

Visar Zhiti

The memory of the air. Poetry

[*Kujtesa e ajrit. Poezi*].

Tiranë. Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve. 1993. 209 pages

Visar Zhiti is one of the many talented writers of modern Albania to have suffered appalling persecution for no apparent reason at all. Born on 2 December 1952 in Durrës as the son of a stage actor, he grew up in Lushnjë where he finished school in 1970 and taught in the northern mountain town of Kukës. Zhiti showed an early interest in verse and had published some poems in literary periodicals. In 1973, he was preparing the collection *Rapsodia e jetës së trëndafilave* (Rhapsody of the life of roses) for publication when the purge of intellectuals broke loose at the infamous Fourth Plenary Session of the Party. Zhiti, whose father had earlier come into conflict with the authorities, was selected as one of the numerous scapegoats in the arts to terrify the intellectual community. The manuscript of the verse collection which he had previously submitted to the editors of the Naim Frashëri Publishing Company was now re-interpreted as containing grave ideological errors and as blackening 'our socialist reality'. There was nothing the poet could say to his interrogators to prove his innocence.

After five years under the people's own Damocles Sword, Visar Zhiti was finally arrested on 8 November 1979 in Kukës, where he was still teaching, and spent the following months in solitary confinement. In order to retain his sanity, he composed and memorized ninety-seven poems (pencil and paper were of course forbidden in jail). Sentenced in April 1980 to ten years in prison for 'agitation and propaganda', Zhiti was transferred to Tiranë prison and from there to the infamous concentration camps from which many talented Albanians never returned: the copper mines of Spaç in Mirdita and the icy mountain camp of Qafë-Bari near Fushë Arrëz. Released on 28 January 1987, he was then permitted to work in a brick factory in his native Lushnjë until the end of the dictatorship. In autumn 1991, the poet fulfilled a dream and spent a year working in Italy, and tasting freedom for the first time. Visar Zhiti is now director of the Naim Frashëri Publishing Company which had once abandoned him to his fate.

*Kujtesa e ajrit* (The memory of the air), a volume of ninety-nine poems, follows the author into the very soul of the dictatorship which he encounters incarnate in a prison skull. They are moments of terror, of revulsion, of despair and of hope. What distinguishes Zhiti's poetry from other volumes of 'prison verse' is his absolute reverence for the humane. This chronicle of contemporary horrors is devoid of animosity and of that ever so Albanian characteristic - an inexorable call for revenge.

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