Once upon a time, there lived a young prince. From the moment he came into this world, his parents the King and Queen made sure his every need was met. When his stomach growled with hunger, the prince was immediately brought the most delicious of foods. When icy winds howled outside, the massive stones of the castle walls held firmly and kept the little prince warm, as did his clothes made from the softest wools and silks. If the prince sighed with boredom, the newest toys and games appeared in the blink of an eye. As he yawned each evening, feather-filled pillows were tucked under his head. And so it went, and each day the prince knew only comfort and ease, and his every desire was immediately satisfied.

One day the prince awoke, irritable and restless. Servants scurried to his side and offered delectable snacks, beautiful clothes, colorful toys. But he snapped at those around him and ordered his favorite horse be brought for he wished to ride out into the forest. The stable hands scrambled to ready his sturdy mare. Soon the prince was galloping away from the castle with a royal attendant hastening to keep pace with his young charge. On and on they went, past farmers tilling the fields, a stonemason building walls, the shepherdess tending her flock, until they came to the forest with its dense growth of trees. The royal attendant called for the young prince to slow down, worried that he might be knocked off his steed by branches hanging low across the path. Upon hearing the warning, however, the prince gave his horse a sharp kick, sending her into the forest with such speed that the royal attendant was soon left far behind.

Pleased with his newfound freedom, the little prince finally slowed and led his patient horse off the main trail and deep into the woods. Looking about, the prince realized he had never before visited this part of the forest. On and on they went, deeper and deeper into the woods, and soon the prince was pulling his cape close about his shoulders for nightfall was upon them. The prince slid off his horse and looked about for the way that would lead them home. All that he saw, however, was the rough earth peppered with rocks of all sizes and the plants and trees of the forest – there was not a clear path to be found. As the moon rose, the prince began to hear soft rustlings in the grasses and calls from the owls overhead. In frustration, the prince yelled out in his most commanding voice, “Royal Attendant, take me home immediately!” But of course, there was no one there but himself and his horse. With greater urgency, the prince glared at his weary companion and spoke sternly, “Royal Horse, carry me back directly to
our castle.” But the poor beast was hungry and lowered her nose to nibble at the grasses. Increasingly angry, the prince picked up a stone and threw it with all his might, yelling, “It isn’t fair!!” And then the prince, this small boy, plunked down on his bottom and began to cry. With tears falling, the prince imagined himself safe and warm in the castle, and worried that he might never find his way back.

“There, there,” said a soft voice behind him, “dry your tears now.” The little prince startled and looked up to see a woman rubbing the side of her head. “And what on earth are you throwing the stones for? They wouldn’t throw you!” Under her knobby gray-green hat, the prince saw that this peculiar person was gingerly touching a bump that was turning quite purple. Bright green eyes peered curiously at the prince. “And what is your business here in the woods giving old Mistress Moss a bump on her noggin?” The little prince stood up to his full height, quickly wiped away any evidence of tears, and called out in his most regal voice, “I am the Royal Prince and I demand that you take me home!” Mistress Moss began to chuckle and turning away from the little boy, she called out, “It’s nearly supper time. You may join me if you wish.” And off she trotted, with the prince’s horse following eagerly. The prince stared at her retreating back, in disbelief that his order had been quite thoroughly ignored. It was now bitterly cold, though, and the prospect of a warm meal was too much to resist. Off the boy went, hustling to catch up with the odd little woman.

Winding between the stones and trees, Mistress Moss moved with ease in the dark and soon led them to a clearing in the middle of which grew a magnificent tree. The soft glimmer of moonlight fell gently on the branches, covered with silvery gray-green leaves. Never before had the prince seen such a tree, not even in the elaborate castle gardens. When he finally pulled his gaze away, the prince saw that the clearing appeared to have four corners, each of which was clearly part of the old woman’s home. Mistress Moss herself seemed to have forgotten about the little prince for she was busying herself around a pot, tasting and stirring while the horse peered over her shoulder. The prince interrupted with a loud, “You may bring me my dinner now,” and he sat down on a large stone and prepared to dine.

The woods were still as could be, and both mistress and horse froze and quietly regarded the hungry boy. Seconds ticked by, then the horse shook her head with a soft whinny. “Yes, indeed, you are quite right,” replied the old woman. Whether she was talking to him or the horse, the prince could not be sure, but before he could ask, Mistress Moss stepped over to him and took his hands in hers. Looking gently into his eyes, she said, “Many helped prepare our meal. Let’s go thank them.” The prince was baffled. His eyes darted around the clearing, but
he did not see any cooks, nor servants. But the woman had him firmly by the hands. She pulled him to his feet and led him to the center of the clearing. Beside the silvery tree was a stone basin filled with water. Mistress Moss plunged their hands into the water and scrubbed vigorously. When done, she directed the prince to pour the water onto the tree’s roots. Too flustered to refuse the woman’s order, the boy did so.

Briskly, Mistress Moss then led them to one of the clearing’s corners where stones of many sizes were stacked atop each other, forming the old woman’s sturdy cooking hearth. Mistress Moss stood quite still before the hearth for some moments, then quietly said:

“The first bow of thanks is for minerals and stones, In whose glimmering veins the earth’s history is known.”

The old woman bowed to the stone hearth, her bones creaking ever so slightly. The prince gazed at the sturdy stones, impressed with how the tightly packed stones contained the small blaze warming their supper. Quickly imitating the old woman’s bow, he hurriedly followed as she moved over to a corner where grew a small garden. The boy admired the leafy greens and bright fruits and vegetables nestled together on the little patch of earth. Mistress Moss leaned over to smell the herbs tumbling over each other as she spoke again:

“The second bow of thanks is for the life of plants, Plants that reach up to the sun and in the breezes dance.”

The prince also gave a quick bow as the old woman plucked a bit of parsley and handed it to him for nibbling. With a few steps, they came next to a third corner in the clearing where the prince’s horse was keeping company with two cream-colored sheep, a lively grey goat, and several clucking hens. Pulling several carrots and a handful of grain from her apron pocket, Mistress Moss smiled at her friends:

“The third bow of thanks is for all the world’s beasts, Those that live in the skies, on the land, and in the seas.”

The prince looked at his sweet mare and grinned. He rushed back to the garden and, with a nod of approval from the mistress, carefully pulled up a handful of greens. Offering them to his horse, he realized he had never thought to feed her before. “Who does feed her?” he wondered.
The old woman made her way back to the cooking pot, the little prince scurrying behind. As he watched, she began to ladle the fragrant stew into two bowls. Turning to the boy and holding out a bowl, now filled with the gifts of the stones, the plants, the animals, the old woman smiled:

“The fourth bow of thanks is for people far and wide, Be they strangers unknown or friends who walk by my side.”

The woman bowed to the prince, as so many others had done all of his life.

The prince stood silently for a moment. And then, with great care, the prince bowed to the old woman, as he had never done in his life.

The boy and the woman carried their bowls of stew to the fourth corner of the clearing where stood a sturdy cottage. Side by side they sat under the moon, with the light bouncing off the silvery leaves of the tree, and shared their meal. By the time the prince’s spoon scraped the bottom of his bowl, his head was nodding onto his chest. Mistress Moss guided the boy to a soft bed in the corner of the cottage, tucking him under a woolen blanket and bidding him sweet dreams.

The prince slept deep and long. Images of moonlight, gentle sheep, bright green eyes drifted in and out of his dreams. When the boy awoke, the sun was shining brightly. Lifting himself from his feathery bed, he felt something tumble off into his lap - a beautiful branch covered with silvery grey-green leaves and small tufts of moss and sheep’s wool. Suddenly wide awake, the prince looked about his bedroom – yes, there were his fine clothes, bright toys, and a servant stepping through the door with breakfast. But the branch… the prince closed his eyes and memories unfolded. The prince saw himself and Mistress Moss in the woods, bowing to the stones, the plants, the beasts, and yes, to each other. A sense of great comfort flowed into the boy, traveling from his very small toes right up to the top of his tousled head.

Jumping from his bed, he took up the branch and rushed from the room, shouting “Thank-you for my breakfast, but please enjoy it yourself!” The bewildered servant watched as the boy, holding the branch tight, flew out of his room, through the castle’s halls, and into the morning sun. The prince nearly bowled over the master gardener, but quickly apologized to the astonished man before thrusting the silvery branch into his hands. “Please, sir,” asked the boy, “please plant this tree in the middle of the garden.”

An odd look came over the gardener as he examined the boy’s offering. “From where did this come, your royal highness?”
Words began to pour out of the prince’s mouth. “The woods... moonlight on leaves of silver... such a sweet old woman... we thanked the stones...” On and on he went as the gardener nodded, a knowing smile spread over his face. Gently taking the prince by the hand, the gardener led them to the center of the royal gardens and side by side, boy and man began to work.

One morning leads to the next, and the young prince grew to be king. Throughout the land, he was much beloved. Many men and women presented themselves to the king to request his help, offer gifts, share news of the greater world.

While accounts of his generosity and kindness traveled far and wide, tales of dining with the king were those that truly captured the hearts of the people. For it was told that in the center of the royal garden grew a glorious tree with silvery gray-green leaves. Before every meal, the king led all in his household out to the clearing and with gratitude in their hearts and voices, they bowed and gave thanks to the earth’s stones, plants, beasts, and each other. The king himself then turned towards the woods and offered the deepest bow. To whom, no one knew, but perhaps you, dear listener of this tale, have an idea.

Snip-snap-snout, the tale’s told out.

story by Christine Waskowiak