

Ghazal: the Basics

- consists of an indefinite number of couplets (known as *shers*), but usually no less than five
- each couplet is considered independent of the rest
- no enjambment between couplets or even *within* couplets
- the second line of every couplet must end with the same word or set of words (a refrain known as the *radif*)
- before every refrain (*radif*) there must be a rhyme that immediately precedes it (known as the *qafia*)
- the first couplet (known as the *matla*) has the rhyme and the refrain in both lines, but all subsequent couplets only have them in the second line
- the final couplet (known as the *makhta*) is a signature couplet in which the poet invokes his own name in first, second, or third person
- the meter (known as the *beher*) in English is often iambic pentameter or syllabic

Some observations:

- Epigrammatic terseness and constant longing define the ghazal, which uses impulse and intuition more than rationality. Fragments, glimpses, and exclamations often need no more than a couplet! Continuity and unity flow from the associations and images playing back and forth among the couplets in any single ghazal, so it's okay to make a "jump" after each couplet, from the political to the personal, from talk to thought, from idea to image, from near to far.
- Unity stems from a theme and its variations.
- Some American poets have omitted the rhyme while retaining the couplet form and the approximate length. They also emphasize a disconnectedness between couplets, juxtaposing apparently unrelated observations, placing insights or images side by side without explaining their connection. These gaps can be a great source of power and mystery.

Ghazal Schematic:

(where *a* is the *qafia* or rhyme, and *A* is the *radif* or refrain)

1. _____ a + A

2. _____ a + A

3. _____

4. _____ a + A

5. _____

6. _____ a + A

7. _____

8. _____ a + A

9. _____

10. _____ a + A

11. _____

12. _____ a + A

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.

Drought was over. Where was I? Drinks were on the house.
For mixers, my love, you'd poured--what?--even the rain.

Of this pear-shaped orange's perfumed twist, I will say:
Extract Vermouth from the bergamot, even the rain.

How did the Enemy love you--with earth? air? and fire?
He held just one thing back till he got even: the rain.

This is God's site for a new house of executions?
You swear by the Bible, Despot, even the rain?

After the bones--those flowers--this was found in the urn:
The lost river, ashes from the ghat, even the rain.

What was I to prophesy if not the end of the world?
A salt pillar for the lonely lot, even the rain.

How the air raged, desperate, streaming the earth with flames--
to help burn down my house, Fire sought even the rain.

He would raze the mountains, he would level the waves,
he would, to smooth his epic plot, even the rain.

New York belongs at daybreak to only me, just me--
to make this claim Memory's brought even the rain.

They've found the knife that killed you, but whose prints are these?
No one has such small hands, Shahid, not even the rain.

--Agha Shahid Ali

Red Ghazal

I've noticed after a few sips of tea, the tip of her tongue, thin and red
with heat, quickens when she describes her cuts and bruises—deep violets and red.

The little girl I baby-sit, hair orange and wild, sits splayed and upside down
on a couch, insists her giant book of dinosaurs is the only one she'll ever read.

The night before I left him, I could not sleep, my eyes fixed on the freckles
of his shoulder, the glow of the clock, my chest heavy with dread.

Scientists say they'll force a rabbit to a bird, a jellyfish with a snake, even
though the pairs clearly do not mix. Some things are not meant to be bred.

I almost forgot the weight of a man sitting beside me in bed sheets crumpled
around our waists, both of us with magazines, laughing at the thing he just read.

He was so charming—pointed out planets, ghost galaxies, an ellipsis
of ants on the wall. And when he kissed me goodnight, my neck reddened.

I'm terrible at cards. Friends huddle in for Euchre, Hearts—beg me to play
with them. When it's obvious I can clearly win with a black card, I select a red.

I throw away my half-finished letters to him in my tiny pink wastebasket, but
my aim is no good. The floor is scattered with fire hazards, declarations unread.

--Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Ghazal

The sky is a dry pitiless white. The wide rows stretch on into death.

Like famished birds, my hands strip each stalk of its stolen crop: our name.

History is a ship forever setting sail. On either shore: mountains of men,

Oceans of bone, an engine whose teeth shred all that is not our name.

Can you imagine what will sound from us, what we'll rend and claim

When we find ourselves alone with all we've ever sought: our name?

Or perhaps what we seek lives outside of speech, like a tribe of goats

On a mountain above a lake, whose hooves nick away at rock. Our name

Is blown from tree to tree, scattered by the breeze. Who am I to say what,

In that marriage, is lost? For all I know, the grass has caught our name.

Having risen from moan to growl, growl to a hound's low bray,

The voices catch. No priest, no sinner has yet been taught our name.

Will it thunder up, the call of time? Or lie quiet as bedrock beneath

Our feet? Our name our name our name our fraught, fraught name.

--Tracy K. Smith

Miscegenation

In 1965 my parents broke two laws of Mississippi;
they went to Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi.

They crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name
begins with a sound like *sin*, the sound of wrong—*mis* in Mississippi.

A year later they moved to Canada, followed a route the same
as slaves, the train slicing the white glaze of winter, leaving Mississippi.

Faulkner's Joe Christmas was born in winter, like Jesus, given his name
for the day he was left at the orphanage, his race unknown in Mississippi.

My father was reading *War and Peace* when he gave me my name.
I was born near Easter, 1966, in Mississippi.

When I turned 33 my father said, *It's your Jesus year—you're the same
age he was when he died.* It was spring, the hills green in Mississippi.

I know more than Joe Christmas did. Natasha is a Russian name—
though I'm not; it means *Christmas child*, even in Mississippi.

--Natasha Trethewey

Dawn

Some love to watch the sea bushes appearing at dawn,
To see night fall from the goose wings, and to hear
The conversations the night sea has with the dawn.

If we can't find Heaven, there are always bluejays.
Now you know why I spent my twenties crying.
Cries are required from those who wake disturbed at dawn.

Adam was called in to name the Red-Winged
Blackbirds, the Diamond Rattlers, and the Ring-Tailed
Raccoons washing God in the streams at dawn.

Centuries later, the Mesopotamian gods,
All curls and ears, showed up; behind them the Generals
With their blue-coated sons who will die at dawn.

Those grasshopper-eating hermits were so good
To stay all day in the cave; but it is also sweet
To see the fenceposts gradually appear at dawn.

People in love with the setting stars are right
To adore the baby who smells of the stable, but we know
That even the setting stars will disappear at dawn.

--Robert Bly

Speak Now, Or Forever. Hold Your Peace.

Two weeks after 17 students were gunned down in Parkland, Fla., hundreds of worshippers clutching AR-15s slurped holy wine and exchanged or renewed wedding vows in a commitment ceremony at the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary in Newfoundland, Pa.

Draped in thick silk the hue of hemorrhage and bone, you fondle
your butt stocks, muffled lust needles your cheeks. Your aim? To
make America great. Again,

your terse-lipped Lord has nudged you into the glare—numbed
and witless in His name, you preen and re-glue blessed unions,
mistake America straight, contend

your unloosed crave for the sugared heat of triggers. Besotted beneath
your crowns of unspent shells, you hard-rhyme vows and
quake, aware of that weight again,

the gawky, feral gush of fetish. Every uncocked groom and rigid
bride is greased and un-tongued, struck dumb by what's at
stake. A miracle waits. You men

and women kaboom your hearts with skewered Spam and searing
pink Walmart wine, graze idly on ammo and blood-frosted
cake. A prayer is the bait. *Amen*

woos guests in their ball gowns and bird suits, hallows your blind
obsession with your incendiary intended. Though you've
faked America, hate upends

all this odd holy—its frayed altars, fumbled psalms, assault rifles
chic in itty veils. And we marvel at this
outbreak, bewareing that gate again,

left unlatched so this bright foolish can flow through. This ilk
of stupid blaes blue enough to rouse ancestors—y'all 'bout to
make Amiri berate again,

'bout to conjure Fannie Lou and her tree-trunk wrists. While you
snot-weep, caress mute carbines, wed your unfathomable
ache, America waits. 'Cause when

the sacrament cools, and the moon is pocked with giggling, who'll
fall naked first, whose shuddering tongue will dare the barrel?
Take that dare. Consummate. And then,

whose blood will that be?

--Patricia Smith

Late Ghazal

Footsole to scalp alive facing the window's black mirror.
First rains of the winter morning's smallest hour.

Go back to the ghazal then what will you do there?
Life always pulsed harder than the lines.

Do you remember the strands that ran from eye to eye?
The tongue that reached everywhere, speaking all the parts?

Everything there was cast in an image of desire.
The imagination's cry is a sexual cry.

I took my body anyplace with me.
In the thickets of abstraction my skin ran with blood.

Life was always stronger . . . the critics couldn't get it.
Memory says the music always ran ahead of the words.

--Adrienne Rich