

## **The Mysterious Anxiety of Them and Us**

by Ben Okri

**1** We were in the magnificent grounds of our mysterious host. A feast had been laid out in the open air. There were many of us present. Some were already seated and some were standing behind those seated. In a way there were too many of us for the food served, or it felt like that.

**2** There was a moment when it seemed that everyone would rush at the food and we'd have to be barbaric and eat with our hands, fighting over the feast laid out on the lovely tables. The moment of tension lasted a long time.

**3** Our host did nothing, and said nothing. No one was sure what to do. Insurrection brooded in the winds. Then something strange happened. Those who were at table served themselves, and began eating.

**4** We ate calmly. My wife was sitting next to me. The food was wonderful.

**5** We ate with some awareness of those behind us, who were not eating, and who did not move. They merely watched us eating.

**6** Did we who were eating feel guilty? It was a complex feeling. There is no way of resolving it as such. Those who were at the table ate. That's it. That's all.

**7** We ate awhile. Then the people behind us began to murmur. One of them, in a low voice, said:

**8** 'The first person who offers us some food will receive...'

**9** I was tempted to offer them some food. But how could I? Where would I start? The situation was impossible. If you turned around, you would see them all. Then your situation would be polarized. It would be you and them. But it was never that way to begin with. We were all at the feast. It's just that you were at the table, and you began to eat. They weren't at the table and they didn't eat. They did nothing. They didn't even come over, take a plate, and serve themselves. No one told them, to just stand there watching us eat. They did it to themselves.

**10** So to turn around and offer them food would automatically be to see them and treat them as inferior. When in fact they behaved in a manner that made things turn out that way. And so we continued to eat, and ignored the murmurs. Soon we had finished eating. We were satisfied, and took up the invitation to visit other parts of the estate. There was still plenty of food left, as it happened. My wife and I were almost the last to leave the table. As I got up, I looked behind us. I was surprised to see only three people there. Was that all? They had seemed like more, like a crowd. Maybe there had been more of them, but they'd drifted off, given up, or died. While we had been eating it had often occurred to me that there was nothing to stop them from sticking knives into our backs. My wife and I filed out with the others, towards the gardens, in the sumptuous grounds of that magnificent estate. It had been a dreamy day of rich sunlight.