

To My Father

I

We have a story you never knew.  
Suicide tends to do that – stops knowing.  
When you died, I was oblivious in the womb  
fed cigarettes and grief.  
Mother was never a healthy woman,  
but you knew that.

I was born in a sea knowing sadness,  
what it's like to be another's salvation,  
the surviving piece of you.  
Never fully myself to them,  
not even when I was new.

II

An image laden people,  
we accept photographs  
like air to lungs,  
light writing reproductions  
no longer miracles.  
But you are a paper ghost,  
pile of pictures my inheritance,  
your film fingerprints  
infuriating treasure.

There's no denying you  
before the lens,  
camera's eye absorbing  
something mine never will.  
Light radiating off your skin,  
shining from your teeth,  
shadows in your disheveled hair.  
Imagine atoms trapped in sticky chemicals,  
body pressed into reproducible image.

Looking at your photographs is the  
closest I get to touching you.

## III

You were a secret after suicide.  
 Your wife's decision after  
 replacing you.  
 Three half-siblings later your ghost  
 had not found me, but  
 I went searching.

A shed with rusted tin roof,  
 abandoned, unpainted,  
 my play room on the prairie.  
 The four of us  
 filled the small space  
 with dirty bodies, broken toys.

Large wooden chest half buried in a corner.  
*Don't mess with that. It's storage.*  
 But of course I did.  
 I'd sneak out to the shed,  
 pry open the lid,  
 gorge on forbidden images.

Brimming with report cards, school  
 portraits, baby pictures,  
 that chest held your childhood.  
 I recognized your face from grandmother's walls.  
 Having just learned the secret of my birth,  
 I knew this little boy was *father* but didn't see how –  
 I grew into the resemblance with a vengeance.

That chest was left in the shed by your wife  
 when we moved back east in panicked poverty,  
 probably burnt by whoever profited from foreclosure.

## IV

Your mother still sees your ghost.  
 She told me you were going into my room one night.  
 She tethers you with old grief;  
 this was not where you killed yourself.  
 I doubt they ever got the stain  
 completely out of walls, carpet, mattress.  
 I would have moved too.

Your absence more present than pictures ever were.  
It would be easier without them,  
without the infuriating realness of your referent.  
That you were,  
before the lens, reflected light.  
There's my hair, my eyes, my mouth.  
You were, and you smiled.

I out-aged you years ago,  
still needing you to be alive.  
I will never out grow or out run your ghost –  
a ghost I wouldn't even recognize.