

Ruth Silcock

Thoughts about Neighbours

(based on a story in Mrs Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë)

When we were small, when mother was so ill,
Dying upstairs, some wealthy neighbours came
To pray and comfort, showing such goodwill
That even father overlooked the shame
Of taking help from strangers, and until
Her death, they brought her grapes and gifts. The same
Kind neighbours used to ask us out to tea,
To visit their grand house and family.

Then mother died at last, and father said
There should be no more visiting. We stayed
Shut up indoors like father, wrote and read
Newspapers, looked from windows, sometimes played
Whispering games in the cold uncarpeted
Uncurtained rooms. Or, holding hands, we made
Long walks on the moors together, and at night
Sat by the kitchen fire, talked by firelight.

The servants used to tell of the countryside:
Crimes, riots, lock-outs; murders, hangings; who
Had danced with demons, met with fairies; a bride
Stolen, or runaway, or maddened; they knew
Of cock-fights, preachings, whippings, wailings; pride
Fallen, families ruined, secrets, the true
Histories of our parish, about a lost
Child, a cruel parent, a local ghost.

This is what happened: a wealthy family
Of strict Dissenters built themselves a grand
House by the high road, and lived stylishly.
Across the road, on a separate piece of land,
Stood a greenhouse in a garden, cumbrously
Made, more of wood and wall than glass, but planned
For novelty in our neighbourhood. These fine
Rich rigid religious people liked to shine.

An elder daughter had married well. When near
Her time, she begged a younger sister to come
And stay with her, to keep her thoughts from fear.
This favourite sister came, to be sent home
Ill and dispirited. The cause was clear.
The husband had seduced the child. For some
Months she was shut away, despised and shamed.
Her mother pitied her, but also blamed.

The angry father said he would pay a man
To take his daughter, and give her a name.
Some brutal fellow wed her, and began
To break her heart, soon killing her. The shame
Was buried in her grave more quickly than
The family had expected. Free to claim
A moral reputation without stain,
They visited the rich husband again.

The greenhouse stands by the high road. Passers-by
Can hear the mother and daughter walk and weep
Though both have long since mouldered. The family
Are held as cursed in our countryside, and reap
Failure in business, failure in health. We try
To remember grapes brought from a greenhouse; keep
Comfort from neighbours' visits, their goodwill
That troubled father so, when mother was ill.

Elizabeth Bartlett

The Intruder

I grow in the dark from nothing.
At first you don't know I am there,
or mistake me, with a frisson of fear,
for my brother, the seeding one.

I grow for no reason, attaching myself
to whichever organs I care to choose,
for until they cut me I have nothing to lose,
and my beauty is never seen.

I grow at my own whim or fancy,
perhaps after you've fallen in the snow,
or later in the season on the patio,
slipping on wet stones after summer rain.

I grow to the size only I decide;
an acorn or an apple, secreting
a brown liquid like a greetings
present of soft-centred milk chocolate.

I grow for the hands of the surgeon,
my only admirer, who dangles me before
the camera, catching my profile, where
that I am, with my insidious ways.

I grow as a child grows and I am rare,
but I am not loved for my fibrous skin,
and after my portrait I am thrown in a bin
to shrivel with all the other intruders.