



**Josef Winkler**

**Domra**

**On the Banks of the Ganges**

Novel

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Sample translation by Adrian West

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## **I. Selections from *Domra, am Ufer des Ganges***

1. A Swiss writer, who had been living for months in the Hotel Ganges View in Varanasi, recounted that a dead saint was bound to a chair with a hemp rope, weighed down with stones, and sunken in the middle of the Ganges. After a short time his corpse, still tied to the chair, rose to the surface. The dead man's head sagged over the chair back. A vulture dug its claws into the dead saint's chest, pecked out his eyes, and burrowed with its hooked beak inside the mouth and nostrils of the corpse tied to a chair with a hemp rope, drifting down the Ganges. He recounted further that he had once lived with an Iranian family who one day received a package containing a number of fruits and pomegranates. The same evening a second package came, in which the head of the patriarch's brother lay packed in wood shavings, because this brother was alleged to have maintained ties to Iraq. A Portuguese woman, who showed up repeatedly at the Hotel

Ganges View and was writing a dissertation on cremation ceremonies, reported that in India, superstitious people would take epileptics *chapatti* roasted over a corpse. This recipe was thought particularly effective when a few bits of the corpse's flesh were cooked into the bread. While Shashank recounted that formerly, the departed saints were interred in mesh cages, so that the fish could not devour them, he cleaned the dots of insect droppings from a green windowpane on the veranda with a damp cloth—a section of the hotel's veranda is glassed-in—and wiped off the two lanterns affixed to the columns from which, trapped in spider webs, hung countless grey moths, dead or still twitching. Wiping a plate in one of the lanterns with a washcloth to which the insects held fast, and grazing the fixture with his forearm, so that the moths dangled in the fine web that hung from his left wrist, he recounted that children, in religious processions, would carry a dead ass to the river's banks and hurl it into the Ganges.

2. By the dhobis near the cremation site, a small boy rolled from side to side on his back, pulled his legs apart, took the tip of his member from his open zipper, tugged at his foreskin and shouted: "Hallo! Photo! Photo! Hallo! Photo!" The boy's parents, spreading freshly washed saris out on the sand hills to dry, laughed as he showed his sex organ to passersby, calling, "Baksheesh! Baksheesh!" On their shoulders, two barefoot Domba, naked save for a loincloth, carried heavy bundles of mango wood to the edge of the river and threw them at the feet of a corpse tied to a seven-runged bamboo ladder and wrapped in golden and multicolored synthetic cloths and wreathed with orange flowers. While I sat with my open notebook at the edge of the round cremation altar stone, an old bearded man about to perform a cremation ceremony was shaved bald. A young man put a fresh blade in his razor, doused the man's hair in Ganges water, pressed the edge of the razorblade into the middle of the his head and made a clean streak down

to the base of his neck. Dark grey, damp curls of hair slid down his naked back and onto the strewn-about charcoal and the perforated fragments of charred white bone from a dead body cremated that morning on the round altar stone. No sooner had the old man with the beard, now shaved bald, noticed that I was looking at his ringed hands, than he stretched out his fingers and contemplated the ten or twelve pieces of gold and silver jewelry adorning his extremities. A barefoot Domba with a black moustache, dressed only in a loincloth, read a few lines from a Hindu newspaper before using it to kindle a pyre on which a corpse lay wrapped from head to foot in a seamless sheet of fine white cotton; lighting a matchstick, he held its flaming tip under a corner of the paper and approached the pyre, near which little black children, stark naked, vaulted over the heads and backs of the black water buffalos standing in the river. The fat black legs of the water buffalos, sparsely wisped with hair, had gotten tangled in the wine-red garlands floating in the Ganges. The clean-shaven man, who had wrapped his naked body in a single, seamless sheet of white cotton, began the cremation ceremony at the second pyre; followed by three barefoot men, holding a crackling sheaf of dry, burning reeds he circled the pyre seven times, touching the dead man's forehead at each turn before laying the burning bundle among the heaped up wood. At a third pyre that had been burning more than an hour, a Domba with a bamboo staff, its tip blackened and smoking, kept shoving a roasting corpse back onto the glowing embers. The short, burnt kindling, which kept slipping from beneath the pyre, he caught between two short prongs of the tattered bamboo cane, pushing them back onto the brownish-red, roasting human flesh, coated in black soot and grey ash. The bowed, blackened spine, covered in a film of ash and still clinging to the head of the deceased, recalled to me for a moment my grandmother's grimy black rosary, slender and fragrant of sweat and urine, which to this day I have not thrown out, because a small silver crucifix hangs at the end of it, the features

of which have been imprinted in my mind since childhood. So that the crackling fire could reach the head of the charred and sputtering human remains, the Domba poked the blackened head with the bamboo staff and pushed the dead face into the flames. That same night, I dreamt I had packed wooden boards into a silver aluminum chest to carry them down to the parish house, and that, because I shall never, ever stop writing about the two hanged adolescents, although it has more than once been declared that things will get hot for me, the confectioner was apparently going to burn me alive; the confectioner therefore wanted to help me carry the logs and was already there with a wheelbarrow, so that we went down to the parish house together, I with a silver aluminum chest full of boards and the confectioner with a full wheelbarrow. At the rear of the parish house, where one can see one of the priest's frescoes covered with a clear plastic sheet, to protect it from the rain and snow, I opened the chest, threw the square boards, all wedged together, to the floor, and said to the confectioner, who was zealously stacking the boards up into a pyre: "Birch! That's birch wood! Birch wood burns best!" My cremation should take place just behind the parish house barn where, what will soon be two decades ago, the two seventeen year old apprentices Jakob and Robert hanged themselves together with a three meter-long calf rope from a joist.

## II. Selection 1 from *Wenn es soweit ist*

1.

In very bottom of the clay vessel in which the putrid smelling bone stock was distilled from the bones of slaughtered animals, to be brushed on the horses with a crow's feather around the eyes, on the ears and nostrils, and on their bellies, to protect them from the horseflies, flies, and mosquitoes, lie the arm bones, torn from his body in a trench on the battlefield, of a man who dragged a life-sized statue of Jesus through the forest before the Second World War and threw it over a waterfall. Even after days of searching, they couldn't find Jesus' arms, which had broken off from his body in the fall—the pastor, Balthasar Kranabeter, wandered for nights on end through the forest, with a flashlight and a holy card hanging around his neck, praying loudly Holy God, we praise your name, Lord of all, we bow before three—in return, however, according to the priest, the blasphemer lost his own arms in Hitler's war, and spent the rest of his days with a wooden prosthesis to which iron hooks were affixed, and had to be fed by his wife and children. Before meals, he would make the sign of the cross over his forehead, lips, and breast with the iron hooks attached to his prosthesis, and pray, Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and bless what you have bestowed. Since then, the holy card-painting village priest would say, lifting his index finger menacingly before the wide eyes of the children of the landowners and peasants seated before him for their religion lessons, the town, built in the form of a cross, which had already been consumed by fire at the turn of the century, is imprisoned in an image framed left to right, top to bottom, by fire, on which, his hands aloft among the red and yellow flames darting upward from the floor of Hell, the profaner of Christ lies, his naked torso wound in a green serpent as thick as a man's arm. Red-winged Lucifer leans over the sinner and spills a cup

of gall into his mouth. *Ô toi, le plus savant et le plus beau des Anges, / Dieu trahi par le sort et privé de louanges, / Ô Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère!*

## 2.

The fifteen year old Ludmilla Felfernig, Maximilian's mother said, had to work on the Schaflechner farm with menials and peasants who mocked and jeered at her unceasingly. Once the boys were stacking straw bales on the threshing floor of the barn when the girl, to use his mother's words, became unwell. As she bent over the straw bales, the boys poked fun at the blood that had seeped through her underwear. The girl, in tears, let the straw bale fall, ran down the gangway of the hayloft, down the village street, to the calvary, and knelt, folding her hands in prayer, under the flames leaping up from the floor of Hell. While the menstrual blood ran over her thighs, she wept aloud, with a pounding heart: Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom His love entrusts me here, ever this day be at my side to light and guard, to rule and guide. Wedging her hand between her thighs, she smeared blood on her face, the whitewashed wall of the calvary, and the devil's horned head, and ran, red-masked, with blood-drenched hands and thighs, past the graveyard, where the crosses stood erect like life-sized tin soldiers, stretching their thorn-crowned heads, past the church, over the hill capped by a lake, down through fields fenced in with rusted barbed wire, in which hung tufts of grey and brown hair from the grazing cattle, through the narrow, tangled woodlands by the river, and threw herself into the rapids of the Drava. After days of pointless searching, her corpse was pulled out of the river in Villach. Milla got snagged in the grating on the Drava bridge! Thus Maximilian's mother, the wife of the ninety year old man with the grey-flecked moustache and the trimmed eyebrows.

In the clay vessel in which, from the bones of slaughtered animals, the pandapigl was distilled, to be painted on the horses with a crow's feather, around the eyes and nostrils, and on

the belly, to protect them from the pestering mosquitoes and horseflies, the bone collector lays the skeleton of the fifteen year old girl, found caught up in the grating among the driftwood and pulled out of the river, over the skeleton of August Rosenfelder, whose corpse, splattered with feces, was cut down from the stable door before the tails of the cattle swinging back and forth. In front of the calvary opposite the schoolhouse in the center of the town built in the form of a cross, on which the lies the blasphemer, who threw the life-sized Jesus over a cliff, his hands aloft, among the flames of Hell, while Lucifer, his red wings unfurled, bends over his victim, to spill a cup of gall in his open mouth while he cries out in misery, the funeral train halted, with the black-clothed priest, the acolytes in black and white, the peasants and menials bearing lit candles and murmuring prayers. With holy water and incense, the priest blessed the bloody handprints the young suicide had left on the walls of the calvary and the image of Hell, which he himself had painted, and said: *Ô Prince de l'exil, à qui l'on a fait tort / Et qui, vaincu, toujours te redresses plus fort, / Ô Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère!*

### 3.

When Ms. Lakonig went on her bicycle through the outstretched right arm of the village built in the form of a cross, to the Steinharts'—Jonathan, the family's seventeen year old son, had hanged himself with his friend Leopold, of the same age, a few years before—to pick up fresh milk, still warm from the cow, she was run over by a truck that swerved onto the shoulder of the road. She flew with her bicycle past an elderberry, its black umbels hanging low, down the hill into a poppy-covered wheat field. When a retired bricklayer told her husband, Wilfried Lakonig, that his wife lay dead in a furrow in a wheat field, he screamed into the handpiece: Fuck off! Pack her up and get her to the morgue! The retiree who gave him the bad news had lost a son

himself a few years before, in Egypt, also in a traffic accident. Two jeeps had collided on a desert road...

The black hearse with the silver cross in the milk glass of the windows belonging to Sonnberger from Großbotenfeld was called to the scene of the accident by the police and arrived at the same time as the coroner. Two men in grey coats, one young and one old, stepped out from from a Mercedes and heaved the woman's corpse, bloody and disfigured, into a lead coffin at the edge of the wheat field. When the funeral procession, led by the sacristan with a crucifix, neared the center of the village and the schoolhouse, the peacock, standing before the calvary, the fan of its outstretched tail feathers covering the flames and the naked torso of the screaming blasphemer, lying on the floor of Hell, disappeared, whipping its tail feathers a few centimeters above the asphalted street. Only Lucifer's horned scalp was visible over the eyes of its feathers, his unfurled red wings and his claws emptying gall into the sinner's mouth. The dusty undersides of a few haggard feathers, eyeless, dragged on the ground as the peacock, startled by the black coil of the procession, took flight over the village street, hid under the gangway of the Felsbergers' barn and settled into the hot, dusty earth. There was no bouquet of delicate posies, quickly expiring under the violently flickering flames, only the shards of a shattered vase lay there. No red bouquets of poppies were tied to the coffin, not even a bundle of green poppy seed pods when they lowered the casket with a creaking rope into the deep earth. A big flowerpot filled with carnations hid the small wooden cross, light brown, with its plastic Jesus. Katharina, the mother of Jonathan, the young suicide—a friend of the deceased, who died on her way to her house to get milk—instead of taking the aspergil from the copper bucket of holy water, splashed the coffin, already in the grave, with milk from a medicine bottle, and was taken to her



farmhouse just after the burial by two men, one young and one old, a father and a son, who walked at her right and left, holding her up by her arms.

In the clay vessel in which, from the bones of slaughtered animals, the putrid-smelling bone stock was distilled, to be brushed on the horses with a crow's feather, around the eyes and nostrils, and on the belly, to protect them from the mosquitoes and horseflies, lies the skeleton of the deceased, over the skeleton of the pastor and religious painter who, dying before her, could not give her his final blessing, but the mortal remains of the shepherd of souls were driven in a black Mercedes from Carinthia to Upper Austria, by the same people who took the woman's corpse, found in a wheat field with countless broken bones, from Pulsnitz to the morgue in Großbotenfeld. A few weeks later, the combine, painted green, like an iron insect, was in the valley shoving ears of grain into its maws and leaving one tract of stubble after another in its wake. Not far away, a few meters from where the cadaver had lain with the bicycle and the empty milk can, the half-naked farm children wearing ski goggles, a film of grey dust over their tan bodies, were tying up the full grain bags in the hot, dry afternoon, and throwing them from the combine onto the stubble field. *Mary, Queen of Heaven, Queen of angels, we salute thee! Rejoice, Queen of earth, we reverence you with glee! Commend us to your merciful son, that he may set us free.*

#### 4.

In the clay vessel in which, from the bones of slaughtered animals, the putrid-smelling bone stock, to be smeared on the horses with a crow's feather, around the eyes and nostrils, and on the belly, to protect them from the mosquitoes and horseflies, lies, next to the skeleton of the twelve year old child, who at a bus stop, across from a butcher's shop—slices of ham hung out over the crunchy edge of the roll—ran carelessly into the street, the skeleton of the bishop's chauffeur and

pastry-maker Eduard Kirchheimer, who not infrequently regaled the Bishop of Gurk and his nuns with cream horns or a Malakoff Torte, as well as the skeleton of Emilie Kaiser, who lived with her brother, Viktor Kaiser, for many decades in a cabin without electricity or water and who, on Saturdays, when the first acolyte Maximilian used to go from house to house passing out the parish bulletin and would take a seat, curious and anxious, under the Herrgottswinkel of her kitchen, which smelled of potatoes and polenta, would tell him of the terrible doings of Krampus and the Habergeiß in her native village in Styria, where women and children were dragged off by the devil, and left maimed and bleeding in the snow-covered spruce forest. The two siblings fed themselves from their little vegetable plot, the herbs they grew, goats' milk and chicken, and mushrooms and fruit from the forest. For a time they got water from the spring in front of the house of the gentleman with the grey-flecked hair, preferably at night as opposed to during the day. When the pious Emilie died, the crusts of filth were so thick on her legs that the two corpse-gofers had to vomit outside her front door. Around her neck she wore a tight chain with a gold crucifix, which had grown into the oozing flesh of her breast. Without washing and dressing her, we slung the corpse, said the young corpse-gofers, into the coffin like a log and shoved it into the Mercedes. Her other brother, who begged throughout the region, had been found decades ago, frozen in a ditch.

Only recently, Maximilian, smelled rot as he passed by the feed troughs in the ninety year old man with the grey-flecked moustache's stables, and stopped, where the reek of decay was strongest, before a young bull; looking at the chain around its neck, saw that the iron chain had grown straight into the animal's skin. The ninety year old man, who had neglected to let the chain out as the bull's neck grew, tore the metal, smelling of pus and decay, from its flesh, thick spread black anti-inflammatory beech tar over the wound, wrapped the blood-smearred chain,

smelling of animal flesh, pus, and rot, clumps of hair hanging off it, in a jute sack on which the words Cafe de Guatemala and a whip were printed, and put it back around the bull's neck. As he closed the jar—black beech tar was running over his index finger—he said that the farm people, who often let the chain sink, not only into the skin, but deep into the flesh of the bulls' and oxen's necks, were many times reported to the police for animal cruelty by the butchers, who discovered the deep wounds in the animals' necks in the slaughterhouse, and hauled before a judge.

Emilie Kaiser, who had worked for a season in a household in Paris, and whom Maximilian saw frequently on his visits to her cottage reading religious books and pamphlets, had a fixed seat in the church, which no one disputed her. The people of the village used to joke about the two siblings, because, already from far away, when you approached their cottage, you could detect the acrid odor of their nannies and their old billy goat. Even in the church they couldn't cover up the odor of their animals, which had penetrated into their clothes. Emilie had always hated the calvary and its picture of Hell. Many times she had complained to Maximilian, who carried the parish bulletin from house to house, that she did not understand why the pastor Balthasar Kranabeter had painted Lucifer on the wall, why he hadn't immortalized the mother of God with the Christ child, the Good Shepherd with his herd, or Saint Christopher with the Christ child on his shoulder. She would not put flowers under Hell's sea of fire, but two or three times a year she tied a bundle of herbs from her garden to a shingle on the calvary's roof. She had asked her brother to light a holy candle, only a holy one, in front of Hell, if one day, when the time came, he outlived her and she were brought over the village street, behind the cross-bearer, passing by the calvary to the church for her final blessing. *Bâton des exilés, lampe des*

*inventeurs, / Confesseur des pendus et des conspirateurs, / Ô Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère!*

In a bus stop in Villach-on-the-Drava, the twelve year old Lukas asked the bus driver if there was time for him to cross the street and buy a sausage roll from the butcher. The boy threw his knapsack in his seat and scurried down the steps. Just as he was crossing the street, a car came and ran the twelve year old down. The child died on the spot. The day after the calamity, the family received a phone call from a flower shop stating that a bouquet of flowers was there for them to pick up. When the dead boy's father, who had to identify the child in the hospital, went to the florist's, he found a scrap of paper in the bouquet on which the driver expressed his condolences to the grieving parents. In court, it was confirmed that the driver was not only speeding, but also driving recklessly.

Later, the marriage produced further offspring. Two children were born, a boy and a girl. You've got two beautiful children, what more could you want! the people say, when they run into the mother with her children on the street. Those two children, the people say, have their unfortunate brother to thank for their lives. If Lukas hadn't been in the accident, those two wouldn't have had more children, thus the wagging tongues of the village, behind their cupped hands. The daughter, having reached three years of age in the interim, said once to her mother: I made a cemetery from Lego blocks, I left the cemetery gate open, that way Lukas can get out! *In the wounds of this heart, my soul is tranquil. In my hours of joy and suffering I shout unto the world: praise, blessed be for all time the most holy heart of Jesus.*

## 5.

Not only the cobbler's apprentice and his father, Jonathan and Leopold, Roman and his father and Leopold's brother, but also the schoolteacher Florian Leibetseder, who lived with his family

on the second floor of the schoolhouse, across from the calvary, and also his twenty five year old son, took their own lives, one in Vienna, the other in Berlin. One Christmas Eve, the teacher threw open the windows of his living room and shouted Fire! Fire! out over the calvary into the night. His wife knocked frantically at the front door of Matthias Felsberger, Maximilian's grandfather, and interrupted his two hour-long rosary. A lit candle stood on the table, in front of the photos of his three sons fallen in the war. The brilliance of his Christmas tree, shining at that late hour, fell onto the calvary and lit up the naked torso of the tormented, lying among the flickering flames of Hell, and Satan's outspread wings and horned skull. The fresh snow on the calvary roof glittered pink, the blooming Saint Barbara branches, freshly picked, shone pink under the image of Hell. The neighbors showed up with water buckets and baskets full of sawdust and put out the blaze. A candle had fallen from a branch of the Christmas tree unobserved and had inflamed a half-full box of Sirius matches lying on the table. A few burn-spots on the wood floor remained, and traces of soot on the whitewashed ceiling. All that was damaged were the chocolate spruces, which dripped down from the Christmas tree, the chocolate chimney sweep, dripping chocolate from his eyes and mouth, the waning chocolate half-moon and a chocolate four-leaf clover, stripped of its leaves. The black soot was cleaned from the gold and silver tinsel by the teacher's wife with a benzene solution. And on Christmas day, the schoolchildren filed before the wood cottage, admiring the charred Christmas tree. The following year, the polished tinsel hung again on the Christmas tree, lit by the first strand of electric Christmas lights that had appeared in the village.

In his retirement, Florian Leibetseder, who had taught Maximilian in his first two years of grammar school, traveled from continent to continent, and set up slide shows for his former students, his friends and acquaintances, which not infrequently turned into tests of their memory

of geography. When he found out he was ill with malignant cancer and had only a few months to live, he wrote to a friend that the time had come to undertake his final voyage, and he took an overdose of sleeping pills. His son, who had fled from the narrowness of the Drava Valley in Carinthia into the big city in hopes of starting his life afresh, came to nothing in the foreign land and put an end to his life a few years before his father, in Berlin, with a pistol. The transfer of the body was entrusted to the funeral director Sonnberger, from the neighboring village, with his black Mercedes. Over the broken star of Mercedes, the undertaker had had soldered a miniature replica of the calvary with its representation of Hell.

After the schoolteacher Florian Leibetseder had left the village and taught in a high school in Villach until his retirement, the teacher Timo Wigotschnig from lower Carinthia moved into his apartment and set up house there across from the calvary with its representation of Hell. His twelve year old son died in an accident not even ten years later. When he was taking leave of a schoolmate at the bus stop, a van struck and killed him on the roadside. His father Timo Wigotschnig, who had taught Maximilian more than five years in grammar school, died ten years after the accident, of osteoporosis. His bones had literally disintegrated.

Spider webs, dusted with flour, could be seen in all corners of the little grain mill in the farmhouse. Big, fat spiders waited for hours in their white lairs. Maximilian often entered the mill, knelt down before the receptacle, and smelled the fresh milled flour that ran between his fingers. In the mill—Maximilian was ten years old at the time—he asked his father, for the first time in his life, whether he could go to the cinema. *Winnetou I is playing!* The teacher is going with us, he wants to see the movie too, both his sons are going too. *Winnetou I is playing, Father. Karl May, get it!* Over and over, for an hour, he asked if he could go to the movies. In the meanwhile, Maximilian would come out of the mill, go into the kitchen, look in the mirror,

bare his hips in the outhouse, go back to the mill. Father! Winnetou I is playing, the teacher.... Only after an hour—he had not even once looked his son in the eyes—did he murmur Yes! softly to the receptacle, in which aromatic flour, warm and freshly milled, piled up in the shape of a pyramid. To lead off, a short film was shown of slowly overturning cars. The teacher Timo Wigotschnig, whose bone-crums the tale-teller and bone-collector sprinkles in the full clay vessel over the skeleton of his predecessor, Florian Leibetseder, leans into his neighbor and whispers to him: Maximilian, this is slow-motion!

## 6.

Decades ago—Maximilian at that time folded his child's hands on the steps of the altar, as an acolyte—the ninety year old man expressed to the painter and pastor Balthasar Kranabeter the wish that the big, unused vestibule of the church be converted into a mortuary chapel, so that the dead would need not be taken to neighboring Großbotenfeld, but could lie exposed in their native village. It long fell on deaf ears, and then another priest, well-disposed to the idea, met with official resistance, as the proper sanitary facilities could not be installed, although the people can go to their own toilet at home, the old man said, the houses in the village aren't far from the church nor from the graveyard. At night, he continued, the mortuary chapel should be closed, because only a couple of years back in Carinthia, a few days before Christmas, a dead man and his coffin were stolen by various men and thrown into the river. The floating coffin with the dead man was five kilometers downstream before it got trapped in among the ice floes near the shores of the Drava and had to be salvaged from the frozen river.

The people of the village want a woodwright to restore the handicapped Christ hanging in the new mortuary chapel, who had once, soaking wet, been rescued from a stream bed; to glue arms

to the torso, so that, when the time comes, he may grasp the deceased and drag him off over the sea of flames over the devil's sharp horns and his outstretched wings, billowed by the hot winds of hell, and speed him to his heavenly fatherland. *Our sacrifice is done, great God, we thank you, that you have kindly bestowed your grace on those here gathered.*