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.
The Skipping Stone

by

Jonathan Austin Peacock

A THESIS

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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.

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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.
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…”

…and 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)
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 iambic.
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 payload 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.
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.
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:
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 treded 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-
We were all panhandlers. Begging.

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

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—
*ob, 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.