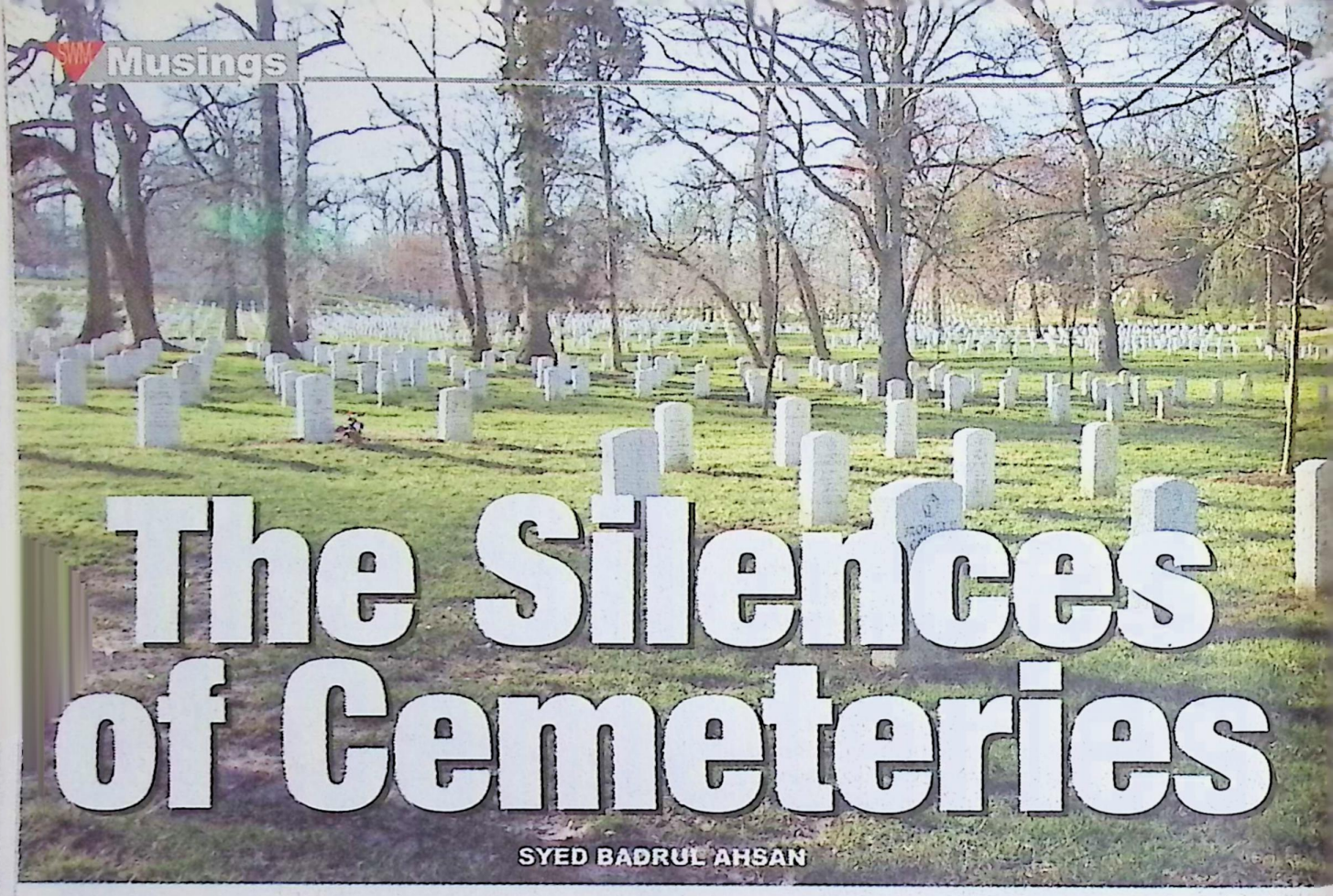


The Silences of Cemeteries

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE are thoughts of the hereafter, of what lies beyond life, that come to you in a cemetery. Or when in the deepening hours of the night it is the rain which suddenly rushes through the leaves and passes through the paddy in the quiet fields, you remember with something of a shudder that the rain around you is also the rain that seeps into your mother's newly dug grave. The misery in you, in me, cannot then go any deeper. But, again, a sense of misery, a contemplation of the tragedy that comes with birth and death, are what you sense as you mull over the men and women who have died through the ages.

A decade ago, or thereabouts, I stood before the eternal flame over the grave of John Fitzgerald Kennedy at Arlington National Cemetery outside Washington. It was a blustery day, almost reminiscent of the moment when the thirty fifth president of the United States was buried on a November day in 1963. As Hermann Melville would say, there is forever something damp and drizzly about November. When Kennedy's coffin was lowered into his grave, we were children in school. That did not stop us, though, from internalising the tragic drama of the moments as they came to be captured by newspapers around the world. As I prayed before the eternal flame, I remembered all the powerful men who had stood there on that long-ago day as the earth closed over President Kennedy. There were Charles de Gaulle, Haile Selassie, Ludwig Erhard and Anastas Mikoyan. There were a whole lot of other people. By the time I had come to stand where they had once stood, they had each of them gone to their own graves. It was the fleeting nature of life that hovered as a thought in me.

Not long ago, on a trip to Cumbria in England, I chanced upon a cemetery that held the remains of men and women whose lives had come to an end in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The headstones looked run down, and naturally too. And it was difficult to make out the names on them as also the precise dates of the birth and death of the inhabitants of the graves. But it was something more poignant that hit the sensibilities. All these good people, I reasoned with myself, had lain there for centuries while the world has gone by. Were the coffins that contained their remains still intact? And did the suits they had been dressed in before burial remain, even if in somewhat tattered a fashion? Of course these were wild thoughts, almost bizarre. But when you think of death, when you imagine the slow but sure decomposition of the bodies that are placed in graves