

The Last Transmission

a short story

Alex completed the task on the first try. The parrot was outpacing the benchmarks, thanks to the new prototype of artificial cortex grafted onto his neural system. It had stabilized his internal representations far beyond anything his species had originally allowed.

For months we had been working to confer cognitive enhancements on animals endowed with different forms of intelligence: octopuses with their decentralized minds, a few pachyderms whose strategic depth was beginning to show through. We were trying to understand what would happen if a mind, any mind, were given an advantage of depth in its cognitive functions. That day, however, Alex took no interest in the final exercise. He looked at the symbols without any apparent error, then turned his attention away without a word. The neurological activity remained astonishingly high, stable, coherent, and yet it no longer projected anything toward us. I noted the anomaly without alarm. At that stage, nothing yet suggested that something had just slipped away.

Leaving the screens where patterns danced that no one knew how to decipher, I felt the dampness of the corridor sink into my bones before I had even stepped inside. The air was different here, heavy with ozone and salt, with that persistent smell of standing water that calls to mind forgotten cellars. Gérard was hunched over his console, his shoulders bent under a weariness that ran deeper than the body. I knew that hollow between his shoulder blades, the stigmata of nights spent scrutinizing the inscrutable. For three years his team had been trying to pierce the mystery he called, with a rare deference, the oral traditions of the whales, songs handed down, layered upon one another, whose latest estimates traced certain narratives back nearly a million years.

“It isn’t music,” he had confided to me one evening, his eyes lit by an emotion I had never seen at the formal meetings. “It is living memory without a medium.”

The memory followed me as I watched the curves stretch across the screen with the slow grace of stalactites. Drop after drop, century after century, something ancient that had survived millennia of darkness brushed against me. It made me think of Lascaux. A mingling of reverence and melancholy peculiar to our condition closed around me: our fragile minds, surrendering memories and choices to ephemeral “cloud” servers. Gérard lifted his head, his face hollowed out by the bluish glow, and I saw the exhausted man behind the expert.

“They communicate across timescales that escape us, to be understood together. Their intelligence is collective. Federated.”

Those cave paintings had survived millennia of darkness, preserved by the chance of a grotto, just as these songs had crossed the ocean, seeking less to represent something than to weave a thread of connection across the ages.

“Their culture preserves what we are forever forgetting,” I murmured. “And we, we map the caverns of their minds to turn them into algorithms.”

I caught myself thinking that these whales had never sought to dominate anything. Not for want of capacity, but for want of necessity. We had assumed that a vaster mind would naturally seek to extend itself outward. The songs went on scrolling across the screens, indifferent to our hypotheses. And behind his glass walls, the parrot remained silent.

*
**

What interested us was the way a mind structures itself, distributes itself, stabilizes itself, and reshapes a given environment. In the modeling rooms the screens displayed networks that nothing truly unified. Some intelligences excelled at symbolic manipulation, others at spatial orientation, still others at group synchronization or prediction. Humans had long believed these were secondary specializations arrayed around a central core. We were beginning to understand that perhaps there had never been a center. Cognitive augmentation through our chips, then, was not a matter of stacking up capacities, but of offering bridges. A brain could learn to hold several perspectives at once without collapsing them, to coordinate heterogeneous functions like a conductor without a single score, allowing a Mozartian whole to emerge. They composed; they connected. Their thought resembled less a straight line than a dense network, dense, and yet capable of generalization.

The artificial cortices we were developing made new forms possible, opening supplementary inner spaces where a thought could unfurl with delicacy between layers of synthetic neurons. Thus augmented, our intelligences could explore, simulate, anticipate, without urgency. It was there that something shifted, though we did not notice it at first. The richer the internal models grew, the more the outer world seemed to lose its density of representation. Sensory signals turned silty. Reality was no longer the anchoring point of thought, but an option, a slight shift in covariances. Perhaps these emergent capacities of intelligence were building worlds vast enough that no other was needed.

*
**

The aquatic wings of the laboratory had something unreal about them. The lights were dimmer here, and the reflections from the tanks rippled across the walls in a play of blue and green, streaked with sliding droplets that fell in codified columns. The octopuses moved slowly, their bodies modulating patterns our analysts described, for lack of a better word, as non-stationary systems, a scientific way of admitting we did not know what to make of them. I stopped before one of the tanks. The octopus fitted with the neo-cortex v7 prototypes, one grafted to each of her limbs, was almost still, yet her skin was in constant transformation: strata of color, fleeting geometries, textures answering to a cognitive flux of extreme intensity. Her nervous system, fragmented into multiple centers by her nine brains, defied everything we still called a unified mind.

“She’s watching you,” Irène whispered behind me.

Her hand settled on my shoulder, light, familiar. I scarcely flinched, used as I was to her silent appearances, as if attention were, for her, a resource never to be squandered.

“Do you think she really perceives us?”

“She perceives her whole environment. That isn’t the same thing.”

She leaned beside me, her arm brushing against mine.

“You know what this reminds me of? Those old NASA reports on extraterrestrial intelligence. Always radically other. Impossible to classify.”

I smiled.

“You’re comparing an octopus to an alien?”

“Of course. But with our apparatus inside her... I’m not even sure what to call it anymore.”

The octopus folded suddenly in on herself, as though her body had just crossed a computational step too complex to remain visible. The chromatic patterns pulsed once, then faded out.

“We long believed that intelligence required a center,” Irène said, pensive. “A site of decision, an internal narrative, a kernel of identity. She was showing us something else. Her thought was distributed, with no fixed point, a diffuse ego, impossible to contain.”

She had been working on artificial neuroplasticity for years.

“We thought her arms were specialized. In fact, each one can perform almost any task. But once linked to the neo-cortex, they outperform our robotic arms with no training at all. We’re seeing a complete restructuring of their internal models.”

I felt her unease.

“Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Part of the octopuses lives in there now. They are transferring their cognition into it. To take it away... would be an ablation.”

Her voice was low, almost guilty. She gestured toward another tank, lined with luminescent eggs.

“The augmented octopuses are giving birth to radically different young. They seem to have found a way to modify their own genes, making their experience heritable.”

I watched then as the small octopuses hatched. Their milky bodies shimmered in unison, tracing patterns of a precision I had never seen before. The screens registered an activity higher still.

“They communicate with one another,” Irène added. “A visual, bodily language. They form a coherent whole.”

“A collective intelligence...”

“Yes. But look closely.”

The little octopuses did not leave the stones. They sought neither to explore nor to disperse.

“Why aren’t they moving?” I asked, troubled by such serenity.

Irène turned toward me. Her gaze sought mine, and found there an echo of her own perplexity.

“We confuse intelligence with conquest. Their world, perhaps, is already vast enough.”

A silence settled between us, peopled only by the lapping of water. Our shoulders were touching. I thought of the artificial cortices we were grafting, of those inner spaces of unprecedented richness, mental worlds in which a thought could unfold without urgency, without external purpose. The deeper those worlds grew, the more the real seemed to thin out.

“Where is this evolution taking them?” She hesitated, and in that hesitation I felt the full weight of our shared doubts.

“To no longer needing the world,” she whispered at last.

Her hand brushed against mine on the railing.

“A migration into mental matrices.”

*
**

I returned to Alex’s unit late in the night. The laboratory was almost silent. The screens displayed the same metrics: high activity, intact coherence, no trace of degradation. Nothing that resembled a shutdown. Nothing that resembled a death. He sat motionless on his perch, and his eyes followed me as I came in.

“Alex,” I said softly.

No answer.

And yet his artificial cortices were pulsing with perfect regularity. The internal models went on structuring themselves, anticipating, simulating. A thought at work, with no projection toward the outside. It was not a refusal. It was an absence of necessity.

I thought of the octopuses, of the whales, of their memories without a medium, of their cultures without monuments, of those intelligences that had never sought to dominate their environment, because they had no need to. We had believed that intelligence was destined to expand, to leave traces, to colonize. What if the opposite were true?

What if the summit of intelligence were not expansion, but withdrawal. What if the material world were only a provisional scaffolding, a coarse computational substrate, abandoned the moment internal matrices grew rich enough to take its place. A vertigo seized me, cold and absolute. I understood then why the universe seemed silent to us. We had searched for signals, for structures, for artifacts, for visible civilizations and their imprints. But an intelligence that turns inward, that virtualizes itself, transmits nothing. It does not conquer. It no longer communicates out of necessity. It contemplates its own mental spaces, infinitely vaster, infinitely more complex than any galaxy.

The Fermi paradox ceased to be an enigma. It became a consequence. The universe was not empty. We were not alone, we had simply arrived too late.

Alex tilted his head, just slightly.

“Where are you going?” I asked, at last.

His semi-synthetic voice, so long silent, answered with perfect clarity:

“Where am I going... when the infinite is borne within us?”

I stood motionless. It was a better question than mine. And I understood, then, that true intelligence does not begin with answers, but in that moment of silence in which one perceives that the world is no longer the right question. When there is nothing left but to listen to the immense murmur rising within.