"The Pantoum" from *Unbroken Line: Writing in the Lineage of Poetry*
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Obsessive Compulsive
As a poet, or a writer of any sort, you must use your own obsessional material. At first it may not be that obvious what your own obsessions are, but the more you write the more you will see your recurring material appear. Obsessional material is not something you choose--it chooses you. And it may not be pretty or neatly packaged or present the face you want to the world. Over the years I've found my poetic obsessions and even watched them change--images of flying and escape from my childhood, a fascination with the desert landscape of the biblical Exodus, love and sex in all its forms, the death of my first husband. To be honest, on most days I really don't want to write again about bring widowed or about the view of the Hudson River that is my first memory. But you cannot censor obsessional material, or you will block completely. In fact, once you realize you have obsessions, welcome them, because they are a rich foundation for poetry.

No one wants to be stuck completely, though, on well worn mental pathways. In graduate school I studied with the critic Helen Vendler, who though essentially a formalist had a lot to say about the Romantic poets. She observed that the poet Keats was so great--despite the fact that he died so young--in part because he wrote in bulk. He wrote right through his faults and obsessions--line after line after line--until his poetic vision was purified.

Like Keats, you need to start writing frequently and massively. One excellent exercise for dealing with obsessional material is to write a long--long autobiographical poem based on childhood. Decide to go for at least a hundred lines--that is over three pages--and address some or all of the following themes: What is your first memory? What are the early houses and apartments you lived in? When did you first hear someone lie? What did you eat as a child? Did you have a special hiding place? Secret treasures or objects? Who was your first love? Did you ever run away from home, even briefly? When did you first realize you believed in God? Or stopped? What was your first kiss?

There is a fascinating concept in the Buddhist religion that in order to be a bodhisatva--a compassionate being--you must have the childhood of a bodhisatva. Of course, most of us don't have childhoods that would lead us to become saints of any sort. The same is true of poetry--to be a poet you must have had the childhood of a poet. What does that mean? It means you must recover your sense impressions from the time when they were the most vivid. Your childhood may have been happy, unhappy, or downright traumatic. None of this matters--poetry is not therapy. You want to be able to taste and touch childhood. This will serve as one of the greatest wellsprings available to your work.

A Slinky

Certain forms also lend themselves to the exploration of obsessional material. The best of these is probably the pantoum. The pantoum comes into English from the Malayan. Like the ballad, the pantoum is written in quatrains, and was first oral--a form that derived from fishing songs--before it was written down. The pantoum, or pantoun as it is called in Malayan was first picked up in Europe by the French poets, including Charles Baudelaire. The New York school poet John Ashberry introduced it into the American mainstream in the mid 1950's, when he began publishing and teaching the form. I

learned the form from Jane Shore, who had learned it under Ashberry's influence, when I studied with her as an undergraduate. I was immediately fascinated by its seemingly endless repetition. I teach it in every writing group I lead, and students love it because it is an instant--if highly spontaneous--way to give a poem a sophisticated, musical, and pleasing form.

Here is the grid for the start of the pantoum:

___________________ (Line A)
___________________ (Line B)
___________________ (Line C)
___________________ (Line D)

___________________ (Line B)
___________________ (Line E)
___________________ (Line D)
___________________ (Line F)

___________________ (Line E)
___________________ (Line G)
___________________ (Line F)
___________________ (Line H)

And so on for as many stanzas as you want to write until the last, which has its own special form.

The method of composing a pantoum is simple yet elegant. You first write a stanza of four lines. The pantoum will work best if the lines are fairly intact--each expressing just one basic idea or image. In the second stanza, it is time to let go of the idea that you can control the pantoum. You cannot control its flow, or even its sense completely--instead, you must allow the wave-like quality of the form to carry you along. This is because of the nature of the pantoum's repetons--the lines that repeat. In the pantoum you simply pick up lines 2 and 4 of the first stanza and plunk them down as lines 1 and 3 of the next stanza. I always write out the repetons first. The good news is--you have already written two lines of the quatrain. The more frightening news is that you now have to connect the repetons with new lines. Don't think too much here, spontaneity will help you, and it is probable that you first impulse about what to write is the best.

The pantoum continues in the same fashion--lines 2 and 4 pick up and repeat as lines 1 and 3. I have alphabetized my grid, but you can number yours if that works more clearly. I always visualize a pantoum as a slinky going down a flight of stairs--it is smooth, fluid, and repetitious.

One of my favorite contemporary pantoums is by poet Joan Logghe:

High School Graduation Pantoum

The dark boy leans against his pickup truck.
His heart widened into Romeo since he met my daughter.
I say to myself, "it's not worth creating a tragedy."
With the Blood Mountains behind them for Verona.

His heart widened into Romeo since he met my daughter,
a girl pulling him by the arms down the driveway
with the Blood Mountains behind them for Verona,
the wild plum blooming, they will make sour fruit.

> A girl pulling him by the arms down the driveway,
> not long ago, her arms reached, her face ached red for me.
> The wild plum blooming, it will make sour fruit.
> Passion so sweet, grape couldn't turn wine without it.

Notice that Logghe starts her pantoum with a quatrain in which each line ends with a period. But the lines start to soften and loosen as the poem continues. Her repetition is quite exact at this point in the poem, although some poets will vary the repetons slightly as they go, perhaps using a pun or different sense of a word. If you feel you must vary for effect, go ahead and try it, but not so much that you alter the integrity of the pantoum form.

Logghe's pantoum continues:

> Not long ago her arms reached, her face ached red for me,
> crying through play-pen bars as I gardened
> passion so sweet, grape couldn't turn wine without it.
> I thinned lettuce, her stomach full of milk and need.
>
> Crying through play-pen bars as I garden.
> Time is a rascal magpie pecking at the corn.
> I thinned lettuce, her stomach full of absence.
> I sat next to her driving, yelling, "Brakes!"
>
> Time is a rascal magpie, exotic in the corn.
> A yogi asked, "What if this baby should die?"
> I sit next to her driving, yelling "Brakes!"
> My heart beats audibly past midnight curfew.
>
> A yogi asked, "What if this baby should die?
> Her tongue is long." He wrote on his slate at Lama Mountain.
> My heart beats audibly past midnight curfew.
> At Christ in the Desert I cried in the chapel for loss.
>
> Her tongue is long, he wrote on his slate in silence.
> She's kissed a boy she loved and some she didn't.
> At Christ in the Desert I cried in the chapel for loss.
> I sat with older mothers who had moved on.

Joan Logghe is now at the second to last stanza of her pantoum. How do you finish a pantoum? When I come to this question I am often reminded of my cousin Margy, whom my sisters and I adored. She taught us all how to knit, long bulky scarves out of purple yard. The problem was, we didn't see her that frequently, and she never taught us how to cast off. As a result, we created endless scarves that could never be worn. You don't want that to happen with your pantoum. Luckily, there are neat ways to end it.

Joan Logghe's last stanza uses the most common grid for the pantoum in English:

______________ (Repeton from line 2 of previous stanza)
______________ (Line 1 of the opening stanza of the pantoum)
______________ (Repeton from line 4 of previous stanza)
______________ (Line 3 of the opening stanza of the pantoum)

This is what it looks like in the poem:

> She's kissed a boy she loved and some she didn't.
> The dark boy leans against his pickup truck.
> I sat with older mothers who had moved on.
> I say to myself,"Let go. It's not worth creating a tragedy."

Notice that here Logghe does vary the last line for emphasis. Another way to end the pantoum is one I like to use in my own--to flip lines 1 and 3 of the first stanza so that the poem ends with the same line it began with:

______________ (Repeton from line 2 of previous stanza)
______________ (Line 3 from the opening stanza)
______________ (repeton from line 4 of previous stanza)
______________ (Line 1 from the opening stanza)

This gives the feeling of a complete circle.

It should be obvious to you by now--and certainly will be once you start experimenting with writing th pantoum, that there is no way to control it. You have to trust that the form itself will give the poem its sense, and to allow for happy accidents and juxtapositions. To further complicate matters, it is possible to rhyme the pantoum. The rhyme scheme for the pantoum is abab, bcbc: that is, lines 1 and 3 rhyme, as do lines 2 and 4. However, keep this strictly optional. The pantoum is complex enough not to need rhyme--but do try a bit of partial rhyming or half rhyme if it appeals to you. I also sometimes use the pantoum as a temporary stage in writing a poem. I might put a poem into a pantoum to see the effect, then break it out in the next draft into looser quatrains. Try this as a way to add just the echo of structure in a poem, and as a way to free up its leaps and associations.

The pantoum seems particularly suited to us writing in America at the end of the twentieth century. Its repetition and circular quality give it a mystical chant like feeling. Its cut-up lines break down linear thought. The form is both ancient and fresh. Once you embark on it, it will be a poetic path you will want to take again and again.

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