

DIGGING

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

Two days after the baby died, Jeremiah got his shovel and began to dig in the front of the house facing the fields. The morning marked twenty-nine days with no rain and the ground was dry as rock. The shovel hit schist. Sparks filled the hole. Almost six feet, Jeremiah reckoned, almost deep enough. Dust filled his mouth, a fine chalky yellow when he spit. At least his eyes didn't burn—he couldn't shovel with tears, not in this heat.

He felt Sheila watch from the bedroom window. The steady sound of shoveling for the past three hours would have woken her, should have made her come to the window, but when he looked up to wipe the sweat from his forehead, the window remained dark.

One more shovelful of earth. Enough. He pulled himself from the hole and perched on the edge. The box, hand hewn in cedar, and the sapling, balled in burlap, laid at the field's edge. Two days ago, when they had returned from the hospital, after Jeremiah had placed the casket in the storm cellar where the air stayed cool and Sheila had gone upstairs and locked herself into their room, Jeremiah had gone down to the creek and dug up the river birch.

He looked up to the window. The curtain did not move. Jeremiah picked up the casket and lowered it into the hole. He jumped in and positioned the box to make it level. He pulled himself out from the grave. In the field, he picked stems of soft wheat straw, still green, and purple bugle that smelled of mint, and Queen Anne's lace and daisies, and fashioned a bouquet of sorts. He laid the flowers on top of the casket.

The first handful of dirt made a clinking sound when it rained on the box. He reached into his jeans and pulled out a guitar pick, the one he had used the night Sheila started to bleed. He dropped that in, too. Then Jeremiah shoveled the dirt into the hole, fast and hard, and when the earth obscured the wood, he dropped to his knees, and cried. The curtain in the house stayed still.

