

WRITING IN FORM by Barbara Pelman

I love using various forms when I write a poem: sestinas, pantoums, ghazals, but most of all, glosas. When talking about form, I mean not only the complicated ones with many rules (which words to repeat, how many lines, where is the rhyme scheme, etc) and a long history, but also how the stanzas are divided in a regular pattern: couplets, tercets, quatrains. But mostly when we talk about form poems, we mean those traditional and historic forms such as the ones mentioned above. Sestinas, villanelles, glosas from Italian and Spanish sources, pantoums and ghazals from Persia, haiku and senryu and haibun from Japan. The paradox of writing within these boundaries is that the boundary frees you. At least, it does me. Knowing where the boundaries are gives me a freedom to work within them, like the shape of a canvas, and generally gets me out of that comfort zone where all poems are, to paraphrase another poet, “Barbara poems.”

Kate Braid and Sandy Shreve collected many poems in these patterns in their wonderful books *In Fine Form*, editions 1 and 2 (Caitlin Press) My poetry books contain pantoums, sestinas, haibuns, but mostly glosas. A few times, a poem begins in a form but after editing, I remove the form—reluctantly—kind of like the scaffolding of a building, that gets removed when it can stand alone. But mostly, the scaffolding is the poem, and it stays.

The glosa is, at the moment, my favorite form. Originating in Spain in the 15th century, it was recently brought back into the limelight by PK Page in her two books, *Hologram* (Brick Books 1994)) and *Coal and Roses* (Porcupine’s Quill 2009). I keep a file of 4 line or 3 line or 2 line gems from other poems, in case (note: there are also variations on the glosa: the tri-glosa, the demi-glosa). But more often I read a poem and am knocked out by it, so I raid 4 consecutive lines from it and begin a glosa. This is what happened when I read Carl Phillips’ tiny and perfect poem, “In a Field at Sunset.” *The rhyme scheme between lost and most....* so evocative! That day a friend had written, in an email, “there was a boy that summer in Germany” and I was inspired. That became the first line. All I needed was 8 more, the 10th line already there and waiting for me: *When he asked if I still loved him I didn’t answer*. The beginnings of a love affair, parts imagined, parts true, typed themselves onto the page. Yes, I had been to Berlin, heard a cello playing and people dancing along the banks of the Spree River. The rest of the story formed itself, line by line. Nearing the 8th and 9th lines, I knew I had to maneuver the poem toward the borrowed line, so some shift in time was needed. And voila, the first stanza with the borrowed line as the 10th.

The next issue was to figure out why “*I didn’t answer*”, in this little story I was making up as I went along. Editing this poem showed some awkwardness between the time shifts—seeing the lover now and remembering that summer in Germany—but I sorted that problem out by the time I got to the second borrowed line, which answered the question pondered in the first. The third stanza allowed me to return to the love story, the summer in Germany, and build it again line by line, heading to the next borrowed line. This was going to be tricky: that ‘*rhyme scheme between lost and most*’ is the heart of Phillips’ poem but the rules of the glosa required me to break up that rhyme scheme. What else could so tantalizingly rhyme with loss? I think I

took a break from the poem here, to mull over some rhymes. Loss/moss/tossed/toast/cost? It had to be a slant rhyme, something surprising. Finally, I thought of ‘ghost’. I could now move the poem to the idea of memory, the ghost-like quality of it, how that lover had retreated in my life but still haunted me.

I was ready to wrap up the poem, to find a way to reach down the next 9 lines to “*and most*”, and to find the heart of the poem, beyond merely a piece of memory or an imagined love affair. Something about how small things, brief things, can have a huge impact. Something about the difficulty in putting memory, emotion, thought into words that will reverberate. I tried for a number of words to express that: *inescapable*, *soudade*, and finally, *ineffable*—the word that by definition states what cannot be stated. And that got me down to ‘*and most*’. Here’s the full glosa, which is in my new book, “A Brief and Endless Sea” (Caitlin Press 2023).

CELLO

*When he asked if I still loved him, I didn't answer;
but of course, I loved him.
He'd become, by then, like the rhyme scheme between lost
and most.*

Carl Phillips, “In a Field, Sunset”

There was a boy, in Germany, one summer,
he spoke halting English, and I had no German
but we were young enough not to care.
It was August, and along the Spree River,
there was a cello playing. He asked me to dance
and of course, because it was summer, in Germany,
and we were young, I did, and after many days
and nights, we were still humming the tunes from that cello.
I saw him again, just yesterday, so many years later.
When he asked if I still loved him, I didn't answer;

Could I fold the years back? Seal them against time,
which disarranges all the moments we thought we had.
Did we kiss? Of course. Did we talk?
There were times when the silence between us
was richer than words, heavier and deeper, as if I knew him
from some other life, but as I said, we were young
and I am less wise now with all my years. Perhaps
the trees leaning into the river, the tall grasses
remember better, those hours after the cello.
But of course, I loved him.

He read me Rilke, I read him Yeats.
Because we had no language, we listened more carefully,
the words rising and falling, like music.
Was it hours or years ago? The sun on our backs,
the sharp grasses, dragonflies drifting above us,
the languid scent of our bodies, deliquescent sun,
such words that could stretch along his skin,
his lustrous skin, his eyes solemn, so liquid
he could fill me up. But as I said, I am less wise now,
He'd become, by then, like the rhyme scheme between lost—

and ghost, and I try with words
to pull that summer onto the page,
the long days by the river,
his hands, his spine, the curve of his neck,
the way he woke my skin. And later, at night,
an owl, that low gurgle in the trees above.
And beyond that, the ineffable something
that halts my steps now, along a dark city street
so many years later, a boy I loved the briefest
and most.