

Fatos Kongoli.

Le paumé. Christiane Montécot & Edmond Tupja, tr.
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In March 1991, when Albania had finally broken through the heavy chains of half a century of Stalinism, over 10,000 refugees scrambled onto a decrepit and heavily rusting freighter to escape the past and to reach the marvellous West, where they washed up, unwanted, on the shores of southern Italy. At the last moment before setting sail, protagonist Thesar Lumi, the 'loser' for whom all hope is too late, abandons his companions, disembarks and walks home. "I returned to my neighbourhood at the fall of night. No one had seen me go and no one saw me come back."

It is at this point that the gripping narrative of Fatos Kongoli's 'The loser' returns to the long and numbing years of the Hoxha dictatorship to revive the climate of terror and universal despair which characterized day-to-day life in Albania in the sixties and seventies. Thesar Lumi was born on the banks of a river (Alb. *lumi*) in the looming shadow of the people's own cement factory, which produced more dust than it ever did cement. Despite a skeleton in the family closet, an uncle who had earlier fled the country, Thesar manages to get himself registered at the university. There, Ladi, one of his fellow students, makes it possible for him to penetrate briefly into a milieu which is not his own and never will be, that of the ruling families of Albania's red aristocracy. An affair with the rebellious Sonja, who refused the advances of a minister's son, culminates in a catastrophe which Thesar, the loser, is unable or unwilling to foresee. Intrigue and corruption lead to the unmasking of his origins and to his expulsion. "At a tender age I learnt that I belonged to an inferior race or, as I saw things at the time, to a category of mangy dogs to be kicked about and chased away." Ladi commits suicide after the political execution of his father and the tragic Sonja is interned with her whole family in a remote mountain village. "Like me, she was incapable of committing suicide and was destined to taste her own death while still alive." Thesar, whose fate in Albania's hermetic and suffocating society has been sealed once and for all, returns to live a life of futility and despair in a universe with no heroes.

Far from the active protagonist struggling for control of his own destiny or even from the staid positive hero of socialist realism, Thesar Lumi is incapable of action and incapable of living. He is the voice of all the 'losers' who glimpse the silver clouds on the horizon and know full well that they will never reach them. "My existence is that of the mediocre, setting out from nothing and going nowhere."

Kongoli's novel 'The loser' marks a visible step forward in contemporary Albanian prose, which over the last decade has been dominated, almost exclusively, by the works of exile writer, Ismail Kadare. When first published in Albanian (*I humburi*, Tirana 1992), in what was a comparatively large edition of 10,000 copies, the novel found immediate success among the reading public. Who could not identify with the confessional monologue and the unending tribulations and torment of Thesar Lumi? Equally well-received have been the Italian translation of Eugenio Scalambrino (*Un Uomo da nulla*, Lecce 1994) and the present French version, *Le paumé*.

Author Fatos Kongoli was born in Elbasan in 1944 and studied mathematics in China during the tense years of the Sino-Albanian alliance. He wrote and published little during the dictatorship, preferring to wait until he could express himself freely. His first novel *Ne të tre* ('The three of us,' Prishtina 1987) was followed by *Karuseli* (The carousel, Tirana 1990), but his

narrative talent and individual style have only really emerged with 'The loser' and his other recent novel *Kufoma* ('The corpse,' Tirana 1994). In 1995, Kongoli was honoured with first prize in the national literary competition organized by the Albanian Ministry of Culture.

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