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edited by onuora ossie enekwe

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(Editor's note: The drawings in **Okike** No. 32 were by Chika Okeke)

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From the Editor

As announced in the February issue, the October 1996 edition will mark the Silver Jubilee of *Okike*. The theme for this issue is "**Nigerian Literature in the Last Decade (1986-1996)**". (See inside back cover for details).

Contributors are once again reminded to send biographical notes. This is very important.

Manuscripts should be in duplicate, typewritten, double-spaced with ample margins.

We have taken significant steps to ensure that *Okike* is available worldwide. If you have advice or suggestions as to how to facilitate this objective, please, write.

Thanks for your continuing interest in *Okike*.

ONUORA OSISI ENEKWE
Editor

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*AYO MAMUDU***Harmattan**

Bears on her billowy back
the season of harvests
mates past and future.

She stretches the tingling skin tight
to transmit impulses raining on mind,
the voice of cold-sharp vision.

Egrets return delivering parcels
to waiting souls
and children mark their white blessings on finger-nails

Cows flaunt the elegant burden
of the birds -
companions and dutiful valets

The eye puts new colours
on objects sifted through the bluish haze
which hangs down from skyrafters.

The call of the spirit
perched on the flowering branches of the soul
rebukes the year's slide

Even as on rising ashes
longings etherised rush beyond
swirls of dust storms.

Childhood Eggs

The colourful bird my childhood
re-acquaints mirthfully my afternoon
with catapults

The familiar long-forgotten tune flows
from its swollen throat into my afternoon
days parched beyond the touch of iced water;
on birdsong the years ebb;
flood-freight silting plant roots.

In the silted seabed flap-flops a fish,
disembowels herself and sets
her pouch of eggs my dreams on a rock slab

Between bird and fish, the dialogue
soon becomes warm
on questions of height and vista,
maturation and time.

I hear out
the weave and wash of their exchange,
my eyes blazing, hair smoking.

*SOLA OSOFISAN***Eternity**

He's been around for long
Forever,
He's been around forever,
Numerous footsteps invisible on windwaterwashed shores.
The creaks of his age,
The streaks of his days,
He wears no Rolex,
And because he alone dares to be timeless,
They call him Eternity

He was around when they manufactured history
And good children gathered the rumpled folds of curiosity
To spread at the knowing feet
Of yesterday's griots.
He outlives the insane songs that entomb,
The empty echo of bloodstained jackboots,
Knock-about babies,
The zombies of fear.
He seeps painstakingly through the millennia
To detonate mindless moments,
Assuring urchins hanging at the unacknowledged edges
Of courtyard celebrations
That homeless crumbs would always need a friend.
His is not the fickle affection of the bee for the pollen,
The vastness of every place is the forever of his love.
He is around in our longing for one to hold us today
As if tomorrow is just a mirage,
Around fleetingly in the alternate loins
Of couples hidden in the sweaty hasty grip
Of 'short time',
He was.

They called him Eternity.

He is .

They call him Eternity.

He was Eternity when moments had no name

And creatures had no place.

He was Eternity when Eve had no shame

And serpents hadn't lost face.

His voice is a querulous whistle

Asking 'whooooooooooooo?',

Screaming around sudden corners in high places

Whittling leaves in woody passageways.

Sometimes he makes a restless home in the armpit

Of the wind,

And because he's been around for so many forgotten

Yesterdays,

They call him Eternity.

He's awake in the sleeping night,

Smoothing wrinkles with fingers of light,

Cradling the battered faces of battered babies,

Whispering 'everything will be alright'.

He is in the drumble as angry clouds grind their teeth,

The fatal whiplash of his signature tattoos the sky.

The faraway stars are fireflies in the tangled

Macroverse of his endless hair,

The cohesive sparkle in his daylight eyes.

He watches even as darkness haltingly deserts the sky,

A broken whore dragging her bruises to bed,

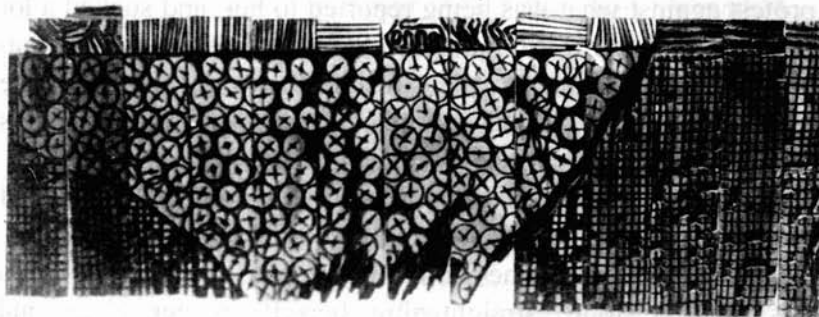
And because his mind never fails

And his limbs never ail,

They call him Eternity.

He's numbered the miserable moments at many graveside,
Deleting glowing names for whom only yesterday
He uncovered a fresh page.
That's when he feels he's been about for too long
And won't something delete him too?
And because he is the final eraser,
They call him Eternity.

And when they puff smoke in his gentle eyes
And when they pile dust in his waiting embrace
And when they empty curses in his lungs,
Still he speaks infinitely in the gargle of the waves,
Laughing his wild laughter above the tallest trees,
Tickling a neglected backside,
Fondling hair.
And though he be one of the galaxy of gods men pray,
Gods too seek his face,
For all need Time to do the undone,
Sing the unsung.
Time, winged bird poking caring beak into the nest
Of perpetual harvest...
Even the gods call him Eternity.



"Pata", 1990

ARTHUR GAKWANDI

A Man For One Season

The office cleaner, who had been staring through the open window for some time, suddenly stepped back and ducked towards the secretary's table. Half crouching, he gave her a naughty grin and whispered loudly: 'The Minister has come'!

The secretary gave him an indifferent side glance and continued with her long chat on the telephone. The cleaner snatched a rug from the window-sill, made mock gestures at dusting the typewriter in front of the secretary, was waved off with a gesture of the hand, at which he leapt through the doorway into the corridor.

Almost immediately there were rapid, half-audible verbal exchanges outside the door, a hurried shuffling of feet, slamming and opening of doors, and general commotion along the whole length of the corridor.

Inside the secretary's room, there was a clearing of throats, shy exchanges of glances and adjustments of neck-ties as a group of people straightened up themselves in their chairs in preparation for the minister's arrival. They all kept their anxious eyes at the secretary who, to their surprise, maintained her remote and indifferent composure as she gave out long drawn grunts of disapproval into the telephone, hissed in protest against what was being reported to her, and sucked a lot of air through her teeth in disgust. She did not pay any attention to the people who crowded inside the room because she regarded them as part of an endless stream of favour seekers whom she had come to view with contempt.

'A - ah! ah - ah!' she remonstrated with loud fist-banging of the table that made everybody in the room start.

'Well, anyway,' she said after a pause, switching to a business-like tone, straightening herself in her chair and

beginning to arrange the papers on her table with the hand that was not holding the receiver. 'I'll ring you later. I want to get the full details, but now I can't. Yes. O.K.' and she abruptly replaced the receiver.

She pulled out a notebook and a pencil from the drawer and placed them close to the edge of the table. She then started to arrange the paper trays, pads, and the little stationery objects on her table. She was not in a hurry because she knew that the minister would take some time to walk up to the fourth floor, the lift having broken down for the third time in a fortnight. The Minister had now given instruction that no more money should be wasted repairing the lift because he attributed the recurrent breakdowns to constant overloading and to the violent and persistent pushing of the button by impatient users each one of whom seemed to expect the lift to give him special priority.

'Let them go up on foot for some time,' Honourable Makanga, the minister had said when he heard about the latest breakdown. 'That may teach them to be responsible. In the meantime, of course, some of us will have to pay the price of being Ugandans,' he added, waving his hand dismissively.

The corridor, which had been deserted a few minutes earlier, now become crowded with people hurrying in all directions and some times colliding as they stepped aside to let the minister pass. None of them forgot to say 'good morning sir' as the minister hastened down the corridor with long measured strides, not looking either way. He shot past the entrance of his secretary's office by exactly two strides and made an about turn while the bodyguard who was close at his heels, opened the door just in time for him to enter.

Everybody except the secretary jumped up. The minister muttered a 'good morning everybody' as he crossed the room without looking at anybody's face. A discordant jumble of sibilants floated in the room in response to his greeting as he disappeared into his office. the bodyguard in police uniform

followed him closely, carrying a briefcase in one hand and a Chinese SMG in the other. The bodyguard returned almost immediately with the gun but without the briefcase, closed the door, and sat on a hard chair with his legs stretched out to block any entry into the office.

More people poured into the room and made a lot of noise as they jostled about the middle because all the chairs were already occupied. The secretary tried to cast reproachful glances at the people in order to restrain them from causing commotion but she made no impact because some of them were standing too close to her. She became irritated as things began to get rowdy. Those of you who cannot find chairs, please wait outside,' she ordered. 'The minister cannot see you all at the same time.'

The crowd did not pay any heed to her commands and continued to eddy around the middle of the room.

'Please give us space to work!' she shouted. A murmur of protest rippled through the crowd.

'Where is the bodyguard?' she yelled with irritation, as she turned round only to see that the policeman was already gently but firmly shoving the favour-seekers out of the room, using his gun as boy scouts use their staves to control spectators at school concerts. He was showing people out without allowing his weapon to come into contact with their bodies. You could see from the way he tilted his gun upward, the muzzle slightly above the people's heads, that he was following certain rules.

When there was no one left standing in the room, the policeman came back and sat in his chair next to the door of the minister's office. He waited for things to quieten, and then went out of the room.

'Yakobo, where are you?' the secretary called the messenger in a stern voice. The messenger often made himself invisible, but almost always surfaced when called. He now emerged from somewhere among the visitors and stood in front of the secretary. 'Bring forms for these people to fill.'

'Oh no!' someone groaned with irritation. The secretary suddenly turned round to see who had dared to voice a complaint but only met with a general growling and grunting that ended quickly as she searched their faces with her piercing eyes to determine the source of the noise.

'But this is not fair!' exploded someone who could not control his irritation. 'Some of us have been here for two hours! Why didn't you give us the forms earlier?' There was a general murmur of support for this man who had plucked up courage to make a verbal protest. Still no one else dared support him openly.

'She doesn't know that some of us come from up-country,' continued the man who now had nothing to lose and whom the others watched with silent admiration. He was a lean, middle-aged man with greying whiskers and stooping shoulders. Faced with someone whom she could not intimidate, the secretary looked the other way and stretched her naturally thick lips into a short menacing muzzle. The protester decided to address her directly. 'Madam, you have to learn to be fair to fellow Ugandans, even if they are not important.' He spoke in a quiet but defiant tone, trying to keep his irritation under control. There were murmurs of approval from all around the room.

Mrs. Wandera, the secretary, decided to maintain a fixed gaze at the wall in front of her and to re-mould her thick lips into little mounds that now assumed the shape of a half split pumpkin. She maintained that posture for some time but she was the one who finally broke the oppressive silence.

'The forms can't be distributed before we know whether the minister is coming or not and whether he is going to have time to see people,' she asserted in triumphant self-justification as she turned her cold stare on the group. The finality of her tone made people fidget and sigh as they struggled to contain their frustration.

For the past twenty years, Jovia Wandera, the senior personal secretary to the minister, had served in the same

ministry of Rural Development. She had worked for Commissioners, Directors, Permanent Secretaries, Deputy Ministers and Cabinet Ministers. She sometimes joked that the only senior government official she had not served under was the President; but she would quickly add that she had no intention of exposing herself to such a security risk. She had started her working life as a copy typist, climbed to the rank of stenographer in a period of three years and, after one year of in-service training, been promoted to the rank of personal secretary. Over the past five years she had carried the title which she knew would be the highest attainable in her profession: Senior Personal Secretary. Most of the people under whom she had served had either been retired in the public interest or due to old age or were dead. Some had fled into exile. The political turbulence of the seventies and the eighties had taken a heavy toll among them. But she, Jovia Wandera, had stayed on in the same ministry for twenty-five years.

The destruction of official records during the looting that followed the overthrow of two governments had conferred upon her additional importance since she was the only person in the ministry who could remember official decisions taken before 1979. She had come to be accepted as an indispensable element now, that she would outlive the present permanent secretary and the minister neither of whom she particularly liked. It was frustrating to know that she would never attain any higher status than that of a secretary but she went about her work with stoic patience, taking comfort in her secret sense of power, the power to outlast those who came swaggering into high office only to be humbled in a few years. Moreover, she regarded most of them as frauds who were beneficiaries of injustice. For as long as their intrigues and machinations placed them above her, she endured their follies and mischief, but she inwardly sneered at their expectation that she should serve them with loyalty and enthusiasm. She carried out their orders with

professional indifference but discreetly exposed their follies whenever she could do so without putting her job at risk.

'I have to catch a bus before one o'clock,' said a short pot-bellied man wringing his hands in apparent despair. He opened the collar of his red shirt and mopped sweat from his thick neck with a brownish handkerchief. All eyes turned to the corner where he was sitting, almost in tears; but this show of sympathy was suddenly interrupted when the messenger came into the room with the forms. There was a brief stampede as everybody jumped up and jostled to catch a copy of the form.

When all the forms had been collected, the secretary arranged them neatly and handed them to the messenger, saying: 'Take them to Mr. Nyondo.' A few people exchanged looks of bewilderment as the messenger disappeared into the room directly opposite the minister's office.

'And who is Mr. Nyondo, if I may ask?' inquired a man in an elegant blue safari suit and a maroon samsonite brief case. He spoke with slow, heavy sarcasm in a polished accent that set him apart from the rest of the waiting crowd. Mrs. Wandera turned towards him, fixed his face under her stern stare, and addressed him in a slow emphatic tone, trying to match his sarcasm:

'Mr. Nyondo is the Honourable Minister's Special Assistant.'

The telephone buzzed.

'Yes sir.'

Everybody strained their ears as if to catch what the minister was saying to his secretary in the receiver: but it was impossible to catch the words.

'His extension is not working sir. I'll go and call him, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.' She replaced the receiver, got up immediately and walked slowly across the room, consciously defying the hostile stare of the people and opened the door to Mr. Nyondo's office. She closed it behind her with a bang.

A few minutes afterwards Richard Nyondo emerged from his office. He was a lanky but vivacious young man in his late twenties. He swept into the room with the confident and pleasant smile of a salesman. He shook hands vigorously with a few people and bent down to receive whispers in his ear to which he replied loudly with, 'no problem! no problem!'

The telephone buzzed again and the secretary gave an automatic 'yes sir,' into the receiver. She replaced the receiver hurriedly and signalled Nyondo, adding 'The Minister wants us both, NOW!' Nyondo winked at her and she responded with a shrugging of shoulders and a knowing look. They went in quickly.

The Minister did not look in their faces. He kept his gaze below their mid-riffs, creating an uncomfortable suspense. However, he looked directly in the face of the messenger who at that moment brought in the day's paper which he deposited on the minister's table before sliding quietly behind and busying himself with files and papers in the far corner. The secretary crossed the room to the other side as if to take her legs out of the minister's gaze but he halted her with a gesture of his hand.

'You sit here,' he instructed in a low bored tone, looking up into her face for the first time. 'I want you to take a dictation.'

She approached the chair in front of his desk and managed to steal a quick glance at the weary expression on his face before she sat down.

'Now Nyondo,' he turned to the special assistant with a slight wave of the hand, 'I want you to tell the undersecretary of finance to replace my car radio TODAY.'

'Yes sir.'

'I missed something on the BBC on my way here because the radio was *coughing* and *sneezing*.' He emphasized the COUGHING and SNEEZING as someone reacting to offensive behaviour. 'This is the second time I have missed an important item of news.' His austere frown and the heavy twang on the

edges of his husky voice made it clear that this one was one of the orders which had to be carried out without any delay.

‘Yes sir.’

‘And tell the permanent secretary I’m travelling to the constituency this weekend.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘He should authorize allowances for four days.’

‘O.k. sir.’

‘The allowances for the driver and the bodyguard should be handed to me personally.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘I don’t want this business of drinking the whole night before we travel,’ he pronounced with impatient firmness.

‘Yes sir.’

There was a moment of silence.

‘And how far have you gone with processing the PER DIEM for the trip to India?’

‘Sir, I understand the Prime Minister’s office has queried the number of days.’

‘And...?’

‘I think the PS is handling it.’

‘And why hasn’t he consulted me?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘Does he think he knows more about the trip than I do?’

‘Well, sir, I think he will get in touch with you, sir.’

‘It’s not a question of getting in touch, it’s a question of getting the work done!’

‘O.K. sir. I shall remind him, sir.’

‘Yes, you better do so right away. I don’t want to arrive late at the seminar because YOU PEOPLE believe in doing everything at the last minute.’

‘O.K. sir.’

Nyondo moved towards the door but as he grabbed the handle, the minister called him back.

'Ring the General Manager, Hima Factory, and ask him when he is delivering my cement. No. In fact ask him to ring me *personally* and tell me what he is doing with my money. Give him my direct number. I am tired of his evasive messages.'

'But sir, I understand the factory has been out of production for some weeks.'

'That's their usual story!'

'O.K. sir.'

'Whenever the black-market price comes down they close down for some time.'

'Well sir...'

'O.K. go.' Nyondo was waived off dismissively.

Ten minutes later, the secretary emerged from the minister's room, holding her notebook and a pencil. She pulled her chair and slowly sat down while keeping her eyes away from the anxious faces in the room. After arranging some things on her table, she turned to the waiting crowd and said in a loud flat voice:

'The Minister will not be able to see anybody in the next one hour. He says he has important work which he has to finish before he can see people.'

The tension deepened and turned into a low rumble that sent its vibration across the room; but the rumble slowly subsided into a dead silence of powerlessness. Suddenly, the secretary broke the silence with the rickety noise of her old manual typewriter which she banged and slammed with a mixture of frustration and pride that made her chair, the table, and the machine creek, squeak, vibrate, rock, and swing in a discordant rhythm of dilapidation.

There were whispers and low-tone exchanges within the group in the far corner. Already the shared ordeal in the room was beginning to foster some closeness among the vigil keepers. However, any break in the typing would cause the whispers to die down.

After a while, the same man who had first challenged the secretary said in a low tone to the person sitting next to him: 'These people will learn a lesson when multi-party elections come.' People strained to catch what the leading protester was saying and so the man raised his voice. 'This man; his father and I used to herd goats together!'

'Surely!' said the short, pot-bellied man with a red shirt as he opened his mouth and raised his empty palms above his head in an apparent appeal to heaven to intercede. The man sitting next to him gave him a little elbow jab and said: 'When elections come in two years' time, that's when these people will remember that we are also people.' The new speaker was a hairy, broad-chested man with only a thin ring of hair around his bald head.

'Aah, ah!' a thin, evidently underfed man of uncertain age exclaimed in a whisper. 'This one shouldn't even waste his time trying' he went on, shaking his head.

'Eh? Are you from his constituency?'

'Not constituency - same village!'

'So he is unpopular in his constituency?'

'Worse than that. Everybody has lost confidence in him!'

The telephone rang and brought another pause to the rhythmic clatter of the typewriter.

'Yes sir? O.K. sir.'

'Yakobo!' Mrs. Wandera called the messenger soon after she replaced the receiver. 'The Minister wants yesterday's NEW VISION. You get it from among the heap in the newspaper cupboard over there and take it to him.'

'You see!' Someone whispered, 'he is going to read a newspaper!'

'This world!' exclaimed the hairy chested man with a bald head as he shook his head repeatedly. 'This man used to buy maize flour from my kiosk on credit.' The company turned inquisitive faces towards him.

'I was the one who used to give him posho, sugar, and powdered milk on credit during UNLF days; he even went into exile without settling his debt.' The man went on shaking his head slowly in disbelief. 'When the government changed, I got a shop from a UNLF soldier who had run away but now they want to take my shop away and this man can't help.'

'Surely!' said the short pot-bellied man with his empty palms pointing to heaven.

The secretary finished the letter which she was typing and took it to the minister for signature. Immediately the man with grey whiskers got up and announced his decision to leave.

'In fact, I was warned before I came here that the man would not help me but I refused to listen. Now I have wasted a whole morning. He was not like this before. It is money which is going to his head.'

'By the way, what did you want to see him for?' the hairy-chested man blurred out conspiratorially, with childish curiosity.

'My daughter has been given a place in Tororo Girls school. But how can a thirteen year-old girl travel by herself from Bushenyi to Tororo?'

'Especially in the Uganda of these days!' interjected the hairy-chested man in sympathy.

Everybody gazed sympathetically at the elderly man who remained standing by the door for a while, apparently undecided whether to leave or stay. He suddenly grabbed the door handle as if he had made a fresh resolve. 'It's better to find money and bribe a headmaster than go through all this humiliation,' he declared with resolve.

'Yes, if you have your two hundred thousand you can get a place in the best school just like that!' said the hairy-chested man with a loud click of his middle finger against his thumb. 'Yes!' he said with emphasis as he repeated the click, using both hands and producing a startling bang. At this, the man who

was holding the door handle turned it, swung the door open and left.

Someone who had so far not uttered a word got up, stretched his back, yawned, massaged his knees, and went out of the room. Another man followed him. A young couple quickly moved in from the corridor and occupied the seats.

Mr. Odongo, the Permanent Secretary (or PS as he was commonly referred to) walked into the room. He was dressed like an Englishman going for Sunday service. He strolled in with light, easy steps as if he didn't want to be noticed. His expression was of someone who is used to carrying the world's burdens on his face. He gave a half-friendly, half-condescending 'good morning, Mrs. Wandera' before he casually pushed open the door of the special assistant without knocking.

'Good morning Mr. Nyondo,' he said in a quiet, formal tone.

'Good morning sir!' replied Nyondo who immediately shot up. Yakobo, the messenger, slithered through the half-open door, past the permanent secretary's back and headed for the bookshelf in the far corner where he started to look for something among the newspapers and magazines.

'What is the minister doing?' the permanent secretary asked Nyondo in a conspiratorial tone.

'I don't know sir.'

'Tomorrow is Cabinet day and he has not yet given me his comments on the memo which I gave him two days ago.'

'Well, sir, I think it is better to talk to him directly.'

'I spoke to him on the phone and he said he hadn't had time to finish it.'

'Now sir, what can I do?'

'Well, just find a way of putting the memo on top of his papers.'

'I didn't see any papers on his desk.' There was a moment of silence during which the face of the permanent secretary tensed up, his forehead assuming contours that resembled the grooves of a finely woven basket.

'Is he in one of his moods?' he inquired between sighs of resignation.

'Well sir, IT IS DIFFICULT TO TELL.'

It was common knowledge in the ministry that the minister had recently become prone to varying and unpredictable moods. It was therefore thought prudent by those who interacted with him at work to check what mood he was in before entering his office. Mrs. Wandera was generally regarded as the best interpreter of these moods but the permanent secretary preferred to exchange such confidences only with the special assistant. He knew that there was a lot of gossip floating around the office on the subject but he let the special assistant pick up the gossip from drivers, bodyguards and secretaries so that he in turn could pick it up without having to be indiscreet.

'Anyhow, you find a way of reminding him about it.'

'O.K. sir.'

'I mean from time to time.' he said as he closed and opened his fists, trying to keep his frustration under control.

'O.K. sir.'

The permanent secretary turned and was slightly jolted when he noticed that the door behind him was not firmly closed. He tried to close it but Mrs. Wandera just managed to edge her way in and closed it for him. He ignored her and addressed Nyondo: 'And what is this story about a radio for the minister's car? I have a voucher for it on my desk.'

'Yes, this morning the minister said he had missed important news because the car radio was not clear.' The permanent secretary shook his head in frustration. He started pacing up and down the room and tightened his fists to stop

himself from wringing his hands. Mrs. Wandera got an opportunity to chip in:

'Sir, I had come to beg you to let me have the radio which they are going to take out of the minister's car.'

The permanent secretary looked at her with a blank expression, apparently having been taken by surprise.

'You see the radio in my little car collapsed a few years ago,' she went on hurriedly, 'and I have never had money to replace it.'

'So the radio is O.K.?' the permanent secretary asked with eagerness as if he was glad to find support to confirm the minister's wanton extravagance.

'Yes, the radio is very fine. I travelled in the car to take the minister's daughter to school last week and the radio was very loud and clear.' Mr. Odenyo struck the air with the back of his hand as if fending off an ugly fat fly.

'I think you better discuss this with the transport officer. It's better if I'm not directly involved,' he said making a great effort to maintain a dignified calmness.

'Oh, ho! that one!' Mrs. Wandera exclaimed, 'he may have sold the radio by now!'

'I don't think so. I haven't signed the voucher for its replacement yet.'

'Yes, but he is the one who provided the quotation and he may have sold the radio by telephone.'

'O.K. tell him to come and see me,' Mr. Odenyo said in apparent resignation. As he approached the door, he said in a half appealing voice: 'Nyondo, you pursue this matter of the cabinet memo URGENTLY.'

'Yes sir.'

Yakobo, the messenger was already approaching the door which he now opened for the big man. He followed him outside.

'You imagine!' began Nyondo, adopting an expression of martyrdom and letting his arms drop loosely on his sides in

feigned self-pity. 'The minister doesn't want to talk to the PS, so he sends me to tell the PS to do ABCD. The PS does not want to talk to the minister, so he asks me to convince him to do XYZ. What a ministry!'

'Yah, that's what it means to work for big people', answered PS.

'And what do I get for it? My colleagues spend only two hours in the office and spend the rest of the day ensuring their survival, while I can't move out of the office even for half an hour!'

'At least for you, you can get out when the minister is away, but a secretary! Honestly, its bad not to have a degree.'

'But what's a degree worth these days?' At least, you have a government house. I can't even get a house.'

'Ha! But I heard the minister promising to find a scholarship for you.'

'Ha! Really!' he exclaimed, his face beaming. If that works out, then I can say that my sacrifice has paid off. Then I can say to hell with your civil service.'

'Eh, you mean you won't come back after your M.A.?'

'Me? You must be joking. If I get my M.A., I shall go to Botswana or South Africa. Or if I can make it, I shall work as a night-watchman in America until I have got enough money to come and start some business of my own. Why should I come back here to die a pauper?'

The telephone started ringing and Mrs. Wandera ran back to her desk to answer it.

It was well known in the ministry and in the wider circles of government service that the current minister of Rural Development did not get on well with his permanent secretary. This was not in any way unique to this ministry as there were several other such personal conflicts which provided gossip in Kampala club, the golf club and the National Assembly bar.

The most commonly expressed opinion about such conflicts was that the minister and his permanent secretary had failed to 'eat' together. Another often expressed opinion was that a particular minister wanted to get rid of his permanent secretary so that he could replace him with one from his own tribe. Occasionally, someone who wanted to sound advanced in his thinking would attribute the bad blood between a minister and his permanent secretary to the personal chemistry of the two individuals; but this was a line that was rarely pursued in high circle drinking places. Conversation would inevitably drift towards speculation on who had benefited from which government project.

Nyondo had heard all these opinions but none seemed to fit the situation in his ministry. All he could sense was that there was going to be a showdown at some point. He suspected that the permanent secretary would win because he was a seasoned bureaucrat who calculated every move and never did anything that was not covered by some government standing order. If there was anything that he wanted to do outside the rules he always found a way of getting one of his subordinates to do it, usually after a little inducement and a promise to cover up. And he had no shortage of inducements, since it was he who authorized both internal and external travel, and the use of government cars, not to mention his key role in transfers, promotions, and training opportunities.

Nyondo found the Minister more difficult to sum up, because he behaved erratically. He could be reasonable, informal, and very personal in a way that the permanent secretary could not. On the other hand, he could be openly churlish, self-indulgent, and inexplicably truculent. He could be friendly and charming on one occasion and behave as a vicious bully the next time you met him; and yet at another time, he would behave as if he did not know you. If he chose to work, he could produce impressive memos but most of the time he chose to do nothing. People who knew him during his student days

said he used to be very clever but that he lacked the discipline to pursue any career. He had attempted various courses in Britain, but abandoned them half way through. He had spent many years in Europe doing things that no one could give a name until he got elected on the executive of an opposition group in exile in Sweden. And from exile he had come back home as a hero along with many who had campaigned against the previous regime. And he had been rewarded by being appointed a Minister. That was why the permanent secretary regarded him as an upstart who had never held any other public job before becoming a minister.

Nyondo re-emerged from the Minister's office into the secretary's room, leaned against the door and took a deep breath with his eyes closed. He then opened his eyes and, after some hesitation, started in the most humble and most brotherly tone that was full of appeal for understanding: 'I am really sorry, but the minister will NOT be able to see anybody today.' All the heads dropped, some in despair, some in disgust. 'And I'm sorry again,' Nyondo continued, 'tomorrow is cabinet day, so the minister will not be in his office.' There were gasps of exasperation and sucking of air through the teeth.

'And I'm even more sorry that on Friday the minister is traveling to his constituency.' People hissed in disgust. 'He is probably going to come back on Monday; therefore, Tuesday is the earliest he can see anybody.'

Several people got up and moved towards Nyondo, trying to engage him in a dialogue but he excused himself in the most humble manner possible and dashed out followed by the messenger who was trying to see which way he was going.

There was a time during the sixties and early seventies when residents of Kampala eagerly looked to weekends as

times of relaxation, family visits, and trips to their village homes. But things had gradually changed so that during the eighties weekends came to be viewed as undesirable interruptions during which people did not know what to do with themselves and during which they could not use government offices to carry on their petty speculative businesses. Insecurity had driven decent people out of night clubs; home entertainment was beyond the means of the majority, and trips to the village had become a luxury for the very rich. This particular weekend was no exception. The Minister, as was often the case, got a full tank of petrol for his car, plus night allowances for himself, driver and bodyguard, and went to his village. The Permanent Secretary also got his car filled with petrol and went to his village. He did not claim allowances because his village could not be called a constituency.

On Tuesday, at 9 a.m., the following week, the minister, for the first time, in many weeks, took the initiative to call his permanent secretary on the telephone. 'Have you seen the newspaper story?' he growled with deep sarcasm.

'Yes sir,' Odenyo replied in a voice that could have chilled milk into a tasteless yogurt.

There was silence on both sides. 'So you have nothing to say?' the minister went on sarcastically.

'But sir,' the permanent secretary started, 'the press has been publishing all sorts of damaging things against people and some of these things have no foundation.'

'But can we prove with concrete evidence that these things are not true?'

'Well, I'm sure I can get the accounts people to dig up vouchers, invoices and LPOs to show that the allegations are not true.'

'Can it be done to-day?'

'That would be difficult sir. Our system of keeping vouchers is not, is not really the best.'

'Why should that be so?' the minister snapped.

'Well, it's the caliber of the staff we have and, of course, the general situation in the country'.

'Well, you **are** the Accounting Officer and as far as I'm concerned you are the one to produce the evidence to refute these allegations.' He bellowed, 'This exercise takes precedence over everything else.'

'Yes sir.'

'And let me have the facts by tomorrow because I have to talk to the press before the end of tomorrow.'

'O.K., sir.'

'In the meantime, if reporters call at the office, tell them I am on urgent state duties and that I shall be out of the office until tomorrow.'

'O.K., sir.'

Around the time when coffee and tea are served in most government offices, Mrs. Wandera walked into her office with a sullen face. The room was deserted, except for Yakobo, the messenger, who was standing close to the window through which he peeped from time to time. She tried to open the door to Mr. Nyondo's office, but found it locked. 'Where is

Nyondo?' She inquired of Yakobo.

'He is in his office,' the messenger replied in a half whisper.

She tapped on the door gently, saying: 'It's me Jovia!'

The door opened and she went in followed by Yakobo. 'Here, that's what the permanent secretary has written,' she said handing him a circular. He read:

TO ALL SENIOR STAFF

You will all have read some misinformed and totally unfounded reports in some Kampala newspapers alleging that there have been financial irregularities in this ministry. My office is now collecting data so that these false reports which have been mainly leveled against the Hon. Minister can be refuted publicly. In this exercise, I shall need the co-operation of all members of staff. Accordingly, no member of the senior staff may leave his/her office today and

until further notice without my express personal permission. This instruction also applies to all junior and intermediate staff in the accounts department. Failure to abide by this instruction will lead to serious disciplinary action.

You are all reminded about paragraph 2 of section F-H of Chapter One of the Uganda Govt. standing orders which forbids you all from talking to journalists about anything concerning the ministry without the express permission of the minister. Any violation of this order will equally lead to serious disciplinary action.

Julius Odenyo
Permanent Secretary

cc: Hon. Minister
Hon. Deputy Minister

‘This is **very** unfair,’ Nyondo commented coldly as he tossed the circular on his table.

‘Well, what do you expect?’

‘I mean, why can’t I be allowed to escape from these journalists who are hounding me? If the minister himself can’t face them, why should I, especially when I’m told to say nothing to them?’

‘As for me, I’m going to sit in the staff canteen. In case the PS wants me, that’s where I’ll be.’

‘I can see those other two journalists coming back,’ Yakobo whispered, as he ducked from the window.

‘Let me run out!’ Mrs. Wandera said as she hurried towards the door.

‘Yakobo, you go and wait in the secretary’s room. Tell everybody who looks like a journalist that you have no idea where I am,’ Nyondo said before showing the messenger out and locking the door.’

Yakobo sat in the secretary’s chair and played with the typewriter while Ngoga, the driver of the minister’s second car leaned against the window-sill and yawned repeatedly.

‘But can’t we have some tea?’ Ngoga moaned.

'And where do you get the petty cash for buying milk and sugar?'

'Has the minister gone with the petty cash? What about those of us who have reported for duty?'

'My friend, you just don't count. Forget about tea, forget about petrol for your car and forget everything until the minister comes back.'

'Aaaa - ha!' Ngoga said shaking his head slowly.

'You lend me some money: I want to buy a soda for myself,' Yakobo said.

'You hear him! You've just said that I have no petrol in my car and you expect me to have money?'

'Ha! I wish someone could give me a car, even without petrol. I would not even ask for a salary!'

'And you would lose your job within one week!'

'How come you haven't lost yours all this while?'

'You also! But tell me, Yakobo, do you think the minister has *eaten* all this money?'

'Wheya? of course not! The money is all *eaten* by the PS and the Chief Accountant!'

'Enh!' Ngoga said pushing his head forward and backwards like a lizard, 'then where does the minister get the money for buying all these lorry-fulls of building materials?'

'He got all his money when he was the Minister of Lands. There is no money in this ministry as you know. This one is just a ministry in name!'

'And how does a minister in Lands get money?'

'Ah! There everybody is rich. Even a messenger can build a big house. Every time they allocate some land, the minister and the PS and the commissioner must each get a plot. And so a minister can easily get ten plots in one year. You work out how much money that is.

'Eh, but are they not afraid doing such things?'

'Oh, do you think they are fools? Do you think they use their own names? And that's where messengers come in!'

Some one entered without knocking. He had a camera slung over his shoulder. He was holding a notebook in one hand a pen in the other.

'I want to talk to the Minister of Rural Development,' the man said without any formalities.

'He is not here,' Yakobo replied guardedly.

'What about the minister's special assistant?'

He is also not here.'

'What about the personal secretary?'

'She is also not here.'

'Where are all these people?' the man demanded aggressively.

'I don't know, sir. They don't tell me where they are going. I am just a messenger.'

The man started writing in his notebook. Yakobo got frightened.

'Sir, if you write in a newspaper that I have talked to you, I shall be dismissed from my job,' Yakobo said in an appealing voice.

'O.K. then show me the PS's office,' the man said somewhat menacingly.

'But you can see I'm the only one in the office. I can't leave the place.'

'What about this man here?' the journalist pointed to Ngoga with his pen, threatening to write something.

'This man is my cousin. He is visiting me from up-country.'

The journalist turned away from the two frightened men and surveyed the room with contemptuous amusement. Then he sat down on a chair and started writing.

Yakobo and Ngoga watched in terror. The man was writing furiously with only an occasional glance around the room.

'But sir, I am not important in this office!'

'O.K., I shall write that!' The journalist remarked casually while increasing his writing speed.

'But if you mention my name I shall lose my job! Please sir, I have no father and I am paying school fees for my two brothers.'

'O.K., tell me where the minister is and I shall not mention your name,' the journalist said with his pen pointed directly at Yakobo.

'Sir, I am not supposed to talk to you,' Yakobo said with trembling hands. 'There is even a circular saying we should not talk to journalists,' Yakobo went on as he involuntarily picked the permanent secretary's circular which was lying in the tray and waved it in his trembling hand.

The journalist moved forward quickly, grabbed the circular and left the room without ceremony.

Jovia Wandera could remember a time when she thought it beneath her dignity to drink beer in a Wandegeya bar. During the years when she was a student at Nakawa secretarial college she insisted on being taken out to fashionable bars along Kampala road by whoever dated her. When soon after graduation, she got married to a senior police officer, her social status suddenly changed so that even those open bars along Kampala Road became unworthy of her visits. During the early 70s, she only went out with her husband to big hotels or to official banquets. But she could not now remember when her standards had begun to fall. Even before her husband was murdered during an unsuccessful *coup d'etat*, they had started going out together to sit on hard stools and empty beer crates in sub-urban shops, because everybody was trying to keep a low profile for fear of being noticed by state agents of terror. She never thought about going back to those big hotels even after governments had changed and the secret service had ceased to be a source of terror. Somehow, to the disappointment of many things had not gone back to what they used to be. She had long ago abandoned herself to sitting on empty beer crates and

leaning against sacks of beans and maize flour in provision stores drinking warm beer with other widows who mainly talked about the good old days before General Idi Amin wrecked the economy and swept away decency.

On this particular Wednesday evening, Mrs. Wandera received endless offers of free beer from people who filled her regular nook and sat out on benches straining to catch every word she said.

'But can a minister be so naive? How can he take public money so openly?' someone asked in honest disbelief.

'But you know our Uganda journalists; they just write things anyhow without checking whether they are true', Mrs. Wandera commented with authority.

'But did he steal the money?' someone asked eagerly.

'No, not stealing. Some newspapers have completely distorted the whole thing!' Mrs. Wandera explained in a slow, grave tone.

'What is the issue then?'

'The issue is,' Mrs. Wandera went on, 'that the Public Accounts Committee has alleged that more than fifty percent of the whole ministry's budget was spent on the minister himself, either for his external travel or his internal travel or his entertainment,' she clarified.

'But is it possible for one individual in a whole ministry to do that?'

'Of course not,' Mrs. Wandera said. 'The problem with my boss is that he has been too conceited. He does not even know what goes on in his office. As long as his car is serviced and his travel allowances are paid, he imagines that he is on top of the world. But most of the money is *eaten* by the Permanent Secretary and the Chief Accountant.'

'By the way,' someone intervened, 'where is Makanga now?'

'Honestly!' Mrs. Wandera exclaimed with an air of disbelief. 'Some of these so-called ministers are so naive you

can't believe it. Instead of coming to work or facing the press, he is spending all his time trying to see the President.'

'To see the President! For what?'

'May be he wants to clear his name with the President.'

'And so what is happening in the ministry now?'

'Well, nothing is happening,' Mrs. Wandera explained. 'The Minister is in his house drinking and telephoning State House. I am told the President has been avoiding him. In the meantime, the Permanent Secretary and the Chief Accountant are busy destroying evidence. Makanga has never talked to anybody in the ministry; so he doesn't know what is going on. The man may lose his job for nothing - although, of course, I have no sympathy for him - while those who have eaten the money are strengthening their position.'

In an adjacent shop, within earshot of Mrs. Wandera's explanations, Yakobo was also enjoying a generous flow of free beers from a motley company of small businessmen, research assistants, taxi drivers and junior army officers, drivers and messengers. In low tones, he was explaining to his admiring beer companions who treated him as one of the most informed people who deserved a higher status than his current one that the whole entertainment vote in the minister's office had been spent by Mrs. Wandera herself. She often made requests for crates of beer and soda to entertain non-existent guests. Yakobo confirmed that he was the very person who lifted these crates and put them in the boot of Mrs. Wandera's car. In return he got a few free beers, kilos of sugar and a crate of soda once in a while.

On Friday at 9.00 a.m., after exactly one week of absence, Hon. Steven Makanga arrived at the ministry. He sauntered up the stairs looking on every side but seeing nobody. The corridor on the fourth floor was completely deserted and the secretary's room was empty, except for the messenger who seemed to be so busy cleaning the windows that he did not notice the arrival of the minister. Makanga stopped just before the door of his

office, his attention having been caught by his photograph on the front page of the *Monitor* lying on the secretary's desk and by the large letter headline which said:

STEVEN MAKANGA VOLUNTARILY RESIGNS

He grabbed the paper, turned quickly and collided with his bodyguard. The bodyguard moved away quickly in fright, while Makanga tried to keep his balance by resting his arm against the door of his office. During that moment, Yakobo had the time to observe how puffed and tired the minister's face had become. His complexion had changed from the rich dark brown colour of cooked beans to the dark grey colour of weather beaten pot shards. Makanga opened the door, entered and slammed it behind his back. He sat on the chair, his elbows resting on the table, his head in the palms of his hands. He did not pity himself: he just felt tired, bored, and lonely. Suddenly he was seized by an intense desire to talk intimately to somebody. He thought of his wife who had recently become bitter and estranged, he thought of his old school friends but could not remember how and where to contact them; he thought of his Cabinet colleagues who treated him with guarded correctness; and he thought of the numerous flatterers who had suddenly vanished from him. His desire to find someone to talk to became stronger and compelled him to get up from the chair and to move towards the window. From the elevation of the fourth floor, he saw human figures moving in the car park below. He did not strain to recognize anybody and he did not care if anyone recognized him.

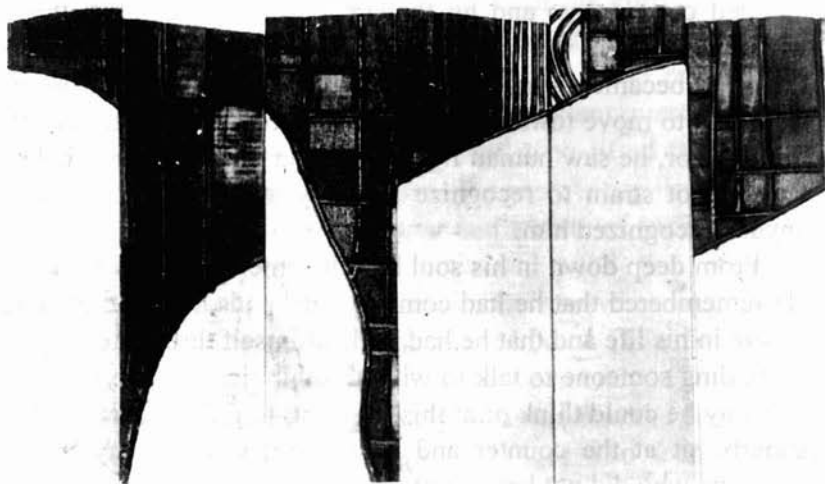
From deep down in his soul he felt some strength welling up. He remembered that he had come to dead ends a couple of times before in his life and that he had pulled himself through each time by finding someone to talk to without inhibitions. There was only one way he could think of at this moment: to go to a bar in a poor suburb, sit at the counter and gossip freely about anything to someone who did not know him.

*IDA OFFOR***Abuja Zuma Rock**

Descending the Abuja hills
 From south to north of Nigeria
 The rock with human face and grey scalp
 Swallows all that approach
 Her mysterious territory of splendor.

The two arms of express road
 Like black snakes bathing in the sun
 Glide down the bowels of Zuma rock
 The wind rushes by as we speed
 Through arid and open countryside
 Approaching with great expectation.

But just at the foot of Zuma
 The roads veer away to the left
 In pious fear
 Lest we see into earth's bowels.

***"Zuma" Re-arrangement II***

OBI CHRISTOPHER AGOR

Sepulchral Gloom

I was there,
Hardly prepared for the jolt.
The night air caressed
While the Night-Fiends choked
And this sepulchral gloom shrouded my thoughts.

He lay there;
He that was once a man
A benefactor and a beacon
Among the famished minions
A semblance of the living
Gasping for air like a minnow, light-years from home
On the precipice,
To infinity.

Yes, a beacon indeed!
Eko mills him no more.
A vanquished soul in a vanished continuum
The lantern flickers in this sepulchral gloom
The advent of the reaper is nigh, give him room!

We resign, we ache with anguish;
The blood of the innocent runs cold -
And if I unveil the meaning of life in death,
May I reflect in my eyes, that sepulchral gloom
Which trails the faltering clock
And edges me into limbo.

