WIOLETTA GREG

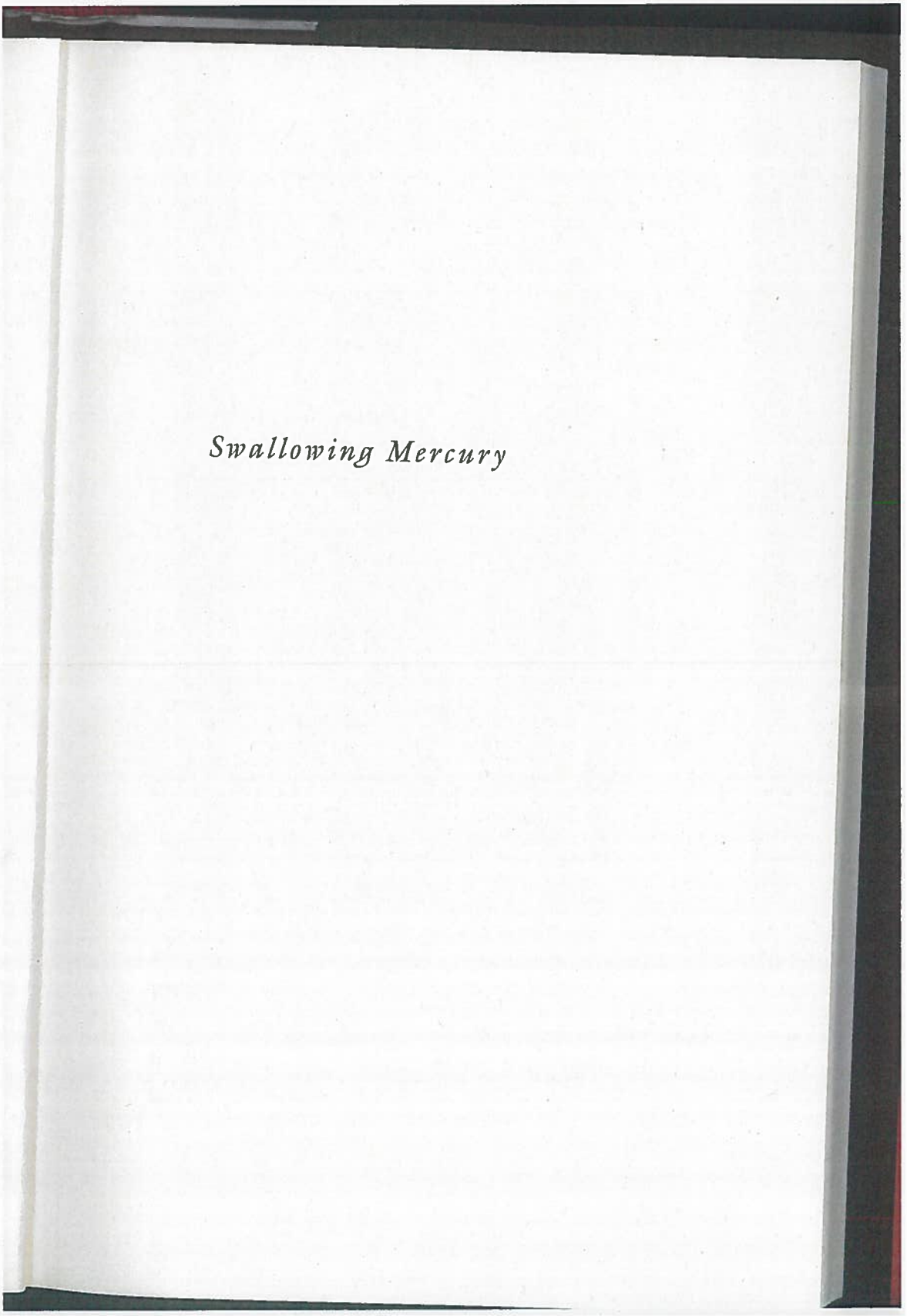
SWALLOWING

Swallowing Mercury

Wioletta Greg

Translated from the Polish by Eliza Marciniak

Portobello
BOOKS



Swallowing Mercury

The Fairground Girl

A CHRISTENING SHAWL DECORATED WITH periwinkle and yellowed asparagus fern hung in the window of our stone house for nearly two years. It tempted me with a little rose tucked in its folds, and I would have used it as a blanket for my dolls, but my mother wouldn't let me go near it.

'Don't touch the shawl, Loletka. It's a memento. We'll take it down when your dad comes back,' she'd say. And when her friend who lived nearby would pop in 'for a moment' – meaning two hours – she would repeat the story of how, a month after my father was arrested for deserting from the army and two weeks before her baby was due, she received a summons to start a work placement at Cem-Build. Together with a dozen other women, she had to make paving slabs as part of the new five-year plan, so that the district government could create new squares in front of office buildings, schools

and health centres within the allotted time. In the end, Mum couldn't take working outside in the freezing weather. She hid behind a cement mixer, and when her waters broke into a bucket full of lime they drove her to the maternity ward.

She brought me home in February. Still bleeding after childbirth, she lay down on the bed, unwrapped my blanket, which reeked of mucus and urine, rubbed the stump of my umbilical cord with gentian violet, tied a red ribbon around my wrist to ward off evil spells and fell asleep for a few hours. It was the sort of sleep during which a person decides whether to depart or to turn back.

Dad remained absent. His letters, decorated with drawings of plants and animals, kept accumulating in a shoebox while the pages of the calendar kept falling away, until only a thin stack of days separated us from the end of the year. A few more months passed. Ducklings hatched in the hallway, and Mum moved them with their mother to the pigsty, where they were close to the water-filled piece of tyre in the yard. My grandfather started to plane down new window shutters for the attic and rockers for my rocking horse. My grandmother made colourful cockerels from strips of aspen bast. The flies living between the window frames reawakened. When the christening shawl had faded and the periwinkle leaves

had fallen onto the windowsill, a thin man with curly hair and a little moustache came into our house. After he saw me, he cried for a whole day, and he calmed down only when Poland started playing in the World Cup.

In June, we went to the parish fair at St Anthony's Basilica. The procession began. The priest came out of the church, followed by embroidered banners and women dressed up as princesses carrying plaited straw lambs and wreaths. Girls who had recently received First Communion scattered lupin flowers under their feet. I was mesmerised, and when Mum started searching through her bag for coins for the collection tray, I let go of her hand and ran after the procession as if it were a royal entourage. I didn't stop until I reached a market stall with a blown-up silver whale. The whale wasn't able to float off towards the clouds. The sun caught it in red and purple rings and blinded me, burning my cheeks. Gilt figures kept disappearing between the cars and the britchkas, leaving elongated shadows on a wall.

A balding llama was standing under a tree, drooling. People would come up to it, throw money into a tin chained to the fence and mount their children on the animal's back, which was covered with a patterned blanket, while a man in a straw hat would snap photos with a clever camera that spat out prints instantly. The llama gazed sadly from under its long lashes. Little burnt

flashbulbs were spinning in its eyes. I wanted to pet its matted forelock, but just at that moment a toy cap gun went off. The frightened llama jumped, and I hid under the plastic tablecloth of the nearest stall. Outside, wrappers were rustling; trumpets, whistles, wind-up toys and harmonicas were playing. I covered my ears and sat under the stall while raspberry juice dripped from the plastic tablecloth right onto my new dress.

Wasps began circling around my plaits like striped piranhas, drinking juice from the little roses on the fabric of my dress and growing larger and larger. One nasty wasp sat on my head, buzzing behind my ear. I lay down on the dry ground and cried out, 'Mummy! Mummy! *The wasps want to kidnap me!' But Mum wasn't there.*

The plastic tablecloth was drawn aside, and I saw the Moustache Man. 'That's where you are! My... my...' He pulled me out from under the stall and hugged me close. 'My little fairground girl! Where have you been?! I've been looking for you everywhere.'

'Lemme go, Daddy, lemme go!' I squeaked merrily and secretly wiped my snotty nose on his lapel. The Moustache Man, probably delighted that I had called him Daddy for the first time, lifted me up and spun me around in the air. I half-closed my eyes and burst out laughing. The sun's rays pierced the wasps, which shrank back to their normal size and flew off through the red

and purple rings. The light tickled me like water during a bath in the wooden washtub in our yard. I felt hungry and started chewing on the edge of my belt. Mum leaned out from the dark alcove of the bus shelter, her head wreathed with a string of little bagels.

The Jesus Raffle

DISOBEYING MY MOTHER, I STARTED SLEEPING with Blacky. Blacky smelled of hay and milk and had a snow white map of Africa around his neck. He would come to me in the night, lie on my duvet and start purring, kneading the covers like dough under his paws. Ever since I found him up in the attic, we lived in a strange state of symbiosis. I'd carry him inside my jumper like a baby, steal cream for him from the dresser and, on Sundays, feed him chicken wings from my soup.

I spent the whole summer roaming the fields with Blacky. He showed me a different kind of geometry of the world, where boundaries are not marked by field margins overgrown with thistles and goosefoot, by cobbled roads, fences or tracks trodden by humans, but instead by light, sound and the elements. With Blacky, I learned to climb haystacks, apple and cherry trees, piles

of breeze blocks; I learned to keep away from limestone pits hidden by blackberry bushes, from hornets' nests, quagmires and snares set in the grain fields.

After Christmas, Blacky began to avoid me. He'd turn up at home only briefly and deposit a dead mouse on the doorstep, as if he wanted to make amends for his absence. On the first day of the winter break, he disappeared for good. I searched for him under tarpaulins and in the empty boxes where Uncle Lolek used to breed coypus and where Blacky loved sleeping all day, but he was nowhere to be found.

Uncle Lolek was my main suspect in the case of Blacky's disappearance. A few months earlier, he had somehow managed to get hold of a sack of sugar which he hid in the coal shed, and that's exactly where Blacky set up his litter box. So, armed with my father's air rifle, I ran to confront Uncle Lolek. I pointed the gun at him and ordered him to hand over Blacky immediately, since I couldn't allow my kitty to be turned into sausages and fur, like those nasty-smelling coypus. Uncle Lolek was speechless, and then he burst out laughing so hard he almost fell into the sauerkraut barrel. Grateful for being cheered up so much first thing in the morning, he offered me some sweets.

At dawn the next day, I struck up a conversation with the milkman, who had stopped his horse at the bottom

of our dirt drive and was pulling milk churns up onto his cart with a big hook.

'Excuse me, have you seen Blacky?'

'Who?'

'My black cat.'

'Bah!' he spat. 'That's all I need, some black mouser crossing my path today! Mind you, there was some spotty thing hanging round the bridge.'

'No, not a tabby cat… But if you see a black one, can you please let me know?'

'Ah, wait, Wiolitka, I've got something for you.' He gave me a packet of vanilla cream cheese from the co-op, urged his horse forward and drove off.

I wandered around Hektary for a couple more hours, looking in drainpipes and clumps of willow bushes. Finally, I went home, chilled to the bone. My father had come back from work and was sitting on the sofa, soaking his frozen feet in warm salted water and carving a fishing float out of polyfoam. Quietly, so that he wouldn't notice me, I climbed the ladder up to the attic, buried myself in hay and tried to find some trace of Blacky: a scrap of fur, a feather, an eggshell.

'What are you doing up there in this chill?' my father called.

'I'm waiting for Blacky, Dad. He's been missing for three days now.'

'Come down, or you'll freeze. We can bake some potatoes in the ash pan if you want.'

'I'm not coming down until Blacky is back.'

'Come on, get down. I know what's happened.'

I came down the ladder so fast it felt like I was flying. I was lucky that a sack of oats had been propped up against the lowest rungs, or I would have knocked out the last of my milk teeth as I fell. I sat down in the corner by the Christmas tree, nervously crumpling dry spruce needles as I waited for the news, but my father was silent. He finished painting the last bright yellow stripe on the float, put it on top of the *People's Tribune* by the stove and sat down across from me.

'Well… How should I say this…' he began. 'Three days ago, Blacky tried to pull a fish head out of a muskrat snare and he drowned in the pond,' he said in one breath and looked at me anxiously.

I lay down on the sofa and turned to face the straw mat on the wall. For the next week, I didn't speak to anyone; I only whispered to myself. There was nothing strange in that, really, since everyone in our house was always whispering or singing something under their breath. For example, my grandmother would recite the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary as she prepared little round dumplings for soup; 'Mother Somethingorother,'

repeated the walls and the glass hen for storing eggs; 'Mother Somethingorother,' repeated the embroidered wall hangings, the mirrors, the springs sticking out of the sofa propped on its four birch pegs. My father would hum Elvis songs and prison ballads, such as 'Black Bread and Black Coffee', improvising on a lime-tree leaf or a banjo; my mother would sing 'A Little Bee Sat on an Apple Tree', but only when she was on edge; my grandfather would start his morning in the limestone quarry with the old Resistance song that went, 'On the first of September, Hitler that rogue promised to conquer the world.' But when I muttered or sang to myself, everyone would glance at me with surprise, and Mum would give me more and more drops of the sedative Milocardin on a teaspoon.

One day during the second week of the school break, I sat by the window watering geraniums with cold mint extract. My stomach was hurting because I missed Blacky so much that I had secretly eaten the fringes off the throw on the sofa and some slivers of whitewash from the walls.

My warm breath opened up a gap between the crystal ferns of hoarfrost on the windowpane. I peered out into the yard. An hour later, the front gate creaked, and I could hear my classmates Justyna and Big Witek talking to my mother outside as she emptied the ash pan

onto the path. They were wondering if I was coming to St Anthony's Basilica.

'I don't think Wiolka's going with you,' I could hear my mother's hoarse voice. 'She has an upset stomach.'

'But there's going to be a raffle!' Big Witek interrupted her.

'What raffle?'

'Oh, to win a blessed figure,' Justyna explained.

'Then maybe you want to tell her yourselves?'

'They don't have to tell me anything.' I came outside wrapped up to my ears in a woollen shawl. 'I'm going.'

Mum seemed surprised by my sudden recovery but didn't say a word. She poked with her wellies at the patch of warm ashes ringed with glistening brown grass, picked up a sooty nail, threw it on a heap of sand and turned back to the house.

That afternoon, the Łagisza power station had announced on the radio that there would be a period of energy-saving measures. The whole parish had its electricity cut, and the church was as cold as a kennel. The breath of more than a hundred children drifted up in little clouds towards the vault, where fat saints gently floated, as if they were bathing in Lake Balaton. Only a few candles by the altars lit up the nave and the two aisles. The forked light of the setting sun pierced the clay Jesus standing on a pedestal in a light blue robe, with

a crown of thorns around his heart. I stood in an aisle, watching a mouse wander around the intricate labyrinth of gilded stucco decorations.

Towards the end, each of us cast a small piece of paper, rubber-stamped by the parish, into a wooden urn. A young girl dressed as an angel drew one out and handed it to the curate. Silence fell. The power came back on. The light blinded us. The hum of the electric fans poured down into the church like a flood. The curate spoke my name. The echo of his voice bounced off the votive offerings. I was so overwhelmed I swallowed my gum, which I had got from Big Witek. The organist intoned 'The Fishing Boat': 'Oh Lord, today Your eyes fell on me. Your lips uttered my name.' The children parted. Justyna pushed me into the middle of the church. I walked slowly in a golden glow all the way to the altar. The curate gave me his stole to kiss, then passed me the statuette of Jesus. Someone grabbed me by the cord of my mittens and led me into the corridor. I went outside accompanied by the children from Hektary, forgetting to dip my fingers in the holy water.

I wrapped the figure up in my woollen shawl, and as night fell Justyna, Big Witek and I took turns carrying it the two and a half miles to Hektary. Small lumps of ice kept falling into our boots. Our hands were frozen stiff,

but we paid no attention. We were so excited about our prize that we kept crossing ourselves in front of every roadside shrine and holy spring; Big Witek even crossed himself in front of our headmistress's villa, just in case her Dobermann came running at us through a gap in the fence.

I said goodbye to my friends near the well and ran down our drive to the yard. I paused on the porch and unwrapped the figure. I entered the bright room like a priest making the rounds after Christmas and placed Jesus on the table. It happened to be a feathering evening at our house, and all the women who had come to help my grandmother tear up feathers turned speechless when they saw me. After a pause, they set aside their down-filled farm sieves, kneeled on the floor among the white piles of feathers and started to recite prayers. They didn't have time to say more than two decades of the rosary, however, before their concerned husbands came knocking on our windows.

Late at night, when all the women had gone and I could hear my parents' steady breathing through the partly open door, and after the fire had died down in the stove, I moved the figure to the dining room and put it on a starched napkin, which up to that point had been occupied by our glass hen and a few dead flies. I wrapped myself up in a duvet, since it was terribly cold

that February, in 1981, and I stood taut and still in the darkness until the statue rose a little above the napkin. That's when I mustered up the courage to ask Jesus if he could resurrect my Blacky.

Little Table, Set Thyself!

I WOKE UP AT DAWN, REALISING THAT SOMEONE was slinking into the room where I was sleeping. It was my father. In his waterproof cape and wellies, he looked like the mysterious Don Pedro from *The Kidnapping of Balthazar Sponge* cartoons. He cursed the creaky door hinges. Our eyes met in the semi-darkness. He put a finger to his lips, so that I would keep quiet and not alert my mother, but my mother wasn't asleep. She knew what time he got back from fishing on Sundays and was already banging pans around in the kitchen and lighting the fire in the stove. My father undressed, sat down on the sofa, put an immersion heater in a mug and fell asleep instantly. The water danced, sprayed up onto the ceiling and spattered the table, where the blood of the weasel that my father had stuffed the previous week was still clotting in the cracks. A quarter of an hour later, my mother came into the room.

'Rysiek, get up… Come on, get up,' she whispered as he chased a magnificent stag in his dream.

'Mmm…' he muttered. 'If I could stuff it and put it on display on the porch… The whole village would come to see it.'

'Rysiek, the eggs are getting cold. Why did I bother?!'

The raised voice wrenched him out of his dream, but he must have had just enough time to glimpse his wife's golden hair flickering in the undergrowth. She looked like Saint Kunigunde, who had fallen in love with a stag.

'What? How did you get here?' He rubbed his eyes. Between sleep and waking, he seemed to have the impression that pine needles had grown out of his thighs and that brambles had sprung up inside his boots. Strangely, when he woke up, I detected the scent of a forest in the room. He sat up, rocking back and forth over his plate as if he were fishing. 'It'd probably take a couple of pounds of alum and a few yards of wire.'

'Again going on about your tawing and stuffing? Don't tell me you've dragged another one home! We've already got three stiffs on the porch. What for? What do you want with all these corpses? This isn't a forester's lodge. Wiolka is walking around drunk from all that glue.'

My father smirked under his moustache, kissed my mother on the cheek and led her out onto the porch.

He opened the cupboard, and out fell the stiffened claws of eviscerated hares, pheasants, martens, goshawks, buzzards and kestrels.

'Look at this.' He pulled out a dead goshawk, spread out its slightly stiffened dark blue wings and looked at them with admiration. 'I promised to prepare this beauty for the director of the paper mill. If I do a good job, I might get a pay rise. This is the last time, I swear to you. You know I can't live without it. Gypsy blood! My grandfather Szydło, the one who raised me, he was also into stuffing birds, and my great-grandfather would bring skins to trade at the market in Siewierz.'

My mother narrowed her green eyes. The bit about a higher salary clearly persuaded her because she changed her tone.

'Okay, fine, but this ghastly bird is the last. You can stuff the rest in the barn!'

She went back to the kitchen and began to singe a plucked hen over the stove. The fire blazed between the partly open stove lids. The smell of scorched skin and burnt newspapers filled the house.

I heard the rustle of a nylon housecoat. My mother pulled the warm duvet off me and laid it out on chairs arranged together by the side of the bed. Even though it was summer, she didn't air out the bedding on the fence on Sundays because, as she used to say, it would

be a disgrace to display all that clobber outside on the Lord's day.

After I washed and put on a puff-sleeved blouse, a checked mid-length skirt and knee-high socks, my grandmother called me into her room. She pulled out her purse from under the straw mattress, gave me a banknote for the collection tray, verified that I had plaited my unruly hair and sent me off to church.

Still feeling a bit sleepy, I walked down the cobbled road, chewing dried pears. Near the fire station, the ice-cream man's painted van sounded its horn. I glanced at the banknote and inwardly prayed that this week I wouldn't yield to temptation to use the collection money to buy three scoops of ice cream – and then have to own up to it at confession.

'Well, well, who do we have here? Rysiek's daughter, I see,' smiled the ice-cream man. 'Do you know how my hare is doing? Is it ready yet?'

I shrugged. 'Dad was reinforcing it a couple of days ago, so I guess it'll be done soon.'

I took my ice cream and turned by the holy spring towards the lane that crossed the road to St Anthony's Basilica.

After Mass, I wanted to slip away to my hiding place in a pile of breeze blocks to read my comics about Tytus, Romek and A'Tomek, but an acquaintance of

my grandmother's was cycling beside me, watching me closely. On my way home, I picked two parasol mushrooms which had grown in the ditch, in the exact spot where our neighbour would dump animal slurry. When I got home, I steeped them in milk, put a lid over them and left them in a cool room. Then I sat at the table, which was set with plates full of pasta, laid my head down on the surface and felt the pulsating of the wood. In its cracks and knots, christenings, wakes and name-day celebrations were in full swing, and woodworms were playing dodgeball using poppy seeds that had fallen from the crusts of freshly baked bread.

'Wiolka, watch where you put your head. Your hair will get into the pasta,' my mother admonished me. I woke up. Golden light was gliding along the wall unit, the crystal, the glass fish, the stoneware cups.

After scrubbing the burnt pan with sand in the company of insatiable chickens, ducks and turkeys, my mother filched a few cigarettes from my father's jacket pocket and disappeared. I finished the washing up and went off to look for bantam hens' eggs among the nettles because on Sundays I always felt like *kogel-mogel*, which I would scoop up with a teaspoon and dip in freshly brewed coffee.

When I got back, my father removed the tablecloth, covered the table with newspapers, washed his hands

thoroughly like a surgeon and began making an incision in the goshawk's belly with his penknife, taking care not to stain its shiny down with blood. He spent over an hour removing the entrails, which he threw into a tin bucket under the table. The bird, stripped of its light pink flesh, bones and fat, lay on a newspaper. After carefully flipping it inside out, my father rubbed the skin with alum, which he kept in a pickle jar. The climax of the process was the preparation of a wire frame to replace the bird's skeleton. This activity demanded considerable concentration, so my father usually took a break at this point, reached for the cigarettes in his jacket and told me to brew him a cup of strong tea with five teaspoons of sugar. When preparing animals, he always liked to drink this sort of sickly sweet syrup.

Smoking, he would narrow his eyes and scrutinise the dead bird drying on the warm stovepipe. Then he'd get his toolbox from under the bed and start trimming pieces of golden wire with his pliers. I liked the metal frame much more than the bones, which reeked of coagulated blood. After slipping what remained of the goshawk over the structure, he would stuff it with wadding, using tweezers to push cotton wool into places that were harder to reach. Finally, he sewed up the skin with fine thread and affixed ruffled feathers with Butapren glue. To finish things off, he inserted suitably painted glass balls into

the eye sockets. Using the thin wires sticking out of the talons, he attached the goshawk to a birch bough that had been marked by a hot poker with his initials: RR.

The clock struck seven. My father told me to salt the table and scrub it thoroughly, while he himself took his paints and moved to the porch to work on the final touch-ups under the 200-watt bulb. Right after I put the tablecloth back on the table, my mother came back with a basket of plums. She called me into the kitchen to help prepare supper. I cut the bread and spread paprikash paste onto the slices. When I returned to the dining room with a plateful of sandwiches, my father was no longer sitting at the table; he was dozing on the sofa. The goshawk, with its artificially spread wings, soared above him.