

# **Tortoises**

**By**

**D. H. Lawrence**

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## **BABY TORTOISE**

You know what it is to be born alone,      Baby tortoise!      The first day  
to heave your feet little by little      from the shell,      Not yet awake,  
And remain lapsed on earth,      Not quite alive.

A tiny, fragile, half-animate bean.

To open your tiny beak-mouth, that looks as if      it would never  
open,      Like some iron door;      To lift the upper hawk-beak from the lower  
base      And reach your skinny little neck      And take your first bite at  
some dim bit of      herbage,      Alone, small insect,      Tiny bright-eye,  
Slow one.

To take your first solitary bite      And move on your slow, solitary hunt.  
Your bright, dark little eye,      Your eye of a dark disturbed night,      Under  
its slow lid, tiny baby tortoise,      So indomitable.

No one ever heard you complain.

You draw your head forward, slowly, from your      little wimple  
And set forward, slow-dragging, on your four-      pinned toes,      Rowing  
slowly forward.      Whither away, small bird?

Rather like a baby working its limbs,      Except that you make slow,  
ageless progress      And a baby makes none.

The touch of sun excites you,      And the long ages, and the lingering  
chill      Make you pause to yawn,      Opening your impervious mouth,  
Suddenly beak-shaped, and very wide, like some      suddenly gaping  
pincers;      Soft red tongue, and hard thin gums,      Then close the wedge of  
your little mountain      front,      Your face, baby tortoise.

Do you wonder at the world, as slowly you turn      your head in its  
wimple      And look with laconic, black eyes?      Or is sleep coming over you  
again,      The non-life?

You are so hard to wake.

Are you able to wonder?

Or is it just your indomitable will and pride of the first life  
Looking round And slowly pitching itself against the inertia Which  
had seemed invincible?

The vast inanimate, And the fine brilliance of your so tiny eye.

Challenger.

Nay, tiny shell-bird, What a huge vast inanimate it is, that you must  
row against, What an incalculable inertia.

Challenger.

Little Ulysses, fore-runner, No bigger than my thumb-nail, Buon  
viaggio.

All animate creation on your shoulder, Set forth, little Titan, under  
your battle-shield.

The ponderous, preponderate, Inanimate universe; And you are  
slowly moving, pioneer, you alone.

How vivid your travelling seems now, in the troubled sunshine,  
Stoic, Ulyssean atom; Suddenly hasty, reckless, on high toes.

Voiceless little bird, Resting your head half out of your wimple In  
the slow dignity of your eternal pause. Alone, with no sense of being  
alone, And hence six times more solitary; Fulfilled of the slow passion  
of pitching through immemorial ages Your little round house in  
the midst of chaos.

Over the garden earth, Small bird, Over the edge of all things.

Traveller, With your tail tucked a little on one side Like a  
gentleman in a long-skirted coat.

All life carried on your shoulder, Invincible fore-runner.

The Cross, the Cross Goes deeper in than we know, Deeper into  
life; Right into the marrow And through the bone.

## **TORTOISE-SHELL**

Along the back of the baby tortoise    The scales are locked in an arch  
like a bridge,    Scale-lapping, like a lobster's sections    Or a bee's.

Then crossways down his sides    Tiger-stripes and wasp-bands.  
Five, and five again, and five again,    And round the edges twenty-five little  
ones,    The sections of the baby tortoise shell.

Four, and a keystone;    Four, and a keystone;    Four, and a keystone;  
Then twenty-four, and a tiny little keystone.

It needed Pythagoras to see life placing her    counters on the living  
back    Of the baby tortoise;    Life establishing the first eternal  
mathematical    tablet,    Not in stone, like the Judean Lord, or bronze,  
but    in life-clouded, life-rosy tortoise-shell.

The first little mathematical gentleman    Stepping, wee mite, in his  
loose trousers    Under all the eternal dome of mathematical law.

Fives, and tens,    Threes and fours and twelves,    All the volte face of  
decimals,    The whirligig of dozens and the pinnacle of seven,    Turn him  
on his back,    The kicking little beetle,    And there again, on his shell-  
tender, earth-touching    belly,    The long cleavage of division, upright  
of the    eternal cross.

And on either side count five,    On each side, two above, on each side,  
two below    The dark bar horizontal.

It goes right through him, the sprottling insect,    Through his cross-  
wise cloven psyche,    Through his five-fold complex-nature.

So turn him over on his toes again;    Four pin-point toes, and a  
problematical thumb-    piece,

Four rowing limbs, and one wedge-balancing-    head,

Four and one makes five, which is the clue to all    mathematics.

The Lord wrote it all down on the little slate    Of the baby tortoise.

Outward and visible indication of the plan within,      The complex,  
manifold involvedness of an      individual creature      Blotted out      On  
this small bird, this rudiment,      This little dome, this pediment      Of all  
creation,      This slow one.

## TORTOISE FAMILY CONNECTIONS

On he goes, the little one, Bud of the universe, Pediment of life.

Setting off somewhere, apparently. Whither away, brisk egg?

His mother deposited him on the soil as if he were no more than droppings, And now he scuffles tinily past her as if she were an old rusty tin.

A mere obstacle, He veers round the slow great mound of her.

Tortoises always foresee obstacles.

It is no use my saying to him in an emotional voice: "This is your Mother, she laid you when you were an egg."

He does not even trouble to answer: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" He wearily looks the other way, And she even more wearily looks another way still, Each with the utmost apathy, Incognizant, Unaware, Nothing.

As for papa, He snaps when I offer him his offspring, Just as he snaps when I poke a bit of stick at him, Because he is irascible this morning, an irascible tortoise Being touched with love, and devoid of fatherliness.

Father and mother, And three little brothers, And all rambling aimless, like little perambulating pebbles scattered in the garden, Not knowing each other from bits of earth or old tins.

Except that papa and mama are old acquaintances, of course, But family feeling there is none, not even the beginnings.

Fatherless, motherless, brotherless, sisterless Little tortoise.

Row on then, small pebble, Over the clods of the autumn, wind-chilled sunshine, Young gayety.

Does he look for a companion? No, no, don't think it. He doesn't know he is alone; Isolation is his birthright, This atom.

To row forward, and reach himself tall on spiny toes, To travel,  
to burrow into a little loose earth, afraid of the night, To crop a  
little substance, To move, and to be quite sure that he is moving:  
Basta!

To be a tortoise! Think of it, in a garden of inert clods A brisk,  
brindled little tortoise, all to himself-- Croesus!

In a garden of pebbles and insects To roam, and feel the slow heart  
beat Tortoise-wise, the first bell sounding From the warm blood,  
in the dark-creation morning.

Moving, and being himself, Slow, and unquestioned, And  
inordinately there, O stoic! Wandering in the slow triumph of his own  
existence, Ringing the soundless bell of his presence in chaos,  
And biting the frail grass arrogantly, Decidedly arrogantly.

**LUI ET ELLE**

She is large and matronly      And rather dirty,      A little sardonic-  
looking, as if domesticity had      driven her to it.

Though what she does, except lay four eggs at      random in the  
garden once a year      And put up with her husband,      I don't know.

She likes to eat.

She hurries up, striding reared on long uncanny      legs,      When  
food is going.      Oh yes, she can make haste when she likes.

She snaps the soft bread from my hand in great      mouthfuls,  
Opening her rather pretty wedge of an iron,      pristine face      Into an  
enormously wide-beaked mouth      Like sudden curved scissors,      And  
gulping at more than she can swallow, and      working her thick, soft  
tongue,      And having the bread hanging over her chin.

O Mistress, Mistress,      Reptile mistress,      Your eye is very dark, very  
bright,      And it never softens      Although you watch.

She knows,      She knows well enough to come for food,      Yet she sees  
me not;      Her bright eye sees, but not me, not anything,      Sightful,  
sightless, seeing and visionless,      Reptile mistress.

Taking bread in her curved, gaping, toothless      mouth,      She has  
no qualm when she catches my finger in      her steel overlapping gums,  
But she hangs on, and my shout and my shrinking      are nothing to  
her,      She does not even know she is nipping me with      her curved  
beak.      Snake-like she draws at my finger, while I drag      it in horror  
away.

Mistress, reptile mistress,      You are almost too large, I am almost  
frightened.      He is much smaller,      Dapper beside her,      And  
ridiculously small.

Her laconic eye has an earthy, materialistic look,      His, poor darling, is  
almost fiery.

His wimple, his blunt-prowed face,      His low forehead, his skinny neck,

his long, scaled, striving legs, So striving, striving, Are all more delicate than she, And he has a cruel scar on his shell.

Poor darling, biting at her feet, Running beside her like a dog, biting her earthy, splay feet, Nipping her ankles, Which she drags apathetic away, though without retreating into her shell.

Agelessly silent, And with a grim, reptile determination, Cold, voiceless age-after-age behind him, serpents' long obstinacy Of horizontal persistence.

Little old man Scuffling beside her, bending down, catching his opportunity, Parting his steel-trap face, so suddenly, and seizing her scaly ankle, And hanging grimly on, Letting go at last as she drags away, And closing his steel-trap face.

His steel-trap, stoic, ageless, handsome face. Alas, what a fool he looks in this scuffle.

And how he feels it!

The lonely rambler, the stoic, dignified stalker through chaos, The immune, the animate, Enveloped in isolation, Forerunner. Now look at him!

Alas, the spear is through the side of his isolation. His adolescence saw him crucified into sex, Doomed, in the long crucifixion of desire, to seek his consummation beyond himself. Divided into passionate duality, He, so finished and immune, now broken into desirous fragmentariness, Doomed to make an intolerable fool of himself In his effort toward completion again.

Poor little earthy house-inhabiting Osiris, The mysterious bull tore him at adolescence into pieces, And he must struggle after reconstruction, ignominiously.

And so behold him following the tail Of that mud-hovel of his slowly-rambling spouse, Like some unhappy bull at the tail of a cow, But with more than bovine, grim, earth-dank persistence, Suddenly seizing the ugly ankle as she stretches out to walk, Roaming over the sods, Or, if it happen to show, at her pointed, heavy tail Beneath the low-dropping back-board of her shell.

Their two shells like doomed boats bumping,      Hers huge, his small;  
Their splay feet rambling and rowing like      paddles,      And  
stumbling mixed up in one another,      In the race of love--      Two  
tortoises,      She huge, he small.

She seems earthily apathetic,      And he has a reptile's awful  
persistence.

I heard a woman pitying her, pitying the Mère      Tortue.      While I, I  
pity Monsieur.      "He pesters her and torments her," said the      woman.  
How much more is he pestered and tormented,      say I.

What can he do?      He is dumb, he is visionless,      Conceptionless.

His black, sad-lidded eye sees but beholds not      As her earthen mound  
moves on,      But he catches the folds of vulnerable, leathery      skin,  
Nail-studded, that shake beneath her shell,      And drags at these with his  
beak,      Drags and drags and bites,      While she pulls herself free, and  
rows her dull      mound along.

## **TORTOISE GALLANTRY**

Making his advances    He does not look at her, nor sniff at her,    No,  
not even sniff at her, his nose is blank.

Only he senses the vulnerable folds of skin    That work beneath her  
while she sprawls along    In her ungainly pace,    Her folds of skin that  
work and row    Beneath the earth-soiled hovel in which she  
moves.

And so he strains beneath her housey walls    And catches her trouser-  
legs in his beak    Suddenly, or her skinny limb,    And strange and grimly  
drags at her    Like a dog,    Only agelessly silent, with a reptile's awful  
persistency.

Grim, gruesome gallantry, to which he is doomed.    Dragged out of an  
eternity of silent isolation    And doomed to partiality, partial being,  
Ache, and want of being,    Want,    Self-exposure, hard humiliation, need  
to add    himself on to her.

Born to walk alone,    Forerunner,    Now suddenly distracted into this  
mazy    sidetrack,    This awkward, harrowing pursuit,    This grim  
necessity from within.

Does she know    As she moves eternally slowly away?    Or is he  
driven against her with a bang, like a bird    flying in the dark against a  
window,    All knowledgeless?

The awful concussion,    And the still more awful need to persist, to  
follow,    follow, continue,    Driven, after aeons of pristine, fore-  
god-like    singleness and oneness,    At the end of some mysterious,  
red-hot iron,    Driven away from himself into her tracks,    Forced to  
crash against her.

Stiff, gallant, irascible, crook-legged reptile,    Little gentleman,    Sorry  
plight,    We ought to look the other way.

Save that, having come with you so far,    We will go on to the end.

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## **TORTOISE SHOUT**

I thought he was dumb, I said he was dumb, Yet I've heard him  
cry.

First faint scream, Out of life's unfathomable dawn, Far off, so far,  
like a madness, under the horizon's dawning rim, Far, far off, far  
scream.

Tortoise in extremis.

Why were we crucified into sex?

Why were we not left rounded off, and finished in ourselves, As  
we began, As he certainly began, so perfectly alone?

A far, was-it-audible scream, Or did it sound on the plasm direct?

Worse than the cry of the new-born, A scream, A yell, A shout,  
A pæan, A death-agony, A birth-cry, A submission, All tiny,  
tiny, far away, reptile under the first dawn.

War-cry, triumph, acute-delight, death-scream reptilian, Why  
was the veil torn?

The silken shriek of the soul's torn membrane? The male soul's  
membrane Torn with a shriek half music, half horror.

Crucifixion.

Male tortoise, cleaving behind the hovel-wall of that dense female,  
Mounted and tense, spread-eagle, out-reaching out of the shell In  
tortoise-nakedness, Long neck, and long vulnerable limbs extruded,  
spread-eagle over her house-roof, And the deep, secret, all-penetrating  
tail curved beneath her walls, Reaching and gripping tense,  
more reaching anguish in uttermost tension Till suddenly, in the  
spasm of coition, tugging like a jerking leap, and oh! Opening its  
clenched face from his outstretched neck And giving that fragile  
yell, that scream, Super-audible, From his pink, cleft, old-man's  
mouth, Giving up the ghost, Or screaming in Pentecost, receiving the  
ghost.

His scream, and his moment's subsidence,      The moment of eternal  
silence,      Yet unreleased, and after the moment, the      sudden, startling  
jerk of coition, and at once      The inexpressible faint yell--      And so on, till  
the last plasm of my body was      melted back      To the primeval  
rudiments of life, and the secret.

So he tups, and screams      Time after time that frail, torn scream  
After each jerk, the longish interval,      The tortoise eternity,      Agelong,  
reptilian persistence,      Heart-throb, slow heart-throb, persistent for the  
next spasm.

I remember, when I was a boy,      I heard the scream of a frog, which  
was caught      with his foot in the mouth of an up-starting      snake;  
I remember when I first heard bull-frogs break      into sound in the  
spring;      I remember hearing a wild goose out of the throat      of night  
Cry loudly, beyond the lake of waters;      I remember the first time, out of a  
bush in the      darkness, a nightingale's piercing cries and      gurgles  
startled the depths of my soul;      I remember the scream of a rabbit as I  
went      through a wood at midnight;      I remember the heifer in her  
heat, blorting and      blorting through the hours, persistent and  
irrepressible;      I remember my first terror hearing the howl of      weird,  
amorous cats;      I remember the scream of a terrified, injured      horse,  
the sheet-lightning      And running away from the sound of a woman in  
labor, something like an owl whooping,      And listening inwardly to the first  
bleat of a      lamb,      The first wail of an infant,      And my mother  
singing to herself,      And the first tenor singing of the passionate  
throat of a young collier, who has long since      drunk himself to death,  
The first elements of foreign speech      On wild dark lips.

And more than all these,      And less than all these,      This last,  
Strange, faint coition yell      Of the male tortoise at extremity,      Tiny from  
under the very edge of the farthest      far-off horizon of life.

The cross,      The wheel on which our silence first is broken,      Sex,  
which breaks up our integrity, our single      inviolability, our deep  
silence      Tearing a cry from us.

Sex, which breaks us into voice, sets us calling      across the deeps,  
calling, calling for the      complement,      Singing, and calling, and  
singing again, being      answered, having found.

Torn, to become whole again, after long seeking      for what is lost,

The same cry from the tortoise as from Christ,            the Osiris-cry of  
abandonment,    That which is whole, torn asunder,    That which is in  
part, finding its whole again            throughout the universe.