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From Sijoforum (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sijoforum/>)

SIJOFORUM PRIMER #1:

An introduction for those new to sijo, a refresher for others.

See the house fall at our feet, faithful timbers come crashing down;
Those with our life in their hands join the termites, gnaw at beams.
Till the dawn, hold me while we sleep -- in the cold, that is enough.

(TOP #14 May 1995; Canadian Writer's Journal, Fall 1995)

It seems to be the nature of mankind continually to try something new. That is just as true in poetry as it is in other areas. During the past forty years or so we have shown increasing interest in Asian verse patterns. The Middle Eastern ghazal has its devoted followers in the West, and Japanese forms like haiku, tanka, renga and haibun are now commonly found in small press and commercial poetry periodicals. Journey through the Internet and you will see these forms blossoming everywhere. We Westerners have fallen in love with Asian patterns, patterns that connect us tenuously with ancient cultures so different from our own.

So it is with the SIJO (see-szo or she-szo, with the J pronounced as the French pronounce Jacques). The roots of this lyrical Korean cousin of haiku and tanka stretch back well over 1000 years. It has been the most popular form of lyric verse in Korea for over 500 years, sung equally by Confucian scholars, members of the royal court and common folk.

I say sung because the sijo is, at heart, a song. It is for the Koreans what the ballad is for Western Europeans. Originally, that word referred only to the music. The lyric was called tan-ga, an ancient verse based on still earlier Chinese patterns which also influenced Japanese poetry. Eventually, the term sijo (which is both singular and plural) came to be applied to both words and music.

Sijo is traditionally composed in three lines of 14-16 syllables each, between 44-46 total. A pause breaks each line approximately in the middle, somewhat like a caesura, as illustrated in this verse by Yun Son-do (1587 - 1671), one of Korea's most revered poets:

You ask how many friends I have? Water and stone, bamboo and pine.
The moon rising over the eastern hill is a joyful comrade.
Besides these five companions, what other pleasure should I ask?

Each half-line contains 6-9 syllables; the last half of the final line may be shorter than the rest, but should contain no fewer than 5 syllables. This natural mid-line break comes in handy, since printing restrictions often cause Western sijo to be divided and printed in 6 lines rather than 3. Indeed, some translators and poets have adopted this technique in their writing, so most editors accept either format.

The sijo may tell a story (as the ballad does), examine an idea (as the sonnet does), or express an emotion (as the lyric does). Whatever the purpose may be, the structure is the same: line 1 of the 3-line pattern introduces a situation or problem; line 2 develops or "turns" the idea in a different direction; and line 3 provides climax and closure. Think of the traditional 3-part structure of a narrative (conflict, complication, climax) or the 3-part division of the sonnet, and you'll see the same thing happening.

Though the ancients seldom titled their sijo, some modern writers, such as Elizabeth St Jacques in the following verse, frequently do:

EVEN NOW

just us two in the photograph
his arm around my thin shoulder
That strong limb I then leaned against
would break so many falls
We stood like this but only once
but his strength holds me still

[Elizabeth St Jacques, *Around the Tree of Light*(1995)]

To achieve the rolling, musical quality so characteristic of sijo, each half-line is further divided into two parts averaging 3-5 syllables each.

Look at Elizabeth's "Even Now." Notice that each line usually divides into 2 phrases or word groups ("just us two / in the photograph"). Some people find parallels between this rhythm and that of Bible verses, and others find likeness to sprung rhythm popularized by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Regular meter is not vital to sijo, but that musical quality is. Here is Yun Son-do once more, with a verse from his masterpiece, "The Fisherman's Calendar":

When autumn arrives on the river, all the fish grow fatter.
We savor unnumbered hours swept along by gentle currents.
Man's dusty world fades away, doubling my joy with distance.

Like haiku, sijo usually displays a strong foundation in nature, but, unlike that genre, it frequently employs metaphors, puns, allusions and other word play. And it loves to play with sounds. The first word (or two) of the final line is very important. It provides a "twist": a surprise of meaning, sound, tone or other device, much as the beginning of a final sestet does in the sonnet or the final line does in a haiku. That final sijo line is frequently lyrical, subjective or personal, and may very well supply a profound, witty, ironic, humorous or proverbial twist.

Remember the three characteristics that make the sijo unique – its basic structure, musical/rhythmic elements, and the twist. It is shorter and more lyrical than the ghazal. It is more roomy than the haiku, and it welcomes feelings and emotions which haiku either discourage or disguise. It should please lovers of ballads, sonnets and lyrics, and the downplay of regular meter and rhyme should appeal to writers of free verse. In short, it's a fascinating challenge. Let us see your latest one.

Carefully I lifted it from the branch, an empty cocoon,
took it home and mounted it center stage on the mantel.
Hear it speak? What does it say of living, what of the dead?

(Parnassus, Winter 1996)

Text and adaptations by Larry Gross unless noted otherwise.

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