

## **Natasha Trethewey, "Incident"**

**We tell the story every year --  
how we peered from the windows, shades drawn --  
though nothing really happened,  
the charred grass now green again.**

**We peered from the windows, shade drawn,  
at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,  
the charred grass still green. Then  
we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps.**

**At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,  
a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns.  
We darkened our room and lit hurricane lamps,  
the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil.**

**It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns.  
When they were done, they left quietly. No one came.  
The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil;  
by morning the flames had all dimmed.**

**When they were done, the men left quietly. No one came.  
Nothing really happened.  
By morning all the flames had dimmed.  
We tell the story every year.**

The **pantoum** is a form of poetry similar to a villanelle in that there are repeating lines throughout the poem. It is composed of a series of quatrains; the second and fourth lines of each stanza are repeated as the first and third lines of the next. This pattern continues for any number of stanzas, except for the final stanza, which differs in the repeating pattern. The first and third lines of the last stanza are the second and fourth of the penultimate; the first line of the poem is the last line of the final stanza, and the third line of the first stanza is the second of the final. Ideally, the meaning of lines shifts when they are repeated although the words remain exactly the same: this can be done by shifting punctuation, punning, or simply recontextualizing.

A four-stanza pantoum is common, and in the final stanza, you could simply repeat lines one and three from the first stanza, or write new lines. The pantoum "recipe" is as follows:

Stanza 1 A B C D (or A C B D)  
Stanza 2 B E D F (or C E D F)  
Stanza 3 E G F H  
Stanza 4 G I (or A or C) H J (or A or C)