
PANTOUM

Forms of Poetry

What is it?

The pantun is a Malaysian poetic form that was introduced to the West by French novelist, essayist, and poet, Victor Hugo (1802-1885), hence the French spelling, pantoum. Pantoums can have unlimited stanzas, but you might want to begin with a 3-stanza poem until you get the hang of it:

The Form

Stanza 1:

4 lines

Stanza 2 (or 3 or 4):

Line 1 (repeat of line 2 in previous stanza)
 Line 2 (new line)
 Line 3 (repeat of line 4 in previous stanza)
 Line 4 (new line)

Last Stanza

Line 1 (line 2 of the previous stanza)
 Line 2 (line 3 of the first stanza)
 Line 3 (line 4 of the previous stanza)
 Line 4 (line 1 of the first stanza)

Bareback Pantoum by Cecilia

Woloch

One night, bareback and young, we rode through the woods
 and the woods were on fire —
 two borrowed horses, two local boys
 whose waists we clung to, my sister and I

and the woods were on fire —
 the pounding of hooves and the smell of smoke and the sharp
 sweat of boys
 whose waists we clung to, my sister and I,
 as we rode toward flame with the sky in our mouths —

the pounding of hooves and the smell of smoke and the sharp
 sweat of boys
 and the heart saying: mine
 as we rode toward flame with the sky in our mouths —
 the trees turning gold, then crimson, white

and the heart saying: mine
 of the wild, bright world;
 the trees turning gold, then crimson, white
 as they burned in the darkness, and we were girls

of the wild, bright world
 of the woods near our house — we could turn, see the lights
 as they burned in the darkness, and we were girls
 so we rode just to ride

through the woods near our house — we could turn, see the
 lights —
 and the horses would carry us, carry us home
 so we rode just to ride,
 my sister and I, just to be close to that danger, desire

and the horses would carry us, carry us home
 — two borrowed horses, two local boys,
 my sister and I — just to be close to that danger, desire —
 one night, bareback and young, we rode through the woods.

Atomic Pantoum by Peter Meinke

In a chain reaction
the neutrons released
split other nuclei
which release more neutrons

The neutrons released
blow open some others
which release more neutrons
and start this all over

Blow open some others
and choirs will crumble
and start this all over
with eyes burned to ashes

And choirs will crumble
the fish catch on fire
with eyes burned to ashes
in a chain reaction

The fish catch on fire
because the sun's force
in a chain reaction
has blazed in our minds

Because the sun's force
with plutonium trigger
has blazed in our minds
we are dying to use it

With plutonium trigger
curled and tightened
we are dying to use it
torching our enemies

Curled and tightened
blind to the end
torching our enemies
we sing to Jesus

Blind to the end
split up like nuclei
we sing to Jesus
in a chain reaction

Imagery and Rhythm:

Pantoums lend themselves to creating a scene; imagery and rhythm and repetition intertwining to create a sense of echoing images and movement. As Mark Strand and Eavan Boland explained in *The Making of a Poem*, "the reader takes four steps forward, then two back," making the pantoum a "perfect form for the evocation of a past time."

Using distinct and concrete imagery write a few sentences that create a scene:

Shape your scene into a four line stanza:

Now, using *Bareback* and *Atomic* as your models write your poem: