Pinckney Benedict

In Their Own Country transcript

1 Pinckney Benedict: I remember, I think it was the *Times*, the *New York Times* review of *Dogs of God*, my novel, said something like, “One fears for the sanity of the writer who dared to look the devils in the eye” or something like that, and I figured, about the time I’ve got people worried about my sanity, I must be doing something right.

Kate Long: And that’s the voice of Pinckney Benedict. And you’re listening to *In Their Own Country*, a weekly radio program that brings you the thoughts and work of some of West Virginia’s best known and most interesting writers. This week, it’s Pinckney Benedict.

2 Pinckney: I remember, when I went to Michigan, turning in my West Virginia driver’s license. They punched a hole right through it. It was the first time I’d ever had a driver’s license from anyplace other than West Virginia, and it was just this very weird, alienating feeling. It was like I’d just decided I had to go live on the moon or something like that.

So I’ve never wanted to go live outside the Blue Ridge. This is the landscape that calls to me. This is the area where, when I walk out my front door in the morning, I can look out and I see something immediately I want to write about. I see something I’ve never noticed before, and I think, “My God, how have I gone my whole life without seeing that?” If I’m somewhere else, I don’t get that. I can only mine my memories.

3 Kate: Pinckney Benedict writes all kinds of things: screenplays, even the lyrics to an operetta. His fiction has landed him international recognition, including England’s Steinbeck Award. “Benedict’s voice is unique,” said the *Richmond, Virginia Times-Dispatch*. “It is meant to be listened to.” He writes tough, funny, insightful, often violent fiction about people who live on the edge. He himself grew up on a large dairy farm outside Lewisburg, son of a businessman who has served as West Virginia’s Congressman and Agriculture Commissioner.

4 Pinckney: I didn’t live in a neighborhood where I went to play with the neighbor kids or whatever. I was on my own a great deal. And when I was playing a game, it was something I made up.

Kate: What games did you make up?

Pinckney: Well, I remember, I really used to play World War II a lot. That was a big thing. Then it just bloomed out from that where I was playing everything. Maybe dinosaurs or science fiction. But I learned to spend a lot of time by myself, actively making up my own world. And that, for me at least, is kind of where I trace the writing from.

Kate: And there were plenty of places to stir a kid’s imagination on that farm.

Pinckney: I remember, we used to have a pit on the farm that, when the cows died, you just tossed them down in there. Well, tossed, you rolled them down, they were very heavy. They would be in various states of decay, and it was like an archeological dig. Because of course, at the very bottom, were cows from years and decades ago. And they were pretty well reduced to skeletons and so forth. So you got pretty familiar pretty fast with the corruption of the body after death.

Kate: Pretty interesting place for a little boy out playing by himself.

Pinckney: Well, that was, exactly. It really was! And in the garbage hole, there was an old car from the forties down in the bottom of it full of bullet holes. And there were washing machines and lawn mowers. And we'd take our rifles over there and shoot them and bust the bottles. It was great target practice down there too.

Kate: And Pinckney's work is full of that same great jumble of tumbling physical images. He writes to music: rockabilly, early raw country, Pink Floyd, to get himself into that zone where the stories play through his mind.

Pinckney: I listen to music as I write. I know a lot of people can't do that, but I do. And music is a very powerful, sort of inducement to me, for writing, for that waking dream state.

Kate: We decided to have fun, try to recreate the kind of music that might've been playing in Pinckney's head as he wrote. West Virginia musician Ron Sowell plays that music.

5 **Kate:** So here comes part of one of my favorite Pinckney Benedict stories: *Rescuing Moon.* In this story, a guy named Grady gets a letter from Moon, an older man who was his boyhood hero.

Moon writes and asks Grady to "Come bust me out of this nursing home." Grady loves Moon, and so he drives to the nursing home. Here, he walks up behind the home's operator, Mrs. Tencher, while she scolds Moon in his room. Grady looks Moon over.

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6 **Pinckney***: He's lost weight since he come up here, a lot of weight, and his skin has gone yellow. I don't like that at all. His mouth is pinched and looks mean, and she's got his hair cut back to nothing, like he is a recruit in the military. His ears stand out from his head like they do on the boys they got up on the farm at Huttonsville or in the maximum security at Moundsville.*

"You horn-headed bitch," Moon says, and I never heard him talk to a woman like that before. "Why is it you are all the time messing with me?" His voice is soft, like he can't even draw the breath to shout at her. I think, this is the man that used to shout from one holler to another, used to call the hogs in a voice so strong and loud, you'd think it was some kind of a church organ, all stops out.

You got to stay in your chair, Mr. Potterfield," she says to him, sounding real reasonable. She's wrestled him back into his seat, no busted bones and no trouble. She don't see me behind her either, don't seem to be thinking of me at all.

"You got no use of them legs, so you got to sit. You can understand that. That's why we keep you tied in there, so you don't slip down." I can see where they got the johnny laced into the chair in the back. It drives Moon crazy, I know, makes him work at it and worry it till he finally gets it loose.

I move into the room, and Mrs. Tencher rears back, she is so surprised to see me. "Hey Moon," I say. "I'm here to get you." I come right out with it, no use to beat around the issue. I figure maybe we can get this thing over with and get out of here soon, tonight. Looking at the way Mrs. Tencher has got her jaw set, though, I'm not so sure it will be as easy as all that. She's still got that greasy canvas apron on, and it makes her look like she means serious business.

"Grady," he says. "Grady, goddamn, Grady." It is not much of a greeting, but I know what he means. He's glad to see me, but he never really expected to. It hurts me in a way that he did not expect me all along. He reaches up a hand and I take it. His flesh is cool and thin on the bones, hardly cushions them at all. Still, the bow-hunting calluses are there, rough and hard as a wood knot. I remember them calluses like they was on my own hands.

When I was a kid, Moon taught me all about the bow, how to stand quiet among the trees and pull back to full draw without quivering. He taught me the stance, the release, he showed me. Moon could put a shaft through the pumps of a whitetail at seventy yards, a perfect center-shot, and track the deer to wherever it might go down, across shale slides, through streams, up viney wooded grades. He got as close to being a Shawnee tracker as a white man is like to get.

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7 **Kate**: So Grady decides to brave Mrs. Tencher and get Moon out of there.

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Pinckney*: Then I bang Moon's chair through the front door and we come out into the evening air, out where we can hear the tree frogs singing. "Good boy," Moon says to me. Looking down, I can see his scalp through the brush-cut hair, as yellow and unhealthy as the rest of him. "How do you like that, Tencher, you old whore," he says back over his shoulder, and it is the loudest thing I heard him say yet.*

"You're killing that old man, sure as the day," Mrs. Tencher says behind me.

It takes me a minute to manhandle Moon's chair down the uneven porch steps. Having Mrs. Tencher right behind me like that makes me nervous. One of the steps gives a little, and I am scared that I will pitch down on top of him, knock him out of the chair.

Mrs. Tencher is still coming after us. Ellen just stands on the top step, watching. She's still got the rabbit in her hand, holding it by the hind legs.

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K: Ellen is Mrs. Tencher's aide. She's been skinning rabbits for dinner.

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8 *"You going to give him his pills?" Mrs. Tencher says to me. "Who's going to give that man his pills? Not you, that's who," she says. "Eight different kinds of pills he's got to have, the doctor says, four different times of day. You going to do that for him?"*

I don't say anything back, just keep the chair rolling toward the car. I don't want to get in a wrestling match with her. "Coot," Moon says back to her. "Bunch of coots," he says again, softer.

"Hush," I say. "Let me get us out of here."

"Help me get in the car," Moon says. "I got no use of my legs. You got to lift me in."

"What about them pills, Moon?" I say. It strikes me as something to think about.

"I don't need no pills," he says. "Get me in the car."

"No pills," Mrs. Tencher says. "Stone dead inside a fortnight, a week, is what. Dead and mortifying. You watch."

I untie the hospital johnny, lift Moon up out of the chair. He is light as a girl, and his head is heavy on his neck, I can see. There is no strength or weight to him. His flesh is dry and cool, like the skin of a snake. It is not easy to open the car door, but I get it done, put Moon on the passenger seat. He slumps down, and I belt him in as tight as I can, to keep him sitting up. "Hell of a job," he says to me. "Keep it up." I shut the car door.

"It'll be on your head," she says. "When he grabs his chest and coughs up blood, that'll weigh on you. You'll carry that crime before Almighty God," she says.

I pay her no attention, even though she is shouting it in my ear ...

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Tencher," I say to her. With Moon out of the picture and not cussing her for a minute, I figure to calm her down somewhat. "He'll be all right."

"I ain't worried," she says, and her face is contorted and ugly, she is so angry. The cords on her neck stand out. "You're the one that's got to be worried. You're the one that's killing him."

I get in the driver's side, crank the car up. Mrs. Tencher stands next to her wheelchair, staring at me and Moon in the car. I can smell him in the seat next to me.

As I back the car around, I see Ellen still up on the porch. Ellen is as angry as Mrs. Tencher. I am surprised to see that, such a pretty girl and so mad. She shakes her head, scowling. We will not eat her game meat that she has taken such pains over.

She underhands the skinned rabbit at the car, and it smacks the windshield right in front of my face, sounds like a softball. It bounces off, lays in the gravel next to the car, pale against the rocks. A couple busted bones poke out of the flesh. There is juice on the windshield where it hit.

"Jesus Christ," I say," shoving the Dodge into drive. "That's a crazy thing to do."

music shift

The left rear tire goes over something small, something that makes a crunch. Mrs. Tencher cries out. For a second, I am sure it is her foot that I have run over. She slams a fist down on the rear quarter-panel of the car.

Looking in the rearview, I see her bent over the feathers, the bright tailfeathers of the banty rooster. I put the wheel right over him without even meaning to. I can see where a small breeze shivers the feathers as Mrs. Tencher cries over them. I am surprised to see the tears on her face. I put on the brakes, start to get out of the car.

"You crazy?" Moon says to me. "You don't want to go back there. She'll kill you. She loved that goddamned chicken."

"Yeah," I say. He's right about that. As we pull out of the yard, onto the nine-foot blacktop, I see that Mrs. Tencher has straightened up, is shaking that fist after us, shouting. I can't hear what it is she says.

"Shoot," Moon says. He is laughing. He has seen it all, and sick as he is, he is laughing to bust a gut.

"What is it?" I say. "Christ, I don't see what's so funny." I turn on the windshield wipers to try and get the rabbit blood off the windshield, but it just smears and makes it worse.

"Goddam," he says. He is wiping at his eyes and it is good to see him this happy, even if I am not sure what is funny. Looking behind us, I can see Ellen wheeling Combs back into the Manor.

Mrs. Tencher is down on the ground, got her hand in the little pile of feathers, not even looking after us anymore. I set the car straight on the road and grind all the speed out of it that I can get.

"I don't know about you killing this old man," Moon says, and he is still laughing, "but you sure as hell did leave that woman's yard full of little dead animals, didn't you?"

He settles his head back against the seat like he is going to sleep. Looking at him, with his sunken eyes and skin parched like a mummy, I get the image of what he will look like when he is dead. The road stretches out ahead of me, all the way across the mountains and the big level to the camp on the Jackson.

What then, I want to ask Moon, but he is shaking a little like he is laughing inside. What about when we get back to the camp, I want to say, but there is no good answer he could give me. That is a question I will have to answer somehow myself, some other time. And I think, "Right now, it's some driving I have got to do."

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Kate: This story keeps going in my head after it ends on the page.

Pinckney: It's meant to be equivocal at its end because, in fact, Mrs. Tencher - although she is a comic figure and kind of hard to get along with - she kind of has a point. That the Moon he remembers, it would have been fine for him to take away. But this Moon maybe is a guy who needs more than Grady can give him. But everything's already in motion. He thinks too late for him to worry too much about that.

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Kate: You got a lot of characters who act without thinking about the consequences. Act out of their heart, act out of anger. One thing or another.

Pinckney: Generally speaking, they are people who fulfill some aspect of me that I don't possess but would like to. They have some bravery about them that I don't have. Or, if they are reckless, they're reckless in a way that I kind of admire because I tend to be very careful. I tend to look before I leap and be very cautious and try to always have a plan. And so on and so forth.

Kate: Pinckney actually modeled Moon on some heroes of his childhood.

Pinckney: One of them is a guy named Bill Tuckwiller. He taught me and his grandson how to shoot. And my great-uncle, whose name was Hunter Bean, who actually did live in a camp up on the Jackson.

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Kate: Pinckney Benedict's stories often involve a young man and a father figure. Here's a section from one of his earliest and best-known stories, "The Sutton Pie Safe." From his short story collection, *Town Smokes*.

Pinckney: It was my first published story. It won a thing called "The Nelson Algren" award of the *Chicago Tribune*. It's the first story in my first collection. So I probably wrote it when I was 19, I guess.

Kate: So a father and a son are out in the barnyard, and they see a snake. And the dad shoots the snake and asks his son, "Wouldn't you like a belt, made out of that snake skin?" And the son's hot to have the belt. And then a woman drives up. She's the judge's wife, Mrs. Hanson. And she's come to get some eggs. And she sees something else.

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11 Pinckney: *Mrs. Hanson gave out a laugh that was like nothing I've ever heard from a woman before, loud and happy. "You've a fine boy there," she said to my dad. I bent my head. To my father, my mother said, "Why don't you take that snake out of here, Jack, and get a shirt on. We've got company." He darted a look at her. Then he waved the snake in the air to point out to everyone what a fine big blacksnake it was. He opened the screen door, leaned out, and dropped the snake in a coiled heap next to the steps. It looked almost alive, lying there, the sheen of the sun still on the dark scales. "Mrs. Hanson," he said, and went on into the house. He let the door slam behind him, and I could hear him as he climbed the stairs inside.*

Once he was gone, Mrs. Hanson seemed to settle back, to become more businesslike. "The Judge and I certainly would appreciate the opportunity to buy some of your eggs." She sat down in one of the cane bottom chairs we kept on the porch in summer, set her purse down beside her. "But Sara - may I call you Sara?" she asked, and my mother nodded. "Something else has brought her here as well." My mother sat forward in her chair, interested to hear. I leaned forward too, and Mrs. Hanson shot a glance my way. I could tell she wasn't sure she wanted me there.

"Sara," she said, "You have a Sutton pie safe." She pointed across the porch, and at first I thought she meant the upright freezer that stood there. Then I saw she was pointing at the old breadbox.

My mother looked at it. "Well, it's a pie safe," she said. "Sutton, I don't know -"

"Oh yes, it's a Sutton," Mrs. Hanson said. "Mrs. Spangler told me so, and I can tell she was right." Mrs. Spangler, as far as I knew, had never said anything to us about a pie safe. Mrs. Hanson rose, knelt in front of the thing, touched first one part of it and then another.

"Here, you see," she said, pointing to the lower right corner of one of the pie safe's doors. We'd always called it a breadbox, kept all kinds of things in it: canned goods, my dad's ammunition and his reloading kit, things that needed to be kept cool in winter. The pie safe was made of cherry wood - you could tell even through the paint - with a pair of doors on the front. The doors had tin panels, and there were designs punched in the tin, swirls and circles and I don't know what all. I looked at the place where she was pointing. "SS," I saw, stamped into the wood. The letters were mostly filled with paint; I'd never noticed them before.

12 *Mrs. Hanson patted the thing, picked a chip of paint off it. My mother and I watched her. "Of course," Mrs. Hanson said, "This paint will have to come off. Oh, a complete refinishing job, I imagine. How lovely!" She sounded thrilled. She ran her hands down the tin, feeling the holes where the metal-punch had gone through.*

"Damn," she said, and I was surprised to hear her curse. "What's the matter," my mother asked. Mrs. Hanson looked closely at the tin on the front of the pie safe. "It's been reversed," she said. "The tin panels on the front, you see how the holes were punched in? It wasn't put together that way, you know. When they punched this design in the tin, they poked it through from the back to the front, so the points were outside the pie safe."

"Oh," my mother said, sounding deflated. It sounded ridiculous to me. I couldn't figure why anyone would care which way the tin was put on the thing.

"Sometimes country people do that, reverse the tin panels," Mrs. Hanson said in a low voice, as if she weren't talking to country people. My mother didn't disagree. "Still, though," Mrs. Hanson said, "it is a Sutton, and I must have it. What will you take for it?"

I guess I should have known that she was angling to buy the thing all along, but still it surprised me. It surprised my mother too. "Take for it?" she said.

"Yes," Mrs. Hanson said. "It's our anniversary next week, mine and the judge's, and I just know he would be thrilled with a Sutton piece, especially one of the pie safes. Of course, I don't think it will be possible to have it refinished by then, but he'll see the possibilities."

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13 **Kate**: And then, to his surprise, his mother asks if it's worth a lot, as if she might consider selling it. Mrs. Hanson says that the workman who made it is very famous.

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Then, as if understanding that she wasn't being wise, she said, "Of course, the damage to it, the tin and all, that does lower the value a great deal, and the paint."

"I don't know," my mother said. "After all, we don't use it much anymore, just let it sit out here. And if you really want it..." She sounded worried. She knew my father wasn't going to be pleased with the idea. "We should wait, ask my husband." Mrs. Hanson reached into her handbag, looking for her checkbook. I knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Didn't that belong to Granddad?" I asked my mother. She looked at me, didn't answer. "Dad's dad?" I said, pressing.

It was in my husband's family," my mother said to Mrs. Hanson. "He might not like it."

"Could we say, then, three hundred dollars? Would that be possible?" Mrs. Hanson asked. She wasn't going to give up. Just then, my father opened the door and stepped out of the house onto the porch. He'd washed his hands, put on a blue chambray shirt, one I'd given him for Christmas.

"Three hundred dollars?" my father said. "Three hundred dollars for what?" I saw my mother's face set into hard lines. She was determined to oppose him.

"She wants to buy the pie safe," my mother said. Her voice was soft, but not afraid.

My father walked over to the breadbox, struck the tin with two fingers. "This?" he said. "You're going to pay three hundred for this?" Both my mother and Mrs. Hanson nodded. "I think that's a fair enough price, Mr. Albright," Mrs. Hanson said. I noticed she didn't call him Jack.

"You could use it to get someone over to help you work on the barn," my mother said. My father didn't even look at her. I moved to his side.

"Didn't know the breadbox was for sale," he said. "Didn't know that it'd be worth that much if it was for sale."

"My father owned that," he said. "Bought it for my mother, for this house when they were first married." He turned to my mother. "You know that," he said.

"But what do we use it for, Jack?" she asked. "We use the barn. We need the barn. More than some pie safe."

My father put his hand on my shoulder. "You're not going to leave me anything, are you?" he said to my mother. She flushed, gestured at Mrs. Hanson. Mrs. Hanson managed to look unflustered.

My dad looked at Mrs. Hanson. Her calm seemed to infuriate him. "We aren't merchants," he said. "And this isn't a furniture shop." He turned to me. "Is it, boy?" I nodded, then shook my head no, not sure which was the correct response. "Mrs. Hanson," my mother began. You could tell she didn't like my father talking like that to Mrs. Hanson, who was a guest in her home.

"Don't apologize for me, Sara," my dad said. "Go ahead and sell the damn breadbox if you want, but just don't apologize for me." My mother opened her mouth, shut it again.

"Boy," he said to me, "you want a snakeskin belt like I was talking about? Like my daddy made?" He gestured to the porch door, to where the headless snake lay. A big fly, colored like blue glass, was crawling on the body.

"Yes sir," I said, glad not to have to look at the high color rising in Mrs. Hanson's cheeks.

"You come out back with me then, and I'll show you how to skin it, how to stretch the hide. How'd that be?" Neither my mother nor Mrs. Hanson said a word. My dad pushed me ahead of him, and I headed out the door.

As he came after me, he turned and spoke through the screen. "I'll tell you something, Mrs. Hanson," he said. "You ought not to try to buy what hasn't been put up for sale."

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14 Pinckney: I wrote this story for a workshop in college. And at the end of the story, the son and the father actually go to make the belt. Joyce Carol Oates, who was my teacher, read the story. And she said, "No, no, no, this story ends wrong. Of course, we want the father and son to make the belt together. But you have to deny us our satisfaction in that. Because that's not what the father would do. The way he's just been affronted, he's going to be angry, and with no way to take it out on the mother, he's going to direct it toward the wrong person."

Kate: So Pinckney rewrote the ending. And the way it ends now, the father and his son go out in the yard to skin the snake. And then Mrs. Hanson bounces by with a smile on her face. As she drives away, the dad, already angry, finds fault with his son, and then deliberately cuts up the snakeskin so his son can't have the belt. And the reader thinks, "Oh no!"

And that was a great lesson in what stories are, that they aren't necessarily satisfactions. That often, stories work best when they deny us our expected or hoped-for satisfactions and give us some other experience instead of that.

music

15 Kate: It's interesting to read the reviews of your work and to see the way different reviewers describe your characters. They have different takes on them, and that says something about the reviewer, I think. Here's a guy from the *Chicago Tribune*. He says, "Benedict's lyricism never plays his flinty characters false." So he's calling them flinty characters. And over here's the *Richmond Review*. And he talks about "the harsh, white-trash America which is the subject of the nine short stories." Now, the "flinty characters" has a lot more dignity.

Pinckney: The flinty characters, I like that a lot better. I mean, "white trash" isn't a phrase I would use to describe my characters. I can't imagine who I would describe as white trash. That's just kind of nasty, if nothing else. And I certainly don't think about my characters that way because they're always people I like very much. I can't imagine writing a story about someone I didn't care for, wasn't enthusiastic about, didn't like and didn't respect.

And so it has always bothered me, those reviews that either use stereotypical words, like white trash or hillbilly or what have you. Those have always seemed to me sort of shorthand, probably more indicative or what the reviewer thinks than of what I think or, I hope, what the characters actually are.

16 **Pinckney**: Robertson Davies is a writer I admire a lot, a Canadian writer, a really great novelist and essayist. And he saw the role of the writer as moralist: not to moralize or proselytize or set out any moral standard. But the writer as moralist was really obligated to observe carefully and truthfully and to record what the writer observed. That's sort of the highest calling I can imagine for myself, is just to observe truthfully and try not to lie about things and try not to shape things toward my own ideology or someone else's ideology or my own preference or what have you.

That said, of course, I'm making stuff up and writing fiction. But I'm just trying to observe with as clear an eye as I possibly can.

music

17 **Kate**: So here's a clear-eyed slice of his story, "Getting Over Arnette," from his short-story collection, *The Wrecking Yard.*

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Pinckney: *Loftis and Bone headed over to the Bowl-a-Drome to take in the women's leagues and see if they could get Loftus's mind off of Arnette. Arnette was the redheaded woman that had run off with some college puke a couple of days before and had broken Loftis's heart and shattered his life.*

Loftis had had some time to think events through, but still he couldn't stop running the final bit over in his head. The whole thing took just a minute to consider.

There was Arnette and there was this guy that looked like he was a fast tight end for some state school somewhere and there was skinny sad-sack Loftis standing watching them go off together. Loftus whipped a brick at them from the loose pile outside the cellar door, but that was after the Pontiac was already in motion out of the yard, just too late altogether. The brick hit the trunk of the car and did some damage, but Loftis couldn't find much satisfaction in something a couple of bucks' worth of Bondo was going to be able to fix.

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Kate: So these guys hassle the women in the bowling alley until the women gang up on them, pick them up, and push them out of the bowling alley. Then, the guys go over to this bar. And they run into a veteran of the military special forces. And they mess with him when they shouldn't have.

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Loftis and Bone looked at the guy just sitting back there sucking on the ice cubes of his drink. And he looked at them sitting where they were. He sucked an ice cube into his mouth and

crushed it with a loud noise and swallowed. Then he did the same again. "What is he staring at like that?" Bone said.

"Leave him be," Loftis said.

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Kate: They don't. Instead, they start drinking with him.

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He told them a mess of stories that had to do with assault rifles and rice paddies and helicopter dustoffs and long-range patrol. He mentioned stuff like phosphorus rounds and grenade launchers and flamethrowers as if they were normal parts of the world and just sitting around there in the room to be touched and handled and used on an everyday basis.

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Kate: Then the guy - name of Leonard Meadows - makes a remark about the red-headed woman who left Loftis. And Loftis doesn't like it and grabs him by the collar.

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Pinckney: *He never did see Leonard Meadows hit him or what he hit him with, but he did see Bone go for the knife he carried clipped in an ankle sheath. He was lying on the floor and couldn't find a way to tell Bone not to do it. Leonard Meadows kicked Bone in the face with one of those big jump boots and shattered his jaw. Bone gave it up and lay down and bled on the board floor of the place. He spat a couple of times, then held his tongue out of his mouth. There were teeth on his tongue. They fell off and made a little clattering sound on the floor.*

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18 **Kate**: All right. Let's talk about violence.

Pinckney: OK.

Kate: Any reviewer who talks about your work mentions the amount of violence in it. You're drawn to it in some way.

Pinckney: Yeah, I am. I'm fascinated by it. Because it is, um, it's strangely, it's something that we as human beings are really, really good at. And it's also something that we say universally we deplore, at the same time as almost universally engaging in it. Here we are in this enlightened twenty-first century, and at the same time, there is a level of violence in the world now that is at least as prevalent as it was in the Dark Ages.

Kate: Your stories are the opposite of these little novels of manners.

Pinckney: Well, yeah. The one thing I try not to do in my fiction is over-intellectualize. I mean, I do it a lot in my own life. I'm sitting around in a room just sort of thinking myself into a big hole, you know. But my characters don't do that. And they do have recourse to their bodies, a lot. Again, it's something I admire very much. They exist in their bodies rather than solely in their heads.

I do box and I enjoy it a lot. I really enjoy controlled violence in myself. I find it extremely therapeutic to hit the heavy bag or to hit a sparring partner. But with these folks, it's even less controlled than that. When they're angry, BOOM, they immediately go to violence. And I've got a lot of training against that. I've got a lot of training that represses that. And a lot of us do. But a lot of folks don't. And I can imagine that, without a whole lot of conditioning, it's very easy.

I mean, I get very angry and often for very little pretext. I just hear something wrong, and I get all cross-eyed and, you know, breathing hard. And I can easily imagine, you know, that I'd be right across that table, grabbing that guy by the collar because he looked at me sideways if I weren't the end product of centuries of mental conditioning that that's an uncool and unwise thing to do.

Kate: So you can do it in your stories, really.

Pinckney: Exactly. That's exactly right. I mean, in some way, my stories are where my id actually gets to have its play, where I get to do that thing I would do if I weren't so concerned with having a nice job and so on and so forth. That's where that part of me just gets to be what it actually is rather than what I manage to tamp it down and make it look like being civilized.

19 **Kate**: Jayne Anne Phillips says that, after she wrote *Black Tickets*, when she'd go on tour and people would say to her, "You don't look like you could have written that! How did you write that?" Do you ever get that?

Pinckney: Yeah, I do sometimes get it. I remember the tour for *Dogs of God*. I would show up, and people were often startled that I was not - I dunno what exactly they expected, Tannhauser or something.

Kate: They were expecting a biker or something.

Pinckney: Yeah, exactly. That I was supposed to show up and be sort of terrifying or something like that. I think folks are sometimes surprised to meet me and find out that I'm just a kind of mild-mannered college professor.

Kate: Well, you are very mild-mannered looking. You look downright pleasant.

Pinckney: (laughs) I mean, I try to be. And one of the reasons that I can be is that I have this place where I can use my less sophisticated and less socially acceptable self in a socially

acceptable way. You know what I mean? I can, rather than being a multiple murderer, I'm a novelist. And I really do think that's one of the ways I let the pressure off, use that safety valve.

Kate: Yeah.

20 Even in small scenes, Pinckney Benedict reminds us: life is unpredictable. Here, the main character of his novel, *Dogs of God*, is out for a run. He noticed a cat trying to catch a chipmunk on his way down the road. Now, he's on the way back.

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As he passed the ruined house with the pillars, he saw the parti-colored cat lying in a patch of sun near the standing pillar. It looked up at him as he passed, blinking lazily. He stopped and went over to it, thinking to coax it into coming home with him. He liked the cat's lean looks and thought that it would make a fine pet.

When he saw the headless body of the chipmunk lying curled between its forefeet, he changed his mind. The cat stared at him defiantly, as though it would defend its catch. After a minute it rose, stretched luxuriously, and sauntered off into a dense patch of weeds and flowering vine. It carried the body of the chipmunk clamped in its jaws. Goody watched after it. Then he turned and went back to the road, running home through the blistering heat as fast as his leaden legs and straining heart would carry him forward.

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Kate: It's kind of unnerving when something so ordinary is so scary. Benedict's world is beautiful, but full of threats.

Pinckney: Well, at least for these people and, I really do think, for all of us. Uh, we know not the hour nor the day. You walk out your front door and get hit by a bus or what have you.

The folks in my fiction tend to be folks who either place themselves or have been somehow placed in harm's way. Some serious threat is imminent. But that seems to be not a bad metaphor. We all exist under threat all the time. I've always found that frightening. I sort of wish we were more assured of things than we are.

21 Kate: Do you write about things that frighten you?

Pinckney: A lot. And that's always the first advice I give to my students. Write to your fears. Pick out the thing that scares you the worst, and then go as straight as you can to the heart of it. Because there's real energy in that.

22 **Kate**: Pinckney Benedict will probably never be accused of writing naval-gazer stories.

Pinckney: A friend of mine and I call a lot of contemporary fiction, uh, we call it living room fiction because it all takes place in somebody's living room. And it is, it's just folks sitting around contemplating and I find that deadly dull.

I mean, I love plot! And I guess maybe that's an embarrassing thing to admit nowadays. But the fiction I read, all of it is generally speaking, heavily plotted. Stuff happens and people fall in love. And there's sex, and there's death, and there's violence. And you know, I love that. I love it when things happen.

Kate: Well, let's read a little bit from *Booze*, something that doesn't appear in too many Manhattan living rooms.

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23 *He was a full-grown Duroc boar hog, white-haired and huge, with the nastiest yellow eyes you ever saw, as different from those poor Chester sows as a hunting knife is from a spoon. His hide was flawless, shiny pink under stiff white bristles, stretched tight over bones and muscles and sinew. He was Tobe's breeding boar, probably the finest. strongest thing Tobe had ever owned. You could see how that old man swelled up when he looked at Booze, when he watched him go to rut on one of those sows, no match for his size, his weight, his immense strength and endurance. He was fierce and the sows always ended up winded and bitten. One poor bitch had even lost an ear to him.*

Two tusks, larger than his other teeth, jutted out on either side of his broad lower jaw, the size of Havana cigars. Six feet long, more than five hundred pounds, nearer six hundred, with his hunched back and massive haunches, Booze was awesome and terrifying. Tobe could have rented him out for stud and made some good money, but he claimed that none of the dirt farmers around could pay enough for the likes of Booze. That was a serious decision for a man who had as little as Tobe Fogus did. There's not much money in hog farming.

"That Booze," Tobe said, moving on to another hog. "Like to put him up against a pit dog one day." Tobe was talking a lot. I winced to think about the dog in there with that monster. It would be a slaughter. A good-sized black bear, maybe, but Tobe would never set Booze up where he might not win.

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24 **Kate**: So Tobe dies and Booze gets out. And Booze is rampaging around in the underbrush, and the boy's dad takes a shot at him. And after that, Booze isn't seen. He's glimpsed. But one day, this boy and his buddy are out walking in the woods, and they run across Booze. And Booze runs at the boy's friend. And the boy's friend has a little bit of time to raise his brush hook.

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It was a killing blow, well aimed. The thick, curved blade of the brush hook caught the boar hard between the eyes, knocked him to his knees. The blade hooked in bone for a second, and Kenny stumbled forward, actually pushed himself forward off the boar's shoulder to stand. He swung the brush hook up to strike again.

In that moment, between Kenny's first blow and the one to follow, Booze snapped blindly sideways and caught one of Kenny's ankles. Yanked off balance, Kenny hit Booze again, on the side of the neck. The blade sank deep into the loose flesh and stuck there, the wooden handle jerked from Kenny's hands. Kenny was down, and I could see his mouth moving. I couldn't hear his voice.

Booze dragged himself forward. Kenny jerked his ankle free, backed away, sliding, using his good leg and his elbows, weaponless. The white hog drooled blood, choking.

I shrieked at Kenny to get up, get up. I started to run toward him as hard as I could, empty-handed. Kenny stared in horror. I thought I was going to be sick. Split from snout to ears, grunting, Booze came on, stumbling, catching himself. His rear legs quivered. He should have been dead.

As the boar reached Kenny, thrust his snout down, searching for something to bite, to crush, his hind legs collapsed slowly, slowly. His jaws worked, closed on a pants leg, closed almost gently on Kenny's sneaker. Kenny snatched his leg back. Booze shoved himself forward again. Blood soaked the grass, spattered Kenny.

Then I was there, kicking the boar hard, feeling the toe of my boot smack against his ribs. I could feel the heat coming off him, hear his grunts, bubbling wheezes. He smelled like rotten pork.

His head came around, grotesque and awful. A single yellow eye peered dully at me. I knew he was going to kill me. There was nothing I could do.

With a groan, a hot rush of air, Booze rolled to one side, away from me, muscles jerking. His jaw clamped shut, then open, then shut again. His hooves, surprisingly small and delicate on such a monster hog, drummed against the ground. His blunt snout, the size of a man's work boot, thumped to the ground, teeth bared. Still his rib cage rose and fell, slower and slower.

"Help me, for Christ's sake!" Kenny yelled. His leg was caught underneath the hog, his lips drawn tight, face pale with pain and shock.

Booze shifted again, blinded, dying, but still powerful. I couldn't make myself get close to where he lay.

Kenny was scrabbling at the grass, pulling up handfuls of it, trying to work himself loose. I managed to go to him, to get a hold on his shoulders.

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Kate: So, do they get away from Booze? You can find the answer in Pinckney's book, *Town Smokes.*

25 **Kate**: Your main character in *Dogs of God*, Tannhauser, was Mr. Evil. I think he might be an exception to your rule that you don't write about people you wouldn't like to have a beer with. (laughs)

Pinckney: He's as close to the devil, I guess, as I've ever written about. He wears boots that sound like hooves whenever he walks. And he has too many fingers. And he used to have a little pig's tail before it got cut off. And so he really is the devil, and he is the outsider.

Kate: I've got him hooked up in my mind with Booze.

Pinckney: (laughs) Well, maybe he's the sort of personification of Booze, who's a 600-pound boar hog. If I ever do my own version of *Moby Dick*, that's it, this huge white pig out in the fields.

Kate: So let's get a little glimpse of how evil Tannhauser is.

26 Tannhauser is a drug lord operating in southern West Virginia. He sets up an illegal fistfight in which his right-hand man, Yukon, fights a local guy, name of Goody. Goody was supposed to get creamed. Instead, he literally paralyzed Yukon. Tannhauser got so mad, he kidnapped Goody. And now he's ordering one of the Mexican laborers who work for him to strangle Goody, who's tied up.

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Pinckney*: Tannhauser turned his attention back to Renny. He clapped him on the shoulder, and Renny flinched. "All right," Tannhauser said. He shoved him toward his victim. Goody's head felt heavy on his neck, and he longed to look away. But he kept his eyes steadily on the man who, according to Tannhauser's plan, was going to execute him. For what? The people around him were obviously insane.*

"Do it!" Tannhauser said. Renny stood, his hands clenched into fists a few feet in front of Goody. He swayed slightly. His breathing was rapid and uneven. "Strangle him." Still, Renny did not raise his hands to Goody's throat. Goody blinked. "Does he know what he's supposed to do?" Tannhauser asked the co-pilot, the only one among them who knew any Spanish. "Did you tell him?

"I told him," the co-pilot said, "as best I could. They didn't teach us much vocabulary about strangling and such in high school. Plus, it was a good long while ago. I'm pretty rusty."

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Kate: Not a placid little novel. Pinckney listened to heavy medal while he wrote it. It won an international award: Great Britain's Steinbeck Award. He split the prize money with the Greenbrier Valley theater group and domestic violence shelter.

music

27 Kate: Like most writers, Pinckney composes as much with his right brain as he does with his left.

Pinckney: I feel very much not in control of my work when it's going well. When I AM in control, then I know I've done something wrong. Or that I'm putting my foot down too heavily on what I'm trying to accomplish.

Kate: I think the average person has a hard time imagining not being in control of what you're writing. You know, we're thinking, "Now what shall I write next?"

Pinckney: And that's how it always starts. Now, I'm going to do a story about X. Then if you've got it right, and if you set things up right, and if you're imagining the world in which the story takes place richly enough and powerfully enough, then that world and those characters have their own demands. You say, "Oh, I want to write a story about betrayal." And really what they want to do is a story about filial love, or something like that. And your demands have to be secondary to their demands.

Kate: How do you know what they want to do?

Pinckney: It has a lot to do with dreaming. Everybody's a really good storyteller, at least when they're asleep. Because your dreams are you, right? You generate your dreams. They come out of things you know. You recognize people in them. You recognize places in them.

And you do have some kind of control of them, in that, without you, they don't exist. And they're utterly convincing in the way you want a story to be. I mean, when you're in them, you believe them absolutely. And they terrify you, or delight you. I mean, you can laugh in your dreams. You can scream. You can cry. You can have sexual adventures. And at the same time, the dream is using the material of your brain in some way to shape itself.

Kate: You don't know what's going to happen, but it's you that's doing it.

Pinckney: Exactly. If you've ever had a dream where you're told a joke or someone has told you a joke. And when you hear the punch line, you laugh, because it's a surprise to you. But then you wake up, and you think, "How could it have been a surprise? I told myself that joke. I mean, there's no one in there but me."

Well, that's very much what writing is like for me when it's going well, is that there is this fully-realized world that is utterly convincing to me, and that I recognize parts of, although they're

often recombined. You know, there'll be some of my grandmother's house joined to some of my parents' house, joined to some of my own house. Just like in dreams.

And the characters are people I recognize, although often they shift and transmute and change and take on different aspects in the course of the writing. And they'll surprise me. I mean, they'll say things. It really is like I'm dreaming them or they and I are participating in some common dream.

28 **Kate**: Before Pinckney learned to write words, he was making books. He'd get his dad's typing paper and ask his mother to write down the stories he made up. She stapled them into books, and he drew the pictures. As he grew up, people kept encouraging him to write.

Pinckney: I really had terrific English teachers. They always seemed encouraging. Particularly encouraged by a teacher when I was in high school, Mr. Hilton, Rick Hilton. He was reading my science fiction and stuff like that and actually World War II stories. I remember a story about a kid who was an altar boy in a cathedral in France during a bombing raid in World War II.

And he encouraged me to write about where I grew up, to start writing about West Virginia. And I wrote for him a story called "Gigging," which was basically autobiographical, about gigging frogs on a pond on my family's farm with a friend of mine.

It was the first, sort of emotionally true story I think I'd ever written. I wasn't manufacturing every element of the story. Some of it was coming through me, rather than coming from me. But that was a story that I then took to college with me and used as a model when I started writing in college.

29 **Kate**: There, he ran into the writing of Breece Pancake, at the time, a newly published West Virginia writer. Pancake had committed suicide before his book was published. Later in this series, you'll hear some of his intense stories about people trapped on the edge by life circumstances.

Pinckney: Yeah! My first day in a college creative writing class, my teacher, who was Joyce Carol Oates, when she heard I was from West Virginia, her first words to me were, "You have to go out and get the stories of Breece Pancake."

And I did. And I had just started making forays into that same material myself. And to see here, this guy was really writing literature. I mean, it really was real literature. And at the same time, it wasn't the same kind of elevated, inaccessible voice. But it was the voice of people I grew up with. I mean, he uses so many real places: Sewell Mountain, Gauley Mountain, Chimney Corner, Ansted, Gauley Bridge, you know. I mean, these are all places that I know.

For me, it just took the top of my head off. And it said that first thing I tried with that story about gigging frogs was exactly what I needed to be doing, that I didn't have to pretend that I knew

about France in the 1940s, that knowing about West Virginia in the sixties and the seventies was sufficient to make literature. And it changed the direction of my life utterly.

Later, when I went to the University of Iowa, a writer named James Allen McPherson was there, who was one of Pancake's teachers. And when we first met, the first thing he ever said to me was that he thought that, in some way, that I was the ghost of Breece Pancake. That when Pancake died, his spirit called me up, he said. And I thought that was a remarkable thing to say. He said I was responsible for writing Breece's books as well as my own now.

Kate: Well, I'll bet you thought about that one. (they laugh)

Pinckney: Well, I did. It was really sort of a scary. It was one of my first days in graduate school, and it was a pretty scary prospect.

30 **Kate**: Is it ever a burden to you that people compare you to Pancake so much?

Pinckney: Well, even when it's an invidious comparison - he's not as good as Breece Pancake - it's still kind of nice to be in the same league. Because he was a major leaguer. That collection of stories - in my opinion at least - will be deathless. If I didn't owe so much of what I do to him, maybe I wouldn't enjoy the comparison so much. But I, it would be hard for me to deny that his work inspired me and continues to.

At the same time, I think I'm more my own writer now. Now, I hope I'm doing more of my own work and less of an homage to Pancake. I think I'm much more consciously trying to use humor. Maybe too consciously. But I like humor. I like that wry, backhanded humor, and I think there's not much of that in his work.

32 **Kate**: We'll read from one last Pinckney Benedict story, "Odom."

Pinckney: It's my favorite story. It was one of the last stories written for *The Wrecking Yard,* for the collection. It's my unsung favorite. I have stories like "The Sutton Pie Safe" that I'm extremely fond of, and I'm glad it's been anthologized a good bit. At the same time, I wish that I could take ten percent of that attention and put it on Odom because Odom feels like a much more mature story to me.

I dunno, I mean I go back to that story frequently, just when I feel, OK, I'm a lousy writer and I can't do anything. Because it's a story that reassures me. Because it accomplished so much, I think, of what I want to accomplish. And it does, to my mind anyway, create a real and convincing imaginative world.

Kate: Odom and his son live way up a rutty road on top of a mountain. Odom is scared his son will go live someplace else and leave him up there lonesome. As the story opens, they're dynamiting stumps.

Pinckney: They're cutting down the trees. And then blowing the stumps to clear some land, so they can build a new house. The house they're living in is just kind of a little shanty place. And the father, Odom, has visions of building a really beautiful house up there, so the son will stay.

And he just kind of imagines that if he manages this great work, if he manages to clear this land, everything will be OK, and his son will come back, and they'll raise up a wonderful house together. And it's this impossible dream that he has. He's so committed to it and so in love with it that he goes ahead, and nothing can stop him.

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Odom squats beside the fresh-cut stump of a hickory tree. The heavy gnarled trunk of the hickory lies in cubit sections, ready for splitting, at the edge of the small clearing. Odom clasps a slender length of slow-burning fuse in his left hand, marries it to the wooden kitchen match he holds in his right.

The fuse runs to two sticks of dynamite, unpacked now from their thick waxy skins, capped, and tamped into a hollow under the hickory stump. Odom peers at the flame, shields it with the bulk of his body from a light breeze that has sprung up. Still the flame dies.

Odom tosses the spent match away, and his son hands him a fresh one, which he strikes against the dry leather upper of his boot. The son kneels, breathless, presses his solid shoulder against his father's, cups his hands around the burning match. The fuse smolders, fires, and Odom drops it. He and his son scramble away crabwise, clamber over a windfallen oak, and drop prone in a drift of leaves, not daring to look past the defilade of the charge they've planted. A minute or two passes.

"It's gone out," the son says.

"I don't believe so," Odom says, head down among the stinking windrowed leaves. "I got it lit pretty good."

Before he finishes the sentence, the explosive detonates. Odom hears only a dull thud, winces at the painful pressure inside his ears and against his eyeballs. He feels suddenly heavy where he lies, thickened, and his belly presses into the cool ground. The leaves whip and rattle around his head. Dust patters down on him, powders his shoulders and hair, the back of his neck. He can taste it on his lips.

Beyond the windfall, the stump rises, turning, into the air. A slab of wood as thick as a man's arm whickers by overhead. At Odom's elbow, a distressed copperhead slides out from under its blanket of leaves and cobwebs and slips away, tongue flickering from between its delicate triangular jaws.

When Odom opens his eyes, he sees that his son is pointing over the windfall and laughing, but he can't hear the sound. A drifting pall of smoke gets into his eyes and his throat, makes him

cough. "What," he says. "What is it?" His own voice makes a dull, distant sound in his ears, like a dog's barking somewhere.

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32 Kate: Odom's hearing has been damaged, but he hardly pauses in his work.

Pinckney: The son has borrowed Odom's truck to go down into the valley. He's been gone for a few days, and Odom is very worried about him. He doesn't know whether he's had an accident or what has happened to him. But he has no vehicle now. So he takes to walking the roads at night, down the mountain, as far down as he can go, to try and see if he can find the wreckage where he fears his son has died. So this is just Odom on the road.

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Pinckney: *"Twice now, Odom has made the long walk along the roads his son might have taken when he left several nights back. He goes as far down the mountain as he can get and reasonably hope to walk back: dirt roads and gravel cutoffs and blacktop one-lane highways streaked with slick red clay. He examines gullies and crumbling embankments and hopscotches his way down wooded inclines, looking for the wrecked truck that he imagines and the body of his son. His calves ache with the effort of descending and of climbing again.*

In his searching, he finds a desolate Volkswagen Beetle on its roof in a reeking sump and, further on, enmeshed in a rustling hedge of rhododendron, an elderly Nash convertible.

The rhododendron has grown up through the floorboards of the car and out of the rotted cloth top. Caught in the Nash's shattered grillwork is the narrow rib cage of a deer.

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Kate: Odom has no phone, no way to know what happened to his son. So he just works frantically, as if that could bring his son back. Nine days later, the son does finally come back. He's wrecked the truck, been in jail. He brings some canned goods and propane to heat their place. Odom's not inside. The son hears a hammering sound.

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Pinckney*: He enters the house, sets the bags down in the frigid kitchen. His breath mists when he exhales. He puts his hand on the propane heater in the corner and finds it cold. He shakes his head, goes to the window. When he looks out, he sees his father hunched against the granite outcropping, wielding a small claw hammer. He swings it clumsily, his grip high, just under the hammer's head. When the hammer comes down, metal chimes.*

The son's eyes widen when he looks beyond Odom and the boulder to the clearing. The ground there is torn and pitted, as though an artillery barrage has walked through it. A large number of

trees are gone. They have evidently been cut and sectioned, their branches sliced away and piled together for a coming bonfire, the stumps blown and removed. Those are the trees closest to the shanty.

Farther away, the trees are down, but they have not been cut. They have been blasted wholesale from the ground, and the seared trunks lie at startling removes from the tangles of their roots. The trees are tumbled pell-mell over one another, two and even three deep in a welter of sap and pith and broken wood.

Odom has cleared enough space for a mansion, for the home of a giant.

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Kate: The son goes outside. There's his dad. The side of his dad's head is blistered, and Odom has dropped a lot of weight.

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"I knocked them down," Odom says, gesturing at the cascade of flattened trees. "Now all we got to do is shift them trunks out of there, break up this rock, and we can lay the foundation. We'll be in by spring." He turns back to his son, stares at him. His bloodshot eyes are tearing, and he wipes at them with the back of his hand. "You see?" he says.

"I see," the son says.

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Kate: By the end of this story, Odom's got my heart.

33 **Pinckney**: It seems to me that it's the job of art to reveal as beautiful those things that are not apparently beautiful.

Kate: That's kind of the heart of what you try to do in a lot of your work, isn't it?

Pinckney: That's exactly right. Things that we wouldn't normally even want to look at, I like in my work, not only just to look at, but to look at long and hard. And to see if, by looking at them in an intense and loving way, we can realize about them things that have previously not been realized.

34 **Kate**: You write with great detail about things like blowing up stumps and drilling into rocks. Where do you get the detail for your stories?

Pinckney: Well, some of it, I grew up with. This is one of the great advantages of growing up on a dairy farm. There's all kind of practical work going on all the time, and you learn about machines, and you learn about animals, and you learn about agriculture.

That story in particular, I learned about dynamite. I talked to my Dad about it, and my dad is an encyclopedia of obscure knowledge of various kinds. And I also went down to my barber shop in Lewisburg, down to Flanngan's. The guys down there, a group of old guys that just kind of loaf around the barber shop, and they know about pretty much any kind of subject like that. I just went in one day and said, "Tell me what you know about dynamite." And every one of them, by God, had some kind of story about dynamite: some friend who'd blown himself up, a guy who committed suicide because his wife's cheating on him. And accidents and how dynamite's used, and that sort of thing.

Kate: We've been talking with Lewisburg native Pinckney Benedict. No wonder he wants to stay within easy reach of his family farm and that Lewisburg barber shop. Hollins College, where he teaches, is only 85 miles away.

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In Their Own Country is produced and edited by Kate Long. Music is performed by Ron Sole. Bob Webb recorded the music and supplied production assistants. Francis Fished provided technical mentoring and production assistance.

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