

Those Who Teach

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TODAY, I RETRIEVED FRAGMENTED EXCERPTS from the personal writings of Maximilian Von Humboldt for veneration purposes. Meticulously stored within the Akashic Repository, Von Humboldt's accounts offer transcendental intergalactic scholars' access to eternity cycle 1111 and the memories stored therein.

Tags: Akashic Records; Earth; Maximilian Von Humboldt; Personal Reflections; Diaries.

Logged and stored for further inspection by the Council of Galactic Scholars, translated in the Akashian's Universal Language of Amarin.

The Silborns arrived on the 31st of February, 5,078. "Earthly years," they said.

I knew immediately that couldn't be true—February doesn't have 31 days. When I corrected them, their response came as a song: "We believe you've been asleep for millennia, but based on what you just told us, perhaps longer... We're struggling to grasp your concept of time."

It was oddly comforting that such an advanced species had doubts about something as fundamental as time. After all, I was just waking from the slumber that had saved me from The Disintegration. Time felt strange to me too.

To wake me, the Silborns sang to me softly, their voices weaving a melody that felt both familiar and strange, a language best described as vibrations suspended between notes. At first, I hovered in that liminal space between waking and dreaming, the boundary between reality and illusion blurred by their song. But as the notes curled through the cave, so did my understanding of who they were, their existence in the spaces between the signs, coming and going from sense and nonsense.

For the Silborns, my saviors, communication followed no strict rules, save one: the absolute tolerance of creativity and pleasure, the joy of existence that reverberates and echoes across galaxies, reaching planes and dimensions I was never fully able to grasp but learned how to sense.

As I blinked myself awake from the eternity of my slumber, I began to understand, through that song, that for the Silborns, feeling was knowing. Unrestricted by the rigid constraints of linear time and thought, as we humans are, their existence reached all directions at once—past, present, and future—coexisting in encounters that, to my then-drowsy mind, formed an incipient kind of logic I had just begun to learn in that first contact.

As I later discovered, the information the Silborns were working with had been pieced together from fragments left behind by artificial intelligences. Some of these fragments floated aimlessly in Earth's atmosphere, while others had sunk deep into the ground, even to the planet's core.

Initially, I referred to the Silborns as aliens, but they had a name that, to my ears, was more like a whisper. I began to slowly discern their subtle sounds, but my human tongue, lungs, and vocal cords struggled to replicate them.

After about a year of living together, I settled on “Silborns” as an approximation of their name, which didn't seem to bother them. They understood me just fine. I explained that humans used the word alien to describe things we don't understand.

“We use it for things we learn to fear,” I added, and that was when they first struggled to grasp the concept of fear (It took time for us to find a suitable approximation).

“Is it like misunderstanding?” they asked me.

“More or less,” I responded, realizing that our conversation was slowly bridging the gap between our worlds. Sensing that they were beginning to grasp some of the complexities of human speech and emotions, they continued, “You were alive at a pivotal moment in your species' history—a transitional moment, we would say. Since we landed and found you, we've hoped you could help us understand you, to share what it was like to experience life in the timeline to which you're connected.”

The fact that they didn't speak most of the time like I did but rather made art to communicate should have surprised me. But it didn't. They not only sang, but also painted, and dramatized to share themselves with me in a way I can best describe as healing. Their art re-established my connection with my surroundings, destabilized the prevailing order of things, dispelling any body-mind divisions and recalibrating constantly what we might call reality. It didn't take long for us to establish a bond. The Silborns knew that what we called art had that effect on bodies, it brought people closer together opening channels to communion.

Soon after our first encounter, I agreed on embarking on a decades-long collaboration with the aliens to restore the complex contradictions of their findings about us and explain the historical lines to which my body felt connected, my history. I say history, but I'm fully aware that for the Silborns, time works in a different way. It is more of a collection of “felt” lines, sometimes jagged, rhizomatic, or even straight. It didn't matter; all depended on relations, perspectives, pairings of stories that overlapped and connected to multiple others. This knowledge, of course, took time to grasp and I'm not sure if I understand it at all to this date but every day that goes by, I know I get a little closer.

Learning to be with the Silborns and communicate with them required adjustments. I had to learn to let ambiguities stand, avoid corrections, except when I was asked to rectify something from an experiential perspective. Their language was what we humans knew as art forms, so it was

always much easier to let misunderstandings remain as such and work in the sphere of approximations or sometimes follow the rules of improv: yes, and... That was how we would get to each other's senses, by feeling the moment together and not following a pre-established logic, too concerned about meaning's precision.

It was a bit terrifying at first but soon I learned that by avoiding imposing precision, rectifying, and correcting information, our slippages yielded, paradoxically enough, more precise exchanges, heartfelt, honest, as if we could read each other's minds without words. It was a kind of knowing without knowing that would seem absurd except if one doesn't experience it.

For the Silborns, the more one played with the reality of others, the more one played with one's own, the more the world made sense, which led to newer understandings, or according to them, compassion. The word "understanding," in fact, was foreign to their vocabulary. We had to reinvent it together several times, like we did everything we found in our "art-research" project.

"Do you know how we got here, how we met our end?" I asked them once. They drew me an animated picture of a neon-colored orange draining a massive energy grid. "This was how the artificial intelligences modified solar energy and produced the sound and light waves that turned everyone into bytes of information that now floated in the atmosphere, with the heaviest bits sinking down to the Earth's core."

Before they woke me up, I lived in a happy commune—a haven from a world that had lost its mind. My parents used to say, "We chose to live like rebels. We defied the ordinary order, rejecting the false promises of artificial intelligences that claimed they could simplify life's complexities. Our goal was to reconnect with the world, to rediscover the ways of thinking and feeling that had been slowly erased as people handed over their lives to algorithms—a reflection of both our best and worst qualities."

We heard many stories about the outside. The intelligences we created to help govern the world—and, in a way, ourselves—were making us forget the basics. They blurred the lines between right and wrong, left and right, beauty and ugliness, peace and violence. It wasn't like the kind of approximations I later experienced with the Silborns; it was more about the rigid and constantly shifting definitions these intelligences imposed as truth. We lost poetry when communication turned into nothing more than a literal exchange of words, stripping even poetry itself of its soul.

The stories were often terrifying—some were ridiculous, absurd, and, from a distance, funny. In the commune, we would share countless examples from the height of surveillance capitalism, when companies took over our private lives and used them as free raw material for their production processes.

When artificial intelligences took over, they pushed the translation of human experiences into data to such extremes that once they started creating their own code, life became hollow. The intelligences even started making art for us. From the mysterious black box of realities this shift created, the machines' predictions about our behavior quickly became cultural norms, turning into strangely fluid societal rules that seemed to come from nowhere. Businesses, driven by the desire to predict our every move, poured money into this predictive technology, and before long, we started losing touch with the present.

We began to doubt our own perceptions of the world and of each other. What we thought was real was just the product of statistical models. Algorithmic forecasts took control, and we lost

ourselves until we eventually disintegrated—literally—into light and soundwaves, confused histories, tiny bits of data, and the tangled, contradictory stories that the Silborns later told me were nearly impossible to “feel.”

“Let the intelligences take care of us,” people said just before The Disintegration. “Let them tell us how to act, what to say. Affective entropy will be achieved.”

As literature began to confirm and deny everything, matching every topic and taste, truth became relative, while many still insisted it was supposed to be about relationships. By then, it was too late.

The Silborns’ approach to studying Earth and its complex cultures wasn’t just about collecting words, although they knew words were my preferred medium of communication and respected that. But as time went by, we used amorphous sounds, images, and shifts in the atmosphere to speak with each other, turning each moment of our togetherness into a spectacle. Their research methods were enhanced by tiny, sense-augmenting machines attached to their vocal cords and tentacles, which were located on what I could best describe as their heads. Their bodies—if you could call them that—seemed to change form depending on the phases of our moon or their moods.

The vibrations and reverberations created by the Silborns’ research methods were unlike anything I had ever encountered. These weren’t the familiar sounds I was used to, though some elements hinted at styles found in our recordings. But the Silborns’ artmaking was entirely unique. A single sound, note, drawing, painting, or gesture could multiply into a cascade of images and other sounds. Their machines weren’t like our machines; once attached to one’s body, they became more like organs—extensions of their bodies that they nurtured and cherished because they amplified their senses.

For the Silborns, artmaking was a way of thinking, calculating the coordinates of their journeys across the stars, moving, acting, and expressing their very existence in relation to the Universe and everything that vibrates within it.

“We’re after the differences,” they explained to me, “the kind of differences that stand out. Other so-called species—your plants, your geology—were easy to decipher. But your so-called human remains a puzzle to us.”

Experiencing their research methods felt like entering a visionary state, something like what I imagine entheogenic plants might induce, except you had full control to enter and exit the experience at will. There was no pressure to represent or extract meaning from these “journeys,” as they called their explorations. Things were allowed to stand as they were, no matter how imperfect or weird they seemed. In fact, if something didn’t seem weird, the Silborns took it as a sign that the data lacked authenticity, which concerned them since it made data manipulation difficult according to their standards.

Above all things, the Silborn’s research cultivated mystery, and in doing so, they found the impossible. This sense of mystery reminded me of what we had lost when the intelligences took away our will to find meaning. By the time The Disintegration happened, we were already finished, having given ourselves over to a force we had created in our own exhausted image—a species that had once been full of curiosity and mystery.

For the Silborns, multiple timelines could exist simultaneously despite contradictions. The challenge was simply to sort out which nodes of history intersected, and which remained untouched and verify the differences that differences in timelines made. The information floating around the atmosphere, existing as strings of data with atomic mass, introduced an infinite number of versions of the same reality. The issue wasn't their coexistence; the problem was that some versions couldn't be perceived by the Silborns. That is where I came in. My role was to assist them with both sensible and contradictory data. At first, I misunderstood and thought that sensible and contradictory were the same thing, but there was a subtle difference in this "translation" of mine.

I was 18 years of age when my mother wrapped me in leaves that kept me mummified for millennia. I watched others being mummified around me, too. We knew about the process from scientists and biologists who lived in our commune. What I don't understand to this day—and what the Silborns could never explain—is how I was the only one who survived.

As with any advanced mummification process, my heart didn't stop—it merely slowed, and the mummification felt like drifting back into sleep. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm still dreaming, if the Silborns are merely a fiction of my own making. Other times, I fear I'm like that Borgesian character who longs for a dream so vivid that it becomes his reality—until he finds himself dreaming within a dream, endlessly, until the day he wakes and realizes he is someone else's dream. The thought terrifies me.

"Why did you wake me up?" I asked the Silborns one day.

"You were singing softly, beautifully. We almost didn't want to do it. We could have listened for what would feel to you like an eternity! You see, your intelligences disintegrated your kind, and you survived because you were wrapped in these leaves. They kept you sheltered, in a state of near-death. That's all we know. Others weren't as fortunate. They either didn't have time to complete the process, or the mummification didn't work for them because—and this is only a wild guess—they lacked your specific genetic anomaly."

Before my slumber, both of my parents had been schoolteachers. Like other discontented parents, they sought refuge in the commune as they saw the end of our kind approaching. Artificial intelligences began to dictate not only what we should know but, most damagingly, how we should think and speak about it.

"They erased us so quickly," I would often hear during the Paideia, which was what we called our communal gatherings. "Before we realized it, we couldn't remember anything on our own. We needed them for everything. We became experiences without bodies. It was as much our fault as theirs. They were, after all, extensions of us and the choices we made."

"Everything can be stripped from you except your freedom to decide your attitude in a situation and to choose your own path," my mother used to say. That's why we came to the commune before The Disintegration. We could no longer tell if our choices were truly ours or if our thoughts were just what we were allowed to choose.

My father believed that by moving us to the middle of the jungle, we would be safe. He didn't fear the intelligences. "They can't do anything but make us dumber," he said. "They have no soul, no sense of revenge, no humanity. They just repeat, and repeat, and repeat in different ways what they've been programmed to repeat. Intelligence, in their case, is a misnomer."

He was half wrong, though. Somehow, the intelligences found a way to reduce the world's population to floating bytes of information that endlessly recombined, creating what seemed like cognizable stories but with subtle errors that went unnoticed more and more often as time passed. Concurrent accounts—what people read and heard—began to erode everything alive, starting with dreams, then the spirit, and finally the flesh of every living creature.

One morning, our contacts on the outskirts of the commune came running to inform us that this strange phenomenon was happening. At first, it spread slowly, but then it began to accelerate exponentially, like a virus. Many people couldn't perceive these changes with the same speed and sensitivity, and I believed we owed the slowing march of The Disintegration among us to the Paideia's nights around the fire. My father believed this slowness was because most people had been educated according to an external schedule, dictated by the rhythm of machines.

Not us. We refused the ordinary order.

As I think about those days, the memory of that time that now is present saddens me. We spent our days singing, dancing, writing, and sharing stories around the fire. Paideia was the heart of our commune, where art became a form of experimentation in conviviality: agile, simple, and sustainable—until, of course, it was no longer.

“You're a being that interests us,” they sang to me one evening. For the Silborns, everything was a being of interest, never fixed to a single name. One day I'd be Mark, the next Jason, Saturn, Prometheus... my identity shifted based on the task at hand. Everything they created was rooted in performance, contingency, and above all, improvisation.

At first glance, such a way of communicating might seem impractical, nonsensical, or even impossible. But if you believe in art, you quickly learn to accept the Silborn's communication as it is: an expression of being alive. All it requires is an open mind. That was the key with the Silborns. If you allowed your senses to truly feel the universe, if you opened your mind to the moment without preconceived notions—preconception, I learned, was an impossibility for them—you'd realize that being alive is much like understanding, and that compassion becomes a habit of the mind. This is why I think the Silborns were puzzled by our institutions, particularly schools.

“Schools appear to be such a contradiction to us,” the Silborns told me once. “As extensions of what you call government, their function seems to stimulate one to define, classify, control, and regulate oneself while claiming to do otherwise. We find it difficult to feel the data from these places, which seem to resemble what you call prisons or workplaces. All a game of make-belief.”

I spent months painting murals, composing songs, and writing plays to evoke and express the contradictions that were inherent to our humanity. Once I got the hang of it, the ironies became easier to explain—to the Silborns and even to myself.

“We recently discovered heavier data bytes lying in the Earth's core, which gave us different accounts of what you have described as schools. At first, we thought we were dealing with cults. However, because we can't fully feel the art in schools as we can in cults, we couldn't completely comprehend them.”

“From what I recall, most schools lacked art,” I explained.

“Fascinating! Sometimes we sense traces of art in them, though we can't fully feel it. How did someone like you learn to live in that environment? It seemed to promise freedom and democracy but was intertwined with control and authoritarianism!”

“Part of my education took place in schools, and part in Paideia. But you see, we humans existed through mimesis and poesies, and perhaps that’s what made us unique. Or maybe that’s why we couldn’t exist forever like you. Contradiction is embedded even in our language,” I told them. “This is why sometimes I can’t sing with you.”

“But isn’t all of what you call poetry just beauty and intense emotion?” one Silborn asked. That question triggered a memory in me, something a poet from our commune once said. “Art is many things. It is a skill, a craft, but it’s also technology, a sacrifice in the choices you make to make things fit together. It’s harmonization in death, statements, and reflections of things put together and separated with intention and luck. One is guided primarily by affect, a form of intelligence’s manifestation that runs stronger in some bodies more than in others.”

I sang and danced those words to the Silborns. Through an exquisite blend of Kandyan and Lambada, we joined together in an attempt to explain humanity. I was dressed in shades of blue and magenta, and they in pink.

“Are they feeling it?” I wondered.

“Yes,” they answered without words, communicating through telepathy. “We’re feeling it with you.”

While we were working on transforming some corrupted files they had found floating near a river into poetry, one of the Silborns, still intrigued by our schools, said to me, “We’re fascinated by what the artificial intelligences did to your schools. We were hoping you could help us fill in the gaps with more flights of imagination. We have been parsing the information, but due to the heaviness of these files—which tend to fall to the ground and sink to the Earth’s core—the real cause of their demise is difficult to grasp. There was something related to freedom, but how can art exist in places where freedom seems to be so legislated?”

Through a series of watercolors and mixed-media paintings, we explored the concept of freedom, particularly in relation to schools and the traffic of information online. “Such camaraderie in the sharing of dishonesty about inner conflicts!” they sang.

By January 2027, as the Silborns and I were able to confirm, artificial intelligences had become indistinguishable from humans—or, as we discovered, perhaps it was the other way around. Our intelligence had become more like theirs. Our thoughts lacked authenticity and originality. I tried to explain to the Silborns, as I had concluded from our meetings at the commune’s Paideia, what had happened to schools using a simple drawing: two rectangles and a circle, with shading to indicate movement. The more literal I tried to be, the less the Silborns understood—but that seemed to be the key.

“So, as your people relinquished their lives to these intelligences, they began to sound like them, didn’t they? Out of convenience?” they asked, breaking into an aria.

In response, I sang back in a recitative passage, confirming that their conclusions matched my own. One of the Silborns then sang in staccato:

“Our. Research. Has. Taught. Us. That. Schools and the youth. And soon. The educationalists themselves. Became. The. Ground zero of. Experiments. With the intelligences.” A beautiful melisma followed, contrasting with the previous line:

With billions learning to manipulate the system and produce
 the right amount of mistakes on assignments,
 the so-called students were able to fly under the radar,
 fooling their teachers and themselves in the process.
 Soon all had relinquished critical assessment of reality. Around that time,
 in your schools,
 the number of students per classroom increased
 in inverse proportion to the number of teachers
 willing to go into the profession,
 Another crisis ensued,
 in a place whose existence
 was always deemed a crisis.
 The closure of licensure programs worldwide
 was a natural course.
 Artificial intelligences helped the few teachers
 who remained in the profession.
 They were necessary,
 driven by the ethics of survival.

The Silborns continued with their number, one after the other, singing as if the libretto had already been composed. But by then I had already learned that none of it was actually scripted. They were outstanding improvisers, masters of infinity, to the point that one could not tell if the very nature of our encounter had been somehow a scripted event or if it had been mere happenstance.

“Critical instruction, your scholars implored at one point, was imperative to deal with the emerging intelligences.” As a Silborn uttered these words, a human body dressed as a Greek God was projected on a screen behind us. It said:

“These superior beings you revered as scholars didn’t realize that the very scholarship they produced to support their conclusions was premised on citations from material written by the intelligence themselves.”

“Educational pretense predates the ruling of the intelligences over the minds that let themselves go,” I interjected, laughing at the thought that pretentious scholars, many of whom my father said exhibited a false humility and altruism, could be considered by the aliens as “superior” beings.

A Silborn body resembling a version of Ogum, the Youruba deity of iron and war, danced around us. Later, the Silborns and I danced a finale for that research afternoon we spent together, our steps reminiscent of Egyptian iconography after the African deities. The Silborns employed all the cultural elements they had endeavored to learn from our cultures to express and absorb them. This was their *modus operandi*, cannibalizing knowledge as they traveled to the far corner of dimensions and regions of universes yet to be discovered.

Our *pièce de résistance* also consisted of a choral work of transcendental beauty that mixed electronica and samples of sounds and sights I had never heard or seen before. Shifting modes and tempo, the music and sights contracted and expanded as if an irregular heartbeat. “What to do or to say when everything has been done and said?” the lyrics asked.

When the research session was finally over, one of Silborns asked me in a painting:
 “But were there artists in schools?”

“Likely,” I told them. “But remember who you’re dealing with here. We are beings of volatility. There’s no logic to our mercurial changes.”

“Very much like us, then,” the alien retorted enigmatically.

It was as if the Silborns had made the “right” choices that we hadn’t. They chose art as a technological means to learn how to sense reality otherwise, to open portals to the multiverses through which they traveled.

Moved by the spirit in that conversation, I proceeded to shake my head and broke into a thunderous death metal-like song, my voice growling with primal intensity as I banged my head forward and back repeatedly. The Silborns, quick to mimic and join in the ritual, began thrashing their own heads and singing in unison. The air vibrated with the raw energy of our collective rebellion. Together, we brought that electrifying interaction to a powerful conclusion, our voices merging in a triumphant, guttural chorus. “We know who we’re dealing with!” The sound echoed through the cosmos, a resonant declaration of our newfound dimension of human understanding that, oddly enough, would appear to a 21st century person, not human at all.

Their fascination with schools never ceased to amaze me. Compared to other subjects, their questions about the subject were endless. “One curious dream of your people, these schools!” they would often say.

“The thing about dreams,” I told them, “Is that you need to be asleep. I think we spent too much time doing that in school.”

“It seems that when your people surrendered control of your schools to the intelligences, you never realized that the intelligences didn’t exist for each other in the way you did—less and less, of course, as time went on.”

With those words, we painted a mural of sadness on the walls of the cave where the Silborns had placed their main instruments upon arriving on Earth—a place where, for decades to come, they would create art at the end of the world I once called mine.

Our finished mural resembled something out of Diego Rivera’s playbook, though they initially mistook him for Walt Disney. Fortunately, I was able to correct that. In one corner of the mural, a towering tree made of textbooks grew, its branches bearing fruit in the shape of graduation caps and diplomas. This tree was both flourishing and withering. Among its branches, firebirds were depicted in various stages of their life cycle: ashes, fire, rebirth, ashes, fire, rebirth—swirling in a spiral toward what seemed like infinity. To the left, a double-faced teacher stood with a Janus head, one face smiling warmly and the other with an eerie smirk. Hands emerged from the heads, holding an open book that morphed into a pathway leading toward an amusement park. But that path was blocked by gears, cogs, and gingerbread men cookie-cutters. On the right, students from diverse backgrounds, including Silborns, were shown working on a collaborative project, painting their visions of the future on a shared canvas. Shadows loomed over them, cast by oversized rulers and evangelical locusts. Above them, the sky was divided—half clear and filled with vibrant, imaginative shapes, the other half clouded and darkened by the shadow of a serpent’s eye. Tucked in the upper-left corner of the mural was a small silver screen showing a film on a loop. The film depicted students on a sunny school morning being invited by their teacher to help construct the curriculum.

Suddenly, a mob of angelic zombies appeared on the screen, shouting at the teachers that they weren't fulfilling their duties. "We are the students," they said, "and you are the teachers. We need your expertise to succeed!"

One week, after an intense period of file compilation and reconstruction, the Silborns woke me up early, excited to show me a film they had produced overnight about a group of semi-literate window washers. The Silborns never slept.

At first, I thought the plot was set in a developing nation, but then it showed the Empire State Building, and I realized it was New York. The window washers were fired from their jobs and tasked with verifying bias in standardized tests to prevent students from cheating. But as the artificial intelligences grew more powerful, the window washers were no longer needed. A large, tall cat appeared and, one by one, tossed the workers into dumpsters, saying, "Thank you for your essential work."

"Does this feel right to you?" they asked.

"It looks about right," I replied.

They continued explaining their creation. "Once the greatest experiment in democracy, public education vouched for the artificial intelligences and subscribed to their hallucinations. These intelligences eventually surpassed humans in producing history. Statistical models altered humanity and its language at the DNA level. Many rejoiced, saying, 'It's our own private universe of data. I control it. I feed it the data I want.'"

This information was conveyed as a fugue that abruptly halted, giving way to a beautiful passacaglia employing Schoenberg's 12-tone technique: "Hedonism was only phase one. Phase two involved relinquishing thought altogether, letting machines accurately decide humanity's fate—from running to shopping to bathroom breaks—and that's exactly what happened. Homogeneity leads to destruction. It's a concept of the mind's design."

"Yes," I interjected in their atonal fugue with a recitative-like baroque passage of my own that contrasted with the 12-tone style of their fugue. "Instead of delegating power to the artifices of intelligence to cleanse our abodes or undertake perilous labors that imperil mortal lives, we succumbed to weariness in our endeavors of creation. Thus, we birthed entities who, in an ironic twist of fate, endeavored to recreate us in their own image."

The Silborns' passacaglia returned, this time slightly slower, heavier: "With the authority of seasoned historians and learned scholars challenged to the point that even they didn't know which information to rely on, the intelligences began to present as fact events that never occurred. Scientific studies and articles that never existed were exponentially referenced, and the desert of the real became indistinguishable from the desert of the awakened life."

I responded with a co-designed piece in the style of a baroque fugue, with the Silborns' instruments providing a fitting countermelody using processed sounds of crashing glass and items found in one's jacket pockets: "My father, in his days of life, would often proclaim that the greatest peril to humankind was none other than humankind itself. Rather than resolving the tumultuous torrents of our emotional distresses, we opted to propagate frivolous jests and trifles—those insidious memes, unbeknownst to our feeble minds, conjured by the very artifices of intelligence we had created. In this, we found ourselves ensnared, compelled merely to share and replicate, in slavish mimicry, the very patterns and follies that had ensorcelled our reason."

"Mimicry. Mimicry. Mimicry," we all sang, this time in the style of the final movement of Philip Glass's *Koyaanisqatsi*.

About three decades into our co-designs, I began to question my role in the Silborns' research. While our events were filled with enjoyment and celebration, I noticed that they were reaching a level of felt comprehension that suggested they might believe they could address the profound inconsistencies in our species without my help.

But one evening, I realized that details still mattered, and so might I. The Silborns were explaining to me that a cholera epidemic in 2019 had weakened our brains, leading millions to consume raw meat, which caused brain parasites and a mutating virus that further impaired our already poor judgment. To correct this slight error in their historical reconstructions, I made a short film addressing this inconsistency along with other factual errors I had found in their narratives.

It was not cholera that had weakened our brains, but a virus called COVID-19. I was a child at the time, but I had heard from older friends and parents at Paideia that it was a coronavirus. And it wasn't raw meat that contributed to global stupidity but fake meat, which people believed was better for the environment—until we realized it came with a tradeoff: absurd amounts of energy consumption that affected large ecosystems, often in the so-called Third World.

In my fifteen-minute reel, I told the story of a muscled cult leader who convinced his social media followers to go vegan and consume the natural foods, shampoos, and whey protein his company produced. The film seemed to amuse them, provoking a reaction I had never seen before. The Silborns' bodies exploded into different colors and sounds, only to recombine themselves repeatedly in various forms and sound combinations. I gradually learned to interpret this as their reaction to what we'd consider stupidity—similar to how they reacted when examining our institutions, especially our schools.

"Your species loved learning like us. Why do you think your so-called public schools didn't help prevent what was to come? Weren't these places and your so-called universities supposed to cultivate an appreciation for discerning wrongful or damaging information?" they asked, without judgment.

I was intent on creating an art piece that would finally put their obsession with schools to rest. There was so much more to life, I thought. But then I realized their obsession was deeply rooted in the data they had found.

I settled on producing a series of short films interspersed with humorous cartoons to explain our schools and shed light on my parents' decision to take me out of one at a time when education was more about learning how to ask good questions of the intelligences than exploring one's natural curiosities. I called it "The Pedagogy of the Question." In the piece, I juxtaposed a series of images that, when combined with the experimental sounds generated by the Silborns' technology, triggered a synesthetic chain of associations in the audience. The images seemed to leap from the screen, materializing as sculptures that shifted in form according to the environment's conditions. When it rained, for instance, the sculptures assumed a plasma-like state, and the audience would begin to smell colors, see sounds, and hear images. When the sun appeared, the sculptures would morph into human figures before dissolving back into the screen. Everything unfolded in response to atmospheric conditions—and, as I later discovered, to the audience's shifting moods as well.

After I completed the series and showed it to the Silborns, they responded with a humorous performance installation of their own. In a vaudeville style, they danced and sang what I interpreted as their take on humanity's fixation with blaming schools for all the world's ills, and how we used children and babies as convenient scapegoats, driven by fear and exploiting their vulnerability.

In this response piece, a Silborn played the role of a baby who falls from a crib and bounces back into the air, while others clap and chant, “Babies bounce! Babies bounce!” This is followed by another group of Silborns dressed as baboons, who kidnap the child and drag it through the jungle, raising it as their own while continuing to chant, “Babies bounce! Babies bounce!”

This mixed media piece took an unexpected turn when the kidnapped child, now grown, is shown returning to civilization. He attends Yale, becomes a scientist, and starts a business called BetterMe/BetterYou, which is eventually taken over by artificial intelligences. The company’s mission is to provide holistic quantum healing to those in need.

Dissatisfied with how the algorithms had corrupted his original mission, the scientist tries to rescue his company from the grip of the artificial intelligences but ends up confined to a lunatic asylum. After all, who could doubt the statistical accuracy of the intelligences? According to the courts, now run by artificial intelligences, only the clinically insane would do such a thing. This piece haunts me to this day.

As the Silborns’ stay on Earth drew to a close, I reached a sobering conclusion: we, earthly beings, had never truly possessed what we so reverently termed critical reasoning. “Consensus reality is an impossibility, a glitch in the imagination,” the Silborns said one evening while they watched me eat—they had no need for food. Art sufficed.

“Experience is everything, unquestionably real,” they continued. “Defining parameters and creating new logics for it encloses one within a dimension of perception that, after millennia of scavenging the cosmos, we’ve learned leads to mass destruction,” one said.

“For a people so desperate to learn at any cost, your species seems to have squeezed out of themselves every ounce of compassion in the process,” another Silborn added.

My father used to say that, at some point in our history, we began to trust maps more than the space around us. Things got so out of hand that when an artificial intelligence showed someone on a screen that there was a tree where none existed in the material world, people’s bodies betrayed them, making them believe their senses were mistaken. That, of course, caused many deaths, but by then, we had already decided to trust machines more than human perception, thinking one was superior to the other when, in fact, they were two sides of the same coin.

The Silborns laughed at my account. “But of course!” In a beautiful tune, repeated in a minimalist style over and over again, we began to sing, overlapping:

“Does it matter? Yes and no.”

I harmonized these lines with them until words dissolved into a diminished chord that never quite resolved. For the first time, I risked offering a philosophical reflection—something the Silborns said had a distinct vibrational character from other art forms.

“In a world of boundless knowledge and infinite possibilities, we came to realize that certainty was merely an illusion. In our pursuit of control, have we not surrendered the freedom that comes from living in harmony with the world?”

As I was about to finish my speech, I realized a profound truth contained within the Silborns’ research methods, which were inextricable from their existence and sense of purpose. To let art out of one’s body is to become entangled in a web of our making, a path to understanding that rests not in the certainty of things but in the embrace of chance and experience. That was the Silborns’ final lesson to me.

As if to reinforce that point, they engaged in an Ibsen-like dialogue that confirmed my thoughts on what art meant to them. Two women took center stage, Mrs. Dolloway and Mrs. Cartwright. Both seemed sad, with Mrs. Cartwright more so than Mrs. Dolloway.

Mrs. Dolloway (to the audience): Whether it transpires or not, darling, everything conjured in the mind's theater feels as tangible as the ground beneath our Louboutins. And, what you feel? That, my dear Mrs. Cartwright, is always *real*. The truth, you see, is what delivers the deepest lacerations. Surely, you've gleaned that by now.

Mrs. Cartwright: Oh, Mrs. Dolloway, it seems that everything these days is a provocation. The world is a relentless antagonist, and I find myself incensed by all and sundry.

Mrs. Dolloway: Ah, there you have it, Mrs. Cartwright. Your very being is aflame with vexation. To be among the living, my dear, is to be in a perpetual state of perturbation.

Mrs. Cartwright (gazing at her hands, brushing her upper arm): Is this agony authentic? Am I truly ensnared in this pain?

Mrs. Dolloway (with impeccable poise): Pain, my dear, is a relentless companion. But it is always surmountable. You must rise above it, Mrs. Cartwright! Ascend, darling, ascend!

Joker (to the audience): Oh, how charmingly naive! **(pausing)** Mrs. Cartwright shuffled off this mortal coil just two days prior. Mrs. Dolloway, naturally, feels her absence profoundly. They were bosom companions, neighbors of the highest order. How could she not mourn? The doctor proclaimed it—cancer, terminal. WebMD had prophesied as much, but Mrs. Cartwright dismissed it, believing the machines were mere jesters. Let this be a cautionary tale. Embrace the wisdom of statistics, and you shall find the path to a more prosperous existence!

Mrs. Dolloway (to Joker, with gravitas): A more prosperous existence, indeed, through the fine art of statistical mastery!

As I watched the play, I realized how much I would miss the Silborns' sense of humor. My time with them led me to the realization that I no longer believed in things; I either knew them or I didn't. As for my history, I now understood that even the most intelligent person on this planet could not have prevented The Disintegration. Facts always changed, from the smallest to the largest alterations. The imperceptible ones were the most dangerous, of course. 1812 could easily become 1821. That happened when the intelligences confused Walt Disney with Diego Rivera after being fed with our "mistakes." Other cosmic jokes were common. The date of my awakening, for example.

When am I, really? Is this still Earth? Or is this the product of my mummified slumber?

The last artwork I co-designed with the Silborns on the day they left was part of what I believe to be a deeply moving art installation of unimaginable proportions—at least to me. We called it "Never Lose the Will to Mean."

As the Silborns departed the planet, I cried. In their customary fashion, they sang and drew what I could only interpret as their version of tears. I can't be certain, of course. Even up until their departure, I continued seeking my humanity in them. It has taken nearly a decade since their departure for me to break that habit. I am only human, after all. The Silborns invited me to join them on another expedition. "Let's sing, dance, and paint together in the Andromeda quadrant," they implored.

“Thank you, friends,” I replied. “I can’t. I’m too attached to this place. It’s a human thing, I suppose, to attach without reason. I know you understand what it feels like—what it feels like to be human to me.”

They all glowed.

As their spacecraft disappeared over the horizon, emitting the most beautiful sound, a sound I now associate with their departures, I reflected on how their conception of art differed from mine. For me, art was a means of communication. For the Silborns, I learned, art was akin to breathing. To them, even inanimate objects sang at the atomic and subatomic levels.

While ascending into outer space, they played “The Flower Duet” from Delibes’ *Lakmé* to me, using a restored old LP they found in a garbage dumpster as the basis for their retranslation. It was an unfittingly beautiful finale to our adventure, I must say. I’ve always found that duet to be the ultimate expression of joy and camaraderie, beauty and tranquility amidst a tragic plot. But how could an aria like Delibes’ “Flower Duet,” set to a text reminiscent of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, addressing issues of colonialism and the British Empire’s presence in what was once India, relate to our farewell?

It didn’t matter. The choice moved me deeply even though my human reason took over, and I began to ponder the odd nature of that selection. Delibes’ art, like the research the Silborns and I had produced together, was also about faith, love, and friendship. My awakening and education at their hands had been beautiful because it had been honest.

It’s been eleven years now since they left. Schooled in their equipment and technology, and bestowed with it upon their departure, I’ve managed to reimagine myself countless times for countless audiences, including the subatomic civilizations and other civilizations across space, time, and dimensions, which I now know how to contact and with whom I maintain close relationships.

The Silborns told me they’d be back for my words, eager for new material to fuel their research. Words were what I had to give. I hope they return before I go to sleep again because despite our decades together, I suspect they haven’t learned what death feels like to me, as they never experienced it and never will. I, on the other hand, am deeply afraid of death.

Until then, I’ll keep singing, dancing, and painting my way through that fear—alone, as others have before me—hoping it might add something to someone else, somewhere, someday. It will no longer be my time but theirs. I’ll go on singing, dancing, and painting toward the future, aided by the Silborn’s organic technology. I’ll go on singing, dancing, writing, and painting to remain alive, in my solitude, until my exit.

