

Excerpt of "The famished road"

by Ben Okri

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry. In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries. There was much feasting, playing and sorrowing. We feasted much because of the beautiful terrors of eternity. We played much because we were free. And we borrowed much because there were always those amongst us who had just returned from the world of the living. They had returned inconsolable for all the love they had left behind, all the suffering they hadn't redeemed, all that they hadn't understood, and for all that they had barely begun to learn before they were drawn back to the land of origins.

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There were not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat. He had a red beard and eyes of greenish sapphire. He had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds, known by a hundred different names.

It never mattered into what circumstances he was born. He always lived the most extraordinary of lives. One could pore over the great invisible books of lifetimes and recognize his genius through the recorded and unrecorded ages. Sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, he wrought incomparable achievements from every life. If there is anything in common to all his lives, the essence of his genius, it might be the love of transformation, and the transformation of love into higher realities.

With our spirit companions, the ones with whom we had a special affinity, we were happy most of the time because we floated on the aquamarine of love. We played with the fauns, the fairies, and the beautiful beings. Tender Sibyls, benign sprites, and the serene presences of our ancestors were always with us, bathing us in the radiance of their diverse rainbows.

There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born, and one of them is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering. The happier we were, the closer was our birth. As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at first opportunity. We made these vows in fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of that world. Those of us who made these vows were known among the living as abiku, spirit-children. Not all people recognized us. We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding.

Those who broke their pacts were assailed by hallucinations and haunted by their companions. They would only find consolation when they returned to the world of the unborn, the place of fountains, where their loved ones would be waiting for them silently. Those of us who lingered in the world, seduced by the annunciation of wonderful events, went through life with beautiful and fated eyes, carrying within us the music of a lovely and tragic mythology. Our mouths utter obscure prophecies.

Our minds are invaded by images of the future. We are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world. We were often recognized and our flesh marked with razor incisions. When we were born again to the same parents the marks, lingering on our new flesh, branded our souls in advance. Then the world would spin a web of fate around our lives. Those of us who died while still children tried to erase these marks, by making beautiful spots or interesting discolorations of them. If we didn't succeed, and were recognized, we were greeted with howls of dread, and the weeping of mothers.

In not wanting to stay, we caused much pain to mothers. Their pain grew heavier with each return. Their anguish became for us an added spiritual weight which quickens the

cycle of rebirth. Each new birth was agony for us too, each shock of the raw world. Our cyclical rebellion made us resented by other spirits and ancestors. Disliked in the spirit world and branded amongst the Living, our unwillingness to stay affected all kinds of balances.

With passionate ritual offerings, our parents always tried to induce us to live. They also tried us to reveal where we had hidden the spirit tokens that bound us to the other world. We disdained the offerings and kept our tokens a fierce secret. And we remained indifferent to the long joyless parturition of mothers.

We longed for an early homecoming, to play by the river, in the grasslands, and in the magic caves. We longed to meditate on sunlight and precious stones, and to be joyful in the eternal dew of the spirit. To be born is to come into the world weighted down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile. So it was with me.

How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea.

So much of the dust of living was in me. But this time, somewhere in the inter space between the spirit world and the Living, I chose to stay. This meant breaking my pact and outwitting my companions. It wasn't because of the sacrifices, the burnt offerings of oils and yams and palm-nuts, or the blandishments, the short-lived promises of special treatment, or even because of the grief I had caused. It wasn't because of my horror of recognition either. Apart from a mark on my palm I had managed to avoid being discovered. It may have simply been that I had grown tired of coming and going.

It is terrible to remain forever in-between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, know it, love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother.

When the time arrived for the ceremonies of birth to begin, the fields at the crossroads were brilliant with lovely presences and iridescent beings. Our king led us to the first peak

of the seven mountains. He spoke to us for a long time in silence. His cryptic words took flame in us. He loved speeches. With great severity, his sapphire eyes glowing, he said to me: "You are a mischievous one. You will cause no end of trouble. You have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. This life of yours will be full of riddles. You will be protected and you will never be alone."

We all went down to the great valley. It was an immemorial day of festivals. Wondrous spirits danced around us to the music of gods, uttering golden chants and lapis lazuli incantations to protect our souls across the inter spaces and to prepare us for our first contact with blood and earth.

Each one of us made the passage alone. Alone, we had to survive the crossing - survive the flames and the sea, the emergence into illusions. The exile had begun.

These are the myths of beginnings. These are the stories and moods deep in those who are seeded in rich lands, who still believe in mysteries.

I was born not because I had conceived a notion to stay, but because in between my coming and going the great cycles of time had finally tightened around my neck. I prayed for laughter, a life without hunger. I was answered with paradoxes. It remains an enigma how it came to be that I was born smiling.