MAGGIE ANDERSON In Their Own Country

1 Kate Long: If you thought nobody was going to read or hear the poems you wrote, would you write them?

Maggie Anderson: Yeah, sure. Absolutely.

Kate: Why?

Maggie: For me, there's some satisfaction in being able to articulate something that I don't seem to know how to articulate in any other way. Writing is kind of a double life. I live life, and then I write life. And they're both equally important. And if I stopped breathing in either one, it would be some kind of ending.

Kate: That's Maggie Anderson, living that double life. I'm Kate Long. And this is *In Their Own Country*, a weekly program designed to help us get to know West Virginia's great tribe of poets and fiction writers. This time, it's poet Maggie Anderson.

2 Maggie: I don't think writers are any better or any worse than any other human being. But we are different from some other human beings who've made other choices. We've decided to spend a significant portion of our lives noticing caterpillars and cucumbers and other such things. And paying attention in a particular way to the events of our own local world and the larger world. And to think about those in writing.

Kate: She's got family roots in Preston County, upbringing in Keyser and New York City. She's a lively, deep thinker. Her poetry comes out in a variety of styles: sometimes funny, sometimes sensual, sometimes deeply serious. Sometimes all three.

3 *Related to the Sky*

At dusk, the blue line of these hills looks of course like waves. So I wave. Hello hills. Being hills, they do not speak back, but just draw in more light. Clouds, a small platoon of healing hands, brush the trees. I try to find the exact spot of the stars I liked in last night's sky. Impossible. The leaves sift and muffle, make room for the moon. I try to remember the color of those leaves, how they were, their shaggy shapes now draped in dark, cover the round, animal back of the hills. I try to remember how it was once ocean floor and will be again, ancestral

and related to the sky.

Kate: How the mountains were once ocean floor and will be again.

Maggie: I love studying and reading about geology and thinking about the way the earth is just not stable underneath us. I like the idea that the earth seems very solid, but really isn't.

4 Kate: Did you always have the eye of a poet, do you think?

Maggie: I know that when I was a child, I was a really productive daydreamer. I liked to just, mmm, look at things and imagine things, look in puddles, drag sticks around in puddles. My family didn't get television 'till I was maybe ten or twelve, something like that. I read. But I was also real interested in television.

I just remembered this actually not too long ago. One of the things I did was, I would get the newspaper where it told about the television programs. And we had this kind of square footstool, and I'd turn the footstool on its side, and I'd kind of pretend, I guess, to turn the knobs. And I'd sit there and stare at the footstool, watching TV (laugh).

When I think about that now, my parents must have thought I was nuts. And they did finally get a TV, shortly after that. But it was never as satisfying as the stool, what I imagined on the stool.

Kate: So you were sitting there making up little stories?

Maggie: Yeah, I guess so. I would read the description in the newspaper, like it would say, Mickey Mouse Club and who was going to do what. And I'd watch it! I could see it! I knew all about it!

So I guess it has been from a very young age that I guess I was sort of able to entertain myself. I was an only child. I was alone a lot. And I read and I wrote, drew, watched the stool (laugh). Watched TV later.

Kate: Well, you know, Merle Haggard always encourages people, says, if you want to write songs, watch the movie in your head and just tell what happened.

Maggie: That's exactly what it is. There's a movie in my head. And I just take notes. That sounds overly dramatic. But at least, when I was a kid, that seemed quite possible to do.

5 Kate: So here's a love poem for a chair: a fat, upholstered, comfortable friend who's always there in disturbing times

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Interior with Letter

Kate: You're taking an object that people usually don't think of as having people qualities, and you're giving it that.

Maggie: I guess I really must think about things that way. But it is a poetic device. I guess, technically, it's called personification. But I guess I just really think there's some kind of sentience in everything. And so chairs and furniture are like friends to me.

6 Kate: Maggie's dad came from a railroading family in Preston County, West Virginia.

Maggie: My father was one of seven children. And his father worked on the railroad, as did most of his family and most of the men that his sisters married. One of my father's sisters moved to Parsons. But other than that, they all lived in Rowlesburg, all their lives. Nobody went very far.

Kate: Except for your dad.

Maggie: Except for my dad. Interesting, you know, how sometimes in a family where nobody's gone on to college, and it's a big family - there were seven children - they decide which one gets education. My father was the youngest, and he got the education.

That was a big leap in one generation for both my mother and father. My dad met my mother when they were in college. She was as teacher of his at WVU. They were first generation in their families to have high school education, even let alone college.

Kate: They lived in the New York City area when Maggie was little, in part because West Virginia's teaching salaries were so low then.

Maggie: So I really did have two places when I was growing up. Those places, while maybe not equally important, each had a very particular influence on my life. One of the first things I remember doing with my father was singing songs.

Kate: Broadway tunes and traditional music from West Virginia.

Maggie: We sang a lot of different things. We sang the "West Virginia Hills." That's one of the first songs I remember learning. And we used to sing it to people in New York! Like a little band. He taught me union songs and railroad songs. One of my father's favorite songs was "The Wreck of the Old 97." He taught me that when I was a kid.

7 Kate: Her mother got leukemia and died when Maggie was small.

Maggie: I knew my mother so little because she was ill. She had leukemia. She essentially left my daily life when I was about 6 1/2. But one thing I do know about her, she was from a farm in western Pennsylvania. And she always insisted that I learn things about the natural world. She took me to the Bronx Botanical Garden. She took me on walks in Central Park and made me identify trees. She taught me, this is an oak leaf, this is a maple leaf. We planted things. She always planted vegetables, even if it was on the fire escape.

8 There

Hot summer days he'd get off the bus from the city with his tie loosened and his jacket over his shoulder and his daughter would run to meet him.

Did you bring me something, Daddy? Did you bring me something?

And in the apartment, before his wife died, she'd be there cooking dinner.

Every summer she grew tomatoes in boxes outside their tenth floor kitchen window. She even made and canned juice for the winter. Once she tried peppers.

They'd have a drink in the living room with the fan going, while the daughter played with the monkey on wooden sticks that did ring tricks as she moved the sticks

in and out, in and out.

Sometimes he would talk about the humidity or the ride on the subway. Or what happened at the office. And most every evening his wife, before she died, would speak of her window box vegetables, how well they did, despite the awkward staking under the fire escape and the farm they had left to come live there.

9 Kate: And every summer, they'd drive to West Virginia.

Maggie: My parents used to like to drive at night. I remember being bundled up in pajamas and put in the back seat of the car. And I always remember that, about morning, my parents would start singing "The West Virginia Hills." And I'd wake up, and they'd be coming back into West Virginia. It was one of the first songs I learned to sing. And we'd all sing, (sings) "Oh, the West Virginia Hills." And it'd be, just the sun coming up.

I remember, Rowlesburg seemed so big to me when I was a kid. You know, it was bustly then! There was a drug store. The mail came twice a day. There were a lot more things to do, and a lot more things I could do on my own than there were back in the city.

I had a bunch of cousins. And we'd go down to the river and play and catch crayfish and look out for copperheads and sometimes gather up black snakes in a bucket, and that kind of thing.

So it was kind of like a big playground, a *really* big playground. At that time, we were living in New Jersey right across the river from Manhattan. And I had a playground. And it had a swing and a slide and some other things, but it had a chain-link fence around it and a gate. And that's where we were supposed to stay. And it felt like Rowlesburg was this big playpen! I could go all over the place. And people didn't worry about me, and didn't worry what was gonna happen to me. So it was an enormous sense of freedom.

10 Maggie: I had an aunt in Rowlesburg whom I especially loved, my Aunt Nida. I'd go to her house a lot, whenever I could and spend time there. And after the supper dishes were done, we'd always sit on the porch. And her husband would sit out there too and chew tobacco and spit in a can.

Kate: And she asked about your poetry.

Maggie: Yes. She asked to read my poetry. And she asked to read the books I read in college. And I remember one summer, in particular, I was in Morgantown, taking a summer school class in southern writers, and I was reading Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. And what we'd do, I'd

read the books I was supposed to read, and then I'd leave them there. And during the week, she would read them. And then I'd come back the next weekend, and we'd talk about them.

It was a wonderful thing, kind of like getting two educations for the price of one. But she was a wonderful critic. She would read these books and get so excited about them. We'd talk about Faulkner, we talked about technique, we talked about those strange voices. We talked about Eudora Welty.

I wanted to write a poem to honor my Aunt Nita.

Kate: So here's a poem called "Sonnet for Her Labor."

My Aunt Nita's kitchen was immaculate and dark, and she was always bending to the sink below the window where the shadows off the bulk of Laurel Mountain rose up to the brink of all the sky she saw from there. She clattered pots on countertops wiped clean of coal dust, fixed three meals a day, fried meat, mixed batter for buckwheat cakes, hauled water, in what seemed lust for labor. One March evening, after cleaning, she lay down to rest and died. I can see Uncle Ed, his fingers twined at his plate for the blessing; my Uncle Craig leaning back, silent in red galluses. No one said a word to her. All that food and cleanliness. No one ever told her it was good.

11 Kate: And a poem for her grandmother.

The Wash in My Grandmother's Arms

In the only photograph of my paternal grandmother she wears an apron and a dust cap, holds her washing in her arms, and squints at the camera as if she finds photography too theoretical, its attempt to capture history as it's made. I never knew my grandmother but I've heard stories; how she never wanted anyone to marry, how she feared thunderstorms and the whistles as helper trains pushed forty times their weight up Laurel Mountain.

My grandmother had seven children, no teeth, and no belief in medicine. I recognize my relative by her suspicion of impropriety in taking pictures.

It's my grandmother's conviction that, like lightning or heavy trains on mountain sides working against gravity, photography and marriage leave too much to chance, to interpretation later of expression or disaster. She is clearly overworked and resists this fixing of the present in a beautiful nostalgia, the diurnal translated as the representative. My grandmother clutches her wash in the wind and I locate my inheritance: how she holds to her task in the face of speculation, as if the picture could not possibly turn out, as if the sheets were trying to fly away from her like pale extinct birds.

Kate: "I locate my inheritance." What do you mean by that?

Maggie: I just see some look in her eyes. And I recognize that kind of stubbornness in myself, and that kind of, you know, just disregard for what people say can or can't be done.

12 Kate: During the Depression, Walker Evans, the famous Depression photographer, took pictures in Rowlesburg, among other places. Maggie wrote a series of poems about those pictures.

Kate: Now, I'm fascinated by your poems about Walker Evans. You've got it kind of out for Walker Evans.

Maggie: Well, that's kind of interesting. I sort of do, have it out for him. See, what he did was, he came in here for some very good reasons, to photograph poor people during the Depression. And he wasn't poor. He was a fashion photographer in New York. And I think, he worked for the WPA, so he had this idea that he was doing a good thing for the country. He's also a wonderful photographer.

But there just something about the stance he took as he stood and photographed these representatives of poverty - however much good it might have done to bring public attention to the realities - that makes me feel protective of those people.

The weirdest thing was, when I was teaching this class at the University of Pittsburgh – and often because I like photographs, like to work with them - I assigned students to find a photograph. One of my students came in with a photograph she had found. It was a Walker Evans photograph of a cemetery in Rowlesburg, West Virginia, which happens to be the cemetery where my

grandfather and my grandmother and some of my aunts and uncles who died before I was born were buried, right there in the cemetery.

And it just brought it really close to me that he was literally photographing my people. And I just sort of felt protective about that. I felt like, well, he doesn't know anything about my people. I didn't say he didn't have a right to photograph them. But he couldn't, he couldn't know them in the way that I do.

13 "House and Graveyard, Rowlesburg, WV 1935"

I can't look long at this picture, a Walker Evans photograph of a West Virginia graveyard in the Great Depression, interesting for the sharp light it throws on poverty, intimate for me because it focuses on my private and familial dead. This is where

my grandparents, my Uncle Adrian and my Aunt Margaret I am named for are buried. Adrian died at seven, long before I was born. Margaret died in childbirth in 1929. The morning sun falls flat against the tombstones then spreads across Cannon Hill behind them. I see

how beautiful this is even though everyone was poor, but in Rowlesburg nothing's changed. Everything is still the same, just grayer. Beside the graveyard is Fike's house with the rusty bucket, the tattered trellis and the same rocker Evans liked. Miss Funk,

the school teacher, now retired, and her widowed sister still live down the road out of the camera's range. I remember how my Aunt Nita loved that mountain, how my father told of swinging from the railroad bridge down into the Cheat. Nita worked

for the Farm Security Administration too, as Evans did. She checked people's houses for canned goods, to see how many they had stored, and she walked the road by here, every day. I can't look long at this picture. It warps my history into politics, makes art of my biography through someone else's eyes. It's a good photograph, but Walker Evans didn't know my family, not the distance his careful composition makes me feel now

from my silent people in their graves.

14 Kate: With almost every line of these poems, you seem to be saying, "The photographer is saying that he's showing you what's going on, but he can't know."

Maggie: Yeah. I think that's true. A photograph gives you a picture of somebody's picture of what's there.

Kate: But doesn't a poem do that too?

Maggie: Yeah. And that's the part where I can't be too critical of Walker Evans. Because I'm an artist too, and I understand what he's doing. And I think there's always that question of appropriation in art. Are you taking somebody's experience and using it for your own ends? Or violating it in some way?

Kate: And another poem, about another Evans photograph:

15 Mining Camp Residents, WV 1935

They had to seize something in the face of the camera. The woman's hand touches her throat as if feeling for a necklace that isn't there. The man buries one hand in his overall pocket, loops the other through a strap, and the child twirls a strand of her hair as she hunkers in the dirt at their feet. Maybe Evans asked them to stand in that little group in the doorway, a perfect triangle of people in the morning sun. Perhaps he asked them to hold their arms that way, or bend their heads. It was his composition, after all. And they did what he said.

16 Maggie: When I look at some of those pictures, one of the things I start thinking about is: these are people who've never seen movies or television. And they look at the camera - like my grandmother - as if it's wholly theoretical, this person standing over there. It's a way of looking that we can't have now. We've all seen too many screens, too many pictures.

Kate: A very direct way of looking. They don't think they're having their picture taken.

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?

23 Kate: She's never been an ivory tower poet.

Maggie: I've worked as a poet in schools and communities, and I've taught classes in all grades. Taught in prisons. I've taught in senior centers and community centers.

Kate: Maggie and a former student, David Hassler, put together a wonderful anthology of poems about the school day, called "Learning by Heart: Contemporary American Poetry about Schools."

Maggie: We divided the book up like the school day. It starts out with home room and then there's language lessons and recess and sports and clubs. And we have poems throughout the book that talk about these various experiences. We each included one poem of our own in this anthology. And the one I included is one of my poems that I think of, I guess, as a love poem for a teacher. It's called "The Thing You Must Remember."

24 The thing you must remember is how, as a child, you worked hours in the art room, the teachers' hands over yours, molding the little clay dog. You must remember how nothing mattered but the imagined dog's fur. The shape of his ears and his paws. The grey clay felt dangerous. Your small hands were pressing what you couldn't say with your limited words. When the dog's back stiffened, then cracked to white shards in the kiln, you learned how the beautiful suffers from too much attention. How clumsy a single vision can grow. And fragile with trying too hard. The thing you must remember is the art teacher's capable hands - large, rough, and grainy - over yours. Holding on.

25 Kate: Your mother died of leukemia when you were very young.

Maggie: The memories I do have of her were mostly outdoor images, and they're very good memories. And I have a kind of recurrent memory of her that worked its way in some form into the poem.

In My Mother's House

In the dream, she is never sick and it is always summer. She wears a polished cotton sundress with wide shoulder straps, sits calmly in a wooden lawn chair, green, I remember from a photograph. I wonder if she'll know me now; but want to keep formality awhile. I shake her hand and introduce her to my friends, who seem more like my parents' friends than mine.

subdued, and gathering with wine glasses on the grass. Then I'm in the house my mother's lived in since her death and she has changed her clothes, put on her plaid viyella shirt.

She's sitting in her attic, among suitcases and webs of boxes. A yellow triangle of light skims the floor into the lap of her wool skirt. I have had to be resourceful to get to her,

climbing up a bright blue ladder to the window that broke down as I came through, transformed itself from glass back into sand. My mother holds a glass jar in her hands. She seems

preoccupied, as if it's tiring to be dead.
I ask her, Are you weary? and she says, No, are you? Yes, I say and move into her arms for a minute only, then she says she must be off, something pressing, like the weight on my heart as I wake, alive now, but her body with me still, and warm, in the silk stockings without shoes they dressed her in for burying

26 Maggie: Those images of my mother - and others of my family who have died - they come to me in dreams, they're so real. And then, waking up and realizing they're not there, I think there's no other feeling of loss like that.

Kate: Connecticut composer, Stephen Gryc, was so moved when he heard Maggie's poetry, he composed music that does go beautifully with her poetry. Here's a sample:

27 What Grief Does

Like the ivy in my bedroom that climbs steadily from the red pot out the window, grief is the power of certain madness. And one dreams of bodies. They rise up from beneath blue blankets and expose themselves. They fly under the fluorescent lights and grow long fingernails. They never speak. The language of grief is silence.

This will never go away. It is your middle name, how you hate it. Grief grows with you, against you, forever: a movie title you can almost remember, or a friend's phone number. Like the ham bone from the party that the black dog buries and reburies under the forsythia bush, grief only becomes more yellow, a bright fire at the center of the earth. And it keeps showing up, again and again, on the living room floor."

Kate: "Like the ham bone the black dog buries and reburies."

28 Kate: Maggie wrote a whole series of poems about a black dog. On one level, she does have a black dog. On another level, she's talking about depression, that state Winston Churchill called his "black dog." Here's one of Maggie's black dog poems.

The Game

I take the black dog down to the field in early morning. I find a stick heavy enough to seem like work, and thick enough for her to get her teeth into. We begin. Sit, I tell her. Fetch. Drop Sit, fetch, drop Black dog leaps and turns and slides through wet grass and muck. *She wants to outrun the stick's trajectory,* to catch the task midair, get ahead of the game. So many sticks, so many ways to chase and grab and bring. Although she pants and shakes and slows, black dog would do this unto death if I did not stop her, which I always do, by making the sticks go away, by holding her wet, muddy head in my hands 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.

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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.

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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.

We will lie down together in purple robes. We will eat apples and grow slowly incandescent. One day we will vanish, strong, beautiful.

31 Kate: So you didn't – like in the movies – just sit down and start writing the poem and write it in your beautiful handwriting, and throw the pen away and then it was done?

Maggie: That never happens to me. I revise a lot, over and over again. It sometimes takes me two years to write a poem.

Kate: Is that fun?

Maggie: Yeah! Yeah, it's a lot of fun. Actually, I had one poem that took me almost twelve years to write. I still really like this poem. And I think it was worth every ounce of labor that I put into it. Not giving up on it.

Kate: Here's the last few verses of that poem.

32 Anything that happens here has a lot of versions, how to get from here to Logan twenty different ways. The kids tell me convoluted country stories full of snuff and bracken, about how long they sat quiet in the deer blind with their fathers waiting for the ten-point buck that got away. They like to talk about the weather, how the wind we're walking in means rain, how the flood pushed cattle fifteen miles downriver.

These kids know mines like they know hound dogs and how the sirens blow when something's wrong. They know the blast, and the stories, how the grown-ups drop whatever they are doing to get out there. Story is shaped by sound, and it structures what we know. They told me this, and three of them swore it was true, so I'll tell you even though I know you do not know this place, or how tight and dark the hills pull in around the river and the railroad.

I'll say it as the children spoke it, *in the flat voice of my people:* Down in Boone County, they sealed up forty miners in a fire. The men who had come to help tried and tried to get down to them, but it was a big fire and there was danger, so they had to turn around and shovel them back in. All night long they stood outside with useless picks and axes in their hands, just staring at the drift mouth. Here's the thing: what the sound must have been, all those fire trucks and ambulances, the sirens, and the women crying and screaming out the names of their buried ones, who must have called back up to them from deep inside the burning mountain, right up to the end.

33 Kate: One of the places I remember reading that poem was at a poetry festival in Bisby, Arizona, which is a big, rollicking thing that goes on for two or three days. And there's a lot of performance poetry. And I had to read. I was scheduled to read, following a mariachi band. And people were dancing. It's kind of a poet's nightmare, to have to be a single voice after a really good mariachi band.

One of the things I thought about was, that town, Bisby, is a copper-mining town or was a copper-mining town. And now the mine's closed. And I thought maybe the people there at the festival would know about mining.

So I started reading. And by the time I got about 10 or 12 lines into it, all the mariachi fluster had quieted down, and they were absolutely quiet. And it was just a real connection I felt with people who know mines.

34 Kate: And now, we'll go back to Maggie's whimsical side. A few years ago, she was wondering if vegetables go to sleep. So she wrote a series of poems about vegetables having dreams.

Maggie: There were two things that went into writing these poems. One, I was growing a pretty big garden. And the other things was that I was reading this book about dream psychology that sort of laid out different kind of dreams people had and told about what they meant. And so I got to thinking about, what if, what if vegetables had dreams. What kinds of dreams might they have? So it was a sort of little game I was playing with myself. I would sometimes arrive at the dream by looking at the way the yellow squash are. You know, crook-necked squash look curled-up, almost bashful. And I thought, "They would probably have a dream of being out on a

busy street, missing some essential article of clothing." The kind of dream all of us have had probably!

Kate: Remember that Connecticut composer? Stephen Gryc liked Maggie's vegetable poems so well, he composed a suite of musical pieces to go with them. So here come two of Maggie's poems with Stephen Gryc's music. First, yellow squash.

35 Exposure

The yellow squash sleep in skins covered by dirt and their own extravagant leaves, large as their dreams and as embarrassing. Because their bodies are both crumpled and appealing, they dream of being utterly naked on a busy street in a large city. They bend the crooks of their necks to cover themselves and curl up among their own stalks like shy bananas. Suddenly they realize the crowd that has gathered, if not applauding, is at least not throwing stones. The pulp of the squash is as heavy as wet sand. In full baskets, they reflect the sun.

36 Maggie: I had thought, after I did a number of these dreams, that there would probably be one of these vegetables that wouldn't be able to sleep. So I decided to call one of the poems "Insomnia."

37 The radishes pace in their red plaid bathrobes and wish for sleep. They grow up and down simultaneously and are preoccupied. Their green tops keep them awake like fast conversation they feel compelled to be in on, while the white tangled threads of their pale roots drag them down. They should have said something else. They flush and fidget in the light topsoil like reprimanded pups. Radishes sear the tongue, the aftertaste of vigilance. They dream the burning need for dream, the black dirt that won't go away, the fear of intimacy, of breathing.

Kate: I just love these things.

Maggie: I do too. Actually, I had great fun writing them. I don't know any other poems I enjoyed writing more.

38 Kate: There are lots of people who will listen to these programs who think, well, maybe I could write something. Got any advice for them?

Maggie: I'm a big believer in keeping diaries, journals, notes. And when you say that, people think, "Uh-oh, I can't do that, some kind of dutiful exercise or something, I'd have to sit down every day and write down what I did." You don't have to do that. You can write a sentence every day. You can write a word. You can write a color that you noticed today.

When it's nice weather, I walk to school. And it's about a mile to school. And one of the things I do as a kind of exercise for myself is try to notice all the yellow things on the way. And then when I get home, I'll write all the yellow things I saw today. Or the blue things. Or the green things. And if you give yourself a focus like that, it helps you sort of discipline your mind so you observe a little more closely.

Sometimes when I go for a walk, I notice doors. I do that when I travel a lot. One summer, everywhere I went I took pictures of doors. The pictures weren't the point. And I'm not a great photographer. The point was, to focus myself on a small thing in a lot of different places. And then just have a picture of it and write a little bit about it.

Kate: "To focus myself on a small thing." Now, you do that habitually. You focus on cucumbers, beans, tomatoes, moths. Any kind of small thing could probably produce a poem, couldn't it?

Maggie: I think so. I think it's just those very small things that sometimes get squashed out in the daily run of our busy lives, that are often the most important things. I mean, it's a cliche, about stopping to smell the roses. But it's, there's truth in it. I mean, if you stop every day and just notice some little thing, your imagination - which is, I believe, like a muscle - will get stronger. And it'll help you notice things more often. With more regularity and with more care.

39 Kate: Maggie wrote this next poem after she watched some out-of-state people who had come to West Virginia to learn to play Appalachian traditional music. They seemed to be approaching it as a musical exercise. And Maggie wondered if they had any idea how much hard living had produced that music.

40 Ontological

This is going to cost you. If you really want to hear a country fiddle, you have to listen hard, high up in its twang and needle. You can't be running off like this, all knotted up with yearning, following some train whistle, can't hang onto anything that way. When you're looking for what's lost, everything's a sign, but you have to stay right up next to the drawl and pull of the thing you thought you wanted, had to have it, could not live without it. Honey, you will lose your beauty and your handsome sweetie, this whine, this agitation, the one you sent for with your leather boots and your guitar. The lonesome snag of barbed wire you have wrapped around your heart is cash money, honey, you will have to pay.

41 Kate: "Honey, you will have to pay."

Maggie: Yeah, that's right, that's the nature of it, the nature of being. That's why I called it "Ontological." That was that big academic word I stuck on the top there, after I wrote the poem.

Kate: What does "ontological" mean?

Maggie: It's the study of the nature of being.

One of the things that was important to me in writing that poem was getting the sounds of it just right. And in that poem and in a number of others, I've thought a lot about making the sounds of the poem do what the poem is about. And so, I felt like, especially in this one, it was important to do that. Especially since I was talking about the nature of being. Music has always been very important to me, as I think it is for many West Virginians.

Kate: Would you give some examples of words you chose because you thought they echoes the sound of the fiddle?

Maggie: Well, a couple of them would be: "If you really want to hear a country fiddle, you have to listen hard, high up in its twang and needle." I was interested in the off-rhyme, and the echoing sounds of "the drawl and pull." I thought of that as the whine of a fiddle.

"Drawl" seemed to be talking - well, it's a word that refers to a certain kind of speech, so it refers to sound. And it just sounded, to me, like when a fiddle's been going duh duh duh duh duh for a long time, then suddenly go DING! And I thought, "That's like a drawl." Then you pull it back and it goes dyyyannng! Excuse my sound effects, but I thought that was kind of how it sounded. I liked that "drawl" and "pull" went together.

42 Kate: Maggie Anderson also has a well-deserved reputation for thoughtful, insightful poems that address injustice. None better known than her poem, "Closed Mill."

Maggie: I was teaching in Allegheny County, Pittsburgh area for a year. I taught in almost every junior high school in Allegheny County. It was 1987-88. A lot of the mills had just closed down, and it was very painful to be working with those kids and seeing the ways their lives were being absolutely transformed by that economic loss.

43 Kate: From Maggie Anderson's poem, *Closed Mill*.

"Death to Privilege" said Andrew Carnegie, and then he opened up some libraries so that he might repay his deep debt, so that light might shine on Pittsburgh's poor and on the workers in the McKeesport Mill. The huge scrap metal piles below me pull light through the fog on the river and take it in to rust in the rain. Many of the children I taught today were hungry. The strong men who are their fathers hang out in the bar across the street from the locked gates of the mill, just as if they were still laborers with lunch pails, released weary and dirty at the shift change.

Suppose you were one of them?
Suppose, after twenty or thirty years,
you had no place to go all day
and no earned sleep to sink down into?
Most likely you would be there too,
drinking one beer after another,
talking politics with the bartender,

and at the end of the day, you'd go home, just as if you had a paycheck, your body singing with the pull and heave of imagined machinery and heat. You'd talk mean to your wife who'd talk mean back, your kids growing impatient and arbitrary, way out of line. Who's to say you would not become your father's image, the way any of us assumes accidental gestures, a tilt of the head, hard labor, or the back of his hand.

From here the twisted lines of wire make intricate cross-hatchings against the sky, gray above the dark razed mill's red pipe and yellow coals, silver coils of metal heaped up and abandoned. Wall by wall, they are tearing this structure down. Probably we are not going to say too much about it, having as we do this beautiful reserve, like roses.

I'll say that those kids were hungry.

I would not dare to say the mill won't open up again, as the men believe.

You will believe whatever you want to.

Once, philanthropy swept across our dying cities like industrial smoke, and we took everything it left and we were grateful, for art and books, for work when we could get it.

Any minute now, the big doors buried under scrap piles and the slag along this river might just bang open and let us back inside the steamy furnace that swallows us and spits us out like food, or heat that keeps us warm and quiet inside our little cars in the rain.

Kate: Anger, channeled into a poem.

Maggie: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

44 Kate: You know, people who want to write are always stopping too soon instead of revising. You got any thoughts about that?

Maggie: There's a couple of reasons for that. I think people stop because they think, "Well, I don't have any good ideas." And also, I think, it is a bit of a stretch to try to think of something that isn't a cliche or that isn't something we've heard over and over again.

You have to, you have to exercise your imagination, just like you have to exercise your body. It's not going to come right away. But if you try to think of more things and more things. Sometimes I'm like a coach, I'll say, OK, you've got four things down, try to think of five things, seven things. Just keep it going. And nine times out of ten, the ninth or tenth thing, somebody will go "ooo!" They've gotten somewhere.

Kate: We've been talking with West Virginia poet, Maggie Anderson. Hope she makes you want to go out and look more closely at small things. And this is *In Their Own Country*, a series that brings you the vision, thought and work of some of West Virginia's finest writers. Thanks for listening.

In Their Own Country is produced an edited by Kate Long. Music was performed by Tim Courts, Robin Kessinger, Bob Webb, and John Blizzard, with special thanks to Stephen Gric for permission to use his music. Bob Webb recorded the music and supplied production assistants. Francis Fisher provided technical mentoring and production assistance.

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