

Between Bars Podcast
Episode 1
Transcript

Hello, and welcome to the inaugural episode of Between Bars, a poetry podcast. I'm your host, SheryLeigh, a performance poet, author, and blogger.

Between Bars is designed to not only share poetry, but to explore the stories and inspiration behind the bars.

For this initial episode, I'm sharing a piece from my book, "black pearls." The poem is entitled "Fire Escape."

Fire Escape

Quit fanning the flame.

On the anniversary of Michael Brown's killing,
The Post removed the mystery
of missing names.⁵
It tallied the casualties
of a war that knew neither beginning
nor end, proving
that when police bullets make homes of unarmed bodies,
the victims are disproportionately
black.
Different names
various trespasses
assorted threatening movements—
uniform consequence.

In the infamous Comments section
among the compassion of sympathizers
and declarations of revolutionaries
were foolish notions
made by the willfully ignorant,
reducing hard facts to figments
of dark imaginations,
shifting blame
from perpetrator to truth seeker:
Quit fanning the flame.

As if the fire is fed by anything other
than black bodies.
White supremacy as tinder,
poverty as kindling,
black bones for firewood,
lit with a match of suffering,

breathed on
with the weary sighs of survivors.

When leaping flames died down to embers
this society heaped on
ghettos and gerrymandering,
wage gaps and predatory lending.
This government
claimed spontaneous combustion
while stoking the fire
with raised police batons and slammed jail cells.
The only oxygen fanning flames
is the hot air of post-racial denial
and the stolen breaths
of the missing names.

This blaze that began as bonfire
for your amusement
was fine when it was contained.
But once flames
leapt across MLK Avenues
to threaten downtown revenue,
when protests disrupted your commutes
and disturbed the quiet of your symphonies,
when entire cities
became inferno,
at last
you called for assistance.

But as you stood watch
from a comfortable distance,
water hoses were trained on buildings and bodies alike,
more trauma
inflicted on those who have never known life
without burn,
people who have learned
to function under the constant wail of sirens,
to be lulled to sleep by the rhythm
of snap, crackle, pop,

people who caution their children
to stop, drop, and roll—
though imperfect,
it is more successful than attempts
to raise them to be fire-resistant adults.
These parents cannot prevent
sparks in lives that are flammable

by design.
Generations of bodies and belongings
eaten alive
with no reparations.
Their hearts keep time
to a pendulum swinging
between depression
and hope
that beauty will spring
from this mounting pile of ashes,
that one day Savior
will offer safe passage
through a fire escape of gold.
But today
they strain to breathe
through the smoke's chokehold
on life and dreams,
their smoldering spirits pleading
for rain.

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That was Fire Escape.

This poem started taking shape in 2015, after I read a *Washington Post* article entitled “Black and unarmed: One year after Michael Brown’s shooting death.”

The subhead included a startling statistic: “a year after Michael Brown’s fatal shooting, unarmed black men were 7 times more likely than whites to die by police gunfire.”

As most of you know, Michael Brown was a black, 18-year-old killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. His death was an affront to black people for several reasons. He was young. He was unarmed. And his body was left on the street for 4 hours.

Obviously, people took the streets in protest. I think this may have been of the first times in recent years that we saw law enforcement take a strong, military-like stance in response to protesters. And protests crept up across the country several times over the next year following similar tragedies.

Yes, Michael Brown was just one of many. In the opening lines of the poem, I say the Post removed the mystery of missing names. On one hand, I’m referring to the fact that so many deaths of unarmed people were not being reported because they weren’t recorded, or people simply didn’t know about them. But I’m also referring to another poem in my book entitled *Missing Names*, which speaks to the fact that the roll call of victims is so long and exhausting that sometimes we purposely look away and choose not to learn all the names and details.

But when the article ran, there were some names that had recently been in the headlines. There was:

- John Crawford, who just four days before Michael Brown died, was shot and killed in a Walmart while holding a BB gun that was for sale in the store
- Tamir Rice, age 12, was killed in Cleveland in November of the same year when his toy gun was mistaken for the real thing.
- April 4, 2015, Walter Scott was shot to death as he ran away from police in North Charleston, South Carolina.
- Sandra Bland was found hanged in a Texas jail after a traffic stop in July of 2015.

So, this was the climate in America – more specifically in Black America – when the *Washington Post* ran the article in August 2015 sharing the results of investigations of fatal shootings by the police at the time. It had been a rough year, stacked on top of hundreds of trying years for black people in this country.

When I read the article back then, I did what everyone knows you should NEVER do: I started reading the comments. And as the poem shared, I was really struck by one:

“Stop fanning the flames,” is what the commenter said.

The flame or fire in question in the commenter’s mind appears to be the agitation of the black community, the outrage and desire for justice. The commenter seemed to be under the impression that the fire would just die down if it was left alone. The black community’s anger and cries for justice would quiet if the Post and other media would just stop covering it.

This single comment – and I know it was no more than like a sentence – enraged me more than the statistics I read in the article.

Now, of course the term fanning the flame is a popular saying used to describe something someone might do to make a bad situation worse, or to further incense people who are already angry.

But that’s such an overly simplistic view of the problem. And it’s such a common view of the problem. And that dismissive attitude is infuriating. This idea that if we just don’t talk about it, the problem will go away, is foolish. It’s not like the Post ran an article solely focused on the anniversary of Michael Brown’s death – no, they did the work to show how the problem persisted. So what was likely to further anger people was the fact that unarmed people were still dying – not the fact that the Post shined a light on it. Basically, I felt like the commenter was worried about the wrong things.

I thought it was interesting that the commenter used an idiom that strikes such imagery. Fire is so dangerous and destructive. It claims lives and property. It mercilessly eats up anything in its path.

Now, we all know that wind, or fanning the flame, can cause fires to spread or intensify, or at a minimum keep burning. What I was trying to do with this piece is explain that for the fire in question – the outrage surrounding killing of unarmed black people – blaming news coverage is a cop-out.

You don’t have to fan a flame if you keep adding fuel to the fire. I wanted to paint a picture of black bodies as the primary source of fuel. But I also wanted to point out that it’s so much more. It is a history of injustices – from violence to policies – that feeds the fire. In the line “this

government claimed spontaneous combustion while stoking the fire,” I want us to be honest that we can’t say we don’t know how we got here. Ugly parts of our history as well as a current criminal justice system that disproportionately punishes people of color. And then I wanted to suggest that any air feeding the fire wasn’t from news coverage – but perhaps the hot air of people like the commenters, the sighs of the people left behind, and of course, the stolen breaths of the victims.

The next part of the piece starts with “this blaze that began as bonfire for your amusement…” Like I said, I think the fire has been burning for hundreds of years. This line is a nod to a time when black people were regularly executed in the middle of polite society, without judge or jury. Lynchings were a part of American life, and the bodies of the victims were often set on fire and the pieces carried off as souvenirs. So it’s just another reminder of the true source of the fire,

It’s also an introduction to a section that suggests that the flames aren’t really seen as a big problem for the majority of the population until it begins to affect them and their way of life personally. The fire of black bodies is problematic when we have to board up storefronts of downtown buildings. Or “when protests disrupted your commutes and disturbed the quiet of your symphonies” because at the time, protesters were showing up in random places to draw attention to the issue, inconveniencing people who would otherwise look away.

But of course, black people could not look away. The fire had always been in our community. And even attempts to put it out tended to heap more harm on black and brown people. Fire was a part of life – either we were in it or on the fringes of it.

Finally, I wanted to talk about the long-term effects of the fire – the trauma it inflicts on the black community – as I said, “people who have never known life without burn.” For one, there’s obviously the danger of the fire.

But there’s also just the anxiety of it all. The noise of the sirens. The heat of the fire itself. Trying to teach your children how to survive – stop, drop, and roll – so many black and brown people have ‘the talk’ with their kids regarding how to interact with the police. It’s like we know we could never make them fireproof – because they’re flammable by design when you consider the systemic problems of our society – but maybe we can teach them how to survive the fire. They’ll carry some burns, but at least they’ll be alive. But no matter what you teach them, there’s the possibility that no move on their part will be the right one, that your instructions may not be enough. No one is safe while the fire rages on. It’s trauma.

Last week I was watching NBC Nightly News and there was a story on about U.S. veterans who served in the Middle East. At military bases during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they had to figure out how to dispose of things in the middle of the desert. The simple solution seemed to be to burn it – trash, vehicles, electronics, human waste – you name it, they burned it. Years later, many of them are dealing with serious health issues as a result of breathing in toxic fumes from those fires. Just simply being in proximity to the fire – breathing the exhaust from it – takes a toll on the body.

In this poem, I wanted us to consider the toll the fire of police brutality has on the black community. Not just the victims who are literally swallowed up in the fire, but the black community as a whole - who are in proximity to the fire and inhaling the toxic fumes. The fire kills hopes and dreams instantly, but with the fume from the smoke, the hopes and dreams of survivors die a slow death.

I wasn't sure what poem I would share for the inaugural episode of this podcast, but Fire Escape seemed like an obvious choice given all that's happening in the world right now. When I started working on this episode, we were awaiting a decision in the trial of former officer Derek Chauvin for the death of George Floyd. We were also reeling from news of Daunte Wright's death in the same metropolitan area **during** the trial, and then we were faced with the news of Adam Toledo's killing in Chicago shortly thereafter.

I know that so many in the black and brown community balance the despair of knowing how similar cases have played out in the past, with the hope that things will be different this time. We lean into our faith, praying that there will be beauty for our ashes and that God will send rain to end the fire once and for all.

I was prepared to end this podcast resigning that we have to live in the tension that exists between the disappointment of previous acquittals and hope for justice in the future. I was going to tell you that we should try to find comfort in the fact that God lives there with us. There in the tension – and yes, even in the fire – that through it all, God is with us.

And yes, that is still all true, so I'm glad I've said it. But I'm so relieved, grateful, and honestly somewhat surprised, that there has been a conviction. It's a reminder to me that there is always reason to hope – not just that God is sitting high in heaven ready and willing to dump rain on manmade fires, but more likely that God is able to move in people's hearts and minds to bring change. That the people God changes will find courage to convict wrongdoing, to create more just laws, and to make such abuses of power as politically incorrect as the N word.

Amos 5:24 says:

But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

We can pray for rain. But justice - like we saw in a Minneapolis courtroom today, and the refusal to add any more bodies to the burning pile – can not only stop the fire but end it completely. Today was a big step, but we have so much further to go. I pray that as a society, we'll find the courage to do it.

You have been listening to Between Bars, a poetry podcast. I'm your host, SheryLeigh. Because I'm a madwoman, this episode was also written and produced by yours truly, with some sound effects courtesy of the folks at Zapsplat.

You can find the poem Fire Escape in my book "black pearls," which is available on Amazon under my full name – Sheryl Leigh Robertson. You can follow me on Instagram and Facebook @sheryleighwrites and on Twitter at @sheryleigh or you can visit my website sheryleigh.com. Also feel free to email comments and suggestions to info@sheryleigh.com. This is very much a work in progress, so I welcome your feedback on format, etc. You can also find all of this contact information in the show notes.

Thank you so much for joining me on this lyrical journey. If this episode resonated with you, I hope you'll subscribe and/or share it with a friend.

Take care of yourselves. I'll see you next time, between the bars.