

July 2014

The Turtle Teacher

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Wheeler, Rachel. 2012. The Turtle Teacher. *Obsculta* 5, (1) : 13-14. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol5/iss1/3>.

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The Turtle Teacher

Rachel Wheeler

God gave the turtle a certain shyness as it suns
its glossy black back at the water's edge, only
to drop suddenly into the lake as you approach.

Do not take it personally, this seeming inhospitality,
this deprivation of self, this evacuation of space
as if your too big presence in it were wholly insupportable,

an assertion in the worst possible taste,
indeed the most calamitous of events,
in this little amphibious life.

Take it rather as a lesson. Turtle Teacher
sees you, stumbling student, and offers you
the best he has: he shows, by example, how

immersion can be so totally, so swiftly, effected.
No hemming and hawing at the water's edge.
Plop! Right in. The whole self, face forward,

shell side curved to slice the lake surface,
stumpy arms and legs agile. And oh,
to show you the sweetness of water,

of anything that holds and surrounds you
so thoroughly as water, as the air we breathe,
as the grace of God in which all things suspend.

Though Isaiah's vision would eliminate its fear
and have you friends, how almost better:
to be taught this radical removal,

of slaking the world's thirst to be rid of you
if only for a moment or two, to be drunk
in the total inebriation of every pore,

saturated shell, skin, gaping mouth,
to be nearly sponge, the thinnest webs
of flesh keeping house for the soul.

Rachel Wheeler is graduating from Saint John's School of Theology Seminary in May 2012 with a Master of Arts in Theology. In the fall, she will begin work on a Ph.D. in Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. Though she concedes that the past couple of years have not resulted in writing much poetry, the poems she has written have had to do with two important elements of the Saint John's experience: nature and liturgy.

SAINT HILDEGARD OF BINGEN



Icon of Hildegard, Jeana Visel, OSB