

## Shake, **RATTLE PACKET**, and Roll

Welcome to *Rattle* #62. Since PE began PE members have been making and sharing poetry. Many of you have probably seen the anthologies we print every 6 months. We also have book clubs where we mail multiple copies of the same book and then have a discussion through the mail about it. Two summers ago, Samantha, a student worker, was working on the Slaughterhouse Five book club project. She showed it to her mom. As it happens her mom, a poet had a chapbook published by Rattle. Elizabeth [the mom] offered us copies of her book to have a book club poetry project. She provided a description on how to write a chap book and we sent it out with the poetry book she wrote, "Did You Know". She received 48 chapbooks submissions written by PE members.

Elizabeth was taken with your work and shared it with Tim, the editor at Rattle. Lo and behold, Tim too, was taken by your poetry and this summer he is featuring some of the poems in the next edition of Rattle.

He also offered to send free copies of new back issues of Rattle to all of you. We are starting the series with Rattle #62. I hope the next mailing in our series will be the issue coming out this summer with the PE authors included. I know Tim already has at least one poem picked from a PE member for a future edition coming out after this summer. It is so nice to see your poetry moving into these popular poetry magazines. Even if your poem is not in an issue of Rattle, perhaps people will learn about our program and find some of your writing in our on-line poetry archive. <https://prisonerexpress.org/poetry-archive/>

We probably archive about 20% of the poems received. We don't have the staff or time to scan everything. Your poems have to be legible as well so if you do submit be sure others can read your writing. Always put your name and number on your poems. Typically, you can send as many poems as you want to PE for consideration for our PE anthology. As you read further you can see that this project is different. Elizabeth and her team are willing to read up to 4 submissions per participant, and then write back to you with individual feedback, and then forward your poetry on to Tim for consideration for inclusion in a future edition of Rattle. Rattle also has an online presence and thousands of people go to their website to read poetry

But I am getting ahead of myself. Tim the editor of Rattle will introduce himself next and explain the potency of poetry. Following that Elizabeth will share her role in this new project and help define an assignment. Both Elizabeth and Tim offer ideas on how to begin your next poem. Feel free to use their techniques or find your own inspiration. We all look forward to seeing how this evolves.

Best-Gary

**Tim Green here**, editor of *Rattle* magazine. First off, thank you for participating in this program. We're thrilled to be able to put copies of the magazine to good use.

We've started by sharing issue #62, chosen mostly for the interview with Jimmy Santiago Baca. After growing up in and out of orphanages, Jimmy found himself in prison for seven years, and that's where he learned to read before eventually becoming an award-winning poet and prose writer. It's an inspiring story, and we hope you enjoy hearing it in his own words.

We also hope you enjoy the poems in the issue. A good place to start might be with an explanation about what poetry actually is, as far as I can tell. I've asked many "professional" poets and professors to define poetry over the years, and even they seem to have trouble articulating what exactly it is that they do. This is one of my own attempts, pulled from an essay I wrote a few years ago.

### The Real Magic of Poetry

If you ask a roomful of poets what poetry actually is, you'll hear a lot of grandiloquent hemming and hawing. Poets talk about poetry like the old parable of the blind men describing an elephant: "It's long and slender—a snake!" "No, it's thick and sturdy, it's a tree!" Even though they're all talking about the same thing, they're often touching different parts of it and coming to different conclusions. But to me, the answer is as simple as it is self-evident when you step back and look at the whole elephant: Poetry is magic.

I don't mean magic as some fancy metaphor, nor that poetry will make a table float up off the floor and wow the crowds. I mean poetry is real, honest-to-god, actual-because-it-works magic.

Recently I started playing video games again, reenacting a part of my youth. Everyone seemed to recommend a game called *Skyrim*. It's basically *Dungeons & Dragons* on the computer, with swords and shields and health points and all that—including magic. If you're not a wizard and adept at magic, you cast your spells by reading a scroll. Each scroll has a silly little phrase, like "Woe be upon you in fire's crucible," and presumably your character says the phrase aloud to produce the desired effect.

That's what a spell is: a string of words you recite to produce some desired effect.

And that's what poetry is: a string of words you recite to produce some desired effect.

Unlike in *Skyrim*, there are no poems for walking on water or

shooting lightning out of our fingertips—but you could easily say that there are poems for healing. There are poems for laughter, poems for joy, poems for sadness, poems for epiphany, poems for transformation.

Another word for a spell is a *mantra*, which comes from the Sanskrit “man-” (to think) and “-tra” (tool)—literally translated, then, a mantra is a tool for transforming the mind. Mantras have been a key component to meditation in the Vedic tradition for thousands of years. Buddhism has the Great Compassion Mantra, and the Heart Sutra. Hinduism has mantras for Vishnu and Shanti. Mantra japa are recited in cycles of 108, counted on beaded necklaces called *malas*, which do more than just remind one of Catholic prayer beads—they’re one in the same.

No matter what tradition they’re working from, people use the sounds and rhythms of language as a guide for meditation, in an effort to alter their own mental states. That’s all poetry is—a spell, a prayer, a mantra, transcribed by one and recited by another.

Once you see poetry in this way, other aspects of the art-form start to make a lot of sense:

1. Every sound is important. If Bugs Bunny says Abracablahblah instead of Abracadabra, the Count doesn’t turn from a vampire into a cute little bat. The spell just fails. That’s why a certain word in a poem can feel “off.” And the rhythm matters, too—that’s why a poet can spend the entire day deciding to delete a comma only to add it back again.
2. Every time you cast a spell, it loses some of its effect. Clichés are old spells. They’re little poems that used to work, but we’ve used them so often the papyrus is crumbling and the magic’s worn off.
3. Attention matters. One of the main tenets of any school of magic is the idea that the focused will is central to execution. If your mind starts to wander, or you lose your suspension of disbelief, the spell fails. You have to fully engage in a poem if you want to get anything out of it.

Most importantly, the poem-as-spell definition explains the fundamental connection between meditation and composition, what the poet Elizabeth Bishop calls an art’s “self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.” A poet meditates on the self, diving inward in search of some new feeling or understanding, making meaning out of the chaotic mess of their thoughts and experiences. A poet’s job is to conjure that magical space, and then record it as a string of language, the mantra (mind-tool), so that others might follow them there.

When it works, it casts a spell over us as readers. We might laugh or cry or understand what it feels like to be someone else. As long as the spell lasts, we’re transformed as much as transported, and the spell cast by a great poem can last a

lifetime.

So it’s as simple as that: Poetry is magic.

### Here’s One Way to Make a Spell

There are a thousand ways to write a successful poem, which is one of the things that keeps the artform interesting. Some poems use rhyme and meter to create that magical space. Others rely on storytelling or metaphor. Usually it’s a combination of techniques, but the goal is always to somehow get at honest meaning, to make some helpful sense of the world or conjuring up a feeling to share.

One of the techniques poets often use is something I’d call a descriptive journey. Turn to page 20 for an example, Susan J. Erickson’s poem “Ode to *Antiques Roadshow*.” If you’re unfamiliar with the *Roadshow*, it’s a program that’s been airing on PBS for the last 25 years. People will bring their antiques to the show, which travels around the country, to have them appraised. In the process, viewers learn about the items and their history.

Susan seems to be wondering what draws her to the show and why she finds it interesting. To cast the spell, she begins by describing what she sees, first some of the people who appear, and then some of the antiques. It’s almost like watching an episode of the show, with one scene after another playing out, only being described.

The poem continues for over a page and a half, almost lulling us into a daydream with the series of descriptions before finally making the turn to what it’s really about, the memory of the poet’s father that the show conjures. “If I were to visit the *Antiques Roadshow* ...” And with that, she tells the story of her father and the jugs he found in a river, and we realize as she realizes that she’s drawn to the show because she’s reminded of him, the way he collects things, and the way our most important memories are often stored in objects.

I’ve never once in my life watched *Antiques Roadshow*, but through the magic of poetry now understand not only the appeal, but what it actually feels like to be appealed to it, and I’m thinking about my own objects that I keep for sentimental value in a new way.

### An Assignment

Do what Susan J. Erickson did in “Ode to *Antiques Roadshow*.” Pick something to describe that’s present right now and describe it. Keep going with that description until it begins to spark memories, and then describe the memory until you understand why the memory is important to you.

This is one of the great tricks of poetry, and it can be done with anything. There's a stapler on my desk right now, a standard black "Swingline." I never noticed until that there's an old scrap of paper taped to its side. The paper is mostly torn so that only two handwritten letters remain" "CO."

I don't know where I got the stapler—an office? A garage sale? I don't remember writing a note and it doesn't look like my handwriting. What did it originally say? Connie? Was it Conrad's stapler? Did it used to belong in the Copy Room? I have no idea. Which reminds me of the phone number that's written on the side of the wall in my garage. It was here when we bought the house 11 years ago, and there's no name, just a 9-digit local number the previous owner had written there in pencil. A repairman? A grandmother? And that makes me think of the lines we wrote on my childhood home, marking the growth of my brother and I. Every year my dad would write the date, a line, and the letter C for Chris or T for Tim. Did the new owners paint over the wall on that inside left corner of the hall closet? Has anyone even noticed it since we left? And what else do we leave behind when we leave a place forever?

These are two examples of the way the mind wanders toward meaning, any time we let it. And sharing that journey is a kind of magic. Try this technique for yourself or read any other of the poems in the issue, see how they go about casting a magic spell, and then try to write your own poem in the same way. - Tim

**Hello again! It's Elizabeth**, the author from the chapbook project. To those of you who participated, thanks again for sharing your work. Congratulations if your poems were selected for publication in the upcoming Rattle feature. To those of you who are new to this program, you are welcome.

I had the opportunity to present the Prisoner Express chapbook poems in several forums. Other poets were inspired to get involved. So, below is your new assignment: response poems. If you choose to join in, PE will gather up your work and pass it back to me. I will be sharing your packets with poets in the Merrimack Valley. Everyone who sends in poems for this assignment can expect personal feedback from a practicing poet. In addition, we will read your work in local open-mic meetings (attributed to you, of course!). Then, we will submit the poems on your behalf to Rattle, to be considered in their general submission pool.

I have to say, the chances of being selected for Rattle publication are not great. The general queue is long, and responses take many months. But! you can only be accepted if you submit. If your poem is accepted, Prisoner Express and the Rattle editors will contact you directly. And we will all be cheering you on. May the odds be ever in your favor.

Prisoner Express will accept your assignments through the end of August. We will take the fall to read your poems and reply to you. I'm happy to say I will be spending some time and energy promoting my new book, *A Collection of Partings*. You may not hear back immediately. Rest assured we are reading and sharing your words out into the world. Your voice will be heard.

## Response Poems Assignment

Response poems are just what it sounds like: a poem written in response to another piece. It can be an answer to a question raised in the first poem; a memory provoked; something in the same form or structure or tone. Before you write a response poem, it is good to do what we call a "deep read" of the source. How was it constructed? Is it long or short? Is the language accessible or a challenge to understand? Are the words like you'd hear in church, or at a bar, or between lovers? Are there jagged line breaks, or many short sentences, or long formal clauses? Did anything surprise you? What is it about? Is it about what it says on the surface, or are there deeper meanings? Is there a metaphor? Is it used once or carried throughout the poem (that is, does it mention only a butterfly, or also a caterpillar and the cocoon?). Is there a "turn" you didn't expect?

You can decide how you want to respond. Do you want to write something similar, or deliberately different? Do you want to use the same structure, or the same topic approached in a different style? Do you want to call out any of the images in your own poem? I'm assuming while you are reading this assignment you have a copy of the Rattle magazine in your hand. There will be many poems that you can choose from.

If you don't want to write a response poem, if nothing in the issue calls out to you, try this prompt: why do you read poetry? Why does every culture we know of which has a language have some form of poetry? What the heck is it for?

Whatever you choose, send us up to 4 poems. New poems, old poems, response poems— as long as they are your own original poems, we will read them and respond.

## Response Poem Example

Here is an example I wrote at a workshop last fall. The source poem is from Ross Gay's book, *catalog of unabashed gratitude*, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2015.

## ending the estrangement

from my mother's sadness, which was,  
to me, unbearable, until,  
it felt to me  
not like what I thought it felt like  
to her, and so felt inside myself—like death,  
like dying, which I would almost  
have rather done, though adding to her sadness  
would rather die than do—  
but, by sitting still, like what, in fact, it was—  
a form of gratitude  
which when last it came  
drifted like a meadow lit by torches  
of cardinal flower, one of whose crimson blooms,  
when a hummingbird hovered nearby,  
I slipped into my mouth  
thereby coaxing the bird  
to scrawl on my tongue  
its heart's frenzy, its fleet  
nectar-questing song,  
with whom, with you, dear mother,  
I now sing along.

So, wow. The first time I read this poem was for the emotion and the story. Then, upon deep reading, I noticed a few things. Like how the title flows in as part of the opening. The whole poem is one sentence. At first there are lots of pauses, and a tense rhythm, and then by the end it is more open. Look at the use of long dashes. Think about the progression from that tension, conflict and sadness to gratitude and singing along. This is what I wrote in response. It was published in Rattle Spring 2022:

## When the phone rings

while you're visiting your father,  
and I know it's you because  
it's your ringtone, the notes in a tune  
you chose, so it would be bright and  
I would know it was you, and  
answer my phone, so it's a sound  
both buoyant and urgent, it's a

need in three notes, and while I wish  
you weren't visiting your father,  
since it upsets you when you do, there's  
always some part of the story you'll  
tell me that's off, that raises an  
alarm, a flag, but after all this time  
we don't need subtle clues, do we,  
we know he's not right, so is it wise  
to visit him again but in the back  
of our minds is the night he was so  
stoned on the phone and then dead  
on the men's room floor—  
but they brought him back—  
and so you go, again, to his new  
sober living apartment because what if  
next time he is gone, what if, and so  
you go visit and I answer the ringing phone  
for you to tell me you hiked up a hill  
so high you saw all the way to Boston and  
there were clouds reflected in the glass  
of the Hancock building, like the blue sky  
was both solid as a tower and as  
gossamer as hope and anyway  
you are on the road and your  
favorite artist just dropped an album  
so you need me to stay off our shared  
Spotify so you can sing out loud  
all the way home.

So, the source poem isn't copied or plagiarized or parodied. Instead, it inspires a new poem that uses your voice and your experience. It is a compliment to the original poet and another step along the path of literary tradition. There are a lot of poetry craft books which use this method. Plus, it's a great way to get out of a rut and think about how the composition of a poem both contains and advances the story you are trying to tell. -**Be well-Elizabeth**

**Gary here again** to remind you if you are sending poems for Elizabeth and her team to review and respond to, write Attn Rattle on the envelope. That way mail will get forwarded to her more quickly. Send up to 4 poems total for this project. Best is to wait and send all your entries at once so to reduce our postage cost in forwarding your poems to Elizabeth and her Poet Crew. Here s a chance to create and be heard. I hope you can find time to read the Rattle and send us your poems and thoughts on how to make this Rattle/ PE collaboration an even better program for you.

Good timing leads to great Rhyming. I look forward to seeing your creativity manifested-Onward and Upward -Gary