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Some Thinking on Form in Poetry

Recently, I read a fascinating essay by Robert Bly, in *Talking Until Morning*, where he quotes the poet Donald Hall.

Hall contributes a wild thought on form, that I adore: when a poem is written in "form" whether a formally acknowledged, traditional form: sestina, villanelle, pantoum, sonnet, or is somehow formalized on the page: quatrains, tercets, concrete or shaped poems, we are subtly experiencing the presence of 1 of 3 kinds of infantile fun, which he calls "Sensualities":

1. Mouth fun: the great delight of sound play, i.e., Shakespeare's sonnets

2. Leg fun: like a baby's glad kicking: meter, strong dancing beats, i.e., Yeats

3. Appearance/disappearance: Peek a Boo, hiding/finding, rhyme/internal rhyme, sound in rhymed poems disappear, then reappear…

William Blake says every artist needs the strength to endure the tension of fierce opposites in a poem, so, we might say that if form gives us a pleasurable experience that is inherently in someway childlike, and yet the content of the poem is adult, we can create and sustain huge tension in the poem.

This is a forcefield I have often experimented with in my poems, using the bouncy, playful lines from nursery rhymes, or the Pantoum form, as a container for powerful content. And it works!

I have a practice I call the solace of form. Open Ron Padgett's *Handbook of Poetic Forms* and use it like the I Ching: learn and write what you are given by chance, follow form instead of content, and watch the unknown unfold into knowing.

A Pantoum is the Western version of a 15th century Malayan form, the Pantun, a poem of undetermined lines, where the 2nd and 4th line of every stanza repeat as the 1st and 3rd lines, called in French, *repetons*, in the next stanza. The pattern repeats, as the poem requires, in the poet's, we hope, capable hands , until the final stanza, where we have a neat twist: the only un-recycled lines in the poems, the 3rd and 1st line from the first stanza, become the 2nd and 4th line of the last stanza, respectively.

A poem that ends as it begins, with all its startle made from the expectation of repeat.

In Samurai Angel, I put a bit of torque on each line, a tweak 'til the whole poem pulled.

Here's an example of the Pantoum used to hold material that is tender, and…. well…. watch the tiny altering in each *repeton*, as it builds the tension towards the final line.

Samurai Angels

I heard your name in my dream last night.
It was your childhood name and I was calling you.
There was an angel on every stair.
There was light from four directions.

It was your childhood name and I was calling you.
Tell me eleven names for wind, I said.
There was light from four directions.
Tell me how you followed the scent of daffodils
    through the streets of London.

Tell me eleven names for wind, I said.
I'm one thought away.
Tell me how you found a square filled with flowers
    in a dark city.
The angels are calling our names out loud.

I'm one landscape away.
Any moment could be Japan.
The angels are calling our names out loud.
Their wings are light and cherry blossom, we could hear
      temple bells ringing on any street.

Any landscape could be Japan.
You were born there.
There will always be plum blossoms, can't you hear the silence
      in the temples around us?
I can write you three lines and there will be cranes in all of them.

You were born there.
After love we breathe in Japanese, our sleeping bodies form the character for light.
I can write you three lines and there will be the way you loved your father in all of them.
There's a secret in Haiku: I'll tell you.

After love we breathe in Japanese, our sleeping bodies
      form the character for angel.
After love the taste of Saki is silky and fierce.
There's a secret, I'll tell you:
Haiku is really four lines, but the last line is silent.

After love the taste of Saki is silky and fierce.
See how gently I write us into your past.
The fourth line in Haiku is a temple.
I call your secret name for the last time.

See how delicately I write us into your past.
Under Fujiyama, I know you are weeping.

I call your childhood name for the last time.
I hold you. Your tears rhyme with the grain of light woods,
The sound of taps for your father.

Pantoum

This is a 13th century poetry form brought to Malaya by the French Troubadours, (from the French, Trobar, *to find*), an ancient order of bards: the mystical poet-musicians of the Love Courts in Provence, Catalonia and Italy. And back to modern poetry by the surrealists, esp. Charles Baudelaire. John Ashbery introduced it to the New York School of poets, in the 1950's. The circling, repetitive form of a pantoum, by its very nature, makes for lyrical, evocative poetry, and it is FABULOUS for dealing with Obsession: something all poets know a bit about!
Making a pantoum is also a marvelous way to work with, and develop, a finished poem from lines within your WildWriting exercises.
Read through a piece of your writing and highlight the lines and images that attract you.
Calmly, gently, write a 4 line stanza (quatrain) that will begin the pantoum.
Make sure you have 4 distinct, separate lines.
Number each line: 1, 2,3, 4.
Next, write a second quatrain, (4 line) stanza, using this pattern:
Lines 2 and 4 of the preceding stanza are repeated as lines 1 and 3 of the next stanza.
For example:

Curiouser Pantoum
Who is in the garden, who shall come to tea?
Textiles spin, weave silk into text.
Looking, I am suddenly seen,
Rose vines grow round wells of dark water.

Textiles spin, weave silk into text.
I read a warp and weft of color.
Rose vines grow round wells of dark water,
Whose eyes sparkle, quiet, in that mirror?

Then go on - at least 5 stanzas – or as long as the poem wants to be!
A pantoum does not have a specific length.
When you are ready to write the closing stanza, re-copy the 2nd and 4th line of the previous stanza as the 1st and 3rd line of this final stanza, and leave the 2nd and 4th line blank.
Go up to your very first, beginning stanza of the pantoum.
The 3rd line of the very first stanza becomes the 2nd line of the last stanza, and the very first line, the opening line, of this poem, now becomes the 4th, and final line of the poem…
Thus, every line is used twice, and the first line and last line are the same – hopefully with an exciting **AHA!** moment at the end for the writer!

I gaze into an emptiness, sweet as late roses,
Looking, I am suddenly seen,
Something knocks, quickly on my open heart -
Who is in the garden, who shall come to tea?

Sestina

This intricate poetic form is a wonderful, playful exercise to stretch skills, work with dominant images in a given subject, or watch fascinating connections form, as totally disparate images cycle and re-cycle through the poem.
Writing a sestina is a fabulous way to surprise ourselves with random wild things we say because the words are pulling us across the page!

Select 6 words and number them 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.
A sestina is a seven stanza poem in which the first six stanzas has six lines, and ends with a final, seventh stanza of 3 lines (a tercet).
The selected six words are the end words of each line, and they permutate in each stanza, in the following pattern:

1	then: 6	then: 3	then: 5	then: 4	then: 2
2	1	6	3	5	4
3	5	4	2	1	6
4	2	1	6	3	5
5	4	2	1	6	3
6	3	5	4	2	1

In the final tercet, one of the words appears in the center of the line,
and the other at the end, in this order:

1	2
3	4
5	6

So, this is how we work with the words: Number them:

kimono	(word 1)
shadow	(word 2)
teapot	(word 3)
cinnamon	(word 4)
doorway	(word 5)
fish	(word 6)

Then use them at the end of the line in the word order pattern shown above: for example:

A painter dances in skywhite kimono
Her wintery sleeves cast lunar shadow
In evening's quiet sings the teapot,
Green ginger, clouds of cinnamon
Swim past the silvered doorway:
A sheen, a shine, scales of fish.

Today she painted many fish
As if the canvas were kimono
As if silk was really just a doorway
And brushes only solid shadow.
Arises from her work, fragrant cinnamon
That never came from any teapot.

And ends:
She wears her kimono as if a shadow
She offers the teapot, with its veil of cinnamon
You'll enter her doorway, as if a fish.

Ghazal

"Unless there is a new mind, there cannot be a new line," William Carlos Williams wrote, and poet Jane Hirshfield added, "And the converse is true as well".

And what I hear in this conversation, is that taking forms from other cultures, other times, refreshes both our minds and our poetry.

A great example of that is our adoption of the Persian, and later, Urdu poetry form, the Ghazal (pronounced *ghuzzle*) a word, that in Arabic means, "to woo, flirt, or engage in amorous conversation with women, paying tribute to their grace and beauty." The ghazal gained prominence in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century thanks to Hafiz and Rumi. In the eighteenth-century, the ghazal was used by poets writing in Urdu; among these poets, Ghalib is the recognized master.

Historically, the ghazal has been written to explore metaphysical questions, or express love and devotion between a speaker and the Beloved, either a person, or usually, the Divine, and at a distance, lending the poem a quality of intense longing.

The ghazal is composed of a minimum of five couplets—and typically no more than fifteen—that are structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous: a kind of "continuity in discontinuity".

Traditionally, each line of the poem must be of the same length, though meter is not used in English. The first couplet introduces the pattern that will repeat: each line ending with a rhyme, the ***qafia*,** followed by a refrain, the ***radif***. Subsequent couplets repeat these in the second line only: repeating the refrain and rhyming the second line with both lines of the first stanza. The final couplet usually includes the poet's signature, called a ***makhta*,**

referring to the author in the first or third person, and frequently including the poet's own name or a derivation of its meaning.

Once you have established your pattern, your refrain and the rhyming word, you then, traditionally, must obey it! This aspect - like a sestina – is what gives both the poet and the audience/reader the delicious element of surprise!

The ghazal is mean to be performed and is often interactive: when the audience learns the Radif, the repeating refrain, they often call it out with the poet! Exciting!

Ghazals are often sung by Iranian, Indian, and Pakistani musicians. Other languages that adopted the ghazal include Hindi, Pashto, Turkish, and Hebrew. The German poet and philosopher Goethe experimented with the form, as did the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca.

Indian musicians such as Ravi Shankar and Begum Akhtar popularized the ghazal in the English-speaking world during the 1960s.

In 1970, Urdu scholar, Aijaz Ahmad invited seven poets to help translate a collection of poems by the poet Ghalib, and from this, we have the blossoming of this form into American poetry. The first ghazals I ever read were those of poet Adrienne Rich.

In 2000, poet Agha Shahid Ali officially introduced the ghazal, in its classical form, in his collection, *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English.* Ali compared each ghazal couplet to "a stone from a necklace," which should continue to "shine in that vivid isolation." And added: “Once a poet establishes the scheme—with total freedom, I might add—she or he becomes its slave. What results in the rest of the poem is the alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master.” Here’s a few lines from Ali's ghazal *Even the Rain:*

What will suffice for a true-love knot? Even the rain?
But he has bought grief's lottery, bought even the rain.

"our glosses / wanting in this world" "Can you remember?"
Anyone! "when we thought / the poets taught" even the
rain?

After we died—That was it!—God left us in the dark.
And as we forgot the dark, we forgot even the rain.

In our modern ghazals, we find the disconnectedness between thoughts and stanzas more often than a strict following of the traditional forms.

Robert Bly’s last three magnificent books are all ghazals - created with tercets, instead of couplets…he felt the usual line length of the traditional ghazal equaled our three lines. And he only occasionally includes a *radif.*

Writing a ghazal is one of the ways that moving a traditional form into our own work, our own idiom and prosody combines the evocative power of the original, with our own call to poem…and can result in a hybridization that enriches the possibilities not only of our own work, but of poetry!

This ghazel by American poet, John Hollander actually explains the ghazel form:

John Hollander 1929-2013

Ghazal on Ghazals
For couplets the ghazal is prime; at the end
Of each one’s a refrain like a chime: “at the end.”

But in subsequent couplets throughout the whole poem,
It’s this second line only will rhyme at the end

One such a string of strange, unpronounceable fruits,
How fine the familiar old lime at the end!

All our writing is silent, the dance of the hand,
So that what it comes down to’s all mime, at the end.

Dust and ashes? How dainty and dry! We decay
To our messy primordial slime at the end.

Two frail arms of your delicate form I pursue,
Inaccessible, vibrant, sublime at the end.

You gathered all manner of flowers all day,
But your hands were most fragrant of thyme, at the end.

There are so many sounds! A poem having one rhyme?
—A good life with sad, minor crime at the end.

Each new couplet’s a different ascent: no great peak,
But a low hill quite easy to climb at the end.

Two armed bandits: start out with a great wad of green
Thoughts, but you’re left with a dime at the end.

Each assertion’s a knot which must shorten, alas.
This long-worded rope of which I’m at end.

Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,
At the same he’s been wasting his time at. THE END.

Hafiz **1315-1390**

Ghazal 84
Dear wine boy, bring us wine. The fast's over.
Give us the cup. The well-known past's over.

It's time to say prayers we've long forgotten.
Thank God the break from wine at last's over.

Intoxicate me so I will forget
Those I've known well and those I've passed over.

We catch the scent of what's inside the cup.
We send, in thanks, our deepest prayers over.

From the dead heart new life had reached the soul.
From the soft breeze your perfume passed over.

The prideful ascetic followed danger.
The path to a safe life's been passed over.

I spent all my heart's currency on wine.
My counterfeit coins have been passed over.

How long can one repent in such turmoil?
Pour wine, at last the madness is over.

Don't try to lead Hafez down the hard path.
He's discovered wine. The hard path's over.

Ghazal 85
We couldn't taste his lips before he left.
His light-filled moon face shone no more. He left.

Perhaps, you say, he felt constrained by us.
He broke his chains alone before he left.

We chanted Sura's, said so many prayers ...
We spoke the heart's language before he left.

His gaze said, "I will never leave desire."
We held his gaze in our mirror. He left.

He walked into the meadow full of love.
We'd never felt such spirit before he left.

By weeping when he's gone we're like Hafez.
Our goodbye kept us here before he left.
Both poems translated from the Persian by Roger Sedarat

Ghalib **1797-1869**

Inside the heart, love carps it lacks space.
Inside a pearl, the raging sea is free.

Answering letters cramps your style.
Once every day, I have to write my story.

Autumn arrives on henna-tinted feet.
Night agony succeeds a splash of glory.

I could not scale the peaks of light.
The old pointers never worked for me.

Skipping the play, I let her collar me.
I played it safe: this love is haggle-free.

My tears are only tokens of my grief.
I hold back a flood wide as the sea.

In the sun's glare, I often think of her.
On sunny days, she has no time for pity.
Translated by M. Shahid Alam

Rumi 1207-1273

The Twelve Lies

People say, "The one you love is unfaithful."
That's the first lie.

They say. "Your night will never end in dawn."
Did you hear that lie?

They say, "Why give up sleep and die for love? Once in the grave,
All that is forgotten; it's over."
That's the third lie.

Some thinkers say, "Once you leave our time system,
The spirit stops moving; in fact, it goes backward."
People love to tell lies!

Daydreamers with sluggish eyes say,
"Your poems and your teaching stories are nothing but daydreams."
I heard that lie.

People running around in the underbrush say,
"There's no path to the mountain and no mountain either."
That's the sixth lie!
They go on: "If you have too much earth in your chart,
You'll never grasp what angels are."
Another lie!

They like to say, "You'll never get out of this nest
With your stubby night wings; you'll drop like a stone."
Did you hear that lie?

They maintain, "What human beings do is insignificant anyway.
Stones weigh more than our evil. God cares nothing about it."
That's a big lie.

So just keep silent, and if anyone says to you,
"No communion takes place without words," just say to him,
"I heard that lie."
Translated by Coleman Barks

Adrienne Rich 1929-2012

For LeRoi Jones

Late at night I went walking through your difficult wood,
half-sleepy, half-alert in that thicket of bitter roots.

Who doesn't speak to me, who speaks to me more and more,
but from a face turned off, turned away, a light shut out.

Most of the old lecturers are inaudible or dead.
Prince of the night there are explosions in the hall.

The blackboard scribbled over with dead languages
is falling and killing our children.

Terribly far away I saw your mouth in the wild light:
It seemed to me you were shouting instructions to us all.

Agha Shahid Ali 1949-2001

Ghazal I

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles.
You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles.

You open the heart to list unborn galaxies.
Don't shut that folder when Earth is filed by exiles.

Before Night passes over the wheat of Egypt,
let stones be leavened, the bread torn wild by exiles.

Crucified Mansoor was alone with the Alone:
God's loneliness—just His—compiled by exiles.

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine—
It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles.

Tell me who's tonight the Physician of Sick Pearls?
Only you as you sit, Desert Child, by exiles.

Match Majnoon (he kneels to pray on a wine-stained rug)
or prayer will be nothing, distempered mild by exiles.

"Even things that are true can be proved." Even they?
Swear not by Art but, O Oscar Wilde, by exiles.

Don't weep, we'll drown out the Calls to Prayer, O Saqi—
I'll raise my glass before wine is defiled by exiles.

Was—after the last sky—this the fashion of fire:
Autumn's mist pressed to ashes styled by exiles?

If my enemy's alone and his arms are empty,
give him my heart silk-wrapped like a child by exiles.

Will you, Belovèd Stranger, ever witness Shahid—
two destinies at last reconciled by exiles?

Robert Bly 1926-

The Night Abraham Called to the Stars

Do you remember the night Abraham first saw
The stars? He cried to Saturn: "You are my Lord!"
How happy he was! When he saw the Dawn Star,

He cried, ""You are my Lord!" How destroyed he was
When he watched them set. Friends, he is like us:
We take as our Lord the stars that go down.

We are faithful companions to the unfaithful stars.
We are diggers, like badgers; we love to feel
The dirt flying out from behind our back claws.

And no one can convince us that mud is not
Beautiful. It is our badger soul that thinks so.
We are ready to spend the rest of our life

Walking with muddy shoes in the wet fields.
We resemble exiles in the kingdom of the serpent.
We stand in the onion fields looking up at the night.

My heart is a calm potato by day, and a weeping
Abandoned woman by night. Friend, tell me what to do,
Since I am a man in love with the setting stars.

Pitzeem and the Mare

Let's tell the other story about Pitzeem and his horse.
When the One He Loved moved to the mountains,
He bought a mare and a saddle and started out.

He rode all day with fire coming out of his ears,
And all night. When the reins fell, the mare knew it right
Away. She turned and headed straight for the barn.

No one had told Pitzeem, but his horse had left
A new foal back in the stable. She thought of nothing
All day but his sweet face with its long nose.

Pitzeem! Pitzeem! How much time you've lost!
He put the mountain between the mare's ears again.
He slapped his own face; he was a good lover.

And every night he fell asleep once more.
Friends,
Our desire to reach our true wife is great,
But the mare's love for her child is also great.
Please

Understand this. The journey was a three-day trip,

But it took Pitzeem thirty years. You and I have been
Riding for years, but we're still only a day from home.

Nikos and His Donkey

Let's tell the sweet story about the day Nikos,
Wandering around with his donkey and saddlebags,
Turned up one day at a farm of Godseekers.

The Godseekers all came out when he knocked.
They welcomed him, gave him tea, brought
His donkey to the stable for oats and water.

"Stay for supper," they said. How glad he was!
They drank tea for hours. Dinner came.
They all ate happily and began to dance.

The Godseekers sang two lines over and over:
"Compared to God's, our song is only a bray;
How beautiful is the scent of a thousand hairs!"

In the morning, he said, "Could I have my donkey?"
They said: "What do you mean, your donkey?
You ate the meal! You danced. You sang the songs!"

The donkey we have loved for years may be killed
And cooked one day while we go on singing.
So don't write a single poem without gratitude.

GROWING WINGS

It's all right if Cezanne goes on painting the same picture.
It's all right if juice tastes bitter in our mouths.
It's all right if the old man drags one useless foot.

The apple on the Tree of Paradise hangs there for months.
We wait for years and years on the lip of the falls;
The blue-gray mountain keeps rising behind the black trees.

It's all right if I feel this same pain until I die.
A pain that we have earned gives more nourishment
Than the joy we won at the lottery last night.

It's all right if the partridge's nest fills with snow.
Why should the hunter complain if his bag is empty
At dusk? It only means the bird will live another night.

It's all right if we turn in all our keys tonight.
It's all right if we give up our longing for the spiral.
It's all right if the boat I love never reaches shore.

If we're already so close to death, why should we complain?
Robert, you've climbed so many trees to reach the nests.
It's all right if you grow your wings on the way down.

Ravens Hiding in a Shoe

There is something men and women living in houses
Don’t understand. The old alchemists standing
Near their stoves hinted at it a thousand times.

Ravens at night hide in an old woman’s shoe.
A four-year-old speaks some ancient language.
We have lived our own death a thousand times.

Each sentence we speak to friends means the opposite
As well. Each time we say, “I trust in God,” it means
God has already abandoned us a thousand times.

Mothers again and again have knelt in church
In wartime asking God to protect their sons,
And their prayers were refused a thousand times.

The baby loon follows the mother’s sleek
Body for months. By the end of summer, she
Has dipped her head into Rainy Lake a thousand times.

Robert, you’ve wasted so much of your life
Sitting indoors to write poems. Would you
Do that again? I would, a thousand times.

The Villanelle

The villanelle, a French form codified in the 16th century, has its roots in Italian and Spanish folk music.

The term "*villanelle*" has its etymological origin in *villano*, an Italian word for "peasant," and in *villa*, the Latin word for "farm" or "country house." So interestingly, a *villain* wasn't the bad guy in a story: it was a farm servant or country person...a similar fate as has befallen the word, *pagan*...

The origin *Villanella,* or *Villancico,* was an Italian and Spanish folk song with an accompanying dance; it may have begun as a round, a work song to accompany various agricultural tasks.

The villanelle was established as a poetry form by Jean Passerat (1534-1602), whose rustic song about a lost turtledove created the vogue for the villanelle as a form of pastoral. Passerat's *Villanelle,* which is really a love poem, permanently set the pattern:

I have lost my turtledove:
Isn't that her gentle coo?
I will go and find my love.

Here you mourn your mated love;
Oh, God—I am mourning too:
I have lost my turtledove.

If you trust your faithful dove,
Trust my faith is just as true;
I will go and find my love.

Plaintively you speak your love;
All my speech is turned into
"I have lost my turtledove."

Such a beauty was my dove,
Other beauties will not do;
I will go and find my love.

Death, again entreated of,
Take one who is offered you:
I have lost my turtledove;
I will go and find my love.

A villanelle's repetitive dynamic lends itself gorgeously to telling us how you feel about something.... It's also a great form to give advice or instruction...or refuse to!

A villanelle is also the perfect form when you have something you're afraid to write about: the form will both hold and release the feeling...your repetitions become a solace and guide as the meanings arc and echo. The most important element is the villanelle's capability of building in intensity, as the same words take on more and more meaning and passion.

The villanelle consists of 19 lines divided into six stanzas—five tercets, usually rhyming *aba,* and a final quatrain, rhyming *abaa*. The first line of the first stanza becomes the last line of the second and fourth; the last line of the first stanza, becomes the last line of the third and fifth stanza. These two refrain lines (repeated lines) become the couplet at the end of the final quatrain.

They rhyme throughout, as do the middle lines of each stanza. The entire poem builds around two repeated lines and turns on a pair of rhymes.

The rhyme scheme is: AbA', abA, abA', abA, abA', abAA', with the capitalized letters representing the two lines that repeat.

The modern villanelle tends to have even line lengths: iambic pentameter works...but if holding a meter doesn't work for you, try just counting syllables, and staying somewhat (or NOT!!!) consistent!

Dylan Thomas **1914-1953**

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieve it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Elizabeth Bishop 1911-1979

One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster,

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

- Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

Ode

The ode form has undergone many modifications in its illustrious history! An early writer on the ode, Edmund Gosse, defined the ode as any type of “enthusiastic and exalted lyrical verse, directed to a fixed purpose and dealing progressively with one dignified theme.” The word *ode* comes from the Greek word *aeidein* (“to sing”), and broadly, as we now know it, an ode is a song or lyric poem, most often one that addresses a thing or person not present.
Basically, there are three types of odes: Pindaric, Horatian, and Irregular.
The Greek poet Pindar (522—442 B.C.) is credited with inventing the ode. Commissioned for particular occasions; they were sung and danced by a chorus. Each of Pindar’s victory odes are triumphal choral pieces, commemorating the victor of an athletic competition, and include a formal beginning, an invocation, prayer, myth, a moral, and a conclusion, all in complicated metrical and stanzaic patterns, although Pindar strove for spontaneity inside this structure.
The traditional tone of these odes is exalted and intense. The form is: STROPHE (a turning) - because the first part of a Greek ode sung as the chorus moved to one side, the ANTISTROPHE, (counterturn) as it reversed its direction, the EPODE or aftersong, also called, the STAND, when the chorus stood still. Maybe fun to play with today?
Also known for his odes, is the Roman poet Horace (65—8 B.C.). Controlled and polished, with a mellow, civilized tone, his

witty odes are more philosophical, more personal, and usually briefer.
Like Pindar's, they follow particular stanzaic and metrical patterns, but unlike the Pindaric, these contain one stanza pattern that is repeated throughout the poem. A modern example of this, is Alexander Pope's *Ode on Solitude*: not a poem to be performed, but meant to be enjoyed in private, with time for reflection.
The third form, the Irregular Ode, throws the doors of possibilities wide open for us, discarding some or all of the metrical, stanzaic and line rules. All that remains of the ode is its rise and fall of emotional intensity and its dedication to one dignified - or not! - subject. Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* and the lush, gorgeous odes of Keats and Shelley are examples of this kind of ode. They have the tone and thematic elements of classical tradition but follow their own rules of form. A great example is Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.
The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (1904—1973) transformed the Irregular Ode: moving the ode away from "dignified themes" in his *Odas Elementales (Odes to Simple Things).* By writing about simple, ordinary objects using wild metaphors and images, the object and language shift the poems into high gear of celebration and offering deliciously fresh understandings of things we think we know.
Other notable modern odes are Allen Tate's *Ode to the Confederate Dead,* W. H. Auden's *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, and those of Frank O'Hara.
Ultimately what has survived of the ode in its 2,500 years is its spontaneity, its expansiveness, tone of celebration and its openness to a wide range of emotions. Today, these are the qualities that make an ode an ode.

Horace 65—8 B.C

Ode I. 11

Leucon, no one's allowed to know his fate,
Not you, not me: don't ask, don't hunt for answers
In tea leaves or palms. Be patient with whatever comes.
This could be our last winter, it could be many
More, pounding the Tuscan Sea on these rocks:
Do what you must, be wise, cut your vines
And forget about hope. Time goes running, even
As we talk. Take the present, the future's no one's affair.
Translated by Burton Raffel

Alexander Pope 1688 - 1744

Ode on Solitude

Happy the man whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,

Content to breathe his native air
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire;
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
In winter fire.

Blessed, who can unconcern'dly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away
In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease
Together mixed; sweet recreation,
And innocence, which most does please
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me die;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.

John Keats 1795-1821

Ode to a Nightingale

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—

To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Pablo Neruda 1904-1973

Ode to Salt

This salt
in the salt cellar
I once saw in the salt mines.
I know
you won't
believe me
but
it sings
salt sings, the skin
of the salt mines
sings
with a mouth smothered
by the earth.
I shivered in those
solitudes
when I heard
the voice
of
the salt
in the desert.
Near Antofagasta
the nitrous
pampa
resounds:
a
broken
voice,
a mournful
song.

In its caves
the salt moans, mountain
of buried light,
translucent cathedral,
crystal of the sea, oblivion
of the waves.
And then on every table
in the world,
salt,
we see your piquant
powder
sprinkling
vital light
upon
our food.
Preserver
of the ancient
holds of ships,
discoverer
on
the high seas,
earliest
sailor
of the unknown, shifting
byways of the foam.
Dust of the sea, in you
the tongue receives a kiss
from ocean night:
taste imparts to every seasoned
dish your ocean essence;
the smallest,
miniature
wave from the saltcellar
reveals to us
more than domestic whiteness;
in it, we taste infinitude.

Ode to My Socks

Mara Mori brought me
a pair of socks
which she knitted herself
with her sheepherder's hands,
two socks as soft as rabbits.
I slipped my feet into them
as if they were two cases
knitted with threads of twilight and goatskin,
Violent socks,
my feet were two fish made of wool,
two long sharks
sea blue, shot through
by one golden thread,
two immense blackbirds,
two cannons,
my feet were honored in this way
by these heavenly socks.
They were so handsome for the first time
my feet seemed to me unacceptable
like two decrepit firemen,
firemen unworthy of that woven fire,
of those glowing socks.

Nevertheless, I resisted the sharp temptation
to save them somewhere as schoolboys
keep fireflies,
as learned men collect
sacred texts,

I resisted the mad impulse to put them
in a golden cage and each day give them
birdseed and pieces of pink melon.
Like explorers in the jungle
who hand over the very rare green deer
to the spit and eat it with remorse,
I stretched out my feet and pulled on
the magnificent socks and then my shoes.

The moral of my ode is this:
beauty is twice beauty
and what is good is doubly good
when it is a matter of two socks
made of wool in winter.

Ode to the Watermelon

The tree of intense summer,
hard,
is all blue sky,
yellow sun,
fatigue in drops,
a sword
above the highways,
a scorched shoe
in the cities:
the brightness and the world
weigh us down,
hit us
in the eyes
with clouds of dust,
with sudden golden blows,
they torture our feet
with tiny thorns,
with hot stones,
and the mouth suffers
more than all the toes:
the throat becomes thirsty,
the teeth,
the lips, the tongue:
we want to drink
waterfalls,
the dark blue night,
the South Pole,
and then the coolest of all
the planets cross
the sky,
the round, magnificent,
star—filled watermelon.
It's a fruit from the thirst—tree.
It's the green whale of the summer.
The dry universe
all at once
given dark stars
by this firmament of coolness
lets the swelling
fruit
come down:
its hemispheres open
showing a flag
green, white, red,
that dissolves into
wild rivers, sugar,
delight!
Jewel box of water, phlegmatic
queen
of the fruitshops,
warehouse
of profundity, moon
on earth!
You are pure,
rubies fall apart
in your abundance,
and we
want to bite into you,
to bury our
face
in you, and
the soul!
When we're thirsty
we glimpse you
like
a mine or a mountain
of fantastic food,
but
among our longings and our teeth
you change
simply
into cool light
that slips in turn into
spring water
that touched us once
Singing.
And that is why
you don't weigh us down
in the siesta hour
that's like an oven,
you don't weigh us down,
you just
go by
and your heart, some cold ember,
turned itself into a single
drop of water.