Your First Family Portrait

We are at your first family portrait, down in the underbelly of a San Diego mall, your stomach wide and heavy, your marine husband’s shaved head glimmering beneath the shifting lights. I am a voyeur, perched on the photographer’s stool, trying to sound the right reactions at the right times. I twist and turn the chair, let my toes graze the floor, try to time my squeaks with the pop of the flash.

The waiting room is filled with families, newlyweds, all dressed up like how they wish they were. I am New York black boots, hair tied back, and smudged eye liner and you are maternity chic, flowered sundress, and barefoot. It was still cold in Binghamton when I left, and here the sun seems never to disappear, revealing the wrinkles earned since I last saw you, the paleness of my forearms and face.

Later we make our way to the food court, escalators filled with teenagers looking pissed off, our hands careful not to touch the rolling strip of a handle because once our friend in high school told us it was covered in semen and pee.
Your husband goes off to find us corn dogs—
me a veggie one, because they have those here—
and as he eats two with his own fries and some
of yours I remember the year you lived with
my family in high school, how you hid
ecstasy and acid in my underwear drawer,
how I told you I’d nark you
because though I loved you
I would always love my siblings more,
how we’d bring boys up to my bed,
the bed we shared,
and learned how to turn our bodies just so,
twist our tongues and roll our hips to draw
noises from boys. We thought that meant we were
doing something right, that we knew how.

Your husband talks about tanks, then coyote hunting
and you nod along, eyes tired,
but I remember when we’d talk all night
wrapped under heavy blankets
because my stepfather kept the heat at fifty-five,
and how if we talked too loudly
fists would bang at the wall above our heads
until we filled our pillows with laughter,
and how you’d tell me every night
your feet were cold
then press them to my calves
until we both fell asleep.