

Oliver Kellhammer

I Love Turtles

Ecolit Nonfiction & Grand Prize Winner

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The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex.
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a fix to be so fertile.
—Ogden Nash

Another summer approaches and the warm night air smells of earth and lilacs. The warmth of the morning sun and the sight of ferns unfurling on the stream banks remind me of the summers of my southern Ontario boyhood. It was a time when a weedy little river near Toronto still lazily wound its way lakeward through grey shale ravines, unimpeded by civil engineering. In the golden light of endless afternoons, rock bass darted in dark pools while water snakes undulated gracefully through the glint of ripples.

It was at this time of year that I often used to see snapping turtles, their heavy shells festooned with emerald strands of moss, start their ponderous annual migration away from the cool safety of the river into the forbidding glare of the desiccating land. They seemed to have come from another time but were condemned each year to make this perilous journey out, to plant their eggs in the soil of an increasingly hostile present. Like dazed, self-propelled suitcases, staggering away from the debris field of an invisible plane crash, the turtles dragged themselves laboriously through weeds and over burning tarmac and scattered into the alien world of nascent suburban sprawl, just beginning to assert its choke-hold on the once bucolic landscape. They lumbered across the human environment as indifferent to it as to a cloud shadow flitting across the vastness of geological time. Concrete curbs and dinosaur corpses were all the same to them—just so much detritus to be circumnavigated before the completion of a vital mission. Caked in yellow dust, they doggedly tracked the ley lines of the antediluvian maps coded deep into their tiny brains to the hidden sites of their ancestral nesting grounds, now rendered almost unrecognizable by the destructive interventions of an upstart naked ape. Their sad, dark eyes streamed tears into the glare of the unaccustomed sun. Sadly, many of the old nesting sites were located in places now highly vulnerable. I would find the big turtles, wheezing with exertion, laying their eggs in busy factory yards or beside roaring traffic on the shoulder of the highway. I even found one blithely preparing to nest right next to the home plate of the local ball field.

The very first turtle I saw in my life was such a star-crossed individual. My father had come across her early one June morning, as she sought out her nesting site in the parking lot of the plastic factory where he had just come off night shift. A recent immigrant from Germany, he

coaxed the hapless reptile into a cardboard box and, beaming with pride, brought it home on the bus to show me—perhaps trying to convey me something of the sense of wonder he felt since arriving in what he still thought of as the romantic wilderness of the strange New World. The timely intervention of a neighbour likely saved my curious two-year old fingers from the snapping turtle's aptly named jaws and the animal was quickly dispatched to the bemused staff at the local Humane Society.

When the gravid mother turtles arrived at their carefully chosen locations, they would tilt the backs of their shells into the ground like a fleet of marooned flying saucers and start the arduous process of excavating their nest holes. For many hours, they would painstakingly scoop out the hard packed gravel with the stiff claws and webs of their muscular back feet. Then, without even being able to see the consummation of her efforts, each mother turtle would pause, urinate into the hole and then begin the slow, glistening extrusion of ping-pong ball shaped eggs into the cossetting safety of the dampened earth. When finished, she carefully covered the nest to hide all traces of her presence, before starting the long, slow trek back to the ancestral river.

As mysteriously as they arrived, a few days later, the mother turtles were gone. The unlucky ones, who had strayed into the migration path of a strange new gasoline-drinking dinosaur, lay flipped and putrefying in the heat haze next to the road, their armour crushed like fallen warriors in a Pyrrhic battle against time. No one driving by even slowed down for a look.

Despite the odds, this epic and dangerous gamble for the future of their species paid off. In the spring after a successful nesting year, I would find tiny black snapping turtle hatchlings, perfect little replicas of their Godzilla-like elders, floating warily in the shallow pools at the edge of the river. These, the lucky few in the brutal lottery for survival, already had their parents' no-nonsense hooked beaks and toothed, crocodilian tails. Somehow, maybe under cover of darkness, they evaded the fatal gauntlet of traffic, raccoons and dehydration that decimated their nest-mates, surviving the long and dangerous scuttle back to the river's cool bosom. Having made it this far, they would have a chance, a small chance, to someday grow big enough to repeat their parents' journey and ensure the continuation of their ancient race. This is the way it had always been, despite asteroid impacts and ice ages. Since the end of the Triassic, 200 million years ago, turtles had been faithfully repeating this rhythm, yet unimaginably, this was about to change, within the short span of my own human life.

By the 1970's, we were nearing the end of an epoch, for both the turtles and the place where I lived. Although I didn't understand it at the time, I still remember feeling a thrumming sense of ecological doom. Like most children, growing up at the edge of the country, I was finely attuned to the minutiae of nature, knowing which old boards to look under to find baby meadow voles or how the goldfinches would wait till the end of summer to build nests, so they could line them with thistledown. Yet all around me, a shock wave of suburbanization was proceeding apace, and I began to notice things I had always taken for granted starting to disappear.

An early casualty was the exquisite milk snake, named for a quaint but mistaken belief that it stole milk by secretly sucking the udders of cows. Resplendent in its creamy skin, offset by lustrous ovoids the colour of Moroccan leather, the milk snake frequented many of the picturesque, century-old barns dotting the landscape near my home. Far from stealing, the milk snake

performed a valuable service for the farmer, ridding barns of rodents with relentless, reptilian efficiency. But the barns soon became bereft of cows as one by one, the exasperated dairy farmers succumbed to the hectoring of developers to sell their farms. Before long, there was a “sold” sign on nearly every farm gate in the district and the vast old barns were left to creak empty in the wind. As the suburban tsunami crested and surged across the fields and woods, the barns fell like dominoes, their wreckage sold off as “authentic barn boards” to decorate the walls of the tide of rumpus rooms and steak houses flooding into its wake. The milk snakes of course, vanished with the barns. I saw my last one sometime in the mid 1970’s, disoriented and clinging to the flattened remains of a barn about to be replaced by a neo-colonial retail cluster, containing a family-themed restaurant, a real-estate office and a golf supply store. I wish I had kissed that last milk snake good-bye. I miss it.

The pace of change in my once semi-rural neighbourhood was becoming breathtaking. One morning on my way to school, I was shocked to see the old orchard I used to walk through completely bulldozed. Its venerable apple trees, dating back to the days of the pioneers, lay uprooted and pushed into burn piles atop the raw red earth. For the first time, I couldn’t hear the calls of any of the birds I used to hear there. That was the last I ever saw of the bobolink, a cheerful, black and white bird with a jaunty yellow skull cap and an odd metallic call. It needed extensive meadows of long, undisturbed grass in which to hide its nest and raise its young. No more undisturbed meadows—no more bobolinks. It was a simple, brutal equation, variations of which were playing out in all the other habitats in the area, the species within them now evaporating like puddles on a hot highway.

Near the orchard, a grove of young ash trees was also being razed. This was the place where my school chums and I used to search for red-bellied snakes. These beautiful little creatures were so docile that when picked up, they would curl themselves around our wrists like living jewelry, their vermilion ventral scales opalescing in the sun like Japanese lacquer. The obliterated ash grove was soon replaced by a low-rise complex of light industrial units, quickly occupied by an electronic controls manufacturer and a factory producing adhesive machinery labels. We never saw another red-bellied snake, but consoled ourselves with a new preoccupation—scooping up the quivering globules of mercury we found at the bottom of the waste bins behind the new building. We would sneak the mercury into school, hidden in our pencil cases. Beguiled by the liquid metal’s otherworldly heaviness, we would fondle it obsessively in the cubbyholes of our desks. Collecting mercury became a mesmerizing addiction, and a kind of malevolent gold fever descended on our little group. We just couldn’t stop thinking about it. In frequent forays to the waste bin, we feverishly gathered as much of the mercury as we could, an awkward and often difficult task. A friend, who had brought a carefully hoarded jam jar of the stuff to school, suffered a beating for it from an older kid, who wrenched it violently from his hand. In the struggle, the jar smashed on the pavement and everyone in the vicinity went running after the fleeing silver blobs, tantalizingly disintegrating into even smaller blobs as we pursued them. Despite the strange power it had over us, mercury never quite made up for the loss of our little snakes.

As the landscape’s death by a thousand needles drew closer, it became more difficult for me to parse the defining moments out of what had now become a continuum of loss. Even when I was just beginning school, many things had already slipped into the realm of memory. Back then, we learned from the older children that the strikingly beautiful *Cercropia* moth, its powdery wings the

size of a small bird's, had recently been quite common. They spoke of having collected them in cake tins and of how clusters of the moths used to press against screen doors on summer evenings, blinded by a frenzy to commune with electric light. DDT had ensured the *Cercropia*'s disappearance from our world by the mid 1960's. The bug killer went by the satanic trade name of "Black Flag" and everyone kept cans of it around to control what TV described as "those pesky bugs." The *Cercropia*'s ghostly cousin, the Luna moth, must have vanished at around the sametime. I only ever saw one once, its pale green wings with their long kite-like tails, lying crushed on a white line in a gas station parking lot.

But by junior high school, things had gotten really disturbing. In the early summer of 1973, I was called over by the neighbours to look at some baby cardinals that had fallen out of their nest. The sight of the scarlet male cardinal flitting in and out of the dark green yew tree across the street had been a hallmark of summer since I could remember. The birds had always raised successful broods, save for occasional predations by our ginger tomcat. But this year was different. This year the nestlings had hatched out without beaks. What was there instead was a sort of hideous bleeding hole. The adult cardinals had thrown their mutated children from the nest in horror.

The previous summer, our neighbour had signed up for a lawn care contract with the Chemlawn company and every two weeks during the season, a half-ton truck pulled up, carrying a big yellow fibreglass tank. A tired-looking man would emerge to dutifully unroll a long hose and methodically spray the yard with a viscous, oily-smelling mixture. After he was through, he would put up a little sign suggesting people keep off the grass for a few hours after spraying. But the kids in the neighbourhood played on the lawn right away anyway, undeterred by the sight of dandelions turning black beneath their sneakers. For an increasing number of households, it had become fashionable to sign up with Chemlawn. It implied an arrival to the modish, WASP culture of the patio, a sense of status and propriety that the more ambitious families of my own immigrant working class hoped one day to emulate. Modern chemicals could deal with all those nasty weeds, leaving the leisure-conscious suburbanite free to concentrate on mixing the next martini. A few years later though, the owner of the house died of a particularly virulent cancer. I always wondered if it was somehow connected to what was happening to those birds.

Cancer was something we were hearing more and more about. Down the street, my friends Gordie and Doug grew up together in houses with adjoining back yards. Doug was short for his age, had a mop of rust-coloured hair and loved reading pulp science fiction magazines, the kind with lurid big-breasted space women on the cover standing on a moonscape against an orange, alien sky. Gordie was tall, with crooked teeth and had what we would now call a learning disability. He had an unusual talent for mechanical things though, and together we often would while away lazy Saturday afternoons, taking apart old televisions to get at the powerful magnets inside. This was a tricky business because of a potentially lethal voltage carried in the TV's capacitors that remained even when the set was unplugged. But despite melting the tips off a few screwdrivers, Gordie had found the knack and we soon amassed a large collection of magnets with which we performed endless experiments.

In what seemed at the time to be the cruelest of coincidences, the mothers of Gordie and Doug both developed cancer in the winter of 1974. Vital, young women, just in their early thirties, both were dead within the year, leaving behind devastated husbands and shattered young children. Neither Gordie nor Doug came to school much after that. Even though neighbours pitched in to

help look after the kids, the faces of their young fathers soon became etched with deep lines of strain.

As if in sympathy, the following year the stately elms all through the neighbourhood began to die. A few dead branches at first and then gradually more, as the Dutch Elm disease systematically exerted its deadly calculus. Before long, their enormous vaulted, umbrella-shaped canopies, once shimmering golden green in the evening sun, stood brown and withered, as if scorched by the poison breath of an invisible dragon. Our street became a street of skeletons and for the first time ever, the summer orioles no longer sang from the bag-shaped nests they once hung in the branches high overhead. But life went on. Crews from the “city” as it was now called, came by and cut down the dead elms, tidying up, as it were, so we were no longer daily reminded of what we had lost. From that point on, no child growing up in Southern Ontario, would ever again delight in lying face up on the back seat of the family car and looking up through the back window see the great green tunnels of overarching elms pass overhead. Yet I remember this. I always will.

Since those long-ago summers, an entire generation has grown up in what became the city of Mississauga, unburdened by memories of elm trees or snapping turtles. Maybe they are the better off for it. But for me, that transmogrified landscape will always be a landscape of loss, its ghosts travelling with me everywhere, etched into my subconscious.

Inevitably, as I got older and went away to college, I began to think less and less about the place where I grew up. Yet development had become even more frenzied in my absence and I found myself beset by a strange sense of anomie during my visits there; getting lost, for example, driving to the Beer Store for my father, in the vast and unfamiliar new fractal-scape of streets. A dream-like quality had descended on my sense of the place, as if like Rip Van Winkle, I had somehow woken up far into the future—which of course, I had.

By the late 1970’s I had adopted the nihilism of my disaffected generation of suburban youth. The Sex Pistols’, “No Future” was our anthem and I was eager to expunge any sense of bourgeois nostalgia from my being. Remembrance Day of 1979 happened to fall on a weekend and I had a few days off from class. Early on November 11th, at about three in the morning, I was driving home toward my parents’ house after an Iggy Pop concert at the venerable Rex Theatre on the Danforth. It had been an incredible night and I felt somehow deliriously apocalyptic as I drove through the empty, rainy streets, past the donut shops and the all-night gas stations, past the endless empty parking lots of the shopping malls, past great piles of excavated earth, singing the lyrics from Iggy Pop’s “The Passenger.”

I am a passenger
 And I ride and I ride
 I ride through the city’s backside
 I see the stars come out of the sky
 Yeah, they’re bright in a hollow sky
 You know it looks so good tonight
 And all of it was made for you and me . .

In my delirium I sort of half noticed that the “hollow sky” on the Mississauga horizon was looking a lot brighter than usual. It had turned a lurid orange colour. Suddenly an enormous

flaming object rocketed skyward, raining sparks like Ezekiel's terrible Wheel. A quick mental inventory of the evening's drug intake: A bit of weed, a couple of 'uppers,' nothing out of the ordinary. Or hallucinogenic. A bright flash and another enormous fireball shot upward. Then another.

I drove on, horrified. Perhaps I was having some kind of mental breakdown. After what seemed like an eternity, I turned onto my parents' street. They were standing on the front lawn in their pyjamas, gesticulating wildly. My brother and sister were inside the house, their awe-struck faces pressed against the kitchen window.

"Vee are being attacked!" my mother cried out as I pulled into the driveway. "Maybe eats za Russians."

It seemed a little far-fetched, the Russian invasion thing, but my mother had a vivid imagination. She had lived through the Allied firebombing of Stuttgart. I suggested we go back in the house and listen to the radio to find out what was going on. Madly twiddling the dial, I finally came upon a 24-hour news channel:

"Propane tank cars are exploding and flying hundreds of feet into the air," the announcer said,

"Emergency response teams are on the scene..."

Just before midnight on November 10th, a 106-car CPR train jumped the tracks at the intersection of Mavis Rd., in Mississauga, just two miles away from my parents' house. The train was carrying tank-cars loaded with hazardous industrial chemicals—caustic soda, toluene, styrene, propane and chlorine. The resulting fire was burning out of control, spewing toxic gases and raining flaming chunks of metal over a wide area.

It was too much for us to process. Bewildered, exhausted, not knowing what to do, we all went to bed. The next morning, I got back in the car and drove to Guelph, about 100km away, to resume my classes. Later that afternoon, the rest of my family was told to evacuate as a viscous yellowish-green cloud of lethal gas started bearing down on the neighbourhood. Everyone within a 25-square-kilometre area was forced to leave. The fire took five days to put out, releasing incalculable amounts of carcinogens into the environment. But in the end, everyone went home.

It's been a quarter century now since that derailment. Cancer's relentless tendrils have stricken my father with Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and my young sister-in-law with thyroid cancer. Both are thankfully in remission, at least for the time being. But one never knows. Cancer it seems has gone from being a rare disease to a new rite of passage. Conversations at my parents' dinner table are dominated by anecdotes about who has cancer now, how far along they are in their therapy, and whether or not their prognosis is terminal. Dad spends his mornings volunteering on the cancer ward at one of the area's modern hospitals. The state-of-the-art ward is always full. He tells me of the many young mothers he sees there and how he helps them prepare for their chemo.

"It doesn't make sense," he says.

I haven't seen a wild snapping turtle for years now. Eventually, I packed up and moved to the West Coast, which has its own environmental problems like clear-cuts so big you can see them from space. The summers here are too insipid to incubate the heat-loving eggs of snapping turtles, though I've heard that there are still a few of these refugees from deep time to be found back in Ontario. But turtles, collectively, are in the middle of an unprecedented crisis of extinction. By some estimates, nearly half the world's species will disappear, imminently. The snapping turtle is doing better than most and might hang on a little longer. Apparently, they are somewhat tolerant of pollution.

And that's a good thing, because, according to Mississauga's first people, humanity's fate is inextricably entwined with that of the turtle. In fact, the turtle is our fate's foundation. At the beginning of time, the Iroquoian creation story tells us that a pregnant woman fell from the Sky World down toward the Lower World, which was then completely covered in water. Sky Woman is rescued by a great turtle, who agrees to carry her on his back. With the addition of a little soil from the bottom of the sea, the turtle's shell magically starts to grow, first to the size of an island and ultimately to become the earth itself. Here, Sky Woman gives birth to twin sons, one good and the other bad. The bad twin refuses to be born in the usual way and kills his mother by tunneling, cancer-like, out through her armpit. The good twin immediately starts to shower blessings onto the emerging world, while his evil sibling spews out impediments. They then lock themselves in mortal combat to decide the fate of man.

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