



## Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize 2022 Written entries

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### **Monument**

The oak platforms are silhouetted black against the ridge skyline as the red dawn breaks behind the hill. They are visible from below and from miles around. Their construction is solid, four oak uprights one at each corner, rising to a height of five feet and braced to combat the winter gales. The four corners joined by stretchers to keep them taut forming a rectangle six feet by three feet. The high platform made from horizontal timbers is lashed to the frame with old man's beard vines and animal sinews and crossed with woven willow withies. Ten of these structures form a line.

Buzzards, ravens and crows circle high on warming thermals. The ravens and crows mob the buzzards who glide effortlessly higher ignoring the false threats from the corvids.

A small party of young men carry a litter on their shoulders to the High Path, to the platforms. The Elders, women and the throng of the community follow. On the litter is the naked body of an elderly man, his grey hair and long beard combed and plaited. He lies on a ceremonial cloak made from deer hides, beaver pelts and ravens feathers. A stag antler and head mask covers his face to denote his position as Shaman. This is my father. He has lived for forty-six summers inheriting his title of Chief and Shaman from his father and those before. My eldest son carries a bow and arrows held in a hide quiver, the arrowheads of finely knapped flint made by the dead man. My second son carries polished stone axes, testament to the craft of the dead one, which glisten in the warming sunshine. The only other adornment of the body is a necklace made from small white quartz stones drilled using hard antler, threaded onto a fine sinew and tied in a complex knot behind his neck.

The women keen and the children skip as they climb the hill from our camp houses at the base. When they reach the line of platforms the men lift the litter above their heads and slide it onto the platform, securing it with clematis vines. This is almost the final journey for the grandfather, father, husband, brother and Chief of our extended tribe. On the hillside a lone wolf howls as if saying farewell to an old friend. The children reply with mimicking howls and the wolf turns his head and lopes off into the distance. He will be back- he is a constant on the High Path with one eye on our early lambs and young goats for his supper. He, like me, has a family to feed, but we will only tolerate so much from him before a hunting party removes him from his trail and a fine new wolfskin will warm my bed and his skull will join that of the aurochs bull on posts outside my home.

Of the ten platforms, six are occupied. Two bodies are almost picked clean by the buzzards, kites, ravens, jackdaws and vermin that invade this site. For them an important feeding station especially during the lean winter months. These two young men were killed some weeks earlier during a hunting party foray into the forest. They had surprised a small herd of aurochs and the large bull with a fine set of long horns had stood his ground, charged and gored one unfortunate in the groin and the other was crushed against a large oak. An unusual occurrence but the rogue aurochs was finally overcome with our honed spears and his massive

horns displayed in my father's house as a lesson to us all. Nothing of this huge animal was wasted, even the dogs feasted. It will feed us for weeks and provide us with clothing and footwear now the hide has been scraped and dried by the women.

Another platform holds the excarnated bodies of a young mother, no more than fifteen years old who died in childbirth, and her newborn infant son. A sad day for the village only a short time ago and a great loss to our community for her work input and for the continuation of the tribe. Three other platforms hold bodies in various states of decay, one man and two women who died through illness or longevity.

I am the second son of the Shaman and I will inherit the ceremonial cloak, the bow and arrows and the stone axes to denote my position as head of the extended community. The first born son is blind, has deformed limbs and cannot take his place in the line of succession. To ensure he would not pass any of his bad blood to other generations my father castrated him soon after his birth. He should have been left at the Monument to die when he was born but my mother's first child was long awaited and she could not bear to part with him. Despite his best efforts to persuade my mother to give him to the Gods my father relented. The child survived and his knowledge of herbs is outstanding, he is a healer and a valuable asset to our community as our medicine man.

At the next full moon we will light a huge bonfire and cook wild boar, cattle and sheep in celebration of the departed Chief's long life. Deer will be sacrificed to our Gods and I will read the entrails to determine the future. News of my fathers' death was quickly sent along the High Path to the other settlements and they will join in the celebration of his life and my accession as Chief and Shaman. They will drive some of their animals along the High Path, some over several days, to contribute to the feasting. It is a great responsibility to protect and lead these people and my father performed his duty with much skill and this will be a sign of respect for his leadership.

We are all related through our womenfolk. At our large gatherings at the end of Winter and after Harvest our girls of child-bearing age are exchanged amongst the settlements to keep our blood clean. Negotiations had taken place at the time of their birth and they take with them some of our new breeding livestock ensuring our animals remain free of disease or malformation. This exchange maintains peaceful relations with tribes as far as we can see, to the horizon and beyond, because everywhere we will have a daughter, sister, aunt, niece or cousin who has living memory of us. Now I am Chief I can take another wife and I have chosen a young, childless widow from one of our furthest settlements whose husband died fighting at the fringes of our territory against a conflicting domain. I knew him well and he would be pleased his wife was coming into the premier settlement as a wife of the new Chief. May I have many more sons to hunt and farm and daughters to exchange with our friends.

When my fathers' bones have been cleaned by the birds I will remove them from the litter, carefully looking under the platform for the small bones of his feet and hands which always slip between the weave in the litter or are scattered by wind and rain. I will take them home to cut them free from any sinews that may still hold them firm and wash them carefully in the spring. The women will dry them and only then will they be deposited in the Monument at a full moon.

The Monument is at the highest point on the hill above our settlement, seen and seeing, a marker for all travellers coming to feast and honour our rituals. The High Path leads to it, the

sacred path that connects us to family north and south, well trodden since time began. The first tomb was built in the time of my grandfather's grandfather when he was still a young boy and finished when he was our Chief. His were the first bones to be deposited in the small wooden box together with those of his senior wife who killed herself on his death, their bond was so strong. The bones of several other important community leaders were placed in the Old Monument before it fell into disuse only a few short years after it was built.

My grandfather's grandfather when a much older Chieftain, persuaded the Elders and sub-chiefs the Monument was not imposing enough for such an important person as himself and set about calling on the surrounding dignitaries to send fit, young males and slaves after harvest to build the new Monument to mainly his design. Stone was quarried and dressed, ditches were dug, chalk was brought to site and the build progressed slowly until the Spring when the site was abandoned until after the following harvest. Back they came and worked hard all through the colder months with many injuries and some fatalities. Stone chambers appeared with shelving for the storage of our ancestors' bones. A capped roof of stone was raised and the holes for the six massive guard stones to the entrance were dug. The sarsens were dragged and heaved into place with much sweat and swearing. Finally the tomb was covered with earth and topped with chalk rubble dug from surrounding hillsides with deer antlers, cows shoulder bones and flint tools. The tomb was magnificent. It was a wonder. It shone on the hilltop in its large treeless clearing as it does still today. An auspicious site, sacred but also a place for feasting, dancing and worshipping our Gods with sacrifice and blood-letting.

Unfortunately that Chieftain did not live long enough to see the completion of his mausoleum but his son did and was the first of our family to be interred. When my turn comes to return to the Hunting Grounds my bones will also be lovingly honoured and placed with reverence into its hallowed safe-keeping.

Many people travel along the High Path, some from other lands who bring weapons made of a type of stone we have not seen before. Finely worked black arrowheads and spearheads, pure black axe heads that are smooth and shine in the sun. It is called obsidian and is not found here. These are objects we admire and willingly trade food or animals for such exquisite treasures. These strangers often stay with us for some days helping out with harvest or lambing sheep in our good pastures. All are welcome, we can feed and shelter them before they move on or even decide to stay and settle with us. They are different from us, darker skinned, with black hair and very dark brown, almost black eyes. They bring news as they pass along the High Path from settlement to settlement and tell us tales around the fire of crossing huge waters which we cannot drink and strange animals we don't believe exist. They like our women, especially those with blue-eyes, rarely seen in their part of the world. If they are lucky they will take a barren woman that has been cast-out by her husband, but the handsome stranger manages to give her strong, healthy sons with lusty lungs, olive skin, dark hair and blue-eyes.

Life for us here is hard at times; when there is snow on the ground and the fires are low and wood has to be collected and seasoned, when water has to be brought in skins from the springs, when our meat and grain stores are almost depleted or eaten by weevils or animals die for no reason we understand. But the joys of living in the folds of these hills, overlooked by our ancestors in the gleaming Monument on our sacred ground, outweighs our hardships and we will continue our life's cycle with hope.

*Carole Barfoot*