

Maggie: Right. They're just looking at the world as it's real. And we all now know how to look at the world at five or six removes. We can look at pictures on screens that are moving around, that are controlled by a little thing in our hand. And all they'd ever seen was real stuff.

17 Kate: After Maggie's mother died, she and her dad moved back to West Virginia, to Buckhannon, and then to Keyser. She was already scribbling, but she didn't think real writers would write about small-town things or things they saw around them.

Maggie: I guess I didn't think it was really wrong to write about the things I saw around me. But all the poems that I was reading seemed to be about things that were far away. I just thought, "Who would want to know?" I mean, even the lives of my family seemed basically, just weird to me. You know, like who would want to read about that?

Kate: Then she heard Louise MacNeill, West Virginia's poet laureate at the time.

Maggie: I'd never heard a poet give a poetry reading. And I hadn't read much poetry at all. And what we had read, I don't think - except for Emily Dickinson - that any of it was by women. And so when Louise McNeill came to Potomac State College in Keyser - which is where I lived and was going to high school - to give a reading, I went to hear it. And I'd never heard anything like that.

Anybody who's heard Louise MacNeill read can probably conjure her voice in your mind. It was an absolutely distinctive voice: a mountain accent and just a real connection to ancient rhythms of poetry. And I remember she had a hat on, and she had a blue dress. And when it came time for her to read, after she'd been introduced, she came out from behind the lectern and recited her poem, "Hill Daughter," which starts out, "Land of my fathers, blood of my fathers, whatever is left of your hate in the rocks, of your grudge in the stone, I have brought you at last what you sternly required that I bring you. And I have brought it alone."

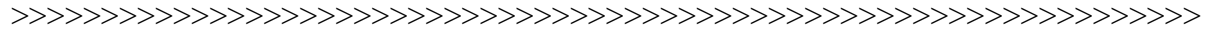
And so she read that poem, and I thought about that. And I thought, "Boy, you could probably write about some things you know."

Kate: At that point, she never would have imagined that, later in life, she would edit Louise MacNeill's autobiography, *Milkweed Ladies*.

And today, Maggie Anderson teaches at Kent State University, not far from the West Virginia border.

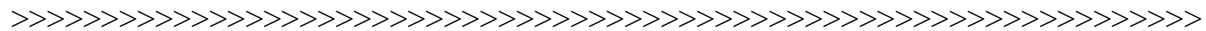
18 Maggie: I'm always homesick for West Virginia. Sometimes I'm even homesick for West Virginia when I'm in West Virginia (laugh).

Kate: Here's the first half of a poem about Ohio. Maggie's imagining that she died. And instead waking up on a cloud in the afterlife, she found herself in Ohio.



Beyond Even This

*Who would have thought the afterlife would
look so much like Ohio? A small town place,
thickly settled among deciduous trees.
I lived for what seemed a very short time.
Several things did not work out.
Casually almost, I became another one
of the departed, but I had never imagined
the tunnel of hot wind that pulls
the newly dead into the dry Midwest
and plants us like corn. I am
not alone, but I am restless.
There is such sorrow in these geese
flying over, trying to find a place to land
in the miles and miles of parking lots
that once were soft wetlands. They seem
as puzzled as I am about where to be.
Often they glide, in what I guess is
a consultation with each other,
getting their bearings, as I do when
I stare out my window and count up
what I see.*



19 Maggie: I wrote that poem shortly after I moved to Ohio. I was offered this job in Ohio. And I thought, “This is great. It’s almost like being back in West Virginia!”

Well, come to find out, there is a very different culture that rises up after you cross the Ohio River. And this is not West Virginia. This is the Midwest. And that was a place I’d told myself I’d never live. And then here I was.

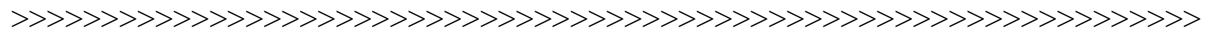
I’ve made some kind of awkward peace with it, and I’ve learned some of its charms. But I feel most comfortable in Ohio when I start driving over toward the river. And I see the little hills rising up. And I see the Ohio and West Virginia on the other side.

Kate: It’s like being across the river from the Promised Land or something.

Maggie: Yeah! Yeah. I also think it’s important to remember that when people have left West Virginia, a lot of times they have left out of economic necessity, it wasn’t a big choice they made. It was like: where’s there going to be a job? And I think that’s true for miners, and I think it’s true for teachers. And I think it’s true for writers.

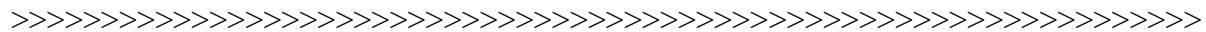
20 Kate: After college Maggie tried to make a living as a writer in West Virginia, patching together various jobs. For part of one year, she was poet-in-residence in Mercer County.

Maggie: I was so alert and alive those days, that year, and so connected to the kids I was working with. And it was one of the most beautiful falls I think I've ever seen. And I was driving around these back country roads, talking about poems with these kids. And it was, it was great.



21 *Spitting in the Leaves*

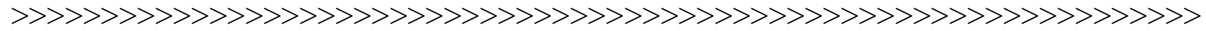
*In Spanishburg there are boys in tight jeans,
mud on their cowboy boots and they wear huge hats
with feathers, skunk feathers they tell me.
They do not want to be in school, but are.
Some teacher cared enough to hold them. Unlike
their thin disheveled cousins, the boys on Matoaka's
Main Street in October who loll against parking meters
and spit into the leaves. Because of them, someone
will think we need a war, will think the best solution
would be for them to take their hats and feathers,
their good country manners and drag them off somewhere,
to Vietnam, to El Salvador. And they'll go.
They'll go from West Virginia, from hills and back roads
that twist like politics through trees, and they'll fight,
not because they know what for, but because what they know
is how to fight. What they know is feathers,
their strong skinny arms, their spitting
in the leaves.*



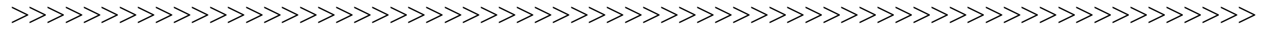
22 Kate: Did you set out to write a poem about boys going off to war?

Maggie: No, not at all. I started out to write a poem I thought was going to be about teaching poetry in the schools and this guy with the skunk feathers, and probably it's better. If I'd started out to write a poem about boys going off to war, it would've had all the risks of highfalutin rhetoric and, you know, I'm-gonna-make-a-speech kind of thing. But here, it just sort of emerged out of the poem. Out of a couple of little pieces of logic. If they're not in school, where are they going to go?

*to slip the leash back on, by wiping off
her bloody jaw. Sit black dog
I say. Lie down. Lie down.*



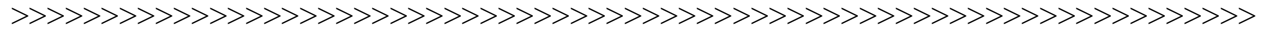
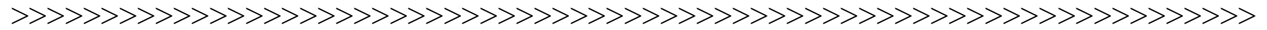
29 Kate: And now, we're going to switch directions, cover another part of life. Here come a couple of Maggie's sensual poems. Love poems.



Company

*We are making love underneath you. Our staggered
breathing is a rhyme scheme for your turning in the bed
upstairs. We giggle, and our noses grow teen-aged into the
pillows.*

*There is a contagion to this lust. We feel like a headline in
twelve-point Gothic, or an exhibitionist who doesn't know he's
being watched. As we rock each other, gently gasping, you do
not snore. You are truly our guest.*



30 Seduction

*I am the largest muscle in your thighs. I am strong and
beautiful.*

*I am the small hairs on the inside of your wrist: the base of
your neck; your spine, its indentations. I am a new sensation in
your toenails, their smallest cells. I am strong and beautiful.*

*And this feeling is as delicate as Japanese porcelain, brought by
a missionary in 1939. It is a feeling of copper tea kettles with
warm tea in them, some steam; and some starlings
outside, bursting away, leaving a taut phone line
quivering; very strong and beautiful.*

*I will wear red dresses; gold pieces will hang from my ears,
touching my neckline. I will become deeper, more ecstatic, your
black wishes. Soon you will expect certain doors to sound like
me. You will grow a new ear.*

