

War Ballad

By Stanley Moss

(after the Russian)

The piano has crawled into the quarry. Hauled
In last night for firewood, sprawled
With frozen barrels, crates and sticks,
The piano is waiting for the axe.

Legless, a black box, still polished;
It lies on its belly like a lizard,
Droning, heaving, hardly fashioned
For the quarry's primordial art.

Blood red: his frozen fingers cleft,
Two on the right hand, five on the left,
He goes down on his knees to reach the keyboard,
To strike the lizard's chord.

Seven fingers pick out rhymes and rhythm,
The frozen skin, steaming, peels off them,
As from a boiled potato. Their schemes,
Their beauty, ivory and anthracite,
Flicker and flash like the great Northern Lights.

Everything played before is a great lie.
The reflections of flaming chandeliers—
Deceit, the white columns, the grand tiers
In warm concert halls—wild lies.

But the steel of the piano howls in me,
I lie in the quarry and I am deft
As the lizard. I accept the gift.
I'll be a song for Russia, I'll be
an étude, warmth and bread for everybody.

Notes:

The epigraph of this poem was originally omitted in the changeover to the new website. Because of this, reciting the epigraph is optional for the 2019-2020 Poetry Out Loud season.

Stanley Moss, "War Ballad" from *A History of Color: New and Collected Poems*. Reprinted with the permission of Seven Stories Press, www.sevenstories.com.

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Stanley Moss was educated at Trinity College (Connecticut) and Yale University and makes his living as a private art dealer, specializing in Spanish and Italian Old Masters. As a child he visited Europe with his family, and after serving in World War II he taught English in Barcelona and Rome, where he became familiar with the religious and mythical figures that appear in his work.

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