

Years 11 & 12
1st Place: Yizhen Pu
Year 11, Kelmscott Senior High School

The Last

Summertime. The time of haymaking, shearing, and the early harvest. Scythes fall by the dozens upon the golden fields. Carts roll reluctantly over the rutted road. Sheep struggle vigorously in the arms of shearers. Children refusing a haircut. The lazy air was fuzzy with the heady smell of pollen and grass. I sat with my brothers and sisters in our cottage eating lunch. Bread, potatoes, and sour soup. Mother is bent over the table, kneading dough for the week ahead. Straw spirals down from the thatch above. The baby cries and mother hurries over to comfort her. Then, a shout from outside! My siblings and I jump up to join the other village children, tripping over the mud and stick floor in our haste. Tears are immediately forgotten as we are drawn into the carefree game of summer.

We venture into the forest. Our village, Jaktorów, is perched upon a forest of the same name. A Royal Forest. Sanctuary of the King's herd. They lived there to be kept safe from poachers. They died there when the King wished to hunt. Kept alive just to be shot. Father was a gamekeeper. He told me of the time when there were many herds in many forests. Then they started to disappear. Eventually, our herd, the last herd, had only 28 individuals. But that was long ago. Now there is no herd. Though they were fed, guarded and meticulously counted by the King's gamekeepers, the aurochs still died. Season after season, calves were not born, and they faded away until there was only one left. The last auroch. Towering, horned giants, father told me. Black, brawny bulls. Rust red cows and calves. All of them with spiralling, yellow-white horns tipped with black. They were majestic. Royal. Now lost.

I woke up in a clearing where the drowsy summer air had tempted me to sleep. The laughter of the other children babbled in the distance. Before me was a red ghost. With an empty sigh she dropped to her knees. The last auroch. I wondered what it was like walking through the forest alone. Through the changing leaves of autumn and the hazing heat of summer. Had it hurt the most when the buds opened for spring and there were no calves to mind? Or when the winter snow fell and there were no others to huddle warm with. I could not imagine being the last. I thought of my brothers and sisters and uncles and cousins. An endless web that kept spreading. I could not imagine them all gone. She closed her eyes. The robins continued to sing, the birch and beech to whisper. Unaware or indifferent. Did they not see? Not hear? I wanted to shout and scream, but I feared I would disturb her peace. The sun remained shining. The ground remained firm. How many last ones had closed their eyes before her, unknown? How many would after? And how many are yet to before we finally open ours?