

The Way of the River

Sijo Poetry in English



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David Jibson

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Introduction

About Sijo (Short Song)

Sijo is a concise Korean poetic form consisting of three lines, each containing 14-16 syllables, totaling 44-46 syllables. These lines feature a midpoint pause, akin to a caesura, although it need not adhere to a specific meter. The first half of each line encompasses six to nine syllables, while the second half should contain no fewer than five. Originally intended to be sung, Sijo typically explore themes of romance, metaphysics, or spirituality. Regardless of the topic, ideally, the first line introduces an idea or narrative, the second elaborates the theme, and the third offers closure, often with a twist. In modern times, Sijo are often presented in six lines. Traditional Sijo lacked titles, while contemporary ones may or may not be titled.

Sijo share some characteristics with other poetic forms more familiar to us. The 14-16 syllable line, for example, closely resembles the length of Haiku. It also closely parallels the “American Sentence” as imagined by the beat poet, Alan Ginsberg. Emily Dickinson was known to favour poems written in *common meter*, which features alternating lines of 4 beats and 3 beats (usually 14 syllables). Common meter is also a staple in songs like *House of the Rising Sun*, *The Yellow Rose of Texas* and *Amazing Grace*.

Writing Sijo in English is a challenge, similar to the challenges of writing Japanese Haiku in English. The rhythms and syntax of English differ significantly from those of the Korean language. Our best hope is to capture the essence and spirit of Sijo in English rather than to reproduce the form perfectly.

Some of the Sijo that appear in this book were written specifically for it. Some were written earlier and several of those have publication history in print and online journals, including *The Bamboo Hut* and *The Gyroscope Review*.

I hope you enjoy these Sijo and if you are new to this poetic form, I hope you will find some inspiration to begin writing your own.

At the back of this book, I provide further information about Sijo resources and examples of traditional and contemporary Sijo.

The Seasons (a Sijo Cycle)

For many weeks I have been looking
forward to this day.
The Siberian iris have bloomed,
their throats a heavenly blue,
but like every good thing they will fade
and wither too soon.

In the sunny front garden
I have raised up a new bed
with planks of rough cedar
and a special mix for growing.
The lavender are so happy now
that they raise me up with them.

It's the time of year
that salmon come into the river.
The overnight temperatures
have begun to signal a change.
If the first frost were a bell,
you could hear it ring in the distance.

At the bus stop a girl with a hijab
shivers against the cold.
On this dark winter morning,
we wait together in silence,
occasional flakes of snow catching
in her long eyelashes.

On A Long Drive

On a long drive I sometimes imagine
you sitting next to me.
I look at you in the passenger seat
and you are young again.
Your eyes turn to me and you say,
“How long until we’re home?”

The Way of the River

As a young girl my mother learned
the way of the river;
what might cause a ripple, how
currents and eddies are alive.
“Don’t fight the current,” she’d say.
“Let it take you where you want to go.”

Midnight Snow

It's been falling since morning,
 weighing down the branches of the trees.
I carry in an armload
 of seasoned oak for the wood stove.
The fire flickers and our shadow puppets
 dance on the ceiling.

March Afternoon

The day and the season linger
 like the scent of a tangerine
once lingered on your fingers after
 you'd peeled and eaten it.
If we could be together now
 I would kiss those fingers.

Retirement

You ask what I do all day
 now that I no longer work for the man.
I am too busy doing nothing
 to answer your question.
Perhaps later I will have time to think about it,
 but not today.

My Mountain Friend

I have a friend who lives
 where mountains fill the horizon.
He often hikes and takes pictures
 of the many things he sees.
He sends these to me to admire,
 which I do with mild envy.

Albert

My old friend Albert told me
that he is slowly going blind.
I told him not to worry,
his other senses will compensate.
“Yes, I know they will,” he said,
“already I can smell you.”

Dinosaurs Playing Chess

In a coffee shop this morning
two children are playing chess,
but their game is about the pieces
roaming over the board
devouring each other
then searching for other things to eat.

The Empty Room

“I hate football,” grandmother told me,
“but I miss the sound of him
watching his favorite team
while I cook the Sunday pot-roast,
so I keep the television on
in the empty living room.”

Last Night

Last night the moon and Jupiter
appeared so close together
they were like a tiny tug boat
towing a huge liner
bound for the antipodes
into the blackest ocean.

Enlightenment

Siddhartha sought enlightenment
 in the shade of a banyan tree.
His followers claim he found it
 after years of meditation,
but he also found
 that he could no longer uncross his legs.

Full Moon of January

Above a haunted forest, the Wolf Moon
 glows eerily through thin clouds.
Frost weighs heavy on my heart
 and touches everything I see.
From a distant hill top,
 the sound of hunger fills the air.

Dining Out After...

At what was our favorite restaurant,
I stand before a sign that reads,
Please Wait to be Seated.

When the young hostess approaches
with a warm and friendly smile
I request a table for one.

The Birds of Morris Graves

Oh, these are not the pretty
painted plovers of Audubon,
but spirit birds that seek to nest
in a wounded wilderness,
Taoist owls in times of change
singing in the next dimension.

Necessities

An old woman stoops over
 with her bags of necessities;
heavy tins of meat for the cat,
 a carton of milk for tea,
burdens too heavy for such a small woman
 to bear — yet she does.

The Blind Astronomer

She was the first astronomer
 to ever see a black hole.
I ask, “how can it be?”
 With a wry smile, she explains to me,
“because these eyes of mine are useless
 I see with my heart.”

Plastic Shopping Bag

Caught in the limbs of a leafless oak,
a plastic shopping bag
shreds in a raw January wind.

“I know just how you feel,”
I tell the hapless bag.

“Winters have become hard for me too.”

The Ninth Wave

The western ocean is never still.

The ninth wave is coming.

It divides us from all we have known,
everything we have loved.

The far shore is attainable
only to the courageous.

Her Song

While I'm cooking breakfast

I can hear her singing in the shower.

Her voice, between alto and soprano,
is off-key as always.

She sings the song's final line,

"I really don't know love at all."

Family Heritage

My family didn't accomplish much

but cutting down trees
and failing to get rich doing it.

We didn't invent working hard
to make other people rich
but we perfected it.

Coming Home Late

Parking lot at midnight,
 Fords and Chevys asleep under the moon.
A dog howling far away
 thinks he is protecting his home.
From an open window,
 the aroma of roasting garlic.

October Rain

October rain falls quietly
 on a cold afternoon.
Cars wait their turns at a stop sign,
 lights reflected in wet pavement.
Wipers beat out time like Brubeck
 writing another hit tune.

Danse Sur Le Lac

An impromptu pas de deux
 in the Lake Michigan surf,
pirouettes and pliés timed
 with the rhythm of the water.
Slicing through an incoming wave,
 two girls rise in a grand jeté.

Country Estate

Twelve-wide trailer, oxidized mint green,
 yard of dry grass and weeds.
Shed full of things every old shed holds,
 empty gas can, snow shovel.
Driveway markers made of tires,
 sunk half in the ground, painted white.

Wire Hangers

Two entwine like lovers, a Chinese puzzle,
or ring of keys.
When disturbed, empty ones
clatter with the tone of muted bells.
My favorite wears a blue dress,
empire waist, ruffle at the hem.

Shrines

Blessed virgin of chipped cement
warms in the morning sun.
Rusted Camero rests on cement blocks
between heaven and hell.
My question about these holy shrines,
which is more sacred?

Garden Of Eden

I see Eve at a stop sign
 in a red Mustang with alloy wheels.
I know it must be her because
 she's nibbling an apple.
How I envy Adam
 the impending loss of his innocence.

Anna Karenina At The Beach

I found her abandoned on a park bench,
 a cheap paperback,
picturing Anna on the cover,
 like a young Keira Knightley.
Poor girl, big decision to make,
 so far from the train station.

Dance of the Pines

The pines of the forest
 have stolen the voice from the wind.
The melody it sung was
 too melancholy for the trees,
so they took it away
 and made it into their own waltz.

Abandoned Chapel

A neon sign hanging from a frayed wire
 proclaims, *Jesus Saves*.
A broken sign announces
 the final sermon, *Forgiveness*.
I count the many wrongs
 I wish I might be forgiven.

Physics 101

When I tried to hold snow in my hand
it turned to water,
but when I held you in my arms
you didn't melt. Conclusion:
The physical laws of the universe
don't apply to love.

Googling the Ex

Just two of us in the photograph,
my right arm around her.
I don't recall who took the picture
or when exactly it was.
I wonder whatever happened to her
but *Google* won't tell me.

The Falls

The way the frozen mist of Niagara
clung to her eyelashes,
she looked like a chorus girl
about to break into song.
It's all I remember about that night —
our last trip together.

All I Need

What do I really need? Nothing much;
a little air to breathe,
water to drink, food in my stomach,
a tiny apartment,
and you wondering where the hell I am
and when I'll be home.

Tristia

Little poem, go off into the world
 untroubled and unashamed.
Look around with a timid heart
 until you find someone to love.
If anyone asks, say that I lived.
 Except for that, be silent.

The Widower

She would surely have told him
 it needed to be thrown away,
but he pauses over the sink,
 lifts the lid and gives it a sniff,
then rummages through a kitchen drawer
 to find a fork.

Voyager I

The images were spectacular;
 the rings of Saturn,
the goddess moons of Jupiter,
 the sulfurous fires of Io.
Now the bonds of gravity
 have released it among the stars.

First Snow

It arrived early this year.
 In the park a fortress rose.
In the neighbor's yard, a snowman
 walked off sometime during the night
leaving not a trace behind
 but his ragged knitted scarf.

The Martians Are Coming

On a clear summer night
 that glowing red eye glares down at Earth,
daring us to invade
 before their robots can destroy us.
Naming Mars for a god of war
 wasn't such a great idea.

Sijo Resources

The best source to learn about the history and writing of Sijo is the website of the Sejong Cultural Society: (<https://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/>).

The society's mission is to “advance awareness and understanding of Korea's cultural heritage among people in the United States by reaching out to the younger generations through contemporary creative and fine arts.”

The site contains links to video lectures on Sijo as well as articles on writing and teaching Sijo at various levels. The society holds an annual competition open to residents of Canada and the U. S. for several age groups and publishes the winning entries.

Sijo: Korea's Poetry Form (Sejong Cultural Society), a book by Elizabeth Jorgenson and Lucy Park is available at Amazon.

Following are some examples of Traditional and Contemporary Sijo:

Two Traditional Sijo

The spring breeze melted snow on the hills then quickly disappeared.
I wish I could borrow it briefly to blow over my hair
And melt away the ageing frost forming now about my ears.

— U Tak (1262–1342)

Oh that I might capture the essence of this deep midwinter night
And fold it softly into the waft of a spring-moon quilt
Then fondly uncoil it the night my beloved returns.

— .Hwang Chin-i (1522-1565)

Two Contemporary Sijo

Under our oak the grass withers,
so we plant petunias;
We water them, we coddle them,
burn their youth with chemicals.
Digesting their timely death,
the oak renews our summer shade.

- Anon.

Without the pines / the wind is silent;
without wind / the pines are still;
Without you / my heart is voiceless,
without that voice / my heart is dead.
What potent power / of yang and yin
pairs us / before we sleep?

-Anon

About the Author

Having grown up in rural Michigan, David Jibson now lives in Ann Arbor where he is the editor of Third Wednesday, an independent quarterly journal of literary and visual arts, a member of the Poetry Society of Michigan and a coordinator of The Crazy Wisdom Poetry Circle. He is retired from a long career in Social Work, most recently with a Hospice agency. His poetry has been published in dozens of journals in print and online.

David holds BA degrees in Social Work and Interdisciplinary Communications from Western Michigan University and an MSW from Michigan State University.

His author website is at davidkjibson.com. There, you can find links to published poems and books, several of which are available free of charge in electronic form because he favors readership over profit.