

An Interview with Pattiann Rogers

Richard McCann*

I

Straight up away from this road,
Away from the fitted particles of frost
Coating the hull of each chickpea,
And the stiff archer bug making its way
In the morning dark, toe hair by toe hair,
Up the stem of the trillium,
Straight up through the sky above this road right now,
The galaxies of the Cygnus A cluster
Are colliding with each other in a massive swarm
Of interpenetrating and exploding catastrophes.
I try to remember that.

(from "Achieving Perspective")

McCann: One of the surprising qualities of your first book, *The Expectations of Light*, was, as Peter Stitt noted in *The Georgia Review*, "its sophisticated incorporation of modern scientific thinking into poetry." Did you consciously set out to incorporate the findings and vocabulary of contemporary science into your poetry?

Rogers: I didn't have a formulated way of looking at life that I wanted to express in poetry. The poetry has created me at the same time that I was creating the poetry, especially over the last five to seven years. There is one thing I did consciously try to accomplish, however, and I worked on it for a number of years, and that was to find some way of incorporating into my poetry the massive scientific vocabulary that has built up. This vocabulary has been mainly an untapped vocabulary, and many of the words are very evocative, not sterile at all. But I didn't only want to be able to use this vocabulary. I wanted to express the kind of wonder and exhilaration that I felt was contained in much of what science has been discovering and also to reflect in my poetry how some of these discoveries affect our ways of seeing ourselves. I felt that somehow poetry was going to have to deal

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with the process of science and what science is saying. Poetry could not pretend science was not radically changing our basic concepts about ourselves. We are the poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. How could we, as the verbal interpreters of our age, ignore science? Or, even worse, deal with it out of fear or anger?

McCann: In what ways did you want to deal with science's impact?

Rogers: This was a conscious intent I had: to employ scientific vocabulary to the extent I was able and to employ it in a way that would convey some of my own enthusiasm for what science was telling us and to use that vocabulary as an investigative tool to discover and at the same time shape some of my own feelings; I wanted to work toward discovering, through my poetry, how what science is saying—about the origins and development of life and the universe, about the ultimate particle, about space and time and matter and light and perception—how all of these affect our visions. I kept trying to do this, but I couldn't find the right approach; the poems were no good. Around this time, or a little before, I read an article called "Science, Physics, and the World" by Richard P. Feynman, a well-known physicist. He said:

. . . I stand at the seashore, alone, and start to think. There are rushing waves . . . mountains of molecules, each stupidly minding its own business . . . trillions apart . . . yet forming white surf in unison. Ages on ages . . . before any eyes could see . . . year after year . . . thunderously pounding the shore as now. For whom, for what? . . . on a dead planet, with no life to entertain.

In other words, he's thinking poetic things—and what he's thinking and feeling is based on what science has revealed about the development of earth and man, about matter and atoms, about how molecules work in a wave. He wrote:

The same thrill, the same awe and mystery, come again and again when we look at any problem deeply enough. With more knowledge comes deeper, more wonderful mystery, luring one on to penetrate deeper still. . . . It is true that few unscientific people have this particular type of religious experience. Our poets do not write about it; our artists do not try to portray this remarkable thing. I don't

know why. Is nobody inspired by our present picture of the universe? The value of science remains unsung by singers, so you are reduced to hearing, not a song or a poem, but an evening lecture about it. This is not yet a scientific age.

This just struck me like a thunderbolt. Why can't we sing about this? And then I thought—here is a scientist who wants the artist. He's a scientist. He's doing his work in the way he must, and he feels incomplete and distressed because his exhilaration, his religious feeling about the universe, is not being expressed—as he wants it to be expressed—by those best able to express it in a meaningful, artistic way. It seemed a kind of plea to me, a cry. It made me even more determined to keep working at what I was trying to do.

McCann: When did you first begin to feel successful in these attempts?
Rogers: "The Rites of Passage" comes first to my mind now. I couldn't believe it as I began to feel this poem coming into shape; I couldn't believe it. Did I do it this time? But accomplishing this poem didn't mean I could do it again. I had many subsequent failures. But doing it right once meant I knew what it felt like to do it right. I've always felt that if I could do just a little bit, that if I could make that crack, that opening, there might be poets coming after me who could do this better than I have done it. I'm not a scientist. I want that always clearly understood. I understand certain things in science, but I'm not a physicist. I'm not a zoologist. I'm not a botanist. I'm not an astronomer. Sometimes I know where to go to look for information I need, but I hope there will be other poets more knowledgeable than I am who will do this in their own ways.

McCann: But you studied science as an undergraduate at the University of Missouri, majoring in English literature and minoring in zoology; and your husband is a geophysicist. How has physics—the work of Heisenberg and Einstein, for example—been important to your poetry? In *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden* you cite Heisenberg: "What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning."

Rogers: Trying to discuss the new roles of physics is like poetry. In *The Ascent of Man*, Jacob Bronowski quotes Niels Bohr speaking to Heisenberg: "When it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images." Einstein used to say a scientist is like a seamstress who

makes a coat and holds it up to see if it fits the universe or not. If it doesn't fit, he takes it back to the workshop and works on it some more. My work is an ongoing investigation too, in a sense — each poem is an investigation in itself, and whatever the work comes to mean as a whole is an investigation with discoveries made along the way.

McCann: In your poem "Reaching the Audience," which investigates the many ways of seeing by which one might know an iris, you call your work "these volumes-in-progress," which, in some ways, recalls Whitman's ever-expanding *Leaves of Grass*. Does the sense of your work as "volumes-in-progress," as "an investigation with discoveries made along the way," affect the ways in which you arrange that work within individual volumes?

Rogers: It's hard for me to break the work up into books. Books require that I make a linear arrangement of my work. That's what the publishing company demands; it has to be done. But it's so arbitrary in a way. Why should one poem have to follow another and why should one poem be the beginning and another be the ending? That's not my vision of my work at all. 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.

McCann: Given your interest in science, what brought you to, and what keeps you with, the specific medium of poetry?

Rogers: Some people seem to be curious as to why anyone would write poetry when it seems so few read it. A few years ago, before we had the space shuttle, I heard a professor from M. I. T. being interviewed on a television program outlining the future plans of our space program. He was saying that he wanted to make space travel available to people other than astronauts. He said, "My goal is to be able to take a poet to the first space station." Whether he read poetry or not, it seemed to me that there was an unquestioned assumption on his part that there were poets working. It seemed to me that this man, like Feynman, expected that the work

he was engaged in would somehow be experienced and investigated by someone who could express the glory and beauty and awe of it, who could invest it with a purpose beyond its physical accomplishment. It seemed unquestioned, accepted, that this person would be a poet.

McCann: If you were chosen to be that poet on the first space station, what would your role be? How would you begin the poem?

Rogers: I wrote a poem about this, "NASA Takes a 63-year old Poet to the First Space Station." It's in the last section of *The Expectations of Light*. It isn't written from my viewpoint on the space station, however; but the way I would begin a poem like that would be the way I begin any poem. I would start with the senses, and I would start with my sensual pleasure in what I was experiencing; or I would describe a physical object very carefully and then see if anything else rose out of that. That to me is the salvation. Salvation is in the physical object, whether it's my body, a locust, an egret, an iris, or a man-made object in space. In the particular physical object lies all that I discover. I would try to describe that in the finest words I could find, in exact words, in words that fit. Like the scientist holding up a garment to see if it fits the universe, I would try to write so that I could hold that poem up, and it would fit my feelings, and yet, oddly enough, create my feelings at the same time.

II

Suppose benevolent praise,
Coming into being by our will,
Had a separate existence, its purple or azure light
Gathering in the upper reaches, affecting
The aura of morning haze over autumn fields,
Or causing a perturbation in the mode of an asteroid.
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?

(from "Supposition")

McCann: What unifies the scientist's way-of-seeing and the artist's way-of-seeing?

Rogers: I think science is a form of investigation; so is art. “Let’s investigate this man’s face,” an artist says. “And we’ll do it with oils on canvas.” Or Schubert says, “I want to investigate trout, so I’ll write a quintet.” It’s the activity or process of the investigation that has value, not necessarily the results. We all have a desire to capture something absolutely. We want to cling to some certainty, all of us. But we live in a world of flux, and I think that fluctuation itself is a pleasure. Do we really want something that’s known with certainty? Do we really want that? I don’t know. I think we enjoy the process of constantly discovering things, surprising ourselves, having this wonderful, infinite puzzle to work on. And what kind of mystery would it be if we could solve it anyway? Investigating this mystery—whether the investigation is done by electron microscope or violin or calculus or ballet—is an activity of praise and adoration and affirmation.

McCann: How is science an activity of praise?

Rogers: Stephen Jay Gould, a biologist, studies a particular type of rare snail that only lives on a single island somewhere. He adores that work. He has said something to the effect that he doesn’t care if there are only seven other people in the world who are interested in what he discovers about the snail. Every time he discovers something about the life of that snail that was never known before, he feels a tremendous exhilaration and a sense of success. I think that’s a high form of reverence and praise.

McCann: How is that praise? Is it the thing being praised, or the activity?

Rogers: Praise is an activity. That’s a high honor to pay a snail—for someone to spend his whole life finding out everything he can about how it lives and how it survives, how it endures. Indifference is a kind of death, a condemnation to death. And what is even more wonderful is that the study of that snail can last a whole lifetime and longer! It isn’t a narrow, restricted study. Study the snail long enough and the whole universe can be seen there. That wasn’t my idea: “a world in a grain of sand.” That’s why I come back to the word “praise”: it’s the only thing I know we can do safely and assuredly. I know we can do that. We can invent our songs and we can sing. There’s not a doubt in the world we can do that, and I think it’s important that we do it.

McCann: But isn’t the scientist at least conceived of as attempting to know some absolute, as attempting to take the world and pin it down?

Rogers: I think that’s not right about scientists. I don’t think scientists

lock things in. Their body of knowledge is very flexible, constantly being refined as their techniques and instruments become more refined. Dogmas—political and religious—claim certainty, not science. Scientists nearly always use qualifiers when announcing the results of their work. Neither the artist nor the scientist captures an absolute certainty. We don't ask the artist to do that, but for some reason the scientist is expected to do that whether or not he even believes it is possible. I think if ever the ultimate answer to the mystery of the universe were found, the scientists would be the most disappointed people around. They love the mystery; they love the puzzle of it all, and they love trying to solve that puzzle. It is a popular misconception, I think, that the scientist is after an absolute certainty. It was Heisenberg, after all, who developed the Uncertainty Principle.

McCann: Do you know Whitman's poem, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"? Despite everything Whitman says about the value of science to poetry in his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, in "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," the astronomer's evening lecture reduces Whitman's experience of the universe, and his sense of wonder is not restored until he leaves the auditorium and wanders in silence beneath the actual stars.

Rogers: I wish so much that when Whitman went out in silence he was awed by what he could know about the universe, but I don't think that's what he means. He means that the figures, the columns, and the charts were still a distraction from actual experience. I had an astronomy class at the University of Missouri that profoundly affected me. I had exactly the opposite reaction from Whitman. I was awestruck with revelation as to what was up there in the heavens. I was also struck not only by what I was discovering about the complexity and size of the universe, but also by what a marvelous wonder it was that we could know and discover these things. I was not even aware that we could know such things. I had feelings of tremendous release and power and possibility that this earth was not all that there was, and that I was not confined here. What science tells us is often liberating.

McCann: Perhaps poetry's distrust of science originates in the early part of this century, during World War I, with the sorts of anti-technological views which Hart Crane felt called upon to answer in *The Bridge*. When considering nuclear weaponry, however, it is difficult to conceive of

science as being “an activity of praise, adoration, and affirmation.”

Rogers: Technology and science are sometimes confused in people’s minds; technology rises from pure science. What scientists discovered about the nature of the atom made the technology of nuclear weapons possible. And, well, I think it’s been impressed on all of us quite strongly that we are fallible beings, and that mankind as a species is brutish and bestial (I don’t mean to cast a bad reflection on the beasts). There are many voices in our society proclaiming this fact over and over. So what do we do? We know these things about ourselves. The question is what to do about them. I guess I agree with Faulkner that the poet’s duty, his privilege, is “to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.” So when I speak of science, I mean to refer not only to the discoveries science has made but also to the process of science. And I mean to refer to the best that science has offered us and to the best scientists, just as when we speak of American literature we mean to refer to the best literary works that we have produced. I think our finest scientists have a very great respect for the world, nature, and the universe, and that they feel a reverence for it.

McCann: In *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden*, our human relationship to the natural world seems far more hopeful than in some of the works of your predecessors and contemporaries, in which “human life” seems antithetical to and hostile toward “natural life,” and in which human language serves primarily as a justification for murderous human behavior. I’m thinking, for instance of W. S. Merwin’s “For a Coming Extinction,” in which the speaker tells the gray whale “That we who follow you invented forgiveness/and forgive nothing,” or in Merwin’s “Avoiding News by the River,” in which the natural landscape “fills with blood” as human life awakens. How do you see humans — with our language, particularly — as sustaining the natural world?

Rogers: I have this sense of an ongoing creation, and that we are a part of it, and to separate ourselves as merely observers of the universe is a big error. We have been a part of it; we are right in the middle of the universe, not only being an effect but also affecting this ongoing process. I think a poem which deals with this is “Supposition”: “Suppose the molecular changes taking place/In the mind during an act of praise/Resulted in an emanation rising into space. . . .”

McCann: This seems to me to be the first real appearance in *The Expectations of Light* of a theme which is to become major in *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden*. The working title of *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden*, for instance, was *The Dimension of Witness*; the act of witnessing is central to these poems.

Rogers: As I was working on “Supposition” and on similar poems I had this thought: What if we are the only cognitive beings in the universe? What if we are the only creatures with self-awareness? Then what part in the ongoing creation of the universe does our witnessing play—I used this religious word, “witnessing”—if we are the creatures solely responsible for these activities? I don’t know the answer; just the question itself brings forth so much. At one time I thought if we don’t name the stars they will never be named. How terrible, the poor stars never to be distinguished. That’s our gift, our talent. We can bestow that kind of distinction—that kind of reality and being—on the universe. Fred Wolfe, in the introduction to his book *Taking the Quantum Leap*, says, “Quantum mechanics appears to describe a universal order that includes us in a very special way. In fact, our minds may enter into nature in a way we had not imagined possible. The thought that atoms may not exist without observers of atoms is, to me, a very exciting thought.” That’s a tremendously exciting thought to me, too!

McCann: Is it possible we name the stars in order to distinguish ourselves, not to distinguish them? Can’t the act of naming be a way of finishing them off?

Rogers: Some people do consider that once a thing is given a name it can be set aside. I don’t believe that. I think the poem “How the Moon Becomes Itself” addresses that question. A curious mind doesn’t let the name be the end of the process of knowing; it is part of the process. I think that our language has locked us into this idea that something has got to be one thing or the other, that it can’t be two or even more things at once. Why can’t one thing be an infinite variety of things and not be contradictory to itself? We see ourselves as an accumulation of contradictions and yet we accept ourselves as being a whole unit. Poets must work all of the time to overcome the limitations of language. An object can be two contradictory things or two things that seem contradictory.

McCann: Language then does not separate us from the creation?

Rogers: Helen Keller’s testimony of the discovery of language is so impor-

tant: she is one of the few people who could say what it was like to live without language. Some people think that's a desirable state to move toward, but I think Keller's testimony says just the opposite. The world for her was not created until she learned language; at that moment, the world became real for her. I think that it was that moment of discovering what language was that sustained her for the rest of her life; if you have ever seen a picture of her even as an old woman, you see joy all over her face. Before she knew what language was, she was a completely selfish human being: she felt no guilt, no remorse, no love; she only ran to her mother for protection, not with affection; she was ungenerous, unthankful. But her teacher's diary says that the moment Helen Keller had the revelation that everything had a name, her face completely changed to a glow, and it began to be expressive in a way it had never been before. You must remember that even before this she had a small vocabulary, primarily signals. What she lacked was a *language*, a means by which she could investigate the world, nurture the world, affirm the world. Her teacher said that Keller crawled into her lap that night and kissed her goodnight and patted her face. What we might call spirituality entered Keller at that moment.

McCann: In *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden*, the repeated activities of seeing, naming, and praising seem to be activities which create the universe; in the poem "Angel of the Atom," for instance, reality is created by perceiving and naming it. Yet you describe the "angel" who is within each atom as "real but nonexistent," as a "real illusion." Is the universe a creation made by language only?

Rogers: We can give meaning to the universe. I have moments of despair. I say, "This is senseless. There's no meaning to our existence at all. This is a horrible joke. We are creatures who happen by accident to be conscious of ourselves, to be conscious of where we are, and, most horribly, conscious of our own death. Our own death! This is a nightmare. How could this have happened? There's no meaning in the universe." My husband once said, "You forget that we are part of the universe, and if we give meaning to it, there is meaning in it. We are the agent of that meaning, and maybe we are the only source of that meaning."

McCann: In "Angel of the Atom," then, the fact that we perceive, name, and therefore create meaning does not diminish that meaning's reality?

Rogers: Right, that's the dream that is the reality in "Angel of the

Atom.” That dream, the meaning that we invent, is physical, rooted in our bones, integral to our blood and flesh, one with the material of the universe. If we deny this, we throw away the significance of what we are, what makes us human, and what we are able to contribute to the universe. Our bestowal of meaning is part of the universe, and it is real. That’s what “Angel of the Atom” is about and part of what “Inside God’s Eye” is about.

McCann: At the end of “Inside God’s Eye,” you write, “We are the vessel and the blood/ And the pulse he sees as he sees the eye watching/ The vision inside his eye in the perfect mirror/ Held constantly before his face.” Is our role in the creation, then, to help create it through our acts of witnessing and praising?

Rogers: We are the only source for this self-awareness and maybe this is the only way god can see himself. See how our language limits me, how I have to speak this way in which all of a sudden god becomes this contained thing. I don’t mean it this way, but it’s the only way I can say it here and now.

McCann: Does this “ongoing creation” include the creation of a god, as in the poem “The Creation of the Inaudible”?

Rogers: Right. The crucial stanza in that poem—for me, anyway—is the next to last stanza, in which the sound of god’s being is described: “Someone far away must be saying right now/ The only unique sound of his being/ Is the spoken postulation of his unheard presence.” That’s the stanza of revelation for me, a revelation that we are in some way involved in the process of creating god, that he is not a god who has created us and put us here, but that this creation is an interaction. He becomes as we create him; he is not omnipotent, and he depends on us to complete his creation. I’m not promoting this as a doctrine; it’s the idea I’m working with.

III

How can he stand to comprehend the hard, pitiful
Unrelenting cycles of coitus, ovipositors, sperm and zygotes,
The repeated unions and dissolutions over and over,
The constant tenacious burying and covering and hiding
And nesting, the furious nurturing of eggs, the bright
Breaking-forth and the inevitable cold blowing-away?
Think of the million million dried stems of decaying

Dragonflies, the thousand thousand leathery cavities
Of old toads, the mounds of cows' teeth, the tufts
Of torn fur, the contorted eyes, the broken feet,
Bloated odors, the fecund brown-haired mildews
That are the residue of his process. How can he tolerate knowing
There is nothing else here on earth as bright and salty
As blood spilled in the open?

Maybe he wakes periodically at night,
Wiping away the tear he doesn't know
He has cried in his sleep, not having had time yet to tell
Himself precisely how it is he must mourn, not having had time yet
To elicit from his creation its invention
Of his own solace.

(from "The Possible Suffering of a God during Creation")

McCann: Comparing *The Expectations of Light* to *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden*, it seems that the question of god becomes more important within your work.

Rogers: My original intention was to express what I find exhilarating about some of the things science is telling us about ourselves and to investigate by language and to praise. Those were conscious intents but, in attempting to do that, the work moved in ways I didn't expect. For one thing, I never intended to approach god as a subject and yet it is appearing more and more. The movement has been gradual and natural, at least from my standpoint.

McCann: Specifically, how did this movement occur for you?

Rogers: My background is kind of unusual. Until I was thirteen, my family was traditionally Presbyterian and very active in the church, not just casually. When I was thirteen, my parents made a radical shift in their religious viewpoint. It came about from my father having met a man who belonged to a very small religious sect. This sect read the Bible literally and were very staunch in their beliefs, similar in ways to the Jehovah's Witnesses—very doctrinal.

McCann: You've spoken of your father often these past two days.

Rogers: He only had an eighth grade education, but he was tremendously creative, always tinkering with something. His big goal was to make his

first million dollars; yet I don't think he wanted that at all. He just liked the idea of inventing. He invented a baseball pitching machine, which he sold to the miniature golf course. He didn't get a patent on it. He invented using light meters that would automatically dim car headlights, but he didn't get a patent on it. He invented stuff to put on the bottom of ice cube trays so they wouldn't stick to the freezer, and then we got all the kids in the neighborhood and we worked like an assembly line. He was a dynamic, energetic, optimistic man who had a lot of crazy mottoes.

McCann: What happened when your father became involved with the religious sect?

Rogers: My father made a break with the Presbyterian church. He didn't just leave; he had to go and confront the minister, who was also a close personal friend. This was a major crisis in our family: it meant the overthrow of all kinds of social norms, and things which had been previously promoted were now regarded as evil. Until I left for college, there was a long period when religion was the subject in the house, when the Bible was read continually, and when I was taken through studies and all kinds of doctrinal arguments. When people formulate doctrines, they begin to get into arguments: there were many heated arguments. It was a stimulating and exciting time—in a terrifying way—because I did have a strange fascination and pleasure in the debates that went on. It was a sense of questioning what had been unquestioned in my life up until then, although this questioning was not always done with an intent to find truth. I was at an impressionable age; some of these questions we considered at that time have been with me since. Of course this religion wasn't satisfactory to me. After I went to college, and other questions arose, it seemed very narrow. Things like reading a novel were considered wrong because it was not God's word; reading a novel was not meditating upon God's word.

McCann: Did your college experience call into question the sort of absolutism you're describing?

Rogers: I had a humanities course which lasted two semesters, taught by teachers from the departments of English, philosophy, and art. The philosophy part was very moving and important to me because I saw people working with language and words in order to try and explain to themselves what "I" was, and what was outside, and what was inside. It was a careful and intellectual scrutiny of language and the ways words were used, the definitions attached to words, and the kinds of things we

take for granted until we hear someone question them. Meeting my husband was important. He was a physicist. He has a Ph.D. in physics and then he did post-graduate work in geology.

McCann: In college, you began to study science. How did you react to the scientists you first met?

Rogers: The process of science represented a new attitude for me because I saw people who were not intent upon convincing somebody else of something they believed in, but who were engaged in an objective investigation to try to find out what could be known about the universe. I'm talking about scientists now. They were willing to correct themselves if they made mistakes; they were willing to change—again, we are talking about the best of science, the real scientists—and their aim was to discover what they could about nature. I liked that. It seemed important to me. It seemed right somehow; it seemed to lack a kind of pride and arrogance that goes with certain kinds of religious and political beliefs.

McCann: Your description of poetry as mounting tentative “investigations” also seems to lack that kind of religious “pride and arrogance.”

Rogers: When I was a teenager, there were lots of verses quoted about my missionary obligation to present “Truth” to others. I was constantly put in embarrassing situations in order to fulfill what, according to this religion, Christ had asked of me. I had to present my beliefs to others. I couldn't just develop a casual relationship with someone; it was my obligation to bring this kind of “Truth” to their minds.

McCann: And so this experience affected your sense of poetry as a way of speaking which is not written in stone. . . .

Rogers: I think it's a reaction to that experience. I don't ever want my work to be considered a philosophical system. Sometimes the words and tone involved in discussing it, even in this interview, words used by me now, seem to contain an underlying assumption of closed doctrine. Niels Bohr, it is said, would always begin his lecture courses by saying, “Every sentence I utter should be regarded by you not as an assertion but as a question.” I love that, and that's the attitude I want to maintain in my own work and in my comments regarding it. I think I can maintain that kind of attitude in my poetry. I hope I do. I think it's less easy to keep that tone out of this conversation. Language in a conversation like this seems to lend itself to statements that sound as if they were in concrete. I don't ever want any kind of dogma attached to what I have to say. That's one reason

I write poetry. It allows the kind of flexibility of language that I love.

McCann: Despite the prohibitions, were you reading novels and imaginative literature?

Rogers: I did, but not to the degree I would have had I been encouraged. I was isolated from my peers. The normal kinds of things teenagers do, like going to football games, were considered wrong. If I went out with a boy, I couldn't go out with him very long without attempting to convert him because he was of the world and not of the "Truth."

McCann: In your work, particularly in your praise of the physical world, "the world" and "Truth" never seem opposed to one another.

Rogers: After I left home and went to school, there was no way anybody was going to tell me that the kind of beauty I was reading in good literature or hearing in fine music was sinful. There was no way anyone was going to convince me of that. In fact, I once said to my husband, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if all god wanted from us was to create beauty? If this was all he wanted. If he didn't want us turning away from everything." Pure Christianity can be interpreted as a denial of life here on earth because one must set his sights on the life to come.

McCann: Much of your work rises from and celebrates life here on earth; and much of your poetry celebrates the body. . . .

Rogers: How beautiful the relationship between our bodies and the universe is! If I could have designed my own creation, I couldn't have thought of anything more perfect. To begin with, we are made from the dust of old stars. What could be more wonderful than that? All the elements of our bodies came from the dust of old stars. Then every once in a while I have a vision that this world is our whole history. All we have to do is look at it. It's our genealogy, our ancestry, and it's visible, right in front of us all the time, the whole thing. The same math that describes the working of the atoms in our brains describes the working of the stars in the heavens. How could we feel alone or isolated or solitary seeing that we have risen up right out of the surge of the sea, right out of the soil, out of the roots of trees, right through the skeletons and bones and blood of fish and birds and bears? The human embryo passes through many of these stages in its development. And the very atoms that compose our bodies have already traveled through the dark reaches of space. Sometimes I feel like the universe is just waiting for us to accept ourselves. We don't know how to do it yet.

McCann: In “The Reincarnated” and “The Rites of Passage,” the body becomes a way of knowing, as though it might recall vast histories which we have forgotten. In “The Rites of Passage,” for instance, you conclude your description of the birth of the frog eggs by describing your reaction to this event:

Think of that part of me wishing to remember
The split-second edge before the beginning,
To remember by a sudden white involution of sight,
By a vision of tension folding itself
Inside clear open waters, by imitating a manipulation
Of cells in a moment of distinction, wishing to remember
The entire language made during that crossing.

What is it you encourage the body to “remember?”

Rogers: I have a feeling that we know many things, that our bodies respond to things that we haven’t been able to verbalize yet. So, in a sense, we don’t know them. We can’t investigate them because we need to have them in language in order to look at them and examine them. It is in this sense that I use the word “remember.” There are too many strange things going on. We have these vague words like “intuition,” “feeling,” “sense,” and “music.” What is music? What in the world is that? Our bodies can tell us things. Sometimes we “know” when the garment has been made right, if it fits right, or if something seems true, we have a certain feeling about it. Where does that feeling come from? It’s a bodily feeling, not an abstraction. I tried to approach the subject in “Capturing the Scene.” I think we have to do everything we can with our minds. We have to work to our potential in analyzing, in naming, in taking apart, investigating by using the checks on superstition that science has developed, and we have to continually ask others, “Is this how you see this happening too?” And then there are the times when we put everything back together and remember something more. But all of the analysis and concentration, all of the intellectualization is what helps us to make that other step in which we add our part, our humanity, what we can give. Then we see beyond the physical by means of the physical.

McCann: Are these divisions we’ve been discussing—divisions between science and poetry, earth and truth, body and spirit—related to the split

between knowledge and feeling? In your work, you frequently present multiple ways by which something may be seen and known.

Rogers: I think some of these divisions are locked into the language. We can't break out of that language. It forces us to think of knowledge and feeling as two separate things. Maybe there's no division there. The language forces us to think in a certain pattern, such as to think in terms of cause and effect. I have tried to break this by writing not about one thing causing another in a kind of linear fashion, but by writing about a reciprocal creation in which many things rise together creating each other simultaneously.

McCann: In *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden*, the real question is how to praise death.

Rogers: I like the way you're phrasing that. I think I am glad I am taking on this subject in my poetry because to ignore it would be to weaken the work as a whole. Yet there are fears I feel about some of these poems.

McCann: What kinds of fears?

Rogers: I don't want to dramatize this. It isn't dramatic. But sometimes it happens that I've gotten into a poem and have wondered if I could get back out of it. It's kind of like a spiraling; when I'm that deep in it, I wonder if I can find my way back when I need to get back out of it. There was one poem I wrote where I was conscious of my breath for three days afterwards.

McCann: What poem was this?

Rogers: "The Possible Suffering of a God during Creation."

McCann: What made you fearful during the writing of it?

Rogers: I can't explain it. Maybe it was those things we have been talking about—that there are crucial things that depend upon us within creation. Maybe this was the first poem where I felt impatient for whatever it is that I am calling "god," "creative force," or whatever it is. Maybe it's the first poem where I felt that he needs us, that he himself is in the process of being created, and that he needs us to complete certain aspects of his own creation.

McCann: In many of these poems—"The Possible Suffering of a God during Creation," "The Birth Song and the Death Song," "Trinity," "The Possible Advantages of Expendable Multitudes"—you seem to be attempting to reinvent an attitude toward death. What attitudes did you begin with which required reinvention?

Rogers: When my father died in 1975, that was the first really close death I had experienced. I still had this personal sense of god. My first reaction was that he must be an unkind god—if we're going to die, all right, but why make us aware of it? This is all a traditional view of god. Then I thought "My father is gone, completely gone." And I thought maybe it's not god's fault, maybe he can't help it.

McCann: It's with your father's death that the question of death first comes up in *The Expectations of Light*, in the poem "Without Violence."

Rogers: Yes, and later, in *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden*, it comes up in "The Possible Suffering of a God during Creation," with the idea that god is not perfect, that he is somehow depending on us, and that we forgive him for that. But I am still saying "him" in these old ways because I don't have another vocabulary I can use.

McCann: In "The Rites of Passage," "life" is defined as bringing "the instantaneous distinction of being liable to death"; in "Trinity," you wonder whether death might not be "gentle," "careful," and "patient."

Rogers: "Trinity" is another example of experimenting, of saying that maybe death is like this, then. How do you reconcile being a lover of life and, at the same time, accept its inevitable conclusion? I don't know whether Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night" is the right attitude, that we should fight death all the way; or if it's like John Niehardt said, that death is like a good mother coming to you and taking you in her arms. Maybe both are right. I don't know. I am willing to try to work on it.