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The New Noah

I

We travel upon the Ark, in mud and rain,
 Our oars promises from God.
 We live — and the rest of Humanity dies.
 We travel upon the waves, fastening
 Our lives to the ropes of corpses filling the skies.
 But between Heaven and us is an opening,
 A porthole for a supplication.

“Why, Lord, have you saved us alone
 From among all the people and creatures?
 And where are you casting us now?
 To your other Land, to our First Home?
 Into the leaves of Death, into the wind of Life?
 In us, in our arteries, flows a fear of the Sun.
 We despair of the Light,
 We despair, Lord, of a tomorrow
 In which to start Life anew.

If only we were not that seedling of Creation,
 Of Earth and its generations,
 If only we had remained simple Clay or Ember,
 Or something in between,
 Then we would not have to see
 This World, its Lord, and its Hell, twice over.”

tuna as being “como enlutada flecha./ dardo del mar./ intrépida acci-
 tuna.” He is enjoying the chime of “aceituna” (an olive) and “atún”
 (tuna), but it seems unrewarding for the English to try and follow his
 Chilean wordplay; as Peden has it: “a mourning arrow, / dart of the
 sea, / olive, oily fish.” Equally, a few lines later, still describing the tuna,
 “ímpetu / verde, abeto / submarino” isn’t clarified by “green / assault,
 silver / submarine fir,” only complicated. In rendering this Neruda
 ode into English I have taken minor liberties of addition and dele-
 tion and attempted to steer a middle ground between Lowell’s rangy,
 risk-taking rewritings and the traditional, strictly literal approach.
 Effective translation is not accurate transliteration; it is a matter of
 losses and gains, and it requires a certain boldness (some might say
 irreverence) in attempting to reach the feel of the original. Nothing
 can replace the reading of the poem in its true language, of course,
 but — in my view — a loose version by a writer attentive to, and
 familiar with, the dynamics of poetry is always better than a straight
 literal verse translation that defers too dutifully to all the words in
 the order in which they first appeared.

I should also say, in further defense, that the brief odic line that
 gives the poem such impressive length is adopted not just because I’m
 Scottish and we’re being paid by the line, but because I’ve followed
 Neruda’s original: its sinuous, vertical shape is surely the shape of
 Chile itself. — R.R.

If time started anew,
 and waters submerged the face of life,
 and the earth convulsed, and that god
 rushed to me, beseeching, "Noah, save the living!"
 I would not concern myself with his request.
 I would travel upon my ark, removing
 clay and pebbles from the eyes of the dead.
 I would open the depths of their being to the flood,
 and whisper in their veins
 that we have returned from the wilderness,
 that we have emerged from the cave,
 that we have changed the sky of years,
 that we sail without giving in to our fears —
 that we do not heed the word of that god.
 Our appointment is with death.
 Our shores are a familiar and pleasing despair,
 a gelid sea of iron water that we ford
 to its very ends, undeterred,
 heedless of that god and his word,
 longing for a different, a new, lord.

Translated from the Arabic by Shaoukat M. Toorawa

Translator's Note

"The New Noah" is a poem I first encountered in my twenties, a poem Adonis *wrote* in his twenties. The poem's content is simple enough. In the first part, Noah is saved from the flood and wonders why he and his people alone have been saved; despairing, he asks the Lord what He has in store for them. In the second part, Noah describes what he would do if he could turn back time, describes how he and his people would ignore God and sail to a different kind of salvation. Meditation on the relationship between the poetic persona and the prophet I leave to the reader.

In Adonis's long poems, with which I have more experience, the language can at times be opaque, dense with allusion, and grammatically complex, what some admirers term *al-sahl al-mumtani'*, the (apparently) easy (but effectively sublimely) elusive. "The New Noah" is in a straightforward Arabic, plaintive and mournful in the first part, aggrieved and assertive in the second, but translating proved difficult indeed. To begin with, there is the irregular but insistent rhyme at the ends of quite short lines (most are only five or six words long), something I have tried to convey. There is the playful and daunting use of classical Arabic meters, which I have brazenly ignored. And there is the careful deployment — I cannot think of another way of describing this — of the words *allâh* ("God," line 2), *rabb* ("Lord," lines 8, 15, 22, 42), and *ilâh* ("god," lines 25, 36, 41). Unlike English, Arabic does not have uppercase and lowercase letters: the distinction between "God" and "god" is, consequently, made by using two different, though admittedly related, words: *allâh* and *ilâh*. I have paid special attention to this.

Overall, I am at peace with the translation, though rhyming the final four lines was difficult: "undeterred," however implied, is my own intervention; and I still waver between "A New Noah" and "The New Noah." There are certainly small successes: "fastening" and "opening" in lines four and six happily rhyme; the resonance of "porthole" in line seven; the possibility in English of using uppercase in the first part of the poem to underscore the difference in tenor between it and the second part; and that rarest of creatures, a cognate, in "gelid" in line 39. — S.M.T.