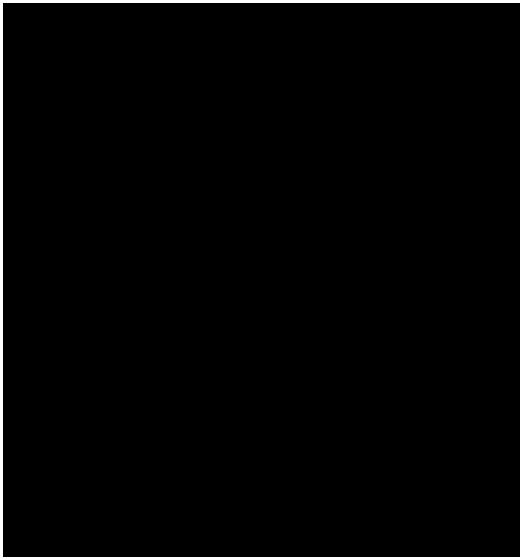


Strife



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Shimmer Chinodya



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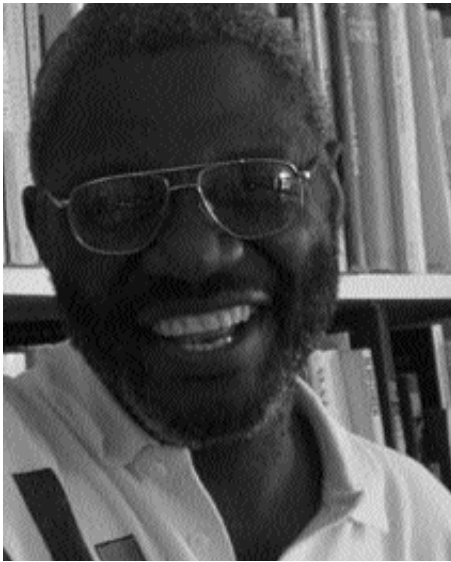
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Shimmer Chinodya was born in Gweru in 1957 and educated in Zimbabwe. On completion of his first degree he went to the Iowa Writers Workshop where he did an MA in Creative Writing. His publications include the novels *Dew in the Morning* (1982), *Farai's Girls* (1984), *Child of War* (1985), under his pen-name, Ben Chirasha, *Harvest of Thorns* (1989), an anthology, *Can We Talk and other stories* (1998), a teenage novel, *Tale of Tamari* (2004) and *Chairman of Fools*, (2005) *Harvest of Thorns* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Africa region) in 1990; *Can We Talk* was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2000. Chinodya has also written children's books under his pen-name, as well as the script for the award-winning feature film, *Everyone's Child*. In addition, he has developed a highly acclaimed language textbook series *Step Ahead: New Secondary English Course*. Chinodya has won many fellowships abroad and from 1995-97, was visiting professor in Creative Writing and African Literature at the University of St Lawrence in the USA. Chinodya works as a free-lance writer and consultant.



Glossary

aiwa – no

ambuya – grandmother/ mother-in law/brother-in-law's wife.

Also common term of respect for a mature woman.

amzukulu – grandson/granddaughter

babamunini – husband's young brother

bira – traditional beer party held to honour ancestors

burakwacha – literally: black watcher i.e. black
policeman/guard

chakata – sweet soft fruit with pips

chibhoi – Africanness/blackness

chiiko? – what is it?

chipako – a small carved container for storing snuff/tobacco

chitirobho – a leather rope for harnessing oxen

dare – place where elders meet to talk

derere – okra

dhandahead(s) – slang term for 'slow learner' at school

doro rechikaranga – beer for the ancestors

futi, futi – and, and

gogo – affectionate term for 'grandmother'

he, hede! – an expression used when laughing or expressing
incredulity

hes blaz – hi brother

humwes – communal work party accompanied by drinks/ food
/alcohol

ingozi – avenging spirits

iwe – you

jharadha – long partitioned block for housing lodgers/workers

Krismas – Christmas or short-hand for a gift or an annual bonus

kukara – greed, usually for food

kwakanaka here – is everything all right?

lobola – bride price

madora – mopani worms (edible)

madzimai esungano – women who worship in special churchgroups

maininis – mother's young sisters or mother's brothers' daughters

maita – thank you

majoni – policemen, as they were known in the 50s, 60s and 70s
makadii – how are you?
mamhepo – bad spirits
mapadza– hoes
mariposa – plastic shoes worn long ago; old fashioned attire
maroro – sweet soft edible fruit which turns yellow when ripe
mashuku – loquat fruit
mashura – strange happening, usually foretelling disaster
matamba – tennis ball sized fruit, with pips
mazhanje– another name for loquat fruit
mbanje – marijuana
mbaura – metal bucket with holes, used for fires in winter
mbuya – grandmother/mother’s brother’s wife
mbwire-mbwire – traditional powder made from ground roasted maize grains mixed with salt
menija – manager
Mhai! Mhai! Mhaiwe! – Mother! Mother! Oh mother!
Mhai ndofa! – Mother, I’m dead.
mhamha – mother
mhamha nababa – mother and father
mhiripiri – red/green spice/powder
midzimu – ancestral spirits
misi – a young woman who works in the Reformed Church
mhondoro dzinomwa – great spirits drink
mroora – daughter-in-law
muchakata – tree bearing chakata fruit (see chakata)
mudhara – old man
muhacha – the other name for muchakata
mukoma – brother
mukwasha – son in law married to speaker’s daughter/sister
muneri – priest
munyai – the ‘ go between’ in marriage consultations
mupfuti – a tree whose wood is good for firewood
mupositori – member of the apostolic church
muramu – wife’s sister to a man or husband’s brother to a woman
mushe kanjani – fine thanks and how are you

mutamba – tree bearing matamba fruits
mutakura wenyemba – maize grains baked with wild beans
mutakura wenzungu – maize grains baked with groundnuts
muunga – thorn tree
muzukuru – grandson/granddaughter/nephew/niece
mwana – child
mwana wamai vangu – my mother’s child
mwanangu – my child
Mwari – God
n’anga – traditional healer/herbalist
Ngara – name of a Shona totemic group
ngororombe – type of Karanga dance
nhedzi – a wild mushroom
nhodo – game played by children
nyimo – round nuts
nyora – incisions made on skin for healing or for decorations
nyovhi – type of wild vegetable
ona – see
rupiza – porridge made out of a type of peas
sekuru – uncle, term of respect for older man
shangara – a type of Shona dance
shuku – loquat fruit (single)
tada tovi – sadza with peanut-butter relish
tsvimbo – knobkerries or walking sticks
vanabhudhi – brothers
vanamuneri – white priests
vanasekuru – uncles/grandfathers
varooro – daughters in law
zambia – printed cloth, popular in Zambia, worn by women in
Africa
zvauriwe – And because its you
Zvipiko imi! – What!

1

She searches the sky for a slice of moon. Sometimes she is too early by a day or two and the darkness yields nothing to her anxious eyes. She knows nothing of lunar calendars, but her instincts are alive to the power of the moon. It knows the secrets of wombs, the ebb and flow of the human tide. The moon knows everything, regulates everything. Once or twice she is late and she stumbles upon the startling, razor-thin fingernail in the west. She gasps. Her heart heaves and she hurries back into her house. She does not sleep. Her bag is already half packed. It dreams of impromptu journeys. She waits for the phone to ring. Waiting is a form of death.

She sleeps fretfully.

She dreams of him – her son – always, in his wedding suit, smiling his handsome white smile and signing his vows at the pulpit. She dreams of him kicking and yelling on his wedding night, thrashing against the arms of his weeping wife. She dreams of the long night drive to the hospital, the bouncing truck, her son limp on the front seat, the wheelchairs, the doubting orderlies, the night he spent in the hospital, the inappropriately cheerful doctor. The young nurses' casual laughter cackles crisply in her ears. She dreams of pythons, of fires consuming her house. She dreams of the whole world laughing at her, of God, her ancestors, mocking her.

She sleeps fretfully.

The phone does not ring. Sometimes she thinks she hears it ring in her sleep and she jumps out of bed. He – the man sleeping beside her – her husband, gently grabs her and pulls her back. He, the man of the house, pleads with her to go back to sleep. He, the father of her ailing son, snores gently through the

night. After all, he has to go to work in the morning – six days a week.

Men have no wombs, know little about moons. But the worry smoulders in his eyes.

His name was Mhokoshi. He was a hunter; he had no wife and hunting was everything to him. He lived in a cave alone in the forest, away from relatives. He hunted buck, ostrich, buffalo, eland, kudu. He crossed paths with lions, hyenas and elephants. Sometimes when the dried meat became too much to store he delivered it to his people down in the village, but he never stayed long. Often he hid in the shadows of the trees at the edge of a homestead and called out to a child. Thus he got to know if anybody was sick, or if a woman had given birth, or if there was to be a bira – a traditional beer party – of sorts; he hurried away when he saw any elders coming, hurried away leaving his sudden gifts of meat, back to his cave, his spears and knobkerries, to the forest where he belonged.

He was lucky he never fell ill; nature knows how to look after animals and outcasts – creatures without roots or religion. Madmen walk barefoot and half naked in forests, without catching fevers or diseases of the chest. He must have been in his late teens when he started living this way, a dreadlocked outcast drenched with the smell of the outdoors. Nobody was sure when he began slipping off into the bush. Some nights when the moon was young, or full, he slept fitfully, and woke up with a whimper – but that was nothing because he did not drink alcohol and his constitution was strong. His people left grain – for his sadza – on the edge of the village for him to collect – which he did shyly and rarely.

His people worried about him – he had a handful of brothers and sisters and was one of the last born in the family. His parents were dead – but he had dozens of uncles and aunts and many cousins, nephews and nieces. His people thought he was insane and they prepared a brew, slaughtered an ox and poured libation on the doorsteps of cooking huts, pleading with the ancestors to restore his sanity. They found a young wife for him,

a belle from the neighbourhood, and sent word for him to come, marry her and settle down, but he never did.

The hunter lived in this way into his mid-thirties, perhaps early forties – back then the sharp sickle of death spared few and forty was a ripe age. Nobody knew when he died, where, or why. They only noticed that his visits ceased; no one came to collect the grain any more. They dared not go looking for him; the forest was infested with lions, hyenas and snakes; they were scared of his spirit; they thought he was a curse on the family, on the clan. They consulted diviners to inquire about his fate. One said that he had been torn apart by lions, another that he was swallowed by a python, a third blamed it on a wicked spirit hounding the family.

All three diviners advised atonement, urging that his bones and weapons be found, brought back from the forest, buried and cleansed.

Fretfully, she sleeps, waiting for the phone to ring. He, her husband, grunts longingly and puts an arm over her shoulders. She shudders. Since the wedding of their son on the last new year's eve, they haven't made love, they haven't really talked. When she goes out to look for the moon, he watches her quietly. He knows she knows there is something he knows – but he does not really know.

He does not know.

He does not really know what happened and why; why this misfortune has chosen him and his son, singled out his family. For forty years he has placed his complete faith in the Bible, and throughout his life God has shielded him from trouble, but the incident on his son's wedding night has shocked him; rent him like old cloth. But he carries the bad news like a man, smiling to colleagues and customers at work, respecting his Indian bosses, hiding his fatigue behind the mountains of shirt boxes and trousers, the backbone of his job for three decades. Forty years of faith have not dulled his fear; like a true black man he listens to the words of his neighbours.

After his son returned from hospital with a card and a bot-

tle of pills, he brought a herbalist home. A big fire was made in the yard, a drum full of fresh roots and leaves boiled on the embers, secret ablutions were conducted at night in the bathroom; steaming blankets, scented grass and coals smouldering like incense, bitter porridge that had to be swallowed, spoon by spoon; signs and symbols invaded his home.

He did all that, but she – his wife – instinctively feels they should do more.

The phone rings at last, a sharp cruel stab.

She stumbles to the living room. He – her husband – sits up in bed to listen. She is breathless on the phone, her voice trembling prophetically. She is on the phone a good fifteen minutes, struggling with her fear. When she returns she says, 'It's happened again. In the bedroom, while he was sleeping.' He does not probe her with questions. She goes to the bathroom, takes a quick bath, dresses hastily and rummages through her bag. He knows he cannot stop or reason with her.

Sunrise sees her at the market place, waiting for the bus. It's a ninety-minute ride to her son's home and when she arrives he – her son – the one that fell sick on his wedding night, is just finishing his breakfast, getting ready to go to work. His wife – her daughter-in-law – makes tea for her and they chat casually for a while. She – the mother – notices that the young woman has a fresh scar on her finger.

'He bit you,' the mother says.

'He bit himself, too,' says the young woman.

'Open your mouth,' the mother tells her son. He swallows his tea jerkily so it almost burns him and obediently slides out his tongue. He is like a six-year-old boy who has hurt himself. The light falls from his face and she notices how deep his eyes are, how tired he really is. There is a raw pinkish mark on his tongue.

'Did you rinse it with salt water?' she asks. He looks at his wife and shakes his head. He goes to the kitchen to gargle with salt.

'Next time it happens put a spoon between his teeth,' says

the older woman.

'I'm off to work,' he announces with boyish zeal, adjusting his khaki trousers and tying the laces of his farmer's shoes.

'Have you taken your pills?'

'Yes, Mother. I'm all right. Really, I am.'

'We'll see you at lunch, then.'

'I'll be back for tea at ten. I have to go. I have a meeting in five minutes.'

He lopes off to his office, which is just behind the trees, bordering his house. He is a busy young man with no fuss about appearances, a graduate plant breeder who will not be held back by anything, not even this unpredictable misfortune, this mysterious ailment that shook him up on his wedding night.

His wife is six months pregnant and when her husband has left, the mother turns to her and asks how she is feeling.

She's a deep, quiet girl with a beautiful, rather sad face, one of those people destined for silence, for unhappiness, one of those who will never start a conversation. She answers that the pregnancy has been going well – going well the way of first pregnancies because problems are unanticipated, unknown. She shows the older woman her clinic cards.

When her son – the plant breeder – returns for tea there is a bowl of bitter porridge waiting for him. She – the mother – the woman who is always searching for the moon, makes sure he spoons it all up and busies herself showing additional herbs to his wife. She spends the night with them, lying awake on the bed in the spare bedroom, listening. She thinks she hears him yell and she sits up, her heart in her mouth, the word, '*Mwanangu!*' leaping to her tongue. Embarrassed, she lies back and tries to sleep.

She leaves, reluctantly, the next morning, knowing that there is nothing else she can do. Staying on with them is good for company, but only heightens her concern.

His three brothers went to the forest to search for him. They scoured the caves but could not find him, not his bones, nor his knobkerries and spears.

They were not happy with the way things had turned out, and they blamed their brother for the way he had lived his life, away from his people. They let their thoughts of him wither like the flowers of winter, yet their memories remained and they trembled like dry elephant grass in June – grass awaiting a veld fire – at the thought of him – his bones lying naked to the rain, his weapons unfound, his spirit unatoned.

He had several living brothers and sisters. Their mother was dead, bitten by a puff-adder on her way from the fields. After that their father had become a surly craftsman, carving objects out of stone and wood, who would sit staring at the fat moon, talking little and eating less. He never re-married. They called him Zevezeve, the whisperer. Mhokoshi's brothers and sisters were all married, and there were plenty of children, and goats in the pens. One brother was a renowned farmer, growing millet, groundnuts and sweet potatoes and the other was a famous dancer – a broad-faced man with strong hips that made other men's wives ogle and giggle at the harvest parties. The dancer was an adventurer who had amassed four wives and several concubines by the time he turned forty. One of the sisters was a potter and the other a basket-maker and they lived with their husbands in the hills.

The family, the clan, was scattered over the broad hills near the Save River. That was before the scorching cycle of drought descended like a bitter curse on the land, when the forest still abounded with fruit and the river was generous with fish. Hippos stumbled starkly out of the floods and crocodiles slithered in the mud. Life was easy – or seemed easy enough – progeny was a subtle gift of soul, seed and blood from the ancestors and death was something that had to be expected. In between those two states there were lean years and fat years, mean hunts and good hunts, unappeasable spirits and resolute witches, evil and laughter, good relatives and bad relatives and rules about good neighbourliness. If your neighbour stole your wife you took an axe and settled the score with him. The chief and his council of elders picked up the pieces at a village court and you were fined or let go. No act, no crime was too great for a fine and the hangman and his noose was unheard of. If some-

body pointed a finger at you and said you were a witch you hauled him to the court to be fined a beast. Illness and death were to be expected but nobody died from illness alone – your ancestors played a hand. They cleared the path for wicked spirits to molest you either because they were weak or because they had allowed themselves to be bought off to settle a grudge with their peers or with you. Or because you had offended them. Your ancestors blessed you or they cursed you.

She, the moon huntress, has seven children, and he, the determined plant breeder, aged twenty-four, is her first born. The second-born, male too, aged twenty-two, is completing his university studies and is in love with languages. The third, a taciturn twenty-year-old, is a first-year political science student at the same university. The fourth-born is a girl – a student teacher. The fifth and sixth children are girls at secondary school, and the last and youngest is a boy at primary school.

The country is masquerading under the oddly double-barrelled surname of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. A fierce civil war is raging through the country; the air is saturated with an insipid pessimism. Sell-outs and betrayals are the order of the day. Roads are mined; schools, shops and clinics closed, the economy reeling under sanctions and the call-up of all able-bodied whites. Thousands of black children have run off across the borders, in thirst of freedom and respect; to train as guerrillas, to chant slogans in forests; to fire guns and throw grenades, to act as fodder for Ian Douglas Smith's bombs. But this is not a story about that war. The story of that bitter conflict has been told elsewhere, many times before.

Her children are safe from the turmoil. They go to safe schools. They come home to their little house in the township, secure from the savage fighting. They are 'brilliant', and in these colonial seventies when education for blacks is regarded as the be-all and end-all, hers is considered a glorious household. Her children are the envy of the town, but there is a steep price to pay for it. Silence. Uncommunicativeness. Seriousness. No father drawls rudely, drunkenly, excitingly, in the sitting

room, ordering his children to bring him another beer from the small but efficient fridge. No woman swings buxomly, fatly, pleasantly; chidingly shaking a sausage pan in her husband's face.

She has defied poverty and tradition and carved a niche for herself in the town. For fifteen years she has lived another life, almost single-handedly building a home in a new land among strangers – a woman braving the morning dew in her gumboots.

Her story has been told elsewhere. But this is her tale again, a new version, the story of a woman who sought to defy the odds, the capable, sad woman who gave all for her children, the woman called my mother. This is the story of her, her husband and children and what became of them when they tried to cut the umbilical cords of their ancestries, to challenge fate.

What year was it – 1850? 1860? How does one transport oneself a century and a half to capture one's ancestry? Revisit faces, smells, clothes, food, music, stories and dances? Talk to people, seek out griots and historians, peruse books, hunt out photographs, registration and baptism certificates, ransack museums and the documents of teachers, priests and district commissioners – those surly agents of the colonial past? Your relatives, your parents' people, shake their heads laconically as if to say, 'Young man, leave history alone; what use does your empty little head want to make of time?' Or should you drink seven-days brew at the family bira and wait to dream up the past? What if your story, your real story, is about the lack of it, your ignorance, your inability to penetrate events, your bemoaning of the fact that there are no griots in your clan? What if you can only salvage the bare bones of your history? Are you then allowed to invent, to imagine, to fill up the vacuum and flesh out by-gones?

My great-grandfather – the sullen craftsman who would not speak when his wife was bitten by a puff-adder; father to the hunter who died in the mountains – was soft spoken and people nicknamed him Zevezeve, the whisperer.

Beyond him is a void – the swirling dust of the savannahs, muddled memories of the great wild-hoofed trek from the north.

Or did our clan come from the south-east, from that little country now known as Swaziland? Or did we come from the north and go south to Swaziland and back north again to the domain where the umbilical cords of our grandfathers and grandmothers were buried? And where were our great-great-grandparents buried? What marked their graves? Or were their bones scattered over the vleis of Africa, only to be trashed out of anthills by ploughs, tractors and Caterpillars? Do their ghosts shine at night? Are their spirits at rest?

Oh, Zezezeve my forebear

Help me tell this story.

Now, what year was Zezezeve born? 1830? 1835? Come Chigs, my dear history teacher, help me reconstruct the past. Let's dress Zezezeve up. Give him a loincloth and maybe a leopard-skin hat and a cow-hide in winter. Offer him snuff and a pot of millet beer, though he won't drink much. Give him millet sadza and derere, though he won't eat much. Make him a fire, plenty of wood; the night is young, winter is weeks away and the young moon has not set, but already his wives and children are asleep. Don't talk to him too much, don't ask him too many questions. He is a silent man, given to listening to the noises of the night, to the noises of other men; a philosopher embroiled in his own thoughts. The clearing is small, the forest looms darkly over the grass enclosure and the huts; owls hoot in the trees; a hyena coughs in the night; across the river a lion roars insistently but he, Zezezeve, has no need of a spear or an axe; lions – inveterate cowards – are afraid of fires; his goats, chickens and precious hoes, mapadza, and his grain are locked up in the huts with the children; a lamb bleats foolishly from one of the huts.

Crouch, kneel, sit in the dust, reader; Zezezeve is forty-five or fifty, not very old – people die young, death harvests richly here; but already he has married off three or four of his daughters and paid off his last remaining oxen as lobola for two sons. His head is white as maize-meal. Clap your hands softly and speak of your mission; he is not a sage or n'anga or diviner or rainmaker, just an eccentric whisperer. He is a man given to giving advice to others, a pacifist, a rationalist, a counsellor of sorts – a man who knows that if problems cannot be solved, they

can't be solved and life has to go on despite Mwari and midzimu. Of course, he respects God and ancestral spirits, but he knows that the true way of solving problems is not through herbs or biras or axe fights, but through soft talk, through whispering. He is a man far ahead of his time.

Why have you come here in the night anyway, reader, braving the ghosts and the snakes of the night paths? To seek his advice? To pay your respects? To offer your condolences? His wife died a month ago, bitten by a puff-adder on her way from the fields, and she is fresh in her grave, but he – the whisperer – will not weep.

But we are only describing his person, his personality and his household. Like old-fashioned anthropologists. What about the times in which he lived? The times, the place in history? Come Chigs, my dear teacher, you are good at this. 1835, 1840; the Pioneer Column is half a century away; great Great Zimbabwe is in decline – the Rozvi architects have at last given up mounting ladders into the sky to try and retrieve the moon which they believe is their king's rightful necklace; the bellicose Ndebeles under Mzilikazi have begun their infamous raids into Mashonaland. The Munhumutapa Empire is in decline – the Shonas are scattered over the land and ruled by many chiefs; there are no real wars yet; the Shonas are busy planting and gathering and hunting and fishing and weaving and carving and dancing to shangara and ngororombe and drinking and mounting their wives and laughing and crying and raising their children; sickness and drought and death are the only real tragedies.

This, then, is the world which Zevezeve inhabited, the land in which he breathed and whispered. Ah, but Teacher Chigs, this is not a history textbook and we have to move on. We have a long way to go and we have to be brisk.