

The Psyche at Risk: On the Work of Poet Larry Levis

An Interview With Editor & Poet Christopher Buckley by Ray González

In the poetry hustle where dozens of new anthologies are published every year, collections that focus on the work of one poet are often the most successful. Almost 10 years after the untimely death of Larry Levis, one of the best collections of this kind has been gathered by editors Christopher Buckley and Alexander Long and published by Eastern Washington University Press. *A Condition of the Spirit* pays homage to Levis, a poet whose influence continues to grow and one who stood out among the generation of poets born right after World War II. Levis' commitment to his art, his way of illuminating our most fundamental human fears and turning them into personal triumph and delivery, and his style that transformed poetic language into an all-embracing music make him one of the most important and widely acclaimed writers of recent decades. *A Condition of the Spirit*, with its essays, interviews, and reviews of Levis' work, is a labor of love but also a landmark of devotion, vision, and sacrifice. This anthology is not a sounding board for admirers but a document that acknowledges what poetry does to the individual and how it shapes a community out of personal responses to the demands of poetry.

Larry Levis was a professor of creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond at the time of his death. He also taught at the University of Utah, the University of Missouri in Columbia, and California State University in Los Angeles. A native of Fresno, California, he attended Fresno State College, Syracuse University, and the University of Iowa, where he received his PhD. His first book, *Wrecking Crew*, won the United States Award from the International Poetry Forum in 1972. For his poetry Levis received three fellowships from the NEA as well as Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships. *The Afterlife*, his second book, won the Lamont Award in 1976. *The Dollmaker's Ghost* was selected by Stanley Kunitz as winner of the Open Competition in the National Poetry Series in 1980. *Winter Stars* was published in 1985 and *The Widening Spell of the Leaves* in 1991. Two posthumous volumes of his work were also published: *Elegy* in 1997 and *The Selected Levis: Poems 1972-1992* in 2001. A book of prose, *Black Freckles*, was published in 1992 and won the Western States Book Award for Short Fiction.

Christopher Buckley has taught at several universities around the country and is currently a professor and chair of the Creative Writing Department at the University of California, Riverside. He is also an associate editor for *Poetry International*. Buckley has received many awards and grants, including four Pushcart Prizes, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Fulbright to Yugoslavia in creative writing. He has written 12 books of poetry as well as written and edited creative nonfiction.

Alexander Long has written poems, essays, and book reviews

that have been published in *Quarterly West*, *Third Coast*, *American Writers*, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, and *5 AM*. He has received two Academy of American Poets Awards from the University of Delaware. Long currently teaches in the English Department at the University of Delaware in Newark.

The Bloomsbury Review: *Why did you choose to do a book about Larry Levis and his work?*

Christopher Buckley: The obvious reasons obtain: his poetic genius, his tragic and early death. Also, he was a gifted and consummate man of letters. First off, his exceptional poetic gift. Poetically he was a genius, and I mean that literally and seriously—"exceptional or transcendent intellectual and creative power" as *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines it. Larry was one of the two or three poets who were the best of their generation, that group of poets, say, 20 years in back of the most senior poets in America. The other one who comes immediately to mind, easily a genius as well, is Bill Matthews, and we lost them both within a few years of each other, just on either side of 50.

Larry's was a singular voice and vision, and it kept developing book by book. His work was admired by so many; his early loss demanded a book or books that would preserve his gift and work for others. Simply by looking at the table of contents in *A Condition of the Spirit: The Life and Work of Larry Levis*, anyone can see how many poets and readers of poetry admired the work and the man. In an interview I conducted with Philip Levine (and there is no one's poetry or poetic intelligence I admire and trust more) for *Quarterly West* in the Winter 96/97 issue, Levine said about Larry: "I think he was easily the best poet of his generation, at times I truly believe he was writing the best poems in the country. Many of the poets I've talked to since his death feel the same way."

Though Larry received book publication prizes, NEAs, and a Guggenheim, he was, by comparison to his talent, "overlooked." Why is he left out of the *Norton Anthology*? Why did Poulin and subsequent editors not include his work in *Contemporary American Poetry*, the Houghton Mifflin anthology? Those two anthologies are arguably the most visible and representative. Poetry politics, networking, political correctness—all of that left no room for a talent as transcendent and important as Larry's. So it was a project crying out to be done; it took no original thinking to see that readers of poetry over the last 30 years would expect and respond to a volume that was a testament to his life and writing. Also, there is a tradition of this type of book in contemporary poetry, largely manifest in the University of Michigan's Under Discussion series, books that collect the critical response to a major poet's work over the years. But with Larry, my coeditor, Alexander Long, and I wanted to do more. In addition to collecting and selecting the

response to his poetry, we solicited other critical essays from poets more than eager to contribute their view of his accomplishment. Yet beyond this, there were many poets who wanted to speak to Larry's *life* as a poet, how he made his work, his influence as a teacher and friend, his influence simply as someone who wrote a singular poetry. And so there is the initial section of memoirs about Larry's life, loving tributes from Philip Levine, Peter Everwine, Stephen Dunn, Marcia Southwick, and others. The middle section of the book is composed of Larry's essays on poetry, those not already contained in the Michigan Book, *The Gazer Within*. Larry was also the author of an award-winning book of prose, *Black Freckles*, and while some of the pieces there line up with fabulist fiction or the surreal tradition, there are a number of heartbreaking lyrical pieces that are truly more creative nonfiction than anything, and which again represent the writing life of the poet, and we wanted to include those. Larry was a marvel, a writer of many interests and talents, one who never pushed himself forward; always, he let the work stand on its own. For instance, while many know Larry worked in the international translation program at Iowa while he was completing his PhD—largely translating the Spanish and South American poets—few knew, as Alex Long discovered, that Larry also contributed translations to an anthology of a contemporary Japanese poet: *Responses Magnetic* by Kijima Hajime.

With all the varying camps in poetry, with its egos and contentiousness, it is difficult to have a group of poets agree about the achievement of any one poet. Larry was the exception, in my experience. I was never in a group of poets where there was not unanimous acclaim for his poetry—its poignancy and humanity, its inventiveness and importance. Clearly a testament was needed to this exceptional and wide-ranging life and work.

TBR: *Levis had a short career as a poet yet produced a monumental body of work. How would you describe his poetry?*

CB: Not yet 50, and Larry died of cardiac arrest in May 1996. I don't know if he produced a "monumental" body of work in quantity, but certainly the adjective applies in quality. At the time of his death, Larry had published five books of poetry, a handful of limited-edition chapbooks, the prose book *Black Freckles*, and a number of essays on poetics. A few weeks before his death, he told Levine that he had a new book all but finished. That book was *Elegy*, which Levine edited and which was published posthumously. In 2000 the University of Pittsburgh Press released *The Selected Levis*, edited by David St. John.

One of Larry's main gifts was his intense and specific imagination—his power to conceptualize, to go out into unlikely realms and connect to an accessible and experiential base at an emotional and human level that moved you and made sense. His poems were at once intimate and lyric and yet detached, objective—he was never sentimental or self-indulgent; he was able to view himself as a character and examine events in the context of common history. And he had invention; he was always finding original strategies amplified by a mind that wanted to discover the many permutations of the heart. His

second book, *The Afterlife*, was his breakthrough book and contained his amazing long poem, "Linnets," with its mix of narrative and what you could call a quotidian-surreal mode of imagery. Its sections were made of prose poems and lined poetry. In his late 20s, he had written this big poem, an elegy for us all that mocked us and God's beneficence as it revealed God's weakness. Larry established a symphonic movement working there between theme and variation and lyric and imagistic accretion—a style of poem he'd further develop and use in *The Widening Spell of the Leaves* and in *Elegy*.

In *The Afterlife*, we also come across the poems "The Double," "The Morning After My Death," and "Rhododendrons," all of which have incredibly inventive conceits and moves, and each of which is absolutely grounded and accessible. Credibility, authority, gravity without self-importance—those are qualities that anchored this new work and the work that followed. I can still remember the first time I read "Rhododendrons" and came across the move in which Larry goes back to a younger version of himself:

*I want to turn back and go up
to myself at age 20,
and press five dollars into his hand
so he can sleep.
While he stands trembling on a street in Fresno
suddenly one among many in the crowd
that strolls down Fulton Street,
among the stores that are closing,
and is never heard of again.*

I realized that that kind of imagination—the audacity of the move, the specificity of its context, the clear inclination to surrender the ego to the concept of the poem—was what I had always wanted and had been unable to come up with. I was, as we used to say, "blown away." Larry's imagination and its concrete underpinnings usually took an image, a scene, three steps beyond where most good poets would have left it.

And as his work developed, he was able to weave more subjects, more themes, more incidents into one inclusive, symphonic whole. I think of poems like "Caravaggio: Swirl & Vortex," which deals with, among many things, the Vietnam War and the War Memorial, the loss of his friend Zamora in that war, the life of Caravaggio, the life of art, the senselessness of war and early death. And of course he developed a longer syntactical rhythm that would accommodate his voice, the candid asides that qualified his subjects and eliminated any self-pity or importance. His voice was absolutely authentic and compelling—a big voice that spoke softly, thoughtfully. Absolutely startling and legitimate, never strained. One of a kind.

TBR: *How did you choose which articles and essays about him and by him to include?*

CB: This was easy. We printed almost everything we could find by Larry that had not already been collected and published. I came up with this idea for the book almost immediately, if for no other selfish reason than I knew what a particular vacuum there would be without any more poetry and writing from Larry. I think I recall bringing up the subject with Mary Flinn [execu-

tive director of New Virginia Review, Inc.] after Larry's memorial service in Richmond, and she mentioned that she was working with some of Larry's former students to put together a book. I didn't know what exactly they were thinking of, and then they worked out a book in the Michigan Poets on Poetry series and were able to publish it—*The Gazer Within* (2001)—before I'd yet found a publisher. This book collected nine of Larry's essays on poetry and one interview—the title essay and the essay “Eden and My Generation” both first appeared in *Field* as the hallmarks of his writing on poetics. Any young poet needs to know those essays. And so, as much as I loved those essays, I wanted to be of service and not repeat any of them. The single exception was Larry's essay “Philip Levine,” which the Michigan book did not reprint in its entirety and which Larry had written at my behest some years previously for the Michigan book I edited on Philip Levine. That is a particularly brilliant and touching essay on “the education of the poet,” as some would have it, and a loving tribute to the value of true and great teachers. I show it to all of my poetry workshops. And let me add that Mary Flinn and Randy Marshall, who were some of the prime movers behind *The Gazer Within*, were of invaluable help in pointing us toward Larry's prose on poetry we might not otherwise have turned up.

And so we looked over everything remaining, and if a piece carried forth Larry's ideas about poetry, we included it. We even included a couple letters Larry wrote to *The Reaper*; those letters offer a look into Larry's thinking about some of his fellow contemporary poets. We did not cast too much to the side.

Beyond the second section, which contains Larry's prose on poetry and some of what I call his creative nonfiction prose from *Black Freckles*, we looked up the critical response written on his work over the years. Reviews, long and short, were included to offer something like a historical perspective. Reinforcing that were many longer appreciations of his poetry by poets such as Dave Smith, David Wojahn, and David Young, among others.

Finally, we wanted to include any interviews that had not surfaced, and we were lucky to find three, a couple of them from the 1980s that had never seen light. And so we produced a more comprehensive book than what you would usually find in the Michigan series or in other similar texts.

TBR: *Why do you think his work continues to be praised by so many people?*

CB: Because he is an original—no one sounds like Larry; because the examination of self and of the world is absolutely honest and accessible; because of his fresh, wide-ranging, and brilliant imagination. The intellectual and emotional charge in a Levis poem sweeps up a reader with observations that strip pretension from the world and from the self; his ability to make poetic statement without ever sounding “Poetic” strikes a true chord in every poet, I think. The psyche is truly at risk, and style and language take risks and find fresh ground in every poem. That has to be enormously attractive to anyone who loves poetry, reads it, and wants to write it. In *Elegy* especially, we find Larry pushing his vision and strategies to their limit and

taking poems on a symphonic journey where the secular and the metaphysical meet. As David St. John has said, Larry had the “courage” to make such remarkable poems: “It is not at all paradoxical that Levis saw both the most intimate expressions of poetry and the grandest gestures of art, of language, as constituting individual acts of courage.” His poems, for all their inventiveness, for their compelling mystical quality, are always accessible, experiential, and never exercises in theory, in that dry academic and self-indulgent language. Every poem has spiritual and human grit. Larry was playing for keeps, as we used to say.

A poet's voice—as unfashionable as it may be to talk about “voice” these days—is a large measure of his soul, the over-music of the life to which we aspire. Larry's work had great modesty, but also a great passion, a passion derived from such close and empathetic observation, from the perfect detail and image and not from any element that would hint of sensationalism. My response to a Levis poem is that he genuinely was speaking to me, to us, as he meant to; his poems were not rhetorical constructs to aggrandize the self; they were not constructs in the current style; they did not point to their surfaces. They were unique as his life was unique, as he paid attention to his life and spoke it.

TBR: *Would Levis' poetry fit into today's fractured poetry scene?*

CB: There is always room, a place for work that is exceptional. To my view the poetry scene has always been fractured. Today, of course, it is more so; there are more camps, more contentiousness, from the Language poets who disavow meaning and coherence as passé to the new formalists/meter-is-moral group. In Larry's lifetime he never cozied up to any group; his tastes were democratic, and from the poetry and poets he supported and reviewed and published as an editor, it is easy to see that he looked only for originality and quality. Larry also had a great social conscience, and as well knew art, literature, theory, and history, and he brought all of that into the service of any given poem. He wore his learning lightly, as the cliché has it; he was comfortable in many arenas. Larry's poetry is so singular, so possessed of an essential human utterance, that his work would rise now—as it did in his lifetime—to the top regardless of who he knew or didn't know in New York. And really, he'd only be 58 right now—just think of how many more extraordinary books he would have written. As Philip Levine has said, “His early death is a staggering loss for our poetry, but what he left is a major achievement that will enrich our lives for as long as poetry matters.”

TBR: *What is the main thing a young poet can learn by reading Levis' work?*

CB: This is a tiny thing, to start, but as Fellini once said, “Sometimes you pull a little tail and there is an elephant at the other end.” A young poet, then—especially in Larry's later books—would do well to pay some attention to his use of the comma. Yes, that tiny. No one used them to greater effect. And what he established by setting off his phrasing so distinctly was a unique and original voice. He had developed a long, almost conversational style, but his diction and

imagery, the subtle yet trenchant music of his line and meditative texture, rendered a poem that was far from simple and flat as much conversation is. He was able to build asides, to embed reflexive phrasing that kept him honest and lucid, that kept him focused and credible. And so from looking at the tiny comma a young poet today can learn to discover and follow and develop an individual voice, and to allow that voice to follow the imagination in a unique but coherent vision. To find the music and medium for your own obsessions with the world and leave camps, cliques, celebrated trends, and factionalized praise behind in favor of work that is soul-making is what, I feel, a young poet can learn from Larry, among many other things.

The best example I know of is my coeditor for the book, Alexander Long. Sixteen, 17 years ago he was my student when I was teaching at a state college in the East. Like most, he struggled for the first year or so to make a good complete poem; but when I showed him Larry's work, that seemed to be all it took. The example of Larry's unflinching introspection and the true, jazzlike but calm evaluation of the rush of experience set Alex off on his own road. He is one of the finest young poets I know or have read in the last many years. The first time he sent off work, to a reasonably sized literary magazine contest, he won and had several poems published. I told him it would not always be that easy. And unfortunately, I was right. Alex now has two extraordinary manuscripts going around that some publisher should snap up. They do not sound like Larry; they do not sound like anyone but Alex. So I was a great teacher. What had I done? Simply put Levis into his hands. ■