Sterling Brown and the Spirit of the Blues  
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The influence of the blues can be felt throughout the work of African-American poet Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989), most notably in his 1932 collection Southern Road. Some of these poems are actually in blues form; some have blues in their titles; many have that relation of dejection and hope that characterizes the blues—including in their subjects: race and racism, economic oppression, pain in love.

In talks and writings over many decades, American poet and critic Eli Siegel, founder of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism, showed that the decisive thing making a poem successful is its verbal music—arising from how fully and fairly a poet sees the object about which he’s writing. And in a 1966 lecture, he showed that Brown’s poems in Southern Road have that music. Though their subjects are frequently about terrible injustice, the poems themselves are resplendently just to reality as sound—in the relation of vowel and consonant, of word to word. This is true of both those written in the Southern dialect, and those in classical literary forms—including sonnets.

In his essay “The Immediate Need for Poetry,” Siegel writes:

Poetry is a picture of reality at its truest, most useful. We look at reality...mostly in a contradictory way. We are for it, and we retreat from it. It is, sometimes, most sweet concord; but how much discord do we feel in it! Reality hurts and pleases. It frightens and allures. It surprises and soothes. It shrieks and coos….We need to see reality as one thing, with discord present. We need this
very much. Poetry meets this need.

Pain and pleasure, concord and discord, are of the essence of the blues, and they're beautifully one in the poems by Brown I’ll discuss. We can see this in “Southern Road”—about working on a chain gang, written in traditional blues structure. We see it in “Sister Lou,” which tells with poignant and powerful music of the freedom from suffering a dying woman will meet in heaven. This poem has, Eli Siegel explained, people’s desire “to be folksy, personal, chatty with the great forces.”

It begins:

Honey
When de man
Calls out de las' train
You're gonna ride,
Tell him howdy.

Gather up yo’ basket
An' yo' knittin' an' yo' things,
An' go on up an' visit
Wid frien' Jesus fo' a spell.

“Riverbank Blues” describes the fight in self about feeling stuck and needing to keep moving—and this is felt in its music. The oneness of struggle and longed-for release is in the sonnet on the struggle of African-Americans “Salutamus.”

Sterling A. Brown, professor at Howard University and son of a former slave, cared deeply for African-American culture, was a careful scholar of it, and was
poetically influenced by it—including its music: spirituals, jazz, and most definitely the blues.