

## Poetic Reactions

Lawrence M. Lesser

*The University of Texas at El Paso*, Lesser@utep.edu

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## Poetic Reactions

### **Cover Page Footnote**

The author remains deeply grateful for the opportunity as a Rice University undergraduate to take a poetry course from Susan Wood.

# Poetic Reactions

Lawrence M. Lesser

*Department of Mathematical Sciences, The University of Texas at El Paso*  
Lesser@utep.edu

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## Dogs Know

A dog-eared *College Mathematics Journal* lies  
open to a paper called  
“Do dogs know calculus?”  
where the author’s canine travels land  
and water to reach most quickly  
the ball thrown  
into Lake Michigan.

I don’t live near a lake –  
I don’t know  
if my dog knows calculus, but I suspect . . .

My dog knows algebra, making  
series between me  
and the door I head for  
to take him  
for our morning walk.

My dog knows statistics,  
sniffing out trends  
in data left  
on lawns.

My dog knows probability by following me,  
knowing food  
most likely  
falls from me.

My dog knows geometry, solving  
the packing problem  
when there’s at most  
one place to join the whole  
family on the TV couch.

My dog knows trigonometry, tracking  
periodic rhythms  
of moon  
and heart.

50-50

In print, the magazine editor muses, "Every time  
I board a plane, I assume my chances  
are 50-50: either  
the plane lands safely, or it doesn't."

There it is again – the common  
misconception that  
outcomes must be  
equally  
likely.

I could blame  
his teachers and textbooks  
stuck in stale symmetry:  
quarters, cards, dice.

Now my choice:  
either I make  
a teachable moment  
or I don't.

I decide  
to ask that editor if he is just  
as quick to apply  
his view to rare events  
deemed delightful,  
like winning the lottery,  
finding one's soulmate,  
and world peace.

What is the chance I will find myself  
reflecting on sages who say most  
of us live  
a 50-50 life,  
spiritual scales  
in equipoise between  
merit and sin,  
awaiting  
our next choice?

(A student comes to terms with) the 'M word'...

I.

MATHEMATICS

Meteorologist's Mild,  
Measuring  
Money Markets,  
Mortgages,  
Microsoft Motherboards.

MATHEMATICS

Military  
Megaton  
Missiles  
Misguided.

MATHEMATICS

Mathematize  
Metastasize  
Median Mortality Models.

MATHEMATICS

Myopic Monastic  
Medieval  
Manmade.

MATHEMATICS

Mercator Map Misleading  
Manipulating  
Mechanical  
Menial  
Monotone  
Memorizing, Mimicking:  
Mindless  
Meaningless Merciless  
Mean.

MATHEMATICS

Mandatory Meticulous  
Midterm  
Magnifies  
Manic Minutes:  
Murky  
Messy  
Misstep Mistake  
Minus  
Mark:  
Mediocre.

II.

MATHEMATICS

Mentor

Mollifies

Misconceived

Myths.

Metacognition:

Moderate

Mediate

Meditate

Modulate

Motivate

Momentum,

Moving. . .

MATHEMATICS

Magnanimous

Magnificent

Majesty Manifest

Myriad Mysteries

Mozart Melodies

Mandelbrot Mountains

Mollusk-shells

Moth-wings

Mud-cracks

Moon-tides

Mesopotamian

Multiplication

Multiplicities

Metaphysics

Modus-tollens

Maneuvering

Mastering

Meritorious

Marvelous

MATHEMATICS

## Postscript

Some of my poems (and songs, for that matter) have real-world origins that turn mathematical, some have mathematical inspirations that spill into the real world, and some meet in the middle. One poem [7] was inspired by playing around with the smallest dataset with nonzero entries that I had identified [11] as illustrating Simpson's paradox, and another [9] by playing with permutations. One poem [8] was inspired by conducting a mathematics education research interview, one [12] by reading a book [2] on the life of Georg Cantor, and one [10] by accepting the challenge of Growney to write a 26-word acrostic poem as she did with her poem "ABC" [5].

In this issue of *JHM*, I present a new set of poetic reactions. "Dogs Know" takes the mathematical question posed by [14] (and engaged by [1, 13, 15]) as a point of departure to describe my experience as owner of a Xoloitzcuintli named Kelev. The "50-50" poem was conceived when my knowledge about equiprobability bias [6] was activated by a comment I came across in the editor's column [16] of a (non-mathematical) literary magazine.

The third poem in this new set is a poetic reaction to a performance art monologue [4] by Philadelphia-based psychotherapist/dancer/songwriter/performer Judy Freed from her one-woman show *Food Fight*, an exploration of ambivalent feelings some people have connected with food. In a similar vein, there are some students whose past experiences (e.g., [3]) result in their arriving to our courses with emotional baggage or limited views of our beautiful subject. And so Freed's piece consisting entirely of "F words" inspired me to write an extended poem using only "M words" to describe such a student's feelings and create a positive resolution. More generally, the existence of such students arguably further demonstrates the desirability of a more humanistic view of mathematics and its instruction.

## Acknowledgment

The author remains deeply grateful for the opportunity as a Rice University undergraduate to take a poetry seminar course from Susan Wood.

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