

The Day Mabata-bata Exploded

From Mia Couto, *Voices Made Night*, translated by David Brookshaw (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990)

Suddenly, the ox exploded. It burst without so much as a moo. In the surrounding grass a rain of chunks and slices fell, as if the fruit and leaves of the ox. Its flesh turned into red butterflies. Its bones were scattered coins. Its horns were caught in some branches, swinging to and fro, imitating life in the invisibility of the wind.

Azarias, the little cowherd, could not contain his astonishment. Only a moment before, he had been admiring the great speckled ox, Mabata-bata. The creature grazed more slowly than laziness itself. It was the largest in the herd, ruler of the horned fraternity, and it was being kept aside as a bride price for its owner, Uncle Raul. Azarias had been working for him ever since he had been left an orphan. He would get up when it was still dark so that the cattle might graze the early morning mist.

He surveyed the disaster: the ox pulverised, like an echo of silence, a shadow of nothingness.

'It must have been a lightning flash.' he thought.

But it couldn't have been lightning. The sky was clear, blue without the slightest smudge. Where could the bolt have come from? Or was it the earth which had flashed? He questioned the horizon beyond the trees. Perhaps the *ndlati*, the bird of lightning, was still circling the skies. He turned his gaze towards the mountain in front of him. It was there that the *ndlati* dwelt, there where all the rivers are one,
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born from the same desire to be water. The *ndlati* lives concealed in its four colours and only takes to the air when the clouds bellow and the sky grates. Then it is that the *ndlati* rises into the heavens on the wings of its madness. High in the air, it dons its clothes of flame, and casts its burning flight upon the creatures of the earth. Sometimes it throws itself to the ground, making a hole. It remains in the cavity and urinates there. Once upon a time it was necessary to resort to the skills of the old medicine man to dig out that nest and retrieve its acid deposits. Maybe Mabata-bata had trodden on some malign vestige of the *ndlati*. But who would believe it? Not his uncle. He would want to see the dead ox, at least be shown some proof of the accident. He had already seen thunderstruck cattle: they became burnt out carcasses, a pattern of ashes reminiscent of a body. Fire chews slowly, it doesn't swallow in one go, which is what had happened here.

He looked about him: the rest of the cattle had scattered into the bush in fright. Fear slid from the little cowherd's eyes.

'Don't come back without an ox, Azarias. That's all I say: you'd better not come back.'

His uncle's threat blustered in his ears. That anxiety consumed the air he breathed. What could he do? Thoughts rushed at him like shadows but found no way out of the problem. There was only one solution: to run away, to travel the roads where he knew nothing more. To flee is to die from a place and, with his torn trousers, an old bag over his shoulder, what would he leave behind to regret? Mistreatment, running after cattle. Other people's children were allowed to go to school. Not he, for he was nobody's son. Work tore him early from his bed and returned him to sleep when there was no longer any trace of childhood left in him. He only played with animals: swimming the river clinging to the tail of Mabata-bata, making bets when the stronger animals fought each other. At home, his uncle told his fortune:

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'This one, judging by the way he lives mixed up with livestock, will surely marry a cow.'

And everyone laughed, without a care for his tiny soul, his mistreated dreams. This was why he looked back at the fields he was going to leave behind without any regrets. He considered the contents of his bag: a catapult, some *djambalau* fruit, a rusty penknife. So little cannot inspire any remorse. He set off in the direction of the river. He felt he was not running away: he was merely starting out along his road. When he arrived at the river he crossed the frontier of water. On the other bank, he stopped without even knowing what he was waiting for.

As evening fell, Grandmother Carolina was waiting for Raul at the door of the house. When he arrived, she let fly with her anxieties:

'So late, and Azarias hasn't come back with the cattle.'

'What? That brat is going to get a good hiding when he gets back.'

'Isn't it that something has happened, Raul? I'm scared, these bandits ...'

'Some fun and games have happened, that's what.'

They sat on the mat and had dinner. They talked about the matter of the bride price, the wedding preparations. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Raul got up, casting Grand-mother Carolina a questioning glance. He opened the door: they were soldiers, three of them.

'Good evening, do you want something?'

'Good evening. We've come to inform you of an incident: a mine exploded this afternoon. An ox trod on it. Now, that ox belonged here.'

Another soldier added: *'We want to know where its minder is.'*

'The minder's the one we're waiting for,' Raul answered. And shouted: 'These bloody bandits!'

'When he arrives, we want to talk to him, to find out how it was that it happened. Nobody should go out towards the mountain. The bandits have been laying mines over there.'

They left. Raul remained, hovering round his questions.

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Where's that son-of-a-bitch Azarias gone? And was the rest of the herd scattered out there goodness knows where?

'Grandmother: I can't stay here like this. I've got to go and see where that good-for-nothing has got to. It must be that he's let the herd scatter maybe. I must round up the cattle while it's still early.'

'You can't, Raul. Look at what the soldiers said. It's dangerous.'

But he disregarded her and went off into the night. Does the bush have a suburb? It does: it was where Azarias had taken the animals. Raul, tearing himself on the thorns, could not deny the boy's skill. Nobody could match him in his knowledge of the land. He calculated the little cowherd would have chosen to take refuge in the valley.

He reached the river and climbed the big rocks. At the top of his voice, he issued his command:

'Azarias, come back, Azarias!'

Only the river answered, disentombing its gushing voice. Nothingness all around. But he sensed his nephew's hidden presence.

'Show yourself, don't be scared. I shan't hit you, I promise.'

He promised lies. He wasn't going to hit him: he was going to thrash him to death, when he had finished rounding up the cattle. For the time being he decided to sit down, a statue of darkness. His eyes, now used to the half light, disembarked on the other bank. Suddenly, he heard footsteps in the bush. He stood on his guard.

'Azarias?'

It wasn't him. Carolina's voice reached Raul's ears.

'It's me, Raul.'

Curse that old hag, what did she want? To interfere, that's all. She might tread on a mine and blow herself up and, worse still, him too.

'Go back home, Grandmother!'

'Azarias will refuse to hear you when you call. He'll listen to me though.'

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And she put her assuredness into effect by calling the cowherd. From behind the shadows, a silhouette appeared.

'Is that you Azarias? Come with me, let's go home.'

'I don't want to. I'm going to run away.'

Raul began to creep down the rock, cat-like, ready to pounce and seize his nephew by the throat.

'Where are you going to run away to, child?'

'I've nowhere to go, Grandmother.'

'That fellow's going to come back even if I have to cudgel him back in little pieces,' Raul's guileful voice cut in quickly.

'Be quiet, Raul. In your life you don't know the meaning of wretchedness.' And turning to the cowherd: *'Come my child, I'll look after you. It wasn't your fault that the ox died. Come and help your uncle to herd the animals.'*

'There's no need. The cattle are here, alongside me.'

Raul stood up, unsure. His heart began to do a drum dance inside his chest.

'What's that? The cattle are there?'

'Yes, that's right.'

The silence became twisted and tangled. Azarias's uncle was not sure of his nephew's truth.

'Nephew, did you really do it? Did you round up the cattle?'

The grandmother smiled, thinking of how the quarrels of the two of them would now end. She promised him a reward and asked the boy to choose.

'Your uncle is very pleased. Choose. He will respect your request.'

Raul thought it better to agree to everything at that moment. Later, he would correct the boy's illusions, and his sense of duty as a cowherd would return.

'Tell us your wish then.'

'Uncle, next year can I go to school?'

He had guessed this would be it. There was no way he would consent to this. By allowing him to go to school he would lose a minder for his oxen. But the occasion required bluff and he spoke with his back to his thoughts:

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'Yes, you can go.'

'Really, Uncle?'

'How many mouths do you think I have?'

'I can continue to help with the cattle. School is only in the afternoon.'

'That's right. But we'll talk about all that later. Come on out of there.'

The little cowherd emerged from the shadow and ran along the sand to where the river offered him passage. Suddenly, there was an explosion and a flash which seemed to turn night into the middle of its day. The little cowherd swallowed all that red, the shriek of crackling fire. Amid the flecks of night he saw the *ndlati*, bird of lightning, swoop down. He tried to shout:

'Who are you coming to get, ndlati?'

But he spoke not a word. It wasn't the river that drowned his words: he was a fruit drained of sounds, pains and colours. Round about, everything began to close in, even the river sacrificed its water's life, and the world engulfed its floor in white smoke.

'Are you going to land on Grandmother, poor thing, so kind? Or have you chosen my uncle, after all repentant and full of promises like the true father who died on me?'

And before the bird of fire could decide, Azarias ran and embraced it in the passage of its flame.