

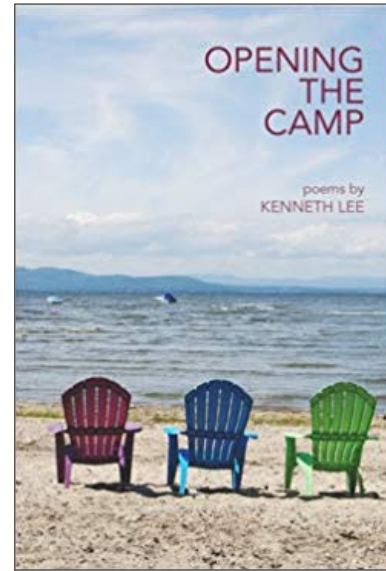
Opening the Camp

Kenneth Lee

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Reviewed by David P. Miller

If a person has the good fortune to reach older age in decent health, more or less stable circumstances, and of sound mind – and yes, that’s a lot of ifs – it’s possible to develop a double consciousness about your life. You can look at its decades as a phenomenon, a strange occurrence not taken for granted, a curious tale about a person who happens to have your name, face, and Social Security number. This isn’t only the province of aging, of course. Back around 1980, David Byrne put it memorably in the Talking Heads song “Once in a Lifetime”: “And you may find yourself in a beautiful house / With a beautiful wife / And you may ask yourself, well / How did I get here? ... You may ask yourself / Where does that highway go to? / And you may ask yourself / Am I right? Am I wrong? / And you may say to yourself / ‘My God! What have I done?’ ” I wonder what he would write about this now, forty years later.

Kenneth Lee’s poems often show an acute sense of amazement, sometimes bemusement, regarding the fact of his life. I find that his approach to autobiography evokes my own personal incredulity. Let’s spend time on “Memoro Ergo Sum.” The title riffs off Descartes’ “cogito ergo sum,” often translated as “I think therefore I am.” Lee substitutes memory for reasoning, suggesting that one’s identity is more deeply rooted in what one remembers. The first stanza features his characteristic specificity of description, in his treatment of the streetlight, unusual perception of the snow’s color, and its vanishing intensified by simple repetition of “disappear”:

*Black snowflakes, backlit by the streetlamp,
drift across its yellow megaphone
as I stand on the corner of Palmer and Griggs
looking up at them as they disappear
and disappear into the blackness around me,
age six, late winter of forty-seven.*

So far, a simple, nostalgic picture, immediately complicated in the next stanza. The snows of 1947 weren’t evoked by wintertime in later life, but by the poet’s double in an anomalous moment:

*Except that it’s summer of 2017
and I, on the self-annihilating point
of the present, trolling in its wake,
have hooked a snow-filled interlude*

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*entered that night by my recorder
standing with his notebook beside me.*

Notice the density of this. The instant of recollection disappears as soon as it arises, “self-annihilating.” And yet there it is: a disappearing mental event, in a summer seventy years removed, evokes black snowflakes in street light, and the poet’s double-consciousness manages to snag it. Who is the “recorder?” The final stanza says it’s like Samuel Johnson’s constant companion and biographer:

*My Boswell, with his instinct for the highlights,
to document my growing apprehension,
that life was real and I’d been placed inside it.*

The “growing apprehension” is the six-year-old’s, becoming aware of his own awareness. His Boswell, by his side since childhood, made sure even then that this sensation – black snowflakes in a megaphone of street-light – will be permanent in the memory bank, to surface who knows when, for who knows what reason.

It can be sobering, even frightening, to consider that every aspect of your present life exists only because of every specific thing that previously occurred. This means an infinitude of forking paths past. Never mind “the” road not taken: it’s more like a four-dimensional universe of disappeared paths multiplying at every instant. And so we have “What Never Happened”. It seems that his parents lost the chance to put money down on a house, and so “we grew up in River Vale, not River Edge.” Against the too-similar neighborhood names, Lee concisely imagines the shape of an alternative past, shaped by “all the kids who went to high school there”:

*whom I never fell in love with, never married
to father kids who never existed with,
or become old friends I’m out of touch with.
I lived my life, grew old, and never missed them.*

Of course, non-events only exist because actual events did happen. In retrospect, these seem so inevitable that one can make “The Case Against Free Will.” Here Lee casts his memory back across a varied set of happenings: a risky walk home by himself at six years, an expensive auto repair estimate, and his marriage proposal, concluding “I don’t remember choosing to be naughty, / electing to accept that estimate, / or opting to commit myself forever.” The poem “Pleasing God” unpacks his life’s stages using a different framework. Lee’s awakening into art and matters of the spirit was delayed by the command to obey a parched idea of God:

*the gospel drilled in by those jack-hammer nuns
that anything painfully gained pleases God
caused me to dismiss English, Music and Art
as pleasure gods, unworthy of my worship.*

As a college student, he “filled [his] empty attic” with engineering

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study. But the repressed returns. He fell into poetry near “the age of poor Shelley’s last birthday,” music at “the age that took Mozart away,” art at an age “approaching the one that stole Rembrandt.” He concludes with the ironic reflection that God required engineering “so I’d cram my left brain to appease Him / that my right might remain a pure virgin / until she was primed to be ravished” as he achieved the ages at which those artists disappeared. Still, his years of college cramming are given music and meter:

*I analyzed the water weight of salt,
I gauged the shear and tensile strengths of steel,
the time it took glass ingots to anneal.*

Lee’s capacity for close and fresh description has been noted. Although this is hardly the exclusive province of age, if sharp perception endures, experience itself may become more precious. Opening the Camp’s penultimate poem, “Shades of Gray,” is a brief, exquisite essay in re-learning to see. The speaker views a range of mountains on the morning after a rainy night, realizing that each one “represents [a] sovereign state of grayness: / ashen, smoky, pearly, leaden, iron, / all fringed with filmy evanescent tassels, / and here and there perceptible between, / a streak of iridescent green, a blush of blue.” It’s a cue to this reader, at least, not to let the title phrase simply rest as a cliché for relative morality.

In “Pleasing God,” Lee tells about being cracked open to the arts; ekphrastic poems bring his powers of observation into this realm. “Clash of the Great Powers,” a title hinting at the grandiose, ironically frames two concise quatrains. It approaches the puzzle of contrasting civilizations by considering two artworks. An outdoor work by the Japanese-American sculptor Noguchi, a “great grey mass of twisted stone,” allows “infinite replies to light by form” as viewers have the freedom to experience it from different angles. In stark contrast, the same viewers, in front of Titian altarpiece “set fixed above / a grand Venetian altar” are “forced to view / the same magnificence from every angle.” The narrow response compelled by an authoritarian context is reflected in its slighter description: there is simply less to say. Among other poems devoted to music and art, “Of Art, Of Craft” responds to an Eva Hesse exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. Here it is, complete:

*Of wool, of rope, of wavy plastic tubes:
of simple and of sparse and yet so strong.*

*How are they not like a boat in a bottle
or a glued and beveled solid walnut table?*

The question is doing a lot of work. It invites a close comparison of Hesse’s pioneering and controversial work, using perishable materials and labeled-feminine processes, with traditionally labeled-masculine crafts. At the same time, as Hesse’s work has been established in the realm of art, what does that suggest about other forms of making not given that status? (And kudos to Lee, in any case, for giving Eva Hesse, who died far too early at 34, a place in this book.)

There’s evidence, throughout *Opening the Camp*, of Lee’s sensitivity to

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the slightest events and simplest images as portents of far greater things. "Scavenging My Earliest Memories" provides insight into memory's its origin in early consciousness, linking concrete images – "Brown chickens on a lawn beside a barn, / white dunes along a shore seen from a car" – and the mature reflection that, with these, "agency sought entrance to awareness." At the stage where images first imprint and persist, the child's sense of self as a separate being with a history takes form: "a rock-rimmed goldfish pond, / a tiny stucco house beside a well / precipitates from blankness into time." Personal time begins with recoverable awareness. (My own sense of myself as an individual person began with self-aware fascination with gold Christmas ornaments shining in a window.) This original self-consciousness may, mysteriously, reappear in moments outside any logic, as we see in "Still Going," the collection's concluding poem. On a September evening in the Adirondacks (the transition to autumn pictured as summer "pulling up a Caribbean blanket"), Lee watches Orion sink below the horizon, then turns to go inside. "Then, as I straighten and turn for the door, / I'm greeted by the basic core of me." And what is this? Not the older adult occupied with present concerns and past regrets:

*No, it was the one, untouched since its inception,
by memory, anxiety, or age;
the one that first congealed when I was three
who comes unbidden intermittently,
to bring me the good news that he's still going.*

The great good fortune of Kenneth Lee's poetry expresses the anxieties of impermanence and time (with its terminal effect on each of us), simultaneous with joy in the present and often in recollection. This balance is not given to everyone who arrives at a later stage of life. It is rediscoverable at the most ordinary of moments. A final example will be the simple, formally elegant "Smoke Break in the Courtyard," in its entirety:

*Meanwhile mid-March restokes the coming fire.
And I note that since my morning smoke
a crocus shaft has thrust its fervent bill
outside earth's startled shell in one sharp stroke.
But, where within a crocus lies its will –
how can a gristly bulb invoke desire?*