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ROBERTO CALASSO

## KA

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**Roberto Calasso**

## KA

Born in Florence, Roberto Calasso lives in Milan, where he is publisher of Adelphi. He is the author of *The Ruin of Kasch* and *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, which was the winner of France's Prix Veillon and the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger.



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*Stories of the Mind and Gods of India*

Roberto Calasso

*Translated by Tim Parks*

*Vintage International*

Vintage Books

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the Knopf edition as follows:

Calasso, Roberto.

*Ka* / Roberto Calasso; translated by Tim Parks.—1st American ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Mythology, Greek—Fiction. 2. Mythology, Hindu—Fiction.

I. Title. II. Parks, Tim

PQ4863.A3818K3 1998

98087763

eISBN: 978-0-8041-5166-5

Author photograph by Giorgio Magister

[www.vintagebooks.com](http://www.vintagebooks.com)

v3.1





The world is like the impression left by the telling of a story.

~~Yogavāsiṣṭha, 2.3.11~~

Ideae enim nihil aliud sunt, quam narrationes sive historiae naturae mentales.

Spinoza, *Cogitata metaphysica*, 1.6

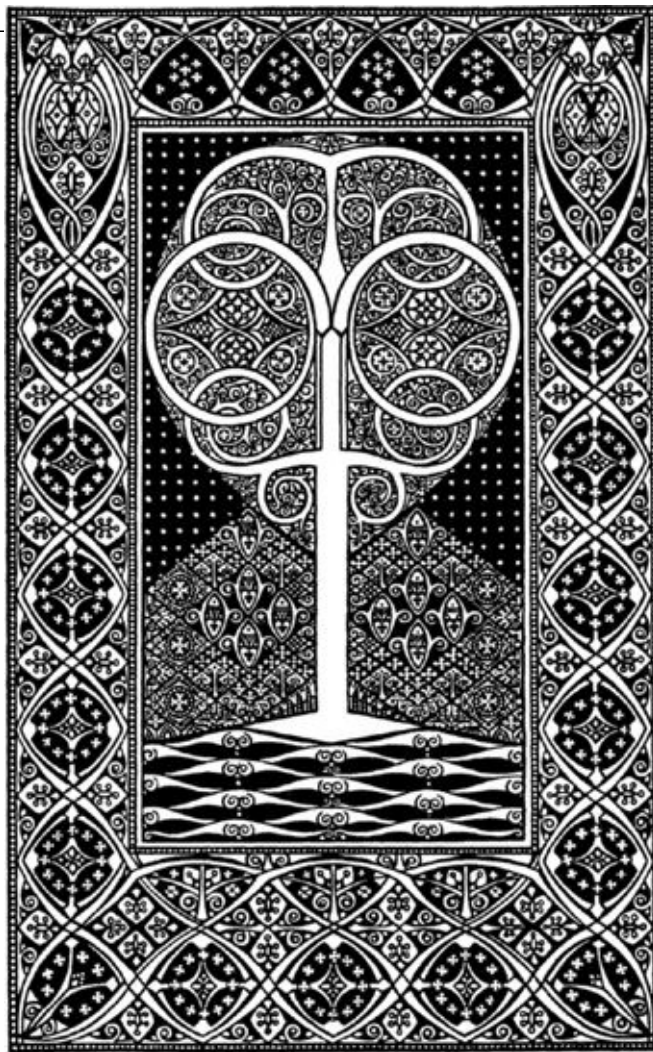
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Suddenly an eagle darkened the sky. Its bright black, almost violet feathers made a moving curtain between clouds and earth. Hanging from its claw likewise immense and stiff with terror, an elephant and a turtle skimmed the mountaintop. It seemed the bird meant to use the peaks as pointed knives to gut its prey. Only occasionally did the eagle's staring eye flash out from behind the thick fronds of something held tight in its beak: a huge branch. A hundred strips of cowhide would not have sufficed to cover it.

Garuḍa flew and remembered. It was only a few days since he had hatched from his egg and already so much had happened. Flying was the best way of thinking, of thinking things over. Who was the first person he'd seen? His mother, Vinatā. Beautiful in her tininess, she sat on a stone, watching his egg hatch, determinedly passive. Hers was the first eye Garuḍa held in his own. And at once he knew that that eye was his own. Deep inside was an ember that glowed in the breeze. The same he could feel burning beneath his own feathers.

Then Garuḍa looked around. Opposite Vinatā, likewise sitting on a stone, he saw another woman, exactly like his mother. But a black bandage covered one eye. And she too seemed absorbed in contemplation. On the ground before her, Garuḍa saw, lay a great tangle, slowly heaving and squirming. His perfect eye focused, to understand. They were snakes. Black snakes, knotted, separate, coiled, uncoiled. A moment later Garuḍa could make out a thousand snakes' eyes, coldly watching him. From behind came a voice: "They are your cousins. And that woman is my sister, Kadrū. We are their slaves." These were the first words his mother spoke to him.

Vinatā looked up at the huge expanse that was Garuḍa and said: "My child, it's time for you to know who you are. You have been born to a mother in slavery. But I was not born in slavery. I and my sister Kadrū were brides of Kaśyapa, the great ṛṣi, the seer. Slow, strong, and taciturn, Kaśyapa understood everything. He loved us, but apart from the absolute essentials took no care of us. He would sit motionless for hours, for days—and we had no idea what he was doing. He held up the world on the shell of his head. My sister and I longed to be doing something with ourselves. An angry energy drove us from within. At first we vie for Kaśyapa's attention. But then we realized that he looked on us as clouds do: equally benevolent and indifferent to both. One day he called us together: it was time for him to withdraw into the forest, he said. But he didn't want to leave without granting us a favor. Immediately we thought of ourselves all alone, amid these marshes, these woods, these brambles, these dunes. Kadrū needed no prompting: she asked for a thousand children, of equal splendor. Kaśyapa agreed. I too was quick to decide: I asked for just two children, but more beautiful and powerful than Kadrū's. Kaśyapa raised his heavy eyelids: 'You will have one and a half,' he said. Then he set off with his stick. We never saw him again."

Vinatā went on: "My child, I have kept watch over your egg for five hundred years. I didn't want the same thing to happen to you as happened to your brother Aruṇa. Impatience got the better of me, and I opened his egg too soon. Only then did I understand what a ṛṣi from

distant land, a pale and angular seer, will say one day: that impatience is the only sin. That was the lower half of Aruṇa's body left unformed. No sooner had he seen me than my first child cursed me. I would be my sister's slave for five hundred years. And at the end of that time I would be saved by my other child, by you. This said, Aruṇa ascended toward the sun. Now you can see him cross the sky every day. He is Sūrya's charioteer. He will never speak to me again."

Vinatā went on: "We were the only human beings, myself and Kadrū, with a thousand black snakes about us, all of them the same, and your egg maturing imperceptibly in a pot of steaming clay. Already we loathed each other, we two sisters. But we couldn't do without each other. One evening we were squatting down on the shore of the ocean. You know that I am also called Suparṇī, Aquilina, and perhaps that's why I'm your mother. There's nothing my eye doesn't see. Kadrū has only one eye, she lost the other at Dakṣa's sacrifice—oh, but that's a story you could hardly know ... Yet she too has very keen sight. One evening we were heading in the same direction, bickering and bored as ever, our eyes scanning the waters of the ocean, seeking out the creatures of the deep, the pearls. A diffuse glow in the depths led us on. We didn't know where it came from. Then we turned to gaze at the ocean's end, where sea joins sky. Two different lights. A sharp line separated them, the only sharp line in a world that was all vain profusion. Suddenly we saw something take shape against the light: a white horse. It raised its hooves over waters and sky, suspended there. Thus we discovered amazement. Beside the bright horse we glimpsed something dark: a log? its tail? Everything else was so distinct. That was what the world was made of, as we saw it: the expanse of the waters, the expanse of the sky, that white horse."

Garuḍa stopped her: "Who was the horse?" "I knew nothing at the time," Vinatā said. "No one knows. I know only that this question will haunt us forever, until time itself dissolves. And that final moment will be announced by a white horse. All I can tell you now, of the horse, is what it was called and how it was born. The horse is called Uccaiḥśravas. It was born when the ocean was churned." Listening to his mother, Garuḍa was like a schoolboy who for the first time hears something mentioned that will loom over his whole life. He said: "Mother, I shall not ask you any more about the horse, but how did it happen, what was the churning of the ocean?" Vinatā said: "That's something you'll have to know about, and you'll soon understand why. You are my son—and you were born to ransom me. Children are born to ransom their parents. And there is only one way I can be ransomed by giving the *soma* to the Snakes. The *soma* is a plant and a milky liquid. You will find it in the sky; Indra watches over it, all the gods watch over it, and other powerful beings too. It's the *soma* you must win. The *soma* is my ransom."

Vinatā had withdrawn deep within herself. She spoke with her eyes on the ground, almost unaware of the majestic presence of her son, his feathers quivering. But she roused herself and began talking again, as though to a child, struggling both to be clear and to say only the little that could be said at this point: "In the beginning, not even the gods had the *soma*. Being gods wasn't enough. Life was dull, there was no enchantment. The Devas, the gods, looked with hatred on the other gods, the Asuras, the antigods, the firstborn, who likewise fe

keenly the absence of the *soma*. Why fight at all, if the desirable substance wasn't there to fight for? The gods meditated and sharpened their senses, but there would come the day when they wanted just to live. Gloomily, they met together on Mount Meru, where the peacock passes through the vault of the heavens to become the only part of this world that belongs to the other. The gods were waiting for something new, anything. Viṣṇu whispered to Brahmā, then Brahmā explained to the others. They had to stir the churn of the ocean, until the *soma* floated up, as butter floats up from milk. And this task could not be undertaken in opposition to the Asuras, but only with their help. The pronouncement ran contrary to everything the Devas had previously thought. But in the end, what did they have to lose, given that their lives were so futile? Now they thought: Anything, so long as there be a trial, a risk, a task."

Vinatā fell silent. Garuḍa respected her silence for a long time. Then he said: "Mother, Mother, you still haven't told me how you became a slave to your sister." "We were looking at the white horse. The more it enchanted me, the greater the rancor I felt for my sister. I said: 'Hey, One-Eye, can you see what color that horse is?' Kadrū didn't answer. The black bandage leaned forward. Then I said: 'Want to bet? The one who gets the horse's color right will be mistress of the other.' The following morning, at dawn, we were together again, watching the sky. And once again the horse appeared against the background of sea and sky. I shouted: 'It's white.' Silence. I repeated: 'Kadrū, don't you think it's white?' To this day I have never seen such a malignant look in her eye. Kadrū said: 'It's got a black tail.' 'We'll go and see,' I said, 'and whichever of us is wrong will be the other's slave.' 'So be it,' Kadrū said.

"Then we split up. Later I learned that Kadrū had tried to corrupt her children. She had asked them to hang on to the horse's tail, to make it look black. The Snakes refused. For the first time Kadrū showed her fury. She said: 'You'll all be exterminated ...' One day you will realize," Vinatā went on in a quieter voice, "that nothing can be exterminated, because everything leaves a residue, and every residue is a beginning ... But it's too soon to be telling you any more ... Just remember this for now: Kadrū's curse was powerful. One far-off day will happen: the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas will fight, almost to the point of extinction, the one on their own and that of the peoples allied to them, so that a sacrifice of the Snakes may fail, so that the people recognize that the Snakes cannot be exterminated. That will happen at the latest possible moment ... Kadrū is calamitous, her word is fatal." Vinatā's eyes were two slits. "But where was I? Now we had to get to the horse. We took flight, side by side. The creatures of the deep flashed their backs above the waters, surprised to see these two women in flight. We paid no attention. The only thing in the world that mattered to us was our game. When we reached the horse, I stroked its white rump. 'As you see,' I said to Kadrū. 'Wait,' said One-Eye. And she showed me a few black hairs her deft fingers had picked out from among all the white ones of the creature's tail. For no apparent reason, they were wrapped around a pole. Some say that those hairs were Snakes, faithful to their mother. Or that there was only one black hair, the Snake Karkoṭaka. Others say that Uccaiṣravas has black hairs mixed in with the white. It's a dispute that will never be settled. 'I've beaten you. The sea is my witness. Now you are my slave,' said Kadrū. It was then that I sensed, in a sudden rending, what debt is, the debt of life, of any life. For five hundred years I would feel its weight."

“I’ll go and win this *soma*, Mother,” said Garuḍa with his most solemn expression. “But first must eat.” They were squatting down face-to-face. Garuḍa, a mountain of feathers; Vinatā, minute, sinuous creature. “Go to the middle of the ocean,” said Vinatā. “There you’ll find the land of the Niṣādas. You can eat as many of them as you want. They don’t know the Vedas. But remember: Never kill a brahman. A brahman is fire, is a blade, is poison. Under no circumstances, even if seized by anger, must you hurt a brahman.” Garuḍa listened, even more serious. “But what is a brahman, Mother?” he said. “How do I recognize one?” So far Garuḍa had seen nothing but black, coiled snakes and those two women who hated each other. He did not know what his father looked like. A brahman? What on earth can that be? wondered Garuḍa. “If you feel a firebrand in your throat,” said Vinatā “that’s a brahman. Come out if you realize you’ve swallowed a hook.” Garuḍa stared straight at her and thought: “So you can’t tell a brahman until you’ve almost swallowed him.” But already he was stretching his wings, eager to be gobbling up the Niṣādas.

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Caught by surprise, the Niṣādas didn’t even see Garuḍa coming. Blinded by wind and dust they were sucked by the thousands into a dark cavity that opened behind his beak. They plunged down there as if into a well. But one of them managed to hang on to that endless wall. With his other hand he held a young woman with snaky hair tight by the waist, dangling in the void. Garuḍa, who was gazing ahead with his beak half open, just enough to swallow up swarms of Niṣādas, suddenly felt something burning in his throat. “That’s a brahman,” he thought. So he said: “Brahman, I don’t know you, but I don’t mean you any harm. Come out of my throat.” And from Garuḍa’s throat came a shrill, steady voice: “I never come out unless I can bring this Niṣāda woman with me, she’s my bride.” “I’ve no objections,” said Garuḍa. Soon he saw them climbing onto his beak, taking care, fearful of getting hurt. Garuḍa was intrigued and thought: “Finally I’ll know what a brahman looks like.” He saw them sliding down his feathers. The brahman was thin, bony, dusty, his hair woven in a plait, his eyes sunken and vibrant. His long, determined fingers never let go of the wrist of the Niṣāda woman, whose beauty immediately reminded Garuḍa of his mother and his treacherous aunt Kadrū. This left him bewildered, while he reflected that quite probably he had already swallowed up thousands of women like her. But by now those two tiny beings were hurrying off, upright, agile, impatient, as if the whole world were opening before them. Garuḍa was more puzzled than ever. He felt an urgent need to talk to his father, whom he still not seen. As his wings stretched, another whirlwind devastated the earth.

Kaśyapa was watching a line of ants. He paid no attention to his son, nor to the crashing thunder announced his arrival. But Garuḍa wasn’t eager to speak either. He was watching Kaśyapa’s wrinkled, polished skull, his noble arms hanging down in abandon. He studied him for a while. He thought: “Now I know what a brahman is. A brahman is one who feeds himself by feeding on himself.” After a day’s silence, Kaśyapa looked up at Garuḍa. He said: “How do you know your mother?” then immediately went on to something else, as if he already knew the answer. “Seek out the elephant and the turtle who are quarreling in a lake. They will be your

food. The Niṣādas aren't enough for you. Then go and eat them on Rauhiṇa, that's a tree near here, a friend of mine. But be careful not to offend the Vālakhilyas ...”

“Who can these Vālakhilyas be?” thought Garuḍa, flying along, the elephant and the turtle tight in his claws. “No sooner does one thing seem to get clearer than another, bigger things turn up that's completely obscure.” While Garuḍa was thinking this over, puzzled again, his wing skimmed the huge tree Rauhiṇa. “By all means rest on a branch and eat,” said the tree in a voice. “Before you were born you sat here on me, along with a companion of yours, exactly like yourself. Perched on opposite branches, at the same height, you never left each other. You were already eating my fruit back then. And your companion watched you, though he didn't eat. You couldn't fly about the world then, because I was the world.” Garuḍa settled on a branch. Surrounded by the foliage that enfolded his feathers, he felt at home and couldn't understand why. Of his birthplace he could remember only sand, stone, and snakes. Where this tree protected him on every side with swathes of emerald that softened the mercile light of the sky. Hmm ... In the meantime he might as well devour the elephant and the turtle, now on their backs on this branch that was a hundred leagues long. He concentrated in a moment. He was choosing the spot where he would sink his beak—when there came a sudden crash. The branch had snapped. Shame and guilt overcame Garuḍa. He knew at once that he had done something awful, without having meant to. And it was all the more awful because he had not meant it. A vortex opened up in the tree, and Garuḍa flew out with the broken branch in his beak, the elephant and the turtle still in his claws. He was lost. He didn't know where to go. He sensed he was in danger of making a fatal mistake. From the branch came a hiss. At first he thought it was the wind. But the hissing went on, peremptory and fearful, shrill. He looked at the twigs. Upside down among the leaves, like bats, dangled scores of brahmans, each no taller than the phalanx of a thumb. Their bodies were perfectly formed and almost transparent, like flies' wings. Used as they were to hanging motionless, the flight was upsetting them terribly. Garuḍa thought: “Oh, the Vālakhilyas ...” He was sure it was they, sure of the enormity of his crime. “Noble Vālakhilyas,” said Garuḍa, “the last thing I want is to hurt you.” He was answered by a mocking rustle. “That's what you all say ...” No more he made out a voice. “The indestructible is tiny and tenuous as a syllable. You should know that, being made of syllables yourself. The tiny is negligible. So it is neglected ...” “Not blame me,” said Garuḍa. And now he began to fly in the most awkward fashion, taking the greatest possible care not to shake the branch he held in his beak. Despondent, he studied the mountains, looking for a clearing large and soft enough for him to put down the Vālakhilyas. But he couldn't find one. Perhaps he would waste away in the sky, circling forever. It was then that a huge mountain, the Gandhamādana, began to take shape ahead, and Garuḍa thought that he might attempt a last exploration. He was flying around the summit, slowly and cautiously, when he recognized the polished head of his father, Kaśyapa, sitting by a pond on the slopes of the Gandhamādana. Garuḍa hovered over him, without making a sound. Kaśyapa said nothing, paid no attention, though the whole of Gandhamādana was veiled in shadow. Then he said: “Child, don't be distressed, and don't do anything rash that you might regret. The Vālakhilyas drink the sun, they could burn your fire ...” Garuḍa was still hovering above his father, terrified. Then he heard Kaśyapa's voice change. He was speaking to the Vālakhilyas, on familiar terms, whispering. “Garuḍa is about to perform



great deed. Take your leave of him now, I beg you, if you still think well of me ...” A little later, Garuḍa saw the Vālakhilyas detaching themselves from the branch, like tiny, dry leaves, gray and dusty. They turned slowly in the air and slowly settled next to Kaśyapa. Soon they had disappeared among the blades of grass, heading toward the Himālaya.

Garuḍa had watched the scene unfold with overwhelming anxiety. Now he felt moved. Long after the last of the Vālakhilyas had disappeared in the vegetation, he said: “Father, you saved me.” Without looking up, Kaśyapa answered: “I saved you because I saved myself. Listen to the story. One day I had to celebrate a sacrifice. I had told Indra and the other gods to find me some wood. Indra was coming back from the forest, loaded with logs. He was feeling proud of his strength, and he knew he would be back first. As he was walking along, his eyes fell on a puddle. Something was moving in it: the Vālakhilyas. They were trying to ford it, which was hard going for them. Moving in single file, they held a blade of grass over their shoulders, like a log, and at the same time were struggling to get out of the mud. Indra stopped to watch and was seized with laughter. He was drunk with himself. Just as they were about to get out, he pushed those Vālakhilyas back in the puddle with his heel. And laughed.

“The following day I got a visit from the Vālakhilyas. They said: ‘We’ve come to give you half our *tapas*, the heat that has baked our minds since times long past. It’s the purest *tapas* never corroded by the world, never poured out into the world. Now we want to pour some into you so that you can pour out your seed and generate a being who will be a new Indra who will be the scourge of Indra, the arrogant, the uncivilized, the cowardly Indra. Such one shall be your son.’ ‘Indra was brought into the world by the will of Brahma. He cannot be ousted by another Indra,’ I objected. ‘Then he shall be an Indra of the birds. And he shall be the scourge of Indra.’ I agreed.

“That night I felt the Vālakhilyas’ *tapas* flowing into me. I became transparent and manifold, a veil and a bundle of burning arrows. Your mother, Vinatā, took fright when she came to her bed. The following morning she told me how, while pleasure had been invading her pores and curling her nails, something dark had raised her to a mattress of leaves, on the top of a huge tree—and she had seen a glow flare up from beneath. Down the trunk ran droplets after drop of a clear liquid. She felt sure that that liquid came from an inexhaustible reserve.

Engrossed in his father’s tale, Garuḍa had almost forgotten that he was still hovering in the air, claws sinking ever deeper into the elephant and the turtle, who had long been waiting to be eaten. Not to mention that cumbersome branch, still clenched in his beak. Garuḍa did not dare do anything further on his own account. If he dropped the branch on one of the nearby mountains, even the most barren, and crushed so much as a single brahman, hidden in the vegetation, what then? “Thinking paralyzes,” thought Garuḍa, motionless in the sky. Kaśyapa was eager to put an end to his son’s wretched predicament. He would have plenty of time, billions of passing moments, to reflect on his crime: that broken branch. Now his father could help him. “Fly away, Garuḍa,” he said. “Go north. When you find a mountain covered with nothing but ice and riddled with caves like dark eye sockets, you can leave the branch there. That’s the only place where there’s no risk of killing a brahman. And there you can finally eat up the elephant and the turtle.” Garuḍa flew off at once.

“So many things happening, so many stories one inside the other, with every link hiding y more stories ... And I’ve hardly hatched from my egg,” thought an exultant Garuḍa, heading north. At last a place with no living creatures. He would stop and think things over there. “No one has taught me anything. Everything has been shown to me. It will take me all my life to begin to understand what I’ve been through. To understand, for example, what it means to say that I am made of syllables ...” He was even happier, drenched in joy, when a barrier of pale blue ice and snow filled his field of vision, a sight that would have blinded any other eye. The branch of the tree Rauhina fell with a thud, then down plunged the elephant and the turtle just a moment before Garuḍa’s beak forced a way into flesh already wrapped in gleaming sepulchre.

“And now the theft, the deed ...,” said Garuḍa. Around him on an endless white carpet lay the stripped remains of the elephant and the turtle. He rose in flight, off to win the *soma*.

At that very moment one of the gods noticed something odd in the celestial stasis: the garlands had lost their fragrance, a thin layer of dust had settled on the buds. “The heavens are wearing out like the earth ...” was the silent fear of more than one god. It was a moment of pure terror. What came after was no more than a superfluous demonstration. The rains of fire, the meteors, the whirlwinds, the thunder. Indra hurled his lightning bolt as Garuḍa invaded the sky. The lightning bounced off his feathers. “How can that be?” said Indra to Bṛhaspati, chief priest of the gods. “This is the lightning that split the heart of Vṛtra. Garuḍa tosses it aside like a straw.” Sitting on a stool, Bṛhaspati had remained impassive throughout from the moment the sky had begun to shake. “Garuḍa is made not of feathers but of meter. You cannot hurt a meter. Garuḍa is *gāyatrī* and *trīṣṭubh* and *jagatī*. Garuḍa is the hymn. The hymn that cannot be scratched. And then: remember that puddle, those tiny beings you found so funny, with their blade of grass ... Garuḍa is, in part, their child.”

Still raging though the battle was, its outcome was clear from the start. The gods knew they were going to lose. They hurried to get away. But what infuriated them most were the whirlwinds of dust unleashed in the heavens by every flap of Garuḍa’s wings. Dust in the heavens ... It was the ultimate humiliation ... Even the guardians of the *soma* were overcome. In vain they loosed their arrows. Just one of Garuḍa’s feathers spun majestic in the sky, severed by an arrow from Kṛṣṇānu, the footless archer. Garuḍa took no notice of his enemies. The trial still before him was far harder. On the summit of the heavens he found a metal wheel, its sharp spokes spinning without cease. Behind the wheel he could just see a glow: a gold cup, or rather two cups, one turned upside down upon the other, their rims jagged and sharp. And these cups likewise were moving. They opened and closed in a rocking motion. When they closed, their rims fit perfectly together. Between the wheel and the cups hissed two Snakes. Garuḍa tossed dust in the Snakes’ eyes and concentrated. He must slip between the wheel’s blades, he would have to get his beak between the rims of the two cups, he would have to snatch the glow he had glimpsed within. Then escape. But everything had to happen in no more than the blinking of an eye. On that tiny fraction of time depended the fate of his mother, indeed of the world. Garuḍa did it. It didn’t occur to him to drink the *soma* that dripped from his beak as he headed back to earth. He was thinking of the Snakes, and of his mother.

Indra tried to stop Garuḍa as he flew toward the earth. He found an accommodating and contrite expression. “There’s no point in our being enemies,” said Indra. “We are too powerful to be enemies,” he added. Then he started to cajole: “Ask me anything you want, I have something I want to ask you: don’t let the Snakes get hold of the *soma*.” “But I have to ransom my mother,” said the obstinate Garuḍa. “To ransom your mother all you have to do is deliver the *soma* to the Snakes. You don’t have to do any more than that. But I don’t want the Snakes to possess the *soma*. I’ll tell you what to do ...” “If that’s how things stand ...,” said Garuḍa. He was intimidated by Indra’s self-confidence, and his reasonableness too. “After all,” thought Garuḍa, “this is the king of the gods talking.”

“And now tell me what you want ...,” said Indra. He was growing insistent. “That the Snakes be my food, forever and ever,” said Garuḍa. Whatever it took, he didn’t want to risk swallowing a brahman again. And then he liked eating the Snakes. But now he fell silent for a moment, out of shyness. He was about to announce his deepest desire, something he had never uttered before: “I would like to study the Vedas.” “So be it,” said Indra.

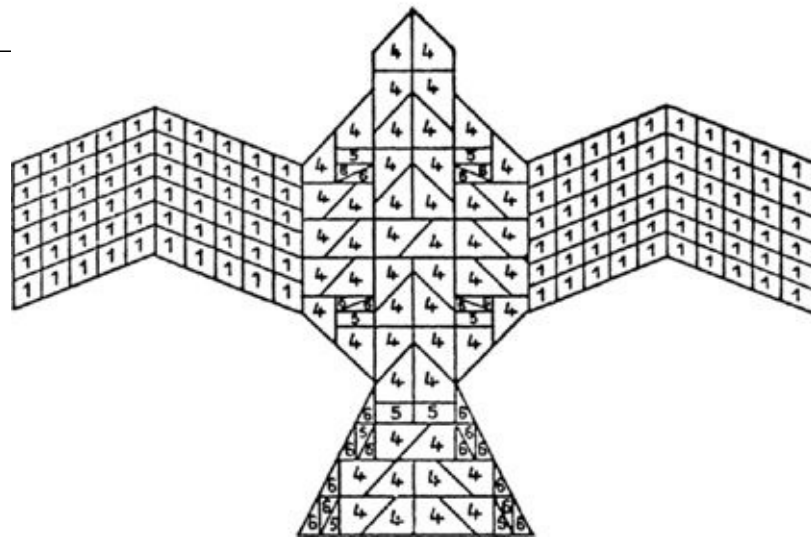
The Snakes had arranged themselves in a circle to await Garuḍa’s return. They saw him coming like a black star, a point expanding on the horizon, until his beak laid down a delicate plant, damp with sap, upon the *darbha* grass. “This is the *soma*, Snakes. This is my mother’s ransom. I deliver it to you. But before you drink of this celestial liquid, I would advise you to take a purificatory bath.” In disciplined devotion, the Snakes slithered off toward the river. For a moment, the only moment of tranquillity the earth would ever know, the *soma* was left alone, on the grass. A second later Indra’s rapacious hand had swooped from the heavens, and already it was gone. Gleaming with water, aware of the gravity of the moment, the Snakes could be seen returning through the tall grass. They found nothing but a place where the grass had been bent slightly. Hurriedly they licked at the *darbha* grass where Garuḍa had laid the *soma*. From that moment on the Snakes have had forked tongues.

Garuḍa said: “Mother, I’ve paid your ransom. You’re free now. Climb on my back.” They wandered over forests and plains, over the ocean, leisurely and blithe. Every now and then Garuḍa would fly down to earth to snatch bunches of Snakes in his beak. On his back, Vinaḅ bubbled with pleasure. Then Garuḍa took leave of his mother. He said his time had come. Once again he flew to the tree Rauhiṅa. He hid among the tree’s branches to study the Vedas.

Buried deep among the tree Rauhiṅa’s branches, Garuḍa read the Vedas. It was years before he raised his beak. Those beings he had terrorized in the heavens, who had scattered like dust at his arrival, who had tried in vain to fight him, he knew who they were now: with reverence he scanned their names and those of their descendants. The Ādityas, the Vasus, the Rudras. Varuṅa, Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Tvaṣṭṛ, Pūṣan, Vivasvat, Savitṛ, Indra, Viṣṅu, Dhāt, Aṁśa, Anumati, Dhiṣaṅā, Soma, Brhaspati, Guṅgū, Sūrya, Svasti, Uṣas, Āyu, Sarasvatī. And others too. Thirty-three in all. But each had many names—and some gods could be replaced by others. The names whirled in silence. Perfectly motionless, Garuḍa experienced a sense of vertigo and intoxication. The hymns blazed within him. Finally he reached the tenth book of

the Ṛg Veda. And here he smelled a shift in the wind. Along with the names came a shadow now, a name never uttered. What had been affirmative tended to the interrogative. The voice that spoke was more remote. It no longer celebrated. It said what is. Now Garuḍa was reading hymn one hundred and twenty-one, in *triṣṭubh* meter. There were nine stanzas, each one ending with the same question: “Who (*Ka*) is the god to whom we should offer our sacrifice?” Estuary to a hidden ocean, that syllable (*ka*) would go on echoing within him at the essence of the Vedas. Garuḍa stopped and shut his eyes. He had never felt so uncertain and so close to understanding. Never felt so light, in that sudden absence of names. When he opened his eyes, he realized that the nine stanzas were followed by another, this one separated by a space that was slightly larger. The writing was a little more uneven, minute. Tenth stanza, without any question. And here there was a name, the only name in the hymn, the only answer. Garuḍa couldn’t remember ever having seen that name before: Prajāpati.





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Prajāpati was alone. He didn't even know whether he existed or not. "So to speak," *iva*. (As soon as one touches on something crucial, it's as well to qualify what one has said with the particle *iva*, which doesn't tie us down.) There was only the mind, *manas*. And what is peculiar about the mind is that it doesn't know whether it exists or not. But it comes before everything else. "There is nothing before the mind." Then, even prior to establishing whether it existed or not, the mind desired. It was continuous, diffuse, undefined. Yet, as though drawn to something exotic, something belonging to another species of life, it desired what was definite and separate, what had shape. A Self, *ātman*—that was the name it used. And the mind imagined that Self as having consistency. Thinking, the mind grew red hot. It saw thirty-six thousand fires flare up, made of mind, made with mind. Suspended above the fires were thirty-six thousand cups, and these too were made of mind.

Prajāpati lay with his eyes closed. Between head and breast an ardor burned within him, like water seething in silence. It was constantly transforming something: it was *tapas*. But what was it transforming? The mind. The mind was what transformed and what was transformed. It was the warmth, the hidden flame behind the bones, the succession and dissolution of shapes sketched on darkness—and the sensation of knowing that that was happening. Everything resembled something else. Everything was connected to something else. Only the sensation of consciousness resembled nothing at all. And yet all resemblances flowed back and forth within it. It was the "indistinct wave." Each resemblance was a crest of that wave. At the time, "this world was nothing but water." And then? "In the midst of the waves a single seer." Already the waters were the mind. But why that eye? Within the mind came the split that precedes all others, that implies all others. There was consciousness and there was an eye watching consciousness. In the same mind were two beings. Who might become three, thirty, three thousand. Eyes that watched eyes that watched eyes. But that first step was enough in itself. All the other eyes were there in that "one seer" and in the waters.

The waters yearned. Alone, they burned. "They burned their heat." A golden shell took shape in the wave. "This, the one, was born from the strength of the heat." And inside the shell, over the arc of a year, the body of Prajāpati took shape. But "the year didn't exist" the year. Time appeared as the organ of a single being, nesting inside that being, who drifted on the waters, with no support. After a year the being began to emit syllables, which were the earth, the air, the distant sky. Already he knew he was Father Time. Prajāpati was granted a life of a thousand years: he looked out before him, beyond the cresting waves, and far, far away glimpsed a strip of earth, the faint line of a distant shore. His death.

Prajāpati was the one "self-existing" being, *svayambhū*. But this did not make him any less vulnerable than any creature born. He had no knowledge, didn't have qualities. He was the first self-made divinity. He didn't know the meters, not in the beginning. Then he felt something simmering somewhere inside. He saw a chant—and finally let it out. Where from? From the suture in his skull.

Born of the waters' desiring, Prajāpati begat "all this," *idaṃ sarvam*, but he was the only one who couldn't claim to have a progenitor—not even a mother. If anything he had many mothers, for the waters are an irreducible feminine plural. The waters were his daughter too, as though from the beginning it was important to show that in every essential relationship generation is reciprocal.

The mind: a flow restricted by no bank or barrier, crossed by flashes that fade away. A circle would have to be drawn, a frame, a *templum*. "Settle down," Prajāpati told himself. But everything pitched about. "Need a solid base," *pratiṣṭha*, he said. "Otherwise my children will wander around witless. If nothing stays the same, how can they ever calculate anything? How can they see the equivalences?" As he was thinking this, he lay on a lotus leaf, delicate and flimsy, blown along by the breeze, which was himself. He thought: "The waters are the foundation of all there is. But the waters are the doctrine too, the Vedas. Too difficult. Who of those to be born will understand? Need to hide, to cover at least a small part of the waters. Need earth." In the shape of a boar he dove into the deep. Surfacing, his snout was smeared with mud. He began to spread it out on the lotus leaf, with loving care. "This is the earth," he said. "Now I've spread it, I'll need some stones to keep it still." He disappeared again. Then he arranged a frame of white stones around the now dry mud. "You will be its guardians," he said. Now the earth was taut as a cowhide. Tired as he was, Prajāpati lay down on it. For the first time he touched the earth. And for the first time the earth was burdened with a weight.

The dried slime covering the lotus leaf set in a thin layer. Yet it sufficed to give some impression of stability. The white stones sketched out an enclosure, allowed one to get one's bearings. It was this, more than anything else, that was reassuring, that invited thought. Beneath, immediately beneath, flowed the waters, as ever.

While Prajāpati's back lay glued to the earth, time stretched out within him. One by one his joints were coated, inside and out, by a corrosive patina: past and future.

In his solitude, Prajāpati, the Progenitor, thought: "How can I reproduce?" He concentrated inside, and a warmth radiated from within. Then he opened his mouth. Out came Agni, Fire, the devourer. Prajāpati looked. With his open mouth he had created, and now an open mouth was coming toward him. Could it really want to eat him, its own creator, so soon? He couldn't believe it. But now Prajāpati knew terror. He looked around. The earth was barren. Grasses, trees, they were only in his mind. "So who can it want to eat? There's no one but me," he repeated. Terror left him speechless. Then Prajāpati knew the first anguish and the first doubt. He must invent a food for the creature he had made if he wasn't to end up in Agni's mouth. Prajāpati rubbed his hands together to conjure up an offering. But all that appeared was some soggy stuff, matted with hairs. Agni wouldn't want that. He rubbed his hands together again—and out came a white, liquid substance. "Should I offer it? Or maybe



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