



Josef Winkler

Roppongi

Requiem for a Father

Novella

(Original German title: Roppongi.

Requiem für einen Vater)

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Since his award-winning first novel *Menschenkind*, the Austrian Büchner Prize winner Josef Winkler has been deeply concerned with the burden of memory, the scars left by childhood trauma, and the competing claims of restitution and reconciliation. At the center of his conflicted narratives lies his father, the plowman from Carinthia, as he calls him, a brutal, incomprehensible figure whose stature in his son's writings is like that of a savage god. From the time he began to write, Winkler has proven a gadfly for his homeland, ruthlessly disclosing the savagery and sorrow that lie beneath its bucolic surface, particularly as regards the region of Carinthia, which has spawned many of the signal voices of twentieth-century literature, but which also harbored the unregenerate fascist tendencies embodied in the notorious Jörg Haider.

In his fifth novel, *The Serf*, Winkler repeats a scurrilous story about a farmer from his home village that his father had told him in confidence. Enraged, his father phones him and screams "When I'm no longer around, I don't want you coming to my funeral!" His wishes are fulfilled when Winkler, who has been invited to a literary conference in Japan, leaves Tokyo for Nagano the day before his father's death. Only on his return to

his temporary residence in Roppongi does he hear of the ninety-nine-year-old man's demise, and by then, it is too late, there is no time to return to Austria. Against the backdrop of the streets of Tokyo, Winkler considers the extent to which his father's death has freed him, and the impossibility of a definitive reconciliation with the man who has been the center of his poetic universe.

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In February of 2002, I sent a postcard from Varanasi in India to the writer Bodo Kirchof in Frankfurt with the following words: Imagine, Bodo, you wouldn't believe it, the vultures are almost extinct in India. For a month they crouched immobile in the trees and then plunged dead to the ground, like stones. Only in the state of Rajasthan are there said to be any left.

I always say: before the poets the vultures die. Thence will the world perish, Bodo, thereby we have had not so bad a time in the last twenty years, since 1979, when our first books appeared, with great zeal and wrath. Kindest greetings from India: Josef (Winkler). Now, when I begin to write and say that the vultures are almost extinct in India, I hear dhrupad. Dhrupad is the original form of Indian classical music, the oldest form of north Indian art music, which in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to its definitive form arrived and whose origins trace back to the Vedas. The structure of Dhrupad is said to lead back to the eighth century. According to legend, the Indian gods granted music to man as a game, to charm away evil from the earth. Dhrupad became the fundament of all northern Indian art music. The recital of a Raga is not supposed to entertain the public. The Raga rather constitutes a prayer, an expression of religious sentiment, and attempts to awaken the consciousness of God in the listener. Centuries of oral transmission from teacher to pupil have conserved this style up to the present day. It could be made possible for the singer, a broad palette of timbres and microtonal shadings to produce. The singer, it is said, plays with his breath the instrument crafted by God.

The great singer of Dhrupad, Fahimuddin Daggar, said, with relation to the fundamental characteristic of Indian classical music: According to Indian mythology, music shows the way to Moksha, that is, to liberation. Our ancestors directed their music

to the almighty God, in order to achieve liberation. Our Hindu religion is apparently the only one in the entire world that preserves the belief in the transmigration of souls. For centuries, man was incapable of freeing himself from the cycle of birth and death. The divine purpose of humanity lay in the attainment of Moksha, and without Moksha, the soul cannot free itself definitively from its worldly shell. Music is but one of the many paths that leads to this goal. But no, I cut the radio back off, I cannot write and listen to Dhrupad at the same time, I will have to listen to the music on another occasion. Above all then, when I walk back and forth without a pause in my room and stare over at the radio, or also at night, before falling asleep and as I fall asleep, when I at last drift off to dream, Fahimuddin Draggar sings me Dhrupad and blots out, before I fall asleep, while the music continues on, the reverse glass painting of an image from my childhood, when I used to kneel at my pillow before going to sleep, fold my hands, stare up at the large religious image, pray to the guardian angel, and, slipping under the blanket, and, with my naked toes in the cold winter night, touch a brick wrapped in a blanket that I had laid on the hot oven in the kitchen until it was hot enough, brought into the living room, and buried at the foot of the bed. I can therefore not listen to Dhrupad, not here and now, while I am writing. I turn the radio off and return again to the cultures.

In the past ten years in India, Pakistan, and Nepal millions of Indian vultures, Bengal vultures, and slender-billed vultures have died. Depending, a mere one to three percent of the carrion birds have survived. The affected birds display goutlike symptoms and die abruptly from kidney failure. For a month they crouched motionlessly in the trees, let their heads hang slack, almost to between their legs, and plopped from the branches. Though at first a previously unknown virus was suspected, researchers later discovered that the medicine Diclofenac was responsible for the vultures' decimation. This pharmaceutical anti-inflammatory, developed for humans, has since the nineties in Pakistan, India, and Nepal has been used in veterinary medicine, especially for treating cattle. The vultures ingest the chemical through the cadavers of domesticated animals.

Repeatedly the men bring the cadavers of the holy cows, which may not be slaughtered or consumed, to the roadside trash heaps, where they are flayed, but now, instead of carrion birds, the dumping grounds are set upon by packs of roaming dogs, a

dangerous epidemic for men and animals. The vultures had been able to reduce the cadaver of a cow to a skeleton in twenty minutes. The multiplication of dogs has raised the risk of rabies for the men. The stomach acid of vultures is so powerful that cholera and anthrax cannot affect them, and their immune system protects them from pathogens borne by rotting flesh, but now, wild dogs and ravens transmit these life-threatening pathogens to people and animals in the villages and in the cities.

The vultures have, moreover, a particular significance for the 120,000 Parsi. According to their beliefs, a human corpse should not contaminate the elements of earth, fire, or water. Traditionally, the Parsi, who are concentrated in the region of Bombay, offer their dead to the vultures on a stone tower, the “towers of silence,” to be eaten. This method of disposal was only proscribed when there were no longer enough vultures to dispatch the human remains. From history we know that vultures, which are described in the Bible as an “abomination,” have followed after armies for centuries, in the American Civil War, for instance. At the Battle of Gettysburg, there were so many fallen soldiers, it was said that the vultures had so sated themselves on the corpses, that they could no longer fly, that they weighed so much, they could no longer stand on their feet and lurched among the perished soldiers. In the Serengeti, vultures consume more flesh than lions, hyenas, and leopards combined. It has been concluded that the famed savannas of the Serengeti would be buried a meter deep under the carcasses of animals, if there were no vultures. In Spain, where, thanks to legal protections, there live some 70,000 griffon vultures, the farmers use the vultures as gravediggers. Instead of hauling them to the rendering plant, they leave their dead domestic animals to the vultures in a specially prepared, dedicated area, commonly referred to as a “vulture restaurant.”

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Three years ago, when I was staying with my family in the Roppongi area of Tokyo, with one-year-old Siri and eight-year-old Kasimir in tow, my ninety-nine-year-old father died, the man known in many of my books as the Plowman from Carinthia, who said to me a year before his death, upon discovering I had scattered neither cornflowers nor peonies at the feet of a farmer from my home village in my most recent prose work, in a short but

moving monologue over the telephone, that when the time came, I was not to show up at his funeral. It was on a Saturday in November, as we traveled past a smoldering volcano on our way from Tokyo to a literature symposium in Nagano where the talk was to center on the Plowman of Carinthia, that he succumbed to a gentle storybook death. Only two days later, on our return to Tokyo, were we informed of his passing. It was too late. We had not arrived in time to make it to the funeral.

My father lay exposed in the church vestibule in Kamering, just next to the life-sized, armless statue of Christ that hung on the north wall and had once been carried off into the forest by two men and hurled down over a waterfall. The arms of the crucified had broken from his body when he crashed against the rocks on the riverbed and were washed away to the ends of the earth, and the parish priest Franz Reinthaler, who salvaged the body and carried it to the parish house, could never find them again; however, as he would utter repeatedly over the course of a decade in our religious lessons on Saturdays and on Sundays in his sermons, the blasphemers would lose their own arms in Hitler's war and had to live out their remaining days with wooden prostheses fitted with iron hooks so they could go to work, to the end they'd had to be fed by their wives and children, and when they died, they could not be buried with their hands folded in prayer. "The defilers of Christ could not lie in their coffins with folded hands!" shouted the parish priest Franz Reinthaler from the pulpit, "That was a punishment from God for their blasphemy!"

One summer afternoon a year before his death, my ninety-eight-year-old father called me in Klagenfurt and shouted into the telephone: "Seppel, what a pig you are, a vile, worthless dog! What's that you wrote about Frido Lemmerhofer? His wife threw him out into the pig stall and the pigs ate his testicles while he was passed out drunk and lying in shit. What kind of person are you? I'll tell you this just once! When I'm no longer around, I don't want you coming to my funeral!"

More than a decade before, to my astonishment, my mother recalled that he had never taken me on his lap when I was a child. At that time my grandfather was still alive, my father truckled under to him his entire life and never dared to show me the least affection in his presence; this was the grandfather who pushed me away, who

disapproved of my petulance, who used to come into the bedroom I shared with the brother who was two years my junior and try and dress us when we'd awakened, and I would struggle, waving my hands and kicking my feet, to escape from his cold hands. When I was fifteen and wore a Beatles haircut like my friend Emanuel Wenger, my father cursed us, calling us tramps and scamps, he detested me and when we bumped into each other in the narrow entryway of the farmhouse, he would shout, when would I finally go to the barber, and that people must be ashamed of me. And once when I and my brother, whom I used to hear bellowing "Most holy heaven! Most holy heaven!" late at night, were brawling feverishly and split open the top of my grandparents' table, which was painted glossy yellow and had a black border, my father, hearing the fight, rushed upstairs to scold me, and I stepped back once, twice, threw open my arms, and shouted "Hit me, hit me, I don't feel anything anymore!" He winced, turned around, went downstairs, and never again dared to mention my haircut or my ratty first pair of jeans. Some time later, when he was standing at the threshold of the kitchen door in his dung-flecked blue work pants and his dung-caked Goiserer shoes while I sat at the kitchen table with an open book, he implored me: "Seppl, don't you disgrace us!" Tears filled my eyes, I shook my head, looked down at the book with blurred vision, reading the same sentence over and over, not understanding a single word.

My brother recalled to me that early in the morning, on the day of my father's death, the family doctor had come by to administer him a vitamin shot. "There's nothing more I can do for your father," said the family doctor to my sister, "he could well depart today." My sister Apollonia then called our brother Bruno Lautenschläger, the heritor of the estate, and repeated the doctor's words. "What sat mean, he c'd depart," the husky Catholic Bruno Lautenschläger asked. "He's going to die," Apollonia cried into the telephone, standing before the framed, sepia-tinted picture hanging on the wall before her, where our father, then in his thirties, still showing the vigor of his youth, sat on the new reaper, which was pulled by two horses, and on his left hand, which held the reigns, one could clearly see the stump of his little finger, which he had lost cutting hay in the hayloft at the age of three, a photo taken by his brother, our Uncle Franz, with his Hasselblad camera, the same brother who had been in the SS in Nuremberg — "I only sat at a desk!" — and

who had also snapped a picture of my sister and my two older brothers, one of whom was now the heritor of the estate, and had said, before releasing the shutter, the words, “Watch out, here comes the devil!” Since that day there has existed a photo in which all three children are crying from fear of the devil, the middle one with his eyes closed, the future heritor of the estate with a gaping mouth and open eyes slightly swollen from crying, and the oldest, my sister Apollonia, more whimpering than weeping, her eyes wide and her hair long and stringy, pressing the back of her left hand into her mouth.

“When I’m no longer around, I don’t want you coming to my funeral!” A few months after my father had uttered these words, I came to visit my parents’ home and my father did not repeat his curse or even touch on it; but for my part I was glad not to have to go to the church, and squeeze the hands and hear the leaden words “My condolences” from the yawning lips of the hypocrites and condolers in the village of Kamering who would stand at my father’s open grave and would much rather have me buried in the pit than the hundred-year-old man, and not to have to see the crocodile tears, violet like Palm Sunday vestments, gathered in the corners of their eyes.

I was glad to stay in Roppongi, not to have to listen to the countertenor voice of Pelé Schöndarm — my father was his favorite uncle — who, when he used to go on trips, traveled not only in the company of his Catholic bride and spiritual helpmeet Emma Schöndarm, who would ingest a holy wafer at every place of pilgrimage within and beyond the country’s borders, but also with a rules notebook he kept in his suitcase where he would paste photographs of women’s naked lower bodies with Uhu craft glue, but no torsos, no heads, and if he suffered an asthma attack while cutting these women’s lower bodies from his porn magazines, then he would clasp his own neck, dropping the scissors, the tattered sex magazines and the trimmings of female under-parts with their moist, pink labia splayed open, clinging to the armchair while his eyes bulged out and flecks of expectorated foam mixed with long threads of saliva fell over the lower bodies of the woman, hirsute or shaved.

I was glad to stay in Roppongi, not to have to listen to the voice of Frido Lemmerhofer, the mustachioed farmer who’d had his lower lip sewn back on and sings “Take me out over the Onga” loudly and with great mournfulness and vigor at every

funeral, and whose Catholic wife and helpmeet Sonja Lemmerhofer, when he had remained again until dawn at the smoke-filled bar the farmers frequented on the far bank of the Drava playing Watten and drinking schnapps and had crossed the line, lifting a few too many glasses of Villach beer, had dragged him out of that dingy taproom, walking up on the clueless man from behind, pulling him by the hair, and maneuvering him into the car, had driven him to his parents' farmhouse, where for decades the servants had not been allowed to sit at the family's table, but had taken their meals at a special table for the servants, and had thrown him into the hog pen, where he lay unconscious throughout the remaining hours of the morning and the pigs, snorting and smacking, had chewed off his testicles, had half-unmanned him, after which, to the renewed dismay of his Catholic spouse and helpmeet Sonja, they'd had to sell off numerous heads of cattle to pay for the interminable bills at the urologist's in Liechtenstein. To avenge himself on Sonja, who is not seldom plagued by holy wafers coursing through the tabernacle in her dreams, Frido Lemmerhofer is little by little cashing in on the livestock from the stables that his father, now deceased as well, had exactingly constructed, where in our childhood we had been able to listen to the radio while we worked in the stalls: a full hour of news, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and "In the Ghetto" by Elvis Presley.

I was glad to stay in Roppongi, not to have to see Raudi Kaltenschläger, my brother's Catholic wife, in mourning, looking like a woodpecker in her black outer clothes and red polka-dotted underclothes, with curly, bleach-blond hair and glitter painted on her eyelids, whose father, a blowhard and a barfly, had hanged himself in the cattle stalls after his drinking pals from the village, all of whom he had slurred and denounced, had abandoned him, skirting the bewildered blowhard and leaving him on his own. He did so with a still-moist, slimy calf-rope he had used the night before to drag two calves into the world that were fused at the breast, so that he'd had to shoot the monster and bury it. While my father, who hadn't eaten for several days, lay in a hospital in Spittal-on-the-Drava to be examined, Raudi Kaltenschläger, subservient to authority like a good Catholic, took advantage of her father-in-law's absence to show up at my parents' farmhouse in the streaming rain, where she threw open the kitchen door, smelling of a mixture of cheap perfume and the cow stalls, raised her index finger, while the rain water

ran down from the desolate windows down onto the upholstered bench, conscious of her power over my sick sister Apollonia, at whom she glances several times while she shouted from her gap-toothed, lipstick-ringed gorge: “You will not write another word about my father and my brother!”

“Anyhow he just scribbles fibs about the deceased,” the Catholic poser said about me in her colorful Carinthian dialect, that is, he writes about the dead and about the corpses and about the departed and about the hanged and the suicides and about the no-longer-here, and not just about the living.