

CARNIVAL

In the Rain



Linked Sijo Poems
David Jibson

Carnival in the Rain

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Table of Contents

<i>Forward—Linked Sijo</i>	4
<i>Sister Rosetta</i>	6
<i>My Sister and I Buy Green Tomatoes from Richard Brautigan</i>	7
<i>Fathers’ Hopes for the Sons</i>	8
<i>Salt</i>	9
<i>My Imaginary Protégé</i>	10
<i>October Morning</i>	11
<i>The Sand Bar</i>	12
<i>Stacking Wood</i>	13
<i>Why I Don’t Take Pictures of You With My Phone</i>	14
<i>The Hospital at Night</i>	15
<i>The Blue Dress</i>	16
<i>What They Left Behind</i>	17
<i>Shoveling Snow With Robert Frost</i>	18
<i>The End Is Near</i>	19
<i>A Fan Letter To Laura Gilpin</i>	20
<i>Mobility Training</i>	21
<i>The Widower</i>	22
<i>Driving Through Ohio</i>	22
<i>Things I Learned from Reading My Own Memoir</i>	23
<i>Old Tractor Show</i>	24
<i>A Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep</i>	25
<i>Plutarch</i>	26
<i>Carnival in the Rain</i>	27
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	28

Forward—Linked Sijo

Pronounced *Shi-jo*, it 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. Each line should consist of four groups of syllables that fall into natural groupings. 4/4/3/4 (total of 15 syllables) for example. Modern Sijo are often presented in six lines with breaks at the caesuras so the syllable groupings might 4/4 followed by a 4/3, or any combination of syllables as long as the total is 14-16. Sijo masters try to begin the final line with a group of 3 syllables, though it is not a requirement of the form.

Originally intended to be sung, Sijo typically explore themes of romance, metaphysics, or spirituality. Ideally, the first line introduces an idea or narrative, the second elaborates the theme, and the third offers closure, often with a twist.

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 (not having 17 syllables does not make something a Haiku). It also closely parallels the “American Sentence” as imagined by the beat poet, Alan Ginsberg. Emily Dickinson was known to favor poems written in *common meter*, which feature alternating lines of 4 beats and 3 beats (14 syllables per couplet). Common meter is 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.

Here is one example of a traditional Korean 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 aging frost forming now about my ears.

— *U Tak (1262–1342)*

And here is a contemporary Sijo of my own presented in six lines:

On the night I was born,
 my father bought two bottles of champagne.
One he drank — one he saved
 to drink with me when I turned twenty-one.
He didn't know that champagne
 wouldn't keep that long — nor would he.

Many Korean Sijo poets write in sequences of two or more stanzas. One of the most famous and revered Sijo poets, Yi Un-sang, wrote a Sijo sequence of ten stanzas, each stanza following the traditional structure.

In this book I share some of my own Sijo sequences (or linked Sijo). In some cases these poems began life as free verse poems, several of them published in their original form. I found that the rhythm and musicality of these poems was greatly enhanced by rewriting them following the pattern of the Sijo form.

— *David Jibson*

Sister Rosetta

Strange things are happening every day.

 In Arkansas it rained frogs
and music played in the church one Sunday
 that made a blind man see.

In the pews we started rockin'
 and the preacher cried "Amen!"

We rose to our feet in tears
 because happiness is not a sin.

Some nights I hear singing.

 It falls from above and rains down
upon me out of the dark
 which it turns to a bright light.

In the beginning was the song.

 God listened and said it was good
The notes twisted and bent
 when Sister Rosetta's *Les Paul*
wept for the stars. Some strange things —
 are happening every day.

My Sister and I Buy Green Tomatoes from Richard Brautigan

After an hour of combing
the Lake Erie sand for beach glass
and nothing to show for it,
we made a coffee stop at Starbucks
where she asked why I came.
“Getting too old to make the drive,” I said.

On the way back to Saegertown,
in a run-down part of Erie,
I spotted a popup vegetable stand
in a parking lot.
“Shall we stop?” I asked.
“I think I see some green tomatoes.”

“I haven’t had them in years”, she said.
“My doctor says no fried foods.”
“We can make them in the oven.
Not quite the same as fried,
but the taste will be familiar.”
She nodded so I pulled over.

We had a good laugh over the man
tending the stand because
he looked just like Richard Brautigan;
wide-brimmed hat, granny glasses,
the turned-down mustache that gave Brautigan
his perpetual frown.

As we were driving away, she said
she thought this might be it.
“This might be what?” I asked.
“The last time we’ll see each other.”
“I hope not,” I said, “but you never know.”
“I think I know,” she said.

Fathers' Hopes for the Sons

In the picture are a blue-tick hound
and six men with long peaveys
on a raft of logs
afloat on the Muskegon River.
The men are my great uncles,
broad brimmed hats shadowing their faces.

If you could see those faces
in the discolored albumin print,
you would see right away
that these rugged men are brothers.
A seventh brother, Albert,
is missing from the photograph

because he left the family business
to study pharmacy
at a college in a city far away.
I suppose my great grandfather, Robert,
shook his head and shrugged,
just as my father must have done

two generations later
when I told him I had no interest
in following him into his
construction business, but instead,
chose a path of my own,
and just as I did —when my son chose his.

Salt

On the day you decided to leave
the streets had melted
and you discovered that your feet
had burned away.
But you were determined, so you crawled
through broken glass on your knees.

You didn't look back like Lot's wife,
a woman so insignificant
even God didn't know her name.

One glance over her shoulder
was all it took to stop her in her tracks,
so you kept eyes front,

remembering—there was no reason to stay
because you never belonged.

My Imaginary Protégé

My imaginary Protégé
 asks how I do it.
I tell her it's all in the wrist,
 a private joke between us.
What she really wants to know
 only she can discover.

So I tell her that a poem
 is about asking a question
and leaving it for the reader
 to sort out an answer.
I'm not sure she understands,
 but she's smart and I know she'll get it.

Today we talk about navel gazing,
 which she calls *Drishti*.
I tell her it's a start, then recite
 The Red Wheelbarrow to her,
tell her that next time—
 I want her to tell me the answer.

October Morning

There comes that morning once each year
that I notice just before dawn
that broad-shouldered Orion has returned
to the southern sky
and hovers just above the trees
in their autumn overcoats.

My thoughts turn to someone with whom
I share an accident of birth
under the sign of the hunter who
walked on water and slew monsters,
yet was somehow left out
of the pantheon of the zodiac.

The Sand Bar

My mother grew up on a farm
along the bank of a river
at the end of a two-track that began
where the paved road ended.
Some Sundays we 'd drive along that lane
through thick stands of willow.

We took our yellow cooler packed
with Stroh's beer, Squirt, Dr. Pepper,
hot dogs—unless dad had overtime pay
from his construction job,
then rib-eye steaks or even a sirloin
might be on the menu.

Father would set out his butterfly chair,
put on a baseball game,
sip slowly at his beer and sleep
in the shade of an ironwood tree.
Mother cooked over a hibachi grill
and I would wade into the shallows.

The strong river current pulled my feet
toward an uncertain future
as I looked back at two people
whose lives I couldn't understand.
It was the river that taught me
to judge the power of the current.

It was the river that taught me
about the ripples and eddies
of the past, and how that far shore,
once you've reached it,
may not be very different or better
than the one you're on.

Stacking Wood

One bush cord dropped off
by a dump truck, rumbly and rattly,
one headlight punched out.
Seasoned oak, un-split ready to burn,
in need of sorting and stacking
I decide to do it right.

I stack it into three equal rows,
of a face cord each,
to see if I got what I paid for.
I sort as I go, trunks in one pile,
to be split in cooler weather
by hand with a maul and wedge.

By mid-day I've finished
and when I pace off the rows
I discover just what I suspected
all along, that Carl Hansen,
despite what I heard in town,
delivers an honest cord.

Why I Don't Take Pictures of You With My Phone

It costs nothing to
 take a picture of you with my phone
but that would deprive me
 of two trips down to the drugstore
to drop off and pick up the film.
 Who knows what interesting things

could have happened along the way?
 I'd miss the anticipation
of waiting to see how
 that photo of you turned out
and I can't put it a drawer
 to discover later

while looking for a pencil.
 Worst of all, a digital image
won't fade like memory,
 so every time I see your face
you'll be just as you were—
 and not as I want to remember.

The Hospital at Night

In strange muted light,
 I listen to the whirl of machines
I didn't hear during the day,
 their blinking and beeping
are more reassuring than
 worrisome at this hour.

Absent the sound of voices,
 the halls take on an echo.
What little talk passes between
 nurses on the grave yard shift
is a whisper, though few of the patients
 are deeply asleep.

I go out for a vending machine coffee
 and a light snack.
A floor polisher whines past
 like a miniature Zamboni
leaving an icy shine
 on the marble floor in its wake.

On my way back to the room
 I compare the footstep sounds
of my heavy work boots
 to those of the soft squish and squeak
of the hospital staff's shoes.
 I try to walk quietly — it's hard.

The Blue Dress

Birthday or an anniversary?
I don't remember now,
but I recall the bright blue dress
so unlike her, and how
it stood out in the snapshots
even after they had faded.

It was the only time
I saw that dress and I remember
that an orchid corsage decorated
her left shoulder.
It was the moment I realized —
she was beautiful.

Seeing it again; that dazzling
unapologetic blue
on a wooden hanger
in the back of her closet
I wonder if it would be too much
for a funeral.

What They Left Behind

A carpet stain that will never come out,
a toy truck with no wheels,
a doll with one arm, naked,
one eye permanently closed,
four squares of kitchen tile,
a worn broom, tip blackened with soot,

an overlooked drawer containing
a tin box of Band-Aids
with only the smallest size left,
one leaky D-cell battery,
some rubber washers, twist ties,
a box of strike-anywhere matches.

In a closet, a half-used can of Comet
with a rusty lid,
a dozen wire hangers, mostly bent,
one shoe tied in a double knot,
child-sized for the left foot,
a muddy sock stuffed in the toe.

Shoveling Snow With Robert Frost

His shoulders were broad
as if bearing the weight of the world
would be no more trouble for him
than a five pound sack of flour.
His hair had not yet turned pure white
and he lacked the bushy eyebrows

that would make his appearance
unmistakable later in life.
His hands were massive and paw-like,
red, rough and calloused from years
of manual farm work and piling rocks
at the edges of fields.

“I don’t know, Bob. Maybe we should wait;
get it all after it stops.”
He shrugged and pulled on his boots
over a pair of thick wool socks.
“Let’s get started,” he said.
“It’ll just get heavier if we wait.”

I was pretty sure that he’d be doing
the bulk of the work.
“Too bad we’re in this subdivision, Bob.
If we were in some guy’s woods
we could just watch them fill up with snow.”
“Very funny, he said. “Hand me those gloves.”

The End Is Near

So says the sign held by a thin bearded guy
 who's dressed in sandals and long robe.
It's obvious to us who live
 outside of the cartoon panels of
The New Yorker that
 he's about to be struck by a piano

that's falling inexplicably
 from a second story window.
The prophet of doom won't make it
 to Armageddon, and won't
be around to see the full impact
 of global warming.

Back at home his family waits,
 their dinner of locusts and honey
gone cold on the stove.
 Tomorrow the eldest son, Obadiah,
will make a new sign and take his turn
 standing on the corner.

A Fan Letter To Laura Gilpin

I thought you'd like to know
 that I checked out a book of your poems,
the one that won the Whitman Prize,
 from my public library.
I read my favorite about the calf with two heads.
 over and over.

My library, which is in a small town,
 still does things the old way
of stamping a due date on a slip of paper
 on the inside cover.
I'm the fifth person to read your book
 since 1977.

It's little wonder, with those numbers,
 that you had to search for
and find a much better way
 to live a life of healing —
to see the universe
 with twice the usual number of stars.

Mobility Training

The tip of her white cane weaves
back and forth across the sidewalk
like the nose of an excited beagle
tracking a scent.
She stays close to the buildings
to avoid the edge of the world.

Gradually she falls behind
the pace of other trainees
who seem to have more confidence
in their abilities.
She stops, still four feet
from the corner of Main and Liberty.

Turning each ear through the points
of an imaginary compass,
she listens for sound of traffic
to change when the light turns red.
With a determined look on her young face,
she steps off the curb.

The Widower

If she were here, she would have told him
 he shouldn't eat it,
that it's been in the refrigerator too long.
 He pauses over the sink,
lifts the lid to give it a sniff
 the way she would have done,

then opens the silverware drawer
 and rummages for a fork.

Driving Through Ohio

Behind nearly every house
 along a busy interstate,
a rusting metal shed leans
 against a back fence
where the grass has been left
 to grow long at the boundary line.

Inside, pans of dirty motor oil,
 outgrown bicycles,
dulled axes, rakes with broken handles,
 families of field mice
peacefully sleeping though the winter
 in a box of old shoes.

Things I Learned from Reading My Own Memoir

I thought I would make a difference.

Everything I know is wrong.

My fondest memories

are of things that never happened.

What I thought I did for others,

I really did for me.

Some things are worth doing badly.

I don't have a lucky number.

Always choose the simplest font.

I had better parents than I thought.

I had no reason to write a memoir.

I thought I would make a difference.

Old Tractor Show

They trailer in from the little towns;
from Newaygo, Luther, Fountain,
Tustin, Onekama, Beulah, Kalkaska.
John Deere green
Farmall red, Allis-Chalmers orange,
Minneapolis-Moline gold.

The oldest ones with metal-tired wheels,
a couple of old gals,
steam-driven like locomotives
come off the rails.
One proud owner claims his Oliver,
forty years older than he,

could still work the fields his grandfather cleared,
though he takes it easy
on the old girl now,
running a younger Deutz-Allis
to do the heavy work.
When somebody starts up a '39 Gibson

a crowd gathers to listen
to the putt-putt of the single cylinder,
as the owner throttles back
until she's barely running,
each pop of the engine puffing
a perfect black ring of smoke.

Each year the men in their feed caps
have a little more curve
in their backs, more hair in their ears,
less freedom in their joints,
but those machines shine in their fresh paint —
a line of dolled-up floozies.

A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep

after a photo by Alexander Gardner (1863)

He lays on a mattress of hard earth
as if he's fallen asleep,
one knee bent, arms resting
comfortably by his side,
the way he might have lain at home
in his own bed.

Leaves of a mulberry stir
in a morning breeze.
Sounds of battle have faded
but traces of black powder smoke sour the air.

If I could kneel down
with my ear close to his,
I might hear his mother's voice
calling him to morning chores before breakfast—
a call that will not rouse him today.

Plutarch

I can hear him whispering in Greek
 from a dusty shelf
in the public library,
 spreading his gossip about
the Parallel Lives of celebrities,
 Themistocles, Plato,
Cato the Younger, Alexander,
 Both of the Plinys.

His humorous dialog
 between Odysseus
and one of Circe's enchanted pigs was,
 no doubt, the model
for the modern late night television talk show.
 Of course the pig,
having had the experience
 of being both man and swine,
thinks little of the prospect
 of becoming a man again.

Carnival in the Rain

On our first date we went to a carnival
where your favorite ride
was the Tilt-a-whirl because of the tickle
you felt in your belly.

I loved the Scrambler because
who doesn't like to be spun
in two directions with another body
pressed firmly against yours?

We fell in love with the taste
of forbidden foods only a carnival offers
like the sweet stickiness of cotton candy
as it melts on our tongues.

When we tried going back it was all different
because we knew
that the shooting gallery guns were rigged
to miss the targets,
that a winner every time
didn't mean what we thought it did.

We could see that the paint
on the carousel horses was faded,
that the thrills we once felt
in the House of Fun seem silly now,
that the view from the top of the Ferris Wheel
was always the same.

Today the carnival is back in town
but it's raining.
The rides and the games are all closed,
the people have gone home.

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What They Left Behind / Waccamaw Journal

Driving Through Ohio and Shoveling Snow with Robert Frost /
Peninsula Poets

Salt / Sheepshead Review

The Blue Dress / Poetry Leaves

A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep / The Ekphrastic Review

Plutarch / Making Waves

Carnival in the Rain / Making Waves