

**Between Bars, Season 1, Episode 7**  
**“Something in the Water”**

Hey, everyone, and welcome. This is Between Bars, a poetry podcast exploring the stories between the lines. And I’m your host, SheryLeigh.

This episode’s poem is one that I decided on a little while ago. The anniversary of Hurricane Katrina is this week. And with it being hurricane season and areas enduring deadly and devastating floods, I wanted to share “Something in the Water.” It’s a piece from my second book, “black pearls.”

**Something in the Water**

There’s something in the water.  
Of the Atlantic:  
Unrecognizable bodies  
loved in distant lives,  
nameless in death.  
Obstinate chains and defiant bones  
sunken to depths  
unknown  
and scattered across ocean floor.  
That something in the water  
is an eternal echo of the screams  
of the innocent,  
the vestiges  
of stolen dreams.

There’s something in the water.  
Of the Bayou:  
The bloated bodies  
of those perpetually stranded  
by circumstance and finance.  
The tattered doilies  
that once had a place at every family dinner.  
The blurred passages of diaries  
that held more family history than mouths will ever utter.  
That something in the water  
is the cherished fragments of modest lives,  
the despair of drowning dreams,  
memories gasping for air.

There’s something in the water.  
Of Flint:  
Specks of greed,  
traces of neglect,  
the ink of discarded memos  
flowing to the taps of unsuspecting homes.  
A truth more repugnant

than the liquid's odor.  
That something in the water  
is a fraudulent definition  
of clean,  
a contamination  
of devalued dreams.

For black folks  
there has always been something in the water.  
That uproots and carries away.  
That turns natives into castaways.  
That makes wreckage of prized possessions.  
That muddies vision  
and suffocates ambition.  
That infiltrates happiness  
and soaks up hope.

But it is man's evil  
that reveals ugliness in what God called beautiful.  
There is something greater in the water  
than the power that destroys.  
There is a presence  
that buoys up those swept into currents.  
That sustains rather than smothers.  
That heals instead of inflicting pain.  
That offers refuge from blood hounds.  
That engulfs the confounded  
in peace.  
That cleanses of sin  
and the fingerprints of vile men.  
That baptizes and restores souls  
to God's original plan.  
The water is proof  
that good and evil must coexist –  
*but the light shines in the darkness  
and the darkness can never extinguish it.*<sup>7</sup>  
There is indeed  
something in the water.  
Both in calm and in conflict,  
it will never be absent  
the Father.

That was "Something in the Water."

If you asked black people about our relationship with the water, we would probably borrow from an old Facebook status and say, "It's complicated." Granted we are not a monolith, so every black person has their own thoughts and feelings about water, but I feel confident in saying that we can generally agree that as a unit, our relationship with this awesome part of Mother Nature is complicated.

I'm one of those black people who can say that my own personal relationship with water is complicated. I think it's one of God's most beautiful creations. It brings me so much peace to be near it or sailing on it. Every time I do, I wonder why I don't do it more often. But at the same time, I don't actually swim. Probably haven't in more than a decade. I assume I still know how, but I don't actually like being completely submerged, and I have some unpleasant memories of a childhood incident, so one day I just stopped swimming. I'd rather just float on my back with the sun's rays beaming on my face. I guess I realize that water is vast and powerful and intimidating. So I love the water, but at the same time, you could say I keep a safe distance from it.

I decided to write this piece because I was thinking of moments in ancient and recent history for which water was a running theme. Of course, the poem uses the popular saying "there's something in the water," which refers to the idea that something is widespread. A lot of women in a community pregnant at once? Folks just might decide there's something in the water. So, the saying felt like an appropriate way to describe significant events that happened to large groups of black people, while describing the things that were literally in the water as a result of those events.

The poem starts in the Atlantic Ocean with the slave trade. I've never been to Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, but the pictures I've seen show beautiful ocean waters as the backdrop of the slave castle. Ships were loaded up with captured African people who made a long, horrific journey across the Atlantic. Some died in the process and their bodies were thrown overboard. Others jumped to their deaths.

In the poem, I'm attempting to honor those ancestors. In this case, water has become a final resting place. "For unrecognizable bodies, loved in distant lives, unrecognizable in death." I wanted to consider the bones of the people, and their lives, and their stories, and how they were interrupted and cut short. And I also wanted us to consider that maybe the ocean is haunted by their tortured screams. Not necessarily haunted in the sense that a deep-water diver could still hear them hundreds of years later – but haunted in that the water as a living organism holds the depth of that pain simply out of respect for the human beings that are buried there.

The poem then heads southwest to the Bayou—New Orleans—and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, which killed 2,000 people. "The bloated bodies of those perpetually stranded by circumstance and finance" refers to the fact that storms like these hit poor people and communities of color hardest. Some of that's based on the fact that their neighborhoods are not well protected, or their lack of means to evacuate, or even the lack of insurance and access to funds to help rebuild. But beyond the \$161 billion dollars in property damage, I wanted to imagine the hurricane's waters carrying off the little things that make a house a home. The doilies from some black grandma's dining room table—the table that was used for big Sunday dinners. The diaries bearing family secrets is literal, but it also refers to the fact that every piece of furniture, or household item, or article of clothing could tell a part of the family's story, and those pieces of personal history are in some ways lost.

The last event the poem explores is the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. There, the something in the water is contamination that sickened the community. The greed, the neglect, the cover-up, that made water, something essential to human life, instead very harmful. In all three stanzas, there is an emphasis on the people's dreams that were lost. In this one, they're referred to as devalued because those who covered up the problems with the water clearly deemed the lives and dreams of the people in those communities as less than.

Looking at these events, you can start to feel, as the poem says, that  
“For black folks/ there has always been something in the water./ That uproots and carries away.  
That turns natives into castaways./ That makes wreckage of prized possessions. / That muddies vision  
and suffocates ambition. / That infiltrates happiness / and soaks up hope.”

And we may wonder, is there anything left when dreams have been stolen, drowned, and devalued?  
When every last drop of hope has been soaked up?

But I wanted us to remember that as much bad as has come through water, there has been plenty of  
good as well. African people may have jumped to their deaths into ocean waters to escape slavery. But  
their descendants waded in rivers and streams in America to plot their way to freedom. We may flee  
water’s vengeance in times of a storm. But other times, black folks, weary and hopeful, seek it out,  
joining voices and singing “take me to the water to be baptized.”

Water, like so much in life, “is proof that good and evil must coexist.” Sometimes we are so hurt by the  
evil that we fail to recognize the good. Yet the good is still there. Sometimes the evil seems so powerful  
that we’re convinced it has won. But just as the waters eventually calm, good will always prevail. Those  
lines – “*the light shines in the darkness/ and the darkness can never extinguish it*” – are scripture, John  
1:5. They’re a promise.

Even amid all the horrors the water has seen and caused, God is nearby. In tragedies like this, we often  
wonder, where is God? As in, why did God let this happen, why didn’t God stop it? I will be the first to  
tell you I don’t know why. But I do know where God is. God is always there with us in the moments of  
our greatest pain. God is present, crying with us, comforting us, guiding us, washing away the pain,  
restoring the hope and joy that we thought were lost, encouraging us to believe that there are more  
good times in our future.

I’m praying for everyone who’s been affected by the recent storms and flooding, especially those who  
have lost loved ones. May God bless and keep them. May there be brighter days ahead.

You have been listening to Between Bars with Sheryleigh. This episode included some sound clips  
courtesy of Zapsplat. You can follow me on Instagram and Facebook @sheryleighwrites, on Twitter at  
@sheryleigh, and online at sheryleigh.com. This episode’s poem, “Something in the Water,” can be  
found in my book black pearls, which is available for purchase on Amazon or my website. I also accept  
feedback and show ideas at [info@sheryleigh.com](mailto:info@sheryleigh.com).

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