

FEATURES

Review

Poems Reflect Asian Heritage

Mason Currey
Features Reporter

Acclaimed poet Li-Young Lee gave an excellent reading April 23 in the Highsmith Center Lounge, insightfully exploring issues of love, family, tradition and the sacred through his poems and accompanying commentary.

The event, in celebration of Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month, was sponsored by UNCA Cultural and Special Events, the Creative Writing Program, the P.B. Parris Visiting Writers Series, Multicultural Student Programs and Asian Students in Asia.

After a pair of brief student introductions, one in English, the other in Chinese, Lee took the podium, lightheartedly asking if anyone in the audience knew enough Chinese to understand the second introduction.

Upon the showing of only a few hands, he joked, "she said some glowing things, you guys missed it."

Lee said he would begin by reading love poems, and added, "I think when you read love poems, you show yourself at your most vulnerable."

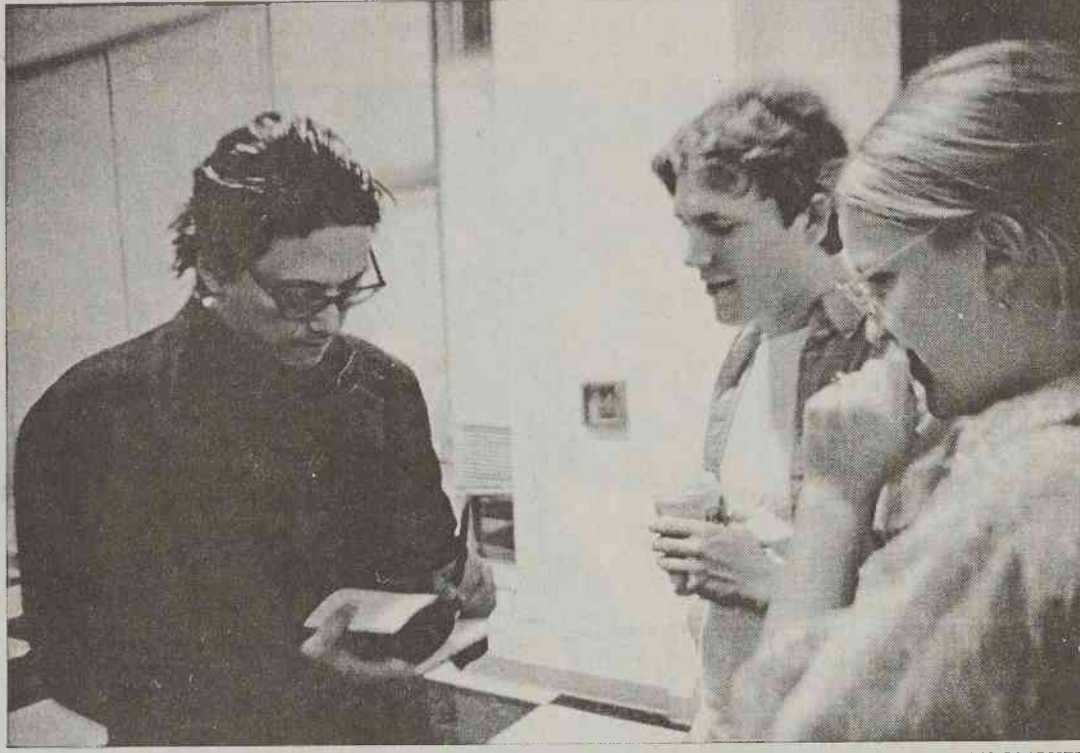
He commented that, in his experience, love poetry is often divested of its eroticism in academic settings, and that he was interested in poetry's ability "to eroticize a listener."

He also spoke briefly to the audience about his idea that poetry is a double medium, composed not only of language, but of silence as well. "I hope the words can make you feel different qualities of silence," Lee said.

"He respects the balance between language and silence," said Clare Cain, a senior creative writing major, adding that this balance is a feature of the poetry itself, not just his reading style.

Following this opening comments, Lee read the poem "Braiding" from his 1986 book of poems, "Rose," which won the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award.

Divided into six cantos, the poem centers around the speaker's experience of braiding his wife's hair, ending with a meditation on the passing of time: "Love, how the hours accumulate. Uncountable. / The trees grow tall, some people walk away / and diminish forever. / The damp pewter days slip around without warning / and we cross over one year and one year."



WALTER FYLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Li-Young Lee signs his book for Rebekah Sulock, a UNCA alumna, after his poetry reading in Highsmith Center Lounge April 23.

Lee read the poem slowly and quietly, separating each canto with a brief pause, to an utterly silent room of nearly 100 people.

His reading style was perfectly suited to his poetry, as he imparted a sense of intimacy through his gentle, meditative tone, taking ample pauses between phrases, letting each word sink into the listener's consciousness.

In fact, later in the reading, Lee addressed his interest in elevating the reader's consciousness through poetry.

In response to a question about the influence of traditional Chinese poetry on his work, Lee spoke about a concept in Chinese poetry known as the "raising of the head."

It is that moment in a poem where one suddenly becomes aware of the immense context of the subject, producing, in effect, a raising of consciousness in the reader.

For Lee, moments like these make poetry a way to contemplate the universe and sacredness.

Lee made the assertion that "poetic presence is sacred presence," saying that his ambition is to practice this sacred presence in his poetry.

Lee added, however, that he did not claim to always achieve sacred presence—explaining why he often prefaced his reading of a poem with the comment, "if this is a poem"—but the reading proved that, at the very least, he could convey the sacredness of language's ability to express powerful emotions through poetry.

Lee also read the poem, "This Room and Everything In It," from his collection, "The City in Which I Love You," which was the 1990 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poetry.

After that, he turned to some of his more recent work, reading from a long series of poems collectively titled, "The Book of My Nights."

"These are tentative," Lee told the audience. "If you have any suggestions later, you can let me know."

Introducing the third poem in the series, "A Dwelling," he said that, after reading it once, a woman approached him, and told him that it was a "dysfunctional" poem.

"Maybe romantic love is dysfunctional," Lee said before reading the poem, which deals with a man only aware of his self while in the presence of his lover.

Lee ended the reading with a selection from his latest work, "The Winged Seed," a long prose poem that serves as a memoir of his family's emigration from Indonesia. It deals particularly with his father, who spent 19 months as a political prisoner in that country.

"It's 200 pages. I'll only read half of it," Lee joked, before reading a poignant selection from the

work dealing with a dream he had about his father.

This selection was the last of Lee's reading, which lasted about 45 minutes. Afterward, Lee was available to sign copies of his books.

Overall, one could not ask for more of the event; Lee's warm, affable manner, insightful comments and excellent poetry all made for a wonderful evening.

My only complaint concerns the chosen venue—the Highsmith Center Lounge is a lousy place for a poetry reading—but Lee even managed to distract one's attention from the almost preternaturally ugly mural that spans the wall behind the stage, no small achievement in itself.

Lee was born in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1957 to Chinese parents. But, following his father's political imprisonment, he and his family fled anti-Chinese sentiment in the country in 1959, eventually settling in the U.S. in 1964.

Lee was educated at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Arizona and the State University of New York at Brockport, and has taught at several universities, including Northwestern University and the University of Iowa.

Lee, who now resides in Chicago with his family, has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Travel Review

Fun on a Budget Over the Border

Scott Adams
Guest Writer

If you are looking for an affordable place for your summer vacation, Montreal, Quebec is an excellent destination.

Montreal is an incredible and truly world-class city that offers Quebec's drinking age of 18, great museums and parks, bars/clubs that do not close until 3 a.m., and a large resident student population to keep it all going.

Once you factor in a favorable exchange rate (\$1 United States = \$1.50 Canadian), affording the trip is easy.

A friend and I went to Montreal this past spring break, and we did the whole trip for under \$300 a person.

First, we declared this a road trip instead of flying. We spent just over \$50 per person on gas for the round-trip, as we drove from Asheville to Montreal.

Do not do this all at once, though. Since I contacted a friend in Philadelphia, PA beforehand, we broke the long 20-hour drive in half.

Sleeping on someone's floor is great after driving for several hours.

In Montreal, we stayed at The Alternative Backpacker's Hostel of Montreal, a clean, safe and cheap (\$11 U.S./night) hostel in an amazingly renovated 18th-century building.

The hostel had a full service kitchen, which helped to cut down on food expenses.

In Montreal, you can see the sun rise in the "south." Do not tell a native they're wrong; in Montreal, west is north and east is south because of the island's narrow, north-south orientation in the St. Lawrence River.

There's no fighting it: all addresses are listed according to human, rather than natural, directions.

We visited Plateau Mont Royal. The neighborhood is a fun mix of students from nearby McGill University and the University of Quebec at Montreal, in addition to several ethnic groups.

We walked along Rue St. Denis and Rue St. Laurent, the main streets for shopping and nightlife there.

We briefly stood in an around-the-block line for Cafe Campus, a well-reputed, four-story tower of drinking and dancing.

If you are stuck in a huge line for a club, there's always a smaller and likely more-entertaining one nearby.

This materializes as Angels, a nearby bar that was packed with young people dancing to re-mixed American, French and Quebecois hip-hop.

The next morning, I decided to explore Chinatown.

It is true, most large cities have Chinatowns, yet Montreal's was unique because all the store's signs were in Chinese, French and English.

After exploring the neighborhood and eating delicious, cheap food (\$4 U.S. for unlimited dim sum), I concluded that language and culture defined this city.

This city stays fun and interesting; you never know what language someone speaks until they talk to you.

Montreal's city flag reflects the city's original ethnic heritage, with a clover for Ireland, a rose for England, a thistle for Scotland and a beaver for fur trapping French-Canadians.

An image of Earth would be an appropriate new flag, though, because Chinese, Indian, Arabic and French-speaking African groups live all over the city.

As an English-speaker, you can get around fine, just make sure to be humble when you tell someone, "I don't speak French."

I heard "Bonjour" several times in stores before I replied with a "pardon" and received a kind grin for it.

This happened at Basilica Notre Dame, a church with an altar whose huge scale and sky-blue background appear to be outdoors.

I tucked my English brochure into my jacket as the church closed and met my friend a few blocks away at the hostel.

Montreal is very walkable; in addition to having a fast and clean subway, which we rode to Plateau Mont Royal.

We ate dinner at Cafeteria on Rue St. Denis, where a gourmet pasta and wine dinner was \$22.50 in U.S. dollars for two people, and the deejayed trip-hip music was excellent!

Our last day in Montreal entailed visits to the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Mont Royal Park, a snow-covered 900-foot mountain overlooking downtown.

The museums were amazing, but goofing around in insanely deep snow is equally entertaining!

Snowball hurling makes one hungry, so we met my Montreal friends at Cafe Santropol on Rue St. Urbain in The Plateau.

It served incredible vegetarian sandwiches that mix up carrots, cream cheese, radishes and other seemingly mismatched ingredients for tasty results.

After blowing our excess coins (non-exchangeable in U.S.) in Little Italy's huge Saturday morning market, we finished the evening listening to Celtic music at Buster Harvey's, an Irish pub.

It was a great trip, and it was affordable.



COURTESY OF SCOTT ADAMS

UNCA student Scott Adams visited Montreal, Quebec, and recommends the affordable trip for summer vacation.

Parkinson's Disease Walk-a-Thon

The American Parkinson's Disease Association will hold its 14th annual Walk-a-Thon beginning at Biltmore Forest Town Hall April 29. The walk starts at 2:30 p.m., and winds around five miles of Biltmore Forest. Musical entertainment, refreshments and door prize drawings will be provided.

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