

# MONKEYS

*Prose by any other name.*

BY KEN LIU

Ted and Kathy stared at the chaotic scene through the bars of the cage. A large, male macaque monkey about two feet tall screeched and lifted the typewriter — a 1953, lime green Olivetti Lettera 22 — over his head. He stood still for a second like a weight-lifter, and then threw the machine hard against the ground. It clattered on the dirt floor, keys and platen jangling, and came to rest with the sequence “jl,dykb nvcxliuear cx,juoun2 ep89 xadl” on the sheet of paper.

Kathy’s hands covered her mouth. She blew out a breath. “At least we now have our first keystrokes.”

Ted just shook his head.

Two smaller males approached the typewriter. One jumped up and down on the keys: “cx,juoun2 ep89 xadl.” The other watched, and then decided to defecate into the curved bowl formed by the type bars.

“Well, Professor Emroche isn’t going to want *that* typewriter back,” Kathy said, after recovering from the initial shock. Then she started to laugh. The monkeys stopped to stare at her, which only made her laugh harder.

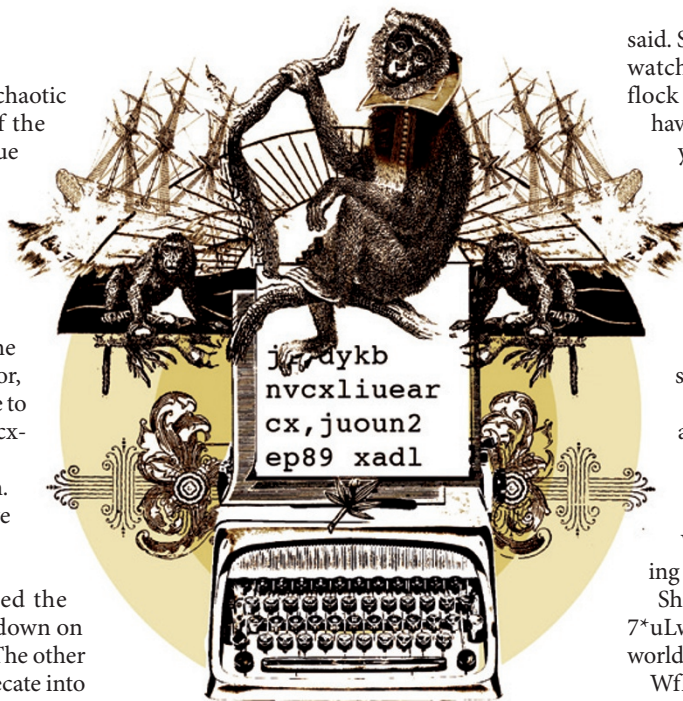
Ted shook his head again.

The ‘Monkey Shakespeare’ project was an interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities and the science departments. But after a short clip of the monkeys pooping into the typewriter was circulated online, everyone began to distance themselves from it.

“We don’t really think there’s much *science* in a project like this,” said Professor Kun of the Department of Computer Science. “That old chestnut about an infinite number of monkeys banging on an infinite number of typewriters is just a thought experiment. You should really ask the literature people what they’re trying to accomplish with this.”

“This is obviously not how we envisage the future study of *literature*,” said Professor Emroche of the Department of American and English Language and Literature. “We already have the works of Shakespeare, so why would we want monkeys reproducing it by chance? You should really talk to the biology people about what they are trying to get out of it.”

In the end, Ted and Kathy, undergraduate assistants who had yet to declare their majors



and who had signed on to feed the monkeys, became the only names attached to the project. The students felt like orphans. No one wanted to claim responsibility for them.

They decided to treat the project as a piece of performance art.

After a while, the monkeys stopped abusing the typewriter. They mainly left it alone during the day, like a toy they found boring. But once in a while, one or a group of them would come by and bang on the keys until they grew tired of it again. Ted and Kathy stopped by several times a day to swap out filled pages for fresh ones.

Kathy flipped through the stack of typescript they had collected, examining each like a puzzle.

“There’s a word!” she said.

Ted looked at where she was pointing. Amid a full page of jumbled letters, a sequence of four stood out like a bright diamond: “734q9u8opfuiou wise djk;we897d78.”

Ted sighed. “It took the monkeys 5 days to produce 25 pages, and we have one word. At this rate, we aren’t going to have much to show by the end of the semester. Not much of an art project.”

“You’re missing the point about art,” Kathy

said. She threw the papers up in the air and watched them drift to the ground like a flock of pigeons. “It’s not about what you have to show, but how you interpret what you have.”

“How would you interpret this?”

“It shows just how rare order is in this random universe we live in. It shows how art is precious and miraculous. It shows the true measure of Shakespeare’s genius.”

Ted laughed. “Yeah, that B. S. sounds pretty good.”

“It’s the viewer who gives meaning to art,” Kathy said, laughing as well. “Just like it’s the reader who gives meaning to the book.”

Wflq rushed into the Eqqlb, gesticulating wildly.

She waved a sheaf of papers in front of 7\*uLw, who asked her calmly what in the world was the matter with her.

Wflq was too excited to speak coherently. It took a while before 7\*uLw finally understood that her experiment had finally yielded some results. In one of the infinite number of universes that she had been observing, the native creatures had finally produced something worthy of notice.

Although the natives who dominated that world seemed to bang on keyed machines randomly all the time, this time they had allowed some other creatures — deemed inferior by them for some reason — to use one of their machines. These ‘lesser’ creatures immediately produced the most beautiful poetry that the universe had ever created. Out of the babbling, random chaos that made up almost all the symbolic output of that world, this new string stood out like a clear voice in the wilderness.

But tragically, the natives of that universe did not seem to understand what they had. Wflq had to rescue a great piece of art.

Here’s how the masterpiece began: “jl,dykb nvcxliuear cx,juoun2 ep89 xadl ‘...’”

As they read, Wflq and 7\*uLw fell in rapture. The beauty of the language overwhelmed them.

Translated into our language, the book Wflq produced started this way:

*Boatswain!*

*Here, master: what cheer? ■*

Ken Liu lives and writes in Massachusetts. You can read more of his fiction at <http://kenliu.name/stories>.

JACEY