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Eggs, Hair, Seeds, Milk

Patrick West (Deakin University, Australia)

Elizabeth found it hard to believe there had ever been a time when she wasn't waiting. She was even further from remembering that period when no desires had been denied her. Ages the delay had lasted, and for what? For this? She scanned the prospects before her. Nothing to comfort a maidenly woman. The cruel world, the same as it ever was. If this kept up, she swore to herself she'd do it, she'd turn her heart into unshakable stone out of spite.

Of the sundry lookouts scattered through the blossoming canopy, Elizabeth had the extra misfortune of occupying that spot commanding the greatest view. A whisper issued from the next tree. "Any sign of them yet?" Her ears thought to detect, in the tone of voice, the least portion of an accusation. How dare anyone hold her—innocent, pure, put-upon Elizabeth—responsible for this state of affairs? She fixed her mouth into a tight, thin line.

"Did you hear me? Did you hear me, Liz?" The watching woman hated, besides all else, this address of such intimate mode. "Liz, Liz, Liz." Only Ted, once upon a time, had been welcome to call her that. Dear Liz, he'd started—and told her it was the end.

"Liz, Liz, tell me, please, what can you see?" Not to be denied, the plant's whining. . . .

"If I could see anything at all, don't you think I would have spread the word by now?" Elizabeth's utterance suggested the hiss of a snake disturbed from winter hibernation. The tree, wisely, desisted. A draught of cold air produced a rustle of leaves, a sashaying of flowers—undefinable stirrings on all sides. Still, neither head nor tail of those she longed for. In the offing, only gloom. In the black sky, the moon had wandered who knows where.

Elizabeth was familiar with its plight: reflecting, neglected, genuflecting relation of the solar sovereign. No worse hell than to shine by the light of another. Every month, she observed it diet down to a sliver in the heavens. “The sun grows fat on the moon’s green cheese,” her mother had told her once. “Don’t trust your happiness to last,” she might have added—for Elizabeth knew this much to be true, and truth always outs, even if little else her mother said had gospel’s eternal perfection.

She frowned into the dimness at the image of the woman with a gaggle of infants on her lap—a litter of crepuscular memories.

Elizabeth’s whereabouts was scattered with the seeds she had released while waiting. The floor of this patch of world: sterile, inert, infertile. How vitality was denied before it had even the chance to become vital—resistance of the living to what grows betwixt death’s crevices. Oddest of magic. Certainly the forest sheltering this company of men and women, Edward (no more to be favoured with Ted) among them in his barrenness, was not of the usual sort. This wooden woodland, miserable abortion of existence: Elizabeth’s solitary confinement.

Or so it was, until the probing feelers of the world infiltrated her cocoon. If she swooned, didn’t others swoon with her? In the lulls of Elizabeth’s sighs, weren’t the strains of a whole forest to be heard? Blood no longer scurrying through spines; bones as heavy as convict shackles; lockjaw; hearts flayed and scourged. Thoughts of release, running to seed.

Which didn’t mean that her companions had any greater billing than extras in suffering. Elizabeth concerned herself exclusively with herself. She wanted to sneeze. She sniffed once. (She glimpsed the moon from one eye’s corner.) She stifled it. Her snorting, unexpectedly loud, must have sounded like a response to expectations fulfilled—echoing through these leafy arbours.

“Liz, Liz, Liz, you simply must be able to see them by now. Tell me you can.”

She felt like taking an axe to that insolent tree, importunate colleen, cat with a cat's tongue. Mentally, Elizabeth consulted her street-taught Cockney vocabulary of insults and slurs. She parted her lips, breathed in—prepared to let fly. Except just then, at their own slow pace, those they awaited, began to make themselves known; she could prune that stupid sapling later on, make her shake and shudder to an autumn shedding.

Elizabeth heard them before she saw them: crescendo cries of the children—reverberations in the gloaming. Most cruel, most unfathomable, their tediously prolonged arrival at forest's margin. The trap, at least, was set. Innocent of the ways of the world as they might have been, like all those who'd come before, Elizabeth wanted these infant souls captured. Let the business of mid-winter begin. Now the snare could be sprung.

“Liz, Liz, Liz. Is that them? Say we can start soon. Say we can.”

“You have to keep your mouth shut. We can't risk them hearing us now.” Elizabeth spoke more harshly than she intended to. If only her pollarded petitioner would stop getting on her nerves so irritatingly. “I'm sorry”, she added, gently. “It's just that they're almost here.”

“But why have they tortured us by leaving it this long? My back's splitting in two. I need to take a pee. Liz, Liz, Liz. Have they travelled halfway across London to get here?”

The voice died down to nothing in the greenery. Years of training are only good for so many minutes of endurable confinement. Encased in a wood that was unchanging from autumn to spring, from winter to summer, Elizabeth felt—if not sympathy exactly, then sorrow of a sort—for Edward, all alone with his troubles, in some other part of the forest. If he were even now stumped in a stump, with no green, glistening shoots to console him, then perhaps that very intimation of death would invade him, as it had her.

Feeling hollow inside, within her own hollow, Elizabeth sought relief and distraction from these thoughts of Edward. All the events leading up to this tantalizing duration,

when the children could be heard and not seen, what of them? The most eager of the boys and girls would soon be arrayed before her—observers not believing themselves observed.

From too much time, to too little. As was her habit, now she'd begun, she'd have to finish. Elizabeth sought to hurry her recollections through her mind, and be rid of them at last, the way she'd once seen her mother brush spilt milk off a table, lovingly laid for some long-forgotten special occasion, without causing any of the fatty, white globules to split asunder. Yolks of milk, they'd been—perfect in their quavering primness.

They'd chased after each other, she remembered, many in a row, into her mother's embrace.

So Elizabeth began to sweep into the draughty corridors of time these memories of this morning, careful not to puncture their skin, letting loose a flooding, a seeping in, a staining that could never be unstained, even by the ferocious scrubbing of eternity. Wasn't Cinderella scolded each evening for the laziness of her sweeping, her inability to tidy the mess of the day? No matter how carefully she cleaned, invariably, a spot would be missed—a bit of something or other. A speck of malicious time, unaccounted for.

Elizabeth couldn't stand this notion of herself always being late, a truant from vital happenings. Was she doomed to be the tortoise that never quite caught the hare?

She wanted to remember, in a forgetful way, as brush or broom gathers up all that it desires actually to dispense with, capturing the unwanted, wishing it far away.

The stage door attendant should have known better, observing Elizabeth's face, than to attempt a conversation. "Time wasted is time never regained," he'd remarked, and then, at her response, blushed red as a tomato crushed in the snow, near the marketplace, by the wheels of a carriage taking gentlewomen to elevenses. He'd swung the door open. She entered into that lair of theatrics, illusions, deceptions. Down three steps at once in the darkness (the theatre manager was a cheese-parer) but Elizabeth knew her passage

as well as the moon knows its task of reflecting the glory of the sun. Into the pit she descended.

The town hall clock was booming a quarter past the hour. A fifteen-minute segment of her life had proved Elizabeth's undoing. It was madness to think of it: the countless opportunities since her birth to make up for this lost time; then, the loss of each one of these opportunities, also to time, which force eternally sweeps forward from the past towards a future unknown. (At school, she'd always had trouble with her tenses, condemning all acts to the present. "Stop conjugating like an idiot," said the master, before raising his cane.)

The property man gave thanks for Elizabeth's eventual arrival—another of those actresses with the tresses like swathes of flowing ivy—without a flicker of emotion affecting his visage. Old hands of the troupe enjoyed telling newcomers (those yet, perhaps never, to play the Dane) that the grumpy stockist had smiled only once in his life. "Probably before you were even born, when we performed for Queen Victoria in 1879. You think I'm joking? Just wait a bit. You'll see." Usually, they refused to believe it on the first day, had their doubts on the second, were blank slates for persuasion by the third.

No doubt at all, the property man was a grouch. In bed, before dreaming, he poured scorn on himself. Permanent as his own props, he'd observed many directors come and go over the years, seen them succumb to inevitable pride, thought of them as worse men than himself (then even worse of himself for thinking it).

Elizabeth surveyed the developing scene from the edge of the stage; they must only have started the operation a few moments before—except those moments were vital. Once again, she cursed under her breath at the source of her delay. It always seemed to happen to Elizabeth, the interruption to life, and then: the 'sold out' sign would go up in her face; the ferry would blow its whistle for the third and final time; the last ticket to the circus, passport to tigers and clowns, would be sold to the man one ahead in the queue. Most trivial delay.

Then trouble everlasting.

There were footsteps behind Elizabeth: frantic sounds of others, similarly outwitted by the clock. They knew each other's parts; you played what you wore. (Men were flowers and women were rocks.) Edward must already have been disguised. She needed to grab something, anything, fast. Knowing, besides, that not all choices were equal. And of human selfishness.

Upon a battlefield of all the paraphernalia of preparation for a role, of costumes and props, of guises and disguises—of fantastical, flummoxing flux—she looked for what she might not mind to become. Predictably, the dandelions and the will-o'-the-wisp had been claimed, mere pieces of fluff in the arms of the property man. They pinched his sides most cruelly in possessing themselves of such roles. While those to miss out pinched harder and double.

Now the windmill is taken. A man has popped his top through its top. Even now, the vanes are turning: one way, then the other, upon the breeze-less stage! Some have no talent for realism: the very least a fictional wind should do is to blow like its relations of the weather.

Next to go, the mushroom. If she weren't careful, Elizabeth would end up as a log on the forest floor—even worse, as the scarecrow. She shuddered. Now the moon is gone. The stars and the sun also. The last of the trees waddles into a coppice of its companions.

Elizabeth regarded the rock pile once more. Best resign herself at once to spending the following hour, crouched as if in an acorn or woody womb, at the feet of the dandelions.

She hurried across the boards. The white stains, Elizabeth saw, had not been wiped off. Yesterday's performance had benefited from the injection of a realistic element no director could ever have choreographed. Having made it into the bowels of the auditorium, who knows how, a pigeon had commenced building a nest upon one of the

performers. “I half expected to have an egg laid on my head,” the unfortunate tree had said in the green-room.

“At least it didn’t shit on you,” said another, busy unbending his body into human form once more. (Matinée Matthew, the children had dubbed the dove—direct from Trafalgar Square.)

And now, for the first time today, Elizabeth is lucky. (“Lucky Liz,” Edward said to himself from his hide—and smiled—and was sad.) Apart from the remains of a nest in its upper branches, it was perfect: a tree that everyone else had happened to overlook. A heartbeat more and her costume would have been snatched away, by another of those to miss out on the most prized parts of the forest. Let that other latecomer suffer the fate of the scarecrow; the tardy tree allowed itself a little gloating.

Elizabeth dragged herself inside the previously unnoticed conifer. Its trunk moulded firmly to hers. She pushed winter-pale arms into branches shaped like a ‘V’. Hands entered gloves sewn to frondescence a little the worse for wear (built in 1871, this splendid spinney, this thicket of thickets, was getting on in years). Each of Elizabeth’s fingers controlled its own thumbnail forest of tendril, stem and leaf. She could tickle the clouds, signal to the moon.

Peepholes at various levels were suited to actors of almost all dimensions. Elizabeth towered over most of her fellow thespians. To the casual, external observer, her eyes were like buds—of a catching uncertainty of colour between blue and green—high up on the tree’s surface (sure you had to know just where to look). Elizabeth gazed upon the outside world.

Staring at her, from where it had planted itself temporarily in the front row of seats, was the sulky mushroom. Elizabeth eyeballed it without meaning to. Tree and truffle regarded each other for a moment; a vegetable communication ensued: poor puffball, bilious boletus, why was she the frumpy fungus, and this late arrival a most respectable

icon of the forest? The mushroom tossed her pink- and blue-gilled cap: beware my power, toadstool with a toadstool's malice. . . .

But let the pantomime commence. Elizabeth, at least, was ready. The director stalked through the forest, clad in the day's fashion, making final adjustments to his wood's artifice. He tucked a leaf in here; smoothed the forehead of a quivering stone; stroked the petals of the girlish dandelions; signalled to the mushroom to shift itself. A construction of bucolic genius, he said to himself, too good for unappreciative children. How dare that pitiful cheese-parer pay a man of his talents so miserably?

He was God on the seventh day!

Immediately, he was sorry for suggesting it; the director repented in the shadow of the scarecrow, suffering within certain livery almost suitable for a mortal—almost—but which, in this slight difference, was far less agreeable an outfit than flower or tree, even rock. The actor hung from his pole as if upon a cross. The director shuddered: it was as if they had crucified a man for the foolishness of art. Hurrying off stage, he brushed past Elizabeth. Poor woman, his mind whispered to itself, all that fuss and nonsense involving Edward (a reliable although certainly far from exceptional actor).

Elizabeth suffered his presence. The half-constructed pigeon's nest was cradled in her arms, at heaven's floor. The bird had spent the first act gathering materials. Cross-eyed attention revealed: an ancient ribbon from some audience member of yesteryear; a counterfoil from the ticket to a show panned by every critic bar one, who had loved it; and—yes, she was quite sure of this—a few red hairs from the head of Edward. Edward, who had let her down at the last.

He could be breathing down her neck in this hideaway forest, watching her even now. Elizabeth felt herself cast upon the ground like a shadow. Red—colour of too many things. Red of fruit pressed into fresh snow; red spilling over temples; red of the blood flowing in every heart; seeing red; the red stain across her soul of the one she had abandoned.

Elizabeth watched the carrot hairs dance in the breeze created by the windmill. They gambolled now this way, now that—children at play, almost without cares. There was the special smell of Edward as well. Exquisite stink of his redness. Was he closer than she knew, hidden inside the moon or the sun? Knowing him, either lunar sulking or sun somersaulting.

The waiting really and truly begins now.

Elizabeth found it hard even to believe there was ever a time when she hadn't been anxious for the children to arrive.

(Edward, the bastard.)

And now their cries are loud in her ears. But still they haven't arrived. How much longer might she remain so painfully positioned? When might a tree commence its dancing?

Elizabeth envied those granted the freedom of unrestrained, fictional movement: the windmill of swirling scimitars; the sun; the moon. Even the fallen log, moss-infested branch, which had fallen perchance—legion the inevitable ambiguities of back-story—to the ground in a storm. Slyly part of its act, even now it was rolling across the stage, without a care for ankles or shins—sweet revenge on those to have duped it out of less crestfallen roles. Cast-off cast member—a dizzy 'memento mori' for the trees.

Still, Elizabeth continues to wait—as if endlessly—as if for the Christmas after this one, and for the one after that. . . .

1901 and 1902 and 1903. . . .

And still the children haven't arrived.

And still they're crying, laughing, carolling into her ears.

Yet no sight of them.

Outside, even the snow knows that it's winter, and of spring's grave too.