

Question Marks

by Sydney Lea

Because I crave the dawn, at 5:30 this morning I walked a dirt lane in Vermont, the sun having just breached the eastern ridges. I saw my first butterfly of the year, spotlighted by a beam, perched on coyote scat.

The scene didn't typify what most people think of in conjuring butterflies. Even lacking its marks on either wing, we might label this insect Question Mark. In a season of renewal, the sentimentalist (like me) longs for flowers and nectar, or at least for things non-repulsive; but when it isn't feeding on feces, the Question Mark likes a carcass or sap oozing from a tree, the ranker the better. I silently challenged it: "You're an icon of spring! Can't you *act* like one?"

A few yards on, I noticed an earthworm, wet with dew, a small dash of light. The scientific name for its pale saddle is the *clitellum*, which secretes slime to protect worms' eggs in mating. *Both* worms exchange sperm in the sex act; both harbor those eggs. Such matters seemed as baffling as a shit-loving butterfly. If the world couldn't be beautiful, could it not at least make sense?

No one includes excretion, slime, and decay in daydreams of spring. We want twittering warblers, wood frogs quacking like ducks, familiar calls of returning geese. When these yearnings were canceled this morning, I remembered my Grandma's frequent protest: *Let's think about something more pleasant!*

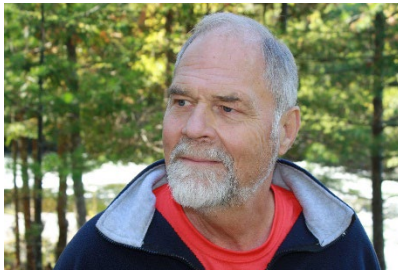
So I thought of a favorite lake, its ice run out by now. I could go launch my canoe there if I chose. I almost felt water resist my paddle, saw the bow crease the surface, which reflected sky, cloud, bird, and the blossoms of bowing shadbush in upside-down detail along the shore. Foulness couldn't encumber me. The world stood unrent, harmonious.

A mile down, I decided to rest on a stump above a cellar hole from a more pastoral epoch. In that moment, I knew my fantasy was another mere product of yearning. Honest

observation wouldn't lead anyone to read the natural world as harmonious, let alone gentle. It was, as the poet said, red in tooth and claw. I envisioned the fisher I watched eating a snowshoe hare alive last fall, the prey screaming until it could no more. Oddly disinterested, I noted the hare's legs had started to whiten; its body would never reach its full winter pelage.

Despite, or more likely because of such an example, along with infinite others noted over eighty-one years; despite or because of racism, vitriolic politics, war, and rape, I've resolved to value beauty, whenever and wherever I find it.

And so, on my way home, when I re-encountered the Question Mark, in full sunlight now and still perched on its clump of dung, I forced myself to salute it. As for the earthworm, it had slithered off somewhere.



A former Pulitzer finalist in poetry, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. In 2021, he was presented with his home state's Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. He has published twenty-four books: a novel, five volumes of personal and three of critical essays, and sixteen poetry collections, most recently *What Shines* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2023). His sixth book of personal essays, *Such Dancing as We Can* and his second novel, *Now Look*, were both published earlier this year.