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bearing imagination...

REMICA BINGHAM INTERVIEW

by Rae Henaghan

I am thrilled to share my latest interview with author Remica Bingham about her book of poetry, *What We Ask of Flesh*. As a poet myself, I was very excited to sit down and really examine my first book of Etruscan poetry. *What We Ask of Flesh* takes you through many stories anchored in the pressures and violences that women have and do face. Remica Bingham's poetry cuts right to the heart—her talent echoing through a precise diction and rhythm with elegant lyricism, yet sometimes brutal content. Take deep and long breaths as you are moved from praises of the Lord to praises of the vulva, from retellings of Biblical stories to the South Side Street Photo. I encourage readers to sit with the introduction by Patricia Smith, who presents both personal and textual background to Remica and her work with great love and care; an analysis so well crafted that it is humbling to even speak of it.

While waiting for my first phone conversation with Remica, I became increasingly nervous to talk with and interview such an incredible poet. Though Remica is undeniably a great talent and remarkably sharp, I found that she also has the kind and encouraging thoughtfulness of a great teacher. I was fortunate to talk to Remica about *What We Ask of Flesh*, her work with Cave Canem, and her experience judging the 2014 Etruscan Prize.

1. When was *What We Ask of Flesh* written? Where did the book begin in your personal timeline as a poet?

What We Ask of Flesh was written from about 2004 to 2011. It takes me a good long while to finish a manuscript, or at least it has in the past. I work through so many revisions. As a poet, this book began, really, when I went to Cave Canem and as I was just starting to teach at a university. The project dawned just as I was starting to come into my own.

2. *What We Ask of Flesh* opens with a quotation from Judges 19:29-30 from the New Testament, a passage which also takes a central role in the first poem of the book, "The Body Speaks." For those of us unfamiliar with this Bible passage, could you explain the significance of Judges 19:29-30? How do you understand the role of the Bible in relationship to *What We Ask of Flesh*?

"The Body Speaks" is based on an account from the book of Judges chapter 19 in which a visiting woman is raped by a mob of townsmen. The woman dies shortly thereafter and,

upon finding her, the woman's husband cuts her into pieces and sends her body parts into each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

What We Ask of Flesh, and especially "The Body Speaks" suite, bloomed out of my weekly Bible reading. When I came across this passage in Judges, which I surely must have read before, I was really blown away by it. I dreamt of the woman for a long time after and, eventually, was compelled to try to construct parts of her story.

3. In our phone interview, you noted that you felt forced to write about this story. Where did this "force" come from? What was the process of writing "The Body Speaks" like for you, especially as a woman writing about gendered violence?

I was just obsessed with it, thinking about this woman as a wife and possibly a mother, and how women have been treated by society historically, by men historically, and how I was becoming a woman, entering into that legacy against my will. This woman just wouldn't set me free. The only way I knew to get free of her was to write her out of my body and into another kind of existence, to keep her living, in a way.

I wrote the earliest drafts of those poems almost in one sitting, certainly in one 24-hour period. They just kept coming. After I got drafts of the twelve pieces, I could breathe a little better. It really was a strange experience for me mentally and physically. I was exhausted afterward, but freer.

I think I was so arrested by her story at the time because I was about to buy my own house and be really alone for the first time in my life. I was frightened. I saw women brutalized everywhere—in the Bible, in movies, on the nightly news—and I'm sure without saying so I was thinking, *will this happen to me?* Often when I don't understand something or I'm frightened by it, I have to write about it to get a little closure, which is the next best thing to comfort for me.

4. In her review of *What We Ask of Flesh* on Rattle.com, Jane Alberdeston Coralin noted how "COME, came, comes, coming, v.," act as a collage:

"In the poem "COME, came, comes, coming, v.," Bingham gathers lines of poems and lays them as if they were quoted from other places within the collection, each line a body poised between quotation marks and arranged into a new poignancy, each constructing a montage of the overall theme: the women's body and all that's been enacted on that body, against the body, for the body and to it. Now, being the type of reader who enjoys starting a poetry collection at the end or in the middle and traveling through the book backwards and then forwards towards the last poem, my mind staggered with surprise when I came to "COME, came, comes, coming, v." The collage as poem (or poem as collage) is extremely inventive and yet the craft of the poem did not get in the way of its meaning. I found myself pinched between the sober discovery (or re-discovery) of the lines and images and the tongue-in-cheekiness of the form. And still the poem works hard to boat us through to the next section, while never truly leaving our minds."

Did you have the idea of a poetry collage in mind while writing “COME, come, comes, coming, v.,” and do you agree with this analysis?

Yes, I certainly take that as a compliment, and I hope the poem works that way. I didn't have that exact idea in mind, but I did think it was important to have this myriad of women speaking for and through the unnamed woman that the poem was about. I was reading so many things, lots of women poets especially, while writing *What We Ask of Flesh*, and they started to reside in me as well.

I revised “The Body Speaks” for years, and it took all different forms, literally. Then I thought about creating hybrid forms (like this one that works as a dictionary entry as well as a collage/chorus), just to shake myself out of being repetitious. I love working in formal verse, as it's constrictive and freeing at the same time.

5. As a poet and as a reader, *What We Ask of Flesh* challenged my presumptions about how eulogies could be written, their purpose, and even made me reconsider what poems I could identify as eulogies. How did eulogies become so central to the book? Is it possible that the book as a whole can act as a eulogy to women's bodies?

It's a eulogy and also a praise song. I am under no delusions that this isn't very difficult, heavy stuff, but I hope by illuminating all these lives, no matter how difficult, these poems help to validate the resilience of women. We are amazing creatures and we should honor that. And that was my intention, to honor women and specifically to thank some of the women who taught me something about survival, women like my grandmother Mary Knight, the poet Lucille Clifton, my cousin Jasmin, always my mother Doris, even the unnamed and unknown.

6. How did it feel to have your work praised by the great poet Lucille Clifton, and also to have such a beautiful and illuminating introduction by Patricia Smith?

What a nice follow-up question! I love to see Ms. Lucille's name here again. Ms. Lucille is a gift. I made sure she opens and closes *What We Ask of Flesh* because so much of what I want from my work is what I often find in her work. I was very fortunate to be put in touch with her by another fabulous poet Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, then I got to work with her at Cave Canem and she was such a giving person, kind-hearted and so funny. Her daughters carry that light now.

I met Patricia Smith, too, at Cave Canem, and I know we bonded in the middle of somebody's Soul Train Line! I cried the first time I read the introduction, mostly because I was so grateful to find that someone I loved and admired really, really knew and loved me, too. What a gift that is.

7. How did your experience at Cave Canem influence your writing of *What We Ask of Flesh*?

Well, you see I can barely give an answer without mentioning the Cave Canem retreat...it really was the place and time that changed everything for me. I met so many poets over that

three-year period who have become friends, colleagues, confidants, mentors. It was there that I felt valued, validated and *seen* as a poet. Some of the poems in *What We Ask of Flesh* were written at one of those retreats. One specifically that I can think of is “Things I Carried Coming Into the World,” which was written in response to a prompt from another of my favorite teachers from the retreat, Cyrus Cassells.

8. You have a connection with Tim Seibles, Etruscan poet and faculty member at Cave Canem. Did you work with him at Cave Canem? How do you know him?

I didn’t work with Seibles at Cave Canem. I studied with him as an undergrad, and he told me I needed to go to Cave Canem, so I applied over and over until they let me in. Seibles was and still is one of my closest mentors. I was writing these really terrible poems in undergrad but he saw something in them, or in me, and started giving me writing exercises and advice about how I could make this writing life a reality.

9. You noted Natasha Trethewey’s *Native Guard* as an influence in your writing. Specifically, you discussed the impact of her “precision” on your work. Where in the book should readers look out for this influence?

Oh, well, I’m influenced by Natasha (another teacher of mine) in countless ways. Her deft hand, especially in formal verse, is something I try to emulate. I go back to poems of hers like “Myth” and “Incident” with every book I’m trying to write.

10. As an Etruscan author, you were asked to judge the Etruscan Prize, awarded to one page of writing “that sings,” submitted by students in the Wilkes University low-residency graduate program in creative writing. What was it like to judge the Etruscan Prize contest? What was it that enticed you to select Ahrend Torrey as the winner for his poem “Trophic Cascade”?

What a great idea for a contest. All of the entries had to be only one page long, so all of the writers worked to put their best scene, paragraph, poem, etc. on the page. As I judged, I was just looking for sustained tension in the work. Since the writers only had one page, I wanted to be intrigued by all the decisions they made on that page, and I was with Ahrend’s poem. That’s what I want from my own work, too.

Remica L. Bingham, a native of Phoenix Arizona, is an alumna of Old Dominion University, Bennington College, and is a Cave Canem fellow. Her first book, *Conversion* (Lotus Press, 2007), won the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award and was shortlisted for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. She resides with her husband and children in Norfolk, VA, where she currently serves as the Director of Writing and Faculty Development at Old Dominion University.

Visit Remica Bingham’s website: <http://www.remicalbingham.com/>

To learn more about Cave Canem, visit: <https://www.cavecanempoets.org>

Rae Henaghan is a writer and artist living in New Orleans. Rae is a big nerd for politically and culturally conscious poetry, queer history, good tattoos, and spending time with nature (preferably with dogs). Rae graduated from Hampshire College in 2012 with a concentration in queer studies and poetry and was an active organizer in the LGBTQIA community. Rae is currently working on exploring more of New Orleans and its history and writing.