

*The
Lewis Carroll
Limericks Contest*

-Musings in Eight Fittings-

Entry for
The 4th Annual Wonderland Award Contest
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Participant Details

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Artist's Statement

“*The Lewis Carroll Limericks Contest : Musings in Eight Fittings*” consists essentially of eighteen limericks based on ‘*The Hunting of the Snark : An Agony in Eight Fits*’. The limericks are woven together by a casual prose narrative. I have chosen limericks as the medium of creative expression because of their aptness to humorous writing. Moreover, Lewis Carroll is known to have reveled in composing limericks.

The setting in this work is a university which the reader can imagine to belong to the contemporary world. The ‘plot’ is simple: the attempts of professors of different disciplines to explore and reinterpret Lewis Carroll (in a manner not too different from USC’s Wonderland Contest itself!). The narrative is plain and underplayed, only serving its intended purpose of placing the limericks in a meaningful context. There are no dialogues, but only soliloquies of each professor as he writes his entry for The Lewis Carroll Limericks Contest.

The narrative has been organized into eight chapters, each corresponding to a ‘Fit’ from “*The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits*”. In each chapter, a Professor participating The Lewis Carroll Limericks context picks a stanza from a certain Fit and composes two limericks. I have named the chapters in my work as ‘Fittings’ since they represent the efforts of each Professor in finding a fitting analogy to ideas in their field.

The limericks themselves deal with serious philosophical questions as well as contemporary world issues, namely: threats to world peace, the spirit of adventurers, concerns about poor dietary habits and pandemic obesity, the modern-day need for being multi-lingual, declining standards of mathematics education globally, the perils of never-ending litigation, the popularity of mood-enhancing drugs and the need for dialogue between the sciences and the humanities. While these are all weighty matters in their own right, they are treated here with the levity that is apt to the limericks medium. No substantial concrete historical or present-day instances are provided for any of these issues, and the limericks are simply intended to gently nudge the imagination of the reader.

Though someone who has read *The Hunting of the Snark* will find this work doubly enjoyable, it is hoped that my attempt will be an enjoyable, light-hearted read even for those who haven’t read the original. Providing a light-hearted read is the primary motivation and the real-world references, though not incidental, are not intended to serve an agenda or convey an activist message. The work is in keeping with the spirit of Lewis Carroll who said,

"Periodically I have received courteous letters from strangers begging to know whether *The Hunting of the Snark* is an allegory, or contains some hidden moral, or is a political satire: and for all such questions I have but one answer, *I don't know!*"

-Arvind Iyer

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PROLOGUE

On a spring morning just before the summer holiday, the Professors of The Queen of Hearts College of Arts and Sciences, received this most curious invitation in the morning mail.

THE LEWIS CARROLL LIMERICKS CONTEST

*It's time to kindle your literary spark,
And outside of your specialty make a mark!
In ten lines you must jot,
What you think Carroll thought,
At the time he penned the Hunting of the Snark!*

Here are the rules of the game. Read Lewis Carroll's "The Hunting of the Snark : An Agony in Eight Fits". Find a line or two in one of the Fits that fits in best with your chosen science's description of the world. Fit in the most fitting interpretation of the line according to you, into not more than ten lines. Ten lines can say a lot, for that is the size of a pair of limericks!

The winner wins an all-expenses-paid vacation to Wonderland!

*-Signed-
Dean,*

The Queen of Hearts College of Arts and Sciences



FIRST FITTING -WAR AND PEACE-

The Professor of World Affairs just finished reading *Fit the First : The Landing*, and sighed when he read about the uneasy calm between the Beaver and his mortal enemy the Butcher. He read again these lines...

*Yet still, ever after that sorrowful day,
Whenever the Butcher was by,
The Beaver kept looking the opposite way,
And appeared unaccountably shy.*

“Even if the Lion lies down with the Lamb, can the Lamb still breathe easy?” he mused. He looked back at the history of world conflict and thought that the history of the world itself is one of fragile truces punctuated by wars. He began to write...

*Even on the day men sheathe sword and spike,
And make peace with the ones they do not like;
With all the hatchets buried...
Wise men are still worried,
For hearts can yet harden, and hands still strike!*

He paused. So many of his students had now become journalists and World Affairs Correspondents. ‘Demilitarization’, ‘negotiated settlement’ and ‘confidence-building measures’ were some of the words he heard ad nauseam in their television reports. “Do any of these words ring true and really herald world peace?” he thought and concluded his piece thus...

*The truth about any enforced peace is this,
That the moment the enforcer is remiss...
Silent guns begin to boom,
Heralding the delayed doom!
Brokered peace is often a broken promise!*



SECOND FITTING -FINDING THE WAY-

The Professor of Geography smiled as he read these lines in Fit the Second : The Bellman's Speech;

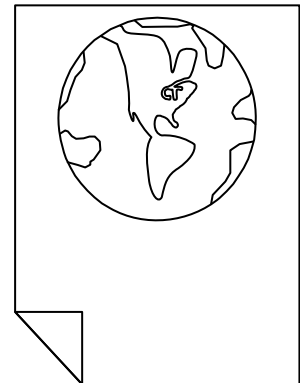
*Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
But we've got our brave Captain to thank:
(So the crew would protest) "that he's bought us the best—
A perfect and absolute blank!*

"Well, Columbus had no map of the Americas to start with!", he chuckled. He thought of the explorers who went where nobody had ventured before, seeking riches or simply seeking adventure. Fancifully he wrote,

*Can adventurers' routes ever be planned?
Can they trace caravan tracks in the sand?
The beaten path is no crime,
But in the loose sands of time,
Do guiding footprints stand a chance to stand?*

His thoughts changed direction and he said, "Let alone exploring the ends of the earth, it's hard enough not to get lost in a hiking trail!". He completed his piece with these lines..

*In a forest where trees grow and fall,
A tree laid low is like a risen wall!
The trail in the old map wends...
Toward what are now dead ends!
Aren't we better off without maps at all?*



THIRD FITTING -FOOD FOR THOUGHT-

The Professor of Dietetics laughed to himself when he read in *Fit the Third : The Baker's Tale*,

*They roused him with muffins—they roused him with ice—
They roused him with mustard and cress—
They roused him with jam and judicious advice—
They set him conundrums to guess.*

He recalled all those times when people got on to his nutritionist nerves, when they told him that chocolate was therapy and boasted about their binges! “Let me set their usual laments to a limerick”, he thought and wrote...

*During the off-days when you sulk and brood,
And want to just gorge on your comfort food...
You find that chocolate's banned,
By that diet you had planned!
What then can you eat to lighten your mood?*

“Does food affect the mind as much as it does the body?” he thought. “Well, the ancients thought that the spleen was the source of melancholy and now we know it's got nothing to do with the mind. When I tell people coffee is bad for them, they tell me it stimulates the intellect! Let me give everyone a bit of my mind about this mind and intellect business!” Thinking so, he finally decided to finish with another limerick, this time a coffee-addict's lament.

*Feeling like an also-ran and a has-been,
When all you would like is a shot of caffeine,
All you get is decaf brew!
Not at all like coffee true!
Is there no antidote for modern-day spleen?*



FOURTH FITTING -LOST IN TRANSLATION-

“Voila!” cried the Professor of Linguistics when he read these lines in *Fit the Fourth : The Hunting*,

*I said it in Hebrew—I said it in Dutch—
I said it in German and Greek:
But I wholly forgot (and it vexes me much)
That English is what you speak!*

He right away knew what to write. With the air of an evangelist and the interests of a salesman, he wrote...

*Whatever be your current occupation,
One thing that can wait is a vacation.
Sign up for that language class!
Make sure it's a test you pass!
A second language may be your salvation!*

He smiled smugly to himself when he thought of the burgeoning enrolments in his class thanks to students needing to know foreign languages to enhance career prospects abroad. Fancying himself as the prophet of a multilingual world, he decreed...

*If to dated notions of language you cling,
Even as worldwide alarm bells had rung,
That complacency can rob
The security of your job!
Better learn to converse in another tongue!*



FIFTH FITTING -KNOWING WHAT COUNTS-

“I quite understand...” the Professor of Mathematics said to himself as he read in *Fit the Fifth: The Beaver’s Lesson...*

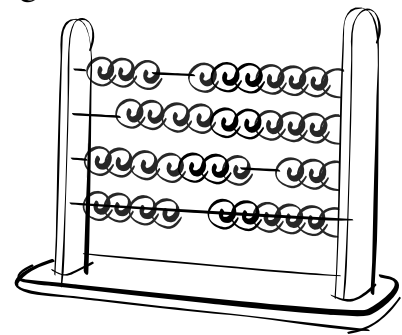
*Two added to one—if that could but be done,”
It said, “with one’s fingers and thumbs!”
Recollecting with tears how, in earlier years,
It had taken no pains with its sums.*

“...I quite understand what Carroll would have had in mind. He taught mathematics after all!” he thought. He shook his head when he thought of all those parties when he has introduced as a Professor of Mathematics and the only response he got was “Oh! That was my worst subject in school!”. “Let me get my two cents worth in two limericks”, he thought, and wrote...

*When you decide to add up the tallies later,
Just because you can’t find your calculator,
Why don’t you instead,
Do it in your head?
Such skill must be a common denominator!*

It always escaped him how many youngsters he met wanted to make it big in business, but would shun math. He signed off his entry for the contest, with a word of advice for these ambitious youngsters...

*If big brave deals you always dream of clinching,
And want to be spared the pain of penny-pinching,
The first step in the path,
Is to crack and ace math!
What you must be good at is number-crunching!*



SIXTH FITTING -RULE OF LAW-

“Sounds so familiar!”, the Professor of Law said as he read *Fit the Sixth : The Barrister’s Dream...*

*In the matter of Treason the pig would appear
To have aided, but scarcely abetted:
While the charge of Insolvency fails, it is clear,
If you grant the plea ‘never indebted.*

Years of legal practice before his current teaching appointment had made him cynical. Wryly, he wrote,

*When lawsuit charges pile up without pause...
Don’t yet brace yourself for damage and loss.
Even if the charge is breach of trust,
Fear not for you only must
Scan the fine-print to find an escape clause!*

He looked back to the time when he was himself a student, and remembered a philosophical argument he had had with a friend on whether ‘obeying the law’ and ‘being in the right’ are always the same thing. He had given up finding the answer ages ago. With such ironies in mind, he completed his entry with this...

*“We’re one before the Law” say the professors,
But if you are one of those skilful trespassers,
And you haven’t left a trace,
And got friends at a high place,
Who said we are one before the law-enforcers?*



SEVENTH FITTING -MIND OVER MATTER-

The Professor of Psychiatry had hoped that *The Hunting of the Snark* would prove to be a psychoanalytical specimen to probe the mind of its maverick author. But when he read the following lines in *Fit the Seventh : The Banker's Fate*, he was reminded of a very contemporary topic in his profession.

*Down he sank in a chair—ran his hands through his hair—
And chanted in mimsiest tones
Words whose utter inanity proved his insanity,
While he rattled a couple of bones.*

Almost as if he was continuing from where Lewis Carroll left off, he began to write...

*The slightest noise makes him scream in horror!
Falling asleep too was never harder...
The cause for this drama,
Is yesterday's trauma ...
It's called post-traumatic stress disorder!*

He sighed when he thought of all those newspaper reports about magic pills that would cure all ills of the mind. To drive home the sobering truth, he wrote...

*Giving up on the counselor and mentor,
It's an anti-depressant you reach out for.
The remedy is just not,
In a drug as you thought.
A 'chill pill' is sadly just a metaphor!*



EIGHTH FITTING -ON DUAL IDENTITIES-

The Professor of Theoretical Physics had just finished reading *Fit the Eighth : The Vanishing*. He sniggered at first when he saw these lines...

*In the midst of the word he was trying to say,
In the midst of his laughter and glee,
He had softly and suddenly vanished away—
For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.*

“Snark was a Boojum indeed!” he sneered. He was about to dismiss this as useless nonsense-verse when a thought occurred to him. “If the crew did not know what a Snark really was, how many students of physics know what a quark really is? And in Quantum Physics, vanishings of some sort are quite routine! People at first find the notion that light waves are also particles in a way. One can never simultaneously know for sure where a particle is and how fast it is moving...that’s the Uncertainty Principle that rankled even Einstein”. Ready to start ‘the dialogue between disciplines’, he wrote...

*Knowing a particle’s fate in advance,
Is so much like playing a game of chance.
Its path you can only surmise,
For it is a wave in disguise!
It’s itself the dancer, itself the dance!*

“You can’t measure anything without changing it!”. This was one of the most oft-quoted popular statements of the Uncertainty Principle. The Professor made it the theme of his contest entry and finished by writing...

*When you think you’ve measured all you need,
The position is known but not the speed!
And whenever the speed is known,
The particle’s already flown!
All is ruined by the measuring deed!*



EPILOGUE

The Dean of The Queen of Hearts College of Arts and Sciences had just finished judging all the contest entries. He began to write in a letter to the professors,

*Dear friends,
I liked each of the entries and it's hard to choose a single winner.
Each one made sense in its own way. So everyone wins. Let all the
Professors share the prize! Congratulations to all!*

He paused a moment and thought of all the earthy as well as otherworldly things the Professors had written about. "So much sense in nonsense verse?", he asked himself. Playfully he wrote at the end of his letter

*Though it's true that after some thoughtful readings,
That Carroll's work each time a different bell rings...
My humble opinion,
Is that Carroll wrote for fun!
These professors are all imagining things!*

