



Library

podcast

Virtual It's About Time Writers' Reading Series, #386

00:00:01 Peggy Sturdivant

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to reading number 386 of the It's About Time Writers Reading Series. I'm very happy to welcome tonight the series founder, Esther Helfgott. The series first started in January 1990. It seems very appropriate to have her kickoff 2022 for us. Tonight we're going to be hearing from Carolyne Wright, Ruth Schemmel, and Esther Helfgott. We also have the most participatory Open Mic that we've had since we went online. So thank you so much to those who've let me know and chat that you want to be part of this. I'm very happy and feel increasingly encouraged about 2022. So our first reader tonight is Carolyne Wright, and she is going to be reading her new book *Masquerade*. It is a memoir in poetry, published by Lost Horse Press. Her previous book is *This Dream the World: New & Selected Poems*, whose title poem won a Pushcart Prize, and also appeared in the best American Poetry 2009. Her groundbreaking Anthology, *Raising Lilly Ledbetter: Women Poets Occupy the Workspace* received 10 Pushcart Prize combinations. She has also received NEA and 4Culture grants and the Fulbright Scholar award in early 2020, which will take her back to Bahia after the covid-19 and dimmick subsides in Brazil. Welcome Carolyne ... have you Well, you see, there you go.

00:01:49 Carolyne Wright

Thank you everybody. And good evening. Thanks so much for having me Peggy. And I'm great. I'm very happy to be here with Ruth and Esther and reading with all of you in the zoom room. And I'm looking forward to hearing your work as well. Well as Peggy said, I'm going to read from this new book called *Masquerade*. It's a memoir in poetry. And I'm going to read a couple of the shorter pieces from it. And let's see where it takes us. The first one, I mean, it's really, it's really a... it's the story in verse in poetic form of an interracial love affair. And this was something that occurred quite a long time ago. But I'm going to take you through a few of the parts of it. The first poem I'm going to read is a round, which is a formula here, some repetition with variation, and it's called *At First Sight*. Notice that there's one word that is often part of that phrase. If that is not there. Round At First Sight. Through the Windows louvered blinds you Glide and profile across the room, angled pitch of your hips, almost a dancer's, backlit by a single kitchen bulb, that's all. Through twilight's translucent blinds. You glide through back light that falls four square on the outside veranda, where I hover waiting for my door to open, glancing through the next store window, where you glide in profile, the room falling in foursquare light onto the veranda at my feet next to the studios caretaker, turning the key in my door, angle of your dancers silhouette, flooding my breast bone with sudden fear. Or is it the single kitchen bulb that silhouettes you in profile in your studio? A reversed mirror image of my

own next door, where the caretaker turns the key so that I can step inside my mirror image in reverse next door studio, where I will live a year beside you. Fears light falls on all fours at my feet, your profile in silhouette, the blinds half open. Have you noticed my moments gaze that goes on a year until I step into my studio and close the door? Your image profiling mine through louvered blinds.

00:05:05 Carolyne Wright

Well, I'm going to go to the next poem in the sequence, which is called Blame It On My Youth. A lot of these poems have Jazz influence and Jazz references in them. And that's a song you may recall. Sort of one of those ballads, torch song ballads. And this is ... it starts at an artists' colony. As we could say, it's a residency program on the other coast. And you may recognize the setting if I read enough from here. So this is it. And the title is also the first line. Blame it on my youth. I hum at the arcs Center's opening fet, a tune I've heard for the first time on public radio's after-hours Jazz out of Boston. I'm happy by myself this evening, sipping a gin and tonic without the gin. Newly arrived as everyone. Early October's red letter Maple leaves, scraping my paper mache scraps against the windows. Where are you? As I chat with sculptors and novelists, painters and poets, all of us reading each other's name tags. Oh yes, that center of stillness, near a bookcase. You sit on a braided throw rug on the gallery floor in faded blue jeans and pressed denim shirt, one arm, folding your crossed knees to your chest. Even then, you lean into the next moment gazing into your wine glass with a sly smile, lip-synching whose words to yourself? Have I forgotten that first sight's blow dart has already struck? If anyone asked then, the question would puzzle me. Safe? Of course, I'm safe. You glance up as I pass. Your attention ripples then veers away. I'm just another woman in the room without a name, yet. As conversation swirls and Elvis Costello groans on the stereo, the angels want to wear my red shoes. We haven't yet been introduced. What if the cloud of circumstance had hovered a moment, then eased off. If the future weren't already stitched to the past. This evening we are all just starting out; all of us too young for blame.

00:08:07 Carolyne Wright

Okay, let's see, you know, I might kind of stay with this, because it's sort of fun to read the opening. This is a ... this place was on Cape Cod. As we have here in the Salish sea, there are whale watch boats that go out, and they go out into October, you know, and then there's a winter break, and they resumed sometime in the spring. So I had, I think, at that point, I don't think I had ever been on a whale watch. So I decided to sign up. And, you know, however, I had to do that. I went and signed up for a whale watch and got a couple of the other new fellows to go with me. So I decided to invite this person. But, you know, I never things never come out quite straight. So instead of going on a whale watch, we went to be watched by whales. And that actually happened. Sun floods the dunes this morning with Cape Cod's Indian yellow wash. And I try to scat whistle Herbie Hancock's Dolphin Dance between my teeth as I bound up the swaying walk the plank steps, and give my syncopated tap tap tapping on your door. Want to come be watched by whales? I asked the wooden panel swinging inward and the rectangle of shadow from which you emerge. Heavy-lidded, averting your glance as the dunes lemon feflections strike the planes of your face. And I repeat my invitation, squint-grinning to deflect the threat. Above us, wavering Vs of geese yelp in unison like a big band's reed section. You gaze down at me as if I were the busybody from Porlock nosing in on your private Xanadu. Say what? you mutter, your voice dusty with reluctance. Have you been at work? Asleep? Is

a woman with you? Your arm across the door, space blocks my view inside. I shiver in late October's sudden chill. Keep it light. I tried myself as I stutter to explain the season's last whale watch. Some painters are novelist, and I are getting tickets. Would you like to join? I finish with some quip that Ahab never had it so easy. you know it with Moby Dick, then flush as the look on your face makes me follow the thread of that comment to its race-baiting source. No, no, you murmur. Thanks. Then shut the door. The whole exchange? Two minutes. To your five words, I've spilled five-score shivering in the quickened breeze, still talking as your door closes. How foolish do I feel? I shrug, I don't believe in all or nothing at all. I've done what I could to be a pal, drawing the line at friendship. I clatter down the rocking steps still in my right mind. Not yet anybody's consolation prize. From inside your shuttered studio, you never see the pod of fin whales, frolicking off the bow, breaching and spouting in the slate gray scud, as the captain cuts the engines, and in the sudden lull a young whale breaks from the ponderous royal to lift straight up, nose to house high tail flukes against the sky. He arcs over the deck, hanging a moment, like a dancer in shear wind as the railings length of watchers gasps. And he slides back like a pewter blade shelving into the wave storm. I grip the rail in a speechless breeze. I never tell you, no man has ever thrust his summer into me like that.

00:13:03 Carolyne Wright

Okay, I'm going to read one more, because I don't want to take too much time here. The next poem is in two parts. I'm staying here in this Northeast Coast here. Here we are again in the dunes, and it's a poem. It's a pair of Trio lays. Would you may know, is a form that has eight lines, of which one line gets repeated three times. And another line gets repeated once. So there's, you know, three lines are the same. And then two other lines are pretty much the same. And it's called Treo Lays on a Dune Shack. The Dune Shacks were little shacks that painters used to use on Cape Cod. And they go out there paint and, you know, in a place with no distraction. And so there are there are still dune shacks out there. And the poem has an epigraph from a writer named Lester Walker, the tiny book of tiny houses and the the epigraph is snuggled in between two small glassy dunes facing the ocean. Trio Lays on a Dune Shack. One. We make love only once in the dune shack. Our reflections stroke each other in the mirrors, the pot-bellied stove by the bunk bed glowing black. We make love only once in the dune shack. Atlantic winds rattled the french doors, sand drifts against us on the bolsters. We make love only once in the dune shack, our reflections stroke each other in the mirrors. And then here's the here's the mirror Trio Lay. Number Two. Let's say we never make love in the dune shack. We kissed and walked away. Dunes, glassy, around us. We gazed out to sea. We never looked back. We tell ourselves, we never made love in the dune shack. We stopped short where the weathered driftwood found us and turned away in the lee of the dune grass. We never made love, we say, in the dune shack. We kissed and walked away the dunes, glassy around us. So thank you very much. And, you know, to be continued at another reading, thanks so much.

00:15:54 Peggy Sturdivant

We're not going to forget that whale ending, I'll tell you that. Thank you, Carolyne. Okay, Sylvia, if you will unmute yourself. Then I will have you do the open mic.

00:16:10 Sylvia

I am unmuted. All right. As many of you know, I like to write about various characters. I mean there's the deaf woman, there's Leticia, but there's a new character I've been writing about, and he's called Mr. Zeitgeist. And this is a prose poem called Night Visitor. In the night my bedroom door eases open. Mr. Zeitgeist sidles into the room, slips under the covers, into my head. He stays until dawn, takes control of my dreams, dangles a noose, screams slogans in my face, sprays virus laden spittle. I don't like how he makes me feel. It's fatiguing. He suggests remedies for my symptoms. He shells for pharmaceutical companies, whereas a sandwich board advertising his wares, I am wearing.

Whatever he's pushing is undoubtedly harmful. Side effects may include headaches, nausea, blurred vision, vertigo and unwanted pregnancy. He suggests consult your doctor, but where are the doctors? Medical schools shriveled into demagoguery. Sometimes I fear I might be carrying one of Mr. Zeitgeist's conceptions. Perhaps Mr. Zeitgeist's pals will decree I must carry it to term. If I deliver a litter, where will I find a strong enough of gunny sack? Heavy rocks? A fast-flowing river to carry them out of my mind?

00:18:01 Peggy Sturdivant

Oh, great, you're going to leave us there. I have take Carolyn's whale at this point. Thank you so much, Sylvia. Glad you're here tonight, Denny, if you will unmute

00:18:18 Denny

Well, oddly enough, I'm going to read something called putting the Zeit in the Geist.

00:18:27 Peggy Sturdivant

Wow. That is Cosmic

00:18:30 Denny

Purely on a cost basis, ephemera outweighs gold. Dust markets manipulate the sand fleas. The cat goes crazy, killing every mote on tempo in an exuberant cloud, claws splayed in an ornery gesture. But if malady took a holiday, what would become of calamity? Would she drink whiskey on her porch and shoot at crows for sport? Cataracts to shadows and pummel the cork tree? Her geist may be the gist of the jest in gesture or the winds lecture. Go rob a cloudbank and fill the gutter for a barrel of moonshine. Given the gift of the Geist, it's a slow raft up a long river, gets the guest a lift past eddies and idle banks. Some think the mind a frog on a slippery bog. But let the tendriled tongues catch bugs of the bog and nod to cranes on the by ways. We can whistle with the boast and paddle sidesaddle on a craft and coast to the breezeway come sun or slow drizzle. Sometimes note accord or dissonance spirals in consonants to harmonize. El Cid and Don Quixote, met in a met in a ghost town for a duel. Cid took the L and grabbed a V a single vase with a rose on the way. Quixote brought a bottle of rose a and a Jews harp. Droop dude, he commanded, and the L roared to sleep in a hurry, fingering the rattling vase. Quixote took the flower and grew into a novel that's still speaking, but Cid's grown deaf and needs a leash whenever they leave the apartment. Now that's what you call a formalist, mumbles The Don, donning a nod and nany and knotting dawn. Reams of broken rules litter the empty streets.

00:20:41 Peggy Sturdivant

Have you and Sylvia been sneaking off to meet somewhere that I didn't know about? That was amazing. Talk about synchronicity. So glad I ran into you at the fish market.

00:20:53 Denny

Thanks, Peggy.

00:20:54 Peggy Sturdivant

Thank you. Denny. So Ruth Schemmel is a Seattle area, writer and teacher, whose fiction has appeared in Bellevue Literary Review, Fiction and New Orleans Review among other places. She has been a finalist in Glimmer Train's Fiction Open and the fifth place overall winner in the NYC Midnight Short Fiction Challenge. She will be as newly announced as a Jack Straw 2022 writer. She is at work on a novel. Welcome, Ruth.

00:21:27 Ruth Schemmel

Thank you. Thank you. I'll be reading from a short story called Women's Wellness. So this is the beginning. "Where's the other instructor? The boy?" Renee said. It was day one of Women's Wellness Camp, which Renee had embarked upon in hopes of having a young man's hands on her body, even if it was for some instructive purpose, like correcting her stroke. But the firm young college student, she'd envisioned teaching her to kayak, the one she'd seen, in fact, on the website and new to be real was not to be found on the dock. "The boy?" said the instructor, a woman in her 70s, face stiff with amusement, legs sun-browned, scratched up with the sorts of old wounds that served as evidence of past adventures, of life rather pointedly well lived. "We don't employ children. Anyway, you got me." "The website showed a picture of a boy," Renee insisted, "a young man, and the kayak instructor listed on the staff page is Ralph." "Well, maybe I'm Ralph," the woman in her 70s said mysteriously, your Ralph, she gave little jerky motions of her head and shoulders as she said it, as if to heighten the ridiculousness of anyone of Renee's age and station, seeking access to the world's Ralphs. "All right, grab your ore." "You mean paddle?" "Call it anything you want princess. Call it Ralph." Renee had suffered the usual love story. Boy meets girl. Boy marries girl. Boy impregnates girl twice. Boy makes girl take teaching job in the suburbs, giving up her various passions, poetry writing among them, to pay her share of her house the bank would own for the next 30 Years. And when girl starts heading around the bend toward 50, boy leaves girl, by now clearly, well past girlhood. He leaves her for, no surprises here, a girl 26, basically a child, breathless, whippersnappy, good at whatever nonsense tech industry job the universe offers that sort of person. Not that Renee minded much. She was sick of the boy, the man she might as well call him, also nearing 50. She'd seen him since in spandex, a neon sneer on a racing bike, zipping among cars in their old neighborhood, lifting two gloved fingers to her in her scratched Subaru, without meeting her eye. A kiss off or a wave, who could say? He'd been tagged in hiking shots on Facebook that still appeared on her feed, holding up cardboard signs and pointing at the elevation with a quizzical "Am I really here?" expression. Apparently he was hitting all the high points in the country. Apparently, this had always been his dream. Apparently, he'd had many dreams, skydiving, technical climbing, sex with a woman who could be his daughter. He was living, no one could argue with this, not even Renee, his best life. Time for Renee to begin living hers. Women's Wellness, pitched to her by a neighborhood housewife she recognized from years of dog park visits and youth soccer sidelines, and whose name

she might as well finally learn, had seemed to Renee like a start. "The kayak instructor is a disappointment," Renee reported during evening activities. She and her bunk mates had chosen body-positive paper mache, which, with the help of wine they'd concealed in their water bottles, was becoming lively. "Do yourselves a favor and avoid her." "I tried archery," said Evelyn, a large woman who required machinery to sleep. "No complaints. You should have seen the hottie who helped me with my grip. Ralph, I think he said his name was Ralph." Renee set down her newspaper stack. "No shit. I was looking for Ralph. I need Ralph." "Yes, you do. We all need Ralph." Evelyn removed her shirt and began wrapping sodden paper strips around one hefty arm. Did they all need Ralph? Did the others need Ralph? The way Renee needed Ralph, doubted it. These women had already all, but given up. It was the second time that day Renee had seen Evelyn remove her shirt. Earlier, while Renee was driving their group carpool to the camp, Evelyn had flashed a couple of truckers on the highway from the backseat. Renee had never been a boob flasher, or friends with boob flashers, wet t-shirt contest participants, even bikini wearers. She had always known better. And so had her sensible friends. Yet the reaction of the truckers who had cheered and applauded, tapping at their horn, struck her as sweet, nearly heroic. Who were these kind men? These Galahads, making sure no middle-aged woman's random highway flashing went unappreciated, keeping the old myths alive for no reason now, beyond tact. "Claim your body!" the young instructor said, specifically to Renee, slower than the others to get started. "It's yours, right? So celebrate it, make art with it." "I feel like doing a tit," Renee said. "Or you could do an elbow. A foot is easy," concern creased the instructors brow. "You should absolutely do a tit," Evelyn said. "Body-positive." "Body-positive," the rest of them sang out tipsilly, Renee among them. It was a joke. Everything was a joke. Women's Wellness was a joke. Look around. These were the unhealthiest women Renee had seen in her life. "You had to joke because otherwise, what?" she thought, swooning into momentary depression. They had so little to show for their time spent on Earth. Did Renee kid herself she was different? For what had she lived? She, they all, had given everything to their families. They had spent themselves. Had anyone asked them to? Had they thought there was something else they were getting? "Jokes on us," she thought, as she unbuttoned her shirt. "You ladies are certainly going for it," the counselor tried not to look at Renee's plastered tit, the paper mache almost dry enough to peel off. "That's how we do things." Renee responded. "Body positive," added Jackie, a densely packed woman with a frozen shoulder and a limp. She slugged wine from her water bottle, making no effort now to hide it from the counselor. "There," Renee said suddenly, all of them, including the counselor, turned to look. "That's Ralph." It was indeed the same young man she'd seen featured in the camp catalog. Tall with the broad shoulders of myth and romance novel jackets. Not that she read that sort of thing. But that was where the fantasy broke down. He was rather more puffy than muscular, as if he'd been fed a diet of exclusively processed carbs, or as if he'd been a football player once, but hadn't kept up the workouts. He had a goofy smile ears that stuck out like her younger daughter's did. But there was a brightness about him, the halo of youth and vigor. He was a man after all, a young man. One who'd made himself available this weekend to the cause of women and wellness. He would do. Ralph tested the mic. "Hello. Hello," he said. "So I'm Ralph." "Hi Ralph," someone who was not Renee, but might as well have been, screamed. He began reading announcements in a shy, jokey way, beginning with a list of the next morning's activities. The women, mostly obedient up to that point, arranged compliantly into their various activity groups, their knitting clusters and storytelling klatches, their acupuncture and meditation circles, began to show signs of restlessness, of edgy, raucous energy.

"We love you, Ralph!" another woman shouted. Two or three women whistled. "Do we all need Ralph?" Renee found herself again wondering, bemused yet also troubled. Am I no different from these others? At the same time she found herself swept up in the giddiness, the emerging hysteria. She emitted a small whoop and a fist bump. "So a couple more announcements," Ralph said. Cheers and whistles

00:31:31 Ruth Schemmel

drowned out his next words. "This is a little too much reality for him, isn't it? Jackie said. "He has no idea what he's in for." Reality. Renee thought. No idea of what? The extent to which women let themselves go? Become hooting, cawing barn animals for whom sexuality is an absurd performance? As if this descent into invisibility, into not mattering at all were somehow preordained. No help or hope for it? This was just how it was. "Poor boy's frightened of us," Evelyn was saying. 'Good Lord, he will be devoured." He did look frightened, smile glued to his lips, hands all but useless at his sides. Renee, could think of a few things he could do with those hands. Twenty minutes with Ralph in a boathouse, that's all she needed. That's all she needed in the world. "What's he teaching tomorrow?" she demanded of the body positive paper-mache instructor, her plastered tit pointing at the woman like a pistol. "Find out!" The next morning, she had been assured she would find Ralph at archery. Instead, she found the 70-something year old woman, the same one from the day before. Sunlight caught her chin whiskers. "Well, look who it is," the woman said, "we must stop meeting like this." She laughed at Renee's expression. "Here. Grab yourself a bow and some arrows." "I thought you were the kayak expert." "The kayak expert," she gave Renee a penetrating look, an unpleasant I-see-you smile. "We all do everything here. Jacks of all trades. I thought you were here to broaden your horizons." "I am," Rene said, suddenly confused. "That's why I'm here at archery learning to arch." It was meant as a joke, wordplay. She was a poet, right? Sort of. "To arch,"he woman said raising her eyebrows, "I don't think I want to see that." "Well, what the heck was that?" Renee thought. "So," she said, aiming to cover her horror at the minefield of accidental sexual banter she may or may not have stumbled into with technical questions, "this is called a what exactly?" "A Bow?" "Yes, but I thought there were different kinds." "Oh, sure there are. I see you really know your stuff. We call this kind plastic." She pronounced it like a foreign word. "Yes, but the style..." "How about less talk and get those arrows flying, Katniss." "Archery wasn't as great as you described," Renee told Evelyn at lunch. She felt bruised after her morning session with the seven-year-old. Every interaction with the woman abraded. Why, though? It was as if the woman knew her thoughts, her fantasies even and had deliberately thrust herself in Fates path. She was bruised physically, too. The skin along her forearm red and swollen where the string had repeatedly slapped it with each arrow's release. She blew on it softly. "That's not supposed to happen. Didn't the instructor show you how to do it? My instructor put his arms around me," Evelyn, confessed, giggling. "Mine didn't," Renee said, "Thank God. Though I wouldn't mind a tussle with yours. Honestly, all I wanted from this experience is a man's hands on me." It was a mistake to admit this. "Wait. What? You came to Women's Wellness to hook up and you're not gay?" "Well, of course, it sounds insane when you put it like that" Renee said. "You should visit my mind. It all makes sense there. It was that cute picture of Ralph doing kayak lessons on the website." "Was there?" Evelyn made a helpless gesture. "I'm just in it for a break from home, no cooking, cleaning up after people, driving to practices fresh air's not bad. But if you want a man's hands on you, or at least near you, you should head back to the kayak station after lunch." The whole

thing was foolish Renee thought as she headed to the docks, unless maybe it wasn't. She could get lucky and see him. She could get lucky period. She believed in luck the same way she believed in lust, that edge of insatiability that made her feel vital and alive. Nevermind her aging face, the knee just then giving her pain. Nevermind the way as she crested the hill, and approached the waterfront lit to sparkles by the sun, just beginning its descent. She limped. And that's where I'll stop. Thank you.

00:37:07 Peggy Sturdivant

Thank you. I just want to say that you are a terrific reader. You said, you didn't have that much experience, but you are a really good reader. Characters were... we could hear each of their voices. You're a natural, I would say, in the chat which you'll see everybody is definitely were laughing in our little Zoom boxes. So glad that I finally got to hear you're writing after too many years. Thank you, Michael. I'm going to have you unmute, and you are open mic. Thank you again. You.

00:37:50 Michael

Hey, hello everyone. And thank you to the readers who have read already. I have two poems. The first is titled Mange Tout, a French word. Anybody know what that means? Say it again, Mange Tout, eat everything basically. Pardon my French. If cars were edible, we'd know what to do when the cost of repairing them exceeded their value as transportation. We'd slice off a strip of Goodyear Tire, sprinkle it with synthetic oil dripping scraped off the manifold. Chow on down. Or a burrito like hors d'oeuvre, we could wrap windshield shards and seat leather and fish up a melange of Tabasco taillights, shock absorbers and camshafts on shiny hubcaps. Dice up the floor mats, mud flaps to serve with headrest hollandaise and turbocharger chutney. Nibble on a seatbelt, or turn signal, make a cocktail of melted steering wheel and miscellaneous engine parts. If the axles were too filling all at once, we could shave them down to filings to swallow with the washer fluid. Same with the aluminum frame mixed with gasoline or diesel whipped to a froth with a timing belt or antenna. Airbag powder would flavor the alternator and carburetor, complimenting s'mores made of a sun visor and a license plate. Gear knob and speedometer would be truffle like delicacies. But one could take only the tiny, tiniest morsels, even if buttered with the battery radiator brake pads it savor the distinctive mustard tastes of the muffler, depending on its aging by rust. Imagine eating the radio now silent, or that thing that used to be called the cigarette lighter, downing the windshield wipers, cracked rubber blades and chunks of pickled accelerator pedal. We might work our way from front bumper to exhaust pipe or roof rack to chassis, have friends over for transmission parties as we pay our last respects to our dearly departed automobile, splitting the differential like a wishbone to see who scores the catalytic converter or dashboard dessert. How about a bite of rearview mirror or cruise control, topping that off with pistons on a dipstick. Fender leftovers like sushi on a fan belt, then sharing spark plugs and lug nuts with wasabi in post-party goody bags. Italian sports cars might be especially delectable, but we'd be wise to be wary of Eastern European clunkers. You might wonder if a limousine is more tangy than an SUV, or a jalopy more tart than a truck. But when its engine will no longer turn, must relish our own car, convertible, Jeep or sedan our gratitude salsa. In the end you might congratulate ourselves for exceeding even Michelle Lotito, better known as Monsieur Monge Tout, Mr Eat All ate bicycles, shopping carts, chandeliers, televisions, a pair of skis, a computer of coffin, a waterbed and even an entire Cessna. Never ate a car.

00:41:43 Michael

And do I have time for a shorter one? Sure. Okay, this is called that preppy feeling, and it's an unusual one for me in that it rhymes I'm prepping for colonoscopy. It's hardly a thing to avoid. It may be unpleasant and leave some debris, but my life will not be destroyed. I'm prepping for colonoscopy. It's nothing at all to dread the potion I'm drinking tastes lemony and won't leave me writhing or dead. I'm prepping for colonoscopy, which might make me feel a bit sore, it keeps me dancing happily to the bathroom to do my chore. I'm prepping for colonoscopy, for I know it's a healthy trend. So I'm doing my prep so dutifully, because I know I'll feel good in the end. I'm prepping for colonoscopy. I really don't mind one bit. I'm finding how quickly I don't need to pee, but I definitely need to...

00:42:47 Peggy Sturdivant

Okay, well, that's a break from the Zeitgeist. And aren't you a vision with your backdrop of blue? Thank you.

00:42:59 Unknown speaker

Is it okay to say something? Sure, That was... those were great! I want to read a whole book full of them. Thank you. Thank you.

00:43:13 Peggy Sturdivant

Thank you so much. And that is a new take I did write a column about a colonoscopy, which I called columnoscopy. But never a poem. So Bravo. Okay. Now I know tough act to follow as they so often say. Esther is the founder of this series back in January 1990, and she's going to be the new piece called Becoming Eighty. She is a nonfiction writer and poet with a PhD in history from the University of Washington. She is the author of Listening to Mozart: Poems of Alzheimer's, Dear Alzheimer's: A Caregivers Diary, and The Homeless One: A Poem in Many Voices. She is a longtime teacher and a 2010 Jack Straw writer. That doesn't do her justice. Welcome Esther.

00:44:07 Esther Helfgott

Thank you. I'm going to start by reading about my new book, Dakota. Becoming Eighty, part 1 Dakota. My German Shepherd, Smoky Bro, died on August 14th and I went four months without a dog, the longest time I can remember being without one. And if you don't think an 80 year old woman could pine with loneliness for one of those four-legged creatures, you're mistaken. Then my daughter, representing all three of my children, came in the house with a two-and-a-half-year-old tri-colored aristocratic pup. Twenty-three pounds of energy with hair growing out of her toes. I never had such a small dog. She looks like a porcelain doll. I'm almost afraid to touch her. She's so delicate. I could put her on a shelf and nobody would know she's real until she awakens and runs a black rust and white ball of fur. She curls up under my arm at the bottom of my feet, or in my lap, without asking. She sleeps on top of my pillow as if I were her very own security blanket. She knows very well that she owns me. I couldn't pick up my full-grown German Shepherd Smoky Bro and put him in my lap. So the habits of this little girl called Dakota are new to me. I turned 80 on December 3rd of last year. The whole year before that, the thought of becoming 80 plagued me. I don't know why. My mother lived till 96; Aunt Mamee lived till 99, Aunt Mariam 102. In other words, longevity on my side of the family was taken for granted. So why did I waste time worrying about what it meant to be 80, especially with the

gift of Dakota right around the corner. She and I will certainly grow older together, and the word 80 will have lost all its meaning. More of Becoming Eighty. I have a new friend. Its name is Peter. He comes to my house every day at 3:15. I leave the door open for him. We sit and talk until he gets up to leave when light begins to fail. He's afraid of the dark, even though he loves it. He's fallen and doesn't want to take the chance of falling again. Why is it important that I have a new friend? I've had new friends before, friends who've sat with me through the years, friends I've talked with over breakfast and dogs, and then, for instance, who brings her own coffee in a cup for me too, plus sticky buns. Judy visits me in late afternoon. I've known her for years. I don't know how many. Perhaps I know her from schul, synagogue. Or maybe I know her from Abe. Did Judy know Abe before I knew Abe? I don't know, but she's still in love with him. Even after all these years, after his death in 2010, she's still in love with him. I was with Abe when he died, but I don't remember him dead. I only remember him alive. He was a sweet man. But he could lose his temper too. I saw him lose his temper a few times. His temper led me to want a divorce, but I never got one. We just separated for a while. Separations didn't change anything. They just helped us to settle down, to know each other better. I saw the poet Sylvia Pollock walking in the street today. She wasn't actually in the street, which is just an expression. I saw her in the street means she was walking in the neighborhood. She looked like she was actually going for a walk. She didn't have a destination. I saw Jacob Lawrence walking in the street once too, he lived in my neighborhood. His hands were in his pockets with his head tilted, but just a little bit forward. Everything I've said up to now is true. I could put it in my autobiography. Actually, this is my autobiography, my autobiography in verse. I'll turn 80 in two weeks December 3rd, 1941. Special date for me. Perhaps Peter will bring me a cupcake. Driving home from mother's house. As I drive through the bower of old oak trees scanning 68th and 20th Avenues North East. I am scared by the Moon. It is so low in the sky this night, I think it will smack me in the face. I tried to turn the wipers on, but strands of hair white as paste cover the window like thick rain. A woman's mouth stretches open and a silent scream. Bent fingers claw until they reach my chest. Some nights I lose my way home. This is called Mother Wears a Shroud of Pure Linen. When she died, a team of women bathed her head to toe every inch of loose skin, even hard to get to underneath folds and creases. These women of the Chevra Kadisha washed her 96 year old still warm self. Their cleansing, a protective shield. Mother, buried in Seattle's Herzl-Ner Tamid Cemetery, you are ready for anything now. Eight Years Old. Cupcakes with sprinkles on top. My birthday party, Herbie Hellbergers here, and I'm happy. His parents are communists, too. Could somebody read an open mic while I let her out? And then I'll be back for one more poem.

00:50:39 Peggy Sturdivant

So Robert Hoffman, perhaps, if you could unmute, and then read an open mic.

00:50:45 Robert Hoffman

Yeah, I can, I have two. But I can read one. What's Wrong with Bob? It's a duplex, a form we were messing around with another group of mine. We had a lot of fun with this. So: What's Wrong With Bob: A Duplex. Our days are filled with attempts at meaning. You wake up at 2:00 with a case of FOMO. Your fears guide you to examine your phone, depending check or Solitaire, or the latest news. The latest news is flat, and down the rabbit hole you fall with the creator of Rock and Roll Heaven, an artist playing a plastic price for fame. In tight jeans Elvis thanks you very much. In loose

jeans you fix breakfast for the family as fresh face Heather begs for a picnic, but it's early, and the park is wet this time. So you take the time to go shopping. She pushes the mini shopping cart for eggs, and you buy the last two Betty White magazines. Driving home, you remember you didn't bag the mags and left them behind, and you pick up Lisa 30 just in time to return home to cook lunch, a BLT or an LOB, because you don't like tomatoes. The lettuce onion bacon is delicious, but you're out of ice, and you saunter to the liquor mart and buy extra liquor, because now it's 2 pm and wonder why you haven't written a word of meaning all day long. Thank you.

00:52:39 Peggy Sturdivant

Thank you. You have to come back and do more readings for us another time.

00:52:43 Robert Hoffman

Absolutely would love to.

00:52:46 Peggy Sturdivant

So while we wait for Esther, I often forget to do this part. Let's say that I will be welcoming Ann Hursey, Judith van Praag, and GG Silverman in February. And then I believe Anna Kim Dawn is here March, and she's here with us as well this evening. So wonderful. Well, does anybody else want to do an open mic or is Esther back?

00:53:19 Unknown speaker

Mary Ellen said she wanted to read one.

00:53:22 Peggy Sturdivant

Well, should we go to Mary Ellen? And then back to Esther?

00:53:25 Mary Ellen

Sure. Okay. And you can believe the poems that Esther said, but mine are more like Michael Dylan Welch's. I don't think you want to believe it. This was published in Lothlorien. It's a surreal poem. Okay, and it's for my grandchildren. Children get their just desserts. The trick to making fluffy children is using quality whipping cream with higher butterfat content. Wherever said children are lollygagging during dinner preparations, place them in appropriate containers, use manual beaters. No need for children to be apprehensive. They will love the attention and basking in foam. Younger children produce better results due to higher fat content. For that reason, teenagers are not ideal. Stainless steel beaters work well. Whip those children in the tub on the playground, in school, out of school, even on their way to the dentist. Whip whip, whip. Children with naturally curly hair foam up faster than those with long straight hair. Parents may wish to keep their children at their peak of freshness in a tupperware bowl in the fridge. It is recommended that you do not seal the bowl, as fluffy children need to breathe. Serve the just whipped children atop homemade pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving dinner. This dessert serves two purposes, creamy and sweet, especially if two tablespoons sugar and a half teaspoon vanilla extract are added toward the end of whipping. Do not energetically re-whip froth after removing fluffy children from the fridge. Folding stiff white peaks gently with a spoon will gather up any liquid that has separated. Besides taste, an additional benefit to this holiday delight is

that when children rest in stiff peaks, atop pumpkin pies, they give their parents 10 minutes to eat in peace. Although not recommended family dogs or cats will be eager to lick spoons, bowls and beaters. It's quite all right. Many fluffy children prefer this to taking a bath before bed. Thank you.

00:56:23 Peggy Sturdivant

Thank you, Mary Ellen. And thank you, Katie, for keeping me on track, too. Esther we're back to you. And then we'll hear from Mark Hennin.

00:56:34 Esther Helfgott

Okay, this is Father's Letter. My father is writing me from the grave. He says, he's sorry, he wasn't more whole as a human being. Even from up there he falls into bed, for days stares at the ceiling as if it holds an answer. None appears. He lies there unhappy in his, not. When he returns, he laughs as if the past few days belonged to someone else's life. Daddy closes his letter from the grave with a touch that moves me to the page. And for both of us, he's glad I'm here. The old woman worked, went to meetings, rode buses, shopped, carried bundles home. At demonstrations she held peace signs high. Shouted as if she owned the keys to her life. No one thought her body frail, least of all me. She was supposed to last forever or walk erect until the end. That's a mother. Now, she's in a nursing home, screaming, her old life, shadowing the bed. Throngs of people marching, wars raging, children waiting. At the hospital I lock myself inside the space of home, just as I did the bathroom when I was 3. Mother and father yell and beg and pound for me to come out. But I am steadfast. I watched the pee run over my thighs and into the space behind my knees and down the backs of my legs until the tops of my socks are sopping wet, and my feet are sloshy in my shoes. My brother and sister demand news of our mother's condition as my pen scribbles sounds of being along edges of my paper until words come together on the page. I look for my shoes to the quivering door, as firemen Meander through the mind of dream and doctors continued on even after the lock is broken. Farting mother, I will barter against all harm, I will watch her until my eyes run dry. I will swab her mouth with a saliva stick. I will hold her hands and to warm thumbs, I will watch her breathing until it stops. Even then I will watch. Mouth, that's all I see of her now, the wide-open hold that never closes, the tunnel of darkness to drive enter. No one wants to anymore. Anyway, except me. I want to climb in, tongue the periphery fill the hollow, moisten her until she glistens again. I'll read one more Mother Wears a Shroud of Pure Linin. When she died, a team of women bathed her head to toe every inch of loose skin, even hard to get to underneath of folds and creases. These women of the chevra khadisha washed her 96 year old still warm self. They're cleansing a protective shield. Mother buried in Seattle's Herzl Ner Tamid Cemetery. You are ready for anything now. Thank you.

01:00:23 Peggy Sturdivant

Thank you, Esther.

01:00:27 Peggy Sturdivant

What a lovely opportunity to set off the year mark.

01:00:32 Mark Hannon

Hi, I'm Mark Hannon. This is condensed from my quo is death, non fiction series. It's called Blame Inflation on Billionaires. Today's inflation is by billionaires who price gouge Americans on gasoline, meat, electricity and heat. U.S. fossil fuels are dominated by ExxonMobil Chevron and Conoco Phillips. Their billionaire owners raised prices over 50 percent higher than last year, gasoline up 58%, diesel fuel 53%, residential heating oil 53%, methane, AKA natural gas, the stuff powering furnaces, hot water heaters and kitchen stoves, up 58%. Fossil fuel billionaires, raised consumer prices for electricity, and every other consumer purchase that is shipped by ocean by train, by truck and delivery services, like Instacart. Big fossil raised all those costs for all other businesses, too, which led them to raise their prices, perhaps you hadn't gouging of their own. Some had pandemic profits peak. U.S. food is monopolized by 3 billionaire corporations, Cargill, Tyson and Purdue. During covid, they raised prices about 20%. In just one year, pork is up about 17% and steak 25%. Cargill is twice as big as Tyson and Purdue combined. Controlled by the 14 billionaire Cargills, "the family with the most billionaires in the entire world," their corporation raked record profits of about five billion dollars for its last fiscal year, up from three billion the year before. That's a 66% increase in profits during covid for the same steak and bacon. Cargill tried to hide its price gouging, but Bloomberg News found out: "What's good for Cargill" Bloomberg stated "is a headache for households which face the highest food inflation in a decade," subhead from worse to despicable. Each greedy billionaire takes food and heat from hundreds of thousands of homes with limited means, struggling students, young families, the handicapped, disabled veterans, seniors on Social Security, everyone working for slim wages and children. At the same time billionaires use their fat prices to pay politicians for laws to take the right to vote away from millions of Americans, so they can't fight back with a so-called "Supreme Court" that does what the billionaire's desire. By boosting inflation, billionaires inflate their power. And for the Americans the billionaires rip off, the status quo for their partners and their children is a lesser life, a shorter life and a sooner death. The status quo is death. Quo is death. Thank you.

01:03:27 Peggy Sturdivant

Thank you. Returning to like the big ending of. So thank you all for being here tonight with reading number 386 if you let me know, you want to read. Remember, it's my email, my first and last name, and I look forward to a wonderful year. Perhaps not all of it online.