



EMILIE C. BLACK

FEARS

What are you afraid of?

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Emilie C. Black

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DIGITAL EDITION

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To Sarah, Theresa, and Dave, For being the biggest fans and supporters I could have ever asked for. I'm sorry I organised your names so that it goes STD.

And to Ash and the Edinburgh Horror Festival, that roped me into doing this as a show for two years.

Thank you.

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Preface

Everything started with the question, “What are you afraid of?”

It might seem strange for a poetry pamphlet to have a preface at all, and that’s fair. But here’s the thing: this is not a pamphlet.

I know, we’re not starting off great, but stick with me it’ll all make sense I swear.

Fears began its life as a spoken-word poetry show written especially for the Edinburgh Horror Festival, and has now had two moderately successful runs at EHF 2017 and 2018. Bereft of inspiration for a Horror Festival show, I took to the internet, and simply asked

“What are you afraid of?”

So I gathered those fears and promptly put them in a spreadsheet. Pored through them and analysed each detail and trend and realised a spreadsheet is not a great tool for poetry.

But I saw the common fears and the unique fears, looked for the stories and reasons behind them, and realised these stories needed to be heard as well.

That's an idea for a show.

Each poem from this collection has a story to tell, and just putting the poems themselves on their own could never fully do them justice. They help us to understand what these stories have to do with fear, because they don't follow what might be... traditionally "scary" or fear inducing.

But there's no better way to introduce you to what exactly Fears is, with the words I've opened every show with:

This is not a horror show.

Honoured guests, this is not a horror show;
There are no monsters or murderers or
Supernatural spectres locked in place and time.
No ghosts or ghouls or vampires or werewolves,
No heroes or villains or magicians or comedians.

This is not a horror show.
This is about the terror and fright
Borne from the grim reality
That sets off your anxiety that
Grips your chest tight.

This is not a horror show
This is something different.
This is an experiment.
This isn't a story.
This is real.

The Desert

One of the earliest answers I had back when I set out to write the show came from a woman who had moved from Africa to America with her family.

Growing up in Africa, her mother had always taught her not to stay or play in the desert after dark because that was when all the fearsome animals and monsters would come out.

But this has had a lasting effect. Even now, thousands of miles away in a different country, these teachings and stories have stuck and she still won't go out into the desert-like surroundings of Texas.

Once the Sun crawls under the blankets of sand,
And it's watchful gaze ceases to stare,
The Desert becomes both dead and alive.

The warmth of the world fades into the night,
Dying embers of the day burn away
Turning golden sands to cold, grey ash.

What hides from the light can come out to dance
To the music of the rattles and whistles of the dead on the wind
And the howls of coyotes crying for flesh.

The ugly and carnivorous crawl out from their holes
With wild grins across their impatient maws,
With teeth and claws praying for blood.

Contorted shadows crawl towards the taste of life,
Thirsting for something sanguine and bursting with vitality
That they can extract and replace with their pernicious essence.

The Moon's cold, empty stare,
The breeding ground
of death and despair,

Her monstrous children thrive
and turn her hollow smile from blue to red
As they desperately appeal to one who looks down on them.

Until dawn breaks, and the fires of the earth reignite,
Scaring the cold away, chasing nightmares with white stallions,
Bringing life and light to the world once again.

And so we walk the desert by day
And sleep with the Sun to be safe
Lest we be prey to the Night

Don't Blink.

In my research, one fear that seemed to unite every generation was Doctor Who. Truly, the fear of Doctor Who villains transcends time and space.

Every now and then, I'd receive a message about the age-old tradition of hiding behind the sofa because of the Daleks or the Cybermen or the Autons, but it appears that these classic monsters have all been surpassed.

The Weeping Angels. Those staunch, silent, stone monoliths with their cold eyes and embraces have become the latest and greatest addition to the pantheon of Doctor Who villains.

And evidently, for great reason...

Hiding eyes
Always open
Never sleeping
Eyes wide open
Behind open hands
They are always open
Their eyes, their jaws, their minds
Always thinking, plotting, manipulating,
Waiting for you to fail and your eyes to fall
Waiting across the oceans of time, forever.

Always hungry
Always thirsting
Always waiting to
Kill you with kindness.
Or the closest thing to it
There are worse ways to die
Than to live your life out of sync
Live your life out of time until your time runs dry
No guns, no blood, no heartbreak
Just blink.

They don't sleep
They don't need to
They've been resting
Since the dawn of their time
Going from being quantum locked
In one place until you break your gaze
Then they become stepping stones in a dark room
The threat in the night, in the darkness, following and stalking
Treading the shadows of your life for all of your time.

They are tired of waiting.

Crash!

No one would blame you for being afraid of the circus.

The death defying acts, twists and turns, dizzying heights, the exotica and erotica intertwining, and, of course, clowns. There's a lot to be afraid of.

Not just for the audience, but also the acts and performers. Anything could go wrong at any moment. The faintest misstep or misplaced foot could turn a human catapult into a caterwauling catastrophe.

The same is sadly true for so many other things in life. It's why a lot of people in their messages said they were afraid of driving, in spite of how many years they'd been on the road.

A circus and a car have many similarities. Twisting, turning, driving force, clowns. And, of course, the smallest mistakes can have the greatest repercussions.

The whole thing was a car crash!
You should have been there.
The slow crawl of the tightrope walker
Unprecedentedly speeding up
Edging towards a death defying
Sudden stop, I thought
Maybe the cable had been slashed,

The whole thing was a car crash!
You should have been there.
It all began to unfold and segue into
A slowmotion bloodsport ballet,
Twisting and turning and
Transforming into a flying trapeze
With relative ease with no safety net.

The whole thing was a car crash.
You should have been there.
The tent collapsed and the metal frame
Turned a sword swallower into a sieve,
The tiger cage was crushed but they escaped,
Crawling and prowling and licking their chaos
With flashes of orange and white,
And no one could stop it.

The whole thing was a car crash!
You should have been there.
When the fireworks started clipping the fuel tank,
And the air filled with smoke and sparks that
Mingled with whisky-soaked breath
To create uncontrollable catherine wheels
And turned to catastrophic, volcanic eruption.

It was a car crash,
You should have been there.
But I was the ringmaster,
And it was my fault
That you died on impact.

The cancer in the walls.

These poems have a difficult relationship with death.

For some people, for sure yes, they were afraid of dying and there's absolutely no shame in that. That's perfectly justifiable at any age or stage of life, and was quite possibly one of the most frequent fears that people said they had and that may be why death appears so frequently in the previous and next few poems.

But for some people, it wasn't the inevitability of death that scared them, but how they could die that scared them the most.

Cancer came up a lot. Totally understandable. They all had their different reasons; some knew they were predisposed medically, some had seen other family members go through it, others knew themselves to be high risk because of various risk factors, the list goes on.

Some people spoke about cancer being extremely claustrophobic. The tightness in the chest, being surrounded by medical equipment or by people all the time, the immense emotions brought on by facing mortality just overwhelming them, building up around them and feeling their worlds become tighter and tighter.

It sounded terrifying.

These walls used to be white;
Now, a premature sunset closes in
with an off-yellow stain through
clouds of grey that never
rain or fade away.

Instead they cling to the air
like spirits of devil-may-care chaos,
borne and trapped from a seance of
burning leaves and paper and
human lips.

They coil like a snake around my throat;
a razor tooth and burning tongue
licking the skin around my mouth,
nicking the corners of what used to be
my smile, all the while sickening my
body and lungs, feeling my heartstrings
being strummed by a careless musician
writing a decomposition on a
guitar with callousness and
untrimmed fingernails.

These walls have closed in;
wrapped around me and my loneliness
like withered fingers grasping at nothing,
like crushed velvet lungs gasping for air
and sounding out a rasping cry for help;
death-rattles echoing through dusty halls,
over walls of spores and floors of bone
before they turn to stone,
blocking the light and
the breeze.

Plants that I have stolen oxygen from
have claimed a revenge as toxic sap
oozes through my lungs and chest,
gripping to flesh and bone,
tar tarnishing my ribcage,
like alien fingers tearing and prying,
like an unborn child dying
while trying to escape a mother
withering away to
a living coffin.

These walls used to be white;
now, they are darkened with nicotine bruises
and scorch marks scar the painted face
of hard work gone to waste as
I lie here defaced, by myself.
Confined by a rib-cage and spine
that ache too much to move,
and walls that cocoon and whisper that
my lungs died in prison;
I died in bed.

Bubble

Thalassophobia is the fear of the ocean.

It's infinite and vast, only ten percent of the ocean has been explored.

It's cold, cruel, and deceptive. It can be peaceful on the surface, only to hide chaos and monstrosities underneath.

There are so many myths and legends and mysteries we may never get a clear answer to.

Or maybe someone did learn the answer, and never had the chance to tell the tale.

Your thoughts were as clear as the water,
And as the ebb and flo rode out,
It look you right along with it.
It was a tropical sea of no cares,
And you drifted out, not caught up in
Currents or worries.
Until you woke up.

You drifted too far out and into nothingness,
Too far away from land, looking into blank space
And calling for something, calling for anything,
Challenging your own atheism in a desperate attempt
Of some level of salvation but
Nothing.

And right now,
You are also nothing.
A drop of water in the ocean,
Small and insignificant,
Weak and panicked,
Nothing.

And the panic rises,
A tidal wave of anxiety
Crashing down with a
New and unfamiliar coldness,
Knocking the wind from your sails
And the air from your lungs.

Kick as hard as you can,
Flail until your body breaks,
Scream until your lungs give out,
Fight until your spirit drowns
Fight until you can't fight
That sinking feeling,

Wrestle with yourself and the riptide,
Feel your skin dissolve in the salt
And your blood turn cold.
Feel the waves pull you under,
Feel your heart smash itself
Against your ribcage like
A failing escape artist until
You can't feel anything.

Feel the cold of her kiss
Push past your lips.
Feel the consent fade away with
Each passing, failing breath.
Feel the water flood and fill you
Until your lungs can't hold any more.

Watch your life flash before your eyes
And feel your tears turn into nothing.
Watch the light at the end of your tunnel
Fade further away as you drift into nothing,
Feel the panic wash away with the tides
And become nothing.

And in those final moments,
As you give up,
As you're robbed of your breath,
Watch the last bubbles of your life
Pass from your frozen lips and fall away.
Close your eyes forever,
And sink away into nothing.

Spark

On the other side of the coin, we have fire.

So many people spoke about how when they were growing up, there were so many videos about fire safety, leaving candles lit, dropping a cigarette, etc, the fear of fire was ingrained in so many people's minds.

At least fifty responses directly said they were afraid of being burned alive.

But there's so much more fire can do.

There's so much more to fire than meets the eye.

Maybe it was the still-lit cigarette,
Leaping from the prison of your fingers
And falling to ill-advised escape to
Resume it's life of unsolicited
murder and arson crimes.

Or maybe it was the barely-sleeping candle,
Too tired but too awake,
Like a mother-cat after giving birth to
A thousand killer kittens,
Crawling up the curtains bringing
Unwanted life and light to your home.

Or is it more likely it was the phone charger,
Left alone to fight against a tide of
Violent and virulent electricity,
Desperate to break free of
The wires in the walls that
Were never strong enough to hold it back.

But it doesn't matter how or why it happened.
Right now, your four walls are painted
Red, orange and white, like Satan's prison cell,
Like a volcanic eruption,
A flow of irrepressible heat
Melting away and redefining
What it means to be safe and warm.

But of course,
You'll never see it.
The smog and smoke has
Wrapped itself around your head,
Stabbing and stinging your eyes,
Like a bag of broken glass
Tied around your neck,

You can feel it,
Crawling and writhing and climbing
Like a snake or salamander
Along your legs, your chest, your neck.
It's white-hot, forked tongue
Licking and lapping and ripping your skin,
It's teeth tearing and it's jaws engulfing
Like you're the last meal it will ever feast upon.

You can smell it,
Invasive and pervasive aromas of
Immolated wood and scorched concrete,
Burning plastic and molten flesh.
The smell of death
Clinging to your clothes
Hanging in the air,

You can taste it,
The ash and embers
Scorching your lips and tongue,
Burrowing into your cheeks,
Falling down your throat,
Possessing your lungs,
Burning your stomach,
Choking you from inside out.

You can hear it,
The roar of the flames,
The cries for help,
The screams of your world
Ripping and tearing and falling apart
And all it took
Was just one spark.

আমি (Āmi or “I am”)

A photographer ran into me at a gig in Edinburgh one night when I should have been working on this show He'd heard my poetry a few times and asked if I could write a poem for a project he was working on.

The project was an investigation and exploration of an island in Bangladesh called Banishanta.

Banishanta is a brothel. A population of a hundred to a hundred-and-fifty women and girls who, through a combination of coercion, kidnapping, and selling, were forced into prostitution, who are told by their government that they don't exist.

We were able to make contact with some of them and get an understanding of their experiences and feelings.

There was a girl called Reena. She'd been abandoned by her stepfather, sold to a madame, and been broken down by the world and her work, using drugs and alcohol to get through the days. She was twelve years old.

Her experience, as was the experience of so many others like her, was the fear of the next day, and the fear of being lost and forgotten.

Her name is Reena.

They said they found someone to love me,
And from now on, I wouldn't need to worry about
Choice or love because
It would come naturally.

Instead, they traded away my independence.
Now I am trading my innocence for lifelong dependence
Because the only way to survive this existence
Is to drown it out with substance abuse.

This isn't love,
And this isn't 'making love'
This isn't feeling or being loved
I am unloved.

I am synthetic and prosthetic parts,
I am 'Thing', I am পতিতা¹
I am bought-and-sold, I am living gold
I am as inhuman as the system that made me

1 Translit. Patitā, "prostitute"

I am deprived and barely alive,
I am never slept on, skin-and-bone bedclothes,
I am both criminal and victim,
I am a child.

I am part of a society that calls me অস্পৃশ্য²
Until it suits them to forget my name and my age.
I have felt their hypocrisy on
My skin and my femininity.

I am broken and defeated,
I am exploited and injustice,
I am human,
I am.

2 Translit. Aspr̥śya, “untouchable”

Dear Homophobe

You may recall that I said this all began by asking the internet the question, “what are you afraid of?”

Unfortunately, asking the internet anything inevitably leads to trolling and it wasn't long until the slurs and the insults started:

“the gays!”

“the queers!”

One particular asshole threw in the faux-justification of “homophobia’s called phobia for a reason!” and then the usual other dross and bollocks they spew forth to make themselves feel better at night.

I wasn't surprised. Homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia, I've heard it all. I've seen it all. I've heard it inside my own family.

Allow me to show you how stupid it is.

What did you call me?
Why the fuck does it matter?
I'm still a person,
Regardless of what
Unintelligent bullshit
You choose to sprout forth.

I have loved you all my life
But I'm not allowed to love someone else
Because you chose to believe that it's
"Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve"?
Why do I not get to experience true happiness,
Just because I found it differently to you?

I am still your child,
Despite what you have to say.
Whether I'm straight, bi, or gay
I exist.
And I am free to enjoy
Anyone's kiss that I please and pleases me.

For what it's worth,
I'm none of the above.
I've let myself be
Used and abused
Now I'm not confused when I say
"I am what I am".

I'm not under your roof anymore,
And if loving who I want is a crime,
Then goddamn, I'm guilty as sin.
You can deny, deny, and deny me
But I am nothing wrong in this world
And love is not a criminal offence.

But if being happy with him
Means I'm a fairy,
Damn right I'm a fairy,
I'm fucking magical.
"Poof".
You've disappeared from my life.

Angel

On one of my social media posts, I received a response from a girl called Angel.

Angel was afraid of everything.

She was afraid of other people's reactions to her, afraid to stand out but afraid to be seen. Afraid to look at magazines and mirrors in case she didn't meet the expectations they could demand of her.

Afraid of living, but afraid of dying. Afraid of her mental health, her physical health because she's afraid of eating,

She was afraid of herself.

That felt like the worst kind of fear. Absolutely toxic and paralysing fear.

And that kind of fear wasn't coming just from within in. Social media, society, and entertainment and beauty industries have to eat at you and bury themselves so deep into your brain to to become that afraid.

But if you'd seen her and spoken to her, you'd wonder what she had to be afraid of.

This is for her.

She doesn't have her wings yet and I hope it stays that way.

She doesn't think she's beautiful,
She's afraid of unrealistic expectations
that plague and follow her like a rabid dog that
would bite her and disfigure her into someone that
she never wanted or planned to be.
And even though she wants to stand from the crowd,
she's afraid of being caught in an undertow of
temporary beauty for dollars and dimes that
can't last a lifetime so it requires her to
cut and carve her body into a series of investments,
a combination of high payments and extreme losses
of happiness and self and security.

She's afraid that the weight of the world
hangs around her hips and her stomach
like modern art on a gallery wall,
hung out against its will for all to see,
exposed and ogled and judged for
its physicality and shape and form.
She wants to lock herself inside a vault,
not to make her feel precious but
because she doesn't want to be seen.

She's afraid of living a life.
Because living only means that Time
marches on with Death by her side,
like a trusted lieutenant or baying bloodhound,
ready and willing and waiting to take either
her or someone she loves, and
the only exposure
she's been exposed to
belongs in books and magazines and photographs
that she considers to be perfect art
because she doesn't look like
what she considers to be beautiful.

She's afraid of change but
terrified of not changing,
spending nights tossing and turning,
not resisting her inner demons of
depression and bulimia because
she wants to be a better type of better
but she's in a battle between herself
and those who care about her because

Even though she's afraid of dying,
sometimes it's all she can think about
because it's easy to get lost in thought
when it's all dark and all the same.
She thinks that it's easier to close her eyes
and open a vein and sleep life away
than to struggle on with the troubles of
neuroticism and paranoia and the
pain of losing everyone you love because
you can't feel pain when it all slips away.

But she doesn't get to see what I see.
What her friends and family see and
what people actually see because
she's been wearing circus-mirror sunglasses
and it's warped her perception of herself to
the point of near beyond recognition.
She doesn't see that she is nothing but
beautiful, on her skin and in her mind,
she is beautiful in grace and in nature,
she is beautiful like her name.

And I am afraid to lose you,
Because this world needs someone beautiful.

It's too soon to join the ranks of your namesake.

What am I afraid of?

In using everyone else's fears to write the show, I kept finding myself asking myself "but what am I afraid of?" and would then keep finding myself pushing that question to the very back of my mind because that wasn't something I was ready to deal with.

But eventually it felt that I couldn't write this show without finding that out and accepting it. It felt disingenuous to talk about all these fears and stories and avoid the most obvious person to ask.

So, what am I afraid of?

I'm afraid of letting people see the real me.

The autistic me. The disabled me.

These facets make up so much of me and I felt I had to keep them hidden to be accepted by society and feel safe because that's what I grew up with. I was told my emotional responses weren't valid, that I was the "weird kid".

So I buried it. Only to find I was constantly silently asking this question:

Is my autism showing?

I feel like it is.

But unfortunately it doesn't fit

In my shirt or jeans.

It just spills out uncontrollably

Like a nosebleed when you get nervous,

That happens to other people, right?

The tension builds up in your head,

And the pressure becomes too intense

And then it doesn't know how to come out

Except as a volcanic eruption of red and mucus and-

I'm sorry you don't want to hear about that

Sometimes I don't know

What it's appropriate to say or when.

And every now and then

Surrealist and existential garbage

Falls out my mouth like

Teeth in a bad dream,

A non-stop avalanche of confused and contrived

Word-like noises that have some semblance

Of an order that

Hopefully makes sense.

When you put white light through a prism,
It creates and exposes all the colours
On the visible spectrum.
Autism exists in this spectrum.
It might not be obvious
You might not see it
And maybe that's because you're colourblind.
Or more likely
You don't know what it looks like.

So it merges into the tail-end of
Indigo-violet, near invisible to you because
We're not on the same wavelength.
But I see it all the time,
Like a near ultraviolet ghost
Using me as a host
And others like me.
Pretending to be a cape,
Letting me pretend to be a superhero
As if somehow I have superpowers.

Sometimes, I don't really understand
Anything at all.
We all have a brain that's bespoke
But I've got some manufacturing defects.
I'm wired like a sentient bomb
Too afraid to go off because
I don't know what I'll do.
I make and mix up my
Metaphors and malaphors
And I use the same lines and similes
Like someone who can
Make and mix up their
Metaphors and malaphors
Because I like patterns,
I see the patterns in daily life and
Have a carefully constructed routine,
Making my life on an assembly line,
Staying consistent and clichéd.

But it's a losing battle,
This is an ever changing world
And things break and evolve and devolve
And I can't prepare for that.

My mental preparation is effectively
To stay in a constant state of anxiety,
Living in a permanent panic attack,
Staying on edge with a brain that's ready to crack,
Taking beta-blockers and antidepressants
To hide the frustration and confusion
And stop the compulsion to do something
Stupid.

But everything I do
Is stupid,
I'm clumsy and wrestle
And tumble and stumble
Over things like a
Drunk in a dark room
Hallucinating that it's a minefield,
Falling over shadows and shapes
That aren't actually there,
Hitting my head on walls and my hands
As they flail like a fish out of water
Clutching for something
Or someone to lean on because

I've needed additional support all my life.
School work assistance
Not because I didn't know what I was doing
But because I didn't know how to
Verbalise it.
Or even write it down.
I couldn't hold a pencil and write until I was ten.
Because my brain wouldn't work that
Because my hands couldn't comprehend
How to work a piece of wood and lead
Because I'm stupid.

And everything I do
Is stupid.
I keep a firm grip on my childhood
Because it's a coping mechanism.
Unchanging and consistent,
Using stories and Disney movies
As a hoping mechanism,
Playing Yu-Gi-Oh cards by myself
Because it's a safe way to fight my demons
Because it just makes sense.

I don't expect you to understand.
But I grew feeling different,
And these were the things I could relate to,
These are the things that let me feel normal.
Because there was so much that didn't.

I am not stupid,
The occupational therapist told me
I am not stupid.
That my brain is special,
It's like having a superpower.
But my brain is supposed to have a superpower,
Then I will play at being the superhero.
Like a pseudo-savant
Playing words and emotions
Like I'm playing piano
Hitting all the right notes,
Solving problems and curious incidents
Like a synth-pop Sherlock,

I've spent twenty-five years
Fighting my lack of confidence
And lack of coordination
With elaborate orchestrations.
Playing viola and violin,
Piano and organ,
Ukulele and accordion,
Banjo, guitar, saxophone,
Drums, harp and computers,
And words.
Going from page to stage,
Performing as another person,
Playing pretend until I became able to
Play myself.

That may have came out wrong.
But as I try to tell you my story,
I'll be brutally honest as I wrestle
And tumble and stumble with my words
As I become more and more exposed
As I realise it's becoming too real
And I start to panic and become manic
And words start to fall out my mouth
Like teeth in a bad dream
And my nose starts to bleed and
I don't know anymore.

How can something invisible
Make me feel so exposed?
I hate change but it's all I want for me
So, when I ask if my autism is showing,
It's because it feels as obvious as
A part of glasses or a broken leg,
A debilitating disability
Dressing as a superhero
But the cape's staplegunned to my shoulders.
I never wanted this.

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