

1.

"Remember where you come from," Bus tells me.  
Bus Conway, my neighbor down Indian Creek,  
has peeled soft-shelled crabs for eighty years.  
He remembers the Bay before too many people  
and pollution. Bus gave me a fossil scallop shell  
the size of an LP record from the dusty box  
full of vertebrae he found in the mud. Years ago  
he took a hunting buddy, a museum man, to see  
a skull on a sandbar where he set his crabtraps.  
In the clay bank along the shore they found  
bodies curled in fetal position and ceremonial  
brass bowls. The first green of the golf course  
covers the Algonkian burial ground.

2.

My memories growing up start with my father's stories.  
Salt runs in my blood like an estuary.  
Loading watermelons on a bugeye bound for Baltimore,  
my father, as a boy, would drop one, grab a fistful of  
red, sweet heart-meat and kick the rest off the dock.  
Eating just the heart of watermelon  
was as rich as I could ever imagine.  
Once his sailboat sank off Tangier Island and  
he had to stay afloat all night with jellyfish  
up his pantsleg. We couldn't swim in the Bay  
because of the jellyfish.

3.

At the bend in the road by meadows of wild mustard  
past the unpainted shack with window-box flowers,  
in the farmer's field along the rutted driveway,  
where Robert E. Lee's uncle was buried,  
I could pick ears of corn without asking permission,  
but I would thank the farmer in his yard  
full of chickens and kittens. Land of pleasant living:  
We smoked bluefish in the old refrigerator.  
We steamed trash cans full of crabs that turned  
blue to red. Whoever cranked the peach ice cream  
got to lick the paddle.

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4.

When I was five I leaned under the dock  
at Fishing Bay to see what was swimming by  
and wasps swarmed in my face. Every time  
I walk a dock I want to kneel down to see the shine  
on the surface, to see how deep the water is,  
whether the bottom is sand or mud, grass  
or debris. I'm wary still of wasps.

5.

Sound spreads smooth under the plaster  
vaulted ceiling of King Carter's chapel,  
red brick church built in 1720.  
The hymn comes from all directions instead  
of the center at the intersecting naves. Outside  
ladies pile cakes and casseroles on tables  
in the loblolly grove. Gold day-lilies  
border the lawn where my father's grave  
marker lies flat, set in the grass.

6.

In search of homeplace I sail my boat  
across oceans but go aground in the creek  
approaching the yacht club dock, grinding,  
halted, on an oyster rock, round the bend  
from the house where my mother lives alone.  
A deep-keeled ocean boat doesn't belong  
up a shallow creek. It's cold, late and dark,  
and she'll worry since she expects me by dusk.  
But to row ashore I have to re-inflate the dinghy  
stowed already for ocean passage, so I wait  
for daylight and high tide to float off and  
head down the Bay again to deep water.

In storm and in calm, sailing is continuous prayer.  
As the wind vane steers through rough seas,  
I lie in the bunk below, hoping my boat  
won't break apart. My hand on the hull,  
thin metal membrane, I sense my father's palm  
meet mine. And I say to reassure him:  
I'm fine, Daddy, you taught me to navigate.

7.

Last fall I walked into a farmhouse  
that smelled like hot cinnamon  
of a grandmother's cookies.

I felt then, "It's time to go home."

On the Bay a homeplace is a white  
clapboard house on a point of land.

Still silhouette hidden in the reeds,  
like the great blue heron watching fish  
move at her feet, I crouch on the shore  
and look inside lamp-lit windows.

Anadromous fish, I return  
mature to shore to head upriver.  
Flying ahead into the distance  
is the great blue heron.

As I paddle my boat, the heron flies  
the channel around the next bend.  
She waits until I float to her perch  
in the pine tree, then lifts, cries,  
and stretches her wings wide,  
waiting ahead-- the great blue--  
leading me home.