

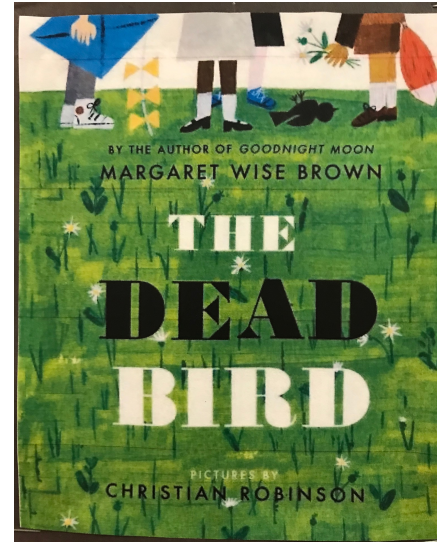
The Dead Caterpillar: **a True Story about how a Library Book and the School Garden** **Inspired Science Curriculum**

by Emily Hartzell

the book

On the first day of school, Cheryl showed me a picture book called *The Dead Bird*, by Margaret Wise Brown. I was excited, because Margaret Wise Brown also wrote *Goodnight Moon*, which is my favorite children's book. In this book, a group of children discover a dead bird in the woods. They pick it up and notice that its body is getting cold and hard. They feel sad that it died. They write a song for it. Then they bury it in the ground and decorate its grave with flowers.

I loved the way the book was both matter-of-fact and reverent. Death always comes up in Science class, so I checked out the book and kept it on my desk.



the caterpillar

One morning a few weeks later, Karen, the parent who cares for the garden, ran into my room.

"Emily!" she cried. "There are caterpillars in the garden! Do you have something you can keep them in? If we leave them there, they'll probably be eaten by birds!"

I found my butterfly enclosure and followed her downstairs to the garden. On the way, we kept talking. Karen said, "They must be swallowtail caterpillars."

"How do you know?" I asked.

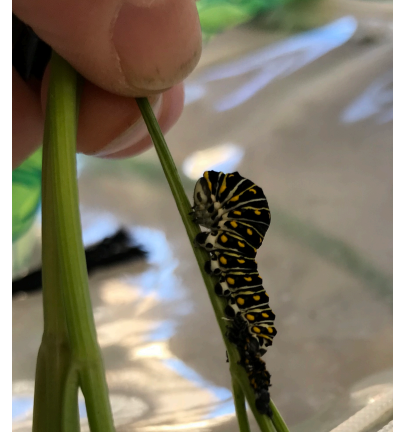
"I found them on the fennel. Swallowtail butterflies always lay their eggs on fennel, since that's what their caterpillars love to eat," she explained. This reminded me of monarch butterflies, who lay their eggs on milkweed. By now we had reached the garden, and I followed Karen over to the fennel plants. At first I didn't see the caterpillars, because they were so well camouflaged. But once I saw them, I couldn't tear my eyes away.

They were beautiful! About an inch long, they were pale green with black stripes, and black and yellow spots. With their two rows of little legs gripping the fennel stems, they looked like subway trains on an elevated track.

We cut the fennel stems that had the caterpillars on them. We also cut some parsley, since swallowtail caterpillars also eat parsley. I brought the enclosure back up to my room and filled a little beaker with water and tucked the stems into the water so the fennel would stay fresh for the caterpillars.

They ate all day, and they grew fast!

Each day, on the way to my classroom, I'd stop in the garden to cut a few stems of fresh parsley and fennel for the caterpillars, and almost every time I'd end up finding another caterpillar. Soon, there were five plump striped caterpillars in the enclosure, each of them getting bigger daily. The kids loved checking on them every time they came to Science.

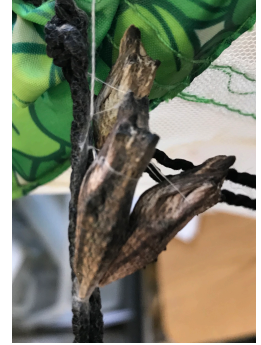


transformation

One morning when I came in, I noticed that the biggest one had transformed overnight into a pale brown, papery pupae. It had spun a little thread like a spider, and used it to suspend itself from the top of the enclosure. It looked like it was resting in a tiny hammock! I showed all my classes a video of the process, and we discovered the pupa actually emerges from WITHIN the caterpillar, bursting through its striped skin and then shimmying out of it, finally knocking it to the floor. The transformation was so shocking that some kids screamed when the head of the caterpillar in the video split open!



One by one, over the next week, the rest of the caterpillars transformed into still, faceless pupae. For some reason, two of them chose to hang their hammocks off of another pupa, so they looked kind of like a bunch of alien grapes. By now, there were just two caterpillars left. Catlin's class named the smaller one Stripes Candy.

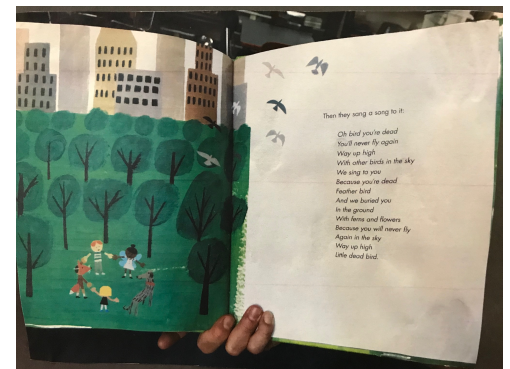


a sad day

When I came in on Monday morning and added some fresh parsley, Stripes Candy fell off his fennel stem and landed on the floor of the enclosure. I picked him up and put him back on, but he was too weak and fell again. I put a piece of parsley next to him there on the floor and hoped he would eat it to gain strength. But later that day, I found him still and lifeless.

Stripes Candy had died.

I looked through the stack of books on my desk to find *The Dead Bird*, the book I'd checked out of the library on the first day of school. When Catlin's class came to Science that afternoon, I told them what had happened. Then I read them the story about the children who found the dead bird, sang it a song, and buried it. I asked them if they would like to write a poem for Stripes Candy. They raised their hands, taking turns adding lines to the poem, and this is what they wrote.



Goodbye Caterpillar by Catlin's Class

Oh Caterpillar, you're dead.

You can't move
You can't eat
You can't drink.

You can't play with your caterpillar friends.

You were lying on the branch in the morning, and you were lying flat on the floor when Emily came back.

Oh Caterpillar, Oh Caterpillar

Your beauty was amazing.

Oh Caterpillar, I'm so sad you can't be a butterfly.

the funeral

The next time Catlin's class came to Science, we laid Stripes Candy in a toothpick box and carried him down to the garden. We shared memories of him, read the poem aloud together, and buried him in the garden, wrapped in parsley. We picked a few flowers to decorate his grave.

epilogue

One day I ran into Karen in the garden, and she said "How are those caterpillars doing?"

"They've all turned into pupae," I told her. "Except for one," I added sadly, thinking about poor Stripes Candy.

"We better put them in the fridge," she said.

"The fridge?" I asked. "Why?"

"It might take them a few weeks to turn into butterflies, and by then it will be too cold to release them in the garden," she explained. "There won't be any flower nectar for them to drink. If we'd left them in the garden and they'd turned into pupae, they wouldn't have hatched until the spring when it's warm."

"They would have stayed out there through the whole winter?" I asked, shivering.

"Yup," she replied. "It's called 'overwintering.'"

"Wow, so by putting them in the fridge, we're kind of tricking them into thinking they're outside, and it's winter," I concluded.

"Exactly," she confirmed.

So that's where they are. . . in a plastic container with holes in the lid, at the back of the third floor fridge, behind a bag of bagels. I can't wait to bring them back to the Science room once there are flowers blooming in the garden in the spring.

I hope they all turn into butterflies.

