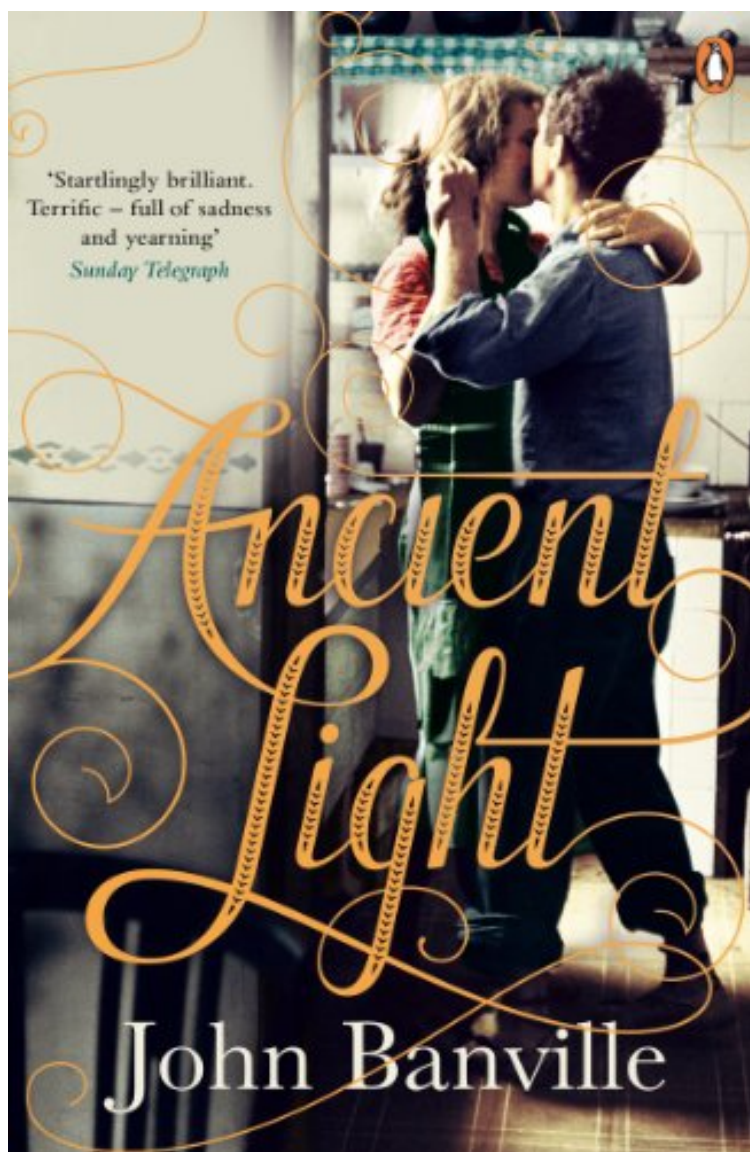


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Ancient Light



Par John Banville
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJohn Banville's Ancient Light is a story of obsessive young love and the power of grief 'Billy Gray was my best friend and I fell in love with his mother.'In a small town in 1950s Ireland a fifteen-year-old boy has illicit meetings with a thirty-five-year-old woman - in the back of her car on sunny mornings, and in a rundown cottage in the country on rain-soaked afternoons. Unsure why she has chosen him, he becomes obsessed and tormented by this first love. Half a century later, actor Alexander Cleave - grieving for the recent loss of his daughter - recalls these trysts, trying to make sense of the boy he was and of the needs and frailties of the human heart.Praise for Ancient Light:'Brilliant. Banville excels in his brightly lit descriptions of self-absorbed teenage lust', Guardian'Dazzling . . . captures a long-lost adolescent

world of passion and desire', Independent'Banville perfectly captures the spirit of adolescence ... This is a luminous breathtaking work', Independent on SundayJohn Banville was born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. He is the author of fourteen previous novels including *The Sea*, which won the 2005 Man Booker Prize. He was recently awarded the Franz Kafka Prize. He lives in Dublin.ExtraitIBilly Gray was my best friend and I fell in love with his mother. Love may be too strong a word but I do not know a weaker one that will apply. All this happened half a century ago. I was fifteen and Mrs. Gray was thirty-five. Such things are easily said, since words themselves have no shame and are never surprised. She might be living still. She would be, what, eighty-three, eighty-four? That is not a great age, these days. What if I were to set off in search of her? That would be a quest. I should like to be in love again, I should like to fall in love again, just once more. We could take a course of monkey-gland injections, she and I, and be as we were fifty years ago, helpless in raptures. I wonder how things are with her, assuming she is still of this earth. She was so unhappy then, so unhappy, she must have been, despite her valiant and unfailing cheeriness, and I dearly hope she did not continue so.What do I recall of her, here in these soft pale days at the lapsing of the year? Images from the far past crowd in my head and half the time I cannot tell whether they are memories or inventions. Not that there is much difference between the two, if indeed there is any difference at all. Some say that without realising it we make it all up as we go along, embroidering and embellishing, and I am inclined to credit it, for Madam Memory is a great and subtle dissembler. When I look back all is flux, without beginning and flowing towards no end, or none that I shall experience, except as a final full stop. The items of flotsam that I choose to salvage from the general wreckageand what is a life but a gradual shipwreck?may take on an aspect of inevitability when I put them on display in their glass showcases, but they are random; representative, perhaps, perhaps compellingly so, but random nonetheless. There were for me two distinct initial manifestations of Mrs. Gray, years apart. The first woman may not have been she at all, may have been only an annunciation of her, so to speak, but it pleases me to think the two were one. April, of course. Remember what April was like when we were young, that sense of liquid rushing and the wind taking blue scoops out of the air and the birds beside themselves in the budding trees? I was ten or eleven. I had turned in at the gates of the Church of Mary Our Mother Immaculate, head down as usualLydia says I walk like a permanent penitentand the first presage I had of the woman on the bicycle was the fizzing of tyres, a sound that seemed to me excitingly erotic when I was a boy, and does so even yet, I do not know why. The church stood on a rise, and when I looked up and saw her approaching with the steeple beetling at her back it seemed thrillingly that she had come swooping down out of the sky at just that moment, and that what I had heard was not the sound of tyres on the tarmac but of rapid wings beating the air. She was almost upon me, freewheeling, leaning back relaxedly and steering with one hand. She wore a gaberdine raincoat, the tails of it flapping behind to right and left of her like, yes, like wings, and a blue jumper over a blouse with a white collar. How clearly I see her! I must be making her up, I mean I must be making up these details. Her skirt was wide and loose, and now all at once the spring wind caught it and lifted it, laying her bare all the way up to her waist. Ah, yes.Nowadays we are assured that there is hardly a jot of difference between the ways in which the sexes experience the world, but no woman, I am prepared to wager, has ever known the suffusion of dark delight that floods the veins of a male of any age, from toddler to nonagenarian, at the spectacle of the female privy parts, as they used quaintly to be called, exposed accidentally, which is to say fortuitously, to sudden public view. Contrary, and disappointingly I imagine, to female assumptions, it is not the glimpsing of the flesh itself that roots us men to the spot, our mouths gone dry and our eyes out on stalks, but of precisely those silken scantlings that are the last barriers between a womans nakedness and our goggling fixity. It makes no sense, I know, but if on a crowded beach on a summer day the swimsuits of the female bathers were to be by some dark sorcery transformed into underwear, all of the males present, the naked little boys with their pot bellies and pizzles on show, the lolling, muscle-bound lifeguards, even the hen-pecked husbands with trouser-cuffs rolled and knotted hankies on their heads, all, I say, would be on the instant transformed and joined into a herd of bloodshot, baying satyrs bent on rapine.I am thinking particularly of those olden days when I was young and women under their dressesand which of them then did not wear a dress, save the odd golfing girl or spoilsport film star in her pleated slacks?might have been fitted out by a ships chandler, with all sorts and shapes of rigging and sheeting, jibs and spankers, sheers and stays. My Lady of the Bicycle, now, with her taut suspenders and pearly-white satin knickers, had all the dash and grace of a trim schooner plying fearlessly into a stiff norwester. She seemed as startled as I by what the breeze was doing to her modesty. She looked down at herself and then at me and raised her eyebrows and made an O of her mouth, and gave a gurgling laugh and smoothed the skirt over her knees with a

careless sweep of the back of her free hand and sailed blithely past. I thought her a vision of the goddess herself, but when I turned to look after her she was just a woman rattling along on a big black bike, a woman with those flaps or epaulettes on the shoulders of her coat that were fashionable then, and crooked seams in her nylons, and boxy hair just like my mothers. She slowed prudently in the gateway, her front wheel wobbling, and gave a chirrup on her bell before proceeding out into the street and turning left down Church Road. I did not know her, had never seen her before, so far as I knew, though I would have thought that by then I had seen everyone in our tight little town at least once. And did I in fact see her again? Is it possible that she was indeed Mrs. Gray, the same one who four or five years later would irrupt so momentarily into my life? I cannot summon up the features of the woman on the bike clearly enough to say for sure if she truly was or was not an early sighting of my Venus Domestica, though I cling to the possibility with wistful insistence. What affected me so in that encounter in the churchyard, besides the raw excitement of it, was the sense I had of having been granted a glimpse into the world of womanhood itself, of having been let in, if only for a second or two, on the great secret. What thrilled and charmed me was not just the sight I got of the womans shapely legs and fascinatingly complicated underthings, but the simple, amused and generous way that she looked down at me, doing that throaty laugh, and the negligent, backhanded grace with which she subdued her ballooning skirt. This must be another reason why she has become merged in my mind with Mrs. Gray, why she and Mrs. Gray are for me the two faces of the one precious coin, for grace and generosity were the things I treasured, or should have treasured, in the first and, I sometimes disloyally think sorry, Lydia only real passion of my life. Kindness, or what they used to call loving-kindness, was the watermark discernible in Mrs. Grays every gesture towards me. I think I am not being overly fond. I did not deserve her, I know that now, but how could I have known it then, being a mere boy, callow and untried? No sooner have I written down those words than I hear the weaselly whine in them, the puling attempt at self-exculpation. The truth is I did not love her enough, I mean I did not love her as I had it in me to do, young as I was, and I think she suffered for it, and that is all there is to say on the subject, though I am sure that will not stop me from saying a great deal more. Her name was Celia. Celia Gray. It does not sound quite right, does it, that combination? Womens married names never sound right, in my opinion. Is it that they all marry the wrong men, or at any rate men with the wrong surnames? Celia and Gray make altogether too languid a coupling, a slow hiss followed by a soft thud, the hard g in Gray not half hard enough. She was not languid, anything but. If I say she was buxom that fine old word will be misunderstood, will be given too much weight, literally and figuratively. I do not think she was beautiful, at least not conventionally so, although I suppose a boy of fifteen could hardly have been called on to award the golden apple; I did not think of her as beautiful or otherwise; I fear that, after the initial gloss had gone dull, I did not think of her at all, but took her, however gratefully, for granted. A memory of her, a sudden image coming back unbidden, was what set me stumbling off down Memory Lane in the first place. A thing she used to wear, called a half-slip, I believe eyes, undergarments again a slithery, skirt-length affair in salmon-coloured silk or nylon, would leave, when she had taken it off, a pink weal where the elastic waistband had pressed into the pliant, silvery flesh of her belly and flanks, and, though less discernibly, at the back, too, above her wonderfully prominent bum, with its two deep dimples and the knubbled, slightly sandpapery twin patches underneath, where she sat down. This rosy cincture encircling her middle stirred me deeply, suggestive as it was of tender punishment, exquisite suffering I was thinking of the harem, no doubt, of branded houris and the like and I would lie with my cheek resting on her midriff and trace the crimped line of it with a slow fingertip, my breath stirring the shiny dark hairs at the base of her belly and in my ear the pings and plonks of her innards at their ceaseless work of transubstantiation. The skin was always hotter along that uneven, narrow track left by the elastic, where the blood crowded protectively to the surface. I suspect, too, I was savouring the blasphemous hint that it gave of the crown of thorns. For our doings together were pervaded throughout by a faint, a very faint, sickly religiosity. I pause to record or at least to mention a dream I had last night in which my wife had left me for another woman. I do not know what this might signify, or if it signifies anything, but certainly it has left an impression. As in all dreams the people in this one were plainly themselves and at the same time not, my wife, to take the principal player, appearing as short, blonde and bossy. How did I know it was she, looking so unlike herself as she did? I, too, was not as I am, but corpulent and ponderous, sag-eyed, slow-moving, a kind of an old walrus, say, or some other soft, lumbering water-going mammal; there was the sense of a sloped back, leathery and grey, disappearing slidingly around a rock. So there we were, lost to each other, she not she and I not I. My wife harbours no sapphic inclinations, so far as I know though how far is that? but in the dream she was cheerfully, briskly, butch. The object of her transferred affections was a

strange little man-like creature with wispy sideburns and a faint moustache and no hips, a dead ringer, now that I think of it, for Edgar Allan Poe. As to the dream proper I shall not bore you, or myself, with the details. Anyway, as I think I have already said, I do not believe we retain details, or if we do they are so heavily edited and censored and generally fancified as to constitute a new thing altogether, a dream of a dream, in which the original is transfigured, as the dream itself transfigures waking experience. This does not prevent me from crediting dreams with all sorts of numinous and prophetic implications. But surely it is too late in the day for Lydia to leave me. All I know is that this morning I woke in the pre-dawn hour with an oppressive sense of loss and deprivation and all-pervading sadness. Something seems set to happen. I think I was a little in love with Billy Gray before I was a lot in love with his mother. There is that word again, love; how easily it trips off the pen. Strange, thinking of Billy like this. He would be my age now. That is hardly remarkable he was my age then yet it gives me a shock. I feel as if I have suddenly taken a step up or is it a step down? into another phase of ageing. Would I know him if I met him? Would he know me? He was so upset when the scandal broke. I am sure I felt the shock of public disgrace as much as he did, or more so, I should think, but all the same I was taken aback by the passion with which he repudiated me. After all, I would not have minded if he had been sleeping with my mother, difficult though that would have been to imagine I found it difficult to imagine anyone sleeping with Ma, the poor old thing, which was how I thought of her, as poor, and old, and a thing. That surely was what so troubled Billy, having to contemplate the fact that his mother was a woman whom someone desired, and furthermore that the someone was me. Yes, it must have been all kinds of agony for him to picture the two of us rolling naked in each others arms on that filthy mattress on the floor in Cotters place. He had probably never seen his mother without her clothes on, or not that he could remember, anyhow. It was he who first stumbled on the Cotter house, and I used to worry that one day he would stumble on his mother and me at our love-play there. Was she aware that Billy knew the place? I cannot remember. If she was, my worry would have been as nothing compared to her terror at the thought of discovery by her only son as she was being made love to by his best friend in the midst of ancient squalor on a dirty, leaf-littered floor. I recall the day I first saw the house. We had been in the little hazel wood along by the river, Billy and I, and he had brought me up to a ridge and pointed out the roof among the treetops. From the height on which we stood only the roof was visible, and at first I could not make it out, for the slates were covered with moss as green as the surrounding foliage. That must have been why it remained hidden for so long, and why presently it would make such a secure trysting-place for Mrs. Gray and me. I wanted to go down and break in straight away for we were boys, after all, and still young enough to be on the look-out for what we would have called a club-house but Billy was reluctant, strangely, as it seemed to me, since he had discovered the place and had even been inside it, or so he said. I believe he was a little afraid of that house; perhaps he had a premonition, or thought it haunted, as indeed it soon would be, not by ghosts but by the Lady Venus and her sportive boy. It is odd, but I see our pockets that day filled with hazel nuts we had collected down in the wood and the ground around us plated with the hammered gold of fallen leaves, yet it was April, it had to have been April, the leaves green and still on the trees and the hazel nuts not even formed yet. Try as I will, however, I see not spring but autumn. I suppose we straggled away, then, the two of us, through the green not golden leaves, with our pockets not full of nuts, and went home, leaving Cotters place undisturbed. Something in me had been struck, though, by the look of that sagging roof among the trees, and I went back the very next day, led by love the necessitous and ever-practical, and discovered in the tumbledown house just the place of shelter Mrs. Gray and I were in need of. For, yes, we were by that time already intimate, to put it as delicately as I may. Billy had a sweetness to his nature that was very attractive. His features were nice, though his skin was poor, somewhat pitted, like his mothers, I am afraid, and prone to pimples. He had his mothers eyes, too, of a liquid umber shade, and wonderfully long fine eyelashes, each lash perfectly distinct, so that I thought, or think now, of that special paintbrush that miniaturists use, the business end a single filament of sable. He walked with a curious bow-legged rolling gait, swinging his arms in a hooped fashion that made it seem as if he were gathering invisible sheaves of something out of the air before him as he went along. That Christmas he had given me a manicure set in a neat pigskin case, a manicure set, with a pair of scissors and nail clippers and a file, and a polished ivory stick, shaped at one end like a tiny flattish spoon, which my mother examined doubtfully and pronounced either a cuticle-pusher or a cuticle-pusher? or more prosaically an implement for prising dirt from under the nails. I was puzzled by this girlish gift yet accepted it with good if uncertain grace. I had not thought to get him anything; he did not seem to have expected that I would, or to mind that I had not. I wonder now, suddenly, if it was his mother who bought the manicure set for him to give to me, a coy and

secret gift, delivered by proxy, that she thought I might guess had really come from her. This was some months before she and I had become oh, go on and say it, for Gods sake! before we had become lovers. She had known me, of course, for I had been calling for Billy at the house most days that winter on the way to school. Did I look to her like the kind of boy who would think a manicure set just the thing for Christmas? Billys own attentions to personal hygiene were less than thorough. He bathed even more infrequently than the rest of us did, as indicated by that intimate, brownish whiff he gave off on occasion; also the pores in the grooves beside his nostrils were blackly clogged, and with a shiver of mingled relish and revulsion I would imagine getting at them with my thumbnails for pincers, after which I would certainly have had need of that elegant little ivory gouge. He wore jumpers with holes in them and his collars seemed never to be clean. He possessed an air rifle and shot frogs with it. He was truly my best friend, and I did love him, in some way or other. Our chumship was sealed one winter eve when we were sharing a clandestine cigarette in the back seat of the family station wagon parked outside the house this is a vehicle we shall become deeply familiar with presently and he confided to me that his given name was not William, as he would have the world believe, but Wilfred, and further that his middle name was Florence, after his dead uncle Flor. Wilfred! Florence! I kept his secret, I can say that for myself, which is not much, I know. But, ah, how he wept, for pain and rage and humiliation, the day he met me after he had found out about his mother and me; how he wept, and I the prime cause of his bitter tears. I cannot remember the first time I saw Mrs. Gray, if she was not the woman on the bike, that is. Mothers were not people that we noticed much; brothers, yes, sisters, even, but not mothers. Vague, shapeless, unsexed, they were little more than an apron and a swatch of unkempt hair and a faint sharp tang of sweat. They were always dimly busy in the background, doing things with baking tins, or socks. I must have been in Mrs. Grays vicinity numerous times before I registered her in any particular, definite way. Confusingly, I have what is certain to be a false memory of her, in winter, applying talcum powder to the shinily pink inner sides of my thighs where they had become raw from the chafing of my trousers; highly unlikely, since apart from anything else the trousers I was wearing on that occasion were short, which would hardly have been the case if I was fifteen, since we were all in longed-for longers by the age of eleven or twelve at the latest. Then whose mother was that one, I wonder, the talc-applier, and what opportunity for an even more precocious initiation did I perhaps let pass? Anyhow, there was no moment of blinding illumination when Mrs. Gray herself stepped forth from the toils and trammels of domesticity and came skimming towards me on her half-shell, wafted by the full-cheeked zephyrs of spring. Even after we had been going to bed together for some time I would have been hard put to give a fair description of her if I had tried, what I would have described would probably have been a version of myself, for when I looked at her it was me that I saw first, reflected in the glorious mirror that I made of her. Billy never talked to me about her why would he? and seemed to pay her no more heed than I did for so long. He was a laggard, and often of a morning when I called for him going to school he was not ready, and I would be invited in, especially if it was raining or icy. He did not do the inviting remember that suffusion of mute fury and burning shame we experienced when our friends got a glimpse of us in flagrante in the naked bosom of our families? so it must have been she. Yet I cannot recall a single instance of her appearing at the front door, in her apron, with her sleeves rolled, insisting I come in and join the family circle at the breakfast table. I can see the table, though, and the kitchen that it almost filled, and the big American-style fridge the colour and texture of curdled cream, the straw basket of laundry on the draining board, the grocery-shop calendar showing the wrong month, and that squat chrome toaster with a seething gleam of sunlight from the window reflected high on its shoulder. Oh, the morning smell of other peoples kitchens, the cotton-wool warmth, the clatter and haste, with everyone still half asleep and cross. Lifes newness and strangeness never seemed more vividly apparent than it did in such moments of homely intimacy and disorder. Billy had a sister, younger than he, an unnerving creature with the look of a pixie, with long, rather greasy plaits and a narrow sharp stark white face the top half of which was blurred behind enormous horn-rimmed spectacles with circular lenses as thick as magnifying glasses. She seemed to find me irresistibly amusing and would wriggle inside her clothes with malignant hilarity when I appeared in the kitchen with my schoolbag, shuffling in like a hunchback. She was called Kitty, and indeed there was something feline in the way she would slit her eyes when she smiled at me, compressing her lips into a thin, colourless arc that seemed to stretch all the way between her intricately voluted, translucent, prominent pink ears. I wonder now if she, too, might have been sweet on me and all the snuffly amusement were a means of hiding the fact. Or is this just vanity on my part? I am, or was, an actor, after all. There was something the matter with her, she had some condition that was not spoken of that made her what in those days was called delicate. I found her

unnerving, and was I think even a little afraid of her; if so, it was prescient of me. *Revue de presse* A devastating account of a boys sexual awakening and the loss of his childhood . . . Seamless, profound, and painfully true to the emotional lives of his characters, it is an unsettling and beautiful work. --Wall Street Journal A slyly constructed and stylistically buoyant novel . . . The ending [is] shattering and genuinely surprising. --New York Times Book Banville perfectly captures the spirit of adolescence, the body of yearning for sexual experience, the mind blurring eroticism and emotion. . . . [He] is a Nabokovian artist, his prose so rich, poetic and packed with startling imagery that reading it is akin to gliding regally through a lake of praline: its a slow, stately process, delicious and to be savoured. . . . This is a luminous, breathtaking work. --The Independent (UK) *Ancient Light* is a brilliant meditation on desire and loss, which also skillfully reminds us, even warns us, that Madam Memory is a great and subtle dissembler . . . [Contains] page upon page of luxurious, lyrical prose. --Minneapolis Star Tribune Beautiful . . . Banville is the heir to Proust, via Nabokov. --The Daily Beast *Luminescent* . . . Illuminating and often funny but ultimately devastating . . . Breathtaking beauty and profundity on love and loss and death, the final page of which brought tears. The Stockholm jury should pick up the phone now. --The Financial Times Banville's prose, as gorgeous and precise as in his 2005 Man Booker winner *The Sea*, evokes scenes so that they burn in the readers mind. --Sunday Express (UK) A breathtaking new novel . . . Banville, a writer of exquisite precision and emotional depth, writes with droll inquisition and entrancing sensuality in this suspenseful drama of the obliviousness of lust and the weight of grief. Alex's misremembered love story and complicated movie adventures are ravishing, poignant, and archly hilarious as the past and present converge and narrow down to a stunning revelation. Banville is supreme in this enrapturing novel of shadows and illumination. --Booklist (starred) A world where the past is more vivid than that present, and the dead somehow more alive than the living. . . . startlingly brilliant. --The Sunday Telegraph (UK) The prose of the new book has a kind of luxuriant beauty, and, given the number of gorgeous arias written in difficult keys with many sharps and flats, the novel has the feel of a feverish atonal chamber opera . . . Its as if the prose has shouldered the entire burden of undoing death and loss, an ambition rarely seen in contemporary letters. One reads *Ancient Light* in a state of slightly stunned admiration and disbelief that anyone still believes in literary art sufficiently to call upon its resources for these particular ends. --New York of Books Banville, with his forensic sensory memory, his great gift for textural (and textual) precision, his ability to inhabit not just a room, as a writer, but also the full weight of a breathing body, is exactly in his element here. . . . Cleverness is on display, and nothing might be quite what it seems, but Banville's duty of care, to the emotional lives of his characters, to the worlds in which they live, is not neglected for a moment. --The Observer (UK) *Ancient Light* dazzles . . . It is a work of commanding artistry, each scene exquisitely realized in burnished prose. . . . Banville's unmatched descriptive artistry [fixes] every fleeting moment and sensation mind with painterly precision . . . haunting beauty. --The Scotsman