

FABIO MORABITO

Translated from the Spanish by Geoff Hargreaves

Suits of Armor

One morning, two knights errant meet upstream, at a bend in the river, in a small clearing that could have been designed expressly for a sword-fight. It is eleven o'clock on a bright spring morning, with both the hour and the season ideal for dueling. Some time later, at twelve or one, when the sun is beating down hard, their suits of armor will get as hot as ovens and it will be torture to move inside them.

As soon as the two knights see each other, they get off their steeds, tie the reins to a tree, and take up their positions in the clearing. There is not much to say, except to declare in a loud voice the name of the lord each one serves, which is frequently the same for both combatants, though that is no impediment to a fight, possibly because each one announces it in his own particular way, selecting the parts of those grandiose, interminable names that most appeal to him, or because their nervousness at the approaching combat deafens them to what the other is shouting. Then they unsheathe their swords and exchange their first sword-thrusts, and the din, in the words of the poets, "makes the woodlands tremble."

In reality, this first exchange of blows is only a warm-up and a way to assess the strength of the opposition. An unspoken rule in these encounters states that it is altogether improper to slaughter your adversary right away, for it is a question of fighting with style, not brawling in the street. Hence the opening round should not be shorter than ten minutes, and ideally the whole fight should last between twenty minutes and half an hour. If the fight continues beyond the half hour, this can only mean that both combatants are incompetent. It is a well-known truth that Orlando and Agricane fought each other for two solid days, but that was Orlando against Agricane, the finest Christian warrior against the champion of the Moors, no less.

Another implicit rule insists on the right of the combatants to suspend the fight, if anything happens to compromise it, from twisting an ankle to a simple fit of coughing. In other words, one has to win in a clean fight between equals, with no sort of unfair advantage. So when the left shoulder-guard of Knight A is knocked off by a blow from Knight B, the fight is interrupted. "Truce!" exclaims A, and hearing the exclamation, B lowers his sword, letting its point droop toward the ground. Then as A bends down to pick up the lost shoulder-guard, B uses the moment to go for his flask and swallow a mouthful of water.

Repairing a detached shoulder-guard is not a matter of seconds. So B sits down in the shade of a tree and watches how A goes about fixing the damage. Every knight errant carries a repair-kit with him, consisting of a few tools and replacement parts, and A is no exception. He has a bag in which he keeps a hammer, pliers, a variety of studs, and wires of different lengths and thicknesses. While A works on the shoulder-guard, B wanders over to glance at the repair-kit, wondering if A has anything that B is short of. The rules of chivalry do not prohibit the swapping of replacement parts. On the contrary,

they recommend these little business-deals during fights, for they contribute to the quality of a knight errant's equipment and thereby raise the standard of their conflicts.

B asks A if he can spare a bit of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wire, and A interrupts his work on the shoulder-guard, opens his bag, pulls out a section of top-quality wire, and shows it to B.

B inspects it and asks A how much he wants for it. A replies, "Half a basket of bread."

B offers a quarter of a basket, and after haggling a minute or two, they reach a deal. B goes to his horse, pulls out the bread from his provisions, and hands it to A. Then B takes off his helmet, yanks out the rusty wire holding his visor in place, and replaces it with the wire he's just bought. This simple operation takes less than ten minutes. B checks out his visor, to make sure it has stopped squeaking, and puts his helmet back on. Meanwhile A has fixed the shoulder-guard back onto his shoulder, taps it with his sword to test it, and looks satisfied. They are now ready to resume the fight. "Attack!" exclaims A and launches the first blow from his sword, one that B parries easily. They fight for five minutes without anything of consequence occurring. This is a well-balanced fight, where the slightest mistake could be fatal. They are both aware of that and they proceed with caution.

"Truce!" exclaims B suddenly. He shows A that his shin-guard has come loose and is dangling from his knee. A points his sword to the ground, and B goes over to his steed and opens his repair-kit, looking for a replacement shin-guard. He doesn't find one and asks A if he has an extra one. A can't understand why B started to fight without having an extra shin-guard and reproaches him. "You should have said so at the beginning, when we met! Then I wouldn't have bothered getting off my horse." B listens unabashed, for he knows that A has two shin-guards in his bag, because he saw them, when A was repairing his shoulder-guard. And he says so to him, offering half a basket of bread for either one. "Three quarters," replies A. B accepts, goes for the bread, and hands over the agreed amount to A, who presents his rival with the shin-guard. Then B sits on the ground with his tools and begins to fit the new shin-guard onto his armor, hammering away, threading in a three quarter inch wire and one-inch studs.

This operation takes him a full half-hour, long enough for A to enjoy a nap in the shade of a tree. When B has finished, he wakes A. "Attack!" he exclaims, and A, still half-asleep, stands up, puts on his helmet, and they renew the fight. But by now it is high noon. The sun is beating down, they are both sweating copiously inside the ovens of their armor, and their sword-blows are lackluster and unenthusiastic. Luckily, B's backplate falls off, and once again they have to interrupt the fight.

The heat is unbearable and they both dash for their flasks and gulp down water. Then B has to face the difficult task of repairing his backplate. He doesn't have a spare one, and A can't criticize him for that, because only an idiot would load himself down with an extra backplate. B knows that his only recourse is to repair the broken piece and now regrets putting off buying a new suit of armor. He has had the same one for fifteen years and lately things have become impossible. In every fight recently, the studs have worked loose, and with increasing frequency he's had to use wire to hold the rattling pieces together. He hates to do it because the wire makes his appearance so shabby.

But what else can he do? A few days back, he'd run into a knight errant, who took one look at his shabbiness and pretended he didn't see him. Nobody likes to measure himself against a scruffy opponent.

But to tell the truth, the other knight's armor was no great shakes, either. And in fact, now that he takes a close look at A's armor, it strikes him as being very like that of the knight who snubbed him. It's full of repairs and replaced parts and is crying out for a complete overhaul. It's almost worse than B's own. Six of one, half a dozen of the other, thinks B and hopes to goodness that nobody sees them fighting.

Meanwhile, A has sauntered over to look at the size of the repair and he realizes that it's going to take ages. B doesn't have any pliers, since he swapped them with another knight errant for five brand-new studs; so he asks A if he can borrow his. A goes to fetch them and on his return makes his adversary an offer: while B is working with the hammer and pliers, A, just so that he's not standing idly by, will make some holes in B's breastplate, where the studs that fix the backplate to it can go in.

Depressed by the breaking of his backplate and tempted to consign the whole of chivalry to hell and to get a regular job, B accepts A's offer, takes off his breastplate, and passes it over to A.

A short while later, everything seems to be going smoothly. Then B has a tantrum and starts to pound his backplate with his hammer and bends it completely in two. "Are you crazy?" asks A and seizes B by the arm, to get the hammer away from him. But B fights back. They grab each other and go rolling over in the grass, locked in a fierce embrace of metal plates, studs, and wires, until B manages to wriggle free, and visibly embarrassed at his momentary loss of self-control, jumps up and shouts, "I hate this suit of armor! I spend more time repairing it than I do fighting."

A says nothing. He is down on all fours, looking for some screws he lost, while he was rolling around with B. Since they are very small and his eyesight isn't the best, he asks B to help him. B bends down and starts to look in the grass. It takes them a while to find the screws. Two of them came out of A's collar-bone area, and he won't be able to put them back himself without removing the complete suit of armor, a time-consuming and fussy procedure, so he asks B to put them in. B picks up A's pliers, stands behind him, and starts to put the two screws into the top of the backplate. "Don't screw them in too tight," says A, while B looks closely at the pliers that A has just given him.

"These pliers are exactly like ones I used to have!"

Then he asks A where he got them.

A replies he got them from a knight errant in exchange for some brand new studs he needed.

"Studs like these?" asks B and he shows A the ones he'd put into the shoulder-guards.

"Yes, just the same," says A.

"We haven't met before, have we?" asks B.

A looks him in the face. "I doubt it. The world is too big for two knights errant of our standing to meet each other twice, though, of course, anything is possible."

Once he finishes adjusting the screws into A's armor, B goes and sits back down in his place and sets to work again on his broken backplate. Under expert strokes of the hammer the backplate begins to take its old shape.

A now takes a closer look at that hammer, because it seems familiar. He asks B where he got it.

B replies, "In a swap with a knight errant who was badly in need of a visor."

"A visor like this one?" asks A.

B looks at the visor on A's helmet and says, "Yes, like that one."

A looks B closely in the face for a second time. "You could be right. I think we might have met before."

While they are talking, A is going ahead with the holes in B's breastplate, but the suspicion that he might have bumped into B previously disturbs his concentration. He checks out B's horse from top to bottom. But all horses look the same to him. In fact, he hardly ever bothers to look at horses. Even his own, though it's the only companion he has. Because it's just a horse to him. If somebody switched it for another horse, the chances are he wouldn't notice. Being a knight errant is the loneliest job in the world. When you're not fighting, you're dreaming of fighting, so there isn't much time to pay attention to what goes on around you. All the same, if you have eyes and a memory, it's hard not to notice certain things coming back into your life.

"This place, for example," thinks A. "This bend in the river, with the two willows on the bank. I could swear I was here before. And not just once, but several times. But then the river was in full spate. Now its level is lower. The waters used to be clean, but now they're brownish, and full of garbage."

He decides to mention the matter to B. Without stopping his hammering on the backplate, B says he's been thinking the same.

"Wouldn't you say the river was cleaner back then, without so much garbage?" A asks. "They used to wash clothes in it, didn't they?"

B makes a gesture of agreement, then goes back to his hammering.

There is no rule against it, but knights errant don't like to indulge in small talk.

Small talk is for small minds, as they say.

Stupefied by the heat, they both feel like sleeping, a common feeling among knights in armor, who spend almost two-thirds of their lives fast asleep. While they are dozing off, C enters the clearing. He is on foot, leading a donkey by the reins, and is dressed as townsman. He looks at A and B sleeping on the grass. He sees the damaged backplate in the hands of B, and ties his donkey to the same tree as the horses of A and B.

Then he walks towards the knights, clapping his hands to wake them. A and B, warriors from the cradle, leap to their feet and grasp their swords, ready to fight.

It takes C a while to calm them down. "Gently, gentlemen," he says. "Nothing's happening." Then he points to B's backplate and adds, "I see you gents have a problem there, but as luck would have it, I've got something with me that might interest you." He goes to the donkey and lifts a huge sack from its back and deposits it on the ground. "Come over here," he says to them, "while I untie it."

A and B, cautious despite still being half asleep, take a few steps forward but keep their hands on their swords.

They are astonished at what they see. The sack is filled with pieces of armor. C spreads them out with the practiced skill of a merchant. There are almost brand-new backplates, breastplates and gorgets in excellent condition, greaves without a single dent, visors and helmets in all shapes and sizes.

"You gents are in luck," says C. "Everything I've got here is going for half price." A and B, who have never seen so many replacements in one spot before, drop their swords, and each one picks up a piece, scrutinizes it carefully, checks its size against his body, then picks up another, drops it, and picks up yet another. There are enough pieces of armor to outfit four knights completely, from top to toe.

B finds a beautiful backplate that is a perfect fit and says to C, "I'll give you three quarters of a basket of bread for this, plus five studs."

C looks at him with contempt. "What do you mean, bread? I'll let you have it for thirty ducats, a special price for such a distinguished gentleman."

B, who hasn't understood, comes back with, "Half a wineskin of wine. You've never been offered that much before for a backplate. Half a wineskin and not a drop more!"

"You don't get it, do you?" C retorts. "Here you pay with ducats, sir. Let's not fool around any more. Twenty-eight, my last offer."

Seeing that A has picked up some shoulder-guards and is staring at them with stars in his eyes, C says to him, "I'll let you have both those for eighteen ducats, a genuine bargain, but I don't give credit."

A asks what credit is.

C looks at him, trying to work out what is behind the question. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you?" he says. "I'm talking to a couple of jokers, aren't I?" Then changing his tone, he adds, "Okay, gentlemen, I'll be straight with you. I want to get rid of all this junk, but I'm not giving it away. So let's act like the civilized persons we are. Give me a hundred ducats, a hundred ducats, and you can have the lot."

But A and B look at him in puzzlement. They have only the vaguest notion of money and neither one has ever had a single ducat in his pocket. Their days are spent far from towns and markets, on the shadowy banks of rivers, in the

middle of valleys and forests, where they live on wild fruits gathered here and there or on things from the farmlands they pass in their wanderings.

C looks at A and B, from one to the other. Now that the thrill of bargaining is over, he notices the months-long growths of beards on their chins, their filthy fingernails, and the decrepit condition of their armor. A look of scorn creeps into his eyes. Suddenly he grabs the backplate and the shoulder-guards from their hands and packs all the pieces scattered on the grass back into the sack, cursing between his teeth.

A and B watch him close the sack and load it onto the back of the donkey. They watch him untie the animal and disappear with it into the trees. Their eyes are distraught. When the metallic clinking dies away, they realize that he has really gone.

Then, without a word, they go back to their business. They sit on the ground and get on with the repairs, working now with their hearts in their boots, especially B, who can't help comparing his misshapen backplate with the one the man with the donkey showed him. He bangs away, heart-broken, then suddenly stops and says to A, "This backplate will never be fixed. Let's finish what we started, with or without it."

But A disagrees. He tells B that he has never fought a warrior who lacked a backplate and he has no intention of starting now.

"Then take off your shoulder-guards," B tells him. "That way we'll be equal and we can get this thing over and done with."

A thinks that B has gone crazy, but he doesn't want to look a coward.

"Just as you wish," A says. "And I'll take off my arm-guards as well."

Not to be outdone, B says he won't put his breastplate back on and pulls off his skirt.

They both pick up their helmets and resume their places.

A has never fought in such wretched conditions and prays no one walks by. He and B put their helmets on, unsheathe their swords, lower their visors, and B, the one who last interrupted the fight, shouts "Attack!" and they charge at each other.

The fight, under the two o'clock sun and with their armor in the state it is, takes on a rough and ready air. One of A's leg-pieces goes shooting through the air, but neither stops for it and the fight goes on. B's gorget is loosened by A's sword, but B doesn't shout, "Truce!" He keeps on fighting with the piece of iron flapping across his chest. They don't even stop when B sends A's helmet flying, a mischance that would halt a duel between knights anywhere in the world. On the contrary, the blow only serves to infuriate A, who hurls himself against B. But B dodges the onrush, and A, going too fast to stop, loses his balance and falls over. B reaches him with a leap and manages to jam the point of his sword against the neck of his foe, before he can get up.

Lying on the ground, panting and with B's sword at his throat, A remains still, with terror in his eyes, awaiting the final thrust. They both know what comes next.

But B appears to hesitate. He looks at A, as if seeing him for the first time, and says, "I could swear I've seen you before."

A replies, "You're wrong. A true knight errant never treads the same ground twice."

B frowns. He knows that with that sentiment A is pardoning B for killing him.

If the world has suddenly contracted in size, bringing them back to each other time after time, the way it does with the small-minded, there is one way only to preserve the grandeur of bygone years; their paths must never cross again.

And B, closing his eyes, buries his sword in A's waiting throat.