

## 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*

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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](mailto:trumbullc@comcast.net).*