

On the Sandbar

When the tide is right, almost at its lowest point but not quite rising again, I take out the kayak. At my grandparent's house, a sacred and scarce island property, the back-yard slopes down and down until a sudden drop off the bulkhead sends you straight into the canal. To paddle from my grandfather's dock to the sound takes only ten minutes. These water ways are man-made, constructed in an attempt to prevent the inevitable. In the Outer Banks, the islands shift constantly, making it necessary to control the water with an iron fist and fill in the beaches every five years with more sand. Otherwise, Pine Knoll Shores would melt straight into Bogue Sound.

Located between Emerald Isle and mainland Morehead City, Bogue Sound acts as a nursery for young life. The center is dredged to allow boats to safely pass through without worrying about sandbars. But if you know where to look, the murky bottom rises up to the surface, suddenly only a couple feet deep at high tide. Throwing my sand anchor overboard, I can step out of the kayak and onto the soft sandbar, now covered in a measly six inches of water at low tide. Out here, it is necessary to wear water shoes; you never know when you may step on a half-buried welk or hidden stingray. I trudge through the sinking sand, watching tiny fish dart here and there. They like to hide in the rippling sea grass, where food is abundant, and the seagulls can't reach them. One day, these babies will make their way out to the open ocean. Today they hope to not become someone's next meal.

This time, at super low tide, is what my grandmother would have considered peak clam digging time. As a child, she and I would carry our mesh bags and clamming rakes to dig up the delicious mollusks. She taught me where to find them, how to pick out the sunken indent in the sand that revealed the clam's hiding spot. We would fill our bags and drag them home to steam up for dinner.

Today, I'm not looking for clams, just looking around, noticing and absorbing the presence of sea life like the rays of sunshine on my bare back. The waters I'm wading through are the same that Rachel Carson, renowned nature author and conservation biologist, waded through almost a hundred years ago. Back then, the menhaden fish plant still brought in thousands of tons of fish a day. The smell used to permeate every corner of town. Back then, the sands were slightly different, shifted one direction or another in a formation even a native Beaufort fisherman wouldn't recognize today. But the islands, Emerald Isle, Carrot Island, Shackleford Banks, were all named the same.

Rachel Carson is probably most known today for her book *Silent Spring*, the text that sparked government concern and interference into human effects on nature. It led to the ban on DDT, a chemical that softened eggshells and was causing a decimation of keystone populations of birds. It was one of her later pieces, published in the sixties, during a time of great political change and social upheaval. But before birds, Carson was obsessed with the sea. It began with "Undersea," an article written in *Reader's Digest*, that captured minds and hearts alike with her poetic depictions of nature. In 1937, when "Undersea" was first published, the world also felt a bit unsure. The Great Depression had hit Americans hard. World War II was on the horizon. And yet, here was a piece that put things into perspective. What I love about being submerged in the ocean is that you hear nothing but the waves, muted through underwater sound but still roiling and rumbling. I imagine this is the way people felt, reading "Undersea,"

the world around still rumbling with discontent, but at peace for a moment. It had been a long time since art and science were so eloquently combined. Carson writes:

“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 tidepool 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 breath the upper atmosphere. Nor can we know the vicissitudes of life on the ocean floor, where the sunlight, filtering through a hundred feet of water, makes but a fleeting, bluish twilight, in which dwell sponge and mollusk and starfish and coral, where swarms of diminutive fish twinkle through the dusk like a sliver rain of meteors, and eels lie in wait among the rocks. Even less is it 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.”

Her language reads like spoken word poetry and educates like a textbook. She incites the human senses, sight, touch, sound, and releases them of their earth-bound cage. The reader feels the warm water rush over them, sees the filtering sunlight, hears the crash of a wave. And then, all at once, banishes those senses and leads us on a journey to a deep-sea world, one where there is no light, no sound, only the bitter chill of freezing cold water. Carson knew that if someone, anyone, would care as much as she did, the ocean would need to reach out and touch them through the page. Her words possess the reader, grasp their minds and hold on tight, teaching them to love and care. The ocean is not to be feared but respected. It is to be cared for in the ways we are not caring for it now. Even in 1937, before climate change and pollution had become a political pillar, Carson warned of how humans may destroy the ocean's beauty.

Back on the sandbar, the tide is coming in again. I can feel the current swirling around my ankles, gently tugging this way and that. Looking up, I notice I have strayed too far from my kayak in pursuit of a pelican, bobbing gently on the waves and only half-heartedly avoiding my attention. In my rush back to the kayak something in the water flashes. I have startled it and it startles me in return. “Maybe a big fish,” I tell myself, trying to ignore the fact that it's probably a baby shark. Fortunately, whatever it is considers me more as a predator than as prey. As the grey blob darts away, I look more closely at the spot it once occupied. There, hidden among the blades of sea grass, is the telltale indent of a clam, buried beneath the sand. Today, I leave it be.

Conclusion:

The ocean is deep and wide. She contains endless mysteries, some half solved, most not solved at all. She shapes the lives of humans in ways far too complex for a single essay, or even four. But, regardless of the impossibility of containing her, one can at least appreciate her for what she gives: food, a home, a place to fight to survive, a place to learn and be taught, a guiding light for those who traverse her aquatic mass, a destroyer of those who disrespect it. If I've learned one thing about the tides, it's that life is all push and pull, give and take.