

Rachel Carson's *Material Immortality*

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Abstract

This personal essay tells the story of David's pilgrimage to Rachel Carson's cottage by the sea in Southport, Maine. The pilgrimage was one of several David made to reconnect with his "literary ancestors"—wise elders whose literary works inspire his own learning. "Literary Ancestors" is the subject of David's edited book in progress (with Mark Dickinson). Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, arguably launched the environmental movement. Its 1962 exposure of the chemical pesticide industry led to worldwide changes in environmental policy, thought, and behavior. Carson's politics, however, emerged from her finely tuned "sense of wonder" nurtured by art and science. On his pilgrimage to Carson's sacred place, David traces her sense of wonder for the world she loved through the tidepools below her cottage and through several of her literary works. The author weaves his travel narrative with Carson's life and writing, and wonders about what it means to be human, mortal, and blessed with a sense of wonder for life on earth.

Keywords: place, environment, pilgrimage, environmental policy, ecology, natural world, nature

*For at last all return to the sea—to Oceanus, the ocean river,
like the ever-flowing stream of time, the beginning and the
end.*

Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*

I arrived at Rachel Carson's cottage late on a Saturday night after traveling all day—first flying into Montreal and then driving through the northern corners of Vermont and New Hampshire and on through the mountainous labyrinth of inland Maine. Somewhere amidst the switchbacks and passes, I saw a sign for Mt. Katahdin, the site of Thoreau's estranged mountaintop encounter with "Chaos and Old Night." The mountains themselves were covered in mist. The year before I had traveled to Walden Pond. Now I was on another quest to honor my literary ancestors, the elders of the environmental movement, and to consider what, if we choose to listen, they still have to teach.

Dropping down east from central Maine into the coastal Boothbay region is a jarring transition in geography and culture. With the smell of salt water, layers of traffic, money, and people-in-a-hurry cover the land as it flattens toward the Atlantic. The throng crowds close to the water, seeking the sweet spot of solitude with a seaside view—ideally with a little buffer of privacy from the neighbors. This must have been part of what Rachel Carson sought in her Maine retreat

from her relatively harried and urban life in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. It was definitely what I desired. I wanted to meet her there at her cottage, the place she loved.

Darkness had shrunk the narrow roads into shadowy tunnels when I finally crossed the bridge to Southport Island. From there I had directions from my hosts, Wendy Sisson and her partner Roger Christy. Roger is Rachel Carson's grandnephew and has been coming to the cottage all his life, since she had it built in the 1950s. I had learned what I could about Roger from the Carson biographies. He's a major figure in Carson's life story and, as a child, played a leading role in her writing on "the sense of wonder." One day while exploring Carson's legacy on the web, I discovered that the cottage still stood where she built it and that it might be possible to rent it. I was skeptical; this seemed to me the near equivalent of renting Thoreau's hut on Walden Pond. But after talking to Wendy on the phone and telling her about my intention to research and write about Carson, I had the cottage booked for a week of solitude and wandering.

At last I followed the rutted gravel drive called Carson Road up a steep hill to a high point above the tidal mouth of the Sheepscot River. And there it was, just like in the photos: long and rectangular and squatting under the pines, Rachel Carson's aging, gray cottage. I shut off the engine and the

lights and just sat, listening to the place breathe. I felt like I was visiting my grandmother. I didn't want to disturb her sleep with my late arrival.

Outside I couldn't find the key or its hiding place. It wasn't needed. The kitchen door had been left unlocked and opened easily. My hands found the light switch that dimly lit up the main room—all knotty pine and windows facing the water, plenty of old wicker furniture and antique floor lamps. All of it has a familiar cottage décor and, I supposed, just as Carson had left it. Opposite the big windows, two small piles of split hardwood flanked an open brick fireplace. In the lighted room I now saw a door that led out to a large deck in the trees above the water. What more could I need? A steady surf rolled below and the whole place pulsed. That's when I felt the cold. Not only was every exterior door of the cottage unlocked, but every interior window facing the bay was thrust wide open to the wind. At that moment I wasn't sure exactly what I had come for. But like a dutiful grandson, I moved promptly from window to window, shutting out the cold, asserting my presence, and resolving to be of use.

People who know of Rachel Carson most often remember her as the author of *Silent Spring*, her 1962 classic exposé of chemical pesticides, and the industry behind them, that helped launch the modern environmental movement. *Silent Spring* did in the 1960s what no one book had ever done before and will likely ever do again: it radically changed the terms of the conversation between people and nature in the public imagination, in media, science, business, and in government. It galvanized a massive public outcry about the impacts of technology on human and non-human health, it led to a series of national policy shifts around environmental regulation (in more than one country), and it became an enduring symbol of the need for citizens to both heighten our awareness of ourselves as environmental watchdogs, and also to recover our sacred obligations and connections to the earth. Translated into many languages, *Silent Spring* quickly became an international best seller and signaled a new era of global environmental politics. Technological progress and the interests of business would from then on be questioned on a planetary scale by a growing group of concerned citizens, scientists, and policymakers who would become known as environmentalists.

Carson, of course, did not achieve this alone. She was part of an emerging network of twentieth-century scientists, writers, educators, and activists working to better understand and express what they saw as a dangerously strained relationship between humans and the natural world. *Silent Spring* catalyzed what may best be described as a “paradigm shift.” In his classic study, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (published the same year as *Silent Spring*), historian of science Thomas Kuhn showed how paradigms shift when enough “anomalies” within a given paradigm begin to accumulate. Anomalies challenge conventional thinking, they need to be explained with new theories, and over time new theories prevail and sometimes lead to dramatic shifts in worldview.

In Carson's day, evidence of harmful effects from widely used and virtually unregulated pesticides can be viewed as an anomaly to the common claim that these pesticides were safe, effective, and necessary. But from her years working as a government scientist throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Carson knew a lot about the danger of chemical pesticides. Throughout her career, and especially in the late 1950s as she began writing *Silent Spring*, she maintained a prolific correspondence with other scientists, citizens, writers, and community groups, constantly seeking advice, feedback, and more material to help guide her own investigations. As Kuhn showed, paradigm shifts, such the “Copernican” revolution that put the sun in the center of the universe, are not the singular triumph of one individual, but rather the culmination of a mounting wave of change that builds to a crest and finally breaks through.

If there are breakthrough moments in the history of the environmental movement, the publication of *Silent Spring* is one of the biggest. With *Silent Spring*, Carson revealed a new and grotesque shape of progress. She described it with stunning images of toxins, cancer, and death. Right into the neighborhoods, living rooms, and back yards of a prosperous, post-World War II America, she brought the strong suggestion that our fundamental relationship to the earth may be fundamentally flawed. Carson's achievement had many roots, including her skill as a writer and researcher, her relentless work ethic, her love of the natural world, and her reputation as a best-selling author. All of these, I would learn on my journey to Maine, converged in her relationship with the sea and her Southport cottage.

The week I stayed at the cottage, it was a sacrament to walk down the stone path, morning and evening, at high and low tide, to the same tide pools that Rachel Carson stalked for specimens. This primordial edge, where ocean meets land and tidal currents meet river mouth, is as unfamiliar to me as the surface of the moon. I felt my strangeness there and I stepped carefully around the slippery basalt, wondering at the local sea grasses, sponges, anemones, periwinkles, ghost crabs, and sea stars. I knew I was seeing only a tiny fraction of what Rachel saw, her eyes trained by decades of marine study, opened further by her love for this place.

Whenever I walked out into the tide pools, I saw how the edge of the sea constantly converses with the edge of the land. It's a sensual give and take, where water and rock are endlessly lapping, seething, and morphing, one into the other. At high tide the sea dominates and covers up much of the action, though you can still be with the surge and its undertow as each wave breaks and recedes. But at low tide, the remnants of this ancient conversation, in the language of genus and species, are left scattered for seagulls and beachcombers. A better naturalist than me might have tried recording and interpreting the hieroglyphs and matching their forms to the descriptions in field guides, but it was enough for me simply to notice the strangeness and wonder. It wasn't long, though, before I sensed Rachel admonishing me to pay closer attention and to explore. Mainly I wandered about aimlessly, with a beginner's mind, following the path of novelty.

To get to the tide pools at low tide, I would first step into a ten-foot-wide ribbon of newly stirred wet sand, which had been submerged hours before at the high watermark. Past the sand, a wider band of seashells was freshly laid down in drifts, fragile husks of calcium drying by the boatload and bleaching in the sun, some still oozing saltwater and slime. The whole drift, which was several inches deep, rattled a muted shell music as I moved through. Beyond these outer layers of beach stretched a vast plain of tide pools—an irregular spread of puddles and small ponds, impounded in depressions of the volcanic rock that rises out of the water and dominates much of the Maine coastline.

The beach revealed something new each time the tide receded. Carson, I knew, lived for tracking this drama of sea life as it pressed up daily against her beach. She would wade for hours watching and looking, often taking specimens back up to the cottage for closer viewing under the microscope. For me the murky tide-pools themselves remained mysteries

I felt ill-prepared to explore. But I flung myself out on the rocks anyway, plunging my arms into pools to stir the shadows. Several times I felt what might have been a ghost crab skittering over my hand.

The beach drew me out each day to the furthest rocks I could stand on without falling in. A creature of inland forests, I am awed by vistas and distance; in Maine my gaze invariably searched out the great expanse of the Atlantic. But Carson did not have a view of the open sea. Like much of Maine's east coast, with its endless series of coves, inlets, peninsulas, and islands, Carson's cottage actually faces the *western* horizon over Sheepscoot Bay. Though good for watching September sunsets from the deck, which I savored each evening, Carson's beach view is not the scenic climax of ocean tourism. As in the photographs of Carson tide-pooling, the vastness she regarded comes not from looking out, but from looking down, down into what is submerged, and successively revealed, here at the sea's edge.

During my week at the cottage, I slept in Rachel Carson's room. This felt presumptuous, and at first it was hard to relax. But as it was by far the most comfortable bed in the house, and had almost certainly been replaced recently, I accepted the privilege. I did not, however, feel comfortable using her study. Unlike the cottage's open living area, the study was dark and musty. A funereal quiet hung in the air and the space seemed to demand privacy. I felt Carson's presence most strongly in this small room, which featured a long writing desk underneath large, curtained windows, shelves full of books about the sea, and a door leading outside to the deck overlooking the water. The study seemed closed off from the rest of the house on purpose, and as I remembered from her biography, she built it with the aim of solitude in mind. So throughout my stay, I chose to keep the door of her study closed. I pictured Rachel working there with her notepad, her microscope, and her books. I read and wrote mainly in the dining room in front of a big picture window, and fantasized that we were sharing her cottage together, as if we had arranged for a writer's retreat. I knew she was a hard worker and would want to keep up a schedule: up early for coffee, breakfast, and reading something that inspired us to write; minimal conversation until we were both ready for a walk at lunchtime.

For morning reading throughout my visit, I chose Carson's *The Sea Around Us*. Published over ten years before *Silent Spring*, this is the book that made her reputation as a major nature writer. Sales from *The Sea Around Us*, along with a constant stream of requests for new writing and speaking engagements, gave Carson the financial freedom to quit her government job, build the cottage in Maine, and become a full time writer, her lifelong dream realized. She benefited from the massive publicity behind the book, which included serial pre-publication in *The New Yorker* (*Silent Spring* would receive the same privilege), a Book-of-the-Month Club selection (ditto for *Silent Spring*), the John Burroughs Award, and the National Book Award. The accolades were the fruition of a long effort to write while holding down a government job and supporting her extended family. But most of all, Carson's success reflected her literary gift to communicate her own sense of wonder through poetic prose that somehow married a cosmological vision with vivid natural history, unbridled enthusiasm, and the careful reasoning of science.

The Sea Around Us begins with the birth of the planet, a review of earth's geological time scale, and a discussion of evolutionary biology as it pertains to the oceans and all of the life they have spawned. I'm always struck by the act of imagination required to roll back time to the very beginning and to envision the miracle of creation. This imagination is the genius of Carson's environmentalism. Before *Silent Spring*, she focused her writing on unveiling the mysteries of nature by translating geology, oceanography, biology, and other physical sciences, into a readable natural history full of fantastic characters and literary drama. *The Sea Around Us* was the second of what became a trilogy of best-selling books about the ocean that also included *Under the Sea Wind* and *The Edge of the Sea*. The fame and stature she achieved as a leading nature writer in the 1950s positioned Carson to become a major spokesperson for the new environmentalism, especially with her 1962 publication of *Silent Spring*. The more I read about Carson, and the more time I spent with her at her cottage, I felt that all of her books could be traced back to her first major publication, "Undersea," published in *The Atlantic* in 1937.

If *The Sea Around Us* was Carson's breakout book, writing "Undersea," was the breakthrough that sparked her literary career. After earning her master's degree at Johns Hopkins and teaching zoology and biology, Carson worked as a science writer for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries (later the Fish and Wildlife Service) in Washington D.C. In this role Carson

had access to much of the latest environmental research, as well as to the researchers who would eventually support her own writing projects. Rachel had wanted to be a writer since childhood; much of her success in her government career was owed to her ability to translate government science into prose for the taxpaying public. As biographer Linda Lear tells it, one day Carson handed her supervisor, Elmer Higgins, a draft of an eleven-page essay for a new fisheries brochure. Remembering his words later, Carson reported that Higgins "handed it back with a twinkle in his eye. 'I don't think it will do,' he said, 'Better try again. But send this on to *The Atlantic*.'" The result was a four-page feature in the magazine. In Carson's own words, "everything else followed." Indeed, "Undersea" led immediately to a book offer, and to what would become a steady stream of feature nature essays, most of them about the oceans, in the leading periodicals of the day.

One night in Carson's cottage I read "Undersea" by firelight, while at the beach below the rhythmic heave of the surf dropped over rocks and hissed and swayed through seashells piled on the beach. The essay begins,

Who has known the ocean? Neither you nor I, with our earth-bound senses, know the foam and surge of the tide that beats over the crab hiding under the seaweed of his tide-pool home; or the lilt of the long, slow swells of mid-ocean, where shoals of wandering fish prey and are preyed upon, and the dolphin breaks the waves to breathe the upper atmosphere. Nor can we know the vicissitudes of life on the ocean floor...where swarms of diminutive fish twinkle through the dusk like a silver rain of meteors, and eels lie in wait among the rocks. Even less is given to man to descend those six incomprehensible miles into the recesses of the abyss, where reign utter silence and unvarying cold and eternal night.

What strikes me about "Undersea," apart from Carson's lyric prose and her precise attention to detail, is the religious fervor of the language, its emphasis on the unknown, the incomprehensible, as she takes us into the dark recesses of the abyss. Carson's style as a nature writer is neither aloofly objective nor sentimentally dramatic. It conveys both real enthusiasm and respect for the astonishing creatures she describes, and a much deeper sympathy for other lifeworlds that ultimately remain impenetrable.

The word “abyss” appears eight times in the four-page essay, and more frequently in her other writing on the sea. Like much of Carson’s prose, the word carries both literal and figurative meaning. Literally, an abyss is one of the deep chasms, gorges, and rifts of the deep ocean; figuratively, it signifies the unfathomable, the sublime. In Carson’s time, the deep ocean, like space itself, was relatively unexplored. The technology required was experimental, rudimentary, and in early stages of development. The vastness of the ocean, its breadth and its abyssal depths, thus represented what human beings still did not know. Humility and awe before the creation, and sympathetic curiosity for each of its constituent parts—this is the fulcrum of Carson’s environmentalism.

Reading Carson’s early work showed me her unique talent for a science that reveals mysteries, and a poetics that embraces the mysterious. I find that this blend, which seems so necessary to developing an informed and respectable relationship with the more-than-human world, is present in only the best of contemporary environmental writing. Carson had it in abundance, and she may have been the first. Her passion for scientific theories and findings is complemented by an equal fascination with what can only be hinted at with language. Carson’s conclusion to “Undersea” underscores a metaphysical stance toward nature that extols both the known and the unknowable:

Thus we see the parts of the plan fall into place: the water receiving from earth and air the simple materials, storing them up until the gathering energy of the spring sun wakens the sleeping plants to a burst of dynamic activity, hungry swarms of planktonic animals growing and multiplying upon the abundant plants, and themselves falling prey to the shoals of fish; all, in the end, to be redissolved into their component substances when the inexorable laws of the sea demand it. Individual elements are lost to view, only to reappear again and again in different incarnations in a kind of material immortality. Kindred forces to those which, in some period inconceivably remote, gave birth to that primeval bit of protoplasm tossing on the ancient seas continue their mighty and incomprehensible work. Against this cosmic background the lifespan of a particular plant or animal appears, not as a drama complete in itself, but only as a brief interlude in a panorama of endless change.

Again, the language of this early essay conveys a seemingly religious awe for the “inexorable” laws of the sea. Here she introduces the theme of “material immortality”— an odd pairing of paradoxical terms—which surfaces again in her later writings. Scientifically, she is simply describing the law of conservation of mass, which states that nothing is created or destroyed, but only redistributed within a system. Metaphorically, however, she is stretching our imagination beyond science to consider the “mighty and incomprehensible work” of life, death, and creation itself. Significantly, Carson concludes *The Sea Around Us* with the same kind of emphasis:

The continents themselves dissolve and pass to the sea, in grain after grain of eroded land. So the rains that rose from it return again in rivers. In its mysterious past it encompasses all the dim origins of life and receives in the end, after in may be, many transmutations, the dead husks of that same life. For all at last return to the sea—to Oceanus, the ocean river, like the ever-flowing stream of time, the beginning and the end.

Caron’s essays and books on the sea did much to educate a generation of readers about the actual environment of three quarters of the planet’s surface. She remains one of the most loved biographers of the ocean in literary history. And all of her efforts to reveal the drama and natural science under the “world of waters” (the original title of “Undersea”) are expressed with a deep sense of wonder that values what remains *unknown* as much as it revels in discovery. As she puts it in *The Sea Around Us*, “It is always the unseen that most deeply stirs our imagination.”

When I was at the cottage I didn’t do much exploring or sightseeing. I was honestly more awestruck and motivated sitting at Rachel’s fireside and reading her books about the sea than I was in trying to learn the natural history of a place so unfamiliar to me. Deep as I was in her writings, I was super-tuned into my own sense of wonder at being able to share her place with her. Day and night I felt the giant pulse of the Atlantic; often it summoned me to the beach if only to check the shape of the tide.

One afternoon at low tide, I saw a woman wearing a broad-brimmed sun hat carefully stepping over the slippery basalt exposed on Carson beach. She strolled slowly, and

deliberately, around the pools, looking down into what the ebbtide had uncovered. She held to her body a large chunk of knotty driftwood that looked like a thick, unwieldy boomerang. Wendy, my host, had mentioned that someone named Rachel would be staying at a nearby cottage. She had told her of my interests in Rachel Carson, and hinted that maybe we would meet. I had thought she was joking. Now here on the beach, not quite strangers, we smiled at each other in recognition.

A woman in her sixties with long gray hair and pockets full of seashells, she introduced herself to me as Rachel and, with an ironic sparkle, explained that she was renting the cottage several properties up the beach. She also offered that she had just been a guest in the Carson place the week before my arrival. It was probably she who had left all the windows open the evening I arrived. A retired teacher, she had for years been coming to Southport for weeks at a time. We recognized in each other a common ancestry in Rachael's lineage of devotees. For a while we walked the beach together and Rachel named some of the shells that caught her eye. Stopping once, she bent down near my feet and came up handing me a perfectly round, undamaged anemone shell. I took it from her and examined the squat, roughly textured dome in the palm of my hand. It was a wonder. Its near-perfect symmetry, texture, and coloration recalled Pueblo pottery; the hole at the top marked life's entry and exit. I had been picking up fragments of such shells for several days and these pieces were beautiful relics in themselves. Now I was standing next to Rachel, holding one whole and listening to her go on about periwinkles. I reached out to return the specimen to her and she put it back where she found it. I knew it would get ground up by the waves. When I asked her what she was going to do with her driftwood, she told me it was for the centerpiece of her altar.

We sat down in a dry place among the tide pools, and as we watched the slack water slowly rise and fall at the tideline, we talked about Rachel Carson's writing and its legacy. I told how powerful it was to imagine myself into her world by reading her books from the heart of her sacred place. Rachel nodded understanding. We also spoke of Carson's intimate relationship with Southport resident Dorothy Freeman, and how their letters revealed Rachel's vivacious spirit and her obsessive personality. It was Rachel who told me where to go at the beach in Newagen where a plaque memorializes the place where Dorothy had spread her ashes. When it was time for us to part, Rachel remembered one more thing to

tell me. In the cottage's dining room, she said, there is a cabinet on the wall behind the table. In one of its drawers, I could find a sheaf of papers with architectural drawings. It was a collection of correspondence between Rachel and the builder of the cottage. Rachel told me that, as with her writing, she had been very particular about what she wanted and made many revisions. How did she know this secret would interest me?

Meeting "Rachel" at the tide-pools on Carson's beach gave me a lot to think about. Here I was reading about "transmigrations" and "material immortality," and right out of the tide-pools slides a woman named Rachel bearing secrets about unpublished papers in drawers of an old cabinet. That night I read through the correspondence with Carson's builder and was astounded at both the sheer quantity and length of the letters, as well as at the level of detail with which Carson would describe a long string of "alterations" to the original plan. Many of these alterations had to do with the fireplace that I sat by every morning and evening, and also the study where I continued to imagine Rachel working. It seemed to me that Rachel's presence during my stay, and I can't really say for sure how many Rachel's I met there, was fated to help me discover what I believe to be the most significant aspect of her character and her legacy: her sense of wonder.

If you were to examine Carson's major publications in reverse order, you would need to begin not in 1962 with *Silent Spring*, but in 1965 with her posthumously published, essay-length book, *The Sense of Wonder*. I believe this is her most timeless book, the one that, because of its brevity and broad appeal, may be the most widely read today, and the one that will still be read for its freshness decades, perhaps centuries, into the future. Unlike her other books, which, though poetic, dramatic, and profound, depend largely on a science that may seem outdated, *The Sense of Wonder* captures a universal human experience that the environmental movement, and all of its advocates, consistently need to return to for sustenance.

The Sense of Wonder was first published in 1956 as an article in the popular magazine, *Women's Home Companion*, under the title, "Help Your Child to Wonder." Carson never had children, but she was very close to her grandnephew, Roger Christy, who she would eventually adopt when his mother died. Carson's biographers and her own letters tell us of her

struggles with her maternal role. Throughout her adult life she had been the chief caretaker—and breadwinner—for her entire extended family, including Roger and his single mother. The burden, in terms of time and money, that this placed on such an ambitious writer as Carson was significant, and it forced her early in her career to develop strict work and business habits. Hard pressed to find space and time to write, she also always wrote with the aim of making as much as cash as she could. Adopting five-year-old Roger at fifty added pressure to a host of family obligations she had begun to refer to as “the Emergency.” Yet her constant care for all of her family reflected her commitment to the values of nurturing, empathy, and responsibility. Even before she adopted him, Carson was very fond of her little nephew. Her relationship with Roger, and their adventures near the sea at Southport, are what inspired “Help Your Child to Wonder” and gave the public a closer look at the private, feeling life of the best-selling author.

Sense perception, the world of feeling, surprise and wonder at even the smallest parts of creation—such receptivity has always been a touchstone for nature writing. Naturalists like Thoreau, Burroughs, and Muir all celebrated the mysterious forms, energies, and relationships between each part of the living earth and the entire cosmos, as did dozens of other writers Carson admired. Intimacy between people and nature, however, and the meaning one makes of it, depends largely on place and time, on the conditions that either invite or inhibit the development of such relationships. In their seaside adventures in Maine, Rachel both witnessed and nurtured Roger’s bond with the natural world. Her reflections about these childhood experiences stand up today as necessary reminders—on behalf of all of us—to protect and reclaim our own sense of wonder.

Because of its focus on children and its origin in her relationship with Roger, *A Sense of Wonder* is often invoked as a guide on behalf of children—help your *child* to wonder. But Carson’s words also remind adults of our own capacities, while warning us about how much there is to lose:

A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in

the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.

In Rachel Carson lore, the genesis of *The Sense of Wonder*—and arguably today’s widespread educational efforts to foster a sense of wonder in children—was the tide pool below the Southport cottage. I was standing on sacred ground. Here is where Carson played with, tutored, and watched her grandnephew Roger grow and respond viscerally to the sea and its creatures with excitement and joy. Here is also the place where Carson communed with the pulse of creation that she expressed so beautifully in her writings. And here is the place that Carson regretted leaving when she knew she was dying and would not return.

During her final years, with her health failing from cancer and cancer treatments, Carson had badly wanted to turn her essay into a full length book, so strongly did she feel about the significance of its message in a culture bent on despoiling the earth. Illness prevented that effort, but it is suggestive of her own deepest commitments that, in the aftermath of *Silent Spring*, and in the face of her own mortality, she would want to return to the theme of wonder. At this point in her career, Carson could write and publish anything she wanted. Offers for lucrative contracts were by now familiar and even burdensome. I think she wanted a book that would celebrate the sense of wonder because she knew how important it was to be a responsible and responsive human. She also must have known, as *Silent Spring* became the biggest environmental controversy in history, that a successful environmental movement depended on more than politics. I’m sure she would have appreciated educator David Sobel’s words when he wrote, “what’s important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds.” The relationship between one’s politics and one’s sense of wonder is often unclear. It seems that these two dimensions of life don’t always mix well, even in environmental literature. In Carson’s case, the political monkey wrench she brandished with *Silent Spring* was the product not primarily of radical politics, but rather of an enduring sense of wonder and care that defined her approach to writing and her relationship with the world she never stopped loving.

One of the treasures I have collected in my study of Rachel Carson's life and writing is the DVD recording of Kaiulani Lee's one-woman play, *The Sense of Wonder*. Filmed on location in and around the cottage on Southport Island, Lee dresses and plays the part of Carson narrating her own story with a script crafted from her many writings. The two central features of the performance are reminiscences of the events surrounding the publication of *Silent Spring*, and the moving expression of Carson's abiding love of nature even as she faces her own illness and death.

When I returned home from Maine, I wanted to see Rachel again in her cottage, to reconnect with the place and her presence in it. The gorgeous cinematography in the film took me back to the tide-pools on Carson's beach, and to the knotty pine interior of the cottage that to me had felt so much like home. Kaiulani Lee delivers such a convincing performance that watching the play almost makes me believe that Carson is still there herself, still regretting the time she would have to leave.

In the last years of her life, just as *Silent Spring* was catalyzing a new environmentalism, Rachel Carson suffered from a number of serious health issues. The most pressing was breast cancer, which had spread throughout her body and contributed to a number of other ailments, including a heart condition that would eventually take her life. At the height of her fame she suffered a great deal of pain. She relied on a wheelchair for the few public appearances, talks, and award ceremonies she was able to keep. Reflecting both the times she lived in and her character, Carson stoically hid the crisis of her illness from the public eye, insisting instead that she had only arthritis. Hiding her cancer may also have been, in part, a precaution to avoid being accused by chemical companies of holding a personal grudge against them. Whatever her reasons, she chose to stick with science. I'm sure she would be disheartened to learn that cancer rates since *Silent Spring* have risen dramatically—as she predicted. Yet, thanks to Carson, those who suffer the consequences of chemical contamination now often become vocal advocates for the environmental regulation that Carson knew we needed—and still need—to demand.

During September of 1963, two years before I was born, Carson prepared to leave Southport for what she knew would be the last time. Ahead of her waited an ominous series of radical cancer treatments and the massive backlash from the chemical industry over the publication of *Silent*

Spring. Of all the moving scenes in the film *The Sense of Wonder*, Kaiulani Lee's portrayal of Rachel packing up the cottage for the last time is for me the most poignant. The mood she creates with her wistful monologue is full of both longing for what she loves and dread for what she faces back home in Baltimore. She pauses frequently to gather herself, gazing seaward into the distance. The climax of the film is when Lee narrates part of a letter Carson wrote to her Southport soulmate, Dorothy Freeman, a few days after returning to the city. She was remembering their recent morning together at Newagen, the tip of the island that faces the open ocean, where Dorothy would later spread Carson's ashes. Carson writes:

"For me it was one of the loveliest of the summer's hours, and all the details will remain in my memory: that blue September sky, the sounds of the wind in the spruces and surf on the rocks, the gulls busy with their foraging, alighting with deliberate grace, the distant views of Griffiths Head and Todd Point, today so clearly etched, though once half seen in swirling fog. But most of all I shall remember the monarchs, that unhurried westward drift of one small winged form after another, each drawn by some invisible force. We talked a little about their migration, their life history. Did they return? We thought not; for most, at least, this was the closing journey of their lives.

But it occurred to me this afternoon, remembering, that it had been a happy spectacle, that we had felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return. And rightly – for when any living thing has come to the end of its life cycle we accept that end as natural. For the Monarch, that cycle is measured in a known span of months. For ourselves, the measure is something else, the span of which we cannot know. But the thought is the same: when that intangible cycle has run its course it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to an end.

That is what those brightly fluttering bits of life taught me this morning. I found a deep happiness in it – so I hope, may you."

My last day at the cottage was also in September. Throughout the late morning I sat quietly in the sunlight on Carson's deck, watching the water sparkle, and listening to

the life of the place stirring in the breeze. I decided to drive down to Newagen to take a last long look at the ocean. While I stood there in the rocks near the plaque dedicated to "RACHEL CARSON: WRITER, ECOLOGIST, CHAMPION OF THE NATURAL WORD," I looked for, but did not see, any monarchs. Instead, while staring out into the vastness of the Atlantic, I saw other signs of "material immortality" everywhere. The signs had been there in Carson's voice, which had brought me to this place through her writings. They were there in the encircling ocean, out of which all life on Earth crawled, and into which everything eventually returns. And they were there in the mysteries that remain hidden beneath the surface of our knowledge. Having shared her place with her for a week of sacred time, I felt I had absorbed something of what she gifted to the world. Perhaps her very molecules were there at the beach with me, incarnate now in the shells that wash up to the high tide mark and scrape against the rocks.

Acknowledgement

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