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Unprepared For This Bullets & Butterflies: Queer Spoken Word Poetry Emanuel Xavier, Editor

Book Review by Alexander Renault



"Sometimes words assault the audience from the stage like bullets, wounding quick and deeply. Sometimes poems leave lips like butterflies,

beautifully decorating the room with hope." —Emanuel Xavier

Bullet & Butterflies was not what I expected. I thought this new anthology of slam poetry would be entertaining and mildly titillating. Xavier, an outstanding poet and gifted orator with a personal history as powerful as his poetry, has lined up an army of comrades led by some

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of the most uninhibited and talented poets of his generation. I not only read straight through the 200-page collection in one sitting, but experienced a spectrum of emotions ranging from dysphoria to profound pride at simply being a member of the modern GLBT community.

Slam poetry is a form of rage against the despair we feel about our lives, this out-of-control circus run by a ringleader who mispronounces the most basic words in the English language, making us wonder if he should actually be wearing a clown suit instead of a top hat. In either case our current president still holds the whip and these poets know it.

This anthology thumbs its nose directly at admonitions that writers and poets of our GLBT communities should play nice and keep the erotic to a safe minimum. This is an important time, considering the current climate of our country as some neutered Jesusland, to keep the sex in sexuality and keep erotica alive.

Horehound Stillpoint opens up the antagonistic elements of his own personality in "Bottom Who Doesn't." Then he dives straight into politics with "It Came From Behind": "The future, this country, and my ass/
Fucked, fucked, fucked/ Thank you,
President Prick/ Thing is, heroes and
villains can be hard to distinguish/
They both come from behind/
Lighting a mortal fire deep within/
Undeniably, irresistibly,
unbelievably/ I'm alive and so is my

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ass/ Good job, President Prick/
You've made me feel Born Again."

Shailja Patel is one of the best poets of her generation. Born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, she is a third-generation East African Indian. A poet raised under the government of Idi Amin, this is a woman who understands the power of racism and crushing oppression. Fortunately, from the time she wandered the playground she also understood the power of words (to borrow from Alice Walker, Patel has seemingly always possessed that secret of joy, "resistance").

Patel creates beautiful references to the power of making love, even from a political angle: "it's true we really do/ change the world/ by fucking yes/ the revolution/ is our naked bodies let it give/ pat robertson/ dr. laura/ screaming slaving/ wet dream nightmares".

The photograph of Alix Olson shows that a picture *is* worth a thousand words. It could have been used as the book cover because her words hit harder than a fist. She speaks of teaching her symbolic daughter, "She'll relinquish White Privilege/ observe, be wise, she'll compromise/ when the fire is stoked by other womyn's desires/ but she'll never leave the flame/ All the same, she'll crave what makes her burn./ She'll learn her Cunt's good name-- /the thick liquid lips, the small hot tip./ No more of this cryptic shit./ This Vagina will be known."

The latest squabbling within our GLBT communities has revolved around the prominence of not just our sexual orientation but our sexual representations, how much we define and show ourselves in our sexual acts. Olson reminds us of the dangers of painting our sex lives as white as a picket fence in "Cute for a Girl." Here she writes, "She stopped, dropped, rolled, paused, turned./ And that night I learned/ That skin is where this revolution gonna begin,/ Touching one woman at a time, show there's no crime/ In feeling this good."

Anyone who has read Emanuel Xavier's *Christlike*, his semiautobiographical novel from 1999, might agree that the poet knows where he comes from and what his background has molded. Yet he remains filled with wonder regarding his success which he notes in "In the Eighties": "Don't know how it happened. I suppose/ I was never meant to get this far./ There are places that nurture noble men/ but my eyes, disguised behind shades/ no innocence to find."

Xavier also catches us off guard with the suspiciously titled "A Simple Poem." It is utterly glorious in its urgent message to both our current and future generations to keep expressing via written and spoken words. Its disarming force is laced with mortality, sexuality, *sensuality*, and is beautifully lyrical:

Make me believe you
want to be a poet

Make my heart break,
tell me why you can never
love me
with just a few words
leave me lost and insecure
feel the admiration of
others
bask in their desire
forget that I am there

Pound your fists in the air
with passion
go off about politics,
poverty, machismo, and
hate
scream poems that don't
give a fuck
about traditions,
slamming, or scores
save your whispers for
those who make love to
you

Write a poem for me that
makes me want to puff a
joint

A poem that loses control
unafraid to be vulnerable
for once just make me
believe
it is all worth letting go
when the smoke clears
I will understand
the reason
I am just another face
in the crowd

I want you to continue
writing
because I will not always
be around

You can tell why Xavier's collection is so powerful because it is obvious that he knows the stakes. He will not allow our GLBT history to be painted a pretty shade of complacent pink.

Daphne Gottlieb describes the herstory of relationships with severely emotionally disturbed women. She notes, "All this time I thought I've been kissing, but maybe I'm always doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, kissing dead girls in the hopes that the heart will start again. Where there's breath, I've heard, there's hope."

Marty McConnell's takes her stand on keeping sex within the framework of social revolution:

what connects your gut
to your spine to your
heart

refusing to sacrifice any
facet of your sexuality
on the altar of any cause,
wearing the proof
of your life in the price
your loud pen will exact
knowing this life is an
argument with darkness,
a battle
to believe that morning
holds something
worth waking for,
something harder
than flesh

The anthology closes with Staceyann Chin, a Jamaican national whose lists

of accomplishments and press covered are beyond impressive. Her unnerving realism of "Christmas" could only be overshadowed by her "Thesis on Love." If she reads this review, I hope Chin will forgive me for chopping out two pieces to stun my readers with recognition:

The game of happily ever
after in love
is a cruel farce
the lonely wish of
a gullible asshole
who somebody done told
a whole lot of silly lies to
love is nothing
by the by-product of a
teenager
wagering hormonal
changes
against the smell of his
own diluted sperm
spilling innocent into his
awkward palm

Love
as I have understood it
is primarily
disappointment
and hard work and very
little return
so now I'm canvassing for
volunteers
to go tar the cupid who
conjured
the stupid concept
feather the fucker and
leave the body to burn

Bullets & Butterflies closes appropriately with Chin's "Audre Lorde." In addition to praising

Lorde's legacy of words, Chin also praises those who have come before us to fight oppression and the incantation for future generations to continue where others have left off.

This anthology is the perfect answer to those who would shun erotica for political gain. Being patronizing to the GLBT communities, and trying to soften our sexuality, is a step in the wrong direction.

I cannot recommend this book enough. If words could catch paper on fire, *Bullets & Butterflies* could burn down every bookstore and library in the world.

Bullets & Butterflies: Queer Spoken Word Poetry

(Suspect Thoughts Press, February 2005; ISBN: 0974638854)

Available at: Amazon.com / Amazon UK / Amazon CA

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