

RACHEL CARSON AND
THE POWER OF QUEER LOVE

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of QUEER
LOVE



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For Jennifer

CONTENTS

ONE	Queer Love in Southport	1
TWO	Wondrous Revelation	29
THREE	Loving Use	57
FOUR	Environmental Desire	91
FIVE	Heteronormativity Is a Climate Issue	119

Acknowledgments 133

Notes 137

Index 157

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ONE



QUEER LOVE *in* SOUTHPORT

Rachel Carson grew up in rural Pennsylvania, but she always dreamed of the sea. Carson saw the ocean for the first time after she graduated from college, and it was a revelation. As a “beginning investigator” in the Marine Biological Laboratory, Carson spent six weeks at Woods Hole during the summer of 1929 after a mentor encouraged her to apply for the opportunity. Carson’s friend Mary Frye recalls that walks with Carson along the shore at Woods Hole during low tide “had a ‘mystical quality’ about them. Rachel would wander off by herself, silently watching the ocean, utterly captivated by the sounds, smells, and rhythm of the ocean as well as by the variety of the marine life all around her.”¹

Carson’s most famous book, *Silent Spring* (1962), was not about the ocean she loved. It was about the environmental devastation caused by unregulated insecticide and pesticide use. The title referenced the future possibility of a spring where no birds sing, because they have all been killed or rendered sterile by pesticides.

Carson wrote that the failure of government to regulate industry had resulted in the deaths of birds and other animals, possible damage to the health of humans, and the pollution of rivers and streams and lakes. Yet the passion and feeling of the book came from Carson's longstanding relationship with the ocean. She had become more and more herself in her relationship with the sea, and through her deep relationships with other people infused by oceanic life and rhythms. *Silent Spring* is a book about the devastating loss of the nonhuman natural world and its impact on meaning, beauty, and love. It is a book about how losing the diversity of the earth impacts our ability to become ourselves and to develop our own desires and loves.

Carson learned this lesson most potently on Southport Island, Maine, where she bought land and built a house with money she earned from her earlier, immensely successful book, *The Sea Around Us* (1951). She was attracted to Southport because of its incredible natural beauty and diversity of plant and sea life. However, Southport turned out to hold more beauty for Carson than she could have imagined. Once there, she met and formed a deep, lasting love relationship with Dorothy Freeman, who had a summer house with her husband near Carson's home on the island. Her relationship with Freeman brought Carson to life in a new way.

Carson and Freeman met at Freeman's initiation. Freeman wrote a letter to Carson during Christmas 1952, when she learned that Carson was building a house down the road from her family's summer home. Freeman and her husband Stan had both read and loved *The Sea Around Us* and were excited about the possibility of meeting the famous author. Following a cordial exchange of letters and a brief introduction during the summer of 1953, Carson and the Freemans went on a tidepooling outing right before the Freemans left for the season. Carson and Dorothy Freeman formed

Queer Love in Southport

an instant connection, and each wrote the other a letter before leaving the island. In a postscript to her letter, Carson wrote, “And here is your sweet letter. . . . I, too, feel a strong bond of common interests—and that we have the same feeling about many things.”² Perhaps anxious to confirm mutual interest in the blossoming relationship, Carson walked over to the Freemans’ house the evening before their departure, and left Dorothy with a kiss.

In some of her subsequent letters to Freeman, Carson describes the great beauty of Southport, imagining Freeman as her companion in the exploration of the island. Carson says, “The big September tides have come and gone, and every time I was down there exploring I wished you were there, too—you would have enjoyed it so” (AR 5). After telling her that she was sending her a snapshot of low tide (that wasn’t as low as it should have been), Carson said, “By the way, I think I see Dogfish Head [an outcropping of rock into the ocean right next to the Freeman cottage] in this picture. The near points are, of course, the entrance to Deep Cove, but I thought the dimly seen bit on the horizon might be yours. If so, I can wave to you at low water of springs, anyway.” Carson then went on to tell Freeman “the things you might have enjoyed most (as I believe I did),” which included “thick crusts of the coralline algae,” “tiny anemones living inside the empty barnacle shells,” and a “whole community of creatures living in” the crusts of algae and “under it” (AR 5). While Carson would certainly have noticed and enjoyed these creatures without writing to Freeman about them, she wrote in deep, excited detail because she was imagining Dorothy as her companion. And—as she said only a few letters later—she loved Dorothy. Carson wrote,

[A]s you must know in your heart, there is such a simple answer for all the “whys” that are sprinkled through your letters: As why do I keep your letters? Why did I come to the Head that last

night? Why? Because I love you! Now I could go on and tell you some of the reasons why I do, but that would take quite a while, and I think the simple fact covers everything. (AR 13)

Carson was always a wonderful writer, and always wrote beautifully about nonhuman nature. But through her relationship with Freeman, her writing about nature became more vibrant, passionate, and urgent. When Carson met Freeman, she was finishing *The Edge of the Sea*, a book about the creatures who live along the shores of the ocean. Just a few months following their meeting, Carson wrote to Freeman, “Maybe the easiest way for me to write a chapter of my book would be to type ‘Dear Dorothy’ on the first page! As a matter of fact, you and your particular kind of interest and appreciation were in my mind a great deal when I was rewriting parts of the section on rocky shores” (AR 10). About a year later, when Carson was publishing *The Edge of the Sea*, she dedicated it to Dorothy and Stan Freeman, and she wrote to Dorothy Freeman:

When finally I became [the sea’s] biographer, the sea brought me recognition and what the world calls success. It brought me to Southport. It gave me You. So now the sea means something to me that it never meant before. And even the title of the book has a new and personal significance—the sea around Us. (AR 59)

The meaning of the sea, even for its celebrated student and biographer, changed and deepened through experiencing it with Freeman, someone she loved. So too did her relationship with Freeman deepen through sharing the sea and other forms of nonhuman nature.

It is no coincidence that Carson felt the courage and urgency to write *Silent Spring* through her relationship with Freeman. While Freeman worried early on that the topic was too dark—or

Queer Love in Southport

at least much darker than Carson's earlier writings on the ocean—the safety of Carson and Freeman's love allowed Carson to risk her reputation in writing the book. At the end of 1962, Carson wrote to Freeman,

It has been such a mixed year for us both—joy and fulfillment in the Dream House built and lived in, and in *Silent Spring* published and making its mark. And on the other hand, the shadows of ill health. For me, either would have been a solitary experience without you, and I know you feel the same. (AR 420)

She went on, “Now, to you both, so much love and the hope that the new year will bring us all more joys than sorrows and renewed joys in being together—in belonging to each other.”

Carson and Freeman's love helped Carson write the book, but their love was also the emotional core of why Carson wrote the book in the first place. Carson and Freeman especially shared a love of the veery, a species of thrush whose two-toned call creates a feeling of otherworldliness for the listener. Throughout the decade and more of their relationship (until Carson's death from breast cancer in 1964), they would write about the veery's song, about wanting to listen to it together, about searching for it and hearing it in special places. The veery was the voice of their love.

In her letters to Freeman about *Silent Spring*, Carson continually links her writing of the book to her relationship with Freeman and their shared love of the natural world—and, in particular, their shared love of the veery. Writing to Freeman in the fall of 1962, in the midst of breast cancer treatment, Carson said of writing *Silent Spring*, “It was simply something I believed in so deeply that there was no other course; nothing that ever happened made me even consider turning back. . . . I told you once that if I kept silent I could never again listen to a veery's song without overwhelming self-reproach” (AR 408). *Silent Spring* was written to

defend a vibrant world of nonhuman nature that helped deepen Carson and Freeman's love and allowed each to become more and more themselves.

As is probably evident already from these excerpts from their letters, Carson and Freeman's love was certainly romantic. It was also the central relationship of their lives, changing their life course in so many ways. They craved time and connection with each other and relied on each other in their darkest moments. Stan Freeman had an independent relationship with Carson and knew about the intensity of his wife's relationship with Carson. As Dorothy Freeman wrote in a 1963 letter to Carson, "Stan knows that we love each other to a greater depth than other friendships" (*AR* 442).³

Carson and Dorothy Freeman each changed how they lived their lives (in practical and intangible ways) for the sake of their relationship, and they became more and more themselves through it. Carson was responsible for an unconventional family, including her niece and great nephew, and the Freemans became increasingly involved in helping her with her caretaking. Carson and Freeman developed their own language, in conjunction with their experiences in nonhuman nature, to describe their love: terms like "apples," the "white hyacinth," "stardust," the "Dream House," and the "Dream" became part of their lexicon. Whether or not their love was "homosexual," to use the language of the time, it was certainly queer. It drew them out of conventional forms of marriage and family and allowed them to find happiness where their society told them they weren't supposed to: in loving each other and the world of nonhuman nature.