

1999

# May You Live in Interesting Times

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## Recommended Citation

Krysl, Marilyn. "May You Live in Interesting Times." *The Iowa Review* 29.3 (1999): 163-166. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.S218>

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## Marilyn Krysl

### MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES\*

It is an urgency not of *reportage* but of revelation that powers Ralph Salisbury's second collection of stories. Using the sensibility that has come to fruition in his long career as a poet, Salisbury has fashioned an elegiac urgency, a *cri de coeur* sufficient to hold his protagonists' grief. The narrators' voices, hypnotic and often omniscient, transform narration into incantation.

Forty, he is telling me this, my father, he wants to be known by this, he wants me to live by this, my father, he wants to be me, reliving this, himself, as me, above the earth. (5)

Such rendering suggests we are at the level of the archetypal. And yet these are stories of rending particularity, the documented anguish of beings whose mixed blood ancestry plays a crucial role in their poverty, their failures of confidence, their alienation. They are stories, as Susan Griffins writes in *The Eros of Everyday Life*, that portray "the social and political effects of stereotypes, and the terrible psychological toll such ideas take when they are internalized, the cumulative economic loss which occurs as the result of years of prejudice, a poverty that engenders despair, and depression in every sense." These are stories that decry the scarring of the soul.

Inheritance is crucial, and on some occasions Salisbury invokes it as a source of suffering.

. . . the Indian kid who was ashamed of the smell of cow barn . . . of not being able to afford underarm deodorants and fragrant after-shave colognes . . . of being more intelligent than others but doomed never to read anything which wasn't in the small town library . . . of being the conquered evil savage in history, in movies . . . all to be redeemed, I thought, by volunteering to be a hero in war. (119)

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\**The Last Rattlesnake Throw and Other Stories* by Ralph Salisbury; University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.

But inheritance is also portrayed as a source of strength, of continuity with the impermanent universe, its beauty. Salisbury's portraits of female characters are as full and as sensitively perceived as those of males, and one of the high moments in this collection occurs in "Hoopa, The White Deer Dance." Havel, a mixed blood, tells the Medicine Woman "I'm all hung up—crazy. I don't belong with anyone, I don't belong anywhere." She replies:

You belong anywhere you draw breath. . . . You didn't just fix a chair. I watched you. You done you some living with wood. You felt you were that oak chunk you knew to use as a tool. You felt you were this metal that's holding up my old body, and you felt your own body, old, and needing this chair, and sitting in this chair. . . . Don't be like my pitiful niece, your momma, too timid to take the big risks and ending with less than nothing. You get going. . . .

Salisbury's narrative skill ranges from a Faulknerian, associational, meditative style, through spare Hemingway realism, to Garcia-Marquez lush, hallucinogenic magic realism. The Little Boy, appearing in several stories, is the good, obedient child who "only did what he was told, always did, always, what he was told, worked hard, studied hard." His alcoholic war veteran father perceives him as an "all the goddamned time yamping sissy." Conditions are a kaleidoscopic haze through which the Little Boy "trudges" helplessly, first after his big brother—his only protection against the father—and later, as a captured bomber pilot,

through streets lined with dozens of people, who hit him with handles of hayforks, like ones he'd worked with, day after day, year after year, at home . . . people cursing him, people whose families and friends his bombs burned to death, Asian people whose ancestors may have been his Indian brother's ancestor's too. (138)

Still he trudges into the prison camp, out, along with other GIs in the welcome home parade, into a factory, and finally into that ubiquitous category, "the unemployed." He is every "little man," and it is Salisbury's genius to point out such a character's ironies.

. . . in dream after dream—everything precious, everything depending on him, kitten trembling, kitten purring—a sissy little day dreaming boy goes on yamping and yamping in the brain of a man whose bombs killed hundreds of children, a steel blade splitting black earth, a steel wheel hurtling, shining in the sun, eternally rising and going down. (139)

After watching the dance in which the men moved “as if on the plumes of eagles,” Havel “had no idea for any kind of research paper he might write. He hadn’t learned anything. He still didn’t feel that he’d ever had a mother. He didn’t even know what he’d hoped to feel about her, about anything” (192). We recognize the convention. But Salisbury can transform this narrative mode into his own version of magic realism, that projected world in which the extraordinary transforms the diurnal. In “An Aqueduct of Sky” characters are evoked only tangentially. It is an omniscient narrator’s perspective, an elaborately symbolic and evocative voice, that carries the story.

. . . snow walls twist, like paired snakes of heart specialist’s caduceus, across thawing meadow, beneath which hibernating real snakes feel Time as warming. Sun, which turns gray slush into exquisitely glowing crystal scales, destroys—simultaneously, but with blessed slowness, the beauty it creates. Thus, my brother’s glittering, Eden-evoking snakes, walling, like Roman lovers sharing a bath, water between them, evoke the paradox of Art—and of Life, for this is part of my home, this constantly constantly-changing small meadow. (40)

In story after story the sentence becomes a fractal branching, clause after clause powering the writer’s vision, adding successive levels of irony. Some of the collection’s best moments occur when Salisbury addresses war’s ironic ramifications within the context of character.

Bear’s daddy shoots when he comes home Friday from where it is he works. Bear’s daddy isn’t going to pay any more rent on a farm . . . he fought a whole damned year of war to own, before it all turned out to be a Republican scheme to make a man a goddamned slave again. Bear’s dad isn’t going to be a taxpayer any more—

screw Nixon, screw the whole damned greedy crew. . . . Bear's daddy never means to shoot at Bear, he just does, when his bottle gets empty and there's no more white powder. He just shoots because he remembers that Bear cost an arm and a leg at the hospital, and shouldn't have been born. (226-7)

"Universals are universals," Scott Momaday has said. "They don't belong to any particular literature, not to any ethnic experience." Yet we are indebted to artists who articulate the particularities of gender, race, language, class. Such works assist our transformation. They illuminate the larger ignorance and urge us—franchised and disenfranchised alike—to examine the true conditions of our lives.

For we live in a time when everyone must be afraid. Even the corporately comfortable surely sense that the price they pay for the illusion of safety is too high. Confucius' curse is now a fact—not only for those who understand this but also for those who choose denial. Salisbury acknowledges what is. The nuanced sensitivity of perception, the seamlessness of moral viewpoint, and compassion that is the result of earned wisdom shimmers from the page. Here is the focused attention that results in experience fully lived, painstakingly rendered. To write better, Rilke declared, you must be better. Salisbury has labored in both spheres.