

Pattiann Rogers and Gordon Johnston

an excerpt from

Breaking Old Forms: A Conversation

Pattiann Rogers' books of poetry include *The Expectations of Light* (1981), *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden* (1986), *Legendary Performance* (1987), *Splitting and Binding* (1989), *Geocentric* (1993), *Firekeeper: New and Selected Poems* (1994, with a revised and expanded edition appearing in 2005), *Eating Bread and Honey* (1997), *A Covenant of Seasons* (a collection of poems and monotypes completed in collaboration with artist Joellyn Duesberry, 1998), *Song of the World Becoming: New and Collected Poems, 1981–2001* (2001), and *Generations* (2004). She is also the author of *The Dream of the Marsh Wren* (1999), a book-length essay interspersed with poems. Her new book of poetry, *Wayfare*, will be published by Penguin in April 2008.

Rogers has received many awards and honors for her work, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts grants, a Literary Award from the Lannan Foundation, and a residency at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy. Her poems have won the Tietjens Prize, the Bess Hokin Prize and the Frederick Bock Prize from *Poetry*, and five Pushcart Prizes. A faculty member of the MFA program in writing at Pacific University, she also has held other teaching posts, including an associate professorship at the University of Arkansas from 1993 to 1997 and the Ferrol A. Sams, Jr. Distinguished Chair in Creative Writing at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, in 2002. She has two sons and three grandsons, and she lives in Colorado with her husband, a retired geophysicist.

Gordon Johnston led the Georgia Poetry Circuit from 1996 to 2007 and is associate professor of English at Mercer University, where he directs creative writing and teaches contemporary literature. His reviews and short fiction have

ROGERS AND JOHNSTON

appeared in *The Georgia Review*, including a story “Third and Long” in the Spring 1996 issue. He has also published poems, essays, and stories in *Atlanta Review*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Fourth Genre*, *Denver Quarterly*, and elsewhere. His interview with Lee Smith appeared in the Fall 2002 *Arts & Letters: Journal of Contemporary Culture*.

Roger Jamison, a potter in Juliette, Georgia, fires Johnston’s poems on clay pages and pilgrim pots in his anagama kiln. In fall 2007 Amy Pirkle of Perkolator Press produced *Gravity’s Light Grip*, a limited letterpress edition of a selection of his poems. Johnston is a father of three.

INTRODUCTION

The poems of Pattiann Rogers have startling breadth, often engaging scientific, theological, and artistic modes of perception simultaneously without ever losing a central focus or a syntactical sense of direction. In a word, her poems are cosmological. That is, they seek to heal or to renew the Western cosmology—to weave into some kind of whole cultural cloth the epistemological threads that over time have unraveled and diverged so as to be perceived as dualities: flesh and spirit, analysis and synthesis, inside and outside, cause and effect, life and death. Given the polarizations and culture wars that continue to harry us, we need the kind of expanded vision that arises from Rogers’ poetry of, in her words, “multiple intentions and beliefs shifting and modifying, overlapping and affecting one another.”

Too often, Rogers’ work has not been recognized for this breadth. She has been categorized as a nature or environmental or transcendental poet, and although these terms are not inaccurate, they do justice neither to the reach and grasp of her body of work nor to the extent to which she reinvents her poetic self from book to book. My conviction that her work has been classified too narrowly, along with my sense that her eleventh book, *Generations*, is dramatically different in tone from her earlier collections, led me to want to interview her. In October 2005 we spent the better part of three days talking in her study at her Castle Rock, Colorado, home, which is about a mile from the site of Kit Carson’s last campfire. Transcription of the tapes of our conversation was done by Saaliha Ally.

G.J.

THE GEORGIA REVIEW

GJ: In many of your poems, there's an emphasis on the organs and the vehicles of perception. In "In Order to Perceive," from your first book, for instance, perception only works if there is a suggestion that leads to enormous visions—even some visions, by the end of the poem, that the reader starts to doubt a little bit because they become so grand. I want you to talk about your concerns about the organs of perception, and the way I think we often take those organs of perception for granted. We don't recognize that to some degree they see what they're taught to see.

PR [flipping through *Generations* until she stops on pages 47 and 48]: These two poems, "The Questing" and "Seeing What Is Seen," are similar to "In Order to Perceive," which is older and more difficult for me to remember writing. "The Questing" and "Seeing What IS Seen" actually were written about the same time; one followed the other.

GJ: And they follow one another in *Generations*.

PR: Well, I had this idea that we see by being seen. I didn't say that in this poem specifically, but I think you gain a new perspective by being around other creatures: when a cat looks at you and you see the cat looking at you, all of a sudden you are defined by the cat. You see yourself as the cat might see you. When a creature looks you directly in the eye, and you're looking at it, something happens. You know something about yourself that you didn't know before. You're being perceived by something else.

GJ: That's another way you're seeing yourself from outside yourself. "Hearing the Unexpected" in *Song of the World Becoming* [2001] says, "In time, the ear may be capable / of hearing its own function." There's a self-consciousness that you come around to. It seems to me there's always another consciousness to arrive at in the poems. You treat the ear almost as if it has a selfhood entirely apart from the rest of the body. And that's true in *Generations*, too. You have a lot of poems about ears and hearing, and a lot of poems about seeing, being seen, the faculty of sight. But in "Hearing the Unexpected," you arrive at this ultimate moment of self-consciousness where the ear can be brought to know its own meaning. And I guess that's the ultimate upshot of self-consciousness. Is it?

ROGERS AND JOHNSTON

PR: Self-consciousness in general, meaning and function? Yes, I suppose that's true. In regard to this poem and the investigation of the ear in many of its manifestations, that's just where the poem seemed to be going. And it seemed like an interesting, kind of fun thought. There's a great deal to say about how we tend to see, and hear, only what has been pointed out to us, as in the poem "In Order to Perceive." We are given words for those things that are pointed out to us. What about everything else? What are we missing? That's one reason I like poetry, because it allows me to surmise, to question what may be beyond what we presently see and hear simply because it's never been noticed.