Beowulf Translation Assignment

The ultimate goal of this exercise is to have you create your own literary "translation" (in poetry or prose) of a passage from the poem. Below you will find a passage from Beowulf in Old English and its literal translation. Read the two passages carefully. Try to discern any cognates between the two passages. What seems to be the rhythm of the passage? Is the syntax especially contorted in this passage? If so, why do you think it is so?

Your task for this assignment is to write either a poetic (i.e., in the form of poetry) or prose translation of the passage. You are the translator; you must make this choice based on your own sense of the text. Whichever form you choose, be sure to capture the sense (or meaning) of the passage, but also attempt to recreate the mood, tone, and (perhaps) syntax of the original.

Group A:
Beowulf, lines 32-42:


His ring-beaked ship  
Was ready to sail,  
Ice-clad, impatient,  
Eager for the voyage.

Prose translation by E. Talbot Donaldson (Beowulf: Norton, 1996):

There in the harbor stood the ring-prowed ship, ice-covered and ready to sail, a prince’s vessel. Then they laid down the ruler they had loved, the ring-giver, in the hollow of the ship, the glorious man beside the mast. There was brought great store of treasure, wealth from lands far away. I have not heard of a ship more splendidly furnished with war-weapons and battle-dress, swords and mail-shirts. On his breast lay a great many treasures that should voyage with him far out into the sea’s possession.
They laid their beloved lord in its hold,
rested their ring-giver in its roomy hull
near the heel of the mast.
They heaped beside him fabulous wealth
from far-off lands;
I have never heard
of such magnificent things,
mailcoats and swords
and mask-helmets
and bright war-shields;
on his breast lay many dazzling jewels
destinted to ravel
to the far reaches
of the flood’s domain.

**Group B:**
*Beowulf*, lines 710-19:

Da com of more under mistleotpum
Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær;
mynte se manscada manna cynnes
sumne besyrwan in sele þam hean.
Wod under wolcnum to þæs þe he winrecd,
goldsele gumena, gearwost wisse
fættum fahne. Ne wæs þæt forma sid,
þæt he Hroþgares ham gesohte;
neafre he on aldordagum ær ne sipdan
heardran hæle healdegnas fand.


Then came from moor under mist-hills
Grendel going, God’s anger he bore;
meant the killer mankind’s specimen to snare in hall the high.
Waded under clouds until he wine-hall,
gold-house of men, most-clearly sightred golden gleaming. Not was it first time
that he Hrothgar’s home had sought;
never he in life-days before nor since harder luck nor hall-thanes found.

Then from the moor under the mist-hills Grendel came walking, wearing God’s anger.
The foul ravager thought to catch some one of mankind there in the high hall. Under the clouds he moved until he could see most clearly the wine-hall, treasure-house of men, shining with gold. That was not the first time that he had sought Hrothgar’s home. Never before or since in his life-days did he find harder luck, hardier hall-thanes.

Now Grendel came,  
gliding like mist  
across the bleak moorland,  
bearing God’s wrath.  
The merciless monster  
meant to ensnare  
fresh victims  
in the fear-stricken hall.  
He strode rapidly  
beneath the starless sky  
until at last Heorot  
loomed before him,  
gleaming with gold.  
This greedy visit  
to the home of the Danes  
was hardly his first,  
though before tonight  
he had never found  
hardier hall-thanes  
or harder luck.

Once you’ve completed your own translation, write a two-page essay in which you discuss your translation. Consider, among others, the following questions:

Why did you choose to write the translation in the form you chose?  
What is the prevailing tone/mood of the passage?  
Does the syntax of the original enhance or detract from the overall mood of the selection?  
How did you choose to achieve the mood of your “translation”?  
If you chose to write a poetic translation, did you make use of a mid-line caesura? Why?  
Have you used archaic language or have you modernized some of the vocabulary?  
Did you make use of invocatory words?  
Did you choose to make use of contorted syntax?