Heirlooms

I imagine my grandmother
bound by paper-bag lunches
and unreciprocated love
in an eroded marriage,
watching divorce shimmer
like heat in the distance,
tucked away
in a gorgeous pacific-ocean
house made of glass,
china bright as mirrors,
laundry rolling endlessly,
lacquered wood, kitten heels,
whiskey in the linen closet,
candle-lit dining table.

Sometimes I think I remember her,
the cool sharpness of her rings,
the quiet sounds they make as she
fits a bottle between my gums.

I wonder about her, if she ever sat still enough
to feel the earth’s plates move beneath her,
slow and achingly wise,
if she felt gravity like that,
so much it hurts.
I wonder if she ever felt like a forest, burning itself
to survive.

How do you mourn someone you never knew?

I know her heart, I have
it, arrhythmic, rolling
over itself like
going under a wave too late, thrashing against
the sand, left dizzy, bottom-up;
it’s congenital, they say,
and I think of heirloom pain
of women tethered down to what they love most
of alcoholism and second chances
and curses and genes and the promises
our bodies make
but cannot keep.
In a photograph of us--
suspended in that in-between space before
anything happens,
my tiny cheek pressed against hers,
me teeming with promise, with the years
I’d spend without her,
the two of us utterly unknowing--
she’d been sober for 6 months.
I turn it over.
The cursive reads: “first sleepover”
as if there would be more.
I feel her salt
stick to my face.