

To Live with a Landscape

By Constance Urdang

1

Take your boulevards, your Locust Street,
Your Chestnut, Pine, your Olive,
Take your Forest Park and Shaw's Garden,
Your avenues that lead past street-corner violence,
Past your West End, past your Limit,
To shabby suburban crime,
Vandalism in the parking-lot,
Abductions from the shopping mall—
Like making the same mistake over and over
On the piano or typewriter keys,
Always hitting the wrong note—
How "very alive, very American"
They are, how chockful of metaphysics,
Hellbent to obliterate the wilderness.

2

Learn to live with sycamores,
Their sad, peeling trunks, scabbed all over
With shabby patches, their enormous leaves
In dingy shades of ochre and dun
Rattling like castanets, their roots
Thick as a man's leg, crawling
Like enormous worms out of the broken pavements,
Continually thrusting themselves up
From pools of shade they make,
Sculpturing the street
With dappled dark and light
As glaucoma, a disease of the eye,
Makes the world more beautiful
With its mysterious rainbows.

3

Already in Iowa the monarchs are emerging,
Signaling with their tawny wings;
In regalia of burnt orange and umber
The spangled imperial procession
Meanders along the democratic roadsides,
Across straight state lines,
Over rivers and artificial lakes
And the loneliness of middle America
On the way to Mexico.
The tiny wind of their passing
Is not even recorded
As a disturbance in the atmosphere.

4

Driving back into the American past,

Homesick for forests, flowers without names, vast savannahs,
Lowlands or mountains teeming with game,
Bluffs crowned with cottonwoods, mudbanks
Where crocodiles might sun themselves;
Finding instead the remains of strange picnics,
Replications of old selves, a cacophony of changes
Like a room crowded with chairs
In which no one can sit, as if history were furniture
Grown splintered and shabby;
Studying a picturesque rustic architecture
To master its splendid abstractions,
Shady verandas and porches,
Or the republican simplicity of a cow.

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Poet and novelist Constance Urdang was born in New York, and attended Smith College and the University of Iowa. She worked as an editor for several New York publishers before she returned to school in 1954. In 1955, she married the poet Donald Finkel, and they moved to Mexico, where they lived until 1960. From 1974 until her death, she was on the Washington University faculty, where she taught and coordinated several writing programs. In poems such as "Reflections on History in Missouri," and "To Live with Landscape," Urdang uses a free verse form to reflect on the image of America, both past and present.