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# GRAFFITI IN THE TOILET

Eka Kurniawan

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editor and translator

## Introduction

At the age of only thirty-two, the Sundanese Eka Kurniawan is without any doubt the most original, imaginative, profound, and elegant writer of fiction in Indonesia today. If anyone has a chance of filling the aerie in Indonesian literature left empty with the death of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, it is he. It is no accident that his first book, published in 1999, *Pramoedya Ananta Toer dan Sastra Realisme Sosialis*, is by far the best work, admiring and critical at the same time, on the master written by an Indonesian. Traces of Pram are visible everywhere in his fiction, yet Eka, born into another culture and in another, gloomier epoch, writes in an inimitable manner, which is immediately recognizable in any paragraph. Over the last six years, he has published two outstanding novels, the enormous if unwieldy *Cantik itu ... Luka* (Beauty is ... a Wound) in 2002, and the fiercely dense *Lelaki Harimau* (Man-Tiger) in 2004. In 2005 he published his first collection of short stories, *Cinta Tak Ada Mati* (No Death for Love), and, in the same year, a second collection, *Gelak Sedih dan Cerita-cerita Lainnya* (Sad Laughter and Other Tales), from which the story translated below has been drawn.

He was born on November 28, 1975, in a remote village of southeastern West Java, two hours' drive south of Tasikmalaya, and close to the Indian or Indonesian Ocean.<sup>1</sup> This village, where he spent his earliest years with his four grandparents, is blazingly recreated as the scene of *Cinta itu ... Luka*. Later, he joined his parents at a rubber plantation near to Tjilatjap. He received his primary education in a public school in the

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the biographical material that follows below has been taken from Gramedia's website: [http://www.gramedia.com/author\\_detail.asp?id=EFIK5041](http://www.gramedia.com/author_detail.asp?id=EFIK5041).

small town of Pangandaran. There, stimulated by the books he borrowed from itinerant bicycle-riding “librarians,” he started to discover his gifts. He wrote comical short stories for his classmates and published his first poems in the children’s magazine *Sahabat*. When the time came to enter junior high school, he moved to Tasikmalaya and lived with an aunt. He continued to write, now with a typewriter given by his father when he scored the top marks for his class in five subjects. Although he expanded his reading in the school’s library, he eventually got bored and set off on weeks of solitary wandering, first to Jakarta, then back through Tjirebon, Tegal, and Purwokerto. On his return, he found that he had been expelled.

The only school prepared to admit him without forcing him to repeat classes was the special teacher-training senior high school back in Pangandaran. (These high schools were abolished not long after he graduated.) For his final two years, he was always the top student, but also indulged his *wanderlust* in the Segara Anakan marshes near Nusa Kambangan, the port of Tjilatjap, and the south-coast caves used to store ammunition during the Japanese Occupation; these locations became the settings of some of his subsequent stories.

On graduation, he enrolled as a student in Gadjah Mada University’s Literature Faculty, where he also worked for the student publications *Pijar* and *Balairung*. This was the period when Suharto’s New Order was starting to fall apart, and regime violence against students steeply accelerated. When bored with classes, he turned to graphic design, writing comic books and playing in bands. He has said that he decided to become a writer when he found himself stunned by *Hunger*, Knut Hamsun’s celebrated novel about Norwegian peasant misery.

After completing his MA thesis on Pramoedya, he set to work on his first novel, titled *O Andjing* (Oh Dog), 140,000 words long, which he completed in 2001 at the age of twenty-six. But he could find no publisher in Djakarta, only a tiny one in Central Java, which promised to print only two hundred copies. Luckily, at the end of that year, he was awarded a six-month fellowship by the Akademi Kebudayaan Yogyakarta, which gave him the time radically to revise *O Andjing* and turn it into the scarcely less enormous *Cantik itu Luka*, which, with the support of the AKY, was finally published at the very end of 2002. It stirred a huge controversy in literary circles, which helped the first printing to be sold out very quickly. In 2003, he moved to Djakarta with his wife, the writer Ratih Kumala. There he worked on *Lelaki Harimau* (mostly written in the food court of the Sarinah department store), which was published in May 2004 and quickly went through two printings. In 2006, Ribeka Ota’s translation of *Cantik itu Luka* into Japanese came out. In the midst of all this, Eka found the time and the energy to translate Maxim Gorki’s *Strike*, John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*, Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *Of Love and Other Demons*, as well as Mark Twain’s *The Diaries of Adam and Eve*.

Some of Eka’s readers find many of his writings distinctly morbid, even perverse, in their fascination with murder, violent sex, monsters, the supernatural, and Indonesia’s heart-breaking modern history. They are not mistaken in so feeling. But the judgment misses three things: the sheer, queer elegance of his Indonesian prose, which at its best is superior even to Pramoedya’s; his black sense of humor, quite close to Pram’s as well as Twain’s; and his gift for parody and ear for how his fellow-Indonesians (of different groups and generations) speak.

I decided to translate *Coret-coret di Toilet* not only because it is one of Eka's best-known short stories, but because it is very blackly funny. It catches perfectly the atmosphere of student life in Indonesia at the start of the new century, as the brief promise of *Reformasi* was being extinguished by gangsterism, cynicism, greed, corruption, stupidity, and mediocrity. It also mirrors beautifully the bizarre lingo shared by ex-radicals, sexual opportunists, young inheritors of the debased culture of the New-Order era, and anarchists *avant la lettre*. Finally, it shows Eka's gift for startling imagery, sharp and unexpected changes of tone, and his "extra-dry" sympathy for the fellow-members of his late-Suharto generation. It could be said to be Eka's update of parts of Pram's *Tjerita dari Djakarta*, written as the promise of the Revolution was being extinguished, which has the Eka-ish subtitle, *Karikatur2 Keadaan dan Manusiaanja*.

## GRAFFITI IN THE TOILET

### John 19:22: "Pilate answered, What I have written I have written."

He pushed open the door of the toilet, enjoying the smell of still fresh paint. Then he closed the door, locked it from the inside, and, a few moments later, standing in front of the toilet-hole, undid his pants.<sup>2</sup> With a hiss, the liquid sprayed down into the hole, giving off an ammoniac scent. The kid smacked his lips, grinning with satisfaction. When he was done, he shook what he was holding in his hand and bathed it with a few splashes from the dipper, tossing the rest of the water down into the hole. Then buttoned up.

The kid, twenty years old, dressed punk-style, stood there admiring the unspotted walls of the toilet. They had just been painted a tempting cream. He gave a little laugh, revealing four bad teeth, then groped in his backpack till he found what he was looking for: a felt-tip marker. With a triumphant grin, he wrote on the wall: "*Asshole! Reformasi's a total flop, Comrade! Let's complete the democratic revolution!*"<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

At seven in the morning, before the students had begun to make a racket in their classrooms, a kid had already attacked the toilet, located precisely beneath the staircase. There was something wrong with his urinary system, so he had to go all the time. Maybe because he drank too much coffee, or took too little exercise. After finishing his boring morning ritual, he stared at the graffiti on the shimmering wall

<sup>2</sup> As readers will recall, the typical Indonesian toilet consists of a shallow ceramic basin, slightly above floor-level, with a hole towards the back and two slip-proof places for the crouchers' feet. Next to it there is a small tank of water, with a dipper, for cleaning up after defecation or urination.

<sup>3</sup> *Asu* (dog), translated here as "asshole," is an Indonesian insult that doesn't work in English. The last six words satirize the jargon of the once-radical Partai Rakjat Demokratik (People's Democratic Party), which the Suharto regime tried harshly to suppress.

with mildly sadistic pleasure.<sup>4</sup> With a pen, he scrawled an arrow aimed away from the first sentence. But the tip of the pen was too sharp to make the arrow really visible. Putting one hand into his bag, he fumbled around in search of something that would make the lines thicker. But he found nothing and had to make do with his pen. Someone banged on the toilet door, so he faked a groan, to let whoever it was know that the toilet was occupied and the occupant didn't want to be disturbed. Feeling fairly sure whoever it was would be patient, he retorted, in small, but still legible letters: *"Blabbermouth! Provocateur! The revolution was already dead in your grandpa's time. Our nation loves peace, and a lunchtime nap. Let's hunt up a wild girl and find the revolution in bed!"*<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

The next to show up was a tomboy girl, with a hitchhiker's knapsack. She was wearing very tight jeans and an oversize singlet. Sometimes the neckline would drop down, once or twice showing what was bra-less inside. She hated peeing, because it was such a hassle to undo her pants. She had tried once to pee standing up, following the bad habit of boys, for convenience's sake. But the result wasn't at all satisfactory. The annoying liquid sprayed out all over, and some of it dribbled down on her pants. But in this world everyone is condemned to pee, so she peed in that same toilet, even though it was a hassle.

As had happened with most of the toilet's consumers, her eye was caught by the scribbles on the wall, and she felt tempted to add her own commentary. She fumbled for a felt-tip in her bag, but all she found was her lipstick. Before adding to the graffiti, she paused for a moment's reflection. She searched in her bag for a small mirror, but with no luck. Usually, she didn't take a small mirror with her, even though the lipstick was always there. It didn't matter anyway. She applied the lipstick to her lips, then kissed the toilet wall, leaving a clear print. She smiled as she stared at the kiss, but then started to feel her message wasn't clear enough. So she wrote in lipstick: *"You gotta be a henchman of the military! New Order running-dog! Feudalist, bourgeois, reactionary moron! Blabbermouth full of bullshit, get ready for the revolution!"*<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

For the next two days, nothing much happened in the toilet, until another kid stopped by. He took down his pants and squatted over the hole. "Plop! Plop!" He was startled by how loud it sounded. So he opened the tap to let the whoosh of the gushing water compete with the disgusting plop-plop noise. Very embarrassing! And while enjoying these stinking moments, the kid started to read the three comments on the toilet wall. He smiled at the last of them, trying to imagine what kind of girl had

<sup>4</sup> *Gemas* is the untranslatable word for the pleasure one gets from pinching a chubby baby's bottom.

<sup>5</sup> *Perek* is an acronym for *prempuan eksperimen*, a promiscuous girl. It is now obsolete, replaced by *jab(e)lai*, an acronym for *jarang dibelai* (rarely caressed, by her husband or boyfriend).

<sup>6</sup> Again a mixture of student slang and PRD jargon. "Henchman" and "running-dog" are two ways of translating *antek*.

written it. After washing his behind, he stood up and pulled up his pants, while still staring at the rows of letters on the toilet wall. With a lewd smile, he leaned over and kissed the lipstick lips. Holding his own lips between two forefingers, perhaps asking himself what kind of warmth he should be feeling, the kid took out his pen and excitedly added his own contribution. *"Hi, gorgeous! I like your red lips, as red and as hot as the spirit of a wild animal. Wanna trade the feel of lips with me?"*

\* \* \*

Later, and in broad daylight, another girl showed up, a different type. A hedonist, and dressy. Her backpack was really much too small and filled with the usual this-and-that small arms of a come-hither girl. Her appearance in the toilet obviously had nothing to do with peeing or conducting a "Plong! Plong! concert." Not even with washing her hands or spitting. The reason why she entered the toilet almost every day was simply to renovate her face, which was a mess thanks to several hours' exposure to the soot-filled air. She wasn't very self-confident, and naturally always had to fix herself up.

The girl stood by the little tank, staring at her reflection in the little mirror in her hand. She sprinkled her face—which she would never admit was filthy—with a pretty thick layer of powder, and redid the eye-shadow around her eyes. Nor did she forget to rouge her cheeks. Then she recombed her tangled hair and fixed it in place with a ribbon and a clip. As for her ashen lips, she swabbed them over with blazing red lipstick, as red as the national flag. Just at that moment, she read over all the sullen comments on the wall. With a flirtatious laugh, she made her own contribution, also in lipstick: *"Bandit, you wanna trade feel of lips with me? Okay! Meet me at nine tonight at my grandma's. N.B. Don't bring along any spies!"*<sup>7</sup>

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On the umpteenth day after the toilet was freshly painted, a guy showed up at the toilet. A big and tall guy, his scalp was covered with the stubble of a recent full shave. A moustache and a thin beard adorned his fair-skinned face. A silver earring hung from his left lobe, and he had four or five necklaces around his throat. The floppy shirt he wore was made of tie-dyed cloth, while his pants were baggy. Anyone looking at him would certainly suspect him of being queer, though this could be hard to prove.<sup>8</sup> Even from what he would later write on the wall, which expressed his deepest feelings, it would still be tough to decide on his sexual leanings. He had gone into the toilet in search of a quiet place for a chat, away from the usual racket, and now pulled out his cell phone, which had been ringing for a while in his pants pocket. Using his right hand to hold the cell phone to his left ear, while his mouth kept up a steady chatter, he used his left hand to hunt for a pencil, and found one while his brain was still busy

<sup>7</sup> *Garong* is jocular, teasing student slang. "Spies" is my inadequate attempt to translate the ubiquitous, scornful *intel*—short for government intelligence agent.

<sup>8</sup> Eka uses the semi-official word *wadam* (i.e. *wanita adam*—Adam woman) rather than the street terms *banci* or *bencong*, maybe because *wadam* can also mean homosexual in a general sense, not just referring to a transvestite.

scanning the graffiti on the wall. This is what he eventually wrote: *“Coward! Revolutionary in bed! Beaten up just once by the military and you run to mummy’s crotch. Hey, if you guys really wanna be revolutionaries, just show up here! Big mouths! Agitators! PKI maggots!”*<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \*

For a week thereafter, nobody could bear to enter the toilet, thanks to a frustrating development. Some bastard, for sure a goddamn shit without morals,<sup>10</sup> and cursed by almost every faithful customer of the toilet’s services, did something revolting. God knows on what day and at what hour he entered the toilet and immediately showered the bowl with a stream of rockets from out his ass. The idiot then went off without cleaning up his damned wastes, piled up around the hole in each other’s arms.<sup>11</sup>

You could be sure that from then on anyone entering the toilet after that lost the appetite for doing anything there. Everyone avoided the room. Everyone? Not quite! It turned out that there was one nutty kid who went in on purpose. It happened during a class period, and this kid tore out of the classroom clutching the front of his pants, scared he wouldn’t make it. He went to the first toilet on the top floor. Occupied. The second, also occupied. So was the first toilet on the ground floor. His legs began to tremble, and he leapt from side to side, struggling to prevent a disaster at the wrong time and in the wrong place. But because he couldn’t stand it a second longer, he entered the fatal toilet. In a single blind movement, he stood there, gave in to his need, and whoosh ...

All this time, he held his breath and kept his eyes tight shut. But when he was done, he decided on an act of heroism, to put an end to the horror in the toilet. With his eyes still tight shut, and holding his nose, he sloshed water into the bowl, attacking the now almost shapeless piles, till they all came free and disappeared down the hole, even though he felt nauseous.

Now the kid felt better, and he started to read the messages on the wall, with what was left of his fury at the tragedy that had just occurred. He took out his blue-ink felt-tip pen and immediately wrote: *“A real reactionary jerk, dropping a load of bombs without cleaning up afterward! Probably never even wipes his ass! Hey, shithead, yeah, I’m a Commie, a fan of Indonesian Comics! Wanna make something of it, ha?”*<sup>12</sup>

\* \* \*

Everyone knew that the toilet had been painted to make it look clean and pleasant. Before that, it had showed its real face: a small, marginal room where lots of people

<sup>9</sup> The same mixture of sarcastic street language (*selangkangan mami*) and New Order-speak (*biang rusuh*).

<sup>10</sup> Seorang oknum, pasti bangsat keparat jang kurang moral.

<sup>11</sup> ... yang menumpuk saling berpelukan di lubang kakus. A sarcastic-lyrical formulation typical of Eka’s style.

<sup>12</sup> The insult *Begajul* is untranslatable, so I have taken the liberty to substitute “shithead.” The joke in the final line turns on the substitution of Penggemar Komik Indonesia for Partai Komunis Indonesia.

liked to babble. The walls were completely covered with comical graffiti responding to one another—radical-progressive ideas, obscene sexual invitations, and the complete works of poets whose masterpieces had been rejected by publishers. In addition, amateur cartoonists embellished the walls with sketches for “toilet comedies.” As a result, the toilet’s walls were thickly covered with mischievous graffiti, some sharp as nails, others idiotic, just like the walls of public toilets everywhere—in bus terminals, stations, schools, stadiums, and even government offices.

Eventually, the toilet walls became such a dirty mess that the Dean decided to have the toilet repainted once again. Thus the communal public diary was erased. But, as everyone knew, a first piece of graffiti then appeared, followed by someone’s commentary, and sure enough the toilet walls ended up once again covered with representations that tried to emulate the reliefs on the walls of ancient temples. This situation troubled the pious students, who loved beauty, loved harmony, and upheld the highest moral values.

One such student eventually entered the toilet and was immediately irritated to see that the walls, only a few days earlier nice and clean, were again full of the idiot fantasies of troublemaking babblers.<sup>13</sup> This guy wasn’t a vandal and had never before damaged public property, but on this occasion he felt extraordinarily provoked. Out of irritation, of course. So he too started to write, even though in his heart he felt like crying. *“Friends, please don’t scribble on the toilet walls. Keep them clean, for cleanliness is part of morality. The toilet is not the place to let off steam. Please channel your aspirations to the members of parliament ...”*<sup>14</sup>

\* \* \*

As it turned out, within a single week, dozens of comments were scrawled below the words of this pious student. By the end of a month, the number had reached almost one hundred. No way to tell who had pitched in to return the walls of the toilet to their natural filth. The comments on the pious student’s proposal were scribbled with every kind of tool: pens, felt-tips, lipstick, pencils, blood, nail-scratchings into the concrete, and even bits of brick and charcoal. The urge to comment was so great that the old proverb was perfectly exemplified: if there’s no rattan handy, any root will do.

The first graffiti read: “Blabbermouth, I don’t have any faith in our members of parliament. I have more trust in the walls of toilets.” The second went: “Asshole, I agree!” All the remaining one hundred and thirteen graffiti simply said: “Me too.”

\* \* \*

<sup>13</sup> This is the nearest I can get to the untranslatable *makhluk-makhluk usil*.

<sup>14</sup> A parody of the condescending New Order cliché: *salurkan saja aspirasi Anda ke bapak-ibu anggota dewan, please ...* “Parliament” as such is not specified, but the context makes it plain that *dewan* is a reference to the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (Parliament).