

Turtle by T. Allen Culpepper

On a June Saturday morning,
awakened much too early by my cat,
more eager than I to face the day,
I pull on shorts and venture out back
with my mug of coffee to see
what needs watering today,
the basil probably, the clematis maybe.

This time of year, I often discover
a representative of the local wildlife
population already there before me.
Today, it is a turtle, and I am pleased.
One shared my space all summer
the year I bought this house,
and I was disappointed not to see
one last year. Who knows?
Perhaps this one is the same,
they live quite long, I'm told.

I move a little closer and notice
the details of the face, the
engaging amber eye, a streak
of vermilion I'm not expecting.
I've never thought of turtles
as having personalities, really,
but this one seems to have
some character at least,
a history I wish it could tell.

For some ridiculous reason,
I have my phone, so I
approach to take a picture.
The head retracts immediately,
of course, but after several
cautious attempts, reassurances
that I mean no harm, it
slowly eases out again,
and I eventually get my photo,
though not the close-up I'm aiming for.

It occurs to me that I don't know
whether to say "he" or "she,"
sexing turtles being one of the
lessons I apparently slept

my way through in that
long-ago biology class.
(Later, I learn that eye color
and belly shape give clues,
but I don't know that yet.)
In fact, I realize, this is only
one of the many things
that I do not know about turtles.
I cannot identify this one
more specifically than "turtle."

Not until evening will I find out
from a friend, who apparently
took his Scouting more seriously
than I took mine, that its probable
classification is Eastern box turtle.

In any case, the characteristic
that interests me most is the shell.
Intricately patterned, its mingled
browns and greens and yellows,
richly displayed in sunlight, in shade
give it the effect of camouflage;
its shape's a bit like an army helmet.

Consulting *Wikipedia*, I read that
the shell of this species is remarkable
functionally as well; when the turtle
feels threatened, it can close its
hinged underside, the plastron,
tight against the upper shell,
the carapace, sealing its
soft body inside a box of bone.
And if it's damaged, given
time, it can regenerate.

I think the shell's the aspect
of the turtle that I understand
quite well, despite my lack
of zoological knowledge,
for I too have a shell of sorts
and have often taken refuge
in it, not so much from
actual danger as from
an anxious fear of
something I can't quite name.

It feels safe in there,
and I suppose it is, though
there is, regrettably,
enough room
for only
one.

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