Paternal Care

by Brian Aldiss, 1925-2017

Published: 1966

Because it was so hot, the student sprawled for a long while in the shade of a cliff and stared without interest at the landscape. There was not a great deal to see, if one looked at the matter from one point of view, although from another point of view there was much to see, and the much consisted mainly of sky and mountain.

Beyond the great expanse of mountain on which the student was, lay another range of mountains, as thickly wooded as the nearer one was bare. A line of wooden watch towers, perched on stilts, stood along the farther mountains; on the nearer, the only signs of man were a hut and, near at hand, a tap, standing up rather rakishly from the rock at the end of a length of pipe. Since the pipe was close to the student, and in his line of view, he found it worthwhile looking at.

He had used the tap some minutes ago and, after drinking at it, had neglected to turn it off properly, so that a series of droplets flashed from it down to the stoney ground. A pair of sparrows made fluttering trips from a nearby slab of rock and drank the drips as they left the mouth of the tap. A frog crawled from under

the slab and hopped slowly under the tap, until the drips splashed from the ground onto its face. The student did not move.

This was as far south as he had ever come, and this was as far south as he could go. The wooden watch towers housed foreign soldiers and stood on alien territory. Tonight, the sparrows might fly across the valley to roost and the frog might hop down into the brook in the valley, but the student could get no further than this hill; his country ended by the brook, and beyond it a different and conflicting ideology ruled.

This thought occupied the student's mind a good deal as he sat by the rock, but he could make nothing profound of it; after all, he supposed, a country must end somewhere. This desolate place, with only the meagrest of fields scratched at one point on the hillside, seemed as good a place as any for a country to end; in fact, it seemed less to end than to peter out, for on this side of the brook there were no soldiers and no watch towers, as if nobody back in the capital cared about this hill anyway.

A woman was working on the patch of field. The student watched her occasionally, when his gaze drifted off the tap. He was interested to see whether she was young or old, ugly or attractive, but was not going to let such a question disturb his rest: the climb up the hill had been a long one. In any case, the woman was swathed in clothes and wore scarves about her head, so that it was difficult to make out much about her. She worked at the slow pace of the peasant, hammering the clods on her field until they shattered into grey dust. And her labours were constantly interrupted by her child.

At first the student could not see whether the child was a child or a dog. It seemed, to his idle gaze, misshapen; but he was sprawled very low and the heat from the ground made everything near it tremble.

The child came from the hut, which stood only a few metres from the field. It too seemed wrapped about with many clothes, in a way that the student supposed was characteristic of the region, and it was because of the behaviour of the child and its mother that his interest was slowly drawn away from the frog and the birds at the tap.

The child persisted in coming out of the hut, while the mother constantly interrupted her labours to usher or carry it in again. When the child was safe inside once more, the mother would shut the door, but then the child climbed from the single stone window. The mother's attitude to this behaviour appeared from a distance to be always the same: she went hurriedly to the child when it appeared, and then got it gently and firmly back into the hut. The child sometimes struggled wildly and cried aloud; sometimes it seemed resigned and allowed itself to be removed without protest.

By its very repetition, this scene awoke interest in the student. Commonplace enough in itself, the mother's concern for her child seemed so overpowering that the student began to puzzle about it. He became at first touched at her diligence, then amused, and finally irritated. Why should she be so persistent about seeing that the child kept within the hut? Since it was old enough to walk, it was old enough to come to no harm in the sun. Why could it not be free to play where it wished?

It was his irritation that moved him. He got slowly to his feet, so that the woman would not notice him, for although she had observed him coming up the hill, he had sat in the shadow of the rock for so long he thought she must have forgotten him. The two sparrows scattered across the hillside, the frog quickly regained his hiding place under the rock, but the mother was just trying to lift the child into her arms, and had her back turned to him.

Further down the hill and considerably nearer the hut was a jagged fin of limestone rock as tall as a man. Embarrassed by his own curiosity, the student doubled up and ran to it, flattening himself against its hot flank.

Now his viewpoint had considerably changed. He saw that the nearer watch towers of the hostile nation were in fact very close, that he was under their surveillance. Sitting in the grim boxes were soldiers in steel helmets—but he saw also that they sprawled there motionless. For a moment, he felt a jolt of terror at the sight, wondering if they had been struck down, perhaps because of the subconscious association of soldiers with death; then it occurred to him, and he smiled with relief, that it was siesta time, and the siesta, like the birds, was able to cross frontiers.

He turned to see what the woman and child were doing. She had just shut it in the hut again—its thin wail came to him—and as she turned to go back to the strip of field she directed a sharp glance at the cliff under which the student had recently been sitting. This covert stare of hers made him, for some reason, feel extremely guilty. He wished to continue on his march, but it was impossible to leave his present position without giving himself away; so he stayed where he was, and presently the child came out again.

Being so much nearer, the student could now see more clearly what was happening. The door of the hut was secured only by a simple latch, which the child could dislodge from the inside with a stick. It stole out now and endeavoured to play in the dirt by the side of the house where it was concealed from its mother's view. As it squatted there with its stick, he saw the child was a girl. She wore a long and dirty grey dress and was considerably hunch-backed.

The student leant against the rock for a long while, staring across at the deformed child. While he looked, the child grew bolder. It played more widely, uttering little cries to itself. Not understanding the noises it uttered, he thought, 'God, and it's half-witted too!'

The child's mother interrupted her clod-breaking to stare across at the child and then at the cliff under which the student had rested. As he caught her look, and saw her return back to her work without interfering again with the child, he understood her former tiresome vigilance. A wave of discomfort ran through him. She had hidden the child away merely because she had been aware of his presence, and had wished to conceal its deformity from him. He wondered at such sensitivity in a peasant woman and feared for its effect on the child, who would have enough trouble from its deformity without adding to it a sense of shame. The whole business seemed the more pathetic since he now clearly observed that the woman was young and had a face as dark and beautiful as a face in the Byzantine frescoes of his native region.

All his troubled thoughts were banished by the sound of a footfall behind him. He turned. A soldier had leapt across the brook and was rushing up the hillside

after him. It was like a picture in a war magazine. The soldier had left his rifle propped against a tree on the other side of the brook, and was now running with an expression of savagery on his face and his hands clenched as if they could not wait to grasp the student's neck.

No sooner did the student see this awful sight than he took to his heels, running up the hill. He did not pause to argue that he was innocent of any evil thought against the woman: he fled. The soldier shouted and flung his helmet. It caught the student cruelly behind his left knee, on the soft popliteal flesh, so that he tripped and fell, with his hands in the stones and the enemy helmet rolling beside him. But in a flash he was up again, and running hard up the hillside.

Only when he was absolutely out of breath did he stop to look back. The soldier was now some way below him and had stopped the pursuit. Puffing and sweating and swearing to himself, the student sat on the bare hill and rubbed his leg. Small figures down below, the soldier went over to the woman and put his arms about her. The child ran across to them, and hugged one of the soldier's uniformed calves; he lifted it so that he could embrace it and the woman at the same time. This he did only for a moment. Then he set the child down, cast a glance across at the watch towers, and ran back down the hillside, clutching his helmet. The deformed child stood waving to him long after he had crossed the brook and was among the trees of the further slope.