



Portfolio

Charlotte Griffiths

Arguments

By Charlotte Griffiths

“It’s such a shame that your daughter couldn’t be here to join us Jane dear, it would have been wonderful to see her again.” The woman smiled over her tea cup – no one met her gaze.

“Oh, I’m sure she would have gotten away if she could Clara, after all we so rarely get the chance to see you. So how is Elisa – still having problems at school?” Her tone was sweet but the man next to her struggled to hide his wince.

“Fine, thank you, in fact she was made Head Girl last month.”

“Oh, how wonderful! You know Rachael turned down the position at her school so that she could concentrate on her school work; we were so proud that she could make such a mature decision – recognise the important things - weren’t we darling?” Her husband grunted a reply but looked away.

“Of course, of course – did you manage to find a maths tutor – I recall she was having problems in the subject?” This time it was Clara’s husband who concealed his grimace.

“That wasn’t necessary; her employer at the animal shelter where she volunteers offered to teach her – she got the highest grade in her class in her last exam.”

“How lovely; it’s nice to know that state schools can still produce good results; of course I never wanted to take that risk.”

“Oh I wouldn’t put any faith in private education these days; full of the most dreadful sort of stuck-up children, Elisa being an exception, of course.” As the women continued through their smiles the men looked across at each other with apologetic glances. One leant forwards and poured the other more tea.

Insanity

By Charlotte Griffiths

Sand skittered in rolling waves, nipping at ankles and clinging to sweaty skin. The sun cast long shadows, deep across the faces of the travellers and deeper in the troughs carved through the land, balanced on the periphery of night.

The stale water tasted of metal; warm and bitter, but gratefully received. Soon the dunes were consumed by darkness, only the barest silver outlines visible. From a distance, they could have been mounds of lush grass. The stinging sand now encouraged shivers from the bare skin that it prodded, scraping at raw burns that the cool winds had begun to soothe. Someone had lit a fire. The twigs were bleached white, artefacts of the desert so dry they crumbled at a touch, burning out before the chill in the air could be relieved. Nevertheless they huddled close around it, faces pallid in the sullen glow, only silence between them. All but one.

He sat some distance apart, shying away from the flames, the firelight barely smouldering in dark eyes. His face was covered, swathed in the same dark cloth which he wore, melting his form into the growing blackness. Gazing out into the tangled shadows, he waited. In the silence phantasmal shapes reared, whispering and muttering behind his back. They slithered, just out of site, purring into his ears then sinking into the sands when he turned to see.

The sounds faded, becoming indistinct as the gathering clouds made the darkness absolute. In the surrounding quiet his breath seemed harsh, rasping in a parched mouth. His senses strained in the darkness. Answering this call, sounds seeded themselves in the silence, intangible fragments which congealed into sinister mutterings. The shadows drew in, easing relentlessly around his shoulders as, with agitated tremors he shook them off.

A wraith departed from the darkness which cradled the man. It crawled across his form, seeping through cloth and painting his skin with ice. Others joined, biting, scratching and all the time *whispering*. The words hissed in his ears, at which he batted and clawed. Still the voices remained. Now they were inside.

The man that they found in the morning was set aglow in the first light, but it was not the man they had left the night before. He was twisted, curled against the whispering world, and thrown apart as it had invaded his mind. His ears were torn and bloody, deep lacerations cut by his own nails spilled gore onto the ground. Dark patches stained the sand.

His petrified eyes were wide, the whites shot with crimson and raw from the slow creep of the desert which already feasted on his unmoving form. The others dared not look too closely. A rapid wind sent them on their way, and soon began to consume the body. If they had waited, they may have seen a shadow. They may have seen it rise from between the ashen lips, a bare ripple under the desert sun. They may have seen the inky form sink and slink across the sand, patiently tracing their tracks.

But they did not.

An Incoming Tide

By Charlotte Griffiths

The low canopy, in places brushing against the rising tide, blocked out most of the afternoon sun. The water was lit with a warm green glow, dappled against the surface which was occasionally marred by an errant ripple. Further out, across one of the many rivers which cut a path through the twisted trees, the water flowed at greater speed, and it was here that the tide rose fastest. A canoe, roughly hewn from a single trunk, rested half upon the rising waters and half wedged between a tangle of roots which marked the bank of the tributary.

A basic mooring held the vessel steady, although its bow bumped rhythmically against the shell-encrusted wood. Soon the river would rise enough for the craft to make progress, as although the water here lapped above waist height, further along the course the tide was barely turning. For now there was nothing to do but wait.

The sun traced an arduous track across the sky, heating the shallows which never drained away, but were yet to fill with the second high-tide of the day. Here the film of sediments, coating most of the roots, was heaviest and glistened brightly where rays penetrated the gloom beneath. The reflected light skittered across the face of the waiting boat-man, who gazed dully into the shadows from a perch just above the crystalline gilding on the roots, which marked the water line at high tide. Caught between the tree-line and the river, sounds were muted; muffled by the steady swell of the incoming tide. Beneath the trees however, calls echoed, interspersed with the movement of assorted creatures. Nevertheless, the usual racket was dulled in the heat, the rising waters sending land-dwelling creatures which often roamed the swamps scurrying to firmer ground.

Shadows lengthened in languid veins across the swamp, caging the gentle wash in their arms, darkening as the water edged inexorably up the calloused roots. Many shellfish clung to the underside of the arching structures, hidden from the sun between high tides. As the water rose the shells opened to feed, trawling the murky depths which flowed amongst the trees. A chill seeded itself in the air which the sun no longer touched, though heat still radiated from the hollows of still water and, where in places, some solid ground remained. Here silt had collected on rough shingles caught in the skein of roots where deep crevices existed. In these areas rough grasses grew.

The water, which at first had been almost still, now ran more readily. The canoe rocked and creaked against its mooring, grey under a sky now darkened with cloud. The green luminescence which the sun-lit leaves had cast was gone, replaced with a deepening gloom which dulled the waters, though the canopy still seemed lurid. The forest had quietened further and a sullen air rested between the branches, disturbed only by the water which dragged across the mud. An egret rose above the canopy, plumage a pale apparition against the darkening horizon. The knife which cut the sodden ropes, keeping the canoe in its place, flashed dully. Released, the vessel struggled for a moment against the pull of the water, then relented and drifted with the current. The dark reflection shivered in the ripples left by its wake.

A Letter Home

My dear, I promised I would write you home
And tell you tales as I go though
I cannot fathom why this should
Intrigue you so, but indulge you this.

Four mornings gone I spied a stumbling fawn,
In forest cast with light of dawn,
And hence across the glen I glimpsed a tiger
Ground to claw, so I watched them both.

For a time the beast contented while still,
To watch, as I, the fawn until,
With gracious pounce the master caught
And made his kill. I left him to eat.

Through furthermore a weary day we went,
Past fewer, even than our master sent,
To some grand abode that same man here to sleep,
For us a tent. I envy his comfort.

Light of morning roused us early from our beds,
The master's orders quickly cleared our heads,
I need not describe the curses rattled off my tongue
I said; you know them well.

Along the road that day we passed a market place,
Of wines and spice and sweetened meats to taste,
Beguiled, the master here to stop a while
The time to waste. We searched about.

I think you would have swooned to see the silk,
Fine cloths and beads and dresses of this ilk,
I would have bought you some small gift,
Ah, Guilt. I could not afford you such.

That day, 'til dusk we walked beside the carriage door,
Till our feet and legs and souls were sore,
Before the master called us "Halt!" for camp.
I envy no more -he sleeps in the damp like us.

Two more jaded days of endless travel passed
Until last night we paused at last,
In house that gave me leave to write this note
And asked, only that we savour sleep.

It seems on our return, we may not be alone.
For the master great affection shown
To the kind maid who welcomed use to this retreat
And low, they may yet think to marry.

And that, my dear, concludes this sorry trek
As much of it I've trod as yet,
I'll write a few days hence again and say,
The time is set. I'll be home soon.

(And if the master should permit, a gift for you I'll get.)

Spring

The stillness of a waiting March
Sits dreaming in the wind,
And rocks through lesser frost and little sun,
The end too long and drawn to count
Slow morning's clinging chill,
To see the measure of their seconds grow
Until, with neither fuss nor dainty mark, they fill
With glit'ring flowers, paler than the sun,
That once but haunted shades of laden cloud
Now soars, and tarries here for long.

Candle-lit

Little dancer why, at such late hour,
Do you disturb my sleep?
Who set you here, to flicker on my desk,
And prance and curl and leap,
Whisp'ring along to some small song
Whose gentle time you keep?
Perchance it was that pretty maid
Who thought with light to say,
Although true dawn has yet to break,
Tomorrow is today.

War

Face to face the armies wait;
Distance silencing the anthems of their hate.
Banners wave, their words ablaze,
Yet fade into horizon's haze,
Rolling out to curse the sky,

The sun which passes idly by.

Over glist'ning dunes the soldiers ride,
Leaving shadows in their wake to hide
The twisted strings which pull and guide their fate.

Roaring out their cause, the armies stream,
Calling for their foe to scream,
Brandishing their sharpened blades
To cut and slice and stab and slay.

Don't pause to see the victims of the fight;
Their glassy eyes reflect the dying light.
With knowledge certain as they fell,
To join their brothers lost in hell,
That they would never live to tell
The truth which pain had taught them.

Those burning eyes will never see the world again;
Their depths become the graves for fallen men,
So turn away you soldiers, born into the night,
To cry and blaze and kill with all your might.
You too will join those corpses slain,
Or else be haunted by their pain.

A deed in time is not undone,
No matter how you turn and run,
Ever hunted by the setting sun
To count the hearts you silenced.
Think what friends they left behind;
What loves, what lives your blade denied.
In death for this they've paid their price,
But you will suffer – suffer with your life.

Sanctuary

It is a small place beneath the furrowed brow
Of a forested hill, just below the mountain's feet.
There is a little stream with fish to eat,
And a creeping vine about the door, on which
Hangs rip'ning fruit – the sun has made it sweet.

A chimney stack pokes through the fallen leaves,
Red brick and moss, the stones are warm
With gently rising smoke which wanders on the breeze
And fills your lungs with woody scent
As you watch long summer days 'til spent.

Serpent's Bite

In the dark the coiled body waits
Ever silent and still
Poised for deadly blow
Waiting, yearning for the kill

Such might and power held
As indrawn breath
Just as frozen storm
A waiting tide of death

As lightning it strikes
Hungry eyes ablaze
Cruel reptilian beauty
A blow to end his days

Terrible screams
Split the sleeping night
Silenced in an instance
Another fatal bite

The coiled neck rears back
For the final blow
The bloodied moonlight drips
A long enduring woe

Matches

The corpses in the hallways
Are blacker than black
And the flesh that remains
Is charred on their backs.

The ashes are littered
All over the ground,
And blown by the wind
Make a burial mound.

A crowd has gathered
Way over the hill,
Where they gazed at the flames
So silent and still.

At the back of that crowd
Sits a pale-faced boy,
Alone on a stump,
In his lap a small toy.

His eyes were wide,
And filled with the flames –
Although long extinguished,
The light still remains.

And deep in a pocket
Inside of his coat,
Lies a small box of matches
Which silently gloat.

Why Death Despises War

The drums of War awake with the dawn
And beat
To the steps of her soldiers
Who march,
Half dead,
So even before the battle
They fall
And rot,
In the wake of an army of ghosts –
Ghosts who yet walk.
Death follows behind
With the sick
To gather their bones.
He looks out ahead to the banners,

Blown in the wind
Aloft,
Then behind at the blood on the road:
As black in day
As it was beneath the moon.
He sighs,
And empty eyes regard the skies,
Already full with souls.

Taking Poison

The pipes of the sewers are veins in the sand,
Each shallow beneath the dune.
As they reach the waves, the metal degrades
And the poison is vented too soon.

Trace back those veins to the heart of the
beast,
Where the vessels are plated with lead.
It corroded each mind and turned them all
blind,
And now the whole city is dead.

In the streets are the bones of the people
deceased,
Whose corpses now rest where they stood.
They smile at the sky, so blue and so high –
If they could fly away, then they would.

But nothing remains, in their hearts or their
brains,
Though little if ever there was.
So let the tides wash away this stench of
decay,
And all that there was will be lost.

The Footsteps of Death

Nothing, save the outstretched hand
Of Death
Do they have left.
He waits for them.
Nothing but the slow, hot breaths
Beneath the sun,
To count a hollow rhythm
Down to dusk.
They will sleep away the night,
And sleep

To never see the passing of that sun
Again. He walks among them.
Yet the stars are bright,
And soft and quiet –
Quiet enough to forget the sound of guns.
A crescent floats on the horizon
And from that place the world below
Is silent, as the stars.
A silent Earth which glows,
Glowing in the night.
He turns away, and lets them dream,
Dream
Of peace one day.