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Word of the day:

LARVA

Have you ever seen a butterfly crawling on the top of a leaf, munching away at the edges? “Butterflies don’t crawl!” you tell me. “Butterflies FLY!” Yes, they do, but not all the time. In the early stages of its life, the butterfly, as you probably know, doesn’t look much like a butterfly. It is a caterpillar, a squishy, crawling, very hungry caterpillar.

When a monarch butterfly hatches from its egg, that’s what you get. You don’t get the beautiful butterfly with the paper-thin wings of scarlet and orange and jet black.



You don’t get the creature that weighs less than a straw, but that will fly for thousands of miles to escape the cold of winter, and then return the next spring. You get a greenish wormy thing, with yellow and black stripes, like a sick tiger. You get a little leaf-eating machine with thirty little stumpy things for feet. Eventually, when

it is fat enough, the caterpillar will attach itself upside down to the bottom of something solid, like the eaves of your house. It will spin from its substance a shell that we call a cocoon, or, to be fancy about it, a CHRYSALIS. The Greeks called it that because their word for gold was

CHRYSOS, and most of the cocoons for their butterflies in that part of the world were gold. The monarch’s cocoon is pale green. Inside, that caterpillar will be changing, changing form and color, until finally it splits the shell and breaks forth as the butterfly – one of the most beautiful of God’s creatures.

The scientific word for it when it is a caterpillar is LARVA. That’s a strange word, and you may wonder where it comes from. There once was a great scientist who studied plants and animals, and who tried to show how they were related to one another – whether they were descendants, as dogs have descended from wolves, or whether they were cousins, as wolves

and foxes are. His name was Carl Linnaeus. I have visited his old home and his gardens in Sweden, where he grew many of the plants he studied. Linnaeus was not going to be fooled by how a thing looked on the outside. He knew that a caterpillar already *was* the butterfly, in an early stage of its life, just as the butterfly was what the caterpillar was always going to become, unless a bird ate it first. So he came up with a name for the stage of life that might fool you if you weren't paying attention, or if you didn't think hard enough.

That name was LARVA. Linnaeus got it straight from Latin. Back in the time of the ancient Romans, there were no microphones to blast out your voice so that hundreds or thousands of people could hear you. Nor were there cameras for close-ups. So actors would hold masks in front of their faces, with an opening for the mouth. The opening would be shaped so as to magnify the voice, by concentrating the sound waves. Cup your hands and put them around your mouth and shout, "Hey, you! Get off my lawn!" It will sound like the way capital letters look: "HEY YOU, GET OFF MY LAWN!" The masks also let the audience know from far away who it was

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you were impersonating. There were two words in Latin for that mask. One was PERSONA, from which we get our word PERSON. The other was LARVA. Linnaeus couldn't have called the caterpillar a PERSON, because that would have made no sense. He called it a LARVA. His idea was that, just as the actor on stage wore a mask, so the butterfly was lurking

behind the mask of the caterpillar. The LARVA seems to hide the adult butterfly inside it.

Linnaeus was a good Christian man who didn't like long sermons, but who did believe that his work in science was his way of giving praise to God, the

Creator. He coined that word in 1768. But there was another meaning for LARVA in ancient Rome: it was a ghost, a disembodied spirit. So you might see a LARVA in your dreams, and it wouldn't be a caterpillar. It might be the grumpy old man who lived down the street, who gave you the creeps. I like the caterpillar better.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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