

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 — This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material.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, Chelonian Research Foundation, E-mail: 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 humans 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 people's use of the turtle for sustenance, others will stress our 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, 2023, 22(2): 249

Turtle¹

LESLÉA NEWMAN

for Mary Vazquez

I still think about her
that great old turtle
large as a coffee table
standing by the side of the road,
her narrow eyes, her wrinkled head,
her grey-green shell spotted with lichen.

How she rose up on her elephantine legs!
How she hissed and snapped
at the metal ice scraper
you thrust at her
trying to steer her away from the stream
of cars barreling past.

It was her will against yours
as you blocked her path
again and again
until she finally turned
and ambled off into the trees
without so much as a backwards glance.

Two years have passed and I wonder,
Does she still think about us
the way we still think about her?
Does she dream about us?
Thank her lucky stars
we came along just in time?

Or does she curse us daily
for stopping her from stepping
into that dangerous traffic,
risking it all
to reach her ancient heart's desire,
forever unknown on the other side of the road?



Editorial Comment. — Lesléa Newman has created 85 books for readers of all ages including the dual memoirs-in-verse, *I Carry My Mother* and *I Wish My Father*. She has received poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation, and from 2008 to 2010 served as the poet laureate of Northampton, Massachusetts. Her spouse, Mary Vazquez, has been taking pictures of the natural world ever since she could hold a camera. Her photography awards include a 2023 Artist's Grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and many blue ribbons from the Tri-County Fair in western Massachusetts. The photo she took of the Eastern Painted Turtle shown above is one of her favorites.

When I asked Lesléa about her inspiration for this poem, clearly concerning a Snapping Turtle, *Chelydra serpentina*, she answered, “my spouse and I were driving somewhere here in western Massachusetts when we spotted the turtle on the side of the road. My spouse immediately stopped the car; [she was] scared that the turtle, who was heading into traffic, would get killed. All we had in the car to distract the turtle was an ice scraper, which my spouse thrust out at the turtle, who snapped at it and held onto it so that my spouse was able to point her in the other direction. I was so taken with this inter-species interaction of compassion, that I decided to write a poem about it.”

Lesléa initially wrote the poem as if the turtle were a male, but then someone told her that it was most likely a female on a nesting journey; so in this, her second version, the turtle became a female. However, in view of her description of its size (“large as a coffee table”) it may well indeed have been a male migrating, perhaps earlier in the season. The poem reminds me of a similar one we published in this journal [CCB 12(2)] exactly 10 years ago, “An Interruption” by Robert S. Foote, in which he described a similar encounter between someone stopping a car and helping a Snapping Turtle across a road. We thank everyone who takes care to avoid hitting turtles on roads and helping them across when they are able to do so—and always hopefully in the direction the turtle was going. . .

¹ Composed and published 2003 in *The Sun Magazine* at <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/332/turtle>; reprinted with slight edits in 2008 in *Nobody's Mother* by Lesléa Newman, Orchard, WA: Orchard House Press, p. 92. Copyright 2003 by Lesléa Newman; reprinted with permission of the author and Curtis Brown, Ltd., New York, NY. Photo “Turtle and Fly” copyright 2012 by Mary Vazquez; reprinted with permission of the photographer.