

HANA BERGMANNOVÁ KLÍMOVÁ

The Price of Freedom, 2018
Oil painting on paper, 30 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

IVAN KLÍMA

The Price of Freedom

—Translated from the Czech by Gabriela Kalna

Have you ever been to prison?
No!
And why haven't you been yet?
Maybe because I've never stolen anything.
But once you steal something, they'll lock you up.
I hope they don't, since I'm not about to steal anything.
Why not?
I don't have the courage. I also don't think it's right to steal.
If they locked you up, would your window have bars?
Prisons tend to have bars.
Could you swing from them like a chimpanzee?
No.
Why not?
I'm not a monkey.
So what would you do there all day?
I told you, I hope . . .
Wouldn't you like it there? They'd bring you food and you wouldn't have to do a thing.
Nobody likes it in prison. Not even animals do.
Can they even lock an animal up in prison?
No. But they can lock it in a cage and take its freedom away.

I'm going to tell you a story about a silver fox, how I heard it from a hunter, who lived in the far north for a very long time. The silver fox, he said, isn't actually silver. She's almost black but her fur glistens like it's powdered with a shimmering metal. This is why people hunt the silver fox, catch her in traps, then kill her, skin her, and sell her fur. Our fox lives far in the north, in a forest surrounding a lake, what remains of an ancient glacier. The fox is still young and strong at the time of this story. She can stay on her feet for hours on end, sneaking through birch forests, under low pine trees, and through juniper brush. She knows every path treaded by animals and walked on by hunters, who thankfully rarely come here. She also knows where to hunt for a wild rabbit, a snowy partridge, or at least a mouse. Like all her kind, she is quiet, quick, agile, and cautious. Recognizing the hunters' scent from a long distance, she knows how to avoid their traps. But there come days, especially in the wintertime, when the snow builds up high, and she has to make her way through deep snowdrift, not a single live creature in sight, nothing to hunt, all animals burrowed in their dens and lairs, sleeping deeply. Our fox is starving,