

Old Bill

by Janie Meneely

Once knew a waterman, name of Bill
Kept his boat at the end of our street
And each afternoon when his day was done
He'd bait up right there in the creek.
Now Bill was a codger, as old as the sea
His whiskers grew out of his ears
He'd hitch up his trousers and spit when he pleased
Tobacco juice dripped down his beard
He had the name Molly tattooed 'cross his chest—
They'd met in a Baltimore bar
Running up longside his sunbeaten cheeks
He carried one heckuva scar.

CHORUS:

He told us the tales of the times long ago
Times that were fading out fast
And we listened hard with our eyes all aglow
Tangled in yarns of the past

When Bill was a young man, the oyster was king
And a boatload would bring in good pay
A fist full of dollars, a wink and a grin
Were all that he had to his name.
He spent all his money on poker and beer
He never had too much to show
Till he got lucky one night with the cards
And he won enough cash for a boat
A sweet little deadrise, white as the foam,
His mother's name bold on the stern
He liked Molly better but thought the good Lord
Would better approve of Miss Ferne

CHORUS

It happened one winter, we kids were in school
The storm clouds rose sudden and grey
We shuddered to think of old Bill on his boat
Hauling oysters up out of the Bay
The wind it was fierce and the wind whipped the air
Like the devil himself on a bend
They found the Miss Ferne with some oysters on deck
But we never saw old Bill again
Some said he was lucky, some said he went quick
Some said it was really a shame
And they ran the Miss Ferne way up into a marsh
And our life went on just the same

CHORUS

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The kids don't hang out at the street end these days
Hearing all those stories and such
There aren't any workboats tied up anymore
Just a couple of big fancy yachts
But come early morn in the dawn's rosy glow
As the starlight grows dim in the sky
You can hear the low growl of a workboat go past,
You'd swear it was Bill going by
And come afternoon when the sun hunkers low,
And the fireflies flit through the trees
You can hear all those stories Bill told long ago
Still echoing soft in the breeze.

CHORUS