

FIELD OF ASHES

Carl Colvin

It was the first day of summer, and the early morning sunlight shone brilliantly over the mountain range, each mountain pointed like a blade of grass. Mist wove its way through the shadows of the mountains and sunk lower into the valleys, trying to avoid the sun's reach. The valleys, filled with old tree stumps, held a deep blue hue as the red sunlight crept over the mountain sides. Old Ambrose stared off into the day from the front of our cave with his hand on my head. The corners of his mouth curled upward into a grin, wrinkling his tanned face like a bent piece of leather, as he squinted into the rising sun with his small, beady eyes.

"It looks to be a fine day," he said.

I tried to nod in agreement, but the weight of his hand pushed my head slightly forward toward my chest. All I could see was the desolate valley underneath me. Ambrose was not a large man, only about as tall as a doe, but he

still looked huge to me. He moved his hand down to my shoulder and pulled me toward him. I wrapped my arms around him, but they could not make their way around his bare potbelly.

He looked down at me and searched for me, his eyes looking in all different directions. "Yes, yes, a fine day."

I tried to look past him, acid filling my stomach at my discomfort of his gaze, but his eyes kept probing. I opened my mouth to tell him where I was, but he lifted his hand and opened his palm toward me. "Let's go back into the cave," he said. "I have a surprise for you."

I placed my palm in his and led him back into the cave. Darkness swallowed us, and after a few steps, the only light to guide us was the fire in the main living space down the tunnel. Sharp pebbles poked at our feet, and rough outcroppings reached out to us from the walls as I maneuvered Ambrose around potholes in the floor. The fire grew significantly brighter as we walked around a protrusion from the wall, and I peered up at the ceiling to see my history. Drawings filled this entire part of the tunnel, drawings of people dancing around fires and feasting on animals. Other pictures contained wars of the people fighting against different-looking people and sometimes against themselves. Ambrose would never explain who these people were, but I always

guessed they were just like us. I started to slow my pace as I gazed at the pictures, and Ambrose gently bumped into me from behind.

"Are you staring at the pictures again?" he asked as he steadied himself.

"I'm sorry, Ambrose," I said as I moved forward into the small, spherical living space. The light of the fire easily reached the extremities of the dome and danced weirdly on the different tools and utensils on the wall. I led Ambrose to his usual spot by the fire and slowly assisted him as he sat down.

"Thank you for getting the fire for me this morning, my boy," he said as he smoothed out his breechcloth. When he was settled, he reached out his hand. "Look under my mat and bring me what you find."

I went to his mat and brought back a smooth, wool blanket. As I walked back to the fire, I felt something under the wool, something hard but with a smooth contour. I recognized the shape, and my heart rose to my throat.

I placed the object in his hands, and he looked at what he thought was my face. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

I tried to speak, but with my heart in my throat, I could only nod. Ambrose looked satisfied, as if he heard my nod, and proceeded to unwrap the blanket. Anticipation seeped through my limbs as the folds of the blanket fell on his lap. My eyes widened as Ambrose lifted a bow and quiver. He reached

forward with them in his hands, and I gently took them from his grasp. My fingers caressed the smooth wood and followed the intricate carvings engraved into the surface. I stopped at a set of engravings by the handle, frowned, and looked up at the figurines on the tunnel wall.

Ambrose sat with his legs crossed under him and with his hands on his knees. He seemed to be looking at something behind me. "I traded for it in one of the villages deeper in the mountains. They made it, but I oversaw the engraving process. After I caught you trying to use mine, I started thinking that you should have one for your own. I hope you enjoy it," he said with a smile.

"I love it," I whispered as I continued to compare the engravings and the wall drawings.

"I figured that it was time for you to start learning how to hunt," he said as he started to slowly get up. "We will go to the plains tonight when the animals come out and set camp."

I looked back at the handle. The engraved people on it were running away from a fire. "What do these engravings mean?"

"Which ones?"

"The ones by the handle."

Ambrose stopped, still only halfway off his seat. His smile quickly faded. "Like I said, I figured it was time for you to learn."

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Twilight quickly approached while we stood outside the cave, and the sunlight receded from the mountainsides as the mist reclaimed its place in the valleys. I grabbed Ambrose's hand and led him along the path down the side of the mountain, shouldering my bow and quiver of arrows. Looking up, I could see past the end of the mountain range to the plains and their numerous tree stumps. Heat waves still vibrated above the flat land of the valley as the world started to darken, giving the appearance of spirits hovering above the stumps. I gulped, thankful that Ambrose was with me.

He squeezed my hand as we sidestepped a boulder, bringing us very close to the edge of the cliff. He shifted the pack he brought with him from one shoulder to the other. "It has been a long time since I have been down this way. I hope that nothing has changed much."

I helped him step off the path and onto the soft, gray ground of the valley and realized that I had never gone this far away from the cave before. The gray material sifted easily through my wiggling toes, and I stopped once it started to tickle.

"Ambrose, what is—"

"Ashes, my boy. Ashes." His face was grim again. "Let's continue forward."

I looked up toward the end of the valley, where the mountains ended and the plains began. The ashes almost rose to my ankles, so I gingerly put one foot in front of the other, never quite sure what I was going to bump into under the surface. I was always glad when we came across a tree trunk, something familiar, and I was tempted to step onto a stump and hop from one to another until we reached the plains. My hand reached out and touched the edge of one but recoiled when its singed bark crumpled into dust.

The valley opened into the plains like a delta into an ocean. I stopped and gazed out before me: a sea of ashes lay like a gray, wool blanket, stretching in all three directions. A forest of tree stumps poked through the blanket like fingers through the strands of wool. I peered up at Ambrose, fear and confusion clouding my face.

Ambrose placed his hand on my head and rubbed his thumb behind my ear. "Do not worry. There is nothing out there at the present. However, we must keep going if we are to reach the higher ground before dark."

The floor of the valley opened into a slope down to the surface of the plains. There was no sure footing, so we allowed ourselves to slide with the

ashes with each step. Once on level surface, my foot bumped into a large white dome about the size of a coconut protruding from the ashes. I gave it another nudge, and a human eye socket appeared. I clutched my stomach and kept moving forward, only changing my course when Ambrose said to.

My feet continued to swim through the ashes as we weaved through the stumps. The sunlight started to disappear by this point, giving the tree stumps oblong shadows across the landscape. With the departing sun came a low, cool breeze, brushing the hairs on my arms and making them stand on end. The breeze played with the ashes, creating miniature versions of dust devils and kicking up enough to sting my eyes.

Still clasping my hand, Ambrose suddenly stopped, and I jolted backward as he held his ground. He evidently felt the absence of the sun and the coolness of the breeze. "We will have to stay here for the night," he said, "before we continue on in the morning."

I looked around anxiously, and all I could make out were more ashes and stumps. There was no high ground in sight.

"Where is the high ground?" I asked. "Will we be there soon?"

"Yes, absolutely. I believe we just need to continue for a little while longer, then we will be there. However, the light is gone, so it would be better for us to stay put."

I looked at him curiously as he started to set up camp. He set his pack down and started to sort through the items he brought with us. He pulled out our mats and unrolled them, along with other various small items, some wood, and a large clump of parchment. "Take this and spread it out."

I opened the parchment, and the smell of raw meat hit my nose. I set my bow down and bent over a stump that was not as singed as the rest and started to set out the strips of meat. Looking over my shoulder, I could see Ambrose setting the wood out in a smooth patch of ashes and start working at the flint and steel. His face contorted in concentration as he worked at the steel. Sparks started to fly. "Good thing about camping here is that there is nothing left to burn down," he muttered with disgust under his breath.

I finished setting out the meat and turned to see Ambrose still working at the steel. I bent to help him, but stopped short when I saw that he was missing the wood completely. With a gentle nudge, I led his arm so that it was hanging over the wood.

"Not again," he sighed. "This is why I now always have you start the fires."

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As we sat and ate our meat, the night grew darker and colder. I started to shiver. The only thing I could make out past the fire's circle of light were the stars and moon. Singed stumps surrounded us like dark shadows rising out of the ground, our fire casting its flickering light upon them. They seemed to dance in the light's movement.

Ambrose sat on one of the stumps and stared into the darkness. I also peered into the night, scrutinizing the sheet of velvet before us to make out anything he was trying to see. A set of green eyes blinked at me and disappeared. I jumped with a yelp and rubbed my own eyes, wondering if I really saw anything. I turned to Ambrose in desperation, but he started to stand, unfazed. He grabbed a hunting knife from his pack and slowly walked toward me.

"We have not reached the high ground, but I figure that we should start your learning now anyway," he said, as he stretched out his hand toward me. "No use in waiting any longer. Grab your bow and quiver."

I sat there cowering in the ashes, staring at his hand with wide eyes.

Ambrose stood there motionless with his hand out, stone-faced. "We must go if we are to start your learning," he insisted.

I grabbed my bow and tentatively took his hand. He walked toward the edge of the circle of light, and acid once again filled my stomach, not because of the impending darkness, but because Ambrose was leading and I was not. As Ambrose took a step forward past the light, a cry broke out in the darkness, a cry of an animal in pain. Ambrose gritted his teeth together and continued forward, his feet parting the ashes. The night swallowed us whole, and we once again moved through the stumps. After a while I turned to see our camp light dwindle as we proceeded into the darkness.

"Ambrose—"

"Hush," he said in a gentle whisper. "We are almost there. And we do not want to scare them off."

My eyes looked back, longing for the camp's light, which was only the size of my little finger. More green eyes blinked at me, but we quickly stopped, and Ambrose lowered himself onto one knee.

"Yes, this is the spot," he said as he dragged his hand in the ashes in front of him. "Come and set up here."

I kneeled down beside him and took a quick glance behind me. The only thing there was the dying fire light. I turned back, grabbed my bow and an arrow, and set the arrow on the string.

"Now we wait," whispered Ambrose. "Stay sharp and ready for when and where I tell you to shoot."

My knee gradually sank deeper into the ashes as the night slipped by and the moon ran its course through the sky. Ambrose surveyed the field, and sleep tugged at my eyes, but I waited in anticipation as the green eyes periodically startled me throughout our vigil. As the moon fell in the sky, the sun's rays slowly illuminated the back sides of the mountains on the other side of the horizon. The air started to brighten to a dull gray, matching the surface of the plain.

"To the left," Ambrose motioned with his hand.

I shook my head awake and swung my bow to where he indicated. Nothing there. Out of the corner of my eye to the right, I noticed some motion, and saw a small, dark figure trotting away from us and disappearing behind the dead stumps.

"Aim and shoot!" Ambrose whispered hoarsely, still looking to the left.

"There is nothing there," I said flatly, staring at Ambrose hard.

"Nonsense, boy! Shoot, or it will get away!" he said, his voice starting to rise.

I continued to stare at Ambrose as he continued to scold me, almost at a shout. "Listen to me! I gave you that bow, now you must shoot it when I say!" Tears started to fill his eyes, and he slapped the ground in front of him.

I decided to lift myself out of the ashes and dust myself off. The plain continued to brighten, and the gray started to lift out of the air. Bones were scattered around us, and the skulls looked down at us. I peered into the dark eye sockets of one of them, then looked down at my bow's handle. The people were still running from the fire. I looked back at the skulls.

"Please, please, just shoot," whimpered Ambrose. Both his knees were now sunk in the ashes, and he was bending over, like he was praying.

I looked back up at him and decided to put the arrow back into the quiver. I held my gaze for a moment over his crumpled body, then started making my way back to the camp. As I walked, I could hear shuffling behind me, knowing that he was trying to follow. Soon back at the camp, I realized that the distance to where we stayed the night was not very large. The fire had died out long before, resulting in a pile of ashes to contribute to the field.

I heard scraping sounds from the stump where I kept the meat. As I approached, a coyote jumped from the stump. I aimed a swift kick, but it easily hopped out of the way and ran into the maze of charred trunks. Ambrose shuffled into the camp, muttering under his breath. He reached out his hands for

me, but I simply watched him until his foot nudged his empty pack and mat. He felt around the ashes for his supplies and picked up his flint and steel. He sat on the ground between the new heap of ashes and his supplies and started to scrape the flint and steel over nothing. I walked over to nudge his hand again, but this time I moved it over his supplies. He grunted something in my direction as he continued to scrape, sparks catching hold of the pack and mat and starting a small blaze. Ambrose smiled in satisfaction as he placed the tools beside him.

"Thank you," he said as he lifted his hands to the fire. "I could always count on you to start the fires."

I sat there engrossed by the flame, saying nothing, but watching the mat roll in on itself and the pack quickly change colors.

"Are you still there?" His hand extended toward me, mere centimeters from patting my head.

"Yes," I said, though my mind was not really there.

"Do we have any leftover meat?"

"No."

Ambrose frowned, deep in thought. "We may then need to eat once we get back to the cave."

I rose to my feet and looked farther out toward the plains. The heated air from the rising sun started to shimmer above the tree stumps, a dance on mini stages. The gray had completely risen from the flat land, and there was still no higher ground to be seen.

"Yes, that is what we will do," Ambrose continued to say, and started to get up. "Help me pack up our things," he said to the open air.

I turned toward the mountains and saw the mist weaving along the crags and outcroppings, enjoying its time while darkness still held. The sun continued to rise, the light slowly catching hold of the other sides of the mountains and making its way toward the mist. I looked back at the handle of my bow, then inspected the ashes at my feet. I bent low, cupped a small amount of the gray material in my hand, and carefully let it slide to the bottom of my quiver.

"Are you still there, boy? Where is my mat and pack?" Ambrose said as he continued to sift his hands through the ashes.

I delicately stepped onto the nearest trunk and bent slightly to test its durability. After a moment, I jumped to the next one, and proceeded toward the mountains, making sure not to touch the ashes.

It looked to be another fine day.

Carl Colvin is a freelance writer, editor, and oboist residing in Chicago, Illinois. He was recently awarded by Z Publishing as one of America's Best Emerging Poets. As an oboist, he has performed in a broad range of settings and genres, from classical to hip hop.