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Three Poems from *The Fabric of the Universe* by Andrée Chedid

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Kathryn Kimball
Three Poems from
The Fabric of the Universe

Andrée Chedid
L'Étoffe de l'univers

Still Here Passing Through

De passage je suis encore là

Still here
passing through
still traveling
the road of life
clearing pathways
breaching walls
brief and fleet
this one-way trip
hoping fate
will find me soon
no “see you later.”

And if I were a long-distance runner, would I rest at the end of my race, would I not increase my effort?

Diogenes

Running, running everywhere, never stopping. Take off running, increase the incline, never give up. The key word is effort. More and more effort is required to get to the end of a race or to the end of *anything*. Life is made up of constant effort. I agree with the old cynic—and yet leisure, even laziness, seem to me as important as effort, linked as words are in necessary opposition.

In short, I prefer that lounging Diogenes who said to Alexander: “Move out of my sun.”

Kathryn Kimball

Andrée Chedid

Growing Old VI

Veillir VI

This disease
so hard
to face
this losing touch
with the universe
this clash
with death
this too short life
this home boarded up now
soon to be nowhere

These broken ties
with the world
this confrontation
with death
this far too brief a time
these memories
soon forgotten
this total absurdity
this opening
into infinity
this break
with my own mind
the final period of this sentence
never wished for.

*Do not go gentle into that good night
Old age should burn and rave at close of day
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Dylan Thomas

It's true that there is plenty to rage about. But what good would that do? And since the poet says the night is "good," I prefer, instead of raging, to go there as "gently" as I can.

November 2005

Dying IV

I've had enough of dying
day after day
of letting time
slip through my fingers
I've had enough of dwindling
day after day
of losing my tomorrows
to oblivion

The sap of memory
no longer flows
Silence settles all around
Our clasped hands
lie still
in the grass
My mind has deserted me
The day wraps itself up
with string
swaddling me inside
abandons me on the riverbank
orphaned

Mourir IV

I demand redress
but why?
how?
I concede
and let vast death
take my place
forever?

*Everything begins with memory and everything ends with it. . .
The present is opaque.*

Paul Ricoeur

The opacity of the present is an immense problem. Everything is remembrance; everything is memory recomposing or reviving itself. So nothing is lost? To the flashy showman demonstrating how to develop memory, the Philosopher poses this question: "How do we learn to forget?" If only Alzheimer's, in splitting open the breastplate of language and abolishing the Newtonian certainties of time, space, matter, and the principle of causality, could teach us something. Why not? And if God had truly willed, as St. Paul declares, that our wisdom be folly and our folly be wisdom. Why not?

Commentary:

Andrée Chedid was born in Cairo in 1920 of Lebanese-Christian ancestry. In 1946, she moved to Paris with her physician husband, eventually becoming a French citizen. During her lifetime, Chedid published over forty volumes of poems, novels, short stories, and plays, which won numerous prizes, including *Prix Mallarmé* (1976), *Prix Goncourt de la Nouvelle* (1979), and *Prix Goncourt de la Poésie* (2002). In 2006, she completed *The Fabric of the Universe* while suffering from the first stages of Alzheimer's. As an integral and unique part of many of the poems in this last volume, Chedid included quotations from other writers as well as her own reflections in prose. She died in 2011.

To render Chedid's straightforward diction, I keep the English simple. The lines of this English translation correspond to the lines of the French original, although very occasionally, line order may be switched for comprehension and/or effect.

Chedid's verse runs on an engine of high-octane verbs, with few adjectives and fewer adverbs, and I try to find sharp English equivalents, such as "dwindling," "swaddling," "clearing" pathways and "breaching" walls. Some minor stylistic features of Chedid's poetry are minimized in this English translation. The capital letters beginning each of Chedid's lines are generally cut back either to a capital at the start of each stanza or to a change in the thought-stroke within the stanza. I keep to Chedid's practice of no period until the last line.

I agree with Antoine Berman that translators cannot help but destroy the rhythm of the original language, its unique linguistic patternings, its golden expressions, idioms, and associative chains (Berman in Venuti 276–289*). Even though every translation *falsifies* the original, still one must attempt this "false fidelity" to *connect* across languages and cultures. Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 comes to mind:

O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,

...

Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.

Indeed, there can only be a *seeming* trust between two texts. Assuredly, there's unavoidable lying going on, which actually allows them to co-exist and which permits the glorious privilege of lying side by side—text and translation. Since cloning a twin text is impossible, a text with a remarkable family resemblance is the next best thing. I can only hope that I have found adequate rhythms and expressions in English to accomplish this task, and that, as translator, I have justly rendered Chedid's translucent poems.

*Venuti, Lawrence. (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2004.

Source text:

Chedid, Andrée. *L'Étoffe de l'univers*. Flammarion, 2010, pp. 81, 102–03, 117, Post-Scriptum, pp. 137, 142, 146.

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