

TURTLE POETRY

Editorial Introduction. — This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material. We encourage our readers to submit poetry or songs for consideration, either their own material or work by other authors. Poems may be submitted to Anders G.J. Rhodin at Chelonian Research Foundation [RhodinCRF@aol.com].

Our desire is to share with our readers the beauty and wonder of turtles as expressed through the art of the poem or song. In the sense that the relationship between man and turtles is multifaceted, so too is turtle poetry. The poems we publish here will reflect that complexity, from poems of pure admiration for the creatures themselves to others reflecting the utilization of turtles and their products. Some poems will reflect man's use of the turtle for sustenance, others will stress man's need to preserve and protect turtles. Some will deal with our emotional interactions with turtles, others will treat turtles light-heartedly or with seeming disrespect, but all will hopefully help us to better understand both the human and the chelonian condition, and remind us that the turtle holds a sacred place in all our hearts.

Chelonian Conservation and Biology, 2006, 5(2):335

Elegy for the Giant Tortoises

MARGARET ATWOOD¹

Let others pray for the passenger pigeon
the dodo, the whooping crane, the eskimo:
everyone must specialize.

I will confine myself to a meditation
upon the giant tortoises
withering finally on a remote island.

I concentrate in subway stations,
in parks, I can't quite see them,
they move to the peripheries of my eyes

but on the last day they will be there;
already the event
like a wave travelling shapes vision:

on the road where I stand they will materialise,
plodding past me in a stragglng line
awkward without water

their small heads pondering
from side to side, their useless armour
sadder than tanks and history,

in their closed gaze ocean and sunlight paralysed,
lumbering up the steps, under the archways
toward the square glass altars

where the brittle gods are kept,
the relics of what we have destroyed,
our holy and obsolete symbols.

Editorial Comment. — This poem by Margaret Atwood, a well-known Canadian writer, laments the gradual passing into extinction of giant tortoises. It speaks to their destruction at our hands, and how we honor their symbolic imagery—but not always their actual lives—reducing them eventually to nothing more than holy relics kept in glass cases in eternity's museum. As conservationists, each of us must specialize and become champions and advocates for our particular charges—in this case, turtles and tortoises—lest they materialize eventually from our peripheral vision, too late for help, on the road to certain extinction. The poem is a call to action, a call for personal empathy and commitment—a challenge to us to prevent this plodding, lumbering path towards extinction. Turtles and tortoises must remain living members of our natural world, not just destroyed, holy, and obsolete symbols of that world.

¹Published 1968 in *The Animals in That Country*.