

Between Bars, Special Episode
“A Note from Hope”

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

Sooooo what do you say to close out a year in which you’ve basically been silent? What words are appropriate when you’re barely dragging yourself across the finish line of 2022 and wondering what, if anything, you can look forward to in 2023? I suppose you could talk, or share, about something you have a precarious relationship with: hope.

For today’s episode, I’m reading a piece entitled “A Note from Hope.” Before I begin, I want to warn you that this poem has metaphors involving suicide that could be triggering. If you need to sit this episode out for your mental health, I understand.

A Note from Hope

They have tried to kill me.
Tied rope around my neck.
Pumped bullets in my chest.
Injected heroin
Into my veins.
Fed me food laced with poison.
Rigged my home with explosives.
Starved me with policies,
Stuffed me with artificial intelligence
And assistance
That never fulfills.
Choked me with inequalities.
Told me to take this world as is—
Or leave.

You have tried to kill me.
Strangled me with the weeds
Overtaking your mind’s garden.
Popped pills to still
My incessant voice.
Slit my wrists
Trying to loosen my grip
On your soul.
Held a gun to my temple
Told me to surrender
to the terror.

But you cannot kill me.
They cannot kill me.
When you think I have reached my final hour,
When you have made all arrangements—

Chosen a casket and headstone,
Selected songs and flowers—

Before the ink has dried on my obituary,
Before you've had a chance
To bury me,
I'll be born again
In your soul.

Life is my identity,
Resurrection my destiny.
I will always be counted among the living,
And I will never stop asking
You
To join me.

This poem is from my book "black pearls." Most pieces in the book were stirring in my soul long before I actually wrote them. This poem was different. I chose to write it after stepping back to look at all the book's pieces. I saw poems on racism and sexism and heartbreak and the exhaustion of being a 'strong black woman.' Collectively, the poems were pretty real—and pretty dark. As much as I wanted to give words to important issues, thoughts, and feelings, I didn't want readers to finish the book in despair. Where was the hope?

Hope, I discovered, was there all along. It was observing the atrocities and listening to the accounts of persons wronged—yet persevering through it all.

I wrote this piece *from* Hope rather than *about* Hope because I believe Hope is always speaking, whether we're listening or not. I wanted to give Hope a captive audience. Not a passive or timid Hope, but an audacious, triumphant, 'put-some-respect-on-my name' Hope.

Hope is powerful. It's a beckoning to believe for something more, something better, something just. Hope is both a catalyst for change and a resolve to persevere. And maybe, like anything of value, Hope is attacked by forces that are threatened by it.

We tend to think of Hope as something that we lose. As if it is slight and slippery, easily swept away during life's downpours. We also think of it as something that dies. We believe that with every setback or disappointment, Hope loses strength, growing increasingly frail until it finally withers away.

I don't think our typical views of Hope are necessarily wrong—but they don't paint a full picture. What if this powerful, necessary life force called Hope doesn't just go missing by happenstance, or randomly die of natural causes? What if it is under attack?

The first stanza of the poem explores what that attack has looked like for the black community. Our community that has been harmed over time through both targeted violence and willful neglect: Violence, drugs, fast food on every corner, punitive policies, and assistance that deconstructed the black family. These are all means of not only perpetuating white supremacy, but also killing Black Hope. If you can convince someone that what they see is all they can access, or worse, all they deserve, you can limit their progress. Yet Hope says, "I see how you were wronged. Yes, I was the target. No, it didn't kill me."

Yet Hope couldn't stop there. Hope also had to challenge us on a personal level, the ways we try to kill Hope's attempts to well up within us.

I don't know about you, but Hope is always making a play for my heart. Every day, it pleads with my mind—not to ignore hurts or tragic circumstances, but to choose to hope in spite of them. Hope is always wooing me, and though I would like to give in to its advances, I put up a fight. Call it experience or jadedness, pride or ego, self-preservation or even self-sabotage—I have found Hope within me, breathless and begging, and I have refused to breathe life into it. I have tagged Hope with a Do Not Resuscitate order and waited for it to expire. I have told myself to *hope* less so that disappointment *hurts* less. I have tried to bury hope under six feet of caution and bitterness. But it didn't work.

1 Peter 1:3 in the Bible refers to a “**living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” A living hope is active, speaking, listening to and countering your arguments. No matter how we try to starve or deny it, because Jesus lives, Hope lives. It may not be Hope for life as you planned it, but it is Hope for something more, better, and just. Hope for now and Hope for eternity.

If Hope is living and resilient, trying to kill Hope is not only futile, it's counterproductive. I heard something recently: oftentimes we struggle because we resist what God is trying to get us to accept. Maybe life feels unbearable not just because we experience loss, hurt, or disappointment. Maybe we struggle because we resist Hope. Hope is simply doing what it was created to do: live. At all costs and against all odds. Trying to kill something that is destined to live only leaves you defeated and exhausted.

“A Note from Hope” is the final piece in my book “black pearls,” it's the conclusion of the matter. After all the difficulties and challenges have been shouted in poem after poem, Hope whispers. As we close out 2022, it's important to acknowledge the hurts, disappointments, challenges, and losses. But after you have tallied it all up, Hope must still have the final word.

1 Corinthians 13 offers a beautiful description of love that is cited by believers and nonbelievers alike. While it is notable that the passage declares that love “always hopes,” what's more important is how the chapter concludes: “And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love.” The New Living Translation says, “these three will last forever.” The conclusion of any matter is faith, hope, and love.

At 11:59 p.m. on December 31, these three will remain: faith, hope, and love. When 2023 makes her grand entrance at the stroke of midnight, Hope will remain. Then Hope will ride out the bitter cold of winter and appear again in the buds of spring. Hope will be present in the sweltering summer and light the spark of your bonfires come fall. At the conclusion of it all, Hope will remain.

If there is a part of you, no matter how small, that is hopeful for 2023—if there is a piece of you that feels even a tinge of excitement for what the new year might bring—embrace and nurture that Hope within you. Resistance is futile. If you don't detect a hint of Hope for the new year, be still and be patient. Hope is alive and active, and it will find you.

You have been listening to Between Bars with Sheryleigh. This episode's poem, “A Note from Hope,” can be found in my book “black pearls,” which you can purchase on Amazon or my website www.sheryleigh.com. If this episode helped you embrace Hope, share it with a friend. Also, be sure to subscribe to Between Bars wherever you listen to podcasts and to rate us on Apple Podcasts. Thanks for listening!