

Translation :
Anne-Marie Desmeules
Le tendon et l'os

This project is a translation of the first five poems of *Le tendon et l'os* by Québécoise author Anne-Marie Desmeules. This collection has received wide acclaim in Canada as the recipient of both the Governor General's Literary Award (2019) and the Prix des libraires du Québec (2020), but has not yet been translated into English. As a poet myself, I am invested in making more international poetry available to the English-speaking public, and I'm particularly interested in broadening the awareness of the American literary community to contemporary Canadian poetry beyond the few well-known figures (such as Margaret Atwood, Anne Carson, and Christian Bök).

Although Desmeules' work is not highly formal (in that it does not employ meter or oral/aural effects in any sustained way, making these poetic translation difficulties less fraught) her use of lineation and punctuation is stylized. By far the biggest challenge in translating these poems, however, was polysemy in the source language. Because the language used in poetry is, in general, strongly polysemic and densely associative, the most difficult aspect of translating this project was deciding how to translate words that have, in French, many meanings and associations. To guide me through this process, I drew upon the work of Antoine Berman, Kate Briggs, Sawako Nakayasu, and Lydia Davis.

Ultimately, I decided to translate each poem three times: first freely, allowing myself associative and musical leeway I would not have otherwise, then in a way that is tightly constrained and as close to the French as possible, and finally combining the two approaches for a hybrid/final version. In this approach, I was inspired by contemporary novelist, translator and theorist Kate Briggs, who (in *This Little Art*) argues against the idea that one must have flawless mastery of the source language, or that any translation needs to be definitive. Instead, she makes the case for a translation ethics of openness and curiosity: "Do translations!" She argues for an embodied translation practice rooted in pleasure, curiosity, ongoingness, and openness, and for the practice of translation as "a responsive and appropriative *practicing* of an extant work" (119). Similarly, contemporary poet, essayist, and translator Lydia Davis (in *Essays 2*) responds to those who don't understand why a work need be translated multiple times: "The more the better, in the end" (487).

Antoine Berman's foundational work makes the case for avoiding twelve types of "deformation" which, in assimilating the text to the target language, betray the source language. His ethics of translation is thus based on fidelity to the source text, with the consequence of a marked foreignness in the target language. In general, the final translated versions of these poems hew toward this "Bermanian" approach, prioritizing closeness to the source text and source language. In translating these poems, I combined Berman's approach with Briggs' (which acknowledges the embodied and responsive experience of the translator), and the work of Sawako Nakayasu, who extends both Berman's and Briggs' different approaches in making a case for an ethics of translation that is rooted in the body and actively fights the ethnocentrism historically inherent in translation as a discipline.

Tendon and Bone

Anne-Marie Desmeules

p. 9-15

Original French Version

Free Translation

Constrained Translation

Hybrid, Final Version

*Il y a eu plusieurs moments.
Des articulations.
Des saisies.
L'abandon des membres au profit de la tête,
l'abandon du cœur au profit des lièvres.*

*There were several moments.
Hinges.
Seizures.
Forsaking the limbs for the head,
forsaking the heart for the hares.*

*Il y a eu l'éblouissement,
l'éclatement des disques d'argile,
les pistes à l'odeur gâchée.
Le ventre occupé, puis fendu.*

*There was wonder,
clay discs exploding,
rotten-smelling paths.
Belly occupied, then split.*

*There was several moments.
Some articulations.
Some entries.
Abandoning the limbs for the sake of the head,
abandoning the heart for the sake of the hares.*

*There was the dazzling glare,
the bursting of clay discs,
the paths with a rotten odor.
The belly occupied, then split.*

*There was several moments.
Some articulations.
Some seizings.
Abandoning the limbs for the sake of the head,
abandoning the heart for the sake of the hares.*

*There was the dazzling glare,
the bursting of clay discs,
the paths with a rotten smell.
The belly occupied, then ruptured.*

*Déjà, il y avait eu la perte,
le désistement, le retour.*

*Avant ça, la trahison.
Celle-là, mais aussi celle-ci,
et l'autre encore,
remontant le collier jusqu'à
la première dent.*

*La première trahison,
sa porte ouverte sur les murs blancs.
La radio laissée allumée.*

*Already, there had been loss,
discontinuance, returning.*

*Before that, betrayal.
That one, but also this one,
and another one,
pulling up the necklace to
the first tooth.*

*The first betrayal,
his door open on the white walls.
The radio left on.*

*Already, there had been loss,
withdrawal, return.*

*Before that, betrayal.
That one, but also this one,
and yet another one,
pulling up the necklace to
the first tooth.*

*The first betrayal,
its door open on the white walls.
The radio left on.*

*Already, there had been loss,
withdrawal, return.*

*Before that, betrayal.
That one, but also this one,
and the other one,
pulling up the necklace to
the first tooth.*

*The first betrayal,
its door open on the white walls.
The radio left on.*

Un jour il était là, distinct
un jour ce n'était plus moi
l'enfant faisait contraste

sa fonction
me rappeler que je ne suis pas
la légèreté

One day he was there, different
one day it wasn't me anymore
the child was something else

his function
to remind me I am not
nimbleness

One day he was there, distinct
one day it was no longer me
the child made a contrast

his function
to remind me that I am not
lightness

One day he was there, distinct
one day it was no longer me
the child contrasted

his function
to remind me that I am not
lightness

Je n'ai pas choisi mon enfant
il m'a été attribué
on l'a attaché à moi
sans présentations
avec une petite chaîne

I didn't choose my child
he was assigned to me
they fixed him to me
without introductions
with a little chain

I did not choose my child
he was attributed to me
someone attached him to me
without introductions
with a little chain

I didn't choose my child
he was assigned to me
they fastened him to me
without introductions
with a little chain

il me ressemblait
ne me comprenait pas
se contentait de m'imiter
puis il a pu parler

he looked like me
didn't understand me
simply imitated me
then abruptly he could speak

he resembled me
did not understand me
contented himself to imitate me
then he was able to speak

he resembled me
did not understand me
just imitated me
and then he could speak

un jour j'ai remarqué
la chaîne s'était dissoute
pourtant il restait
toujours à la même distance

one day I noticed
the chain had dissolved
yet there he was still
always at the same distance

one day I noticed
the chain had dissolved
yet he remained
always at the same distance

one day I noticed
the chain had dissolved
yet he remained
always at the same distance

Je n'étais pas faite pour ça
prendre soin, veiller sur, être avec
je l'ai su dès son arrivée
je croyais que ça changerait
je me disais, il doit bien y avoir une raison

I wasn't made for this
taking care, watching over, being with
I knew it as soon as he got here
I thought it would change
I told myself, there's got to be a reason

I was not made for this
to take care of, to watch over, to be with
I realized it upon his arrival
I thought that it would change
I told myself, there must really be a reason

I wasn't made for this
taking care, watching over, being with
I knew it the moment he arrived
I thought it would change
I told myself, there must be some reason

mais il n'y a pas eu de raison

but there was no reason

but there was no reason

but there was no reason

une succession de jours
de gestes et de paroles
cette impossibilité d'être
sans lui
de ressentir
l'acuité d'être libre

a succession of days
of movements and words
this impossibility of being
without him
of feeling
keenly freedom

a succession of days
of gestures and of words
this impossibility of being
without him
of feeling
the acuity of being free

a succession of days
of gestures and of words
this impossibility of being
without him
of feeling
the acuteness of being free

General Notes

OV = original version (in French)

V1 = the freer translation

V2 = constrained

V3 = hybrid/final

In the translations of these poems, I followed the use of italics in the OV. In the explanations that follow in this document, I italicize French words and phrases and put quotations around the English words and phrases I am discussing.

I tried to preserve line length as much as possible (particularly in V2) and fastidiously preserved punctuation in all versions. I didn't pay much attention to preserving the "music" of the verse, since this is not an effect that is emphasized in the original; however, for V2 I paid slightly more attention to oral/aural effects and tried to choose a similar-sounding English cognate where one was available.

In general, for V2 I chose to preserve *que* as "that," *de* as "of" and *des* as "some," where obligatory in French but optional in English. I often omitted these English words in V1.

In general, I used contractions in V1 and avoided them in V2. I often used contractions in V3 (particularly when occurring in the first line of a poem) because I felt that not to contract (where a native speaker in English would) often unnecessarily elevated the register.

1) *Il y a eu plusieurs moments*

Line 1: *Il y a eu*

Il y a eu translates to both “there was” and “there were.” In this case, since the phrase is followed by a plural noun (*plusieurs moments* / “several moments”), a grammatically appropriate translation is “there were,” as rendered in V1. In V2, following the idea that a literary translation should feel foreign in the original, I tried “there was,” and although this is in some sense not true to the original (the phrase is perfectly grammatical in French, and not in English) I ended up keeping this translation for V3 because I appreciate the way in which it preserves the parallel structure of the first lines of both stanzas of this poem—maintaining this parallelism felt more important and more true to the poem than exactly mirroring the grammatical naturalness of the original. It’s perhaps also worth noting that this slight oddness of English phrasing is also true to the disequilibrating effect and slight disorientation I felt upon reading this poem and entering this work.

Lines 2-3: *des*

Des (some) is grammatically necessary here in French but not in English; I therefore left it out of V1 and preserved it in V2. I chose to preserve “some” in V3 with the rationale that poetry is, by nature, not required to be grammatical in a prescriptive sense, and in fact Desmeules often, in this collection, chooses to ignore or subvert grammatical structures (for example, with the sentence fragment that closes this particular poem, or with the choice throughout to avoid punctuation in the non-italicized poems). Therefore, the choice to include *des* implies authorial intention and should, I thought, be preserved.

Lines 2-3: *articulations/saisies*

The word *articulations* is in French, as in English, polysemic, carrying a range of meanings including, primarily, joints (as in the human body) and hinges. It also implies the concept of linking or joining, as well as the notion of speech, enunciation, and expression, and especially (as in English) of clarity in communication. I tried out “hinges” in V1, with the idea that the process of giving birth is a metaphorical hinge, and that the body of a birthing women (as I have observed as a doula on several occasions) hinges, quite literally, around her baby. However, I ended up preserving “articulations” for V2 and V3, as it is both formally identical to French *articulations* and also polysemic in English (with some, though not all, of the same meanings as French *articulations*).

The two primary meanings of *saisies* are “entries” or “inputs” (as in data) and “seizures” (as in of goods or property). The verb *saisir* means to seize, grasp, or grab, or to input. In V1, I tried “seizures,” which in English, in the context of a birthing women, recalls sudden, uncontrolled body movements. However, this ultimately felt too free (although “seizures” does carry the meaning of property seizure in English, its use in that sense is specific enough that I don’t think it would come to mind for most native speakers in the context of this poem). I tried the more literal “entries” for V2, but this felt misleading also—although we speak of “data entry” in English, in the context of this poem that word feels again more related to the physical (and

perhaps also the metaphorical, a baby “entering” the world) than I believe it does in French. In V3 I settled on “seizings”—not an actual English word—but one which preserved the strangeness (and the sound) of the original *saisies* in this context, while in its oddness softening the strong and specific connotations of “seizures,” which are nowhere in the original (a “seizure,” in the context of for example epilepsy, is in French *une crise épileptique*).

Lines 4-5: *l'abandon*

The French phrase *l'abandon de + article* would most literally be “the abandonment of the,” but this felt too unwieldy even for V2. For V2, I tried the slightly less literal but still relatively constrained “abandoning the.” In V1, I tried “forsaking” as an alternative that keeps the same number of syllables (though not the stress pattern) of *l'abandon*, and also incorporates both the sound and the sense of “sake” in the second half of each of these lines (*au profit de* “for the sake of”). However, the resulting line is poorer, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and I kept the more literal construction for V3.

Lines 6-9: definite articles

The definite articles before each noun in this second stanza are grammatically necessary in French but not in English. For V1, I left them out, but added them back in for V2 and kept them in V3 for the same reasoning that I preserved “some” for *des* earlier in the poem—poets are less constrained than prose writers by the rules of grammar, yet Desmeules has chosen here to follow grammatical convention and include the definite articles, implying that they are significant. To keep them in English translation also more closely approximate the rhythm of the French.

Line 6: *éblouissement*

Éblouir means to dazzle, to temporarily blind, or to amaze. *Éblouissement* is therefore a glare or a dazzle (the latter is not an English noun, although “the dazzle” or “the dazzling” would no doubt be understood by a native speaker as an invented noun). It can also mean “wonder” or “amazement” and I tried the former in V1, but ultimately decided that “wonder” in English has a too-positive connotation compared with *éblouissement*; “wonder” is also tonally gentler. Finally, it is much further removed from the physical realities of the body than the intensely corporeal *éblouissement*. For V2, I translated this word rather literally as “the dazzling glare,” which I kept in V3 both for its semantic fidelity and because the phrase has the same number of syllables and stress pattern as *l'éblouissement*.

Line 7: *l'éclatement des disques d'argile*

The most literal rendering of this line would be “the bursting of the discs of clay.” However, that representation of the possessive construction the latter half of the line, which is extremely natural (and indeed obligatory) in French, is gratuitously unnatural in English. For V2, then, I have rendered this line as “the bursting of clay discs,” which I kept for V3. In V1, “clay discs exploding” feels more native to English, with its preference for strong, evocative verbs; “exploding” also approximates the music of *éclatements* as well as its syllable count. However, “clay discs exploding” strays far from the original in terms of syntax, since the clay discs, rather

than the bursting/exploding action, become the subject of the clause (which, in French, has no verb).

Lines 6-7: *éblouissement/éclatement*

In translating these words as “dazzling glare/bursting,” I tried to preserve with the repetition of “-ing” the aural and felt effects of the repetition of the -ment endings of *éblouissement/éclatement*.

Line 8: *pistes à l’odeur gâchée*

The construction *pistes à l’odeur gâchée* most literally translates to “paths with a rotten/spoiled smell/odor” in English, and I chose “paths with a rotten odor” in V2 to preserve the similarity of *odeur/odor* and the syllable count of *gâchée/rotten*. This became in V3 “paths with a rotten smell” in English as “odor” in English has a different (higher) register than *odeur*, and “smell” feels like a more neutral translation in the same register as *odeur*. I tried “rotten-smelling paths” in V1, which feels more native to English, but decided that rendering takes unnecessary liberties with the syntax of the original French.

Line 9: *fendu*

Fendre means to split, crack, rupture, cleave, fissure, or chop (as in wood). I liked the aural similarity of “fissure” with *fendu*, but ultimately chose “split” for V1 as I felt that better persevered the dynamism and sense of movement inherent in French *fendu* (in English, “fissure” is perhaps more likely to be used as a noun than a verb). Further, *fendu*, although functioning here as an adjective, is the past participle of *fendre*, and “split” is the only option available that fulfills both of these grammatical functions in English as well. For this reason, V1 and V2 are identical in this particular instance.

However, although it is not translated in this selection, this word plays an important role in a poem later on in the book (“Il n’aime pas les nœuds,” p. 23). This latter poem in fact ends with the word *fendre*, which closes the phrase “je lui inculque / la peur de fendre” (I teach him / the fear of splitting). This parallelism seems clearly intentional, and I therefore believe it is important to translate both of these words in the same way. To change “split” to a noun requires an -ing suffix, which feels unnecessarily awkward in English and is quite difficult to picture. Of the available options for *fendre*, only “fissure” and “rupture” can be both verbs and nouns. Rejecting “fissure” in this particular poem for the reason described above, and in the later poem because “I teach him / the fear of fissure” seems to imply the fissure is located outside of the child (when in fact it seems clear that act referred to by *fendre* is intimately embodied by the child) I chose “rupture.” This word choice in English has the added benefit of calling up the idea of an “attachment rupture” between parent and child, a phenomenon that seems inherent in this later poem in the original French.

2) *Déjà, il y avait eu la perte*

Line 2: *le désistement*

I considered “abandonment” for *désistement*, which would have been an echo of *l’abandon* in the previous poem—but to choose this translation would have been to insert this echo where it does not exist in the original.

“Discontinuance,” which I employed in V1, approximates the music of the original *désistement* (although it does not have the same syllable count) but I opted in V2 and V3 for the semantically more accurate *withdrawal*.

Line 5: *et l’autre encore*

This could be reasonably translated as “and (yet) another one” as in V1 and V2, or as “and the other one,” which I settled on for V3 because I felt it preserved the rhythm of the original as well as evoking the English phrase “this, that, and the other.”

Line 9: *sa porte*

Because possessive adjectives in French agree with the grammatical gender of the possessed object (and not the gender of the possessor, as in English) *sa* here is ambiguous and could be translated as “his,” “her,” or “its.” In V1 I tried “his,” which inserts another character into the poem—interesting, certainly, but not true to the original, in which there is no incontrovertible indication that a male lover is the agent of the betrayals alluded to in the poem. Although there is certainly a reading of this poem that permits a faithless lover, in the end I decided that to assume that was the case would be to narrow the range of possible meanings in this poem in a way that is both reductive and heteronormative. With this in mind, in V2 and V3 I chose to translate *sa porte* as *its door* (in other words, the door “belongs” to the betrayal).

3) Un jour il était là, distinct

line 1: distinct

As in English, *distinct* can mean both “clearly-defined” and “different” or “separate from.” In V1, I tried “different,” and in V2 and V3 “distinct,” which hews more closely to the polysemic nature of the word in French.

line 2: un jour ce n'était plus moi

This can be translated reasonably as both “one day it wasn't me anymore” and “one day it was no longer me.” I ultimately chose the latter as I felt it better reflected the sense here—not that the speaker is “no longer herself” but that her space is occupied by “no longer [just] her.”

line 3: l'enfant faisait contraste

Faire contraste is most literally translated as “to make a contrast” (as in V2) or simply “to contrast.” I tried the freer “the child was something else” in V1, echoing the colloquial American English expression “to be something else” (to be unusual or in some way extreme, an idea taken up apropos of the child later in the book), but ultimately felt this was to insert a sentiment not original to the French expression *faire contraste*. For V3 I reverted to the simpler “contrasted,” which is, I feel, both true to the French expression as well as natural and evocative in English.

line 6: la légèreté

Légèreté means both “lightness” and “frivolity/levity,” as well as carrying implications of grace, agility, and ease. Picking up on the latter connotations, I tried “nimbleness” in V1, which I hoped would reflect in English the polysemy of the French (“nimble” in English can describe ease in movement, bodily carriage, and conversation), but in the end I decided that “lightness” most effectively reflects in English the many meanings of the French *légèreté* (as well as preserving the initial [l] sound).

4) Je n'ai pas choisi mon enfant

line 2: attribué

Attribué is perhaps best translated in this instance as “assigned,” as in V1 and V3 (in the sense of “allocated”). I did try English “attributed” in V2, which is certainly possible as “attributed” is a true cognate of *attribué*; however, I felt in this instance that “attributed” was a bit misleading, since in English it lacks the polysemy of *attribué* and carries instead the more limited meaning of “being ascribed to someone.”

line 3: on l'a attaché à moi

Attaché is a true cognate of “attached,” but a number of other synonyms could equally be used. I tried “fixed” in V1, the more literal “attached” in V2, and settled on “fastened” in V3. Although in general in this translation project I have tried to use a more literal or exact English cognate of French words where possible, in this instance I preferred “fastened” for reasons I cannot fully explain other than to refer to my felt sense of the connotations of the French verb *attacher*, which feels, to me, much more intimate and corporeal than “attached” in English (perhaps because of the existence of the adjective *attachant*, “endearing,” which does not have an English cognate).

The third-person nongendered subject pronoun *on* is strongly polysemic and can be translated in various contexts as “one,” “someone,” “we,” “people in general,” and “they.” I liked the third person plural “they” for its disorienting and slightly sinister effect, and for the reason that one reading of this stanza allows for a description of the birthing process, for which, in general, multiple people are present. In V2 I tried “someone,” which preserves the grammatical singularity of the original, but I ultimately decided that “they” was both more evocative in English and perhaps closer to the tone of the French *on* in this particular case.

line 6: il me ressemblait

“He looked like me” and “he resembled me” are both reasonable translations of *il me ressemblait*. I chose “he resembled me” for V3 to more closely approximate the sound of *ressemblait* and because, in general, if an English cognate exists that is similar in tone and register to the French, I preferred it.

line 8: se contentait de m'imiter

Se contentait is a bit difficult to translate into colloquial English; I tried the very constrained “contented himself” in V2 but felt this was too odd in English and draws unnecessary attention to itself (whereas in French the construction isn't “marked” as at all unusual). “Simply” in V1 felt too formal; I felt that “just” in V3 was faithful to both the sense and the register of the French, although I'm not entirely happy with the way it drastically changes the line length and music of this line.

line 9: puis il a pu parler

The French imperfect and composed past tenses do not map neatly onto the English simple and progressive past. In this stanza, each of the first three lines contains a verb in *l'imparfait* (the imperfect), none of which can reasonably be translated into the English progressive past. It's therefore a bit difficult (although, in my opinion, crucial) to mark the change in this last line of the stanza to the *passé composé*. I tried to gesture toward this with “abruptly” in V1, but it didn't sit quite right; I translated the line straightforwardly (without marking the change in tense) in V2. For V3, I settled on “and then he could speak,” in the hopes that “and then” marks the mild surprise and sense of beginning or moment-ness (as opposed to ongoingness) that inflects the French *puis il a pu parler*, as well as the way in which *puis* connects this line logically with the previous line (in other words, in both the OV and V3 there is a sense that the child can speak partially as a result of imitating the speaker, and also that this sudden ability is nonetheless a surprise).

line 12: pourtant il restait

I tried the slightly freer “he was still there” for *il restait* in V1, but ultimately preferred the more constrained and slightly-more-formal (in English) “he remained” for its economy and the way it more closely echoes the sound and syllable count of *restait*.

5) Je n'étais pas faite pour ça

line 2: prendre soin, veiller sur, être avec

For V2 here I tried the more constrained/literal translation of these infinitives, but decided that these forms unnecessarily impeded meaning, and for V3 preferred the present progressive of V1.

line 3: je l'ai su dès son arrive

Although the verb “savoir” means “to know,” in the *passé composé* it carries the meaning of “to realize” (to say “I knew” the *imparfait* is used). For V2, I translated as literally as possible—“I realized it upon his arrival.” However, this elevates the register from the French, which is not formal—“upon his arrival” in English sounds unnecessarily ceremonial in a way that does not reflect the source text. For V1, I translated more freely “I knew it as soon as he got here.” Although we lose the word “realize” in this version, V1 preserves the sense of “moment-ness” and the sense of realization in a way that feels true to the French *je l'ai su* in both sense and in register. I modified V1 to “I knew it the moment he arrived” in V3 to preserve the similarity of *arrivée* with “arrive” and to make the line slightly more efficient (also reflecting the original).

line 5: il doit bien y avoir une raison

I tried the relatively free “there’s got to be a reason” in V1 but felt that to leave out the more literal “must” for *doit* was to stray too far from the OV; since “must” is the literal translation and also the same register as *doit*, it seemed important to preserve it. However, to translate this simply as “there must be a reason” would be to efface *bien*, which adds emphasis to this expression. I tried “there must really be a reason” in V2, which works fairly well and has the added benefits of preserving the indefinite article (“a” for *une*) as well as more carefully reflecting the word order of the French (with the adverb “really” coming, like *bien*, between “must” and the verb that follows). In the end, though, I landed on “there must be some reason,” which I feel most accurately represents the tone of this line and the way in which *bien* adds emphasis to it.

line 8: de gestes et de paroles

Geste can mean a gesture, a movement, or an act. I tried “movement” in V1 with the reasoning that it sounds more down-to-earth and practical than “gestures” in English (essentially, I worried that translating *gestes* as “gestures” would be to insert a register change). However, I ended up deciding that English “gestures” is close enough in register to *gestes* that it’s worth preserving this very similar word.

line 12: l’acuité d’être libre

Acuité is strongly polysemic, meaning “acuity” but also “keenness, sharpness” as well as “perspicacity” and even in some contexts “urgency” or “intensity.” In V1, I took a number of liberties in translating this line “keenly freedom” in order to insert the assonant sound [i]. However, this is purely addition for the sake of making the English version more aurally

pleasing, and does not reflect a similar effect in French. The most literal “the acuity of being free” (V2), while it does most closely reflect the sound of the French *acuité*, is less natural than “acuteness,” on which—since it has both the same root word and syllable count as *acuité*—I settled for V3.

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