

Charcoal

Dull black and dusty charcoal – useful for art and outdoor cooking – activities towards the leisure end of our lives.

Such unprepossessing stuff, and yet it can produce a delicately shaded drawing and such appetising outdoor tastes and smells.

Charcoal is far from the luxury end of the lives of other people.

It's all they have as fuel No coal or oil; no gas or electricity.

Jesus lumps of the dusty black stuff.

The whiteish embers of a charcoal fire lie under steaming and simmering cauldrons in millions of rural homes around the world.

The slightest breeze brings forth glow below the ashes; red breaks through the grey, and rice or beans or millet or corn cook merrily away while families' appetites are whetted.

Such an important commodity in the everyday lives of countless country people. Tiny quantities are purchased daily; merchants arrange their wares in woefully small pyramids of matted, blackish lumps.

The wood that produced this fuel was once mounded under earth or turf and subjected to slow burning over many, many hours.

Smoke-producing organic material was burned out of it,

Higher-octane, steady-burning carbon was left for further use.

In the poorest countries of the world

the wood they turn to charcoal

Comes from trees they can't afford to be without;

hard woods and even fruit-bearing trees,

whose cutting down strips the soil of its protection

and allows the heavy rain to carry precious earth into the distant sea,

leaving eroded hillsides and a bare tomorrow.

Strange to think that a cheerful boiling pot and the smell of the next meal, might well announce so many dreadful woes with loss of Eden and the inexorable onward march of the desert.

An unfashionable commodity but only too vital for the people of a land with no other fuel.