

Umar TIMOL**Prose****Diary of an Old Mad Woman**

I am a cliché.

An exotic cliché, indeed, I've been living here close to thirty years and like clockwork, I am asked the same questions, the same commentaries. So you come from there, it must be so beautiful so wonderful; why do you live here when your island is so lovely. I just dream of going there, to relax under the beautiful tropical sun, allow me to tell you madam, that you have the charm and kindness of the people from over there. Yes, nice and charming, that's what I am remembered for. I am the foreigner, the other who comes from somewhere else, but who is more like you than you could ever imagine; and so I am filled with the same shit that festers in the dregs of your aborted dreams.

Then come the victim-clichés, usually after a few glasses of booze, the hangdog look when you are red in the face and not fully aware of what you're saying, or perhaps you just want to let out what your real thoughts are. That yes, over there, with the coconut palms, the natives must be really happy, busy merrymaking. That's the legendary island laziness; it's the weather, the indolent sun that makes you want to laze around, sleeping and dreaming; thank goodness we succeeded in civilizing them. But being charming and nice, I keep quiet; for a long time now I've just been skimming the surface of people and things; whatever you say, think or shit; I can't care less.

I don't even give a fuck actually.

I am a cliché. Cuz, I am in the average lower class. I live in a small, crummy apartment on the outskirts of the big city. No need to describe it. You just need to know that it exudes the stink of mediocrity. I am neither rich nor poor, neither beautiful nor ugly, intelligent or stupid. I am nothing. But no one would want to say that. We live in a positive era. We should be positive. The world is in bad shape. We have enough bombs to blow us all the way to hell but we should be positive. I am positive. I am nothing but I am positive.

I am a cliché. For I am an old woman, and the old woman is expected to know how to behave in society. You need to hold yourself up, dear. For instance, she can't be belching forth that she is scared shitless at the prospect of death. She cannot say that she doesn't have any desire to play with her grandchildren. Anyway, I don't have any. She has to make herself small, all gnarled up like a chamber pot, oh so sorry for my rudeness, let's just say a flower vase, which we would like to get rid of but can't because we are nostalgic about times past. Over in my island, we like old people, especially when they have enough land to feed several generations of heirs. Here it's civilized, so we send them to what is modestly called a retirement home. Strange prudishness when we all know that they spend their days in piss- and shit-filled diapers.

I am a cliché because I hate my husband. Nothing venomous, I need to emphasize, of course, but again, I dislike him. My husband, le seul et unique (I express myself in French; I am from there you know, the so-called exotic island, a former colony; we speak every language but master none and

please don't think that I'm bashing the sacrosanct French Language). Let me make this clear, he is not a bad man, just mediocre. After all what do you expect after thirty years of cohabitation? Do I need to talk about true love, the kind of love that crosses boundaries of time and space; the love that is fulfilled in the fusion of body and soul? We'll leave that to the big-hearted and intellectually challenged teenagers. He is just like any other man, neither better nor worse. He watches his porn discreetly and manipulates his dick with the same gentleness as the remote. He is a soccer fan, he follows Liverpool (why Liverpool and not Manchester, I would like you to meditate once more on our colonial history). He watches the games, a can of beer in hand and swaying like the very devil himself. He thinks he is such a great soccer player, he has the gait of a referee and the gawky look of a ball boy. I have never understood, for the life of me, why heterosexual men, at least to all appearances, enjoy watching twenty-two men in briefs chase a ball. We'll not understand the mystery of the male anytime soon. Let's move on. No need to evoke poetically the tricks he uses to fuck me, sorry, I mean to make love to me. Or his stubbornness, his gauche ways or his loud clothes, he tends to lean toward pink and orange.

I am a cliché. I am a predictable woman, in predictable surroundings, in an aseptic society, which eliminated violence and sells prefabricated dreams to the masses, which thinks death can be fooled with a consumption frenzy. We live in the era of triviality. Prosperity made us mawkish. I am a predictable woman in a society of predictability.

I am a comedian in my free time. I made hypocrisy an artform, I deserve an Oscar for my performance, or, why not, the title of Professor Emeritus at a prestigious university. Well, don't they confer titles on idiots, for instance, a doctorate to a great soccer player, such a great man who, what an achievement, spent his whole life chasing a ball. I imagine the scene: the crowd cheering, I am being awarded the title of Doctor in Hypocrisy or better yet, the title of Miss World Hypocrisy, and there I am, choked up, tears in my eyes, thanking everyone who helped and sustained me and, especially, and there's a lot of them, those who messed up my life. Not only am I crazy but I also possess a great sense of humor. It seems like a lot of talent in one person, don't you agree!

The tragedy, you see, is that I want to be by myself. I don't need anyone. But that's rarely possible for the simple reason that I am married. And my husband, pardon me, my dear husband, an aficionado of fashionable gatherings, is, as I said before, involved in everything, often the most repugnant frivolities such as associations, clubs, unions, and I think I said it already, he—sorry, his wonderful wife—regularly entertains at home. It's a strange parade of bastards, half-bastards, would-be bastards, complete and utter bastards, neurotic screw-ups and dumb bastards, who think they are superior to others. Makes me think of a zoo, there's the whole range of human bastardy spread out in all its splendor and diversity. And the lady, that's me, I pose and play; I'm extremely gracious, I know the welcome protocol specific to each communal group. Depending on who's the listener, I know how to pose the type of question that charms and disarms (how is your son or daughter the doctor/ accountant?). I've read Dale Carnegie, I will open my little mouth only at the right time, everything is well thought through. I know how to exude the poison that enthralls and throws off balance, since I am the demure wife, I try to stay away from the chat of my beloved's friends; when he makes some insipid comments about me— isn't she just pretty today—I play coy and simper; oh, honey stop it, you shouldn't...right here in front of everybody. I am embarrassed and in order to play the part better, I even blush, not too much but just enough. I am in other words a real saint, a noble ethereal soul who sows friendship and brings out the best in everyone. To put the last nail in the coffin, toward the end of the evening, I talk about my charitable work with an association that caters to indigent people. You should see, I nail it down, they look at me flabbergasted and awestruck. Go on, you can applaud, but I really reach the height of my abilities when I entertain my dear husband's family. Bunch of half-witted fools, they are, from the village-island; you can admire me, I pamper them, spoil them, I am at their every beck and call. I prepare the nice dishes they like, I take them

around the city, I give the children gifts, I patiently listen to the old people telling me their problems and it works, they love me, adore me even. They tell my husband that he is very lucky to have such a wonderful wife. I am indisputably, a very gifted actress.

I play my role so well that sometimes I forget who I really am.

I am crazy

I spend all my days riding the subway. I like the dizzying feel of it, losing myself in the crowd, an anonymity that dilutes all feeling of belonging just letting yourself go, dragged along in the flow of bodies and metal. I do this because I am in search of a glance, a lascivious look from a being who would reawaken me, give new meaning to my life. I stay like that, on the trains, for hours on end, I transit from one train to the next, searching for those eyes, only one glance, but it does not come and will never come because no one sees me anymore, I no longer arouse desire in anyone.

I am invisible

I am nothing.

I allow myself a second kind of madness. I sometimes cut my veins with a blade. To be honest with you, there's nothing to dramatize about, I always stop myself at the right moment. A few drops of blood and soon it's all over. I am not like those teenagers, stupid and crude, who slash themselves to the bone. I have always hated drama. I am a middle-class lady, even if it doesn't look that way, and the middle class doesn't condone cheap acts of provocation. To tell the truth, I'm like a surgeon who can remodel a nose or tits, sorry, I mean breasts, without leaving any scars. High art.

I chisel my skin artfully.

This is who I am. A cliché, a comedian, a mad woman.

Or so I think.

Sad spectacle or an ordinary one. It's up to you.

The essential isn't here.

I am in love.

I love you.

Translation from the French © 2012 Joyce Fortuné-Pope.

First published in *Words Without Borders* in May 2012 ; appears here by permission.

**

BLOOD

You are beautiful. And I am mad.

Body of stone. Body of sun. Body alone. Summer milkiness. Neckline's wild plunge. You are my ivory flesh. Black star. My province of obscene desire. You seal me up in walls beneath the dome of lamentations. My permitted succulence. My mistress. My connivance of the senses. My tyrannical moon-being. My possessed princess. My filigree of sweat, my idol wrapped in silk. And thorns.

Work of fire and blood. Your circling lips marry and notch my skin. Dry me. I am a desert. Whip me. I am a slave. Make me your vassal. I am your thing. Your trinket. I pleat up your nape. I open out your belly's secrets. Your celestial dunes. Your hair is a sheaf of flames. Your eyes a hurricane of sand. I slit your swollen tongue and quench my thirst. It is a sacred wafer for that infidel, my mouth. It is a chalice for my mouth, heretical.

I renounce all duty. Reason. I am a worshipper in places of excess. I am a beggar at the threshold of your tavern. I quench my thirst hallucinating at your springs. With opium and wine. I sniff your opiate fragrances. I bite your intoxicating nicks and cracks.

I am the one in rags who bathes your feet with kisses. I want to drink. And drink again. And drink. And then dissolve, sucked up by the small cells of drunkenness.

I am love's lover. The one in wool. The one in clothes of mud and grime.

The one who prostrates himself across your body. I am the place of veneration. The place of prayer.

The one who at your veil's first light recites your eyes' silences. The one who gleans braids of blood on your mausoleum.

And you are my sacred book. My poem.

And I am a mad poet begging for the meaning of your verb. And I am a mad poet stealing words.

Mad poet pocketing his gestures of obedience. Mad poet who declares a transmuted language.

Words of incantation to celebrate and create you. Words beyond words to love you.

And you are my fertile one, my indecorous one. The one who purges me of all my weariness. Who ebbs away my faults and my resentments. Who brings together ecstasy and pain.

And your nectar permeates my most unruffled dreams. Your nectar saturates my night repentances.

You are a feast I break, a celebration which corrupts.

And I savour your white throat. I breathe your spicy scents, decant your swelling beads of sap.

And you are my vanity. My lustful one. My shameless virgin.

You criss-cross the vengeful seas, the fetid streets. You criss-cross my greedy carcass and my terrified delights. While my saliva still besmears your lips. And while the liquors of enjoyment dry to threads stitching your fissured skin.

You are a woman and the hungry dark crumples the graves. You are a woman and the sky exudes flakes of stone.

You are a woman and the ocean dries to desert and the earth decalcifies. You are a woman and the animals are shivering apocalyptic signs.

And you are beautiful. My opaline gazelle. The water that rains down between my lashes. Sighs which stroke my dreams to velvet. Saffron to dress the surface of my scars.

And you are beautiful. My gentle one. My yielding one. Your face a shining dawn. Blue nebula. A necklace of the dust of stars. Necklace of endless promises.

And you are beautiful. My hidden treasure. Ripple of diamonds. Tresses of pearls. Canvas of rubies. I am the silversmith of your enchantments. Of your idleness.

And you are beautiful. A woman-island. Island-woman. I revoke my elsewheres, take my island-dweller's oath. I am a lighthouse built on your belly-button. I light up the canticles of your luxuriance.

And I still want for years to come to crawl like an animal across your shroud. And patch it with my blood. And go to sleep co-mingled with my refuge – with your bloodless body.

And I black my eyes with the ashes of my black moon. And I disclaim the frivolous distorted dramas of the fleeting. And my blinded subject flesh gives itself up to the obsessions and the prejudices of your cult.

And I am a body-instrument. A body-tabla. A body-ravane.

And you give me rhythm in the furrows of your lips. And you excise me on your crucifix.

And you are a mirror.

And you inflect the migration of the stars. And wreath the suns in snow.

You are a mirror. You suck the crimson out of evil's poisonous reds.

You are a mirror. Deep in your glass I uproot myself in order to be you.

You are a mirror. And I shatter you.

Your fractures slice my veins. Long after I have died my blood will collect your breath on madness's esplanades.

And I am dust circling a white-hot niche.

The world's heart.

And I cut off the heads of those – faithful and unbelievers – who wallow at your feet but who cannot unearth the alchemies of love.

And I drift about in my fragile boat with the souls of the outlawed and the weak.

And I give the lame to eat. I sing of infamy with lepers. And my body is a shelter for the mangy dog. And my body is a suit of armour for the tramp. My body is a well for the fallen woman's weeping.

And in their dwelling-place which is my dwelling-place I converse with madmen.

And our bloody lips are dancing inspired words reciting verses from the book of love.

And you are beautiful. My black fairy. My black wound. And I want to exhaust black pupils excavating verbs inside my skin. And chisel an ebony dream. To strip the bark from this ebony dream.

Extract its essence and unravel all your strange excesses.

And I chant your name as nothingness engulfs me I invoke your name when war throws up the bodies of dead children.

And I implore your name when my tears are wiped away and I no longer want to, can no longer cry.

And I am in waiting.

For the black sap that runs like nerves within your rounded flesh. For the black sap which inks in your hair.

And I am in waiting.

For the black sap which populates your skin. For the black sap which swells your rage.

Let it cut into me, impale me. Let it abandon me as fodder for the spiteful crowd of clowns.

For I am nothing.

And I want to die.

And I watch for glimmers which foretell my sacrifice.

My friends, sharpen your sabres.

For I do not recognise either death or life.

For to die is to be reborn in you. It is to be you.

And you are beautiful. You are the most beautiful.

And I am travelling beyond the bounds of time.

I am the lover of all your places. Where you have been and where you will be.

I am a father and I have conjured you in my imagination. I am a mother and I have fashioned you. I am your first smile and your first gulp of milk.

I am the tracts of land which you have trampled. And the skies you have deserted. I am your hands unfolded at the hour of prayer. And your hands knotted at the hour of pain.

I am the swelling seas you have caressed. And the raging tumults you have calmed.

I am the letters that chisel your first name. And the sacred book which holds the secret of our conjugations.

I am the hands that will rock your final breath. And the hands that will stroke you to sleep inside your tomb.

And I love you.

And a single atom of your love can satisfy my hunger. And makes me shine.

A single atom of your love amputates all my unsightliness. And purges me of my rottenness.

A single atom of your love and I forget myself.

And I think of you alone.

A single atom of your love and I am beatified. I am the chosen one.

And I love you.

And you are in all things.

You are the sun untying the restraints of dark. The sun that casts its scarlet glow across the oceans' indolence.

You are the tears that burst across the seams of dawn.

The tears that celebrate secessions of the dusk. The tears that mow down cavalcades of moons.

And you are in all things.

You are the souls under assault. And the monsters that attack us.

And the axes that embalm our eyes.

You are love's transients as we lay down our irreparable hates.

You are the last remaining snow and bursts of fire that sift the ashes of my nights.

And I love you.

And I am a man alone prostrated in the desert.

And I fast.

And I stone the spectres come from other places.

And I fast.

My encircled body is a wound, a crevasse.

An empty skin and dwelling-place for your amazements.

You.

And you are beautiful.

And I see hell and heaven intertwined in your amber eyes and in your filmy body.

And I desire neither mercy nor damnation but your love.

Your love alone.

And I love you.

I banish my own heart so I can be your heart.

I tear me from myself so I may live in you.

Grant me extinction.

First published in the Poetry International, 2012

*

THE EYES OF OTHERS

She's a young woman living in a village in a distant country, she's just got married and she's pregnant, and she likes her husband he works hard, he's pretty nice to her and doesn't beat her and she waits impatiently for her baby to be born, she feels it, in her belly, growing a bit each day, it's like a seed that's growing, growing, it'll be a girl, she knows it will, and she already loves her very fiercely, as she loves her little life, sometimes, it's true, she has mad dreams, especially when she watches the TV, she too would like to travel round the world, to visit cities, meet a handsome prince and stand there in the snow and sing a sweet romantic song and she tells herself she's mad to think of all that stuff, you're crazy, you are, but she likes her little life, of course there is her husband's mother who's a pain but there are, as her sister neatly puts it, giggling, worse pains somewhere else and she quite likes her little life and maybe what she loves the most is going down to the sea each morning, she goes very early on her own and then she starts to run, run fast, run very fast, so fast she feels as if she's lost her head, she starts to yell, her happiness so strong it muddles all her senses and she also loves the trees, they are so strong, so powerful, deep-rooted in the earth like that since the beginning and she loves the stars as well, they are so lovely and she wonders what they really are, the ones who've been to school they say they're balls of fire, she doesn't really grasp it all that well but knows they're very beautiful and that she'd like to touch, to travel to a star and live there but you're crazy, you are, crazy, that's what she tells herself, you're mad to think of all that stuff, she knows deep down, a lot of things she doesn't like to talk about, she doesn't trust the men because they're scared of women, doesn't trust the gossips in the village, they haven't got a clue about it all, she knows, but it is hard to work it out, untangle all the meanings in their eyes and she can see so many things in them, like love, quite often, lots, and love is like children when they start to dance, it goes a bit in all directions and it's full of laughter makes you giddy but there's also hate and hate is scary, makes her want to run away, it's like a bushfire eating things all up and she tells herself she's mad, no question, you are crazy, you are, crazy, it's not really normal to be like this, to laugh at every little thing and ever since she's been expecting there's a sort of music in her, something tuneful, magical, that floods her body, something beautiful and strong and she knows it's going to be a girl, she'll be like her and be – but it's her husband who maintains, how silly he is sometimes – just as beautiful as she is and she tells herself one day they'll go and marvel at the trees, the stars, they'll run out in the fields, run fast, run very fast, and faster, faster and they'll start to shout it feels so good, she'll delight in pretty things, she'll make

her lovely clothes and she will hug her hard so she'll absorb her innocence, she likes her little life, then one day in the village something happens, difficult at first to put your finger on, it seems that people from the town are making something up, saying that she and hers are different, that they're like cockroaches or microbes, when she hears it she wants to laugh because here in the village everyone's the same, they also say their ancestors were looters but what does she know of her ancestors, that they can't be trusted, that they're all two-faced, they want to steal our women, that they have a lot of children out of stubbornness and that they smell, she hears a sneaky sort of word well up, those burst-and-splatter words, like 'we', the way her closest friend will tell her 'we' are different from you, she wonders who they are this we, this famous we, she doesn't get it, then one day when she is on the point of dozing off she hears a scream, the scream of someone having his throat cut, a scream which splits the sky and something in her breaks, this fear too long held in, this knowledge stifled for too long and then she starts to run, to run away, to go – where can she go, she's no idea but it's too late and she can see them coming but they've changed from men to animals and in their hands they carry hatchets, hooks, a torture toolkit, and their eyes are hollow, holes where eyes should be, they're coming closer, they insult her but she can no longer hear them, she won't hear them, she won't die, not now, and not like this, she's murmuring the name of god, protect my child, protect my child and one of them is young, she recognises him, he is her neighbour, he comes up and spits on her, he tells her to kneel down, down on your knees, you slut, you've got it coming now, just look at her, the bitch, she'd like us all to fuck her, fancies our big cocks, down on your knees I said, we'll teach you to respect us, to respect your masters, on your knees you filthy whore and while he slits her belly cuts her foetus up and empties petrol over her and lights it, in the eyes of this young woman – from a country distant yet not different from ours – still lingers, and will always linger the enchanted light-show of the sea, the trees, the stars.

© *Translated from the French by Susan Wicks*
