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The Lost Prose Poems of Larry Levis Christopher Buckley

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THE LOST PROSE POEMS OF LARRY LEVIS

Larry Levis died of cardiac arrest in May, 1996, not yet 50. I attended his memorial service in Richmond, VA, the following November. The turnout of poets from across the nation was not only testament to his importance to poets and poetry, but to Larry the person as well. In an interview I conducted with Philip Levine, Larry's teacher and one of his best friends (*Quarterly West*, 20th Anniversary Issue #43 Autumn/Winter, 1996-97), Levine said, "There was no one quite like Larry as a poet or person. 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." Certainly, we lost one of our best and brightest.

Over the years, I collected everything of Larry's I could find—trade editions, letterpress printings, chapbooks, prose, whatever—and in the inaugural issue of *Poetry International* (Summer 1997) I published a long appreciation of Larry's poetry. So I was amazed and delighted last winter to discover a chapbook Larry had published with his former wife, Marcia Southwick, in 1980, a chapbook unknown by anyone I knew. I was visiting another former Fresno poet, David Oliveira, who had long ago been in a Levine class along with Larry. He showed me the slim chapbook, *The Leopard's Mouth is Dry and Cold Inside*, which contained seven prose poems by Larry and seven by Marcia. It was published in a modest offset edition, bound by staples, with a red paper cover (K.M. Gentile Publishing/Singing Wind Press, St. Louis). I made a xerox of David's copy. Then, speaking with Mary Flinn, editor of *The New Virginia Review* (which will bring out a special issue dedicated to Larry this fall), I discovered that she had a copy of the chapbook with Larry's emendations to the published text. Mary was gracious enough to send on a copy of the annotated versions. Of the four presented here, three are presented as Larry revised them; "The Plains" had no changes.

As most readers know, Philip Levine edited the final manuscript of Larry's posthumous book, *Elegy*, and he told me how many versions of individual poems he often had to go through to find the final version. Larry was an inveterate reviser, a hard worker for the immense talent he had. And so I suspect the revisions of these prose poems, after they were published, were just part of the process for him; indeed, the pieces are a bit tighter and more focused for his changes. Levine also mentioned that there were drafts of other poems, poems that Larry had decided not to include in the book; he was, Phil said, a

rigorous editor of his own work. (I am especially in debt to Philip Levine for helping me read the changes Larry penned in on the text. Phil and Larry had been exchanging poems for twenty-five years and he was used to reading Larry's handwriting.)

These prose poems in the chapbook are interesting then, not only for their own merits but also because they are not to be found in any of Larry's trade or letterpress publications. It is also interesting to try to place them historically, for the prose poem was a form Larry used previously, most notably in his very well-known poem—originally published in *Field*—"Linnets," which was the last poem in his book, *The Afterlife* (now reprinted by Carnegie Mellon University Press). In the same book, the poem "In A Country" is a prose poem in two paragraphs and the poem on the preceding page, "Inventing the Toucan," reads in the same voice, and to my ear—though written in lines—with the longer rhythmical continuity of the prose poem. It "sounds" very similar to "In A Country." In organizing the poems for the book, Larry clearly saw the echo between the two poems and so placed them next to each other.

The Afterlife is Larry's second and breakthrough book; in it he discovers many of the rhetorical and imaginative moves which he will develop and expand all the way to *Elegy*. "Linnets" is a fine example of his style here, and I suspect he chose the prose poem for the first three sections of the twelve section poem to establish the conceit of the poem, the "factual" basis, the apparent "truth" of the background of the poem. Thus he gives the poem's conceit—his brother shooting the small linnets with a shotgun—a credible and authoritative tone, and he can move on to more imaginative embellishment and metaphysical speculation. Larry's work in this period, and in many of the poems in *The Afterlife*, still shows some of the elliptical, deeper image style that was popular at Iowa and in many places across the U.S. in the early '70s. In "Linnets," there is a careful balance of Larry's honest, direct, laconic and detached but empathetic voice with that kind of imagery. It seems perfect there, and the first section of the poem, a prose poem, ends with the sentence, "He drove on the roads with a little hole in the air behind him"—a symbol of the guilt and the damage in the world his brother had wrought. The poems in *The Afterlife* which I find the strongest, the most original and true to Larry's unique take on experience, are those that employ that voice more than the surrealist image. Indeed, I have heard that Larry's Ph.D. thesis of poems, in the stacks somewhere at the University of Iowa, is written mostly in that '70s

surrealist mode, and that those poems never saw publication in a book. Instead, he chose the poems—the newer poems I think—of *The Afterlife*, and among those were prose poems.

In 1973 Larry had an NE A to complete *The Afterlife*, and his next book, *The Dollmaker's Ghost*—then fully in the hallmark Levis style—was completed in 1979 and was chosen as the winner of the open competition of the National Poetry Series for 1981. When, then, were the seven prose poems in *The Leopard's Mouth Is Dry and Cold Inside* written? Looking at the four reprinted here, I thought they might be from the time period just prior to the writing of *The Afterlife*, and so while seeing publication in 1980, these prose poems' mix of the more elliptical connections and deep image dated them earlier? Indeed, in a recent and helpful note from Marcia Southwick, she recalls that she and Larry used to collaborate on poetry projects and poems and give each other challenges for writing. She remembers a little "contest" for writing prose poems that probably occurred in 1976-77—before the publication of *The Afterlife*—in which they both worked on prose poems for a week. This chapbook was the result.

I have the most trouble with the title poem; I cannot make a connection between the title and the speaker of the poem. To be sure it's about mortality, transience. I especially like the line Larry removed in his post-publication editing, a line that seems very "Levis" to me: "... or the brickyard I pass each day, while my ear throws out an even shadow that I love." This line followed the one about his wife's reading glasses, and had that quotidian observation, and then an emotional personalization of the unlikely detail of the ear. Interesting, but it still doesn't help me put the whole poem together.

"Toad, Hog, Assassin, Mirror" is a mostly successful *ars poética*. His revisions hold the tension of the poem a bit longer, not making it too obvious too soon. It uses a rhetoric which, while it communicates a cynical or jaded tone, is a little stiff or formal. There are some imag-istic sparks here, but this is not Larry's deepest or most original theme. I think of course of "The Poem You Asked For" from his first book, *The Wrecking Crew*, which had more brio and invention on the same subject.

Larry's more mature voice steps up in the poems "The Plains" and "Schoolhouse." In these, the prose-poem method is so honest and direct, the voice so true, personal, and yet detached at the distance of art and witness, that a reader could never doubt what he/she is being told. In a way, "The Plains" is also an *ars poética*. The writer at his desk,

looking out over the plains of Iowa? Missouri? cherishing what he can save of the past—his own family who were farmers in California. The writing, at the same time, distances the writer from loved ones, and while the last phrase, "whenever I look up, somebody else is missing," may remind some readers of Mark Strand, in this poem, it is not simply a rhetorical styling; it is the emotional truth, delivered directly, and with the true and factual music of the prose poem as well.

My favorite of the prose poems is "Schoolhouse" because of its realism, poignancy of detail and vision, as seen through the eyes of the protagonist of the poem. In this kind of arena, Larry's imagination had the greatest latitude to pick out the significant detail, to select a simple qualifier that would indicate time and place. The physical detail is so accurate for the small first grader that a reader can feel/remember the feeling of the whole body pulling on the bell rope. The speaker knows the older boys, one of whom was already a car thief, and then he goes into the imagination of the boy of that time, the wild daydreams about his teachers, the intensity of that imagination which sees the orchid print of her dress, the brittle 78 records, and the glass of brandy. He stops time a bit, holds the secret life of a place in place which the speaker sees/knows as dull. Here is Larry's mature voice with that pathos and exact measure of experience and sadness in it. He preserves a time and era from a bit of autobiography, trusting the imagination to render the setting and event accurately to memory and emotion. "Schoolhouse" shows Larry's voice as it will be for his mature work and for most of his books.

There is, at their best, a candor in these prose poems, one element the form especially offers. This candor, so representative of Larry's voice, is one attribute that makes his poems stand out from all the rest.

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