

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 — This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material.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

GRACE S. McLAUGHLIN¹

You —
 who we name
 tortoise —

Ancient ones,
 you carry the weight of the world
 on your backs.

From your burrows,
 you watched
 the mountains rise
 and the seas recede,
 the giant mammals disappear
 and the condors soar less,
 the two-legged ones arrive.

For 10,000 years
 they named you sacred —
 honored your presence,
 your strength,
 your persistence.

Then, the two-leggeds changed.
The new two-leggeds
 no longer named you
 sacred
 but killed
 for no reason
 and did not honor
 tortoise.

They brought new four-leggeds
 in great numbers
 who ate your food
 and trampled your burrows and nests.

Machines came
 that tore the land
 crushed your families and homes.

From your burrows,
 you watched.

Some two-leggeds grew in wisdom
 And began to watch
 And to care.

They learned about your lives
 And protected your homes
They moved the four-leggeds
 And kept machines away.

Once again,
 they name you sacred
 and honor
 tortoise.

And you, ancient ones,
Who carry the weight of the world
 on your backs
From your burrows,
 You watch.

Editorial Comment. — This poem was presented at the Conference on Health Profiles, Reference Intervals, and Diseases of Desert Tortoises on 3 November 1996 at Soda Springs, California. It describes the plight of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*).

¹ Composed 1 November 1996
Submitted by John L. Behler