

U T L H T U L M E A

D A V I S M <sup>C</sup> C O M B S

WITH A FOREWORD BY W. S. MERWIN

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## F O R E W O R D

In the past few years a number of gifted young poets have presented collections of poems related to some single theme or subject or image. This is not without precedent: it is easy to think of forerunners, from the Greek pastoral poets, to Petrarch, to the Spoon River Anthology. Why there should be this recurrence now is something we can only guess at. It may have to do with an urge for a different scope from that of short poems standing by themselves; for the broad canvas of narrative, without linear continuity.

One thing that happens when poems cluster in this way around some common formation or feeling or circumstance is that the recurring subject, poem by poem, becomes a primal metaphor which in turn informs each of the separate poems to some degree, and the poems come to pick up reflections of each other.

The ruling image of Davis McCombs's *Ultima Thule* is the cave. Before turning to Freud or Plato, and their lights on the subject, it is well to know that McCombs has a very specific cave, or caves, in mind — their topography, their history, and the history of human acquaintance with them. He lives in Kentucky and when he presented this manuscript he was working as a park ranger at Mammoth Cave National Park. The known and the unknown of that vast complex of riddled limestone, as it exists in the earth and in the minds of those who have come to it, awake and asleep and in all the tenses of language, are the setting for his poems. The more apparently defined and practical and rational the viewer's approach to this setting, the more evident it is that what informs the references, all of them, is the underworld. We know immediately that the main ground is unknowable, that what we seem to

know of it is immeasurably small, fragile, and flickering. Only a little of it can even be spoken of directly. But since this unknowable bourne underlies all the surface accounts and illumination that pass over it, they themselves refer to it, even in telling of themselves.

The human figure, or the human shadow, that goes ahead with a light through the passages of *Ultima Thule* is that of Stephen Bishop, born in 1820, a slave of Dr. John Croghan, who owned Mammoth Cave from 1839 to 1849. (The idea of “owning” this sunless labyrinth seems even stranger after reading McCombs’s book than before.) In a prefatory note McCombs describes Bishop’s two decades of work as a guide in the cave, during which he helped explore countless new passageways and became something of a tourist attraction himself.

So McCombs, employed as a ranger at the cave, is retracing a predecessor in Stephen Bishop — a figure of the known and of the unknown. And in the first sequence of poems in the collection Bishop speaks. He does so, inevitably, in a later voice, from a later shadow.

McCombs’s own language is quiet, understated, delicate as a hand exploring a tunnel in the dark, and it remains so whether he is writing in the voice of Bishop or in his own, with his unfinished questions, some of which may have been Bishop’s before him. McCombs’s search for Bishop, his conjuring up of Bishop, and Bishop’s questions, as he imagines them, come back to him like an echo of his voice in the caverns. “Am I the letters or the hand that made them?” his figure of Stephen Bishop asks, in the book’s first poem, speaking of the names forming from the soot of a candle on the cave walls, as he is learning to write. Bishop’s vocabulary, in the poems, has become that of an articulate, highly literate successor, part remnant and part persona, who in speaking of the waxing of the moon can allude to “everything cognate to her nature.” Yet the vocabulary, in his voice, is not forced nor obtrusive, and what presents it, the author and the elusive forerunner share. The later figure — the author — explores the questions from a dif-

ferent perspective in the “outside” world, in the book’s penultimate poem, “Stephen Bishop’s Grave,” where he recognizes Bishop’s elusiveness, the other side of his shadow, as something integral to the search itself, and ends listening without expectation, aware that a search for summary must come to accept that there is no such thing. The poem itself, even in the quiet of its tone, is as close to a summary as the book comes.

### *Stephen Bishop’s Grave*

It took four summers here for me to realize  
the cave looped back under the Old Guide  
Cemetery, that what was mortal floated  
in a crust of brittle sandstone or leaked  
into the darkest rivers and was caving still.  
I went that drizzling night to stand  
where the paper-trail he left had vanished:  
woodsmoke, mist, a mossed-over name.  
I knew enough by then to know that he,  
of all people, would prefer the company of rain  
to my own, but I went anyway, thinking  
of my pale inventions, and stood a long time,  
vigilant for his shadow in my own,  
his voice as it differed from the wind.

In the poems in Bishop’s voice, McCombs gives us a language that is, necessarily, his own, and in doing it plainly and without emphasis he creates a haunting, echoing distance, a sound from some unidentifiable place. He presents a simplicity of words not of mind.

There is a further echo in the poems that are set in the voice or in the footsteps of Bishop. They are the length, and they suggest

the meter, of sonnets: a sonnet sequence, or an allusion to one, and the classical theme of the sonnet sequence is love, the unfinishable relation. The poems of the book's second section, flaring up into moments of the history of the cave, are in a more rapid line, the pace of notation:

Near Mummy Valley a flat slab  
propped upright and markings —  
turtle? dancing figure? map of the cave?  
Twenty centuries and only one moment  
when burnt torch end scraped limestone . . .

And the moment is in the poem:

. . . trace of what held heat, what is mine.

The history defers to one of the great admonitory shadows, Floyd (Floyd Collins), cave explorer, trapped in a nearby cave in 1925, dying in the dark, immensely famous for a while, then another monosyllabic echo, in the poems of Donald Finkel, in our time, and now in those of McCombs, who glimpses him at two moments: when Floyd enters the cave in the winter, February 1925, and then the moment that is all that was afterward — the laying out, the exploitation, the leaching away.

The book's third section moves through time in the upper world of Kentucky farmland and forest, and the recurring awareness of the caverns, the night, and the invisible sky under it. It is, to the end, a book of exploration, of searching regard. Its authenticity is deep in its language, not dependent on flash or effect: a grave, attentive holding of the light.

— W. S. Merwin

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*The Missouri Review*

- “Ultima Thule”
- “Freemartin”
- “Dismantling the Cave Gate”
- “Broken Country”
- “Stephen Bishop’s Grave”
- “Cave Mummies”

*No Roses Review*

- “Pond”
- “The River and Under the River”
- “Watermelons”

*The Best American Poetry, 1996*

“The River and Under the River”

*Columbia Poetry Review*

“Flowstone”

“Cave Wind”

*The Harvard Advocate*

“April Fifth, Nineteen Hundred Eighty-Three”

*Insurance*

“Kentucky”

In writing *Ultima Thule* I consulted a number of sources from which occasional phrases were taken and in some cases adapted. For information about the cave in the 1800s I relied on *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave*, by Alexander Clark Bullitt, and *One Hundred Miles in Mammoth Cave in 1880*, by H. C. Hovey. I also drew inspiration from works of a similar time period, most notably *Travels*, by William Bartram, the *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, and the writings of Henry David Thoreau.

I.

# U L T I M A T H U L E

*Stephen Bishop was the slave of Dr. John Croghan, owner of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave from 1859 to 1849. Bishop served as a guide at the cave from 1838 until 1857. Accounts of his daring explorations, which led to the discovery of miles of cave passageways, appeared in newspapers and books. His fame drew visitors from all over the world. By smoking their names onto the walls of the cave, he learned to read and write. Stephen Bishop died in 1857, at the age of thirty-seven. Oddly, the cause of his death was not recorded and remains unknown.*





## Candlewriting

Childhood was a mapless country, a rough  
terrain of sinks and outcrops. Not once  
did I suspect the earth was hollow, lost  
as I was among the fields and shanties.  
I remember the wind and how the sounds  
it carried were my name, meant me, *Stephen* . . .  
called out over the cornfield where I hid.  
There was no sound when candlesmoke  
met limestone—just this: seven characters  
I learned to write with a taper on a stick.  
What have they to do with that boy in the weeds?  
Am I the letters or the hand that made them?  
A word I answer to and turn from, or the flame  
that holds the shadows, for a time at least, at bay?

## Star Chamber

Once, the Doctor spoke to me at length  
of stars and prognostications, how,  
when we observe the waxing of the Moon,  
everything cognate to her nature—marrow  
in bones and in trees, flesh of the river  
mussel—increases also. He told of tides  
and how the ocean is affixed as with a chain  
to moonlight. I think it must be different  
in the Cave, where no light penetrates.  
There, I have lost hours, whole cycles of the Sun.  
At Star Chamber, I control the spheres—  
a lantern hung just-so will produce the night sky  
as if seen from a gorge; wobble it, and a comet,  
smoky, pestilent, streaks across the Ether.

## Visitations

There came to us, Tuesday last, a man  
of most peculiar visage. The Doctor,  
to whom we turned for insight, muttered  
of abominations, dismissed our questions.  
And yet I did not hesitate to show the Gentleman  
as far in the Cave as his leisure and his pocket  
would allow. For, there, to the faltering  
glow of a greaselamp or candle, throng  
shadows far more monstrous than he.  
These I do not fear. It is the women  
on the tours that give me pause, delicate,  
ghost-white, how, that night, I'm told,  
they wake to find themselves in unfamiliar  
beds, and lost, bewildered, call my name.

## Bottomless Pit

Before I crossed it on a cedar pole, legs  
dangling into blackness, here the tours  
would end: a loose and shingly precipice.  
From my pack I would produce a scrap  
of oiled paper, set fire to it, and send it  
twisting and sputtering into the abyss.  
I never saw it land, a flicker of light  
on the fluted cistern. Soon I had found  
the rivers beyond, their strange inhabitants  
that emerged into the circle of my light  
as if from another world, then vanished  
at the least agitation of the water. *Touched,*  
they said, *fish with no eyes!* until I sloshed  
a pailful into light, reveled in their silence.

## Echo River

Soon we had fashioned a rude boat,  
and with lanterns affixed to the prow  
were ferrying tours across the smoky waters:  
Styx, Lethe, Echo River, the host  
of wonders I had found. By slapping  
the water with the flat of my paddle,  
there comes a sound like the ringing of bells,  
a mournful, hollow melody—waves lap-  
ping and beating under the low stone arches.  
The voice, too, will reproduce in myriad;  
often I have led a tour in song, shouts raised  
or pistols fired on the dark, deep water.  
Children of a clanging, squeaking world,  
we cannot bear the silence.

## Shadow World

I am speaking of the shade of walls  
and woods, the half-light on the dark side  
of groves and fences—a region nearer  
to the source of things, but always close at hand.  
I have felt, of late, my shadow as an other  
person there. Behold how the shades in the Cave  
gather and deepen, extend in darker zones  
from the center of the flame where I stand.  
It was in such light that first my Charlotte came  
to me. For a week I'd half expected her, until  
at twilight, a shadow at the door, the sky waiting  
a long time, pale and still, for the Moon  
to rise. And afterwards, even the hemlocks  
seemed foreign, their scent and turpentine.

## Cartography

At Locust Grove, Great House, I pass days  
in the garden—a stone bench, ornamental  
cherries, August's dappled light. Once, a hawk's  
shadow crossed my paper, startling me  
from the dark rooms and corridors of my map,  
an eye-draught of the known Cave passages.  
The mind moves and the hand follows, as if  
by torchlight on a moonless midnight, inking.  
The Doctor is himself engaged in certain nightly  
observations, plotting, by aide of lenses and tubes,  
an atlas of the Moon, that distant, yellow orb,  
yet closer, he says, than our own dark Continent:  
its map made up of fringes and waterways, a dense,  
vine-thick interior left blank. Uncharted.

## Cave Formation

Safe from the withering glare of daylight,  
a stone arbor, stone clusters of grapes.  
I have heard more than one traveler  
proclaim these encrustations coral-like.  
Was once this place the bottom of a sea?  
I think it must be so. How else explain  
the salts that grow from joints in the rock:  
Epsom, Glauber. Or what of the eyeless fish?  
Stranded, perhaps, when the ocean vanished,  
never again to join their kindred tribe  
in that great salt realm. Who better to conjecture  
on these matters than I? Theories I have learned  
to keep from other, educated men,  
lest they, like bats, fly shrieking at the torch-bearer.

## Doctor Croghan

The Doctor draws the world to him by dint  
of much imagination, fortunes spilled  
to bring the *rudiments of culture* to this  
*poor backwater*. At his bidding, oxcarts  
bearing crates of wine will leave the coastline  
of Virginia, clinking. The latest books  
he brings that this place too might shine  
as a center of learning and enterprise.  
I have watched his projects grow, consume him—  
hotelier, surgeon, gentleman farmer—  
days when the light drains out of him,  
and irritable, distant, he walks into  
the orchard but finds, it seems, no peace  
among the trees, his dream of ordered rows.

## Brush Fire

A hot night, and the first breeze through my window  
carried with it the whinny of a horse.

It had been so still, but suddenly the night  
was restless, cocking its ear to a distant crackling,  
a light, as of dawn, across the valley. To walk  
abroad, and toward its source, was to swim  
against a river of game, flushed from their roosts  
in the oldest stands of timber, or from dens  
in the tangled underbrush. By dawn,  
forty acres had been consumed, the Hotel saved.

How strange when a party emerged from the Cave  
at daybreak, blinking into the blue, smoke-  
filled, ridgetop of embers—unaware  
of the flames that all night raged above them.

## Indian Mummy

If, as the Doctor believes, putrefaction  
is the work of unquiet spirits hastening  
to congregate with the air, she must have died  
at peace, little Indian. Still dressed  
in cloths of woven hemp, preserved,  
she was displayed for a time in the Cave  
where I found her. I will never forgive him  
for selling her remains to a Mr. Nahum Ward,  
purveyor of travelling curiosities,  
oddments, a renowned Wonder Cabinet.  
As I predicted, she never returned—lost,  
they say, in a burning Museum,  
a tiny spirit freed in ash and smoke . . .  
safe at last from looters, learned men.

## The Church

How soon the Cave forgets their worshipping,  
a preacher and his flock, the great vault quiet.  
Surely their God was here as he was not  
in their sermon, words that have dissolved unheard.  
I have stood at Pulpit Rock and felt the Cave  
grow thick around me, as if for having  
once been broken, it here became the essence  
of itself. Nothing remains of their scattered  
lights, of what they said or did. Nothing.  
Where once the faithful came, a congregation  
of bats, faint stirrings from the pews.  
Gods too will be forgotten, exiled  
to the pages of books. The Cave is praising them:  
from the Organ Loft, vast chords of silence.

## Dripstone

The Bengal Light is the most effective means we have of driving darkness from the corners where it lurks—a quick, blue flare that brought this day a single drop of water to my gaze. Globe-like, suspended, it held the scene about me in reverse: a grotto glistening with nodules and globules. Though not of the vegetable world, these live and grow, and when struck, produce melodious tones, liquid and wavering. Mat and I had gone in search of specimens for the Doctor's collection. How sad I grew to see the changes wrought in them by sunlight. How lustreless they appeared under glass, their sparks extinguished, their music fled.

## Tuberculosis Sanitarium

A taper burned at night, two stearine lights  
by day—no way to gauge the weather here.  
Such was their hope, distinct and inseparable  
condition of the disease, that even when  
reduced to shadows, they refused to quit  
the Cave, insisted on their imminent return  
to health. From the Doctor's monograph  
on the curative virtues of the Cave came  
stone huts, black drifts of smoke from cookfires,  
their dry, hollow coughs. A colony of invalids.  
I smuggled them plants against the Doctor's  
commands that they should *take the cure*  
*beyond the solar influences*—that grave  
experiment. Unmentionable now.

## Tours

The services of a guide cannot, as a rule,  
be dispensed with; we alone can disentangle  
the winding passageways. I will admit  
the tours for me grow burdensome.

How long must I endure their need to fill  
with talk the natural silence? I have heard  
it all before, their proposed improvements:

*Widen the trails so that two carriages  
may pass abreast . . . here, a capacious ballroom.*

Mere fancies. And yet beneath their words  
I have discerned a kind of rough-hewn fear.  
From drawing rooms and formal gardens  
they come to me, from sunlit lives they enter  
the chill, grand and instantaneous night.

## River

The river is a wondrous machine. Haunt  
of the Moon's changing face, it drifts among  
the knobs and foothills: there, deep and fluid;  
here, rippling over gravel beds. The water  
swims with flesh—walleye, minnow. From nights  
foggy and indeterminate rise mornings  
when the Sun burns like a scald. On its banks  
frogs pipe, the grass bends and rustles. It is  
the singularity of chance and the shuffle  
of things, stone basins where the chaff I've cast  
on waters in the Cave emerged some several  
hours hence. From the high stone bluffs nearby,  
the water shines with an inner light—  
makeshift, shifting, a candle in the current.

## The Others

Thus far I have explored into the bowels  
of the earth without impediment.  
Others too would try—Materson, Nicholas,  
those injudicious and eager for fame.  
I've heard it said that yesterday, our Nick  
was lowered by rope into the Maelstrom,  
a pit of unknown depth. Those present claim  
such shouts arose then from the chasm, the rope  
was pulled until it fired by friction. A comedy.  
I have seen the eyes he casts at her, and she  
at him. This year I hardly note the seasons' turns:  
first spring, and now the woodlands are awash  
with summer. My thoughts remain unquiet,  
here: low arch of the Netherworld, brooding.

## Fame

It was the night before the night before last  
when I sat so deep in thought by the fire.  
The Doctor boasts I was the merest germ  
of a man when he bought me. Through him,  
I was able, in time, to acquire a knowledge  
of science, a considerable degree of culture.  
Through him, my fame—the subject of articles,  
my map distributed widely. But fame,  
like the fire in the hearth, must be fed:  
a bundle of twigs soon needs a log to stay  
alight. And then full thirty cords of oak.  
I am ever in search of exploits, discoveries.  
Some nights I wake in darkness to know  
a greater darkness waits. A hillside. A mouth.

## Ultima Thule

Above me even now the hills are bristling  
with pine and cedar, dark branches shifting  
in the rays of Sun or Moon; there, deep pools  
receive their cave-cooled water, the Entrance  
breathes its mingling airs, and, surely, somewhere,  
Charlotte—stepping, perhaps, to the back porch  
door at twilight. Absently. By habit.

I have felt the legend almost leave me.

Elbows, rucksack. No one has ever come  
this far—a dusty, Hell-bent crawl, past pits  
and keystones, to find myself deep in the ridge.

I was drawn to wonder, the margins of the map.

Breath and a heartbeat. A fading lamp.

I was coffled to the light.