FOR MY FATHER WITH ALZHEIMER’S (May 2003)

I remember my father when his memory was good
when the world was good; before the onset of Alzheimer’s and before a dark depression
grabbed hold of him and held on to him and would not let him go.
I remember him as though it were yesterday
when life was good and his children were young
and he knew who he was and I knew who I was
and we were all together as one.
And it was oh so good.

We all knew what death was
but not the loss of memory—time, times, and a half time.
Synapses snap, strength saps, brain-shrunk punks flame
on off on off on off again
never knowing when the he we once knew will not be
here or there.

He is no Lazarus fresh-sprung
flung from some living stone-hinged tomb of Bethany
Baptist (independent of course, but) mostly dependent
on the words of others—mothers brothers sisters blisters poised on the nerve endings
that spike the mind up and out and back down to the edge of nothing.

And my sisters, Mary and Martha-like come and see and cry dry-eyed heaves of dirt and shit
hit the ground with fists of full flexed force.
But the mind-gaped grave-gate don’ open heah no mo’.
Like me they want to be held like children like babies like fetuses like sperm like eggs
microscopic beginnings all over and under and inside breathless
by hunger and desire and kisses caressed
and cared for forever
but knowing now that never.

The one mind they loved I love
which knew them when
has somehow been somebodied out
zombied off
and crumbles before their varied huged eyes heavy with what is gone
but not quite yet.

REMEMBERING (My Father with Alzheimer’s)

my father remembers
his years with us
in fistful snatches

in pieces of the past
slowly un
wound

he sees each child real
ize
d
within
r
each
li
fe-filled
mom
ent re
me
m
be

ring us for
hi
m is a re
membering

SIGNS DURING RUSH HOUR

Every bloody hand
At city crosswalks blinks stop.
Jesus! Let me go!
HOLY WEEK 1984
(variations on a haiku form)

THE GREETING

pilgrim’s oasis
this cool and comforting palm
resting in my palm
a shoot from dry ground
the feathery frond unfurls
fingers press like crowds
shouting hosannas
joy rides in air tense gripped with
anticipation
palms clenched heavenward
jerusalem celebrates
triumphal entry

Palm Sunday, April 15, 1984
I visit mother in the hospital for the first time, after her heart attack.

THE CROSSING

She was no Moses
leading masses to mountain
peaks that scratched God’s face;
nor a Miriam,
timbrel-whirling victories
over monstrous seas.
She had no gilt tongue
for free-phrasing, like Aaron’s,
which fought Pharoah. Still,
her passing over
this night makes herbs more bitter;
lamb less savory.

Passover, April 17, 1984
Mother dies in the early afternoon, just before Passover begins.
THE REMONSTRANCE

Mandatum novum
give us back the old command
this one Judas kissed.

Farewell footwashing
freezing rain on mud-caked boots
gravedigger’s solace.

Chalice of blessing
blistered, bleeding, ice-cupped hands
they need no god-balm.

Slave’s knotted towel
Carrizo Mountains wrapped white
in late April snow.

Maundy Thursday, April 19, 1984
My brothers and I dig mother’s grave at Immanuel Mission, on the Navajo Reservation.

THE CURSE

Damn it all to hell
the witching rage demons smell,
smoky ash of death.

Dam this flood of tears
Satan’s red-hot iron sears
every choking breath.

Damaged, worthless good
this sin-wrought flesh never could
outlive Eden’s curse.

Damn God’s double-cross
king’s crown cannot cover loss;
 thorns pierce beggar’s purse.

Good Friday, April 20, 1984
We build mother’s coffin and plan her funeral service.

THE WAKE

No battering shock
could raise this cold, hardworn corpse
set in hand-framed pine;
though blinking machines
and pulsing plastic held her
heart’s charges four days.

When her memory
is etched in silicon dust,
perhaps Lazarus-like laser cells will
be implanted and tie her
to some god’s mainframe.

Holy Saturday, April 21, 1984.
We put mother’s body in the coffin we made, and have her funeral.

THE STONE

Like friends at midnight,
we pleaded for bread, oh Lord.
But you gave us stone.
We took it, shaped it;
then grim-faced, rolled it upright
on a fresh filled grave.

Dawn came; it was gone,
crushed and mixed with blood-flecked sweat,
a finely ground flour.
Now, gaunt bellies roam,
stop and sniff the altered stone—
cryptic, hand-held crumbs.

Easter Sunday, April 22, 1984
Communion with family and friends at Immanuel Mission.

Written on the occasion of mother’s death
April 17, 1984 in Albuquerque, New Mexico
And she said, “This is my body; take, eat ye all of it. Run your tongue over its soft round smoothness. Breathe deep its heavenly scent. Gaze long at its fragile opaqueness. Cup it in your hands, caress it tenderly. Nibble its outer edges slowly, slowly, then swallow me whole. Eat me up, up, up; sup on me, one long, everlastingly long sip—dip in, dine, dine. Come to me, oh come, come unto me—on to me now, now, and I will give you rest.”

And it was so.

And she said, “Here is my life blood poured out for you; drink deeply of it. Savor its tangy afterglow, linger over its richness. Remember me in the rhythmic passages of your life; wash your body in my scarlet flow. Find in its pale flush yourself: rebirthed, unearthed, a wriggling mass of unumbilicated joy.”
And it was so.

**MY FIRST HOUSE**

I always wanted to live in two stories:

A house fenced with white pickets
and shuttered in pale blue.
It would have bright rooms upstairs
sheltered under broad eaves,
and bay windows on the ground floor
fluttering with snowflake-lace.
Tall maples would shield us from neighbors
and smaller trees would speckle the back lawn
with late autumn fruit.

I always thought love would come
easily, like the spring blossoms falling
from my dreamyard pear. It would be golden,
the comforter mother
fitted so snugly
to the double bed in her room;
the same one a quavering-voiced boy of four
had once pulled over his head
while forming his first prayers
to a god-fearing forty-five.
(Fully loaded, revolving in an oak cabinet,
that hot cylinder used to fire heavenly bulletins
and send gospel choruses zinging
toward his brain every day at nap time.)

And children—they, too, would come in time—
bounding tousle-headed onto my lap; girl first,
then boy. They would be blue-eyed and fair-skinned,
and I would tickle and hug them,
then finally tuck them into comfortable beds
far above the glowering cold
that crept across the floors
during long prairie winters.

Perhaps I have always lived in two stories:

A doll house set up
in my parents’ bedroom
during quiet afternoons; pulled out
of a Sears catalog in late November, with pleading eyes.
(It had appeared like magic)
under a Kansas Christmas tree in 1956, while my two older brothers looked on, grinning wickedly.)

And a blackened disk still spinning, shot through the center with a hole so large that I can push three fingers into it: perfectly round, a marksman’s bull’s-eye.

RAIN

My son once asked whence comes the rain, and in reply I sang:

“In oceans deep the droplets sleep till stirred by winds of chance. Then up they dance on lightning wings—gold gifts that heaven brings.”

But when he left, I whispered, soft:

“Behind the gifts, the angels kiss, and behind the kissing godeyes wink.

And behind the winking darkness reigns.”

CHRISTMAS SPELLS

Caught in the spell of Xmas, we often confuse presents with presence.
JIGSAW PUZZLES

So like the father is the son,
matching color to color,
shape to shape, with quickness and precision;
with flashes of intuition.

Surprises are interlocked
with carefully crafted solutions:
Sometimes he follows shadows to light,
or bright hues to near whites;
at other times, the mere
slippery force of gravity
pulls pairs together.

But, curiously, he does not begin with borders.

He leaves, without speaking,
those straight edges
that protect the slow-forming picture
from the chaos creeping
across the dining room table,
for another to shape and fit.

EASTER MORNING

So strange to see snow
white bend yellow daffodils.
Cracked eggs spill golden.

JANUARY IN SEATTLE

It is sometimes difficult
to trace the thin lines of life
connecting bare branches
wet and aching for spring
cold metal rainspouts swirling angrily
grim skies full beating
against old panes of mottled glass.
HOLY WEEK RAIN

Dogwood blossoms sweat
bloody red. Easter Vigil
ends with soft green head.

RESERVATION BURIAL (April, 1984)

so lovely the grave
feather-dusting of white lies
on muddy red skein

HOLY HOLDEN WONDER

There they were in mid-June,
poised at the edge of Copper Creek Trail
like two children, impatiently
trying to break into an adult conversation.
“Calypso bubosa,” said the Village botanist.
Some call them fairy slippers.”

Dangling two inches above the ground,
they balance on slender lace legs—
purple ballerinas turning summer
saults in petticoats of crinkled green.

PROTESTANT PRAYER AT A BACCALAUREATE MASS

Perhaps this mass of atoms
clasped in my hands
will rub off on me;
this piece of yeastless immortality, nourish me
in its going down.

May this hastily gulped, fortified wine
dislodge the particle
now caught in my throat,
and sustain this adam
until the disrobing.

WILD BLACKBERRY PARISH

I know a priest,
a compassionate man
and a lover of animals,
who feeds stray cats growing wild
in tangled blackberries
firm white breasts of turkey
boldly stolen in daylight
from the refectory table.
He has the cats trapped
occasionally, in wire cages.
Coaxed by the sweet smell of dainties,
they are taken away, examined and sterilized,
then returned to thorny safety.

Sometimes, over glasses of dark red wine, he and I reflect
on the rights of animals and wombs,
and other tangled things.
He finds it an inconceivable horror
that my father, farm-bred,
could bury newborn kittens naturally
alive, saving a solitary, eyeless, furry ball
to bear the love of a mother
who can’t count past one.
RACHEL’S CHILDREN

Like Joseph of old,
I, too, have been troubled by dreams:
the peculiarity of the one sheaf
before which ten bound stalks fall;
the star-crossed luminary
to which other knees shall one day bow.

Why does the angel’s icy finger poke me, rib-eyed awake?
Startle, with nascent fear, my nocturnal yearnings to
put away the woman I thought I knew (to
say nothing of the hard kicking inside her); to
remain in this house full of bread (though
royalty seeks the life so strangely thrust upon her)?

The child raises questions before he can kick;
before he has the strength to lift his head.
Before he can mouth his first round word,
he empties me.

Where were the saving angels,
the hidden angles
for Rachel’s other children?
Where were the fleshy fingers pointing
to their Egypts of pharonic safety?

This infant’s instant
insistent rage
at mother’s milk denied
mocks Rachel weeping.

So many other tattered stars have fallen
like ashes. The chaff of sheaves
harvested by a different angel—
another Joseph,
counting still
in Brazil’s red soil.