

Between Bars, Season 1, Episode 5
“Thirty-Something”

Hey, everyone. Welcome to Between Bars. This is a poetry podcast exploring the inspiration behind the bars. I’m your host, Sheryl Leigh.

Your tardy host, Sheryl Leigh. It has been over a month since the last episode, which means I have failed to meet my goal of producing a podcast twice a month. I would run down my excuses, but at the end of the day, they don’t really matter. I just have to do better.

However, I will admit that I was procrastinating on this episode a bit. I was wondering what to share and since my birthday passed, I thought maybe I’d go with my poem “Thirty-Something” from my book *black pearls*. And then... I read “Thirty-Something” for the first time in a long time and promptly closed my book and my laptop and went to bed.

In the couple of weeks since I decided I was not ‘going there,’ of course, life took me there. And dropped me off. So here we are. Today’s poem is “Thirty-Something.”

Thirty-Something

I have been humbled
at thirty-something
to find myself facing
every issue of the heart
my twenty-something-self pushed aside
rather than conquer.
I have learned
progress is not permanent,
some demons must be cast out again
and again,
and you only grow to the extent
you’re willing to revisit
places you have already been.

There are lessons back there.
Wisdom buried
at the bottom of boxes you hastily packed as you fled
without warning,
etched on the face of the person
with whom it pains you to make eye contact,
written in the script of scenes you impulsively reenact...
and later regret,
inscribed in fiction
you mistook for fact,
hitched to dreams stolen
when you were too timid to fight back.

At thirty-something

I have caved to a wanderlust soul
mastering time-travel
between present-day angst and the lessons
back there.

I am still learning to find meaning
in being my own
to shun the private shame
of not being someone else's,
to not seek salvation
in a changed last name.

I am still accepting singleness
is not punishment
for sins long forgiven
or the disadvantage
of being damaged
goods.

I am still fighting to reject suggestions
that I am difficult to love,
too much complexity and sensitivity,
too little dependence and openness,
anything other than just right
for the right one.

I am still conceiving
a grace-induced evolution
to just-right status
that accounts for my imperfections.

I am still struggling
not to carry the hurt of lost loves
like untreated battle wounds,
turning relationships into emergency rooms
and placing bleeding heart in the hands of men
not qualified to operate.

I am still discovering
that healing comes during the wait,
in the hushing of voices
that tell me I have been forgotten,
that say my house is silent,
that claim my bed is empty,
as if my presence
does not count for anything,
as if there is no value
in my voice,
as if I am not a full person on my own—
ample mind, body, and spirit
to fill a home.

I am realizing

both the challenge and beauty
of thirty-something
is no different than
the joy and heartache
of any age.
It is always
the learning.

That was “Thirty-Something.”

Full disclosure: my thirties were a bit rough. At some point in the middle of them, I decided I was going to write a blog post entitled “Why My Thirties Have Been So Dirty.” I planned to turn the phrase Dirty Thirties on its head. I didn’t mean dirty in the fun and exciting way that phrase is often intended. I meant, “y’all told me this was gonna be lit, and my life has determined... that was a lie.”

I never actually wrote the blog post—maybe I was waiting to figure everything out. Obviously that day never came. But I did learn—or more accurately, learned to accept—a few things, which led me to write this poem as my 30s were winding down.

I titled the poem Thirty-Something because your 30s is really the decade in which your precise age seems to matter less and less. You could be 33 or 37... it’s all *grown* grown, and you’re less likely to want to announce the specific year to people and unlikely to be able to pinpoint precise growth moments. I feel like it happens slowly, and then all at once.

The thing about my 30s is I approached them expecting to pretty much have everything figured out. Never mind the fact that there was still so much I didn’t know at 29. Somehow the world had me naively thinking that when God flipped the switch on my 30s, I was magically going to be wiser, bolder, and happier. I was going to stop caring what people thought, I was going to take more risks, I was going to be more fun and flirty, I was going to write epic pieces, I was going to live the life I dreamed about.

Not only did God not flip a switch when I turned 30, the whole experience was just as I wrote in the opening line of the poem: humbling. I wasn’t at the place I expected to be. That was partially because of things I avoided dealing with earlier in life, and partially because I assumed that you conquer things once and for all—when, in actuality, as the poem says, “progress is not permanent, some demons must be cast out again and again, and you only grow to the extent you’re willing to revisit places you have already been.”

We rightfully put a lot of emphasis on moving forward, but it’s important to look back. How else can you learn from your mistakes, or duplicate your successes, or identify the little tweaks needed to take you from good to great?

Sometimes we’re so anxious to escape a time, place, situation – or even an age – that we flee without gaining all we needed from the experience. In the poem, I note that “there are lessons back there.” There is wisdom in the people we were so desperate to get away from—of course not abusers or anything like that, but simply the people who made us uncomfortable because being around them forced us to grow, people who we hurt or who hurt us, people who cause us to second-guess the way we see the world and ourselves, there’s wisdom in all of them.

But not just people. There is wisdom, as I said in the poem, “in the script of scenes you impulsively reenact.” How often have we found ourselves doing the same things over and over again, without even realizing it until the moment has passed and it’s too late to act differently? There is wisdom in “the fiction you mistook for fact,” or the lies about ourselves and the world that we’ve been repeating for years without any real proof. And there is wisdom “hitched to the dreams stolen when you were too timid to fight back,” which refers to all the good we’ve forfeited because we assumed that the presence of challenges meant those good things were not for us.

Those were all lessons from my 20s, and really even my early 30s, that I could more easily identify in my late 30s. I realized that I had a lot of regrets and I had to face them if I had any hopes of living the life of my dreams. Some days I had to be patient with my soul and its desire to travel back there from time to time in order to gather wisdom, and other days, I had to push myself to be fully present in the current moment in order to implement the changes I desired.

During my trips down memory lane, I realized that I was still struggling with some of the same things. If I’m honest, I recognize that even today, I still struggle with some of the same things, because as I said in the poem, “some demons must be cast out again and again.” That may not be sound theology for literal spiritual demons, but it rings true for bad habits and bad thought patterns.

I was talking to someone today who commented that there are a lot of us women of a certain age who have never been married and have no children. Yep, we’re out here! The single life has so many benefits and high points, but let’s face it, girls are conditioned in childhood to love the idea of love. It’s no secret that our society places a high value on marriage and motherhood. It’s easy to fall into the trap of feeling less than if you find yourself without those things.

This poem was really a refresher course for me. A reminder that marriage won’t save me, that singleness is not a curse, and that I am neither too much nor not enough. That, as the poem says, I’m “just right for the right one.” That I can’t move forward carrying the hurts of the past, that men are incapable of treating my emotional wounds, that healing comes through the quieting of voices that shout or whisper anything contrary to the truth of what God has said—which is that I am good, I am loved, I am whole.

As I mentioned, your 30s are humbling because people have given you the false expectation that you’ll already know it all. You expect to easily discern which job or city or path or person or dream is the right fit. The truth is, you don’t automatically know in your 30s... and you may not immediately know at any age. Every decade requires pulling from the experiences and wisdom of the past in order to create the future you desire.

I told you earlier that I assumed that in my 30s I was going to stop caring what people thought, take more risks, be more fun and flirty, write epic pieces, and live the life I dreamed about. Interestingly enough, I realized after typing those words that I did each of those things in my 30s. I may not have done them the moment I turned 30, and I may not have done them all at once, but I did them. I may have had to fight myself tooth and nail the first time I did them, and fight myself again for every occurrence thereafter, but I did every one of those things. And it took forcing myself to look back at this poem and the moments from my past to realize just how far I’ve come. It took unpacking the lessons back there to assure me that I can do those things in the future.

Hmmmm. Maybe, just maybe, my 30s weren’t so dirty after all.

Before we close this episode, I did something a little different this time around that I wanted to share with you. Years ago when I was still thinking about blogging about my 30s, at one point I played around with the idea of choosing a bunch of song lyrics that resonated with me, and then expounding upon them. Of course I had way too many lyrics and songs to pull that off. However, I did keep a decent list in my phone. I found it as I was working on this episode and decided to create a playlist of the songs on Spotify. Now, disclaimers: 1) some of the songs are explicit so listen at your own risk, 2) there is at least one song on the list that I disagree with (I was just planning to write about the fact that it was indicative of what's wrong in the world), 3) some of the songs are on this list not because the song in its entirety spoke to my life, but as a writer, I'm a sucker for a good line—so some songs made the list because of one line and one line only, and 4) this is not an exhaustive list; of course there are a million others that should have been on the list, but for whatever reason, they didn't leave me feeling inspired to write. Okay, disclaimers aside, if you'd like to listen, I've placed a link to the playlist in the show notes. You can also look me up on Spotify @sheryl_leigh. The playlist is called Thirty-Something. I also made it collaborative, so if you feel like there's a song that should be on the list, you can add it.

Okay, I think that's it for this go-round. You have been listening to Between Bars with SheryLeigh. You can find me on Instagram and Facebook @sheryleighwrites, on Twitter at @sheryleigh, and on my website at sheryleigh.com. The poem you heard on this episode can be found in my book black pearls, which is available for purchase on Amazon or from my website. If you have thoughts or suggestions, feel free to email me at info@sheryleigh.com.

Thank you for listening. If you know anyone trying to get through the dirtiness of their 30s—or any age—feel free to share this episode to let them know they're not alone in trying to figure it all out. Also, don't forget to subscribe to Between Bars wherever you listen to podcasts, and to rate us on Apple Podcasts.

See you soon, between the bars.