NAMING THIS WORLD

How Pattiann Rogers Participates in Creation

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In 1966, one year before I graduated with a bachelor's degree in English, I stood on the grass outside the health sciences building at the University of Montana, watching a scene through the second-floor windows—students in white lab coats working with test tubes and microscopes, against a backdrop of bones. I recognized a loss within me. I had chosen literature, instead of science. I thought I'd made an either/or choice, a dividing of one possible view of the world from another.

My early life on an isolated farm in western Montana had prepared me to understand everything. As a child contained by mountains, fields, and a river, I experienced moments of perfect understanding—transcendent moments full of natural sounds, observable creatures and plants, and my joy at being connected to all of it. I was no scientist, but everything in my experience seemed explainable in relation to everything else, especially when I knew the names of things. My mother taught me names of wildflowers, the difference between white-tailed deer and mule deer. I knew the songs of mourning doves and meadowlarks, the dastardly names of weeds like Canadian thistle, vetch, and quack grass. I could tell ponderosa from lodgepole, fir from spruce and hemlock. Rocks had names and distinctions that fascinated me—igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic—all discernible in the mountains around me. Knowing the names of plants and rocks and animals felt like proof to me that I belonged to the place. I possessed what I could name.

I was a believer by nature, in nature. I knew my place in it—a concrete belonging, not an abstraction. In his book *Imagination in Place*, Wendell Berry makes distinctions I know as truth—between an abstract lover of the land and a farmer who actually tills the soil

(10), between a superficial interest in the "pastoral" and a serious knowledge of "country things" (142-143).

The problem with different ways of knowing nature and the land is that it sets up division and cross-purposes. With the realization that day on the college campus that academic knowledge also divided and estranged, began my hope to connect things again. This has been my personal, artistic, religious quest—always darkened by my view of science as a realm I could not claim because I had chosen a different direction, and by my view of science as laying claim to the concrete—the "country things"—while literature tended toward the pastoral. Common sense and facts on one side, imagination and ephemera on the other. The divisions exist in post modern thought, as does the impulse toward unity.

Pattiann Rogers writes poetry to dispel this division. Her informed, wholly female, ecstatic expression of belief in the unity of science, spirit and art grounds itself in "country things." Her poems are infused with metaphysical joy translated into specific observation of hummingbirds and mountain goats. She calls nature, science, and spirit "the grand array" in her book of essays by that name. This paper explores Rogers's stance in the unity and division of knowledge, and the effect her litanies of naming have in her work.

Rogers addresses the human need to name and understand our world directly in this poem "The Origin of Order" from *Splitting and Binding*:

> Child of the sky, ancestor of the sky, the mind
>
> Has been obligated from the beginning
>
> To create an ordered universe
>
> As the only possible proof

Of its own inheritance. (lines 33-37)

This poem explains what Jacob Bronowski (*Magic, Science and Civilization*) calls "human specificity"—the human ability to "build a view of the world in which nature and man are really joined into a unity" (15). What Bronowski calls "a unitary sense of the human situation" (88) is subject to debate. The issues seem to be which point of view, science or art, shall rule the other and where religion and politics stand in this grand union.

Poetry works at levels beyond itself, communicating and affirming truth. Poems that overcome inertia in a reader are grounded in truthful images, nurtured by belief on the part of the poet, imagined in relationship to completeness. Pattiann Rogers's poems speak truth informed by science, by belief, by the poet's need to "notice and name" creation, with a "particularizing language" that Wendell Berry says we need in order to defend the things we love in this world (*Life is a Miracle* 41). There is an element of ecstasy in Rogers's poetry that connects the reader with "everything," as in "Because You Understand This" from *Firekeeper*:

> Everything is watching you—the mockingbird,
> the wood warbler, the jay, the crawfish frog,
> carrion beetle, fungus beetle, the hanging fly;
> everything is watching you, even the thick draw
> of the tulip, the sunless center of the lidded
> harebell bud, the underwater witch's nest—crowfoot,
> bogbean—lungless salamander, the smallest circle
> in the wound shell of the copper snail. Everything
> stares. Each ring of the jingle shell, the stalk

of milk thistle, the blowing pine-needle

shadows reaching forward, forward and back,

on the stone walk, all are watching you. (lines 1-12)

The poem contains a huge view of nature, more than most observers comprehend. But it closes into the impression of a person who is both poet and reader standing on the stone walk, watched by pine-needle shadows—not just the pine trees, or the pine needles, but the very shadows of those things (with a description of movement "forward, forward and back"). It is a sensation imagined—and recognizable.

This poem also illustrates Rogers's use of naming as a central technique in her poetry. "Naming is a distinctly human activity," Rogers declares in her Credo essay "Writing as Reciprocal Creation" (*The Dream of the Marsh Wren* 25). When a name is accurate, speaking that name creates a relationship between speaker and named creature, a recognition through language that affects both namer and named. Rogers describes this idea in her description of what she calls reciprocal creation. In a moment of longing for her native Missouri she closes her eyes and names details of that landscape to herself, calling the naming a litany. "I realized in those moments the power of the language . . . to enter and alter my soul. The language had created me. This thought of reciprocal creation has remained central to my writing since" (*Dream* 7).

Adrienne Rich, in her book *What is Found There*, describes her reactions to a coastal ecology field guide. "I found myself pulled by names: Dire Whelk, Dusky Tegula, Fingered Limpit . . . I felt the names drawing me. I began to think . . . of a time when naming was poetry, when connections between things and living beings, or living things

and human beings, were instinctively apprehended" (5). Rich goes on to ponder this instinct for naming:

> This impulse to enter with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world, is poetic at its root as surely as it is political at its root. Poetry and politics both have to do with description and with power. And so, of course, does science. We might hope to find the three activities—poetry, science, politics—triangulated, with extraordinary electrical exchanges moving from each to each and through our lives. Instead, over centuries, they have become separated—poetry from politics, poetic naming from scientific naming, an ostensibly "neutral" science from political questions, "rational" science from lyrical poetry—nowhere more than in the United States over the past fifty years. (5-7)

Scientists do acknowledge transcendent experiences of unity. The title of Rogers's early book, Splitting and Binding, refers to different directions in scientific study—breaking things down into smaller and smaller parts, versus connecting information together into a big picture. Edward O. Wilson, an entomologist and professor at Harvard, describes his experience with "Ionian enchantment" in his book *Consilience, The Unity of Knowledge:*

> Static pattern slid into fluid process. My thoughts, embryonically those of a modern biologist, traveled along a chain of causal events, from mutations that alter genes to evolution that multiplies species, to species that assemble in faunas and floras . . . . By inwardly manipulating time and space, I found I could climb the steps in biological organization from microscopic particles

> in cells to the forests that clothe mountain slopes. A new enthusiasm surged through me. The animals and plants I loved so dearly reentered the stage as lead players in a grand drama . . . . I had experienced the Ionian Enchantment . . . a belief in the unity of the sciences—a conviction, far deeper than a mere working proposition, that the world is orderly and can be explained by a small number of natural laws. (4-5)

Wilson goes on to suggest that this “enchantment” extends to the social sciences, and touches the humanities. He wonders if science is the new religion:

> Could Holy Writ be just the first literate attempt to explain the universe and make ourselves significant within it? Perhaps science is a continuation on new and better-tested ground to attain the same end. If so, then in that sense science is religion liberated and writ large. (7)

Wilson would also claim art criticism for science, thereby joining science and the arts and “reinvigorating interpretation with the knowledge of science and its proprietary sense of the future” (230).

In his book *Life is a Miracle, An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, essayist and poet Wendell Berry objects to a world defined by science, taking on the author of *Consilience* head-to-head. It is that “proprietary sense of the future” Wilson mentions, along with the tendency of scientists like Wilson to support claims with conjectural words like “I believe,” “conceivable,” and “slender evidence”, that raises Berry’s hackles. “We are alive within mystery, by miracle,” Berry asserts (45).

“[Wilson’s] proposed consilience, by attempting to impose on art and religion the methods and values of reductive science, would prolong the disunity and disintegration it is

meant to heal. . . . There is simply no reason for any person of faith to discuss consilience with Mr. Wilson. One cannot, in honesty, propose to reconcile Heaven and Earth by denying the existence of Heaven" (99). Berry suggests that totalitarianism would result from Wilson's brand of consilience—science as the religion of progress, scientists who fail to subtract the damages of science from the gain. "To trust 'progress' or our putative 'genius' to solve all the problems that we cause is worse than bad science; it is bad religion" (11). Berry is a conservationist; Wilson is a conservationist. Berry's fiery reaction to *Consilience* is based on his perception that reductive science removes something very essential from the idea of conserving nature.

> We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love. To defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know. The abstract, impersonal, dispassionate language of science can, in fact, help us to know certain things, and to know some things with certainty. It can help us, for instance, to know the value of species and species diversity. But it cannot replace, and it cannot become, the language of familiarity, reverence and affection by which things of value ultimately are protected. (41)

In a world reeling from the effects of two great wars, Muriel Rukeyser proposed poetry as antidote. Her book *The Life of Poetry* was first published in 1949. "The sources of poetry are in the spirit seeking completeness," Rukeyser wrote (209). She offered three definitions for peace, the third one being "peace is completeness." She continued that thought: "It seems to me that this belief in peace as completeness belongs to the same

universe as the hope for the individual as full-valued" (209). Rukeyser was adamant about our country's need for poetry:

> Everywhere we are told that our human resources are all to be used, that our civilization itself means the uses of everything it has—the inventions, the histories, every scrap of fact. But there is one kind of knowledge—infinitely precious, time-resistant more than monuments, here to be passed between the generations in any way it may be: never to be used. And that is poetry.
>
> It seems to me that we cut ourselves off, that we impoverish ourselves just here. I think that we are ruling out one source of power, one that is precisely what we need. Now, when it is hard to hold for a moment the giant clusters of event and meaning that every day appear, it is time to remember this other kind of knowledge and love, which has forever been a way of reaching complexes of emotion and relationship, the attitude that is like the attitude of science and the other arts today, but with significant and beautiful distinctness from these—the attitude that perhaps might equip our imaginations to deal with our lives—the attitude of poetry. (7-8)

"Imagination finds, and combines, to make its works more human", Rukeyser wrote (164). She called the unity of imagination "the meeting-place between science and poetry and between one man and another" (165). Rukeyser quoted French scientist and mathematician Henri Poincare`: '[Science] is before all a classification, a manner of bringing together facts which appearances separate, though they are bound together by some natural and hidden kinship. . . . .Therefore, when we ask what is the objective value of science, that does not mean: Does science teach us the true nature of things? but it means:

Does it teach us the true relations of things?' Rukeyser then made her case for the importance of poetry. "The search of man is a long process toward this reality, the reality of the relationships. One meaning of that search is love; one meaning is progress; one is science; and one is poetry" (165).

Rukeyser urged her readers to think back to a poem that defined a personal reality:

> Choose your poet here. Or, rather, do not choose. But remember what happened to you when you came to your poem, any poem whose truth overcame all inertia in you at that moment, so that your slow mortality took its proper place, and before it the light of a new awareness was not something new, but something you recognized. That is the multiple time-sense in poetry, that is the ever new, which is recognized as something already in ourselves, but not discovered. (31)

Many poets write about the natural world in this way, reminding us of what we somehow know without full awareness. Jorie Graham and Mary Oliver present their readers over and over with jolts of "multiple-time-sense" discovery, each from a singular stance, each different from that of Rogers.

Jorie Graham, in the title poem from her collection *The Dream of the Unified Field*, describes snow, starlings, a crow in relation to herself walking to deliver a leotard to her daughter (176). Bare trees fill with starling leaves, snow melts but changes things with its certainty, Christopher Columbus and the poet's dance teacher make appearances. Unified, yes, but only as it all suddenly relates in the poet's mind. The title refers to a theory in physics that links elementary particles in terms of a single field, a theory Einstein worked on during the last years of his life. In this poem, the poet and the reader unify history,

nature, the present and the future. Graham's stance resembles a single person drawn with a great bubble of thought above her. She dreams of unity, but stands outside it.

The same can be said of an earlier poem of Graham's, "The Geese" in *The Dream of the Unified Field*. In this poem, geese fly overhead, "a code tapering with goals," as the poet hangs laundry (lines 1-3). "Between the lines," (6) spiders connect things, try to hold them together. The poet wonders if this natural binding puts humans in or out. The poet expects an end to the world as it is—the rushing geese, the fearful spiders, her own activity. Meanwhile, "this astonishing delay, the everyday, takes place" (33). It is a recognition of limited time, borrowed time, of "a feeling the body gives the mind/of having missed something . . . ." (21-22) A natural scene, the human uneasy within it.

The nature poetry of Mary Oliver represents an opposite stance—that of a woman (her child self) escaping "a difficult house" in *Why I Wake Early*, leaving the human world behind to view the happiness in nature. Oliver writes a poem titled "How Everything Adores Being Alive" (20). She tries to write a poem about a world that has nothing fancy in it, but even spider webs with dew in them must make the spiders sing, even stones on the beach are lovely enough to be set in gold, but "so happy to be where they are, on the beach, instead of being locked up in gold" (line 26). This poet sees happiness in nature, finds her own happiness in the observation of nature, accepting the miracle. In her poem, "Snow Geese," she writes:

> What matters
>
> is that when I saw them,
>
> I saw them
>
> as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly. (35-37)

These poets, and many other poets of nature and the environment, divide the human world from the natural. Pattiann Rogers claims humans for nature too, as well as human inventions and mistakes. "Nature is what is, everything that is, everything that has been, and everything that is possible, including human actions, inventions, creations and imaginations" (*The Dream of the Marsh Wren* 37).

The poetry of Pattiann Rogers is full of the names of plants and animals, full of the poet's delight in abundance, full of her conviction that happiness comes from human connection with all that is alive. Full also with the poet's belief that creation reflects creator, that poetry participates in creation by calling out a creature's name. With this attitude, chasms between religion, science, and human consciousness cease to exist. The three are shaken together, blended into one ecstatic stream. Consider the lily the way Pattiann Rogers suggests, and a scientific examination of parts—a listing of botanical names—becomes a wildly sensual consideration of lily leaves and folds and tongues, enlivening the biblical passage referred to in the poem's title "Consider the Lily" in *Firekeeper*. Observe angels descending in "Jacob's Ladder"—dressed in wind, rain, grass, scarves the color of sunflowers—and you will see how closely the divine resembles nature in Rogers's view (Generations 7). In "All the Elements of the Scene," learn the names of baweedle bug, pickerel weed, pink toothwort until you, the reader, become part of the scene (*Firekeeper* 23).

Pattiann Rogers writes in defense of religion without taking on the posture of defense. She is a "firekeeper," one who keeps the coals alive. She writes in the tradition of apologetics with the happy assumption that all things taken together make joyful sense.

Compare her poem "On the Existence of the Soul" (*Firekeeper* 22) with an essay by Marilynne Robinson, "Thinking Again," from her book *Absence of Mind*.

Robinson quotes the psychologist Steven Pinker, professor of psychology and director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as he debunks the idea of a human soul: "The supposedly immaterial soul, we now know, can be bisected with a knife, altered by chemicals. . ."(*Absence of Mind* 111). Robinson objects to Pinker's assertions by pointing out dualism in his thinking, his error in combining brain, mind, and soul into one definition. Robinson, a novelist, has published two books of essays—*The Death of Adam* and *Absence of Mind*—that debate prevailing scientific thought and its tendency to oppose Christianity and Judaism. Her tone is necessarily contrarian, antagonistic.

Pattiann Rogers also defends the idea of soul, of the human's ability to, as Robinson put it, "outwardly and imaginatively engage with the world" (127). Rogers says in "On the Existence of the Soul" (*Firekeeper* 22):

> How confident I am that it is there. Don't I bring it,
>
> As if it were enclosed in a fine leather case,
>
> To particular places solely for its own sake? (1-3)

And then Rogers begins naming the world—salt dome, variegated canyon, sea spray, and shells. She instructs her soul like a scientist, a teacher, naming and describing insects ("one hundred species"), naming their parts. Using the language and behavior of a scientist, Rogers does what Steven Pinker says she cannot do—proves the existence of the soul by her own experience—and she does it with convincing ardor and art:

> I have cherished it. I have named it.

By my own solicitations

I have proof of its presence. (24-27)

In science—botany and zoology—Rogers finds a language of particulars, although she chooses common names rather than the Latin names. Note how the names she uses particularize her subjects. In "Consider the Lily," a poem in *Firekeeper*, she begins with a list of lily names:

. . . blackberry, blue bead,

Easter and yellow pond, spider, swamp,

trout, rosetwisted, Indian cucumber,

colicroot. (1-4)

The list becomes musical, lyrical. It begins to sound like praise. How admirable a flower with so many names. She names parts of the lily, then names its various habitats: peaty bog edges, moist wooded slopes, meadows, thickets, low sandy sites.

Adrienne Rich noted the power of common names she found in her field guide. "You will remember the pictorial names as you won't the Latin," Rich writes in *What is Found There*. These names, Rich says, give evidence of the human eye seeing likeness in the midst of contrast and associating thing to thing:

> So begins the suggestion of multiple, many-layered, rather than singular meanings, wherever we look in the ordinary world. . . (Poetry) begins in this way: the crossing of trajectories of two (or more) elements that might not otherwise have known simultaneity. When this happens, a piece of the universe is revealed as if for the first time. (6)

Rogers does not confine each poem's descriptions to one morning, one forest, one landscape. Her view of particulars mixes and connects into "everything," as in the poem I have already quoted—"Because You Understand This" (*Firekeeper* 183). She does this without sacrificing a sense of place. The reader is grounded on a stone walk, where the specific motion of pine needle shadows watching laces "you" to a place. But the "everything" includes underground granite, the "cold lens of the grey moon." The sense of immensity includes "the other side of the earth" as well as the bones of the dead, the history of a place.

In " Supposition" (*Firekeeper* 18), Rogers asserts the transcendent properties of language—of naming and describing becoming a kind of praise that affects the universe. In the language of science (molecular change, emanation, configuration, physical properties, atmosphere, cosmos, atomic disarrangement) Rogers says what a preacher or a psalmist or an evangelical Christian means by the phrase "praise the Lord." Praise, Rogers suggests, is the use of language to say something about rain pocks on the surface of a lake, or the prickly orange legs of the pod-eyed hermit crab.

> What if praise and its emanations
>
> Were necessary catalysts to the harmonious
>
> Expansion of the void? Suppose, for the prosperous
>
> Welfare of the universe, there were an element
>
> Of need involved. (25-29)

Rogers explains praise further, in her essay "The Dream of the Marsh Wren," as a human skill: "The giving of praise is one activity that humans can do very well. I don't believe we can praise, I know we can praise. Even in our ignorance and confusion, we can

praise very beautifully and in an astonishing variety of ingenious ways. Poetry, in its seeking and questing, in its notice and naming, is one way of giving praise. It's my way" (*The Dream of the Marsh Wren* 79).

The pleasure of reading Rogers' poetry is enhanced by the availability of essays and interviews which explicate her foundational beliefs. In her essay "Born, Again and Again," published in *Bearing the Mystery: Twenty Years of Image*, Pattiann Rogers describes her baptism, at the age of 13, in a river, and the convictions that followed her immersion:

> I believed wholeheartedly in river belief. The river was being—swift, assertive, foresworn—moment by moment by moment. And I knew I was joined in that same being and supreme in the being of believing, moment by moment by moment. . . I never regarded the river as a god. I would never have tangled it up in the vagaries of that word. Today, I remember, and I want to define God as unfolding, engendering, keeping, yielding. I want to imagine God, not static as the river is not static, as mountains are not static, as the stars are not static, as life is not static, but God as mighty, empowering, urging, infusing, coming, and continually pressing against oblivion.
>
> All the earth is engaged in this being. Every living entity—from the eelpout on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean to the bar-headed goose flying over Mount Everest to the golden, orb-weaving spider of the mangroves to the giant forest hog of the Congo to the bent and twisted bristlecone pine in the ice of the Rockies to the beds of fluffgrass on the barren Mojave—every living entity is testifying to this and agreeing with me. (*Mystery* 304-305)

The poetry of Pattiann Rogers begins with this creed. Her ability to appreciate science without losing faith in a creator, along with her willingness to explore a belief in that "unfolding, engendering" God, sets her in the midst of the debate between science writers like Stephen Pinker (*How the Mind Works*), E.O. Wilson (*Consilience*), and Christian writers like Marilynne Robinson (*The Death of Adam, Absence of Mind*) and Wendell Berry (*Life is a Miracle*).

In the collection *Eating Bread and Honey*, there is a poem titled "Mousefeet: From a Lecture on Muridae Cosmology" (71). It's nice to know that muridae is the scientific classification of the family that includes mice. Also that cosmology is a branch of astronomy that deals with the origin, structure, and space-time relationships of the universe, and that Edward Pickering was an American astronomer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Because after all that the reader is swept into a comparison of mousefeet with eighth notes, mouse toenails with poppy seeds, wild radish leaves with mousefeet, a skimpering mousebreath wind through aspen or poplar leaves with the sound of mousefeet.

> . . . And there are pale,
> blue footprints of mice all over the moon.
> Just get a telescope and check
> for yourself some night. (21-24)

The poem asserts that frozen mousefeet bones are in the snowflakes that catch on a dark wool scarf—and, should you eat one of those snowflakes, you can feel "the prickle of cold scurry" in your mouth. This has taken us very far from science and religion as we generally discuss them. The last stanza of the poem turns to prayer—with the sounds of

mousefeet, through the "alpha-and-omega pickering machinery," figuring prominently "every time in God's perfect reply."

This poem evaporates any science/art/religion argument with humor, with full awareness of the argument. Knowledge is alluded to, there is a bow to science and its methods, but mice and their darling little feet have invaded the telescopes and one has the impression that God loves mice as much as Pattiann Rogers loves mice. In fact, the reader gets fond of mice, because the focus on mousefeet—"tiny folded fans of knuckles and pins"—creates fondness.

"The Consequences of Death," also in *Eating Bread and Honey*, gives a nod to the idea of quantum entanglement. With each death described—gray titmouse, sugar pine, mountain sheep, butterfly—the poet includes a simultaneous death. All that the titmouse once held inside its eye, the stars and dust and sun clusters once contained in the sugar pine's sky:

> . . . . We could hear
> the sound of that galactic collapse as well,
> if we had the proper ears for it.
>
> And when a mountain sheep stumbles,
> plummets, catapulting skull, spine,
> from cliff side to crumbling rock below,
> a like shape of flame and intensity
> on a similar sharp ledge on the other side
> of the same moment, out of our sense,

> loses balance, goes blind. (19-28)

Rogers throws this poem into the air of science, art, religion and lets it soar.

In her essay "Twentieth-Century Cosmology," published first in 1995, Rogers quotes Bertrand Russell when he suggests that science has provided us with truths that form a "firm foundation of unyielding despair" (*The Grand Array* 69). Rogers argues that there is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness if we make what science has measured so far into our total reality. "Total truth has not yet been discovered," Rogers reminds us. She goes on to discuss connections not taken into account by science, questions not yet asked that will make new connections and new metaphors—that will alter our cosmology:

> The path to follow, it seems to me, is not contradicting or fighting or turning from science and its beautiful, invigorating story but assimilating it, incorporating its glory, celebrating both its findings and its method of scrutiny and openness, using its great power and stimulation and beauty as a jumping-off point to an energetic and meaningful spirituality. We are definitely and positively capable of finding and creating spirituality in this cosmology. We have the power and ability and possibly the obligation to do that. We must possess our cosmology rather than being possessed by it." (72)

Poetry is the process by which Rogers possesses her cosmology, works to establish progress toward the "garden" and expresses love to the universe. Rogers's poetry explores connections and relationships, tries to get at the truth of those connections and relationships, imagines "new, different connections, broadening our conception of the universe and its interconnectedness as a whole" (*The Grand Array* 71). Here Rogers is

referring to ideas presented by Jacob Bronowski in *The Origin of Knowledge and Imagination*. "I believe that every event in the world is connected to every other event," Bronowski says, sounding very much like Pattiann Rogers herself. She quotes him further: "All acts of imagination . . . take the closed system, they inspect it, they manipulate it and then they find something which had not been put into the system so far. . . . All those who imagine take parts of the universe which have not been connected hitherto and enlarge the total connectivity of the universe by showing them to be connected" (*The Grand Array* 71).

So Rogers connects science and art, science and religion, poetry and science. Those connections are not linear. In an interview with Richard McCann, reprinted in *The Grand Array*, Rogers described this vision of her work:

> I envision my work as being interrelated and circular. I made a joke about this once at a reading. I said that I think the perfect book would be a clear plastic, inflatable ball. The poems would be printed on the surface of that globe, so that when you read any single poem, you would see it surrounded by other poems, and you would see other poems behind it. Each time you would turn the globe, there would be new configurations. My poems don't seem to be separate entities. One poem may give rise to three or four others; a question will rise from writing one poem, and that question becomes another poem, which in turn gives rise to yet other poems. (144)

The transitory moment, rooted in experience and place, is the poet's reality.

The enthusiasm and affirmation in Rogers's poetry celebrates the human imagination as part of nature and part of science, rejoices in the romance of life on earth by naming. The sheer volume of naming in her poetry becomes a distinguishing technique.

Here at the end of “Geocentric,” in *Firekeeper,* Rogers comes to a conclusion affirming earthy decay:

> . . . all sulphur fissures
>
> and fetid hillside seepages, old,
>
> old, dependable, engendering
>
> forever the stench and stretch
>
> and warm seeth of inevitable
>
> putrefaction, nobody
>
> loves you as I do. (26-32)

Gray Jacobik, writing about Rogers in the June 22, 2000 issue of *The Antioch Review*, makes this observation. “Quoting excerpts presents a particular challenge for anyone writing about Rogers, for she is a maximalist who depends on the power of cumulative detail for some of her effects. ” The cumulative detail Jacobik refers to is usually in the form of naming, as in the poem quoted above. That conclusion, “nobody loves you as I do” was preceded by an ebullient list of various kinds of rot: “bilious reek of turnip and toadstool decay . . . purple-haired, grainy-fuzzed smolder of refuse . . . fumes and boils and powdery mildews . . . sink-mire flatulence . . . ear wax, corn smut, blister rust, backwash and graveyard debris . . .” The poems tumble with connections, plenitude, and joy toward declarations of holiness. That the declarations come as discovery for reader and for poet makes holiness tangible.

After September 11, 2001, Rogers wrote a poem called “Grief” with that event “somewhat in mind” (*Grand Array* 189). In an interview with Gordon Johnston, Rogers describes the events of 9/11 as shaking her optimism, making her question her celebratory

voice. “Grief” is two sonnets with a turn between them, away from the dark images of “a stone sinking in a night sea,” “a thundercloud in wind,” “a shadow of smoke against a winter hillside,” toward “all those powers that rise by themselves” (*Generations* 19-20). Those powers, represented by natural images that mix darkness with light—like “fog in sunlight”—restore promise by connecting us with the past and the future of humanity. In her conversation with Gordon Johnston, the poet describes the positive side of grief as that kind of connection. “No one is alone in experiencing grief,” she says. “We hold grief in common with every human being of the past and their power to sustain themselves despite grief” (*Grand Array* 188-89).

Also in *Generations* Rogers presents a poem titled “Where God’s Grief Appears” (103). God’s grief is everywhere, in a long list of particular things like “the drumming hind feet of kangaroo rats,” and “the water-skating of the stilt spider.” The poem ends with this: “in light in living / motion everywhere it appears, as offering, as evidence, / as recompense” (30-31). Grief does not erase the presence of God, it makes us aware of that presence in a new way, as a presence that seeks to comfort—even to make amends (recompense).

Rogers tells Johnston how difficult it was for her to read her earlier celebratory poems after 9/11 because she was “worried that all the endeavors of our culture in the arts and sciences, our ideals of freedom, might be lost” (*Grand Array* 206). She felt like an “imposter” reading in celebration when she was uncertain about the future of the world. “But sometimes, strangely enough, my own poems, along with the response of the audience, would rejuvenate me during a reading” (206).

Gray Jacobik, writing about the erotic dimension to many of Pattiann Rogers’s poems—“The Center of the Known Universe,” for example, is “the tip / of my breast kissed

and held / in his mouth" (*Eating Bread and Honey* 50)—notes that "Rogers never stops short of a comprehensive view" (*The Ecstatic Erotic Poetry of Pattiann Rogers* 348). Jacobik likens Rogers to Dickinson in this regard, the two poets having a vast scope, being obsessed with enormity and grand abstractions.

Jacobik makes an important distinction between Dickinson and Rogers, however. "Where Dickinson sees dichotomy and dualities, Rogers sees aligned forces and unity." Later in her essay, Jacobik describes how Rogers's vision of unity affects her poetry: "Elements of the landscape, conditions of weather, insect and floral life, planetary and stellar bodies—in fact, any object or force from the microscopic to the cosmic—can be pulled into the sphere of the poem."

Pattiann Rogers creates by naming. She uses imagination to connect things previously disconnected. She finds hope within her own poetry despite current world events, despite the "unyielding despair" that Bertrand Russell saw in science. That hope is for unity. It works against any kind of rigid fundamentalism that ceases to question and to search and yet God is at the center—the great engendering and unifying force. Her irrepressible joy in this multifarious world makes her poetry true and important. In her essay "The Dream of the Marsh Wren" Rogers distills her attitude of delight into this couplet written by Robert Louis Stevenson:

> The world is so full of a number of things,
>
> I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings. (*Dream* 59)

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