

Fell Ponies

They have got up
out of the dirt, the first
hauling the buried boat or ramshackle cart
of its own self

from a ditch.
Then four more follow,
the props of their legs
fossilized limbs of oak,

because there were forests here once.
Not ponies as we know them
but big-engined,
an early design,

leather straps and hardwood cogs
at work when they move,
boulders for ballast
swinging in rope sacks

strung from a crude frame,
the flesh
an all-over daub
of soil and mulch that won't set.

But a lean burn all the same –
just enough breath
on the oil
to keep the lamp in flame...

All this gone wild,
Ashington escapees grown moody and mean
on aloneness and sleet.
They trundle forward

into some old war, then forget,
or blink awake from a dream
of pack road or pit,
of ploughs or sleds

at their heels,
then lower their heads
to browse on root and weed.
Wherever they halt

is the world's edge,
or they wait
just an inch from the future's wall of glass,
seeing nothing,

taking it all in, at any moment
to turn into mist, or re-emerge,
come lumbering
out of the flooded mine,

now cut-outs up on the ridge,
now barring the path to the bridge,
seaweed fringes and axe-head stares,
their hides

knotted rugs of rags
slung over the beam of the spine,
all smoke and steam,
ignited by lightning strike in the first storm,

put out by rain.

Simon Armitage