

The Talking Horse and the Sad Girl and the Village Under the Sea

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Extract

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Nuns

They're out again,
flocking on the esplanade
like crows.

Passing the nudist beach
they giggle into cupped hands
like smokers round a match.

Some play crazy golf.
Some buy the less exciting
flavours of ice cream.

Others lie in deckchairs
and seem unnaturally comfortable
despite the heat.

Their ankles
are like flashes
of lightning.

We come across them
paired in bumper cars
or spellbound by cartoons

and Rugby League
on televisions stacked
in storefront windows.

They smell of soap
and dentists' hands
and rustle when they move.

Some go native,
as they always do,
stung by that long view

through the shilling telescope
or by the soft eyes
of the boy who rents the pedalos.

They move into cheap lodgings
with a single suitcase
and experiment with fashionable clothes.

Later, out of season,
we will recognise them,
frying breaded cod

or punching ferry tickets,
marked out
by the chapel-silence

which surrounds them still,
and by the way they stoop
to talk to children.

They are not mourned,
for come October,
when the ghost train shuts down

and the coloured bulbs along the pier
are packed away,
their places will be filled

by girls we teased in school
who yearned for love
and dreamed of reaching up

to take the teacher's hand
and being lifted from the flesh
in which they'd never felt at home,

or walking, as they walk now,
up the harsh rake of the lanes,
past burger bars and butchers,

past the Grand Hotel,
the Smuggler's Haven
and the Wall of China,

past the car park and the campsite,
past the Esso station
and the padlocked school

then through the granite arch
and over moonlit
geometric lawns

into the silence
of a clean white room
out of the swing of the sea.