THE PANTOUM

The pantoum is based on a Malaysian form. It involves the repetition of alternating lines in stanzas of four lines, as follows:

- The second and fourth lines of the first stanza become the first and third lines of the second stanza.

- The second and fourth lines of the second stanza become the first and third lines of the third stanza.

- And so the poem continues until the last stanza, in which the first and third lines of the first stanza are repeated, usually with the first line of the poem also serving as the last. (Our model poem includes a variation on this—the second and fourth lines of the last stanza are the first and third of the first, repeated in the same order as in the first stanza.)

- Traditionally, the repeating lines rhyme with each other, though in our model poem they do not.

Because of its reliance on repetition, the pantoum is especially suited to subjects having to do with obsessions, passions, cycles—the passing of time, the changing of the seasons, etc.—and conflict or ambivalence.

For our model, let’s look at a poem by Linda Pastan.
SOMETHING ABOUT THE TREES

I remember what my father told me:
There is an age when you are most yourself.
He was just past fifty then,
Was it something about the trees that made him speak?

There is an age when you are most yourself.
I know more now than I did once.
Was it something about the trees that made him speak?
Only a single leaf had turned so far.

I know more now than I did once.
I used to think he’d always be the surgeon.
Only a single leaf had turned so far,
Even his body kept its secrets.

I used to think he’d always be the surgeon.
My mother was the perfect surgeon’s wife.
Even his body kept its secrets.
I thought they both would live forever.

My mother was the perfect surgeon’s wife.
I still can see her face at thirty.
I thought they both would live forever.
I thought I’d always be their child.

I still can see her face at thirty.
When will I be most myself?
I thought I’d always be their child.
In my sleep it’s never winter.

When will I be most myself?
I remember what my father told me.
In my sleep it’s never winter.
He was just past fifty then.
Here we have a calm, reflective persona narrator. We can see how well the form serves the subject of the poem, as this narrator turns a memory over and over in her mind. As Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux point out in their book *The Poet’s Companion*, the speaker is “haunted by the past . . . and her recognition of the cycles of life.” Notice that the lines are mostly end-stopped, and the logic as we move from sentence to sentence is associative or dream-like rather than rational. For example, what exactly does this statement mean: “Only a single leaf had turned so far, / Even his body kept its secrets”? It doesn’t make ordinary sense, but the emotional meaning is clear. Furthermore, although the language and idea are simple, the sense of longing and grief that accrues as the poem progresses is powerful. (I felt a wave of grief when I first typed up the line, “I still can see her face at thirty.”)

**Assignment:** Create a calm first-person persona narrator, and give that narrator a subject that has been an obsession of yours, something that haunts you or that you can’t get off your mind. Use the pantoum form to have your narrator explore or reflect on this subject. Stick to the form as closely as possible. By avoiding variations, you are more likely to corner yourself (or your narrator) into making surprising discoveries, via the constrictions of the form itself.