Sounding

by Jane Hammons

Grey Six-Killer's sister Phoebe is famous in four counties. Cherokee, Mayes, Sequoyah and Adair. From all over eastern Oklahoma people come so that his father, Felix, can fit their horses with the fancy hoof plates he's known for. His mother, Priscilla Crane Six-Killer—most call her Cilla—plays several instruments. She accompanies Phoebe, who performs as Little Songbird. Cilla also travels through the countryside teaching music to Indian children. If they don't have instruments, she teaches them to use their voices, what God gave everyone. Some people disapprove because she teaches Negro children, too. She went to school at the Hampton Institute in Virginia where Indians and Negroes were mixed together in some kind of experiment. That's where she learned their music along with Beethoven, Bach and Brahms.

Cilla wants Phoebe to study for the opera, but it is the Negro spiritual—the sound of mourning sung low and joy raised high—that Phoebe loves. She is a tiny girl with a voice so deep it ought to come from a big bear of a woman like her mother who accompanies her on a German—not reed—flute even when Phoebe sings traditional Cherokee songs. Depending on the music Phoebe selects, Cilla might play piano, guitar or violin. This is what people crowd in to see on Saturday afternoons in parks and meeting halls and Sundays after church.

Nothing comes easy for Grey. He's not dumb like people think. He gets it. Slowly. Sound plunks into his head all the same measure and beat. It's why he stares too long. Waiting for words to make sense. By the time he gets the message, it's too late. He's made a bad impression. And there's something about his name he doesn't understand. Theirs breathe. Ee and ah. Grey is a sound trapped in his throat.

The Six-Killer house is a den of commotion. Musical instruments in the parlor. Song throughout the house. His father talks designs and numbers in the office, pounds metal in the barn.

Grey would rather be in the trees or down by the river. When a wind comes up, he grabs the wooly blanket from the hook in the barn and calls Phoebe. They stretch the blanket out between them and sail into the grassy meadow that slopes down the hill from their house. Grasshoppers flee their pounding feet and fly right into the blanket where their spiny legs are trapped in fuzzy threads. Grey and Phoebe pick them off and keep them in a wooden box with air holes drilled in the top. A damp cloth and a spoonful of cornmeal every day keeps them alive. Except to put her pork chop and chicken bones into the coffee can Grey has pounded into a trap, making a little lip they can squirm through, Phoebe won't catch leeches. Sometimes she'll help with the crayfish, turning up rocks and poking them in the head with a stick, making them scoot backward away from her and right into Grey's hands. Her giggle bubbles up like fresh water from a cold spring and sprinkles over Grey. He laughs, too, even though it isn't funny to him. It's just the way a crayfish moves.

Five crickets for a penny, a penny a piece for a leech or a crayfish. That's what Grey charges when he sets up his bait shop down on River Road.

People pay a nickel to hear Phoebe sing. The Six-Killer children are learning about business and finance. Civilized, they will make something of themselves. Cilla and Felix have seen to that. No need to send their children to Indian Schools.

Felix wears a long ponytail and a big black hat that he trims with tiny bits of silver, designs he doesn't share with customers. But otherwise he dresses like a white man: trousers and a starched white shirt, a vest with a watch pocket, cowboy boots. Cilla is a

proper lady, if a little too large and independent, driving all around the countryside alone or sometimes with Phoebe.

Handbills featuring Phoebe in her brilliant white pinafore and a flat straw hat that sits atop her head like a pancake are posted in the town halls and churches to advertise her concerts. Grey laughs when he sees images of his sister nailed to a fence or a water barrel. It's the only place she's ever still. When she sings she swivels and shakes in a way some don't think proper for a little girl, but no one can stop her. In the picture her mouth is pursed in a tiny O that gives no indication of her big sound. The eyes are true, though, small and dark as a flicker's, just like the one that pecks away at the elm tree where Grey and Phoebe swing on a plank hung from a rope.

After she is killed, scraps of Phoebe Six-Killer, the little murdered songbird, litter the countryside.

Saturday afternoon Grey sits in the barn and reads the newspaper, the pointer of his left hand inky from directing each word into his mind where he figures out what it all means. War to end soon. Felix is shoeing a horse for his friend Horace Counsel who teaches at the Cherokee Seminary School for Girls.

“Why do you buy such mean horses?” Felix wants to know.

Horace looks up over a book he found in a little shop in Washington, D. C. where he goes to give talks on Indians. “They're cheap. What I save on horses, we can spend on books for the girls.”

Felix grunts his approval. If the Cherokee schools survive, people can keep their children nearby.

Grey puts the paper down and helps his father. He is slight and can move back and forth under the horse more easily than Feilx. He wraps the hame strap around the fetlock. The horse snorts and rolls

a vicious eye back at Grey. A long rope of foamy spit hangs from its mouth. Grey doesn't care much for Horace Counsel who sits while they work, but Horace's voice is filled with notes like those way down at the end of the piano that almost growl. He hears them clearly.

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands.

Buffalo, bluestem, grama, Grey whispers the names of all the grasses he knows. switchgrass, Indian.

Felix buckles the front right foot around the fore-arm so that the horse has just three feet on the ground and will have to concentrate on standing up instead of kicking him in the head.

Grey crawls out of the shoeing stall. Books interest him. They are quiet and this one is pretty, too. He rubs his fingers across the dark pebbled cloth. The words that say Leaves of Grass are written in script that grows roots and sprouts leaves. He sniffs the gold ink. It doesn't smell like grass. It smells like the mossy rot under fallen branches and rocks along the riverbank. He leans into Horace, his ear close to the man's throat where he can feel the words.

Or I guess the grass is itself a child. Horace has known Grey for all of his 10 years and is used to his strange ways. He continues to read, Grey's silky black hair tickling his neck.

Grey likes the cover better than the poem and hopes Horace takes his smelly book with him when he goes. He looks over his shoulder at his father who is buckling the strap in place.

Felix nods his permission for Grey to leave, knowing his son would rather be down at the river than listening to Horace Counsel read poetry.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Grey rolls up his trousers and flies across the meadow full of blue sage and boneset. When he gets to the river, he goes to the marsh first to fetch the leeches. From far off, up river toward Goldie's Mill, Grey hears Phoebe singing. It isn't right, he thinks, her song coming to him this way. The wind turns chilly. The sun moves behind a smoky cloud. This happens in Indian Summer. Warm days go suddenly cold. The water pricks his hand like a thousand trilling needles. Go down Moses Oppressed so hard they could not stand Let My People Go. He is drawn out into the eddy where the bluegill feed. They are dizzy there, trapped in the whorl of Phoebe's last song.

Upstream and down Grey swims. From shore to eddy then around the little wingdam of built-up sand and pebbles where Phoebe liked to build pyramids, Grey swims until he hears his name gruff and raw coming through the trees. Grey, his father is calling, his voice the sound of a broken heart. Crouching under the curtain of black willow, Grey watches his father and Horace run along the riverbank and is surprised to see that his father knows all the places he and Phoebe thought were their secret—the coves and marshes, a tiny cave.

Felix Six-Killer sits down hard on the bank his head in his hands. Horace goes to him but has only one arm to offer. Under the other he carries Leaves of Grass. Horace calls for Grey, his name a clap of thunder in that man's mouth. Grey slips back into the water and stays under as long as he can. Cold and tired from listening too hard and swimming too long, he soon pops up near the trunk of the fallen willow, an easy catch.

Felix pulls his son—light for a boy his age—up onto the bank. Your mother he says Phoebe. Other words Grey can't hear. Felix throws him over his shoulder like a sack of feed and hauls him up the slope, crushing crickets and indigo beneath his heavy boots.

Horace runs back to the house. Men are gathering there. Felix deposits Grey on the divan and covers him with the old quilt Cilla made in her school days back in Virginia. Patriot's Quilt. All the girls made them. Grey traces the little eagle stitched into an octagon of red and gray.

Men in the living room. Rifles and dogs. Two krauts a man says. Grey pictures soldiers in pointed helmets. The war isn't ending. It's coming to Oklahoma. Germans on the shores of the Neosho. Horace paces the living room, the dark green book under his arm. Uncut hair of graves the grass itself a child. Grey lunges at Horace Counsel, the teacher of girls, the reader of poems. The men are startled by the skinny boy who grabs the book and runs out the door, ripping dry pages from it. Horace calls after him, weeping for Cilla for Phoebe and for the leaves blowing down to the river and away in the sky.

Bruno Bukolt and his brother Gunther sit in a cell wondering what's dumber than a redskin doughboy fighting for a country that won't even make him a citizen. Stories of Joseph Oklahmobi and William Stands Alone and all the other Kaiser-killing redskins had filled their days to the brim. That's all they'd been hearing for the past few years. They'd come in '07 for the land lottery but got nothing. Everywhere they looked ranchers and oilmen and Indians taking the land they wanted. It was their mother and father who were Germans. Bruno and Gunther were born in Buffalo, New York. They barely even had accents, but back home people hated Germans as much as they hated Jews.

For years Bruno and Gunther prowled the Western territories taking what they could. The little girl's face on paper told where she'd be. They'd heard about her fancy father, his horseshoes made of silver

and gold. He had a big house by the river. His fat wife teaching black and brown and red children to play their music. Beethoven Bach and Brahms.

Gunther hangs his head while Bruno tells the story, taking pleasure in the tears and trembles of grown men.

The horses went down one shot apiece. Wagon tipped easy. The woman and girl spilled out near the covered bridge. Gunther took the ax and chopped off the horse's feet. Father taught him how to cut. He was a butcher known all over Buffalo for his chops. He could trim a perfect roast. Men with no accent and the right kind of name—Collins and Williams—took his shop.

We're not dumb. We saw right off those shoes were not silver or gold. The hoof plates thick and heavy. Brass. That's all it was. Then Gunther sees the little girl's silver buckles and wants them. He touches her shiny black shoe. The mother roars. Gunther grabs the ax and whops her hard across the back.

The little girl bangs him in the knees with a tiny suitcase. The flute drops out and starts to scream. He throws it over the bridge, and when the little girl starts singing, she goes over, too. The big bitch goes down in a bloody mess among the pilings. We never get anything we want.

Cross the covered bridge in Indian Summer. Put an ear to a knothole. Listen to the song rush below. Go east to the old River Road where Grey sold the fancy lures he became famous for once Felix Six-Killer let the forge go cold. Follow the road south to Goldie's Mill and get white meal for corncakes. Cilla made the best.