

Letters from Manuela

*Manuela Sáenz, 19th century South American revolutionary and intimate of Simón Bolívar,
ended her days exiled in Peru earning money translating love-letters for American whale hunters*

They come to her cottage
by the harbour
to compose confessions,

men adrift
with tattooed hearts.
At the parlour table

she interprets talk
only a lover should hear,
thoughts she, too,

might have sent
at one time in this life.
For a coin in her palm

each client can buy
a voyage of hope,
boys from the north

who'll not see home
until their beards are full,
older men

with sailcloth faces,
watching the mystery
of pen on page,

handing her letters
from one-night wives,
paper worn so thin

the pieces fall apart
in her fingers,
ink rubbed to a fog,

ghost words
the writer
has long forgotten.