

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 — This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material.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 Wallace J. Nichols, School of Renewable Natural Resources, Wildlife Ecology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721 or Anders G.J. Rhodin, Chelonian Research Foundation, 168 Goodrich Street, Lunenburg, MA 01462.

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.

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Wake, Methuselah! (Tortoise in Midwinter at the London Zoo)

AUTHOR UNKNOWN¹

Come from the hole where the dark days drew thee,
Wake, Methuselah! Wag thy tail!
Sniff the snare of the winds that woo thee,
Sun-kissed cabbage and sea-blown kale.
To the salted breath of the sea-bear's grot
And the low sweet laugh of the hippopot
Wake, for thy devotees can't undo thee
To see if thou really art live and hale.

Leap to life, as the leaping squirrel
Flies in fear of the squirming skink;
Gladden the heart of thy keeper, Tyrrell;
Give Mr. Pocock a friendly wink!
Flap thy flippers, O thou most fleet
As once in joyance of things to eat;
Bid us note that thou still art virile
And not imbibing at Lethe's brink.

Art thou sleeping, and wilt thou waken?
Hast thou passed to the Great Beyond,
Where the Great Auk and the cavernous Kraken
Frisk and footle with all things fond;
Where the Dodo fowl and the great *Dinornis*
Roost with the Roc and the *Aepyornis*,
Where the dew drips down from the fern tree shaken
As the pismire patters through flower and frond?

Art thou sleeping, adream of orgies
In sandy coves of the Seychelle Isles,
Or where in warm Galapagos gorges
The ocean echoes for miles and miles?
Of sun-warmed wastes where the wind sonorous
Roared again to thy full-mouthed chorus,
Far from bibulous Bills and Georges
That smack thee rudely with ribald smiles.

Dost thou dream how, a trifling tortoise,
The hot sun hatched thee in shifting sand,
Before the wrongs that the Roundheads brought us
Set Oliver Cromwell to rule the land?
Of an early courtship, when Pym and his earls
Were making things lively for good King Charles?
Not one left of them! *Exit sortis*
(Horace), but *thou* art still on hand.

Grant, thou monarch of eld, a token
Of blood now fired with the breath of Spring;
For the crowbar's bent and the pickaxe broken
With which we endeavoured to "knock and ring."
At the warm love-thrill of the Spring's behest
That biddeth the mating bird to nest,
Wake to the word that the wind hath spoken,
Wake, old sportsman, and have thy fling!

Editorial Comment (Peter C.H. Pritchard). — While cleaning out my attic, I found this poem that I laboriously copied out in the library of my boarding school in Ireland about 40 years ago. It came from a bound volume of *Punch* (the British humorous weekly magazine), decades old — probably from around the turn of the century. The poem consists of the thoughts of someone contemplating a cold, immobile, hibernating, or possibly dead giant tortoise seen in midwinter at the London Zoo, when Mr. Pocock and Mr. Tyrrell were in charge of the Reptile House. The poem has the form of a Mock Heroic worthy of Alexander Pope, and is remarkable not least for its unusual rhyming scheme. In each stanza of eight lines, lines 1, 3, and 7 rhyme, as do lines 2, 4, and 8. Lines 5 and 6 rhyme with each other (although with a classical asonance in the fifth stanza). In terms of literary devices, the poem is gloriously overdone. It is, for example, positively festooned with alliteration — dark days drew thee, sniff the snare, leap to life, flies in fear, squirming skink, flap thy flippers, frisk and footle, roost with the Roc, dew drips down, pismire patters, flower and frond, Galapagos gorges, trifling tortoise, shifting sand, wake to the word that the wind hath spoken. One can almost picture the now long-forgotten (and surely long-dead) author smiling to himself with glee as he crafted his clever composition. Parts of the poem suggest some uncertainty as to whether the animal in question was an Indian Ocean or a Galapagos tortoise. Indeed, up to about the mid-nineteenth century, it should be remembered that it was common to call all giant tortoises *Testudo indica*. Certain phrases (flap thy flippers, sandy coves of the Seychelle Isles, hot sun hatched thee in shifting sands) also suggest confusion between giant tortoises and sea turtles. But no matter, the poem is magnificent.

¹ Published in *Punch Magazine*, ca. 1900, original title and author unknown
Submitted by Peter C.H. Pritchard