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THE ETERNAL SON

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THE ETERNAL SON

Cristovão Tezza

Translated by Alison Entrekin

'I think it's today,' she said. 'Now,' she added, her voice stronger, touching his arm because he was absent-minded.

Yes, he was absent-minded, possibly. Someone makeshift, perhaps; someone who, at the age of twenty-eight, still hadn't begun to live. Strictly speaking, except for an array of happy anxieties, he didn't have anything, nor was he anything yet, exactly. And this walking, talking bag of bones, full of aggressive, oft-times offensive cheer, saw himself before his pregnant wife almost as if he had only now understood the full extent of the fact: a baby.

'So today's the day,' he said, laughing expansively. 'Let's go!'

His wife, who had supported him in every sense for the last four years, was now supported by him while waiting for the lift, at midnight. She was pallid. Contractions. My water, she said, or something to that effect. He didn't think a thing — as far as newness went, tomorrow he'd be as new as his baby. In the meantime, he needed some make-believe. Before leaving, he'd remembered to slip a little cowboy-style flask of whisky into his other pocket. In the first were his cigarettes. A cartoon: a character chain-smokes in a waiting room until a nurse, a doctor, someone shows him a little bundle and says something funny, and we laugh. Yes, there's something funny about the wait. We role-play, the anxious father, the happy mother, the crying baby, the smiling doctor, the stranger who appears out of nowhere and congratulates us — the vertigo of a time now desperately speeding up, everything spinning quickly and inevitably around a baby, to only come to a halt some years later, sometimes never. The role came with a whole scenario, and in it one must appear to be happy. Proud, too. He'd deserve respect. There was a whole dictionary of things one should say about a birth.

In a way — now he was trying to start his yellow vee-dub (they didn't say anything, but they felt something good in the air), taking care not to scrape the mudguard on the pillar, as he'd already done twice — he was being born now as well, and he liked this more-or-less edifying image. Even though he was still elsewhere. This was a constant feeling, which is why he smoked so much, an inexhaustible machine demanding fuel. It was a whole terrain of ideas: standing in it, we have nothing, just the expectation of a vague, sketchy future. But I don't have anything yet either, he might have said, in a kind of metaphysical competition. No house, no job, no rest. Come to think of it, I do have a son — and, always joking, he imagined himself pot-bellied, severe, finally working on something solid, a perfect portrait of the family on the wall. No, his was a different sphere of life. He was predestined for literature — someone necessarily superior, an individual for whom the rules of the game were different. Nothing ostentatious: true superiority was discreet, tolerant, and smiling. He lived on the fringe, that was all. He didn't feel resentment because he wasn't mature enough yet for resentment — a force that can come along and aggressively put us in our place. Perhaps the origins of this counter-force (though he had no way of knowing, being too close to the present) lay in the fact that he'd never been able to make a living from his work. From his true work. This was a tension that almost always escaped in laughter, the only release available to him.

At the maternity-ward counter the woman politely asked for a cheque, and things moved too quickly because someone was leading his wife away. Yes, yes, her water's broken, he heard, while doing the paperwork — once again he had a hard time filling in his profession, and almost said, 'The one with the profession is my wife. I ...' He still found time to say something — his wife, too — but in front of other people their affection became ceremony. It seemed that something bigger was taking place, a kind of theatre insinuated itself (we are too delicate for this matter of birth and need to disguise life's dangers) as if someone — and the image was absurd — was leading his wife to her death, and it was completely normal. He once again felt his horror of hospitals, of public buildings, of solemn institutions, of columns, foyers, reception desks, domes, queues, of their granitic stupidity — and the grammar of bureaucracy was repeated here too, in the small, private space of the maternity ward. Later, he found himself in a room gazing at his wife on a stretcher. Pallid, she smiled at him and they touched hands timidly, almost as if they were breaking the rules. The sheet was blue. There was a sterility about everything, a brutal absence of objects, footsteps echoed as if in a church, and again the falseness bothered him. There was a primary error somewhere, and he couldn't work out where; but he quickly let the thought go. The seconds slid past.

Someone said something that he didn't hear, and he lost all track of the hours as he waited. 'What time is it?' Late. Now he was alone in a corridor next to an empty ramp facing two swinging doors with round windows that he peeked through from time to time, but saw nothing. He didn't have a single thought but, if he had, it might have been: I am as I have always been — alone. Then, lighting a cigarette, happy: and that's good. He took the whisky out of his pocket and had a sip, acting out his little pantomime. For now, things were good. He didn't think about his baby — he thought about himself, and that included the totality of his life, wife, child, literature, future. He knew he'd never written anything really good. Just piles of bad poetry, from the age of thirteen until last month: 'The Son of Spring.' Poetry dragged him mercilessly into kitsch, pulling him by the hair, but something needed to be said about what was going on, though he didn't know exactly what was going on. He had a vague feeling that things were going to work out fine because he wanted them to, and people on the fringe, like himself, took risks — either that or be slotted into the sub-life of the system, that load of crap, he almost declaimed, taking another sip of whisky and lighting another cigarette.

At twenty-eight he was still doing a degree in Language and Literature, which he loathed, he drank a lot, laughed long and inconveniently, read chaotically, and had a drawer brimming with texts. An old hook still held him to the nostalgia of an actors' community, which he visited once a year because of a prolonged dependence on his childhood guru, struggling endlessly and hopelessly to adjust today's clock to the phantasmagoria of a time long gone. Still clinging to the 1970s, filled with the pride of the periphery of the periphery, he used his intuition to sniff out a solution. Being reborn is hard, he'd say some years later, colder. Meanwhile, he tutored a few pupils in essay writing, and painstakingly proofed master's theses and dissertations on any subject. Grammar was an abstraction that allowed for everything. He'd quit being a watchmaker — or, rather, the profession, a medieval dinosaur, had quit him. If only he'd had a gift for business, behind a shop counter. But, no, he'd chosen to fix watches, because of a childlike fascination for mechanisms and the useless delicacy of manual work.

Nevertheless, he considered himself an optimist. He smiled, seeing himself from above, as he had in his imagined cartoon, now a real person. Alone in the corridor, he took another sip of whisky and started to feel the euphoria of the father being born. Things were fitting together. The perfect portrait on the wall. He laughed at the paradox, almost as if the simple fact of having a child entailed his definitive induction into the system, which wasn't necessarily bad, as long as one was 'whole,' 'authentic,' 'true'. He still liked these lofty-sounding words coming from his own mouth, the myth of the powers of natural purity versus the dragons of artifice. He was already starting to have doubts about these rhetorical absolutes, but he lacked the courage to part with them — the truth be told, he had never completely freed himself of this folklore, which meant he had to stay on his toes, alert, his whole life, so as not to be devoured by the violent and fathomless power of the trite and impersonal. He needed 'truth' to emerge from rhetoric and become a permanent restlessness, a brief utopia, a sparkle in his eyes.

Like now, and he took another sip of whisky, almost entering the terrain of euphoria. He wanted to create a sense of ritual for that moment, a ritual that was all his own. Like the director of a play walking an actor through a scene: You sit down like this, then you go over there and smile. Look how you take out a cigarette, sitting alone on this blue bench, while you wait for your baby. You cross your legs. You think about how you didn't want to watch the birth. Fathers watching their children

being born is 'in' now, an almost religious participation. Everything seems to be becoming religion. But you didn't want to, he imagined himself saying. It's just that my world is mental, he might have said if he'd been older. A child is the idea of a child; a wife is the idea of a wife. Sometimes things coincide with our ideas of them; sometimes they don't. They almost always don't, but time goes on and we occupy ourselves with new things, which fit into new families of ideas. He hadn't even wanted to know if it was a boy or a girl: the heavy shadow of the echogram, that primitive phantom projected on a small screen, moving in the darkness and warmth, didn't translate into a gender, just a being. 'We'd rather not know,' they'd told the doctor. Everything seemed fine; that was what mattered.

There, finally, he felt as if time was standing still, suspended. In that well-lit silence, in which tiny, distant sounds (footsteps, a door closing, a low voice) took on the gravity of a brief echo, he thought about the change in his life and tried to imagine a routine, so that things wouldn't change too much. He had more than enough energy to spend days and days sleeping poorly, drinking beer in the intervals, smoking a lot, laughing and telling stories, while his wife recovered. Now he was going to be a father, which always dignified one's biography. He'd be an excellent father, he was sure: he'd make his child the arena for his view of the world. He already had a whole explanation of the universe ready for him. He remembered a few verses of 'The Son of Spring.' His lecturer friend was going to publish it in the university literary magazine. Yes, the lines are beautiful, he thought. Poets were good with advice. Do this, be like that, breathe this air, look at the world — metaphors, one by one, evoked human goodness. A Kipling of the province, he felt impregnated with humanism. My child will be the ultimate proof of my qualities, he almost said out loud, in the silence of that last corridor, a few minutes before his new life began. It was as if the communal religious spirit secretly flourishing at the heart of the country, the whole dream of natural utopias with its soft irrationalism and ethereal transcendence, the celestial peace of God's lambs now revived without frontiers, rituals, or textbooks (everything goes, oh Lord!), had also found refuge in the fringe poet, perhaps in him above all. The irrational undertaking of utopias: long hair, Franciscan sandals, the doors of perception, natural lifestyle, free sex, we're all authentic. Yes, a counterweight was needed, or else the system would crush everyone, as it had done time and again. There was something out of sync in this supposedly personal mission, but he didn't know it yet, adrift in an obstinately makeshift life. My life hasn't begun

yet, he liked to say, as if justifying his own incompetence. So many years dedicated to ... to what was it now? To literature, to poetry, to an alternative lifestyle, to creation, to something bigger that he couldn't put his finger on — so many years and no results! Being alone was a good alibi. Living in a city with aggressive geniuses on every corner, he thought about the meagreness of his short stories, finally published, in which he found flaws every time he turned a page. The book of juvenile fiction published nationwide was to end with its first edition, after a stupid tiff with his editor in São Paulo a few months later. 'We need to cut this paragraph from the second edition because country school teachers are complaining.' He gave up on the book.

He still didn't know it, but he already sensed that it wasn't his niche. Three months earlier he'd finished *The Lyrical Terrorist*, and something better, still formless, seemed to be starting there. Someone struggling to free himself of his guru's influence, trying to leave the world of messages and enter the world of perception, guided by cold reason. He was no longer a poet. He'd lost forever his sense of the sublime, which, hackneyed as it may sound, was the fuel needed to write poetry. An idea of the sublime wasn't enough, he was beginning to realise — it only led to imitation. He needed the strength and courage to summon the language of the world without sliding into the ridiculous. There's something incompatible between me and poetry, he told himself defensively. To assume poetry, it seemed, was to assume a religion, and he'd always been completely devoid of religious sentiment. A creature moving in the desert, he might have written, with some pomp, to describe his own solitude. Solitude as a mission, not a cause for sadness. I've never really managed to be on my own, he concluded, with a pang of anxiety. And now, he thought, instinctively glancing at the swinging doors, I never will. He'd recently started writing a new novel, *Essay on Passion*, in which, he imagined, he'd go through his life with a fine-tooth comb. And everyone else's, with a satirical tongue. No one would be spared. Three chapters ready. It was a cheerful book, he thought. I need to *begin* once and for all, he told himself, and it was only by writing that he'd discover who he was. Or so he hoped. There were too many things to organise, but, perhaps precisely for this reason, he felt good, happy, peopled with plans.

Suddenly, the doctor (whom he'd never liked and thus of whom he had no expectations) opened the swinging doors, unsmiling as always. There was nothing new about his lack of smile, which is why he, a kid father, barely managing to hide his flask of whisky, paid no heed. The man was removing his green gloves as if he'd

just finished an unpleasant task. For some reason, it was this absurd image, no doubt false, that he retained of that moment.

‘How are you?’ he asked the doctor, because it’s what you do. His mind was already a month down the track, seven months, a year and three months, five years ... his child growing, his spitting image.

‘It’s a boy.’

No surprise either. I knew it was going to be the son of spring, he would have said, if he’d spoken.

‘Your wife is fine.’ And the doctor disappeared back where he’d come from.