The Big Seminar We Call Time
An Interview With Poet, Storyteller & Fiction Writer Ralph Salisbury
By Marilyn Krysl

Ralph Salisbury is the son of a Cherokee storyteller/singer father and a storytelling Irish American mother. He grew up in Iowa, hunting and trapping for meat and pelts and working in the fields of a family farm that had no electricity or running water and was reachable only by a dirt road. When he visited his father's mother, his only road was a footpath along a creek. Now 77, Salisbury has worked for a living since age 12. Through World War II air force service he earned nearly seven years of university education and began to publish his work at age 21.

Characteristic of Salisbury's poems and stories is a rending particularity that records the social and political effects of stereotypes and the psychological toll such ideas take when they are internalized. His work embodies the anguish of human beings whose mixed-blood ancestry plays a crucial role in their poverty, failures of confidence, and alienation. His is an art that decries the scarring of the human soul and our participation in the unfolding of our own and others' anguish. Its elegiac urgency is a cri de coeur.

His oeuvre includes two books of stories, *One Indian and Two Chiefs* and *The Last Rattlesnake Throw*. He has published six books of poetry: *Rainbows of Stone*, *Poesie da un Retaggio Cherokee*, *A White Rainbow*, *Going to the Water*, *Spirit BeastChant*, and *Ghost Grapefruit and Other Poems*. With Lars Nördstrom and Harald Gaski, Salisbury translated both *The Trekways of the Wind* and *The Sun My Father* by Sami poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapaa. He has worked abroad as a Fulbright scholar and is the recipient of a Rockefeller Bellagio Award in fiction. His work has appeared in Great Britain, Canada, Germany, Italy, Norway, France, and India. He directed the Creative Writing Program at the University of Oregon, and *Newsweek* [November 23, 1999] praised his skill and service as a teacher. He is known as well for his dedication to aesthetics and political activism. This interview took place in June 2003.

The Bloomsbury Review: *Marilyn Chin has said that poets of the dominant culture lack a passionate purpose. Do you feel you have a mission as a Native American writer?*

Ralph Salisbury: Like yourself, Marilyn Chin was once my student, and I am glad to be with the two of you in "The Big Seminar We Call Time." I agree with Marilyn about many mainstream writers, but I'd add that you, and many other "nonethnic" writers, write passionately against the smugness and evil of the dominant culture. With an Irish American and Native American heritage, I have a focused hatred of injustice, and to protest injustice is a part of my mission as a writer. Certainly that's true of Marilyn Chin, but your writing, which implicitly protests evil against people with whom you've lived in Sri Lanka and India, certainly has a passionate purpose. Faulkner was not Indian, but he is one of the greatest writers to voice Indian life.

TBR: *In selecting your book* Rainbows of Stone *as an Oregon Poetry Book Award finalist, Maxine Kumin wrote, "Nature in Ralph Salisbury's conception is a Presence to be addressed." Her remark suggests the opposite: the Cartesian view of nature as "a Nonpresence to be ignored" or, worse, destroyed. This duality, in which humans see themselves as distinctly separate from and "above" nature, has been terribly destructive and painful—and it's false. Will you speak about how you've managed these two opposed worldviews?*

RS: One night when the stars were clear enough and close enough to be remembered, my mother told me in words a child could understand, or at least accept, that God was all around us in his creation, nature. This view was completely in accord with my father's American Indian view, and after all the rebellions and confusions of these many years, it is my view. I agree with you that seeing oneself separate from nature and above it is a destructive and false view.

Much of my writing condemns the arrogant worldview, which causes humans to shorten one another's lives in war after war. The enjoyment of feeling oneself a destroyer, with the power of life and death over other people, is the insane ultimate of feeling oneself separate from nature, separate from mortality. The ravaging of nature and the ravaging of one's own kind are inseparable. My instinct is to write out of a sense of harmony with nature and with other human beings. I write condemning disharmony as a murderous and suicidal evil.

TBR: *In* Rainbows of Stone *you declare yourself not part Indian, not part white, but "wholly both." There seems a Western cultural inclination—perhaps a self-protective impulse rising out of fear—to remove oneself from the richness of reality by breaking down that reality into manageable bits and classifying these shards.*

RS: Much of my writing grows out of being of two races and feeling myself a member of the human tribe. Increasingly as I age, I sense that my Native American heritage focuses my natural hatred of social injustice and my devotion to harmony with nature. An all-white southern jury convicted

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
to sing aeons-extinct dark-sea-
ecology ancestries, then nest
in leaves glittering like jade
sacrifice-blades.

My Indian nose sharing air
with comic banana beaks,
tragedy's cosmic rhapsody sounds
from unfathomable depths'
thundering against the merely meaningful,
where clouds, roots, fragrance, fruit
offer survivors of war in the genes more
than invaders took
and defenders gave
their lives trying to save.

Ralph Salisbury

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my father of murder, and he was imprisoned for one year of a life sentence before he was pardoned on evidence that he'd had to kill to save himself from a knife attack by a white. My father, unlike our neighbors, farmed "ecologically" decades before there was such a term. Being Indian is both a reality of my life and a metaphor for values I mean my writing to express.

What you suggest about American society is unfortunately true. TV bombards us with incessant messages of insecurity and fear from childhood on. Don't fail to buy this Barbie doll, this G.I. Joe, or you'll never attract friends. Don't wear the wrong clothes/perfume, or you'll never attract a lover. Americans are afraid to be anything but what they are told is American. The theme of great literature is the common humanity of all.

TBR: *You write in "A Declaration, Not of Independence"* [Rainbows of Stone], *"I thought what the hunted think."*

RS: To hunt, one has to know what the hunted knows; to become, to a great degree, the animal one kills. In my poems and fiction, I try to keep close to what I have lived but move out from this base and experience what others are living. When I'm successful, I satisfy a hunger, just as my hunting used to satisfy my hunger and that of my family.

TBR: *As a child I imagined that words came out of the ground and were lifted by wind into our mouths. I'm struck by the lyric moves with which you evoke our connections to where we are—to land and the natural world. It's a recurring theme that appears in the book's first poem.*

Eluding recreational killers' calendar's
enforcers, while hunting my family's food,
I thought what the hunted think,
so that I ate, not only meat
but the days of wild animals fed by the days
of seeds, themselves eating earth's
Aeons of lives, fed by the sun,
rising and falling, as quail,
hurtling through sky,

Fell, from gun-powder, come—
as the First Americans came—
From Asia.

RS: First, that words come out of the earth and are borne by wind into our mouths is so clearly true that only a gifted, imaginative child could have known it. I first read your work when you were 19 and in your first year at the University of Oregon, where I'd just been hired to help start an M.F.A. creative writing program and to chair it. After reading your poems, I did the logical thing. I led you into the only poetry class I was teaching, the graduate poetry writing class, and you legitimized my flaunting of academic red tape by publishing two poems in literary journals that year. Yes to words out of the ground; yes to wind; yes to human mouths—and yes to schools that serve literature by allowing writers like yourself freedom and whatever guidance may help them develop their talents.

As a sometime translator, Ezra Pound insisted that some things could only be written in the original language. The Sami [Lappish] poet I helped translate, Nils-Aslak Valkeapaa, would not allow my cotranslators, Lars Nördstrom [Swedish] and Harald Gaski [Sami], to translate one section from the last book we three worked into English. Nils-Aslak was adamant that it could only be right in the language of the land it came from, Sami. My colleagues made me, their Native American team member, the judge. I quoted Pound and said do as Nils-Aslak says.

Some critics deplore the focus on nature, citing it as a habitual tic of English romantic poetry and pointing out instances in which evocation of nature as image seems merely decorative. When I was in Robert Lowell's workshop at the University of Iowa, Louise Bogan of *The New Yorker* made a guest appearance and dismissed one young writer's poem with the phrase "My! It sounds as if someone has been out in nature." Still, she became a strong advocate of Roethke's work, despite—or because of—Roethke's devotion to the natural world of the Pacific Northwest.

Second, in the poem you quote, I try to evoke the often harsh reality of what I have lived. But if I did only that, I'd be one of society's statistics. My father could get only two years of schooling, but he could think, talk, write, and use numbers effectively. Thanks to World War II's G.I. Bill, I finished nearly seven years of university study. When I write, I try to connect my experience with what I've learned of the world and its people in this time and in all times.

TBR: *What was your earliest introduction to the body of English poetry?*

RS: My father's singing English traditional ballads.

TBR: *Who do you consider your literary forebears in that tradition?*

RS: In the rural school I first attended there were few books, but I read *Oliver Twist* at an early age. Often whipped and terrorized by my sometimes drunken father, I felt close to Dickens' abused London child. Later, *Moby Dick* gave me an unforgettable cannibal harpooner and a big fish. Later, *Huckleberry Finn* connected me with my father's southern upbringing and the Kentucky hills where I visited my father's mother and my numerous cousins. Among my mother's few books I found *Ivanhoe*, and retained—from that massive Scottish avalanche of words, attitudes, landscapes, and castles pounded into rubble—the word "javelin."

TBR: *I too read* Moby Dick*—in fifth grade. I longed to read, to feed my imagination. TV hadn't come on the scene, and in fourth grade—on the recognition that the pleasure of reading a long book would go on for a long time—I read* War and Peace*. I saw it on the shelf—the biggest book there—and thought, that's the one I want. I read Faulkner's novels to get through vicissitudes of high school.*

RS: All of Faulkner's books were out of print when I started college in 1946, but my instructors taught his work from anthologies and steered me to the library to find his novels. Faulkner's writing opened my mind to what I needed to write and to the voice in which I would write, my own voice—inherited, learned, and influenced, but my own. Faulkner's headlong surge of words in search of feeling and meaning moved me deeply, and the voice was southern, like the voice of my storyteller father—who was, I reckon, my

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most important literary forebear in oral literature. Faulkner freed me to move from my father's ballad singing and storytelling to writing poetry and fiction.

TBR: *A signature characteristic of* Rain-bows of Stone *is the poems' syntax. You invoke elaborate ironies by embedding images—sometimes single words, sometimes a phrase—in sentences that cover past, present, and future. The effect is elliptically tantalizing. I became a miner, moving carefully down a densely packed psychic tunnel, poised, because at any moment—just around the next preposition—I sensed I'd come upon a glittering gem. Describe how this stylistic move evolved.*

RS: I feel that writing is a process of discovery, and if I glimpse something that seems to be truth and/or beauty, to hell with syntax. Eighteenth-century Enlightenment was a smug, orderly tyranny, which has persisted into our time. Poetry is tedious when words come out of Doc Johnson's fat dictionary or Harold Bloom's pompous dictates. Life is much better when words come out of the earth. And if, in time, they seem to come from the sky as well—good.

TBR: *Formal verse has been embraced by some contemporary poets and rejected by others. How would you describe your relation to formal verse?*

RS: I think all verse is formal. End-rhyme patterned verse was and is a great aid to memory, and maybe our TV-governed country needs all the help it can get in resisting becoming a throwaway society, but end-rhyme patterning is structure, and structure is only one aspect of form.

TBR: *Is free verse more free than end-rhyme patterned verse, or less, or neither?*

RS: Neither is implicitly more free. Free verse relies on much more than end-rhyme structure. Free verse explores many voice possibilities, and these demand their own structure. For many of us, free verse is a source to which we return for intensity and profundity. Like all poets who teach, I like to pontificate a bit, have a good argument, get things clear for a while, but really, I think one should write what and how one feels. I studied with Robert Lowell during the time of Lord Weary, and that certainly intensified my love of end-rhyme patterned verse. I cut all my classes for two weeks and read all of Yeats. I didn't, however, cease loving the free-verse, regionalist writers of the Midwest and elsewhere. My first group of poems in *Poetry Chicago* included a sonnet, couplet, and free verse. Studying with Lowell at age 21 and 22, I articulated for our group the idea that end-rhyme patterning could move into the more natural flow of language called free verse—counterpointing. That seems right for me.

TBR: *Do you remember the process of writing your first poems?*

RS: "In the Children's Museum in Nash-ville," written in 1959, is one of my earliest poems I still consider a real poem. Based on personal experience, it evoked injustice against blacks and against Native Ameri-cans. Maybe because it was published in *The New Yorker* and got some notice, it is sometimes mentioned as one of the first poems published in what is called the contemporary Native American literary movement. I remember writing my first published short story. I wrote it in the newsroom of a daily paper because I had no typewriter, and, having worked as a journalist, I knew no one would notice one more man banging away on one of the noisy machines lined up like those in a factory. I entered the story, "A Pair of Boots," in a national contest for writers enrolled as students. I did not win, and neither did a fellow student, Flannery O'Connor. But our stories were published in the then-flourishing New York magazine *Tomorrow*. The contest she and I failed to win was won by an East Coast student who later wrote me and confessed that his brother had written the winning story.

TBR: *Do you write more by ear or eye?*

RS: It all starts with the inner ear, and then the images from my life begin to come.

TBR: *Do you have a theory of the line around which you characteristically compose?*

RS: I've no theory, just instinct, helped by afterthoughts during revision. A classmate, W.D. Snodgrass, once asked Lowell if he wrote in the patterned Georgian lines to begin with or if he wrote more spontaneously and then regularized the lines. Lowell said, "I write in Georgian lines and roughen them up in revision to make them sound more natural."

TBR: *Do you remember your first public performance as a poet? How would you describe the relation between the printed text, the experience of a reader alone with a book, reading in silence, and the poet's live performance of his or her poem?*

RS: We read poems aloud in Lowell's class and stories aloud in R.V. Cassill's classes. Through the years I've read poems and stories for hundreds of audiences in universities, bars, coffehouses, libraries, and on radio and TV. Hearing Pablo Neruda read "*Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu*" on a recording, my Chilean father-in-law got tears in his eyes and said to my wife, the poet Ingrid Wendt, "So that is what you do." To hear the beauty of a human voice in a moment of realizing our common humanity—that's why I attend readings, and I hope it's why others attend mine. To read to oneself and to let the words of another form into sound in one's mind is one of the world's most significant experiences. But to be part of a receptive group and to hear eloquent, true words read with feeling is another important experience.

TBR: *When I was a freshman in your class, I attended my first public poetry reading. The poet was William Stafford, and he talked about having been a conscientious objector. This was the first time I'd heard of this. At that time I wasn't aware of your Native American heritage, of your lifelong participation in the struggle against racism, or of your refusal to fight in Korea. Will you talk about this and also address how self-censorship might have played into that history?*

RS: I started teaching at a college in the Deep South during the Korean War and the tyranny of Joseph McCarthy. The college was a military college. I'd volunteered for World War II, but I'd refused an order to active duty in Korea—partly because I didn't want to carpet-bomb civilians, partly because *The New York Times* had documented the strong possibility that South Korea had started the war. I escaped prison by a computer fluke. I had no reason to argue the morality of the war with my students in the South or with anyone else, but racial prejudice was another matter. My classroom text's essays dealt with racial equality, and I didn't flinch from addressing the issue—no self-censorship. I'd already been fired as a journalist for insisting on writing an exposé on discrimination against Jews. In Texas I was threatened with lynching, but I didn't censor my teaching or writing. One of my poems, "Student Writing," was for a student who was Apache and had endured a year of harassment. In his last class before going back to New Mexico, he thanked me for my support, and he threw a final war-

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rior defiance at his racist classmates, telling them off by telling me, "You're the only man I've met in this place." I fought campus battles against administrators and legislators intent on censoring the magazine I edited for five years. Before I became editor, an entire, expensive issue was destroyed and a censored replacement published. The editor gave me one copy of the issue that had been destroyed and kept one for himself. I was fired as editor after insisting on publishing an issue that contained writing opposed to the war in Vietnam. I'm not mentioning the name of the magazine because it survived, and it flourishes in this far less oppressive time, without censorship and under an editor whose integrity and talent I admire.

In the last few months I've had a manuscript rejected by an editor who has printed quite a lot of my work. The reason given was a subeditor's remark: "Doesn't the author think that there has been a good war?" Another magazine solicited some of my work and accepted two of my poems. Then the magazine, which was devoted to minority-race writing, lost its funding before its first issue. And an anthology, *Oregon Poets Against War,* lost its printer, who wrote that "some of the writing is not in line with the views of my staff and other customers." Happily, the anthology will appear from Rainy Nights Press in Port-land, Oregon, printed by someone less inclined to censor. Much has been said on television and in nationally prominent magazines about advertisers' governance over what is published. There have always been restrictions on writing: Shakespeare dealt with it; all writers deal with it, in their individual ways. But the bottom line for me is: Do not censor yourself.

TBR: *Like many of the poems in* Rainbows of Stone*, "Bullet Holes ... Drops of Rain" speaks to the delicate balance of power between parents and children. The poem evokes our human capacity to harm and your own longing to somehow "Finish the killer in everyone." I sense your abiding concern for human welfare and your intent to remind yourself through the act of writing that your part in this is both minuscule and crucial.*

RS: "Both minuscule and crucial" puts it well. The only difference between me and a close friend incinerated in the crash of his bomber—the only difference between me and someone incinerated in Hiroshima or the World Trade Center—is that I'm alive. If I did not feel grateful, if I did not try to live and work as well as I can for all who have lived, for those who are living and those who will live, I would not deserve to draw one more breath. Each day I ask the Spirit too great to name to help me to be worthy of my Medicine Path, my destiny, and to live well enough and long enough to fulfill my destiny. May it be so.

TBR: *What are the present dangers in Western culture for intellectuals?*

RS: One of our great dangers is being jailed for being true to what is best about our country. Another danger is being marginalized by centralized, corporate control of publishing. As writers, our danger is America's danger: being silenced.

TBR: *We carry our shadows with us. You write about this in* Rainbows of Stone *and in your fiction. What in your life are you most proud of? What do you most regret?*

RS: I'm proud of having twice defended my home against criminals and once against racists. I'm proud of my part in the desegregation movement. I'm proud of sometimes having helped minority-race students. I'm proud of my efforts in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and currently, in the anti-Iraq invasion movement. I'm proud of having volunteered for World War II, proud of my youthful desire to fight evil and do good, though my idealism involved me in one of those colossal human blunders my species seems unable to forswear. I'm proud of having shared in creating and raising two sons and one daughter. I'm proud of my writing when it seems to matter to someone. I regret the selfishness and stupidity that have wasted some of my life.

TBR: *I read the poems in "Death Songs," the last section of* Rainbows of Stone*, and remember my time as an undergraduate. I've heard quite a few stories of teachers who squelched a student's talent rather than nurturing it. Partly because of those stories, I'm aware of how fortunate I was—and how grateful I am—that when I was 19 and utterly naive, the universe brought you to be my teacher. Your patient and wise dialogue about writing in general and my first drafts in particular gave me a confidence I might not otherwise have come by easily. And there was also the fact of your character—the nuanced ways in which you were honest—and your carefulness with your students' psyches—willing to befriend as well as teach, cautioning about various pitfalls we might not have expected—and your kindness. Your exemplary stand against censorship. I remember the public reading you organized for Ginsberg's "Howl." Always your principled life was there as example. All of the above is preparation for saying that I read the poems in "Death Songs" in a hush, read them not only as yours but ours: poems from which anyone may learn a wise acceptance of mortality. "Long and Longer" is especially moving.*

RS: "Long and Longer" has been selected for the Poetry in Motion project, and it is now on the walls of Portland, Oregon, city buses. I connect this development with your question because all of the "Death Songs" are quiet, contemplative, not the mode one would readily associate with public places. Maybe the poems speak to the feeling of personal sanctity all of us possess, whatever our surroundings. I've been close to death, and it seems natural to share some sense of the beauty, the pain, and the hope for whatever comes next. "All I have tried to teach is that I don't know," Socrates is quoted as saying on his deathbed. And he told his executioners that, instead of punishing him, they might be sending him to a better world. The Cherokee Death Song tradition, celebrating those you have come from and who you are, is my tradition, and I hope that final section of the book somewhat realizes that.

Anyway, with six Oregon Book Award readings in Oregon communities and a reading for the United Nations' Inter-national School in New York City, I'm carrying on the oral tradition, and living with my wife of 32 years, and looking forward to the birth of our daughter's child, and hosting a mild virus, and writing nearly every day, and enjoying my life. ■

INTERVIEWER: **Marilyn Krysl** is a former student of Ralph Salisbury. Her latest books are *How to Accomodate Men: Stories* (Coffee House, 1998) and *Warscape With Lovers* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1997).

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