

Ismail Kadare.  
*Shkaba*.  
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*L'aigle*. Jusuf Vrioni, tr.  
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The twenty-two-year-old Max went out one evening to buy a pack of cigarettes. On his way down the street, he passed under some scaffolding, slipped on a board, and fell... plunging into another world. There he found himself in a community not dissimilar to his own, a small town in the provinces with a bar, a bank and a zoo. Max discovered that he was not the only stranger to have made the abrupt descent from the world he knew; even some of his acquaintances were there. He also learned that there was no return. Like everyone else, he came to realize he would have to make do.

For the Albanian reader, the immediate analogy to Max's plight is the infamous institution of political internment practised widely under the communist regime. For political motives, or for no reason at all, one could suddenly find oneself despatched to a remote mountain village with no hope of return. Only recently have statistics been made available about the real number of people who suffered internment during the long years of Stalinist rule. The unspeakable concentration camps which the regime set up in Spaç and Burrel meant almost certain death for real and supposed adversaries of the regime, but political internment conveyed horrors of its own. At times, it was practised almost at random and could strike anyone. For intellectuals of the period, it was like being buried alive.

Max learned to come to terms with his new underground environment and, with time, began to hear rumours of a possible method of flight, in both senses of the word. Escape was said to be possible with the help of the one remaining eagle in the zoo. An ancient legend had it that the eagle would take you wherever you wished, on condition that you fed it meat. Should the supply of meat run out while you straddled the bird and overflowed the chasms, it would demand your flesh: an arm, a leg, your liver or your heart, and then finally, your soul. Max knew what he was in for.

Such are the basic components of the plot of *Shkaba* (The eagle), a short story written in the summer of 1995 and now published in separate Albanian and French-language editions. The eagle is, of course, a symbol of many things, a bird of more than one legend. The two-headed Byzantine eagle draping the Albanian flag has for centuries been the country's national symbol and even today one can hear Albanians referring to themselves as the 'sons of the eagle'. One can only give thanks that the bird has stopped devouring its children.

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