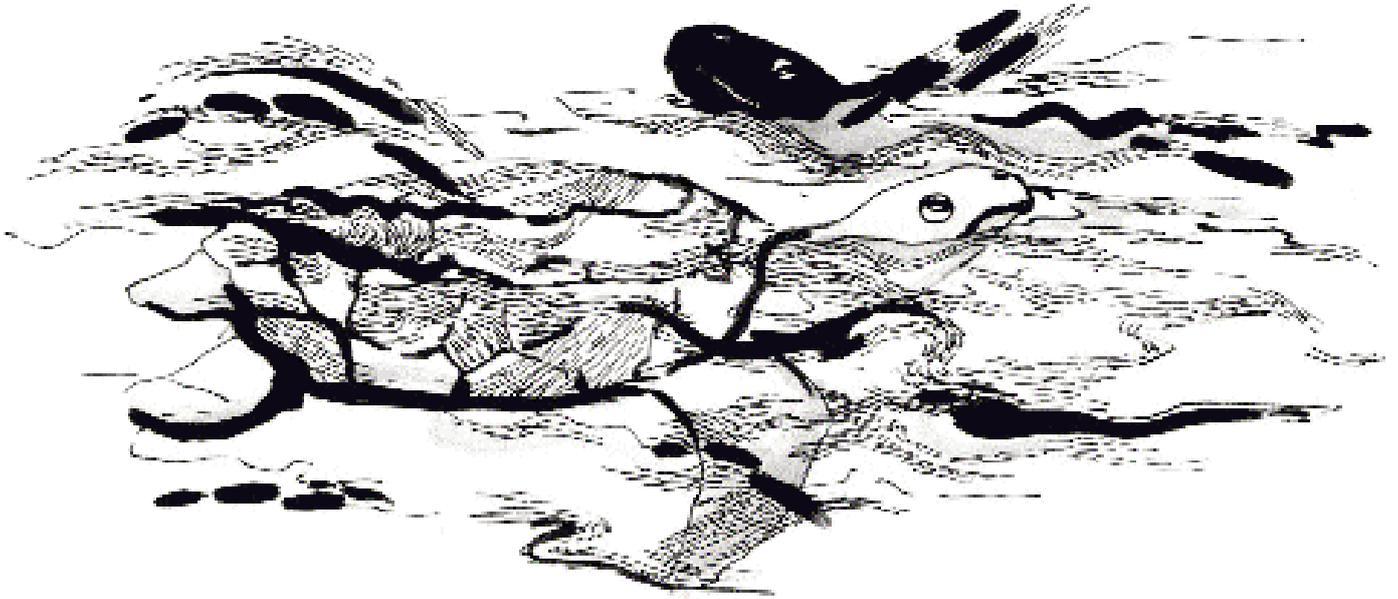


# The Tortoise

by Andrés Henestrosa



Clean, shiny like the water where it lived, and prettier than if it had been made to order, in the early days of the Christian religion in Iztaxochitlán, the tortoise served as an offering to Saint Vicente.

There were big ones and small ones; one kind, a little yellow, the other, very, very black. Both slid under the fresh water and the salt water, and every so often raised their heads above the surface to get a little air. They went onto land once in a while, leaving a trail of whimsical marks that Zapotec women would later copy onto the embroidery of their skirts and *huipil* overblouses.

The men would go out on religious anniversaries, holidays they observed, looking for them, and, both on land and in the water, they would catch them with their hands.

Clumsy, it's true, the same a few days ago as the day after tomorrow, placed at the foot of the altars, a flame had to be put to its tail—that wasn't so short then—which was the way to tame it, so that it would move upward less slowly by its own

slowness toward the saint. And it rose spreading meekness. Sometimes it kept its head, its feet and its tail inside its shell, but then its martyrdom was worse; it was as though it came out of the coals to fall into the flames: they forced it even more cruelly.

One day Saint Vicente took pity on it and, before the trepidation of the faithful, came down the two steps of his altar to raise it up; the tortoise, bashful, pulled in its head and from inside begged the saint to make it ugly so no one would pursue it.

And Saint Vicente the miraculous, without a word, made its eyes big and its head flat and pointy; and put his hands carelessly on its shell, changing it.

Ugly, with a shorter tail, it came down the steps and slowly returned to the water.

No one offended it again. But, even today, when you meet it, secure in its ugliness, red with embarrassment, it inclines its head and pulls it in like that time it pulled it in in front of Saint Vicente. ■■■