

"... I would save the cat." An Interview with Ralph Salisbury

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Ralph Salisbury is part eastern Cherokee and part Irish and English, and besides being a professor of American and Native American literature at the University of Washington, Eugene, he is an accomplished poet and writer of short fiction. Robbed of their land and ordered to move to Indian Territory in 1838, some of the Cherokees chose to hide in the Carolina-Tennessee mountains, and among those people were Ralph Salisbury's ancestors. However, later they were allowed to remain undisturbed in their homeland due to the courage of their leader Tsali and his brother and oldest son who surrendered to Major General Scott to be executed for a crime they had not committed (Dale van Every: *Disinherited*, Avon, 1967, p. 264). The symptomatic irony of this relatively small episode in the history of Native American contact with European imperialism is that Salisbury's father was forced to leave the ancestral land anyway. So Ralph Salisbury was born and raised in poor circumstances on a small Iowa farm isolated from other Cherokees but still in a relatively traditional Cherokee way.

To date, Ralph Salisbury has had four books of poetry published, and he has recently finished editing an anthology of Native American literature entitled *A Nation Within* for the Outrigger Publishers of New Zealand. In addition he has written several short stories and a great number of poems which have been published in magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Western Review*. His books are *Ghost Grapefruit and Other Poem*, 1972, Ithaca House (out of print); *Pointing at the Rainbow*, 1980, and *Spirit Beat Chant*, 1982, both Blue Cloud Quarterly Press; and *Going For the Water*, 1983, Pacific House.

Ralph Salisbury's poems are often expressions of personal experiences, and as a Civil Rights activist he has more than once been the victim of discrimination. In "Feeling out of It" he states;

I wished my words were bullets
when students intent
on keeping "colored" out
of public toilets and employment
and from between white thighs
made threatening
to drive "one Niggerloving Cherokee Damyantee"
out of town their ultimate argument
in Beginning Logic
(1983, p. 19)

However, Ralph Salisbury's saving vision is his faith in Cherokee ways of staying in harmony with oneself and one's surroundings. This faith is evidenced in his search in ethnological works on the Cherokees for more knowledge of Cherokee traditions and in his longing for participation in time-honored rituals such as the one taking place in the "Asti" — the Sweathouse. This yearning is difficult for him to combine with reality, however. In "For The Good" he sums up his situation with striking honesty:

...
My books bound in vegetable fiber
a jogging suit — red, "color symbolic of spirit-power" — my
only Asti, The Nation's life in my veins,
its history in my brain, for the good .
of body and spirit, I sweat.
(1980)

Asked about his identity, Ralph Salisbury says that his first identity is as a human being with a certain heritage. "If I was in a house that was burning and there was a cat that I could save or a great painting by Picasso, I would save the cat." (From an interview with RS, May 6, 1983). This seems to be what Ralph Salisbury is doing by writing poetry; for himself; for this people; and ultimately for all of us, and in doing so he gracefully manages to save the painting as well.

(Here follows an interview with Ralph Salisbury, conducted at the University of Aarhus, May 6, 1983.)

Bo Schüler: Having studied your poems I have noticed that the theme of war is prominent. Why is this?

Ralph Salisbury: Well, I think it probably grew out of the fact that I enlisted in the air force when I was 17 and I was pulled in the day after my 18th birthday. What experience I had in the war wasn't very impressive in a military sense, I never engaged in bombing an enemy city, but a lot of my comrades died in airplane disasters ... probably a hundred that

we lost during the two-and-a-half years I was flying, so I think it made an impression on me.

And as you know, it didn't end with WWII. The military tried to call me back to machine gun troops from the air in the Korean War. I didn't think it was a moral war. I decided that I could only go back as a medic. The other alternative was to go to prison for five years. Ironically, I was honorably discharged due to an administrative error. By the time Vietnam came around, my sons were old enough for military service. The laws defining a Conscientious Objector had improved, and I helped my younger son to establish C.O. status. My elder son drew a lucky number in the draft lottery. Thousands of other young men were not so lucky.

War is a typical part of the American Indian experience. It has been one of the ways of getting out of starvation. My younger brother was a transport pilot in Vietnam. He never left the air force. It lifted him out of poverty. He has stayed in uniform.

BS: With the war theme there is also the theme of the nuclear disaster, and you sort of indirectly and directly put it in contra-distinction to Thunder and the activities of the Thunder Boys. Could you elaborate a little?

RS: Yes. Thunder is one of the most powerful gods that we know about from the Cherokee religion, but his is a benign power associated with rain. He brings life, and beauty, the rainbow. So he is contra-distinct to the atomic fission which is destructive — massive destruction. His sons, the Thunder Boys, are similar to the Irish Little People. They are hell-raisers. They have fun. They make pranks, but they are like human beings. They are always helpful, just the opposite of nuclear bombs.

I think I told you that I was struck by lightning when I was 15, and some Cherokees who know my writing about this think that I am a spirit leader because I was spared. It has left me with a sense of awe and an intense love of life; that's all I can say.

BS: Your Cherokee heritage seems to account for the warm undercurrent, that extra voice that is in your poetry.

How do you think that this heritage has influenced you? For instance we have mentioned Great Thunder. Your whole approach to nature, for example, how has that been influenced?

RS: I think it works two ways. One is very immediate and personal, because I grew up with a Cherokee way of living. I was my family's

hunter. When I was 12 years old I killed my first game. I was actually blooded at four years of age; my father had me kill a chicken that was sick, but I didn't actually become a hunter till I was 12.

At 12 I worked but I wasn't as big as my two older brothers, so they would give me the gun to go out and get the meat. So it was very personal and immediate — hunting, getting my family's meat in the traditional Cherokee way. Then, as I grew older and I wrote poetry, I realized that my religion was always Nature. I realized too, that my family history was an important part of U.S. history. We were cut off from our heritage, but I could read James Mooney [ethnographer living among and describing the Cherokees during the second half of the last century], and I would each time realize that my people had a past, a civilization...

It gave my experiences universal validity. It gave me courage.

BS: This connects with the theme of continuation that you have developed and that you are continuing ...

RS: Yeah...

BS: ... and it seems to me that you are developing this through Cherokee imagery. Also, I have noticed that a lot of the poems are very personal poems. They are reminiscences filled with your blood, so to speak, and childhood thoughts. Is this the way you write, by reaching back to your own childhood to seek inspiration?

RS: Yeah, that is extremely important, to keep reaching back to things that are in one's memory, but at the same time I think that I'm an existentialist. I get up every morning and say my prayers to the sky, the earth, and the four sacred directions of creation to start that day and accept what it brings. If it is your whole life, good. The Sioux have the saying: "It's a good day to die."

A lot of my poetry just comes in the morning, a time that is very spiritual and creative, and something in the scene will take over my awareness and then will become the center of the poem. But then the poem may move from that and back to something from my childhood or sometimes to something earlier, one of my father's stories perhaps.

BS: Yeah, and this is close to the definition of the oral tradition. I think it was Professor Larry Evers who once said that the oral tradition is a matter of bridging the serendipity of individual lives and the slow moving wisdom of the collective life. Is it as a storyteller that you write?

RS: I think it is. As you know I do write short stories as well. In my

lecture the other day (at the University of Aarhus) you heard me tell one of my father's stories, and that is a part of my perception of myself as a writer. It's hard to think that I'm important as an individual. My perception of myself is as a spokesperson for my people.

BS: I know that your father was a storyteller and a minstrel, so I wonder whether you have ever seen your poems as songs.

RS: They are musical, I think, but they are not songs. I've written free verse since I was quite young. When I first got published nationally I was just 21 — something I had written when I was 20 — I was writing free verse, but then I began studying with Robert Lowell, and he was doing end rhyme patterned verse. For me this probably connected with having grown up hearing my father sing old Kentucky hill country songs which were end rhyme patterned.

Anyway, I started writing end rhyme patterned poems, and it seemed to go pretty well. I think my first group of poems published in Poetry Magazine consisted of five rhymed poems and one free verse poem. Gradually I moved all the way back to free verse because it was the natural way for me to grow, but I still value my imitation Lowell period, because it gave me some insights into musicality. What happens in my poetry now is that the music is naturally patterned inside the lines — in the phrasing.

BS: That leads us to another thing which is very typical of your poetry, and that is enjambment. It appears that this is the way you make the poems flow. This was what caused me to ask about singing, because it seems that with enjambment you are always pushed a little farther — continuing a subtle rhythm. Have you experimented a lot with form, for example enjambment?

RS: I've given up consciously doing this, but when I was younger like everybody I had to work hard with form. I think it's true of all young writers that first they learn somebody else's form, and then gradually they get into something that is their own. Like what I told you about moving the musical effects inside the lines. I suppose that enjambment is a good part of it — the suspense of the last word of the line hovering, sense needing to be completed in the next line, or even the one after that. And connected with that too, is the fact that enjambment helps give a sense of voice driving at something, speaking, or with inner voice thinking, very passionately and intensely.

BS: Yes, your poems are very intense. Also Cherokee stories obviously

play a great part in your poetry. They inspire you, you build on them and then universalize whatever you write about. You mentioned James Mooney.

RS: Yes, I first read Mooney, and first encounters are often very abiding. Olbrechts is the second scholar who has been very helpful. As you know he retranslated the sacred formulas which Mooney had transcribed, but did not live to publish. Olbrechts was a very dedicated scholar. He left a comfortable life, moved in with a poverty stricken Cherokee family and lived in their attic. His work has given my work a spiritual emphasis. He is very, very important. But Mooney, I think, is closest to my heart because he was always on the side of the Cherokees. We were one of the "five civilized tribes." Mooney was never condescending. He was our advocate. His whole understanding was that the Cherokees were victims. Olbrechts is a little stand-offish for whatever reason.

But one other thing, too, which I think is kind of interesting. People say that Sigmund Freud was such a good writer that his style convinced people as well as his ideas. Even when he is translated the power of his voice still lives. I think that this is true of Mooney as well. Mooney has been indispensable for me, a guru, to use a word from the sixties, a good spirit guide or whatever you would call it.

BS: Based on a reading of your poetry and on what we've been talking about here, it seems that you are searching for a synthesis of all races of all people. I realize that this is a big question, but what is the function of poetry for you?

RS: The first one is a personal function. It keeps me together spiritually — mentally. I know people who don't read poetry, but at the same time the way they live with people, the way they live with the land, gives them a spiritual center. For me poetry has that function; that's the first thing.

And then the second is to let the poem be available for others. I don't want to force it on them as a cynical politician sometimes forces his views on the world, but I want my writing to be available to others as a resource...

BS: I think now that I would like to turn to a couple of questions that mainly address you in your capacity as a scholar, but then maybe just as much as a poet. Do you think that there is such a thing as a Native American Literature?

RS: I definitely think there is. It's different things for different Native Americans, like I suppose that maybe I might have more in common

with a German than I would have with a Navajo in many important cases, but I think that there are things that define the Native American Movement. And the first has to do with poverty. Of course, all along in history, what happens with a people that has been militarily defeated is that they become pariahs. My family is a good example of this.

We were very well off. Had a lot of land. It was taken away from us ... We became poor. We became pariahs. Poverty is one thing that separates Native Americans from the general public and ties Native Americans together. Our sharing religions which are based on spiritual oneness with nature is another thing that defines us. And finally just the awareness that we were defeated. We have had to fight back from a military defeat through generations. We have a right to define our own past, our own ancestors. I think that those are three realities which are very important in identifying Native Americans in America.

BS: So you have also defined some of the characteristics of this literature. Do you think that Native American literature will remain a distinct literature?

RS: I think it will. But it will also be placed in a larger context. For one, more and more writers are regionalist writers; they focus on a region to get more intensity by "going local," as it were, to get an intensity that New York writers generally don't have. Native American writers are part of the new regionalist movement. Thus we will be grouped with, for instance, Scandinavian Americans who are coming up more in awareness of their regional cultures, as are all ethnic groups in America.

So we will be a part of something else, but with something that is uniquely ours, and the political term "Native American" has something to do with this. We may have been immigrants a long time ago, coming from Asia, but we are the oldest population on the land. So I think it will be kind of a paradox that we are part of other things but we will keep this identity which is ours alone.

BS: To wrap it all up I have a question which concerns the things you are working on now. What are your plans? What are you working on? How does the future look for you?

RS: Well, my plans for today are to type up the poem I wrote last night, which as you know is based on a story my father told, the one I told your students and colleagues the other day. It kind of started working in my mind, and then I created a poem.

I think my plans are to conceive one story or one poem at a time. Also, I have an autobiographical novel about the sixties which I think I'll

finish. Most immediately I have a whole book of poems that are completed and a lot of the poems are published in magazines. I want to shape these into a meaningful book with theme patterns and try to get it published.

For me it is like it was for the old traditional Native American shaman; my plans are to wake up at dawn, say my prayers, wake up to the day, really wake up and try to do the best I can...