



Swire Ridgeway Arts Prize 2022 Written entries

Along the Oldest Road: Riding the Ridge

Out from the yard, Mo and I slowly climb
the chalk flecked track that borders Furzewick Down
Between the stubble and the ragged hedge
Its leaves now faded to October brown.

The track becomes a path and turns due east
Past Pewit Farm to Britain's oldest road:
The Ridgeway, rising, dipping with the downs,
Unkempt and timeless, never ploughed or sowed.

But let the fleeting present fade and let
The ghosts of past millennia arise.
For where Mo's hooves now mark the muddied earth
Once mammoths roared beneath the ancient skies.

And high above that long forgotten land,
Great eagles rode the wind on outstretched wings
Ever swooping, soaring, sliding, gliding –
Of their wild realm of untamed air, the kings.

But then Mo jumps and breaks the dreaming spell –
A cyclist stealing past on silent wheels.
Mo snorts and flicks his tail and skitters past
A scattering of sheep in close cropped fields.

Along this track a stream of sheep once flowed
Heading to their fate in far off London;
Most not from here but the wet hills of Wales;
Lambs at the start but, by the end, mutton.

Now from the vale the tang of autumn drifts,
Leached from a twist of smoke that gently climbs
Where once acrid flames of pillaged hamlets
Marked the brute clashes of less certain times;

When the invaders fought the invaded;
First Celts, then Romans, Vikings, Saxons, Danes.
Now time has worn their mounds, shallowed their ditches –
Of their hard-fought lives, nothing else remains.

A mile on, a slender marble column
Whose plinth records a lauded general's name:
Lloyd-Lindsay. Here his tall memorial
Ever surveys the bounds of his domain.

Once brigands, vagrants, lost souls, trudged by here;
Today beneath his lichen coated crest
Tired hikers put away their crumpled maps,
Slide off their nagging packs and slump to rest.

They gaze on thorn hedged fields and stands of beech;
But once all this was ice. An age ago
This was a lifeless land, a white-out land
Of cold and cutting wind and driving snow.

Were there men here even before the ice?
Trekking along this ridge for countless years;
Half-clothed in crude cut skins and ragged furs,
Clasping in rough-hewn hands, their flint-tipped spears?

After the ice, the vale sank beneath a sea
Of trees – the ridge the only open ground;
Rough road by day; hard beaten bed by night;
Clear of the dangers lurking all around.

At Ridgeway Down we turn and head due west
Along the lane that runs beneath the trees;
Shapes in the shadows, wild imaginings;
Mo stops and stares – but what is it he sees?

A mighty curve-horned aurochs, motionless?
A wolf? The hollow where a wild cat lies?
A brown bear's solid bulk? A sharp-tusked boar?
Or, from the darkness, a lynx's flashing eyes?

On we go, round the old race track's rough turf
And broken rails. Do your memories flow?
Back years to when you won as Muthabir
Before you were retired to be just Mo?

Then the modern world intrudes: circling down,
Stub body black against the fading light,
a clattering Chinook. Away, up and up,
Smaller and smaller, until lost from sight.

We pause, then quickly cross the Chain Hill road
Onto the rutted track that takes us home
Past Furzewick Farm to back where we began,
Leaving the wraiths of former times to roam.

Roland Jack