

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

*Beate Sigriddaughter*  
**BURNING**  
*(Zimbabwe 1980)*

I remember the night we went into the fields  
to show our solidarity with the Zimbabwe  
students celebrating their ancient country's  
brand-new independence by raising  
the new flag into the night wind,  
lowering the old accompanied by some  
haphazard singing; most didn't yet know  
a new national anthem, if there was one  
already; the rest were above  
such frivolous considerations. There was  
no lack of beer and cheap wine and girls'  
voices and young men's voices.  
I felt honored to be there;  
until the old flag had come down  
and a young man improvised a scream  
of loud obligatory hatred: BURN THEM!  
BURN OUR ENEMIES! BURN OUR OPPRESSORS! LIKE THIS!  
He leapt for the flag in the grass  
and with his colonial cigarette lighter  
he set its edges on fire.

I remember the shiver and the distancing  
in me; first everything reeled  
and gave way, and then I was back  
home in my native German body. I do not remember  
the smell of burning human flesh. I do not  
remember the sound, but I can recognize any echo.  
BURN THEM! BURN OUR ENEMIES, OUR POWERFUL WOMEN!  
BURN THE WITCHES! BURN THEM! BURN  
OUR ENEMIES, OUR TEACHERS! BURN THE JEWS!

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And I long in no facile fashion,  
since I too have murder in my genes,  
for a time when human lust was sated  
--we had come so far once--with burning  
effigies of winter, carried with shrieks  
and blood-curdling music, drums,  
down to the narrow river that flows, dragging  
the flaming puppets of straw down its eddies,  
lapping the borders of fields in their green,  
mirroring the moon only, and no sacrifice  
or vengeance in anyone's heart.