

Bobby Arnet (1792 – 1863)

James Longwill

1. Ayresome Village

At fifteen
I wore a man's jacket
and steadied the plough

the horses
dragging it
the earth curling away.

The work-shaved leather
of bridle and belly-band
were my tackle.

Working in fields
before first light
was metalled on walls.

Ditching, drain-laying,
that night
nursing the sick beast

while the wind blew the rain
like a wet tarpaulin
slapping against the byre.

And the evenings
cheeks warm with
the flame of winds

leading the horse
its slack puppetry trot
down the field paths

to Ayresome
the little houses
by the river.

2. The Soldier

At eighteen
the wars
ended all that.

I was
pressed into
the King's shilling.

I fought
in Spain
and at Waterloo.

Discharged in 1816
I walked back north
found my family evicted

land sold
mortgaged to neighbours
who bought us out.

Got no
start at
Yarm hiring-fair.

That winter
I tied sacks
about my feet.

3. The house

Their children play
there now. We made
its small, red bricks

from field-clay
dug in autumn
and left for the frost to break.

Next spring
fired
in the kiln.

We moved there
from the old house
our great-grandfather built

with stones lifted
out of fields
and that rusty stream.

Like that old house
I blacken
in the weather.

Grow
harder and darker
in the face.

4. Cholera

1802
floods all winter
harvest failed.

Beasts felled and salted.
Two years, rain all summer
and bad drainage, harvest failed.

Next spring, our faces like lanterns
white lights
weak and sickly in fields.

Three days
I watched our kid
die of cholera.

Instead of
the dark rubble
of the bowels

he passed
nothing but
watery shits.

His tongue
dried and cracked
like old leather.

By autumn
stone over him
"In the eighth year of his age."

5. Their farm

They've done well
since the coal-field
opened in Durham.

1836 the slaughter-house
full of their beef
for the Durham market.

And now that Middlesbrough
fills with Irish
they go over to dairy.

I see the beasts
led back
for milking

steam rising
from the raised masonry
of their heads.

I see the dairy's
scalded and
salt-scrubbed wood.

The tools
in the barn
scythe, flail, spade.

Their wooden handles
grained and shining
like a worked palm.

I say the names of their pigs
Yorkshire, Gloucestershire
and Tamworth Gilt.

6. Greatham Creek

I read the Bible
in my house-boat
by the estuary

the flat land
of water
where the tides crawl

unbroken by
the long planks
of the waves.

Here by the sea
and bitter water
I will be clean.

I go to it
over dunes
where the sharp grass cuts

and over
the wet
bird-printed sand.

I catch fish there.
They move like smoke
under water.

Other days
I collect driftwood.
Go to the woods

to kill vermin.
For six crows
I get three parish pennies.

7. From the prophet Isaiah

Now they are
building staites
and lighting buoys on the Tees.

Furnaces light
the night
in a gale of flame.

I hear
the sound
of hammers

and the
plate-breaking
noise of trains coupling.

Where once
the light
lay down in fields

there are
buildings
with darkness in them.

And from coal and iron
will come
the building of cities

never gracious
at the voice
of thy cry.