Become the Axe Handle

Digging the earth to plant a tree for a teacher who had died, my shovel hit something hard, something other than stone. Carefully scraping the soil away, I lifted an iron axe head into the autumn light. I felt its weight, ran my fingers over the blade dulled by rust, looked through the hole where the handle had rotted.

A world brimmed there. My world and that of another. The world of mountain, of forge and hammers, of files and calloused hands, of being and time. When we swing an axe, we open a world of cleaving, and how we become in that world is who we are then and forever after.

I continued to dig the earth, thinking about who buried that axe in the ground and why. What memory was buried there? When the wooden handle decayed what was released?

I uncoiled the roots of the young tree, kneeling at this edge of its life. I thought about my teacher who implored us to wield words to counter war within our hearts. I slipped the axe head
over one of the long roots
that the tree might grow
to become a handle
holding this blade in the earth,
until it became a pocket of ochre,
and the tree was no longer
its handle.

—Ian Boyden
H.J. Andrews, September 23, 2018