Sunday at the Skin Launderette

Kathryn Simmonds

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Extract

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The Boys in the Fish Shop

This one winds a string of plastic parsley
around the rainbow trout,
punnets of squat lobster and marinated anchovy,
the dish of jellied eels
in which a spoon stands erect.
He's young, eighteen perhaps,
with acne like the mottled skin of some pink fish,
and there's gold in his ear, the hoop of a lure.
The others aren't much older,
bantering in the back room,
that den of stinking mysteries
where boxes are carried.

The fish lie around all day,
washed-up movie stars
stunned on their beds of crushed ice.
The boys take turns to stare
through the wide glass window,
hands on hips, an elbow on a broom,
lost for a moment in warm waters until
Yes darling, what can I get you?
and their knives return to the task,
scraping scales in a sequin shower,
splitting parcels of scarlet and manganese.
Their fingers know a pound by guesswork,
how to unpeel smoked salmon,
lay it fine as lace on cellophane.
A girl walks past, hair streaming,
and the boy looks up,
still gripping his knife, lips parting in a slack O.

Talking to Yourself

It starts with sounds of which you're unaware:
the window, opening, gives a rusting sigh,
saying something, although there's no one there.

The bath brims over while you ask the air
what's the point? The air makes no reply.
It's used to sounds of which you're unaware.

Children see you chattering and stare,
and mothers with their trolleys wonder why
you're whispering, although there's no one there,

just artichokes, an avocado pear –
they cannot tell you how to live and die,
they're lipless, though they may still be aware.

Inside the church the shadows lisp a prayer,
and votive candles clamber to the sky,
insisting something, although there's no one there:

the priest has gone, the altar's been stripped bare.
You've never prayed, but now you kneel and try:

it starts with sounds of which you're unaware,
saying something, although there's no one there.

My Darling, My Cliché

Don't start what you can't diminish.
A bird in the hand is worth nothing if it lies
stock still and won't sing. You can lead
a horse to water but you can't make it recite the rosary.
If I said you had a beautiful body would you.
This is our bed you have made for yourself.
Beware of old lovers bearing gifts. A rolling stone
gathers much loss. If you can't say something nice
say something with gall (many a true word
was said in a vest at three a.m. on a Wednesday night).
Why not begin afresh, put the past beside us,
forgive and beget? What the heart
hasn't seen the eye doesn't grieve for.
Please. It's not over till the. Oh.

The Woman who Worries Herself to Death

She wasn't robbed or raped or made a scapegoat of,
she didn't take ill-fated flights on shaky planes and

no one splashed her house in paint. Kids with hoods
and sovereign rings and hates left her alone. That twinge

she sometimes felt was just a twinge. Her fillings didn't
leak. At office do's she danced and no one laughed.

Her children didn't have disorders, fail exams,
take smack. Her husband didn't love his secretary

or get the sack. But, if you saw her fidgeting
towards the dawn, her breathing playing tricks,

a thousand *what if's* snaking in a queue, you'd feel for her,
you'd wish she had something to pin her torment to.