Death in the Forest

Now it was here in this great golden dawn.
By her still sleeping husband lain she gazed
Into her past as one about to die
Looks back upon the sunlit fields of life
Where he too ran and sported with the rest,
Lifting his head above the huge dark stream
Into whose depths he must for ever plunge.
All she had been and done she lived again.
The whole year in a swift and eddying race
Of memories swept through her and fled away
Into the irrecoverable past.
Then silently she rose and, service done,
Bowed down to the great goddess simply carved
By Satyavan upon a forest stone.
What prayer she breathed her soul and Durga knew.
Perhaps she felt in the dim forest huge
The infinite Mother watching over her child,
Perhaps the shrouded Voice spoke some still word.
At last she came to the pale mother queen.
She spoke but with guarded lips and tranquil face
Lest some stray word or some betraying look
Should let pass into the mother's unknowing breast,
Slaying all happiness and need to live,
A dire foreknowledge of the grief to come.
Only the needed utterance passage found:
All else she pressed back into her anguished heart
And forced upon her speech an outward peace.

1 The Book of Death was taken from Canto Three of an early version of Savitri which had only six cantos and an epilogue. It was slightly revised at a late stage and a number of new lines were added, but it was never fully worked into the final version of the poem. Its original designation, "Canto Three", has been retained as a reminder of this.
“One year that I have lived with Satyavan
Here on the emerald edge of the vast woods
In the iron ring of the enormous peaks
Under the blue rifts of the forest sky,
I have not gone into the silences
Of this great woodland that enringed my thoughts
With mystery, nor in its green miracles
Wandered, but this small clearing was my world.
Now has a strong desire seized all my heart
To go with Satyavan holding his hand
Into the life that he has loved and touch
Herbs he has trod and know the forest flowers
And hear at ease the birds and the scurrying life
That starts and ceases, rich far rustle of boughs
And all the mystic whispering of the woods.
Release me now and let my heart have rest.”
She answered: “Do as thy wise mind desires,
O calm child-sovereign with the eyes that rule.
I hold thee for a strong goddess who has come
Pitying our barren days; so dost thou serve
Even as a slave might, yet art thou beyond
All that thou doest, all our minds conceive,
Like the strong sun that serves earth from above.”
Then the doomed husband and the woman who knew
Went with linked hands into that solemn world
Where beauty and grandeur and unspoken dream,
Where Nature’s mystic silence could be felt
Communing with the secrecy of God.
Beside her Satyavan walked full of joy
Because she moved with him through his green haunts:
He showed her all the forest’s riches, flowers
Innumerable of every odour and hue
And soft thick clinging creepers red and green
And strange rich-plumaged birds, to every cry
That haunted sweetly distant boughs replied
With the shrill singer’s name more sweetly called.
He spoke of all the things he loved: they were
His boyhood's comrades and his playfellows,
Coeval's and companions of his life
Here in this world whose every mood he knew:
Their thoughts which to the common mind are blank,
He shared, to every wild emotion felt
An answer. Deeply she listened, but to hear
The voice that soon would cease from tender words
And treasure its sweet cadences beloved
For lonely memory when none by her walked
And the beloved voice could speak no more.
But little dwelt her mind upon their sense;
Of death, not life she thought or life's lone end.
Love in her bosom hurt with the jagged edges
Of anguish moaned at every step with pain
Crying, "Now, now perhaps his voice will cease
For ever." Even by some vague touch oppressed
Sometimes her eyes looked round as if their orbs
Might see the dim and dreadful god's approach.
But Satyavan had paused. He meant to finish
His labour here that happy, linked, uncaring
They two might wander free in the green deep
Primæval mystery of the forest's heart.
A tree that raised its tranquil head to heaven
Luxuriating in verdure, summoning
The breeze with amorous wideness of its boughs,
He chose and with his steel assailed the arm
Brown, rough and strong hidden in its emerald dress.
Wordless but near she watched, no turn to lose
Of the bright face and body which she loved.
Her life was now in seconds, not in hours,
And every moment she economised
Like a pale merchant leaned above his store,
The miser of his poor remaining gold.
But Satyavan wielded a joyous axe.
He sang high snatches of a sage's chant
That pealed of conquered death and demons slain,
And sometimes paused to cry to her sweet speech
Of love and mockery tenderer than love:
She like a pantheress leaped upon his words
And carried them into her cavern heart.
But as he worked, his doom upon him came.
The violent and hungry hounds of pain
Travelled through his body biting as they passed
Silently, and all his suffering breath besieged
Strove to rend life’s strong heart-cords and be free.
Then helped, as if a beast had left its prey,
A moment in a wave of rich relief
Reborn to strength and happy ease he stood
Rejoicing and resumed his confident toil
But with less seeing strokes. Now the great woodsman
Hewed at him and his labour ceased: lifting
His arm he flung away the poignant axe
Far from him like an instrument of pain.
She came to him in silent anguish and clasped,
And he cried to her, “Savitri, a pang
Cleaves through my head and breast as if the axe
Were piercing it and not the living branch.
Such agony rends me as the tree must feel
When it is sundered and must lose its life.
Awhile let me lay my head upon thy lap
And guard me with thy hands from evil fate:
Perhaps because thou touchest, death may pass.”
Then Savitri sat under branches wide,
Cool, green against the sun, not the hurt tree
Which his keen axe had cloven, — that she shunned;
But leaned beneath a fortunate kingly trunk
She guarded him in her bosom and strove to soothe
His anguished brow and body with her hands.
All grief and fear were dead within her now
And a great calm had fallen. The wish to lessen
His suffering, the impulse that opposes pain
Were the one mortal feeling left. It passed:
Griefless and strong she waited like the gods.
But now his sweet familiar hue was changed
Into a tarnished greyness and his eyes
Dimmed over, forsaken of the clear light she loved.
Only the dull and physical mind was left,
Vacant of the bright spirit’s luminous gaze.
But once before it faded wholly back,
He cried out in a clinging last despair,
“Savitri, Savitri, O Savitri,
Lean down, my soul, and kiss me while I die.”
And even as her pallid lips pressed his,
His failed, losing last sweetness of response;
His cheek pressed down her golden arm. She sought
His mouth still with her living mouth, as if
She could persuade his soul back with her kiss;
Then grew aware they were no more alone.
Something had come there conscious, vast and dire.
Near her she felt a silent shade immense
Chilling the noon with darkness for its back.
An awful hush had fallen upon the place:
There was no cry of birds, no voice of beasts.
A terror and an anguish filled the world,
As if annihilation’s mystery
Had taken a sensible form. A cosmic mind
Looked out on all from formidable eyes
Contemning all with its unbearable gaze
And with immortal lids and a vast brow
It saw in its immense destroying thought
All things and beings as a pitiful dream,
Rejecting with calm disdain Nature’s delight,
The wordless meaning of its deep regard
Voicing the unreality of things
And life that would be for ever but never was
And its brief and vain recurrence without cease,
As if from a Silence without form or name
The Shadow of a remote uncaring god
Doomed to his Nought the illusory universe,
Cancelling its show of idea and act in Time
And its imitation of eternity.
She knew that visible Death was standing there
And Satyavan had passed from her embrace.