

How many candles burned  
In lighthouse miniature,  
When one flame at the window  
Was enough to tell a fisherman how far  
He was from home. How far  
From the wrecking rim of the bay,  
How far from a bowl of broth  
And the warming body locked around  
His own, when you are cold and can only  
Be warmed from inside.

How many candles flickered  
On that out-breath of relief:  
He's home, or dread: He's home,  
Or disbelief: He's not.  
The nine moons' turning darkness leave  
A rocking cradle or an empty bed.  
The fish pour from the nets,  
Coal tipped in the scuttle for another week,  
A step down to the stores for a slab of bacon on tick  
And a pack of thin, white tapers.

How many candles shone  
On nights identically black,  
Each blessed in its paper wrapper,  
Each hope confessed again.  
And how many ears at the flaring pane  
Awaiting the crunch of keel  
And scrape of oars and the hefted nets and pots.  
How that little light picks out a cigarette,  
The glisten of spit on shingle, toe and heel,  
Wet boots upon the beach.

Excerpt from *The Houses Along the Wall* © Karen Hayes