



Céleste Albaret burns the *Cahiers Noirs*

The promise was coaxed from her heart
during one of his asthma attacks:
wheezes filled his sibilant chest
and fought the breath of life for three nights.
He feared the notebooks might be found,
their contents known beyond the cork-lined room
in mirrored halls, in boulevards
bistros and cathedrals,
near the arch of his triumphs,
by the flow of the Seine—
scorned by the *Nouvelle Revue Française*!
Cold spells:
His purple finger tips
hurt as much as his fame—
the mind, clouded like an autumn night,
failed to grasp the tenacious loyalty she owed him.
Those perfumed small hands,
her piercing intemperate will
like the writhing writing-inhibiting cough
that ailed him.
They burned like a deep-red sunset,
Like the curtain beyond the door of hell—
A black plume of unintelligible words rose before her.
What secrets hid in its heated folds?
Forgotten moments, forsaken memories?
Or words meant to be lost
in the fire-tongue of history?

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Céleste Albaret was Marcel Proust's housekeeper and confidante during the last nine years of the writer's illness-riddled life. He suffered from asthma, excessive sensitivity to cold, and "eczema." He died of pneumonia at 41. Albaret kept her promise to Proust and, upon his death, burned 32 black notebooks containing unpublished material.

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