

essays

“TURTLE”

FROM A FIELD GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN HAIKU

by Charles Trumbull

A Field Guide to North American Haiku is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-saijiki, a selection of the best English-language haiku arranged by topic and attempting to illustrate what it is about a given topic that attracts poets to write. When complete, the Field Guide project will comprise multiple thick volumes keyed to the several topics in traditional Japanese saiiki (haiku almanac) and Western counterparts, notably William J. Higginson's Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac (1996). These topics are: Season, Sky & Elements, Landscape, Plants, Animals, Human Affairs, and Observances. The current compilation presents "Animals: reptile: turtle." The haiku are selected from my Haiku Database and are offered as prime examples of haiku in English that illuminate our points. The Haiku Database currently contains just over 350,000 haiku. I sometimes indicate the count of haiku in the Database on the given topic in this form: N=520; J=46, meaning in this case there are 520 "turtle" haiku in the Database, of which 46 are translations from Japanese. These numbers have no absolute significance but are useful in gauging the significance of a subject in haiku—i.e., a very rough frequency index.

Turtles are believed to be the oldest extant members of the reptile class, having originated more than 150 million years ago. Turtles are characterized by a hard protective shell and by their longevity. Some species can live for hundreds of years. Though the three types are rarely distinguished in common usage, much less in haiku, technically *turtles* live in water, *tortoises* on

land, and *terrapins* live in either or both but always near water.

Specific types of turtle are not often named in haiku beyond simply “tortoise” or “terrapin.” The types that are occasionally mentioned include painted, leatherback, loggerhead, snapping, box, and mud turtles. Rarely does naming the type of turtle add much meaning to the haiku.

Japanese haiku refer almost exclusively to sea turtles, and “sea turtle” (海亀 *umigame*) is a *kigo* for mid-summer. Higginson admits “turtle” (亀, *kame*) as a season word for all summer. Most turtle haiku by Japanese have an element of time or longevity, for example:

What matter if I live on—
a tortoise lives
a hundred times as long.

Issa, in Yoël Hoffmann, Japanese Death Poems, 1986

Turtles in Japanese haiku are often said to cry or make similar sad sounds (亀鳴 *kame naku* = turtle chirping):

turtle’s crying
is like my crying
over my shortcomings

Ishihara Yatsuka, trans. Hiroaki Sato, Frogpond 19:3, 1996

sorting the letters
of my deceased friend—
a tortoise cries

Fay Aoyagi, Chrysanthemum Love, 2003

English-speaking turtles, however, are more often noted for their silence:

sea turtle:
her silence enters
the surf’s roar

Ruth M. Yarrow, Modern Haiku 25:2, 1994

Longevity implies doggedness, wisdom, and even sanctity:

a pond turtle rises from 200 million years

Marlene Mountain, Roadrunner VII:4, 2007

thundering rain—
an ancient pattern gleaming
on the turtle's shell

Wally Swist, Modern Haiku 27:3, 1996

turtle 100 years
without mouth talk
straight at me

Paul Reys, 22 Ways to Nowhere, 196?

on the creek bottom,
century-old snapping turtle:
years of beer bottles

Nicholas A. Virgilio, Frogpond 13:4, 1990

Surely because of turtles' wisdom, many cultures attribute spirituality and godlike behavior to them. It is often said, for example, that the Earth is balanced on the back of a giant turtle, and these creatures are stock figures in folktales and fables, especially of Native American peoples. Legends and myths would seem to be fruitful hunting grounds for haiku poets, yet this area has yet to be much exploited. A few appealing exceptions:

box turtle
gods look
like that

John Martone, Box Turtle, 2008

a turtle rises
from the stone buddha's shadow
break of day

Karma Tenzing Wangchuk, Stone Buddha, 2009

Turtle Dance
 the youngest boy
 almost in step

Marian Olson, Desert Hours, 2007

One finds an occasional allusion to a fabulous race:

Year of the Hare;
 in the window of the PET SHOP
 tortoises for sale.

Lorraine Ellis Harr, Selected Senryu, 1976

The turtle's carapace attracts great interest among poets, who often relate emotionally to the beast and impute human feelings of isolation, solitude, and loneliness to it:

empty pond
 winter's
 tortoise shell

John Martone, Modern Haiku 37:2, 2006

turtle's shell
 the smooth emptiness
 inside

Jim Kacian, Six Directions, 1997

deep inside
 the turtle's shell
 no wind

Wayo Bo (pseud.), Roadrunner, IX:3, 2009

Two old mud-turtles
 dozing on the river bank ...
 each in his own shell.

Evelyn Tooley Hunt, American Haiku 3:1, 1965

The silent communing
 with the tortoise in his shell
 and I in mine.

Foster Jewell, Modern Haiku 7:4, 1976

Turtles and the stones on and among which they are frequently observed have a natural affinity for each other, at least in the minds of haiku poets. Undoubtedly this has to do with the fact that they look alike and are both rather slow moving:

Christmas Eve
the stone can't hold
another turtle *paul m., Few Days North Days Few, 2011*

Indian summer
a turtle on a turtle
on a rock *Peggy Willis Lyles, The Heron's Nest 3:10, 2001*

shallow creek—
a stone frees itself
into a turtle *Edward J. Rielly, Answers Instead, 2015*

boys with a stone
try to crack the turtle's shell
Bob Boldman, Eating a Melon, 1981

In and out of its shell, in and out of the water, the turtle's head provides endless fascination for the haiku poet:

a turtle raises its head
as high as it will go ...
dawn *Larry Gates, Modern Haiku 17:3, 1986*

Around the bend
a log lying in the stream
— the turtle's ears *Robert Spiess, The Turtle's Ears, 1971*

slow thunder...
 through pond moss
 a turtle's back

Frank K. Robinson, High/Coo 6:22, 1981

sultry afternoon
 turtle noses stipple
 the glossy lake

Ebba Story, Modern Haiku 29:1, 1998

all the turtles
 are headless—
 the heat

Ty Hadman, Modern Haiku 23:1, 1992

Dusk over the lake;
 a turtle's head emerges
 then silently sinks

Virgil Hutton, Modern Haiku 10:1, 1979

The turtle's unhurried gait is a frequent subject of haiku; so are the advantages and consequences of its moving slowly:

The year's first turtle
 slowing...
 still slowing

Vincent Tripi, The Heron's Nest 7:3, 2005

Stopping the jogger
 in his tracks
 a tortoise

Alexis K. Rotella, Clouds in My Teacup, 1982

midday
 the tortoise halfway
 round its pen

Michele Root-Bernstein, Dandelion Wind, 2007

tortoises
mating
the long day

Carolyn Hall, Modern Haiku 43:3, 2012

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crushed turtle shell nearly across

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Robert Spiess, Some Sticks and Pebbles, 2001

Sea turtles laying eggs on the beach—in haiku this typically happens symbolically under a bright moon—and the newborns’ perilous trip back to the ocean past predators and despite distractions also captures the imagination of many poets:

a leather back turtle
transporting the full moon
on a lonely beach

Keith A. Simmonds, Ito En Oi Ocha New Haiku Contest 2012

a full moon rises—
the sea turtle covers
her “one-in-a-thousand”

Nina A. Wicker, Wild Again, 2005

moonrise:
turtle’s white egg
almost buried in the sand

June Moreau, Boston Haiku Society News, 2001

no last goodbye
so soundlessly the turtle
returns to the sea

Carolyn Hall, The Heron's Nest 12:4, 2010

night surf
lit by condo lights
a sea turtle
returns

Keiko Imaoka, Centerfold website, 1998

beach lights ...
a baby sea turtle
headed the wrong way

Mary Wuest, Modern Haiku 39:1, 2008

autumn leaves
the turtle eggs
that never hatched

Linda Robeck, Dew-on-Line website, 2002

The creature's human predators consider the soup made from turtle to be a delicacy, but the turtle as food is rarely a topic in haiku. One notable exception:

what thing cries out
deep inside us
cooking the turtle?

Bill Pauly, Henderson Award (HM) 1980

Publishing these miniature topical haiku anthologies is an experiment to test the feasibility of the larger Field Guide project. Critique and suggestions, supportive or critical, are warmly invited; please comment by e-mail to trumbullc@comcast.net.