

Timothy Steele

A Visitor

I stop cold, having misinterpreted
The large, brown-yellow, lozenge-patterned rock.
I make out, in its midst, an arrowed head
Whose still, black-pupiled eyes are taking stock.
The mass rolls supple coils within itself;
I back off, yielding it the deck's warm shelf.

The rattle, shivered, gives a meaning buzz.
He's not inviting me to a debate.
He's come forth, as in spring he always does,
In search of food and water and a mate.
The corner of the deck is a retreat
Where he collects himself and soaks up heat.

I trim plants, mindful that he's resting there.
In due course, he uncoils; I watch him slide
His upper body out into mid-air
Above the canyon and sway side to side.
Locating an oak shrub, he feeds his length
Down through it with unhurried, fluid strength.

The poet Lawrence tells how, one hot day,
A like guest visited his water trough
And how, in panic and to his dismay,
He hurled a log at it to drive it off.
He saw the creature as an exiled king
And felt shame, having done so mean a thing.

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Fear all too often cancels sympathy.
I hope the fates that manage our affairs
Ensure that, if my snake revisits, we
Don't come upon each other unawares
But can give one another a wide berth
As fellow mortal pilgrims on the earth.

That way, I may observe him without dread
As he suns, coiled, or as he winds among
The potted plants; and he may lift his head
To take me in and flick at me his tongue
Before returning, under no duress,
From my raised garden to his wilderness.