

1980

Review of "One Way to Reconstruct the Scene" by William Virgil Davis, "The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown" by Sterling A. Brown, "Any Body's Song" by Joseph Langland, "Denizens" by Ronald Perry, "Folly River" by Wendy Salinger, and "Silks" by Roberta Spear

Sybil P. Estess

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Estess, Sybil P. "Review of "One Way to Reconstruct the Scene" by William Virgil Davis, "The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown" by Sterling A. Brown, "Any Body's Song" by Joseph Langland, "Denizens" by Ronald Perry, "Folly River" by Wendy Salinger, and "Silks" by Roberta Spear." *The Iowa Review* 11.4 (1980): 189-196. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2666>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

One Way to Reconstruct the Scene. By William Virgil Davis. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. 62pp. \$4.50, paper. *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown.* By Sterling A. Brown. New York: Harper & Row, 1980. 257pp. \$12.95. *Any Body's Song.* By Joseph Langland. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1980. 119pp. \$8.98. *Denizens.* By Ronald Perry. New York: Random House, 1980. 88pp. \$5.95, paper. *Folly River.* By Wendy Salinger. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1980. 71pp. \$7.95. *Silks.* By Roberta Spear. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980. 85pp. \$4.95, paper.

I have before me six recent volumes of poetry, all of which have won awards: the five books which were selected for the 1979 National Poetry Series, and the winner of the 1979 Yale Younger Poets Award. William Virgil Davis' book, *One Way to Reconstruct the Scene*, the volume which Richard Hugo chose for the Yale prize, is the best collection of contemporary poems in this group. If I were buying two books out of this set, though, I would choose, in addition to Davis' book, either Joseph Langland's *Any Body's Song*, or *Folly River*, by Wendy Salinger. Both of these works are part of the first National Poetry Series and are the two best books of the four in that series which are what we might think of as poetry in a contemporary style. Salinger writes direct, lyrical poems in a conversational voice. Langland's are mostly formal poems, usually distanced from the way people now speak. His poems are highly crafted, often composed in rhyme or meter, and would be generally thought of as more "traditional" than either Salinger's or Davis'.

The most substantial volume in both scope and length of these six is even more distanced from a contemporary mode; that is *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, again part of the 1979 National Poetry Series. Sterling Brown is an eighty-year-old professor, poet, critic and writer of short fiction. His first collection of verse was *Southern Road*, published in 1939. That volume, for whatever reasons, has been out of print for some time. All the years since, Brown has published in journals and his poems have regularly appeared in anthologies. His new *Collected Poems*

is a valuable compilation by a well-known thinker and writer who is particularly concerned with Black culture and the sufferings of Blacks in America. In addition to its eight sections of poems, Brown's book contains an annotated bibliography of all his work and a reprint of James Weldon Johnson's introduction to *Southern Road*. The poems in this volume include ballads, lyrics in dialect, long narrative poems, and a series of sonnets.

William Virgil Davis' *One Way to Reconstruct the Scene* has forty-six poems, most of which are very strong. Here is a characteristic poem from his book:

An Odor of Chrysanthemums

Invariably, the room was earthy. There was little for us to say. We repeated the names, testing our breath against the odor of chrysanthemums. We spoke of irrelevant things, not worth repeating. The room was small, stuffy. The chrysanthemums were yellow and red. The day was gray, overcast. By afternoon, a steady drizzle began, as predicted. People we didn't remember came and went quietly. We spoke softly and nodded, smiling. Men in dark suits stood along the walls and blinked when the clock chimed. Everyone knew exactly what to do. The walls were off-white. No one spoke of chrysanthemums as inappropriate.

Such a poem demonstrates that one strength of Davis' poetry is its imagery. For instance, "breath against the odor of chrysanthemums." (Then later, the colors of the chrysanthemums, yellows and reds, against the gray day.) Much of Davis' power emerges from his hauntingly realistic details. Such attention allows him to reconstruct scenes which he wants to relive as a poet. He reminds us in "An Odor of Chrysanthemums" of sad details almost always true of funerals—things which we know but might not happen to remember until a poem such as this one nudges us toward recognition. People we don't remember come to funerals; strangers in black stand around; clocks chime, recalling the passing of time for us all.

The description in Davis' poems is often, at surface level, extremely

simple. Indeed, much of contemporary American poetry tends to be this way. Our poets are often criticized, sometimes rightly, for leading us down disappointing paths, for merely remembering or describing what is, rather than enlarging our visions. Yet, by the end of the best poems by Davis, we realize his recorded observation has become an extended metaphor.

The poem I mention here, "An Odor of Chrysanthemums," is one enlarged trope. People do not know what to do, how to act, what to say, against the reality of death. They always do inappropriate things. Davis never once tells us that this is a funeral, or what the poem is supposed to be "about." But we know it is about death (even if we do not recall Lawrence's story, "The Odor of Chrysanthemums," to which the title of the poem alludes). The poetic quality of Davis' poems lies precisely in the hushed, muted ways which they both describe and metaphorically state their theme.

Davis usually lets us know the specific locale or situation of his poems. When his successful poems conclude, their readers have come to know the problems or issues from which the works germinated. This in itself is a virtue. Although the middle section of *One Way to Reconstruct the Scene*—in which Davis attempts a kind of surrealist poem with overused metaphors, such as bones—is weaker than the rest, there are many excellent poems in this volume. Among the best of them are "Another Night with Snow," a poem about how the poet imagines himself as a fetus in his mother's womb; "After the Funeral"; "My Son in Snow," about a dead child; and "Cultivation of Pain."

Joseph Langland is quite a different kind of poet. In the "Postscript" to *Any Body's Song*, he writes,

I hear the cry, "Be Natural!" and then I walk out and examine rocks, leaves, grass, birds, animals, people, the flow of wind and fire and water. They all cry out, "Form!" The absence of form is unnatural.

Thus the title poem of his volume, a lyric about love, is written in rhyming couplets—and also in images and language which many persons today consider to be either displeasingly "poetic" or stylized, overly romantic, too distanced from the speaking voice of the poet. These are the first and last sections of "Any Body's Song":

Here's an acorn from my breast;

plant it gladly, let it rest.
Lie down in its broken shade,
body out of sunlight made.
And if any twig or leaf
fall upon your summer grief
let it root upon the mind
while I catch the autumn wind.

If, by chance, I touch your hand
somewhere in another land,
if I knock upon your door
somewhere in another world,
let this oak abide us there,
lift its boughs upon the air.
And let your summer shadows run
through me till our time is gone.

Some of Langland's best, most natural-sounding poems are not his lyrics, but his narratives. "Sacrifice of the Dandelions" is one. In this poem the poet's language is down-to-earth, clear. ("When all their gold blew up in a cloud/and threatened a silver blight on the land,/the entire neighborhood rose in arms/and took a hand.") But sometimes, in Langland, I think the form of the poem appears imposed, and thus muddies the poetic truth. I believe this happens, for example, in "An Old Discussion with Myself":

They say God loves and Jesus dies
so that man lives. Or so the tale
came into fame for good or ill.

If it were ill that man loves,
then love-and-fame most surely dies.
Is that the tale by which he lives?

...

Neither ill nor fame lives in this tale.
All that love dies; all that loves dies.

Surely the subject matter considered in this poem could be handled more directly. The cleverness of the form itself obscures the poem's meaning.

This point leads to my mentioning what I consider the greatest weakness in Langland's poems. The fact that he experiments with so many different kinds of poems has led some reviewers and critics to laud his work. But I think the polymorphic nature of the book creates at least two flaws. First, Langland can be heard as having no consistent voice. Second, his poems sometimes seem contrived. They can seem to be experiments which are too obviously worked on. But Langland believes that any "body" has its own (different) form, its own distinct song. And he writes about subjects as disparate as his Scandinavian heritage, landscapes he knows and loves in the Upper Midwest, "Winter Nights in the Land of the Midnight Sun," "Meadowlands," a little girl suffering the effects of the Hiroshima bombing, or "Reincarnation," with as many different kinds of songs as he hears each of these sing.

Ronald Perry in *Denizens* too often finds it necessary to address poems to a vague "you," a technique somewhat overused in contemporary verse. Here is one example, from the first poem in the book, "Some Paper Flowers":

I'm sitting here looking
At your paper flowers
Wondering if you brought them
All the way from Mexico
As we did—eight, ten, eleven—
Who knows how many years ago.

Perry thus suggests that many of his poems are written to persons whom he decides to keep completely private. This is reinforced by his numerous dedications to people referred to by their initials only. Such a practice would not be a problem in itself except that it points to what I see as a larger issue in this poet's work. Perry too often does not place us in a concrete situation in his poems; or, he does not sufficiently tell us the real subject about which he writes. Sometimes we have too hard a time trying to guess why, for just one example, he titled a poem "For Father Pugh." This vagueness arises even in a poem which would seem, on the surface, not to have such a flaw. It is one entitled "A Hospital Poem for My Mother."

It's all too much. The deck's

Overloaded. The wheel
Won't stop turning. It's a fix. The dice
Are nineteen-
Sided.

 Okay and
Alas, my dear. It's all
Too true. If it's the truth
We're looking for
(And what else is worth the gamble?)
We've got it. The question now
Is, as always, what
To do with it?

 If the crooked
Dealer's almost unintelligible mumble
Makes any sense at all
It is, "Nothing. Do
Nothing. Wait. Be
What you have always been. Be
And accept."

Although we do know what the relationship is between the persons in the poem (the mother and the poet), I still find it quite difficult to tell just what nuance of that relationship the poet wishes for us to try to sense. Is the problem toward which the poem points simply that this mother-son relationship is painful? Or that the mother is very ill and going to die? We cannot tell, since the poet doesn't give us enough facts, facts being just what he has circumvented.

Perry obviously knows and cares for music—and his poems are often pleasingly melodic. He is a poet who can create lyrics, as he does, from material such as the Hungarian Revolution, living in Laos, or a procession of beasts. But all in all, *Denizens* begs to be more than it really is. Ronald Perry gives too few clues about how either his history or his geography has influenced him. He titles the volume *Denizens*, yet readers have almost no way to ascertain how or why the volume's title relates either to the poems or to the poet. Until now, he has not published at all for ten years. That silence having been broken, one can hope that his mature and recognizable talent for lyric will not continue to keep him from speaking more straightforwardly.

There are two poets who have published their first volume as part of this first National Poetry Series: Wendy Salinger and Roberta Spear. Salinger's book seems to me superior to Spear's. Her poems identify with particular situations and places. Having grown up in North Carolina, Salinger lives now in Folly Beach, South Carolina. Hence, the title of her book. Her poems, often about places for which she has affection, can seem by their titles to be sea-or-landscapes, or still lifes: "Copper Light," "Seasmoke," "Charleston, South Carolina, 7 P.M.," "Folly River." "Copper Light," for instance, goes like this:

When the sun rubs the ocean in its oils,
and the banked cumulus is fired rose,
and the shrimp trawler rides

like a mythical city, white and lone,
when mullet crack the steel cover,
when I see the ocean in its fever,

I remember waking
from my own sluggish childhood
to the first bar of land.

This poem, like many of Langland's and Perry's, is a kind of song. Yet Salinger gives her readers more suggestions than does Perry as to what the poem is trying to accomplish. "Copper Light" is an evocative description of a landscape, incorporating associations which the poet makes when she muses over the scene.

Sometimes Salinger is too flat, and her descriptions appear to come to nearly nothing. This happens in "European Strangeness":

Our car rolled down the lower deck
and Mother sat inside and Jennifer and I
puzzled the sixteen pieces of luggage
into the pattern we trawled like a shell
over the older dirt of Europe
and my father drew up the papers.

But if some individual passages fail to be musical, the entire poem succeeds by projecting rather clearly what the poet means by European

strangeness as it compares with the familiarity of her homeland, the Carolinas. This poet grew up in “land that gave/a muck of oxblood clay and kudzu”—where “there is no/light, no light at all.” In “Folly River,” that is, a kind of thick, brute reality looms, dark and real, cut off from the imagination. The irony, though, is that Salinger’s sensibility sheds light on such opaque places when she chooses to re-experience them in her poems.

For my taste, there is too much reality in *Silks*, by Roberta Spear. There is too little metamorphic transformation of actuality via the mind. Poems such as “The White Dress,” about female innocence and virginity, and “Building a Small House,” a poem which concerns maternal strength, are among her best. Maybe in Spear’s next volume she will exclude rather flimsy poems about trivial experiences such as “August/Fresno 1973.” And perhaps her talent for combining narrative and image, which she demonstrates in her title poem, will mature and manifest itself later in *Vision*, which is what I look for in any poem.

Such seeing does emerge in a few places in Spear’s work, such as in the final lines in the book, the ones which conclude “*Silks*”:

Ailanthus, no one said
the branch leading to heaven
would be beautiful.
We take our silks from its thorns
and musty odor,
from its molded leaves.

I wish for Roberta Spear more such wisdom, and many more lines as fine as these.