

## ***Reading Before the Story... Author's Biography***

It is nearly impossible to overstate the importance of Breece D'J Pancake to modern Appalachian fiction, despite the shortness of his life (he died two months before his twenty-seventh birthday) and the fact that before he died he had published only a few short stories. The publication of his single collection of stories, four years after his death, sparked renewed national interest in regional literature and helped writers like Denise Giardina, Richard Currey, and Pinckney Benedict to find national audiences and critical attention. His style and power have been compared to such twentieth-century literary giants as William Faulkner, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, and Samuel Beckett. But who was this brilliant and troubled young man, who made such an impact on the literary world with his life and death?

Breece Pancake was raised in Milton, West Virginia, a small town in Cabell County. He briefly attended West Virginia Wesleyan College, then moved on to Marshall University, where he completed a B.A. in English in 1974. He spent the next two years as an English instructor at Fort Union Military Academy and Staunton Military Academy. He left teaching in 1976 to enroll in the Masters program at the University of Virginia. At UVA, Pancake began to write fiction, seriously and prolifically. His first published story, *Trilobites*, appeared in *The Atlantic* in 1977. This event would bestow on him the unusual middle initials D'J, a mis-punctuation by the *Atlantic* editors of the initials for "Dexter" (his middle name), and "John" (the name he adopted after his conversion to Catholicism in his mid-twenties). Pancake chose to adopt the misprint and used it afterwards on all his published works.

But despite finding publication success, and earning the respect and friendship of his professors, Pancake did not have an easy time at UVA. In his *Foreword to The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, James Alan McPherson writes about the University's struggle to reconcile its new make-up— a generation after the admission of middle-class males and less than a decade after the admission of women and minorities —with its "traditional" upper-class Southern identity. In this struggle, Pancake, like others from the Southern middle- and lower-classes, felt "isolated and insecure." Pancake did not fit in well with other graduate students at the university, though many admired his work. He seemed to deliberately cultivate a "hillbilly" persona, rough and unkempt, telling people of his "poor" origins, though his parents were in fact closer to the middle class than to the poverty and roughness of the

people whose lives he captured. He lived in a single room equipped with a shower that was attached to a larger home in a wealthy suburb outside of Charlottesville. The room contained little furniture; he slept on a cot and wrote at a desk placed under the room's only window. His personal relationships tended to be private and intense, Pancake bringing the same passion to his life that he did to his writing.

Breece D'J Pancake died on the night of April 8, 1979, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. His death was officially judged a suicide, though some family members and childhood friends believe his death was a tragic accident. Other friends, including UVA faculty member John Casey, believe that they received "suicide" notes from Pancake in the weeks before his death, notes only understandable through hindsight. Whatever the true reasons behind it, Breece Pancake's death was a huge blow to the Appalachian literary community. All those who read his work believed he was on the cusp of a brilliant career, full of promise and potential. Though that potential was in many ways unfulfilled, Breece D'J Pancake lives on— in the lives he touched, the work he left behind, and the influence he has exerted on the Appalachian writers that would follow him.

\*\*Breece D'J Pancake's works are collected in *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*

## “Time and Again” by Breece D’J Pancake

Mr. Weeks called me out again tonight, and I look back down the hall of my house. I left the kitchen light burning. This is an empty old house since the old lady died. When Mr. Weeks doesn’t call, I write everybody I know about my boy. Some of my letters always come back, and the folks who write back say nobody knows where he got off to. I can’t help but think he might come home at night when I am gone, so I let the kitchen light burn and go on out the door.

The cold air is the same, and the snow pellets my cap, sifts under my collar. I hear my hogs come grunting from their shed, thinking I have come to feed them. I ought to feed them better than that awful slop, but I can’t until I know my boy is safe. I told him not to go and look, that the hogs just squeal because I never kill them. They always squeal when they are happy, but he went and looked. Then he ran off someplace.

I brush the snow from my road plow’s windshield and climb in. The vinyl seats are cold, but I like them. They are smooth and easy cleaned. The lug wrench is where it has always been beside my seat. I heft it, put it back, I start the salt spreader, lower my shear, and head out to clean the mountain road.

The snow piles in a wall against the berm. No cars move. They are stranded at the side, and as I plow past them, a line falls in behind me, but they always drop back. They don’t know how long it takes the salt to work. They are common fools. They rush around in such weather and end up dead. They never sit still and wait for the salt to work.

I think I am getting too old to do this anymore. I wish I could rest and watch my hogs get old and die. When the last one is close to dying, I will feed him his best meal and leave the gate open. But that will most likely not happen, because I know this stretch of Route 60 from Ansted to Gauley, and I do a good job. Mr. Weeks always brags on what a good job I do, and when I meet the other truck plowing the uphill side of this road, I will honk. That will be Mr. Weeks coming up from Gauley. I think how I never met Mr. Weeks in my life but in a snowplow. Sometimes I look out to Sewel Mountain and see snow coming, then I call Mr. Weeks. But we are not friends. We don’t come around each other at all. I don’t even know if he’s got family.

I pass the rest stop at Hawks Nest, and a new batch of fools line up behind me, but pretty soon I am alone again. As I plow down the grade toward Chimney Corners, my lights are the only ones on the road, and the snow takes up the yellow spinning of my dome light and the white curves of my headlights. I smile at the pretties they make, but I am tired and wish I was home. I worry about the hogs. I should have given them more slop, but when the first one dies, the others will eat him quick enough.

I make the big turn at Chimney Corners and see a hitchhiker standing there. His front is clean, and he looks half frozen, so I stop to let him in.

He says, "Hey, thank you, Mister."

"How far you going?"

"Charleston."

"You got family there?" I say.

"Yessir."

"I only go to Gauley Bridge, then I tum around."

"That's fine," he says. He is a polite boy.

The fools pack up behind me, and my low gears whine away from them. Let them fall off the mountain for all I care.

"This is not good weather to be on the road" I say.

"Sure ain't, but a fellow's got to get home."

"Why didn't you take a bus?"

"Aw, buses stink," he says. My boy always talked like that.

"Where you been?"

"Roanoke. Worked all year for a man. He give me Christmastime and a place of change."

"He sounds like a good man."

"You bet. He's got this farm outside of town — horses — you ain't seen such horses. He's gonna let me work the horses next year."

"I have a farm, but I only have some hogs left."

"Hogs is good business," he says.

I look at him. "You ever see a hog die?" I look back at the road snow.

"Sure."

"Hogs die hard. I seen people die in the war easier than a hog at a butchering."

"Never noticed. We shot and stuck them pretty quick. They do right smart jerking around, but they're dead by then"

"Maybe."

"What can you do with a hog if you don't butcher him? Sell him?"

"My hogs are old hogs. Not good for anything. I just been letting then die. I make my money on this piece of road every winter. Don't need much."

He says, "Ain't got any kids?"

"My boy run off when my wife died. But that was considerable time ago."

He is quiet a long time. Where the road is patched, I work my shear up, and go slower to let more salt hit behind. In my mirror, I see the lights of cars sneaking up behind me.

Then of a sudden the hitchhiker says, "What's your boy do now?"

"He was learning a mason's trade when he run off."

“Makes good money.”

“I don’t know. He was only a hod carrier then.”

He whistles. “I done that two weeks this summer. I never been so sore.”

“It’s hard work,” I say. I think, this boy has good muscles if he can carry hod.

I see the lights of Mr. Weeks’s snowplow coming toward us. I gear into first. I am not in a hurry. “Scrunch down,” I say. “I’d get in trouble for picking you up.”

The boy hunkers in the seat, and the lights from Mr. Weeks’s snowplow shine into my cab. I wave into the lights, not seeing Mr. Weeks, and we honk when we pass. Now I move closer to center. I want to do a good job and get all the snow, but when the line of cars behind Mr. Weeks comes toward me, I get fidgety. I don’t want to cause any accidents. The boy sits up and starts talking again, and it makes me jittery.

“I was kinda scared about coming through Fayette County,” he says.

“Uh-huh,” I say. I try not to brush any cars.

“Damn, but a lot of hitchhikers gets killed up here.”

A man lays on his horn as he goes past, but I have to get what Mr. Weeks left, and I am always too close to center.

The boy says, “That soldier’s bones – Jesus, but that was creepy.”

The last car edges by, but my back and shoulders are shaking and I sweat.

“That soldier,” he says. “You know about that?”

“I don’t know.”

“They found his duffel bag at the bottom of Lovers’ Leap. All his grip was in there, and his bones, too.”

“I remember. That was too bad.” The snow makes such nice pictures in my headlights, and it rests me to watch them.

“There was a big retard got killed up here, too. He was the only one they ever found with all his meat on. Rest of them, they just find their bones.”

“They haven’t found any in years,” I say. This snow makes me think of France. It was snowing like this when they dropped us over France. I yawn.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Maybe the guy who done them all in is dead.”

“I figure so,” I say.

The hill bottoms out slowly, and we drive on to Gauley, clearing the stretch beside New River. The boy is smoking and taking in the snow.

“It snowed like this in France the winter of ‘forty-four,” I say. “I was in the paratroops, and they dropped us where the Germans were thick. My platoon took a farmhouse without a shot.”

“Damn,” he says. “Did you knife them?”

“Snapped their necks,” I say, and I see my man tumble into the sty. People die so easy.

We come to Gauley, where the road has already been cleared by the other trucks. I pull off, and the line of cars catches up, sloshing by. I grip the wrench.

“Look under the seat for my flashlight, boy.”

He bends forward, grabbing under the seat, and his head is turned from me. But I am way too tired now, and I don’t want to clean the seat.

“She ain’t there, Mister.”

“Well,” I say. I look at the lights of the cars. They are fools.

“Thanks again,” he says. He hops to the ground, and I watch him walking backward, thumbing. I am almost too tired to drive home. I Sit and watch this boy walking backward until a car stops for him. I think, he is a polite boy, and lucky to get rides at night.

All the way up the mountain, I count the men in France, and I have to stop and count again. I never get any farther than that night it snowed, Mr. Weeks passes me and honks, but I don’t honk. Time and again, I try to count and can’t...

I pull up beside my house. My hogs run from their shelter in the backyard and grunt at me. I stand by my plow and look at the first rims of light around Sewel Mountain through the snowy limbs of the trees. Cars hiss by on the clean road. The kitchen light still burns, and I know the house is empty. My hogs stare at me, snort beside their trough. They are waiting for me to feed them, and I walk to their pen.

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