

The Comedian

The comedian slips the mic from its stand,
gathers the excess cord in a loop, and placidly
stares at the audience as he begins to pace.

A few people titter expectantly. He stops
pacing, looks up, shifts his weight to one foot,
and the murmur dies away. The comedian's
eyes roam the crowd. He raises an eyebrow.
A woman guffaws abruptly, an outburst soon
followed by a ripple of laughter. Time passes.

The audience shift in their chairs, making
soft papery sounds. A man clears his throat.
"Come *on*," someone shouts. Two minutes
pass. A few people shake their heads, chuckling
uneasily. Others sit stoic, not chuckling at all.

Whispers simmer lightly through the crowd,
and people begin gesturing to one another,
"Is *this* the joke? Us?" Near the back someone
says a name, "Andy Kaufman," as explanation.

After seven minutes, the comedian whispers,
"You have been a great audience. Ever since
you were born—"

His voice breaks and the breathy whisper
fades into overwhelming awkwardness. He
begins to take off his clothes. There are more
clothes underneath. And then more clothes
underneath. Eventually his body itself begins
to peel away in gauzy layers,

and it becomes clear he's not
a man but a slender woman. And then no longer
a woman but a heron. And not a heron but
a blade. And soon it is clear he is not even that—