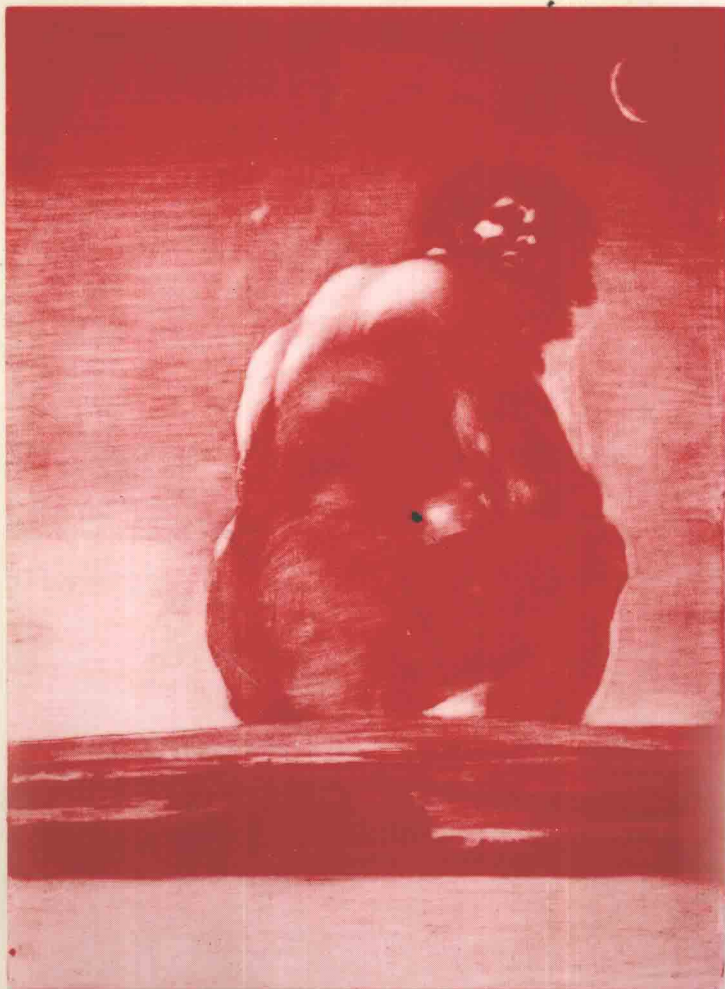


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# The Intelligence of Clouds



ems by **Stanley Moss**

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Poems by

**Stanley Moss**

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*To Jane and Tobia*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stanley Moss was born in New York City. He was educated at Trinity College and Yale University. He has published two previous books, *The Wrong Angel* (Macmillan) and *The Skull of Adam* (Horizon) in the United States, and each with Anvil Press, London. He makes his living as a private art dealer, largely in Spanish and Italian old masters, and is the publisher and chief editor of The Sheep Meadow Press, a non-profit press devoted to poetry.

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ONE



## SONG OF ALPHABETS

When I see Arabic headlines  
like the wings of snakebirds,  
Persian or Chinese notices  
for the arrivals and departures of buses—  
information beautiful as flights of starlings,  
I cannot tell vowel from consonant,  
the signs of the vulnerability of the flesh  
from signs for laws and government.

The Hebrew writing on the wall  
is all consonants, the vowel  
the ache and joy of life  
is known by heart. There are words  
written in my blood I cannot read.  
I can believe a cloud gave us the laws,  
parted the Red Sea, gave us the flood,  
the rainbow. A cloud teaches kindness,  
be prepared for the worst wind, be light of spirit.  
Perhaps I have seen His cloud,  
an ordinary mongrel cloud  
that assumes nothing, demonstrates nothing,  
that comforts as a dog sleeping in the room,  
a presence offering not salvation  
but a little peace.

My hand has touched the ancient Mayan God  
whose face is words: a limestone beasthead  
of flora, serpent and numbers,  
the sockets of a skull I thought were vowels.  
Hurrah for English, hidden miracles,  
the A and E of waking and sleeping,  
the O of mouth.

Thank you, Sir, alone with your name,  
for the erect L in love and open-legged V,  
beautiful the Tree of Words in the forest  
beside the Tree of Souls, lucky the bird  
that held Alpha or Omega in his beak.

## HANNIBAL CROSSING THE ALPS

He urged his starving elephants upward into the snows,  
the barges still smelling of Mediterranean brine,  
packed with huddled troops, men of Carthage  
in ice-covered armor, some wearing desert sandals  
wrapped in leaves, elephants up to their necks in snow,  
trumpeting, their trunks grabbing at crumbling clouds of snow.  
The colossal gray boulders swayed, moved upward,  
some tumbled back into the echoing ravines.  
An avalanche, forests of ice fell on Africa.  
In the morning soldiers gathered remnants of red and blue silk,  
dry sardines and beans, gold goblets still sandy  
from desert victories, live turtles meant for soup,  
a tangle of chained goats and sheep meant for sacrifice.

O you runners, walkers, horsemen, riders of bicycles,  
men of sense and small gesture, commuters like me,  
remember Hannibal came down from the Alps  
into the warm belly of Italy, and conquered.  
It was twenty years later in another place,  
after errors of administration and alliance,  
that he poisoned himself. What is remembered?  
—His colossal head asleep on the sand of Tunis,  
a few dates, confusion between victories and defeats,  
his elephants.

## LETTER TO THE BUTTERFLIES

### 1

Dear Monarchs, fellow Americans,  
friends have seen you and that's proof,  
I've heard the news:  
since summer you traveled 5000 miles  
from our potato fields to the Yucatán.  
Some butterflies can bear what the lizard would never endure.  
Few of us have the power to flutter away from the design:  
I've seen butterflies weather a storm  
in the shell of a snail, and come out of nowhere  
twenty stories up in Manhattan.  
I've seen them struggling on the ground  
—I and others may die anonymously,  
when all exceptionalism is over,  
but not like snowflakes falling.  
This week in Long Island  
before the first snowfall, there is nothing left  
but flies, bees, aphids, the usual.

### 2

In Mexico  
I saw the Monarchs of North America gather,  
a valley of butterflies surrounded  
by living mountains of butterflies,  
—the last day for many.  
I saw a river of butterflies flooding  
through the valley, on a bright day black clouds  
of butterflies thundering overhead,  
yet every one remained a fragile thing.  
A winged colossus wearing billowing silk  
over a sensual woman's body

waded across the valley,  
wagons and armies rested at her feet.  
A village lit fires,  
and the valley was a single black butterfly.

3

Butterflies,  
what are you to me  
that I should worry about your silks and powders,  
your damnation or apotheosis,  
insecticides and long-tongued lizards.  
Some women I loved are no longer human.  
I have a quarrel with myself for leaving my purpose,  
for the likes of you, beauties I could name.

Sooner or later  
I hope you alight on my gray stone  
above my name and date, questioning  
above my bewilderment.  
Is he dreaming of a butterfly,  
or is a butterfly dreaming of him?  
*What is this nothingness  
they have done to me?*

## THE BATHERS

### 1

In the great bronze tub of summer,  
with the lions' heads cast on each side,  
couples come and bathe together: each touches only  
his or her lover, as he or she falls back  
into the warm eucalyptus-scented waters.  
It is a hot summer evening and the last  
sunlight clings to the lighter and darker blues  
of grapes and to the white and rose plate  
on the bare marble table. Now the lovers  
plunge, surface, drift—an intruding elder  
would not know if there were six or two,  
or be aware of the entering and withdrawing.  
There is a sudden stillness of water,  
the bathers whisper in the classical manner,  
intimate distant things. They are forgetful  
that the darkness called night is always present,  
sunlight is the guest. It is the moment  
of departure. They dress, by mistake exchange  
some of their clothing, and linger  
in the glaring night traffic of the old city.

### 2

I hosed down the tub after five hundred years  
of lovemaking, and my few summers.  
I did not know the touch of naked bodies  
would give to bronze a fragile gold patina,  
or that women in love jump in their lovers' tubs.  
God of tubs, take pity on solitary bathers



who scrub their flesh with rough stone  
and have nothing to show for bathing  
but cleanliness and disillusion.  
Some believe the Gods come as swans,  
showers of gold, themselves, or not at all.  
I think they come as bathers: lovers,  
whales fountaining, hippopotami  
squatting in the mud.