

LAWRENCE JOSEPH

In It, Into It, Inside It, Down In

How far to go?—I have to, I know,
I promised. But how? How, and when?

And where? It was cold. The sky,
blue, almost burst, leaves burnished

yellow. Nearing Liberty, Liberty
and Church streets. So it happened

in early November. Which is to say
a story took place. Once again

new lines, new colors. One scene
and then another. Characters talking

to one another. It was she who
opened the conversation. “A wild rose,

and grapes on vines along the ground,
a butterfly on the green palmetto,

plums the size of walnuts, gray
and vermilion”—she sat up straighter,

lips pressed together, looking me
square in the eyes—“and why, you tell me why,

in this time of so many claims to morality,
the weight of violence

is unparalleled in the history
of the species . . .” What needs to be said—

why not say it? “Who dares to learn
what concerns him intimately,”

is how he says it in his book. Then the mind
runs through the spaces left behind, crossing

over to a different place. It certainly was
a well-dressed crowd. Here, again, the General,

the Attorney General, a beeper in one hand,
a crucifix in the other; here, again,

language, a language—a style, a groove, a fate.
On the esplanade, Battery Park, a newspaper,

old, caught in a gust, a child,
lost, crying—the pain was ours, I know it now;

beauty, the answer, if you must know—
the sun ablaze on the harbor. Hearing

a sentence phrased in . . . a tenor? countertenor? . . .
an error of nature, after all—made

of thought and of sound, of feelings seen—
in it, into it, inside it, down in.

Inclined To Speak

I saw that. One woman, her personality
and appearance described as lovely,
while performing her predawn prayers,
watched the attackers shoot to death her husband,
her seven-year-old son, three of her brothers,
as they grabbed her four-year-old son from her arms
and cut his throat, taking her and her two sisters
away on horses and raping them. Of course it's genocide.
And, yes, it brings to mind I am constantly aware of,
in making the poem, Brecht's point, to write about trees—
implicitly, too, to write about pleasure—
in times of killing like these is a crime;
and Paul Celan's response, that for Brecht a leaf
is a leaf without a tree, that what kinds of times
are these when a conversation—Celan believed a poem
is a conversation—what kinds of times are these
when a poem is a crime because it includes
what must be made explicit.

What is seen, heard, and imagined
at the same time—that truth. A sort of relationship
is established between our attention
to what is furthest from us
and what deepest in us. The immense enlargement
of our perspectives is confronted
by a reduction in our powers of action, which reduces
a voice to an inner voice inclined to speak only
to those closest to us . . .

On That Side

April and May. There, very near,
dimensions imploded—
the point, the line, the surface.
The arrangement of power, the immanence
of the pressure. “What,”
he said with a laugh, “you think I’m exaggerating?”

I can’t say that I’ve internalized it all yet.
I’m over on the other side—
Green Dolphin Street, the bar and café, that is,
a table in back, in the garden, engaged
in an act of asceticism.
A memory—so vivid, I close my eyes.

Why Not Say What Happens?

I

Of icons. Of divination. Of Gods. Repetitions
without end. I have it in my notes,
a translation from the Latin, a commentary
on the Book of Revelation—"the greater
the concentration of power on earth,
the more truth is stripped of its power,
the holiest innocent, in eternity,
is 'as though slain . . .'"
It has nothing to do with the apocalyptic.
The seven-headed beast from the sea,
the two-horned beast from the earth, have always-
I know, I've studied it—been with us.
Me? I'm only an accessory to particular images.

II

According to the translation of the police transcript,
the sheikh—the arrested head
of the cell mockingly said—in a plot
involving a chemical attack,
needs, simply,
two or three young men with brains and training
with nothing to gain or lose,
not an army.
It doesn't take much these days to be a prophet.
Do you know how much poison can be put
in a ten-liter barrel?
You pour it and spread it, then you leave.
The web is, prosecutors believe,
so intricate, the detainee,
they think, may also be a member
of cells in Barcelona and Frankfurt.

III

Yet another latest version of another
ancient practice—mercenaries, as they were once known,
are thriving, only this time
they're called "private military contractors."
During the last few years their employees
have been sent to Bosnia, Nigeria, Colombia, and, of course,
most recently, Iraq. No one knows

how extensive the industry is, but some military experts estimate a market of tens of billions of dollars.

IV

Autumn turned to winter and the site began to clear. The limits of my language are the limits of my world, said Wittgenstein. The realization—the state of the physical world depends on shifts in the delusional thinking of very small groups. One of Garfinkle’s patients tripped over a severed foot while evacuating the Stock Exchange. Several others saw the first plane pass right next to the almost floor-length windows of their conference room. “When I’m not working, the last thing I want to do is talk about it,” said one policeman, who, like many of the city’s uniformed officers, is still working a schedule of twelve hours on, twelve hours off . . . Shoes, books, wallets, jewelry, watches, some of them still keeping time . . . The congressman says he can’t say for sure there isn’t a suitcase with a nuclear bomb floating around out there. Everything immense and out of context. The large item in the mud, one of the motors that powered the Towers’ elevators. “It’s intense”—says Lieutenant Bovine—“no photographs! This is a crime scene!” What happened was one floor fell on top of another, as many as ten floors compressed into a foot of space. What fell was mostly metal . . . The cement vaporized . . . *The Night Watch* was what the laid-out scene looked like. The fences around the wreckage covered with T-shirts, teddy bears, and memorial banners signed by thousands of visitors; tourists snap pictures, and, subject to the way the wind is blowing, the air is tinged with an acrid smoke . . . “Lost/Missing Family 1-866-856-4167 or 1-212-741-4626 . . .” A Web Exclusive, the poet will speak about poetry and grief . . . The smells of burning wiring, dankness from the tunnels, the sharp and sweet cherrylike smell of death. At eight-ten on Friday

two more bodies are found in a stairwell
of the South Tower. Work, again, stops,
and the ironworkers, who have been cutting
steel beams, come out from the hole. The work
goes on until well past midnight. More debris
is removed, another body recovered. A group
of ironworkers stands on a gnarled beam,
one end of which juts over the pit
like a gangplank. Three 35-millimeter movie cameras
are placed on top of nearby buildings, each programmed
to take a picture every five minutes, day and night.
A bugler slips onto the site and plays "Taps."

V

That period of ten or eleven years—
concerning it I can express myself briefly.
At some point, in collective time, electronic space
turned into time. The miraculous
multiplication of loaves was restricted to the rentiers.
A grappa in a black, pyramid-shaped bottle
was taken cognizance of,
and, with no resistance,
for the most part, no guarantees
were made for the slow, the meek, or the poor of spirit,
who, for reasons unexplained,
allowed themselves to disappear
into the long, red evenings, nights early gray-blues.

VI

Screaming—those who could
sprinting—south toward
Battery Park, the dark cloud
funneling slowly—
there are two things you should know
about this cloud—
one, it isn't only ash and soot.
but metal, glass, concrete, and flesh,
and, two, soon
any one of these pieces
of metal, glass, or concrete
might go through you.
As she turns to run, a woman's bag
comes off her shoulder,

bright silver compact discs sent
spinning along the ground, a man,
older, to the right,
is tripping,
falls against the pavement,
glasses flying
off his face.

VII

Have I mentioned my grandmother,
my father's mother, who died long ago
but who visits me in dreams?
It's to her, mostly, I owe
the feeling that, in cases of need,
those transfigured in eternal love help us
certainly with eternal,
and, perhaps, also, with temporal gifts;
that, in eternal love, all is gratis—
all that comes from eternal love
is gratis.

VIII

My father?—my father was a worker. I can still hear him
getting up in the morning to go to work.
Sadness, too, has to be learned,
and it took my father time to learn it,
but he did, though when he did
his tears were never chronic.
As for the economies on which my parents' lives depended,
they won't be found
in any book.

IX

It's the details that dream out
the plot. Rearrange the lies, the conceits,
the crimes, the exploitation
of needs and desires,
and it's still there, the whole system's
nervous system—inside it,
at times, a dreamer at work, right now
its me. The air not yet too cold with winter,
at a sidewalk table at the Cornelia Street Café—
a dream, it's a dream, the dream

of a dream song, the dream of a dream,
a glass of Sancerre on the table, re-visioning,
in a purple mist, a tugboat, practical and hard,
as it approaches a freighter,
black, with the red-lettered name BYZANTIUM.

X

Capital? Careful! Capital capitalizes,
assimilates, makes
its own substance, revitalizing
its being, a vast metabolism absorbing even
the most ancient exchanges, running away,
as the cyberneticians put it,
performing, as it does, its own
anthropomorphosis, its triumph
the triumph of mediation—
and, let's not forget,
it organizes, capital organizes, capital is
“an organizing,”
organizing
social forms.

XI

Pink above the Hudson
against the shadows lingering still,
the sky above an even blue and changing
to a pale gray and rose.
A coat of snow in the park on Tenth Avenue,
clumps of grass sticking
out of it, late afternoon, in Druids,
Sam Cooke on the jukebox, lines
from an obscure tune from the box set,
“even my voice belongs to you,
I use my voice to sing, to sing, to sing to you . . .”
The lives of the two or three others who pass through
as close to you as the weather.
Walking back, the dotted lines
of the lights on the Bridge, the sun
blotted out by a burst of vermilion.

XII

I remember it—the gold burnt into gold,
the gold on gold and on white and yellow,

an incandescence condensing the sunlight,
outburning the sunlight, the factory
molten, the sun behind it, in it, thin,
gold, pig iron, a spray of fire, flywheels
revolving through the floor, rims almost
reaching the roof, enormous engines
throwing great pounding cylindrical arms
back and forth, as if the machines
are playing a game, trying to see how much
momentum can be withstood before one
or the other gives way. I remember—down Sixth
to Downing, to Varick, down Varick, downtown.
A cat is in the rubbish in the street. The sun
over Jersey. The gap at the end of West Street,
the sun on the clock tower. The melancholy
induced by the pressure of time, the wavering
ambitions, failed ideas, time wasted.
The unexpected breeze, warm, the sense
of the river. The sky blue, dark blue
yet pure in color, not blackened
or tarnished, above the low, old
buildings, like a painting of something
solid rather than the solid thing itself,
a high and low composition. But what
light there is in that landscape . . .

That Too

A long walk up West Street along the piers.
The sky—right now the sun,
the clouds, a few seconds of light yellow.

The deepest being being a longing
to satisfy the longing for a solitude of two.

Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation," that too.

Surely the blacks and golds
are the depth of a late October afternoon. Surely
the blues and greens fired by crimson are the sea.

The Game Changed

The phantasmic imperium is set in a chronic state of hypnotic fixity. I have absolutely no idea what the fuck you're talking about was his reply, and he wasn't laughing, either, one of the most repellent human beings I've ever known, his presence a gross and slippery lie, a piece of chemically pure evil. A lawyer—although the type's not exclusive to lawyers. A lot of different minds touch, and have touched, the blood money in the dummy account in an offshore bank, washed clean, free to be transferred into a hedge fund or a foreign brokerage account, at least half a trillion ending up in the United States, with more to come. I believe I told you I'm a lawyer. Which has had little or no effect on a certain respect I have for occurrences that suggest laws of necessity. I too am thinking of it as a journey—the journey with conversations otherwise known as the *Divina Commedia* is how Osip Mandelstam characterized Dante's poem. Lebanon? I hear the Maronite Patriarch dares the Syrians to kill him, no word from my grandfather's side of the family in the Shouf. "There are circles here"—to quote the professor of international relations and anthropology—"Vietnam, Lebanon, and Iraq . . . Hanoi, Beirut, and Baghdad." The beggar in Rome is the beggar in Istanbul, the blind beggar is playing saxophone, his legs covered with a zebra-striped blanket, the woman beside him holding an aluminum cup, beside them, out of a shopping bag, the eyes of a small, sick dog. I'm no pseudoaesthete. It's a physical thing. An enthusiasm, a transport. The melancholy is ancient. The intent is to make a large, serious portrait of my time. The sun on the market near Bowling Green, something red, something purple, bunches of roses and lilacs. A local issue for those of us in the neighborhood.

Not to know what it is you're breathing
in a week when Black Hawk helicopters resume
patrolling the harbor. Two young men
blow themselves up attaching explosives
on the back of a cat. An insurgency:
commandos are employed, capital is manipulated
to secure the oil of the Asian Republics.
I was walking in the Forties when I saw it—
a billboard with a background of brilliant
blue sky, with writing on it in soft-edged,
irregularly spaced, airy-white letters
already drifting off into the air, as if they'd
been sky-written—"The World Really Does
Revolve Around You." The taxi driver rushes
to reach his family before the camp is closed—
"There is no way I will leave, there is no way—
they will have to kill us, and, even if
they kill every one of us, we won't leave." Sweat
dripping from her brow, she picks up the shattered,
charred bones. She works for the Commission
on Missing Persons. "First they kill them,"
she says, "then they burn them, then they cover them
with dead babies . . ." Neither impenetrable opacity
nor absolute transparency. I know what I'm after.
The entire poem is finished in my head. No,
I mean the entire poem. The color, the graphic
parts, the placement of solid bodies in space,
gradations of light and dark, the arrangements
of pictorial elements on a single plane
without a loss of depth . . . This habit of wishing—
as if one's mother and father lay in one's heart,
and wished as they had always wished—that voice,
one of the great voices, worth listening to.
A continuity in which everything is transition.
To repeat it because it's worth repeating. Immanence—
an immanence and a happiness. Yes, exquisite—
an exquisite dream. The mind on fire
possessed by what is desired—the game changed.

Once Again

The esplanade. High summer.
The sea is beyond

the sunset's light—
the shapes amassed, the sky

a current carrying us along,
heavy with that green and that black.

Fate's precise wheel revolving,
force's writhing wheel—

the stealing, the killing, accomplished
by new types of half-monsters—

it's what I said—
the poem is the dream, a dream technique;

the primary soul-substance
on which our attention is fixed—

supernal, metaphysical—in other words,
a representation,

as we have seen,
of mythical origins.

Something felt, something needed—
as much as we needed;

a woman, a man,
love's characters, the myth

their own. We are agreed.
The moon is low, its silent flame

across the garden of roses, almost level
with the harbor. We place our hands

on the silence
and, once again, repeat the vow.