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A Declaration for Turtles1

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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 — This section is devoted to poetry involving turtles, representing either reprinted previously published or new unpublished material.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 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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A Declaration for Turtles[1]

ANDERS G.J. RHODIN

Turtles, persevering, biding their time,
with patient persistence and measured step,
overcoming obstacles, trumping their threats,
as Biden beat Trump, tortoise beats hare

For turtles and tortoises, terrapins and kin,
their kind to protect, their future to win,
we craft for them a Declaration of Existence,
a Constitution of values, proclaiming their rights:

We hold these truths to be self-evident,
that all turtles are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Evolution
with certain unalienable Rights,
that among these are Life, Survival,
and the pursuit of their Natural Life History.

We the People, on behalf of all Turtles,
in Order to form for them a more perfect Existence,
establish Justice, ensure habitat Tranquility,
provide for their common survival,
promote their general Welfare,
and secure the Blessings of Protection
to their kind and their Posterity,
do ordain and establish this
Constitution for the Turtles of the World.

For turtles and tortoises, terrapins and kin,
their kind to protect, their future to win,
we declare and ordain their right to existence
and work to promote their continued persistence.

Editorial Comment. — I wrote this poem and declaration after watching Joe Biden give his victory speech after being designated the winner of the presidential election over Donald Trump. The moment was inspirational and I thought about his perseverence and step-by-step low-key balanced approach that had gradually led to ultimate victory—not unlike a tortoise, I thought—and the first stanza was born. When he quoted the Irish poet and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney and his poem about hope and history rhyming, it inspired me to think about some of the similarities between the political process I had been experiencing and watching these past four years and the problems of turtles and their survival and need for recognition and protection. I thought about the universal needs and rights of all peoples to be free, to have life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I thought about all wild animals (and turtles) also having similar needs and rights to life, survival, and the pursuit of their natural life histories–and our need to protect and promote those rights as far as possible and to continue to work for their existence and persistence. I then thought about creating some kind of a universal declaration reflecting those needs and rights, and given the current political moment, I took further inspiration from history and slightly reworded the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution to craft a Declaration of Existence for turtles in the body of the poem.

In my opinion, we the people have a moral imperative to work to preserve the wonderful biodiversity with which we share this one and only Earth–our mutual home–and our hope is that one day we may achieve success and justice for all threatened life and habitats. In the words of Heaney, as Biden quoted: "History says, don't hope on this side of the grave. But then, once in a lifetime the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme."

I now hope that the darkness and disrespect of these past four tumultuous and dysfunctional years of Trump's presidency will turn to light and new possibilities as we transition to Biden's leadership and a more hopeful and decent future of increased equality and respectful recognition of the needs and rights of all peoples and also that of our shared biodiversity heritage and our increasingly threatened biosphere. May history eventually judge that we helped them all, and our Earth, to not only survive, but also to thrive.

[1] Composed 7–8 November 2020 in Arlington, Vermont
on the occasion of Joseph R. Biden, Jr. being designated President-Elect of the USA.
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