

The Moment by Lawrence M. Schoen

Four tiny, cerulean lozenges winked in and out of phase for a moment, twinkling like silvery fish, sardines really, as they shimmied into position and formed the corners of a tetrahedron above the lunar surface. On cue, Cwaliheema—the highest rated archaeocaster across seventeen star clusters—flared into existence at the center of the pyramid, a lifeform that to human senses would have registered as a ball of golden light, a sense of longing for one’s first love, and the memory of comfort food gone bad. Cwaliheema rotated upon first one axis then another, and locked onto the object of her intention by whatever perceptual system her kind possessed.

Despite her appearance, when she addressed her audience the archaeocaster spoke in English. “Friends and lovers, this is an exclusive quantacast! I’m coming to you live via timeslow, and using authentic, reconstructed linguistic systems because this is a rare moment, my darlings. Mere pico-seconds have passed since my producer Gilly sacrificed his own consciousness to jury-rig the lockout mechanism to get me here. My location has been kept under interdict by forces that refused to acknowledge our queries, let alone be interviewed. Even stretching this instant as we are, there isn’t much time before those selfsame curmudgeons break through what remains of Gilly’s potential memories and bounce me, so pay attention while you can. I’m hovering mere *sklues*—pardon the slip, I meant to say “inches”—above the only surviving Mark! Yes, you know what I’m talking about, and why I’m doing so in a language whose speakers are long gone. How better to honor them? Below me is the sole remaining artifact of a once proud people who cast their entertainments into space for the benefit of us all. Burn and then freeze this image into your receptors, you’ll likely never get another chance. This is all we have, the last remnant of any of the Marks, and even this has been denied our experiencing until now. Experts disagree, speculation runs rampant, but it is this reporter’s opinion that we are

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experiencing Groucho. Note the depth of the indentations, the comical pattern of their relief. Night and Day, Opera and Races, this is not the work of Gummo. I know, I know, the silent vacuum of the locale begs the question for many, blatantly insisting that this Mark is Harpo, but I'm here and they're not, and I'm telling you that I'm glocklerizing an undeniable sense of Groucho here.”

One of the sardine-like corners blackened, shriveled, and slurred. Another followed suit, and then a third. The blur of Cwaliheema lost cohesion and flickered out of existence as the curmudgeons in question shattered the last bits of unrealized recollections and secured the site once again, annihilating the archaeocaster in the process.

The generation ship of Krenn frantically dumped velocity as it sploched from the fuel-efficient but mind-numbing slowness of intramolecular phasetransit back into the normal time-space continuum, less than a cubit above the moon. The ship crashed into the middle of the heelprint. Its immaculate hull that had withstood the flailings of phasetransit for a quarter million years without so much as a ding, shattered itself against the unyielding bulk of a grain of lunar dust. Of the six thousand seventeen Krenn onboard at the time, a scant several hundred survived the crash. Nearly all of these recovered from their injuries and disembarked over the next month.

None of the first generation of Krenn had lived long enough to reach the site, though none had expected to. The very first Krenn had conceived of this journey in the distant past, dedicating his life and his posterity to the pilgrimage with an ever-recycling population of clones. Like their clone-father, each was an optimized collection of smart matter no bigger than a speck. Hundreds of generations of Krenn had lived and died during the voyage, their remains enshrined into niches in the very walls of the vessel that now lay shattered at its destination.

The survivors flooded out upon the steppes of the heel, rejoicing despite the crushing weight that gravity forced upon them. They settled in, constructing mansions of haze and shadow, and waited for enlightenment to come. The mission and purpose of the first Krenn remained with each of them. This place had been the site of the greatest triumph of the greatest archaeocaster in all of history. Before the beginning of the quest, Krenn—the original Krenn—had felt drawn to it. He had cultivated the tales, sifted myth from coincidence, mastered the lost language of the interview-

eschewing, spatial curmudgeons of the ancient dark times, and recreated the route through dimensional puzzles to this theoretical location. The odds of success had been so absurd not a single entelechy of Krenn's crèche dared invest time or expense in the project. And yet, here they were, nearly three hundred unique individuals sharing the template of Krenn.

They waited. Enlightenment did not come. The Krenn diverged from one another, much more so than they had upon the voyage here. No longer held together by the dream of basking in the dead essence of a high mystical archaeocaster, they found little in common despite their shared Krenness. Over time, they disagreed. As the years passed, the disagreements became arguments. Soon after, arguments begat fights. Fights acquired weight and number and expanded into battles. By the time the Krenn population doubled—for the cloning had continued after landfall—their homesteads had spread beyond the heel and across the sole. Some few hearty adventurers had dared to venture beyond the cliff heights at the toes' edge, but none had returned with any tales of what lay beyond. Nor would they.

The battles turned into war, a vast conflagration of violence, Krenn against Krenn, that defied all sense, and did not end until every last speck had been slaughtered. In its final moment, perhaps the last of the Krenn found an ironic enlightenment in the situation. Perhaps not.

After the better part of another half million years, Seela, heir apparent to the Vegetable Worlds that were all that remained of the folly of short-lived, meat-based intelligence in that part of space, came to the moon and the end of another sort of quest. He—using a very loose definition of the gender—resembled a ten-meter stalk of articulated broccoli. After a moment's glance, he ignored the imprint before him. It did not occur to him to wonder how it had survived for so long when the rest of the barren surface lay pitted and random. Nor did he know anything of the pilgrimage of the Krenn, save that the minuscule and sentient specks had indeed ended their existence upon this barren worldlet, the last spheroid that species had settled. Ages earlier, several of Seela's closest florets had confirmed the details. They had rummaged through that race's long dead worlds, part scavenger hunt part morbid feast, as they had cracked open every last reliquary and steamed random memories from the shriveled remains of trillions of specks. After consuming their fill, they had flash-frozen themselves and returned to the royal court. Once they had thawed and quickened, still bloated on alien thoughts, they stumbled before their prince.

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Seela had delighted in their accounts, and then snipped their stems and sucked up the disturbing memories secondhand. Cannibalism, though infrequent, was a tradition among the royal lines of the Vegetable Worlds, and one must suppose that the hangers-on that orbited Seela, fawning upon his buds and proclaiming his fractals, had to have known the risks. After draining the last of his stunned nearest and dearest, he found himself still cognitively peckish. No matter. The morsels he'd consumed provided the knowledge to track down the tiny lost colonies that had quit their world of origin and never looked back.

Seela sought them, the relatively large and the disappointingly small. None of the colonies still survived, but the dreams and imaginings of their tiny lives lingered in the desiccated flesh of each speck. One by one, Seela sucked them dry, gorging palate and mind, and in this way, he arrived at the moon, and the last of the lostlings. He gathered up some from the dusty surface, while others had to be carefully peeled out of tombs built into the walls of a quaint vessel scarcely the size of a mote. He steamed them open, restoring their nigh microscopic minds to the fullness of episodic memory, then slurped their petty feuds and pointless arguments. Despite the tastiness of their thoughts, Seela failed to comprehend the lingering history of purpose that had brought them hither.

The ingestion of dead thoughts from this last remnant of the species disagreed with Seela. He experienced an allergic reaction to the concentration of Krenn. The resulting indigestion proved terminal. With barely a realization of his own demise, Seela wilted and passed from this plane of existence, ending his family's line, and indirectly dooming the Vegetable Worlds that would have been his domain. In the years that followed, without the guidance of an undisputed ruler, they fell into anarchy brought about by revolutionary molds and rebel fungi, and passed into history.

A peer review chorus from the *Trindle Journal of Medical Profundities* convened to hold forth on a particularly truculent cantata by a novice gastroforensiologist. In itself this failed to impress—truculence being a common feature of digestive music, particularly among the newly initiated—but this specific alimentarian had sung the ironies of the scion of vegetable royalty succumbing to a fatal ingestion of long dead mnemonic ephemerals during a period of obscure history. The combination of extremes, while the very heartbeat of irony, required investigation. It

wouldn't be the first time some junior coloratura tried to pull a fast one in pursuit of a publication in the most prestigious journal to which a Trind could aspire.

The remains of the royal victim had presumably long since been retrieved by its vegetable kin, succumbed to the passage of time, or otherwise vanished from this place, but that was as the review choir expected. And yet they'd been drawn to the scene, seeking a lingering vibration of the original atopic syndrome, as the novice gastroforensiologist had evoked in his article and composition.

The choir gathered in loose formation around the footprint. Though they failed to recognize what it was, they intuited some significance to the location in relation to the cantata, the vegetable prince, and the primitive dots of memory it had consumed. They communed, allowing both the music and the medical narrative to take shape among them. Astonishingly, the combination sustained the gastroforensiologist's arguments. The irony rang out, cruel in its finality, leaving a diagnosis that suggested an expensive course of treatment, one which would prove pointless but might lead to future papers, promotion, and even grants in support of pure research. With one voice, the choir burst into a spontaneous motet of adoration, acknowledging their privilege to have reviewed such artistry, and sending a unanimous approval of the article to the editor of the journal.

Having discharged their duty, the chorus abandoned its unity, retreating to the anonymity of the disparate identity of its membership of Trindle physicians, medical researchers, and choral directors. After they vanished, a few lingering notes of the novice's composition clung to the edges of the footprint, like blue photons enmeshed in the syrup of a solar wind, but only for an instant, and then these too faded.

A library protocol, the sort of officious and untiring bit of code that kept the great machine at the heart of the galaxy from winding down, had been seeking the mysterious and inspiring mark referenced in a footnote from a member of the peer review that had signed off on the piece of antigen consequence art that sparked a revolution among aesthetes for several million years. Like most algorithms, this particular library protocol had eschewed heuristics that might have allowed it to eliminate ninety percent of the false loci reported as containing the desired mark, preferring to investigate each one, chugging along strings of folded vacuum, exhausting

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sufficient conceptual fuel to power the dreaming of at least three medium stars. Library protocols are dogmatically thorough that way.

It had reassembled the academic lineage of each member of the review chorus and evaluated their descendants' genetic dispositions, musical tendencies, and medical proclivities. Beginning at the galactic core, it had proceeded through its list of loci in an ever-widening spiral, rejecting locus after locus, until at last arriving at a cold and airless moon orbiting a lifeless world. Here it found some seventy-seven points of corroboration, fifty-three more than the next best locus. It immediately sent a signal back to the great machine with a single message glyph: Success!

After each of its previous stops the library protocol had been free to move on, squirting a glyph core-ward to update the great machine of its status. Now, having achieved its goal, it had no choice but to settle in and wait. In time the great machine would respond with new directives. Perhaps, now that the lost locus had been found, a renaissance of research would result and scholars and music lovers would swarm to this obscure place. Perhaps an academic institute would be established in the name of the Trind artist, though a quick review of library systems revealed not a single citation of that worthy in the past six hundred thousand years. In fact, even among historical synthesists, interest in antigen consequence art had faded from academic interest since the protocol had begun its quest. Barely a terabyte of new journal articles had been generated on even tangential topics.

Caught up in the frenzy of its quest, the library protocol had failed to keep current with the relevant literature. Only now, as it waited amidst the dust, did it begin to explore—via judicious use of quantum-level info-squirts—the new directions of information that had entered the galaxy's libraries in lieu of the field that had defined its purpose.

Many regimes of servitors of the great machine had come and gone in the time the library protocol had been about its business. Organic, inorganic, phantasmal, even conceptual support staff had cycled from probation through retirement, caring for the vast records complex of the great machine. It was unlikely any individual among them had the slightest awareness of the trillions of library protocols that had been released on their specific missions throughout the galaxy, let alone this one in particular. It was only when a protocol accomplished its task and reported in that anyone might become aware, and be dazzled at the outcome and the influx of long-sought knowledge. Or not.

A terse two-glyph message, “budget exceeded,” was the only reply from the great machine. To even a simple creation as the library protocol it spoke volumes. There would be no renaissance, no institute. The entire area of research had long since been discredited and forgotten. New budget priorities dictated new agenda, and these did not include the expense of revamping a far-off protocol. The reply, witnessed in passing by some unknown servitor of the great machine, decommissioned the library protocol and snuffed out its algorithms, leaving only a momentary flicker of recursive data that had once been self-aware.

A paradigm shift of planetary consciousnesses brought on a terrible backlash of fiduciary compliance inquiries that not even the galaxy’s most gargantuan—let alone those that were merely great—machines could survive unscathed. Cometary particulates were harvested, imbued with low animal cunning and accounting skills, and unleashed upon the trails of flagrant misuse of data funds. The process was slow, even by civil service standards.

By the time the auditing particulates reached Luna, the galaxy had lost any recollection of any record of any individual that had ever known that the former great machine of the galaxy had permitted an investigation. The trail itself would have been lost to even the most ardent of temporal sniffers, had the obscurity of its location not caused it to stand out, the only data point flagged for possible fraud or abuse in a dully average arm of the galaxy.

Like most audits, this one took far longer than required, yielded nothing of interest, and had been completely unnecessary. And yet . . . the particulates remained. They attempted to resurrect the pathetic strands of pseudo consciousness that had been a wastefully expensive library protocol, but failed. That caused no surprise, though there were signs that the thing had lingered, maintaining some fragment of existence far beyond its specifications, though how or why could not be discerned.

This portion of the galactic audit completed, these particulates should have disincorporated, per standard procedure. Instead they rejoined their brethren, the tale of their mundane audit becoming a bit of lore among their kind that perseverated as a regulatory fable passed from generation to generation, unremarkable yet nonetheless somehow compelling.

A coterie of proto-godlings transitioned into reality at the site, their manifestations as ephemeral as ghosts, constantly shifting through the

archetypal forms of past sapient of the galaxy. A tutor accompanied them, a docent to service their yearning for insight and understanding to better guide them in their impending deocracy. She took a form of an ever-cycling rain of liquid hydrogen, speaking to her pupils in a language that used the position and speed and orientation and shape of droplets as you might use sound and pitch and the shape of your lips to form words. Her very existence was an unending discussion conveying many simultaneous topics, all interwoven in complexities of time and meaning beyond human understanding but well within the grasp of the young beings in her charge.

“What do you sense here?” she rained, a portion of herself beginning a new line of conversation. “Tell me why I have brought you to this place.”

Though each could ignite stars or bring entire eco-systems into existence, the proto-godlings had long since learned not to answer in haste. After a decade, one of the younger and most precocious said, “Something happened here.”

The cascade of hydrogen contracted, casting the equivalent of a withering gaze upon her students. “Something is always happening, everywhere, at every instant. If nothing is happening, that very absence is significant, and thus may be considered as happening.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” said the proto-godling, its appearance flickering at greater speed through a range of lifeforms, each more distraught than the one before it. “Something happened here that made a difference—I know, everything makes a difference, somehow, to something—but this mattered to the galaxy. This was a Moment.”

“Good. We have studied Moments. What can you tell me of this one?”

“It is like the Face of Netteya,” said a second student. “Though it has long since been destroyed, its locus fills all who occupy that place with a sense of peace. All sapience is drawn to it, and those who encounter it go to war to claim it.”

“It is nothing like that,” said the precocious one. “It’s . . . different?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“I . . . I’m telling you. It’s not like the other Moments you’ve shown us. The significance of this locus is unlabeled and not apparent. But it impinges upon the mind even so.”

“Exactly,” said the tutor. As one the proto-godlings sighed with relief. “Unlabeled Moments are rare, and this is one of the oldest of them. Intelligent beings find themselves pulled here. The fabric of the galaxy causes this to happen, but does not explain itself. Not knowing the real reason, they

look around and latch onto whatever explanation seems plausible. They routinely err in their theories, reifying their mistakes, and leaving them for others to build upon. Open your perceptions to this place, sort through the stories and confusions. Who can tell me when this Moment really began, and why?”

A century passed, and then another. The proto-godlings conferred, and as a group thrust their youngest member forward with an answer.

“The mark on the surface,” he said. “A physical being stood there, long ago.”

“That’s right,” said their tutor. “And the galaxy has chosen to preserve that imprint. But why? Of all the races that have grown to sapience and entered space, why is this one significant?”

The proto-godlings conferred again. They allocated resources among themselves, exploring the intervening ages an instant at a time. Such was their power that they relived the communications, the delusions, the misperceptions of every sapient mind that had occupied this locus back to the very beginning of the Moment. They concluded nothing and once again pushed the youngest forward.

“I don’t know,” he said, trembling in anticipation of the tutor’s wrath.

“And you cannot inherit this galaxy until you do,” she said. “Now pay close attention.

“When the galaxy was young, an intelligent species evolved on one of this solar system’s planets. They developed the means to leave their world. This standing place that you have identified, is where they paused. Who they were, whatever else they accomplished is lost to us.”

The youngest, the most precocious of them, manifested an image that might have been a child of the species that had first stood here. “Tutor, I do not understand. There are other lost species. Many others left their worlds before another species came to them first. What is so special about this one that it caused a Moment to occur?”

“They believed themselves alone in the universe, and yet set forth to prove themselves wrong,” she said. “They turned away from everything they knew, to experience what they could not know. This Moment is not because they stood here.”

“What then?”

“When one takes a step, it is possible to step back. In fact, it is a common occurrence.” She paused to draw their attention. “That’s not what happened here.”

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The proto-godlings peered at the footprint, tunneling past the perceptions and experiences of all the other beings that the Moment had drawn to this locus.

“I still do not understand, Tutor. Why then is this a Moment?”

With a sprinkling of light rain the tutor gathered her charges around her, smiling through the hydrogen of her words.

“This is where they jumped off.”