

LAWRENCE JOSEPH

Curriculum Vitae

I might have been born in Beirut,
not Detroit, with my right name.
Grandpa taught me to love to eat.
I am not Orthodox, or Sunni,
Shiite, or Druse. Baptized
in the one true Church, I too
was weaned on Saint Augustine.
Eisenhower never dreamed I wore
corrective shoes. Ford Motor Co.
never cared I'd never forgive
Highland Park, River Rouge, Hamtramck.
I memorized the Baltimore Catechism.
I collected holy cards, prayed
to a litany of saints to intercede
on behalf of my father who slept
through the sermon at 7 o'clock Mass.
He worked two jobs, believed
himself a failure. My brother
believed himself, my sister denied.
In the fifth grade Sister Victorine,
astonished, listened to me recite
from the Book of Jeremiah.
My voice changed, I wanted women.
The Jesuit whose yellow fingers
cracked with the stink of Camels
promised me eternal punishment.
How strange I was, with impure thoughts,
brown skin, obsessions,
You could tell by the way I walked
I possessed a lot of soul,
you could tell by the way I talked
I didn't know when to stop.
After I witnessed stabbings
outside the gym, after the game,
I witnessed fire in the streets

My head set on fire in Cambridge,
England, in the Whim Café.
After I applied Substance and Procedure
and Statements of Facts
my head was heavy, was earth.
Now years have passed since I came
to the city of great fame.
The same sun glows gray on two new rivers.
Tears I want do not come.
I remain many different people
whose families populate half Detroit;
I hate the racket of the machines,
the oven's heat, curse
bossmen behind their backs.
I hear the inmates' collective murmur
in the jail on Beaubien Street.
I hear myself say, "What explains
the Bank of Lebanon's liquidity?"
Think, "I too will declare
a doctrine upon whom the loss
of language must fall regardless
whether Wallace Stevens
understood senior indebtedness
in Greenwich Village in 1906."
One woman hears me in my sleep
plead the confusions of my dream.
I frequent the Café Dante, earn
my memories, repay my moods.
I am as good as my heart.
I am as good as the unemployed
who wait in long lines for money.

This is How It Happens

This is now it happens, Paine
—says he's related in some way to Tom—

says, touching the moisture
on the side of his whiskey and ice.

The dollar declines, decreased
foreign investment. Consequently,

the deficit must be paid for
solely by Americans, crunching

the financial markets into inflation.
Interest rates exploding

while taxes rise! Expansion
never before so debt-ridden!

Expectations never so supreme.
Never have the happy been so well liked . . .

The day after Orpheus dies—
shot point-blank with a shotgun

by his father who, later questioned
whether he loved his son,

testified he couldn't say he disliked him—
the announcement of the latest fashion:

mink coats for men (Orpheus wore a tuxedo
at his press conference in Amsterdam

when, without hesitation,
he replied that his mission was to tell

about the upcoming holocaust
to whoever possessed the consciousness

to believe). And what about
that afternoon that August? Do you remember?

You worked in one room, through book
after book; two rooms away

she stretched a new canvas, the southern
light hot and almost red across her face

—who more alone, or afraid?
whose desires or volitions

less inexorable to each other's?
And what about your first brush

with fame? Serving Mass
for Father Coughlin in his Shrine

years after he'd been silenced by the Pope
—Coughlin! eloquently

ranting on the nature of money,
the mercy of Christ Militant,

the Christian Corporate State,
the Satan of the Jewish question

not in the central bank of Berlin;
no one cared what you thought about him,

no one cares now. Do you see?
Your mother, silent, her life

a series of disappointments,
Do you remember the first time

you saw a man your own age collapse
on the street from hunger and weakness?

Let's just say now it was
intentional when your hand brushed

against her blouse—the subtle knowledge of
who touches whom with which meanings.

Let's say the darkening of your voice
combined with an ever-increasing

refined sense of phrasing creates
religious intensity. And who could change

your purpose? Speaking a different tongue
in the Park where the two rivers

merge, or else by the oak benches
in some Court of Equity, your gaze

almost balanced. From the Heights,
through the Bridge's rows of iron

woven and girded in a silhouetted loom,
a woman might be seen closing her eyes

to think, or perhaps, later, to cry;
a woman, exhausted and sorrowful, might know

she must put on her face and forget
what just went through her mind.

I've Already Said More Than I Should

All that I know is that I know
my age from a face that was young

when I was, and is young no longer,
and the smell of salt from the East River

streaked black by black broken clouds
isn't mine to choose. When,

in the Hall of Oceanic Life, the waiter
brings medallions of veal, morels

and wild rice pilaf from a serving plate
onto my plate, 410 glasses

await 1979 Chateau Chasse-Spleen,
and in the past my grandma

walks with two oak canes
beneath the street's great silver maples

to the house I lived in my first year.
When, in this morning's paper,

the renowned poet and critic
professor is quoted decrying

the demise of English forms,
I write Esquire after my name.

This isn't an apology. I read
Fadi is too young to read, but

the message seems to have gotten through:
he vows he will kill who killed

his father and crush the bones.
This isn't a credo or a confession.

I make favors, complain, wear
a white shirt and blue shirt. I'm tired.

I see controversy continues whether
the current situation is civil

commotion or war. "Fifty thousand
to 100,000 killed, a wracked

government, an army in barracks,
howitzers, tanks!" the president

of the insurance association's
property division lashes out in reply.

It isn't for nothing that I deny
interior theological dialogue, doubt

the existence of the new aeon,
don't sleep past dawn anymore.

In the offices of the great firm
whose name might matter

I won't reveal what I abhor,
or my desire, if I can't be rich,

to be, instead, moral or famous.
In the Desbrosses Street café

I order my third cappuccino al cognac,
light another cigarette,

confide to whoever listens
I've already said more than I should.

An Awful Lot Was Happening

When you come down to particulars everything's more complicated.
Fervent gestures in the South U restaurant, even the Greeks
behind the counter listen. Burned draft cards,
lamb's blood poured over files at the downtown draft board
—acts of resistance, moral values begun.

Saint Augustine in *De Trinitate* didn't see memory structured
by public events. A great moment in my life—not purple clouds
which excited my longings in Nichols Arboretum;
instead, the rumor cancer spread through Lyndon Johnson's brain.
Saint Augustine in his *Enchiridion ad Laruentium* didn't see

her dress and bra across the only chair in my small room
at One Thousand Four Olivia. I couldn't comprehend
whether more words might mean more, my greed, untrained,
not yet certain of its justifications.
And there was war. And from the bluffs above the Huron River

rain of starlight above Ann Arbor's lights, three, four
bell chimes ringing in the Tower. It wasn't Rome.
She dizzied me with excessive desires and thoughts.
What I wanted from all my talk of beauty, she said, was power,
and because of it, she said, I'd cause much suffering.

Although I never bragged misery—maybe once. I was serious.
What was I supposed to do when I heard you could be beaten or worse
in the neighborhood in Detroit between Linwood and Dexter,
the color of your eyes wrong. These are facts.
Professor Fuller's response that no one taught them to be quiet.

Glass from the bank's large plated windows all over the street.
I telephoned—line busy; tried again a few minutes later
—no answer. Where is she?—the verge of tears.
Swinburnian dactyls merely went through my ears. Advocated
concision, spatial range, temporal disposition of simple language.

And didn't the spokesman for the Black Action Movement
also receive a number over three hundred in the draft lottery
and attend graduate school? —I came back.
Three years later, every space turned inside out.
January, noon, beams of light across you shake out. Confused,

whirling joy when you slid off me. I leaned
again to embrace you. Uniform Commercial Code on the table.
On the dresser, a cup of coffee, tulips in a vase.
How to explain to myself how much I love you.
In the Law Quadrangle—my peer. He commanded Marines

in the Anhoa Basin. What did I know—what hookworms are like.
What it's like to shoot a Viet Cong, popped from a hole, in the eye.
A piece of metal in your kidney. It's too easy
to be sheep, he concludes, softly. Or too difficult,
I add, softly. He stares at me and whispers something.

When I answered I intended to maintain freedom my brother was riled.
What, or who, collides in you beside whose body I sleep?
No work at Tool & Die, Motors, Transmission, or Tractor
while the price of American crude rises another dollar.
There really wasn't enough work anywhere. And there was war

God the spirit of holy tongues couldn't release me from,
or from my dumbness. Pressured—delirious—
from too much inductive thinking, I waited for
the image in whose presence the heart opens and opens
and lived to sleep well; of necessity assessed earth's profit

in green and red May twilight. —You came toward me
in your black skirt, white blouse rolled at the sleeves,
Anticipation of your eyes, your loose hair!
My elementary needs—to cohere, to control.
An awful lot was happening and I wanted more.

A Flake of Light Moved

Sunset, for a while
animated, colors appeared
out of nowhere.
We crossed Cornelia Street,
ate dinner in the open air.

“Love,” she observed,
or was it me? I looked around.
Diagonal shadows slid across
one facade after another,
down to the river.

At the table opposite
a deeper blackness.
Something in the contour
of that ebony shape
caught my eye.

A flake of light moved. The great
island intermingling
watery lilac haze. Everyone
watched, as if hypnotized, and more,
much more, than that.

Sentimental Education

So no self-centered anarchism
was of use, too manic the sense
of economy, employment and inflation
curved. Detroit's achromatic
sky for a son of lower
middle class parents like me
glowed. My baptism by fire
in the ancient manner,
at my father's side in a burning city,
nothing sacramental about it.

Everything was—everything fast!
Strips of twilight shadow sheened
transparency and cast
a concisely stylized groove
you could count on
around the door to the dance.
War days conscientiously objected to,
the racial on me all the time,
I knew my place, you might say,
and white-hot ingots

in their molds, same time,
same place blue jays among the marigolds
held their own beside
the most terrible rage, tears wept
for no reason at all except
what might have been,
—my mother's tears, for instance,
She doesn't sleep well
in this climate
composed of pale tints.

But first, back to Henry Ford.
Of the world-famous Highland Park Plant
Otto Moog, the German engineer,
in 1923 proclaimed (Vladimir
Lenin thought so too): "No symphony
compares to the music hammering
through the colossal workplace"
—proof, so to speak,

that speech propels the purposes
by which it's been shaped.

But back, first, to Marvin Gaye,
during an interview in Brussels.
"Remember the Turbans?" he asks,
laughing at the memory. "Cats
sported silk headdresses, sang up
a storm. Had this one hit tune,
'Please Let Me Show You Around Myself,'
the lyrics comparing enclosed
empty space to an open heart
showed me to appreciate language."

Back to, because you want to,
Grand Boulevard, excessive sky
hot and indigo, poured out
onto Hendrie. Inside the store,
Grandpa lifts you into his arms,
small as a single summer Sunday,
a kind of memory trance truly
dark, deep and dark, steel dark,
not as pure, but almost as pure,
as pure unattainable light.

What now? The palette's red.
The beggars wear red in their hair.
Red's contained in the place's currency.
The distance sustained between
subject and object looks red.
History, increasingly ephemeral,
is red. The switches of the music are
red while you mark the beat,
consistent with your education,
without any inner dispute.

Just That

I.

So that's it? Just that? No dream.
A memory, and it happened
a while ago. On Grove Street
a sophora tree slightly swayed,
soul to soul in the plum-misted chill.

II.

You wait and see. That language doesn't work
anymore, its century is over. It turns out
Joseph's Market is as free as the boy with one arm
kissing the tangerine my father gives him.
The entire place—upside down. Only money
and credit move around, part of the future.

III.

So I take another look at my circles,
see them through an aphorism or two.
You do want you do, and do what you must.
There's refuge in observation.
And never expect to make hard cash from a poem.

IV.

Actually, the whole night's slow
snow embodied the autoworks'
dull yellow grasses, embankments,
the sweepings. The noisy chains on
Jefferson Avenue, that steamship whistle
blowing beyond Belle Isle,
heaven, in its way, rained justice.
The city rioting seems to have remained
more than a portion of the brain.
The place continues, a state of flux,
opera neither tragic or comic.

V.

His finger jabbing like a revolver,
a talking head in a high-backed chair,
His Honor suddenly takes his glass eye out,
places it on the bench. The Public
Defender's case, he laughs, is a "mystical

allegation." He is, after all, a lawyer.
He can measure what a word means.
In a prison suit the accused smiles, too,
when a point is made in his favor.

VI.

What time is it? There's a taxi on the way
downtown. Sulphurous yellow's hot sweet
rose, furious counterpoint, gentle anxiousness,
and words reveal it: gold-pink, sun-shot,
wave-cord, green-gathered. Say no more.
It's there. Except to plead you begin
again, as soon as possible, beautiful secrets,
part of my element, out of mind, in the flesh.