

Carole Satyamurti
from The Mahabharata

The Song Of The Lord

As morning broke on the opening day of war,
the rising sun (as Sánjaya described it
to the king) streaked the sky with scarlet.
The heat slowly burned off the mist that hung
over the plain. The opposing armies,
division upon division, stretched away
as far as the eye followed the curving earth.
All was brilliant. The chariots of the princes
and all the royal allies were resplendent
with noble banners, each with its own emblem.
One king's standard carried a scarlet bull,
another, a boar on a cloth of silver,
others, bright flowers, stars, eagles, comets...
the sight too dazzling to be taken in.
Some kings were riding in their chariots
others sat erect on the necks of elephants
or on spirited horses, proudly wheeling.

So much armour, on elephants, horses, men!
The flashing gold and bronze rivalled the sun.
The close-packed troops and beasts, constantly moving,
glittered like a river thick with fish.

Both armies were terrible, both beautiful.
In both, men's hearts were filled with joy and pride
at being part of it – this huge event,
this grand spectacle, this sacrifice,
this, the well-trained warrior's highest calling.
Fear, suffering and grief would follow later.

With the two armies facing one another,
one east, one west; with ten thousand conches
blaring out in challenge, the din of cymbals
and the deep, heart-stopping throb of war drums,
Árjuna said to Krishna, his charioteer,
'Drive the chariot into no-man's-land
so I can see, before the battle starts,
the faces of the enemy I must kill.'

Krishna did what Árjuna asked of him.

And there, with every soldier tense and ready,
with every horse straining at its yoke;
there, in the moment before hell’s unleashing,
with each blade whetted, every weapon honed;
there, in the moment when the frenzy
of preparation is over, and the din
of death not yet begun – there, at that point
in the relentless passage of events...

time freezes.

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Árjuna sinks down in his chariot.
His warrior’s heart has failed him.
His eyes stream with tears, his limbs tremble,
the bow, Gandíva, drops from his nerveless hand.
The world holds its breath.

For Karna, Kunti, for his brothers,
for Krishna – for each differently – Árjuna
is the point, the mainspring of the action.
He is the hero on whom all the hopes
of the Pándavas are pinned; the obstacle,
above all others, the son of Dhritarashtra¹
sees as blocking his road to victory.

Árjuna has fought scores of bloody battles,
exulting at the slaughter of enemies,
threshing them like standing stooks of grain
without regret, never looking back.
He is the supreme kshátriya;²
the whole effort of his life is geared
to heroism and glorious victory.
But now he is unravelled by distress.
He gazes at the rank on rank of kinsmen.
They are so familiar – human, as he is.
How to make them stranger to him than strangers?
Death takes on new weight, sharper meaning.
Whether this war brings victory or defeat
there will be no occasion for rejoicing.

1. Duryódhana, the eldest of the Káuravas.

2. Warrior.

Striking his brow, he cries aloud to Krishna,
'I will not fight! A kshátriya enters battle
to preserve dharma.³ But how can it be right
to kill our kinsmen, to coldly slaughter those
who have nurtured, taught and grown with us?
There is Drona, our dear teacher, and Bhishma,
beloved grandfather to all of us.
He looks so serene, full of resolve –
has he not imagined how it will be
to aim his arrows at the hearts of those
joined to him by blood – who once were children
gathered round, enraptured by his stories?

'Look at all our cousins standing there,
sick with greed and anger – but, Krishna,
even though they are blind to their own evil,
even though they are desperate to kill us,
how can we, who know dharma, do the same?
I feel already the familiar heft
of Gandíva, flexing to dispatch death
at those I should protect, my kin – how can I
cut them down as though they were rank weeds?'

Krishna smiles, as at a foolish child.
'Son of Kunti, your doubts sound honourable
but they spring from deep misunderstanding.
You speak as if this life were all there is.
But it is just one brief embodiment
of the eternal soul, the indestructible.
Bodies are born, they flourish, age, and die.
But the soul, part of that greater spirit
that infuses everything that exists,
was never born, and cannot be killed.
That soul, the witness of our every thought
and action, persists from one life to the next;
it sloughs off its old and out-worn body
as one discards old clothes and puts on new.
Wise people know this, and do not lament.

'From the perspective of eternal time,
the undivided, everlasting present,
those men you see lined up, eager for battle,
full of the beauty of their youth and strength,
are dead already.

3. Right action.

The bodies which have known cold and heat,
pleasure and suffering, already carry
death and decomposition in their bones.

‘You need to understand, Ārjuna,
that in this life, nothing is permanent,
nothing can be held, or truly owned.
The individual ‘I’ a person clings to –
the ego with a sense of past and future,
furnished with intentions and memories –
is simply an illusion. There is only
an infinite procession of present moments.
Time *is* the present,
to be experienced, enjoyed, endured,
misery and pleasure equally.
Beings have mysterious origins.
They emerge into the light, then disappear
into shadow. Why should this cause grief?’

‘Within the framework of a single life
each individual has their dharma,
the path of right action they should follow,
depending on the station they occupy.
Your dharma is to fight. That is your purpose.
You were born for this, and it is for this
that praise-singers will extol your memory
long after you are dead. Think. To refuse
would lead to deep disgrace – people would say,
“When it came to it, he was a coward.”
What could be more miserable than that
for a kshātriya? Fight as a warrior should
and you cannot lose – either you are killed
and go to heaven, or win and enjoy the kingdom.
So get to your feet, scourge of your enemies,
gather your strength, Ārjuna, and fight!’

Carole Satyamurti writes: The main narrative thread of the *Mahabharata* concerns the conflict between two sets of royal cousins: the hundred Kāurava brothers under the eldest prince, Duryódhana, who has grabbed the entire kingdom for himself, and refuses to negotiate; and the five Pándava brothers, the eldest of whom is rightfully entitled to it. Ārjuna is the greatest warrior of the Pándavas. In the war which, in this extract, is about to begin, Krishna, an avatar of the god, Vishnu, is Ārjuna’s charioteer and counsellor.

The passage occurs at the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna’s teaching on the nature of right action, which is a sacred text for Hindus.

The entire *Mahabharata* is more than 5000 pages long in dense English prose translation. At 700 pages, my version (verse, as is the Sanskrit original) is, like other versions for non-specialist readers, an abridgement.