What’s a Sijo?

Sijo (pronounced she-joe) is a traditional Korean form of poetry. The earliest known one was written in the 14th century. Sijo are three lines long, each line 14–16 syllables. One type of sijo, called sijo chang, is sung so slowly, it has been called the “slowest song in the world.”

Sijo began as a sly political weapon. They were written at first in classical Chinese by Yangban, the male aristocrats of the Korean ruling class, who were typically military officials and civil servants. These writers disguised the political points they wanted to make by using nature poetry. By the 18th century, times had changed, sijo were written by everyone, and in Korean.

Poet Hwang Jin-I, 1506–1560, (there’s a K-drama about her!) often wrote sijo half in aristocratic Chinese, and half in Korean hanja used by women even though it was suppressed by the scholar officials. Take this one, for example, where the first half of each line is in Chinese, the second half in Korean:

Can you sense where the languages change?

Jade Green Stream, don’t boast so proud of your easy passing through these blue hills.
Once you have reached the broad sea, to return again will be hard.
While the Bright Moon fills these empty hills, why not pause? Then go on, if you will.

—Hwang Jin-i, translation by David McCann

Make your own Sijo! Use the word bank to fill in the blanks.

old gate tiger forest hide listen annoy fly river
magpie teeth stalk regal green wince stones be
legs wing on parent dance powerful gull deer
drink snow play crane bear water teach leaves
baby ugly clouds hungry palace fight grow eat
maple stripes in rain field love tall hare
run of gawk

So, the __________ grewled, you’ve come to __________:
animal or person verb

the ______ emperor ______ , locked in his ______

adjective noun place

Nights I _______ the ________, eyes low, ears pricked.
verb place

Did some ________ ________ scurry off?

adjective noun

I would love a __________. Oh, for a ________!
noun noun

Poetry? I _________ it with my claws.
verb

If you get going and need to change some of the given words, go to it.

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