

Her man and she

After JM Coetzee's 2003 Nobel lecture, *He and his man* and *Elizabeth Costello*

Elizabeth MacFarlane

Although she knows she shouldn't, she looks one day into the drawer that holds his diaries. He's away and won't be back for weeks, "on the circuit", as he calls it. Ten diaries, a solid pile, each a different colour and design. They are a yearly gift to himself, though to imagine him, in a gift store, choosing from among leather and cloth, A5 and A4, looking at price tags, makes her redden with shame for him. She selects the one from 1976. Thirty year old ink in faded writing-blocks on the page, each block numbered, unbroken into paragraphs or days. He is writing about a woman he sees trapped in a lull, maddened by the sky and the dust, a purgatory in which everything but herself simply goes on existing. Despite the roaring of dream-violence, and despite the seizing of white by black, the crossing of stone barriers, still the heavy sky, the blistering sun, continue without breaking apart. The woman is a hazy figure among the mindscape, an outline, a sign. She, the reader, feels herself falling for the young white woman who, lusting and dirty, denies herself sex until it is forced upon her. In the diaries, there are short bursts of description, like reminiscence, annotated with questions: "What does a skirt do on one's thighs when one flops down in the dust beside a river?" and "How many times to repeat the rape? Is three times enough? Is four?"

She puts the diary down, ill-at-ease with her hurried trespassing, and wanders to his armchair by the fireplace. Next to it is a rosewood side-table on which books are piled, and his second pair of reading glasses. She settles in the chair and puts the glasses on her nose, picks up a book: the short stories of Franz Kafka. She tries to cast herself into the crevices of the chair and sits with her legs crossed, as he does. She scans the words on the page, tries to still her restless feet, holds her head cocked, her jaw unlocked and crooked.

Later, she roams through the empty rooms. In her hand is the diary from 1980. She opens the door to his study and the cat, who had been asleep on the rug, stirs and yawns. She picks it up, as she has seen him do, and nestles it under

her chin, scratching its forehead. She sits at the desk and turns on the overhanging lamp. The pages of the diary are soft and complicated with the indentations of words. This time he writes in columns and doubles. *Colony, sunglasses, borders, purification ritual* on the one hand, *barbarian, the hut by the granary, scars, mute* on the other. Between the columns are question marks and connecting lines, *jurisdiction* travelling along one, *torture* along another. There seems to be a figure, M, that appears repeatedly, but she is unsure of his real quality since he appears on both sides of the columns. In the corner of the page is a little line drawing: a man standing by a pool of water watching an animal – a deer? – which stands stiff, one leg bent in the air. The drawing has been circled many times and there are various arrows coming from the columns which point to it. The page itself, though hectic with interlocking lines and repeated words, lies still and soft on her hand as her eyes trace the arrows and movements. She smooths the page with her hand – a noise like the letter *s*, lisped.

She wakes suddenly from a dream and finds herself still in the study, uncomfortable in a tall straight-backed chair, her head lolling onto her shoulder. She rises stiffly and returns the diary to its drawer. She had dreamt a fearsome figure, both man and woman, both terroriser and coward, enormous, containing many signals, holding time still, its words protruding like a limb from its mouth.

She sleeps in his bed, making herself small under the covers. When she wakes it is to the sound of a voice – his. She hears the last words of a message left on the answering machine, "I will be back soon." She gets up and goes to the mirror. With her eyes still bleary her face in the glass looks smeared, unformed.

It is a sunny morning and she takes the diary from 1983 outside to read. By now, she has lost any feeling of guilt. The diaries don't seem forbidden, but like invitations, openings; as she reads them it is as though she is treading a path already laid for her.

This diary is different again from the previous

two. There are only a few words on each unlined page, the rest is left blank. Sometimes the words are in the centre of the page, large and thick, as though formed slowly and heavily. Sometimes the words are in his usual tight script. It is as though there were two people here, working on the diary side by side. *I sit here day after day, one of the large entries goes, I don't need to eat. I can be still as a rock.* She reads the scripted entry on the next page; the handwriting is skewed as though written in haste: *A curse on it all! I am the law-enforcement, I am the boot in the head, I am the kick in the backside. I am the peering eyes of strangers and the pitying arms of women. I will take this from him at any cost. I will take the words from his mouth along with his food and his entrails.* The rest of the page is blank and crumpled.

As she reads the diary, which now seems to her like a two-handed duel, the sun shines on her face, warming her shoulders and beaming on the page of the book until it gleams. She reads this diary slowly, absorbing it, just as the pores of her skin are opening and drinking in the sun's heat. Coming inside in the evening, the bright page is still emblazoned across her vision. She feels heavier, shiny with sweat, and must stoop drunkenly to enter the low bedroom doorway.

In the morning her bones ache, her gums feel swollen and sore. She has a headache behind her eyes. She looks in his cupboards and finds a bottle of whiskey, adds a shotglass-full to her coffee and tops it with cream and icing-sugar, a combination of tastes she feels is just right.

Knowing she doesn't have much time left, she skips ahead and selects the diary from 1990. This one is not contained in a bound book, but is a sheaf of papers folded into a blank envelope. As she reads, she feels her heart beating faster. Her man writes, this time, of an old woman. He writes with affection and sadness. He sees her, he writes, wherever he looks – resting in his bed, walking past him in the street, her face at his window at night. *She is here with me on the page, her fingers inhabiting mine.* In the woman's life is another presence, a simple quiet one like the heavy-handed pages from the 1983 diary. It is towards this obscure trackless company that her life begins to tilt, as though testing her edges. Somehow, despite their differences, she the epistolator; he the messenger, they seal each other's

fissures, replace the parts that have been severed under knife or law. She, the reader, quivers at his descriptions of the dying woman's fears for her safety: *Like some wingless ineffectual bird, locked in her cage, the last of the dodos, old, past egg-laying, "Now you are safe," the zookeeper whispers.* As she reads, there is something that sets her trembling: a name, a voice, a premonition. This old woman and her story, in the meditative words of her man, stirs something, like the stirring of dividing cells, inside her.

She receives a postcard from him dated seven days ago. *I am thinking of you,* he writes, *as I do the rounds and tout old rituals of speech.* She smiles and swells. The picture on the front is of a grand old building surrounded by greenery and the wafting shadows of young people. Just as she had imagined it.

He will be arriving tomorrow. She moves on to the diary from 1994 and starts to skim it hurriedly, but then pauses to take in what she is reading. On the left hand side of the page is the running account of another man's life: date of birth, parents' backgrounds, youth, major events, sicknesses, work. On the right side are reflections on death her man has written carefully, tightly spaced. This page is, as are all the right-hand pages she flicks through, smudged with tearstains. *Does he, D, feel this too? The return to storytelling like a piston-engine, inescapable, locked into this motion of hand across page, of one word built atop another?* Later, as the notes and quotations pertaining to the other man become more and more detailed and minute, the right-hand pages become almost unintelligible, scrawled nonsense words that dip across the page like death throes. *Water in the beard, goes one, a child in the bed, I'd sell my soul, I'd mistreat that child, to write, to write, to write ...*

She puts down the diary, shuddering. She feels suddenly very tired and afraid. Lately, though she has tried to refuse it, she has begun to hear sounds that aren't really there. Waking in the night she might hear a thud and then a whispered voice. Visions spring through her mind – what the sounds might mean, who might be invading the house. And then, more dreadful still, come the words she might use to tell the story of the invasion, the rape, the violence. And there is he, her man, whose presence she feels

everywhere. Sometimes she has the eerie feeling that he is still here in the house, hiding during the day and emerging at night; shifting objects so they are in easier reach, moving others to the back, planning her movements, forging some subtle course for her. Even the diaries have been placed to be seen and reached for. Especially the diaries.

She checks her watch and finds it is already evening. She shivers. Even the hours and the minutes pass swiftly or sluggishly according to the will of her man. She is suddenly distracted by the sight of her own hand, held in a fist, the wrist bent. Ropy blue veins wind like canals, bunching the skin into clumps and rifts. Her knuckles are wizened hills surrounded by moats of spongy flesh. When did this happen? She cannot remember the transition; she cannot remember a time when her flesh was taut. Or rather, she can call up certain episodes of her youth clearly, in unmistakable detail, but to try and recall her hand, before it collapsed like this... There is nothing, a blank, not even a shadow-hand.

She finds she is shaking and rises, walks over to the drawer of diaries as though her legs are being lifted, her feet placed one before the other. She takes the last three diaries, dated 1997, 1999 and 2001 and sits once again in his armchair. This time she does not even try to effect his poses, but relaxes into his position easily. She reads like a robot, barely moving, her eyes scanning the words like a preset precision weapon, bullets or lasers firing at precise targets according to a code. She reads pages at random, first from one diary, then another, becoming confused as to who is who, what is what. She finds herself reading notes for another character, but one who is so similar to he himself, to her man, that she begins to wonder if perhaps he did not write these diaries at all, but someone else. Another person with him in mind. Could it be possible, and she does not stop the thought as it comes like a missile through her mind, that it was in fact *she* who, in a trance perhaps, has written these diaries? Written them and then read them in that voice she knows so well, which she seems to hear her own thoughts in: his?

It is at this point that she hears a key being turned in the lock of the front door. Footsteps and the creak of luggage. She has not even

noticed the night passing and the new day beginning. It is today, the day of his arrival. She stands up from the chair, letting the diaries fall to the floor.

Although they are only paces apart, he in the doorway, she standing before the armchair, it is as though a ravine has broken open between them, or a torrent. It is difficult for her to make him out, so blurred has her vision become, and so loud the roaring of blood in her ears. He is saying something about his trip, about the talks he has given all over the globe these past weeks. He has been asked, he says, many difficult questions by those in attendance, and sometimes has had no satisfactory answer to offer. She tries to understand what he is suggesting, but the sound of his voice and that pitching water between them have become thunderous. People seem to expect something else from him, he is saying, because of who he is. He begins to walk forward now, into the shallows. What would you say, he asks now, if I were to introduce you to the world? If it were you to whom they were directing their questions? She is trembling again; she needs to get out, past him to the door and then out onto the street. My emissary, he is saying as he advances, a stranger to them, but no stranger to their ways. She is desperate to get out, the only way is past him, and the gulf between them. He falls suddenly to his knees and lets out a sound, a low *oof*. She moves instinctively to help him, but he sinks further until he is prostrate on the floor. It is her only chance at crossing and she takes it, putting first one foot and then the other onto his back. She needs to apologise; opens her mouth, takes a breath.

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