



## **Itsy-Bitsy and the Black Death**

*Janet F. Williams*

As a manuscript editor, I work from a home office so when stay-at-home orders fell into place to keep safe from COVID-19, my lifestyle didn't change much. As the pandemic's scope grew, I needed something other than social media and Zoom calls to give myself a break from the troubles of the world. I decided to focus on the butterfly weed I had planted the previous winter. Once Monarch butterflies discovered it, the plant sustained a "crop" of caterpillars.

I spent many computer breaks sitting outside on a ledge, watching in fascination as the caterpillars ate along leaf edges in a predictable top to bottom fashion, not unlike how some eat corn on the cob. These creatures with their distinctive yellow, white, and black stripes amused me with their all-black tentacles that wiggled and danced. As a child growing up in Michigan, raising caterpillars on milkweed was easy and fun. I eagerly waited and watched as each gathered caterpillar plumped up and turned into a chrysalis. The most satisfying stage of all was letting the fully formed butterfly crawl onto my hand and fly away.

I selected a few larger caterpillars from my butterfly weed to take indoors. Some caterpillars died before turning into a chrysalis, and the ones that did transform also died. Most of them oozed out thread-like clear strings that dripped to the bottom of their enclosure. Despite the high mortality rate, I had one success and released a large, beautiful male, sexed by the black spots on his lower wings.

While outside one day I observed a red-eyed fly attack a caterpillar. It fell from its leaf and writhed in agony. After a pause, it seemed fine and returned to the butterfly weed to resume eating. I didn't think much of it until I started reading about why so many of these caterpillars were dying. I found out I had seen a Tachinid fly attach its eggs into the caterpillar's soft body where eventually larva would emerge, killing its host.

I took the remaining caterpillars inside and a few I hadn't rescued early enough died from parasites. Others became listless, turned dark, and hung down by their mid-sections. This ailment was caused by a bacterial infection or a virus, nicknamed the "Black Death," and I could not stop infected caterpillars from succumbing. To prevent it, I continued to learn more about how to disinfect their containers and keep them free from unwanted moisture.

When I found a new hatchling, I housed it in a separate container where it had a better chance for a healthy life free from virus or bacteria that can be spread by infected butterfly wings. I named the critter Itsy-Bitsy.

Naming your pets only makes it harder if you think they're going to die, but I had faith in this tiny creature. For many days all was well. He grew into what appeared to be a healthy caterpillar, yet he did not find a spot to purposefully hang upside down in a "J" shape, the precursor to becoming a chrysalis. I held out hope, even as he became listless and his eating slowed to a stop. Some sources suggest freezing the caterpillar when you know it's going to die, but I couldn't do it. I let him pass naturally.

Several friends were also rooting for Itsy-Bitsy and asked me to tell them when it became a chrysalis. I shared the news with the following obituary.

—

**Itsy-Bitsy**  
Beloved Caterpillar  
08-2020 – 10-18-2020

True to his name, Itsy-Bitsy was a mere quarter-inch long when rescued by his caretaker. Saved from the parasitic flies that preyed upon his brethren, he happily munched his way through carefully selected leaves in his private indoor environment until he grew quite large. Itsy-Bitsy had a healthy appetite and pooped prodigiously. Though not talkative, in his quiet moments he played a mean blues harmonica.

As he passed through each instar, he grew into a fine specimen worthy of his species—Monarch. He brought great joy to all who witnessed his antics and appreciated the wonders of nature inherent in his kind.

Sadly, when it came time for him to molt into his chrysalis, he lingered and languished. Perhaps he had claustrophobia and could not bear to be in a confined space. If he had an undiagnosed internal problem, he gracefully bore his discomfort. Or perhaps he walked his eighteen feet to the tune of a different drummer. In the end, he stopped eating and slowly faded away, living longer than would have been expected until he came to rest upon his side, never to march again.

Itsy-Bitsy is survived by his caretaker, who buried him in a private ceremony beneath an antique rosebush where his beauty will continue to bloom.

—

I never got to see this particular caterpillar perform its miracle. Of course I was disappointed even though I hadn't known Itsy-Bitsy very long. It's likely he died of Black Death. I felt sad. I had spent days making sure all his needs were met, his container aired out, cleaned and supplied with fresh leaves and along with that, I put my heart and hopes into its future.

Some people value certain life forms over others based on size or intelligence, and might view the life of a caterpillar as inconsequential. I don't see it that way. Like any person or pet in our care, we take measures to ensure a good life and in return, we often receive intangible rewards. Itsy-Bitsy had the capacity to turn on his DNA to become a butterfly. And though its moment passed, I have other caterpillars and several

chrysalides in my care. It might not be a good idea to personalize them with names, but don't tell that to Big Boy and Curly or Ethel and Lucy. They just might make it.

