The news of your illness came with a garden, to feed and treat you, to feed and treat me. My sweat had gone into it, along with a certain kind of determination that was the key to finding peace. I began by digging rows. They were about fifty feet long with thirty inches between them, and there were eight of them. If you remember, I didn’t tell you what I was doing. I had purchased some simple tools to help me with the job and found the time at twilight, after work and before bed. My lower back ached with the effort, and the soil had inked itself through the cracks in my skin. It was impossible to rub out, but it encouraged me to continue.

After the rows were dug, I asked you to take time to see them. You thought they were beautiful but maybe too much effort. You asked to help me plant the first row, and I wasn’t ready to see you weak, so I said yes. You remember that first planting? The flat of seedlings: so hard to take out. They were soaked in fish that dripped down our forearms. It smelled like the wrong side of the ocean. Do you remember? After half a flat or so, we had mastered it. I popped and you pushed, tender roots snapping as they went into the soil, and by four in the afternoon, we had our row of early spinach along the back of the garden.

When I decided to put in the lettuce, you had other things to do. They were the row up next, and the seedlings were ready. You had wanted badly to help. You said to me that it should be done together, but a frost was coming, and the surgery was scheduled.
There was nothing to be done. I planted each one gently, thinking of you all the time, and wondering what you would have looked like with your knees in the dirt.

You were going to be sick for a while. I knew that. I wanted to do something special. Carrots. But not just any carrots. They were purple, and I planted them in row three. I thought you could help me. It was a simple matter of spreading seed, but you were still confined to bed rest so I thought better of it. When the first sprouts came through, feathery and lime green, I thought you could help me weed, but the lamb’s quarters and pig weed confused you. Your hands shook with the effort, and so I cleared the row myself.

You wanted to do something, some kind of work to help me with mine, and so I asked you to weed the first two rows. By then the spinach and the lettuce had gotten big enough to clear the edges, so I handed you a scuffle hoe, thinking that it would make for easier work. I showed you how to use the hoe around the base and down the sides. I showed you how to clear the rocks, and you did, but one row was enough to put tension between your shoulder blades, so I finished up the second one myself.

When it was time to put in the nightshades, the sun had been coming through a little bit more each day, and you were feeling better. It was an early Saturday morning spent crouched among the soil. A chickadee was somewhere nearby, and the vanity of her call gave us conversation. One row for you, and one for me. We planted peppers and tomatoes. You liked them hot. That’s what you told me. So we put in jalapeños, cherry bombs, and Hungarian waxed peppers. But you didn’t think you could handle the acidity, so there were also yellow taxi, and striped German, and orange blossom peppers. You pushed the plants in and covered the holes and told me about the organic methods for
blight you had researched online. When it was time to hammer in the stakes, you returned to your place inside with a glassful of iced tea and a handful of medication.

I told you the summer squash had to go in quickly. I was scared that the cucumber beetles and the squash vine borers would find our little plot. The faster we got the squash in the better. These little plants came in peat pots, and the work was relatively easy. You were able to help me but the going was slow. It took more than an hour to finish it all: 25 feet of zucchini and 25 of yellow squash. You didn’t let their prickles get to you, and I was proud. When it was time to dig the row cover, I set you up in a beach chair with a book of 20th century poetry to read to me. I spread the filmy bit of material across the length of row and struggled before I realized it would have been easier with your help. I didn’t ask. I pushed the blade into the earth and used it to stabilize the edges. I was trying to prevent damage. That’s what I told you when you asked.

Row seven was half kale and half rainbow chard. I didn’t invite you. White had come to the surface of your brown skin. It took me less than thirty minutes to finish, and after I was done, I sat back in that beach chair with my own iced tea. The garden was almost finished, and I deserved a rest.

The final step was winter squash. I didn’t have the energy for flats, so I picked up a packet of seeds instead. You were miles away in some sterile bed and far from earth. I didn’t expect you. I pinched two seeds in my forefingers and pushed them into wet holes that I had punched into the row, as far up as my first knuckle. They went in one by one, muddier and muddier, until sweat and dirt ran together across my torso and along where hair met brow. Mud smeared the buttons of my slim white telephone when I called to ask about you. They told me you were resting but things looked shaky.
I had picked spinach and lettuce and bagged it. I had pulled carrots and boxed peppers and tomatoes for you to try. I fed you summer squash. You even tried the kale and chard. But by the time the butternut, the red curry, and the baby bears had come in, you had left me. I ended the garden hoping it had been some comfort to you – some help – as it had been to me.