CHAPTER 6

THE POETICAL SUBJECTIVITY OF KUUSISTO

Stephen Kuusisto’s writings embody a self-conscious art of blindness in two ways, which are not separate but contiguous – the art of living as a blind person, and the art produced in and through blindness. This position of Kuusisto with regard to blindness is different from the positions taken by Borges and Hull. While the former deals with blindness in his art after the aesthetic turn to experience during the late 1950s (discussed in Chapter 2), his writings still display ambiguous feelings about his blindness, bordering on a largely melancholic stance. The latter grapples with the reality of living ‘with blindness’ in his two diaries, and in the book on the Bible; at times gaining insights into his existence, and coming upon moments of aesthetic experience. However, we do not perceive an art of blindness in his writings. Kuusisto, on the other hand, explores the experience of blindness employing a narrative aesthetics that is deeply aware of the artistic potential of this way of being-in-the-world. The two memoirs, Planet of the Blind (1998) and Eavesdropping: A Life by Ear (2006), embody an aesthetic shaped by sensory experience. The first is a long narrative with “a dramatic scenario” (Eavesdropping xi), and the second is a collection of twenty-nine essays called “auditory postcards or tone poems” (Eavesdropping xii).

The memoirs tell the story of how Kuusisto’s difficult journey embodies a movement over several years from an outright rejection of blindness to embracing it. Early in the first book, the memoirist writes, “Raised to know I was blind but taught to disavow it, I grew bent over like the dry tinder grass” (Planet of the Blind 7). It is worth comparing the previous statement with the following one from the preface to the second book: “Happily I no longer crave recognition as a sighted person. At fifty I’ve learned
how to be as much of myself as possible” (*Eavesdropping* ix). While the former statement clearly indicates that Kuusisto’s long-term rejection of blindness is strongly influenced by his parents’ and society’s negative attitudes towards blindness, the latter leaves the reader with no doubt that the memoirist has grown into a complete blind person. When both memoirs are taken together, they tell the story of his development from the state of disavowal to the total acceptance of blindness, together with its artistic potential as well as the world that it creates. The works harness the metaphoric power of sensory imagery to render the richness of Kuusisto’s experience comprehensible to the reader. The narrating voices in the works are those of the grown-up Kuusisto, who has come to terms with his blindness. Hence, the books may be considered to be the fruition of the blind artist’s labours. His narrative technique involves presenting the viewpoint of the experiencing self, and the analysis of the writing self, in a complementary fashion. We may describe this method citing a statement from Penelope Scambly Schott’s review of *Planet of the Blind*: “Memoirs are about seeing—what you saw then, and how you see it now” (218). Although Kuusisto takes forward the story in a chronological order, he alternates between various times in his life to build the narrative. Describing a particular episode or occurrence, he narrates incidents from either the future or from the past to illustrate a point relevant to that time of his life. In tight prose writing that combines narrative, poetry, and reflection, he tells his multifaceted story. Another important feature of the narratives is that, in them, Kuusisto connects his experiences to those of other disabled persons and artists who lived in the past, or who are still living whenever relevant (*Planet of the Blind* 22, 30-1; *Eavesdropping* 3, 9, 14). In this way, he indicates that his experience is part of the wider world, and not unique or isolated.
6.1. Questions and Answers Regarding Blindness

_Eavesdropping_ is a book which grows out of a conversation about the lack of eyesight, and the worth of travelling as a blind person at a talk Kuusisto delivers to blind people in Boston:

Suddenly a woman called out from the back of the room. Her voice was fierce. “Why travel anywhere if you can’t see?” she asked. Her words seemed to linger in the air. . . . This woman was in her mid-fifties; she’d gone blind from diabetes; her husband had recently passed away—her question was complex and it had a good deal to do with faith. What would the future hold? What is the use of going forward? Without eyesight aren’t we selfless in the worst sense? How can one live in a world without independence or the daily therapy of sight-seeing? (x)

Let us rephrase the above dilemma slightly differently: what relationship can the newly blind person develop with his or her surroundings, and more fundamentally, what relationship does blindness make possible and necessary between self and world? The newly-blind woman’s self-conception is almost identical to the one held by Hull when he “began to sink into the deep ocean” ( _Touching the Rock_ 12; _On Sight_ 9) and started facing the reality of being blind. This becomes clear by the woman’s linking of sight with the self. The desperate question asked by her is similar to the ones dealt with by Hull in his books on blindness. The validity of our (metaphysical) rephrasing of the newly-blind woman’s question to Kuusisto is proved by the subtitle of the memoir: _A Life by Ear_. The question she raises has philosophical implications for the way the blind person lives and moves in the world. This book constitutes the answers Kuusisto offers indirectly, in the form of essays, to his interlocutor at the meeting (who finds herself
where Hull was as a newly-blind person), and to other readers about “living or travelling by ear” as a veteran blind person (x).

6.2. An Aesthetic Dialectic

*Planet of the Blind* and *Eavesdropping* present two startlingly different pictures of Kuusisto’s life as a child and adolescent (which constitutes only a part of their narrative content). The former narrates his denial of blindness and the painful lengths to which he goes to ‘pass’ (see below for an explanation of the term) as a sighted boy in a world obsessed with the normal – in this case, sighted – body. The latter offers essays – appropriately called “auditory postcards” – which bring out in careful detail the boy’s (and later, man’s) life listening to the varying sounds of the natural world\(^1\) and popular songs of the 1950s and 60s. Of particular importance here are two memories\(^2\) which Kuusisto does not narrate in *Planet of the Blind*, but does so in two early essays in *Eavesdropping*.\(^3\) I suggest that the author remembers the said details after embracing his blindness, and welcoming his own blind self into his life. He is able to utilise the creative power that is released when he has wandered “the galleries of self, pausing to read the hard words about failure, incompleteness, and self-forgiveness” (*Planet of the Blind* 123). This difference between the artistic approaches adopted by the author in the two memoirs indicates his differing narrative plans for them. Thus, the two works enact a significant dialectical movement in Kuusisto’s life and art, which is motivated by the related questions of selfhood and aesthetics.

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1. They suggest to the memoirist the richness of musical experience.

2. These are of listening to birdsong and other remarkable sounds in the environment as well as of the boy’s declaration of his blindness to the world through the act of playing in his class the talking book of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Here ‘talking book’ refers to an audio book.

3. I deal with this point in detail in Chapter 7 (249-60).
6.3. Being Bound with the Minute Threads of Normalcy

Born “three months prematurely, in March 1955” (*Planet of the Blind* 5), and incubated in an “overly oxygenated” incubator, Kuusisto is left with the visual impairment called retinopathy of prematurity (where his “retinas were scarred”) and additional ophthalmic complications, viz. Nystagmus and strabismus. This impairment foregrounds his body in its difference from that of a ‘normal’ person. Although in childhood he has barely enough sight in his left eye (he cannot focus the other eye) to read “dark and large” print from very close, he is definitely a blind person (from birth) “who possess[es] some marginal vision” (*Planet of the Blind* 6). It is in this context that the memoirist says that blindness should not be regarded “as an either/or condition” in which the person “[either] sees or does not see.” Instead, his blindness may be described as a “series of veils” constituted by “heliographic distortions of sunlight or dusk” (*Planet of the Blind* 5). He experiences what he calls, with humour, “a mad, holy vision, the repeated appearance and disappearance of the physical world” (*Planet of the Blind* 7). Thus, his sensorium is characterised by abstract shapes and colours that are unreliable, “disturbing” (*Planet of the Blind* 6), and blinding. Kuusisto repeatedly mentions the effects of his residual vision in both his memoirs. When, for instance, he says, “Even today I live in the ‘customs house’ between the land of the blind and those who possess some minor capacity to see” (*Planet of the Blind* 11), it is clear that he brings the narrative (which, at this point, is dealing with his childhood) to the present to show how the thread of the experience of residual sight runs through his life. This is also made clear when he explains, in the preface to *Eavesdropping* (ix-xiv), what his “own version of blindness” entails: “Blind people who have this condition [retinopathy of prematurity] often see the world in fragments. . . . This kind of seeing is both
beautiful and worrisome” (xii). As the foregoing words suggest, residual vision shapes his particular subjectivity.

Kuusisto characterises his boyhood as dominated by the two-fold behaviour of denial of blindness, and the need to ‘pass’ (that is, to appear) as a sighted child. Simi Linton explains ‘passing’ as follows:

Disabled people, if they are able to conceal their impairment or confine their activities to those that do not reveal their disability, have been known to pass . . . passing may be a deliberate effort to avoid discrimination or ostracism, or it may be an almost unconscious, Herculean effort to deny to oneself the reality of one’s . . . bodily state. The attempt may be a deliberate act to protect oneself from the loathing of society or may be an unchecked impulse spurred by an internalized self-loathing. . . . When disabled people are able to pass for nondisabled, and do, the emotional toll it takes is enormous. (166)

We see that Kuusisto engages in ‘passing’ (that is to say, he conceals his disability) over many tormenting years, from childhood to the age of thirty-nine (Planet of the Blind 171), for the reasons mentioned in this passage. He confirms this when he writes about how his mother, motivated by “a horror of blindness” (Planet of the Blind 14), enforces on him from a very tender age the attitude of rejecting his disability. In Eavesdropping, he offers a related reason for his persistent effort to ‘pass’ as a sighted boy: “Like many children with disabilities, I was eager to be a part of the world around me and capable of denial if denying my blindness allowed me to join in the activities of normal children” (ix). Besides the desire to protect himself from discrimination and
loathing, the wish to participate in the activities of “normal” children encourages him to engage in this behaviour. Thus, he shuns life as a blind person in accordance with his mother’s attitude towards the disability:

I am going to be dimly sighted and normal. According to her, I will damn well ride a bike and go sledding, and do whatever the hell else ordinary children do. To her the prospect of the white cane denotes the world of the invalid. But I need that cane. I am about to begin an impossible contest with the sighted world, a display that today is known as “passing” or more correctly, “trying to pass.” (Planet of the Blind 14-5)

This passage encapsulates the clash between the blind person and the overwhelming sighted world which dictates norms to the blind regarding the ‘right’ way to live and so forth. Kuusisto explains that in his strenuous attempts ‘to pass’ as a sighted boy, he is egged on by his mother’s good intentions: “I begin this eccentric waltz with my mother’s own fears that blindness means a reduced life for her child. But behind every facsimile of accomplishment lies that word, like a corset with a thousand minute laces, each one a thread of normalcy” (Planet of the Blind 42). Although his mother strongly desires that her son should lead a full life, and in this light considers blindness as a limiting condition, the memoirist suggests that her attitude of rejection towards his disability was conditioned by normative ideas about life and embodiment. The struggle that he goes through due to these societal (and maternal) demands for normalcy, his attempts to fulfil them, and his final embrace of the blind self, form the major themes of Planet of the Blind.
This devaluation of the “blind self,” which the memoirist calls “that blackened dolmen” (*Planet of the Blind* 7) with reference to his self-conception at the time, is enforced on the disabled individual from above, as is clear from the foregoing discussion, by society and his/her family. It is with this complex normative “web of beliefs” (Hagberg 123) as the background that Kuusisto comments,

I couldn’t stand up proudly, nor could I retreat. I reflected my mother’s complex bravery and denial and marched everywhere at dizzying speeds without a cane. . . . The very words *blind* and *blindness* were scarcely to be spoken around me. I would see to this by my exemplary performance. My mother would avoid the word, relegating it to the province of cancer. (*Planet of the Blind* 7)

Thus, from childhood onwards, he learns how not to be (and works hard not to appear as) a blind person in the eyes of the sighted world and for himself, living according to the following scarring thought: “Who would choose to be blind?” (*Planet of the Blind* 8). He is very active, doing the things that sighted boys (and later, adolescents and men) do in order to ‘be’ a sighted person in a ‘normal’ world.

**6.4. Boyhood and Adolescence**

The memoirist writes that when, “at the age of three,” he was given his “first pair of glasses,” he did not want to wear them. So “I carried them in secret to the garden and buried them under the wide leaves of a rhubarb plant” (*Planet of the Blind* 7). This (almost strange) action suggests that the small boy had already come under the influence of normative beliefs concerning blindness. The problem is highlighted by the encounter the boy and his father have with an “old crone” when the family lives in Helsinki, Finland. When the three-year-old boy and his father are “climbing the stairs . . .
. in our apartment building,” the former becomes an “object of scrutiny” for “a severe old woman” (Planet of the Blind 10). This woman points out that the boy is blind (I shall write more about becoming an exhibit to be watched later in this chapter). This angers him. Kuusisto writes, “I was not quite sighted; I wished to never be blind. Didn’t this old crone know that I’d buried my first pair of glasses under the rhubarb? This will be a nearly lifelong puzzle for me: Am I not a sighted boy? Am I not attempting bravely to see? What must I do?” (Planet of the Blind 10-1). The incident shows that, even at the tender age of three, he knows the dilemma of a blind person: how to live in the sighted world? Although he is blind, and his marginal vision does not aid him in any way, he refuses to regard himself as a blind boy (person), and the memoirist indicates the child’s thought: “I wished to never be blind.” This is because, as Kuusisto states in the preface to Eavesdropping, “I was ashamed of my disability throughout my childhood and this sadness was compounded by my mother’s militant refusal to use the words ‘blind’ or ‘blindness’” (xii). The three questions concluding the above quote concerning the boy’s helpless anger at the words of the “old crone” speak volumes about the normative, sighted world’s hold on the minds of the blind: “Am I not a sighted boy? Am I not attempting bravely to see? What must I do?” It is this tyrannical requirement to “bravely” attempt to live like ‘normal,’ sighted people that impoverishes the lives of the blind.

When the Kuusistos return to the United States, the boy’s mother has to struggle to enrol her blind son in an ordinary school. The memoirist writes, “[M]y mother decides to enrol me in public school instead of an institution for the blind and finds both consternation and disapproval from school and staff officials” (Planet of the Blind 12). Moreover, some parents of ‘normal’ children, due to their ignorance of disability,
prevent the disabled boy from playing with their children. This is because they “think I might break during ordinary play” (Planet of the Blind 12). However, this concern appears to be only an excuse, because when the boy asks them, “‘Why don’t you tell them to play with me?’” (Planet of the Blind 13), they avoid giving any answer to the child. This is probably because they do not want their children to play with a disabled boy. Thus, we get glimpses of societal prejudice against the disabled, and of the pressure brought to bear upon the mother and child to govern themselves due to the latter’s disability.

The episode of the painful encounter between the blind social worker and Kuusisto’s mother demonstrates the complex choices the disabled and their families are faced with while trying to live life in a world not prepared to accept disabled members. The social worker advises the mother to enrol her blind son in a school for the blind because, at such an institution, he would learn the life skills necessary for the blind. That would include Braille, and how to use the white cane, which he would never be able to acquire in “the public schools of the day” (Planet of the Blind 14). The mother lives in denial of her son’s blindness, and wants him to live as a ‘normal’ person with his residual sight. As suggested earlier, she is impelled by the desire for her son to have “the same kind of social experience” (Planet of the Blind 14) as other, non-disabled children. Contrasting the schooling system available for the blind in the 1960s with those functioning today, the memoirist writes that life for blind and visually impaired children in America of the 1960s and 70s was extremely limiting. Out of necessity, they had to attend segregated institutions devoted to educating and giving them vocational training instead of gaining full exposure to social life. Kuusisto writes as follows about his mother’s decision: “Hers is an urgent and primitive choice, one that today would be
unnecessary as blind children regularly attend public schools and receive cane, travel, and Braille lessons at the same time” (*Planet of the Blind* 14). Be that as it may, his mother decides that her son should attend a public school, and her resistance to the white cane proves to be a terrible deprivation for the boy. As we will see, he grows up rejecting his blindness due to shame, thus shunning his disabled self for several years.

So when the boy starts attending the public school, the memoirist writes, “I am without assistance” (*Planet of the Blind* 18). Due to the lack of “special education standards” to get schools to accommodate blind and visually impaired students (and guide them in this task), his school does not provide him with educational facilities adapted to the needs of visually impaired children such as Braille lessons and “large print materials.” As a result, he cannot follow classes: “My fingers slide in all directions. I clasp and unclasp the lid of my pencil box, trace the scars on my desk” (*Planet of the Blind* 18). The foregoing narrative statement describes the blind child’s reaction to the inability to understand lessons without suitable help. The adult memoirist’s retrospective description brings out the bewilderment and boredom of years ago very well. In the following passage, he stresses the boy’s isolation in class: “While the class reads aloud, I watch the spirals of hypnotic light that ripple across my eyes when I move them from side to side. I do not belong here. My little body at this desk is something uncanny – a thing that belongs in the darkness and that has been brought to daylight” (*Planet of the Blind* 20). These words indicate the blind boy’s dilemma about sight (which the child cannot articulate), and feeling of not belonging to the sighted world of school, which is well brought out by the thought that his “little body . . . belongs in the darkness.” His form of blindness means that he is exposed to the “hypnotic light” of “daylight,” which renders him vulnerable. Under such
circumstances, the little boy cannot restrain himself from talking during class hours. The teacher, Mrs. Edinger, catching him whispering to a child sitting beside him, immediately inscribes his name on “a Photograph above the blackboard [of] two chubby infants swaddled in diapers” (Planet of the Blind 17-8). The ashamed boy, “swollen shut” (Planet of the Blind 18), has to endure his classmates’ derisive laughter. Another method the teacher adopts to get the students to do their work efficiently results in Kuusisto’s mistreatment by a classmate. The memoirist describes the pedagogic method: “Students who finish their in-class assignments before the rest will henceforth be ‘astronauts’—permitted to orbit the classroom and peer over the shoulders of others” (Planet of the Blind 19). A boy who finishes his work before the rest of the children takes advantage of the blind Kuusisto’s inability to read print, and makes fun of him. Thus, the teacher fails to realise that such inducements to get the children to obey may cause unnecessary pain to those who are slow, and require help and support.

Despite the difficulties the boy has to undergo, most crucially the agony of having to rely entirely on his damaged sight, he gains some knowledge in school: “[I follow] lessons without usable print or concrete numbers. . . . I follow the teacher’s words and make a kind of caged progress, trapped as I am in my own neural nets” (Planet of the Blind 19). In the absence of facilities such as Braille, usable print, or concrete numbers, the boy listens to the teacher’s words and makes limited progress. Listening and “repetition” (Planet of the Blind 19) allow blind children to acquire a surprising amount of information and details in the classroom, and from their environment (I write this based on personal experience). In Eavesdropping, Kuusisto stresses the importance of listening in the classroom: “[I] listened to teachers when I
was a small boy and developed an auditory version of what was happening around me. Unable to see the chalkboard or read a standard book, I learned by necessity how to hear both for content and splendour” (xi). We see that Kuusisto was, even as a child, keenly aware of the power of listening. Further, he receives unexpected encouragement and additional academic help from Mrs. Edinger, who we learn, is a black woman. The memoirist recognises that the marginalised status both of the teacher and of himself as a blind boy helped in bringing them close to each other. Mrs. Edinger, he writes, has “noticed my determination and has figured out that I have a photographic memory” (Planet of the Blind 20). This motivates her to give him additional lessons.

However, the heroic act of reading with one eye causes the boy great physical agony. Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of what he calls “an example of morbid motility” (117) or, in other words, of difficulties faced by a person with a nervous disorder is important in the discussion of problems encountered by blind persons (due to their impairment) in doing their work. Kuusisto writes:

I have to hold my book an inch from my eye and try hard to hold the hot, spasming muscle. The exhaustion of this is like the deep fatigue drivers feel after being too long on the road. The ordinary effort of reading is, for me, a whole-body experience. My neck, shoulders, and, finally, my lower back contract with pain. The legally blind know what it is to be old: even before the third grade I am hunched and shaking with effort, always on the verge of tears, seeing by approximation, craving a solid sentence. (Planet of the Blind 21)

The passage vividly brings out the sheer corporeality of the boy’s experience of reading.
with his damaged “left eye” (*Planet of the Blind* 6). As Merleau-Ponty points out, we find here that Kuusisto’s visual impairment has “its repercussions on the main body of experience and open[s] the door to its disintegration;” that is to say, it affects “the whole of consciousness.” This happens because “the life of consciousness . . . is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ . . . which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility” (Merleau-Ponty 157). So blindness results in a different mode of being, which the boy is not able to accept and make his own. We may contrast the blind boy’s painful physical state of being “hunched and shaking with effort” while attempting to read with “the uprightness of the [blind] man” (*Planet of the Blind* 1, 171) portrayed in the prologue, and towards the end of the memoir. This interpretative exercise gives us a paradoxically quasi-visual image of the movement in Kuusisto’s self-conception from one who was ruled by norms dictated by the non-disabled world to one who is at home ‘with his blindness’ in the world (or planet) of the blind.

As Kuusisto is able to keep up with the class due to help from Mrs. Edinger, he is treated better by his classmates. He is now able to maintain the appearance of not being blind. However, ironically, the next recorded experience belies the child’s sense of achievement, and firmly shows him that he is still only “blindo” – a weak boy to be made fun of – to his sighted peers. “[A] boy I think of as a friend,” writes the memoirist, harasses him at school by stealing his glasses. “More than thirty years” after “that moment,” Kuusisto still feels “disconcerted by what it felt like to belong so thoroughly to other people, to be, in effect, their possession” (*Planet of the Blind* 21). The panic and confusion he experiences in this situation literally make him an exhibit. (This feeling of having become a spectacle is familiar to most persons with disabilities.)
Thus, the memoirist describes the corporeal experience of the boy in order to bring out the social dynamics of disability, which allows him to integrate that experience of humiliation into his subjectivity.

By depicting the classroom as a microcosm of society, for such is true in the case of children, Kuusisto shows how teachers and parents are responsible for the continuance of prevalent attitudes towards the disabled. This becomes abundantly clear when, in accordance with normative preferences, the blind boy’s doctor and parents make him wear “glasses fitted with telescopes” (*Planet of the Blind* 22). This leads to his being harassed with labels such as “Martian” and “Magoo.” The popular representation (in a magazine) of Mr Magoo, who is a blind fool, belongs to “a long line of comic blind characters playing the role of the sighted man” (*Planet of the Blind* 22). The harassment may be interpreted as an indulgence by those who subscribe to the ideology of the normal body (popular with the non-disabled) to objectify the blind. “When Mr. Magoo drives a car,” explains the memoirist, “America’s television audience experiences the same comic frisson as Hauy’s villagers who laughed at the beggars wearing cardboard spectacles. But the blind are seldom depicted as being more than this. They are blind fools, or conversely, they’re suddenly cosmic” (*Planet of the Blind* 23). Here Kuusisto draws the reader’s attention to the representational aesthetic that conceives of disabled characters either as freaks or as heroes. As a result, disability is perceived as the most important identity marker in the lives of disabled persons, which obscures other aspects of their personalities, and reduces them to their disabilities (as happens to the memoirist at school). When the ophthalmologist ignores him as a person, and talks “about [him] in the third person” (*Planet of the Blind* 28), we see how the blind child is reduced to merely an object of study as a patient. Thus, Kuusisto
sketches the direct consequence of the medical model of understanding persons with disabilities, according to which the impaired individual must be normalised by repairing his/her body.

In contrast to the foregoing painful experiences, Kuusisto writes next about activities which shape his self ‘in blindness.’ Following his mother’s decision, he discovers typing at school, and it quickly becomes a means of fostering creativity: “Soon I am left to writing stories. . . . Because I’d been reading Kipling on records, I fashion a primeval forest and fill it with conversational birds. Sometimes I write about submarines, sinking ships, people lost at sea” (Planet of the Blind 29). Now that he has a suitable instrument in the typewriter to develop the art of expression, he takes early steps in that direction. The memoirist relates an anecdote about Borges to suggest the crucial importance of practising literature: As “the blind poet who lived in Buenos Aires” and a “woman friend” (Planet of the Blind 29) walked together in the city, the former “would narrate . . . funny, involuted, decorous stories about the world that he could invent as a means of navigating the hours. The stories were an amusement, the intellectual equivalent of card playing, a pictorial solitaire that could be shared, a demarcation of art and of mental health” (Planet of the Blind 30). Clearly, these stories which arise from the isolation of blindness enable the boy and the poet to not only amuse themselves and their friends, but also to fashion new worlds. Thus, Kuusisto draws a strong connection between his own storytelling activity as an eager boy on the typewriter, and Borges’s stories, casting art as a means of preserving sanity and the self. The world of literature, the sound of voices on the radio, and music are Kuusisto’s companions as an isolated child with no boyhood to speak of in the blind condition. We read about Mary Day, a blind woman in 19th-century America, through whose story
Kuusisto emphasises the power of art to shape the self. He says, with regard to the “music lessons” she gladly took in the “blind asylum” where she was living, that “they gave her the means to shape her blindness, her days could become a tapestry of sounds” (Planet of the Blind 30). This brief sketch exemplifies a significant feature of the narrative method employed in the memoir, namely the technique of compressing memories and stories about other blind people into vivid vignettes.

The memoirist describes in minute tactual detail the discoveries he makes as a boy in his grandmother’s house. It is “a long-in-the-tooth yellow Victorian” which reminds him of a “four-story museum” (Planet of the Blind 31). The house is located in New England, and is a place where the boy finds playmates in his cousin Jim and his sister Carol. For one who is denied the pleasures of playing with other children, it is no coincidence that he discovers a few joys of blindness in the solitary attic of his grandmother’s house while enjoying a game of hide-and-seek with the two children:

There are doors in the attic that open into the deepest closets, places of rich concealment, rooms without lights, rooms that have never had lights. In here I am not at a disadvantage: my body is like a falling silk scarf in the blackness... My hands are actually breathing. This is pleasure: to be blind in the museum dark, unwrapping and holding.

(Planet of the Blind 32-3)

Moving stealthily in the darkness of the attic, exploring the innumerable strange objects he discovers in there, the boy comes to realise the pleasures that the non-visual world offers. Away from this exciting world that is friendly to him as a blind boy, the “daylight world,” in sharp contrast, reduces him to a tormented loiterer “on the
sidelines” (Planet of the Blind 33) of school life.

With the passing of time – now he is in “the fourth grade,” and his schoolmates use the f-word to abuse him – he has grown despondent due to exclusion and loneliness. He eats uncontrollably to comfort himself: “With no exercise plan, I’ve ballooned. By the fourth grade, I am buried in my girth, fat with anguish and defeat” (Planet of the Blind 33). The memoirist writes that as this lonely, excluded boy, he would spend his nights feeling ugly and inferior (Planet of the Blind 34). He has internalised the social rejection resulting from people’s negative attitudes towards the blind, and towards those who are fat. After a particularly stinging, humiliating experience in class, the narrator describes the helpless vulnerability of the blind boy:

More laughter. I stumble into the hallway like a child who has wet his pants. For refuge I have the nurse’s office, where I lie in the dark like Tutankhamen. My mask is a cold cloth. There are headaches that spread from my skull to my stomach. My entire body is uninhabitable. I have backaches from leaning and straining to see. The heat inside my body is oppressive: I’m parched, clogged. Never have I been so thirsty. (Planet of the Blind 43)

Under the hammering impact of societal pressure (or power), it is difficult to explain the psychological reason(s) for someone who is disabled to give in to the desire ‘to pass’ even if it leaves him or her exhausted and broken. We may say that it is impelled by the person’s nature of being a social animal. This gives other non-disabled people the power (and ability) to reduce that person to a palpitating wreck. Kuusisto moves into his teens, still hungering to see.

Using a nimble method of telling his story, with the help of which he weaves
ideas and memories born of association, Kuusisto narrates, how as a child, he read (or listened to recorded) books voraciously: “I stayed alone in rooms, listening as a daily ritual, hardening my memory, making my tongue sharp.” However, his immersion in language increases his desire to see: “My appetite for seeing is fed by lingo as vanilla” (Planet of the Blind 40). His parents encourage him in his denial of blindness. Derisive peers force him to reject who he is – the words “the addiction to pass” are significant. The narrator asks, “Why can’t I tell him [his father] how little I’m seeing? What’s wrong with a life of color and light, inferences pouring through my skin like dream-water? How do you personalise darkness, make it yours, if you’re living in denial?” (Planet of the Blind 41). Here Kuusisto wonders why as a boy he was unable to figure out the value of his kind of blindness, which exposes him painfully to “colour and light,” and forces him to infer, as in dreams, the nature of the world around him. He recognises the suffering of the child, his inability to accept blindness, which state of self, as he realises later, would enable him to flourish.

This brings us to the question of sexuality. Kuusisto describes his sexual awakening by offering an early scene of masturbation. It is important to point out here that this requires visual excitement: “Blind Portnoy! This is what girls look like! Look at this! Its perfection! Curve of breasts, hair cascading! My God! I’m Quasimodo. Who would ever accept my passionate approach? How will I ever get close enough to see a girl’s face?” (Planet of the Blind 45). Here the memoirist indicates that the blind adolescent’s sexual expectations are shaped by sighted male values of ideal female sexual bodies, and the improbable depictions of pornographic perfection. He suggests the boy’s excited and despairing thoughts through the exclamatory throes of language. So, in the midst of his sexual thrill, he is discouraged by the thought of his own disabled
body’s yearning. The fix he finds himself in concerning girls and sex is well articulated in the following quote: “[D]esire is conveyed by a fixed eye. The steady eye makes one available, places us in the centre of a room. But my eyes would not hold still” (Planet of the Blind 51). Since he is caught in the sexual paradigm of the sighted world, we find here the dilemma faced by a blind person who is expected (forced) to behave according to social norms that favour the sighted. The blind boy is thus disabled by society, which does not accommodate his needs by providing accepted means of socializing with potential sexual partners.

As a teenager, Kuusisto encounters “a dozen blind men [who] sit at a table in a coffee warehouse” (Planet of the Blind 48) depicted in an 1885 photograph. Then the memoirist offers a history of the blind encompassing the civilizations of the world, which reveals various stereotypes used over time to characterise them: “Their one talent was their compensatory payment from God—all human feats of memory or articulation became the proof of a divine intervention. As a result, the blind have appeared throughout history as bearers of divine judgment. . . . The coffee drinkers are descended from a vast and powerful clan” (Planet of the Blind 49). The narrator says that the fifteen-year-old boy sat in an octagonal room (which had been built in the nineteenth century for the purpose of conducting séances) in the Kuusistos’ residence at Geneva, New York, and dreamt about the long line of blind people down the millennia (Planet of the Blind 48-50). This may suggest a recognition of the self as an inheritor of all that blindness entails personally and socially “throughout history” (Planet of the Blind 49). Thus, Kuusisto recognises historical continuity in the types of relationship existing between various societies and the blind.

Then Kuusisto’s social life begins to change along with his self, which shrinks
from his blindness due to shame:

[I]n all the fractions of denial, I’m growing thinner. I conjure tutelary angels, seraphs who will spin me faster, burning my incompleteness into blackened sugar. . . . I tell my parents I have a stomach ache, and I do. I’m overflowing with blind shame, embarrassments of the flesh, humiliation of the demiurge: I cannot look you in the eye. . . . Weight is vanishing, and no one looks at my face. My identity is being solicitously honed. (Planet of the Blind 52-3)

Here the memoirist fuses the personal and the social aspects of identity through his corporeality. He talks about his “incompleteness,” “blind shame,” and the erosion of his self-worth because no one looks at his face, which means that no girl shows any interest in him.

Later, he grows dangerously thin: “Upstairs I’m free to be urgently thin, inverted around my disappearance. My shrinking is an abstraction, just as I am. Together we are a species” (Planet of the Blind 56). He starves himself as a means of giving in to his shame of the disabled self. So in the case of Kuusisto (as with Borges and Hull), we find a doubling of the self in the form of two abstractions, “my shrinking” and the blind “I” (Planet of the Blind 58). The memoirist indicates that both his obesity and anorexia are expressions of his shame as an ‘incomplete’ person. He experiences a diminished self-worth in the context of lacking a sex life (Planet of the Blind 58). Sexual hunger, and the blind teenager’s despair that he can attract no girl due to his disability, clash to produce a conflicted selfhood.

Later, just before he receives his first kiss from a girl, says Kuusisto of his friends and himself: “We are each seeking some kind of transparent nourishment. Moira
wants to act. Teddy needs a town where he can play the horn. I’m under the roof of
disability, an iron-coloured room. I belong to fruitfulness but have no idea that
blindness does too” (Planet of the Blind 59). Here we find that Kuusisto talks about
“fruitfulness” in blindness, which refers to his future as a blind poet and writer. The
image of his being trapped in a restrictive conception of disability suggests that the
narrating voice is that of the Kuusisto who is writing his memoir. Unlike the boy, the
writer clearly regards his blindness as “a rich way of living,” that is, it is a creative
force “rich as an oak tree or strong grapes” (Planet of the Blind 59). That the memoirist
writes of his future creativity along with his narration of his first kiss with a girl
suggests a link between fruitfulness and sexual fulfilment.

One day, Kuusisto is touched by his eleventh-grade English teacher, Mr
Morton’s suggestion to his class “to pray for me” (Planet of the Blind 60). After
ascertaining that the teacher and class were not being derisive of him, the teenager
responds in his mind to Mr Morton’s kind thought:

I wouldn’t be telling the truth if I said that at that moment I regretted
taking the acid. But I make a resolution that I should go to school. The
teacher said the truth. I haven’t been there in over a month. I’ve spent
days roaming around like a sleeping wanderer. Blind Huck. . . . I’m
trying to imagine the power of prayer—other people’s prayers. I don’t
quite get it, the connection between faith and reward in my life seems so
far apart. But lately, I have been eating without appearing to have made
a conscious choice. I don’t know what changed me, but to this day, the
Eucharist can start me weeping. (Planet of the Blind 61-2)

He has been shunning school because, for too long, teachers and his peers have
regarded him only as an inferior creature due to his blindness. Shame about his blindness also plays a major role in his behaviour. Kuusisto indicates that, touched by the teacher’s gesture, he has emerged from his eating disorder a changed person.

In 1973, Kuusisto enters college, but he still denies his blindness. He refuses to use the white cane for mobility, and soldiers on using his damaged eye to read the nearly inaccessible print. This behaviour and barriers erected in his path, such as “unreadable print in books, the dark dormitory room, the inaccessible library books” (*Planet of the Blind* 64), make up the familiar forces that disable him. However, he finds that reading books and poetry “are wholly necessary” (*Planet of the Blind* 65). He has a way with language, and he experiments with words to fashion something fruitful:

> I often go home from the library with the few words I’ve been able to see and absorb still vivid in my imagination. Alone, I take the words apart and rearrange them like Marcel Duchamp playing chess with his own private rules . . . exploring what words can do when placed side by side, I’m starting to build the instrument that will turn my blindness into a manner of seeing. (*Planet of the Blind* 66)

The idea that poetry is “the instrument that will turn my blindness into a manner of seeing” suggests the understanding that artistic expression allows the young man to “see” in a different way, that is to say, it is somehow visionary. This means that it enables the solitary, anguished disabled student to be with himself, and also find fruitfulness later in his life, as a poet.

Kuusisto writes that his experience of being read to by a young woman called Ramona has a liberating effect on his social life. As he listens to her inspiring reading of poetry, lying flat on his back in a quiet room of the college library, his sexual nature
is awakened: “Oddly enough, eros, syllables, and alchemy are facts, particularly in the lives of young people . . . my habitual shyness around women begins to fall away. Outside the library, I find myself conversing with my female classmates with ease” (Planet of the Blind 69). Thus, from the splendour of spoken poetry, we move with the blind man to matters of romance and sex. He finds love with an “altogether irreverent young woman” (Planet of the Blind 70) whom he calls Bettina:

I begin to cry. I who cannot see a woman’s face, who can’t look someone in the eye, I, I, who, what, never thought this could happen. I’m crying in earnest, copious sparkles. . . . Bettina refastens her dress, retrieves a tortoiseshell hair clasp, arranges it, sings very softly some lines from Yeats. . . . I’m unimaginably blessed. The crystallography of sharpened syntax, image, her voice behind it, wash of water on stones.

(Planet of the Blind 71)

The poetic passage shows that the blind young man discovers peace in himself for the first time in his sexual relationship with Bettina. However, even in his relationship with his first girlfriend, he needs to show that he can see: “Even while I know she knows I can’t see, I still need to appear sighted. Manage my steps. Look forceful. Race-walk in the white foam” (Planet of the Blind 78). Travelling with Bettina and other college mates in Greece, the young man experiences agonies due to his denial of blindness: “There is oil on the paving stones. I’m beneath a wave of light, my arms and legs so tense, I must look like a child wearing clean clothes. Hypersensitive, holding my breath, I try to navigate the narrow walks impossible for footing” (Planet of the Blind 79). He finds it terribly difficult to walk in the streets of Athens because he does not carry even a white cane. The foregoing passage acquires its semantic force when we recognise that
the memoirist is writing from the perspective of a blind man who knows how to use the white cane, and who has mastered mobility with the help of his guide dog. Due to his difficulties in walking and inability to see, he starts hating his blind self again (*Planet of the Blind* 84-6). He longs to accept his blindness and be at peace with himself by asking Bettina to take his hand, and guide him through the ruins and wherever else they might travel together. However, he cannot open his lips to utter the words about his disability (*Planet of the Blind* 86-7). Some years later, as a Fulbright scholar in Helsinki, when he finds love with a young woman named Karina, who is a student in the city, he experiences the same difficulty due to his rejection of the blind self. Then he and Bettina part ways because she chooses to take her own path in life. Kuusisto remarks that in the 1970s, both young women and men in the United States have the liberty to choose their fields, though the latter do not like this (*Planet of the Blind* 90).

On graduating “from college with highest honours in English and a cum laude diploma” (*Planet of the Blind* 91), Kuusisto must confront the uncertainty of what to do as a blind person. Wishing to study further, he has applied to graduate schools but is not certain about the results. He hates the thought of living in dependence on somebody else. So he decides, “Roaming in needy tandem with the others who can see is no substitute for a room of one’s own—this I understand. I need to live somehow, I don’t know” (*Planet of the Blind* 93). Here the intertextual allusion to Woolf’s essay with the crucial expression “a room of one’s own” spells out the one principle important to the selfhood of the blind man. Then he joins the graduate programme of the Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa (*Planet of the Blind* 95).
6.5. Struggles with Normativity: The Adult Years

Enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, although Kuusisto experiences considerable difficulty finding readers (peers who would read aloud his course material to him), he is eligible to receive “social security assistance” (*Planet of the Blind* 96), which translates into a stipend. Also, for the first time, he finds an organisation – the Commission for the Blind – that exists for the sole purpose of supporting the blind living in Iowa State. Thinking about the academic difficulties he experiences in the 1970s, the memoirist contrasts the situation then with the technological facilities for the blind, and a powerful legal tool to enforce rights of the disabled in the form of the Americans with Disabilities Act in the 1990s (*Planet of the Blind* 103). Barry, a “very secure, compact, cool” blind man who is comfortable using the white cane, works for the commission. Kuusisto accords him great respect: “He’s the second angel in my life after Mrs. Edinger, who thought I could read with a little extra effort” (*Planet of the Blind* 97). Barry understands the blind student’s disability like no one before in his life. Kuusisto writes, “Here’s a stranger who understands me: this is as beautiful and unforeseeable as the guest who appears in poems by Kabir, the guest who is really a god, but a god who has known you all along” (*Planet of the Blind* 98). Thus we see a mystical strain in the memoirist. Barry, whom he calls “my first ever blind adviser” (*Planet of the Blind* 97), tries to nudge him out of his long-ingrained denial of his own blind self by encouraging him to carry the white cane (*Planet of the Blind* 99-100). However, despite this help, Kuusisto persists in not carrying a cane, and rejects his being-in-blindness. As a child, he faced prejudice due to his disability, and was sidelined at school and outside. Therefore, he finds it agonisingly difficult now as a young man to come out of the trap of sightedness forced upon him. Kuusisto describes
his younger self as being “in my self-constructed village of St. Ovide, a blind man in a charade” (*Planet of the Blind* 103) because he still dances to the visual-normative tune played by the sighted world.

In Helsinki on a Fulbright scholarship for literature, Kuusisto continues to ‘pass’ as a sighted person. However, he feels the desperate need to articulate his problem of rejecting his blind self without feeling ashamed about it: “I desperately need words, ones that will point my sharp prow toward the great green water of my blindness” (*Planet of the Blind* 121). His loneliness in the secret of his disability makes him ripe for poetry: “And there is an ache in me like wind through an open door, a complete, unadulterated fervor for poems” (*Planet of the Blind* 119). He fools his companions about his useless sight, and puts on a show for himself, making believe that he is not blind. When he says that he must “act more sighted, seem jaunty and independent” (*Planet of the Blind* 122), there is a well-founded assumption that sight gives most people greater independence to move unhindered through the world. Blind persons need assistance – a dependence that is construed as diminishing their worth as human individuals.

Back in the United States after his Fulbright tenure, he meets with an accident to his reading eye while trying to read a book (*Planet of the Blind* 129). Stopped short in his foolish rejection of blindness, the young man undergoes a change. He starts considering his situation as a blind person who can no longer ‘pass’ in the world as a sighted member of the ‘normal’ world. Then he becomes a teacher of creative writing at his undergraduate alma mater – Hobart and William Smith College – and works there for “seven good years.” After losing his job “owing to campus cutbacks” (*Planet of the Blind* 136), he experiences the sharp anxiety of being unemployed. He discovers that it
is very difficult for a blind poet and creative writing teacher to land a job, and starts receiving social security disability payments (*Planet of the Blind* 138). Walking home one day, he barely escapes being run over by a car. At home, and badly shaken, he admits to himself, “I can’t get from one point to another. Can’t sleep. Can’t pray. Can’t find intelligence because I am without humility. I can barely bathe” (*Planet of the Blind* 142). He feels that he has no purpose in life. He recognises that he needs to acknowledge his blind self, and seek help. The memoirist wonders why he could not accept himself: “Why should it take so long for me to like the blind self? I resist it, admit it, then resist again, as though blindness were a fetish, a perverse weakness, a thing I could overcome with the force of will power” (*Planet of the Blind* 142). The younger self of the memoirist regards his blindness as a weakness that mars his dignity and manhood. Shaken by the close shave with death, however, he calls the New York State Commission for the Blind to seek help with walking (*Planet of the Blind* 143), which means that he wishes to be trained how to use the white cane.

When Kuusisto starts carrying the white cane, walking becomes much easier for him, and he develops a more engaged style of self. The memoirist’s words, when he describes his younger self’s acceptance of the white cane, reveal a change in his selfhood, thus signifying the recognition of blindness and the welcoming of the blind way of life:

He [Mike Dillon, an orientation and mobility expert] hands it to me, and I take it. Finally. Nothing terrible happens. He shows me how to use it, sweeping it from side to side like an electronic metal detector. The paradox is that my cane produces only casual regard. Cars slow for me. An old man on a porch calls out cheerfully. I’m wrapped in the silence
of discovery. I’m an acrobat walking on the wings of a biplane. I’m both light-headed and sombre, bending to a delicate task. Nothing terrible happens. I can be disabled. On this ordinary street. I need to touch my hair. I want to feel my own face. (Planet of the Blind 145)

The acceptance of his blind self is clearly evident in the above passage. Moreover, his desire to touch his hair, and feel his “own face,” also suggests a blind person’s behaviour, since these are gestures used to know oneself (a theme that has been dealt with by Borges and Hull). However, his acceptance of the disabled self brings with it the necessity of dealing with both societal prejudice towards the disabled and friendliness.

Kuusisto’s poetic musing about a planet of the blind in outer space (Planet of the Blind 147-48) strikingly communicates his desire not only for societal acceptance of the blind, but also for the peaceful coexistence of sightless and sighted people. This imagined planet is shaped by the blind, and its inhabitants experience blindness and the world in all its physical, aesthetic, and spiritual richness. With this conception, we realise that the blind man has reached a new phase in his selfhood. The cane is, for him, only a temporary instrument. He wants to walk and travel everywhere, and decides to be partnered with a guide dog. This realisation comes after a reckless driver almost mows down the narrator and his friend Mike: “There’s danger out here. I need something more powerful than the cane. I need eyes. Now that I’m out of the closet, blind for everyone to see, the cane has done all that it can do. I’m thinking: dog” (Planet of the Blind 150). He has accepted his blind self, and it is important to note that he articulates this acceptance with the phrase, “out of the closet,” which is used by homosexual persons to indicate that they are openly gay. now Kuusisto wishes to
unleash the traveller in himself by getting a guide dog. Therefore, he applies to Guiding Eyes for the Blind in order to achieve his goal of learning how to work with a guide dog, and attends the school. This is how he comes to find his canine companion Corky.

6.6. The Aesthetic of Listening

In the essay entitled “Tchaikovsky” (27-30) in *Eavesdropping*, Kuusisto narrates the camaraderie that he and his Finnish father share during the former’s childhood. So, one day, the latter takes the seven-year-old boy to a circus. The memoirist’s auditory description of walking with his father “through the circus tent” skilfully brings out the child’s association of similar memories by weaving them together. He remembers how adults never failed to comment on his physical appearance after his recent eye surgery: “[A]ll [those who saw him] had ways of suggesting that I was terribly unfortunate” (*Eavesdropping* 28). He recalls the “fat and bored” grunts of lions, the feel of his father’s hand as the two “walked arm in arm,” a question concerning the boy that a Russian clown asks the older Kuusisto in a “baritone voice” (*Eavesdropping* 29), and innumerable other sounds. In this essay, Kuusisto presents a striking (and jarring) contrast between two realms – the blind boy’s personal experiences, and social perceptions of him as a disabled person. This idea is brought out by the boy’s love of the Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s music. In fact, this contrast differentiates the two volumes of memoirs, the earlier *Planet of the Blind* and the later *Eavesdropping*, as recorded in both works, on the one hand, the personal experiences of Kuusisto and his understanding of them at the time of having them and at the time of writing them display a remarkable artistic subjectivity. On the other hand, the social attitudes he encounters as a blind boy and later as a man attest to the lack of awareness
of blindness and other disabilities among the members of twentieth-century American society.

Whereas in *Planet of the Blind* Kuusisto talks about the dilemma he faces (as a little boy, teenager, and man) of a blind person in a sighted world, and deals only secondarily with the joys of listening, he writes with great lyrical beauty about his listening life in *Eavesdropping*. He understands that “Knowing and savoring the world by ear is really an impressionistic subject” (*Eavesdropping* xi). The preface to the latter book gives a number of indications of the aesthetic of listening that he develops in the auditory essays contained in the collection. He first offers a description of how he experiences delight in travel: visiting “hundreds of cities” with his guide dog Corky, the man does “all the listening” as his canine companion “watch[e]s the traffic” (*Eavesdropping* x), thereby helping him to be safe. The memoirist provides a sketch of how the (fortunate) blind eavesdrop:

Veteran blind people know that it’s possible to sightsee by ear, for we do it all the time. Alone in unfamiliar hotel lobbies, we survey our surroundings and hear in the ambient curves of architecture a hundred oddities. We hear the movements of strangers; hear their laughter; hear pennies dropped in the Hilton’s fountain; the bristles of a shoeshine brush; the wings of a pigeon that has made its way indoors. The blind hear all this while they’re locating the chiming bells of the elevators.

(*Eavesdropping* x-xi)

The essayist describes the fruit of his hard labour over many years to develop his method of “living or travelling by ear” (*Eavesdropping* xi) in the passage. The rhythmic prose writing, with its emphasis on hearing, itself constitutes part of this achievement.
He elaborates further on the effort required to become a practiced listener: “This is how I navigate the world. I enter unfamiliar environments and I listen with everything I have, finding inchoate music in what happens around me” (*Eavesdropping* xii). We see his rich artistic and philosophical awareness in the recognition that auditory events have meaning, which idea is expressed when he combines the two elements, “treasures of sound and sense” (*Eavesdropping* xiv). So he says,

> Blindness often leads to compensatory listening [or “creative listening”] (if one has the fortune of a hearing life) . . . Blind people are not casual eavesdroppers. We have method. As things happen around us we reinvent what we hear like courtroom artists who sketch as fast as they can. . . . In reality I cannot see the world by ear, I can only reinvent it for my own purposes. But admitting this may make me lucky. I am free to daydream for survival or amusement. (*Eavesdropping* xi)

This passage reveals a poetic aesthetics that, in Kuusisto’s words in *Planet of the Blind*, has the power of water to sustain life (30). The essay “Dog-Man: The Action Figure” (*Eavesdropping* 63-8) demonstrates the truth of Kuusisto’s friend and guide-dog trainer Dave See’s words that “letting the dog navigate would free up my ability to listen” (*Eavesdropping* 67). The memoirist narrates the absorbing activity of listening in the streets as he walks with his dog. The writing pays close (phenomenological) attention to the sounds which carry meaning for the narrator and paint a vivid auditory picture in his consciousness. This character of his auditory journey becomes the foundation for his creative work.

> “The Invention of the Cell Phone” (*Eavesdropping* 69-79) is an essay that possesses a complex structure like a musical composition. It begins with the narrator
listening to non-digital, classical music, moves on to ugly sounds heard in airports and streets, also occasional beautiful sounds, and ends with him resolving “to live as much as possible like a man waking up” (*Eavesdropping* 79), according to a new aesthetic of listening he develops in the course of the essay. He dwells on the lonely art of listening, describing the ever-present quality of sound in mystical terms: “Birds scurry on my roof. The ears, I think, *are a dream we will never be rid of*. Forget serendipity—all the luck of chance music, sound, even the most ineffable sound is permanent—a continuous wave throughout creation” (italics as in the source, *Eavesdropping* 70). He displays an attunement to sounds in his environment, which isolates him from the sighted world. He traces the accumulative experience of listening to “chance sounds” (*Eavesdropping* 71) in a stream-of-auditory-conscious technique. He writes,

> Whitman could reconstruct a whole day from sounds remembered in sequence. This was my ambition, at least for the moment; an idea as ephemeral as a New Year’s resolution. . . . I sensed that one could listen to sounds in a sequence just like Whitman did. But how could I learn Whitman’s patience and live the whole day with open ears? The days turn ugly. . . . *Let the ugly be ugly. . . . And let the ugly be part of the daylong Whitman method.* (italics as in the source, *Eavesdropping* 71-72)

The narrator quotes the words of the Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski who was a Buddhist, and we find in his own attitude to the world and in his poetic method, as is expressed in the above passage, a Buddhist acceptance of the beautiful and the ugly with equanimity. He describes the method used by the composer John Cage, who creates music from sounds heard in city environments humming with machines. Kuusisto compares the
composer’s art to Whitman’s poetic method: “The modernist composer wants the ugliness of both the notes and the intervals to have meaning.” The memoirist makes this method his own, and pays attention to “the quick transformations in a soundscape, especially the ugly ones” (Eavesdropping 75) in order to mark the development of a situation, the change in human relationships, and important shifts in the modes of communication (Eavesdropping 73-4). His musical practice structures this essay. He bases it on an aesthetic principle that he has come to through long and careful reflection: “If you really want to hear with penetration and find its associated pleasures,” the narrator emphasises, “you must imagine you are waking up over and over again—waking on your feet, becoming aware in medias res” (Eavesdropping 75). Thus, the essay, and his other auditory postcards, develop an understanding of listening that links the blind person’s chance hearing of everyday sounds with the careful comprehension of (classical and other kinds of) music.

The two essays “Albatross” (Eavesdropping 121-28) and “Letter from Venice” (Eavesdropping 129-42) explore two kinds of difficulties that Kuusisto faces in his project of developing an aesthetic of listening: the former dwells on its abstractness, and the latter concerns itself with the puzzle of appreciating a world of visual forms as an ‘eavesdropping’ blind tourist⁴ in a city famous for its architecture. In the play about a Finnish man called Heiskanen and his friends that Kuusisto listens to in “Albatross,” the Finn finds himself living in a trailer park in Sweden, not liking his new home but confused and not appearing to consider returning to his beloved Finland (Eavesdropping 121). The albatross, the famous symbol from S. T. Coleridge’s long poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” here denotes the burden of a limiting culture.

⁴ I am trying to avoid confusion here. What I want to suggest by this phrase is expertise in listening.
The narrator calls this way of life ‘provincialism,’ and employs the trailer park as a symbol for this unsatisfactory culture of self (*Eavesdropping* 122). The reason for the narrator’s dissatisfaction with himself stems from his inability to figure out a way to listen to the sounds of the world intelligently (*Eavesdropping* 123). It is in this situation that his statements about his being “an exile from visual culture” and the desire to be “an advanced ear man” (*Eavesdropping* 122) assume importance. Although (as described in *Planet of the Blind*) the memoirist has embraced the blind self and its mode of being, he is seeking a way (with difficulty) to develop the art of listening which would enrich his life. Thus, he says:

> I had the feeling that I was both solitary and simple. The sensation had been building for months. I walked around without knowing exactly where I was going and gave myself over to chance soundscapes. Hardly anyone does this, and though you can find writing about soundscapes and the music of what happens, well it’s all rather abstract. Sitting in that theatre listening to Heiskanen and his friends, I recognised my true situation. I was declaring myself to be a rube. (*Eavesdropping* 124)

Kuusisto’s reflection upon the self, which is prompted by the aesthetic appreciation of the burlesque performance, illustrates Danto’s understanding of literature as a mirror that shows the reader an aspect of the self (63-4). The blind man’s concern relates to a sense that he has no method as yet of practising the art of listening to “chance soundscapes,” and comprehending “the music of what happens.” However, he thinks of Walt Whitman’s lines on listening (*Eavesdropping* 124), and finds in poetry solace and encouragement for this art as in the earlier essay entitled “The Invention of the Cell Phone.”
In “Letter from Venice,” Kuusisto comes “to Venice precisely because I was blind” since, as he explains, the city of canals “has endless distractions for the listener.” He wants to “prove it” (*Eavesdropping* 129) as he is interested in sightseeing by ear. However, he recognises the difficulty involved. Citing “the Florentine translator of Plato” Marsilio Ficino’s claim, “sound equals form,” he wonders if this is strictly correct: “[C]ould I, for instance, listen to the accidental music of a place like Venice while my wife explored the architecture? Could I find corresponding pleasure in merely listening?” While Ficino might mean by “form” Plato’s conception of ideal forms, the word that appears (“shapes”) in his description of the world as being “just shapes and sounds” (*Eavesdropping* 129) suggests that he means visual forms by that word. Kuusisto wonders if it is possible to equate auditory occurrences such as “the accidental music of a place [sound]” with “the architecture [of that place, that is, forms or shapes].” In the latter’s understanding, “form” clearly means a configuration or arrangement.

Kuusisto recognises the care required in developing “the art of hearing” (*Eavesdropping* 139) when he says, “[H]earing has only its acquired nobility, sequenced and slow” (*Eavesdropping* 130-31). This means that it takes time and patience to (learn to) hear intelligently. So he must, as he puts it enthusiastically, “wander in a delirium of sound in a vast city with no cars. I had to get lost there” (*Eavesdropping* 131). While walking around the city with his dog Corky, he stands on a bridge, and wonders about the possible answer to the newly-blind woman’s question (introduced in the preface): “*Guesswork and understanding create a knowing man,* I thought. *The subjectivity of Kant.* . . *Why go anywhere when you can’t see? Is it because the spirit of man and the world of form are identical? Because even with eyes
shut my spirit and the narrow alleys of Venice were one and the same?” (italics as in the source, Eavesdropping 135). Thus, his speculation yields a poetic/philosophical answer: it is the character of man’s being to be one with the world, and from that comes the desire to travel. However, he acknowledges the limits of sightseeing by ear: “There were limits to how much listening I could do without the consoling balance of visual description” (Eavesdropping 138). He accompanies his wife Connie to see Venice, and she describes in detail the various buildings and architecture of the city. He concludes that “the sounds of a place” cannot reveal physical form: they constitute different and equal realms, and the blind person must therefore rely not merely on sighted help, but on “a nobility of descriptive engagement” (Eavesdropping 139) to appreciate architectural beauty. He states, “Walking in Venice in long, slow circles, I realized that sound is to shape as thirst is to hunger. Ficino understood the nature of the meal” (Eavesdropping 140). So Kuusisto comes to understand the way in which sound can be equal to form through his walking exploration of Venice with help from Connie. The two types of phenomena are separate, and need to be understood by means of different sensory modalities. This fosters partnership between the blind and the sighted – here, between the memoirist and his wife. Instead of relying solely on the self “all our days” in most matters including that of art and becoming absorbed “in the geometry of self;” he feels that it is “all right” to appreciate the world through the eyes of another and “get lost in someone else’s wonder” (italics as in the source, Eavesdropping 141).

In “Letter from Venice,” as we have just seen, Kuusisto comes to the conclusion that, although he can appreciate the city partially by listening to the sounds in its streets and buildings, in the end he does need sighted help to see the beautiful architecture. But in “The Twa Corbies” (Eavesdropping 147-54), he narrates his experience of going
alone into the woods and enjoying the music ever-present in the natural world without any help. The essay starts off by presenting, through the figure of “a ten-year-old [boy] who plays too much Nintendo, but [who’s] now . . . delirious because he’s got the birds talking” (*Eavesdropping* 147), a contrast between the technological world of mankind, and the world of talking and singing birds. However, Kuusisto immediately bridges this gap by offering a harmonious incident involving the young boy: “I picture Yamaguchi Goro playing the shakuhachi flute in the woods of Nara. Music, even a child’s primal music, pays homage to the soundscape” (*Eavesdropping* 147). This seems to suggest that man, woman, and child can all participate in the soundscape of what we know as the natural world. The singing human voice as well as musical sounds produced by playing instruments enrich the narrator’s life.

The memoirist narrates memories of listening to music as a four-year-old boy – he was born in March 1955 (*Planet of the Blind* 5): “I spent the better part of the summer of 1959 listening to records or walking the woods, where I thought I might find the singing soldiers of the Red Army. Instead, I found the crows” (*Eavesdropping* 148). This combining of singing men heard on records from the Soviet Union, the woods of childhood in New Hampshire, and calling crows residing there becomes a memory path on which Kuusisto treads the way to narrating his “first job of the new summer,” that is, listening “to the crows all day” (*Eavesdropping* 148). He goes on to describe (in minute detail) how he sits under a tree for hours without moving, and listens to the music that first two crows, and soon many crows, produce – initially in friendship, and then in a mighty fight. The narrative moves between his childhood and present as a “blind man [in] the forest [listening] to the unmusical corvidae—the ugly crows” (*Eavesdropping* 150). Here he makes an important statement that connects his experience of listening to
birds in childhood and as an adult: “I’ve wriggled into a nest of childhood [in ‘a grove of spruce trees’]. As a visually impaired kid who played no baseball, I spent a thousand hours in places like this. I learned how to spin a story in a sheltered place. Writers are all orphans of a kind. . . . I learned my listening early. Knew the cicadas from the katydids. Knew starlings from grackles” (*Eavesdropping* 150). These words show that for Kuusisto the art of listening and the creativity of a storyteller are closely connected.

Two similar auditory events related both in the early essay on childhood “Victrola” (*Eavesdropping* 15-7), and in the present essay on listening in adulthood “The Twa Corbies,” strengthen the connection between them: “a noise like thrown buttons” (*Eavesdropping* 16) to describe hornets hitting a window, and “a sound like buttons thrown against glass” to indicate the rhythmic sounds made by “crows’ beaks” (*Eavesdropping* 151). This solitary listening in the forest that the present essay narrates not only contrasts with sightseeing in Venice, but it also represents the method that Kuusisto has fashioned in his practice of the art of hearing, which was a problem he faced earlier (*Eavesdropping* 124). Thus, the essay expresses the joy of being alive and blind in the woods, listening to the music of the crows (*Eavesdropping* 154).

“Skull Flowers” (*Eavesdropping* 155-56) is a brief, exquisitely written essay that treats the physical activity of listening. The narrator describes how he listens to birds going about their business, and provides a detailed commentary of the sensory process of hearing, which is jointly performed by the ears and the brain. He takes the two themes forward in a harmonic form as in a musical composition, weaving them into four movements (in two paragraphs): an introductory paragraph, a brief outline of how the perception of sound takes place, then a longer description in which the listener plays
an active role in channelling “molecular vibrations” (Eavesdropping 156) through the ears to the brain, and a very brief concluding section summarising the experience.

If “The Twa Corbies” explores the practice of the patient aesthetic of eavesdropping that Kuusisto has developed through the collection of essays, “Skull Flowers” revels in its rich potential. In the process, it outlines the corporeal self’s active involvement with his/her environment in performing the activity of listening. The narrator begins, “I sit all afternoon in a low-slung canvas chair and keep still because I can hear the blue heron tracking mice through pond grass. It is good just sitting here. My ears know the sky, the opaque and impossible air is filled with purple feathers martins catch mosquitoes even in a light rain” (Eavesdropping 155). Kuusisto listens with all his attention to the sounds of nature, and reinvents the world through this experience. These words bring out what is remarkable about his art: it is his “ears [which] know the sky,” and not his eyes, although he can catch sight of the opaque air filled with the purple feathers of the insect-hunting martins. His objective is to know as much of the world as is possible through his ears and brain (thereby not giving room for regret at the lack of sight). Thus, he describes the process whereby auditory experience is produced:

Human ears stand like dried flowers. The pinna, the twin flowers of cartilage, dry, without much blood, they hang out there, transparent crescent moons. The purple martin drops from the barn’s roof quick as a flying mongoose, dropping fast as gravel in a well. And air, obedient, moves with him, and molecules are pressured, and the vibrations rush into my dried flowers. The cartilage shakes, hot sounds reach the
brainstem faster than the purple martin can swallow the errant hornet.

*(Eavesdropping 155)*

This scene, although it includes a couple of images drawn from sight, possesses a rare power that literary language usually derives from the strength of visual observation. Here, however, we have auditory metaphors that build fittingly a picture of the experience through the sound of a fast-diving (“dropping fast as gravel in a well”) bird’s activity, and of audition itself in descriptions such as the following: “the vibrations rush into my dried flowers.”

We may thus conclude this chapter, wherein I have traced a trajectory in Kuusisto’s life from a rejection of his blindness and the consequent struggle manifested in the social and personal spheres of his existence to an acceptance of the blind self. *Planet of the Blind* and *Eavesdropping* also demonstrate the artistic development of Kuusisto as he fashions an aesthetic of listening, and achieves poetic and narrative fulfilment. In the next chapter, I will pull the threads of the thesis together by exploring some salient narratological issues that have been thrown up by the foregoing, multi-layered discussion.