## Breece Pancake: In Their Own Country transcript

**1** I'm going to come back to West Virginia when this is over. There's something ancient and deeply rooted in my soul. I like to think I have left my ghost up one of these hollows, and I'll never really be able to leave for good until I find it. And I don't want to look for it, because I might find it and have to leave.

**Kate**: Those are the words of Breece Pancake of Milton, West Virginia, from a letter he wrote to his mother when he was studying writing at the University of Virginia.

I'm Kate Long, and you're listening to In Their Own Country, a special series that lets you visit with some of West Virginia's most compelling writers.

**2** Kate: And "compelling" is a good word to describe Breece Pancake's writing. His only book, *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, was published in 1983. The New York Times review said he was "A young writer of such extraordinary gifts that one is tempted to compare his debut to Hemingway's." The USA Today Reviewer praised his "Drum-tight and stunning writing..." She said, "Brilliance is on these pages."

West Virginia writers agree. Here's novelist Pinckney Benedict:

**Pinckney Benedict**: That collection of stories, in my opinion, at least, will be deathless.

**Kate:** Jayne Anne Phillips:

**Jane Anne Phillips**: The book reminded me of Joyce's Dubliners. I think it's on that level. It's about a culture from inside a culture. And he makes that culture universal in a beautiful, powerful way.

**Kate**: West Virginia poet laureate, Irene McKinney:

**Irene McKinney**: He created a voice and created a fiction all by himself where there was none before.

**Kate**: Breece Pancake committed suicide 4 years before his book was published. But, that one book him earned a remarkable place in American literature. Only 12 published stories, and yet critics have compared to Hemingway, Faulkner, and Joyce. His book is used as a textbook in many college writing programs. It's been translated into foreign languages, and it had special meaning for West Virginia writers.

**Pinckney**: It was the voice of people I grew up with. I mean, he uses so many real places: Sewell Mountain, Gauley Mountain, Chimney Corner. For me, it just took the top of my head off. It said that knowing about West Virginia was sufficient to make literature.

**Kate**: But the book is not limited to the Appalachian area. As Massachusetts writer Andre Dubus III wrote: "It would be a mistake to consider these stories merely regional, for they go far too deeply for that. By giving us the hollows of West Virginia, its farms and coal mines, barrooms, and motels, fighting grounds and hunting grounds and burial grounds, but, most significantly, by giving us its people in all of their tangled humanity, Pancake has achieved the truly universal."

A Texas writer said Pancake's 12 stories are about people "struggling to stay afloat financially and spiritually." Let's meet a few of those people.

**3 Kate:** In Breece's best-known story, "Trilobites," a guy named Colly grew up in Teays Valley. His dad recently died, and Colly's supposed to keep the farm going. But the farm is going belly-up and Ginny, the girl he hoped to marry, moved to Florida, and his mom wants to sell the farm to a real-estate developer.

It's early morning. And Colly is stopping by the diner before he goes to work on the farm. Read by John Morris.

I open the truck's door, step onto the brick side street. I look at Company Hill again, all sort of worn down and round. A long time ago, it was real craggy and stood like an island in the Teays River. It took over a million years to make that smooth little hill, and I've looked all over it for trilobites. I think how it has always been there and always will be, at least for as long as it matters. The air is smoky with summertime. A bunch of starlings swim over me. I was born in this country and I have never very much wanted to leave. I remember Pop's dead eyes looking at me. They were real dry, and that took something out of me. I shut the door, head for the cafe.

I see a concrete patch in the street. It's shaped like Florida, and I recollect what I wrote in Ginny's yearbook. "We will live on mangoes and love." And she up and left without me - two years she's been down there without me. She sends me postcards with alligator wrestlers and flamingoes on the front. She never asks me any questions. I feel like a real fool for what I wrote, and go into the cafe.

The place is empty, and I rest in the cooled air. Tinker Reilly's little sister pours my coffee. She has good hips. They are kind of like Ginny's, and they slope in nice curves to her legs. Hips and legs like that climb steps into airplanes. She goes to the counter end and scoffs down the rest of her sundae. I smile at her, but she's jailbait. Jailbait and black snakes are two things I won't touch with a window pole. One time I used an old black snake for a bullwhip, snapped the sucker's head off, and Pop beat the hell out of me with it. I think how Pop could make me pretty mad sometimes. I grin.

I think about last night when Ginny called. Her old man drove her down from the airport in Charleston. She was already bored. Can we get together? Sure. Maybe do some brew? Sure. Same old Colly. Same old Ginny. She talked through her beak. I wanted to tell her Pop had died and Mom was on the warpath to sell the farm, but Ginny was talking through her beak. It gave me the creeps.

4 Kate: Here's Tom Douglass, Breece Pancake's biographer:

**Tom**: All his stories are about people under pressure, layers and layers of pressure, of inabilities, of impossibilities, of closing doors. He heaps them up on each character, just to see what they'll do next.

This layering of character that Pancake does is very similar to Shakespeare, or any artist who tries to make a character that's deeper than the surface. A character that shows not only a human heart, but a human psyche.

music

**5 Kate**: In Breece Pancake's story, "In the Dry," Ottie, a truck driver, has left West Virginia. When he was a kid, his foster parents, the Gerlocks, mistreated him but he keeps thinking about the only home he ever knew. He's come to visit the Gerlocks for the first time. Read by Rick Wilson, who's from Milton, Pancake's hometown.

**Wilson:** At a wide berm near the farmhouse, he edges his tractor truck over and the ignition bell rings out until the engine sputters, dies. He picks up his grip, swings out on the ladder, and steps down. Heat burns through his T-shirt under a sky of white sun, a flattened green snake turns light blue against the blacktop.

The front yard's shade is crowded with cars and yells, and giggles drift out to him from the back. A sociable, he knows, the Gerlock whoop-de-doo.

But a strangeness stops him. Something is different. In the field beside the yard, a sin crop grows - half an acre of tobacco standing head-high, ready to strip. So, George Gerlocks's notions have changed and have turned to the bright yellow leaves that bring top dollar. Ottie grins, takes out a Pall Mall, lets the warm smoke settle him, and minces a string of loose burley between his teeth. A clang of horseshoes comes from out back. He weaves his way through all the cars, big eight-grand jobs, and walks up mossy sandstone steps to the door.

Inside smells of ages and of chicken fried in deep fat, and he smiles to think of all his truckstop pie and coffee. In the kitchen, Sheila and her mother work at the stove, but they stop of a sudden. They look at him, and he stands still.

The old woman says, "Law, it's you." Sunken, dim, she totters to him. "Where on earth, where on earth!"

He takes the weak hand she offers and speaks over her shoulder to Sheila. "Milwaukee. Got to get a tank trailer of moasses from the mill. Just stopped by - didn't mean to barge your sociable."

"Aw, stay," Sheila says. She comes to him and kisses his cheek. "I got all your letters and I saved every one."

He stares at her. She is too skinny, and her face is peeling from sunburn with flecks of brown still sticking to her cheek, and along her stomach and beneath her breasts, lines of sweat stain her blouse. He laughs. "You might of answered a few of them letters."

The old woman jumps between them. "Otto, Buster's awful bad off. He's in a wheelchair with two of them bags in him to catch his business."

Sheila goes to the stove. "Ottie don't need none of that, Mom. He just got here. Let him rest."

music

**Kate**: As is true in all Breece Pancake stories, a big mess is lurking beneath the surface here. In this case, something from the past is about to explode out all over the sociable. Ottie was driving the car that put Buster in the wheelchair years before. Buster helped cause the wreck. The Gerlocks blame Ottie. Sheila thinks she's in love with Ottie. Ottie is desperate in his work life. It spins out from there.

**6** Kate: Next, we'll meet a third character from Pancake's story, "Hollow": Buddy. Buddy works in a little hillside coal mine, a doghole mine, mining coal the coal company left behind, on land his family used to own. He's bitter about it. Here, he's coming home from work. Kirk Judd is reading.

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Night rose up from the hollow, and he came to the dusty access road. Buddy could feel the cold air washing up around him, making him cough. Patches of clouds gathered over the hollow, glowing pink. He turned onto the blacktop road, banging his lunch box against his leg as he walked, and remembered hating Fuller as a boy because Fuller had called him a ridge runner. After twenty years of living in the hollow, he knew why Fuller hated him. He laughed again at the thought of the coal. He would have a new trailer by fall and a new trailer, maybe even a new double-wide.

**Kate**: What do you do when you don't know what to do? Buddy, working in the doghole mine, makes no money. The woman he lives with leaves him for the bar life. He slaps her, shoots a dog out the window, gets drunk, punches out one of his friends. But other Pancake characters in equally desperate situations make less destructive choices. And there's always this unspoken question for the reader: What would YOU do in this situation?

**7 Kate:** Breece was an intensely moral writer concerned with values, according to Tom Douglass.

**Tom**: I think what Breece realized about the world he was living in was that the traditional moral choices or values no longer existed. Instead, it was replaced with a world of individual choice, where individuals went off "helter skelter", here and there. I think Breece understood this as the destruction of a moral center that he was trying to rediscover in his art. In order to recover that moral center, he placed his characters in dilemmas that challenged the personal choices that they made. For him, personal choice DID matter. What you did in your tiniest private moments was very important, if not sacred.

He'd heap up things against his characters. Heap up things that got in their way, obstacles or boundaries they had somehow to get through, just to see what they would do, what choices they would make. Now what are you going to do? And sometimes his characters don't behave very nicely. They behave very badly.

**8** Kate: When life gets rough, Pancake's characters can't take a vacation or fly off somewhere. Most of them find comfort or meaning in the natural world. They go off into the woods. With everything falling apart, Buddy goes hunting.

By the time Buddy crested the ridge, he could feel the pain of trailer heat leave his head, and he stopped short of the salt blocks he'd laid out last fall. He held in a breath to slow the wheezing, and when it stopped, sat on his old stump, watching the first mild light of the sky glow brown. He

loaded his gun and watched a low trail in the brush, a trail he saw through outlines of snow in the ghost light. From the hollow, dog yelps carried to the ridge. The trail was empty.

Behind him, something rattled in the leaves, and he turned his head slowly, hearing the bones in his neck click. In the brown light, he made out the rotted ribs of an old log barn he had played in before they sold the land, moved to the hollow. Something scurried past it, ran away from him and up the ridge. From the baying of the dogs below, he was sure it was a fox.

Between the clouds and the hills hung the sun, moving fast enough to track, making the snow glisten on the branches. When he looked away from the sun, his eyes were drawn to the cool shadow of a deer standing against the yellow ribbon of sunlight.

**9 Kate**: All these different guys find comfort in the out-of-doors. Ottie, the truck driver, painfully misses the natural world. Colly, faced with the sale of the farm, goes wading in a pool, gaffing a turtle.

**Wilson:** "I take up my sack and gaff for a turkle. Some quick chubs flash under the bank. In the moss-dapples, I see rings spread where a turkle ducked under. This sucker is mine. The pool smells like rot, and the sun is a hardish brown.

I wade in. He goes for the roots of a log. I shove around, feel my gaff twitch. This is a smart turkle, but still a sucker. I bet he could pull liver off a hook for the rest of his days, but he is a

sucker for the roots that hold him while I work my gaff. I pull him up and see he's a snapper. He's got his stubby neck curved round, biting at the gaff. I lay him on the sand and take out Pop's knife.

10 Kate: It's one of Breece's big themes. People who are connected to the natural world have a source of strength other people don't know about. They know if they move to a city, they'd lose that. That the modern world doesn't value it like they do. Irene McKinney:

**Irene**: All of Breece Pancake's male characters have a very deep connection with the land, and when society itself fails them, they just turn away and walk away off into the woods. They go hunting. They observe the weather. They go kill a turtle for soup. They shoot a deer. This puts them back into primary relationship with the land. And I understand this turning away from the failures of the social world, back to something that's natural.

**Kate**: Breece Pancake understood that in his bones. Tom Douglass:

**Tom**: In Charlottesville, he would give presents of fish to his neighbors and try to get them outdoors with him. He did that when he was a kid too. He was a solitary kinda kid. He would take a friend or two out in the woods and talk with them. Always a quest for letting him be himself with another person and let them be themselves, rather than make believe in a social context.

**Kate**: Irene McKinney:

**Irene**: When he would meet people, one of the first questions he always asked was if they went hunting. So, I think he wanted to make that connection, and he tried in small ways to do it. To bring bookish people into the natural world that he loved, and also into the rural and small-town society that he loved and that he was connected with.

Music

11 Kate: But Pancake, like many other West Virginians, had to leave the state to work. That separation colors every story he wrote.

**Irene**: I've taught Breece Pancake for several years. And as I went over and over those stories, I kept thinking about the central conflict in his life, which seems to me, not to be reductionist, but it is: Should I stay, or should I go? And this is something you find echoing all the way through WV literature and through the lives of people who are not writers.

The sense that you're economically powerless and you're culturally powerless creates a great conflict in us because we have a real love for our culture. And I feel that in Breece very, very strongly.

**Kate**: The clash between the rural culture, closely connected to the land, and the modern culture, divorced from the land?

**Irene**: There were these two worlds, side by side. And in Breece Pancake's generation, they are clashing. They are causing a terrible grinding pain in all the people in the region who still feel a great, abiding connection and affection to the land and to animals and to farming and foresting and hunting and small-town life, relatives, all those things. They feel this deep connection, and yet they feel that they should be leaving. They feel that if they were worth anything at all, they would high-tail it out of there.

And so, all his young men in his stories are sitting at lunch counters thinking, "Why don't I leave?" or "Why did she leave? What should I do? This land is dying right under my feet. I can't keep the farm going. I don't really want to keep the farm going." So that kind of conflict, I think, is just really acute all the way through Breece Pancake's work. And he worked very, very hard to try to come to terms with that some way and just to articulate it.

That's the really valuable thing. He articulated something that had not been articulated before.

12 Kate: Here's Colly again. Just as he pulls the turtle out of the pond and is cutting it up to eat that night, the real estate developer drives up. He says:

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"I saw you from the road - just came down to see about my offer."
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Blood drips from the poke to the dust. It makes dark paste. Trent pockets his hands, looks over the cane. A cloud blocks the sun, and my crop glows greenish in the shade.

"It'll come out," he says. I hope not. I grin and watch the turkle's mouth gape on the sand.

**Kate**: They go their different directions, Colly on his tractor.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I told you yesterday, Mr. Trent, it ain't mine to sell." I tone it down. I don't want no hard feelings. "You got to talk to Mom."

<sup>&</sup>quot;This is about the last real farm left around here," Trent says.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Blight'll get what the dry left," I say. I shift the sack to my free hand. I see I'm giving in. I'm letting this guy go and push me around.

<sup>&</sup>quot;How's your mother getting along?" he says. I see no eyes behind his smoky glasses.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Pretty good," I say. "She's wanting to move to Akron." I swing the sack a little toward Ohio and spray some blood on Trent's pants. "Sorry," I say.

I pass Trent's dusty Lincoln, move away from my bitten cane. It can go now, the stale seed, the drought, the blight. It can go when she signs the papers. I know I will always be to blame, but it can't just be my fault.

I stop my tractor on the terraced road to the barn and look back across the cane to the creek bed. Yesterday, Trent said the bottoms would be filled with dirt. That will put the houses above flood, but it'll raise the flood line. Under all those houses, my turkles will turn to stone. Our Herefords make rusty patches on the hill. I see Pop's grave and wonder if the new high waters will get over it.

I watch the cattle play. A rain must be coming. A rain is always coming when cattle play. Sometimes they play for snow, but mostly, it's rain.

music

13 Kate: Some of the characters also find great comfort in the history of the land, the knowledge that they're just part of a chain of creatures who have lived on that particular piece of land. In the story, "Trilobites", Colly is always looking for fossils, just as Breece did as a boy. Most of all, he wants to find a trilobite.

**Tom**: I think it represents a connection not only to a time, but to a place. And it's a return to first things, the origins of things. That's sort of what this trilobite represents to Breece: this sort of rootedness, this being connected to a place.

**Kate**: When Colly looks at the landscape, he sees the past superimposed over the present.

**Judd:** I lean back, try to forget these fields and flanking hills. A long time before me or these tools, the Teays flowed here. I can almost feel the cold waters and the tickling the Trilobites make when they crawl. All the waters from the old mountains flowed west, but the land lifted. I have only the bottoms and stone animals I collect. I blink and breathe.

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**Kate**: Buddy, the doghole miner, doesn't have daydreams like that.

At the foot of the smoldering bone pile where the shale waste had been dumped, Estep's little boy stopped, searching.

<sup>&</sup>quot;What ya doin' there, Andy?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Rocks," the boy said. "They's pitchers on 'em." He handed Buddy a piece of shale.

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"Fossils. Ol' dead stuff."
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The boy looked down and shrugged.

"You get on home, hear?" Buddy said, watching as Andy disappeared down the secondary, leaving him to the hum of the transformer. He wondered why the boy looked so old.

14 Kate: People are always assuming that Breece Pancake is writing as Breece Pancake. That the thoughts of his characters are his thoughts.

**Tom**: I think if you read those stories that way, then you're going to lose the beauty and the art of that book because these voices, these characters, are not Breece Pancake. They are masks, personas that he created. Maybe, in form, they're directed by some internal conflicts that he had. But they're not one-to-one representations of the artist.

West Virginia was the subject for him. He recast the stories that were told to him. Recast the things that he observed in an artistic way. He was able to make that the stuff of art.

Music

15 Kate: Breece had a pretty typical small-town upbringing. His dad worked for Carbide most of his life, and his Mom was a librarian.

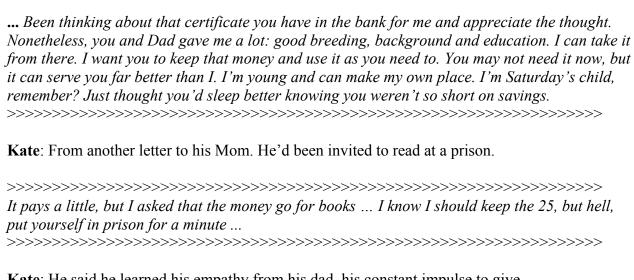
**Tom**: All three children went off to college. They lived in a modest middle-class home, and they never really wanted for anything, except probably the latest in anything.

**Kate**: Breece peppers his stories with renamed places and people from the Milton area. When he actually lived there as a kid, he was always walking around in the hills, friends recall. A tall, gangly blonde guy who often wore clothes and hats that nobody else would wear. He loved folk music: Phil Ochs, Woody Guthrie. He made model ships, looked for fossils. He and his dad walked around town together (their "walks and talks") passing time with his dad's buddies, listening to stories about The Depression, local history and jokes, so on.

Family and community were very important to Pancake. When his dad developed a serious illness, he transferred from West Virginia Wesleyan to Marshall University so he could be with his dad every day. After he left home, he wrote home several times a week. Those letters offer clues to his character. Here's part of a letter to his mom:

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm collectin' 'em."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What ya wanna save ol' dead stuff for?" he said, handing the shale back.



**Kate**: He said he learned his empathy from his dad, his constant impulse to give.

Anyway, this is for him: he taught me to give a bum a dime because it might give the bum the last chance he needs to sober up. So maybe a book, a hillbilly reading a story or just something to break the stay will shake one fellow into thinking it might not be so bad to get by honestly. 

16 Kate: Gordon Simmons, from the WV Division of Culture and History, read those letters. Here's what he has to say about Pancake:

Gordon: Pancake had that kind of empathy for the underdog, for the alienated, for the person on the outs. And he does it so well in his stories that, if you don't know anything about his personal life, you can't help but believe that he must have lived that way or he must have been that way, just because he's such a great artist at it.

He was able to imagine a character fully. His creative imagination was just so powerful.

17 Kate: Now let's hear a slice from a different kind of story, "The Way It Has to Be," the only story in Pancake's collection in which the main character is a woman. The only one that takes place outside West Virginia. Read by Ann Pancake, a distant pancake cousin from Romney, who has published an award-winning collection of her own stories, Given Ground.

The Way It Has to Be

Alena stepped under the awning of the Tastee Freeze and looked out at the rain draining into the dust, splattering craters with little clouds. When it stopped, cars hissed along the highway in whorls of mist. She stood by the slotted window, peering through the dirty glass to empty freezers and sills speckled with the crisp skeletons of flies. Far down the parking lot stood a phone booth, but as she stirred circles in the bottle caps and gravel, she knew she could not call home.

She sat on a lip of step by the porcelain drinking fountain and watched Harvey's head lolling against the car window, his holster straps arching slack above his shoulders. She felt her stomach twitch and tried to rub her eyes without smearing. She didn't want it this way, but knew Harvey would never change. She laughed a little. She'd only come from West Virginia to see the cowboys, but all this range was farmed and fenced. The openness freed and frightened her.

Harvey jostled, rolled down the window. There was a white dust of drool on his chin. "Wanna drive?" he said.

She started toward the car. "All last night I worried. Momma's cannin' stuff today."

"Lay off," he said. "You got a right to get out."

Kate: They start off driving toward Oklahoma City.

**Ann**: Harvey took the wheel, and they drove down a small secondary toward a farm. Alena watched the land slip by, growing flatter, longer in the new heat. Always the steady haze hid the horizon, and she wished she would see a cowboy.

**Kate**: Harvey just got out of prison. He wants to get even with a guy. He finds him and shoots him.

She could still see it: the man reached out to shake, and Harvey handed him three in the chest.

"I'm afraid," she said and could not forget the old woman sitting on the porch, stringing beans. Alena wondered if she still sat there, her mouth open, her son dead in the yard.

"Have a drink," Harvey said. He had stopped shaking.

**Kate**: And the story twists from there, twisting with Alena's choices.

music

**Kate**: When he died, Breece left behind an outline for a novel in which Alena would have been one of the characters, along with Colly, Ottie, and Buddy. They were all going to meet somehow. Pancake had applied for money to write the novel. This was typical of his hard-at-work, planahead style. Tom Douglass:

18 Tom: He was a night owl. He'd stay up real late at night. Maybe four or six hours later, he'd wake in the wee hours of the morning and maybe write some more. His work ethic was

incredible. His fiction's very tight and very well-phrased. And that comes from writing over and over again. Some of these stories he wrote maybe twenty times, maybe ten handwritten drafts, then maybe as many typewritten drafts.

**Kate**: From one of his letters home:

"The only thing about writing first drafts is that it's just as much a drain as basic training. I've been at it since seven this morning, and at 2:30, I feel whipped. Seven pages. I know that doesn't sound like much, but I assure you I bleed with every word."

**Kate**: Pancake intensely admired Tom Kromer, a writer from Huntington, who wrote one book

**Kate**: Pancake intensely admired Tom Kromer, a writer from Huntington, who wrote one book during the Depression in a lean, fast-paced style that Pancake consciously incorporated into his own writing.

**Tom**: He told his students to "Look upon your stories as a fine wine, one aged and well-made, not as a cup of instant coffee. Rewriting is the key to refined fiction," and that's what he learned at the University of Virginia.

music

19 Kate: Pancake's last years were spent in the graduate writing program at the University of Virginia. Several teachers, including John Casey and James MacPherson, recognized his talent and gave him special attention. But the social snobbishness he found in Charlottesville really bothered him.

**Tom**: He resented that land of refined manners in Virginia. Wealth, and property, and blood lines, and exclusion. And he found himself a stranger in it.

Among his fellow students, he stood out because of his cowboy boots, his large US Army belt buckle, his blue jeans, and the hill twang in his voice. His friend and classmate Nancy Ramsey recalls, "He was so different from all those little mealy-mouthed graduate students. There was Breece coming down the hall with his cowboy boots clicking and stomping."

According to Chuck Perdue, one of Breece's teachers, Pancake was thought of as some sort of Appalachian primitive. Some were both attracted and repelled by that perception, and he helped it along. Once, he told a group of graduate students about how he had stopped along the highway to pick up a freshly killed rabbit and took it home and skinned it out and cooked it. They were rather negatively impressed and talked about it with considerable disgust. And he added, "and Breece enjoyed their reaction."

He was different from many at the university because he came from the mountains, and because he had access to something that many no longer had: a rural woodsman's experience, for instance. He had also worked dozens of jobs before entering graduate school.

**Kate**: So, he had a lot more life experience to draw from. Some from the University of Virginia have described Pancake as less sophisticated than his fellow students, but he felt they were less sophisticated.

**Tom**: Breece found that many of his fellow students had not worked at all, and this was incomprehensible to someone who had been taught to work hard, pay as you go, and to make it on your own. Concerning his fellow students, he raged, "What the hell do those people know about getting by? What is the good of knowing books if you haven't had a life?"

His students admired him for his integrity. They knew that Breece was rough on himself and on his own writing as he was with them. And that made it OK. Sometimes his students copied his dress: the blue jeans, flannel shirt, boots, and blue jean jacket. And once they teased him, "See, Mr. Pancake, we're just like you." And Pancake laughed and said, "Yes, but you're not authentic like me."

music

**20 Kate**: While he was at the University of Virginia, *The Atlantic Monthly* published three of his stories, an amazing accomplishment for a graduate student. By the way, this is where Breece picked up the "D'J" in his name. When *The Atlantic* sent galleys of his story, they had misprinted Breece D. Pancake's name. They wrote it "D'J." And when Breece saw that, he laughed a lot, friends say. He'd been really nervous about it, and that loosened him up.

"Leave it," he said. So, in the literary world ever after, he's been Breece D'J Pancake. His real middle name is Dexter.

Here's a section from a letter to his sister after his first story was accepted. Wilson Hall is the English Department at UVA.

>>>>>>> Dear Donnie,

Made it! Atlantic bought "Trilobites" for \$750. Don't know when they'll print it, but Manning wrote personal congrats and said they'll put some editorial comments in at a later date.

This has really set fire to Wilson Hall and the – cross yourself – English Department. Poor second-rate citizen Pancake who can't speak the King's English, who lost the Balsch Prize by one, who just was never good enough for Peter Taylor to take seriously, who, God forbid, went to work when the money ran out, that turkey made it. I went to mass that night, worked the next day, and I still put my pants on one leg at a time.

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**Tom**: I think that he was alienated in a way that is not negative. Alienation is a way of preserving the self, and I think he tried to do that above all else, preserve his own identity, his own voice.

**Kate**: Here's Irene McKinney:

**Irene**: I spent a year at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, and every time I drove over the mountains, I thought about Breece Pancake. All you have to do is drive over the mountains and go down into that civilized valley around Charlottesville, and suddenly you're in a totally different world. And that's where Breece was in graduate school.

He was enormously successful for somebody his age, was publishing in the Atlantic and getting a lot of recognition from older writers. And yet, I think that that split was not healed in his mind and in spirit at all. So, I imagined him when I would pull up into the mountains out of Charlottesville, as leaving that hypercivilized world, moneyed world, world of confident people, and climbing higher and higher up into the mountains until you get away from everything.

And then after you get over a couple of mountain ranges, you're in a different world. A you come down into the valleys there, you get past Elkins and Buckhannon, you get down into the pockets where people have lived for a long time in a lot of old ways. And those old ways are a lot more close to the land and a lot more primitive – in the positive sense of the word; primitive in the sense of touching the natural world on a daily basis.

**21 Kate**: Well, it's time for an entire story. "The First Day of Winter" illustrates just about everything people have said about Pancake's writing so far in this program. It's about a guy named Hollis, faced with a basic moral choice with no easy answer. This is read by John Morris.

>>>>>>> The First Day of Winter

Hollis sat by his window all night, staring at his ghost in glass, looking for some way out of the tomb Jake had built for him. Now he could see the first blue blur of morning growing behind bare tree branches, and beyond them, the shadows of the farm. The work was done. Silos stood full of corn, hay bales rose to the barn's roof, and the slaughter stock had gone to market. It was work done for figures in a bank, for debts, and now corn stubble leaned in the fields among stacks of fodder laced with frost. He could hear his parents shuffling about downstairs for their breakfast; his old mother giggling, her mind half gone from blood too thick in her veins; his father, now blind and coughing. He had told Jake on the phone, "They'll live a long time." Jake would not have his parents put away like furniture. Hollis asked Jake to take them into his parsonage at Harpers Ferry; the farm was failing. Jake would not have room: the parsonage was too modest, his family too large.

He went downstairs for coffee. His mother would not bathe, and the warm kitchen smelled of her as she sat eating oatmeal with his father. The lids of the blind man's eyes hung half closed and he had not combed his hair. It stuck out in tufts where he had slept on it.

"Cer'als hot." His mother giggled. The crescent of her mouth made a weak grin. "Your daddy's burnt his mouth."

"I ain't hungry." Hollis poured his coffee, leaned against the sink.

The old man turned his head a little toward Hollis, bits of meal stuck to his lips. "You going hunting like I asked?"

Hollis set his cup in the sink. "Thought I'd work on the car. We can't be with no way to town all winter because you like squirrel meat."

The old man ate his cereal, staring ahead. "Won't be Thanksgiving without wild game."

"Won't be Thanksgiving till Jake and Milly gets here," she said.

"They said last night, they ain't coming down," his father said, and the old woman looked at Hollis dumbly.

"I got to work on the car," Hollis said, and went toward the door.

"Car's been setting too long," the old woman yelled. "You be careful of snakes."

Outside, the air was sharp, and when the wind whipped against his face, he gasped. The sky was low, gray, and the few Angus he had kept from the market huddled near the feeder beside the barn. He threw them some hay, brought his tool chest from the barn, began to work on the car. He got in to see if it would start, ground it. As he sat behind the wheel, door open, he watched his father come down from the porch with his cane. The engine's grinding echoed through the hollows, across the hills.

Hollis' knuckles were bloody, scraped under the raised hood, and they stung as he turned the key harder, gripped the wheel. His father's cane tapped through the frosty yard, the still of December, and came closer to Hollis. The blind man's mouth was shut against the cold, the dark air so close to his face, and Hollis stopped trying the engine, got out.

"You can tell she's locking up." The blind man faced him.

"This ain't a tractor." Hollis walked around, looked under the hood, saw the hairline crack along one side of the engine block.

His father's cane struck the fender, and he stood still and straight beside his son. Hollis saw his father's fingers creeping across the grill, holding him steady. "She sounded locked up," he said again.

"Yeah." Hollis edged the man aside, shut the hood. He didn't have the tools to pull the engine and had no engine to replace it. "Maybe Jake'll loan you the money for a new car."

"No," the old man said. "We'll get by without bothering Jake."

"Put it on the cuff? You think the bank would give us another nickel?"

"Jake has too much to worry about as it is."

"I asked him to take you all last night."

"Why?"

"I asked him and Molly to take you in and he said no. I'm stuck here. I can't make my own way for fighting a losing battle with this damn farm."

"Farming's making your way."

"Hell."

"Everybody's trying for something better anymore. When everybody's going one way, it's time to turn back." He rationalized in five directions.

In the faced morning, the land looked scarred. The first snows had already come, melted, and sealed the hills with a heavy frost the sun could not soften. Cold winds had peeled away the last clinging oak leaves, left the hills a quiet gray-brown that sloped into the valley on either side.

He saw the old man's hair bending in the wind. "Come on inside, you'll catch cold."

"You going hunting like I asked?"

"I'll go hunting."

As he crossed the last pasture heading up toward the ridges, Hollis felt a sinking in his gut, a cold hunger. In the dry grass, he shuffled toward the fence line to the rising edges and high stand of oaks. He stopped at the fence, looked down on the valley and the farm. A little at a time, Jake had sloughed everything to him, and now that his brother was away, just for this small moment, Hollis was happier.

He laid down his rifle, crossed the fence, and took it up again. He headed deeper into the oaks until they began to mingle with the yellow pine along the ridge. He saw no squirrels but sat on a stump with oaks on all sides, their roots and bottom trunk brushed clean by squirrel tails. He grew numb with waiting, with cold. Taking a nickel from his pocket, he raked it against the notched stock, made the sound of a squirrel cutting nuts. Soon enough, he saw a flick of tail, the squirrel's body hidden by the tree trunk. He tossed a small rock beyond the tree, sent it stirring and rattling the leaves, watched as the squirrel darted to the broadside trunk. Slowly, he raised his rifle, and when the echoes cleared from the far hills across the valley, the squirrel fell. He field-dressed it, and the blood dried cold on his hands. Then he moved up the ridge toward the pine thicket, stopped every five minutes to kill until the killing drained him, and his game bag weighed heavily at his side.

He rested against a tree near the thicket, stared into its dark wavings of needles and branches. There, almost blended with the red needles, lay a fox. He watched it without moving and thought of Jake, hidden, waiting for him to break, to move. In a fit of meanness, he snapped his rifle to his shoulder and fired. When he looked again, the fox was gone, and he caught a glimpse of its white-tipped tail drifting through the piney darkness.

Hollis dropped the gun, sat against the tree, and when the wind snatched at his throat, fumbled to button his collar. He felt old and tired, worn and beaten, and he thought of what Jake had said about the state home he wanted the folks in. They starve them, he said, and they mistreat them, and in the end, they smother them. For a moment, Hollis wondered what it would be like to smother them, and in the same moment caught himself laughing. A darkness had covered him, and he pulled his gloves on to hide the blood on his hands. He stumbled up and, grabbing his gun, ran between trees to the clearing nearest the fence, and when he crossed into the pasture, felt again a light mist of sweat on his face, a calming.

He crossed the fields and fences, slogged across the bottoms and up to the house. Inside, his mother sat in the tiny back room, listening, with her husband, to quiet music on the radio. She came to Hollis, and he saw in her wide-set eyes a fear and knowledge. And he knew she could see what insanity had driven him to.

He handed her the squirrels, dressed and skinned, from his game bag and went to wash his hands. From the corner of his eye, he saw her, saw her as she dropped the squirrels into the soaking brine, saw her hand go up to her mouth, saw her lick a trace of blood and smile.

Sitting at the table, he looked down at his empty plate, waiting for grace, and when it was said, passed the plate of squirrel. He had taken for himself only the forequarters and liver, leaving the meaty hinds and saddles.

"Letter come from Jake." The 'ol man held a hindquarter, gnawed at it.

"And pitchers of them." His mother got up, came back with a handful of snapshots. "He done fine for himself. Lookee at the pretty church and the children," she said.

The church was yellow brick and low, stained windows. In the picture, Jake stood holding a baby, his baby girl, named after their mother. His face was squinted with a smile. The old woman poked a withered finger into the picture. "That's my Mae Ellen," she said. "That's my favorite."

"Shouldn't have favorites." His father laid down the bones.

"Well, you got to face that he done fine for himself."

Hollis looked out the window. The taste of liver, a taste like acorns, coated his mouth with cold grease. "Coming snow," he said.

His father laughed. "Can't feel it."

"Jake says they're putting a little away now. Says the church is right nice people."

"They ain't putting away enough to hear him tell it."

"Now," she said. "He's done just fine, just let it be."

When the meal was finished, Hollis pushed back his chair. "I asked Jake to help by taking youall in. But he said no."

The old man turned away. Hollis saw tears in his blind eyes and his body shook from crying. He wagged his head again and again. The old woman scowled, and she took up the plates and carried them to the sink. When she came back, she bent over Hollis.

"What'd you figure he'd say? He's worked like an ox and done good, but he can't put us all up."

The old man was still crying, and she went to him, helped him from the chair. He was bent with age, with crying, and he raised himself slowly, strung his flabby arm around the woman's waist. He turned to Hollis. "How could you do such a goddamned thing as that?"

"We'll take our nap," she said. "We need our rest."

Hollis went to the yard, to where the car stood, looked again at the cracked block. He ran his hand along the grille where the old man's hands had cleared away dust. The wind took his breath, beat on him. The first light flecks of ice bounced from the fenders. The land lay brittle, open, and dead.

He went back to the house, and in the living room stretched out on the couch. Pulling the folded quilt to his chest, he held it there like a pillow against himself. He heard the cattle lowing to be fed, heard the soft rasp of his father's crying breath, heard his mother's broken humming of a hymn. He lay that way in the graying light and slept.

The sun was blackened with snow, and the valley closed in quietly with humming, quietly as an hour of prayer.

Kate: So, he chooses to stay. Tom Douglass:

**Tom**: "Quits ain't the answer." Hollis is a good example of somebody who lives by that maxim. He can't make a choice when it comes to loving his family or the duty he feels toward them.

**22** Tom: The hand-to-mouth existence Pancake is describing is, in a way, a fact of life, not just in West Virginia, but in any region of the world where people are brutalized into living in a certain way. And this is an example of a kind of world he created to challenge what the human spirit is capable of, what human beings are capable of. And I think you could cast this story in Africa, in the Middle East, in the Southwest, anywhere in the world where you could tell a story like this.

**Kate**: Hollis is almost at that point, but yet he makes a choice to stay with his parents.

**Tom**: Well, that wasn't Hollis' choice. He's resigned at the end of that story to that. And what he's left with is a prayer.

Kate: Don't you think Hollis made a choice? I mean, Buddy would've left in a heartbeat.

**Tom**: And maybe so, but that's what's really good. I mean, you can't read these stories as if all these characters are the same, and Hollis is more complex than that. I think Hollis wants to leave so badly. He feels so trapped. And yet, he's conflicted by the love and duty he feels to his parents, even though they disregard him. And they think less of him than they do of his brother.

It's something that Hollis would never think of as a choice. He just did it, the obvious thing that had to be done. And I think Breece would feel the same way. It's another take on the prodigal son story: when the dutiful son is left behind.

**23 Kate**: One of Pancake's starkest stories is "A Room Forever." This story is set in an Ohio River town. The main character is a second mate on a tugboat – a guy adrift in life. As Pancake described it, "Huck Finn after the raft is no longer possible." He's in town on New Year's Eve waiting for his boat, the Delmar, to come in. Kirk Judd reading:

**Judd:** I toss my cigarette, watch it bob down the gutter-wash and through the grate. It will probably be in the Mississippi before the Delmar. Moping around these towns for nine months has made me screwy. Walking barges and securing catheads in high water has finally got me down here with the rest of the cruds. Now my mouth hurts from the coffee burn, and I don't even feel like getting soused. I walk down the street, watch people as they pass and think how even the chippies in their long vinyl coats walk like they have someplace to be.

**Kate**: He's watching an old bum make a bed with newspapers when he notices a young girl in a doorway, watching him watch the bum.

**Kate**: These two find each other again in the story, with tragic consequences. Here's Tom Douglass, whose biography of Pancake, by the way, is also called *A Room Forever*.

**Tom**: This last paragraph, I think, is a significant one because it reads, "I stop in front of the bus station, look in on the waiting people and think about all the places they are going. But I know they can't run away from it, or drink their way out of it or die to get rid of it. It's always there. It's always there. You just look at somebody, and they give you a look like the wrath of God. I turn toward the docks, walk down to see if the Delmar may be put in early."

And it's this IT, the pronoun reference IT. What is that IT that you can't run away from, or drink your way out of it, or die to get rid of it? "But it's always there." "It" is a predicament that he's describing. It's a predicament that he puts his character in that's not so dissimilar to the life any of us might face when you think that there's no future, and the past suddenly has no meaning for us. These are moments in our lives that we all have, not just in the life of Breece Pancake or the lives of some of his characters.

Lotta people read that story as strictly autobiographical, that he's trying to work through some of the difficulties that he had in his life, the psychological prisons he was trying to work out of. But I think it also talks about the predicament that he saw that we all share.

## music

**Kate**: In the literary world, it's really unusual for a book of short stories to be in print for over twenty years, as Pancake's has been. The new edition of his stories has stirred up a whole new round of praise and attention from the critics.

Breece Pancake had a traumatic experience the night he died, and his death is still a mystery. But it seems his voice will last. I asked Tom Douglass what he thinks Pancake would say to West Virginians who want to write today.

**Tom**: I think Breece would tell people from this state, from the region, that you can have a creative life. That you can express yourself as an artist and become a writer, not just recognized in your own state either, but recognized in the whole country and around the world.

I think he saw that the ordinary things in West Virginia are really worth writing about. I think that's what Breece showed people. I think he showed would-be writers that the things around them are worth writing about. And that's what he's saying: that this place, this culture, though it's derided through stereotype, has something vital to say to the rest of the country. Not maybe in the particular detail that he uses, but in the essence of these stories that have to do with a certain longing for beauty. A longing for love. A longing for redemption that we all have.

**Kate**: And that's a good place to end. We've been talking about the writing and life of Breece D'J Pancake. I'm Kate Long, and this is In Their Own Country. Thanks for listening.

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