THE MAN OF SMOKE

Njabulo S Ndebele

Strapped to my aunt’s back
I find warmth
We walk through many streets
I don’t know which,
but I know when we turn.
Even in my blanket,
I can feel the dust of the wind
pecking at me, like many needles,
but I cling to my aunt,
her back is warm and moist.

There are voices in this house
I don’t know which,
I’m in the warm darkness
of my blanket.
‘Mzalwane’ Voices greet,
‘Bazalwane’ auntie answers.
Then I am unstrapped
to the gaze of silence
to the gloom of a candle
to the frightening stares
of a huge face of a person of wood
with teeth as big as fingers
smoke comes out of his mouth,
smoke comes out of his wicked smile.

Put me back, auntie, put me back,
it is cold here
but my words are not lips
they are my hands
clutching at her dress.

She puts me under a table,
but I move out to a corner.
A drum begins the beat:
GOGOM GOM.....GOGOM GOM.....
and there is song and dance
wild song and dance
and I am watching alone
from a corner; my corner.
I am wide eyed
I am shorter than the table
and dancing legs are massive pillars.
I cling to my corner
lest I am crushed by dance.
I cling to my corner
watching my aunt do funny things;
she is mad, quite mad:
all are mad here,
and smoke issues out of
the ugly person’s mouth,
smoke is filling the room,
the room is grey smoke now,
GOGOM GOM .....GOGOM GOM ..... 
Alleluia! Alleluya ..... 

round round round they dance
round the table 
GOGOM GOM .....GOGOM GOM ..... 
Alleluia! Alleluya ..... 

I am a child watching
from a corner
I am a child clinging
to my corner

I am a child fearing
to be crushed.
I watch my aunt who is mad
quite mad.
All are mad here.
They kneel before the face of smoke
they cry, they shriek,
they breath in gasps
they say a wind must enter them
they are mad quite mad,
rising to sing and dance and clap hands.
I fear people with the wind, praying
like a cow bellowing.

Strapped to my aunt’s back,
I find warmth
we walk through many streets
I don’t know which,
but I know we are going home now.
I know that we are passing other people
singing, drumming and hand-clapping
down the street:
‘These are the wicked dogs
who broke away from our sect
‘Curse them, God. May they burn.’
even in the noise of the wind
I can hear auntie’s spitum
cursing the dogs on the tarred road.
But I am warm in the blanket
it is dark and warm and moist inside,
and I dream of the man of wood
standing next to my bed in the dark,
choking me with his smoke.
and I cry;
‘Poor boy, you are hungry’ auntie says.