

julia sargis

poems of pollution

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word from the artist

the environment is something that inspires what i study, what i think, what i see, how i live, who i am. i am continuously drawn to unprecedented environmental problems that are so deeply sewn into our daily lives that we forget they exist. this is what came to mind when i was asked to document; to me, the environment and those suffering along with it need a documenting voice because they so often go unheard over the noise of individualistic, industrialized life.

this collection of poems parses through problems that have stuck with me since my introduction to them, such as the fires in my home state of california, or the impending future of world conflict in response to climate tragedies. i use the idea of pollution as a medium for exploring physical, spiritual, and emotional connections with the environment from a modern and personal perspective. pollution is the presence in the environment of a substance that has harmful effects, invading a pure thing with poison. these poems explore the idea of purity in many forms, from that of a burning star to that of a newborn baby, and how those beings can be polluted in many senses of the word.

i view nature as a connection to our deepest selves; if we are in touch with the natural world, then we are in touch too with our loved ones, dead and alive; our deepest emotions that can flow like rivers through our hearts; our families and friends whose company surrounds us but can sometimes be lost in false loneliness; our childhood selves that never stopped being curious about the wonder of the stars in the sky. therefore, some of these poems contain documentation of personal experiences with nature, loss, love, and coping mechanisms that are ways of silencing, or, yes, polluting nature when the purity and truth of its form are too real to bear.

exploring air, noise, light, water, love, and life with poems of pollution.

js

poems of pollution

written in durham, north carolina in the fall of 2021.

breathing (the wonder of the lungs)

breathe in
inhale me
heavily like the love of a newborn
 baby in your tummy
what is being delivered to my
 capillaries?
breathe out
before eyes open,
air pulled from the stillness
of the infinite cloud.

 breathe in
 tickling every fiber in your nostril
sailing through your throat on wings of
 pale linen
 filling your head with a rush of
 abundant emptiness
 breathe out

breathe in
purity of life given energy in
 waves
pulled by the soft light of
 the moon
drawn up a straw to disperse
 cornflower molecules into your
 lungs
breathe out

 breathe in
 lungs expanding
 heart pauses to appreciate the dryness
 of pencil lines gliding over
 smooth paper
drawing off with a flourish, a soft tail
 that points up high
 breathe out

breathe in
palm drifting over soft strands of
 fur that broke the scalp two days
 ago
planetary bliss suspended in a
 still fog above your nose
brushing the tip with flurries of
 kisses of the purest love your
 lungs will ever know
breathe out

air pollution

angel in l.a.

what is being delivered to my
capillaries?
the angel coughs dust
when every breath burns with acid
rain and her lungs ask her in a
whisper
to be still
in this cloud of corrosive gas
baked in an oven in the perfect
ratio of heat and sunlight
until the angel has an asthma
attack
the taste of American Spirit
seeping into the heavenly rays of
the l.a. sun.

a bead of salty sweat drips down
her temple
brushed by an innocent breeze and
now atoms of reddish-brownish-grey
stain her skin like ash from a
young tree that still cries, even
in the dead of night, even in the
winter
god, i didn't know the sky could be
that color.

reddish-brownish-grey, the
california sunset of your dreams.

the transportation sector is alive
and well on highway 5 snorting up
gasoline like cocaine, coughing up
smog like the devil next to me
choking on the burning tobacco he
sifted through his teeth not one
second ago
is this what they mean by ashes to
ashes?

185 particles of reddish-brownish-
grey per billion that she flies
through, and the angel begins to
cry
stagnant air suffocates her sobs
her winds were too weak to sweep up
much pollution so the sun got to
it first and put it in its beaker
to cook, photochemical reactions,
a million per blink of the angel's
tired eyes
is it 2049 yet?
the angel is exhausted; she has a
cigarette
as reddish-brownish-grey licks her
dull skin
and aching lungs.

balloons

red rubber expanding
with helium from the canister
tie it up in a tight knot and its
 breath is held
grab a needle and pop!
an explosion of control
no more than a fragile vessel
for air to move on command
rubber lung expanding
with nitrous oxide from the canister
tie it up in a tight knot and its
 breath is held
close your eyes and whoosh!
a
 m omen tary
 st ate
 of
 ecst
 asy
no more than a fragile vessel
for the mind to leave its own demand
have you ever breathed in
and wished you never had to let it
 out?
have you ever sat in a fluorescent
 room
and wondered at the darkness in front
 of you?
have you ever waved your hand before
 you
and seen frames of a flying bird?
seven strings in one hand
smile for the flash of the camera
balloons float gently
eyes close softly
grimace of held breath
 releases silently into the
 atmosphere above.

noise
pollution

noise

do the butterfly's wings no longer flap
if the butterfly's wings are not heard?
humming of power lines
buzzing with small electricity
tapping of footsteps
walking with no grace
rumbling of concrete
rolling with dead vigor
honking of car horns—
if the butterfly's wings are not heard?
wailing of sirens
crackling of radios
rumbling of thunder
screaming of children
yelling of mothers
begging of beggars
talking of talkers
do the butterfly's wings no longer flap
if the butterfly's wings are not heard?
noise of the
do the butterfly's wings no longer
noise noise of the city
flap
noise of the city
do the butterfly's
noise noise noise
no longer
the noise of the city
the noise of the city
the noise of the city sounds in your
ears forever

Curupira, creature of the woods

Curupira, creature of the woods
her sound can be heard by any listener
but if your ears are not attuned,
you will never hear her ring.
boar-taming mistress
backward-footed goblin
she whistled at him.
he observed but didn't see anything.
he kept watching.
observing but not seeing anything.
still looking, but couldn't find it.
enchanted protector
zoo-kept creature
over here you can hear the whistles
 everywhere
whistles from one side, then from
 another to another
close your eyes. do not try to see me.
all-knowing seductress
belly button screamer
part of the rainforest, i see you
going around in circles
walking, walking and always ending up in
 the same place.
that's how you get lost.
four-foot smoker
hairy-faced trickster
let's do a test
looking up she draws you to the treetops
but she is not that close
my sound entices, attracts, and invites
but i whisper only after i have
 disappeared.
tree-dwelling thief
guava tree kidnapper
if you're not smart, she'll take you
 away, and you'll get lost!
when you hear her sound, your brain
 shuts off

her sound enchants, hypnotizes,
 enthralls
but she whispers only after she has
 disappeared.
Curupira, creature of the woods
mysterious creator
invisible thing
amidst the howling dogs and the ringing
 cicadas
pacifist mother
from the center of the jungle
Curupira, creature of the woods

screamo

FEED MY EYES
ON A LEASH
I MISS YOU
SAD!

practiced in the art of
drowning
in my own silence

the art of
stuttering
over my own
words

STAY AWAY
NO ONE KNOWS
WAY DOWN
LOSER BOY

the quiet peace of that rock
by the lake

the peace of
coming to
terms with
yourself

MISQUITO DEATH
GOD WAKE ME
ROW BY ROW
PATIENTLY

the comfort in being sad
nostalgic taste

the comfort
of feeling
more than
nothing

MY WORLD
STILL ALIVE
TEENAGE RIOT
LIKE SUICIDE

the destruction of silence
ears ringing

until you
forget what
you're
missing at
all

light
pollution

co-star

are you comfortable in knowing
your screen shines brighter than the
millions of stars lost in the
night sky?

astrometry is dead, as is my circadian
rhythm
astrology is thriving
have you checked your co-star today?
you're an aries, aren't you?
what good is a cosmic chart if the stars
don't exist anymore
fallen out of the sky
to illuminate hong kong streetlights and
those big monitors in times square
read me my l.e.d. horoscope
will i find love today? is it in the
stars?
all of that is silly to me;
why would we wait on something that
takes light-years to get to us
when we have two-day delivery from the
nearest fulfillment center?
my little brother asked for a telescope
for Christmas and i found it
online for 79.99
ever since the renaissance men with
fancy last names have uncovered
interstellar mysteries
stars have been explored and understood
by the greatest scientists
maybe he'll be like them one day
and be able to tell me where the stars
went
for 79.99 he better! i can't wait to
know!
then we can shine darkness on the beings
we've been missing
turn off our lights in which their light

has been hiding
say hello to the stars again, because,
really, i feel so small without
them!

destruction of the celestial body

star

burst!

a cascade of light

no one saw me live

and no one saw me die

you cannot post a photo

of something so bright

star

burst!

an explosion of sound

no one heard me burn

and no one heard me burst

you cannot stream a song

of something so loud

star

burst!

a celebration of life

no one felt me smile

and no one felt me cry

you cannot knit a shirt

of something so warm

star

burst!

once upon a time

you cannot write a story

of something so divine

modern darkness

worry about light pollution
some prefer to live in the dark
i close my blinds to the world and let
 me tell you i have never been more
 content in my darkness
no one can touch me when they can't see
 me
and vice versa
the world keeps turning around me
and i keep my head down in a peace
 that only those hidden from the
 light can truly understand

worry about equal distribution
some people call me a vampire
sucking blood from the pulse of society
but what good would they donate to my
 existence?
everything is beyond saving anyway
the left fell off a cliff years ago
the right is in a fight with life itself
the polls will keep running in circles
 with or without my vote
i close my blinds to the world and let
 me tell you, you should try being
 content in the darkness

my ex-girlfriend tried calling last week
she said some weird things like i've
 lost touch with reality
i think she's crazy
she just doesn't understand

worry about anything in the world
some prefer to live in the dark!
the stars shine brighter in my
 imagination
than they ever will again in any
 american city

diesel engines will keep driving in
 circles without my opinion
smug governments will keep suffocating
 society without my intervention
i close my *blinds* to the *world*
 and *let me tell you!*
i have *never* been more content in my
 darkness!

digital visionary

the world is so easy to see
each country so accessible, if you just
turn on your cookies
alabaster skin somehow tanned in a photo
of cabo
was that pina colada sweetened with
local agave?
did you go to the louvre
post a photo of your favorite painting
behind your new hermes bag?
i saw she had the full french experience

living digital is easy
be whoever you want from the center
cushion of your couch
tunnel vision to the only thing that
matters while your post is still
younger than 24 hours

the world is so easy to see
each road to accessible, if you just
agree to the privacy policy
your vintage chevy looks amazing on top
of that mountain
did you tear up the alps with your 38-
inch tires?
i guess nothing breaks down anymore

living digital is easy
climb whatever mountain you want from
the left side of your bed
who needs real life
when you have better in your hand?

magnifying glass (when the light is so
bright it burns ants to death)

get the magnifying glass from the pencil
drawer in the kitchen
run outside, but not into the screen
this time
find a dry leaf
one that could crumble between careless
fingers
one that's red or brown and has no more
water sitting in its veins
evaporated by the sun days ago

the sun—
that's the main tool in this scientific
experiment
take the leaf gently by its stem, place
it on concrete
not on wood, nor on other leaves
safety comes first when playing with
sunrays
angle the magnifying glass in such a way
that a dark spot surrounded by a glowing
halo
sits in the center of the dried leaf

all of the sun's energy filtered
to one spot five inches from your
eager eyes
stare at the leaf, at its heating skin
watch for a second
two
seven seconds until it finally
surrenders to

all of the sun's energy filtered
to one spot now singing and burning
billowing the smallest wave of smoke
the dry leaf burns under your watchful
eyes

you've started a fire
with nothing but the sun
and a magnifying glass

water
pollution

arsenicosis

twenty-seven members of her family
dark marks on her cousin's chest
lesions on her niece's skin
cancer in her mother's lungs.

when the glass of water a child drinks
 in the morning
infects his brain
poisons his ability to remember the
 glass he drank just yesterday
what is a mother to do?

last year her sister died
in her own bed in her own home
with foreign chemicals weaved deeply
 into her fibers
from generations of poison
generations of poison

when the bowl of rice a woman eats one
 evening
infects her heart
poisons her ability to pump vital blood
 to her body
what is a sister to do?

mourning tens of millions of infected is
 too much for one woman to bear
"the largest mass poisoning in history"
what is a woman to do?

the metalloid toxicity runs too deep
to be vomited up
from their stomachs.

ipanema ([un]sustainable tourism)

vacation!

clear water, warm winds

a big cruise to one thousand
destinations

it's our job to help you leave yours
behind

the shores of ipanema—

i hear they glisten with foreign light
a cascade of shimmering speckles dancing
on the warm brazilian waves
dolphins gliding next to you as you swim

i want to do this every month

hell, every week!

i want to take all of the sweet mangoes
from the luscious trees

i want to swim with all of the dolphins
then eat their fins

harpoon my heart with your exotic flair,
my tropical lady

tall and tan and young and lovely
let me watch you go walking

vacation!

give me all of it! this land i own!

it did say all-inclusive

the package i bought, my dear

so i'll drink until their wells run dry
and expect even more next year

i give you my tongue

dew on my fingertip

rest

an orb of upside-down reflection

regenerative molecules

seep

into cracks of my parched skin

rapids in a river

rush

white spines spitting, spewing

legs in a glass

drip

sticking and crawling back to their body

wholistic healer

heal

glowing earth, nature's tonic

coruscating cleanser

soak

the world in your ancient medicine

vital source

birth

life into a lush, lush forest

slip down my throat

flood

to you i give my tongue

rest

seep

rush

drip

to you

i give my tongue

heal
soak
birth
flood
to you
i give my tongue

love
pollution

love pollution

tear ducts clog with sand and no tears
can push through i thought you said you
loved me! she looked into my eyes. she
saw my future and shaped it for me, her
way. she molded it like clay, fixed it
until it showed her what she wanted to
see. then she left me to figure it out,
dark in the blindfold she gave me. your
love was polluted with fear and rage.
your kisses had a slight aftertaste of
black licorice. your false empathy when
peeled back revealed selfish
thoughtlessness. you cared nothing about
the world around you. you watched my
forests burn while you lit fires in my
fields. you sucked the water from
beneath my skin while you sailed in my
overflowing tear ducts. you scraped the
dirt from under my nails and used it to
plant seeds of carnivorous plants in my
guts. you ate the food i provided for
you and vomited it into my stomach. i
gave you life, i gave you love, i let
you see the light of each morning under
my sullen protection. i watched you grow
with the nutrients from my own womb
coursing through your veins as i
withered behind you. you turned your
back to me and still i reached for your
eyes to grab them and make them mine
again. but they were never mine, and
here i stand spinning myself into an
eternity of mourning. i grieve you and i
grieve myself since you have been with
me. i grieve the lives of everyone and
everything you have killed in your
attempts to live. i grieve the moment i
allowed you to give me your polluted
love.

holiday

on holiday

somehow tears feel a bit colder on his
cheek

will the snow fall in blankets to cover
his blood-stained hands?

on holiday

music sounds in minor key

winter wonderland charms enough for him
to close his eyes and picture the
years when he celebrated, too

in a past life, it must have been
father time trekking through the tundra
with a bag of gifts slung over his
shoulder

granting him 15 minutes of sober silence
with his thoughts

on holiday

somehow memories look a bit greyer in
his mind

will the cider he drinks work to summon
his only mother from the cold
night?

on holiday

he sits on the stool by the fireplace
imagined in his mind

sniffing and shuttering as his veins
run icy blue polluted with the
love from a drug that is much
warmer than his father's arms

chestnuts roasting on an open fire he
opens his palms to dry them off in the
heat

and smiles slowly as it passes in soft
blue—

christmas day

war

no water

no crops

no food

no farmers

drought leads to death in an endless
desert of dust

as homes that held deep heart crumble
too in the hot wind

no power

no peace

no family

no love

migrants muttering for jobs with words
drenched in mourning

for the loved ones they leave woven in
layers of loss

no news

no talk

no care

no attention

cannot speak it cannot look it in its
lurking eyes

the fourth mass extinction of the earth

the fourth mass extinction of the earth

climate "change" ?

ambiguity abounds

climate

 killing*

 war*

 drought*

 starvation*

 displacement*

 death*

 extinction*

loss of nature is loss of nature

when you put a bullet through the heart
of a wild boar
what does it feel like?
when you put a bullet through the heart
of another man

cut down a redwood
amputate a limb
pour salt on a snail
gauge out an eye

life ceases in some places so often it's
absurd
when you take a life you feel it;
the skip of your heart as another's is
silenced
so how many deaths did it take for you
to be numb to the dying?

when you clear an ancient forest for
cheap timber
what does it feel like?
when you line up a row of innocent
prisoners and gun them down

ensnare a bird
snap a finger
put down a dog
dig through skin

taking a life and putting it in your
overflowing pocket
when you hold a spirit in your palm and
never release it,
instead put it in a steel cage and tell
it to shut up
what does it feel like?
ask this to anyone, because everyone
should know.

life
pollution

life pollution

when something is born into a life of death, is it really born at all? she cried as the baby escaped her womb. it cried with her. like it knew all the darkest secrets of the world.

this baby's spirit could have been infused anywhere. it could have cried tears to fertilize a missouri crop. its waters could have met those of the nile river. it could have wailed echoes into the silence of a fjord, below freezing. it cries with the knowledge of a million places. through its face every organism on the planet screams in an earthly symphony. this newborn thing, an oracle of creation, until it is taught to forget with the very first word it learns.

a vessel of life, a newborn is, of all the lives that ever lived. but a child can only muster so much in one body, so all the lives that ever lived must die within its ribs. all that was contained in its overflowing heart reduced to a fraction in its very first seconds.

when something is born into a life of death, is it really born at all? she cried as the baby escaped her womb. it cried with her. like it felt its kaleidoscope soul turning one last time to singularity. something dies in every birth.

horizon (looking ahead at the dust of
what's to come)

squint into a hyperreal hallucination
as the dust swells into a heaven-sent
cape tailored to fit your
shoulders

squint at the holographic horizon
as the ash floats into a beautiful shoe
stretched to hug your toes
take a step toward your imagined
homeland

left foot, right hand passes through
time in slow motion

hazy reddish-brownish-grey
squint at the shimmering shroud before
you

that comes into slow shape
it's your family, smiling, awaiting
your eternal embrace

right foot, left hand passes through
time in slow motion

your knees have never felt more at ease
squint into a forgiving fog that
welcomes you to what you always
loved yet took for granted

animals running in endless herds
turning up dust beneath their hooves
what you left behind an eternity ago
before the bombs blew craters in their
eyes

before the ash fell forever from the sky
squint at the horizon
do you see your home in the dust?

sources and references

breathing (the wonder of the lungs)

my experience with breathing and the
feeling of controlled airflow

angel in l.a.

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almost 30 years.* Los Angeles

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balloons

my experience with whip-its and how too
many of those around me have abused them

noise

my experience hearing the soundscape of
new york city for the first time

curupira, creature of the woods

Curupira, creature of the Woods. (2018).

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2021, from

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"the amazon, so magnificent, land of
splendor. the river, and abundant sea.
your jungle is a flowering image. your
people, so generous. your landscape of a
thousand charms. one day, you'll be the
bounty of the whole world, the glory of

brazil. the amazons, amazons, you're the
pearl of my brazil."

screamo

my experience with use of loud music as
a method of silencing thoughts,
eliciting feelings in a state of deep
depression. specific songs referenced:
man in the box, alice in chains; freak
on a leash, korn; cemetery drive, my
chemical romance; sad!, xxxtentacion;
stay away, nirvana; no one knows, queens
of the stone age; judgmental c**t, kid
cudi; the rooster, alice in chains; one,
metallica; like a stone, audioslave; my
world, kid cudi; alive, pearl jam;
teenage riot, sonic youth; like suicide,
soundgarden

co-star

my experience with watching the
astrology fad define my generation as
stars disappear from the sky, and
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destruction of the celestial body

giving documentary voice to a
dying star

modern darkness

my experience with the effects of
uninformed people on modern politics,
chosen isolation, and emotional
detachment

digital visionary

my experience with scrolling through
instagram and the subsequent questioning
of reality

magnifying glass (when the light is so
bright it burns ants to death)

my experience as a young child playing
with the power of the sun in my backyard

arsenicosis

documentation of the uncontrolled
arsenic contamination in Bangladesh
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in Bangladesh (1)*.

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ipanema ([un]sustainable tourism)

my experience with the environmentally
damaging effects of cruises/travelling,
as well as the toxic western
fetishization of "exotic" people and
environments

i give you my tongue

documentation of my physical and
spiritual experience with water

love pollution

documentation of the earth speaking to
humankind, as well as my past
relationships that hold similar dynamics

holiday

my experience with watching loved ones
suffer with drugs, documentation of
those whose holidays are not spent with
loved ones

war

documentation of the exacerbating
effects climate change has had on modern
conflict, and how it will continue on
this trend.

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worse by climate change*. Global
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climate-change/](https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/conflicts-affected-by-climate-change/).

loss of nature is loss of nature

documentation of death and killing, and
how human death is connected to
environmental/nonhuman death

life pollution

documentation on the pollution of a
newborn life

horizon (looking ahead at the dust of what's to come)

documenting the future if action is not
taken against climate change and
environmental disaster