

EMBEDDED CHRONICLES: LAWRENCE JOSEPH'S POETRY OF URGENCY

*Lee Upton**

What follows are two lawyer jokes widely distributed on the Internet:

Your attorney and your mother-in-law are trapped in a burning building. You only have time to save one of them. Do you: (1) have lunch?, or (2) go to a movie?¹

A man was sent to Hell for his sins. As he was being taken to his place of eternal torment, he passed a room where a lawyer was having an intimate encounter with a beautiful young woman. "What a ripoff," the man muttered. "I have to roast for all eternity, and that lawyer gets to spend it with a beautiful woman." Jabbing the man with his pitchfork, the escorting demon snarled, "Who are you to question that woman's punishment?"²

What is important in any joke is not so much the punch line as the uprush of recognition that occurs after the punch line, as compressed subtextual connections come to us with the surprise of a vulgar epiphany, but an epiphany no less. When we talk about jokes we might say, "Did you get the joke?"—as if a joke were something that we could physically handle, pick up, and carry, as if a joke must be something that we are responsible for retrieving. Given that many jokes are pressurized narratives, they have been routinely compared to poetry, which depends on concision and a charged subtext.

Certainly there are few narratives more compressed than jokes, unless we are talking about poems. As Robert Frost wrote in his notebook: "The Poem must have as good a point as a [*sic*] anecdote or a joke."³ The structure of a joke depends on conceptual embedding, and more often than not, as in the lawyer jokes quoted earlier, a violation of a fleshly boundary is at least implied. Lawrence Joseph's poems are hardly about joking matters, but they too are composed of condensed

* Professor of English and writer in residence, Lafayette College.

1. TCYonline.com., Law Humor, http://www.tcyonline.com/law/law_fingmatters.php (last visited Nov. 3, 2007).

2. Jokes at VariousStuff.Net, Lawyer Jokes: Punishment, <http://jokes.variousstuff.net/joke/1897.html> (last visited Nov. 3, 2007). As the tenor of these jokes suggest, lawyer jokes harbor signs of our culture's conflicted responses to lawyers: a mixture of attraction and aversion, admiration and envy.

3. Robert Frost, *Notebook 4*, in *THE NOTEBOOKS OF ROBERT FROST* 32, 35 (Robert Faggen ed., 2006).

narratives that depend on heightened references to the vulnerabilities of the flesh and complex cues that defeat our initial expectations and reveal what otherwise might be obscured. As Joseph insists, “that’s the law. To bring to light / most hidden depths.”⁴ Not only do Joseph’s poems depend on subtext, much as in the shell game of a joke, but they enact and reflect on the sensation of what he calls “pressure”—the invisible but felt experience of our contemporary situation. His poems are structured so that they arrive with something close to physical weight for some readers. What Joseph gives us could be named the enactment and articulation of pressure in embedded narratives. As he writes in “History for Another Time,”⁵ “Pressure is what / it’s about, and pressure’s incalculable— / which eludes the historian.”⁶ He figures contemporary reality: “A slow, shapeless wheel is what / it feels like, the pressure deep and silent.”⁷ Either in overt or covert ways, Joseph focuses on “The arrangement of power, the immanence / of the pressure.”⁸ Violence appears in his poems through images of a broken arm, a slit throat, the abandonment of a child, or the results of “Technocapital war [as] a part / of our bodies, of the body politic.”⁹

In *The Mirror of Justice: Literary Reflections of Legal Crises* Theodore Ziolkowski traces what he calls “moments of crisis in the evolution of law when the entire system is being challenged”¹⁰ In such “legal works,” he tells us, “it is not the facts that are in question but the values by which the facts are to be judged.”¹¹ In Joseph’s poetry the point of crisis involves narration itself: how we tell what we know, what voices we trust, and what untrustworthy voices become part of the story. As he asks in “Woodward Avenue,”¹² “So many voices, which of them to be taken / seriously?”¹³ In a period when our descriptive resources are stalled, and when explanatory structures are sliding away from comprehension, or are so reductive as to have little bearing on our lived experience, Joseph writes poems that embed evidence of the accumulated trauma of generations and the condensed experience of

4. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Variations on Variations on a Theme*, reprinted in CODES, PRECEPTS, BIASES, AND TABOOS: POEMS 1973–1993, at 154, 155 (2005).

5. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *History for Another Time*, in INTO IT 58 (2005).

6. *Id.* at 59.

7. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Metamorphoses (After Ovid)*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 46, 51.

8. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *On That Side*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 19, 19.

9. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *News Back Even Further than That*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 38, 40.

10. THEODORE ZIOLKOWSKI, *THE MIRROR OF JUSTICE: LITERARY REFLECTIONS OF LEGAL CRISES* 16 (1997).

11. *Id.*

12. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Woodward Avenue*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 15.

13. *Id.* at 16.

contemporary reality as it is experienced on multiple levels. He constructs a harrowing and loosely connected playing out of speculations in the midst of sensual images that perform in tension with his explicit lines of argument. There is a generally wide field of intelligence at work in many of his poems, with elastic results: abstract contemplation, physical violation, a painterly resurfacing of the visual field, and a re-immersion into the past. What makes these poems anything but straight chronicles has to do with Joseph's assembling of moments of trauma that accumulate, repeat in different contexts, and prove dynamic.

A scene in Don DeLillo's recent novel *Falling Man* contributes to our understanding of Joseph's poetry.¹⁴ In DeLillo's novel a man who escaped from inside one of the towers of the World Trade Center on September 11th arrives at an emergency room. A medical technician picks glass out of the character's face and begins to talk about the after-effects of suicide bombings:

In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who's in striking range. Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel.¹⁵

In the technician's account, pieces of the body—now a corpse—of the murderer-suicide are lodged in the innocent bystander's living body and, as such, the witness is inhabited by death and, in a sense, cannot escape the suicide bombing even if she has escaped with her life; she is inhabited by the bomber's flesh, and that dead flesh itself may work to the surface of her living skin.

How does this horrific anecdote from DeLillo illuminate Lawrence Joseph's poetry? In much of Joseph's poetry a narrative of violated flesh emerges. The psychic pressure of recalled and predicted violence in the United States and in the Middle East occupies poems not only as explicit subject matter but as a constituent of formal organization in which fragments of embedded particulars—narrative accounts, bits of dialogue, references from numerous sources—are made dynamic, as in DeLillo's

14. DON DELILLO, *FALLING MAN* 16 (2007).

15. *Id.* at 16.

account of the “pellets” of bombed flesh that bury themselves but eventually “develop,” revealing themselves in a living human body. The dead past enters the living and “works” its way into both the present and into intimations of the future. The past, our re-imagining of the past, and our speculations about the future, are not suspended but circulate. We might turn to one of Joseph’s lines, “I don’t know about you, but it all goes through my skin”¹⁶ for a direct example of how experience in Joseph’s poem is rendered as both physically embedded and volatile. The perpetration of violence and the perpetrators themselves burrow within the poems’ structures and the speakers’ psyches. Poetry exists here as a collection of fragments recast in ultimately nightmarish terms, as violence to the flesh is internalized but not inactive. Joseph reminds us, then, of the fact that we cannot escape one another. Bodies, however individual and apparently free, affect other bodies—contact turns into impact. In “Unyieldingly Present,”¹⁷ for instance, the scene of violence is refracted into sensations of pressure as violence is “encoded in the brain.”¹⁸ And yet our perception of violence is unstable in terms of how we might think it is structured: “Is it that reality, disjointed // cannot be discerned, or that consciousness, / disjointed, cannot discern it?”¹⁹ Our perceptual faculties may be inadequate to our reality. The syntax of language and the syntax of history are obsessively dwelled on as Joseph engages in “The act of forming / imagined language [resisting humiliation].”²⁰

I have chosen the word “embedded” as only a partial, but I hope resonant, description of a dominant element in Joseph’s poems. *The American Heritage Dictionary* refers to primary definitions of “embed” as: “To fix firmly in a surrounding mass”; “To enclose snugly or firmly,” “To cause to be an integral part of a surrounding whole”; “To assign (a journalist) to travel with a military unit during an armed conflict” and, finally, from Biology, “To enclose (a specimen) in a supporting material before sectioning for microscopic investigation.”²¹ Each definition takes on metaphorical life in Joseph’s poetry. Tellingly, his most recent collection is titled *Into It*—with its suggestion of entering an interior. “It” is a troublesome pronoun, ungendered, used

16. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Movement in the Distance Is Larger Up Close*, reprinted in CODES, PRECEPTS, BIASES, AND TABOOS: POEMS 1973–1993, *supra* note 4, at 173, 173.

17. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Unyieldingly Present*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 35.

18. *Id.* at 35.

19. *Id.* at 36.

20. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Before Our Eyes*, reprinted in CODES, PRECEPTS, BIASES, AND TABOOS: POEMS 1973–1993, *supra* note 4, at 125, 126.

21. THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY (4th ed. 2000).

ambiguously for singular or plural, for the living or non-living. The preposition “Into” designates an immersion—whether into Dante’s inferno or a traffic jam; into Henry James’s “the world of creation” (cited in Joseph’s epigraph to *Into It*);²² or into a pair of pants or a prison sentence—or, given this poet’s preoccupations, into an interior decimated by 9/11.

During the early days of the Iraq war the term “embedded” took on renewed life with the advent of embedded correspondents, news reporters who traveled with military troops and were protected by troops. Whatever one thinks of the ethics or the outcome of the practice, the term in relation to news reporting has come to suggest a desire for authenticity at the same time as it suggests a deeply ambiguous and suspect position—a witness to some immediate effects of combat and yet a witness whose objectivity may be sacrificed. The term “embedded correspondent,” however, assumes a metaphorical complexity if we apply it to Joseph’s poetry—for he is a poet seeking lines of correspondence, certainly, while he assumes a position that differs markedly from that of the embedded news reporter, given that Joseph so thoroughly complicates our notion of what it means to report or to witness an event. Although Joseph’s poetry is incised with fragmentary materials that serve as evidence of our contemporary moment, this poet does not compose what reliably could be called “a poetry of witness,” the term that has been used in popular forums for more than two decades for much of politically charged poetry. The term “poetry of witness” may suggest an unimplicated and reasonably objective access, an ability to maintain control of the body while speaking of atrocity and injustice as an on-the-scene eyewitness who records but is neither victim nor perpetrator. Joseph is not a poet of witness in the conventional sense because he is implicated in the scenes that he enacts; sufferings are embodied with a familial bearing; his speakers are not under protection. Nor does he write a poetry dominated by the eye as suggested by the common term eyewitness. Despite the painterly disposition of much of his work, he focuses almost as fully on sounds as on sights, representing the peculiarities of speech and the dynamics of heightened listening. For Joseph it is not so much what the speaker sees as what he hears while he sees—and what he imagines. Seeing may even be the perceptual act performed in his poems to relieve the pressure of the heard; seeing may offer a reprieve from the noise of violence.

This is a poetry that deploras fanaticism and presents structures that allow us to come closer to enacting in language aspects of contemporary

22. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at unnumbered dedication page (quoting Wallace Stevens).

experience that we have yet to find another way to respond to. The factual in his poems—and even the act of thinking about what occurs—initially shines with the aura of the fantastical, but what seems unreal soon takes on the imprint of the actual. In the midst of trauma, the mind balks; we have to be convinced that we are having the experience that outrages our sense of physical and mental integrity. The sensation of violation that he writes about is not static, but re-emerges as he reminds us through his unremitting images and his intimations of future loss that the story of the body's vulnerability is the story of history. The Nobel laureate Wisława Szymborska's poem, "Torture,"²³ speaks of the human body in a way that may elucidate this direction in Lawrence Joseph's work:

Nothing has changed.
 Except for the courses of rivers,
 the contours of forests, seashores, deserts, and icebergs.
 Among these landscapes the poor soul winds,
 vanishes, returns, approaches, recedes.
 A stranger to itself, evasive,
 at one moment sure, the next unsure of its existence,
 while the body is and is and is
 and has no place to go.²⁴

In Joseph—whose poetry is ordered through complex imagistic and voice overlays rather than through a contemplative singular voice mulling human limitations, as in Szymborska—the perception of the body's vulnerability is as acute as any in contemporary literature. As Szymborska insists, the body "is and is and is / and has no place to go." Or, as Joseph informs us in "Rubaiyat":²⁵

I want you to watch carefully
 what I am saying now—are you
 with me? An inch-long piece of steel,
 part of the artillery shell's

casing, sliced through the right eye
 into his brain, severely damaging
 the optic nerve of his left eye,
 spraying bone splinters

into the brain, making him quick to lose
 his temper, so acutely sensitive to pain

23. WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA, *Torture*, in *MIRACLE FAIR* 46 (Joanna Trzeciak trans., 2001).

24. *Id.* at 47.

25. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Rubaiyat*, in *INTO IT*, *supra* note 5, at 41.

the skin on his face hurts
when wind blows against it . . .²⁶

The predecessor who is unmistakably most “unyieldingly present” for Joseph is Wallace Stevens. Indeed, seldom has one poet made a more transparent homage to another as fully as Joseph does in regard to his modernist predecessor and fellow lawyer, particularly in reference to “Of Modern Poetry,”²⁷ in which Stevens famously argues that poetry

. . . has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice.²⁸

“Of Modern Poetry” is echoed, challenged, and transformed by Joseph into a new key, as if he is intent on charting the urgency of the project that presses upon any serious poet: remaking our narrative and descriptive resources to take into account the particularities of our present situation and the legacies of history. In writing of poetry in previous centuries, Stevens tells us “the scene was set; it repeated what / Was in the script.”²⁹ In a play on that line, Joseph tells us “reality changes the script”³⁰ and, in another poem, “And so on, the script proceeded.”³¹ In “The Bronze-Green Gold Green Foreground”³² his revision of Stevens becomes “The code changed again.”³³ With his focus on “a morality of seeing, / laying it on,”³⁴ Joseph enacts a sharpening of sensibility that opposes our muted understanding of violence. In a famous phrase, Wallace Stevens told us that he writes a poetry of places not of people, whereas in Joseph we are more likely to find that his places are intensely peopled. Yet Joseph refuses to shed the human need for beauty as it is experienced in places. His is not a misreading of his predecessor, in Harold Bloom’s sense, but a reformation: tradition rotated with a difference.

26. *Id.* at 44–45.

27. WALLACE STEVENS, *Of Modern Poetry*, in PARTS OF A WORLD (1923), reprinted in WALLACE STEVENS: COLLECTED POETRY AND PROSE, at 218 (Frank Kermode & Joan Richardson eds., 1997).

28. *Id.* at 218–19.

29. *Id.* at 218.

30. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Material Facts*, reprinted in CODES, PRECEPTS, BIASES, AND TABOOS: POEMS 1973–1993, *supra* note 4, at 128, 129.

31. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *What Do You Mean, What?*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 20, 21.

32. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *The Bronze-Green Gold-Green Foreground*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 9.

33. *Id.* at 9.

34. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Before Our Eyes*, reprinted in CODES, PRECEPTS, BIASES, AND TABOOS: POEMS 1973–1993, *supra* note 4, at 125, 125.

Elaine Scarry has written about a conception that Joseph puts into circulation next to violence: beauty. Scarry argues that beauty and justice are interrelated and that an awareness of beauty can spur an urge toward generative activity. As Scarry notes, “Beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people.”³⁵ But I would argue that so too, in Scarry’s own language, can violence “bring copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people.” Along with the embedding of narratives of violence in many of Joseph’s poems appear moments of heightened attention to beauty, what we might call a sudden movement toward an aesthetic that defies the seductions of violence. This movement happens so often in his poems that we may grow accustomed to looking for it: the swift glimpse of a fully realized moment. “[T]he shock of beauty / is what turns the game around.”³⁶ Moments of uplift are charged as refreshment, not as an escape but as a recognition of another lived reality that requires attention: “beauty, the answer, if you must know . . .”³⁷ The particulars that animate this conception may recur as simple emblems: “[T]he sun ablaze on the harbor” in “In It, Into It, Inside It, Down In,”³⁸ or “[w]hole lots of amplified light” in “When One is Feeling One’s Way.”³⁹ Lilacs, bridges, poplars, the sea, roses, the moon, a garden, the harbor, a marriage—the reverberant images of lyric poetry—are called up. Beauty in these poems moves us out of devastation, even if we are soon again immersed in a contemporary reality that Wole Soyinka has described aptly: “Constantly immersed in the cumulative denigration of human sensibilities, only to have one’s most pessimistic predilections topped again and again by new acts—or revelations—of the limitless depth to which the human mind can sink in its negative designs . . .”⁴⁰

Which bring us to the question—suspended until now throughout this discussion—of genre, and of Joseph’s choice to remake narrative possibilities within poetry as his primary genre of choice. Some writers, perhaps most writers, simply have relatively little choice of genre. The fiction writer or poet may write the occasional essay but is likely to experience some sense of inhibition while writing outside his or her primary imaginative form. As A. Alvarez points out, “The art of poetry

35. ELAINE SCARRY, ON BEAUTY AND BEING JUST 3 (1999).

36. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Metamorphoses (After Ovid)*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 46, 51.

37. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *In It, Into It, Inside It, Down In*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 3, 4.

38. *Id.* at 4.

39. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *When One is Feeling One’s Way*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 6, 7.

40. WOLE SOYINKA, CLIMATE OF FEAR: THE QUEST FOR DIGNITY IN A DEHUMANIZED WORLD xxi (2005).

is altogether different from that of prose, just as writing fiction is different from writing nonfiction, and literary criticism is different from them all.”⁴¹ In Joseph we have a writer adept at multiple genres: poetry and fiction and creative non-fiction, as well as the most challenging legal rhetoric. Why a writer gifted with linguistic talents in multiple forms chooses poetry as his primary imaginative genre may get at the heart of the challenges that the genre and our contemporary situation pose: How can we live in the midst of a reality that outpaces our ability to comprehend it? How can the ancient springs of poetry—rhythmic language shaped to be remembered, language that often assumes nature as emblem—survive in a culture that disintegrates memory and nature, a culture in which there is too much to remember and a surplus of unnatural stimuli that clamors for our attention, but that may not be worth remembering? And why choose poetry which baffles certain narrative impulses and remains under-read and under-valued as a genre, if we judge value by attention given within a culture?

Joseph’s poetry spans a literary period, still ongoing, when some of the more vital poetics appear suspicious of narrative, define themselves against simple cause and effect as mechanisms for understanding, and dedicate themselves to an ongoing project to deflect unitary consciousness. But what Joseph’s poetic narratives accomplish with their focus on accruals of sensory perspectives is a realization and dramatization of both what it means to live in a particular time and place and simultaneously to find one’s consciousness stretched by a developed awareness that the self is not splintered so much as multiplied over time and space. In its urban milieu, Joseph’s poetry gives us a lyric voice pulled by the gravity of living simultaneously and fervently on several spatial and temporal planes: “Then what, and then again what, unfolded[.]”⁴² He suggests that what is real is not only an actual event but our imagining of it, “feeling one’s way”⁴³ as time works in two directions: “Time flows, is flowing, forward and back.”⁴⁴

As such, poetry as his primary genre makes palpable the psychic pressure of heightened contemporary experience, and presents in an imagistically associative manner the impression of living at a rate and a speed that other genres may not supply. Poetry demands we put sustained pressure on our imaginative and linguistic resources, that we call up mental images of a sometimes incredible density, that we actively attend to both the shapes of mayhem and the shapes of

41. A. ALVAREZ, *THE WRITER’S VOICE* 13 (2005).

42. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *In a Mood*, in *INTO IT*, *supra* note 5, at 33, 34.

43. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *When One is Feeling One’s Way*, in *INTO IT*, *supra* note 5, at 6, 7.

44. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Rubaiyat*, in *INTO IT*, *supra* note 5, at 41, 43.

controlled order as they are enacted in language. That is, in poetry more than in any other verbal genre, readers bring an expectation that not only do all elements matter down to the comma and the white space at the end of a line and between stanzas, but that each of those elements, no matter how widely spaced, may tug at other elements and condition the whole. The poem is an echo chamber where we listen to the reverberations that otherwise dissolve into the white noise of anxiety. For all the innovations that we speak of in poems, the genre remains the one where space and time are most acutely accented and where expectations of concentrated attention are most sought. Through a narration of layered time, Joseph's poems mimic both the quick order changes that bedevil us in our present landscape and the way certain facts cannot be transformed. He holds the potential to address what Soyinka calls "the shrinking ethical space that is still left for humanity."⁴⁵ His poetry is squarely within his historical period, but it interrupts any temptation to allow complexities of history simply to wash over us. Instead, he draws us into a deeper awareness of our need to be peculiarly active participants as we read, burrowing into language, coming closer to inhabiting words as sources of meaning that open up memory and imagination in ways that are culturally conditioned and yet hold the possibility of being intensely individual. He manages, then, to pull off two feats at once: to register the speed, variety, and many-layered aspects of lived experience, and to contain those densities within a medium that is unrepentant about the linguistic demands it places upon anyone who wants to contend with it. At points, the experience of reading his poetry is like climbing down stairs to open a door, whereupon we climb down further and find another door, and then another. As the title of his most recent collection suggests, we are entering *into* it, summoning reserves of ingenuity to question how we use language and what the stories we make are ultimately for.

In turn, Joseph uses his primary genre to expose and roughen the grain of one of the key assumptions often attached to poetry: that poetry tends toward an endless play of transformations through the vehicle of metaphor. As Joseph insists, our own physical vulnerability tells us that we continually face limitations upon our willingness to change or be changed. In his epigraph from *The Metamorphoses* Joseph invokes Ovid's summons "... give me the voice / To tell the shifting story . . ."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Joseph's poems express an uneasiness about transformative shifts, an uneasiness that is palpable even in his

45. See SOYINKA, *supra* note 40, at xv.

46. JOSEPH, *supra* note 5, at unnumbered dedication page (quoting Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*).

references to money, that ever-vexing vehicle of transformation. He refers to “law which ‘distributes / money to compensate flesh.’”⁴⁷ In “I Pay the Price”⁴⁸ he writes “I live in words and off my flesh / in order to pay the price.”⁴⁹ Famously, Wallace Stevens said, “Money is a kind of poetry.” But what happens in Joseph’s poetry is a realization that some things cannot be changed into other things, that some events resist all our attempts at metamorphoses: wounding and death create undeniable, unalterable facts that are not subject to transformation. Often in these poems his speakers make uneasy accommodations with the urge toward transformation because transformation remains so unfailingly suspect: “What isn’t separated, what isn’t / scribbled, what will not be metamorphosed, // reduced, occurring, it will be said, / unyieldingly fixed, unyieldingly present . . .”⁵⁰

Of course we can argue that poetry is simply not the most efficient way to tell a story, if we think of a story as a sequence of events in which the beginning, middle, and end can be easily navigated. In Joseph’s poetry each story or sliver of story is lodged among multiple stories and multiple interpretations and remains suspended, as stories refract upon stories: “Simultaneity requires the use of a topological / logic. Time compressed—interactively escalated / to maximum speed.”⁵¹ These poems are not fragments shored against our ruins, but fragments whirling in ruins, and yet seemingly indestructible in terms of the way the mind is imprinted with the felt pressure of psychic trauma. The rich interior world of associative correspondences is violated by an external world; the poem becomes an active assemblage in which we can trace the effects of that violation. Giorgio Agamben in *The End of the Poem* argues that poetry “tenaciously lingers and sustains itself in the tension and difference between sound and sense . . .”⁵² We can reverse that supposition and argue that poetry inserts itself in the realm between silence and non-sense. Joseph’s poems are tense with the possibility that an affront to sense and meaning, in the form of ultimately senseless violence, may intrude at any moment. Emily Dickinson’s ability to “dwell in Possibility” takes on a new cast; Joseph

47. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Sand Nigger*, reprinted in CODES, PRECEPTS, BIASES, AND TABOOS: POEMS 1973–1993, *supra* note 4, at 90, 91–92.

48. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *I Pay the Price*, reprinted in CODES, PRECEPTS, BIASES, AND TABOOS: POEMS 1973–1993, *supra* note 4, at 105.

49. *Id.* at 107.

50. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Unyieldingly Present*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 35, 37.

51. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *The Pattern-Parallel Map or Graph*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 13, 13–14.

52. GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *THE END OF THE POEM: STUDIES IN POETICS* 112 (Daniel Heller-Roazen trans., Stanford University Press 1999) (1996).

suggests we are dwelling in possibilities of endless violence.

In “Working Rules for *Lawyerland*” Joseph begins his list with Rilke, who writes “Don’t be confused by surfaces; in the depths everything becomes law.”⁵³ He follows quickly with Gertrude Stein in two rules, both of which concern narration, writing of Stein’s *Wars I Have Seen*: “Stories within stories within stories within A means by which to broaden and deepen (and concentrate) time and space (including the temporal and spatial dimensions of language).”⁵⁴ Surely the aesthetic strategy that he locates in Stein seems to be his project in both his poetry and in his genre-defying book *Lawyerland*, and even in his notations pairing Rilke and Stein, suggesting the breadth of his own interests and the compression of his influences. Rilke’s attachment to spiritual depths and intimations of unseen presences is cross-referenced with the hardy flat surfaces and linguistic play of Stein. In the same piece, Joseph cites Frederic Jameson’s argument about the role of doctors as literary characters in modernism, asking that the reader substitute the word *lawyers* when Jameson cites doctors as professionals who have the ability and the responsibility “to penetrate . . . sealed and disparate social spaces, to visit the rich as well as the unemployed, to listen to the voices of workers as well as those of bureaucrats and politicians”⁵⁵ This focus on both entering into and “mapping . . . social space”⁵⁶—of both propulsion through boundaries and of creating blueprints of boundaries—reflects Joseph’s extraordinary ambition to be immersed within a situation and to be able, at the same time, to find patterns, to discern the contours within repetitions, and to present the poem as the appropriate focusing agent for that attempt.

An account of a science experiment may prove at least suggestive in this context. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, David P. Barash refers to studies in which a rat in an electrified cage is shocked repeatedly.⁵⁷ Eventually, the rat succumbs passively to its miserable situation. As Barash tells us, “When autopsied, the animal will be found to have oversized adrenal glands and, frequently, stomach ulcers, both indicating serious stress.”⁵⁸ What is surprising about the experiment, as Barash describes it, is what happens if the rat has access to a stick. If the rat gnaws on a stick, an autopsy of the rat will show a smaller number of ulcers and less enlarged adrenal glands than those in the autopsy of the

53. Lawrence Joseph, *Working Rules for Lawyerland*, 101 COLUM. L. REV. 1793, 1793 (2001).

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.* at 1794.

56. *Id.*

57. David P. Barash, *The Targets of Aggression*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC., Oct. 5, 2007, at 6.

58. *Id.*

rat denied the stick. In the final stage of this gruesome experiment, two rats share the electrified cage. When shocked, they do not grow apathetic but fight each other.⁵⁹ Barash tells us, “[A]t autopsy, their adrenal glands are normal, and, moreover, even though they have experienced numerous shocks, they have no ulcers.”⁶⁰ His conclusion? “When animals respond to stress and pain by redirecting their aggression outside themselves, whether biting a stick or, better yet, another individual, it appears that they are protecting themselves from stress.”⁶¹ As Barash argues, “When an individual suffers pain, he most often responds by passing it on to someone else. When possible, that ‘someone else’ is the perpetrator, the original source of the pain. But if this cannot be achieved, then others are liable to be victimized, regardless of innocence.”⁶² That is, we pass on pain to others for reasons that are at least partly biological. If the experiment can be applied to humans, it suggests that our biology may urge us to take our problems out on others—that such an urge runs rampant unless it is channeled; that punishing wrong-doing is a biological need and difficult to control. We tend to overcompensate. We may be prone to “redirect[ing] aggression,” finding scapegoats and assigning guilt even to the innocent. In what appears to be a related insight, Theodore Ziolkowski points out that the biblical injunction “an eye for an eye” was originally meant to curb excessive violence by insisting that only equivalent violence be enacted;⁶³ break my arm and I break your arm, but I do not wipe out your entire family. It seems to me that Joseph’s poems are, in some ways, about refusing to engage in a circuit of redirected aggression. His poems implicitly ask us to rise to an occasion that demands resistance to passing on violence by learning to use our narratives in a more multi-dimensional way than do those narratives that rise before us in unbroken succession through our media. If telling stories is one of our ways “to chew on a stick,” the more stressful our reality, the more we may need stories that allow us to increase our awareness of whatever electrified cage we happen to be in.

I began this discussion with references to jokes and noted how Lawrence Joseph’s poetry shares, like much good poetry, something of a good joke’s extreme concision, charged subtext, and physical impact. But in effect, Joseph’s poetry ultimately creates the inverse of the joke. Since Freud we have tended to think of the function of jokes as a release

59. *Id.*

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.*

62. *Id.*

63. See ZIOLKOWSKI, *supra* note 10, at 12–13.

of psychic pressure. That is what laughter is for: physical release of an event that occurs in the mind. But the pressure in Joseph's poems, even when violence is paired with painterly aesthetic illumination, is not released or dispersed but contained and in circulation, awaiting response and recognition. Under some circumstances, "Poetry's not what's made impossible / . . . —laughter is,"⁶⁴ he tells us. The contemporary pressures, the conflicting perspectives that he negotiates, are addressed in "transcriptions of the inexpressible . . ."⁶⁵ Poetry aspires toward the inexpressible and yet intimates our yearning to render in language the experience of our lives in more capacious form. We do not need anyone to do our worrying for us, but we do need new imaginings that are deeper than anxiety. It is in those new imaginings that we may find that Lawrence Joseph's poetry attains its greatest urgency.

64. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *Rubaiyat*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 41, 42–43.

65. LAWRENCE JOSEPH, *I Note in a Notebook*, in INTO IT, *supra* note 5, at 10, 10.