

POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

A Service of Poetry Foundation

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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “they can be sectioned and still survive.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

*DISMAL ROCK*

A review of Davis McCombs’s recent poetry collection.

By Jason Guriel

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**Dismal Rock**, by Davis McCombs. Tupelo Press. \$16.95.

Younger poets still making a name for themselves, like Davis McCombs, know that they must be clear and compelling and not take up too much of our time—“for time,” as August Kleinzahler smartly reminds us in a recent talk, “has vanished with inflated rents and the blitzkrieg of what’s cheerfully called information, information to be attended to, and I’m talking right now.” McCombs gets this and—in the first section of *Dismal Rock*, a sequence on tobacco farming—gets down to business, describing a world with the rigor of an anthropologist in the field:

The people are talking about budworms; they are talking  
about aphids and thrips. Under the bluff at Dismal Rock,  
there where the spillway foams and simmers,  
they are fishing and talking about pounds and allotments;  
they are saying white burley, lugs and cutters.  
Old men are whittling sticks with their pocketknives  
and they are saying Paris Green; they speak of topping  
and side-dressing; they are whistling and talking  
about setters, plant beds and stripping rooms.

In these lines, from “Lexicon,” McCombs’s speaker, a good listener, has catalogued his environment’s recurring sounds—the “u” in “bluff,” “lugs,” and “cutters”; the “w” in “white,” “whittling,” and “whistling”—and organized them into a brief, cohesive sound loop that captures the aural energy of a rural landscape. *Dismal Rock* reassures us that

