



Like Haiku, It Is a Three-Line Poem

The Sijo

**one-two rhythm of the stallion trotting down a country lane
he moves through woods over a bridge across a stream and up a hill
well-worn beneath his clockwork feet the dusty road leads home**

*Kirsty Karkow, in [The Sijoforum](#)
That's what it looks like. Simple, isn't it?*



SIJO (the word is both singular and plural) is an ancient Korean verse form traditionally containing 3 lines of 14-16 syllables each, for a total of 44-46. It resembles haiku in having a strong foundation in nature and in even more ancient Chinese patterns, but its unique characteristics and flavor distinguish it from all other poetry genre .

Either narrative or thematic, this lyric verse introduces a situation or problem in line 1, development (called a **turn**) in line 2, and a strong conclusion beginning with a surprise (a **twist**) in line 3, which resolves tensions or questions raised by the other lines and provides a memorable ending.

A welcome weekend at Cedar Key, relaxing on the dock;
pelicans wait poker-faced for bait fish we may leave behind.
Bob away, line, while I watch the sun going back to water.

...Larry Gross, Sijo West #2, Summer 1996

Korean poetry can be traced at least as far back as King Yuri's *Song of Yellow Birds* (17BC), but its roots are in still earlier Chinese quatrains. Sijo, Korea's favorite poetic genre, is often traced to Confucian monks of the eleventh century, but its roots, too, are in those earlier forms. Its greatest flowering occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries.



Sijo is, first and foremost, a song. This lyric pattern gained popularity in royal courts as a vehicle for religious or philosophic expression, but a parallel tradition arose among the 'common' folk. Sijo were sung or chanted with musical accompaniment, and still are. In fact, the word originally referred only to the music, but it has come to be identified with the lyric as well.

As stated earlier, historically, sijo consists of 3 lines of from 14 to 16 syllables each:

beneath wisteria clusters, hidden, I wait in purple.
perfumed by petals, these longings rise, twine, intertwine and rise...
rise to break apart among clouds...silently break among clouds.

...Debi Bender, in [The Sijoforum](#)

However, some contemporary poets and editors prefer to split the long lines in half for formatting reasons, resulting in a 6-line format which has become quite acceptable:

Remember when we made a seine
of gunny-sacks and broomsticks?
Soaked to the waist, we filled milk-pails
with channel-cat and crawdads.
A snapping turtle snagged our net
and bit clear through a broomstick.

..gino peregrini, in [The Sijoforum](#)



Again like haiku, sijo may use puns, allusions and similar word play. Unlike its Japanese cousin, however, it may use metaphor and other figurative language more openly.

Frankincense and ancient chants
embrace upon this holy air.

The stone vault, sealing their ascent,
is the art of a cathedral.

But the bolder leap of our open kiss
cannot be wed to earth.

...Donald Lanska, in [The Sijoforum](#)

An important feature at the beginning of the final line (or couplet in the 6-line form) is the **twist**: a surprise of meaning, sound, tone or other technique. It is likely to be more subjective and personal, and it frequently takes a profound, witty or proverbial turn.

Although most sijo in the classic tradition have no titles, the author of the following verse chose to use one. In this case, I believe it supplies important information that might otherwise slow the progress of the body of the poem.

Zuisen-ji (Kamakura: January Second)

Climbing stairs to Zuisen-ji,
I go deeper into the hills.
In the garden of the temple,
narcissus lean against stones.
Once at home again, a thought rings true;
even stones have friends.

...Carmen Sterba, in [The Sijoforum](#)

Although the classic sijo adheres closely to syllabic restrictions, it doesn't simply count syllables. It is more phrasal than syllabic. Because of its nature and the nature of Hangul, the Korean script, the structure of sijo resembles Hebrew & biblical verse. In English it may resemble Hopkins' sprung rhythm. To achieve this effect, each long line, once divided, is divided again, into quarters averaging 3-5 syllables. This phrasal quality is a basic feature of the form. Meter is not vital in sijo, but that musical link is. In the following verse, the midline break is represented by two slashes (/) and the quarter-line breaks by one (/).

how lovely / this spruce tree // its limbs laden / with virgin snow
the bloodred / on a robin's breast // the skyblue / of a mountain jay
for such wonder/ what wise man // would not know / his Creator ?

...an'ya, in [The Sijoforum](#)

The poet should not lose sight of three basic characteristics that make the sijo unique: its structure, its musical/rhythmic elements, and the twist which begins the final line. For best results, poets follow these and other guidelines very closely.



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