Approaching the Shoals

by Joseph Conlin

I stood along side the bus at the upper level of BWI's terminal, avoiding eye contact with Bailey and Father Donovan. I had been told that there were planes leaving for New York from the C and D concourses. The bus idled high, and the fumes from its diesel engine floated along the curb as the driver searched for my bag in the belly of the bus. My attention darted, a car honking, people shouting, the faint roar of a jet. I squatted and looked for my red tube bag as the bus driver pushed around the luggage of the other passengers, some of whom were staring from the windows in the bus. I didn't see them, but I felt long peering, especially Paige's, for why shouldn't they, and she, after what I had done. I wanted to hit Monk. I did. I even believed that there were people on the bus, not Paige though, who wanted me to hit Monk. Yet, no one wanted me to hit him for real. When they saw the blood, they had no choice but to ask me to get off.

‘‘That's it.” I pointed when he grabbed the handles of my bag. There was speckles of blood on the sleeve of my shirt, nothing dramatic, dots of crimson that had sprayed from his nose. I withdrew my arm quickly, hiding it behind my back.

‘‘The only one?”

‘‘I travel light.”

He swung the bag out and let it down on the curb, near where Bailey and Father Donovan stood.

‘‘That everything?” Father Donovan had shoved his hands in his pants pockets.

Even with his plaid shirt and khaki pants, the man was a priest, reminding me of all the priests in my life, the one who dripped water on my head, the one who heard my first Confession, the one who put the Eucharist on my tongue, the one who slapped me, the one who witnessed my vows to Effie, to one who said Effie's funeral Mass. They were all present at the moment, and even though I no longer believed, I felt as if I should be on my knees asking for forgiveness. “Yes.”

‘‘You'll be all right?” Bailey came forward with his hand out.

I slung the bag over my shoulder. We shook hands. “I'll be fine.” I wanted to say thank you to Bailey for his simple act secularized the moment, and I felt a reprieve. It wasn't what I was expecting. I presumed he would slap me on the back and say, See ya, and be off. There too in his eyes was a request for an explanation, which he didn't expect and which I couldn't give. He saluted, turned, and boarded the bus.

Father Donovan removed his hands from his pockets and stepped closer. “Geoffrey, you're not fine. I know that. You know that. I know a few people in Baltimore. I could give a call.”

He had this look on his face that seemed to be offering me something between absolution and redemption, and I couldn't figure out if I resented it or not. So I just presumed that it was an act of generosity, of concern. “I appreciate it but

no.”

He moved a pebble with his foot, and I stared at it as if it were offering some type of connection between the two of us. He kicked a pebble to curb. “Take care.” He boarded the bus. There was nothing for me to add. So I stood and watched the door closed behind him. As the bus pulled away, Paige waved from the seat where I had been sitting. I didn't wave. I wanted only to be disconnected from her, a link to Effie, to dying, to what had become of me during the past few months. The bus passed from view. The clouds drifted away, and the day lightened as the sun's heat warmed the sidewalk. I faced the sun, absorbing the warmth, and the noise of the planes, cars, and people faded.

Inside the terminal, scores of people with luggage at their sides queued at the ticket counters, winding in zig-zags. Others scurried along with plastic handles extended from the suitcases on rollers, moving at a determined pace. The scent of coffee wafted from a nearby coffee bar, and the lighting dulled colors and smoothed edges. The place had a feeling of passing from one life to another, changing people from visitor to returnee, going back to who they were in the place from which they came. I suddenly realized that I have never felt like me in airports or train stations, always a person waiting to go from what I was in one place to what I would be in another. And if I sat, even for a second, I could avoid waiting on line to buy a ticket and avoid going back to who I was.

In the waiting area, seats were filled with people reading, watching those small televisions, talking on cell phones, or working on laptops. Other seats were filled with small pieces of luggage. The aisles were cramped with larger pieces. I found two seats. I put my tube bag on one and I sat on the other. My lower back and my neck were knotted. I leaned back in the seat and stretched, the pain increasing slightly, and I stretched further, rocking my head to the right and left. I could hear a crunching.

‘‘Excuse me, is that yours?” The woman looked at my tube bag on the seat.

‘‘I'm sorry.” I moved the bag quickly. She wore a gray sweatshirt with an image of the Bass Head lighthouse. “Bass Head?”

‘‘Excuse me.”

‘‘On your sweatshirt. Bass Head lighthouse.” I pointed.

She looked at the image. “Oh, yes. I forgot. Isn't it pretty?”

‘‘Yes. Bass Head was my wife's favorite.”

‘‘Mine too. Matter of fact we just toured some of the lighthouses along the Chesapeake.” The woman put down her bags and sat. In the terminal's light, her short gray hair was dull and the lines in her face, a friendly face, appeared deep.

‘‘We saw a small one at a place called Piney Point,” I said. It was a small light not far from Billy's campus and where Peter worked. Effie and I had seen it the first time we dropped Billy off at college.

‘‘We saw that one and the one in that state park. What's it called? Yes. Point Lookout. That was impressive.” She shifted in her seat so she could face me.

‘‘Never saw that one.”

‘‘You should. It's not particularly pretty, but it has a unique history. They say it's haunted.”

‘‘We, actually my wife, she was the one who loved lighthouses. She was more interested in the keepers, especially the women. There's this one light near us in Bridgeport. One of the few female keepers.” I felt proud about Effie and her lighthouses and the trips we took to see them and the memory of her joy.

‘‘I beg to differ, at least according to the information we received. Let me see if I can find it.” She opened her large, canvas pocketbook, her face bent over the opening, her fingers touching leaf after leaf of paper. “Here it is. Let me count. One, two, three. Three women manned Piney Point. God, where's the other stuff?” Her fingers leafed through the sheets. “Oh, yes. Here. About four at Point Lookout. The first was the wife of the light's first keeper. What's her name?” Her finger ran down a piece of paper. “Ann Davis, wife of James Davis who died only six months after his appointment by Andrew Jackson. Imagine that.”

‘‘We never knew.” The pride vanished. It felt as if she had stolen something from my memory.

‘‘It's not uncommon. People are just starting to compile the history of these places.” She pulled some papers from her bag. “Some of it is inaccurate. Some lady, I can't remember her name, she even lived at the light for a while, compiled all this information based on newspaper accounts and county records. Here.” She handed me a stack of papers.

‘‘No, thank you. It's not my thing.” I waved my hand, trying to shoo the stack away.

‘‘These are extras. I have duplicates in my suitcase some place. You should give them to your wife. I'm sure she would be interested.”

‘‘She would.” I read the papers quickly.

On May 3, 1825, the Federal Government decided that a light was needed at Point Lookout to warn ships of shoals.

I stopped. Effie would have enjoyed talking with this woman, discovering her own error about female keepers, and learning that more women braved the life of a keeper and saved hundreds or thousands of men, most never knowing the keepers' names. She would have projected herself into the light, keeping them off the shoals, as she had kept me.

‘‘You have to read it all. It's a fascinating history.” She reached over and leafed through the pages in my hands. “You see all the references to the *St. Mary's Beacon*. It was the local paper. It's amazing.”

I spotted the February 12, 1885, entry.

Several of our citizens have expressed a willingness to serve as keeper of the

lighthouse at Point Lookout. All are "A-1" democrats.

I wanted to joke with the woman, asking if all lighthouse keepers were Democrats, but then I would had to explain that I had called Effie a faux-Democrat because she wrote in Harry Truman in every election from 1972 to 2000.

February 8, 1888: *William Yeatman, the efficient lighthouse keeper at Point Lookout, gave a party a few nights ago to his many friends. The table was replete with good things and the music and dancing was up to the standard.*

Effie would have wanted to see Point Lookout. She would have announced, "OTR. We're On the Road again," and I would have driven without much question to the end of Maryland. She would have insisted that we take the boys to dinner as well, who lived about twenty miles north of the light. "Thank you very much. You don't know how much." I turned and kissed the woman on the cheek.

‘‘My." She pulled back.

‘‘I apologize. You just gave me something to do." I stood and picked up my bag. "I have to go. Thank you again."

‘‘Don't forget to give that material to your wife."

‘‘I won't."

I rented a blue Ford Focus, put on my eyeglasses, and drove south on I-97. After not having worn my glasses for months, the world looked different. Before this moment, there had been nothing to see and so little reason to see far ahead. Then again seeing far ahead seemed to reveal something about another instance in time I did not necessarily want to know. Now driving on the highway, I wanted and needed to see as far ahead as possible. I loved and hated driving on the highway. It had nothing to do with the mechanics or concentration or the sense of power. Driving was a conveyance, a means of seeing what would be in a matter of seconds, knowing a location before its arrival. Destiny became clear. The future predictable. And if the concentration was pure, then that destiny, that future would be what was seen. There was the power, the power to predict and to know with certainty. At that moment I wanted certainty, even though I had driven the highway many times while taking Peter and Billy to St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Peter, having graduated before Effie became sick, worked for a defense contractor associated with the naval air base near the town of Lexington Park. Billy was attending the college. The Point Lookout Lighthouse was twenty miles south of the college on the southern most tip of Maryland's western shore where it once cast a wide light onto Chesapeake Bay, saving sailor and cargo from the shoals along Maryland's western peninsula.

The light didn't burn any longer. I knew that as I drove, but I hoped—unreasonably--that the light would rotate illuminating the water with its long luminescence that would enable me to see beyond the beyond to the edge of the

horizon packed to its left and right in the blackness of night. Yet there would be no light. Darkness would drape over Point Lookout for the Coast Guard lighted so few, trading the light's functionality for historical sentimentality, standing as unarmed sentinels, and that mattered so little to me for I wanted protection from that part in me beating to the rhythm of a lighthouse's flicker, that anger I could even at that moment feel rising in me if I didn't focus on the cars around me, that anger that I had directed at Monk in the bus. He had deserved it. But I knew I was not mad enough at him for what he said and did to hit him. Nor Paige, no matter how possessive she had become. I thought of where I wanted to be.

It was about a hundred miles to the point, and most of it on state highways, passing through the major towns of Prince Edward and Calvert counties. I needed to make up as much time as possible along I-97 before I reached Routes 50/301, 4, and 235. The road was open, and I was in the left hand lane pushing the four-cylinder car about seventy miles per hour. The car slipped around me, leaving only my speedometer, clock, the images of cars in my mirrors, and finding empty spots along the road to point the car. My mind would not trouble me, my thoughts would remain someplace where I couldn't retrieve them, so long as the road remained not too crowded and not too empty. And it was just right on I-97.

Wildflowers, planted in clusters along the median, were coming to life—all about two weeks earlier than back in Connecticut, where remnants of winter clung to the early spring like a stain in a white shirt. The road was marked with evergreens, pines, and from the highway what appeared to be azaleas falling out of bloom and dogwoods or crabapples coming into bloom. The sun sat high in the sky, beating through the window, heating me, my face feeling flush. I turned on the a-c low. By the time the car began to cool, the sides of the highway rose into brick Georgian walls supporting exit and entrance ramps and overhead byways, all connecting to 50/301.

I took the Washington-50/301E exit. By leaving the interstate I felt as if I were finally getting to my destination. It was a child inside me, or I thought it was because whenever Effie, Peter, and Billy I drove distances, the boys presumed that once we exited an interstate we were within fifteen minutes of our destination.

After twirling through the tight circular ramp coming onto 50/301, cars bustled along, most heading to the capital. I shifted over two lanes into the third quickly and accelerated to seventy-five. This stretch of 50/301 looked like an interstate and I felt cheated. The speedometer moved toward eighty even as a trooper, with lights flashing buzzed down the western side. When I saw the exit signs for 301, I slowed and shifted to the right hand lane. Trailing a pack of cars, I moved through the exit ramp, slowing to thirty, and popped onto 301.

There was the Seadogs baseball stadium, and I remembered Billy talking about trying out for them when he graduated. Strip malls, all built in the past ten years, lined the state route with that manicured landscaping of mulch and evergreens with architecture in a faux Georgian style that looked only pretty, not real, not permanent, nor tested by time. It seemed surreal, it always did, being in a place called Prince Georges County, seeing Georgian like architecture, and knowing all the buildings were younger than the Beatles. Traffic lights hung at intersections in their red, green, and amber cascade, and the cars herded together, and then with orchestrated release of fumes sped to the next. Over the next twenty miles, the packing at and galloping from the green light became routine, and there were more malls packed with McDonalds, Burger Kings, Popeyes, and Ruby Tuesdays. They crowded the road, making the two lanes

feel smaller.

Then the white Calvert County Hospital and Emergency Center appeared, the only hospital for more than fifty miles, and inside that building people watched as their friends, lovers, and children retreated from life into death. With the light red, I imagined them standing over beds, at one moment cursing, then asking God or god or Allah or Yahweh or whomever for miracles, and some even holding a pillow, as I had, wondering if the end was better than the present, were they doing it for themselves or for the person lying before them, did they hesitate because they were about to break a law, civil or religious, or did they pause because they lacked courage, for ending life—even flushing a Wal-Mart goldfish down a toilet—is never easy. Then they would back away, terrified by their thoughts, desires, and maybe even lack of action. I hadn't backed away. I stepped forward with the pillow, stopping when Effie opened her eyes, and she grabbed my hands, pulling them closer with a strength I thought she no longer possessed. Then her hands waved at the butterflies, and I watched the fluttering Monarchs before her. My strength then became fragile as a Monarch's wings.

The horns blared and the light was green. I accelerated quickly, rushing away from the sight of the hospital, from Effie, from her damned hands because I knew then that I hadn't had the courage. I would have pulled away. I would have stopped. I began to cry with short tears barely reaching my cheeks. I had wanted someone or something else to take Effie. I wanted her, in whatever pain and shape, in my life, not because I loved her, which I had, did, and do, but because I feared life without her.

A light turned red. I slammed on the brakes. I almost hit the car in front of me. Then I saw the exit sign for Prince Frederick and Route 4 South.

The symmetry of southern Maryland changed little as I pulled onto Route 4, but it would change as I drove deeper into the small peninsula bordered by the Patuxent and Potomac rivers. Ten miles from the intersection of 301 and 4, malls thinned, lights shined over fewer intersections, traffic disappeared, and the road opened. And there was the speed, the concentration of controlling a machine headed for a predictable destiny, and I surrendered to the notion. I had choices that I could see with or without my glasses.

Then there were the Solomons.

The two-lane bridge rose like a sea serpent from one side of the Patuxent River to the other. The first time I crossed I was taking Peter to see St. Mary's College. It was nine at night and a fog shrouded the expanse. Condensation collected on the windshield as soon as the wipers whisked some away, and the headlights, even on low beam, reflected off the water vapor creating a white wall. I drove over at twenty-five miles per hour. This day, though, the air was dry, and I could see out to my left the great Chesapeake Bay, expanding to a horizon, making it look more like an ocean. The car sped at fifty across, to the far end of Maryland's western shore.

Only a few minutes passed, and I turned onto Route 235. The strip malls returned, and I knew that I would be eating at one of the restaurants that evening with Billy and Peter, and I became frightened of how I could keep my story to myself. At a stop light, I angled my rear view mirror down and studied my face. There was the story, in my eyes, the words seemingly coming from the red lines crossing my sclera, pointing to my irises. There was no hiding the story, but how

could I explain.

A horn honked.

I drove along 235, passing through Lexington Park, where Peter lived, passed the U.S. Naval Air Station. The road opened. The street lights vanished and I was cruising again at 50 along the edge of St. Mary's City. The road narrowed, and the pines stood thirty feet and came in closer to the road. The buildings vanished, except for a gas station or two at intersections. Finally I came to the intersection of Route 5, and a sign, painted years ago, proclaimed “Welcome to Ridge, the Sportsman Fishing Capital of the Chesapeake.”

I turned left, passing through Ridge which was marked only by a few stores, and a church. Route 5 narrowed, leaving only two feet of dirt separating the road from the drainage ditch running along side. The branches of the trees enclosed the road and blocked the sunlight, and just as I was beginning to feel lost, a brown sign with gold letters appeared: “Point Lookout State Park” with an arrow pointing to the right. I turned into the park. The trees thinned. At the end, I parked in a lot and I grabbed the sheets of paper the woman in the airport had given me.

I could see the lighthouse in the middle of a lawn spreading out for a couple of acres. I walked towards it. A hurricane fence surrounded the white stuccoed two-story building with a tall, red cupola. The paint was peeling, and the cupola's top and glass appeared stained with drippings of dry bird droppings. I walked along the fence. There was a ten-foot drop to a small beach. I sat on the edge and looked out onto the Chesapeake. The grass was damp and the wind blew hard off the water, creating a chop and leaving a scent of salt over the land. Effie wouldn't have sat. She would have been walking around the perimeter of the fence asking me to shoot pictures from this angle and that. She would have wondered aloud about the nature of the Fresnel lens and when the Coast Guard converted it from oil to electric. She would have read the packet of material I held in my hand, almost memorizing each detail.

I moved my glasses to the top of my head. I held up the sheets of paper in the sunlight. There was an item written by John A. Crane.

Many shipwrecks occurred near the point, but the Express was one of the more famous wrecks. The Baltimore Express headed out of Baltimore but did not know that storm warnings were posted. As the steamer made her way down the Bay, a gale began to blow and eventually sank the ship in the bay off Point Lookout. One of the ghost stories involves a Mr. Haney who was supposed to have attempted to row to shore to gain assistance from the lighthouse keeper at Point Lookout, but because of the raging storm never made it to Point Lookout. Someone living in the lighthouse said that one night he saw a man at the back porch who looked like he was in trouble and was wearing clothes from a long time ago. When this person opened the door, the figure floated across the lawn and disappeared toward the Bay.

Effie would have read the next item quickly from the *St. Mary's Beacon* dated October 31, 1878. She would have walked around the point wondering where the winds hit the ship, forcing the bay to reach over its forward gang plank and cascade to the wheel house, “straining the joiners work and filling the fire and coal rooms,” according to the newspaper story. She would have felt for the

passengers who had not cleared the boat when it capsized. She would have put her fingers through the hurricane fence, wanting to get closer to the building that was haunted, whose kitchen walls were said to glow at night, from where people reportedly heard the sounds of someone snoring in the kitchen and of people walking up and down the staircases, and where a parapsychologist discovered psychic activity. We would have reviewed the names of the keepers, especially the light's three female keepers, Ann Davis, Martha Edwards, and Martha's daughter Pamela Edwards. She would have imagined them maintaining a farm and she might have presumed that the expansive lawn was once a pasture for cattle. She would have imagined them climbing the stairs and filling the lamps with oil.

I didn't care. It was a decommissioned light, a building without a light, without a function, sitting on the edge of a massive bay. A crab boat sailed along about a half mile from the coast, floating up and down on the chop, and the light, a beam no longer guided the skipper. He stayed with his course based on his knowledge, instinct, and probably some type of GPS device. Times had changed and the lighthouse no longer was needed. The sailors had adapted, the Coast Guard changed, and the bay, with its rising and setting tides, was always changing, leaving nothing the same from one minute to the next.

Yet it all appeared the same. The lighthouse stood as it would have on any given clear day—no light and no fog horn, and the Coast Guard was not to be seen as the skipper returned to his mooring clearing his hull of the catch. Yet the memory of the light was preserved by the woman I met at the airport, a person like Effie, who gathered the information, some in brochures, some on Web sites, and in photographs, and then spread her memory of that memory to others who would come to witness the memory, creating a collective memory of the light and even of the *Express*, its crew letting go of anchors and throwing freight overboard, and the passengers who rowed a mattress but who were never seen again, creating as if it were a collective ghost that still haunted the point, not to terrify anyone but to warm them for the collective memory of what had been and what would never be again and yet what was recreated. For it was in these memories, the resurrection of these ghosts, that people were able to leave the memory of pain and grief, leaving fascination, admiration, and respect for all that had come before. It washed the memory's beach of debris, while leaving some of its own that was not altogether unpleasant, that would decompose and vanish with time without anyone noticing.

I had been one of those sailors, lost at sea, struggling ashore. I was the storm raging against not Monk, nor Paige, not any one alive, but Effie. She asked for me to take her life. She never asked if I wanted to, if I could. She presumed that I could and would. She presumed I understood what she needed and wanted, and I had, but she ignored me, my sense of loss, my sense of having lost another life in an unimaginable way as to make my own living purgatory. She had asked in the end too much, and I was pissed at her. Yet how could I be angry. She had suffered. The pain and drugs had stolen her consciousness, making its lack more desirable than its possession, meaning that she no longer wanted to be with me. How could she leave me with this and to tell the boys something that has yet remained unexplained?

I stood and threw the Point Lookout papers into the water, each fluttering down like Monarch butterflies until they landed in the water. They sucked up the bay, regaining the water baked from their pulp and cotton fibers, returning to what they once had been. As I watched them sink, the air cooled as the sun dropped down to the Chesapeake horizon, and there was no acceptable returning. There was no universal element for me to dissolve into. There was ashes and dust, and

I was not ready for that.

‘‘Fuck.” Even though my throat hurt as result of my volume, the air or the bay or maybe the lighthouse absorbed the sound, leaving the day silent. And it surrounded me, turning off the sound of the waves hitting the beach. I looked out eastward. The crab boat had disappeared. There was only me.

I walked back to the car, looking over my shoulder for a second for my last look at a lighthouse. And the sun sank lower. I sat in the car waiting for the sunset, waiting for its light to vanish and to see if the lighthouse would illuminate streaks across the bay. There was no light, there was no longer a need for that type of light.

I started the car and pointed the headlights in the direction I would take under the canopy of trees along Route 5. It was as if I were lighting up my return to where I had come, but under the settling of the night, the route would change as everything seemed to change. In the darkness though, where life loses its definition, my way seemed clear as I passed the sign at the entrance to Ridge and continued north on the road, heading for St. Mary's College. The college sat on the banks of the St. Mary's River. Even though the college sat at the site of the state's first capital and port, it never had a light. Now I swore I once had seen a light out on the water guiding sailors. As I drove I swore the lights ahead of me were guiding me to the college. I had never approached the college from the south so the road was new to me and I slowed.

In the headlights, I saw the skeletal structures of “Historic St. Mary's City,” the frames of what were to be the homesteads found in the state's first colonial capital where the English Roman Catholics first came with Lord Baltimore. It was four years in the making alongside the school, a hub of education and history that had yet to reach fruition after about a decade of planning. I remembered walking the historic path of the yet to be completed recreation, learning about the Catholics and their loss of power when the Anglicans came, and the eventual move of the capital to Annapolis with its larger harbor. And I remembered then being bored. Places such as St. Mary's City, Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Sturbridge Village, fashioned a sanitized history, clean of the brutality, sickness, and stench that plagued the settlements of early America, giving visitors a variation of a memory, making what was seen more desirable than what existed. And that would come to me. I would create my own version of Effie, hopefully faster than Maryland was recreating St. Mary's City, and just like the visitors to St. Mary's City, I would look forward to that time when the anger, grief, and pain were themselves distant memories, smothered under the lacquer of bright fresh times, untrue like Disney World and yet more desirable to be seen. Until this drive, no until she died, I thought my memories of Shane and my father had mended because most times I could no longer see the tear unless I decided to look at them carefully. That day would return and would come for my memories of Effie. I wondered if that day had already begun to mend the Billy's and Peter's memories, giving them no reason to see that moment again, to examine it closely, to feel a new pain, and for what reason. Or was I afraid of pointing to the tear that I had rent. I would not know until I sat with them and talked about the Yankees, about school, about work, about their lives. And in between the sentences I would see them and they me, and I would know then what to say.

I pulled into the parking lot of the student union building. I pulled out my cell.

‘‘Billy, I'm on campus. We're going to dinner tonight.”

‘‘Dad?”

‘‘Yes. I'm here.”

‘‘Why aren't you at Disney World?”

‘‘That's part of the surprise. Meet you in the student union building in thirty minutes.”

‘‘Yeah, I guess. Everything all right?”

‘‘Everything's fine. I'll call Peter.”

‘‘See you in a few minutes.”

I dialed. “Peter, it's the old fart.”

‘‘Everything fine?”

‘‘Yes, I'm in St. Mary's. Billy and I will pick you up in a few minutes.”

‘‘You sure everything's all right.”

‘‘Yes, yes. We'll have dinner and we will talk. Meet you at your place.”

‘‘Okay.”

Of course they would be anxious, but I would tell them all at dinner.

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