

The Verse

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HAMMER & BIRCH

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THE VERSE

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The Verse

A tendril, a root, a suggestion, curled around the child's heart while he knelt on the hill, whispering into a chilly fall breeze. The book had revealed the little verse, endorsed it with yellowed pages and that musty attic smell. The boy recited the couplets in a low insistent whisper, over and over, until the words ran together into a hiss. He was patient. Magic isn't easy. Some spells take a while.

As he muttered the verse, he fingered the stone in his pocket. The stone was also magic. He discovered that by accident a few weeks ago, in math class. He had known he would fail that test, despite the fact that he had stayed up late—till 10—studying. Fractions, deep and frightening things. He had picked up the stone the next morning by the bus stop, while muttering the rules of adding and subtracting fractions. It was a dull, dark grey. He fondled it all through the harrowing exam. And he got the highest grade in the class. Not just an “A,”

but the highest grade in the class. Mrs. Peterson had put a holographic sticker next to her gorgeously swirled "Well Done!"

He knew the stone had done it. Later that day, desperate for more knowledge, he showed the stone to Mr. Zarinsky, enshrined behind his vast metal desk, next to the deer fetus, which was preserved in a five gallon jar of formaldehyde. The fetus's mother had died after hitting a car, and the jar was used in the biology classes for demonstrations. "Basalt," pronounced Mr. Zarinsky, after glancing at the stone. "It's quite common in this region."

Common! The boy smiled briefly, remembering how darkly shiny the rock became when it got rinsed in the bathroom sink. Not his stone.

Whisper. Whisper. He continued his muttering, looking down the hill to the road. The stone soaked up the warmth of his hand. The sodden grey sky darkened further, and he knew that soon he'd have to get home for dinner. Still, he repeated the verse. The cars on the road below flicked on their headlights one by one. The boy shivered, crouched ankle-deep in the fallen leaves.

He looked to the side as some bird flapped suddenly away from the tree above his head. Almost at the same moment, he heard a screech and a crash below. A car lay half off the road, the engine practically wrapped around a tree trunk. The

headlights, impossibly, were still on, beaming at wrong angles into the woods across the way. The boy choked off his recitation, awed by the power of the verse. He heard, then saw a deer pound through the woods barely five feet away. Heart racing, he yanked his hands out of his pockets and ran as fast as he could for home.

Gold light spilled out of the windows as he raced up the driveway, breath ragged in his throat. He slowed as he reached the porch. It was real dark now, and colder. He hurried inside. His mother wasn't upset that he was late, since his father hadn't got home yet either.

"Wash up," she told him. He ran upstairs. In the tiny bathroom, he washed the forest soil off his hands; found a brand new scrape on his left leg. He washed the basalt stone too, and set it on the small wooden shelf to dry. He wouldn't need it for dinner. Before he flicked the light switch he looked at the stone, suddenly beautiful, beckoning, dark and glistening. Then his stomach rumbled, so he bounded down the stairs to the kitchen.

Although he was bursting with the knowledge of his newfound power—the power of the little verse, the dinner menu sobered him.

"Lima beans?" He stared into the pot with disdain.

"Maybe they're magic lima beans," his mother smiled. "Put that lid back on!"

Then his father swept in. Wool coat, leather briefcase, warm smile.

"Hello, love." He embraced the boy's mother a tad longer than usual. "Sorry I'm late. There was an accident down by Muscovy Road." He took off his coat before tousling his son's hair.

"Another one?" His mother was dismayed as only a mother can be. "That turn is so unsafe. Was anybody hurt?"

"The paramedics were there." He shrugged. "I saw a stretcher. They weren't hurrying. Who knows?"

The boy sat down at his place, tongue tied. He knew. He was certain. He felt the power in the words. But he said nothing. That was one of the rules of sorcery. He learned it in a book at the public library. *Tacere*, to keep silent. That was Latin, the librarian had said.

The boy tucked in to dinner. Even the beans tasted okay, he was so hungry. Magic isn't easy. Sorcery was a demanding, lonely business.

Tacere. That rule was right after *audere*—to dare.