Stew on the Summer Solstice
by John Cantey Knight

Where the stream had cut a bed, deposited sand washed away as water tumbled past boulders, I stumbled across ten pounds of ugliness. It hissed as I circled it in visions of turtle stew. Unafraid, angry, thinking about taking a hunk out of me, it pivoted, neck extending, to notch the stick I was using to distract it. I grabbed its tail and lifted it an arm’s length from my body. Gingerly, I carried it a quarter mile to the corncrib, its jaws snapping at my crotch.

I’d never decapitated a chicken, never watched the feathered body magically, or mechanically, continue in motion. “Once one of them mud turtles gets a holt of you, it won’t let go till it thunders,” she advised. Its jaws locked in a vise grip on the broomstick, its neck stretched over a chopping block, the axe fell. It’s scary to see the bulk of a body clamor through space, headless. It took a screwdriver and hammer, maybe distant thunder to pry back the broom.

“There’s seven kinds of meat in one of ‘em.” Idell vouched, as I disengaged carapace from plastron and opened it up to discover leathery eggs. Seven kinds of meat skinned, onion, potato, parsley, pepper and salt went in the pot to cook slowly. Periodically, I stirred the stew, pondering headless turtles walking while clinched jaws waited on lightning. But beyond all comprehension were the eggs, the whites never set no matter how long they’d boiled. She muttered to herself, “That ain’t natural.”