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.