

love in the universe

— Christine Ernst 2018

we talk for two hours at starbucks precious time for Celia these days  
she brings me a small lavender square a patch in a quilt someone is sewing for her mother  
all the strong women are invited to write a note to Pam on the fabric in sharpie  
we will wrap her in love if not in health Celia explains that the cancer spreads like moss  
she says the visiting nurse told them last night to cherish every moment now  
and that she responded indignant laughing *but we are gals of the future we have plans*  
she navigates the conflicting narratives of her grandmother who prepares for the worst and her  
mother who awaits the strength to heal  
she reasons that both are necessary stories right now she says that both could be true it is  
unclear so she cleaves to her mother's plan because  
the story is energy and her mother must be raised lifted strengthened by the future  
even if there is no hope  
we talk of the college she will attend in the fall how her fears of adulting and change are  
diminished and right-sized by her mother's illness  
she says *I will move away I will make friends I will have roommates I will do well and  
these things do not worry me anymore*  
with a jolt I remember she is 17 I am 51 exactly three times her age and I listen closely  
young prophet she says that this is at once the best year of her life and the very worst and  
that she knows that no matter the outcome she will be okay her connection to her mother  
transcends time and form she knows that this is simply their current journey together  
they will meet again and again through lifetimes  
and she recites the prayer her mother raised her on

*Love above me Love below me Love before me Love behind me  
Love beside me Love around me Love inside me Love unto me  
Love in the world Love in the universe*

the two hours feel like 10 minutes and we walk to our cars  
I tell her carefully not wanting to burden her further that I am impressed in awe in fact  
of her strength her optimism that she is a sunbeam a rainbow a gift to her mother  
herself us all *you are a sparkling human, Celia* I say trying to encapsulate my feeling and  
I mean not like glitter not shine she is vital vibrant she scintillates  
a transcendent being she laughs she says *oh I have so much to sparkle for*

two weeks later at the hospital I sit with her and her mother the sign on the door says *no  
clergy* exclamation point we admire the completed quilt each message sewn into the  
colorful patchwork I imagine this on Celia's bed at school this fall Pam says *this is so  
fucking depressing gimme some dirt girlfriend* I oblige we laugh over the old stories  
she tells me she is not afraid and will not be in pain when she transitions from this life she  
says she knows her next life will be near Celia I think *they are gals of the future they have  
plans* I watch them both there is a rhythm in them an underlying thrum of loving purpose

even as they prepare for this particular end      I watch them breathe and speak and smile  
and laugh    Celia moves carefully tenderly around her mother  
Pam's eyes do not leave her daughter      I think *you two form a multitude*  
mother and child are luminous in the july evening's dying light      I cannot take a photo in this  
sacred space but I need to remember this      this union    this dance    this sweet leavetaking  
it is a lesson I will need in the future  
I have overstayed but before I go      Celia says I must learn the movements that go with the  
prayer that her mother raised her on  
she stands at the foot of her mother's bed      her long limbs seem to glow in the dusk  
*Love above me    Love below me                      Love before me    Love behind me*  
*Love beside me    Love around me                      Love inside me    Love unto me*  
*Love in the world    Love in the universe*  
amen