

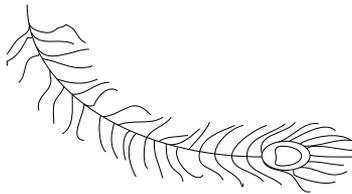
The Peacock's Stone

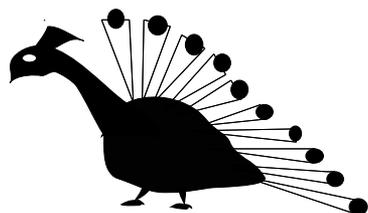


Faith Richardson

Again, I woke with the peacocks calling forth the dawn. Again, the sense of urgency burned within my chest. But this time, I warned of my people; this time I sought to protect the Other—if Other, truly, he was. I journeyed with purpose, dog-trotting like coyote, following my trail. My inner eyes remained fixed on Truel, my friend; my outer eyes worked only to set my feet a clear path, in disdain of pre-dawn shadow. And well before dawn I reached the camp of Truel.

The cave was empty, as it had been before. I scaled the trail up to the lookout cliff, but he was not there. I sat, my back to the cedar tree, and watched where he had watched the river, eyes straining to see Truel. First light came. Then dawn broke, the sun shooting yellow beams across the water, dazzling my eyes. I looked away, into the cool grass at my feet, and then I saw it





Young Adult Fiction
by
Faith Richardson

Dark is a Color

Hoverlight

Angel Walker

Tree Root and River Rat

The Peacock's Stone

Christmas Pigeons

The Peacock's Stone

Faith Richardson

Published by Fox Song Books
Los Angeles, California

The Peacock's Stone
by Faith Richardson

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ISBN: 0-9744989-0-4 Trade cloth edition
ISBN: 0-9744989-1-2 Trade paper edition

Cover Illustration and inside graphics:
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Richardson, Faith.

The peacock's stone / by Faith Richardson.
p. cm.

Summary: Eleven-year-old Shahumin, who has just begun learning the wisdom of the elders, befriends an odd-looking youth whom she meets in the woods, not realizing he is an Other, one of the people not created by YAWH, and an enemy of her people.

ISBN 1-0-9744989-1-2 (alk. paper)

[1. Prejudices—Fiction. 2. Creation—Fiction. 3.

Grandfathers—Fiction. 4. Prehistoric peoples—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.R39435Pe 2003

[Fic]—dc21

2003008086

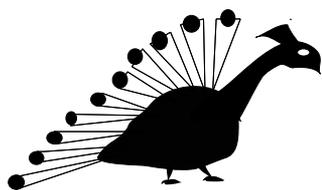
Printed in the United States of America

Published by Fox Song Books
Los Angeles, California



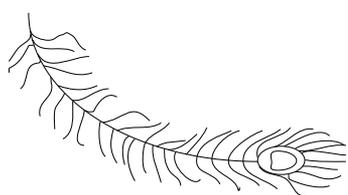
For my own Truel.

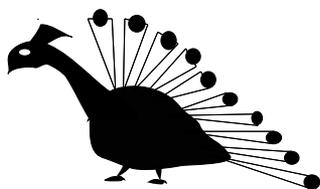
*My soul loved you before I met you,
and I thank God we were brought
together
through the magic of our own
silicon stone.
I love you eternally.*



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1

Ba-pa

So my story begins—as a child, with a child’s dreams and a child’s fears, and a child’s loves. I loved my village; ringed about with green giants of cedar and hemlock, the nearby river, relentlessly busy. Glistening under the sun our tents stood like smooth, brown boulders, fire-circles warm with supper and laughter. I loved my family: my father, my mother, my small brother Shimhu. And I loved Ba-pa.

Our village was small—under twenty fire-circles in all, less if you failed to count the camps of the elders, ringed higher on the hills above us, near the choicest bend of the stream and under the protection of the jutting rock fingers of the mountain. Alone, we were small; but we met with other villages of our people every season, for feasts and weddings, to exchange news and to worship YAWH as one people. When we met as one, our fire-circles were more than

I could count. I remember, as a small child, perched on my Ba-pa's shoulders as he walked the flat of a cliff overlooking the plain where our people had gathered, seeing camp upon camp scattered like innumerable rosy leaves by the wind. And I hugged the head of my father's father, and wondered at the vastness of our people, covering the world. Surely we were the nobles of creation, YAWH's Own, stamped with His Image? Such dizzying heights.

Of the Others . . .? And Others there were: not of our village, not of our people. But I was left to ponder such awful mysteries on my own, until I reached the age when I could enquire of the elders the dark things of YAWH's creation. What I heard as a child, snatches of undertone, bits of stories, filled me with horror: the Others were shaped as us, shaped as Woman, shaped as Man, but beared not the Image of YAWH.

With the eyes of my mind I saw these nameless ones as gibbering horrors, men without hearts, blood-lusters who slayed without need, and without sorrow. Beasts in man-skins. I feared them—as did all children—more than a she-bear, more than a wolverine. But I, unlike the other children who refused to talk of such night-terrors even by day, was haunted by questions of those mysterious ones, and the sun did not rise nor set on a day when I did not think of them. And although I was afraid, and knew the wickedness of my fascination, I wished a child's wish to see the Others.

Perhaps I thought more about mysteries because of my father's father. He ignored the custom of most elders by welcoming me as a small child within his fire-circle. We would talk of many things: the stars and their stories, the

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rocks and why they breathed not, the animals and why they spoke without words. But even with my Ba-pa, I was very aware that talk of the Others was talk of Darkness, and for many seasons I held off asking him what I most wanted to know.

When evening coolness came, more often than not, I would tear through the forest, up the trail to the high camps, my feet sending out satisfying slapping sounds on the hard-packed path. Smacking leaves aside as though I were swimming through trees, up the path I would pound, no need for sight, I knew it well. Jump the cracks in the clay for luck! Avoid the sticky Wha-Wha stem! I would burst in on my Ba-pa's fire-circle like a silly peachick: no ceremony, no dignity, only a thoughtless need to be near him.

He was always pleased to see me, although his face would remain impassive and his eyes, trained deep into the flames, would not waver. Eventually, if I gathered myself into a respectful waiting position—my feet tucked under me, hands quiet upon my lap, and my eyes mimicking my Ba-pa—he would rouse himself from his thoughts and I would feel the fire of his gaze upon me.

I spent many evenings with my father's father, watching the restless orange-heat send out a trailing message of white, feeling the night creatures gleam and glint around us, hearing the deepness of Ba-Pa's voice, and living out in my child's imagination the tales he told.

The day my story begins, I had reached eleven-summers and was feeling the importance of myself. That evening I came to my father's father not because of a baby's wish for story-telling, but to have him answer a question—the question. I would wait no longer, though my heart pounded

at my audacity. I said to my heart, “Be quiet!” and the mad thirst in my mind pushed my body into its best, most diligent, waiting posture. Rigid and hooked as Old Hunter’s walking stick.

There: the scanning orbs focused upon me. I puzzle even now, speaking this, recalling his eyes. Ba-pa had a gaze I could feel; it was as though his life-force, kindled at soul-depths, flared through the physical openings of his eye sockets. The result was a tangible tapping on my shoulder. I looked up and met a quizzical, warm, smile—although his lips remained in a straight line.

“My father’s father,” I greeted him formally, inclining my head. I was now putting aside my babyhood name of him. No more childish prattling for me; I was eleven-summers.

“My child’s child,” he answered gravely, a twinkle flickering in his eyes. “Are you so old now, my Shahumin? No more ‘Ba-pa’?”

I flushed. ‘Ba-pa,’ indeed! Why could not I have lisped out something a little more dignified when I was a baby?

“I humbly wish to enquire of you, my father’s father,” I continued my speech firmly. “I wish to learn from your wisdom... I wish—I wish to . . . know . . .” But my memory failed me. I had been quoting the formal address my adult cousins used with Ba-pa, but in spite of all my practice I could not remember what came next.

“Ba-pa! You are laughing at me,” I cried indignantly. His throaty chuckles filled my reddening ears, but suddenly I was in his arms and I did not care.

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"I only laugh because you bring me joy," Ba-pa whispered. "Now, what did you want to discuss with me, my Shahumin of eleven-summers?"

I wriggled from his arms and sat back on my haunches, surveying him with my head tilted to one side.

"It is a serious subject—a grown-up subject," I warned him.

"I am ready," he promised.

"A dark subject . . ."

He remained listening. After one more scrutinizing survey, trying to will my heart to slow, I blurted: "It is about the nameless ones that I want to know." The stars remained in the sky; Ba-pa remained impassive. One loud gulp, and I continued, "The Others. Who are they? Where do they come from? Where do they live? Oh, and how do they live, knowing that they bear not YAWH's own Image? And what do they look like?" I felt as though I were a small river that had finally burst through a beaver's dam—question after question boiled out until Ba-pa called a halt. I saw it in his eyes.

"Indeed it is a serious subject, Shahumin. One that is not talked of without thought." He paused, and for a moment I feared he was going to tell me what I already knew—that I was too young for such things. But no: "Tomorrow I will send for you; first we will share salt, then I will speak of Beginnings."

I was to share salt with Ba-pa! No longer would I be told tales to comfort a silly baby—I was to hear wisdom—to partake in ceremony. Tomorrow night! Dizzy with the ecstasy of such honour being granted to my eleven-summers, I could say nothing.

I crawled back into Ba-pa's lap and leaned my head on his lean shoulder. The stars were winking into view. All my familiar friends. The Running Horse, one hoof forever raised in a pawing motion, one back leg trailing. The Mother Bear with Two Cubs gambolling behind. The Hunter with his bright shield. Deer Woman with Three Fawns. The silly Peacock, eye cocked down, still trying to find his glittering dropped stone. The Snake, curving around and around the Broken Spear. I shuddered. Deer Woman with Three Fawns was so near to the awful coils of the Snake . . .

"Why does Deer Woman not take her Fawns away to safety, Ba-pa? Away from the Snake?"

"It is the Three Fawns who protect Deer Woman, Shahumin."

"The Three Fawns—the babies? Protect the mother? From the Snake?!"

I felt Ba-pa's head nodding, the sinews at the juncture of his neck and shoulders tightening and releasing. "Yes," he murmured to himself. "Always it is the children and the old, the weak, that protect the strong . . ."

"Go on home," he said gently, pushing me onto my feet. "I will send for you tomorrow."

So slowly did the sun journey across the sky that next day! Although the sun moved as an old one, I did not; at eleven—summers I had grown into many duties. Not only had I to pick up firewood along the river, but I must watch my young brother while my mother tilled and worked the garden and my father dug another well with the other men, or worked in the fields with the oxen. Every day I had to keep the fires burning just right so everyone's lentils would cook

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slowly. It was my job, and a heavy responsibility. I had heard many times the story of a careless child long ago who had let the fires go out. In the evening, the families had all returned to cold fire pits and hard, uncooked lentils. That child—I had never been told what happened to that terrible child. Taken by the Snake in the night, I supposed, and I ran to put another stick on Aunt Hoa's fire. Of course, at that moment Shimhu, my little brother, chose to race chortling toward the dried dung pit. I grabbed him, and he collapsed, giggling in my arms.

Griphen and Taamuri, my friends, twins born one summer before me, were unloading their bags of collected dried ox dung into the pit.

Taamuri greeted me. "Will you play this evening with us? Griphen has thought of a new game—with coloured sticks—see?"

"I cannot," I answered, a trifle importantly.

I told Griphen and Taamuri that I was to share salt with my father's father that very evening. Such news cannot be kept entirely to one's self. Surely I would pop like dried corn on a fire if I tried.

Griphen's eyes turned dark.

"I do not believe you. I have seen no messenger from the camp of elders," he said flatly.

Taamuri looked pleasantly doubtful, as though she wanted my news to be true, but also was quite aware that no summons had come.

I was most aware that Ba-pa had not sent for me yet—and already the sun was high in the sky. My pride,

however, was a live thing that would not back down.

“One may not believe the sun is in the sky, but it is,” I challenged, nose in the air. “And a snake may look to be a root, but it will bite you all the same!”

Griphen’s face flared in frustration. He picked up a stick and swung it at an inquisitive peahen. The peahen wanted the drawstring lacing off his loin-skirt; she retreated one leap, and then sidled in quick, running steps toward the boy again. “Go away!” he menaced, waving his stick. The peahen stepped back but still stared fixedly at the tempting lace. Finally, he answered, his face fixed away from me.

“I do not believe you, Shahumin, because you are as silly as a peahen,” Griphen said, glaring at the real peahen.

“Silly, or not,” I said grandly, feeling my heart pound. “I will share the salt with my father’s father tonight,” and I hoped fervently that my words were true. I turned and carried my struggling brother back toward our fire-circle.

When I glanced back, Taamuri’s eyes had followed me with a wondering gaze, but Griphen’s back was stiff.

“Come on, let us go,” he said gruffly to his sister, pulling her arm. “We need to get two bags more before we rest. This is just a game of her’s—the telling of a story. No one shares salt before they are twelve-summers.”

“Almost no one,” I yelled back. “But I am!” And then I wondered to myself, suddenly, had I made the whole thing up? Was last night only a baby’s dream? *Would Ba-pa forget?* Horrid fears, like cold spiders scuttled up my spine. And the rest of the day I alternated between elation at the thought of sharing salt with Ba-pa and hearing in my mind Griphen’s

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triumphant “I told you so!” tomorrow, if I did not.

I waited and waited for the message boy to emerge from the forest, walk the path to our fire-circle, and pull from his sack the little package that would hold the summons from my father's father for me to share salt with him. And the day was long, and never before had Shimhu been so mischievous. My mother and father returned home from their work and I watched them prepare for evening, as if this were just any old day.

The sun was low and I had milked three goats before the summons came. Granit, the message carrier, entered our fire-circle without ceremony. No solemn long walk with all the villagers wondering. No one even noticed him. But how was it I never saw him enter the village from the forest path I knew so well? Granit inclined his head in courtesy and handed my father a small package. That was that.

But was this the summons? The message must contain three items: a small stone with holes in it, that meant me, Shahumin, the YAWH-breathed stone, a knotted, dried root from the cherry tree, that would be Ba-pa, and, most importantly, a twist of salt. Ba-pa would only use the traditional message package; he scorned the lazy practice of the younger generation who used hand-drawn symbols on bark.

I leaped up from the goat I was milking, and she gave a deep *ma-ha-ha*. But how could I wait? I stood behind my father, but just outside our fire-circle. My father unrolled the soft leather, his head bent. No words from him. He turned, and held out the contents of the message package to my mother, and then I saw their faces, first molded in surprise, then melting into pride.

“Shahumin!” My father called, sensing me behind him. His large hands still clutched the packet. “Finish the goats! Quickly!”

My mother hurried into the tent and brought out a much folded parcel. She unfolded its layers, settled herself down, took a bone needle and fine yellow lacing and began pulling it through what looked like a leather garment. My legs returned my impatient spirit to the goats.

Those silly goats—why did YAWH ever bother himself to make them? They kept getting in my way, turning their heads and filling my ears with sudden bleating. My hands shook as they closed around the goat’s teats. I still could not be sure of the message . . .

Only three more udders to go.

Then two.

One more.

Done!

My father called me to him. He stood before me, tall, stern, wearing a tunic of beaten brown leather. My eyes travelled from the ground, to his dust-covered moccasins, up his heavy work leggings, a giant’s distance to his copper face, his black hair pulled back and held with a flat leather lace.

“My daughter, Shahumin, the stone with YAWH’s breath,” as he spoke the words he pressed into my palm a small, black stone, porous with air bubbles.

“Her father’s father . . .” I felt the wiry roughness of an old, earth-red root beside the stone that was me.

“They will share salt.” The words were born, resounding. The small twist of salt opened, spilling out onto

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the stone, the stick, through my fingers.

“We will eat,” my father said after a long, silent look of pride at me.

My gaze fell before my father’s melting eyes. All this for me, Shahumin. Then the largeness of this moment shrunk me; Griphen dropped from sight. I concentrated on the stone, the knotted bit of root, the salt on my palm.

Shimhu, awakening from his nap, rushed my father, crashing into his long legs with a giggling grunt. My father swung him high, saying, “Shimhu, you must now treat your big sister with respect—she has been called to the fire-circle of wisdom.” I laughed, a sudden swoosh of relief, and I grew to Shahumin size again—but no more.

My mother, watching from her sewing task, smiled. “You must eat—all of you. Shahumin must have time to prepare for this evening.”

I could barely choke down one small bowl of lentils, so filled was my stomach with excitement. Taamuri and Griphen stole furtive glances at me from their fire circle. Suddenly shy of me—even Griphen. Their awed looks thrilled me, and—something else. Was I still Shahumin? I clutched my bowl in alarm; it, at least, was unchanged. Same dark-etched crack running like a crooked root down the side. The familiar little burr of a knot still under my little finger. If I ate from Shahumin’s bowl, I was still Shahumin.

After dinner, which my mother worked through, sewing carefully, evenly, waving away the bowl of lentils my father brought her, my mother handed me a butter-yellow leather dress. “A little big,” she laughed through shiny tears. “And not quite finished. But I did not expect your inside to

grow faster than your outside . . .” I slid into the soft sheath, the unfamiliar feel of leather lying on my chest and swishing across my knees. My father was silent, but pride shone from him. He filled the matching salt-pouch my mother had just finished and handed it to me. My mother clasped his arm. There they stood, my father, hugging Shimhu to his chest. I was the first in our village of all eleven-summer and many twelve-summer to be summoned by an elder to share salt.

Then my father handed Shimhu to mother, and he began the familiar drill of the sharing of the salt ritual, but this time his voice rang with a stern urgency.

That evening I did not leap through the forest like a deer-child, although I wore her skin. I did not slap the earth with my feet like a hare. I walked with dignity, my little pouch of salt clutched in my hand, an eleven-summer child, to the fire-circle of wisdom. And I shared the salt with my father’s father.

Does every action we make, every word we speak,
create our reality?

What if reality were only another's myth?

What if you, a child of eleven-summers,
went out for a walk,
found a friend,
picked up a rock along the riverbank,
and turned your village upside down?

The Peacock's Stone is a mythopoeic fantasy set on ancient Earth. Shahumin, a precocious eleven-summer child, is invited into her grandfather's fire-circle of wisdom, where she learns the old stories that have shaped the culture and beliefs of her people. Encountering a strange, pale youth along the river bank, Shahumin unwittingly steps into a new story, a story of power that challenges the wisdom of her people and threatens to shatter her world.

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by **Faith Richardson**

Adult/YA Fiction

Available November, 2003

Published by *Fox Song Books*

ISBN 0-9744989-0-4, Trade cloth, 192 pp, \$16.95

ISBN 0-9744989-1-2 Trade paper, 192 pp, \$12.95

For more information, please contact:



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Faith Richardson can't remember a time when she was not fascinated by stories: listening to them, reading them, and spinning her own. As a writer and a health care provider, Faith is a daily witness to the impact our beliefs and assumptions have on us. "When I take a patient's history, I am really hearing the story of their life: their hurts, their struggles, their hopes."

***The Peacock's Stone** is an affirmation of the power of story to change lives.*

Faith grew up in British Columbia, Canada. She currently lives in California with her husband, artist Vincent James Richardson, who provided the illustrations for this edition.

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