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The Wind Bloweth Where It Listeth

CHARLES PORTIS

THE EDITORS are spiking most of my copy now, unread. One has described it as “hopeless crap.” My master’s degree means nothing to this pack of half-wits at the *Blade*. My job is hanging by a thread. But Frankie, an assistant city editor, is not such a bad boss and it was she who, out of the blue, gave me this choice assignment. I was startled. A last chance to make good?

Frankie said, “Get some bright quotes for a change, okay? Or make some up. Not so much of your dreary exposition. Not so many clauses. Get to the point at once. And keep it short for a change, okay? Now, buzz on out to the new Pecking Center on Warehouse Road, near the Loopdale Cutoff. Scoot. Take the brown Gremlin. But check the water in the radiator!”

An introductory word or two on the subject at hand will not be out of place before we come to the exciting work now going forward inside the new Hazel Perkins Jenkins Pecking Center at 75002 Warehouse Road, near the Loopdale Cutoff.

Readers of the *Blade* will recall an old theory/prophecy that went as follows: a hundred monkeys pecking away at random on a hundred typewriters will eventually reproduce the complete works of William Shakespeare. The terms may be a little dated, what with the typewriters, and that modest round number, meant to suggest something like “many,” or even “infinite.” And one monkey, of course, would suffice, given enough time and an immortal monkey. In any case, the chance duplication would require the monkeys—let us say a brigade of monkeys—to peck out 38 excellent plays and some 160 poems of one metrical beat or another.

Is the musty old prophecy at last being fulfilled? We now have millions of monkeys pecking away more or less at random, day and night, on millions of personal computer keyboards. We have “word processors,” the Internet, e-mail, and “the information explosion.” Futurists at our leading universities tell us the day is at hand when, out of this maelstrom of words, a glorious literature must emerge, and indeed flourish.

So far, however, as of today, Tuesday, September 14, late afternoon, the tally still seems to be fixed at:

Shakespeare: 198, Monkeys: 0

They plead for more time, for just one more extension. And then another. We are all familiar with their public-service announcements on television in which they make these irritating appeals.

Perhaps the goal has been set too high. Let us then leave the Bard for a moment and look at some even more disturbing numbers, from UNESCO's ten-year world survey (1994–2004) of not very good plays written in blank verse, and not very good sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, elegies, and odes. The result:

Not very good blank verse plays, sonnets, etc.: 219,656

That figure was widely reported and has not been seriously disputed. Less well known—hardly known at all—is this tidbit, which was buried deep in the appendix of the thick UNESCO volume:

Not very good odes, blank verse plays,
etc., composed by monkeys: 0

So again, nothing, no blip of art from random pecking, good or bad, nor even of proto-art, unless one counts the humming, haunting, and hypnotic page of z's which turned up last year in Paris. Never much taken with Shakespeare themselves, the French await the appearance and reappearance of their own Francophone glories. They wait for art to happen. Their central clearing house has been established in Marseilles, at the international headquarters of Peckers Without Borders.

As for the recent American commotion over the DeWitt Sheets affair, it has largely and mercifully subsided. Young Sheets, the *Blade* reader will recall, is the Memphis tyke, four years of age and illiterate, who was said to have pecked out with his tiny tapered fingers, uncoached, on a personal computer,

this complete line from one of the three weird sisters in the tragedy of *Macbeth*: “And, like a rat without a tail, I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do.”

It was complete even to Shakespeare’s rather excessive punctuation. The Sheets woman, mother of DeWitt, later made a full, weeping confession to the fraud. Later still, alleging coercion, she recanted. She insists once again that DeWitt alone hit on the rat line. The woman is currently reported to be traveling about the country in a small car with young Sheets. She presents him on stage in his little professor’s rig—gown, mortarboard—at state fairs and rock concerts, where he recites selected passages from time-honored soliloquies.

Now, without more ado, we come to the amazing new enterprise out on Warehouse Road, near the Loopdale Cutoff, where organized ape-pecking has finally arrived in our town—with bells on! In a *Blade* exclusive, I can take *Blade* readers inside the strange writing factory, to which I gained immediate entry with a flourish of my *Blade* press card. The “line chief,” a sort of superintendent, was favorably impressed by the card, stupefied even, by the legal-looking scrollwork and the sunburst seal, which seems to radiate some terrifying powers of the state. He granted me full floor privileges.

I spoke there on Tuesday with some of the monkeys. Row upon row, they were ranged about at their pecking stands, in a high, open, oblong room, something like a gymnasium. The first one I approached, actually a surly mandrill, said, “Beat it. Can’t you see I’m pecking?” The line chief came scuttling over to suggest that I put off all interviews until the mid-morning break.

I wandered around in my socks. This shoeless, padding-about policy had to do with preserving quiet, rather than from any Oriental sense of delicacy. Eavesdropping is a big part of my trade (I hold a master’s degree in tale-bearing from one of the better Ivy League schools), but I saw no opportunities here. All was pecking with this crew, or a furious clicking.

White placards were posted along the walls exhorting the monkeys to STAY IN YOUR SEATS! PLEASE! At the upper end of the long room, on a dais, a string quartet was playing, softly,

a medley of Sousa marches. Above the musicians, high on the wall, there was an oil portrait of the poet and billionaire widow herself, Mrs. Hazel Perkins Jenkins, in her signature white turban. She smiles down on her workshop monkeys.

Mrs. Perkins Jenkins is, of course, their patroness. All of these Pecking Centers—thirty-seven, to date, nationwide—are lavishly funded by the Hazel Perkins Jenkins Foundation for the Arts, in Seattle. She is a widow many times over. Of her five husbands, all rich and all now dead, only one, Jenkins, professed any love for—or even the slightest interest in—poetry. After his death she was saddened to learn, on flipping through his diaries, that Jenkins himself had been faking the passion all along. “I don’t get it,” he had confessed, in a number of entries. “But then men were deceivers ever,” she said, taking the disappointment in stride. “Poor Jenkins, yes, it now seems that he too had a tin ear, but he was only trying to please me. He had his quirks, as we all know.” This was a vague reference to the declining days of Jenkins, when he annoyed ladies on city buses as he roamed aimlessly around Seattle.

There, in the drizzle of Puget Sound, atop the Foundation’s south tower, is the famous Shakespeare Countdown Clock, some thirty feet in diameter. The minute hand stands, or appears to be standing, at eight minutes before midnight—and The New Day. A few veteran observers say they can perceive constant, unbroken movement of the hand, though conceding it to be slight.

As it happened, I was looking at my own watch when, at 10:15 sharp, the musicians stopped their scraping abruptly in mid-passage, and there came two blasts from a Klaxon horn. I gave a start and an involuntary and embarrassing little chirp of alarm. It was the morning break. The peckers rose as one and stepped away from their stations. Heads thrown back, mouths agape, they squirted soothing drops of balm into their eyes. They flexed their simian fingers and twisted their necks about. They performed a few side-straddle hops in unison.

Trolley carts appeared, laden with bananas, grapes, and assorted nuts, less than fifty percent peanuts. There were small club sandwiches, crustless and elegant, and pitchers of organic fruit juices.

These monkeys were, for the most part, good-natured little fellows, proud of their work and eager to talk about it. They are paid, I learned, by the "swatch," this being a standard print-out sheet densely spattered with letters of the alphabet, numerals, and the various punctuation symbols. The peckers are penalized (token fine) for leaving spaces between the characters, and rewarded (token bonus) when one of their swatches, seen from a little distance, gives the appearance of a near-solid block of ink, similar to *The Congressional Record*.

Their work is transmitted instantly to Seattle, where it is given intense scrutiny, line by line. And there is a redundancy arrangement to insure that nothing pecked is ever quite lost, into the void. For backup swatches are also printed out in the local Pecking Centers, then gathered, compressed, and bound into bales, like cotton. These monstrous, cubic haikus are shipped out weekly, air freight, to the Foundation's 2A Clearing House, which is a hangar leased from the Boeing company.

It is there that the American pecking harvest undergoes a final scanning, in the search for words and coherent snatches of language. A long white banner hangs across the cavernous work bay, reading, THE WIND BLOWETH WHERE IT LISTETH. The scanners, known as "swatch auditors," are 720 elderly men in baseball caps. They work in three shifts around the clock. They are paid well and seated comfortably on inflated doughnut cushions.

During breaks the auditors play harmless pranks on one another. These antics once caught the indulgent eye of Mrs. Perkins Jenkins, who was looking on from an observation gallery, and thereby hangs the tale of how her most celebrated poem, and by far her shortest one, "just popped into my head." It was not, that is, fabricated. The two stanzas simply came to her, suddenly and all of a piece, complete with title, "The Levity of Old Men." She dictated the words to her secretary at once, before they could evaporate. Such was the origin of this gem of the modern anthologies, and thus the grand old lady's unwavering trust in her muse.

My interviews went well enough until I came upon another touchy mandrill, Red Kilgore by name, as I could see by the prism nameplate on his pecking stand. He had been watching me, glowering.

"So," he said. "What is this thing you have about monkeys?"

"Well, I do, you know, associate monkeys with chattering and gibbering and shrieking."

"You don't approve of chattering?"

"I approve of chatting."

"Cute distinction. Do you find me gibbering now?"

"Not at all, no. But there on your screen, just a minute ago, I did see something that appeared to be, excuse me, gibberish."

"How many of our swatches have you actually read?"

"Some. A few. I extrapolate freely, of course. Like poll takers. It's an accepted practice."

"I suppose you think all that stuff you churn out at your paper is a lot better than the stuff we churn out here."

"Well, it is better, yes. But then we still use typewriters at the *Blade*."

"Say what?"

"Manual typewriters. They don't hum at you like the electric ones. And the ribbons are cheaper."

"But *typewriters*."

"They give you black words fixed hard on white paper."

"And that's good in some way?"

"Good enough. There are critics who say that things written with quivering cathode rays on greenish luminescent tubes have a different tone altogether. A loose, thin, garrulous feel."

"Tone. Feel. You seem to be saying to me that all those old Smith-Coronas in your office are so many Stradivaris."

"We use Underwoods and Royals."

"When will this report of yours be in the paper?"

"Tomorrow, with any luck."

"Will my name be in it?"

"Yes."

"On what page?"

"I don't know."

"What will the headline say? So I don't have to wade through all the other junk."

"Again, not my department. Probably something like 'Monkey Business.'"

"Look here, I know I'm wasting my breath, but let me try to explain something. Are you familiar with the law of large numbers?"

"That law, no, it doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, the idea is that a great many little uncertainties—a long series of coin-flippings, say—will miraculously add up to one big certainty. You will get half heads and half tails."

"How does that apply?"

"Order from disorder, you see. The moving finger of grace, unseen."

"Then you are in the disorder business here."

"We are in the volume business, sir. Moving product. And allow me to tell you this, that a certain brute quantity can attain a special quality all its own. We are not the least bit interested in your old elitist notion of writing as some sort of algebra."

"But Red, listen to yourself. Here you are speaking to me in that algebra."

"Not for long. Vamoose."

My article—this article—was much longer. Two editors slashed away on it, turn and turn about. But it was not spiked. What remained, now somewhat garbled, was actually set in type and scheduled to appear in the Sunday feature section. I was delighted. On Friday, however, the *Blade* went broke and out of business. There was no Sunday edition. Neither was there any money left for our final salary checks, let alone severance pay.

The closing out was poorly managed, overall. A scrap-iron dealer hauled away our typewriters. They were flung into his dump truck from a third-floor window of the city room. Even some of our clothes were seized, with the lawyers for the bank declaring them to be "workplace specific apparel, i.e., company uniforms, and as such, *Blade* assets." Can you imagine—making off with the old coats and ties and *shoes* of newspaper people? Frankie retaliated by stealing the blue Gremlin and keeping it hidden under a tarpaulin in some woods until the legal dust had settled. It was the pick of the litter. The blue one still had two or three hubcaps. It had come to this pass then, with the *Blade's* ancient flotilla of Gremlins, once so jaunty, and always great favorites of the crowd when they cruised down Main Street in attack formation with the floats and fire trucks of city parades. Frankie picks me up every weekday morning at 7:40 in that blue car. She gives five or six impatient toots of the horn, when one light toot would do. We

are both working now as peckers, level three, at the Pecking Center on Warehouse Road, not far from the Loopdale Cutoff, and happily so, I may say. The sheer abandon of it all. A revelation. I had no idea. The joy of writing in torrents. In swatches! By the bale! My master of arts degree means nothing at all to these monkeys and I have come to share their indifference. Red Kilgore was on to something. There is much to be said as well for the largesse of Mrs. Hazel Perkins Jenkins.

At odd moments, Frankie and I will pause in our work and look each other full in the face, then break out laughing again, over our old nonsense of writing by design. All that misplaced striving. We laugh till our eyes water up. Ever bold, Frankie said her formal goodbye to artifice some weeks ago, and this, today, is mine. We may have another little announcement quite soon.