

**Between Bars, Season 1, Episode 9**  
**“Reconciliation (An Open Letter to Black Men)”**

Hey, everyone! Welcome to Between Bars, a poetry podcast where we not only share poems, but the stories between the lines. This is SheryLeigh, host and resident poet.

Some time has passed since I last checked in, so Happy New Year! I figured a reappearance now was fitting since it's February – a month when we pause to celebrate two things that I have written many a poem about: black people and love. I care deeply about both of these topics so, without even trying, they've become common themes in my writing.

Unsurprisingly, I have a poem that will park us right at the intersection of Black History Month and Valentine's Day. Not really in a lovey-dovey way, but what I think and hope are a real way. Wise people often say that love is not a feeling but a decision. Granted, I want the butterflies, sparks, romance and all that good stuff. But most importantly, real love is about commitment and choice.

The poem I'm sharing today is about black love, which is a choice that I celebrate for reasons you'll hear in the poem. This poem is also quite old. I think it was one of the first few poems that I wrote with the intention of sharing via spoken word. So, it's long because that's where I was at, but I hope you'll enjoy it just the same. From my first book, “Promises & Epiphanies,” this is “Reconciliation (An Open Letter to Black Men).”

**Reconciliation (An Open Letter to Black Men)**

Brother,  
If you had a dollar for each time I told you that you ain't no good,  
A quarter for every criticism you withstood,  
A dime for each time you were misunderstood,  
Chances are,  
You would be a millionaire.  
I stamped you with a sign that said 'buyer beware.'  
Then tried to play it off like I just didn't care,  
Stubbornly declared to the world  
That I could do bad all by myself,  
Not comprehending that our history  
Can't be bound to a book on a shelf.  
And while oftentimes I keep my feelings subdued,  
Have you guessing  
Like we're playing a round of Taboo,  
I figured I would blow the whistle on these games  
And make sure that you knew:  
I am utterly and unapologetically enamored with you.

Because I have finally come to realize  
That if I take the time to stare into your eyes  
Until I see past the disguise—  
Until the many layers are peeled  
And the depths of your soul are revealed,

I'd see that we're each what the other needs  
In order to be healed.  
I'd grasp  
That every time we part, a piece of you dies,  
And that I've been permanently scarred  
By our hasty goodbyes.

In you,  
I see my brother, cousin, father, and friend.  
Because of the places we've been, you *are* my next of kin.  
We were a couple  
Throughout slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crowe.  
You may have to teach others your past,  
But I already know.  
We shared the same cramped, dirty space  
On our journey across that vast ocean  
And I saw each lash of the master's whip land on you  
As if it were in slow motion.  
I flinched as if it had struck my own skin,  
My screams resembling a screeching violin.  
My arms caught you  
When your broken body swooned,  
Then my hands tenderly nursed your wounds  
Until you were healed,  
Then joined you in the cotton field.

Because you were *my* man—  
When they said you were only three-fifths of a man.

We held one another up  
When the blood of our sons and daughters was spilled.  
When our churches and homes went up in flames,  
I was the one who helped you rebuild.  
I stood in your place  
After they tied your neck with that noose,  
Providing for our children without pity or excuse.  
We linked arms to form a barricade  
Against dogs and the water hose.  
At Selma, you were my shield  
Against the policeman's brutal blows.  
At the segregated lunch counter,  
Shoulder to shoulder, you and I sat.  
After Vietnam,  
I welcomed your warped body and mind back from combat.  
I prayed for your dismal soul  
When you dropped the Bible and picked up a gat.  
I shouldered our family's burden  
When you turned to heroin and crack.

My love was unrestricted  
When you were addicted,  
And even when you were wrongly  
And justly  
Convicted.  
You closed the caskets  
When our children killed one another in drive-bys.  
Then, in the privacy of our home,  
I wiped the tears from your eyes.  
I walked through the wilderness with you  
As we trekked to the promised land.  
Every trial,  
Every heartache,  
We faced it hand in hand.

But this trip down memory lane  
Is not to make you think you owe me anything.  
I just need you to understand that what we had  
Was not some simple fling.  
Not even a wedding ring is symbolic enough  
To represent our common struggle's worth.  
So maybe we should ponder the possibility  
Of our union's rebirth.

And please don't think that I'm hating on her –  
For she's beautiful in her own right.  
But I put in centuries of work,  
And she just stepped on the scene last night.  
See, I heard you when you said that I'm too hard  
And just don't know how to let down my guard.  
But what you seem so quick to forget  
Is that you and I once faced the same threat,  
That I was right beside you working up a sweat;  
And that those conditions  
Tend to strip away the delicate.

Truthfully, it won't bother me terribly  
If you should happen to fall in love  
With someone other than me.  
But my pride is crushed  
When both your preference and your tendency  
Is suddenly for she who is the polar opposite of me.

Brother, now that you've become every great thing  
That they said you'd never be,  
Now that you're seen as more of a commodity than a liability,  
Please, just don't forget about me.

That was “Reconciliation (An Open Letter to Black Men).”

I wrote this piece not to make a case *against* other women, but to make a case *for* black women. I know how often cases are made against black women. There is no shortage of arguments for why we should not be chosen—whether it’s for a seat on the Supreme Court or to be hit by Cupid’s arrow. Those arguments can be exhausting and hurtful. So, whenever I have an opportunity to do so, I will always make a case for black women.

At the time that I wrote this, maybe a decade ago, I felt like black men and black women—on the dating scene at least—seemed to have a hard time relaxing into loving one another. I was probably spending a lot of time on Twitter watching us war it out over \$200 dates and other nonsense. Given the fury being typed by Twitter fingers and the foolishness I saw in my own life and the lives of my friends, sometimes I wondered, in the infamous words of Rodney King, “can’t we all just get along?”

As is also the case with social media, the criticisms of black women seemed louder than the praise – and never-ending. I had heard one too many black men proudly proclaim that they don’t date black women. Additionally, there were stats announcing that most black women were single, and plenty of relationship gurus cashing in on our insecurities and genuine desire for love by telling us all the things we were doing wrong. Whether we were said to have too much mouth, too much independence, or too much baggage, we didn’t have to read between the lines to get the message that we weren’t wanted.

I wanted to capture that to some degree—the idea of feeling overlooked and unwanted. Even amid the slight neck roll that could easily accompany a few of the lines – because, yes, a black woman is going to say what needs to be said – there’s also a vulnerability there, in expressing a desire for someone who doesn’t fully desire you in return. The love doesn’t disappear, you just learn to live with it. I wanted to begin by being clear that more often than not, black women do like, love, and desire black men.

I also wrote this poem to speak to the shared history between black men and black women, who have obviously been through a lot together. Not all bad, but certainly some tough times. If I had to rewrite this poem today, I may not have focused as much on the tough times. But having overcome those struggles together is commendable. So, I wanted black men and black women to take a look at one another and acknowledge that we were each other’s day ones.

I also wanted this poem to touch on some of the criticisms we hear about black women and consider, for those which there is some truth to, how we could have gotten here. Everything is not simply personality. Sometimes we are the products of our environments, of the paths we walked yesterday and those we have to walk today. A little empathy goes a long way.

Yet another reason I wrote this poem is because I wanted to acknowledge that sometimes, a lot of times, black women will put on like we don’t care. Some of it is due to the hurt we’ve experienced in the past and a vow not to let it happen again. Some of it is the hurt we’ve experienced second-hand when another sister was done wrong. Some of it is due to the fact that love is an area of life that our boss moves can’t seem to control. Or it could be the fact that disappointment doesn’t hit quite as hard when you’ve told yourself and everyone else that you could take it or leave it. But the truth of our desires comes out at inconvenient times – and yes, in poems.

Those are some of the reasons why I penned the piece, but there are two reasons why I’m sharing it now. The first I already mentioned: it kind of fits for both Valentine’s Day and Black History Month.

However, the other reason I selected “Reconciliation” for this episode is because a part of me wonders if I still agree today with the words I wrote so many years ago.

I mean, at my core, of course I do. Black love is, as they say, a revolutionary act. I know the war that has been waged on black families throughout history, the many schemes and plots developed to tear them apart. So, when I see black men and women choose each other, love each other, and build families together, it’s a beautiful thing.

Yet on a more practical level, I can’t help but wonder if all this nostalgia, loyalty and sentimentality leave many sisters single. It’s not uncommon for a black woman to deeply relate to the words in this poem. But brothers? Ehhh it’s hit or miss. Thankfully I’ve lived and experienced enough to know that there is truth to the claims that most black men marry black women. The black married couples that I know make this data point real for me. However, I think many more black men than black women are open to dating and marrying other races. I often see black men keeping their options open, while black women will ride or die in the name of black love, even if the wheels have already fallen off and we’re being passed by acceptable options that simply aren’t packaged as we imagined.

I don’t know, I’m just thinking aloud. Not trying to convince you one way or the other, but maybe to get you to think, too.

Well, before we wrap this episode, I want to share one more thing. As I said, this was a specific type of love poem. However, I have more. Poems on the topic of love. There is an entire section of my book “black pearls” that focuses on the topic and it’s appropriately named “Little Black Book.” For Valentine’s Day, I’m going to read the poems live on Facebook and Instagram. It won’t *actually* be on Valentine’s Day; it’ll be February 15, Singles Awareness Day. Another *actually*—I hate that term, Singles Awareness Day. However, I hope people have plans and feel lovey-dovey and whatnot on Valentine’s Day, so I’ll share my poems on the topic of love the next day. That’s February 15, 7:00 p.m. eastern time, on both Instagram and Facebook live @sheryleighwrites – which are both linked in the show notes. And if we’re actual friends on Facebook, I’ll probably share the stream to my personal page so you can tune in there. It will be chill, intimate, not a performance. Just reading a few pieces for whoever happens to join me.

This was Between Bars with SheryLeigh. This episode’s piece, “Reconciliation (An Open Letter to Black Men)” can be found in my book Promises & Epiphanies: Life Revelations Through Poetry and Prose,” which is available for purchase on Amazon or my website, [www.sheryleigh.com](http://www.sheryleigh.com).

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