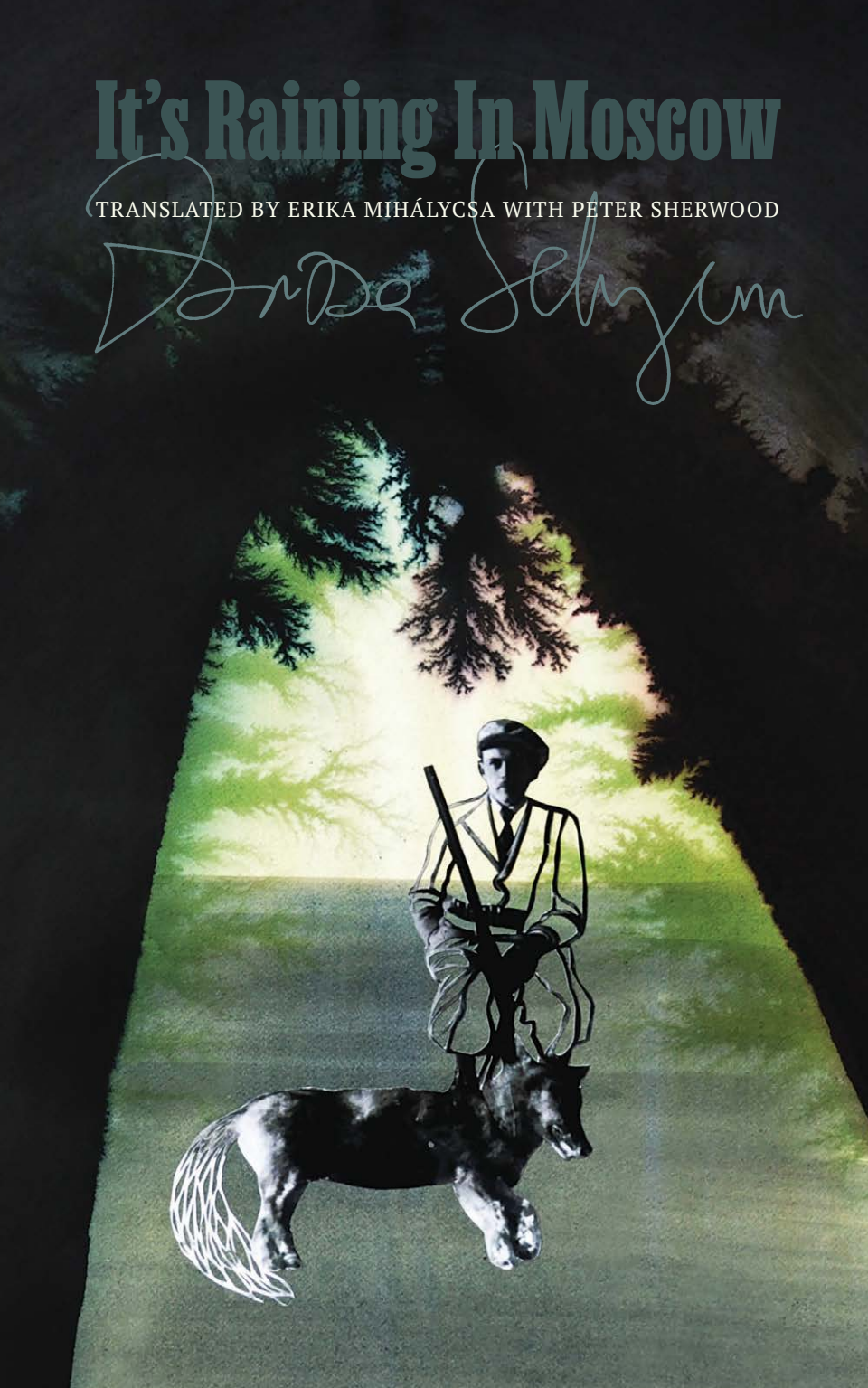
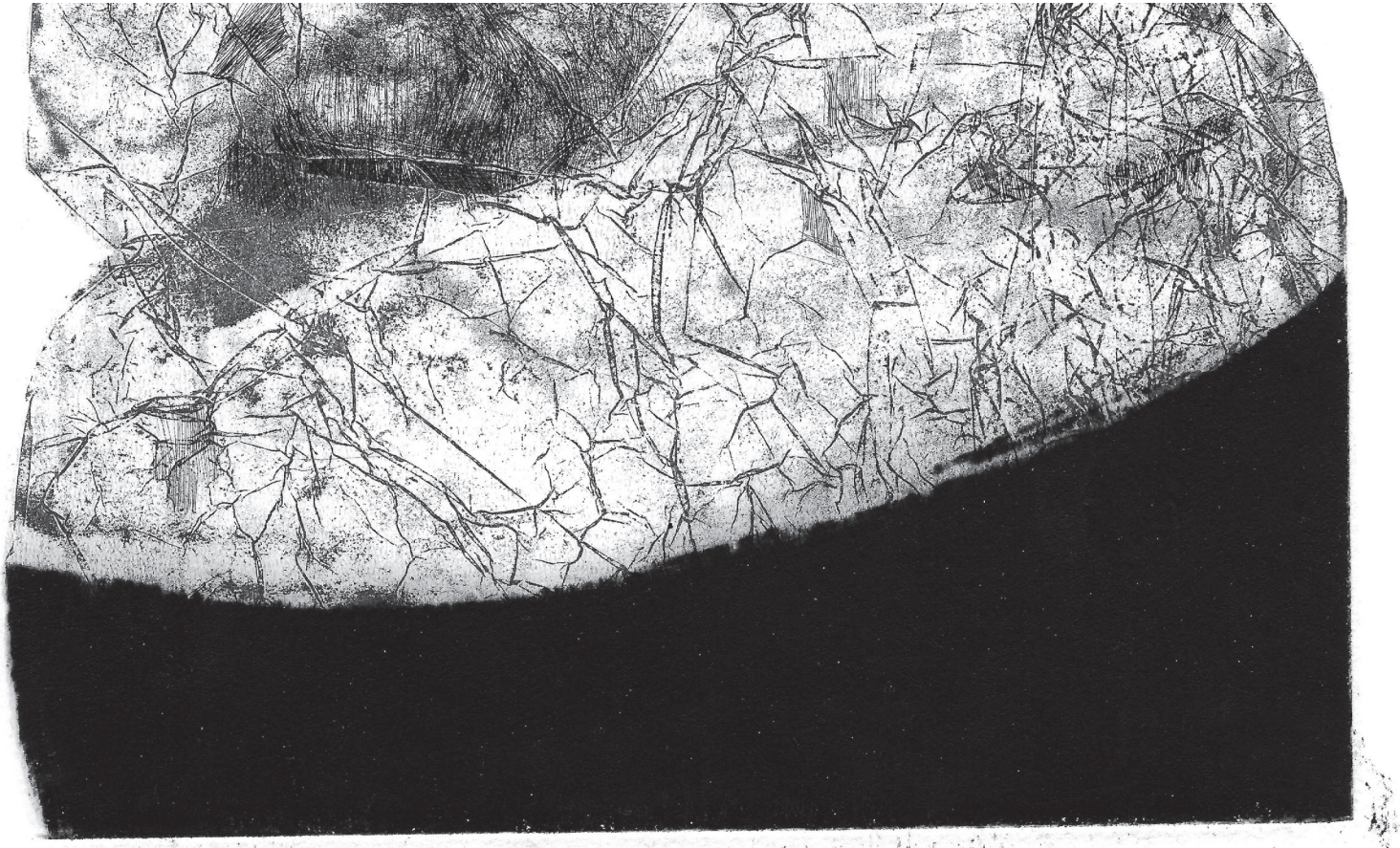
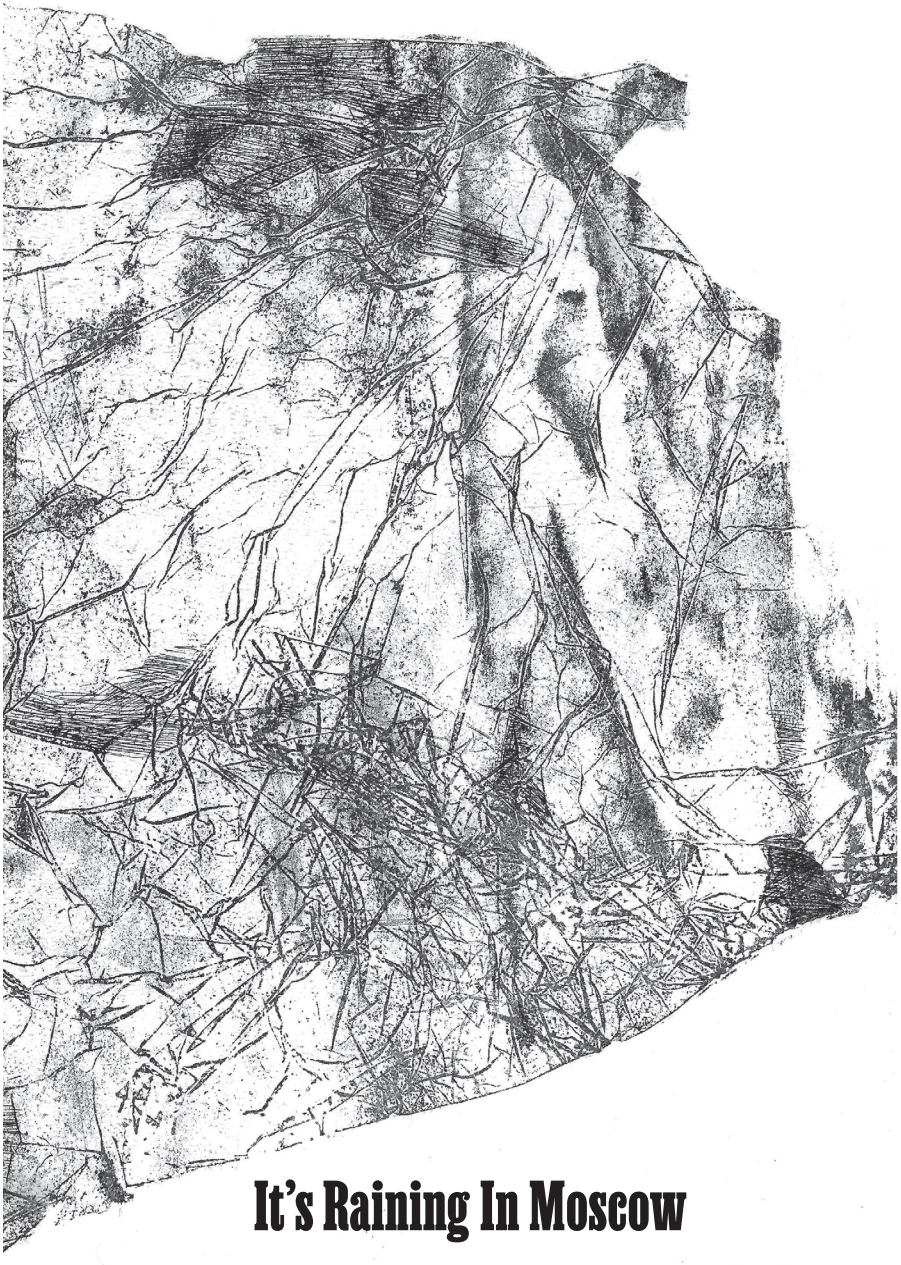
It's Raining In Moscow

TRANSLATED BY ERIKA MIHÁLYCSA WITH PETER SHERWOOD

Dezső Selyem







It's Raining In Moscow

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Zsuzsa Selyem

Translated by
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with Peter Sherwood

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Hunt 1947

A nightmare that will end well. This is what László Luka was hoping for. Perhaps the previous night he had drunk a bit more than usual, or the pálinka was not of the purest sort; it even crossed his mind that he should employ a taster. After all, the child rejected by its mother had risen to enough power by now, and last night he had dreams so wild that he could hardly pull himself together to stagger out of bed, even though he was preparing to go hunting and the orphan already knew that anyone who wants to go hunting had better be up early. If only getting up were not so damn hard.

László Luka was a handsome man, and well aware of this fact. He wore short, tight-fitting sports jackets with breast pockets. Not for him the reach-me-downs: the best Paris and London sartors worked on his clothes. For hunting he used to wear a Swiss-made short mink coat, never put on a scarf, and tended to wear even his skewed-neck Russian shirts unbuttoned: he loved to share the sight of his body

with others. He had a winsome smile and intelligent foxy eyes. He had completed six years of primary school — so what? At the Hermannstadt Catholics, whenever he was not being thrashed, he devoured all the adventure stories he could lay his hands on and made up his mind at a tender age that he would get hold of everything he wanted. Is there no order in the world? no justice? do cause and effect only correlate by chance? So much the worse: he would be the master of chance.

The gate was open, the dark green GAZ-67 pulled up right to the entrance, ploughing up the lawn where a strapping young man, Beczásy, the owner of the hunting ground, was already waiting for them.

— Good morning, gentlemen, the beaters have been ready since dawn. The only question is, what are you after: hare, rœbuck, fox, boar, deer? We have everything here, all one needs to know is where to find them.

— At this hour the most we can get is hares — Szenkovics answered quickly. He desperately wanted to prevent Luka from opening his mouth: the fact that he was the finance minister parading in a Swiss huntsman's jacket didn't in the least mitigate his painful and utter ignorance of hunting matters.

— We'll shoot a couple of fine hares — Luka concurred with the minister of light industry; he blurted out whatever crossed his mind, no time for prestige

battles now, all that had to be postponed until later when his headache subsided.

— At least one glass of prime plum brandy, gentlemen — Beczásy offered and chuckled to himself at how these two scoundrels purred at being called gentlemen — You should have seen it, he later told his wife at coffee, how at every 'gentlemen' à plaisir coupable showed on their mugs.

— Ce monde n'est, je vous l'assure, qu'une immense entreprise à se foutre du monde! – said Zina, like a clown Cassandra, quoting the Journey, curtsied, and blew a kiss at her husband's forehead.

A shade embarrassed, Luka and Szenkovics shook hands with Beczásy, then jumped back into the jeep.

— Let's keep that prime plum brandy for our return — Luka shouted back in a steelyringing voice, at once covering up his hangoverish nausea from liquor, and showing the whole wide world that no matter how long Beczásy had been lord of this place, he, Luka, was the lord of chance. A war won, he reasoned, painstakingly fighting back his nausea, is more than enough to disqualify the centuries.

The Soviet jeep was climbing the slope slower than expected, the trees surrounding the house drifted into Luka's field of vision. In this state he was even more incommoded by the fact that the needles of one of the fir-tree species were short, those of the other of palm's breadth. And then there was that

weeping willow, what the fuck is a weeping willow doing here in Háromszék County, he grumbled to himself. He was sleepy, but still had an appetite for the hunt, and lo and behold, here are these two funny creatures, I haven't seen anything like them, not even in Sochi, they must have come from somewhere in the Far East with those queer fan-like leaves.

In front of the gate they suddenly bumped into the beaters on horseback and on foot with their beagles. Why are they standing outside, why are the dogs silent, the bellicose thought pierced Luka's headache. How come we didn't see them when we were going inside. In the end Szenkovics lobbed two words at them, that they would be going for hares, at that Luka came to and growled at the broadax-faced man in Romanian: Speed up, we've come here to hunt, not to have a banquet.

In the field the beaters with their dogs fanned out into an invisible circle, the horn blew, they started narrowing the circle, the dogs were barking furiously, and from a ditch, or from the void, there sprang up the first hare. It felt it could no longer lie low, the only chance for its young not to be mauled by so many dogs was if it leapt into visibility, running, coursing, careening, zigzagging for its life. It had terribly short ears, even the way it ran was dog-like. Luka didn't want to but ended up taking aim and shoot-

ing, at the same moment as Szenkovics. The animal or whatever it was tumbled over, one of the beaters sent Vitéz to fetch it and the dog brought it back in its jaws. At the rattling of the guns the hares began to leap up like mad one after the other, the two ministers could hardly keep up with aiming and shooting, and the dogs retrieving the prey. Luka was getting dizzy, he wiped his brow, looked around himself, saw the kill laid out in neat rows, the wide-open eyes seemed to understand everything, all the orphanhood of the world, he had to close his eyes because he could suddenly see those daft Moldavians laid out in neat rows at Fântâna Albă, who stupidly thought that if they waved a white flag and a few wooden crosses they could safely stroll over from the Soviet Union into Moldavia like hares. Not all of them were lucky enough to get a bullet: the rest had to be battered with shovels until they somehow fainted into the ditches and no longer attempted to climb out.

— I say we can call it a day, the mistress is waiting for youse with the lunch — an elderly beater addressed Luka, who nearly tripped over. Luka gave a shudder, for a second he didn't know where he was and who this grey-haired man with a moustache might be, speaking to him in Hungarian, in that singsong he remembered from his childhood, from the time before his mother, in order to be able to remarry at ease, dumped him into the orphanage in Sibiu.

Szenkovics lowered his rifle and patted Luka on the back:

— As far as I'm concerned, Laci, we can go, we've got a handsome haul and the gang is ravenous.

— You needn't worry, sir — the grey-haired beater went on — we'll take care of them hares. We have men enough to skin the whole lot and…

— Do what you like with the hares — Luka interrupted him. He was in no condition to listen to the details of processing corpses. He flung his gun, still hot from the shooting, into the jeep and signaled to the others they should get going.

For a while Szenkovics sat in silence on the back seat, musing on whether there was any point in trying to talk to Luka, now or ever, whether he had advanced any further along the rocky road to self-awareness, or if he was simply a damned lucky bastard shooting left, right, and center at whatever came into his field of vision, hare, dog, sheep or decent prole. When he got so engrossed in his thoughts that he was afraid his future treason was taking visible shape amid all the jolting, he leaned over to Luka:

— The landworking folk in these parts can somehow never give up on yessiring. Dependence comes as naturally to them as eating or shitting. It must be something to do with nature, for no matter how many rational arguments they are spoon-fed, they just nod and then do everything exactly as before.

Luka was disinclined to enter into ideological arguments now, he wanted pálinka and food; he wanted to see living human beings around him. He snapped at the broadax-faced one: Doru, you motherfucker, what are you waiting for, step on it. Szenkovics leaned back pondering why equality & fraternity were forever failing here, and if the Soviets had indeed managed to achieve it over there. As if in answer to his thoughts, he noticed a rather peculiar construction in the village center, a seeming successor to the village shop: something about one meter high, half a meter wide, and about ten or fifteen meters long, properly whitewashed & with a tiny roof. No windows, no door.

In the parlor the table was laid for six, but the driver and the guide were left outside. Sitting at the head of the table was Zina, at the other end Luka, the minister of finance. Beczásy raised a small glass:

— So now let's have that glass of plum brandy.

The brandy connected Luka's limbs, which were on the way to slowly detaching themselves from one another, with a sweet sense of hovering; he soon took the carafe from Beczásy's hand and started pouring the drinks himself. He barely noticed that by then they had finished eating dinner and he found himself next to Zina, talking about Tolstoy in Russian, whether War and Peace was the greater work, as Zina argued, or Anna Karenina.

— Anna is the incarnation of the longing for freedom — Luka expounded in an ever more porridgy voice — she is the premature victim of the marriage of sense and sensibility in a society built on injustice and exploitation. Oh for god's sake! Anna is a real woman!

— I can accept your argument, sir — Zina answered and winked at Beczásy who had in the meantime moved into the chair facing her — Anna Karenina is adorably complex, but allow me to value more highly the work that represents individual relationships not merely through psychological dispositions but in the context of the social milieu's expectations and dynamics.

— Tolstoy was a great man, a great realist, and a great master of dialectics — said Szenkovics joining the conversation. — There is no better evidence for this than the fact that he was able to reassess his own views under the impact of reality, and even though he initially intended to pillory an immoral, irresponsible woman in his novel, in the course of writing he realized that Anna is a complex figure whose downfall is not provoked by her own flaws but by the hypocritical norms of society.

Beczásy didn't understand Russian but at this moment hardly regretted this fact: he was watching his wife, a beauty with irregular features, listening to her poised and unflustered alto voice, and felt proud

at the evident effort with which these two ministerial pipsqueaks tried to impress her. He was awoken from his reverie by his little daughter who clambered into his lap in her frilled light blue dress and with her chubby baby paws tried to reach the plate full of cakes in the middle of the table.

— Tania, my bearcub, just tell me which cake you'd like? — Zina asked, pushing toward the child a plate for the dessert with a napkin.

— All of them, Mama — came the answer, and she ran straight over to her mother's lap.

Luka could not take his eyes off this little Tania, she has the same name as Anna's daughter, who knows what happened to that one. Anna is a revolutionary, she has to tend to all the world's children, she can't be pampering just one forever. So she had consigned the little blue-eyed Tania to the orphanage, she must have grown up since. Perhaps this green-eyed Tania, too, will grow up, in the worst case she'll have less cakes to gorge on so that others may have a slice too, in the worst case she'll grow up without a father and a mother, as so many of us do, Luka thought and reached out to the little girl, lifted her into his lap and asked her what she'd like him to get her the next time he comes, for there will be a next time and then he'll bring Betty with him, how happy she'll be to have the opportunity to make conversation with such an intelligent woman in Rus-

sian, for if nothing else, these pampered bourgeois definitely know how to make conversation.

Liliann, the elder daughter, was watching the scene from the doorway, mortified. She saw the ruins of the dinner, the animal bones under the table, the human bones in the ditch, her father as he sat proudly watching her mother who was smoking with a long cigarette-holder in her mouth, she saw her unsuspecting baby sister in the lap of a stranger, saw the other stranger who would navigate through a dictatorship betraying everyone, but primarily himself, she saw today's hare hunt, every single hare on its own, she saw the orphaned young ones starving to death, she saw other hunts going for roebuck, fox, boar and deer, she saw the dictator shooting bears at the feeding troughs, she saw her mother up to her thighs in water cutting rice, she saw her father beaten to death at the Securitate, she saw how her father aged 81 walked out into the street in December 1989, erect, right into the revolution, she saw as the dictator fled like game pursued and was shot like a dog, and she saw that everything is full of joy and full of sorrow.

She stood there in the doorway in her frilly white nightdress, barefoot, with her curly blond tresses aloft, aged nine. She saw everything, but only said in a small voice,

— Tolstoy était végétarien.

Forest 1789

Sixteen years is what I've got in human terms. The time spent in the egg doesn't count. Time and space exist so we know that things don't snuggle together in the one nest, and are not glued together in a single owl pellet, but stand apart, each one different from the other.

Here's this world for instance. When I hatched from the egg I thought that the nest was the world and we blackbirds were in it alone, for whose enjoyment everything existed. We, that is, I and my little brothers and sisters, the little weenies whom I had to outshout and outshove, so they didn't get more to eat than me. I gaped, and the comfort bites came, so I grew stronger by the day. One of my sisters didn't gape at all, so she fell out. Then we others became so chill that we just spread our wings and whoosh, went up in the air, or perched about on the trees having a good time and whistling with our nice yellow beaks as the day was long.

In the morning hours I usually sing on this bough. I can see into the house where the cats *&* old Beczásy live, the one who gives us seeds and lard skin in winter. Cili and Mici always try to snatch me away but I keep my eyes peeled. They were not hatched yesterday either. But old Beczásy is a real Methuselah, in human terms he's getting on for a hundred. He sits around all day long: if the sun is out he basks in it, if it's cold he shivers. He does that all day. He barely sees or eats, rarely ventures beyond the veranda, human voices he doesn't hear well, but me he can hear clearly. So I sing for him, I sit on the bough of this hemlock that is a hundred and twenty years old in human terms, and sing. That hundred and twenty is mind-boggling, isn't it? Especially if you compare it to my sixteen. And unless some calamity hits, it could easily reach eight hundred! I dare hardly imagine that fifty blackbird lives could be fitted in his.

Old Beczásy (eight Beczásy lives could be fitted in a hemlock life) likes telling his visitors stories about himself. Close to a hundred, he's bored to high heaven by novelties. But stories told a thousand times invigorate his circulation, his round brown eyes start shining, at such moments he's quite like a blackbird. For what is a blackbird like? Everything in the world came into being for his sake: a tree might live fifty times longer, but lives only to feed the blackbird with its seeds; water might once have covered the whole

planet, but it is so plentiful only to quench the blackbird's thirst; humans may be knowledgeable about a great many things, but they know all those things only in order to be worthy companions of the blackbird — for it is from us that humans learn to sing, it is us blackbirds that water mirrors, it is us that the branches cradle *&* rock, O immense love! The world exists to be our nest.

It so happened that while I was whistling, old Beczásy related to his visitors that at the beginning of the seventeenth century the Moslem powers surrounding it decided to crush Armenia. They knew precisely that you need to start with the economic and intellectual elites. As so often in history, the massacre started, and my ancestors were forced to flee for their lives. They headed for the West, and spent enough time in Beregszász to adopt the name Beregszászi. Why, what was their original Armenian name? — one of the visitors asked, but old Beczásy heard only me, and I didn't ask anything, just whistled and watched.

Emánuel Beczásy then came as far as Háromszék, he bred horses, hoarses, as I whistle so he says hoarses, motley hoarses whose fame reached far and wide. And Prince Stirbey, who loved horses beyond everything, immediately sent one of his English grooms to Zágon to see with his own eyes if those motleys were indeed as outstanding as their fame would have it.

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It's Raining in Moscow is a novel that goes both beyond and stays this side of history — the history of a family, of the post-1945 deportations, of a multiethnic region in Eastern Europe, Transylvania, in the 20th century, of the interactions of animals, plants, and humans, where for once the text inhabits non-human perspectives. A novel that repeatedly asks the question: what do we need to face our own lies and the lies of others; what do we accept as truth if we are dispossessed, left to our own means and entirely alone in the wasteland, or in the torture chamber?

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Zsuzsa Selyem's books have been translated into German, French, and Romanian. Her stories have come out in English in *World Literature Today*, the anthology *Best European Fiction* 2017 (Dalkey Archive) and elsewhere. This is her first volume in English.

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