Lizards and Wooden Tongues: Translating Liviu Campanu

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In the late 1980s, between school and university, I spent fifteen months in Bucharest, Romania. I taught English to members of the foreign community, visiting them in their houses or offices in the upmarket districts where the diplomats, businesspeople, and trade representatives lived. I came to know a few students too, thanks to my occasional job in the British Council library, where one of my small contributions was to suggest books, magazines, films, and music to order in. I helped run the evening film nights, and my first *coup* was to update the library's stock of UK pop music tapes. There were only two listening booths, and people had to book them in advance. The queues were sullen and bad-tempered, and reminded the Romanian visitors too much of their daily lives, which already involved a great deal of queuing and waiting. I had the idea of ordering half a dozen personal stereos, which people could sign out in exchange for their ID card, and listen to on-site, in the reading room, or in the British Council compound.

News of the Walkmans' arrival, and the accompanying tapes of Duran Duran, Pet Shop Boys, Queen, spread around Bucharest, and attracted a younger clientele. This was 1986, and items like these could only be bought at hugely inflated prices on the black market or in the special shops where the Nomenklatura – the high-ranking Party members and the diplomats from other communist countries – bought their luxury goods. Ordinary Romanians had to queue for basics. For the country as a whole, deprivation and repression were the order of the day. Queues snaked

around street corners as people waited for bread, meat, sugar, flour. If there was no queue outside a shop it usually meant there was nothing to buy, yet the shops stayed open, fully staffed and with empty shelves, in some parody of commerce. Restaurants, in a matching parody of hospitality, would also open, their liveried waiters waiting, and their menus largely hypothetical. You'd arrive, sit down, get a menu, point at what you wanted, and be told: 'nu avem', we don't have any. You'd go through the menu item by item, in a ritual of hope and hope extinguished, and finally you'd ask, '*ce* aveti?' – what *have* you got? If they had something, it was usually pork, and only then if there was gas or electricity to cook with. Often they did their cooking in advance, as there were daily power cuts, so whatever they did have you'd get cold, served with the ubiquitous gherkin-cucumber hybrid and some potatoes. And if they had no food, you would drink. The theatre of Ionesco, with its banal and recapitulative conversations, their logic so dogged and so literal that they become absurd, might have been honed in just these kinds of contexts. In the tourist restaurants where Romanians couldn't go, it was better but not much. In the Party restaurants and the classic Bucharest institutions like Capsa or the Athenée Palace where senior party members and diplomats dined, it was a different world. I had my first and only taste of caviar in one of these places.

My time in Romania coincided with the end of the Ceaușescu regime, with *glasnost*, 'transparency', and *perestroika* 'opening up'. Gorbachev had become Russian leader in 1985: the Cold War was thawing and all those closed societies were opening up. Not in Romania. Romania had for some time been the most deprived and repressed of the Eastern Bloc countries (with the possible exception of Albania). There was to be no *glasnost* here,

and Ceaușescu even attacked Gorbachev for liberalising the USSR, declaring proudly that Romania would never follow suit.

A few of the students I met through my British Council job were studying at the University of Bucharest. Contact with foreigners was dangerous for Romanians – they were obliged to report any interaction within seven hours, and to inform on whoever they met. They often informed on each other too, but what amazes me about the relationships I had back then was how, despite all the duplicity, the friendships were real. I knew not to ask, they knew not to tell: each of us knew the other knew we knew. The black market was the only reliable system for getting goods: food, cigarettes, cooking materials, petrol. It seemed to me that there was also a black market in friendship: the goods themselves – the friends – were real enough (the counterfeits were easy to spot, or so I still tell myself), but they reached you circuitously, obliquely, and usually at a higher cost than the 'open' market, where they were in any case unavailable. Suspicion, fear, and falsehood were the air we breathed (that and the odour of thrice-boiled cabbage), but what we had was genuine.

Thanks to these friends, I attended readings and events with Romanian writers, but I also met many literary and artistic figures on the cultural circuit. Several of the poets – Marin Sorescu, Mircea Dinescu, Ana Blandiana – were well-known in the UK and in Europe, and already translated into several languages. In December 1989, Dinescu was one of the rebels who, with the actor Ion Caramitru (whose *Hamlet* I'd seen at the national theatre), took over the national TV station and announced the revolution, broadcasting it live. This revolution really was televised – it was the first of the great 24-hour media revolutions. I watched Caramitru and Dinescu on

TV in my bedroom less than eighteen months after I'd seen them in Bucharest. I wished I was there – after all, I'd put in the hours, the days, the weeks, and the months of privation and boredom, repression and occasional fear. And here I was, sitting on my bed, missing the pay-off, the ultimate sense of 'being there'. I watched the trial and execution of the Ceaușescus with glee, cheering on the sentence and its enactment. The barbarity felt good, and then disgusting. That bad smell of crowd-animal, of revenge and bloodlust? It was coming from myself. Trying to understand those feelings – and that smell – made me write a novel about it all, albeit twenty years later.

One of the most mercurial of the writers I came across was Liviu Campanu, who I first spotted at a reading by the poets Jon Silkin and Alan Brownjohn, organised by the British Council. No-one was sure how Campanu got into the Silkin/Brownjohn event because he'd been expelled by the Union of Writers some years before, which meant he wasn't invited anywhere, or not officially. In fact, he'd been expelled from most organisations, and wasn't allowed to publish in any of the literary magazines. The rumour went that he had been exiled to Constanța for falling foul of one of Ceaușescu's most loyal henchmen. (Not that loyal, as it turns out, since he abandoned his boss at the first sign of trouble and moved, like a fat slug on a cushion of slime, straight to the other side.) Campanu hadn't done anything especially political, apparently, except by omission – omitting to praise so and so, omitting to turn up to such and such a celebration, omitting to send in this or that eulogy for the next Five-Year Plan, the new Dacia Tractor range, or Comrade Elena Ceaușescu's latest scientific 'discovery' …. If apathy had a politics, and I think there are times when it does, then Campanu was political.

The real reason for his falling out of favour, and for his subsequent exile, I learned eventually, was that he had been amorously involved with the senior PCR (Partidul Communist Roman) member's wife or daughter. It was never clear which. Ordinary Romanians were not allowed to leave their towns and cities without permission, so we never knew how Campanu managed to get across the country, from Constanța to Bucharest, or Cluj or Brașov. Yet there he was, fingers in a crisp-bowl, hands around a glass of wine, rummaging between his teeth with the cocktail stick he had just chewed a cube of cheese off. Slightly feral, he seemed to forage around the edges of the cultural diplomacy circuit: Goethe Institute reception, Cervantes Institute cocktails, Alliance française Bastille Day party…

People in Bucharest talked about Campanu almost as much as Sorescu and Dinescu, Blandiana and Cassian, all of whom were well-known outside Romania, not just as poets but as dissident writers. These writers were too famous to be imprisoned, but they were constantly monitored and occasionally harassed. The state didn't seem to bother with Campanu, which led to speculation that he was either secretly 'in' with the system or so irrelevant as not to warrant surveillance. Perhaps he was, and his shadowy *passe-partout* status was a result of performing some services for the Securitate: watching, listening, reporting. It's not out of the question in a country where the secret service employed nearly 40,000 people directly, and another million or so (in a population of 22 million) as informers. But I doubt it. Campanu seemed uncorruptible because he had nothing to lose. Then again everyone has something to lose, and it was the Securitate's job to find out what it was. What did he have? On the face of it, not much.

I'd hear Campanu quoted in all kinds of contexts – the odd line here, a phrase there, half a stanza, a partial paraphrase of something he'd written once. This was usually in contexts where a certain dose of fatalism, or at the very least irony, was called for – so in other words, often. He had Dinescu's and Sorescu's sense of the absurd, but was not interested in the metaphysical, or in the way they slanted their poems in such a way as to make them subversive but without one's being able to put one's finger – quite – on where exactly the subversion was. He was not, like them, a navigator of the fine line. Unlike Ana Blandiana, whose work was brave, full-frontally challenging to the state, and hugely costly to herself and her husband – Campanu did not 'take on' the system. And yet, he was there, a sort of roving ironic bacillus in the cultural bloodstream, putting everyone on edge.

I spoke to Campanu only once, though I caught sight of him many times across rooms. He was possessed of something we might call *counter-charisma*: he was badly-shaven and badly-dressed even by the standards of a country where it was difficult to dress well – the old joke was that they used barrels as tailors' dummies. His indifference to what one might think of him was attractive, and had a certain nobility about it. In a world where poets wanted to be published in the UK, translated into French, German, English, Italian, he exuded an aura of wanting nothing from anyone – always unsettling. He was part of no clique and he had no 'career'. The politically connected writers avoided him because they thought him a dissident and because he ridiculed their work openly, while the genuine dissidents didn't bother with him because they found him too apolitical, and maybe also irresponsible, unaligned. But it seemed to me that several of his poems were political in their implications – the problem was, I could

never find them. I only heard them quoted and in fragmentary form, notably 'In the Natural History Museum', which was banned. As I lived near the natural history museum, I was intrigued.

In the 1980s it was never even clear how much Campanu had written. There was one collection, in 1971, and some stray poems here and there, but then the trail went cold. When I finally laid hold of some of his poems – a few months before I left for university – they seemed barely worthy of the samizdat in which I was reading them: photocopies of photocopies of photocopies of rather downbeat love poems – unrequited love, of course, boredom, empty days. They were handwritten in capital letters, because in Romania, typewriter ownership was strictly controlled and registered by the security services, who took copies of each letter, diacritic, and digit the way they'd fingerprint criminals. Every typewriter was traceable, in other words. The idea, apparently, was Elena Ceaușescu's.

So far as I could tell, Campanu was a lyric poet at a moment when lyric poetry was considered *bourgeois* by the state apparatus and self-indulgent by the dissidents. His work was of no interest to the West, to the editors, journalists, and publishing houses who preferred their Eastern European poets to be in danger, or at any rate oppressed, and to be speaking from a place of Testimony and Witness (capitals obligatory). The West had its own lyric poetry to be getting on with, thank you very much; what we wanted was the poetry of hardship, unfreedom, and surveillance – export-strength too. I'll come back to this because it was the substance of my only conversation with him.

Campanu lived in Constanța, where he had been sent after losing his job as a lecturer at the University of Bucharest. I knew Constanța because it had a Club Med I had been to – the only Club Med, at the time, behind the Iron Curtain. Constanța is a Black Sea resort, best known in its Roman name of Tomis, and even better known for its most famous resident, the exiled Ovid. Campanu was said to be working on a collection called *The Ovid Complex*, a joke because when he published his first book – poems about love, loneliness, memory, his rather mundane 'exile' to the coast – one of the official critics trashed his book and accused him of suffering from a '*bourgeois* Ovid Complex'. Campanu is said to have enjoyed that, not least because his flat was on the ninth floor of a grey apartment block with no lifts that was actually called Ovid Complex. It had nothing *bourgeois* about it, unless you counted the balcony.

This was explained to me at a party once when we caught sight of Campanu smoking on a balcony. Balconies featured a lot in his work – inner-outer spaces, places of amorous assignation but also secrecy, places where you might speak and not be heard; or where you might speak and be dangerously *over*heard. Balconies were also of interest to the Romanian censors, because Ceaușescu gave so many speeches from balconies that it soon became shorthand for vacuous pomp and authoritarian guff, part of totalitarianism's iconography. Absurd as it sounds, the word 'balcony' was often censored in Romanian literature, along with words that might draw attention to what was missing from everyday life: 'coffee', 'steak', 'petrol', 'electricity' … . Even the word 'waiting' was politically charged in a country where you would queue six hours for a bag of flour. In one of his poems, 'Afternoon Sleep: National Holiday', Campanu describes 'taking the old words for a walk' around his head – 'coffee, petrol, dentist, news …' – and

finding them 'difficult to rouse'. Most famously, on 23 December 1989, the balcony features in Ceaușescu's universally televised final speech where the crowd turns on him. He is waffling on woodenly, his wife at his side, and mistakes the collective snarl beneath the balcony for cheering. He pushes on, confused, until his minder comes from the state room behind, draws back the curtain, and spirits him back in. Ceaușescu's face in that moment is the very image of the tyrant toppled. Soon, a helicopter lands on the Communist Party HQ and he's gone. Three days later, he's shot against the wall.

When, in 1990 – a year after the fall of the regime – Campanu published *The Ovid Complex*, he added in a series of poems and sequences written in the seventies and eighties. It was a kind of *Selected Poems*. There was not much to show for thirty years' work, but it finally gave readers a chance to follow a literary career that had prospered, to use almost exactly the wrong word, in the shadows and on the margins. In the title sequence of *The Ovid Complex*, the poet indulges his own Ovid 'complex' by exploring, ironically and with plenty of auto-derision, the parallels (and lack of them) between him and the Roman poet, exiled for having offended the Emperor Augustus. There's a balcony in there:

> And what I complain most about is that it's *not exactly*
> suffering, *not quite* extremity, but rather fretting
> at tedium's hem, picking myself apart remembering
> those nights in Bucharest, or one night in particular,
> when we stole a moment on the balcony,
> adultery's hanging basket, at the Union of Writers
> *Festival of Progressive Literature*:
> she was the trellis and I the vine (which is a *bourgeois*
> poet's way of saying I was all over her).

As Verlaine said of the label 'decadent' – words to the effect of 'if that's what they're going to call us, let's run with, glory in it, make it our own!' – Campanu was happy enough being labelled an anachronistic romantic and a *bourgeois* lyricist. In another poem, with the dangerous-looking title 'Manifesto', he writes: 'I write about universals: my balcony, my feelings and me'. Lines like this seem to me to be aimed as much at the Western expectation that East European poets should be bravely political (on our behalf of course) as it obviously is at the duty to write socialist-realist poetry. They are also thoroughly ironic lines, because Campanu does a great deal with his balcony, his feelings, and himself. If he wasn't able to write his *Metamorphoses*, he managed to write his own *Tristiae*.

Back in the 1980s, it was impossible to find his poems. Yes, this or that volume or anthology where he was featured existed, but, much like what was on the restaurant menus, it was a case of 'nu avem': we don't have it … . The snippets of poetry I heard, including lines from 'In the Natural History Museum', sounded pretty political to me, but these dated from the late sixties, when Romania was comparatively liberal. In 1971, inspired by a visit to China and North Korea, Ceaușescu published the 'July Theses', which called for greater state control over all spheres of daily life, education, science, the economy, music, art and literature. This also heralded the cult of the personality and the brutal and repressive surveillance society that lasted until his downfall.

Ceaușescu was fond of quoting Nicolae Iorga: 'The man who does not write for his entire people is not a poet.' I've often thought that line was in Campanu's mind as he set about constructing an *oeuvre* in opposition to it. But I also think that Campanu's work – precisely *because* it is lyric poetry,

about having a balcony, some feelings and a self – might well outlast that of those writers whose poetry and poetic identities were shaped by their time and place, and by the translation market and its Western readership.

What characterised Romanian poetry at the time – much like that of other communist regimes – was obliquity, indirectness, and a kind of coded language designed to get past the many layers of censorship: from self-censorship (fear for oneself, one's family), to the editor and publishing house (fearing for their status, their viability) and the censors themselves (fear of missing this or that anti-regime line or phrase and being punished). Writers found ways of getting around these fears, and around the explicit and implicit prohibitions they imposed. Romanian science-fiction especially thrived, because the worlds it represented were presented as so far away in time and place that they were able to parody the present so pungently it was amazing they hadn't been censored. The same was true of historical fiction and – to a limited extent – detective fiction. All of these genres, naturally, contained huge amounts of code, metonymy, and metaphor, by which the here and now could be refracted by some there and then, and put the censors off the scent.

Poetry had a harder time. Every word counted, and because a poem is a sweatshop of words, each word working and overworking, tasking and multi-tasking, it was poetry that was most scrutinised. In a way, the censors were the poem's ultimate readers, its perfect readers: reading for what wasn't there as much as for what was. They were looking for 'lizards' – a term that often came up in literary discussions in Bucharest. Someone would spot a lizard in a book, or hear a lizard in a conversation; official speeches might contain a lizard or two, and when we couldn't see or hear a

lizard, we were told to look harder. The lizard was there. In a witty and lucid article about Romanian science-fiction in the 1980s entitled 'Hunting Lizards in Romania', Maria Ioniţă defines the lizard as:

> a type of short, highly codified, oblique text, often humorous or ironic, 'planted' in a seemingly innocuous literary piece.[1] … The lizard is a small, yet slippery, act of rebellion: it hides between lines and words, camouflaging itself with the adaptive coloration of *double entendres*, scurrying away from the heavy-footed censors and daring the alert readers to uncover it, resting patiently on the page, barely visible among heaps of innocuous phrases.[2]

It was unclear where the term 'lizard' came from, what its social and political 'etymology' was. I heard various explanations: the lizard could change colour, the lizard could dart from one place to another, the lizard could get in between the cracks of the system …. The lizard was ironic, a parody of a parody; often it was subversion through over-compliance with the absurd logic of totalitarianism. It was also a parodic riff on the state's own *limbă de lemn*, wooden tongue or wooden language: the indigestible, jargonised meaninglessness of officialese, of public declarations, the lumpy clichés of Party edicts and Ceauşescu's own narcissistic five-hour speeches.

Romanian poetry contained a great many lizards, as poets tended to write elliptically, in 'Aesopian' ways, in the form of fable-shaped shaggy-dog stories, often with a dose of surrealism and the absurd – transpositions of the real through a series of situational metonyms. Reading these poets in 1987, they felt thrillingly risky, but also oblique in ways I understood – I

[1] Maria Ioniţă (2011), 'Hunting Lizards in Romania: Oblique Speech and Humor in Ioan Groşan's *2084: A Space Epic and Planet of the Mediocres*', *East European Politics and Societies*, 25: 4, 704–19 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325410387636>.

[2] Ioniţă, p. 706.

had developed an eye, an ear, for the lizards. They were ludic, though the humour was dark and the laugh lonely and jaded. Reading them today, they read like codes I've lost the key for. Many of the poems resemble each other, and as the history and political system that forced them into such clever contortions of meaning and expression have been forgotten, so they now seem marooned in time.

Maria Ioniţă, writing in 2011, puts it this way:

> [T]oday most of these lizards appear somewhat bathetic – not crocodiles but little chameleons, scurrying about in texts, both inviting and evading readership, and whose existence was often more important than their message. The novelist Norman Manea summarizes the sadness and bitterness of the Romanian lizard-master: 'The code was more important than the text, backstage more important than the performance…'. The act may have been one of rebellion, but its results proved strangely fragile: most lizards never survived their heyday… . Today, twenty years after they became obsolete, most Romanian lizards have turned into dinosaurs: their bones have to be pieced back together to make sense, they need heavy decoding and the reconstruction of a specific context for their meaning to emerge, but the resulting beast is often too clumsy or alien to be relatable.[3]

As Norman Manea (another dissident writer, forced into exile in 1986) observes: once the code takes precedence over the content, you're the victim of the very system you think you're playing. Ioniţă's description of the lithe and sparky lizard dying into a cache of heavy dinosaur bones is apt, and I find both judgments sad but persuasive – though individual poets and poems will always rise above the levelling.

[3] Ioniţă, p. 709.

Poets had become products, not just of the East's oppressive system, but, transversally, of the West and its need for martyrs in an age of comfort. The lyric poet was squeezed at both ends, and this is the substance of the only conversation I had with Campanu. I don't remember the exact words, but it was in French, at an evening at the Alliance française. I asked him if he had been translated. He laughed, gave a little shake of the head. Naively, I asked why. He replied to the effect that poets of the East weren't 'permitted' to write the same sort of poetry as their Western counterparts. He hadn't suffered enough, he said, for his art. Nor, he added, waving his wine-glass at a crowd of diplomats and cultural attachés, was he going to suffer 'in' his art. Why would any Western publishers be interested in him?

'All I want to do', he told me (and I do remember this bit), 'is write poems about the same things *you* write poems about'. I didn't write poems but I knew what he meant: love, sorrow, elegy, personal failure, weak flesh, loneliness, and disappointment. 'In other words, the usual stuff', he laughed: 'Like a fool [*comme un con* as he put it].' He also correctly surmised that one day all the codes and the lizards would be unreadable once the political contexts that had alimented them had gone or been forgotten. In the midst of evading their time and place, they had finished up depending on them.

We tell ourselves that censorship and repression make art more ingenious, more urgent – purer. I was lucky to get inoculated, so early in my life, against that *bien pensant* virus of the privileged West, and it came from Campanu.

Yes, he was probably bitter and jealous of his friend Marin Sorescu with his UK publisher and his translators who combined into a roster of British and Irish poetry greats: Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Michael Longley, DJ Enright … but he wasn't wrong to feel that Western demand for a certain sort of poetry created a particular market, a version of literary 'Occidentalism' which the East of Europe supplied. It was not so far off an extractive economy, though Campanu would have laughed at phrases like that.

Campanu died in 1994. His small but unified poetic *oeuvre* consists of regretful meditations on place and placelessness, and on a particular kind of fretful tedium that characterises intellectual life in a totalitarian state. After the fall of Ceaușescu, which he mentions only once, in a two-line poem dated and titled '15 December 1989' – 'The news from Bucharest is that the regime is crumbling the way rocks on the shore erode – by seeming not to' – he was offered his old job as a university lecturer and a seat on the board of Romania's most important literary review. It was the same review, now purged of Party apparatchiks, that had condemned his work and assailed his small reputation. For reasons that remain unclear, he refused both offers, and stayed in Constanța until his death.

An edition of Campanu's complete poems and fragments by his friend, the scholar Sergiu Trofim (Minerva, Bucharest, 2002), makes an emphatic claim for Campanu's place as a 'lost lyric poet in an age of conformism'. In Trofim's judgment, Campanu's distinction lies in having refused, through no special fortitude, strategy, or sense of purpose, every mode available to the Romanian poet: 'the folk-heroic, the abstract-apolitical, the absurdist-

allegorical, the slavish social-realist; but also, to the regret of many, the dissident'.

I left Bucharest in October 1987 and didn't go back to Romania until 2014. In 2009, I began translating a few of Campanu's poems after ordering the collected edition; it was a thrill to find him there, not so different from the person I had imagined, and briefly spoken to. I was at last able to read 'In the Natural History Museum', a poem I had heard in fragments and tried to piece together into a whole from the scattered lines people had recited: sometimes as a political poem, sometimes as a love poem, sometimes as a poem of existential fatalism. The Natural History Museum itself – the Muzeul Grigore Antipa – was a few minutes' walk from my flat when I lived on Aleea Alexandru. I went often, and remembered one of the rooms had the theme, 'Evolution and Extinction'. The poster was illustrated with a giant lizard; now, thirty years later, and reading the poem in full, I realised Campanu had written his own 'lizard'. This is because the poem was obviously 'about' the museum next door, The Muzeul Partidului Comunist Român, the Romanian Communist Party Museum. I recognised it because, unlike the Natural History Museum, it was always deserted – as you went through the rooms, they turned the lights out behind you to save electricity and ran ahead of you to switch the lights on in the next room. It was a shrine to the Ceaușescus and to the personality cult.

Campanu had made his own lizard out of dinosaur bones, a piece of satirical politico-palaeontology that survives the contexts of its making. Despite his reputation as a 'lost lyric poet', his poems are frequently political, but also vulnerable, ironic and self-knowing, though never arch or meta-. I translated a few and they appeared in my second book of poems,

Jilted City. I felt I owed him something, and I hope one day to produce a volume of his *Selected Poems*. I'd call it *Cold War Love Songs*. Though the title is mine, the poems are his.

In the Natural History Museum

By Liviu Campanu

Room by room, beads on a string of corridors,
the lights up ahead come on and those behind
go out. It is a metaphor for History, or what passes
for it around here. But what's easier to feel is the momentum
of depletion, the world subtracting from itself faster

than it can replenish. We're caught in a present
so invested in becoming that year on year, Five-Year-Plan
by Five-Year-Plan, it fails to happen, or at any rate to us.
We fiddle the figures, stretch the graphs,
tour the exhibits and pay our homages of inattention…

but nothing changes, as the old joke goes, *except the past*:
the past they're always reinventing, so that we need to climb
the moving walls of history, to stay one step ahead of it,
the way a surfer rides his wave, his carpet of sheer momentum.
As we walk the scribes are in their carrels, cooped up

like battery hens, chewing garlic bulbs and smoking *Carpati*,
typing up the latest version: *History, the Variorum Edition*,
where the margins give the best (perhaps the only) view.
The Museum of Natural History was our refuge from all that –
we spent hours there in the old days, though only minutes at a time –

after all, I asked her under my breath, our hands joined
at the knuckles, *how can a brachiosaur be political*?
Check his police file she answered, her face straight
as a loaded dice, her lips hidden by a plastic cup of *ersatz*
coffee. All around us, dinosaurs in interrupted poses,

jaws wired back in silent screams, their articulated backbones
like the staircases of Bucharest's ruined palaces, chipped
and here and there a slab short, a segment gone, pianos
with missing keys each as differently out of tune as their
melody stayed the same: Mass extinction in B Minor.

Around them lay the plaster ghosts of their own feet,
long-gone and striding to the end of Time or treading plates

in learned books in libraries, archives, police files,
huddled in the man-made caves of species-death. *Stegosaurus's*
police file she laughed, just loud enough for everyone to hear

though there was no-one else around, and our most likely eavesdropper,
Homo sapiens, was still three rooms and forty thousand years away,
hunched over his witless grin, his birdbath mouth, stupid in the face
of what he doesn't understand but already learning to reduce
it all to what he does.
We hold hands

(my thumb on her wrist but it's my own pulse I'm checking)
and survey the whole static safari. She tells me about Cuvier
the greatest poet of them all, she says, the palaeontologist
who could take a tooth and reconstruct the animal
around it, who made wholes from the smallest part,

who fleshed the bone and sealed the flesh with skin,
dreamed a species from a femur, named it
and made it breathe in our imaginations.
The next room. Light off. Lights on. *We're caught between*
two darknesses, she whispered, *the one ahead and the one behind* …

Afterword

In my first novel, *The Last Hundred* Days, about the fall of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania, I invented a poet called Liviu Campanu. I imagined him as an apolitical exile exiled in Constanța. People in the novel quoted him: 'As Campanu said', they'd muse, or the narrator would think: 'I recalled a line by the poet, Liviu Campanu', and so on. I'd remembered an idea of Baudelaire's about a poem that existed only in hearsay, rumour, quotation:briefly put, in the memories of those who had heard it rather than in a book or on a page. I wrote a few fragmented Campanu lines, ice cubes implying an *oeuvre* the size of an iceberg, and scattered them along the novel. People quoted him, or mentioned him contemptuously or admiringly, but he would remain always out of the narrative line of vision.

He was seen only once, from afar, by the narrator, at a vigil protesting against the demolition of one or other of Bucharest's historical buildings, but the sighting remained unconfirmed because no-one believed Campanu would ever have roused himself for any sort of political action. The lines kept coming. Campanu had a line for every eventuality, and his poems became, in the book, a sort of unofficial guidebook to the old Bucharest Ceaușescu was busily destroying. I had myself, when I lived in there, witnessed so many of these demolitions – I even wandered the building site that was to become The Boulevard of Socialist Victory and the People's Palace after the demolition of the Uranus-Isvor neighbourhood. 40,000 people were 'rehoused', hundreds of historic buildings destroyed.

For twenty years after leaving Romania, I would have a regular dream: I was walking through Bucharest, a city I knew well, unable to find my way

because this or that building, street, corner, church, monument, had been destroyed. It was a dream I enjoyed, because I liked being 'back' there, and even the disorientation as I looked at the bulldozed houses or paced the unrecognisable streets was a pleasure, an in-sleep stimulation. The dreams were so regular that they seemed to quote each other, or to carry on, like a miniseries or a box-set, where the last one left off. My dream-self even started to think of them as performances, stagings of memory: the dream was aware, even in the throes of my disorientation within it, of itself as something comforting and regular; formative, even.

When I began writing the novel, I had no story (and, as plenty of reviewers averred, it shows), but what I had was smells, tastes, atmospheres both literal and moral, and a powerful sense of Bucharest as a subject in itself, even a character. I also wanted to express the sense of slow-burning crisis, the aroma of decay and corruption, in which we seemed to live back then and back there. When I finally sat down to write my novel, a couple of decades later, I knew that one of my motivations, aside from the autobiographical-fictional elements, was to do justice to a city that fascinated me and continues to fascinate me. I deliberately didn't go back, because I thought – rightly, I think – that revisiting the place in reality would stop me writing my version of Bucharest – the one that kept me pushing on with the novel long after I got bored with the characters, the plot, and even the first-person narrator, a lightly-disguised version of myself. When I'd finished the novel, the dreams of Bucharest stopped. I miss them, but I also understand why they might feel their job had been done.

As for the real Bucharest, I finally went back in 2014 with my partner, who

knew it only from images of the 1989 revolution and from the dreams I told her about, and there's nothing more boring than hearing someone else's dream. When we got there, I strode confidently around the streets I once knew and realised (she realised before me) that I had no idea where I was going, and no real idea of where I was. We got a tourist map.

After the first draft of the novel, and in one of my few acts of self-editing, I took Campanu out of *The Last Hundred Days*. It was slow-going enough as it was without introducing a poet. But I realised I had imagined Campanu quite fully: I wished I had met him, and I needed to think people like him existed. As soon as he'd gone, I assembled his lines on a page and set about writing whole poems around them. Before I knew it, I had about twelve pages of finished poems, which appeared in my second book, *Jilted City*, as pseudo-translations (I provided his biography and a scholarly edition), which I called *City of Lost Walks* – the original title of my novel. Some reviewers of that book preferred his poems to mine. I could see why: he was frank and wrote about feelings, whereas I was tortuous and contorted and wrote intellectual portraits of my feelings. Some reviewers were angry and felt I had mounted a hoax or played some sort of tedious sub-Borgesian game. He was a fictional character, and the culture allows fiction more leeway than it allows poetry: an unreliable narrator in fiction is part of the game; in poetry, the place in the culture where, *par excellence* , we are supposed to put ourselves, our voices, to be in *propria persona*, it must be a hoax or a trick or a jaded po-mo experiment. It wasn't. Campanu was a fictional character who had nonetheless written some real poems – after all, the poems existed, didn't they? I could not have written those poems without imagining him first, which in turn brought me to the question of who one *is* when one writes; who I *am* when I am writing. To write –

especially poetry – is to take on a voice, a shape, a mask. It is an adjustment of self, a clearing of the existential throat, a form of method acting.

Campanu was for a while a second self: I wrote poems as if I was him; I thought through him, felt through him, and wrote another twenty or so pages. For a while I became his pseudonym. Forged (in both senses of the word) in a novel, he continues to live in poetry. I owe him a lot, and it's only fitting therefore that I pay my dues to him here.