

INTO IT

Poems

Lawrence Joseph

FROM FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

"*Into It*, Lawrence Joseph's fourth book of poems, is as bold a book as any in American poetry today -- an attempt to give voice to the extremes of American reality in the time since, as Joseph puts it, 'the game changed.'"

"Joseph's first three books dramatized the challenge of maintaining one's self in a world in the hold of dehumanizing forces. The new book finds him in a time and place where 'the immense enlargement / of our perspectives is confronted / by a reduction of our powers of action' -- where the word 'wargame' is a verb and 'the weight of violence / is unparalleled in the history / of the species.' Along the New York waterfront, on a crowded street, at the site where the World Trade Center stood: Joseph enters into these places to capture the thoughts and images, the colors and feelings, and the language that give the present its pressured complexity. Few contemporary writers have been able to shape this material into poetry, but Joseph has done so masterfully-in poems that are daring, searching, and classically satisfying."

"*Into It* is a new work by a poet of great originality and scope."

PRAISE FOR INTO IT

"As Lawrence Joseph notes, 'the technology to abolish truth is now available.' Fortunately, we have poets like him to respond to this challenge, which he does in poetry of great dignity, grace, and unrelenting persuasiveness. Sentences 'made of thought and of sound, of feelings seen' give the lie to the destructive element that wants to submerge us. Joseph gives us new hope for the resourcefulness of humanity, and of poetry." --John Ashbery'

"*Into It* begins with an invocation to the muse from Ovid that reads 'give me the voice / To tell the shifting story ...' [T]hough Joseph invokes Wallace Stevens, another lawyer, in his epigraph and elsewhere, the voice that dominates *Into It* evokes New York after 9/11, recalling ... edgy voices of T.S. Eliot's personae making their way through postwar London. Like Stevens and the other modernists, Eliot is a son of Ovid, charting the metamorphoses he sees Power is the subject of Joseph's new poems ... In 'History for Another Time,' the poet looks back from the distant future to one nearer our own period... It's as though the doomsday machine in 'Dr. Strangelove' has been triggered and is now 'impossible to untrigger,' in the words of Peter Sellers' crackling doctor. The arson and shootings in [Joseph's] Detroit seem pretty primitive, Wild West stuff compared to what Joseph calls the 'technological war' that is going on right now, even if we only wake up to it during days like 9/11 to blink wildly for a moment and then sink back into our luxuries. Like Henry Adams, Joseph seems to be writing ahead of actual events, and that makes him one of the scariest writers I know" --David Kirby, *The New York Times Book Review*

"The title of Lawrence Joseph's fourth and latest poetry collection, *Into It*, echoes words from Henry James's assertion that 'the only thing' is 'to live in the world of creation -- to get into it and

stay in -- to frequent it and haunt it...' Like Wallace Stevens, Joseph balances the vocation of law with the avocation of poetry, so he knows a thing or two about engagement with the external world and the complex role language plays in determining the social perceptions and balances of power within it... He is acutely aware of the gulf between the officially sanctioned, abstract rhetoric that expresses an ideal societal vision and the diminished inner voice of the disillusioned citizenry in which that vision has been instilled... The effect of powerlessness, the consciousness of it, produces a form of anti-rhetoric, rhetoric's covert opposite: a reticent language of intimacy... Detail is the medium of presence, and the truth lies at the intersection of perception and imagination. Synthesizing the aesthetics of Williams and Stevens with his own... Joseph's vital and emotionally hard-won poetry suggests that each of us must discover his or her own tools of engagement with the world, forged in the crucible of personal experience, sociocultural context, and language." --Fred Muratori, *American Book Review*

The violence without' -- Steven's phrase -- is that against which the poems found in Lawrence Joseph's fourth book of poem, *Into It*, 'press back.' [I]n Joseph's book the world's violence is political and socioeconomic... Joseph's syntax presents the poem itself as a conversation, or a conversational... [P]leasure (tacitly, beauty as well) is offered as what the times may need and even, insofar as what is 'seen, heard, and imagined' is truly known, as a form of truth. Yet the violence of the times does not disappear from view or from consideration in these poems, by any means... Joseph offers more of a meta-discourse on image and narrative in poetry, even as the poems themselves do sing, do remain lyrical. More precisely ... the poems are as focused on voice -- offering a kind of rigorous meditation on history and the self's ability to thrive -- as on story... Throughout the volume, the voice of *Into It* tries on a series of personal, public, and literary languages... [forging] a poetry that can simultaneously think about and resist contemporary unreality... [T]hese poems record the work of connecting the self to the world (both moving targets) feelingly... The immanence to which it keeps alluding seems to be the merging of the eye and ear and feeling mind with the realities that have escaped public and political discourse." -- Lisa M. Steinman, *Michigan Quarterly Review*

"...[A] fiercely articulate new book of poems woven from events before, during and after Sept. 11, 2001 ... [Joseph] stays resolutely near [Ground Zero] and weaves a cat's cradle of connections between that dreadful day and all the perverse manipulating and warmongering that has gone on since ... Joseph is an Arab American with a Catholic upbringing, a law professor who understands law, business and politics from the bottom up and the top down. [*Into It*'s] determination is to make us think about our times. [Joseph] establishes his authority with surreal details ... [His] staccato lines form a shattered mosaic, as the poet fights for words to absorb what he sees. Few poets work so intensely to provide a tapestry of how malevolent public forces work upon us. When is the last time you read a poem about the power of mass technology to corrupt mass psychology? Joseph's claim to uniqueness is his relentless moral diagnosis of 'times of killing like these.' The work often feels like the diary of an unusually thoughtful reporter who privately guesses at how events he covers intersect and who might be responsible ... work [that is] always calling on a sense of volatile complexities. Introducing an anthology of poems written in response to wars of the 20th century, the critic M. L. Rosenthal described poets who wrote from 'disillusionment with a society that took war and repression and privilege for granted,' who committed their work to 'prolonged immersion in the desolate implications of existence and a

varied search for the artistic means to encompass them ...' It is one that Lawrence Joseph insists upon with every line." --Allan M. Jalon, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"The poet Lawrence Joseph is also a lawyer and a legal scholar. The grandson of Lebanese and Syrian immigrants, he grew up in Detroit. Since 1981, Joseph has made lower Manhattan his home. The event of Sept. 11, 2001 -- 'everything immense and out of context' -- sets the tone for *Into It*. Fundamentally, [Joseph is] a poet of ideas ... [He] sees the 'conversations' that make up Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a bridge between creating an overview of an entire culture and private reactions to it. Our age, however, lacks the cosmology that lends the Renaissance poem its coherence. Every epoch, Joseph observes, requires its own metaphors. For Dante's age, theology shaped a world view. Today, engineering has replaced the controlling deity ... Joseph concludes that too many of our current metaphors -- computers, multinational corporations, global networks -- have no 'heart,' no prime mover in the manner of older systems. Even quantum physics suggests that the universe was created outside time, so that past and future are actually part of the present. What we call history is merely a construct of the moment. But since we cannot live like this, we fall back on the private sphere -- whatever we apprehend through our senses and emotions. Joseph's own perceptions are shaped by his Christian Arab heritage and his Detroit childhood. When mass destruction arrives in Manhattan his imagination reverts to the racial battles and economic burnout of the Motor City ... In his wrestling with these elements, a near epic tension mounts that renders the disparate sections of *Into It* whole, albeit with holes and disjunctions. The poet trusts words to do justice to the atrocities and the panicked reactions to them ... *Into It* succeeds in placing what is almost beyond description under the lens of poetry and illuminating the darkness for us to make our way forward." --Phoebe Pettingell, *The New Leader*

"[O]ver the course of his four collections, [Joseph] seems to have deliberately shed any desire for elegance, favoring instead a hard-edged and even dissonant style, one designed to incorporate but not synthesize a long list of polarities. This list derives in part from Joseph's biography: his grandparents came from Lebanon, immigrating to Detroit, where several family members as well as the poet himself worked in auto plants; they poems also allude to a Roman Catholic upbringing. Joseph later became a lawyer, and presently lives in New York City, where he is a professor of law at St. John's University... [I]n Joseph's recently published collection, *Into It* ... the dichotomies and ambivalence which fueled the previous poems are focused upon discourse itself, on language's seeming incapacity to authenticate contemporary experience... Joseph's new mode as often as not seems to begin in the discursive -- rhetorical questions posed in a manic perversion of the Socratic... Yet soon this method gives way to a kind of relentless collage making -- though it is not the formulaic reliance on lists and catalogues you encounter in certain of the language writers... Above all, Joseph is concerned with how postmodern culture, especially in its more insidious forms of political discourse, debases language, a process which is seen as accelerating exponentially in the wake of 9-11 and the two Gulf Wars. This concern is of course a familiar one, but Joseph expresses it with a troubled intensity of vision that distinguishes it from theoretical cant... Joseph's new work shares Celan's goal of restoring language to its capacity for intimate speech, as well as his perception that language faces a kind of apocalyptic crisis. Yet he rejects Celan's hermeticism and drive for refinement. The realities of contemporary existence demand from him linguistic dissonance and the presence of sometimes violently opposing modes of discourse with a single poem... [R]eferences to two events are

alluded to obsessively in the collection, and in a perverse fashion act as leitmotifs which give the individual poems and the book itself a cohesive form. As a consequence of the World Trade Center attacks and the second Iraq War, Joseph insists in the book's penultimate poem, 'the game changed.'... The game has changed in no small part because the stakes have grown higher. As Adrienne Rich puts it, 'the problem is not 'finding an imaginative interest in life,' but sustaining the blows of the material and imaginative challenges of our time.' And these blows fall down without ceasing... Joseph's poems are free of the cant and debased rhetoric from which our political discourse is formed; they are free as well of the similarly debased and cant-afflicted postures which pass for most political poetry today." -- David Wojahn, *The Writer's Chronicle*

"[I]t is impressive to watch Joseph's struggle with the limits of language and the integrity of the lyric in an effort to remain faithful to the truth. His goal is to express the immense confusion of the last ten years, to find proper words to pose against 'the precious and turgid language / of pseudoerudition (thugs, / thugs are what they are, / false-voiced God-talkers and power freaks / who think not at all about what they bring down).' *Into It* radiates big ambitions, announcing Joseph's intention 'to make a large, serious / portrait of my time'... Joseph implies that at the moment we live in contingency, in possibility; our world is seldom fully realized, even as the poet works to fulfill his responsibility to communicate it precisely. Endeavoring to assimilate the wide disparities and sympathies of contemporary life, Lawrence Joseph's achievement remains, in some ways, a work in progress. I say this not as a criticism, but as a way of suggesting that later poems may yet resolve the tensions informing these ambitious, skilled, and demanding works of art." --Michael True, *Commonweal*

"How can a poet's style reflect the dislocations of New York after 9/11, the insensate wreck he sees in American politics and the particular gifts and difficulties of Arab-American heritage? Joseph answers these questions ... with a dizzying mix of abstractions, urban details, and nuggets of historical fact ... a 'dream technique' of juxtaposition and exclamations [that] derives from the late style of Robert Lowell ... updating Lowell's Vietnam-era frustrations for the era of the smart bombs and globalization." --*Publishers Weekly*

"*Into It* ... reveals a different poetic voice ... Many lyrics seem 'coded' with essayistic digressions that gracefully intertwine question, observation, and emotion. Being a New Yorker in a 9/11 world has certainly resonated with Joseph, and the melancholy, grief, and hope of so many people coming to grips with large-scale violence is palpable. Many of these poems are deftly painted ... with feeling as brushstroke, judgement as perspective, language as dimension, metaphor as theme." --Janet St. John, *Booklist*

"Joseph's poems, many of which interrogate 9/11, are insistently quiet, doleful... [H]is poems ... have a[n] affinity to Greek tragedy, to the ... lines of Euripidean choruses ... Joseph, however, focuses on collective forces, not individuals. His ambitious intent is 'to make a large, serious / portrait of my time' ... His poems are in continual, often maddening flux, constantly morphing and shifting ... They are ... poems that take place with the mind like those of Wallace Stevens, who, in the book's epigraph, coolly quotes Henry James and considers how the world of the imagination relates to the 'world of actuality.' They are, as Stevens writes in 'Of Modern Poetry,' poems of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice' ... Joseph ... writes ... with the force and grace of a conductor's swift baton ... Yet Joseph is more than an intricate stylist ... He

confronts us with history -- here he differs from Stevens, who was rarely topical ..." --Tim Kindseth, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

"In his new volume of poems, *Into It*, Lawrence Joseph asks, 'The technology to abolish truth is now available -- not everyone can afford it, but it is available -- when the cost comes down, as it will, then what? This quest for one true thing, one item of surety, drives all his new poems, which find truth to be slippery 'in an era of after, of postmodernism.' What happens, then, is that Joseph's work becomes a refreshing document of the struggle for truth. This struggle makes *Into It* a very intimate book, one that counter-intuitively and productively sidesteps confessionality ... [W]hen Joseph stumbles upon a potential truth, he doesn't shy away from stating it clearly and almost aphoristically ... And somehow, he maintains humor in a meandering alternative account of events surrounding our recent wars ... Joseph sets *Into It* in a rational, complex and yes, occasionally funny sensibility. *Into It* is just that, into the world, and the poems that compose it are very much of the world and of this time. Joseph presents information cleanly and evocatively, and in doing so most effectively displays his search for truth and reason in a world whose operators ... don't value them very much. The essential pleasure of reading Joseph is recognizing that, in this world, there's at least one other person trying to figure out how to live, what's true and what's right." --Nicholas Gilewicz, *Bookslut*

"[T]he most important lawyer-poet of our era... [L]ike Joseph himself, the 'I' of the poem is often a lawyer... Joseph's lawyer-narrators have little in common with the subjective 'I' of the Romantic poets, however. Rather than purporting to speak directly to the reader, the 'I' of the poems is multifaceted (not just a lawyer but a Catholic of Lebanese descent, a child of Detroit, a resident of blocks around Ground Zero, as Joseph himself is) and is continuously shaped by the pressures of the external world." -- David Skeel, *Legal Affairs*

"For loss, bliss, and courage met and endured, try Lawrence Joseph's *Into It*. Joseph who lives near Ground Zero and had to be evacuated in the aftermath of 9/11, gives us our urban world anew, pressing worlds till they sing of both justice and mercy. --Marie Ponsot, *Commonweal*

"... Lowell and Williams. Lawrence Joseph finds himself in very good company as a ... witness to our times. But the sardonic humor with which to counter the public lies distributed to *The New York Times* and CNN, and the human ache, and the search for something like peace -- to these this poet has given a local habitation and a name." --Paul Mariani, *America*

"In his newest collection of poetry, Lawrence Joseph grapples with the task of giving witness to a brutal world. *Into It* takes the hard cold materials of the madness and violence that have entered American consciousness since 9/11 and the Iraq war, and shapes them into portraits that honor the horror and let it stand on its own terms... Joseph's reverent attention to the unsayable draws one in rather than repels, bringing us to our senses even as it tears at our senses of sanity. It also allows the insistent question of victim versus perpetrator to dissolve into a larger question: how is it that the 'slow, the meek, or the poor of spirit ... allowed themselves to disappear / into the long, red evenings.' Those in love with death are always with us, Joseph laments, even from ancient times -- irreconcilable mystery. Yet for all that, Joseph is drawn to beauty... He marvels, amid everything, at 'what / light there is in that landscape.'" --*Image Update*

"[I]n his new book, *Into It*, Joseph has become the flaneur of an irrevocably changed landscape, 'the vista, a city / the city, taking a shape and burning.' Joseph has become the transparent eyeball that Emerson envisioned. This emphasis on the visual carries over into the writing of a poem; like Montale, Joseph sees the poem as a visual-aural object of emotion and feeling... Joseph is a prophet without much honor in the land of the military-industrial complex. But unless we heed his message, we are lost." --Regan Upshaw, *The Bloomsbury Review*