

A Prayer from the Living (1993)

By Ben Okri (Nigeria, England)



Ben Okri
born 1959

We entered the town of the dying at sunset. We went from house to house. Everything was as expected, run-down, a desert, luminous with death and hidden life.

The gunrunners were everywhere. The world was now at the perfection of chaos. The little godfathers who controlled everything raided the food brought for us. They raided the airlifts and the relief aid and distributed most of the food among themselves and members of their clan¹.

We no longer cared. Food no longer mattered. I had done without for three weeks. Now, I feed on the air and on the quest. Every day, as I grow leaner, I see more things around us. I see the dead, all who had died of starvation.

They are more joyful now; they are happier than we are; and they are everywhere, living their luminous lives as if nothing had happened, or as if they were more alive than we are.

The hungrier I became, the more I saw them-- my old friends who had died before me, clutching onto flies. Now, they feed on the light of the air. And they look at us-- the living-- with so much pity and compassion. I suppose this is what the white ones cannot understand when they come with their TV cameras and their aid. They expect to see us weeping.

Instead they see us staring at them, without begging, and with a bulging placidity in our eyes. Maybe they are secretly horrified that we are not afraid of dying this way.

¹ Though the details of the setting are left (purposely) vague, Okri is most likely dramatizing the widespread famine experienced in the Igbo state of Biafra when it attempted to break away from Nigeria in 1967. The ensuing civil war lasted three years before the rebellion was quelled, due in large part to a Nigerian blockade that starved the Biafran populace into submission. The famine was the first such African famine widely covered by Western journalists, though it would certainly not be the last. Okri's family moved from Nigeria to London when he was two years old, but returned to Nigeria in 1968 at the height of the conflict, the war proving a formative experience for young Okri (later recurring in much of his writing).



scene from the Biafran war

fought among themselves eternally. It didn't seem to matter to them how many died.

All that mattered was how well they handled the grim mathematics of the wars, so that they could win the most important battle of all, which was for the leadership of the fabulous graveyard of this once beautiful and civilized land.

I was searching for my family and my lover. I wanted to know if they had died or not. If I didn't find out, I intended to hang on to life by its last tattered thread. If I knew that they, too, were dead and no longer needed me, I would die at peace.

All my information led me to this town. If my lover, my brothers, my family are anywhere, they are here.

This is the last town in the world. Beyond its rusted gate lies the desert. The desert stretches all the way into the past, into history, to the Western world, and to the source of drought and famine-- the mighty mountain of lovelessness.

From its peaks, at night, the grim spirits of negation chant their awesome soul-shrinking songs. Their songs steal hope from us and make us yield to the air our energies. Their songs are cool and make us submit to the clarity of dying.

Behind us, in the past, before all this came to be, there were all the possibilities in the world.

There were all the opportunities for starting from small things to create a sweet new history and future, if only we had seen them. But now, ahead, there lie only the songs of the mountain of death.

But after three weeks of hunger the mind no longer notices; you're more dead than alive; and it's the soul wanting to leave that suffers. It suffers because of the body's tenacity.

We should have come into the town at dawn. In the town everyone had died. The horses and cows were dying, too.

I could say that the air stank of death, but that wouldn't be true. It smelled of rancid butter and poisoned heat and bad sewage. There was even the faint irony of flowers.

The only people who weren't dead were the dead. Singing golden songs in chorus, jubilant everywhere, they carried on their familiar lives.

The only others who weren't dead were the soldiers. And they

We search for our loved ones mechanically and with a dryness in our eyes. Our stomachs no longer exist. Nothing exists except the search. We



turn the bodies over, looking for familiar faces. All the faces are familiar; death made them all my kin.

I search on. I come across an unfamiliar face; it is my brother. I nod. I pour dust on his flesh. Hours later, near a dry well, I come across the other members of my family. My mother holds on tightly to a bone so dry it wouldn't even nourish

the flies. I nod twice. I pour dust on their bodies. I search on.

There is one more face whose beautiful unfamiliarity will console me. When I have found the face, then I will submit myself to the mountain songs.

Sunset was approaching when, from an unfinished school building, I heard singing. It was the most magical sound I had ever heard and I thought only those who know how sweet life is can sing like that, can sing as if breathing were a prayer.

The singing was like the joyous beginning of all creation, the holy yes to the breath and light infusing all things, which makes the water shimmer, the plants sprout, the animals jump and play in the fields, and which makes the men and women look out into the first radiance of colors, the green of plants, the blue of sea, the gold of the air, the silver of the stars.

It was the true end of my quest, the music to crown this treacherous life of mine, the end I couldn't have hoped for, or imagined.

It seemed to take an infinity of time to get to the school building. I had no strength left, and it was only the song's last echo, resounding through the vast spaces of my hunger, that sustained me.

After maybe a century, when history had repeated itself and brought about exactly the same circumstances, because none of us ever learned our lesson, or loved enough to learn from our pain, I finally made it to the school-room door.

But a cow, the only living thing left in the town, went in through the door before I did. It, too, must have been drawn by the singing. The cow went into the room, and I followed.

Inside, all the space was taken up with the dead. But here the air didn't have death in it. The air had prayer in it. The prayers stank more than the deaths. But all the dead here were differently dead from the corpses outside.

The dead in the school were-- forgive the paradox-- alive. I have no other word to explain the serenity. I felt they had made the room holy because they had, in their last moments, thought not of themselves but of all people who suffer.

I felt that to be the case because I felt myself doing the same thing. I crawled to a corner, sat against a wall and felt myself praying for the whole human race.

I prayed-- knowing full well that prayers are possibly an utter waste of time-- but I prayed for everything that lived, for mountains and trees, for animals and streams, and for human beings, wherever they might be.

I heard the great anguished cry of all humankind, its great haunting music as well. And I, too, without moving my mouth, for I had no energy, began to sing in silence. I sang all through the evening.

And when I looked at the body next to me and found the luminous unfamiliarity of its face to be that of my lover's-- I sang all through the recognition.

I sang silently even when a good-hearted white man came into the school building with a television camera and, weeping, recorded the roomful of the dead for the world-- and I hoped he recorded my singing, too.

And the dead were all about me, smiling, serene. They didn't urge me on; they were just quietly and intensely joyful. They did not ask me to hurry to them, but left it to me.

What could I choose? Human life-- full of greed and bitterness, dim, low-oxygenated, judgmental and callous, gentle, too, and wonderful as well, but... human life had betrayed me.

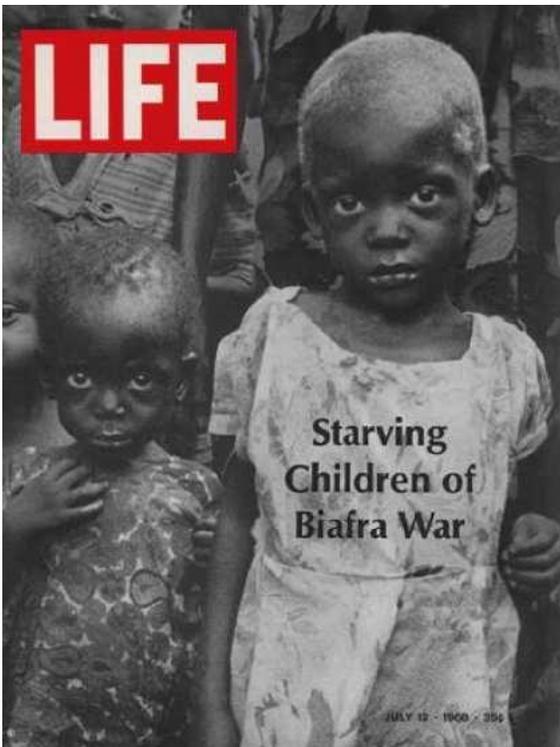
And besides, there was nothing left to save in me. Even my soul was dying of starvation.

I opened my eyes for the last time. I saw the cameras on us all. To them, we were the dead. As I passed through the agony of the light, I saw them as the dead, marooned in a world without pity or love.

As the cow wandered about in the apparent desolation of the room, it must have seemed odd to the people recording it all that I should have made myself so comfortable among the dead. I did.

I stretched myself out and held the hand of my lover. With a painful breath and a gasp and a smile, I let myself go.

The smile must have puzzled the reporters. If they had understood my language, they would have known that it was my way of saying goodbye.



Western coverage of the Biafran war