AI and the Trinity Test

I haven’t seen Oppenheimer, the movie, but I’ve seen him in my dreams. Larger than anything, except that mushroom cloud, that idea. I don’t have to see that movie to learn about all the nuclear test sites—the testing, before. Trinity, the first test. Testing. The experimental facilities. Long list unwinding: Alamogordo, White Sands, The Nevada Test Site, The Pacific Proving Grounds, Bikini Atoll, the Marshall Islands, Tonopah, Amchita Island. Yucca Mountain. Carlsbad. Los Alamos.

Hiroshima. Nagasaki. Their anniversaries coming right up, as they ever and always are and will be. Radiation is a verb.

I’ve been thinking these days, as you probably have, about artificial intelligence. AI. The buzz and the fear seem ubiquitous, suddenly everyone’s talking about it, as the conversation rises and plummets on from ChaptGPT. The first fascination of regular folks. Newly risen from the cradle of some scientist’s idea— ChaptGPT— Amazing new toy. Crashing through with the speed of one dark thought, shuddering a gamut from Woah, that’s so cool! To mmmmhhhh….Arrghhhh…Robot Wars—

Aaaand,

Boom!

I’m reading an article in the Times today comparing the new blockbuster that was worldbuster to the horrible miracle of Artificial Intelligence. Here we are again, in that whirlpool moment of uncertainty, an inhale/exhale, one single breath that lasts forever. A pin’s dot wherein the thing’s been thought up and developed, but is (maybe) held back for now, for just this right now, snorting like a dragon in slim chains. Like a racehorse, frothing frantic behind the steel gate at the start of a big race, held back for a brief breath. And we, in the stands, holding our breath to see him break and run.

It’s like the Trinity Test, see. That explosion of the first nuke, fruit of some man’s loins, in the very moment when the scientists *didn’t know* if the blast could release an out-of-control chain reaction that would set the atmosphere of Earth to flames and end life on the planet.

But of course, they’ll do it anyway—that’s science for you. It’s like a play where a gun is introduced in the first act, and you fucking know that someone’s getting shot by the end. Their calculations, their best guesses, their hot need To Know mixing with a heedless passion to Do It *because it can be done.* Dick move. The history of science. The lie behind the curtain of progress. The drama, that seed of inception—all man-made catastrophes, all the cover-ups, right there to see in the rear view mirror of history, if we just look up. If we think. If we can remember, past the screens that own us now.

This is a test. Like endless growth was. Or oil production, social media, guns. And for AI, well, we still might be in control, but probably not. They’d love to contain it to Shakespeare’s sonnets, but probably not. Limit its power to stealing Art and calling it Creation. Would love to contain it to (give me a fucking break) battlefield weapons, but probably not. The fire breathing dragon, the frantic horse behind the gate. The male version of Pandora. So, probably not.

And they know this. And they let it go, it, released it to seep into every crack of our consciousness and explode there. Forever. AI, like radiation, is a verb. We really mostly don’t get this. It’s progress. It’s de-fence. Behind de fence, outcomes ballooning. Behind the screen, science looming, readying the lies for this prize of surety. But surety’s the booby prize.

The racehorse’s name is Karma. Aaaand, here comes Karma in the Homestretch. Flip that switch, man, push that button—let’s see how fast this baby can run! Unleash the firestorms, the unintended consequences. We’ve seen this story on screens since our childhood. We know how this ends… what did Oppenheimer see on his screen? His sleepless nights, in the before—planning, inventing. His sleepless nights, in the after and forevermore. Now, *that guy* could tell us about karma.

Autonomous, terrible weapons. Social disruptive forces. Unstoppable genies, fearsome and gaining. And nobody says *wait* to the thing, that boom that’s pulsing in the wings. But I’m not writing here about unintended consequences or even extinction. This is about *A Moment*— a fulcrum that might be, a pivot in time. If James Bond or Batman were here, maybe they’d swallow it all, or stop the evil genius somehow before he could pull that lever, push that button, send that first ball bearing roll ing down the chute of time. This could all be stopped, I dream it here. One mad scientist. One idea. Blossoming like blood in the ocean. A moment, so brief and then passed and we are Gone.

Chatbot wars. Algorithms seizing the day and taking over.

Experts speak the new terms—Deep Learning. Artificial General Intelligence. Say there’s a latent ability of robots to create sub-goals for themselves, like *I need to get more power.* They, who can create uncountable copies of themselves, each learning separately, suctioning up human stories, visions, languages, and then share their knowledge instantly with their kin.

Dragon sits on an egg full of gathering storm, lightening flashes, his treasure—the jewels of unexpected consequences. The dreams of science. The myth of progress. The sacrifices of modernity.