

**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







**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.

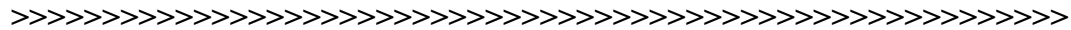
**7 Kate:** How can it be that you can find meaning in something that you wrote, years later?

**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?

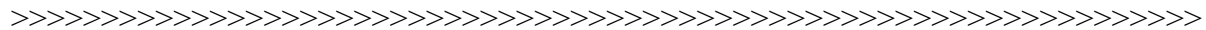
**Irene:** Yes.

**8** (She reads “Deep Mining” again.)



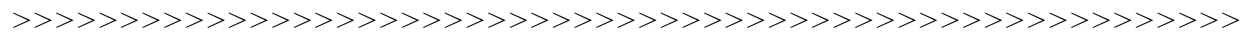
**9 Kate:** Some people say writing helps them make sense of life. Do you agree with that?

**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.



**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.*



**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 Durrets. 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.















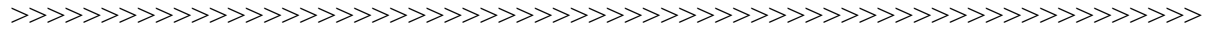








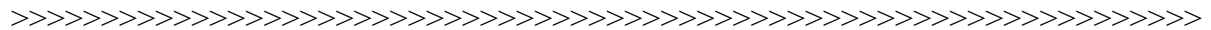
*This hymnal I hold in my hands.  
This high bare room, this strict accounting.  
This rising up.*



**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.

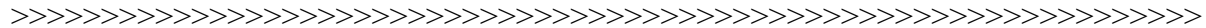
**Irene:** I was surrounded by death, and I was also surrounded by life. I had sat up very late with my father, and he finally drifted off to sleep. And I came back to my house, and there my dog was, having her pups in the kitchen. And so I sat down there with the pain of my father's dying with me and 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**

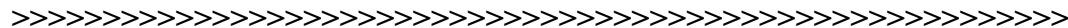
*What can I say. The moon looms in the nighttime sky  
with brilliance, as it does. But we are going  
to land there, and then it will go away.  
What can I say to stop it? There was a time  
when the moon was here to stay. The animals on earth  
are breathing, but we will take their hearts  
and put 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**

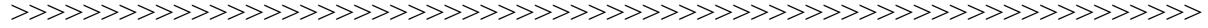
*Because it enters us through our breath,*







*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.*



*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.*

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