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# RHYMED RUMINATIONS



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by  
SIEGFRIED SASSOON

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To  
EDMUND BLUNDEN



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## BREVITIES

I am that man who with a luminous look  
Sits up at night to write a ruminant book.

I am that man who with a furrowing frown  
Thinks harshly of the world—and corks it down.

I am that man who loves to ride alone  
When landscapes wear his mind's autumnal tone.

I am that man who, having lived his day,  
Looks once on life and goes his wordless way.

## THOUGHTS IN 1932

Alive—and forty-five—I jogged my way  
Across a dull green day,  
Listening to larks and plovers, well content  
With the pre-Roman pack-road where I went.

Pastoral and pleasant was the end of May.  
But readers of the times had cause to say  
That skies were brighter for the late Victorians;  
And 'The Black Thirties'<sup>1</sup> seemed a sobriquet  
Likely to head the chapters of historians.

Above Stonehenge a drone of engines drew  
My gaze; there seven and twenty war-planes flew  
Manoeuvring in formation; and the drone  
Of that neat-patterned hornet-gang was thrown  
Across the golden downland like a blight.

Cities, I thought, will wait them in the night  
When airmen, with high-minded motives, fight  
To save Futurity. In years to come  
Poor panic-stricken hordes will hear that hum,  
And Fear will be synonymous with Flight.

## PROPERTY

Upstairs among my books  
I heard a noise of rooks  
Returning to the woods.  
Loud was that legion wheeling;  
And queer my inward feeling—  
\*These windows are revealing  
My chattels and my goods.'

Possession thus we claim  
Of natural sights and sounds,  
Who purchase earth with pounds  
And take it all for granted.  
We nothings use a name,  
Nor ask whence acorns came  
Before the oak was planted.

## OUTLIVED BY TREES

.

A beech, a cedar, and a lime  
Grow on my lawn, embodying time.  
A lime, a cedar, and a beech  
The transience of this lifetime teach.  
    Beech, cedar, lime, when Pm dead Me,  
    You'll stand, lawn-shadowing, tree by tree;  
    And in your greenery, while you last,  
    I shall survive who shared your past.

## EULOGY OF MY HOUSE

House, though you've harboured grave-yards-full of lives  
Since on your first foundations walls were built,  
In your essential atmosphere survives  
No sense of men's malignity and guilt.  
Bad times you must have known, and human wrongness;  
Yet your plain wisdom leaves it all behind you,  
Within whose walls tranquillity and strongness  
Keep watch on life. Dependable I find you.

Much good has been your making. I can feel  
That when your ghosts revisit you they steal  
From room to room like moonlight long ago:  
And if some voice from silence haunts my head  
I only wonder who it was that said—  
'House, I am here because I loved you so.'

## IN HEYTESBURY WOOD

Not less nor more than five and forty years ago  
The old lord went along the ornamental ride;  
For the last time he walked there, tired and very slow;  
Saw the laburnum's golden chains, the glooming green  
Of bowery box-trees; stood and looked farewell, and sighed  
For roots that held his heart and summers that he'd seen.

And then, maybe, he came again there, year by year,  
To watch, as dead men do, and see—who knows how clear?—  
That vista<sup>1</sup>d paradise which in his time had thriven;  
Those trees to which in cogitating strolls he'd given  
Perennial forethought,—branches that he'd lopped and  
cherished:

Came, and saw sad neglect; dense nettles; favourites felled  
Or fallen in gales and left to rot; came and beheld  
How with succeeding seasons his laburnums perished.

'Return', I think, 'next summer, and you'll find such  
change,—

Walking, some low-lit evening, in the whispering wood,—  
As will refresh your eyes and do them ghostly good;  
See redolence befriend, neglect no more estrange;  
See plumed acacia and the nobly tranquil bay;  
Laburnums too, now small as in the prosperous prime  
Of your well-ordered distant mid-Victorian time . . .'

Thus I evoke him; thus he looks and goes his way

Along that path we call the ornamental ride—

The old slow lord, the ghost whose trees were once his  
pride.

## WHILE READING A GHOST STORY

Opening my window for a breath of air  
I meet the midnight cold, and am aware  
Of wind-shook trees and harmless lonely stars.  
There's nothing monstrous moving; nothing mars  
This friendly blustering of mid-winter gloom.  
    Behind me, in the comfort of my room,  
    A story I've been reading lies half read . . .  
    *Corrupt revisitation by the dead.*

Old houses have their secrets. Passions haunt them.  
When day's celestials go, abhorred ones taunt them.  
Inside our habitations darkness dwells.  
While dusk of dawn is on the unwatched stair  
And lofty windows whiten strangely,—there  
What presence thins—with what frustrated spells?

## ON EDINGTON HILL

Stars wink beyond the downland barrows  
Where Alfred marched to meet the Danes,  
Far in advance of flinthead arrows  
And unaware of aeroplanes.

Now the white owl on silent wing  
Crosses the looming lonely track;  
And here our anti-pagan king  
Beat the red-handed plunderers back.

That Eastertide — historians write —  
He saved the future by the sword  
Which emblemized in barbaric night  
The cross of Jesus Christ his Lord.  
That was the crucial point, men say:  
For Alfred's wisdom was his crown,  
Who, in the old skull-shattering way,  
Christened the powers of darkness down.

Dawn breaks where tribes once fought with flints;  
Where Alfred smote, the white owl flits  
Whose instincts are as old as time.  
And we — to-day's historian hints —  
May all be Alfreds, bombed to bits  
In conflict with a creed of crime.

1935.

## 878-1935

Here, on his march to Eathundun, King Alfred passed:  
No wood was planted then; the terraced hill was grassed.  
Now, in the summer, tanks come lumbering down the lane.  
I'd like to watch King Alfred walk this way again.

Then, it was quite correct to hack and hew the Dane,  
And to be levied for a war was life's event.  
Now in a world of books I try to live content,  
And hear uneasily the droning aeroplane.

I'd rather die than be some dim ninth-century thane;  
Nor do I envy those who fought at Eathundun.  
Yet I have wondered, when was Wiltshire more insane  
Than now—when world ideas like wolves are on the run?

# SILVER JUBILEE CELEBRATION

(At the Dinner of the Royal Society of St. George)

Broadcast across the as yet unbeaconed dark,  
I heard the shout of that symposiarch  
Whose voice, like some Gargantuan-mouthed grotesque,  
Demanded silence for the honoured guest. \*  
Then—when prolonged applauding had subsided—  
Kipling, that legendary name, confided  
In us—a host of atmospheric ears—  
His planned post-mortem on the post-war years.

Suavely severe—not one bleak syllable blurred—  
In dulcet-bitter and prophetic tones  
(Each word full charged with dynamite deferred)  
He disinterred a battlefield of bones. . . .  
And then reminded us that our attempt  
To put all war behind us with the last one  
Had been a dream administrators dreamt;  
In fact a virtuous fallacy—and a vast one.

Meanwhile his audience, mystified at first,  
Sat spell-bound while he preached with barbed conviction,  
Who, through implied anathemas, re-cursed  
Our old opponents in that four years friction.  
And if indeed it was the astringent truth  
He told with such incomparable concision—  
That we must now re-educate our youth  
With 'Arm or perish\* as their ultimate vision—

Let us at least be candid with the world  
And stitch across each Union Jack unfurled  
'No bargain struck with Potsdam is put over  
Unless well backed by bombers—and Jehovah!'

## A REMEMBERED QUEEN

If I could see that wild and warring Queen  
Who lived here for a time, old histories claim;  
If she, revisioned by my thought, could come!

Did voices walk the air, released from death,  
Hers might be heard when, very late at night,  
I turn the wireless on and catch no sound  
But atmospheric cracklings, moans, and thuds.  
Hers might be heard, associate with this ground  
Whereon her house once stood. Eight hundred years  
Are not so far, in terms of light from star.

Like moonlight on the low mist in the park  
Is that remembered fierce twelfth-century Queen  
Who lived here once, men say. If on the dark  
I heard shrill Norman French and stood between  
That utterance and eternity! If, so  
Attuned, I could watch Queen Matilda go  
Hunched on her horse across the crunching snow!

## PREHISTORIC BURIALS

These barrows of the century-darkened dead,—  
Memorials of oblivion, these turfed tombs  
Of muttering ancestries whose fires, once red,  
Now burn for me beyond mysterious glooms;  
    I pass them day by day while daylight fills  
    My sense of sight on these time-haunted hills.

Could I but watch those burials that began  
Whole history—flint and bronze and iron beginnings,  
When under this wide Wiltshire sky crude man  
Warred with his world and augured our world-winnings!  
Could I but enter that unholpen brain,  
Cabined and comfortless and insecure,  
That ruled some settlement on Salisbury Plain  
And offered blood to blind primeval powers,—  
Dim Caliban whose doom was to endure  
Earth's ignorant nullity made strange with flowers.

## ANTIQUITIES

Enormous aqueducts have had their day,  
And moles make mounds where marshals camped and  
clashed.

On stones where awe-struck emperors knelt to pray  
The tourist gapes with guide-book, unabashed.  
Historian Time, who in his 'Life of Man'  
Records the whole, himself is much unread:  
The breath must go from beauty, and the span  
Of Lethe Weaken over all the dead.

Only the shattered arch remains to tell  
Humanity its transience and to be  
Life-work for archaeologists who spell  
The carven hieroglyphics of Chaldee.  
And where the toiling town once seethed in smoke  
There'll drop, through quiet, one acorn from an oak.

## A LOCAL TRAIN OF THOUGHT

Alone, in silence, at a certain time of night,  
Listening, and looking up from what I'm trying to write,  
I hear a local train along the Valley. And 'There  
Goes the one-fifty', think I to myself; aware  
That somehow it's habitual travelling comforts me,  
Making my world seem safer, homelier, sure to be  
The same to-morrow; and the same, one hopes, next year.  
'There's peacetime in that train.' One hears it disappear  
With needless warning whistle and rail-resounding wheels.  
'That train's quite like an old familiar friend', one feels.

## THOUGHTS IN .1938

A man's mood can be not unlike the place, the time of day,  
the weather:

One afternoon, toward sundown, these were toned for me,  
all three together.

Riding with ruminant mind, I stared at Salisbury Plain's  
November distance,

By solitude imbued, responsive to my world without  
resistance.

Mild weather after wind and rain; earth, sky, and season all  
quiescent.

'If this be my biography,' I mused, 'to pace along is pleasant;  
And after all, my unambitious mid-maturity deserves  
—If luck befriends me thus—this liberal landscape's con-  
tour lines and curves.'

There on that ancient drove-road, leading to nowhere now,  
my horse

Grazed and then gazed, as I did, over the quietly coloured  
miles.

Though sign-posts pointed toward the dread of war, our-  
selves, of course,

Were only humdrum joggers on through time. Remember-  
ing it one smiles.

## 'A VIEW OF OLD EXETER'

Pyne, a small honest painter, well content  
To limn our English landscapes, worked and went,  
From 1800 onward, seventy years,  
Then left the world to louden in men's ears.  
Here's his 'Old Exeter'; much eyed by me  
Since (how time flits!) full fifteen years ago  
I bought it cheap and carried it home to be  
A window on my wall making me know  
Old Exeter, affectionately recorded  
In the now slow paced 'fifties.

Glancing down

From some neglected meadow near the town,  
He hummed and sketched that I might be afforded  
This purview of the past's provincial peace.

For J. B. Pyne Old Exeter was good;  
Cows in his foreground grazed and strolled and stood:  
For J. B. Pyne Victorian clumps of trees  
Were golden in a bland October breeze:  
Large clouds, like safe investments, loitered by;  
And distant Dartmoor loomed in sombre blue.  
Perpetuator of that shifting sky,  
It never crossed his mind that he might do  
From death such things as make me stare and sigh,—  
Sigh for that afternoon he thus depicted,—  
That simpler world from which we've been evicted.

Here his prim figures cruise and sit and drive

In crinolines as when they were alive.  
Out of the town that man and wife are going  
In smart new gig, complacently unknowing  
Of their great-grandchild's air-raid-worried mind:  
Into the town those gentlewomen are walking  
Attuned to life, of the new Bishop talking—  
Pleased that the eighteenth century's left behind,  
And civically unconscious, I conjecture,  
Of what it gave them in good architecture.  
That group beside the cypresses adds calm  
And absent-minded momentary charm  
To the industrious artist's composition . . .  
    When J. B. Pyne's, this was a Devon Day.  
    For me it shines far far—too far—away;  
    For time has changed this 'View' into a Vision.

## METAMORPHOSIS

Sandys sat translating Ovid. Both his hands  
Were busy. Busy was his curious mind.  
Each note he wrote was news from fabled lands.  
He hob-nobbed with Pythagoras, calm and kind.  
In a quaint narrow age, remote from this,  
Sat Sandys translating *Metamorphosis*.

The scholarship is obsolete, and the verse  
Pedestrian perhaps. Yet, while I turn  
His friendly folio pages (none the worse  
For emblematic worm-holes) I discern  
Not Nature preying on itself, but Time  
Revealed by rich humanity in rhyme.

## IDEOLOGIES .

'I've an idea!' cried someone long ago  
In liveliest monkey-language. What he thought  
Caused chatter. What it was we do not know. ✂  
But this was the earliest ape on earth who brought  
Experimental notions into play.  
Nature ignored him, as she does to-day.

When Man's at last learnt how to make his mind  
Nature may listen to thought and serve its needs.  
Meanwhile where Babels once were built we find  
A spider in his web among the weeds.

## TWO OLD LADIES

Here's an old lady, almost ninety-one.  
Fragile in dark blue velvet, from her chair  
She talks to me about Lord Palmerston,  
With whom her father 'often took the air'.  
I watch her tiny black-lace-mitted hands—  
When tea-time's ended—slowly crumble a rusk  
For feeding peacocks with. Reflective stands  
My memory-mirror in the autumn dusk.

Memory records the scene; and straightway plays  
One of its dream-like unexpected tricks;  
Transports me forty years to summer days  
On time's first page, when I was only six. ...  
Miss Clara, deaf and old, alert and queer,  
With scraps of bread heaped on a dark blue dish,  
Conducts me—I can catch her voice quite clear—  
Out to the lily-pond to feed the fish.

## BLUNDEN'S BEECH

I named it Blunden's Beech; and no one knew  
That this—of local beeches—was the best.  
Remembering lines by Clare, I'd sometimes rest  
Contentful on the cushioned moss that grew  
Between its roots. Finches, a flitting crew,  
Chirped their concerns. Wiltshire, from east to west,  
Contained my tree. And Edmund never guessed  
How he was there with me till dusk and dew,'

Thus, fancy-free from ownership and claim,  
The mind can make its legends live and sing  
And grow to be the genius of some place.  
And thus, where sylvan shadows held a name,  
The thought of Poetry will dwell, and bring  
To summer's idyll an unheeded grace.

## NOVEMBER DUSK

Ruminant, while firelight glows on shadowy walls  
And dusk with the last leaves of autumn falls,  
I hear my garden thrush whose notes again  
Tell stillness after hours of gusty rain.

Can I record tranquillity intense  
With harmony of heart,—experience  
Like a rich memory's mind-lit monochrome?  
Winged lovely moments, can I call you home?

This texture is to-day's. Near as my mind  
Each instant is; yet each reveals to me  
November night-falls known a lifetime long:  
And I've no need to travel far to find  
This bird who from the leafless walnut tree  
Sings like the world's farewell to sight and song.

## WEALTH OF AWARENESS

Stars burning bright in summer night; and I  
Standing alone with lifetime on this lawn;  
Smelling the dew that soaks the sunburnt grass,  
Alone with moth-winged gloom and folded flowers  
And secret stirrings, hours away from dawn.

One with these garden silences that pass,  
I know that life is in my saturate sense  
Of growth and memories of what lifetime meant.  
I am yet young with my unheard unspent  
Awareness of slow-stored intransience:  
And still, where trees like sentinels look for day,  
I feel what all have felt and know what none can say.

## ACCEPTANCE

Can happiness be mine when the restless body tires,  
And, wearied of the wine of dangerous desires,  
I turn toward heights that shine with unbefriending fires?

I have looked and understood how happiness recedes;  
Not like the shore we leave at sunset; not by deeds  
Of anger or indifference darkened into death,  
But taken away by time,—O given back like breath.

## HEART AND SOUL

Growing older, the heart's not colder:

Losing youngness, the eye sees clearer.

(Inward eye, while our sight grows blurred.)

Living longer, the soul grows stronger.

Looked on, the darkening weald grows dearer.

(Weald of youth, a remembered word.)

Soul undaunted and heart death-haunted

Dwell together, estranged yet one.

(Starlight lonely and firelit room.)

Heart, be brave as you go to your grave;

Soul, be girt for the race unrun.

(Holpen both by ghosts from the gloom.)

## A PICTURE OF THE MUSES

In an empty room upstairs,  
While the sunshine dozes lonely  
And on summer evening airs  
Time is heard in rumours only,  
Still unframed, my mother's 'Muses'  
In their world of dawn and roses  
Reinvoke an old idyllic  
Rapture that my life now loses.

Long ago the flush of day-break  
Bloomed beyond those calm shapes pacing.  
Now, in empty room and evening,  
I, that grievening vision facing,  
Stand in memory's moment halted,  
By my dreams no more exalted.

## TRAGITONES

I have not sought these quietened cadences,  
These tragitones, these stilled interior themes,  
These vistas where imagined presences  
Lead me away from life,—loved ghosts or dreams?

Look where the light of June is in the leaves,  
And how the world with laughter hurries on.  
The grass is golden; yet my faith perceives  
No foot-print where felicity has gone.

## MIDSUMMER EVE

Time, you timeless old mower of all that we men love most,  
Are you indeed the Unknower, or a wisely garnering ghost?

On Midsummer Eve you are symbol of centuries carried like  
hay:

And all the year round you are nimble, fetching our spirits  
away .

To the unknown land of death where you are a locked-out  
stranger. . . .

O Time, you bringer of breath, you ever-unchanging  
changer!

## OLD WORLD TO NEW

Two thousand years ahead, maybe,  
Some man looks back toward myriad Me,  
And thinks, 'Td give a lot to know  
What life was like—that time ago!

Beyond our monuments destroyed,  
Beyond Utopia gained and lost,  
And cheerful centuries well employed  
In paying what men's folly cost,—  
O face no more humane than this,  
O heart no less deceived than mine,  
O spirit brinked by death's abyss,  
O eyes which earth and cloud confine,—  
From your world order gazing back,  
Learn, and forgive me what I lack.

## A PRAYER FROM 1936

We are souls in hell; who hear no gradual music  
Advancing on the air, on wave-lengths walking.  
We are lost in life; who listen for hope and hear but  
The tyrant and the politician talking.

Out of the nothingness of night they tell  
Our need of guns, our servitude to strife.  
O heaven of music, absolve us from this hell  
Unto unmechanized mastery over life.

## EARTH AND HEAVEN

What harmonies of earth are heard in heaven? . . .

If heaven there be, it is not strange nor far;  
Much nearer is it than the morning star,  
And human as our hearts which die forgiven.

O if there be that other world, that grace  
Of souls redeemed, we breathe it like the air;  
And angels are about us everywhere  
In love's good deeds, in life's transfigured face.

# GLORIA MUNDI

Who needs words in autumn woods  
When colour concludes decay?  
There old stories are told in glories  
For winds to scatter away.

Wisdom narrows where downland barrows  
Image the world's endeavour.  
There time's tales are as light that fails  
On faces fading forever.



## TO MY SON

Go, and be gay;

You are born into the dazzling light of day.

Go, and be wise;

You are born upon an earth which needs new eyes.

Go, and be strong;

You are born into a world where love rights wrong.

Go, and be brave;

Possess your soul; that you alone can save.

## A BLESSING

Your little flame of life we guard  
For the long night that must be hard:  
Your eyes we teach to know the day  
That shall make wonderful your way.  
Bright be your flame, my soul, my son,  
Whose pilgrimage I see begun:  
And when these guiding hands are gone,  
In love of all things good go on.

## THE CHILD AT THE WINDOW

Remember this, when childhood's far away;  
The sunlight of a showery first spring day;  
You from your house-top window laughing down,  
And I, returned with whip-cracks from a ride,  
On the great lawn below you, playing the clown.  
Time blots our gladness out. Let this with love abide. . . .

The brave March day; and you, not four years old,  
Up in your nursery world—all heaven for me.  
Remember this—the happiness I hold—  
In far offsprings I shall not live to see;  
The world one map of wastening war unrolled,  
And you, unconscious of it, setting my spirit free.

For you must learn, beyond bewildering years,  
How little things beloved and held are best.  
The windows of the world are blurred with tears,  
And troubles come like cloud-banks from the west.  
Remember this, some afternoon in spring,  
When your own child looks down and makes your sad heart  
sing.

## PROGRESSIONS.

A lovely child alone, singing to himself serenely,—  
Playing with pebbles in an unfrequented garden  
Through drowse of summer afternoon where time drifts  
greenly.

A youth, impassioned by he knows not what, exploring  
Delusive labyrinths in errors age will pardon,—  
A youth, all ignorance, all grace, his dreams adoring.

A man, confounded by the facts of life that bind him  
Prometheus-like to rocks where vulture doubts assail  
him,—  
A man, with blank discarded youthfulness behind him.

A mind, matured in wearying bones, returning slowly  
Toward years revisioned richly while fruitions fail him,—  
A mind, renouncing hopes and finding lost loves holy.

## SILLY SOOTH

Do not deny your dreams  
That are the absurd release  
From worldly wisdom themes  
To paradoxical peace.

When sleep invites your mind  
To push the unhasped door,  
Be glad to leave behind  
The unrest of Evermore.

There in that reasonless clime  
You are yourself; and thither  
You float, set free from Time  
And all its whence and whither.

Farewell to hands and feet;  
Good-bye to mouth and eyes.  
Dreamer, go forth to greet  
What world within you lies.

## OLD MUSIC .

Like the notes of an old violin,  
Thoughts talk to me within  
My mind, that shuttered room.  
Like luminous portraits, hung  
On walls where I once was young,  
Dead friends pervade the gloom.

Decades of mellowing went  
To make this calmed content,  
This mental vintagemnt  
Of youth's harsh tasting wine. . . .  
Old violin, play on  
Till heart-held thought be gone:  
Old friends whose charity shone  
For me, be memory-mine.

## DOGGEREĀ ABOUT OLD DAYS

Young people now—they don't know what the past was like.  
*Then* one could find the main roads museful on one's bike.  
Give *me* a moment and I'm back in Kent; I know  
How safe and sound life struck me thirty years ago.

Passenger trains puffed on through landscapes then like Time;  
• And this year with its next year found an easy rhyme.  
Uninterrupted cricket seasons were to come.  
Beanfields were good to smell and bees would always hum  
In trees that knew no threat of overhead invasion.  
One liked the foreground future, needing no persuasion.

Kent Was all sleepy villages through which I went  
Carrying my cricket-bag. In wintertime, content  
To follow hounds across wet fields, I jogged home tired.  
In 1909 the future was a thing desired.

I travelled on; the train was Time; Kent was the scene;  
And where I was I felt that, as I'd always been,  
I should continue unperturbed in storm and shine.  
Will someone tell me where I am—in '39?

## THE ENGLISH SPIRIT

Apollyon having decided to employ  
His anger of blind armaments for this—  
That every valued virtue and guarded joy  
Might grieve bewildered by a bombed abyss—  
    The ghosts of those who have wrought our English Past  
    Stand near us now in unimpassioned ranks  
    Till we have braved and broken and overcast  
    The cultural crusade of Teuton tanks.

May 19, 1940.

## SILENT SERVICE

Now, multifold, let Britain's patient power  
Be proven within us for the world to see.  
None are exempt from service in this hour;  
And vanquished in ourselves we dare not be.  
Now, for a sunlit future, we can show  
The clenched resolved endurance that defies  
Daemons in dark,—and toward that future go  
With earth's defended freedom in our eyes.  
In every separate soul let courage shine—  
A kneeling angel holding faith's front-line.

May 23, 1940.

## EYES

Narcissus youth has looked at life and seen  
In the strange mirror only his own stare,—  
His own unanswering gaze whose circled green  
Contains two tiny pictures of the scene  
Where youth sits dumb, only of himself aware.

Prophetic age will bid the glass good-bye  
And read his microscopic tales of being  
In every face but that which answers 'I',  
Earning achievement from the art of seeing.  
In every face he fathoms, age will throne  
The intensely sphered reflection of his own  
Life-labour toward unsealed intelligence.  
For life sits faithful in old eyes, alone  
With mortal frailty and magnificence.











