

OF DAWN

INTRODUCTION

Hello, I'm Al Robertson.

You're about to read my novella, 'Of Dawn'. It was first published in Interzone 235, and has been nominated for the BSFA 2011 Best Short Fiction award. You probably downloaded it from www.allumination.co.uk, my weird media website. If you didn't, come by sometime and say hello.

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And now for the story...

OF DAWN

The coffin was closed when Sarah went to say goodbye to her brother. Before she could even think about asking, the funeral director had touched her hand, and said – 'Of course, it would be better to remember him – as he was'. Insurgents had taken advantage of a traffic jam to attack Peter's convoy. Fire had taken his jeep before he could escape, flaying the life from him.

A bus rumbled past outside, and the floor shook gently. For a moment, she imagined a god passing by - a drift of shadow that might have been wings; a soul borne away, to cross a dark river. She was sure that Peter could have found a poem in the moment - fragmented and confusing, as all his recent work had been, but real. Loss filled the space where jealousy would once have flared.

The funeral director had missed a patch of stubble while shaving that morning. He tried to smile sadly, but his eyes showed nothing beyond professional detachment.

'Thank you' she said. 'Maybe it would be best.'

And then he left her, and she was alone. The drizzle greyed the light at the window. Even the hard colours of the Union Jack that covered the coffin were muted.

It was the same at the funeral. Soft rain drifted across Parliament Square. Grey traffic clogged the roundabout. One of the traffic lights had broken. A red man would not turn to green; a green light would not change to red. Horns protested, echoing off the mud-coloured walls of the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey.

Before Sarah went into St Margaret's Church, nerving herself to see Aunt Veronica and the others, she stopped to look around. Church and state; and, over at the edge of the square, an off-white banner, flapping in the wind, that read 'Peace'. It seemed very far away. She turned again, and St Margaret's took her. It was cold inside, and she barely knew anyone. Nobody had asked her to play, which was a relief. She hadn't touched her violin for eighteen months.

She'd last seen Peter two years ago. They had tried to talk over a meal in a small Italian restaurant in Brixton. 'I should come to your place' he had said. 'Make it easy for you. Least I can do'. There had been apology in his voice. But she wouldn't let him. He had already told her that he was transferring out of the Devon and Dorsets; that he would shortly be leaving for Kuwait, and then perhaps invasion. He was tall, and fit, and his voice slipped easily into loudness. He would quickly imprint himself on her flat, and remain present, long after leaving. Memories of her mother, once a frequent visitor, already permeated her home. She could not stand for him to die, and then suffuse her days and her dreams too.

'I'm sorry. It's been too long' he said.

'Seven months' she replied, immediately regretting her precision. 'And now – you're off again.'

'A bit further than Armagh, this time.' He tried to smile. 'But I'll be fine.' And then, the argument had begun.

Sitting in the cold church, listening to the priest drone, she wondered how many others who'd been close to soldiers had, over the centuries, felt the same regret. She had been angry with his absorption in camp life in Warminster, and then furious that he had left it, to – it seemed to her – leap so decisively towards death. And so her final memories of him were of hot anger, and tears, and of rich food that tasted of ash.

After the argument, there had been a few embarrassed emails. She had sent birthday cards, and terse congratulations when a small but prestigious poetry press had offered to publish his first collection, but they had not met up when he returned home on leave. Aunt Veronica would always let her know the dates, but Sarah never emailed him, and he never got in touch with her. She half hoped that she would bump into him, as she scurried between Warren Street tube and the small legal college where she worked, or that he might be waiting for her one night outside her Camberwell flat. But he was never there, never anywhere where she might find him again.

Now that he was dead, he seemed more present. Every few hours, she would see him in a stranger. The shift of a shoulder, a certain firm way of walking, a sharp voice ordering pints in a pub – for a moment, each one would flare with a sense of his presence, and become a ghost, and then – as she looked back again, amazed, thrilling suddenly, forgetting; the ghost would melt again into flesh, and if she was lucky she would not catch the eye of the stranger she found herself staring at.

The days danced by like flames. Aunt Veronica left a message on her answerphone. 'Do come to Salisbury for a few days, dear. I know it must be hard.' They had barely spoken at the church. The sympathy and near-warmth in those few words surprised her. She did not return the call. It was harder and harder to get out of bed. A letter came about Peter's life insurance. Sarah could not read it for weeping. Lunch breaks devoured the afternoon. The list of emails to respond to grew

daily. It was easier to ignore them. Calls from friends went unanswered. Her regular lunches with Debbie fell away.

‘All this with your brother – we’re so sorry, but...’

The legal college called it compassionate leave, but she knew that she would be quickly replaced with a temp. Soon, they would not even remember her. She had arrived, she had said, between orchestras. She had never wondered whose place she was filling – who had moved on from the small office, the dirty keyboard, and the photocopier that wheezed and spluttered like a heavy smoker. There had been another round of failed auditions, and then she had realised that it was easier to just stay on there. She wouldn’t have to fall back on any of the investments her mother had left; wouldn’t have to let the family know how badly she had failed.

Peter’s poetry collection had come out about then, surprising and confusing her. It had been well received. There had been a significant article in the London Review of Books. Peter had been called the first of the twenty first century war poets. The reviewer had compared him to David Jones and Paul Celan. Neither of these names meant anything to her. She had set the book down unfinished, and not returned to it.

Now, she picked it up again, and found herself obsessed with it. Its broken style mirrored her sense of the world. Words would knit together and she would suddenly hear his voice. These poems held so much more of his presence than the pretenders she saw in the streets. But she found it frustratingly difficult to pin down any final meanings. Images and characters rang repetitively through the book, but she could not make them cohere.

Peter returned obsessively to early twentieth century composer Michael Kingfisher, to the aftermath of warfare in the former Yugoslavia, to Salisbury Plain and the deserted village of Parr Hinton; to images of a skinless man, walking through the nearby woods, at once leading him into knowledge and foreshadowing his own future. ‘An angel satyr walks these hills’ Peter had said, quoting Kingfisher. Sarah shuddered whenever she encountered the creature, and would flick rapidly past the precise, bloody words that described it, wishing for the comforting abstraction of music.

One particular poem hooked her, and called her back, again and again. It was, she began to realise, an elegy for childhood. It took her many readings to piece together its broken syntax, and understand the subtle, ambiguous references that it encoded. When she did so, recognition burned in her, directly triggering memories.

The poem was set in 1982. She had been five, Peter eight. The family was overnighing at a friend’s quarters. Slurred, too loud adult singing from downstairs had woken them both. There was a television in their room. Peter had tip-toed to it, and looked back at her.

‘Should I?’

A moment, and then she nodded, too stunned by his daring to speak. He had climbed back into his bed, and she had scrambled across to join him. The Open University logo shone on-screen, jewelled with the thrill of the forbidden, and then a title card announced the next programme as ‘Music and Landscape, Unit 10: Michael Kingfisher’.

Then, rich music and numinous images blazed out around them. Sarah could only ever remember fragments of the documentary. The dense, muddy greens of

Salisbury Plain, the softer greens and browns of the Dorset countryside, shuddered out of the television as music exploded into the room. Some of it reminded her of the classical pieces that she already started to know. Some was indescribable – strange electronic inventions, sounds that danced out of sine waves and binary code. A flute span melodies across it all, shaping difference into one enchanted whole.

Running through the music were hissing moments of recorded sound that felt truly ancient – old men’s voices, softened by cider, singing incomprehensible words; the pattering thud of little drums, flitting around notes scratched from fiddles and accordions; a deep and indescribable roaring, that felt like the sound of the earth, singing to itself. Every so often a cultured voice would interrupt, intoning facts about Kingfisher’s life with all the impassioned detachment of a priest overseeing a ritual.

Verdancy suffused the television screen as the programme built to a climax. The camera explored ash-grey Stonehenge. Red ribbons shook and bells jangled as six men danced together. Sunset blazed through trees, a fire in the deep woods. Tumuli humped like whales in the green. Between each shot, colour bloomed across the screen like so much spilt paint.

At the last, the music died to a soft, liquid piping. There was a cloister, partially tumbled by the trees that had grown up within it; there were houses without windows or roofs, looking like they had been built from cardboard. A small medieval church shuddered into view, and then vanished. A gravestone appeared, embedded in soft, emerald gloom. A red hand held something like a flute, bright against the green. Then, the pipes died, and there was silence.

Credits rolled, black on white, and the Open University logo appeared again. Soon afterwards, a man with a moustache and thick-framed spectacles was talking about mathematics.

‘That...’ said Peter.

‘Oh yes’, said Sarah.

The next day, Peter wrote his first poem, puzzling his hungover parents. Sarah was soon asking for, and then thrilling at, violin lessons.

All of that was encoded in the adult Peter’s writing. He made those few minutes the last safe moment. A few days later, they had both been returned to their respective boarding schools, each proud not to cry as their parents left them. A couple of months had passed, and then their father was shot in the head and killed by a terrified Argentinian squaddie.

The poem touched and intrigued Sarah. She had hardly thought of that night for years. She had occasionally asked her music teachers about Kingfisher; they had always dismissed him as at best an eccentric, at worst an idiot, and so he had slipped from her mind. Now, she Googled him.

There was a reasonably detailed biography on Wikipedia. His musical career had been triggered by the first performance of Vaughan Williams’ Tallis Fantasia in 1910. He had spent three pre-war summers walking the land, collecting folk songs and composing his own music. The first excursions had been south of Oxford, around Belbury and Edgestow; most had been in Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset, following the old green tracks between hillforts and tumuli. They had been centred on Parr Hinton – then, a thriving village, deep in Salisbury Plain. The woods that surrounded it had become a sacred place for Kingfisher.

She jumped out of the entry to an article about Parr Hinton. It had been abandoned in 1943, when the military had requisitioned it for training purposes. Photographs showed broken, roofless houses. The church seemed well preserved. The steep-sided Mercy's Hill, dense with trees, loomed over the village. There was a bald patch on top of it where a stone circle stood, boring a hole in time. Kingfisher had fled there in 1916, after he had been invalided home. He had composed his 'Parr Hinton Fragments', and then apparently disappeared.

Another Wikipedia article discussed the Fragments. It began by describing them – a series of sketches for soloist, quartet, or full orchestra, running between three and ten minutes long, to be performed in an order chosen by drawing cards. It touched on the wax cylinders – field recordings of rural singers, made by Kingfisher in the summers before the war. They were to be played as part of the performance, their order and placing determined by rolling two dice.

A brief critical note was apparently sympathetic, but in fact dismissive. The work was too unstructured to have ever been performed; its fragmented structure was a sad result of shellshock; the famous Tarot quote demonstrated the extent to which Kingfisher's occult interests had corrupted his talent. The quote was given in full, pulled from one of his 1913 diary entries:

'Cards pulled at random hook deep truths; fragments hint at a whole, fluid and vast, always streaming by, impossible to grasp. I dream of a music as fresh as these old images always are; as this old world is, renewed each time my floating self perceives it.'

This led to a discussion of Marsyas. Kingfisher had seen the myths surrounding the Greek satyr as directly relevant to his music. But Marsyas had been flayed alive by Apollo, and so Sarah winced and skipped over the rest of the paragraph. The article finished by noting that Kingfisher's wax cylinders had been lost sometime before the Second World War. There was now no way for the Parr Hinton Fragments to be played according to his original instructions.

Pain flared in Sarah's lower back. She had been sitting at her desk for too long. A low static hiss told her of rain. Looking away from the screen, she was surprised to see that it was nearly three am. She stood up, and stretched. A sound snatched at her. It could have been a distant siren, fading out; it could have been someone whistling, out in the street. She went to the window.

There was a figure – something like a man – standing on the other side of the road, not quite in the light. She started as she saw that the creature was naked; that where there should have been skin, there was only a deep, clotted red. It was holding something white up to its mouth. Remembering the thin, high sound she had just heard, she imagined pipes, or perhaps a flute. She took a step back, suddenly afraid that she would attract its attention.

It moved, stepping towards the light, the white still at its mouth. She held her breath, but could not stop looking. Her imagination was filled with a sense of Peter, as he had been at the last. A failure to have seen is no barrier to vision. As the creature reached the streetlights, she saw that it had a shimmer to it. She had been expecting something ragged and burned, but to her surprise its flesh shone, as if it had been carved from red amber and then studded with so many rubies.

And then she took a step forwards, and was breathing again, for as the figure stepped fully into the light it revealed itself to be a man in a red tracksuit made slick by the rain, smoking a pale cigarette.

She realised that she couldn't remember how many days she had been up for. She went to bed, and let herself sleep. There were no dreams. When she woke up, it was about ten in the morning. She couldn't tell how long she had slept for; if only for a few hours, or for an entire day and another night. There was no food left in her cupboards. Her fridge was empty of all but a small container of spoiled milk, and a sad-looking onion.

There was another message from Aunt Veronica on the answerphone. This time, Sarah did return the call. Her Aunt's fussy concern broke over her like a cool spring, and she agreed to take the train down to Salisbury the next day.

The teabags had not been given enough time to steep. The lemon cake had a tart meanness to it. 'Such a shame not to have a man to look after you, dear' said Aunt Veronica. Sarah had been in her house for half an hour, and was already plotting ways she could leave.

'But then, that's your choice'.

The sun had pulled itself behind a cloud, as if scared that – if caught in the dusty room – it too would be offered a cup full of pale liquid, and would have to chew politely on dry bitterness, mumbling the occasional platitude to keep the conversation going.

'And how is your cello playing?'

'Violin, Aunt.'

'That's what I meant.'

'I play,' said Sarah. 'I teach.'

'Well, someone has to. It's very lucky that you don't really need to work, isn't it? Though I'm not sure it's what your mother meant for you.'

Sarah couldn't face an argument. A clock counted out the seconds. Veronica seemed to have squeezed out her entire stock of conversation. Sarah took another sip of tea, and winced.

'I was thinking of getting out for a bit' she said.

'Well, I'm always happy to walk into town, dear.'

'Maybe a drive, perhaps.'

'I couldn't take you too far. It would give me one of my heads.'

'I thought I might just – borrow your car.'

Aunt Veronica pursed her lips, pushing them together so hard that all colour left them.

'Oh.'

Sarah had said that she would stay for a few days. She couldn't just leave. She felt the possibility of any sort of escape receding. She reached desperately for somewhere to flee to.

'There's somewhere – very special to Peter. I'd like to go there – just me, and remember him.'

Veronica's lips decompressed a little.

'And where is this place?' she said.

'Parr Hinton. On the plain.'

‘Oh.’

Veronica reached forward, and poured herself another cup of tea. She did the same for Sarah. Sarah restrained herself from trying to stop her.

‘I don’t know the name.’

‘I would love you to come, Aunt. But – it would be fearfully dull for you. And I do so want to just be there, alone, with him.’

Veronica nodded, once, and then took her tarnished knife in hand, and went to start cutting at the remains of the cake.

‘I’ll see what I can do about the insurance, dear.’ she said.

First the A36, and then the B3083; each road nestling through soft, mounded landscapes, fields and pastures and woods touching at their edges. The countryside was all soft, clotted greens and browns; the sky dense with pastel clouds. Every so often the sun would break through, and the landscape – jewelled with water from the recent rain – would shimmer into life, suddenly bright and vibrant. And then, just as suddenly, the clouds would close round it again, and the trees and hills and hedges would lose all sharpness, becoming softly blotted once again.

Sarah was driving to the village of Chitterne. It was on the edge of the military areas of the plain, a few miles from Parr Hinton. She wasn’t sure if she’d push on beyond it. She assumed that she would be happy with a pub lunch, and maybe a short walk through the fields. And then she would return, driving as slowly as she could, and pretend to Veronica that she’d walked in the past with her memories of Robert. She had his book with her. She could read that, and think of him.

‘Parr Hinton?’ said the short postmistress. ‘You can’t go there. It’s far too dangerous.’

Sarah was surprised at how disappointed she felt.

‘Can you get close to it?’ she said.

The woman’s face softened, and she touched Sarah’s hand with her own.

‘I am sorry, love’ she said. ‘It’s the military.’

Sarah sighed.

‘Well, if it’s shut...’

‘I’d hate you to have a wasted journey’ said the postmistress, suddenly brightening. Sarah remembered the wet fields, shining into life. ‘You’re not a Michael Kingfisher fan?’

‘Yes’ said Sarah, and then: ‘How did you know?’

‘Well, you’re too young to be one of the people who used to live in Parr Hinton! And he’s the only other reason people ask about it. If you look over there’ – she waved towards a rack of paperbacks – ‘we’ve got his books.’

‘I didn’t know he’d written any.’

‘Oh, then you haven’t had a wasted journey!’ She beamed, overjoyed on Sarah’s behalf. ‘I’m so glad.’

The books were published by a small Glastonbury press. There was a ‘Songs of Wiltshire’, a ‘Critical Writings’, and a ‘Diaries 1911-1913’. Sarah bought all three, and then walked down the small High Street to the King’s Head pub. ‘Very friendly’, the Postmistress had said, ‘and they do a lovely Ploughman’s.’ And she was right.

After lunch, Sarah lost herself in leafing through her new purchases. She started with 'Songs of Wiltshire'. The book recorded the music that Kingfisher had found, walking across the county in those long summers before the First World War. She was surprised to see that there were only about six or seven different songs in the collection. Kingfisher had set down multiple versions of each one, carefully noting the differences between them. She flicked between songs, reading each one and then exploring the footnotes. Some mentioned Parr Hinton. One made her start:

'The words as given here were obtained from Mr Edward Verrall of Parr Hinton, a neighbour of Mr Henry Broadwood, who offered me lunch as I passed through the village early in 1912. The second verse differs from most other versions by replacing the words 'showed his ugly head' with 'skinless and shining red'. I thus take it to be an older variant of the song, referencing the Marsyas myth, which has found a remarkable new life in these parts.'

Sarah remembered the bloody figure who had chased her down to Dorset; the flayed man who haunted Peter's poetry. She put the book of songs down. Her plate had been tidied away. She emptied the last of her white wine, and then settled the bill.

Outside, the wind was dancing through the village, and the clouds had broken into soft fragments, leaving the sky a soft blue, dappled with white. The threat of rain had lifted, and the world felt fresh and alive. Sarah decided to walk as far as she could towards Parr Hinton.

But the road soon ended in a fence and a low gate. There was a military sign, warning her not to go any further. She thought about going on, but then imagined being stopped by a soldier, and sent back – the military once again coming between her and her brother.

Sadness surprised her for the second time that day, and she turned away. Accepting that for now the way was closed, she walked slowly back to the car, and the long drive back, and the sharp, controlling pain of two more days of Aunt Veronica.

'I was starting to get worried about you, Sarah!' said Debbie, shifting her glass of wine in her hand. 'You could have texted or something – you know, to let us know you were ok.'

'I just had to get through it. Lose myself a bit, I guess. I spent a lot of time trying to understand Peter's book.'

'His poetry? What's it like?'

'One of the poems is lovely. I'm not sure about the rest. The critics liked it.'

'That book was a surprise. I always thought you were the really creative one.'

'So did I.'

They talked into the evening. When the bar closed, it felt like hardly any time had passed. They walked each other to the bus stop. Sarah hugged Debbie onto her bus, and watched it recede; a great bright block of warmth and safety, roaring into the night. When Sarah got home, her flat seemed very quiet. Her drinks cupboard held gin and wine. She kicked off her shoes and poured herself a glass of red. The

sofa was so soft and warm. She had left her travelling bag just by it. The Kingfisher books peered out. They had saved her from Aunt Veronica.

Kingfisher had written lyrically about the people and landscapes of Dorset and Wiltshire. The 'Critical Writings' had gone some way to explaining the repetitive nature of 'Songs of Wiltshire'. He had been deeply concerned with improvisation, with personal remaking. 'Music should be a supple response to lived experience', he had written in 1912, 'dancing on the moment. To pin songs down into one, final interpretation is a kind of death for them. I think of butterflies, pinned in boxes; skulls, stripped of life, that can only ever show one hard dead face to the world.'

Sarah found herself remembering some of the songs. She tried to sing one of them to herself, but couldn't remember her way past the first line. She pulled 'Songs of Wiltshire' out, and – carefully avoiding the introduction, with its invocation of Marsyas – paged through it until she found the song. The melody was simple, tumbling off the stave; the words catchily evoked love, and then loss. She sang the first few lines, enjoying the way her tipsy voice twined round the song. Reaching the end of the first verse, she stopped, suddenly self-conscious. But the wine was at hand, and it was easy to pour another glass.

Sarah woke with a start. Pain thumped at her head, vague memories whirling around it. She made herself a coffee, and then tried to reconstruct the night before. She remembered singing, and music, and a slow and rhythmic thumping. There had been people playing with her. She must have been dreaming. Caffeine energised her enough to reach the living room. She was surprised to see her violin lying on the little coffee table, by 'Songs of Wiltshire'.

A shard of memory leapt to the front of her mind; shoes tumbling out of the cupboard as she dug around for her violin case. But there had been more than violins playing, last night. There had been those others. She remembered a flute, guitars, even drums, but of course that was absurd.

She saw that her laptop was turned on, and went to take a look at it. A rich, vinous smell reeked up and shook her as she passed the empty bottle of wine. The gin bottle was out and open too. Sitting down at her little desk, she saw that she had left several windows open. She paged through them.

Most were different YouTube pages. There was a man alone in his bedroom, singing 'The Farmer's Thorn'; black and white footage of a 60s folk band playing a sitar-driven version of 'T'owd yowe wi' one horn'; morris dancers, all shivering bells and drifting red ribbons, jiggling through 'Long Lankin'; and then many others, each a fresh interpretation of one of those three songs. These digital ghosts must have been her accompanists.

There was also an Amazon page: 'your order has been accepted'. She had apparently brought a copy of the 'Music and Landscape' series on DVD. It had already dispatched. 'I'll have to send it back when it gets here', she thought. There was a single review:

'The last TV documentaries Natalie Ashton made before she moved to New York. They introduce us to Vaughan Williams, Britten, Warlock and others. Pretty good for 1973, though some of the later programmes get quite abstract. Hey ho,

that's Ashton for you – and if you're a fan of her more avant garde stuff from the late 70s, you'll love 'em! A bargain for lovers of British classical music, too.'

The rest of the day passed slowly. Memories of the night before receded with her hangover, until all was something of a blur. One image stuck in her mind, though, for it had been the last to burn there before she had woken.

A man with a glistening red face had turned towards her and smiled, his eyes alive with sad recognition. For a moment she had forgotten to be afraid, feeling instead something between pity and wonder. And then understanding had crashed in like a misplayed chord, and she had been shocked into wakefulness.

She had thought that the immediate sharpness of her grief for Peter had started to recede. Clearly, she was wrong.

Over the next few days, Sarah tried to get out and about as much as possible. If she was at a loose end, she would go and sit in a café, or walk in one or other of London's parks. She took Peter's book with her; she had decided to try and reach a deeper understanding of it, as a kind of private apology to him.

Memories of her trip to Wiltshire, and her drive to Chitterne, combined with her reading of Kingfisher, helped her clarify some new aspects of the book. Peter had engaged obsessively with the countryside around Warminster, following traces of journeys that Kingfisher had made. In particular, he kept on returning to Parr Hinton, pulling words from its empty houses and woods, and from Mercy's Hill.

He had not been absorbed in camp life, she realised, when – in the two years following their mother's death – he had been so distracted, so out of touch. Instead, he had been using all the moments spared to him to lose himself in a deep relationship with that dead musician, and the landscapes they had shared. That relationship had borne fruit in the creation of this endlessly open, endlessly opaque collection of poems.

She saw Debbie again, meeting up with her for lunch. A couple she knew from the legal college had her over for supper. The temp who had replaced her had recently accepted an offer of full time work at the college. Rattling home on the tube, she had a sudden and surprisingly decisive feeling that a chapter in her life had closed. The money from Peter's life insurance cushioned her from any immediate need to either find work, or admit to the family that she needed to draw on her investments. She decided just to let things flow for a while.

There was an Amazon package waiting for her when she got home. She settled down on the sofa to open it. The image on the cover of the DVD set memories flaring in her mind. It was an aerial shot of Stonehenge. She was sure that it came from the Kingfisher documentary. Her childhood suddenly seemed so close.

When the DVD menu came up on her TV, she was surprised to see that there were only nine programmes shown. None of them were about Kingfisher. There was an 'extras' choice. She flicked the cursor to that, and was relieved to see that the Kingfisher documentary was included there. Wondering what kind of glitch had pulled it into this part of the DVD, she sat back, ready to watch.

Words shone out of the screen:

'The music for this film was largely based on Kingfisher's Parr Hinton Fragments. It was arranged and performed by Brian Mayhew, who withdrew all

usage rights early in 1982. The documentary shows some of director Natalie Ashton's first experiments with the narrative techniques that she would later build on in her more famous American work. We present it here stripped of its musical accompaniment.'

The documentary played on, silent but for the upper crust voice that Sarah remembered so well. Dry facts about Kingfisher flowed out; images of lush countryside danced by, cut together – Sarah now realised – with an acute and profoundly dynamic visual sensibility – but there was no music, and without music the film was only half complete. The narrator's voice annoyed her, and so she muted the sound. Watching the film to the end, she was pleased to see that its final sequences were as visually powerful as she had remembered.

Over the next few days, the absence of music in the documentary started to nag at her. Sequences of images would pop into her mind, and she would find herself imagining scores to set to them. Sometimes she would draw on melodies that she'd found in 'Songs of Wiltshire'. Sometimes, she would imagine synthesised music, and assume that she was remembering the programme's original soundtrack. Sometimes, she found herself dreaming of music that she could play herself. She would find that her fingers were tapping away in time with it, writing chords on the air.

She had put her violin in its case, but she hadn't returned it to the cupboard. It was sitting just by her sofa, surprising her every time she looked at it. She had expected to feel her old self-disgust returning; the sense of deep failure that had come to her when she had stepped back from life as a musician. Instead, an excitement at the possibility of making music for its own sake suffused her, an emotion that she hadn't felt for a long time. One day, returning from a long afternoon spent deep in the green embrace of Hyde Park, she reached down and pulled it out.

She started by playing a few scales, adjusting each string as she did so. At last, the violin sang beneath her fingers, perfectly in tune. She lifted the bow, ready to start playing, and then stopped. She had no music to hand, and she had never felt comfortable with improvisation.

She remembered the 'Songs of Wiltshire'. The book was lying on the coffee table, face down. She reached for it, turned to a song at random, propped the book open on the table top, and started to play. The simple melody leapt off her violin and flowed out into the air. There were six verses in the song; she played through them all, whispering the words to herself as she went. The melody was very simple, but it had a deep, implacable catchiness to it. When she stopped playing, it ran on inside her mind, only slowly fading away.

Looking for something fresh, she turned the page, and found the same song again. Remembering Kingfisher's determination to communicate different versions of the songs that he'd recorded, she went through it carefully. The melody had been lightly shifted at several points. Some of the words had been changed, too, and Kingfisher had also noted that this version of the song was played more slowly and mournfully than most. Sarah was surprised at the extent to which such small changes altered the song, lending it a deep, fresh gravity. On finishing, she turned the page to the next version, and then to the one beyond, playing quickly though each.

As she did so, she started to understand what Kingfisher had been trying to achieve. Each subtle variation was a small lesson in how to take something that already existed, and in small but important ways make it new. Kingfisher sought to teach his readers the art of variation, and through that, improvisation. Realising this, Sarah felt liberated. Rather than turning to the book to find new interpretations of the song, she began to create her own responses to it, playing the simple melody through again and again, altering it a little each time. She stood up, and began to sway with the music that she was making.

As she played, she was reminded of Peter's poetry. Like Kingfisher, perhaps he too sought to not just deploy his own creativity, but to inspire it in his audience. The frustrating gaps in his poems – the missing words, the uncompleted sentences, the only half resolved narratives – could be there, she realised, to provide space for his readers to complete each poem for themselves, in ways entirely personal to them.

She remembered the documentary, and wondered what it would be like to use it as a trigger for improvisation. She put down her violin, cued up the DVD, and hit play. At first, she found it difficult to respond to the on-screen images. She was used to reading music in staves and notes; to find it in moving images and fragmented sentences was a daunting leap. She remembered the song she had just been playing, and let a few random passages shrill out. They seemed to work against Ashton's images. Sarah felt an odd embarrassment, but she kept playing, experimenting with different tunes and tempos.

Soon, she found a music that meshed with Ashton's images. She let the melodies of the folk songs that Kingfisher had collected dance out of her violin. Songs that he had composed began to spin out too, reworked by memory. The fit with Ashton's images became seamless. Jagged noise reflected footage of the trenches. Then, the programme entered its last few minutes, covering Kingfisher's final period - his stay in Craiglockart Hospital, his escape to Parr Hinton, the composition of the Fragments.

Images flared across the screen; some of them were familiar to her, some seemed entirely new. There was Stonehenge, and then the low tumuli that surrounded it; there was Silbury Hill, and the stones at Avebury. They seemed to form a kind of visual algebra, a puzzle that demanded completion through sound. Mercy's Hill loomed out again and again. The camera danced through dense green woods. She felt her violin leap under her hand like something living, and her music became part of a chorus.

Of course, it was impossible. The programme had no soundtrack. It seemed that she had played as part of an orchestra, an orchestra combining classical instruments and rough, rural recordings with ferocious electronic noise. There were words, too, more fluid and evocative than anything the original narrator had said. Old and new musics flowed together, in salute to Kingfisher, and to the landscapes that had so inspired him.

And then there was a sense of presence, too. At first, there was just a scent – something rich and dark and bloody. Then, there was a sound – the thin high piping of a whistle, leading the aural dance that she had become a part of. Something bright was reflected in the television screen, standing just behind her, shifting and flowing in time with the music. She was too focussed on her playing to turn. When

the morris men leapt across the screen, the red flutter of their ribbons was a sudden visual rhyme with its dancing image.

The music leapt and soared towards a peak, building up with the soft inevitability of a thunderstorm. But as it did so Sarah felt her playing falter. There was magnificence before her, as vale, and hill, and wood, as tumulus, and standing stone, and henge, as farmer, and priest, and midwife, flew across the screen together – but she felt her grasp on them weaken, and the language she had to respond to them slip away from her. No matter what notes she threw out, her improvised solution to the puzzle that they represented was falling away into incoherence.

There was no-one playing but herself, and her own failed music embarrassed her. She stopped playing, and let violin and bow swing away from each other and down, becoming once again nothing more than dead wood and steel and horsehair. She took a step back, and turned, and for a second there was the ghost of a creature there. It was standing manlike and staring at her, its eyes alive with joy, its rose-petal flesh glowing out – at once so open to the world, and so vulnerable to it.

It let the pipes fall away from its mouth – white teeth flashing against the red – and, fearless at last, she found herself reaching out to it. But there was nothing there to touch and hold on to. Wine-red lights were spinning across the wall as an ambulance passed by outside, its siren wailing succour into the night, and then there was darkness.

Sarah slumped, collapsing onto the sofa. The last few images of the documentary rolled by, and then the titles began but – exhausted – she had fallen into a deep sleep before her head hit the cushion.

That night, her brother's words leapt through her dreams like fire. But at the moment when she thought that she was about to step past his art and touch his living presence, dawn ignited and burnt out the night.

'If you could be quieter in your flat I'd appreciate it' said the neighbour.

'I'm sorry' said Sarah.

'I like music as much as the next person – but it's been twice, now. If you could get a rehearsal room for your band?'

'I'm not in a band, Mrs Ensor. I've heard music too. I think someone's playing their stereo too loud.'

'I'm going to talk to the building committee if it happens again.'

Sarah had spent the day at the English Folk Song and Dance Society in Camden, consulting the original manuscript of the Parr Hinton Fragments. She retained a deep sense of frustration that she had not been able to match the documentary's final section with appropriate music. She only had confused memories of that first session; subsequent attempts to recapture the intensity of her playing had ended in failure. So, she had decided to seek inspiration in the Fragments. She had also found Natalie Ashton's website. There was an email address on it, so Sarah had written to her asking about the documentary's soundtrack. She could find no recent information about Brian Mayhew, or his music.

The manuscript was a remarkable document. Sarah could see why generations of music scholars had been so baffled by – and hence so dismissive of – it. Rather than presenting a finished composition, it challenged its reader to create

their own piece, using a range of pre-defined components. Kingfisher had dedicated it to 'those who are reaped by those who would control'.

Shards of music were presented, to be combined in any order. There were specific instructions concerning Kingfisher's wax cylinders. He advised the use of dice to randomly select individual ones to play, at random points during the performance. Sarah had jotted down some of the work's key themes, but had had to sadly conclude that – without Kingfisher's recordings and a number of supporting musicians – she would be unable to do it justice as a performer.

That evening, she read through Peter's book again. She was finding it much easier to engage with. Reading it now felt like a collaboration with the poet. Where she had once found only an echo of his speech in it, now his living mind seemed to drift behind his words. Losing herself in his work, she almost felt that she was in conversation with him, responding to the openness of his work with memories, thoughts, even stories of her own.

She could even stand to read about the flayed man, understanding now how he fitted into the pattern of the whole. Marsyas the satyr – a god of fluid, improvised music, skinned by Apollo for challenging him – had become for both Peter and Kingfisher an image of openness betrayed; of the many ways that the world carved away at its own finest, most lively products. Both men had been to war, and – in their different ways – seen such threshing at first hand.

It struck her as she read that it would be fascinating to combine Peter's words with the Parr Hinton Fragments. The two were already so closely linked. Absorbed in thoughts of poetry and music working together, she didn't check her laptop until late in the evening. When she did, she was surprised to find a note from Natalie Ashton.

Sarah –

Thanks for your email. I'm glad you enjoyed the documentary. It was an important ignition point for me. Kingfisher was a remarkable man.

I don't know what happened to Brian. We all got very involved in the music. We went to do some work on Parr Hinton. You could say Parr Hinton did some work on us. Brian didn't take it very well. In the end I think the work he did scared him. I don't think he'll give you a copy of the music, but you never know. He was certainly the last person to have the wax cylinders. I've attached an ecard with the last contact details I had for him. I haven't talked to him for years.

I must look up your brother's poetry. It sounds fascinating. I'm sorry for your loss.

N

When Mayhew picked the phone up, the first thing he said was:

'Hello? Sarah?'

It had only rung once. He must have been sitting right next to it.

'That's me. Have you heard about me from Natalie Ashton?'

'Who? No, I haven't spoken to her for years. He said you'd call.'

'Who's he?'

'I've got to meet you. I've got something to give you. Where can I see you?'

Mayhew's voice was suffused with a desperate kind of fear. Sarah wondered about the wisdom of meeting him.

'Are you still there?' he said. 'I have to see you. I have to give you the music.'

'The Kingfisher music?'

'From the programme, yes. He wants you to have it.'

Sarah was torn. She did want the music, but Mayhew was scaring her.

'Could you tell me who said I'd call?' she said, stalling for time.

'It's got to be somewhere public' said Mayhew.

That seemed sensible. If she met him in an open, crowded space, she was reasonably confident that she would be safe. She reached a decision.

'I'm in London. Are you coming from Hove?'

She could find out who'd told him about her when they met.

'Yes' he said. 'There's a Starbucks in Victoria Station, opposite the bus rank. I can give you the recordings there. Tomorrow morning. Eleven.'

'Does that include the wax cylinders?' she said, but Mayhew had already slammed down the phone.

Mayhew was a short, overweight man. He had wrapped a shabby overcoat around himself. A tie peaked out of the v of a v-neck jumper, bright against a drab and dirty shirt. There were remnants of food spattered across it. He hadn't shaved that morning. He brought a stale sweat tang with him into the busy café.

'It's here.'

He hadn't stopped to buy a coffee, had barely sat down before he was fumbling a glittering silver disc out of his pocket.

'All the music – on here. Take it.'

He pushed the DVD-ROM across the table, watching intently as Sarah picked it up and put it in her bag.

'You've got it now, haven't you? I've handed it over. Nice and easy to listen to?'

'Yes', said Sarah. 'It should be.'

'Good.' He was already standing up, ready to go. 'I've done it.' He looked around, as if searching for someone watching. 'I've given it to her!' he shouted. 'You can go back to Parr Hinton now! You can leave me alone!'

'Wait' she said. 'How did you know me? And are the field recordings on there too?'

'I've done what he asked me to.'

'Please...'

Sarah gave him her best pleading look. He sighed, sat back down, and then leaned forward conspiratorially. It was difficult not to flinch away. One hand was scrabbling in another pocket.

'He gave me a picture of you. Said I should keep the music safely stored for when you called. I was going to burn it all.'

'Who did?'

'You know who!' His voice was suddenly loud. She noticed a couple at a next door table turning to look at them. 'You know who.' Now, he was whispering. 'The song in the woods. The river in the green. The flayed man.'

Grief, then outrage, prickled through her.

‘You know about my brother, don’t you? You and Natalie – oh, that’s cruel. What are you playing at, Mayhew?’

Mayhew looked genuinely mystified.

‘Your brother?’

He had found what he had been looking for. He pulled it out of his pocket. It was a piece of paper, with brown, dry leaves stuck to it. Taken together, they could have formed the shape of a face. They were smudged with bloody fingerprints.

Now Sarah was pushing her own chair backwards. She just wanted to leave this man and his dead, sick madness.

‘Look’ he said, pointing at the withered leaves. ‘It’s you.’

She was standing up.

‘I recognised you as soon as I saw you. He came to me just after I saw the bloody programme again, just when I was about to strike the first match, and told me to keep the music for you now. Today.’

As she turned and started to hurry, walking as fast as she could without running, she heard him shout:

‘He took the cylinders himself! He said he’d keep them safe for you, but you’d have to go to him to get them!’

The meeting with Mayhew confused and saddened her. His madness seemed to have found a hook in her brother’s death. She sat on the bus, wondering whether she’d even play the disc. When she got home, she nerved herself for gibberish; possibly something deeply offensive. But Mayhew had been true to his word. The disc was full of MP3s, each one neatly labelled, each one a recognisable component of the Parr Hinton Fragments.

Mayhew was a talented multi-instrumentalist. His reworking of the fragments combined synthesiser and live playing, to create versions of Kingfisher’s music that both referred back to the composer’s time and looked forward into a 1970s vision of the future. As she listened, Sarah began to tap her fingers, imagining how she could play over the recordings, collaborating with them to create something new. Peter’s words would fit well with them too, she thought, seasoning their 70s feel with something far more contemporary.

However, her excitement soon began to turn to frustration. The field recordings shouted their absence. Listening to Mayhew’s work, and remembering as best she could the programme’s original soundtrack, Sarah was struck by how much texture they had added. There was nothing about Mayhew’s work that directly touched the archaic sources that had been so important to Kingfisher. The addition of Kingfisher’s field recordings would have changed that. Reaching the end of Mayhew’s work, Sarah felt that she had listened to music that only approximated Kingfisher’s vision. It failed to embody it.

Sitting back, she realised that she had been using the music to avoid thinking about what Mayhew had said. Kingfisher’s obsession with Marsyas had touched him, as it had touched her brother, and her. But Mayhew had only been able to find madness in it. It was sad that such instability had existed in him; sadder still that – she assumed – it had led to the destruction of Kingfisher’s field recordings.

She remembered Ashton’s comment. Parr Hinton had indeed done some work on Mayhew. The silent village suddenly struck her as being something like

Robert's poetry, or Kingfisher's music; a half-made empty structure, waiting for an observing mind to bring it to subjective life. It was sad that the life Mayhew had brought to it had been so warped, that he had not been able to realise that he himself was animating the visions that he saw.

She shook her head, and smiled. She was thinking too much about all this. But the image of the village as a trigger to creativity persisted in her mind, intriguing her. She realised that she wanted to visit the place that had so inspired Kingfisher, and her brother, and Ashton, and led Mayhew into such fear. She was curious as to what it would awaken in her; whether it would help her find a way to bring all their different musics together.

It was decided, then, she thought to herself.

She would travel to Parr Hinton.

And a part of herself that she almost refused to hear wondered what ghosts she might find there.

It was almost midnight when Sarah reached Chitterne. She hoped that the darkness would make it easier to avoid any military presence. She left her rental car just down the road from the warning sign. She didn't look at it as she passed, not wanting to be warned off. The woods closed in on the road as she walked. Sarah realised how much of a city girl she'd become. Every rustle around her suggested a presence. She had been glad of the white, shining moon, feeling that its bright light would guide her and help her avoid danger. Now that brightness was making the shadows that surrounded her so very dense.

An owl's smoke-soft hooting drifted in the void. She thought of Mayhew. He had described the flayed man as 'the music in the woods'. She found it comforting to think of the night sounds around her as a kind of performance. The music was soft, and subtle – the wind shushing in the trees, leaves brushing against each other, the calls of hunting animals. A fox barked; a few minutes ago, it would have made her jump, but now, filtered through the muting branches, imagined as a single note in a dense aural weave, it had nothing jarring to it. She found that she was imagining the forest as a giant organic harp, trembling into song as nature moved within and across it. Every few moments there would be a fresh, new melody. None of them would ever be repeated.

Cresting a hill, she found that she was looking down on the village of Parr Hinton. She recognised it from the Kingfisher documentary. Cottages ran down the main and side streets like ghosts of themselves, black windows empty, and the church steeple rose above it all. She thought of a conductor at his lectern, standing over an orchestra. She had expected the village to be in darkness, but to her surprise saw that lights were flickering in some of the small windows. An army unit must have taken up residency for the night. A closer look confirmed it. There was a small group of tanks parked up on the village green, dense blots of darkness in the night. Their crews must have been very relaxed – the sound of untrained voices singing drifted up towards her.

She didn't want to go down into the village while it was occupied. Looking up the small valley, she realised that she could enter the woods and skirt round Parr Hinton, climbing Mercy's Hill when she reached it. She'd be able to explore the stone circle atop it by moonlight, and could then come down and look round the village

when – as she hoped they would – the soldiers moved on at dawn. She could while away the remaining hours of the night listening to Mayhew’s music, and imagining how to set Peter’s words – and her own playing – against it. She set off into the woods.

She was soon lost. The path through the green had petered out, and she found herself stumbling along, tripping over roots and falling into branches. The sense of peace she’d felt earlier deserted her. The voices from the village disrupted the music of the night, their dissonance making it jagged. Soon, she was tumbling into a light panic, half walking and half running through the night.

A deep sense of presence began to oppress her. She imagined soldiers moving through the darkness, olive drab camouflage folding them into their surroundings. Her brother had been a soldier, so she shouldn’t feel threatened; but then she remembered his tales of squaddies, of their sometimes casual brutality, and fear sparked imagination, and she began to run.

Branches snatched at her like cold, brittle fingers. The moonlight helped her avoid most of them, but some still hit and stung her. There seemed to be no way out of the trees. Every so often she would glimpse the village beneath her, but running downhill brought the edge of the forest no nearer. The wind in the leaves whispered threats in secret languages. For a while, she tried to keep to a straight line, going neither up nor down – but Mercy’s Hill, looming against the stars, never seemed to come any closer. She climbed up, but could not find the hill’s crest.

The incline became steeper and steeper, until at last she was scrabbling on her hands and knees, climbing earth rather than running on it. Her breath whistled in the night. A root slipped under her foot, and she found herself falling, and falling, and falling. Enough time to be surprised by the memory of a little lost otter called Portly, in a book she’d read as a child; and then she hit the ground hard, and there was no longer any world to fall down through.

A fire was dancing in front of her. Beyond that, there was the shape of a man, sitting on a log, firelight making his face a collage of scarlet and shadow. The brightness of flame stopped her from seeing anything else but darkness. She went to sit up.

‘No. Don’t’

The voice was at once deep, and gentle. She thought of a stream, running over rocks; spring leaves rustling; the deep creak of branches, pulled at by the wind.

‘You took quite a knock. You should lie there, for now. There’s water at hand.’

There was indeed – a small, battered flask. She reached for it, and drank. Coolness spread through her, soothing the pounding in her mind. She was reminded of her last hangover. When had that been? A few days ago? A month? Longer? She felt that she had stepped outside time.

‘Is that better?’ said the man.

‘Yes. Thank you.’

She lay back. A soft breeze shivered across her, bringing voices. The soldiers were still singing, but now their music seemed softer and more distant.

‘Who are you?’ she said. ‘Are you one of them?’

The man laughed.

'No. Not that, not at all. I'm what you might call a caretaker. A gardener.'

'Where are we?'

'On my hill. By the stones. I found you in the woods, and carried you here. It's lucky I was passing by.'

'Yes.'

'Now, you should rest. Can I play for you?'

'Play?'

'I have my pipes here. It will help you sleep, and heal.'

'Won't the soldiers hear us?'

'No. They're singing themselves. They can't find us tonight.'

'Oh. Ok.'

White flashed on the other side of the fire, as the man's instrument came out. He put it to his lips, and started to play. Sarah thought for a moment that it was very important that she should try and see him. But then soft notes were drifting in the air like smoke, completing the songs of the soldiers, and of the forest, and of the night; and it was so very hard for her to stay awake. There was one question she had to ask, though, before his music soothed her into a far gentler darkness than the one she had emerged from.

'Are you my brother?'

He laughed again – but this time, so much more sadly.

'I knew your brother well, Sarah. But Peter died in Basra, and you buried him four months ago.'

'I wanted to tell him I was sorry...'

'It's too late for that, now. But there are other ways for you to reach him.'

And then, the music began again, and Sarah could not stop it from pulling her into sleep.

Soft dew had landed on Sarah's face, chilling it. That, and the high whine of heavy diesel engines throttling into gear, woke her. She opened her eyes. The broken village was fresh in the dawn. Four tanks were driving out of it, carving brown tracks in the fields as they passed. She lay still until they had passed over the brow of the hill, and out of sight.

She was lying by the remains of a camp fire. Beyond it, a circle of stones, slewed like a nipple on the slope of Mercy's Hill; and then trees, and then, below, the empty village. Her head was nestled on her pack, her sleeping bag carefully draped over her. Sitting up, she found that she had been sleeping on a bed of light branches and leaves.

There was no sign of anyone else.

She stood up, and shook herself down. Something dark and sticky was smeared across her coat; sap, she thought at first, but then saw that it was red on her hand when she tried to brush it away. Perhaps she had bled when she had fallen – but, feeling her head, she could find no trace of a wound.

A couple of minutes, and she was walking down into the village. The church was locked. She thought of the subtle poetry that her brother had found in it; the music that it had inspired in Kingfisher; the madness that had come to Mayhew. None of that was evident now. In the dawn light, it only looked broken and empty – something like a half-built stage set, or a canvas awaiting paint. She poked around in

some of the houses, but there was nothing to be found beyond empty ration packs and a few broken chairs and tables.

Walking back to the car only took a few minutes. Sarah was surprised at how at ease she felt; how happy she was not to have been overwhelmed by the experience of Parr Hinton. Robert's poetry and Kingfisher's music still existed, two different ways of understanding it. Mayhew stood as a warning. Now, she was free to develop her own interpretation of the empty village, and of the wider world of which it was a part. She passed the military sign by the gate, and smiled to herself.

The car was where she had left it. She went to unlock it, and then, opening the door, was surprised to see a large wooden box on the passenger seat. She pulled its cover off. It was full of small leather tubes, each one tied shut with a bit of twine. Dried leaves and moss had been packed between the tubes to cushion and protect them. She picked one out. It had a handwritten label on it – 'Chilmark, August 18th, 1912 – John Addiscombe, Long Lankin'. There were also two numbers printed on it, a four and a one. Looking back into the box, she could see that all the other tubes had similar labels on, and were similarly numbered. None of the numbers went higher than six.

Astonished, and wanting to be sure that she should be astonished, Sarah untied the cord that held the case together. One end of it opened up; she shook it gently, and a wax cylinder dropped out, falling into her waiting hand as if it had always been meant to be there.

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