IRENE McKINNEY:
In Their Own Country

1 **Irene McKinney**: I wanted to believe that I would be a writer when I grew up. It seemed almost too wonderful a thing to actually happen. But I went around telling people that I was going to be a writer. And I think I told them that before I'd written very much at all.

Anytime anybody asked me, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" I would say, "I'm going to be a writer!" I stated certain fantasies and made certain fantasies come true. Just by talking about them, imagining about them, speculating.

Kate Long: And you know, it worked. Forty years later, Irene McKinney is a nationally praised poet and West Virginia's very down-to-earth poet laureate.

And you're listening to Program #1 of *In Their Own Country*. For 14 weeks - each week at this time, - we'll bring you readings and stories and conversation with yet another nationally-praised West Virginia fiction writer or poet. I'm Kate Long, the person who was lucky enough to interview these people.

Does West Virginia HAVE that many nationally praised writers? You bet we do! This series isn't long enough to include all who deserve to be here. In the past thirty years, West Virginia has produced an amazing collection of writers.

And these fourteen will make you think deeply about this place we call West Virginia and what it means to be a West Virginian.

And nobody better to start with than Irene McKinney. I interviewed her at her family's Barbour County farm. She stirred my brain cells, made me laugh, and routinely said things that seemed to go right to the heart of whatever we were talking about.

Even people who think they don't like poetry end up loving Irene, her sense of humor, her "rhythmic, beautifully ordinary speeches of the heart," - to quote the *Hiram Poetry Review*.

And as the *Hungry Mind Review* said "A beautifully crafted voice is at work here, in the rhythmic language of authority, a voice that knows a place well."

That place is definitely West Virginia. Fifty years ago, Irene McKinney was one of six kids growing up on a working farm on the Barbour / Randolph county line. Their farm was an hour from the nearest town. Irene carried coal for the fires, slopped the pigs, fed the workhorses, cleaned the fireplaces, gathered eggs, dug potatoes and so forth. And after work was done, she had fun.

2 **Irene**: I loved my life. I loved the freedom of wandering around in the woods, that sense of knowing that I could go off and do whatever it was that I wanted to do. Usually it was just taking the dogs out in the woods, going out to pick walnuts, going up in the apple trees in our orchard and sitting all day eating apples, picking raspberries. All those things were like, I could be a self-starter, and nobody told me not to.

And also it got me used to solitude. And one of the things that has been puzzling to me in contemporary life is seeing so many people who are absolutely terrified of solitude and would do anything to avoid it.

Kate: What is solitude to you?

Irene: Somehow knowing that your own company is probably pretty good, and that you can come up with interesting thoughts and ideas all by yourself, really.

But of course, in my solitude, I always had books.

Irene: For me, to go off someplace with a book was just the height of pleasure. I remember reading a book that my dad had about sheep shearing, and I just read it because it was there, and it was a book, and I considered anything printed, between covers, to be magical, valuable, and wonderful. So I read it. He also had a book on the repair of farm machinery, which I remember clearly. It had a blue cloth cover. And I read that! We had an old copy of Byron's poems, and I read that! We also had an old copy of Edgar Allen Poe's work, and I read that!

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3 dFodder

So I was a scavenger child, whuffling in filthy attics,
scrouging for broken-backed editions of Edgar Allen Poe,
covered with pigeon droppings, accumulating old yellowed books
from abandoned schoolhouses buried in the woods
smelling of piss and mire, and all abuzz with giant wasps
building a nest in the pump organ.
These were my fabulous loves, my secret foods
These were my handholds into shakey light
My emergence from the pit and loving the furniture of the pit.
My dedication to the darkness and the shadows of fireflies' bodies
found between the smelly pages. The vile effluvium of bookworms' paths
trekking with intention through one after the other,
out one cover, into the next, eating their way through shelf after shelf
Byron, Sheepshearing in America, Kiss Me Deadly to Paradise Lost and
Lo, the Bird. Why should a hungry worm care what it ate?
It was all paper and words, all black magic marks in an unmarked world.
All height and depth and beautiful fodder, a method of moving the eyes
until they brimmed with startlement. The swollen pupils,
reading themselves to death and up beside it and into it.
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Kate: Why, you were the hungry worm, weren't you?

Irene: Yeah, I really am. And I still am. I read everything that comes to me, constantly, almost without discrimination.

4 **Kate**: Did you try to write poems when you were a kid?

Irene: Yeah, I did. I think I started somewhere around the age of 10 or 11. I thought, “I can do this.” And I remember sitting down one afternoon up in my room. And I was looking at a poem written in rhyme and using that as a model. And I tried to duplicate that. And I remember at some point thinking, “This is hard. I didn’t know this would be so hard!” And I could feel my brain reaching and trying to expand, to try to encompass this new kind of mental experience.

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5 The Stone

Hold the stone in your hand.
Put the stone inside your mouth.
Grind your teeth against it.
You know it will not crack.

Drag your tongue over it.
Fit the buds of your tongue
in its pores.

When the stone begins to speak,
you swallow.
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Kate: Drag your tongue over it. Fit the buds of your tongue in its pores.

Irene: Yeah. Paying attention to what’s around you is, I think, maybe number one on the list of things you need to be doing when you’re writing a poem.

6 **Kate**: Irene’s poems are like can openers. She starts with something ordinary, something grounded, something we know, like a stone or an owl or coal mining, and then uses her poem to peel back the lid and show us something below the surface that we hadn’t seen before.

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Deep Mining

Think of this: that under the earth
there are black rooms your very body

can move through. Just as you always
dreamed, you enter the open mouth

and slide between the glistening walls,
the arteries of coal in the larger body.

I knock it loose with the heavy hammer.
I load it up and send it out

while you walk up there on the crust
in the daylight and listen to the coal-cars

bearing down with their burden.
You're going to burn this fuel

and when you come in from your chores,
rub your hands in the soft red glow

and stand in your steaming clothes
with your back to it, while it soaks

into frozen buttocks and thighs.
You're going to do that for me

while I slog in the icy water
behind the straining cars.

Until the swing-shift comes around.
Now, I am the one in front of the fire.

Someone has stoked the cooking stove
and set brown loaves on the warming pan.

Someone has laid out my softer clothes,
and turned back the quilt.

Listen. There is a vein that runs
through the earth from top to bottom.

and all of us are in it.
One of us is always burning.
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Kate: How did you know the details to put in that poem?

Irene: I just picked them up through my life, through the general culture of mining, and having uncles who were miners, and hearing reports on the radio, and community talk.

Kate: “One of us is always burning...”

Irene: Yeah. I didn’t realize this at all. This is one of the odd things that can happen with writing poetry. When I wrote it, I was thinking more about personal relationships. How in personal relationships, it always seems, that at any given moment, one person has the power and the other is slaving in some way to please the other. And how this can be reversed, suddenly, as in the swing shift image. Then everything turns around. Everything turns upside down.

But later on, maybe 5 years after I wrote the poem, somebody said to me: “This is a mythical poem about the journey to the underworld.” And in many ways, I’m sure that it is. You go to the underworld, you go to the unconscious, to find things, to bring back up to the surface.

And my idea of chopping these things loose and carrying them back up. It’s a great labor to write in an original way, to mine this stuff and bring it up to the surface and **do** something with it, turn it into fuel or whatever.

And the third dimension to the poem came to me after I started teaching the course in Appalachian Lit. I think it’s a political poem too, about the levels of power in a culture. The people who provide the fuel don’t get acknowledged. They work hard, they strain hard, they’re pushing these loads of things, whatever these loads of things are.

All the work that gets done in our society is hardly acknowledged at all. And the people who are the recipients of all this good stuff stand around in front of the fireplace and rub their hands together.

So I think, really, I don’t want to brag on this poem, but it does work on three levels at least.

7 **Kate**: How can it be that you can find meaning in something that you wrote, years later?

Irene: I think that, in certain kinds of very intense lyric poetry, the poem knows better than I do. That is - I’ve heard many poets say this - if you’re paying attention to whatever it is that the poem is demanding of you, it knows much more than you do. Actually, what I think happens is that, when you’re hot, when you’re writing rapidly, and with a lot of energy, all the best parts of you are clicking together. Then when you quit, you drop back to your usual, ordinary state. So, as a person in my ordinary state, I might not see everything that’s in that poem until later on, when I learn a little more in my life. And then I look back at the poem and say, “Oh, that’s what I meant.”

Kate: Will you read that poem again please?

Irene: Yes.

8 (She reads “Deep Mining” again.)

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9 **Kate**: Some people say writing helps them make sense of life. Do you agree with that?

Irene: Yeah, I really do. I think, probably for those of us who write, we’ve made a decision sometime in our lives, either consciously or unconsciously, that this is the way we’re going to understand the world. And so anything that’s going on needs somehow to be interpreted by a poem or a story or an essay.

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10 Stained

I’m stained with the iron-red water from the mines
and I’m stained with tobacco and red wine and
the rust of perpetual loss. Near Mabie,
West Virginia I pulled off the narrow road one
morning on my way to work as a substitute teacher.
I wanted to stand there awhile to see how bad
it was, my shuddering in ten-degree weather
on my way to something that couldn’t
possibly matter. I had quit smoking and I felt
like a squirrel about to be shot, looking around
in a frenzy. There was a squirrel there, not
afraid at all, turning a hickory nut in its
hands and ignoring me. I must’ve looked
like what I was, a woman who had lost her
bearings and refused to admit it. It was
another day in my history of posthumous
days, another day when nobody touched my body.

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11 **Irene**: This is a recent poem. And one of the things I’ve been thinking a lot about is: I no longer care to come out sounding wonderful in a poem. Come out smelling like a rose. I think there’s always that impulse in a poet’s writing. But I’m not trying to be wonderful. I’m not trying to be anything more than I am, which is an ordinary person with ordinary desires and ambitions. So it’s very precious to me that I be just as truthful as I can about the unpleasant things in my life. The times when I was depressed and confused and going in the wrong direction. I’m trying to use the poem as a place where I could see clearly. I’m painting a picture in this poem of a woman, a car, a squirrel, and cold air.

Kate: Why would you not just write abstractly about that and just say, “Oh I feel confused” and sort of discuss it? Why do we need the squirrel and the car and the cold air?

Irene: Well, if my own reading experience is any gauge of that, I would just say, “Well, I don’t care.” If somebody told me that, I would say, “Well, that’s too bad, but I don’t really understand fully what you mean, and I don’t care.”

A good piece of writing makes you care because it’s not about anything, it *is* the thing. Robert Lowell said that once about poetry. He said, “Poetry is not *explaining about* something. It *is* the thing itself. A thing *happens* to you when you read a poem. Or it should.”

Kate: So what did you put in that poem to make it happen?

Irene: There are several things that are very real in this poem and that I hope will bring it to life for other people. One of them is the iron-red water. On the property I live on, there’s a vein of coal under the house. So when we dug a well, rusty, iron-red water came up. So I have iron-red water. The mines themselves always cause iron-red water, which pollutes the streams.

And I say I’m also stained with tobacco, which is quite true. I was a lifelong smoker. And red wine. I occasionally drink red wine.

And, I say, the rust of perpetual loss. If you name three real things, you may have earned the right to use an abstraction.

12 **Kate**: Irene McKinney’s poems stand on their own. But to know Irene the person, you have to know about the farm. Irene McKinney built her own house on the 250-acre Barbour County farm that has been worked by at least seven generations of her dad’s family, the Durretts. She can look out her window, across a steep holler, and see the house where she grew up.

Irene: This farm is extremely steep and hilly. And lots of times, when I look out and think about my ancestors clearing this land, it seems to be a task that would be almost impossible. It rocks up off these hillsides, to try to get a plow up on the sides of some of these hills is just amazing to me. Where my house now is set is in a very steep spot. A friend of mine who is a poet came here. And he looked out on the landscape, and he said, “It looks like when you spread a bedspread over a bed, before it settles down.” It just has those kind of soft, curvy, deep places, high places. So that farming was extremely difficult.

Kate: Irene’s dad started running that farm when he was 10 years old. His own dad had died, so he and his 13-year-old brother just took it over.

Irene: They kept that farm going for their mother and grandmother and their brothers and sisters for a number of years on their own.

Kate: The older farmers in the community showed the boys how to do things and helped when they needed it.

Irene: He loved the organization of it. He loved planting, figuring out different kinds of grass seed, grafting and trying new crops, and so on. But sometimes he couldn't make enough money farming. And when that happened, he would go back to teaching in a one-room school. At another period in his life, when the one-room schools were gone, he went to work on a construction site in Moundsville, West Virginia, in order to make money to keep the farm going.

But it was always about the farm. The idea of the farm being sold or falling apart was just unthinkable.

13 **Irene**: When I was a little girl, this farm was the entire world to me. And when you talk about an isolated area being the entire world to you, there's going to be a very strong positive side to it, and there's going to be a very strong negative side to it. And I think in the popular imagination, when people talk about living on a self-sufficient farm or nearly self-sufficient farm, the myth in America is that that was heaven, that that was all rosy and all good and all positive. And of course, nothing with life in it is ever all positive. That's totally insane. I don't know where we ever got that idea.

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14 Atavistic

I wanted to walk without clothing
in the woods beside the creek,
and come to the barn at night

and sleep beside the horses, curled
in the smell and scratch of hay
with the bitch and pups.

The life of the house was flat,
filled with monotonous talking,
passing to and fro among the rooms,

and for what. My mother hated
animals, the way they ate the
food and dirtied the floor.

They were her enemies, she fought
their right to be there and
would have wiped them off the earth

if she could have. If a cat or a dog
came too close to the back door she
threw scalding water on it, and

was righteous in her anger, shouting

that they were not human and
didn't feel real pain.

If we must choose sides, I said
as a child, I take
the side of the animals.
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15 **Irene**: We give ourselves the impression that we're the center of the universe, that we are truly unique among all other living creatures, that everything else in creation is a cut below us. And I truly do not believe that.

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The Animals

The animals have tongues in their feet and taste the leaves
in crevices and holes, in the quirks of the earth,
They seep from your pores in your sleep, move into
the woods and back

The fox is a mantle of heat and stink,
the owl's deft sweep, a flume in the elm,
I give my own peculiar call,
three flaps and a glide.

The continual thumbnail scrape of the cricket
easing his knees: at the level of grass
we fix each other with a stare, droning a cellular song

And the bear's shamble, his rooted breath,
As you take them in, they come and go
through the turns of the wrist, the temples,
the vulnerable bend of the arm

You take their faces between your hands,
lick them into shape while you lie in the dark
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16 **Irene**: The poet Gary Snyder was very important to me. And the reason he was important to me was, he made me feel like I had permission to write about rural life. So many of the poems I was reading were about city life or didn't seem to take into account the natural world in any way. Or if it did take into account the natural world, it was just kind of like a decoration. It was something in the background. But to me, the natural world was in the foreground. When I would go down to the barn and spend time with the cattle, with the workhorses, also we usually had some hound dogs down there, these were important characters in my life. And their life processes were important to me.

And Gary Snyder - in talking about rural life and tribal life and traditional kinds of life, farming and living off the land - made me suddenly realize that I could write about that, that I could bring that into my poems.

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17 Possum

My brother
walking home at noon, his face clenched like
a trap with a stuck spring, a possum hanging
on his thumb, bitten through to the bone.
It sits on a shelf in the storage room now,
a dusty albino with red glass eyes.
The mice have eaten its feet and the thin bones
small as a mouse's leg shine through, caught
in the swirling sunlight from a haze of windows.

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18 **Kate**: The house Irene grew up in was built before the Civil War by one of her ancestors, who came to the mountains with his 17-year-old bride to seek his fortune.

Irene: Nobody but my family has ever lived in that house. And all the time I was growing up, it was an eyesore. It had faded, unpainted boards on the outside. The siding had never been painted in 120 years. And one of my dad's projects was to put new siding on the house and paint it. He got so far as to put up some scaffolding around the house. Then the boards in the scaffolding aged to the same color as the siding on the outside of the house. So it looked like the house was falling down or being rebuilt or something.

But it was a lot more comfortable than that on the inside. Even though this was before we had any central heat, and we had no running water and no bathroom.

I remember a lot of winter mornings there because it was all very intense. We all slept upstairs, and it was icy-cold up there. There was no heat up there. So my mother arranged all these feather ticks over us at night. We were sort of embedded in this big nest. And you could get very, very cozy in those feather ticks, even if it was zero outside.

My father was the first up and got the fires going, and my mother got up shortly after that. And then at some point, she would call me. And this was always a difficult (laugh) ten or fifteen minutes, because she would have to call and call and call before I would finally agree to put my feet out on the icy floor.

And we'd all come down in front of this huge, blazing fire in the fireplace and stand there with our backs to it for a while till we thawed out. And when we were school-age, we'd all be rushing around at this point, because the bus came very early from Belington.

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19 Covering Up

When I saw that I would have breasts
and that they wanted me to cover them up,
I took my shirt off and tied it around my waist
and stomped out into the yard.

I was so furious that no one stopped me,
not my mother, who thought I was acting crazy,
not my father, out working in the hayfield,
not my brother, who thought it was a game,

not my sister, who thought I was acting-out,
who thought I was crazy. I was crazy.
For three days I stalked around and stomped,
refusing to wear a shirt. They all said

"Cover up" and to cover up made me feel weak.
I wasn't weak: I was damned if I'd pretend,
I was damned. They were two badges on my chest,
each of them saying, "This is me."

First the nipples plumped up and turned
from pale pink to dusty rose.
They were two eyes seeing things
my other eyes couldn't see.

Then they rounded out and ached.
They wondered what was going on,
getting ready for the long story,
nursing mouths, kisses, suckles.

Later, I would stand in the bathroom
with my arms raised painfully
while my husband wrapped a wet towel
tightly around them to bring down the swelling
of too much milk. Later, I would stand
at the lingerie counter and choose a black
lace bra. Later, I would change back
to white cotton. Later, I would burn them.

But that week when I was eleven,

I wanted it to be solved. I wanted it to be over.

I took a hoe from the shed and stood bare-breasted
outside and beat the hoe to splinters

on the trunk of a maple. I knew it wasn't over,
but I was exhausted. I would have to enjoy
not covering up in secret. That's when
I began to speak in my head as the naked one,

and the other went clothed into the world.

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Kate: I began to speak in my head as the naked one?

I**rene**: Yes.

20 The thing that I really value in poetry, that I really love when I come across it in poems and want very much to have in my poems is the sense that I am getting as close to the naked truth as I can.

Kate: And the other went clothed into the world, to work, to the hardware store, to the gas station.

Irene: Yeah, that facade that we present to the world is necessary, as a kind of social lubrication. Yet I think it's very, very dangerous if we forget what the self is, the sort of bare, naked self beneath that facade.

21 I think our connection with the natural world has to be primary. I feel very sad and very sorry for people who don't have the opportunity to have that kind of connection in their lives. People who live in the inner city all their lives, for example. I think that they're cut off from a lot of sources of human strength. (1:23 with poem below)

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22 **Secrets**

Nothing but secrets and mysteries endure. Our lives are full of the glaring dead light from the television, the staring light on a field of asphalt, the metallic shine of information unhitched from its objects. But the woods do not glare, they are furtive, dark green. They will close over, they will wrap and enclose with layers of darker green. They will proliferate, encase, hide, obscure. They transform light into dark leaves. They make as many leaves as they have to. And a secret grows on the underside of every leaf.

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23 **Kate**: Irene's family had no TV when she was growing up, so until she was a young teenager, she thought most people lived like she did. But then, she started going into town to school and began to study popular magazines.

Irene: I pored over the advertisements: people in clean and sparkling kitchens, filled with all kinds of bright, shiny appliances that we didn't have. When I compared that in my mind, the message that came through to me was that the way I was living and the way people in my community were living was inferior.

I didn't see anything that reflected my experience in these popular magazines. Everybody seemed so much more well-dressed, well-educated, well-adjusted, and cleaner than I was or than any of the kids I knew were. When you live on a farm, dig potatoes, carry coal, carry water, and so on, you're dirtier than children who live in town. In order to clean ourselves, we had to carry buckets of water from the spring, heat it up on the stove, pour it into a wash pan, take it into another room, and sponge ourselves down. So this was quite an undertaking to try to keep neat and clean.

24 **Kate**: Irene went to college at West Virginia Wesleyan, still writing, still trying to figure out what kind of attitude to have toward her farm upbringing. She got married, had two kids, got a Ph.D. Then at some point, she was a young, divorced mother with two kids. And she was desperate for time to write. The things she had no time to write woke her up in the middle of the night.

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25 Waking Up Sweating

I have been sleeping and
laboring in a nest of hair
wound in my gown, the pillows
caught on the glare from
the streetlight, a pale-red
animal framed in the doorway.

It is 2 AM. The children
squirm in their beds with
the heat. The relief of
waking dries off me like sweat,
and I know that all the things
I can't say or write
squeal in my sleep
and slap the soles of my feet,
begging for breath.

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Kate: "All the things I can't say or write squeal in my sleep and slap the soles of my feet, begging for breath."

But Irene McKinney made time to say those things and give them breath. She decided to write about what she knew, no matter what anyone thought about it.

26 Her first nationally-published book of poems, *The Girl with the Stone in Her Lap*, was very well received. People at the University of California got hold of it and invited her to teach there for a year, said she had a fresh, original voice.

It was the first time Irene McKinney had been out of the Appalachian area. To her amazement— and relief— she found that Californians not only did not look down on her mountain farm background, they envied her for it.

Irene: People who come from a rootless culture are fascinated by, and maybe envy rooted cultures. I didn't really realize that I had a very rich kind of background and heritage until I got away from it and began to miss it. I saw how valuable to me this experience of growing up in this particular way was.

Kate: And through West Coast eyes, she looked back at West Virginia.

Irene: I think that it's maybe necessary to step entirely out of your own culture in order to begin to fully see it. I physically felt that I was looking back to the east and seeing this little area and seeing how precious it was to me and how much it had done to form all my values and the way I felt about the world, and the way I felt about other people, and what my hopes and aspirations were, all these things which, actually, I had denied up until that time.

Kate: And she began to truly appreciate - in an unsentimental way - the rural community where she grew up, along Talbott Road in Barbour County: where families shared party lines, a community center, a church, special events like corn shuckings and bonfires, and just helped each other get by from day to day.

Irene: When I say that the people around us were our universe, I mean that very sincerely. We depended on each other in many ways. For example, when we got ready to sell some cattle, my dad did not have to load them up by himself. He usually would call Uncle Dewey and maybe another man named Armand Riccatelli, who lived up the road from us and was a very good neighbor.

At that time, there usually wasn't any money exchanged for these things. Instead, what would happen, a neighbor who had helped out at that time would call my dad up and say, "It's now time to castrate the bull calves. Will you come and do it?" Because my dad had a lot of skill in that and knew how to do it safely. So he would go and do that for them.

So people exchanged abilities that they had in various areas. That is, you know who in the community knew how to do certain things. And this wasn't something that was coldly calculated. People didn't actually talk about those exchanges. They didn't say, "OK, now it's time for me to pay back a favor." It was just a very easy-going, natural exchange that went on all the time.

That was part of the definition of being a good neighbor.

27 **Kate**: Irene's third book of poems, *Six o'Clock Mine Report*, also draws heavily from Talbott Road community.

Here's a poem that starts with two-grave plot beside her family church. Now, Irene bought it while she was still married. Her dad talked her into it. But then she was divorced, and she still had this double grave site.

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28 Visiting My Gravesite
Talbott Churchyard, West Virginia

Maybe because I was married and felt secure and dead
at once, I listened to my father's urgings about "the future"

and bought this double plot on the hillside with a view
of the bare white church, the old elms, and the creek below

I plan now to use both plots, luxuriantly spreading out
int he middle of a big double bed. - But no,

finally, my burial has nothing to do with marriage, this lying here
in these same bones will be as real as anything I can imagine

for who I'll be then, as real as anything undergone, going back
and forth to "the world" out there, and here to this one spot

on earth I really know. Once I came in fast and low
in a little plane and when I looked down at the church,

the trees I've felt with my hands, the neighbors houses
and the family farm, and I saw how tiny what I loved or knew was,

it was like my children going on with their plans and griefs
at a distance and nothing I could do about it. But I wanted

to reach down and pat it, while letting it know
I wouldn't interfere for the world, the world being

everything this isn't, this unknown buried in the known.

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Kate: I always loved that line, "This unknown buried in the known."

Irene: Yeah. It's very difficult to paraphrase or comment much on that, but my sense is that to be alive at all and to be on this earth at all is a very great mystery. And most of the time, we go around acting though if we know what we're doing. We buy a plot for a house, we build a house, we buy a plot for a grave. And we know we're going to be buried there. This all seems very known. But there's a secret inside that, a huge secret inside that, the secret of life and death itself. And there's no way we can penetrate that.

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Sunday Morning, 1950

Bleach in the foot-bathtub,
The curling iron, the crimped, singed hair.
The small red marks my mother makes
across her lips.

Dust in the road, and on the sumac.
The tight, white sandals on my feet.

In the clean sun before the doors,
the flounces and flowered prints,
the naked hands. We bring
what we can - some coins,
our faces.

The narrow benches we don't fit.
The wasps at the blue hexagons.

And now the rounding of the unbearable
vowels of the organ, the O
of release. We bring
some strain, and lay it down
among the vowels and the gladioli.

The paper fans. The preacher paces,
our eyes are drawn to the window,
the elms with their easy hands.

Outside, the shaven hilly graves we own.
Durrett, Durrett, Durrett. The babies there
that are not me. Beside me,
Mrs. G. sings like a chicken
flung in a pan on Sunday morning.

This hymnal I hold in my hands.
This high bare room, this strict accounting.
This rising up.

>>>

29 Irene: What I realize about this poem now, reading it, is that, when you go to church, you bring some sense of strain from your life outside there. And you want some relief from it, you want some release from it. And just being there, as I remember, made us all feel somewhat relaxed, you know, just being there together. I'm not talking about any larger theological issue about God or religion, I'm just talking about the people themselves, coming in there, sitting down, and being quiet for a while after their hard week or work. And everybody in that community worked hard all week. So you bring your sense of strain in there and lay it down on the altar, and then you go away relieved.

30 Kate: Irene McKinney's father died two years after he had had an enormous stroke. During those two years, this man who had been so vigorous and active required full-time care. Irene did a lot of the caretaking.

Irene: I was surrounded by death, and I was also surrounded by life. I had sat up very late with my father, and he finally drifted off to sleep. And I came back to my house, and there my dog was, having her pups in the kitchen. And so I sat down there with the pain of my father's dying with me and watched these pups be born. And it seemed to me that the life force, human or otherwise, is something that's a great secret. It's filled with great mystery. And I felt pained, but also in awe, that I was in the presence of that mystery.

>>>

31 Full Moon Sitting Up Late at My Father's Bedside

What can I say. The moon looms in the nighttime sky
with brilliance, as it does. But we are going

to land there, and then it will go away.
What can I say to stop it? There was a time

when the moon was here to stay. The animals on earth
are breathing, but we will take their hearts

and put them into broken human bodies.
What can I say to those people. You took the heart

of a chimp; you found you could do it,
and you did? Secrets come out of the heart,

and nowhere else. We don't know how,
What can I say when my father is dying,

with his new eyes and his new heart.
His mind is like a flapping line of laundry,

clothing full of wind. How can I speak
about the babble of his speech? His saying

does not go from here to there, it's only here.
Out of the dog came five pups, slick, wet packets,

each different. They grew at different rates.
Some slept, two leapt around all day.

What can I say about their secret selves,
their paws, their separate ways of walking?

What can be said about their natures, and
their flawed and perfect lives? I gave

them away. They have a new trajectory and
I'm still here. I think about them every day.

My father's manner is the same as it was
when he was sane. Senility's a secret too.

It isn't vague to him. I see intensity in all
he misconstrues - I feel he misconstrues

The night is brilliant, and the moon's too close.
It calls him out. To where, I cannot say.

>>

32 **Kate**: And the summer after her father died, the farm seemed especially vivid to her.

Irene: I found myself spontaneously examining leaves and seeds and seed pods, as though I'd never seen them before.

>>

What Enters Us

Because it enters us through our breath,

and because its sweetness is beyond belief,
belief being something in the mind,
as opposed to breathing in and breathing out,
as opposed to feeling your muscles shake loose
and expand, full of the heat of your
blood pumping as you lift and bend,
digging in the garden or running along
the country road in the morning,
and there are no cars rumbling around
the loops and bends, but there are
three kinds of birds sending out
trills in the upper air, the smooth
gray doves making a sound of broken
ecstasy, the woodpecker using his head
and a dead tree-trunk like a tabla, and
another one that just opens its throat
and lets something we don't understand
pour out. It enters through their breath
too and they don't understand any
more than we do, but to them it doesn't
matter. We don't know what comes into us,
and I'm saying it doesn't matter.
>>>

Kate: We don't know what comes into us.

33 **Irene**: People are much too rational, and much too mechanical-minded. And I think, out of fear, we all try to figure out reasonable explanations for things. We try to figure out a kind of 1-2-3-4 step way of looking at our lives. And this is very deceptive. Because it cuts us off from a lot of spontaneity. It cuts us off from our own vulnerability. And maybe worst of all, it makes us have a lot of false pride.

And I think we know very little for sure. And we need to keep that kind of vulnerability, in order to see what life is really like, to see what it really feels like day by day, minute by minute.

34 **Kate**: A good poem, every time I read it, I see something different.

Irene: I do too. And that's true with my own poems too. The more I read them, and the more I think about them, the more they have to teach me, I think.

Kate: Isn't that funny.

Irene: Mmm-hmm. It is. It's very, very strange. It's a great mystery. I don't know exactly how it happens. I think I have some theories about how it happens, but it still feels very mysterious to me, that process.

Kate: What are your theories?

Irene: Well, one theory that I have is that our deepest, deepest desire is to know the truth. And then we have some other desires up above that deepest, deepest desire which don't want us to know the full truth. Because it's going to be too difficult. It's going to change our lives. It's going to change our relationship with somebody else. It's going to make us have to work hard at something. And so we would rather avoid it.

When you're writing really well, you go ahead and tell yourself those secrets. And so you can look back at your own poem, and the poem has something to tell you in a conscious way that you didn't really know before.

Kate: Irene McKinney is still writing about what she does know. Still urging us to stay connected with the natural world. Still hoping to show us the extraordinary in things we think of as ordinary.

35 **Irene**: I want to write about the reality of being an aging woman in a way that I haven't seen in print. There are a few people who have written about the subject, but not in the way that I would want to write about it.

>>>

Constant Companion

Two days, enclosed by rain, hugged up in this room
with no amusement but my voice
So now it's time to take off all my clothes
and dance around alone. The belly scars,
the pads of flesh, OK. And OK, the slippery breasts,
their soft, surprised pink seals. And equally OK,
the body hair, the freckles, darkenings that flesh is bound for,
the overlap and burn.
Here in this rainy box, I've left it all outside,
The crowded kitchen and the laundry tub, the judging looks.
Except the birds. In their variety out there, they peep and croon.
And there's an orchestra of black crickets. This voice
is my constant companion. Looking at the morning glories
draped on a lovely thing of latch and wire, a frame for burgeoning,
cascading down in blue. You say it's not OK? You say it's unlovely, even ugly,
the way the feet splay out, the way age grabs you by the face.
OK. I'm dancing to the Maho Telequeens and singing along with
their male groaners, Ah-way, ah-way. That's the kind of thing I do in here,

where it gets as dark as it can get at night, and the air is saturated with rain and fog,
and the voice, the bud of a voice, has a chance.

>>>

36 **Irene**: People often come up and ask questions after a reading. And they say, "Is that true? Is all that true? Is that about your personal life?" And it's very hard to answer. Because if it were just about your personal life, you could just sit down with friends and relatives and tell them about your personal life. But that's not it. it's cranked up to a higher degree. It uses personal material. All creative writing uses personal material. But it gets transformed in the process.

>>>

37 ***Personal***

None of this is personal, not the way you'd think.
The moon keeps on traveling and I can see it
from my balcony each night and each night
different but it's not my own, not like we want

things to be our very own. But it sways me
nevertheless and stands in for certain losses
and gains and for even that much I'm grateful.
I stand at the back door and stare.

>>>

38 **Irene**: When you're writing a poem, I don't think you're usually aware that you're going to present it to somebody else. Your audience is some part of yourself at that point. And so it's always a wonderful surprise when you see that somebody responds to this poem. You get up and read it, and people come up and talk to you afterwards. And it takes on a whole new dimension then. And so, long after you finish with the process of composing it, it keeps on being a gift to other people.

Kate: We've been visiting with Irene McKinney, West Virginia's poet laureate. And she's going to leave us with a gift.

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39 **A Gift**

Out of my father's eyes, out of my mother's mouth,
Out of the great trees at the edge of the woods,
Through possum blood, squirrel's brain, crow's wing,
From potatoes, corn meal, friend pork, feather ticks, weaving
Torn shirts, faded cotton, red rags.

Out of shame at my face and my name,
Out of cows' teats, barns, buckets,
In my broken shoes, with my mad ideas, my blurting out
And my regret, my prayers, my eyebrows.
Out of the old, worn fields worked over and over
Out of the fresh, green trees,
I carry this weight as well as I can
And I give it to you.

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In Their Own Country is produced and edited by Kate Long. Bob Webb performed and recorded the music for this program and supplied production assistants. Francis Fisher provided technical mentoring and production assistance.