

# Together // Alone

Federica Silvi

At its heart, *Hounds of Love* is an album about compassion. Bush offers to trade places with someone suffering ("Running Up That Hill") and examines the way in which a murder finds solace ("Mother Stands For Comfort"). But then, "And Dream Of Sheep" appears. It is a song that is tired of fighting, even when that fight is simply to love and offer empathy to others. It is a song about the loneliness that comes after so much struggle, whether that struggle is witnessed or internal. And, maybe more than anything else, it is a prayer that those who show compassion will receive it as well." (Erin Lyndal Martin – "Mysteries Of Desire: Kate Bush, Beyond The Hits" – *The Quietus*, 2 September 2014)

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Spring 2002

They're doing it again. That thing with sitting at the dinner table, talking about me as if I wasn't in the room, as if all I was good for was staying still and keeping my mouth shut. I look down and scrape my fork on the plate, real slow, because if no one can hear then no one can say *how rude* or *just stop*. Once I've mopped up the last drop of sauce and made the dish shine so bright it looks clean, I get up, drop my stuff in the sink and slip away. The heavy door to my uncle's living room slides shut and I'm off to another world, where the brash kitchen lights and the adults' conversations can't reach me, much as they try.

I'll get told off for this. Later, in the car, when no one can pin the blame on my mother for letting me disappear at someone else's house. Right now I have a room to myself, a darkness that doesn't ask questions, a silence that doesn't demand to be broken. I'm an astronaut floating away from the mothership in search for signs of life on a deserted planet, walking its surface in slow motion, wondering where to start: at the panoramic window that looks straight into the night; on the fabric sofa that still smells of smoke after years of abstinence and two house moves; on the walls painted yellow, dotted with heavy-framed portraits of faces too perfectly formed to belong here; or from the corner nearest to me, where a rack almost twice my height holds a lifetime's worth of CDs. That's it, that must be the place.

Some days, out of the blue, my uncle pulls his favourites out of the pile and plays them for me and my mother. His gaze fixes on us, looking for something we never quite give back: a spark of recognition, the familiar skip of a breath, the revelation that hits with no warning and ties you to a song for life. Tonight, I stretch my arm as high as I can and run a finger down, wondering whether it's time for Dulce Pontes or David Sylvian to get a second listen; then I spot the Kate Bush album buried at the bottom, and the epiphany finally strikes. Or, I should say, strikes again, because I've heard her before: nearly a year ago, on my best friend's radio, tuned in to a station we never play at home. As her voice carried me like a surging tide, reaching higher and farther than I'd ever imagined, I promised myself I'd look for it again, and keep listening until I could feel its grace colour my own life.

When it's time to go, I hold the CD close to my chest as if it could blend with the pale of my skin or the grey of my coat: already a part of me, not completely mine. Before I know it my lips are moving and my voice is stumbling, asking if maybe, if possibly, if it's not too much bother, if I can. My uncle's eyes skip over the case. An unwanted gift perhaps, or an impulse buy. "Suit yourself," he replies.

Kate Bush



*Hounds Of Love*

Kate Bush

"And Dream of Sheep"

*Hounds of Love*

09/1985

EMI

I spend the twenty-minute drive home staring at the back cover, straining to read the song titles in the dark. Another thought strikes me, louder than my mother's lecture about manners: something about one man's trash being another's treasure, and how strange it is that the things you get handed so carelessly can be the ones that change your life.

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*"I started off writing, I think, "Running Up That Hill", "Hounds of Love", and then I think probably "And Dream of Sheep." And once I wrote that, that was it, that was the beginning of what then became the concept. And really, for me, from the beginning, The Ninth Wave was a film, that's how I thought of it. It's the idea of this person being in the water, how they got there, we don't know. But the idea is that they've been on a ship and they've been washed over the side so they're alone in this water. [...] And they've got a life jacket with a little light so that if anyone should be traveling at night they'll see the light and know they're there. And they're absolutely terrified, and they're completely alone at the mercy of their imagination, which again I personally find such a terrifying thing, the power of one's own imagination being let loose on something like that. And the idea that they've got it in their head that they mustn't fall asleep, because if you fall asleep when you're in the water, I've heard that you roll over and so you drown, so they're trying to keep themselves awake." (Kate Bush – "Classic Albums interview: Hounds Of Love" – BBC Radio 1, 26 January 1992)*

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#### Winter 2004

My father stands outside the metal gate, loath to push it open and step into the enemy field. He just returned from the other side of the world, and yet the few steps to his former home's front door seem a much harder distance to travel. I go outside to meet him, running on the tips of my toes so I don't feel the cold pavement stone beneath my slippers. If there's a teen advice column that explains what to do when you see your father for the first time in five years, I haven't read it. If a sign's coming from inside that the frost has thawed, that I'm allowed to invite him in, I must be missing it. Between a shy hello and everything I can't bring myself to say, all I can think is that I've never been able to describe his hair.

He handed me the closest word over ten years ago, the key to a "Describe your Parents" assignment my second-grade vocabulary was struggling to crack. "Brizzolato", he said, the Italian for "salt and pepper": a rolling R, two vibrating Zs, a combination of letters and sounds I couldn't believe he hadn't just made up. I never used it since, and today, as we hug on the threshold of the garden, I realise I won't need it again. His hair is almost completely grey, sparse at the temples and tied in a thin ponytail; his unkempt silver stubble prickles my cheeks in a way that makes me want to pull back, and his neck no longer smells of the aftershave the pillow next to Mum's used to be soaked in. Everything I'm bound to inherit is laid bare in front of me: the big frame, the beady eyes, the stout round face. I wonder if this is what people mean when they say we look alike; how long I have left before I start changing shape, and if that's what they've been trying to shield me from all this time.

As the weeks go by, we get our routine down to a tee. He picks me up at home or after class with a rugged Fiat Uno he borrows from the woman who rents him a room in town; when he shows up, that is. Then he drives me places: the mall, the bookstore, the ice cream parlour, our favourite pizza place. The living rooms of old friends we haven't seen in a while, where he lands bearing gifts and years' worth of catch-ups, until the novelty of his return fades into a habit neither side quite knows how to keep up.

I spend enough time in his car to realise it's a piece of junk, inside and out. Its body is older than me, four-fifths white, save for the rusty lilac door on the driver's side: a spare part, a patch stuck on a hole that had once seemed beyond repair (*that makes it the two of us*, I'd comment, if there was a chance anyone would laugh). I learn to tolerate it, in the same way as I force myself to overlook his strained, fitful driving. I only wish it had a radio, but all its sounds come from squeaky seats, an engine that sputters like a perpetual last breath, and the conversations we're learning to make.

"So," Dad goes one afternoon, "what do you listen to these days?"

It's the most natural question no one ever asked me. Not my mother, who only plays Italian music so she can understand the lyrics, and not my school friends, who watch MTV's charts and play in punk-rock bands. But here's a man who has been to places I've only ever seen on textbook maps, who speaks languages, who owns records, who wants to know. I've gone through years of hearing *you're just like your father*, and only now it dawns on me that it might not be that bad.

"Loads of stuff. You know, all sorts. I'm really into Kate Bush."

"Kate who?"

"British, high-pitched voice? She was big in the Eighties. Guess she didn't make it to Italy."

I spell her name; he tries to pronounce it as *bash*, and everything clicks into place.

"Wait, I know who! *Babooshka*, *Babooshka*—that's her, right?"

"That can't be all you know her for. What about *Hounds of Love*?"

"Ah, but '*Babooshka*,' now that was a tune. Radio single and everything, kind of a one-hit wonder 'round these parts."

Everyone should know "*Babooshka*" is far from Kate Bush's most impressive track, and I wish he'd let me tell him, but he's found a safe ground to hang on to. I spend the rest of our short drive in silence, while he chants "*Babooshka*, *Babooshka*" every now and then, as if he'd just learnt a joke that's only worth anything if I join in the fun.

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"An engineer we were working with picked out the line in "*And Dream Of Sheep*" that says "*Come here with me now*". I asked him why he liked it so much. He said, "*I don't know, I just love it. It's so moving and comforting.*" I don't think he even knew what was being said exactly, but the song is about someone going to sleep in the water, where they're alone and frightened. And they want to go to sleep, to get away from the situation. But at the same time it's dangerous to go to sleep in water, you could drown. When I was little, and I'd had a bad dream, I'd go into my parents' bedroom round to my mother's side of the bed. She'd be asleep, and I wouldn't want to wake her, so I'd stand there and wait for her to sense my presence and wake up. She always did, within minutes; and sometimes I'd frighten her - standing there still, in the darkness in my nightdress. I'd say, "*I've had a bad dream,*" and she'd lift bedclothes and say something like "*Come here with me now.*" It's my mother saying this line in the track, and I briefed her on the ideas behind it before she said it. And I think it's the motherly comfort that this engineer picked up on. In fact, he said this was his favourite part of the album." (Kate Bush Club newsletter, Issue 21, 1987)

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## Autumn 2005

The notes Mum left before checking into the hospital are my homemaker's cheat sheets, a Domestic Art For Dummies course on scraps of squared A5 paper. I watched her tape them all over the house the night before she left: one on each of her five recycling bins, to thwart any claims of wilful ignorance (FOOD WASTE ON THURSDAY NIGHTS! TAKEAWAY BOXES ARE NOT PAPER!); one pointing out the obvious about the cat's litter; one to decode the washing machine's cipher of numbers and settings; and one on the electric panel to save my ass the next time my space heater triggers a power failure. There's a torn notebook page for everything I need, but none to explain what I really want to know: how long she'll be gone for, what's the worst that can happen, and whether she'll ever walk again.

Falling asleep is a thorny affair. It's always been hit-and-miss at best; now I'm on my own, I can't even count on the soft flashes from the TV downstairs to comfort me into surrender. My head jolts from the pillow with every little noise that fragments the silence: squeaks and screeches, creaks and thuds I never hear during the day. They come from inside the roof, from cupboards packed with old summer clothes and moth repellent, from rooms I've barely set foot in for days; as if the house was cracking its knuckles, adjusting its joints, warming up for a secret life that can only resume its course once the last light has gone out.

Most nights I lie on my back, staring at where I know the ceiling is, wondering how other people handle these invisible presences in their homes (or, you know, their brains). A friend into meditation recommends lying with my feet pointing south and breathing slowly, allowing every part of my body to soften as if it was swaying with the ocean's ebb and flow. I really have to picture the ocean in my head, she says. It works once, then never again.

Sleeping in the master bedroom seems to improve things, though not by much. I stretch across the side that should be my mother's, set a timer on the TV and let whatever late-night show's on knock me out; it buys me a couple hours' rest before waking up in total darkness, surrounded by a silence that's more parts fear than it is calm. At last, I settle for going to bed with headphones on, lulled to safety by the cool blue light my iPod spreads under the covers. I play *Hounds of Love* until my eyes blink shut and the warmth of the sheets seeps into my bones; by the time "And Dream of Sheep" ends, I finally feel myself subside.

Though I've never been one to ask for bedtime stories, I come to see "And Dream of Sheep" as just that: my closing ceremony, my good-night song, tender and soothing even as it conjures unforgiving waves and fear of drowning. As soon as the first note strikes, my bed becomes the shipwreck relic, drifting on the sea's surface under a sky with no stars. I lie still, conscious of every movement that might threaten its balance, and cling to Kate's voice singing *let me be weak* as if the plea of the song's weary soul was mine. But it's not release I'm looking for, it's respite: time enough to recharge, to feel whole again, to summon my strength so I can pull myself to shore in the morning. I'll shine my little light to illuminate the way ahead. I won't pray to be saved, because that's only mine to do.

Hiding under the duvet, all covered up but for a slit large enough to breathe, I wonder what it feels like to not be alone.