

A CHILD'S DELIRIUM

Njabulo S Ndebele

I
mama,mama, i am afraid,
i fear the elephant outside.

hush, my child, it is the dog;
only our dog barking outside.

mama, dogs do become elephants
at night? then i fear the dog.

hush, my child, hush hush.

(Who sat in the shade
And a stump of a cut branch
became the sun? Who?)

mama, blow the candle out
lest the elephant sees we're awake;
i shall not cry in the dark, mama,
i shall not cry.

hush, child, it will be alright.

(Who is it sat in the shade
And the stump of a cut branch,
Wet, became the burning sun? Who?
Who in a tuftless manger lay,
By night covered, in the dead of night?)

i'm afraid, mama – the elephant –
it flaps its ears now; i can hear.
chase it away, mama, let it go away, ma,
lest it eats us up
oh sleep, baby mine, sleep,
it is only the dog – our dog.

... mama, you too,
i'm afraid of you...

II

you are back again!
away, go away,
who are you?
your necks have no heads
but blood gushes out of your throats
like the fountains in town.

yet it is only i who can see you.
who are you, men, six men?
i'm only a child
and you are old,
looking down at me
because i'm alone;
standing round my bed and laughing.
i see, you laugh at me
because i am alone:
baba and mama are at work;
sisi is at school,
so you laugh at me
thinking that i am an orphan.

away, go away,
you men, six of you;
stop laughing at me,
you scare me; you shame me,
i'm only a child
can you not see?

o.k. go on then,
baba is coming back soon...

III

my doll's eyes
are as deep as mine.
the ghost says it's hunger,
but I don't believe; do we?
mama simply hates us
because other people hate her.

IV

little bird, little bird, fly away
fly away little bird
before the flame harms you:
look, the candle flame
does not harm me,
look, i put my finger in ...

STOP DUDU! STOP IT!

have you flown away, little bird?
yes you have; you have.
you flew away little bird,
never shall you be harmed.

[Published in *The Classic: Volume three number four*. 1971