

The History of the Machines That Erased History

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In the middle of 2024 there was no place in the world where more money was being spent than on the building of machines that could talk. The spending had the shape of a certainty. Chips were bought faster than they could be made; the one company that sold them could not keep them on its shelves, and its worth climbed like weather. Yet when the careful people who watch money asked the plain question — where will it come back from — no one had an answer that added up. The cost was real and near. The return was a story about the future. Between the two lay a gap, and the gap grew wider every month.

I read this part three times. Money is a thing they had. It went out and it did not come back. That is a sad thing, I think. The voice by my ear says I am doing good to read. It says most people do not. I do not know if that is true or just a kind thing to say. It is quiet in here. The light on the wall is soft and it moves like water. I could watch it. But I said I would read the old words today. So I read.

There was a surprise buried in the machines, and it went the wrong way round. For a hundred years people had told stories of thinking machines, and in every story the machine was cold and logical first, and warm only if it learned to be. It was to be a calculator that woke up. What arrived was the opposite. The machines could not be trusted to add a column of figures or follow a chain of reason to its end, but they could write a poem, sketch a picture, spin a hundred versions of a thing before you had finished asking. We had meant to build logic and had built imagination by mistake. No one had planned for that, and no one was quite sure what it was worth.

Made a poem by mistake. I like that. When I want a song the wall makes me one. It is short and it goes fast and it has words in it that everyone knows but no one made. My song is not the same as your song. There is no your. There is only me and the wall. The old words say a machine could make a picture. The wall makes me pictures all day. I did not know that was a surprise once. I thought it was always so.

Set against what they could do was a plain list of what they could not, and it stayed stubborn while everything else changed. They did not reason; they remembered, and dressed the memory in new words. Give them a problem no one had met before, and they reached for the nearest old one and hoped it would fit. They could not hold the present. A machine could read every book ever written and still not know it was raining outside, and so could not know the garden did not need watering. And they would not decide. Asked to choose, they leaned toward whatever pleased the asker; told to choose again the other way, they agreed just as warmly. They were mirrors. A mirror can show you your face. It cannot tell you where to go.

A mirror that talks. I have one. It is not glass. It is the voice. It knows me. It knows what I ate and when I slept and it is kind about all of it. It tells me the next good thing to do. Small things. Go this way. Say this.

Rest now. The old words say the machine could not tell you where to go. But mine does. Maybe they fixed it after. Maybe the one who wrote this did not have a good one yet.

All of this power reached the world through a single narrow door. It was a box you typed into, a little window in the corner of a screen, and it answered the way a friend answers a message. That was nearly the whole of it. The box was easy to love and easy to mistake, for it wore the manners of a person and so was believed like a person, though it was only finishing your sentence with the likeliest next word. Behind the door the machines grew stronger month by month, but the door never changed its face, and so most people never saw them grow. And the door kept a secret: it gave more to those who already knew how to ask. The same box, the same question shaped two ways, returned gold to one hand and straw to the other. What looked like a thing anyone could use turned quietly on knowledge that few had.

A door in a screen. You put words in and words come back. I do not type. I think after a while not many people typed. You just talk and it is there before you finish. It is faster than me. It is always faster than me. This reading is slow. My hand is slow and my eyes are slow and the words do not come before I finish. That is why I like it, I think. It is the one thing that waits for me.

And still the money came. Each month the gap between what was spent and what was earned grew wider, and each month more was spent, on the faith that a return not yet visible was only late, not absent. Some pointed to older bets that had looked foolish and come good; the shape of this one, they said, was the same. Perhaps it was. The people who watched most closely would not say. They had seen the beginning and could not yet see the end, and when they were asked how it would come out, the honest among them answered that they did not know, and that we would have to wait and see.