

Questions about *ASTERISM*

- Describe the book's structure: How is it organized?
- What role does the title of the collection play in your reading of the book?
- In what varied ways does the author engage with the concepts of belonging and ownership throughout *ASTERISM*?

Self-Portrait Poems

Poet [Lisa Russ Spaar](#) notes, “Some might posit that the self-portrait poem, at least in the lyric tradition, is a tautology—isn’t every poem a “portrayal,” however disguised or indirect, of its maker be it Sappho, Bashō, Mirabai, or Father Hopkins? And yet, with notable exceptions, it isn’t until the mid-20th century that we begin to see poets calling their works ‘self-portraits.’”

The explicit mention of the term “Self-Portrait” draws attention to the poet-human behind the page. By tracing our bodies, histories, and speech patterns, observing and recording what we do and feel, and all the other manners through which we exist, we reveal the ways we (wish to) perceive ourselves and thus meet the reader on the page with peculiar vulnerability.

Metaphors and similes are commonly utilized to approximate the self to an object, animal, idea, and/or myth as these can provide interesting means of approaching and exploring the more complex aspects of our behaviors and psyche. The Self-Portrait poems in *ASTERISM* follow this tradition through the lens of human relationships. The self tends to be shaped by the people closest to it, but even strangers we have only met once or briefly might have left indelible prints on who we are.

The opening poem of the collection “Self-Portrait as Portrait” is characterized by its self-aware title and lyric tone. It is based on a question I have asked myself often: Where does the impulse to define the self come from? Any attempt can but achieve capturing a fraction of a moment, the self being by nature an ever-changing entity. I wanted to embrace what is often considered as an inconvenience or odd to categorizing systems as something that is beautiful precisely because it is elusive.

On the other hand, “Self-Portrait as Mother” takes a narrative approach, alluding to the idea that (other people’s) stories are also a part of who we are. As the daughter of Korean parents who moved to Peru in their early thirties, and now an immigrant in the United States myself, I realized years after living in Wisconsin that I had learned from my mother “how to be a foreigner.” Writing this poem made me reflect on the seemingly prophetic quality of my mother’s life and my bond to her.

Questions:

- Read “Self-Portrait as I” and "Self-Portrait as Sister": What selves are each of the poems exploring and how do their respective forms inform the differing approaches the writer has chosen to take?

Prompt:

- Write two self-portrait poems as other people, one about someone you know well and another a stranger who has influenced your life. What do you know about these people’s lives? What do you not know? What have you learned from them, what did they leave you with, and/or how did they change you? How do you resemble them? Why do you think that resemblance came to be? How are you different from them? How does this difference also define you? What (porous) borders exist between you and this other person?

Sijo Poems

From [The Sejong Cultural Society](#):

The sijo (Korean 시조, pronounced SHEE-jo) is a traditional three-line Korean poetic form typically exploring cosmological, metaphysical, or pastoral themes. Organized both technically and thematically by line and syllable count, sijo are expected to be phrasal and lyrical, as they are first and foremost meant to be songs.

Sijo are written in three lines, each averaging 14-16 syllables for a total of 44-46 syllables. Each line is written in four groups of syllables that should be clearly differentiated from the other groups, yet still flow together as a single line.

As described above, the Sijo form traditionally consists of three lines. However, when I was reading English translations of Sijo, I encountered variations in which the line was broken into two, visually creating a total of six lines.

I was born in South Korea, but I moved to Peru at the age of three; Growing up, I rarely referred to my birth country as home. Still, my family made sure I would not forget to speak the language and kept many of their traditions alive within the house. Perhaps this is why the breaking of the Sijo line in the translations I saw, the unique way they had rearranged themselves in, felt intriguing to me. I eventually went on to experiment with a Sijo form in which my three lines, while broken up, were overlapping to shape a narrow path down the middle of the poem.

“Sijo :: Genealogy” employs an old Korean pun that adults have used to tease children with: the Korean words for bridge and legs being homonyms. The children often end up crying in response, misunderstanding that they had been picked up from under a bridge. When I was drafting the poem, I thought to upend the expected reaction and instead communicate “I felt fortunate to be called / the daughter of a bridge.” I hoped to reframe the uncertainty and sense of alienation I once felt as opportunities for wonder and connection.

“Sijo :: Meeting Point” came to me when I mistook the Midwestern storm clouds piled up on the horizon for the Andes mountains that I was used to seeing in the landscapes of Peru. The convergence led me to a surreal moment in which I was there and now but simultaneously “not there/ nor now”: an in-between place, a third space.

Questions:

- The Sijo is a form that has twists and turns structured into itself. Where do these happen in “Sijo :: Genealogy” and “Sijo :: Meeting Point”? How does the conciseness of the form and the turns affect your reading of the poems?

Prompts:

- Take an existing form and personalize it by modifying one of its features. When deciding how to do this, make sure the change implicitly or explicitly touches upon your relationship with the form.

Additional Prompts

- Pick a recurring word in your life. After looking up its denotative meaning, list all the personal connotations (objects, emotions, colors, narratives, etc.) that surround this word for you. Write a poem in which the word is employed as defined by a connotation of your choice rather than a well-known denotation.

- Start by describing a common practice or accepted worldview in your culture. Then write a line in response to each of these (and experiment with their order):
 - A metaphor that addresses the practice/worldview's significance or impact in your community
 - A historical fact related to the practice/worldview that you learned recently and which startled you
 - An assumption you had previously made about the practice/worldview
 - A question about the practice/worldview you could not find an answer to
 - Another question that complicates the practice/worldview
- Step outside the house and pick an image that's in the distance, one that you can see but cannot make out clearly. What do you think it is? Write down your answer. Walk closer towards it but not right up to it. What do you think it is now? Write down your answer. Walk closer towards it until you can recognize it for what it is. What do you see? Using your three answers, compose a poem about metamorphosis, be it of the image in question or yourself.