

Laura Donnelly

The Dove House

—after Winslow Homer's
Cullercoats paintings

All down the wharf the women
mend nets and this song on the radio,
I remember it too. The hooks on the lines
like so many small fingers. The oysters' sheen
clapped shut and burred into place.

Aged fifteen, they claimed, a shilling a day
for her straight back, straight chin. Maggie on break
from mending the nets. Not more
than *thirteen* but already those steel-pinned eyes
gone to market, steel voice hawking herring.
Bright sun against slate, barrel shimmered
with scales. She wears the woven basket
like a second hip tilted wide.

The men leave every night. The moon,
should there be one, calling the fish
like a lover.

Meanwhile, the painter
might sleep. Every blue on the palette a shadow,
black hole, and the quiet is such a fine echo.



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A border, a shoreline, a wandering sheer.

Whoever has dropped
in storm, in darkness, and how the salt tastes
bone-deep loss.

To cross over and back
as if into dream. To wade deeply. To grasp

barefoot the breakwaters and fossil
yourself to that wall.

—

Sway out the sails, the billowing gray-
blue skirt, overskirt,
how I always think of sky as *fabric*.

Our shoulders seep up watercolor
the way waves take the changeling sky,
this line a whole note, full breath.
When the mainsail expands,
the chest with it. *Weight, counterweight. Weight,*
counterweight. The wind creates
peaks and troughs in the sky. Sea spray
about to tear paper.

—

Every hole in your life. The ones you made,
the ones handed down. The sea that will swallow
your father, your brother. There are stitches for this,
the needle's quick dive down-and-back,
not a sliver of gray but a thick slab of bone.



You imagine your life a long, low boat,
and the tide a barely perceptible iron glow.

—

For *dove*, for sparrow: gray softness
of flight.

For the cliff edge: these years
looking up, out, and over,
that ruddy-cheeked squint in the sun.

And for house: stoic keeper, stone on stone,
Sparra Harl, you grasp at the name's guttural,

how we perch there between rock and flight.

