

KATHLEEN MCCLUNG

Whistle Keepers, 1883

We all drown. Before sinking into earth or water we work, raise
children, sing and weep, nurse the afflicted, repair a boat,
christen it with a woman's name. My own is lost.

Yes, yes, I am Mrs. Colburn in every sheriff's report passed
across oak desks, across years of sun and fog.

Yes, yes, we have a tale. Mrs. Ashley and I have a tale, wives

of whistle keepers posted to Año Nuevo Island, ordinary wives
of quiet men, Henry and Bernard. Solemn men, they never raised
their voices, took only a drop of rum on holidays, no fog
of drunkenness, no bellowing rage, steady—like a boat
just finished, not yet at sea. Readers all, we four could pass
a clear evening in silence once the children slept, lost

in *The Tempest* or *Moby Dick* by lamplight as our children, lost
in their dreams, twitched in their cradles. Husbands and wives
swimming peaceably through pages, words like *harpoon* and *magic* streaming past.
Other nights, the men tended the steam whistle, raised
its blast from hot coals for ten seconds every minute into the thick weave of sky. Grand boats
had smashed to bits years before—the *Sir John Franklin*, the *Coya*—in our California fog.

We'd read the stories as schoolgirls, dreamed of gold coins glinting in fog,
trunks of soft pelts tumbling onto beaches, handsome sailors lost
among octopus on the ocean floor. On April 8 our husbands rowed a boat
to the mainland for supplies: more leather-bound books for their wives,
fresh artichokes, strawberry jam, a real china doll for Ida, sharp razors
to scrape away their beards. We busied ourselves scrubbing pots, passed

the spring day as any other, industrious, aproned. Pelicans passed
low over our heads. We pinned wash on the line. No fog,
but forceful gales, tall waves, the baby colicky as the last rays
of sun drained from the sky. Did he know his father would be lost
in the morning? Did he know we women—friends, mothers, wives—
would witness the small boat whirling and bobbing in rough water? A boat

named *Ophelia*, full of food and gifts. Henry had painted our fine and only boat
before the birth of our son. It carried our men out to thrashing open sea, past
our island of new years, past our cries, our reach. Wives
flow into widows every hour—some keen and howl, curl tight within caves of fog.
But we could not. *We must signal*, we agreed, *bring a ship to us or we are lost*.
First the flag. We lowered the salted cloth, spun it upside down, raised

it again, half-mast. Then the fog whistle we wives had memorized
but never used until that bright April day. We raised the alarm, beckoned
to distant boats: We have lost treasure to the sea. Find us. Do not sail past.



ABOUT KATHLEEN MCCLUNG

Kathleen McClung is the author of *Almost the Rowboat* (Finishing Line Press 2013), and her poems have appeared in *Mezzo Cammin*, *Unsplendid*, *Atlanta Review*, *A Bird Black as the Sun: California Poets on Crows & Ravens*, and *Raising Lilly Ledbetter: Women Poets Occupy the Workspace*. Having received master's degrees in English and education from California State University Fresno and Stanford University, she lives in San Francisco, California, and teaches for Skyline College and The Writing Salon. She also serves as the sponsor/judge for the sonnet category of the Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition. Online at kathleenmcclung.com.

