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opening extract from

# Sylvie and the Songman

written by

## Tim Binding

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*Every creature has a song*
*The song of the dogs*
*And the song of the doves*
*The song of the fly*
*The song of the fox*
*What do they say?*

Adin Steinsaltz
From Steve Reich's *Three Tales*





# *Chapter One*

*Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,*
*In the forest of the night:*
*What immortal hand or eye,*
*Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

Sylvie recited the poem along with the rest of the class. It was the last lesson of the day. George was sitting next to her trying to kick her legs. Their form teacher, Miss Coates, stood in front of them, her eyes scanning the room for anybody who hadn't yet learned it properly. The first lines of the poem seemed straightforward enough, the tiger with his bright shining eyes prowling through the jungle, but she couldn't get her head round the second half too well. Immortal hand – what did that mean? And symmetry? She'd never even heard of the word. But despite it all, it did

make a sort of sense, this fabulous beast with its great rippling body and huge padded paws.

She and Dad had been to the zoo the Sunday before last. The zoo was down by the coast, with large pens for the animals that ran down to the marshes. Beyond lay the sea and the abandoned lighthouse that always seemed shrouded in mist. It had been a strange day. All the animals had seemed on edge, running back and forth in their compounds, calling to one another in shrill, agitated voices – all except one: the solitary tiger. He lay stretched out on the ground, his great head on the packed earth, as if he was listening to something far away. His cage was set back, a fenced-off no man's land in between him and the path. He was lying near the bars. Sylvie had stood as close as possible, drawn to his immense size, his frightening weight, the strange, unsettling quietness of him.

'I wonder what he's thinking,' she had said.

'A man once wrote, If a tiger could talk, we wouldn't understand a word he said,' Dad told her.

Sylvie frowned. 'I don't get it,' she said.

'What he meant was that tigers don't see the world as we see it. No animal does. If the tiger could paint you a picture of how the world looked to him, you wouldn't recognize it. How we talk – well, that's a way of describing our world: a tall tree, a brown cow, a red sky. So if a tiger could speak, he would not describe what we saw, but what he saw, and it would sound as

strange to us as if he was an alien from outer space. Do you understand?'

Sylvie had nodded her head, but she didn't really. Yet looking at the tiger that day, she had an inkling of what her father had meant. What lay behind those eyes? What went on in that great head? When he looked at her, what did he see? A thirteen-year-old girl with long fair hair, thin and strong and small for her age? A friend? A foe? A snack in-between meals? As if in answer to her silent questions, the tiger had raised his immense head and stared back, first at her hands, and then straight into her eyes. She could feel his presence boring into her. It was almost as if he was trying to tell her something. Then, without warning, he bared his teeth and, throwing back his head, gave a huge roar, a wild animal sound, fit for a untamed forest, standing proud on the point of a craggy rock, not hemmed in on a patch of arid ground in a corner of Kent. She had stood back, ashamed.

George kicked her legs again. A sharp voice broke in from the front of the class.

'Sylvie! Did you hear what I said?'

'What?' Sylvie jumped back to the present, still thinking about that day. She was completely lost. The class murmured. Trouble ahead.

Miss Coates tapped her fingernails on her desk, making a hollow drumming sound, like rain on a tin roof. She was a nice enough form teacher but, like most

teachers, hated it when you didn't pay attention.

'So enlighten us all please, Sylvie: symmetry. What do you think it means?'

Sylvie glanced around. George was looking down at his desk, trying not to be noticed. He was staying over in two days' time. Then it was the last day of school and the beginning of the summer holidays.

'Well, Sylvie,' Miss Coates intoned. 'All agog, we are, waiting.'

There was a ripple of laughter. Miss Coates glanced triumphantly around the room.

Sylvie didn't know what the word meant, but in her mind she saw the tiger in front of her, pacing up and down in his cage, sunlight falling on the length of his massive body, his muscles rippling under his skin with each step he took; his domed head, his slow sweeping tail, his heavy trembling mouth all waiting, watching, every part of him ready to jump into action, to tear the world apart.

'Perfect, Miss Coates. Does it mean something like perfect? Like everything about a tiger is just so.'

And Miss Coates had to admit that, yes, it did mean something like that: there was something about a tiger that was just so.

The bell rang. School was over for another day.

On Mondays and Tuesdays Sylvie stayed behind. Mondays she worked in the library, doing her home-



work, Tuesdays she learned the flute. But today was Monday, and after an hour and a half's homework she caught the bus down to the station and the train home. Sylvie and her dad lived on the edge of their small Kentish village, at the end of a row of semi-detached houses, red brick and ivy on the outside, wooden floors and high ceilings inside. It was an ordinary sort of house, a bit messy, in need of a coat of paint – though, being at the end, they had a bigger garden than most of their neighbours. However, the one out-of-the-ordinary part of the house was Sylvie's bedroom.

Once it had been the attic, dark and uninviting, full of broken furniture and cardboard boxes, but on Sylvie's twelfth birthday Dad had converted it into her very own room, as long as the whole house, with a huge window knocked into the roof from where she could look down onto the back garden and the disused railway track that ran along the back of it. The stairs leading up to it were not fixed onto the walls but were attached to the inside of the trapdoor, and were pulled down onto the landing by means of a long rope. Sylvie had hung Mum's last photograph, the one with her waving in her green swimsuit, on the wall facing the stairs, so every time she went to bed, it was as if Mum

was wishing her goodnight. Most of the time the steps were left down, but when she felt like it, Sylvie could climb up to her bedroom and pull them up like a drawbridge, sealing the bedroom off from the rest of the house. She liked shutting herself away sometimes, having the world and her room all to herself. It made her feel strong, as if nothing could stop her from being who she was, and who she wanted to be.

Mum had disappeared three years ago, before Sylvie and Dad's very eyes. The three of them had been out at Durdle Door, where the cliffs form a great arch into the sea and the beach shelves deeply into the water. Sylvie wasn't allowed to swim there because the tow was so strong, but Mum loved it, riding the waves, playing with the current as it washed her to and fro, in and out of the arch. The greater the swell, the longer she stayed, laughing at its strength. She'd come back, her eyes shining with excitement, her skin glowing as if the water had brought it alive. She always seemed restless and a little sad after a good swim; she seemed sorry to be back on dry land. But that day she went in and vanished. Coastguards were called out, lifeboats and fishing boats searched the coastline for days on end, but they never found her.

Sylvie missed her. Every day she missed her. There was a part of her that was hollow now. She could feel it somewhere between her heart and her stomach, an aching gap she knew would never be filled. Sometimes

it ached more than she could bear, but good or bad it was always there – always would be too. Sometimes she felt as though she would see her mum again one day, not in heaven or as a ghost – things she didn't quite believe in – but here on earth, standing by her bed or coming out of the waves at Durdle Door, but she knew it would never happen. Her mum was gone for ever.

Opening the back door, she called out, 'Wakey-wakey, Mr Jackson. I'm home.'

The old dog blinked and wagged his way out of his basket. Mr Jackson was nearly as old as she was – older if you counted him in dog years. Part collie, part Labrador, he was a black, comfortable, obstinate dog, with inquisitive eyebrows and devoted brown eyes. When he was young, he used to bark at almost everything – bicycles, prams, skateboards – but even in his old age the two things that still set him off were hot-air balloons and the moon.

A few days earlier, he'd disappeared on one of his walkabouts, as Dad called them, and come back looking tired and hungry and with his voice completely gone. At first it was something of a relief, but it still hadn't returned, and he was beginning to look rather miserable. 'Where the bloody hell have you been?' Dad had shouted in mock anger, and Mr Jackson had wagged his tail sheepishly, happy to be home. During that terrible holiday he'd lost his name tag and Mum

had sewn a leather pouch onto his collar, and folded a letter inside which read, *My name is Mr Jackson and I'm a bit lost. Here is my address and telephone number. Please get in touch. My family need me*. She'd written it only a few days before she'd disappeared herself. Every once in a while Sylvie took the note out, unfolded it and stared at the bold handwriting with the swirled flourishes, the last thing her mum had ever written. My family need me.

Perhaps the letter he carried was the reason why Mr Jackson liked the letter song so much. It was one of Dad's favourites, and when Sylvie was young, he used to hold her in his arms and sing it to her while she fell asleep. Every time Mr Jackson heard it, the same thing happened.

*'I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter*
*And make believe it came from you . . .'*

Mr Jackson would come up beside them and try and sing along in a soft, whispering howl. Dad would keep on singing:

*'I'm gonna write words, oh so sweet*
*They're gonna knock me off my feet*
*A lotta kisses on the bottom*
*I'll be glad I got 'em . . .'*

Mr Jackson would roll around on the floor and stick his legs in the air. Sylvie would chuckle sleepily as the last verse came.

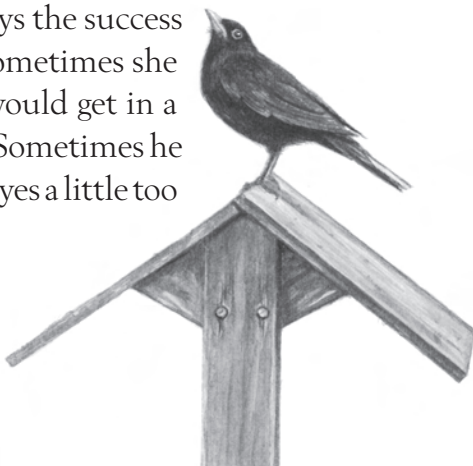
*'I'm gonna smile and say "I hope you're feeling better"*
*And close "with love" the way you do,*
*I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter*
*And make believe it came from you.'*

And along with Sylvie, Mr Jackson would curl up and fall asleep. He just loved that song.

Sylvie took a slice of bread from the bread bin. 'Come on, Mr Jackson,' she said. 'Time for your constitutional.'

Outside, the old blackbird with the one white feather in his tail flew down and perched on the roof of the little bird table, chirping away while she broke the bread into pieces. He was almost tame, the way he followed her about. Then it was time for flute practice. She'd rather have watched television, but Dad would be upset if she hadn't done her regulation half-hour by the time he got home.

Although Sylvie looked forward to him coming home, the evenings weren't always the success they both wanted them to be. Sometimes she had too much work to do and would get in a temper if he refused to help out. Sometimes he came home smelling of beer, his eyes a little too



bright, his manner a little too friendly, as if he wanted everything to be, yes, just so, and the day would end unfinished, with a nasty taste in their mouths. But sometimes the evenings were perfect: Mr Jackson lay in front of the fire, nice and cosy, while she and Dad talked and watched a murder mystery; if the weather was good enough, he stretched out on the little patio watching them play a game of badminton on the back lawn. Then it was just the three of them, Sylvie and her dad and Mr Jackson, against the world.

Dad's name was Daniel. He played bassoon in a London orchestra, the Orchestra of Light. He didn't earn a lot of money. Sylvie didn't even have a mobile phone yet, though he'd promised her one this coming birthday. As well as working in an orchestra Dad was also a composer. When he wasn't working in London, he was busy in his wooden hut at the bottom of their garden. The trouble was, no one wanted to listen to his music except Mr Flowerdew, Sylvie's music teacher at school. Mr Flowerdew was Dad's oldest friend, a sort of unofficial uncle to her. Although at home she called him Uncle Alex, at school she had to call him Mr Flowerdew. Sometimes she got it all mixed up and called him Uncle Alex in class and Mr Flowerdew at home, but he just laughed it off with an understanding wink.

Back in the kitchen, she opened up the sack of feed. 'Dinner time!' she called out. 'Where's your bowl, Mr

Jackson? Where's your bowl?'

Mr Jackson came trotting over, his enamel bowl gripped between his jaws, his tail wagging furiously. She measured out three handfuls, topped it up with cold water and laid it on the floor.

'Wolf it down,' she said. He set to it with abandon, pushing the bowl across the floor as he buried his nose deep into the mixture.

She could still hear him crunching it down as she climbed the stairs and set up her music stand. On the wall above her bed was the poster of this year's summer concert in Hyde Park. All the top stars were going to be there, their names ranged in importance. At the very bottom, in much smaller letters, she could read, *Also Appearing: The Orchestra of Light, Conductor Walter Klopstock.* Dad playing in a pop concert! They were booked to play in the early evening, in between the afternoon and evening events. Walter Klopstock had even promised that Dad might be able to perform one of his own compositions. Dad had become both dreadfully excited and desperately nervous. Every spare waking hour was spent in the hut, trying to get everything exactly right.

Sylvie had just started her practice when the back door opened and Dad called out. He was home early, and by the smell coming up the stairs, he'd brought back an Indian takeaway. She clattered down the stairs. They hadn't had curry in weeks.

Dad was holding the bulging paper carrier high in the air and his round face was smiling.

'Chicken tikka masala, king prawn biriani, two onion bhajees, one pilau rice, one peshwari nan and four poppadoms. How's Mr Jackson? Still not a hundred per cent? Voice not back yet?'

Sylvie shook her head. Dad stood over him.

'Well, he doesn't look ill, does he?' He felt Mr Jackson's nose. It was perfectly cold and wet. 'Nothing wrong there,' he said.

'Well, something's not right,' Sylvie insisted. 'I mean, he doesn't look happy, does he?' Mr Jackson raised his baleful eyes. She was right. He didn't look happy at all.

'You know, it may not just be him,' Dad declared, setting out the containers. 'Apparently half the animals at the zoo have lost their voices too. There's some sort of virus going round. Perhaps we brought it back with us on that last visit.' He reached down and ruffled Mr Jackson's head. 'In a bad way, are you? Not tickety-boo? Well, if it doesn't clear up in the next day or two, we'd better take him to the V-E-T – eh, old boy? Now come on, let's have this food before it all gets cold.'

Sylvie prised the lids off the silver-foil boxes while Dad fished a can of beer out of the back of the fridge. Mr Jackson sat by the table, licking his lips in anticipation, his spirits momentarily raised. Takeaways usually meant extra grub.

Sylvie sat down and helped herself to the steaming food. 'How's it going?' she said, breaking a poppadom in two.

'Great.' Dad poked his rice about the plate. That meant it wasn't going well at all.

Sylvie bit into the dark red chicken. It was hot and spicy, just as she liked it. 'Did Klopstock agree?' she asked. Walter Klopstock was famous for his fiery temper. It seemed to go with the territory.

Dad nodded. 'I get fifteen minutes, all the instruments. Me and Uncle Alex.'

'No, Dad, I meant the backstage pass.'

'Oh, that. I haven't asked him yet.' Sylvie looked disappointed. 'Don't worry. I will. It just slipped my mind. There's so much to do. Alex is coming round this Thursday and I want to have everything ready by then.'

She looked at his worn suit and his shock of uncombed hair and the big baby face that tried to hide his thoughts and feelings but revealed so much.

'Don't worry, Dad.' She patted his arm. 'It'll come right in the end.'

'Perhaps, but it's not right yet. There are some adjustments I've got to make. I don't suppose you'd care to lend me a hand this evening? It's not easy, all by myself.'

'I've got my own work to do. Miss Coates expects, and all that.'

'Can't it wait a bit? I'll help you afterwards if you want. What is it?'

'French, but I can do that in the morning. There's that poem too, about the tiger. I've got a test on Wednesday.'

'William Blake? That won't take you long. Come on, just for a while.'

There were no windows in Dad's shed. It was longer and wider than most, with a wooden floor, and walls lined with egg boxes. They helped keep the sound in. Down one side ran a long table covered with sheets of music.

The stuff Dad wrote was weird. It was so weird he'd invented strange instruments to play it all. They had strange cumbersome names too: there was the Shinglechord, the Featherblow and the Furroughla. The Shinglechord was built of old beer barrels and huge shells, with valves made out of dried sea urchins and conkers, and when he turned the handles, it sounded like the sea was singing, restless and deep. The Featherblow was shaped like a church organ on wheels, only fashioned out of bullrushes and bamboo canes and feathers. When he worked the bellows, it hummed and shimmered like still air on a summer's day. The Furroughla looked a bit like a piano, but one that had been crossed with some old farm machinery. It had pedals and keys made out of thick blocks of

wood, but also wheels of leather flaps that delved into its unknown heart. Lodged inside were hollowed-out pumpkins and rams' horns. It was deep and throaty; it could rumble like thunder and squelch like wet mud, and when it hit the low notes, it felt as if the very earth was trembling.

Dad had once tried to explain to her what his music was all about, but it was rather like that stuff about the tiger, a bit above her head, just out of reach. He'd sat her down at the piano in the living room and run his fingers up the scales.

'You know how the music you play is made out of octaves, rising from the lowest notes to the highest?' Sylvie had nodded. 'And you know that in each octave there are twelve notes; on this piano, for instance, the seven white keys and the five black ones – twelve notes in all.' Sylvie nodded again, a little impatiently. Who didn't know what a piano looked like? 'Well,' Dad continued, 'I believe there are other notes in between, notes that we're not used to hearing, or don't think of as notes. How many times have you heard the wind blowing through the trees or a branch rubbing against a windowpane and thought, That's a note I've never heard?'

Sylvie had never thought any such thing, but had kept quiet. Dad had been in full flight.

'Everything is made out of notes, vibrations. Many people think the universe started with a great big

bang. What's that if it isn't a note, albeit a rather loud one? Somewhere there's probably a note that brings the whole universe together.'

'Is that what you're looking for, this note?'

'Me? No. Goodness knows what will happen if anyone finds it.' Dad had laughed. 'We'll probably all be blown up; either that or we'd find ourselves in another universe.'

'Sounds like something from a sci-fi film.'

'Don't worry. It won't happen. But what I am trying to do is make music out of those other lost notes – the sounds and music that we've forgotten. There are so many songs that most of us never get to hear.'

'What sort of songs?' she had asked.

'The songs of the sea, the songs of the earth and, the most precious of all, the songs of the animals.' He had leaned forward, his eyes sparkling. 'Every animal has a song, Sylvie. It's how they talk to each other and the world around them. If only we could get close to it, close to all the other music in this world, think how wonderful it would be.'

Daniel dragged the Furroughla, the Shinglechord and the Featherblow into a rough semicircle so that he could quickly move from one to another. There was another instrument there too, one that Sylvie had never seen before, made out of long hollows of highly polished wood. It was shaped like one of those three-sided washing lines people have in their gardens, the

wooden slats hanging down like Venetian blinds; in the centre hung a huge, upended glass bowl.

'That's the Clattercloud,' Dad said proudly. 'The vibrations just drop into the glass and produce the most wonderful resonance.'

At one end of the building were stacked the instruments' spare parts: pumpkins, bundles of bamboo, boxes of feathers and wing bones, a variety of rams' horns all arranged in order of size. Placed behind Daniel's stool was the only other device in the shed, the Harmonograph. It was the most complicated instrument of all, with pendulums and tuning forks and a large sheet of paper over which four pencils were poised. When Dad played his music, the vibrations set the pendulums in motion, which in turn moved the pencils across the paper. Strange fantastic forms would appear, which looked familiar but somehow defied definition. It was like seeing shapes in ink blots, feeling that something was nearly there, but not quite.

Dad plonked Sylvie down on the old piano stool in front of the Furroughla. He had in his hand what looked like a bag of conkers, only with a series of holes drilled into them.

'I'm increasing the number of variables,' he explained. 'What I want you to do is work the pedals on the Furroughla with these stops out, while I adjust the setting on the Shinglechord with these. I want to see

how they combine against the higher vibrato of the Featherblow. I should be able to work both. Hang on a moment while I set the Harmonograph.'

Standing over the machine, Sylvie started to pedal while Dad bent down beside her, opening up a flap at the side of the Shinglechord with one hand, while the other worked the bellows of the Featherblow. The pitch began to rise slowly. The pedals of the Furrough-la grew harder to work.

'Come on, Sylvie, keep it up,' Dad urged.

Really, she thought, this was just what she shouldn't be doing when she had a poem to learn. She pumped and pumped, her legs beginning to get tired. Dad was working the Shinglechord with one hand while trying to adjust the Featherblow with the other. Suddenly Sylvie foot's slipped off the pedal, and instinctively she grabbed at one of the stops to prevent herself falling. It broke off in her hand, sending her crashing into Dad, who was kneeling beside her. A low humming sound started to fill the hut, rather like one of those spinning tops she'd had as a child, but lower in tone, like a slow undulating wave. Then she heard another noise, higher up but coming down, as if it were trying to meet the other one coming up. Sylvie couldn't work out where it was coming from but she could feel the two notes converging on one another. They sounded far away, like a plane's engine in the distance, growing more insistent as they drew closer. She looked across.

Dad was lying awkwardly on the floor, his foot jammed underneath the Featherblow.

'Are you all right?' she said, but he didn't answer.

Although no one was pedalling or working the keys, the notes were still there, as if the instruments had taken on a life of their own. The Furroughla was shaking slightly; the Shinglechord's reeds were rattling against each other. Behind her, the arms of the Harmonograph had sprung into life, the pendulums swinging back and forth, the paper twisting and turning as if trying to escape. The notes grew louder. Sylvie's head started to pound. It was as if someone had stuck a bicycle pump in her ear and was filling her head with pressurized air. She clamped her hands against her temples, wincing in pain. Just when she could stand it no longer, in a split second of time which seemed to last for ever, there was nothing, nothing at all; her ears and her eyes and everything outside floated in silent black space. Then her brain seemed to explode, booming like a paper bag bursting inside her skull, and she was flung backwards across the room. There was a sucking noise, and the door burst open, throwing Sylvie headlong out into the garden. A howling wind pulled at her hair, her skirt billowed out, Dad's music sheets swirling around her in a chaotic spiral. Then, as quickly as it came, it was gone. Paper floated down like oversized confetti. Dad stood in the doorway, clutching his head.

'Dad! Are you all right?'

'Yes. Yes.' His breath was short. He looked about him, dazed. 'Quick, Sylvie! My music! Before it's all ruined.'

She ran round snatching up the sheaves of paper. Dad limped out into the garden. He had a bump on his forehead the size of a bird's egg. He looked suddenly older, shaken. Soon Sylvie had all the sheets bundled up in her arm.

'Here, Dad, sit down.'

She led him to the little wooden seat on the porch, and began handing them back one by one, counting out the page numbers as he tried to shuffle them back in order. There was one smaller than the rest, covered in a mass of irregular squiggles, as if a child had been let loose with a biro.

'That's the Harmonograph,' Dad told her. 'Surprised it didn't blow up altogether. That was some bang.'

Sylvie looked at the sheet again. There was something there, in amongst the tangle. 'What's that, Dad, in the middle?'

Her father peered down. In the very centre was a small black dot, only it wasn't really a dot, more like a bulbous head on a thin neck peeking up from the ground.

'Looks like a mushroom,' she said. Dad stared at it for a moment, then folded the paper in two and

stuffed it into his top pocket.

Sylvie was still shaken. 'What happened?' she asked.

Her dad ran his fingers through his hair, still out of breath. 'I'm not sure, to tell the truth. But whatever it was, better not tell anyone, eh? Better not tell anyone at all.' He looked at her seriously. He meant it. She nodded. He reached up and squeezed her hand. 'I'll be OK from here on in. I want to write all this down. You'd better go and do that homework.'

Hours later, Sylvie heard her father come in from the garden. She could hear him wandering around the house, muttering to himself, and then talking to someone on the phone, a long conversation, held in a low voice as if he didn't want her to hear what he was saying. Perhaps he had found a girlfriend. It was going to happen one day, whether she liked it or not. Trouble was, she didn't like it. For all his faults she wanted Dad all to herself.

Sylvie got into bed thinking of who it might be. Someone at work? The leader of the violins, the woman with the long hair? No, she'd tried last winter and failed. Julie, the PE teacher? Too young, surely. What about her form teacher, Miss Coates? No, that was too ridiculous for words. No one could fancy Miss Coates. Not even her dad could be that desperate. Sylvie fell asleep with a smile on her face.

