

Stephen Kuusisto's Sensory World

People who are sighted often miss out on just how much information can be gained through other senses, such as hearing, touch, and smell. People who are blind, however, come to rely on these other senses. And for them, the world can consist of a rich array of sounds, textures, and smells. The following excerpt from Stephen Kuusisto's memoir, *Eavesdropping*, vividly demonstrates just how opulent these non-visual sensations can be:

Maybe it was a Saturday. I remember that my parents were still sleeping. I had a plan and dressed quietly. When I was certain that no one was awake I slipped from the house. I loved to walk in the woods and follow the beams of light or depths of shade that fell between the trees. I remember that on this particular day I got lost while chasing light and found myself standing in front of the university's horse barn. I knew that somewhere in the cool space before me a horse was breathing. I stood in the door and listened to him breathe. He sounded like water going down a drain. Then I took one step forward into a pyramid of fragrances.

What a thing! To be a young boy smelling hay and leather and turds!

From his place in the dark the horse gurgled like water in the back of a boat.

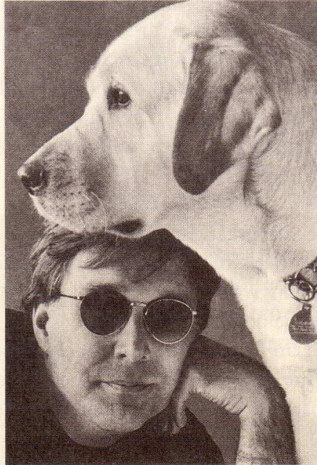
Mice scurried like beaded curtains disturbed by the hand.

I stood in that magical nowhere and listened to a full range of barn sounds.

I was a blind child approaching a horse!

Behind me a cat mewed.

Who would guess that horses sometimes hold their breath?



Stephen Kuusisto and his guide dog Corky.

The horse was eying me from his corner.
Then two cats were talking.
Wind pushed forcefully at the high roof.
Somewhere up high a timber groaned.
My horse was still holding his breath.
When would he breathe again?
Come on boy!
Breathe for me!
Where are you?
I heard him rub his flank against a wall.
Then I heard him breathe again with great deflation!
He sounded like a fat balloon venting in swift circles.
And then I imitated him with my arm pressed to my mouth.
I made great, flatulent noises by pressing my lips to my forearm.
How do you like that, horse?

He snorted.

I noticed a ringing of silence. An insect traveled between our bursts of forced air.

Sunlight warmed my face. I was standing in a wide sunbeam. I was in the luminous whereabouts of horse! I was a very small boy and I had wandered about a mile from home. Although I could see colors and shapes in sunlight, in the barn I was completely blind.

But I had made up my mind to touch a horse.

Judging by his breathing, his slow release of air, that sound of a concertina, judging by this I was nearly beside him. And so I reached out and there was a great wet fruit of his nose, the velvet bone of his enormous face. And we stood there together for a little while, all alive and all alone. (Kuusisto, 2006, pp. 7–8)

Source: Kuusisto, S. (2006). *Eavesdropping*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. Reprinted by permission.