

Pen a Pantoum

In describing the pantoum, a form of poetry that derives from the Malay oral tradition *pantun berkait*, Carlos Villa observed that it “might be of indefinite length — made up of stanzas whose four lines are repeated in a pattern . . . so as the words and phrases are repeated — the meanings shift and change because of their placement.”¹

Read the following pantoum by the poet huiying b. chan and note which lines get repeated and how the impact of each repeated line changes as the poem goes on:

how we survived: 爺爺's pantoum (ii)
by huiying b. chan

we wore watermelon husks to hide
lost cargo floating east to hong kong
water lilies & crickets our last witness
we departed the cattailed creek one final time.

lost cargo floating east to hong kong
new hing dai treaded water, compasses toward freedom
we departed the cattailed creek one final time
white sharks awaited our legs in the depths.

new hing dai treaded water, compasses toward freedom
they said we had an 80% chance of making it
white sharks awaited our legs in the depths

breath + breath x wanting =
death

an 80% chance of making it
letters sent back announced survival.

breath + breath x wanting
death

banked on generations of dreaming

letters sent back announced survival.
we were promised work in the restaurants
banked on generations of dreaming
fishermen took pity & reeled us on gasoline tanks.

we were promised work in the restaurants
i clawed brown earth before collapsing.
fishermen took pity & reeled us on gasoline tanks
five bowls of rice in hong kong, my sweetest meal.

i clawed brown earth before collapsing
villagers found us gasping, fish out of water
five bowls of rice in hong kong, my sweetest meal.
memories escape me now.

villagers found us gasping, fish out of water.
my thoughts enter one ear & leave the other.
memories escape me now.
you being here helps me remember.

my thoughts enter one ear & leave the other.
water lilies & crickets, our last witness.
you being here helps me remember
we wore watermelon husks to hide.

for 爺爺
in memoriam

爺爺: *yeh yeh*, Cantonese for paternal grandfather
hing dai: Cantonese for brother or close friend

Source: chan, huiying b. *Dandelion Speaks*. 2 Feb, 2022. Accessed March 13, 2022.
<https://dandelionspeaks.com/2022/02/02/how-we-survived-爺爺s-pantoum-ii-huiying-b-chan/>
Originally published in *The Shade Journal*. To learn more about huiying b. chan, go to huiyingbchan.com.

Here is Carlos Villa's own pantoum "Zim's Lament Crabbox Pantoum," which uses six-line stanzas. How does Villa convey a different message in each stanza, just by placing the same lines in a different order? How does Villa's pantoum compare/contrast with Chan's in terms of format and theme?

Zim's Lament Crabbox Pantoum

No clean breaks
Itching to split
Eagles don't
Fly with sparrows
Never let me be
Afraid of the dark

Itching to split
Eagles don't
Fly with sparrows
Never let me be
Afraid of the dark
No clean breaks

Eagles don't
Fly with sparrows
Never let me be
Itching to split
No clean breaks
Afraid of the dark

Fly with sparrows
Itching to split
Afraid of the dark
Eagles don't fly
Never let me be
No clean breaks

Note on the pantoum's title: The authors of *Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision* explain that Villa "may have been seated in a Zim's, a now defunct chain of San Francisco restaurants, as he worked out the pantoum's cyclically repeated lines in successive stanzas. The 'crab box' is a metaphor for a minoritized mindset in which individuals pull members of their own communities down, holding one another back as they struggle for advancement."²

1. Francia, Luis H. "America Is in His Art: Carlos Villa's Poetics of Multiculturalism," in *Carlos Villa, Worlds in Collision*, eds. Mark Dean Johnson, Trisha Lagaso Goldberg, and Sherwin Rio (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 89.
2. Johnson, Mark D., Trisha Lagaso Goldberg, and Sherwin Rio. "Worlds in Space: Carlos Villa's 1990s Notepad Drawings" in *Carlos Villa, Worlds in Collision*, eds. Mark Dean Johnson, Trisha Lagaso Goldberg, and Sherwin Rio (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 96.

Brainstorm for Your Own Pantoum

Jot down the people, moments, quotes, and feelings that come to mind when you think about your identity, your family history, or your community. What do you want to reveal about yourself through your poem? Feel free to use words, doodles, or emojis to express your thoughts.

People	Moments
Quotes	Feelings

Now, write your pantoum by using the following template; the different colors show where certain lines should repeat. Read your draft out loud so you can hear the rhythm and repetition of your lines. Keep revising until your lines and stanzas sound right to you; feel free to use extra templates if necessary.

Line 1 _____

Line 2 _____

Line 3 _____

Line 4 _____

Line 2 _____

Line 5 _____

Line 4 _____

Line 6 _____

Line 5 _____

Line 3 _____

Line 6 _____

Line 1 _____

Feel free to write more stanzas to make your pantoum longer. Just remember that the second and fourth lines of one stanza become the first and third lines of the next stanza. In the final stanza, bring back Line 3 and Line 1 of the first stanza, so that in the end, each line of the poem gets repeated.

After finishing your final draft, consider:

What title might you give your pantoum? With whom might you share this poem?

Option: Collaborate with your friends or family. Decide on a theme and have each person contribute a line that gets inserted into the pantoum template.