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THE MOTH

When she comes to bed on tiptoe, she’s facing
the oil lamp on the nightstand. She’s almost dreaming.
Her body knows the slow choreography of moving
toward sleep, even as the mind drifts. Nothing’s there.
Already she’s pulled the counterpane back from the corner,
just far enough to slip into the soft sheets,
rumpled folds like valleys and hills of a landscape
she knows and will again walk into, soon-to-be warm.
Over her arm a silk nightgown falls as thin
and easy as water. The cold floor is gleaming.
But who, you might ask, is the gazer, the painter
who looks and strokes? And what is she feeling?
Her body is lit flesh-rose, just fresh from bathing.
Her face in shadow, her hand is up against the light.

She’s trying to see the moth. Is it death? Is it life?
Drawn to light, it is large, its sudden wings spread wide
like a specimen in a book, flat like a stencil on the wall,
an ugly tattoo she’s seen on a man at the circus.
Is it real? Its double white wings repeat the pattern
in the counterpane, a child’s red whirligig in a box of toys.
She’d just like to know what it means, though she’s not
yet pulled from her dream of the painter, who looks at her
as he always looks at girls, the hint of breasts,
dream of the woman he can’t be. There’s a sadness
for you—this truth you look at: what you cannot be.
When she wakes wondering what it was,
where it went, her fingers will have touched
the dusty moth and kept some glitter from its wings.