

Michael McDowell

## Light Keeper's House

*North Head, Washington*

In a clearing above the lighthouse, the keepers' homes  
of years past sit beneath roofs of bright Coast Guard red.  
High Victorian windows stare at the dark hemlocks and spruce.

The surf grumbles below and sparrows in the portico flutter  
as we haul our luggage through the doorway white with droppings  
and rusty from decades of fog and drizzle and storm.

Here the family of the first-assistant keeper of the light lived,  
tending gardens and chickens and mules at the cliff-end  
of a long plank road patched and repaired with pieces of shipwreck.

We eat at the table where they ate their home-grown meals,  
climb the circular stairway of polished wood to the bedrooms,  
and listen to the waves pound the headland's basalt below.

*The windiest weather station in the country, my mother would say,  
with wind so fierce the keepers would crawl on their bellies  
to the oil houses for kerosene to keep the wicks burning all night.*

Late at night under a gibbous moon and stars and faint clouds  
I follow the keepers' walk along the dark ravine to the lighthouse.  
A soft wind barely rustles the summer foliage.

One June day long ago, the head keeper's wife arose at 5 a.m.,  
told him to stay in bed while she walked the grounds,  
and went into the new dawn.

After thirty-three years of isolation in wind and fog and rain,  
she walked along these cliffs, left her coat on the damp grass,  
and slid on rock two hundred feet to the surging waves below.

The lighthouse beam now sweeps the night forest.  
Its soundless ball of light bounds across dark cliffs and trees  
and suddenly disappears out to sea.

