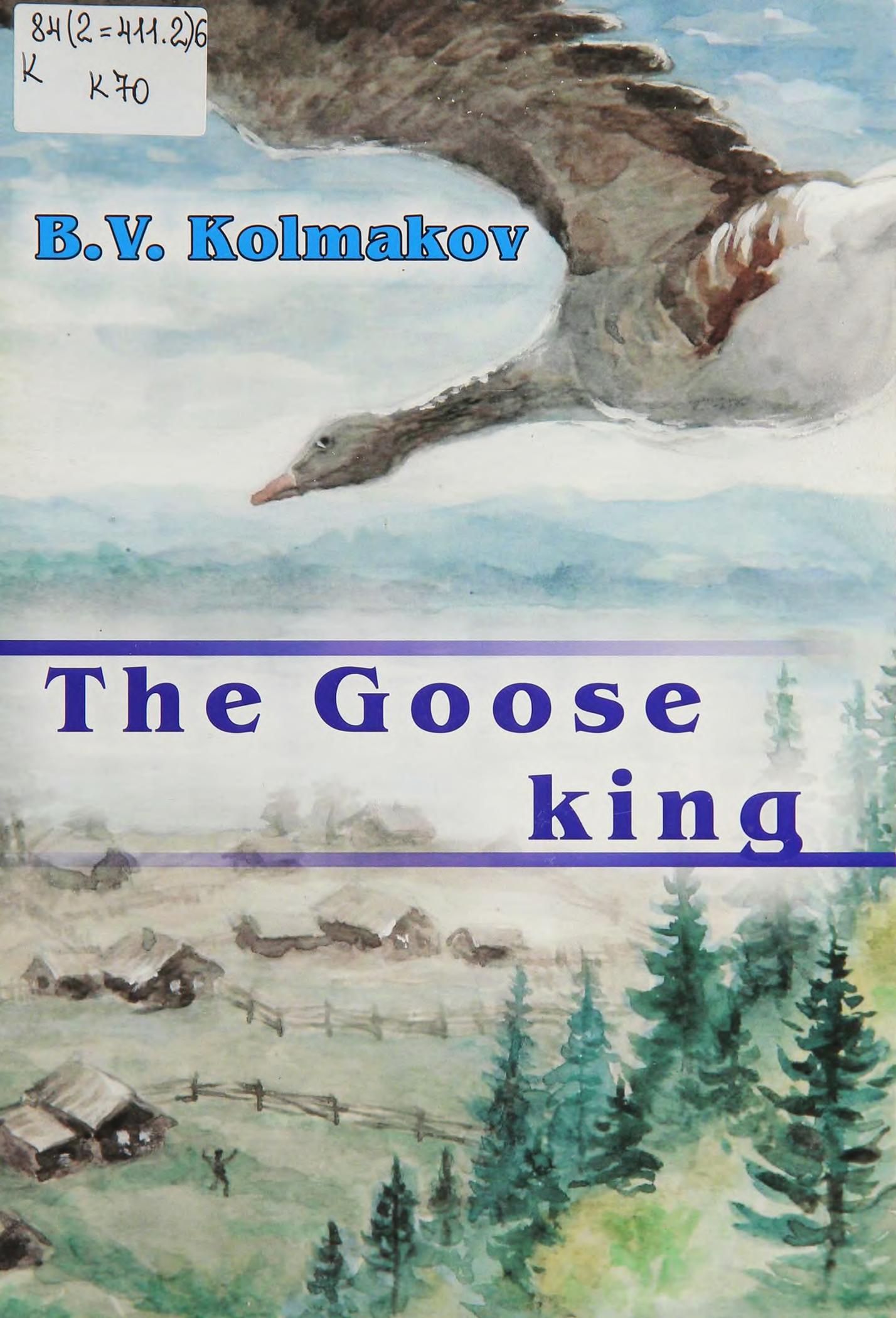


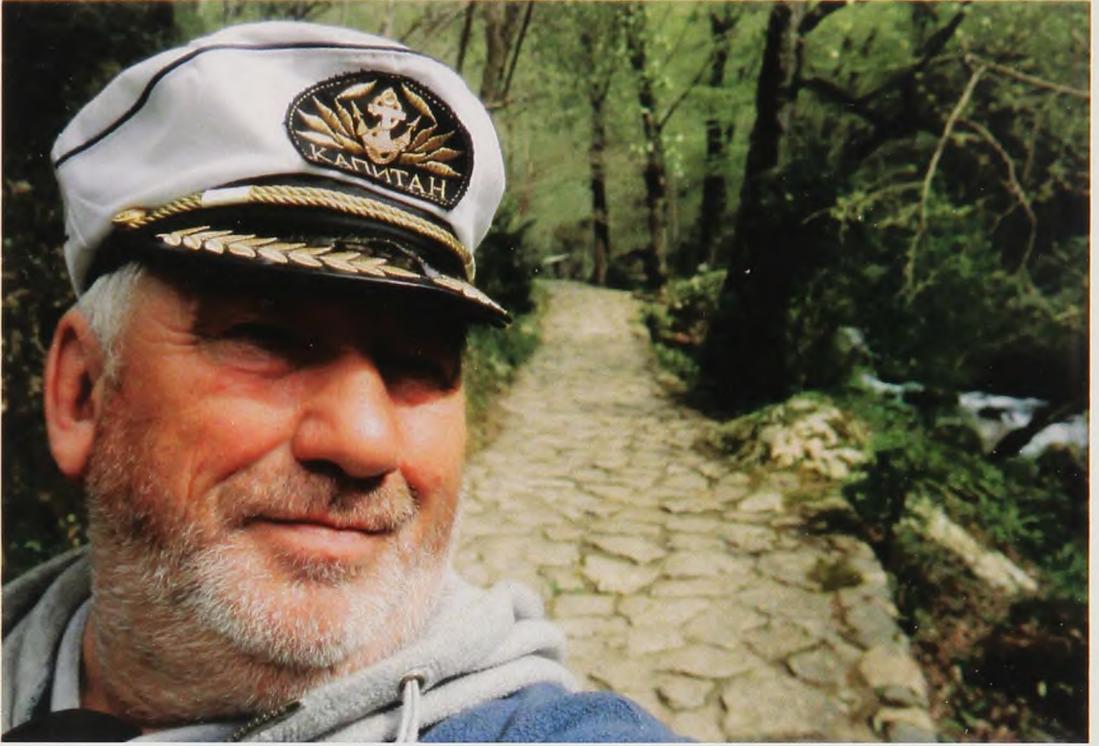
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B.V. Kolmakov

**The Goose
king**





Boris Kolmakov, the author

“A fairy tale lives in every child, it is needed only to be

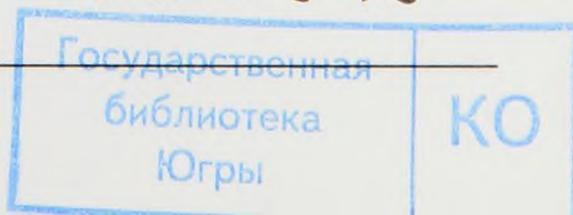
The Goose King

The tale about souls, courage and
strength of mind.

By B.V. Kolmakov

Translated by L.N. Dudanova

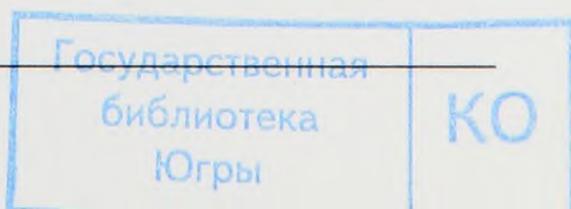
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Boris Viktorovich Kolmakov was born on 30 April in 1955 in the village Korliki, Nizhnevartovsky district, where he still live surrounded by the enchanting and peaceful Siberian nature because the village Korliki is a secluded spot – the only way to get to Korliki is a helicopter.

In 1972 Boris Kolmakov graduated middle school in the village Laryak.

In 1973 he was drafted for 3-year service. He was the best soldier in his unit.

In 1977 Boris Kolmakov graduated the technical school where he studied organization of hunting and fur-farming. He had an interesting job experience: he was a wildlife manager and a section foreman and a hunting industry manager.

In 1982 he entered Kiev Institute of Civil Aviation. He had been working as an airport manager for 25 years in his home village where still the only air track exists to this day. Boris Kolmkov can speak such rare languages as Khanty and Eskaleut. His knowledge about the exotic Siberian culture is more than that: he can also drive a reindeer team. He loves the Russian nature with all his heart and he would love to take part in saving its wildlife, that's why he began writing his tales. It took him only a night to write his first book "The Goose king", others took him 2-3 days.

Boris Kolmakov keeps saying that fairy tales "sleep" in every child since his or her childhood,

they simply need to be woken. Boris Kolmakov's tales often describe a "parallel" world around us: it's pets like parrots, fish, hedgehogs, tortoises and many others. Today the tale-teller travels around Russia to meet his young readers: from Kaliningrad to Kamchatka Peninsula, from Ukraine to Vladivostok, from North Caucasus to Volga Region. Boris Kolmakov always interests children with his tales making them feel the whole emotional palette. Then he comes back home, his calm and quiet forest corner, to write new books.

The tale "The Goose king" was written by Boris Kolmakov, who is a native in the village Korliki, Nizhnevartovsky district. He has got a nice ear for "the singing of birds and the breath of herbs". His book is based on his long experience of observing the wildlife. The purpose of this tale is to show a right way of the world perception: a man can understand himself only when learn the laws of nature. Kolmakov describes the spiritual path as the search for harmony with nature.

For Kolmakov ecology is concerned with a soul first of all. All these facts made Nizhnevartovsk State University (NVSU) support the publishing of the tale for ecology education in the context of the VI International Ecological Action "To Save and Preserve".

The story is interesting and useful to different people who are not indifferent to the environment problems.

About B.V. Kolmakov's tale

I have gone into the story “The Goose king” by chance – being a specialist in study of literature, I was supposed to read the vested material, estimate it and write an opening address. Well, this is what came off.

I have read the story in a breathless rush and felt as if I'm a part of the appearance of an original occurrence on the literature sky of our region – the art of B.V. Kolmakov that will be definitely noticed by amateur of Russian literature and own nature. The main theme of the tale “The Goose king” is relations between a man and nature. According to Russian philosophy, presented by V. Soloviev, N. Fedorov, V. Rozanov, P. Florensky, the writer believes, not unreasonably, that a man needs to cognize himself only through understanding the universe. That is way Kolmakov realise the spiritual path as the search for harmony with nature, and he concerns ecology with a pure soul. The feeling as a single whole with nature seems to come from the author's countryside childhood (he was born in a village Korliki of Nizhnevartovsk district, where he has spent all his life). The name of talented B.V. Kolmakov can fall abreast of the names of the significant Russian writers: V.V. Bianki and M.M. Prishvin, whose works are

characterised with the synthesis of literature and philosophy.

The genre of the tale makes it related to M.M. Prishvin's. B.V. Kolmakov adverts to the "tale" form as to the genre that has the endless opportunities to rapprochement of dreams and reality and personification of ideas to change the world (in tales, as everybody knows, good always overcomes evil). The fairy tale begging, namely: "fairy tale, legend, myth" are also determinative genres for M.M. Prishvin. According these parameters he wrote his novel "The Chain of Kashchey", a "true fairy tale" "The pantry of the Sun", a narrative tale "The thickets of vessels" and a novel-tale "The Osudarev Road". B.V. Kolmakov's tale "The Goose king" is based on the personification of nature that makes it related to the folk works. Despite it, his landscapes are realistic: the author renders the colours and sounds of nature and the voices of birds – all these make a reader physically feel the described atmosphere.

I believe that the tale can be interesting and useful to different people.

Assistant professor, Philology Department of
NVSU,

Olga Kultysheva

The Goose King

From the author

For centuries, people have wondered for the destiny of man. What is his mission? Do the voiceless animals understand him? Is there anything for him after death? Perhaps we don't die at all, but God gives us another chance instead, turning us into animals or birds and returning us to the Earth?

Most likely, God gives second chance to those people who did good. Owing to my many years of experience observing the lives of animals and birds, I can tell you how similar to us, or even better than us, they really are. There are plenty of things they can teach us.

People have a sixth sense called intuition. Animals have it also. A wild animal can surely sense is something wrong – the murderous eyes of the hunter – and will run away. Birds can see such a

scowl from a greater distance. But if it can be an inoffensive photographer who has come to the world of nature with good intentions only, the animals and birds let him come near, because they sense and understand his kindness.

This is a wondrous story about a bird whose soul knew the good and evil of the human world, because it was from that world that its soul had come.

Birds

An elderly woman was doing the washing-up. Yesterday had been the anniversary of the death of her son. A lot of friends had come, all had remembered her son kindly, who had died rescuing a flock of geese entangled in nets stretched to dry on fence racks by the lake. His death has been senseless: When with his knife he had cut the nylon thread to free the last of the wild geese, a thawed marsh tussock had fallen in under his feet and the net had covered him. There was no hope of escape from the marshy depths... The last unfettered goose flew about its rescuer and joined its flock. That is how his friends told the story of his death. Everyone saw it but no one could help. The woman thought about this as she washed the dishes.

The May Day sun was shining brightly in through the open window. There was no snow outside. Here and there, green grass was beginning to grow. Above the village, as a year ago, a flock of

wild geese was flying around cackling under the free heavens. One goose flew on its own, apart from the flock. It was almost falling like a stone, its flight was unnatural. Then, straightening over the rooftops the bird came in to land in the yard of the woman's house.

The goose landed and began to walk up and down the yard cackling loudly. It was strange: huskies who had been napping in the sun jumped up suddenly. Their hackles raised. They eyed the wild goose warily.

No one would believe it, if you were to tell them. The dogs watched the goose's every movement, but made no attempt to catch him. The goose continued wading around, gagging loudly and boldly, heading towards the house. Meanwhile, the woman watched this spectacle from her open window. A glass dropped from her hands and shattered, the woman sat down on her chair slowly: she thought that perhaps that goose was that same

one that her son had saved. In gratitude, a year later, this goose had flown towards her house. The wild goose was nearing the window. The huskies were following him, wagging their bushy tails. And then the woman understood, this was her son, come back as a goose, as the bird he had rescued. After all, he had always liked to watch the geese flying in a V beneath the sky, honking to announce the spring coming, or the autumn ...

Through a dream, Alexander heard the water splashing, felt the morning sun. He also heard the geese that he had loved since his childhood. From a very early age, he had gone out hunting and fishing with his father. Whenever birds flew, he always watched them, learnt or even knew the meaning of their sounds, and could imitate the cackles of the geese and swans. They answered to him and even flight up to him. He loved everything about them. Alexander often mentioned that he would like to fly away with them and see another world from a

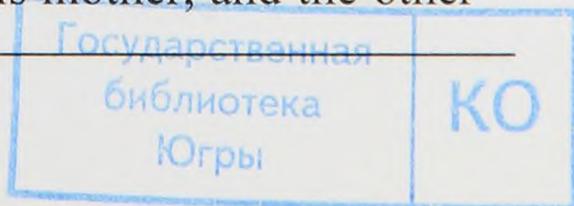
bird's point of view. Especially, he wanted to help the birds to see hunting blinds from far away, to fly the whole flock to safety.

Alexander didn't want to wake up, but he had a strange feeling as if he were floating gently in water. He opened his eyes to find geese and some other birds swimming and bathing close by him. He had never seen these birds before. All the birds were busy with their own concerns: some preened themselves, others dove for algae, their heads beneath the water's surface, resurfacing to swallow it. And some birds walked around the estuary, searching carefully for something or other.

"It's a dream," thought Alexander. He shut his eyes and opened them again, but he still saw the same scene. There was sound from the sky. He looked up... Oh, God! He was a bird! Alexander looked upon himself in surprise, realizing he was a goose. He threw up his hands, only to see they were hands no more, but wings. He flapped and flapped

and began to fly upwards. Of course, he flight was uncertain, but he flight was still. He flapped harder and harder, gradually gaining height and looking around him. A beautiful sight rose before him: A green bank and a great sea or ocean gulf. In the far distance, on the horizon, Alexander could see a plane passing by. Still, he flapped and flapped and thought it was just a dream. He was a human after all! Yes, he loved birds, he wanted to fly like the birds... But to became a bird? His head was full of thoughts and questions. Was it possible?

Alexander stopped flapping and, like a plane, lost altitude. He landed awkwardly and sat on the water. Everything was the same. The birds were taking care of their morning business. Somebody called to him, but not by his name of Alexander. It was Ho-honk for some reason. Oddly, the voice seemed familiar to him. From the sunny side of the water, two geese swam towards him. As he later realised, one of them was his mother, and the other



his sister. One she-goose said, “Sonny, what is the matter with you? You could hurt yourself!” she continued as though she were a human not a bird, “Only yesterday you were ill. We thought you wouldn’t survive.”

Alexander raised his head proudly and said, “I’m not your son and I’m not Ho-honk.” At that, exchanging glances, the she-geese began to argue, trying to convince Alexander that he was their relation and that a malady had corrupted his memory. He asked them to tell their version of events, of who he was and why he was here, pleading his forgetfulness. And that is what they told him.

In late autumn, their clan Obis has flown south. When they had stopped to have some rest on the shores of the big lake, hunters had shot at them. One of she-geese still had a case-shot in her wing. Ho-honk was shot in his chest but he could still flight, with great difficulty, but he could. The flock

stopped to rest from time to time, especially for him. After thirty days, they had reached this place, but Ho-honk was getting worse. He didn't eat and lost weight. His mother and sister thought he would die, but on that day a miracle happened. "But you have changed, you don't recognise us. But we are happy that you feel better. Now, let us fly to our flock's leader. Yesterday, he wished you a graceful death, as a goose feather. He will be glad to know you have recovered."

Alexander listened carefully to the she-goose, whom he would henceforth call "mother". And from that day forward, he lived according to the laws and customs of the flock. Later, he learnt from the stories that gaggles were subdivided into clans: Euris, Volguis, Obis, Enis, Lenis and Faris. Every clan derived its name from the riverbed along they flew to their winter ground. Ho-honk's clan – Obis – usually flew along the Ob river. Before migration season, all geese gathered at the

equator for a council to discuss when and how they should fly in the spring. There, at the council, a new leader was chosen for the following year, he was responsible for the safety of the migration.

Lyubie's Love

Day by day, Ho-honk enjoyed his new life more and more. He still remembered that he had once been a human. He also remembered he had once loved birds since his childhood, and had always been envious of their strict V. His soul yearned to fly with them. And now his dreams had come true. Still, he didn't understand how it could have happened. People do not know where the soul goes after death. Might the Lord return good people to life? But in what form? And what is their destiny? Ho-honk accepted all these facts. However, he kept a little secret in his heart: he was a Siberia, and when the flock flew north, he could see his home again.

Training of flock members was held daily: as well-experienced pilots, the geese knew how to land and take off, they learnt how to chose a nesting place, how to fly over hunters safely and recognise their hunting blinds, how to guard their eggs and their little goslings from the foxes, red or white. They learnt many different things.

It was time for The Grand Council of clan Obis to hold the examinations Ho-honk thought it was much like in the human world, but perhaps more honourable. It was hard to become respected.

At last, it was Ho-honk's turn. The council tested him. The leaders were amazed by his knowledge. The questions were difficult. "How to determine where hunters hide?" Ho-honk answered, "Camouflage. It glows. Man thinks it is invisible. But it is only invisible to man. We geese can see it. What's more", he added, "where there are hunting blinds, there're always many branches. Hunters may also make little fires. These can alarm the

flock.” The geese council liked the young gander’s answer.

It was the first time the council had listened to Ho-honk. He seemed to be very experienced. Every goose cackled loudly. They wanted Ho-honk to serve as a scout commander. Their system was much like that of the humans. There were geese who led the way a dozen kilometres ahead, to see if it was safe, and only after which would the flock fly further.

There were other questions and Ho-honk answered easily. The Obis leader asked him again, “What birds are our friends and what birds are our enemies?” Ho-honk said, “Crows are tundra friends of forest. They are harbingers of spring, but they are our worst enemies. No sooner is a mother-goose distracted from tending to her eggs, crows will come and eat them all up. Scenting the blood of a wounded bird, crows will prosecute it till they catch it. They are first who to arrive north, and people

celebrate The Day of Crows Arriving. We, geese, fight them: during their first passage north, we find out who their leader is. Scout geese gain height and then dive to hit the crow's back with their chest. This impact makes the crow fall like a stone. After such a life lesson crows stay away." "Excellent!", said the leader of the gaggle. But Ho-honk continued, "Our friends are black grouse, capercaillie and partridge. In spring when we meet each other after a long winter, we drink melt water together. On marshes we treat ourselves to cranberries. We go to the pine woods to feast on cowberries. They are the best after-winter delicacy. We spend summer with these birds on marshes and in tundra. They are noble birds."

Ho-honk did not know at that time that fate would bring him together with a capercaillie named Smug. At their annual meeting, they would discuss the lives of resident birds that dwell in pine and birch woods. And here came the story of their first

meeting. Smug was standing on a small log in the middle of the marsh when Ho-honk landed on the edge of that same log. It swung smoothly. Smug and Ho-honk liked the swing. They spent hours teetering. Their amusement attracted many birds. They watched them joyfully.

“The northern birds know a lot and we can learn many useful things, summed up Ho-honk. They have great experience in protecting their brood in harsh conditions.” The council of the flock quietened. The council gave Ho-honk ten points for his profound knowledge. It was the highest bigwig mark. Afterwards, the young gander showed off his knowledge of languages of different animals and unfriendly birds, such as the falcons, hawks and eagles. He rightfully earned his position as a scout commander. After the council he was told to be a hero of the geese. He was well-known for his serious wound and recovery. Now he was ready for great feats.

Ho-honk was given the best feeding place, but now he talked less often with his relatives. Many young she-geese wanted to marry him, but his position did not allow it. He was a responsible “official” goose. He was a member of the council and in a week he had to fly with other members to The Grand Council of Three Oceans, at which time a new leader of the whole goose world would be chosen. Competitions and lectures by experienced ganders would take place at this time. And Ho-honk looked forward to it.

Right up until his departure to the Grand Council, Ho-honk explored the wintering grounds of his gaggle wintered. Flying over a floodplain with yellow water, he understood it was the Nile, and the country was Egypt. People below on the earth were so tiny, everyone had pursuits of their own. It reminded him of his childhood: when he watched an ant hill, ants swarmed and carried on with their own business in the same way. One time,

watching from the bird's eye view, he noticed a gaggle on the sandbanks, and further still he notices several crows attacking a goose. Folding his wings, Ho-honk darted down and the whizz of his wings made the crows fly away. When he made the acquaintance of this goose, he learnt that it was a young she-goose named Lyubie. If she were a human, she would be named Lyuba. Listening to her, he discovered that she needed help: a pen-feather of her left wing was broken. At that moment, a flock of geese flew to them, thanking Ho-honk. Their feathers were bright. These geese called themselves "red-breasted geese". His heroic action had not gone unnoticed. News of Ho-honk's fast flight spread among the geese.

Ho-honk liked the red-breasted she-goose Lyubie, she was the daughter of a grandee. Although Ho-honk did not count on her love, and was forbidden to breed in any case, he sensed that they would meet again one day and that a true

romance would grow between them. He would become the leader of geese all over the world, and she would be his queen.

Until then, the flock of red-breasted geese flew by bounds in a westerly direction, towards the sunset. Ho-honk flew back to his gaggle. Love flooded his heart. Love for Lyubie.

The Grand Council of the Three Oceans

The day came, when several members of the Grand Council of the clan Obis flew up for a lap of honour and a flight towards the rising sun. In the strict V there was Ho-honk. He was stronger. The geese changed their places from time to time, leading the even V by turns. There, they could see some islands with palm trees amid the quiet, calm ocean waters. People were swimming in the blue lagoons and nobody paid any attention to the birds. Ho-honk saw ripples in the water and he knew this meant that on the earth the east wind blew, but

here, in the sky, it blew in a different direction. The geese used this fair wind later on. Very rarely did the geese talk over as they flew. Ho-honk remembered when he was a little boy, his father had asked pilots to let his son fly in a navigator's seat. They even let him put on the headphones. Then, beneath him, just as it was now, the earth floated, and the pilots spoke occasionally to the earth or to the crew members. Everything was like that time, but at a height of 1,000 meters, the height of an airliner's flight. Again he thought about the great similarity between these two worlds...

The wind was warm, but it became cooler as they drew closer to the ocean. On the surface, the first ridges appeared. Before Ho-honk could say it aloud, he heard the leader's warning. A storm was approaching. The leader veered closer to the land. It was Indo-China. The storm was moving in from the south. The flock leader announced that they should withdraw to the land and wait out the

storm in the rice fields. From his height Ho-honk could see that numerous other flocks of geese and swans were deviating from their course, heading the land. Ho-honk calculated that they had already flown fifteen hundred kilometres in seven or eight hours, so there was very little distance left in their journey.

They landed in a place where the leader of clan Obis was well-known. For some reason, as their leader greeted every bird, he also introduced Ho-honk and told of his intelligence. He even called Ho-honk his successor who would rule the clan after him. Ho-honk looked at the other birds with curiosity.

Besides the geese, there were swans. They have their own clans, but they are more disciplined. Ho-honk decided to talk about faithfulness of swan couples, to which a swan leader Glacier Hiss replied: "Faithfulness is the most important thing. If one half of a pair is killed, there is no point for the

other to live. When a hunter aims his gun at a cygnet, we adults block their bullets.” Hardly had he finished his explanations, when Ho-honk interjected: “When I was a little gosling, I overheard some hunters talking about how Eskimos preferred the meat of the swan to that of the goose.” From the corner of his eye, Ho-honk saw more and more birds gather close, listening intently and silently to Ho-honk’s words. He pretended not to notice, and continued: “A hunter asked another:

- How many trunks of geese would you give for a single swan?

- Six.

- Ok.

“This, they said”, concluded Ho-honk, “Meat of the sacred bird is delicious and prized”, and then they rode their reindeer relays away. That is why when you fly to the north, you should be on your guard against them. All these people hunt you.” Ho-honk looked around: thousands of geese, swans

and other birds listened to him intently. The leader, Glacier Hiss, was the first to ask questions: “How did you know human language? And how could you get close to the hunters to hear them talking?” “My mother taught me,” Ho-honk replied confidently, “I know fox and dog languages, deer and elk languages. I can also understand crows, hawks and falcons.” All the birds cackled and praised Ho-honk, then they went to roost. Every bird noted the young gander’s accomplishments.

Suddenly it began to rain and snow. But this did not bother the great gaggle which had assembled. The watchers guarded along the perimeters of the roosting ground. The geese and swans placed their heads under the wings to sleep. Ho-honk thought sleepily that next morning this dream would end and he would become a man again. With this thought, he fell asleep.

Thousands of birds began the morning with cackle and clang. The sky was clear, the sun found

its way above the eastern horizon. “It’s time,” said the leader of clan Obis, and they flew ahead, up into the skies where they could see other flocks beginning to bustle and busy about. Their course was the same, but a bit to the right, towards the Philippines. Other flocks overtook them up above. Ho-honk’s name was heard from everywhere. The leader said: “Now every bird knows your name. But I never knew that your mother taught you to understand humans.” “If you want to survive, you must find a way to understand your enemy”, replied Ho-honk. “When evil eyes of hunters gazed at you, it is felt and you have to be careful”. However hunters became far more shrewd: they put on sunglasses to hide their malicious intent.” He continued flapping and beside them several flocks passed by and heard the things he was saying. Ho-honk added: “You have to keep watch for any humans, and be smarter than they.” Many geese and many swans were enchanted with young

gander's wisdom. And the leader knew Ho-honk was worth inviting to the Council.

There was held the Grand Council. For birds all over the world it was sacred: at this gathering, food was plentiful and humans were none. There they were supposed to live for about twenty days and show their skills, wits and endurance in series of tournaments. In short, thought Ho-honk, it was the Olympic Games of birds. The flocks came slowly in to land. The king of all birds lived there. His name was Eddie Gale. It meant "strong wind". He was undoubtedly the biggest and the strongest, but already old so mostly he helped other birds with advice. It was the first quarter of a century of his reign. All newly arrived flocks were presented to the king. The Obis leader also presented his gaggle and Ho-honk. The king was pleased to meet such an honourable gander, about whom he heard so much. As it turned out, the king's relations had heard Ho-honk's conversation with the swans that

night of the storm, and had reported everything back to him. That is how the king knew about Ho-honk. Like the other birds, the king was amazed by the knowledge of this young gander from clan Obis.

Competitions were held several times a day. The winner of all events was Ho-honk. Building up his speed, he darted down, whistling like a falling hawk. Once, he dashed into a palm-tree. He was thought dead because the palm-tree didn't have its crown – but in fact, it was cut off with his wings. Ho-honk was in the spotlight.

When The Grand Council concluded, Ho-honk was crowned. Every now and then, he was allowed to recruit geese from all clans into his scouting group. They would be the first to fly north to the nesting place and would choose a safe route for spring passage. He was also responsible for the inspection of all birds nesting in the north.

Ho-honk's chest was marked with a solemn sign, resembling a crowed bird with its wings stretched wide. The sign was in red, as geese perceive only two colours: the colour of feathers, grey and red, because these are visible to birds from afar.

Flying home

Returning to the place where his long-drawn dream, Ho-honk met with his mother, little sister and his beloved Lyubie. Though he longed to spend more time with her, his duties demanded more attention. He said to her in a whisper: "When we get to the snow, we will see each other more often."

Ho-honk recruited about a thousand of scout geese. After a lap of honour around the vast sky, they headed northwards. Almost without change, Ho-honk stayed at the head of the V formation. On the right there were snow-capped mountains. The wind at a high of five kilometres was favourable. It

had been already seven hours of steady flight. It was surely the time to seek some overnight rest. Among the mountains, Ho-honk spotted a green valley and even some geese that Ho-honk had never seen before. They in turn noticed the representative of the king and began to honk in greeting. These were bar-headed geese. Their passage north could only continued after reconnaissance of the route. The gaggle flew around and landed slowly. The grass was lush. “Black” geese guarded the flocks of scouts. It was said: “This place is safe. There is nothing to worry about here. Sometimes there are snow slides, but we are quite far from them.” This put Ho-honk’s mind at ease.

The day was about to dawn, the scout-geese flushed in a formation and set their course for the north. Ho-honk thought: “The flight be three to five days more, then we will fly above my home, Western Siberia.” He didn’t know if anyone would recognise him or understand, but his affection for

his homeland gave him hope. There were no mountains on his right anymore. Cities, roads, cars and trains appeared. It was April, and the ground had freed itself from the snow's captivity. People were burning straw and grass in the fields so the throat was tormented with the smell of smoke. In some places tractors were ploughing the ground. The landscape was painfully familiar to Ho-honk.

Ho-honk had never yet told anyone that he had been a human. Later, in the north he would confide to Lyubie, open his heart and tell her everything, but now every gander of his flock obeyed his orders and trusted him only. Every gander was ready to die by directions of his majesty King Ho-honk. Only later Ho-honk learnt who the "kamikaze geese" were and what their mission was. Only later would he see the evil of people. He would change his attitude to the world.

It would be like this. The gaggle would arrive for nesting. The coastline of the Arctic Ocean was

generally free from ice cover. Geese had paired and they brooded upon their precious eggs. All birds hoped for the welfare of the long passage. The bad news came unexpectedly. It was announced that in the nesting area, more than a thousand kilometres into the tundra, a helicopter flew and people shot geese and goslings straight from the portholes. They were poachers. A group of geese led by Ho-honk flew there at once. There is no sunset in early July. Leaving the rest, the geese flew west along the edge between tundra and ocean. Their duty hammered in Ho-honk's head. Save! But how? How can birds stop a giant roaring machine? The flock seemed to strain themselves to breaking point, but the wind became favourable, as if yielding to the flock. Nature stood up and protected her children. And now chatter of the helicopter could be heard. And here is what they saw: the helicopter was flying sideling at a height of fifty meters, barrels of weapon were seen from the open doors,

plops were heard. “Fire!” thought terrified Ho-honk, who was moved to action. Gaining altitude, the geese watched every move of the murderous machine. On his command, two Ho-honk’s ganders, one by one, folded their wings as they had been taught and began to dart downwards, picking up speed. Close to the ground, aligned to the horizon, they broke the windscreen and killed the pilot. In a moment the helicopter dipped, fell on its side and burnt. It was terrifying. Later on, among the harsh tundra there remained only a black crater and a mass of jumbled metal. Landing for rest, Ho-honk asked for the names of his killed brothers.

During that spring, there was another incident in which a subtle hunter, driving an air-cushioned vehicle, shot geese and swans in their nests and seized their eggs. The flock was on duty in a flying V formation when the birds caught sight of him and they gained height. On the

command of their leader, a gander dived down to break the hunter's skull. It was righteous cruelty. It was revenge for defenceless birds. Ho-honk's detachment was responsible for their safety and guarded all the birds that nested in the north.

All these would happen soon. By then, it was the sixth day of the passage; something could be seen on the horizon. On the edge of the horizon the great river Ob was dimly visible. Torches were burning. The ice had started moving, but the snow was still laid deep upon the banks. On the marshes, hummocks of bog labrador began to appear. The gaggle hedgehopped, touching the tops of the trees with their wings. There was a big lake in front of them where swans were resting. They were pulling the roots of pond-lilies and water-lilies. These are the most favourite delicacy for large birds. At the great distance, the swans recognised the king's envoy. The meeting of that stormy night before the Council of Three Oceans stuck well in their

memories. They were delighted to see the gaggle. The swans even performed their ritual dance: spreading their wings, craning their necks and clanging loudly, they danced and ran eagerly to meet the geese.

After greetings and conversations, the situation at hand was discussed: Every bird reported what had seen and heard. The swans are the first to fly north. The geese fly there twenty one days after them. And now they overtook them. The place was good. All the birds knew the frost was coming so they agreed to stay there. On the second day, a swan pair had already chosen a nesting place on a tussock and began to build it. They had even laid their first egg already. But a fox lingered around, edging closer to their nest day by day.

When the geese flew to their nesting place, they saw the swans standing with their back to the nests and with their wings raised and the old fox trying to pass them and to capture their eggs.

Ho-honk could not risk. Together with his flock, he folded his wings and dived. Close to the ground, he levelled and hit the fox on his shoulder. It made the fox tumble and bounce. The fox lay stock-still with his jaws open and without any sign of life. The “kamikaze goose” got off lightly and without bruises. The flock thanked him for his great work. Meanwhile, the swans approached grandly the dead fox and pecked his body violently to shreds. This was the daily routine of the scout geese on their way to the north. They stood upheld their nesting rights and helped other birds.

Although day by day the weather was getting warmer, the frost did not retire. The main gaggles had already reached Kazakhstan and there on the big lakes they awaited the better weather. There was no point in flying to the north so Ho-honk decided to visit his home, it would take a bit more than two hours. He gave out an order and his formation headed eastwards. He did not have to

account to any bird. It was only he who knew that he flew to his birth place, the place where once he was a man. He couldn't remember how and why he had turned into a bird. They were flying fast and high. Below there were villages, roads and cars. They flashed, they gleamed, they loomed. A large part of the earth was covered with piny woods. The forest rivulets were the first to be free from the ice. Mallard flocks were reposed on the mirror-like surface.

Every minute, every kilometre made Ho-honk's heart faint. "How are they? Do they still remember me?" thought Ho-honk. Finally he saw his native village on the horizon. He had dreamt about this moment for such a long time! Not losing height the gaggle made its first loop above the village, then its second, then the third. No goose questioned their direction. Ho-honk dived heavily but then he gained height again. It was clear in his mind that if something happened to him, the gaggle

would die defending their leader. Ho-honk could not allow this, so he decided to explain to his scouts that he had been born in this village, that humans had found him and raised him here. And now he wanted to see these humans again. Of course, it was a lie, but they trusted him and agreed to fly round above the village.

When Ho-honk was sure that everything was safe for his geese, he began losing his descent. Now he didn't care anymore what the flock would think about him. He landed in his yard. His favourite dogs were sleeping next to the fence. His sudden appearance made them jumped up, their hackles raised. Ho-honk called every dog by its name and they recognised this gander as their master, and bayed and wagged their tails, though without knowing exactly what was happening. Suddenly, his mother appeared in the window. How much he gaped for crying out: "Mom, it's me, your son!" And how much he craved to shout aloud: "People,

think! Perhaps after death in this world God gives us another chance and returns us to the earth in other vessels as birds, fish, beasts – voiceless animals?!”

Ho-honk walked to and thro half an hour, he even hugged the huskies. They licked him. His mother looked at this from the window, weeping bitter tears. Ho-honk knew that he would never hear again the name Alexander, and returned to that world where he was so-called. Cackling and running across the yard, he rose sharply up to the skies, where the flock and his new life waited for him. There, beneath the heavens, he cried aloud in a human language: “So long everyone, I leave you on the earth...” With this, the geese, flying in their strict V formations, disappeared towards the northern horizon.

Epilogue

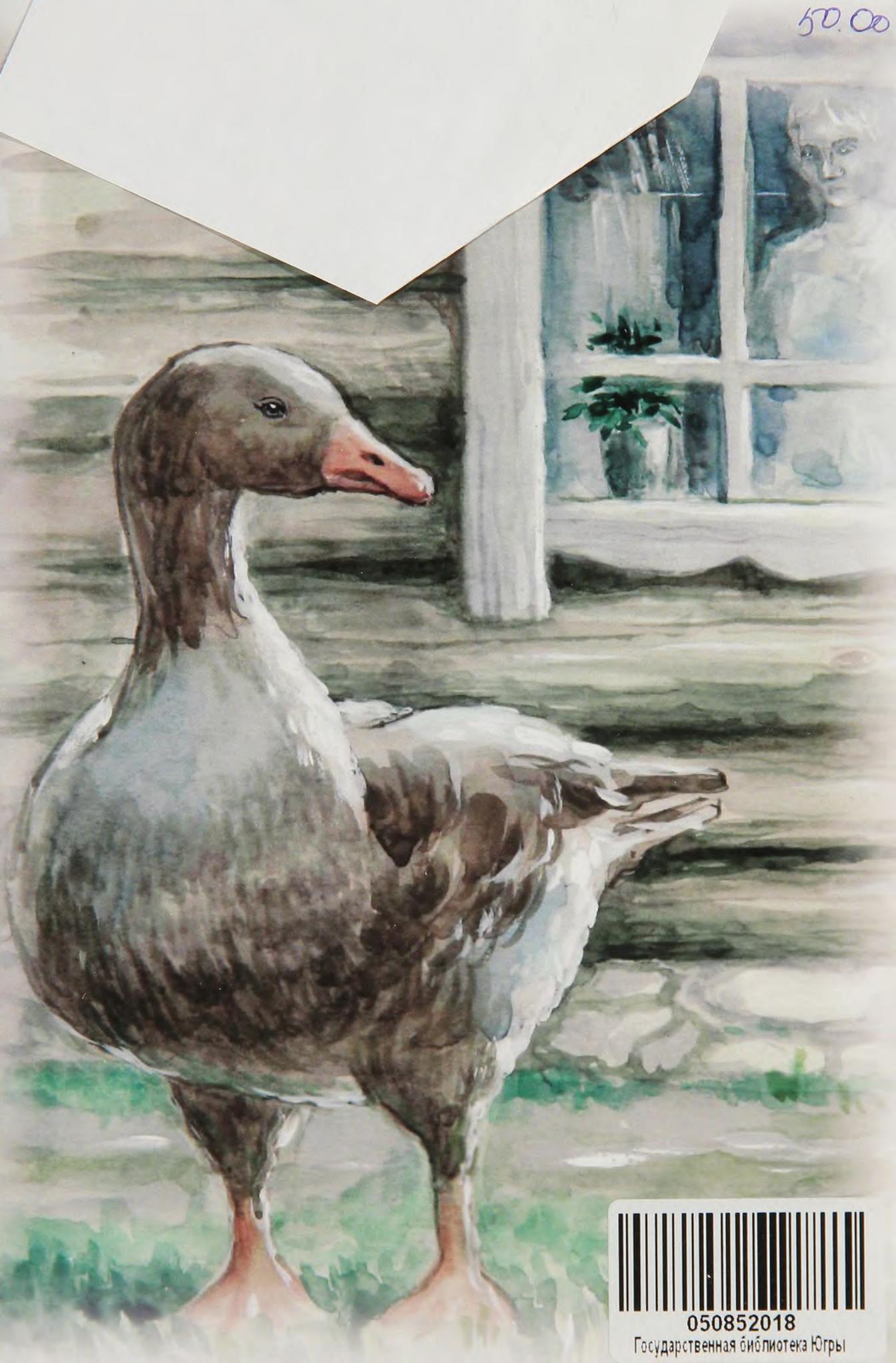
The night storm had passed. There floated upon the lake a boat carried by slight waves, in which Alexander slumbered peacefully. On the bank, as always, nets hung to dry on the fence racks, where the struggle to save entangled birds was evidenced only by a couple of ragged holes...

The village Laryak, 2008

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Translated by L. Dudanova

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