

Between Bars, Season 2, Episode 2
“Late Bloomer”

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

In honor of National Poetry Month, I’m sneaking a poem into your podcast feeds before April ends.

Since Spring has sprung—or at least is trying to—and DC’s cherry blossoms are out in full force, the pick for this episode was an easy one. Today I’ll be sharing a poem entitled “Late Bloomer,” which is in my second book, “black pearls.”

Late Bloomer

Perhaps if I were younger,
greener,
I might be amused
by the sun’s regular rounds of peekaboo.
Might beat my feet
in time to the rain’s sporadic pitter patter
and slow dance through drought
with the same fervor.
I might giggle
as wind gusts tickled my nostrils with the earth’s dust
or as puddles
mixed with soil to gag me with mud pies.
Yet try as she might,
Nature’s games are wasted on me.
I am older,
woman, no longer
the tender shoot in the garden.

This is for the late bloomers.
Anyone who has ever
dreaded brunch with your girls because you knew
it meant thumbing through pictures of handsome husbands
and laughing children—
with nothing to share in return.
You who prefer to quietly listen
to the telling of innocuous firsts
rather than at last
face the looming question:
so, what’s new with you?
Because you never have an answer
worthy of squeals
or a story and picture reel
to meet the great expectations
of loved ones

or your own fantasies, courtesy
of a Disney-inspired childhood.
Anyone who has wondered
how the same roots that produced
vibrant florals in abundance in every other area of your life
could lie dormant when it comes to romance.

This is for the early bloomers.
Anyone who was a textbook example
of the growth cycle:
advanced through every level
of formal education
with honors,
then watched those seeds sprout into a career
with blossoming salary and position—
yet starved of passion.
Anyone who has ever been pulled up at the root
by your own hands,
then wandered through wasteland and pastures
in search of Eden.
Replanted yourself in a garden
destined for sweet communion with God,
only to have dirt dumped upon your progress,
to drift into slumber starved of water,
and to wake yearning for the sun's elusive kiss.
Anxious to bloom again
and wondering if your relocation
was inspired by the voice of creation
or the hiss of a serpent.

This is for the hybrids.
Those of us unfortunate and blessed
to know the beauty of blossoming
and the agony of being choked by weeds.
The perennials
who have bloomed so often
the world has labeled you low maintenance,
not knowing that each open petal
endured a silent struggle beneath the surface—
through the barrenness of winter,
the budding hope of spring,
the glory of summer's bloom,
and the doom of fall's shedding leaves.

Anyone who mistook resurrection
for a one-time event,
only to die and bloom again and again—
each time as a different species

with a new testimony.
You who were once rose,
breathtaking beauty and prickly thorns that warned
not to come too close.
Then became hydrangea, a saga
of passion-fueled emotion.
Who later bloomed as bleeding heart,
a sob story of love unrequited.
Then as daisy, a narrative
of joy after tragedy.
And finally
a memoir of hope in the form of chrysanthemum.
Each blossom is a poem,
a love letter from God,
who still walks through the garden
in the cool of day,
calling out to the best version of us.
Doling out correction and direction
in the same instant.
Warning that you are not called to meteorology's
attempts at weather prediction,
nor to horticulture's
obsession with the hues and patterns
of every plant within view.
God is still walking through the garden,
pruning and cutting
as a form of nurture,
assuring you and me
that it is our nature
to bloom.

I wrote "Late Bloomer" in early 2019, a time when I was feeling stuck. The list of things I wanted in life was super long, and I hadn't been able to check many of them off yet. Like the children in the first stanza who can dance in both sunshine and rain, when you first start waiting on something, it's easier to find joy and excitement in all types of weather and scenarios. But you become less amused with every passing day, month, and year.

I'm sure you've heard it said that sometimes when we go through difficult times and feel like we have been buried, in actuality, we've been planted. The way my faith was set up, I had accepted that I had been planted—but I wanted to know when, exactly, I could expect to bloom. When was God going to make something beautiful out of the mess I was in?

As the title and the poem make clear, I wrote this piece for late bloomers. People who know what it's like to wait a long time for something to come to fruition. People who know they're behind schedule, and everyone around them knows it, too. Questions about the unblooming area can be awkward. Other times, it can be even more frustrating as people around them do things like steer all conversation away from the unblooming area, or downplay the significance of the unblooming area, or even question what

the late bloomer is doing wrong, with subtle and not so subtle hints that the late bloomer is not tending to the unblooming area properly. I needed my fellow late bloomers to feel seen.

On the other end of the spectrum, I wrote this poem for early bloomers. Sometimes you can achieve success in something fairly early in life—only to discover it's not what you thought it would be or simply not what you wanted. For some of us, that's the professional paths we chose before we were old enough to even buy alcohol. About five or ten years in, you start to accept that this is not how you want to spend half of your waking hours. Still other people have bloomed early in relationships, only to realize later that growing into their true self also meant growing away from their partner. In either case, early bloomers often make the difficult decision to dig up their progress and start over. It's a painful process and a frightening place to find yourself in. You're giving up all you know for the unknown. In addition to the people who tell you that you're crazy for taking the risk, when you hit hard times, you will have to contend with your own voice questioning whether you made the right decision. Maybe you should have been grateful and content for your early bloom; how dare you expect to bloom again?

Finally, I wrote the poem for people who are hybrids—both late and early bloomers. I couldn't write my late bloomer woes about not blooming in certain areas, without acknowledging that I have bloomed in other areas, and that I bloomed early by many people's standards. I needed to acknowledge the tension of being grateful for all I have and have had, and still feeling like something was missing. Like I wasn't done, like life had more to give.

I called my fellow hybrids perennials because if you fall into both the late and early blooming categories, and are the type of person who is always growing, always seeking to become better and live a more full life of passion and purpose, you're going to bloom over and over again. Each time, you'll bloom into something different, hence the various types of flowers in the poem.

People often see the beauty of blooming and reblooming flowers and assume it happens like clockwork, but as I said in the poem, it's a "silent struggle beneath the surface." It happens in a dark and lonely place. It requires allowing pieces of yourself or your life to die and become something else. It requires trusting that you have indeed been planted and not buried, and that in the right season, you will bloom.

I don't know that I would be able to believe blooming is in my future if it were not for my faith. John 15:1 – 2, says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

There is a rhyme and a reason to this process. God has created us to bloom, and God is cutting off the things that are dead and unproductive. God is trimming back pieces and parts to help us grow stronger and to produce even more blooms.

When I was writing this poem, and as I read it again for this episode, I realized that even as I am waiting to bloom, I have *already* bloomed. I have been a multitude of flowers, each unique, beautiful, and imperfect. If I give in to the discomfort of it all, I can continue to bloom, each time more beautiful than the last.

This episode, like the poem, is for anyone who feels stuck, defeated, or buried. Anyone who has been struggling in a still, dark, and dirty place, wondering if you'll ever see the light of day again. Trust that you have been planted, and that if you give in to the process, you are destined to bloom into something beautiful.

That's a wrap for this episode of Between Bars. The poem "Late Bloomer" can be found in my book "black pearls," which is available for purchase on Amazon or my website, www.sheryleigh.com.

Finally, if you enjoyed this episode, share it with a friend, and don't forget to subscribe to Between Bars wherever you listen to podcasts and to rate us on Apple Podcasts. Thanks for listening!