
Electronic Computer and Stub Pencil: Poetry and the Writing-in of Ralph Salisbury

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On an electronic computer's memory chip I am writing about myself as a writer -- a dog chasing its own tail... Most of my poetry and much of my fiction has been composed with a stub pencil. The pencil a one-legged skater, trying not to stumble.

- *So Far, So Good* 186

The merest first reading of *So Far, So Good* (2013),¹ Ralph Salisbury's autobiography deservedly awarded the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize, can leave little doubt of a life early to negotiate frequent challenge. The tough farm upbringing at the edge of Depression-era subsistence, for him as "third child of an Irish American mother and an English-Cherokee-Shawnee father" (5) and for his siblings in Fayette County, Iowa, meant the very threads of survival—undernourishment, a dead child brother, winters, devoted parents and aunt but occasional paternal drink and gun violence.

A World War II enlistment in the US air force as specialist gunner, and which he joined under-age, not only promised to expose Salisbury to aerial bombardment of Germany (his war-service ultimately remained that of trainee) but made war a kind of persisting engram for him. The chance mis-registration that saved him from taking part in USAF missions in Korea becomes a related touchstone. An adulthood pledged to peace, Vietnam to Iraq, together with ecological activism, further put him on the line as did bouts with pneumonia and later with cancer and heart problems. Increasingly, the imperative to come to terms with the war and peace within his own life augments into confronting that of the world. But if all these factors situate Salisbury in the one unfolding of his life, so, quite as quintessentially,

do connecting others. First has to be his "mixed race" (95) legacy in all its Old and New World spiral, its pride and yet vex. Although tribally un-enrolled, Caucasian (a term he favors) in appearance, and small of physique, he returns with self-aware frequency to his situating Native identity. "My immediate family's last-ditch Indian survivor" (242) he designates himself. "We Indians" he says, when writing of the 1992 quincentenary of Columbus's "discovery" of America (267). Yet for all the references to his sunrise prayers or to Cherokee traditions of sacred tobacco and respect for the seasons, and for his ancestral Cherokee grandmother, he has the honesty to ask "Am I still an Indian?" (241). In this he shares status with, say, Louis Owens or Jim Barnes, writers to whom indigenous legacy supplies reference and locale but who remained tribally un-enrolled. In an interview with the Danish scholar Bo Schöler in 1985 Salisbury speaks, if a little tendentiously, of Native "regional" authorship:

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. (33)

The other factor, and that to which this essay gives its emphasis, lies in the call to literary authorship. The recall of boyhood creativity, the jottings and small drawings, point to the eventual larger resolve of "my writer's urge to tell the truth" (196), aided in kind by his Kentucky father's itinerant stories and five-string banjo songs, and by fondest second marriage to his writer-wife Ingrid Wendt. Contemplating the course of this personal pathway in the light of a re-found photograph he observes with some poignancy:

A nineteen-year-old bomber crewman, only a year from beginning his writing career, yields to an eighty-two-year-old writer of poetry and prose. (265)

Other way-stations related to acts of writing equally feature, whether teacher training at the North Iowa Teachers College, studies on the GI Bill for an MFA in 1951 at the University of Iowa with Robert Lowell as one of his mentors, or the follow-on into different professorships, but, most of all, in English and creative writing at the University of Oregon (1960-1994). Likewise, the Rockefeller-Bellagio award and residency by Lake Como adds its weight, as do Fulbright professorships in Norway and Germany and each further European trip. There can be added the USIS lectureship in India, editorship of *Northwest Review* (1965-70), co-translations with Harold Gaski of the Sami poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, and each public and campus reading.

Computer or stub pencil, prose or verse, Salisbury acknowledges authorial possession of his life's trajectory to have been an abiding impetus. Authorship, even so, was not to mean some mere exercise in self-reflexivity, though there would be self-reflexivity involved. That holds across the eleven poetry volumes, for which *Light from a Bullet Hole: Poems New and Selected 1950-2008* (2009) acts as representative anthology, and the three story-collections for which *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin* (2009) and its title-piece especially provides a trove. Each major fold of event finds address in *So Far, So Good*, but so, inerasably, does the overlap with how and why he becomes the poet and story-writer.

The process of "re-authoring" the timeline from birth to war marks the very opening page of his autobiography:

Bullet-shattered glass clattering onto my baby bed. I awake and cry, into darkness, for help.

Do I remember this? Or do I remember being told? I will feel it, whichever it is. I will feel it, chill bomb-bay wind buffeting my eighteen-year-old body, a mile above an old volcano's jagged debris; feel it, seeing photos of Jewish concentration camp children, huddled together for warmth, photos

of Korean orphans, huddled together, homeless in blizzard after American bombing – bombing in which, twenty-five, I had refused an order to join. (1) If the self-queries given here link childhood to adulthood, drive-by Iowa shooting to Nazi camp and wartime Korea, they also reflect the author taking hold of his creative latitudes and longitudes ("Do I remember this... or being told?"). How, runs the implicit accompanying question, to assume authority of word, coordinating literary voice? The issue of the *figura* of Salisbury as the writer behind, and within, his own body of texts, clearly operates throughout, as much his way of situating himself as "mixed" Midwestern farm-boy or airman or even professor. *So Far, So Good*, for all the plentiful life-history it supplies, also incorporates full indication of his literary calling.

Salisbury also registers the detail of his life, especially the emphasis he gives to his boyhood, in terms wholly aware of how life-writing like *So Far, So Good* creates its own kind of fiction. Self-interrogation enters early when he speaks in his Prologue of starting "most days for most of my life... trying to write. Why?" (3). He alleges *So Far, So Good* best be understood in the teasing phraseology of "a hop-skip-and-jumps-and- maybe-some-dancing-memoir" (4). "Imagination" is to be apostrophized as "shield," the solvent for "free association, spontaneity, a wholeness of moment, a union of past and present" (4). In other words, if this is to be a line-graph of actual autobiography it is equally to be responded to for its performative elasticity. The risk could have been of over-consciousness. In fact, it makes for considerable density and layering.

Ruminatively, and with *So Far, So Good* as his "not-too-soon-to-end Cherokee-Shawnee Death Song," he ponders his English name-heritage and pitches himself as "the Shakespeare of pig-food bearers... a post-Elizabethan word magician" (15). As though in ancestral affiliation and a reflection of his own call to word, he equally gives praise to Sequoia for his Cherokee "written symbols" (39). Working repairs to his present-time house cause him to remember the electricity-

less family farm and the “several books written with pencil” (60) in anticipation of those composed on computer screen. Avian reference, with its implication of literary flight, aligns bird and bomber, air and earth (“I can’t remember when I began to dream of exploring Earth by flying,” 79). He profiles himself as “fifteen-year-old bookworm” (130) whose youth-time rescue of two drowning girls links to “what compels me to write” (133), namely life-saving as though mirrored in their literal and figurative senses.²

Even one of his severest dramas, that of the eighteen-year-old armorer precariously helping save fellow crew-members from likely death when an in-flight bomb slips its casing, comes under his self-circling “have I exaggerated?” (163). The question plays into the overall creative awareness of deploying keyboard and pencil:

By now I am so modern I have become addicted to a computer keyboard for creating prose, but for poems, elusive as deer among dawn mists, my rifle is a stub pencil, like those with which I first drew cowboys and Indians and other combatants and like those with which my father recorded the days the bull was observed in the act of creating calves. (240)

So Far, So Good gives a full enough repertoire in situating Salisbury within mixed Native and white identity, along with the economics of class, European and Asian war, the university and its customs, peace activism, and always the ancestry of Cherokee and fellow tribes. Markers range from the Sand Creek Massacre to Hiroshima, *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Red Badge of Courage*. These, Salisbury concludes in sum, constitute “my memories of life flowing into the computer screen” (272). They do so, however, in a way such that the overall serial refracts his rite of progression into poetry and authorship, the outrider determinedly written-in by his own insider.

To turn from *So Far, So Good* to the poetry is to become sharply aware of how much of this pattern of self-figuration inheres for Salisbury, whether in the context of his take on Native identity, or early family Iowa, or war, or ecology, or the role of poetry. The voicing of each, allowing for how they inevitably also filter the one into the other, links always into the image of himself as the writer under near-destined summons. Each poem, in kind with his storytelling, bears this kind of hallmark as if always the writer is, to the one degree or another yet without over-intrusion, writing himself.

Salisbury's Native-white genealogy, incontestably, gives a major pivot to this writing-in, not least when localized in "A Declaration, not of Independence" which opens *Rainbows of Stone* (2000). There he summons birthright in the wryest of terms:

Apparently I'm Mom's immaculately-conceived
Irish-American son, because,
Social-security time come,
My Cherokee dad could not prove he'd been born. (3)

This is Salisbury as mock-Jesus, the bureaucratic de-legitimization of his Native father the quite shrewdest taunt. One suspects, too, the implied wider irony. Tribal peoples unable to offer paper certification of birth obliquely shadows the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 with its almost surreal conferring of their "right" to Americanization. In life and writing, Cherokee signature for Salisbury, whatever the family attenuations and acknowledgement of Anglo and Irish roots, recurs for him as an inescapably situating point of reference. It may well have done so the more given his ability to pass for white. At the same time, and nothing if not again self-situatingly, *So Far, So Good* serves to remind of his insistence on the inadequacy of versions of himself as somehow un-whole: "I am a Cherokee/Shawnee-English-Irish person, not part this part that but all everything, whatever that is" (242).

"A Declaration" profitably segues into "An Indian Blows Up Mt Rushmore and Indianizes What Cannot Be Resanctified," another opening poem, this time drawn from *Like The Sun in Storm* (2012). The effect conjured is one of the imagined dismantling of each "Father of Their Country" presidential head, carved by Gutzon Borglum, white supremacist Klan supporter in his time, from Black Hills granite. This is settler history's "Rushmore" word-inverted into "Rush Less. Not More" (4) and "Thanksgiving" likewise into "Thanks-taking Day" (4). Jefferson has become "marble-wigwamed," Lincoln emancipated by "Indian-Giving generations" (4). It is also a poet's riposte. Teddy Roosevelt as Rough Rider gives way to Salisbury or his persona as "Rough Writer" (4). If "Vanishing American" pervades, then "Native American" contests, and repudiates, that cliché through "tongue petroglyphs" and "pow-wowing ears" (4). Salisbury manages a deft contra-dance; "Make Peace Not War" (4) becomes his requiem to tribal dispossession in "the shadows of desecrated peaks" (4), and yet at the same time tribal continuance and to which through his own scripts and its reader-listeners he envisages his shared contribution.

The gallery is as various as frequent. "Being Indian" in *Rainbows of Stone* focuses attention on the evolving complication of mixed Native heritage. The opening of "Who we were seemed simple when gun/dropped meat onto plates" (5) yields to the poet's father, provoked into a killing and probable life imprisonment "if a lawyer had not convinced the governor / to pardon an Indian" (5). In turn a personal shelf of memory gathers of a Cherokee "Granny's apples and tales", of "road snow, mud or dust, from my parents' farm," and the library-learning of "colonial tyranny" (5). Each, on the poem's evolving disclosure, has played its part in his mixedblood entry "into the 20th Century" (5). Little surprise, perhaps, that Salisbury's closing line asserts "being what I was [was] not ever simple again" (5).

"A Rainbow of Stone," the collection's near-title poem, brings a yet fuller Native diorama into view, the universe of "Thunder's home" and "Creation" to be remembered against "factories smoking guns... a bomber" (65). One order of

planetary being has incriminatingly yielded to another, that of "my Cherokee people's buffalo, deer / plantations, even our holy town, / Echota" to "crime, monoxide, disease, and other city uncertainties" (65). If a right balance can be restored, a four-directions-full human ecology as it were, then in the poet's eye "the whole earth will be toe-to-toe / rainbows" (66). Thunder God and "your home" so again can phase into Nature's right equilibrium. The poem situates Salisbury in visionary mode, modern versifier yet also aspiring indigenous seer.

A similar ambition of scale holds for "A 20th Century Cherokee Farewell to Arms" (26-7). Child fantasies of becoming a tribal warrior supply a juncture, disconcertingly, with the allied World War II bombing of Dresden and follow-up in atomic Japan. The poem then veers back from what might have been "oxygen" or "cherry blossom," the end to "killing skills" (26) whether past or still in prospect:

the screams of victims to be
the screams of Cherokee tortured and massacred – and
of all the people who have ever been or will be
lovers or killer. (27)

The lines convey Salisbury's wary lamentation born out of his own emplacement within modern war but, quite as equally, within the haunt of Native history.

The first years of Salisbury's life serve his poems as a form of lattice, not only actual self-history but as the very genesis of his vocation as poet. The Preface to *Rainbows of Stone* (2000) gives a succinct gloss:

I need to recall the vanishing farming and hunting traditions with
which I was raised. They are the landmarks I need if I am to keep to
the Medicine Path I feel is mine. (i)

These beginnings supply requisite footfalls and echoes throughout the volume. Alimentation becomes its own drama in "Of Pheasant and Blue-Winged Teal" ("Dad's killed / buffalo, deer and bear, respectfully," 10). Prairie homestead and

weather presides in "Without Thunder" ("Twelve, I was shocked out of dreams by what / whatever makes thunder had done to the barn," 18). Farm animals and their role are remembered in "Unloading" ("two huge geldings hauling home, easily, the mountain of hay my aching arms had raised," 21). The killing of a predatory weasel presages other and later war-killing in "Frost Baby Harp Seal Pelt" ("blizzard-drift shape I clubbed / And pried out of trap-teeth baited / With guts of victim-chicken," 96). The poetry wholly un-sentimentalizes the legacy. Farming and hunt emerge as indeed the family's spare terms of survival with Salisbury, the real but also figurative presence of the boy-poet, put to steer his way through, and beyond, them.

Quite one of Salisbury's most affecting poems in this regard is to be met in *Rainbows of Stone's* "A Harvesting," with its link between seasonal just-about subsistence and the poet's imaginative crop from his past. Taking its point of departure from an image of growth in the shape of a fern frond "Curling around a finger of air" (117), the poem moves on to the poet's dead musician father "strumming / iced vines above his grave... English, Irish and Cherokee tunes." (117). This is the father whose "trigger-finger" and "hunt / for food, for generations" (117) embodies life-will, the refusal of defeat. One almost thinks of Breugel's "The Hunters in the Snow," dogs, snow, light. For if the lines bespeak a starker world, one of under-nutrition and necessity, they also point to the poet's "harvesting with tongue, then pen" and to "feasting, dancing, courting again begun" (117). The balance is finely struck, the two kinds of crop "harvested" and celebrated with the poet as mediating presence.

Emphasis, however, falls time and again upon remembered eat-or-die survival in the face of odds and which will through the course of Salisbury's writing segue into his anti-war life ethos. A poem like "For my Daughter, 10 Then and Now 11" gives voice to exactly those connections. Set "on this farm / my home / I've returned to" (78) it conjures back from past time "wild dogs tearing sheep / to self-sopping rags / when I was ten" and "our dog fleeing from a rabid skunk / around

and around our yard / until Dad's shot" (78). The prevailing memory, however, lies in helping birth the calf "I pulled out of the heifer's gene-narrowed young withers" (78). This scene of utter life, even if the obstetric calf is likely destined for the butcher's "no doubt rusted to dust by now blade" and bombers gnaw the air like "enormous rats," links to life's obduracy (78). The metaphor he deploys perfectly encodes this will to life "like leaves of corn / growing towards ripening," (78) whether that of his "safe-for-now daughter" or that of himself (78).

Immediate ancestry finds memorial fashioning in "Family Stories and One Not Told" from the 2009 collection *Light from a Bullet Hole* ("Our Irish mother's tongue," "Dad's... pipe smoke tethering in our ears," "Great Grandmother... her Cherokee-Shawnee braid loosened at last" 29). It does again in "To My Mother's Father" as chronicled by "Your grandson, his family visiting done, / on his way home" (218). "For My Sister," she, too, as he thinks of her at the family homestead in later age, is remembered for "hair gray as the shingles of the farm" (34-5). Whether the voices of family, or scant mealtimes and farm accidents to his brothers, plough horses and seedtime, rabbits and gophers, school-going and winter snow, Salisbury's beginnings press hard. The imaginative force of writing himself in from early family life seized from farm and hunt can be little doubted: it bespeaks the very fibers of his formation as person and poet.

War and peace, as "Green Smoke" in *Rainbows of Stone* underscores, conjoin in the B-24 bomb episode that continues to haunt him:

And yes, eighteen, I saved eight men.
 Nine if I count myself,
 Corraling a bomb banging wild like a colt
 Against our own bomb-bay, and now I'm a poet
 And try to save everything
 I love. (28)

The framing oppositions do immediate figurative duty. "It's World War Two again" is tethered to "now I'm a poet" (28). The black death-threat of the "bomb-bay" grates against the regenerative green growing around the "graves of some friends" (28). The poet, awakened at "six in the morning" by long distance phone-news of a downed crewman who shares his own exact name and who has been saved by The Rescue Squadron, tracks back to his own near-destruction aboard the training plane. The one happenstance meets another. Time-present tracks back into time-past. East Coast Atlantic gives way to Oregon Pacific. The poet, arisingly, sees himself the by-chance rescuer of the living. Humane, custodial, un-clichéd, it can be thought symptomatic of Ralph Salisbury's insistent stance for life over death.

This same event again finds remembrance in "A Bomber Crewman's Dance Around the Dead," one of the highly personal war poems gathered in *Blind Pumper at the Well: Poems From My 80th Year* (2008) and whose section-heading Salisbury entitles in upper case: "WAR: DECLARATIONS, EVOICATIONS AND CONDEMNATIONS" (38). The poet's precarious "18-year-old self," dangling "from a catwalk two miles / of freezing air about peaks" seeks to un-jam a wayward shackle with its bomb-load attached (38). The detail is insistently physical, raw hands on steel, the chilled body poised over a bomb that "could instantly kill eight, / including me" (38). Were the "safety wire – a copper cobra" (38) to rip those, too, at ground-level below might die. The task, however, its altitude and daring once negotiated, brings back into view the plane's basic purpose:

...bomb

and bomber were joined in unholy matrimony,
not to be put asunder, until
divorce would tell
a story, with no ending. (38)

Salisbury's metaphor of marital joining and breakage, the prospect of bomb released from bomber, acts as both memory and forewarning. The poet himself may

well have dangled, but so does humankind in its sundered "story" of quite un-ended warring.

These poems have their company across the Salisbury oeuvre. Family and war have their outlet in "War on, One Brother, Sixteen, and I, Try to Be Men" (82). Harking back to the farm's "corn-stalk-cutting machine," and its ability to "slice me into bacon strips" as he works the land with the brother who will become his "soldier-brother," he creates a contrast of not one but two kinds of machine (82). The earlier, culled from "68 years" of back-memory, invokes "planting," albeit itself dangerous with horse-reins gripped and mud underfoot. The other, with his brother in military service, invokes the un-planting implicit in a "war-besotted world" (82). Both kinds of hazard count but rarely more so than in the willed condition of armed conflict.

If Salisbury queries so-called "Indian Wars" in poems like "Canyon de Chelly," be it in frontier America's "name of civilization" or in conquistador Spain's "name of the Virgin," so his poetry alights on modernity's unrelieved penchant for military violence (48). A quartet from *Blind Pumper at the Well* bid for consideration. "Old German Woman, Some Wars" envisages an aged American poet helping an even more aged German "survivor of bombs" as she descends from a tram (40). The both of them carry war-history: he in his remembrance of bomb revenge for Britain's World War II Coventry, she of the Reich's marching soldiers. He ends literally in askance at his own once-again writing-in ("my fate to live to write to be / ignored, or read, by all / I would love to save," 40). The contrast of two different sites accrue in "A Cherokee Airman Remembers Two Wars" (41); one the Trail of Tears forced removal of the Cherokee in the 1830s and, in a time-leap forward, the bombing of Laos and other Asia in the 1960s. Salisbury writes as though inside his own double or even own double-double, the once tribal warrior of the Mississippi basin, the future high-tech warrior embroiled in the Mekong predations, "the moment's shade," (41).

"My Country Again Threatening Aggression (This time, for oil in Iraq)" shifts into yet more contemporary terrain (29). "Our crusaders," this time, have become corporate bankers whose Middle East appetite has again led into war and with it the desecration of "the union of women and men – and children – with earth" (29). Natural resources have become unnatural, oil as ultimate "ocean" available only as war currency and to go un-thanked and un-uncelebrated "in cathedral / or temple or mosque" (29). "A Nightmare After 9-11" (46) has the poet indeed caught up in dream-terror, the evisceration of the tribes into "Vanishing Americans" and the act whereby "imperialism's wronged" have "turned planes, and themselves, into bombs" (46). He imagines himself a would-be stay against both "Columbus's invasion" and an inheritor of the "poetry" of moon and tides each in natural motion "aeons" (46) before the New York attack. As war-poet, his span Europe to Asia to the Middle East to the ever-present danger of global nuclear calamity (in "Night Sky, Indian Ridge" he speaks of "our, nuclear target, home," 27), Salisbury gives claim to yet another major writing-in.

Ecology, manifestly, holds yet another sway in Salisbury's poetry. Rarely can that have been more emphatic than in the four-poem oil sequence in *Rainbows of Stone*, his environmentalist alarm at sheer reckless pollution imaged with characteristic vibrancy. "Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil Spill" (68), tracing the *Exxon Valdez* calamity in Prince William Sound, Alaska in 1989, opens with the streak as "Space-capsules-globules". Born of ancient evolutionary process ("ghost lizard-birds' coevals"), its modern abuse has led the quest for oil to become the pollutant of seabirds ("re-entering the atmosphere / in the nostrils of terns"). Wings, dark, saturated, have turned into "witch-wings." Nature's balance has been unbalanced. "Each tern is sacred" insists the poem. The oil itself, equally, "formed from the dead – is sacred." Overall, "each moment of life is sacred." This is sun-given-life as the poem's title indicates, a gift of "breath" wholly the opposite of the oil spill and

"not to be wasted" (68). A second stanza links the poet's flow of blood inside his own arteries to the earth's oil ("I understand my blood, / its cargo vegetable and animal"). In self-acknowledging "words" he sees fatal endangerment in either spillage (68).

"Oil Spills, 1966, 1989" (69)—given over to the *Torre Canyon* reef collision off Land's End, Cornwall, the worst in UK history, and again to the *Exxon Valdez*—connects Salisbury family history to each disaster. The poem looks back to Roman England, where the name Salisbury with its meaning of salt-storage originates, and then sideways to the 1966 of the Vietnam War, Israel's defeat of the Arabs, and the civil war of Biafra. The contrast arises between animal killing "to keep my Indian people from extinction" and the arbitrary killing of habitat and people. Salt-preserved Native-consumed meat invites a truce "with the creatures whose lives we'd made ours" (69). But modernity's glut lies far in excess of required subsistence. The closing stanza acts as summary:

OIL SPILLS, MORE CARS, OIL, WARS
and SUICIDAL MURDERS'S BULLET HOLES
IN CHILDREN'S CHILDREN'S CHILDREN'S
OZONE PROTECTION, our literature
today, tomorrow's page. (69)

If the mien is sardonic, 1966 or 1989 as a "literature" of crude-oil tanker spill, car, bullet, ozone or child, and with the "page" of the future likely more of the same, then it remains for the poet "fed / by a grant (conceived to prevent poets' extinction)" to issue written and written-in warning.

"Ocean Enough: Exxon's Alaskan Oil Spill" (71) avails itself of more closely Native-referenced bearings. It uses a deft avian contrast, oil-impaired bird, and Salisbury's own possible membership of the Cherokee/Yunwiya "Bird Clan." Reports of "spilled tons" have been accompanied by the headline cant of "THE PRICE OF PROGRESS." The poet thinks back to the extinction of prairie chicken "that / kept

us from starving during The Great / Depression" as necessity but also guilt. He also thinks of Tsk-skwa, the Cherokee for mating, birds sprung from prehistoric pterodactyl but become "ghost-fledgling" in the wake of desecration of ocean and "corpse-poisoned shore" (71).

"Oil Spill Spreading" (72) shares this vision. Time-scale has meant centuries of "oil put under pressure." Opportunism has led to the lure of "Black Gold," a "Siberia" of "imprisoning Indians" and "oil company guns." The upshot, courtesy of *Exxon Valdez*, has been "ink-black / fossil-blood on a white / Alaska shore" (the inserted scriptural trace not to be missed) and yet more ominously under hunger for exploitable resources the "danger of being, forever, / the night of nuclear-winter" (72). The "I" of the poem, Salisbury in persona, gives himself no exemption in the chain of exploitation ("I'm a killer, a carnivore"). His writing-in, albeit minute in scale, so links into the always immensely greater cost, the earth's vulnerability, "hurling towards extinction," (72) in the face of each act of environmental predation.

Writing and its actuation in its own imaginative right assumes a defining importance throughout each Salisbury poetry-collection. Even so, in "Personal Poem, Perhaps in the Manner of Tu Fu" from *Like The Sun in Storm*, Salisbury is not above affecting the off-hand as though himself the merest good-luck poet:

I drift in a poem an apple tree,
 Ripening before first frost, throws off,
 Without apparent thought. (28)

In fact, there can be little mistaking his skills, the fine-tuning of metaphor, the adeptness with periodical line-sentence. Across all the domains which draw him it is always the poetry that dictates, however consequential the matter at hand. "Without apparent thought" may give off an impression of Zen-like osmosis. In fact, it exactly belies Salisbury's summoning of self to craft.

"Words Concerned with Words," the second poem in *Blind Pumper at the Well*, approaches something of his writer's credo. How best to keep language oxygenated, free of political or other sham? For him the answer lies in literary good-practice, that of the poet above all. To this end he invokes a column of writers whose work has been preserved against odds: the great Jewish Hungarian writer Miklós Radnóti, killed by the Nazis, but whose work was saved by his wife ("The years of love in her husband's words," 4) or the intervention of Robert Bridges in saving the poetry of Hopkins and Max Brod in the case of Kafka and their "lifetimes of words" (4). The final stanza takes its swipe at the pretend-truth of "millions of words / of leaders" as against, in a sharp paradox, "the betrayals of faithful friends, who saved loving and deathless, words" (4). Alluding to the "fidelity" in this respect of his own wife, he looks to his best fortune in anticipating the prospect of so being further written-in.

A whole concourse of similar writerly self-allusion invites notice. In "For Years and Years," a poem given to dreams of death by accident, the first of them in childhood recalls himself with "legs no longer than pencils" (114-5). "Slitting the Tongue, so That Crow Should be Parrot," Salisbury's remembrance of cutting his wounded crow's tongue in the name of having it "sing," he links it to his eventual bardism as "age bends my trigger-finger on pen" (137). "Caring for the Soon to Be Born," self-glossed as "a final heartbeat likely to leave / grandchildren and poems not yet formed," offers the very synopsis of the poet at work with "stub-pencil sharpened on trigger-finger nail" and bound "to scribble the times / of destinies, which would – war not yet nuclear – be born" (140).

Salisbury's fellow-writer tributes and affinities each add to the writing-in, whether "For Octavio Paz" ("This magician" 63), "Jim Barnes, Choctaw" ("Jim Barnes is trading the world" 81), "For Simon Ortiz" ("his words circle the world" 78), or "Two Poems in Memory of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää" ("remembering the Chernobyl disaster year, when Nils-Aslak and I first exchanged poems" 65-6). Perhaps verse

like "Green Cows" (71) serves to draw the threads together. Late-written, aware of pressing mortality ("Alive, still"), Salisbury gives thanks for maple trees and their leaf-sugar ("seventy foot tall green cows") and beech trees (their squirrels and the gathered nuts "to bag and crack"). These are trees that yield "Growth ring / on growth ring – a poem" (71). The allusion commands attention. It would be apt to think of Salisbury's lifetime writing-in as his personal species of growth-ring, the poem within his poetry.

Notes

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² This episode is again summoned in "Swimming in the Morning News." The lines read of his awakening and remembering "the day I awkwardly swam/and saved two young women from drowning," as against "today, the somber wing of poetry so many's / sole chance to survive." (*Like The Sun in Storm* 65).

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