

# The curious room

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# The Curious Room

Angela Carter

## *Introduction*

The following piece of speculation in the form of a short story starts thus:

"Alice said: now you're going to read a story."

This opening is based on the way that Jan Svankmajer, the animator of Prague, begins his film based on Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (Switzerland, 1988). The Alice in my story, with her frail teeth, flaxen hair, stern expression and pink frock, looks like Svankmajer's Alice, at the moment, not like Tenniel's, but she may change. At the beginning of Svankmajer's film, Alice says: "Now you're going to watch a film," describing the formal parameters of what is going to happen. Similarly, my Alice defines the formal parameters of what is to follow, which is in some sense a sequel to Svankmajer's film because this Alice, no longer in wonderland, has gone through the looking-glass and found herself in Prague, the city where Svankmajer lives and works, though she has not found herself in the Prague of our time nor of her own time but that of the time of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II, that is, the late sixteenth century. It is also the Prague hymned by André Breton, the city where "the clock whose hands, cast in the metal of desire, turn ever backwards."

Alice was invented by a logician and therefore she comes from the world of nonsense. Literally. From the world of *non-sense*, the opposite of *common sense*, from the world constructed by logical deduction, the world which is both created by language and in which language shivers into abstractions. (That is why the carnival figure, "Summer," is compared

to Carmen Miranda's hat; Carmen Miranda was the favourite film actress of the linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.)

In Prague, Svankmajer makes films that follow, quite rigorously, the aesthetic of surrealism and its exploration of the unconscious via the adventures of the image. This is also the world of nonsense, although arrived at through the furious disruption of rationality rather than by its scrupulous utilisation.

Alice emerges from the looking-glass to find herself in the crystal ball of the English alchemist and magician, Dr. John Dee, about whom more may be read in Aubrey's *Brief Lives*. Dr. Dee visited the court of Rudolph II accompanied by his assistant, Edward Kelly, who really was a confidence man, in 1584, at the time when the natural sciences and the occult sciences were still inextricably mixed up, a time of extraordinary intellectual richness and confusion.

Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1530–93), born in Milan, worked in the court at Prague for the greater part of his life, building carnival machines and designing stained glass and tapestries as well as painting the "composed heads" for which he is famous, portrait heads made up from various objects, vegetables, fruit, flowers, etc., suited to their subjects. For example, the allegorical portrait of Spring is composed of flowers. I have permitted Dr. Dee to "animate" carnival figures based on these "composed heads"; Dr. Dee had some expertise in the construction of automata, as described in the text.

"Lying between life and death, animated and mechanic, hybrid creatures and creatures to which hubris gave birth, they may all be likened to fetishes. And, as fetishes, they give us, for a while, the feeling that a world not ruled by our common laws does exist, a marvellous and uncanny world." (Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel. *Creativity and Perversion*. London, 1984, 88.)

Rudolph II and his contemporaries looked to science to provide this frisson, which left art in a quandary.

Mannerism, as a form of artistic practice, was born out of the inability of the rational, critical methods pioneered by the humanists to embrace the expanding universe of the sixteenth century and bridge the gap between the new versions of reality that the scientific discoveries of the Renaissance offered and traditional assumptions. The late sixteenth century crisis in representation that resulted created an aesthetic dominated by irony, eccentricity, wit, strangeness.

"The artist of the second half of the Cinquecento overturns the satisfied awareness of the Renaissance, replacing it with a state of alarm controlled by *manner* and *quotation*, with a view of life wherein language branches off to avoid confronting the terrible face of the world. Quotation becomes the strategy of a sensibility that sees reality slipping away along obscure and tortuous paths. Time, present time, becomes the moment for blocking its escape, with action and direct experience impossible, and the only possibility being the recourse to memory and culture . . ."

(Achille Bonito Oliva. *Arcimboldo*. Milan, 1980, 71.)

The resemblance to the late twentieth-century style called "post-modernism" is obvious. "The Curious Room" attempts to make apparent this kinship, whilst adhering to the surrealist aesthetic of the marvellous, as a homage to Svankmajer.

Rudolph II kept a room, a Cabinet of Wonders, containing deformed vegetables, fossil gastropods, stones that had fallen out of the moon, idols from Mexico and Peru, mantles of feathers, monstrous births preserved in glass jars of alcohol and so on; the Imperial Library in Vienna has inherited his collection of mandrakes. The extraordinary room was a kind of ur-museum, manifestation of an omnivorous curiosity, a gluttony for the world, but also a potent image of the unconscious, which is the world, or underworld, in which language develops a life of its own.

I was privileged to be able to read "The Curious Room" at the 1989 SAUTE conference at the University of Basel, where Paracelsus graduated.

*The Curious Room*

Alice said: "Now you are reading a story."

\*

Outside the curious room, there is a sign on the door that says: "Forbidden." Inside, inside, oh, come and see! The celebrated DR. DEE.

The celebrated Dr. Dee, looking for all the world like Santa Claus on account of his long, white beard and apple cheeks, is contemplating his crystal, the fearful sphere that contains everything that is, or was, or ever shall be.

It is a round ball of solid glass and gives a deceptive impression of weightlessness because you can see right through it and we falsely assume an equation between lightness and transparency, that what the light shines through cannot be there and so must weigh nothing. In fact, the Dr.'s crystal ball is heavy enough to inflict a substantial injury and the Dr.'s assistant, Ned Kelly, the Man in the Iron Mask, often weighs the ball in one hand or tosses it back and forth from one to the other hand as he ponders the fragility of the hollow bone, his master's skull, as it pores heedless over some tome.

Ned Kelly would blame the murder on the angels. He would say the angels came out of the sphere. Everybody knows the angels live there.

\*

The crystal resembles:                    an aqueous humour, although not yet;

a glass eye, although without any iris or pupil – just the sort of transparent eye, in fact, which the adept might construe as apt to see the invisible;

a tear, round, as it forms within the eye, for a tear acquires its characteristic shape of a pear, what we think of as a "tear" shape, only in the act of falling;

the shining drop that trembles, sometimes, on the tip of the doctor's well-nigh senescent, tending towards the flaccid yet nevertheless sustainable and discernable morning erection, and always reminds him of

a drop of dew,

a drop of dew endlessly, tremulously about to fall from the unfolded petals of a rose and, therefore, like the tear, retaining the perfection of its circumference only by refusing to sustain free fall, remaining what it is because it refuses to become what it might be, the antithesis of metamorphosis;

and yet, in old England, far away, the sign of the Do Drop Inn will always, that jovial pun, show an oblate spheroid, heavily tinselled, because the signpainter, in order to demonstrate the idea of "drop," needs must represent the dew in the act of falling and therefore, for the purposes of this comparison, *not* resembling the numinous ball weighing down the angelic doctor's outstretched palm.

For Dr. Dee, the invisible is only another unexplored country, a brave new world.

\*

The hinge of the sixteenth century, where it joins with the seventeenth century, is as creaky and judders open as reluctantly as the door in a haunted house. Through that door, in the distance, we may glimpse the distant light of the Age of Reason, but precious little of that is about to

fall on Prague, the capital of paranoia, where the fortune tellers live on Golden Alley in cottages so small a good-sized doll would find itself cramped, and there is one certain house on Alchemist's Street that only becomes visible during a thick fog. (On sunny days, you see a stone.) But, even in the fog, only those born on the Sabbath can see the house, anyway.

Like a lamp guttering out in a recently vacated room, the Renaissance flared, faded and extinguished itself. The world had suddenly revealed itself as bewilderingly infinite but, since the imagination remained, for, after all, it is only human, finite, our imaginations took some time to catch up. If Francis Bacon will die in 1626 a martyr to experimental science, having contracted a chill whilst stuffing a dead hen with snow on Highgate Hill to see if that would keep it fresh, in Prague, where Dr. Faustus once lodged in Charles Square, Dr. Dee, the English expatriate alchemist, awaits the manifestation of the angel in the Archduke Rudolph's curious room, and we are still fumbling our way towards the end of the previous century.

The Archduke Rudolph keeps his priceless collection of treasures in this curious room; he numbers the doctor amongst these treasures and is therefore forced to number the doctor's assistant, the unspeakable and iron-visaged Kelly, too.

\*

The Archduke Rudolph has crazy eyes. These eyes are the mirrors of his soul.

\*

It is very cold this afternoon, the kind of weather that makes a person piss. The moon is up, already, a moon the colour of candlewax and, as the sky discolours when the night comes on, the moon grows more white, more cold, white as the source of all the cold in the world, until, when the winter moon reaches its chill meridian, everything will freeze – not only the water in the jug and the ink in the well but the blood in the vein, the aqueous humour.

Metamorphosis.

In their higgly piggly disorder, the twigs on the bare trees outside the thick window resemble those random scratchings made by common use that you only see when you lift your wine glass up to the light. A hard frost has crisped the surface of the deep snow on the Archduke's tumbled roofs and turrets. In the snow, a raven: caw!

Dr. Dee knows the language of birds and sometimes speaks it but what the birds say is frequently banal; all the raven said, over and over, was: "Poor Tom's a-cold!"

Above the Dr.'s head, slung from the low-beamed ceiling, dangles a flying turtle, stuffed. In the dim room we can make out, amongst much else, the random juxtaposition of an umbrella, a sewing machine and a dissecting table; a raven and a writing desk; an aged mermaid, poor wizened creature, cramped in a foetal position in a jar, her ream of grey hair suspended adrift in the viscous liquid that preserves her, her features rendered greenish and somewhat distorted by the flaws in the glass.

The Dr. would like, for a mate to this mermaid, to keep in a cage, if alive, or, if dead, in a stoppered bottle, an angel.

It was an age in love with wonders.

\*

Dr. Dee's assistant, Ned Kelly, the Man in the Iron Mask, is also looking for angels. He is gazing at the sheeny, reflective screen of his scrying disc, which is made of polished coal. The angels visit him more frequently than they do the Dr. but, for some reason, Dr. Dee cannot see Kelly's guests, although they crowd the surface of the scrying disc, crying out in their high, piercing voices in the species of bird-creole with which they communicate. It is a great sadness to him.

Kelly, however, is phenomenally gifted in this direction and notes down on a pad the intonations of their speech which, though he doesn't understand it himself, the Dr. excitedly makes sense of.

But, today, no go.

Kelly yawns. He stretches. He feels the pressure of the weather on his bladder.

\*



The privy at the top of the tower is a hole in the floor behind a cupboard door. It is situated above another privy, with another hole, above another privy, another hole, and so on, down seven further privies, seven more holes, until your excreta at last hurtles into the cesspit far below. The cold keeps the smell down, thank God.

Dr. Dee, ever the seeker after knowledge, has calculated the velocity of a flying turd.

Although a man could hang himself in the privy with ease and comfort, securing the rope about the beam above and launching himself into the void to let gravity break his neck for him, Kelly, whether at stool or making water, never allows the privy to remind him of the "long drop" nor even, however briefly, to admire his own instrument for fear the phrase "well-hung" recall the noose which he narrowly escaped in his native England for fraud, once, in Lancaster; for forgery, once, in Rutlandshire; and for performing a confidence trick in Ashby-de-la-Zouche.

But his ears were cropped for him in the pillory at Walton-le-Dale, after he dug up a corpse from a churchyard for purposes of necromancy, or possibly of grave-robbing, and this is why, in order to conceal this amputation, he always wears the iron mask modelled after that which will be worn by a namesake three hundred years hence in a country that does not yet exist, an iron mask like an upturned bucket with a slit cut for his eyes.

Kelly, unbuttoning, wonders if his piss will freeze in the act of falling; if, today, it is cold enough in Prague to let him piss an arc of ice.

No.

He buttons up again.

Women loathe this privy. Happily, few venture here, into the magician's tower, where the Archduke Rudolph keeps his collection of wonders, his proto-museum, his "Wunderkammer," his "cabinet de curiosités," that *curious room* of which we speak.

\*

There's a theory, one I find persuasive, that the quest for knowledge is, at bottom, the search for the answer to the question: "Where was I before I was born?"

In the beginning, was . . . what?

Perhaps, in the beginning, there was a curious room, a room like this one, crammed with wonders; and now the room and all it contains are forbidden you, although it was made just for you, had been prepared for you since time began, and you will spend all your life trying to remember it.

\*

Kelly once took the Archduke aside and offered him, at a price, a little piece of the beginning, a slice of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil itself, which Kelly claimed he had obtained from an Armenian who had found it on Mount Ararat, growing in the shadows of the wreck of the Ark. The slice had dried out with time and looked very much like a dehydrated ear.

The Archduke soon decided it was a fake, that Kelly had been fooled. The Archduke is *not* gullible. Rather, he has a boundless desire to know *everything* and an exceptional generosity of belief. At night, he stands on top of the tower and watches the stars in the company of Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, yet; by day, he makes no judgement before he consults the astrologers in their zodiacal hats and yet, in those days, either an astrologer or an astronomer would be hard put to describe the difference between their disciplines.

He is not gullible. But he has his peculiarities.

\*

The Archduke keeps a lion chained up in his bedroom as a species of watch-dog or, since the lion is a member of the *felis* family and not a member of the *cave canem* family, a giant guard-cat. For fear of the lion's yellow teeth, the Archduke had them pulled. Now that the beast cannot chew, he must subsist on slop. The lion lies with his head on his paws, dreaming. If you could open up his brain this moment, you would find nothing there but the image of a beefsteak.

Meanwhile, the Archduke, in the curtained privacy of his bed, embraces something, God knows what.

Whatever it is, he does it with such energy that the bell hanging over the bed becomes agitated due to the jolting and rhythmic lurching of the bed and the clapper jangles against the sides.

Ting-a-ling!

The bell is cast out of *electrum magicum*. Paracelsus said that a bell cast out of *electrum magicum* would summon up the spirits. If a rat gnaws the Archduke's toe during the night, his involuntary start will agitate the bell immediately so the spirits can come and chase the rat away, for the lion, although *sui generis* a cat, is not sufficiently a cat in spirit to perform the domestic function of a common mouser, not like the little calico beastie who keeps the good Dr. company and often, out of pure affection, brings him furry tributes of those she has slain.

Though the bell rings, softly at first, and then with increasing fury as the Archduke nears the end of his journey, no spirits come. But there have been no rats, neither.

A split fig falls out of the bed onto the marble floor with a soft, exhausted plop, followed by a hand of bananas, that spread out and go limp, as if in submission.

"Why can't he make do with meat, like other people," whined the hungry lion.

Can the Archduke be effecting intercourse with a fruit salad?

Or, with Carmen Miranda's hat?

Worse.

\*

The hand of bananas indicates the Archduke's enthusiasm for the newly discovered Americas. Oh, brave new world! There is a street in Prague called "New World" (*Novy Svet*). The hand of bananas is freshly arrived from Bermuda via his Spanish kin, who know what he likes. He has a particular enthusiasm for weird plants and, every week, comes to converse with his mandrakes, those warty, shaggy roots that originate (the Archduke shudders pleasurably to think about it) in the sperm and water spilled by a hanged man.

The mandrakes live at ease in a special cabinet. It falls to Ned Kelly's reluctant duty to bathe each of these roots once a week in milk and dress them up in fresh linen nightgowns. Kelly, reluctantly, since the roots, warts and all, resemble so many virile members and he does not like to handle them, imagining they raucously mock his manhood as he tends them, believing they unman him.

The Archduke's collection also boasts some magnificent specimens of the *coco-de-mer*, or double coconut, which grows in the shape, but exactly

the shape, of the pelvic area of a woman, a foot long, heft and clefted, I kid you not. The Archduke and his gardeners plan to effect a vegetable marriage and will raise the progeny — *man-de-mer* or *coco-drake* — in his own greenhouses. (The Archduke himself is a confirmed bachelor.)

\*

The bell ceases. The lion sighs with relief and lays his head once more upon his heavy paws: "Now I can sleep!"

Then, from under the bed curtains, on either side of the bed, begins to pour a veritable torrent that quickly forms into dark, viscous, livid puddles on the floor.

But, before you accuse the Archduke of the unspeakable, dip your finger in the puddle and lick it.

Delicious!

For these are sticky puddles of freshly squeezed grape juice, and apple juice, and peach juice, juice of peach, plum, pear, or raspberry, strawberry, cherry ripe, blackberry, black currant, white currant, red. . . . The room brims with the delicious ripe scent of summer pudding, even though, outside, on the frozen tower, the crow still creaks out his melancholy call:

"Poor Tom's a-cold!"

And it is midwinter.

\*

Night was. Widow Night, an old woman in mourning, with big, black wings, came beating against the window; they kept her out with lamps and candles.

\*

When he went back into the laboratory, Ned Kelly found that Dr. Dee had nodded off to sleep as the old man often did, nowadays, towards the end of the day, the crystal ball having rolled from palm to lap as he lay back in the black oak chair, and now, as he shifted at the impulse of a dream, it rolled again, off his lap down onto the floor where it landed with a soft thump on the rushes — no harm done — and the little calico cat disabled it at once with a swift blow of her right paw, then began to

play with it, batting it that way and this before she administered the *coup de grace*.

With a gusty sigh, Kelly once more addressed his scrying disc, although today he felt barren of invention. He ironically reflected that, if just so much as one wee feathery angel ever, even the one time, should escape the scrying disc and flutter into the laboratory, the cat would surely get it.

Not, Kelly knew, that such a thing was possible.

If you could see inside Kelly's brain, you would discover a calculating machine.

Widow Night painted the windows black.

Then, all at once, the cat made a noise like sharply crumpled paper, a noise of enquiry and concern. A rat? Kelly turned to look. The cat, head on one side, was considering with such scrupulous intensity that its pricked ears met at the tips something lying on the floor beside the crystal ball, so that at first it looked as if the glass eye had shed a tear.

But look again.

Kelly looked again and began to sob and gibber.

The cat rose up and backed away all in one liquid motion, hissing, its bristling tail stuck straight up stiff as a broom handle, too scared to permit even the impulse of attack upon the creature, about the size of a little finger that popped out of the crystal ball as if the ball had been a bubble.

But its passage has not cracked or fissured the ball; it is still whole, has sealed itself up again directly after the departure of the infinitesimal child who, so suddenly released from her sudden confinement, now experimentally stretches her tiny limbs to test the limits of the new invisible circumference around her.

Kelly stammered: "There must be some rational explanation!"

Although they were too small for him to see them, her teeth still had the transparency and notched edges of the first stage of the second set; her straight, fair hair was cut in a stern fringe; she scowled and sat upright, looking about her with evident disapproval.

The cat, cowering ecstatically, now knocked over an alembic and a quantity of *elixir vitae* ran away through the rushes. At the bang, the Dr. woke and was not astonished to see her.

He bade her a graceful welcome in the language of the tawny pippit.

How did she get there?

She was kneeling on the mantelpiece of the sitting room of the place she lived, looking at herself in the mirror. Bored, she breathed on the glass until it clouded over and then, with her finger, she drew a door. The door opened. She sprang through and, after a brief moment's confusing, fish-eye view of a vast, gloomy chamber, scarcely illuminated by five candles in one branched stick and filled with all the clutter in the world, her view was obliterated by the clawed paw of a vast cat extended ready to strike, hideously increasing in size as it approached her, and then splat! she burst out of "time will be" into "time was," for the transparent substance which surrounded her burst like a bubble and there she was, in her pink frock, lying on some rushes under the gaze of a tender ancient with a long, white beard and a man with a coal-scuttle on his head.

Her lips moved but no sound came out; she had left her voice behind in the mirror. She flew into a tantrum and beat her heels upon the floor, weeping furiously. The Doctor, who, in some remote time past, raised children of his own, let her alone until, her passion spent, she heaved and grunted on the rushes, knuckling her eyes; then he peered into the depths of a big china bowl on a dim shelf and produced from out of it a strawberry.

The child accepted the strawberry suspiciously for it was, although not large, the size of her head. She sniffed it, turned it round and round, and then essayed just one little bite out of it, leaving behind a tiny ring of white within the crimson flesh. Her teeth were perfect.

At the first bite, she grew a little.

Kelly continued to mumble: "There must be some rational explanation."

The child took a second, less tentative bite, and grew a little more. The mandrakes in their white nightgowns woke up and began to mutter among themselves.

Reassured at last, she gobbled the strawberry all up but she had been falsely reassured; now her flaxen crown bumped abruptly against the rafters, out of the range of the candlestick so they could not see her face but a gigantic tear splashed with a metallic clang upon Ned Kelly's helmet, then another, and the Doctor, with some presence of mind, before they needed to hurriedly construct an ark, pressed a phial of *elixir vitae* into her hand. When she drank it, she shrank down again until soon

she was small enough to sit on his knee, her blue eyes staring with wonder at his beard, as white as ice cream and as long as Sunday.

But she had no wings.

Kelly, the faker, knew there *must* be a rational explanation but he could not think of one.

\*

She found her voice at last.

"Two American Indians were sitting on a log — a big Indian and a little Indian. The little Indian was the son of the big Indian, but the big Indian was not the father of the little Indian.

How do you explain that?"

At the sound of the voice of logic, everything in the curious room gave a shake and a shudder, and, for a moment, looked as if it were painted on gauze, like a theatrical effect, and might disappear if a bright light were shone on it. Dr. Dee stroked his beard reflectively. He could provide answers to many questions, or knew where to look for answers. He had gone and caught a falling star — didn't a piece of it lie beside the stuffed dodo? To impregnate the aggressively phallic mandrake, with its masculinity to the power of two, as implied by its name, was a task which, he pondered, the omnivorous Archduke, with his enthusiasm for erotic esoterica, might prove capable of. And the answers to the other two imponderables posed by the poet were obtainable, surely, through the intermediary of the angels, if only one scried long enough.

He truly believed that nothing was unknowable. That is what makes him modern.

But, to the child's question, he can imagine no answer.

Kelly, forced, against his nature, to suspect the presence of another world that would destroy his confidence in tricks, is sunk in introspection and has not even heard her.

\*

However, such magic as there is in *this* world, as opposed to the worlds that can be made out of dictionaries, can only be real when it is artificial and Dr. Dee himself, whilst a member of the Cambridge Footlights, at university, before his beard was white or long, directed a

famous production of Aristophanes's "Peace" at Trinity College, in which he sent a grocer's boy right up to heaven, laden with his basket, as if to make deliveries, on the back of a giant beetle.

Architas made a flying dove of wood. At Nuremburg, according to Boterus, an adept constructed both an eagle and a fly and set them to flutter and flap across his laboratory, to the astonishment of all. In olden times, the statues that Daedalus built raised their arms and moved their legs due to the action of weights, and of shifting deposits of mercury. Albertus Magnus, the Great Sage, cast a head in brass, that spoke.

Are they animate or not, these beings that jerk and shudder into such a semblance of life? Do these creatures believe themselves to be human? And if they do, at what point might they, by virtue of the sheer intensity of their belief, become so?

(In Prague, the city of the Golem, an image can come to life.)

The Dr. thinks about these things a great deal and thinks the child upon his knee, babbling about the inhabitants of the new world, must be a little automaton popped up from God knows where.

Meanwhile, the door marked "Forbidden" opened up, again.

It came in.

\*

It rolled on little wheels, a wobbling, halting, toppling progress, a clock-work land galleon, tall as a mast, advancing at a stately if erratic pace, nodding and becking and shedding inessential fragments of its surface as it came, its foliage rustling, now stuck and perilously rocking at a crack in the stone floor with which its wheels cannot cope, now flying helter-skelter, almost out of control, wobbling, clicking, whirring, an eclectic juggernaut evidently almost on the point of collapse; it has been a heavy afternoon.

But, although it looked as if eccentrically self-propelled, Arcimboldo the Milanese pushed it, picking up bits of the thing as they fell off, tut-tutting at its ruination, pushing it, shoving it, occasionally picking it up bodily and carrying it. He was smeared all over with its secretions and looked forward to a good wash once it had been returned to the curious room from whence it came. There, the Dr. and his assistant will take it apart until the next time.



This thing before us, although it is not, was not and never will be alive, *has* been animate and will be animate again, but, at the moment, not, for now, after one final shove, it stuck stock still, wheels halted, wound down, uttering one last, gross, mechanical sigh.

A nipple dropped off. The Dr. picked it up and offered it to the child. Another strawberry! She shook her head.

The size and prominence of the secondary sexual characteristics indicate this creature is, like the child, of the feminine gender. She lives in the fruit bowl where the Dr. found the first strawberry. When the Archduke wants her, Arcimboldo, who designed her, puts her together again, arranging the fruit of which she is composed on a wicker frame, always a little different from the last time according to what the greenhouse can provide. Today, her hair is largely composed of green muscat grapes, her nose a pear, eyes filbert nuts, cheeks russet apples somewhat wrinkled — never mind! The Archduke has a penchant for older women. When the painter got her ready, she looked like Carmen Miranda's hat on wheels, but her name was: "Summer."

But now, what devastation! Hair mashed, nose squashed, bosom pureed, belly juiced. The child observed this apparition with the greatest interest. She spoke again.

"What happens," she asked earnestly, "if an irresistible force meets an immovable object?"

Once again, she stumped them. They pondered, all three men, and at last slowly shook their heads. As if the child's question were the last straw, "Summer" now disintegrated — subsided, slithered off her frame into her fruit bowl, whilst shed fruit, some almost whole, bounced to the rushes around her. The Milanese, with a pang, watched his design disintegrate.

\*

It is not so much that the Archduke likes to pretend this monstrous being is alive, for nothing inhuman is alien to him; rather, he does not care whether she is alive or no, that what he wants to do is to plunge his member into her artificial strangeness, perhaps as he does so imagining himself an orchard and this embrace, this plunge into the succulent flesh which is not flesh as we know it, which is, if you like, the living metaphor — "fica," explains Arcimboldo, displaying the orifice — this intercourse

with the very flesh of summer will fructify his cold kingdom, the snowy country outside the window, where the creaking raven endlessly laments the inclement weather.

"Reason becomes the enemy which withholds from us so many possibilities of pleasure," said Freud.

One day, when the fish within the river freeze, the day of the frigid lunar noon, the Archduke will come to Dr. Dee, his crazy eyes resembling, the one, a blackberry, the other, a cherry, and say: transform me into a harvest festival!

So he did; but the weather got no better.

\*

Peckish, Kelly absently demolished a fallen peach, so lost in thought he never noticed the purple bruise, and the little cat played croquet with the peach stone while Dr. Dee, stirred by memories of his English children long ago and far away, stroked the girl's flaxen hair.

"Whither comest thou?" he asked her.

The question stirred her again into speech.

"A man is looking at a portrait," she announced urgently.

The three men turned to look at her as if she were about to pronounce some piece of oracular wisdom. She tossed her blonde head. She went on.

"He said: 'Brothers and sisters have I none, but this man's father is my father's son.' Who is he?"

They could not think of a reply. They continued to stare at her, words turning to dust in their mouths.

"Who is he?" she repeated, now almost with desperation, as if, if only they could stumble on the correct reply, she would be precipitated back, diminutive, stern, rational, within the crystal ball and thence be tossed back through the mirror to "time will be," or, even better, to the book from which she had sprung.

"Poor Tom's a-cold," offered the raven. After that, came silence.

### *Note*

The three conundrums posed by Alice come from Raymond Smullyan's *What is the Name of this Book? The Riddle of Dracula and Other Logical*

*Puzzles*, New York, 1986. The answers are as follows:

- a) The big Indian was the mother of the little Indian.
- b) It is logically impossible that there can exist both an irresistible force and an immovable object.
- c) "A remarkably large number of people arrive at the wrong answer that the man is looking at his own picture. They put themselves in the place of the man looking at the picture and reason as follows: 'Since I have no brothers or sisters, then my father's son must be me. Therefore I am looking at a picture of myself.'

The first statement of this reasoning is absolutely correct; if I have neither brothers nor sisters, then my father's son is indeed myself. But it doesn't follow that 'myself' is the answer to the problem. If the second clause of the problem had been, 'this man is my father's son,' then the answer to the problem would have been 'myself.' But the problem didn't say that; it said 'this man's *father* is my father's son.' From which it follows that this man's father is myself (since my father's son is myself.) Since this man's father is myself, then I am this man's father, hence this man must be my son. Thus the correct answer to the problem is that the man is looking at a picture of his son" (14).

Raymond Smullyan, Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University, is also a professional magician, according to the biographical note in his book.