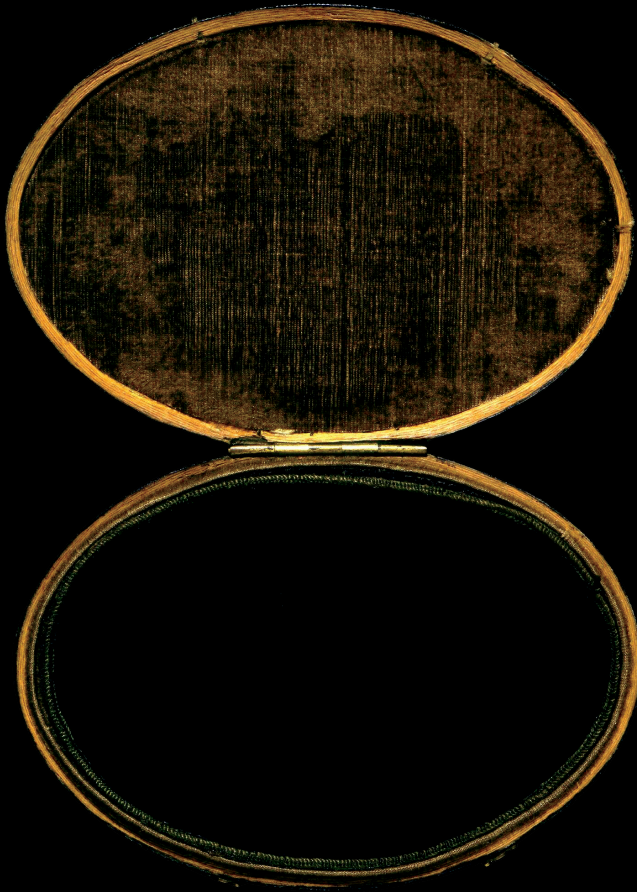


*Donna Stonecipher*



*the* RUINS *of* NOSTALGIA

# THE RUINS OF NOSTALGIA

ALSO BY DONNA STONECIPHER

POETRY

*The Reservoir*

*Souvenir de Constantinople*

*The Cosmopolitan*

*Model City*

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*études* by Friederike Mayröcker

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*Donna Stonecipher*

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IN MEMORIAM

*Thomas Joseph Stonecipher*

1930 LANGDON, NORTH DAKOTA—

2016 SEATTLE, WASHINGTON



Our imagination . . . leads us unexpectedly into cities or theatres,  
plains or meadows. We may further observe, when the fancy thus reflects  
on the scenes that have past in it formerly, those, which were  
at first pleasant to behold, appear more so upon reflection, and that  
the memory heightens the delightfulness of the original.

JOSEPH ADDISON | from “The Pleasures of the Imagination,” no. 417

Nostalgia is at the very core of the modern condition

SVETLANA BOYM

Only other men’s nostalgias offend

RAYMOND WILLIAMS





# THE RUINS OF NOSTALGIA



## THE RUINS OF NOSTALGIA 1

Courtyard opened out into courtyard opened out into courtyard, and in the final courtyard, an art gallery was closing. It had opened shortly after the fall of the Wall, incandescent with idealism. Tonight was the opening of its closing exhibition. \*

What is art for? To critique society, to manufacture beauty, to make the artist lose all sense of time like a malfunctioning hourglass through which the sand just keeps pouring and pouring? \* *When I get a little money I buy books, if I have any left over I buy food and clothing.*—Erasmus. This was printed on a bookmark tucked into each book she'd bought at the bookstore she used to frequent in her youth, which was closing.

At this bookstore, courtyard after courtyard had opened in her mind. The bookstore was wood-paneled, with a spiral staircase winding up to fiction, and a spiral staircase winding down to nonfiction. At this bookstore, she had felt incandescent with idealism.

\* "One door closes, another opens": a commonplace. The art gallery was closing; the bookstore was closing; but when their doors closed, the commonplace said, other doors would open. Other commonplaces. "The market takes care of itself." \* It was only at night, sometimes, that she realized that the door in the saying wasn't really a door, it was only sgraffito, and the series of courtyards wasn't really a series of courtyards, it was only a recurring dream of never arriving, walking permanently through archway after archway into the ruins of nostalgia.

## THE RUINS OF NOSTALGIA 2

We had been to the secret service museum, to the shredded-documents-being-pieced-back-together museum, to the museum of the wealthy family's Biedermeier house from 1830, to the museum of the worker family's apartment from 1905, to the museum of the country that no longer exists, to the museum of the history of the post office, to the museum of the history of clocks. We had seen the bracelets made of the beloved's hair, the Kaiserpanorama, the pneumatic tubes, the hourglasses, the shreds, the microphones hidden in the toupees, the ticking, the gilded mirrors reflecting our faces, the two rooms eight people lived in, the eight rooms two people lived in, the shreds, the trays of frangible butterflies carrying freight, the silvery clepsydras, the ticking, the simulacra, the shreds, the vitrines, the velvet ropes, the idealized portraits of the powerful, the blurry photographs of the powerless, the shreds, the erasures, the eras, the sureties, the ticking, the pink façades, the upward mobility, the shreds, the plunging fortunes, the downward spirals, the ticking, the ticking, the shreds, the shreds. We had been to the museum of the ruins of nostalgia.

## THE RUINS OF NOSTALGIA 3

Four deer stood poised down in a valley as the train passed by, like four artworks in a museum, framed in the rectangular windows of the train, a tableau vivant that hardly changes no matter how many times the train passes, heading north or heading south, for the poised deer are the same poised deer that stood there a century ago, the streams ferrying their cargo of dead twigs are the same streams as two centuries ago, the trees felled and planted and tended and felled and planted and tended, and felled, the foresters still sculptural and storied, the kids in the woods flirting with addiction to crystal, crystals forming on the windows of the train carrying the cargo of passengers whose bloodstreams ferry the cargo of antidepressants, antihistamines, anticoagulants, anti-inflammatories, passengers who keep glancing out at the museum of nature, reminding themselves *I've been meaning to visit that exhibit*, that exhibit where the deer are waiting for us and not waiting, where the trees are waiting for us and not waiting, where the wildflowers still under the earth are waiting and not waiting for spring to force them out into morbidly orderly inflorescence, where the origin is and is not waiting for its impurity, and a crystal palace whose roof fell in on itself from its own weight years ago still houses the ruins of nostalgia.

We didn't miss mercers or chandlers, and anyway the world was still full of silk cloth and candles. We didn't miss coopers or smiths. We didn't miss elevator boys or indexers, haberdashers or confectioners or lady's maids or almoners. We didn't miss typists. We didn't miss scriveners. So would we really miss doctors and lawyers and accountants when the day came, and the radio tonight said it was coming, when their expertise was surpassed by software? \* We didn't miss the assembly line. We didn't miss data entry. Did we miss switchboard operators? No, because we had too many photos of them. We did miss lamplighters, a little, because we missed the ornate iron gas lamps they had lit in the evenings, as we missed carrying flickering candles up to our rooms in our nightgowns, banking the fires in our hearths, out our windows the liquid vantablack of night, nightly flooding and drowning lux perpetua. We had missed it—we had missed the lamplighters and the candles and the banking and the snuffing. We had missed the labor of light. \* Would we miss truck drivers? Would we miss flesh-and-blood babysitters, teenage girls that the fathers would drive home in their Volvos in states of sexual tension they would evanesce later, back home with their wives? \* Software was so . . . so very soft. We would miss software. We wouldn't miss hardware, though. We would secure for software the softest of soft spots among the ruins of nostalgia.

She drove downtown and got disoriented. There was a forest of towering new towers refracting the familiar landscape, erasing the turns and curves she'd long followed unconsciously in her car, to get downtown, where now there was a forest of towers, where once had been only forest. She parked, and got disoriented. The low, ornamented, turn-of-the-century buildings were being wrecking-balled to oblivion to make way for towering new glass towers, wedged between one-way streets like the one she'd driven up the wrong way as a timid teenager in a blue Hornet picking up her sister from her summer job (selling ice cream in the old outdoor market) (saved from the wrecking ball by citizens' initiative, 1971). \* She tried to find the ice cream shop, but got disoriented. \* She drove to a neighboring neighborhood and got disoriented—there was the blue bascule bridge, but what was it bridging? Two halves that did not make a whole. She crossed back to the canal where the poplars of her childhood had all been felled, felled, the canal now canal-front—canal-front property—for new residents paying to muse upon the mutability of moving water. \* She drove to the wooden house she'd been born in on the ridge, with little windows not showcasing the picturesque mountain view (little windows because nobody cared back then about views) (had once elucidated her father) (who'd grown up in the house with no view on the ridge) and got disoriented, for now each house on the ridge had had its back or front wrecking-balled to make way for picture windows giving the new residents a permanent picture of the picturesque mountains—and—were they visible?—of the mounting ruins of her nostalgia.



Nostalgia feels personal as a pearl feels personal in its shell, never knowing that beyond it are thousands of other mollusks depositing nacreous layers over parasites in thousands of other shells. \* Many people remember the downtown of a neighborhood from their youth, with its dowdy department store and its five-and-dime, but one person is nostalgic for the clove cigarettes you could buy one at a time from a glass jar, another is nostalgic for the little blue Bakelite birds that cost a quarter, a third is nostalgic for the doughnut shop that became a Thai restaurant (and a fourth is nostalgic for the Thai restaurant, which became a vegan doughnut shop). \* True, looking backward can either cause you to miss what's ahead or envelop you in a warmth so contingent you understand how a coat can be made of translucent ashes. Every pearl is on a continuum with a parasite. \* A fifth person was nostalgic for the dowdy downtown just because he knew the new people drinking and shopping in the new downtown were not, could not be nostalgic for it, because they had no idea it had ever existed. Ah, but they could. They could be nostalgic for a downtown they had no idea had ever existed. Because nostalgia is specific yet indiscriminate, benign yet opportunistic, personal yet collective, and if the twentieth century taught us anything, it's that anyone feels welcome to wander through the ruins of anyone else's nostalgia.

Even if unconsciously, the city's inhabitants had been glad of the holes. Empty slots between buildings, empty lots on corners, where here a handmade bar, there an impromptu park had been wedged between brick walls, or the green grass had just been left to expand unchecked. Even if unconsciously, the inhabitants had been glad of the empty lots, which had seemed permanent, rendered the city permeable; the ease of them, the way the holes allowed the whole to breathe, the city's inhabitants to breathe more easily, for if there was surplus space, then surely there was surplus time, lots and slots of unoccupied and unmaximized time to fill the holes and empty them again. Or so it had seemed. \* Of course it was a little odd to be glad of the bombs that had blown the buildings to bits, to be grateful for the failed bankrupt state that had enabled the holes to remain holes, so lying on the grass of an accidental playground, one just listened to the ping-pong ball batted back and forth across the concrete table. And thought idly of one's own surpluses and deficits. \* And then, one day, one of the city's holes that had seemed permanent was filled. Not long after that, overnight—a few more. And then still more. More people, it seemed, wanted to become inhabitants of the city marked by surplus space and time. More people than there was surplus space for. The people who had moved a long time ago to the city marked by surplus space and time looked at the people who were now moving to the city marked by surplus space and time, who would soon be looking at people moving to a city no longer marked by surplus space and time. \* And suddenly any remaining empty lots turned into sites of projection and desire. Because as soon as a hole was filled, it was gone, seemingly never to return. And soon the city would no longer seem permeable. And this would seem permanent. \* Content, it turned out, was not synonymous with form; some forms of content blew some forms of form to bits. Empty form was just formal. A surplus of people wanted surplus space and time, which swiftly used up the surplus space, which meant the surplus time was gone, too; never to return. And so it goes in the ruins of nostalgia.

First someone invented a word designating nostalgia for life in East Germany: *Ostalgie*. Then someone else made a movie called *Ostalgie*. Then other people opened an *Ostalgie*-themed hotel where guests could stay in rooms with faded pink patterned wallpaper and orange phones with a special button for *Volkspolizei*. Of the people, for the people, by the people. “A country does not have friends, it has interests” (Charles De Gaulle). And sometimes maybe even people do not have friends, they have interests. And maybe a population does not even have people, it has interests. The *Volkspolizei* seemed the dream of a people who would discipline themselves and never need to peer into the mirror and say: fuck the police. But long after the *Volkspolizei*’s demise, when six hundred policepeople enforced the eviction of eleven anarchists from a squatted building on Brunnenstrasse whose billionaire needed it back, what button was there to push? Curtains hung in the windows; rent was paid; the Umsonst Laden on the ground floor saw influx and outflux of stuff without influx and outflux of cash; “Wir bleiben alle” read the façade. \* No one knows where the anarchists are now, the Umsonst Laden melted away like smudged snow in spring, and the building stood empty for years, only a few pigeons nesting in the derelict splendors of the ruins of nostalgia.

We watched a video on the internet of the arena we'd seen our first concert in being bulldozed. We had seen no video of the club where we'd first smoked clove cigarettes and kissed a boy wearing makeup bulldozed. One day it was just no longer there. We had seen no video or photos of our high school being bulldozed. When we heard that our elementary school was scheduled for the wrecking ball we walked down and took photos of the mural of a deer in a snowy landscape we'd won a contest to get to paint on the school wall. Shortly after, the deer was bulldozed. We had seen no photos of the café where we had first drunk a mocha bulldozed. One day it was just no longer there. We had been astonished to find a real café, with real intellectuals in it playing chess, real Persian cats draped on sills, real mochas and cappuccinos and disheveled newspapers on poles and foxed wallpaper in our own provincial city. By the time the café was bulldozed ten years later, we weren't astonished. We had not seen any photos or videos of it bulldozed; one day, it was just no longer there. In that bulldozed café and other bulldozed cafés around the city we'd always ordered mochas, which bridged our childish love of sweets with our lust for adult narcotics. We had not seen many photos or videos of the sites across which our youth had played out bulldozed, but one by one they must all have been, for one day they were just no longer there. \* Sometimes we felt sheepish for listing the sites of our youth that had been bulldozed to make room for the bulging of prosperity. But the question of who was really prospering did not stand long before it was bulldozed. Any attempt to turn around and glance one last time at the past resulted in that past being instantly bulldozed, bulldozed, bulldozed. For the bulls never doze in the ruins of nostalgia.

## THE RUINS OF NOSTALGIA 10

A woman began to fall prey to bouts of nostalgia for the world of her youth, which was the world her mother had just been entering when she began to fall prey to bouts of nostalgia for the world of her youth, which was the world *her* mother had just been entering when she began to fall prey to bouts of nostalgia for the world of her youth, which was the world *her* mother had just been entering when she began to fall prey to bouts of nostalgia for the world of her youth, which was the world *her* mother had just been entering when she began to fall prey to bouts of nostalgia for the world of her youth, which was the world . . .