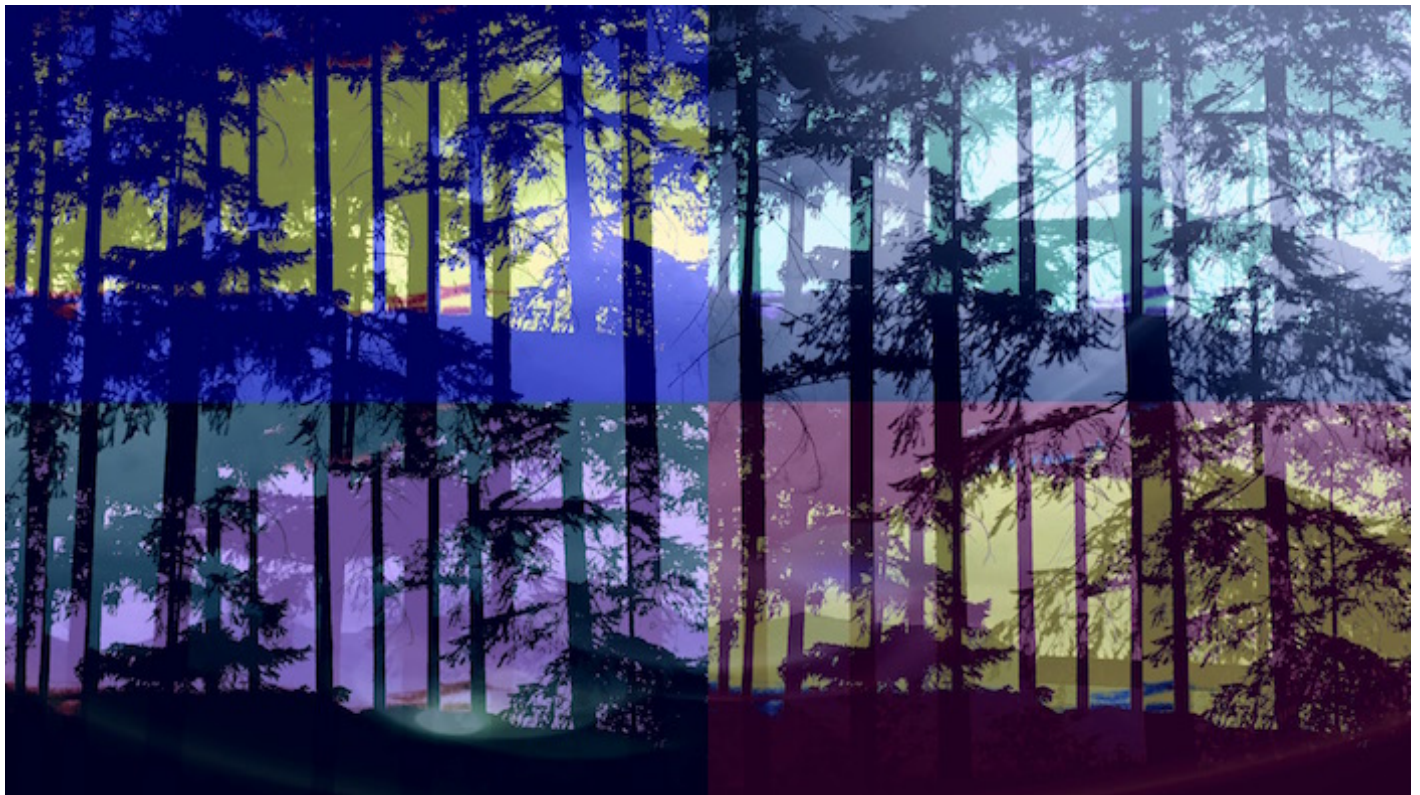


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Flash Fiction by Bernard Grant



Stone

A dirt trail leads from Mr. Leon's back porch to a pond near the woods. He takes me and Mamma there when we visit him. We eat sandwiches and toss rocks into the water. Mr. Leon likes to skip them across. The trick, he says, is to use a flat stone so it'll skim the surface, skipping a couple of times before it sinks. Every time I throw a stone, even if it's flat, it smashes into the water.

One time I do skip one, but Mamma and Mr. Leon are on the blanket smiling at each other and don't see. When Mr. Leon goes to the house for sandwiches, I go sit next to Mamma. She squeezes the back of my neck and asks me if I like him. Just when I'm about to fib and say I do, hot static fizzes over our legs. Mamma grabs my hand, and we run up to his house.

Mr. Leon stumbles outside, slipping a lighter into his pocket. "Fire ants," he says. Calm, like he was just letting us know. He smells smokey, piney.

When he goes back inside, I say, "I don't think I like Mr. Leon. He's mean to you, and he—"

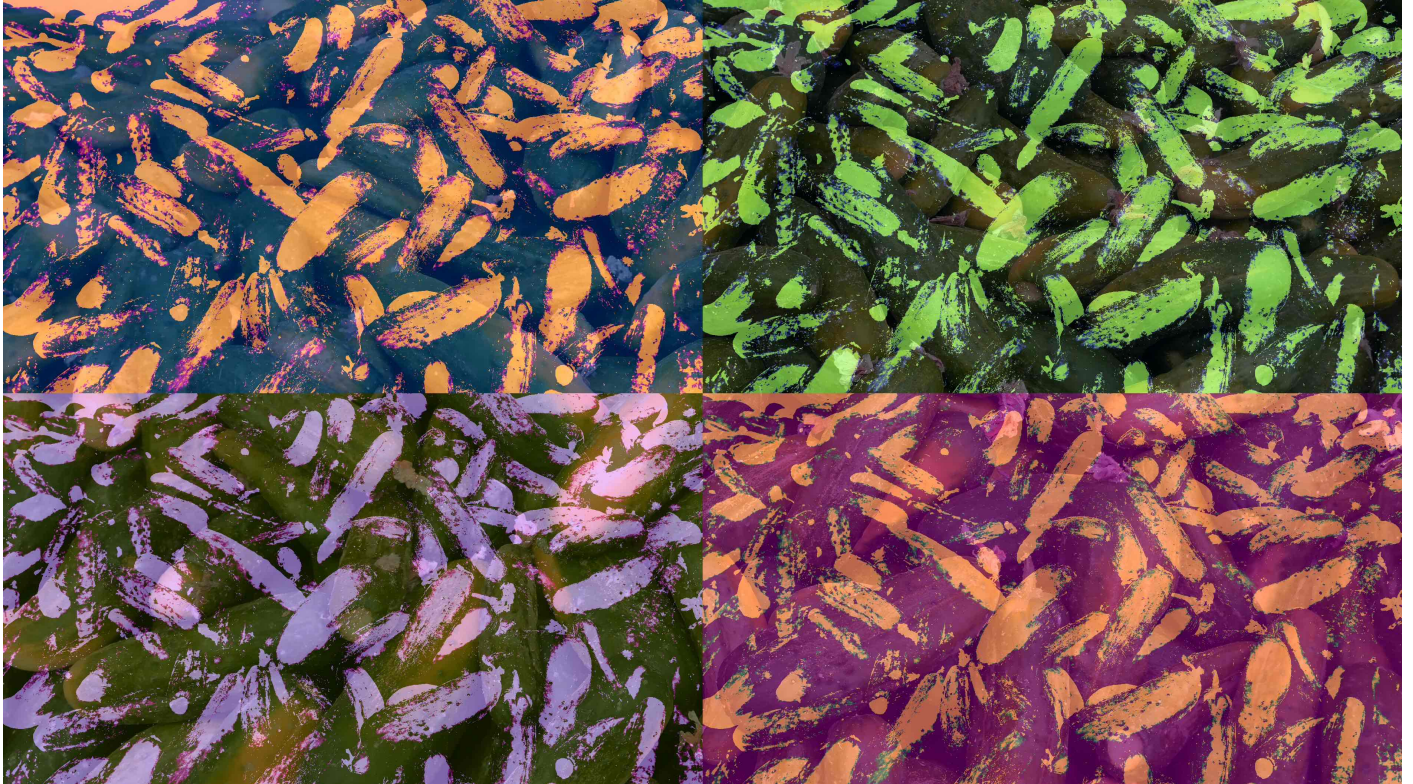
“He taught you how to skip stones. You liked that, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but I think he does—”

Mamma slaps ant bites on my leg. “Skip stones, child. Don’t throw them.”

The screen door creaks open. Mr. Leon comes toward us waving a bottle and wiping his eyes. They’re pink, like the cream. The cream smells like medicine. But it stops the stinging. He hands me a soda and promises ice pops later.

Mamma eyes me as she stoops to wipe the cream on her legs. “My son acting like he don’t like you. He silly.”



Turtle

Grandpa takes me to Brackenridge Park and shows me how to cast my line into the lake. Mamma told him I need to get out of the house more, and he promises that if I don’t have fun, he’ll never make me come again. It’s boring. Watching our bobbers float on the water, green and dark, dead leaves floating on top.

The sun blazes. I down three cold sodas, but that doesn’t help. Bottles lie. Bug spray doesn’t repel mosquitoes. Aloe vera doesn’t stop the itches. Sodas don’t cool you down. We’ve been out here forever. Long enough to miss Saturday morning cartoons and the ice cream truck. Fuzzy men argue on the radio. I haven’t caught anything. I’m not hungry, but I go to find a mini bag of chips next to the cooler. Grandpa asks for one.

“What kind?” I ask. I’m shuffling through the bags.

“Dori—oh! Come here, child. Hurry up now.”

He holds my fishing pole with one hand, waves me over with the other. I take the pole. The weight pulls me down. He comes up behind me and helps me reel it in. The tip bends. Before he picked me up this morning, Mamma said for me

to bring back something good, a big fish we can eat on all year. I was worried I wouldn't catch anything.

The pole jerks. A shadow darkens the water. A dark hump surfaces. A shell. Four kicking legs. My eyes warm up. A tear tickles down my cheek. Grandpa takes the pole and sets it on the ground. While the turtle squirms in his hand, he slides out the hook and tosses him back into the water.

"He all right," Grandpa says, patting my back. "Let's go on, child. Get you some lunch."

When he starts unwrapping the sandwiches, I tell him I won't eat, not until he promises we won't fish anymore.

Art Information

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Bernard Grant is a doctoral student at the University of Cincinnati, where he is a Yates Fellow. He's also received fellowship support from the Jack Straw Cultural Center, Vermont Studio Center, and Mineral School. He holds an MFA from Pacific Lutheran University. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review* and the *Chicago Tribune*.

He's the author of the nonfiction chapbook *Puzzle Pieces* (Paper Nautilus Press) and currently serves as associate essays editor at the *Nervous Breakdown*.

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