

Introduction: What Are You Afraid Of?

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Maybe you remember this happening to you—a renegade coming of age when you realized that being *different* isn't such a bad thing after all, a time when you stopped wishing you fit into the crowd and started building an identity based on standing out from it.

For me, this happened around the time when my grandparents and teachers started referring to me as “young lady.” The awkward girl that I had been lifted her shy head and said, “I’m not afraid of you”—meaning curfews, school uniforms, church on Sundays, and any other rules that seemed to exist only to alienate and annoy me. It was then that I discovered a certain power in being different, in breaking the rules.

I kissed my first girl at a chaperoned slumber party, and graffitied my first wall at age twelve (it read “Fuck tha Police” not because my small Southern Ontario town had much of a police presence, but because as a preteen I believed I could truly relate to gangster rap group N.W.A.). I set fires in parking lots, and sucker-punched boys; I also dropped out of Niagara Catholic Secondary and transferred to a vocational high school where I was free to shave off all my hair and wear second-hand lingerie as outerwear. I became a *petite villaine* in my gossipy, close-knit community, a neophyte spider woman with no particular target

to seduce or slay. In retrospect, I was just impatient to become the defiantly shameless queer femme I am today.

For many of us, discovering ourselves to be queer or otherwise rebellious women holds some parallels to the shaping of the fictional identities of comic book characters such as Spider Woman, Black Widow, or Gypsy Moth. We put on that “super suit” and thus separate ourselves from the world. But real-life rebellions, even preteen rebellions, don’t take place unnoticed. And even though I fancied myself to be fearless, I found out early on that being a woman who sticks out often means being afraid. In high school, there were certain hallways that I avoided for fear of encountering the football team. Years later, I learned there were parts of town where I wouldn’t dare to be caught holding hands with another woman. Later still, I realized that certain sex acts made me feel too vulnerable, anxious inside my own body.

These fears aren’t mine alone. In fact, “What are you afraid of?” happens to be a standard question among my friends and partners. I suppose we do this as a means to meet our fears together and to strategize various ways to be safe. Indeed, “safe” is a word frequently used by women: “Call me when you’re back safe at home,” we might say to one another as we exit the dyke bar, tipsy and wearing our leather boots or low-cut dresses. And creating safety—from staffing rape crisis centres to organizing queer sex parties—largely remains women’s work.

But if there is one thing that can be said about rebellious women, it’s that we are masterminds at revamping what burdens us, at subverting things to our own advantage. Wallop us with insults—queer, freak, slut, bitch, cunt—and we’ll turn them into terms of endearment. Give us yesterday’s family dysfunction, and we’ll transform it into today’s kinky “daddy and little girl” role-play fantasy. As for reclaiming fear, a friend of mine perhaps summed it up best when she told me, “I took Wen-Do women’s self-defence classes for years, and the only time I ever use it is to

flip my girlfriend onto the bed and pin her down.”

I knew long before I began working on this anthology that queer feminine sexuality and fear made good bedfellows, especially when it comes to literature. I’ve spent many chilling and satisfying nights poring over Sarah Waters, Octavia Butler, and Kathy Acker novels. And I firmly assert that nothing tops off a self-indulgent beach vacation better than a book from the increasingly popular subgenre of lesbian vampire fiction, of which contributor Fiona Zedde is a champion (in “Every Dark Desire,” an excerpt from her novel of that name).

In *Fist of the Spider Woman*, fifteen daring authors frankly ask themselves, “What am I afraid of?” The aim is not quell our fears, but to embrace them. In doing so, their work takes on an entirely different form than the familiar thrills of contemporary Hollywood horror films. Perhaps this is not surprising; after all, we are far from the narrowly defined, status quo heterosexuals scared that zombies will invade the suburbs. And let’s be honest, if the blinkered characters from most horror films got a good look at what happens inside a radical queer woman’s bedroom, they’d be as mortified as if a zombie were running through their neatly manicured back yards. *Fist’s* contributors know what it means to operate outside of the norm. This puts us in a position to uncover distinctively queer, distinctively woman-centered horrors, and bring life to empathy-worthy victims and villains rarely seen before.

You will not find comic book sidekicks cloned from archetypal male heroes among these pages. Nor will you find the home-wrecking spider woman of *noir* fiction, whose seductive powers only exist to oppose the story’s decent and virginal female characters. Of the many versions of this character, perhaps the one that most suits *Fist’s* contributors is a type of matrilineal spider woman as seen in First Nations mythology. This spider woman spins her web to create life, to make connections—her web represents the complex matrix of our relationship to the world

and each other. Similarly, *Fist* contributors make connections between fear and desire, power and vulnerability, our internal feelings and external reality.

While all the contributors have honestly earned their title as rebellious women, you'll find their answers to the question "What are you afraid of?" richly diverse. Some have chosen to tackle very real and politically charged horrors, such as Nomy Lamm's tale of a poor, disabled genderqueer whose suspicions of government conspiracies prove to be more than mere paranoia in "Conspiracy of Fuckers," or the hauntingly elusive yet grave portraits of women in war-torn nations seen in the excerpts from Larissa Lai's long poem "Nascent Fashion." Michelle Tea and Amanda Lamarche use humour to trump horror; Tea's "Crabby" a refreshingly multidimensional comic account of surviving pubic lice, reminds us that sexual and personal horrors are often connected, while an unusual phobia is the subject of Lamarche's poem "Fear of Dying to the Wrong Song." Some also treat this anthology as an opportunity to give voice to their darkest, wildest fantasies. Megan Milks' oddly perverted story "Slug" is a perfect example of fear meets fantasy ... and I won't spoil the ghastly and "fowl" ending to Suki Lee's romantic thriller, "Sido."

Instead I will leave you to explore unique—different—fears and desires as revealed by *Fist of the Spider Woman's* extraordinary contributors.