

A photograph of a field of pumpkins, with several large pumpkins in the foreground and many more in the background, creating a sense of depth. The pumpkins are orange and have dark green stems.

TENDER IS THE HARVEST

LAURIE
MCCONNACHIE

THIS ESSAY ORIGINALLY APPEARED ON [WRITINGITREAL.COM](http://writingitreal.com)

image info

Yet, it is when the leaves begin parting from the branches and floating their way back to earth that they take my heart with them to a place as dark as the night soil upon which they land. When I see that first pumpkin of fall, I feel myself sliding into the abyss.

AS WE SLOWLY MAKE OUR WAY DOWN the hallway, I feel her lean into me. She lists to the left inside the shapeless, faded green-and-white striped cotton robe that engulfs her petite frame. I can't help but wonder how many other men and women have worn this exact same robe between hundreds of steamy sanitizing washes. What happened to those souls? What was their fate?

Deliberately, yet hesitantly, she places and grounds each step. Her feet are tucked inside the navy velveteen slippers from home that are accustomed to padding along on cushioned carpet. Here, pale gray linoleum floors mopped to a shine smell of pungent disinfectant. Florescent lights reflect off bright white walls that feel like they are closing in on us. They sting my reddened eyes, making me want to shut them completely.

We hear moans and calls from patients as we pass their rooms. I glance in open doors. Some look caught in uncomfortable slumber, monitors beeping, TVs droning. I see IVs and tangles of tubes. Some pump saline and drugs or liquid food into bodies. Others take out the flow of acrid-smelling fluids as they drip into clear bags clipped onto the sides of beds.

Next to the nurses' station, an icy metal cart displays a collection of pumpkins of different shapes and sizes. "The neurosurgeons have used their scalpels to show off their carving skills," the nurse declares with the levity of someone on the lucky side of the desk. They have sliced off the tops of the pumpkins, scraped out the slimy entrails, and cut out crude eyes, noses, and menacing smiles.

My mother stops, stares. Her hand tightens

around my arm. Fingernails pushing through my thick cabled sweater, into my skin. She looks up at me through the dullness that now clouds her gray-blue eyes. Eyes that were clear mere weeks ago. "How would you like to have your head cut open like a pumpkin?" she whispers. It is the eve of her surgery. It is Halloween. The day of the dead.

WHEN I WAS IN FIFTH GRADE, MRS. Reynolds asked our class what our favorite season was. My hand was the first to fly up. "Fall!" I called out. Fall was mounds of cheerful pumpkins in huge bins greeting us at the grocery store and adorning porches. It was bright October days giving way to fresh November rains that brought out the scent of the evergreens to grace the air. Autumn meant warm, knitted sweaters and woodsy-smelling smoke swirling out of chimneys.

As the darkness of the days quickened, it meant more time with my mother inside our 1950s brick rambler tucked above the salty waters of Puget Sound. We would sit in the kitchen, sharing warm oatmeal cookies straight off the sheet and apples so fresh they had veins of juice running through them.

There, at the round, white Formica table, under the glow of the green and gold hanging glass lamp, my mother and I would sit together every day as afternoon slid into evening. With steam from the pots simmering on the old white stove forming on the inside of the window while heavy rains pattered and dripped down the outside, we shared our lives. My mother would ask about my day, listen to my troubles and laugh at my jokes,

share her own stories and wisely guide me through homework and life.

But life doesn't change on a dime. It changes with a CAT scan in a windowless room after your family notices you aren't getting over what you insist is the flu. It changes when the technicians inject dye into your veins, slide you into the big metal tube and scurry behind the protective wall of glass to activate the radiation-emitting machine so they don't get cancer. Life changes with a scan that looks inside your brain and crashes your safe little spot on the planet with its findings.

❖

GENTLY, I GUIDE HER BACK TO ROOM 221 where my father and a nurse are waiting. The nurse holds slim silver scissors and my father holds a brown paper bag. We lift and swing my mother's legs onto the bed. Before my mother leans back fully onto the pillow, the nurse jumps in. She starts to shear with the distracted dexterity of someone who has done this countless times. Auto-pilot. Perhaps she is wondering what groceries she will pick up for dinner after her shift, on a night my mother will have none.

The nurse's fingers flit with quick snips across my mother's head, from front to back, and across again. My mother's soft brown curls fall all around her shoulders, her lap, the sheets and floor. My father tries awkwardly to keep up with the nurse's haphazard movements, to catch the falling swaths while keeping out of the moving path of the scissors. He is like a child cupping his hands under falling snow, racing to catch flakes before they melt.

When the flurry quiets, tears trace directionless paths down his cheeks as he looks at me imploringly, quietly clutching

the crumpled bag. My mother, silent, tilts her head downward. Tears drip off her barely lined cheeks wetting the wisps of hair that have landed on her lap. Her head suddenly bald on this freezing October night. Her crowning glory fallen all around her.

The next morning, the orderlies pull my mother on the gurney past the display of pumpkins with their hollow eyes and empty smiles. They cart her through the wide doors to surgery. On the other side, the surgeon readies himself. He will use a saw to cut through my mother's skull, exposing her brain, which he will inhabit for the next ten and a half hours. What ghoulish monsters will he find as he attempts to trace and excise the tumor's insidious tentacles that reach into the folds and crevices of her brain?

❖

IT IS MY TWENTY-EIGHTH FALL. I HAVE JUST parted from my mother. I don't know if this was our final goodbye. She could die in surgery. I am still becoming. Whom will I marry? What did she feel that made her decide to marry my father? What will I do with my career? How old was I when I smiled for the first time, took my first step? Will I have children? I will need her advice and help. So many unanswered questions yet to ask.

Two days ago, I was carefree in sunny California where I had lived for the last ten years, riding on the high of a recent trip to Greece, a gift from my mother who had been excited to take it with me vicariously. Now, as I wander the hospital halls, my whole body clenched, I see the phone the nurse had handed my father to tell me the news, his words almost impossible to decipher through his sobs. The phone call that overturned my world. Distraught, I had grabbed

my still-packed suitcase and headed back to the airport. Staring out the window at Mount Rainier as the plane descended into Seattle, I repeated a silent mantra to myself, "Let it be benign."

❖

NOW AS I WAIT, HOUR UPON DRAGGING HOUR, I think of my mother's modesty. I try to distract myself from the image of her head opened wide to the intrusion of bright lights and barbaric instruments and at the mercy of a team of humans enshrouded in blue scrubs and white masks, those whom she has never met and never will. I pick at cafeteria food I cannot taste and flip through worn magazines with fake smiling faces, no words attaching to my mind. Needing air, I push through the heavy hospital doors that open to the early November wind that whips at me head-on.

This city that I grew up in, know intimately, feels more foreign than the ones I just visited halfway around the world. Nothing looks the same. The sun shines brightly like it did on the fall days I used to love here, but the warmth it emanates is too far away to feel. It cannot penetrate the chill permeating my being.

And then, the call finally comes. Surgery is over. We convene in a tiny waiting room adjacent to the main lobby. It is dimly lit by outdated lamps, filled with a few chairs and has its own door to close, perhaps for privacy, perhaps to muffle the sound of the cries of the sequestered. How many countless others have waited here, frightened and expectant, to face the doctor who has sliced open their loved one? Holding his surgical mask in one hand, he wipes his graying brows with the other. He looks at no one in particular and with dreaded words that seem to have little feeling beneath them, tersely declares, "I couldn't get it all."



My mother is wheeled back into her room. Any sparse remnants of her shorn hair are now completely shaved off. The flaps of her scalp that were peeled back to expose her skull have been stretched back together in a sharp fleshy seam that reaches across the top of her head, from one ear to the other. Small spots of blood have already seeped through and crusted around the staples. She is sleeping, wounded.

❖

IT IS NOT THE LAST TIME MY MOTHER'S HEAD will be cut open like a pumpkin. A few months later, another surgeon will try his scalpel-wielding hand at slaying the goliath glioblastoma, the most aggressive type of brain tumor. Then, on a spectacular autumn

image info

day with leaves dancing and beckoning outside her window, her legs will buckle under her for the last time.

On Christmas Eve, she will strain to utter a barely audible “I love you” under the glow of the white lights on the wreath that hangs above the tall wooden dresser. It will be the last time I will hear the calming sound of my mother’s voice. By Valentine’s Day, she will have fallen into the open-eyed stare of a coma.

For the next five and a half months, I will turn my mother every two hours and tend to the web of tubes through which my father reaches his arm to wrap around her every night. It will become a ritual, rising from my bed in my childhood bedroom, which I haven’t inhabited since I was eighteen, to turn her body to abate bed sores. It is a constant rotation, two hours on her back, two on her right side, two on her left. Repeat.

Unimaginable skills will be added to my unplanned repertoire, forcing me to face down my innate squeamishness. I learn how to change the sheets on the bed with her still in it, to clean the tube that transits nutrition straight into her stomach, and search nightly on her bruised belly for a tiny spot of skin that has healed so I can reinject it with heparin to stave off blood clots, a threat to the bedridden.

Using the plastic wand that drains into the small machine with the clear plastic canister, I will suction saliva and phlegm from her mouth and throat that she cannot swallow or spit out so that she doesn’t choke, and it doesn’t seep down into her lungs and cause her to aspirate. Several times a day, I will dump its contents into the toilet and flush it away with my dreams about how my life was going to be.

I will race in for the uncountable number of flinching, jerking seizures, never knowing if it will be the one that causes her to die, and

peer into her once penetrating eyes that saw deeper into me than any others could. Eyes that no longer see me. Standing in the darkness at the doorway, I’ll strain to listen for the sound of her breath. The breath that assures me that I am not motherless.

It seems only right to hold a space of possibility and hope around her. I have heard the stories of people coming out of comas. The miracles. Why not her? Because she is kind and good, her spirit gentle and generous. She is not just the mother I need. She is what this world needs.

But, in the middle of a warm, still July night, at 1:18 a.m., as I turn her onto her left side and prop a pillow behind her back, her breath will suddenly start to rattle and labor. It will be unexpectedly loud and wrenching. My own insides will churn and overtake me as I bear witness. Helpless. She will strain and gag, look in horrific distress and then just as suddenly, she will go silent. A silence unlike any other. While all the neighbors lie sleeping, safe in their dreams.



THERE ARE REMINDERS OF MY MOTHER throughout the year. On random days, anything can trigger my grief. The path by the waterfront that we used to walk along together on breezy spring mornings. The brightly lit boats that cruise the shore playing carols we went to see every December from the beach, cups of hot cider warming our hands through our mittens. Frothy whitecaps on the ocean water on a stormy winter day. A spray of tiny daisies in the verdant spring grass. Chanel Number 5. Her blue hairbrush with the white bristles entwined with strands of her thick brown hair that still sits in her bathroom drawer.

Yet, it is when the leaves begin parting from the branches and floating their way back to

earth, that they take my heart with them to a place as dark as the night soil upon which they land. When I see that first pumpkin of fall, I feel myself sliding into the abyss. I am back by the nurses’ station, feeling the grip of fear from my mother meshing with my own. Pumpkins, once a symbol of autumn jubilation and the warmth of home, are now one of darkness and loss. And they are everywhere, mocking me with their jagged, empty smiles.

The earth keeps spinning in its orbit. The seasons circle around. I grasp at anything that might lessen the haunting, aching to reach past the graphic flashbacks to the peace I once felt. They travel with me, hound me, wherever I go.

On dark Monday nights, I meet with a group of grieving women. We sit in a circle around a table with a lighted ivory votive and box of

Kleenex. In that room, we share what torments us, whom or what we have lost, and we wonder together, yet alone, how we will find joy or meaning again. The counselor tells us that “The only way out of grief is through it.”

I learn to meditate, to work with my thoughts, to think of the happy times tucked in our modest house, the place I once thought so safe and impervious to suffering. I let the tears flow, not trying to block them. I lean into the pain, breathe, and remember what was good that I can still carry forward. It is conscious and it is effortful.

After many turns of the earth, I feel life growing inside my belly. I take long walks in woods under shimmering trees. I see pumpkins and feel my hands touch the growing roundness of my belly. Now I am the mother of a little girl with soft brown curls



image info

and big blue eyes, the whites as bright as the ever-changing clouds scudding across the sky.

“Mommy, I’m so excited for Halloween. Can we get a pumpkin? I can’t wait!” I see in her an innocence I have long forgotten. Her eyes are shiny and opened wide to life, the way mine used to be. Now, the blinders I wear have become as much a part of me as my limbs. They are my armor and unbeknownst to her, she is asking me to take them off. She is unwittingly goading me to go where my heart no longer allows.

One misty October afternoon, I pick Keira up from school after a morning of kindergarten. On the island where we live, a small farm sits wide and serene along the road we travel to head home. Miniature pumpkins adorn the tops of each fencepost. Down below the slope of grapevines, lies a bountiful field of bright orange spheres, their roots still reaching into the earth.

“Can we go get a pumpkin, Mommy?” She has been pleading every day and each time, I look away and say, “Not today, honey.”

“But why not? Why can’t we ever go get a pumpkin?” I hear again the disappointment and feel it grate against my heart. On this day, unlike the others, something inside me guides me to turn the car around and go back.

I drive through the open wooden gates and follow the dirt road down toward the fields, brown dust stirring up around my gray car, clinging to its sides. “I can’t wait, Mommy. We are going to have so much fun!” As soon as I park, she bursts out of the car and is running toward the vast sea of pumpkins. I breathe in and force myself out.

I stand and watch as she runs, her long brown hair bouncing down the length of her small, young back. Her blue flowered dress billows in the breeze above her pink sparkly boots. “Come on, Mommy!” She calls out to me, her voice high and pure. “Look at all

these pumpkins! Aren’t they beautiful?” She dances and skips around the patch and waves me toward her, beckoning. “Mommy, bring a wagon so we can collect the pumpkins!”

The only way out is through. I glance toward the gate at the top of the hill and back toward this innocent girl that I have brought into the world. I throw my blinders to the dirt, grab the rusty handle of a worn black metal wagon, and head toward my daughter and the pumpkins.

“Let’s fill up the wagon,” I declare.

“Really?”

“Yes.” I hear myself affirm. She hoists in small sugar pumpkins and then scurries ahead in the field until one calls to her. With a giant smile, she claims one that is half her size. It sits large and ripe in the dirt, proud and unassuming. It is symmetrical, its unblemished skin a luminous orange. Time and weather have formed the stem into a wide and pleasing gentle twist that narrows into the stalk joining the earth.

“Mommy, please help me.” I look at the sky. I look at the pumpkin. I look at my daughter. Bending my knees, I gather my strength and heave it into the wagon, now overflowing with our own cornucopia. Her hand meets mine inside the handle and together, we pull our bounty up the bumpy path.

After I pile our load onto the big scale and pay for it, I sit on an old wooden apple box. “Look at me,” Keira calls from inside the maze of hay for the children. “Take my picture!” She poses with a smile next to a faceless scarecrow. The cool air cupping my cheek is fragrant with the heady scents of dirt and hay, vines and vegetables. I take in a sip of cider pressed from freshly picked apples from the cup between my palms.

We make our way home and unload the eight pumpkins onto our porch. “I can’t wait to carve them,” Keira exclaims, and I feel

myself flinch. A few weeks later, as Halloween draws near, we carry her favorite, the biggest one, from the porch into the kitchen and place it on the tarp I have laid over the wooden table. It is the eve of Halloween.

Keira climbs on top of the table next to it. “Please, Mommy, get the knife. I can’t wait for you to help me carve the pumpkin!” I think of my mother and her head. My chest tightens and my stomach hollows at the memory of the pumpkins carved by those surgeons showing off their prowess with the knives so many years ago. I force my attention to what is in front of me, not behind. I pick up the knife.

“I want to see all the yucky, gory stuff inside!” I feel the ache for my mother as I look at my daughter’s expectant face. The grandmother she will never meet. I force back the tears I feel forming before they can fall. They are not Keira’s to catch.

It takes several attempts before I can pierce the long, serrated blade completely through the dense orange flesh. Back and forth, I saw, working the knife in an arc around the thick stem until I complete the circle. Holding the stem at its base for stability, I feel the top break free from the body. Gleefully, Keira grabs for the lid I have just created. She pulls it off and eagerly peers inside.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, I DRIVE BY THE pumpkin patch and see a farmer riding his tractor back and forth over the slope, loosening and turning the remnant roots into the dark brown soil. The field, overflowing with abundance mere weeks ago, now lies fallow. Only a smattering of orange orbs remains. They lie scattered randomly, unchosen, across the deeply grooved rows of dirt.

The next day, I go by again and see some of those pumpkins arranged in a large C-shaped

semi-circle, an arc at least fifty feet across that can easily be viewed from the road and even the sky. What is the farmer up to? What is he making with these leftovers and what is driving him to make this mysterious design in nature?

The following day, I am eager to drive by again to see if anything has changed. With Keira tucked in the backseat, I pull over and look. He has gone, leaving his work completed. An intentional, yet random act of beauty. What made the farmer do this? I wonder. Is it to lift up people whom he will never meet as they drive by? Is it for him? For everyone? For me?

“What’s that big circle of pumpkins in the dirt, Mommy?” Keira asks as we climb out of the car and stand on the edge of the road to survey the scene. We huddle together in the November wind. The late sun rakes over us and the pumpkins glow in its light, a large warm golden-orange ring against the almost-black earth.

Was it a whim, an act of pure fancy? Or, is this his way of taking what is leftover and transforming it into something new? Different, yet beautiful in its own unique way? Does he also struggle with trying to live with his wounds and losses as he toils out in the fields? I feel the grief rise from that fathomless place inside me and then the momentary surge of something vaguely familiar that I know I was born with, but have forgotten.

“What are those lines in the middle?” Keira points at the three rows of pumpkins radiating outward in three directions from the largest one in the center, until they touch the edge of the circle.

“It’s a symbol, a sign,” I explain, unable to pull my stare away, my breath at first halted, now slow and resonant.

“What does the sign mean, Mommy?”

“Peace,” I whisper. “It means peace.” ❖