

# TIMES

## Pramoedya Ananta Toer Translated by Daniel T. Sicular\*

A new situation: he had been thrown into a cell. He laughed within. And his lips curled into a smile. The first time he had experienced it. Saddening too. Both his cheeks were swollen and blue. A dozen marines had usurped him with fists. Fists as white as cheese, as black as car tires, and fists as brown as ripe sawo fruit. It was funny, in a cramped room, and ten pairs of eyes greeting him, flickering as they caught the rays that entered from a grate—two and a half meters from the floor.

The ten pairs of eyes had owners: three full-blooded Dutchmen—corruption. A Dutch-Indo tank driver—corruption also. Two Chinese-Indos, military-corruption also. An Indonesian *pemuda* aged 17—running arms near the demarcation line. An Indonesian *pemuda* from Bogor—for possession of a tenth of a kilo of gold. A *pemuda* from Tanah Rendah—long hair. And a boy of 13, always alone in the corner—didn't know his own offense. Day ended. Night. Heavy rain outside. Cold. A stream of water entered through the grate above. The whole cell had tired of telling their various experiences. Now they yielded to their own memories. A cell in the MP barracks, Jagamonyet, Jakarta.

One after another laid his body on the plank floor. Abdul stood up. His smile had disappeared. For smiles cannot last long. The Dutchmen, full-blooded and Indo, lay on their cots. Also the Chinese military men. Calm. Only their breath gently intermingled. Almost completely inaudible.

Suddenly all thoughts and eyes were centered on the cell door. Those lying down sat up, and stood. An MP entered. A tommygun was slung over his shoulder.

"Maliki!" he yelled.

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The smallest prisoner extended his body. Like a dog afraid of the stick, slowly, head hung, eyes cautiously watching the feet and hands of his summoner, he approached. As before he paid no attention to his cellmates. Walking flesh.

"Follow me!" a ferocious voice.

Both of them left the cell. The door was slammed, then locked. Those remaining drew a deep breath. And Abdul cleared his throat. The MP had not come for him. Summonses, interrogations—these terrified him. Because: welts and bruises would always follow. And he had never before had anything to do with police, military or civil. Furthermore, he did not understand what had led to his being arrested, then beaten, and now—in this cell. And a child as young as Maliki was already adult enough to be in prison.

His thoughts drifted on. Conjecturing. Guessing. From question to question. And the rain outside fell heavier. One by one, the prisoners flopped down, stretched out.

Again the door was opened. The night air entered. But it had no power to alter Abdul's mood. His heart was shaken. He could control his thoughts no longer. All the prisoners stood. He too. An MP entered. Behind him was dragged a boy of 12. He was thrown inside. And this boy crawled to the corner—to where Maliki had been. His body was husky, plump, and dampened by the rain.

Abdul heaved a sigh of relief. Not for him. The boy drew apart, and curled his body into a heap of breathing flesh. He wore no shirt, only dirty black pants reaching halfway to his knees. The MP left. The door was thrown shut again. Locked from outside.

All attention was drawn to the heap of flesh. Abdul approached. Some of them came near. Only the two full-blooded Dutchmen stayed by themselves on their cots.

"Maliki's a kid, but this one's even more of a baby," said the pemuda from Bogor.

Silence.

Abruptly Abdul added: "And cleaner." The rain was subsiding. From outside came the sound of the guard's footsteps, heavy upon the asphalt of the main road. The rumbling of passing cars could now be heard. Also the horns and klaxons that answered back and forth on Harmoni.

"What for, kid?" asked the corrupt Indo tank driver.

The boy stretched. He did not answer.

"And fatter," said the pemuda from Tanah Rendah.

"Sturdier than Maliki," continued Abdul.

"Maliki's got no home," said the boy, extending his body. "He sleeps in store fronts. But me, I got my ma."

"You know Maliki?" asked the corrupt Indo in awe.

"He was arrested 'cause of me."

"Ha. You'll be in jail ten years, kid," said the pemuda from Bogor, trying to scare him.

"Ten years?" the boy repeated. "So I'm in here my whole life. So what."

"Huh?! I couldn't do even a month. And he's saying he could take it for his whole life long. Well, kid, that lifts the ol' spirits a bit. What'd they pick you up for?"

No answer.

They took turns asking why he had been arrested. Still he would not answer.

"Such a little kid," sighed Abdul, and he let out a deep breath. "Maliki's at least a little bigger."

The boy remained dumb. Everyone wanted to know why. They asked again. Still dumb. And they asked again. Completely futile. He let their urgings fall cold—as cold as the rain outside. Again he curled up his body until it had become even smaller, into the shape of a 2.

Silent. Disgusted. Each crawled back to his own bed. Some to cots. The others to the wooden floor, dirty and itchy. More rain. The only sound was the rain soaking the tile roof. All went back to puzzling and groping. Truly, in a cramped space, the mind and soul are free to roam.

All closed their eyes. Those on the wretched floor scratching themselves the while. Unexpectedly, half incoherently, his voice floating, the boy began:

"In the time of the English, the Turbans<sup>1</sup> caught me," and he sat up. Slowly he leaned against the stone wall. And the men crowded close in. He went on: "In this very cell. Three days I was kept in here. Then they moved me to Glodok prison. Ya, they gave you this much food," he lay back. Then he showed them the palm of his hand, closed and hollow. "Eight months."

Abdul cleared his throat.

The boy continued his story. One afternoon, he was hanging about with his friends in Pasar Baru.<sup>2</sup> A *becak* filled with rolls of muslin halted beneath a tree. And why should there be so much cloth, while their clothes were in rags? The needs and desires of a child's spirit forced the boy and his friends to steal the *becak* with its contents. It was easy: he sat in the saddle and steered. The others pushed from behind. The first reason he became a prisoner. Sans questioning, sans interrogation—put in jail! When he came out of the pen, the Turbans had gone. The English, too. It was the Dutch who held power in Jakarta.

His story ended. And the boy sighed.

"The little rascal," thought Abdul.

But who could blame him? So young. Sans education, sans father, sans guarantees for his stomach. Maybe during the Japanese era he had begged. Then again maybe not. Nerve prevents the growth of a begging spirit. Maybe he stole. And theft demands responsibility. Consciously or unconsciously. Responsibility for one's deed. And a raging responsibility that runs berserk!

The Japanese era: an era of chaos. The occupation era: an era of recklessness. There was no lack of people who refused to recognize the boundaries of individual rights. And the influence of these items moulded souls still seeking form. Is evil indeed evil in a time when evil is inundating the earth?

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<sup>1</sup>Turbans—troops of the British colonial army.

<sup>2</sup>At that time, Pasar Baru was the main shopping street of Jakarta, and was known especially for its fine dressmakers and tailors.

After he was released from prison, the boy once again had to search for means to ward off death. He was accorded the duties of a member of adult society. He worked in Tanjung.<sup>3</sup> Hence his huskiness.

Too bad, thought Abdul, he never got the chance to live like a child ought to live. Only twelve years old! And he's already considered an adult. Society had stolen six years from him. Getting food: so difficult! Especially for such a little boy. So: he was not sad and did not regret living as a prisoner. For his whole life, such was his dare. A challenge that had come from the mind of a child who was not of age, yet already grown-up.

This time he had been imprisoned for the same reason: stealing. He continued his story as he lay. The men listened with full attention. A child's story that was jumbled and meandering. But completely intelligible. His ability to lie was still too weak.

It started when he was walking with his friend. On Harmoni. An open two-seater was parked by the side of the road. A shoulder bag had been left behind the seat, and they snatched it. Eight o'clock in the evening. The owners were not around. Maybe they were having a drink in "Des Galleries." The two of them ran to the river. They opened the bag—a zippered bag! They swore. It contained nothing but papers.

Pounding footsteps hunted, following. The two of them fled, throwing the bag into the river. It was a full moon that night. For a moment the bag could still be seen as it floated away.

Bad luck for Maliki. He was taking a bath. And it was him they arrested—he did not know his offense.

Everyone in the cell laughed. Uproariously or otherwise. Only the little boy stayed silent, bewildered. Then he sighed. Again he pulled his body up to form a 2.

"Too bad," Abdul sighed again. "Such a beautiful bag. The zipper alone would have fetched twelve rupiah."

"Little rascal!" interrupted the corrupt Indo. And he laughed. He went on, "when he's a little bigger he'll really be something." And the boy's story did not continue. Again they crawled back to their beds. A minute later the little rascal was snoring—asleep. One by one they dropped off. All were accustomed to the atmosphere of a cell. All but Abdul, who still could not manage to sleep.

And so the night wore on. The roar of the rain, so heavy earlier, had ceased completely. A still night. Only occasionally a car rumbled along the main road in front of the barracks and on Harmoni. Outside, the guard's rhythmic footsteps sounded from time to time. Regular breaths answered one another. And Abdul was left alone. Although his eyelids were now heavy, his thoughts drifted on. Far away. Far away. This time, not to the girl he secretly loved. Not to his family. Not to MPs. Not to the interrogations and beatings and punchings of the day before. To the thousands of homeless children roaming the streets throughout the city. Throughout the Residency of Jakarta. Throughout Java. Throughout Indonesia. And the power of Hunger herded them wherever it willed. And if they had even a little nerve, why not steal? Victims of the times! Pupils of the times! Victims, victims! Maybe children such as his cellmate had experienced hardship from the moment they had learned to walk. And consciously or not, human beings are obliged to extend their lives. Maybe the eras of the Dutch and the Japanese had claimed

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<sup>3</sup>Tanjung: Tanjung Priok, the port of Jakarta.

the lives of their fathers or mothers, or of their whole families. Or maybe the time of the outbreak of the Revolution of Independence. An age of war is indeed an accursed age.

Abdul lay down. He stretched a minute.

Maybe, he thought again, their fathers had died in the season of *romusha*.<sup>4</sup> Maybe they were the children of Republican soldiers who had fallen at the front.

Abruptly, Abdul felt his two cheeks. They hurt inside. The swelling was getting worse.

"And can it be that they will someday take responsibility for their country?" he whispered slowly.

He slept.

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<sup>4</sup>*Musim romusha*: literally, the season of forced labor (for the Japanese).

