

# THE MONKEY'S RIBBON

by Gottschalk

(Note: This story was originally published in the Winter 2004 issue of *Pangolin Papers*.)

Perhaps I will be gone, and they'll unhinge  
The doors, dismantle all the locks and turn  
The man keys into monkeys, then perhaps  
I'll still be here, and they'll come in with their  
Weapons drawn and find me at the typewrit-  
er

Weapons drawn and find me at the keyboard (do I mean typewriter or piano?)

It's no use. Iambic pentameter just won't do for such an unheroic end. If it is the end--perhaps it's only an unheroic middle, if you can have a heroic middle, where traditionally the complications arise. By middle, I don't mean torso. Of course you can have a heroic torso. I don't intend to pun. My mind lacks discipline.

This is my record, middle or end, undone by the cruel tricks of two cruel women and feeling like a beetle in a wine glass. Perhaps insects, not monkeys should have been my theme, the insignificant insect male. But no, monkeys I've kenned and monkeys I'll keep.

I made it to the stretch of grass beyond the sidewalk today. If I manage to go, I'll leave this behind as my brief explanation. The things I need to explain--my wife, her co-worker, my poems, my house and my preoccupation with monkeys all will be addressed, undressed and redressed. But this pramble is neither beginning nor end. So--

I have a prehensile scalp. . . Well, that is not, strictly speaking, a correct use of the term 'prehensile', which means 'to grasp', from the Latin *prehendere*--as certain New World monkeys including the howler monkey have tails which they can wrap around a tree branch and which will support their full body weight. It is a common misconception that all monkeys have this feature, this extra limb, but that is not so; prehensile tails are exclusive to New World monkeys. Though Old World monkeys, those inhabiting Asia and Africa do have muscle and bone in their tails, their

tails are weak; they are used strictly for balance. All monkeys, though, and apes, too, for that matter, have four hands--their hind limbs end in hands, with opposable thumbs, a feature we humans left behind long ago, though Harry Houdini could untie complicated knots in ropes with his toes. My scalp simply moves--it would be overly grotesque to claim that it can grasp things; of course it cannot. But it ripples across my head moving my entire crop of hair and causing it to look like a bad toupee slipping off. My wife, Sheila, has forbade me to move it in her presence, so I must exercise these muscles in solitude.

Which of late I have plenty of. Perhaps I never meant to mention my scalp at all, perhaps I meant to talk about monkeys, which have been on my mind of late. Last night, as I lay sleeping alone in bed--Sheila had been gone for the whole weekend--last night was Monday--one even crept into my dream. I was standing at the window, moonlight bluing the room, when a noise set the walls of our house, all of them, vibrating like drumheads. I slowly made my way downstairs to the lower front of the house, diagonally opposite the bedroom's upper back, where the living room and just off it the small den were dimly illuminated in sickly yellow from the streetlight just outside. The living room was empty. Empty of living creatures but for me, that is. I went to the doorway of the den which was strangely shut; I was alone in the house, I had not shut it, I had not even been in the den, for the poem I was working on was going badly. I grasped the knob. It was not locked. I opened the door. The window in the room was wide open, and through it a summer breeze entered the room tentatively, not cool, but not unpleasant. The window screen sat on the floor, leaning against the wall directly below its former setting. And sitting upon the large, old, black Royal typewriter upon which I painfully type out the love poems for my wife, was a large South American howler monkey. His coat appeared to be red-orange, though in the awful light it was hard to tell. He stared at me for a long silent moment, then opened his mouth wide. I feared another great noise like the one that had shaken the house, but he was only yawning. Then he reached down, long black fingernails on his hand-paw, took, in a rather surprisingly delicate gesture, the ribbon in the typewriter and pulled it out. He kept pulling until there was but a black snarly tangle of inky, staining cloth on the floor. When he was finished, he jumped up and egressed through the window. I ran to the window and jumped out after him, then I awoke, falling to the floor, wrapped in a straitjacket of sheet, striking my shoulder painfully on the floor. The dream was so vivid that I unwrapped myself immediately and went downstairs; the door to the den was wide open, the screen was in the window, the typewriter unmolested. Even so, I stole outside and stood below the monkey's window, and

there, to my confusion and consternation, I immediately noticed that Sheila's peonies were trampled almost beyond recognition. I examined them as closely as moon and streetlight allowed, but couldn't tell what had brought them to that mutilated state.

Tuesday morning. Again I am in the den, staring out the window. I am sick with time. Too much time, too little else, it withers me. When you have nothing to do, it is sweet for some time. Then, leisure becomes the worm in the apple of your skull. The true punishment of our first sin is work. To earn our bread by the sweat of our brow, that was the commandment, the burden, the separation of man from his maker--and in that moment, our maker did not just pass judgment upon us, no, He planted the need. If we were placed in the Garden of Eden right now, and the Garden were infinite and everything we wanted we had, we would be full of sorrow, because the need that was planted in our heads, our bodies, and our souls is there, and it is the need to work. Of course I take care of the house, of course I wash each thing that needs to be washed, flat surfaces and curved, the cloth, wood, porcelain, glass, steel and silver. I prepare the meals from her menu, according to instruction. But all of that is simply a wheel that turns automatically, with no effort, endlessly, its center rotting as I get older.

I am a prisoner in my own home. When most people say that, they mean it figuratively, such as "I feel like a prisoner in. . .", or it is qualified; "I may as well have been a prisoner. . .". But I assure you I mean it quite literally. I am held here. It is not by some mental weakness, or irrational fear, or any other circumstance; my wife is keeping me as her prisoner. Eighteen months ago, she received a promotion at the bank, and with it came a large salary increase. On that day, she assumed all of the financial responsibilities in our unremarkable and not, in any terms or definitions, extravagant life. I left my job to custodialize the house, and to write her love poems, one of which she expects on every odd day of the month, when she is here, that is, which makes December, January, July and August especially burdensome. I am not allowed to leave the house; she does all of the shopping and any other errand that would take one from the domicile, while I do all of the work within the house. She allows me outside to clean the windows, but while I perform that duty, she watches me closely from a collapsible plastic lawn chair, the kind with the long extension upon which she rests her legs. Now I'm denied even the empty labor of the poems, because Sheila is gone.

Friday night she strode from the house in a straight-cut black skirt, black stockings, a double breasted, waist-length black jacket, and red high heels. I wish I could say that time had stolen away her charms; I wish I could say she looked vaguely ridiculous, like someone unaware

that time has redrawn her features, but she actually looked quite striking. She is lean and hard, and I have grown rounder and smoother from inactivity. Not fat, no, I have not gotten fat, but time has erased some of the lines from my body while adding a few to my face. Her dark hair was pinned up; she did not turn around as she strode down the sidewalk, heels clicking like a tapping cane; she got into the car and drove away.

I was sad and frightened after she left; I do depend on her after all for everything; but now, in daylight, I feel determined to leave the house. I think Sheila will be gone for several more days. So I stand at the monkey's window and look out across the yard to the single large tree on our lot, and in front of that the square of bricks upon which rests our iron lawn furniture. A path of large stones leads up to the square; the furniture consists of a low table and four chairs. Though they look rather forbidding and austere, the black iron is not inviting, they are in fact quite comfortable, from what I remember. I haven't sat in one for a year. I imagine myself walking across the lawn, sitting on one of the chairs with a cup of coffee and a book; the book would be poetry, modern, Stevens or Eliot. I would finish my coffee and begin to walk away from the house. I imagine seeing the book and cup carefully placed on the table in a pleasing arrangement, a gesture of farewell. Sheila said nothing to me on Friday night. I stood in the doorway of her bedroom watching her change from the tweedy, dowdy, mannish business suit into the stylish clothes she left wearing. The business clothes seemed to augment her carriage and manner nicely, seemed to suit her more than the other outfit. I didn't mention that to her, of course. She smiled at me. Without, however, showing her teeth. If I could pretend that I weren't married, I could feel a sense of freedom, but in fact I still depend on her opinion of me. Indifference is freedom. The tooth of her smile is the locked door.

Monkeys have been on my mind of late. All animals are symbols, those that share our anatomical structure are symbols for what we have lost: spontaneous action without meditation, deep connection to nature, simplicity, the Garden of Eden. Monkeys and apes are exempted from that. Despite the romance of the animal kingdom, monkeys and apes continue to symbolize under-developed humanity. If you call a man a lion or bear, you are giving him a compliment, if you call a man an orang-utan, you are insulting him. Then when you think of the invertebrates you realize that they are always described as though they come from an alien world, but even that is deceptive. In the entire animal kingdom, the eye which in structure and function most closely resembles the human eye belongs to the octopus. Yet the spine continues to be even more the symbol of our humanity than the brain. And to say a man has a strong back once upon

a time meant that he was sexually virile.

Wednesday. Sheila has not returned. The last four days passed dream-like, some hours seemed to last a day, others, minutes. I turned on the television but didn't watch it, drank too much red wine on Sunday night, did laundry. I ask myself if I'm worried, but I'm too confused to answer, and the root of this confusion is the opportunity to leave the house which means my thoughts are more for me than they are for Sheila. I tried to work on the poem; it's a meager thing, only ten lines long, and I feel that to make it significant I should lengthen it out, but the thought is expressed, expounded, expostulated, exhausted and expired. It must be quite an insignificant thought to run its course in ten pentametric lines. Perhaps that was the significance of the dream, telling me I was a monkey slapping the typewriter keys. But what thoughts could I have, staring out the window and thinking of monkeys? Or should I say, what new thoughts? In short, I gave up before too long, and I have to admit that in Sheila's absence I stopped caring whether she would find the poem an unacceptable declaration of love. Instead, I put on my favorite hat, a stylish tan porkpie with a thin brim and stood in front of the bedroom mirror moving my scalp and watching my hat rock comically back and forth on my head. It cheered me up a little.

The doorbell rang around one o'clock. It had been so long since I heard that sound, that I didn't know what it was at first. I was in the kitchen eating a cheese sandwich; I swallowed a mouthful of milk, stood up and looked around the room. Not until the bell rang again and I looked at the small electric box screwed to the wall did I remember. I went to the front door and peered through the window. A woman unfamiliar to me stood on the porch wearing a grey tweed business suit, white blouse, round wire-rimmed glasses, hair pinned up. Her expression was unreadable, at least to me. I opened the door. Her expression changed, but it was still unreadable. She stood about a foot from the door, arms crossed over her chest which bunched up her jacket unattractively, and told me she was here to see Sheila. Her voice was a contralto that hummed in my ears annoyingly as though my eardrums were being tickled by pinpoints. Of course I told her that I hadn't seen Sheila since Friday night, but I'm sure I sounded hesitant, because I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to sound nonchalant or concerned, and it seemed from her posture that this woman already regarded me with some suspicion. I don't honestly remember whether I invited her in for a cup of coffee or something, or whether she invited herself in, but I do remember that she walked slowly through each room, living, kitchen, bath, stopping, in the den, to examine the lines on the typewriter that refused to expand:

When at night my wife's strong arms enfold me  
And dissolve the stony wall between  
Sweet dreams and thorny wakefulness, this clay  
Like dry ice sublimates--Spreading out to  
Release the barbs lodged in its nervous shell.  
When my thoughts are renegade and lock up  
The five open gates and shut my mind up  
In darkness and silence, one soft touch  
With a dreaming hand that beckons me towards  
Dreaming light lets all gates fall and bury thought.

Her only comment was that the poems was about me, not Sheila at all, a comment that revealed her ignorance of the literary arts.

After the tour, I made her a cup of tea without cream or sugar. She sat at the kitchen table, very erect, legs crossed, tapping her grounded foot very slowly. She asked me again if I had heard from my wife. I explained to her, as matter-of-factly as I could that Sheila often left the house for a few days without telling me where she was going, which wasn't altogether true--a single night had being the longest duration of her absences until now, but the woman relaxed a little, or at least seemed to, and asked if that bothered me. Now, this was, I thought, an odd question, and again, I wasn't sure how to respond. In truth, I liked being alone in the house, usually at least, for the single nights she'd left me alone in the past. This was the first time I'd felt uneasy about her leaving, but I'd already spoken a small lie, and in any case, it wasn't really her concern how I felt with or without Sheila. At length I gave her a brief 'no'. She then remarked, in an accusing tone, I might add, that increased the painfulness of her voice in my ears, she had noticed that I flinched when she spoke. I thought this was a rather rude thing to say; ordinarily, I probably would have come up with some excuse that would lay the blame upon me for the flinching, but she was a stranger, so I had no reason to steward her feelings, and I was emboldened by the presumptuous tone of her remark. Yet, I was tactful. I explained to her with the most indifferent tone I could manage, that her voice had a peculiar quality that irritated my ears, that it had nothing to do with what precisely she was saying, nor the manner in which she said it, but that the tone itself, the very sound was the salient trouble, and I advised her that the most mature thing would be for us both to regard it as an oddity out of our control. She opened her mouth to speak, paused, then poured tea into it instead.

I thought the silence would have been a relief, but it was even more annoying than her voice, and as we sat there, my mind, which can usually amuse itself for hours with the most insignificant ephemera was as still as a stagnant pond. I hoped the silence was as annoying to her and that it would speed her departure from the house, but she seemed quite comfortable, slurping up the tea, looking past me into the living room as if she still expected Sheila to stroll in casually. And I still had no idea who she was. It was plain that I'd made a mistake in revealing to her the effect of her voice on my ears. When her tea cup clattered emptily on the saucer, I thought the trial was over, but instead of standing to go, she crossed her arms over her chest, much in the way she did when she first stood at the door, and looked at me, and again, though she'd seemed quite comfortable while she was drinking her tea, her expression had quickly changed to one that I couldn't decipher, though her unwavering gaze didn't seem to be particularly friendly. Then she spoke. Our meeting seemed doomed to parade through different zones of unpleasantness. She asked whether I intended to sit silently for the duration of her visit. I replied that I hadn't decided, which was probably the first purely true thing I'd said to her. To my surprise, she smiled slightly at my answer, without showing her teeth.

When she spoke again, she kept her voice low, as though there were someone sleeping nearby she didn't want to wake up. I thought this was a very courteous thing to do, and it did help, in fact, at that volume her voice was hardly irritating at all. She explained that she worked with Sheila at the bank, was the Secondary Chief Private Consumer Lending Processor, (Sheila being the Primary Chief Private Consumer Lending Processor), and since Sheila hadn't come in to work that week, and no one had heard from her, she'd decided to drop by to see if Sheila was ill, or if there were some other problem she might be able to help with. Her name was Angela. She asked me not to call her Angie. I was silent while she explained all of this, and for a long time after she was finished. She shifted in her seat, appeared nervous for the first time, then asked a question that imparted more information than it requested--why is it I never leave the house?

I knew then that she was the peony trampler, the predator, and my monkey dream was a dream of warning, a revelation of the predator's presence. Looking back, I suppose I should have simply answered her, but I did not. I rose from my seat and took a step towards her, and though I moved slowly, even clumsily, perhaps, she slid her chair back as if trying to escape an unappetizing meal then stood up herself and walked fast towards the front door. As she did so, she unleashed her voice again on my defenseless ears, and though she muttered unintelligibly and quietly, too, her tone sharpened the sounds into little knife points accompanied by hisses and

spits like a snake, a monkey devouring snake such as, perhaps, the bushmaster. Certain words she deliberately I am sure spoke more clearly, more loudly, more painfully, words like 'police', 'body', and 'search warrant' then the front door opened, and I stopped walking. Her voice and the rest of her, too, were gone. I stood in the center of the room and watched the door close.

Thursday.

Friday. Now I wait for two arrivals: the police or Sheila. Though after a week, Sheila's seems only a remote likelihood. As for the police, there will be no evidence against me, yet neither I can produce evidence to prove my innocence, and let's not kid ourselves that they are the ones who carry the final burden. But if I leave. . .

I lied about reaching the grass beyond the sidewalk. I've not left the house in a week. Longer. So I wait, and whether it is Sheila or policemen who come for me, she or they will find a monkey in a cage.