

Ode to Rachel Carson



Ode to Rachel Carson

The Sea Around Us was published in '51
& won the National Book Award and the Burroughs Medal
It sold over 250,000 copies that year
& made her a national treasure

She'd been one of the first women to hold an upper position
with the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

In early June of 1960 she served on the
Natural Resources Committee
of the Democratic Advisory Council

and listed for the committee the issues she thought most vital:
pollution control, radioactive contamination of the sea, chemicals
poisoning the air/water/land,
preservation of wild space
and the Wilderness Bill:
let's get it passed.

That was the year
she suffered the irony of researching a book
tracking the relationship
of pesticides & disease
while she herself fell prey

She'd been surging ahead in her book
encouraged by her editor at *The New Yorker*
William Shawn

when in January of '60
her doctors found a duodenal ulcer
& then, the same month,
viral pneumonia
& a sinus infection

In March she discovered
several cysts in her left breast
& she was to go to surgery in DC

On April 4 they operated
& then doctors recommended a mastectomy

She asked her Doctor about
the cyst
she was told she "had a condition
bordering on malignancy."

Ode to Rachel Carson

2



WOODSTOCK Journal

There had been a metastasis
but she was not told

There was no radiation
& lymph nodes on the left side were removed.

Determined to finish her book she began
dictating changes in the manuscript
which an assistant
would type

That November, her literary agent Marie Rodell liked the chapter on birds
& suggested that the whole book might be
titled *Silent Spring*

Then, ghastly,
in late Nov 1960
she discovered a hard swelling
on the 3rd or 4th rib
by the mastectomy

a dense mass 'tween rib & skin

so that within days there were
2 radiation treatments
then in late January '61
she was sterilized & received
ten more treatments
through February

She began
working again
on *Silent Spring*
by the summer of '61
in Maine

—Maine always energized her.

Back in Silver Springs, Md
in the late fall
she shoved herself harshly
to finish the greatness
polishing the “fable for tomorrow”
which begins the book.

By year's end she was sick again
almost blind with iritis
& in pain



but struck onward
so that by the end of January '62
she sent
15 of the 17 chapters
to her publisher Houghton Mifflin
& the same to the *New Yorker*

Shawn loved it
& wanted to publish it
in the spring o' '62

While polishing & revising
revising & polishing
in March
she discovered
a few hard, hurtful lumps
in the lymph glands on her right side

A biopsy gave the grim news
of another cancer, to the right

So that mid-March
Rachel Carson began
more radiation

She worked on *Silent Spring*
in bed in the mornings
& then to the hospital for radiation
in the afternoons

She was nauseous by mid-day

And then, April 20, 1962
Silent Spring
in the agony of its creator
was done!

It was a moment for America

She ordered a wig
so that she could start interviews, speeches,
and appearances
to stand by the science
of her book

Then, an enlarged
& painful node in her armpit
& soreness
in her neck & spine



The installments of *Silent Spring*
began in the *New Yorker* on June 16
creating a culture-shaking stir

The publication occurred
in the public anger over
thalidomide

The chem-companies
fought back
but JFK's Secretary of the Interior
Stewart Udall
backed Carson's book

& advocated
for pesticide regulation
in the New Frontier
that summer

Silent Spring was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection
& went on sale in stores September 27, 1962

There was a huge huge flood of press interest & interviews
& considerable hostility from conservatives
and chem-sleaze.

A pesticide industry ooze-group
spent over \$250,000
to attack Carson & her work

She was picked on as just a alarm-ringing woman
sort of a Cassandra of chemistry

The press was very attentive to her marital status—
that is, single
with the Cold War implication:
Communist, &, like, Sapphic

and the fact that she had “only” a Master's Degree

Then, December '62
terrible pain
in her back
with *Silent Spring* #1 on *The New York Times* best seller list
most of the fall
and during Christmas
she went through radiation treatments
on her back

During the increasing hubbub from chem-sleaze
Carson was always ill



yet worked hard
 answering critics
 doing outstanding stints on television
 making excellent speeches
 & shaping the p.r. battle

Then new lymph tumors
 above the collar bone
& another in her neck
 in February o' '63
 after which another series of heavy radiation

She began suffering from angina
 in the spring of '63

The federal government issued a report on May 15, 1963 called
"The Use of Pesticides" by the President's Science Advisory Committee

By September
of '63
it was too painful to walk
from "the pain in the bones of
her pelvic girdle"

yet she kept up her fierce Icy Fight
with the Scythe Man

till by March 13, '64
 the disease entered her liver

& then on April 14, 1964
Rachel Carson passed away
 of a heart attack

2/3s of her estate she gave to the Nature Conservancy
 & to the Sierra Club

& you can pause by her monument
on a street in Booth Harbor, Maine
to know the Hokusai churning
of The Sea Around Us

—2001, March 5, 2002