

Between Bars, Season 1, Episode 6
“Origami”

Hello. Welcome to Between Bars, a poetry podcast exploring the stories between the lines. This is your host, SheryLeigh.

Your on-time host, SheryLeigh. Last episode I called myself out for being tardy. This time I’m quite punctual and I don’t see anything wrong with shouting myself out for that. Baby steps.

For our latest episode, I’ve decided to share a short piece that’s been on my mind over the last week or so. It’s called “Origami.” I’ll read the poem and then tell you why I’ve been thinking about it.

Origami

A woman learns to fold
inwardly
inventively
like origami,
finished product
whatever you need her to be.

She thinks this trick
makes her more interesting
more likeable.
She is relieved when the crowd marvels
at the many shapes made of her.
But she can’t tell
whether she is admired
for her creativity
or exploited
for her flexibility.

She claims her contortions
harmless.
She rationalizes
changes made without scissors
can be undone.
But in time
simple folds leave permanent creases.
With each new shape
she veers further from the original.
Unable to smooth out the crinkles,
incapable of making
the bends less noticeable,
she folds herself
again and again
until there is nothing left
but the flimsy, ragged

remains
of what she used to be.

That was “Origami.”

So what made me think of this poem recently? A petite dose of black girl magic who goes by the name of Simone Biles. I, like much of the world, was shocked when it was announced that the young gymnast was not going to compete in the Olympic games that she had spent years preparing for. I was equally surprised when it was revealed that she cited her mental health as a reason for sitting out certain events. It was a bold move. One that was sure to draw unwelcome opinions from around the globe. She was on top of her game, the greatest gymnast in the world. It was the most inconvenient time ever to take a seat. People would question her strength and her sportsmanship, her patriotism and her perseverance—yet she did it anyway.

I had flashbacks to several weeks prior when tennis phenom Naomi Osaka bowed out of Wimbledon, also prioritizing her mental health. Another major world stage. Another young woman dominating her sport. Another inopportune time. Another flurry of opinions and criticisms. Yet she did it anyway.

And I could not be prouder.

I don’t know exactly when I got the idea for “Origami.” However, it probably came sometime after hearing a speech given by one of my favorite writer boos, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She gave us the books “Americanah” and “Purple Hibiscus,” as well as the essay “We Should All Be Feminists.” She also gave an inspiring commencement speech to the 2015 graduating class of Wellesley College, during which she said these words: “All over the world, girls are raised to make themselves likeable, to twist themselves into shapes that suit other people.”

Profound and powerful. Words that stuck with me. So, at some point in the future I thought of Origami. If you’re not familiar, it’s the Japanese art of folding paper into shapes. According to Wikipedia, “the goal is to transform a flat square sheet of paper into a finished sculpture through folding and sculpting techniques. Modern origami practitioners generally discourage the use of cuts, glue, or markings on the paper.” Origami pieces can take whatever shape you want, ranging from something as simple as a heart to something as intricate as an animal. Versatile.

As the poem begins, women are like origami in that we fold inwardly. We learn to work with who and what we are, one piece of paper without any extra parts, and we fold ourselves until we become something different altogether. It could be as simple as straightening our hair for the job interview, or swallowing our words during a heated exchange with a friend, or turning off our trash talking during a game with a significant other. Each is a fold, as the woman becomes smaller, a different shape that other people would find more pleasing.

The poem states that “she is relieved when the crowd marvels at the many shapes made of her.” There is something about the applause, the approval, that becomes almost addictive. It’s almost like she can’t exhale until people agree that she’s good, that they like her.

Then there’s the line about whether she’s “admired for her creativity or exploited for her flexibility.” I’ve found myself here before, basically unsure whether people truly like me for who I am or if they simply

like the fact that I tend to be nice and agreeable and go with the flow. But beyond that, as human beings, we tend to admire people's natural gifts and talents. However, at the same time, we tend to view those same gifted people as superhuman. As if, just because they can do somersaults and flips and tricks in the air, that sticks and stones can't break their bones, or words could never hurt them. If you can't appreciate someone's gifts and abilities within the context of their humanity, you can't accept the fullness of who they are.

Back in the day when I was still sitting behind tiny desks in schoolrooms, one of the things I noticed as I watched my classmates fold papers into shapes – no, I never did it because I don't have the patience – but one of the things I noticed was that the paper, even when it was unfolded, never completely returned to its original shape. As the poem says, "She rationalizes changes made without scissors can be undone." One of the defining things about origami is that you can't cut or use scissors. So it's easy to think that you're only making small changes, that there's no real significance to the little folds you're making here and there. That it can all be undone whenever you're ready.

"But in time simple folds leave permanent creases." That's what Simone and Naomi realized early in their 20s that some of us are still trying to grasp decades later. Every little fold, every time you become a different shape, it creates a crease or a crinkle. The more creases you have, the less you look like the original, the further you venture from who you started out as and who you are ultimately meant to be. In fact, what I noticed all those years ago in school, is that if you fold paper enough times, in the same places, a hole begins to form. The paper begins to tear. And the more you mess with it, the more the paper tears and the bigger the hole becomes.

That's what happens when you're folding yourself to fit into shapes that have been defined by others—you begin to tear away at the things that make you unique. You create gaping holes in your soul. But when you remain true to who you are, when you concede to what you need, you maintain your original shape. You can still recognize yourself. You feel a sense of gratitude for who God made you to be and a sense of pride for how you have remained true to yourself.

Origami is beautiful when paper is used to create it. But human beings were never meant to fold, twist, and contort themselves to fit other people's ideas and preferences. Be you—boldly, beautifully, wholly.

This was Between Bars with Sheryleigh. Follow me on Instagram and Facebook @sheryleighwrites, on Twitter at @sheryleigh, and online at sheryleigh.com. This episode's featured poem, "Origami," can be found in my book black pearls, which is available for purchase on Amazon or my website. I also welcome your thoughts and suggestions at info@sheryleigh.com.

Additionally, I welcome all of your people to join us on this podcast journey – so feel free to share this episode. Also, remember to subscribe to Between Bars wherever you listen to podcasts, and to rate us on Apple Podcasts.

Thank you, as always, for listening. Take care.