

**John Dryden Translation Competition for 2013-2014 First Prize Winner**

**Extract from the novel *La muette* by Chahdortt Djavann, translated by Lesley Lawn**

**Chahdortt Djavann, *La muette* © Flammarion, 2008**

**MUTE**

In September a letter arrived at my home. It was from Iran. I did not know anyone in that country and I thought it must be a mistake, but it was clearly my name on the envelope. On the back there was an address written in Persian script. The ink, although blue, was not exactly the same on both sides of the envelope. Each address had been written by a different person with a different pen. I am now convinced that it is important to publish this letter as a preface to this story:

*Madame,*

*I am a journalist in Iran. I have sent you a parcel via the diplomatic bag that you will receive in ten days or so. It contains two manuscripts: the first, the original in Persian, and the second the translation. The story is a true account, written by a young woman, fifteen years old, in prison. By some miraculous chance this manuscript came into my hands. I worked on the translation with an Iranian writer, a specialist in Western literature. He wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. At the end of the story, I have taken the liberty of adding several lines to explain the circumstances by which this manuscript came into my possession. I thought you would be interested in seeing it published. I hope I am not mistaken.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*C.J.*

I was intrigued by this letter. Two weeks later, I received the parcel. It did indeed contain a printed manuscript and a notebook crammed full with tortuous handwriting, tiny and cramped with no margins, no paragraphs. These pages, blackened with foreign words completely unknown to me, filled me with a strange, oppressive feeling. On the last pages the writing became even smaller and more cramped — the author clearly only had this one notebook, I thought to myself. I read the translation in one go, and then took up the notebook. I went through it page by page, without being able to read it. My chest was tight, I had a lump in my throat, I had the feeling that I was beginning to understand a little of the Persian version, or at least its author's determination and the suffering that was expressed in this writing that came from so far away. I would not have believed such a story to be true if I had not held that notebook in my hand. There was no hesitation. I would publish it.

*To my guard M.A.F.*

I am fifteen years old. My name is Fatima, but I don't like this name. In our neighbourhood, everyone had a nickname; mine was "the mute woman's niece." The "mute woman" was my aunt, my father's sister. I shall call her M. Soon I am going to be hanged. My mother called me Fatima because I was born on Muhammed's birthday, and as I was a girl, she named me after the Prophet's daughter. She didn't think that one day I would be hanged, nor did I. I begged the young prison guard to bring me some paper and a pen. He took pity on me and granted a condemned woman her last wish. I don't know where to begin. Often I had read a little dictionary that had been left in the room where I lived for over a year. I liked to learn what the words meant, but I don't remember all of them or their meaning. I have never written anything before, except a few poems, twenty or so, but nobody ever read them. At school, I was a good student but I had to leave when I was thirteen. I would have loved to stay on and go to university. No one in my family, no one in the neighborhood for that matter, had ever even set foot in a university. Where I grew up, there was only poverty and drugs. Everyone's fate was one of inescapable hardship. In our world, men and women were crushed by poverty, making them wretched, mean, ugly. Too much misery and people lose the ability to dream. My uncle, my mother's brother, was funny, handsome, a drug addict. He was twenty-two and was still able to dream, a bit too much perhaps. M was beautiful too. She had big eyes that sparkled and a reassuring face, for someone who didn't speak. I am not beautiful, but I'm not ugly either, except that now in this cell, I must be. The first three days of interrogation were the longest in the history of humanity, being beaten for seventy-two sleepless hours. Indescribable pain. I have several broken teeth, my face is swollen, some of my ribs broken, my body hurts every time I breathe. It is only dawning on me now that I am going to be hanged. Day and night waiting for death in this narrow, totally empty cell, it's more than I can bear. Thinking of her, imagining her by my side stops me going mad, helps me cope with the pain and the fear. I am writing so that someone will remember her, my silent aunt, and remember me, because I am terrified of dying just like that, leaving nothing. Perhaps someone will read this notebook. Perhaps someone someday will understand. I am not seeking approval. I just want to be understood.

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The guard must be terrified by the way I look, and also by my cries of pain, since at times it is intolerable. Today he slipped me a little paper handkerchief. At first I thought it was so that I could blow my nose. It was a kind thought and I thanked him. Then I realized that it was just half of a crumpled tissue, a bit grubby. I felt something very small, miniscule, inside the tissue. It was a tiny

piece of opium. I put it into my mouth at once. The guard does not look as though he is from around here. He must be from a big city, to try something that bold. I'm feeling quite strange, like I have never felt before.

During my interrogation, I didn't say a word; I took the blows without a sound. I too was mute. Those three days made me understand the obstinate silence into which my aunt had taken refuge. The way she presented a total wall of silence made others respect her, and sometimes made them afraid of her. Remaining silent was a way of not betraying the truth. People started calling her "the mute woman." Was she really? Nobody knew, because she had not always been like that. Up until the age of ten she could speak. Later on, she made her silence speak in ways that no one else could. Joy, sadness, hatred, love, tenderness, rage, indignation, hope and despair were all expressed in her eyes, in every part of her face, in her way of getting up and leaving or staying, listening and caressing you with her eyes. Even the most ignorant and illiterate person could read in her face what she was saying without words. I miss her, my silent aunt. She may have stopped speaking, but she had not closed her heart. She had made silence into a way of life. As for me, since I have come this far, I have a duty to tell her story. I need to tell her story.

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She was not deaf, she could hear and understand everything people said; she was not mad, although her behaviour was often surprising, out of the ordinary.

Although she had given up speech forever, she was not unfeeling. In spite of her silence, she knew how to grasp those rare moments of beauty in life. She knew how to be there when she was needed, how to be caring.

The first day of my interrogation my period came on early, probably because of the shock of the violence I was subjected to. When one of my torturers realised, he shouted, " Look at her, the whore, she's pissing blood. Now, I'll show you how to really piss blood." He beat me savagely, I thought he'd rip me open with his boots, crush my vile stomach as if I had defied him somehow with my menstrual blood. I always knew that my periods would only ever bring trouble: I was little more than twelve years old, and I was coming home from school. On the way, I felt a sudden discomfort, a sort of pain low down in my stomach; my pants were wet and the inside of my thighs all damp. I hurried home and as soon as I got in I rushed into the toilet. There was blood running down my legs. I had heard that women had bleeding from time to time, but talking about it with girlfriends at school was quite different from actually experiencing it. I was terrified, I couldn't say exactly why, but I felt guilty, unclean. This was goodbye to childhood, or at least what remained of it, and where we lived it was nothing to rejoice about. I stayed in the toilet for a long time, then I had to come out because my brother was knocking on the door. I stood there. My mother was washing clothes. Seeing her scrubbing one of my father's collars made me feel even more guilty about my underwear soaked in blood. I didn't dare say anything to her, although she had never

been violent towards me, she had never hit me, but I always felt there was a distance between us. I didn't want to be like her ever, not remotely. I didn't want her to see me as one of her own kind, as another one of the women in our neighbourhood. I believed I was destined for other things. Perhaps I wasn't thinking all that at that particular moment, but I was feeling a sort of grief, the misery of being a woman. I was still standing by the toilet door, with my legs squeezed tight together. M got up and came towards me and handed me a sanitary towel. I took it, we looked into each other's eyes; mine were full of gratitude and hers full of tenderness and understanding. She placed her hand on my cheek. That brief moment of contact gave me a strength and calm that dispelled my feelings of anguish. Today I am pissing blood and she is long gone. All sorts of images rush into my head and plunge me into a state of confusion, but I must carry on. God in heaven, give me the strength to finish this story before I lose my mind.

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I asked the guard if he had any more of his little bits of tissue, he said he'd bring me some in the afternoon. He has remarkably beautiful eyes, the colour of honey.

My father was not a drug addict, nor was he violent; he was a man who had endured poverty and helplessness. He had the coarseness of a working man, but on rare occasions, he could be tender, in his own way. He told me once that in some ways I was like her, M, that I had her bad temper, and that like me she used to be good at her schoolwork. I knew that from the age of fourteen after their mother had died, he had looked after his sister by working on building sites. I asked him several times about his sister, but every time he dodged the issue. On the twentieth anniversary of my grandmother's death we went to the cemetery, as we did every year. M stayed at home. She never went out, not even to visit her mother's grave. When we got back, my father went to sit in the small yard that backed on to the single room that we all lived in. Every spring, my mother tried desperately to grow some herbs there, but they always failed. My father told her that she didn't have green fingers and that annoyed her. I watched my father as he sat smoking, deep in thought. I sat beside him and he took a drag on his cigarette like a long sigh. I asked him why my aunt had become mute. That day he told me that their father was a drug addict like most of the men in the neighborhood. He beat them regularly, and when he needed a fix he could be very violent. Twenty years ago to the day he came home late and began shouting. My father, who was in his teens at the time, got up and left the house so that he did not have to hear all the swearing and the insults. When he came back in the early hours of the morning, he found his mother at death's door, and his sister half paralysed in a corner. At the police station, his father denied having beaten them. The policeman questioned his sister, then ten years old, and she looked at her father, but did not say a word. Their mother died of an internal haemorrhage. After three months in prison, my grandfather was released, but then six months later he was dead, of an overdose. My father looked after his

sister; he even took her to some medical specialists who diagnosed her as suffering from trauma. She had refused to testify against her father and since then she had never spoken again. My father hoped she would get better. Weeks, then months, then years passed and still my aunt did not speak. He tried to teach her sign language, but M would not give in, she was determined to remain silent. My father felt guilty, he said that if he had not left his sister and his mother alone, none of it would have happened. He could have intervened and stopped his father from beating up his mother. What struck me most of all that day, more than the story itself, was my father's impassive tone. There was no emotion in his voice. He spoke as though violence was after all something banal and ordinary, the everyday lot of people who are born and die in misery. My mother often repeated a saying that used to irritate me back then: No one can fight his own destiny; every one has to accept the lot that falls to him, that's just how life is.

That night I remember it was a full moon and I could not get to sleep. On the rectangular patterns of the curtain that my mother had put up to divide the room, I saw the scene that my aunt must have witnessed when she was ten years old, the murder that took away her voice forever. She was lying beside me, and like me, she was awake. The pictures I saw on the curtain disappeared suddenly with the sound of my father panting and my mother attempting to stifle her cries of pleasure. M and I listened to their duet from the other side of the curtain.

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The young guard, my guardian angel, gave me my ration of opium.

"Where are you from?"

"I'm not allowed to talk to you."

"And are you allowed to give me this?" I said, taking the crumpled piece of tissue.

M was not like other people; she never did anything in the usual way. People thought her mad because of her unconventional and uninhibited behaviour. She could not care less about things that were forbidden. It was only much later that I understood why she was so different. She never covered her head, even when she opened the door on to the street, whereas no other woman around here, even if she was bald, mad, blind, or mute would never appear on the doorstep with her head uncovered for fear of being seen by a passerby. In our neighborhood there were only men, the women never went out and like my mother, even in the house they wore a headscarf. M always dressed in a long coloured dress, always barefoot and always with two long plaits that draped over her breasts. She had the freedom of a man, a woman's attention to detail. Sometimes she would spend ages painting our toenails, or making up her eyes in front of the mirror. And she smoked. She would stick a cigarette in the corner of her mouth or between her teeth while she washed the clothes or the dishes, then she would take long drag, like the poker players in those American films. I loved to watch her. Everything about her fascinated me. After what she had been through at the

age of ten she was no longer afraid of anything, she did as she pleased. Sometimes she fell into a profound sadness, as dark as the deepest ocean, then she would shut herself off and no one could get near her. Other times, she was bright and happy, like a little girl who knew nothing of life; then she would lavish her joy on us all. The fact that she was mute gave her a freedom that she certainly would not have had if she could speak. Being mute meant she was not like other people, and her silence aroused their suspicion. She was scandalously different and had a knack of making enemies. She was the accursed, the evil and untamed woman. The gossips in the neighborhood said that we were harbouring a she-devil, a witch who cast spells on all those around her. [...]

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Everything is silent in this cell and all I can hear is the beating of my own heart, the demons of the past jump out at me, I am afraid, I am suffocating, I don't want to die with this piercing hatred that consumes me. I don't want to be hanged with this suffering that I have had to bear in secret. I don't want to take it with me to the grave. I want to die in peace, free of it all. I have to use up all my suffering in this cell. I must record my hatred in this notebook.

Whenever I think of my childhood, I always see M. She used to spend ages combing my hair, then would put it into long plaits, like her own. She made me say my homework out loud and then clap loudly and hug me in her arms. Sometimes she held me so tight that I didn't know where my body ended and where hers began. There was a bond of love between us, in me she saw the little girl that she had once been. Her personality, her life, her way of living in silence had all left its mark on me. Her existence, her story were part of my destiny, but I didn't know that at the time. I just let her go on combing my hair — I loved that. With her, I felt protected. There was a sort of collusion between us, a chemistry without words. It was she who had brought me up, as my mother went to work every morning and came back in the evening, exhausted. When we were alone, she would ask me to read out loud from *A Thousand and One Nights*, a book that my father had given her. I liked being Scheherazade.

In spite of my fever, my memories are very precise. I can remember quite clearly when I started to be suspicious about M and my uncle. I was coming back from school and I bumped into my uncle. M was alone in the house, and was looking particularly radiant. The smell of the potato cakes that she had made for lunch made me feel really hungry. I quickly went about setting the table. My brother and sister were also starving hungry and were getting impatient. We waited for her to bring in the potato cakes and dish them up, but she made us wait. I went into the kitchen and asked her reproachfully what she was waiting for. She grabbed me by the shoulder and pushed me out of the room. It was the first time she had ever been rough with me. I went to sulk in a corner; I knew then that something was going on. After a long wait, my uncle came in and M finally brought in the potato cakes. She didn't eat anything, but instead devoured my uncle with her eyes, her cheeks

burning. She was twenty-nine, a virgin and in love, and her heart was fit to burst. She radiated passion. For a woman, she displayed too much emotion, her eyes expressed an unbridled desire, and they fixed on my uncle who, at twenty-one, understood nothing about women. He carried on eating mouthfuls of potato cakes and remained completely indifferent to her, perhaps because she was mute, perhaps because she was eight years older than him. From that day onward, coming home from school I kept a look out for my uncle in the street where he often hung around with a bunch of local youths with nothing better to do. If ever I saw him I would say, "Come on, come home, we're going to eat."

[...]

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I'm happy. The guard came today. I got my dose, but no sweet and not a word from him.

From time to time my mother would get together with the other women to peel aubergines or wash vegetables while they chatted. Mostly, their discussions involved saying bad things about other women in the neighbourhood. It kept them busy and gave them the illusion of having a social life. These gatherings always happened at our house, we only had the one room, and two of the women whose husbands were in prison would often stay until evening. I didn't like our neighbours, they always looked suspiciously at my aunt, and I felt they had a bad influence on my mother. Sometimes I complained "Why do they always come here, why don't you go to their houses?" I couldn't concentrate on my homework. My mother scolded me and proclaimed that, if I was really keen on concentrating on my studies, I wouldn't hear anything, even a thunderstorm. So I tried to get on with my homework, but their noise and their presence were a real nuisance, especially when they all talked at the same time, which made a deafening racket. My mother never joined them, she always stayed in the little kitchen, made tea for them, cooked or looked after the flowers and herbs that she had grown in the yard. One day I was doing my homework and among the other words that filled the air I heard them say "the mute" several times. I was curious and listened to try and grasp what they could be saying about my aunt. I heard one of the neighbors talking in a low voice to my mother. She was a bigoted woman who went to the mosque every Friday, but who was famous for her spiteful tongue. "You know it's not right, your brother coming round every evening when your sister-in-law lives with you and she doesn't even cover her head. People are talking—they're saying things. You should never give people a reason to talk, after all she may be mute, but she's still a woman."

"What can I do? I can't stop my own brother from coming to see me. He's on his own and hasn't got anyone else. As for my sister-in-law, I've had to put up with her since I got married. I can't ask my husband to throw her out on the street. They are never alone together anyway, and my brother only calls for a few minutes on his way home."

“Of course they are alone together. Several times I’ve seen him with my own eyes going in for lunch when you are still at work and your husband’s away.”

“But *she’s* always there,” protested my mother, looking pointedly in my direction, and anyway, why would you think my young and handsome brother could be interested in a dumb spinster eight years older than him?”

Listening to her I was incensed, but I kept my head down and pretended to do my homework. Suddenly they all went quiet — my aunt was in the room with a tray of tea. She put it on the ground beside my mother, nodded to them and went out into the yard. All the women, including my mother, watched her as she went out.

“Anyway I’m only saying what I’ve heard. You know she has a bad reputation, and it’s true when you see her, you think people must be right. After all, men are men, they can’t control themselves, and if a pretty woman makes advances and goes around without covering her head...”

“But what can I do?” wailed my mother.

“You can marry her off, that way you’d be rid of her forever.”

“Who would want to marry a mute?”

“There’s always someone, you know, after all a mute is better than a woman who nags all day long, and she’s not bad looking. OK, she’s not young, she’s already twenty-nine. Now I come to think of it, there is someone who might be interested.”

“Who’s that?”

The women looked at one another. I thought then that they weren’t as nasty as I had thought, because naturally I imagined they were thinking of my uncle.

“Can’t you guess?”

“I told you, I don’t know...”

I was so engrossed in their conversation that my mouth was wide open and was about to reply in my mother’s place, when she turned and told me to go and fetch another tray from the kitchen. Each woman was holding an aubergine and a knife.

“So are you going to tell me who wants to marry my sister-in-law?”

In the kitchen, I heard the bigot woman say the name of the mullah. The tray I was carrying fell to the ground with a huge clatter.

“What are you doing in there?” shouted my mother.

“Nothing,” I said, picking up the tray from the floor. I put it down next to my mother and went back to my place to carry on with my homework.

“The mullah? The one who comes here and says prayers?” said my mother, astonished.

“Obviously, there isn’t another.”

“But how do you know?”

“I know. They say his last wife couldn’t have children and he wants to take a new wife.”

“But he’d never want to marry a woman who was mute.”



“Listen, if I’m telling you it’s because I heard that he saw her once when he came for the Friday prayer, and it seems he is interested. And as he’s already got a wife about the same age, it could be an advantage that she’s a mute, at least the two of them won’t argue.”

“I’ve nothing against it after all, he’s got a good position, but my husband will have to agree.”

“I don’t see what he could have against it. After all, it’s not everyday you find a husband for a mute sister who’s going on thirty.”

I didn’t know what to do, keep it to myself, go and warn my aunt, or tell my father about my mother’s Machiavellian plan. In the end I decided to wait, not to throw my aunt into a panic and to speak to my father as soon as possible.

My mother didn’t lose any time, got there before me and had told my father. That evening before going to bed, she had done her very best to soften him up. I thought he would be furious at the very idea of marrying his sister off to the mullah, but that was not the case. The next evening after dinner my father took his sister by the hand and led her out into the yard. I looked at my mother who was anxiously watching my father. I realised that she had got to him. I couldn’t hear them, but I sat by the glass door so that I could see them. My father was still holding his sister’s hand and talking. She was listening and attempting to understand what her brother was trying to say. My mother came up and stood next to me to see what was going on. I noticed that as my father went on, my aunt’s face gradually hardened. She shook her head as if to say no, withdrew her hand and shot a fierce look at my mother standing by the window, then rushed off to the other side of the yard and huddled in the corner. My father went over to her and tried to reason with her but she got up, looked him hard in the eye and moved away. My father came back into the room and said to my mother,

“It’s no good.”

“What do you mean? You’re the one who decides, not her, you’re her guardian, and she’s your responsibility.”

“You don’t want me to force my own sister to get married, do you?”

“Force. There’s no force about it. Once she’s married, she’ll realise that it was for her own good. What does she know about marriage anyway? It’s not right keeping an old sp...” — she was going to say spinster but corrected herself — “a girl of her age shut up in the house. Don’t you realise this is perhaps the only chance she’ll get to have a husband, have children and a family?”

“What do you want me to do?” said my poor father.

“You can go and see the mullah and give him your consent,” bullied my mother. “He’s the one who draws up all the marriage contracts, he can do one for himself.”

“You talk as though we were trying to sell something.”

“Listen, your sister is twenty-nine years old, she’s mute, she frightens all the neighbours, and remember when she was ill and you thought she was going mad. Marriage is the best thing for her.”

“But I can’t marry her against her will, to someone she can’t stand.”

“Can you see any others queuing up to marry her? And how do you know she can’t stand him, she doesn’t even know him. She’s just afraid to leave the house, it’s not good, her staying here, clinging to you like this. You’re her brother, not her husband.”

My father cut her short. “Listen, you are in mourning for your father until the end of the year. We’ll see about all this in the New Year.”

M was in the corner of the yard, smoking a cigarette. I wanted to go and comfort her and tell her what I had heard the night before, but I didn’t dare. She looked very miserable. I watched her from the window and then took a decision.

The next Friday when the mullah came for the prayer, I didn’t go into the yard with my aunt, but stayed in the kitchen and offered to make tea. In truth it was so I could spy on them. I knotted my headscarf tightly round my head and went up to the mullah with the tray in my hand. I caught him looking at me over his glasses. He had almost certainly thought that it would be my aunt who served him tea. I bent over and held the tray in front of him so that he could take a cup, but I had overfilled it and some had spilled into the saucer “How many times have I told you not to overfill the cups.” My mother was scolding me for my clumsiness. My hands were shaking, so was the tray and the cups with it. “No harm done,” said the mullah, taking his cup. I looked up and caught him piercing me with his eyes. I don’t know why, at that moment, I had a dreadful feeling of foreboding. I went back to the kitchen, watching them all the while. After the prayer, he spoke with my mother by the front door. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, he was speaking in such a low voice. I was sure my mother was cooking up something and I decided to thwart her plans.