

# *Catharine Lucas*

## **BURNING LEAVES**

*for Marianne Leppmann, at 90, 1989*

The soul yearns outward  
the body turns to salt, this slow pillar-making  
punishment enough for looking back.  
How release the ready heart?

Images flood the night  
a flush of false dawn, breath of spring  
beat of memory like birdwing, a letter in his hands,  
"From an admirer, someone in love with you..."  
Already taken by the finest of them all,  
you're pleased he knows another thinks *you*  
finest of them all

New biographies unbury your oldest friends  
corpses nakedly exposed  
"girlish letters no one's business"  
"a man's confessions of unmanly need"  
This, you will not allow. Each night, by candlelight,  
you unrecord the history of a love  
that's only yours, not time's  
nor progeny's

October, the smell of burning leaves—  
letters unfolded give off his scent  
fine German script imprints the air  
black flakes breathe to ash

I protest—  
"Maybe burn only the love letters?"

"They are all love letters."  
You have not looked shy like this since he was alive

*(continued)*

*(Lucas, Burning Leaves, page 2, new stanza)*

In 1940, you dreamed the black, devouring cloud, Europe  
in flames. Joachim, the engineer, welcomed by the Turks,  
traveled ahead; you, the doctor, followed with the children.  
Survivors. Stunned, as the pages turned.

Four score years along, once more he travelled out ahead,  
destination: no known country.  
Survivor, you wear his absence like a presence, trust  
he waits for you, a place prepared

This time, you travel light—  
grow lighter still, this slow and careful way,  
each day one letter gone

I remember how the smell of burning leaves  
in childhood carried the scent of winter;  
it was how we prepared: a blaze, a drifting  
plume of smoke,  
a Festival dance—

A young girl runs across the floor  
to meet her love