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Mary Gray

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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.