



A Rattlesnake Story

Paulann Petersen

Kim Matthews Wheaton,
The Far Ridge in Winter

A RATTLESNAKE STORY

— for Mabel McKay, Pomo medicine woman,
master basket-maker, last Cache Creek Pomo speaker

she has an ancestor her mother's uncle died long ago
who comes to her in dreams years before she was born
while she sleeps he gives her songs she thinks about him anyway
one night he gives her a rattlesnake song awake she recalls dreaming of him
he says the song will bring snakes to her that morning she hears whirring
but the rattlers will never harm her a faint thrum is in her ears
she sees one rattlesnake then another she thinks about her dream
then a third she thinks it strange how a dream can twist and sidle
so many snakes are in one spot she remembers the dream-thing
how can so many be so near a creature glinting as it moves
they appear inside her house with a luster fine as beadwork
she asks her uncle about them the next day she's outside
why are these snakes now inside where she gathers sedge roots
when she isn't singing the song for making her baskets
he says it makes no difference her mind isn't on her dream
they'll be with her if she sings the gathering goes quickly
if she doesn't they'll still be there she loops the supple roots
the song will be with her always in a bundle she can carry home
soon rattlers are everywhere she begins weaving with a one-rod coil
snakes slithering in her house working on her porch she can hear
two wound around a table leg a rustling coming from under the oaks
a snake meanders under her bed the start on her first basket goes awry
people stop coming to see her again she attempts the tiny first coil
even friends are staying away without that spiral she has nothing
she talks to her uncle saying she's been working for several days
snakes are all well and good not ever leaving her house
but these are different times time to add quail plumes
her friends are all afraid to finish with bits of shell
the snakes make them jumpy she pauses distracted
her uncle asks what she wants under an oak out front
does she want the song taken away wisps of grass waver
she says yes take the snake song back a rattlesnake rivers itself
so the dream-snakes begin to retreat through yellowed blades
in their own way they disappear cooler weather will come
the song coils tight inside her sending snakes back home
farther within her the heat does break
the snakes stay those rattlers soon go
 where they belong

deep inside her
they belong



Photo by Rose Lefebvre

Paulann Petersen, Oregon Poet Laureate Emerita, has six full-length books of poetry, with a seventh, *One Small Sun*, scheduled to be published by Salmon Press of Ireland in March, 2019. The Latvian composer Eriks Esenvalds chose a poem from her book *The Voluptuary* as the lyric for a choral composition that's now part of the repertoire of the Choir at Trinity College Cambridge.

Editor's Note: "A Rattlesnake Story" is a concrete poem. To read it in its proper form please view it on a desktop or laptop.





