

## Lia Purpura

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an excerpt of

### *Attendant Surprise: An Interview with Stephen Kuusisto*

STEPHEN KUUSISTO is the author of a collection of poems, *Only Bread, Only Light* (Copper Canyon Press, 2000) and of the memoirs *Planet of the Blind* (Dial Press, 1998) and *Eavesdropping: A Memoir of Blindness and Listening* (W. W. Norton, 2006). He holds a dual appointment at the University of Iowa, where he teaches in the graduate creative nonfiction program and in the College of Medicine. He has served as coeditor of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, and he speaks widely on diversity, disability, education, and public policy. His poems and essays have appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines, including *Harper's*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Poetry*, and the *Washington Post*. His new book of prose poems, *Mornings with Borges*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon in 2010.

This interview took place at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland, on 8 November 2007, before Kuusisto read as part of the Modern Masters Reading Series. I had just finished *Eavesdropping* and was renewed by Steve's approach to the memoir; to my mind, he had created a form that was fresh, lyrical, and flexible enough to move deftly through well-built scenes without sacrificing an essentially poetic stance. Although his approach to memoir in *Eavesdropping* is not wholly unlike that of *Planet of the Blind*, I felt that in some profound ways Steve had advanced and deepened the form. When Steve arrived at Loyola on 7 November, our informal conversation took flight as we traded enthusiasms for new books we had read, talked about teaching at the University of Iowa and elsewhere, and discussed the dual-genre life we share as poet-essayists. Anticipating that the energy and pace of the conversation—akin to trying to

keep up with Steve and his guide dog Vidal—would continue the next day, I thought to formalize a few questions, find a tape recorder, and set an interview in motion.\*

Lia Purpura (LP): *Eavesdropping* is a different kind of memoir. First off, you're not compelled to "get it all in" or chart events chronologically. Its interests are impressionistic, and yet there is a narrative trail, from the intense, private listening you practiced as a kid to advanced, aleatoric public listening. So many gestures in the book are poetic ones—forms of circling back, lyrical flights. There's a kind of easy-seeming juggling going on here as you keep elements of story, poem, and memoir up in the air and rolling.

Stephen Kuusisto (SK): *Eavesdropping* differs from *Planet of the Blind* because its hopes are different. Most contemporary English classes in universities get this area of the *hope* in literary writing, the hope in the mind of the writer, wrong. There's this idea that writers do not have a sense of enticement and attraction, that somehow the language is built out of mediated, polemical, political constructions. But, in fact, as the Victorians would say, it's more about "intentionality." Writers have a thing called intentionality, and literary writers in particular have a sense of where they want to go even if they don't know where they'll wind up. It's the jones that the jazz musician is all about. You're going to improv until you find where you're supposed to get to.

In *Planet of the Blind* I knew that I wanted to have a narrative unfolding the histories and mythologies of blindness as culturally received, while I explored my own childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. I threw myself into activities to see what would happen, how they would suggest the story, how the life as gambled upon would suggest further declivities in the story. I had a pretty strong sense that there were threads and patterns that fit the memoir as an art form, and that it would all, in some way, come together around narrative issues, even though the language is mostly poetic.

With *Eavesdropping* I was driven by something far more elemental. A woman in Boston asked me at the end of a talk I had given on disability issues, "Well, why travel anywhere if you can't see?" Her question was so obviously a

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consequence of her depression and sense of hopelessness; she was around sixty and had just gone blind from macular degeneration. I thought whatever glib answer I might give her about the joys of traveling when you can't see actually deserved a much fuller treatment. The book is the answer: how is listening a private, aesthetic experience; how is it anodyne for the absence of being able to sightsee and enjoy all of those photoreceptors and all of the neuropathic dimensions of pleasure that seeing can give people? If you've lived in an opto-centric way, the absence of the gift of sight is a profound absence. What would it be to sightsee by ear? How would you describe it? How would you narrate it? What would it look like? And so I looked for books on the subject, but there's really nothing. I found eccentric narratives about the history of mechanical noise, and I found books by musicologists on the nature of tonality or atonality; I found a lot of stuff about the history of musical instruments, but no personal narrative about the evolution of listening throughout a lifetime or listening-as-travelogue, and none about the kind of wager, as I said before, that you make with reality. *Eavesdropping* was, really, a book that allowed me to throw myself into different situations to see what I could hear. And that's a book without a plot. I used to joke with people when they asked me "What are you writing?" I'd say, well, it's like the *Seinfeld* show: it's a thing without a plot. . . .

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LP: If I could push what you just said even further and chart a couple of things that I see happening *imaginatively*—which is a word that's hard to use these days, but that I stand behind fully and that you use with absolute freedom, impunity, and muscle. Some imaginative moves seem to come out of your stance toward listening and its attendant creation of form, and I've tried to follow them. . . .

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SK: Not seeing allows me some luck—not necessarily an advantage, but opportunity for luck, because luck is, after all, entirely about opportunity. The opportunity is not seeing the woman, or the tree, or the cathedral, or the cobblestone streets, or the queen's horses. I can't conjure them by enunciating them, and so I'm not trapped in the tyranny of much modern journalistic writing: having to explain. I don't have to describe it. Everyone knows that famous moment in Ernest Hemingway's notebooks where he describes how he hopped off a

train in France during the First World War so he could write minutely what it was like to see a dead dog being devoured by maggots. I've always thought, though, that at this moment Hemingway is the prisoner of the news photo and its influences: by the end of World War I, the news photo was on the front page of the newspaper alongside the writing, and twentieth-century literary prose and literary journalism would have to become as descriptive and immediate as the photograph.

I think we're still operating under the tyranny of that, but I get out of it because I can't do it. I can't tell you what that woman, standing under the poplars at the end of day in the last light wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a purple robe, really looks like. All I can do is suggest that I'm an impressionist. There's freedom in impressionism, and with that freedom comes luck, because then, if your language has a kind of compensatory sweetness, musicality, energy, and rightness, literary consciousness unfolds and something larger than the writer occurs. That's where I get lucky. . . .