

CODES, PRECEPTS, BIASES, AND TABOOS

Poems 1973-1993

Lawrence Joseph

FROM FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

"*Codes, Precepts, Biases, and Taboos* brings together the poems from Lawrence Joseph's first three books of poetry: *Shouting at No One*, *Curriculum Vitae*, and *Before Our Eyes*. Now in one volume, the poems from these three books can be seen as the work of one of American poetry's most original and challenging poets."

PRAISE FOR *BEFORE OUR EYES*

"In a feast of opposites and tangents, the sensual, the intellectual, the visual ... the political ... come together in Joseph's poems to create a voice both rich and intelligent. His luminous revelations remind us that this is the stuff for which we turn to poetry in the first place ... *Before Our Eyes* takes us to new territories of sensory truth and observation." --*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"The third collection of poems by an increasingly important talent. Joseph's unique sensibility is a distillation of two very different perceptions of language. As an attorney, he is intimate with words as expressions or cultural values and laws. As a poet, he is enraptured by the resonant beauty of simple language and its ability to convey such revelations as the promise of light, the aptness of a gesture, or the odd juxtapositions of daily life. This seesawing between the cerebral and the emotional, the political and the sensual, gives Joseph's poems their potency. But that's not the only key to his work. Joseph's experiences as a Lebanese-American underlie each of his poems about urban violence, international finance, war, and the global epidemic of 'soul sickness.' Joseph is shrewd and informed, romantic and inspired, writing about the world as we know it ..." --Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

"History, personal and global, a sense of place, and any kind of sequential or moral order, break into isolated images which fly outward without quite disappearing, without losing their crispness as singular elements. Many passages attempt to render accurately a moment of perception simply by being faithful to the diffuseness of its particularities, and to the distortions inherent in the very act of perception. The poems transfer feeling *as feeling* directly to the page. Their images generate at once great velocity and a kind of freeze-frame effect. Such immediacy feels revolutionary. Reading *Before Our Eyes* is challenging and jolting. The poet's submission to struggle, contradictory as this sounds, becomes a kind of beacon -- an example. For this poet, bravery is a way of being. He identifies what seems most difficult to utter, given the times in which we live, and in his own way finds the words, the images, the cadences, to utter it." -- Leslie Ullman, *The Kenyon Review*

"As Joseph makes clear, the way we think is also a product of our culture, a special construct almost as solidly built as any machine off the assembly line in Detroit. *Before Our Eyes* is an amalgam, a fusion of time and place and sensory perception, held together by its central sensibility and welded into place by its own 'lighting syntax.' Joseph manages to pull off the

difficult feat of creating an *antilogic*, a place where the poem presides over its intricate synesthesia ... The inner world of these poems is an invention, yes, but, like all good inventions, its innovations begin to feel imperative. Actually, it seems as if Joseph has understood all the connections in advance; his method is a kind of controlled surrealism ... But rather than revealing the irrational, *Before Our Eyes* is, in spite of itself, a book of ideas. Joseph has clearly mastered the ability 'to remember and imagine at the same time.' His 'act of the mind' shows us what will 'suffice' can be complicated; in *Before Our Eyes*, it is a blend of Williams' multifaceted America with Stevens' rich interior world." -- Judith Kitchen, *The Georgia Review*

"In *Before Our Eyes*, Joseph tests the limits of emotion and relects on a morality of feeling and seeing. Perception is practiced, 'made' and 'felt,' particularly perception that would seek out the neglected, the excluded, and the hidden. Joseph's poems practice direct sensory observation in a technological culture in which sensory materials are framed, reframed, and programmed. Yet while Joseph's is a painterly sensibility focusing on shape and color, line and contour, his clouds and sunsets are cut through with urban facts ... At the same time, he is deeply protective of an inner life. It is out of his sense of the durable privacy of sensibility that Joseph defines poetry as 'the act of forming / imagined language resisting humiliation.'" --Lee Upton, *Northwest Review*

"... [A] brilliant collection that casts light on the relationships between speech and language, power and law, the individual and the state. Joseph's range of reference is vast, including theological formulations drawn from Aquinas and Ignatius, as well as more popular musical sources from his native Motown, and rich thematic connections between Rousseau and Saussure -- all of which introduce subtle biographical and philosophical nuances ... As a child born into Arab-American shopkeeping culture, Joseph redirects cultural and political sign systems through an 'open heart' now written into his own compelling poetry." --Kenneth Warren, *American Book Review*

"Beyond his style, it's Joseph's unflagging powers of reflection that linger. Though frequently like a French *moraliste* peering from the vantage point of a cafe table, Joseph never settles for an armchair sensibility. His poetry works along the front lines, reconnoitering and marking down the slightest shocks and snarls of urban and international life, resist flinching or turning away, they deserve our attention. If what they say about that world comes from a place of vigilance or concern ... they have earned our admiration. In *Before Our Eyes*, Joseph negotiates the finer points of our linguistic and social contracts ... For this, he and his collection are to be praised." --David Yezzi, *Parnassus*

"*Before Our Eyes* makes the tension between beauty and terror, lyric language and historical fact, aesthetics and politics, its central subject and major burden ... Visually opulent, Joseph's poems employ a dazzling array of color words ... The result is a poetry by turns engrossing and exhausting, charged with anxious introspection yet still transfixed by flashes of beauty. --Roger Gilbert, *Michigan Quarterly Review*

The rift between our public and private realms is where Joseph strives ... a mind at work -- at home with inconsistencies and wary of conclusions ... idiosyncratic, off-kilter pieces, yet no less observant for being so ..." --Albert Mobilio, *Voice Literary Supplement*

"His juxtaposition and examinations of language are often dazzling, often beautiful. Joseph raises the right issues and shows us how to be morally instructed by the sensual world we see before our eyes ..." --Nancy Schoenberger, *Verse*

"Joseph grew up in Detroit, a child of the Lebanese and Syrian community there. His family had a small grocery store in a neighborhood that went up in flames in the 1967 riot. With stints in its factories, he attended the universities of Michigan and Cambridge, and the University of Michigan Law School. He now lives in New York City ... His is an aesthetic of inner and outer, public and private, physical fact and abstract speculation, a melding of opposites appropriate for a poet who embodies many of the contradictions of American society today ... Joseph celebrates the city and the kaleidoscope of images it thrusts on us ... In the midst of sometimes lunatic fullness, and against all odds, he also celebrates the possibility of love." --Regan Upshaw, *Multicultural Review*

"Acutely conscious of the passing scene, in his immediate New York City and in the world, Joseph offers poems of abrupt juxtapositions and sheer dizzying variety, products of a poet who truly believes that 'By written I mean made, by made mean felt.'" --Laurie Greer, *Virginia Quarterly Review*

"Now comes Lawrence Joseph, a professor of law at St. John's University School of Law in New York, who, with greater effect than any of his contemporaries, is carrying on the tradition of other poets who were also lawyers, such as Wallace Stevens, Charles Reznikoff, and Edgar Lee Masters ..." --Elizabeth Cohen, *The New York Times*

"A beautiful book. The poems are so good they made me hurt down to the roots of my hair. This book is going to be a classic. Reading the poems, the way one sets u the other -- the total impact, each poem separately, the whole experience -- is a challenge and an exquisite thrill. I'm going to tell everyone I know about it." --Thom Jones

PRAISE FOR *CURRICULUM VITAE*

"Outstanding ... A poet of fierce intensity ... In the age of the universal writing workshop, Joseph writes with an authenticity that is earned, not just acquired." --David Lehman, *The Washington Post Book World*

"Lawrence Joseph is the poet as secret agent, prowling for incongruities. With rare nerve and intelligence, he brings together everything -- from the financial markets to his family history -- always with a finally balanced sense of form and moral consciousness. Strong stuff!" -- Stuart Klawans, "Fresh Air," *National Public Radio*

"Joseph's achievement goes beyond color and detail.. *Curriculum Vitae* has an ironic, restless intelligence that keeps it right on the cusp of wisdom ... There's also an exhilaration in the speed of his associations ... With a graceful touch and virtuoso timing ... he constructs cubist panoramas in pitch-perfect free verse that never betrays his commitment to the mode ..." -- Matthew Flamm, *The Village Voice*

"*Curriculum Vitae* argues without resolution, without the escapism of false sentimentality, nostalgia, or self-indulgence. It confronts the violence of both psyche and polis while seeking not the balance of reason, but rather, the effort of conscience ... This is a ... writer who can bring drama to his passions. Let's have some more." --Paul McDonough, *American Book Review*

"Lawrence Joseph's language of transaction and law (he is a professor of law at St. John's University School of Law) is compelling as an invocation of systems of power. National debt and a client on hold may coexist with notes on poverty and sudden thrusts of sensuality. Animosity is leavened with beauty ... The specificity of events intrigues him ... His sensibility registers the accumulative trauma of knowledge and event ... Yet the shifts in register and ostensible subject do not seem arbitrary. Instead they open a sphere in which rapid juxtapositions reflect much of present experience." --Lee Upton, *Northwest Review*

"His poems engage us immediately ... Their dominant mode ... is kind of gritty, straightforward confessionalism in which a relaxed, conversational tone is intensified by its bizarre, violent, and poignant topics ... His vision cuts inward and outward with equal ferocity ... His candor and dispassionate moral insights draw us to him ..." --Henry Hart, *Michigan Quarterly Review*

"His is a tragic sense that perceives and expresses human sorrow as well as struggling human hope ... Joseph's work is what poetry should be: the human spirit pitted against what is unacceptable but which nonetheless is." --Samuel Hazo, *The Pittsburgh Press*

"Lawrence Joseph's poems have the poignant exactitude that only real poetry has. His words carry a great responsibility and strength, so rare in our time." --Yehuda Amichai

"A lively, fastidious, cosmopolitan talker, Lawrence Joseph takes on the ... realities of his world and ours in poems that pulse with conviction." --James Merrill

"The diction and rhetoric of economics, law, commerce, and religion intermingle in *Curriculum Vitae* to convey the array and disarray, the patter and pattern of this historical moment in America. Lawrence Joseph's poems are dynamic, written with acuity about the relationship of power, work, and money, illuminating States too complex and separate to be called United. Joseph understands that there is no self-implication without self-revelation: these are poems of unremitting passion, dexterous language, and bristling intelligence in which the personal proceeds with the political toward conclusions both surprising and unavoidable. Social engagement is transfused with imagination; the tone is at once tough-minded and compassionate; gritty exposition invigorates prayerful lyricism. The inclusiveness of vision amounts to a moral stance. Unlike poets who excise unpleasantness in favor of unfathomable, the untenable, the strange, the sad, and chooses to look long rather than look away. 'My power becomes my sorrow,' Joseph writes. The reverse is often true." --Alice Fulton

PRAISE FOR *SHOUTING AT NO ONE*

"Exceptional ... An extremely impressive poetic debut." --David Lehman, *Newsday* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Shouting at No One offers reminders of what we choose to ignore and the poet cannot forget. Joseph's poems cut to the quick; they never dignify violence or try to explain it away. They gleam with the sharp edge of their truth; they are hard to forget." --James Finn Cotter, *The Hudson Review*

"A passionate, ambitious, strangely beautiful book ... poems [which] certainly deserve to be anthologized, and widely taught and read." --Richard Daniels, *The Minnesota Review*

"Joseph does not need dramatics: his ear for dialogue, eye for detail, and direct voice are immediately arresting ... These poems shine with gritty truths gleaned from hard reality." --Joseph Parisi, *Booklist*