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.