

Tintin Wulia

Memory is Frail (and Truth Brittle)

It was a quiet Tuesday afternoon and the TV was on. A film showed a small white airplane crashing into the White House. Hollywood, I thought, is a legend at devising different realities, and wow, who would've come up with such an act of violence? We are so fragile, I thought, and, as though agreeing with me that life is indeed so fragile, my mind replayed a familiar scene so innocently: one of my recurrent wakeful dreams, where I was walking along a crowded street when suddenly someone stabbed me in the stomach with an insignificant knife.

Insignificant, but sufficient. Death is really not that dramatic, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, plants and animals; it happens to everyone.

That evening, I saw another thing on TV. At first I thought it was still that same film. The camerawork, however, was not as controlled. That was when I realised it was really a news report; it was *real*. Someone had actually crashed an airplane into something. Not the White House, but something similarly significant. I was astonished. Did they watch the same film I saw earlier that afternoon? Were they inspired by that film, or did they inspire that film? Which came first, the reality, or the film?

For a second, I thought of Orson Welles's radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*. From 16,327 kilometres away, I didn't recognise the tower on the screen; it was a mere tower, which to me only became christened with meanings when it was destroyed.

A teacher in Samira Makhmalbaf's *God, Construction and Deconstruction* later tried to expound that very tower to a bunch of school children in Afghanistan. I later felt I could've been any one of those children.



*Out of the different kinds of realities // What I prefer is rarely the truth,*  
video stills from *Nous ne notons pas les fleurs*, Jakarta, 2010, 8-channel unsynchronised video installation with sound, duration variable. Courtesy of the artist

## My Father the Contortionist

That Sunday, when panic-stricken listeners tried to escape from the first Martian attacks on the US, my father was trying to climb a ladder, some fourteen-thousand kilometres (and an international date line) away. He was only a few months over one year old, an agile young toddler whose presence I can only imagine, as his babyhood, unlike mine, has left no traces on photographs. But knowing him, and looking at photographs of myself at his age when the Martians first invaded the US, I deduced that he must've been trying to climb a ladder that day.

Perhaps the earliest photograph of my father was taken when he was approximately nine. This photograph was only found after he died, some sixty-ish years later. In it, he was showing off his contortionist skill, a skill I never knew he had. He looked so much at ease. Looking at the photograph, another part of his life revealed itself to me: he had always been a performer, the eldest son of my grandfather the performer, who led his traveling troupe performing plays around the villages of Bali.

My father's first stage experience was as a crying boy. "Just go up to the stage, say you're hungry, ask for a banana to eat, then cry, okay?" That was his script that evening. I imagine it wasn't difficult to imagine hunger: my father had told me stories of when a luxurious meal meant sharing a single egg with his eight siblings and their parents and a few others. He went on stage, stupefied by all the eyes on him, asked for a banana, sobbing, and cried out, not of hunger but of stage fright. He was praised as his crying seemed so real ("such a talent!"). I thought of my grandfather, the theatremaker, showing a boy crying of hunger to the villagers, his audience that evening, who might have been in near-famine. What was he trying to say with the rest of the play?

In his contortionist photograph, my father was not alone. There were two

other boys, his younger siblings. My second uncle, as I heard, was a great painter. He was so good, I heard, that he received a prize from Lekra, the people's social and cultural movement associated with the Indonesian Communist Party. After my grandfather 'disappeared' in 1965, understandably, and sadly, my second uncle quit painting.

My fourth uncle, the boy with no front teeth in the background, was known in town as the walking encyclopedia. When I was eight, he presented Existentialism to me via a pinch on my arm. "Ouch," I screamed. "Does it hurt?" — "Of course it hurts!" — "Are you sure? Are you sure it's not merely your brain telling you that it hurts?" That was an epiphany. I got excited to be able to think that I might have just been a thought floating around in the ether of my brain, and that everything, including myself, and including my brain, might not be real. This gave me permission to leave my body — including my slant-eyes, which I hated so much because so many people seemed to dislike me only because of them — behind.

This page top:  
*My Father*, 2018

This page bottom:  
*Fourth Uncle*, 2018

Page 41 top:  
*Second Uncle*, 2018

Page 41 bottom:  
*Stage Fright*, 2018

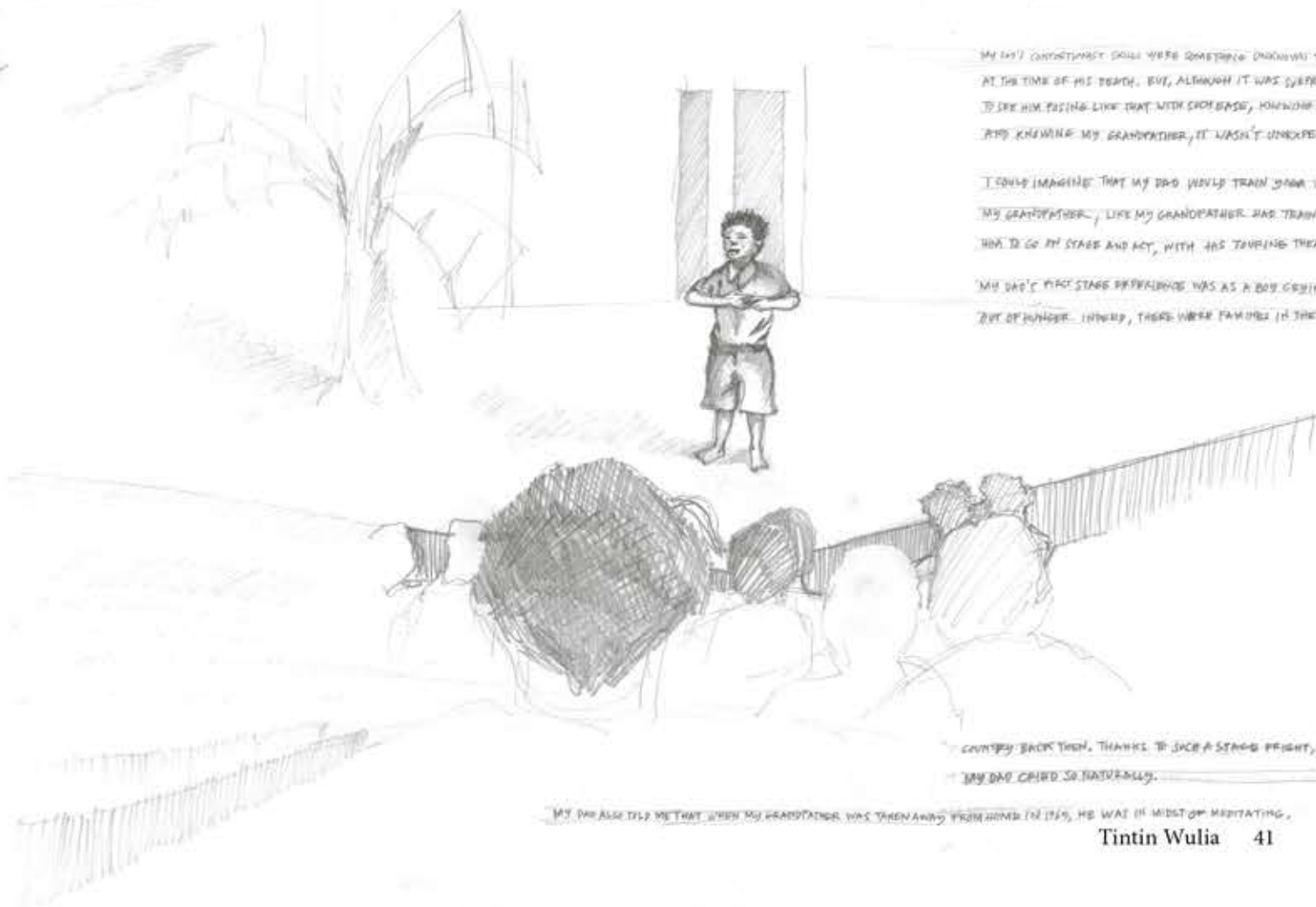
From the *My Father the Contortionist* series of drawings, work in progress, pencil on paper, 42 x 59.4 cm each



BEHIND HIM, LEANING ON HIS BOM, STOOD MY SECOND UNCLE. HE TRIES TO BE A RECLUSE.

MY DAD'S CONTORTIONIST SKILL WERE SOMETHING UNKNOWN TO ME AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH. BUT, ALTHOUGH IT WAS SURPRISING TO SEE HIM POSING LIKE THAT WITH DROPPED HEAD, HINDSIDE HIM, AND KNOWING MY GRANDFATHER, IT WASN'T UNEXPECTED.

I COULD IMAGINE THAT MY DAD WOULD TRAIN DANCE WITH MY GRANDFATHER, LIKE MY GRANDFATHER HAD TRAINED HIM TO GO ON STAGE AND ACT, WITH HIS TRAVELING THEATRE. MY DAD'S FIRST STAGE PERFORMANCE WAS AS A BOY CRYING OF HUNGER. HOWEVER, THERE WERE FAMILIES IN THE



COUNTRY BACK THEN. THANKS TO JACK A STAGE FRIGHT, MY DAD CHIED SO NATURALLY.

MY DAD ALWAYS TOLD ME THAT WHEN MY GRANDFATHER WAS TRAINING HIM FROM INSIDE IN 1949, HE WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF MEDITATING.

This page & page 43 top:  
*Under the Sun*, 2017, locked door, peep-hole, periscope system, surveillance camera, telematic structure (Venice and Jakarta), LED screens, wall, round holes; dimensions: variable.  
 Installation view of “Tintin Wulia: 1001 Martian Homes”, Indonesian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale 2017. Photograph: Davy Linggar



*Not Alone*, 2017, acrylic, LED lights, electroluminescent wires, PIR motion sensors, surveillance camera, telematic structure (Venice and Jakarta), single-channel video projection, dimensions: variable. Installation view of “Tintin Wulia: 1001 Martian Homes”, Indonesian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale 2017. Photograph: Davy Linggar



### Unfamiliar Worlds

*“What is essential is invisible to the eye,” the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.*

*“It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important.”*

*“It is the time I have wasted for my rose —” said the little prince, so that he would be sure to remember.*

*“Men have forgotten this truth,” said the fox. “But you must not forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.”<sup>1</sup>*

When everyone sleeps, does reality still take place? This is a hard question to answer, because I bet there has never been a moment where everyone — and by that I mean every single creature in our universe, dead and alive, including their tiny atoms — slept. At the launch of universe v1.1, the biblical gods must’ve sneaked out of their rest-day and made the universe round, and made everything in it go round and round, and thus created time. Hence all the different time zones, as well — not to mention all the different bubbles of realities — which makes a very smart design. The biblical

gods really made sure that at each single moment, someone would be awake to get at least one reality going wild enough to fuel time.

This smart design was a result of learning. Once upon a time during universe v1.0, at one extraordinary point, everyone went to sleep at exactly the same time. At that point, time mysteriously stopped. Although what really happened was never disclosed, the error 500 was carefully documented to be avoided in the next version of the universe. Thus, the problem was solved with the orb-shaped design that underlies everything — e.g. no matter what the outer shapes of our eyes are, our eyeballs are all orb-shaped — which made way for the different kinds of realities to co-exist.

*Perhaps it should be called a stroll into unfamiliar worlds; worlds strange to us but known to other creatures, manifold and varied as the animals themselves. The best time to set out on such an adventure is on a summer day. The place, a flower-strewn meadow, humming with insects, fluttering with butterflies. Here we may glimpse the worlds of the lowly dwellers of the meadow. To do so,*

*we must first blow, in fancy, a soap bubble around each creature to represent its own world, filled with the perceptions which it alone knows. When we ourselves then step into one of these bubbles, the familiar meadow is transformed. Many of its colorful features disappear, others no longer belong together but appear in new relationships. A new world comes into being. Through the bubble we see the world of the burrowing worm, of the butterfly, or of the field mouse; the world as it appears to the animals themselves, not as it appears to us. This is what we call the phenomenal world or the self-world of the animal.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Saint-Exupéry, A. D., & Howard, R. (2000). *The Little Prince*. San Diego: Harcourt.

<sup>2</sup> Von Uexkull, J. (1934). Schiller, C. H., & Kuenen, D. J. (1957). *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*. New York: International Universities Press.

It might have been fear that prevented me from talking with Ilham about 1965, when he was my senior at the architecture school. Which kind of fear it was, I don't really know. Was it a fear of illicit involvement of some sort, resulting from discussing 1965, or was it more a fear of Ilham's father, whom the government had portrayed to the whole nation, and especially to my generation, as a chain-smoking demon, the devil himself? It was probably a bit of both, working their ways through my own family secret. One day at uni, I remember, someone whispered to my ears: "Ilham is Aidit's son," and that was enough to make me shiver, in silence.

My memory of Ilham's father, Aidit, was crystal clear. In that film that we all had to watch every year on the last day of September, Aidit was cold-blooded, ambitious and anxious. He killed everyone. I can't remember whether he won in the end, though. He must've lost, because wasn't it Suharto who saved the country from the murders of the army generals that Aidit orchestrated? One of the generals had a sweet daughter, Ade Irma Suryani, who was only a few years younger than myself in that film. She was killed. Another daughter, older than me, found her dad's body and hugged him crying, washing her face with his blood. That's how cruel Aidit was.

Never did it cross my mind that my grandfather was lucky not to be elevated as a public enemy of such calibre. For that matter, perhaps it was I who was lucky. As for my grandfather, we never know where he ended up, or whether he was even still alive. We heard so many stories, both kind and nasty, about the end of his life. I knew, though, that even if he was still alive, somewhere, he might have not cared the least about being a public enemy. "I have done nothing wrong," he said when the family tried to convince him to leave the ruins that used to be their

#1965setiaphari

PULANG TULANG KONTAK #1965SETIAPHARI

Ayah dan Cerutunya

30/9/2017 0 Comments

Ada kejadian awal tahun 1960an yang pernah diceritakan Ibu kepada saya, yang selalu saya ingat.

Saat itu, Presiden Soekarno dan ayah saya, ketua komite sentral Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) Dipa Nusantara Aidit, sedang berkunjung ke Kuba. Mereka bertemu dengan Fidel Castro, Mao Tse Tung dan Che Guevara di sana.

Seperti biasanya, Fidel mengeluarkan cerutu Havana kebanggaannya, dan menawarkannya kepada semua tamunya. Ayah menolak.

Archives

- September 2017
- August 2017
- July 2017
- June 2017
- May 2017
- March 2017
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- December 2016
- October 2016
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- November 2015
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- September 2015
- October 2014
- February 1989

Kontributor

- All
- Ariita Sobron

Screenshot of Ilham's contribution, 2018-06-09 at 7:27:26 pm, from 1965setiaphari.org. Collection of stories on weblog and social media. Collators/Editors: Tintin Wulia and Ken Setiawan, ongoing. Left photograph: Agan Harahap

home, burnt to the ground already. That night, he was taken away.

More than twenty years after uni, I asked Ilham for a story about his father. He chose to tell me such a heart-warming story, the most humanising story of his father. It reminded me of stories my father told me about my grandfather; they were stories about a human being. I wonder if it was the instilled feeling of guilt and shame that motivated my father, and Ilham, to recount the most human stories of their fathers. Either that, or their fathers are just that, merely human.

When asked for a photograph to accompany his story, however, Ilham stumbled. I immediately realised that must have been a tough request. Ilham's family house might have not been burnt to the ground, but his

household was destroyed when his father was assassinated, and when as a little boy he was at gunpoint. As with so many people in their position, at one point in their lives the only thing they had left was their souls — and even these might have not been entirely theirs.

"Just look around online," he said, "There's a lovely photograph of my father showing President Soekarno a camera made in Russia. They were both smiling in that picture. That's how close they were."

Later, we found that the lovely photograph was actually an artwork. Everyone in that photograph was photoshopped in.

If one falls in the middle of a forest and no one is around to hear it, does one make a sound?



The plan was that we would grow our own food. In practice, though, most of the food we produced was for the authority - we only got the scrape.

## Solitary Truth as an Act of Violence

If one falls in the middle of a forest and no one is around to photograph it, does one really fall? But then how is it possible for anything to happen with absolutely no one — and absolutely nothing — around, to bear or dare witness?

Day by day, these questions eroded Tedjabayu and Hersri within the endless years of their internment. Realising how precarious reality was, Tedjabayu kept himself sane by reciting any single thing that he could remember, so as not to lose his memory. Hersri covertly wrote journal after journal of new and newer thoughts, burying them underneath a specimen banana tree, as it was made illegal for them to write or read. "Hopefully, one day, these thoughts could be free again, with or without us."

For the citizens of Earth, Tedjabayu, Hersri and many others may as well have died, especially because no one on Earth knew anything about the Martian labour camp. They may as well have

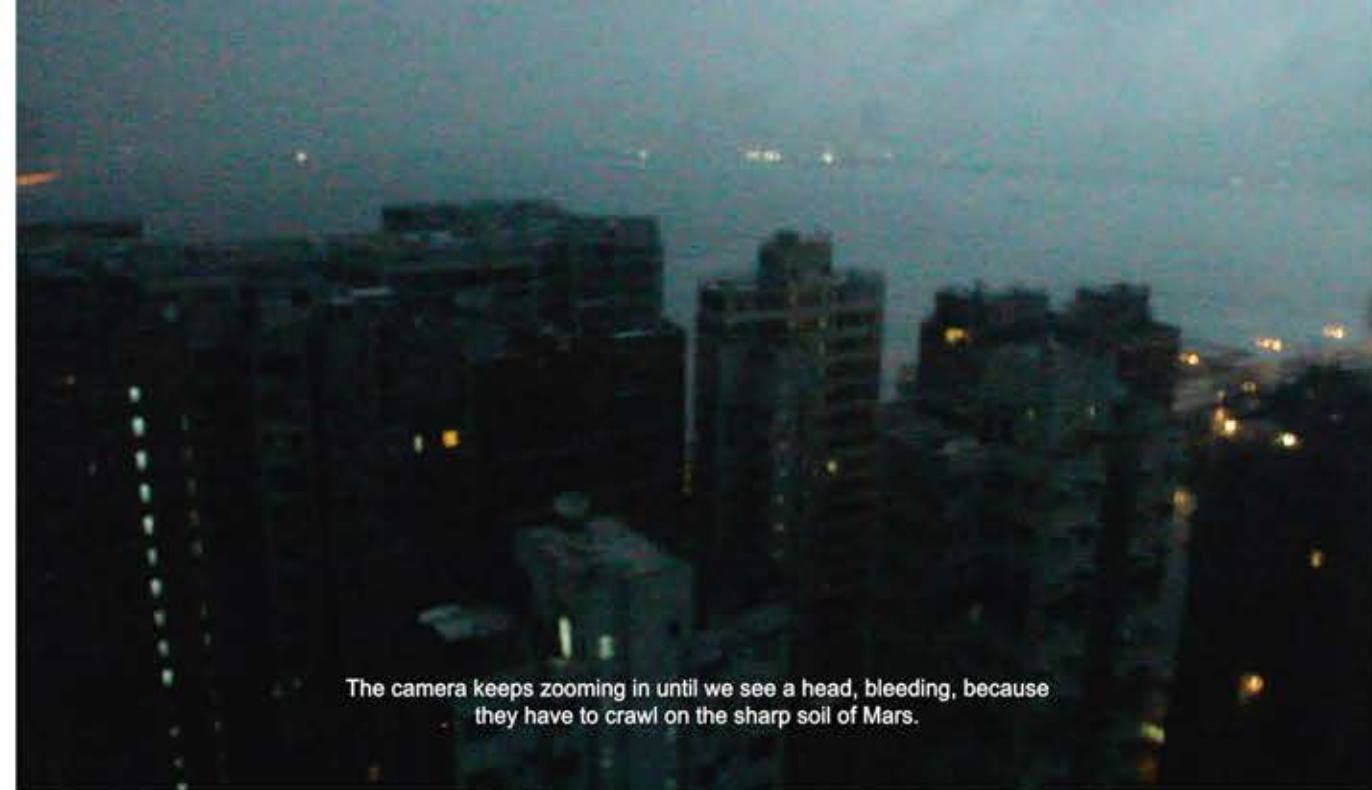
gone to heaven, or hell, as in 2065 a distance of 54.6 million kilometres was still not too different from a distance of 401 million kilometres, or 225 million kilometres for that matter (and no one knew how much further or closer heaven or hell was). Most probably hell, as they were the devil themselves.

Everyone on Earth knew, though, and remembered that 2065 was a great year for NASA. That was the year when NASA's administrative operations budget was increased tenfold. In 2079, when the Martian terraforming was completed, and Hersri and Tedjabayu were quietly returned to Earth with hundreds of other political prisoners, no one talked about them. Indeed, the people who would have talked about them were mostly killed, or 'disappeared', while the rest eagerly shut their mouths in fear, to protect their children in a bid of secrecy. Even when their return was the closest thing to a Martian invasion of Earth — albeit a very gentle and humble one — people talked about the excitement of progress and moving forward, instead, and of

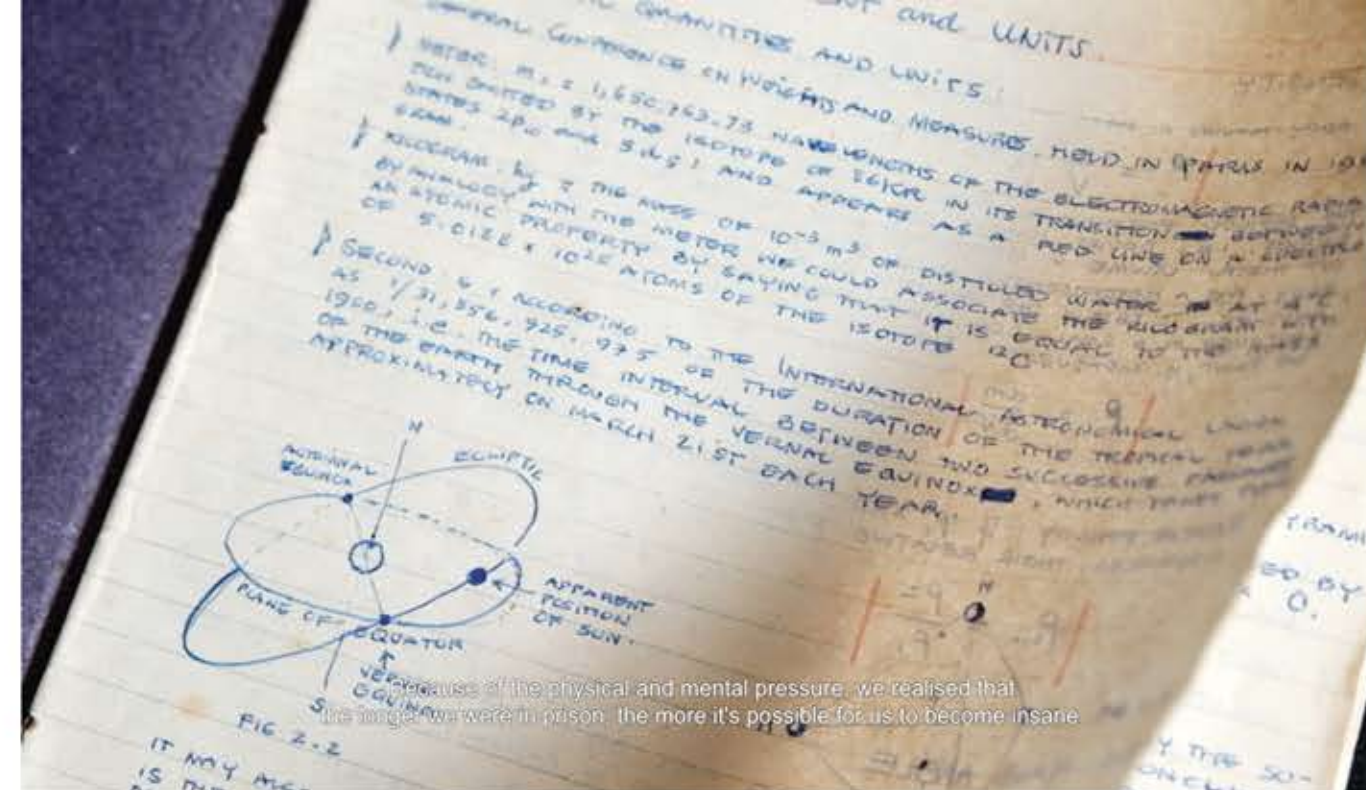
the large astronomical distances being eventually overcome. *Perhaps it should be called a stroll into unfamiliar worlds.*

No one talked about them in 2098 either, when the dictator fell. They did talk about the dictator's fall, though, because everyone had seen it, as it was broadcast all over the solar system.

In 2112, a documentary film about them hit the headlines. Suddenly, what had happened to them on Mars became *real*. My friends promptly urged me to watch that film. So I asked them: "If one was killed in the middle of a forest and no one know about it, does one continue living?" When they scratched their head I told them: I knew these people. I pretended I was not one of them to protect myself, but by way of my grandfather I was really one of them. One story we were told was that he was shot under a tree in a cemetery, "squealing like a pig." *No one is around to hear it; does it make a sound? Was my grandfather inspired by that film, or did my grandfather inspire that film? Does the film document reality, or does reality document the film?*



The camera keeps zooming in until we see a head, bleeding, because they have to crawl on the sharp soil of Mars.



Because of the physical and mental pressure, we realised that the longer we were in prison, the more it's possible for us to become insane.

Which came first, reality, or the film? If I was part of that reality, how should I watch the film? If I were part of that reality, how would the film observe me?

The War of the Worlds caused nationwide panic in 1938 because it was performed in a timeline. In a timeline, once a point in time is gone, it's gone. Had people listened to the start of the play, where it was announced as a play, they would've understood that it was just a play. Once that starting point was gone, however, over time the play became part of reality.

And — the reality of our reality is that it is expanded. It includes voguing and line dances, the wars of the worlds and otherwise, celebrities and people seeking asylum, facebook betrayals, soccer matches, other people's selfies, my family's fear, your love, their hatred; it includes all their likes, all their facts, all their fictions, and all their myths and faiths, manifold and varied. "Men have forgotten this truth," said the fox.



One night, I heard faint ruffs, all footsteps, going back a room without any noise tolerance of speech.

In universe v1.1, there remains a problem not even the biblical gods have ever been able to sort out between themselves: out of so many different kinds of realities, which one is the truth?

Part of the problem, as they later discovered, is in the question. The question assumes that the truth is amongst these realities, an aspect of them perhaps, that perhaps shines so brightly, or perhaps sends such a strong

narrowband radio signal back to Earth then disappeared like a wow signal, never to be found again. The question also assumes that there is only one truth.

For the thirty-three years of the dictatorship, there was only one solid, solitary truth. This tower of solitary truth not only disregarded the manifold and varied realities, but also the many lives that hold those realities, that could have brought other meanings to the tower and therefore threaten its

solidity. In order to assert itself as a solitary truth, the dictatorship had to kill as manifold and varied lives as possible. *Death happens to everyone anyway.*

What it didn't understand was that if the chemistry of your brain can make you believe that you exist, then genetics are not merely physical. "What is essential is invisible to the eye," the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember. As thoughts are transferred through so many lives that they eventually become bodiless — or rather, independent of bodies — they proceed towards the potential of invincibility. This applies to any kind of thoughts, however, and sadly doesn't favour us or them.

The latest, but not least part of the problem, as the biblical gods are currently figuring out, might be inherent to their v 1.1 design. As everything is round, whichever direction you walk away to, you can't avoid getting back to the point in space where you began. *The best time to set out on such an adventure is on a summer day.*

You might argue that a point in time can never be repeated, and therefore no two points can be exactly the same ( $A \neq A'$ ) as time will have lapsed in a trip between the two. *A new world comes into being.* However, memory is frail, and truth brittle.

— Tintin Wulia

Page 45–47:  
*1001 Martian Nights*, 2017, single-channel video projection (38 min. 1 sec., looped, colour, stereo), surveillance camera, telematic structure (Venice and Jakarta), screening room, dimensions: variable. Installation view "Tintin Wulia: 1001 Martian Homes", Indonesian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, 2017



Now, in our unit, writing is an extraordinarily big crime. "Consigning", they call it.