

Horslips, The Story

One night in bed, the promiscuous Connacht Queen, Maeve, quarrels with her husband Ailill. They argue over who has the most wealth. Ailill doesn't like the suggestion that he's a kept man. "Her words were sharp; they cut him deep, in a war between the sheets". Ailill's magnificent White Bull is the deciding factor in their subsequent measuring of possessions. Maeve's a bad loser. Mac Roth, her messenger, goes to Cooley to rent the famed Brown Bull for a year, thus giving Maeve the decider. "I once told her where she could find her dream". The Bull's owner is agreeable until Mac Roth and his party get very drunk and reveal that had they not been allowed to borrow the bull they would have taken it by force. The deal breaks down. They go home emptyhanded. Maeve decides on war.

Having marshalled all her warriors, and allies from Munster and Tara, and with Ailill's six brothers and their armies standing by Maeve receives favourable omens from her Druids. The long march to Cooley begins. "The champions and the Seven Sons are come to take away the Donn". However, a sorceress appears and warns Maeve of impending defeat at the hand of Dearg Doom, Cu Chulainn. "Saw the host stained red in war, saw the hero-light around the head of a dragon-boy". The warning is ignored.

Meanwhile, the men of Ulster are ill with labour pains - the legacy of a curse put on them for their inhuman treatment of a pregnant woman. The one man exempt from this curse is Cu Chulainn, whose very birth is shrouded in mystery. Singlehandedly he takes on the defence of Ulster, harassing Maeve's soldiers, "And like a hawk I'll swoop and swoop again", beheading those who stray from the main force. "You can hear me shout 'two heads are better than none. One hundred heads are so much better than one'". Cu Chulainn is a hard man. Originally called Setanta, he became known as Cu Chulainn, the Hound of Culann, because of his savagery. As the Connacht losses grow greater, the deposed King of Ulster, Fergus MacRoich, who is having a secret affair with Maeve, meets Cu Chulainn and arranges a treaty. Cu Chulainn agrees to singlehanded combat with any Connacht champion provided Maeve's army does not advance. One by one, day after day he defeats each warrior until eventually he faces his old foster-brother and close friend Ferdia. Cu Chulainn pleads with Ferdia to leave. "But Ferdia just laughed and shook his golden head and then they fell to battle again". For three days they fight at a ford and appear evenly matched until on the third day Cu Chulainn flies into a rage and lets loose his supernatural javelin, the terrible Gae Bolga, which destroys his friend. As Ferdia falls Cu Chulainn catches him and carries him to the riverbank, lamenting. "Life was a game, Now I miss your name; your golden hair". Then overcome by despair Cu Chulainn abandons the fight.

Maeve's army moves south with the stolen bull. The Ulster men rally and with Cu Chulainn in their ranks they give chase. "But before you hit off, let me say this time you bit off more than you can chew". The Morrigan, Queen of Demons, who has been encouraging slaughter all along, prophesies the outcome. In the battle which follows the Connacht army is routed. "It seems our fortunes lied despite our gain. Our tears fall like our pride". Maeve's life is spared by Cu Chulainn. As the Ulstermen are taking the Brown Bull home, they meet Ailill's Bull, the White-Horned one. The Donn immediately attacks the White. "You can fool them alright but can you fool the beast"? All day and night they are locked in combat. Morning sees the Donn victorious. The armies consider destroying him, the cause of all their suffering, but leave him as, dying, he staggers homewards.