



# 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.







