

## 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.