Down There

By Melissa M. Slocum

*“I hope someday somebody will hear me. I hope nobody has to go through this. We have to have our own language. Because what we do when we talk to our spirits…they don’t understand English.”*

*Andrew Windyboy. Flandreau Indian School survivor*

She peered down into the hole. The darkness took the stairs and swallowed them. She shivered, even in the high spring sun. Noon. Or near noon. She didn’t know anymore. Not now.

The door had folded into the wall in such a way, the entrance was hard to see. He pointed it out. ‘Quick,’ he said. He wasn’t supposed to be there. But he knew where she needed to go.

She didn’t want it. Needed it. Wanted it all to go away. She had wondered, wondered. Now, it was here. She pushed herself back. She pushed. He touched her. She recoiled.

‘Quick,’ he said again. ‘Down.’

It was her pre-dawn. Or maybe her pre-dusk. It depended. It depended on her reaction.

He went down ahead of her.

She followed. Slowly.

Not light even inched into the corners or the walls or the floors. The room appeared to go back, far back under the depths of the extraordinarily large building. No home. No house. Administrative building. People moved above them creaking the boards.

‘Hurry,’ he said.

She looked around. He pulled out a lamp and lit it.

‘You’ll have to dig.’ He pointed to the ground. ‘Down here.’

The dirt lay flat, as if undisturbed. Like it had been that way a while.

‘Where?’ she asked.

He shrugged. ‘Anywhere, really.’

Her eyes bulged. Her heart beat faster. Painful faster. Her heart hurt anyway. She was used to that.

Out from a corner, he pulled a shovel and handed it to her. He glanced around. ‘I can’t stay here,’ he said. ‘You’re not here. Not really.’

She nodded.

For a long time after he left, she stared at the ground. Dust drifted up, up. It hung in the light, little bits. Pieces. Light crawled up through them.

She sighed. Picked up the shovel. Held it. The cold metal of the handle penetrated her fingers. She molded digits around the roundness—yet tried not to hang on too tightly. The heft pulled her arm down.

Where to dig? She didn’t know. No answers. Pacing the floor, her eyes raking the dirt, she wondered. She tried not to wonder. It would overtake her. Missing, missing the affection had already enveloped her. Taken over her body. Most days, she couldn’t feel. Objects. Relationships.

Where? Where to dig?

Her heart pulled. It yanked her to one spot. Starving her heart had been. Now the beats filled with hardness, heft, grief, anger. She felt that instinct.

Digging filled her arms. Muscles ached with the time of misuse and then no movement. Sitting and sitting in her house.

Dirt entered her nose, was gritty in her mouth, flew into her hair.

Light strayed around her. She couldn’t see, though. She just dug. Went at it. Couldn’t stop. She wanted to. To stop.

The tip of the shovel hit something.

She had waited. For this. But not for this. Not this way.

It didn’t clang. She felt it vibrate throughout her body. The vibrations went into her body. Into her blood and brain.

She kept digging.

They came up out of the dirt. They rose to the surface. Dirt sifted over and under careening down the white—now cream—the now unburied.

When they came up out. When she knew all there was, she fell to her knees.

She felt the impact.

The wail echoed up up into the boards. Down into the dirt. Hands over her eyes rocking. Rocking. West. Face. Muddy rivers down her cheeks. Her wail continued and took on a tone that rang steady, steady. Coming into itself as one note.

She held herself, tried to stop the rocking after a long, long tone and continuous movement. When she wailed again—the pitch rose.

Small body. Small body. Arranged not as original, but as time has decayed. Laid out—disjointed—disconnected from sinew and muscle and skin. No skin. No body.

No skin. No body. No body. Bones cream. Laid out. Disconnected. She didn’t touch them. She cried over them.

The bones. The bones. Scattered in front of her. They called to her. They melted with her own brain. They ignited in her the fire of grief followed by anger followed by pain. Pain bit her.

Her daughter. Hidden. Stolen. No words. Nothing from them. A school. An education. Bones. Triggering light reflection.

People crash down into the room. Take her out. Take her out. Take her. Pull away. Arms along back. Pulled tightly. They drag her. Wanting her away from there, from her.

‘My daughter!” She screams.

They whisper, then yell in her ear.

‘Her. There. You buried her.’

Back up the stairs. Out of the dark. Not dark. The lamp still lit. The body laid out broken. Gone. The door closes. She wails.