

Spring 2017

# Phobophobia: A study in fear

Rebecca C. Josephson  
*James Madison University*

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## Recommended Citation

Josephson, Rebecca C., "Phobophobia: A study in fear" (2017). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 269.  
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Phobophobia: A Study in Fear

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

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by Rebecca Christine Josephson

April 2017

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of English, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

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Project Advisor: Dr. Allison Fagan, Ph. D  
Assistant Professor, English

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Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,  
Dean, Honors College

---

Reader: Gregory Wrenn, MFA  
Assistant Professor, English

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Reader: Karin Tollefson-Hall, Ph. D  
Assistant Professor, Art Education

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at Ruby's on April 26<sup>th</sup>.

Thank you to  
Dr. Allison Fagan,  
Professor Greg Wrenn,  
and  
Dr. Karin Tollefson-Hall  
who saw this project from tiny thought to completion.

Thank you to my parents and family for supporting me from afar.

Thank you to the Honors College and English Department at James Madison University  
for giving me this wonderful opportunity.

And a final special thanks to my friends for helping me to push the boundaries  
of my fears far past where I ever thought they would go.

“Beware, for I am fearless,  
and therefore powerful.”

- Shelley

## Scabs

The child studies her hand, brings it into the light.  
The scabs turned from red to brown then white  
then will fade, a reminder, picks the marks.  
The rough scab clings but  
the nail begins to push, digging deep into the skin  
and drags down lint to mix with tissue,  
brings bits of bloody pain. The finger flicks,  
exposes raw, regressing back to stage one.  
Stage one: the original pain.

This scab picking becomes a habit, a  
cleansing ritual, thin and fragile  
skin lines interrupted by translucent circles.  
She turns the hand into the sun.  
Glimpse the inside – the flesh melting  
in the sun's heat, tiny dots working,  
healing. The hand picks until  
the wounds crust over,  
a new spot of red appears.  
A scratching, searching, looking for first cause.

## Rotting

In between sips of leftover coffee  
and bites of sandwiches dripping  
with diner grease, I pulled the string  
    of my grandfather's story:  
he choked up a life  
as I yanked on a thread  
    slimy brown with rot,  
not cleaning up any of the dripping  
    but memorizing each  
    puddle and pool.

The string grew taut –  
his coughs only made me pull harder.  
Then blood-colored chimney appeared.  
    A house, his mother's house – greened, sunken,  
    but still stoic, a determined foundation,  
for a man, whose mother  
died before he understood  
    why mothers matter.

He stares at the house in his hands,  
    the reeking years  
    filling the room.

The house  
oozes.  
Look at his brown lips, now empty mouth.

## Smoked Butter Scotch on the Edge of the Procrastination Latte

“It was a pleasant cafe, warm and clean and friendly, and I hung up my old water-proof on the coat rack to dry and put my worn and weathered felt hat on the rack above the bench and ordered a cafe au lait. The waiter brought it and I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and a pencil and started to write.”

— Ernest Hemingway

### *Smoked*

salmon or turkey, warm gray fumes salting a well-prepared meal. Not my coffee. Don't touch my coffee with your salting smoke, your smoldering cigarette under a lamp. The glow of regret. The end of something small – rising into the air.

### *Butter*

My brother got to name our cat and on this matter I was bitter. Butterscotch found his way into my heart as candy into my skinny fingers. The night before they numbed his body I buried into his thick coat, dragged him closer, leaving swollen scratches on my arms and heart. The next day I stopped putting butter on my bread.

### *Scotch*

After that kitty, I used him as a password for my phone. Typing scotch reminded me of him perched to pounce, but scotch is for grandpas and war vets drinking liqueur in short glasses with rocks to remind them how hard life used to be. Maybe one day I'll too drink scotch, complaining of the cold, my loneliness, the incompetence of the mailman or that they finished off the coffee. I'll take tea please. And sugar.

## Getting Along

The dishes shake with the knocking  
– break my solitude.

Through the rush of cold air  
stands a woman, clipboard to attention.  
Her button down was pressed  
for this occasion and I'm not impressed,  
still being in my pajamas.

*I was wondering if you  
had considered voting for –  
I cut her off as I think,  
I am too busy  
    converting others to finding compassion.*

I close the door on the cheerful  
explanation pamphlet.

Watch her go home and ask –  
*Why can't we all just get along?*

We can't get along because  
    sometimes the vats of color we  
    swim in spill over and the blue  
    and yellow make green –

We can't get along because  
    this viridian slime turns to  
    powder at the touch – but tears  
    can't be swept into dirty piles.

*Can we please get along tonight?*  
She pleads with the husband, her  
shirt now wrinkled from being  
bus driver and chef and nurse and  
mother.

He takes a fistful  
of peanuts from the jar,  
the click of the lid breaks  
their silence.

### **Three beans, Dinner, and a Pattern**

I am living in an old warped pod of beans –  
    little bean next to  
    bigger bean beside  
    smallest bean.

Daytime – we sunbath through transparent  
    bean green walls

Nighttime we feed on each other  
    until we collapse –  
    exhausted, skeleton brown beans.

Show me a bean bright with color and I will  
    tell you it is only paint.

Show me a smooth pod and I will  
    not fall for the lies we iron –  
a morning after smoothing.

Bathing and feeding, bathing and feeding,  
carousel bean pods spinning –  
forgetting the bending branch holding  
the absinthe wind we ride.



## **Afloat**

In a rubber sea we float.  
Dubious shore watchers,  
dubbing over our cries,  
    consider us – we three maids  
all huddled in this glass-bottom tub  
stained red, our whited shoes  
still clean.

The butcher deals only in flesh –  
the meat packed over bone –  
her hands raw from carving.

A speckled gray fish touches the glass but turns away at our hands pressed to the bottom.

The baker folds lard over sugar over  
salt, mixing to spread then bake again.  
Her eyes are found resting on our concave stomachs.

The men jeer, but it's the women – aprons still wrapped around their waists – that clap as the sea draws sin deeper.

I am the candle-stick maker fitting wicks  
into melted wax, waiting, waiting to dry  
and the tub to be washed out to sea.

## Ode to Fear

You, a tired and war beaten  
ghost, walk me slowly to your bed,  
showing me where to step.  
Your head to my shoulder,  
sleepless, I watch  
you peel back your folds  
and snore.

Magnify worry, push me deep into  
the corner, wrap arm  
over head over arm,  
fold deep beneath the dark –  
this moment, this embrace.

I don't know if I've  
ever wrapped my fingers  
in yours but I know your  
icy touch, how it wakes me  
each morning. You, my protector,  
shiny armed and shielded  
fighter of thoughts. Even as you  
wake next to someone else's  
shadow, still I come back each night  
saying *Thank you*.

## The Princess and the Hag

Sometimes the cashier or the nurse  
tries to tell her *78! You don't look  
half that. Not a day over.*

But of course,  
her hair tints the white and silver  
streaks of moon on dark gray mornings,  
breasts sag with the weight of years.  
Old hag of nightmares, feeble,  
angered with age and lack  
of love. Baba Yaga greened  
with the stench of time.

Tiny girl – not even teen – sits up late after  
high school romance films and wonders,  
looks deep into cootie catchers, Ouija  
fortunes, asking *who will it be? when, oh  
when can I find love.* She asks  
with worry if it's him... or him... or ...  
Smooths makeup into the cracks  
and mistakes, diets and practices kisses.  
Mommy's little princess on the ledge of the  
crumbling wishing well.

They meet, touching gray wrinkled lips to  
pink puckered mouth – a peck.  
Small, barely brushing the other.  
Disgust, repulsed – never wondered what age  
tasted like.  
Old: stale and bitter.  
Young: so sticky, sour with sugar.

The moment slips in and out of  
their consciousness. Catches the hag  
in the grocery, in black  
sleeplessness. Finds princess on  
walks, under piles of clothes,  
in black sleeplessness.

We dig backyard holes – bury the moment  
beneath earth, but it catches rides  
on the backs of worms and beetles, finds  
a way back to the warm bed.

## Final Reflection

Flicking the stair light off as I turned the corner into the upstairs hallway I saw him – or rather it. I felt the hot breath on my neck – the black hooded cape billowing behind as it too ran. I slammed my door in dark's face. I saw a face peak around the corner of my window before letting the shades drop. I checked the locks, then under my bed – wondering what I would do if someone was there. Finally, I turn off the lamp above my bed and strain my eyes into the slowly emerging but dark room. I would stay this way – eyes open into the dark, waiting for the imaginations to get me – until I fell asleep.

It is senior year of high school; my economics teacher asks us our biggest fear and I say the dark. They chuckle because it's not a "real fear," and I confess it's not the dark I'm afraid of, but what could be in the dark.

The demons, the criminals with knives yearning to kill, the waiting rapist – I fear the dark because it's where evil easily can hide. However, I have many fears, only one of which is the dark. I have a plethora of fears and anxiety and it's this fact that made my friends drag me to a haunted house earlier this year– a place I vowed never to step. I began to ask why I felt I had so many fears? What is this biological but irrational fear we have? Is there a way to overcome my fears?

What is fear?

However, as I have moved from the daunting thought of this project to completing it, I have discovered that the idea of conquering fears wasn't what this project was about. Though I have only been focusing directly on fear for about a year, in that year my fears have drastically changed. As one fear was conquered or dissipated, another one developed and grew. They weren't always direct replacements of one another, but rather changed as I did.

I have discovered fear can't be thought of as individual problems to solve. I can't treat a fear of heights or spiders or speaking in public as something to "get over." My fear of spiders may never go away, but I can find a way that makes dealing with that fear easier. Rather, fear should be something I quite literally "walk with." I find a way to cope and understand my fears so it doesn't always get in my way.

I now think of fear as a wall. I can see through it, but it's not transparent. Its little worn in places. I know that there are things I can do to jump over that wall at any given moment but fear will always come back. The best thing I have learned is that what is standing on the other side of fear is worth the time spent trying to jump over the wall. Recently I saw a video of Will Smith talking about fear. He says that "the best things in life are on the other side of [fear]." However, I think that fear is something that holds us back. It is biological to fear, but much of our fear today is taught. Fear doesn't follow me, but walks a little in front. Sometimes we use fear to hide, sometimes we use it to control others, sometimes we use it as an excuse, and sometimes fear saves us.

Thus, in a year of work I have not overcome my fear of spiders, I still feel the future is daunting, and I even have a new list of fears recently discovered. However, I did finally enter a haunted house. Though there were some tears and I definitely concerned the security guards, the elation at the other end of the walk was the adrenal rush I could use to bike across the country or finally write that paper I was putting off. I faced fear in this year like I never have before. I questioned it, looked it in the face, and found that most often the face staring back at me was my own.

Though perhaps on the edge of sounding a bit too much like a commencement speech, this really captures something that anyone who has truly pushed past their boundaries of fear will realize. There is a momentum that we find on the other side of fear that propels us to keep jumping over. Fear is something we will all always find in front of us no matter how many times our fears grow and change. The trick is to find how to use this fear to our advantage instead of our downfall.

In Margee Kerr's book *Scream* about her adventures in exploring fear she concludes, "Thrilling experiences and self-scaring all come with a moment of confrontation and resolution, leaving us feeling good, in control, confident, and secure in our abilities and ourselves... All we have to do is be open to it, to choose to opt in." Defining what fear is no longer seems as important as defining what I do with fear. However, I think that fear is something that holds us back. It is biological to fear, but much of our fear today is taught. Fear doesn't follow me, but walks a little in front. Sometimes we use fear to hide, sometimes we use it to control others, sometimes we use it as an excuse, and sometimes fear saves us.

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