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 *aba* 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 Iaşi

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
creams 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.