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This interview was conducted with Janet Wong on July 30, 2017, in a meeting room at the Bellevue Regional Library in Bellevue, Washington. The interviewers are Nancy Johnson and Sylvia Tag.

**ST:** This is Sylvia Tag and Nancy Johnson, and we're here with Janet Wong at the Bellevue Public Library in downtown Bellevue, in the Children's Reading Room, sitting on children's chairs and a little, wonderful, teardrop squeaky table. We're delighted to be able to have the opportunity to hear from Janet. So I'm

going to turn it over to Janet. And maybe just a beginning prompt, you maybe want to start out with a poem, and then maybe talk a little bit about your journey early on into poetry.

**JW:** Okay. Well I have a poem to start with. It's called "Here We Go." You ready? This is in the voice of four characters that I created for the book called *Here We Go: A Poetry Friday Power Book*. And the four characters are Ameera, David, Jack, and Jenna.

“Here We Go”

We are the food drives,  
the walk-a-thons,  
the read-a-thons,  
the gardens.  
You start us  
with a dial-a-mile,  
a dollar-a-book,  
a hug, a smile,  
a bucket of soil.  
You give us life,  
you make us strong,  
you let everyone know  
they can belong—

We’re changing the world,  
a town at a time,  
a book and a dollar  
are muscles and a dime.  
We need who you are,  
we need what you know.  
Join us, will you?  
Here we go!

Alright, is that a good beginning -- to our talk here today?

**ST:** That’s a great beginning. Thanks.

**NJ:** So “Here We Go.” Step us into how you got to where you are right now with poetry.

**JW:** Well, 26 years ago I was a lawyer. I was the director of Labor Relations at Universal Studios Hollywood, and it was my job when I was there to negotiate nine different union

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contracts, including the Teamsters, and to fire people. I was firing about ten people a week on average. The scary part was it was starting not to bother me. And so one night I said to my husband, I think I'm becoming a mean person. And he said, Mm-hmm, yes, you are. I thought, you know, I want to do something different with my life. I want to do something important. I thought and I thought, and I couldn't think of anything more important than working with kids. But I had been a substitute teacher. When I was working my way through Yale Law School, one of my jobs was being a substitute teacher, and being a teacher is the very hardest job I have ever had. I knew I wouldn't make it as a teacher.

I didn't yet have a child of my own. Now I do. Now he's 25 years old. But I had a cousin who was 2 years old, and it was her birthday, so I took her to our local indie bookstore to look for a gift, and the next thing I knew I had an armload of picture books for two year olds that I wanted to buy for myself because I loved them so much. And the idea hit me, somebody wrote these books. Why couldn't I be one of those people? I didn't have any idea how write a book or how to get it published, but I thought, I can figure it out. I told my husband, I want to do this. I want to do this for a year, take a leave of absence, see if I can sell a book. And if so, then I'll keep on going. And if not, I'll go back to being a lawyer.

At the end of the year, I had a stack of 26 rejection letters, most of which did not even have my name, Dear Author, we regret to inform you your book is not right for our list. And I thought, wait a minute, I went to UCLA, I graduated summa cum laude. I went to Yale Law School, one

of the best law schools in the country, and I couldn't write a book for two year olds? I felt like a failure. I almost picked up the phone and told my boss I wanted to come back.

But I remembered what my husband had said the night before I quit my law job, he had said, Why don't you do this for a year, and it doesn't matter if you sell a book. Why don't you do this for a year, and if you love it, then keep doing it. And I did love it. I do love it. I love the way that when you write, you can create your own world. I love the way that when you write, you can take the worst thing that happened to you last week and change the ending. And so, I kept on writing, and six months past my own deadline, a year and half after I got started, my first book, *Good Luck Gold*, was sold.

**NJ:** So how did you -- so that's poetry. Were you always writing poetry -- even the rejections -- was it always poetry? What's the intro to poetry for you?

**JW:** Well, I was not writing poetry. I was writing picture books. I wanted to write and sell the next *Goodnight Moon*. The bulk of what I sent out were picture book manuscripts. But I came into poetry because one month after I started, I took a one-day class, a UCLA Extension, wanting to learn, not anything about poetry really, but just how to write better, and how to sell something. There was an editor speaking at the end of the day about the acquisition process, and that's what I wanted to know. But right before lunch, Myra Cohn Livingston got up to speak, and I had no idea who she was. Myra Cohn Livingston, the name meant nothing to me.

She got up, she said that she was the author of over 80 books of poetry, and I thought, oh no, poetry.

(Laughter)

**JW:** I started looking out the window and daydreaming and doodling, and then she read a poem of hers called “There Was a Place,” from a book by the same name, which is now out of print. Poetry goes out of print faster than any genre. She read “There Was a Place,” and I started blinking back tears, and I thought, wow, if that little poem can make me feel so much inside, I know there’s something I can learn from this woman. But I didn’t want to learn poetry.

(Laughter)

**JW:** So it wasn’t until 26 rejection letters that I decided -- maybe if I learned about rhyme and repetition and rhythm, those poetic devices, maybe then I could write the next *Goodnight Moon*. So I signed up for Myra Cohn Livingston’s beginning class in poetry at UCLA Extension. And the first day of class when we went around the room and introduced ourselves, the way many people do in seminar settings, the first day I actually had the nerve to say, well, or I was so oblivious, that I said, Oh I’m not really here to learn to write poetry. I’m here to sharpen my prose --

**ST:** Oh lord.

**JW:** Right. -- because I really want to write picture books. And you can imagine how silent it became in the room, because this was a room of maybe 20 people, 15 of whom had taken the class 3 or 4 or 5 times already --

**NJ:** Oh wow.

**JW:** -- with Myra, because Myra taught two classes, the beginning class and the master class. And the master class in poetry was invitation only. There was very little attrition in the master class, and so the result was you had people taking the beginning class for years and years and years. They all looked at me. It was very quiet. Only later did I realize what they probably were thinking when they were looking at me. But, anyway, when I told Myra that I was really surprised and upset that I hadn't been able to sell a book yet, she said to me, You're not ready to be published. This was after, say, eight weeks of studying with her. You're not ready to be published. And I said, When will I be ready? And she said, I will tell you. And I said, Well, how will you know?

(Laughter)

**JW:** She said, Periodically, you'll send me poems, and I will write you back, and I will let you know if you are ready. And actually, she sold my first book for me. The way she did this, she actually, she called me one day and said, Guess what I did last night. And I thought, This is very peculiar. Number one, Myra's calling me? She never called me. She was calling me? Then for her to be so conversational. Myra was an incredibly generous person, but very formal with

most of us. So I said, What did you do? And she said, I sold your book for you. And I said, Oh, who did you sell it to? And she said, Margaret McElderry. Margaret McElderry was staying at her house, to attend the Arbuthnot Lecture, I think. Or maybe she was giving the Arbuthnot Lecture at that time, because I think she actually gave one.

**ST:** Do you remember the year?

**JW:** This would have been 1993, I think.

**ST:** That's close enough, we can --

**JW:** I think actually it would have been April '93.

**NJ:** The last time it was west coast.

**JW:** Right. Because I believe that I sold my first book one week before my son was born, so this would have been March of '93. We'll have to look it up.

**NJ:** Yes.

**ST:** We'll do that after.

**JW:** Alright. So anyway, that was my -- that's how my first book got sold, *Good Luck Gold*. But I did want to write picture books, and I kept on writing picture book manuscripts in addition to poetry collections. I kept on writing picture book manuscripts. My first picture book came out as book number six of mine, but it was actually book number two or three that I sold, but then it took a little while for it to get placed with an illustrator and for the illustrator to finish it.

**NJ:** Which book was that?

**JW:** That was, I think that was *Buzz*, illustrated by Margaret Chodos-Irvine.

**ST:** So I have a clarification. When Myra Cohn Livingston did this, you didn't know she thought so highly of your poetry? You were surprised that she was --

**JW:** I was shocked!

**ST:** Okay. So she had somehow -- you were taking the class, but she hadn't praised you --

**JW:** I was shocked. The only praise I got from Myra was nine weeks into studying with Myra, I finally got a mark on one of my poems. They didn't have any marks on them. I would turn in a thick stack of homework, and the poems would come back totally unmarked. And I would wonder, is she even reading my poems? I would have preferred red ink all over, but nothing. And then finally, nine weeks into studying with Myra, I got what looked like "u.q." -- what looked like a lowercase "u.q." and I thought, "u.q."? What does this mean? I went up to Myra after class and I said, Excuse me, Myra, this week you put a mark on one of my poems. It's a "u.q." And she said, That's "v.g.," dear.

(Laughter)

**JW:** You got it, but I didn't. I looked at her blankly, and she said, Very good. That was the epitome of praise from Myra, I think. I would love to know if somebody else got better than that "u.q." or "v.g."

(Laughter) I wonder, what would have been better than "v.g."?

**NJ:** How long did you study with her?



**JW:** I studied with Myra for, let's see, I think a year and a half. But I have to think about that because, you see, when Andrew was born, I took a little break. I took a little break from studying with Myra, and then when I moved up to Seattle at the end of, let's see, '95, December of '95, that's when I really started to fall out of touch with Myra completely. But then she passed away very shortly after that. I think she passed away in '96, if I remember.

**NJ:** So in addition to the "u.q." and the fact that she sold your first book, did you hear from her about any of your other work?

**JW:** Periodically. And actually, even today, I'm reminded of things that she said to me then. She was like the stern grandmotherly-type figure in a way, or a godmother-type figure. Even today, if I'm writing something and I'm reading it over to evaluate it, sometimes I'll hear Myra say, Can you put a little more music into it? If it's too prose-like, prosy, then that was one thing she would always say, Can you put a little more music in? So it didn't have to rhyme, but there had to be some musical element. So if you didn't use rhyme, then some repetition, or could you improve the rhythm so that it held the poem together. Or if not that, could you at least pack it a little bit more tightly with sound, with assonance and consonance. And Myra always used to say, You need to know the rules before you break them. You know, that thing that so many people who advocate learning the rules like to say. But I am so grateful that she taught us the rules. We would do exercises in her class where she would say, Homework this week is to write in anapests and use tetrameter. And so I learned those things that some people know

instinctively, but I needed to learn. And doing those exercises, the benefit of doing those exercises, I think, still remains in me.

**NJ:** What poem got the “v.g.”?

**JW:** Ah, the poem that got the “v.g.” is in *Good Luck Gold*, my first book, “Waiting at the Railroad Cafe.” I think the reason this got the “v.g.” is because before this poem, I was writing mainly funny, lighthearted poems that had nothing to do with my real life, because what sells? Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky, funny poems. That’s what kids like to read, that’s what families buy for their kids. This was the first poem that I had written about something serious, something that had happened to me, and something that was a painful memory even. “Waiting at the Railroad Cafe,” and this is based on something that happened to me somewhere between 8th and 9th grade when I traveled with my father. We went from Los Angeles up to Yellowstone, went into a small diner by the railroad tracks, walked in. There were about a dozen people sitting down. We stood there in the “Please wait to be seated.” We stood there and we waited and waited and waited to be seated. No one looked at us, no one seated us, so we seated ourselves. The waitress passed by and -- the waitress was passing by and we never were served. We seated ourselves but we never were served.

“Waiting at the Railroad Cafe”

All the white kids are eating.  
“Let’s go, Dad,” I say.  
“Let’s get out of this place.”  
But Dad doesn’t move.  
He’s going to prove  
the Asian race  
is equal. We stay  
and take our silent beating.

He folds his arms  
across his chest  
glaring at the waitresses who  
pass by like cattle  
ready for a western battle.  
They will not look, they refuse to  
surrender even to my best  
wishing on bracelet charms.

“Consider this part of your education,”  
Dad says. I wonder how long  
we’ll be ignored, like hungry ghosts  
of Chinese men who laid this track,  
never making their journeys back  
but leaving milestones and signposts  
to follow. “Why do they treat us so wrong?”  
I wonder. “Don’t they know we’re on vacation?”

A drunk shouts at us and  
gets louder and redder  
in the face  
when we pay  
him no mind. I say  
“Let’s get out of this place.  
We’re not equal. We’re better,”  
as I pull Dad by the hand.

So that's the poem that got the "v.g." And it encouraged me to start writing poems from my real experience, writing poems about childhood memories, and not being afraid to write poems that weren't funny. It really changed the way I wrote.

**ST:** Did you share that poem with your dad?

**JW:** I didn't read it aloud, but this, *Good Luck Gold*, I think is possibly still my first in my, of my two dozen-plus books, I think this is still his favorite. I think it is. And maybe that poem is why. Although actually, that book also has a poem that he doesn't like very much.

(Laughter)

**JW:** Can I read it? It's a poem he doesn't like very much, but it made my mother laugh. It's called, "Dad." It's about anger management. It goes like this:

"Dad"

Watch out.  
Mad, he snaps  
like a turtle.  
His face blows up  
round.  
His mouth thins  
to a frown.  
He sticks his neck out  
in a dare.  
Beware.  
Quick as he strikes,  
he draws back,  
hiding in his tough  
hard shell.

Funny he didn't like that poem, I think.

(Laughter)

**JW:** I don't know. We never really talked about it.

**NJ:** In your study of poetry as a grownup, I'm curious, did you ever look back at how you were taught poetry? Do you remember being taught poetry as a kid? Did any of that come back to you? Or did it all just start when you were an adult?

**JW:** I remember being in 4th grade and standing in front of the class, reciting or trying to recite a poem that I should have memorized, and feeling mortified because I'd forgotten the poem. I think that was the moment I decided I hated poetry. So when I heard that Myra was going to talk about poetry that day at UCLA Extension, that's why I thought, Oh no, I'm not interested in that. Starting in 4th grade, I think I hated poetry.

But Myra changed that. Part of it too is, in all fairness to poetry, I didn't know enough poems. I didn't know enough poetry. The poems that we share with kids today are very different than most of the poems that I studied back in the 1960s, very, very different.

**ST:** I think study is a good word choice, actually, because it did often feel like a study of poetry. We had young nursery rhymes, and then all of a sudden it shifted to study versus play, with language, which is very different, hopefully. Some things that are happening today, which is part of the work that you've sort of transitioned into certainly over the years.

**JW:** Right. Well, one big difference is that most of us, 20-plus years ago when we were learning poetry, learned it as part of a poetry unit. And today, teachers are sharing poetry all throughout the year, any day of the week, and maybe Poetry Fridays. But I think that's a huge difference, not having it sequestered as a unit.

**NJ:** Could you talk, then, before we totally go to Poetry Fridays, about how from this one book - then what are the kinds of things happening, could you lead us to the kind of work that you do now, to your connection with Sylvia, for example, to your commitment to teacher education, for example. Can you kind of take us there.

**JW:** Well my first several, maybe, I think several, first few or several books of poems, poetry collections, all were very much inspired by childhood memories and family stories. So for instance, *Good Luck Gold*, *A Suitcase of Seaweed*, *The Rainbow Hand*, *Behind the Wheel*, they all have a lot of poems with ties to my childhood. Then, after that, came books that were inspired by topics. So, *Night Garden: Poems From the World of Dreams*, *Knock on Wood: Poems About Superstitions*, *Twist: Yoga Poems*. And then, my third phase of my poetry career would be the *Poetry Friday Anthology* phase. And now, the new phase, the 4th phase, is the *Poetry Friday Power Book* series, where we tried to inspire young writers and readers both.

I'll give you an example of one the poems highlighting a family story. When kids ask, What's your favorite poem, of yours, of your own? I often will answer with "GongGong and Susie," which is the poem that I wrote to document one of the stories that my grandfather used to tell

around the dinner table. He told this story so many times. Well, in this poem I actually blend two stories, one of his tried and true dinnertime stories with a story that he told once about his dog Susie and how she had a little tangle with a skunk. Here's the poem. And just to set the scene for this, I'm half Chinese and half Korean. My Chinese grandfather, my GongGong, is the one that I was really close to because my Chinese grandparents lived in Los Angeles, and I was born in Los Angeles, raised in Los Angeles, so I got to know them really well. I spent a lot of time with my GongGong. He came to this country in the 1920s, worked on farms in California, picking fruit, cutting asparagus, saving his money. Every time he had a bundle of money saved, he would send it home to China. Consequently, because he had been sending his savings on a regular basis, in 1929, when the stock market crashed and we were launched into the Depression, he had no savings, he soon became unemployed, no work, no work on the farms, and nowhere to live. And so what could he do for food? Where did he live? Well, he used to tell a story, and I put it down in "GongGong and Susie." Here it goes

"GongGong and Susie"  
from *A Suitcase of Seaweed*

Susie sure is good  
watchdog.  
Got to be.  
I treat her right.  
Last night  
almost  
kill a skunk.

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Did I tell you?  
Many times  
I did eat  
skunk  
soup.  
Take out them  
stinky thing,  
cook  
with garlic, onion.  
Skunk, snake, night owl,  
I eat them  
all.  
It was Depression time.  
No work, nothing  
to do.  
We hunt, we fish, we camp.

Hey Susie, Susie,  
want to eat  
some chow  
mein?

And my grandfather used to cook chow mein noodles for us. He'd cook up a big pan of noodles, serve one-third of the pan on a plate to me, one-third of the pan on a plate for himself, and the remaining third would go on a plate for Susie, who was a very round dog.

(Laughter)

**JW:** You know, when I perform that poem, all of a sudden, for 30 seconds, my grandfather is alive again. He lived until he was 98 years old, a good long life. I tell kids, when I'm at schools, I preface this, I like to sandwich, often sandwich poems in just a little bit of story, or just a little



bit of talk to hope to hook the listeners in some way. So I'll often open with saying, How many of you know an old person who loves to tell stories? Oh, and the hands go up. And I'll say, How many of you know an old person who loves to tell the same old story? And even more hands go up. And then I'll say, You know, my grandfather used to love to tell a story. I put it into this poem. Let me perform that. Then I'll perform the poem, and then sandwiching it, so then the bottom layer I'll ask, after I've read the poem, I'll ask or I'll say, So next time you see that old person you know who loves to tell stories, ask for a story. Maybe you'll ask, What's the weirdest thing you ever ate? Maybe you'll ask, What did you used to do in the summer when you were a kid? Maybe you'll ask, What was your first job? Then I'll tell the kids, When they tell you a story, stop, turn your ears into tape recorders and get those words down, just the way they're spoken, and chances are that will be one of the best poems or stories you'll ever write.

**ST:** Do you hear back from school, some children? Do they write to you? Do they -- how do they come, and do they want to tell you about their family, their old person, their plans, or what happens next?

**JW:** More often when I first started, kids would come up to me and tell me little things. Actually, one comment that I really, really loved was a girl who came up to me and said, You know, your Chinese grandmother, she is just like my Norwegian grandmother. They could be sisters. I really loved that. I don't know if it's something about the way I do my presentations now or the tighter schedule that I allow now, or sometimes I'll go back to back to back to back

with assembly and workshop and workshop and workshop, or if it's the fact that the school day is so crunched and they're so pressed for time, that we don't have that leisurely -- we don't have 10 minutes of passing time, just 10 minutes of empty time for them to come and chat and say something. Every once in a while now when a kid does come up, within 30 seconds, he's yanked back into line, and you know, and it's like, we gotta go. And so, I hope that they're thinking things and wondering things. I do get lots of mail from kids. But too often the mail seems a little bit scripted, and I think that that also has to do with how little time there is for "extraneous things" that maybe there's time in the school day for writing a thank you note to the author. So that's what we're going to do. You have 5 minutes, guys, let's write your thank you note to the author. I'll get lovely, lovely notes, but not quite the free form, rambling letters that I used to get that do take time, not just to write but also to think up.

**ST:** Extraneous and extemporaneous.

**JW:** Right.

**ST:** That those go hand and hand in some ways, that the lack of one and the lack of the other.

**JW:** Right. But I should say, that's actually one reason why now I'm spending all my time doing the Poetry Friday work. I'm spending almost all my time doing Poetry Friday work now. So five years ago, Sylvia Vardell and I started the *Poetry Friday Anthology* series.

**NJ:** Can we back up?

**JW:** Yes.

**NJ:** How did you two connect? I'd like to know how, before you started the series, somehow you had to know each other.

**JW:** We met each other because years and years ago, I think when I had only one book out. I think only *Good Luck Gold*, I'm pretty sure. An author friend of mine told me that she had heard Sylvia Vardell sharing poems from *Good Luck Gold*. And she said, Oh, this Sylvia Vardell person really loves your poetry. And I thought, oh, I should contact this Sylvia Vardell person and thank her. So I think maybe it had been at maybe IRA or NCTE, more likely NCTE, where Sylvia had shared some of my poems from my first book, and I tracked her down. Even then I don't think that, I don't think I had the Internet back then, but maybe I did. That would have been 1995 probably. I wrote her a thank you note. Now, if you were to ask Sylvia, she has a very different version of this. She thinks that she came up to me at a signing at a conference and introduced herself as a fan of my work. But I know how it really happened.

(Laughter)

And how it really happened was I wrote her the thank you letter, and then later, I think, she met me at a signing and then invited me on a panel. I think I did a couple of panels actually with Sylvia and Terrell Young and Nancy Hadaway, together, and then we did several sessions. I really got to know Sylvia when she was co-chair along with Peggy Oxley -- of the NCTE Poetry Committee. I was one person on the committee, the NCTE Poetry Committee, and she was at that time also active in CLA -- which she later clued me into and I became active. But when she

was co-chair of that committee, we actually elected, or not elected -- we awarded the Excellence in Poetry Award to Nikki Grimes. That was Nikki's year. And we kept in touch. Then when I continued on that committee with Ralph Fletcher as the chair, our committee chose Lee Bennett Hopkins. We actually had to rewrite, had to request permission to rewrite the award guidelines in order to be able to give the award to someone who was primarily an anthologist, to recognize that person for that. So we rewrote the guidelines and then gave the award to Lee Bennett Hopkins.

Then we wanted to do something very special for Lee, and I said, you know, maybe Sylvia would help us with this. Sylvia Vardell and I ended up putting together a tribute book for Lee Bennett Hopkins. That was our first collaboration. We created these little booklets that NCTE paid for. It was a lot of fun. We had, I think, I think we had over 90 poets contributing pieces in honor of Lee Bennet Hopkins. We had a fun session. I smuggled in apple cider, sparkling apple cider, and balloons. I got hats that said "poet." And Sylvia wanting not to serve the apple cider in regular plastic glasses insisted that we get little plastic champagne flutes, which we did. And that was really, I think, the start of our collaboration.

**NJ:** You both have class. You know how to do it.

**JW:** I guess she would say she knew how to do it. But I was really good at smuggling in the stuff.

(Laughter) It was a pretty special celebration.

**NJ:** So then, what was your first collaborative work with *Poetry Friday*?

**JW:** Well, actually, to back up.

**NJ:** Okay.

**JW:** After the tribute book for Lee, which was given away not sold, we decided to do e-books, because I had this idea in my mind that if we could sell poetry for 99 cents, that people would just snatch it up the way they do a Beyoncé song. Wouldn't they? I was convinced that they only needed to be given poetry anthologies that cost 99 cents. And I sprung this idea on a bunch of poets one night, and Lee Bennett Hopkins was there, and we all talked about it. And all these poets came on board, including Lee, but then Lee said, You have to pay the poets, Janet. And I said, But, Lee, we're going to be selling this for 99 cents, how can we pay the poets? And he said, Then pay us a penny, but you have to pay us. And so the first one, I think, was -- I don't know if it was a penny a copy or if it was two. I think it was a penny a copy, yes. And we did three e-books. They were called *Poetry Tag Time*, *p\*tag*, and *Gift Tag*. And they were for sale until recently on Amazon.

But we took them down because the royalty accounting was so incredibly complicated. In order to calculate something like 78 cents a year per poet, it took me like, you know, five or six days per book, just because royalty accounting is not my strong suit. And so, poets, you don't know this yet, but we took those books down. Sorry, sorry.

After that, we decided maybe people were not interested in e-books in the children's poetry community, and maybe it would be better to stick with books in paper format. After some of my books went out of print and the rights reverted to me, I brought them out in paperback reprints that are available on Amazon through CreateSpace. I told Sylvia, if we want to start just producing anthologies, I know how to do it because I've put *Good Luck Gold* and *A Suitcase of Seaweed*, these books that have gone out of print, I've put -- I've brought them back to life and put them up on Amazon using CreateSpace.

So when she came to me with a little nugget and came -- she has a different version of this, too. Anyway, when she came to me with -- this is the true version -- with this little nugget, where she said, Texas has put poetry on the standardized test for the first time, and students are being required to learn poetry TEKS, T-E-K-S. It stands for Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. She said, I'm getting emails from former students of mine or practicing librarians who now are responsible for supporting their colleagues with instruction in the poetry TEKS, and they don't know how they're able to do this with 5 extra minutes a week. How can you teach poetry in 5 minutes a week? And I said, We can do it. I'll get the poems. I know the poets. I've been doing this for 20 years. I know the poets. I will ask them to give us poems. We'll have all original, never before published poems, and then you will write a mini lesson for each poem that will tell how a teacher or librarian can teach this poem in an easy, engaging, quick way. And everybody will love poetry even more than they do today. So we started with the *Poetry*

*Friday Anthology for K-5*, which was available both in a TEKS version, and since the TEKS are very similar to the Common Core, we also have a Common Core version. Then after the *K-5* was successful, we decided to do a middle school version. Then we did a *Poetry Friday Anthology for Science*, and then we did one for *Celebrations*. And so that's the *Poetry Friday Anthology* concept and series.

But what we've recently branched into is the *Poetry Friday Power Book* series, where -- did Sylvia tell you about this?

**ST:** Not at all, no, so please.

**NJ:** Of course, you can tell the real --

**JW:** Yes, I can tell the real story without any contradiction.

(Laughter)

**JW:** Dear listener, here's the real story. So what we have in the *Poetry Friday Power Books* is a story told in poems. I take 12 anchor poems, poems by different poets. So for instance, *You Just Wait* has poems by Carmen Bernier-Grand, Joseph Bruchac, Jen Bryant, Margarita Engle, Robyn Hood Black, Charles Ghigna, Avis Harley, Julie Larios, Amy Ludwig VanDerwater, Charles Waters, Virginia Euwer Wolff. And I take those 12 poems, and I link them together in a story that I create using characters inspired by those anchor poems. The story in each book is divided into 12 PowerPacks. Each PowerPack has five components: the anchor poem, two response poems, a pre-writing activity that gets the whole thing started that Sylvia Vardell creates, and

then a writing prompt that ties the PowerPack up. You've got the pre-writing activity, anchor poem, response poem, response poem, writing prompt. And with these PowerPacks, kids are encouraged to read and then write. But first you get their pencils moving in the pre-writing activity, which might just be drawing, which might just be drawing lines through words that they don't like or circling words that they do like, which might be in one of the younger ones going through a word, through a maze. Just to get their minds moving and their pencils moving with the pre-writing activity. Then the anchor poem, the two response poems. And then with the writing prompt, they're raring to go. By that time, they've heard three poems, they're thinking, well, I have something to say about that. So for instance, in *You Just Wait*, Margarita Engle -- well, in *You Just Wait*, the first PowerPack starts with a power play activity that says, check the boxes. And they're all kind of boxes. Check all the boxes that are true for you or for someone who is special to you. So if this is too personal, you don't have to do it about yourself or someone who is special to you. Then, there are a wide variety of boxes, everything from athletic, cousin, vegetarian, redheads, to LGBTQ, sports fan, band member, cheerleader, you know, all kinds of things. And blank lines where they can check a box and write in whatever applies to them. They might check a box and say, chicken wing eater, right, whatever it is. Then they -- so their minds think -- their minds are whirring right now, and they're wondering, who am I, anyway? Then, they turn the page and see,



“Who Am I?”  
by Margarita Engle.

Each time I have to fill out a form  
that demands my ethnic origin, I try  
to do the math. Half this, half that,  
with grandparents who were probably  
half something else or maybe  
a quarter  
or an eighth.

Why do forms always ask  
*what* I am, instead of asking  
*who*?

And then, my Response Poem is written in the voice of Paz, one of the characters that I created,  
and her poem is:

“I Am.”

I am a runner.  
I am a soccer player,  
sister to Joe, a basketball star.  
I like to dream of myself  
making it far,  
a future scientist.  
A Nobel winner.  
Why not me?

But wait—  
this form doesn’t really care  
about who I really am  
and what I do or don’t do—

All this form wants to know is:  
what kind of  
*other*  
are YOU?

Then the Mentor Text, my mentor poem, also written in the voice of Paz.

“Today I Am”

Today  
I am  
someone who ate ice cream for breakfast  
someone who dresses like a panda (black and white)  
someone who hates the smell of banana peels in the class trash  
someone who carries way too much in my backpack  
someone who carries way too much in my head.

And then facing that is the “Today I Am” Power 2 You writing prompt, where Sylvia writes, Now describe yourself using the same poem skeleton, but filling in words and details that apply to you to create a new poem. And then there’s Today I am someone who blank, someone who blank, someone who blank, someone who blank, someone who blank.

“Today I Am”

(poem with repetition)

Now describe yourself using the same poem skeleton, but filling in words and details that apply to you to create a new poem.

Today  
I am  
someone who  
someone who  
someone who  
someone who  
someone who

The things that people come up with really are inspiring. And this work that I’m doing today, this work is especially gratifying to me because of what I was saying earlier about how the

school day is so tight and there's not really room, or at least a lot of teachers are feeling there's not really room for "something extra," and poetry is considered by too many people as "something extra." Well here I can say, You might not think you have 30 seconds for poetry, but do you have 30 seconds to teach writing? Or in *Pet Crazy*, a brand new *Power Book* coming out next month, there are hidden language skills, and each PowerPack highlights some kind of hidden language skill. For instance, PowerPack 1 has they're, their, there: they're, as in they are, contracted; their, like their property; and there, as in there is a place; right? I can say to someone new, You might think you don't have time, have 30 seconds to teach poetry, but do you have 30 seconds to teach the difference between they're, their, and there? Do you have 30 seconds to teach antonyms? Do you have 30 seconds to teach number words, like seven, one, to just teach the spelling of number words? Do you have 30 seconds to teach quotation marks? Because these basic building blocks of language learning can be taught using poetry. And I think that that is the way to bring a whole new generation, not just of readers but of teachers to poetry, by showing teachers, you can teach math in 30 seconds with a poem. I have a poem by Heidi B. Roemer that teaches median, mode, and mean in 30 seconds. Can you do that? Otherwise, probably not as well. I have a poem that can teach what radium is in 30 seconds. I have a poem that can teach you about electromagnetic radiation in 30 seconds. So please use these tools. And if you think you're not crazy about poetry and you don't have time for poetry,

you can just use these tools and disregard the poetic elements and use them for the information. So, that's what we're doing with *Poetry Friday*. And I hope that it works.

**NJ:** What do you think Myra Cohn Livingston would say?

**JW:** Myra Cohn Livingston would probably say, Oh my.

**NJ:** No "v.g."?

(Laughter)

**JW:** I think she would say, Oh my, can't we just let children enjoy poetry? And I would say, Myra, in an ideal world, we could. But the fact is, too many teachers today feel so pressed for time, and they feel that they need to just check off the different items that they're teaching. If we can help them check off those Common Core elements and say, Alright, you want to teach this -- Actually, in the *Poetry Friday Anthology*, we have them listed. But I'll say, You want to teach RL.3.5.1? Here you go. You can do it in 5 minutes, check it off, and you're done for the year. You're free. So I would say, Myra, in a perfect world, yes, let's just read the poems. But in an imperfect world where we do have standards and teachers are being evaluated, let's help our teachers out and give them the tools to address their needs, and hopefully make some poetry fans along the way. That's what I would tell Myra. Myra would still frown at me. One day -- she used to have these great potluck lunches at her house for the master class group, and they would be at her house, and everyone would bring a different dish, and Myra would have her fine china and cloth napkins. And I used to feel so bad. Even in restaurants, I

actually feel bad about using cloth napkins. It's not that -- I know that cloth napkins are more environmentally friendly, supposedly, but, you know, you do have to wash them. And Myra's cloth napkins were pressed, and so it takes energy to press them and time. So one potluck, I actually brought some very attractive, fancy, paper napkins. At the beginning of the potluck, I said, Myra, I brought you a present. I gave her the fancy napkins, and I thought she was going to say, Those are so beautiful. They are unlike any paper napkins I have ever seen in my life. She instead looked at them and said, Well, that's nice, and put them aside, and we used the cloth napkins. Sorry, Myra.

**ST:** She was her own person.

**JW:** Yes, she was.

**NJ:** That's right, that's right. Do you have one more poem that you --

**JW:** I have one more poem.

**NJ:** Do you want to close with that?

**JW:** Yes, I will close with that. This is a poem called "Ears," and -- Are you superstitious?

**ST:** Uh, yes, I could be a little bit superstitious, actually.

**JW:** Yes?

**ST:** I hate to admit it. Not obsessively so, but yes, I pay attention sometimes.

**JW:** Are you superstitious?

**NJ:** Not obsessive, but of course there are certain things.

**JW:** So when your ears itch, what do you think about that?

**ST:** That someone's talking about you?

**NJ:** About us.

**JW:** Yes, you've heard that too? Have you heard that when your right ear itches, it means something different than when your left ear itches?

**ST:** No.

**JW:** Ah. Well, this is what it means.

"Ears"

from *Knock on Wood*

Your right ear itches? Let it be.  
Someone talks about you now,  
how kind you are, smart, how good.  
Let it be, let songs be sung.

Your left ear itches? Pinch it quick.  
Someone talks about you now,  
how mean you are, dumb, how bad.  
Pinch it, let him bite his tongue.

So just a word to you, dear listener, say only good things about us, and spread the word about PoetryCHaT, because we want Nancy's and Sylvia's ears to be itching, the right ears only, all the time. So let's clap for you.

(Clapping, laughter)

(End of audio recording)

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