

THE PRICE OF A FISH SUPPER

RAB:

Are you after a fry?
You'll be lucky.

Folk used to say that.
Have you got a fry?
Dog's abuse.
Now you'd get dog's abuse.

There are lucky fishermen
And there are unlucky fishermen.
My grandfather was lucky.
My great grandfather was lucky.
King Herring.

When Willie's sittin' in the stern, wi the wire, feelin' for the herrin
Shouts to Kruger keep her west, I've felt all night but this is the best....

PAUSE

They used to
they used to come down the harbour. After a fry. People like you. Holiday folk. When
the harbour was busy.

My grandfather Fergie
His name was Fergie but they aye called him Jeely Piece.
He used to tell me
he'd a cousin who was harbourmaster down here and he used to feed the gulls every
morning with guts from the herring
And this wee Glasgow woman comes down all dolled up
she looks at the seagulls and says are those your pigeons?
Of course they are Madam, he says. I'm just feeding them.
Could I buy two of them, she asks him.
Oh certainly he replies.
She hands him five bob and he pockets it and says just take your pick missus.

PAUSE.

Have you got the price of a fish supper?
Have you?
No.
So what do you think I'm going to spend it on?
Aye well you might be right.
But let's face it I am no longer a young man so does it matter?
Does it matter?

It is an ancient mariner and he stoppeth one of three.

For all averred I had killed the bird that made the breeze to blow.
Averred bird.
Used to say that at the school.
Do you know what a fucking albatross looks like?
I don't.

Funny word that.
Albatross.
The more you say it the funnier it gets.
Albatross.
They don't write them like that any more.
Instead of the cross the albatross about my neck was hung.
Used to have to learn it off by heart.
They don't nowadays.
Not by heart.

This year next year some time
time goes by
too fucking fast for me.

You count in tens don't you? You say in ten years time I'll be.
And then you think, one time you think how many? How many ten years do I have left?
Three lots, two lots, one lot?
Water water everywhere and not a drop

Nicky Jock, he fell off the quayside, dead drunk, went crashing down between the boat
and the wall.
They found him in the morning floating face down.
That was a few years ago now. He was only thirty.
He didn't have many tens did he?
Not that I'm planning my exit you understand. Not right now, anyway.

But I'll tell you what.
I have to try something else. Something new.
In ten years time I'll be
I'll not be sitting here anyway.
One way or another
I have to take myself
I have to give myself a
except that when I try it all goes
the sea's in my head.
It's quiet down here. Nice and peaceful. At least there's that.

I could work on a ferry. Or take folk out fishing. Rod fishing.
The sea's in everything I
The sea.
The great fucking weight of it holding you down.

PAUSE

Visitors.
Something like yourselves.
They used to
They used to come down and watch the boats.
This woman says to me what will the weather be like tomorrow and I look at the sky.
Rain in the morning, clearing from the west.
Can you tell all that son, just from the sky?
No missus, but I listened to the shipping forecast a couple of hours ago.

Another one. Says to me. Do you know where all the rocks are out there?
No I tell her. But I know where they aren't and that's good enough for me.

It isn't always the rocks that do it.

PAUSE.

Fish. They were always going on about the price of fish.
In the shops. In the market. The price of a fish supper.
Gies a fry son.
Once upon a time you could give them a few fish.
But later on we were supposed to say no, not a hope in hell.
Why, they'd say. Why can't we buy it?
But see it all goes away and then it gets processed and packaged so the last thing it looks like is a fish.
And then it comes back and *then* you can buy it, in the shops like.
Frozen or chilled. Fish fucking fingers.

We weren't supposed to sell it but
sometimes I did.
And sometimes I'd give them a fry for nothing.
If I liked the look of them. If they were polite.
If they didn't piss me off. If they were female.
Jimmy. He said I was giving the profits away.

Fucks sake, half of it goes to Spain.
They eat fish you wouldn't look at. In Spain.
They eat stuff that looks more like it should be in a pet shop in Spain.
They barbecue them and suck the brains out of the prawns in Spain.
They eat velvet swimmer crabs in Spain and *they're* so small you wouldn't think

But who are we to complain?
Do we complain?
Aye. We do. All the time. Who doesn't?
But if they pay for the shit it's fine by me
he used to say. That's what Jimmy used to say. Jimmy.
Jimmy's my
Was my
Was

PAUSE

Would you just take a look at this place?
You'd never think this was once a working harbour would you?
A hundred boats and more.
You could walk across it on the decks of boats.
Mind you that was before my time.
Now there's well see for yourself.
They moved the market.
The water's full of turds and plastic bags.
Going through the motions eh?
You wouldn't believe the plastic bags and the shopping trolleys.
Why do folk have this urge to dump shopping trolleys in the river?
Or do they just
like lemmings
after dark

PAUSE

My great grandfather was King Herring. Best fisherman of his day.
But that was when there were fish to be had.
There's this story my grandfather used to tell me.
There they are, steaming up Loch Striven. It's a lovely evening. And the whole land just
seems to disappear. They steam into this haze and you know what it is? It's herrings.
Putting up. That's what they call it. Breathing. And it covers the whole sea like a mist.
The sea's covered in it. The herring have just arrived and they've been swimming hard
and fast and they're putting up and you can just see it.

Or you would feel for them with a wire.
That was another.
When Willie's sittin' in the stern wi the wire feelin' for the herrin'
Or what else?
Or you would see whales feeding on the fry, or basking sharks, or gannets streckin on the
herring below, diving into the water.

They go blind. Gannets. Did you know that?
They go blind and when they can't do the business any more they die.
They die of starvation.
I've seen the fire on the water.
I've seen that.
Phosphorescence.
Light everywhere.
You pee over the side and it's like
Magic.
But no more.
I haven't seen it for
years.
They say it was. It was

that was the way it was.
But it's gone. It's all gone now.

The herrin' went and they never came back.

PAUSE

Some say it's the overfishing and some say it's the pollution and some say it's the nets
and – what the fuck? Some say.
I say hell mend them all.

They sold this industry down the river.
And I'll tell you another thing, we went a damn sight more quietly than the miners
Too busy trying to earn a living.
But that's not
no.
That's another story.
That isn't why I'm

PAUSE

What I wanted to tell you was this. What I really wanted to tell you was
it's in a fucking museum you know. It looks. Well you wouldn't want to. You wouldn't
ever want to
what I'm trying to tell you
the last time I was there, Christ, the only time I was ever there, there were kids. A bunch
of kids. All over it.
They were on a day out from somewhere.
School kids.
You couldn't blame them. No. Oh no.
They were having this brilliant day out.
One of them says. I hear him.
This is brilliant he says
Cool. Cool they say.
You wouldn't even want to
I don't know what the fuck to do about it.
I don't know what to do or what to say.
I haven't the words.
Who the fuck would ever have the words?

PAUSE

Jesus Christ alone knows why I went. I paid my ticket as well.
I paid.
I can't remember what it cost.
What it cost
It cost
The price of a fish supper.

I didn't tell them.
I mean if I'd told them they'd have gone all soft .
I wouldn't have had to pay.
I know that.
Well I'm assuming that but who knows?
Who knows eh?
They might have made me pay

Anyway I did pay.
They've got
they've got a notice. Telling you. Telling you all about

who wrote it I wonder?
How would they write it?
No I mean how could they?
Did they think?
Did they know?

So I get there and it's full of kids having an experience.
It looks like. I can't tell you. It looks like some great big
like a sickness. Sitting there. Just sitting there. High and dry.

Come to that it doesn't look dry. Not at all fucking dry.
Even on a sunny day it looks kind of wet. Oozing.
Like a big sore.
In me.
A sore sore place.
It hurts
me.

PAUSE

I'm not making much sense am I ? I will tell you. I will. If you'll wait with me. Wait a
minute.

If it was farmers. Jesus, don't get me started about.
If it was farmers or miners at least they'd.
But they didn't did they?
We're all in the same boat really.
Nobody.
Nobody gives a fuck and that's the truth.

Jimmy says. No. Jimmy said.
I keep saying that you see.
Jimmy says. Jimmy does. Jimmy thinks.
Jimmy might.
Jimmy wouldn't. Jimmy doesn't. Jimmy won't.
Not ever. Never again.
Jimmy and Annie. Annie and Jim. Jimmy and me.

My brother. Myself.

PAUSE

We were at the school together. Me, Jimmy, Annie.
Annie was my friend. My pal. Mine.

The school. Picture it. It's just a wee school. But there's this long corridor. With classrooms off it.

It smells of chalk. Cabbage. Sweaty shoes. Disinfectant. Piss.

The first day I go in the front door and I can smell all this.

And I'm off running and I'm straight out the back.

Away home.

Mammy mammy, I'm home. That's it. I've done school. Over. Finished.

One day. All done.

I don't know why I don't twig. Jim's older. He goes every day.

I know he goes. I see him go. I wave him off.

But no me I think. No me.

What am I like?

My mother's mortified.

But she keeps me at home that day. She's in the middle of the weekly wash. Place full of steam and sunlight soap.

She sits me down with a glass of Tizer. The appetiser.

Be good Robbie she says. Be a good boy for your mammy now.

My dad's raging when he comes home from the boat but my mammy won't let him batter me.

The second day they lock the door at the back so I can't get out.

They put me in a classroom and I sit at this wooden desk with initials and rude words cut into it.

Except that I can't read them because I can't read, can I? I only find out they're rude later on like.

I'm greetin' I'm making a bloody awful racket.

They take me out to the cloakroom with its wee pegs for coats and they give me a glass of water but I just keep on greetin'.

They sit me in a chair and I fall asleep.

I just shut it all out and fall asleep until home time.

The third day I have the wood axe, the short handled one for chopping up the kindling under my grey wool v-necked jumper.

I'm all for breaking out the back door.

Jimmy, he's in primary three. He's mortified as well. He says he'll hammer me if I do it again.

He says I'll beat the living daylights out of you.

The next day they sit me beside Annie.

It's their last shot.

Their best shot.

She's wee and plump with plaits and nice pink cheeks.

She watches me howling for a bit and she says "For goodness sake!" like a grown woman.

She's five and already she's got this I don't know this self possession.

She sorts me out. She tells me what to do and when to do it and how to do it .

Nobody ever picks on me.

Annie's got a temper.

I feel safe with Annie. Annie always sorts me out.

Well she used to. She did. She did.