



# Library podcast

## It's About Time Writers' Reading Series #384

### 00:00:01 Peggy Sturdivant

Thank you so much. Seattle Public Library for recording and editing this. It's about time writers reading Series. This is number 384 we're closing in on the end of another year with the anniversary, always the first one in January. So I will have to double check. We might be in about our 33rd year. This being number 384 I'm excited to welcome you all here for our crossover event with the Ballard Writers Collective, which is the second year that we've been online. Reminder that once a Ballard Writer, always a Ballard Writer. They're in New Jersey. Bainbridge Island, someplace in Oregon. We don't know where they've all gone, but that has been the Silver Lining is being able to broaden our Horizons so much. Next month, we will be hearing from Eleanor DeVito Owen, who will be our first, as far as I know, our first hundred-year-old writer. It's something to Aspire to. She recently won an award for a chapter of her Memoir that she started writing when she was 90. And she's also an outstanding mental health advocate it in originally from New York. And I'm looking forward to hearing her chapter next month, along with readings by... let's see, I know Pamela Hobart Carter is also going to be joining us. So for tonight, we have a few of our Ballard writers. We have Sheila Kelly, we have Jay Craig, we have Lauren Zienski. I'm going to read, and I hope that we'll be joined by Stefan Lundgren. So first, I would like to introduce Sheila. Sheila is the person who basically got me to Alaska and therefore changed my life, because I think I was meant to be in Alaska. Sheila is a Washington state native and 40 year resident of Seattle. She's the author of Treadwell Gold an Alaska Saga of Riches and Ruin published by University of Alaska press 2010, which was made into a play with a lot of help from Sheila and staged, and a musical I might say, staged at the perseverance theater in Juneau in 2017. For tonight's reading, she was torn between focusing on something searing or something endearing. The recent searing experience came in May when her journalist son based in New Delhi, India contracted covid and had to be Medevaced to Harborview in Seattle, happy ending. The endearing Recollections have to do with her emerging role as a spokesperson for Gramping, which she unapologetically defines as camping while old. Skip euphemisms. For tonight, Sheila has chosen to take on the lighter topic of gramping while she is still trying to probably process and capture the covid story. Welcome Sheila Kelly.

### 00:03:31 Sheila Kelly

Thank you. Peggy. So, yes, what I want to talk about is the joy of gramping, which is camping while old, and not to be confused with glamping, which you've all heard of glamping. You try it, you know they try to seduce you with that, which we have not succumbed to yet. Nor camping with grandchildren, which gramping sounds like it should be. We have done it, but we're now done. So this

is a new definition of gramping. So who says the outdoor life is the Dominion of the hard bodied young? At ages 83 and 79 my husband, Jeff. And I continue to explore our world up close locally, regionally and nationally. As we meet people and share our backgrounds, married 57 years, three children four grandchildren, traveled the world, wrote books, careers in business and government. The Revelation that grabs most people is that we camp in a tent and sleep on the ground. Yes, with a mat, but no cot or air mattress. And we travel in the 10-year old compact four-door sedan. No trailer, truck or RV. We live overlooking Puget Sound and the Olympic mountains. Our house has a hot tub and a deck surrounded by trees and greenery. We don't have to go anywhere to watch birds and wildlife. And yet we take great pleasure and pride in regularly stuffing our 2011 ruby mist Subaru Legacy with our tent, two sleeping bags and a Motley assortment of pots and pans and utensils and drive miles to pitch our tent in the woods, preferably along a river, then building a campfire and sleeping on the ground. So how did we come to this stage of grampers? We started camping in 1964 when we were newly weds living in Denver. My husband and his five siblings camped regularly when he was growing up in South Central Washington State. It was all they could afford when I was growing up. My family rented a rustic, which really meant shabby, cabin on a lake near Spokane. I failed as a campfire girl. I hated summer camp. My attitude started changing as a newlywed in Colorado, the perfect place to be introduced to camping. Only an hour away from magnificent forest and stunning Mountain Landscapes. I had never realized that that was true in Washington, too. Spokane was too far away from that I guess. We bought warm flannel, lined sleeping bags. Inflatable air mattresses, because Therm-a-Rest was not invented until 1971 and heavy canvas tent. Maybe there was space-age camping gear available, but we outfitted our first Expeditions from a secondhand store. Over the years I have evolved. A tent and sleeping bag are now my preferred lodging. Now, that was not true when I was twenty something and eight months pregnant, trying to put up a heavy canvas tent on a rainy night while traveling through the mountains of Tennessee. Three children and four grandchildren later, we have logged a respectable list of discovering amazing campgrounds in the Pacific Northwest. Now that we are retired and empty nesters, we can be full-on tenters, taking more trips for longer times. We have upgraded our gear slowly. We moved our wedding gift stainless silverware to the camping box and got a new set for home. We purchased a lightweight tent and better sleeping bags. When our children left home their full bunk bed mattresses became cushy sleeping mats. Yes, we have to make accommodations for our age, our stiff bones and weak bladders. These are the inconveniences that keep most of our peers at home, viewing the world from their decks close to their showers, flush toilets and soft beds. They are not moved by our breathless tale of that freezing morning in Jasper National Park. Overnight it was so cold, we had to sleep in all our clothes and blankets. We woke up to nearby snorting and snuffling, definitely distinct from snoring. We peered out of our tent to see the huge rack of an elk escorting his harem about 8 feet away. We waited with respect and trepidation for the troop to pass through. Since we were in his territory, we shouldn't have been surprised. The campground was named Wapiti, which is Algonquin for Elk. Then two playful Fox kids came bounding around and up and over our picnic table. We got up, made a campfire (that's the key) and savored our cup of coffee. We have amenities and delights in our Seattle home, but never visits from young foxes or rutting elk. Now that we sleep on mattresses so that not technically on the ground, but we do have to get up and down from the mattresses, often during the night. And it is the up and down and up that make many of our peers say they just cannot do that, especially the getting up. So they do not aspire to our form of gramping. I tried to think of the

move as a variation on the yoga pose downward facing dog, if you can get up. Getting up during the night refers to bladder needs that have changed over the years. During my chemo therapy for Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma in 2014. I carried a urinal in the car for emergency and convenience. It has since become necessary camping equipment. Years ago, when we took our grandchildren camping, we brought a potty chair for convenience. So a urinal is now a part of the family camping Continuum. We have discovered that many of our fellow grampers do the same. And it was a significant milestone in my post-chemo recovery, when I could get out of the tent in the middle of the night, find a discreet spot and perform another unique yoga pose, a squatting pee while holding onto a tree and enjoying the starry night sky. And it actually was lovely. So gramping meals are experimental. Jeff insists on cooking over the campfire whenever possible, not to prove his gramping creds, but because he loves it. That's what a fire is for, right? The result is basic entrees and blackened cast iron frying pans. Using our universal pan, our Bananas Foster can taste more like bananas fisher, with hints of the catch of the day left from breakfast. A disappointing dessert. But a great story. These days, most of our gramping partners are Foodies, Great Cooks, and some are even certified nutritionists. So we have cut down on s'mores and spam. In 2006 our friend Robin Donovan sent a copy of her new book Campfire Cuisine: Gourmet Recipes for The Great Outdoors with the inscription, "Go wild. Eat Well," We have worked to improve our menus. In 2018 Jeff turned 80. We offered a range of appropriate gifts to mark the occasion. A Mediterranean Cruise, a Rolex, a new car, maybe a luxury RV? His choice: Let's upgrade our camping gear. So in the day of the celebration, he and I started out at REI trying out new sleeping bags. I said, I didn't need a new one, but he insisted we upgrade together. I was consultant on colors. I chose rust orange bags that went with our almost new tent. We were unaware at that very moment, our daughter was at a nearby counter, getting a generous gift certificate from the family. So Grandpa gramper could go wild upgrading. After the birthday brunch of crab omelettes prepared by our son-in-law, grandpa gramper had the family assemble in the garage as he retrieved the camping trunks and pulled out all the Vintage gear he was going to replace. He ceremoniously past it all down to our adult grandchildren. Then he spent several hours surfing websites and ordering new stuff with abandon. So when the deliveries came, two foldable black camp chairs, brand name, Bubba chairs with backs, high enough for next support while reading, lounging and drinking coffee and contoured seats that don't slouch so low that getting up requires mastering yet another yoga move. He also got a new stove, cast, iron pan and stainless steel pot. All are foldable to fit in the trunk of our trusty Subaru sedan, which we did not upgrade. In 2020, we had to cancel many events because of the Covid epidemic. During these two stressful years, gramping provided safe outings to familiar and beloved sites. Even when fires were not allowed, we still made magic with battery-run candles. We went to Mount Rainier Park so a gramping companion could visit a site in remembrance of her late parent. On another occasion, in another place, we had a 75th birthday celebration for a fellow gramper, who couldn't be there because he was in chemotherapy. These too are the realities of being an aging camper, otherwise known as a gramper. Those campfire coffees and streamside meditations have become sacred rituals.

**00:14:50 Peggy Sturdivant**

You absolutely make me want to get out my camping gear and go with you. The sacred rituals reminded me, is it around Thanksgiving or Christmas that you have the famous item in your fridge?

### **00:15:13 Sheila Kelly**

It's still there. The Helen M Kelly (that's my mother) Memorial mince pie, which has been in my refrigerator since 1988. Refrigerator, not freezer. And it's cooked. It's cooked by my mother the last time I saw her. And I still have it.

### **00:15:34 Peggy Sturdivant**

This became a radio topic. Once Sheila told me the story, I think I was able to pass it on, or else you passed it on to Joshua McNichols, another Ballard Writers Collective writer, a couple years ago. And you know, he featured it on KUOW. So this is a now also famous mince pie and a wonderful story to boot. If anything, our annual readings help to set deadlines for people. Milestones. I don't think that Jay has missed a single year as reading since Ballard Writers Collective was conceived, if you will, in 2010. We've since been through all sorts of readings, iterations and many jobs with him. And I am happy to report that... well not happy to report that his painting stages over, because he certainly did some amazing work, which you can see at Secret Garden. But he is now working on another book. So Jay Craig worked for a very short time as a city bus driver. And if he's donned it, you may notice that he is still wearing his Metro jacket, which he calls his free bus pass. Last year we purposely did not in introduction discuss his composting toilet. He is now definitely more than halfway through his next book, Brave Liver. And I believe he'll be reading from that this evening. Jay.

### **00:17:11 Jay Craig**

Yes, well, thank you, Peggy. So yeah, this is this is a follow-up to the Scottish Buddhist Cookbook, which is, as far as I know, it's the first bipolar cookbook, but I haven't seen any others. But so us Scottish Buddhism is a metaphor for manic depression. So and it's also a metaphor for Scottish Buddhism, actually now that I think about it. But so I was... these stories that I'm doing now, are mostly about all the jobs that I've had in Seattle. I've had a lot of a lot of jobs, and I would tend to quit them very quickly over the silliest reason. And then get another job right away. I don't know what it is. But so anyway, I was an operator. It's what they call the bus driver for Metro for about two months. I like the act of driving a bus. But when you start working for Metro, you're just another worthless piece of crap. They bring you in as a part-timer, and give you no indication when you'll be allowed to go full time. And it's best you just not even ask, you filthy maggot. Full-timers won't even talk to you, because you are somehow a threat to their livelihood, although they can't tell you why. Part-timers don't get to pick their routes, of course. And I ended up with a 64 starting at 4:00 on Cherry Hill through downtown and out to Ravenna and Lake City. The first stop was Swedish Hospital. And on my very first day, a very cute woman with a shy smile and scrubs got on. Nurses. I hadn't expected that. She was there the next day, and then it was the weekend. But then she was there on Monday. She sat a little closer to the front this time. And I imagined her staring at me, wondering what led me to drive a 60-foot, articulated bus for the largest metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest and the coolest city the United States. The stories I must have driving down fourth, I stopped next to a duck boat. I opened my door and honked at Captain Rick O'Shea, who is schmoozing passengers for tips. JJ he yelled as he came over and got on my bus. I started to say, I was blocking traffic, but he cut me off to address my passengers. He yelled to the back, "Your driver's crazy. I'd get off right now if I were you. Ha ha." He's kind of guy that, that laughs at everything he says, right? "He wrote a book. What was that? The Irish cookbook? Ha ha? Take a bunch of potatoes and garlic and onions in ceramic

crock pot for two days. Boy, that'll clear out the pipes. Am I right? Haha! He's frickin nuts. He once made a Jesus doll to sell to the Christians. Ha ha. Any more of them hungry, Jesus dolls, JJ? ha ha." The older buses used to have a handle to open and close the doors. But now it's a button. I pushed it and the door, closed on him, trapping him like a fly. "Hey, let me go," he said half serious and half hamming it up. "I told you he's crazy. He's trying to kill me." I moved the bus forward a couple inches, and he screamed a little. I laughed and open the door so he could get out. And I drove away. There's my opening to talk to the cute nurse, I thought. As we got to Wedgewood, I heard somebody ask me how I knew that guy downtown. "Oh, we used to work together. I used to be a duck Captain." I said, like driving a duck, or a 60-foot, articulated bus was nothing, something any asshole could do. Then I realized it was the cute nurse. "Oh, I love the Ducks I've gone twice. Did you have a goofy name?" "No," I said, "I was Captain Brave Liver." "I'm Lisa," she said as she got off. I had to remember that. I have a problem with name's Lisa Lisa Lisa Lisa. Lisa Bonet, Lisa Loeb, Lisa Presley, Lisa Marie Presley, Lisa Hartman, Lisa Hartman, Mona Lisa. I wrote Lisa on a transfer ticket before I forgot it. I want to ask her out, but I don't know what the rules were, because they never went over it in training. I could ask my union rep when I got back. They seem to know everything, or I could hand her a copy of my book. But that was always risky. It's really more of a guy's book. But she did tell me her name, Lisa, Lisa, Lisa, Lisa. Metro had a program called Poetry on the Buses, where they would plaster the insides of buses with poems from local writers, which is great if you're into poetry. But I prefer short stories. On the way home I stopped off the Staples of got a nice black metal tray. In a ream of paper, I printed out a sign that said, short stories on the bus and a smaller one that said free, take one. I printed out a couple of my stories, including one about my time at UtiliKilts, a Seattle institution that Lisa must surely know about, and a racy story about Huggy Jesus in case she was wondering what the hell that guy from the Ducks was yelling about. About the only thing I'm good at with women is weeding out the Christian ones, and this version of the story would certainly do that. We said, hello as she got on the next day, and I couldn't help noticing her standing in front of my display of short stories. She said, thanks. And waved one of my stories at me and smiled as she got off. It's amazing what a shy smile can do to me. That night I printed a few more stories and went back and forth for a long time about whether or not I should bring a copy of my book. Here's a copy of my book I just wrote that I just happen to have on under my seat. Would that be too forward? Too soon? Should I inscribe it? For Lisa. So nice to meet cute you. Was that too forward? Before my shift I went to the common fridge to get a sandwich I left there the day before, but it wasn't there. It was gone. A full-time asshole ate my goddamn sandwich. I was so mad I went downstairs and told the base Chief I quit. No, I wasn't giving notice. Like, just like nobody gave me notice when they're going to eat my goddamn sandwich. She seemed to understand a little, I think, and found a frozen dinner for me and asked if I could do one last shift. I agreed and then dumped the dinner in the first trashcan I saw. I had to run the 415 route, and Lisa wasn't there. I was bummed about missing Lisa, and I spent the whole ride thinking about how much I like driving a bus. It was surprisingly relaxing. All you have to do is not get stuck in the intersections. And I've only heard a couple drivers actually getting shot, which is pretty good considering. About two years later, I was on the 40 heading downtown and Lisa got on at Fremont. She was talking and laughing into her phone and sat in the middle of the bus. I was in the back, and I just watched her imagining her looking back and seeing me, but she never did. She got up when we got to Pine Street, which is my stop. I'd already stood up and was wondering what she

would do if I touch her shoulder and said, hi, but instead I stayed on the bus and got off a few stops down and never saw her again. That's it.

**00:23:41 Peggy Sturdivant**

I don't remember that ending the first time I read it, did you change the ending?

**00:23:47 Jay Craig**

Yeah, actually, in the, in the longer versions, this is just like a snippet of that story, we actually actually did interact a lot more.

**00:23:58 Peggy Sturdivant**

Well, as we know from the time that we were with. You know, I still treasure the time that Jennifer Dean Monroe read us a story, and then kind of put it out there for audience discussion about how she should revise it. And so, you know, maybe I should have had you read both versions. We could have voted. But that was a good one. I like it. If you're looking for any other people to like weigh in and, you know, give you unwanted advice, you know, feel free to reach out to the rest of the Ballard writers Community.

**00:24:33 Jay Craig**

Well, I do happen to have a manuscript. Jennifer. I'm looking at you.

**00:24:43 Peggy Sturdivant**

Yeah, absolutely. And let me see if I can show. And also, I want to point out that this is Jay's poster available at Secret Garden, which especially the original Ballard writers Collective and their early works. It pretty much has managed to represent a lot of their works like Sheila, who you just heard. There's Treadwell Gold. So Dear Writer, which is the anthology of writer's craft and the forthcoming Preserving Ballard, which we've been working on. So Jay, as I mentioned, is no longer in his artist phase. But okay, well, Lauren Zienski, who I'm delighted to still be writing with, thanks to another Ballard Writer, now lives in New Jersey. But she is both an East Coast and a West Coast transplant having lived roughly equal parts in each place. She does many things for profit, personal organizing, bookkeeping, upcycling and hand-stitching felt play food and only two things for fun: writing and collecting antique typewriters. She is mother to two small children and refuses both pets and slime entry to her house. She writes personal essays, growing, I might add, in the margins of time. I'm so glad you were able to use this as a deadline and join us tonight. Welcome Lauren.

**00:26:24 Lauren Zienski**

Thank you. Thank you for having me. And thank you for the deadline. It was a good one. Contagion, November 2021. One of the more freeing bits of wisdom in this life is this, the world goes on in spite of our place in it. When so much invective coming from every place on social media feels pointed and personal, it's comforting to know the universe will deal you a blow on a blue sky day, impersonal and apropos of nothing. I am reminded of the endorphin rush I was coming down from, my running sneakers still strapped to my feet, the weather clear and brisk when I got the call, telling me my father-in-law had died suddenly in 2012 just months before my wedding. The world didn't care to set a

scene to accompany that announcement or color the sky gray, or play a sad song in the car radio. News just arrived Like a stranger at the door, unexpected, and without regard for my endorphins. Throughout this pandemic, the phrase "We're All in This Together" has been making the rounds, but immediately I knew something about this was aspirational at best when I heard it. A year plus in we know we're not all in this together. Some of us have the luxury of not losing our incomes if we have stay-at-home orders, and some of us have to caretake for sick or elderly parents or small children, while services are cut and stores have run out of essential supplies. We're searching, though, some of us for the thing that unites us, admits the dysfunction. I'm standing on a playground midday, scanning for bullies and assistance needed on monkey bars, chatting with a friend about a neighbor who's died suddenly, when I understand if there is one thing we can call a collective experience, it's that we have all had to carry on with the banal while the world explodes around us. We get bad news while the sun shines. We scrape the uneaten portion of our dinners into the garbage while miles and miles away a car crashes into a barrier, a tree caves in the roof of a house. We cup our mouths in horror during a phone call, our children unaware smile up at us, and beg for more chocolate milk please. Just as the CDC was announcing approval for a vaccine for my seven-year-old, thereby inoculating 3/4 of our household, and just as I'd blithely remarked to my husband during a long car ride that it would be a miracle that we had gotten through this pandemic without getting sick. A routine PET scan revealed a nodule on my mother's lung. Cancer. Sun was likely shining brightly as I stood before my kitchen sink, taking in the news. The leaves cascading gently from trees on a banner fall day. The universe did not care that the world was battling a virus. It heaped cancer into our laps and turned and walked artlessly away. And then on the eve of sitting down to try to pull together into a cohesive essay, the separate threads of cancer and daily chores, and the echo chambers of her own infectious thoughts in the middle of an unremarkable weekend, between bowls of buttered noodles and efforts to replace cartoon watching with nature walks, my husband and I came down with covid symptoms. Everyone tells you not to write about your experience while you're in it. But what else could I do? Especially now that we had to stay at home in quarantine for 14 plus days, we had become contagions ourselves. A collective positive diagnosis set off a Cascade of thoughts and feelings around personal failure, a contagion in and of itself. They started off in one small part of my head, and I could feel the multiplying, filling up corners that hadn't seen the light of rumination since I'd started swallowing a tiny prescription pill back in January, back when my rumination was causing my nervous system to overheat and spark. I hadn't had a reason to give anything a second thought since those pills came

### **00:30:35 Lauren Zienski**

into my life, the contagion of my obsessive thinking was finally gone. Those pills contain a missing ingredient, a crucial component of a type of mortar that sealed together the bricks of rationality. One obsessive thought could start, but there it would sit, walled in unable to talk to the other thoughts. I slept for the first time in 44 years without spinning out. Now, despite the best efforts of the pill, my brain was back at it. What if, those ruminating cells said, it was that time you took your mask down to take a swig of water while you were with that client? What if, those corners said, you kill your parents with this? What if, those corners said, you infected your immune compromised friend? In other words, what if this is my fault? I thought about the contagion inside my Mother's lungs, small cell carcinoma, about how we get used to saying mouthfuls of Latin when we need to. The cancer had metastasized,

but was concentrated in just her lung, just one lung, and just one part of one lung. It was the best of all prognoses, given the circumstances. I'd now possibly compromised the schedule of her surgery to remove it by exposing her to covid. I thought of everything around us, and inside us being infectious and unseeable. I thought about the invisible line that connected me to my mother's cancer and to her mother's cancer. My grandmother had made the record books, having had so much of her lower abdomen excised in successive procedures, a half hollow woman by the time she died. My mother was worried she was next to be cut up and allowed to live next. And what about me? What would be the first sign of the contagion living in our shared blood? How old would I be when the first signs of discomfort would lead me to a room of magnificent and intimidating technology that would scan my unknowable insides? Mostly I thought about how careful we were, how even when mask mandates were lifted, we still wore them. How I filled out with a cocky hand my daughter's note to her preschool saying we wanted her masked full-time, how she even liked masking, how great she was at keeping those ear Loops up. When I got the news via text from the testing center, I felt like a hollowed-out woman, like all her hand-washing and mask-wearing and standing in line for a vaccine didn't do anything for us. It's a virus, my mom with cancer said, it was bound to get us. You live with germ vectors. my best friend said, referring to my two young kids. They bring all that stuff home from school. I could hear the voice of another friend back in March of 2020. We're all going to get it, he said. There's no way we won't. At the time, so early on in the pandemic, I detested the surety in his voice, but I also envied it. How could he be so sure and so unafraid at the same time? I wanted to tell him otherwise. They wanted to tell him we weren't going to adopt such defeatist thinking, that I believed we wouldn't get it. Not because God had some special plan for us, not that we could stave it off with the power of her own positive vibrations. But because we were doing what the scientists said to do. We washed our hands. We stayed away from people. We got our vaccines. I scoffed at the people who said they were putting their faith into the hands of a higher power. We had faith in a different kind of invisible. I cycled through rage and terror. Rage because we did everything right and still caught the virus and Terror because of who we might have exposed. Terror, too, because of the long-term effects this might have on our family, What complications might develop over time, because this virus had circulated through her bloodstream in 2021? What invisible enemy would sleep next to the cancer cells, waiting for a blue sky day to make their appearance? And then my brain went to the most dangerous place in all the echo chamber of my own data thoughts. The carefully constructed walls now showing signs of microscopic holes. I confirmed my year old suspicions. In my wildest, most tortured daydreams in 2020, during the height of my panic attacks, I saw this coming. I saw her family being taken down by covid. Back when the lockdown was announced, I started to have physiological responses to these imaginings. For the first time in my life, I couldn't stop imagining. The contagion of my thoughts was overwhelming, every single one leading to my imagine to death. I laid myself down in the backyard, my feet in the grass, my head held up by a foam boogieboard and tried to breathe my way through these attacks. I closed my eyes and tried to listen for what I'm still not sure after a while, calm would return. During one attack, I'd heard a promise from the trees that they support me, that the grass would nourish me, that the clouds would cover me. I was supported, the universe was saying. It might knock me down, but it would also help me stand back up. The invisible was in control, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was not to blame for us getting covid. I saw myself writing goodbye letters to my children then. I saw myself in my husband getting sick at the same time, both of us on ventilators. It turns out my imagination wasn't entirely accurate. It had been



a bit more Maudlin in my head. Well, we were now both sick at the same time. Our symptoms were relatively mild. Our children asymptomatic. No one had a fever. My sense of smell starting to return after just a week. For all my fussing and fighting over the physical part, it was the least of our current concerns. The headaches waxed and waned, as did the fatigue. My cough subsided, but can't help but think about the people who got this before the vaccine who could not breathe without help. Really, I don't have time to be worried about the physical parts either. I only realized how awful I felt after I sat still for a few minutes, which was rare with two quarantine children under foot. The demands of kids don't stop. A headache is a hard thing to explain to a four-year-old. I sobbed in my kitchen over a half made peanut butter sandwich. I cried big gulping cries, not over the aches and pains of what was to become of our lungs, but over thinking I might have exposed both my parents to a virus they might not survive. I sobbed over exposing a whole gaggle of eight year old girls at a birthday party on Sunday. I sobbed at the Injustice of having scheduled my seven year olds vaccine for that coming Thursday. I cried into my chest, and my kids wouldn't hear me, because how could I explain that my brain was up to his old tricks again. I wiped my nose on my sleeve, and I picked up that knife, and I finish slathering on the peanut butter. I had marching orders from the gods of the banal. My despair gave way to rage, which started to dissolve my sympathy for all of us. I found out on day 3 of quarantine that the source of the spread might have been an office worker who wasn't vaccinated at a medical facility I'd recently visited. I wanted to march the whole half mile down to the office on foot and shout down the director. I wanted to write a letter in 48 Point font and plaster their windows with it, drawing a diagram of all the people who've been affected by this one person's decision, including my mom with cancer. Later on that day my rage turned outward, at my kids for needing the every moment of the day, at the already weakened the lungs of my husband, at having to call my parents to see if they were symptomatic, at having to spend three hours rescheduling days and weeks of hard fought for appointments and emotion months ago. Not to my kids; my husband took the brunt of my anger. We'd reached either the part of the pandemic, or the part of our marriage, where even the sound of his cough made me grit my teeth in fury. I tried to find the part of me comprised solely of that Heavenly light. The one that contained compassion for all animals great and small, and especially the sick and wounded. And all I came up with is bitter crumbs of resentment, because the lunch dishes had been left just inches from the dishwasher, instead of in the dishwasher. My store of empathy was an empty root cellar. I stretched out my hand in the dark, expecting to reach something nourishing and miraculous. And instead, I found cold empty space. I swept the ground and found only a fine grit between my fingertips. I was shocked at how empty of concern I felt for the people in my own house. Didn't they know this essay was boiling over inside me. Didn't they know I don't have time to load a dishwasher or scrape hot pink toothpaste hardened against the side of the bathroom sink or sort the growing pile of receipts and birthday cards I agonize over throwing away and toy manuals and unopened magazines we thought we might need one day. This metastasizing pile of life with two small children falls to me to clean, even though I have so many sentences piling up inside my head. And my sinuses ached, my joints protest. My thinking gets hazy, but my head is filling. Please begin offering help. Food and phone calls to different friends said they would pray for my mom. My instinct was to tell them, I don't believe in God, but I'm being asked to keep a faith in everything else invisible, so why not. Everything that matters right now, I cannot see with the naked eye: radiation treatments, a shield against a microscopic protein spike, my friends' and loved ones' abilities to keep their masks up, in my fastidiousness, the hand-washing. What are these requests being sent up to the heavens,

but just one more invisible thing. My mom ate her greens and kept herself fit, and the contagion came in anyway. We kept up our guard, and the contagion got us too. We are susceptible to so much. Maybe this is the thing I've been seeking, this common connection, the ordinariness of our Frailty. In the final analysis, I will have to admit, I prayed to a theory, just like everyone else. I feel empty. So I let others fill me. I take in their words, there are hundreds of people around the world going through what you're going through, they say. You did the best you could. I tell myself lies of a gentler sort. It's not that bad. My symptoms aren't that bad. No one has been hospitalized. There are things we can do, vitamins we can take, soft beds to lie in, and children who, even when they've seen you cry your ugliest cry will not be deterred in asking you to get down the corn chips and fill up their bowl, because the banal overtakes the emergency always. There is a husband who, after 20 years of knowing you, is still not sure what to say to comfort you, but offers his open arms as a hug as a sort of replacement. There are the black beans simmering away on the stove that while you can't smell or taste them will provide sustenance this evening when they are ready. There is nothing that can be controlled. Nothing that will offer up its chain reaction headed toward resolve in this moment. If I stay in this moment, nothing is going to metastasize. Nothing is connected to the future or the past. In this moment. Nothing is contagious. Not even the tiny hope that has begun to bloom in me, as it always does. It sits there, trying so hard to be redolent of what is to come. No, I tell it. Just be still. Don't grow. Don't spread. Even hope feels like one more excess right now.

#### **00:42:32 Peggy Sturdivant**

Thank you Lauren, who could've ripped from your own heart. And, you know, it's as you said, what is it you're not supposed to write? They say, you're not supposed to write when you're in the moment, and you have given us an amazing, honest dispatch from the absolute moment. So I'm so glad I know you, and that you have stayed with, you know, stayed connected to us here in Seattle is that is just amazing piece. Thank you so much. Oh my, oh my. Well, it's a rare time when, you know my pieces are the the upbeat comparatively. So thank you for that entree. I didn't hear from our other writer, unfortunately. And so I'll switch to ending with myself. I was thinking today, the hardest part of being a writer is often writing the bio. So let's just say that I facilitate writing for the moment at Cancer Lifeline. I used to write a column. I used to get dressed. I still enjoy coordinating this writers reading series and being an overall Ballard gadfly. So here is piece that, you know got me thinking. I call it. I went for my mother's 87th birthday, but stayed for the storm.

#### **00:44:24 Peggy Sturdivant**

Everyone remarked on the acorns as though they were the weather, how in all their years, they've never seen every inch of ground covered by them. Night and day they hit the eaves and hoods of cars is thought they'd been fired, blinking on metal. When the occasional car drove down the street in front of the Cottages, the acorns crunched beneath the tires. It was the latest in fall I'd ever been on the vineyard. I was there for my mother's 87th birthday. In the cottage on the 7 mph Street, where I'd first ridden my tricycle, I wondered, how did my grandparents next door get replaced by their son who is 94? When did my parents move downstairs to take their places in separate beds, occupying what we always called Grandpa's room. And my grandmother's on the first floor. The gingerbread Cottages already look like dollhouses with the characters being moved down as they near closer to the grave. But on the night of the storm, I was upstairs just below the 150 year old roof that was not going to

protect me from being crushed by 200 year old trees, that, like many of us, are rotting from the inside out. The Cottages were built to replace canvas tents from Methodist summer camp meetings, not to shelter humans for over a century. Somehow, they survived hurricanes far better than fire. We crawled out of our sleepless beds in the morning to see what had survived, what was supposed to be a mere Nor'easter. In her downstairs bed beneath the leaky skylight put in by her father, my mother on her 87th birthday was beaming like a child on Christmas morning, one who still believes. She flipped back the covers on the open side and child that I still am. I climbed in beside her. My mother's happiness is contagious that way. She cannot sleep when the forecast is for snow. But when she does nod off her eyes pop open, she claims because she can't bear to miss the first snowflake. My family is fortunate in that there is only a garden and open space on one side of the cottage and massive oak trees in the Inner Circle, which is truly a circle surrounding the open-air tabernacle that serves as the center of worship, dating to the 1800s. The cottage rooves overlap. One person's back door opens to another's front. When one person cooks bacon at least six households expect it on their plate. When Bob sneezes next door, we say, bless you. At night the televisions or computer screens flicker through the windows, shaped like a church panes. Overhead the oak tree rustle and sometimes there's the crack of limbs. My mother disobeys the warnings about not driving during the storms. But without power she can rightly claim she didn't know to stay off the roads. She wants to see the waters splash over the seawall, the boats that are bobbing at the same level as the parking lot, or whether the paper boat is going to try and get into the harbor. She's fearless that way, but tell her that the neighbor has the stomach flu, and she becomes queasy as though the very suggestion is contagious. The wind roared all night, like a jet plane that couldn't gain altitude. The tree leaves waved frantic shadows on the walls, until the flash signaled the wires were finally down. Upstairs, closer to the trees already deemed dangerous, I thought of how I would never want to be on a boat at Sea during a storm. It was the only time I've ever been afraid in the cottage, the place I have always felt the most safe. Windows always open during thunderstorms to feel the rain on my face. It didn't occur to me to go downstairs this time, move to a couch farther from the Giant Oaks. I suppose, like my mother, I didn't want to miss anything. When I say that my mother was 87 that morning, don't picture her in a black and white photo looking like a grandmother from the past. My mother lives in color, her cheeks bright pink, eyes very blue above a mass that's always political, lipstick always being her only makeup and lightly apply even before she had to go see the downed trees, check on the older neighbors, hope beneath the branches to see if the Heavenly Blue lines were intact. The next door neighbor's car was invisible beneath the tree that was lying on it. It was hours before my mother came in long enough to make herself instant oatmeal. Then she was off again to take more photographs. I don't think there was anything my mother didn't love about the storm, especially when there were no injuries reported, just damages. She mourned the clothesline more than the tree. It was an opportunity to burn the cardboard, use shingles she could never discard. How to stoke a fire in the wood stove. She had her car for warmth and to charge her cell phone. We could boil water on the range and had hot water for the outdoor shower. My father parked his walker in front of the fire instead of the television. My mother lacked for nothing, flooded with memories with the childhood year without electricity, the time after Hurricane Bob and the neighbors huddled with her. The good fortune of being utterly alive, rain still beating on the skylight. I think too, that she loved that I was there to share it with her. I manage a cake using a neighbor's working oven. We had her birthday dinner by the light of many candles. On the second day, there was the constant roar of chainsaws and wood

chippers as crews worked first to clear the roads. Throughout Oak Bluffs the broken trees littered the park, beaten to pieces, hollow like paper mache. Just before the power came back I heard the crew whoop at 5 am on the pole just beyond our privet hedge. Downstairs for breakfast, the daylight was harsh. The kitchen had a morning after look, the party long over. My mother plodded to the kitchen in striped pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, knees still morning stiff, talking even as she brushed her teeth, I felt impatient with her suddenly, daunted by the melted ice puddling in the cooler bags, bespattered stove, But mostly by the evidence of my mother aging. I thought when my mother is gone, I hope I won't remember these moments. It hit me as I started to fill the kettle. And my mother went to spit. I am already missing what I think I won't miss. With the return of power came the endless television, access to Internet, a plane ticket back to Seattle. I wish you weren't leaving, my mother said. As I packed, I realized I was the only one who had been upstairs this entire stay. It's been since my father's stroke 10 years ago that he was up there. My mom avoids it because of her knees. It seemed different than when I had arrived, a rarity in life even being alone upstairs. It was so quiet. No Breeze to rustle the remaining leaves and not a single acorn left to drop. The quiet seemed ominous. I'll miss you, my mother said, as I put my bags into the car. She limped her way from the parking lot all the way down the ferry dock. She said she probably wouldn't stay until the boat left. But once I was up on the deck, she never did walk away. In fact, she waved and waved until the ferry made its turn from the harbor out into open water. In my pocket. I caressed one last acorn as though massaging my own future broken heart.

**00:53:19 Speaker 1**

Okay, well, with no word from our Stephen Lundgren, who is such a good poet. I have no few other further readings unless anyone wants to open mic, but it's been sort of a nice tradition recently on Zoom to be able to allow anybody if they want to unmute and ask any questions about about it. The different writers we could have our own little reunions here. Saw something in the chat from Wendy, over and Bainbridge will say that the Ballard writers Collective has put together a gorgeous gift basket, which is part of the Ballard Senior Center auction, which is ongoing now as a silent auction. And also they're going to have their first live event since they were cancelled in March, 2020. And it includes a copy of Jays, Ballard writers, Collective poster. A lot of signed books from Carol. Rita even found one of Jennifers that didn't go to Goodwill, many beautiful things, and they need all the help they can get. I also had the opportunity to be present for an award given to the 32-year director at the Ballard Senior Center, who's a real favorite of mine. Carly Teel was awarded a Martin Luther King Lifetime Achievement medal from the King County Council. And I get to photobomb the whole video presentation. So that was fun. And I forget, if I have any other notes. So to support Secret Garden, figure out a new place for open books to move to and feel free to chat, I will stop the recording so you can feel more comfortable.