

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN KUUSISTO

Ryan Van Meter

Ryan Van Meter: This essay begins in a fairly typical personal essay structure. But in just a few pages, it transforms, and a Finnish folk-tale takes over. Tell me about how this piece found its form — were you always working toward the Finnish tale — did you always know that's where the ending was?

Steve Kuusisto: I knew that by recounting books that had mattered to me in that period that something from my reading would direct me toward the valediction. But I did not know what it would be. Until I got richly, deeply down into the confusing multiple alleys of the broken narrative. And I call it a broken narrative because I'm essentially saying memory is not reliable, the stories we tell ourselves are arrangements, but are not conclusive, and that one arranges narratives in a kind of insistent and desperate search for finding what will suffice, as Wallace Stevens once famously said. Then I remembered, of course that I had been reading from *Kalevala*, the Finnish folk tale, and remembered how the Finns dealt with the unsolvable riddles of the dead. They simply create a kind of darkly funny intersection between our desire for words and what they conceived of as the dead's desire to hide those words. That struck me as a useful way to create a kind of counter-position to a contemporary writer's own struggle to find some satisfactory words for saying good-bye to someone. Words that had eluded me for a long time.

RV: To deliver a "valediction" is to say farewell. In this essay it seems as though you're saying farewell to your friend, but also to grief and perhaps even memory. What was behind the choice of "valediction" in your title?

SK: In the first paragraph, I mention standing at the edge of a winter field and I've received the news that a friend has died and the twilight is coming on and I'm having that complicated grief reaction where one realizes that the world as it's been known is turned upside down and that nothing will ever be the same again. And that's either tragic news for the individual or it's a position rich with possibility. It seems to me that the essay is, without narrative essentially, a kind of tribute to finding richer possibilities than mere

astonishment and grieving.

RV: He past away when you were nineteen. Tell me about living with that memory ever since. Is this something you always knew you would write about?

SK: I always knew that I wanted to write about it but couldn't find a way in. One of the things I believe lyric writing is about is that it furnishes us with a useful reaction or counter-position to the Victorian narrative. The Victorian narrative seeks to claim, almost in an Aristotelian way, a firm position about the tragic and looks for satisfactory explanations and closures. Certainly the poetry of modernism and even postmodernism suggests that the creative writer is not comfortable with assuming that much authority, and I think lyric prose has more room to both admit that the Victorian certainties are not so easily available to us while it can also play in the way of poetry and find some sufficiencies of feeling and intellect that can help us navigate those places that are seemingly inchoate, cryptic or impossible.

RV: What does "lyric" mean to you?

SK: It means that in crisis, in a moment of not knowing what will happen with your body or your mind or career or marriage or children — in moments of tremendous diffuse emotional and intellectual energy, one writes in short fragmentary ways that help recast the world and transform the chaos into meaning. I will always find Emily Dickinson far more interesting than, say, the poetry of Emerson or Hiawatha.

RV: Does that mean it isn't possible to write about contentment or certainty in the lyric form?

SK: I think you can write about contentment in the lyric form. Sappho is a great example. In more contemporary ways, one thinks of the prose of Wendell Berry or Mary Oliver. To be content doesn't mean that you're not still admiringly confused.

RV: You said you had to find your way in to "Valediction." What was that way in? Where did you start?

SK: I started with the memory of hearing of this friend's death and going outside to shovel snow, not knowing what else to do. And so it begins as anecdote, memory, but I have the advantage of some 35 years between that moment and now, so I have the ability to reflect on what I was thinking. What I'm asserting as the stream-of-consciousness in that young snow shoveler is essentially correct insofar that I was seeing quickly that I'll never have this friend again and already he's fading, and that's quite terrifying. And accordingly, the reading one does as an ardent and hungry young undergraduate suddenly takes on a steepness.

RV: What, if anything else, surprised you about writing this essay?

SK: One is that by the time I got to the Finnish folktale I realized that the essay would have no static conclusions about our relations to words. Initially I had hoped that would be the case, that I would come to a nice Victorian conclusion, but the folk tale freed me to understand that you simply walk around and realize words are notes played on a very dark instrument, and that the desire for certitude and easy closure will simply evade us. And that's okay. So that was a surprise. I think the second thing was I was pleased that the valediction dimension of this thing became morbidly funny. Thinking of the crazy Finnish shamans, the live one and the dead one, obviously creates a balance to what otherwise is essentially a rehearsal of grief. So as imaginative writing often will, it finds a way out of the dilemma. You can't count on that when you start.

RV: The form here is strikingly different from your memoir, *Planet of the Blind*. What determines style and form for you — the subject or your understanding of a certain experience you're trying to write about, or some other force?

SK: *Planet of the Blind* is a memoir but its first draft was 350 pages of prose poetry. Some of that prose poetry survives in the final book — actually lots of it. But in order to turn it into a memoir, I had to write narrative prose. Which is oddly enough, a place where I'm least comfortable. So I had to write quotidian, ham-fisted prose. "In 1952, I entered the public school system," or "That was the winter. . ." I had to learn how to infuse clumsy narrative with the poetry. I could just as well turn this essay into a memoir about a life of read-

ing by marrying to it more classically first-person narrative. But the impulse here is essentially different.

RV: In “Valediction,” you write that, “fiction is the heart of memory.” So fill in the blank: Nonfiction is the heart of. . .

SK: Nonfiction is the heart of finding abiding stories that will get us through the hours. Whether a writer is writing lyric nonfiction or a more classically narrow first-person narrative or memoir, they’re asserting to themselves and others that they can explain the weirdness of being alive. I think part of the popularity of contemporary nonfiction has everything to do with the fact that after Watergate, after Vietnam, after Reagan and all these terrible scandals of church and state, people are really hungry for narratives that explain how to live and what to do. Literary writers can’t stand this and we’re not supposed to talk about it in nonfiction writing workshops. We certainly don’t want to be thought of as self-help writers. We’re literary writers and we know that literary writing is not the same thing as “How to Survive a Divorce” or something like that. But it’s still the case that the popularity of nonfiction has to do with the fact that the public is looking for thoughtful imaginative intelligent books about how individuals navigate lives. Having said all that, one of the things that the nonfiction writer needs to do is convey — with all the arrows in the quiver of art — the life of the mind, the life of the spirit, the life of the senses, the life of intuition, doubts and minor victories. And all of those things belong to what we would call stream of consciousness, or dramatic irony. I think one of the things that makes literary nonfiction different from the kiss-and-tell memoir of the Hollywood person is that we as literary writers bring forward a sense of what the narrator now knows as opposed to what she or he used to think. That difference is everything.

RV: *Planet of the Blind* is explicitly addressing growing up legally blind. In “Valediction,” if one didn’t know that fact about your identity, they might not necessarily get it from the essay itself. I was struck by how many writers have something essential about their identities that has everything to do with the way they experience and process their understanding of the world that they probably don’t want to have to define in every piece they write. What governs the decision about leaving that part of yourself out, or writing

around it?

SK: Disability is a funny thing. People in Britain refuse to call themselves “disabled people” and refer to themselves instead as “persons with disabilities,” and I think that position is correct. And we know gender is not merely a question of one’s genitals and race isn’t merely a question of pigmentation, and so too, with disability. It’s a significant part of a life but it’s simply part of a life. There are all these other areas. Although I write a lot about disability, sometimes it doesn’t enter, at least in a very primary way, because it’s such a minor part of what else is going on. I don’t always know when I start something where that divergence will go. I have a lot of poems that have no disability in them at all, and plenty that do.

RV: Does it feel like a conscious decision, or is it always determined by the demands of the piece?

SK: I have to get fairly far into it before I see where it’s going. I’m kind of an action painter, as an essayist. Jackson Pollock once said when I’m in my painting, I’m in my painting. And then I step back and see what I’ve been about. I’m sort of that way too. I plunge in and I’m driven forward by the music and the image and the rhythms and the feeling, and rarely am I driven forward by plot. I can write that way if I have to but it’s not my first approach.

RV: It seems as though in a writing workshop, there is always the voice who says, “I want more of the father” or “I need you to develop this aspect of your identity,” so it’s interesting to think about how writers have to make that decision each and every time.

SK: I’ve often thought that we should do a workshop, the theme of which would be “leaving things out,” because that’s also an important part of the process. In *Planet of the Blind*, I tell readers that my mother was dysfunctional, but I tell them very little about her. That’s because her story would quickly have ballooned and taken over a lot of the book. She was a fierce alcoholic and also addicted to prescription drugs, had lots of psychotic episodes and violence; she was a very, very troubled person, and I didn’t want the book to divagate too much into her story. I wanted just enough of it there so that people understood she wasn’t much help.

RV: One of the so-called hazards of memoir or personal writing is self-pity. One would think that a memoir about growing up legally blind would be pre-disposed to such a problem, and your book never approaches this territory, partly because of its exuberant tone. Even when you're describing your struggles, you're still writing about them very ecstatically and exuberantly. Was that an intentional choice?

SK: One of my heroes in literature is Mark Twain and another is Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Those two have been central to my immersion in creative writing. And I think that's not an accident. I'm always going to favor *Huckleberry Finn* over *Moby-Dick*. And I love razzle-dazzle and language, so I love the silliness in Wallace Stevens or Theodore Roethke, and prefer it to Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," which I think is inflated and goofy. I think that humor, if handled right, is a very complex kind of engagement that allows us to say many things simultaneously. Whereas the more mordant or tragic line can only carry one thought at once. So I think a comedic imagination lends itself better to writing about a disability because disability is very complicated. The guy on the street thinks you're a wretch. You on the inside are having this fantastic insight about the intersection between Goethe and Schopenhauer in some marvelously abstract way, and that guy on the street suddenly comes up and says, "Can I pray for you?" I mean this *is* funny.

RV: I think of the scene in *Planet of the Blind* where you're running on the sidewalk and end up falling into wet cement. That seems like a very ecstatic moment that could have gone the other way.

SK: Those guys could have been really pissed off at me but they were, in an odd way, sort of amused. Along comes a blind guy and runs through their cement. How many times has any of us been full of pompous, inflated self-delusion and suddenly the handle falls off the frying pan as you're trying to impress a new lover with your cooking skills, or you get your necktie caught in a revolving door on your way to a job interview. We've all done these things. We all get our comeuppance from reality and the question is what are you going to do with it. Are you going to be Richard Nixon and imagine that the fates are after you, and persecuting you? Or are you going to make art out of it and raise the stakes.

RV: There are several moments in *Planet of the Blind* where you step outside of your physical being, and describe yourself from an outside perspective. Likewise, there's a moment in "Valediction," when you describe the circles of footprints in the snow that seems to depend on a kind of wide-angle lens. What moments demand those kinds of shifts in perspective?

SK: I used the phrase before "dramatic irony," and it's also known as "comic irony." If you think about it, Shakespeare's comedies depend on this. You are in the audience watching the proscenium arch of the stage and the characters are up on that stage behaving as characters will, but you in the audience are given the knowledge. That is to say, you know more about them than they do themselves. You know their true identities, what they're hiding, all the uncomprehending complexities and dichotomies of their situation. That's a form of aesthetic pleasure — to be given that knowledge by the playwright as an audience member. The ancient Greeks seldom used this technique. It comes I think out of modernity and literacy. Shakespeare's audiences were readers, so Shakespeare's characters have more ironies about them, because irony comes out of reading. Nowadays people who advise business people or write self-help books — like the psychologist Daniel Goldman, who's written about emotional intelligence — those books are all about how to slow down your fight-or-flee emotional reactions to problems with other human beings. Count to 400 and see that there's something else going on that might be a lot larger. The person who cuts you off and you feel road rage while driving your car — that person hasn't done it because they want to spite you. They've done it because they've just been diagnosed with cancer and they're miserable and not even paying attention. So the story isn't about you, it's about something larger. And any time we can — as writers of the personal essay or memoir — present ourselves and then back up as though we're in the audience looking at ourselves and seeing with a wider perspective what the broader social, cultural or communal perceptions may be, I think that's good.

RV: What are you working on now?

SK: I'm working on four things. One is a book of prose poems for Copper Canyon Press, which will be published in 2010. It's a series

of linked prose poems called *Mornings with Borges*, where I travel around to different cities and imagine what those cities look like, even though I can't see them. Borges used to do this, so I'm intersecting with him. Another book is a short little book on the art of conversation, which is part of a series on the arts of life being published by the AARP. It's very funny — I'm writing it as though I'm Kurt Vonnegut, and this allows me to be amused and amusing. I bring in Plato and *Symposium*, but in an entirely non-linear and non-academic way. I'm having fun with it. Then I'm working on a novel, which is part nonfiction, part fiction on the inner life of the great opera tenor Enrico Caruso, who was a peasant from Naples who had arguably the greatest tenor voice of all time but he couldn't explain why he had it. And nobody else could explain either. He took a couple of singing lessons and blew away all the teachers, then went to see Puccini and sang for him and blew him away. Caruso understood that he had this odd gift but that he was just a carrier of this voice. So the novel is really about the weirdness of being the guy who carries around this voice. Then I'm working on essays, which I think will eventually come together in a kind of collection that will include this essay, the "Valediction."

