Döblin Prize, Günter Grass singled out Winkler's commitment to the writer's vocation and praised *Natura Morta* as a work of dense poetic rigor. 

Ha un cesto di rugiada  
il ciarlatano del cielo

*The charlatan of Heaven  
Bears a basket of dew*

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