# Jayne Anne Phillips: In Their Own Country transcript

**1 Kate**: I know that many young writers feel that in your homeplace, there are so many voices that say, "Don't talk about that" or "Do talk about this."

**Jayne Anne**: Well, I was definitely always the one who talked about things she shouldn't talk about. I think it's really a prerequisite for a writer. (laughs)

**Kate**: That's the voice of Jayne Anne Phillips, who grew up in Buckhannon, West Virginia and became an internationally known writer. I'm Kate Long, and this is *In Their Own Country*, a radio series that brings you the work and thoughts of some of the best fiction writers and poets coming out of West Virginia today. This time, it's Jayne Anne Phillips.

**2** Jayne Anne: I think language has to take chances. Language has to talk about what we might not speak about, but we do think about.

**Kate**: That's Jayne Anne Phillip's territory! What we don't talk about, but do think about.

She burst onto the national literary map in 1979 with *Black Tickets*, a wildly sensual book of short, intense pieces that got five-star critical reviews. She was only 26 then. In the years since then, her work has been translated into at least 12 languages.

**Jayne Anne**: I've always thought of the writer as the conscience of a culture. Not in the sense of "This is wrong, this is not wrong," but in terms of searching for meaning, and in maintaining that there IS meaning. I think writing is an act against randomness, against the idea that things simply happen, that there's no reason, there's no eye in the sky. There's nothing but us, sort of fumbling around. And I think that's not true. And I think the writer - or really any kind of artist - is presenting us with evidence that that's not true.

**3 Kate:** I interviewed her in West Virginia and in Boston, where she lives, and then West Virginia musician Bob Webb created music for the program. As I read back through all her books, I was struck by the variety of her characters: nursing mothers, haunted veterans, street kids, middle-class teenagers, a man with Alzheimer's. As the *New York Times* said, "She writes beautifully, creating elusive moods and scenes." To create those scenes, she often starts with a few real details and lets the story bloom from there.

So let's see how she does this. We'll use several short readings from her books as examples. And the first reading comes from *Machine Dreams*, her first novel.

**4 Jayne Anne**: This, of course, is a complete imagination of the real story.

**Kate**: Jayne Anne heard this tale as a child and couldn't get it out of her mind. She heard that, when the B and O Railroad was being built into West Virginia, a Chinese railroad worker was found to have leprosy. The railroad men quarantined him in a tent, and he died there.

When Jayne Anne grew up, she spun a much deeper story from that seed, in which a local farmwife, Ava, is hired to bring the leper food. Ava's little girl has recently died.

She keeps her distance from the leper, but also keeps him company while he eats. And though they don't speak the same language, a deep empathy develops between them.

**Jayne Anne**: This is Ava, speaking about the leper:

*>>>>>>* 

5 He was grateful for the smallest kindness; the railroad men must have been very brusque to him. I took no liberties and addressed him as "Sir" or "Mister." I would put the tray down and back up to the edge of the woods; he would nod and bow, pick up the food, and then sit crosslegged by the tent, eating. He seemed to feel he showed thanks by eating in silence with great concentration. I went closer again. Later we spoke briefly or sat without speaking. He knew some words but understood the ideas behind many more.

I hadn't been outside my house in weeks. Early mornings in the woods were so quiet and green, all the wildflowers blooming and the sounds of the river so cool. The clearing was like a church, the sky arched over and deeply blue. I think I talked aloud because I knew he didn't understand all I said. I told him my little girl had died and showed him in motions. She was this tall, etc. He knew someone had died and folded his hands, then pointed to his eyes and touched his cheeks. When I describe these simple gestures, I do not mean to give the impression he was not smart. I believe he was quite intelligent, and wishing to comfort me. He gave me to understand that he also had children, two, in his homeland. He would not see them again. I explained he might send letters, messages, but he said, "No, no," holding his finger to his lips.

I wanted him to see Emily so badly that I took him a photograph of her, knowing once he touched it I could not take it back. I put the picture on his tray. He understood at once and looked at the image carefully; then he bowed his head to me in gratitude and put the picture in his breast pocket. He placed his hand there and said, "Yes, safe. Safe." "Yes," I said to him, and knew she was, when before I'd felt only the injustice.

Safe. He knew that word because the railroad men had said it loudly, many times, about the woods and the tent and where they were taking him.

**6** Kate: You can hear how she fleshed out the bare bones of the story she heard as a child until she made it into a moving, timeless tale of loss, isolation, and people who try to communicate across differences. And that's a common Jayne Anne Phillips theme. Like Ava and the leper, her characters often try to communicate despite differences. They come from different generations, want different things, don't speak the same language - literally and figuratively.

7 Kate: The seed for this next reading came from her own family history. From her novel, Machine Dreams.

>>>>>>> JA: My father got worse as time went on. When my friends stayed with me, he used to stride into the room, pull the sheets off us, and tell them to get dressed. He didn't want strangers in his house at night.

One autumn, we were burning trash on the hill. He picked up a pitchfork of blazing leaves and chased Mother around the fire. After that, we had to have him put away. A couple of weeks later, a guard knocked him down, and he died. I was fourteen. My mother and I turned on every light in the house that evening and sat on the porch, looking at the street. October. A clean moisture in the air. We both felt such relief. We'd been ashamed to send him there. But we'd gotten afraid of him and had no money for anything better. I didn't know until he was gone what a shadow he'd cast.

**Jayne Anne**: I think that story - or even just that one line, "pitchfork of blazing leaves" - is based on a story my mother told me about her father. It was just one of those stories she told me growing up. Because the whole story of her life, her mother's life, even her grandmother's life, were stories I grew up with. And the stories of their lives were connected to political events. The Civil War, the Depression, World War II. And I think I had the incredible opportunity to view history through my blood kin.

music

**8** Kate: Jayne Anne says you can find a seed of a story anywhere: family history, a road sign, an overheard conversation. The important thing is, it affects you, for whatever reason.

**Jayne Anne**: And I think there has to be that gut connection. And it may have to do with a sight or a smell, an anonymous sight, the sight of someone doing something, and you have no idea who that person is. It may come from a remembered line that you heard spoken in childhood. It may come from a fantasy. But you have to start somewhere real.

And many times, you write what you never intended to write. The writing always has a kind of evolution that you can't plan and you can't limit. And that's what's so miraculous about it.

**9 Kate**: Jayne Anne's early writing is filled with vivid portraits of people on society's edges. No show on her writing would be complete without a sample. In her twenties in New Orleans, Jayne Anne knew that a lot of young people worked the strip clubs. She imagined a girl from West Virginia. That was the seed. Here's the piece from *Black Tickets*.

Jayne Anne: Stripper.

When I was fifteen back in Charleston, my cousin Phoebe taught me to strip. She was older than my mother but she had some body. When I watched her, she'd laugh, say That's all right Honey sex is sex. It don't matter if you do it with monkeys. Yeah, she said, You're white an dewy an tickin like a time bomb an now's the time to learn. With that long blond hair you can't lose. And don't you paint your face till have have to, every daddy wants his daughter. That's what she said. The older dancers wear make-up and love the floor, touchin themselves. The men get scared an cluster round, smokin like paper on a slow fire. Once in Laramie I was in one of those spotted motels after a show an a man's shadow fell across the window. I could smell him past the shade, hopeless an cracklin like a whip. He scared me, like I had a brother who wasn't right found a bull whip in the shed. He used to take it out in the woods some days an come back with such a look on his face. I don't wanna know what they know. I went into the bathroom an stood in the florescent light. Those toilets have a white strip across em that you have to rip off. I left it on an sat down. I brushed my hair an counted. Counted till he walked away kickin gravel in the parkin lot. Now I'm feelin his shadow fall across stages in Denver an Cheyanne. I close my eyes an dance faster, like I used to dance blind an happy in pop's closet. His suits hanging faceless on the rack with their big wooly arms empty.

music

10 Kate: People don't always realize that this is the character's voice, not Jayne Anne's.

**Jayne Anne**: People are always so bent on asking you, "Well, I assume this happened to you." or "How could this have happened to you?" Or "How could you have known about that?" People used to say to me, "How could you have written those stories? You don't look like you could have written those stories."

**Kate**: How do you respond to them when they say things like that?

**Javne Anne**: I just kind of smile (laughs).

music

**Kate**: Actually, Jayne Anne often writes about children who know about things they don't look like they should know: alcoholism, abuse, parents who chase each other with pitchforks. These children concern her, and so she's often written their stories.

11 Here's a section from *Shelter*, her second novel. A boy named Buddy lives on a back road with his mother, Mam. He's deeply afraid of his stepfather, who just got home from prison. This guy has flashbacks from Korea.

Jayne Anne: Dad might still be drunk from this morning. Or he could rouse up from a drunk sleep if he heard Buddy and be out his head. You could never tell what might set him going. He'd rip off his own shirt and thump it with pillows. Or he'd get to throwing things at the light bulb that hung from the kitchen ceiling on a cord, pelt it with rocks or coins from his pocket. Mam didn't keep a bulb in it anymore., but he still got riled and swung the cord all around, yelling words that weren't American. Mam said he learned those in the Army, in Korea. And he didn't talk foreign unless he was drunk. Then he got afraid. Afraid of what? He'd been in prison in Korea, Mam said, long time ago. Not for doing anything wrong, just for being a soldier.

So you got in jail, just for being a solider?

No, no, he was captured by his enemy in a war back then, and the jail was like a cage. He don't like being closed in. So what does he do but throw over a job in the mines and go rob him a gas station? Get himself in prison.

music

Kate: So many different characters.

12 Jayne Anne: I do subscribe to the gestalt idea of personality in which, when we dream a dream, it's not just one facet of the dream that represents us. Each facet of the dream is a part of us. And I feel very much that way about writing. That every voice I imagine is a facet of me and a facet of the reader who will then pick up that story or book and feel, hopefully, different parts of himself or herself inside it. That's why, I think it was Gorky who said that writing should be deeply disturbing if it's effective, sometimes in good ways, sometimes in ways that are threatening. But that a book should really act as a kind of a slow fire. You read it and think about it. And it doesn't quite go away.

13 Kate: If you'd been watching Jayne Anne while she wrote any of these stories, you wouldn't have seen much movement. She doesn't pace, doesn't wring her hands. In fact, she compares writing to meditation or a religious practice in which you sit quietly in space and wait for your characters to show you what they're going to do.

**Jayne Anne**: I just sit there like a piece of stone. I often write by hand, in a notebook, writing lines. The computer makes revision much easier, but my process doesn't seem to have been sped up much by it. I really require a lot of time to just sit and think. And I write very slowly.

music

**14 Kate**: There are many people in West Virginia and elsewhere who struggle to write and struggle to get past all the inhibitions. How do you find the courage to write as honestly as you do?

**Jayne Anne**: Well, I don't think it has to do with courage. I think every writer writes because they must. It's a means of survival. And I think so-called courage is simply a measure of how badly the writer needs to speak. And I think if there's anything writers owe writing, it is the promise to go as far as you can, to go as deeply as you can, to do as much as you're able to do, with the help of the language.

**Kate**: Have there been times in your life when you were hungrier to do that than others?

**Jayne Anne**: Oh no. I have a, I would say, an unquenchable hunger to do that. Although life doesn't always cooperate in allowing me the time and space.

**Kate**: And she literally means she HAS always been hungry to do that, to write, even when she was growing up in Buckhannon.

**15 Jayne Anne**: I remember when I was in Girl Scouts writing a kind of serial novel to entertain my friends. We met in various churches around town. And I remember, at the Baptist Church, they had these beautiful mahogany cubicles like restaurant booths almost. But they were all enclosed by red velvet curtains.

They'd put various groups in these cubicles, and we'd draw the curtains, and I'd bring out my so-called novel, which I began with everyone in it. Myself and all my friends were in the novel. And then the heroine moves to New York City and falls in love with a gang member. And there are wars going on in the subway tunnels and all. But the interesting thing was that they kept wanting to hear it, even after they'd been written out. And that was my first sense of writing something that people were interested in. And that they could be represented by things other than themselves

**Kate**: Before the serial novel, she read and read and read.

16 Jayne Anne: My friends used to complain because they'd come out to see me or to play with me, you know when I was a kid under twelve, and I would be sitting on my bed reading. And I remember my girlfriends getting mad at me because they couldn't get me to put the book down, even though they were standing there. So I was a kind of book junkie. I wasn't always

reading great literature, by any means, but I was constantly reading. And as time went on, I read better and better work. I think, by the time I began writing, I had, really by osmosis, I had soaked up different ways to work with words. And I think I used language as an escape. I used books as an escape. I knew I could go anywhere inside someone else's language. And I could know a lot more than I was supposed to know at my age. Nobody could keep me from learning what was in books.

music

**17 Kate**: I like this quote from a *Newsday* review: "Phillips work is deeply personal, but never simplistically autobiographical."

**Jayne Anne**: Well, the broad outlines are sort of autobiographical. But they're the details that have happened to everybody. Parents, parents' illnesses, birth of children, running away, coming home. What happens when you come home. What home is. I think that's one of the basic questions in my work: What's home? What's identity? How do we find out what they are? Sometimes we find out what they are in their absence.

music

18 Kate: Jayne Anne left West Virginia after she graduated from WVU and went to the Iowa School for Writers. She published several critically acclaimed books, got married, had kids. She lives in the Boston area now, where she teaches at universities like Brandeis and Harvard. But she always comes back to West Virginia in her writing. She's like so many West Virginians who left the state to work: the place follows her around.

19 In this next reading, a daughter who lives in Boston is trying to get her West Virginia father to move to Boston. He doesn't want to do it. From her novel, *Motherkind*.

"I could find you a place on your own then. But here. None of us are living at home anymore, Dad. I hate for you to be there by yourself."

"Why, it's what I'm used to. What would I do here?"

"I make the rounds. Coffee of a morning with the fellows at MacDonalds. Couple of cousins I still see. You remember Nella. Lives in a trailer over by the river. She's near-blind now. Since her husband died, she don't get out. I do her shopping."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm used to being on my own, Miss."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Well, what do you do there?"

Waylon took his hat from his head and placed it on his knees, smoothing the taupe brim with his fingertips. "Everything's there," he said. "Houses I built, streets I laid down. Raine's grave. You'll be bringing your mother back. I've been in that town sixty years. It's home, no matter who's left it. Your home too."

"My home is here, Dad," she said gently.

He turned to look at her. "This is where you live. Home is where you come from." He reached to cover her hand with his.

music

**20 Kate**: In the front of Jayne Anne's second book of short stories, *Fast Lanes*, there's a long list of her awards and honors, including an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Before any of the honors are mentioned, it says "Jayne Anne Phillips was born and raised in West Virginia."

**Jayne Anne**: Well, it's a lot more important. And it came way before any award. I think my work is really rooted in my childhood, my young adulthood, my family, my ancestry. And it's very much rooted in place. I've sometimes written about places very far away from West Virginia, and people who certainly have maybe never seen the place where I grew up. But the sense of hard reality, the edge in my work, I think, comes from having grown up there.

**21 Jayne Anne**: I think no matter where I had grown up, I would have followed the same kind of path. There's almost a sense that I don't have the right to write about where I came from until I've gone away and found out who I was apart from that place. And then I need to find my way back to it, through language. And it's part of the intensity of need to write is that need to go home, not physically, but spiritually.

**Kate**: She says her "need to go home" helps her as a writer.

**Jayne Anne:** Space and distance make you very aware of what you lose in going away to work. And that loss sharpens everything that you have to say and everything that you think about. There's just no substitute for growing up in West Virginia.

**Kate**: Well, let's hear some more of that hard edge. Every book she writes is set at least partially in West Virginia.

**22 Kate:** So for the rest of the program, we'll move around twentieth century West Virginia with Jayne Anne Phillips. And we'll start in the 1960s, with an excerpt from one of her best-known stories, "Home." In this story, a daughter is broke. She comes back to West Virginia to live with her mom awhile, to work till she can save up enough cash to launch out on her own again.

My mother gets Reader's Digest. I come home from work, have a cup of coffee and read it. I keep it beside my bed. I read it when I'm too tired to read anything else. I read about Joe's Kidney and Humor in Uniform. Always there are human interest stories in which someone survives an ordeal of primal terror. Tonight it is "Grizzly." Two teenagers camping in the mountains are attacked by a bear. Sharon is dragged over a mile, unconscious. She's a good student, loved by her parents. An honest girl, loved by her boyfriend. Perhaps she's not a virgin, but in her heart, she is virginal. And she lies now in the furred arms of a beast.

The grizzly drags her quietly, quietly. He will care for her all the days of his life. Sharon, his rose. But alas, already rescuers have organized. Mercifully, her boyfriend is not among them. He is sleeping en route to the nearest hospital. His broken legs have excused him. In a few days, Sharon will bring him his food on a tray. She is spared. She is not demure.

He gazes on her face, untouched but for a long, thin scar, near her mouth. Sharon says she remembers nothing of the bear. She only knows that the tent was ripped open, that its heavy canvas fell across her face.

I turn out my light when I know my mother is sleeping. By then my eyes hurt. And the streets of the town are deserted.

**Kate**: The daughter in the story falls asleep and she has an erotic dream.

**Jayne Anne**: Well, I think if I'm going to take the reader deeper and penetrate inside what our everyday lives really mean to our unconscious selves, to what we do when we dream, when we fantasize or remember, um, the prose has to start at a kind of communal reality. And then move into the superconscious, the unconscious, to all the things that literature can say that we can't.

**Kate**: And in that story, we have a conversation between the daughter and the mother, and then the daughter is reading Reader's Digest, then she goes to sleep and she has a dream. So you have reality, something that's read, then something that comes to you from the unconscious mind.

**Jayne Anne**: There is constantly this tug, the tug of the unreal on the real. But the unreal is no less true than the real. And I have always felt that language can get at that, because it can hold past, present, and future, in one sentence, on one page, and let us see it whole, in a way that we never do in real life.

music

**23 Kate**: "The unreal is no less true than the real." Now, that thought takes us right into the next reading, from a story called "1934," set in a small town in mountains during the Depression

50-year-old J.T. is a charmer of a man who worked his way into ownership of a mill, lost everything in the Depression, and then started losing his mind. And Jayne Anne's grandfather lost a mill in the Depression. But the resemblance ends there, she says. The rest of the story is her imagination about J.T.

J.T.'s young, 28-year-old wife and his daughter sell butter and eggs to get by. People in the community love J.T., and so they baby him along as he gets worse and he doesn't know what year he's in. The story is told from the point of view of his young daughter, Francie. Lacey is J.T.'s young wife.

**Jayne Anne**: At fifty, he was still a big man with powerful arms. His greyed hair curled thick and long over his collar before he'd let Lacey cut it. Every few weeks, he'd get to drinking, be docile, childish, speak to Lacey as if she was his mother. She'd tie a bib around his neck, sit him down, shave him, and cut his hair. After he was spruced up, he'd grow thoughtful, walk slowly upstairs in his bare feet, shower, put on aftershave and his green silk vest. He'd put on his straw boater, still almost new because he seldom wore it and walk to the drug store after candy.

**Kate**: Whenever J.T. walked downtown, Lacey sent her daughter along, to make sure he didn't get lost. J.T. thinks Francie is a boy.

I'd walk him downtown. "Frank, my boy!" he'd say, and put his arm around me. He'd tip his hat to all the women. He was a very handsome man, my father. He'd fairly swagger with happiness, and everyone on the street spoke to him. They'd nod and shake hands eagerly, the men anxious to talk.

At the dry goods store, he'd ask Mrs. Carvey about her children. "How's Bill doing in the sandlots? That boy has a genuine pitcher's arm, Miranda, he should have training, it's a fact."

Bill had grown and gone before my father married my mother, but Mrs. Carvey went on just like he was nine years old. Her husband was dead; she was lonely. She'd get feeling so good she'd pile me up with remnants to take home. That was how Lacey made my clothes.

Then we'd go down to Farmer's Drug. Cy gave J.T. a box of candy and put it on the imaginary bill. Cy loved J.T. He even slipped Lacey sleeping powders to sedate him in the bad times. J.T. had staked Cy in pharmacy school and again when he started his store. Cy gave me sodas so J.T. would stay and talk to him. Pop always thought it was Sunday when he was in the drugstore and he'd ask for a paper.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Nope, not in yet this morning, J.T Come back this afternoon."

"Well, I'll do that, Cy."

They'd shake hands and clap each other's shoulders. Once Cy started tearing up.

"Now, boy, none of that," said J.T. "Times are getting better, you'll see. And if you have trouble with the store, you know I'm right here with whatever you need."

Out front we'd sit down to discuss the stock market with the men.

**Kate**: J.T. would talk as if the market had never crashed. And the men would go right along with it, as if they didn't know that J.T. had lost everything.

Finally, J.T. got up and stretched, winked, said someone waited for him. He'd whistle all the way home and seem to forget me. He knew the way, he owned the street. I walked behind him. He'd begin to smooth his now-cropped hair and clear his throat.

We could smell our kitchen from down the block, Butter-fried chicken, new potatoes, Jocasta's buttermilk biscuits.

Kate: Jocasta is Lacey's mother, who lives with them and has never approved of J.T.

J.T. made his entrance, swept off his hat grandly, flourished the box. When he spoke to Lacey, white in her muslin dress, J.T. stuttered.; something tugged in his brain but he got past it. He took Lacey's hand and folded it to his mouth.

Through dinner, she glanced at him, small penetrating glances, as he argued quietly to Jocasta about Galsworthy, whose collected green-bound volumes he read alone in his room at night. Lacey watched them both, twisting her dress beneath the table.

I cleared the plates and she turned on the phonograph, handled heavy waxen records until the old waltzes tinkled out at the right speed. J.T. eyes were bright; he whirled her around the room while Jocasta sat downcast. Finally they'd go upstairs as soon as it was decently dark, Lacey's hair falling from the dancing. The record finished and kept scratching, needle bouncing back and forth.

The wind blew the curtains in billowed forms. The glories closed on their vines. We could hear the old brass bed upstairs beginning, rocking very gently. Sometimes Jocasta turned the music on again. Sometimes we just sat, looking at each other, while the rocking went on; small swooning cries, sharp jabs of the bed against the wall.

music

Kate: That scene ...

**24 Kate:** Sex runs through Jayne Anne's stories like an underground river that suddenly flows into plain sight and washes over everything, just like it does in real life And really, most things in Jayne Anne Phillips' writing have many layers. There's so much below the surface.

**Jayne Anne**: I remember when I was a young kid, I had a recurring dream that the hill right behind our house - which was beautiful and covered with dogwood trees in the spring - was turning into a volcano and nobody knew it but me. Smoke was coming off it.

The volcano never erupted in the dream. But it was as though I knew something, and I had to tell what it was, but no one was ready to hear it. And I think that, that's where the writer always is. And the resistance that we move through in writing is really our own resistance. It's not so much that other people don't want to hear what we have to say. It's that it's so hard, inside the self, to get at what's most important to us - and what might be most threatening to us.

**Kate**: Five generations before Jayne Anne dreamed that volcano, her father's family was working a mountain farm in Randolph County, about twenty miles from her childhood home.

**25 Jayne Anne**: My father's family, the Phillips's, had a farm near Coalton, a farm that was actually a land grant from King George. Like 300 years before, it was a huge tract of land. It was broken up among the descendants of the family, little by little, until in his generation, it was pretty much gone.

**Kate**: That farm became a major seed in her writing. Here's a reading from "Bess," one of Jayne Anne's most-praised stories. Bess is speaking here, remembering childhood winters on an isolated, snow-covered farm near Coalton. That would be somewhere near the farm Jayne Anne's father's family used to have. The time is early twentieth century West Virginia.

**26** From Jayne Anne Phillips' short story collection, *Fast Lanes*.

**Jayne Anne**: Those long winters inside were not bad times at first., but in later weeks a strange loneliness came. Late in the cold, the last few weeks before it broke, we seldom talked or read aloud or argued anymore or played games. We lived instead in silence, only doing what we were told to do. And waiting.

We could see no other farms from our house, not a habitation or the smoke of someone's chimney. We could not see the borders of the road anymore but only the cover of snow, the white fields, and mountains beyond. The mountains were an awesome height. You could not see where the sky began. The house in this whiteness seemed small, alien, as though we might be covered

up and vanish; no one would know. Sounds were so muffled, except for the wind. One could have fantasies of deafness. The power of the Scriptures in such a setting was great, and we heard the Bible read aloud nearly every evening. Twilight, because the valley was deep, came as early as three or four in the afternoon; the world, the snow, seemed to fly in the face of the Word. Remove not the old landmarks, venture not into the fields of the fatherless; yet the snow still fell.

Winters frightened me. But it was summers I should have feared.

**27 Kate**: Bessie, the narrator, is very close to her brother Warwick - in age and spirit. One summer, Warwick gets a terrible infection all over his body. He is unconscious for days. The family is afraid he will die.

**Jayne Anne**: I was rubbing Warwick with alcohol to take the sweat. He was wet and smelled of poison, his legs, arms, eyes all bandaged and hands and legs tied down so he wouldn't thrash and make his raw skin bleed. I was terrified there in the hot narrow room, sun in the windows horribly bright. Voices in the kitchen, the other side of the wall. "Thou has made him lower than angels! He did fly up!" Mam shouted, and Warwick in the darkness in his secret place, all round about him like black water boiling in the dark. I could see him vanishing like something sucked down a hole, like fire ducked into a slit. If he could hear them praying, if he could feel this heat and the heat of his fever, blind as he was then in bandages and tied, if he could still think, he'd think he was in hell. I poured the alcohol over him, and the water from the basin, I was bent close his face just when he stopped raving, and I thought he had died. He said a word.

"Bessie," he said.

"Bless me," I heard. I knelt with my mouth at his ear, in the sweat, in the horrible smell of the poison. "Warwick," I said. He was there, tentative and weak, a boy waking up after sleeping in the blackness three days. "Stay here, Warwick. Warwick."

I heard him say the word again, and it was my name, clearly.

"Bessie," he said.

So I answered him. "Yes, I'm here. Stay here."

Later he told me he slept a hundred years, swallowed in a vast black belly like Jonah, no time anymore, no sense but strange dreams without pictures. He thought he was dead, he said, and the moment he came back, he spoke the only word he'd remembered in the dark.

Sixteen years later, when he did die, in the mine - did he say a word again, did he say that word, trying to come back? The second time, I think he went like a streak. I had the color silver in my mind. A man from Coalton told us about the cave-in. The man rode out on a horse, a bay mare, and he galloped the mare straight across the fields to the porch instead of taking the road. I was

sitting on the porch and saw him coming from a ways off. I stood up as he came closer. I knew the news was Warwick and that whatever had happened was over.

I had no words in my mind, just the color silver, everywhere. The fields looked silver too just then, the way the sun slanted. The grass was tall, and the mare moved through it up to her chest, like a powerful swimmer. I did not call anyone else until the man arrived and told me, breathless, that Warwick and two others were trapped, probably suffocated, given up for dead. The man, a Mr. Forbes, was surprised at my composure. I simply nodded. The news came to me like an echo. I had not thought of that moment in years - the moment Warwick's fever broke and I heard him speak - but it returned in an instant. Having once felt that disappearance, even so long before, I was prepared. Memory does not work according to time. I was twelve years old, perceptive, impressionable, in love with Warwick as a brother and sister can be in love. I loved him then as one might love one's twin, without a thought. After that summer, I understood too much. I don't mean I was ashamed; I was not. But no love is innocent once it has recognized its own existence.

**Kate**: "No love is innocent once it has recognized its own existence." Here again, her characters are contending with things that raise questions like, "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" The death of a child, a loved one disappearing in Alzheimer's, alcoholic or crazy parents, care of a dying parent, child abuse, and in this story, a sister's overwhelming love for a brother.

**28** Jayne Anne: I see the books as being all connected. I see them as all coming at the same thing in a lot of different ways, through a lot of different characters and a lot of different guises of language. But it's as though that spiritual progress or spiritual seeking has to be grounded in extremely physical language. And sometimes it's very sexual language. Sometimes it's very lyrical language that has to do with land, with smells, with weather. With the feel of things.

**Kate**: I asked Jayne Anne: As you write, who are you aiming your stories at?

Jayne Anne: The God within (laughing). I really feel as though it's the writer's responsibility not to think about the reader. Not to think about who's looking at this. Not to think about whether to have permission. I think writing is always, in a sense, an act of risk and an act of transgression. Because there's always a pressure on us not to speak. There's always a pressure on us not to know. That old phrase "ignorance is bliss" came out of somewhere. But I don't think ignorance is bliss. I feel as though bliss is the possibility of gaining access to something larger than the personality, to something more than we can know as individuals. And that's what language is, and that's what writing is.

Kate: Next, we'll go with Jayne Anne to 1960's West Virginia.

**29 Kate:** From *Machine Dreams*, Jayne Anne's novel about a West Virginia family torn apart by the Vietnam War. *The Wall Street Journal* review said "It carries the strength of myth, and yet is utterly of our times." Here, a daughter confronts her dad after her brother, Billy, is drafted. She's scared. And she wants her dad, Mitch, to do something about it.

Billy had already refused my suggestion that he resist the draft and go to Canada. But I was still plotting. Bess stayed in the kitchen as I followed my father into his bedroom. Dad," I said. "Aren't you worried about Billy?" I stood on one side of the perfectly-made double bed. My father stood on the other.

He looked down at the ribbed bedspread and touched the foot of the wooden frame with one hand. "Of course, I'm worried. We don't have any damn business over there.

"Dad, I borrowed some money from Student Loans. It's money for Billy to go to Canada. And I have information about places for him to go, people to contact. There are organizations that will help. I want him to go soon, and I would drive up with him."

My father looked across the room and made a sound with his mouth, a click of his teeth, a sigh of air through his pursed lips. Scowling, he shook his head. "That's not right either. He'd never even be able to come back here."

"He doesn't have to live here. It's possible to live somewhere else besides Bellington."

"I'm not talking about Bellington. Now, you know that. He couldn't live anywhere in this country."

"Does that matter?"

"Well, hell, yes it matters."

I touched the surface of the bed. The spread was so smooth, the pillows so perfectly covered. I didn't see how anyone could have slept there the night before. "Dad," I said. "I think we should all talk to Billy about going to Canada. Someday, he'll be able to come back, surely." I waited. My father made no reply. "If we let them get hold of him, there won't be anything we can do later to help him."

Silently, my father nodded. Then he said, "I don't know, Miss. We'll have to hope they don't send him there."

"Don't send him? Of course they'll send him. Why do you think they want him?"

My voice had taken on a strident tone ... I was frightened. Suddenly it all seemed real.

music

**30** Kate: Still in the 1960s, another passage from the story "Home." In this passage, the young adult daughter and her mother have both just come home from work. They teeter between being friends and being parent and child. And they keep trying to communicate, despite their differences.

Jayne Anne: From "Home."

My mother sits in the blue chair my father used for years. "Come quick!" she says. "Look!" She points to the television. Flickerings of Senate chambers, men in conservative suits. A commentator drones on about tax rebates. "There!" says my mother. "Hubert Humphrey. Look at him."

It's true. Humphrey is different. Changed from his former toady self to a desiccated old man, not unlike the discarded shell of a locust. Now he rasps into the microphone about the people of these great states. "Old Hubert's had it," says my mother. "He's a death mask."

"That's what he gets for sucking blood for thirty years.," I tell her.

"No," she says. "No. He's got it too. Cancer. Look at him. Oh."

"For God's sake, will you think of something else for once?"

"I don't know what you mean," she says. She goes on knitting.

"All Hubert needs," I tell her, "is a good roll in the hay."

"You think that's what everyone needs."

"Everyone does need it."

"They do not. People aren't dogs. I seem to manage perfectly well without it, don't I?"

"No, I wouldn't say that you do."

"Well, I do. I know your mumbo jumbo about sexuality. Sex is for those who are married. And I wouldn't marry again if it was the Lord himself." Now she is silent. I know what's coming. "Your attitude will make you miserable," she says. "One man after another. I just want you to be happy."

"I do my best."

"That's right," she says. "Be sarcastic." I refuse to answer. I think about my growing bank account. Graduate school, maybe in California. Hawaii. Somewhere beautiful and warm. I will wear few clothes and my skin will feel the air. "What about Jason?" says my mother. "I was thinking of him the other day."

Our telepathy always frightens me. Telepathy and beyond. Before her hysterectomy, our periods often came on the same day. "If he hadn't had that nervous breakdown," she says softly, "do you suppose—"

"No, I don't suppose."

"I wasn't surprised it happened. When his brother was killed, that was hard," she says. "But Jason was so self-centered. You're lucky the two of you split up. He thought everyone was out to get him. Still, poor thing." Silence. Then she refers in low tones to the few months Jason and I lived together before he was hospitalized. "You shouldn't have done what you did when you went off to college. He lost respect for you."

"It wasn't respect for me he lost," I tell her. "He lost his mind if you remember!" I realize that I am shouting and shaking. What is happening to me?

My mother stares. "We'll not discuss it," she says. She gets up. I hear her in the bathroom, water running into the tub. Hydrotherapy. I close my eyes and listen. Soon, this weekend. I'll get a ride to the University and look up an old lover. I'm lucky. They always want to sleep with me for old time's sake.

I turn down the sound of the television and watch its silent pictures.

•••

**31** "Sweetheart," my mother calls from the bathroom. "Could you bring me a towel?" Her voice is quavering slightly. She is sorry. But I never know what part of it she is sorry about.

I get a towel from the linen closet and open the door of the steamy bathroom. My mother stands in the tub, dripping, shivering a little. She's so small and thin. She's smaller than I. She has two long scars on her belly, operations of the womb, and one breast is misshapen, sunken, indented near the nipple. I put the towel around her shoulders and my eyes smart. She looks at her breast. "Not too pretty, is it?" she says. "He took out too much when he removed that lump."

"Mom, it doesn't look so bad." I dry her back, her beautiful back which is firm and unblemished. Beautiful, her skin. Again, I feel the pain in my eyes. "But you should have sued that bastard," I tell her. "He didn't give a shit about your body."

We have an awkward moment with the towel when I realize I can't touch her any longer. The towel slips down, and she catches it as one end dips into the water. "Sweetheart," she says. "I know your beliefs are different than mine. But have patience with me. You'll just be here a few more months. And I'll always stand behind you. We'll get along."

She has clutched the towel to her chest. She's so fragile, standing there, naked, with her small shoulders. Suddenly I am horribly frightened. "Sure," I say. "I know we will." I let myself out of the room.

**32 Jayne Anne**: I think there is a kind of unconditional love between some mothers and daughters. That doesn't mean there's not tension and that there's not very open haranguing and quarreling and whatever. And joking. But there's a kind of endurance, a kind of enduring love that moves back through generations and has about it an incredibly strong and heavy history.

We have to talk across generations. Especially women do. If we don't talk across generations, we lose history.

And things are not always as they appear to be. I mean, part of the reversal that happens in the story "Home," is that the daughter, who has had far wider sexual experience than her mother, has actually experienced less real intimacy than her mother has. There's this moment in the story when it becomes clear that the mother has a lot to teach her, even about that. Whereas, outwardly, it would appear very different.

**Kate**: As a child, Jayne Anne soaked in so many stories from her mother's life and was so close with her mother that those stories naturally became a powerful influence on her writing. They became seeds that grew into stories that were quite different sometimes from what actually happened between Jayne Anne and her mother. In real life, in Buckhannon, her mother also worked with words, but in a different way. She worked with literacy, with kids who couldn't learn how to decode words.

**33** Jayne Anne keeps coming back to that deep connection, whatever it may be, between mother and daughter. Here's another example, from *Black Tickets*. This passage is drawn from her mother's life, from the years that her mother took care of her mother.

**Jayne Anne**: My mother doesn't forget her mother. Never one bed sore, she says. I turned her every fifteen minutes. I kept her skin soft and kept her clean, even to the end. I imagine my mother at 23, her black hair and dark eyes, her olive skin and that red lipstick. She is growing lines of tension in her mouth. Her teeth press into her lower lip as she lifts the woman in the bed. The woman weighs no more than a child. She has a smell. My mother fights it continually, bathing her, changing her sheets, carrying her to the bathroom so the smell can be contained and flushed away.

My mother will try to protect them both. At night, she sleeps in the room on a cot. She struggles awake, feeling something press down on her, suck her breath. The smell. When my grandmother can no longer move, my mother fights it alone. "I did all I could," she sighs. "And I was glad to do it. I'm glad I don't have to feel guilty."

"No one has to feel guilty," I tell her.

"And why not?" says my mother. "There's nothing wrong with guilt. If you are guilty, you should feel guilty."

My mother has often told me that I will be sorry when she is gone.

**Kate**: You took care of your own mother while she was sick, before she died, right?

**Jayne Anne**: I did. And this archetype of a story, having been written, the story of my mother's care of her mother, was a story that I had grown up with and then written twenty-five years, thirty years before my own mother faced the same passage.

**34 Kate**: In Jayne Anne's novel *Motherkind*, published after her own mother died, a daughter named Kate gives birth to her first child at the same time as she takes care of her dying mother. The two women keep changing places, taking care of and helping each other. They've reached that extraordinary plane where the exchanges go both ways. The mother is actively dying.

*>>>>>>* 

**Jayne Anne**: Her mother had begun an unsought, unexplained journey. Despite concerted efforts to interrupt her and impede her progress, Kate was merely a witness. Unwilling to enter into death, unable to cross beyond it, careful not to violate any limbo that might hold Katherine fast. This much Kate recognized. And the rest was mystery.

**Kate**: The pain of her mother's death mixes with her amazement at - and love for - her new baby.

>>>>>

35 Jayne Anne: Absently she traced the baby's lips, and he yawned and began to whimper ... Her milk let down with a flush and surge, and she held a clean diaper to one breast as she put him to the other. Now she breathed, exhaling slowly. The intense pain began to ebb; he drank the cells of her blood, Kate knew, and the crust that formed on her nipples where the cuts were deepest. He was her blood. When she held him he was inside her; always, he was near her, like an atmosphere, in his sleep, in his being. She would not be alone again for many years, even if she wanted to, even if she tried. In her deepest thoughts, she would approach him, move around and through him, make room for him. In nursing there would be a still, spiral peace, an energy in which she felt herself, her needs and wants, slough away like useless debris. It seemed less important to talk or think; like a nesting animal, she took on camouflage, layers of protective awareness that were almost spatial in dimension. The awareness had dark edges, shadows that rose and fell. Kate imagined terrible things. That he might stop breathing. That she dropped him, or someone had. That someone or something took him from her. That she forgot about him or misplaced him. There were no words. The thoughts occurred to her in starkly precise images, like the unmistakable images of dreams, as though her waking and sleeping lives had met in him.

**Kate**: Though it might not seem so at first glance, Jayne Anne is still breaking new literary ground with this material.

**36** Jayne Anne: The idea of women's vaginas not being just sexual objects, but the vehicles of birth, the blood and the pain and the tearing and all the stuff that really is part of birth, is very explicitly described here. I may have won myself a lot of readers by writing very explicitly about sex, but I think I lost a certain number of male readers by writing so explicitly about birth, about nursing, about babies and about just the minutia of women's lives, the details that make up that period of time, those first two years between a mother and a baby.

**Kate**: Once again, you're writing about subjects that a certain percent of the population would just assume people didn't talk about.

**Jayne Anne**: (laughing) That's why they're so important. That's why there has to be language that talks about them, studied language. Language that is meant not only as information, but as art.

**Kate**: A lot of mothers would like to ask you: How do you write and be a mother too?

**Jayne Anne**: Well, you just don't write that much. (laughs) You know, you don't write that much. So what you do write better count. (laughs)

**Kate**: We've been visiting with Jayne Anne Phillips, who grew up in Buckhannon, West Virginia, and became an internationally praised writer whose work has been translated into at least a dozen languages. As art. I'm Kate Long. Thanks for listening.

In Their Own Country is produced and edited by Kate Long. Music is performed by Bob Webb, who also recorded the music and supplied production assistants. Francis Fisher provided technical mentoring and production assistants.

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### **EXTRA**

**Jayne Anne**: I think no matter where I had grown up, I would have followed the same kind of path. There's almost a sense that I don't have the right to write about where I came from until I've gone away and found out who I was, apart from that place. And then I need to find my way back to it, thought language. And it's part of the intensity of need to write is that need to go home, not physically, but spiritually.

**Kate**: She says her "need to go home" helps her as a writer.

Well, I think too that space and distance make you very aware of what you lose in going away to work. And that loss sharpens everything that you have to say and everything that you think about.

(From Shelter) Dad might still be drunk from this morning. Or he could rouse up from a drunk sleep if he heard Buddy and be out his head. You could never tell what might set him going. He'd rip off his own shirt and thump it with pillows. Or he'd get to throwing things at the light bulb that hung from the kitchen ceiling on a cord, pelt it with rocks or coins from his pocket. Mam didn't keep a bulb in it anymore but he still got riled and swung the cord all around, yelling words that weren't American. Mam said he learned those in the army in Lorea, and he didn't talk foreign unless he was drunk. Then he got afraid. Afraid of what? He'd been in prisoin in Korea, Mam said, long time ago, but not for doing anything wrong. Just for being a solider. So you got in jail for being a soldier. No, no, he was captured by his enemy, in a war back then. And the jail was like a cage. He don't like being closed in, so what does he do but throw over a job in the mines and go rob him a gas station, get himself in prison. You mean down in Carolina? Yes, but you know there's no need to talk about it to people. He gets cared locked up. Least he wasn't drinking then, That's what saved him, Mom said.

But Dad wasn't saved. Not like they said about saved at church.

(From Machine Dreams) He was grateful for the smallest kindness; the railroad men must have been very brusque to him. I took no liberties and addressed him as "Sir" or "Mister." I would put the tray down and back up to the edge of the woods; he would nod and bow, pick up the food, and then sit dross-legged by the tent, eating. He seemed to feel he showed thanks by eating in silence with great concenteration. I went closer again. Later we spoke briefly or sat without speaking. He knew some words but understood the ideas behind many more.

I hadn't been outside my house in weeks. Earkly mornings in the woods were so quiet and green, all the wildflowers blooming and the sounds of the river so cool. The clearing was like a church, the sky arched over and deeply blue. I think I talked aloud because I knew he didn't understand all I said. I told him my little girl had died and showed him in motions. She was ... this tall, ec. he knew someone had died and folded his hands, then pointed to his eyes and touched his cheeks. When I describe these simple gestures, I don't mean to give the impression he was not smart. I believe hw as quite intelligent, and wishing to comfort me. I gave me to understand that he also had children, two, in his homeland. He would not see them again. I explained he might send letters, messages, but he said, "No, no," holding his finger to his lips.

I wanted him to see Emily so badly that I took him a photograph of her, knowing once he touched it I could not take it back. I put the picture on his tray. He understood at once and looked at the image carefully; then he bowed his head to me in gratitude and put the picture in his breast pocket. HE placed his hand there and said, "Yes, safe. Safe." "Yes," I said to him, and knew she was, when before I'd felt only the injustice.

Safe. He knew that word because the railroad men had said it loudly, many times, about the woods and the tent and where they were taking him.

**Kate:** In 197X, Jayne Anne, Irene McKinney (now WV poet laureate), and poet Maggie Anderson - three friends on the edge of successful literary careers - had a recorded conversation on the steps of Jayne Anne's mother's house. Jayne Anne's mother joined into a discussion about basements jammed full of things people don't want to throw away. Maggie said Jayne Anne was going to be executor of her mother's basement.

**Jayne Anne**: I was literally the executor of her estate. And I remember she and I going through the basement. And I remember going thru all kinds of stuff that she had down there, sort of deciding where it was going to go and what we were going to do with it, long before she ever was sick. But it's an interesting metaphor for what writers do - and for what women do - with their mother's lives. Because I think we are not only in charge of the women's things, the objects. We're also oftentimes in charge of the stories.

But we all are in charge of our parents' basements in the sense that we inherit their unresolved traumas, their dreams, the things they wanted to do and didn't get to do. And in a sense all of that is a little bit hidden. It stands in a kind of shadow, and a kind of underground. And that's what a basement is.

I think writing has a lot to do with discipline, with sitting down and working and working and working. But no matter how much you work, you don't always gain that access to where the work will eventually take you if you stay inside of it long enough.

**Jayne Anne**: Well, I think too that space and distance make you very aware of what you lose in going away to work. And that loss sharpens everything that you have to say and everything that you think about.

**Kate**: On one hand, a never-ending source of material. And on the other hand, all those expectations weighing down, all the ties, all the things that say, "You are THIS."

**Jayne Anne**: Well, I think growing up, I felt that it was hard enough to be a woman, and it was going to be impossible to be an artist - impossible for me to be an artist there. That I wasn't at that point strong enough to fight everything. You know.

**Jayne Anne**: There's almost a sense that I don't have the right to write about where I came from until I've gone away and found out who I was, apart from that place. And then I need to find my way back to it through language. And it's part of the intensity of need to write, is that need to, to go home. Not physically, but spiritually.

**Jayne Anne**: Well, I think the key to it for me is that I write a lot from and about childhood. And that I write about identity. Spiritual identity. And it's my sense that we begin to be conscious about identity and spiritual identity as children, and more and more so as we become adolescents and teenagers and we begin to understand our homeplace and separate from it.

**From Callie**: Jayne Anne's own life - and history - does merge with her fiction at times ... The story "Callie" has been added to the new edition of Fast Lanes. Set in her fictional CALLIE: the BING of the pear butter dish

**Kate:** And here's a story - "Gemcrack" - told from the point of view of a serial killer, a soul gone astray. This guy - modeled on Son of Sam - claims that a spirit named Uncle tells him to kill women he doesn't know.

**Jayne Anne**: ... this is a voice that cuts straight to the bone.

... I didn't write it immediately after reading about the Son of Sam killings. Later, I read that David Berkowitz had been a creative writing student in New York City. And that really got to me. And maybe a few months afterwards, that knowledge settled into what I knew about those murders and violence in America. And men and women. And children who had been damaged, then go on to damage others. And a lot of concerns I've had that I've talked about in different ways in the work kind of came together.

# **Kate:** From Gemcrack

I wait for a weekend. Saturday night. All day I wait for the dark. My Uncle is with me though he is not present. / I look at the gun and I touch it. I turn it over and touch it everywhere. I have everything I need and his voice has stopped and I go where his voice has said to go. I park the car and I walk a few blocks. I have the gun in my pocket and the note I have signed for his voice. I don't wonder about the girl: I'll read about her later, her parents, where she lived, what she did. Now she is dancing or she is getting smoke in her eyes from the cigarettes in the crowded

room and she is getting ready to walk outside. I hear a buzzing and my vision flickers. / In an alley by the side entrance to the club I have my hand ready: I see her hair and her red coat. Sometimes they don't see me but she does and that's good, it's very good: because she shakes me, I'm, fluttering, she rushes in like electric shock in the instant she looks at me and knows - I never hear the gun - But after she falls there is a loud crack. Something big caves in. The whiteness comes up brilliant, sudden, stutters sparks and spreads its burning arms. Then a flash like imploding air. I pass through like flame. My shoes bleach concrete where I touch. "

*>>>>>>* 

#### music

**Jayne Anne**: I was trying to pull the reader into the way he had seduced himself. Or the way his past or his mental illness had seduced him.

**Kate**: Was it scary - to go there?

**Jayne Anne**: Oh yeah. I think if you really get down to what compelling you about a book, as the writer, you do feel scared. You do feel threatened. And the only way to work through it is to go directly into it. Is to move inside. And that's where the power of it comes from.

**Jayne Anne**: I think when you pick up a story or a poem, you can read the first line and know immediately whether or not the writer is writing from a real place, whether or not the writer is at risk. And I think there has to be that gut connection. And it may have to do with a sight or a smell. It may come from a remembered line that you heard spoken in childhood. It may come from a fantasy. But you have to start somewhere real.

**Kate:** And the starting place here?

**Jayne Anne**: I think language has to take chances. Language has to talk about what we might not speak about, but we do think about...

**Kate:** In her next poem, "Wedding Picture," Jayne Anne continues that cross-generation conversation. She starts with a photograph of her own parents on their wedding day... and spins the poem out from there. She includes things you can't see in the photo ... an airplane the man used to fly ... the mother's high school sweetheart, who died five years before.

# Jayne Anne: "Wedding Picture"

My mother's ankles curve from the hem of a white suit, as if the bones were water. Under the cloth, her body in its olive skin unfolds. The black hair. The porcelain neck. The red mouth that barely shows its teeth. My mother's eyes were round and wide as if a light behind her skin burns them to coals. Her heart makes a sound that no one hears. The sound says "Each fetus floats, an island in the womb." My father stands beside her in his brown suit and two-tone shoes. He stands also by the plane in New Guinea in 1944. On its side, there is a girl in a swing wearing spike heels and short shorts. Her breasts balloon. The sky opens inside them. Yellow hair, smooth as a cat's. She is swinging out to him. He glimmers, blinded by the light. (insert pause)...

Now his big fingers curl inward. He is trying to hold something. / In her hands, the snowy Bible hums, nuns swarming a honeyed cell. The husband is an afterthought. Five years since the high school lover crumpled on the bathroom floor, his sweet heart raw. She is 23. Her mother's sick. It's time. / My father's heart pounds, a bell in a wrestler's chest. He's almost 40, and the lilies are trumpeting. Rising from his shoulders, the cross grows pale and loses its arms in their heads.

**Kate**: So many of the details stick in my mind. "My father's fingers curl inward, trying to hold something..."

**Jayne Anne**: That's ...what we were talking about... The idea of a physical detail having so much metaphorical and visual power...

Kate: Yeah.

**Jayne Anne**: And I think in this piece, Wedding Picture, there's a sense that, even though the piece is so short, you have a very tight encapsulated vision of both of them, and you sense inside them the power of how they both want something. And yet you sense the distance between them.

music

**Kate:** So many different situations, so many different characters ...

**Kate:** She doesn't shrink from too many subjects. Here is a poem about a child who can't stop thinking about a tiny living creature she helped kill.

# Javne Anne: Toad:

We entered the grey air of the enclosed porch. Sitting motionless on the table was a small toad. I touched the cook ridged skin. Please hop, said my cousin, and nudged the silent body. Don't touch it, said my brother. Get some sticks fromt he woodpile. / Twigs tapped in a pattern. Toad hopped over and around them. He danced for us. Someone slipped, the creature bled from its sheltered belly. Quiet and amazed, we caught the scent. My brother's stick moved to examine the cut and toad jumped, piercing itself. We prodded and rolled it and when it was still, we looked at each other. The funeral took place on a sandpile. Topping the mound with a blue bucket my cousin excalimed, I gave it a sky! / For weeks I was afraid of its yellow eyes. I was tony, trapped in blue, dancing to a tap as a key turned in my back. Or sitting in a sandpile, head level with the wheel of my brother's dump truck, as he backed it toward me, crooning motor sounds. I didn't see the load of sand falling like mountains. At last I grew desperate, alone in the yellow eyes. Removing the bucket, I dug into the grave.

# music

**Jayne Anne**: I think this is a scene that so many kids take part in. It's almost a rite of childhood. It's almost an exercise in empathy. It's as though she had to experience this in order to feel like

she was those yellow eyes. There is that Buddhist sense of all sentient beings - which includes anything with any level of awareness - that we're deeply connected to all of those beings. And I think this is a kind of investigation of that idea.

music

**Jayne Anne**: There's a chilling parallel to some of these kids who have shot up their schools - They often say, "I didn't realize what I was doing" or "It didn't seem real." And it's almost as though - unless we make that leap of empathy into the creature that's been hurt - something's wrong.

**CONDENSE THIS SEVERELY> Kate:** When Jayne Anne was fresh out of college, she and two friends were sitting on her mother's back porch one day. One was Irene McKinney - now West Virginia's poet laureate. The other was poet Maggie Anderson - now director of Kent State University's creative writing program. Maggie recorded their conversation and published it in Trellis, a literary magazine she edited. Midstream, Jayne Anne's mother wandered out and started talking about cleaning out the basement. Maggie said Jayne Anne was going to be executor of her mother's basement. I read Jayne Anne that remark thirty years later. She liked it.

**Kate:** The threads that run between generations of women. It's one of Jayne Anne Phillips' strongest themes. She compared it to her mother's basement ... full of STUFF.

**Jayne Anne**: I remember, she and I going through-all kinds of stuff that she had down there and deciding where it was going to go, what we were going to do with it, long before she was sick. But it's an interesting metaphor for what women do and for what women do with their mothers' lives. Because I think we are not only in charge of the women's things, the objects. We're oftentimes also in charge of the stories. And we are all in charge of our parents' basements in the sense that we inherit their unresolved traumas, their dreams, the things they wanted to do, but didn't get to do... In a sense, all of that is a little bit hidden. It stands in a kind of shadow or underground. And that's what a basement is.