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CONTOS

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03

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Cover photo: Children at a Puppet Show, Alfred
Eisenstadt, Paris, 1963

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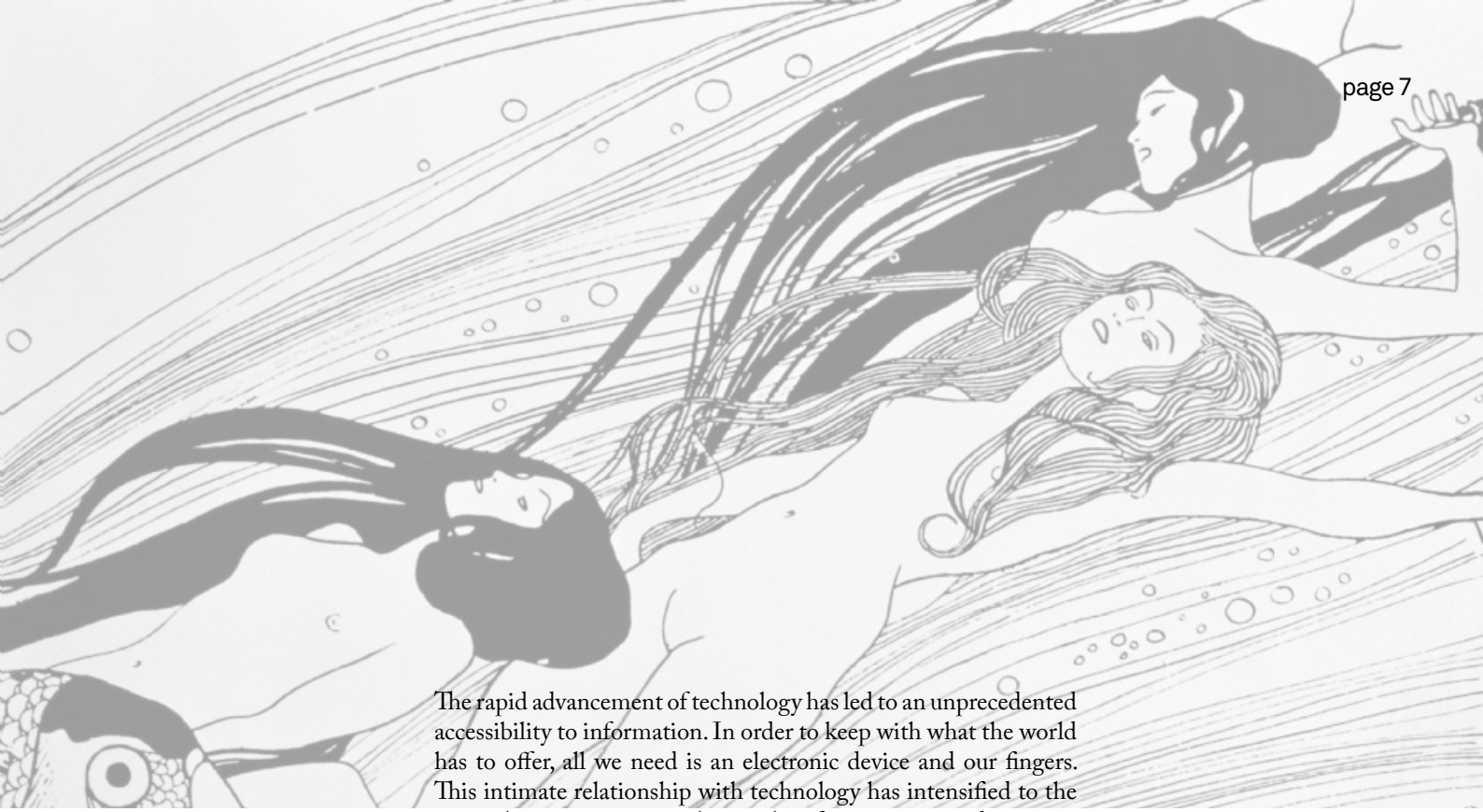
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editor's note



The rapid advancement of technology has led to an unprecedented accessibility to information. In order to keep with what the world has to offer, all we need is an electronic device and our fingers. This intimate relationship with technology has intensified to the point that we sometimes lose sight of its positive and negative consequences.

We have become dependent on the sheer convenience of knowing so much by doing so little, while those controlling the production and circulation of both trivial and serious content—especially mass media—continue to feed on these responses by producing and circulating even more information that may or may not help us to make sense of our current situation.

Ideally, everyone who has access to information should have the ability to digest and apply it according to his or her most pressing needs. Unfortunately, the violent current of information has destroyed the fine line that separates right and wrong. In short, the very thing that has the potential to enlighten us turns out to be same thing that can mislead us. "Reality" is lost amid all this excess, making the task of determining what it should or should not entail all the more difficult.

Now, are you strong enough to withstand the current and swim against it? Or would you rather be swept away?

poems



UNTITLED

"[…] Left the ruins, climbed out from under the white stones"

— Amiri Baraka

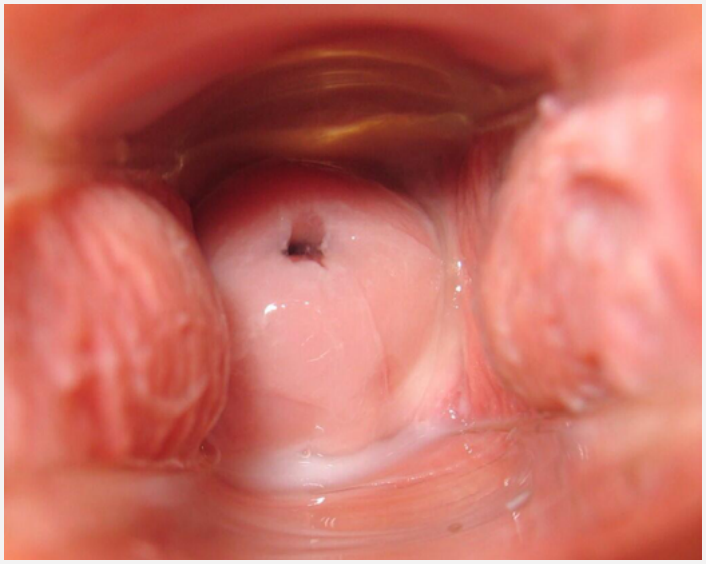
I

There we talked, like we were in a documentary
There we talked, in code made of letters,
unaroused and undetected by official culture
Until suddenly for some reason, I felt like it was 1963 again,
we were trapped inside it, between Lekra and Manikebu;
between Pramoedya and Jassin, cornered in epoch—
clutching to our most reasonable point of view
I cannot say more, it does not matter
too many vast territories to explore
ideas exchanged, but never been potentialized
our singing selves, decommissioned by the judge
Maybe it was 2008, or something,
I do not remember, but my set of laws
was just a system of false brains, yes I know
I recognize that—splintered and oblique
social utterance as flaming malevolence, but the beat
alluring and magnetic, maybe I would soon go dancing!

Our minds were clean and pleasant
the sphere of our employment: none
Listen, we are your friends and your most beloved enemies
gliding down like magazines on the stall rows—
we are inside each nations' serenity,
we are sitting near you on the bus, the mall, youthful gigs in town
totally harmless characters, strange and flattering in numbers
Trickling inside of what we once were, having an esoteric sense of panic,
swifter than birds in our social role: objects
—maybe a glass of vodka, a cigarette on the table
or something other more ridiculous like a fluorescent neon lamp
Class struggle in theory, also in poetry (you yawn!)
its contagion is spread via rhythm and melodies
We have followed your dubious traditions and living standards,
another landscape ripe for gentrification
Do not blame us now for ruining your octaves:
projectile vomits all over your present moment,
in whatever fucking historical era

II

Everyday there is always something to reject
how many sins is one able to commit?
I swear I will not scream when I die
Even if I do, I will not let them hear it
Not a bloody chance (you yawn, again!)
I will let my echo slumber through the streets,
the libraries and the terminals
I will whisper the names from the grave
Marx, Bakunin, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg—
The '65 massacre and the dream of Sisyphus!
I will not miss a single thing, I will tell the dead everything
Should I begin writing down a note?
A memoir, perhaps? I know these simple facts:
there are flowers and there are colours;
there are homemade cooks and homemade bombs
I think I am going crazy, but why are you not?
My dreams, my friends' dreams
all these dreams are the same dream
repeated breakdowns, defeats and endless weeping
Puking spirits loathing, we understand everything
Dreams as a mean of speaking, and
poetry as a mean of screaming my nightmares down
Every morning there is always something to apologize for



CARNAL TUNNEL

Words oh words oh words
Absent from the craft
So how do I tell you what I mean?
Those balls are dangling between her legs,
But do you know what I mean?

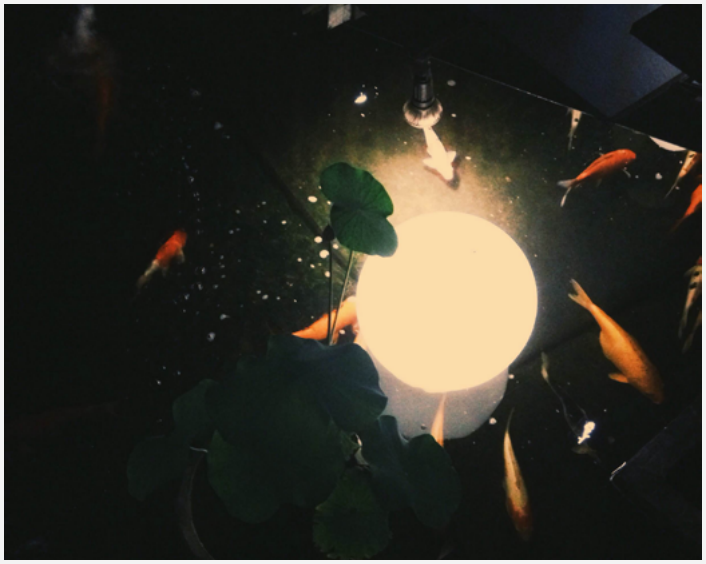
I mean,
It's not whether you know,
But have I communicated what I intend to
Letterlessly,
Do you know what I mean?

When I melted into him
The light escaped, the dark come
My eyes were closed but I felt every surface
Movement, vivid to
Recreate in doing
Phallic compositions and such,
You know what I mean?

Saliva
Wet
Bone
Rough
Bank note
Collision
Subtle

Image
Imperfect
yet fine
Not wholly
mine
Empty to a
stranger
My emperor
I serve to thee
I serve for me
For you to see
What objects
could be, be, be

Thriving in silence
Suffering from pestilence
You know what it means



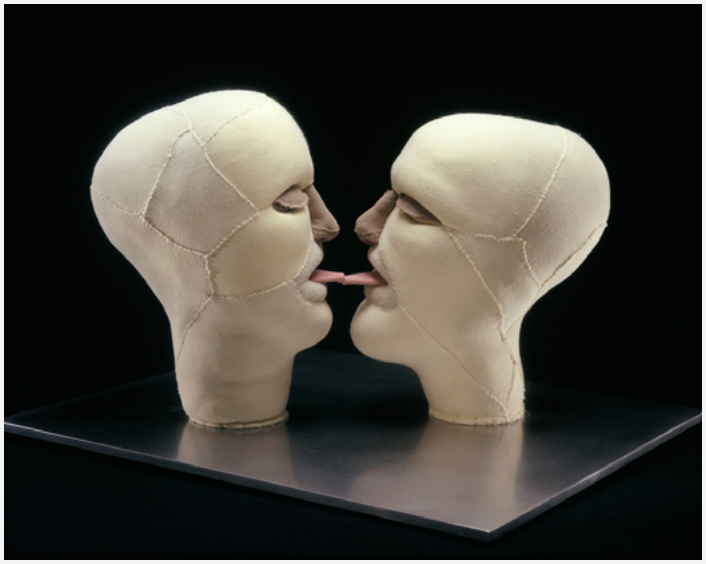
BEFORE THE FLOOD

How do I express an anger
that is not restricted by
its own definition?
How do I profess my love
for you, my sweetheart,
without getting my feelings
stuck between those four
frail letters?
How do I write about my
sadness without letting the
words drain my aching heart,
my vast ocean of sorrow?
How do I compose verses
whose meaning will not fade
with the ink that the storms
of everyday life can so easily
wash away?



TANGLED

I
picture every human being on earth chanting
“I AM FREE!”
in every language
yet in one voice
thinking that there is no difference between every
“I”
and every
“Ich”
Every
“Kami”
and every
“Nosotros”
…
The freedom of speech means nothing
without the freedom of language.
But does language make us free?
…
We are simply united by
our
intention and desire to
unravel the knots
of our tongues.



What
Do
You
Write
With
?

Where
Is
Your
Pith
?

-

When
I
Write
I
Don't
Think.

All
Talk
Like
A
Trip

To
The
Shrink.

I
Cry
At
The
Sink.

TOGETHER, Louise Bourgeois, 2005.



Rupa yang kau dambakan
Alih-alih hanya pengaburan
Dari yang bukan kepunyaan

Atas nama seni
Kagum melahap sana sini
Serupa tapi tetap sama
Hingga tak ada isi

Tiap dawai nada
Terdengar ramah di telinga
Namun bikin hati gundah gulana

Memang sudah budaya
Ambil dari luar sana
Lalu jahit agar lebih nyata

Dikala hening
Cakapmu membahana

Dikala gelap
Perangkatmu bercahaya

Dikala gegap
Kau dan kawananmu
yang paling gempita

Kedua pasang telinga
Lebar terbuka
Terpaksa
Ikut terusik

Ah…

Sudahlah

Nikmati saja pertunjukannya

prose + essay



YVES TANGUY, Man Ray, 1936.

AGAINST HUMOUR AS ENTERTAINMENT:

A CRITIQUE ON THE CONTEMPORARY PATHOLOGICAL NEED TO BE ENTERTAINED

"I treat the ludicrous seriously."

— Karl Marx, On Freedom of the Press (1842)

When Charlie Chaplin introduced great laughter to the general masses—who were at the time, hugely devastated by the cruelty and inhumanity of the first World War—with groundbreaking humour (intelligent as he was), he accidentally opened a way of perceiving the world in the face of tragedy. Providing and consuming entertainment, the writer believes, is seemingly the most innocent service in the world—to make people cathartically laugh and cry with joy. By pleasantly loving and hating, they forget the burdens of life with its pain, grief and boredom. To give the people an opportunity to be in a fantasy world full of rainbows and confettis and forget about the demands, traumas and torments, and the indifference of reality. Even just for a second. Amidst a world of cruelty and indifference and sadness, it is only reasonable to let the people have at least a little happiness and hope.

There is a common assumption that humour should not be taken seriously, for humour is considered as an antidote to seriousness. It seeks to upset the proprieties of seriousness and prevents us from taking ourselves too seriously, even more extreme, taking tragedy too seriously. It may well be true, in the case of Chaplin or even the Marx Brothers. But what about us? We make fun of almost everything that we can think of, be it something important or not. Humour has taken shape as a kind of an autistic entertainment for the kind of people who are already way too indulged in apathy. This is the kind of (ignorant) humour that the writer tries to challenge: the contemporary notion of humour as an absolute good, as a necessary and vital attribute of "being human", regardless of the means.

Today in Indonesia, we see comedians and TV personalities like Tukul or Sule driving around in their highly expensive cars, earning millions (if not billions) of rupiahs every week; we see more and more people on social media making the most of their exploits: generating tongue-in-cheek jokes and *memes* for the pleasure of their followers (which will, in turn, benefiting their own brand of self-image). Under this constant pressure of jouissance, mass cultural entertainment has become a form of business—of buying and selling, of "surviving", and a chance for one to succeed and maybe, even to become the next future billionaire. In order to be a highly functioning social being, it is imperative for us now, more than ever, to be fun, to be relentlessly witty, to be entertaining to others, to be capable of fully enjoying ourselves, and ultimately, to be fully entertained. This demand for the "entertained masses" is a plastic carricature of Shakespearean tragic-comedy: humour in a time of farce.

From a slightly different perspective—a Marxist one that is—entertainment is a form of production, employment and consumption. And, of course, it is also a form of interaction between producers and consumers—profitmakers on the one hand and pleasure seekers on the other.

The very need to be entertained today is a universal pathological condition, caused mainly by the boredom and the blandness of modern life—to be provided with easy consumption (of entertainment) that will satisfy without expecting to do anything difficult or unpleasant and in a context of relaxation of the hypnotic sort and the feeling of self-importance. Who can say anything against this kind of arrangement where one side is making a living by helping the other to be able to tolerate life as it is—the kind of life that is always hard and very seldom gives you a chance to smile?

It seems that this feeling of being the center of the world (in the way that a monarch is) is the most precious "service" provided by the "massage" of successful entertainment. People who are efficiently entertained, either by humour or any other form of entertainment, immediately forget that they are not on the top, that they are marginalized and exploited, and very often sacrificed for the interests of the privileged minorities. Is this not what the Chinese painter Yue Minjun's dead pan smile is all about: a defensive mechanism, a mask of real feelings of helplessness? When entertainment touches them, they start to breathe deeper, and blood intensifies its circulation in their bodies. They feel alive because they feel happy. Entertainment is as inseparable from megalomania as a blowjob. It transforms humour into commodity; the entertained into an object. You sit and listen and see—and emotions flow inside your soul easily and lightly, and you feel that you are not an adult with responsibilities at all, and simultaneously, more privileged than the very privileged one. Entertainment now is considered sexy, sensual and essential, even when it has nothing to do with sexuality, sensuality and essence. It becomes intertwined with the spectator's (as a consumer) soul, and for this reason—also the spectator's body. Entertainment is an irresistible approach to exhausted human souls— fewer and fewer people can resist its seductive steps. It is like an eternity without the threshold of death, the ultimate recognition of ourselves by the world and beyond.



UNTITLED, Yue Minjun, 2006.

Those whose lives are subdued by entertainment are no longer a subject. They dissolve into fascinated objects. The everyday life of constant hassles, competing, achieving, fighting for (or having lost) a job, leave the scene. It is like a magic pillow full of feathery hallucinations of one's self-importance and the opportunity and freedom to laugh at others; to fall in love madly but without risk; to hate others wholeheartedly and cruelly without direct consequences. Entertainment, in other words, is a land where you can treat others without rituals of politeness and discretion, where you can do what you really wish to do, but under the pressure of civilization, cannot. In this sense, entertainment is indeed a great liberation from constraints, a freedom-giver and therefore, much more democratic than moral restraints. People actually do appreciate this and would pay for the next round of entertaining the consumption of entertainment which is for them like a land of brotherhood inside animosity or like a land of liberties in a world of necessity.

With the rise of digital techonolgy and social media as the crowned prince of today's internet world, the fact that entertainment provides us with transformation of what we fear, into a joke; what we hate into fun

(when we can ridicule others without any feeling of ambivalence and remorse) is unquestionable. It can give us a kind of finite yet satisfying sensation, and let it be with us forever. It can transform quick foreplay into an overwhelming romance without really stopping it from just being a foreplay, a smile into marriage, and romance into a death wish. It makes up anything—for us, for our joy and satisfaction—also full of life because of the tireless and dedicated efforts of those "entrepreneurs" or "philanthropists" who provide us with almost non-stop day-to-day entertainment. However, it is also unquestionable today, that for those who are addicted to entertainment—that is the majority of people on Earth—they keep their narcissistic megalomania in a vacuum, while at the same time masking themselves in a fun fair.

Indeed, humour, the writer believes, is integral to social relationships and social interaction. But humour, to what extent, and for what purpose? Humour, taken as a form of ready-made entertainment, is a misleading and disorienting strategy typical for today's successful business dealings. It becomes an instrument of capital, a valuable asset, always ready to be thrown into the market (each according to each own target market). The young male executive throws sly or witty jokes (with a little bit of sexist, sexual references every now and then) in order to attract, entertain, and ultimately, to succesfully pitched bored, balding, middle-aged clients; the so-called social media "inspirators", trying to attract new followers by throwing some overused jokes combined with stale commentaries on his or her "daily life" —only fitting for oblivious herds who are in dire need of a quick laugh (or diversion); the meme makers, the jokers (or profitmakers), making money out of gullible pleasure-seekers using click-baits—an exhausting exchange of seduction that leads to a kiss and transformed into money; a fairytale of piles of shit turned into jewellery.

What the writer is trying to propose here, is the need to draw a clear line between what kind of humour is considered as appropriate within the social occasion and circumstances in which it occurs, and what kind of humour is not. But the reality is, under this constant flow of information, we simply just do not give a shit. Given the right consensus, we would take just about anything. Anything remotely weird would come out just as funny and entertaining. It is as if we need entertainment as a scapegoat, just so that we can feel great about ourselves again, like the two maids who need to impersonate their chamber lady in Jean Genet's famous play; like slaves who like to play the masters with one another in their pastimes; like the poor who dream of becoming rich and are grateful to their country for giving them the right to keep this dream alive; like every soldier in the depth of his soul feels himself a general; like every boy in his wet dreams imagining himself a president.

We as the potent manifestation of the Young-Girl, devour mass cultural entertainment (as our psychological compensation for not corresponding to our ideal self-image as being on the top of the social hierarchy) without chewing, like it is not a big deal. To us, everything is potentially funny and entertaining. We would make fun of everything. We would immediately identify ourselves with funny, entertaining people, the way the pauperized Soviet population under Stalin were identified with Communism and felt themselves super-powerful and prosperous and invincible to decay and death.

Challenging the notion of humour as an absolute good means that humour cannot be taken as a form of discourse or performance that is isolated from other discourses or from wider configurations of social relations. Humour may at times provide distraction or diversion from the serious sides of life or from entrenched social problems, but it is not separate or separable from the broad spectrum of communicative forms and processes or from the manifold issues surrounding social encounter and interaction in a society. Therefore, to take humour seriously is not being anti-humour or being unentertaining, the writer insists. It is not intended solely to stop people from laughing or from being mildly entertained, rather, it is to say that ideally in its various communicative acts, humour could be used proactively and intelligently to subvert the dominant ideology or to form a distinct modality of human interaction—universal in occurrence yet highly particular in how it operates—and how it is sanctioned within different societies and different historical periods. It enables us to tell how existing social relations are reaffirmed, and how normative social boundaries are maintained.

If we still cannot treat humour a little bit more seriously, if we still cannot resist this seduction of laughter (as an opium of the masses), if we still cannot overcome this condition, this need to be constantly entertained (the useless excess and residues of information), it is only a matter of time before we slip into passivity, a soulless doll designed only to provide canned laughter. For love of being entertained is like a Tourette syndrome: it makes us frozen in a posture of a retard, unable to lose the comfortable feeling of being in the center of the world.



Bulan Mei mungkin adalah saat kita (ya, aku dan kamu) menyadari bahwa dunia sepandangan mata bisa tiba-tiba berubah. Kadang kita tak tahu bagaimana perubahan terjadi. Kita hanya bisa menepuk jerawat yang menyembul dan menggaruk rasa gatal di lengan.

Pelajaran terpenting hari mendung di bulan Mei itu bagiku tetap dua hal; saat kejutan perubahan datang, tak semua orang dapat baik-baik saja setelahnya. Dan mesin besar ini bisa saja berhenti, atau dihentikan.

Dulu aku tak tahu kenapa kami dipulangkan sebelum jam sekolah usai, yang aku tahu teman-temanku berencana berburu serangga di lapangan belakang. Aku tak tahu beberapa kilometer dari lapangan itu sekompleks gedung hangus menghitam.

Kami menghabiskan berjam-jam di lapangan itu. Entah sudah berapa kantung plastik kami isi dengan belalang ketika perlahan teman-temanku beranjak pulang. Muka-muka datar orang tua mereka tak membuatku penasaran, toh ini memang hari kamis seperti biasa. Tapi aku tak tahu pagar-pagar tetanggaku sudah tertutup rapat, jalanan sudah ditelan sunyi.

Aku pun akhirnya dijemput ibu, padahal aku masih ingin menangkap belalang. Tak sadar pula aku tinggal sendirian di tengah ilalang. Langit larut dalam abu-abu, sekhawatir raut muka ibu. Aku tak tahu ternyata banyak orang-orang menggendong radio dan televisi beberapa meter dari sini.

“Ayo pulang, nanti kena peluru nyasar.”

Sesampainya di rumah aku bingung melihat pagarku ditempeli papan. Hal yang sempat membuatku lebih bingung lagi adalah mengapa dua kata ini sepertinya teramat penting, hingga harus dituliskan di depan rumah.

“PRIBUMI - MUSLIM.”

Aku masih tak tahu ternyata kekuasaan sedang bergeser di Jakarta. Ibu terus menonton berita dengan serius dan aku membaca komik, menunggu kartun sore. Aku tak tahu ternyata ayahku yang baru sampai di bandara kebanjiran tawaran mobil. Banyak yang bergegas naik pesawat, dengan wajah panik dan ketakutan kata ayah.

“Masa’ mobilnya dijual seratus ribu? Dia bawa STNK sama BPKP-nya. Katanya, ini pak seratus aja, keluarga saya mau pergi ke Singapur.”

Ayah pun tak menggubris tawaran-tawaran itu, karena hanya punya uang untuk naik taksi. Dari cerita ayah aku tahu kebanyakan penjual mobil itu bermata sipit. Aku tak tahu beberapa kilometer dari rumahku, mereka diusir dari rumahnya. Diperlakukan seperti sampah dapur.

Aku bosan. Aku akhirnya melongok ke televisi.

Tiba-tiba ada gambar orang ramai-ramai bersorak di televisi. Menyoraki apa entahlah, aku menonton sembari membaca komik, kebosanan melihat raut muka datar bercampur cemas dalam rumah. Raut tak nyaman itu kuingat betul hingga sekarang. Belum lagi muka langit yang muram, gelap tanpa rintik air.

Apa ini yang namanya langit runtuh?

Sekejap aku teringat kisah Si Kancil yang terjebak dalam lubang dalam. Si Kancil membohongi Si Gajah, mengabarkan informasi palsu, dia berkata langit sebentar lagi akan runtuh. Satu-satunya tempat aman di dalam lubangnya.

Akhirnya Si Gajah mengikutinya karena takut keruntuhan langit. Lubang dalam itu terisi penuh oleh badan gajah yang polos. Tanpa pikir panjang, Si Kancil akhirnya memanjat tubuh si Gajah dan berhasil keluar dari lubang. Menyisakan gajah terperosok, meratapi langit.

Aku juga tak tahu kalau penguasa yang disoraki di televisi adalah Si Kancil. Aku hanya ingin menonton kartun sore.