
Poems by Ralph Salisbury¹

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.

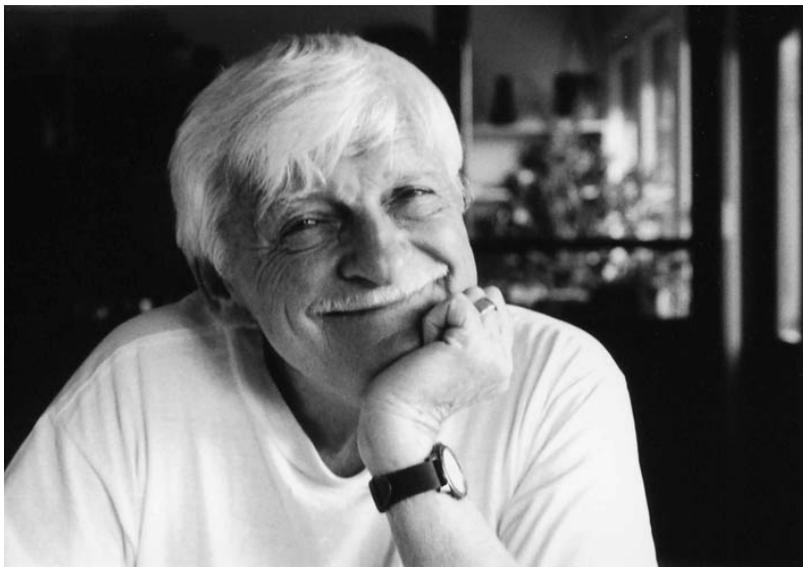
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With the Wind and the Sun

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.

--from "Going to the Water: Poems of Cherokee Heritage" (Pacific House, 1983), reprinted in "Light from a Bullet Hole: poems new and selected 1950-2008" Silverfish Review Press, 2009

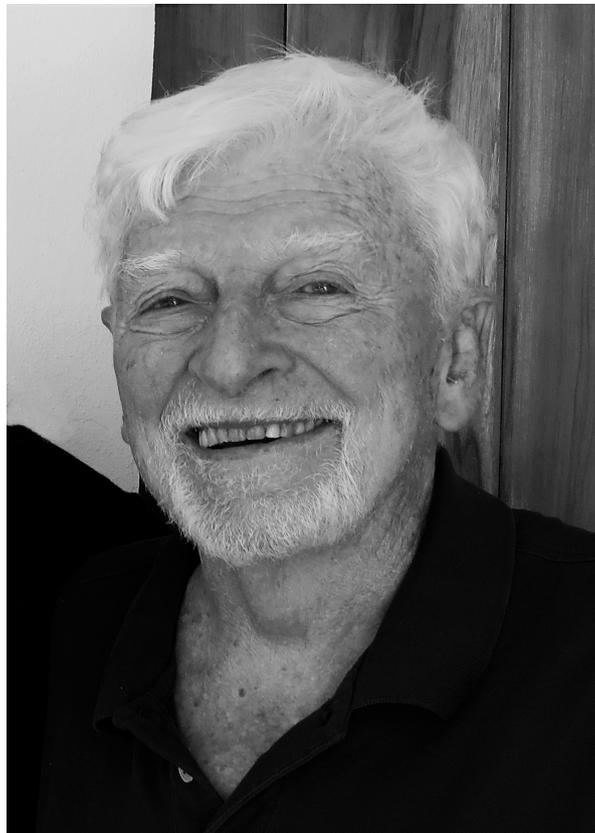


Ralph Salisbury, Eugene, OR, 2006. Photo: Ingrid Wendt.

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)"*]



Ralph Salisbury, Akumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 2012. Photo: Julie Bray

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



Ralph Salisbury, self-portrait, circa 1946.

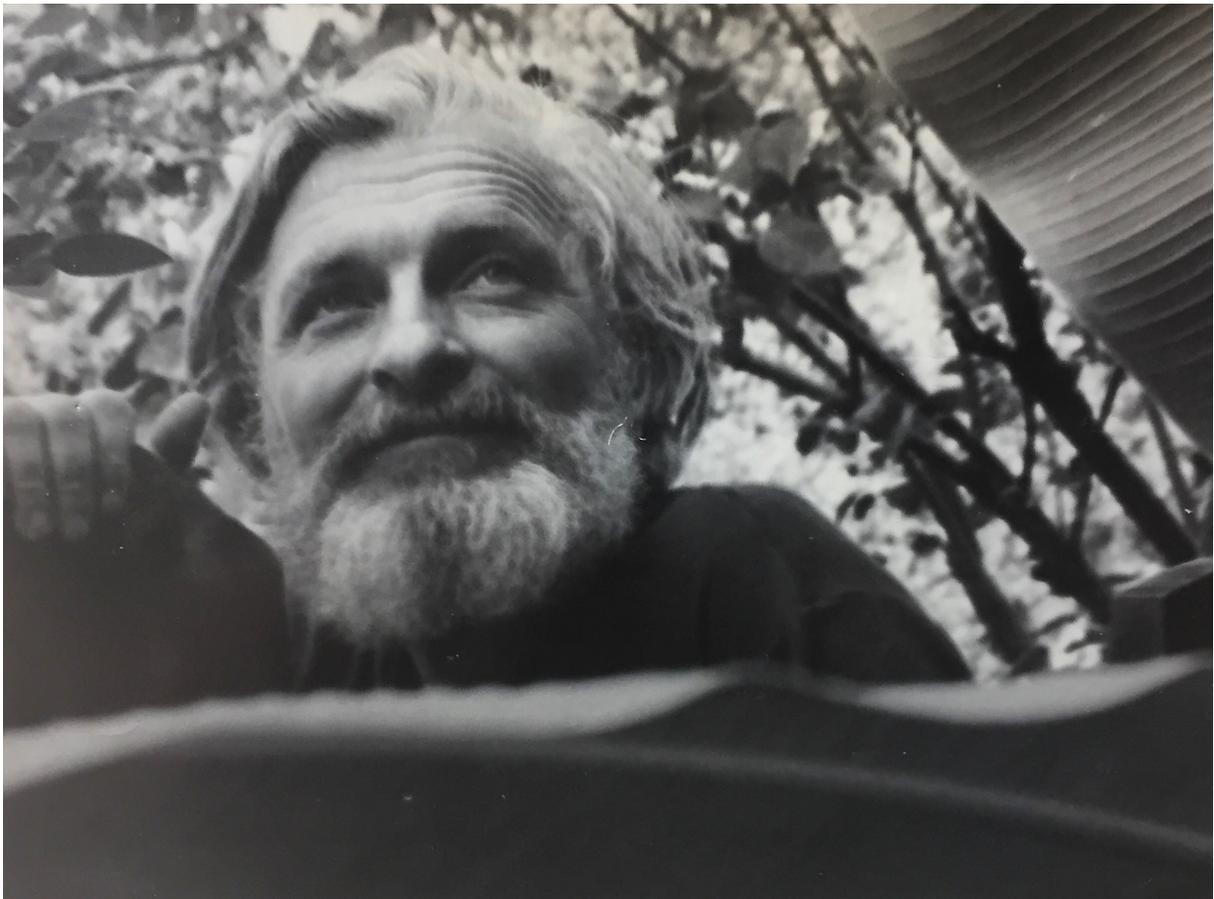
For Robert Wessels

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.

--from *Blind Pumper at the Well*
Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008



Ralph Salisbury, Fresno, California, 1970. Photo: Ingrid Wendt.

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*
Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008



Ralph Salisbury (right) with his half-brother Robert (Bob) Wessels, parents Olive McAllister Salisbury and Charles (Charlie) Salisbury

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*
Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008



Ralph Salisbury, Milwaukie, Oregon, 2013. Photo: Ingrid Wendt.

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*
Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2008



Ingrid Wendt and Ralph Salisbury, Akumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 2012. Photo: Julie Bray.

Medicine-Meeting, Hoopa, 1994

for Helen and Chad

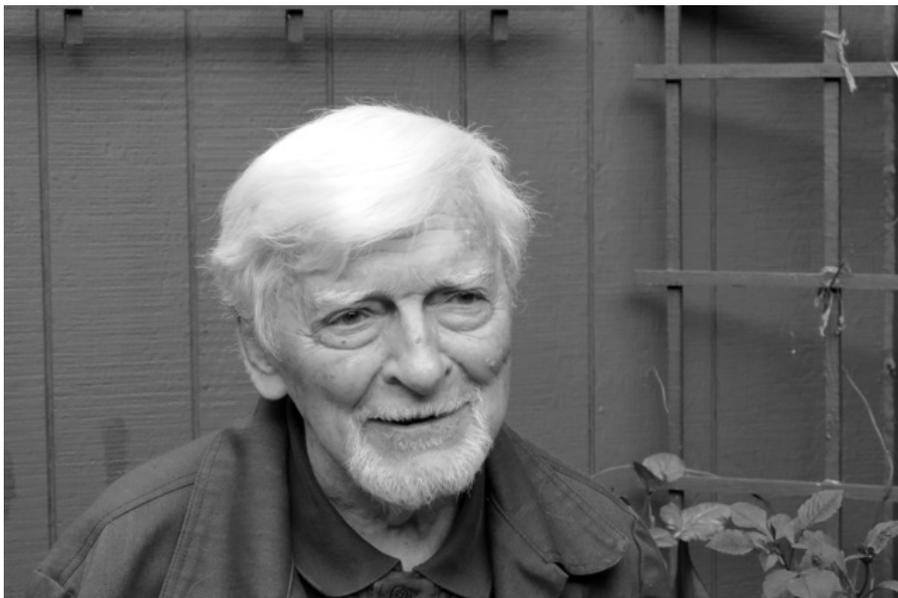
Telling the gathering I'm Cherokee –
my skin, like the skins
of many of them, the skin
of soldiers who tore
futures not rightfully theirs
from the genes of defeated populations –

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



Ralph Salisbury, Eugene, Oregon, 2012. Photo: Ingrid Wendt.

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



Ralph Salisbury during his U.S. Army Air Force training, 1944.

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

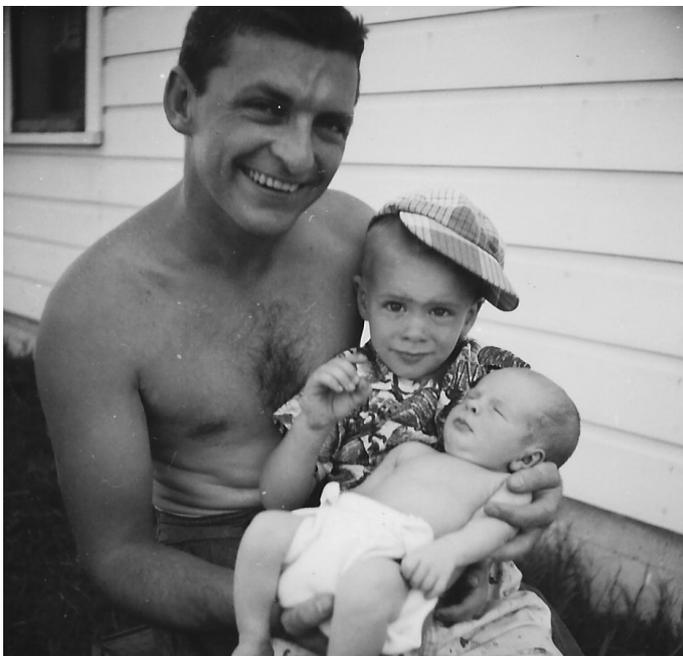
What happened to sheets of carbon all night
while under moonlit sheets I loved then dreamed?

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

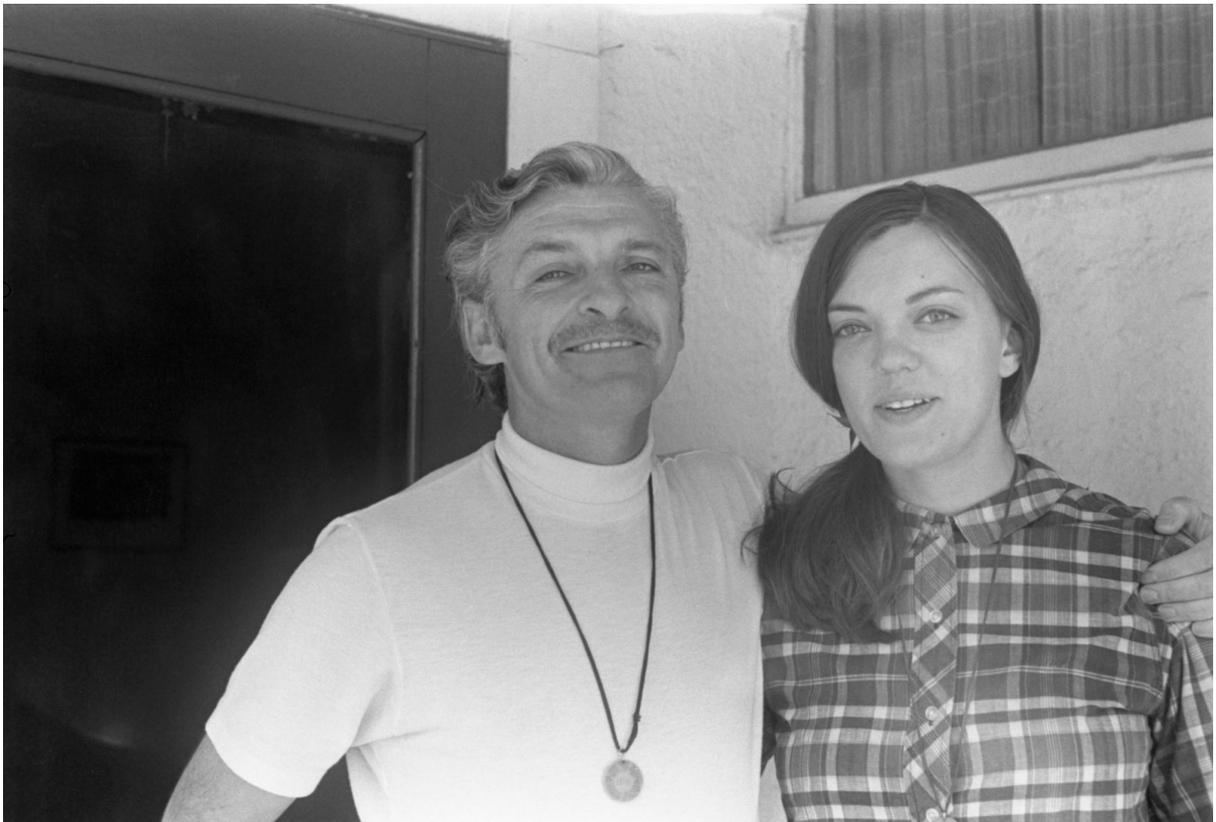


Ralph Salisbury with sons Jeff and
Brian, 1953. Photo: Joyce
Salisbury

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,
its flesh to become new life,
to go on sustaining lives;

which say that oil—
formed from the dead—is sacred,
not 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.