

The Wedding Night

To some, vulgarity is a prayer we whisper to the bone
of our pelvis. Mine, honey, is tired of listening.

Above me, you switch off the light,
as you always do—afraid of what its touch could turn

you into—the reverse of some lupine curse.
We meet in the dark, sheets thick as thieves. I feel you

beside me—an absence overlaying omission—on your breath
the dark-reek of Chianti you slipped past the bellboy.

Your tongue is a wetted cork against my neck.
In the moments before light left us, you were

talking about your mother. How did you describe her?
A manacled tiger with a paper doll in its jaws?

A house cat eating its kittens under rosewood cabinets?
In the gloom, I trace what you won't let me touch

in the light—and your face under my fingers resembles
the scene of a Japanese screen—tight fabric, and under this

fog, stunted pines, crags, herons, fish scaled with jewelry—
and under this a woman naked, her garments strewn,

massaging the muscles of her leg. Your scar, run the length
of the right side of your face, is the texture of asphalt

on a summer day—bubbling tar at the moment it becomes
malleable. That first night you took me from the pier,

brought me to this blue motel with its lampshades
and scent of smoke and tallow, you wouldn't turn your cheek

to me. When I asked, you said it was a gift from your mother,
who was afraid men would be turned by the Osage dusk

of your beauty, so had held your face to the flames herself.
I let you enter me, and what you do know

is the rhythm of my body under yours, the hum that swells
in the back of my throat like a bee between the palms

of a boy. What you don't know is that after you
were asleep I struck the flint of a lighter and held it

over your face until I had memorized every trial
of its topography—until I was sure I knew you—

until the heat of the flint could be suffered no longer,
and I dropped the flame onto your chest. You woke

with a start, hurling yourself out of the bed, sweat
slicking your body, a tiny cherry between your breasts.

From this I learned two things. That there is a part
of you that will always be leaving me,

and there is nothing—maelstroms, moonlight,
the singeing mouth—I will not dare to keep you.