



The Poetry Center at Smith College Presents

Q&A Session
with poet

Marney Rathbun

reading with Meredith Nnoka
& Abe Louise Young

Tuesday, February 20, 2018

4:00 PM

Poetry Center
Wright Hall



I call
my father
by his name

poem by Marney Rathbun

Marney
Rathbun

June

We are in the smallest suite of the Carleton Circle Motel complex.
Three years from now the owner will shoot himself behind the front desk.
You are asleep.

I am seven and awake, buzzing for a snack or toy.
Under the twin mattress upon which I slept for five days in this not-
house,

I find a Hustler.

It is something.

On the carpet that sweats Febreze, I flip.

Pages of breasts I do not have, mouths of labia shaven and wide.

Bathroom locked, cotton rabbit sleeping under the sink,

I strip.

In the shower naked, in the mirror learning, magazine splayed
like my legs on the floor;
how to become them?

Since April

Some afternoons, when I walk home, I have to pause for breath
because a dirt-ground cigarette butt reminds me
of the cheapest spot in St. Joseph's cemetery
where a 40-dollar gravestone smells like dog shit and rot
but the box in the ground holds an ash body, a gold filling or two.

Cleaning out the storage unit, I find waterlogged scripts,
sweaters he wore when I was 3, even a pair of holey jeans that fit.
At the bottom of a black duffel, the cheapest porn on the market
and I remember he was more, more than a body.

Here, you wake.

And pick the lock to find me red and prodding.

I do not remember if you scream or touch me.

This part is all damaged.

The next: in the kitchen at our not-table.

You remove the foil from a peach Yoplait and find a plastic spoon.

Finally, a snack.

As you cry, you beg, *do not tell your mother, do not
tell your mother.* Which part? I do not ask.

I eat and swaddle the rabbit, awake now from the yelling.

I do not tell my mother, any part.

This is what I know of shape and lonely men.

re born

mark meets his daughter

i saw her like the first lightning
waking up on the first morning
a glory born forest a fire
on the kitchen table the only thing
i could see for hours and this is
the rest of your life i thought and
red was not the color of her hair
not burning skies or velveteen or
deepening or the face of my heart
in the face of this child no her
hair was the plush flesh of a peach
this my daughter there i
imagined her into existence
and now pink infant here
i dont need a drink drunk is
9 pounds and 21 ounces of
new not amsterdam just new
this the first moment i've
ever been alive the reason i didn't
let them kill me this baby my girl
this love might kill me

After all of it

after Lucille Clifton's "she lived"

And so the wind stopped considering my skin.
It discovered the fragility of pores.
It decided in collective that I was born to be airborn
and thrust itself so thoroughly through me
that there was an ocean of air where my blood once flowed,
and lungs became floating husks of highest altitude.
I was suddenly all atmosphere, begging my knees
to remember, pulling myself up in the wake
of the storm, hurtling torn bones to stand,
clinging to every segment of body that remained.
Everything dies in the cold, I thought,
but I decided to live. And I lived.

Puking for the 2nd time this year

I collect the remnants of my vomit into the shower drain
strip off my wet blue skirt, boots clogged with spit
watch what was once in me swirl across the tub
a whirlpool of gin and cabbage
I have a floor to clean now, a toilet, a sink;
I am not finished.

I think of the night Julia threw up in her crib
smeared the walls pink with it as she stumbled
wobbly toddler, sweaty head
to the bathroom, gripping her dripping blanket
a lifeline to normalcy, *take me out of here*, please
let this be over now.

Now, I miss him. For the first time in months.
And all the ways he brushed my hair.
How he would kneel, *here*, pull it up into a clip,
close his eyes as I felt more rising and pouring,
rest his head on my contorted shoulder;
I loved once.

Dream without mama

It is your legs I miss.
I am at a kitchen table.
There is a bowl of pomegranates, and two tall candlesticks.
Cups of red wine for each: a stepfather, a grandmother, a sister, me.
You are decidedly absent.
A still life for dinner. A still, still life.
When the mussels are served, I understand:
you are not coming. You will never be coming again.
I cannot eat the mussels. I do not like the table.
My grandmother sees before I do that I am weeping into the shellfish dish.
No, not here, she tries to say, but I have left the room.
I want to climb out every window at the same time.
I want to find you anywhere, in the attic, in the compost.
When I turn the corner to the bathroom, I pray that I will see
your legs standing at the sink.
All the colors are too bright. The bookshelves are too close.
I cannot see your perfect, dark-pored calves.
There are no knees for me to collapse on, no dowels of you to hold.
There is no place else.

We never had a house

Only rooms, only floors.
In the Riverview basement, our apartment,
the one a raccoon ruined, the one the marsh flooded,
you drank a can of beer.
Left it next to the hot plate, what made a kitchen.
I was seven. Everything happened when I was seven.
Getting ready for school, already too aware of my body, my
face,
I saw the can next to the pan on the plate.
You said it was for bacon grease, you dumped the miller
down the drain.
You knew I knew.
Dressed and ready for first grade,
your unsobored self weeping in my lap.
As if forgiveness were the remedy. As if it were possible.
When we drove to Forestdale Elementary, we decided
I would tell Ms. Santos I had been at the dentist.
That my eyes were red because of the pollen.

This takes place at a funeral

Brother and daughter, closest to the cement box of body.
Daughter in blue, inappropriately cold, weeping like this is new knowledge.
Brother a tuxedoed shark, named for Paul, all martyr and gun.
Soon, they will never speak.
Daughter of the body cannot yet know the motive of the hand
handing her new tissue.
For now, for a few funerary moments, Paul is a safe thing.
Daughter is Margaret. She knows no church, only choir.
Here, the choir stands to sing, all old.
And outpours the cry of ducks, an endless barrage of missing notes.
In the bleak midwinter of this April afternoon, Jesus is disgraced
and Mark is laid to rest.
Mark the body in the box, the father of the daughter, the brother of the shark,
sung into oblivion off key, offered no angelic wing,
just dirt, cement, and the laughter of his kin.

Family dinner with one x

As the night begins
I sip a tonic derivative.

Artichokes dipped in butter,
cheddar in hot mustard.

When I think of my stepfather
in his first bout of shingles

I smell vinegar boiling on the stove.
My mother preparing as ever

a cabbage. Behind the phalanx
of my sister, I am safe from his mad skin.

We might laugh. My mother might
turn over her slicing shoulder

to smile. Like a metronome,
I raise my glass. I sip.

Supper is a labor of shredded chicken
and hominy. She made it alone,

starting with the fire for the stove.
When he does not eat the cabbage

my skin contracts. The cat's
screen scratch. A plouffe

Family dinner submerged

And there's my stunning mother,
her dinner a success

her wrist warped and singing
from swinging the knife.

of moths, a hum of fan,
my mother's one pinky-bent hand

tipping wine over ice. He will not speak
to me. He will not look.

Believing in the blue pool
begins the night. My

grandmother bounces
in the shallow end

wakes. I am beyond
touching at twelve feet.

I am not a confident
swimmer. My grandmother
reminds me of this
legible fact:

Mahney, she says,
Hyde Park slumping out,
Move Ya Ahms. Like This,
and she hurtles back.

Her arms churn like
spatulas in batter.

She could be at Cisco
beach breach of the spume
a white cistern, a mess
of kelp, dirty in anemone.

Ya See? She stands.
My odd, accented mermaid.

I have not seen her
dunk in years. We could
have been born here.

Our basin of starts.

My mother calls from
the door Ma, she says,

Your Martini Is Ready.
Her R's! Like fists.

My grandmother
usually hears this as

a sailor a siren
call, lurching out

fast as a baseball. But
today, since we were

just born and have seen
it happen, she takes

a little longer to
swim to the dripping

silver ladder.

for Mark unwound

Family dinner without quotation marks

At the table he is not at, I believe I belong in a bivalve.
 Cloister space inelegant as a compost heap.
 Without him, the wilted roses of our beers canker.
 What could have been a meal, a memorable consumption —
 fish in our mouths like pop rocks, neptune cheeks —
 is a plate I cannot consider and my mother says:
 These clams have sand. So they were not washed well.
 And who is to blame? He who never arrived in the first place?
 My vowels are mixed up. The shells need rinsing.
 My mother looks at me, her uncontrollable beauty
 bending around the candlesticks. I see what she is thinking:
 These clams are not good. We do not need him at all.

In an ecru cable knit Mark boils water.
 His back in its sweater beads into sweat
 but he likes the sweater — it reminds him
 of his grandmother, who splashed lukewarm tap
 water into her scotch. Manhattan nights,
 she shook n' flicked two Sweet n' Lows into
 her coupe. We come back to booze.
 Mark boils water so he doesn't pour
 wine. It could happen many ways, any
 night of the week. A faucet taut to leak.
 He sweats, he is hot, he is hardly not
 drinking. He needs a cup to hold bacon
 grease. Did I say he is frying bacon?
 The Bud pops
 and pours out. Sweetwater tossed to the drain
 as if spoilt. If only it could, all
 the liquor alive, rancify and sour.
 Mark barely tips the cast-iron fryer
 to transfer its meat fat to the can.
 A thick glug of gold. I have no fine phrase
 for the shaking of his hand.
 My poor, frightened father.
 Where is faith when he stirs honey into
 tea? When he quietly removes his shoes
 and sits to face tv, back taut in grim
 refusal — where is praisesong for
 his insular no's, for his muscular
 memory of four-to-six second
 pour, sown as the thumb flip of clove-hitch
 knots, ignored? He lifts the BLT —
 he eats. That sweet meat. That sweating man. Look
 at him do the thing he does not want to
 fail at. Praise him for it.

I.

My mother wants me to marry
a man of local origin. Nothing

about him matters—he could be a basket
of balloons and screws—but that

he live close. He invite me to live
closer. Somedays, I am confused

for a neon mouth. To hide, I stuff
my mother in my ears. She speaks.

I want to live closer to her voice—
which opens and whacks

me around. Which, one night, asks
for natural grandchildren. Sperm-meet-embryo

hope. She says it over dinner: cole slaw,
sausage, potato buns in a fought-over toaster.

My mother is often cutting dark blue
cabbage. She eats beets. Our cutting boards,
pre-oiled, stain indigo.

II.

It is Sunday. I am nannying a baby
named Stefan. He is becoming a house—

remember how it felt to become
a house—and screaming

at the columns rising

in his mouth, which is open and shaking.

I want to kill him. There is a fireplace,
a rack of wrought iron tools.

I consider the window, the ten ways
I could do it. To stop myself, I call my mother.

Who has not spoken since that
natural-child remark. My furious,

homophobic mother. Who wants me
to make life with a man. Who lets

vegetables dye the counter
when I am gone. Who lives a huge

and hurtful life, the edges of which
I envy. I want to make it easy.

I want to look into her closet
and see how she folds

her camisoles. My mother,
who on the phone confesses

when I was new, she could not be near
the knives in their block. She could not

even enter the kitchen.

I ask you this: ever have you laid
in the bed of your own making and considered

the punctuality of New York's roses?
I have. I say this because they all

look like you in countenance. When I held
my hot drink and the keys to a flat

life in one hand, my laundry bag in the other,
it was I who saw the stem of a yellow blast and I

who said My god that looks like the head and neck of the Q
I loved. Even the face of the flower

exhaled you, suggested by the fact that you are two
well-made things. As if on accident

you and this rose were laid so, features falling
in mad craft, and I was not supposed to be

taken aback. Of course the rose
in a Brooklyn yard at 7am

is biblically right. Then I thought
if never I see you again, who could I want,

what would compare? Down the block
the rows of houses, bush upon bush of rose,

their eye contact and bent neck mimicking
your head between my thighs. Their wet mouths

murmuring something about staying
hydrated, about coming back to bed.

Woods Hole, 2008-2017

On the scrubbed floor of a white boat on a blue harbor
are the pink guts of a fresh cod among gold beer caps
and this scrubbed floor is like my first love the night
his pink hands pulled my small back to his twisted chest
in a swing dance at the town hall that looked over the blue
harbor and we slow rocked in the public way like me and my
second love the night we slipped off the old roof of the fish house
naked but for gold rings and my mouth filled with the black
tang of port water and we rose close to the white boat
kicked off from its sharp hips to the wet ladder
to the peopled bridge where drunks stared stock straight
at our mooned bodies which reminds me of the old woods
where beside the huge rock I had sex with both men
and left the scene once with poison oak and once
with a belly button filled in dirt which reminds me
of the green birds singing green songs in the green trees
the day my baby sister and I walked in the brew heat
of the old woods and tried to count the plum lady slippers
but could not for they were numinous in number and bud.