A writer’s careful, surprising attention

J. D. Daniels writes beautiful letters to no one. They aren't for everyone.

by Isaac Anderson in the June 20, 2018 issue

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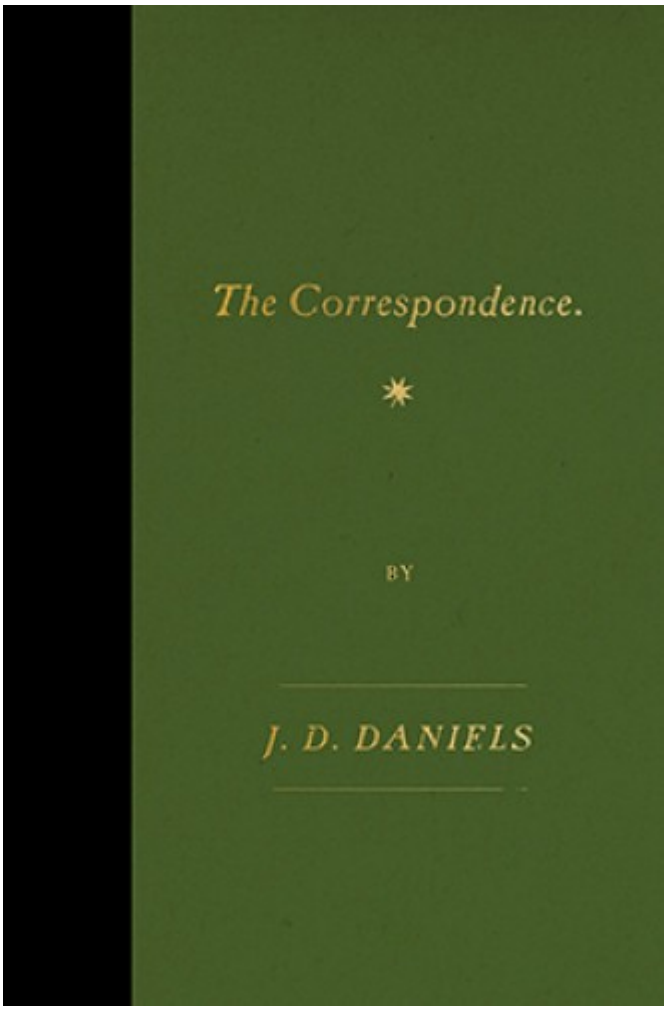

The Correspondence

By J. D. Daniels
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

He that refraineth his lips is wise, says the proverb. Or as J. D. Daniels's father used to warn, "Don't tell them everything you know, Johnny. You aren't going to like how little time it takes you."

This collection of six mostly nonfiction "letters" published first in the *Paris Review* reveals a writer devoted to narrative economy, the kind of artful compression reminiscent of Denis Johnson's stories in *Jesus' Son* or Sarah Manguso's argument-aphorisms. With Daniels, certain ambiguities and elisions—"my wife became, as the years passed, my ex-wife"—are the result not of carelessness or haste but of a virtuosic restraint. Daniels sculpts prose like Michelangelo summoning David from the marble block. Some passages are so finely hewn that the reader wants to stop and study them.

The recipient of a 2016 Whiting Award for emerging writers, Daniels grew up Southern Baptist and working class in and around Louisville, Kentucky. His mother was an English teacher, his father a "genius storyteller" and "cornpone hard-ass." During stints as a college dropout, Daniels worked as an exterminator, a janitor, and a factory assembly line hand. Later he moved east, taking a master's in creative writing from Boston University and writing handbooks for Harvard's molecular biology department.

The Correspondence outlines some of the same regional and class disparities discussed in J. D. Vance's breakout memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), but Daniels is no political pundit. He is a raconteur of American border crossings—geographical, tribal, economic, religious—whose work displays the high-low diction, the intimacy and ironic detachment of someone who belongs to several cultures at once.

These missives are addressed to no one in particular and thus to anyone interested in a bold writer who follows "his frequent errors wherever they might lead." Daniels is unafraid to play the novice, to make himself the butt of wry jokes. To cope with bewilderment or frustration he seeks out new experiences that give form to the chaos within. (As he told one interviewer, "Instead of trying to settle down my insides, I try to go somewhere the agitation makes more sense.") Feeling beat up as a writer, he begins training in Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Feeling "at sea," he quits his teaching job and joins the crew of a ship crossing the Mediterranean.

Whether these pieces are *for everyone*, as a blurb in the book's front matter claims, is another question. Daniels is poignant and funny in equal measure. His acuity

punctures all manner of pretense. He wrestles with big ideas while transmitting little stories in the space of a sentence or two. He is also given to profanity, a kind of conventionally male aggression, and a consciously Freudian interest in bowel movements. Daniels isn't being adolescent; this isn't indelicacy for its own sake. But neither is he trying to sidestep that accusation. Add to these earthy qualities Daniels's fondness for the absurd—"I flew back to Kentucky. . . . Next time I'll swim"—and prospective readers may deem his book too much of an acquired taste.

Which would be a shame, since few writers are so good at overthrowing expectations. Century readers may be interested in Daniels's early church experiences and particularly in his oblique handling of biblical texts and themes, such as Jacob wrestling with the angel, the Tower of Babel, and Jesus' words at the Last Supper. After listing a series of drills associated with jiu-jitsu, Daniels drops in the coda to John's Gospel: "And there are also many other things, which, if they should be written every one. . . ." At a conference on group relations, he drops in Paul: "The good that I would I do not." These texts aren't framed by quotes. They are part of the writer's vernacular. (He favors the King James.) In this respect, while no longer a believer, Daniels remains the unmistakable offspring of a complex Christian milieu.

In his arresting "Letter from Kentucky" Daniels returns to Louisville and goes on a driving tour of old haunts. Amid a landscape choked with bars and churches, strip clubs and strip malls, Daniels remembers Passion plays in which he was "Jesus one year and Judas the next." He recalls singing about "the blood" at church suppers. And he argues with the disembodied voice of a radio preacher, a scene that culminates, strangely, movingly, in Daniels's own quasi-prophetic ordination: "God had laid his burning hand on me." Few contemporary essayists—Kristin Dombek, John Jeremiah Sullivan, Jordan Kisner, Meghan O'Gieblyn—have, after renouncing the evangelical faith of their earlier years, found ways in their writing to channel that old religious earnestness and idiom to great effect.

The two fictional pieces included here do belong, though as the critic Dwight Garner observed in the *New York Times*, they "lack the gravitas" and deadpan punchiness of the essays. Aimlessness and ambition, "fringe-religious" upbringings, predilections to violence: these characters share some things in common with Daniels himself. They are nearly as weird. They are simply not as real.

Even so, Daniels has produced a first book that captures the reader's attention and holds it, thanks to the careful attention he pays his own experience. "I had formed

myself on the Ruskin model," he explains early on. "'The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way.'" Alert to human dignity and degradation, these letters see far beneath the glittering surfaces of modern life. If they don't tell everything, they tell enough.