

# 10 RATIONS = 1 DECORATION: A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER L. KNOX ABOUT POETRY'S STRANGE MATH

*When I first started my PhD in 2007, Jennifer L. Knox had just published her second book but already seemed to be something of a legend. I'd hear "Chicken Bucket" whispered in the halls of the English Department. After reading her first two books, *A Gringo Like Me* (Bloof Books, 2005) and *Drunk by Noon* (Bloof Books, 2007), I got why. The surrealist leaps, the cast of quirky speakers, the raucous humor. Those books, and the two that have followed—*The Mystery of the Hidden Driveway* (Bloof Books, 2010) and *Days of Shame and Failure* (Bloof Books, 2015)—are innovative without being gimmicky, readable without being easy, hilarious but completely serious, the way humor has to be to mean something. You may have noticed that her four books were all published by Bloof Books. Bloof was actually founded to keep *A Gringo Like Me* in print. Yes, Jennifer L. Knox is that kind of poet. The kind who inspires people to start presses. The kind who has appeared four times in the *Best American Poetry* series—and also *Best American Erotic Poems*. The kind whose childhood tree house will someday be a historic landmark.*

**Josephine Yu:** What do you attribute the appeal of "Chicken Bucket" to? What's the "Chicken Bucket" magic? (I just want to keep saying it: chicken bucket, chicken bucket, chicken bucket...)

**Jennifer L. Knox:** I used to give my speakers a really hard time, and that's definitely working in this poem. I would never write it now; it's punching down, which is a term Chris Rock coined. Good funny is when you go after those above you, i.e. punching up. Going after Cassie—and especially where she ends up in the poem—is punching down. Perhaps I was punching down at myself. What's even funnier about the punching up/down concept is that Chris Rock later said rape jokes were funny and everyone should be able to tell them, but you can't punch more down than a rape joke.

Everything in "Chicken Bucket" is real. I heard, saw, or did it in the town where I grew up. Cassie, the speaker, is a 14-year-old girl who's suffering from dramatic irony-itis (my favorite itis). She has



no idea how stupid she is in so many directions, which is exactly the way I was when I was 14. I remember hitchhiking with my friend, Tammi, to the pizza place in town so we could hook up with the 18 yr old guys who worked there—both of us were wearing tube tops and ridiculously short short-shorts. We were practically naked, and it's amazing we weren't murdered. Maybe that's why people like it: They get to look at the speaker and say, "What an idiot!" That's punching down. Cassie eventually moves into a trailer with her mother's boyfriend, who impregnates her, which is exactly what happened to my friend Maggie, in 6th grade. It's a very unusual place for a poem to occur, so maybe the location, the diction, and the dramatic irony has drawn people to it—or repelled them. My friend Jennifer Michael Hecht said that a student showed her the poem, and she thought that voice was me, so she was very leery until we met face to face. "You write one chicken bucket..."

I got the title from a Southern Culture on the Skids show, when the band passed out a bucket of fried chicken to the audience. I had no idea that so much autobiography would fall out when I wrote it.

**JY:** Back in 2010, on the *Best American Poetry* blog, you talked about how your poems weren't always taken seriously because of your roots in slam poetry. In the years since, your most recent book, *Days of Shame and Failure*, received a starred review in *Publisher's Weekly* and glowing praise in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, and your work appeared a *fourth* time in *Best American Poetry*. Has that dismissiveness changed?

**JLK:** Boy, that makes me feel good, Josephine. Remember that time I was trying to smuggle a parrot out of the crazy place I worked in NYC, and you actually entertained the idea of adopting it? I was going to drive it down to Florida. Anyway, I've always liked you.

**JY:** I really wanted that parrot. But birds shit a lot. And they live a long time.

**JLK:** I don't know if slam was the reason I felt my work was being dissed, or if was because the work was funny, or if I really was, indeed, being dissed. I'm super paranoid, so maybe I wasn't. But now I know that some unfunny people have problems with the

humor—people who think that, as poets, their feelings are special and they need to protect some illusion of authority. For some, it's a way to dismiss the work. "Oh, it's funny!" and that's it, even when it's not funny at all. Which is weird. I remember people laughing and laughing in grad school workshops at my poems, and my friend Ada saying, "Uh...I don't think this is funny at all." Funny's relatively rare in American poetry, and even rarer in the work of women—although I see that's changing, especially among younger women.

**JY:** What about your own attitude or approach to your work? Do you feel differently about writing now that you've hit the big time? Do you feel more pressure—and it is a useful pressure?

**JLK:** Again, I like you. I don't think I've hit the big time. I do put a lot of pressure on myself. I don't relax, I can't sleep, and I overprepare for everything. If I'm feeling good for a second, my brain leafs through the Rolodex of everything I've ever done until it finds something shameful and says, "Hey, look at this! You need to start worrying now."

**JY:** You've said that you think "poetry might be more physical or visual than strictly literary" and that your work is influenced by film. In fact, you've made some amazing short films! My favorites are your short mockumentaries "Corgis: God's Li'l Shart" and "Tasting Brown," which taught me facts like "Ants can see the atomic structure and orientation of all things, which takes up a lot of time. So unless it's, like, a jelly donut, they can't really be bothered." Are there ways you approach imagery or narrative differently thanks to your interest in film and your undergrad background in visual arts?

**JLK:** Never say I didn't teach you nothing! And thank you! I don't know if I approach imagery or narrative differently than other poets. I might. I like to subvert expectations. I wouldn't say other poets don't subvert expectations. I think we all want to surprise the reader, right? But I really like to flip the reader hard, and the hardest flip is when you think you know *exactly* what's going on,



but you don't. I do write a lot of dialogue, and I often refer to films, TV and popular culture.

**JY:** Whatever medium or genre you're working in, you're always hysterical. Were you funny as kid? Let's psychoanalyze you! Is humor a defense mechanism? What are hiding, Jennifer Knox?

**JLK:** Yes, I was a funny kid, voted class clown, did impressions in the talent show, etc. It is a defense mechanism. I've always been game to get other people to laugh at me. It's a kind of power, as some comedians know—and I say "some" because not all comedians want you to laugh at them. Some want you to laugh at other people. My joke is: writing poetry to be funny is like becoming a nun to get laid. It's absolutely the wrong way to go about it. For many poets—especially those in positions of power—funny undermines your authority. As many poets in positions of power are men, a funny woman is as embraceable as a trash bag full of radioactive waste, because a man's number one fear is being laughed at by a woman, whereas a woman's number one fear is being raped. Female poets in positions of power who love and support the patriarchy that put them there don't like funny, either. No one wants to be laughed at, it seems, except me.

**JY:** Humor provides a counterweight to one of your recurring themes: the end of the world, whether the end times are a looming threat, as in "We Are Afraid," or already in full swing, like in "Popular Music after the Apocalypse." In "Indian Head," the speaker predicts, "Suits on the news and radio will / sputter, then *poof*," reminiscent of Eliot's apocalypse whimper. In "Immutable," humanity will "slip out of this world, / our swan songs clogging the ears of all / the wordless species going first— / 'After you.'" And your last book came out *before* the election! *Before* the doomsday seed vault flooded! So how pessimistic are you now?

**JLK:** Very. We're dying at a time when everything on the planet is dying. I can't watch the starving polar bear. I can't look at the elephant on fire. I'm rooting for the mushrooms and their 1000-year clean-up.

**JY:** Fungus is our best hope, huh? That's pretty bleak. In "The New Let's Make a Deal," a voice interrupts a description of a game show to ask "Hey, what kind of poem is this?" and the answer is ultimately "a poem for the end of the world." What good is poetry at the end of the world? This is an old question but more important than ever to discuss: Can poetry make anything happen?

**JLK:** I think a poem's job is to make the reader feel that feeling that only poetry can make us feel. Feeling ≠ action. The poetry community is different, though: We're very empathetic and involved in good politics and good at spurring people to act. I love the company of poets.

**JY:** In addition to the humor and despair, another recurring feature of your work is the variety of forms, including prose poems, short plays, even some freestyling. Is innovating with form connected to being funny? I mean, is that kind of experimentation one way you create humor? I'm thinking about how poetry and humor both function by way of surprise, a disruption of expectation. In "Mighty Mighty Primate: Reconsidered" the speaker (a movie star primate) invites his audience to "behold the wonder of [his] incredible nip / ples." The surprise (and hilarity) of this gorilla's brag about his nipples is multiplied by that mid-word enjambment.

**JLK:** Form is an immediate way to thwart expectations, which is the incongruity theory, and my favorite form of funny, as well as parody, which also requires a form that the reader knows in order to flip it. I try to never write the same poem twice, and to make the form mirror the content.

**JY:** What advice do you offer a poet who wants to be funny? Is humor something that can be learned or practiced?

**JLK:** Maybe it can be learned, but I think if you want to be funny, you're already funny. In other words, I don't think an unfunny person would wake up and think, "I want to be funny." If it's possible, my advice would be "Surprise us," because humor lights up the same place in your brain as surprise.



**JY:** One way you surprise the reader is with titles that don't always relate to the poem in an obvious way, like "Nice 'n Easy Medium Natural Ash Brunette" about a hipster couple who takes a "Grow Your Own Cocaine class at the Y" and "I Cast a Shadow of a Sword over Sky & Sea," in which a clown is caught sodomizing a tiger in an apartment full of dragons and radioactive waste. This kind of title is like a prism refracting light, making us see the poem differently. What do you want a title to do for a poem?

**JLK:** It always changes. "I Cast a Shadow of a Sword over Sky & Sea" is a glimpse into the main character in the poem. It's what he tells himself—and he's a monster. My subconscious gave me "Nice 'n Easy Medium Natural Ash Brunette." The connection between that title and the poem is more intuitive. The title recalls the 1970s, back when the idea of something being "natural" was desirable and manufacturable. The couple in the poem are desperate for an authentic, or natural, experience, but everything they're doing is manufactured and purchased—yet they manage to connect with each other.

**JY:** In "The Laws of Probability in Levittown," the speaker (a poet) seems to be looking for the calculations that will lead to safety, figuring out the odds that a particular therapist will be "100% batshit nuts" and inventing equations like "10 rations = 1 decoration" and "10 monologues = 5 dialogues." Yet the speaker is trapped in uncertainty regarding even low-stakes decisions: "But I've been thinking I should / tip the Domino's kid more than a buck on 14. Should I?" Many people turn to poetry for comfort, but this speaker, given a choice between Robert Frost and Farrah Fawcett, chooses Farrah "because I knew what was going to happen and I was right." What can poetry's math help us calculate? Can poetry serve both as a place of reassurance and of uncertainty?

**JLK:** Oh, I like that! Poetry is the weirdest animal, or it can be. It moves however it wants, whenever it wants, like a cartoon—it's liquid. So it can pivot on a dime between soothing reassurance and terrifying uncertainty.

**JY:** In "The Ideal Reader for Jennifer L. Knox (A Fellow Down on His Luck)" that perfect reader "reads poetry only if he's going to be tested on this shit," like most of the general public. Do you aim for accessibility, for poems that everyday folks (not just MFA students) will enjoy?

**JLK:** This question is interesting. I've been asked it so many times. It's about diction and vernacular, but it's also about the perceived class bias of poets and poetry. It's why page poets diss spoken word poets. I write for all readers—not according to a theory or precedent. I suppose there must be poets who write only for poets, but I bet they're boring and snotty. I can't imagine it.

**JY:** On the one hand, humor and narrative make your poems very accessible and enjoyable, but often your humor is surreal, and something that's surreal doesn't always make sense. Do poems need to "make sense" to appeal to a wider audience?

**JLK:** Maybe. I just read an essay by Kazim Ali about Rupi Kaur, the young Instagram poet who's outselling Homer because she traffics in recognition—not epiphany. So poems that make readers think, "I know just how she feels!"—those poems will have better luck at drawing a wider audience. It's human nature to be drawn to a mirror of yourself, not a schism. But I've always liked it hardcore weird.

**JY:** Speaking of readers, what does your family think of your poetry? You get pretty raunchy sometimes. I mean, I'd say "Crawling Out of the Mouth of More" is a hard R, what with its (earmuffs, kids!) buttplugs and pussy vacuums and all. And actually, the word "pussy" appears pretty frequently in your work. Have you written anything you didn't want someone in particular to read? Are there any topics you wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole?

**JLK:** "Crawling Out of the Mouth of More" is a straight-up X. I really lucked out, because no one in my family ever read my work until very recently, but all I have to do is write another "Crawling Out of the Mouth of More" and they'll stop again. Magic! They've



never bought a book. My mom donated the copies of my books that I gave her to the library. When I sent books to my brother and he wrote back, "What do you want me to do with these?" I wrote, "Well, you could sell them on E-Bay. Somebody might think that buying three books personally signed 'To my brother' is hilarious and would scoop them up. That's what I did with the pictures of your kids that you sent."

**JY:** You could also sell those pictures to Awkward Family Photos.

Writers are told to write what they know, and most, I'd venture, do get inspiration from everyday experiences. What inspires poems with speakers who lick "a payphone—on accident" ("Reticence in the Afterglow of a Powerfully Frisky Fit") or who fondly remember having sex with a stepmother and her "withered leg" at age 12 ("The Clean Underwear/Ambulance Thing"), or who raise "a crocodile as one of [their] own" ("M' Is for the Tears of Meat She Shed Me")?

**JLK:** Maybe it's because I grew up in Southern California—land of mania and the id—but I'm interested in what drives the subconscious and compulsion. Like when my brain tells me to lick a payphone (I didn't), which I actually saw Julie Klausner do on an episode of "Difficult People," fifteen years after I wrote that. I was like, "Yep! I knew it! That's *a thing!*"

The wooden leg poem is 85% verbatim from an interview I saw with George Hamilton on the *Today Show*. Having sex with his step mother, loving it, the wooden leg, the whole bit. The crocodile: I just remembered where that poem came from! My dear friend, Jeff Eaton, gave me a vintage paperback nonfiction book called something super goofy like *That Crazy Squirrel, Kevin* about a family who adopts an injured squirrel and the hilarity that ensues. I loved how much chaos they put up with for this animal that absolutely did not belong in human home. One of my favorite books is *Ring of Bright Water*, another true totally inappropriate animal in the home story, which was also the first movie that ever made me cry hysterically as a child. So I switched the squirrel with a crocodile, which is so much more obviously inappropriate. I loved the idea of a inept pathological liar trying to manipulate this upstanding little family on Christmas eve.

Sometimes when I write about my life—like the poem "Cars" in which I describe some (not all, mind you) of the car accidents I've been in—people don't believe it. I guess I haven't lived an ordinary life. When I write about quieter, sadder times, like in "Hive Minds," those poems do seem to move people more than I anticipate. But hey, Jo, I cry *a lot*.

**JY:** There are more moments in *Days of Shame & Failure* that sound more autobiographical than in your earlier books. Is that my imagination? A trick of the light?

**JLK:** No, that's very accurate. Writing about myself is the greatest challenge, so I force myself to go there.

**JY:** What about the evolution of your work over four books has surprised you?

**JLK:** I'm not sure about the work's evolution, but as far as its perception goes, what's surprised me is how almost every review mentions the books' humor when they're mostly not funny and no one mentions all the violence!

**JY:** Let's talk about reading... Who are your poetry ancestors? What poets do you read for inspiration? And what new poets are you currently excited about?

**JLK:** My old go-tos are Tate, Stevens, Hugo, and Sexton. I'm currently reading and loving Victoria Chang, ca Conrad, Shane McCrae, Morgan Parker, and the selected Bill Knott.

**JY:** An excerpt of your "Culinary Memoirs of a Non-Chef" is up at *The Inquisitive Eater*, and (not surprisingly) it's hilarious. What different challenges does nonfiction present? Have your writing process and habits changed as you've taken on a new genre?

**JLK:** The memoir has been an absolute pleasure to write—unlike writing poems, which is often like giving birth to a creature that's never existed before. I have to write poetry very early in the morning, whereas non-fiction seems to like the afternoon better—after I've had a chance to talk to people.



**JY:** In “*Baywatch*” the speaker worries about valuing or remembering the wrong things after telling a joke “from a really dumb movie // I will remember—unlike my mother’s birthday— // for as long as I live.” Why do we always remember the dumb stuff? What do you worry about forgetting?

**JLK:** I think Patton Oswalt said it best. <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4tzz8x>

**JY:** Your project Iowa Bird of Mouth resulted in twelve crowd-sourced poems. What inspired the project?

**JLK:** People asking me, “How can I be creative?”

**JY:** The first poem in the series, “Poem for the American Goldfinch,” describes these birds that are “Found across North America, like beer, cheap motels, and Pokémon Go,” weaving together the different styles, forms, and rhythms of contributors’ lines and their wide-ranging references, from the Garden of Eden to Rob Lowe to a grandmother’s journal entry. The last poem honors the Great Blue Heron, described as “a hint of color in a cove” with “legs stroked by water, wings ready for air.” What surprised you about these poems written by over 750 people?

**JLK:** Everything. I can’t believe people did it and how amazing the poems are. I’m floored by it all. I can’t believe it happened to me and the world.

**JY:** Let’s end by looking ahead. If you were—no, when you *are*—the Poet Laureate of Iowa—no, the United States!—what will your project be?

**JLK:** Something public that everyone gets to participate in.

**JY:** And one last request: In “Instinct in the Age of Astrology” one dog reassures another “Darling, all horoscopes were originally created during the Civil War—just like shoe sizes. We’re simply too lazy to write new ones.” Write us a new horoscope.

**JLK:** “Give the mushrooms your place at the table. On your way out, kiss the animals goodnight.”