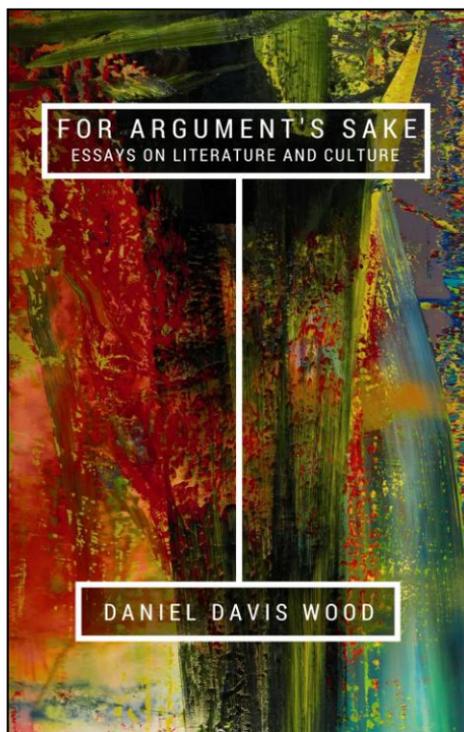


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# BEWILDERED

DYLAN NICE'S *OTHER KINDS*

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BEWILDERMENT IS MORE THAN JUST CONFUSION OR PERPLEXITY. It is, in its most literal sense, the paralysing disorientation of waking to find oneself lost in the wild and overwhelmed, overawed, by the encompassing wilderness. Perhaps one follows a path through the world that is suddenly swallowed up by forest, or perhaps the path dwindles away, losing all distinction, as barren expanses surround it and stretch out towards the horizon. When one is brought to a halt by some obstruction of one's intended course, bewilderment is the fog that descends and occludes all avenues for onward movement.

Bewilderment of this sort is the soul of Dylan Nice's *Other Kinds* and the closest thing to the narrative centre of this baroque and disquieting debut. Across twelve prose snapshots, each one pristine, the fog settles upon a nameless narrator and a young man named Tom whose lives are so alike as to be interchangeable. A boyhood spent in the mining towns of the Pennsylvania Alleghenies is cut short by a mother's illness and the trauma of her painful death. Adulthood is marked by a westward migration, a flight towards some idealised liberation from the past, which strains a relationship with a father left at home to mourn the absence of his wife and son and to seek comfort in an increasingly rigid Christianity. Time and again in *Other Kinds*, a young man awakens to find himself lost in the wilderness of a world that has reconfigured around him and wiped away the path he presumed to follow. What makes this collection so powerful, though, is the deftness with which it repeatedly reaches for something beyond simply conveying the young man's sudden bewilderment. Its power flows from the compounding of his figurative bewilderment, his standing dumbstruck before the thwarting of his intentions, with both a literal bewilderment whereby the mystery and magnitude of unfamiliar surroundings overwhelm him and a stylistic bewilderment whereby the drift from sentence to sentence, from snapshot to snapshot, stirs up for read-

ers an experience of disorientation which echoes the experiences captured on the page.

“I am named after the place I’m from,” the narrator says in the third prose snapshot, ‘Thin Enough to Break,’ which typifies the governing aesthetic of *Other Kinds*:

It’s a lot of fog and smokestacks. Trailers parked in mud and dog shit. The roads circle places you don’t want to be. We had left the Chinese restaurant. The subject changed in the car to Christ.

‘The man spoke in riddles,’ Dad said, ‘for ears that could hear.’

Leafless trees dripped water and there was a war somewhere. The onions gave me indigestion, and this year the ladybugs were bad. Dad would vacuum them off the windowsills.

Posters on the campus I went to had asked me if Jesus was a Republican. The campus was far from the place I’m from. It was deaner, more cluttered, full of people who knew enough about God to say he’s on their side. I spent my time there alone. Some days Dad called and said he hadn’t spoken to anyone all day. Birds pecked at the brown grass outside my apartment window.

‘That happens to me, too,’ I would say.

It was spring break and rain fell slow most days that week, melting mounds of dirty ice at the edges of parking lots and driveways. Our street stretched into the woods and each driveway had its own name. Smoke rose from a row of off-white houses.

I painted in my bedroom. The same canvases over and over. I tried to paint a vision I had. I was a little boy and I was in a field looking up. And up there, the sky was gray and an airplane was taking off. The plane seemed to be everything. It wasn’t flying away, or leaving me alone. (16-17)

The bewilderment of the narrator is front and centre here. Having fled the decaying town in which he spent his youth, he finds himself alone and abandoned in a place he supposed would be more hospitable and then, returning briefly to his roots, he finds his father as deeply enamoured of theological trivia as the very people who alienate him in the place that is now his home. Crucially, though, his figurative bewilderment is compounded by both his literal bewilder-

ment and the bewildering effect of the style in which he narrates events. His literal bewilderment manifests in the disjuncture between the world as he expects it to be and the aspects of the world that contradict expectations. Springtime brings with it the promise of natural vitality, and yet a slow rain falls over trees that are still leafless while birds in search of sustenance peck at lifeless grass. His stylistic bewilderment manifests in his attempts to strike parities between disparate and disorienting aspects of the world by focusing on them and naming each of them in succession — an attempt that produces only a stream of *non sequiturs* which suggests, deep down, an impulse to master the overwhelming world.

Consider the trailers parked in mud, the small-town Chinese restaurant, the conversation about Christ, the war “somewhere” (16), the melting ice and the driveways with names, the painting and the vision of the airplane snared in stasis. How is any one of these things related to any one of the others? They are related only by the observing presence of the narrator himself, by his having associated them in prose and by his stance as the subject around which they coalesce. His attention is drawn to each one of them as an aspect of an overwhelming world, and the act of naming them all implies an urge to alleviate his sense of being overwhelmed, but his failure to name them without elaborating on the relationships he sees between them extends the experience of bewilderment from the narrator himself to those who hear what he has to say. Stylistically, then, his use of words illuminates his desire to cope with his bewilderment even as the words themselves, shot through with *non sequiturs*, reinforce that bewilderment and experientialise it for readers by forging superficial connections between aspects of the world whose sole substantial connection is their having equally left him bewildered.

For some readers, perhaps, *Other Kinds* will seem to be little more than a catalogue of things that capture the attention of its wayward young men and burden them with their feelings of disorientation. Dirt roads running behind power substations in the middle of nowhere. A river overflowing its banks and blackening the nearby grass. Parking lots reeking of gasoline and the threat of impending rain. Chunks of ice in a stream, swept along by the strength of the

current, slamming hard against one another, and tropical plants that smell “worse than rot because of something sweet in the stink” (54). ‘Ice Floe,’ the sixth prose snapshot, gives clear expression to the bewilderment that arises from these sorts of worldly phenomena. Having relocated to the Midwest, which is described elsewhere as a place in which you can “see the size of the weather, the long breaths of wind” (93), a young man stands paralysed both in and by his new surroundings:

There was enough wind that the douds moved fast above the buildings. The town was on the plains and the flatness there changed the shape of the sky. ... The wind felt different coming in from the emptiness out there — it was like he was standing at the spot where the world began to get round. He was exposed. (42)

But additional structural features of *Other Kinds* amplify the affective power of these details, superseding the rote recitations of the form of the catalogue by calling forth variations in the sources of the bewilderment of its characters and in their responses to it. The twelve prose snapshots are broken down into three sections, each of which consists of a short italicised fragment preceding and thematically linked to three longer pieces. In the first section, a sense of shame about an impoverished upbringing, and the antagonisation of that shame by others, is the source of a young man’s bewilderment. In the second section, under pressure to beat back the silences that attend his bewilderment, he makes disclosures and personal confessions that only end up intensifying his awkwardness. In the third section, his difficult interactions with family members, with relatives who are ill or mean-spirited or somehow embarrassing, leave him flailing about in futile efforts to accept or ameliorate his troubling relationships. Yet, rather than appearing in three discrete sections, these variations on bewilderment work together in an accretive way so that, for instance, the shame experienced the first section becomes the prompt for the awkward attempts at speech in the second, and those awkward attempts exacerbate the family difficulties experienced in the third.

As *Other Kinds* unfolds, then, its bewildered young men increasingly strive to assert control over the very world that bewilders them and yet repeatedly meet with failures that only entrench and extend their disorientation. In the first section, for instance, the narrator, now at college in the Midwest, returns to the town of his boyhood and thinks over the time he spent with a girl he says he loved. Lost in a haze of emotional insecurity and unable to articulate his feelings for her, he recalls that he “made her a CD and labeled it *Tonight* and played it [in the car on the way to her house], thinking there were chord progressions that sounded like whatever it was I was pursuing” (17). His choice of music is therefore the voice in which he first attempts to steady his course through a world that leaves him alienated and adrift. In the second section, though, he inadvertently worsens his waywardness when he uses his own voice to try to steady himself. “She moved and talked in ways that made me feel smaller than I was,” he says of another girl who captures his heart. “I told her embarrassing things about myself. I thought saying them made them less true. As we flew to Chicago I had said I once tried to break up with a girl I wasn’t dating” (52). And later, in the third section, his failures of articulation resolve into a suppressed and inchoate frustration, a rage against the futility of living in a world that renders him insignificant. “As a child,” he admits earlier, shortly after having acknowledged the “war somewhere” out there, “I had imagined whole wars raging just out of sight, and my house rose from the violence as something sacred. ... Out there men were dying and it was fine because they were just men and I was a little boy” (18). Now, towards the end of *Other Kinds*, the yearning for a war resurfaces. “There needed to be a war someplace close,” we are told in a glimpse of his boyhood thoughts. “The war, if it was a good war, would be in the summer” (81). Why should he not yearn for such a war? For someone so utterly bewildered by the world, the total chaos of war would extend his bewilderment to the world itself and so at last place him on a sort of equal footing with it.

Of course, with its undercurrents of war, its focus on the minutiae of disjointed experiences, its structuring of various prose snapshots around shorter italicised fragments, and its author’s stylistic

preference for short, clipped sentences and plain, unadorned prose, *Other Kinds* channels no other work of literature more clearly than Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Often, too, its affinity with *In Our Time* even flows down from the stylistic and structural qualities of the collection as a whole to the various pieces that constitute it. In 'We'll Both Feel Better,' for instance, when the narrator delivers a rebuke to a young woman who he believes he loves (53), his words are as shockingly understated and as devastating as those which deliver a similar rebuke in the final lines of Hemingway's 'The End of Something.' And while I would usually hesitate to strike any association between a recent literary debut and *In Our Time*, one of the greatest debuts ever published, I made my way through *Other Kinds* with the sense that, for the first time in a long time, such an association would not be lazy, hyperbolic, or unwarranted. Almost every line, and certainly every space between one sentence and the next, simultaneously speaks to the bewildering experiences observed in words and strikes at the heart of the reader by making a bewildering experience of reading itself. Adopting a lack of self-assurance as an essential theme and absorbing that lack into its own aesthetics, *Other Kinds* takes bewilderment as a static state of being, a state subject to mere representation, and transforms it into a process of recurrent *becoming* by way of a dialogue with worldly phenomena whose own state of being is far from fixed. Rarely does the alchemy of subject, style, and structure produce results of such concentrated power, and rarer still is their combined effect as mesmerising, as involving, as intense, and as sustained as it is in this volume.

## Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *In Our Time*. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925. Print.

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