

The Children Made Of Wax

THIS IS A STORY THAT ORIGINATES IN ZIMBABWE, AMONGST THE NDEBELE PEOPLE OF MATABELELAND.

It became well known in English-speaking countries thanks to its inclusion in a collection of folk tales gathered by Alexander McCall-Smith. McCall-Smith is a British-Zimbabwean writer, perhaps best known for his series of novels about the No.1 Ladies Detective Agency. It is not explicitly a queer story, but I think that its themes and images resonate in ways that reflect the queer experience. It is a story about desiring things which are forbidden; about difference and transgression; about transformation and ultimately about love.

The story concerns a couple whose children are all made of wax. There is no explanation given for this, and none is needed for the family are happy together. The only trouble is that the children cannot go outside during the daytime, for the glare of the sun would cause them all to melt. Their parents build them a special hut to live in, with a thick, shady roof, and they spend their days in the shadows.

When night falls, the children come outside to play and work in the fields with their parents.

One of the children, Ngwabi, longs to see the light of the sun. He stares at it through a crack in the door. One day, his desire overcomes him. He runs outside in the full heat of the day. His siblings watch in horror as he slowly starts to melt. When, at last, the night falls, the children tell their parents what has happened. Together, the family gather up the wax that was once Ngwabi and shape it into the form of a beautiful bird. In place of feathers, they decorate the bird with leaves, which they hope will protect the wax from the sun. When the bird is finished, they place him on a rock and the children return to their hut. The sun rises and warms the bird, whose feathers glow and shine like a rainbow in the morning light. The bird then stretches its wings and flies away, ready to start a new life. The family smile because they know their brother is happy at last.

There are many versions of this story, told in different contexts. There is a lovely, animated version, that you can watch online for free. Go to BFI Player – www.player.bfi.org.uk – and search Children of Wax.