

MARY GRAY

The Mermaid's Story

*But the three-masted "Alice" that crashed into the
outer row of breakers in the winter of 1909 disturbed
me a lot. There was something about her lonely battle
against the gales and waves, her tattered sails, that
seemed most tragic...* —Aneseth House

"Solano" beached
near the grass-tangled shore
spring of 1907,
when I was eleven.

In coveralls
and rubber hip boots
I slopped across the sink
where she sloshed.

Waves lapped her prow.
A hemp ladder swayed
from her side. "Lean in,
girl, lean in," men

called from the deck
as I climbed. Arms,
cracked by sun,
mapped with oil,

pulled me up.
In the galley I ate
hot biscuits and honey.
I fell in love with the sea.

. . .

In 1909, year
of first blood
and tender breasts,
“Alice” grounded,

prow inshore,
bulk falling north.
I tried to swim out
to meet her,

was slapped back
by waves. Mother found me
flapping on sand,
dragged me home.

“To purge longings,”
she said, and spooned
Castor oil down
my throat, plaited

my hair’s grasses
tight against my skull,
bound my feet
with high-button shoes,

my hips and legs
by a green wool skirt,
fluted at its hem,
as if finned.