



Image: PickPik

Steven Hill

Listen to the Animals

Animals are more sensitive than people. I remember my friend Noelle saying how her pet python arranged itself vertically up the side of its glass terrarium, inside her Hayes Valley apartment, just before the Big One struck in '89. Apparently, say the experts, it was trying to minimize the growing underground vibrations on its snake belly while the humans in the room were oblivious. Until it was too late. Another friend's dog bolted down Ocean Beach, uncharacteristically and for no reason, minutes before the ground started shaking. Weird. Yet not weird at all. So I paid attention when I heard this hound dog barking out a passenger-side window. It was riding past, woofing and howling, its human driver ignoring it while checking out a halter-clad jogger, and its canine eye whites were large and ominous like two giant hailstones, like it was baying about something important. I was not surprised then when I returned home and heard the news. The president had sold us out again. Backtracked and caved, agreed to another "compromise." Broke another campaign promise. All presidents do this, of course, but the current one seems to specialize in it. Each time she does it, it feels a bit like someone has crept into your house and swiped something from you. At first it was small things, like a toaster, or an egg beater, or a few

CDs. Then it was larger things, like the computers and a television and stereo system. Lately it's been more cut to the bone types of stuff, like the living room furniture, and the heater in the basement. It's getting cold, the rooms are becoming bare and deserted, and next I suppose they'll want the house itself. Eviction may be in the cards.

Yes, we should listen more closely to the animals. They hear it coming *way* before any of the humans do.

The Train Seat Next to Me

You learn a lot about yourself, and your inbred biases, by watching a line of passengers file past the open train seat next to yours. It unleashes a panic in me over the possibility of which of these peeps might sit down and become my two-inches-away neighbor for the next three hours. It's an unsettling time, to observe how you react, as prospective seat mates shuffle past.

'Oh no, not that one...' you think, about a crusty old gent sporting a bow tie and pulling a smart-looking carry-on with a copy of the Wall Street Journal rolled under his arm. No doubt immersed in stocks and bonds and quantitative easing. I'm whitish myself, but he's gone past white to wrinkled pink. Thanks, but no thanks. He's followed by a middle-aged (I'm guessing) divorcee, black bob hair closely cropped surrounding a once-pleasing face and pretty blue eyes now gaining wrinkles like a crumpled Kleenex. She's straining mightily for the mystique and sizzle of clothed contradiction in schoolmarm-meets-Goth vamp black leather attire, a Camille Paglia look-alike complete with Illustrated Man tattoos and an intense scowling glare like she's spotted Andrea Dworkin seven rows back. Mercifully, she passes on by.

I discreetly, strategically, plump my jacket and newspaper on the open seat, just before the arrival of a ramrod fit and collegiate-looking hunk sporting a young Donald Trump haircut and "I swallowed (the worm), didn't you?" Cancun sweatshirt. He's yakking on his phone and deploying a square Dudley Do-Right chin with a toothy cheshire grin, and his skin is shiny and pale like a hardboiled egg and he is completely absorbed and doesn't notice the empty seat. Or maybe he did. Then comes a largish, Af-Am woman, well-dressed, with a materteral demeanor, rocking bow-legged side to side as her eyes dart, no doubt scanning for even one other chocolate chip in this sea of vanilla ice cream and my gut tenses with anticipation: what could we possibly have in common except for perhaps a well-rehearsed capacity to ignore each other in stony silence?

She's followed by a Katy Perry copycat snapping her chewing gum and showing what passes for obligatory cleavage in this anxious "look at me" age; it's a sign of the times that 10 years ago during my Esquire infatuation phase I would have gleefully rubbernecked her the length of the aisle, but now I am cursed with "maturity" and see her for the x-ray that she is, with an insecure

painted face, blackened lips like wriggling earthworms and a pancake-floured resemblance to a Diane Arbus photograph.

Passenger after passenger passes by, and then in an unsettling transmogrification of the mind, I imagine *myself* coming down the aisle, tugging my carry-on, full of anxieties, neuroses and other types of baggage, hoping against hope he can find two seats all to himself, and I realize that's the person who I least hope will sit down next to me. I already know that person and his likes and dislikes, his obsessive baggage and infatuations, and he's not only an extremely known entity but boring besides. Please, don't let him sit down next to me, I plead. Please.

I move my things from the seat next to me, vacating it for the very next passenger. I even look up with my feeble version of inviting eyes, but she passes on by as well. Soon the train is lurching forward, and I am sad, disappointed and relieved, that no one has sat down beside me.

[Steven Hill](#) is a *Caveat Lector* principal and contributing writer. He is a journalist and the author of seven books of political non-fiction. His essays, articles, and media interviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Die Zeit*, NPR, PBS, BBC, C-SPAN, Democracy Now, and many others. He is the chief editor and contributor to the online publication [DemocracySOS](#). He has published short fiction and poems in a number of publications, including the *Columbia Journal*, *Minnesota Review*, *San Fernando Poetry Journal*, *Struggle*, *Prophetic Voices*, and the anthologies *Sparkle and Blink*, *Grasp the Rainbow*, and *Poets for a Livable Planet*. His plays have been produced in New York City (Off Off Broadway), Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. His website can be found at www.Steven-Hill.com.