

Eley Williams, ATTRIB. AND OTHER STORIES
(2017)

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.