

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.

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.”

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.

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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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