

Eley Williams, ATTRIB. AND OTHER STORIES
(2017)

Synaesthete, Would Like To Meet

When I was eight my sister dropped a copy of the *Yellow Pages* on my head. I was too busy retrieving my tooth from beneath the radiator to notice any immediate change but the next day I found that reading the letter *B* caused a green light to flare directly behind my eyes. My mother explained that I must have been staring too long at the magnetic letters on our refrigerator and was associating their shapes with the corresponding colour of the plastic. This could not explain why an ampersand was suddenly a guttering black for me, however, nor why asterisks had become accompanied by a four-second howl.

Neurological synaesthesia is an unwieldy phrase to sprinkle into conversation so I prefer to describe it this way – the part of one's brain concerned with processing sensory

information should be like a highly efficient switchboard. Mine is set up as if someone swapped the wires around, took a mallet to the bodywork and went to town with a soldering iron and a big jug of water.

Apparently I'm a very rare case, featured in so many medical encyclopaedias with labelled photos and everything that I've had to hire a publicity agent. Get me. I have a doctor of my very own who is paid by a multinational pharmacy to investigate my case and observe how I cope with it. He tells me that a number of people experience similar synaesthetic aspects—they associate colours with days of the week, for example, or endure specific tastes when they hear certain sounds. My condition, however, is complete. Dawn's light through my curtains stinks, my first cup of tea is an orchestra tuning-up and the sound of birdsong outside my window tastes of rosewater and it is scalding. This reaction to birdsong perhaps best demonstrates the way in which my condition is not at all logical. In chorus the birds taste of rosewater but individually the pigeons' coos are a soda syphon's stream, the starlings taste of double-mint chewing-gum and blue tits' warble comes, weirdly, with the smell and bobbly feel of pork crackling. The number 3 is orange for me while 10 smells of buttered bread, but add them together and—rather than a buttery, citric compaction of the two—

seeing 13 provides the sensation of snakeskin drawn against my upper lip.

Glancing at your number pencilled onto this napkin, I read a line of digits that are gawky and spavined, slightly flushed and buzzing like clarinets.

My life is often an unmanageable series of sensations. Other synaesthetes describe their experiences as pleasant while for me it is a constant sensory overload. Back to the switchboard simile, I have it on good authority that when something overloads it tends to crash. Pick up any paperback that uses too many mixed metaphors and that is my day-to-day, with all attempts at clarity squandered by confusing, muddled leaps of imagery. I see fireflies when a tyre screeches, smell fried onions when I step on an upturned plug. In an attempt to process fewer sensations and block out the worst unexpected repercussions of my surroundings, I have taken to wearing tinted shades even when indoors. I'm well aware how daft this looks.

Always wearing shades and looking either wary or disgusted whenever I leave the house can make for quite a lonely existence. This is why I chat online—if I adjust the settings on my monitor so that all text appears a certain shade of grey on a yellow background I don't have to shield my eyes or stuff up my nose nearly so often. Changing the

Display Settings like this just takes the edge off. Grey text on a yellow background sounds so clearly to me like snow on a tin roof and smells so strongly of mown grass that all other synaesthetic responses are dulled.

Online dating marked a huge step. At first I found the profile that I created absolutely disgusting. Reading through it, the paragraphs smelt like tar and vinegar and it was full of chewy toothaching words. I had no hope of any response to such a squalid, acrid thing and imagined that anyone to whom it might appeal in any way must have some kind of perversion I did not want to share. You must understand that it was not just that I did not have high hopes—I actively dreaded who would be interested in such a thing. I gave it to my doctor to edit and he gave me two thumbs up, but I could tell by his tweedy, neoprene-edged vowels that he was just being kind.

Your email back, however, smelt like a sea breeze. That was all it took. I didn't have to read about the interests you listed, your hobbies or your star sign. It was that sea breeze smell cutting through the snow sounds and mown grass that convinced me this was a chance I had to take. I organised a meeting.

You chose a spot near Piccadilly in view of Eros and the Criterion. I like Piccadilly Circus. The exhaust fumes and the

chatter present me with a fresh inky blue. It's almost precisely the colour of the line on the Tube map. To me the flashing adverts are a barbershop quartet suffering the giggles which makes me smile, and the tourists' inter-braiding accents cause a firework display of neurological responses. The taxi drivers' swearing is accompanied by different shades of silver, squeaky and lickable.

As I waited, the rain made a pink overture against my jacket.

And your colour, when you introduced yourself?

You must not be insulted, but you were blank. A soundless, tasteless, brilliant blank.

There was no poetic extension, no misfiring of fizzing neurons as you said your name and shook my hand. I followed you to the cafe and as we spoke our coffee tasted of coffee and when we shared it your cake tasted only, gloriously, of cake. All the unnecessary colour and clamour just drained away—an oil spill's fringe of rainbow fading into pure water. In clarity we swapped numbers and arranged to meet again, and as soon as you boarded your bus all the colours and sounds and smells rushed back at me.

I can tell you that as I watched your bus turn the corner the rain was singing a sweeter, brighter note. It was too

sweet, almost, and just a touch too bright.

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I mentioned all of this to my doctor in his private clinic the next morning. I told him about you, and the cafe and how of all my senses had come flooding back once you were out of sight. He took notes and looked very sympathetic as I finished and asked what he advised. Irritatingly, he did not seem to want to help me with the etiquette of the situation, however, and as I hunched on the plastic seat he shot me a look that tasted of mackerel and grapefruit. He reached for a fresh pen.

'Nothing at all?' he pressed. 'You suddenly felt everything was back to normal, for a whole afternoon?'

'Everything felt *abnormal*,' I corrected.

'Fascinating,' he said. He looked at his computer and began typing.

'I don't want to feel fascinating,' I said. 'I want to be sure that not—' I tried to pick my words carefully, '—that not having any responses like this isn't some indicator that I'm going to blow a gasket.'

'Brushing up on your medical terminology, I see,' said my doctor. He did not look away from his screen.

'Sarcasm tastes like wet dog,' I said.

'But you felt good,' he continued. 'In that moment, where you weren't being overwhelmed on all sides?'

'It was wonderful,' I said. 'Right up until—'

'And you would want to replicate it?' he said, cutting me off and looking up from his computer.

'Completely wonderful,' I repeated. I watched a few purple spangles above his head spin and pivot in the air. 'And then completely terrible.'

'I see,' said my doctor, and I watched hundreds of puce, winking sequins clot and cluster around his head with genuine concern. He tapped with greater urgency at his keyboard then swivelled on his chair and handed me a piece of paper. 'What are you doing this evening?'

On his prescription pad he had written the names of three films.

Three hours later my doctor was sitting in a red velvet chair next to me with his eyes trained on my face as the trailers started.

'Just pretend I'm not here,' he said. He added in a half-mutter, 'Can't believe you've never seen *Casablanca*.'

I raised my hiss to aquamarine levels so that he could hear me in the packed cinema. 'Don't you think that by observing me,' I said, 'that you'll affect any response I might have?'

He adjusted the notepad on his knee. It was difficult for him to take notes due to the darkness of the cinema. He had not been able to resist buying a carton of popcorn as we passed through the lobby either and there was not much room on his lap. 'Let me worry about that,' he said, munching and staring at my pupils. He leaned a little closer over the armrest to peer at my face as the first lemon strains of the film's opening titles began.

I did not ask him what he observed about me during the film but as the credits rolled I saw his face shimmering with an unmistakeable diamante haze. He was disappointed. A migraine raspberried in my tear ducts and my brain was ringing.

'Nothing?' he asked. 'None of that—how did you describe it—no clarity?'

'It gave me a headache,' I said. 'The usual kind of headache when everything is all too much.' I didn't know what he wanted me to say. My sinuses were singing with jazzy, slippery blares. 'At times my mind wandered—'

'Yes?' said the doctor, encouraged. I watched him tongue a crumb of popcorn from the corner of his mouth.

'At times my mind drifted,' I said.

'Specify! You were bored?'

'No. It would have drifted whatever the film. This—this

is embarrassing—'

'Go on.'

'I just started thinking about yesterday in the cafe. And everything became all jagged.'

My doctor wrote down that I was flushed and agitated and he reached up over his empty popcorn carton to pat my shoulder. From his jacket pocket he handed me two tickets to the opera.

I blinked at him through my headache.

'Why are there two—?'

He interrupted as soon as he saw the route my mind was turning. 'It's for me and you,' he said. '*Intensity*. Emotional immersion!' His tie had slipped into his carton of popcorn. 'We'll try some Monteverdi, and maybe an art gallery. But maybe I'm showing my biases—where can we lose you, do you think?' Such was the pressure of the film's residual sounds and textures I was finding it difficult to keep my eyes open. He interpreted my pause as scepticism, or confusion, or generally as an invitation to continue. 'We won't be able to observe any useful results in a lab so it makes sense to keep you under scrutiny out in the wild.'

This does not seem like a good use of funding, I wanted to say. Or rather, *This all seems like a wonderful use of funding, but all I want to do is return to my computer with its calming mown grass*

and snow-on-a-tin-roof screen.

'You could just come along to my next date,' I said. I had a vision of him sitting at a table next to us, his eyes visible through holes cut into his broadsheet newspaper. I imagined your face when I was forced to explain who he was. I imagined your face and began to feel faint.

My doctor cleared his throat.

'I don't think that would be a good idea,' he said.

'No,' I agreed.

His snail-shell tone changed to one prickled with stiff bristles and I realised that I had misunderstood. He did not mean that such an observation would be inappropriate.

'In fact,' he said, and for the first time in the evening he looked away from my face and to the cinema screen, 'I don't think it would be wise to plan another meeting until we're quite sure what's going on. We have no idea what another episode—'

I understood his intentions. When he mentions you I understand he sees you as something of a threat. It might amuse you to know that in all my following sessions with him—whether back in his clinic or in the stalls at the ballet or in the middle of a moshpit as he shouts diagnostic questions and answers over its abrasive sheet of garnet-perfumed sound—he says your name with a certain professional

jealousy. I believe that he thinks you might be my chance of a breakthrough and he wants that triumph for himself.

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Here is a warning, then, and a too-late apology for my lack of communication. Since our meeting my synaesthesia has become more intense. You should know that when I returned from the cafe on the day that we met, as I pulled the door close behind me I noticed the semi-quaver of a stray eyelash had settled on my shirt. It was one that you had blown unthinkingly from your finger. Perhaps you do not remember. You should know that this eyelash was the loudest thing I had ever heard and the sound of it almost threw me across the room.

I told my doctor, and to use the words that he committed to his case files with excited exclamation marks: quite literally every thought of you sends me reeling. This is the root of my fear, however—that if we met again you might perform something incidental and catastrophic. I want to message you and politely ask that you do not, for example, tip up on your toes at a second meeting, or let the sun anywhere near your hair. That you won't laugh off-guard, for example, or

gnaw at your fist or smooth your palms against your elbows
in the way that I noticed, signifying that you are frustrated.
And as sure as hell don't you ever again kiss me goodbye
because I cannot promise it would not leave me blinded.