

TURTLE POETRY

Editorial Introduction. — This section, inaugurated here, will be devoted to poetry involving turtles. A single poem will be published per issue, representing either reprinted previously published work or new material submitted specifically for this section. We encourage our readers to submit poetry for consideration, either their own material or previously published work by other authors. Songs about turtles will also be considered as poetry. Submissions may be sent to Wallace J. Nichols, Coastal Conservation Foundation, P.O. Box 3621, Tucson, AZ 85722 [E-mail: jnichols@ccit.arizona.edu].

Our desire is to share with our readers the beauty and wonder of turtles as expressed through the art of the poem. Turtles need not be the main focus of the poem, but should represent more than just a passing mention. 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 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, 1996, 2(1):121.

To a Box Turtle

JOHN UPDIKE¹

Size of a small skull, and like a skull segmented,
of pentagons healed and varnished to form a dome,
you almost went unnoticed in the meadow,
among its tall grasses and serrated strawberry leaves
your mottle of amber and umber effective camouflage.

You were making your way through grave distances,
your forefeet just barely extended and as dainty as dried
coelacanth fins, as miniature sea-fans, your black nails
decadent like a Chinese empress's, and your head
a triangular snake-head, eyes ringed with dull gold.

I pick you up. Your imperious head withdraws.
Your bottom plate, hinged once, presents a *No*
with its courteous waxed surface, a marquetry
of inlaid squares, fine-grained and tinted
tobacco-brown and the yellow of a pipe smoker's teeth.

What are you thinking, thus sealed inside yourself?
My hand must have a smell, a killer's warmth.
It holds you upside down, aloft, undignified,
your leathery person amazed in the floating dark.
How much pure fear can your wrinkled brain contain?

I put you down. Your tentative, stalk-bending walk
resumes. The manifold jewel of you melts into grass.
Power mowers have been cruel to your race, and creatures
less ornate and unlikely have long gone extinct;
but nature's tumults pool to form a giant peace.

Editorial Comment. — This poem, written by John Updike while living in Massachusetts, USA, appears to describe the common eastern box turtle, *Terrapene carolina carolina*. This represents the extreme northeastern range limit for the species and subspecies.

¹ Composed 23 May 1989, published 1993 in:
UPDIKE, JOHN. *Collected Poems 1953–1993*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., pp. 226–227.
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Submitted by Wallace J. Nichols.