



by Erika Burkart

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Fiction

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Secret Letter

Geheimbrief

review

Geheimbrief is the latest collection – sixty-two short poems in all – by the Swiss writer and poet Erika Burkart, who was born in 1922, has published poetry and novels since 1953, and has won numerous prizes and awards, among them the Grosser Schillerpreis, the most prestigious Swiss literary prize which she shares with the likes of Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Max Frisch.

The volume opens with a quotation from Goethe's *Faust* – 'What is it that grips you thus at dusk?' – which rightly suggests that the main theme will be that of old age, the thoughts of a writer whose life is coming to a close and who feels words, memories, pictures slowing slipping away.

*There I stand on the gravel path/ and cannot grasp
it/would like to keep up/ from the depth – a leaf/ that can
remember its roots.*

Many of the thoughts in these poems centre in words and forgetting, and the acceptance of our human inability to seize and express the essence of life. Over and over again the poet juxtaposes the limitation of human words with the inexpressible nature that surrounds us. Yet there is also a growing sense that with our conscious mind we might never totally grasp this ultimate knowledge and understanding.

Burkart draws heavily on the nature imagery of her native Switzerland – blue alpine flowers, melting snowflakes, birch trees at night, but

never over-romanticises it. There is no longing to become one with nature. Rather she is clear that what makes us human are our words and reflective capabilities, and indeed there are a number of poems that deal with her own fear of losing those capacities:

On a lonely Sunday/ inside your own four walls/ in the brightest daylight, when you fear/the loss of yourself/ In writing/ to find yourself/ in a language/that no one any longer knows.

This is a beautiful collection of poems in which a mature, experienced and talented writer tries to catch in words an old, graceful mind that has accepted the limitations of the human being. Despite its melancholic undertone, this late collection leaves an incredibly calm and peaceful feeling. A fine justification for survival into old age.

press quotes

'For over half a century, Erika Burkart has been enriching our literature with a voice absolutely her own.' – Manfred Papst, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*
'She is the grande dame of Swiss poetry.' – *Tages-Anzeiger*
'A master of incomparably beautiful and precise language, shaped by the rhythm of her beating heart.' – *the Jury of the Great Schiller Prize*

about the author

Erika Burkart, born in 1922, lives today with her husband Ernst Halter, also an author, in a former abbey near Aarau in Switzerland. Her home plays a very important part in her poetical work. She has been awarded several of the most important literary prizes in the German-speaking area.

Previous works include:

Die Vikarin (2006); *Ortlose Nähe* (2005); *Langsamer Satz* (2002); *Grundwasserstrom* (2000); *Das Schimmern der Flügel* (1994); *Das verborgene Haus* (2008, together with Ernst Halter/Alois Lang).

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Ammann Verlag & Co.

Neptunstrasse 20

CH-8032 Zurich

Tel: +41 44 268 10 59

Email: kathrin.baumann@ammann.ch

Contact: Kathrin Baumann

www.ammann.ch

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