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EPIPHANY

Rodney Brooks's colleagues at MIT
assumed robots had to be stable
but he watched a film of insects
tripping, colliding, dropping food—
making mistakes
so he built Gangus, an android
that behaved like an ant
scrambling, falling—rectifying errors

Brooks began programming robots
with sequenced feedback loops
building complexity upon simpler forms
because evolution really only tinkers
developing cleverly
on that which came before
rarely producing the best design

the vertebrate eye being so flawed
that the retinal neurons face backward
as if we're looking into our brains
light toils through a confusion
of light-degrading capillaries
before it's even detected
then redirected through layers of retina
to the optic nerve where it's then sent back
and processed for inversion and blindspots—
a pinball machine of misengineering

in Pirsig's analogy of this evolution
with that of societies
neither is seamless
they advance in ratchetlike steps
and these dynamic advances
need shielding static patterns—
vulnerable DNA, to survive and evolve
needs a protective shell of protein—

as an idea, to advance, needs a skull
or a book with a cover
sheltered by a library
defended by a weapons-bearing
organised society
analogous to the symbiotic relationship
between conservative and liberal
vital to the survival of any culture
for without dynamic quality
an organism or society will not grow
and without static quality
an organism or society cannot last

two pinecones spinning in tandem
is what a millwright saw in his mind
as he ground coffee one morning
so he carved his idea into cone-shaped bits
carried them into a Shreveport bar
and happened upon Howard Hughes Sr.
other riggers scoffed at the model
Hughes bought it—perfected it
and tore into oil deemed invulnerable
mutating the industrial age
for genius—like evolution
really only trifles too
ever building upon prior forms, ideas
in science as well as art

when Hughes Jr. watched the first film
to win a Best Picture Oscar
he felt he could do better
and spent part of his father's fortune
making *Hell's Angels*
a film that would influence Kubrick
just as Lucas's cinematography
was conceived of Kubrick's work
but like crudely carved models of rotary-bits
a work of brilliance is rarely deemed such
upon its conception—
and when Lucas's friends screened *Star Wars*
everyone was aghast at how bad it was
except for Spielberg
who said it would triumph

(no one believed him)
too when Cézanne unveiled his paintings
people laughed
impressionism, rococo, baroque
all derogatory terms
but genius recognises talent
and Hemingway said he wanted to write
like Cézanne painted
said a person could do this
if they lived right with their eyes
he wanted readers to live what he wrote
and some did
further tangling the cobwebs
of art and history
for in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*
Robert Jordon thought a single bridge
the point at which humanity might turn
and so too perhaps a book
for Engels deciphered the French economy
by reading Balzac's novels
and after Castro read Engels
he studied *For Whom the Bell Tolls*
and used what he'd learned
to fight Batista's troops in the Sierra Maestra

dynamic ideas precede sudden change
(mutations for good or ill)
for an odd mistress is genius
bestowing her gifts
on angels and demons alike
but civilization and knowledge
make little progress outside conflict
and those who advance science, art, society
are, at the start, deemed criminal—
threats to the status quo
throughout history hung, burned, crucified
and so prone to self-destruction
and these fates of the brilliant
are analogous to the most able societies
where the jevons effect and the diderot effect
bore south adjacent
in a deadly anthropogenic grinding—
cultures enacting the story of Cain

and when Cain confronts Abel
 only transmutation or death result
 as when the Tuppan Basse mutated
 after Peter Carder washed ashore
 a Tycho Monolith fallen from heaven—
 invited to help them attack the Tapwees
 he taught them to fashion battleshields
 the result was a slaughter
 changing the nature of Brazilian warfare
 a single sprout from the seed of Europe
 planted by Columbus
 and during the festival of the god Lono—
 James Cook sailed into Kealakekua Bay
 and seeing the *Resolution's* white sails
 slapping across her spars
 the astonished natives
 enclosed the ship in adulation
 thinking it Lono himself
 come to bestow his blessings
 (they were wrong)
 and when Nicholas Roosevelt was a boy
 fishing on Minetta Brook
 he watched a millwheel churn the water
 and wondered if it could push a boat—
 decades later he steered the *New Orleans*
 down the Mississippi
 the Indians thought it a god to destroy them
 (they were correct)
 as with the fate of the Tuppan Basse
 the leftover smears on Van Gogh's pipe
 blue, green, and yellow—
 by the time Darwin arrived on the *Beagle*
 the Spanish were exterminating them
 and he thought to himself
 that when races met
 they acted like species of animals
 fighting, cannibalising, trading diseases
 but then came the more lethal struggle—
 which ethnicity was better organised

two such epiphanies I had
 one, sitting on my grandfather's bed
 looking out the window at birds

as he explained their song as not music
but a series of warnings and threats—
I felt for days
that someone had kicked me
then—long after his death
I'd come home from work
and unlocking the door to that same room
I heard a thud and looked down—
a squirrel had fallen
it lay in the grass stunned, motionless
white belly toward the sky
then it shook, looked this way and that
flipped to its feet
and darted up the same tree—
I'd not known such mistakes to happen
but we don't learn so much
from those things we do correctly
so perhaps it's best we see poorly
through our misconstructured eyes—
for El Greco's work was astigmatic
and Van Gogh said he saw better squinting
seeing stars and sunflowers different
seeing wheatfields askew

