

The Making of Flying Scotsman
(a phantasmagoria)

The blueprint came from the future, plans
for a spaceship powered by water and coal;
they fired up the furnace with kindling and oily rags
and strong-armed the bellows till the flames sang.
In went the chainmail and breastplates of knights
for the casings, shields for the footplate.
For the boiler they threw in an ancient vat
that once distilled present from past.
For the frame, suspension bridges were commandeered.
In the forge, blacksmiths practiced their dark arts.
They needed more heat: in went ovens, braziers, kilns,
quartered segments of sun, in went
anthracite kernels that burned with blue breath.
For the firebox they used the Bank of England's
inmost vault, locked with a bombproof door,
in it went, and rivets grown from the knuckles
of dinosaurs coaxed back to life from their DNA.
In went vices and anvils, centurions' helmets.
They shovelled in measures of volume and space: cubits,
choirs, gallons, furlongs, fathoms, spans and roods.
An acre of village green for the famous paint.
The chimney was a girder of solid air.
Sandboxes held the Sahara in their embrace.
(Later there'd be a *Haynes Manual* for all this,
as if you could build the thing in your garage one rainy weekend
from spent matches and candle wax).
From Snowdon, Ben Nevis and Scafell Pike
they recovered the giant pulleys and gears
that rolled those mountains into position,
used them for wheels.
They needed more speed: in went a time-lapse film.
Some engine parts were machined from language alone:
spindle glands, pear drop stink bombs, hornguides, eccentric rods...
They'd need more metal - they diverted a foundry's flow
of pulsing magma into the cauldron where nuclear fusion
took place, where the barrel-fronted
snub-nosed fizzog was starting to bake, and threw in
the odd volcano or two to up the Fahrenheit.
Swords for the slidebars, grease from the earth's axel.
In the organ loft of the cab the shiny plumbing

of tubas, trombones and trumpets got wrenched into shape.

Welds were soldered with silver bracelets
and silver torcs belonging to tribal princesses; hawthorn
and blackthorn needles tickled the faces
of gauges and dials - whitesmiths and tinsmiths applied
the finishing touches here and there
as the range and hearth were hung with ships' clocks,
beer pumps, embalmers' flasks and the like.

Then a nip of single malt and it coughed into life,
came from the tunnel's mouth,
shunted slowly forward crunching inches and yards
under its vast steel circumferences,
straining, hissing, the rippling bodywork pouring with sweat,
skirts trimmed with petticoats of steam,
the spiracle venting cumulonimbus into a blue sky,
devilment glowing red in the lantern's lens,
and stood there all hide, horn, bill, hoof, claw, fin, and tail
as they fell to their knees, astonished to find
this beast had wings - this creature could fly.

Simon Armitage

Commission to mark the 100th anniversary of Flying Scotsman, 2023.