

## Portrait

Is there nowhere to turn? So the chair isn't stable,  
and storm clouds drift through the glass table.  
It's been a hard day. You're dying for dinner.  
Perhaps your own body sat down too near you,

or are you in love? With a song, for an hour,  
or with the one clean break you press to your core?  
Why else does the span of your arms reach so wide:  
one hand touches summer, the other's got winter.

What can you do? Fold swans on the pond,  
the moon on your thumb—and now you bend  
down to straighten the lamplight's odd patterns.  
When you take off your shirt, is the sun among the buttons,

burdened, setting, draped over the chair?  
And when the sun rises, when it paints your picture  
in pink and blue on the wall by the bed,  
does its love for your faults make you feel any better?

And your shadow is wrong. It weighs too large,  
bends too easily, slipping over each edge  
of your frame, its dark accordion singing down the stairs.  
But the larkspur in the meadow is the shadow of the stars

as evening descends. More stars start hatching,  
caught in the treetops, scratching your chin.  
Are you running from someone, tired of the sky,  
the last light wedged over the trees like a scar;

have you twisted him together with feathers and twine?  
The quiet pond nestles in the crook of your arm.  
You feel uneven, but there's no one to blame,  
and evening waits at your lips like a plum.

# Case Studies in Metamorphosis

## 1: *Vehicle*

On I-95, just outside Providence,  
driving home from her work at a freight-forwarding outfit,  
a woman noticed she couldn't lift her foot  
from the accelerator. It wasn't that her rubber sole had melted  
and stuck; rather, her metatarsals twined  
with the pedal and wove with the pistons.  
As she crossed the Woonasquatucket, her fingers  
tendrilled around the steering wheel, and each thumb and pinky  
wrapped the crankshaft and camshaft;  
her ears splayed large and mirrored; her heart, a flawed  
internal combustion, exhausted its thrums and musts.  
Traffic was strangely light this October day,  
the Atlantic's mineral gleam in the air,  
and cell by cell the rest of the woman's flesh  
crept into the gas tank.

According to some,  
the car (an El Camino), after a long and erratic journey,  
pulled up at last in the Sudanese desert and rested.  
Its fluids leaked from the engine and sump, leached  
through the sand and into the great viscous  
subterranean pools of their first form. Sometimes, at midnight, this oil  
bubbles up; people gaze into its temporary black lake  
and see the constellation Turbo Minor. But according to some others,  
those in their cars passing as the El Camino  
arced like a gull over the guardrail and into the sun,  
the woman's face gleamed with epiphanic pleasure. Upon further  
questioning, though, they weren't sure they hadn't  
seen just their own faces reflected  
in the side view mirror.

## 2: *Early Nourishment*

On tiptoe, putting away a box  
of cereal, a woman in Palo Alto felt the first  
tingling between her shoulder blades.  
She checked her watch: 5 o'clock,  
and stepped to the bathroom, slipped off  
her dress, stood with her back  
to the mirror. Twisting,  
she saw: an inch long, at the base  
of her neck, a gap. She walked  
naked to the kitchen,  
drank some water, went  
to bed. Hours passed. Looking  
out the window, she watched  
a barn swallow zigzag  
across the lawn. And all the while  
the gap along her spine grew longer,  
like a crack across a windshield.  
Next door, a baby was crying. Stars poked  
their thorns through a cloud. Finally,  
near dawn, the fissure stretched from the top  
of her skull to the base of her spine.  
She wiggled her shoulders  
free, slipping her arms from the arms  
that clutched the pillow. And gently she  
wiggled her hips free, and gently  
each leg. Then, at last, she slipped her head  
from the old one and got out of bed.  
She felt cool. Her new hands were larger,  
veinless. *And who knows*, she thought, *but someone  
may be watching*. She closed the blinds,  
locked the door, and got back in bed, exhausted.  
And ravenous. Her shed skin, rigid,  
translucent, stretched out on the sheet. She devoured it.

### 3: *Poor Reception*

A man sat at home, absentmindedly  
listening to the radio. His hands: they'd grown,  
each the size of a platter. He raised them  
to the light. Then he stacked the week's news  
and stepped to the mirror to check his hair:  
one bit skewed up. He raised a hand  
to repair it: *such a hand*, three times larger  
than his face. *I look somewhat like a lobster*,  
he thought, *yet unlike a lobster, too*,  
*for a lobster's claws are asymmetrical*,  
*"crusher" and "seizer."* With his hands  
splayed on either side of his face like bare  
maples lining a drive, he wondered,  
*Is symmetry useful?* He inspected  
his nails, those spatulate wonders, and what thumbs:  
each large and clear-headed as an infant.  
But his hands puzzled him. He walked  
to the piano, sat on the little raft  
of a bench to wade the ivories—  
the tip of his thumb hit five keys:  
an awful sound. And his neck and shoulders ached.  
He sat on the floor, and then he lay down.  
*Why just my hands?* he thought, *why not my eyes*,  
*my knees, my mouth?* So, with an index  
and thumb, he tugged at his threadlike  
arms and legs, the little nub of his penis,  
and his pinprick face.

4: *How Self-Conception Adapts, or Fails to Adapt, to Changed Material*

A woman met a man  
and decided to keep him.  
So she unhinged his right arm  
and pinned it between her thighs,  
unhinged her own and hung it on him.  
Then & etc. for the left side,  
and one by one she took his arms  
out from between her legs  
(grasping each with her teeth,  
pinning each with her torso  
against a wall, and so on)  
and hooked them to her shoulders. After,  
they went out to celebrate  
at The Palms. Such a crowded  
nightclub, shoulder to shoulder  
filling the velvet room,  
a champagne stem abloom  
between every finger and thumb.  
And the woman abandoned her glass  
and ran a hand over a woman's  
buttocks to her right; she cupped  
the breasts of a woman  
to her left. The man didn't say anything,  
yet he looked uncomfortable,  
covering his mouth with his hand—  
a hand so recently hers.  
She excused herself to the ladies' room  
to calm herself; but each new woman  
striding in to dust a nose  
or unripple a stream—  
such challenging awkwardness. *These women,*  
she thought to herself,  
*why don't they stop me?*

## 5: *Formless*

A woman in another country enjoyed a healthy relationship with her keeper: sometimes he placed her cage in the garden, turned the lock, and opened the door. Then he'd disappear for an hour. She'd kick off her shoes and stretch her legs on a nub of granite, the freckled gloves of the toad lilies slipping onto her hands, the ostrich ferns uncoiling their perfect spines. She enjoyed this brief self-containment, cheered by the crickets' creaky hinges, how they sang *I'm home, I'm home*. Yet one day her keeper stayed gone too long. She rose to find her cage; the cage was gone. She shook the boxwoods, the leathery fans of ilex: perhaps her keeper sent it for cleaning,

perhaps for repair: she returned to the granite nub and crouched there, racking her head. Beside her, the bleeding heart yanked inside-out its fragile pocket; a rose tore a page from its head: *a rose is the most inefficient flower*, she thought, and she moaned to imagine a future without friction, without limit.

## 6: Comedy

A man stepped outside, crumbled,  
and, when the breeze blew up  
from the east, he scattered: his handful  
of heart, as volcanic ash, spiraled the highway;  
the dust of five teeth slipped between  
his neighbor's breasts. She  
unbuttoned her blouse to scratch  
at this suddenly red yet luminous skin.  
Days passed. Each day the sun distractedly  
drifted from chair to chair; each night the stars,  
old scatterbrains, they commiserated.  
It didn't rain. *Strange*, the granular man  
thought to himself, *although I encompass  
so much, I accomplish so little.*  
His car sparkled beneath his toenails and hair;  
his garden thrived. He tried to think:  
*why now? what had I eaten?*  
*why was I bothered?*—those old hours,  
spotted and exotic lizards, darted  
the gravel, flickering through their chameleon  
skins as if flicking channels on a TV.  
He couldn't catch a one. Then, as a flock  
of grackles, all his twittering specks, his particulate  
brain, and the dangerous shreds of his fingers  
whooshed and converged to the crown of an oak—  
*what an odd cloud*, said someone.



## View from a Temporary Window

*Follow the wrecking ball:* in a month, it will smash  
into this glass

like that housefly. A blueprint unfolds on a table  
beside an orchid doubled-

over with white blooms, and out the window, just half a bridge  
dives into the front page

of a newspaper the neighbor lifts from her balcony.  
Partial to more, we're beckoned

outward, beyond our foundation: and a new picture  
window will jut

over the cliff to frame all the Golden Gate's  
red seismograph, which cuts

through the fog to the headlands. In a year, in wingback chairs,  
we'll sit in the air

high above those tiny people strolling  
the crumbling sill

down on Bay Street, out there where the orchid's reflection  
hovers with a flock of gulls.