

Attrib.

and other stories

Eley Williams

“Williams is a writer for whom one struggles to find comparison, because she has arrived in a class of her own. We are lucky to have her.”

Sarah Perry, *The Guardian*



To **ATTRIBUTE**. *v. a.*

1. To ascribe; to give; to yield as due.

2. To impute, as to a cause.

TROLDAMES. *n. f.*

[Of this word I know not the meaning.]

—Dr. Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)

The Alphabet

(or Love Letters
or Writing Love Letters, Before I Forget How To Use Them
or These Miserable Loops Look So Much Better On Paper
Than In Practice)

The plot of this is not and will not be obvious. I'm pretending that this is not important. It is quite likely that I have lost it anyway. The plot. Related—where are my glasses? For some reason I find that if I say,

'Glasses. Glasses?'

in an authoritative way while searching for them it seems more likely that I shall find them or that I will somehow *invoke them into being*. This is a strategy that does not work for finding one's dignity nor for finding you but *glasses*—possibly. Announcing my intention to find them at least conveys a sense of control as I dither around picking up ornaments and looking under curtains. There is a paper published online that sets out this thesis, and I shall quote it aloud to make it real: speech can alter "ongoing cognitive

(and even perceptual) processing in nontrivial ways" effectively allowing one to concentrate better. *Say it ain't so* — announce, with an ounce of courage and conviction and the world's your —

your —

the world's yours for the mistaking.

For what it's worth, concentrating, I can say that you altered me in non-trivial ways.

The pursuit was anything but trivial, at least. I remember that.

'Glasses?'

I completely lost it (the plot, not the glasses — they're only mislaid) about two weeks ago around the same time that I mislaid you. If you were here you would make a filthy joke about my use of that word, about you being *miss laid*. Scratch that, then. Screw it or unscrew that word out of place. Two weeks ago is when I lost it — the plot — round about the same time that you were not *mislaid* by me but were *misplaced*. When you misplaced me. Two weeks ago is when we ceased to converge by the bedside table, beneath the sofa, by the fridge.

I have realised with some embarrassment that the reason I

could not find them is of course because I am *wearing* my glasses. This is like that time someone (I am being coy—I mean you) complemented no complimented my eyes and suddenly I wished that I could pop them out onto your palm and say, 'Hey, damn right, they're the best thing about me; *not, you know, functionally, of course, hence the glasses, but in terms of form*; want to swap? I wanna see you in 'em', which would of course be impossible for three reasons and horrible for about twelve, but

—*what was I saying?*—

even though I now know the whereabouts of my glasses the feeling of lack remains. I have lost something else so here I must remain, poised to retrieve. If I say,

'Something else. Something else?'
in an authoritative way perhaps it is more likely that I will find it, whatever it might be.

We looked up my condition after coming home from the doctor's the first time where it had been explained to us in a pale room with a ticking light. We had looked the word up in the dictionary. I did not tell you, but I had imagined using my plucked-out eye's optic nerve as a bookmark to

save the definition's place. We also searched online to make sure that our Internet history was keeping up with our life events. I spelt the word with an *f* at first and, sighing, you took control of the keyboard.

A P H A S I A, you typed. It required both of your hands in the same way that origami might or the act of unwrapping a parcel. We browsed. *Aphasia*: a disturbance of the comprehension and formulation of language caused by dysfunction in specific brain regions.

'You can't spell *aphrodisiac* without *aphasia*,' you said later, trying to make a filthy joke out of it and holding me.

'Yes you can,' I said into your jumper after a while. This gave me time to work it out.

'Well, *I* can't,' you had said, not letting go.

And I, not giving up, had said, 'You'd have a spare A.'

And 'Gimme me an A!' you had said in your cheerleader voice. I cannot remember what happened next. I probably did give you something. After all, your innuendo-led ears would probably not let me get away without *giving you one* but it is impossible to recall. I have forgotten, basically, and now I have misplaced you.

I have swept so many words under my tongue and out of the porches of my ear, out of sight and out of mind. Over the years your ears must have become spoked and fairly

bristling with my Xs and Ks and Ts and teasing.

The *plot*, yes—the condition of its *being lost*. I have a great deal of nostalgia for having the plot and a full vocabulary. Both have been lost gradually, along with the—*what is it*—marbles. *My marbles*, specifically. We have come to specific marbles. I have lost *it*, I have lost *my marbles* and I have lost *the plot*—the Holy Trinity of losing I have lost my faith in—wham bam thank you m'—ma—mate. Maybe the *plot* was connected with my *marbles* in some way. Maybe one plays marbles on a plot, *plot* being synonymous with *pitch* or *field* or *court*. I lost them all long ago is what's important. Two weeks ago. You took my *marbles* and *it* with you and I appear to have mislaid *the plot*. In the film-of-the-musical-of-the-play, in Hertford Hereford and Hampshire Hurricanes Hardly Ever Happened but Eliza Doolittle was fed marbles in order to improve her diction not to lose a good thing she had going, and no doubt if you were here you would make a dirty joke about that word too. I shall shun diction, then; a cunning stunt. Spoonerisms, tongue-twisters—I remember that you could make those words affectionate and filthy as soon as you found them and me in close confines.

One cannot spell *eyes* without having to also spell *yes*. This was always especially the case with you, and with yours.

Incidentally, my dictionary is definitely getting smaller. This might be because I am moving away from it or because it is shrivelling.

'What's your favourite word?' you asked me on our first date.

I said something obvious like *pamphlet*.

'Excellent,' you had said. You may have even clapped. 'Favourite letter?' you continued without offering your own answer. You tended to take charge like that. A waiter was sizing-up our shoes, and handing you the bill.

I was trying to seem interesting, so I replied, *Q*.

'*Q*?' you echoed, somewhat accusingly, as you pressed your PIN code into the machine.

Yes.

'*Q* needs *U* to be useful,' you had said, and I remember that I rolled my eyes out of my head and you winked in a pantomime way and touched my wrist with your hand.

'And yours?' I think I asked. I must have done. I should have. I hope I did.

'I consider favourite letters to be a better indicator of personality than star signs,' you had said, and I had thought, *oh great this person's a massive weirdo and is going to try and inculcate me into a reiki-practising cheese-cloth wearing bewhiskered cult or sect*, because I used to use words like

inculcate without thinking twice even though I knew at the time that it was unadvised. Inadvised. *But by God you were charming*, said the other half of my brain. *Cult leaders often are*, replied the first half. *GO ATROPHY ON A STALK*, said the second half, and it did, I think. Thank goodness. You had evaded my question, I couldn't help but notice.

'A is a snapped Eiffel Tower. The shape of it. If you were interested in A as a letter I'd assume that you were only interested in half-finishing projects,' you said.

'Is that right?'

'H is for rugby fans, and penalties. F and E and Y are all prongs.'

And prongs are for stabbing at something, I thought: letters as stabs in the dark. I do not know why you picked these letters as examples. You were misspelling the alphabet.

'What does Q imply?'

You had cocked your head as if the answer might slide out of your ear on to the table. 'Upper case or lower case?' you asked, gravely.

'That would be telling,' I said, pretending that I knew how to flirt.

'It stands for questions, often, doesn't it?' you said and I'm sure that I did not know how to answer. We went to a bar.

'Q was your first answer,' you said very close to my face.

You were slightly drunk by this point and enjoying the sound of your own voice. I was enjoying the sound of your own voice too. 'Queuing, *lining them up*. Very British. Q is the old man in James Bond,' you went on. 'No, the new young man, the lovely whippety one. Q is for questions,' you said again, and then you had said something about liking a challenge.

And four years later after the diagnosis you were putting posters and printouts up around our flat, posters and labels. *This is a kettle on the kettle, these are mousetraps on the mousetraps, I am your one and only, and this joke only works because of a song you like* on a badge that you wore around the place.

I have a children's laminated alphabet poster on my wall. There is a cartoon apple on it, and a ball, and a large yellow cat. The grossly stunted Eiffel Tower shape of A, the headless, limbless woman's body of B; C's upset urn and the taut bow of D; the snapped trident-head of E further-snapped to form an F. An empty workman's clamp: G. The rugby goal of H. There I am next to it, standing tall like something at stake—the following long shadow cast by the I some time past noon makes the J. What is next? K is the point of an arrow smacking into a trunk, while L is a candle-holder where the flame has been snuffed out. M and N are always claimed

by my memory of your knuckles and O invariably is your surprise, or your singing unabashed in our garden when you think that no one is at home. Remaining in the garden the letter P is cuckoo-spit on the length of a chive, cooling in the dew-dawn. Q is a monocle, discarded. We always had time for eccentricity—we watched a battered VHS of *My Fair Lady* and drank whenever a word game presented itself. R is a thrown magnifying glass embedded in a wall. To say that S is a snake is perhaps easy-pickings but true: my occasional lisp a snake-in-the-grass. I lisp when hurried or under stress. What's the evolutionary point in that. I resent the S especially. Atlas seen cruciform from the front, the world removed from his shoulders: T. Then U comes as a grin, grossly extended, or an empty jar—if there were forty we would be ready for fairyland thieves, and because you ruin things with beautiful practicality let's line up an amphora with the lip smashed clean away by vandals: V. Two such amphorae: W. The next letter marks the spot, a kiss or something like the waiter's brace-suspenders against his fresh white shirt-back: X. Pentecostal or horrified up-thrust arms in Y as we finally discover the serpent Z: a cruel child has broken the spine of an S.

Lying in bed and looking at the ceiling, I think that there can

be no time for yellow cats, or balls, or apples when there is all this to remember and bear in mind.

Aphasia is now an autocomplete on my laptop's search field.

'Good thing there's a word for it,' you had said, and my face was in your jumper again.

To fill the empty kitchen, I turn to things like radios. Love songs will try and make you believe that one word is the hardest, and that three particular words are the most important – and I'm sure that those three will be the last to leave me. In truth it is impossible to place a bet on which word will be the next to go. At least I think it will be nothing to do with scansion or prosody. Perhaps it is all to do with the way a mouth moves. That your mouth moved in the kitchen, and that I can remember this clearly – that one's speaking mouth can be form over function as each word that I can remember peels away, or falls away, or does whatever you would like to call it.

'What's your favourite letter?' you had asked me, four years after the last time, the first time, when we were sitting in bed reading the Sunday papers as if I still knew how that worked.

Oh! I said.

'O?' you repeated.

No, emm—

'M?'

No, I—

'I?' you had said and then you reached over and pressed my nose to let me know you that were only teasing.

I think that I clicked my fingers in irritation and said, 'I'll get it eventually,' and you had said, 'Oi oi, you can bet you will get it eventually,' because you cannot help yourself, your filthiness, and I had said,

'That's not funny,' and you said,

'You don't know what funny means any more,' and you looked at me, knowing or hoping that I would laugh, and I did.

And

—you should never start sentences like that, I know, but

what's a sentence, really, if not time spent alone—

the medical pamphlets do not state it and the literature does not concentrate on it but the only two things that I have ever been scared to lose are you and—more so, and originally—my mind. There we have it! The day that I forgot the word

for a hairbrush was when you first looked concerned. I held the hairbrush in front of me and trialled *scalp-tufter* after a few seconds of concentration. You had frowned.

You had cocked your head in the way that you do. And from then on it became—like *easier* but the opposite. Forgetting *hairbrush* became forgetting our address became forgetting dates became figmenting became fragmenting, became I remembered your beautiful, beautiful face but could not quite place it. My brain had unpinned you without me wanting it to and now you have gone. It is not your fault, or whatever the word is.

The heaviest book in the house is the dictionary. I know because to fill my days I went around with a scale and measured each one to learn the weight of words. The dictionary is so heavy that my hand hurts even if I brace myself when I take it down from its shelf. You used to press flowers between its pages. I didn't know that at the time, or if I did I overlooked it—but I do not think I would have overlooked such a thing. The petals that I find do not smell of anything in particular. They are brittle. The word *friable* comes to mind and I look it up at once. The new-to-me petals fall out occasionally into my lap when I'm checking myself or checking up on myself—today there are just five

that fall from the pages, three on my leg and two on the floor. They are your delicate dirty jokes I found increasingly hard to understand. I can only imagine that their colour has not changed since the time you placed them there.

As I say, the dictionary seems smaller in my hands but somehow grows heavier even as my speech-bubbles grow thinner and more gauzy above my head. I want to be able to tell you that the petals are as light-heavy as full stops. I want to be able to tell you that I miss you, and the way you had with me, and the way you had with all the words that – at the time – I had for you.

Attrib.

I held the rib up to the microphone and opened my mouth.

'Dřorák,' said my neighbour's front door. Its pronunciation was very clear. Not quite sure who to blame for this, I narrowed my eyes at the rib.

'His and hers?' asked my computer's cooling fan.

'Lament,' said the tree branch who chose that moment to graze my windowpane, and as if in answer the hinges on our cat-flap downstairs said 'Pyongyang' in insistent tones. The fact I could hear this all the way up in my bedroom proved to be my tipping point and I pushed the printouts of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling from my lap, threw the rib to the ground and fled my desk. I wedged the swinging cat-flap shut with the second thing that came to hand (the first thing that was to hand was the cat, whose *I didn't ask to be born*

look I pointedly ignored) and returned with new, incensed resolve to my computer and its waiting microphone.

I collected my pens together in a neat line along my desktop. I collected my thoughts. I collected my breath. Feeling newly brave I picked up the shard of rib between my forefinger and thumb once more and settled back in my chair, ready for the day's work.

'Sissinghurst,' announced my radiator in its clearest tones. 'Sissinghurst and *gourds*.'

Adrenaline snarled up my spine and directly into my brain so it was in an out-of-body sleight of keyboard strokes that I set about buying soundproofing materials from the first company that I could find online. Scrolling down the page of options available to me with its unfamiliar vocabularies, I reached for my phone and dialled the number.

'Is it for a home studio?' a nice-sounding man on customer services asked.

I explained my situation and the deadlines involved. 'I cannot tolerate these conditions,' I added at the end of my speech. To fill his polite pause, I assured him that I would pay whatever figure he quoted.

'You might also want some baffles,' he said as the conversation began winding down. 'Some sound baffle panels. They'll absorb a lot.' I wrote *BAFFLE* on the back

of my Sistine Chapel printout and underlined the word twice. The baffling material would arrive too late for today's purposes, of course, but at least I could make the order and pretend that I had some semblance of control. 'I've never spoken to a Foley artist before,' the man continued as we finished the order. He pronounced *Foley* as if it was the French word for madness.

'Testing testing, yes yes yes,' I said to the microphone. The neon bars on my laptop screen lit up and jittered accordingly. I messed around with the mouse and the EQ levels. 'One two one two,' I said. Staring down into it, you can see that the grille of a microphone contains endless darkneses. 'Three,' I added. I lined up the pens in a slightly different order on my desk.

'You're — *hello?* — you're still on the line,' said a tiny voice next to my hand. I swore, apologised, hit a button and threw my phone across the room.

'Lament, lamently,' said the tree branch at my windowpane.

I picked up the rib once more and turned my attention to the printouts of the Sistine Chapel.

The commission had come from a gallery and my work for it was pretty much completed, just one task left to the last minute. The gallery was putting together an exhibition in the new year involving huge reproductions of Michelangelo's

major works alongside archival material relating to his life. It was a big deal and I, a small deal, had been brought on board to add incidental sounds to the audio guides included in the ticket price. By pressing various buttons at various stages of the tour, those who wished to—and here I consult the paperwork to check that I have the right wording—*augment their experience of the paintings and statues* could access pre-recorded commentaries from art historians and have complementary pieces of music or literature or Bible verses read to them by actors. These snippets included some of Michelangelo's own poetry in a new English translation—*"My beard extends heavenward; my nape falls in / fixed on my spine, and visibly my sternum / becomes like a harp... [Insert FX: twanging]"* run the lines according to my production notes. All of these tracks would be played via discreet headsets that visitors wear and fiddle with at their leisure as they wander past the artworks.

I am neither an actor nor an art historian. I checked the paperwork of both my brief and my contract three times and it's clear that my name will not be appearing in the credits of these audio guides. Fair enough. Foley artists are employed as a surreptitious service and our anonymity seems fitting, somehow—I only ever get work precisely because I blend in unobtrusively. If you ever hear the sound of rain on the

radio or see rain during a film, chances are that a Foley artist has spent some time sprinkling rice or sand on a cooking tray so that you get to experience the *rainiest* rain that ever rained without the sound dominating the scene. Those cosy TV Christmas specials or period dramas with their crackling fireplaces? That sound will have been added in post-production and what you are actually hearing is me crouched over a sensitive microphone and scrunching wads of baking parchment. When a character walks through snow on screen, imagine me by a microphone stamping up and down on a thick layer of cat litter. When that character slips and breaks their leg, the sound that causes you to wince was made by me snapping a piece of celery in a wet tea towel.

The final recordings that the gallery will use are recorded in the studio, a small room filled to the brim with baffle, but I do like to trial various first drafts and experiments for specific sounds at home. For this Michelangelo commission I had great fun yesterday trying to convey the sound of metal ladders being pulled up from the damned as pictured in *The Last Judgment* and that of angels' long-stemmed trumpets knocking the heads of the elect. I found the right sound for this latter action by bouncing the bowl of a ladle against the top of my IKEA wine rack. The quiet, heavy swish of fabric that accompanies an art historian's discussion of

Michelangelo's *Pietà* statue will be made by flexing my mother's Laura Ashley curtains between my hands.

There was one more Foley track that I had not recorded. It was one that had not been requested—the production notes for the *Creation of Eve* image state I should select some "Mediterranean/English garden birdsong (morning) FX" and the sound of a river from stock audio files. I compared these notes for the *Creation of Eve* to those compiled for the *Creation of Adam* painting. Visitors who hit the button when looking at the more famous painting would literally receive all the bells and whistles. Loud gongs, clashing cymbals! Timpani and choirs! All that plus a Tesla-coil crackle would be stuffed through the wires in the visitor's earphones to signify Adam and God networking on a cloud and showing each other their nipples, going in for the first corporate handshake.

The imbalance of attention lavished between the two *Creations* struck me as unfair. I have a hazy memory of the myth about the birth of Eve, that of a lonely man clutching his side in a garden and asking that a helpmate be Deliverood unto him. As I ordered a takeaway last night and considered for a millisecond whether I could put the cost on research expenses, I looked up the relevant Bible verse to check what was said as per Eve springing into being. And how has

Michelangelo chosen to show it? Perhaps God whittled her from Adam's rib, or perhaps He passed the rib back to the freshly filleted Adam to be whittled. As a test I experimented sliding a pair of chopsticks across one another next to the microphone but the sound was too much like knitting to seem fitting for the miracle of rib-becomes-woman. Maybe God and Adam, wearing nothing but gardening gloves and with all the time in the new world for navel-gazing, planted the rib in the Eden soil and she took root right there and grew up like a shoot. Or the rib might have rolled out of Adam's side and Mandelbrot-fractalled into something bigger, its small curve of bone flinging out sudden rib-promontories and dendrites the very moment that it hit the earth until it achieved the shape of a fully formed woman. What were the presumed mechanics, and how might an understanding of them help me decide on a Foley track? What is the Foley equivalent of a posed rhetorical question?

I dog-eared the printout of the *Creation of Eve* and listened to that action's sound, the minute noise of paper yielding to itself. I rapped my day-old, tooth-stripped #34 Char Siu takeaway rib against the microphone and watched the levels on my computer screen jump with surprise. Michelangelo's Eve looks a bit like me, I thought. I wondered about the model the artist might have used in his sketches to capture

her posture. Distractedly I gnawed on the meatless rib in my hand. She looks like someone who might chew her nails and stub her toes, like she too mistakenly shampoos her hair twice instead of using conditioner because sometimes she neglects to check which bottle she is using. She is painted, presumably, taking a first momentous gasp of Mediterranean/English garden breath but her expression is not momentous. It is small and aghast. It is the expression of someone slightly worried that they might have given the cat fleas rather than the other way around. I turned the printout over and looked at the blank back of the page, and read my word *BAFFLE* underlined twice. It was a cheap printout. You could see a faint trace of Eve's outline through the paper.

In the image Eve is painted standing at Adam's side with her arms raised, palms together as if caught in a dance move or as if shot out of a very slow, lumbering rib-cannon. It is the posture of one who is diving, or perhaps slightly hunched in supplication. She is playing Charades, gamely, against her will, and her audience is having none of it. I compare my own posture at my desk, takeaway rib between my teeth and slumped over my microphone. God is painted facing Eve and it looks like He is giving her a noncommittal ticking-off. He gets to wear clothes but has bare feet. Presumably Eden is turfed with comfy lawns. Adam lies lolling in a tousled,

sidekick slumber to the left of the picture. He does not show any obvious signs of surgery or happy fatherhood. Unlike Eve and God he appears expressionless, merely tired after a day of naming things whatever the hell he likes.

I flipped the printout over because the whiteness of its underside was scaring me. I read in my research notes that Michelangelo once made a snowman. He sculpted it in a Florence courtyard for one of the Medici. Blank-faced and temporary, it must have melted into priceless gutters. I brought the printout up to my eye and saw that the paintwork was covered in spider-leg fractures. I thought about the crack in my bedroom ceiling and about five hundred years of worshippers looking up God's skirts and togas, pointing out and naming their favourite saints.

I felt a growing unnamed impatience that the allotted sounds I had been tasked to provide for this landscape – the vague birdsong and river splashings – did not seem enough of a tribute to the scene. Not to this Eve, disribbed for his pleasure and of whom I had become fond, nor for the sounds of unseen birth and the concept of a floating rib, the body's hitchhikers. I wanted the visitors in the gallery to draw closer to this image when they listened to the suggested soundscape, not skip this track or use it as filler for dawdle time as they moved on to the more famous *Creation's* boom

and pomp or the to-scale version of *David's* contrapposto mooch. There is the suggestion of a river's tributary or some blue remembered hills beyond the figures. Their tableau takes place beneath the calm-before-storm clouds of a sin-scrumpling morning. I wanted to find a sound that would stand tribute to soft paintbrushes on newborn skin and to reluctant rib-ticklers everywhere. The more I looked at Eve's expression, the more she seemed to be saying to her maker *Please put me back. Or what have you done?*

'Lament,' said the tree branch a third time at my window.

'One two, one two,' I said to check the levels. I looked a final time at the picture of the naked couple and their clothed onlooker. I thought about the cracked plaster of my bedroom ceiling, and the lack of my name in the production credits, and I did not feel ashamed.

Ensuring that the microphone was at the correct angle, I put my finger in my cheek, flicked my wrist and I recorded a short, absurd *pop*.