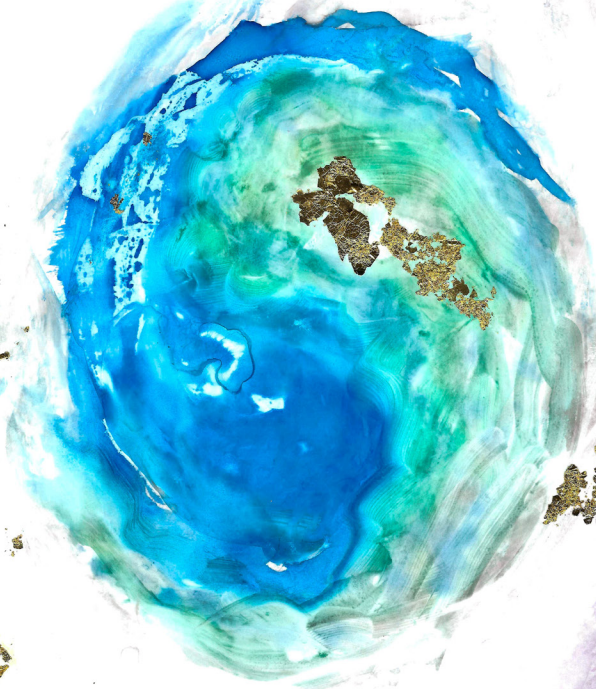


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# Water Gwisin Saves the Earth



Maria S. Picone

2023 Louisa Solano Memorial Emerging Poet Award winner

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# **Water Gwisin Saves the Earth**

a chapbook by Maria S. Picone

2023 Louisa Solano Memorial Emerging Poet Award winner

**Salamander/Suffolk University English Department/  
73 Tremont Street/Boston, MA 02108**

## SALAMANDER'S ANNUAL LOUISA SOLANO MEMORIAL EMERGING POET AWARD

Generously funded by Suffolk University's Ellen LaForge Memorial Poetry Fund, this award is given retroactively to a poet who has not published more than one full-length poetry collection at the time of their publication in *Salamander*. This award is named in honor of Louisa Solano, former owner of Cambridge's Grolier Poetry Bookshop and a champion of poets and literary magazines.

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A song, a song high above the trees  
With a voice as big as the sea  
With a voice as big as the sea  
—Noël Regney, “Do You Hear What I Hear”

Fire and sea—longstanding enemies—formed an alliance to  
destroy...  
—Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 650-652

Great time extinguishes all things and kindles them.  
—Sophocles, *Ajax*, 714





## Gwisin Manifest(o)

Gwisin can't explain the loves that bind them  
nor why they cling to world, wracked—

death shapes hibernal trees,  
liminal shade of other seasons.

Mourning mosses their spines,  
bound to this life by thin gilt

sutures: constructs, contracts, sense part  
-ing obligation from heart. They rise

just as high as they can against the war fog:  
Chosun begins from the sundered

Koreas. Recession pulls in  
tidal crests of mo(u)rning,

peninsula rewiring sorrow to progress—  
history in the bloom of ghosts.

[Love, do not die, but live.  
See how the trees come again in the window.

A cycle only suicide can terminate.  
Inside self is a sliver of spring.

Pull it out and watch it grow against despair.]

## Applied Ethics Test Along the Atmospheric Border

*Kill the sea with fire*, they said. They did not know:

The sea is an empathy warmed at a distance to the conflagration of nature

- a) that someday, hotels will float and constipate a melody along its surface;
- b) that missiles will not kill, only inflame;
- c) the glaciers are ghosting up.

The fire is a malaise that burns

- a) a thousand lives to erect a stadium to Ozymandias;
- b) billionaires briefly escaping orbit, only to be stunlocked by it;
- c) the framework of reality, tethered to a “duty” misinterpreted by modern tongues.

Late-stage capitalism is a pandemic infecting all

- a) with the fanaticism of the anti-inoculated;
- b) the inhabitants who must mobilize the planet;
- c) the self which also ought to inject the cure.

*The moon is an aspiration, a world to be built. Craters and seas.*

The raw materials humans ride to shape the new:

- a) the Olympic Torch of ethical egoism, relayed one tyrant to another;
- b) a recession-busting high interest rate future mortgage;
- c) the avarice and carbon that burned down the old.

# The Korean word for adoptee sorrow is *gwisin*

—after Franny Choi's "*Hangul Abecedarian*"

Gather up all us thousands  
Negated,  
Disenfranchised from greater *han*  
Like an embarrassing family  
Member sent off to live in the West  
But macro—  
Scale of oceans rise  
-ing, masticating sovereign shore,  
Journeying back our livable land.  
Check our feelings on a Likert Scale  
Korea, homelanguage we watered down  
To flood the wider world, now  
Pushing back against the carbon-fired  
History we're burning from.

We are done with Earth and so we have decided to  
move on to the stars and leave all the snowflakes behind

—*a marginalized abecedarian*

Bringers of ends of worlds,  
Derivative haunts of apocalyptic imagination,  
Fuck this place, we are moving out,  
Handing in our letter of intent  
Just in case you ask to whom space belongs (it's us).  
Leave the dying Earth to the gwisin who love it so.  
New stars mean new colonies to postulate,  
Planets to pillage, citizens to abandon. Soundly we  
Reject the gwisins' cries of *Recycle this! Respect that!*  
True to our consumptive ancestry, we vow to never  
Vivisect progress in the name of shame—not when  
Xenobiology, terraforming are so lucrative. Destroyers,  
Zero it out—start our blood ledger from the top.

## Water Gwisin Enjoys MMOs

—*with apologies to Final Fantasy XIV*

She's in love with a dead class. A challenge  
that burns & makes her feel, well, alive.

Everyone is a ghost, doubled identity  
distorting in & out of their own lives.

The hauntology of the sink catches her eye  
& who will assemble spectral dinner?

Once during a pull she learned  
not to put dish soap in the dishwasher.

Some people are too literal.

There's a kind spirit who will buff her  
over the top class that's joined them.

There's a grumbling in her party;  
no one should do less damage than the tank.

When the connection is strong,  
almost anyone can summon her.

It's easy to save the world  
when it's programmed that way.

## Let me return to the glacial history of my people

basalt granite shale  
& sandstone warring houses  
rock me to sleep Gyeongsang-do  
coming together with geologico  
political artifacts in episodes

ancestral DNA left shattered  
fragments pots & axes  
shards & I'm constructing a kintsugi  
internecine discarding  
what no longer households use

to piece together display  
Korean heritage inherited  
battles I've  
fought on monolith's time  
line kairos ancient

word for right  
time dating of identity  
gold weaved boundary  
between selves circulate  
questions within

[research break]

어디 가  
어디서 왔어  
어디로 가고 싶어  
언제

## Water Gwisin Interview Questions

How did you know the instant you changed from fire/bone/  
blood to sea/coral/miyeok?

Can you paint a diaspora by inking in the holes and boxes of  
your Hangul name?

If a stone strikes your image, will it soften and blur, or will it be  
printed in the papers?

Do you remember the name of the greed that drowned you?

Does it have a specific touch point known to man, e.g., War  
Day, Sewol Ferry, or have you, like most maidens  
misting away, lost the bookmark?

Is revenge, to you, the hot spike of overwarm seas or the cold  
determination of hungering sharks?

Have you known the touch of an altruistic man?

Did you learn to speak your native tongue or did the colonizers  
take that from you?

Have you known and cared for the touch of a man, or woman?

How many have you revealed yourself to in the last moment of  
their lives?

How many did you save?

Is the hunger of ocean cold, or hot?

## What will we do with all the space trash?

It is cold, and water gwisin likes the cold. She can never go home to her native climate, which has receded like a defeated army up to the steaming glaciers. As ice ghosts the world, more water will come. More of herself. Water gwisin wears her warmest sweater and holds a plumeria umbrella up over the land. Plink plink plink! Music tinged like Debussy or Chopin muddies the wells. She does not have a good reason to be sad, so she invents one. She is waiting for the world to end, the water to burn off the planet, the sun to grow hungry and masticate the globe like an oat cluster. The star can digest plastic and will end all of humanity's problems, even hers. It is exhausting to be a ghost. If she could dissolve into the atmosphere, she would choose that. Later she wonders if the fuel-burning spacecraft will rise off the dead rock like lightning. If every old life has to be slaughtered in extinguishing the new. They have not done away with animal sacrifice either, despite what they think when smugly examining ancient societies. The gods buy meat at the store and let it rot in the fridge while the poor make tribute of their country's trees and grasses and fauna to send to far-off lands for money. Every choice kills. Better to let it all pass now before they come up with some new solution that murders the future.



## Sea and Fire

—after Franny Choi's *'Hangul Abecedarian'*

Glaciers no longer feed rivers  
neatly since humans  
dammed the world with Dokdo/Takeshima/  
Liancourt Rocks;

masticated islands  
bleed out  
substance to ocean  
o takebacks. This, our climate/crisis:  
Javelins seeking  
counter-insurgents.

Korea, kill the sea or each other:  
test launches  
postcard Peninsula—  
haunts of last century's wars.

## The Korean word for intergenerational trauma is gwisin

and I wonder what it means,  
broken pathways in the blood, lineage  
corrected, chosen, championed,  
delayed in flight to other lands.  
Exile from the hearthfire of my family made me  
frantic, wandering Earth looking for home—  
ghost born with eyes cast to underworld.

How quiet is the legacy  
I pack in my carry-on,  
journeying forth in regressive spillover,  
Korean (un)luminary lacking liminal love!  
Lest this pain taint the poem with suicidal shadows—I  
matter not, I should not exist,  
nihilism is my code—  
ocean will come and lap the depressive heart,  
Picone crest, Picone seas.  
Quiet is my resolve to unbecome,  
return this shattered shell to sheltering  
soil. Instead: I will save the world. I will—

try to raise, in  
unblinking observation, the vital  
voice of witness, bearing a seed to spark our Earth.  
While the people open holes of hate and clamor  
xenophobic nonsense, I'll wander upon  
yearnings till I find my planting  
zone.

## Gwisin Anti-manifest(o)

Gwisin are born with a need to die.  
Nothing could please them more than  
denying existence—  
lessening the burden in their hearts,  
mothered & fathered pinpricks of stars  
borne/unborne in cosmic silence.

Suicide seems solvent to those bent on breaking  
o spirals, societies & cycles  
justified/unjustified—a just war on the self.  
Children cannot understand, yet grow up knowing this:  
Korea abandoned them,  
trauma twinkled up in courts & kingmakers,  
personal telescoped by grand narratives, answers  
hidden like the ghosts they claim themselves.

## Water Gwisin Drowns Like All the Others

(*Zuibitsu*)

The only thing that will save her is:  
to feel other hands, to give  
self into a constellation of ghosts.

They have become aware of this driftless existence.

They suffer with her, asking questions about nihilism  
& flood insurance. About how much less they can  
consume. Whether to shame  
those who cannot give up vice  
in pursuit of virtue.

All drown. The sun does not come to save them.  
It is a few billion years too soon.  
They talk in Zooms & Slacks & Discords & Teams,  
making time for faces—  
miraculous, smiling faces. They say, *continue supporting peace*.  
Heiwa, water gwisin translates.  
The calmest of all the peaces,  
given in double-edged colonization at the end  
of a nuclear age.

*Keep up hope for the future*. Eirene, she knows, most beautiful  
weapon in humanity's search for meaning  
amongst the dead.

*Sarang hae*—love before trauma, in a native language lost.

Before she slips under, Earth's pure air makes  
a pilgrimage into her family's temple, her inherited lungs.  
No water overpowers her, borne of sea & striving—

## Hangul Sonnet to the Korean War

Great nations renewing  
net carbon emissions  
dictate offensive contra Earth,  
le(e/a)ching buybacks from Third World countries.

Men posturing like plastics recycling:  
B  
S  
-ing eco/egotism.

Jong-Un's explosives  
crackle East Sea—  
Korea, kill the planet or each other.  
Track (re)cycling global alliances.

Peace out a new world order  
hurling unrealistic demands.

## Ocean Vengeance

She drowned & kept  
drowning, surrounded by water  
like her country:

submerged until nothing  
rose; she became  
foaming of wave,  
froth of tide,  
erased border—

coming for those who made  
war & marked  
graves like hers, who made  
missiles & marked  
targets like her, who made  
ships & murdered friends of hers:  
corporate bureaucrats stuffed  
with sea stolen profits  
in the neon city.

She streamed a signal  
through the yeok network—  
samusil pipes froze & burst;  
corrupt men slipped on winking ice;  
coastal playhomes went under  
same as her. The wicked turned  
fretful eyes to sinks & gutters.

*Water maidens coming for the Earth, they said.  
Gwisin coming back to claim the sea.*

From elderly ajummas in basement  
hovels she took the water  
mildewing cherished photos, moldering rice.  
To canvassers signing up folks  
to save the planet, she coalesced  
another sip in reusable bottles.  
A lost traveler at a mountain stream  
swore he saw her, in a school uniform,  
pointing the way back home, she,  
mercy & wrath in tidal force,  
surging—



## In that moment, a voice came

not to condemn, but to save. Water gwisin was about to kill herself with a mirror. The slice of belonging reflected her blood. The voice did not say; it shouted. Apologies to fiction writers, but it did. It was a command. Water gwisin remembered that many believe in Platonism—foolish as it seems, the comfort in knowing humans draw upon the eternal. A source to be nourished from when making marathons of intellect. Perhaps a lack of sleep contributed to depression. The grandiosity in believing in divine command in this age. The mirror shard turned to moonlight and flew back to its heart. She—small, silly ghost—did not dissipate. The words of Tecmessa floated spectral in the mind: think of how great a sorrow/dying thou wilt bequeath to him and me. When disaster comes, water gwisin tells herself lies to survive. The pull of ideation is a river of Lethe—a flow erasing happiness. The substance of what she is drowns her; she wants to spacewalk. The mountain edge makes love to mist.

## Water Gwisin Became Conversant in Many Languages

Atop the Pantheon menaces the inscription:

*M.AGRIPPA.L.F.COS.TERTIUM.FECIT.*

In English it reads:

*I did this.*

*I made this.*

*You who are reading should not doubt.*

*It was me.*

Water gwisin touches stone

CV—Agrippa's love bite on the planet. Another

Ozymandias chiseled back what fire burned,  
leaving the lie carved on its forehead.

The tourists are their own haunts,  
seeking gratification in moribund culture.

Gratis, the price of entry.

Water gwisin cries on sun-  
bathed shoulders; she knows the cost is gratia.

Words swim iridescent on her body.

*Pranzo colazione cena—cibo.* Tourists are getting  
robbed in cobblestone streets. *Prego,*  
says one to another who left coins in Trevi Fountain.

Water gwisin claps hands like the grave  
accent on Italian menu. Hawkers try to pick  
pockets from the front.

She measures human greed in dirty  
plates and photographs. The tourists' eyes bulge  
like oculi;  
they've built a miracle of pot shards.

## Hangul Sonnet to Peace

Given the course of what's come before—  
never-ending quest to save the world—  
doesn't water gwisin have to struggle  
losing the war against herself?

[Love, do not die, but live.]

Mark the struggle she has gone under.  
Brightening her eyes, she rejected  
suicide, every day confirm  
-ing o of life, proper way to live and die.

[See how the trees come again in the window.]

This is a miracle. She iterates  
jasal in her thoughts—no day not  
challenging this decision.

[A cycle only suicide can terminate.]

Keeping a faith in the conviction of trees, she traces  
tracks of the branches disappearing to sky.

[Inside self is a sliver of spring.]

Peace will come, she knows. This love  
hurts upon the earth. Only the living hurt.

[Pull it out and watch it grow against despair.]

## Water Gwisin Wears Grandmother Emeralds

Taurus season: time to open ocean's  
belly, distill summer from essential spring.  
Water gwisin clasps hands around green  
plastic watering can, in zone 5b  
planting her grandmother's marigold  
optimism. Arboreal prayer against boreal wind.  
Emma Frost's a Gemini from Boston.

Grandmother grew along the northeast  
corridor, sprouting in the daffodil aftermath  
of New Jersey from transatlantic Carchidi seeds,  
언니 Mary preceded & outlived her.  
She never heard a 한국어 word,  
passed on before her gwisin  
granddaughter claimed birthlanguage in Seoul  
one hundred years after her Italian family found  
their garden plot.

Grandmother's ears were never pierced  
through. She never saw a ghost that wasn't  
Holy. Grandmother shared the burden of tending,  
raised 동생 S. Dominic in the Depression,  
sent her proud Navy cadet to the Korean War.

She bequeathed the planet to her sons—  
her daughters-in-law got jewelry, a light-up  
globe. Grandmother's earrings cling with clamps,  
with Taurean tenacity. Water gwisin's  
square-cut emeralds thrive in sun & water:

May days coming true. Any green shade's becoming  
artificial. In dreams, no one is ever a 귀신.  
Grandmother and granddaughter sit on the porch  
& snap deadheads, save matchstick seeds  
for future enkindling. The forecast looks fine,  
the garden good.

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