

I am simultaneously invincible and incredibly weak, and I operate somewhere in the middle of these two. Through extensive research and reflection, I opened a conversation with myself about my relationship to fear.

My paintings are manifestations of fear. In them, I explore my relationship to fear, as a concept and as a symbol. The figure in my painting is bent downwards anguishing over the skull in her gut, leaves surrounding her form. The bent head and cradling arms shield or preserves the body. Each of the symbols relate to the inward motions that I relate to the physical experiences of anxiety. I chose this imagery to create an iconic symbol of my own personal fears. The female figure is my exploration of individual fears surrounding health, fate, and my body. While the figure is a symbol of a bad omen, the leaves represent healing from this fear, growth and renewal. An aspect of fear is also the trauma and anxiety that precedes and follows from it. This can harm that which can be mended, a hopeful juxtaposition to the woman it encircles.

The smaller painting acts as both an extension of the first and as its own separate symbol. This image depicts an abstraction of a crumpled rug, perhaps also eliciting the imagery of a twisted gut, representing anxiety. The crumpled rug came from the expression, "*sweep it under the rug*," exploring my relationship to fear and vulnerability. It is a manifestation of my tendencies to bury or conceal my fear.

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# Fear

Malia S.



*I love thunderstorms, when the earth cools down and makes a percussion lightshow in the sky. I watch the June thunderstorm on the balcony. Dj<sup>1</sup> hates thunderstorms. He hates weather, he says. On cue with a thunderclap, Dj takes a blanket and moves downstairs to our parents' closet because he theorizes it's the safest place in the house. "We live on a hill," he says, "we stick out like a sore thumb, like a lightning conductor. Did you know Sam's<sup>2</sup> mother was asleep when her roof was struck by lightning. Did you know there are 80 thunderstorm fatalities per year?."<sup>3</sup> I visit Dj in my parents' closet, with our dog George, also in the closet. Two animals. Dj groans and physically winces after each clap. He squeezes his headphones to his ears. Makes me worried and annoyed. My heart also skips a beat when the sky flashes white, but I love the feeling. I don't understand his fear. I want to.*

## INDIVIDUAL TERROR

"Fear is one location in a 2-D space of arousal and valence"<sup>4</sup>

Fear of becoming old. Fear of snapping my ankle. Fear of planes trains and automobiles. Fear of hospitals, fear of wasting time, fear of forgetting everything. Each time minutes before the plane touches down I say a prayer to a God I don't believe in. And then I look to see if anyone is watching. Fear of vulnerability. Fear of being seen.

I am simultaneously invincible and incredibly weak, and I operate somewhere in the middle of these two. My health is a mere nuisance until I'm 57<sup>5</sup> and I feel the first small spike of real terror. Fear is reinforced when I feel my sore wisdom tooth at night. Fear is affirmed when the ophthalmologist tells me I have the eyes of a 50 year old. And then fear is gone when I jump from the low roof of my house and I'm in the air and then I hit the ground and I'm scuffed up with dirt

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<sup>1</sup> My little brother of 2 years and 6 months.

<sup>2</sup> Dj's friend from school; he lives 10 minutes down the dirt road from us.

<sup>3</sup> "Severe Thunderstorms." *Thunderstorms » Natural Disasters » All Hazards*, [www.prep4agthreats.org/Natural-Disasters/thunderstorms](http://www.prep4agthreats.org/Natural-Disasters/thunderstorms).

<sup>4</sup> J.A. Russell Core affect and the psychological construction of emotion *Psychol. Rev.*, 110 (2003), pp. 145-172

<sup>5</sup> Referencing a hypothetical blood-glucose level; the average fasting blood sugar level of a non-diabetic is roughly 80-100.

in my teeth and cat scratches from yucca<sup>6</sup> down my arms. I have no qualms about killing my body. I feel like it is killing itself.

*My mom drives me to Albuquerque Christmas morning to spend money. I am feeling good, it's 2015 and it's snowing. Really hard, actually. We cut our mall visit short because of how hard it's snowing. The air is thick with it. We inch back home, the drive is stretched out so I crawl into the backseat and sprawl across the bench, manipulating the seatbelt so that it lies flat for my nap. I drift off to sleep, heavy on the cushions. And then I'm weightless, I'm spinning, and then there's a thud that strikes my entire body, and then I'm still and the seatbelt is digging into my stomach and rib cage. I'm upside down, cradled by the seat belt. The car is flipped, the passenger seat is spider web crushed in and mom is crumpled in the driver's seat.*

*"Mom?" She is alive. I can't picture her not being alive. "I'm fine" she snaps. Frustration in her voice. I watch her back rise and fall gently, I unbuckle my seatbelt and hit the roof of the car, the floor. Fear of the car engine blowing up because it always does that in movies. "We're getting out." Fear of when her voice sounds like this. We kick the door open and crawl out into the blizzard. The Prius lies belly up in the snow like a turtle stuck on its back. We stand in the snow. Invincible. I laugh. We call an ambulance.*

On an individual basis, fear isolates us. Fear has a way of presenting itself in unique ways to different individuals. This creates interesting conversations about fear as a tangible concept. Several studies<sup>7</sup> debate conclusions of fear as a concept that can be agreed upon. What does fear look like? What does it feel like? If fear was an object, would we agree on what it was? Is there a way to truly share the experience of fear?

It begins in the thalamus, bypassing the sensory cortex and transmitting a signal to the amygdala, the seat of fear<sup>8</sup> in the brain. While the cortex has thought to be required for any conscious experience, it does not entirely rely on the usual sensory pathways, using old experiences as context for the present, and unconsciously reacting to them accordingly. It may be caused by conditioned responses to stimuli that the sufferer may not even consciously fear.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> **Yucca** is a genus of perennial shrubs and trees in the family Asparagaceae, subfamily Agavoideae. Its 40–50 species are notable for their rosettes of evergreen, tough, sword-shaped leaves and large terminal panicles of white or whitish flowers.

<sup>7</sup> "The Biology of Fear." *Current Biology*, Cell Press, 21 Jan. 2013, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982212014352#bib](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982212014352#bib)

<sup>8</sup> Miller, Max. "How the Brain Fears." *Big Think*, Big Think, 6 Oct. 2018, <https://bigthink.com/going-mental/how-the-brain-fears>

<sup>9</sup> Miller, Max. "How the Brain Fears." *Big Think*, Big Think, 6 Oct. 2018, <https://bigthink.com/going-mental/how-the-brain-fears>

## FEAR AS SURVIVAL

Fear is a state of aggravation that keeps us alive; an indicator of past experience and human instinct with strong roots in human evolution. While fear is thought of as an “adaptive, but phasic state”<sup>10</sup> its concept and nature is up for debate.<sup>11</sup> Fear can be viewed as a survival instinct, an inhibitor towards action, the catalyst to action, or the action itself. In addition, there are several types of fear. Fear is theorized to be processed both consciously and unconsciously in the brain. While fear is certainly a conscious process in part, there may be unconscious<sup>12</sup> processes underway in the feeling of fear itself, especially with trauma and long-lasting fear. Regardless of it being conscious, there are several components of feeling fear: one can be aware of circumstance or certain stimuli, one can be aware of the signs of anxiety that come with fear, one can be conscious of their reaction.

Reactions to fear inform who wants to survive. We protect ourselves from fear. We anticipate fear and surround ourselves in comfort. Because it is a natural response, fear is often unavoidable. It can be a means to an end. Our reactions to fear can be manipulated to an extent where we feel like we are in control and are able to perform accordingly, or at least not become traumatized. In the evolutionary sense, our body reacts to fear automatically, releasing the hormone adrenaline into the bloodstream.<sup>13</sup> This is what is known as an adrenaline rush, which is a vital defense mechanism in response to stressors. Adrenaline has several effects on the body, decreasing the ability to feel pain and sharpening mental focus temporarily. It is embedded in our ecology that we react to survive; Does fear rule our lives?

## FEAR AS TRAUMA

“The experience of fear in humans is constructed from core affect”<sup>14</sup>

While fear keeps us alive, we can keep fear with us for a long time. Trauma is defined as ... and is the result of a lasting fear response; a continual stressor that perpetuates fight or flight mode. Trauma can cause perpetual stress, in some cases leading to living in a constant state of fear. This takes a large toll on the mind and body, inhibiting basic functions. Being in a state of perpetual stress is extremely unhealthy and damaging. Is stress the same thing as fear?

## HEALING FROM EVOLUTION

(How to escape irrational fear)

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<sup>10</sup> Sorry, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982212014352#bib83](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982212014352#bib83).

<sup>11</sup> Sorry, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982212014352#bib83](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982212014352#bib83).

<sup>12</sup> K.C. Berridge, P. Winkielman What is an unconscious emotion? (The case for unconscious "liking") *Cognition Emotion*, 17 (2003), pp. 181-211

<sup>13</sup> Sissons, Claire. “Adrenaline Rush: Symptoms, Causes, and Meaning.” *Medical News Today*, MediLexicon International, [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322490.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322490.php).

<sup>14</sup> L.F. Barrett, B. Mesquita, K.N. Ochsner, J.J. Gross, The experience of emotion *Annu. Rev. Psychol.*, 58 (2007), pp. 373-403

Often, thinking back to a traumatic or stressful memory leads to an emotional response in the brain. These emotional memories are embedded in our minds as being more important, because they are rooted in a stressor, fear. While fear stems from the amygdala, it is not learned there.<sup>15</sup> Meaning, our brains are designed so that overriding fear responses is difficult and unnatural. Through evolution, we have equipped ourselves with the means to survive dangerous landscapes. Modern life has made it so that we are generally not in a dangerous landscape. While our environment has changed, our response and perception of fear has not. This means that we may overreact and become traumatized more easily.

There are ways to rewrite these fear responses. This involves “destroying” or “rewriting” the fear paths in our brains that associate a certain stimuli or scenario with anxiety. This is the same concept as exposure therapy. In order to no longer associate a certain place for example, with anxiety, one would have to revisit that place over and over again and have nothing fear inducing occur there. This method disregards serious trauma, but is very logical and useful when considering rewriting small occurrences. Unfortunately, fear is not always logical.

#### FEAR IN THE MILLIONS / CONSEQUENCES OF FEAR

“Fear is one location in a 2-D space of reward and punishment”<sup>16</sup>

Why are so many afraid of so much? In the modern world, individuals often fear situations that are not life or death matters while their body continues to perceive them as such. This triggers an extreme and often unnecessary fight or flight response. Individuals may avoid beneficial or “safe” but challenging situations as a result. When actual danger presents itself, it may cause trauma, which can trigger a fearful response that may linger.

We live in an age where we are constantly presented with new information about our existence. We have cultivated a hyper-awareness towards both the internal and external world, and our culture feeds off of fear as a result. Fear of perceived threats, fear of change, fear of other people. The modern world seems to be a host of new fears, “from technology to transgenic food to industrial chemicals...the new technologies of our modern world pose a host of new risks. Some of these risks are physically real. Many are only phantoms of our perceptions. Both contribute to an undeniably real sense of worry and apprehension that extends far beyond the next 24 hours.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Fear.” *Discover Magazine*, <http://discovermagazine.com/2003/mar/cover>

<sup>16</sup> E.T. Rolls *The Brain and Emotion*  
Oxford University Press, New York (1999)

<sup>17</sup> Ropeik, David. “The Consequences of Fear.” *EMBO Reports*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Oct. 2004, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1299209/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1299209/).

While presented with this abundance of technology and opportunity, our sense of safety as a society continues to become warped. Why?

America made itself afraid: former professor of sociology at Yale, Frank Furedi,<sup>18</sup> reasons that today's culture of fear did not originate from semi-recent events such as the fateful collapse of the World Trade Center. Widespread public panics have cropped up before September 11, whether it be the HIV/AIDS scare, or Y2K. Fureti argues that perception of risk and safety have little to do with science and proven fact. Instead, they are shaped by cultural awareness and assumptions about vulnerability. Our culture tends to feed off of one another, mongering irrational fear, and emotion in general.

Environmental impacts fear in interesting ways. Culture can influence how we are afraid, and more importantly, what we are afraid of. Certain fears appear to be culture-specific, which is in contrast to the popular idea that fear is a universal reaction; that anxiety is felt the same everywhere. Culture specific fears point to the conclusion that fear is based on environment. Ataque de Nervois is an example of one of the many location-specific fears. Having been felt exclusively by Hispanic people, this condition is recognized in Puerto Rico as similar to panic disorders in the US, but does not fully meet the symptoms. This only raises further questions when conceptualizing fear: are we all feeling the same things, just expressing them differently? Or are our experiences unique depending on where we are?

Though more questions than answers arise in relation to cultural fear, we treat fear differently depending on where we are. It influences the expression of emotion. One study<sup>19</sup> assessed the prevalence of anxiety disorders amongst different cultural groups within the US, finding that White Americans “endorsed” anxiety disorders the most, Asian Americans the least. For whatever reasons, fear seemed to be both acknowledged and recognized differently between different cultural groups. It may be that certain cultures revere the expression of these emotions more than others do, such as southeast Asian countries vs western countries. Social norms influence the expression of fear; diagnosis is dependent on location. In addition, other social and cultural groups express anxiety based on their different understanding of the body's functioning.<sup>20</sup> There are culture-specific meanings for similar symptoms. While Americans categorize certain symptoms with anxiety attacks under the influence of western medicine, Cambodians anxiety related disorders are based on “disturbed ‘inner wind’ and blood flow.” They fear “limb blockage”

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Furedi: *Sociologist, Author and Commentator: Official Website*, [www.frankfuredi.com/](http://www.frankfuredi.com/).

<sup>19</sup> Hofmann, Stefan G, and Devon E Hinton. “Cross-Cultural Aspects of Anxiety Disorders.” *Current Psychiatry Reports*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, June 2014, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4037698/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4037698/).

<sup>20</sup> Hofmann SG, Asnaani A, Hinton DE. Cultural aspects in social anxiety and social anxiety disorder. *Depress Anxiety*. 2010;27:1117–1127.

syndrome (*slap day slap cheung*), literally “death of the arms and legs.”<sup>21</sup> In traditional Chinese medicine, anxiety is thought of as due to organ dysfunction, like a “weak kidney” (*shen xu*) or a “weak heart” (*xin xu*).<sup>22</sup> Culture impacts the way we process anxiety and fear, and our reactions towards it. While fear is universal, anxiety depends on context.

Is there a difference between cultural fear and the fear an individual experiences? How is it different?

## WE SEEK FEAR; WE LOVE TO BE AFRAID

From a scientific perspective, our brains are wired so that we feel fear and pleasure the same way, depending on the presence of perceived safety.<sup>23</sup> Once our brain perceives us to be “safe” we shift the way we experience the state, from fear to excitement. This is the difference between finding a movie scary and being completely terrorized. While the adrenaline rush is present whether there is actual danger or not, some people love this adrenaline rush while others hate it. Either way, we live in a culture of fear. Fear is sought out and thought to be a pinnacle of interest and discussion. The media tells us that we love to be afraid. The media tells us when to not fear, it tells us when we should fear for our lives. This controlled information flow can cause mass fears capes and can warp perceived threats. Sometimes to the point of where individuals are not afraid, but there is an atmosphere of fear. This can manifest in several ways.

## MANIFESTATIONS OF FEAR

What does fear look like? Wide eyes, paralysis, a scream. A woman avoids dark streets at night. A man prays to god. A woman lies. A war veteran avoids loud noises. A child sleeps with the lights on. Fear could be argued as being the motivator behind all actions. The longer it is present, the more complex fear presents itself. People begin to associate fear as an emotion with certain objects and situations, from pure experience, and from cultural history.

“Fear is one of a small set of basic emotions, which are cross-cultural”<sup>24</sup> This quote unifies fear as a solid, international state of being, transcending boundaries and crossing cultures. Fear in this sense becomes a symbol, something that can be pinpointed. There has to be more to it than that;

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<sup>21</sup> Hofmann, Stefan G, and Devon E Hinton. “Cross-Cultural Aspects of Anxiety Disorders.” *Current Psychiatry Reports*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, June 2014, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4037698/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4037698/).

<sup>22</sup> Hinton DE, Good BJ. Culture and panic disorder. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press; 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Javanbakht, Arash, and Linda Saab. “The Science of Fright: Why We Love to Be Scared.” *The Conversation*, 6 Jan. 2019, <http://theconversation.com/the-science-of-fright-why-we-love-to-be-scared-85885>

<sup>24</sup> P. Ekman, An argument for basic emotions *Cognition Emotion*, 6 (1992), pp. 169-200

we can't all experience fear in the same way. There is evidence for the concept of fear being up for debate.

Fear can manifest in hate. Bigotry is a symptom of fear. People want control over things and also a sense of it in their lives. Fear can often be a reaction to things we have no control over.

## OBJECTS OF FEAR

We have been conditioned to fear certain things. Some are realistically harmful and have been taught to us through evolution; rabid dogs, disease, weaponry. Some of them are due to the nature of our culture; war, terrorism. Some of them are the ordinary morphed into objects of fear, symbols of the very emotion. Skeletal forms, black cats, the number thirteen.

“Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them”<sup>25</sup> In order to comprehend fear, we've categorized the experience into something that can be shared: a symbol of fear. Symbols of fear originated from a common reaction to something, then were strengthened by reinforcement, and woven into culture and belief systems.

How can the symbols we use to see fear offer a way to overcome it? There are steps to heal from our anxiety-rich culture, as well as individual plight. The first lies in identifying the symbols of fear, which are both very unique to individual experience, and also shared symbols. We can work towards acceptance of these symbols; these symbols offer understanding into our cultures and histories.

*Grandma has Alzheimer's. The way I see it, grandma died years ago and we are looking after her body because no one wants to actually kill her because that is murder(?) So mom and I make her eat and drink and clean her up. We promise each other that we will kill one another if this happens to us. Fear of forgetting things, because remembering is half the fun. Fear that my body will become like this. I fear my body in this sense. I want to protect myself.*

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<sup>25</sup> Epictetus Epictetus, The Enchiridion of Epictetus