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La guerra e le armi  
nella letteratura in inglese  
del Novecento

*a cura di Lucia Folena*

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NATIVE AMERICANS AND MODERN WARS  
IN THE WORK OF RALPH SALISBURY,  
A CHEROKEE VOLUNTEER IN WORLD WAR II.

*Fedora Giordano*

*Indian soldiers, Indian warriors.*

“I am a Sioux Indian woman on the ‘far side’ of 50, born and raised on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation. I was married there and all of my children were born in the land of the Sioux. My only son, Chunskey is now in the Naval Reserve; my elder brother spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy through World War II and Korea, and he never made it home alive. My father served as a private in the U.S. Army in 1916 almost a decade before he was made a citizen of what he always called an enemy nation which had signed treaties with his people and then tried so hard (and still does) to co-opt that nationhood through legislation. I was married for many years to a Minneconjou from Eagle Butte, South Dakota, who, as a teen-aged Infantryman in WWII, won two Bronze Stars carrying a machine gun around Germany; and I am married now to a Spokane Indian who is a former marine. One of my great-grandfathers from Crow Creek was named Bowed Head Ihanktowan and, it is said, he fought at the Little Big Horn with Sitting Bull and Gall. I come, therefore, from a nation of warriors who defended this land long before any white man set foot on this continent in wars that were not wars of annihilation nor were they wars of conquest. It was only after they fought the white man that they came to know of those kinds of wars thus, they too have been drawn into the debate concerning ‘good’ war versus ‘bad’.”(Cook-Lynn, 65)

This 1995 statement by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, one of the Native American writers most critical of United States colonialism and imperialism, was published to express an Indian point of view about the US engagement in the Gulf War, seen as one more war of colonization, a “good war” fought in the interest of oil corporations, comparable to 19<sup>th</sup> century “good” Indian wars of colonization fought

in the name of Manifest Destiny. For the purpose of this essay Cook-Lynn offers also a first person testimony useful to understand the extent of Native American participation in modern wars and the repulsion of many Native soldiers at the new kind of warfare they found themselves engaged in, so far from traditional warfare. As for the number of soldiers, Cato Sells, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, estimated that in World War I a total of ten thousand Indians had been drafted, at the time not yet recognized as citizens of the United States. During World War II that figure was more than doubled, as 25,000 men and women enlisted out of a population estimated in 1940 at 350,000, and the majority of them volunteered, a proportion that outranked any other ethnic or white participation (Bernstein 40-43). Laborers were also hired as seasonal farm workers and in industrial cities as replacements of factory hands. Many volunteered to defend their country, others enlisted for lack of other employment opportunities, many others were drafted.

The attitude to war engagement varied from tribe to tribe. Plains tribesmen with a warrior tradition saw the war as an occasion to prove their individual valor and 2/3<sup>rd</sup> volunteered,<sup>1</sup> while few small isolated tribes tried to resist the draft. In general, for Native American communities 20<sup>th</sup> century's wars have been the cause of important and often contradictory changes, foremost among them a strong push towards assimilation, since the overall war effort, both military and civilian, brought as a consequence the unprecedented involvement of one fourth of the total Indian population with the world of the conquerors. This accelerated process of enculturation in what had always been the enemy's world brought unforeseen consequences. In his provocative 1968 report *The New Indians*, Sam Steiner had remarked that Indian soldiers had been heroes and clowns, victims of a double myth which projected on them the stereotypes of the Noble Red Warrior and of the inferior "Chief." Scholarship has found that the idea that Indians were "inherent" warriors "exerted a considerable influence over the duties assigned to them, both in World War I and World War II" (Britten 2, 186) as many tried to live up to warrior expectations accepting dangerous assignments. Individual acts of

<sup>1</sup> For Cheyennes and Arapahoes in World War I see PARMAN 62-63; for the Lakotas see W. K. POWERS, *The Lakota Warrior Tradition: Three Essays on Lakotas at War*, Lakota Books, 2001.



heroism were widely publicized, such as those of Lakota Sampson P. One Skunk, known as One Shot, decorated with many medals, who became a national celebrity whose anecdotes were frequently reported on *Life Magazine* and *Saturday Evening Post* (Stabler 78).

Probably the most famous soldier is Pima marine Ira Hayes, whose role in the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima projected him into an unwanted hero status. The scene of the second flag raising was immortalized in a photograph by Joe Rosenthal of Associated Press, printed on war bonds, and Ira Hayes was paraded around the US from sea to shining sea with three comrades to raise money for the war effort. Ira, who never fit a celebrity role so distant from his Native equalitarian and communitarian tradition, nor forgot the reality of the bloody event in which so many of his friends had died, drank himself into oblivion. Asked to play himself in the 1949 movie with John Wayne *Sands of Iwo Jima* (now defined by critics a bad joke), he returned home to his Akimel O'odham reservation in Arizona and tried to readjust to community life, but in 1955, aged 32, he was found dead of exposure and probably alcohol poisoning on reservation grounds and now rests in Arlington Cemetery. His role was later interpreted by Tony Curtis in *The Outsider* (1961) by Delbert Mann and more recently by Mohawk actor Adam Beach in the more sophisticated and politically correct *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) by Clint Eastwood. His story has been the object of a poem by Pueblo writer Paula Gunn Allen and of a famous ballad by Peter Lafarge interpreted by Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash among others. Significantly, the protagonist of *Indian Killer* (1996) by Spokane Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie, a noir novel which has been read as a Native answer to John Ford's *The Searchers* (Mariani), hides his identity under the name of Ira Hayes.

After the ban on classified military papers was raised in 1968, the role of the marine codetalkers has also emerged to attention. Dozens of Navajo, Comanche, Choctaw, Hopi, Meskwaki and Sioux soldiers, proud of using their languages as a weapon, served an invaluable role on the front by sending coded military orders impossible to decipher. While scholarship has reconstructed their stories (Bernstein, Rosier, among others), director John Woo has brought the Navajo codetalkers to international attention in *Windtalkers* (2002) starring Adam Beach.

Except for individual cases, in general World War II had a negative, disruptive effect on tribal life comparable to that of the creation of

reservations, the most dramatic turning point in Indian history (Parman 111). The war effort also brought to a considerable “erosion of Native land” (Rosier 96-97) as one million acres were taken for use as aerial gunnery ranges and other military purposes, among which the creation of Japanese internment camps. Among civilians involved in the war effort, out of the thousands that migrated to industrial cities only young skilled laborers adjusted comparatively easily. For unskilled men the adjustment to urban life was an overwhelming experience resulting in poverty in the slums, frustration, alcoholism, and eventually in moving back and forth from the reservation to temporary outside jobs (Parman 111). Postwar readjustment was difficult for many who came home from the military or from war jobs and found no employment opportunities. As it emerged in veterans’ memories such as Omaha Hollis Stabler’s *No One Ever Asked Me* (122) to many soldiers who had distinguished themselves in combat, return to American society persistent racism and discrimination felt like one more broken treaty. “When the warrior of World War II talked of the battles he had fought,” reported Sam Steiner, “he talked not only of those fought on foreign battlefields but of those fought in the barracks of his own army, and on the streets of American cities” (Steiner 19).

Going back to reservation life was not an easy solution either. Tribal elders asked medicine men to perform healing ceremonies to bring back veterans into community life, but in many cases returning soldiers were unable to overcome the horrors of a war which had meant an unprecedented spiritual disruption (Steiner 18-19, Parman 125, Bernstein). A famous case was discussed by French ethno-psychologist Georges Devereux, who began working in 1947 in Topeka Hospital, Kansas. Devereux published a report on his therapy sessions with Blackfoot WWII veteran Jimmy Picard suffering from war trauma and dislocation, *Réalité et Rêve: Psychothérapie d’un Indien des plaines* in 1951. The story has been turned into a questionable movie by Arnaud Desplechin, *Jimmy P.*, which premiered at 2013 Cannes film festival.

Native American literature has often complicated the war discourse using WWII to foreground the Native condition in postwar America. Significantly, the first important novels of the so-called Native American Renaissance, *House Made of Dawn* (1968) by N. Scott Momaday and *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko, powerfully foreground in their postcolonial discourse the drama of a returning Indian veteran,

prisoner of the white evil, and his extremely painful and slow process of reintegration into his native community's world. Discussing the character of Abel, the protagonist of *House Made of Dawn* in an interview with Laura Coltelli, N. Scott Momaday described as paramount the Indian experience during World War II:

... he represents a great many people of his generation, the Indian who returns from the war, the Second World War. He is an important figure in the whole history of the American experience in this country. It represents such a dislocation of the psyche in our time. Almost no Indian of my generation or of Abel's generation escaped that dislocation, that sense of having to deal immediately with, not only with the traditional world, but with the other world which was placed over the traditional world so abruptly and with great violence. (Coltelli 94)

Indeed, Leslie Marmon Silko in *Ceremony* portrayed her Native returning soldiers remembering the extreme self-destructing alcoholism of World Two veterans (her cousins among them) in her native Laguna Pueblo (Silko 2010, 39). Another aspect of the war that she embodied in Tayo, her novel's protagonist, is the uncanny experience many tribal soldiers reported, of finding enemy Asian soldiers looking like a mirror image of their own tribesmen. That represented an insurmountable trial for little educated men ignoring the land bridge theory. We find this powerfully depicted in Tayo's obsessively recurring memories of refusing to shoot at prisoners among which he had recognized his cousin Josiah. Veterans' war memories also recount episodes of being mistaken for Japanese by American soldiers, but on the other hand, also experiences of finding similarities and feeling at home in foreign communities (Stabler 47-8, Kawano 62). Historians have remarked that witnessing international warfare also opened a new perspective on national politics and Indian country:

Native soldiers' participation in the war involved more contact with colonial 'others' than during World War I. Native veterans' conflation of their peoples' struggles against colonialism at home and foreign peoples' struggles against colonialism abroad fostered Indian nationalism on a broader level than after World War I (...) Connecting the local through the global through the language of internationalism, Native Americans developed a sharper sense of themselves as Native and as American, largely because they perceived themselves fighting for two linked

geographical spaces – their ancestral homelands and the United States of America – both facing a crisis of national security. (Rosier 72)

*Ralph Salisbury, Imagining World War II.*

I shall focus now on the war rhetoric of Cherokee writer Ralph Salisbury, who enlisted but never fought in WWII, for he finished his training as an aerial gunman days before World War II ended. Left on the verge of what in his youthful mind he had dreamed as an initiation into manhood and heroism, Salisbury has nevertheless continued through his poems and stories a war discourse which spans the full range of Native American war experience, foregrounding an anti-militaristic and “Indigenous cosmopolitan” (Krupat) position.

Salisbury’s poems and his short fiction explore his multi-ethnic background where only fragments of Cherokee rituals, myths, stories and history are found, exposing his “Cherokee heritage” as a “post-tribal” Indian experience (Krupat 231). Modern Indian identity is very often mixed (Giordano 2009), and much has been written on the Indian mixed-blood by contemporary writers, Gerald Vizenor being one of the foremost in seeing his status as trickster. But as Ralph Salisbury said in the preface to *Rainbows of Stones* (2000), a collection of his poems, he doesn’t feel half Cherokee or half white “I am not part Indian, part white, but wholly both.” And to quote the title of his 2006 collection of poems, for him there is no “War in the Genes.” In order to understand his experience, it is useful to remember the defence strategy of imitation of white customs adopted by the Cherokee after their defeat in a war that had lasted nearly half of the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, the adoption of European clothing, frequent intermarriages, Sequoia’s invention of a written alphabet in 1821 (long before linguists had devised a transliteration of oral languages), the observance of a written constitution (1827), the printing of newspapers, schooling, and the disempowering of women in order to comply with English customs and missionary demands, did not help the Cherokee to keep their lands. The “most civilized” of the Five Civilized Tribes of the Southeast was evicted in 1838 from its valuable lands around the borders of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Tennessee, to be decimated in a long winter death match to Oklahoma, known as the Trail of Tears. Ralph Salisbury’s grandmother descended from one

of the few North Carolina bands that had escaped removal and remained in the Southern Appalachians forming the communities now called Eastern Cherokees. Subject to forced participation in white American culture, these groups underwent a process of assimilation that modified Cherokee society to a point almost of no return (Neely). In her discussion of the famous land dispute which became the 1831 Supreme Court case “Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia,” Priscilla Wald explored the uncanniness of the Cherokee mixed-bloods, a status which presented and still presents a peculiar threat to white identity in post-colonial inter-ethnic negotiations:

The Cherokee’s becoming like but not of the United States political entity, mirroring without acceding to its claims, seems to threaten the terms of that identity. And the threat is literally embodied by the “mixed-blood” who trouble both white exclusionists and integrationists in their *physical* as well *legal*, uncanniness. (Wald 90)

Salisbury was not raised within an Indian community: the Cherokee side of his family in Kentucky, his grandmother and his father’s eleven brothers he sometimes visited, were not part of an Indian community and were not known to him as Indians until later in his life. Neither the manhood initiation rituals through hunting that he experienced with his father during his childhood were known to him as Cherokee at the time. Ralph enlisted in 1943 as a volunteer when he was only seventeen, having survived the hardships of the Great Depression in an Iowa farm too poor to feed one family. The family oral history, told by his father, who had earned his living as professional storyteller and wandering minstrel before working for the farmer that was to become his father-in-law, included traditional stories but also the experience of hunger, cold and violence, which are now part of Salisbury’s poetic, fictional and autobiographical discourse. For a farm boy like Ralph, joining the Air Force and going to war represented the fulfillment of adolescent warrior dreams and the hope for a better future, as a veteran in his story “Dawn Sundown” remembers:

We were just short of twenty – volunteers, right out of high school – mixed-breed White Indians with something to prove to ourselves and to the world – myself with a dead-end farm-kid life to escape, believing the enlistment posters: “The Army prepares you for a better future.” (Salisbury 1993, 150)

The military sharpened instead his awareness of inter-racial tensions, which he tried to avoid passing as white, as the lighter complexioned members of his family had done in racist Kentucky. This White Indian discourse is most evident in poems like “With the Wind and the Sun,” based on his experience during his military training as an aerial gunman:

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 II  
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.  
(Salisbury 1983, 16)

The Navajo shepherd, the Jewish navigator and the young mixed-blood protagonist are seen as pariah of society, all victims of imperialist politics. There is a tragic irony in Salisbury’s mixed-blood discourse, in his acknowledgement that his family has experienced racism both as subject and object. The poem “Scarlet Tornados” explores that irony through the eyes of the poet as a young veteran, focusing on its most powerful metaphor, blood:

the year I returned from war  
twenty unemployed hungry  
selling transfusions

lab-tube a roll of coins  
wrapped in red paper  
those “last red cents”  
“Type O-Negative”  
rare like the minting of  
a small thus soon doomed nation  
my father horrified I’d sell  
family destiny  
glad that I was his  
donor much later afraid of “nigger blood”  
leaving it to his brother to tell me  
that we were Cherokee  
(*Spirit Beast Chant* in Salisbury 2009a)

Salisbury’s experience of race discrimination in the military, a sort of cultural war that challenged his identity, brought him to identify with his Cherokee side. World War II ended a couple of weeks before his first active mission over Japan, leaving him on the threshold of achieving the warrior status he had been trained for and that his older half -brother had acquired; but, as he acknowledged, “World War II went on in my mind” (Swann 27). Denied a chance to prove his valor, he was to consider his destiny somewhat akin to that of young Fleming waiting for combat in the first part of Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, which he had come across by chance in the air base:

One night, while on duty guarding a warehouse, by the light of a fire-exit bulb, I read all of Stephen Crane’s novel *The Red Badge of Courage* – not knowing that Crane was a great writer and not knowing how much the main character’s situation resembled my own. The muskets and cannons of the American Civil War would have seemed no weapons at all compared to what I was guarding – some million dollars of B-25 bombers, the plane that became famous in *Catch-22* [...] (29)

When veteran privileges were established, he was given the opportunity to enroll at the University of Iowa, where he specialized in literature and attended Robert Lowell’s Creative Writing workshop. Echoes of his academic training are Salisbury’s keen sense of the metaphorical power of language, and reminiscence of Hemingway’s style in his fiction, which successfully combines oral and literary tradition. He was in graduate school and had become a pacifist at the

time of the Korean War, but when drafted he had made up his mind to go as a medic rather than being court martialed and imprisoned as conscientious objector. Luck changed his fate once more, when, just a couple of weeks before his call-up, thanks to a computer goof, he was honorably discharged and could go on beginning a University teaching and a writing career. He was to live a vicarious experience of heroism through his older brother, who had fought in Algeria, and his younger brother, who “lived to be the man I thought to become in World War II, a pilot, an heroic medal winner for courage in combat” (Bruchac 249). For him he was to write “My Brother’s Poem: Vietnamese War 1969,” for, as he said in its opening line, “You tell me you can not write it:”

You tell me you can not write it  
yesterday’s pretty village splinters and in  
your aircraft’s cargo compartment ammunitions/rations/med-  
icine 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.  
(*Going to the Water* 2009a, 53)

Salisbury’s cultural wars, together with his father’s stories and songs of the battles of the Civil War in “Old Kentucky Dark and Bloody,” the stories of his uncles, who were World War I veterans, those of his veteran brothers and friends, mingle in his voice shaping his identity as an adult man continuing the male family tradition of storytelling. Writing what he has witnessed or what he has heard from other veterans’ accounts thus becomes Salisbury’s symbolic war. His poetic and fictional discourse offers countless variations of episodes which metonymically limn the complex experience of Native American soldiers and veterans.

Most of his World War II stories, collected in *One Indian and Two Chiefs* (1993) and *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin* (2009), have as



protagonists, or as narrators, mixed-blood Indian veterans. Fictional discourse becomes anticolonial; fighting for the Whites means taking the enemy's side and racist violence is avoided through trickster games, using submission as subversion. Another instance is identification with the enemy, especially with the dark mirror image Other, as well as mistaken identification as the dark enemy Other.

The heroic, unnamed protagonist of "The Soldier Who Would Ask," after placing many times explosives under bridges and one last time in the enemy's barracks, realizes that he has been a tool in the hands of imperialism and lives the pain of all those he has killed:

The air of the enemy's cries entered my lungs, a tidal wave curled over, an impulse of ocean thrown back onto itself, and I was gliding over the graves of every person I had killed, the graves open, the opened throats of children grown to be sentries exposed, the pieces of bodies bulldozed into the same pit after rocket explosion forming again. (Salisbury 1993, 2)

One day he has a vision of the enemy's houses being transformed into wigwams, of women and children becoming his own wife and children, and he understands that fighting on the side of the colonizers of his own people and land, brings his own destruction.

Racist violence continues outside the war contest, but is somehow linked to it. In the story "One Indian and Two Chiefs," which takes place in an Oregon town in the Sixties, a gang of three high school boys sets up to attack an Indian student who dares breaking the race barrier to date a white girl: "Their hatred included, vaguely, shame at television images of Black people chasing the White police in California and shame at images of frightened Americans fleeing from Vietnam." (Salisbury 1993, 125) The story, as its title hints, plays on a role reversal since the negative connotation of "Chief" is attached to the white boys from whom the Indian manages to run away helped by his cleverness and by his luck.

In the story "Four Days, Twenty-Four Miles," the veteran Joe Little Eagle, decorated with one more medal of Supreme Value, feels alone during the military ceremony "as he had been behind the enemy lines" (86). Although they sympathize with him, his comrades cannot consider him as a friend because he is not white. Joe's heroism and self-forgetfulness are shown to originate from a need to forget the

horrible memories of his early childhood, when he had had to hide to escape from the violence of his alcoholic father who “had shot the locked shack door full of holes, trying to end his family’s starvation existence before disappearing for good” (86).

The mixed-blood narrator of another story with the same protagonist “Two Women, Two Men”, explains the feelings shared by many mixed-blood soldiers:

I’d been White all of my life till I felt I couldn’t deny my mother and half my people. Joe had been – not White – but something like White as long as his battle successes kept on making the whites happy. (Salisbury 1993, 91).

Salisbury’s discourse implies that Indian survival often depends on a trickster pattern, whether it means ingenuity, playing the fool, or having luck on one’s side. Salisbury’s personal experiences of being a survivor of the famine that killed one of his younger brothers, of surviving being struck by lightning as a boy, of being spared during the war the many accidents due to the danger of hasty bomber airplane training (Bruchac 249) and finally, of being spared actual fighting in the war, seem to suggest his own identification with a trickster figure.

An instance of the trickster-like attitude necessary to survive is the story “The Son-of-a-Bitch and the Dog”, in which the title’s metaphor is thoroughly explored in the parallel stories of a young man and a dog, until it comes literally alive. “Son-of-a-Bitch” is a seventeen-year-old Indian recruit who has earned that reputation after killing a comrade barehanded. Although undertrained, he is promoted to Commando and sent on a dangerous mission from which he comes back as the only survivor. As a bonus, he is given leave to go to town to drink and enjoy himself. At about the same time, a real, natural son of a bitch, a pup dog, is brought to the barracks by some drunken soldiers and “after everybody was sober the next day, they thought they’d use the pup for target practice” (Salisbury 1993, 7). But the pup starts playing with the soldiers and they decide to keep it; they teach it to lap beer, they train it to take a mortar shell and drop it in the mortar: the pup is so smart they nickname it Commando. One day the dog starts bringing back a hand grenade that had just been thrown, thinking that they are playing fetch and its training comes to an end; eventually the dog is taught to ride a bus to town and back to play

with bitches. The parallel between the young Indian soldier and the dog is now complete, to the point that one night, while they are waiting for the bus, the dog speaks to the young man and warns him that he is being used by his enemy, like other ethnic minorities soldiers, for suicidal missions. In order to save himself the soldier starts playing crazy, he lies down on the ground of the firing range and prays. When target practice begins nobody thinks of taking him away but he continues his ordeal for seven days, fasting and praying “spread-eagled in the sacred way,” till the base psychiatrist declares him insane and assigns him to be the Chaplain’s assistant.

Sometimes a trickster discourse turns the bloody war into a love game as Indian soldiers prove to be ideal lovers. In “The New World Invades the Old”, a Nez Perce army interpreter “sickened by the sight of knives moving over skin as brown as his father” during the interrogation of an elderly Filipino man “wished it was the US imperialism’s contemporary commander” under torture. When he starts drinking himself into oblivion of the war he becomes an embarrassing diplomatic problem and is offered to go to Athens, where a Russian spy tries to seduce him. Later he is asked by a Greek woman whose marriage is “not blessed by pregnancy” to give her a son, since he is as dark as a Greek. Having learnt “that his first child would be a loving Greek couple’s son” he feels “his Indian War against the women of invading Caucasians won by becoming the diplomatic and the human ideal, a peaceful solution” (Salisbury 2009, 58).

Unlike the protagonists of *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, Salisbury’s post-tribal, mixed-blood soldiers – like the author himself – have no reservation to go back to, nor anyone to perform healing rituals for them. Their only certainty lies in their own strength, courage and skills, both during and after the war. They are the victims of “another lost Indian war,” because there can only be broken treaties between Indians and their White conquerors, as in centuries past. But they are not entirely defeated, if not by death, for they become aware of their position. Salisbury’s fictional and autobiographical discourse implies that the war never ends in a violent, racist white world, and must be fought, whether by strength or by tricks.

Two stories in *One Indian and Two Chiefs* have as their protagonist a young man called with the metaphorical name Seek, who will appear again as a schoolboy in the collection *The Indian Who Bombed Berlin*.

Seek is a Cherokee volunteer, fighting in the Far East and resenting having to kill people with a skin the color of his own; he hates killing “for blood on his hands reminds him of the blood of the bear he had killed when he was twelve, during his initiation ritual to manhood, at the time when he was “just starting to think like a soldier” (95). That hunt is narrated in the story “To Take Life, To Kill,” where twelve-year-old Seek is brought by his uncle to a clearing in the woods, a place where, traditionally, Cherokee boys were initiated. For four days he has to fast, keep silent and alert to Nature surrounding him, constellations, birds, trees. Then he kills his first game, a squirrel. Through this fictional persona Ralph speaks an autobiographical discourse that defines him as a quester and as a writer. Seek’s uncle explains to him the meaning of his name:

“See, now, child dead, man born. Seekwaya. Well may he live.” Seek, hearing for the first time the “Seek” and the “way” his uncle had intended in naming him, feels a pride which vanquishes, for that moment, his hangdog subservience to his older brother, his shame at being dark-skinned and small. “(..)eagle Seekwaya. Named for our scholar, who saved our ways from being forgot (...)” (Salisbury 1993, 48)

This is only a first step in his initiation, for a bear suddenly appears and attacks them. Seek kills the bear, thus gaining not only rightful entrance into manhood but also his grandfather’s rifle: “the rifle a weapon with a legend, a name, like King Arthur’s ‘Excalibur,’ the ‘Lee Enfield,’ a name Seek had learned from books, in which two wars were fought again and again” (Salisbury 1993, 49-50)

The hunter and the warrior, two traditional roles for Indian men, are thus linked in Salisbury’s fictional and autobiographical discourse. The war in which he chose to identify with his Indian side brings him to identify the hunt as an Indian ritual, and this is one of the very few stories that deals in details with Cherokee tradition: Seekwaya or Sequoyah, the inventor of the Cherokee alphabet, Uktena, the giant snake, and the Raven Mocker witches. But the setting of the narrative is unmistakably modern, for, as the last day of Seek’s quest begins, a war plane appears in the sky at dawn. The initiatory experience of the hunt is the experience closest to Indian tradition Salisbury had in his youth. This rite of passage into manhood was often linked to a vision quest experience. Besides its great importance as a means of getting

food, the ritual hunt established a link with the spirits of animals, which had to be appeased before the hunt so that they would consent to become food. In Native traditions animals were not be killed in an unnecessary painful way; their bodies were to be honored after the kill and their bones had to be buried in the proper way, or the animal, offended, would not come back again. In hunters' societies the blood of animals, identified with their life and their spirit, was strictly linked with the male world, so that hunters and all hunting paraphernalia had to be kept separate from menstrual blood, in which the power of women was thought to be. As the boys went alone on their first hunt or in their first vision quest, girls isolated themselves at their first menses (when also they could acquire a vision) to learn the meaning of womanhood and its tasks, learning that their power was a life-giving power. Blood was the physical symbol which contributed to define one's destiny as women or men. Ralph Salisbury identifies his entrance into manhood with his first kill:

I was blooded at four years of age, my father helping me shoot a chicken, but my real bleeding came at age twelve, when I first hunted alone and brought back meat, two pheasants, just like the main character in my novel "Lightning Boy and the War against Time." (Swann 24)<sup>2</sup>

In many stories and poems Salisbury speaks of his hunting experience as of a male ritual that created a deep bond with his father, and developed his awareness of the natural world, what he now considers his deepest Cherokee heritage. In his poem "The Hunt" the color red shows all its symbolic relevance, the red of the fox's fur becoming one with that of the rising sun at dawn, with the blood of the boy, the blood of the kill, and finally, in the mind of the grown man, with that of the red rising sun in the Japanese flag in World War II. The worlds of the storytellers, of the hunters and of the warriors are thus inextricably linked in Salisbury's discourse through a "red badge of courage":

This time it was fox, and the east  
was all red fur, soft wind paws  
padding in pines, the moon

<sup>2</sup> The novel has not been published so far.

in the west a silver skinning blade [...]
 Next year it will be bear, Dad said,
 and I, proud of the pelt he raised
 our red-striped flag, now over Japan,
 said Yes not knowing it would be
 him, not knowing well enough who next.
 (Salisbury 1983, 64)

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