

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jonathan Austin Peacock for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 19, 2010.

Title: The Skipping Stone

Abstract approved:

Karen Holmberg

The Skipping Stone is a collection of poetry investigating a wide range of themes: self-displacement, southern heritage, identity of the Self, loss, and grief. At times, the poems confess a kind of anxiety associated with experiencing the death of loved ones, acting as a coping mechanism for loss and self-exploration. In other poems, geographical displacement is explored as the speaker comes to terms with the shock of grieving from a distance. The poems in The Skipping Stone flamboyantly explores what it means to live apart from one's homeland—both honoring heritage and family life while reveling in their metaphorical dissolution.

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The Skipping Stone

by

Jonathan Austin Peacock

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Chair of the Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Jonathan Austin Peacock, Author

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The Skipping Stone

I.
Palinopsia

Tips for Taking Photographs at Great Distances

i.

Cowards gave me
points in case

the camera

flinched—The law

of laws:
Don't let them
see

you cry.
Gentle
words.

ii.

Saturdays I
practiced

iconoclasm.
The city

explained the right
way to undress

a girl with my
eyes.

iii.

Father,
smile.

The first
picture
taken from space.

Grayscale.
But still, smile.

These Words and the Crimson River

The edge of the page vanishes
in cadence and I am drowning
in *ars poetica*. The listlessness
of a stray word walks,
fitted in the sermon delivered
by my lines.

But this poem is a benediction.
Deliver it in pieces
to the adoptive paths and cloudless
backyard empires where I
practice liturgical worship
in shadows. It is by the river

of when-my-head-is-heavy
and will ask if the light
in the atmosphere escapes
etymology: the thousand
words used to construct
the picture. These words

are efficient with their stray sermons.
The other pieces clipped to make
them fit. I know they'll drown
after they fall. This stream of thought
is lethal against the crimson.

The Skipping Stone

George said living is like hearing
a stone bounding across
a lake, that between each hop is
uncertainty of what's coming, or what
isn't, that in those hops we're
falling, and at the end we're sinking
beneath the ripples and we watch them
from the bottom, up,
scuttle to the shore, make tiny
tidal waves where that stone was picked,

that this was why people scrape
their heels along the floor, that they
search for a way to hang on, that
one day they'd walk right through
that floor, worn soles and all, and tread
the dirt, and those who're left to listen would
be lucky to hear the strides at all: that
those heels take the place of the stone and
plunk and plunk and plunk and gone.

Father's Ember was a Firefly in Late October

I'd spend the evening listening
to the screen door's rasp.
How it spoke over the years,
elastic metal springs slackened
by a high-pressure life.

And you'd spend the evening watching
thunderheads consummate, your face in shadows,
cigarette smoke plumes
seeping skyward to graze
with raindrops and lightning strikes.

I wouldn't pretend to doubt all this.
Your heaven is still
this space outside my bedroom window.

The last few islands of cloud sang back:
there is so much more.

Mirage

The apologetic response
from the barstool

and the frequency
of modern
things.

The burning world under
nimbus clouds.

The firelight

above a game
of horseshoes.

There are tensions
to resolve.

And then
our substance,
abstracted

by the flames.
The last

vivid memory

I have.
And yet
you wonder
with loyalty

if only to fire
I refer.

Fantasia on Palinopsia

These were themes and interludes.
The broken metaphor. The broken
eye. If only this were suffering.
If only suffering were in words.

i.

The light carries
the face of a child,
his face in the corner
asks more of the scraping

chair legs,
the image fluorescent
but static. These

beginnings
have frequency.
Imaginary lines

divided,
the broken sun
tracing the ghost-image
around the room.

Torching
the rods and cones. Little
left to see
when the punishment
subsides.

ii.

These cells will not die.

...and I ask...

“But how are we to be sure?”

We cannot
hold
ourselves accountable
for the dangers
of accidental
feeling.

Much
of what is learned
has been lost,
turns quasi-away:
 the genius
of seeing red.
The hyper-sonic clamor
 of light
embedded in the brain.
The mirage,
 lens-focused
and clinching teeth.
The queasy grin, yellowed.

The finely
shaped pupil
 interrogates
this moment,
 the teachable
moment of going
 blind.

...and in the world of light, I say...

“We watched the machine force
 an image on the eye

 long after the
 image had set...”

...stillness, and...

“Try to see the wandering world as a child
 released from sight.”

If the world
 witnessed
the burning from
the start,

It would call this experience
 palinopsia.

(section break)

iii.

Another child crouches
in the corner
 and another
 is me.

And after
a childhood
of presence.
 Of iniquities.
Of the forgotten self.
 Of the revelation:
It cannot
be forgot, that
 which cannot
 be seen.

The Trouble With Monochrome Photography

November gives lessons
on duality while I take
photography for granted.
Inside are the obedient
moving parts, and the outside

too obscure.

I can push
the curtains back and sigh:
Time was such the poignant portrait.

The day we pray
for a name and a case
of bourbon to take this
in is the day we sing
praises of drowning
in nostalgia and I answer
with this poem.
The unloosed
captions are taken
by surprise, one
tack at a time,
until the words tumble.

But these shots are the memories—
the negatives of life and space.

What I'll remember most:
Autumn's loaded gun
to your head in vintage photographs.

II. The Authentic Self

Consider the Losses

I. Temptation

The grand idea was a Texas
ghost town suffocating
in the dust clouds. I knew better
than to trust mile markers
in the heat, the distance
from home blurred, but growing.

II. Entombment

We set camp on a hill
above Santa Fe
a summer after the escape—
dug trenches. Dreamed
of dust storms and missing
words. I was not yet this poet,
scratched childish etchings
in the painted sandstone.

III. Resurrection

I was crucified on a Thursday
between rows of poplars sometime
in the evening. A spirited creature
with artistry on the brain.
Fortitudinous. Ornamental. Reaching
for simile after lonely smile.

IV. Ascension

But admiring the twilight is contagious.
We caught it, doctored
the infection. There was discipline
in general attitude, falling to a trance
mistaking satellites for stars
in the nearly perfect sky.

V. Atonement

I sought the secret thrill
of dying in the presence
of pomegranates, being stained

like Persephone, feeling the weight
of the world in iambs.
I considered the losses that time.
I was asked if snow was white
forgiveness. How could I know.

His First Book, *The Giving Tree*

My strategy was to read *The Giving Tree*
 and forget the locked door
 beside the wrecked aquarium.
 When the faux-wood
 paneling was not faded
 I could trace the shapes of faces
 in the grain and the face
 in the corner panel cried
 for being dented by a broken
 dinner plate one Christmas.

My strategy was to make a place for myself
 in this house, running my finger over
 the scribbled captions
 of old photographs—
 as if reading Braille.
 As if feeling.

Snow in Florida;

First Day of School;

His First Book, *The Giving Tree*;

Broken Arm but Still All Smiles.

My strategy was to read *The Giving Tree*
 over and over again on the carpetless floor
 where I learned my place in this house
 and to care little for the lack of photos on the wall.
 This house is a photoless place—
 For me. For the outsider. For me.

Dying Must Take More Attention Than I Ever Imagined

i.

Dead weight, *but I am
not dead to you.*

Mother
explained him
as a way to see
the need to explain
everything. I was
young, found
reason to panic:
Stuffy nose, hypo-
-chondriac, brain tumor
headache, self-
-diagnosis from
the hospital room
brochures I read in silence.

And thirteen years prior,
from the time he said
his life's work called
for dropping bombs
on German hospitals,
schools, playgrounds to
lessen the payload
for the journey across
the Channel, his pay-
load was heavier
than ever—
a carcinoma evenly
spread. Dead weight, but...

*Metastatic
means...
means*

coughs, hacking,
tearing epithelium
from the basement membrane,
regaining consciousness
long enough to pick
favorites. Tell secrets
to me and to the ones

he'd leave behind.
The others.

Father's plea:

*If
he's lucky they'll let
him go this time.*

...and I once asked my father
the same question: If
he'd let me go if
he had to, when if
the grief of waiting
and if
he simply couldn't
bear it, he could let
me go.

He responded:

*This is
a different kind
of letting go.*

I was older, fearful of
nuclear warfare
and the causes of
cancer: the slow, dark
stumble
into
death.

ii.

Life
was a kind
of wondrousness
spent counting the hours
underneath the ceiling
fan, tracing constellations,
eyes fixed on
the popcorn texture.

The guest
bedroom smelled
of antiseptics
and potpourri. We

were six months from
 moving his deathbed
 into storage and
 painting the room yellow,
 gender neutral for
 the infant growing
 in Aunt Judy's womb:

Another

 little bundle
 of joy to stumble, life
 to death. Each day
 he's dying
 a little more.

 In the end

I'd discover
 the bond
 between George and my
 mother: each finding
 comfort in speaking
 out of turn, taking
 a whole summer to
 restore Father's Day
 weekends missed.
 I caught her whispering
 sweet apologies,
 and although the world
 was never meant to
 see, she smiled all
 the worries from the room,
 silently mouthed,

Dad,

and sent him peacefully
 to sleep.

iii.

 In December

I found a photograph
 of a child in his
 arms: Hospital gown
 from the first
 symptoms, in
 the intensive care
 wing one floor down from

my polished entrance
to the world. The eye-gleam.
Shimmer. Broken
childishness.

Recovery. Remission. Regression.

Remission
is another word
for retreat,
George said.

...And later I passed the time
in waiting rooms, sketching
what I thought cancer
looked like—colored the
page a black shade,
careful not to stay
inside the lines.

My best evocations:

These cells will not die.

Mother's bloodshot
eyes at the doctor's side.
George's stride. The doctor's stride.
The outside world in
mocking continuity.

iv.

October,
priests poisoned the air
with talk of a ship
leaving the shore, white
sails spread upon the
morning breeze, ocean-
-bound, mast and hull and
spar a single speck
where the sea and sky
mingle. They said he
was not gone from us,
but found anew by
those who wait on the
distant shore. And I
chuckled from the speech,

to myself, for George
 long resented the
 sea, secretly, to
 all but me.

Yellow paint,
 spattered with red.
 Splotchy, jaundiced
 arms and the slow march into death.

*Over
 my dead body.*

...And my chuckle. It
 was our custom. I stood
 out for an instant,
 and after mother's
 crying
 ceased, I imagined
 her careful pace
 in the procession,
 her back to the crowd,
 tearless from days of
 grieving, inhaling the
 blazing heat of a
 funeral in the
 dead of a Florida
 summer.

His resolve:

*I don't
 want anyone sweating over me
 in June.*

October was right on time.

Things I recall:
 Mother's broken
 sigh. Open doors.
 Bamboo wind chimes
 dancing outside
 his bedroom window
 where gray clouds billowed
 across the sky.

Confirmation

And how even as a child
I would not pray.
The priest held my head
in trust to smother the wickedness.
I stood beside myself, tasted

stale starch, salty sweat. The eyes
of a congregation demanded
the sins of a frightened boy short
of thirteen years. Salivated because they knew
they were once thirteen, erected

judgment because they knew they were once thirteen
and the experience taught them better.

Their tongues and prayers touched my ears,
and I felt a piece of them inside.

My mouth opened
but the voice refused, and I gasped
for air in the breast of my God.

I was a child
ravaged in a much different bedroom,

the factory of Man and Absolution
where I stood
on trial. On display.

You Wanted an Elegy, and I Gave You One

This poem is not for you.
 Not for the way you smiled
 last December under
 the peeling moon. Nor for
 your heart. No simple flash
 of light and stars and place.

Not for the Sundays of circled hymns,
 days counted by sixes
 on swollen fingers, knuckles,
 arms, toes, bruises as
 things were getting harder.

Not for when you came undone
 and the Word leapt away
 from you, sailed in giant circles
 around the room, around

the air. Our family
 ties became dustless surfaces
 where the Bibles sat—the silhouettes
 of holiness beneath the lampshades.

And beside those lampshades
 you clipped me, under-dressed
 as if you were just cleaning grime
 from fingernails, one nail at a time—
 a single lamp,
 a single shade,
 a single light across one
 vacant face.

No, this poem is not for you,
 but of you, when you
 were the answer, made enough
 warmth to share. But still
 I could not know you.

And I grew distant in spite
 of counting the days. And lying:
 This poem is not for you.

Feigning a Smile in the Presence of a North Carolina Miracle

We drove to Asheville
on the first warm
day in April
to count rows
of azaleas,

plots of marigolds
pushing topsoil
aside.

The perennials cracked
the granite

and if the people
weren't good enough to notice,
if they were ignorant

husbands and jealous wives,
if they made hurried
judgments of the world,
claimed to know

the true path to salvation
they'd have
missed what I saw: signs

like craqueleure
in an overturned china bowl.

But we drove
for miles, my fingers counting
the emerald mirage cast by each passing shrub

with the air and the life
and the sound of the world breaking.

So many flowers
in the foreground, with smiles
on our faces nowhere to be found.

Coldwater Creek

We were Olympic divers from recycled
concrete banks that cut our feet.

Thermometers were watermelons tied
to the shore with twine—tiny green bobbing

Buddhas chilled through the flesh.
Father was a life raft floating in the freshwater

seaweed above crawfish burrows.
But still he warned us of the dangers:

*Stay clear of the highway bridge,
for that's where the busted bottles lie.*

That was my childhood: one ambiguous
warning of broken glass after another.

Snow Day in Florida

Christmas
1996 and God
poured wet confectioner's
sugar on my Florida town.

The locals hailed
the coming apocalypse,
blamed the frozen goop
on the homosexuals,
on the godlessness in the schools,
on the mayor who demanded a mob remove
the Ten Commandments from the courthouse
beside the old lynching tree—the one where
our ancestors took pleasure in the convenience
of justice; the one under which school children

erected men
made of snow.
I watched while God bathed them in white.

The tree died a little and the snowmen turned to milk
a little and the children all caught pneumonia and God
said it was good.

All was right in the anarchic cause of snow.

Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?

A vagrant hummed
 a hymn on the corner
 of Tarragona and Main
 that Sunday when I
 heard a homily
 on the importance
 of charity—on that Sunday
 when I discovered

the other ways to Heaven,
 the other ways
 to please the Lord
 and appease the masses
 and please my southern heritage
 and all
 that other
 shit.

I was my father's bad instincts.
 I was the fear of how I'd be judged
 when I die. And if those were
 the only worries in my mind
 I likely would have judged others
 who walked by the man as I.

But he smiled:

...It's southern hospitality...

...and returned to his hymn.

I wasn't sure
 if that was my moment
 or his. Yet his beauty was mine—
 unhinged my mind. My soul
 was the rhythmic jingle of quarters
 in my pocket, fading from his ears
 as I passed. Grown faint as his hymn,

and I found myself in a new
 kind of Hell on the corner
 of Tarragona and Main,
 wishing I could take this back.

III.
The Harvest

In the Beginning There Was

Shadows
sliding against
the cadent
pounding
of rain.
Stacked memories.
The last stars
of the season
 hide now,
curtain-shaded
 in the stratosphere.
An autumn shower
dilutes this masterpiece
of light and stars and space.
And I will make amends
this morning, gain
 a new
 focus
for the world:
a frenzy
 beside
this broken sunlight.

Degradation

And the hours
winding strands
on the fork.
Consider the taste.
Consider the perpetual motion.
Wrist shaking, arms flailing
against your foreground—
watch you wither,
level me,
cocked head
slightly to see
on the level.

Then I say:

...Try the other hand...

as if a difference were to be made;
as if a difference is what you wanted.

The Prodigy

June and the last bug-riddled scraps
from the garden.

Southern depression. The avenues.

The antebellum shimmer
of the floor.

A broken architecture in a series of aged photographs.

The smileless summer, boy
with leeks and a single ripened tomato.

Notate and harvest.

Slow-moving July and the blood.

The callous medical men. Father. Jaundiced.

A pre-mortem estate planning checklist and the unsteadied hand.

Phrenology because it mattered.

Rabbit-eared pages
of the Life Extension Society pamphlet.

Mother's other vices. The safety pull-cord and children

lynching toys above the mostly immaculate

linoleum surface. Expansion in mind.

But notate and harvest.

August and the departure. Meditation.

Father's judicial eyes and the scarcity of color.

Chiming breeze.

Porch door poundings.

The irony:

Clods of peat. Home. Vestibule floor.

The prodigy. The sheep. The poppy field
beside the garden.

Rummaging for You, George

Spring cleaning, rummaging today,
I found your watch in the desk beneath
the *Episcopalian Encyclopedia of Dying*,
hands still
ticking.

I was moved then, reading
that your breathing was as a fish
out of water. Struggling.
Then a smile for the memory
of your birth theory: you were a fish

incarnate—a red snapper your father
caught on the Florida coast the morning
you were born. A life later, God
should return you to the sea.

And you will
pardon my saying this
little piece of you lives on for me.

But if by chance God forgot:
Spring cleaning, rummaging today
before a short trip to the shore,
I tossed your watch into the sea.

Recalling the Fuzzy Details of a Distant Occurrence

-for Edvard Munch's *The Scream*

i.

I tried to imagine
why the subject
screamed,

thought of distress
and of this timid
reply

to a sky set
ablaze. He was
a spirit

in tapestry.
How embarrassing

to be caught mid-
sentence,
fence

post, mid-sentence—

rolling hills, a sky
turned blood

red,

screaming, mid-sentence,
blood in

the path,
swirl in
fury

and red and

distance, mid-
sentence.

Thieves were the break
and the blue-black

fjord,
the city and the light.

ii.

This was the
tremor,

the infinite
scream passing

above
the knoll

and lot to
iron chariot—asphalt,
highway

slipping by the fence,
the dust,
escape.

Passing hanging
mouths,
yellowed

eyes and the burning
sky.

iii.

And what if
immensity lasted
only

as long as this? Only
as figments
of brush strokes,
only

doubts
of

imperfection?

One painting,
one
Scream found
missing.

iv.

Still
I was a gasping
passerby, awestruck

and mourning
against the contoured
grain,

gawking mid-
-sentence,
lost

mid-sentence.
I see the
past in his
Scream.

Found little else
in the rhythm

of falsely
broken lines.

The Art of Holding Conversations in Your Sleep

I treaded water in the living room beside the mantle
where William shot himself and sang Dixie off key.
Pictures were hung to disguise the blood-droplet quarter notes,
The hall was an inflamed airway with airplanes overhead.
Father always insisted my words were gibberish and I swallow too much.

I read *Psalm 13* from the Bible I was given at Confirmation. Past
times I think I'd throw a tantrum and drown myself in the creek, scream without
sound, run without moving and ask anyone in the room if I swallowed
my tongue. Away from the dream were the cherry blossoms
and the last sanctuary: the first way to make tears and smile and fuck
with passion and build another dream inside the space where
father always insisted my words were gibberish and I swallow too much.

I planted roses in the bedroom when the smell of cancer left little air to breathe.
The garden in the window exposed rotten bell peppers and my mother's alcoholism.
The bible was beneath the blossoms, beside the peppers and roses
and blood. It all burned with feverish delusion—a nightmare set ablaze.

Watching the Cities Drown: A Florida Sequence

i.

This is temporary.

But I once imagined a place
outside the dreamscape
of a Florida sunset.
A rolling panhandle hill,
the highest point,

elevation: 345 feet.

I reinvent the prospectors:

*From here you can see
the whitecaps in the Gulf,*

and so they
called it Crestview.

And had it not been for
the pines and oaks along
North Walton County Highway
285, that might have been true.

ii.

I once told
my father I found
no connection with
Aunt Judy
and Uncle Jimmy
from Orlando.

That's not the real Florida.

As if such a thing
existed at all.

The real Floridians
lived in the backyard:
sandpipers and horseshoe
crabs
 feeding in the break-

water.

We were all panhandlers.
 Begging.

Removed. Dusting
ourselves off from
the filthy boots of Alabama.

iii.

Florida, like me, is temporary.

The limestone
will be consumed.
The playgrounds
and asphalt driveways

in a connected
 cul-de-sac
will fall victim
to the sea.

My first thought
will be to seek
refuge atop
the oaks,

carve my name
in them
with a limestone
chunk and watch
the cities drown.

Yes, I am temporary.
Another molded
character, but

I was telling a story
of a country winter
after the leaves had turned
in the presence of a loved one.

In my mind I journeyed
to Three Rivers Road

across from the vacant

lot where the Pin Oaks
grew. I was too young
to say I'd remember

cracking acorns
with my heel. I was
too young to remember
thinking they'd
outlive me.

iv.

I once spoke
of oaks in a clearing
of a pine tree forest
on father's property
years before I knew
the value of verse.

*there's something
peculiar in a group of oaks
living amongst pines,*
he said.

and I resolved to peek
inside each nook to see
what it might be.

They were Chinkapins
and I swung from them
above the limestone ridges,
determined to explain
to father my love
of diversity.
Of anything.

But this scene
is temporary and
I could not.
For the life
of me
I could not.

'I liked the poem, but there were some things about which I was unsure...'

You're reading these poems with
 wishful thinking, too calm to fill
 the space between the words
 I so carefully omitted—
 vacations in the Florida sun,
 family feuds in places where
 no one knew me and raising
 my voice was divine.
 And because no one knew
 me, raising my voice really
 was divine. These words
 said "I am my father" over
 and over again. These words
 said "I am the torn pages of *Family
 Commandments* for extended
 journeys I never agreed to take."
 But they neglect my delicious
 recollection of that Hardy poem,
 the one where I scream
 in hues of red from the Channel
 and after I wake the dead
 they coil back at the sight of me
 digging through anthologies
 to find a way to describe it.

Reading these poems, you say
 I am the darker way to look
 at this family. But you all must note
 my careful omissions—the other
 ways to read these lines—
oh, Jonathan, how divine!

Notes

Fantasia: A work in which the author's fancy roves unrestricted, or something possessing grotesque, bizarre, or unreal qualities.

Palinopsia: A visual and neurological condition known to cause sensory disturbances such as lingering afterimages and visual snow. The name of the ailment translates literally to mean *seeing again*.

The Scream: Edvard Munch's famous expressionist painting, *The Scream*, is the subject of "Recalling the Fuzzy Details..." Munch created several versions of the masterpiece—some paintings, others pastel, and one lithograph. In 1994, a version of *The Scream* was stolen from The National Gallery of Norway and was recovered years later, damaged, but still intact.

In his diary, Munch described his inspiration for the painting: "I was walking along a path with two friends — the sun was setting — suddenly the sky turned blood red — I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence — there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue- black fjord and the city — my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety — and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature."

"I liked the poem, but there were something about which I was unsure...": This poem makes reference to a Thomas Hardy poem called "Channel Firing," set during a World War I naval battle. Bombardments from ships in the English Channel were so loud, Hardy claimed they woke the dead.