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	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 _____ growled, 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.

Seok Mo Ro-in
Korean, active late 19th century
Tiger (detail)
Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), late 19th century
Ink and color on paper
Museum purchase, funds provided by the David A. Cofrin Fund for Asian Art
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Created by the Spring 2020 Harn Writers-in-Residence Debora Greger, Mirjam Frosth, and Angie Chirino.