

# THE POET'S CORNER

*Janet Wong*



## POETRY IN A CHOCOLATE BAR: FINDING BEAUTIFUL LANGUAGE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

by Jenn Manak & Janet Wong

As the teaching profession becomes increasingly challenging, it is more important than ever to fill our days with activities that do double duty—that meet our curriculum requirements and also bring hope and joy to ourselves and our students. Taking text from something you love—and turning it into found poetry—is one way to do this. At the November 2017 NCTE convention in St. Louis, Jenn Manak, an associate professor at Rollins University, and I led a found poetry workshop on this topic.

### JM:

Found poetry is a type of poetry using the words already printed on book pages, magazine articles, or on items from our everyday lives—even chocolate bar wrappers. Found poets take interesting words and phrases from these texts and rearrange them to create a poem that brings new meaning to the words of the original text. By deconstructing and manipulating the words within a text, poets bring new life to these words as they reorganize them into found poems.

Blackout poetry, made popular by Austin Kleon, is created by blacking out words within a text to create a poem with the words that remain. Kleon, who describes himself as “a writer who make[s] art with words,” has written several best-selling blackout poetry books created by editing the text of newspaper articles with a permanent marker. The words that are not eliminated, but remain uncovered on the page, become the poem.

Below are some examples of found poems created by elementary students as well as my college students by reusing food packaging and candy wrapper labels. Here is an example of a second-grader’s found poem created by cutting out and rearranging the text from a Cinnamon Toast

Crunch cereal box and a fifth-grader’s blackout poem crafted from the words on a Campbell Chicken Soup can.



Being responsible  
on a journey  
mmm...crazy



Would you rather...  
Nutrition  
Or  
Great Flavors



Dainty in form  
When you crave  
Net weight  
And all other  
Are made  
Obtainable  
In our ideal modern  
Sunlit kitchen

**JW:**

What a great example of bringing joy into the classroom! The words “sunlit kitchen” alone generate a sense of vibrant, happy energy for me. Here is an example of a found poem that I created using words on a bag of Bean Box coffee.

**GLIDE**

*A found poem by Janet Wong*

Soft  
bold  
rich

Glide into your day  
on your toes

Make it a smooth ride

Love it



An easy approach with special appeal to younger students is to take a short poem—and make it even shorter. In the example below, I took “Cheering for Cocoa” by Ken Slesarik and circled words that could stand alone.

**CHEERING FOR COCOA**

by Ken Slesarik

It's cocoa, it's cocoa, come on kids, let's go!  
December 13th, it's the cocoa bean show!  
It's cocoa, it's cocoa, we love you, hello,  
on almonds, in pudding, and sweet cookie dough.  
It's cocoa, it's cocoa, so sip, drink, or eat.  
Hot cocoa in winter—my favorite treat!  
It's cocoa, it's cocoa, I'm glad we could meet  
and share yummy cocoa. It just can't be beat!

The process of constructing a found poem is a real-world exercise in close reading that helps students understand the essence of the poem.

**COCOA**

*A found poem by Janet Wong*

Sweet  
hot cocoa

Let's share—  
YUMMY

**JM:**

Found poetry meaningfully integrates reading and writing and provides our students with opportunities to appreciate and play with language. Our world is rich with texts filled with intriguing and

beautiful language—from science textbooks to our favorite coffee labels—that can be rediscovered and rearranged into found poetry.

**JW:**

Introducing students to found poetry with light-hearted texts is fun and easy—but by no means frivolous. By teaching found poem techniques, we are giving our students skills that they can later apply with serious texts such as news about tragic current events, where we have a strong need to express ourselves yet might have difficulty in finding the right words—or might not even have any idea, initially, of what we want to say. Here are the steps I followed to create “Parkland,” a found poem to help students think about the Parkland tragedy.

Step 1: I found an article that I wanted to use as the basic text and saved it to Pocket, a “read it later” service, where I made an ad-free PDF of it.

Step 2: I took a screen shot of one section of the PDF and highlighted words in that text selection. (I prefer highlighting or circling words over the Kleon’s blackout method, and find that doing it digitally, on my computer, gives me more freedom to experiment than using pen on paper.)

## From CNN:

The kids leading the current charge were aged 11 or 12 during 2012's Sandy Hook school massacre and their childhoods have been punctuated by mass shootings that seem to be happening more and more often. “These are unspeakable tragedies that they have had to grow up with and they are saying absolutely no more,” said Samitha Mukhopadhyay, the executive editor of Teen Vogue. “These kids are saying—our whole lives are in front of us and this is not the world we want to live in,” Mukhopadhyay said on CNN International's “Hala Goeuri Tonight” on Tuesday. So far, the activism that spilled over after the Parkland shooting has kept the issue at the center of political debate. It cracked up heat on the White House and congressional leaders. Its youthful leaders have avoided being tarnished by the polarization of America's current politics. In the process, they have established a template for their generation and offered a playbook for how victims of future mass shootings that are destined to occur can leverage their suffering for political effect. They've also offered a hint that despite the ill feeling and mistrust that pervades a bitter political era, America can still generate the idealism and renewal that has been the lifeblood of its democracy. “There is going to be a generation that is introduced to politics for the first time through the lens of guns,” said Peter Amster, executive director of the gun law reform group Giffords. “They are rejecting the notion that we are powerless. You have got kids standing up and speaking out and asking the adults in the room, asking the politicians why the hell aren't they doing anything to protect kids?” Amster said.

Text source: Collinson, Stephen. Parkland students move the needle even as Washington idles. 2018/18. Accessed from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/08/politics/parkland-students-guns-washington/index.html>

Step 3: I pieced the highlighted words together in a found poem.

**PARKLAND (a found poem)**

by Janet Wong

Our whole lives are in front of us

We want to live  
at the center of  
trust  
idealism and renewal

There is going to be  
reform

We are  
kids standing up  
and speaking out  
asking why

**JM:**

What a powerful found poem responding to such a tragic event.

Found poetry activities provide students with opportunities to notice, enjoy, and manipulate the words that surround them—on cereal boxes, in news articles, or within children’s books. Writing found poems develops a love of language in our students by guiding them to search for words that resonate with them and combining them into meaningful pieces of their own.

**ONLINE RESOURCES  
FOR COFFEE AND CHOCOLATE**

Bean Box  
<https://beanbox.co>

Candy Wrapper Archive  
<http://www.candywrapperarchive.com/>

**FOUND POETRY**

Slesarik, K. (2015). Cheering for cocoa. From *The poetry Friday anthology for celebrations* by Vardell, S. and Wong, J. Princeton, NJ: Pomelo Books. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/361625045064124807/>

**POCKET**

<https://getpocket.com/>

Kleon, A. (2014). *Show your work! 10 ways to share your creativity and get discovered.* New York: Workman.

Heard, G. (2012). *The arrow finds its mark: A book of found poems.* New York: Roaring Brook.

**REFERENCES**

Collinson, Stephen. Parkland students move the needle even as Washington idles. 2/28/18. Accessed from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/28/politics/parkland-students-gun-debate-washington/index.html>

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