

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

Emily Bernard

Love, in Four Movements

I. Water

Each mind is a small Titanic
we order the things we love.

There are never enough lifeboats
orchestras will play our tragedies

II. Air

We give altitude to the things we love
we throw ourselves into the night sky

In the end our organs will carry us upwards as
balloon animals rising in helium to the Heavens

We will argue about forming constellations as Rorschach
pictures in psychiatric offices while our husbands yawn.

III. Earth

We will stay in the ground when we die
in the hopes that flowers will be cast

We will visit our graveyards
after book clubs on Sundays

The stones have names written up in catalogues
in hues written like new shower curtain shades

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IV. Fire

The truth is this: I've been told to place you in a blazing fire
until your ashes are small enough to be poured into a vault

with a number on the side. My Jewish father
warned me not to. He flew down last week

thinking you were Catholic
in your clean white dress.

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The More Perfect, or Less

The moon has holes
the colors in our fireworks never explode
their colors properly

never boom frequently enough, disappearing
long before they crash through us--
I suspect our bodies would turn to crayon
and back to childhood

Carnivals are always coming
through towns
fireworks always burning to grace
tiny foam animals will
strut on wires

The child who gets the two stick popsicle,
will eventually split it in half
and throw
one on the pavement

We watch fireworks in the sky
mistaking everything for Heavenly bodies
our minds attend astronomical studies
while fieldtrips inside of us
become celestial (pin-cushioned

in star-struck
love, love that is really just a plane overhead,
with 150 passengers late to
real families)

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as trips to fictive emotional
moons and back,
where we eat frozen foods
and think about everyone we ever loved
over and over again.

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Learning

He tells her, spiders can build their webs
without being told what to do, packs up
his bags, and leaves her on the driveway.

Leaves can change color without timers
she doesn't understand how to bake or
new shower taps. They used to watch

birds at the bird feeder, with slender necks stuck
for seed, they ate sleeves of sesame crackers and
brined their tomatoes in basements like trophies

In the spring she will try to take happiness and
open it up like a parasol, purchasing new Billy
Collins anthologies and at local grocery stores

She will buy chocolates from European countries.
Across from her apartment she will enroll in two
classes concerning American politics, full of men.

The leaves all splayed out in the gutters now,
and when dogs sniff her sandwich wrappers
to lick the butter she will drive home, alone.

She will throw out the expired chocolate paste
bought in a feminist sex shop with her college
friends on a bachelorette trip to Provincetown

In the kitchen of her Cambridge apartment
she will run at low speeds on her treadmill
and watch Oprah talk about women on TV.

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My Father The American Hero

I.

My father proposed in front of Mount Rushmore
He liked to act in the presence of greater men;
When my mother left he beat on her Jacobean door.

He slapped me once, and afterwards made blueberry pancakes
The spatula grasped by his nicotine nail beds
In the afternoon we toured Yosemite
With headsets on.

On late afternoons he would do
The Times crossword
Sometimes he would leave the patio to call my mother
While my sisters and I took our baths.

He took us to South Dakota, and quoted from plaques
How men had died from the dynamite,
How Cary Grant had hung by a rope for Eva Marie Saint,
Spraining his wrist.

II.

None of us will buy real estate in Heaven;
In the summer we will migrate down South,

The showers will be too cold; the Church we attend
Will be non-denominationally cavernous
It will serve apple juice in paper cups every Sunday.

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In its best moments, I imagine Heaven
A little bit like California, with its perfect mangos
Stacked up in cardboard displays by

Mexican employees who will throw
Expired nectarines into dumpster trucks.

III.

My father had a plastic lung and an intravenous
when he apologized for being an imperfect man.
He didn't make his peace with God in time;

The eulogy I wrote alone in his house
To the gurgle of a garbage disposal broken
years ago—all of his travel books still dog-eared.

At his funeral I told about the time
he drove to a hardware store at one in the morning
and bought huge, fist-like bulbs to plant

As we were cleaning out the basement
my oldest sister found them, peeling off plastic
wrapping, the receipt sticking out
like a white sunrise.

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Inside the Family

We were on vacation when it happened:
My brother and I. Our bodies slightly
Darker from the sun, sunscreen
Rubbed into us.

The hotel phone ringing we were
Told your lung collapsed like the leg
Of a dining room table bought too cheaply
At the Ikea outlet store.

The first time our car broke down, we greased
The engine with Vaseline.
My brother and I sitting on the couch, knees
Pressed into one another

My mother got \$1,000 for its parts
The scrap metal yard where huge, half-bodies
Of automobiles lay like exotic animals
Taking their last breaths

Later we will decide whether to put her ashes
in our dining room or not. Yellow was her favorite
color: she had decorated
from things she had seen in catalogues.

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**Excerpt from a Sequence
On Loving Black and White
Movie Stars**

When I told
my father I found
Fred Astaire handsome
he turned on the staircase
and laughed. Fred Astaire had
a women's figure he told me. I fell
in love over again the moon reflecting
In shadowy palette I was not naïve
while waltzes took their place
I had been taught to stand
on my Father's shoes
I began to
1-2-3

Not
that you
haven't had a few
epiphanies, but calendared
out you're barely above the Old
Testament and not enough of them
had to do with love. There were times
when you wore XL trench coats you
took different pills depending on
who you wanted to fuck
that night: it was
always Fred
Astaire

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We will
enter grocery
stores drunk on
Saturday nights. We snort
concert halls of hallucinogens
We call our Fathers under old faded
electric blankets (part electric chair part
stuffed animal) only to hang up
prematurely. We will turn on
the television to Shall We
Dance until iteration
will allow us to
extrapolate
human
soul

In bed
fucking Fred
Astaire probably
felt like orchestras
when the playbill is too
dark to read, when we forget
how many scenes are left until
intermission and in the
darkness we will
finally begin
to fall in
love

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On Needing Books

You stood there with
your chalkboard and talked us
into growing up

We disassembled
the tree-house, let crayons fall
under couches

Our guardian
angels doubling as one-night
stands until love enters
the vernacular

We will wed
men and women with
certificates becoming family;
everything

becomes incestuous in America
but I'm not convinced
that's the way

Parts of us
will be lost in unexpected places
as bicycles stolen
outside the public libraries--

The word wonder
will be used, still, and that's
not an accident.