A Condition of the Spirit
The Life and Work of Larry Levis
Edited by CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY & ALEXANDER LONG
Eastern Washington University, $27.95 paper, ISBN 0-910055-92-0

In my review of Larry Levis’ Elegy (TBR, Mar/Apr 1998), I stated that his poetry is “monumental, spiritual, and some of the most enduring in contemporary poetry. [The poems gathered here] show his work was moving toward a great dance of the self finally coming to terms with the world.” In a review of The Selected Levis (TBR, July/Aug 2001), which included poems from Elegy, I made statements that a number of people have asked me about since. I wrote, “If I could select one book of poetry from the last year to read and read again, this is it. If I could teach only one poet to younger poets, it would be Larry Levis. ... If I could describe everything poets want their poems to do, regardless of their style and intentions, I would turn to Levis’ poetry, once again, and not say a word.” The publication of A Condition of the Spirit: The Life and Work of Larry Levis explains why I feel this way about this poet. Its release also made me think back to my words about him as I pulled all my Levis books off the shelf in silence. For the hundredth time, I read memorable poems like “Linnets,” “The Double,” “Though His Name Is Infinite, My Father Is Asleep,” and “The Cry,” my favorite Levis poem. I felt as if I was saying hello to an old friend, one of the first contemporary poets I read more than 30 years ago, and one of the writers who was responsible for my becoming a poet in the early seventies. When I saw the contents of A Condition of the Spirit, with its reviews, essays, interviews, and personal remembrances by more than 40 poets, Levis’ work filled the room and this new collection did what every good anthology of this type should do: bring the personal moments described by Levis’ ex-wife, poet Marcia Levine, as well as several poets, including W.D. Snodgrass, Marvin Bell, and Philip Levine. In the long meditation “A Divinity in Its Fraying Fact,” Levis writes, “The only explanation of Eternity is in its refusal to explain.” He follows this by telling poet/critic Walter Bargen, “In a way, I react against, or deny, the idea of singular, personal history. To deny oblivion is to write a poem in which you do remember.”

Editors Christopher Buckley and Alexander Long have done a first-rate job of bringing together people who have not forgotten the impact of Levis’ work on American poetry. Philip Levine recalls Levis as a young student walking into his Fresno office in 1964, marking the beginning of a poetic friendship that surpassed the boundaries of teacher and student. Derek McKnown contributes one of the best analyses of Levis’ late work that I have read, while B.H. Boston recalls student days in California and how poetry takes friends so far from each other. Most of all, A Condition of the Spirit verifies what many poets have known for decades and what The Selected Levis confirms: Larry Levis was one of the greatest poets of the last half of the 20th century, and his sudden death at the age of 49 was a major tragedy for American arts and letters, a canon with a grand history of many of its finest poets dying young. Yet this anthology is a testament to the life-giving elements of poetry, not to the dark forces that continuously threaten to kill it. It is a study in nurturing, exploitation of the self, and the process of gathering multiple voices in stanzas of unforgettable poems. From Levine’s reminiscences to personal moments described by Levis’ ex-wife, poet Marcia Southwick, and student experiences retold by poet Kathy Fagan, this book’s magnetism is born from a life of poetry in which the personal, the artistic, and the spiritual became one before casting power on others. If sadness and regret over his tragic death are stated by several contributors, their grief builds a stage for Levis to express himself as the poet, teacher, and dynamic soul who reawakened the spirit of Whitman and Dickinson in a small series of books that are some of the most intense, beautifully disturbing, and uncompromising I have ever read.

Levis accomplished this with his sheer love for language, choosing a style that illustrates how the most devastating poems often contain the simplest choice of words. In an interview with Michael White, Levis says, “This English, this sweet thing, still quite capable of doing long, difficult and passionate work in any variety of forms, means community.” To Levis, “community” included his beloved Fresno, California, its farm fields and the
traditional of migrant labor; the mysteries of father-and-son relationships; and the fragile creation and destruction of the lone man journeying across a cruel America, his hand in his pants pocket touching his final dollar, the memory of his last love fading faster than the color of the hotel room where they met. This role, this human cycle of loss and redemption, formed the foundation for Levis’ books—titles expertly discussed in A Condition of the Spirit. They are studied not by academics but by poets, colleagues, and friends whose experiences with Levis helped them see how a life of poetry is both rewarding and risky. In a variety of ways, contributors such as David Wojahn, Ed Ocheste, Nancy Eimers, James Harms, and others express their desire to bring poetry closer to their lives by using the model of a peer who raced against time, while time itself, with its eternal rewards meant only for the pure poet, kept dodging his human yearnings as it widened the canvas for his work. By the time of the posthumous publication of Elegy, Levis had evolved from the minimalist of Wrecking Crew to a writer of hypnotic narrative poetry whose American stories were profound and haunting.

A Condition of the Spirit is an essential testament to the life and work of Larry Levis. It needs to be read by anyone who thinks he or she knows what poetry does—not what a poem is, but what poetry itself manifests and how it transforms our lives—that essential, mysterious, and uncontrollable force that brought a young man like Levis into his own, propelling him through a brief and majestic body of work. This book has been published because Larry Levis is still with us. As he says in another interview, “I was just trying to confront my life, and it seemed necessary to try and write about it in order to survive it.” This book proves Larry Levis did survive.

REVIEWER: Ray González is TBR’s poetry editor.