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The Praegustator Who Spied on the World

I ate them before they ate me.

--Field Marshal Dr. Idi Amin Dada VC, DSO, MC

To say Bowter Bweter ate to earn a living would be inaccurate since the only other option was being fed to the crocodiles at the falls. What penalty could be greater than being thrown to those saw-toothed reptiles? Only the Conqueror of the British Empire had the answer to that. He was the Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea.

For Bowter, spying on the world around him was his own way of breaking free from the limited options life offered him. He worked part of the morning thrice a week, and in the evenings for the rest of the week. He dressed hurriedly as if wearing clothes were a burden, and hardly groomed his body. Hair sprouted out of his ears like wild grass through a cracked wall. His body stank to high heavens.

He woke up late but never missed the covered pick-up truck because he made few preparations for work. He would walk for about ten minutes from his little apartment embedded in the heart of his neighbourhood and wait for the truck from the Bureau of State Research to arrive. He had no control over what happened in his workplace. He was told what to do. Outside work, there wasn't much else to do. He had no one to talk to. He wasn't really much of a talker anyway. People took little notice of him, but that didn't bother him.

After work, he would sit in his chair with flaking leather upholstery wearing only shorts and drink from a bottle of waragi held between his thick calves, while looking out his window. Bowter loved watching people who could not see him. That was something he could control. That was in fact what propelled his life forward. It was what distracted him from all the wasted days of his past and all those yet to come. Sometimes he watched people go through the motions of life and work but that didn't matter to him.

He would stare like an owl, his eyes roving, trying to figure out if something was going on beneath the things he saw. He would shun the sounds in his room: the crackling of the aluminium sheets in the heat of the sun, the hum of a small refrigerator, rats creeping along the floor or cockroaches leaping from wall to wall.

He watched the daily exodus of worn heels from Chowdhury and Sons, the Indian owned shoe factory far off, and the thick fog of red sand as company trucks chugged by. He watched people stream in and out of bars and cafes. He watched mongrels trot on side streets, mate in little corners. He watched them long enough to notice when they spawned scrawny little puppies. He watched women with Afros and garish makeups make trips to the seedy drugstore down the road. He watched people gather around the newspaper kiosk like tiny insects milling around something sugary, debating with much heat. He watched random pedestrians stop to join in the argument before ambling on.

He knew when the thick-lipped butcher arrived with fresh meat and an army of green flies. He knew when the bell jiggling evangelist with his spectral white robe and wild unshorn hair began his sermon of a new heaven and new Earth. He knew the light-fingered boys and where they lived. He knew that the dreadlocked man who sold arts and crafts fooled around with the road sweeper.

He pondered on the things he saw. He imagined alternate scenarios, he questioned, he inferred. He kept his ideas and opinions to himself. In the end, it was just about watching, pondering and questioning; nothing more.

The short drive to the Den gave the praegustātōrēs just a little time to take stock of their lives, pray to their gods, and worry about what would happen when the vehicle finally stopped. Arrival was signalled by the raw grinding wowl the brakes gave off when the pickup went up the hill in the quiet neighbourhood where the Den was located.

They usually stopped in front of the gated compound with high barbed wire fences and waited outside until a squadron of guards with their dogs emerged like hyenas slithering forth from their lairs. Commander J, the leader of the squadron, was a tall man with a walrus moustache and a regal paunch that spilled over a belt strapped with pistols on both sides.

His pants always looked like they were about to drop. He would stare at the praegustātōrēs with his piercing black eyes, then give a little dry whistle and snap his fingers. Almost at once, the dogs would snap out of their leashes and scamper around them to sniff their crotches. After they had been thoroughly checked, they would be led to the innards of the Den and ordered to sit in the dining hall studded with wooden tables of various shapes and sizes. Then the meals would be served from small cooking pots under the watchful eyes of the squadron. The cooks from State House Catering Department served different dishes, so no praegustātor ate from the same pot.

Having grown up experiencing life's hardships, smuggling coffee across the Nile for meals and a roof over his head, Bowter had imagined his end to be a swift one--a dagger to his neck or a bullet in the forehead. For him, the worst thing about dying was having time to be scared of death, going through the interval between the certainty of death and death itself. It was like crossing that threshold between life and death in slow motion. But then he realized that with his job he would die a slow death, a sure death.

The Conqueror of the British Empire would always squat over his toilet bowl instead of sitting on it because Koboko, where people shat into dugout earth, never left him. He would always plunge himself into the school girls his black-booted guards picked from the streets on their way to school, and every cell in his body would dry up, sapped of vitality, ready to be reinvigorated. He would host diplomats in his villa to feasts crammed with silverwares, brimming with gastronomic pleasures, while the Revolutionary Suicide Jazz Band serenaded and wouldn't want his guests to be poisoned by traitors and enemies of the state.

He would summon the chefs at odd hours just to satisfy his inexplicable desire to engorge himself. Bowter could survive many days, maybe weeks, but the Conqueror of the British Empire would go hungry again. He would host lavish parties. His enemies would keep piling up.

So each time Bowter scooped spoons of pilau--rice cooked with spices into his mouth, ate malakwon prepared with mashed groundnuts or bit into a piece of roast chicken, steam filling his mouth, his lips shimmering with oil, he was reminded of his duty, his place in this world, his fate. The fear that one day something will be set down in front of him that will claim his life clung to him. The fear of facing that certainty was like a blow to the pit of his stomach, and a lump pressing down on his chest.

Before death crept into Kay's pot, the praegustātōrēs hoped that the rumours were unfounded, and their jobs merely ceremonial as the whole setup seemed ludicrous to them.

Kay was a husky man with a large fleshy face whose thinly bristled jaw knotted and slackened like a cow's whenever he chewed. Bowter knew that he had a daughter, even though the praegustātōrēs didn't say a thing to one another, as they had taken a vow of silence. The only thing they shared in common was that they carried out the tasks together. The pickup was mostly quiet, each person thinking his own thoughts, but Bowter observed him. Bowter knew that the Field Marshal's men had Kay's daughter because his lips quivered in prayers every time they drove to the Den and he kept a grainy picture of her in his breast pocket. He brought it out once in a while to look at it, his eyes moist with tears.

The trifling chatter from the guards ended in mid-sentence. The sounds of cutlery and utensils stilled. A fellow across him had pointed to Kay's bleeding nose. Kay dropped his spoon, and quickly dabbed his nose with his napkin. The cloth became smeared with his blood.

In that first startled terror, he flung the napkin away and shoved his plate of rice aside so that it sailed off the table and crashed on the floor.

His look softened, he swallowed saliva, his Adam's apple bobbing to mark the internal passage of the liquid. A wave of panic swept across the room. The guards cocked their guns, chairs dragged and groaned as the praegustātōrēs deserted their tables while inspecting their own bodies for any manifestations. In no time, Kay was left alone at the table. Tears fell thickly from his eyes. He coughed out his daughter's name. More blood seeped from his nose. When he saw his imminent dispatch from this life, he reared up toward the Commander, and grabbed his collar before anyone could make any move.

"Take care of my girl. Please take care of her; I did what I was told. I did it." In a choked voice he cried out to him, lips quivering and frothy with blood. The squadron tore him away from their bloodstained Commander and held him still on one of the chairs, whereupon a sudden horrendous pain lashed out at him. By this time the poison had dried up his guts, as evidenced by the black-flecked phlegm he now coughed up. No one could help him. Soon, he was biting through his tongue, and choking on his blood. In the end his eyes silted and his teeth were bared like those of a dying dog, his chest juddering with each shallow breath.

His body was placed in a blanket, wrapped snugly, and buried in a shallow, roughly hewn out grave in the backyard. The guards herded everyone together. Commander J paced back and forth, barking orders. He made calls and fired cables. No one else spoke a word. It was not a time for words. It was not a time for thoughts either.

The day seemed to stretch on endlessly. Night fell. Bowter went in for questioning. In the patch of rheumy light, Commander J barked at him and spat in his face. He fired off questions and scribbled at full speed in a notepad produced from his pocket, frowning and looking him in the eye once in a while.

Bowter answered all the questions he was asked without qualms. He did not know what to make of what happened. He had no inner musings. No pondering or ideas. Just a numbing silence.

The pickup truck dropped him off and he shoved his way through the crowd of people going back and forth in the final rush of the day. He got to his apartment and climbed the stairs with exhausted legs. He slapped his door closed and stretched out on his flea-ridden mattress.

Bowter stared at the splotched ceiling, wishing that something would happen to pitch him into the arms of another reality.

Bowter flinched against the shaft of raw sunlight spilling in through the curtains of his loneliness. He looked out on the streets, his eyes roaming, hoping to chance upon anything interesting. He saw faces that he recognized or half-recognized from the street—the familiar faces of strangers from the daily commute. He turned his eyes towards the arts and craft shop, he assessed the blue and grey French suits mounted on wooden mannequins in front of the shop managed by an old lady. He wondered if he would ever wear one of those and how it would look on him, but dismissed the thought almost immediately, stifling a sigh. The simple pleasures of life were just not for him.

It had been eight months since Kay ate off the plate that killed him. The Field Marshal had purged the army ranks; helicopters flew overhead, the radio crackled with the voice announcing a curfew as boots marched into neighbourhoods and ordered people to hop like a frog in the streets. The prison in Nakasero swelled. People vanished and their corpses showed up floating in the Nile like poisoned fish. Suspected enemies faced firing squads in front of TV cameras. Some of the chefs at the State House Catering Department were never found. Rumours had it that they were fed to the crocodiles. The Field Marshal beefed up the number of the presidential guards.

For several weeks men of the Bureau of State Research kept an eye on Bowter. They lurked in street corners and shadowed him in crowded places. He knew he was being watched but he did not mind. Only an expert at watching people would know that. He knew the storm would pass

Things became calm again after a while, the BSR men stopped showing up and Bowter went back to spying on the world to distract himself from his troubles.

Feeling slightly dizzy, he closed his eyes and when he opened them again, he caught sight of a figure across the street fingering beads dreadlock hair sold. A faded shawl covering her hair and knotted under the chin gave her face a heart shape. Her dress was fresh and flowery. Bowter was taken aback by her appearance as she struck him as odd. Being brown skinned, Bowter reckoned she must be one of the daughters of those wealthy expatriates at the factory, but then she didn't have any shoes or socks on, which was also strange. She had tiny feet like those of a child, so delicate it seemed that they barely touched the ground.

He got up to pee, and when he went back to the window she was gone.

He saw her again the next day. It was in the same place with the same flowery dress, but this time around, she was not wearing a shawl. Her hair was long, black and curled. Her hair flowed down her shoulders. She tried the beads on her neck one after the other, posing in front of the standing mirror dreadlock hair provided for his customers. The distance kept Bowter from making out the details of her expression, and he knew at once that he had to create a strategy to get close to her. What if she felt his eyes on her or caught him looking at her and she was not happy about it? What if she didn't come to dreadlock hair again and he never laid his eyes on her?

He got up, walked across the room, pulled out his rumpled towel from his drawer, picked up a bucket in the room corner and went out to the bathroom. He took a quick bath. After he came back and dried off, he slathered on lotion and dusted his armpits with talcum powder. Bowter couldn't remember the last time he used anything on his body or was this careful about cleaning himself, at least since he started working at the Den. For a moment he paused to think about what he was doing, the strangeness of it. He knew what was happening to him was an

aberration from his life's regular, solitary course. But then he could not shake off the feeling that there was something special about her and he had no way of telling her that from where he was. He had to be up close. With her, watching from afar wasn't enough.

He opened the door and looked down the stairs. He went back in. He wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers, looked into the mirror again and threw back his shoulders. When he tripped on the steps on his way down and found himself just a few feet from her, he thought in a flash that he shouldn't have come out in the first place.

She turned her head around and smiled at him. He froze. He breezed back upstairs as if borne by an invisible current.

Bowter put forth great efforts to fight what was sprouting within him. He shut his window and drew his curtains together. He willed himself to lie down on his flea-ridden bed and stare at the splotched ceiling. He did what was needed to crush the sudden attraction to the stranger that had afflicted him.

After two days of being cooped up indoors, something of a rage began welling up in him. The desire to see her, even touch her had stuck to him like a flea, leached into his blood. What if he reached out his hand to touch her cheek? Would current flow between them? How did her cheeks feel? Rosy? Chiselled?

Before long, Bowter became angry at himself for losing control. He wondered why someone whom he didn't even know could alter his life so quickly. He would not be controlled by a stranger. He decided to regain control. He would go back to spying on the world, back to his vantage point.

Bowter pulled the curtains apart, flung the windows open, and opened a new bottle of waragi. He saw nothing he had not seen before—a road sweeper pushing a trash cart with rubber wheels across the street, kids playing street soccer, people buying and selling, shirtless young boys lounging against the electric pole, sweating out the lethargy and heat of the afternoon.

He let his glance fall on dreadlock hair's stall. She was there. He peeled his eyes away for some seconds but could not resist the urge to look at her. Soon he became transfixed by her delicate image, her smiles, her tiny feet. When he felt he was ready, he sprang out of his seat and rushed down the stairs.

Now, a mild wind carried street litter in little eddies and rattled the roofing sheets.

Bowter looked straight at her when he got close enough. She smiled at him. This time his reaction was different. He saw her face. He saw her eyes. There was light in her eyes, a glint he had never seen before. There was something about those eyes, the way they reached out and seized him, eyes that spoke of a distant place, a place of bliss. It was as if all the pleasures in the world were contained in them. Suddenly he wanted to become those eyes. He wanted to be one with them. Time stood still and his essence became defined by those eyes. Suddenly he felt the richness of life and death become only a small speck on some distant horizon, on a far shore that he would approach slowly through languid waters with the sticks of old age.

He opened his mouth to speak but his voice sounded hollow to him. He continued speaking froth gathering at the corners of his mouth. His voice was thrown back at him in a bellow. He moved closer, his hands now reaching out to touch her, like he was groping in the dark but she turned to leave. He watched as she seemed to glide over, her dress puffing and billowing in the wind. He wafted towards her like a leaf, a scent. He was light in the air. He was swift. She was fast too; moving so quickly she could well have been a phantom. He followed her, at first through the labyrinth of houses in the neighbourhood, then through a row of ruined houses and then to a place he had never been before, the grass high and thick, the trees as thin as bamboo. The sky

was a sombre, dark blue. He was now walking fast, almost running, freedom suffocating him with surprise, taking over his body. He was a tethered beast broken free. She was a school girl bubbling with glee. Bowter threw back his head, laughter erupting from his throat.

He followed her till they plunged into something thicker and more tangled. They slowed down. He wished he had brought a machete, something to clear the way but forged ahead all the same, thrashing through the thick foliage. Nothing was going to come between him and the lady who had unlatched his soul. He sneezed a gout of yellow snot into the bush and wiped his fingers on the knee of his trousers. He grabbed a stick and used it to clear the path for himself until the bush became impenetrable. When he could no longer see her and was absolutely sure he could go no further, he gave up the trail. He left knowing he would see her again. He knew she would come back for him.

Drenched in sweat and his body stippled with cuts, he lay outside, his cheek against the cold asphalt. He could hear the sound of his own breathing, the pounding of his heart. He did not know when he drifted off to sleep.

Bowter awoke just before dawn, roused by the sound of footsteps clacking on tar, the blare of horns and voices from the streets. He was feverish and sore all over, he dragged himself up and made his way to his apartment. His head swirled. People crossed to the other side of the road to avoid him but he did not bother. When he got to his apartment he was gripped with the sudden urge to clean out his room.

He dressed his bed. He separated the washed clothes from the filthy ones and swept the floor and cleaned the Formica tops. He would invite her to his room. He would make her feel comfortable and maybe then he would be close enough to her to touch her. That hope gave strength to his body. The more he thought about her, the more energy surged within him.

After cleaning his house, Bowter proceeded with the task of cleaning himself. For a long time he kept at it. He washed himself rigorously like he just stepped out of a jailhouse. He scoured his hair, armpits, nether parts and the soles of his feet. He gelled and combed out his tangled hair. He was satisfied with his new look, and decided to go to a street side cafeteria for breakfast. He found a place, he ate a bowl of matooke silently and feeling refreshed, he left. It felt good to eat something without fear of danger. He realized that he had missed the pick-up truck. They would be looking for him at the Den but he did not care. He did not consider his actions before taking them. It was as though he was driven by a force greater than him. He was a spectator to what was happening to him.

After breakfast he roamed the neighbourhood for a while, expecting to find the lady with the flowery dress. He went to the newspaper stand and listened to the talkative vendor and his customers, nodding his head.

'The field marshal is a pure son of Africa' the vendor said and began extoling the virtues of the president.

Bowter smiled.

He used to watch them from his window, but now he was with them. How things had changed for him.

A day went by with no sign of the girl. Bowter kept cleaning up, kept roaming the streets. Nothing else mattered to him. He thought about her. He dreamt about her. At times, the

memories fused with his dreams and when they were over, it was hard to tell which it had been. Did he really run around his room with her? Did he feel her breath flutter on his face? Did she seek his lips?

The evening of the second day brought a tide of gloom. Three helmeted soldiers from the Bureau of State Research broke into his room. He knew what they wanted. He was expecting them. After a heavy blow to the head and repeated kicks, they dragged him downstairs. His head rang. He smelled blood. A salty, metallic taste slid down his throat.

He did not resist them. The blow and the kicks did not hurt him. He only laughed. He laughed as hard as he could. He laughed as though he was privy to something they were not aware of. The soldiers were not amused so they rammed into his head and gut with the butts of their guns. His stomach revolted. Blood ran in rivulets down his face but he didn't stop laughing. They cuffed him, threw him into the back of the pickup truck and began the drive to the Den. The scales had fallen from his eyes. Now he knew nothing was going to kill him. Now he knew he was going to grow old with her. He no longer felt doomed to the same fate as the other praegustātōrēs. It did not matter how many times he consumed the Field Marshal's meals. He was no longer scared of being thrown to the crocodiles. He was no longer scared of the Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea.

The brakes gave that terrible grinding yowl.

Commander J entered the interrogation room, his arms clasped behind his back. He paced here and there for a while, his stomach heaving like a gourd dancing in water.

He gave an address about the dangers of going rogue. He then ordered for him to be locked up to drive some sense into his skull. He told Bowter he might not be so lucky next time. Bowter asked for water and the commander slapped him across the face.

Bowter found a place against the wall of the dark cell. He stuck his tongue out, tasted blood on his swollen lips. A putrid smell engulfed him. The air was heavy with the droning of mosquitoes so he could not sleep, tired and injured as he was. He imagined his lady in another dress, a white dress, flowing, rising and falling like currents.

When he was released the following morning he resumed his search for the girl. He approached dreadlock hair and asked for her whereabouts.

"I don't know what you are saying. No girl in flowery dress came here," Dreadlock hair said to him.

Bowter called him a liar, cursed him and sprang at him, clutching his shirt. Dreadlock hair had a surprised look on his face, the type of look that you would give a deranged person. Men from the newspaper stand intervened and dragged Bowter away, but he insisted that he had seen the girl.

He went back to his room, thinking and gnawing at his fingernails. An idea struck him and he dashed out of the house. He walked through the labyrinth of houses in the neighbourhood, and past the rows of ruined houses. He saw no grass high and thick. No tree thin as bamboo. His ankle throbbed, his mouth denied of moisture. His feet became weary and heavy as though they were placed in stocks.

He returned home, a sense of disappointment and sourness filling him. He sat on the floor of the bathroom and heaved bowl after bowl of water over himself. The water became discoloured as it washed down his body but it did not wash down his pining for her.

In his dreams he saw her with crimson lips and sharply-defined eyebrows. Her lips teased him. Her sultry voice, filled him with lewd suggestions. He woke up damp and sticky. He felt the

wetness slide down slowly inside his thigh. He lay exhausted on his mattress. What does one do with desire?

The following morning he dragged his sore body out of bed, took his bath and walked to the bus stop for the pickup truck. He did not notice the grinding yowl of the brakes.

He floated into the dining hall and shoved the food into his mouth without fear. The meal tasted like sawdust in his mouth. They stared at him out of the corner of their eyes as they ate but he did not mind them. When the truck dropped him off, he went to a bar and drank till the barmaids started clearing the tables.

He lurched out onto the tangle of moonlight and shadow on the streets. Slanting shafts of moonlight sifted down through the roadside eaves.

He stopped to take a piss against a wall, and then wondered why the streets were so quiet. He heard sounds. Two cats shot past him and he turned around. His feet felt cold and he realized he wasn't wearing shoes and wondered how it happened. He dismissed the thought and staggered on.

Bowter Bweter was approaching his apartment when an image loomed out of the dark and a smile gathered at the corners of his mouth.