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# Word Smith, Private I “Rhyme Crime”



By Word Smith, as told to Blane Jeffries  
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The sound of rain pounding on my office window pane filled the February room with gloom. It was noon. I was munching lunch, noting that I had made some rhymes when I would rather have been out solving crimes. My name is Smith, Word Smith. I'm a private detective—a private eye. Actually, I'm more of a private *I* since I specialize in cases involving the twenty-six letters of the alphabet and all forms of the words and phrases they form.

I figured that with all the wet weather we were having, even the people who break the rules of grammar in their everyday speech were staying at home. So, I took another bite of p-i-z-z-a and went back to the daily crossword puzzle.

“Number four down. A seven-letter word meaning, ‘the same.’” From my previous answers, I knew this one started with an S. It was right there on the tip of my tongue, so I spit it out: “sausage”—the spicy kind. Luckily, it landed in a dark and dim place near the trash.



“Yuck. I won’t order sausage pizza from Antonio’s again.” Then I wrote down the correct answer in the crossword, “**synonym**,” and moved on to the next clue. That’s when the door opened and in walked a bespectacled, bow-tied man wearing a blue suit.

“My name is Ben Brannoor. I’m the proprietor of a greeting-card store.”

“Nice **scansion**,” I said, approvingly. “Six syllables per rhyme.”

“Ah, you are indeed Word Smith.”



“And by your accent I can tell you are British, in which case the umbrella you’re shaking out on my freshly waxed floors would be called a bumboreshoot.” (#3 Across in yesterday’s crossword.) “But since I admire the **alliteration** of your name, dress, accent, and accessories—everything beginning with the letter *B*—I forgive you. Now what can I do for you?”

Ben Brannoor explained that Valentine’s Day, which was coming up, was the biggest holiday of the year for the greeting-card business. But customers were leaving his store empty-handed. Why? Someone or something had taken the rhyme out of all the greeting cards. All that were left were plain sentences! Where had the rhymes gone?

"Look at this one," he said. "It is usually my number one seller. Now I may as well store it in the cellar."

I examined the cream-colored card with gold-**embossed** lettering. The cover showed a bouquet of flowers inside a heart. While I was looking at this beautiful card, a lump of sentimental joy welled up in my throat, unless that was a reaction to the sausage I'd just eaten. I opened the card and read the poem inside:

*"Roses are red.  
Violets are blue.  
If I had ten dollars,  
I'd spend it on my pet salamander."*

"Horridly unromantic, isn't it?" Ben cried.

"Maybe it's a Valentine's Day card for an amphibian lover," I suggested.

"The last word in that poem is supposed to be *you*, and you know it." He thrust another card toward me, which I read, dutifully.

"It's Valentine's Day, dear. My heart is full of love.

It's true we fit together. Like a hand in a *bowl of oatmeal*."



"*Glove! Glove* is what that poem is going for," said Ben, so exasperated his bow tie untied.

"True, it is an odd poem," I concluded, "And maybe a bit gross, but not illegal."

"That's exactly what the bobbies said when they came to investigate."

I knew that bobbies, another British word beginning with a *B*, is a synonym for police (#12 down, the day-before-yesterday's crossword).

"The police said they couldn't do anything about the nonrhyming cards, because technically nothing had been stolen; the cards were still on their racks," Ben added. "I suspect some type of **linguistic** foul play is at work."

Was there a case here? Could rhymes really disappear? Or was this just some lazy greeting-card writers getting away with word-murder? And how could something called “play” be considered work? As was my habit when lost in thought, which I much prefer being lost in rather than the woods at night, (or downtown Metropolis at any time), I went to squint through the slats of the 1940s Venetian blinds I had installed in my office.

I gazed across the avenue at the billboard advertising my favorite candy, with its famous rhyming slogan:

“When you’re feeling low this can’t be beat.  
Reach for a Choco-Ball. It’s so yummy to *smack*  
*with a five-iron.*”



Huh? Something smelled fishy, and it wasn't my day-old tuna sandwich. Then I noticed a stream of angry people leaving the theater down the block. It was just 3:00 PM; the Wednesday matinee of the hit musical comedy *Young Love Is Old School* shouldn't let out for another hour. Ben and I went down to see what was up.

A crowd of well-dressed women milled about the theater. "Why is everyone leaving the show so early?" I asked one of the patrons. "You didn't pay good money to come into the city to see an understudy in the role who wasn't up to your expectations?"

"No, all the leads were performing today, and in fine voice, too," replied the patron, ironically named Mrs. Rhett Orically.



“So, what was the problem?”

“Besides the director not reeling in the overacting actors? It was the song lyrics! They didn’t rhyme.”

“Ah-ha!” I said, noting the **palindrome**. “Ah-ha!”

Mrs. Rhett Orically continued. “I have the cast album and saw the original show in London—so I know the lyrics! In the first act, Hiram Hornswoggle, the dashing young pharmacist vows eternal love for Hermione Hillybottom, the spunky, young animal rights activist who, on an undercover assignment, works the drugstore’s cosmetics counter. But instead of singing, ‘The full moon in June makes me want to swoon,’ he crooned, ‘The full moon in *October* makes me want to *break out in an itchy rash that can’t be treated with antibiotics*.’ Terrible. And painful. We didn’t want to sit through that. Why, the image is frightful. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to meet up with my group for some caloric cake and coffee before we take the bus back to Ketchum.”

First, greeting cards, then advertising slogans, and now song lyrics . . . Ben Brannoor was right: Someone *was* stealing all the rhymes and replacing them with un-rhymes. But who could be so evil, so dastardly? I was drawing a blank, and not just blank verse.

Ben and I returned to my office. That's when it hit me like a ton of bricks! A truckload of dirt! A pound of pennies! Well, actually it was more like one brick, thrown through the window, with a note attached.

"Occupational hazard," I explained. "Being a film-noir-style private investigator, I lose a lot of windows this way."

"Let me read the note," said Ben.

"Okay, but don't forget that the note was addressed to me."



Ben read, "If you want the rhymes back and then some/ You will have to pay my ransom."

"Me," I said.

"Of course you, the note was addressed to you."

"No, the word 'me' is missing from the second line of the note. It should say 'pay *me* my ransom.' Any decent poet who can tell his iambic from his pentameter would hear that the second line needs one more syllable to have a musical **cadence**.

Now who could that ‘me’ be? Who would be so overconfident that they would misplace their ‘me’ when it mattered?”

I took the note from Ben, read it again, and immediately sang out, “E. E. Cunning is ‘me’!”

“What?” said Ben, startled by my outburst. “But . . . you’re Word Smith. It says so right on the glass of your office door. I can see it from here.”

“That you can, though from my vantage point, it reads, ‘dTim2 broW.’ And true, I’m he. Or rather, I am me, but the poet E. E. Cunning, or as she writes it, all lowercase, ‘e. e. cunning,’ is the note writer who needed a ‘me.’”



I explained to Ben that e.e., which stood for Eleanor Elizabeth, not extraordinary ego, which is what you must have to refer to yourself only by your initials, was once a successful poet. She broke onto the poetry scene with daring poems that never used commas or capital letters. The beatniks thought she was “out-of-sight” and the rappers thought she was “da bomb,” though English teachers thought she could use extra homework on punctuation. e.e. became the darling of the poetry circuit. She even hosted her own TV show, “For Better or Verse.”



But she got too famous too fast. She couldn't handle the pressure of constantly coming up with pithy witticisms and witty pithicisms, and her skyrocketing career plummeted as quickly as it took off—thanks to me. Back when I was on the Grammar Police, I caught her passing off bad rhymes, such as "oven" with "nothin'," and her poetic license was revoked.

"The last I heard, she was writing silly bumper stickers."

"Ah, so she must need money!" said Ben. "That's why she did it. I wonder how much is the ransom? The note didn't say."

Just then, another brick with another note crashed through another window.

"You had to ask?" I grumbled. This note said, "I'm not doing it for money. I'm doing it to prove my domination of all things poetic. Meet me at the Synonym Bun Cafe tonight for the Poetry Triathlon."

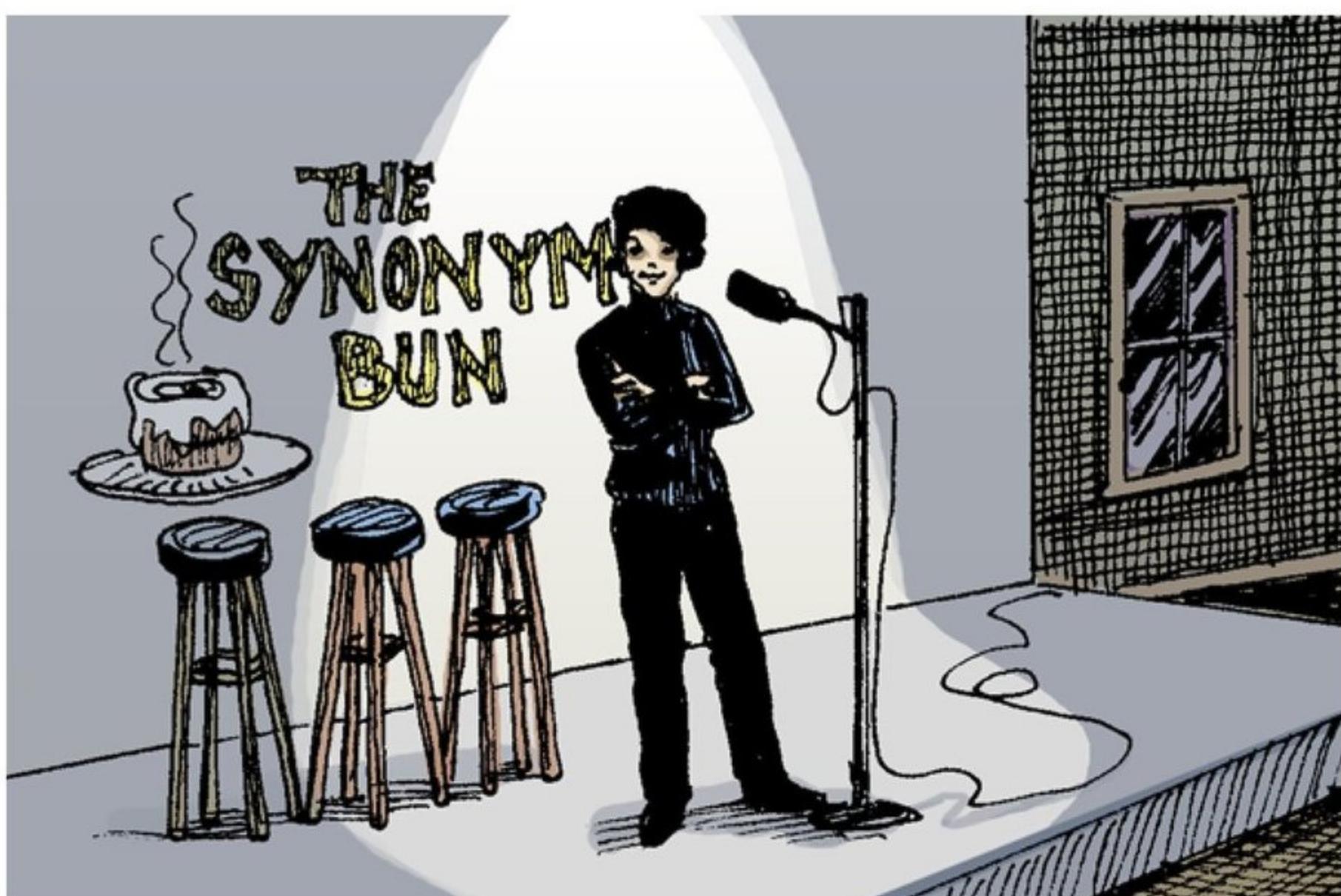
So that was her plan! She would use all the stolen rhymes to help her win the biggest event in the world of professional poetry! All the superstars of poetry would be there: Joyce Killjoy, Edgar Allan Woe, and Tanka, the Japanese **haiku** expert. Dr. Snooze, the beloved author of rhyming bedtime stories, would be the judge.

We got to the cafe shortly before 8:00 PM. The place was in an uproar. The only poet on the main stage was e. e. cunning! Joyce Killjoy had suffered a mysterious accident in which she fell out of a tree. Edgar Allan Woe called to say he was too afraid to leave his house because a crazy black bird kept knocking at his door. Tanka sent a note, in the form of a 5-7-5 haiku:

"I must send regrets.  
Cannot attend the contest.  
Too ill to travel."

All of the all-star poets were no shows.  
Coincidences? I don't think so. I knew e.e. was  
behind this, so I stepped forward.

"May I compete?" I asked.



"Well, I don't know. Serious poets usually dress in all-black. You look more like a member of a game-show audience," Dr. Snooze observed, "but I guess we can overlook that. What do you say, e.e.?"

"Me against the great Word Smith? Oh, I am shaking with fear," she said sarcastically. "I've been waiting for this moment! I'll show him no mercy, though it'll be like taking candy from a baby."

So Eleanor Elizabeth had a sweet tooth for revenge! Well, I wasn't going to give up without a bite, I mean fight.

"The first event is **similes**, which are comparisons using *like* or *as*," explained Dr. Snooze. "The image is 'sunset.' e.e., you're up."

She clasped her hands in front of her chest and cleared her throat. "The sun burnished the Western sky like a bright orange comet."

The audience oohed, ahhed, and applauded appreciatively at the word picture she drew. It was my turn. Sweat poured from my brow like a waterfall after a spring thaw. Gee, that wasn't a half-bad simile for someone so nervous.

"Five seconds, Smith," said Dr. Snooze.



"Um . . . the sunset glowed . . . no . . . blazed . . . no, glowed like a . . . yellow bug light on a hazy July night."

A few embarrassed giggles from the audience broke the uncomfortable silence. I definitely lost that round.

"The next event is hyperboles, which are extravagant exaggerations, not to be taken literally, and often ridiculous to make a point," said Dr. Snooze.

"I'm the best at hyperbole," said e.e. The audience cheered her playful use of a **superlative**.

"Really?" I said. "I could beat you with my tongue tied behind my back."

The audience jeered and the penalty whistle blew. "That was a mixed metaphor, Word," said Dr. Snooze. "If that happens again, you'll forfeit the round. Now, e.e., here is your phrase: 'My dog is so ugly . . .' Give us three hyperboles."



"My dog is so ugly . . . we had to pay people to pet him . . . the fleas moved out . . . he only has cat friends."

Bing-bing-bing! e.e. had scored a perfect ten. "Way to go!" hollered Ben. "Oops, sorry, Word, but she really is the best at hyperbole."

"Beat that, Word-boy," she said, "If you can."

Dr. Snooze cut in before I could come back with a wisecrack. "Your phrase, Smith is: 'It's so cold . . .'"

Cold, cold. My brain froze as if it had taken a headfirst dive into a giant Slurpee. Then some hyperboles came to me. "It's so cold the polar bears are wearing parkas." Yes! "It's so cold . . . the snow has turned blue." A bit esoteric, but in a poetry contest that could be to my advantage. I needed one more. "It's so cold, the ice cubes are . . . blue . . . and . . . wearing parkas." I knew that one stunk worse than dead fish, worse than old sneakers, worse than dead fish wearing old sneakers. The foul buzzer blared.

"Redundant phrasing, Word. No good," said Dr. Snooze.

"Allow me to complete your set," offered e.e., a bit too self-satisfied. "It is so cold that when I tried to take out the garbage, it refused."

The crowd roared with laughter. I was down two rounds and felt so low I had to part my toes to see where I was going.

“Our final event is the synonym speed round. Word, you’re first. Your word is *happy*. ”

“You can do this, Word,” said Ben.

I have to do this, I said to myself, for all that is good about language! “*Joyful, gleeful, ecstatic . . . and . . . and . . . filled with mirth.*” All right! I had rattled off four synonyms in 10 seconds. Those crossword puzzles sure had improved my vocabulary. The crowd clapped politely.

“Your word, e.e., is *tasty*, ” said Dr. Snooze.

“A piece of cake,” said e.e., winking to the crowd, who ate up her word play. She had purposely used an **idiom** which meant “easy,” but also implied something tasty. “*Delicious, delectable . . . toothsome—*” she said.

“Two seconds left,” said Dr. Snooze.

“And . . . *yummy*, ” called out Eleanor Elizabeth, smugly, but a bit shakily.

“Blat!” went the bell that signaled a foul.

"Sorry, e.e., but *yummy* is a slang word, and we can't accept slang here," explained Dr. Snooze.  
"Word Smith wins that round."

The audience applauded louder now.

"Wait!" cried e.e. "I challenge."

Now the crowd really went wild. A challenge meant that I had to come up with yet another synonym for *tasty* and use it in a sentence. If I could do that, I'd get half her points. But if I failed, she'd win the round—and the contest.

*Tasty*. I thought of *appetizing*, but that wasn't strong enough and had as much to do with pleasing to the eye and sense of smell as with taste. *Unpalatable* . . . no, that was an **antonym**, which made me think of Antonio's spicy sausage pizza.



Yuck. Then I thought of Antonio's pizza the way I like it and out of my mouth came: *Savory*. "The savory slice of pepperoni pizza made my mouth water."

The crowd leaped to its feet and gave me a standing ovation. Not only had I risen to e.e. cunning's challenge, I had created a sentence that used multiple alliteration. The fifty bonus points thrust me ahead of e.e. cunning.

"You won, Word!" said Ben Brannoor, clapping. "Well done."

"Or, as you British say, 'Good show.' Now let's get back those rhymes in time for Valentine's Day."

Eleanor Elizabeth sat on the floor of the stage, holding back tears. I took off the laurel crown that Dr. Snooze had placed on my head to symbolize my victory and brought it over to her.

"You did a fine job, e.e. And if you noticed, you didn't even need to use the stolen rhymes. I think you deserve this crown."

"But, you won it, Word."

"True. But it doesn't go with my film noir private detective look. You take it. Just give us back the rhymes."



e.e. looked at me, at Ben, and at the hopeful crowd. A single tear rolled down her cheek.  
“What I did was wrong. I see that now. I wanted to use the rhymes for my own selfish purposes. But there are millions of people out there who need rhymes for so many things: for songs and Valentine’s Day cards, and Mother’s Day cards, and to express the many wonderful moments that occur in our lives every day. I’ll let myself heal and consider it a deal.”

“You’re doing the right thing, e.e.,” I said softly, handing her a handkerchief. “A good rhyme is a terrible thing to waste.”

## Glossary

<b>alliteration</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	two or more words in a row that begin with the same sound (p. 5)
<b>antonym</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a word whose meaning is the opposite of another word (p. 21)
<b>cadence</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a rhythm or flow of sounds of words or the voice (p. 11)
<b>embossed</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	having letters, words, or designs that are raised above the surface of the paper (p. 6)
<b>haiku</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a type of Japanese poetry (p. 14)
<b>idiom</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a verbal expression that does not make sense when interpreted literally (p. 20)
<b>linguistic</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	relating to language and speech (p. 7)
<b>palindrome</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a word or sentence that reads the same both forward and backward (p. 10)
<b>scansion</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	mapping the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry (p. 4)
<b>similes</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	descriptive comparisons of two unlike things as being similar, usually by using the word <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> (p. 16)
<b>superlative</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an extreme description (p. 18)
<b>synonym</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a word that has the same meaning as another word (p. 4)

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### Correlation

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