

Studio One

Volume 44

Article 45

2019

Something in the Dark Swallows

Amber Cigelske

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/studio_one



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cigelske, Amber (2019) "Something in the Dark Swallows," *Studio One*: Vol. 44, 69-82.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/studio_one/vol44/iss1/45

This The Wagner-Berger Prize for Excellence in Creative Writing is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studio One by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

The Wagner-Berger Prize for Excellence in Creative Writing

In 1987, Patricia and Leonard Porcello endowed this prize to honor Patricia's parents, Louis and Mary Wagner-Berger, and to support college women who are interested in writing short stories and novels. It is designed to encourage and reward excellence in creative writing at the College of Saint Benedict.

The Wagner-Berger Prize for fiction is the first scholarship of its kind at the College of Saint Benedict. It is a scholarship awarded annually to the CSB student who submits the most original, previously unpublished short story. All submissions are judged by a committee of English Department members, and the winner receives an award of \$1,000. Studio One is honored to publish this year's winner CSB Student Amber Cigelske.

Something in the Dark Swallows

Bruiser was not an enigma. In fact, he knew a lot of things about himself, and being an enigma, as his teacher described him, was not one of them. He liked the color blue, the glasses his mother wore when she read, and liked the way wearing a bow tie out to the store made him feel. None of those things were enigmatic. Well, not that he knew what that meant anyways.

“Eh-Nig-Mah-Tic.” He rolled the word around on his tongue and bared his teeth on the T.

“What did you say Bruce?” Mama was in one of her good moods. She was leaning back in her recliner with Bruiser sitting at her feet and staring out the living room window.

“Nothin’ mama...What does enigmatic mean?”

“I don’t know, sounds like it has to do with math or something. Matic you know?” He didn’t know. She was looking down at him now with her head tilted to the side.

“Bruce?”

“Yes mama?”

“Do you like that teacher of yours better than me? Do you think she’d be a better mama to you?” Bruiser thought about the sandwiches Ms. Watson brought him for lunch so that he wouldn’t have to sit hungry. There were certain things that a kid could say to a parent, this was not one of them.

“No mama, I don’t.”

“Good.” She smiled and patted the side of his face before turning her attention back to the TV. He stared at her for a bit, watching her head bob and settle as she breathed. Eventually he stood and walked out of the room and into the hall, his mother’s eyes never leaving the screen.

He dragged his hand along the wall of the hallway, his fingers skipping over a couple of picture frames and that hole that’s been there since last December. He reached for the light switch on the wall, just barely illuminated by the light coming from the TV. He flicked it up and the hallway flooded with a dim yellow glow. He felt a bit like God.

Flick.

“Let there be light!” He snickered to himself. He rose his hands dramatically as if lifting something up, and pretended the stained green carpet was turning into lush greenery.

“Let there be jungle!” He imagined that was something God would say. Instantly, the stained carpet grew up into thick foliage and towering trees that burst through the ceiling. The hallway light became the sun, glowing dimly above. He grinned wickedly at the power his small hands possessed. Then suddenly, the light bulb popped and the jungle flooded with darkness.

Bruiser lowered his arms and blinked rapidly trying to get his eyes to adjust to the abrupt change in lighting. Startled, he began to grow eerily aware of the way the darkness filled the space around him. From the far corner of the hallway, he heard a sound that resembled dry hands rubbing together.

Sshh Sshh

In front of him, something like a shadow moved in the darkness. Bruiser had forgotten that when creating a jungle, you

also create the beasts that live in it. His small hand smacked the wall looking for the light switch. When his fingers found it, he flicked the switch up and down, and up and down trying to get the sun to turn back on. The lights stayed out. Something behind him made a sound like air being let out of a tire.

Sssssss

Bruiser jolted forward, his hand skimmed the wall searching for a door handle. A moment later, his wrist struck something cold and hard and he reached down to turn the metal handle. Bruiser flung the door open and threw himself inside, slamming the door behind him and flicking the lights on. Breathing heavily, he leaned his head back against the door frame and looked around, rubbing his throbbing wrist. There was his bed, his dresser, his coat hung on the closet door. No jungle, no beasts, and no green carpet. He stood, his breaths coming in short gasps. He listened for the sound of something moving behind the door. He pressed his ear to the door and when he heard nothing, his curious mind reached his shaking hands down for the doorknob,

turned it, and opened the door a crack. The light from his room pooled out onto the hallway floor. He opened it a bit more and found himself staring at green carpet, a couple of picture frames, and that hole that's been there since last December. In the distance, he could hear the tv playing softly and his mother's light snores. He slowly shut the door again.

Bruiser giggled softly, rocking nervously on his feet. Maybe making things should be left to God. He sat down on his bed and rubbed his wrist. A bruise was starting to form where he had hit the doorknob. Back in second grade, he'd gone to school with a bruise like this. The teacher noticed and pulled him out of class. Asked him if everything at home was alright. When he didn't answer, she called his Mama to come to school. When the meeting was over, his mama pulled him by the hand to her car in the school parking lot. From now on if somebody asks you about them bruises on your arm, you tell them you're just clumsy. Ok? He nodded and she smiled at him. It was one of her good days.

After that day, the kids changed his name to Bruiser. The teacher pulled him aside when she heard them shouting the new name during recess. Does it hurt your feelings when they call you that? He said he didn't mind the name, he was clumsy. What an unfortunate nickname for someone so soft and kind, she'd said.

He laid back on his bed staring at the fake stars stuck to his ceiling. He imagined that the plastic shapes were real stars, far out in space. Too far to touch, but just close enough to see glimmer and shake. He closed his eyes and imagined the smell of a campfire, like the one on the camping trip Dad took him on a couple years ago. His bed was the lightly padded surface of a sleeping bag resting on the ground and the round light cover on his ceiling was the moon. When he opened his eyes, he was no longer in his room. Instead of walls, trees surrounded him on all sides and the ceiling had given way to the mass of the night sky. He was there, suddenly seven years old again, watching his dad stoke the campfire. Bruiser had a whole three days with just Dad and him that weekend. That was the trip his Dad took

him on when Bruiser's Great Aunt died. His Mama had left to help arrange the funeral service. Watch out for those nasty frogs, she'd said. They live in the woods and they like to bite mean boys like you. Dad described the trip as "father-son bonding time" or something like that. Not that a lot of bonding got done. Neither of them talked very much.

Bruiser turned his head towards his dad who was still stoking the fire, playing back the memory of the first night of the trip. He hadn't noticed before, but his Dad's wrists were covered in the same bruises he was named for.

"Dad?" He said it out loud just like he had the first time.

Yah bud?

"Do frogs have teeth?"

No, I don't think so.

Bruiser nodded and turned his head to look up at the plastic stars that were now just tiny dots in a galaxy far away. He heard the rustling of his dad entering the tent while he stayed outside, laying under the stars. He wondered what his Mama was doing back then,

arranging a funeral for a Great Aunt he'd never met. He wondered what she was doing right now. Was she still sleeping in front of the tv? Smoking a cigarette out on the porch? In the distance, he heard what sounded like sandpaper rubbing together, interrupting his thoughts.

Sshhh Sshhh

Bruiser sat up quick. He listened again and heard what sounded like air being let out of a tire.

Sssssssss

It was coming from his right. Something moved between the trees.

“Mama!” He ran from the sleeping bag and the campfire. He ran out into the hallway, past the green carpet, the hanging pictures, and that hole that's been there since last December.

“Mama!” There she was, standing at the end of the hallway. He threw himself into her arms and she let out an Oof. “Mama, there's a beast in my room!”

“Get the hell off me, there isn't any beast in your room!” She

pushed him by the shoulders, and he stumbled back.

“Just come see! I heard it in the closet! Please come see!” He put his hands in a praying position as he said it, tears welling in his eyes.

“Quit crying. There isn’t anything in your room. You imagined it, stop telling lies.” She sneered at Bruiser and walked back into the living room, settling into the recliner and turning the TV volume up. Bruiser stood quietly, watching her flick through channels. She was no longer in one of her good moods.

He sniffled, looking back down the hall to where light shone through his open bedroom door. He glanced one last time at his Mama before walking back towards the woods. Approaching the room, Bruiser peaked cautiously through the doorway. Inside was his bed, his dresser, and his coat hanging on the closet door. No trees, or tents, or campfires. He stepped inside and crept towards the closet doors. He flung them open and flinched, squeezing his eyes shut. When nothing grabbed him, Bruiser opened his eyes a bit and peeked through his

eyelashes, checking for beasts. He held his breath for a minute, but nothing jumped out. No beast hiding in the dark. He shut the closet doors and backed up, staring at them for a bit. He was suddenly aware that his pants were wet, he'd been so scared he hadn't noticed he'd wet himself. He eyed his closet wearily, but when still nothing happened, he grabbed a change of pants from his dresser and left his room, walking into the bathroom down the hall.

Bruiser turned one of the metal knobs on the sink so that the cold water would come rushing out. Splashing some of it on his face, he looked up into the mirror. He was flushed and his hair was wild, sticking out on all ends. He looked like a beast himself. When he reached up to fix it, his elbow smacked the jewelry tray on the counter, spilling its contents into the sink. He scrambled to pick his mother's necklaces and rings out of the basin before they went down the drain, suddenly feel nauseous thinking about what would happen if he lost his mother's jewelry. He grabbed the necklaces and most of the rings and set them back on the tray, reaching back down near the open drain

to grab the last ring teetering dangerously close to the edge. It was the one piece of jewelry his mother wore daily, aside from her wedding ring. It was a gold, thick banded ring she always wore on her right hand. Coiled around the band were two snakes entwined together. He set that one back on the tray, his stomach turning. He quickly changed and left the bathroom.

Later that evening, his father returned home from work. Bruiser was lying awake on his bed with the lights out. He'd been awake for hours just lying there in the dark.

“I told you if you were going to come home this late to not bother coming back at all!” He heard his mother shouting when the door opened. His Dad's heavy footsteps could be heard across the house.

“Got off work late.” Bruiser heard his Dad say this a lot.

“You know I could've had any man I wanted, but you had to get me pregnant. Now I'm stuck with you and that fucking kid! The least you could do is show up early enough to feed it!” Bruiser heard

Mama say this a lot.

Bruiser listened to her stomp out of the house, probably going out to smoke. A few minutes later, his dad knocked on his bedroom door and opened it a crack. Bruiser lifted his head up and his Dad stepped inside, shutting the door quietly behind him.

“Hey bud.”

“Hi.” His dad walked over and sat on the side of his bed, gently brushing Bruiser’s hair out of his eyes.

“You been awake long?” Bruiser didn’t answer. Instead, they both sat in knowing silence.

“Dad?”

“Yah bud?”

“What does enigmatic mean?”

“I think it means full of mystery or something that’s hard to understand.”

“Ok. Do you think I’m enigmatic?” His dad paused, thinking of an answer. When Bruiser’s Dad pauses, his whole body pauses too.

“I think you worry too much.” Bruiser nodded at this.

His Dad kissed his forehead and wished him good night, shutting the door quietly on his way out.

Bruiser thought of the way his teacher had used the word enigmatic. She said it with sad eyes. You know Bruce, you’re very enigmatic. I can’t quite get what’s going on inside your head. I think that’s a whole world that belongs to just you.

He thought of what his dad said about the word. Full of mystery and hard to understand. Bruiser was not hard to understand. He knew a lot of things about himself. He liked watching birds from his bedroom window, how Ms. Watson cut the crust off peanut butter sandwiches, and the way the stars looked in the summertime. None of these things were very hard to understand.

“I am not an enigma.” He whispered the words into the dark. “I know me. I’m not very hard to understand. Right?”

He waited for an answer, but the dark just swallowed his words.