The Bargain

The river in January is fast and high.

You and I

are off to the Barrows.

Gathering police-horses twitch and fret

at the Tron end of London Road and Gallowgate.

The early kick-off we forgot

has us, three thirty, rubbing the wrong way

against all the ugly losers

getting ready to let fly

where the two rivers meet.

January, and we’re

looking back, looking forward,

don’t know which way

but the boy

with three beautiful Bakelite

Bush radios for sale in Meadow’s Minimarket is

buttonpopping stationhopping he

doesn’t miss a beat sing along it’s easy

to every changing tune

Yes today we’re in love aren’t we?

with the whole splintering city

its big quick river wintry bridges

its brazen black Victorian heart.

So what if every other tenement

wears its hearth on its gable end?

All I want

is my glad eye to catch

a glint in your flinty Northern face again

just once. Oh I know it’s cold

and coming down

and no we never lingered long among

the Shipbank traders.

Paddy’s Market underneath the arches

stank too much today

the usual wetdog reek rising

from piles of old damp clothes.

Somebody absolutely steamboats he says on

sweet warm wine

swigged plaincover from a paper bag

squats in a puddle with nothing to sell

but three bent forks a torn

calendar (last year’s)

and a broken plastic sandal.

So we hadn’t the stomach for it today.

We don’t deserve a bargain then!

No connoisseur can afford to be too scrupulous

about keeping his hands clean.

There was no doubt the rare the beautiful

and the bugle-beaded the real antique dirt cheap

among the rags and drunks

you could easily take to the cleaners.

At the Barrows everything has its price

no haggling believe me

this boy knows his radios.

Pure Utility

and what that’s worth these days.

and anything within a decade of art deco

a rarity you’ll pay through your nose for.

The man with the patter and all these curtain lengths

in fibreglass is flabbergasted at the bargain

and says so in so many words.

Jesus, every other

arcade around here’s

a ‘Fire Surround Boutique’ –

and we watch the struggling families –

father carrying hearth home

mother wound up with kids.

All the couples we know fall apart

or have kids.

Oh we’ve never shouldered much.

We’ll stick to small ikons for our home –

as long as they’re portable –

a dartboard a peacock feather

a stucco photoframe.

We queue in a blue haze of hot fat

for Danny’s Do-Nuts that grit

our teeth with granules of sugar

I keep

losing you and finding you –

two stalls away you thumb

through a complete set of manuals for

primary teachers in the thirties

I rub my sleeve

on a rusty Chinese saucer

till the gilt shows through.

Oh come on we promised

we’d not let our affection for the slightly cracked

trap us into such expenditure again.

Oh even if it is a bargain

we won’t buy.

The stallholder says I’ll be the death of her

she says see January

it’s been the doldrums the day.

And it’s packing up time

with the dark coming early

and as cold as the river.

By the bus stop I show you

the beady bag and the maybe rosewood box

with the inlaid butterfly and the broken catch.

you’ve bought a record by the Shangri-las

a pin-stripe waistcoat that needs a stitch

it just won’t get and a book called *Enquire*

*Within – Upon Everything.*

The raw cold gets colder.

There doesn’t seem to be a lot to say.

I wish we could either mend things

or learn to throw them away.

Liz Lochhead