

KEERTHIK SASIDHARAN



THE DHARMA FOREST

'Powerful and bewitching, beautifully written and profoundly steeped
in the lore of the ancients, *The Dharma Forest* moved me deeply'

SHASHI THAROOR



The Dharma Forest

by Keerthik Sasidharan



THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
LITERATURE
—2021—

An exclusive extract from the
JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

Prologue

A wilderness grew
in the sky.
In that wilderness
a hunter.
In the hunter's hands
a deer.

The hunter will not die
till the beast
is killed.

Awareness is not easy,
is it,
O Lord of Caves?

—Allama Prabhu
translated by A.K. Ramanujan

Hours before Jara the hunter killed the much beloved eighth avatar of our Lord who was seated under that leprous tree of enlightenment, he found himself awash in a wave of melancholy that crashed in as he dreamed of making love to his wife who, even in that ephemera

between deep sleep and wakefulness, straddled over him, as she usually did, with the purposefulness of a good samaritan trying to resuscitate a drowned man. The source of Jara's despair was a golden-coloured deer that he had been chasing for days in the woods near the Raivataka hills, but it had eluded him and, in turn, had led him deeper into the forests and closer to the river known as Hiranya whose tributaries emptied themselves into the great ocean near that old settlement of Prabhasa Kshetra. Every time he came close to capturing it, the deer vanished in ways that left Jara with no recourse but to admire the animal's cunning for self-preservation. It was in that despondent mood, just as the sun was about to set, while he sat upon a makeshift seating post on the branch of a *sal* tree, that he saw the deer again, past the bushes and brambles. Only this time, the deer stared back at him, as if it knew that they had met earlier. For a moment, a smile came over Jara as he wondered if he was stuck in an eternal cycle of action and reaction, condemned to repeat the same chase all over again tomorrow. Out of instinct, or more perhaps from some deep-seated intuition, he reasoned that there was no escape out of this forest of illusions except by continuing to chase this lustrous animal. It was already dark when he began to run after the deer once more. From deep inside the forests, faint echoes of a flute and a smell of sandalwood permeated the air. Unlike other evenings however, not a leaf moved on this occasion. Up on the nearby trees he saw monkeys and macaques stare at him from the lower branches, as he jumped onto the ground. On the highest of branches nearby, he saw *apsaras* seated on them, who, too, watched him chase the animal. Further, to his north, were a group of young, attractive men standing under the very same branches of the trees upon which the *apsaras* and the monkeys sat. *Gandharvas*, he told himself—referring to spectral emanations from the heavens who percolate into human lives, like water through sand, as and when they choose. They, too, were observing him closely. The forest suddenly seemed to awaken, as if all lives within it had become sentient and now watched him foolishly run after that animal. Jara began to panic. Why are all these

beings revealing themselves to me? Is this world real, or am I living in the dreams of a storyteller who imagines these words at dawn while his wife sleeps nearby? With thoughts swirling as fast as his body continued its pursuit, Jara concluded that there was only one way to find out—to put the reality of this world to test.

He stopped his run and prepared his bow. He yanked the bowstring hard and aimed his arrows at the deer. He could't see the animal directly, but behind an efflorescence of coloured mushrooms and flowers that shone at dusk, the soft plumes of dust from the deer's hind legs were visible. If this world was real, then his faculties to calculate and kill must still be undiminished—he reasoned. He had come to the forest thinking of abandoning his days as a hunter, of relinquishing violence, and withdrawing into himself. But before he did that, he merely wanted to see the forest one last time. To walk in its groves and drink from its lakes. What followed however was this trick—some demon was hell-bent on deceiving his mind, he told himself. Or some bored spirit who lived within these woods had decided to have some fun at his expense. Either way, he reasoned that if the deer was a mere hallucination induced by the goblins and Gods of this forest, then he would not be able to shoot it down. If that scenario turned out to be true, he would stop chasing the animal. He would just let these illusions be. He would sit still and wait for them to wash away, like some narcotic working its way through the body. But instead, if this world was in fact a dream, and his arrows managed to kill the deer, then in the revulsion of having done something odious, he would wake up in horror. And then, there remained a third possibility—one that made little sense to him. This world in which he found himself—along with his anxieties, exhaustion, and even this golden deer—were not birthed by malevolent Gods, nor were they a consequence of poltergeists playing truant with his mind. But, instead, it was something even simpler and thus all the more radical. This life was indeed real and this world was all there was. It would mean that life contained within itself miracles and visions, illusions and magic,

that reveal only when it is time. *Whose time*, Jara wondered as he felt the heat of the bowstring singe his sideburns.

From the corner of his eye he saw a flutter. There was movement but he could see no deer. The sounds of the flute's whispery notes meanwhile had continued all this while, only now it had slowed down, as if it were waiting. Then, without any further thought, out of instinct than inspiration, Jara's thumb let go of the string and the projectile began its natural flight to its inevitable end. By the time the arrowhead left the bow's frontal arch, Jara was already filled with regret. He could have been more patient; he could have not abandoned his aspiration for non-violence; he could have not surrendered to who he truly was—one who loved to hunt and kill. All the while as the arrow travelled, Jara noticed that the trees had stopped swaying and the winds ceased their frenzied moves. Every falling twig was now audible, each drop of dew hit the grounds with a crackle. Up from the trees, the leaves began to abandon their tenuous bonds with the branches, frogs scampered around their puddles nervously and birds in the skies circled anxiously, like expectant fathers at the hour of birth. The forest stilled itself in anticipation. And the evening sky had acquired a darkness that Jara had rarely seen. The world was now brimming over with portents that not even the darkest oracles could fathom. And then, all too suddenly, he heard the arrow land with a thud and tear into some flesh which, ironically, brought about a semblance of normalcy to that moment thanks to the iron laws of cause and effect which had now seemingly prevailed. His arrow, as always, had found its mark, and Jara sighed in relief—*finally!*—as if some long nursed revenge had eventually found its release. From afar, he could see a pool of blood begin to flow and wet the grounds, and a voice in his head told him that an hour of sacrament was near.

Jara ran towards his mark, past the small ponds and the trees, to inspect the animal that lay there. Even as he hurried, he prayed that he may find an injured deer and not a dead one. To assuage his guilt, he told himself that he would bandage the animal and let it go. The flute's melancholic song, meanwhile, had come to a stop. From the

skies a roar broke out and boomed through the trees and branches, which had already shed their leaves, as if an untimely winter had come upon them. Jara found himself running through a corridor of yellow and green when he heard the forests echo three times.

Jayaa, Jayaa, Jayaa . . .

Before he could make sense of it all, he had arrived at a spot where blood seeped freely into the earth. And there he found a man with many arms—*was this a God who had lost his way*, Jara asked himself in wonder and fear; his complexion was as dark as the blue nights of Jara's dreams, and from his feet, blood trickled steadily. Jara's arrow had sliced away the ankle of his foot. Instead of pain and horror, however, this injured otherworldly person sat there in silence, with his eyes closed, as if he was meditating. And then, perhaps stirred by Jara's presence, he opened his eyes and smiled at him. A generous and beatific smile that took Jara by surprise, for he had expected to be on the receiving end of anger and abuse. Overwhelmed by grief and guilt on having hurt somebody, Jara bowed to this injured being and for reasons unknown to him, tears welled up in his eyes. He bent down to touch this being's feet, out of concern and in regret, as if to make amends for this gratuitous injury. When Jara looked up again, the many arms on his body were no longer there. He was just another ordinary man, even though his presence exuded a form of gentleness and beauty of the kind that Jara had never thought possible in another human. Perhaps, Jara tried to reason, it was another trick played by the forest. Then, this kindly one spoke, 'Jara, my dear friend. I hope it wasn't too difficult for you to find me.'

Jara looked at him again, only to recognize an intuition froth within him that his wanderings through the forest which had lasted for weeks, had now come to an end. The man's presence—despite the blood and agony all around—filled Jara with a kind of peace that he had not experienced in a long while. Then, even as he bled to death, the man said with an easy contentment: 'I am Devaki's son, Rukmini's husband, and Arjuna's friend. I am also known as Krishna of the Yadavas.'

He paused to allow some silence between them and then said to Jara again, 'I have waited for you my whole life.'

* * *

A cloud passed by, obscuring the last faint scatterings of the evening sun. Shadows of swallows returning home fell upon the forest grounds creating patterns of life and play, and the sound from their whispery flaps entered Krishna's mind. To see the arc of their flight, he looked up again, but his muscles had begun to cramp and now slowly ached. Despite the serenity of that hour, a murmur of despair shimmered within him when he realized that this was the last evening he would see this world in this avatar known as Krishna. *So incredible was it to be alive.* This fullness of being, of feeling air ripple past his skin, of opening his eye to be greeted by something so resplendent and improbable as the world, which neither sought the approval of humans nor their humanity to render it meaningful. The Gods in the heavens were omniscient and were therefore unimprovable; but a human form was different. Incompleteness and finitude marked them; and yet, the recognition that life is perfectible made their lives brim over with ambitions, joys and sorrow. That a human life alternated between weariness and frivolity was not unknown to Krishna, but sitting there, wounded and bloodied, on the last day of this life, his thoughts wandered back to the early days of his youth.

In that moment of transcendental clarity, even as the aureole of blood grew larger around him, as the blessedness of Vishnu-Narayana, the supreme being of all worlds, descended into Krishna, a squall of nostalgia rushed onto the shores of his consciousness. It overwhelmed him, as he sat there dying in that unending forests which covered much of Saurashtra, no different than a gored animal, bleeding, one drop at a time. His only companion, with whom he could share the entirety of this moment was his dearest wife Rukmini. But she, too, must have been gone by now, away from this life, after she abandoned the city of Dwaraka, following

its destruction. For reasons unknown to him, his thoughts returned to that someone he had not remembered since he was a young man. *Radha*. It had been so long since he had uttered that name to himself. His friend, lover, confidante, critic and the possessor of his being. He had been young, his muscles were still taut and full of youth, his smile was all too easily forthcoming for all, especially for her. She had been a few years older than him and had been thus more assured about the world and its workings. To her naiveté filled purposefulness which others mistook for seriousness, his enthusiasm for life and mischief had seemed immature; in her, he had found a lover who led him by her hand, in him she had found freedom that her well-meaning but uninteresting husband couldn't offer. When their love had come to an end, he had plunged into the labyrinth of politics and conspiracies, while she had become a memory that effaced itself out of his mind. And in her stead, a bland nothingness had filled in. No one took her place, nor did his wives supersede the memory of her. Just as day follows night, he told himself that she occupied a phase of his life that was meaningful in its own way, but destiny had other plans for him. It had led him, like a mother leads her child by hand, through a forest of action and thought where the only thing that mattered was tomorrow. As he sat there, with the knowledge that his time on earth was to come to an end, he was now able to remember her, those early stirrings of unencumbered love. He was reminded of times when she would come and find him with food in the afternoons when the cows awakened from their reveries, of times at night when she would hurriedly rush over to see him before hurrying back to her household. In this subterfuge of love, they had found a curious arrangement—where they kept their lives separate. But slowly, inevitably, cruelly, the very same Fates that brought the two of them together had other plans for him, as if to teach them both a lesson about heartbreak. The exquisiteness of those passions was never to come back, for when he married Rukmini, her love was of a different kind—one filled with the proud knowledge that the world knew she was his and he was hers.

With Radha, the frisson had arrived with the knowledge that they were never meant to be together, but with Rukmini, love burrowed in like some furtive animal, assured of the warmth that awaited them in each other's heart.

But more than nostalgia, in these last moments, he was filled with a sense of loss. Despite having conquered the worlds through his cunning and generosity, his prowess and talent for friendship, Krishna could not escape the knowledge of how it would all end for him. With no one by his side, the worlds of army, men and empires that he lived for now meant little and thinking about them left him empty. But it was the absence of love—with all its fury and fumes—that allowed his mind to wander and impose shape upon the hazy remembrances of times past.

Seeing him seated in that pensive mood, Jara said: 'Sir, would you like me to get you some food? Or some fruit sap to drink?'

Krishna replied, 'No. Now is not the time to fill oneself up with food and drink.' And then, remembering that even avatars of God must not forget their manners, Krishna added, 'Thank you for trying to help me.'

A silence emerged between the two, into which the sounds of the forest—the chirping of the birds and the low hiss of wind, the distant howl of wolves and the gurgle of streams—wandered in. Jara then said, 'Sir, shall I bandage your feet with some *bilva* leaves?'

Krishna smiled, 'My aches can't be bandaged.'

'Why is that, if I may ask, sir?' In the woods nearby, a parakeet screeched as wildcats set about chasing it.

Krishna spoke calmly, as if not to Jara, but as a confessional to expurgate all that made him human, 'I have witnessed great horrors, aided even greater slaughters. I have sacrificed loves, convinced friends to murder their uncles and teachers, pushed elephants and horses into a volley of arrows so that they may die, and others may live. I have comforted sisters and aunts knowing that their brothers and nephews were to be butchered on my count, I have kept quiet when deception was done by those who were my friends. I have lived

amid the detritus of human excess. I have lived amid pain, all my life. Inflicting much and receiving some.'

Jara kept silent for a moment, watched Krishna closely, and then said, 'Noble sir, may I be bold enough to tell you something?'

Krishna nodded and smiled, and then said earnestly, 'I am eager to listen to you. Speak freely, as if I were your oldest friend.'

'Very well, then. You must have guessed, I live off this forest. Hunting partridges and deer that I sell to the villages nearby.'

'Yes, I did think as much.'

'I have spilt a lot of blood, in my life.'

'Animal blood'—Krishna weakly suggested.

'Yes, animal blood. That is true. Be that as it may, when I kill an animal, I know I hurt it. But I also know that in the great chain of being, I am merely a means, one through which life changes forms. I kill, I cook their meat, I eat it, sometimes I sell it. The living pass through me to become the dead. Just like in the blacksmith's oven, where metal becomes a sword. Are you following me?' Jara asked to confirm.

Krishna smiled and nodded. Jara continued, 'Unlike the blacksmith or me-the-hunter, your oven and forest are the battlefield and royal courts. On those grounds, your ideas of duty and justice become the righteousness of our land. You have suffered on our account, taking upon yourselves the duties to keep the wolves away. And wolves are no good, take it from me.'

With a laugh, Krishna asked incredulously, 'Who told you all this?'

'Every child knows this, noble sir!'

'Every child knows what exactly?'

'That you won the great war in Kurukshetra. If you weren't there, things might have ended differently.'

'You do know—all that is an exaggeration?'

'I really doubt it. One thing the forest teaches you is there can be no footprints without an animal having trod through there. Your actions may not be visible anymore, but we know about them.'

‘You sound like my friend Arjuna, during our days together at Kurukshetra,’

Jara continued with the assuredness that comes to those who discover great truths late in life.

‘Noble sir, what you must think of is the good you have done for so many.’

‘Ah! The Good. Do you know what that is?’

‘No. How can I know. I am just a killer of partridges and pheasants.’

‘Who then knows what ‘good’ means. As my time comes closer, I am filled with doubt, about the purpose of my life. I wonder if my efforts amounted to anything at all.’

‘Sir, the good is hard to discern. But all we know is the emotions that colour us when we see or hear about that which is the good. Think about how your friend Arjuna would have fared without you in the Great War.’

Enthused by his own ideas, and Krishna’s indulgence of him, Jara continued to speak with the prolixity of a man who spent most of days alone and had now finally found someone to speak to.

Krishna was moved by this effusive and talkative hunter who had somehow become the instrument of Fate. Slowly, however, while listening to Jara, Krishna’s mind began to wander. *Arjuna. Dearest Arjuna.* Memories began to congeal. But like a child running after butterflies, before Krishna could seize onto them and render those imageries and smells from Kuruskhetra into something real, they slipped away. He was not able to summon Arjuna’s face. *How did Arjuna look? What did he sound like?* It had never happened before—this vanishing, this stubborn shapelessness of the past, and all that he held dear from it.

* * *

As he sat there and heard the steady drone of Jara’s words, Krishna remembered the full moon night in the month of Mrgashirsha

when, before the Great War in Kurukshetra had begun, he had gone in search of an oracle who lived in a cave at the origins of the Narmada river. She was known to wander in the sugarcane groves that spanned far out till the eyes could no longer see. Every summer, sugarcane stalks split open, letting loose a sweetness that dissolved into the water and air at a watering ghat called Grishmateertha, beyond which the river abandoned its shy origins and went from being a trickle and a stream to a nubile young river. To find the oracle however wasn't easy. Around her purported residence were the huts of sages, mendicants, self-flagellating wanderers, *sramanas* who believed in nothing, and communes of ancient brotherhoods who were rumoured to live on their urine and corn knobs they grew in the gardens nearby. Each one of these spiritual aspirants prophesied the future as well as the past, for the times that had gone by was as much subject to dialogue and controversy as the times that were yet to reveal. No one could agree on what exactly had transpired. How had the present come to be? What was there before there was something? Many versions of the past coexisted together—as if the past was a dormitory where different typologies of time—historical time, human time, geological time, the time experienced by the Gods, and even that mysterious time intuited by Rudra the Destroyer who annihilated all of existence every so often—came together to live amid each other. In their frenzied claims over the nature of Reality, the residents of Grishmateertha had sleepwalked away from the present. Time acquired a heaviness, a glutton's double-chin, and ultimately grew happily obese in that place.

Undistracted by all this however, Krishna walked past incense sticks, sacrificial fires, gardening projects, animal sacrifices, and crematoriums to arrive at the hut where the oracle was supposed to have lived. When he asked for her, an old crone replied from inside—the oracle was by the river and he could find her thereabouts. Upon arriving at the elevated embankments abutting the waters, he saw a young woman seated alone. She looked up at him, acknowledged his presence and then stood up to remove her clothes, and after glancing

at him once more, she jumped into the river. The ripples from her dive spread and then quickly vanished, and before long, Krishna stood there alone, watching an uneventful stretch of water extend once again from one side of the river to the other, betraying none of the tumult within. With the oracle nowhere to be found, Krishna sat there and watched the waves steadily eat into the red earths of the mudbanks. The stream that began from the hills of Amaranthaka now had swept in, arose, flirted, and had slowly acquired a seriousness of purpose that reminded him of his own trek down here. *The War in Kurukshetra. The hour of Dharma was near. How would it all end?* Then, as just his mind had begun to dwell upon itself, unexpectedly, the oracle emerged from the waters—her head first and then her water-swept body. She was naked, unselfconscious, and climbed up the steps of the ghat to sit face to face with Krishna. She was a young woman, probably in her early twenties. She was not a beauty, but she had an allure and a manner of being which told Krishna that her mind travelled freely, that her consciousness had journeyed through worlds that were distant and obscure.

He bowed to her, offered his greetings, and sought her blessings for his family, her guidance so that his kinsmen may live righteously and her watchfulness over his cousins—the Pandavas—who were embarking on a great War against their cousins, the Kauravas. He sought her grace for the living, for those who were to die in war and for those who were to embark on the long journey into the afterlife. Unexpectedly, however, just as he was speaking, she covered his mouth with her hand, as if to silence him. It was the only contact between his clothed self and her naked body. Then she began to speak. Her voice, gravelly and aged, in contrast to her body's youth, spoke about death. His own death.

He had come here as a human, eager to know what his future self would suffer. But she had decided to warn him. Not furiously or with contempt, but in a matter-of-fact manner, as if there could be no other way but the one she envisioned. After hearing her warn of what is to come, he bowed and asked if he could provide her with

something—maybe food, wheat, fowl, or even silver. She refused to acknowledge the question. He took that as a sign that worldly possessions did not matter to her. He asked if there was any way to remedy the heaviness that she forewarned would descend upon him when the War would finish. The oracle refused to answer that question too, but instead pointed to a mangrove that splayed itself above the waters like a canopy. On the upper branches which spread its shade over the aquamarine waters, mangoes in various states of ripening had pushed out of the dense foliage. Krishna stared at it, and slowly saw that instead of mangoes, there were human heads dangling from the branch. The heads of friends and rivals—Duryodhana, Karna, Arjuna and Bhima among others—swayed on the branch; Krishna looked away only to turn to look at it again. Only, this time, he saw that each of those heads were replaced by his own. There, on that resplendent mango tree, was now a garland of his own heads, each in different flavours of disquiet. Krishna stared at this abomination but before he could think through it all, the immanence of the world returned into that mangrove, with jackdaws, cuckoos and crows slowly pecking at the tree's ripening yellow.

When he turned to ask the oracle the meaning of it all, she was no longer there. Neither was the river Narmada flowing nearby. Instead, there was a plain field, emptied of the maize and sugarcane that otherwise grew in that part of Aryavarta. On the other end of the field, he saw that the Gods from the heavens—that celestial managerial class who oversaw the everyday workings of the world—had surrounded the naked oracle. None of them—neither the Gods nor the oracle—could see Krishna watching them. In her palm, with her hand extended out was a single leaf from the mango tree, yellowing and desiccated—as if she was daring them to come and remove that leaf from her possession. Never one to shy away from any challenge, Indra, the overlord of the skies, the God who was the hegemon of all moral order, walked up to the oracle and with a flick of his fingers tried to dislodge the leaf. Suddenly, Krishna realized that the Gods were up to their usual games of one-upmanship, only

this time because of this mysterious woman-oracle in their midst, they were even more deliberate in their moves. Usually the Gods would get drunk on the fermented drink called soma and these metaphysical games would end in a brawl. But here, the mood was sombre and the manners of the Gods were fastidious. The oracle neither smiled nor frowned, but when Indra failed to remove the leaf and fell by the wayside trying, she merely looked at him. Krishna noticed that the oracle had neither compassion nor derision for this defeated God of the heavens. But merely that when her gaze fell on him she seemed beyond this charade. Before long, Agni the God of Fire—the God who contained the powers to burn the world itself and who was the repository of all infernos—released from his mouth a jet of incandescent white flames that could incinerate a city. But the oracle and the leaf remained unmoved. Seeing Agni exhaust his wares, Indra broke into laughter. Following these two, Vaayu, the embodiment of the winds swooped in from the skies—with typhoon and gales swirling behind him. Along with these forces of nature, darkened clouds and thunder followed. What happened next was hard to say, except that the Gods Indra and Agni were laying flat on their bellies laughing. The heaviness of the clouds, the furies of the wind—all of it had failed to dislodge that single leaf from the oracle's hand. A sense of defeat had cast a pall over the proceedings. The oracle still stood there and watched the proceedings with equanimity. Then, there arrived the fierce form of Yama, the God of Death, with demons, snakes and cannibal hordes in tow. This great sovereign of the dead, who seized all the living by his noose and consigned each body to worms and insects, and in turn each worm and insect to its own end, this God who had swallowed the great demons Ravana and Hiranyakashipu, the righteous emperors Raghu and Dasharatha, the villains Jarasandha and Kamsa, was the only one left standing who could defend the honour of the Gods and their moral order. Instead of moving the leaf from her hand, Yama decided to end the life of the oracle and along with it turn the leaf to a yellowing particulate. But, try as hard as he could, the oracle stayed untouched and unmoved

by these exertions. The ogres who accompanied Yama, the young goddesses who contained on their bodies and breasts those pustules of smallpox, the half-beasts who carried dangling heads of buffalos and humans—each tried to scare the oracle by resorting to their bag of tricks. But she was neither moved nor did she threaten to curse them for the meaningless rituals they inflicted upon her. Finally, Death lay prostrate in front of the oracle, and accepted defeat. Soon, the other minor Gods—astral concordances of the elements, emotions and ecclesiastical authorities—the ones who live amid forests, underbrush and human hearts, followed suit and conceded defeat. The oracle, in her resplendent nakedness, her demeanour proudly still, had ended the vanities of the Gods and guardians of the universe.

Krishna watched all this from his end of the field and wondered to himself how that young oracle had found the authority to overpower these sacral embodiments of the elements. As he watched this celestial pantomime unfold, to Krishna's right appeared Brahma, the Father Creator, and to his left, Shiva, the Destroyer Incarnate. Together, the two of them whispered to Krishna, 'Do you not recognize who that oracle is?'

Krishna, still in that in-between eternity of transcendent truths and the here-and-now of our worlds, between his supreme form as Vishnu-Narayana and as a human who must help the Pandavas wage a great war, looked over at the two forms of reality manifest by his side. Before he knew, standing in front, was the oracle herself. Her skin was now translucent, her eyes darker than the clouds themselves. She was almost human. From her emerged a voice which said: 'She is Brahman, the Absolute Omniscience, one beyond all Good and Evil, beyond the Gods and the Seers, beyond all Elements.'

Both Shiva and Brahma bowed to the oracle. Shiva, in his bearded mendicant form, and who was often known to speak in tongues, was now as lucid as the poets:

'We all forget, from time to time, who we are. She is you, my dear Krishna. She is your knowledge about how this Great War will end.'

Brahma added that this form of Vishnu-Narayana as Krishna will soon come to an end. But on the day when it would be his last, like all life forms and avatars who become attached to their past, to their memories, to the emotional flavours that pour into the crucible of their being—Krishna too will have to let go of it all. He would have to rid himself of all the attachments, desires and emotions that had made him the most supreme among all the Aryan tribes. He would have to abandon both—his greatest achievements and the sources of his despairs. He would have to slowly forget the Great War on the plains of Kurukshetra which he would now go onto oversee, mastermind and eventually bring to an end; he would simply forget this inevitable cataclysm which would annihilate entire generations, which would maim, orphan and widow too many to count, and which would leave the battlefields seared in a blood-red hue that wont wash away for millennia despite apocalyptic rains.

‘But . . .’, Krishna went on to ask, before he let go of this avatar as man, he wanted to remember those who he loved and lived with, those who would be slaughtered, those who would perish in that fire of violence. He wanted to relive the dissipation of their selves, he wanted to account for their lives and for their ends. He wanted to witness those hours when the living were consecrated to death, as freely and unthinkingly as butter was poured into a sacrificial fire. He wanted to feel for himself, for the last time, the love, respect, and hate as only a human could. Brahma then spoke with an avuncular tenderness: ‘We cannot delay the Deaths of anyone. But for you, we’ll prolong it by a night. Only for you to hear about all that you hold dear.’

Together, then the Creator and the Destroyer, Brahma and Shiva, spoke in their voices to Krishna: ‘The Fates have ordained your death at the hands of a hunter. On that day, we shall bless him and he will narrate nine lives till your body ceases to draw breath. As each tale ends, your body shall be washed away off that human sentiment embodied in that story. In the end, what shall remain is only you, you who are the Oracle, you who are both Shiva and Brahma, you who are translucent, timeless and the totality of all beings.’

Krishna smiled and bowed to them. When he looked up, he found Jara sitting there, sharpening the nib of his firestone, rubbing it against the rock to produce shards of fire on that cold night. He said, somewhat morosely, 'You have been asleep for a while and I didn't have the heart to wake you up.'

* * *

Krishna watched him labour to make fire when Jara finally turned to him and said:

'Since they say you once helped Agni burn down the whole of Khandava forest, will you be kind enough to help me light a fire. I have been struggling for a while.'

“‘They’?”

'They, the people. I have heard them tell tales of you lifting mountains and killing demons as a child.'

Krishna laughed and said: 'Never believe what storytellers tell you. They marry lies and truth to give birth to pleasure. You surely know that?'

Jara ignored that remark and asked once again, 'So, you truly are not a God?'

'No, I am just Krishna. What you describe is the handiwork of magicians or the Gods. I am neither.'

'What then are you, my dear sir?' Jara said with a touch of exasperation.

Krishna kept silent and let Jara work the stone. A few moments later, a small flame was born. On that fire, Jara placed a cob of corn. With the sun set and darkness nearly everywhere, the air was rife with the smell of food. Then, unprompted, Krishna said: 'The most wondrous thing about our world is that forms change. From stone you make fire, from fires we make food. But the real wonder is . . .'

Jara spoke suddenly, in a voice that was his, but it was now inflected, heavier in tone, and more assured, as if someone else had

taken possession of him. ‘ . . . how wondrous it is to live, watch others live, to see others die willingly. Like in a great War.’

A moment’s silence later, Krishna suggested, ‘Perhaps you could tell me about the war in Kurukshetra, about Bhishma, Arjuna, about Duryodhana . . . about how it all came to end.’

‘How can I tell you about them? I know nothing,’ Jara protested distractedly.

Krishna then kept silent, and watched the spectral presences of Brahma and Shiva whisper into Jara’s ears, ‘Speak, and the words will come. You have heard them before. In the marketplace, from your wife, from the forests and the woods. Let them guide your tongue. Let that be your atonement for injuring this son of Devaki. Speak the story of Bhishma and Arjuna, of Draupadi and Duryodhana as well as you know. Speak freely, and the words shall form on their own.’

Jara kept silent till the luminous presences vanished. Then his body stirred, as if he had awoken from some deep meditative stupor, and said to Krishna, ‘The words that I speak come from somewhere within me but from where they emerge, I do not know. This is not the story told by scholars and priests, but it is one told by hunters and fishermen, men who have neither learnt grammar nor the histories of learning. I speak from my heart, which is corrupt and venal. Please forgive me if these words only echo falsehoods. They are merely truths and lies as I have heard them.’

Krishna noted that Jara’s voice was no longer struck by doubt or hesitation, despite the qualifications he offered. He spoke as if he was Krishna’s equal, a friend who had found his own voice. It was as if an unseen mind had begun to whisper words and ideas into Jara’s body and being.

Krishna smiled and said, ‘Speak that which you can remember. Do not worry if it is true or false. Do not worry if it is brimming over with excesses or if it has been obscured by time. Let me, the listener, find my own way through the forest of your words.’

Assuredly, Jara began to speak in the cadences of oracles and soothsayers, as he slowly prepared the grounds. 'It was the darkest of nights. The ninth day of battle on the fields of Kurukshetra. Death stalked everyone.'

'That is a terrifying start. A most auspicious way to begin. I am already loving it,' Krishna said with mischief and longing in his heart.

What followed was a night full of stories, tall and true, tales of human loves and misery, lusts and blood feuds—all of which were of Krishna's own making—with Jara the hunter as the narrator and Krishna, the God among all Gods, as the listener. The hunter spoke freely, unconcerned by convention or morality,

'Who shall you start with?' Krishna asked, like a child awaiting his bedtime story, even as blood continued to pour from his feet and life was being drained from him.

'Let us start with Bhishma. The oldest of the Kurus. His is a good story. They say he was the most venerable. The greatest of warriors among the Kurus, the oldest of humans. He served the throne of Hastinapura, but they say he never married. He commanded the armies of the kinds we have never seen but he himself never became king. His own life had seen many spectacles and wonders but none was as wondrous as his own deathless life that would now have to die . . .'

Thus began—not a celestial song, set to meter and grace, immortalized by poets and philosophers but rather a human song, narrated by an imperfect and unreliable narrator who helped our avatar of God remember all that he had wrought in the quest for Dharma.

Discover the Greatest Novels of the Year

If you enjoyed this extract and wish to read on, [click here](#).

Keerthik Sasidharan's *The Dharma Forest* is one of ten books on the
2021 JCB Prize for Literature longlist.

Follow @TheJCBprize.

The winner of the 2021 JCB Prize for Literature will be announced on 13th November.



THE JCB PRIZE FOR LITERATURE —2021—

www.thejcbprize.org

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS