

Eley Williams, ATTRIB. AND  
OTHER STORIES

## Concision

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I am anchored to my spot by the landline and we both know that there's nothing that I can say to save the conversation from its course, so instead I pass the time putting my eye to the three holes in the telephone receiver. You are speaking and I am staring, the wire coiled through my fingers connecting our present tenses. You are using short sentences and I blink in time with each clause—I blink directly against the plastic of the phone so that you might

hear the kissing scrape of eyelashes. I am quick to replace my eye with my mouth to calm you when I detect the wheedle of your voice becomes pitched more urgently.

I look at the hand that is holding the phone with a new curiosity. It is holding the curved plastic to my face with a grip that I would usually only ever associate with times of panic. I know, through some previous spurious training, that should I ever find myself wandering on to quicksand, I must endeavour to lie flat, not struggle and try to gain purchase on a nearby bough or rope. Such is my grip on the telephone receiver now—the receiver is an overhanging branch just as it is a branch sprung from the stronger trunk of my wrist. It is also something blooming twin-budded with my mouth and ear at either end. Both buds are flapping, receiving and transmitting. Venus flytraps; my mouth and my ear.

I wait for you to speak once more and for our conversation to present itself through tenses of our throats and flicks at the three delicate bones of the inner ear—we attend the clicks of underwater cables and teeth and caveats and I sit there eyeing the telephone in my hand and waiting for your final line.

You are waiting for mine.

The body of the telephone is black and squat and it is shiny. I didn't like liquorice as a child and always spat it into my hand. I confided this fact to you when we first met, and you told me that you did exactly the same with Mint Imperials. The table on which my spat-liquorice shiny telephone sits has been in this position by the window for so long that its legs have notched crop circles into the carpet. I tried to work out the total number of hours I must have sat in this precise position over the years. I must have perched on the arm of this sofa by the phone like this for weeks, making sure not to struggle or draw lines in the sand.

There is a change in sound and I find that you have hung up, and I am poised to not-speak to the absence of you with the cord of the phone still hanging heavy in my hand.

I put my eye to the holes punched into the receiver and square my shoulders, attempting to stare down the dialling tone. The holes in the phone look like a series of black moons or umlauts trailing in the wake of your absent vowels, or maybe Alice's rabbit hole, or the magician's hat from which one might pull a rabbit. A nostril in plastic, a pore, a piercing, the round cross-hair in opening credits.

My body is shocked that you hung up. My mouth is caught open, mid-howl or mid-coo or attempting a parody of the hole in the receiver.

By now I can hear the subtleties within this dialling tone in the same way that I can recognise the intonations of your laugh or the curve of your fingerprint or of your spine. It is the well-read blurb of you. The dialling tone makes a tuning fork of my head.

In isolation, one of the holes in the phone's plastic looks like a full stop. An exclamation mark is a full stop with a cockatoo's crest. Full stops, three full-stops. Had you been waiting for me to finish your sentence and to join the dots? Lichtenstein or Seurat or the sign of a *therefore's* stacked notation, used to indicate the conclusion of a syllogism. You can't see the whole picture without counting on the importance of dots, motes, specks.

Sitting by the phone, I must have steeled myself because I did not lie flat on my front or on my back but drew my knees beneath my chin and tried to mote myself, sucking in my stomach. Black holes in space, I think, are right now sucking on something and everyone is in awe of *them*. The pupil is an absence in your eye. I wonder if I will see that dot again, or tell you that I know every flex of its absence. It's the "That's All, Folks!" black hole into which a cartoon pig giggles, stutters, disappears. These dots in this lickerish plastic are suddenly your laugh, the dangling bell-rope of your throat,



or it's a river-smoothed disc of black stone that would skip like a heartbeat if skimmed across a flat enough surface. The places that your business trips have taken you! Places with Venus flytraps and sinking stinking sand—I used to have an Atlas under the phone just so I could trace the contour lines and tributaries around your location as you spoke to me, and as I nodded along with your words I would work out our time differences with the small, flat pocket calculator branded with your company's name which you pocketed at a conference and I used as a bookmark. Over the years, you had called me from street corners and from busy cafes and from echoing conference venues.

I wondered whether you had made this particular call in a place that was near water with skippable stones or somewhere that might serve you the black circle of an espresso on a white table.

I put my eye again to the receiver and pretended it could be a periscope and that I could have seen the moment that your hand slammed down the receiver at your end. This is perhaps a mischaracterisation—maybe you simply eased it, gently, back in its moorings. The sense of depth that these holes have is not quite filled with your side of the story. I hope you were not gentle with the phone at your end. I hope my silence made you angry, and that these holes in

the plastic are the phone's 'Ooo!' of camp surprise that you dared to smash the phone down with such violence.

On the road outside my house, the traffic lights stack their circles like the beads of a necklace and the sun does something pale and total behind a cloud. I clicked my jaw and closed my mouth. In short—you waited for me to return the goodbye and when you realised I couldn't, you hung up.

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So: *löyly*, *mbuki-mvuki*, *ngaobera*. I think I hear each of these words in the 90Hz of the dialling tone as I lift the lack of your voice from my face, take breath and return the receiver to its cradle.