INTRODUCTION

THE CHESAPEAKE BAY: A HISTORY OF DEGRADATION

My Maryland hometown sits on the banks of the Severn River, a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay. The brackish waters of the Severn intimately shaped my childhood and adolescence as I grew up in the shelter of the river's lessons. River swim teams, a tradition among Severn communities, taught me the stealthy sting of the jellyfish, the sharp pain of a barnacle cut, and methods of swimming a fast race across choppy motorboat wakes. Sailing lessons taught me the fickleness of river breezes and winds, the importance of channel markers, and the role of balance in righting a capsized craft. Dangling the remnants of chicken skin from thin nylon strings off a wooden dock, while the backs of my legs burned in the sweltering summer sun and I wished a blue crab *would just bite already*, taught me some of my first lessons in patience.

As I grew older in the protective shores of the Severn, I gradually learned that the river was not an endless source of plenty. Instead, the tributary and the larger Bay itself needed protection. These early lessons in conservation were taught by neighbor, family member, and schoolteacher. My neighbor, a bird enthusiast, invited me to observe while she untangled a plastic six-pack holder from the neck of a struggling swan. My brother brought an awkward PVC-pipe-and-wire-mesh contraption home one day from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and enthusiastically tied it under the dock, before filling it with two pungent, muddy-dripping mesh bags of oyster spat. Our family, always pet-deprived, now had 4,000 adolescent oysters to care for before they could be returned to the struggling oyster recovery bars in the Bay. During a middle school science unit, we took water samples from the Severn to determine water quality, salinity, and present pollutants. Whenever I walked along the shore with friends, we made a

game of finding the most interesting articles of washed-up litter and depositing them in our neighbor's trashcans as we trudged home—skin salty, barefoot, and sunburned.

As I grew older, the Severn River was not always the most inviting of places. The increasingly murky waters became further sullied by political battles over Bay protection and preservation. A few times of year, my mother would forbid me from swimming in the water, fearing sewage leaks. Often, my skin and eyes would burn following river swim team practice. Dead fish and crabs washed up on the shore in large clumps some weeks, and in others, newspaper headlines decried the devastation of our river and our Bay due to overfishing, sediment runoff, and nitrification. Gradually, to "Save the Bay" began to be in vogue. Shiny blue-and-white "Save the Bay" bumper stickers plastered my neighbors' cars. Many nearby homes began to raise oyster spat beneath their docks for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's efforts to rebuild the nearly disappeared oyster beds. Op-ed letters to the local paper decried careless construction on the river's edge, overuse of fertilizers near the shoreline, and sewage dumping.

The origins and early history of the Bay itself, an estuary formed 35 million years ago by a meteor, and then honed 12,000 years ago by retreating ice sheets, foretold the environmental degradation that defined my childhood and adolescence (Walker 11). The largest estuary in the United States, the Chesapeake Bay is two hundred miles long, and spans a width of four to forty miles across (Walker 7, 14). The Chesapeake Bay watershed, or the region of area that drains water into the Chesapeake, is expansive—spanning from the mountains of West Virginia, the marshy flats of Delaware, to the hills of New York state—in total, around 64,000 miles. Nineteen major rivers flow into the Chesapeake Bay, like the Severn of my childhood, along with four hundred other smaller rivers (Walker 15).

In the 1500s, Europeans, specifically Spanish and French explorers, first discovered the Chesapeake Bay; however, Native American presence along the Bay long predated the arrival of Old World inhabitants (*Bay History*; Walker 57). The explorers were astounded at the overflowing abundance of fertile soil, clear waters, and most strikingly, an indescribable plentitude of fish (Roberts 45). Walter Russell and Anas Todkill, two companions of John Smith, an early 17th century explorer of the Chesapeake, recall the teeming plenty of the Bay in their journal, observing "…in diverse places that abundance of fish lying so thicke with their heads above the water, as for want of nets…we attempted to capture them with a frying pan, but we found it a bad instrument to catch fish with. Neither better fish more plenty or variety had any of us ever seene, in any place swimming in the water, then in the bay of Chesapeack" (Roberts 46).

Traveling in the early 1600s, Captain John Smith himself records the multitude of fish in his *Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*. He recalls one particular day, in which "Our boat by reason of the ebb chancing to ground upon many a shoals lying in the entrances, we spied many fishes lurking in the reeds. Our captain sporting himself by nailing them to the ground with his sword set us all a fishing in that manner. Thus we took more in one hour than we could eat in a day" (Smith 8). The remarkable plenty of the Bay's waters astounded their European discoverers, who were accustomed to the polluted, murky waters of the Old World (Roberts 44). Sturgeon, a remarkably huge fish measuring up to 18 feet long, was found in abundance in the Chesapeake and its contributing rivers (Roberts 48). Porpoises, sharks, diamondback terrapins, and even whales populated the Bay at the time of discovery. Indeed, the earliest environmental legislation in the New World was a 1698 proclamation from the Council and Burgesses of Virginia, which "for[bade] all persons whatsoever to strike or kill any whale

within the bay of Chesapeake" (Roberts 47). Besides the abundance of fertile lands, clear waters, and fish, the immense oyster beds of the Chesapeake also impressed and bewildered European explorers. So extensive were these towering beds of oysters that "…they posed hazards to navigation" (Roberts 55). The bounty of the Chesapeake Bay region cased Smith to deem the area a place where, "…heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation" (qtd. in *Bay History*).

The Chesapeake's bounty continued to astound settlers and explorers for hundreds of years. John Davidson Godman, a doctor and nature enthusiast who settled on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay in the early 1800s, recorded his observations of the Bay's richly varied sea and land life in his *Rambles of a Naturalist*, written as he walked hundreds of miles along the Bay's shoreline, while simultaneously dying of consumption (Godman 12-15). Though he died at the early age of 32, Godman's reflections on Bay grasses to the intricacies of crab molting reveal the complexity of the Bay wildlife. He observed the immense number of blue crabs in the waters: "…it was astonishing to witness the vast multitudes which flocked towards the head of the stream" (Godman 75). So numerous were the blue crabs that fishermen were able to complete a good catch by simply, "…strik[ing] [their] spear[s] among them. By this several are transfixed at once" (Godman 81). Godman's details about the plenty of fish in the Bay, which "one could see a considerable number at once, and thus choose the best" reflect Captain John Smith's similar observations of the Bay's abundance of fish, written over 200 years prior. The stunning plenty within the Chesapeake Bay served as a textbook for Godman's learning and observation, as he recalls, "Of books I possessed few, and those exclusively professional; but in this beautiful expanse of sparkling water, I had a book opened before me which a life-time would scarcely suffice me to read through" (Godman 69).

Environmental degradation by reason of human influence, however, was present even in this early history of the Chesapeake. As Roberts asserts in *The Unnatural History of the Sea*, "the situation [of plenty] could not last. It was all but inevitable that the problems that afflicted medieval Europe would reappear in the New World" (52). While the colonies blossomed in population and size, the demand for food increased. As more land was cleared to make room for larger settlements, sediment runoff began to cloud the once-clear waters of the Chesapeake. As fish became harder to spot in the increasingly murky waters, colonists began to utilize nets, or weirs, which blocked the spawning runs of fish (Roberts 52-53). Though legislation was imposed to protect the struggling fish populations, it simply came too late to reverse the damage. As Roberts explains, lawmakers were "always falling a little short of giving the fish enough of a break that they could recover as their habitats changed for the worse" (54). With the onslaught of industrialization, the fish losses worsened throughout the 19th century (Roberts 55). As the fish populations declined, the colonists turned their attention to the oyster, depleting that population as well. Today, the current population of oysters in the Chesapeake is merely 1% of what it was in historical times (Walker 59). The impact of human settlers in the area resulted in a profound loss of habitat for the Bay's aquatic animals and plants, and combined with the ravages of extreme overfishing, the Bay was already suffering before the onslaught of pollution issues took hold (Roberts 56).

Throughout the 19th and 20th century, the human assault on the Bay's health continued. With an increased population along the banks of the Bay, and accelerating urban development, the Chesapeake became increasingly more threatened as the years passed (Warner 44). Forest clearing, a burgeoning shoreline population, and industrial pollution contributed to degradation during the late 1800s and early 1900s. As fertilizers became increasingly used during the 1940s,

the Bay suffered greater ruin (*Bay History*). During the 1950s, MSX and Demo, two oyster-ravaging diseases, depleted the population of the crucial water-filtering creatures even further (*Bay History*). Watermen became the focus of environmental criticism as the conservation ethic was born in the 1960s (Roberts 56; Warner 88; *Bay History*). With further development and the increased use of the personal car during the 1960s, underwater vegetation was decimated by sediment runoff (*Bay History*). In response to these events, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation was formed in the late 60s, quickly followed by other environmental advocacy organizations (*Bay History*). In the early 1980s, an Environmental Protection Agency report cited four areas of concern for the Bay's health, including nutrient overflows, decimated submerged vegetation, chemical pollutants, and "over-harvesting" of Bay wildlife (*Bay History*). However, in resistance to Department of Natural Resources surveillance, watermen cite the disastrous effects of shoreline pollution, claiming that a life close to the water "[is] founded on the right of free plunder. If you follow the water, that's how it was and that's how it's got to be" (Waterman, qtd. in Warner 89).

Early literature of the Chesapeake Bay region reflects this belief in "free plunder". In works such as Gilbert Byron's *The Lord's Oysters*, the Bay's resources are claimed as an abundance to be freely taken, a God-given right to be used. However, as the environmental health of the Bay declined throughout the 20th century, as reflected in nonfiction works such as *Beautiful Swimmers,* literature about the Bay, especially an emergent genre of Bay literature geared towards children and young adults, changed dramatically to reflect this environmental crisis. As attitudes among Bay residents shifted to respond to the environmental degradation of the precious resource, children's and young adult authors also responded to this call. Through their works, authors of children's and young adult literature encouraged youth, either didactically

or through metaphor, to value the Bay's resources, protect the health of the Bay, and encourage others to become stewards of a healthy Chesapeake for future generations. Demonstrating a shift from a sense of entitlement to that of stewardship towards the suffering Bay, young adult novels and children's books alike display this transforming attitude towards the Chesapeake environment. These works respond to the environmental crisis and raise a conservation alarm to be answered by every generation.

The Bay is a "teachable" medium—a dynamic place of mysterious crustaceans, hidden coves, and majestic waterfowl—brought to life in the engaging world of Bay children's and young adult literature. Many children's books, especially the *Chadwick the Crab* series by Priscilla Cummings and Jennifer Keats Curtis' *Oshus and Shelly Save the Bay*, anthropomorphize Chesapeake life, from the noble blue heron to the humble oyster, in order to garner personal identification with these threatened creatures among their target audience of young readers. Other children's authors adopt a more stridently didactic approach to educate children about the Bay's environmental challenges, and directly encourage their readers to take action—for instance, in Mike Blakistone's *The Day They Left the Bay*. Factually-based children's books, such as Susan Walker's *Life In An Estuary* and David Owen Bell's *Awesome Chesapeake: A Kid's Guide to the Bay* help familiarize their young readers with the Bay environment and give concrete steps for children to become more ecologically responsible Bay citizens. Rounding out the canon of didactic Chesapeake children's literature are books that offer place-based environmentalism—sharing the wonders of the estuary through narrative in the hopes that young readers will in turn cherish and care for the Bay. Regardless of the medium used, Chesapeake children's literature aims to teach the younger generation about genuine environmental stewardship.

Young adult novels, in contrast, draw their readers to identify with fiercely independent and uniquely competent preteen and teenage protagonists in order to educate their readers about Bay health and progress. For instance, the protagonists of *Waterman's Boy, Dicey's Song, Red Kayak, Jacob Have I Loved, The Boy on the Beach, The Secret of Heron Creek,* and *Oyster Moon* display remarkable independence and personal knowledge of the Bay's intricacies. These protagonists deeply explore the Bay ecosystem, and discover threats to the Bay's health while following a life close to nature. Young adult literature appeals to this age group because the protagonists themselves are at once relatable to the age and interests of their audience and knowledgeable about Bay issues that may be foreign to readers. In a sense, these protagonists become trusted ambassadors to the Bay environment. Exhibiting a strong relationship to and respect for place—the Chesapeake Bay—these model Bay citizens encourage readers to cherish their own natural surroundings and become stewards of the estuary's health.

In contrast to young adult fiction written about the Bay, the two memoirs I investigate at the close of this essay offer one of two approaches to the Chesapeake. *The Lord's Oysters* unabashedly submerges its readers in a historical era, the early 1900s, an age that viewed the Bay as an endless plenty and took freely from this treasure. In contrast, the modern memoir *What the River Means* revisits a Bayside childhood with a refocused lens, utilizing a narrative perspective utterly shifted by the environmental crisis that continues to worsen in the Chesapeake area. Regardless of the specific approach taken to draw readers of all ages to cherish a threatened ecosystem, Chesapeake Bay children's books, young adult novels, and memoirs illuminate the intricacies of a steadily dying world—a world, this body of literature asserts, that is profoundly worth saving. These works of literature inform and color a growing and popular movement for more deliberate, in-school environmental education in Maryland—a movement with the same

goal as much of children's and young adult Chesapeake Bay literature—to inform young people and ultimately transform them into effective lifelong caretakers of the Bay's environmental health.