

Brian Chikwava

A Rigor Mortis of the Tongue & Other Earthly Things

My tongue went into rigor mortis and would not move inside my mouth. That was the year that I spent wandering the paths of London's lonely underbelly. At the time I shared a two-bedroom council flat with Fafi, another musician like me. I had known him from back in Harare. He was a mbira player, had arrived in London with ambitions, hoping to make his big break in world music. Then he met some ethnomusicologist who lured him into academic-conference-type gigs at some university. Fafi's expectations swelled and he, simpleton that he was then, took the gigs for a sure path to commercial success. But London, with its ways of picking large holes through one's pockets, called his bluff and the money from the occasional gig started spouting out of his pocket irreplaceably fast. As with many new Londoners, his ambitions wound up in that wasteland that's littered with wreckages of that sort. He abandoned music and did what every migrant does best: throwing oneself into juggling two or three low paying jobs, hoping to save money and buy a house or some such symbol of success back home. By the time I arrived in London he was a security guard during the day and a burger flipper by night. I never saw much of him and my initiation into London was mostly a DIY job.

Every night he got home after midnight and left at six. But once I got a job, I stopped staying up late, waiting for him to get back home. After that we hardly saw each other; I would get up at seven, when he was long gone, take a twenty minute walk to my workplace, the second-hand furniture shop on our high street. I would spend the day lifting furniture that people either came to buy or flog off to the shop. Thankfully Tony, the shop owner, was quick with his valuations; from the depths of a swathe of cigarette smoke and with the practiced sidelong glance of an old hand, he routinely turned down items from speculative sellers. That saved us lifting a lot of rubbish out of people's vans, except for one piece of furniture—the old

piano that I latched onto after Tony had laughed it off. That would later provide me with relief when my tongue went cold and stiff.

At five-thirty I would head home, walking through the park. At midnight, Fafi would stagger in. Already in bed, I would hear him clanking things in the kitchen. I would fall asleep. When I woke up in the morning he would be gone. I'd make my way to the furniture shop.

At the end of the day I would head home, via the park again. At night Fafi would roll in; I would hear the sound of his urine jet hitting the water in the WC. Then I would fall asleep. Days flashed by, Fafi became a distant memory. That's when I felt the cold finger of a kind of ennui tenderly stroking me. I sprang to my feet and sought the warmth of Londoners. London was still as nebulous a thing as ever to me, yet in the evenings the longing for the familiar company of musicians drove me to the east end of the city. But, throwing off the odd stink of desperation that usually sends men and mice scattering for their holes, I couldn't bring myself to step into any of the small music venues on Brick Lane and around.

When, after days of hesitation, I gathered courage, I ventured into the Rhythm Factory. Putting on a cabaret show there was a collective of musicians, poets and animators—the kindred spirits that are always found huddled together on the fringes of any big city, furiously scribbling staggering verses of poetry and heaps of music-chord progressions, all on the strength of a single meal a day. But their show was packed tight with a jumble of references to obscure iconoclasts of British television, film and music. The whole thing slipped clean off my grasp and I walked off to an arts café bar nearby. There I met a hard-to-figure-out lesbian barmaid who, in my subsequent visits would touch me in a manner for which I couldn't find the words to touch back. About twenty-two, with an immense Afro hairstyle, a mechanic's cap, low slung jeans and pointedly displayed big knickers, she came across as a hardened thing. At least that's what I thought at first. But after she had served me coffee and tried to engage me in conversation I thought maybe it wasn't her looks that I found striking but her nose for a loner. When I went there again I saw her observing me as I sat at my table. Then her girlfriend came, they kissed

flauntingly, walked out and left everyone mildly amused. The next time I went there, having ordered a coffee, I was handing her the money for the drink but, smiling conspiratorially, she waved me away and turned to serve another customer in the queue. Three more times this happened. After that, maybe she sensed my discomfort and tried to keep her distance. Later, a part of me wanted to get to the bottom of all this, but now she was making herself too busy to talk. When I finally caught up with her, I discovered that I had not ordered my thoughts and rather than risk things coming out the wrong way I said nothing but ordered another coffee. Again she smiled, waved my money away and turned to serve another customer. Suspecting that I was perhaps an object of pity, I stopped going to the café-bar and started spending evenings in my room, playing the piano that I had got for nothing at the furniture shop.

Over the following week, on the way to work, I began to notice this dried prune-face old woman at the corner of our block. Possibly a grandmother from Africa; her resemblance to Bi Kidude, the legendary Zanzibari songster, sharp as a clutch of knives. Every morning she splashed water and scrubbed the pavement outside her house—a twitchy touch here and there, a flourish of careless strokes every once in a while. Each time as I came close, her figure would unfold like a penknife and she would stand erect, sharp and indifferent, waiting for me to pass before throwing herself at her task again. Sometimes our eyes met, but hers quickly glazing over, hardening in a single blink.

A few weeks later, while walking through the park, I bumped into her. It was not so much the many layers of clothes on her that struck me, but her manner of walking. She walked at a brisk pace, as if pursued by invisible assailants. You got that impression that the moment she turned her back to the tropical sunshine, long shadows fell on her path and whatever it was that had pursued her to this part of the world, she was trying in her own way to outpace it. From the beginning of the week, her pavement cleaning was also getting noticeably more frenzied by the day. Although, on seeing me approach, she still straightened up and waited for me to pass, she was increasingly impatient, clipping my heel with her brush as I stepped past until, on our last encounter I had to leap out of the way. After watching her

vanish into the distance in the park, I went home and played Abdullah Ibrahim numbers on the piano. *The Pilgrim. Mannenberg. Tshisa.*

Then I lost my job and everything changed. I forgot this old woman, stopped thinking about that girl at the café-bar, and mostly played the piano. At night I lay on my bed staring at the London sky through my window. On some nights it shuddered over London like a gigantic kite on the end of a string whose end was tangled up in my Bi Kidude's feet as she paced through the park. On some nights, when that happened, satellites way up in the sky trembled and threw off digital dust down to earth; a text message would land on my mobile phone and I would think the impossible—hoping that it was a message from that girl at the café-bar that hindsight now imbued with a harmless and clearly sisterly charm. And then one moonlit night I felt my tongue slowly getting gnarled inside my mouth. For three nights I stood in front of the mirror and tried to talk to myself but, conditioned to associate that with madness, I remained speechless. On the fourth night I waited until Fafi was back, hoping to chat and catch up. When he arrived, tired, he went straight to bed. I waited for him again the following night. When he arrived, he quietly made it clear that I was barking up the wrong tree. I gave up.

As days flew by, a hideous normality hung over our road—people walking about on our road as if all was okay. Walking people being hard to talk to, unlike the seated, I simply watched them saunter past our window all day. In London where no one ever sits down except on the tube or bus, where talking to a stranger is a clear sign of madness, I took my stiff tongue to that girl at the café bar.

Four nights in that week I, looked for her, four times there was no sign of her. After a fifth attempt, I went home and sat down at my piano. She had probably found a job elsewhere. At the end of that week, Fafi left for Zimbabwe because of his brother's illness; my isolation was absolute.

Where the juddering riff of anxiety finally delivers its victims is never predictable, but one day, seeking to retain some vestige of control, I decided to start getting up early just as I used to when I still was employed, take a walk down the familiar route to work, pretend I still had a job.

Monday morning: Bi Kidude is still there, scrubbing the pavement. It's a small patch that she scrubs; the four panels right outside the gate, but her manner is now one of bare knuckled determination, a will to wrest back control; as if having lost her place in the world and overwhelmed by this feeling of loss, she is now determined that there shall be at least a patch of earth over which she has complete dominion. When I decide to take my stiff tongue to her the following week, she is nowhere to be seen, outside her home or in the park.

Thursday evening is just as luckless, but on Friday evening a desire to disentangle myself from this deathly grip stirs inside me. I take my last 20 pounds and head for the local pub. There I get drunk and try to lift my tongue—it's like trying to undo a torsion bar. At the first sign of success, it springs out of control and tosses a snatch of unintended words into the air. Fists fly and before I know it I'm in the back of a police van protesting my innocence, trying to explain to the police officers that I only had one pint of beer.

The police cell wasn't that bad, but not having thrown the first punch, I felt a little aggrieved in the morning. The police, more concerned about my immigration status, accompanied me to our flat to inspect my immigration papers. Once inside my room, somewhere in between the peaks and troughs of a delicately thundering hangover, I felt my tongue loosen up a little. I went straight for the piano and there I stumbled upon a new dialect. "It's called *A Rigor Mortis of the Tongue & Other Earthly Things*," I said to the two bemused cops. They said nothing throughout the song, applauded cheerfully but patronizingly at the end of it, whereupon I handed them my passport. They flicked through it and, satisfied, were about to leave when one of them turned round and said, "Just how big was that one pint that you had, mate?"