

The Maze and Her Path:

the story of my mother
within the story
Alzheimer's tells



by Henry H. Walker
5701 Old Stony Way
Durham, NC 27705

punmasterhenry@gmail.com

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Artwork by Aileen Clougherty

*Dedicated to Carol Andrews, Barbara Sieg, Anita Hurst,
Ruth & George Williamson, and all Mother's wonderful caregivers*



THE CLOUDS
GATHER

How Long . . . ?

"How long has your mother had Alzheimer's?"

"I don't know. . . " I reply,

it wasn't like turning a corner
and there it was
but we had hints
a decade or more ago--
I remember . . .

--Mother forgetting to write down checks she wrote
--unpaid bills stacked with piles of junk mail in Harry and David's Fruit of the Month
Club boxes under her bed,

--prescriptions irregularly taken, not remembering whether she had or hadn't
--more anger in her judgements of other people
--her open mind getting stiffer, like an aging muscle
--trouble sleeping when she'd hear hammering or music no one else heard,
dreams crossing over to reality

--tales of a woman coming in and leaving messages on the clock,
telling her to do things she didn't want to do,
a woman who would be knocking at the door to come in

--telling us in the morning she'd spent the night in the woods
--loaning and giving money to a rascal she took under her wing, snapping at any
neighbor or family member who criticized him, appliances disappearing from our
house to his

--disengaging from her beloved politics, not remembering who Al Gore was or her treasured ride with him to a political rally years before, pushing him to push C-Span with the local cable company

--cooking less and less,

like a cloudy dusk when you don't notice
just when day turns to night,
facts piled up, something was wrong,
and then the weight of the facts tipped the scales,

her doctor ventured it was probably early Alzheimer's,

then the psychiatrist at the Geriatric Assessment Program at Baptist Hospital pronounced the verdict to us,
but cautioned not to tell her,
I did anyway, gently,
while she still had a chance to understand a little bit
what was happening to her,
I thought she deserved the truth,

I remember going into her room one time later on,
and she fussed "they" wouldn't let her get up to go to the bathroom,
I told her she hadn't been walking for months,
she frowned and announced either
she was crazy or we were,

sometime day turned to night
and I don't know when.

by Henry Walker
September 2, 2001

INTO THE STORM



Her Border Guards Gone

My head, my heart
both circle around
worries about Mother
and I find it hard to land
and fully give myself to them,

her body that has tried and tried to let her down
actually doing well now
it's her mind that's been so sharp
that's slipping,
so hard for her to call up names
so easy for her to call up voices that aren't there,
the border between imagination and reality blurs
the border guards gone and the fears slip over,
so much of her world nothing the rest of us
can see or hear,
connections to the tangible
softly
pull loose
one
at a time,
so easy to be alone and afraid inside her own world
and since her hearing is so hard
she slips further away,

the sweet soul and the loving smile still there
and I want to help her hold on
for as long as she wills.

by Henry Walker
August 9, 1998

Lulled, Then Awake

The rhododendron boasted few blooms last summer
fortunately, plenty of buds for next year's show
cradle at the heart of many of the rosettes,
a few beech leaves still hold on after the frost,
and in the storm winds squadrons of poplar seeds
gyroscope down
each hopeful to find a place
in the earth in the sun,
so very few make it,
it's all so fluid,
even the pool in the creek
that seems to hold for awhile
soon drops down to the next step toward the sea,
the earth, the seasons, life herself
lull us with a false sense of permanence
till we plummet with a loss,
by the creek remembering
playing along it with my boys
who are now men,
I don't remember the transition,
seems just all of a sudden
I look back and something's gone,
as long as there are
new loves and births, new faces at the table,
we can look away from the empty chair
talk over the silence
forget for a bit
who made up who we are
who doesn't sit here today
who makes up who we are today
who might not be here next year.

by Henry Walker
Thanksgiving '98

“No Defining Tragedy”

Imagine
the generation coming of age now
sure of jobs
no draft
a new Millennium
looking bright
just some darkening clouds on the horizon,
and some feel lost
indulged
“no defining tragedy
and so we’re frivolous” says one,
Wars and Civil Rights and Depression
force us to choose, to define,
and in that pain
something good and strong can be forged--

what defers gratification now?
and so we fight mental maladies
with quick cure
drugs
which don’t cure
which insulate us from living lives
where meaning is won everyday,
where we can be pleased with how well
we can reach toward the whole
when we’re each fighting
our own personal battles.

by Henry Walker
December 28, 1998

Two Worlds Claim Her

Imagine
talking with your mother
and it's like
she speaks a language you understand,
part of the time,
the words, the concepts, the memories
ringing true and clear
to the reality you know and (sort of) understand,
and then she speaks another language
you get the words and part of the concepts
but what's real for her
doesn't intersect with what you can yet know,

she's walking in two worlds
so she's only half here
and she keeps trying to make sense
out of the disjoint
to connect what cannot be connected,
so she's torn between
beating herself up for her failings
and attacking us for how we're punishing her
since we're filled with more power
than she feels she has,
we could fix it if we but would,

and all I can do
is love,
and keep making empathic leaps
that can never quite get to the other side,
thank goodness,
for it's not yet my time to cross over.

by Henry Walker
April 5, 1999

Tethers Slip

My mother drifts away
and the surroundings turn strange
her body still here
her mind doesn't recognize "here,"

for now, for awhile,
something always clicks back into place
and she knows where she is
and she's fine,
something familiar and reassuring grabs her
and her mind comes back home
her balloon tethered
but her mind still strains at the mooring,
we help her with all the lines we can,
they slip, no matter how much she grabs at them,

you hear stories of folks
whose bodies are here
but whose minds are in Oz
all the anchoring gone,

my friend's mother came back
for just a little while early this week
they talked, connected,
and then both mind and body slipped their moorings,

while mother's still here I want her to enjoy her stay
and I pray the tethers will hold.

by Henry Walker
May 13, 1999

Slipping Away

Names go
nouns
the verbal hands
with which we hold
through which we manipulate,
relationships get fuzzy
places unfamiliar
memories hide away,
fade out
fade in,
slowly
surely
slip,
hold,
then
slip again.

by Henry Walker
July 5, 1999

At a Remove

Mother has always loved the mountains
at a comfortable remove,
from the cabin
sitting on the porch
over the raining creek
enjoying the rhododendron
the cool breezes,
the fellowship pulled out of us by this place,
the snow so pretty out a window
and whipped up into snow cream,
the pictures on a wall,

hikes with her were short
over to the Old Swimming Hole
or down to the Orchard creek for a picnic
or to Laurel Falls where she most remembers
the sweetened condensed milk and whipped cream peach pie,
and heading to the door, the road, the car
to see a bear, her excitement and wonder
like the ice-cream truck has just come,

now, when she can,
she likes to sit on the porch
and, for hours, watch a child play in the creek,
a joy she has always better savored secondhand,
and now she has to spend most of her day in bed
looking for hours out the window
at a squirrel, a shape she can't quite get, a flower,
and so we bought her a bird feeder
and it was like the hours before Christmas morning
so eager, so anxious for the birds to find it,
and they did, and it was a soft magic, for a time,
then early one day the crows came
and squandered the sunflower seeds

into their bellies and onto the concrete below the feeder
where the bears found the treats
and mama and cubs ate the snacks,
so like the best of what they could find on their own,
and daddy came and reached up
and climbed up the best he could
and knocked the feeder hard enough
to free up all the oily seeds,
what a show for mother,
the wild within her grasp
without danger or discomfort,

the best of all possible worlds
comfortable, well-fed, and glory out the window.

by Henry Walker
July 26, 1999

Down to the Core

I go into her room
and gaze at her sleeping peacefully,
a moment of doubt--whether to wake her?
a moment of worry of how much of her will wake up
and how I will react, and then I move on
and sing a verse of "Down in the Valley"
and then another and she softly wakes into a cough,
I speak to her, her eyes open, and she says
"Well, hello, Henry."

We talk for awhile
but since so many words have lost their moorings to her thoughts
it's hard to tell what we're talking about,
after a few minutes I start to leave
so I say something and hit my leg-- shouting out "By Crackey!"
a big grin fills her face and she hits her own leg, laughing "By Crackey!",
a back and forth joke we did together months ago.

Singing and joking still work
music and humor mooring the words into meaning, fulfilling them,
using more of the soul to feel their meaning
than the airy world of language usually uses,
as we build fairy castles within our reason--
and when it flies away from us, burned like Icarus,
maybe we drop down to what we still have left,
so much burned away , but it's still the core of Mother there,
burning with love, smiling with music and good humor,
what a tribute to her life
for her to drop down to such a wonderful foundation
she's built with the spirit of her life.

by Henry Walker
March 17, 2000

Mother's Still There

I come around the corner of the house
peer in to see if Mother's still asleep
and her eyes hawk quick spot me
a big smile fills her face and she waves
beckoning me into her world,
starting to push herself up from the bed
worried I couldn't get in, then,
soon as I'm in the door,
she calls for a hug,
Mother there in the shining eyes,
solicitous gaze,
worry about my trip, food and bed for me,

my name and category,
in the scheme of things,
unclear,
as are the words to call up the story she tells,

I ask her how she's feeling
and she fusses a bit
till she elders herself into taking it in the best way possible,

she's present in the moment, here with me,
anticipating my coming up today
she called me her "uncle,"
watching me out the window
she called me her "son,"

the next day I join her for supper:
she forks the shrimp and cucumber slices for herself,
the green beans don't cooperate
and Anita helps
till she rejoins the "Clean Plate Club,"
as she starts to straw the cranberry juice

she exclaims "You know what I want!"
and describes herself as a "heavy drinker,"

the humor's still there, the love and concern, the quickness of eye,

I try to tell a story
and there's so much of it she can't get,
I ask a family question going back 40-50 years
and she doesn't seem to hear any of it,
yet she looks at the pictures on the wall of us as her boys
and tells part of a story of what we wanted and missed long ago,

so much of "us"
created and confirmed with words,
and since so many of those connections don't fit any more
it's so easy for "me"
missing "us"
to assume "she" isn't there any more,
and yet so much of "her" is there,
somewhere,
faith and love get me there,

speech can't cross the chasm
yet Mother still deserves the leap,
and then she's not so all alone,

as I said good by today,
she called me by name,
she knew before
and accessed the name today,

let's leap across the chasm
so she isn't so all alone.

by Henry Walker
May 23, 24, 25, 26, 2000

Out of the Saddle

I avoid going back into her room
some because I don't know what to expect
and I'm afraid I won't be up to the task,
whatever the die rolls this time,
some because it hurts to have the power
of being so tightly bound together
and to have the impotence
of not knowing how to reassure her
that she's "home"
that there's plenty of food and money,
and how to help her accept
what she needs done to her
to get her clean,

most of us learn and remember
how to ride the horse,
all the irrational fears and wants,
but Alzheimer's has thrown her out of the saddle
and she's both the horse and the bruised rider
and when we talk to her she's both.

by Henry Walker
August 6, 2000

Threads Out of the Maze

Another step along the path,
this time Mother bright-eyed
alert
engaging
tells me she's doing fine
just needs four more to go
here
and here
and here,
shows me on the tray by her green glass of tea,
what "they" are I don't know,
maybe matching glasses to hers,

Having "enough" always a goal for her
a hunger from way back
for order, rightness, following the way
whatever should be done,
valances on curtains that match the sofa,
the right clothes to fit the occasion,
Christmas glasses brought out,
Grandmother's Easter lilies baked,
the sharp apple or grape that sings through the sugar,
the right grammar,
the polite word,
presentation as vital as breath,
always called to take care of others,

You come into her room now
and even when she doesn't have a clue
as to who you are
she asks if you're getting enough to eat,
if you have a place to sleep,
doing unto Him through the least of His brethren,

She talks to her pictures on the wall
tells the kids how pretty they are
and notes their eyes look right back at her,
Daddy's still with her,
she talks to his life size portrait on the wall,
calls him "her man,"
calls him "handsome" and "sweet,"
fusses some that he doesn't talk back
or wave back,
fusses when the door is left open
blocking her view of him,

She knew me today,
"of course," she said,
"my son, Henry,"

In the maze her mind is becoming
she still has threads she can follow back.

Henry Walker
October 6, 2000

Focused by Food and Love

As we start to leave the room
she asks if we've seen Lib
that if we do to give her a message,
we need her smile and help, and Mother's a bit worried about her,
Lib keeps calling her and telling her things to do
things she doesn't want to do,
earlier she pulled back the covers and told us of the little girl
who does her homework there, always and still the caregiver
making sure everyone's taken care of--
from her sister Lib whom we lost years ago,
to a little girl she's created out of her need to give,
to the kids' pictures in front of her who "live" there
who need the fireplace on to be warm,
she still teaches school from her bed
she still laughs when Daddy's picture won't answer her
she still asks how we're doing and still feels for the effort of our lives,

her power to act on the world drifts away
yet her mind creates an order where she still gives care
where she's still in the middle of project after project,

she told me once her mother was always working,
in the quiet evenings her fingers still busy with beans or thread,
Mother's still busy too and she holds the family together
as we find our way back here for Thanksgiving,
she sits in her wheelchair at the holiday table and savors the ham
asking for larger pieces because more is always better,
her eyes still quick
her words still ventured but hard to grasp,
still here and focused by good food and love.

by Henry Walker
November 23, 2000

Mother Rhymes

she looks up
and starts to speak to us
standing there before her
and her words sing to each other
rhyme of word after word--

she hits a word
in what she's saying
and follows it with
stream-of-consciousness rhyming,
no longer speaking to us
but singing within her mind
to whoever and whatever is there,

and she finds
harmony
joy
a meaning when words
lose their ties to ideas
but still connect through their sound,

their music?
their meaning.

by Henry Walker
December 24, 2000

Like Picking at a Scab

going back to see Mother
is like picking at a scab,
I'm hurt, and being with her
I open up my hurt to how deep and wide it is,

Joan, the kids, Liz, and I
visit with her after supper
and she's happy
voluble
telling us how it is
asking us some questions,
we murmur
supportive
affirmative answers
and she knows us a bit
as she does the pictures
who are just as real to her as we,
we sing Christmas carols to her
and she applauds--

"I'll have to put you down
so you can do it more often," she declares,

"Oh, that little Henry, he knows everything
he knows what's going on
what he doesn't know today he'll know tomorrow."

her words are going fast in how they connect

"you've got his two little things,
he wants to make sure they're taken care of."

by Henry Walker
December 29, 2000

Like in a Dream

she talks to the pictures on the desk,
they live just like we do,
so I guess we're real in some two-dimensional way
like a movie or dream,
her words tumble out
like she's just woken up
and the dream's still real,
so much now she doesn't understand
so much now she can't control,
and when she's at her best now
she lets go and quits straining
to put back together what can't be
so she'll laugh and shrug away the problem
and she can let herself be happy in the moment
with teaching the pictures
talking at visitors
enjoying a meal, birds, snow,

she hates to be cleaned
and she can work to hold on to the fussing
till soon she forgets
and she's back in the present,
the moment.

by Henry Walker
December 30, 2000

In Prayer

Mother talking, talking, and reaching to the sky with her arms,
as if she were reaching through the ceiling,
praying, praying to Jesus.
Here's what she said:

"Help me, help me, help me learn to love one another
Help me, help me, help me learn to love one another
Help me, help me, help me learn to love one another
so there will be happy memories always.

"Help us to continue our love and understanding of each other.
Help us to get along together.
Thank you.
Thank you.
Good night."

Then a couple of seconds later:

"I helped us get together somewhat, but not completely. . .
I want to say goodbye to all the family, on both sides.

"Jesus, please help us to remember to love one another,
help us to learn how to love and how to remember each other
the way it's a happy one,
I believe it will be a happy one.

Help us remember!" (repeated a lot!)

"Let us remember each other and our wonderful times together!"

When the Spirit moves, time to move with it or move aside.

by Henry Walker
February 10, 2001

Mother In Spring

The winding path I follow pulls me round again into Mother's room,
first I'm out in the yard and spy her, sitting up, through the window,

we wave, I blow her a kiss

and she returns one,

I visit with her for a little while and she's in a fuss
about that man who wouldn't listen, who disturbed her,
getting from bed to chair

more effort than she wants to deal with
her fussing more than I want to deal with
so I excuse myself for a dip in the creek,

half an hour later I return to visit with her,

after she waves me in from outside

we exchange exclamations of how pretty it all is,

then I venture a comment about the corncob squirrel feeder
and her eyes narrow in confusion at what connection to meaning
my words might have,

I rephrase, go just for talking about squirrels, a favorite of hers,
and she responds with words that I think are about squirrels,

it's like the ideas are still there, the images,

but the words her mind calls up fly off on tangents to the random

so we lose words as tools that each of us can use

to pry apart the walls between us

and let us in to understand the other,

for now we still have the tools of a twinkle in the eye, of a hug and a kiss,

for five minutes I stand by Mother while her eyes are outside

and her mind is full of story

which she tells me

which she tells me

which she tells me,

just like that,
full of repetition,
of repetition,
of repetition,
of kids she tries to help, of limits to her help
to her help
to her help,
words of love, of God, of dying but not knowing the hour,
and the story is real and powerful and clear to her while I only get glimpses,
I don't say anything till she's finished, because if I were to,
I would interrupt,
now at this stage in her life, it is not our place to interrupt, to disagree,
she has enough frustrations keeping the train on the track
and moving along to where she wants to go without us derailing,
she finishes and is quiet for awhile,

we look together at her favorite picture, twin babies,
and she tells me of their life
there, on the desk,
for 12 or 13 years she thinks, details don't matter,
she's hard at work building meaning with her life,

it's like the stories of Faerie
and she's stepping away into a different realm
and just because we can't see it
doesn't mean it isn't real
doesn't mean it isn't real
to her,

I think a song for her would be great
a song with a lot of repetition,
so Joan and I sing of "coming 'round the mountain,"
she enjoys it.

by Henry Walker
April 7, 2001

Mother's Day

we celebrate that pulse
that calls forth life,
shelters it from the storm,
guides it toward the light,
holds,
then lets go
when it's time,

another link in the chain
that stretches back to the beginning
to anchor us,
that leaps in faith toward tomorrows
to keep it all going,

though veils fill my mother's mind now
I still
know her
honor her
forge my link in the chain. . .

Happy Mother's Day, Ma.

by Henry Walker
May 13, 2001

Advice

don't expect anything from Mother now
except what she freely gives,

as hard as it is
don't go for the recognition
of your face
a name
a memory,

don't go for a conversation
you start,
because your words work for you
and not for her,
her words work for her
she knows what she's saying
and we should just go along for the ride,

don't correct her
don't disagree with her
'cause if you do
you're piling one more brick
onto the heavy load of frustration
she's already carrying,

she's still giving
but we have to work hard
to appreciate what we're getting.

by Henry Walker
July 2, 2001

Mother Ghosts Here

here in Jackson Hole
as I sit on a porch
surrounded by old hewn logs and Montana stone
with the gracious home opening onto lush Snake River bottom land,
speckled with the oracles of
purple delphinium, lupine, and sticky geranium,
within a light grove of cottonwood and Douglas fir,
my second thought is of my mother
and her last visit here
and how she can never come again,
she could walk just well enough
think and function just clearly enough
to make it here through car and plane
and be able to savor moose and family,
restaurant and geyser, rodeo and visiting,

I feel her here with me
a light touch, like the ghost of a memory,
and now the best we can do for her
has her world her bed, her room,
squirrels and birds out the window,
connected to her pictures, and her memories,
with them all,
her heart still builds meaning in her life
and she loves to tell you about it when you visit
and she loves the folks who take such care to meet her needs,
yet while I sit here in such beauty,
at the edge of my eyes,
like a touch of grey mist,
I feel a soft, wistful sadness
for the paths she'll never walk again.

by Henry Walker
July 16, 2001

Give Thanks

Thanksgiving Eve
we escape work at noon, load up the car, and wend our way through the traffic
like so many salmon
fighting to get back to where they began,
and when we're over the river
and through the woods
we go into Mother's room
where she's sitting up in bed
having a lively conversation
with a picture
within a scene
from her memory
from her imagination
a scene conceived in the mind of her love
and written with the fingers of her will,

she sees us and slowly includes us in the scene, and she knows us,
though the words that tumble out don't name us
I can see it in the twinkle of her eye, the smile of her lips
the old patterns within the structure of what she says:
it's good to see us, we haven't been here for awhile
how much the oneness of the two of us matters to her,
she's far enough into Alzheimer's
that the psychiatrist has washed his hands of her
as have the programs that helped with the drugs for her mind
the government still helps out with her body,
though so much of her has crossed over to somewhere
she still loves to grab at the threads that can bring her back a bit,
and she lives fully in the moment when she savors the joy of eating,
and when she laughs.

by Henry Walker
November 21, 2001

Past Words

The word,
it was in the beginning as we understood the name of God to be known
and then the names of all living things,
and the child is born
and its name helps define it, connects it,
and we celebrate when he names "Mama"
and she names "Dada"
and we express ourselves and connect ourselves and understand,
through words,
if we can just name
a disease, a condition--learning disability?
a problem, an enemy, a subatomic particle, a star,
we feel we know it
and the universe is ordered,
with names we can build outlines
skeletons of connection
and the universe is ordered,

and that's one of the scariest things about Alzheimer's
because it swallows the names
and randomizes the output
the mouth reads from the mind
and we're scared by the Tower of Babel
and must to work to remember the humanity
of those who don't use the same words we know,
the same words with which we order the world,

and this feels like a curse
but could it also be a challenge?
that we might grown even larger
so that we might understand a universe
that doesn't use words to express itself?

by Henry Walker
November 21, 2001

A Little Help

if we're lucky
we share our journey through this life
with guides who help us find our way
with partners who help us carry our burdens
with those we can help up with a hand
with those who will help us up,
parents,
friends,
spouse,
and,
if we can keep going long enough,
caregivers
through whom love can well up
so that their
hearts
and hands
and the fullness of their selves
hold us in their care
so that through the last days of our journey
we're not alone and lost,

those who care for Mother these last days
are humble servants of the divine,
though Mother can feel lost she's not alone
and those caregivers endure the storms of her frustration
so that the glowing sun of her self
can still break through,
through her bright eyes and laughing heart,
flowing from the love
with which she still embraces the world.

by Henry Walker
November 17, 2001

Ma At Year's End

we go back into mother's room to give her a present
a gaily wrapped box from a loved nephew and his wife
and she's blessedly thankful we visit
and she's blessedly thankful for how beautiful the box is
and she goes off into telling us stories about something,
I hold the pink nightgown up as if I'm modeling it, and she laughs,

when our sons come in she recognizes them, seems to me,
"Here's my fine little boy. . . Oh, here's another fine little boy,"
and I burst into tears with how much of their quarter century relationship is still there,
the love flowing from our sons' eyes & smiles & kisses & words,
the love flowing within the labyrinth within which Mother now lives,

there's anger there, too, her hand hits her hand,
words of "whampum," stab, hit--
then "we were so mad that other day--that woman,
little boy, die, die, die"
or "I could just hit him, hit him, hit him. . ."

she looks at Ike and his new beard:
"This is the first time I've seen that hair on you and it looks good. . ."
some words repeated a lot: boy, today, bi (bye? buy? by?),
dealing with her own confusion:
"He was there and he wasn't there. Well, that doesn't make sense, does it?" then
"Let me tell you, we love you all,
and we're gonna keep on loving you as long as we can. . ." then
"You all look as good as if you were still alive."
concluding:
"What's good about you all is you catch on,
you catch on, you catch on,
and you know it's not going to be perfect. . ."

by Henry Walker
December 31, 2001

Adult By Default

I feel like a monkey in charge of the zoo,

I still feel like a child
and I want the parent, the elder,
the arms to enfold and protect
experience and wisdom to give advice
someone else to be on point
between me and the darkness
that waits to swallow my light,

and now with Mother in Alzheimer's maze
I'm the adult by default
and I hate it,

the monkey's in charge of the zoo
and he's faking it.

by Henry Walker
March 10, 2002

Anger

curse words roar out of Mother
to hit at her tormentor,
she slaps at the hands that mess with her,
all of her helpless
all of her furious
at the water that terrifies her
a bath feeling more like a drowning,
cutting her nails or hair like a nagging,
each adjustment of her robe just wrong,

any little maintenance act
can pull the chair of her confidence out from under her
and she's falling
and she's scared,
so helpless,
and she curses and she yells,

when she gets into such a snit
it tears me up to be nearby,
I feel as helpless as she
and my own chair is pulled away.

by Henry Walker
March 10, 2002

Ma, May 23, 2002

I go in to see Mother and at first she's too far away,
too into the reality she's creating to see me back at the other side,
I kiss her and the connection is vague,

next day, she's bright, engaged in eating,
eyes quick to whoever's in the room,
asked who I am she looks at me and pronounces me her "little boy,"
her eyes fix on the writing on my t-shirt
and she gets part of it till linear becomes tangent,
we talk awhile but I get my best reactions, the brightest smiles,
from some light dancing for her, the physical real, beyond words,

for Mother's Day this year
we sent balloons to catch her eye, flowers too,
pneumonia visited her too
so she spent Mother's Day in the hospital,
she even got into watching a Braves game on tv
and rediscovered how entertaining tv can be,
she's back now, eating well, laughing,

the night before I came back home I went into her room
with a dozen middle school kids and several chaperoning mothers
and Mother laughed to their bright faces
and puzzled at the writing on their t-shirts,
we sang "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain" to her
and she laughed so hard her eyes closed,

Mother told us:

"We'll never know where we are and we'll never know where you're not,"
those who visited her pronounced her "cool," their youth a tonic for her,
and they got to touch how impressive and graceful
a 91 year old with Alzheimer's can still be.

by Henry Walker
May 23, 2002

They Make Her World Safe

Mother feels as a little girl,
lost
somewhere where she can't find home
and home can't find her,
bewildered
because the input and output of words
don't anchor her,
don't reassure,
only the music of the lullaby can comfort
the smile on the face
the love in the laugh,
the food and drink,
those who work with her
can be lost and bewildered too
when Mother cries for her mama
when she's scared,

what an amazing gift of art and love
when caregivers build a safe world around her,
when she can trust them that it'll be all right
that she won't fall
that she won't be left alone
that all who need care are taken care of,

the caregivers' love and laughs for her soul
their love and actions for her body
just balance how lost and bewildered she always feels.

by Henry Walker
May 24, 2002

Not Fully Here

What does Mother give now?
No advice that we can fathom . . .
No stories or opinions whose structure grows in the telling . . .
No precise give-and-take where our words
narrow
and build on each other . . .
We can't come in with an agenda for her to follow, so what can we do?
We can deny our pain, our frustration, our avoidance,
we can believe that she understands what she's thinking & feeling & saying
despite how much it all sounds like nonsense,
we can feel for the old patterns, the stock ways of phrasing we remember,
we can nod our head in agreement,
even when not sure what we're agreeing to,
we can pick up clues her eyes drop and we can speak to those eyes
with a funny action, a comforting smile, a touch,
and we can reach her heart with a kiss,
Today that's what I do:
she works to read my t-shirt and gets the first two syllables right
and then guesses in some kind of free association which makes no sense to her
and she comments on how "crazy" that all sounds,
she pauses, holds up both her hands, stares intensely,
and then counts off the fingers of each: "1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . .",
her eyes are drawn to the cartoon network
where the bold simplicity of sketched story catches her
and she tells me of problem and possibility within the scene,
like an impressionistic painting gone wild
there's a picture there when she talks, it's just way fuzzy,
It's hard to praise how full the glass is
when I see how much is no longer there,
I have to "see" with deeper senses
who whisper to me that the glass is still full
but like the grail the glass is no longer fully in our world.

by Henry Walker

July 9, 2002

Ahh, to bridge the gulf . . .

“Did she know you?”

“Do you know who this is? This is your son Henry. . . Don’t you remember?”

No matter how much we understand that Alzheimer’s steals names
and short-circuits the wires that connect head and heart to tongue
we still slip into using names and wanting the words,

I am gifted with how well
my head and heart can connect
and build words into bridges

that can carry us over the gulfs that separate us
from understanding the gifts revealed in a moment, an experience, another,

My gift with words opens me even more to the tragedy of Alzheimer’s
when no matter how well I build my bridge from my side
there’s no firm ground across the chasm I can reach,
my heart can get across,

and I have to shut up to words and just be there with Mother,
smile to her eyes, kiss her cheek, act to do so that she can be,

when we are moved as deep as we can fathom
we build what bridges we can without words:
cakes and casseroles after a death or during an illness,
a hug and a kiss on the cheek

after being separated or after a wedding, a tear if we can let ourselves,
a laugh when it’s just so right, or just so absurd,
and sometimes all that we can do is inside
with no discernible bridge, no ready clue to others
as to where our heart and head are taking us,
maybe Alzheimer’s can help us all grow larger in how we feel
and larger in appreciating how varied the ways
to span the gulf between us
and all that’s out there.

by Henry Walker
November 27, 2002

Back For a Visit

“She’s been laughing all morning...
ok if we get her up and bring her in here to see the tree?”

“Of course” tumbling out of my mouth
before the surprise that it can happen
has gotten all the way through to my brain,

and so they wheel her in
cradled in a swing
her eyes bright
soft words of commentary tumbling out of her mouth
each of us fixed for awhile
in that reacting weighting gaze
that twinkles like her words when she feels right,
and she feels right here,
and happy,
and part of the group
and holding the group together
with her words that story and explain,

she’s come back further from the fall into the maze
than I thought she could still come
even her words today often came back enough
that we could make sense of them,

she loved the grandson’s kiss on the cheek.

by Henry Walker
December 25, 2002

A Time For Tears

the wheel turns,

balance,

this time when I go in to see Mother
she's on her side, quietly crying,
the sheet pulled to her face,
her eyes meet mine
and words of apology and complaint
tumble
out,

I hold her hand and she squeezes hard,
I kiss her hand
and with almost desperate purpose
she pulls my hand to her lips and kisses it,
I kiss her on the cheek
and feel bad I'm not staying there with her,

I have to go back to my frying chicken,

so I ask my son to go in to be with her,

they both get inside
the bubble of sadness
that rises from her
she says

"I don't know how, but I think [my first born son]
will come back to us".

by Henry Walker
January 3, 2003

Losing Coherence

coherence,

when we know and touch all the little pieces
that hold and define us in the present
connect us with the past
anticipate the future,

losing coherence,

a person with Alzheimer's
doesn't lose the moment
but the moment they live
can lose its ties to other moments
that we use to ground us
that we use to make sense out of our piece
which has so much of its value
in relationships,
connections,

for if we can know and feel the ties
then we can fit ourselves
into the wholes that contain us,

and not be

alone,

lost,

scared.

by Henry Walker
January 17, 2003

Still All There?

for most of this last decade
Alzheimer's has been taking Mother away
and I've worked to get to her still
and I've worked to figure out what all's happening,
I've written of paranoia and anger, the loss of mobility--body and word,
I've written also, often, of how much isn't lost,
well-meaning folks have advised me it's not her there any more,
the insidious alchemy of disease changing her at the core of herself,
but my intuition begs to disagree
as it feels more right to me that self endures strong in her
and that self still is connected to us all
despite the topsy-turvy tumbling of neuron pathways gone awry,
the most common question to me: "How is she?"
and close on its heels: "Does she still know you?"
and most seem satisfied with no real answer to the first
just some variation and detail on "She's fine. . ."
and the answer to the question seems to tell them
if she's still close enough to be worth care,
even so far along in Alzheimer's cluttered dusk
my wife and I feel who Mother "is" is still all there
hiding away in dreamy sleep
and when awake without logical, linguistic pathways
to cross the trackless wood between her "there" and our "here,"
her eyes and heart can still cross with ease
and sometimes still even her words mostly work,
she still knows "who" she is,
it's "where" that scares her,
not knowing exactly "what" is happening,
and if we look to her with our heart
we can still get to a Mother all there.

by Henry Walker
July 31, 2003

She Belongs

picture this:

in the early afternoon
something gets her into a snit
some inexplicable action done to her (we'd say "for her"),
some sense of not being in the right place,
she half raises out of the bed and her finger points at me
and her words jab at me in protest,

a couple of hours later
sister, brother-in-law, and I go to her
and she knows that we belong
and, if we belong, she does, too,
and words tumble out of her for 3/4 of an hour,
a long narrative
explaining to us what all's happening,
reminding us the children are the most important,
and beaming brighter with each new family and friend
who join the circle like bees drawn to the honey of her love,
smiles and laughs spread among us
as she holds forth and holds us,
when my cousin tell her her sister and brother-in-law are there
she quickly retorts: "I know. I was just talking to them."
though our names fit her tongue only vaguely,
after talking for quite awhile, she announces: "And finally . . ."
then she looks around and declares:
"I get a kick out of you all."
we touch and kiss her and make our way away
and, exhausted, she slips back into a sleep
we hope is more comforted by our being there
and helping her remember she belongs.

by Henry Walker
August 3, 2003

What Can One Do?

I share the chapter I'm living now,
the one that may be the last chapter with my mother,
and wildly different reactions meet my story:
a turned head as if not to embarrass me,
news of my mother probably dying like dirty linen, avert the eye,
a firm handshake and a few words, all very civil and just between the two of us,
the short hug and disengage so as not to get too close and burn,
the long hug as if they need comfort even more than I,

eyes that widen, brows furrow, hand and word that reach out to comfort,
the ubiquitous offer to "do"--"Anything I can do just let me know!"
a vague sense of disappointment that I can't provide an action for them to do,

and the stories, the advice, loving gifts even if they don't fit--
"This is how it was for me. . ."
a step forward but not always in the direction I'm going,

once the story starts
it keeps on going as if on its own,
the gift to me becomes a release for the giver,
a reliving of the loss,
maybe like the part of us drawn to rewatching
the planes hit the Towers,
or maybe it's only through reliving the hurt
that we can connect
and through that connection move forward a bit more,

perhaps an answer to "let me know what I can do"
is to be there for me after
and to be open and loving
as I relive my story and my pain.

by Henry Walker
September 24, 2003

When Is It Time?

two doors beckon and repel,

a poet stands at his father's bed
and rages at him to not go gently
to flare the light, not let it sputter out,

a daughter stands at her father's bed
and lets him know that the family's fine
and he can let go,

one's work can be one's purpose
and when retirement stops the work
life, too, can stop, oh so quickly,

and if one keeps a purpose
inertia and will can keep you going, oh so long,

and how then to know
when it's time to let go
and let others turn the wheel,

Mother is 93 and still here,
still teaching,
still loving,
still caring for us all,

and I don't know when
it's time for her to go through the other door
and rest in that good night.

by Henry Walker
September 25, 2003

Mother is receding from us . . .

Mother is receding from us
faster & faster

like at the end of the movie *2001*,

click,

the scene changes
and she's further away,

and I've missed the transition,
as if the camera switched to a different lens
to catch the fading image,

she's here, then here, then here,
then there,

now we're so Doppler shifted
that the light almost can't get back,

the only thing faster than light is love.

by Henry Walker
October 5, 2003

The Balance Shifts

some balance just shifted, like a switch flipped
and what was half-full is now half-empty, a reordering
cross the crest and the trail goes down,
for so long I've stressed how much of Mother is still here
and celebrated each victory in the long holding action against dissolution,
so Southern of me to know how to lose but to lose with flags flying,
for a decade we've been living for the moment, knowing it may be the last,
putting together caregiver plans that are firm for awhile
and then they morph into sand that flows away through our fingers
and we gather together and find another firmness that holds for awhile,

then the shift:

nausea, to the hospital, diagnosis--a hypothesis,
back home, no good, back to the hospital,
blockage--no food or liquid can get through, on the phone with the doctor,
maybe a fortnight left, the endgame: calls, e-mails, plans,
back home and slowly the hunger taking her away can be fed a bit
with Ensure, then other liquid food, now baby food,
and she hangs on, still here because she's so loved and her care so carefully adjusted,
but maybe also still here because she's holding on for something,
some business not yet done, some child that still needs her,
so we tell her we're fine,
that she taught us well and we can take care of each other,
that she can let go when it's time,
and she still holds on and we don't know why,
and now the balance has shifted,
and part of me is ready to say goodbye,
and I don't know how to respond
when well-wishers exult in her step back from the abyss,

I teeter, the balance has shifted and I'm not sure where we are
or where we ought to go.

by Henry Walker

November 5, 2003

Slip Into the Scene

Ready. . .
Action. . .
Roll 'em. . .

It's time for my entrance,
I come through the door
stride to the bed
announce myself with a bright
"Hello, Mother!"
and if she can rouse herself
she opens her eyes
and interprets what I say
within the context of a continuing conversation
she's already having,
she's in a play and
I only hear one of the characters who's talking,

I work to slip into the scene
without really knowing the part I'm playing,
though she does,
I work to fake it well enough
to not puncture the suspended disbelief
within which she works so hard,

I wonder if there's a time she's alone,
away from the familiar she's brought with her
into the places Alzheimer's hides from us
but opens for her.

by Henry Walker
November 27, 2003

The Way In, & Out, the Same

Alzheimer's can produce a symmetry towards the end,
a sloughing off of complexity and pounds,
as all gets simpler and closer in
and the mind loses its fetters
and follows wisps that don't have to be checked
moment to moment
in the give-and-take of the wired connections
we feel to be real,

an inversion of child to adult
when back at the first of life
time passing, empowered,
competence increased,
and we enlarged in body and sphere of action,

Mother is small now
and her body only tolerates the simplest, the liquid,
enjoys then rebels at even baby food,
let alone the pureed she's eaten for so long,

conversations are the simplest,
time to agree with wherever she goes,
connections are the simplest,
love and laughs,

so often Mother is asleep or drifty,
off on adventure through doors we can't even see,
till the symmetry will complete itself
and she returns through the door
that opened when her journey in this life began.

by Henry Walker
December 13, 2003

Where the Self?

the animated images linger behind my eyes,
lurking in the very neurons and synapses Alzheimer's attacks,
on tv I watched him gum up the works
and pull loose the connections
like an assassin methodically working
to find and kill the leader who hides
somewhere within the labyrinth of the mind's pathways,

where is the self behind the eyes?
how much of each of us
is the sum of all those connected neurons?
and do we decline in basic self as they slip away?

I offer my mother, my experience and my intuition,
as one answer to the conundrum of self,
and I know somewhere deep behind my eyes
that deep behind her eyes
she's still there,

like a queen retreating high into the last keep
as barbarians take away her outlying regions
and besiege her defenses, step-by-step,

she's lost much of the kingdom she built
with the actions of her life
to which so many of us had access,
but who she is still burns bright
behind the last walls that guard her life and self.

by Henry Walker
January 24, 2004

A Flare Within the Fading

last week
diarrhea and vomit were visited upon Mother,
probably by a passing virus
who would only annoy someone in their prime,
and Mother almost left us,
the color draining from her
along with all the fluids she wasn't replenishing,
Anita doubled the caregivers through the night
and each phone ring might be word of her last step,

the caregivers pulled and Mother helped
and she came back,
along with her color and taking in liquids,

just when it seems it's finally time
Mother rallies and wants to be helped back up
and our amazing caregivers keep being there to lend a hand,
Mother not yet ready to go
something still to do,

I look into her eyes, listen to the tone of her voice,
feel for the structures in the words that tumble and repeat,
note the fading of response to what
she sees and hears and even to the kiss on the cheek,
and marvel at whatever stories and directions she still must be giving us.

by Henry Walker
May 21, '04

Flying in on Wings of Love

Mother came back today in reaction and even in words
as Devon, Caitlin, and Morgan Jean hovered at her bedside
and flew in on wings of love to kiss her and hug her
and twinkle together with flashing eyes,
two five year-olds and a seven, one named for her,
and Mother crowding in on 94,
Mother's glow brightening more each moment
away from slumber and dreaming,
the effort to get out of the gravity well of Alzheimer's just plain takes a lot of energy
and if too few reactions are there when she ventures forth
to connect with the program of words she can still access, why not retreat?
this afternoon smiles and tears and words release, along with a joy from little ones
so there for her and for themselves, and here's what she gave us
within the seeming randomness of so much of what she said:
"How sweet that is . . . thank you, darling. . .
bless your little heart. . . thank you very much. . ."
[later]
"Listen. . . it was such a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful day. . ."
[and a tear flowed from her eye]
[later, as the kids didn't want to leave]
"My goodness, look at all those children. . . There is my little one. . ."
[a kiss from Morgan Jean]
"Thank you, darling. . . today, today, today. . .
I think about the babies coming and they want to see them. . .
you can really see the weather. . . flowers. . ."
[then to Devon] "You worked to be here, didn't you?"
[and after Caitlin had hugged her] "Oh, yes, we want you to see it lots of times. . .
I just want to think of my children. . ."
Mother can still be so much here because of who she has been and who she still is
and because of the resources we can give to her care and the angels who give it,
and I feel for the countless others who can be lost within their own souls
and within the misguided priorities of our self-indulgent politics.

by Henry Walker

May 21, '04

The hard gift of the simple. . .

I cannot cook anything for Mother now
each of my specialties slowly discarded
over these last years of Alzheimer's,

whole wheat and cinnamon-raisin bread lasted a good while,

and June applesauce made it to a few months ago,

her system now can only handle store-bought liquid,

the simplest only can come from out to in,
as the complexity of our words can't get in either,
only the basic of touch and feeling,
some of our ventures through the ear,
and her eyes are still bright and considering,

it's a gift to be simple
yet in this case I so miss the complex.

by Henry Walker
June 22, '04

Of God and Mother

Mother is comfortable
and usually asleep these days,
every few hours she gets turned
and regularly encouraged to drink the like of Ensure and fruit juice,
what her system can now take in,
spit-ups all too common if even yogurt is added to the mix,

she's on a plateau that gently slopes down
with more abrupt
drops
that keep Hospice care by her side,

a Hindu prayer I like and use
describes spiritual progress
as moving from the world of words
to the word of thought
and beyond thoughts to the wisdom of that of God within us,

when my prayers are of Mother
I don't ask that God be with her
for it seems to me God is, and she with God,

there is a rightness deep within Mother,
and, below my tears, I am comforted.

by Henry Walker
August 11, '04

Does she notice the leavings?

imagine a bird catching a thermal
and spiraling up and up
and lightening her load by looking down
a bit less at each distancing turn. . .

the seasons turn
and one more aspect
of Mother's connection to the world--
and thus a way through which we can connect to her--
one more piece drops away, and we don't quite notice
until we realize a doorway is no longer open,

last week the first Mother's Day
even flowers wouldn't register to her dreaming mind,

a few weeks ago her sister died
and there was no way to let her know or to let her mourn,

a few months ago a great granddaughter is born
and she could be told but not know what was told,
the doorway to noting that the picture is a baby is still open
but who the baby is and how she relates can't get through,

the long goodbye is made up of myriad goodbyes
neither of us notices at the time,
Mother seems to be able to be dreamy content
and to not notice the leavings
but each of those goodbyes softly tears at my heart.

by Henry Walker
May 11, '05

She Follows a Call

while meditating
my trip to dissociate
is interrupted,
a bird calls
and it sounds like a kid calling me,
a pull back from detachment
to problem-solving the present,

I think Mother hears some call like that,
and her heart creates a shape
who tells her she's needed,

I remember those old stories
of someone lost in a forest
who follows wispy shapes deeper and deeper
all the while thinking they're headed home,

Mother is headed home
but it's a different home from what we see.

by Henry Walker
May 27, '05

A Dreamy Twilight

brothers and sisters have dropped away,
one older, the others younger,
only one sister still with us,

and Mother endures,

her body smaller than I've ever seen it before,
her consciousness often in a dreamy twilight,
a twice weekly morphine patch
takes the edge off the chronic pain,
which only gets worse,
and takes her slightly below open eyes

where her conscious meets her unconscious
and they tell each other tales
and we are blessed that nightmares
don't often gallop through the tellings,

she's comfortable
and at a place it's hard to know
since the reachings we know how to venture
have so much trouble grabbing anything solid,

I keep being asked: "How is your mother?"
and the best short answer that comes to me: "About the same . . ."

how remarkable and inexplicable
that Mother is holding on in this journey
and working so hard, somehow,
for a purpose we cannot quite grasp.

by Henry Walker
August 3, '05

Why so few visits?

there is the other, and there is you,
and, between the two,
a relationship,

and, as individuals change
the place of connection can bond stronger, or even break asunder,

I stand at the foot of Mother's bed and stare at her with love and connection
combined with feeling a stranger in a new land where I don't know the language,
or the people,

my heart and head work to tell me that I know her
and that the connection and relationship is at heart the same,

but I understand why many friends and family don't visit her any more:

she's so diminished in body
and in near all of the overt signs
of word and smile and eye
that tell us we are real to the other,
and connected,

and what a tragedy
if, for her, we are still tightly connected
and, for us, we can't touch her to prove to her
we know and feel that same bond--
and maybe we can't make the leap of faith
to believe that the relationship still endures
with so little evidence that it all is still real,

a leap of faith is how we reach toward the divine,

can we do less for the other so close to us?

by Henry Walker

August 6, '05

Between the mud and the stars

my updates about Mother
sometimes
become a bit more updates about me
dealing with her each new step down and away
and my not knowing how to feel,
think,
react,
act,

Mother has a simplicity about her now:
days flow into nights into days
in the same bed with the same routines,
we talk of how many cups she has consumed
what quantity she has voided,

she's comfortable--
and she endures,

while bladder infection after infection pulls at her strength,
osteoporosis and arthritis plague her enough
so that every four days a morphine patch
helps her hold them at bay
and also helps her drift deeper into dream,

physically, she's smaller, way smaller,
as less and less can get in,
psychically, she seems way smaller,
as less and less can get out,
it's as if she's fading. . .

the Hospice nurse today notes some signs
that the slope of her slipping has increased,
options to help any more than what we're doing
all but exhausted, barring the extreme,
and she's pleased that Mother seems so comfortable,
and so at peace,

why is she hanging on?

so many who have known her
praise the twinkle in her bright blue eyes
and the wonder of her sweet spirit,

perhaps her spirit is cleansing itself of this world even further
so that when she leaves
the step back to God will be that much shorter,

or maybe it's just the mechanics of the disease
and her machine is but running on fumes and inertia,

I'm my mother's son
and I prefer the stars.

by Henry Walker
October 14, '05

The death of a thousand subtractions

as dusk moves through this Piedmont autumn
I lose my view of the colors just now peaking,
those translucent leaves
with rich reds and golden yellows at their heart
who richly glow before us for awhile
till time and wind pluck and scatter them across the land,

I sit here with pen and paper poised
to write about the frustration
of how long Mother's goodbye is taking,
that death of a thousand subtractions,
the years of fearing the call in the night,
the time after time of reading the signs
that death is just around the corner,
the scurrying around to prepare
words and pictures to capture and celebrate her life,
videotapes of her casting out words
to net what she can of what she has done to be who she is,
the pulling together of a funeral service that will honor her and help us,
the making sure that resource and care are there for her
to keep her at home, comfortable and appreciated,

I sit here, and avoid,
with all the wily evasion I can,
I avoid looking inside, clear enough,
to where I'm ready for her to go,
this week when I tell others
of her pulling herself back from the brink, again,
their quick response is thankful and relieved,

I don't have a quick response like that,
I am tired and I cannot understand just why she's holding on,
she's slowly starving
and she has few bridges left
for either her or us to cross between her reality and ours,

the Hospice nurses don't know how she is holding on
and none of us, no matter how close, any longer know why,

it seems like it's time for her to let go
and I fight letting myself
feel that
think that
say that,

the leaves are leaving the trees,
and it's time,

and I still struggle to endure with her
while she keeps finding the way to not yet cross over.

by Henry Walker
November 10, '05

Tumble & Spiral Into Word

I am intrigued by the word
and by how much it exists before a thought
and by even how much it pulls a thought out of the nebulous ether
and by how much each needs the other as partner
for there to be any creative dance of meaning,

I sit to write a poem
and only when the words tumble and spiral onto the page
do I know just what I'm writing,

as a Little One experiences textures and desires
and the joys and pitfalls of will
inchoate sounds tumble and spiral forth from her
and back to her from us
yet only when a sound eureka into a word
does a thought snap into clear focus,

as an Old One experience textures, desires, joy, pitfall,
the thief called Alzheimer's can cut the connections
that anchor the self in the ether
to the clarity of understanding and relationship,
and the Self can be adrift in the Garden
before the fruit was eaten
that thrust us into knowledge of self as individual
and this world of good, evil, and odyssey,

the Word was a beginning
and I wonder how much it was the beginning,

I feel myself a writer
who writes most with his life:

with my teaching--laughs, tears, and words,
the cheer for every step forward of every student,

with all my relationships--touching, kidding, believing,
the cheer for every step forward of every person,

with my prayers--opening, revealing, centering,
seeking to connect with that which is
first,
deepest,
most profound,

and after some time of being and doing
I like to sit, consider, and express,
and words tumble and spiral to the page,
as they just did in this poem
which seeks the dance.

by Henry Walker
November 21, '05

Mother Still Holds

a poplar seed twirls into the creek seeking a future
while at the same time a sweet gum leaf flutters into the creek
remembering a past,
we go into Mother's room where she lies curled on her side
her eyes closed in a quiet dreaminess,
we touch her, talk to her, and softly tell her,
if she's ready,
that it's time for her to rest, to let go, to be again with Daddy,
she stirs a bit
as if something in tone, in pattern, in familiarity
pulls at her like a kid lightly tugging at her dress,
while she's busy with something else,
we sing to her:
from "Angel Band" of angels with their snow white wings
bearing you away to your immortal home,
from "Poor Wayfaring Stranger" ready to leave this world of woe
and going to a bright land to see father, mother, and no more roam,
from "I'll Fly Away" . . .
after a few more weary days of pain to a land where joy shall never end,
like a saint fasting now she only takes in a little,
and her eyes are closed most of the day as if in prayer,
she is so peaceful
and her soft cheek is warm like a mother's arms,
down by the creek I lift my eyes to the branches above me,
the sky is grey with clouds and a north wind shakes the trees,
one oak leaf floats down toward me in a perfect spiral till it hits a branch
spirals down a bit more
and is caught by the last branch above the ground
where it catches just enough to pause for several minutes
till a random breeze nudges it for the final fall,
Mother now holds till the final spiral calls her down.

by Henry Walker
November 23, '05

The Magnificent Journey

now when I think of Mother
I see her smiling, full of life,
wrinkles drop away, eyes animate,

she quickly heads out the door to see the bear,

local politics prod her to the typewriter for a letter to the editor,

she bustles about the kitchen whipping up angel biscuits and chicken salad,
and the coffee should be hot and fresh,

I see her after Gatlinburg's city council meetings
working friends and councilmen at the cabin
with cake and coffee and a push for the city to do better,

I sleep late while I know she's downstairs
taking care of our kids with doting attention and whole-wheat pancakes,

she delights in watching the kids play in the creek
and in any company who will drop by,

every meal on the porch a celebration of family and friends
and how good food can be:

I see her slice another piece of cake "just to even it up,"

I drive with her to the cabin to get it ready for renters so we can afford to keep it,

I see Daddy and Mother welcoming people to rent rooms
when Gatlinburg motels run out of space, all because money was so tight,

I see her at Nag's Head, at the Old Swimming Hole, and at Edisto:
bathing cap and suit on and loving the water,

I see her intense at the piano and hear

“believe me, if all those endearing young charms. . .”

I see her in her classes teaching the cook,
the literature and writing student,
yet really the whole kid
for whom her school was not designed as well as she encouraged,

I see the twinkle in her eye and the joy in her smile when we kids did well,
and the indulgent pride when she got me to dance to the radio when I was just small,

just 3 hours ago she was taking her last breaths,
for years that vibrant woman, whom I now see so clearly,
has been obscured by Alzheimer’s fog and wasting,

she would not yield
but she could not stop the distance
pushing itself
between us
and that so alive woman I see so clearly now,

she’s finished the hike and left the mountain of her life,
I see her last steps
yet I also see the magnificent journey of all her steps before.

by Henry Walker
December 7, ‘05

A Final Goodbye

as we stand by the grave
and wait for the workers to lower her casket,
as they clear away tent, carpet, and wooden frame,
as if as a door into the earth,

I look up and follow a brilliant shaft of light
to the sun setting in a deep maroon western sky
and then above to a Moon half from the full
and half from the empty,
the trees stark and grey in the bitter wind
that pulls hard at the warm life in our bodies,

the casket lowers,
a lily floats down upon it,
the vault is capped,

we each sprinkle orange clay dirt into the grave
to help us feel and know how final this goodbye is,

her room feels empty
just as her body looked empty in the casket,

two weeks ago today I touched her, kissed her,
and looked into her eyes
and I saw but a trace of her spirit which flickered just a bit
as if it were drawn away from here by a greater call
and only glances back because the memories of answering our calls
still pulled at her a bit,

Mother had nothing left for this world
her body but skin and bones
and the barest minimum to still breathe,
her spirit held on to be there for whatever needed done
for whoever needed her help
till finally her body had to rest

and she had to quit answering our calls upon her,
and she no longer needed to breathe,
none of it all is her problem now,

just two weeks before Winter Solstice
as the sun still moves to the south
yet slows in preparation for its profound pause
before it will start its half year return northward,
in that waning of the year
when nearly all the leaves have swirled off the trees,

Mother's run upon the Earth comes to an end,
her body slows, pauses,
and her spirit leaves it to return to the source,

we gather to celebrate
the bright flare of her life that soared across our skies
and mourn how much darker our skies will be without her,

and we commit ourselves to do our best to remember her brightness
in the fire with which we streak across the cold dark skies in our turn.

by Henry Walker
December 11, '05

Mother's in her eyes

it's been almost a season
since Mother was with us,
and, yet, that's not right,
she hadn't been with us for a long time before
in any way that spoke to us,
right up front like we're used to
in that day-to-day, face-to-face way
we are so tempted to feel as deep and real,
and still we feel alone at 4:00 a.m.
and whenever we wait for a letter, a call,
an email, a hope to be returned,

Mother was there with us as best she could be
while she worked so hard to be there for herself
amid the visions that flitted all around
and over the shutting down doors within her mind,

I'm working on a season of coping
with the finality of her last crossing away
from where I could at least still
kiss her,
listen to her,
stroke her hand,

my mother lives in my blue eyes
and in my touch in the kitchen,
in the way my students overwhelm me with how well they can learn and be,
in my laugh when I need to deal with some problem that I can't just solve,

and I can see her in the wholeness of our sons
and in the twinkling trouble
that joys within our granddaughter's eyes.

by Henry Walker

March 3, '06

connection & value

consider:

do we feel ourselves of value
to the degree to which we relate to the other?
am I of worth because another finds me so?
the very connections at my edge
pull me out of self-absorption
that can spiral me away from the world
and into despair and being lost,
not knowing where I am
because I don't know where others are,

imagine:

Alzheimer's drop after drop dissolves away
each sure connection one feels with family, friends,
the web of culture that holds each part in the whole,
words speak of that connection
and are the glue we use to hold true and feel real
and Alzheimer's takes away the glue from words
and fuzzes understanding,
the wayward wanderer still remembers the connection to others loved
but, like those deprived of the sensory,
they lose feeling themselves in relationship
and can drift into fear upon fear
for what is real cannot be held,
those of us who care for the soul Alzheimer's pulls away from us
can still work at holding to the connection
with our love, our presence, our touch, our kisses, our song, our patience,
though we can feel a goodbye each moment
as they seem to retreat from us
we can do what we can to relate,
both for whom we love and for ourselves
for we too need to be valued in connection.

by Henry Walker
May 15, '07

A Wholeness Yearns

a poem works
works so well
that I thank my lucky stars
kiss my finger
and point it to the sky in thanks
in thanks to the universe
that still lets me be
and lets truth flow through my fingers,

we are monkeys typing
but there's a wholeness in our soul
that yearns to get out,

I feel the battle,
against dissolution,
for one block to stay on top of the other,

if I didn't feel my wounds, my partialness,
why would I work so hard
to build the whole?
within the swirling winds
that matter-of-factly beat at us
to bring us down.

by Henry Walker
July 9, 2002

BEFORE THE STORM



(Clara) Jean Beaman Walker

July 22, 1910-

A woman:

a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a widow,
a grandmother, a great grandmother,
a teacher,

family always so important:

second daughter so they named her Clara
for father Clarence,
for the youngest Chickie she was "Little Mother,"
and she loved the story of selling fruit cakes
so they'd have money for Christmas
she and Margie racing down Kingston Pike
to deliver and get paid
and stopping to get Santa for Chickie
at the only store still open,
parents and brothers and sisters
so much a part of her identity,
of who she became,

learning always so important:

following her curiosity and her mother's charge
to get a college education
and continuing on into a masters
and sending half of her paycheck
from her first teaching job at Englewood
home to Magnolia Avenue,
and teaching till she got married and lost her job,
Depression rules,

as a girl reading the Congressional Record to her grandmother

who waited for a pension
from her husband's service in the Spanish-American War,
and who gave her chocolates Grandma didn't care for,
as an adult poring over every day's newspaper
every week's Time, the Nation too,
teaching sex education to other PTA mothers,
she and Daddy even counseling,
teaching English, a favorite, and home ec,
loving to cook with kids, who "cut her time to double",
spreading the mysteries of sugar caramelizing,
a marble slab, a white sauce, angel biscuits,
and summer transparency applesauce,
a favorite story described her as "lost"
till her parents found her in the icebox
eating butter,

every memory wound up with the memory
of what she ate then,

a feminist, will always so important:
she started her own business,
Camp Chewase during the Great Depression,
and hired her sisters and husband,
touching lives and making money,
teaching character,

building the cabin and renting it to pay for it--
we kids giving up our rooms for summer tourists
when Gatlinburg was crowded,
spring and fall she'd teach a full day in Knoxville,
drive to Gatlinburg,
strip and make the beds, clean it all,
even the tub no one was going to use,
drive back to Knoxville
and teach a full day the next day,

Daddy dies,
companion, friend, helpmate, half of her,
and she holds the family together:
Johnny finishing Duke and Columbia Law School,
Henry finishing Duke and UNC,
Clarence finishing UT and Vietnam,

and after her kids were grown and needed her differently
time to help Gatlinburg:
supporting all the good sides in political battles,
a liberal to the core,
EMS folks still appreciative of her effort, successful,
to keep the service in town,
advising on the Convention Center
and the Foothills Parkway,
at every City Council meeting,
all invited back to the cabin
for cake and coffee and politicking,
her Letters to the Editor a legend,

the mountains so important to her:
a "National Park Founder" says her certificate,
hiking with her long-legged father,
out the door to watch any visiting bear,
the Cabin on the Creek a gateway for
children, grandchildren, and, yes, great grandchildren
to learn to love forest, stream, and slope,

combining family, food, and nature in a favorite story
of sweetened condensed milk fresh peach pie,
plus whipped cream, at Laurel Falls,
including a thermos of coffee, her good friend,

snow cream the way to best celebrate the white stuff,

so like her mother whom she described as never stopping working,
till her body said "no."

and throughout it all her life has been love,

when all else fell away
and she wasn't sure
who was around
and what was happening
her unconditional love still beams from deep within,
when sleep and dimness keep pulling at her
enter a little child into her room
and her face is radiant,
eyes sparkling,

her life was love.

by Henry Walker

What A Spirit!

Persevering,
loss of husband, son,
breaking leg and wrist,
removal of a part of her colon,
breast cancer,
diabetes,
bladder giving up and then the catheter,
and kidney infection after infection
laying her low,
and she keeps bouncing back,

thank goodness for the laugh when there's nothing else to do,
thank goodness for antibiotics and "mind pills"
that help her keep her equilibrium,
thank goodness for caregivers
who help keep her body and soul together.

by Henry Walker
September 2, 2001

THE STORM



A Cry Can Be Good

A good cry
Hot Tears
Shuddering breaths
Eyes scrunched,

For long moments
The whole self
Convulsed and pure
No conflicting emotions,
I'm tapped into an artesian well
That flows from deep within
Up through layers of memory and thought and feeling
And blows out my controls
And the tears geyser,

A cry can be good,

Time to face harsher truths
Time to release pressure out a main vent
So less leaks out side channels
And the caldera never has to blow.

by Henry Walker
July 3, 1995

Who's the Programmer?

The mind a computer
A whiz of process,
No matter how quick and sharp
The product garbage
Without the ordering of value
The clarity of direction
That's worth going in,

The intellect a keyboard
Upon which
Demons and passions dance,
The automatic writing we live
Sources from deeper than the head
Darker than our surface self
From down at the heart
Where feelings drive our fingers
And shadows are real,

We need to know
Who within us is the programmer.

by Henry Walker
April 9, 1996

Flawed But Right

How I want to feel
mature and wise and forgiving,
how understanding, how spiritually developed,
gets challenged, severely,
by some people, by some situations,

I am a child
skipping along in the sunshine
who runs into a wall,

I am Pollyanna
until I drink a cup of experience
and turn into Chicken Little,

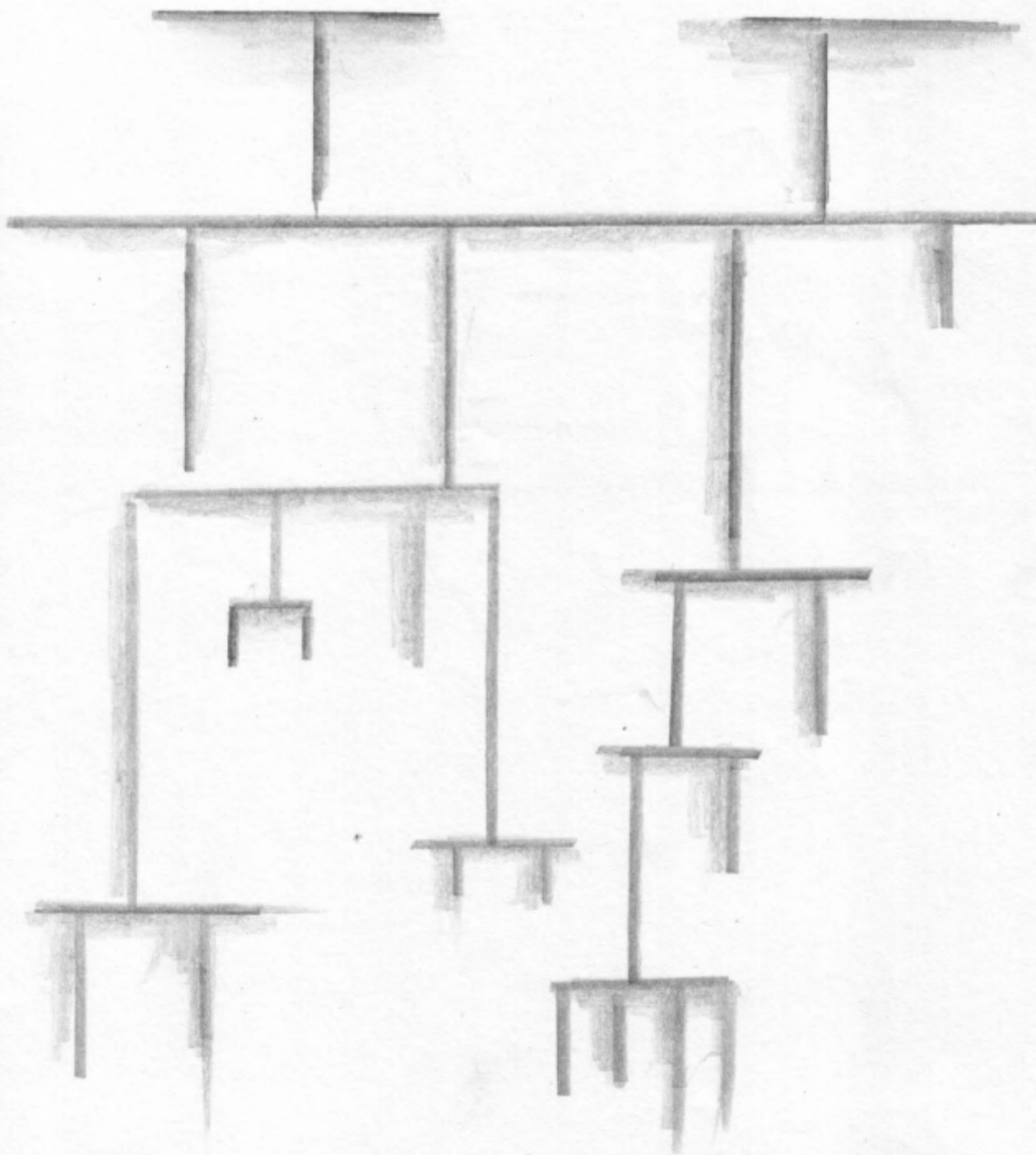
I am the perfect servant
fitting myself to the world
I am the perfect master
forcing the world to fit me,

When conditions don't match up to my philosophy
I question my perception
my understanding
my strength
but I want to hold on to my purpose,

Each of us
a flawed tool
but each of us with the potential
to be just right
for the crafter
to shape a new making.

by Henry Walker
March 31, 1997

BEFORE THESE CLOUDS



Centuries of Family

There it is, the name "John Beaman" carved in stone,
On the adjoining tombstone the name "Priscilla Beaman" carved in stone,
Died 1739, 1729, my first Beaman ancestors to be born on this continent,
The Beamans one thread to the past I share with my mother,
I stand before them, thoughts whirling, and close my eyes in prayer:
May I be a descendant worthy of the labor, the sacrifices,
The lives of effort that stretch before me through history and beyond,
May the substance of my life and parenting continue whole that great work
Of passing on our selves beyond us into indefinite future,
I hold those thoughts for as long as I can till the heat drives me away
Sun and sweat distracting me, I take my photos to remember, to share,
And in the shade of the old spruce trees
I study the lay of the land, note the flat ridge for the cemetery,
Just below the hill where the meeting house stood,
Close by the joining of two branches of the Nashua River,
Like two branches of my ancestry that came together in John and Priscilla
And flowed onward into the future,
We stop by the site of the ancient Beaman Oak
Whose history stretches back into at least John and Priscilla's time,
It's dead now, cut down four years ago,
Flowers planted all around its circumference and throughout its hollowed middle,
A thin band of strong solid wood still rings its outside,
only a few inches above the ground now,
It endured as long as it could, hundreds of years,
And now that it's gone, it still holds memory
Fading into the past like the details of all the lives before me,
We can write in stone and it will last long
But when we write with our lives with our children, we reach toward the eternal,
We send messages to the future that endure beyond wood and stone,
Messages that will forget who sent them
But messages that will live in the glory that each life can bring into being.

by Henry Walker
July 8, 1994

The Golden Glow of One Memory

There's not much on the Earth herself
that holds the stories of people long gone
not even our memories
of intense times tied to place
can find much purchase
a decade or two later
let alone longer,

My middle-aged body and mind
find their way up to Cherokee Orchard
to where my family picnicked when I was a boy
but it's devil hard
to match memory to place,
the trees have grown and
the leaves forget more every year,
someone must have
pulled out the pipe we drank from,

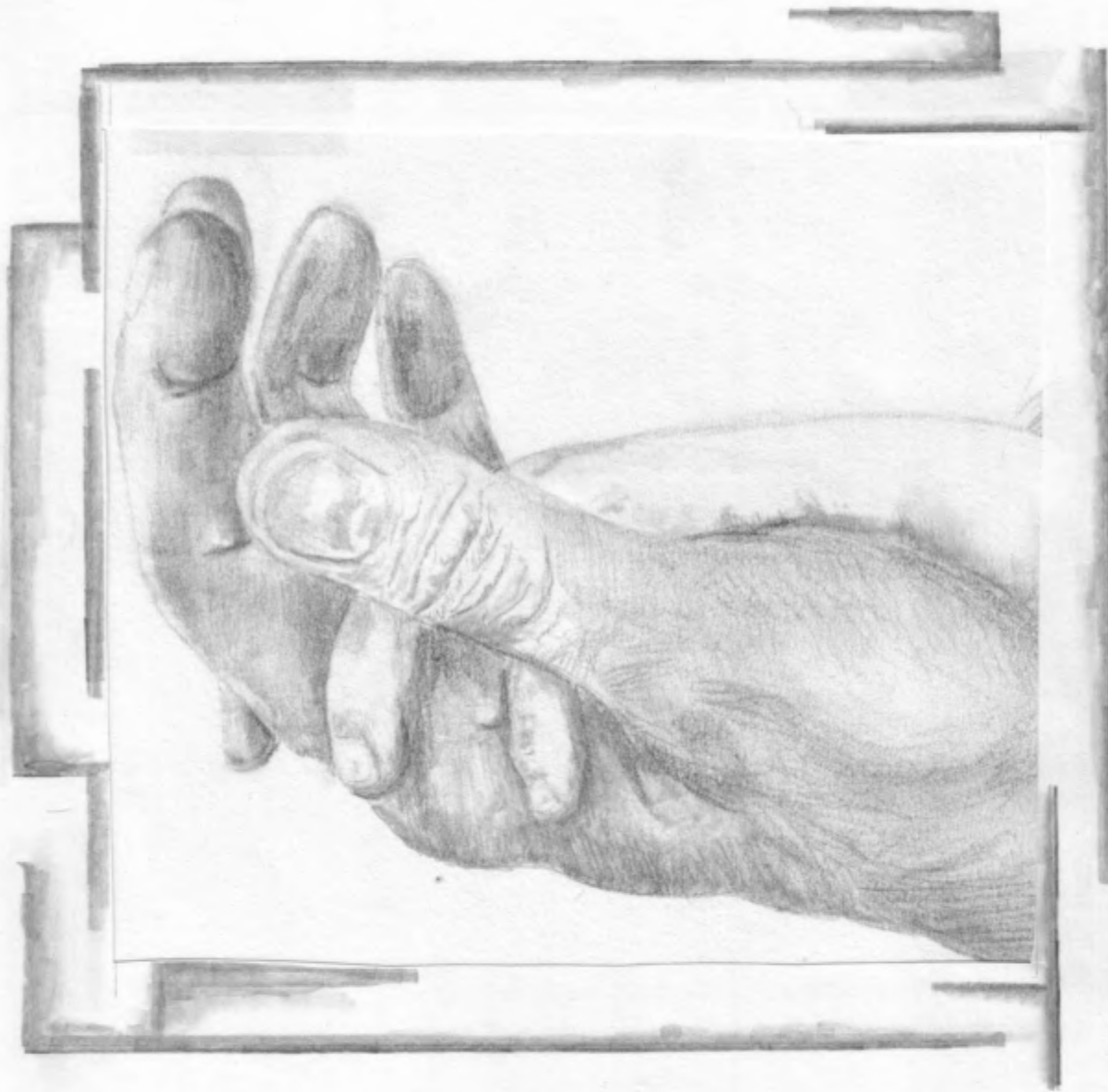
Details are gone but a golden glow
still wraps itself around those picnics,
Earth forgets, but I remember,
for a time,

I meander the old homesteads and wagon roads nearby
and wonder about all the other stories
families played out upon this forgetful Earth
that even grinds down the memory of mountains
where even our heaviest touch will be forgotten,

but the golden glow of one picnic memory
stays with me for a while.

by Henry Walker
April 3, 1997

MOTHER GIFTS ME



Laugh at Yourself

What gift from our parents
do we most treasure?

I love the gift of laughter
of being able to laugh at myself
appreciating the ironies
the log in my own eye
so good to step out
to step aside
and see yourself afresh
feel a pin in your balloon

to get the joke
your life is telling
without your knowing
you're telling it

so good to not take yourself too seriously
while taking today as the most important day of your life

by Henry Walker
March 23, 1998

I See God in Kids: I Teach

I can see the patterns
The patterns taking shape in kids
The wholeness that is building,
I can see the person behind the eyes, behind all the actions,
The self that is giving birth to the best person it can,

I am gifted with that vision
And like my mother I am a teacher:
I can see the patterns
And feel the effort to become, to realize,
What others can see as
Patience and calm within me, isn't,
I just see a different view than they,
A different world, a different universe,
A different ordering of will
And direction and possibility,
I can see the pattern that is building
And I can usually see how to help it
Come into being--

It pains me when a pattern twists wrong
Usually through the fault of others
Who should know better,
But sometimes by the will of the self,
I weep when the building pattern breaks,

I teach, I help, mostly I clear away the clutter,
I am a walker who guards the bounds
To let that within be
To let that within become
To let that within triumph.

by Henry Walker
March 27, 1994

I Hold a Child in My Heart

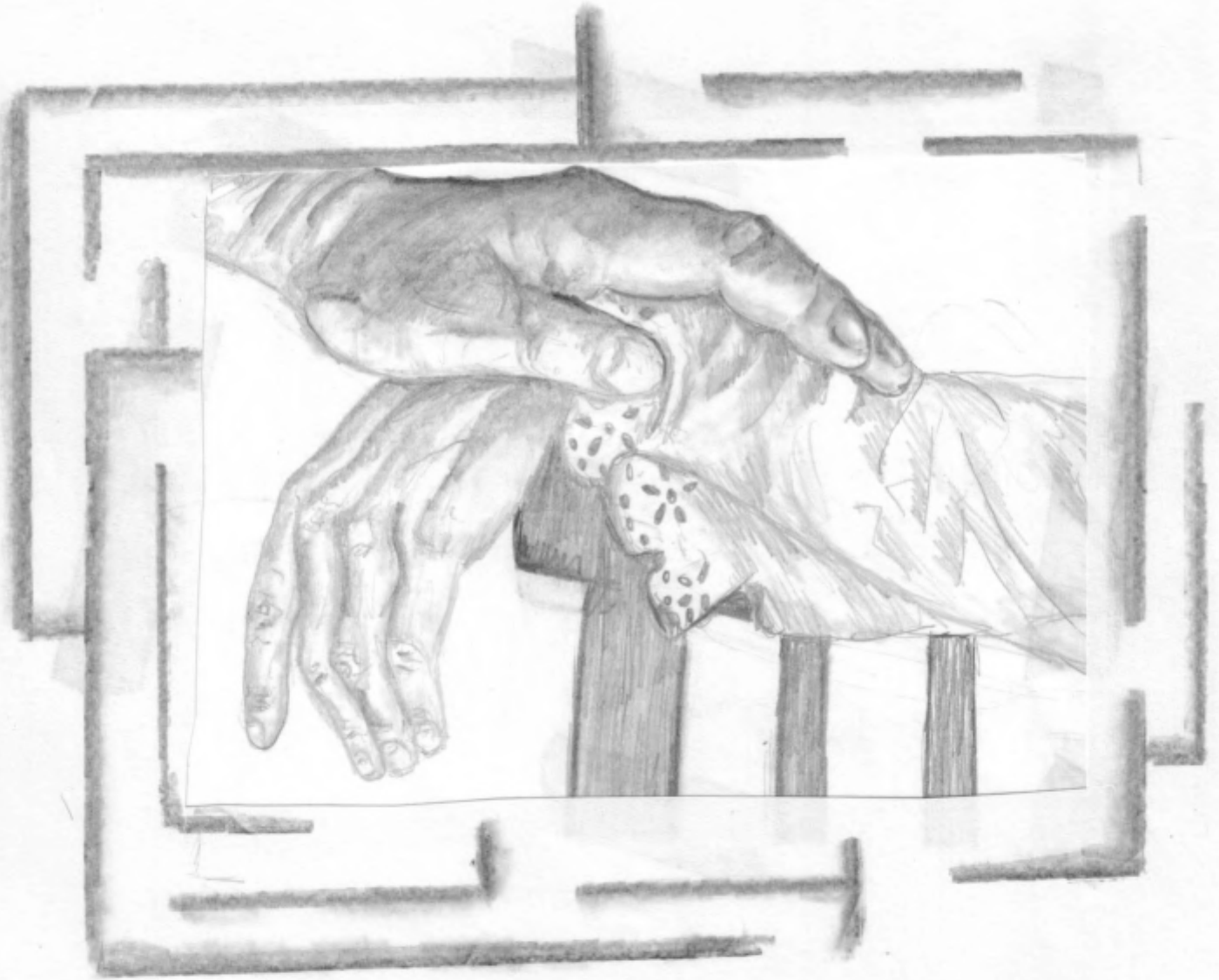
All that I do
that really matters is love,
like my mother,
when I hold a child in my heart
I almost know them
and I love them profoundly,
I see them
I feel them
I touch them
and I glimpse the effort, the purpose, the power of their being,

And I can connect, for awhile,
down deep
catch the eye open
the shutters deep within cracked open
just a bit to look out
and I see in
and I love
that furtive self
too afraid
to come all the way out
but godlike
in its uniqueness,

The poses, the postures, the pretense
nothing
compared
to the fragile within
who in the creation of self
mirrors creation itself.

by Henry Walker
March 17, 1997

WHAT TO DO?



To Feel As Another?

So hard
to feel
really feel
as another
feels
and even when it seems we do
we can never really be sure,
one way to check?
to imagine
how we'd react to the same stimulus
if we had the same history, the same experience,
other folks just us in different clothes,
other folks just us with different faces,
and since "a" produces "b" in us
that's how it must be for them,

Mother's heart is in the same place
but her mind has moved
and her words don't bridge the gulf between us
as they used to,
like an oracle who's been to the other side
and who needs someone to translate
and how do we know which translation gets it right,

a bear comes to her window,
is she excited? is she scared?
we check how we feel
we check what she gives out
we guess and we do what we think is right
and we can never really be sure we get it right.

by Henry Walker
July 2, 2000

*"Let me tell you, we love you all, and we're gonna keep on loving you as long as we can. . .
What's good about you all is you catch on,
you catch on, you catch on,
and you know it's not going to be perfect."*

*Jean Walker
December 31, 2001*

