

## Black swan

Each day I returned to watch.  
Naïvely, I figured nutrients the culprit,  
as with flamingoes whose pinkness paled  
then settled into solid white  
once the state zoo exhausted its carotene pellets.  
I waited for the first discoloration,  
some *aha* of transitioning grey,  
convinced she'd slowly flush out  
gunk fed by idiotic tourists.  
This will take time,  
returning my swan to myths, where she belongs,  
time I have, leftover time  
from years of killing time in the darkroom.  
For spare change, I'd spin the knob  
on the developing tank and blow-dry  
orders with expedited deadlines.  
The developer, the stop, then fixer baths  
I'd rock for pleasure  
to watch the world rise  
from white photographic paper,  
blur swept by certitude in the final tray.  
I was first to see her before she met the light,  
though of course she'd already been brought into focus  
by my father's precise eye. I don't know  
how many test strips he needed to get the exposure right  
or what it took him to learn how to turn  
a white swan black,  
wanting to prove to his skeptical daughter  
they honk and busk in real waters, just outside  
the darkrooms of the Eastern Bloc.

## The homeless women of Iași

So many shouting at no one, disputing  
    accusations, nodding maniacally,  
        flogging trees with headscarves—  
their pantomimes re-populate  
    sidewalks with ousted ghosts.  
    They pose no threat  
but we detour cautiously,  
    afraid their siren voices might awaken  
        the penal colony in our ribcage.

## After tram 2 leaves the depot

Iași, Romania

the woman who's claimed the back row  
crams her rufous duvet into the duffle,

tames hair with spittle, then stretches  
to the tune of her low-pitched yawns.

Tracks pulse below  
as night's retreating.

Lampposts will glare, ignored,  
till the precinct's budget empties.

This next stop  
would have been mine,

but I'm not ready to leave  
or stay.

When tram doors lag open too long  
and silence escorts the gusty chill

she does not, will not  
rant and rage, will not

answer my prayer  
for a deluge of profanities.

## The house

With stained red awnings  
Long abandoned  
Sealed with the dust of linden

I won't break in to claim  
The chess board that taught  
Nothing but patience

I won't break in to salvage  
The cherry bole  
Trapped in the hearth

The gangrened bough  
With leaves curled  
Like fossilized fetuses

Though that's all I need

For the *borș* fermenting  
In the massive glass jar  
That nests in the cellar

If I do it right

The tonic will replenish  
Misspent flora     the splinter  
will release the orchard

If I do it right

Golden orb-weavers have spun  
Silk wheels sturdier than steel  
To snare errant sparrows

Hammocks that might hold  
Two bodies     ghost hearsay  
I already know

You can't break in for me  
And I won't break in  
To search for myself

# Maggot therapy

Socola psychiatric hospital, Iași, Romania

## *Mara*

I couldn't carry the simple task of retracing  
my face from memory. *What color your eyes,*  
the nurse pressed, *speak.*  
I'd chewed my way in  
through brambles meant to keep those already in  
from crawling out.  
I couldn't face another checkpoint, another gate.  
I needed the funeral procession to stop  
tromboning through my veins,  
a place to howl, another womb.  
I needed the nerve ends reattached.  
*Yes, but first, what color your pupils, speak.*  
Her pencil chewed the chart for an answer,  
I chewed on silence. Chestnut.  
Pleased, she showed me to the assigned bed.  
I recognized the stains, the quilted skin  
(my mother's, her mother's),  
the pillow stained with decades  
of other women's tonics and panic.

## *Leti*

After I died at stillbirth,  
I stabbed a man.  
He'd stopped to give me a lift.  
I'd waited on that highway for so long.  
I'm no longer good for kindness.  
Something inside me takes all the good.

### *Leti on the Maggot Queen*

I shake M awake,  
commence as we always do,  
in shared knowledge:  
the obese butterfly inside her collapsed frame  
is that speck of a woman gone missing  
in my pelvic desert.  
To find a common language,  
we call her Maggot Queen.  
Each night M and I sit  
hip plus hip on her bed or mine.  
Her arctic sweat doesn't bother me.  
I am parched potpourri.  
We tabooed the word *rescue*,  
we tabooed the word *word*  
to spite the doc and his self-help bullshit.  
We wait patiently as Maggot Queen,  
loyal to nothing but hunger, wriggles out of M,  
passages slovenly into me.  
I press stolen taffy into M's palm  
so she may plug the hole in her heart.  
On a fine bone comb she croons  
*Nu ridici mâna pentru a mângâia*  
*Deschizi gura doar pentru a țipa*  
*Ulala ulala ulala*  
palms exiled between her thighs.  
I close my eyes. The Queen debrides  
our insides, licks us fresh.  
When entered, we excavate the night,

stuff ourselves with animal sounds.  
The maggot, sated, belches.  
We lift the ceiling with our breath,  
lift ourselves from bedframes,  
slip barefoot into the sky's washroom.