

Tales of the Garuda Bird—a Poet's Fragment

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1)

The elixirs of immortality confuse even the gods.

Who'll scoop it up in a skull and stash it somewhere?

How much do you have to down to know effect?

Insatiable thirst must be slaked by insatiable beverage—its molecules are freak sentient moments, bubbling into a caustic bath that wounds the pallet, scorches the tongue, ravages the vocal apparatus so that, in exchange for immortal being, muteness scotches song. You are shut up in a tower of quiet idiocy — or keep on talking, while the dragon drinks down the sun.

2)

Garuda

... though born from an egg in an instant

was big as the sky—a fiery bird, poised to burn everything.

The gods that already *are* want to stop it, wanted to stop the fiery bird, because they said the bird WAS fire, and its flight would consume them all.

Then everyone came out to praise the bird.

It was a raucus age, if over now.

(Bird fly across time gap
till the next time's come.

3)

Because everybody praised him
he was happy
and damped the fiery atmosphere
his own being ignited.

"I was the trigger point for destiny,
but I am free,"
he said.

4)

Someone piped up:

"It is my nature
to be a water vessel.
I sit on the brink.

"I died in the gap of a moment
and came out the other side
on the back of that fiery bird
whose lunch is snakes."

I think the moon said that.

5)

Garuda wants to tell us about its coming into being, but whenever it opens its beak to sing or speak, a thousand serpents vanish down its gullet. Someone has to teach the snakes to stay away, stay away from the fiery beak, the many colored wings...

6)

Then everybody came out
to praise the moon god
whose pulse is time:

The daily sliver of the moon
and a fraction thereof
and a fraction of that.

They cut it fine
and still they could not find
the escape hatch
where the precious Batch
of juice was stashed.

"Forever you are honored
as Fame itself,"
they said
and made oblations.

It was an epoch of vows and curses, curses and vows...

7)

Now snakes crave water
and when the sunbeast
blazes on the mountain
the snakes desiccate
so they cry with hisses and curses—
snake songs and supplications
that black clouds cumulate in layers
and bright rain come.

And when it does,
the snakes all sparkle with joy—
their checkered skins
twinkle and dance.

8)

Now fragrant woods
with tranquil lakes
where snakes were happy cottage dwellers, as it were—

gentle breezes modulate the hot weather,
blossoms rain from the boughs—
holy place.

But the snakes it turned out were terrible cheaters and had access to all this loveliness and good fortune by a black ruse, so Garuda struck a deal to cheat *them*.

His mother warned, "But still, don't swallow the Brahmins.

"Wind in your wings
moon on your back
fire in your head
sun *overhead*—

"Go get the elixir
to buy our release
from the snakes,"

his mother said.

"First I eat,"
Garuda said.

He ate 10,000 beings but it wasn't enough.

9)

Even wise men feud over property.
They hold their store in common,
but one always wants to keep his own to himself.

Divided store brings enmity, opportunity.

"You are big and mangy, stupid brother.
Since you forever hold your head,
you shall become an elephant!"

"And you a tortoise that lies in the sea," the brother retorted.

And so it was.

Vows and curses,
curses and vows.

10)

The turtle and the elephant lived in a lake, not tranquil now.

The elephant rears up on its back legs.
The tortoise cringes as the elephant focuses his tusks and trunk.
Now the turtle stands on hind legs too
and battles the furious pachyderm.

Lake, a froth with billows, fish withdraw.

Garuda waits in the air till his father, Kasyapa, gives a signal,
then swoops down and seizes one combatant in each claw,
and flies to sacred water.

Below were god trees
gold and silver fruits
branches of beryl
nourished by water of the sea

and an enormous banyan tree
requested that Garuda sit down
upon one of its branches
but the branch broke
and the little sages that were hanging upside down
were in terrible danger.

11)

He flew to Tibet
and stopped on top of a mountain
and ate the animals he clutched in his claws
and set the sages free, I think,
or else Garuda became their weapon—

but the gods didn't like it
and started to fight.

Garlands withered.
Blood rained down.
Lights went out.

They had to find some wise men
to find out why.

"It's your fault, oh king of the gods—
your lack of vigilance
produced Garuda,"

the sages said.

"He wants to steal the Soma, and he can do it!"

Gods stood round elixir, showing the weapons, peculiar to each:

discus
bludgeon
trident
battle ax
javelin
scimitar
club

12)

Great Indra insulted the Miniatures—
They were sages no bigger than the joint of your thumb.

The poet said,

"I better stop this..."

12)

The Miniatures got stuck in the hoof prints of a cow that were full of water.
Indra laughed and stepped on their heads.
The little sages vowed: "We will make another Indra bigger than you!"

"Don't do it," cried Kasyapa, who was the form that Prajapati had at that moment—
"Don't break the King of the Gods! Make, instead, a King of the Birds."

13)

The darkness of Being is a dust storm kicked up by the raging flapping of Garuda's wings. The gods were confused by the dust. Indra ordered the winds to blow the dust away.

Then Garuda boomed out thunder and towered up in the sky. The gods of the atmosphere assailed him with aerial weapons. They zoned in from everywhere, but Garuda handled them readily.

The gods rained showers of blood and fell from the sky.

"Now to take the Elixir," thought Garuda, "its guardians being defeated." But all was ablaze with his flames, so he drank down the water of many rivers and spat it out to quench them.

The Soma remained in the midst of ever-new guardians:
now rapidly turning wheels with razor-sharp accoutrements, ready to slash.

Garuda studied the rate of the wheel's rotation, matched it, and passed—*unslashed*.

Now more snakes. A pair of them, whose snake-eye stares turned objects to ashes.
Garuda tossed dust in those snake eyes and they were blinded.

14)

Vishnu sat in the sky observing the business.
He and the bird made a pact: Krishna, who *was* Vishnu, took Garuda as his mount,
and the bird would become immortal, willy-nilly his Soma.

15)

Snakes feed on wind.
The oldest snake, named Sesa, sat apart from the others,

mastering mystic austerities, practicing in holy mountains spots.

"Why, why do you do this? Not to benefit beings, I wot!"

The god Brahma said that.

"My brothers are idiots. I just wanted to get out of the house. They're hostile to everyone, including themselves, in particular Garuda...locked in excessive mutual grudge. I'll none of it."

"Good fellow," said Brahma. "Choose you a boon."

"I want these austerities to prosper, and me to become a dispassionate upholder of Dharma."

"Good fellow," said Brahma. "Then the stabilization of the earth will depend on you."

"Fine," said Sesa. "Just put the world on my head—I'll tote it like a jug, my balance will be that good, and I'll encircle the ocean with innumerable coils."

Sesa is Ananta.

Garuda assists him, the grudge, in this case, abated.

16)

But the mother of the snakes had cursed the snakes to doom. And a mother's curse—well, in principle, there is no antidote for this one. The snakes were not idiots. They took council.

A Snake Sacrifice of enormous scope was raging. As the fires burned, snakes were magnetized from everywhere and fell from the air to the flames.

In council, innumerable unethical stratagems were invented to avert the inevitable—not one acceptable.

"Only fate de-fatalizes fate," the Snake King said. "The question, it seems to me, is why was our raging mother not stopped by the gods?"

They put the question to Brahma.

"Too many snakes," he said. "Diminish the surplus population of venomous evil. Good snakes will not perish. An accident of nomenclature will give power to a sage. He'll terminate the slaughter."

The poet muttered, "I better stop this."

17)

Why had the snake-mother cursed her sons?

It was a stupid wager.

Kasyapa had two wives: a mother of birds and a mother of snakes.

What color was the horse that was churned from the Milky Ocean, where the Soma itself was churned?

The mother of snakes said a black one, the other mother white.

Though the creature was white, the mother snake ordered her black snake sons to insinuate themselves in the horse's tail. The sons refused to do it, so she cursed them.

18)

The poet was drunk. As he told it, black horse tail snakes made the horse not white, so the snake mother won the wager, and the forfeit was this: that for 500 years the bird mother'd be a slave to the snakes.

"How can we get out of this?" inquired Garuda.

"Get us that Elixir," weezled the snakes.

19)

Churning The Milky Ocean

Mt. Meru is the center of everything.
Its own light spaces out in splendor.
Brilliantly colored, many-feathered bird flocks
swoop across its woodlands.
Beasts both big and little
ecologize its surfaces, plunge its caves.

There are rivers and lakes and mysterious haunts
where timeless sages maintain their timeless states.

Higher than anything, it seems to arrest the sky.

Not any one can see it,
not everyone can know of it,
few can find it if they set out to look for it.

Thus Mt. Meru determines the being of the worthy:
how it seems to you
tells how you are.

20)

Up went the gods to the top of Meru.
They knew there was this thing: the substance called "Soma."
The fact of it was ensconced in Being itself—
so they knew it could be elicited
from the stuff of the world.

"How can we acquire it?" the gods inquired of each other.

Vishnu told Brahma, Brahma told Vishnu.
The deities listened.

21)

Mount Mandara is like a big pole.
The gods uprooted it and set it to churn the ocean.
The gods and the counter-gods
pulled the churning rope.

The King of the Snakes—Ananta—coiled about the ocean, so the gods and the
countergods could set the pole in place.

22)

Now a great disruption afflicted the mountain: timber crashed and burned in crashing,
beasts lost their habitats, were crushed or set tumbling as the mountain moved.

When the ocean churned, not only the *ocean* churned, but all things broke from the orders
that contained them, resolved into the virtues of their substances. All was churned in the
churning—flesh and sinews, blood and bones, herbs and grasses and the resins of timbers
coiled and vorticalized, each passing into the others, the total mixedness infecting every
portion, until the ocean turned into milk—one fantastic frothing...

and this reduction and mixedness
brewed the Batch.

23)

The gods and counter-gods joined in the project to a common end, yet pulled in opposite
senses to animate the churning, first this way then the other. They pulled on the great

snake Vasuki. It served as a rope, wrapping about the mountain. The gods and the counter-gods contributed the force of their enmity to animate the churning.

All beings chimed in in hope to cop a share of the elixir—the whole world churned—and a billion beings were squashed in the sacred mash...

24)

Soma: the virtue of everything—
the life of the gods
the powers of poets
the courses of manifest Being.

Yet the Soma was churned from the broth
by the very ones who produced *themselves* in producing *it*.

Blithely the poets sing of it.
Not stupid. Not drunk. Imbued
with the stuff of its mystery.

25)

If you stick out your tongue, how far can you do it?

Can you milk it like the udder of a cow?
Can you curl it backwards
in the hollow of your skull
and cause amrita
to drop as a dew?

The sages churn it with their tongues—a veritable milky ocean.
They do it now—today.
Meru is the mountain of the spine, they say.
Or is it Mount Mandara? the poets mutter.

26)

...And a tortoise supported the mountain.
The tortoise is Yoga.

We do not recommend it for the wobble-minded.
You'll panic and suffocate, and the nectar will invert as poison.

And where is the ocean of milk right now—today?
Between between the eye brows and the crown of the head—

that is the ocean of milk, the sages say.
But if you make touch the tip of the tongue to a certain site in that ocean
and the moonlike milky nectar is released—
then no snake can harm you, no illness either.
If you still think to be male, females will flock to you, if female, males.
Otherwise time will abandon you
and ensconced in mountain haunts, a timeless sage,
you ever will maintain your timeless state...

NOTE:

Tales of the Garuda Bird—a Poet's Fragment is an impression of an early section of the voluminous Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*. Both the Nagas and Garuda are perhaps more familiar in their Buddhist guise. The story of Garuda's instantaneous maturation has an esoteric provenance: the Enlightened State is not a product of any gestation: it whelms full blown from the milieu where it is encouraged. Similarly Garuda's conflict with the Nagas resolves to a certain soteriology. But in the Hindu context of *The Mahabharata* the stories are somewhat raw. Who or what *are* the Nagas, the snake beings? What primordial temporality assigns to them their prominence in the universe of the living? As always in Indian myth, there are sages who link manifest existence to a timeless coin that remains undebased, even when the sages themselves are embroiled in worldly skirmishes indeed... And no one knows the origin of Soma, the elixir that is itself, in its earlier Vedic context, deity, object, and product of cosmic sacrifice. In *The Mahabharata* it has been manufactured out of the essences of an already existent world, as if by a universal Los Alamos project, an unprecedented collaborative effort by otherwise competing and hostile parties. No sooner has it been squeezed out of the Ocean of Being, than all the suspended conflicts resume their courses, drawing the elixir into their contingencies and fatalities.

The term "Churning the Milky Ocean" becomes or perhaps originally was a concept of Hatha Yoga, to which I make reference in the later sections of the piece. *The Mahabharata* is innocent of this usage, but its presence there renders the epic, appropriately, rife for esoteric readings.

The Hindu gods, in their literary, perhaps as opposed to their cultic, situation, come off as somewhat comic figures. There is a background truth to which they seem to have no access. Or there is an ontology of receding grounds and backgrounds; the gods whose energies unfold as human history are themselves the foregrounds of more hidden histories, to which the minds of the sages, usually human, not only *do* have access, but of which they sometimes seem themselves to be the origin. Story is the play of shimmering illusions, but then there is nothing but story. A single syllable unfolds intransitively the entirety of what in the West emanates an entirely transitive Logos. And what a syllable! Its drone or susurrant can be heard between the subtle gaps that break in every narrative. Conflicts run their savage, violent course. They do not accumulate towards tragic denouement. There is nothing but the comings-forth of an unmanifest and timeless

iprinciple, which is itself at every site about to show its sacred truth—and when it does, it is evidence of the unmanifest only that recedes by the very appurtenances of its appearing, but one more time. Continuity is rendered through the snap of the discontinuous. And the sacred source is honored in the breach.

In 2004 I reopened an interest in non-Buddhist India that was mine in the early 1960s, because I thought I was about to be commissioned to write a short text on the history of yoga for popular consumption. The commission did not materialize, but *Tales of the Garuda Bird—a Poet's Fragment* was its unremunerative issue.