

**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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