

**LOOKING BACK AND BREAKING THROUGH
HOW I GOT OVAH: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS** by
Carolyn Rogers. Doubleday & Co. New York. 1975. \$5.95.
(Paperback: Anchor Books. New York. 1976. \$3.95.)

Reviewed by David Lionel Smith

When I began considering titles for this essay, the first that came to mind was "You'll Wonder Where the M. F. Went . . ." Naturally, I rejected it immediately; yet, there is a certain perverse aptness about that title. I cite it here not to demonstrate that my imagination has been corrupted by Timestyle but rather to suggest the sort of bemusement that I—and probably quite a few others—have felt in confronting this earnest, moving, and unsettling volume by Carolyn Rogers. Before elaborating on this, however, I want to make it clear that Carolyn Rogers is a superb, powerful poet. Her poems are always honest, incisive and engaging; and she writes with the unobtrusive brilliance of a master at ease with her craft. Her reputation as one of the finest black poets to emerge in the late 60s is not to be disputed.

Yet much of the bemusement I have mentioned arises from considering the relationship of the Carolyn Rogers who wrote *Songs of a Blackbird* (Third World Press, 1969) to the Carolyn Rogers who wrote *How I Got Ovah*. The reader is immediately alerted that a change has come by the prefatory "Author's Note," dated August, 1974. She begins: "When a book is finally published, an author is very likely to have changed his style and his mind. About many things." Further on, she adds: "I want my work to interest as many people as possible; therefore, some words have been either altered or eliminated completely." Aside from words, the poet has also omitted certain poems which she calls "old favorites." Taken as a unit, *How I Got Ovah* is a chronicle of the poet's personal journey from where she was to where she is. Certainly, one must respect any poet's right to grow and to change; but that growth and change must be understood before it can be appreciated. In the case of Carolyn Rogers, the history of the last ten years of black militant writing and political struggle are inextricably bound up in this consideration.

This is no place to resurrect the issue of Black Nationalism, but in order to give a sense of where Carolyn Rogers was, politically, eight years ago, I am going to quote here from one of those omitted "old favorites." The poem is called "The Last M. F.":

. . . they say,
that respect is hard won by a woman
who throws a word like muthafucka around
and so they say because we love you
throw that word away, Black Woman . . .
i say,

that i only call muthafuckas, muthafuckas
so no one should be insulted. only
pigs and hunks and negroes who try to divide and
destroy our moves toward liberation.
i say,
that i am soft, and you can subpoena my man, put him
on trial, and he will testify that I am
soft in the right places at the right times (*Song*, p. 37)

This passage bears the mark of its time and of the movement out of which it was written. The principles at work in it are familiar ones: black unity, the love of black men and women for one another, and contempt for the enemies of the movement. The aesthetic principle which informs this—and most of the black writing of the period—is the use of black colloquial speech as the basis for poetic language. (This doesn't mean "Writing in dialect.") The word "muthafucka" is poetically valid here not just because it has shock value (as some would have us believe) but rather because of its vitality within the oral tradition which the poet can draw upon for her own purposes. Now, however, the poet has decided to eliminate the "offensive" words, and that decision is clearly related to a more general development which is chronicled in *How I Got Ovah*.

What, then, has transpired with one of the foremost poetic spokesmen of the black militant movement? It appears that a series of personal crises have led her to retreat from her militancy and to take refuge in the traditional values of the black community: Christianity, respect for older people, and scepticism regarding radical change. In her poem "For Our Fathers" she deals with the relationship between her life and her politics and how recent events in her life have brought about a change in her outlook. Here, for instance, is her assessment of the sixties:

. . . love and *respect is our beginning*. Love and respect is our end. We must learn how to love, to protect, to cherish, our young, our old, our own. (61)

The value of love and respect can hardly be disputed. Yet, insofar as this passage implies that the greatest problem facing black people is a lack of love and respect for one another, it must be strongly denied; for such a claim would further imply that black people are their own worst enemy. It is important to remember that minority people do not create slums and ghettos, they are relegated to them, because this society is run by racists. Likewise, the stereotypes of Shaft and Superfly were not created and promoted primarily by black people. Love and respect *is* a beginning; but racists and oppressors, whatever their color, display neither and deserve neither. The poet herself expresses an awareness of this in her earlier poem "c. c. rider":

we Blacks
know
the ways of

genocide.

This is a knowledge not to be forgotten.

I have discussed the politics of this book at such length not to be contentious but to sort out some issues which are both prominent and important. Many establishment types, who were offended by the militancy of the poet's earlier writing, will gleefully embrace *How I Got Ovah* as a work of repentance. (America has always loved conversion narratives.) That is a silly reason for acknowledging the work of a major poet, but then, conservative politics tend toward silliness. Ultimately, one's attitude toward her politics reflects one's attitude toward black militancy in general. I agree with the assessment she herself made in "Un-funny Situation":

the funniest thing about our r(evolution)
is that if we lose,
we've had our last laugh for eternity,
and the bad joke will have been us. (*Song*, p. 26)

Certain other characteristic virtues of Carolyn Rogers' work should be noted. One is that she has a remarkable eye for detail. In

her poem "47th & Vincennes /Chicago" she describes a group of children flying a kite on the street while "dodging chunks of glass." She notes:

a dog dances around
these children
sure-footed fast tipping
dances, like a ballerina
on his tender toes—
the dog speaks, the dog knows
of
too much glass. (19)

Not only is the description vivid and precise, but the deft control of the language reflects the delicacy of the action.

In addition to delicacy, Carolyn Rogers is also capable of a razor sharp irony, as she demonstrates in her poem, "Esther, as Lead":

kids die ev'ry day, dumb
like people drink ev'ry day, dead.
yeah, the walls as flaky
and the kid took it all in
and her mind just shriveled up
like uh dried old prune.

Here she contrasts on off-hand manner with the enormity of the situation (a child eating paint and dying of lead poisoning) in order to achieve greater emotional impact. Furthermore, the last four lines have a broader social implication, for "walls" can be read as the social environment in general (including newspapers). "Flaky" is not just paint but craziness: the kind of social insanity which the newspapers promote. Hence, the child takes it all in and dies, a victim of lead poisoning and propaganda poisoning, her mind "shriveled up/ like uh dried old prune." After the poet has set us up, she proceeds to this powerful conclusion:

the newspapers ran it down
it was just uh tiny space
cause it happens all the time
u git these kids, u know,
who be eating
they self to death. (27)

Yet all these other things notwithstanding, Carolyn Rogers is first and foremost a lyric poet. She is most distinctive as a voice

when she writes of love, loneliness, and the intimate concerns of her own self. The poem "Breakthrough"—unfortunately, too long to quote entirely here—is to my mind her finest lyric. It begins thus:

I've had tangled feelings lately
about ev'rything
bout writing poetry, and otha forms
about talkin' and dreamin with a
special man (who says he needs me)
uh huh
and my mouth has been open
most of the time, but
I ain't been saying nothin but
thinking about ev'rything
and the partial pain has been
how do I put myself on paper
the way I want to be or am and be
not like any one else in this
Black World but me (35)

In the world of Carolyn Rogers, love and poetry have always been very closely related, and similarly, anxiety over self-expression is closely tied to anxiety over love. I will not begin paraphrasing the poem, for this is a poem which *must* be read; but the poet's search for a true love and a true self-expression is integrally a part of her search for her authentic self. Carolyn Rogers is and has been throughout her career a gentle and sensitive soul, and the central aspect of her poetic quest is to be heard, understood, and—ultimately—loved. This helps to explain the significance of her closing lines to the reader:

if u read this u
will dig where I'm at
and feel what i mean/that/where
i am
and could very possibly
be
real
at this lopsided crystal sweet moment. . . . (37)

How I Got Ovah is a rare book with poems to dispute, poems to admire, and poems to cherish. Many will find it unsettling for many different reasons, but it is the work of a special talent: a work not to be ignored.