

A BHAGAVAD GITA

Great and renowned warrior that he was, it wasn't something that Bran Mac Feabhail had ever done, but one day, drawn to he didn't know what, he walked out of his fortress, down and away into the wet, wild lands where only snipe and herons and otters lived. Before long, he having always been a man among men, the silence and the solitude were getting to him. A red onslaught between mountains, that he could deal with, but this silence that you couldn't spear, this solitude that you couldn't bring a sword down upon, even the mist that came down, it all unnerved him. Suffering his first defeat, he turned for home. Soon, his walking a trudging, he heard music not of our world behind him. Turning round, he saw a silver branch. It was out of it the music came. Strangest of all, the branch didn't play it. What he heard was the branch being itself. Being itself, it had perils for mortals in it. And it raided him. In the way that he himself would raid a triple-ditched ringfort, it raided him. It raided him, not with spear and torch and sword, with its unearthly sweetness it raided him. Almost, almost to swooning. Then it ceased, and, by the time he came back to himself and opened his eyes, it was gone.

In his hall that night, amidst all the usual goings on, Bran sat silent and alone.

A hard man in battle and in all his dealings with the world, it had never occurred to him that anything either in the world or from beyond it could have so disabled him.

Whatever else, the music had damaged him in his sense of himself.

And his people – when they came to know, it would damage him in their eyes.

He imagined their great concern. Bran Mac Feabhail, the hard man, not foremost in battle. Bran Mac Feabhail, his eyes and his mind not fixed on what he was doing.

Bran Mac Feabhail laid low not by a sword stroke but by longing.

Sensing a sudden silence in the house, he opened his eyes and there she was, a radiant woman, cruel if she needed to be.

Fifty quatrains she sang, singing of the wonders of the land she came from. And he, Bran, him she invited to come to that land.

Next morning, in three ships, in each ship a company of three times nine men, he was on the sea, sailing westward.

After two days and two nights of tough, untoward going, suddenly, instead of sea salt in their eyes and minds, the fragrances, blent and separate, of summer meadows, and there he was, Manannan Mac Lir, god of the sea, riding towards them in his four horse chariot. Singing them out over the manes and heads of his horses, they still trampling, thirty quatrains he sang:

Cáini amra laisin mBran
ina churchán tar muir nglan;
os mé, am charput do chéin,
is magh scothach ima-réidh.

A n-us muir glan
don náoi broindig a tá Bran,
is Mag Meall co n-iumat scoth
damsa a carput dá roth.

At-chí Bran
lín tonn tibri tar muir nglan.
At-chíu ca-déin i mMagh Mon

sgotha cennderga gin on

Taithnit gabra lir a sam
sella roiscc ro sire Bran.
Brunditt sscotha sruaim do mil
a crích Manannáin mic Lir.

Lí na fairge fora taí,
geldod mora imme-roí:
ra sert buidhe ocus glas;
is talam nád écomrass.

Lingit ích bricc ass de brú,
a muir finn forn-aiccisiu;
it láoig it uain co ndath,
co cairde, cin imarbad.

Cé at-chetha áonchairptheach
i mMag Meall co n-immat scoth,
fil mor di echaib ar brú
cen suide, nát aiccisiu

The god telling us how different is the world as he sees it from the world as we see it. The god telling us that what we, rising and falling in it, see as grey, salt sea, he sees as a Plain of Delights over which, even now, he is riding in his four-horse chariot. The god telling us that, if only we had eyes to see, we would see that the silver branch being itself is no more wonderful than any ordinary ash branch or oak branch being itself.

And what the god doesn't tell us in words he tells us in his singing. His singing being the singing of the silver branch, he tells us that, had we eyes to see it, any ordinary bush being itself would put an end to us being our everyday selves. Signalling to his men to turn their boats round, Bran sailed home to the land he had left, the land to which the radiant lady had invited him. Waiting for him there on the shore, the silver branch sang the song of his ascent into Ireland.

Over months and then over years it would happen. Bran would be out on his own in the wetlands or he'd be on his way home, alone, from an assembly of his people and full in front of him on an otter trail or on a chariot road, there it would be, the silver branch singing six other stanzas that Manannán sang at sea:

Sech is Manannán mac Lir
asin charput cruth in fir,
bied dia chlaind densa ngair
fer cáoin hi curp criad adgil.

Con-lee Manannán mac Lir
luth lighe la Caointigirn:
gerthair dia mach i mbith gnó;
ad-ndidma Fiachna mac ndó.

Moidfid sognáis gach sidhe;
bid treitil cach dagthíre;
at-fii rúna rith ecne
isin mbith can a ecli.

Bieid hi fethol cech míl
itir glasmuir ocus tír;
bid druac re mbuidnib hi froiss;
bid cú allaid cech indroiss.

Bid dam co mbennuiph argait
hi mruig I nd-agthar carpait;
bid écni brec, i llinn lain;
bid rón, bid eala fionbán.

Biaid tre bitha síora
Cét mbliadna hi findrighe;
silis learca lecht imchían;
dergfaid roí roth imrían.

Manannán, god of the sea, telling us at sea, or what to us is sea, that he will come ashore into Ireland, that he will lie with a woman called Caointigirn, that a son she and her husband will call Mongán mac Fiachna will be born to her, that he will be welcome in all worlds, that he will be both seer and sage, that sometimes when he talks it will seem like it is the oldest bush in Ireland that is talking. Other times, listening to him, it will seem like you are surrounded by an oakwood and that it is telling you the deepest common secret of its being and your own being. Perfectly human when he is human, he will not nonetheless be so perfectly held as so many of us are to the habit of being human. When he needs to, he will be a dragon. Not content to know the world in only a human way, he will be seal, he will be swan. Challenging us in our miserable habits of seeing and knowing, he will walk towards us as a silver antlered stag. A king in the land, he will put down evil but in doing so he will not himself become evil.

Even people who know him only by hearsay will know, hearing about him, that Mongán Mac Fiachna is a Son of God.

Son of the most tremendous of gods, Manannán Mac Lir, god of the sea, of what to us is sea, of what to him is a plain of delights.

Never are we so challenged in all that we are as we are when we encounter Manannán.

The instant we meet him we know that eye and mind are habits of eye and mind.

The instant we meet him we know that the world we have lived in was all along but a habit of seeing, a habit of knowing.

The instant we meet him we know that being human is a habit and, walking away, we know how shaken in that habit we now are.

And how glad we are to be so shaken in this habit of being human, shaken in it and, at times, shaken altogether out of it.

To be human, when being human is a habit we have broken, that is a wonder.

And when, as will happen, we take being human for granted, how good it then is to walk out of it and be a seal in the sea off Tory or a swan on Lough Deirg Deirc. But, having been out of our humanity for days or months or years, there is no wonder so great as the wonder of coming back into it. The outlandish danger and difficulty of it, that is the wonder of coming back into it, of being in it. No wonder we so yearningly call upon it to come and condense all about us. What a wonder and a blessing it is to a naked spirit when a human body begins to condense all about it, when human hearing, seeing, touch, taste and smell condense all about it, when human seeking and knowing condense all about it. Here it is, again setting out on the most perilous of adventures, the adventure of being what we are, human beings for whom their humanity is a conscious choice.

All of this was Bran Mac Feabhail's answering song to the Song of God he heard at sea.

Calling for silence, he sang it in his house.

Calling for silence, he sang it at assemblies of his people.

Calling for silence, he sang it at fairs all over the country.

Not needing to call for silence, he sang it to otters and herons and snipe in the wetlands.

This was Bran preparing Ireland for the day when Manannán would come ashore into Ireland.

It's what Ireland means, Bran one day said to his druid.

What, his druid asked, does Ireland mean?

It means what Manannán singing at sea means.

Simply it means

Silver branch perception of things in their silver branch being.

Then Ireland isn't for living in, the druid said.

How so? Bran asked.

How if I see it in its silver branch being, how if I hear it in its silver branch singing in root and branch, can I cut down a tree and make a chariot of it? How if I see it in its silver branch being, how if I hear it in its silver branch lowing, can I kill a yearling calf and eat it?

A calf out at grass is silver branch being, Bran said. A calf slaughtered outside in our yard is silver branch being, is silver branch singing, in hoof and horn. A beef hanging from a cross beam here in our house is silver branch being, is silver branch singing, in hough and split chest. Whatever its condition or state, being is silver branch being. But yes, you are right, altered perception must mean and will mean altered behaviour. The sea being what it is in his perception of it doesn't deter Manannán from riding over it in a four horse chariot, the druid said.

So?

So we might as well live in the world as it used to be.

To talk about the world as it used to be is to talk about our eyes and minds as they used to be, Bran said.

Manannán did come ashore.

Sometimes people who lived far away from people would see him, a silver antlered stag walking alone.

But of all the people who lived in Ireland at that time only Bran was willing to pay the price of conversion to silver branch seeing and knowing.

And that to this day is what Ireland is.

Less and less as time goes by do the people who live in it know that Ireland is Manannán's lost cause.

Are you content that this is so?

Looking back at it from the Moon or from Mars, are you content that our planet is Manannán's lost cause?

Here at home, standing before a bush in Cnoc an Utha, can you be content with anything less than the mirum and the morality of Manannán's

At-chiu