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# Elizabeth Costello

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## Chapter 1

### Realism

THERE IS FIRST of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on.

Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be.

Elizabeth Costello is a writer, born in 1928, which makes her sixty-six years old, going on sixty-seven. She has written nine novels, two books of poems, a book on bird life, and a body of journalism. By birth she is Australian. She was born in Melbourne and still lives there, though she spent the years 1951 to 1963 abroad, in England and France. She has been married twice. She has two children, one by each marriage.

Elizabeth Costello made her name with her fourth novel, *The House on Eccles Street* (1969), whose main character is Marion Bloom, wife of Leopold Bloom, principal character of another novel, *Ulysses* (1922), by James Joyce. In the past decade there has grown up around her a small critical industry; there is even an Elizabeth Costello Society, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which puts out a quarterly Elizabeth Costello Newsletter.

In the spring of 1995 Elizabeth Costello travelled, or travels (present tense henceforth), to Williamstown, Pennsylvania, to Altona College, to receive the Stowe Award. The award is made biennially to a major world writer, selected by a jury of critics and writers. It consists of a purse of \$50,000, funded by a bequest from the Stowe estate, and a gold medal. It is one of the larger literary prizes in the United States.

On her visit to Pennsylvania Elizabeth Costello (Costello is her maiden name) is accompanied by her son John. John has a job teaching physics and astronomy at a college in Massachusetts, but for reasons of his own is on leave for the year. Elizabeth has become a little frail: without the help of her son she would not be undertaking this taxing trip across half the world.

We skip. They have reached Williamstown and have been conveyed to their hotel, a surprisingly large building for a small city, a tall hexagon, all dark marble outside and crystal and mirrors inside. In her room a dialogue takes place.

‘Will you be comfortable?’ asks the son.

‘I am sure I will,’ she replies. The room is on the twelfth floor, with a prospect over a golf course and, beyond that, over wooded hills.

‘Then why not have a rest? They are fetching us at six thirty. I’ll give you a call a few minutes beforehand.’

He is about to leave. She speaks.

‘John, what exactly do they want from me?’

‘Tonight? Nothing. It’s just a dinner with members of the jury. We won’t let it turn into a long evening. I’ll remind them you are tired.’

‘And tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow is a different story. You’ll have to gird your loins for tomorrow, I am afraid.’

‘I have forgotten why I agreed to come. It seems a great ordeal to put oneself through, for no good reason. I should have asked them to forget the ceremony and send the cheque in the mail.’

After the long flight, she is looking her age. She has never taken care of her appearance; she used to be able to get away with it; now it shows. Old and tired.

‘It doesn’t work that way, I am afraid, Mother. If you accept the money, you must go through with the show.’

She shakes her head. She is still wearing the old blue raincoat she wore from the airport. Her hair has a greasy, lifeless look. She has made no move to unpack. If he leaves her now, what will she do? Lie down in her raincoat and shoes?

He is here, with her, out of love. He cannot imagine her getting through this trial without him at her side. He stands by her because he is her son, her loving son. But he is also on the point of becoming – distasteful word – her trainer.

He thinks of her as a seal, an old, tired circus seal. One more time she must heave herself up on to the tub, one more time show that she can balance the ball on her nose. Up to him to coax her, put heart in her, get her through the performance.

‘It is the only way they have,’ he says as gently as he can. ‘They admire you, they want to honour you. It is the best way they can think of doing that. Giving you money. Broadcasting your name. Using the one to do the other.’

Standing over the Empire-style writing table, shuffling through the pamphlets that tell her where to shop, where to dine, how to use the telephone, she casts him one of

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the quick, ironic looks that still have the power to surprise him, to remind him of who she is. 'The best way?' she murmurs.

At six thirty he knocks. She is ready, waiting, full of doubts but prepared to face the foe. She wears her blue costume and silk jacket, her lady novelist's uniform, and the white shoes with which there is nothing wrong yet which somehow make her look like Daisy Duck. She has washed her hair and brushed it back. It still looks greasy, but honourably greasy, like a navvy's or a mechanic's. Already on her face the passive look that, if you saw it in a young girl, you would call withdrawn. A face without personality, the kind that photographers have to work on to lend distinction. Like Keats, he thinks, the great advocate of blank receptiveness.

The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves. A procedure pioneered by Daniel Defoe. Robinson Crusoe, cast up on the beach, looks around for his shipmates. But there are none. 'I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them,' says he, 'except three of their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows.' Two shoes, not fellows: by not being fellows, the shoes have ceased to be footwear and become proofs of death, torn by the foaming seas off the feet of drowning men and tossed ashore. No large words, no despair, just hats and caps and shoes.

For as far back as he can remember, his mother has secluded herself in the mornings to do her writing. No intrusions under any circumstances. He used to think of himself as a misfortunate child, lonely and unloved. When they felt particularly sorry for themselves, he and his sister used to slump outside the locked door and make tiny whining sounds. In time the whining would change to humming or singing, and they would feel better, forgetting their forsakenness.

Now the scene has changed. He has grown up. He is no longer outside the door but inside, observing her as she sits, back to the window, confronting, day after day, year after year, while her hair slowly goes from black to grey, the blank page. What doggedness, he thinks! She deserves the medal, no doubt about that, this medal and many more. For valour beyond the call of duty.

The change came when he was thirty-three. Until then he had not read a word she had written. That was his reply to her, his revenge on her for locking him out. She denied him, therefore he denied her. Or perhaps he refused to read her in order to protect himself. Perhaps that was the deeper motive: to ward off the lightning stroke. Then one day, without a word to anyone, without even a word to himself, he took one of her books out of the library. After that he read everything, reading openly, in the train, at the lunch table. 'What are you reading?' 'One of my mother's books.'

He is in her books, or some of them. Other people too he recognizes; and there must be many more he does not recognize. About sex, about passion and jealousy and envy, she writes with an insight that shakes him. It is positively indecent.

She shakes him; that is what she presumably does to other readers too. That is presumably why, in the larger picture, she exists. What a strange reward for a

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lifetime of shaking people: to be conveyed to this town in Pennsylvania and given money! For she is by no means a comforting writer. She is even cruel, in a way that women can be but men seldom have the heart for. What sort of creature is she, really? Not a seal: not amiable enough for that. But not a shark either. A cat. One of those large cats that pause as they eviscerate their victim and, across the torn-open belly, give you a cold yellow stare.

There is a woman waiting for them downstairs, the same young woman who fetched them from the airport. Her name is Teresa. She is an instructor at Altona College, but in the business of the Stowe Award a factotum, a dogsbody, and in the wider business a minor character.

He sits in the front of the car beside Teresa, his mother sits at the rear. Teresa is excited, so excited that she positively chatters. She tells them about the neighbourhoods they are driving through, about Altona College and its history, about the restaurant they are headed for. In the middle of all the chatter she manages to get in two quick, mouselike pounces of her own. 'We had A. S. Byatt here last fall,' she says. 'What do you think of A. S. Byatt, Ms Costello?' And later: 'What do you think of Doris Lessing, Ms Costello?' She is writing a book on women writers and politics; she spends her summers in London doing what she calls research; he would not be surprised if she had a tape recorder hidden in the car.

His mother has a word for people like this. She calls them the goldfish. One thinks they are small and harmless, she says, because each wants no more than the tiniest nibble of flesh, the merest hemidemimilligram. She gets letters from them every week, care of her publisher. Once upon a time she used to reply: thank you for your interest, unfortunately I am too busy to respond as fully as your letter deserves. Then a friend told her what these letters of hers were fetching on the autograph market. After that she stopped answering.

Flecks of gold circling the dying whale, waiting their chance to dart in and take a quick mouthful.

They arrive at the restaurant. It is raining lightly. Teresa drops them at the door and goes off to park the car. For a moment they are alone on the pavement. 'We can still abscond,' he says. 'It is not too late. We can get a taxi, drop by the hotel to pick up our things, be at the airport by eight thirty, take the first flight out. We will have vanished from the scene by the time the Mounties arrive.'

He smiles. She smiles. They will go through with the programme, that barely needs to be said. But it is a pleasure to toy with at least the idea of escape. Jokes, secrets, complicities; a glance here, a word there: that is their way of being together, of being apart. He will be her squire, she will be his knight. He will protect her as long as he is able. Then he will help her into her armour, lift her on to her steed, set her buckler on her arm, hand her her lance, and step back.

There is a scene in the restaurant, mainly dialogue, which we will skip. We resume back at the hotel, where Elizabeth Costello asks her son to run through the list of the people they have just met. He obeys, giving each a name and function, as in life.

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Their host, William Brautegam, is Dean of Arts at Altona. The convenor of the jury, Gordon Wheatley, is a Canadian, a professor at McGill, who has written on Canadian literature and on Wilson Harris. The one they call Toni, who spoke to her about Henry Handel Richardson, is from Altona College. She is a specialist on Australia and has taught there. Paula Sachs she knows. The bald man, Kerrigan, is a novelist, Irish by birth, now living in New York. The fifth juror, the one who was seated next to him, is named Moebius. She teaches in California and edits a journal. She has also published some stories.

'You and she had quite a tête-à-tête,' says his mother. 'Goodlooking, isn't she?'

'I suppose so.'

She reflects. 'But, as a group, don't they strike you as rather . . .'

'Rather lightweight?'

She nods.

'Well, they are. The heavyweights don't involve themselves in this kind of show. The heavyweights are wrestling with the heavyweight problems.'

'I am not heavyweight enough for them?'

'No, you're heavyweight all right. Your handicap is that you're not a problem. What you write hasn't yet been demonstrated to be a problem. Once you offer yourself as a problem, you might be shifted over into their court. But for the present you're not a problem, just an example.'

'An example of what?'

'An example of writing. An example of how someone of your station and your generation and your origins writes. An instance.'

'An instance? Am I allowed a word of protest? After all the effort I put into not writing like anyone else?'

'Mother, there's no point in picking on me to fight with. I am not responsible for the way the academy sees you. But you must surely concede that at a certain level we speak, and therefore write, like everyone else. Otherwise we would all be speaking and writing private languages. It is not absurd – is it? – to concern oneself with what people have in common rather than with what sets them apart.'

The next morning John finds himself in another literary debate. In the hotel gymnasium he bumps into Gordon Wheatley, chairman of the jury. Side by side on exercise bicycles they have a shouted conversation. His mother will be disappointed, he tells Wheatley – not entirely seriously – if she learns that the Stowe Award is hers only because 1995 has been decreed to be the year of Australasia.

‘What does she want it to be?’ shouts Wheatley back.

‘That she is the best,’ he replies. ‘In your jury’s honest opinion. Not the best Australian, not the best Australian woman, just the best.’

‘Without infinity we would have no mathematics,’ says Wheatley. ‘But that doesn’t mean that infinity exists. Infinity is just a construct, a human construct. Of course we are firm that Elizabeth Costello is the best. We just have to be clear in our minds what a statement like that means, in the context of our times.’

The analogy with infinity makes no sense to him, but he does not pursue the issue. He hopes that Wheatley does not write as badly as he thinks.

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world – for instance, the son’s concern that his mother not be treated as a Mickey Mouse post-colonial writer, or Wheatley’s concern not to seem an old-fashioned absolutist.

At eleven he taps at the door of her room. She has a long day before her: an interview, a session at the college radio station, then, in the evening, the presentation ceremony and the speech that goes with it.

Her strategy with interviewers is to take control of the exchange, presenting them with blocks of dialogue that have been rehearsed so often he wonders they have not solidified in her mind and become some kind of truth. A long paragraph on childhood in the suburbs of Melbourne (cockatoos screeching at the bottom of the garden) with a sub-paragraph on the danger to the imagination of middle-class security. A paragraph on the death of her father of enteric fever in Malaya, with her mother somewhere in the background playing Chopin waltzes on the piano, followed by a sequence of what sound like impromptu ruminations on the influence of music on her own prose. A paragraph about her adolescent reading (voracious, unselective), then a jump to Virginia Woolf, whom she first read as a student, and the impact Woolf had on her. A passage on her spell at art school, another on her year and a half at post-war Cambridge (‘What I mainly remember is the struggle to keep warm’), another on her years in London (‘I could have made a living as a translator, I suppose, but my best language was German, and German wasn’t popular in those days, as you can imagine’). Her first novel, which she modestly disparages, though as a first novel it stood head and shoulders above the competition, then her years in France (‘heady times’), with an oblique glance at her first marriage. Then her return to Australia with her young son. Him.

All in all, he judges, listening in, a workmanlike performance, if one can still use that word, eating up most of the hour, as intended, leaving only a few minutes to skirt the



questions that begin 'What do you think . . . ?' What does she think about neoliberalism, the woman question, Aboriginal rights, the Australian novel today? He has lived around her for nearly four decades, on and off, and is still not sure what she thinks about the big questions. Not sure and, on the whole, thankful not to have to hear. For her thoughts would be, he suspects, as uninteresting as most people's. A writer, not a thinker. Writers and thinkers: chalk and cheese. No, not chalk and cheese: fish and fowl. But which is she, the fish or the fowl? Which is her medium: water or air?

This morning's interviewer, who has come up from Boston for the occasion, is young, and his mother is usually indulgent towards the young. But this one is thick-skinned and refuses to be fobbed off. 'What would you say your main message is?' she persists.

'My message? Am I obliged to carry a message?'

Not a strong counter; the interviewer presses her advantage. 'In *The House on Eccles Street* your lead character, Marion Bloom, refuses to have sex with her husband until he has worked out who he is. Is that what you are saying: that until men have worked out a new, post-patriarchal identity, women should hold themselves apart?'

His mother casts him a glance. Help! it is meant to say, in a droll way.

'Intriguing idea,' she murmurs. 'Of course in the case of Marion's husband there would be a particular severity in demanding that he work out a new identity, since he is a man of – what shall I say? – of infirm identity, of many shapes.'

*Eccles Street* is a great novel; it will live, perhaps, as long as *Ulysses*; it will certainly be around long after its maker is in the grave. He was only a child when she wrote it. It unsettles and dizzies him to think that the same being that engendered *Eccles Street* engendered him. It is time to step in, save her from an inquisition that promises to become tedious. He rises. 'Mother, I am afraid we are going to have to call a halt,' he says. 'We're being fetched for the radio session.' To the interviewer: 'Thank you, but that will have to be all.'

The interviewer pouts with annoyance. Will she find a part for him in the story she files: the novelist of failing powers and her bossy son?

At the radio station the two of them are separated. He is shown into the control booth. The new interviewer, he is surprised to find, is the elegant Moebius woman he had sat beside at dinner. 'This is Susan Moebius, the programme is *Writers at Work*, and we are speaking today to Elizabeth Costello,' she commences, and proceeds with a crisp introduction. 'Your most recent novel,' she continues, 'called *Fire and Ice*, set in the Australia of the 1930s, is the story of a young man struggling to make his way as a painter against the opposition of family and society. Did you have anyone in particular in mind when you wrote it? Does it draw upon your own early life?'

‘No, I was still a child in the 1930s. Of course we draw upon our own lives all the time – they are our main resource, in a sense our only resource. But no, *Fire and Ice* isn’t autobiography. It is a work of fiction. I made it up.’

‘It is a powerful book, I must tell our listeners. But do you find it easy, writing from the position of a man?’

It is a routine question, opening the door to one of her routine paragraphs. To his surprise, she does not take the opening.

‘Easy? No. If it were easy it wouldn’t be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself. Making up a world for him to move in. Making up an Australia.’

‘Is that what you are doing in your books, would you say: making up Australia?’

‘Yes, I suppose so. But that is not so easy nowadays. There is more resistance, a weight of Australias made up by many other people, that you have to push against. That is what we mean by tradition, the beginnings of a tradition.’

‘I’d like to get on to *The House on Eccles Street*, which is the book you are best known for in this country, a path-breaking book, and the figure of Molly Bloom. Critics have concentrated on the way you have claimed or reclaimed Molly from Joyce, made her your own. I wonder if you would comment on your intentions in this book, particularly in challenging Joyce, one of the father-figures of modern literature, on his own territory.’

Another clear opening, and this time she takes it.

‘Yes, she is an engaging person, isn’t she, Molly Bloom – Joyce’s Molly, I mean. She leaves her trace across the pages of *Ulysses* as a bitch on heat leaves her smell. Seductive you can’t call it: it is cruder than that. Men pick up the scent and sniff and circle around and snarl at each other, even when Molly isn’t on the scene.

‘No, I don’t see myself as challenging Joyce. But certain books are so prodigally inventive that there is plenty of material left over at the end, material that almost invites you to take it over and use it to build something of your own.’

‘But, Elizabeth Costello, you have taken Molly out of the house – if I can continue with your metaphor – taken her out of the house on Eccles Street where her husband and her lover and in a certain sense her author have confined her, where they have turned her into a kind of queen bee, unable to fly, you have taken her and turned her loose on the streets of Dublin. Wouldn’t you see that as a challenge to Joyce on your part, a response?’

‘Queen bee, bitch . . . Let’s revise the figure and call her a lioness, rather, stalking the streets, smelling the smells, seeing the sights. Looking for prey, even. Yes, I wanted to liberate her from that house, and particularly from that bedroom, with the bed with the creaking springs, and turn her loose – as you say – on Dublin.’



‘If you see Molly – Joyce’s Molly – as a prisoner in the house on Eccles Street, do you see women in general as prisoners of marriage and domesticity?’

‘You can’t mean women today. But yes, to an extent Molly is a prisoner of marriage, the kind of marriage that was on offer in Ireland in 1904. Her husband Leopold is a prisoner too. If she is shut into the conjugal home, he is shut out. So we have Odysseus trying to get in and Penelope trying to get out. That is the comedy, the comic myth, which Joyce and I in our different ways were paying our respects to.’

Because both women are wearing headphones, addressing the microphone rather than each other, it is hard for him to see how they are getting on together. But he is impressed, as ever, by the persona his mother manages to project: of genial common sense, lack of malice, yet of sharp-wittedness too.

‘I want to tell you,’ the interviewer continues (a cool voice, he thinks: a cool woman, capable, not a lightweight at all), ‘what an impact *The House on Eccles Street* made on me when I first read it in the 1970s. I was a student, I had studied Joyce’s book, I had absorbed the famous Molly Bloom chapter and the critical orthodoxy that came with it, namely that here Joyce had released the authentic voice of the feminine, the sensual reality of woman, and so forth. And then I read your book and realised that Molly didn’t have to be limited in the way Joyce had made her to be, that she could equally well be an intelligent woman with an interest in music and a circle of friends of her own and a daughter with whom she shared confidences – it was a revelation, as I say. And I began to wonder about other women whom we think of as having been given a voice by male writers, in the name of their liberation, yet in the end only to further and to serve a male philosophy. I am thinking of D. H. Lawrence’s women in particular, but if you go further back they might include *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Anna Karenina*, to name only two. It is a huge question, but I wonder if you have anything to say about it – not just about Marion Bloom and the others but about the project of reclaiming women’s lives in general.’

‘No, I don’t think there is anything I would want to say, I think you’ve expressed it all very fully. Of course, fair’s fair, men will have to set about reclaiming the Heathcliffs and Rochesters from romantic stereotyping too, to say nothing of poor old dusty Casaubon. It will be a grand spectacle. But, seriously, we can’t go on parasitizing the classics for ever. I am not excluding myself from the charge. We’ve got to start doing some inventing of our own.’

This is not in the script at all. A new departure. Where will it lead? But alas, the Moebius woman (who is now glancing at the studio clock) does not pick up on it.

‘In your more recent novels you have gone back to Australian settings. Could you say something about how you see Australia? What does it mean to you to be an Australian writer? Australia is a country that remains very far away, at least to Americans. Is that part of your consciousness as you write: that you are reporting from the far edges?’

‘The far edges. That is an interesting expression. You won’t find many Australians nowadays prepared to accept it. Far from what? they would say. Nevertheless, it has

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a certain meaning, even if it is a meaning foisted on us by history. We're not a country of extremes – I'd say we're rather pacific – but we are a country of extremities. We have lived our extremities because there hasn't been a great deal of resistance in any direction. If you begin to fall, there isn't much to stop you.'

They are back among the commonplaces, on familiar ground. He can stop listening.

We skip to the evening, to the main event, the presentation of the award. As son and companion of the speaker he finds himself in the first row of the audience, among the special guests. The woman to his left introduces herself. 'Our daughter is at Altona,' she says. 'She is writing her honours dissertation on your mother. She's a great fan. She has made us read everything.' She pats the wrist of the man beside her. They have the look of money, old money. Benefactors, no doubt. 'Your mother is much admired in this country. Particularly by young people. I hope you will tell her that.'

All across America, young women writing dissertations on his mother. Admirers, adherents, disciples. Would it please his mother to be told she has American disciples?

The presentation scene itself we skip. It is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction. Breaking into the dream draws attention to the constructedness of the story, and plays havoc with the realist illusion. However, unless certain scenes are skipped over we will be here all afternoon. The skips are not part of the text, they are part of the performance.

So the award is made, after which his mother is left alone at the rostrum to give her acceptance speech, entitled in the programme 'What is Realism?'. The time has arrived for her to show her paces.

Elizabeth Costello dons her reading glasses. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' she says, and begins to read.

'I published my first book in 1955, when I was living in London, at that time the great cultural metropolis for Antipodeans. I remember clearly the day the package arrived in the mail, an advance copy for the author. I was naturally thrilled to have it in my hands, printed and bound, the real thing, undeniable. But something was nagging at me. I got on to the telephone to my publishers. "Have the deposit copies gone out?" I asked. And I would not rest until I had their assurance that the deposit copies would be mailed the same afternoon, to Scotland and the Bodleian and so forth, but above all to the British Museum. That was my great ambition: to have my place on the shelves of the British Museum, rubbing shoulders with the other Cs, the great ones: Carlyle and Chaucer and Coleridge and Conrad. (The joke is that my closest literary neighbour turned out to be Marie Corelli.)