

Between Bars Podcast
Episode 2: Sabbath
Transcript

Hey, everyone. Welcome to Between Bars, a poetry podcast in which we not only share poems, but also explore the inspiration behind the bars. I'm Sheryl Leigh, your host and resident poet.

Today's episode was recorded the week before Mother's Day. While one might typically expect a tribute piece in honor of the occasion, I wanted to share a poem that speaks to the daily lives of mothers – and the lives of women in general. I settled on "Sabbath, which is a piece from my poetry collection, "black pearls."

Let's listen.

[Sabbath

At any given moment
A black woman
Who juggles roles, responsibilities, and emotions
While ducking the bombardment
Of racism and sexism
Is gradually losing her rhythm.
It is undetectable
To the naked eye,
The way her graceful hand movements
Grow slow and methodical,
The occasional stumble
In her fluid steps.

She misses a beat
But recovers quickly.
She misses again,
Resuming less convincingly.
Her hand-eye coordination worsens
And her legs grow wobbly.
She fumbles the items she juggles
And finds herself too heavy
to dodge the world's volleys.
She watches in disbelief
As her roles, responsibilities, and emotions
Fall from her tired hands
In slow motion.
She stoops to the ground,
Scrambling to retrieve them
And reconvene her familiar routine
Before anyone notices.

But in her haste
To return to her feet
She misses an opportunity
To regain composure.

If she would slow her pace
Long enough to breathe,
Let the pieces of her life fall where they may,
Sit cross-legged among the debris
And still herself
Long enough to sit in God's presence,
She would remember
That Strong Black Woman
Is not a name He gave her.
He knows her as Daughter
He calls her Beloved.]

That was "Sabbath."

To start, I don't want to assume that everyone knows the origins of sabbath. The word refers to a time of rest and worship. Primarily observed by people of the Jewish and Christian faiths, the sabbath uses the creation story as a model for how we should approach life. In the Bible, we read that God created the world in six days – and on the seventh day, He rested.

Different people, churches, and cultures observe the sabbath on different days and in different ways. But however it is observed, the general idea is to rest and draw closer to God.

I also want to acknowledge that women of all races can relate to most of this poem. However, as a black woman, I wanted to center black women in this piece because those two identities – blackness and womanhood – add another layer to the experience.

So, we begin the poem watching a black woman. All the different pieces of her life are balls and she's juggling them. Obviously, women have many different roles – it could be wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, cousin – and that's just the personal side. A woman may also be an employee, a boss, a student, a church member, a sorority sister. Maybe she's a member of a sports team or of a planning committee. Hey, maybe she's a writer...

She's all those things, and each role demands something from her. During the pandemic, so many moms are juggling work and family. That's difficult when the world is normal, so when she's working from home at the same time that the kids are learning from home, and she has to help with homework in between her meetings... it's enough to make her scream... or cry.

That's right, there are emotions that must be juggled as well. And depending how busy life is – or how unrelenting those emotions are – the woman may give herself permission to feel them.

So those are the things the woman is juggling, but she's particularly skillful because she is simultaneously dodging things being thrown at her – the poem says she's "ducking the bombardment of racism and sexism." It's the micro- and macro-aggressions. No matter how masterful she is at juggling the pieces of her life, she can't control when or how either of those "isms" will be thrown at her. She's just got to try not to get hit – and not to drop any of her balls.

I wanted to paint this picture because a juggler is on display for the entertainment of others. People watch them in awe and amusement. The audience is amazed by their tricks. So often we as a society see people who are managing completely overextended lives, and we stare and even applaud, but we don't have a real appreciation for what it takes for them to juggle it all. Because they do it well, we assume that they do it without struggle. But the concentration, the

strength, the perseverance displayed... particularly while dodging what is being thrown at them... Each of these things is a challenge by itself, but together, they can be overwhelming.

As we watch this black woman juggle, she misses a beat. No one notices at first because she's so good that she can recover quickly. But the juggling becomes more difficult because she's tired and no one can juggle nonstop without their hands, eyes, or mind betraying them.

To make matters worse, the poem says "she fumbles the items she juggles / and finds herself too heavy / to dodge the world's volleys." Heaviness comes not from the things we're juggling, but the things we carry. The burdens of our hearts. The grief, disappointments, and betrayals. Oftentimes, we don't deal with them, and just allow life and people to stack more and more upon them, until we can no longer move about freely.

When this woman – this mother – can't take it anymore, everything she's been juggling "falls from her tired hands." So many of us have been there before. We miss the meeting or turn in a project that's not our best work. We feed the child fast food yet again. The house looks like a tornado hit it. We yell at the husband. We don't return our friend's call. We tell our sibling it's their turn to help our parents. All at once. Everything we're juggling falls to the ground.

But one day after I myself slipped, something occurred to me: there's nothing that says you have to jump to your feet and immediately start juggling again.

I recently heard a black female therapist say that her black female clients say they don't have time for a breakdown. It's like, "I have to get back to my routine because people are expecting a show."

I'm not naïve, I know we all have to get up eventually. But when we hit those moments in which we unintentionally drop everything and fall to the ground, perhaps it's okay to stay there for a minute.

We often try to spring back to life without skipping a beat. We want to pick up the pieces and clean up the mess before people start staring and pointing. But maybe what you need is to sit there, as the poem says, "Cross-legged among the debris." I've always considered that a bit of a childlike posture. It not only says that I'm staying a while, but that I'm comfortable and not concerned with trying to appear poised in this moment. It says, "I've come to receive."

I believe the stillness of that posture and the quiet of that moment is a perfect place to meet God. To be restored, breathed into, reenergized. To cry. To acknowledge that there is a power greater than you who set the world in motion, and who will ensure it keeps turning. To rest.

For this woman – and for so many of us – life is performative. She is focused on actions, meeting the expectations of others and even those of herself. She's juggling for the crowd because she places her value in whether or not she can manage all of these things simultaneously, while dodging the hate being thrown at her. She has given in to the narrative of the Strong Black Woman and will sacrifice her wellbeing in order to uphold it.

But as the poem says, "Strong Black Woman / is not a name He [meaning God] gave her." She can drop the roles and responsibilities sometimes. She can be hit and tend to her wound. She can be less than perfect.

“He knows her as Daughter / He calls her beloved.” Beloved, a person who is greatly loved. That is the name God has given her. She doesn’t have to perform to hold that title. She can simply be, and she is loved. That’s a powerful position to approach life from. When you’re loved, simply because of who you are – not what you do, not what you say, not how you look, not what you earn, not what everyone wants from you – then you’re able to rest in that love, stop performing for the love of others, and give yourself grace in those times when life becomes too much.

Now, this poem obviously explores sabbath as a reactionary practice. We become overwhelmed, things fall apart, and therefore, we rest and spend time with God in order to be able to effectively pick it all back up again.

However, I encourage us to embrace sabbath as a preventative practice. Because we are, as a wise person once said, human *beings* and not human *doings*, we recognize that there are times when we need to simply be. Be still and at rest, or even to be engaged in a fun activity and therefore, also at rest. To be present with the Father. And in all of it, being restored little by little so that we’re less likely to have to watch everything fall apart again in the near future.

I’m sharing this poem today for the mothers, for black women, and for women in general. Women who know what it means to juggle and who know the stinging feeling of failure when your hands can no longer carry it all. So many people will say they salute you, but I’m sharing this poem to say, “I see you.” I acknowledge that you house both greatness and fragility.

I hope you also know that God sees you. And that God never intended for you to wait until you’re dead to take your rest. Sabbath is available to you whenever you choose to observe it.

This was Between Bars, a poetry podcast. I’m your host and producer, SheryLeigh. with some sound effects courtesy of the folks at Zapsplat.

You can find the poem “Sabbath” in the book “black pearls,” which was written by me, Sheryl Leigh Robertson, and which is available on Amazon. You can connect with me on Instagram and Facebook @sheryleighwrites and on Twitter at @sheryleigh, or you can visit my website sheryleigh.com. I gladly accept feedback and suggestions at info@sheryleigh.com. Finally, for your convenience, all of this information is available in the show notes.

I hope you’re enjoying our time on this lyrical journey. If this episode resonated with you, please subscribe, leave a rating on Apple Podcasts, and/or share it with a friend.

Thank you for joining me, beloved. Wishing you rest and peace. I’ll see you next time, between the bars.