

JATAYU

(Nh. Dini*)

Translated by Jean Taylor

"For Nuning, my twin sister"

She could never be still. Her head was always turning right and left, eyes darting everywhere, or else she would nod her head seriously all of a sudden, giving a smile or a soft, mild look. So gentle was her expression that people finally began to suspect she was really not quite normal.

Everyone knew she was the daughter of the *dalang*¹ who lived at the far edge of the village, and that she had been raised in a house filled with images and forms from the shadow theater, that is, a house exuding the old civilization of Java.

There was still a complete *gamelan*² in the house when she was born. And her birth, longed for by the father, had brought great joy to the entire family. It had been her father's hope that the new baby would be a girl. And so it was. Apparently the gods of the *wayang*³ were listening inside their box to the puppet master's prayers. His newborn girl was a little sister for the oldest child who was a boy. But so many years separated the two children. And this daughter, whom the father had yearned for, was called Prita, a name carrying her parents' fervent hope that she would grow up to be a good person, like Prita, the mother of the gods in the *wayang* stories. But people in the village said the name was too oppressive for the girl, for, when she was sixteen, Prita fell very ill with a malaria that left her mind and nerves affected. And it was whispered around the village that the gods of the *wayang* were angry with the girl for using such an exalted name.

* Nh. Dini is the pen name used by Nurhajati Sri Hardini. She was born in Semarang early in 1936 and received her schooling in that city. A collection of seven of her short stories was first published in 1956, when she was just twenty years old. This was followed in 1960 by Hati Yang Damai, a novella whose major themes and other narrative elements were more fully developed in her first full-scale novel. This work, Pada Sebuah Kapal, appeared in 1973, and has been followed by another, entitled La Barka. The little tale presented in English translation here is third in the 1956 collection, which takes its title from the opening story, Dua Dunia. Since her marriage to a French diplomat in 1960, Dini has lived outside Indonesia, at first in Japan, and then chiefly in France.

1. Central performer of a leather-puppet shadow play, who leads the gamelan musicians, narrates, sings, and speaks the dialogue while manipulating the puppets.
2. A musical ensemble, mainly consisting of many metal gongs and bars of various shapes and sizes, several string and wind instruments, and a set of drums.
3. Traditional Javanese drama depicting tales based on Indian epic literature and Javanese methology, and the puppets used in that drama.

But Prita kept on being called Prita, for her father would not hear of changing it.

Prita was taken out of school just when she reached second form in middle school. Her thoughts would stray so far away that she could not follow her lessons. Her brain had been attacked by the bacteria that had caused her illness. Since then all she did was sit and play with her father's puppets, stand at the front door of her house smiling vacantly, or stay with the boy who sold cigarettes at the edge of the village a little to the side of her house.

"Heh!" sometimes she would call out at people cycling past her house. And then a smile would fill her soft face. People would turn away from her quickly and leave as fast as possible. The girl looked so gentle that they never thought of making fun of her.

At home Prita was never content to remain idle. She worked her father's puppets with stories she had learned by heart, most of them from the *Ramayana*. The eagle king Jatayu, who pointed out to Rama the place where Sita had been taken by the giant, had a special place in her heart which so longed to be free. She yearned to be free, to soar like a bird up into the heavens. Her earliest dream had been to become a pilot. She wanted to fly a plane, even though she was only a girl. But she was not allowed to continue on in school, and so she never got to sit behind the controls of an airplane. While she was still attending school, she would sometimes imitate the motions of a person flying a plane, seated on her schoolbench in the classroom, arms stretched out in front of her and making a roaring noise. In a minute the class would become very still, all eyes riveted on her, eyes shining with amusement as well as with pity. Yes, Prita, the girl who would fly, whose birth had no blessing from the gods, moved to pity all who looked on her gentle face.

Prita had been sitting on the box containing her father's puppets all day long when she heard that her father planned to sell them. People whose minds are disturbed, however, cannot comprehend the necessities that drive ordinary people. Her father felt he must free the house of the mortgage that he had incurred the previous year to pay for the special meal marking the thousandth day following the death of his eldest child.

"Father is wicked," she said to her mother, her face downcast.

"Father needs the money. Later on, when he can afford it, he'll buy an even better gamelan set." Her mother tried to console her. Her old father, though able to control the puppets as he told their stories, felt powerless to confront Prita, his daughter and now his only child since the death of the first.

"I won't have an eagle any more to take me flying." She held on to her Jatayu, the puppet representing the bird in the Rama story. And her mother just looked at her father.

"Everyone in the house is cruel to me. I'm not allowed to go to school. I'm not allowed to go far from home. And now you want to take my bird too."

"Father will look for something to replace it."

"What?"

"A cockatoo."

"It can't fly like an eagle."

"But it can talk."

Prita looked at her father, the old dalang who commanded the puppet-gods.

"I don't want that sort of friend. I want an eagle who can fly," rang out from Prita as she ran, crying, to the box containing the puppets. Opening it she brought them all out one by one as she hunted for Jatayu. These figures, fashioned out of leather, lay strewn all over the floor, in a manner where all respect for gods and warriors was gone.

Finally Jatayu remained in the house, suspended from a board at the head of Prita's bed. The other puppets had already gone to a new owner. Her father had given in to his love and compassion for Prita, and the purchaser of the puppets had to be disappointed because one of the puppets was missing from the box.

Still Prita was sometimes overcome by a sense of utter loneliness. As she grew older she felt a longing for a friend, just like everyone else. Her brother's face was now blurred and dim in her memory. The only brother she had was dead, and none knew where his resting place was. All that she recalled (in her lucid moments) was her oldest brother as he said good-bye to their father and mother, wearing a conical straw hat, singlet and shorts, and carrying his fishing rod and creel. And then she would remember the press of her only brother's lips on each cheek. At first she had missed her brother badly. And later on, she would smile gently at every young man who passed their house, with a smile more tender than the one she gave her parents.

There was one person who took a lot of notice of her. Prita became used to the stares of the youth who often came to sell cigarettes by her house, and often, secretly, she would watch for him to pass by.

One afternoon Prita went out wearing green three-quarter length pants. She walked coyly towards the cigarette stand and, in a harsh voice, hailed the man attending it. The man looked round quickly, startling her, for it was the youth who was always exchanging glances with her. Prita smiled, intending to keep on going towards a bridge nearby.

"How pretty you look wearing that yellow ribbon, Prita." The boy spoke to her in his ordinary voice.

Prita looked at him, her hands pulling at the ribbon that tied up her short, rather wavy hair.

"Isn't your father angry with you for wearing trousers?"

"He's used to them, Dar," replying to the cigarette boy. Prita sat down on the bench next to the cigarette seller and swung her feet slowly.

"Do you like flowers?" The boy moved close and asked his question softly.

Prita nodded and blinked.

"I've got lots at home. Want to see them?"

And Prita nodded once more.

"But you've got to come alone." He was silent, and Prita said nothing either. The youth was hoping Prita would ask him where his house was. But simple Prita was still speaking through smiles only.

"Would you like to pick them yourself?"

Prita looked at him.

"Would you?" Prita kept on staring at him.

"Say something! How can I find out if you won't say anything?"

Prita smiled.

"All you do is smile," said the youth slowly, perhaps to himself. And Prita, who must have been listening, smiled even more.

Since that time, Prita and the young man had become close friends. She often went to his house, deep inside the village. And the youth often came to the puppeteer's house to ask Prita to go for a walk or a bicycle ride into the countryside. No longer was Prita's world confined to the village and her own home (since withdrawing from school she had not once left the village). Now, not only did she know the cigarette boy and her father and mother; but she could recognize the oddly shaped cars and trains--though Prita knew only the outsides of cars and trains for she had not yet had the chance to ride in either. Then Prita, who was simple, no longer glared at people who were strangers to her. But madness always hovered round her, and sometimes would dissolve her lucidity altogether.

One afternoon Prita and the youth were sheltering from the rain together under the eaves of the church. The day had been overcast and sudden bursts of rain alternating with winds would make people scurry for shelter every now and then. Prita gazed musingly out at the main road. The swirl of wind and water on the road fascinated her. The leaves falling from trees that grew round about were so beautiful, tumbling down and swirling in the fading light, like wisps of smoke. And gusts of wind that blew into the church porch carried drops of rain and flung them into her face. So fresh. Cool. A smile played about her lips, and shining eyes enhanced her charm. No disquiet overshadowed her face. As for the others who had taken refuge under the church along with her, there were probably many who were annoyed by the rain. They were wasting time, and the rain and wind spraying the street held no attraction for them.

"I want to fly," suddenly escaped her lips. The boy looked at her.

"I want to be like that leaf, and float free with the wind and rain like a *serimpi*⁴ dancer."

"But you need an eagle, don't you?" the boy replied.

4. Elaborate and graceful female dances performed in times past predominantly in the Central Javanese courts.

Prita was silent, but her lips smiled.

"I've just written a description of a stormy afternoon. Only in it I showed everyone seized with fear. Are you scared of things like that? Lots of wind and rain?"

"No. I'm not afraid." Prita slowly shook her head. "I like it like that. And I wish all afternoons would be like today. The street is lovely, don't you think so?"

With her left hand Prita pointed towards the road that was fading like fog.

Now and then a black car would pass by, its form blurred.

And that night Prita again dreamed that she was flying magnificently, gloriously.

For some time now an acquaintance of her father had been visiting their house. The man looked very harsh with his moustache and long beard. Prita never bustled around bringing him refreshments; no, she had eyes only for something the man brought with him. It was green, similar, or almost, to a motorbike, but again it seemed like a toy train to her, no, like a three-wheeler. Once she had heard the name "scooter." How she loved the noise it made. Then, quite suddenly, a desire took hold of her and she could not shake it off: she wanted to mount it. Once, while she was still in school, she had ridden a bicycle. And now she always watched closely so as to remember everything the bearded man did before he went off on his scooter. Prita could concentrate sufficiently to remember the way one started the machine, but so far she had never found the opportunity to ride it. Whenever the bearded man came and sat deep in conversation with her father on the verandah, Prita would creep up to the scooter and run her hands all over it, her eyes filled with desire, with gentleness and affection. All her other preoccupations had slid away. She no longer cared about Jatayu above the bedstead. Nor did she spend much time at the house of the youth whose only occupation was reading and writing. Her every waking moment was obsessed with a dream that would not change: she wanted to fly. And this time she would fly with a scooter whose engine sounded in her ears like a plane.

Dusk. All day long a mist had hung in the air. Prita's stare was less gentle than usual. Her eyes were glued to an object in front of her.

Very slowly and deliberately she took hold of the scooter's handlebars. Tightly. She felt she would never let go again. And as if propelled by some force, Prita turned the scooter around and walked it a distance away from the house. Then, quickly and without hesitating, she started up the motor. Her father and the man with the beard were drinking coffee on the back verandah. The fog had not let up, supporting Prita's pretense of staying quietly in her room.

Prita was astride the scooter. She had already ridden through the village with never a backward glance at anyone she chanced to meet on the road. She clung on to the handlebars with all her being. Her blue three-quarter length pants and white blouse became quite damp from the mist. And her hair, which was always unruly, streamed out as if it too wanted to fly with the wind which blew from behind. Prita kept quite calm. But suddenly she turned the scooter to the left, on to the town

road that rose steeply. Climbing, ever climbing. The vacant look had left her; now her face was filled with solemnity and exaltation. She felt, this is how it is to fly, to soar up among the rain clouds and winds. This was the dream that had dogged her ever since she was a little girl till this, her eighteenth year. She sat very erect, just like a pilot at the controls of his plane, aware of his responsibilities, and with resolution in her posture and gaze. Climbing. And climbing ever higher. The mist was still falling as before. And the deserted road allowed Prita to continue her dream above the clouds and the wind. The final stretch of the rise was now in sight. And then the descent, falling away on and on. Prita could no longer control her thoughts. I'm flying, I'm flying. I'm soaring above the clouds and the wind, she cried out by turns, as the mist kept billowing. The houses and little stores on the street below looked small. Under the force of a feeling that could be resisted no more, Prita stretched out the fingers of both hands, then let go of the handlebars.

For a moment she can still keep her balance. She imitates a bird, truly flying, wings spread right and left. But the wind blows on her suddenly from the left, jolting her. Prita can no longer keep upright, wobbles to the right, and falls, rolling with her scooter down, down, down, always down with the noise of its engine wailing through the twilight and the mist.

"No, I don't want to fall, I want to fly," she manages to scream with all her strength, the scream of a rational person. Sky, houses, hillocks spin round her as her body rolls on down with the scooter. There is no one to heed her shrieks. Prita hurtles against a stretch of the road that starts to rise. Mutely her head droops, red blood and black hair. She lies quiet there, motionless, stiff, sprinkled with mist as dusk deepens into night. Silence swallows up the glorious courage of a moment past when she flew with outstretched hands.

She had fallen, every bone in her body broken, crushed, just as Jatayu had been brought down by Rahwana's weapon. All her dreams and yearning to fly had been realized in a few brief moments atop a scooter she had perceived as an airplane, as an eagle bearing her aloft to the vast firmament.

Jatayu still hung from the head of her bed, waiting for her to play with him again. But Prita never got up. She died like the wayang figure she had loved so much since her childhood. The mist fell down until it was night and on through the following day.