Sophia's Wings

When Bucyrus counts the rings, he totals ninety-eight, but Sophia swears Grandpappy Jasmine planted the oak when her mother was just a little girl, and now she herself is an old woman, and maybe she was never any good at numbers, but Sophia knows ninety-eight is way too young. She does not object, however. Bucyrus would not remember the yesterdays of an old tree; the rough timber seat Grandpappy Jasmine hanged for her and that she wore as sleek and smooth as a river rock; the boughs of which taught her, like a father teaches a son to kill the deer with a single shot, adventure, liberation, courage, virtue. And now, as she rests in her bed, creating no swell in the quilts draped over her body, her head no longer substantiating a dent of the feathers in her pillow, Sophia holds her ancient hand close to her ruptured face. She repeatedly clenches and unclenches her hand and stares as the bony fingers straighten and fan and then contract and ball together as if her hand were slowly grabbing that high branch, the one she did not know she could reach — the one the oak encouraged her to touch. When Bucyrus, along with Jefferson Taylor and Uncle Grace, scarred the tree's muscle-bark trunk with the butcherous ax, Sophia wept. Like letting someone else put down your dog, is what she felt, not right, not right in any sense; but the tree had broken too many things, and, like Sophia herself, it was now fragile, too weak to withstand another strong storm, likely to topple at any moment. Bucyrus watched when the previous spring the oak dropped a limb onto the wild rose bushes and one in the rosemary and thyme growing beside the shed — it is hard to realize a harvest when a bygone angry tree is dropping parts of itself on the crop — but what could Sophia do, hardly able to lift a book from a shelf, she could not fall the tree herself, but still it was not right, it just was not right, and she knew it. As she lies there and looks at her opening and closing hand which now resembles a butterfly

flapping and floating, landing and taking off, Sophia thinks about that tree, and the dry corners of her mouth raise ever so slightly, and then she flutters off.

A man ought to know when his wife dies, he ought to be there, or at least stop working for a while, is what Delphus believes although he doesn't say anything to Bucyrus that afternoon when George Simmons and his assistants carry Sophia out the front door and place her body in the hearse. Instead, working beside the widower who swings a sledge and drives iron wedges into the old tree stump, Delphus fires an ancient pickaxe against thick, partially exposed roots. Bucyrus's maul bangs off the head of a heavy wedge: the gate closes on the hearse. If Bucyrus knows Sophia's body is being hauled off, he does not show any sign. It is better just to be a friend, Delphus knows. A man has a right to grieve how he sees fit. He does not say this either, but anyone passing would know something terribly wrong is happening simply by the anger emitted from Delphus' pickaxe blows — he drives into the incoherent roots like a man frantically severing the bars of his cell. As the driver accelerates onto the road, the hearse tires throw a handful of loose stone.

A rusted arch of iron lies in the center of a small crater pinning several blooming daffodils — a corroded rainbow fallen on a joyous crowd. Bucyrus knows no man can swing a tool as hard as Delphus has been swinging his without breaking either it or himself, but Bucyrus is too old to teach. Instead he stands his hammer on the ground, its handle like a fence post waiting wire and walks to his shed. When he emerges, Delphus is sitting on the cracked and mutilated stump, pressing his shirt tails to his forehead to absorb the sweat. "I reckon I hit her a bit too hard," Delphus says to make conversation, to force Bucyrus to speak, to say anything, but the prompt fails. Bucyrus merely kneels beside the damaged flowers, sets down a wooden tote-box nesting old garden tools, and gently, lovingly, lifts the dislodged head from the crushed daffodils. He sets it beside his tote-box and removes several small wooden sticks and a ball of green string. Gently, like a doctor splinting a broken bone,

Bucyrus lifts each stalk back to the sky and ties them against the sticks he inserts beside the perennials. Most of the shoots are badly torn, and Bucyrus knows these plants will not recover until next year's sun resurrects them, yet, he does not work in vain‡. All this is done without anger, without regret, without blame — mistakes are common, errors must be anticipated, everything breaks. Bucyrus has seen too much not to know this, and he has learned to repair damage, not scourge its cause––damage is inevitable.

A carefully turned and rubbed-out handle is possibly one of the most familiar objects a workman can grip in his palms, instantly recognizable by weight, smell, feel, like the infant's cry is distinguished by its mother, a solid handle — wood from a broad-leafed tree, not conifer wood handles that town merchants sell, but ash or the old oak handles from McCalaster's mill back then, when things were different, when men were better, stronger, understood tools, solid things. Bucyrus is one of the last of such men. In his shed, with the iron head of the pickaxe clamped into his bench vice, Bucyrus pounds out the remnants of the old handle and wedges in one of several he keeps in a back bin.

At any moment everything can come apart at the seams, break open and spill, gush over us, bury us like a man in the bottom of a silo — fodder dumped on fodder, ground up stalks and husks of corn tossed like a salad with hay, straw, and other odds and ends of saleable crop, and the man at the bottom, already dead, partly from inhaling the dust of the falling mixture and partly from the weight of the coarsely chopped stalks. No matter how much it weighs, if enough of it is piled on you, your body breaks. We all know this. We all know about the thin thread and the absurd, and although Delphus is no exception, he will not accept the lot. "I'm going home." Bucyrus pauses in hauling his sledge over his head. Delphus hears the clang of iron on iron until he shuts the door of his house and tunes music on his radio.

A foamy-white butterfly, too big, too wonderful, to be a moth, flaps aimlessly against the window glass three or four times before changing direction, floating up a foot or two, and flitting over the grape barb and out of sight. Eileen returns her gaze to the sweat-soaked old man, a hundred yards from the house, endlessly driving wedges into an old tree stump. She sips hot tea that she has been handed from someone in the house, maybe Silas, she does not really remember. A piece of loose tea that has escaped from the ball floats around in the mug. “We often turn to work in times of great stress. It provides a distraction, a purpose, a task, the outcome of which, a man can control. Pop is not any different. He did the same thing with Harrison. Remember how when she told him, he went out to that shed and for four days carved wooden pliers from pine blocks?” Eileen remembers. One does not forget the death of a brother. The pliers also she remembers. In her jewelry box, she even has a pair. She knows Bucyrus learned how to make them when he was a child. How he cuts the hinge, she has never understood. She thinks about Silas’s explanation, but that was his son, this is his wife. A man cannot feel the same way for every person.

Reading the paper is infinitely practical, and Silas, like his father, is a practical man. In fact Silas would be chopping at the stump with Bucyrus if it was not for his back and his concern for Eileen. So Silas sits at the kitchen table with the newspaper spread in front of him looking like an artist protecting the table top from the over-spills of his thoughts. Often he rises and touches his older sister’s shoulder or refills her mug with hot tea. He has completed his tasks, notified those who needed to know, talked to Bill Temson at the paper about the obituary, and stripped his mother’s bed. Eileen would have to wash the linen and figure out what is to be done with the quilts, but Silas believes the death-bed looks more appropriate — more reverent — absent the dingy, disheveled bedding.

Old people are forever cutting down trees. Eileen understands this, but to watch Bucyrus excavate the stump while his wife, her mother, lies in the basement of

a funeral home where covert procedures are executed upon her is too much. Alone with strangers, we leave our dead, and only they know what happens there in the cold chambers.

When Bucyrus falls the tree, he does so with a double axe that has been in the Frompton family longer than he has. Jasmine has swung it to provide wood for his family, Jonas for the same reason, and then it is in his hands, and Bucyrus is wedging out chunks of oak from the very tree Jasmine Frompton one day, in celebration of Anna's second birthday, deposited in the soil. Eileen sits beside Sophia's bed, and the two watch in silence as the oak forfeits more and more of its integrity to the steel blade — stronger, older, than itself. Jefferson Taylor and Uncle Grace pull thick barn ropes which are strategically knotted to the upper boughs by Tremont — the men being too old to climb trees, and Silas with his back, the task of knotting the ropes is left to his son who scampers up the tree, so much like Sophia had once herself done, and, using the clove hitch as Bucyrus has taught him, attaches the heavy rope exactly around the old boughs which Jefferson Taylor has judged to be most desirable to their ends. Bucyrus refrains from comment on the placement of the rope, he is against the roping all together — it insults his ability to fall the tree; a good man can chop a tree and fall it where he wants. But Silas persuades him that although this is indeed true, that error in the name of caution is better than the old oak crushing the shed or damaging the roof of the house. When the tree finally cracks and surrenders its last bit of strength, after four hours of fighting off axe blow after axe blow, after over one hundred years of dignified survival, never losing more than a minor bough or a few limbs here and there, after one hundred odd seasons of birth-death-and-renewal, the centurion falls, and as Bucyrus has predicted, a good man can bring her down without ropes, for Jefferson Taylor and Uncle Grace lose the tension as soon as she snaps and merely watch the mighty tree topple into the overgrown field beyond the yard.

Dice are the oldest gaming instruments. Somewhere recorded in the book of humanity is a recounting of all those who have lost their fortune to the die, of all those who tossed one last time, desperate. The chapter runs longer than most, yet the pages continue to be written upon. But metaphors cannot produce the muffled tumble of dice rattled in a fabric-lined cup and then cast onto the felt of a backgammon board, bumped against a rail and ricocheted to their rest. This sound echoes through the kitchen, endlessly through Eileen's head until she wants to scream but has not the energy or will to do so. Bucyrus wedging an old stump, and Silas playing backgammon with Tremont on Sophia's kitchen table. Board-games, wedging, and fresh tea — the death of Sophia, the death of anyone — stirs odd ideas. Eileen leaves her mug on the counter then silently walks out of the house. Blindly she plods past Bucyrus, the father she can no longer tolerate — humanity's clock impassively sounding the passings one clang after the next, a clock Eileen no longer accepts, time was never so irrelevant. She crosses the lane and walks over the hill, and her frame grows smaller and smaller against the backdrop of the cloudy sky until it is not even a speck.

In the old days the body of the deceased was never left unattended, men and women fought over the right to sit the night, beside a dim candle, and guard the corpse — to keep vigil. When Eileen enters the funeral home, dusty and sticky from the long walk, George Simmons is nowhere around. Eileen is not looking for George Simmons though, she is looking for her mother's body, and it does not take her long to find the way to the preparation area and to the frigid room where Sophia lies naked on a gurney. Eileen blushes. She has not expected nudity. Sophia was a modest person; but now, in the moment of greatest sadness, in a time when Eileen most needs Sophia's kind, quiet wisdom, the daughter stands beside the mother's cold, naked body and gazes upon its dilapidated frame — the forlorn integrity of an eighty-seven year old dead woman.

"A dove ain't noth'n' but an albino pigeon, and all pigeons is good for is mess'n' all over the barn," he yells back at Sophia, tired of her reverence.

Silas's great-grandfather fights Confederates by firing a muzzle-loader he bought with inherited money. The gun weighs nearly forty pounds and has a barrel over six feet long. In the stock, the initials HHF, for Humphrey Hudson Frompton, are crudely burned after a battle in which Humphrey is wounded badly in his right triceps and forearm. The doctor who saws off the arm at the shoulder and cauterizes the wound tells Humphrey he is lucky he still had his manhood, says he would rather lose almost anything than lose that. Two days later, while lying on the dewy grass and staring at his missing appendage, Humphrey sees a young soldier shouldering his lost weapon. Even with one arm, Humphrey overpowers the youth, marks him on the face with a hunting knife, and recovers the gun. Although he never shoots it again, that night he heats a wire in the campfire and burns his initials into the stock. Now Tremont is twelve, old enough to handle a weapon, already he has proudly worn the blood of the rabbit, the coon and the deer, like medals of adulthood, on his face. But all that is with a .22. It is only now that Silas is ready to let the boy fire the old gun. Silas himself is twelve when he walks out back with Bucyrus and learns how to hold a forty-pound gun, learns how to aim it. Then Bucyrus fires a ball and drops a dove. The gun is loud, much louder than Silas expects, and he jumps a bit when it fires, but he never takes his eye off the dove which falls nearly straight down into the pasture almost like magic. As it has been shown to him, Silas now shows Tremont the art of cleaning and oiling the old gun, how to pack the powder and how to set the ball, and as Silas has been, Tremont is an eager learner. Bear, full of the deep bark of a coon dog, springs off his leash and bolts into the barn. Doves flutter from cracks and holes in the decrepit siding, and Silas, gun already to his shoulder, squeezes a shot, and a dove falls. Tremont holds his face tight, he knows men do not show excitement, that eagerness is for boys. He knows that hunting is more about patience than

marksmanship; he is not an old predator like his grandfather, but he has picked up this much. The gun kicks when he fires, but the bird falls. Silas shoves two meaty fingers into his mouth and whistles Bear to fetch the birds. Bear finds Silas' bird first, he has shot the head off the white bird and a few kernels of corn are lodged inside the neck. The dog drops the bird at Silas' feet and goes in search of Tremont's kill. He returns and drops the second bird beside the other, Silas bends and examines it. "You didn't kill this one, the fall did. Look here, you blew its wing clean off. A bird, even a stink'n pigeon, can't fly with just one wing." Tremont smiles. "But I hit her, didn't I?" Silas smiles too.

Given a choice, Bucyrus prefers hand tools. The sun is well below Sumner mountain, its aurora like a halo fading gently off the tall pines. Bucyrus remains a strong man, but he is also an old man — an old man can only swing a sledge for so long before his chest hurts, before his muscles refuse to obey his will, before his fingers can no longer grip the handle, and so Bucyrus settles for the crevices and faults he has forced into the old stump, allows them to be deep enough, realizes that roots go too deep and too wild to ever be completely obliterated, and so the old widower stands his sledge and piles the iron wedges on the ground beside Delphus' pickaxe and walks to the shed.

Robert Frost says home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. Eileen is on the concrete floor when George Simmons finds her beside Sophia's naked body. At first he thinks maybe the contagion took her. He has seen such before, grief, guilt, craziness, and then another person passes. Two from the same clan is not uncommon, but he has seen enough death to doubt his prognosis. She is too pink, too distraught, too worried to be gone. Dead people are calm, serene. Then he sees the slight rise and fall of her chest and hears the small whimper of her breath passing through the tunnels of her tearful throat, and he bends and touches her shoulder. "Eileen, go home, get some rest, people shouldn't see their loved ones

like this," and that is when it starts, that is when George Simmons realizes Eileen is not leaving, that, to her, home is here, beside Sophia, that she, of all people, understands loyalty. "Bucyrus needs you." But Eileen stays beside Sophia, and even the sheriff, despite the insistence of George Simmons, is not hard enough to pull the grieving daughter from the basement: "There's something unholy about doing that. Some things are beyond the law." And although George Simmons is not happy about it, he prepares Sophia while Eileen sits beside the body, afloat in memories and emotions of the river that is her mother, and like a dying fish, she swims in that warm water with the knowledge that the end of the river is at hand, that soon, very soon, the last drops will empty from the watershed, and the river will run dry, leaving only a fertile bed and then maybe a field of wildflowers nourished by the decayed bodies of the river's fish, and Eileen smiles when she sees the glorious colors of the field and the butterflies which float over it, peaceful and pure.

Kerosene fills the cracks and faults in the old stump, flooding out ants and termites and worms and filling in the caverns and gorges he has created, forming a tiny volatile ocean. Bucyrus strikes a match and sets the stump ablaze.

"Family must be forgiven, all is lost otherwise." Eileen, Silas, Tremont, Uncle Grace, Jefferson Taylor and Delphus stand solemnly beside the pit and watch the box lower. In the tradition of the family, each tosses a handful of the rich soil onto the casket and each chants the burial rite that has been used since Humphrey Hudson Frompton wrote it into his will and his three sons repeated it over his coffin and which was repeated, years later, over the coffins of each of the clansmen beside that grave, but no one believes the silly message anymore. They chant it for custom — words without meanings. No one intends to forgive him.

Silks, wools, cottons, and linens burning in a pile over the stump. Bucyrus adding now quilts and now her rocker, cane-seated and walnut, now photographs and frames, flames two times as high as the feeder, now wooden utensils and Christmas

towels, and then that which does not burn but melts––plastic jugs and record albums, and then even that which does not melt––pottery and jewelry, and crazed now, beyond all sense of control and unable to stop, the house and then the shed, or maybe at that time the house and the shed leap in on their own, or as the sheriff thinks, maybe the flames eventually develop a mind, and like a small child after weaning, learn to nourish themselves. All the land ablaze and even underground, the roots of the old stump burning, and then Bucyrus, the unforgiven, merges into the pyre, and only Sophia is missing.

From the flames, now thirty feet high, from the heat which warms the onlookers a hundred yards beyond, small ashes — black in the middle with red ember edges — float out and drift across the town, gently settling here and there, and the children smile from their beds as the glowing ash fills the night sky and, like ten-thousand butterflies, gently carries them to sleep.