
ONLY THE DEAF HEAR WELL

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University Team:

Where did you get your writing paper from?

Pramoedya Ananta Toer:

I have eight chickens.¹

I. Sjahrir Recalled

On August 16, 1969, Pramoedya Ananta Toer—a man who did not get the Nobel Prize in literature, but still might, who wanted to become an engineer as a boy, and, apparently, never will—after four years at Salemba prison in Jakarta, and a month in the transport camp at Nusa Kambangan, was put on a ship and set out to exile on the island of Buru 1,500 kilometers further east. To a historian of modern Indonesia the journey should be familiar. Thirty-four years before Pramoedya, another Indonesian intellectual, and later statesman, Sutan Sjahrir, was shipped to his exile along the same route. From Jakarta, then still Batavia, Sjahrir's ship also traveled to Surabaya, and then eastwards between Sulawesi and Lesser Sundas to the Banda Sea. Both men, as their ships sailed, and as all distances appeared to increase, thought intensely about continuing to write letters home. By what might be just a whim of history, or an editorial accident, the letters by both of the men when published, Sjahrir's in 1945 and Pramoedya's in 1988, were headlined "meditations," "reflections," "musing," or "day-dreaming."²

¹ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu* (Jakarta: Lentera, 1995), hereinafter identified as *NSSB*, p. 26. The text of *NSSB* was checked against a previous version of the text, typescript "Nyanyi Tunggal Seorang Bisu" (Edisi Malaysia, 1988), hereinafter identified as *NTSB*.

² Sutan Sjahrir (Sjahrazad), *Indonesische Overpeinzingen* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1945); translated by H. B. Jassin as *Renungan Indonesia* (Jakarta: Poestaka Rakjat, 1947); Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Permenungan dan Pengapungan," from the introduction to *NSSB*, pp. 1-13.

In his writing—or thinking about writing—from the ship and then from Buru, Pramoedya mentions Sjahrir several times. Always, however, as if merely in passing.³ He acknowledges Sjahrir as a great figure of twentieth-century Indonesian history, incomparably greater than leaders of the current regime, whom he must listen to so often as they talk about greatness. Nevertheless, whenever Sjahrir is mentioned, the tone of Pramoedya is cold.

As Pramoedya recalls on Buru, Sjahrir, in contrast to other great men of modern Indonesia, never became a part of the Pramoedya family's lore. When Pramoedya was a boy, his mother did not talk to him about Sjahrir:

She could tell hundreds of stories about the medical doctors, the doctors of law, and the civil engineers, who were also active in the national movement. But she did not give much information about "candidates," the people who studied, but did not get their university degrees; we never heard about them. She was full of stories about Imam Sujudi, Soetomo, Satiman Wirjosandojo, Soekarno, Sartono, Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo. But she never brought up candidate Soetan Sjahrir or candidate Hatta.⁴

Pramoedya recalls that he first read Sjahrir's published letters, "the meditations," in 1961, when, by another coincidence, he was locked in prison at Cipinang near Jakarta, the same prison where Sjahrir's exile correspondence had begun. Pramoedya does not recall himself being too excited by what he read. Sjahrir's meditations impressed him as daydreams, indeed not thoughts fully befitting a patriotic intellectual in the colonial Indonesia. "He," Pramoedya writes about Sjahrir, "so longed to return, return to Holland."⁵

Sjahrir was twenty-six when he was sent to exile, and Pramoedya was forty-three. Yet, the differences between the two men did not seem to result from the disparity in their ages. Rather, the era in which Sjahrir lived appears younger. Like Pramoedya, Sjahrir understood that he was being robbed of his freedom for an undefined number of years: there was, for Sjahrir as for Pramoedya, no trial, and, thus, no time limit to his term of exile. The experiences, however, of the Dutch departure from Indonesia in 1942, the Japanese occupation, and the Indonesian revolution in 1945, along with all that followed throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, was still hidden from Sjahrir by the wall separating one's present from the unknown future. So long as the Wall loomed, Sjahrir could believe that there might be a better world on the other side.

The letters by Sjahrir, written on his way to exile and from his internments on Boven Digoel and Banda Neira, at the most unexpected moments, describing the most unlikely places, could still exude a sense of almost boyish adventure. However

³ Pramoedya is skeptical namely about Sjahrir's role in the Indonesian resistance movement opposing Japanese fascism and Sjahrir's role in the Indonesian revolution of 1945. See especially Pramoedya, *NSSB*, pp. 119-127.

⁴ Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Lied van een Stomme: Brieven van Buru* (Houten: Manus Amici, 1991), hereinafter identified as *LSSB*, pp. 59-60. This is a Dutch translation of the second volume of Pramoedya's letters and reflections from Buru; the original, titled "Cacatan-cacatan pribadi Pramoedya Ananta Toer dari tahanan Pulau Buru," as far as I know (also according to information provided by Ben Abel, Wason Collection, Cornell University) has never been published.

⁵ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 121.

dreadful it was, Sjahrir's exile was described by the exile himself as if it might still be a beginning.

Whatever was ahead, Sjahrir's ship sailed fast, his seas looked blue, and his horizons seemed rather wide.⁶ As Pramoedya travels to his exile, the ship carrying him lingers. Everything is sticky, or it has sharp edges. The ship's deck is crammed with technology that makes it hard to move. There are the same "phosphor flickers" following the ship that Sjahrir observed and described in amazement.⁷ As far as Pramoedya is concerned, however, notable details are the "old and rusting iron" of the ship is all that is around: the noise of the "weary" machines and the "w.c." that does not work.⁸

As far as the eyes can see, death is everywhere: the sea, the latrine of the ship that incessantly squeaks and gasps for breath, bullets, bayonets, orders, roll calls, badges, pistols, rifles, commando knives.

And the ship radio incessantly is on, however nobody listens, the *kroncong* jingling popular songs that make one nauseous, a sermon by a clergyman, who wishes us a good luck in a new life . . .

What can we do, in the cage of a ship like this; we all think of death. And the squealing *kroncong* songs force themselves upon our thoughts. *Kroncong* still had a power before the independence, it still contained a vitality—the vitality of a nation that was not yet free. As the Revolution erupted and as it passed, *kroncong* remained just a kind of narcissism, a bouquet of empty words, a culture of masturbation. Equal to the culture of great speeches, and of puppet shadow theater . . .⁹

Along the ship, the silver skipjack fish of the Banda Sea perform their acrobatics—now as before—and Sjahrir was greatly taken with them. As Pramoedya observes the fish, the skipjacks have no choice but to keep on moving, otherwise their blood clots, they stop dead and sink into the darkness of the sea.¹⁰

Sjahrir was young in his historical time. In the malarial and inhuman camp in New Guinea, one day, he canoed upstream the Digoel River, still inside the restricted area, where the inmates were permitted to go, and he visited the Kaya-Kayas, the stark naked and black cannibals. He swapped some tobacco for sago, did not part with his hatchet, however badly the wild men wanted it, and he made it back downstream to

⁶ See Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahrir: Exile and Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1994), chapter V.

⁷ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10. Pramoedya returns to the motif of radio again: "'menuju ke hidup baru', katanya, 'selamat jalan'—suara resmi dari radio kapal." Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 163. I try to keep the chronological framework of this essay loose for a number of reasons; in one case, for instance, I do not want to suggest that I know when Pramoedya's ship weighed anchor. See e.g. this text by Pramoedya from the very early 1950s: "Memang suatu keadaan yang njata, bahwa makin banjaknja matjam bentuk-benda didunia ini, membuat banjak orang lenjap diantara mereka—tergulung oleh benda-benda sebagai alat yang memperalatkan manusia." Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Sumber Tjipta dalam Kesenian," *Indonesia* (Jakarta), III (1952): 4.

¹⁰ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 12.

his camp, like one of the Jules Verne heroes, just before the sun set. At least this is how Sjahrir described the day's venture to his wife, her son and daughter back home.

Pramoedya also writes from the camp to his son, a little boy, who as we might expect was eager for a little trapper story of his own:

You might have thought of the stories from American prairies, about Schultz's book *My Life as an Indian*, the autobiography of Buffalo Bill, or the movie westerns. But, here, for sure, there are no Indians, and not a single horse.¹¹

This, Pramoedya writes, is a "heartless prairie."¹² Some hunting does go on, it is true. In a letter to another child of his at home, his daughter Rita, Pramoedya explains:

Your dad never goes hunting. Once I went with someone who looked for a deer, but we came upon an enormous wild boar, and, instantly, I was in a tree. Another friend of mine from Cenkareng, his name is Matuyani, likes to catch crocodile . . . In the water, a crocodile cannot do much . . . There are no monkeys here, but there is an enormous variety of cockatoos . . .¹³

The story continues. Yet another of Pramoedya's friends in the camp, an academician in a former life, taught himself how to catch insects and larvae. Three other friends of Pramoedya, who also ventured out hunting on Buru, came upon a piece of raw flesh hanging from a tree. They had a rare feast, and only later did they find out what they had eaten. Does Rita know what was it?

The placenta of an indigenous baby . . .

Now, you can see, Rita, what people do to keep themselves up, to remain alive, and healthy, and strong.¹⁴

Certainly, this is, again, the crucial historical problem of writing, talking, and touching. In the late-colonial Netherlands East Indies of the 1930s, the letters sent by Sjahrir were first checked by a censor and then transported by mail, air-mail actually, once a month at first, and later, as the service improved, once a fortnight. The letters from Pramoedya, on the other hand, with few exceptions, were never expected to reach their destination, and they rarely did. As a rule, the new rule of the cage, most of the time these letters could not even be sent.¹⁵ They were composed by Pramoedya and they stuck silently in his head, or they moved in circles around him as words whispered among the other prisoners in the camp.¹⁶ Writing in independent Indonesia of the 1970s, Pramoedya describes his letters from Buru with some precision: "as paper kites" they flew.¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid., p. 47.

¹² Ibid., p. 208.

¹³ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 300-301.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 302.

¹⁵ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. viii.

¹⁶ Both men occasionally read their letters before they were sent, or "sent," to small circles of close friends in the camps, as a sort of "majalah," Pramoedya says. Ibid., p. viii; see also Mrázek, *Sjahrir*.

¹⁷ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. ix.

II. Memories of Holland

Sometimes, however, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, exile, writer of the Revolution, Indonesian to the root of his soul, unexpectedly and improperly reminds us of the radio buffs of the late-colonial Netherlands East Indies. Mostly Dutch or Western, but not necessarily, modern and apprehensive, the individual members of this colonial audience sat in their houses inside the boundaries of a colony which was itself sliding into disaster, and they pressed themselves close to their radio sets, straining to catch some signal from a far away, Holland most preferably, the West almost certainly, the main source of their modernity as well as their anxiety.

The radio plays as Pramoedya is shipped to Buru. Radio is frequently mentioned in Pramoedya's letters from the camp, and so is Holland, connected with radio. At the end of a long letter to his son from Buru, as he tries to make a sense of what happened to Indonesia during his lifetime, Pramoedya recalls a shock he felt when, shortly after the Indonesian Revolution, very early in the 1950s, he heard a program from Radio Holland in Hilversum

that inquired about what was going on with Indonesia, and was called "Indonesia is on the Moon" . . . ¹⁸

The Dutch language, Pramoedya remembers in the camp, "was not the language of our family."¹⁹ He explains what he means by that:

Later, I found out that we had in our house quite a few books by Eurasian colonial Indies writers in pretty yellow covers and in Dutch. But [my mother] never read to us from them. Neither did she ever read from [the Javanese] *Pancatantra* . . .

My mother liked to sing. But her repertoire was quite narrow. Most rarely did she sing Javanese songs. Probably, as a child, she had heard Malay more often than Javanese children's songs, and her favorite was the Malay *Sang Bangau*, "The heron." Next, naturally, came the Dutch songs that she had learned in school. But, when the *Als de orchideeën bloeien*, "When the orchids bloom," became so popular, remarkably enough, she never sang it. She also liked very much the political songs of the time, and she liked to sing the songs that my father wrote, mostly in Dutch.²⁰

Dutch seems to be remembered with striking ambiguity, like an indistinct but constant buzzing in the air, we may say, a background sound effect heard only because the family music—Javanese music—occasionally breaks loose from the midst of it; Dutch makes a continual noise, like a radio turned on that nobody pays any particular attention. "When the orchids bloom" was one of the biggest colonial-radio hits of the time. Some of the songs written by Pramoedya's father and sung by his mother, we hear, were played on the "Eastern-section" of the late-colonial radio as well.

Holland is also evoked on Buru by pictures of movie stars' faces. In a painful letter to his daughter from Buru describing how he met her mother, his first wife, in 1945, and why the marriage broke down so badly, Pramoedya writes:

¹⁸ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 157-158.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

When I was a boy, I often looked at pictures in Dutch magazines. The American and European movie stars always had such big eyes, not like these half slant-eyes of my people . . . Since childhood, the big eyes had an esthetic effect on me . . . ²¹

The Holland recalled in Pramoedya's letters from Buru has a distinct technological, and simultaneously phantasmal, quality of light and sound dimmed and brightened at will. Indeed, as the nearness of other humans and things appears to vanish from Pramoedya's life, the image of Holland gains intensity. In the early 1950s, Pramoedya writes in the letter just quoted,

I worked day and night, and went more and more often with your mother to the movies . . . Like mad, I just kept on working, like a volcano discharging its lava. M. Balfas said to me, when we met accidentally: it is no more a writing what you do, Pram, it is an ordinary shit . . . ²²

. . . I became truly a bread writer . . . I had to forget the dedication that Han [Resink] wrote for me in his poem *Het koraaldier*, "The Coral": "To the writer of the youth, Pramoedya." I was nothing, but a bread writer, a writer who never gets a break . . . ²³

Thoughts of Holland switched on at the moment of failure:

Via Han from Sticusa, the Foundation for Cultural Cooperation, an invitation came for me to spend a year on visit to the Netherlands.

Truly a honor. However, again, a source of doubt. My Dutch was bad. I could neither speak nor write it; only read. Whenever I faced a European, my inferiority complex became even stronger than usual. But, I had to think of the advice my mother used to give me: go to a school in Europe if you ever can. I accepted . . . You better take your wife and children with you, Han told me. Yes, I thought. Not everybody is so lucky that he could visit Europe.²⁴

With his wife and two children, Pramoedya boarded a ship in July 1953. Remembering the day twenty years later on Buru, he writes that it felt "like on vacation": "For the first time I traveled abroad. And we had a second-class berth."²⁵ In another letter from exile, he reminds his daughter that she was not sick once, through the whole twenty-six-day trip.²⁶

²¹ Ibid., p. 173.

²² Ibid., p. 184.

²³ Ibid., p. 186.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 189.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 3. Memories change with time, naturally. In a text written either on the way to the Netherlands or during the stay in Amsterdam, Pramoedya describes the ship as "kapal tua: Johann van Oldenbarnevelt . . . kapal imigrasi . . . Ini bukan kapal! Ini dapur tangsi. Empat termotank dengan semprotan hawa dari alam bebas tidak kuasa mengusir panas . . . Antara sebentar loudspeaker-loudspeaker terpasang dipodjok-podjok meraungkan lagu-lagu populer Amerika jang susulmenjusul dengan pemberitahuan-pemberitahuan serta lontjeng tanda-makan . . ." Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Kapal Gersang," *Zenith* (Jakarta) 3, 12 (1953): 550-552.

The year Pramoedya spent in Holland is recalled on Buru smoothly. Photogenically, Pramoedya recalls the thinness of his life, the sudden easiness of his writing, and the easiness of his marriage as it was fast dissolving.

Pramoedya remembers himself feeling clumsy among Dutch "big-shots." He could not understand how other Indonesian writers and artists, who like him were traveling to Holland on *Sticusa's* invitation, could socialize with men, former enemies, who just a few years earlier during the Revolution might have been responsible for the deaths of friends. Fortunately, however, throughout the trip Holland seemed comfortably unreal.

Pramoedya recalls an invitation to a symposium on modern Indonesian literature, where scholars from Holland, England, Germany, and Australia read their papers. Looking back at the event from the camp on Buru,

The symposium was truly important to me . . . They debated Indonesian literature that was not theirs, not as a sport, but because they were interested in it as intellectuals . . . ²⁷

He seems to recall himself in Holland as finding some love possible without touching. In a letter from Buru, he writes to his daughter:

I used to go just by myself and sit on a bench made of cement in the park. Once, a young woman came around, and she sat down besides me . . . She appeared to be a cultured person . . . In detail, she spoke about French literature of which I did not know anything at all, since I had read Victor Hugo, Zola, and Balzac in school in Surabaya as a child. The little I knew about the new literature was from a couple of thin little books by André Gide . . .

We also talked about my complex. I do not know, whether she studied psychology or not, but, in any case, I have learned from her that everybody has one, only some people are aware of it and others are not.²⁸

Your mother was not affected by this friendship at all, and she did not have to know about it. At home, I lived happily with my wife and children. All day, I could listen to good music from all over the Europe. Left to myself, I could work without stopping on my fine, flat mini-Olivetti . . . I am telling you this to show you that there was not a slightest discord between your mother and me. Exactly like in Jakarta, we went frequently to movies, concerts, and for walks with your eldest sister, and with Etty in a stroller.²⁹

In the same letter, Pramoedya recalls the climax of his Dutch affair, and of his entire visit to Holland tenderly and describes it flavored with an upbeat carnality of milk and yogurt:

²⁷ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 193-194.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198. Many motifs identical with the ones in this description of Pramoedya's Amsterdam friend can be found in an early Pramoedya text that he sent late in 1953 from Holland. The main difference is, exactly, the all-pervasive sensuality and physicality of this earlier text. See Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Tentang Emansipasi Buaja," *Kisah* (Jakarta) 3, 2 (December 1953): 722-730. In a recent article, in 1992, Pramoedya again mentioned his Amsterdam friend as a very important figure in his life at the period. See Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "De kinder chief in een roda auto: Ervaringen met Nederland als staat en volk," *Eindhoven Dagblad Boekenweekbijlage*, 10 (March, 1992): 5.

The contact with my friend, the young woman, gave me back the self-confidence that I had almost believed was lost forever. It made some sense, now, to study . . .

I did not mind the fall with its bristly winds, smell of rotting leaves, bare trees, and the falling temperatures. I was more and more healthy. Daily, I drank one liter of milk and three quarters liter of yogurt. In the morning, no more blood was running from my mouth and nose. I felt physically and mentally like a bird. And I could work up to twenty hours *non-stop*—something unthinkable in my own country. I took on twenty-eight kilos.

In December 1953 snow was not yet falling.³⁰

Pramoedya's wife and his children returned to Indonesia earlier in that fall. He followed them by plane at the beginning of 1954. It was—Pramoedya repeats it—like a return from a vacation. He divorced his wife very soon afterwards:

The Netherlands let me see the beauty of an organized society, how everyone's service was valued on its merit, and how everyone had a right to attain one's means of existence . . . Your mother began to find faults with the family house in Blora . . . No more, could I work like before. No more, could I be merely a bread writer . . .³¹

Does Pramoeodya, indeed, relive, in the 1950s and 1970s, the drama of the late-colonial Netherlands East Indies radio buff? Do we sense the same anxious modernity and modern awareness that unplugging the radio might bring a soundless loneliness into the house?

In Jakarta, during the couple of months that I was away, nothing changed. The dirt, the torment right in front of you, the lowliness of human feelings everywhere around you. I have written one piece about our neighborhood that was located no more than a few hundred meters from the [presidential] palace. But no response came, except some stones thrown at our house by the fellow community dwellers, who felt that the locale had been offended.

. . . inflation . . . as long as the Indonesian bourgeoisie remains unproductive and uncreative, in contrast to that in Europe, Japan, or America . . .

Indonesia, indeed, was no America, and no Europe. Here, I stood alone . . .³²

III. Time in Three Dimensions

There is as much on forgetting in Pramoeodya's letters from Buru as there is on memory. For instance, Pramoeodya writes that it took him months before he was able in exile to recall all the names of his children. He explains that one cause of his forgetfulness might have been a blow to the head: he was hit on the head with a rifle butt by one of the soldiers who arrested him on October 13, 1965.

Pramoeodya remembers that in Sukarno's time in the 1950s or 1960s, he, as a writer, served on the board of a pencil factory. He also remembers many of his other official

³⁰ Pramoeodya, *LSSB*, p. 198.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

and semi-official functions at the time. He does not recall, when asked, whether during one of these functions he spoke publicly opposing the release of Mochtar Lubis from prison. The significance of Pramoedya to us, however, does not stem from him being an innocent victim.

At one point during his exile on Buru, as he contemplates a historical novel he wants to write, Pramoedya suddenly realizes that the name of the most famous fifteenth-century treaty dividing the world between Portugal and Spain has slipped out of his memory. Friends on Buru all try hard to help him out, and after a while, at last, one of them, a man younger than the rest and fresher from school, comes up with something that sounds like "*Tor de Sila*." It is very evident, Pramoedya comments, that the young man, in fact, constructed the treaty's name in his memory from echoes of Pramoedya's own family name, *Toer*, mixed with echoes from the name of Indonesian state philosophy, *Panca Sila*.³³

Memory is fraught with anxiety on Buru, and Pramoedya is aware how much is at stake. Often memory is the only foundation on which the camp's present time, and its prisoners' integrity, depend. In one letter from exile, Pramoedya thinks about the possibility that he might untie himself from time. As time flows from the origins in the past, may it not be constructed, and, when this is done, taken apart? Time "with its three dimensions," Pramoedya writes, speaking of the past, the present, and the future. This may, indeed, be the culmination of the century-long efforts by modern Indonesians to landscape their history: "*There's a happy land somewhere . . . universal symbol of future.*"³⁴

Long before the present prisoners arrived, time on Buru was seen as moving in a peculiar way. Buru was a place that seemed fated to serve as a perfect exile location for modern men. It was as if time on the island was always broken into three segments—the past, the present, and the future—which adhered only loosely to each other, and, together, to the island airs. As far back as 1858, Buru was described as "among the public, a long-forgotten corner of Moluccas," but, at the same time, as "a way out to relieve the fatherland's overpopulation, and to empty, as much as possible, its prisons . . ." ³⁵

The Buru airs might help Pramoedya to loose, construct, and break the flow of time better than any other place. The island and its inhabitants allow him to tune and mix time with a remarkable freedom. For instance, he writes in one of his long and detailed letters from the camp that the tribes of Buru, the "aborigines" of the island, may easily be the lost descendants of the glorious Javanese fourteenth-century empire of Majapahit. True, they do not know any Old or Middle Javanese, but

as you observe their clothes, Majapahit pops up in your mind. They wear batik headaddresses with the reddish brown as the prevailing color, and loincloths . . .

When you look at the way they carry their headaddresses, it is like the soldiers of Majapahit in their own time might carry it. When they move in their small groups,

³³ *NSSB*, p. 90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁵ Dutch translator's introduction to *LSSB*, p. 7.

they proceed in a long single file. This may be also, of course, because there are no wide roads here, only footpaths . . . ³⁶

Any suggestion of the time's tightness is potentially threatening, on Buru much more than anywhere else. A compact cage and compact memory are both bad for this prisoner. After Majapahit, Pramoedya writes, came colonialism, and after the Revolution came Soeharto. Pramoedya on Buru plans to write:

a novel about a Period of the National Awakening—as a period and not as an event . . . ³⁷

a novel about the national awakening . . . a Period of National Awakening. ³⁸

As a little boy, Pramoedya now recalls, more than anything he liked to read the old Javanese time-calculations of lucky and unlucky days published in almanacs of *Balai Pustaka* which were popular at the time. ³⁹ It is comforting to imagine himself living in days that could serve as multi-colored tokens for calculation. This is how it should be, if possible: timetables, tabulated time, time in columns, time broken in groups and subgroups, "periods," time in many dimensions.

Writing on Buru, Pramoedya, like the generations of the modern Indonesians before him, still believes that history began in "pre-logical time" ⁴⁰; then it moved

along its path towards the time of slavery, the feudal time, the colonial time, and the present time, my own time. ⁴¹

He still believes that history is logical: in the sixteenth century, he writes, world colonialism arose out of the conquest of the Spice Islands, in Indonesia. Thus, it was "not accidental" that three centuries later the Revolution in the same place, in Indonesia, opened the subsequent epoch of decolonization, and, again, for the whole world. ⁴² "Inevitably," also, after the Second World War it was, again, Indonesia that in Bandung inspired the new historic Asian-African "brotherhood." ⁴³

Early in the twentieth century, possibly as late as Sjahrir's time, the logic of history still might promise that Indonesia's future could be built simply as a modern bridge or house. In the early 1970s, however, Pramoedya wonders:

As if the way of history wound, like a rope whose beginning is joined into its end, and the circle is closed. ⁴⁴

³⁶ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 289-290. Pramoedya writes that he gave the name to the camp Unit II *Wanayasa*, which was, as he explains, a place that the famous ruler of the Javanese kingdom of Mataram, Sultan Agung, as he was preparing an attack against the Dutch in Batavia, used as "jaringan logistik . . ." Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁹ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴¹ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 162.

⁴² Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 150.

⁴³ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, pp. 94-95.

⁴⁴ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 150.

What is the place of the Revolution, in the logical construct of history as he learned it, and as he still clings to it?

I don't know . . . The process cannot be judged with any meaningful result unless there is a written history of it. And, I have not yet encountered any true work on the Indonesian Revolution.⁴⁵

Even as the question concerns whether the Revolution is finished or not, historians remain silent, and their mouths are full only of teeth.⁴⁶

Describing a night-long shadow-theater performance he saw on Buru, played by a prisoner puppeteer, with prisoners as the audience, Pramoedya thinks, logically, about a "vicious circle":

A vicious circle, from a point of departure, and back to the point of departure. The blood we all have bathed in did not make us any younger. We became an old nation, and we keep on moving in vicious circles: from an open door of colonialism, to an open door of post-colonialism, a blood bath after a blood bath?⁴⁷

Those who came after [the medieval rebels of] Arok, and those who came after those who came after them, did not carry on, they just returned to the old beginnings, bent merely upon going back, to reenter the vicious circle. And what now? Whom should I ask? What, indeed, is so wrong about the keeping on moving with the ghosts of our ancestors in vicious circles? It goes like that for centuries, doesn't it?⁴⁸

And heavy bodies are thrown into the air just by a little move of hand by a noble and slender knight . . . men are changed into animals, and animals into men. There is no evolution. No revolution is heard about . . . As the sun rises again, the gods, the priests, and the knights are returned back into a perspective showing their true forms. The only ones who have no perspective are we, all the rest, who watch the play.⁴⁹

IV. Bacteria

"And, we have to ask again, Et," Pramoedya writes to his child at the end of another letter from Buru, almost entirely devoted to history,

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 151.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 153. In his lectures on modern Indonesian history in 1964, Pramoedya mentioned two books as the most serious works evaluating the Indonesian Revolution; these were Adam Malik's "Riwayat dan Perjuangan Sekitar Proklamasi Kemerdekaan Indonesia," mimeo, 1948, and Sidik Kertapati's *Sekitar Proklamasi 17 Agustus 1954*, 3rd ed. (Jakarta, 1956). See Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Sedjarah Modern Indonesia* (Jakarta: Universitas "Res Publica," 1964, mimeo), p. ix. Since 1965, naturally, Pramoedya could have no meaningful access to any new historical literature on the topic.

⁴⁷ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

whether we ever may break from these ever bloody vicious circles? And whether we ever may fly free '*to the unknown*,' as the saying goes . . . ⁵⁰

There has to be a way to stop the vertigo experienced by the constructor, Pramoedya declares, trying to convince himself and his child as his own construct closes in upon him. One's sense of flying up "*free 'to the unknown,'*" the liberating sensation of the heights above all the shapes and designs, is made even stronger in this passage by the fact that Pramoedya suddenly uses an English phrase in his otherwise carefully Indonesian text.

In these passages, the senseless flow of time is attacked, dammed, divided into little streams, subjected to a bird's-eye perspective. The author muses that perhaps time may be anchored, tied to an immovable point. His letters from Buru suggest that, for him, this secure, defining point in time is marked by the Indonesian Revolution:

Whatever the other circumstances are: whoever did not pass the test of the national revolution will fail in all the other tests that may follow, whatever he may do otherwise, he will be only pretending to go on living, the intensity of his life will vanish, all that a man may achieve for himself, all the qualities he possibly might give to his nation, will vanish.⁵¹

To Pramoedya on Buru, the Indonesian Revolution of 1945 is the absolute. It stands beyond all the constructs of history. It is the "*flying 'to the unknown,'*" and, thus, it is the focal point of ultimate immediacy:

. . . from colonial to free men . . . from nothing to something . . . As a she-liberator of tens of millions of people, the Indonesian Revolution does not lack anything when compared to the other revolutions; it was greater, yes, endlessly greater than [for instance] the Industrial Revolution.

It is often said that the Industrial Revolution was the first revolution of production in which manpower was exchanged for machines. The time we live in, we also hear, is the time of the second revolution of production, in which computers take place of human brains. However, though a man, indeed, may be lost without his computer-delivered information and without his machine-defined station in life, you must still stick to the conviction that the man is more primal, and that he can rise above the conditions of his subsistence . . . The revolutions of production, thus, mean totally nothing when compared with the Indonesian Revolution. Only he who is blinded by the earthy brilliance can be more impressed by these revolutions . . .

How beautiful was the Indonesian Revolution, the mother of all virtues, this Pradnya Paramita . . . ⁵²

As if it were necessary, Pramoedya explains that, in fact, Pradnya Paramita was the name of his mother and in his memory these two are identical: his mother is the Revolution, and the Revolution is his mother.⁵³ This may be the anchor! At least for a

⁵⁰ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 171.

⁵¹ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 39.

⁵² Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 156-157.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

moment the idea is comforting. If nothing else, it permits Pramoedya, at the end of another letter to his child, to conclude that the Revolution is a "story" and a "fable."⁵⁴

Time, however, swirls even as Pramoedya's mother is recalled. Even with a mother placed in the center, the past, the present, and the future are tied together loosely:

I found out what her name was only after she died, when I saw it carved into her wooden memorial . . .

. . . My mother always made an impression that she was tired, while my grandmother was always fresh . . . On my grandma's lips, there always played a little smile, and she looked at the world with the bright eyes. My mother had a melancholy in her eyes, and she observed the things around with an evident uncertainty. My grandmother was different. She looked younger than my mother.⁵⁵

The mother, in fact, is never remembered by Pramoedya in exile as telling him or other children "stories" or "fables." She "read" them, and, as she has never learned to read Javanese script, this rich source of stories and fables for Javanese kids could never be tapped. Pradnya Paramita read to her children books mostly in Malay and Dutch.

Indeed, she is sometimes recalled as a child rather than as a mother; Pramoedya remembers, for instance, that when he was a boy she often fell asleep before he did, with an open book on her lap. She had died young, of tuberculosis, at an age much younger than Pramoedya's own age, when he wrote this.

She, if anyone, constituted immediacy for Pramoedya. But how to touch her, then, and now, when recalling her on Buru? "I knew," Pramoedya writes about his mother's death,

that when someone dies on tuberculosis, bacteria came out of the mouth and nose. People said that if you place an omelet over the face of the dead, the tiny holes in the omelet would swallow everything.

No, my mother could not murder me with the bacteria. I threw my arms around her cold body, and kissed her on her forehead . . .⁵⁶

This may be the point where memory and senseless flow of time are supposed to come to rest. Pramoedya remembers that he was out of the house when his mother died. He recalls himself running back to the house a few moments too late. He asked an old woman, who watched over the death, whether his mother left him any message before she died. "No message."

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 170.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 104. Recently, Pramoedya returned to the scene. In a Dutch interview in 1992, he said: "Ze was aan TBC gestorven. Mijn leraar had gezegd: als iemand aan TBC sterft, moet je een dunne omelet op de mond leggen, die wordt dan weldra door bacillen geconsumeerd. Maar het kon me niets schelen. Ik heb haar op haar mond gekust, op haar neus." A. Hans den Boef and K. Snoek, *Pramoedya Ananta Toer: Essay en Interview* (Novir: De Geus, 1992), p. 37. Another description of the event, written much earlier, from 1959, may be added. In his typewritten, very sketchy eleven-page biodata written for Professor Teeuw, there are the following lines (Pramoedya speaks about himself in third-person): "Blora, Mei 1942 . . . Ternjata ibu sudah meninggal. Dengan hati menjesal ia tjium kening majat ibunya . . ." Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Bio en Bibliografie," mimeo, 1959, p. 2, courtesy of Prof. Teeuw.

Pramoedya's father is recalled as writing songs Pramoedya's mother sang. Many of the songs were composed in the popular *kroncong* style, and some almost certainly became, as already mentioned, Eastern colonial radio hits. Initially Pramoedya's father stayed at home most of the time, and the house, which also served as a school then, was crowded and bustling with working things:

first, everything was printed on a Godir machine: forms, textbooks for courses. Then, they found Godir too slow. A new Roneo printing machine appeared in the house, and a Gesttner stencil machine with big boxes full of paper. Besides, there were seven standard typewriters bought second-hand but still in good shape ... Father hired a typist from Semarang to give typing lessons. In my later estimate, when I myself became a typist, the man had to type almost three hundred characters in a minute ...

The zinc bins for the Godir laid all around, and some were used to store water ...

The printing and stencil machines ran throughout the afternoons. In the shed of the house, two sets of *pelog* and *slendro* gamelan musical instruments were placed along the walls to be borrowed free at any time. On the verandah, there were iron bits and pieces in one corner, spare part prepared for building a workshop for training pupils as smiths and carpenters ...

Yet in time, Pramoedya recalls, his father grew increasingly aloof from the family. Here, the man's memories of his father resemble an inventory of a dwelling being laid bare, piece by piece; there is no suggestion, even, of a kiss. With the Depression of the 1930s:

With the end of the [Indonesian radical national party] Partindo, and with the Wild Schools Ordinance [for much stricter government control of national schools], the machines vanished piece after piece from our house, I did not know where. Not a single typewriter remained. Printing and stencil machines also disappeared, leaving behind just two spools, and soon nobody knew what they were for. The boxes on paper were empty. Not even a bicycle remained behind the house ...⁵⁷

... My father was now all the time gambling in the houses of friends ... He stayed more and more away from the family. Whenever he happened to stay a few hours at home, he sat, sunk in his thoughts, then he quickly put on his clothes and vanished again ...⁵⁸

Nobody dared to say anything to my father. His eyes took all your courage away. He almost never opened his mouth at home, except when he asked for a glowing cinder from the kitchen as his cigarette lighter ran out of gas ...⁵⁹

In the space recalled by these memories, the mother is in the shadows, and, ultimately, she does not leave a message anyway. The father's eyes, his mouth, and an

⁵⁷ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 24.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26. This is one of the recollections that does not seem to change. In a recent interview, Pramoedya said: "I do not understand why my parents, sometimes for months, did not talk to each other. I cannot understand it at all." P. Kalpana and E. Elburg, "Gesprekken met Pramoedya Ananta Toer," *Bzzletin* 10 (1988): 36.

occasional gleam of the hot cinder is all that is visible. There is a distance, stiffness, and silence in the memory.

V. The Splendid Radio

Pramoedya's most engrossing boyhood dream is recalled on Buru as a "plan":

. . . I saved, everything went into the saving. I nourished a plan about which nobody knew. Not even my mother.

An uncle, who just returned from New Caledonia, had among his things a book about electrotechnics. I leafed through it, and it fascinated me. I went deeper. The formulas, however, became very complicated. I could not understand them, and neither did I ask anybody.

From my savings, I bought liters of sulfuric acid, some copper, and contacts, and just by myself I built a few batteries. As the contacts began to sparkle, I was so happy that I clapped my hands to applaud the thing. We never had electricity at home. I was the first, who brought it to our house . . . In a little while, my savings were gone, and I could go no further . . . ⁶⁰

Pramoedya finished with his local, elementary, and lower-middle school in 1940.⁶¹ He wanted to study, and, indeed, he chose electrotechnics. But any course of study was clearly beyond the family's means, and, besides, Pramoedya's father did not think his son was a sufficiently good student to benefit from such training. Looking back, Pramoedya admits that he might have been right. Everything indicated that the young Pramoedya would never make it in the way Sukarno or Anwari had—two prominent national leaders, favorites of his mother, and engineers.⁶²

Pramoedya's mother was already ill at the time, and she had only about two more years to live. By the summer of 1940, however, during a period when her husband was usually absent, she had somehow made some money on her own, and she surprised her son with an unexpected offer. Pramoedya recalls,

She asked me: "To which school do you want to go? And where?"

. . . I decided: a technical course divided in three terms, each just six month long . . . And, there was a connection with electrotechnics: it was the Radio Technical School in Surabaya . . . ⁶³

He got a wristwatch from his mother, a pair of leather Bata shoes, and two gold rings to keep and use in case of an emergency. Boarding the Semarang-Joana Steam Tram, the fifteen-year old Pramoedya left for the city of Surabaya to study radio.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 70.

⁶¹ Pramoedya, after a four-class elementary school, entered a middle-level MULO school but did not advance further than to its second grade. For over a year, his father also gave him some private tutoring. See e.g. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Bio en Bibliografie," p. 1. See also Hans den Boef and Snoek, *Pramoedya Ananta Toer*, p. 7.

⁶² On Pramoedya's mother talking about the leaders, see Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 76-77.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Years later, writing on Buru, Pramoedya described his experiences in Surabaya, where his radio classes seem to have been less important than expected. Yet he was focused on communication; a variety of books caught his attention. In his boarding house he lived “with no students but clerks and workers”:

They placed me in a back room, and there, on the top shelf of a wardrobe, there was a whole little collection of books on black magic ...⁶⁵

Pramoedya read, also in the back room, “a book on sex by a Swedish scholar,” a thick book, he recalls, and he read it several times. Besides,

One truly captivating book in there was *De laatste stuiptrekkingen*, “The last convulsions,” an account of the Boer War in South Africa . . . From a housemate I borrowed a Javanese book in Latin script by Pak Poeh, which had a great influence on my mental development . . . I have also read, there, the roman cycles by Emile Zola and Balzac . . . In short, everything . . . Handwritten porno. Little detective books . . .⁶⁶

In his school, as he remembers, he was minimally interested in actual repairing:

The school no longer attracted me very much, yet I still got good grades in electrotechnics and radio theory. The practicals were torment, notwithstanding the fact that I could walk around in a white laboratory outfit. The source of all the trouble was my anguish that, through one mistake or another, I might break a radio set. If this should happen—I saw my mother before me. How dreadful it would be for her to have to make up for the thing . . .⁶⁷

At the term examinations . . . in technical drawing, I was assigned a sketch of a television that, at that time, was not yet generally known, and I was not seriously worried about the result of this particular test . . .⁶⁸

Pramoedya, with his wristwatch, Bata shoes, and two gold rings, came from a house where cavities and silence gaped following his father’s withdrawal and silence, and the machinery’s removal and disconnection. His mother sent him a new bicycle to Surabaya, but she could not do much more. Since he was bound by so few ties to people and things, it seemed appropriate that the dreams—or plans—of the boy focus instead on the amazing wireless:

yet another six months to go and then I might acquire a *marconist*, “wireless-telegrapher,” diploma. Then I could go to work on a ship, a radio station, or in a news-agency.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

⁶⁶ Ibid. In a recent text translated by Benedict Anderson and published in 1983, Pramoedya returns to this particular reading: “Actually, since 1940, my mind had been liberated from metaphysics by Pak Poeh’s well-known Javanese work; I was more inclined to focus on reason (*ratio*) as a rider and the flesh (*daging*) as a horse it had to keep firmly reined.” “Perburuan 1950 and Keluarga Gerilya 1950,” *Indonesia* (Ithaca) 36 (October 1983): 25.

⁶⁷ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 80-81.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 84-85.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 88.

When the final examinations at the Surabaya radio school, with all the ceremony, were to take place, the date was December 1941:

As we all already sat in one line in the big laboratory, the most powerful radio receiver was switched on, and tuned to the Batavia transmitter. A signal came in, very hard, but distinct, and not too coarse, granted that at the time there were still no hi-fi systems. The Netherlands news reported that the Japanese machines without a warning had attacked Pearl Harbor on Hawaii. America had declared war on Japan; England, too. Then, the Netherlands-Indies declaration was read, in which, also, war was declared on Japan.

As one man, the students ran from the classroom, jumped on their bicycles, and went home. Myself, too . . . ⁷⁰

The beginning of the war was a blow to Pramoedya in more than one way. Right until that very moment, Pramoedya on Buru remembers, "My good grades gave me some hope that I may go to study in Japan."⁷¹ The reason for his interest in Japan might have been partly political, as he himself recognized:

as a student of the radio school, I knew that Japan in its short-wave service into Indonesia did broadcast [a nationalist, and in the Indies forbidden song] *Indonesia Raya*, "Great Indonesia" . . . ⁷²

His admiration for Japanese technology, however, was clearly the most important factor motivating his ambition to visit the country. In the school, before the war, Pramoedya remembers,

the big hall that served as a laboratory and workshop, was full of big radio receivers, some as huge as 28-lamp apparatuses, of all types, from the most different factories; also wonderful Japanese machines. . . ⁷³

At one particular moment, for the first time during my practicals, I became excited. They brought a receiving set into the room, a Japanese radio. The instructor explained that the Japanese in this case used a system of montage by which each component, when it did not function well, could be extracted from the whole and replaced. When the machine was opened, there were inside no visible wires, unlike normal with all the radio receivers I had seen till then; there was just a copper plate. No, this was not an imitation, this was a genuine creation.⁷⁴

Each time young Pramoedya had a dream, it was dashed. The life of the seventeen-year boy might have been this repetitive, or perhaps the writer's situation on Buru shapes his memories in this way. In any case, Pramoedya's engineer's, or *marconist's* dream was broken in again. Once more, the humming of the working machines stopped. All the radio things were now disconnected and crammed around Pramoedya. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, a possible scholarship to Japan was out of question. The Japanese armies invaded Java in March 1942, and, in a matter of

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁷² Ibid., p. 87.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 88.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 143.

weeks, all the amazing radios were sealed, “repaired” so as to be able to receive only the official Japanese stations.

Japanese soldiers were widely expected to arrive as human machines. Pramoedya recalls some people believing that the Japanese could live just on pills: one pill a day. As the “men machines” arrived, however, they stole wristwatches and bicycles.⁷⁵ And, as the years of occupation passed, Pramoedya recalls, the Japanese proved themselves to be pitifully human:

The aversion to the Japanese was strengthened in the last year of their rule as the women for Japanese soldiers began to appear in greater numbers . . . They were all fat, they were no geishas, and even less might they be mistaken for a component of an army; they were just ordinary whores.⁷⁶

Writing, talking, touching during the Japanese occupation, with Pramoedya watching, listening, and looking for a contact, grew into a perversion of all that modern technology promised to do—to build nearness first of all:

All the Japanese victories on the sea and land were there, on the printing paper. The white screen bulged with Japanese superiority and mastery in all fields, from sport and war to *slap-sticks* in *Schaterbom*. The radio blared Indonesian and Japanese marches ...⁷⁷

The diplomas of the final class of the Surabaya radio school remained stuck somewhere in Bandung, where they were supposed to be issued and signed. Pramoedya waited for few weeks, and then he went back home, to Blora. In search of a job, he tried the only radio shop in town, but there were as yet too few radios in the little town, not enough, even, to keep the shop’s owner busy.

It was then, in May 1942, that Pramoedya’s mother died.⁷⁸ Pramoedya waited for few more weeks, and, then, decided it no longer made sense to stay.⁷⁹ An uncle of his lived in Jakarta and was willing to help out the young man in the beginning. Pramoedya recalls on Buru that he still thought of taking some radio components with him. He still might plan to build, once, a good radio for himself:

I had a rectifier with me [in Blora], and some other radio spare parts . . . I had planned to build a radio, but because there were no [other] spare parts available, I took everything with me to Jakarta.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

⁷⁸ Pramoedya, “Bio en Bibliografie,” p. 2.

⁷⁹ In a later interview, Pramoedya described the moment: “In that time, my father started to work again. The Japanese acted tough against gamblers! I had to get out of the house. Perhaps, my father thought: if he stays in this place, he has no future. He told me: ‘Just go west, to Jakarta.’ Thus I went to Jakarta.” Hans den Boef and K. Snoek, *Pramoedya Ananta Toer*, p. 36.

⁸⁰ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 118.

As far as Pramoedya was concerned, or as far as he recalls, these spare parts were never put together. "Since then," he writes from Buru, "I cut all my ties to the radio vocation."⁸¹

VI. The Mouth of Karundeng

With his "best outfit on, in a white shirt and long white trousers," truly "a good looker" in August 1942, Pramoedya came up for an interview at the official Japanese news agency, Domei, in Jakarta. The interview was conducted in English. The uncle with whom Pramoedya stayed in Jakarta knew English,

and I learned the language just in two weeks from my uncle, Moedigdo. I answered merely with yes or no . . . From behind the wall, sounded the rattle of at least half a dozen of typewriters.⁸²

Pramoedya's coded language, "*yes or no*," carried the day. The sound of working machines once more filled the space, and Pramoedya found a new life in typing:

. . . First, I had to retype an Indonesian text, and then an English text. At that time, I could type two hundred characters a minute, and I was hired.

. . . I had my own desk and typewriter . . . My first assignment was to type short news reports on stencil paper . . .

. . . reporting became fast a part of my life . . . Adam Malik . . . P. F. Dahler . . . Djawoto, while in administration, there was Nur Nasution and the brothers Lubis . . .

. . . With daily training, already after two months I improved to typing two hundred eighty characters a minute, and, thus, I was probably the fastest in the office.⁸³

Pramoedya recalls on Buru that, while in the Domei news agency, he read Spengler's "Decline of the West," and Ortega's "Revolt of the Masses." There was a war going on, but he does not remember himself having a troubled mind. Rather, he seems to remember a sense of liberation, or detachment, or a liberation in detachment:

Nobody gave a damn about the Pacific War, it merely filled the pages of the bulletins I typed . . .⁸⁴

The rhythm of typing and the principle of the typewriter appear to organize Pramoedya's recollections of the time. The number of words he could type in a minute appears to matter at least as much as the words themselves. The technique of recording a message is recalled with greater liveliness than the message itself:

Then, Adam Malik made me do something in the office that was completely new: to start chronicles. First, I had to put together a chronicle of the China-Japan War . . . I had to arrange everything in folders. This did not last long, and I was moved

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 119.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 115-116.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 116-117.

into a section of the archives. The archives were not kept in accordance with the decimal classification that I learned later. Anyway, this was my first encounter with the records. Each day, I sifted through the newspapers, divided the articles in accord with the categories that the agency has used, clipped the articles out, and pasted the clippings in hundreds of files that were placed ready on a big and high rack.⁸⁵

History became liable to be coded. Occurrences of history could be clipped off and pasted in. Time could be ordered. In his Buru memories of the Japanese news agency "editorial room," Pramoedya's staying and moving makes sense:

Against the wall, among other bookcases, and looking like them, stood a wooden cabinet with glass doors. Its shelves were filled with rows of volumes: *Winkler Prins Encyclopedie*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, two volumes of *Who's Who*, published in the United States, three English documentation folders, and a complete set of *Adat Recht*, "Customary Law," in a green cover.⁸⁶

Pramoedya recalls how intensely he schemed to secure at least one volume at a time of the *Winkler Prins Encyclopedie*, especially, on his desk, which rather inconveniently stood in an adjoining room:

I could not read the *Britannica*. The wide spacing, and also the big round letters, were not truly attractive. In the volumes of the Customary Law I read often and, in that manner, picked up something about the rules of life.

Through reading in these big volumes I felt myself bigger, too. The world seemed less petty than before, and, what was more important, nicer . . .⁸⁷

This is how Pramoedya introduces us to the path that, as we all know, led him to literature. Thanks to his reading at Domei, it appeared now that empty places might be filled and the world might even be structured, though merely into the thinly spread order of the news room, a loose web of the light, and the metallic touches of the typewriters.

Pramoedya kissed his dead mother on her forehead. He did not dare to kiss her mouth. This, he knew, might be lethal. He continues here, touching an all-important presence lightly. There was some message he was straining to hear.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 138. On another occasion, Pramoedya told another story that I found complementary to the one quoted above: "On the evening of my arrest in 1965, I had been interrogated at the headquarters of the military command by a picket officer, a lieutenant colonel. At half past one in the morning, I saw some men coming in with index cards I had collected on the historical figures of the past. The index cards were handed over to the officer. 'A list of sections, huh?' he looked at me, just making it sure. All is destroyed, also the metal index boxes that had cost me a lot of money. I had ordered them when I worked on putting together an encyclopedia." P. Kalpana and E. Elburg, "Gesprekken met Pramoedya Ananta Toer," p. 38. On Pramoedya planning, in 1955, to compile "Ensiklopedi Kesusteraan Indonesia" on his own, and the subsequent failure of those efforts, see B. Rangkuti, *Pramoedya Ananta Toer dan karja seninja* (Jakarta: Anak Agung, 1963), p. 21; see also Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Bio en Bibliografie," p. 7.

⁸⁶ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 131.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 131-132.

Beginning in 1944 . . . Domei looked for two of its employees to register for a year-long course in stenography . . . Adam Malik let me know that I was chosen, and could prepare for the course . . . ⁸⁸

The setting for the course, when it started in the summer of 1944, was impressive:

It was a very fine place where the school was located . . . All the doors and windows were decorated with black and dark-red corduroy curtains. All the furniture was equally pretty, everything was beautiful, including the w.c. This was because the school occupied a small section in the building of the former [colonial semi-parliament] Volksraad . . . ⁸⁹

This was the first time in his life that Pramoedya, son of devotedly nationalist parents, met the prominent leaders of the Indonesian emancipation struggle:

On the opening day [of the stenography school] the Head of the *Chuo Sangi-in* appeared with his staff, and with Soekarno CE [civil engineer] . . . The first lecture was given by Soekarno and he spoke on the subject of politics . . . ⁹⁰

Lectures by other well-known Indonesian figures like Hatta, Soekardjo Wirjopranoto, or Maroeto Nitimihardjo followed. Yet, Pramoedya's memory records the event as if it were secondary, a mere backdrop to the real thing:

For the rest, there were the stenography lessons by Karundeng . . .

Karundeng was a tremendous scholar, to whom I will remain grateful for my whole life . . . He was teaching a blind system of stenography.

Karundeng unlocked for me the beauty of the Indonesian language. As he read out a text, all the stenographers held his lips in their eyes. Opened, closed, pressed together, gaping, spouted, the lips exposed his yellow teeth, but nobody noticed. The voice that came out of his mouth formed clear and flawless words . . . not a single letter was suppressed, not a single comma, full stop, or a question mark was clouded. Everything stood in its place. . . ⁹¹

All the living great men of the Indonesian nation paraded before Pramoedya's eyes during the sessions of the Committee for the Preparation of Independence. The Indonesian Revolution moved closer. Yet, Pramoedya's memory on Buru, searching for meaning, spins and whirls around Karundeng's mouth:

The first practical was an unforgettable sensation.

. . . the plenary hall of the *Chuo Sang-in* . . . on a high podium, there was a special chair for Soekarno CE, the chairman of the gathering.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 134.

⁹¹ Ibid. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Karundeng was widely considered to be the most prominent Indonesian stenographer. His textbook, *Stenografi*, in 1990, was already published in its twenty-fifth edition. By a curious coincidence the house in Jakarta, where the textbook by Karundeng appeared most frequently, bore the name *Pradnya Paramita*!

... The practical, done according to the blind system, lasted ten minutes, and then the next student came to replace you ... Two months later the students began practice as assistant stenographers of the *Chuo Sangi-in*.⁹²

In these practical lessons I learned that an average Indonesian speaker does not go faster than a hundred and seventy-five letter-groups in a minute ...⁹³

A historian and flamboyant public figure, Mohammad Yamin, asked Pramoedya at this time to record a series of his lectures on Javanese Prince Diponegoro, the nineteenth-century warrior against the Dutch. The book that developed from this project would take its place in the post-war period among the most influential statements on the Indonesian national history. As Pramoedya remembers the event:

... The four lectures following dealt with Diponegoro and lasted in total eight hours ... Fortunately, the speaker, though he sputtered and sounded at first as if he were speaking fairly fast, never exceeded a hundred and sixty letter-groups a minute ...⁹⁴

Something should always be left unspoken, untouched. Words, if allowed their full force as words, might discharge from the mouth like bacteria and kill. Touching, if allowed its full force as touching, might draw blood. The mouth of Kerundeng, despite its apparent appeal to the students and the passion that bared a set of yellow teeth, still feels to us like the cold forehead of Pramoedya's dead mother. And, as we look closely at the mouth of Karundeng as it is recalled and described by Pramoedya, it appears very much like a machine.

How may the Revolution, then, be remembered?

On August 17, 1945, Sukarno declared the independence of the Indonesian Republic. On September 18, 1945, at a large demonstration at Gambir, the main square of Jakarta, now Freedom Square, the leaders of the Revolution met with the Indonesian people for the first time face to face. Japanese troops, asked to keep order until the victorious Allies, the British and the Dutch, arrived, stood alert in positions around Gambir square and watched. In Pramoedya's memory, recorded on Buru:

On high platforms like watchtowers stood groups of armed Japanese soldiers. The loudspeakers that were announcing the arrival of the president [Soekarno] and vice-president [Hatta] could not be heard over the cheering and shouting. Finally, the escort rode in. And, when the president stepped forward, everything stopped quiet. From the platform, I heard him to say softly: go just calmly home ...⁹⁵

Pramoedya is clearly intent on this particular detail. There were loudspeakers on the square, but Soekarno's voice could be heard unaided. The crowds listened, as Pramoedya believes that he remembers, to a "soft voice."⁹⁶

⁹² Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 134-135.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁹⁶ In Pramoedya's short story, "Jang Hitam," from his collection *Tjerita dari Blora*, published in 1952, Sukarno is speaking on the radio. A blind veteran of the Revolution listens to the president's voice on one of the early post-1949 Independence Days, August 17. He listens to his "12-lamp radio," one of his last

The people left Gambir. The streets they entered were crammed with technology that made it hard to move. Everything had rough surfaces and sharp edges: the Japanese panzers, the armed Japanese soldiers— We can go on in describing the scene by copying, almost verbatim, Pramoedya's description of the ship that, in 1969, took him to exile:

bullets, bayonets, orders, roll calls, badges, pistols, rifles, commando knives . . . radio . . . however nobody listens . . .⁹⁷

The stream of people, as they were leaving Gambir, pushed into the narrowing space left between the Japanese hardware and the soldiers. The people were not afraid. Some of them had sharpened bamboo spears ready; but this is clearly not the point Pramoedya wants to make. The people dared to get close to the Japanese, who were edgy with their vehicles, swords, and rifles. Utterly close! Powerful touch! In the crowd, as Pramoedya recalls it on Buru, an Indonesian young man with a naked hand grabbed at a Japanese soldier. Naturally, he could get hold of nothing but the soldier's bayonet. Some fingers were lost.⁹⁸

VII. Sportsmen-dandies-jokers-engineers

A quarter of a century after his mother died, and after the Revolution ended, in the seventh year of his exile, Pramoedya writes to his child from Buru: "With my common sense, I understand the situation I am in less and less."⁹⁹

Little around Pramoedya, as he lived in the camp, appeared straight or rationally organized. There was a carnival quality about the place. The Indonesian General Attorney, for instance, was witty. When asked, in 1969, whether it was possible for Pramoedya to write on Buru, he said: "He can write, of course, but he has no pen and paper."¹⁰⁰

There was no end to that kind of laughter. The cage of the island that imprisoned Pramoedya was "natural." In the words of Pramoedya, the island of Buru

forms a natural prison, as it is located in a valley with a barrier all around made of forests and bushes, an unbroken mountain chain in the North, West, and South, and the sea in the East.¹⁰¹

As time went on, the prison camp was more and more worth a visit:

. . . as officers [from other units of the camp] arrive at cultural evenings, one can hear the marching songs being played, composed by Nurjaslan from the Salemba

possessions, if not his very last possession. The atmosphere is gloomy, the young invalid can hear "the electric dial" as he searches for a station. Besides this, and Sukarno, there is some "Western music" on the radio, the cheers "Freedom, Freedom" from the celebrations in Jakarta, and, also, "Lilly Marlene." There is not much hope, for the veteran at least. "Jang Hitam," *Tjerita dari Blora*, 2nd ed. (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1963), pp. 381-411.

⁹⁷ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 10; see above, the section "Sjahrir Recalled" in this essay.

⁹⁸ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 160-161.

⁹⁹ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ Dutch translator's introduction to Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 312.

prison, for instance, such as "March of the Resettlement Buru" and "The Units of Buru are Building Up."¹⁰²

As often as not, the military guards at the camp and the supervising army officers on inspection tours from the province and Jakarta were dandies:

Commandant Tefaat was replaced by Lt.Col. A. S. Rangkuti, who, according to what people say, acted in movies.¹⁰³

The first commandant of Unit III, Lieutenant Eddy Tuswara, a former officer of the Cakrabirawa Division . . . likes to walk around in his swimming shorts to show the attractive shape of his thighs; his waist is always adorned with all sorts of firearms. He is a soccer fan, and a punctual administrator.¹⁰⁴

Captain Sudjoso is a devotee of kroncong music, and he likes above all cultural evenings . . . Once, we had a Waisak celebration. Upasaka Buddha. Soemartono Mertoloyo placed a Buddhist swastika above the podium. With a slow and bent step that was typical for him, [Captain Sudjoso] walked up on the stage, ripped the swastika off, then descended again, and sank back into his chair.¹⁰⁵

A tall and slim officer approached me: "You have already forgotten me?" . . . Wing Wirjawan. He was a commandant of Pattimura: "Yes," he explained, "I had an operation in Holland. Now, I am slim. They took out twenty eight kilos of fat."¹⁰⁶

Looking at Buru from a slightly different angle, it appears the prisoners themselves were good "sports." Pramoedya repeatedly mentions push-ups, and also "jogging":

I get up at five or half past four. While still in bed, I do some quick exercise, including *push-ups*. Then, I boil water for my group . . . After I go to the toilet, I walk for a quarter of an hour or do some other sport: weightlifting, taisho, and, at the end, I run about 1 to 2 kilometers; not just a fast run, rather kakiashi or *jogging*. After this, I gather wood for the kitchen . . .¹⁰⁷

The push-ups were a favorite punishment with some of the guards, but they could not destroy Pramoedya, because he had been in training since the Salemba prison, at least. A member of the Indonesian Research University Team that visited Buru late in 1973 to study prisoners was curious about all this, and Pramoedya explains patiently: sport is sport.

P.A.T.: Because I had a feeling, in the Salemba prison, that I would soon have to work hard, I began to practice sport.

University Team (a woman member): Isn't work a kind of sport, too?

¹⁰² Report by "W. R." quoted by Pramoedya in *NSSB*, p. 213.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 281, 299.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

P.A.T.: No, it is something different.¹⁰⁸

The truth, on Buru, it was sometimes believed, resided behind a looking glass. "When I stood in front of my fragment of a mirror," Pramoedya writes to his daughter from the camp:

how completely white my hair became . . . Defective though the mirror is, small, dull, and crackled, it gives a picture that is clear: on the other side is death! . . . Chairil Anwar wrote in a poem:

"once to mean something
then to die"
How romantic.

. . . my hernia is swollen . . . Sport, exercise, however, keeps up a belief in oneself . . . Somebody who saw it himself told me that in the Glodok prison [in Jakarta], the Japanese officers convicted as war criminals, several minutes before they stepped up to their gallows, still went on *jogging*. I forgot which year it was. Maybe 1947. Whether there is a hope or not: all the treasures of life are in the body you have.¹⁰⁹

Living year after year amidst the camp guards, who are also dandies, Pramoedya writes often about clothes. On his arrival on Buru: "From the Salemba prison, we were permitted to carry only two sets of clothes."¹¹⁰ About his mother, he writes, "I have learned how to be good with needle and thread. She taught me, also, to tailor my own clothes. Since then, I often made my trousers and shirts."¹¹¹ And he writes affectionately about his trousers. If one looks for a good and short history of modern Indonesia, here it is, zipped up:

It has been sixteen years already that this piece of clothing I am so proud of has served me faithfully. Initially, I did not feel so warmly about these trousers, as the Chinese tailor had made the legs of the trousers three centimeters too wide. Today, whether the cut is considered correct or not, the stuff of the trousers remains my pride. I mend them with the strongest thread I can pull out from an old parasol.¹¹²

Haircuts, naturally, are touched upon by Pramoedya, and even a beauty salon appears. In a letter from Buru, Pramoedya writes about certain Mulyoso, a friend, who was just found murdered in the camp:

People say that three days before he died, he received a letter from his family. There was a photo of his wife in the letter. He did not recognize his wife as he had known her in the past. It appears that she had recently visited a beauty salon.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 25. At this place Pramoedya also describes the University Team as "Team Psikologi Universitas."

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 136-137.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 70.

¹¹¹ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 63.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 271.

¹¹³ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 130.

At moments, rather than resembling a carnival or a maze of mirrors, the camp on Buru appears as a glass house constructed to perfection. The dreams—or plans—of modern Indonesians concerning the advancement of their twentieth-century nation “from darkness to light,” reach a point of fulfillment. Now, on Buru, everything becomes transparent:

. . . at the end, there is just death, from whatever angle one may look; even when one tries just to peep at the world from a corner. With or without lenses, whatever the instrument for viewing, and whatever stuff it is made from.

. . . In all sorts of fashions, and at all moments death appears.¹¹⁴

Indeed, the image of the late-colonial Netherlands East Indies radio buff, hidden in his house which is itself situated in a country sliding towards disaster, turning dials and searching for sounds from afar, is improper and outdated. Last in the century-long row of modern Indonesian men and women—and they were dandies, too—Pramoedya sits on Buru, in the glass house, and listens to a phonograph:

I feel the twilight, and my life drifting through the space without clear contours and filled with indistinguishable shapes, like a leech trying to suck where there are no veins. The life-appeal returns, over and over again, and it sounds like a phonograph record, His Master’s Voice: thirty years more, Pram, thirty years more.¹¹⁵

As it is natural in our time, Buru, too, was a place full of engineers. The “Appendix 4” that Pramoedya compiled in the camp and later published with his letters deserves to be quoted extensively:

“Agriculture area and road network built by political prisoners”

During the ten years, when the political prisoners were isolated on the island of Buru, they cleared and prepared for cultivation 3.532.5881 [sic] hectares of wet and dry rice fields, and built 175 km of main and secondary roads, including communications through the newly irrigated areas. All this was accomplished solely by the manpower of the prisoners themselves, without budgetary aid from the outside, from the Indonesian state’s Five-Year Development Plan or any other source. Besides this, barracks, a mosque, a church, school, market place, wharf, and other structures were built.¹¹⁶

The number of hectares cleared by the prisoners is tabulated by Pramoedya and set in columns of wet rice fields, dry fields, and fields in total.¹¹⁷ There is a table of thirty-nine “Distances between the units of the camp on the island of Buru”:

1. Mako-Unit I 1.435 km; Mako-Unit II 1.227 km . . . 21. Unit I-Unit XV 7.402 km . . . 24 Unit XV Unit XIV 7.725 km . . . 34. Unit IV- Unit XV 9.238 km . . .¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 308. This is, actually, how Pramoedya arranged the appendix in his (more) original 1988 edition (Pramoedya, *NTSB*, pp. 267-270); in *NSSB* this is placed as “Lampiran 3” (*NSSB*, pp. 308-311).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 308-309.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 310.

In "Road network of the camp on the island of Buru," the section that comes next, Pramoedya lists distances on the road from Mako, the center, to the twenty-six important points of the Buru camp system.¹¹⁹

Whatever his school diploma, Pramoedya on Buru may, also, be the last in the long row of the twentieth-century Indonesian engineers. After Sukarno and Anwari, comes Pramoedya:

We began with improving the roads and bridges in December 1969 . . .¹²⁰

. . . [often] there was not even a footpath of the indigenous people that we might use as a guideline . . .¹²¹

Upgrading the roads of the indigenous people, where there were any, was my first task. The roads had to be widened up to 3 meters, bridges built or strengthened, canals dug out; there were countless tiny meanderings to handle, and large areas under water as a consequence of the overall low altitude of the place.¹²²

Theodolite was merely a fantasy. There was not even a compass. Pencils and drawing paper as well were difficult to get.¹²³

The authorities referred to Buru as a "project." They "planned" and "regulated" "transmigration" to Buru, and they often spoke about "building up" the island. Amidst the guards, who were also engineers, Pramoedya was designing a special project of his own.

Investing a large amount of time and energy, Pramoedya compiled in the camp, and then published as "Appendix 2" to his letters, a "List of friends who died on Buru."¹²⁴ In straight, long columns, each of the Buru dead is listed under a number, name, photograph number, date of birth, date of death or disappearance, religion, marital status and number of children, education, address, and a note: a few lines about the cause of death, when it could be ascertained, and in cases of suicide, whether it happened by Endrin, Deasenon, Thiodan, or "rope."¹²⁵ There is a commentary by Pramoedya:

We all have the same experience. First, in the period of 1965–1970, we were arrested by the authorities of the New Order without any official document issued . . . Second, our families were never officially informed where we were being kept in prison. Third, our families were never officially informed whether we were transported to Buru . . . the New Order and its apparatus, also, never informed our families whether we died and whether we died from exhaustion, work accident, murder, or illness.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 311.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 56.

¹²² Ibid., p. 54.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 56.

¹²⁴ This is, again, how Pramoedya arranged the appendix in his (more) original 1988 edition (Pramoedya, *NTSB*, pp. 262 ff); in *NSSB* this is placed as "Lampiran:1." (*NSSB*, pp. 290-303).

¹²⁵ "Bunuh diri dengan menggantung." Ibid.

. . . I have asked all the units of the camp on the island of Buru to make notes for me about the friends who died. The list that I put together is not based on [information from] the authorities of the New Order . . .

This list is made especially in order to let the families know of the political prisoners who died in exile. The list is also made to become a monument of the island of Buru in particular and of a certain segment of the history of mankind in general.

Before the last group was about to leave the island of Buru and return to Java, the political prisoners made some effort to insure that their graves would not disappear with passing time or by an evil hand. They chiseled the names and addresses of the dead into slabs of concrete, and they placed the slabs on the graves . . . There is a constant danger that measures may be taken by the apparatus [of the state] against what might be considered a "heroization" of the deceased. Yet, some of the families may still find the graves of their dead, as they come upon the slabs of concrete mentioned above . . .¹²⁶

Throughout the twentieth-century history in Indonesia, concrete was a substance of a great technological importance. Many of the most visible and prestigious structures of the late-colonial and post-colonial archipelago, including the National Monument on the Freedom Square in the center of Jakarta, were proudly built of concrete. A close friend of Sukarno's and Anwar's, and their colleague in an engineering bureau in the early 1930, Roosseno through the post-war period had affectionately been known as the "Father of Indonesian Concrete."¹²⁷ Concrete, throughout, was a powerful symbol of a possibly modern Indonesia. It is natural that Pramoedya, too, decides to use concrete to cover the patches of the modern Indonesian landscape that he, in the 1970s, still believes it is possible to save.

VIII. The Ear Culture

One evening, commandant Tefaat called me to himself and ordered me to write some comics. It was simple, and I might be finished with it quickly. But I was troubled. They pushed me into a corner. Already long before my arrest, I belonged to those who were against comics . . . the *ready-made* stories cannot inspire children with a power of fantasy . . . The children will grow into just technicians . . .

As someone, however, who was stripped of his rights of a citizen, I could do nothing but listen . . .¹²⁸

Forced to write ready-made stories amidst the guards at the camp, who also are technicians, and forced just to listen, Pramoedya thinks very much about "the ear culture":

the ear culture for those who are below and still more below . . .

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ "Bapak Beton Indonesia," see in Roosseno e.g. *Roosseno, pakar dan perintis teknologi sipil Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pembimbing Masa, 1989).

¹²⁸ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 86. Pramoedya is right to say that he opposed comics a long time before he went to prison. See e.g. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Realisme-Sosialis dan Sastra Indonesia: sebuah tinjauan sosial," Paper for Seminar Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, January 26, 1963, p. 28.

... so many words disseminated through the ether, all with the same content: such a long file of *musts* and *don'ts*; and obligations, and obligations, and obligations.¹²⁹

"I am," Pramoedya writes from Buru, "also a part of the ear culture."¹³⁰ Sometimes, it even looks as if Pramoedya can imagine his body as a peculiar science-fiction machine equipped with nothing but ears:

And when all that happens, what can you do, you, a creature with nothing but a pair of ears?¹³¹

Eyes can see a design and a perspective. The eyes of the prisoners can see their prison as it is:

Surely not in vain have they chosen this place for us. However far your eyes can see, there is an enclosure of mountains; that is all what is visible. The only crack in this huge dish of a land, an opening to the outside, Wai Apu, is fully decked with watchtowers, rifles, and machine guns.¹³²

Lips, too, and tongues, and vocal cords, as well, may easily be taken from the prisoners, and they may even be used against them:

... Most of the political prisoners speak only as little as they have to and, most of the time, they remain silent and alone with their own thoughts.¹³³

Surveying all the senses that may still remain his, Pramoedya thinks most intensely about ears and hearing:

The shouting of the "hey" that is now heard everywhere is low, but shrieked out in a high-pitched voice. It might be of some profit—and in our culture all is valued by profit—if the commands telling us what to do, and the brainwashing, are turned lower to twenty degrees of Celsius, let us say, on a thermometer of power ...¹³⁴

This, of course, may be the way a radio expert thinks. Turning down the volume of sound, one may be able to make even the dumbest radio machine soften its voice. Naturally, then, one may hear less of what the broadcaster wants one to hear. But, we wonder, whether both, to hear softer, and to hear less, is not what Pramoedya, in the camp, where the ether surrounding him is filthy with words, increasingly wishes to achieve.

At one point during their internment on Buru, the prisoners were informed by the camp authorities that, in fact, they were not prisoners at all, but "settlers," thus a part of the New Order Indonesian government's long-term, social-engineering program to open the Indonesian East and to develop it for the future. "Just at that time, one day," writes Pramoedya,

¹²⁹ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 117.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

¹³³ A letter by another prisoner, "W.R.," Pramoedya quotes in *NSSB*, p. 274.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

I lost my hearing entirely. Degeneration. I was deaf. I was scared, and I began to panic. Will I never again hear the voices of my children?¹³⁵

From that moment on, hearing becomes a very serious topic in Pramoedya's letters. When he later publishes them, there is, above "Appendix 4: Agriculture area and road network built by political prisoners," and "Appendix 2: List of friends who died on Buru," an equally extensive, and no less important:

"Appendix 1: Data about my deafness"

1. Since the beginning of the 1960s, I was less able to understand words spoken by a voice in lower frequencies, especially those by a loudspeaker.

2. 13 October 1965—My left ear was struck hard with an iron butt of a Sten gun, a bone possibly was broken . . . 1971—Repeatedly, for several hours, the hearing in the left ear disappeared completely.

. . .

4. 9 October 1978—Both of my ears were swollen, the canal of the left one closed completely. In the right canal, there was still a narrow crack. The hearing in both ears was at about 5% . . .

5. Present: capability to hear voices in low frequencies did not improve. The volume of hearing is steady: about 25-30%.

. . . Buru, 30 January 1979

N.B.—The percentage of the capacity of my hearing was measured by myself. It may not be fully accurate.

—Doctor was not consulted.¹³⁶

Pramoedya's deafness became known on Buru and soon beyond the island. No more could Pramoedya hear well. Knowing his condition makes people, especially visitors, more nervous to question him, in spite of the fact that Pramoedya's answers are, in a sense, eager, innocent, and logical.

When a member of the already mentioned University Team asks Pramoedya, "Where did you get your writing paper from?" Pramoedya answers: "I have eight chickens."¹³⁷ Of course, one gets eggs from chickens on Buru, and one may get writing paper in exchange for the eggs. An offbeat turn of speech, a hint of a possibility of a disconnection, a joke, and thus a flash of freedom, may pass in an instant. On the same occasion, Mochtar Lubis, a writer, who came from Jakarta with the University Team, asks Pramoedya:

Mochtar Lubis: Pram, have you found God, here?

P.A.T.: God, which one? There are gods, sometimes, visiting Buru.

M.L.: I can see, your hearing is not good. Which ear is weak?

P.A.T.: Both.

M.L.: I may buy a *hearing-aid* for you.

P.A.T.: Thank you. There is no need to.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 314. Again, this is how Pramoedya arranged the appendix in his (more) original 1988 edition (Pramoedya, *NTSB*, pp. 262-263); in *NSSB* this is placed as "Lampiran 5."

¹³⁷ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 26.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

In the glass house of Buru, amidst the perfect machinery of watching, there might be a place to hide, and even to keep on talking. Pramoedya notes down in a letter facts about some of the worst moments of his deafness:

Fever . . . As the fever disappears a little, I hear just my voice, and the sound of my own heart.¹³⁹

There are hours and days on Buru when Pramoedya feels that he might have lost his hearing forever. In a letter about these gruesome moments, Pramoedya uses one word otherwise rare and precious in his loneliness: a "dialogue."

And like a baby, I have no other means of communication but my voice: to scream, to moan, to sigh, to whine. And when even that means of communication is seized and taken away from me, ah-yes, who may seize and take away my right to have a dialogue with myself?¹⁴⁰

IX. The Happy End

Late in the summer of 1973, Pramoedya was ordered to walk from his camp to the camp unit IV in Savanajaya. After a day of walking along the new Buru roads planned by the camp authorities and built by the prisoners, he reached the place on bloody feet:

On 9 October, a helicopter arrived from Namlea, and landed at about 10 in the morning on the Savanajaya soccer field . . . Out of the machine, the Chief Commander of the State Security Service, General Soemitro, emerged with his suite.¹⁴¹

In a speech to the prisoners, which Pramoedya quotes as if he could make notes, the general said among other things:

Gentlemen, each time when I am called to our president in Jakarta, I am always asked: "How are our friends on Buru doing?"¹⁴²

Prompted by the general, still at the place, Pramoedya made

a kind of desiderata inventory, containing a short list of books, copies of documents from the National Archives, some old journals, and newspapers as a documentation for the novel I wanted to write about the Period of the National Awakening . . . ¹⁴³

When a parcel arrived after some time from General Soemitro's headquarters in Jakarta, according to Pramoedya,

. . . there was nothing in the box besides what, evidently, my wife herself had packed. There were no newspapers whatsoever, and neither were there important speeches by the President that General Soemitro also promised.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 314.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

General Soemitro's visit, nevertheless, did make some other officers and guards bolder and more forthcoming. On one other occasion, not long afterwards, writes Pramoedya,

Mayor Kusno . . . presented me with a golden fountain Pilot pen, a bottle of ink, and a thick notebook that he said he hoped I would use for writing. There was an inscription on the first page of the notebook: for "your personal greatness, and for the greatness of Indonesia."¹⁴⁵

It was not too difficult, apparently, for Pramoedya, to keep the communications with the Indonesian generals and captains on an emotionally manageable level. But Pramoedya's wife and children, too, were, and appeared to be, a part of the elusive and often brutal outside world:

Do my wife and children hope that I may come back?

. . .

Is it true? I have already received some letters from them. But how is it in reality, I do not know.

. . .

I have heard, here, that my wife married again.
Lies. Those are lies.

. . .

Is my wife still pretty?¹⁴⁶

A visitor, on a rare occasion, and when things got a bit softer on Buru, offered Pramoedya to record his voice and take the tape with him back to Jakarta, to Pramoedya's family:

Sindhunata urged me to send a message to my family. He wanted to take my voice on a tape so that my children can hear it.

I have never tried anything like that, I said. [We tried it.] As I listened to the tape, my voice sounded so authoritative. I became afraid that my children would be scared as they heard it.

Don't worry, he pushed.

Thus, I gave him the tape, I did not even use it completely. The recording was not good technically, as I had never before worked with a cassette tape-recorder. The wonderful thing was still a possession only of those prisoners who had become rich. I put just a little story on the tape, about a dog I knew—a story for my youngest son . . .¹⁴⁷

Most of us cannot imagine Pramoedya's isolation. In a letter that in all probability will never fly so far as Java, Pramoedya tries to explain to his daughter why his first marriage, two decades ago, had broken down.¹⁴⁸ At the end of another letter, in evident desperation, he attempts to remain a father on hand:

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 175.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 191-192.

¹⁴⁸ Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 172ff.

You do not yet have a boy friend, have you? You are still too young to go out alone. For something like that, you have first to ask permission from your father or mother. Don't do it in secret. You must be always honest with your parents.

I kiss you.¹⁴⁹

Sometimes, exceptionally, what appears to be direct contact with the ones back home is accomplished. A photograph from Buru reaches Pramoedya's daughter, in one instance, and the daughter's response gets back to Pramoedya:

My friends say that mamma remains young so long. But how is it that you have so changed? You became much older. I cannot believe how fast it happened. How does it happen that you became old so fast? . . . ¹⁵⁰

Pramoedya was respected by many of the prisoners in the camp. When they could afford it, and the guards did not seem to mind, the fellow prisoners took some of menial duties over from Pramoedya, so that he could write:

When my typewriter breaks down, they repair it immediately, so that I do not lose a moment. When I am sick, they care for me, and nurse me . . . During these past twelve years, I had so many, so awfully many generous persons around me. . . They have helped me to keep in memory what, otherwise, I might forget completely . . . ¹⁵¹

In a sense, Buru was warm and understanding to Pramoedya throughout the years. At the same time, however, everything on Buru was turned outwards, towards the—elusive and often brutal—outside world.

One is reminded, at this point, of the celebrated early-century Javanese "enlightened woman," Kartini, namely of her enthusiasm for photography, one of the very modern ways of touching the world she knew; she sent the photographs of herself, received the photographs of friends and mentors, arranged, and rearranged the portraits on her bookshelf and her coffee-table.¹⁵² The innocent Kartini, young by the historical era in which she lived, thanks to her work with the camera might be designated the "mother of the Indonesian nationalism" as it matures. Cameras are still

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 295. Buru, in a sense, and in contrast to Boven Digoel, was a compact place. First, unlike the broadly Indonesian composition of the prisoner population Boven Digoel, virtually all the exiles on Buru appeared to be Javanese; also, from some of Pramoedya's remarks it seems that Buru's population was, again compared to Boven Digoel's, very homogenous. See e.g. Pramoedya, mentioning one of the prisoners, and writing: "Mungkin karena orang PNI ia menganggap diri terpencil, dan karenannya membutuhkan sahabat." Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁵² Kartini (1879-1904) is omnipresent in Pramoedya's writing. He still plans to add another volume to his earlier extensive biography of Kartini, *Panggil aku Kartini sadja*, Vol. I and II (Jakarta: Nusantara, 1962). Pramoedya's grandfather, also, lived in Rembang, a place where Kartini lived out the last period of her life, and where she died. Also, Pramoedya's letters from Buru have some rich memories of his Rembang grandfather's big house. Pramoedya was certainly aware that the Semarang-Joana Steam Tram which took him, in 1940, to his radio school in Surabaya (see section "The Splendid Radio" above) was the same line that Kartini used at the turn of the century on her trips to Semarang, and which she immortalized in her letters.

there, and more important than ever. While searching, often in vain, for their faces in their half-dull mirrors, the prisoners on Buru are made flagrant. Pramoedya writes:

Before he climbed into his helicopter to fly back to Namlea, the Chief Commander of the State Security Service [General Soemitro] asked me: "Would you mind, Mr. Pram, if they take a picture of two of us together?"

Before the guests left, political prisoners posed for yet another portrait with the Chief Commander of the State Security Service and his staff. Prof. Dr. Suprpto SH [a fellow-prisoner] and I, on either side of the General. Then, Mochtar Lubis and Rosihan Anwar [another of the guests] let themselves be photographed with me in the middle.¹⁵³

According to a prisoner's report quoted by Pramoedya, at about the time when General Soemitro visited the camp, Unit II of the Buru camp was made into a "*display-window*."¹⁵⁴ Visitors in steadily increasing numbers, first from Indonesia, and then from abroad, were permitted—and sometimes encouraged—to come and see the camp and its inhabitants. As the protests increased from the outside, from the Western world in particular, the prisoners of Buru were put on the stage; the closer they moved to freedom, the more

International protests made a stain on the image of the Indonesian authorities. Already during the first year of the existence of the forced labor camp, Buru, all was set to work to wrest out a sense of justification from the outside world.¹⁵⁵

During one of the earliest visits to Buru, Pramoedya writes:

a team came of the [Indonesian] State Film Co. to make a picture. Myself, Prof. Suprpto SH and Syarifuddin SH [two fellow-prisoners] were directed to work on a house that was just being built. There, we were filmed. Mannequins again.

In the team headed by a Lieutenant Second Class, a native of Cirebon, there was a cameraman, German, who introduced himself merely as Fritz, from Wiesbaden. With permission from the new commandant of our unit, he gave me two shirts and a pair of corduroy trousers . . . I cannot forget the goodness of the man whom I did not know before, whose country I have never seen, and whom I met, here, in the middle of these plains . . . ¹⁵⁶

Tourism was always a powerful issue in modern Indonesian history—a craft, more often than not, to move through a landscape of oppression and suffering in that country without being touched deeper than lightly on the skin. The snapshots from the time of Kartini, and decades thereafter, went well with tourism. On Buru, tourism, too, appears to mature. As Pramoedya writes, in another of his letters,

¹⁵³ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁴ "Unit II oleh penguasa telah dijadikan show-window seluruh Inrehab Buru." *Ibid.*, p. 264; also "Unit II semasa Kol.Karyono diberi sebutan 'Proyek Swasembada', dan selalu dijadikan show-window untuk para tamu . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-278.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

Those who will not survive all the sifting will offer their commentaries, written in white ink, between the lines of tourist guidebooks describing the great Indonesian culture, its good manners, warm hospitality, and lofty decorum.¹⁵⁷

As freedom for Buru prisoners comes closer, or seems to, visitors arrive in streams:

He was Bur Rasuanto, whom I had known before I was arrested, a writer . . . I also recognized Alex Leo, a reporter of Radio Jakarta . . . Then, foreign journalists followed. One among them, Jacob Vredenburg, Dutch, handed me a letter from my wife through barbed wire with the words that it was already read at the Prosecution . . .

The other foreign journalists whom I knew were a Japanese, and an American woman, Cindy Adams, the author of the biography of president Soekarno.

. . . Also among them was someone whose name, as I was later told, was Gunawan Mohamad . . .¹⁵⁸

Shortly afterwards, Captain Sudjoso, the above-mentioned aficionado of *kroncong* music, ordered Pramoedya

and Prof. Dr. Suprpto SH [a fellow-prisoner] to cross Wai Apu to Unit-II; we did not know what he had in mind. When we arrived at the place, we were told that the two of us would be presented for interviews to journalists from Jakarta, Australia, Hong Kong, and Holland. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, Dutch, and English.¹⁵⁹

The visits from Pramoedya's captors, official and semi-official missions by representatives of the regime, appeared not too difficult to perceive in their true dimensions, and to handle:

I felt like a commodity on display for the big shots from Java, like a monkey in a zoo.¹⁶⁰

Some visits by "neutrals" were not very demanding either. One day, Pramoedya was called upon in the camp by an emissary of the International Red Cross:

Swiss citizen, his name was Dr. Reynard, if I am not wrong. Talking with this man, I soon became nervous, because he did not speak very loudly, and I had to make all kinds of effort to focus my already imperfect hearing.¹⁶¹

The visitor emphasized that he was there on a humanitarian, and not a political, mission:

He told me what kind of medicines, and how much of each kind he had in mind. As I did not have a slightest knowledge of pharmacology, I answered by just saying yes-yes. Perhaps, he thought that knowledge of pharmacology was on the same level here as in Europe. He gave me two carbon copies, where the names and

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 97.

amounts of the drugs were listed. "In total, one and a half of a tons," he said. Then, he examined our well and asked if we boiled water before drinking, yes or no. He also checked upon the latrines. There was a call for him from the headquarters in Mako, and he left in a small pick-up truck.

I passed the carbon copies to our friends, the political prisoners who worked at the infirmary. Everything remained as before . . . ¹⁶²

There are some moments, however, as disturbing as they are touching: on the stage, clothed in his prisoner's costume, Pramodya appears almost as if he were meeting a friend. Particularly at these moments, it becomes uncomfortably clear that the glass house of Buru was designed and built well:

Early in the morning, at half past five, David Jenkins from *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Hong Kong, is already here . . . He notes down the measurements of my room: 2,5x2,75 m. Ceiling: 2,5 m. He wants to see my belongings. I open my chest: manuscripts and some clothes.

That's all.

He is a likable man. He explains that he wants to write about me in his magazine, for the series "Behind the Lines." He takes more than ten pictures.

It appears that my room has some power of attraction. Mitsunori Matsumura from TV and Radio Japan asked if he might photograph the room. He moved away all my tins with food, and put them back when he was finished. Trisno Juwono, in his broadcast for Radio Amara, mentioned my shoes, ashtray, tobacco box, and the earthen floor . . .

Everything changes, as it is touched by the current of change over there in the West. Indonesia was always like that, and still is. And political prisoners remain political prisoners . . .

David Jenkins already finished his job. He came to say good-bye.

We will meet again in better times. I will send the photographs to your family back home.

Thank you. Have a nice trip. Bye.¹⁶³

Acutely alone, at moments Pramodya appears to enjoy the talks with visitors, the journalists especially, an easy kind of talk, admittedly, and the more easy, loose, and even thin the talk, it often seems, the better:

. . . the journalists did not give me a chance for a reflection . . . They shouted their questions, and shouted, and fought among themselves to shout. And I was happy. At the least, to talk with free people, people free from slaving to their stomachs, it makes you feel touched by some freedom, too. What a comfort. To feel oneself to be still human, no more a pharaoh's subject, no more a worshipper of the earth. Still human.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁶³ Ibid., pp. 192-193.

Kompas, Tempo, Suara Merdeka, Surabaya Post, Berita Buana, UPI, NHK, ABC, The Asian Wallstreet Journal, Indonesian TV, and Radio, Merdeka, and who knows what else.

The questions-answers are for me the First Releasing. There is no tension . . . ¹⁶⁴

At first, these encounters, as Pramoedya describes them, might resemble the early Indonesian newspaper pages from almost a century ago. Every triviality was thrown in, pieces from the whole wide world, every bit of imagery was eagerly grabbed at. In the camp on Buru, however, it seems that the men and women are asking questions who already know too much.

In lengthy paragraphs, on page after page of his letters, Pramoedya records questions by visiting journalists, and his answers. There is no real order to the questions. Is this made by Pramoedya radio again that makes noise in the background while nobody truly cares to listen? Indeed, the world is described arriving at Buru, buzzing in.

Would not Pramoedya be glad to be released? What would be the first thing he would like to do after his release? Is Indonesian literature in decline? Is Pramoedya's current writing on a higher level than his earlier work? Why did he agree, in the 1950s, to the continued imprisonment of a fellow writer? Does he still believe that writing and politics are closely linked together? Is politics dirty?¹⁶⁵

When you are free, will you be able *cunin* with other people?

What do you mean by *cunin*? What language is that?

English.

Oh, *tune-in*. I will, why not?¹⁶⁶

Why, they ask, has he become so rough when initially he was so gentle? Was he disappointed by the outcome of the Indonesian Revolution? If Indonesian society would not want him back, which country would he choose to live in? Has he read "The Decline of Constitutional Democracy" by the Australian Jew, Herbert Feith? Does he know Harry Aveling? ¹⁶⁷

You have a typewriter. Who gave it to you? . . .

I have read in a newspaper that you got the typewriter from the President.¹⁶⁸

Pramoedya, who lost more than most of us can imagine, and who is writing out of the soul of a nation that lost more than most of us can imagine, is happy, physically happy, breathing a happiness of finding fast words and lanky definitions of "free men," "knowing," "remembering," "brothers and sisters," and "happiness," even:

. . . In spite of everything, the meeting with free people—domestic and foreign journalists—gives me a fine feeling: those in the outside world still know that we live. And as long as there is some life, there must be some sense in it . . . From

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 178-180.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 180.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 180-182.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 185.

Indonesia, almost all came: *Merdeka, Suara Umum, Berita Buana*, Said Salim from *Tempo, Surabaya Post, Pikiran Rakyat*, Indonesian TV and Radio . . . ¹⁶⁹

They dazzle everybody. The arrival of the foreign and domestic journalists, for the first time in twelve years, brings political prisoners in contact with visitors, who come and do not issue new punishments and orders, do not nit-pick and brainwash. The prisoners get a chance to air their lungs, bile, heart, liver, yes, their kidneys, nerves, and their skin. Their skin? Yes, because there is almost no prisoner whose skin is not scratched and torn into a map full of bad signs. The work of charity is a part of democracy! Suddenly, the journalists appear as standing closer to you than your own brothers and sisters. A ton of suffering they ease from our shoulders. Now, the guests have departed again, and again the political prisoners, gram after gram, move to load up their ton. It does not matter. At least for a while, some real humans penetrated the bastion of the Buru camp.¹⁷⁰

Memory returns to Pramoedya with the crowds of visitors from the outside. They come and go. The memories they bring are sharp and clear: like pieces of news, or souvenirs. These memories were canned and preserved for Pramoedya while he was put away. Perhaps some parts of these memories were stolen from him in the first place:

Heap of Ashes [my book translated] by Harry Aveling, pleases me, too. [A journalist brought it to Buru.] Every translation, of course, has some shortcomings . . . The last section, nonetheless—*The Silent Centre of Life's Day*, and I remember, this is a translation of *Sunyi di Siang Hidup*—makes me think intensely back, and think back again. I cannot recall that I gave these particular pages to anybody. This was a fragment from my diary. I wrote it in December 1954, I believe, at a moment when I could see no way out of my social, personal, and family conflicts. Also, I do not recall that I ever saw this text published by the magazine *Indonesia* in its June issue of 1956 [as the translation's editor has it]. I hope that I am wrong.¹⁷¹

This is how the happy end drags in. In December 1977, Pramoedya witnesses the first wave of prisoners released and sent home from Buru:

And 1501 friends left for Java ...

Happy journey to the free world. Happy departure from the time of the last twelve years. Happy being caught and placed into the old dictionaries with the new meanings. Happy being greeted by rotten phrases that are veiled in palace costumes to appear nice. You leave for a changing world—a world made half mad by how dense its population grew, and how noisy its slogans became—loud and empty—¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 194.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁷² Ibid., pp. 194-195. A few pages further, Pramoedya comments upon the declaration that each prisoner had to sign before being "made free"—a new "slavery," Pramoedya calls it: "Maka aku menjadi semakin mengerti waktu seorang teman mengatakan: Benar-benar aku jadi rugi dilahirkan sebagai orang Indonesia." Ibid., p. 201.

It is decades since Pramoedya left the radio school. Now, the world is on the air again. Otherwise, nothing happens:

Catherine Randers from Oslo . . . She writes in Indonesian, something like: "I have heard on radio news today that you were in the first group of people sent off to Buru" . . . She writes, besides, that her daughter is a member of Amnesty International. Another letter, also, came from that most northwestern part of Europe, from Father Verhaar in Haarlem. He writes in broken Malay, and his letter begins in almost the same way as the first one: "I listened to the news on the radio today, and I heard that you don't have writing paper. Would I be allowed to send you some writing paper?" Naturally, I can answer neither of the letters, and, moreover, both addresses were blackened out . . . more and more, I value the intellectual inner self of Europe.¹⁷³

Television, at a certain point, also, becomes available to the prisoners:

. . . television that could be watched by political prisoners in the headquarters of our prison beginning with November 1977.¹⁷⁴

The news of impending freedom trickles in on the wireless, first as rumors that prove to be false:

The population of the camp, and the officers, already knew it from Radio Ambon . . .¹⁷⁵

Even the reality, as it follows, is a news reality. After the first wave of the Buru prisoners is released, and as it reaches Java, the television is already there, waiting in the innermost sanctum of the returnees' homes, watching the faces of the families, and looking around the households. Pramoedya sits in front of the box on Buru:

The First Releasing, clearly, became a reality. Television already reported on the return of the prisoners to the embraces of their families. What is more important: Indonesian society appears to accept them, as it is clear from these warm and touching receptions.¹⁷⁶

Pramoedya does not make it easy for us to learn where he wishes to return on the day of his release. In one letter he writes that in Jakarta, "you are internationally a bit more exposed"; outside Jakarta, it is "more away from all those foreign priers."¹⁷⁷ What is away? He may end his life at sea: if the ship carrying the prisoners sinks, Pramoedya writes, we will leave a "scoop" behind us.¹⁷⁸ Pramoedya wishes to get away from Buru, naturally, and more than anything else. But how deeply may he wish to return home? He reminds his child in one letter from Buru:

¹⁷³ Ibid., pp. 72-73; the letter is also mentioned in letter to Wertheim from late 1977, quoted in the Dutch translator's introduction to Pramoedya, *LSSB*, p. 9.

¹⁷⁴ Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. 164.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

You could see it yourself, how our house was destroyed. Destroyed with the big river stones that our neighbors had already prepared for building their own new house.¹⁷⁹

Mochtar Lubis, who visited him on Buru, asked Pramoedya as a fellow writer: "Pram, what do you read these days?" Pramoedya answers:

I like the magazine *America* published by the Jesuits.¹⁸⁰

Pramoedya appears to be serious. Besides, the Society of Jesus does not turn up fleetingly, either on Buru, where there was a small Christian mission, or in Pramoedya's letters. To his daughter Nen, Pramoedya writes about it in a sudden, long, and enthusiastic letter:

"Letter to Nen"

Daddy did not get a single letter from you for the past two years. Perhaps, they were not allowed through, or are you really writing?

Recently, I have, by an accident, come upon a book by dr. Josef Vital Kopp, "Teilhard de Chardin" . . . I myself have never read the writings of the greatest scholar of this century, Teilhard de Chardin, but the explanation by dr. Kopp gives an interesting picture of the theories of this important scientist . . .

. . . the Indonesian version has a title "Teilhard de Chardin, a New Synthesis concerning the Evolution," translated by Al Hastanta and Ign. Kuntara Wm., with a foreword by prof. dr. J. W. M. Verhaar SJ (SJ, Societatis Jesu, means that he is a member of the Jesuit Society, or that he is a Jesuit) . . .

I hope that you, as an enlightened girl, have already read the book, and it would be very nice if you could get deep into it . . .

Nen, Teilhard de Chardin is the greatest scientist of this century . . . At a given moment, in the seventeenth century, light was brought into the darkness of the preceding era by Johann Keppler, namely in the field of astronomy; but, at present, into the darkness of the preceding era, light is brought by Teilhard de Chardin, in the field of human evolution . . . And this is no philosophy, this is almost a hundred percent science, through which the truth may be proved.

. . . Father Teilhard de Chardin argues that the mankind has not arisen from one single couple, but in polygenesis. Thus, there were all kinds of different Adams and Evas, and not just one pair: there was the Javanese man, the Neanderthal, the Peking man, and so on.

About a theory of evolution, I learned of it for the first time in my middle school, and from the beginning I was really interested. Bits and pieces, and unscientific interpretations I had read, in fact, already in the elementary school, in two Javanese books. One of them was written by a retired teacher,¹⁸¹ who did not believe that it was possible for God to create Adam on one try, because the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁸¹ This may also be a reference to Pak Poeh; see above the section "The Splendid Radio."

natural circumstances would not allow it. God tried at least three times before he succeeded . . .

. . . I always wanted everything logical rather than illogical . . . Reading in verse 31 of *Al Bahara* in Koran, for instance, it was always hard for me to accept that man might not have a language if it were not taught to him by God. It can be scientifically proven that language is a result of human struggle in life and society. Language is a product of human labor . . . Each word, each name, each term, even an acronym, is nothing but a result of human labor . . . Thus, for instance, the theories of Teilhard de Chardin enriched the treasury of human language with specialist terms: biosphere and noosphere.

. . . Nen, it makes me feel so lucky to follow the liberating ideas of somebody who lived in the same juncture of time like me: Teilhard de Chardin!

. . . I like things that are lucid. Whenever anything remains hidden, human misery springs out of that place. That is always so . . .

. . . I am in favor of making *oeuvre de raison* a measure of things. Not that it should be the only measure, but certainly the most important . . .¹⁸²

Rather than being dense, this letter is crowded with signs and signals. Everything and everybody is there, in the letter, as on the newspaper page: "through darkness to light," this was the famous Kartini maxim; Pramoedya's Javanese teacher with his wise little fables that go well with Keppler; *oeuvre de raison*, evolution, almost a hundred-percent science, and Pramoedya's own daughter, an "enlightened girl." The time since Pramoedya was fifteen in Blora, till this instant on Buru, and, perhaps, a little beyond, can be safely surveyed, and flows smoothly. As long as the letter is written, the world makes sense.

Two key words in Pramoedya's long letter are Teilhard de Chardin's additions to "the treasury of human language"—"biosphere" and "noosphere." As an encyclopedia explains,

The Humans, as they are now known, according to Teilhard, are not the end of the process . . . Everything that arises converges. Widely different human cultures around the Earth are now converging toward an omega point, identified by Teilhard as Christ, at which point consciousness can find a new unity. Already humankind has covered the Earth's surface with a noosphere, a sort of collective human consciousness superimposed on the already existing biosphere, and which Teilhard believed is evident in the present worldwide complex of transportation and communication.¹⁸³

Pramoedya's is an exile in the time of wirelessness. The wall is torn down, and wires, barbed or otherwise, are no longer required to keep a nation, or a man, together.

In contrast to tales of some other heroes, the rest of Pramoedya's story is not in silence. Pramoedya's publisher lets us know,

¹⁸² Pramoedya, *LSSB*, pp. 306-310.

¹⁸³ The Grolier 1995 Multimedia Encyclopedia (Grolier Electronic Publishing, Inc, 1995).

with *the very last group*, [Pramoedya] left the island of his exile on 12 November 1979.¹⁸⁴

This group of returnees traveled across the sea, again, to Surabaya, and, then, on the road, via Solo and Yogyakarta, to Magelang. After being locked up for another month in Magelang, the prisoners were transferred to the military barracks in Banyumanik, south of Semarang. In Semarang, on December 20, 1979, the first of a series of the official “ceremonies of release” took place. “Even a number of foreign ambassadors were present. After the ceremony,” these returnees, who initially came from West Java, Pramoedya among them, were transported to Jakarta, back to the Salemba prison, where, ten years earlier, this journey had begun. The next morning, they were

handed over to the Military District Command of the region where they belonged according to their permanent or temporary residence permit . . .

On December 21, 1979, Pramoedya was released, and ordered to report every week at the local East Jakarta police station.¹⁸⁵

—

Pramoedya is free. The whole world knows about him. A stream of eager visitors from abroad, and a somewhat more hesitant trickle from Indonesia itself, never stops. What can we do? What can we do, indeed, except to join in the procession, be patient, ask Pramoedya, when we get there, what he thinks about all this, and, then just hope that he may switch off his new Philips hearing aid for a moment and answer our question with the wisest of his smiles: “I have eight chickens”?

¹⁸⁴ Joesoef Isak in Pramoedya, *NSSB*, p. x.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xii.