Seattle Arts & Lectures
Interview Transcript: Ruth Dickey, Executive Director of Seattle Arts & Lectures
Interviewer: Gabriela Denise Frank
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Note: this transcript has been edited for clarity and flow.

Gabriela Denise Frank
I'm Gabriela Denise Frank, and I'm here on behalf of Seattle Arts & Lectures with Ruth Dickey, the Executive Director of Seattle Arts & Lectures, and the author of a book of poetry called *Mud Blooms*, which was published by Harbor Mountain Press. Thank you, Ruth, for being here with me, and congratulations on this wonderful book!

Ruth Dickey
Well, thank you so much. Thanks for being here with me.

GDF
So, to set the stage for our conversation, I wanted to start by saying that *Mud Blooms* weaves together your experiences feeding people in a soup kitchen called Miriam's Kitchen in Washington, DC; memories of your childhood and your mother as she was experiencing illness and decline; and also your travels through Latin America where, as a young person, you were exploring the boundaries of yourself through the lens of another language and culture. I was curious after reading it a couple of times, what drove the organization of this book? Why these threads coming together?

RD
That's such a good question. I mean, to me, I think all of the threads are about hunger and a search for home and connection and place. I was lucky to work with folks who were homeless in DC at Miriam's Kitchen, and I ran a writing workshop as part of my time there. We met after breakfast on Wednesday morning, every Wednesday, and the only rule in the workshop was, everybody writes. When we sat down at that table, we sat down together as writers trying to figure out how to put words on the page and what worked and what didn't, and it was amazing.

I got to know amazing people through that. I was entrusted with incredible stories and I wanted to honor and share some of those stories, but I didn't want the project to be about stories that are separate from my story. I thought it was really important that my story and my search for home was right next to those stories that I was sharing, and they were all talking to one another. That it was not an experience of othering, that it was very much like a writing workshop but we were all there together trying to figure out what home means and how to make sense of the world and how we grieve. That's, for me, why the poems ended up being organized the way they are. There's an abecedarian poem that kind of arches through the whole book, which is called "Alphabet Soup Kitchen," and it's teeny vignettes that tell the richness of the story of Miriam's Kitchen and the people who were there.

GDF
I loved those and, actually, I love how there's hunger and threads of food going through this. I went through and wrote on every page, challenging myself to see if I could come up with a list of all the different foods. I noticed apples and apple cake are recurring. There's milk, there's honey, there's nutmeg. There's nachos, champagne, eggs, smoked salmon, capers, lemon wedges. As I was reading it, I didn't realize how hungry I was getting! It was this book. And I love how you wove the writing that happened in the workshops into the titles of the pieces. Can you talk about that process? Was that something that you kept, you know, for a while knowing that you would do something with it, or was it something that occurred to you to go back to later?

RD
Yeah, so, the lines that appear as titles in the poems all appeared in anthologies that we published at the kitchen, so they were all lines from poems people wrote after breakfast. I really wanted—and all of those poems are persona poems—I wanted those poems to have voices from people at breakfast. That's where that idea came from. And I was thinking, how do I re-enter and find those voices? That's really where it began.

GDF
They're very distinct. I think you did a great job channeling a sense of someone else, someone who the reader will never meet, but we get a sense through language that you've shared with us a little bit of their insight and their view of the world and, certainly, their voice.

I'm curious about the title as well. I saw in the last poem, the last line of the last poem, says: "Through each long night, murmuring lotuses, blooming mud." When I think of mud blooms, I was thinking of a couple of different things. One would be the shape of mud if someone were dripping water into it and how it actually makes little blooms, but also flowers blooming out of the mud, sort of this juxtaposition. Maybe someone might not find mud beautiful, but someone might find a flower beautiful. Can you talk about how you came to that title to pull all of these ideas together?

RD
That's such a good question. The last poem in the book is really a prayer. I'm not a religious person, but it really is a prayer for the Miriam's Kitchen poets and for any of us who are searching for home. It is about the ways in which their lives are sacred. Our society says so much about people experiencing homelessness, and depersonalizes them and devalues them, and I wanted everything in this collection to be fighting against that.

To me, it's finding beauty in things that traditionally aren't seen as beautiful in this world and so that's why the last words are "blooming mud." This manuscript, at one point, was titled *Collecting Wurlitzers*, which is from a poem in the book about my father collecting Wurlitzers and having visions that he would repair them, then never quite doing it, and how we make intentions to create beauty and repair things and find transformation. But it didn't quite end up working out that way. It ended up with *Mud Blooms*, trying to celebrate

that idea of finding beauty. And I love the idea that lotuses bloom in mud—like, that is where they live and thrive.

GDF
It's a beautiful, beautiful poem, and a beautiful idea. My question about that poem, which is called "Take deep breaths, hold a pen, sit still"—I didn't want to say the word *prayer* because I keep spirituality and religion as separate things—but it feels to me like a blessing of safekeeping and, really, asking the universe to watch out for these people who we've met, some of whom have died, others who have disappeared. And, now, maybe there's a greater sense of watching over them. Something is watching over them.

RD
I hope so. As part of the celebration of the book coming into the world—before we didn't get to go places—I went to DC and got to be there and do a reading. Some folks from Miriam's Kitchen came and most of the people that I write about, who were part of the writing group, are no longer with us. [They] have died of a number of different complications. It was really powerful for me to read the poems and have people say, "Oh, I miss him so much," and, "I remember so-and-so." I hope that, in the book and in honoring those stories, and, in that poem and in the intention, there is an energy of loving and caring for those humans, whether they're on this earthly realm or not anymore.

GDF
Very much. I'm curious, maybe to back up a little bit, what was your relationship to poetry growing up, like, when you were very little? Has it always been part of your life?

RD
Mmhmm. I've always loved it. I've always loved poems and poetry and scribbled them on things, copied them into notebooks, wrote them in the sand on beaches. It's just always been part of what I thought was the most important way of making sense of the world.

GDF
Where did that come from?

RD
I have no idea. That's a good question. My parents are both huge readers and love language, love storytelling; they really believe in the importance and value of that. So, I'm sure that's where it came from.

GDF
Was there a point when you felt like you really started to take off as a poet? Was there a program you went through? Or was that something that happened later in your college years?

RD

Yes, when I was an undergrad, I took a poetry class with Roland Flint, who's an amazing poet who taught at Georgetown, and that was really powerful for me. That was one of the first times, having him respond to my work in a really affirming way, I thought, oh, maybe I am a poet.

Then, after school, I applied to this program called WriterCorps, which was an AmeriCorps program that placed writers in soup kitchens, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, public schools, day care centers, and youth centers—all these non-traditional spaces—to teach poetry workshops. I thought of myself as a poet, but I had published literally nothing. I applied to them and Kenny Carroll said, yes, you can join us in WriterCorps. That was a life changing experience for me.

So many of the people in WriterCorps came out of the George Mason MFA program, but then other people came out of the community, this wonderful blend of writers with all different sorts of experience. E. Ethelbert Miller came to talk to us. Ta-Nehisi Coates was one of the writers of my cohort, DJ Renegade, Jeffery McDaniel—incredible poets who are still publishing today. It was an amazing community to be part of. Then, from there, my life and writing moved along.

GDF
Yes, everything takes off from there. It reminds me a little of my conversation with Bitaniya Giday recently, talking about how she sees poetry as part of her interest in social justice. She is not necessarily fixated on becoming a poet, per se, but having poetry in her life, and poetry is actually part of her work. I see that similar connection in you as well, that it doesn't have to be one thing or the other, that the two really work together and, the poetry ends up being a vehicle for the storytelling, the connection of the social justice work.

RD
Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

GDF
I thought this book was so powerfully observed and very visceral. The way you talk about not only people but nature kind of hits the reader right here. [Lays her hand on her heart.] Like the calf, 421, who you want to save. [Another] image that really stuck with me is the newborn chick as a "dandelion puff"—this little tender thing we want to nurture. How has your relationship with that tenderness of life and loss shifted in the writing of this book, or after this book?

RD
That's such an interesting, good question. Both of the poems you just named were poems about childhood. I grew up in a rural area, and we did have chickens. We had this calf, we had a big garden. There's lots of poems about the apple trees and they show up like that. Life shows up and then, in the poems at the end of the book as my mom is dying, I think I have a different—like, then I'm grieving that time. There's a bitter-sweetness to it, I think, that moved through me and through the book and through dealing with grief. That apple

cake shows up as this comforting, wonderful thing and then, I lose the pan and the recipe. That's the lost thing, that's gone.

GDF
I think that the level and depth of empathy it creates in the reader, I mean, it really brought me to a place where I felt like I was right beside you. I could feel that loss of something as simple as a recipe and a pan—the meaning that it stands for and the comfort of home and the desire to be held in that way, emotionally, by someone—it's very profound.

I also thought, similarly, of this idea of hunger and desire as linked with shame. In the first poem in the book, the speaker tells us about the sugar in the supply room of an orphanage that she's placing her hand into. Or, realizing that people who are experiencing homelessness might not be able to eat an apple because it's too hard. There's a sense of—Oh, I should have known that. I should have been that sensitive. How has your relationship with food and hunger and satiation changed over the course of these experiences?

RD
Oh, gosh, that is such an interesting question. I think, in some ways that through-line about hunger is about understanding and navigating privilege and about understanding the ways in which I and the speaker "I" in the poems hold privilege. The poem about stealing sugar at the orphanage is such a transgressive thing and then also understanding that to not fully have known hunger is such a place of privilege. The ways in which that has a real emotional weight is what I was trying to wrestle with and come to terms with, I think. By the end of the book, my hope is that there's a little more integration of holding hunger as not a shameful thing, that it moves from hunger as something of which there's shame and guilt to a place where we all have hungers. We all hunger for sustenance and also community, connection, home, feeling seen, feeling loved. So, hopefully, it's moving towards that. That's what I was aiming for.

GDF
I'm also curious about the landscapes you're talking about: Washington, DC, North Carolina, Latin America—what do those different geographies represent to you?

RD
These are super personal, narrative, autobiographical poems, so they're all places I've lived. I grew up in North Carolina, I lived in DC for a long time, I lived in Central America for a year and have traveled in that region extensively. I often write poems about things I don't understand that I keep thinking about. So, those are the things that I'm, like, Oh, if I can [write about it], that [subject] has heat and intensity to me. If I can write about it, I can figure out what's happening. I think that's a big piece of why the Latin America poems entered and stayed, because they're containers in which I'm working out things that are related to the other places. In traveling, we feel things so viscerally. When we're in a different environment and a different culture, [it] allows us new windows into seeing ourselves—and our privilege, our culture, our assumptions, our expectations.

GDF
Yes. Is there a place out of any of those that feels like home, or is it a matter of, you know, at this point, does Seattle feel like home to you? Or is there one place that you "home" to?

RD
Yes, I mean, I've been lucky to live lots of different places and to feel at home in the world in lots of different spots. So, definitely, there are some poems at the end of the book that are set here in the Northwest and Seattle [is] very much like home to me. DC is definitely where I became an adult. It's the first place that I developed consciousness of myself as a writer and really had an artistic intention. So, in some ways, that will always feel like my artistic home, but definitely Seattle now feels like where my roots are.

GDF
I know what you mean when you say that. And Ecola State Park—is that the right way to say it?—I've never been there. At first, I didn't know where it was, but as soon as you said "clumps of mosses, riots of mushrooms, rough circles of sea, of foam, of bird," it was, like, I know that landscape because I share that landscape. It's the second to the last poem and it felt like a hinge to me. I wasn't sure if it was simply a matter of that poem coming up at a time when you moved to the Pacific Northwest, and then were thinking about these poems as a collection? Or, what made you include that poem with the rest of them?

RD
To me, that poem is really a poem about opening yourself up to grief and metabolizing it, you know. It ends with this metaphor, seeing this beach seal that's been picked clean by birds, and that I am the seal—ripped, cleaved open by this experience of grief that I'm trying to understand. But, to me, that poem ends on a hopeful note. It was trying to make the arc of going through grief and pain to this place of transcendence and having metabolized it in a way that, then, it can come out to the world.

GDF
I love that. I'm curious, if there was an overarching goal, or a sort of a North Star, how do you see this in your overall trajectory as a poet? What is this chapter of *Mud Booms* on the longer continuum?

RD
Gosh, that's such a good question. This book had a really strange journey to the world. Back in 2009 or 2010, an earlier version got picked by a small press for a prize. It was going to be published, I was all excited, and it was ready to come into the world—and then the small press went out of business. I didn't hear anything and it totally fell apart. Then I was, like, well, forget it. That's just not going to work. So I put in a drawer for literally five years and was, like, okay, done with that, [I'm] not doing poetry. Then I came to SAL, and, you know, having the privilege of hearing all these writers read their work and hearing young people read their work, it was super inspiring to me. I thought, I cannot authentically do this work without also struggling with my own writing. Part of authentically showing up in this job is

continuing to show up on the page—and succeed and fail and carry on. So I got the manuscript back out. At that point, I had lost my mom, so there was a different depth to the poems because I had different things. And, also, I thought it wasn't succeeding the way that it was. So, then, I layered in more things to try and make it a more cohesive whole. And, then, it finally came into the world, but [after] that long—like, [since] its original incarnation—it was a different book than it was, than it [is] now.

GDF
That's so interesting. It's amazing what distance will do for perspective, and how it changes what you write. I think it will be encouraging for those writers out there who are listening to this and thinking about their own work in that way. Sometimes, it just needs more time for whatever reason, and the universe may conspire to help give you that time. Even though, in the moment, it may not feel great.

RD
[Laughs] Yes, we say a lot around SAL about many things that the road to "Yes" is paved with "No." I think that's especially true for writers that, for all of us, our road to yes is paved with no. I've been so moved by the different writers that we've had at SAL who have talked about these incredibly long journeys to finally getting a yes. Both Ben Fountain and Viet Thanh Nguyen talked about writing for seventeen years before anything got published, and I just think, wow, that's such incredible dedication to craft and to belief in your stories and your work and your ideas. For all of us who are writing and struggling and getting rejected, rejected, rejected, it's good sustenance, but that's part of the journey.

GDF
I'm putting that on a three-by-five card. I have a few up as inspirational things to remind me as I'm working, but I love, *The road to yes is paved with no.* That's so comforting. Speaking of literary influences, who are the people who are helping you along now, just as mentors? Or, whose work are you reading that is exciting to you?

RD
Oh, gosh, so many. Sarah Burns, who works at SAL, jokes that SAL is her MFA program. I really feel like that. Every year is like a new MFA in SAL. Getting to read deeply all the writers who come, and to think about their work is such a honor and a gift. And, gosh from last season, I'm still thinking about Carmen Maria Machado and *In the Dream House*, which absolutely amazed and astounded and delighted me. I think it's such a brilliant book and reinvents what memoir can do. And so many things I'm reading. I feel like we are so fortunate that there are so many great writers here in Seattle, too. I just finished *Subduction* by Kristen Millares Young this summer. I have Corinne Manning's collection of short stories [*We Had No Rules*] on my desk. I just got Alison [Stagner]'s book of poetry [*The Thing That Brought the Shadow Here*] in the mail. I love that it is both the visiting writers and, then, our local community of writers, which is so robust.

GDF
We're very fortunate here. And, I think, you're also working on your next project. Is that true? Is that something that you can talk about a little bit?

RD
Yes. I do! I have another manuscript of poems that is about metabolizing grief in a different way. And I have a prose project that I'm working on, which is about walking the Camino de Santiago—what happened and why I did it, what I learned and all the blisters.

GDF
Oh my gosh—and it was, like, a month-long journey—a month-plus?

RD.
Yeah, it was about six weeks and four hundred miles.

GDF
I remember following you on Instagram. I can imagine [it was] a life-changing experience and one, especially now that we're all home for a while, you can savor.

RD
Yeah, it's a nice time to be thinking about and reliving in many ways, the world being a much more expensive place where we could all travel and go anywhere. Feels revolutionary at the moment.

GDF
No kidding. Another thing that we can all look forward to is the upcoming season of SAL, which is tremendous. I don't know if you'd like to talk about that as well. I mean, I'm so excited that we can enjoy this programming at home as long as we need to, but hopefully [it will be] in person at some point.

RD
I'm really excited about the coming season. And, gosh, they're just so many people that I can't wait to hear from: Claudia Rankine, in this moment of her new book, I think will be so incredible. I'm thrilled that we have Toi Derricotte, she's never been in our season, as one of the founders of Cave Canem and an elder in the community. I think it'll be so great to hear from her. I'm excited about Yaa Gyasi. I'm so excited about Yamiche Alcindor and to hear what she says about the election. Oh my gosh, all the inside scoop from DC. It'll be so great. I loved Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. I think it'll be so interesting and powerful to hear from him about his writing process and his poetry and his fiction and, of course, Ibram X. Kendi, who we're so thrilled that we are getting to hear from in April. One of my brother's favorite writers is Bill Bryson. He and his wife read Bill Bryson books out loud to one another, so he screamed when I told him, "We're bringing Bill Bryson!" He was, like, "Ahhhh!" I have not read Madeline Miller yet. I'm one of the only people on Earth who has read none of Madeline Miller.

GDF
I don't think I have!

RD

So many people love, love, love her work. I'm so excited to dive into *Circe* and *The Song of Achilles*.

GDF
It's great. You have these amazing conversations and, from the audience [perspective], those of us who are listening, I mean, I'm always changed by the people I see on stage. Do you have a habit of just thrumming with inspiration? Then, do you go home and write about what you're doing in this role?

RD
I have what I call a Glitter File. I'm madly taking notes as all our different guests are talking and then I type them into this thing that I called the Glitter File, then I'll go back and read it and be like, I loved it when someone said *that*. One of the nice things about social media is that we get to see what other people scribbled down in their electronic version of a Glitter File. It's like this reverberant, other conversation that's happening. I also love going back and seeing what moments people captured online and I'm adding [those] to my collection.

GDF
What a great term, Glitter File! I've never heard that before. I'm going to borrow that, too.

RD
Yes, make your Glitter File—so fun.

GDF
We touched on this a little bit, but how does your practice as a poet inform your work itself? I mean, there's clearly a link with literature but is there something that happens for you inside? How do you bring who you are as a poet to your work?

RD
Mmhmm. Gosh, that's a good question. I think probably most through the introductions to the authors that I get to write. I try and always read, read, read their work really deeply and think deeply about it. I think what I bring to that is just a deep love and admiration for their work and wanting to honor and celebrate that. At the end of the day, I'm a passionate reader like everybody in the SAL audience is. I'm bringing my authentic love for their work and, I think, that love for words in their work is probably why I'm a poet.

GDF
Yes. I have one more question for you, and it involves food. What are you eating these days?

RD
Oh my gosh, so fun. At our staff meetings, we always start with an anchoring question that we all talk about. This week, it was exactly that question, about what everyone's eating these days. I had the least interesting answer of everyone, so really, you should ask that to the whole SAL team who are amazing foodies and cooks, all of them! But, I confess, [the food] I have been super excited about—and, this is so lame, but I'm going to say it anyway and it's going live in infamy forever—this summer, I had hard-boiled eggs for the first time

in my adult life. I think I *thought* I didn't like eggs, and they are the best thing on salads ever, so I'm like reinventing salads, including eggs. It's so exciting!

GDF
That's funny. I know why—I mean, after reading [the Miriam's Kitchen poems] about eggs, and I, too, never knew that trick about how vinegar takes the green out of them when they're in the [serving] pan—maybe some of your relationship with eggs is related to having to try to please people. I mean, that's the other thing [about your book]: there's so much that's relatable when it comes back to food, your notes on [not being able to serve] eggs with things in them. You have to have [eggs] that are plain and there always has to be an option for those who will look [askance] at something that feels too much or too complicated. I think that's very common but it makes you sensitive to preference. There's nourishment and the relationship of food to happiness to, you know, a feeling like you belong somewhere, that something is being made that is for you—so, food is such a complicated, simple thing. I mean, really.

RD
It's so true. And you're so right. I never thought about that with the eggs. That's probably exactly why I have a complicated relationship with eggs. Thank you. You solved an internal mystery for me. That's awesome.

GDF
Well, I'm happy you can enjoy them because they're wonderful things! Is there anything else that I didn't ask you about this book that you would like to share? Or just leave us with?

RD
Oh, gosh, I thank you for such a close and careful reading of it, and all these incredibly insightful and lovely questions. For me, this book had such a long journey to the world, it's such a tremendous thrill and honor that anyone in the world has read it, other than me and my dad. So, thank you. Thank you for it. And thanks for being interested in it.

GDF
It's just beautiful, absolutely beautiful. And I look forward to the next two.

RD
Hopefully, it won't take eighteen years.

GDF
Well, if you need an early reader, I volunteer to do that. And thank you, and thank you to the staff at SAL, for keeping us going during this time. I have to say, when you first announced this spring that there would be a few options to connect with SAL even though we weren't all together, it really kind of made it for me, and a lot of others out there. We're feeling like, yes, we have Zoom meetings and we can read Twitter and Instagram, but actually being connected with cultural programming and hearing people like Carol Anderson talk, like Luis Alberto Urrea—those kinds of conversations are incredibly

important to the heart and soul. I, for one, am very grateful we can still have them even though we can't gather together, and I know you guys are working really hard.

RD
Oh, thank you so much for saying that.

GDF
Thank you.

RD
It's an honor. It's an honor. And, I have to say, I'm kind of a Luddite. I was very skeptical about the experience of these lectures online and what would it be like, and [wondering], would it feel fulfilling at all, but it's been so powerful, the ways in which they are special in new ways and intimate in different ways. I loved the moment when Luis Alberto Urrea was, like, here are the items on my desk and here are the notebooks I've kept since I was a kid. I can show you inside. We could never have seen those things if he were on the stage at Benaroya. There's an immediacy and, really, a specialness to that. So some silver linings of this time. It's good to remember [alongside] all the things that are harder, that we are not able to do, the things that we *can* do and ways we *can* come together and learn and listen and make sense of the world. It feels more important than ever.

GDF
Yes. And get good advice from people.

Maybe I'll close with Arianne True, who is a WITS writer and also a Hugo Fellow for this upcoming year. One of the best parts of conversation that I've had through these interviews has been her advice, when I said, "What should we be reading?" and she said, "Whenever anyone asks me what to read, whether they're happy or they're sad, I tell them read Ross Gay," and she was one hundred percent right. I wrote her a note the other day to congratulate her and said, "Thank you for saying that because now every time I think about you, I think about Ross Gay, and every time I think about Ross Gay, I think about you and it makes me feel good."

RD
That is excellent advice. I think we all should all be reading more of Ross Gay, particularly *The Book of Delights*, but all of his poetry.

GDF
Well, thank you for today. And hopefully I'll get to talk with you again soon.

RD
Hopefully so. And speaking of delights, this has been delightful.