Poems by Ralph Salisbury

Sometimes Likely
If you look white
like I do
And work in the South
like I do
and want to go on making a living for
your woman and children
like I do
there are some
of your people you are
sometimes
likely to forget.

--from Rainbows of Stone
University of Arizona Press, 2000

Ralph Salisbury (hiding behind hat on left) with hired man, Cliff Bailey, and siblings Ruth (lying on ground), Ray (standing), Rex (seated) and half-brother Robert (Bob) Wessels (seated on right). Photo taken in the fields of the family farm, Arlington, Iowa, 1933.
With the Wind and the Sun
When the squadron I was in
bombed a Navajo hogan, killing,
by mistake, some sheep—
just like that flipped out ancient Greek Ajax did—
and blinded an elderly man,
my white buddies thought it was funny—
all those old kids’ war-movies again
against the savages, and,
ironically near where
the atom bit the dust, but

the Jew navigator,
who’d thought World War Two
had been won,
didn’t laugh, and I,
hidden under a quite light complexion,
with the wind and the sun waging Indian war
to reconquer my skin
defended myself
with a weak grin.

Swimming in the Morning News

A mother is saved from drowning below a bridge in U.S.-bombed Baghdad, or, she is one of my Cherokee ancestors, forging the un-bridged, then, Mississippi near present day St. Louis, and crows, flying above my meditations, make me remember black hands of old clocks, which awakened me to cawing the day I awkwardly swam and saved two young women from drowning, today, the somber wings of poetry so many’s sole chance to survive.

--from Like the Sun in Storm, The Habit of Rainy Nights Press, an imprint of Elohi Gadugi, 2012 [Elohi Gadugi is Cherokee for “the world (elohi)” “working together in community (gadugi)”]
A Coastal Temple Ruin, 1992
For Octavio Paz and Cesar Vallejo

Surf echoing Spanish cannon, or Aztec drums
summoning centuries of slain,
victory-regalia-petals proclaim sun
ascendant, while rainbows wing
from nests, to split banana beaks and sing
eons-extinct sea-verge-ecology ancestries,
clouds, roots, fragrance, fruit
offering survivors of war in the genes more
than invaders took
and defenders gave
their lives trying to save.

--from War in the Genes
Cherry Grove Editions, WordTech Editions, 2005
For Robert Wessels

My half brother, whose German-American father died, in the American army, in World War One, was, in World War Two, captured by Germans, who flew him from Tunisia to Sicily.

Escaped, he worked on farms, for a hiding place and food, while Italian sons were U.S. prisoners of war.

Pick grapes, scythe wheat— make wine, bake bread, a little sanity among millions of the mad.


Old German Woman, Some Wars

“Help me!” she cries, faltering, reckless or trusting, from tram,
a survivor of bombs, most likely, and, now,
a flesh-and-blood bomb herself,
the only possible target, me.

I’m old, she’s older, and I’ve no time to accuse,
“Coventry’s rubble,” or her, the name
of a map-coordinate I’d flown to set aflame.

Her hand finds the hand I’ve offered, her feet meet
the cobblestoned earth, we share
with thousands of the living and with
those billions, who waltz, in petal gowns,
or, snail-shell-helmeted, march,

her thanks an echo of mine,
war ending, my bomber turning away from this city,
my fate to live to write to be
ignored, or read, by all
I would love to save.

--from Blind Pumper at the Well
My Country Again Threatening Aggression  
(This time, for oil in Iraq)
The sea, though equally lethal, killing millions, seems sane, as it destroys our own and nations we call enemies.

More mathematically predictable than Christians, our crusaders will change ocean to oil then celebrate, not in cathedral or temple or mosque but in banks, the union of women and men – and children – with earth, not sensing for even one instant the sea’s awesome eons of giving and taking away.

--from Blind Pumper at the Well

An American-Indian Success Story in India

My abandoned grandmother’s raising twelve kids—
two years of study all that my father could get,
before racism shut down his school—
six years of university for me, after what
the army had taught—

a Bombay newspaper reporter—
to whom I’d given an interview
after her union’s strike had ended
press-censorship—honored my family
as a Native American success story.

Although assaulted in their legislature,
India Indian women won freedom for everyone,
and I would honor here those
who honored my American Indian father and
grandmother.

--from Blind Pumper at the Well
Medicine-Meeting, Hoopa, 1994
for Helen and Chad
Telling the gathering I’m Cherokee –
my skin, like the skins
of many of them, the skin
of soldiers who tore
futures not rightfully theirs
from the genes of defeated populations –

my answers are Father’s mother’s: “Sassafras tea
for congested lungs; mint leaves
for troubled digestion; willow bark chewed
for pain; tobacco breathed,
into aching ears” —

and words of love,
to raise the dead

in children's dreams
of living as women and men.

--from War in the Genes
Cherry Grove Editions, WordTech Press, 2005

Respecting Uktena

Columbia River Cherokee glittering monster Uktena, I recall my sister’s husband’s plowing from Mississippi loam a stone ball, proof of our tribe’s migrating through as once was generally believed, or maybe a jewel pried from Uktena’s skull— luck for our people forever or curse if you lack respect.

Mt. St. Helens erupting—Trojan nuclear plant and others built on seismic faults—Uktena, oh mighty Uktena, forgive us, yes, we are foolishly greedy, and Trojan’s our doom’s name.

--from Like the Sun in Storm
Habit of Rainy Nights Press, 2012
My Brother's Poem: Vietnamese War, 1969

You tell me you can not write it
yesterday's pretty village splinters and in
your aircraft cargo compartment ammunition/rations/med-
icines gone an American lies wrapped in his raincoat
strapped to the floor of that machine generations struggled
to invent and thousands of hours of lives went to create
the boy's belongings all he could bear
on his back packaged beside him
sunset a shimmer like cathedral glass
a memory the instrument-panel glow
as low as devotional candles showing
in plexiglass monsoon screams past your face
above the controls your own American face.

--from Like the Sun in Storm
Habit of Rainy Nights Press, 2012

Rex Salisbury (left) and Ralph Salisbury playing with dogs on the family farm, Arlington, Iowa, circa 1939. The one-room schoolhouse, which Ralph and his siblings attended, is in the far background.
A Genesis
What happened to sheets of carbon all night while under moonlit sheets I loved then dreamed?

In dawn my hand switches on, black clouds shoot lightnings from the wastebasket, and on my desk are rectangular fields, black loam that I know was growth pressed under tons of earth aeons before Shakespeare—new growth my own rows of words, this morning seen as the words of men through the centuries imprinting themselves, for love or fear,

which other words and sounds not words had stirred, stirring true lovers and readers and dinosaurs, and

before there were even leaves—
not those of books—stirring nothing until nothing moving with nothing in nothing like love created
this poem and
the next.

--from Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage
Pacific House Books, 1983
Awakened by Cell Phone

Awakening, beneath pines,
where a border of earth
the river dried from
gives thanks to rain,
I hear the lovely and loving chatter
my daughter’s year-old daughter sends
through silicon crystals
transmitted into eons of green
metamorphosed into petroleum
reborn as plastic, and, yes, into the centuries
of families which formed my ear.

--from Like the Sun in Storm
Habit of Rainy Nights Press, 2012

Ralph Salisbury and Ingrid Wendt, Fresno, California, 1969, Photo: William Stafford.
**Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil-Spill**

Space-capsule-shape globules of oil re-entering the atmosphere in the nostrils of terns,

an ocean of air between words’ furthest surges and home,
I say a tern may return,
eons from its final breath,
and smother some other creature—

and I say my cells may return,
eons from poems:

which say each tern is sacred,
itself flesh to become new life,
to go on sustaining lives;

which say that oil—formed from the dead—is sacred,
ot to be wasted or used
to gratify greed;

which say, with all the breath a mind can hold, each moment of life is sacred, and Timelessness and Death.

>--from Rainbows of Stone, University of Arizona Press, 2000

Ralph’s older brother Ray on tractor. Salisbury family farm, Arlington, Iowa, circa 1936.