
The Poetry of Ralph Salisbury: Syntax as Vehicle for Conveying an Ethical Vision

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The opening poem of Ralph Salisbury's *Rainbows of Stone*, published in the first year of the present century, articulates and embodies a central theme of his poetry—the interconnection and inter-relatedness of all creatures, times, things. It is, as its title puts it, "A Declaration, Not of Independence" (3).¹

This "Declaration" opens conversationally, but the seemingly casual tone quickly turns devastatingly ironic:

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.

He could pay taxes, though,
financing troops, who'd conquered our land,
...

The conversational style soon shifts into something hardly sayable. The bulk of the poem consists of two long, curiously complex sentences. Here is the first:

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.

Eased into the poem by the conversational style of the opening, readers may stumble repeatedly as they attempt to negotiate the syntax of this sentence. The subject is deferred by two participial phrases, one nested with the other—"Eluding ... while hunting..." The object of the first participle is modified by two possessives, "killers' calendar's," one likewise nested within the other. This is difficult to process—and made more so by the dense texture of sound repetition. The poet is obstructing readers' movement through the poem, slowing us down, and we would do well to attend not only to his words but to his constructions and to what these constructions, by their very nature, convey.

Deferral of a subject by modifiers signals that the subject cannot be understood apart from particular circumstances. Nesting of elements emblemizes the containment of one thing within another. Both of these features together suggest that nothing is simple, nothing is unto itself.

Once we reach the subject, "I," the predicate, "thought what the hunted think," follows immediately in the same line, but then the sentence is extended by a result clause, "so that I ate ...," which is itself extended by multiple nested modifiers of the verb's object:

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.

Each modifier is itself modified through ten layers of elaboration, and each of the last two modifiers is interrupted by an internal modifier. This structure is a veritable embodiment of dependence.

After this breath- and brain-taxing sentence, the syntax briefly relaxes into a simple clause with a compound predicate and minimal modification—until a “but” launches a second independent clause:

but, with this hand,
 with which I write, I dug,
 my sixteenth summer, a winter’s supply of yams out
 of hard, battlefield clay,
 dug for my father’s mother, who—
 abandoned by her husband—raised,
 alone, a mixed-blood family
 and raised—her tongue spading air—
 ancestors, a winter’s supply or more. (3-4).

The crucial information is arrived at only by digging down through layers of syntax. The clause is repeatedly interrupted by modifiers of various types—prepositional phrase, relative clause, adverbial phrase, participial phrase, absolute construction. The poet’s paternal grandmother makes her appearance only as the object of a prepositional phrase, but this deeply subordinate grammatical element becomes the tail that wags the dog of the clause. The grandmother’s agency asserts itself as forcefully and surprisingly for readers of the poem as it evidently did for the 16-year-old future poet. The main clause elements are simple: “I dug ... a winter’s supply of yams out of hard,

battlefield clay..." But that is not all there was to it. Coming into the knowledge of his Cherokee ancestry was not simple for this young man, and the syntax the mature poet has found to convey that experience embodies its complexity.

Such use of syntax is pervasive in *Rainbows of Stone*, but it was already a significant element of Salisbury's poetry two and even three decades earlier. In *Pointing at the Rainbow* (1980), a one-sentence poem, "Family Stories and the One Not Told," deploys several of the poet's characteristic constructions to tell of his family's concealment and his own "spading" up of one previously unacknowledged Native American ancestor (*Light from a Bullet Hole* 29).

"Our Irish mother's tongue would stitch / wool glowing needles of the wood stove wove," the poem-sentence begins, straightforwardly enough in the first line but already obstructing our parsing in the second. The monosyllabic noun "wool" is followed, without any relative pronoun, by a relative clause with a long noun phrase as subject of the monosyllabic verb "wove," and the dense weave of assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme not only imitates what it describes but also makes the underlying syntactic structure harder to discern. We are prepared for a poem of dense entanglements.

The first independent clause is then followed by a second: "and there was bread and milk hunger made us / lovingly recite[.]" Again a straightforward assertion is complicated by a relative clause following the complement without a relative pronoun. The complexity then deepens, as the sentence is extended by a subordinate temporal clause, interrupted by another contact relative clause, then further extended by a series of absolute constructions. Lineation and syntax come into phase at the end of the ninth line, and there, except for a telltale comma, the poem seems momentarily complete:

while the rattle of fast freights, empty bottles
recalled, sped Dad

north, his pipe smoke tethering in our ears
Great Grandpa's mules
no Yankee patrol could tell from grime,

But the absolute construction conjuring an ancestor-subject of the father's family stories is then followed by another, conjuring another ancestor, this one not present in those stories: "Great Grandmother locked / behind a tobacco-browned stockade, / to keep the word 'colored' from her kin[.]"

The poem doesn't let us stop here, even momentarily. Instead, it launches, with the monosyllable "one," following "kin" at the end of its line, a long relative clause:

... one
of whom would spade
with his tongue enough earth
out of his brain to raise
her coffin to blaze like a meteor,

Though the sentence is again potentially complete at a line-ending, the poem continues past that boundary to enact, in a final absolute construction, what the lines just quoted have described:

her Cherokee-Shawnee braid
loosed at last
to spread black sunshine
on a snow horizon.

The characteristic usages of Salisbury's poetic syntax seem to have emerged as means for carrying out the moral work of recovering suppressed family and cultural history. There are precedents for doing such work in poetry and for developing a syntactical style peculiarly fitted to do it. An important one can be found in the work of Robert Lowell, who was Salisbury's teacher at the University of Iowa. Salisbury received his MFA from Iowa in 1951, and Lowell taught there from 1950 to 1953. At that time, Lowell was between the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lord Weary's Castle* and the

breakthrough *Life Studies*, which would win the National Book Award and become a classic of what would be known as confessional poetry. He was working on the long dramatic narrative "The Mills of the Kavanaughs," continuing to write a taut metrical verse while on the brink of shifting into a looser, but still densely textured non- or quasi-metrical verse (Mariani 190-91). In a 1985 interview, Salisbury recalls that he had started out 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 (Schöler 31).

It is hard to imagine a greater cultural distance than that between this teacher, a Boston Catholic patrician CO, and this student, an Irish-Cherokee veteran raised in rural poverty. That the young Salisbury would associate Lowell's metrics in *Lord Weary's Castle* and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* with "old Kentucky hill country songs" is a measure of that distance. In the 1985 interview, Salisbury implies that Lowell's influence on his work was limited to versification:

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 (Schöler 31).

Perhaps, though, the term "musicality," as Salisbury uses it here, should be interpreted more broadly.

I suspect that imitating Lowell gave the young poet a sense of the possibilities of non-standard syntactical structures, together with dense sound textures, and of their value for conveying an ethical vision otherwise all but inarticulable. In passages from "The Mills of the Kavanaughs," like the following, supposed to be spoken by the character Anne Kavanaugh to her dead husband, Salisbury might well have seen how

syntax could embody complexities of heritage and history. I have boldfaced the conjunctions and relative pronouns launching the clauses that repeatedly extend the sentence at deeper and deeper levels of subordination.

“Our people had kept up their herring weirs,
Their rum and logging grants two hundred years,
When Cousin Franklin Pierce was President—
Almost three hundred, Harry, **when** you sent
His signed engraving sailing on your kite
Above the gable, **where** your mother’s light,
A daylight bulb in tortoise talons, pipped
The bull-mad june-bugs on the manuscript
That she was typing to redeem our mills
From Harding’s taxes, **and** we lost our means
Of drawing pulp and water from those hills
Above the Saco, **where** our tenants drilled
Abnaki partisans for Charles the First,
And seated our Republicans, **while** Hearst
And yellow paper fed the moose **that** swilled
Our spawning ponds for weeds like spinach greens (Lowell 82).

The sentence refuses to end until it has gathered into itself all the actions and situations, occurring at different times in the past, that the speaker feels to have bearing on the present.

Besides Lowell, there is another writer whose work may have shown Salisbury possibilities for making syntax a vehicle for embodying the bearing of ancestors’ lives and historical events on the present. William Faulkner’s late novel *Requiem for a Nun* was published in 1951, the year Salisbury received his MFA degree. There he may have read the now-famous declaration, “The past is never dead. It isn’t even past” (46). There and in Faulkner’s novels and stories of the previous two decades, Salisbury may well have read and contemplated the power of the extraordinary, page-long sentences

in which are interleaved events of different eras, including "the simple dispossession of Indians," the building of the courthouse, and the inexorable development of the town:

the hands, the prehensile fingers clawing dragging lightward out of the disappearing wilderness year by year as up from the bottom of the receding sea, the broad rich fecund burgeoning fields, pushing thrusting each year further and further back the wilderness and its denizens—the wild bear and deer and turkey, and the wild men (or not so wild any more, familiar now, harmless now, just obsolete: anachronism out of an old dead time and a dead age; regrettable of course, even actually regretted by the old men, fiercely as old Doctor Habersharn did, and with less fire but still as irreconcilable and stubborn as old Alec Holston and a few others were still doing, until in a few more years the last of them would have passed and vanished in their turn too, obsolescent too: because this was a white man's land; that was its fate, or not even fate but destiny, its high destiny in the roster of the earth)—the veins, arteries, life- and pulse-stream along which would flow the aggrandisement of harvest: the gold: the cotton and the grain (Faulkner 5; 25-6).

Reading such sentences (the passage above constitutes no more than about a third of the sentence from which it is drawn), he may well have been struck by the possibility of forging a syntax capable of embodying the dispossession of Native Americans, the obsolescing of "wild men," from the point of view of a descendant of those dispossessed and rendered obsolete.

Salisbury was using syntax for such complex, morally charged articulations at least as early as 1972, when his first collection, *Ghost Grapefruit*, was published. "Boyhood Incident Recollected in Tranquility" is a confession of a crime and an unfolding of the retrospectively recognized nature of that crime (*Light from a Bullet Hole* 16). The poem runs for 19 irregular-length lines before it reaches a period. Before

that, major syntactical boundaries are marked by em-dashes and colons, punctuation that signals not only reaching a boundary but continuing beyond it. The first three lines deliver a complete independent clause, but with the normal order of clause elements inverted and with the object disproportionately elaborated: "A snake with the head and foreflippers of a frog, / a frog with enormous snake stern—a boy / at the brink of Eden stoned[.]" Reading, we, like the boy, are first confronted with the image of the apparent snake-frog in all its monstrosity. Syntactical expectation is then for a verb, with the elaborate noun phrases as its subject. But the verb is deferred; another and contrastingly unelaborated noun phrase intervenes: "a boy." Thus, the syntactical and phenomenal monstrosity is not to be the subject of the still-awaited verb, but its object. And then the verb is further deferred by an adverbial phrase, "at the brink of Eden," lifting the scene to the level of myth and conveying that the anticipated action will be determinative, will constitute a fall into knowledge. So long deferred, the single monosyllabic verb, "stoned," has all the force of the action it names.

Deferral of clause subjects and/or verbs is a common usage in Salisbury's poetry, and it does far more than enhance the textural interest of language. It enables readers to experience aspects of the meaning viscerally as well as cognitively. Here, the long-deferred verb is followed by a dash and a line-break, marking an end that is also, crucially, a precipitant of further development—which will turn out to be one of understanding. Through the syntax of the rest of the poem, we, as readers, participate in the emergence of that understanding.

Understanding is developed through an attempt to re-see from different perspectives and, accordingly, to re-name, what the boy saw and to comprehend the action he took in response to the sight. This process is enacted by the syntax. The fourth line of the poem gives the first re-naming: "Stephen-Saint—snake-frog—God." Who or what was stoned? Stephen, who was martyred by stoning and made a saint.

The awkward compound "Stephen-Saint" suggests a peculiar composite being, as does, of course, the compound "snake-frog." Following another dash in the same line, "God" at first seems another name for the victim of the stoning, but as we round to the next line, we're led to re-interpret it as the subject of the verb "saw." God's vision of the victim is described as one might an artist's depiction of a saint: "a halo of red rim / stretched jaws, sash black-speckled green and whitish middle." That is one version. The next line introduces another version, another clause: "human scientist in that instant verified:.."

The object of "verified" extends over the remaining 12 lines of the poem, beginning with a string of three noun phrases, the last of which is elaborated by a relative clause and then extended by an absolute construction, containing a gerund that itself is followed by a string of three more noun phrases as its object, the last again elaborated. In its multiple extensions and elaborations, the syntax embodies the monstrosity, the monstrousness, of what the words seek to name. Here is the whole heavily right-branching clause, formatted to show the layers of subordination:

human scientist in that instant verified:

murder of fellow fauna two-fold,
a hunt without appetite blessed with success,
empty belly balked by a rock,
 that rules so much by ignorance and monstrous fear of what seemed
monstrous ...
 boy-man, man-woman in dread of the hand's doing, cringing from knowing,
simply:
 the size of a snake's mouth,
 the size of a frog's waist,
 the appetite of the world's meat
 so much more than the mouth can ever encompass
 although compelled by emptiness to try

As in the later “Family Stories and One Not Told” and the much later “A Declaration, Not of Independence,” the crucial recognition is arrived at only in a deeply subordinate syntactical element. It is there that, through reading and parsing, we arrive at the knowledge the boy came to through the act of stoning and the reflection it occasioned.

In the 1985 interview, when asked about his use of enjambment, Salisbury spoke of it as helping to give “a sense of voice driving at something, speaking, or with inner voice thinking, very passionately and intensely” (Schöler 31). It is not so much occasional instances of enjambment as it is the whole syntactical style of his poetry that creates the sense of an “inner voice thinking, very passionately and intensely.” The poem “Out of the Rusty Teeth,” published a couple of years before that interview, in the collection *Going to the Water: Poems from a Cherokee Heritage*, invites readers to follow, through a syntax of piled-on appositives and absolute constructions, a train of impassioned thought.

Trigger for this urgent meditation is a quoted phrase, “Trapped in dark corridor,” which opens the poem and is repeated twice in the succeeding lines’ associative reflections (*Light from a Bullet Hole* 43-4). The thinking recorded in, and enacted by, the poem proceeds by fits and starts, through passages both separated and connected by dashes. The poet is considering whether, and, if so, how, the phrase “Trapped in dark corridor” might apply to him.

The syntax is dominated by absolute constructions—most free-floating, apart from any associated full predication—and by noun phrases in apposition to one another—again mostly free-floating fragments. In such a syntax, actions are conveyed as compact with, folded into, states of being: events are never over, but embodied or, perhaps more accurately, encysted. These encysted events insist on being recognized, as the phrase “Trapped in dark corridor” insistently repeats itself in the poet’s mind.

So who and what is he that this phrase should concern him? There is the matter, laid out in the poem's first verse paragraph, of his name—"family name / from earldom and bishopric near Stonehenge, sun- / worshipers built"—and his face—"my face like that / of the late nineteenth century / 'lesser star' Cherokee shaman Herr Olbrechts captioned 'J'"—and of their incongruous association.² Such a name with such a face, such clashing yet peculiarly related inheritances (the "earldom and bishopric" of the poet's family name is located "near Stonehenge, sun- / worshipers built," as the "Cherokee shaman" whose facial features he shares was presumably, in a phrase that appears later in the poem, "a New World sun- / worshiper"), might indeed constitute a sort of entrapment in history's "dark corridor."

"Trapped in dark corridor," the poem repeats at the beginning of its second verse paragraph. Now, though, the poet refutes the implication that the phrase applies to him. Appropriately, he does so in the only full independent clauses in the poem:

but my steel traps caught
fur coats for the rich for years,
and all I am
caught by, really, just now, is
time and the urge to leave a few words
other than my names
carved in stone—...

Even in the defiant assertions of these two coordinate independent clauses, however, the matter of the poet's name insistently comes up again, and the second clause (more specifically, a post-modifier of its object) is extended by a linked pair of absolute constructions that spell out its meaning—the meaning not only of his family name, but also of his given one: "the last meaning 'Salt Town', / 'Wise Wolf' the first, in languages mostly lost—[.]"

With its first line—“‘Wise Wolf Salt Town’—” the third verse paragraph picks up on the names in their recovered earlier meanings, then, in a pair of appositional noun phrases, each modified by a relative clause, riffs on the surname “Salt Town,” derived (as the poem’s opening passage has told us) from an English “earldom and bishopric,” in terms of the poet’s personal history and present stance:

Lord Salt Town who
salted down bloody pelts, to save them from spring sun—
“The Bishop of Salt Town”
who preaches the saving of skins and words,
words, words, words, like “Trapped in dark corridor”—

With the object of the prepositional phrase that ends this verse paragraph, we are back to the phrase that has set the poem in motion.

In this third utterance, the phrase conjures a vision, articulated in two parallel absolute constructions, of Christian soldiers and Cherokee warriors confronting one another by the light of tapers and torches in what is evidently a dark, narrow space:

tall tapers throwing my cruciform shadow onto onrushing
brilliantly emblazoned Cherokee priest-robos
and naked muscles red-painted for war,

pine torches hurling my Cherokee foetal death-curl-
silhouette onto crosses on armor
advancing to expunge a New World sun-
worshiper, his name on three children,
less durable than stone,

...

In this vision, the poet-speaker casts two shadows, a cruciform one onto Cherokee garments and bodies, a fetus-shaped one onto Christian soldiers’ armor, as the two opposed groups advance toward each other. In this confrontation where a pagan Native American is defeated, his name expunged, the poet’s younger self fights on

both sides, as the next two lines make explicit in another absolute construction: "a battle of shadows joined / in the skull of a boy..."

The poem does not end with this articulation, in fitting syntactical form, of past violence inflicted and suffered by ones "trapped in dark corridor" as replayed in the mind of a boy who would become its poet-author. Instead, it continues, through an extended relative clause, to render the actions of the boy, himself a trapper:

... who ran on the sun
on snow, frost white as whiskers of weasels in his nostrils,
to take, out of the rusty teeth of his traps,
common brown mink and, one time,
from the gleaming jaws of a dream, a glittering black glory
the glittering heavens may
not ever flesh again.

From the poetry of his earliest collections to that of his most recent, Salisbury, perhaps spurred by Lowell's and Faulkner's examples, shapes syntax into an adequate vehicle for conveying the presence of past violence and the speaker's at least partial complicity in it. The poem "Canyon de Chelly," set in the Anasazi ruins at that site, is a later example of this, included in *Rainbows of Stone*. Like the early "Family Stories...", it is a one-sentence poem.

The poem-sentence opens with a locative clause that identifies the setting in terms of two past instances of violence against its Navajo inhabitants:

Where Americans, in
the name of civilization, and
Conquistadors, in
the name of the Virgin,
massacred Navajo braves in
the womb... (48)

Only after establishing this context does the poet name the subject of his sentence—"Anasazi walls"—and then he interrupts the subject-verb-object sequence, first with a

participial phrase modifying the subject, then with an adverbial clause modifying the verb. Both modifiers defer anticipated sentence elements with references to the site's heritage of violence from outsiders:

... Anasazi walls, echoing centuries-
ago-forgotten Athabaskan invasion, repeat
and repeat, as if to learn by heart—
for future warning or welcome—

Only then is the deferred object named—"footbeats"—the noun preceded and followed by modifiers that associate it with both recent and remote instances of nations' violence against other nations: "Japanese-shod footbeats of / an Irish-English-Cherokee survivor of nuclear war[.]" Thus, halfway through the poem-sentence, in the object of a prepositional phrase modifying the object of the main clause's verb, we arrive at the principal focus of the poet's concern here—himself, with his particular heritage and personal involvement in history.

The second half of the poem elaborates on that heritage and involvement through two phrases in apposition, both heavy with modifiers. A reformatting of the lines shows the layers of grammatical subordination:

a brother,
 in prayer,
 in blood
 and in hours lived
 learning the generations
 of brick upon brick
 set about Kiva, kitchens and beds,
involuntary countryman
 of those invading [...] Vietnam
 this time,
 and of "J.W. Conway ... Santa Fe ... 1873,"
 boast carved into wall
 surviving as a confession
 which could have been mine

more times than one,
that being is not belonging

Characteristically, the poem's crucial moral recognition appears only in a deeply subordinated syntactical element of a sentence repeatedly extended beyond where it is potentially complete. It then continues for another two lines—an absolute construction that constitutes an ironic mini-coda: "the home he desecrated / one victor's grave stone."

Part of the work done by the syntax of Salisbury's poetry is to articulate relationships between visually similar phenomena from different realms. The poet's visual imagination brings them together, and his moral intelligence makes connections between them. There are several instances of this in the poems examined above. Sometimes they contribute to the poem's texture; sometimes they are central to its structure. "Wild Goose, Eaten, and Owl, Knitted to Hang on Wall," a poem in Salisbury's 2006 collection *War in the Genes*, is one that takes shape from a series of yokings (or, to borrow the poem's principal image, knittings) together of phenomena normally regarded as unrelated (42).

Beginning with a metaphor conveyed by an appositive—"Gray petal, soon to fall from crimson dawn, / a wild goose"—the poem proceeds through three sentences broken over five line-groups to connect the goose, in its hunger and in its "migrant's flight," to the poet-speaker; in its ceaselessly moving wings, to the speaker's mother, with her ceaselessly moving knitter's fingers; and, in its visual appearance as a petal against a contrasting background of sky, to blossoms against a contrasting background of branch in the wall-hanging that the mother has knitted.

As in the early "Boyhood Incident Recollected in Tranquility," the opening line and a half of the poem present a striking visual image of conjunction. Here, the conjunction is metaphorical and syntactically conveyed by apposition. The basis of the

connection between petal and goose seems purely a matter of visual resemblance. However, as the clause continues over the rest of the opening four lines, and as then the compound-complex sentence extends through a second independent clause in the second, longer line-group, a dense weave of more conceptual connections is created.

...
a wild goose, hearing me imitate a call
to join a gaggle of strangers for dinner is met
by flocks of shot,

and life, which flew thousands of miles
through air, shared with words, stills
between teeth, retriever, resolute
as poet, struggling against
the current to bring the dead
back to the living's need.

The gray-petal goose is now understood as a fellow creature, impelled by loneliness and hunger "to join a gaggle of strangers for dinner." The retriever that swims against the current to bring the shot goose to the hungry human trickster-shooter-poet is conceived as doing work equivalent to the poet's—"to bring the dead / back to the living's need." Wild, domesticated, and human are conjoined by shared needs and traits. These morally significant connections emerge gradually through layers of syntactic modification, becoming fully apparent only through the absolute construction, "retriever, ... struggling ... to bring the dead / back to living's need," which ends the long sentence. This syntax both embodies the complexities of connection that it articulates and takes readers through a correspondingly complex process of parsing to grasp them.

The relatively short sentence that forms the group of three lines in the middle of the poem offers readers a bit of rest as the poet delivers a somewhat self-deprecating and jocular reprise of the difficult articulation just made: "No phoenix flight of trilling

syllables, / my feeding-call's honks lured meat / for Mother to cook, for our family to eat."

"Mother," introduced in the role of family cook, is no sooner mentioned than, in the poem's final sentence, shown to have been active in other ways—ways that connect her to the migrant goose with its "ceaseless ... wings." Her poet son, the poem's speaker, in his poem-making activity, is connected to both the mother who knitted and the goose whose flight was directed toward its kind's warm wintering grounds. All these connections are articulated in a single sentence extending over a seven-line group and a final couplet.

Her fingers, as ceaseless as wings
seeking sufficient summer, wove red yarn
into blossoms on a bough an owl's black
prey-piercing claws above me clutch, while,
stark winter years to endure, I try
to make my pen knit
another migrant's flight,

warm Gulf, ancestors' nesting place,
a future to hope for, though far.

Interposed between the subject, "Her fingers," and the predicate, "wove ...," is the long adjectival phrase implicitly linking her to the goose migrating south for the winter. Her weaving has produced a work of art, a wall-hanging showing red "blossoms on a bough an owl's black / prey-piercing claws above me clutch." The visual image of red knitted flowers on a bough recalls the image of the goose as a gray petal against a crimson sky that opened the poem. The knitted owl's "prey-piercing claws" recall the retriever's teeth between which the shot goose stilled. The strained syntax—a contact relative clause with a heavily premodified subject and a preposed adverbial phrase delaying its monosyllabic predicate—slows reading and makes these details obtrude.

The sentence, potentially complete, is then extended by a temporal clause, whose subject, "I," is deferred by an adverbial infinitive phrase with inverted word order (the object placed before the verb). With his mother's woven work hanging on the wall above his head, the poet-speaker, now in the "winter years" of his life, seeks to do his own knitting with words, to make with words his own "migrant's flight."

With that phrase, the sentence is again potentially complete, but again it is extended, this time after a line-group break and with an absolute construction. With the words of this final couplet and this final sentence element, the poet conjures the hoped for destination of his flight—his "ancestors' nesting place"—and completes the poem's web of connections.

Over the long span of his writing career, Ralph Salisbury has employed in his poetry a distinctive syntactical style that serves the essential function of conveying his moral vision. Through nesting of possessives and relative clauses, he represents the containment of one thing within another, often its opposite. Through the use of absolute constructions rather than full subordinate clauses, he gives a sense of the actions they designate as entailed in, rather than separate from, the fully predicated action(s) of the sentence. Through apposition as a means of presenting metaphor, he equalizes the prominence of the items linked. Through omission of a relative pronoun before relative clauses, he promotes the contents of the relative clause to near equivalence with that of the clause modified. Through reduction of the copula to an easy-to-miss sibilant, he brings subject and complement close to parity. Through repeated deferral of anticipated sentence elements, he intimates how much is bound up with, and contributive to, what each deferred element presents. Through all of these usages in combination, he embodies the interrelatedness and interdependence of all Earth's peoples and creatures, alive and dead, and all the elements of their environment.

Notes

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² "Herr Olbrechts" is Frans Olbrechts, a Belgian-born ethnographer who studied under Franz Boas at Columbia and in the 1920s did field work among the Cherokee.

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