



Five Dials

Spring
22

Mementos

Five Dials

ABOUT FIVE DIALS

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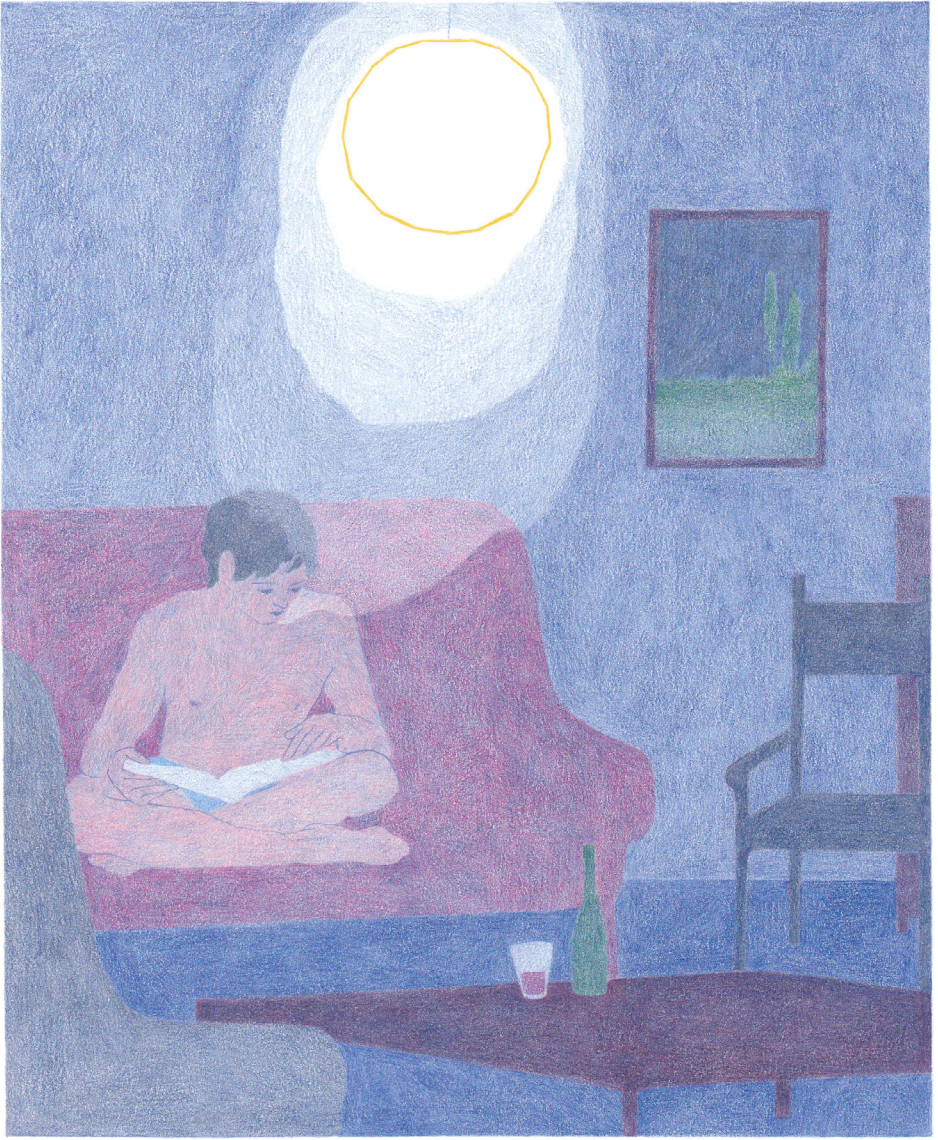
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Five Dials publishes electrifying literary writing of all forms and genres, by writers and thinkers underrepresented on bookshelves across the English-speaking world. Our commissioning rates are £200/1000 words for prose, £75/poem, and £1000/issue for artwork. If you're working on something which you'd like to tell us about, you can find us on Twitter at @fivedials.



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Five Dials



The Everything List

Otosirieke
Obi-Young

Five Dials *asked writer Otosirize Obi-Young to send us an omnivorous list of everything, or almost everything, he'd consumed in the previous month.*

A few weeks ago, I accepted something about myself: I am not as good a cook as I imagined. For the second time in one week, I'd spoiled making egg sauce, burning the frying egg, pouring in every spice on the shelf to redeem the taste, and, finally accepting defeat, I packed the dark sauce into the fridge, lacking the courage to throw it away. Thankfully, we are not judged by the taste of our cooking but by the contents of our heart. And my intentions were upright.

When I cook, I drift to read. Last week, I finally began reading *Middlemarch*, and it was like sinking my mouth into hot Roban bread. I am often delighted to open a centuries-old book and find, in its sentences, narrative techniques that are rife today—the power of style to burrow down generations. And I love stylists. On my table are two novels, *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* and *The Promise*, by Damon Galgut, which I read to profile him for *Open Country Mag*, a platform that I edit which covers African literature. From *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*, a line slammed me: “Then she smiled, and the smile became a laugh: a round, silvery sound, like a coin, which fell from her throat

THE EVERYTHING LIST

and tinkled down onto the ground.’

I sometimes lie on the floor when I read, which means that I feel hugged by the emotions I encounter. Take a half line in Cicely Tyson’s autobiography *Just as I Am* where she describes her first lovemaking with Miles Davis: ‘It was an expression of deep care, our bodies undulating gracefully in the shadows of dusk.’ For a photographer, perfect inspiration: black bodies aglow in love.

I felt *The Butterfly Effect*, Marcus J. Moore’s biography of Kendrick Lamar. I loved it. Its power is in how it conveys the rapper’s rush of ambition. When you are young and ambitious in your craft, you seek out personal stories.

Reading, experiencing, consuming: these are travels of the mind and senses; and in my apartment I have been all over the emotional globe. I watched *Resort to Love*, and Christina Milian being saved from drowning by Sinqua Walls was one distraction I needed. I just watched *The Power of the Dog*, and I still don’t understand the appeal of desolate cowboyland. My favourite thing I watched, though, is *Looking*, the HBO comedy-drama about gay men living through love and work. I am in its second season, and my favourites are Raúl Castillo, Russell Tovey and Murray Bartlett.

I have been interested in Chinese fantasy dramas since I watched the Netflix series *Handsome Siblings* in 2020, and this year I watched *Dynasty Warriors*, a film with three friends looking to prove

themselves in battle. I grew up on martial arts films, and I love the choreography, the chutzpah, swords sailing in the air, bodies defying gravity. Last month, I watched all four films in the *Ip Man* series, in which Donnie Yen plays the grandmaster who eventually mentored Bruce Lee, and the unbothered yet efficient grace of his Wing Chun style is a delight.

When I am not practising Wing Chun in my mind, I am pacing my apartment thinking I can dance. There is a new Nigerian singer on fire: FAVE. Her EP *Riddim 5* contains her hit song ‘Baby Riddim’, but almost as lovable are the trio of ‘S.M.K.’, ‘Mr Man’ and ‘Kilotufe’. Two other hits that caught me are ‘Italy (Refix)’—Buju’s, well, refix of the song by Blaq Diamond—and Bad Boy Timz’s ‘Skelele’, featuring Olamide. I see myself dancing on the road to ‘Skelele’.

Instead, I am dancing to it while making my next meal: pasta garnished with grapes. ◇





FOUR POEMS

Steven Kleinman

Executioner Class

From the couch in my in-laws' basement
I sit imprisoned as one-by-one we flip
through photos of their vacation
cruise to the death camp this is the boat
and this is the camp my father-in-law says
as he walks to the television
to finger the barracks and courtyard
and roped-off walking paths
that lead down to a hole in a cement wall
through which it was one soldier's job
to shoot a pistol at a prisoner
who he wouldn't need to watch die
sit here for communion said a sign
it is true that to keep things going
the way they're going some of us
will learn to work jobs harder than others
but someone g-d love them
has to see done what needs doing.

FOUR POEMS

Small Lives

Weekends pent up spent anger
walked through good neighborhoods
to the neighborhood parks no boy
bouncing on the wall even though
when someone got chewed out walls
shook it's more bone broth in the pot
the spoon turning unhindered
more a nagging infection more quiet
more and more my father would
gently squeeze my hand until my brother
thought it hurt then he'd switch
we played lots of games that made
the impossible seem competitive
if I remember finding my mother
under the stairs hiding as if under
the stairs is where I found her
could it be true that it was there
even if no there as I remember it exists
and the hotel that we weekended at
if I remember that it smelled like rodents
does it matter that it was seafoam green
that if we stayed just a few nights
maybe just one night it wasn't so long
to make a g-d damn movie about
that my mother took us there like a little trip
like a little dream she made it fun.

Steven Kleinman

Good at Dinner Parties

Go in hot and stay too long
always a good idea to wear a cape
don't forget a good joke
at the host's expense a cane
a monocle a one-dollar coin
placed in your eye don't forget
to act dead at least once supine
on the fainting couch
don't forget to eat as much
food as you bring don't forget
to use the bathroom and stay in there
long enough that the other guests worry
like where did he go another joke
on the way out something like
I think someone killed a cat
in the guest restroom don't be afraid
of physical contact to run your hand
on the host's cheek don't be afraid
to mouth-kiss hello and goodbye
to look around the house remember
the medicine you find may save your life
take a pinch out of the potpourri
a flower from the centerpiece
in your teeth let the petals fall
and make a path behind you
baby you're a wrecking ball
baby you're a two-ton semi-truck
you're the speedboat and it's low tide
don't forget if they don't like you
it's just your personality who you are
break what you will let your engine run.

FOUR POEMS

The Oldest

The oldest has tucked herself beside me
under the blanket to my right that is to say

by my right leg stretched out as if flying
toward my toes we have two now two anchors

and a treasury check laying on the ground
piles of books on the sills and coffee tables

rugs covered with fur and piss we aren't children
anymore my father-in-law pointed out

one day a long time ago you aren't children
he said you should have a family by now

we were in a fancy restaurant in the city
and my brother-in-law had just left for a train

to the memorial service of a friend who's left
family and children and was too young to die

sometimes I worry about how soft I've become
all these reminders of how sad I refused

to be as a boy refused to admit I loved anything
it was just too humiliating then this dog flying

toward the ground snorting little snores
in between breaths when she goes she'll go hard

and blind into death lurching for my warm hand
and we'll act like it is fine to lose her

and g—d damn it for a second we'll allow ourselves
to feel unburdened.



FICTION

Tinhead

Gabriel Flynn

O ne night in March of this year, Tinhead left the house he shared with his mother and brother, walked the three miles of disused railway line linking Hayfield and New Mills, and jumped off the Queen's Bridge, dropping eighty or so feet into the shallow River Goyt. This I learnt tonight when, after long contemplation, I decided to leave my flat in Manchester, drive to the Decathlon in Stockport and buy some new boots so that I could head out early the next morning for a day of walking in the Lake District.

Not having left the flat all weekend, at first I couldn't decide whether to go at all, and then, when I found the courage, whether to drive to Stockport, which was easier to reach and had a larger Decathlon, or to the Trafford Centre, which was further and had a smaller Decathlon that closed earlier. If I went to the Trafford Centre, I thought, I might get caught in traffic and miss the chance altogether. But if I went to Stockport, I was breaking a promise to myself. Once I was in Stockport, I would be halfway to New Mills and then I would be only a few miles away from Hayfield, the village that had once been my home and to which I had sworn never to return. In Stockport, I would be within the orbit of Hayfield. After all, I had often taken the bus from Hayfield to Stockport on Saturdays to eat at McDonald's, watch a film at the Savoy or go skateboarding at Bones. In Stockport, I thought, there was every chance that I would

FICTION

encounter someone from Hayfield or New Mills, an acquaintance I hadn't seen in years. Every time I saw one of these former acquaintances they reminded me of the misery and violence that I had been witness to throughout my teenage years, and of the confusion and fear that had governed my emotions at that time. I was not, I thought, standing by the window that overlooked the small gardens behind my new flat, in a fit state to go messing around with my emotions. And yet I deliberated for so long that I missed the chance to go to the Trafford Centre altogether, and had no choice but to go to Stockport.

The town centre was even more miserable than I remembered. It had already been run-down in the 2000s and now it seemed to have run down even further. Many of the red-brick shops and pubs stood empty, their windows boarded up or broken, and on the streets I saw only a few homeless people and drunks. The warm and sterile atmosphere of Decathlon was a welcome contrast and I spent a good while browsing the aisles and trying on boots.

Then, as I walked towards the checkout with my selection, I heard a deep voice behind me saying, 'Rafi? Is that Rafi Orchin?' I knew immediately from the voice's rural twang that this was an acquaintance from the village, though it wasn't until I turned around that I recognized Darren Hallam, cradling two large tubs of protein powder in his arms.

'Ayup, mate,' he said, moving closer to me than

I'd have liked. 'I've not seen you in a long time. What are you doing around here?'

'I just moved back,' I said.

'To Hayfield?' Darren said.

'God, no,' I said. 'To Manchester.'

'Nice one, mate,' he said. 'You gonna come out for a visit?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't intend to.'

'Funny fucker, you,' he said. 'You've not changed.'

'I have,' I said, though he seemed not to hear me.

'Do you still see much of anyone? Joey Pound or anyone like that?'

'Not for a long time,' I said, and then I tried to let a silence kill the conversation. I ought to have held out, and almost did, but finally I weakened and said, 'What about you? What's new in the village?'

There began a litany of marriages, deaths, beatings and imprisonments. One mutual acquaintance had had a heart attack at the age of thirty-two due to his use of steroids, Darren said. Others, former schoolmates of ours at New Mills Secondary, had been convicted of violent crimes or had died of drug overdoses or road traffic accidents.

The long and gruesome list seemed to be drawing to a close when he added, 'Rick Tinsley—Tinhead—do you remember him?' My heart began to pound in my chest and I could only grimace and shake my head because, although I hadn't heard the news, I knew what was coming: Tinhead had finally

had enough of this world and, like many before him, had jumped off the Queen's Bridge. Before I could say a word, Darren spoke again. 'He killed himself,' he said. 'Leapt from the Queen's Bridge.' I was grateful that my turn in the queue came at this moment because I could hardly contain my distaste for Darren Hallam's use of the word 'leapt', a word he wouldn't have used in any other circumstances, whose purpose was obviously to attribute a fabular quality to Tinhead's death and thereby make it palatable. The people of Hayfield were too narrow-minded to understand suicide, I thought, as I turned away and paid for my boots, and it was exactly this narrow-mindedness that had led to the suicide of Tinhead.

The only surprise, I thought, as I got in the car, glad to see the back of Darren Hallam though the smell of his aftershave remained in my nostrils, was that he hadn't done it sooner. A person like Tinhead, in essence an intellectual, who lives in a place like Hayfield is bound to kill himself or die of a drug overdose if he doesn't escape, and it was always clear that Tinhead didn't have the means to escape and would live in Hayfield until it killed him. Tinhead lived in a culture that was hostile to his every need and desire, I thought, as I watched Darren Hallam get in his BMW and exit the car park via the mini-roundabout. He lived in that culture knowing that he could never get away from it. That is always enough to kill a thinking person.

Tinhead wasn't an intellectual in the strict

sense, I thought, as I turned the key in the ignition and started the car. He certainly didn't read books, for example, though he was sympathetic to all people that read books and especially to English teachers. Although he didn't read them, Tinhead understood books. In that sense he was unlike the majority of the villagers, who felt no shame in having not a single book in their garish cottages, decorated for a rustic way of life that none of them in fact had anything to do with. Tinhead also knew nothing about politics or philosophy and didn't even read the newspapers. He was an intellectual in the more fundamental sense, in that he was a restless questioner of everything; he took nothing as immutable and recognized the contingency of all modes of life. Most of all he was an intellectual in the nature of his relation to village life, I thought, as I joined the mini-roundabout. Tinhead was dissatisfied with village life—he found it petty and dull—but at the same time he relied on the people of the village. He coaxed their narrow-mindedness toward open-mindedness; that was the function the little motor in his brain had been engineered to perform.

He would pace around the village on his own, I remembered, as I drove through Stockport's miserable town centre with its famous viaduct, muttering to himself and drinking cider, always holding the rim of the can with the tips of his fingers, and one would think: there goes a person who cannot tolerate the small-mindedness of this

village. But then one might also see him in The Bull, drinking pints with the red-faced men in polo shirts who convened there on Friday and Saturday nights. Tinhead moved constantly back and forth from the periphery of village life to its heart, and he couldn't tolerate either. He revered Carl Atherton, who lived in a shack with a corrugated steel roof that he built with his bare hands on a plot of land near the campsite, but Tinhead would never have built his own shack and lived in it. He was not practical enough to build a shack and, even if he had been, he would have been too lonely there. He needed village life and it needed him, I thought, as I turned the radio on and almost instantly off again because I realized that I wanted to think clearly about Tinhead and not be distracted by the voices on the 6 o'clock news. Without a person like Tinhead in its midst, I thought, without a person who demonstrates the dangers of asking too many questions, the village would lose the impetus for repression that sustains its order; while Tinhead, without the village holding him back and restraining his desire to be free, would have quickly gone astray and veered too far from the moorings of social life. It was his critical position in relation to village life that made Tinhead a true intellectual, even though he didn't read books. While conversely, some of the most respected and acclaimed academics, even in the fields of philosophy, history and literary studies, are not intellectuals at all, but merchants.

One thinks of Tinhead as perennially

unemployed, I thought, turning right and not left on to the A6, turning, in other words, in the direction of New Mills and Hayfield rather than back towards Manchester. In fact, he had a job at a factory in Strines that made circuit boards for electronic goods. One of their largest customers was a manufacturer of budgie warmers, I remembered him telling my friends and me while we had been sitting on the bench opposite Ken Rangeley's Newsagents. We had all had a laugh about that, Tinhead included. He knew better than any of us, who were still in school at the time, that the absurdity of spending eight hours a day soldering circuit boards for budgie warmers was just one instance of the absurdity of work in general. We always liked listening to Tinhead, my friends and I, because he saw through the pretensions of the village and paid no heed to its authoritarian culture, which punished curiosity and joy and rewarded repression and misery. We liked Tinhead because he would always go into Roy's and buy us cigarettes when we were too young to buy them ourselves; he approved of young people smoking, which he understood as a complement to thinking. It was in Tinhead's nature to value thinking, walking and smoking, and to be highly suspicious of work, whereas the villagers on the whole held work in the highest esteem, especially pointless physical work. Tinhead was more suited to walking around the village with a can of cider and asking the big questions. He asked the big, pressing questions that nobody else in the village would

ask, the ones that even many highly remunerated professional intellectuals are too embarrassed to ask, like ‘Why am I alive?’ and ‘Why must I suffer like this?’ I remembered that when Tinhead asked the big questions, he would raise his eyebrows as far as they would go and then laugh as though responding to a feeling of vertigo. This laugh was an early indicator that he would one day kill himself, I thought. Tinhead’s path had always led more or less directly to the Queen’s Bridge.

Tinhead favoured hallucinogenic drugs over cocaine, though he took a lot of cocaine too, I remembered. We had taken cocaine together once in Eric Cuthbert’s caravan, when I still took cocaine and before I left the village. I was well past Stockport Town Hall now, approaching Hazel Grove, and the memory of taking cocaine with Tinhead in Eric Cuthbert’s caravan caused me to reflect that I hadn’t seen Tinhead for ten or fifteen years, since the days of dial-up internet. Since then, I thought, he would have spent a lot of time exploring the darkest corners of the internet and would likely have become interested in conspiracy theories. Yes, I thought, as I entered Hazel Grove, Tinhead was exactly the sort of person who would fall for the most outlandish conspiracy theories because he was not complacent and always wanted more answers than anyone in the village was willing to supply, but he hadn’t a clue where to look for them. Though Tinhead might conceivably have loved reading books, though he might even have been saved by

books, there was no hope for him growing up in a house with no books; with friends who didn't read books; in a village without a bookshop; where he attended a school where books were treated as official documents and were therefore anathema to a person like Tinhead, who mistrusted all authority. It was more than likely that in the years since I had last seen him, I thought, as I came to stop at the traffic lights by the big Sainsbury's, Tinhead had absorbed the wildest conspiracy theories, though he wouldn't have succumbed to overtly right-wing conspiracy theories because he hated militant tendencies and all forms of authority. What would have spoken to Tinhead would have been something like lizards controlling the world. It wasn't hard to imagine Tinhead loping home along the Sett Valley Trail, walking in a way that one recognizes instantly as the physical extension of thinking—in Tinhead's case, an ebullient, unstable kind of thinking—with a can of cider in his hand and a few more in his rucksack, coming to the understanding that lizards run the world. One could imagine him standing opposite Ken Rangeley's Newsagents, by the phone box, the bench and the old set of wooden stocks, which most of the villagers, though not Tinhead, would happily bring back into service, explaining to a group of teenage boys how lizards run the world.

Tinhead's was a gentle, inquisitive and anti-authoritarian nature, I remembered. His eyes were pale blue and conveyed his vulnerability and over-saturation with life. I could picture Tinhead's eyes

clearly as I drove along the A6 in the gauzy evening light, beyond the junction at Hazel Grove and into Middlewood. From there the road climbs towards the Peak District and the gardens between the semi-detached houses are larger, the cars in their driveways bigger and shinier. Tinhead's brother, Ryan, had a more sinister look in his eyes. Were he not so complacent and resigned to his subservient, repressed existence, Ryan would absolutely have been amenable to right-wing militarism, I thought. Tinhead did not consciously refrain from crushing insects, but his instincts guided him to brush insects away rather than crush them. His brother, however, whom nobody ever called Tinhead, though they were both named Tinsley, was the sort who, when he saw a mosquito or spider, destroyed it forcefully and without a moment's remorse, I thought, as I passed the High Lane War Memorial and The Red Lion. There are lots of war memorials in this area, I thought, as I passed High Lane Conservative Club. Ryan would have displayed the same pleasure in killing birds or even larger animals, I presumed, as I drove towards New Mills, the Queen's Bridge and Hayfield. That presumption was not unfounded because I remembered seeing him in The Royal one Christmas Eve, probably on the eve of the last Christmas that I spent in Hayfield, and he had told me that in Thailand, where he had been on holiday, you could pay \$15 to fire a machine gun at some chickens and \$100 to fire a rocket launcher at a cow, and that the only reason he hadn't done it

was because he found the price too high. Tinhead never would have fired a rocket launcher at a cow, I thought, as I passed the entrance to Lyme Park.

Driving along the stretch of road beside Lyme Park, dark because of the high wall and row of oak trees on one side, I asked myself for the first time what I was going to do in just a few minutes when I arrived at the Queen's Bridge. I was going to pay my respects to Tinhead, I thought, because I owed a debt of gratitude to him. It would not be untrue, I thought, as I drove along the A6, to say that Tinhead saved me from Hayfield. Although it's clear to me now, now that I have long since wriggled free of the village's morbid grip and achieved a certain amount of perspective, that I was never *of* the village in the way that most of its inhabitants were, this was not at all clear during the years that I lived there. Then, it seemed to me that living in the village and going to school there qualified me to be *from* the village just as much as anybody else, a misconception that Tinhead helped me to recognize. I had met him walking through the park and we had stopped at a bench to smoke a joint together. Tinhead was always smoking a joint or about to light one.

'You'll be all right, mate,' he said. 'You'll get away from here.'

'What do you mean?' I said.

'You've got brains,' Tinhead said, I remembered, as I drove along the A6. 'You'll get out of here and do something.'

'You've got brains,' I replied.

‘Different kind of brains,’ Tinhead said, ‘very different kind.’ Then he said, ‘You’re not from around here.’ Those words had deflated all hope of belonging that had occupied so much of my thinking at that time. Recognizing this, Tinhead said, ‘That’s a good thing. You don’t want to be from around here. Have you seen what happens to people who live here?’ I shook my head because at that stage, I thought, I still hadn’t. ‘Look more closely,’ he said. ‘It’s not good. Everyone’s fucking mental.’ It would not be an exaggeration, I thought, as I lowered the window slightly to ventilate the car, to say that with these words Tinhead had effectively saved my life where he had not been able to save his own.

Even then he had known the fate that awaited him. Even then he understood that suicide was not a force that came out of nowhere and lopped off a life’s remaining years, but an idea that resided in the very middle of a life and sought to force its way outwards, like the magma in the earth’s core. Yes, I thought, like the magma in the earth’s core. I had effectively given up writing altogether since quitting my studies to save myself from going mad, but I could still turn out an effective simile when I needed one in my day-to-day thinking and that pleased me because it meant that I still possessed some of the agility of mind that had saved me from the village and, so far, from the fate of Tinhead. A certain agility of mind and the ability to think metaphorically may have been the only difference

between us.

The differences between myself and Tinhead, I thought, as I drove around the bend into Disley, could all be put down to the simple fact that I had grown up in a house with books on the shelves and maps on the walls while Tinhead hadn't. When I felt suffocated by the village and its stifling, repressive, petit bourgeois culture, I had been able to stand at the map mounted on my bedroom wall and run a finger along the Danube, or to read the fine red print listing the names of islands around the Antarctic, whereas Tinhead, I was sure, had no such map. I pictured him in the pebble-dashed house on Pendle Brook Close where he lived with his brother and their mother, in his bedroom, which looked out on to the small play area and the boggy fields beyond. It wasn't hard to imagine him looking out at the fields on a rainy day, wishing that his mind would meet with some object that would stop it in its tracks and finding none; wishing that the secrets of the world would reveal themselves to him in the boggy fields. It wasn't hard, I thought, as I passed The Cock in Disley, to imagine how a boy who looked out of his window at some sodden fields in the shadow of Lantern Pike and already felt, at sixteen, that there was nothing in the village for him, and therefore nothing in the whole world, would one day walk along the Settle Valley Trail to New Mills and jump off the Queen's Bridge into the River Goyt.

They had a PlayStation, I seemed to recall, and while Ryan's favourite games were *Call of Duty* and

FICTION

FIFA, Tinhead, who had a technical mind, liked racing games like *Colin McRae Rally* and strategic warfare games like *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon*. But a PlayStation isn't enough to stop an intellectual from going mad in a village like Hayfield. He needed to know about the Bering Strait, I thought, about the Russian Steppe and the Black Sea. He needed to contemplate Moldova, Albania, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz. He needed the North Atlantic and the South Atlantic, Montevideo and Santiago, the North Pacific, the South Pacific, the Solomon Islands, Alaska; but he didn't have them. He needed books. Even the mere presence of books on the shelves might have saved him. He didn't need Swift, Austen, Dickens, Joyce or Woolf, and he didn't need Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer or Wittgenstein; he simply needed *Emil and the Detectives* or *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*. If only Tinhead had received at exactly the right moment a copy of *Emil and the Detectives* and a free afternoon on which to read it, he might have survived. If only one rainy afternoon he had chanced upon a map of Europe in 1910, had leant in to squint at Austria-Hungary and then looked out the window, looked at the sky, with the words 'Little Carpathians' inscribed on his retina, he might have lived. Instead, he remained trapped and alone, not only in the village but also inside his own head.

I remembered, as I passed the petrol station in Disley, that I had once bumped into Tinhead on a fine summer's evening. He was drinking a

few cans of cider on the picnic table by the bus stop and he looked relaxed, at peace with himself. When I told him he looked well, he said, 'I've been studying the universe, mate!' He said this with the zeal and the relief of a person who believes they have finally found the answer they've been looking for all of their life. Even by his own high standards he was drunk, but I took him seriously nevertheless and asked where he had been studying. In reply, he jabbed his finger at his temple and said, 'In my head, mate!' Then he laughed in an unsettling way, pointed at his head again and said, 'In this fucking thing.' I should have understood then, I thought, as I rounded the bend between Disley and Newtown and the green hills of the Peak District came into view in the distance, the chimneys of the old mills in the foreground, that Tinhead would remain locked inside himself until he could no longer tolerate his existence. Naively and wrongly, I took it as a sign that perhaps he could, after all, be saved from the village and that it was even my job to save him.

Not long afterwards, I recalled, as I passed the vintage car dealership in Newtown, I was walking from New Mills to Hayfield along the Sett Valley Trail and I saw him ahead of me, loping along on the stretch of the trail that ran alongside Birch Vale Fishing Lodge. I walked as fast as I could, eventually caught up and fell in step beside him so that we could walk together. He seemed sad and lost, I remembered, as I approached New Mills, and he kept beginning sentences that he wouldn't finish:

‘I don’t know —’ and ‘It’s fucking —’. I should have left him, or simply walked beside him, but instead I took the opportunity to tell him about the book I was reading at the time, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*. This was a terrible mistake and an insult to Tinhead, which made me wince with shame as I remembered it, driving along the A6. I began, ‘I read this book recently,’ as though it were natural for me to say that, which it wasn’t, and never could be in the village or even on the Sett Valley Trail, and I had told him about the book, calling it a ‘philosophical novel’. Being essentially polite and good-natured, he listened and occasionally said ‘right’ as I rambled on interminably, describing the whole plot of the novel, which today I cannot stand, and all of the so-called philosophical themes that it tackled. Driving along the A6 I could even picture the dark look that had come over Tinhead as I spoke, the way he retreated to a troublesome corner of his mind as I described the novel to him.

When I had finished talking and suggested I lend him the book, he offered some polite words in reply, affirmative but vague. We had walked the last stretch together in silence, a silence in which Tinhead was clearly troubled, I realized now, while I had been oblivious. I had tried to persuade him to read a philosophical novel that never would have interested him and didn’t even interest me except in what it symbolized, which was the possibility of a world beyond the village, a possibility that was open to me but not to Tinhead. I had not then

recognized the differences between us, I thought, as I approached the turn-off for New Mills. I was from a house with books and maps whereas he wasn't, and although I lived in the village I was not *of* the village in the same way as Tinhead.

My parents had moved to Hayfield from Manchester because they thought that they would be happier living in a village, surrounded by fields and at the foot of Kinder Scout. Tinhead's parents, on the other hand, had always lived in Hayfield, just as their parents had presumably done before them. Tinhead's great grandparents had probably worked in the mills in the days when they were still in operation. I thought this as I turned off the A6 into New Mills and passed the Swizzels Matlow sweet factory, which was, I reflected, one of the only employers left in the area besides Ferodo Brakes in Chapel-en-le-Frith and the manufacturer of circuit boards in Strines where Tinhead had worked.

The last time I had seen Tinhead, I recalled, he was playing darts in the Kinder Lodge with a man I didn't recognize. I had gone there to meet a friend for a drink before I left the village for ever and went to university. This friend, who I have not spoken to in years, was the last one I had in Hayfield. My other friends and I had already grown apart as we advanced through our teenage years and the differences between us became more apparent. They wanted to become joiners, plumbers and electricians, while I, having grown up in a house full of maps and books, wanted to become an

intellectual. My friend was late to arrive and so I had spoken to Tinhead. 'Same old, same old,' he had said when I asked him how life was going. I told him I would soon be leaving the village to go to university. I had expected him to be happy for me, even proud, or conversely, to feel hurt that I was leaving, but he hardly turned, making two dummy motions of the hand towards the dartboard before he finally released the dart. It hit the triple one ring, I remembered, causing Tinhead to shake his head. He was clearly in a bad way that day, I thought, because he was drinking in the Kinder Lodge, and a person like Tinhead can never be happy in the Kinder Lodge. New Mills really is a dismal place, I thought, as I was slowing down for the traffic lights at the bottom of the Newtown Road. If you had set out to kill yourself here, you would not be incentivized to change your mind by the surroundings. I turned on the indicator and pulled into a side road opposite The Queen's pub to park.

I got out and the air was colder than it had been in Stockport, by one or two degrees, probably because the sun was now setting and I had been gradually ascending during the drive from Stockport towards the Peak District. I crossed the road and stood on the footpath portion of the bridge. It was a long way down to the river, which foamed over the dark rocks protruding from its bed. I wondered if people usually aimed for the footpaths on either side or for the water itself. The former would surely lead to a quicker death because the

impact would not be softened by the water, and yet, standing there, in Tinhead's shoes as it were, I was sure that he had chosen to aim for the river. It wasn't difficult to picture it: a fast movement like a crow taking flight, with just the sound of a shoe squeaking on the railing as he pivoted his weight over. It would have been night, without a doubt. A person like Tinhead loves life too much to kill himself during the daytime. It would have taken him several seconds to descend, perhaps as many as four, and it wasn't hard to picture the look of concentration on his face as he dropped; he had a great capacity for concentration, greater than the soldering of circuit boards for budgie warmers required. Nor was it hard to imagine that he found the experience exhilarating; he loved life and found in every aspect of it something to redeem. As the village intellectual, Tinhead made it his duty never to stop seeing the potential for things to be better than they were, even as his fellow villagers gradually relinquished their hopes and sought out more and more ways to deaden their senses. It was exactly this desire for improvement, I thought, and his absolute conviction that life was not simply identical with the worst thing you could say about it, that caused him ultimately to jump off the Queen's Bridge to his death in the River Goyt.

After looking over the railings for a while, but not for very long because there wasn't much to see and the scene was more or less exactly as I remembered it, I got back in the car and drove along

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the Hayfield Road. First, I fooled myself with the thought that I was going to have a pint alone in one of the pubs in Hayfield, in the same way that one can have a pint alone in London or in parts of Manchester, as a person partaking in a public culture. Then I thought, no, it's not possible to have a pint in the same way in Hayfield. You can go to the pub alone but you are partaking in village life and that is something different. In Hayfield only the locals can go for a pint on their own, and that's because they are never truly alone. If nobody in the pub remembered me, I thought, as I passed the Low Leighton housing estate, and it was safe to assume the pub would be busy because it was a clear Sunday evening with a chill in the air, I would be taken for an outsider and therefore distrusted.

On the other hand, if they did remember me they would also distrust me. I had always been distrusted in the village because I was not *of* the village, even though I lived there, and I would be distrusted even more now for returning after a long absence. But I had been thinking about Tinhead and I wanted at the very least to contemplate him in the only place where he could be truly contemplated, I thought, perhaps even bump into somebody who could tell me something about the circumstances of his death, though in a village like Hayfield nobody understands suicide apart from the village intellectual, the role recently vacated by Tinhead. They would be bemused by his suicide and would regard it as cowardly or dishonourable, concepts that

meant nothing to a person like Tinhead but mean everything to the people of Hayfield, who wish they were still living through the Second World War. There used to be a pub there, I thought, as I drove along the Hayfield Road in my Toyota Yaris, not listening to any music or to the radio but only thinking about Tinhead and Hayfield. There are far fewer pubs now than there used to be.

I reached the point where the Hayfield Road draws level with the Sett Valley Trail, where they are separated only by one sloping field, and I thought about the many times that I had seen Tinhead walking up and down that trail. During the spring and summer months, he used to walk home from work: five miles, starting on the Strines Road, dropping into the Torrs Valley, passing beneath the Queen's Bridge and then following the Sett Valley Trail all the way from New Mills to its terminus at Hayfield. To walk such a long way was regarded as a sure sign of madness in Hayfield, where despite being surrounded by mountains, hills and trails, the villagers wouldn't go to Roy's for a pint of milk without getting in their Land Rovers. This I thought as I rounded the bend by the quarry at Birch Vale and the village came into view. And yet Tinhead walked home every day, drinking his cider, sometimes listening to trance music on his Discman, topless if the weather was good. He walked home, marvelling at the way the evening sunlight fell on Lantern Pike, the way it lit up the gorse and heather, and thinking about the way that there were patterns

in all things, one of his favourite topics. That there were patterns in all things was the inevitable final topic in any long conversation with Tinhead. Now he was dead, I thought, as I closed the driver's side window, and Hayfield has been plunged into darkness.

I entered the village as the church bells were ringing 7 o'clock. I drove down Church Street, past Roy's, the village chippy and The Bull, but The Bull had also closed down and been converted into a house. I passed the church and crossed the picturesque bridge that runs low over the gentle river—too low, I thought, to even contemplate as a place for suicide. Finally, I decided to park in the car park of The Royal Hotel.

The air was cold. Just one person was sitting on the picnic tables in front of the pub: a man in shorts and a fleece with a bit of ale in his glass, smoking a cigarette and looking at his phone. He paid no attention as I passed through the seating area and opened the large wooden door with its shiny, mock-brass handle. Inside, the pub was busy with customers at most of the tables, in both the snug and the bar area, partaking, as it no doubt pleased them to think, in village life. Meanwhile a few locals were sitting on stools at the bar itself, neither entirely alone nor with one another. I felt completely out of place as I crossed the soft red carpeting in my long coat, the sort of coat that nobody wears in Hayfield, and I was at once relieved that I had severed myself so definitively from the village and full of regret

that I had decided impulsively to drive back there alone tonight on hearing the news about Tinhead at Decathlon in Stockport. I never should have gone to Stockport, I thought, as I crossed the carpet towards the bar, because someone like Darren Hallam was always bound to be there, stocking up on protein powder, waiting to give me news of the village, news that would tempt me back despite myself.

I ordered a pint of ale and the young man behind the bar regarded me suspiciously as he placed the glass beneath the pump. 'And a packet of salt and vinegar crisps,' I said, which caused the man behind the bar, as well as the men at their stools, to look me up and down with renewed suspicion, just as they always had done, because there was something about the way I had ordered the crisps, the way that my request had admitted a real desire for crisps and not just compliance with the custom of ordering crisps with beer, that made it obvious to them that I was not *of* the village in the way that they were. But I'm an adult now, I thought, as I took my pint and packet of crisps to a small table in the corner of the pub, and I don't need them to accept me. I've come here to commemorate Tinhead, I told myself, who was my friend, and who was driven to a tragic death by men like the ones sitting at the bar in silence, men who, because they repress everything they think and feel, insist that everyone they encounter does the same. One of these men, a bald and fat-headed local with great crevices in the

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skin of his neck, looked over at me with the dead eyes embedded in his hideous face, which was the same garish red as the carpet, and I realized that I was literally writhing with rage on my oak chair in the corner.

I opened my packet of crisps. No, I thought, placing a large one in my mouth and biting down to break its curvature, this is absurd; I hate this pub and so did Tinhead. The truth is I only came here hoping for news of him, and though some of the faces I could see from my table in the corner were familiar, everyone in the village basically had the same red, unhappy face, and none were familiar enough that I could approach them and ask for news. I could sit here all night, I thought, hoping to see somebody I knew and who knew Tinhead well enough to tell me what had caused him to finally end his life, even though I already knew and had always known the answer to that question. But the chances were that it wouldn't happen, that I would leave the pub alone and frustrated and drive back to Manchester none the wiser. So I got up, having taken just a single sip of my pint of ale and having eaten only one crisp, and walked out of the pub under the suspicious gaze of the locals.

I let the mock-oak door with its mock-brass handle close behind me and I left the car in the car park to set off on foot, past the cenotaph, past Ken Rangeley's Newsagents, the post office, the old butcher's, past The Pack Horse, which hadn't been closed down, and up the hill towards Tinhead's

house. This was also towards the house where I had once lived, on Fairy Bank Road at the top of the valley, whereas Tinhead had lived on Pendle Brook Close at the bottom. I was contemplating this difference between us and whether it also accounted for the fact that I had been able to go on living while Tinhead had needed to die, when I saw a figure in the corner of my eye coming down the hill towards me in the semi-darkness.

Immediately, I retreated into a ginnel between two houses and then asked myself why, why was I now crouching in a clandestine manner beside a wheelie bin in a ginnel, as though I were twelve again and playing a game of hide-and-seek with my former friends from the village? Firstly, I thought as I placed a hand on the ground, which was mossy and cold to touch, because I had effectively exiled myself from the village and was afraid of being discovered there, by myself, as much as anyone else, and secondly, I thought, because without quite admitting it to myself and without examining my motives, I had been planning to walk to Tinhead's house in the hope of seeing Tinhead's brother, Ryan, and the figure I had seen rounding the corner was him. This was confirmed to me as he passed the end of ginnel, clearly oblivious to my presence. He was wearing a hoody, tracksuit bottoms and work boots, and he was smoking a joint as he walked.

I crept out of my hiding place and rose to my feet. Now I had a good view of the portion of the high street leading down to the bend at Ken

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Rangeley's Newsagents, and I could watch Ryan Tinsley as he walked, emitting plumes of thick smoke every ten or so paces. You could tell just from his walk, I thought, as he passed the old butcher's and the post office, that his was a totally different nature to Tinhead's, that walking for Ryan Tinsley was an activity more aligned with fighting and sex than with contemplation. I began to follow him carefully and from a distance through the heart of the village, which was deserted except for me and Ryan Tinsley. As he approached the bend in the high street by Ken Rangeley's Newsagents, I saw that Ryan was not going to continue along the high street but that he was going towards The Royal. I watched from a distance as he entered the pub and then a moment later, I followed him inside.

One of the locals at the bar turned and watched me with his dead eyes as I approached. Ryan was at the part of the bar perpendicular to the part where I was standing. He was making small talk with another local while the young man behind the bar poured his pint of lager. There was no way for me to approach him in these circumstances and I didn't want him to see me now, when there was no chance of us beginning a conversation, so I turned to look at the local sitting directly beside me and our eyes met. We were at an uncomfortable proximity to each other, far closer than was customary in the village, and his eyes were beady and wary like a sheep's.

'Ayup,' the local said.

I nodded and said, 'Evening.'

'Cold, int it?' the local said.

'Bitterly,' I responded, shutting down the conversation entirely.

Now the young man at the bar was standing in front of me, while I sensed Ryan passing behind me with his pint.

'Another pint of the ale, please,' I said, as though I had drunk the last one and was simply getting a second, even though I could see that the first one had been removed from the table where I had sat, and knew that the barman had noticed me leave and come back. He poured the ale and I waved my debit card for him to bring the card reader over.

'Thanks,' he said, in a lazy, absent-minded way that was typical of young people in the village.

I turned and walked across the soft red carpet to find Ryan sitting by the fire in the snug, one hand around his pint of lager, the other holding his phone, whose white light made his face look ghastly, haunted. He looked up at me and said, 'All right, pal.'

There was a resemblance with Tinhead, I thought, but a distant one. They were the sort of brothers that make one think, strange that they are brothers, rather than, they are clearly brothers. It wasn't only that Ryan's hair was brown whereas Tinhead's had been blonde, but that Ryan appeared altogether more robust. Ryan, I thought as I examined him, had the sort of farmer's physique that was common in the village, whereas Tinhead had been more delicate.

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‘Do you mind if I join you?’ I said.

‘It’s a free country,’ Ryan said, and I pulled a stool from under the table and sat down opposite him. ‘How you been, pal? I’ve not seen you in a long time. You were at uni weren’t you?’

‘At Oxford,’ I said, meeting his eyes without flinching, because I wished to underline that whereas in the past I had always fought against my outsider status within the village, that was no longer the case. ‘I was doing a PhD,’ I said, ‘but I had to quit.’

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Fucking hell.’

‘It was too much pressure,’ I said. ‘I couldn’t handle it. I had an episode.’ Ryan’s face looked gentler in the firelight than it had in the white light of his phone, and I now remembered that it was not an altogether mean and violent face but somewhat friendly, though its friendliness appeared painted on, as it were, learnt, rather than a result of an essentially friendly, open nature, as was the case with Tinhead’s face.

‘What’s brought you back to Hayfield then?’ Ryan said.

Without blinking, because I had prepared for this question as I stalked him along the high street, I replied, ‘I’m visiting my parents.’ This was a lie—they had long since moved away to Dorset, where they had recently died, and left me with no connections to Hayfield except for the memory of the unhappy years I spent living there.

‘Right,’ he said, ‘I’ve not seen them about in a while.’

‘They’re very old now,’ I said. ‘How are you doing?’

‘Not too bad, pal,’ he said, ‘not too bad considering.’ He took a sip of his lager and then asked me, ‘Did you hear what happened?’

‘No,’ I said, because I didn’t want to prejudice Ryan’s account.

‘You remember my brother, don’t you?’ I nodded. ‘He passed away,’ Ryan said.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. I was displeased that he had chosen such a euphemistic phrase, a phrase suggesting a peaceful death in a comfortable bed, surrounded by loved ones and completely inappropriate to describe a manic jump from an eighty-foot bridge into a shallow river. ‘I’m so sorry to hear that, Ryan,’ I said. This was a minor transgression in the village, where nobody addressed anybody by their name.

‘That’s life for you, pal,’ he said.

‘Do you mind if I ask how it happened?’

‘I don’t like to talk about it.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I can imagine,’ and I kept my eyes fixed on him as he looked into his pint glass.

‘He took his own life,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry, Ryan. How terribly sad,’ I said while thinking, I bet nobody in the village has used the word *sad* to describe the death of Tinhead, only the word *tragic*. I watched Ryan’s face closely to see whether the word would move him, though when he cast his eyes downwards, pouted slightly and shifted his stubbly jaw I could not say what

was going through his mind. People like Ryan had always been alien to me, just as people like Tinhead were alien to them. ‘He was very clever,’ I said. ‘I always had the sense that he didn’t know what to do with all that energy. Do you think that’s right?’

‘Probably, pal,’ Ryan said. ‘You probably understand it better than me.’

‘Why do you say that?’ I said.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘You were a bit like him, weren’t you?’

‘Perhaps,’ I said. Then I looked up and examined the various brass objects attached to the exposed brick wall above Ryan’s head while he took a long sip of his lager. ‘What pushed him over the edge?’

‘He always had it in him,’ Ryan said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘But it got worse when he lost his job at Blue Lighting. The factory closed and he was on the dole for a bit. Then he got a job at Swizzels, boxing up sweets. He was there for about three years—three and a half years.’

‘Swizzels,’ I said.

‘It’s what everyone dreads, isn’t it? Ending up at Swizzels.’

‘I shudder at the thought,’ I said, and Ryan intimated a chuckle. You could always get a laugh out of the villagers with a bit of elevated language, I remembered. ‘What were those last years like?’ I said.

‘Grim, pal,’ Ryan said. ‘You’ve seen what’s happening around here, haven’t you?’

‘I haven’t,’ I said. ‘What’s happening?’

‘It’s all changing. Going downhill.’

‘It looks the same as it always did,’ I said,
‘except The Bull has closed down.’

‘Everything is closing down,’ Ryan said.

‘I always found it grim,’ I said.

‘That’s because you’re a weirdo,’ Ryan said,
‘you always were.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said.

‘It used to be alright around here,’ Ryan said.

I left a pause to communicate that although I disagreed, I did not want to argue with him because I was afraid of his superior strength and propensity for violent behaviour. I looked at the menu standing on the table, bound in red mock-leather, embossed with the words ‘The Royal Hotel’. These menus haven’t changed in ten years, I thought. Once they conveyed grandeur and tradition, but now they appeared outdated, even seedy.

‘So he wasn’t happy at Swizzels?’ I asked Ryan.

‘No,’ he said with a joyless little laugh. ‘He hated it. He was smashing the coke every weekend. He wasn’t even going out. He used to sit up in his room doing coke and playing *Train Simulator*. All he talked about was train routes: Northeast Corridor from DC to Baltimore, Marsdonshire Lines, the fucking Chengkun Railway from Hanyuan to Puxiong.’

‘Really?’ I said.

‘Really, mate,’ he said. ‘The Gotthardbahn Alpine Classic and the Fife Circle Line. I remember

all of them. If I had to piss in the night, I would hear the sound of the trains when I passed his room, hear his mouse clicking.'

'I had imagined he would have been into conspiracy theories. Lizards and so on. The Illuminati.'

'Not at all, pal,' Ryan said. 'Rick didn't give two shits about that sort of stuff. He had a one-track mind and it was all *Train Simulator* by the end.' Caught off guard by the pun, which I suspected was unintended, I hesitated, but Ryan went on. 'I knew he wasn't happy,' he said. 'But I wasn't expecting him to go and do that. He was saving up money. He wanted to go to Australia.'

'Tinhead was too clever for Hayfield,' I said.

'Don't call him that,' Ryan said.

'Sorry,' I said.

'Rick was a Hayfield lad,' Ryan said.

'That's true,' I said, looking once more at the brass ornaments and instruments mounted on the walls. 'When did he do it?' I said, choosing my words carefully to indicate that I understood the decision to be Tinhead's own, to emanate from the heart of his being.

'March,' Ryan said.

'Yes,' I said.

'What do you mean, yes?'

'It's a miserable month, March.'

'People survive it,' Ryan said.

'Some,' I said. 'Why do you think he did it?'

'I don't know, do I?'

‘But don’t you have an idea?’

‘No.’

‘You must have thought about it,’ I said.

‘I don’t know,’ Ryan said. ‘Because he was an idiot.’

‘Tinhead wasn’t an idiot,’ I said.

‘Don’t call him Tinhead,’ Ryan said, and I remembered that I had always known him to be capable of turning quickly to violence.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘That was how I knew him.’

‘Don’t call him that around me,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. In the village, I remembered, I had always felt under threat from the violent tendencies of the villagers.

‘Don’t call him fucking Tinhead. His name is Rick.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘That’s just how I always knew him.’

‘Don’t call him that again,’ Ryan said. He seemed to have retreated to some private place full of grief and anger and I realized that the moment had come for me to leave. We had attracted the attention of the villagers at the next table: a man, woman and dog. I turned around and saw that the locals remained at the bar, drinking their beer amid a terrible silence.

Buttoning up my coat I asked, ‘Do you mind if I ask how he did it?’

‘He jumped off the Queen’s Bridge,’ Ryan said. This he said without looking at me, without leaving his private place, and so flatly that I knew

he had not even begun to think about what the words meant. I nodded in response as though I were reacting calmly to information I had just acquired, rather than to the confirmation of something I already knew and, in a sense, had always known. Then I stood up, bowed respectfully, and left Ryan alone in the snug.

Outside, the air was cold and dry and the church bells were ringing the new hour. I got in my car and started the engine. I pulled out of The Royal's car park and drove through the village, where I saw no other villagers. I crossed the Hayfield bypass and drove fast along the Hayfield Road towards New Mills, relieved to be leaving the Peak District behind.

Never again will I return to Hayfield, I thought. Never to New Mills, never even to Stockport. If I need any more sporting equipment, I'll go to the Decathlon in the Trafford Centre or I'll plan ahead and order it online. I reached New Mills and drove quickly across the Queen's Bridge, where Tinhead had killed himself six months previously, and then I climbed up the hill past the Swizzels factory where he had spent the last three years of his life boxing Love Hearts, Palma Violets, Drumsticks and Refreshers bars. I drove along the deserted A6 through Disley and past Lyme Park, through High Lane, Middlewood, Hazel Grove and Stockport, glad that I was leaving Hayfield behind for ever and glad, I realized as I drove, that Tinhead had found a way to leave Hayfield behind too.

When I got back to Manchester, to Didsbury where I had recently bought the flat with the money I inherited from my parents, I felt relief. I got out of the car and thought, yes, a person like me can live in a place like this without going mad. It's hardly Paris or New York, I thought, but at least it isn't Hayfield or New Mills. People live in flats and are less suspicious of one another. The air is warmer and more polluted with fumes, noise and light. I looked up at the sky and I was pleased that I could not see the stars as one always could in Hayfield. Instead, I saw sheets of purplish gloom suspended in the darkness. I opened the door to my building and the heat from the hall radiators wrapped itself around my back and shoulders. I was glad to be home. But when I opened the door to my flat and found the silence untouched, exactly as I had left it when I had set out for Decathlon, I remembered that I had still not found a way to cope with being alone.

I put my hiking boots on the countertop and lay down on the sofa in the darkness. My parents had moved to Hayfield as a married couple and were therefore able to live somewhat autonomously, enjoying those aspects of village life that they enjoyed and ignoring those that they didn't. When they moved to Budleigh Salterton, it was not because they couldn't stand Hayfield, but simply because they wanted to retire by the seaside. I, on the other hand, had been deranged by village life, exposed to it from a young age but clearly never *of* it, and had learnt to live in a state of alienation

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from myself and others. But I forgive my parents, I thought. They had only wanted us to have a simple life in the countryside. ◇



TWO POEMS

Alexandra Lytton Regalado

What My Father Taught Me About Evolution

Claws have little ambiguity, this I have come to understand.
And this Thanksgiving our family is the portrait of a grotesque,
the auctioned painting no one bids for. It does not match the living-room
couch. There is no aesthetic consideration in death. Wild & free,
there's no taming it. Will come as it pleases, there's no coaxing.
No tiptoe through the grass to eat out of the palm of my hand.
These are my father's last sounds: is it a cry, a laugh, a cough
so hard to tell if he's breathing. His hundred-pound self curled into a shell,
no, more hermit crab without a shell. But there's nothing soft:
he is all angles, all knees & elbows. His face cut into the death mask,
the skull plain & visible, his eyes sunken, & when I put my hands
around him, to wrap his blanket tighter, I squeeze his foot to say
all set, he cries out loudly. I remove his sock & his toenails
are so long they curl under his toes. Like our childhood dog,
a Lassie, that hobbled on overgrown nails & the vet said
he could have pressed charges against us for neglect.
And it was twenty-some years ago I witnessed our dog's death.
How he searched for a corner, crawled beneath a table,
wanted to escape through any open door but I kept pulling him
to me, to stay, to hold him up so he could breathe,
my twenty-year-old self still imagining I could save others.
There is no metaphor here, it was in effect a death
& the dog went in the most horrible moaning like Chewbacca,
banging his head against the table legs, his limbs shaking,
his body rattling in a pool of piss, shit & blood, snapped off
the tip of his own tongue. It would have been humane
to put him down. But we thought it better to let nature run its course,
he was old, we thought, let it happen the way it was intended.
But there was nothing natural in wrapping our twelve-year-old dog
in a beach towel & setting his body in the back of my car
to drop it off in the rain, to be cremated, while the rest of the family
was at my brother's high-school graduation. It was my first death
& now my father is calling out that he's cold, that he wants a drink,
that he needs to get up to smoke. That night I cut off the thick, yellow
crescents of his nails, afraid I'd cut into his skin, & placed them
in a pile on the nightstand, a shell midden, & for a second

TWO POEMS

I thought about keeping them, how my artist friend had done,
kept his cut nails in an urn for an entire year, a memento of his mortality.
My father in his hospital bed, the final step before the coffin, all the things
he's had to submit to at the slippery slope above the grave.
My artist friend formed words out of his nail crescents—AMOR—
& glazed them on to a canvas. That is the art no one wants hanging
in their living-room, a mirror to remind us how our own nails
continue to grow in the coffin. Claws are unambiguous,
to attack, to defend, proof we were here on this earth living
among other beings. Tonight, we share food at Thanksgiving,
we set the table with wreaths, with apples, candles & flowers
& poems about the harvest moon & cook our grandmother's recipes,
the pies he might like to eat, what he has already let go of, food only
a memory now. This is enough, the night nurse tells me, the smell
is what fills him. Thanksgiving was my father's holiday. He showed us
love in the most traditional sense, putting food on the table.
He'd see us eating & enjoying it & feel satisfied by the work
of his hands. His hands are what I hold, strong grip,
smooth skin, these are the hands I have inherited,
though I worry at them, bite my cuticles to the quick.
This is what he has passed on, written with amor,
on a blank canvas & gilt frame. There,
next to his death bed as he claws for his next breath.

Alexandra Lytton Regalado

The Art Is Knowing When to Stop

Untouched, a rock is a rock.

Hold it in your hand & it becomes stone.

When the sculptor sees the sculpture in the stone,
it becomes art.

Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire*, painted at the height
of his career, is said to be a self-portrait.

The sun goes down on the British Empire,
end of an era, the grand warship tugged into the Thames
to be chopped up & sold for scraps.

It's the mystery we glorify.

The Mayan stelae I thought so wise,

so deep, but was really a billboard claiming:

Warrior King 28 Rabbit killed five hundred soldiers on this spot.

Or in Burma, the temple decorated with curving
calligraphy in translation said, the Win family
donated these ten bricks.

An outline of footprints on wet sand points
back at the absent creator.

In my self-portrait I would not be a tree

roots pushing asphalt, bowing beneath

powerlines. I would not be a tree mid-field among

the slow mouths of moon-eyed cows. Nor a backyard tree

heavy with fruit, rising storeys above a woman who pulls up

her shirt to make a basket, while her son climbs up

to the highest branches & tosses down jocotes to her.

Not the tree, not the fruit, but the seed, hard as a rock.





A CONVERSATION

Toni Morrison on
Angela Davis and
Angela Davis on
Toni Morrison

I n the summer of 2014, author Dan White spoke separately to Toni Morrison and to Angela Davis about the work they made individually and together over the course of their careers. Angela Davis was interviewed by phone from Massachusetts, and Toni Morrison from upstate New York. These parallel conversations are brought together here in a dialogue about creative collaboration, friendship and the power of literature.

DAN WHITE TO TONI MORRISON

I would guess that even some of your most ardent fans don't realize that you were an influential editor at Random House for twenty years. At the time, you were bringing out African American voices, including some strong feminist voices, to a wider audience.

TONI MORRISON

Well, I was determined to do that when I went there. There was a lot of activity going on, a lot of activism, and I thought, 'I will publish these voices instead of marching.' I thought it was my responsibility to publish African American and African writers who would otherwise not be published or not be published well, or edited well, and so I brought out works by [Muhammad] Ali and Toni Cade [Bambara] and Gayl [Jones], and I did a whole collection of African short stories and then I did *The Black Book*, and I thought that was important

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because I was good at it, because I had read some books by Black writers about Black things and they were so badly edited, it made you want to weep. Like *Roots* [by Alex Haley]. Have you ever read that?

DW

I was a kid when it came out. I did see most of the mini-series.

TM

Oh, they just threw [the book] together. It was backward anyway, and they threw in the ending. He says, 'That child was me.' We knew that in the beginning!

DAN WHITE TO ANGELA DAVIS

During her time at Random House, Toni Morrison edited your biography, which was published in 1974. How did that initial connection come about?

ANGELA DAVIS

She contacted me. I wasn't so much interested in writing an autobiography. I was very young. I think I was twenty-six years old. Who writes an autobiography at that age? Also, I wasn't that interested in writing a book that was focused on a personal trajectory. Of course, at that time, the paradigm for the autobiography, as far as I was concerned, was the heroic individual, and

Toni Morrison and Angela Davis

I certainly did not want to represent myself in that way. But Toni Morrison persuaded me that I could write it the way I wanted to; it could be the story not only of my life but of the movement in which I had become involved, and she was successful.

DW

Your autobiography is very cinematic. I've read a lot of your more academic work, but this one is constructed like a novel. In the very beginning, you're trying to get away from the FBI, and there is this palpable sense of fear. The reader is right in the middle of a manhunt. I was wondering how much of that comes from Toni's influence as your mentor.

AD

The decision to begin the story at the moment when I went underground and then would be arrested was an interesting way of drawing people into a story, the outlines of which they already knew because, of course, my being placed on the FBI 'ten most wanted' list was publicized all around the country, all around the world. So yes, there was the use of the kind of cinematic strategy of flashback, and this was thanks to input from my editor. She did not rewrite things for me, but she asked me questions. She would say, 'What did the space look like? What was in the room, and how

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would you describe it?’ It was quite an amazing experience for me to have her as a mentor. My experience with writing was primarily writing about philosophical issues. I really had to learn about how to write something that would produce images in people’s minds that would draw them into a story.

TM

Working with Angela was *sui generis*, and I didn’t just edit her book. I went on her book tour with her; I was her handler! All over. This was before I was Toni Morrison. [Morrison’s real name is Chloe Wofford.] We were in Scandinavia at one point, and I was a good handler. People would come up to her, you know: ‘My brother is in prison, and I was wondering, could we have a cocktail party [to raise money for him]?’ And the thing was, [Angela] would stop and listen, and say, ‘Where is he?’, and I would say, ‘Angela, come on!’

DW

You seem to be someone who is good at setting boundaries with other people.

TM

Yes. That’s true. I’ve learned three things. I tell everybody that I never used these words much, but now I am happy to use them pretty much all the time. One is, ‘No.’ The other

Toni Morrison and Angela Davis

one is, 'Shut up.' And the last one is, 'Get out!' Now that I have that arsenal, I can go forth. [Laughs.]

DW

This is a bit of an aside, but it relates to what you just said about creating firm boundaries with people. Once, I saw you reading at Columbia University, and a woman stood up and said, 'Toni Morrison, I would love to read you this poem I wrote,' and you said, 'No.'

TM

I said that? [Laughs.]

DAN WHITE TO ANGELA DAVIS

When you were working with Toni Morrison she was bringing new books to life of her own. *The Bluest Eye* was written while she was still at Random House. Did you ever have a chance to see her in action, working on a book?

AD

Absolutely. I had the opportunity to read *The Bluest Eye* before most people I know were exposed to it, and I can remember that she would write during every spare moment. This is something that really impressed me about her: her discipline, her focus. One time, I was sitting in her house in Rockland County, and

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she had to drive into [Manhattan] every day to work at Random House. I would see her when we were driving in. When there was traffic, she would pull out a little pad and write something or pull out a scrap of paper here or there, and I realized she was living the life of the next novel in her mind, regardless of whatever else was happening. I have always been impressed by her ability to be so focused and to inhabit the universe of her writing while not neglecting the universe that involves the rest of us.

DW

And she did all this while raising two boys on her own, dealing with the commute and holding down a high-powered job.

AD

And she was not a hermit so she also had a very active social life as well. To be able to maintain that focus—this is something she continues to do today. I am impressed by the regularity with which her novels are published. She is always working on a project. She always inhabits that other world.

DAN WHITE TO TONI MORRISON

Angela Davis has gone into detail about your relentless drive, about how often you bring out new books. I wanted to know what continues

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to spur you on in your career at this point. Is there some other form you haven't tried yet, some goal you feel you haven't met?

TM

No, I've pretty much run the gamut, but writing novels is the world to me, literally. The outside world can be OK or not OK, beautiful or not beautiful, but I am in control here. When I'm writing, nobody's telling me what to do. The expectations are high because they are mine, and that is a kind of freedom I don't have anywhere else. Nowhere. I'm not very happy when I don't have a project. I don't have to actually be developing a manuscript but if I don't have an idea about the beginning of it, wondering about it . . .

DAN WHITE TO ANGELA DAVIS

You've been friends with Toni Morrison for forty years now, and you've had a chance to see her work develop and her influence grow. I was hoping you could comment on the way Toni Morrison's work has influenced the literary world, and the world in general.

AD

As a result of her work, and the work of some others, it became possible to imagine slavery very differently, to humanize slavery, to remember that the system of slavery did

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not destroy the humanity of those whom it enslaved; oftentimes, the assumption is that slavery was all bad, and of course, if you portray slaves as experiencing joy or making music, you somehow violate the ethics of recognizing slavery as evil, but of course, if slaves were not able to reach down and find some humanity within themselves, they would have ceased to be human beings, literally. That is why the focus on reimagining slave subjectivities is so important. *Beloved*, of course, allows us to do this, and it renders a very different approach, not only to literature but also to history and to popular narratives about slave histories. A film like *Twelve Years a Slave* is very important, but at the same time, there was a dimension that was lacking.

DAN WHITE TO TONI MORRISON

Perhaps you could reflect on how slavery was portrayed when you first took it on as a subject.

TM

The way slavery was portrayed was different. It changes when you take away 'the white gaze'. All those wonderful writers who wrote after they were freed were writing for abolitionists. They didn't think I was going to read it, and so they had to please or not disturb white abolitionists with their stories. So you read

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Frederick Douglass and I can feel the anger that he erases. It's not there. If he knew I was reading it, it might be a very different book. Even Ralph Ellison. I tell people he called the book *Invisible Man*. As good as the book is, my initial response is, 'Invisible to whom?'

DW

While you've dealt with some truly horrific subject matter in your books, including slavery, you've also placed a lot of emphasis on narrativizing good in your work. Why is that so important to you as a value in your work?

TM

Goodness—there really isn't anything else that humans ought to be cultivating and living for. The rest of it is petty and selfish, cartoonish almost. I always think of evil with a top hat and a big band and a cape, a cane, maybe some shiny jewellery, so you are very, very attracted by the glitter. I thought the most impressive thing that the Nazis did for their cause was their designer, their uniforms, the length of their boots.

DW

That, and the power of the loudspeaker.

TM

Yes. Crowds, loudspeakers, a big drama, and

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people were seduced: those who were not repelled and those who were not slaughtered.

DW

You've mentioned that evil has gotten an enormous promotion in literature while good has been dragged off centre stage. You've mentioned that goodness often comes across as weak or muffled or silent.

TM

It wasn't true in literature in the early days. There was always a hero who prevailed. As awful as things could happen in a Dickens novel, it ended up with the survival and triumph of high morality, of people who deserved to triumph. But something happened. Now, I'm not entirely sure about this, but I think it is after the First World War with novelists at any rate, and certainly some of the war poets. Perhaps they understood themselves as attacking evil but they ended up theatricalizing it and the good people were fairly stupid or unlucky or what have you. There are references in literature to the silencing of goodness . . . I am interested in pulling from the modern canon what I know and what I believe about this adoration and fascination, this compulsion to display evil. Even if there is a mild attempt to say that it is evil, nevertheless, it's hogging the stage

Toni Morrison and Angela Davis

in many novels. I think goodness is weak in literature almost like it is in culture. This is just a general observation.

DW

In light of this, how do you dramatize good in your own stories?

TM

For me, there is always an ending in which somebody knows something extremely important that they didn't know before, so the acquisition of knowledge is a gesture of mine toward goodness. The accumulation of events, theories, changes of mind, encounters, whatever is going on at the end of the book, it tends to move towards some kind of epiphany that is a revelation of a better self. Now, there is a lot of sadness and melancholy among the people in my books, but strategically, structurally, that is what I think is going on. I might not be the best example of what I am describing in the lecture [the Peggy Downes Baskin Ethics Lecture at the Rio Theatre in Santa Cruz, which Morrison was due to give in October of the same year, introduced by Angela Davis] but I don't want to leave a text with the reader hopeless or even helpless, and certainly somebody in there has to survive in the atmosphere of goodness or love, and *Love* is the best example of my books of that.

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DW

In a lecture at the Harvard Divinity School in 2012 you also delved into different interpretations—different theories—about the reasons for altruism. According to one interpretation you mentioned in the lecture, altruism is not an innate value. It must be taught, learned. With this in mind, do you think novels can, or should, bear an ethical responsibility, a moral weight?

TM

I would hate to say they bear that weight but it would be more interesting to me if they would examine [it] more carefully, not in black and white terms, you know, villains and heroes, but in some other way. I've read some interesting definitions of altruism, none of them very helpful or positive. One said it was narcissism, and another said it was kind of a mental illness. The notion of its being taught is the question you put to me. And I thought about that when I went, as one often does when the human answers aren't [satisfying], to the animal world. There is so much sacrifice of the one for the community, whether it is ants who are always trailing back to find the body of another ant, or bats that sacrifice themselves when they hear something to save the cave, or birds that will call attention to themselves to warn the rest of the flock. It's all over the natural world. Of

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course, there are lots of instances of sacrifice [in the human world], parental sacrifices that are well known, and lovers in the history of narrative, but I was just particularly interested in what was happening currently, you know, in the last forty years. Many writers believe that evil is just more interesting than goodness.

DW

And you've found ways to push the good back to centre stage, at least in your own works. One example that comes to mind is your most recent novel, *Home*, where you have forces of good that not are polite, the 'country women who loved mean'. And when someone complains, they say, 'Hush up, hush.'

TM:

That's right. 'Shut up!'

DW

These women will nurse a dying person back to life but they don't coddle at all. So, clearly, you are making a distinction between these forces of goodness and a kind of sentimentality ...

TM

Yes, exactly. When their maker said, 'What did you do?', they didn't want to say, 'Um ...' They had to answer. That is so familiar to me from

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my family. I am glad you brought up the word sentimentality. It is not that. It is something else that works.

DW

Their desire to help Cee [an ailing character in *Home*] seems like an innate value and a shared value in their community. But you've also had good people going against the collective, like the priest in your novel *A Mercy*. He takes such a risk when he teaches slaves to read.

TM

Yes. He could be thrown in prison and fined. He had to sneak off and teach them to read. Who knows why he did that? The point is he *thought* it was a valuable thing to do. And I remember that kid in *Love* who was with a bunch of friends at a party who were raping a girl, and he couldn't or wouldn't.

DM

And he gets so much grief for that . . .

TM

Yes, he does. That gesture of 'I will not participate'—in doing this, he sacrifices his reputation, and therefore, he could be the one at the end of the book who could salvage this woman. I am much more interested in the movement from evil and selfishness to

something else.

DM

And you have works that complicate the idea of good and evil. For me, as a reader, one of the most emotionally difficult aspects of *Beloved* is the withholding of judgement of Sethe, the main character, for killing her child. You didn't seem to be condemning her. The moral weighing is left up to the reader.

TM

That was the big deal in the writing of *Beloved*, this story of this woman, Margaret Garner [the historical figure who inspired the character of Sethe]. And I realized early on precisely what you said: that I couldn't judge her. Suppose I knew definitely that my boys, my children, were going to be kidnapped, taken off, molested, what would I do? And I couldn't answer. I answered differently depending on what I thought the danger to them was then. I realized there was only one person who was in the position to make that judgement, and that was the dead child.

DW

And we do get her perspective in the book.

TM

Yes, this is what she thinks.

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DW

And that moment in *Beloved* in the barn, when Sethe is killing her child, made me think of other mothers and daughters in your novels, and these extreme demonstrations of love: the scene where the character Eva, in *Sula*, sets fire to Plum, but she also jumps out the window to save Hannah, and a scene in *A Mercy* when a mother gives her child away.

TM

Yes, extreme forms of love. And the thing is, we think of it in romantic ways, but I was reminded recently of somebody in a book of mine, in *Sula*, when [Hannah] said, 'Did you ever love me?' And her mother said, 'I kept you alive.'

DW

It's love, and it's a form of goodness, but there's something kind of fierce about it.

TM

In that community they didn't have anything. They had no water. They were separate from the town. They didn't have anything except for themselves, and how they handle one another is the way they live in the world. I always think these are the people who don't necessarily like you but they won't hurt you. They will save your life whether they want to save you or not.

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DW

The good has a kind of bruising quality.

TM

Yes. That is my way of doing it.

DW

You've also pointed out how narratives that privilege evil, including media narratives, tend to relegate the forces of good to 'freak' status. At Harvard, in your lecture there in 2012, you talked about the Amish community which refused to condemn a man for shooting a group of Amish girls, and even reached out to console his widow.

TM

Yes, and the media twisted it as freakish.

DW

I think the way you portray good without irony in your books, without that freakishness you just mentioned, would not be at all possible if you wrote from a position of cynicism and despair.

TM

Many writers do write from that position. And, you know, think of the suicide rate and the alcoholism. It is high among the writers we adore. Terrible things happen, and the

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world is sort of chaotic, and there is nothing anyone can do about it except to acknowledge it. Goodness, or some reach for moral clarity, is either [portrayed as] weak or is confined to the sort of scholastic confining world of religious people, you know, very religious people, evangelical people. I am a Catholic so even there it is very strong, and this is an aside, but I guess we are seeing the consequences of religion in Syria. [ISIS] just chopped off some kid's head—children!—and why? Because they didn't agree with their system of belief. I know we've had this before, back during the Crusades, but there is something about the merging of evil and its theatrics that troubles me, not just in the world. I look for it in the place where I've always found wisdom and art, and that is in literature.

DW

But surely there are times when world events have driven you to despair?

TM

Let me tell you a little anecdote. You'll enjoy this. I wrote about this for a magazine. I couldn't write, and I was feeling very sad, disturbed, I think. Anyway, whatever it was, it was paralysing, and a friend, Peter Sellars, called up, as he often does on Christmas Day or during the holidays, as he is always up and

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working. He said, 'How are you?', and I said that I didn't feel very good. It was sort of a sad time. I said, 'You know, Peter, I can't write,' and I told him why I thought I couldn't, and he started shouting, 'No, no, no, no!' He said this is precisely the time when artists go to work, not when everything is fine but when things are difficult. Dire. This is when we're needed . . . God, think of all the writers who wrote in prisons, in gulags, you know. I mean, it is just amazing, so I felt a little ashamed but very happy that he said that. I've never had a problem since.

DW

You were a humanities professor for many years at Princeton. Considering these students are high-powered, and many are going on to positions of great influence and power, is it the particular responsibility of the humanities professor to use history and literature to teach ethics and moral responsibility?

TM

I prefer to think of it as moving [the students] towards wisdom.

DW

How?

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TM

By being wise!

DAN WHITE TO ANGELA DAVIS

I'm going to end with a broad question for both writers. Is it possible for a book to change the world?

AD

Absolutely. I think we would be living in a very different world had we not experienced the impact of Toni Morrison's writing. There is no doubt about the extent to which she has influenced the literary world, not only in this country but all over. She has actually changed the face of the planet. And I see her as a person who made a conscious decision to use her literary talent to bring new ideas into the world, to change the world, absolutely. And often that happens more fundamentally, more profoundly, than the change that those of us who work at the political level envision. I don't think that our notion of freedom would be what it is without the impact of Toni Morrison. She said that one cannot be free without freeing someone. Freedom is to free someone else. And of course, those of us who do political work, radical political work, always insist on the importance of transcending the single individual and to think about collective processes, and Toni Morrison has done this in

Toni Morrison and Angela Davis

her writing.

DAN WHITE TO TONI MORRISON:

Is it possible for books to change the world?

TM

Some do. They just do. And it's sometimes very difficult to get such books published. Think about James Joyce. You can't think the same way after you read a certain voice.

DW

Angela Davis believes this is the case with your books.

TM

Well, I hope she's right. And I've never known Angela to be wrong. ◇

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Five Dials