

## Turtle1

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Source: Chelonian Conservation and Biology, 18(2) : 284

Published By: Chelonian Research Foundation and Turtle Conservancy

URL: <https://doi.org/10.2744/1071-8443-18.2.284>

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# TURTLE POETRY

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— This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material.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

*Chelonian Conservation and Biology*, 2019, 18(2): 284  
doi:10.2744/1071-8443-18.2.284

## Turtle<sup>1</sup> MARY OLIVER

Now I see it—  
it nudges with its bulldog head  
the slippery stems of the lilies, making them tremble;  
and now it noses along in the wake of the little brown teal

who is leading her soft children  
from one side of the pond to the other; she keeps  
close to the edge  
and they follow closely, the good children—

the tender children,  
the sweet children, dangling their pretty feet  
into the darkness.  
And now will come—I can count on it—the murky splash,

the certain victory  
of that pink and gassy mouth, and the frantic  
circling of the hen while the rest of the chicks  
flare away over the water and into the reeds, and my heart

will be most mournful  
on their account. But, listen,  
what's important?  
Nothing's important

except that the great and cruel mystery of the world,  
of which this is a part,  
not to be denied. Once,  
I happened to see, on a city street, in summer,

a dusty, fouled turtle plodded along—  
a snapper—  
broken out I suppose from some backyard cage—  
and I knew what I had to do—

I looked it right in the eyes, and I caught it—  
I put it, like a small mountain range,  
into a knapsack, and I took it out  
of the city, and I let it

down into the dark pond, into  
the cool water,  
and the light of the lilies,  
to live.

*Editorial Comment.* — Mary Oliver (1935–2019) was a prominent American poet who won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award. She studied at Ohio State University and Vassar College, and worked for several years at the estate of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Her first collection of poems was published in 1963 and her fifth, *American Primitive*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1984. From 1991 to 2001 she held a Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College, Vermont, close to where I live now. She won the Christopher Award and the L.L. Winship/PEN New England Award for *House of Light* in 1990, and the National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems* in 1992. She was influenced by Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, and is known for her clear and poignant observances of the natural world. Her poetry finds inspiration in nature and life, and she describes the sense of wonder and purpose it instilled in her: “When it’s over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real. I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument. I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world” (from *When Death Comes* in *New and Selected Poems*).

This poem, *Turtle*, conveys the life and death reality of nature as she encounters two separate snapping turtles (near her home in Provincetown on Cape Cod in Massachusetts) and movingly captures her different emotions and reactions to the two contrasting scenarios. For the second turtle, her purposeful action made a difference in its life, as all of us should always try to do.

<sup>1</sup> Published 1990 in *House of Light* by Mary Oliver (Beacon Press, Boston);  
republished 2017 in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (Penguin Press, New York).  
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