



Elegy

Larry Levis , Philip Levine (Editor)

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A few days before his death in 1996, Larry Levis mentioned to his friend and former instructor Philip Levine that he had "an all-but-completed manuscript" of poems. Levine had years earlier recognized Levis as "the most gifted and determined young poet I have ever had the good fortune to have in one of my classes"; after Levis's death, Levine edited the poems Levis had left behind. What emerged is this haunting collection, *Elegy*.

The poems were written in the six years following publication of his previous book, *The Widening Spell of the Leaves*, and continue and extend the jazz improvisations on themes that gave those poems their resonance. There are poems of sudden stops and threats from the wild: an opossum halts traffic and snaps at pedestrians in posh west Los Angeles; a migrant worker falls victim to the bites of two beautiful black widow spiders; horses starve during a Russian famine; a thief, sitting in the rigging of Columbus's ship, contemplates his work in the New World. The collection culminates in the elegies written to a world in which culture fragments; in which the beasts of burden—the horses, the migrant workers—are worked toward death; a world in which "Love's an immigrant, it shows itself in its work. / It works for almost nothing"; a world in which "you were no longer permitted to know, / Or to decide for yourself, / Whether there was an angel inside you, or whether there wasn't."

Elegy, as Levine says, was "written by one of our essential poets at the very height of his powers. His early death is a staggering loss for our poetry, but what he left is a major achievement that will enrich our lives."

Elegy Details

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Kate says

Some of these poems were almost unbearably depressing: "Heaven was neither the light nor was it the air, & if it took a physical form/It was splintered lumber no one could build anything with." (from "Elegy with a Bridle in Its Hand") Well written, but dark.

Gregory Donovan says

Along with all the other books by Larry Levis, *Elegy* continues to be a powerful influence and inspiration to all sorts of poets and to all manner of people who love poetry. It's an essential book for anyone who enjoys being seriously engaged with the art of poetry.

Kevin Lawrence says

This would've been one of the best volumes of poetry I've read in a long time but for the middle section. There seems to be something for the Baby Boomer Generation of American poets that compelled them to try and imaginatively inhabit and write from the basest instincts of murderers, rapists, and just your general human monsters. Levis joins poets like Ai, Stephen Dobyns, Carolyn Forché, and even Frank Bidart in this effort to try and bring a poetic sensibility to rendering moments of torture and abysmal destruction into the light of day--a kind of surreal naturalism that reads like Quentin Tarantino on the page (sans the obnoxious sophomoric tone of whimsy). I guess these are supposed to be noble attempts to sublimate the most depraved human behavior imaginable into something redeeming (to his credit, Levis doesn't indulge in Tarantino's maniacal historical revisionist fantasies), but for me this type of poetry more often than not just ends up giving the reader a depraved and weary experience (writing about forcing a friendly couple working as record store keepers to drink Drano after raping the woman in front of her boyfriend, as one poem in Levis' middle section does, is simply wearying in its pointless details and in its utter depravity).

Luckily, the other two sections of Levis' final book are much more engaging and (as the title suggests) have a poignant elegiac tone about reaching middle age and trying to find beauty and purpose that will somehow sustain life. In a poem about the Cumaean Sibyl whom Apollo granted eternal life to but **not** eternal youth, "Elegy with a Thimbleful of Water in the Cage," Levis asks:

"What do you do when nothing calls you anymore?
When you turn & there is only the light filling the empty window?

When the angel fasting inside you has grown so thin it flies
Out of you a last time without your

Knowing it, & the water dries up in its thimble, & the one swing
In the cage comes to rest after its almost imperceptible,

Almost endless, swaying?"

It's a sobering set of images and questions and I, for one, appreciate the lengths to which Levis strained to

bring a lyrical voice to a condition that seems to have depleted any belief or hope in lyricism. It seems like an inspired moment that Levis was able to inhabit quiet a few times to write some really amazing poems ("The Two Trees," "In 1967," "The Oldest Living Thing in L.A.," "Anastasia & Sandman," "Elegy with a Bridle in Its Hand," & "Elegy for Poe with the Music of a Carnival Inside It" -- as well as the Elegy quoted above -- are all excellent poems), though it must have been a wrenching experience to simultaneously feel so much hopelessness but beauty at the same time. Highly recommend these sections to anyone who is interested in post-50s American poetry.

Kent says

Every time I read this book, I feel how much a tragedy it is that Levis didn't get to call this mss complete, if only because of the few rusty spots, and if only because of the outrageous departure this book is from *Widening Spell* that was published only four years previous. The feeling of human futility may carry from one book to the next, and I personally find the poems in *Widening Spell* have a scope of ambition to them that is beyond what this book is striving for. But I appreciate the breadth of subject matter here. And the full engagement with this sentiment as it plays out in each of the narratives.

Danielle DeTiberus says

His posthumous collection- read: "Anastasia & Sandman," "Elegy for Whatever Had a Pattern in It," and "Elegy With a Bridle in Its Hand."

Leah says

I love Levis. Leaving a star off since this work was compiled posthumously and the editorial touches are not his.

"The afternoon after he found it,
The music of a keel scrape still in his ears,

Columbus wrote in a journal: Walking under the trees there
Was the most beautiful thing

I have ever seen." It's what he left out of it, out
Of the entry, that looks back in recognition.

Did he mean walking there? Did he mean the empty, shaded
Spaces beneath the trees where he rested

After sending his men off to accomplish some task?
To find a waterfall & a China behind it?

Did he mean someone he saw?

But the entire point of the entry, the impossible

Chore he had assigned the men,

Was to be left alone there,

With the sky washed clean above him, with the sun
Burning through all its likenesses

To be what it is, by erasing them."

-from Elegy with a Petty Thief in the Rigging

Jim McGarrah says

Larry Levis died suddenly in May of 1996 and it was a great loss for contemporary poetry. There is no way to measure how many more poems he would be writing if he were still alive. Elegy was his final collection of poems and a good enough collection that it makes me sad that Levis will write no more. With that said, however, I think it's good to realize that the book is a little uneven and to understand how that could happen.

Phil Levine put the collection together from notes and poems that Levis left behind. To Levine's credit, he resisted the urge to revise or rewrite anything. To the discomfort of the reader that means some of what we read is not Larry at his best. Most good poets, and I think he was a great one, live in a state of constant revision. It's impossible for an editor to gauge when a poem is finally finished. For a poet, it may never be finally finished, but we may eventually let it go. I had the feeling that, with some of these poems, Levis may not have been ready to let them go.

He was always a writer with tremendous imagistic range and the ability to leap time and space without losing a reader. I remember one poem in particular that begins with him looking at a Caravaggio painting, traveling through Caravaggio's debauched life, Levis' high school days, the loss of a friend in Vietnam, and ending back in front of the painting. It's a remarkable piece and at no time during the reading of that poem does the reader ever lose his way or question how the poet gets from one place to the next.

You can sense this same genius in many of the poems in Elegy. Some of them, though, seem to leap in one direction or another and never come back. They just keep on leaping into a vague dimension that we'd rather not be in ourselves. Boy in the Arcade and Anastasia & Sandman are notably examples of this. I'm not saying that these inconsistencies ruin the collection. They don't, by any means. I'm saying that Phil Levine did the best he could, but no one can read a dead man's mind.

When you come across a poem like Elegy with an Angel at Its Gate, which does all the things a Levis poem usually does brilliantly, it's much easier to notice the less complete quality of some of the others. Reading such disconnected lines as "we were never the color blind grasses" – "And one by one we vanished from the place/ vanished by becoming part/ of everyone, part of the horses bending/ their necks to graze, part of every law/ part of each Apache heirloom for sale/ in a window, part of a wedding cake/ part of the smallpox epidemic, part of God..." and then jumping to Carl Marx, sugarcane in Cuba and what happened to Larry Doyle, how he went to hell in an Easter basket, might drive you crazy until seven pages later when the last line of the poem hooks up perfectly with the first and you emerge from the world of Larry Levis knowing exactly where you've been and why and wishing that you could someday go back.

Amy says

A moving, brilliant final collection. I must admit that I haven't read every poem in it because I can't bring myself to know I will never read another new poem by this amazing writer and man.

Darrin Doyle says

I lost more than half of my poetry books in a flood. This one was salvaged, and I just reread it. One of my favorite lines: "Arms and wings. They'll mock you one way or the other."

Helen says

Elegy is a posthumous collection of Larry Levis' poetry collected by his friend and fellow poet Phillip Levine. Many of the poems are in fact elegies, not just to people, but to horses, ideas, and places.

The poems are lovely and heartbreaking when you realize that we won't see any more of Levis' work. But one wonders if this is the collection Levis would have wanted to come out. Many of the poems, especially the elegies, feel unfinished, too long, unedited by a careful eye and hand. While death creeps throughout most of the poems in this collection, it doesn't necessarily feel like there's an overall arc, some poems stick out in places and one wonders why they were put there in the first place.

A lovely example of the poet's work, but not necessarily the most successfully collected.

Rae says

I'm reading this slowly. Very moving, at times so much so that I can only read one poem at a time. Great book to put next to your bed and read when you can spend some time thinking about each line.

missy jean says

Levis used to teach at the University of Utah, so some of these poems are set in Utah (my home state). I love reading poetry and prose that is set in Utah, because it tends to have such a naturalistic bent. We are in that wild, "untamed west," after all, and my childhood in Utah was filled with snow-covered mountains and red rock deserts. I know what it is to love a pine tree or a piece of prehistoric stone with such intensity. Levis' poems use nature in such interesting ways--subtly and thematically, like background music.

Nicola says

Poet-friends kept recommending this book to me and now I can finally understand why. Yes, yes, yes, yes. These poems are working on so many levels. I was trying to read them as an example of narrative (for an Intro to Poetry class I'm teaching next semester) and love the way they show how expanded web-like luminous narrative (and worlds!) can be.

Side-note/dish: This book taught me more about how to write about violence than so many other books with that explicit intent.

Hannah Baker-Siroty says

In my top 5 books of poetry, no question. Larry Levis is a brilliant poet and I am grateful for this book. Read it. He makes the long poem seem short, and for that alone his is a poetic genius... to me, anyway.

Rachel says

There is a blueprint of something never finished, something I'll never
Find my way out of, some web where the light rocks, back & forth,
Holding me in a time that's gone, bee at the windowsill & the cold

Coming back as it has to, tapping at the glass.

The figure in the hourglass & the body swinging in the rhythm of its work.
The body reclining in bed, forgetting what it is, & who.

While the night goes on with its work, the stars & the shapes they make,
Cold vein in the leaf & in the wind,

What are we but what we offer up?

—"Elegy For Whatever Had a Pattern In It"

Greg says

Longer poems, but worth the patience. Not difficult reads, just extended imagination required by the reader.

Carrie Lorig says

someone in my class said, "i love this because i know how to feel at the end of each poem." i died and was buried inside of a box made of pelican eyelashes ever since.

Kate Rosenberg says

Oh, Larry. I posthumously adore you. These poems are like houses of cards. Or like a beaver dam. Well-constructed and so much more. I weep at them. Read them or suffer an emptiness that will haunt you until your death.

Michael Gossett says

If not his best, his second best (behind 'The Widening Spell...'). A posthumous collection, 'Elegy' stands as just that to its tremendous author. Levis is, without question, my favorite contemporary poet.

"Elegy with a Bridle in Its Hand"

"Elegy for Whatever Had a Pattern in It"

DilanAc says

A poet of images, beautiful, concrete, surprising images.

And the voice, the voice has authority so that the reader sits up and listens. Try reading them aloud - the music of them entrances even when the meaning is not clear. I love "The Cook Grew Lost in His Village, the Village in the Endless Shuffling of Their Cards" poem.

Ultimately it is about death and how prescient is that considering Mr. Levis died unexpectedly in the middle of composing these poems.

I was moved in a way that only the best poetry can.
