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The Keeper of Black Rock Light

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The Keeper of Black Rock Light

—*Catherine Moore: Lighthouse Keeper: 1817-1878*

Pa needed me to trim the wicks, he said,
eight lamps guzzling whale oil

might save a hundred ships

in fogbound Long Island Sound,
and at twelve I swapped childhood

for something more essential,

this island's straggly spit of land,
a forty-foot tower.

I was schooled by gale and storm,

slept in boy's clothes, face turned
to the tower's light

should the wind dare

swallow our flames.
Our shelves were lined with books,

and I sang land songs

as I hoed a geometry of peas and beans,
sculpted eiders, ring-necks, and mallards

from sea-tossed

blocks of pine. My playmates
were chickens, lambs,
and two Newfoundlands,
their gentle natures disguised
by sticky-burrs, the pungent scent
of rockweed and mussel.
Now and then I rescued
a fisherman from the surf,
fed him soup, prayed
he not die there
in front of my homely fire.