

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 — This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material.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.

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Culebra Leatherbacks

ANDERS G.J. RHODIN¹

Down from the hills
down to the shore
by moonlight we descended
on the coast of Culebra
to reach Playa Brava

Silvery crescent arching
glowing, stretching below us
a narrow white sliver
beckoning in the night

We stepped onto the beach
and felt transported in time—
to an Age before Man
no evidence of his presence
save our prints in the sand

Full moon rose above
with Mars and companions
riding through the night
reflecting and glittering
the sand glowing light

Boldly we stepped
strode down the beach
Rolando and Molly
Carol and me

Our quest in the night
nesting turtles to find
arriving in darkness
reflecting moonlight

Emerging from breakers
surveying the shore
hauling their bulk
from out of the sea

Leatherbacks emerging
black bodies heaving
flippers thrusting
progress halting

Slowly onto sand
wary of disturbance
nest sites to find
follow ancient urges
replenish their kind

Rituals of nesting
slow dances defined
sensed deep in the soul
of the leatherback's mind

Body pit, egg chamber,
oviposition,
covering, camouflaging,
steps in her ritual
danced in the sand

Brine from salt glands
wells from her eyes
mixes with sand
like tears for her kind

Head covered in sand
held still for my touch
sand brushed away
with the palm of my hand

Her role that night
to help us understand
her travels, her life
her fate in the seas

A transmitter to be tracked
by satellites in space
attached to her back
with surgical care

Beacon in place
she crawls down the beach
returns to the sea
and the lives of her kind

their lives, their future,
their fate and survival—
held in our hands
to cherish and care.

Editorial Comment. — I wrote this poem after my first visit to the leatherback nesting beach at Playa Brava on Culebra, Puerto Rico. The beach there was stunning, with no visible lights from human development. It was primeval and magical, and we were surrounded by several leatherbacks nesting. We used novel orthopedic bone attachment techniques for application of satellite transmitters to nesting leatherbacks, techniques that we have continued to modify and improve over the years. Our research and conservation efforts over the last several years on Culebra and in Fajardo have involved cooperative efforts between our team (led by Molly Lutcavage and including at various times Sam Sadove, Charlie Blaney, myself, Carol Conroy, Russ Andrews, Yonat Swimmer, Kelly Stewart, Michael Rhodin, and Jeanette Wyneken) and our enthusiastic Puerto Rican turtle conservation hosts and research collaborators (Hector Horta, Carlos Diez, Rolando Soler, Jovino Marquez-Soto, and others). The island of Culebra and its friendly people and magical beauty has won its way into our hearts and it is our fervent hope that the isolated and near-pristine leatherback nesting beaches there and in Fajardo and Puerto Rico's Northeast Ecological Corridor will receive the on-going and improved protected status that they so richly deserve.

¹ Composed June 1999, revised February 2007.