

That I cannot say

by Rosamund Stanford

Bulu was walking round and round under the old oak tree pushing a pole. The other end of the pole was tied to a bunch of cowhide strips, suspended from a high-up branch. The little girl's eyes were on the still hairy hides. They were twisting, twisting, twisting, and growing a big lumpy bulge. As the bulge got more knotted the pole pulled Bulu's arms up and up, until they were above his head.

You know, said Bulu without looking at her, when your grandfather passes on, the buck are going to die. That herd of rhebok up there on the mountain are going to die, it will take some time, but that is what will happen.

Why will they die? asked the girl.

That I cannot say, said Bulu.

Bulu was very old and very hard to talk to. The little girl wanted to ask more but she felt unable. He had such deep dark lines in his face, and he was filled with sorrow. His sons, whom he'd raised with great care, had become cattle thieves. He said such a thing was almost enough to make him join the mission people, although not quite enough.

Get out of the way! he suddenly shouted. The little girl scattered. The pole came wildly smacking and bouncing down as the knotted riempies unwound.

Then Bulu started again, trudging round and round. My mind is like the hide of this cow, said Bulu, if I put my sinews into it and twist it up, it becomes unruly, like the water

snake when it has been angered. Maybe, as they say in that church that has been built over there, I will go to hell, but there is nothing else for it.

That was very frightening for the girl. Now she was thinking, not only will Bulu one day die, but also her grandfather would die, and all the buck on the mountain too. She felt the presence of doom.

Knowing how she felt, Bulu for the first time looked straight at the girl. Not now, he said, because it is not yet the time, but when you are older, you will have to come back here no matter how difficult that will be, or how inconvenient. But come with me now I will show you something before I die.

The girl followed Bulu up into the hills. You see, he said, when they reached the heights where there was a covering of grey-green isidwadwa shrubs; the goats are destroying the grass, eating even the roots. And the cattle, he shook his head, they are thin long before the frost. And here, this spring, which is the one that sends water down to the homes below, is becoming weaker. We do not know why, but I alone have been speaking to the

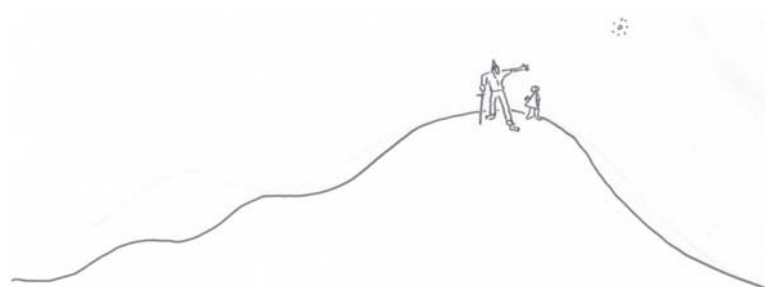
water snake, no one else hears him anymore. He says this mountain is shrinking from him, in shame.

The shame is on account of being left naked. No mountain wants to be without cover, but that is happening. For the first time Bulu smiled at the girl. You, he said, and me, we can put on clothes in the morning and take them off at night, but not the mountain.

They walked along the ridge and down a slope until they sighted the small herd of rhebok in the distance. There they are! said the girl, excited, because they were a rare sight for her eyes.

Now we will follow them, said Bulu, but from a distance. For nearly an hour, the two of them walked quietly behind the herd of buck. They are going, said Bulu, all the way from up here on Inungi mountain, right down down the foothills and into the valley of the Umzimvubu.

When the buck reached the Umzimvubu, the girl expected that they would drink, but no. Instead they trailed along the bank, going south with the bends of the river. They stopped at a place where the water was spreading wider and





shallow enough to wade through. One by one each buck made a small jump into the flow. With their heads held high, half wading, half swimming, they made their way to the middle of the river. Then their backs rose out of the water; there must have been a mound or a rock just beneath the surface. Standing on this they lowered their necks into the river and drank. Then one by one they returned to the bank.

All that way, said Bulu, and they could have drunk anywhere along the river. In fact they could have drunk from the stream up on the mountain. Maybe you, on those short but sturdy legs of yours, would walk such a way, from the top of the mountain to here, if there was coca cola in that water. Now you are teasing me, said the girl.

Soon after that Bulu died and the girl's grandfather died too. The family moved to the city where she was sent to school.

For the first few years the girl was alright. But as the pages and pages of facts began to mount she'd ask her brothers: How can a person remember all these things about an animal or plant, or a river without seeing it ever? The girl was scolded, she was sent for counselling, she was sent to a psychiatrist. When the psychiatrist asked her why she was refusing to learn her work she replied: There's no picture, no story

to help me hold the bullet lists in my brain. I want you to take these pills, he said, they will help you remember.

I don't want pills, said the girl, I want to smell the Umzimvubu again, the water in these taps is disgusting.

The psychiatrist told the girl's family: Without medication I see little hope. It's clear as crystal that she is deluded; we all know that our city water it is absolutely sterile, you can even smell the chlorine.

Now the girl was back. Her brothers had brought her to visit the place of their early childhood. They searched for the mountain spring, but it had dried up, as Bulu predicted that it would.

Then they went down into the valley to Bulu's huts. They were long deserted. There were goats all over the place and a few cattle, bony as skeletons.

They went to the river. If only I can find the place that Bulu showed me, said the girl. I have to find the buck first. Walking around they asked whoever they came across: Have you seen any rhebok? Some people who were herding their thin cattle, said they'd last seen a small herd over there or over there, but that it was some time ago. Nobody was sure whether the buck were still around. One person said he'd heard gunshots on the mountain, and that

maybe the whole herd had been hunted out. Another one said dogs had eaten the buck.

Then the girl and her brothers met a man who was tall and ropey-looking just like Bulu, but younger. You must be one of Bulu's sons, said the girl. Yes he said, they released me from prison only yesterday and I've been walking walking walking, but I no longer have a family to return to.

The spring on the mountain has dried up, said the girl. That is what my father said would happen, responded Bulu's son.

Because it was summer the Umzimvubu was swollen with earth-red water. We will never be able to find the place where the buck drank with the water so full and muddy, said the girl.

You must wait then until the rains subside if that is why you came all this way, said Bulu's son. That could take months, said the oldest brother in consternation. It's too bad, said the girl, I'll just have to wait as long as it takes. What about your schooling? asked the other brother, you will fall behind. It would make no difference if I went back now, she answered, there's no room in my brain.

Your head is too tight inside, said Bulu's son. The remedy for that is known only to the water snake. He is the one who can unravel the tightness of mind that won't allow new things to enter.

You can't stay here, said the brothers, everything's changed: look at the veld, look at how the huge old ironwoods have been hacked away. And in any case you can't drink the water of the Umzimvubu anymore, there's an enormous unserviced settlement ten kilometres upstream,

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you'll have cholera in no time.

I'll stay, said the sister, Bulu's son will look after me: won't you?

I'm known as a cattle thief, he replied, but you are welcome to one of my father's huts.

For four months the girl waited. Then when the grass had broken into little white pins, the water of the Umzimvubu got shallower and clearer; and because it was late summer the snakes spent as long as possible heating up their bodies in the sun.

Then one morning next to the river the girl met the water snake. It was big and long and brownish black, almost invisible, as it lay coiled on a hot black rock.

The girl froze. The next step of her bare foot would have stood right on the snake had she not caught the glint of its eye. Her foot jerked back. Her mouth went dry, as if she'd bitten into a green banana. Her legs were trying to run her away, but she was torn in two, because her mind was saying: this is your chance; you came here because school or some other thing was squeezing your brain, now is your chance.

The girl forced her legs to be still. She faced the water snake.

I see your legs are still running inside themselves, remarked the snake. I see you are being torn apart. Follow me.

Uncurling itself the snake slid across the hot rocks and down into the grass. The girl followed it through grass and bush and deep red dongas. Then the river widened out and the

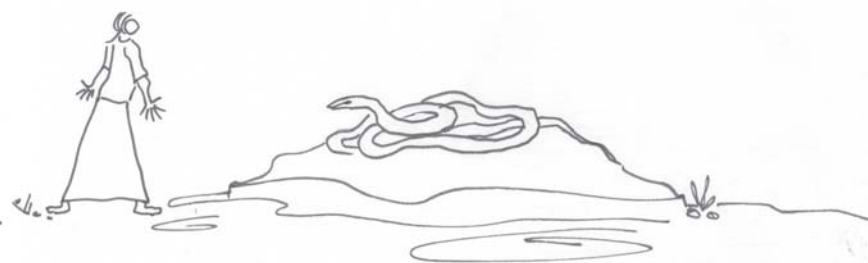
water looked a bit shallower. This is the place, thought the girl, the place where the rhebok came to drink.

You are right said the snake. Now we must wait. So they waited, but soon it was dark and nothing had happened.

You will have to find me again tomorrow, said the snake, I will be back on the same rock. It slid into the water.

In the dusk the girl made her way back along the river, she went as slowly as a creeping creature so as not to injure her upright bones.

The next day as soon as it became light she walked back to the black rocks. There was no snake. She waited and waited and waited.



Then a movement caught her eye. It was the snake gliding up the rocks.

Again she followed it along the bank to the place where the river was slightly wider and shallow enough to wade through. They sat all day there. Nothing happened. The girl felt thin and hungry and very thirsty. She lay on a flat rock and sucked water up like a cow or an antelope.

The snake disappeared without saying a word to her, so again she walked very slowly back to Bulu's huts.

What was she to do? She spoke to Bulu's son: I have followed the water snake today and yesterday and waited and waited, I'm sure it's the same place that Bulu took me to, where the buck drank.

Bulu's son was unable to hear her because he was vomiting his guts out. For days he'd been unable to keep anything in his stomach. He'd heard that many people along the river were throwing everything up in the same way. The girl didn't know what to do to help him. They knew it was the water making everyone sick. If only the spring on the mountain hadn't dried up, she said. She boiled pots of water for Bulu's son, and he drank and drank. Then he said: maybe it is better that we all live in prison, at least there we are fed, and the water does not make us die.

Again the next day the girl went to find the water snake. For many hours she sat on the rock, but there were clouds passing over the sun, and every time another cloud darkened the sun her heart sank. Maybe winter has set in and the water snake has gone into hibernation, she thought.

Then she thought: but what is the point in any case, I must truly be mad, those teachers were right, if anyone saw me here spending my days sitting on a rock like a primitive person waiting for a snake, they would say yes indeed this is madness. This was a terrifying thought for the girl. She could neither get up and leave nor stay where she was: what was going to happen? What can happen if you can neither stay where you are nor leave?

It was then that she noticed that the snake was on the rock, as if it had been there all the time and she'd been unable to detect its presence. But what was happening? It was writhing and swelling. Its skin



was beginning to burst. A slow tear was splitting along the length of the snake's body.

Now, said the snake, take my old skin and grind it up with a stone, then walk along the river bank and you will know exactly which place in the water to throw it. That's all you need to do, nothing further. I will be gone now. With its golden-brown skin, like the skin of a young snake, it slid off the rock and disappeared into the running water.

The girl picked up the skin, which was thin as plastic and slightly translucent. She crumpled it into one hand then began to follow the river as she'd done the two previous days. She saw a round rock, the size of her hand, which she picked up and took with her to the place where the river widened out.

There, she sat down and ground up the water snake's skin. Then she gathered up every bit, every scale in her palms and stepped to the water's edge. This was the place she knew; but her hands wouldn't open, they were afraid to let go of the snakeskin. As long as she held it in her hands she could hope: but what if she let it go and that was the end of that, what if she never found whatever it was she'd come back for? What if she went back to school and was still unable to store more than three facts in her tight brain?

She found herself weeping: this was the first time that she'd allowed her tears to flow since returning to the place of her birth. But after only five sobs the girl took in a very deep breath. These tears, she said, will have to help me: I will not shed them for no good use. She stood up and flung the crushed water snake scales into the stream.

As she did this, she heard a soft sound like hooves on rooigras. She looked up and there was a small herd of rhebok. She remained absolutely still, as still as the snake had been when she had failed to detect it on the rock. The buck reached the bank, then one by one they made a jump and entered the water. First they swam out a bit, then they allowed the current to take them slightly downstream, to a place where the water was swirling like a knot in a tree. There the buck rose out of the water; they were standing on a rock or a mound, with just their lower legs covered. One by one they bent down and sucked up water from the river. Then they swam back to the bank.

When the rhebok had gone the girl took off her clothes and waded and swam to the same place. Just under the water was a large rock where she rested, looking into the river on the far side. The water there looked as if it had rust in it and smelt slightly sulphurous. She put her face in and let her eyes look down into the river. She felt with her arms. Under the river there must be a spring, she could feel the bubbling coming up.

The next day the girl returned with empty two-litre coke bottles. She swam to the same place, then she dived to the bottom of the river. Spring water was welling up from a hole. She filled the bottles, trying as best as possible to keep the river water out.



Then she took the bottles back to Bulu's huts. At first when she drank this water, it tasted awful, but soon she wanted nothing else to drink or eat. For five days she took in nothing but the water of this underwater spring.

On the fifth day she began to feel that her tight brain was softening, and the knotted rope in her belly was turning into a thousand flowing strands all moving together; it was as if all her energies, instead of zooming this way and that way like taxis in rush hour, were just meandering like water or thin strands of cloud on a breeze.

The girl breathed freely again. She said to Bulu's son. I'm going back now. I think those buck were the same ones that came down from the mountain when your father was still alive, the snake allowed me to slip back to that time. Before I go I will show you the place under the Umzimvubu, where the water is still full of life.

(The author can be contacted at mindys@global.co.za)