

Reflections on History in Missouri

By Constance Urdang

This old house lodges no ghosts!
Those swaggering specters who found their way
Across the Atlantic
Were left behind
With their old European grudges
In the farmhouses of New England
And Pennsylvania
Like so much jettisoned baggage
Too heavy
To lug over the Piedmont.

The flatlands are inhospitable
To phantoms. Here
Shadows are sharp and arbitrary
Not mazy, obscure,
Cowering in corners
Behind scary old boots in a cupboard
Or muffled in empty coats, deserted
By long-dead cousins
(Who appear now and then
But only in photographs
Already rusting at the edges)—

Setting out in the creaking wagon
Tight-lipped, alert to move on,
The old settlers had no room
For illusions.
Their dangers were real.
Now in the spare square house
Their great-grandchildren
Tidy away the past
Until the polished surfaces
Reflect not apparitions, pinched,
Parched, craving, unsatisfied,
But only their own faces.

Constance Urdang, "Reflections on History in Missouri" from *The Lone Woman and Others*.
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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.

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